

IN THE BEGINNING

by I. W. Patterson

Early in 1936, I had an electric shop at Fruita and had been selling Onan light plants and wiring farms when I learned that the R.E.A. Federal Program had been promoted by Congress, and after communicating with them, began developing an area north and east of Fruita and had developed about thirty-eight or forty miles of line when I learned that another group, The Grand Valley Water Users Association, were also planning the same thing. I called on Rex Rankin and found he and Orval Herron in Rex's office and we began a discussion of this and at that time, we decided that the best way to get it started was to start taking applications and getting some fees collected to carry on the mapping expenses. At that time, we figured that \$5.00 per member would be sufficient to finance the project, and I pulled out a \$5.00 bill, laid it on the counter, and Rex gave me a receipt for it. This was for electric service to my farm. That was the beginning.

On June 2, 1936, a group of men from all points of the northwest quarter of Mesa County met at Fruita, Colorado, for the purpose of seeing what could be done about taking advantage of the R.E.A. Federal Program. Up to this time, a committee of the Grand Valley Water Users Association and myself had carried on negotiations with R.E.A. relative to a project for Mesa County. It was now necessary that an organization be set up to carry on the work. This group of men elected a Board of nine directors and the board elected officers. The company was organized and on August 12, 1936, the Grand Valley Rural Power Lines was incorporated as a Colorado corporation.

I was employed as Manager and Mr. Ernest C. Porter of Denver was employed as the company's engineer. The Board of Directors began soliciting memberships all over the area, and we set up a drawing board in my garage at Fruita and began plotting the location of those that were signed up each day by the Board Members and in September had secured about 600 applications.

This work was very discouraging. It was difficult to explain to the farmers that there was a possibility of getting highline electric

service. They just didn't believe it. I can remember one Sunday going out to Pete Landini's place northeast of Fruita and happened in on a family Sunday picnic. There were a number of families there and they were having a big time. When I explained to Pete that I was soliciting memberships, he laughed and said he would give me the \$10.00 for the membership fee but he doubted if he would ever see electricity.

We had to set down the figures showing the cost of kerosene for lamps, the price of ice they were getting from Dee Smith who was running an ice route through the valley in the summer, and the radio batteries they had to buy for their radios. We could just then total up about \$2.75 or \$3.00 a month for these items of cost that the electricity would replace. It was discouraging at times. The potential in Grand Valley figured out about six subscribers per mile and we were just barely able to get three, and in September of course, we had what we thought would be enough to make an application to R.E.A. for a loan. I went to Denver, in Ernie Porter's office in the Wilda Building at 14th and Welton Street, and together with an engineer, Mr. Robinson from New York, we planned the rural electric system that we thought would be the answer to the problem out there.

We planned a 4800 volt distribution system, three substations in the valley being fed by the 11,000 volt transmission circuit that the Public Service Company had at Fruita. When we got this all figured out, Ernie took it to Washington, D.C., only to see it thrown in the waste paper basket there, and a new 7200/12470 volt distribution circuit planned while he was there. During the time we were working up the original plan of the system in the Grand Valley, Robinson and I would work until about 2:00 o'clock in the morning because there was so much disturbance in the day time from the American Legion Convention which was then in progress in Denver. I remember one incident especially. We had worked quite late and had gone back to the Cosmopolitan Hotel and just fell over into bed, worn out, went to sleep and a little later I awakened to find Robinson setting up in his bed and outside in the corridor, a bagpipe and a drum, beating away industriously. Those Legionnaires really kept us awake.

Mr. Porter succeeded in getting plans approved in Washington,

and the money had already been set up so that we advertised for bids, and on the second day of December, 1936, a contract for construction was let to the Federal Engineering and Construction Company of Kansas City, and work was started on February 1, 1937.

We were all new to this type of work. We were just as new as the R.E.A. They were unable to help us very much. We had to spot meters, design lines, stake lines, secure right of ways, secure tree trimming permits, and in general, try to keep things moving so we could get the lines built. Bill Calloway, now of Kansas City, Sales Manager for the Maloney Transformer Company, was then Construction Superintendent for the Federal Engineering & Construction Company. He gave us a lot of suggestions and was generally quite helpful. The lines were completed September 17, 1937, and energized.

