



A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative

# HOMEPAGE

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## Edgar Electric Cooperative – It proved the skeptics were wrong

*This July, EnerStar Electric Cooperative celebrated 75 years since first electrifying the countryside. This is a reprint from the book "Architects of Rural Progress," which was published back in 1967.*

If King Kong had strolled up the stairs to the auditorium of the Paris High School that night or had the sponsors of the meeting scheduled a debate between President Roosevelt, Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin ... well, it's doubtful the excitement could have been more intense than it was that frigid February 9th back in 1938.

The crowd of 250 men and women, plus a few children, obviously hadn't come to see the movie monster or to hear a debate between the world personalities of the World War II era.

Then what had attracted them to the meeting?

Why, it was the opportunity to get electric lights! It was the incentive that caused them to leave their warm homes and drive five, ten or more miles to hear a discussion on rural electrification.

It seems strange that people should become excited about electric lights. That's because today practically every rural home is electrified. Back in 1938, however, only a few rural homes could boast of electric lights. Electricity was a status symbol in those days. The family that possessed electric lights instead of lighting its home with a kerosene or Aladdin lamp was in an entirely



▲ Edgar Electric Cooperative, 1958

◀ EnerStar Electric Cooperative, 2008

different bracket. It was like owning a cruiser instead of a rowboat.

And, we might add, just about as expensive.

The people in attendance at the Paris school auditorium wanted electric lights. However, few could pay anywhere from \$500 to \$1,500 to get the local utility to build an extension to their farms. Provided, of course, they could persuade the power company to build the extension. For some strange reason, the utility people were convinced farmers (1) would not buy sufficient current to justify building the extensions and (2) didn't want electric lights.

They were wrong on both counts.

The meeting that bleak February night was a "now or never" type of meeting. These Edgar County farm folks were ready to exchange months of

discussion and planning for a dynamic program of action.

Ernest H. Collins of the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) was the main speaker that evening. He advised the group to name a committee so steps leading to the creation of an electric cooperative would be made.

"Congress has allocated \$30 million for rural electrification projects," Mr. Collins said. "Edgar County is one of the few counties which definitely has been promised an allotment of funds."

A. E. Staley, president of Edgar County Farm Bureau, presided at the meeting. After the proposal had been discussed from several angles, Ernest Guyman of Elbridge moved that the group proceed to organize an electric cooperative. His motion was seconded by B. M. Huffman of Hunter and the rising vote proved to be unanimously in favor of this action. Lawrence Langford then suggested that the county be

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#### COOPERATIVE HEADQUARTERS

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*Serving the Illinois  
counties of Edgar,  
Clark, Vermillion,  
Douglas and Coles.*

divided into seven districts and W. A. Dennis, B. M. Huffman and L. E. McKinzie be named to make the divisions. These were as follows:

O. Cliff Winans, Young America and Shiloh; Walter Little, Ross, Prairie and Brouillett Creek; Clayton H. Perisho, Embarrass and Buck; Bernie Curtis, Paris and Edgar; B. M. Huffman, Hunter and Stratton; John O. Honnold, Kansas and Grandview; and O. J. Bandy, Symmes and Elbridge. Mr. Curtis became president by acclamation and O. J. Bandy was elected secretary-treasurer.

Years later, Mr. Bandy was to recall the meeting as “one of the most important in the history of Edgar and Clark counties.” He was to serve as the first manager of the Edgar Electric Cooperative and take a leading role in the far-reaching campaign that placed the rural people on the same level with city residents.

“Few of us realized the hard work that would be needed to get electricity out to the farms,” Mr. Bandy says. “It was uphill work. Most people wanted electric lights. It was the occasional holdout who blocked us. He would refuse to sign an easement. That would mean detouring around his farm, often causing us to miss serving people who really wanted it.”

The groundwork for the electric cooperative had started months earlier. Once REA had been signed into existence, a Farm Bureau committee had been named to check into the possibility of organizing the cooperative. W. A. Dennis was named chairman while other committee members were B. M. Huffman, Lawrence Langford and H. Zeiss Gumm. The latter was organization director for the Farm Bureau and the others were farmers.

