

Farmers unite to form electric co-ops, bring light to rural America

BY SALLY BAIR

Staff Correspondent

LITTLESTOWN — Can you imagine life without electricity? Certainly it's difficult to remember how things were without this silent servant, but there are many people in rural areas today who remember well those days when chores were finished by the light of lanterns and wind powered the pumps.

In rural America, the lighting of the countryside followed the lighting of the cities by nearly a half century. Electricity was not something readily available to farmers because power companies would extend lines off the main roads only if farmers paid the cost of installing the lines - a prohibitive cost for farmers in the 20's and 30's.

Just 50 years ago today President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed an executive order creating the Rural Electrification Administration. His action was the beginning of a remarkable chance which overtook America and brought rural families that miracle of the twentieth century, electricity. In 1935 just 10 percent of the people in rural America and about 25 percent of rural Pennsylvanians enjoyed electricity.

"The day the lights came on" in rural America marked the beginning of a new life for farm families.

The creation of the REA made money available at low interest rates to extend existing lines to rural areas. It quickly became apparent that the power companies were not interested in what they considered to be a high cost,

low return venture. Farmers, eager to get electricity, followed a familiar avenue - they organized member-owned cooperatives and provided their own power.

The first rural electric cooperative in Pennsylvania, Northwestern Rural Electric Cooperative, with headquarters in Cambridge Springs, was organized in 1936. Eventually 13 would be organized to provide electric service to the rural areas of Pennsylvania.

Howard S. Schwartz, Littlestown, is 98 years old and was an incorporating director of Adams Electric Cooperative at Gettysburg. Although his family had a generator on their farm since about 1920, they were eager to get electricity, something enjoyed by the orphanage just one and one half miles down the road. But the power companies refused to extend the line that distance without his paying \$800.

About forming the cooperative Schwartz says, "It was the only way to get electricity at the time, and there has been no better way since."

People in that area of Adams County generally understood electricity and its uses because the nearby towns and people along main roads already enjoyed its benefits.

However, there were a few instances of amazement and misunderstanding among new members of the fledgling cooperative. Schwartz recalls, "We always talked about 'turning on the juice,' and one man told me he didn't have enough light bulbs for all the sockets so he put corn cobs in them to keep the juice from

running out!"

The day the 'juice' was actually turned on was an historic one, and Schwartz says that cooperative members were invited to the substation to see them throw the switch which literally lit up the countryside.

When asked to comment on how electricity changed farming, Schwartz commented, "Immensely."

In order to get the cooperative going, dedicated people had to get their friends and neighbors to sign on as members. There was a \$5 membership fee.

Schwartz was in on the early organizational meetings because of his position as a Farm Bureau director. Many of those first meetings lasted into the early morning as farmers discussed how to best carry out their task. Representatives of the Rural Electrification Administration came to community meetings to help answer questions.

Schwartz recalls that the most frequent question he was asked was whether members were responsible for actually running the co-op. He said most people signed on the first visit. It was a busy time for Schwartz because he often had to settle questions which arose with other workers who were signing up members. As a community leader Schwartz was often asked for his opinions.

Wade H. Brown, Littlestown, an organizer for the cooperative in Germany, Union and parts of Mount Joy Townships recalls that "some people were eager for it." Many people, like Brown, could see their neighbors benefitting from the use of electricity they were denied because they simply could not afford the exorbitant price of paying for the line construction.

Brown's cost would have been \$375, although generally the cost was from \$600 to \$800 to extend lines. His neighbors along the main road had had electricity since 1926.



Howard S. Schwartz, now 98, served as a director of Adams Electric Cooperative for 32 years, retiring from the Board at age 85. His daughter, Eva Jane, cares for him in his home near Littlestown. Howard was an incorporating director of the cooperative and recalls the years when it was first organized by farmers and neighbors to provide electric service to rural areas of Adams County.

He recalls that the local power company changed its tune once it realized that the cooperative would become a reality. Suddenly it was able to extend its lines, and hook up customers before the cooperative

could get its lines built.

Schwartz recalls a similar attitude with the power company nearest his farm and says that the day after his name was in the

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Homestead Notes



Wade H. Brown helped to sign up members for Adams Electric Cooperative in the southern part of Adams County. Here he reads his meter, one of the jobs which must be done monthly by members of the cooperative.

Rural Electric Administration celebrates 50th anniversary

BY SALLY BAIR

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HARRISBURG — On May 11, over 500,000 rural Pennsylvanians will join in celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Rural Electrification Administration.

There are 13 rural electric cooperatives in Pennsylvania who brought electricity to rural people less than 50 years ago with the help of REA. One of the few enduring New Deal agencies, REA was created in 1935 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to bring electric service to rural areas not served by private power companies.

Most rural electrification in the United States is the product of locally owned, non-profit cooperatives who got started by borrowing funds from the federal agency. Across the United States there are about 1,000 rural electric systems providing electric service to over 25 million people in 46 states. Today 99 percent of the rural homes in the nation have electric service.

Fifty years ago, as the nation's struggled to



survive the Depression, Roosevelt created the REA by executive order to make loans available for electrifying the countryside.

At that time 10 percent of rural Americans and barely one-quarter of rural Pennsylvanians enjoyed central-station electric service. The nation's private power companies were unable or unwilling to serve sparsely populated rural areas because it was not sufficiently profitable. As a result, most rural people were, in effect, still living in the 19th century when Roosevelt took office in 1933.

When the private power companies proved reluctant to work with REA, far-

mers formed cooperatives to bring electricity to their homes. With loans and technical help from the new agency, the co-ops built the lines over mountains and across prairies to reach everyone who wanted service.

Electric power revolutionized life and work on the farm and enabled agriculture to become productive and efficient.

Northwestern Rural Electric Cooperative at Cambridge Springs was the first Pennsylvania cooperative organized in 1936. Thirteen others followed in the next five years, and all will be celebrating their anniversaries.

REA is still the cornerstone of the rural electric program. It serves as a "banker" for rural electric systems, administering loan programs that help co-ops provide their consumers with reliable electric service at the lowest possible cost. The agency, now part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, also provides engineering, managerial and other guidance for the co-ops.