

Rural beginnings...

immediately at the possibility of buying adjoining property. Another loan was applied for and approved for the building of new office headquarters in Sumterville.

Howell C. Hobson, an architect in Leesburg, drew up the plans for the building. I recall working on the construction of the Sumterville office, along with others. Young people connected with the NYA (*National Youth Administration*) were also used as laborers. A man by the name of Cramer was hired to supervise the building's construction.

When asked the names of the first permanent employees of Sumter Electric, I recall the names of Wilmer Shelton, Richard Roesel, T.C. West, Jettie Pearl Mickler, myself and Manager, J.G. Sparkman. R.W.



Eldridge was hired a short time later. (Others were involved in short-term contract jobs at the beginning; but did not remain as permanent employees.)

The first annual meeting of the cooperative membership was held in the summer of 1940, on the schoolhouse grounds in Sumterville. Approximately 40 Co-op members in attendance were served a menu of chicken & rice and lemonade by the Board, Manager Sparkman and the five other employees.

During 1941, now enjoying the new office headquarters in Sumterville, tragedy struck our nation on December 7 with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, bringing our country into World War II.

Employees of Sumter Electric did their part in the war effort by participating in an air raid watch system. Volunteering as watchmen, the employees took turns sitting on the roof of the building with a telephone extension line to the roof to report any and every plane, its type and direction of travel, to defense headquarters. When it was time for shift change, the next em-

ployee would climb out the window onto the roof with their office work.

Soon it became apparent that Sumter Electric employees could not maintain this service around the clock, so the gracious people in the Sumterville area decided to build a watchtower on the cooperative grounds. This tower was built with volunteer labor and materials and people from the community took turns maintaining this service of listening for planes for the civil defense until war's end.

Sometime, if I recall correctly, in the early '40s, the REA in Washington, notified Sumter Electric that a 40-hour work week would be established, along with a workday of 8 hours. The work week would extend Monday through Friday. Any time over and above the 8-hour day or 40-hour work week should be paid overtime.

I will not attempt to explain the formula used by the management and board of directors of Sumter Electric for paying this overtime rate, but I will give an example. If a person worked for 20¢ per hour and worked 40 hours, their pay would be \$8; however, if during the work week, they worked ten hours more than the 40-hour work week, they would be paid the amount of 80¢ for the 10 hours worked more than the 40 hours. I don't know how to explain the formula that was used; however, the employees named it the "Flexible rate of pay for time worked over 40 hours."

So, you see, the employees in those early days didn't make a lot of money, but every employee was dedicated to the task that was before them. They worked hard and long hours to maintain electric service for the Co-op's members.

From this humble beginning, Sumter Electric has grown to be one of the major cooperatives in the United States and certainly one of the larger ones in the State of Florida. When one thinks of the current 149,000 membership, 365 employees, and the multi-million dollar corporation Sumter Electric has become, it seems only fitting to stop, give thanks and reflect on the contributions and efforts of untold numbers

of local citizens who worked unselfishly to make the dream of electricity in rural central Florida a reality. Their contributions were major.

Of the original employees, only two remain – Jettie Pearl and myself. The passing of time has also taken from us those "founding fathers" of Sumter Electric and so many of the other faithful members of the various communities who worked so diligently in those early days to bring into reality the dream of an electric cooperative – a dream-come-true, making possible a better life for people in our rural areas. □

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ray Robbins, worked as a volunteer beginning in 1937, going door-to-door encouraging people to become members of the future electric cooperative. In June 1938, he became the Co-op's first employee. Over the years he held several positions: bookkeeper, lineman, meter reader, serviceman, warehouse foreman, office worker and assistant manager. When district offices began to open, he became the Manager of the Groveland office. In 1976, he retired and then, in 1980 was elected to the Board of Trustees. He later served as President of the Board and left for full retirement in 1991.

He still maintains a continued love and interest for the work of Sumter Electric, however, and I am amazed at the old-timers in the community who still, today, call him for help and advice concerning their electricity needs. Back when I was a young girl living at home, I recall people always called our house when their lights went out. One afternoon, I, personally, logged in ninety-six calls for power outages.

Times are changing. Sumter Electric Cooperative continues to move forward, but, as long as I live, to me, the name of Sumter Electric and my father, Ray Robbins, will be synonymous.