We had spent all of the money in the R.E.A. loan to build lines and had expected to get a loan for Operating Purposes of around \$10,000 but R.E.A. had no such plan and therefore, we had no equipment to begin operations of the system. The Company had no credit and could not borrow money because of the Federal Mortgage. I went to Charlie Wilsea and bought a pickup from him on a personal note paying \$50.00 a month on the car. No money down. I did the same thing with Intermountain Printing and Stationery Company. Bought a typewriter and adding machine under the same plan. Laura Mae Wampler was employed as bookkeeper and Willis Hinman as Attorney. The Board of Directors consisted of Orval Herron, C. E. Blumenshine, Rex Rankin, J. F. Schults, Stanley Cronk, J. A. Edling, C. W. Likes, G. B. Linton, and C. S. Saxton.

When we energized the line September 17, 1937, we had 250 meters connected, the other 250 had not yet wired their homes nor did they seem inclined to do so at the time. We were all worried about the income, whether or not we would be able to collect enough money to pay the power bill and the salaries. In negotiating the power contract with the Public Service Company of Colorado, they had never had such a consumer as the Grand Valley Rural Power Lines, had no experience, and were very doubtful of our ability to meet our obligations. The power was purchased on the basis of 2¢ a kilowatt hour straight. No demand charge, no tapering blocks of rates. After six months of

operation, the Public Service Company voluntarily reduced this rate to 1½¢ per kilowatt hour.

During the first three or four months, we did not collect enough to pay the power bill and all of the salaries. Something had to be done, so we notified all those unconnected subscribers that unless they had provided wiring and made connections or were paying the monthly minimum within sixty days of the date of the notice, we would begin removing the line from their premises. This added a great many subscribers as they did not want to lose the line completely, just wanted to wait until they were ready to wire their homes.

We had some trouble with R.E.A. too on this score because in those days, R.E.A. would allow you to build 1,000 feet of line from the main line into a farm stead and in thirty-eight different cases, we had had to build an amount exceeding 1,000 feet and were advised by R.E.A. Engineers that unless we collected for this extra footage, they would not approve the extension of the line into these farms. R.E.A. finally approved this, too.

To give you an idea of how little the rural people knew of electric service in those years, shortly after we advertised in the paper that the lines were to be energized, we received two phone calls from the New Liberty Section. One of them was from a lady who wanted to know if she should get some bulbs or something to screw into the sockets so the electricity wouldn't drip on the floor. Another said that it took about three days for the water to get down to their place in the canal and would it take the electricity that long to reach them? We are still wondering whether they were trying to kid us or not.

After we got the main section energized, a group from Fruitvale came in and wanted electric service and another Loan Application request was sent in for that area; however, before the contractor could begin work on that particular section of line, the Public Service Company decided to invade that territory and sent their Superintendent, Mr. Daggett, with a crew out there to build a line and cut us off. Some of the farmers in that area learned of this and reported it to us and requested some help. Bill Calloway said that if they could haul the poles up there and Ernie Porter would stake the line,

he would have a crew of men there at daylight to start building the line, which we did. When the Public Service crew got out there at 8:00 o'clock the farmers had already dug many of the holes, had the poles delivered and had some set in line. I'm happy to say that was the only time there was an attempt made to build spite lines.

The following is a quote from the first annual report I made to the Board of Directors and Stockholders as of December 31, 1937:

"We now have 500 consumers connected to our lines at an average cost of \$350.00 per consumer.

A great many more will wish to use energy when they can afford to wire their homes, and it will not cost as much per consumer to connect these new consumers, therefore, the average consumer cost over the project will be reduced, with no increase in overhead expense.

It would have been impossible to raise \$350.00 from each one of the families that are now connected to the line, but we are delivering energy to you at lower rate than other Companies and each time you pay an energy bill, part of it will go toward the cost of the line which will be paid out within twenty years and will then belong to the consumers.

Electricity has made over five hundred housewives in this valley happier this year and has improved living conditions for the entire family.

Do you realize that electricity for a year costs about the same as a new peg tooth harrow?

WHICH do YOU use the most?

Electricity is your cheapest servant.

You have a job that electricity will do for you.

CLEANER - CHEAPER - BETTER

-- USE IT"

After about one year of operation, it is not so difficult to get people to wire up and connect to the system. A group on Orchard Mesa also requested service, and a group west of Palisade east of Clifton also wanted service, and the group up around Mesa and Collbran and a few in around the Debeque area. Building these lines and giving electric

service to rural people for the first time has many compensations.

