

Recalling Life Before Electricity

Thanks to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, rural America became electrified—and life was transformed

By Pam Blair

Turn the clock back and imagine what your life would be like without electricity.

With no electric lights, your day starts at sunrise and ends at sunset.

With hand- or animal-powered equipment, chores are tedious and time consuming.

You have no television or computer. You must entertain yourself.

Today, no matter where Americans choose to live, most have access to electric service. But prior to 1935, nine of 10 rural homes had no electric service.

In honor of National Cooperative Month, Ruralite asked readers to offer a glimpse of what it was like before electricity, and how electrification changed their lives.



The Obermeyers read by lamplight in their home in Montana's Yaak Valley. Photo by the REA-USDA and courtesy of Northern Lights, Inc.

My father used to tell the story about when Grandpa got electricity out on the farm on Parrot Mountain. There was just one light socket in the middle of the living room, and Grandpa didn't have a light bulb. To keep things in order, he put a bucket on the floor under the socket so the "juice" wouldn't run all over the place.

Warren Niete, Netarts Bay, Oregon

I was one of the lucky ones who experienced the olden days. I never worked so hard in all my life or enjoyed anything so much. In the evening, after work, we would light the kerosene lamps, which was the only artificial light we had. The smell those lamps emitted was pleasant, and gave off a warm and secure feeling of home life. Fire was a constant danger in those days, but being careful with matches was simply our way of life. When electricity arrived, everything changed. Flipping a switch was truly a wonder of the ages to us.

Rex Bullis, Lyle, Washington

My first experience without electricity was in 1928, when we moved to an irrigated farm east of Chinook, Montana. The only light was a kerosene lamp. Kerosene lanterns were used in the barn to provide light for cows that were hand milked. In 1939, our area was served by electricity. We felt like we had become an accepted member of our great country. Mother enjoyed washing with a clothes washing machine, instead of washtubs heated on our wood stove. The REA was and still is a great program.

Les Fultz, Lincoln City, Oregon

My grandma, Kate Gragg, lived north of us. Not having electricity didn't bother Grandma. She worked from dawn 'til dark. At suppertime Grandma lit the kerosene lamp and set it on the oil-clothed table. The lamp would sputter and a homey feeling would come over me. Electricity came to the valley when I was 12. Grandma had her first fridge. She was happy. I felt like I'd lost something. I'm 83. I have kerosene lamps around for decoration. I guess I can't let go of the past.

Marjory Fitzwater, Lebanon, Oregon

In about 1925 my family moved from Eugene to a small farm outside of town. We had no electricity. Our heater and cook stove burned wood, and our lights were kerosene lanterns and lamps. No matter the weather, my mother went outside to the faucet and with the garden hose had a shower. I was fortunate, for I bathed in a washtub in front of the wood cook stove. This community lived without electricity and many without running water, but we lived a good life.

Claudie Neet, Bandon, Oregon

It was about 1930 when electricity came to our small community of Henlyville. A cooler with wet burlap sacks on the sides had helped to keep our food cool, but it was no match for the hot weather. My grandmother was delighted with electricity. My usually frugal grandmother went all out. It was really a big change in our lives when our house was expanded and we had a full bathroom. Hot and cold running water seemed like a little bit of heaven.

Dorothy Williams, Likely, California

My life was usually fully electrified, but Gramp's was not. Life at Gramp's meant kerosene lanterns, the barrel to collect rain water from the roof, daily trips with the wheel barrow full of old milk cans to collect brook water, and, of course, the privy. We stored butter and meat in a pail, which was lowered into an old dry well on a hillside. During the summer, he was usually able to buy a block of ice from a roaming merchant. For baths, warm water was ladled out and into a galvanized tub placed in the middle of the kitchen floor. That's what life was like before electricity. I miss it all.

Robert Romancier, Redmond, Oregon

It was 1947 before we had electricity in our home on Rowland Road. No running water, no automatic washers, no dryers. What a change I have seen! It was a wonderful time to have lived—no radio or TV. We made our own entertainment right at home. I am 91 and have many electric appliances now.

Delma Drinkard, Harrisburg, Oregon



Electricity transformed the lives of homemakers. Photo courtesy of Northern Lights, Inc.

When I came to Chemult in August 1939, we had running water, but no lights. Mom's washing machine had a gas motor on the bottom and a crank at the end of the wringers. Cooking was done on a coal-burning stove. Pipes in the firebox made hot water.

Jo Galbreath, Chemult, Oregon

At the start of the 1940s, my dad had tried to get electricity. PP&L offered to put it in for him, but he had to pay \$80 to get it installed. Dad could not afford it. When the co-op came in, they hooked it up for him and gave him the first month of electricity free. About the same time, Bonneville Power purchased an easement over the corner of his land. He was making "all kinds" of money on this new electricity business.

Fred Kroon, Banks, Oregon

I grew up on a farm in Kansas. With the advent of REA in the late '30s, there was talk we would get electricity. That dream wasn't fulfilled until 1946 because the finalization of our district was delayed by World War II. But what a great day it was when that electric switch was turned on!

Adeline Hult, Corvallis, Oregon

We had a cistern fed by water coming off our roof. To get the water into the house, we had to hand-pump it into a sink. Baths were taken in a steel tub. Remember brooms to clean your house? That's all anyone had. Everybody walked to school. That's just the way things were back then. Then came the REA. Wow! The world changed after that.

Dave Francisco, Goldendale, Washington

Daddy would run the generator every Saturday to charge up about a dozen batteries, which would run the lights for a week. My mother had a wash machine powered by a gas motor. She used flat irons heated on the wood stove.

Larry Foster, Post, Oregon

In early 1937, the local electric company announced it would have power in our neighborhood by fall. We got the house and barn wired and the bulbs installed. We turned on all the switches, so we would know when the electricity arrived. One evening we were dazzled with bright lights. We ran around the house to check every room to see if the lights were working. I stood in one room and flipped the same switch off and on at least a dozen times, not quite believing that it really worked. We could now sit any place in the living room and read. It was almost like having constant daylight.

Will Troyer, Cooper Landing, Alaska
"From Dawn to Dusk Memoirs of an Amish-Mennonite Farm Boy"

My grandparents' hunting ranch never had power or indoor plumbing. It was a magical place. Laundry required the better part of a day, and was accomplished by heating water on the wood stove and setting up two tubs on the porch. Day and night were determined by daylight, not alarm clocks. Thank God for the coming of electricity.

Colleen MacLeod, Summerville, Oregon

Being a wheat and cattle farm, we most needed refrigerators and electric motors. I recall busting thick ice in water tanks in below zero weather each morning. We installed electric tank heaters to alleviate this problem. Having electricity made our work much easier.

M.B. Miska, Reedsport, Oregon

I was excited when electricity lighted the house. Life was completely changed. Hand labor changed to machines powered by electricity. I am so thankful for electricity, especially for the hot water. Electricity is a most wonderful thing. I appreciate everything electricity does for us. It would be a disaster for all of us if we didn't have it.

Reva Walter, Arco, Idaho