November 30, 1937. Thanksgiving Day.


For farmer J.A. McDaniel and his wife it was a work day. They were picking scrap cotton in a field near their home at Valley View, just south of Jonesboro. Mrs. McDaniel wanted to use the cotton in a quilt.

A car pulled to a stop alongside nearby Highway 39. Mrs. McDaniel recalled the incident 32 years later.

“I had on an old dress,” she remembered, “and didn’t look much like having company.”

The visitors were Robert Cherry and Oscar Robinson. Robinson was director of the fledgling Craighead Electric Cooperative. Cherry was its superintendent. Craighead Electric was trying to get service to all farmers in the county.

Would the McDaniels like electric service? The price would be reasonable.

Farmer McDaniel was very much interested. So was his wife. But they had some doubts.

Power company folks had been saying it would cost too much to get electric service to farmers. Maybe even $1,000 a mile to build the line. Farmers did not have that kind of money.

Robinson told the McDaniels the money to build the lines would be borrowed from the government. From the REA. It would be paid back from the money folks paid for electric service.

Sounded like a good idea. The McDaniels would try it.

When would the electricity get here?

As soon as the lines could be built. Less than a year, maybe.

It was exactly 363 days before the McDaniels turned on the electric lights in their home for the first time.

This is, in part, a record of those 363 days and the people involved. It is also the prologue and epilogue.

One of the first power poles erected by the cooperative in the Valley View area.
Some other way had to be found. It was.

Regulation No. 4, signed by Roosevelt on Aug. 7, 1935, gave REA a “banker” capability by providing it authority to lend capital for rural electrification work. Commercial power companies were expected to rush immediately to borrow the money and build rural lines. No great rush developed.

Rural areas were no longer at the mercy of power companies.

Another six months would pass before the next step came in REA development. Legislation was in the making to change the lending character of the agency.

Nebraska Senator George W. Norris and Representative Sam Rayburn of Texas joined in sponsoring legislation to give loan preference to “States, Territories, and subdivisions agencies thereof, municipalities, peoples’ utility districts, and cooperative, non-profit, or limited-dividend associations.” Rural areas were no longer at the mercy of power companies.

The measure was passed by Congress as the Rural Electrification Act of 1936, and was signed into law by President Roosevelt on May 20, 1936.

This was the measure Sullivant, Karnes, and Pyles wanted to explain to Craighead County farmers. They could “get the lights.”

The farmers were amazed, Sullivant said, to learn it was possible to get electricity without having to assume financial responsibility for the entire project.

More than 300 agricultural leaders, representing all 18 townships in the county, turned out for the meetings. They were eager to form one of the new “REA cooperatives.”

There was more to it than that, however. First came the paperwork. And the legwork.

A survey had to be prepared, plotting the location of each potential user of electricity. Would the farmer pay a small membership fee? If electricity were available, would the farmer use it? What appliances would he plan immediately? What appliances would he add later?

The price of electricity would be no more than $3.50 for 50 kwh each month. Electricity at reasonable rates. The membership fee would be $5.

Sullivant worked up the survey forms the following day. The 300-plus farmers who attended the meetings would fill out forms for themselves, and then travel over the county asking their neighbors to do the same. Interest grew steadily. Other meetings were held. More farmers volunteered to help in the survey.

Before the preliminary work was completed, 2,000 survey forms had been circulated among the country’s farmers. A large majority – 1,402 – were definitely interested in getting electricity.

The location map was completed. The map was correct in every way. It showed the township, section and range lines and the location of state and county roads. The farms that wanted electric service were pinpointed.

The back of the map amused Karnes.

No one could find a single piece of paper big enough for the map, so it had been drawn on the back of a large “Agricultural Outlook” chart the Extension Service prepared for use by county agents at farmer meetings.

“It was the best use ever made of one of those charts,” Karnes recalled.

The completed map and survey sheets, along with other papers needed to show the feasibility of the rural electrification project, were sent to Karnes Oct. 6. It was the first complete rural electrification project plan from anywhere in Arkansas to reach his desk.

Karnes got the material into proper shape for transmittal to REA in early December. The Craighead County project was the only completed cooperative plan Karnes had received.

He understood, however, that another project was nearing completion in Lonoke County. It carried the name First Electric Cooperative, with headquarters at Jacksonville. It was to get official sanction from REA before Craighead Electric.

