

"Let there be light."

By Michelle Clark and Mary Ross



The R.E.A. got started with Roosevelt's New Deal. Our story is about electricity getting started in the Yampa Valley. It's about the beginning of Yampa Valley Electric. For this story we interviewed Ev Bristol, Eunice Dorr and Dorothy Wither. We started the story with Ev Bristol.

We started the story with an interview with Ev Bristol. He is at Yampa Valley Electric, and has worked there since 1946.

"I'm the old timer around here. I've been at Yampa Valley Electric longer than anybody else. Actually I'm not quite a native, but I came here in 1935 which almost qualifies me as one. I moved from Nebraska following the terrible dustbowl days. If you remember the "Grapes of Wrath" that Steinbeck wrote, I was part of that westward migration from the dustbowl. My family homesteaded, in a matter of speaking, and I've been in this green valley ever since.

"I sort of grew up and matured along with Yampa Valley Electric. It was in 1935, in fact the year we came here, that national rural electrification began. Perhaps you remember the story in the bible, the one about the creation, and how in the beginning, F.D.R. said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light! In rural America at that time, I think the statistics show that only 10% of the people had electricity. Our family was among that 90% that didn't have electric power.

"It was some years before it actually got to our place in Strawberry Park. In the main towns of the valley, Craig, Hayden and Steamboat, there was electric power about 1930; however, the rural areas largely were neglected for some time."

We asked Ev about the town utilities and how they worked.

"The town utilities preceded the rural electric cooperative. There was a gentleman by the name of Douglas Graham, who moved here from

This story sponsored by Yampa Valley Electric



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Chicago and developed several small utilities in Colorado serving small towns and villages. He built a little power plant at McGregor, just west of Milner and across the river. There was a coal mine there that supplied the fuel. Power lines were constructed from there to Craig and up to Steamboat. The company was called the Colorado Utilities Corporation — that was long about 1929 or 1930. Yampa Valley Electric Association was formed in 1940, the cooperative purchased power from this small generating plant. That little plant operated until 1965, when the much more modern plant near Hayden was built, and the old, inefficient plant was closed down. It was a fairly common trend around the country for small, isolated towns, which weren't really growing that much, to merge with the new rural electric cooperatives. Yampa Valley Electric and the Colorado Utilities Corporation merged in 1952."

Ev told us about growing up in Steamboat without electricity and how he ended up working for Yampa Valley Electric.

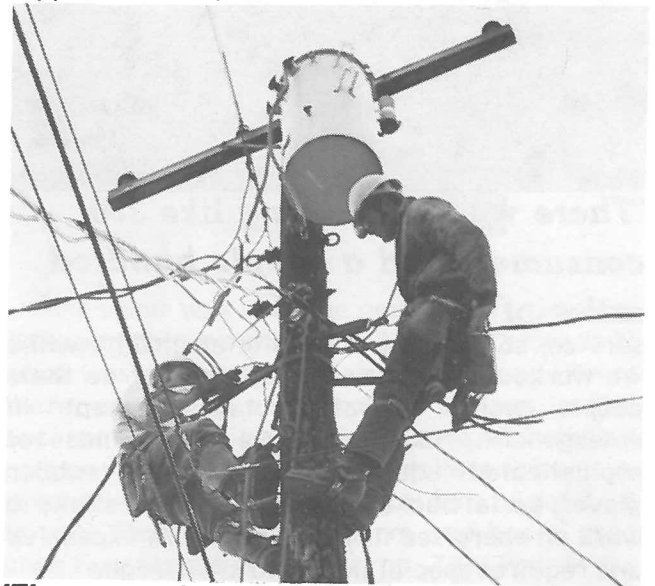
"In those early years we lived out in the northern part of Strawberry Park. I've tried to impress my kids with how we grew up without electricity, and had to study by a kerosene lamp. However, we did have running water — it was a stream that ran by the door of the little house we lived in. And, of course, no refrigerator, just a little cooler over the stream. We had to heat the water on the old wood cook stove and took our baths in a big tub. So, things have changed, and we'd like to think that Rural Electrification played a part, a major part, in changing what we now refer to as the good ol' days. I think it is more fun to remember than it was to actually experience it at the time. We used to walk to school about three miles. It was a little chilly in the winter times — that was before they had school buses to pick you up and deliver you to the steps of the school. I went to high school here and then to the University of Colorado; served in the Navy during W.W.II. After that I came back here and went to work for the rural electric

cooperative.

