

"Of all the similar organizations the country over, the Boone County REMC was the first in Indiana and one of the first few in the United States to accomplish its purpose—the bringing of electricity actually to the doors of farm homes. And when the REMC units have completed their work, it will be remembered that Boone County led the way."

—Public Service Co. of Indiana advertisement
Rural Electrification Edition
"The Lebanon Reporter"
September 26, 1936

Pole-setting start of something big

Icy winds blowing across the Boone County flatlands didn't deter hundreds of farmers from watching a creosoted utility pole being stuck in a five-foot hole.

They knew that this simple pole-setting ceremony on January 9, 1936 would eventually lead to a better life for all of them.

The historic occasion was certainly due to months of hard work by the fledgling Boone County Rural Electric Membership Cooperative. Formed June 18, 1935, the REMC quickly got to work hiring employees, setting up an office, purchasing materials, and signing up members. On July 22, 1935, the Rural Electrification Administration granted one of its first loans, for \$567,926 to the cooperative. The first goal was energizing 60 miles of line out of Lebanon, west and northwest into Sugar Creek Township.

The pole-setting, attended by such luminaries as Morris Cooke, Rural Electrification Administration administrator, and I. Harvey Hull, Indiana Farm Bureau Cooperative general manager and Indiana Statewide REMC founder, was held on the corner of Noble and Lebanon Streets, Lebanon. It only lasted an hour—which was still quite a long time to withstand the central Indiana winter chill. But nonetheless, it was a celebration to behold!

Music from the 139th Field Artillery Band blared before Cooke



Hundreds of people watched the pole hole being dug at the Boone County REMC pole-setting ceremony.

turned the first shovelful of dirt for the hole. James K. Mason, Indiana Statewide president and master of ceremonies, was next to participate in the digging.

Some 500 people attended a program at the Lebanon High School auditorium following the pole-setting ceremony. One portion of the celebration was a portrayal of the new age of electrification featuring 92-year-old Eliza Routh, representing tallow-candle pioneer days, and 5-year-old Clark Clifford Woody, as the modern generation.

Cooke, in a speech to the group, emphasized the tremendous potential of rural electrification. "We are starting to build the first unit of a countywide rural electrification project," he said. "Even this first unit means a great deal to workers and businessmen of Boone County. It means a lot more to workers and businessmen in practically every state in the Union."

Hull presented the following resolution to the group, which was unanimously adopted:

"The members and friends of the Boone County Rural Electric Membership Corporation and the Indiana Statewide Rural Electric Membership Corporation hereby express our deep appreciation to the Federal Government and specifically to President Roosevelt and Hon. Morris L. Cooke, Administrator of the Rural Electrification Administration, for making possible the present program for rural electrification.

"We are glad to make Boone County and perhaps other Indiana counties a laboratory or testing ground for the practicability of cooperative distribution of rural electric power and we urge that everyone concerned study all phases of this demonstration and that just as soon as the soundness of the plan has been reasonably proved, the Government proceed to make available a revolving fund which may be used continuously until all feasible rural electric projects have been served."

The first 60 miles of line were completed and energized in Boone County on May 22, 1936. A second section of lines was completed in August 1936.

By the end of 1937, 2,000 rural families and businesses were receiving REMC power in Boone County.

"None of us little fellas out here in the country realized what was goin' to happen when this rural electricity thing started."

—Clark Woody

Clark Woody family: first to get power

To Clark Woody, electricity meant more than a flip of the switch. Like many other rural Hoosiers in the 1930s, Woody argued and organized and pleaded and toiled just so the power of power could illuminate the countryside.

But unlike the many other diligent rural men and women who worked tirelessly to turn the lights on in the country, Woody acquired a claim to fame the others couldn't! His rural Thorntown farm was the first in the United States to be electrified through Rural Electrification Administration lines.



The Clark Woody home was the first in the country to receive electricity under the REA Act. Although the original house was burned in a fire in 1941, it was rebuilt on the same foundation. Posing by the house are Woody and his son Richard.

