

Electricity near Streeter, North Dakota

By Dr. Don Hoffman, Redlands, California

I was born on "VJ Day" in August of 1945. My earliest recollections began about 1950. At the time we had a 32 Volt Electrical System on our family farm about 15 miles SW of Streeter, North Dakota. I don't remember the year that Mom and Dad had the house 'wired' for 32 Volt. However, I heard about the installation many times. Dad's dear friend from his childhood days... "Todie" Zimmerman from Carrington, ND wired the house. When the job was finished "Todie" insisted that 'Little Donnie' be the first to flip the switch. I could barely get my little finger 'up' to the switch but was able to flip it ON!! It was possibly 1947.

Electricity was generated by a generator driven by a 3-bladed propeller. This assembly was atop a 40 foot steel tower. In the basement of our house was a small panel with a guage and some switches next to two rows of Large Upright Rectangular Glass 'jars' which were the batteries. There were 16 Batteries each capable of 2 volts.

There seems to be CONSTANT wind on the Great Plains but at times there is calm that can last for days. From time to time this happened and the lights would get dimmer and dimmer. I can recall times that I was asked to go down to the basement and look at the 'guage' to see how much electricity was left in the batteries. Apparently decisions were then made as to what electrical devices or how many lights could be used that night. It was important to save enough 'power' to run the Cream Separator the next day.

On occasion I can clearly recall my Parents sending a note to the teacher to tell that my Sister could not get her homework done the night before. This was because their had been no wind, the batteries were low and there was not sufficient light wherewith to read and study.

My Mother did the laundry on windy days. Not only for the wind to dry the laundry on the clothesline but to provide the power needed to run the 'washmachine' motor. Interestingly we did not use the term 'Washing Machine'.

Our 'Wind Charger' was 40 feet tall. Our 'Windmill' for pumping water was 30 feet tall. To this day I can fairly closely 'guess' the height of something in that range because of those two 'standards' I so often saw as a child.

This TALL 'Wind Charger' served other purposes as well. Since our farm was on a hill, the tallest point in the immediate neighborhood, we could climb that tower armed with binoculars and SEE things FAR away. As a Child this was a great pastime. Also, in those "Pre-Cellphone" days, the 'Wind Charger' served as a 'communication' device. When it was time for dinner, (City People call it Lunch) one of us was commissioned to climb the tower and hang a rug over one of the ladder rungs. Dad would see this from up to a mile away and come home for dinner.

From time to time disaster strikes out on the Plains. One morning after a particular robust thunderstorm my Uncle Herman Miller drove into our yard and asked if we could come over and 'help' them.

Lightning had struck somewhere on the Wiring of his 32 Volt System. That event broke ALL of his (16) glass battery jars. Battery acid and broken glass was all over the basement floor. I was young but can remember the

precaution of rubber gloves and rubber overshoes to tackle and clean up the mess. Strangely I do not recall what they used for electricity after that. I suspicion that "REA" was on the way and was soon the new source of power.

The "Rural Electrification Association" (REA) came into our neighborhood in the early to mid-50's. Again I don't remember the exact year. This was BIG excitement. One of the wonderful aspects of this miracle was the "Yard Light". We could flip a switch and LIGHT UP the entire yard. What a 'Wonder'. Many Youth Events and Family 'Parties' were enjoyed around a 'campfire' in the yard under that "Yard Light". Going out to check the cattle before bedtime on seriously sub-zero winter nights was so much more desirable with that "Yard Light".

Once we had "REA" I can remember another curious phenomenon. Now that the 32 Volt systems were no longer needed and dismantled one would see these big battery 'jars' in homes everywhere. They were used as fish aquariums, flower and rock arrangement aquariums as well as all manner of things one could do with such a large glass 'jar'. I remember seeing these 'jars' well into the 1960's. They were probably even used to make 'Sauerkraut'!!

The Farms were then 'Electrified' but the our Country School, Ketterling #1, was not. That wonderful One-Room school functioned until the Spring of 1960 and never had electricity. We always had a Christmas Program with Plays, Singing, Gifts (everyone chose names and traded gifts), Candy and Food. These wonderful events were held during the daylight hours because of no electric lights. However, on one or two occasions this Joyous event was held at night!! Families were encouraged to bring their kerosene barn lanterns and kitchen lanterns. The kitchen lanterns were set on desks and tables while the barn lanterns were hung from a steel rod that passed thru the room above the blackboard and windows. This effect was Wonderful and I can 'picture' it Exactly, to this day!

This is an overview of some of my recollections of rural electrical power in the late 40's and 1950's near Streeter, ND.

Dr. Don Hoffman Redlands,CA

Originally from Streeter, ND