

## ELECTRIFICATION!

A century ago, the Jessie Lake Area was being cleared of trees and hopeful pioneers were building homes and learning to live off the land. Summer days were long and arduous and winter nights were long, dark and cold. Wood provided heat and candles made from moose or bear tallow provided light. Kerosene lanterns were an improvement, but fuel supplies were difficult and costly to bring in, whether by rail, tote road, or strong backs. Chores were physically demanding and time consuming before electricity. Washing clothes, for example, was an all day job once a week year-round. Water was pumped by hand, carried, then heated on a wood burning stove. Clothes were scrubbed by hand on a wash board and hung out to dry.

There was great celebration and hopefulness in Grand Rapids when a small generator brought electric lights to the new Pokegama Hotel in 1894. This event signaled the beginning of the electric age for Itasca County. Over the next two decades small independent producers sprang to life in Itasca County from Deer River to Keewatin and on up the Iron Range. But it would be more than a half-century before power lines reached the Jessie Lake Area. Gradually the larger and more successful power companies bought out the smaller ones and centralized power production, linking the various communities and mining companies together with power lines. In this process of growth and acquisition, Minnesota Power and Light emerged as the dominant surviving company in Northeastern Minnesota. By 1923 the more densely settled communities and mining operations along the Range were tied into an extensive power grid. Electricity came to Bigfork in 1930 when George Holt first provided power to 32 customers with a small gasoline generator. But vast rural areas between the islands of light were still in the dark, literally and figuratively.

How to bring electric service to scattered rural farms and residences was an issue - not just in Itasca County, but across the state and nation. Existing power companies argued that it was not profitable for them to extend power lines to low density rural locations. In addition, they reasoned, farms had neither the means to purchase electrical power nor the need for it. Some power companies were willing to extend service to rural areas if they adjoined existing service areas or if rural residents would pay in advance for poles and lines. Even if poles and lines were secured in rural areas, electric rates were usually higher because of added maintenance costs. Private power companies concerned about profitability were unlikely to risk serving rural areas. Furthermore, utility companies felt that government should not interfere with the private distribution of electric power, declaring this to be a matter for private enterprise. If rural areas wanted electricity they should pay market rates like everyone else, they reasoned. As they saw it, the first responsibility of private utility companies was to make a reasonable profit to benefit their stockholders.

The unavailability of electricity in rural areas put farmers and other rural residents at a

distinct developmental disadvantage in comparison to urban communities. Rural areas lacked the conveniences found in most American homes: refrigerators, washing machines, water heaters, radios, and a wide range of other electrical appliances. Most of the new appliances and labor-saving tools that appeared on the market in the 1920s were not available to rural America. By the mid-1930s only about 10% of farms in the US were receiving electric power, whereas in many European countries 85% or more of farms had been electrified. In 1920 the Canadian Province of Ontario had authorized the formation of rural power districts. Meanwhile, American farmers wondered why the US lagged so far behind. Prominent citizens and national political leaders began seeking answers.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt brought the issue of rural electrification to the federal agenda as part of the New Deal. As a result, Congress included rural electrification as part of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935, and Morris L. Cooke was named administrator. This Act established the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) as an emergency agency to bring electric power to rural areas. The REA was considered to be a work opportunity program with at least 90% of its workers to be hired from among the unemployed. Loans were offered to private companies, power districts, municipalities and cooperatives. Mr. Cooke and Congressional leaders assumed that existing utilities would eagerly seek the low cost money and construct facilities to serve rural areas. But that did not happen. After a few months not a single electric company had submitted a loan application. The first loans went to three cooperatives and one municipality. This caused the administration to reconsider its strategy for rural electrification and in 1936 the REA changed its primary purpose from a short-term emergency employment program, to a longer term economic development program for rural areas.

Under the leadership of Senators George Norris of Nebraska and Sam Rayburn of Texas, Congress authorized 410 million dollars for a ten year program to electrify American farms. The REA then offered low interest-rate loans specifically to cooperatives to construct electrical supply infrastructure in rural areas. Cooperatives were to be established as not-for-profit, consumer-owned and managed organizations for the purpose of providing electricity to member customers. To qualify for a loan, farm people were required to take the initiative in setting up their own organizations. The REA offered administrative assistance in setting up these cooperatives and provided low-cost loans for constructing electric power systems.