When Craighead Electric was approved by the REA on Aug. 11, 1937, it became the second electric cooperative for Arkansas. First Electric lived up to its name. By Dec. 1, 1937, there were 13 electric cooperatives in the state, and seven of them – including Craighead Electric – had REA loan allotments.

Sullivant was at a meeting of the state’s County Agents’ Association on the University of Arkansas campus at Fayetteville Aug. 11 when the word came that REA had approved the Craighead Electric project. Sullivant left Fayetteville immediately. The next step would be to find men to incorporate the cooperative.

The incorporators would serve also as the cooperative’s board of directors. If the project was to be successful it would need strong leadership. Who would be the best men for the job?

There had been some talk about this previously. Several names had been suggested. The final decision fell to Sullivant. As a county agent, he knew almost every farmer in the county.

Aug. 12 found Sullivant conferring with Claude Gregory, a prominent agricultural leader from Cash. Other meetings followed with Oscar Robinson of Brookland, W.C. Beck of Philadelphia, W.C. Craig of Caraway and Ode Chipman of Monette. The five agreed to incorporate the cooperative and serve as its board of directors.

The five farmers and Sullivant drove to Little Rock the following day, and a capital city attorney, John A. Sherrill, prepared the papers for incorporation. That same day the papers were filed with the Secretary of State.

Craighead Electric Cooperative became Craighead Electric Cooperative Corporation on Aug. 13, 1937. It was ready to do business.

On Aug. 16, 1937 – three days after Craighead Electric Cooperative was incorporated by Claude Gregory, Oscar Robinson, W.C. Beck, W.C. Craig and Ode Chipman – the five met for their first official board meeting. They gathered in the office of Craighead County agent A.R. Sullivant, in the basement of the Jonesboro Post Office building.

Organizational procedures took some of the time. Gregory was elected president. Craig became vice-president. Robinson, secretary-treasurer.

An attorney was selected. John A. Sherrill, the Little Rock lawyer who had drawn the cooperative incorporation papers, got the post.

Then sleeves were rolled up and the board got down to the business of making electricity available to farmers. A map was rolled out and examined. A finger traced an imaginary line. It moved over the Craighead County area, and touched also in parts of Greene and Poinsett counties.

Then came the decision. The cooperative would build 192 miles of power line in the three counties. Most would be in Craighead County. Craighead Electric would ask REA for a loan not to exceed $200,000 to build the lines and buy the transformers, meters and other equipment necessary to get electricity to 200 farm houses.

President Roosevelt signed Regulation No. 4 which gave the REA authority to lend capital for rural electrification.
the defunct Bank of Jonesboro. A few weeks later he moved upstairs into the former bank’s board room. The monthly rent was $82. The cooperative had office equipment, of a sort. Two cane bottom chairs. A homemade table. A homemade filing cabinet.

There would soon be money coming in. Money going out. Craighead Electric needed a bookkeeper. On Nov. 20, May Korspeter took the job.

In the meantime, specifications for the 192 miles of power line had been prepared and sent to several construction contractors for bids. The bids were opened on Oct. 26, and the contract went to the L.A. Brayton Company of Dyersburg, Tennessee.

But there was a hitch. The first of many hitches. REA notified Craighead Electric officials that the loan request would be approved only after 612 people had “signed up” as members of the cooperative and agreed to buy electricity when it became available. At the time, Craighead Electric had only five members - the five directors themselves. They had until April 15, 1938, to get 607 more.

It would take time and effort to contact 607 people. Much work remained to be done before the lights could go on in rural Craighead County.

The board met again on Nov. 30. It made no difference that it was Thanksgiving Day. There would be time for that later. The five directors, Cherry and Sullivant decided to start soliciting prospective members as soon as the meeting adjourned.

Cherry and Robinson drove to the Valley View area. The first people they saw were J.A. McDaniel and his wife, picking cotton. The McDaniels wanted electric service. They would be glad to put up a $5 membership fee.

Farmer McDaniel did not know it at the time, but he was the first person other than the directors to join the cooperative.

Several other members had joined the cooperative before the sun went down, but it would be the following day before the membership drive really got started. It took almost five months to get enough members to justify the project.

Craighead County had few paved roads in 1937. Neither did any other county in Arkansas, for that matter. Cherry, Robinson, Gregory, Beck, Craig, Chipman and Sullivant came to know intimately every dusty or muddy road, wagon trail and path in Craighead County in late 1937 and 1938.