“This appointment was made in December, 1936,” recalls Mr. Bandy. “The committee did a great deal of useful work. They discussed the possible use of electric lights with a great many farm families. They drew maps and made numerous inquiries of REA fieldmen and representatives of the State Rural Electrification Committee.”

One of the committee’s main chores was getting signatures on

tentative agreements to use electricity if it became available. L. E. McKinzie was farm adviser for Edgar County in those years. In his annual report he noted during the period from May 1, 1937 to Nov. 30, 1937, a total of 1,042 temporary agreements had been signed by potential users. By July 15, the necessary maps had been drawn, setting up a project of 363 miles.

“I still remember working long into the night to get that map completed on July 4th,” says Mr. Bandy. “We had our office in the Farm Bureau building for about a year. All during the day and into the night firecrackers were exploding but we had an important job on our hands – getting that map ready.”

It was completed in time to be sent out to Washington for approval by REA officials.

The membership fee had been set at \$5.

“Farmers didn’t balk so much at paying \$5 to join the Cooperative,” says Mr. Bandy, “as they did at the idea of having to pay a monthly minimum bill of \$3.50 for electricity. It seemed like an impossibly high figure to so many people at the time. Later, of course, these same people who fussed and fumed at having to pay \$3.50 would be using from \$10 to \$15 worth of electricity each month – and not complaining.

“Most of the early objectors were the skeptics,” he explained. “They reasoned that if the utilities didn’t want to build lines out into the rural areas, then it was out of the question for a farmer cooperative to get the job done. Their arguments seemed quite logical, too. In the end, however, we did get the job done.”

A certificate of incorporation had been granted to the Edgar Electric Cooperative Association under the Illinois not-for-profit act on April 20, 1938. The incorporators were listed as Bernie Curtis, O. J. Bandy, O. Cliff Winans, Walter Little, Clayton Perisho, and B. M. Huffman, all of Paris, and John O. Honnold, Kansas.

Paul Wilson was hired by the board to prepare legal descriptions for right-of-way construction work at \$10 per day. George Taylor of Laramore & Douglass

of Chicago had been named to do the preliminary engineering work.

“We applied for our first loan of \$280,000 on July 6, 1938,” says Mr. Bandy. “There were plenty of people who figured we wouldn’t get it. However, REA approved that first loan on October 10, 1938 to build 255 miles of line in Edgar County.”

News of the granting of the \$280,000 loan hit the rural part of Edgar County with a tremendous impact.



Mr. O. J. Bandy reads a copy of “Architects of Rural Progress” back in 1967. Included in the book is a history of Edgar Electric.

Benjamin Redman, who served a quarter of a century as attorney for the Cooperative, says the announcement came as a shot in the arm to the officers and directors.

“There always was a hard core of rural electrification supporters in Edgar County,” he states. “There never was a time when these people had any doubts of the Cooperative’s eventual success.

“Actually this project continues to amaze me,” Mr. Redman adds. “Here’s a group of farmers who believed so strongly in rural electrification they were willing to spend long hours week after week calling on people. It was a real selling job. You would think that when the rural people had a chance to get electricity they would have been beating down the office door in order to sign up. That wasn’t the case, however. It took a great deal of perseverance and determination on the part of the organizers to get the Cooperative off to a good start.”

During a quarter of a century as

the Cooperative's attorney, Mr. Redman missed only one meeting.

He often chuckles over the Cooperative's early months.

"Its equipment was a bit primitive," he smiles. "Mr. Bandy wanted a typewriter and adding machine and kept asking for it one meeting after another. Something always came up so the board would overlook approving the purchase of these items. Eventually he did get his typewriter and adding machine but he waited several months."

Politics prevented Mr. Redman from becoming the Cooperative's first attorney. That distinction went to T. J. Trogdon, a partner of Mr. Redman. Another attorney noted that Mr. Redman was a Republican and had complained to his congressman. The upshot was that Mr. Trogdon served a short time before relinquishing the position to his partner. After Mr. Redman's resignation in 1965, Carl A. Lund of Paris became the attorney.