"There were men everywhere—in all the rooms and closets, turning on all the lights and switches to make sure they worked; they weren't really sure it would work," Lois Woody once said, recalling that fateful day, May 22, 1936.

For on that day, when Clark and Lois Woody received that first meter, electricity was still an enigma. It was also something of a miracle—a means to the end of the dim light of the kerosene lamp, the scorching heat of the woodstove-heated "sad iron," the well-worn washboard.

All would be replaced by electricity's modern conveniences, which were initially known only by urban residents.

Woody, who passed away on July 5, 1973, a little over a month shy of his 91st birthday, watched his life change after E (Electricity) Day, when his home was electrified. His son, Clifford, who succeeded Woody as a director of the Boone County REMC, remembers, "One of the first things my father did was hook up a grinder to sharpen tools. Then he put an electric motor on the corn chiller." Clifford, five years old when his home was energized, sat on the porch steps and watched the electric meter being installed.

A former school teacher who battled ulcers before deciding to settle down to a tranquil life on a 120-acre farm, Woody learned there was no tranquility to getting electricity.



Lois Woody, shown in 1946, found her electric kitchen appliances very convenient.

"When we asked the power company about puttin' electricity out here, they told us we'd have to buy our own transformers and wiring, and do the wiring ourselves," Woody explained. Clifford Woody recalls that Frankfort Power and Light, which supplied power to Thorntown, charged \$900 to run electric lines to the rural areas.

'I egged them on'

Those exorbitant prices, though, didn't deter Woody's determination to get electricity. "...Some fellas around here were really thinkin' hard about gettin' electricity, so I just kind of egged them on.

"Four or five of us went to Washington, D.C.," Woody said. "Drove a car over there; spent all night a drivin'. Went down to the REA office and talked with the administrator."

Soon after that, on June 18, 1935, a group of farmers met "in the little courtroom" to discuss bringing rural electrification to Boone County. A set of bylaws was adopted, a board of directors chosen. Woody was one of those elected.

Then the hard work began. Policies needed to be established. Membership applications needed to be solicited. Many meetings were held.

Getting people to agree to initial electric service was no easy task.



Electricity made life easier for Woody in the workshop. (Picture is from the mid-1940s.)

"At that time, many people were afraid to sign up because they thought that they'd lose their farms to the government if this electricity thing failed; and there was a lack of money, too," Woody explained. After all, this was the heart of the Depression. "When that first 60 miles of line got electricity in 1936, the country went crazy — everybody wanted electricity then.

"In the beginning, we had to have three members per mile before we could build a line down the road," Woody continued. "Since a lot of guys didn't take electricity, their neighbors who wanted it had to put some pressure on 'em."

But, as Woody could attest to, applying the pressure was worth it. That little bit of prodding helped turn the lights on in the country.

"I know my folks had a washer with a motor on it — a gasoline motor that run the washer. It was built right in with it, underneath, and it had a little pedal, and you stomped and you stomped your leg off to get it started. It did the job once you got it started. It was noisy and smoky...and you had a hose that run out the door...let the flies in. Those things all went by the wayside."

—REMC member remembering the early days

Wives' chores easier with electricity to help

Electricity changed things for the rural homemaker who was accustomed to doing things the good — and hard — old fashioned way. An often printed "receipt" for washing clothes in the "old days" illustrates the difficult life of a farm wife:

1. Bild fire in back yard to het kettle of rain water.
2. Set tubs so smoke won't blow in eyes if wind is pert.
3. Shave one hole cake lie sope in biling water.
4. Sort things. Make three piles. One pile white. One pile cullord. One pile werk briches and rags.
5. Stur flour in cold water to smooth then thin down with biling water.
6. Rub dirty spots on board. Scrub hard. Then bile. Rub cullord but don't bile, just rench and starch.
7. Take white things out of kettle with broom stick handel, then rench, blew and starch.
8. Spred tee towels on grass.
9. Hang old rags on fence.
10. Pour rench water in flower bed.
11. Scrub porch with hot soapy water.
12. Turn tubs upside down.
13. Go put on cleen dress — smooth hair with side combs, brew cup of tee — set and rest and rock a spell and count blessins.