I will never forget the thrill I received one Christmas Eve when we were energizing a section of line east of Clifton and had chained up the pickup so we could get through the ankle deep mud and it was miserable and sloppy. We had twenty-five meters to set. We drove into a yard of a home right at the west foot of the viaduct crossing the railroad tracks just east of Clifton. I don't remember the name but it was a white frame house and those folks had just wired their home and were waiting. They had a little girl about ten or eleven years old who had a string of Christmas tree lights on the Christmas tree and came out when we set the meter and wanted to know if her lights would burn that night. We told her if she would go in the house, she'd probably see and just as she went in the door, we threw the switch. When she came back out, she was jumping about four feet high or so it seemed to me. She was certainly happy. About 8:00 o'clock that evening, we finished setting those twenty-five meters. Tired, dirty, and wet, but happy because we knew that twenty-five more homes had been electrified. Our bookkeeper, Laura Mae, began reminding us that the income was still low and something would need to be done to increase the revenue.

A check of the KWH consumption per consumer per month revealed that we had an average of 28 KWH. Laura Mae then began making notes of those subscribers who were not using the 40 KWH that their minimum paid for and suggesting to them that they get some other electrical appliance and use those kilowatts that they were entitled to. There was a subscriber named Jackson just west of Pamona who was only using 4 KWH per month and had been doing so consistently for several months. Mr. Jackson originally had a small 32 volt light plant system with batteries. He was close enough to radio station KFXJ that he could receive them with a crystal set. We suggested to him that since he was paying 70¢ per KWH for the four KWH he used each month, that he might buy some additional appliances and get what he was paying for. He said he was satisfied, but we did encourage him to buy some more appliances and finally he did get over the \$2.75 minimum. We realized we needed to build load and were looking for some way of doing this

effectively. Three meetings were set up. One at Fairmont Hall north of Grand Junction; one at Fruita; and one at Mack where we had a number of local dealers display their merchandise and called in all the farmers in the area. These were quite well received; however, we didn't get the response we had hoped for. Farm income was not too good, and we think that may have effected the buying power. Following the one at Fruita, Herbert Berg of the High Point Community, told me that there was no need to hold such shows, that the farmers were all aware of the labor savings and conveniences of electricity, but had no money to buy appliances. He suggested that we could do the farmers more good if we could figure out some way to increase crop prices.

In July of 1938, we sent out the first issue of the Power House Bulletin which was mimeographed by the girls in the office. It was just a one page mimeographed bulletin that was sent out to all our subscribers telling them about some of the conveniences of electric service. Edith Newberry was helping Laura Mae with the bookkeeping and some of the other office work and drew up or copied many comic sketches for the bulletin. We started a letter writing contest and awarded a prize for the person submitting the best letter. This stimulated electric use tremendously.

Ernest Swindell who lived north of Hunter won a prize for a letter about his yard light and shortly thereafter, nearly all the stores in Grand Junction sold out on yard light fixtures. During this period, we had many problems and had to set up methods of keeping records, preparing different types of forms for record keeping of our operations. Lowell Long of Intermountain Printing and Stationery Company gave us a lot of help in the preparation of some of our printed forms. He helped us develop a service order form similar to the one now being used by many of the rural electricians in Colorado, and many other forms to help us be more efficient with our record keeping.

We had many other troubles too. One of those was caused by lightning. There seemed to be an area in north of Appleton where lightning would strike everytime a cloud floated over the valley. This would follow down the line and blow through all the fuses clear back to the substation at Fruita, and sometimes blow all the fuses there. We appealed

to R.E.A. for help on this but they were unable to give us any help as they had no more experience at it than we had. After studying my operating records for the previous six months, I found that there was a certain area where this was excessive and decided to fence it in with lightning arrestors. This stopped a lot of that trouble. During this period, we were making preparations for construction of lines on Orchard Mesa, Levi Reynolds of Orchard Mesa handled most of the coordinating and right of way work in that area. One of our Orchard Mesa subscribers, Mrs. G., phoned me one day to tell me that she had been sewing in the dining room when their small pup had yelped and came whimpering to her. She went into the living room where the pup had been to find that he had chewed some of the insulation from the floor lamp cord, exposing the wires. She wanted to know if she should use rubber gloves to wipe up the juice that had leaked on the floor. Following completion of the Orchard Mesa Extension, we turned our attention to the Plateau Valley where a number of people were attempting to get electric service. Henry Stark coordinated that area with the assistance of a committee that had been appointed. I can't remember the names of all of them but I do remember Lee Pruitt and Neal Johnson. Delos Webb was not on the committee but he was especially helpful in granting right of way across his properties. The line to Mesa and to Collbran, and in the Plateau Valley area was energized on February 14. We had a big celebration at the high school auditorium in Mesa. Spring thaw occurred at the same time and many of the ranchers in that area could not get their cars out to the gravel roads or main highways. Rex Howell from radio station KFXJ came to the rescue and made the announcements that if they would come with their wagons or horses or any way they could get out to the main highways that there would be cars to pick them up if they would just phone Lee Pruitt or anyone else on the committee and let them know how many to pick up.

