

When air conditioning came to Carolina country

In 1938, you could get air conditioning in a Packard automobile, but it was another 30 years before it became a household item in rural North Carolina

By Michael E.C. Gery

It's hard to imagine that 40 years ago, next to no one in rural North Carolina had air conditioning at home. In 1963, electric cooperatives and their staff "electrification advisors" were helping members update their indoor wiring and choose electric refrigerators, freezer chests, barn ventilation systems, electric space heating and water heating systems, but air conditioners were still a few years and more than a few dollars removed from North Carolina's rural households.

To cool off in the hot months of the early 1960s, North Carolinians at home and in small businesses within electric cooperative service areas still relied on electric fans or the occasional breeze through an open window. A photo from the time shows a woman working at an office desk while soaking her feet in a pan of ice cubes. Big shade trees surely increased the value would help keep you from feeling woozy on hot days. A plunge into a river's swimming hole or a neighbor's pool were even better.

It's not that the technology didn't exist to cool and dehumidify inside air. It's just that air conditioning would not become affordable in rural North Carolina until the mid-1960s and later. People could certainly take a hot drive to a nearby city and wander around an air-conditioned department store or loaf inside a cooled movie theater for a few hours.



This 1965 industry photo from the June 1965 issue of The Carolina Farmer suggested that air-conditioning "makes entertaining on even the hottest days a pleasure for hostess and guests."

In 1902, 20 years after the nation's first electric power plant went online in New York, Willis Carrier, the "father of air conditioning," headed the "experimental engineering" department of the heating equipment engineering firm, Buffalo Forge Co., when he conceived of air conditioning. Carrier said he was standing in a hot Pittsburgh train station when he realized that air could be dried by saturating it with chilled water to induce condensation. That year he designed an air cooling and dehumidifying system for a Brooklyn printer who had complained of an inability to make color reproductions because changes in heat and humidity altered his paper.

The North Carolina textile industry played an early role in the advancement of air conditioning when in 1906 the Carrier Corporation installed its first industrial-strength system at Chronicle Cotton Mills in Gaston County. The project is also considered the point when the term "air conditioning" first entered the language, according to the Air Conditioning and Refrigeration Institute.

Air conditioning came to urban movie theaters in the 1920s, to department stores in the 1930s, to the Packard automobile in 1938 and into affluent urban and suburban American homes after World War II.

Residential air conditioning accompanied the post-war economic boom. But price remained an obstacle in all but the wealthiest neighborhoods. Installing air conditioning in a new house in 1952 added about 8 percent to construction costs.

In her 2002 book, "Cool Comfort," published by the Smithsonian Institution to mark the 100th year of American air conditioning, Marsha E. Ackermann tells how Carrier Corporation in 1953 sponsored a nationwide competition among architects to design a house containing central air conditioning that a middle class family could afford. The winning design – a 1,000-square-foot house with sealed windows – came from two Argentinean architects based in Raleigh. Ackermann recounts how House & Home magazine, published by Time magazine's Henry Luce, produced a 24-page supplement in 1954 praising residential air conditioning and envisioning a new lifestyle among Southerners who may come to prefer to stay indoors in summer. Quoted were obviously affluent residents of suburban Dallas and Houston: "When we have a party now, the men leave their coats on," and "When you advertise for a girl, they ask if you have air conditioning." And a woman was quoted to say, "The movies and the automobile broke up family life, but televi-



Cartoon in Carolina Country, July 1966.

sion and air conditioning are bringing families together again.” It wasn’t long before air-conditioning equipment whirring outside a house became a status symbol.

The 1960 U.S. Census found 12.4 percent of the nation’s houses equipped with central or room air conditioning. The South reported 18 percent overall, but among non-white Southern householders the figure was 3.8 percent.

Ackermann reports that automobile air conditioning developed at a much slower pace than home cooling. In the early 1960s, factory-installed AC added about \$600 and considerable weight to new cars selling for less than \$3,000. Most air-conditioned cars were sold in the South and Southwest at the time. It wasn’t until 1969 that half the nation’s cars contained air conditioning.

The “hot weather blessing” becomes “another real bargain”

North Carolina’s electric cooperatives began promoting air-conditioning systems in 1965. Carolina Country magazine (then called “The Carolina Farmer”) in June 1965 carried a special edition of its section “The Carolina Homemaker” devoted to window-mounted air-conditioning units. “Homemaker” editor Jennie Layne began this way: “Will this be your first summer of living with an air conditioner? Congratulations – you’ve a wonderful summer ahead of you.” The piece proceeds to advise people on where, how and when to use the systems, including suggestions along the lines of “Grandma’s tricks” such as completing indoor, heat-making activities, such as baking, before the

day reached its peak warm temperature.

Part of the idea was to inform consumer-members that air conditioning was easy to operate and promised both health and social benefits. “Why suffer thru another hot day, or turn and toss on these hot, muggy, sleepless nights?” a co-op advertisement asked. “Air conditioning does more than cool; it also filters the air. This brings welcome relief for those who suffer from hay fever and asthma. And there’s less dirt and dust for Mom to clean. Yet the cost is low, only pennies a day thanks to low-cost rural electric power. Another real bargain in better living, the modern, total-electric way.”

In 1966, ads appeared for a new window-mounted system, the “U-Mount” by Hotpoint (“first with the features women want most”). The U-Mount was billed as quiet, easy to install and stylish. It had top-mounted controls and came in three sizes: 5,800, 7,800 and 9,000 Btus.

Even in 1967, the cooperatives continued basic instruction and advice about “this hot weather blessing” of air conditioning. “The Carolina Homemaker” in June 1967 issued a question-and-answer feature entitled “Puzzled About Air Conditioning?”

Today, most North Carolina cooperative members — even those in the mountains — consider air conditioning essential. A 2000 survey of North Carolina cooperatives revealed that 90 percent of us have air conditioning at home. But there are still plenty who remember the days and nights before we could simply set a thermostat or turn a dial to keep our rooms or cars cool in summer. And some of us still prefer just to open a window.