



Buffalo Tales



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RURAL ELECTRIFICATION 1929-1953

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

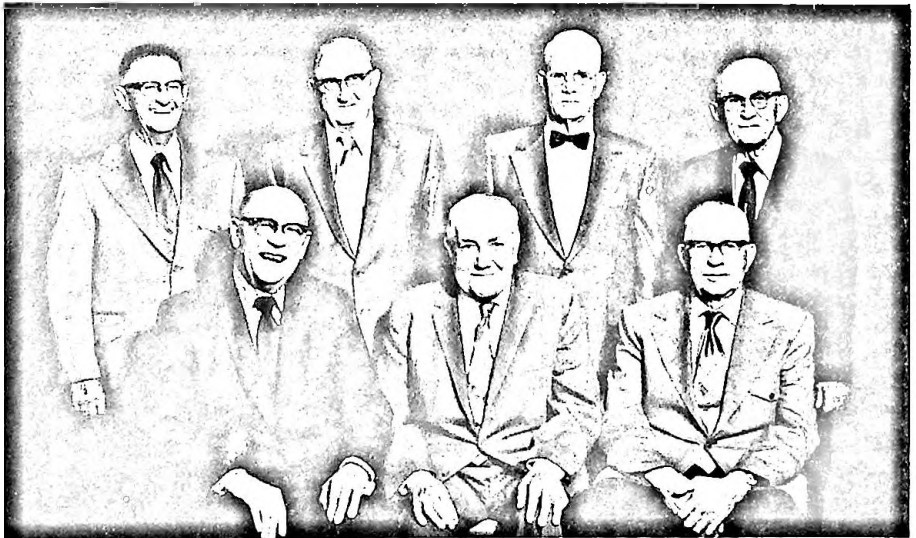
Electricity is a servant, make it work for you.
Then baking days won't be so hot, or washdays be so blue.
Your cows will be contented, with a milker fine and bright.
The kids will like the music. from the radio at night.
Your feed will be ground easily, your babychicks kept warm.
The whole family will be happy, with electricity on the farm.

--Author Unknown

Anyone who has not lived or worked on a farm cannot realize how electric power transformed farm life. Women in unelectrified homes faced every day drudgery and discomfort due to lack of running water, proper sanitary facilities, adequate light and refrigeration, power to run washer, iron, sweeper, chum, sewing machine, fan and radio. For the farmer it meant power to pump water for stock and for irrigation; to operate milking machines and separators, to grind and mix feed, cut ensilage and grind tools. There is no virtue in doing necessary work the hard way, and yet the struggle for electricity on the farm was a hard fought battle from the late twenties through the war years and into the fifties and sixties.

In 1929 in all of Nebraska only 5,278 farmers were served with electricity. Those

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

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Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership \$10.00
 - Institutional Membership \$15.00
 - Supporting Membership \$25.00
- Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Margaret Hohnholt; Vice-President, Merlin Burgland; Treasurer, Philip S. Holmgren, Directors: Frances Link, Barb Avery, Edna Hehner, Viola Livingston, Jim Cudaback, Michael Stauffer, Glen Wisch, Chad Anderson, Colleen Parker, Chandler Lynch III. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

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|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------|
| Trails & Rails Museum | 706 West 11th Street | (308) 234-3041 |
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WITH THE SOCIETY

From the President:

Important Dates:

- April 22nd Annual Meeting — Ramada Inn - 4:00 P.M.
Speaker: Joseph Porter, Curator of Western History & Ethnology, Joslyn Art Museum
- May 13 Tour of Turn Of The Century Homes - Kearney
Tickets will be available at many places in the county.
- June 2 Annual Wagons West Celebration

Memorial Day will be the official opening day of the Trails & Rails Museum.

Our clean up day on April 7, was a great success. Twenty-five to thirty members turned out to clean the yard, the buildings inside and out and enjoy the fellowship of working together and getting better acquainted. Some day we will need to wash the windows on the outside. THANKS TO ALL WHO PARTICIPATED!

The June 18-22 tour to Colorado is filled. Submit your name in case of cancellations if you are interested.

