

# Buffalo Tales

January/February 2015

## **Let there be Light. Rural Electrification in Buffalo County, NE (part I)** By Janice Martin

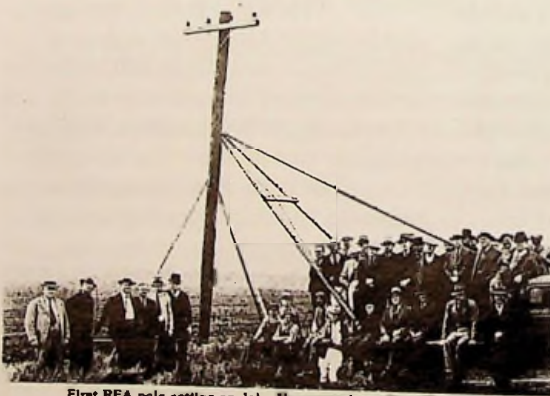
May 15, 1938 was a red letter day in Buffalo County, as the first electric pole was set on the John Hammans farm, northwest of Gibbon. (This location is about one mile north of Highway 30 on Lakota road, as it is now named.)

“ERECTION OF POWER LINES STARTED. The first pole of the Buffalo County Public Power district rural electrification project was erected Tuesday morning of this week on the John L. Hammans farm northwest of Gibbon. Nearly one hundred persons were in attendance at the fitting ceremony. The Hammans farm will also be the location of one of the sub-stations, where the power will be stepped down from high voltage.

Fred Wheeler, project engineer, states the work of erecting the line will be pushed as fast as the weather permits and the entire 116 miles of line should be completed this summer. About 325 farm patrons will be served with electric current. The line, when completed, will extend from Elm Creek east to Gibbon, and is planned to be extended as farmers may demand.” (The Gibbon Reporter, June 2, 1938)

From this author’s perspective, this was a milestone in my family, as this first pole was set on my grandfather’s farm, and my uncle, Earl Hammans, was on the temporary board, and later the board of directors. The pole was set after my grandmother, Dora Hammans, died, and she was buried one day before the first pole was set. My grandfather, John, lived several more years and experienced not only electric lights and household appliances, but electric motors pumping water for livestock and irrigation.

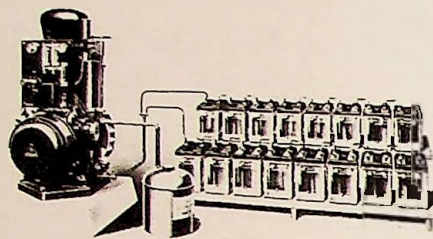
In 1930, 90% of [urban] homes in the United States had electricity, but only 10% in rural America. To appreciate what this event meant to farms, it is necessary to look at the ways farm families lived before electricity. Although many farmsteads dotted the country, the landscape was dark after the sun went down.



First REA pole setting on John Hammans farm, May 15, 1938.

As identified by Earl Hammans. L-R: (Standing) E.M. Manful, E.E. Lowell, Donald Greene, Earl Hammans, Mark McConnell, Earl Snyder. On Truck: Arthur Bendfeldt, Walter Bendfeldt, Harlold Voss, Dale Cress, (Co. Agent), K.C. Knecht, young Manfull, Justus Johnson, C.R. Arbuckle, Frank Webben, Harry Oliver, H.L. Blackledge (Atty. For REA), Alva Zimmerman, Wallace Thorton, Earl Tunks, Henry Kroger (Kearney Hub editor), Rev. Will Sessions, Everett Randall, Charles Millhouse (Co. Treasurer), Rev. John Pattison, Cecil Wolford, Frank Wheeler, Vincent Wolford, Ludwick Johnson, D. Wort (Mayor of Kearney), George Sear (Co. Sheriff), Elton Hammans, unidentified workers.

