

Life before electricity was way tougher than you think

By **Debbie Stringer**

Long before the digital age transformed our lives, a movement of similar impact emerged to extend electric service into rural America.

Although nearly all towns and cities had electric service by the 1930s, less than 10 percent of rural homes and farms had electricity. In Mississippi, it was less than one percent.

People in rural Mississippi subsisted on hard manual labor before they began organizing electric cooperatives in the mid-1930s to obtain badly needed electricity, with help from a new federal agency, the Rural Electrification Administration (REA).

Few people living today have washed clothes on a scrub board and boiled them in an iron pot set over a fire, or cooked three meals a day on a wood stove. Through the years, *Today in Mississippi* has heard from rural readers for whom these chores were a daily reality before electric lines reached their farms. Such a bleak lifestyle is hard for us to imagine today.

"I don't think young people could go through what we did," wrote Twin County Electric member Mrs. Wayne Hunter, whose daughter was delivered in 1938 by the light of a coal oil lamp.

To celebrate National Cooperative Month, we revisit members' descriptions of home life before rural electrification and the profound changes sparked by its long-awaited arrival. Quotes in this story first appeared in *Today in Mississippi* articles commemorating the 50th anniversary of REA in 1985.

■ It was all done by hand

Mrs. Berry Thornhill, a Magnolia Electric member living in Jayess, described living a "dark, work-hard life" without electric lights, refrigeration, washers, water heaters, water pumps, and dairy equipment.

Something as simple as enjoying a glass of iced tea took extraordinary effort: Several homemakers wrote of wrapping 50-pound ice blocks in quilts to keep them from melting and storing them in the hearth (in summer), or packing them in sawdust. Ice was chipped off as needed for iced tea after a long, hot day of work at home or in the fields.

Mrs. Marianna Tolle Hill, a 4-County Electric member in Noxubee County, recalled her family storing perishable foods inside an apple crate submerged in a creek.

"We had about the same luxuries as all the other neighbors: outside toilet, an iron wash pot, an iron stove with a warming closet, the treadle White sewing machine and a wood pile. We were in a depression but did not know its meaning since we were too young," Mrs. Hill said.

Smoke, soot and ashes were constant irritants from the ever-present fires. Wood was burned to warm the

house, cook meals, heat water and boil laundry. Coal oil lamps provided the only light after dark.

"Sometimes the smoke would blow back down the flue into the kitchen. The kitchen would be filled with smoke and I would have to leave out for a while coughing



Electric light was a thing of wonder to rural Americans in the 1930s.

and my eyes burning and running water," said Mrs. Alvin Johnson, a Southern Pine Electric member living in Crystal Springs.

"My mother was awfully proud of her gasoline washing machine.... Can you imagine the smells of gasoline and oil and the noise?" said Singing River Electric member Joel Rogers, of Pascagoula.

"Mom used a charcoal bucket to heat the old smoothing iron, and no matter how hard she tried to avoid it, smut marks seemed to get on a Sunday shirt," recalled Mrs. Lera N. Johnson, of Mantee. "The day power was turned on, I came home from school and Mama was ironing. I don't think I will ever forget her beaming face as she looked up and said, 'There's nothing grander than an electric iron.'"

■ Electricity is coming!

Mrs. W.E. Carter, of Louisville, joined the many rural Mississippians eager to help organize a local electric cooperative—in her case, East Mississippi Electric. "In the mid-1930s, we heard about the REA and began holding community meetings," she wrote. "Soon I went to work in the program and visited every house in the community, signing up members and securing rights-of-way. I plotted each house in the county and drew the lines on a map. It took more than two years of awfully hard work, but when we got lights it made life so much easier for us. It was progress—wonderful progress to me!"

"I thought it was the happiest moment of my life when I came home and found we had electric lights," wrote Mrs. Charles R. Marvin of Hazlehurst, a Southwest Mississippi Electric member.

When Southern Pine Electric energized the new

power lines serving Mrs. Alvin Johnson's home, she was dazzled by the change. "The lights were so bright they almost hurt our eyes at first, since we were accustomed to the dim [coal oil] lamp light. But we were so happy and excited! At last our hopes and dreams had come true," she said.

Monroe County Electric member Mrs. Lois Faulkner, of Greenwood Springs, remembered the single light bulb dangling from the ceiling of her childhood home, filling the room with light for the first time. "For a few nights, every room in every house in the neighborhood was lit up, needed or not. We all wanted the world to know we were out of the backwoods—we had electricity!" she recalled.

"The first thing my husband bought me was a wringer washing machine. I was so happy I sat down and cried," wrote Northcentral Electric member Mrs. Brooksie D. Smith, of Byhalia.

"When we got our TV, Papa thought the people on the screen could see us watching them," said Mrs. Mary Boyles Woodard, a Dixie Electric member in Sidon.

Although her parents "got lights" in 1947, Mrs. Woodard's mother retained some of her old ways. "She passed away in 1983 at the age of 90 years and 10 months, and up until the last two years she was still washing her clothes by hand on her old rub board."

■ The next greatest thing

Mrs. Estelle Barlow Smith, a Southern Pine Electric member, recounted a story from radio show host Paul Harvey: "He was telling of an old gentleman in a rural area in 1940 who said that the greatest thing a person could possibly have is the love of God in his heart, and the next greatest thing is to have electricity in his home. I felt like crying when I heard that because I, for one, also believe it's true."

A national survey revealed that only electric irons nudged out radios as the most popular purchase after rural homes were electrified. Batteries were expensive and tended to die during the most popular radio dramas, or so it seemed. The new, more reliable plug-in models delivered timely news, farm market reports, weather forecasts, live baseball games, entertainment from Jack Benny to the Lone Ranger, and educational homemaking programs.

For Mrs. W.A. Bishop, of Louin, radio brought "good preaching" into her rural home.

"I do thank God for letting me live up to the time when our work is made much lighter and easier by electricity," she said.

"Only one who has done without this convenience for years can fully appreciate the significance of now possessing it," wrote Jean Carraway, an East Mississippi Electric member.