

TEXAS CO-OP POWER

“The House Is On Fire!”

“No, Mama, the Lights Are On.”

RURAL TEXAS SEES THE LIGHT



PLUS

Home on the (Electric) Range
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Classic Vehicle Photos

“The House Is On Fire!”

“No, Mama, the Lights Are On.”

Evelyn Smith remembers the awe and splendor of that moment, as recounted in Robert A. Caro’s book, *The Path to Power*. Returning home one evening in 1939 from an excursion to Johnson City, her family neared the farmhouse and noticed something different. • “Oh my God,” her mother said. “The house is on fire!” • Moving closer, Evelyn said, “No, Mama, the lights are on.”





Rural Texas Sees the Light

BY STACI SEMRAD

When electricity finally reached rural Texans decades ago, it propelled them into the modern age at the speed of light.

Their lives changed forever, and the arduous process endured by such rural Texans in obtaining electricity was no less dramatic.

Though most Texas cities and larger towns had enjoyed electrical power for decades, rural Texas was still largely without it in 1935.

City and country life stood in stark contrast. Urban women washed clothes using washing machines while farm women bent over tubs and washboards. Women in the city flipped a switch to turn on their ovens while women in the country slaved over wood-burning stoves. City kids finished their homework under bright lightbulbs while rural children squinted under flickering kerosene lamps. Families in the city used running water and toilets, requiring electricity, while many rural people still hauled buckets of water from rivers and used outhouses.

“Hill Country folks were living like they were in the Middle Ages,” said Dr. Sandy Cohen, curator of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum in Austin. “It was as though time had stood still.”

On September 2, the museum opens an exhibit telling

the story of how electricity finally arrived in rural Central Texas. The show, which runs through May 29, 2007, also chronicles the early political career of former President Lyndon Johnson.

When elected to Congress in 1937, Johnson made rural electrification a top priority. He was raised under harsh conditions in the Hill Country, where he watched his mother endure strenuous daily chores that electricity could have eased. Johnson was determined to help the people back home and understood the obstacles that had prevented progress nationwide.

Some people had long thought the electric companies serving the cities should take action to extend coverage. But for-profit, Northeastern-based utilities serving Texas had maintained for decades that connecting widely spaced rural customers would be unprofitable because of the great distance between each meter to be connected. Even if lines were built, some financiers figured poor farmers would be unable to pay their bills.

Other people looked to the government, arguing that rivers generated electric power—a natural resource belonging to the people—so the government should involve itself in power production. But the big utility companies and their allies thwarted such attempts until the signature of

Top: Technicians from the REA helped jump-start electric cooperatives across the state with their expertise.



Members of Hill County Electric Cooperative (now HILCO) pose on a flatbed truck bearing the message, "Dreams Come True."

President Franklin D. Roosevelt permitted the establishment in 1935 of the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), a concept advocated by a member of his administration, Morris L. Cooke. At that time, electricity was connected to about 11 percent of farms nationally and less than 5 percent of Texas farms.

The REA, part of Roosevelt's New Deal, was originally enacted to see that government-financed dams and hydro power would benefit rural residents. Initially, Cooke invited the private utilities to join the process, but

they proposed serving only those farmers who had the potential to use a lot of electricity.

Early in 1936, U.S. Representative Sam Rayburn of Texas and Senator George Norris of Nebraska sponsored a bill to make private companies ineligible for REA loans. Ultimately, Rayburn helped reach a compromise allowing the REA to give loans to utilities but with preference to electric cooperatives (usually organized by farmers), municipalities and some other government entities, such as river authorities.

Cooperatives trace their ancestry to English weavers' organizations in the 1840s, one of the most prominent being the Rochdale cooperative. A unique business model, co-ops are owned and operated by the member-consumers they serve. A variation on the original cooperative principles adopted by the Rochdale cooperative is still practiced by Texas electric cooperatives and a myriad of other cooperative entities throughout the world. Those seven principles are:

1. voluntary and open membership;
2. democratic member control;
3. member economic participation;
4. autonomy and independence;
5. education, training and information;
6. cooperation among cooperatives;
7. concern for community.

