BAD OLD DAYS

By Oscar Rau

To me, the greatest of services to come to the aid of rural people was, and still is, Rural Electric and Telephone service. There is just nothing I know of that has made a greater contribution to rural life and to the towns and cities which serve these areas than rural electric and telephone service.

Although the REA program became law as early as 1935, it suffered its share of delays. The program was originally designed to have investor-owned power companies provide this service. However, most decided not to use it.

It took time to organize cooperatives to go ahead with the task of providing service to everyone wanting it, no matter how remote their farms were.

But then came World War II, and the war effort had priority on strategic materials. More time elapsed. Furthermore, after the war, there was a boycott against selling wire to REA cooperatives! Finally, in the late 1940s, it became evident that we were going to have electric power.

There was then a tremendous rush to get farmsteads adequately wired. Electricians were suddenly swamped with more work than they could possibly do. Consequently, many farms were self-wired—sometimes with the neighbor’s help. I remember having helped wire five farms. Afterwards, a qualified inspector would approve the work.

Many people were so anxious to get power that they bought electrical appliances months before the lines were energized!

Bad Old Days?

To take you back to what is now commonly called “The Good Old Days” (which may have had some spiritual virtues), my comment is

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General Electric

Sale

REFRIGERATOR 15% off

But Ma, we don’t even have electricity on the farm yet!

RATS!
that they were the “Bad Old Days.”

Life on the farm was very primitive, and here are a few examples:

- To get up early meant lighting a kerosene lamp or a lantern.
- Breakfast was cooked on a wood or kerosene stove.
- Perishable foods were kept in a cellar or hung into a well to keep them cool in summer and from freezing in winter.
- Water had to be carried in pails to the hogs, chickens, or to the house for cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes—and, of course, for the weekly Saturday bath.
- Water for cattle was pumped by windmill. When there was not enough wind, you pumped water by hand.
- Cows were milked by hand, and one of the hardest chores was to turn the cream separator to speed after a hard day’s work.
- But probably the most appalling thing was the outhouse, which was beastly cold in winter and full of flies in the summer—hardly a place that was conducive to good health or comfort.

**Energy in Early 50s**

Well, it certainly was a happy day when the lines were finally energized in the early 1950s. It was a happy day not only for farmers but perhaps even more so for businesspeople who sold a multitude of appliances and services.

Perhaps the first appliances were radios and electric irons, followed closely by major appliances like washing machines and refrigerators.

An Ashley dealer claimed his store shipped in a train-car load of deep freezers. The freezers were all quickly sold and delivered.

That was really only the beginning because farmers made major investments in water pressure systems and sewer installations.

Milking machines and automatic cattle waterers quickly increased the size of the farming operation, and, at the same time, increased production manyfold.

Today’s farm, in most respects, is a place where the standard of living is nearly equal to that enjoyed in town, which includes telephone service.

**Telephone’s Changes**

Telephone service came a little later. It also enhanced rural living.

There were a few farms which had the crank-and-holler telephone system, but it was very limited.

Some of us drove around to sign up farmers for telephone service. We needed enough places to make projects feasible.

Many believed the telephone to be a bit of a luxury and an added expense, but when the lines began to physically appear, many more took the service.

We were getting modern dial service even though it was multi-party.

There was much to be enjoyed by visiting neighbors over the phone. But soon the lines were very busy during business hours when you had to ask people to get off the line in order to make an im-
important call.

During the 1960s, we had two devastating sleet storms. The storms quickly changed the attitudes about phone service. People realized how dependent they were on the need to communicate.

The next important advance was when telephone lines were placed underground and service was updated to one-party with direct distance dialing and machine billing.

We have really only scratched the surface with telecommunications since there are a raft of services waiting to be used. To name a few: video news, computer services, banking, and informational services.

With Rural Electric and Telephone service, farmers have substantially increased their already extraordinary production because these services have contributed much to the efficiency of their operations.

Rural people now have more time for social and political activities. We are now a part of the action, which was not the case before the advent of electric and telephone service.

Lifestyles are greatly improved because of REA. Ways of living used to be primitive and dismal, but thank God for today and a brilliant future.

Oscar Rau of rural Ashley is currently the president of KEM Electric Cooperative and has served in that position since 1972. Also, he has been a member of Dickey Rural Telephone Cooperative's board of directors since November 1963, and is its president.