

Most power pioneers gone but not forgotten

In 2000, as the world readied for the new millennium, *CHELCO News* looked back at the history of rural electrification in Walton and Okaloosa counties.

Most of the power pioneers who helped bring electricity to the rural areas for CHELCO are now gone, as are the ones who celebrated its coming, but the importance of their efforts to improve life lives on every time you turn on a light, cook on an electric stove or perform any of the numerous tasks that require electricity.

As we enter 2012, named the International Year of the Cooperative by the United Nations, we're reminded again of what it took to electrify homes and farms in areas that are now much less rural than they were when CHELCO began.

In just 72 years, homes have gone from a single light hanging from a cord in the kitchen to homes with every electric convenience imaginable.

Few may remember the day that someone came around collecting the \$5 membership fee for what was called the Choctawhatchee project, but lives were changed forever in the early 1940s thanks to the pioneer spirit.

Times will never be the same again.

The following article ran in the January/February 2000 issue of *CHELCO News* and recalls the challenges of getting electricity in rural Okaloosa and Walton counties.

Getting electricity a challenge sixty years ago

All you have to do is flip a switch, and electricity flows. We all take it for granted, and we can't live without it. But some of our neighbors remember the days before electricity and the struggle to get it.

Ninety-year-old Arlie Wooten says he wanted electricity so badly he gave up \$5 to join the newly-formed Choctawhatchee Electric Cooperative in the early '40s. "I thought I was throwing away that five dollars, but I wanted the electricity," Wooten says. "Next to my marriage license, it's the best investment I ever made."

Wooten and his wife, Karina, live near Leonia in north Walton County in the home where Wooten was born. His father built the house that originally had only one room. The house has since been enlarged to six rooms.

The couple married in 1938. She taught school, and he farmed. Wooten relates that some friends from DeFuniak who already had electricity came up to visit them one time. "We thought they had big heads because they had electricity and we didn't," he says. "It wasn't long after that before we got electricity too. I don't see how we got along without it."

Two men from Missouri came by and wired the house for \$20. "All we had was a light with a pull chain," he explains. "Then I bought a second-hand Westinghouse stove." Their electric bill for the house was about \$7 or \$8 a month, according to Wooten.

By the time Wooten got electricity in Walton County, John Hentz had already been working in Okaloosa County to get the co-op started for several years.

Hentz went to work as County Agricultural Agent Jan. 1, 1940. He and his wife, who was expecting their first child, rented a house on the west edge of Crestview on U.S. Highway 90.

He recalls that the towns in Okaloosa County had electricity from Gulf Power, but the smaller villages and rural areas had none. "Back then, Gulf Power wouldn't go a quarter mile out of town in any direction to serve the biggest farmers in the area," Hentz says. "Rural electric

service was just getting started over the country. The public was just beginning to get acquainted with the plan.”

Hentz collected the \$5 application fee from rural residents and assisted Rural Electrification Administration (REA) officials from Washington and Bill Ficklin, an engineer from J.B. McCreary Engineering Co. of Atlanta, the engineering company hired to map the project.

“He mapped the project with his car odometer, locating each applicant, showing where each member lived and how many miles to the next applicant,” Hentz says. “I rode every mile of it with him and identified every applicant.

“Then we organized. The REA officials from Washington took over. They said the project covering two counties was big enough to form a new co-op.”

Originally, Okaloosa County planned to join with the Jay project, later Escambia River Electric Cooperative. Hentz says the government didn’t want the projects to get too big.

Although the project started in Crestview, Hentz says some folks wanted the project moved to DeFuniak Springs because Walton County was larger, and DeFuniak Springs had a nice hotel for the men from Washington to use when they visited the area. The project headquarters was established in Crestview anyway, but Hentz says the Walton county bunch didn’t quit until the project was moved to DeFuniak.

Most folks in the outlying areas of Okaloosa County thought Hentz was crazy when he first began trying to sell them on the idea of electricity. He quotes one elderly man, who asked him, ‘Air you fool enough to tell these here people there’s going to be an electric line through this har community?’ Hentz had the last laugh, because a year later the folks who thought he was crazy were sitting back enjoying the electricity.

By the summer of 1941, Choctawhatchee Electric Cooperative was in full operation. “The Choctawhatchee project became a reality, and it changed peoples’ way of life in the outlying rural areas,” Hentz says. “Before we had electricity on farms, I’ve seen many old farmers trudge all day behind a pair of mules or maybe one horse or mule and have to go home and pump water by hand with an old force pump or pitcher pump for twenty-five or more head of hogs and cows and feed his livestock by lantern light.

“With the coming of rural electricity, people could live in the country and have most of the comforts of town living. Within a year’s time, there wasn’t a fish camp in the county that didn’t have electricity.”

In October of 1941, Hentz was appointed County Agricultural Agent of Walton County, where he continued to work to help rural residents get electricity. Hentz is now 89 and lives in Panama City.

Oscar Harrison hired on as Assistant County Agricultural Agent of Walton County Feb. 1, 1935, four days before he graduated from college. Harrison, who is now 90 years old, also recalls the early days without electricity and the tough times.

The small farmers didn’t have money to pay the \$5 membership fee to sign up for electricity, Harrison says. He worked up a deal with Henry Elliot, then president of the First National Bank, to loan each farmer \$5. The money would come from the farmer’s peanut or cotton allotment, paid by the United States Department of Agriculture.

Harrison says he would write on a slip of paper that the farmer would have a cotton or peanut check coming on a given date. The farmers would take their notes to Elliot at the bank and sign promissory notes for \$5. Then they would take the \$5 to the co-op to pay their

membership fees. When the checks came in to Harrison's office, he would deliver it to the farmers, who would then go to the bank and pay the notes.

Money was scarce during the depression, but the farmers desperately wanted electricity, Harrison says. Harrison's creative financing helped hundreds of Walton County farmers become members of the electric co-op.

Anne Dudley of DeFuniak Springs was a young girl of 7 in 1948 and living in Alabama when her family got electricity. She recalls the friendly, young man from REA who came to install "this wonderful thing called electricity."

"This made a huge difference in my life," she says. "Instead of coming home and immediately doing home work and reading before dark came, I could play and have dinner before doing homework. I could read anytime."

Dudley says she was so fascinated by electricity that she pulled the string each time she went under the light just to be sure it worked.

Nell Burke recalls her father, Oscar Griggs, helped put up poles for CHELCO, although he didn't have electricity in his own home for a while because he was afraid of it.

Radios were a popular item and often the first thing purchased after a home got electricity. Becky Buxton says it was the other way around in her home. "Daddy ordered a big radio," she says. "He brought it home on his shoulder. That was three or four months before we got electricity."

Times will never be the same as they were back in the '40s when the country first became electrified. Hentz says he has no idea how people today think they got electricity. "They probably think they always had it," he says. "I'll never forget the poor old lady who lived in the

southwest corner of the little town of Baker,” he remembers. “It was her life’s desire to have an electric fan. I know it was mighty hard for her to dig up the \$5 for her application fee.”

Now, with the flip of a switch, electricity flows to power innumerable timesaving appliances, all providing a comfort level that wasn’t dreamed of 60 years ago.

“If the lights go out,” Wooten says, “we just call down there to CHELCO and it’s not long before they fix it. Ain’t it great? I don’t see how we got along without it.”