

“That’s the good part  
about electricity:  
As we wear out, it don’t.”

Remembering when  
the lights came on



In the mid-1980s, staff at the state’s electric cooperatives interviewed members to record their memories of when their cooperative brought electric power to their communities. The project helped mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the federal Rural Electrification Administration, which encouraged people in the latter 1930s and 1940s to form cooperatives. The oral history project was conducted in conjunction with the North Carolina Humanities Committee and historian Lu Ann Jones. The North Carolina Association of Electric Cooperatives collected the recordings and published some in a book, “Living History.” Here are excerpts from the collection, with photos from the REA archives.

### **BEFORE THE POWER CAME** *“It Made Us Want Electricity”*

The towns had lights. We were used to electricity when we’d go to town. Had kin people in town. When you’d go down there and see they had electricity and a bathroom and we didn’t, it made us want electricity even more.

*Gerald Whitehurst / Straits*

We had electricity up until sundown. Had it during the day. When sundown came, why, they turned it off. It was a private operation. The man had a steam motor and he generated electricity, but he’d turn it off at sundown.

*Douglas Robinson / Mars Hill*

There were no modern conveniences. Read by kerosene lamp, washed on a washboard, heated water drawn from a well in a big iron pot, cooked on a wood stove, heated irons on the wood stove and walked 20 miles back and forth from the stove to the ironing board to do a week’s ironing. Took a bath in a wash pan. Had an outdoor privy. If you wanted to have ice tea in the summer, you walked some miles to the store to get a piece of ice and when you hot home half of it had melted. At night you used a chamber pot and had to carry it out in the morning no matter what the weather.

*Edythe Hollowell Jones / Tarboro*

To have beef back then you would have to cook it right straight. And chicken—if you would kill it for Sunday, you would have to salt it and hang it up under the eaves, because it was cooler outside.

*Katie McGehee / Sanford*

We’d go into Turkey and get a mess of fish on Saturday morning. We had to eat ‘em that same day. They were better at dinner than they were at supper.

*Henry P. Lucas / Turkey*

I remember our neighbor having electricity. We’d just go out at night and look at their lights.

*Dema Reeves Lyall / Nathans Creek*

You can imagine six, seven kids trying to crowd around a lamp to see. Or else we sat in front of the fireplace and did our homework.

*Shirley Collier / Hope Mills*

That’s the reason I got these crooked fingers. See? Both of them’s crooked. Milking cows by hand.

*Henry P. Lucas / Turkey*

## HERE IT COMES “I’ve Never Heard Such Hollering”

It created a lot of excitement. Children in the neighborhood came out to watch the construction of the lines. Their dads were glad to help out in anyway. In one particular instance I recall I took my own team of horses and pulled line through the Lumber River swamp because the cooperative did not have equipment at that time to go over these rough places. And when we got to the river with the lines, then the neighbors got together with the construction crew and pulled the lines by hand across the river. Swam the river and pulled the lines across.

*Hubert Prevatte | Pembroke*

You’d suggest to a farmer that you’re going to put some poles down in his field. The first thing he says, “I don’t want to plow around ‘em.” If I could see a persimmon tree in that field, I’d point at it and say, “Well you’re plowing around this persimmon tree and it’s got roots out in your way, and you’re not getting anything out of that persimmon tree. Why not plow around a pole that’s giving you and your neighbors service?” You’d be surprised how many people would sign up just on that one argument.

*Al Wall | Asheboro*

One Saturday, I took about four men to pull the wire to one house. A bunch of their people had come in from Florida—must have been ten or twelve of them there that night. When we turned that power on, they had everything hooked up in the house, and she flashed up! I’ve never heard such hollering and laughing in this world. You know we had to come in and eat supper with ‘em. They had the derndest supper you ever seen. They were the proudest of any people I ever seen in my life.

*Pat Patterson | Highlands*

The only thing that bothered me was how that current came in. How did you measure it? I couldn’t see how it was going to come out of the wire outside and into a home and you could do something with it.

*John Godwin | Pembroke*

## WHEN THE LIGHTS WENT ON “Thank the Lord”

We just felt so good and rejoiceful that we thanked the Lord for it.

*Sam Oswalt | Iredell County*

Some of ‘em were even afraid of electricity. Some felt that the juice was in the wire, and if you did not have a light bulb in every socket, electricity would leak out and it would run your bill up.

*Quinton Hussey | Asheboro*

After electricity came, my aunt had a radio. She was a real religious person, and she thought it was a sin to listen to anything on it except preaching or gospel music. So if you ever did get it, you had to sneak some place and just turn it on real quick and listen until you thought she was coming. Then you’d cut it off, put it back, and run!

*Shirley Collier | Hope Mills*

I remember Grandma ironing with her first electric iron. She’d plug in her iron and let it get good and hot. Test it to see if it was hot enough. Then she’d pull the plug out of the wall and iron as fast as she could! She’d unplug it, iron until it got too cold, then she’d plug it back in again and let it reheat.

*Mary Dryman | Highlands*

The older we get, seems like the more help electricity is to us. That’s the good part about electricity: As we wear out, it don’t. Ⓡ

*Yates Abernathy | Vale*