"Yampa Valley Electric was actually organized in 1940 and I joined them in 1946. There were only four of us then; now we have 75 employees. As I recall, the manager at the time was Claus Rose. The lineman was Smitty, a 'boomer' lineman who had been in the trade for a long time, and the office person was Eunice Dorr, who recently has retired from the county. She ran the whole office and did the billing by hand, kept the general ledger, etc. The manager signed up the new members, did the public relations and supervised the project. The construction crew was the lineman and me. And being the 'college-educated' person, I was the engineer, did the meter testing, staked the lines and then helped Smitty build them.

"There was something like 300 consumers and a couple hundred miles of line in the beginning, which over these four decades have grown to 2,200 miles of line and nearly 17,000 customers. The cooperative now is looking at its 45th Anniversary and we'll be celebrating the 50th Anniversary of R.E.A. this year. There are now about a thousand cooperatives similar to Yampa Valley Electric across the country.

"It is kind of interesting and fun to look back when you've lived through some of the changes. You don't really see them day by day and year by year, but looking back over 40 years, you can appreciate the progress that's been made.



"I'm sure O.S.H.A. wouldn't approve what we did in those days."

"I might reflect a little on some of those changes that have taken place. As I said, my life kind of parallels the growth of Yampa Valley Electric. In 1946, the co-op had four employees, and running an electric system with four employees meant each one had to do a lot of different things, 'wear different hats,' and be jacks-of-all-trades. Just back from the war, and fresh out of school, without any practical experience, I

learned by doing. We didn't have any training programs then. Now we have apprentice programs, we send people to workshops and seminars and provide all sorts of training. Then, you just learned by experience and it wasn't always the best way to learn.

"There has been a change of attitude among the consumers and one of our biggest problems now is getting a right-of-way for power lines. Back in those days, people were so anxious to get power that they not only gave you the right-of-way to build a power line, but they would come out and help you build the lines. And for years they read their own meters. Now, of course, we have meter readers who read every meter each month. The attitudes of people have changed. Before, people regarded getting electric energy as a privilege; it was really something special. Now it's kind of an inherent right that we're entitled to electric energy. In those early days, if we had to work on a line, we would take it out of



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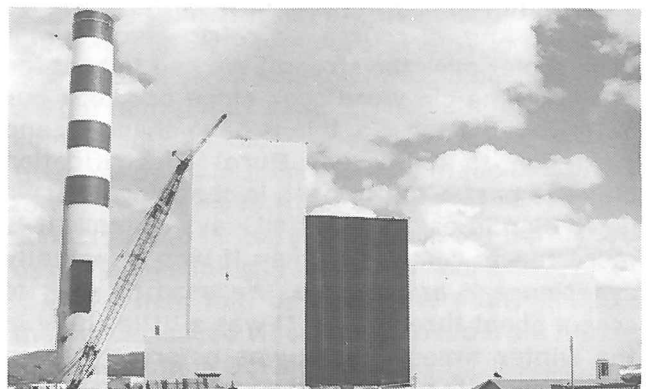
service, so people were out of electricity while we worked on it. Now we can hardly do that; people won't tolerate outages except in emergencies. So we have all kinds of sophisticated equipment and tools, rubber gloves, aerial buckets and insulated hot sticks to work on energized lines. This is more expensive and requires special skills and knowledge.

"Many of today's consumers don't know much about cooperatives. The success of a cooperative is largely dependent upon the interest and participation of the members of the cooperative, similar to our democratic government. If people don't participate, it doesn't function very well. Nowadays it seems people are satisfied if they have good electric service, and if the rates don't get too high. They're not really concerned about the fact that they are the owners of the cooperative. The R.E.A. program is probably one of the best programs that the federal

government ever instituted. The R.E.A., as it's called, is the Rural Electrification Administration, the federal agency in Washington, and each cooperative is a private institution of its own. The program has been successful and has done more for rural America and agriculture than any other program. In fact, its been so successful that along in the 60's, when John Kennedy was President, the R.E.A. pattern was exported to other developing countries around the world. One of the great needs is food production; many third world countries are starving. I have been fortunate to participate in this program in different parts of the world — Brazil, Panama, Ecuador, Indonesia, Egypt, Yemen — to help bring the idea of cooperative rural electrification to these countries, largely building on the pattern that has been successful in this country. It's really been a satisfying experience to help bring electricity to the rural people in these developing countries."

We asked Ev about his early years working with electricity.