Plans are being made to have a quilt show as our display during the summer. This will be during the time that the Nebraska State Quilt Guild will be meeting in Kearney. We hope many have quilts that you can lend us to add to the ones we have at the Museum.

We also, would like to know how many of you would want to buy a copy of *Tales of Buffalo County — Volume I* if it was to be reprinted. We would need to be assured of the number of sales to warrant reprinting.

—Margaret Hohnholt

NEW BASIC MEMBERS

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Helen Marshall Kearney | Margaret Bowers Lakewood, CO |
| Jerry Nelson Kearney | Edna Henderson Kearney |

1990 SUPPORTING MEMBERS

- | | |
|--|---|
| Dwight & Lois Adams Kearney | Bob & Lenore Stubblefield Shelton |
| Emil & Dorothy Tollefsen Kearney | Kieth Buss Gothenburg |
| Fred Hammer New York, NY | |

few farmers were supplied by private power companies. In some cases small groups of farmers constructed short lines at their own expense in order to obtain electric service from private power plants or a municipal generating plant. However, with no trained personnel for maintenance and operation, all of the short lines were eventually taken over by the private companies, which, of course, were not in sympathy with the idea of farmers going into the electric light and power business in the first place.

Legislation had been sought in the state legislature by the League of Nebraska Municipalities to grant municipal light and power systems permission to sell electric energy within a radius of 25 miles of their municipal boundaries, but the politically-powerful private power groups seemed to control the legislature and no progress was made. Finally, in the general election in November, 1930, legislative proposals to free cities and villages from their legal chains were submitted to the people, and a measure providing for farm electricity from municipal plants carried by a vote of 204,579 to 89,205 (*Nebraska Blue Book, 1932*).

However, the problem of serving rural areas was still not solved. In the six years following the legislation permitting rural electrification, lines were constructed to serve only 5,000 additional Nebraska farms. The cities owning generating plants were unable or unwilling to finance rural projects; additional generating capacity and new equipment was necessary, the state was in the throes of a depression, and rates charged by private power companies were so high the small farmer could never afford it. So life in the farm home continued to be very simple; the farm wife's activities centered around the coal stove and the washboard, and the children studied by kerosene lamps.

The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as President in 1932 and the passage of Senate File No. 310 in 1933 opened the way for development of rural electrification in Nebraska, thus removing the first obstacle of rural districts. The same measure provided for organization of three hydro-electric districts in Nebraska: Loup River, Platte Valley and Central Nebraska (Tri-County). These three districts would supply power at low cost, thus removing the second obstacle to rural electrification.

On May 11, 1935, President Roosevelt, by executive order, created the Rural Electrification Administration. One year later the Rural Electrification Act was adopted, authorizing a loan program to co-operatives and public power districts for construction of rural lines. In order to encourage the first customers, installation loans were made to individual farmers.

Even though the path was smoothed by the availability of the federal programs, the progress of rural electrification continued to be an uphill pull. The REA districts had to overcome many difficulties. They were not welcomed by the private power companies, and in truth, it must be said that all farmers did not endorse the program. There were stand-pat Republicans who didn't want anything to do with a New Deal proposition, and others who felt that electricity generated by water was inferior to that generated by steam.

The matter of rates was also of vital interest to the successful operation of REA districts. Nebraska districts were prepared to make their charges reasonable. In most cases the monthly rates were approximately as follows:

\$3.50 minimum charge for the first 50 kilowatt-hours.