Getting the cooperatives organized was a huge undertaking. Some farm leaders argued that cooperatives were an unsuitable structure for such a program. Furthermore, very few farmers had experience in building and operating a public utility. In spite of these obstacles this ambitious endeavor forged ahead. In Itasca County, County Agent Art Frick was the point man who organized publicity, drafted letters, arranged for meetings and completed the necessary paper work.

REA plans for Itasca County called for a single County-wide rural electric cooperative that would serve about 1600 rural homesteads. However, REA fieldmen felt that the southern portion of the county had a much better chance of supporting a cooperative than the entire county and recommended that it be separated. The southern rural area of the county formed the Dairyland Cooperative, whose lines were first energized in January, 1941. It was proposed that the remainder of the county be split into two units. But because of its lower population density, remoteness, and soil conditions, this proposal seemed destined to fail. At a joint meeting of these two prospective units held in Effie in August 1940, Art Frick recommended that the two become one, giving them a better chance to qualify for a loan from the REA and survive. A week later, the determined farmers rallied in Bigfork to support a merger and elect a nine member Board of Directors, including Albin Nelson of Jessie Lake. Five committees were established to carry out the various tasks of the new organization.

The first challenge was to sign up a sufficient number of members to make a cooperative feasible. The REA required a minimum of three members per mile of line. But because of the sparse population in northern Itasca County the REA reduced that requirement to two members per mile. Volunteer organizers visited each residence to sign up members one by one and collect five dollars per share. Some offered two or three dollars for their membership. Others offered tamarack logs or labor in lieu of cash. Critics were certain that the area was too poor and too thinly settled to support a cooperative. It was admitted later that some abandoned or unoccupied homes and tax forfeited properties were counted by the sign-up crew as potential future customers. One board member reportedly joked that some creative sign up crew members had imagined haystacks to be houses in their zeal to meet REA requirements. Finally, in April 1941 the REA recognized the North Itasca Electric Cooperative (NIEC) and granted a loan to begin construction.

Line construction began in the Fall of 1941. "Force account labor" was used - meaning that members of the cooperative did the work. This saved the cost of paying for an outside contractor. Several miles of line had been constructed and a few homes had been wired when the outbreak of World War II brought construction to a halt. The line utilized copper wire, but all strategic metals were confiscated for the war effort. Construction resumed after the war. A contract was signed with Minnesota Power and Light and electricity first surged through the lines in October 1945. By the end of that year, 304 miles of lines had been energized serving 272 farms and rural residences. Expansion into the Northome, Mizpah, Funkley, Orth and Haupt areas nine years later helped boost customers to 1728 and brought income and stability to the cooperative.

Electric consumption had a compounding effect: the more you used, the more you "needed." The availability of new appliances stimulated consumption of electricity and attracted new users each year, including non-farm rural residences, businesses, resorts, and seasonal residences. The new growth brought more demand for electricity and

financial strength to the NIEC, and an increasing quality of life for all across northern and central Itasca County. In the years since its humble beginnings, the NIEC has experienced steady growth, serving more than 4800 customers by the end of 2001.

Electricity not only extended the work day, saved labor, and helped make people more productive, but brought life style changes as well. Refrigeration was one of the most important benefits of electricity, recalls lifelong JLW resident Willard Lind. With refrigeration, perishable foods could be kept fresh longer or frozen for later use. Before electricity, meat, milk, and eggs could be kept only for a few days in an ice box, cellar, or cold spring. Blocks of ice were cut and hauled from the lake during winter, packed in sawdust and used in ice boxes during the warmer months. Electricity made that kind of work unnecessary. It created leisure time and brought cultural changes. Electricity made people more independent of one another and interdependence less important. Butchering, for example, had been an important community affair. It was a big job for one family and there was too much fresh meat for them to use before it spoiled. So the community gathered to participate in the ritual butchering. Soon after it was cut, much of the meat was eaten fresh, and some was smoked or salted to preserve it. Most everyone in the community participated and everyone benefited. With refrigeration, such community events soon disappeared.

The REA became the largest capital investment project of the New Deal and one of the most significant economic successes in the history of federal policy-making. It not only met critical needs for electric power, but brought demands for the growing number of electrical appliances. Electricity brought new modes of communication and sources of information to rural America, beginning with radio, followed by television and now computers. A half century after electricity's arrival in the JLW, the urban - rural gap has closed forever. Electricity made it happen!

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Revised 4/5/02