Farming and outdoor tasks took place during the daylight hours. There were no yard lights, televisions, computers, or many of the appliances that are common-



HOME DELCO LIGHT PLANT

place in homes today. Cows were milked by hand and cream separators were operated by hand power. Farms were quite self-contained for the production of food, with the cooperation of close neighbors sharing equipment and labor. Irrigation was becoming important and provided a special incentive of securing electricity in Buffalo County. Although kerosene and gas lamps in homes were common, as well as sad irons heated on the cook stove, there were other advances that graced some farms in Buffalo County before 1935. Some rural residents had wind chargers, acetylene systems, or a "Delco" plant.

which could start automatically to charge the rows of glass batteries lines up (usually in a garage or out building) to provide electricity. Kitchen appliances

and other electrical equipment were designed to provide this "safe" 32 volt d.c. system. In the 1920s, the invention of the radio and the Frigidaire refrigerator was manufactured by Delco and the future was bright.

Delco and other systems were already providing electricity to nearly one million farms in America. Farmers who had Delco-type systems had invested somewhere around \$500 and never had a monthly electric bill.

In 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt established the Rural Electrification Administration as an "emergency agency" by executive order "to carry electricity to as many farms as possible in the shortest possible time and have it used in quantities sufficient to affect rural life." The Rural Electrification Act of 1936 was born and 210 million dollars was spent on 100,000 miles of power lines to 220,000 farms at the cost of \$950 per home. At that time, \$950 was a little over half of the annual average wage.

This was a blow to the successful Delco-Light plant and other similar businesses. Many of those businesses survived to contribute to the war effort during WWII and then disappeared or changed to a related market.

In 1936, Sen. George Norris of Nebraska and Rep. Sam Rayburn of

The acetylene systems were self-contained devices that generated and stored acetylene. Calcium carbide (which looked like small rocks) came in contact with the water, decomposed, and produced a flammable gas called acetylene. Those systems were installed on farms to produce gas for lighting as well as



ACETYLENE LIGHT FIXTURE

Acetylene ceiling light fixture from the home of Earl and Arta Hammans.

other purposes, such as car and bicycle lighting. The gas was slightly pressurized and was piped into the building to be lighted. It was flammable, and there was danger of explosion. (Portable lights, such as carbine bicycle lights were also used.)

The Delco-Light farm electric system was introduced in 1916 by Charles Kettering. Electric power systems were developed for use for homes, businesses, and virtually every rural or remote building. The system using a gasoline powered electric generator



Texas introduced the Rural Electrification Act, a bill to create the Rural Electrification Administration, REA. When signed by President Roosevelt, financing became available for non-profit organizations, such as cooperatives or, as in Nebraska, public power districts to construct, operate,

and maintain electrical supply facilities in rural areas not served by existing systems. (Note: Nebraska continues to be the only exclusive public power state in the country.)

The first meeting of the temporary committee of Buffalo County Cooperative Rural Power Company was April 21, 1936 and chaired by W.H. Kendell with Earl Hammans as secretary. Seven men were present: W.H. Kendell, Robinson, Alvah Hecht, Cecil Wolford, Mark McConnell, A. Knobel, and Earl Hammans. It was moved and passed that the chairman be instructed to write [to] the REA the committee's intention to form a cooperative users organization and request to the REA, giving the committee the full information on the basis of data already furnished by the committee. After some discussion, it was decided to write to the University of Nebraska requesting that a man be sent to Buffalo County to explain the Rural Electrification setups.

According to the subsequent minutes of the organizing committee, each township in Buffalo County had a meeting with one or two men appointed to make contact with every farm to sign up those interested. This was done between the dates of April 21 and December 30, 1936 in 16 meetings.

