

From Wild Horses to Horsepower

In honor of Public Power Week and KPUD's 75th anniversary, the following is reprinted from the Klickitat PUD 25th annual report, 1962.

Private company service was poor in the early days. Files of local newspapers report how citizens and city councils protested bitterly and in vain about poor service and high rates. People were finding out that city-owned plants in Tacoma, Seattle, Ellensburg, Cheney, Eugene, McMinnville and other Oregon and Washington cities were giving better service at lower rates. Seattle led the U.S. in the number of electric ranges. People served by publicly owned electric systems used more electricity than those served by private companies (and still did in 1963).

Abundance vs. Scarcity

The reason was a difference in service philosophy. Public electric systems were intent on making electricity abundant and cheap; private companies knew that scarcity meant higher prices, and had no incentive (so they thought) to increase supply and reduce rates.

As early as 1912, the White Salmon City Council asked the power company—which had purchased the Husum Power Company the year before—to reduce rates, “The Enterprise” reported. The company refused.

Seven years later, in 1919, when electricity was selling for 17 cents a kilowatt-hour, according to “The Sentinel,” the Goldendale City Council decided to make an engineering study of the possibility of building a city-owned light plant, using water from the city’s water system to generate the power. Before the study was completed, the power company announced that its average rate was now only 8½ cents a kilowatt-hour. Nothing came of the municipal light plant.

The following year the council called the power company on the carpet for



Two early Klickitat PUD employees with a load of transformers for the Trout Lake – Glenwood line.

poor service and suggested that a standby generator be purchased to take over when the regular plant broke down. The company said it could not afford such a luxury. That same week, the Public Service Commission announced a rate hearing in White Salmon on a requested rate increase. At the hearing the company said it lost \$200 in White Salmon the year before and asked—and received—a 20 percent rate increase.

Two years later, the White Salmon council asked the company to cut its rates. The company refused.

In 1928, the Goldendale council started another investigation of a municipal light plant, but nothing came of it.

Meanwhile, all over the state people in small towns and rural areas were trying to do something about poor service and high rates. Efforts to get the city systems to extend their lines met with legal obstacles and the legislature was unwilling to do anything about it.

Finally, in 1929, a public utility district law drafted for the Grange by Homer

T. Bone (later a U.S. senator and federal judge) passed both houses of the legislature, but was vetoed by the governor.

A Vote of the People

Undaunted, the people took matters into their own hands and circulated petitions to place the measure on the November 1930 ballot. Through the heroic efforts of “little people” everywhere under leadership of the Grange, the enabling act was adopted and became law December 3, 1930.

The vote in Klickitat County favored the new law 1,152 to 724. This law permitted each county to establish its own PUD by popular vote.

For six years the PUD idea germinated in the minds of Klickitat County people as they worked their way out of the Great Depression. In 1936, the West Klickitat County Pomona Grange adopted a resolution calling for a PUD vote. A delegation appeared before the county commissioners, who agreed to put the measure on the November ballot.

The power company announced a rate

cut. At election time, the promised PUD measure was missing from the ballot. Nobody could explain why.

Their dander up, citizens began working in earnest toward a vote in 1938.

The power company announced another rate reduction in 1937. The Klickitat County Pomona Grange, serving the eastern part of the county, adopted a strong resolution and appointed a campaign committee. Gerald Fenton, Pomona master, was chairman. Others were M.A. Collins of Bickleton; Martin Lumijarvi of Centerville; Chester W. Hill, Floyd VanHoy and Cash Lawson all of Goldendale; Charles Gaines of Roosevelt; Martin VanAlst of the old Woodbine Grange; and J.S. Degman of White Salmon, master of the West Klickitat Pomona.

Assisting Mr. Degman on the Grange committee were Henry J. Card of Underwood; Carl Pearson of Trout Lake; Robert Wellenbrock of Glenwood; William Olson of Husum; Oscar Gardner and Guy Needham of White Salmon; and S.I. Stratton and Olaf Barker, both of Lyle. Others who performed yeoman service were Kenneth Burdick and Gene Gladden of White Salmon; Howard Erickson of Underwood; Fred Feller of Glenwood; and Fuller McEwen of Goldendale.