Where they could not take a car, they walked. Drive as far as they could, then walk as far as they could in a day’s time. A night’s time, too. The newly signed members got in the spirit, too. Many joined in the drive to get more members. And those new members started out to still get other members.

But there were problems.

Money was scarce among farmers. The nation was in the midst of a depression. Five dollars was a lot of hard cash to invest in an unknown commodity. Few farmers knew anything about electricity. Most had never used it. It was difficult to convince some of them that they should put up $5 for membership in an electric cooperative. Especially so since it would be many months before they would be able to get electric service.

Some farmers did not have $5, but they wanted electricity. Would the membership solicitors take chickens, eggs or other farm produce instead of money? They would, and did. Then the solicitors had to convert the chickens, eggs or what have you into cash so they could turn in the money with the membership signatures.

Call it perseverance. Dedication. Determination. Bulldheadedness. Call it anything. Folks wanted electricity. Here was a chance to get it.

Craighead Electric had its required 612 members before the April 15, 1938, deadline. Barely.

But another problem had cropped up. Easements for right-of-way on which to build lines. The cooperative had no money to pay for putting power lines and poles on anybody’s property. It is hard enough to get an easement when you can pay for it.

A few farmers wanted electric service but did not want lines over their land. Or poles on their land. It took time and effort to work out these matters.

Another problem arose. The firm hired to design and build the first lines, William G. Morrison and Company, decided to quit. A new project engineer had to be found. Quickly. Some staking of lines had begun.

On May 7, 1938, R.S. Weber of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was named the new project engineer. But he, too, was to step aside within a few months, before the first lines were energized.

A clerical error in the staking plans was uncovered about this time. The stakes marking the location for the first poles were set 582 feet apart. Someone felt that was a long distance between poles. An engineering check showed the poles should be 528 feet apart, not 582. Many stakes had to be reset.

More time had been lost.

Where they could not take a car, they walked. They drove as far as they could, then walked as far as they could in a day’s time. A night’s time, too.

Children of an Arkansas tenant farmer. Photo by Ben Shahn, 1935.
There was a lot more to building an electric system than folks might think.

The power company officials had been saying right along that farmers could not build and operate an electric system. Maybe they were right.

But maybe they were wrong.

1938

Not everyone viewed the growing pains of Craighead Electric Cooperative as insurmountable. REA officials took an optimistic view.

The June 20, 1938, meeting of the Craighead Electric board found J.E. Van Hoose, an REA field engineer, on hand to talk about getting farm homes ready for the coming of electric service. Van Hoose suggested a series of “wiring meetings” — gatherings at which members would be taught how to wire their homes correctly so they could use electricity when it became available.

The directors agreed wholeheartedly. Preparations were made for such meetings over the county. Other preparations had to be made, too, because an old familiar problem was still unsolved. Space. Or lack of it. The cooperative’s “office” was overcrowded. One room was just not large enough for administrative and construction staffs. A partial solution saw Weber and his engineering people shifting to new quarters early in November. They moved into what was then the Sanderson Building.

Then, late in the month, Cherry and Mrs. Korspeter moved the cooperative’s administrative operations to 102 West Washington Street, into facilities occupied formerly by the Joe A. Taylor Electric Company. The rent was $50. More than double that paid for the old quarters.

The space was more than double, too. And it was needed. The electrification project was moving forward rapidly. More and more requests for membership were coming in each day.

The requests were not limited to farms in Craighead County. Farmers in Greene, Lawrence, Mississippi and Poinsett counties were also interested in electric service from the cooperative.

Cooperative directors, at their July 22 meeting, had decided to build lines in those counties if REA would lend Craighead Electric the money. The plan was for an additional 200 miles of line, some of it in Craighead County. Much would be in other counties.

Craighead Electric would ask REA for authority to borrow the money needed. Might as well take electricity to everyone who wanted it. County Agent A.R. Sullivant was asked to set up a meeting with agricultural officials on Greene, Lawrence, Mississippi and Poinsett counties.

The meetings brought a definite interest from Greene, Lawrence and Poinsett county agriculturalists. Those from Mississippi County decided to form a cooperative of their own, and later organized Mississippi County Electric Cooperative.

The Oct. 7 meeting of the Craighead Electric board brought visitors to talk in specifics, instead of generalities, about electric service. The guest were Poinsett County Agent Ross Mauney, Lawrence County Agent J.G. Milholland and Greene County Agent John Stephens.