According to the last minutes of the temporary committee, dated January

16, 1937, Earl Snyder and C.R. Arbuckle were chosen to obtain the signed petitions for the creation of a Public Power

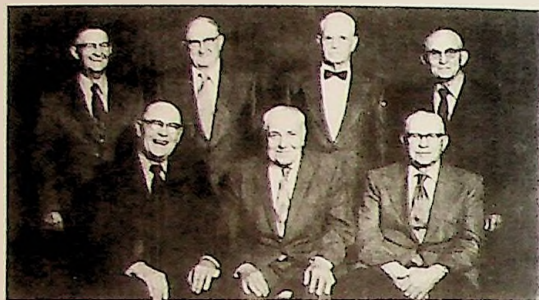
District in Buffalo County from Oscar Drake and that such petitions would be turned in to County Agent Leonard Wenzl and said committee for checking and filing with the

department of Roads and Irrigation.

In retrospect, it would seem that rural families would embrace the possibility of an electric line to their homes to ease the labor both inside the home and outside the farm. However, in reading a packet of questionnaires of those who were not signing up, it reveals many were skeptical that it would ever happen. Reasons given for turning down the opportunity were statements, such as, "we already have Delco," "It would depend upon the cost," "would be interested in it, but can't afford it," "living on a rented place," "it can't be done," etc. In the final meeting of the temporary committee at the end of 1936, the next step was of "getting a petition circulated for the organization of the power district and election of permanent directors." This action would be taken when further word was received from Washington, D.C.

#### References:

- Original Minutes of the temporary committee by Earl Hammans, secretary
- Letters, forms, photos, and notes from Earl Hammans collection
- "Rural Electrification" By Alice Howell, Buffalo Tales April 1990
- Kearney Hub, February 22-23, 2003
- Gibbon Reporter, June 2, 1938
- Rural Electric Nebraska, April 1985, October 1989, June 1992, and October 2013
- Dawson Public Power office, Lexington, NE



First Buffalo County REA Board. Back row: Earl Hammans, Colonel Arbuckle, Mark McConnell, Harry Oliver. Front row: Alvah Zimmerman, Justus Johnson, Earl Snyder

### Explore the Holocaust



Explore the history of the Holocaust in an all-inclusive 11-day study abroad trip to Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic departing in May 2016. Course credit and financial assistance available for students. All ages and the general public welcome as well.

For more information, contact Ross Huxoll, Dept. of History, [huxollrd@unk.edu](mailto:huxollrd@unk.edu) (Picture and ad submitted by the UNK History Department)

## 2015 Calendar of Events

**February 29:** Don't Come Event-This is the most amazing, fun event that you WILL miss. We send you an invitation about all the fabulous things that WON'T be happening and you absolutely will want to attend, but instead, you get to RSVP and then stay home and enjoy your family time.

**Sunday, April 19 from 1-3 pm:** BCHS Annual Meeting-A great gathering of BCHS members to reflect back on the past year's accomplishments and enjoy an entertaining program while eating yummy food. The general public is welcome to join us for the program, too!

**Sunday, June 7:** 8th Annual 1/2 Marathon: Buffalo County Stampede-registration is at 6 am-race begins at 7am

**Saturday, June 20 from 10-1 pm:** 30th Annual Wagons West Celebration-Live music, delicious food, exhibitors, demonstrators, archive researchers, kids' games, and contests (including, back by popular demand---the BEARD contest). FREE admission/donations are appreciated.

**All of November:** Christmas Decorating (during regular business hours)

**First two weekends in Dec. (Dec.5/6 and Dec. 12/13) from 1-5 pm:** Open to the public: 28th Annual Christmas Tree Walk \*\*\* **Saturday, December 5 from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 28th Annual Christmas Tree Walk\*\*\*** check out dozens of trees decorated by area not-for-profits that tie their mission into this year's theme, **Santa's Workshop.**

### Education notes:

Trails & Rails Museum closed April 28 through May 9 for Kearney Public Schools.

**Listen to Mardi Anderson on KGFW 1340 AM** at 9 am on the last Friday of each month for a fabulous story about Buffalo County!