A Bitter Campaign

The campaign was waged in earnest by both sides. The power company spent large sums of money and hired many people to help tell its story. Similar campaigns were also being waged in many other parts of the state, and the newspapers and radio were full of it.

Bonneville Dam had been dedicated the year before, and work started in 1938 on a transmission line through Klickitat County to Grand Coulee. Bonneville Power Administration held rate hearings all over the Northwest and reminded local communities that the Bonneville Act reserved half the output of the dam for public agencies until January 1, 1941. The famed Bonneville "postage stamp" wholesale rate was announced in 1938, at \$17.50

a kilowatt-year, the lowest rate ever known anywhere in the world.

These events added fuel to the local fight, and when the ballots were counted that cold night of November 8, 1938, the local PUD had been created by the people by a vote of 2,219-1,920. The people also elected to the original PUD commission M.A. Collins of Bickleton, J.S. Degman of White Salmon, and Martin Lumijarvi of Centerville.

Meeting for the first time on November 30, 1938, the commissioners elected Mr. Collins president. But it was to take another eight and a half years before the PUD could be in a position to bring service to the entire county. The private company was not willing to sell.

Start of the First PUD System

Early in 1939, the PUD hired an engineering firm, R.W. Beck & Associates, to find out if there was customer interest in an REA-financed system in the western part of the county.

Kenneth Burdick and Henry Stegman were hired as the PUD's first employees. The first customer was signed up, a rock crusher in the western part of the county.

BPA built a line for the district to serve the crusher that also served as the backbone of the Trout Lake and Glenwood systems. Beck's survey found that the proposed construction was feasible, and the district applied to REA for \$100,000 to build it and also to purchase the small Trout Lake Power & Light Company and the Hanson Power Co. of Glenwood.

In the fall of 1940, the commissioners hired Emmet E. Clouse as the first manager of the district, a position he still holds (he held the position until 1977), and Carl Crooks of Goldendale as part-time auditor. Mr. Crooks was later succeeded by Mrs. May Root, who later became city treasurer of Goldendale.

The REA granted the \$100,000 sought for the first system. This was 60 miles of line built around a 22-mile backbone system erected by BPA in 1940 from Condit to Glenwood.

The little Trout Lake Co. was purchased for \$6,000 and the Hanson Co. at Glenwood for \$2,000. The first line was energized on August 24, 1941, and Frank Ward of Glenwood was the first customer. Later in the month, the Trout Lake system was energized and the PUD had 225 customers.

Wartime Postponement

The REA advanced another \$450,000 to construct another project to serve rural areas, and the PUD started legal proceedings to acquire the private company. The war came along in 1942, and the proceedings were postponed for the "duration."

A total of 30 more miles of line and 160 more customers were added to the new PUD system before wartime shortages finally halted construction.

After the war, in December 1946, the federal district court in Tacoma set a price of \$670,070 on the Pacific Power & Light Co.'s system in the county. The PUD took possession April 4, 1947, adding 130 miles of line and 2,400 accounts for a total of 240 miles of line and 2,785 customers.

But there were still some 1,500 families and businesses throughout the county without central station electricity. The PUD put in motion plans that were drawn up during the war and launched upon the biggest construction program ever seen in a single county in the Pacific Northwest.

By the end of 1948, 425 miles of new line had been built, adding over 700 new customers.

On May 30, 1950, the PUD was serving 3,776 customers on 772 miles of line. Two years later, the PUD had grown to 4,193 customers and 1,012 miles of line, and at last electric service had been delivered to every family in the county who had applied for it, even to Indian tepees in the Rock Creek settlement.

The PUD's achievement in completely electrifying the sparsest of all counties in the state (1952) was hailed at home and throughout the Pacific Northwest as an important milestone in man's quest for the better things in life. ■