At about the same time, a three-man delegation from Crittenden County came in to urge the board to begin service in their county. The three were W.J. Tacker, Dee Carrier and J.R. Boone.

The board agreed to serve Crittenden County, as well as Greene, Lawrence and Poinsett counties, provided REA would lend the cooperative the money to build lines.

Many Crittenden County farmers met at Haefer on Oct. 31, Halloween night, to sign membership agreements and plan for the “coming of the lights.” Meanwhile, the board had taken another operational step. Back in August it authorized Supt. Cherry to buy a truck. It would be the cooperative’s first item of rolling stock. Get either a Ford or Chevrolet, “whichever is the cheapest,” Cherry was told.

The first poles arrived in mid-July, and were unloaded and stockpiled at Nettleton. By the first of September, 238 miles of right-of-way had been staked, and poles and power lines were going up in Craighead County. Some staking was under way in Greene County.

Craighead Electric had a new legal advisor, now John A. Sherrill, the Little Rock lawyer who handled the incorporation proceedings and other early legal work, had stepped aside earlier in the year. He was succeeded by the Jonesboro firm of Frierson and Frierson.

Many farmers would take advantage of the availability of the money to get their homes ready.

Oct. 7 brought the addition of an “extension coordinator” to the staff. He was George Roth. That same day the cooperative hired its first lineman and maintenance man, Harold Hedges. The time was nearing when the first lines would be energized, and someone had to be available to handle trouble calls.

Oct. 11 brought another change in project engineers. Weber resigned, and was succeeded by T.J. Robertson. It was under Robertson’s direction the cooperative would go into operation as power supplier.

Back in August, Craighead Electric had asked REA for authority to borrow up to $10,000 to help members wire their homes and put in plumbing. Section 5 of the 1936 Rural Electrification Act provided for such loans, with the cooperatives in turn, lending the money to their members.

Many farmers would take advantage of the availability of the money to get their homes ready.

Farmers were also attending “wiring meetings” to learn how to have their homes ready.

Craighead Electric did not plan to generate any of the electricity it would make available to its members. An arrangement had been worked out with Arkansas Power & Light Company to be the wholesale power supplier for the cooperative’s first six months.

Craighead Electric lines would be tied to the power company system at a point southwest of Valley View, alongside Highway 39. The metering point, as it was called, was only a few miles down the highway from the home of J.A. McDaniel.

Officials of Jonesboro’s municipal electric power and water system had earlier declined to be the cooperative’s wholesale power supplier. Lloyd Rebsamen, manager of the municipal system, and its chairman, M.P. Welsh, had been among officials on hand for the Sept. 26, 1936, meeting in Jonesboro at which the subject of a rural electrification project was first discussed. It was thought at the time the municipal system would be the wholesale power supplier. Rebsamen said the idea would be studied, but the plan never really got into the serious discussion stage.

Everything was ready for the start of electric service on Nov. 28, 1938. About 75 miles of line in the Valley View area were ready to be energized. There was no ceremony to herald the coming of electricity to rural Craighead County. No big gathering. No speeches.

Instead, a lineman climbed a cooperative pole near the metering point and closed a switch. No one even remembers who the lineman was. It might have been Harold Hedges.

First home along the “hot” line was that of Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Collins, in the area between Valley View and Gibson Switch. By Dec. 12, 81 miles of the first section of Craighead Electric lines had been energized.
1930s

Robertson told the board electricity would be moving over the majority of the originally planned 192-mile system by the end of the month, if the necessary transformers had been received from the manufacturer and installed. The equipment arrived in time and was in place before Dec. 25. Most of the people whose homes were connected to the cooperative’s “A” section marked Christmas, 1938, as their first one with electricity.

The membership was growing. Line construction could not keep up with the demand.

Construction of an additional 575 miles of power line was planned in Lawrence, Poinsett, Crittenden and Greene counties. At the moment, 1,118 miles of line were in the planning or construction stage.

The original 192-mile project was 98% complete. Robertson said it would be 100% by the first of February. He also said he would send REA plans for lines in Baxter, Sharp and Izard counties on Jan. 21.

At its first meeting of the new year on Jan. 18, 1939, the directors decided to enlarge the board of directors to include representatives from those areas. In June it added A.W. Cunningham of Beech Grove in Greene County, along with G.M. Shipman of near Walnut Ridge and Lawrence C. Sloan of Strawberry, both in Lawrence County.