Most of the electrical dealers in the area had unusually nice displays at the Mesa High School Auditorium. School was let out by the Superintendent that day and it was a carnival. Many of the old timers who had ridden in there on horseback before there were roads in the area spoke of the progress of the area. Better roads, canals, better

schools, better community activities, and then electricity. The dealers who had displays had been using the radio and the newspapers to advertise the show and it was very successful. A large crowd came out and most of the dealers sold much more than they expected to and had made a good many contacts. Our three service men, Kenneth Stouder (who looked after the area around Mesa, Molina, and Collbran and Debeque), Paul Watkins and Robert Tucker, who were stationed at Fruita, were all very much interested in maintaining good service to the subscribers. Hard workers and very loyal employees.

In the early days, we realized we would have a problem on house wiring and set up specifications for the wiremen to follow and also a system of examining the prospective wiremen to eliminate those who were not properly trained for this kind of work. Maurice Griffith later became our wiring inspector and was especially helpful in this program.

We had our share of troubles too but all of the employees were loyal and very helpful. This made the job much easier.

In 1941, we began looking for a new power source as it appeared that we would need much greater quantities of power at a better rate than we had been getting it. A meeting was called at Montrose, Colorado, where the Colorado-Ute Electric Association was organized. Don Mitchell and F. M. Peterson at Delta and their engineer, Glen Fickle of Denver, had done a lot of planning along this line. Ernest Porter of the Rocky Mountain Engineering Company, the Grand Valley Rural Power Lines engineer, was also there. The original plan was to include all of Western Colorado and part of the San Luis Valley in the Colorado-Ute Electric Transmission System and have a large transmission and generation coop. This is where I first met Dan Hunter of the Empire Electric Association. There were many others there for the final organization. A Board Member from the Gunnison, Colorado, coop, I believe it was Barney Whatley, I am not sure of the name, was selected as President, and Orval Herren of Grand Junction was Secretary-Treasurer. A majority of the record keeping fell into my hands since Orval Herron was a member of the Grand Valley Board. Willis Hinman of Grand Junction was selected as Attorney for Colorado-Ute. George Wilson and Frank Meeker were also on the first Board.

When war was declared we had many problems. Mostly material shortages. Walker Field at Grand Junction was set up as a cadet training center and they needed electricity out there. We rustled all the material we could but could not find the 7200 to 2400 volt transformer of the right capacity and the factories were too busy on war production to bother with our little order. We finally stepped the voltage down to 240 volts and borrowed a transformer from Mesa Verde National Park, stepped it from 240 back up to 2400 for delivery to the airport.

Bill Morrison, an engineer from Texas, came into the valley and built a vanadium mill south of Loma and demanded three phase power at once. We secured telephone R.E.A. authority to proceed with the construction and it was just a matter of using the priorities we could get and did secure the transformers and metering equipment, and the other materials to build the line to the river and provide the power for that load.

During the early years, we used every trick we could think of to try and build more load and increase the consumption so that we could be sure of pay-out on the system. During that period, the R.E.A. had home economists who came out and put on cooking demonstrations to help us. One of these was Carmen Hansel who later became Mrs. Jack Tarr. Carmen did a wonderful job for us and worked hard and I'm sure we had excellent results from her activities.

I left the Grand Junction project in 1942 and went to work with many others for Uncle Sam, returning to Cortez in 1944 to take over the management of the Empire Electric Association.

During the six years I was Manager at Grand Junction, and the sixteen years I have been Manager here, I have noted many changes in R.E.A. methods and personnel and quite an improvement in R.E.A. policies. There is one thing that I am especially impressed with and that is the type of people who have been elected as Board Members to run these systems over the country. At State Meetings and at National Meetings, we meet some of the finest people. They are the cream of the crop. They have been chosen as leaders of their communities and we are sure they must be.

Being a R.E.A. Manager is quite an experience. In the early years, we had many problems and in some cases, the Board Members were extremely helpful and gave the management a lot of support. Had we not had that support, the job would have been much more difficult. The Board Members themselves are better informed and study the problems more thoroughly and are giving all the R.E.A. staffs much more support than in previous years.