Mr. Bandy, who started out as secretary-treasurer, resigned to become manager. Russell Elledge of Paris became a director in his place.

"I was in charge of a hatchery in the Farm Bureau building when all this was taking place," Mr. Bandy explains. "Our first meetings were held in the hatchery part of the building. We didn't have money to buy equipment. In fact, we used boards placed on sawhorses for the first desk. It was here where we worked on that Fourth of July holiday to get the map completed and the data prepared for our first loan application."

Eight bids were opened Oct. 18, 1938, for the first section of line. Miller-Baxter Company of Indianapolis submitted a bid of \$184,760.34 specifying use of copper conductor for construction of 255 miles of line serving 593 member-owners in Edgar County. An REA engineer, however, pointed out that another firm, A. S. Schulman Company of Chicago, had placed a bid of \$176,581.19 with aluminum conductor.

The board was convinced that copper conductor was preferable to aluminum and clung to that belief for some time. However, on Jan. 11, 1939, a

letter was sent to John M. Carmody, REA administrator. Attached to the letter was a copy of a resolution accepting the recommendation of the REA on aluminum conductor. It added: "With the further assurance by our engineers that they will so stake the line around our shade trees that our trees will not have to be cut or unduly trimmed and our electric service safeguarded from interruption by contact with trees."

Construction of the lines got under way May 9, 1939.

Earlier the board had turned down a proposal for partial funds from REA. It emphasized the principle that its main idea and purpose was to provide electricity for all users in Edgar County. The members had insisted that "unless assurance could be had that sufficient money would be provided to complete the project, it would be unwise to start."

An editor commended: "Such was the high-minded resolution and integrity of the men who were to provide rural electrification for Edgar County."

Construction of the lines got under way May 9, 1939. In about nine weeks time, the lines were energized on July 15, 1939.

A newspaper report explained: "This was the first of 327 miles of line to be constructed under the first loan of \$280,000. By the end of the year, 450 homes were receiving electricity.

"The dream had come true. Electrified farms in eastern Illinois no longer are a novelty."

"The Frank Bercaw farm at Route 1 and the Redmon route has Meter No. 1," an early historian wrote. "Following in order are the Minnier farm, George Brown, Archie Morris and Vern English. First residences to be energized were those of Mr. Winans and Mr. Curtis on that July 15th.

Lean, bespectacled, cigar-smoking Cliff Winans remembers those early years.

"When we were named to that first board of directors," he observed, "we knew a lot of work was in store for us. Those of us who were named to the board did most of the work for free, gratis. I hired a man to do the work on the

farm while I was out riding around the district signing up members and getting easements. It cost me money to be on the board, I want you to know."

He puffed on his cigar, reflecting back on those busy years.

"We completed that first map on July 4th at Paris," he resumed. "O. J. Bandy and his daughter, Bernie Curtis and I worked there until dark to get it completed before the post office was closed. I remember the lines that had two members to a mile were colored red; those with three to the mile were blue in color."

In those days, according to Mr. Winans, most farm people wanted electricity for better lights and more efficient washing machines.

"REA wanted a minimum of \$10 per mile," he said. That meant the monthly electricity bill would have to



*Maurice Johnson, former co-op manager, and Cliff Winans remembering the good old days as they read about the Cooperative's history.*

average \$10 to the mile. Some farmers agreed to pay as much as \$5 and \$6 a month. That was lots of money in those days.

"Politics entered into the picture, too. Some people opposed rural electrification because it was started during a Democratic administration. Seems rather silly now, of course, but it was an issue with some people in 1938 and 1939."

He smiled for a moment, revolving the cigar between his fingers.

"I always said I was the first person to have my home energized," he added. "Jack, my son, was an active chap

always climbing the trees. He ‘cooned’ up the pole near our house, turned on the switch and we had electric lights ahead of all the others. Officially, Bernie Curtis was the first to have electricity on the REA lines but unofficially we preceded him in that honor.”