Shortly thereafter, the board was enlarged again to give each county at least two directors. Herbert Montieh of Coffman, in Greene County, became a director, as did S.C. Chapin of Trumann and G.C. Jernigan of Lepanto, both in Poinsett County.

At the same time, the board made another financial decision. The directors approved a plan to spend $4.50 to buy a window sign to identify the cooperative’s facilities.

With lines going up in counties other than Craighead, it was decided to enlarge the board of directors to include representatives from those areas. In June it added W.A. Cunningham of Beech Grove in Greene County, along with G.M. Shipman of near Walnut Ridge and Lawrence C. Sloan of Strawberry, both in Lawrence County.

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Craighead Electric to serve some of the area in which the cooperative’s lines were being built. The dispute had to go to the state’s Public Utilities Commission, forerunner of the Public Service Commission, before it could be settled. Craighead Electric was allowed to provide electric service in the contested area.

1939-1940

While 1938 had been a landmark year for Craighead Electric, 1939 was to bring even more progress. And problems.

Membership solicitors had been as far as Baxter, Fulton, Izard, Sharp and Independent counties in signing up members for Craighead Electric. They had also been in Greene, Poinsett, Lawrence and Crittenden counties, as well as in Craighead County. The membership was growing. Line construction could not keep up with the demand.

At its first meeting of the new year on Jan. 18, Supt. Cherry told the board the cooperative had 3,004 members. There were 1,167 in Craighead County, 1,118 of line were in the planning or construction stage.

By March 3, the cooperative had 463 meters in place. The “connected” members used an average of 9 kwh.

Ice storm of 1968.

At the January 1939 board meeting was also the cooperative’s first Annual Membership Meeting. However, only the directors were on hand. Claude Gregory was re-elected president; Craig, vice president, and Robinson, secretary-treasurer.

By March 3, the cooperative had 463 meters in place. The “connected” members used an average of 25 kwh of electricity during the month. By the end of the month, the average had risen to 31 kwh. In May, 56 members had their first electric refrigerators in use.

Surveying and staking of the cooperative’s second section of line was completed. It, like the first section, was south of Jonesboro. In April, the board called on REA for a construction loan of up to $365,000 to build approximately 405 miles of line in Craighead, Greene, Independence, Lawrence and Poinsett counties.

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The cooperative membership, at its annual meeting on Jan. 17, 1940, approved the board enlargement, and agreed to a change in the articles of incorporation to provide for an 11-member board of directors. The articles were amended officially on April 4, 1940.

A number of young people participating in the National Youth Administration (NYA) program had been working with cooperative employees for several months in 1939. NYA was another “alphabet agency” designed to ease unemployment in the depression years. Some of the young people conducted surveys of members’ use of electricity. Others worked in the office. Some of the boys helped stake new lines.

Sloan, Shipman and Cunningham reported at the Aug. 4 board meeting that people in Greene and Lawrence counties were in “good spirits” as the lines were being built.

But all was not in “good spirits” in Greene County. Officials of the municipal electric system at Paragould decided to contest the right of Craighead Electric to serve some of the area in which the cooperative’s lines were being built. The dispute had to go to the state’s Public Utilities Commission, forerunner of the Public Service Commission, before it could be settled. Craighead Electric was allowed to provide electric service in the contested area.

By Sept. 8, part of the lines in Greene County were up and transformers had been hung. Work was progressing on a substation near Strawberry, in Lawrence County.

It was expected to be completed within a few weeks. The contractor planned to begin setting poles in Poinsett County by the end of the month, and the power lines and transformers were expected to be in place and ready for energization.

Cherry told the directors’ meeting Sept. 8 that, in all, Craighead Electric would have erected 405 miles of line by the end of the month.

Electrical usage was increasing, too. During September, cooperative members used 19,847 kwh on their farms, averaging 251.2 kwh. Rural stores used another 3,479 kwh, or an average of 109 kwh. Public buildings, such as churches and schools, served by the cooperative accounted for another 386 kwh, for an average of 9 kwh.

October saw another construction contract awarded: This one, for 230 miles of line in Craighead, Crittenden, Greene, Independence, Lawrence and Poinsett counties. REA approval for the work had come Oct. 10, along with authority to borrow up to $150,000 for the work.

The directors approved a plan to spend $4.50 to buy a window sign to identify the cooperative’s facilities.
In May, Robertson suggested the cooperative build its own headquarters building. He suggested it be located about one and one-half miles from Jonesboro, out the Bono Road. The matter was taken under consideration by the board.