"It's interesting as you look at the modern, huge power plants now-a-days, with their closed circuit television and sophisticated systems, and compare them with the small, manually operated plants in the early days. The fireman wheeled the coal in a wheelbarrow and shoveled it into the boilers to generate the steam that ran the turbines. By the time I started there, we had a little 'jerry-rigged' kind of a cable car system and didn't have to shovel the coal. There were hoppers to dump the coal in from which it fed into the firebox. They still tell a story about the early 30's when the men worked 12 hour shifts. Of course the demand for electricity wasn't very much and apparently on one of the night shifts, the fella got sleepy, sat down to rest and forgot to shovel coal into the furnace. The fire went out, the steam shut off and the turbine rolled to a stop. So all the lights were out until the superintendent came down and woke the operator.



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"Being young and inexperienced, basically I was scared to death."

"I remember my early days with the cooperative, working on the lines at the cross roads in Strawberry Park. I can still visualize it quite vividly. Smitty made contact with a high voltage line. I'd had no training at all as far as first aid or C.P.R. Being young and inexperienced, basically I was scared to death. It made a horrible roar and with the big arc of electricity, I was sure he was dead. His safety belt was around the pole and he just sort of slid down the pole. We didn't have a two-way radio in those days, so I couldn't holler for help. I was faced with a dilemma, what do I do? I figured there wasn't much time, so I unbelted him and began to work on him. I don't know if I helped, but I really worked on him the way I perceived you got people breathing again. Inadvertently I probably did some cardiac massage, too. Frankly, whether I contributed or not I don't know, but at least he survived. He had a burn on his foot and on his hand where the electricity had gone through him. But to show how tough he was, he got up, went back up the pole and completed the job he had started to do. Now it wouldn't be allowed. You would immediately get a person to the hospital because you can't tell what the extent of the injuries are. He was a character. The fact that he pretty religiously drank a pint of gin every day was what saved him, some people would say.

"This incident relates, in a way, to the lack of equipment and manpower that we had to do line construction. We had no power augers and had to dig all the holes with long handled shovels. When we got into really hard clay or rock, it would take hours to dig a hole. So, we used powder...we'd

take a bar and jam a hole down there and stick the dynamite in it with a cap and fuse. We'd light it and then sit back and wait and hope it would go off and would loosen the dirt in the hole. But, every so often nothing would happen. The fuse would just go out. So here we were, trying to build a line, trying to get this hole dug and there is a stick of powder in there. Is that thing gonna go off or isn't it? So, eventually you go over, look in and there's no fire, no smoke, so you dig it out and start over again, and hope it goes off the next time.

"You may know or have heard about the concerns for P.C.B.'s — environmental concerns. It's a chemical liquid that under certain conditions may be toxic. There was a lot manufactured years ago, that was used in transformers and other electric equipment. Now, it's prohibited, but it's still unknown as to how dangerous it really is. I used to work in the transformer oil with my hands changing the taps under this P.C.B. fluid, and I'm still alive. But, by some of the accounts that have been printed by the government and others, I shouldn't be. However, I have a feeling it's not as serious as it has been suggested."

Ev began to explain more about Yampa Valley Electric.

"Now that people have electric energy, their attention and concern turns to other things, such as the environment and the visual impact of overhead power lines. For years, all power lines were overhead and it was rare, except for a metropolitan area, to have underground lines. Now we do place some lower voltage power lines underground. In the early days, probably the prettiest thing a farmer could see, if he'd been living in the country a long time without electricity, was power poles and power lines. People now would rather not see the power lines but they still look okay to me, especially when you consider the operating and maintenance problems. In addition to the visual effect, we're concerned about public safety. We have much better safety education programs now. We have had people contact energized power lines and that's a concern we have that somebody may get hurt. We're able to do a lot better now in educating people about the dangers of electric lines that we did in those days."

Ev told us about the work he did and the equipment they used.

"We now have many skilled people in the construction and operation area and a whole fleet of trucks and equipment, aerial lifts and digger derricks and all kinds of hydraulic equipment. In those early days our equipment consisted of one old battered pick-up truck and some equipment known as a spoon and a banjo with 8' handles requiring a special kind of energy and back strength to build the lines. The one old



"We used dynamite to help dig the holes. Sometimes the fuse would just go out."

pick-up truck was what we used to set the poles with. We had a little roller contraption on the overhead frame of the pick-up. After the hole was dug, we'd wrestle the pole up on this frame, drive up to the hole and ease the butt of the pole into the edge of the hole, then drive the pick-up forward! And if we did it just right, and with the right speed, and we got the pole erect at the right speed, it would just settle right into the hole. In case it didn't, you ran as fast as you could. The pole was gonna' come down somewhere. The frame of the pick-up was kind of caved in because sometimes it would come down on the truck.