Mary Helen (Robbins) Myers



Once people had lights, they began to look for more ways to use electricity to help with the chores and make life easier.

Remembrances

GETTING ELECTRICITY FOR THE FIRST TIME

Ray Robbins, SECO's first employee, shares his remembrances of how a group of rural citizens got together in the 1930s to establish their own power company – a cooperative



The next time you or I turn on an electric light, run water, cook a meal, watch television,

wash and dry clothes, enjoy air conditioning or electric heat, we must remember that it came about because people had a dream and were willing to work to make it happen! Work done "yesterday," brightens our "today!"

I cannot think of any business entity in Central Florida, in all my 89 years, that has done more to unite Central Florida communities, (neighbor working with neighbor), involve so many people in a more noble and worthwhile effort with such lasting benefits to our citizens – as the founding of Sumter Electric Cooperative, Inc.

Thank you, Sumter Electric, for allowing me to be a part of your beginning and remaining such an integral part of my life for the past sixty-eight years!

Gratefully yours,

Ray Robbins

Tuscanooga, Florida

Much of the decade of the 1930s was one of widespread misery and despair brought about by a great economic depression which swept across the entire country. In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed the presidency at the depth of the Great Depression. Nationwide, 13 million people were unemployed and most banks were closed.

Life in rural Sumter, Lake and surrounding counties presented a typical picture of America's economic situation. Jobs were scarce. Most of those available in this area were on farms or ranches, offering \$1 per-day wages for work from sun-up until sun-down. Pay for overtime work was unthinkable as was compensation for holidays worked. Life was hard!

President Roosevelt proposed, and Congress enacted, sweeping programs to bring recovery to business and agriculture and relief to the unemployed. During this era, most urban dwellers had electricity; however, electricity for rural dwellers was almost non-existent. Private utility companies, who supplied electric power to most of the nation's consumers, felt it too expensive to build electric lines to isolated rural farmsteads. Most of the nation's farmers were too poor to afford it anyway.

In 1935, the Roosevelt Administration created the Rural Electric Administration (REA) to bring electricity to these rural areas. It was felt that not only would it improve the farmer's standard of living and boost the economic competitiveness of the family farm, it would provide needed job opportunities for the community.

Under the umbrella of the Federal Department of Agriculture, news of the newly-formed REA began to spread across the country. The idea of obtaining electricity, which would provide better methods of pumping water, cooking and electric lights to illuminate the darkness in rural America, was indescribably exciting news!

Sometime during the decade of the 1930s, a young man by the name of W.J. Platt, Jr., came to Sumter County to assume the position of Agricultural Agent. Surveying the situation of Sumter and adjoining counties, he saw, firsthand, the tremendous burden the rural residents had in taking care of their families. Sometime after 1935, Mr. Platt received information from the Agricultural Department in Washington, DC, outlining the possibilities of bringing electricity to the rural homes of central Florida. It was welcomed information.

Mr. Platt immediately contacted J.C. Getzen, Jr., an attorney in Bushnell, who was, at that time, a Representative to the Florida House of Representatives. Attorney Getzen suggested Platt contact some of the local citizens to determine their level of interest in bringing electricity to the rural areas. Among those who attended the initial meeting held at the Sumter Courthouse, were: J.H. Hughes (*Bushnell*), J. Grover Sparkman (*Webster*), A.G. Slone (*Center Hill*), J. W. Patterson (*Linden*), W.H. Proctor (*Belleview*), H.A. Sebekow (*Oxford*) C.L. Johnson and T.A. Word (*Wildwood*). All of these men were favorable to the idea and volunteered their services in assisting Mr. Platt in investigating the possibility of forming a Rural Electric Cooperative.

As word spread of the efforts of Mr. Platt, with the help of the above-mentioned citizens, adjoining counties, namely, Lake, Citrus and Marion, also indicated an interest



Linemen working for the Co-op were used to long hours and hard work, most of which was done by hand.

How a group of citizens got together and built a power company

in joining the effort to bring electricity to rural central Florida. Other citizens who gave backing and encouragement to the project idea were J.P. Lynch and Henry Shepherd (*Groveland*), Manuel Sloan (*Mascotte*), O.W. Smith (*Astatula*), Harry Mertz (*Umatilla*), W.L. Spivey (*Belleview*), among others. Representative Getzen was encouraged by their interest and began laying the groundwork necessary for forming the cooperative. First, an organization was formed for the purpose of petitioning the State of Florida for a charter to form an electric cooperative. The initial suggestion was to call it the Sumter County Electric Cooperative, Inc.; however, the name was rejected in the interest of the surrounding counties. Sumter Electric Cooperative, Inc., was eventually agreed upon.