4 or 5 cents per kilowatt-hour for the next 50 kilowatt-hours,

3 cents per kilowatt-hour for the next 100 kilowatt-hours

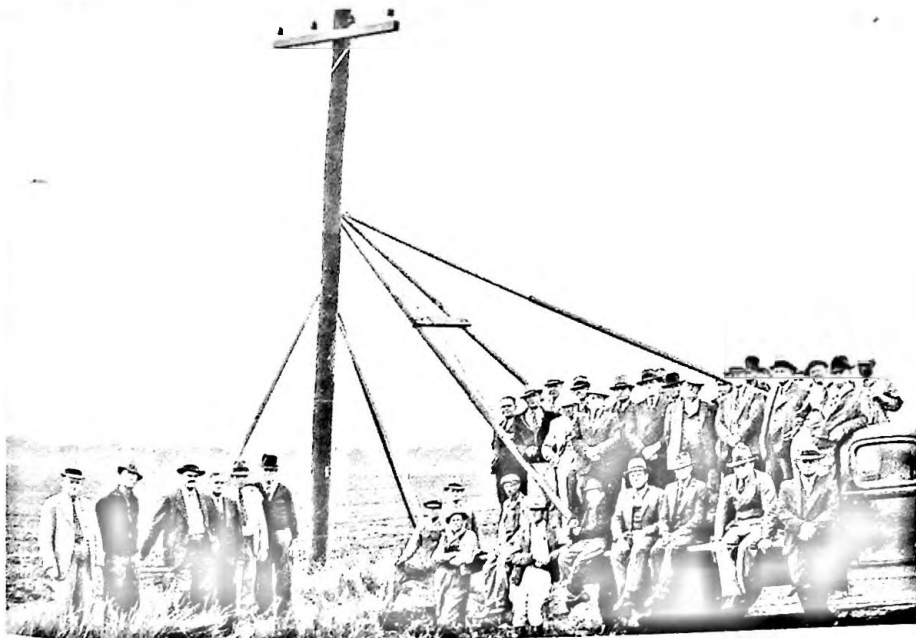
1½ to 2 cents for all additional kilowatt-hours purchased.

The \$3.50 minimum permitted lighting of the home and farm buildings and operation of a washing machine, churn, radio, toaster, fans, vacuum cleaner, iron and sewing machine. An additional \$1.75 a month would operate an electric refrigerator.

As early as November of 1935, before the federal REA loan program was adopted, a group of farmers in Buffalo County met to plan a temporary rural electrification organization. The meeting was called by County Agricultural Agent Alvah R. Hecht for November 29, with plans to discuss rural electrification and pump irrigation at a two-day *Organized Agriculture* meeting on December 12-13. County Agents Hecht and later Leonard Wenzl were of great help in the organizational planning, as were county agents all across the state. Before the November 29 meeting Mr. Hecht had ascertained (1) that if Buffalo County desired to organize a public power district, application must first be made to the REA at Washington; (2) that Buffalo County was included in the Platte Valley Public Power and Irrigation District for power supply; (3) that the Platte Valley District was very interested in developing a district in Buffalo County. Feasibility studies by REA of the Buffalo County area were next, such matters as customers per mile and usage expected per customer. REA's guidelines were 2.97 customers per mile, and use by each customer of 1200 kilowatt-hours per year. Public meetings were held in each school district so that people could be informed, and for farmers to sign up for service when the lines were built.

On January 23, 1937, the first REA board in Buffalo County was organized with Alvah Zimmerman of Gibbon, president; Earl Snyder of Kearney, vice-president; Justus Johnson of Kearney, secretary and C. R. Arbuckle of Kearney, treasurer. Other directors were Harry Oliver, Mark McConnell and Earl Hammans. The organization was known as Buffalo County Public Power District. The board first met on March 13, 1937 and six days later signed a 20-year note for \$212,000, with interest at 2.77 percent per annum.

The door was now open to develop Buffalo County's first rural electrification project. The first construction contract covered 142 miles of line and 328 farmsteads. It was estimated that there were 202 irrigation wells on these farmsteads. Frank H. Wheeler was project superintendent, C. Robert Fulton, project engineer,



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

and H. L. Blackledge was appointed attorney for the district. Bids were let on the first contract in early December, 1937.

The first phase of the project was intended to provide power from Elm Creek east to Gibbon, and the second phase east to the Hall County line. The setting of the first pole was a special event. It took place on May 15, 1938 on the John Hammans farm near Gibbon. The first section of lines was energized in December, 1938. A second contract was signed on November 9, 1938, for \$130,000 for construction of 60.5 miles of line to 132 customers. Bids were let on April 11, 1939. Another 70 miles of line was contracted for in May, 1941.