"I'm sure that O.S.H.A. and other agencies wouldn't approve what we did in those days, but we 'made do' with what we had. We had Smitty, the lineman, but sometimes we needed somebody else up the pole. So I put on a pair of hooks, and went up the pole. Normally you take months or years to learn to be a lineman and to get the proper training to do this. But in my case, I just started in. Fortunately, I never did fall off a pole, but you can't imagine how high up you seem. When you get to the top of a 40' pole, it seems like you're way up in the air. Of course you're supposed to do something while you're up there, but how can you do much if you're hanging on with both hands? The skill you have to learn as a lineman is to be comfortable and to rely on your safety belt that goes around the pole, so your hands are free. Now, in training linemen, they often set several poles close together; they get them up on the poles and throw a basketball back and forth. That's how they get comfortable with being up on a pole with just their hooks

stuck in the pole and their belt so they can use their hands to do the work. I never did get that skilled before I retired from climbing poles."

We asked Ev about how storms affected their work.

"The result was a lot of outages. We again didn't have much protective equipment. Now we have various kinds of circuit breakers and fuses installed over the whole system so that if there is a storm, or somebody runs into a pole, the problem is isolated by the protective devices so the least number of consumers are out.

"We didn't have very many protective devices in those days. I remember generally when a storm came up, Smitty and I would get in the old pick-up and we'd drive from some place on Elk River where we had circuit breakers and out to Yellow Jacket Pass, where we had another set of circuit breakers. We'd drive back and forth between those two locations reclosing and resetting those circuit breakers until the storm was over. During one storm we literally ran the wheels off. We were going up Yellow Jacket Pass and the rear wheels came off our one and only service truck. So we were out of business for a while. Also, back in those days, the farmers would often help build the lines, using their horses. You seldom see that anymore, but that was common in those days. We used horses to drag the poles in and to pull up the wires; we used a lot of horsepower and manpower. Now we use four-wheel drive equipment, some equipment with tracks, and various hydraulic equipment and aerial devices.

"Yes, there have been a lot of changes in the past 40 years, most of them for the better."



"People were so anxious to get power they would come out and help you build the lines."

Eunice Dorr

"I was born and raised in Steamboat Springs, so was my husband and I think that is sort of a record anymore. I grew up on a ranch outside of town about three miles. After I got out of high school, I went to work for a year for the school. My salary was \$35 per month.

"I went to work for Yampa Valley Electric and I was there for six years. I was there when they energized the first lines and I worked as a bookkeeper and an office girl for the rest of the time.

"It was during the war, we had a very small operation. It wasn't like it is now. It had, I think at the peak when I left, only 385 customers. It was actually a rural electrification project at that time. It was a two-man operation all during the war. The manager-lineman, Claus Rose was his name, was there and he was outside most of the time. I worked in the office and did what was necessary — bookkeeping, billing customers, figuring budget, whatever.

"We had our office in what was an old hotel and later was the Courthouse Annex. It was right across the street from the Courthouse. Then it burned down — not while I was working there, but later. I started working at the Y.V.E.A. in 1942. I worked 8 hours a day. My beginning pay was \$420 a year. It was a 40 hour week. Actually it was more than that. I worked 8 hours a day and half a day on Saturday. They asked me to work two weeks for nothing, which I did in order to get the job. I worked the first two weeks without salary and then I was paid after that. I did this because I thought I owed that to them for them giving me the job and because I hadn't had much experience.

"They had an office girl before me. They had to have one. They had the loans from the government and had built the lines. They were getting ready to energize them when they decided they needed some other help. They had been operating, I think, about a year. They had built most of the lines by the time I got there, and they were ready to start selling electricity. I primarily worked at bookkeeping and then we put in appliances for sale — a lot of appliances because they weren't available. They put in some appliances and then house wiring for sale and chicken brooders and a few things like that. I had to sell them.

"I liked working there from the beginning. I didn't help any in the field, but I did sell a lot of wiring and appliances. I think the average bill per month was probably about \$6 to \$8."

We asked Eunice about the appliances her family used when she was younger.

"Our first appliances were a few refrigerators, mixers, toasters and some other small kitchen

appliances and radios.

"At Christmas, we got a few gift appliances for sale at the Yampa Valley Electric when we could get them. Later on, as the war progressed, we couldn't get any of them. If you were lucky, when you went to a store and they had an appliance, you could buy it."

Eunice summed up the interview talking about how storms affected the power lines.