Farmers—often regarded by city dwellers as uneducated and incapable—tackled with determination the enormous challenges of forming and running co-ops. They created cooperatives and municipalities to vote for electrification and learned about the legalities, science and engineering involved in building

BEFORE ELECTRICITY



COOKE COUNTY EC



THE NEXT GREATEST THING: 50 YEARS OF RURAL ELECTRIFICATION IN AMERICA © NATIONAL RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION, 1984



COOKE COUNTY EC

Because there was no electricity, home chores required a farm woman to labor from dawn to dusk. There was wood to cut and water to haul even before she began cooking on a wood-burning stove and washing in an iron pot. After sundown, she could finally settle into a chair

and do the mending by kerosene lamp.

Outdoor labor involved punishing drudgery. A farmer milked and watered his cows by hand and hoped the milk wagon would pick up and deliver his unrefrigerated product to town before it spoiled. He unloaded his feed and

seed by hand, shelled corn with a hand crank, plowed with horses or mules, and used a heavy axe or ripsaw to cut wood. If there was unfinished work in the barn after dark, he, like his wife, used a highly flammable kerosene lamp. Accidental fires were commonplace.

HILCO EC



Cooperative members set policies at annual meetings, which have always been major social events. Above is the crowd at the 10th annual meeting of Hill County Electric Cooperative.

power lines. Many of them joined work crews that spent months digging holes, erecting poles and connecting lines across the state.

Bartlett Community Light and Power Company (BCL&P) became the country's first energized system under the REA's new loan program. Texas Power and Light, the utility company serving the town of Bartlett, had refused to serve the surrounding rural

area at affordable rates, so three local men put up \$50 each for a charter to start BCL&P, now Bartlett Electric Cooperative. The co-op currently has nearly 9,000 meters providing power to members in Bell, Williamson, Milam and Burleson counties.

"That those three men had the foresight to organize [Bartlett] was remarkable," said Clarence Fischer, who has served on the co-op's board

for 33 years and was a youngster when his family's home near Bartlett got electricity.

Like numerous such groups across the country, the farmers around Bartlett had to deal with "spite lines" built by the big power companies into their planned service area. The lines were intended to "cherry-pick" by taking only the most profitable customers—big power users—but the

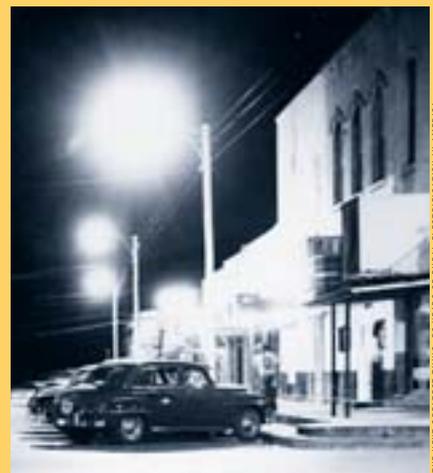
AFTER ELECTRICITY



CENTER FOR AMERICAN HISTORY (TEXAS ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES)



EDWARDS EC



THE NEXT GREATEST THING: 50 YEARS OF RURAL ELECTRIFICATION IN AMERICA © NATIONAL RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION, 1984

With the coming of the electric co-op lines, rural Texas joined the modern age. No longer did city people and country people live in different worlds. For the first time, cooks could precisely control baking temperature. Instead of chopping wood and building a fire to boil

water before bathing or doing the laundry, rural people could use electric water heaters. Refrigeration reduced incidences of food poisoning, dysentery and other diseases that had flourished under unsanitary conditions.

The Rural Electrification Administration

and local co-ops held electric fairs and circuses to display the extraordinary array of labor-saving devices for farmers and ranchers. They increased their productivity in manifold ways. Even small towns began to have electric streetlights.