Another suggestion was presented at the May meeting. An electric use promotion. Members who used 50 kwh each month would be given an electric iron. It was the first incentive program staged by Craighead Electric. By the middle of July, all 500 irons purchased for the promotion had been given away.

By June 17, cooperative membership had reached 1,293. More than 1,900 were getting electric service. In August, 1,632 members were getting "REA electricity." They lived in thinly settled areas, averaging less than 2 1/2 members for each mile of line.

The time was coming when the cooperative would be ready to serve towns as well as communities.

1940-1941

The Craighead Electric board was called into special session on July 23, 1940, to discuss a highly interesting proposition. The electric facilities serving the towns of Bro Okland and Bono in Craighead County were up for sale. Would Craighead Electric be interested? The price asked was $15,000.

The board of directors voted to turn down the proposition. Craighead Electric later, however, did buy the Brookland facilities. But it would be Feb. 13, 1941, before the cooperative became the official power supplier for Brookland.

REA was trying to help electric cooperatives promote the use of electricity in farm and home, and had set up an "Electro-Economy Show" that was touring the nation during 1940. Craighead Electric would join neighboring cooperatives – Clay County Electric at Corning and Mississippi County Electric at Blytheville – in sponsoring an appearance of the show in northeast Arkansas.

The "Electro-Economy Show" had a two-day run in Jonesboro, Sept. 30 and Oct. 1. Hundreds of families attended. Many put into practice the improved agricultural operations outlined by the "REA folks."

Craighead Electric's farm members continued to increase their use of electricity, averaging 42 kwh during September. By the end of the month, the cooperative had an 862-mile network of lines, most of it energized. During October the membership increased to 1,814, with 923 miles of "hot" line. Revenues averaged $8.92 per mile. The average farm member used slightly more than 51 kwh during September. Another 103 members were connected that month.

The nation was moving out of the depression economy that had marked the past 10 years. It was entering a wartime economy.

At the October board meeting, Cherry said all the people in Craighead County who wanted service from the cooperative had signed membership agreements.

The cooperative entered 1941 as a going, growing concern. The nation was moving out of the depression economy that had marked the past 10 years. It was entering a wartime economy. It was an economy with an increasing emphasis on military needs.

Material for line construction was going to be hard to get. Money was going to be hard to get, too. It was a familiar story, in many respects.

The board's hopes for a headquarters facility of its own got a jolt in January when REA rejected the idea. Planning could continue, however. Maybe next year.

Two bright spots marked February. REA authorized a $206,000 loan for construction of another 244 miles of line. They would go up on Crittenden, Poinsett, Greene, Lawrence and Craighead counties. The new facilities would serve 742 as yet unserved members. It was designated the "C" section.

The other development was the cooperative's start of service to the town of Brookland. Craighead Electric paid Arkansas Power & Light Company $2,800 for the right to serve the town.

By March 14, staking of the "C" section was underway, and on April 24 the contract for constructing the lines was awarded to the L.O. Brayton Company. By the end of July, the cooperative had 2,425 "connected" members. The first seven months of the year had seen 378 added to the membership rolls.

The "low-income" rate adopted by the cooperative back in February, 1940, was changed in the latter part of 1941. It took too much maintenance on the special metering equipment. The revenue produced did not justify the expense.

A minimum rate of $1.50 for 16 kwh was adopted to replace the "low-income" plan of 11 kwh for $1. Additional kwh would still cost nine cents each.

There were not too many "disconnects" because of failure to pay bills. Back in April, there had been a problem when several schools in Greene County were delinquent because warrants issued on school funds were not negotiable. But that problem was worked out.
1940s

By the time October rolled around, the cooperative had added 550 new members. By the end of the year, the membership rolls were increased by 706.

Some of the new members were picked up in October when the cooperative “swapped” some service territory with the Jonesboro municipal electric system. The cooperative gave up about a square mile of area south of Jonesboro, and got a three-mile section adjacent to Highway 39 between Jonesboro and Valley View. October also saw Craighead Electric joining in a survey of rural schools to see if there was any interest in a “hot lunch” program for students. The extension Service was working on the program, and county agents were setting up community meetings. The cooperative would help further by making available the electrical appliances with which to cook the food. The cooperative approved a “time payment” plan under which the appliances could be bought.