At one of the early organizational meetings, J.H. Hughes, a former tax collector for Sumter Co., was elected president of the association, J.P. Lynch was elected vice president and J.G. Sparkman, was elected secretary-treasurer. With a volunteer board and elected officers in place, Attorney Getzen proceeded with the petition to the State of Florida for the necessary charter.

The charter from the Florida State Department to establish this not-for-profit cooperative arrived in November of 1937. As one of the many volunteers, in 1937, I recall driving from house to house talking to residents in the countryside, urging them to become a member of the brand

new Sumter Electric Co-op. I am sure all those early volunteers could testify, as I, to the excitement of these rural citizens over the idea of one day having electricity!

A plan was agreed upon to secure at least three customers per mile. People were asked to sign an application for membership in the newly-formed electric cooperative and to pay a \$5 application fee. With the economy in such grave condition, many people were unable to pay the \$5 application fee. I recall that many could only pay 50¢ at the time of sign-up but continued to make small payments until the fee was paid in its entirety. It was difficult to find even one person who did not want to cooperate. Excitement was in the air!

The first week in June, 1938, Sparkman, on behalf of the Board, asked if I would begin working in the office of Attorney Getzen, in Bushnell, to process the many applications that were accumulating, to record the application fees and be available to answer questions from the community. I was hired as the first employee with the agreement that as soon as money became available from the government loan I would begin receiving a salary of \$1.25 per day. I recall working under this arrangement for three months, receiving my first paycheck the last week of August.

The second week in June, Jettie Pearl Mickler, a niece of J.H. Hughes, president of the Co-op, also began working in the Getzen office under the same terms. Applications were flooding in, making the extra help necessary. With Miss Mickler in the office, it also afforded me spare time, on occasion, to continue my travels door to door encouraging people to sign membership applications and collect membership fees. Jettie Pearl and I worked for several months in the Getzen office. Because of the tremendous load of applications pouring in, more room was needed, and it eventually became necessary to

move to a vacant building on Main Street in Bushnell.

With so many applications and membership fees now recorded, the officers of the cooperative felt it feasible to get an engineer to research the area and draw up proposed routes for electric lines. A.P. Michaels was enlisted. He worked diligently, willing to help in any way possible to make the new cooperative a success. He, too, worked on the promise that he would be paid as soon as a government loan arrived. He made permanent drawings which were then submitted to the REA in Washington. With this information, Sumter Electric was officially eligible for a construction loan.

When the first loan was granted, (*\$66,000 sticks in my mind but I'm not completely sure*), the next step was for the Board to ask for applications for a manager's position. I recall that a gentleman came by expressing interest, but after spending several days in the community, decided not to pursue the job as the Co-op's first manager. Afterwards, J.G. Sparkman, told the Board that if he could be paid \$50 a month, he would resign as secretary-treasurer and assume the position as manager of the Co-op. They agreed to this suggestion and C.O. Pitts (*Webster*), was appointed to fill Sparkman's vacancy on the board. Sparkman immediately began to push toward getting construction started on the various portions of the lines. His efforts were untiring toward everything that would be of benefit to Sumter Electric and its membership.

Volunteers in each community took it upon themselves to begin clearing trees and underbrush, making way for the anticipated electric lines. Neighbor helped neighbor. When members were either too old or in too poor of health to clear their right-of-way, friends and neighbors in the community happily did the work for them. Nowhere did a problem arise over the granting of easements for the routes of power lines. Cooperation, compassion and interest for the betterment of their fellow man was the order of the day.

With community interest high, and money now available from the government loan,

it was time to ask for bids for the construction of the first two portions of the co-op's lines. The bids were divided into two sections: the "south portion," which included the south portion of Sumter and portions of Lake County, and the "north portion," which was the area around Wildwood/Oxford and into south Marion County. The south portion bid was awarded to Bigby Electric Company. The north portion was awarded to Miller-Baxter Electric Company.

Near the Fall of 1938, two flat-bed railroad cars of pressure-treated poles were delivered to the site at Webster. Bigby Electric moved equipment into the area and set up temporary headquarters.