Charles A. Palmer of North Platte was appointed in June, 1939, to succeed Frank H. Wheeler as project superintendent in the Kearney office. He headed the REA in Kearney from that time until his retirement. It can be said without a doubt that the success and achievements of REA in Buffalo County were in a large part due to Charlie's guidance and supervision.

Electricity for pump irrigation was a major incentive in the development of rural electrification in Buffalo County, and irrigation was closely tied in with REA projects. Indeed, it was recognized by the state Department of Roads and Irrigation when the first project was planned that Buffalo County was unusual in comparison to other projects in the state because of the irrigation possibilities. Further statistics bear this out as rural lines were built in the county.

At the time the final hook-up of the Buffalo County District's eastern line extension was completed, 51 farmsteads and 50 irrigation pumps were being served, and a potential for 31 more farmsteads and 25 wells in this section.

The first water for irrigation was pumped with REA power on March 16, 1939 at the McConnell Bros. well. Sixteen and a half months later, on July 30, 1940, the 100th pump was installed on the Warren Reynolds farm east of Kearney. Buffalo County farmers felt so good about this that they held a celebration at the Reynolds farm. Ruby Snyder, daughter of Earl Snyder, president of the board, christened the well as Dorothy Oliver, daughter of board member Harry Oliver, looked on. Over 200 people attended. REA officials spoke, and a transcription of the ceremony was broadcast over KGFW Radio, recording the hum of the pump, and an REA speaker's forecast that "next year's



Christening 100th Electric Irrigation Well. Left to right: Ruby Snyder, Dorothy Oliver, Charles A. Palmer, Superintendent, Buffalo County REA.

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pump crop will double this.”

By October 16, 1941, as reported in the *Kearney Daily Hub* of that date, the District was servicing “165 irrigation wells and 49 installations or contracts awaiting service. 65 miles of poles with hardware installed are awaiting shipment of conductors. This construction is located in Sharon Township and in the Wood River valley from Kearney to Miller.”

Around 1940 a movement was started in central Nebraska to coordinate the activities of several rural electrification districts. Proponents felt it would enable the service to be carried on more economically, and would result in better service. In May, 1941 the Dawson and Buffalo County districts merged, with the head office at Lexington. Palmer remained in Kearney along with some employees, but there was no representation of Buffalo County on the board. Because of the nation’s involvement in World War II, and as a consequence, a lack of REA funds, all projects, the planned merger, and most activities were put on hold until the war ended. In 1946 the local board and others interested in REA started action to either get the old Buffalo County district back, or have equal representation on the board with Dawson County. Five years and some months later, in April, 1952, they reached their objective, when Sam Spahr of Kearney, Lester Gross of St. Michael, Dale Stubblefield of Shelton, and Justus Johnson of Gibbon were named to the Dawson County Public Power Board. Buffalo County was also assured that an REA office and warehouse would be built at 801 East 25th Street. The district then had 6,200 customers, including over 900 irrigation wells on 3200 miles of line.

By the early 50s, most of the farms in Buffalo County had REA service. The last portion of the county was the northwest section, where a sub-station at Miller would serve remaining portions of Sartoria, Armada, Scott and Harrison townships, and lines westward into Dawson County. Many individuals, such as Cecil Wolford, Fred Wallace, H. W. Kendall, Howard Mercer, M. H. Webb and many other farmers and businessmen played a big part in gaining the present position of REA in Buffalo County. Rural electrification has brought the farmer from the days of basic tools—the wheel, the block and tackle, the lever and the plow—and energy, which came from himself, the horse and the oxen, to Nebraska’s *Good Life* on the farm.

SOURCES

Sorensen, *Rural Electrification*, Nebraska History Magazine Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 257-270; *Kearney Daily Hub*, July 26, 1937, October 16, 1941, January 27, 1950, May 15, 1951, April 29, 1952, 1973 centennial edition; *Shelton Clipper*, December 22, 1938; *Dawson Dynamo*, May, 1961; Scrapbooks of Margaret Palmer and Ruby Snyder Wolford.

PHOTOS

Earl Hammans and Ruby Snyder Wolford.

ZIMMERMAN PTG. LITHO—KEARNEY