**Fabulous Fridays** are held on the 2nd Friday monthly at 2 pm. Locations vary, so check the web site.

**January:** Place Names in Buffalo County

**February:** The Dust Bowl Days

**March:** The Art of Weaving

**April:** National Sod House Society

**May:** On the Road to \_\_\_\_\_

**June:** Chautauqua

**July:** Teas from Native Plants

**August:** Tea Party

**September:** 100 Years of 4-H

**October:** History of Canning Jars

**November:** History of WWI Poppies

**December:** Sing along with Jim Cudaback

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

PO Box 523, 710 W. 11th St., Kearney, NE 68848

(308) 234-3041 www.bchs.us bchs.us@hotmail.com

We hope you enjoy these stories about Buffalo County. We would love to have a stock pile of Buffalo Tales ready so they can go out in a more timely manner. Please submit your memories and stories to us by e-mailing them to [bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com](mailto:bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com) or sending them to the post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848.

**We appreciate your support!**

### Director's Report

-I am working with the World Theater and Kristi at the Humanities Nebraska to come up with some possible movie titles that we can show at the World as a fundraiser for BCHS while also promoting the upcoming Chautauqua. Mark has an anonymous grantee that might be willing to fund this entire fundraiser.

-I have attended several meetings for the Chautauqua and will continue to, as one the two co-chairs. It sounds like BCHS will host two days of workshops here and will try to have other activities going on between the workshops to keep people on property and to showcase our Museum then.

-BCHS was awarded another \$20,000 from Union Pacific for Phase 2 of the Building Campaign. The funds should arrive in May.

-In 2014, we sold 114 calendars for a total of \$2262.14 (there were some on-line fees). In January, we sold 57 for \$1091.

**Be our friend on Facebook: "BuffaloCountyHistoricalSociety"**

## BCHS Gold Engineers

Frank Cepel	Janice & Bill Martin
Ron Eckloff	Sharon & John Martin
Ft. Theatre Dentistry/Dr. Walter Martin	Midlands Contracting, Inc.
Fred & Betty Kempf	Corene & Errol Phillips
Elbert & Betty Lowenstein	Eric & Debbie Rosenlof
Jerry & Edith Marlatt	Leonard Skov
	Joe & Jean Widdowson

## BCHS Silver Engineers

Ace Irrigation	Howard Kolbo
Arby's & Motel 6 of Kearney	Sharon & Gary Mason
George & Roxanne Bascom	McDermott & Miller PC
Elaine & Michael Batenhorst	Duncan & Janice McGregor
Jim Berglund	Jim & Jan Miller
Vicki Bissell	Nelson's Furniture
Gerald & Genevieve Brandorff	O'Brien-Straatmann-Redinger-Funeral Home
Margaret Brown	Dick & Glenda Prascher
Kenneth W. Carmann	Dr. Charles & Vickie Schaepler
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Cris & Heidi Hehner	Carlene Waldron
Tom & Mary Henning	David H. Weir, MD
Robert Heyd	Dave & Beth Westesen
Carol Copeland Huntington	Roger Worlock
Mr. Robert Jones	

### A Huge Thanks to our Silver and Gold Engineers

### for their support of the BCIS/Trails & Rails Museum

(Contact Trails & Rails Museum for more information on becoming an Engineer)

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Katherine Wielechowski, Editor

2014 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Student .....	\$10.00
Individual.....	\$35.00
Family.....	\$40.00
Institutional Membership.....	\$50.00
Supporting Membership.....	\$75.00

#### Directors

Term expiring June 1, 2015: Corene Philips, Dan Speirs, Gary Straatmann, Bernie Hascall

Term expiring June 1, 2016: Dr. Roger Davis, Lance Hehner, Matt O'Callaghan, Jan Rodehorst

Term expiring June 1, 2017: Kelly Krier, Mary Beth Lowe, Mike Peak, Dr. Jinny Turman

#### Officers (1 year term)

President.....	Lance Hehner
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**Trails & Rails Museum**

**Buffalo County Historical Society  
710 West 11th St. P.O. Box 523  
Kearney, NE 68848-0523**

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