Co-op employees of both sexes pitched in to educate new customers about cooking with electricity.

Bartlett farmers finally succeeded in turning on the lights in 1936.

Eighty-six-year-old Maurice Steglich, whose great uncle, Ervin Steglich, was one of the co-op's three founders, remembers that day.

"It was the greatest thing that ever happened out in the country," he said.

Electricity was on its way to most other parts of the state, too. However, it took longer to reach areas with lower population densities because the REA loans were limited to applicants where electrical lines would serve an average of at least three farms per mile. Residents in these areas, including the Hill Country, felt hopeless, but then-Congressman Lyndon Johnson assured them they would get a loan, even if he had to appeal to President Roosevelt.

Some of Johnson's constituents had to be dragged into the modern world. Electricity was a foreign concept to many rural residents. Some farmers feared the danger of electrical power or didn't realize its full benefits. Others felt skittish about being unable to pay their debt and possibly losing their farms. Still others wanted to join a co-op but couldn't afford the required \$5 membership—a hefty sum back then. There's many a tale of farm wives using all their butter-and-egg money to make that \$5 commitment.

The farmers finally gave Johnson the support needed to go to President

Roosevelt and ask him to relax the REA density requirements. Roosevelt agreed to help the Hill Country residents and their tenacious congressman. A loan was made in 1938, and the next year, lights sparkled across that once dark region of the state.

By the 1960s, the vast majority of Texas farms were electrically powered.

In 2002, Johnson's daughter, Luci Baines Johnson, accepted on his behalf the Distinguished Service Award from the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

"Generations of Johnsons are grateful to each and every one of you for continuing my father's dearest dream," she told the crowd.

Indeed, Johnson once said, "Of all the things I've ever done, nothing has ever given me as much satisfaction as bringing power to the Hill Country of Texas."

Electricity drastically changed people's lives. Farmers began to purchase refrigerators to keep their milk cool rather than hauling ice to the farm and risking spoilage. Farm women delighted in simply plugging in their electric irons. Families huddled around radios that connected them to the outside world. People could now spend more time reading.

"I could sit curled on the wicker sofa by the front windows where the sun streamed through the lace curtains, and when the sun went down,

keep on reading," Carmen Bennett wrote in a letter to *Texas Co-op Power* magazine in 1999. "What a wonderful world was opening before us."

George Pesek of Schulenburg remembers electricity reaching his family's Lavaca County home in 1940, when he was 23.

"It was energized on Christmas Eve, and we had the radio, and the Christmas tree was lit," he said. Even more awesome were the conveniences to come, such as refrigerators.

"Before, you had to butcher a chicken the same day you ate it," he said. "Electricity was a great change for farm people and a big help."

Through the years, Texas co-ops have consolidated and suburbanites have joined what were once primarily rural service areas. Today, the state's nine generation and transmission co-ops provide wholesale power and services to the state's 66 local distribution co-ops, which serve 241 of the state's 254 counties. The statewide association, now called Texas Electric Cooperatives (TEC), was formed in 1940.

"Though we have grown exponentially, we have not forgotten who we are or who we serve," said TEC Board Chairman Audie Morris.

Co-ops have evolved to incorporate technology with improved metering, outage prevention, load management and cost. Golden Spread Electric Cooperative's Mustang Station, a natural gas-fired generating facility in the Panhandle, and several coal-fired plants on the drawing boards around the state exemplify such advances, said Mike Williams, TEC chief executive officer. Technological improvements aside, some of the greatest benefits of co-op membership remain those that made co-ops popular in the beginning.

"Co-ops continue to unite people who value community cooperation, local control and free enterprise," Williams said. "With those shared priorities, co-ops will no doubt serve Texans well into the future."

Staci Semrad is an Austin-based freelance writer and a member of Pedernales Electric Cooperative.