Mr. Winans, along with Mr. Bandy and Mr. Perisho, are the only living members of the original board. Mr. Bandy had resigned from the board to become its first manager.

“Those early days were tough,” he says. “We had one lineman and one truck to maintain the lines. There were plenty of problems for us other than securing easements. Imagine trying to keep 255 miles of line energized when a storm hit with only one man to help. When I climbed a pole, it seemed as high as a five-story building. Especially when rain was flooding down and lightning and thunder were adding to the excitement. I wasn’t a seasoned lineman, for that matter, so those were thrilling experiences for me.”

Clayton Perisho, sometimes referred to as “the workhorse of Edgar Electric Cooperative,” was a board member for 16 years.

“Trying to sign up members for the Cooperative and secure easements was hard work,” he recalls. “Sometimes we were greeted in a friendly manner when we called on prospective members; other times it wasn’t so agreeable. I was called a lot of names because I would volunteer to call on people other board members didn’t want to contact. That part didn’t bother me – it was the people who refused to grant easements or cooperate in any way who caused me to wonder why I had ever started out on the job.”

Mr. Perisho recalls the principal objection to rural electrification was the cost.

“More than once, I was told the price was completely out of sight,” he says. “Farmers said they couldn’t pay a minimum monthly bill of \$3.50. They didn’t know that the more electricity they used, the cheaper it would get.”

Reflecting back over those pre-REA days, Mr. Perisho says he feels a sense of pride in the fact that the Cooperative

today serves 3,830 member-owners over 1,363 miles of line.

“Originally we thought only in terms of serving Edgar County farms, Mr. Perisho says. “However, it was apparent Clark County was having difficulty getting an electric cooperative organized so we extended our lines into that county. Today we are serving rural people in Clark, Edgar, Coles, Douglas and Vermilion counties. The majority of our members live in Edgar and Clark counties.”

Russell Elledge is another person we definitely want to recognize and associate with the early history of the Edgar Electric. Mr. Elledge served the Edgar Electric in three different capacities in its formative years and is still highly interested in the welfare of the Edgar Electric.

From all three capacities – that of a vitally interested member, director and employee – Mr. Elledge recalls many experiences that he had in obtaining right-of-way for the construction of the electric lines. “If the landowner was interested in getting electric service he would sign a right-of-way easement without much trouble, but if he was not interested in receiving electric service it was just impossible to obtain a right-of-way to build a line on his property,” Mr. Elledge stated.

Trees were another big problem in obtaining a desirable right-of-way, he recalls. For some reason or another people were reluctant to authorize the cutting of a tree regardless of the tree’s type or shape.

“In fact,” Mr. Elledge recalls, “if we had obtained the line right-of-way we desired and could have removed the necessary trees, we could have built much better electric lines and saved several thousands of dollars. Furthermore, we could have secured the electric service for many of our members much sooner than we did and would have had a much better electric line to serve them.”

Through his experiences in obtaining right-of-way and in signing up members, Mr. Elledge has a complete repertoire of reasons or excuses people gave for either cooperating or not

cooperating in getting the cooperative going. He also had the sad, but familiar, experience of attempting to obtain central station electric power to his farm home prior to the REA era. As was the experience of many others, he found the utility did not refuse to serve him, but the cost was prohibitive.

“Despite the many hardships and long hours I experienced in working in the interest of the Edgar Electric, I enjoyed it,” he says, “because it gave me a feeling of accomplishment in helping my neighbors, friends and community. Even though I do not receive electricity from the Edgar Electric now, I do drive by the headquarters building frequently and



*Maurice Johnson and Clayton Perisho reminiscing over a book about the history of electric cooperatives in Illinois.*

many pleasant memories flit through my mind. In fact, my association with the Edgar Electric is a bright spot in my life and I am very proud to have had a part in its development.”

A new headquarters building was constructed on Highway 1 north of Paris in 1953. It was formally dedicated May 14, 1953, with an open house held the following day which attracted several hundreds of persons. This is a modern structure with ample facilities for meeting the needs of Edgar Electric Cooperative and its member-owners.