

Rural Electrification Act Brought Power to Farms in 1930s

by Tom Emery
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CARLINVILLE - A landmark in American public utilities was the Rural Electrification Act, which brought power to farm homes and small towns in the midst of the Great Depression.

The REA is credited with electrifying millions of rural homes and giving rise to the electric power cooperatives that still dot the nation.

The 1920s and early 1930s were hard times for American agriculture, and farm households lagged in basic technology. Though 79.5 percent of Illinois farmers owned cars in 1936, only 40.8 percent had radios, and 19.8 percent had running water.

Electric service was even more scarce.

In 1925, a mere three percent of American farms had electricity, a number that grew to only ten percent in 1931. As the Depression hammered rural life, only eleven percent of American farmers enjoyed central station electricity by 1935.

Much of the problem stemmed from the refusal of established power companies to expand, fearing a loss of profits. As a result, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the REA as part of his sweeping New Deal initiative.

Although New Deal programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps and Works

Progress Administration are better remembered, the impact of the REA is indisputable.

On May 11, 1935, Roosevelt signed an executive order to create the Rural Electrification Administration, the basis for the REA, which passed Congress on May 20, 1936. The REA provided \$50 million in loans to build rural electric systems.

Under the act, “persons, corporations, cities, districts, states, and co-operatives” were allowed to borrow money. Towns of under 1,500 in population were eligible to participate, and as one source noted, “rural electric borrowers” were required to “agree to serve all who are without electricity in their area, regardless of whether the service is profitable or not.”

Even with the federal loans, existing utilities showed little inclination to expand into rural areas. To meet this need, hundreds of electric cooperatives sprang up around the nation, many of which exist today.

Though the framework was in place, many rural cooperatives did not develop for several years, pushing electrification into the postwar era. From 1946-49, the number of rural electric systems doubled as the mileage of energized power lines jumped five-fold. By 1953, over ninety percent of American farms were electrified.

With the new amenities, the quality of farm life improved dramatically. In 1960,

a Mount Vernon newspaper reflected that “gone are the days of drab drudgery and back-breaking toil of pitching hay with a fork, carrying water by the pail, and firewood by the armful.”

The paper added that “the day is long gone when farm folks seemed to age overnight, and young people were forced to leave for the city’s bright lights, better jobs, and easier living.”

Through 1959, nearly \$3.5 billion in loans to 1,084 electric systems, mostly cooperatives, had been distributed for power generation, transmission, and facilities.

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