

Pee Dee Electric member recalls when the lights came on

by Ashley Haynes, Pee Dee Electric

Alice Birmingham grew up in a time when electricity was considered a luxury and something that seemed unattainable for those who lived on farms and in rural areas. The first born of community leader and local farmer Claude Brewer, Alice remembers what it was like to grow up without electricity.

“All my years of growing up, we didn’t have electricity,” says Alice. “My father would get up every morning at 4:00 a.m. to go and light the lanterns in the chicken houses.”

Alice grew up in the Burnsville Community of rural Anson County and has lived between Anson and Union counties all of her life. After school Alice would help out on her father’s farm where he raised chickens, and grew cotton, corn and grain.

It wasn’t just the value of hard work that Alice learned from her father, however. As the patriarch of the family, Claude Brewer helped raise his brother’s seven children after a tragic accident took his life as a young man. “My father taught us to help other people. He was very active in the community even though he was busy at home and on the farm.”

The history of Alice Birmingham’s life and her memories of her father tell a familiar story for rural America. Not only was Claude Brewer a father figure and well-respected community member and farmer, he was also instrumental in organizing the rural communities in Anson County to establish an electric cooperative, which would later become Pee Dee Electric.

On May 11, 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt passed the Rural Electrification Act, which paved the way for bringing power to farms across the country. It was a team of people that worked and advocated for power to be brought to the rural areas within Anson County.

“Mr. Jim Cameron, the Anson County Farm Agent, was very interested in getting electricity out on the farms, as well as my father,” she recalls.

According to Alice, Claude Brewer had tried in earnest to get Duke Power to extend its lines to their farm, which was just down the road from Olive Branch, where Duke had already run power from nearby Marshville. “Daddy also tried to get Carolina Power & Light to run a line to our farm, as they had already run electricity from Polkton to the Burnsville community. However, both companies [Duke and CP&L] insisted that it would not be profitable to run electric lines to the farms and rural areas.”

Jim Cameron kicked off the initiative to bring power to the community and was helped tremendously by Mr. W.C. Hall and Mr. U.B. Blalock, who helped obtain the funds from Washington, D.C. “Daddy was one of five individuals who visited Washington, and met with President Roosevelt between 1935 and 1939 on behalf of rural Anson County. Daddy was the one who knocked on the neighbors’ doors to tell them about the push to get electricity and collect the five-dollar membership fee to join Pee Dee Electric,” which was harder than it sounds.

“You can’t imagine what daddy had to go through to get the farmers to agree that they wanted power because the five dollars also gave the electric company the right-of-way across their land,” she said.

In 1935, \$5 was almost a week’s salary that could be earned at the local hosiery mill. Finally on July 4, 1939, after four long years of knocking on doors and working to bring electricity to his farm, Claude Brewer would realize the fruits of his labor.

“They told us in the paper that the power would be turned on Friday, July 7, 1939,” said Alice. “Well, I’ve always been hard headed...just hard headed. So on about Wednesday, I went out on the screened-in porch and took a chair [to stand on] and stuck my finger in the light socket to see if it worked, and it stung the fire out of me,” laughed Alice. “I ran around the house yelling, ‘we’ve got electricity...we’ve got electricity!’”

Alice was 12 years old. When asked to describe what it was like to watch as crews worked to bring power to her father’s farm, Alice very eloquently stated: “During those early days holes were dug and set by hand and mules pulled the wires. Bucket trucks and digger/derrick trucks did not exist. When a rock was hit while digging a hole, a black bar was used to break up the rock by hand. All right-of-way lines were cut by handsaws and sling blades.”

From January 1, 1939, to June 27, 1939, 368 miles of power lines had been constructed and 745 families and farms joined those members of Pee Dee Electric Membership Corporation.

“So that night, on July 4, 1939, we placed bulbs in all of the rooms in the house and in the chicken houses. And when it got down to sunset, we hopped into the pickup and rode to the top of the hill and looked out over the valley at all the lights. They were everywhere,” recalls Alice. “It was so pretty. It was definitely a view I will never forget.”

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Alice Birmingham, Pee Dee Electric member. Her father, Claude Brewer, helped bring electricity to Anson County.