"The storms were always hard on the lines of course. In view of the fact that there was only one man there to take care of them, there were times when people were without electricity for several days. I remember particularly a storm that came in and hit us in September. It was a big storm. There were a number of ranchers on feeder lines and they were without electricity for three or four days."

Dorothy Wither

"There used to be a plant, the big brick building, where the Elkins live. That was where the first plant was and people by the name of Carver started it. There was a father and he had four sons, Will, Don, Walter, Norman and one daughter Louise. Will left, but the other boys stayed and helped their dad. What year it was, I don't know. I was too young. After a few years, they took the steam from it and ran it under the streets here and heated houses from the plant. In the spring we could all play marbles because all the snow was gone early because the steam came up and melted the snow. When Bob and Frances Wither did some things in their house a few years ago, they found the old pipe. I know it went up past the school because I played marbles with the boys.

"The Carvers had a daughter and she married Clay Monson. Then they had their office on the main street, down where the Conoco station is today. There were buildings all around there.



"I think the Rural Electrification is the best thing to have happen to this country."

The very last one is where they had their office and only the girls worked there. Anna Nay was one of the bookkeepers. I don't know anybody else who worked for them.

"I think the Rural Electrification is the best thing to have happen to this country. It's still the greatest thing to have happened to the United States. All these people on all these hills never had running water in their house. Those poor women carried the water in and carried the water out to dump it. There was no way they could do anything about it. They had water in the ice box and you had to take the water out from under the ice box, put your ice in it and every day carry it out and throw it out back. You had to do that to take the ice that melted, you see.

"I just think it was a wonderful thing to have electricity. Shut off your electricity for four days and see where you'd be, even for a day and see where you'd be. We are so dependent on it; it's such a part of our lives. The Rural Electrification is really the best thing to have happened, as far as I'm concerned, because it gave freedom to all the ranchers. I was talking to a woman the other day, her father lived out on a ranch down in Craig. She said that he bought a gas motor so her mother was able to do her washing; they didn't have lights.

"I had a cabin up here and I built my own line up to the cabin from downtown, and I had to pay \$150 to connect, and then I had to pay so much a month after that because I wasn't off the main line, I was by myself. I hired some kids to build the line."

We asked Dorothy what her life was like before she got electricity. "I remember that very well. We had lamps. We didn't have any hot water. We heated it in the stove and poured it into a big wash tub. That's how we took our bath on Saturday night. We went in the kitchen and took the bath. We moved from the main street to Oak Street and then in two years we moved up the hill. I can remember we moved into the big house about when I was in the third grade; I was about eight years old, so that would be in 1911. We had electricity up at the new house and I guess we had electricity before that, but I wasn't impressed with that."

Dorothy began to tell us about some of the electric appliances that they had bought. "We had a coal stove. I do remember getting electricity for the washing machine. Then we thought we had made it. We'd sit down and help Mother wash. I can remember an iron and that's it. I think we toasted our toast on the kitchen stove. Mother liked the electric iron; I remember that. Of course, that was a long time ago.

"Of course, electricity is a wonderful thing. All our lights came down in the middle of the room and pulled off and on there. We didn't have

switches. I'd get on a chair and turn it on; that's how I remember it. Some downstairs rooms had switches; the bedroom didn't. We had an electric ice box and we got a great big one and put it in the kitchen. It was just huge. We didn't have any more room. It was just a place to have ice and keep your food cool. Now they are streamlined, little and narrow. You can get your ice water right out of the refrigerator."

We asked Dorothy if she used to listen to the radio a lot. "We didn't have a radio. The first musical instrument we had was a piano. We played the piano. My mother had an uncle who died over in Snake River and left her some money, \$100, and with that she went down and bought a Victrola (the one at the museum that you wind). That was our Christmas present. She sent us to school and hid the Victrola in a closet; we weren't allowed to go in it. So that morning she went in and turned it on. That was about 3 or 4 in the morning. They couldn't keep us in bed. That was exciting! We didn't get radios for a long time. Of course, today it just seems like a natural thing to have electricity."



"I remember getting electricity, then we thought we had made it."

We decided to end our story with an incident that Marvin Elkins gave us. It kind of sums up electricity when it first came into our area. "I don't really remember my reaction to electricity when I first saw it. I was too small. If you want an interesting reaction to the story, it happened at the Sheraton Hotel over by the Chevron Station. They put electric lights in there and they rented a room to a man from Yampa. He stayed at the hotel and when getting up the first morning he told the manager, Clay Monson, that he couldn't sleep. He said the lights were so bright he had to stick them in a dresser drawer because he didn't know how to turn it off."