

Electricity – a Right or a Privilege?

We cannot live without electricity.

I don't normally like to speak in absolute terms, but we've become a society with an overwhelming addiction to electricity.

So, is it a right or a privilege? Whose fault is it that we can't do without? Let's start at the beginning.

By the mid 19th century, electricity had left the jars, copper wires, carbon, sulfur and zinc in the laboratory. It wasn't something dreamers were striving to achieve.

Thomas A. Edison received a patent for the incandescent light bulb in 1880. In 1882, he opened the Pearl Street Station, which generated and delivered power by direct current throughout Manhattan. It provided street lighting and lighting for homes.

About that same time, the city of Wabash, Indiana, became the first city in the world to be electrically lighted. As they say, after that, the rest is history. Cities across the country were soon enjoying the pleasure of electricity, not just on their streets, but in homes and businesses.

Having lights was a great thing, but more great things were to follow. Soon, people had radios, refrigerators, electric stoves and phonographs. More and more things were invented that used electricity.

Sadly, the electricity that was brought into cities didn't make it to the countryside. Rural America was deemed not profitable; the investor owned utilities didn't see that it was a commercial proposition. Farms were too spread out. Electricity was generated at central stations and building more was costly, not to mention stringing the lines. It just made sense to stay in cities where everything was close together.

Electricity was the divider between cities and rural America. City residents had all the benefits allowed by the new inventions. Rural residents considered that they were living in drudgery and darkness, but they remained hopeful that they would one day have electricity.

Consider that farmers milked by hand, hauled endless buckets up from the well, lifted hay into the barn loft, shelled corn by hand and sawed wood by hand.

Inside the home, the farm wives cooked on a wood stove, washed and ironed by hand, and sowed the fields by hand. These were the same things their mothers and grandmothers had done.

They got up at dawn or earlier, and went to bed when the sun went down because kerosene lamps seldom gave off enough light. Old time westerns don't really portray lanterns in the real light.

President Teddy Roosevelt brought the farmer's plight to light, but it wasn't until President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps, or the CCC, and the TVA Act, a system of dams and reservoirs that controlled flooding and provided electricity, that things got rolling.

Then in 1935, Executive Order 7037 created the Rural Electrification Act and rural Americans finally began to get electricity and all the benefits enjoyed by their city neighbors.

That was almost 75 short years ago. Think about how much has happened in that length of time and how many inventions there have been just in our lifetimes that require electricity. Very few people alive today remember the days before electricity.

And the only time we know without electricity is when there's a hurricane or some other storm. Then we get a taste of life without electricity. It's gone in the blink of an eye and we're living the life of our ancestors.

Almost.

We know the lights will be back on in a few days, a week, maybe two at the most, based on our history here.

But think about Kentucky where recent ice storms had power out for three weeks, and a storm like Hurricane Katrina when every pole was knocked down in South Mississippi and South Louisiana and every substation torn apart. Electricity didn't come back for months.

Linemen work in all types of conditions to get the power flowing as quickly and safely as possible because we can't live without it. In the meantime, we huddle around our candles and battery-operated lamps and we complain. And complain, and complain.

We're spoiled. But that's the way of society. We've made ourselves what we are – dependent on electricity – something we're privileged to have but take for granted.

Electricity is the reason for our prosperity, but is this commodity a right or a privilege? Everyone has a different opinion. I say a privilege that we're very fortunate to have and one I never take for granted. You decide what you think.