Immediately, many, especially the men in the farm areas, began to make application for jobs to help with the construction of the first phase of the electric lines. Word had spread that laborers would be paid 15¢ per hour for a 10-hour day. This was better than the current rate among the farm workers of \$1 a day, sunrise to sunset.



Work Crew—May 1942 (L to R): Oneal Marsh, Ray Robbins, Lloyd Dias & R.W. Eldridge.

With the unloading of the poles from the railroad cars, came the first lost-time accident for the Co-op. Reasie Dobson (*Webster*), a short-term contract worker, received a crack in his leg bone from an erratic move of a pole during the unloading process. This accident did not quench the fervor of the laborers or slow down the work.

Staking sheets, prepared by Engineer Michaels, were given to foremen of Bigby Electric. Poles were loaded on trailers and distributed according to the staking sheets. Holes were dug, poles set, anchors installed, hardware applied in readiness for

the distribution from pole to pole of the electric lines. While Bigby Electric Company was busy installing electric lines in south Sumter and Lake Counties, Miller-Baxter Electric was, likewise, busy installing lines in north Sumter, Marion and Citrus Counties.

As these two contractors installed their lines, metering points were set up on the electric lines of Florida Power Corporation, whereby, Sumter Electric could receive electric service from the existing Florida Power lines. One metering point was south of Webster, one was near Belleview, and another near Howey-in-the-Hills. These metering points served for a few years until the load on Co-op lines increased to the point that Sumter Electric eventually began to install substations, whereby, they could transmit power for the substations from the power company's high voltage lines.

As work continued, more and more people were getting their houses wired for electricity. Many farmers were not financially able to have this done, consequently, the national REA made available low interest loans. This loan program was known as the Electric Home & Farm Authority. In addition to offering low-cost financing, the EHFA also made arrangements with appliance makers to supply electric ranges, refrigerators and water heaters at reasonable prices. Sold at local power companies and electric cooperatives, they could be purchased with the low-cost financing loans from the EHFA.

On November 12, 1938, the first electric power surged through the lines into about 400 homes in rural central Florida. Overcome with excitement, people actually shed tears of joy when their lights first came on!

As electric power began to spread throughout regions of the countryside, W.J. Platt, continued working to improve life on the farm. Knowledgeable of the problems farmers were having with their irrigation systems, usually powered by a tractor or a stationary engine, Platt began to encourage farmers to think seriously about electric pumps for their irrigation purposes. The

first person to install an electric-powered irrigation system on Sumter Electric lines was J.G. Sparkman, the Co-op's manager. The first to install an electric-powered irrigation system in south Lake County was Thomas Orgo (*Groveland*), who very much supported the efforts of Sumter Electric.

The following were the first rate schedules established by the Board of Directors. The minimum rate was \$2.40 per month. For this price, each member was allowed to use 35 kilowatt-hours (kWh) of electricity. The next 45 kWh per month would cost 5¢ per kWh. The next 120 kWh would cost 2½¢. If my memory serves me correctly, for 200 kWh of electricity used each month, a person would be billed \$7.65. Any electricity used over 200 kWh would be billed at 1½¢ per kWh.

Many people were, over time, able to have an electric water pump, a refrigerator,



SECO headquarters in 1941, consisted of six rooms, plus restrooms and parking spaces for two vehicles. The NYA (National Youth Administration) helped in the construction of the building.

stove, an electric iron and lights. With the economy as it was, no one wanted to obligate themselves for appliances other than those absolutely necessary; however, some did splurge on an electric radio to enjoy the Saturday night, *Grand Ole' Opry* from Nashville. The water pump and electric iron were the love of each housewife.

As the number of members continued to multiply rapidly and electric consumption increased, it became necessary to think about more office space.

Walter Wynn (*Bushnell*), a strong supporter of the Sumter Electric effort, donated some property in Sumterville. The Co-op accepted his generous gift and looked



SECO Work Crew 12-24-48. Standing (L to R): Edward Sparkman, R.W. Eldridge, J.G. Sparkman. Kneeling (L to R): Crawford Traylor, James Williams, Ray Robbins, Herman Sparks, Grady Turner, Loren Mann, Harry Wood, Oneal Marsh, Mitchell Mann, Troy Hudson, Doc Tompkins, Walter Boswell, Tracy Myles and Edwin Caruthers.