The board made another important decision in October. It decided to join the state’s other electric cooperatives in setting up an organization to help get the equipment for power line construction. The new concern was to be called Arkansas State Electric Cooperative. REA, in September, had a change of heart and told Craighead Electric to go ahead with plans to build a headquarters facility at Jonesboro. The board got busy with plans for the building, but in November decided against the project. It agreed to postpone, at least temporarily, the idea.

It was just as well. Virtually all construction plans — power line, substation and other electrical facilities, as well as office buildings — were altered in the last few weeks of the year. The Japanese saw to that when their bombs fell on Pearl Harbor.

When the nation went to war, men and material went, too. There was to be little construction of any kind for Craighead Electric or the country’s other electric cooperatives in the next few years. Whatever construction that was done would have to be related to the war effort and keyed to the wartime economy. Many more people would sign as members, but for the most part they had to wait a long time before they would get electric service.

Cooperative employees would face the new year with a pay increase, however. The board approved slight increases for the majority of them.

Listed as employees were T.J. Robertson, manager; Mrs. Harvey Broadway, clerk; Mrs. May Korspeter, bookkeeper; Ida Pearl Gilbreath, clerk; Frances Bobbitt, secretary, Max Hales, lineman; H.W. Kifer, lineman; Cecil Brothers, construction supervisor; Reginald Powell, groundman, Robert Cherry, electrification advisor; L.C. Massey, groundman; Dale Reaves, assistant bookkeeper; Herbert Beck, construction foreman; Dayton Lloyd, groundman; Vernon Smith, lineman; J.H. Hunter, lineman; Leland Massey, groundman, and Miss Jessie Dee Copeland, clerk.

The board lost two of its original members in 1942. W.C. Craig died Feb. 4, and W.C. Beck resigned in March. The cooperative’s members elected two new directors at the April 8 Annual Membership Meeting, choosing Dan W. Jones of Caldwell Chapel and A.E. Miller of East Black Oak. Later that month the board reorganized itself by electing S.C. Chapin vice president to succeed Craig. Gregory was re-elected president and Robinson secretary-treasurer.

Robert Cherry, whose title had been changed from assistant manager to electrification advisor, had been given a three month leave-of-absence in February. He joined the staff of the REA “Electro-Economy Show” which was on tour again. He would be back in early May.

May, incidentally, brought an order from the War Production Board that prohibited the construction of line extensions more than 250 feet from an existing line. Poles, wire, transformers and meters were in short supply.

May also brought a decision by the board to join another new organization, the then-forming National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA). It would be headed by Clyde T. Ellis, a former Arkansas congressman with a great interest in rural electrification and development of water resources for electric power generation.

Maybe cooperatives could get some of that hydroelectric power for their members. Buying all their power from commercial power companies was not the best way for a cooperative to do business.

1942-1946

The Army Air Corps had a training facility near Walnut Ridge. It needed electric service in 1942. Craighead Electric wanted to serve it. By June, however, the cooperative had to withdraw its request to serve the field. Arkansas Missouri Power Company would not sell the cooperative the power needed. The power company served the field instead.

There were three military auxiliary air fields in the vicinity of Newport, in the area served by Farmers Electric Cooperative. The military wanted the cooperative to move about 10 miles of power line located within and adjacent to Farmers Electric, sending its construction personnel and trucks to aid in moving the lines.

It seemed Craighead Electric was always moving something. Its offices included. Still plagued by cramped quarters, the cooperative moved again during September. The board rented the Thornton Building at 508 South Main Street.

August brought the cooperative’s first advertising budget. The board approved an advertising expenditure of $70 per month, some $840 a year.

Although there could be little construction now, the war had to end. Things were looking better, militarily, toward the latter part of 1944. While Craighead Electric did little construction during the war years, it did a lot of planning for “after the war.”

By April 7, 1944, detailed maps and other construction data for postwar line construction and extension were well developed. Manager Robertson was told to start buying equipment, as it became available, so it would be on hand for the building boom that would come when the war ended. In September, the board decided to start putting aside the money to begin buying the needed material.

August brought the cooperative’s first advertising budget. In November, Robertson unveiled a comprehensive postwar construction plan that called for 1,000 miles of new line. A new rate schedule for farms and homes was also adopted in November. It called for a minimum of $1.96 for 24 kWh.
The next 76 kwh would cost four cents each, the next 100, two and one-half cents each.

At the July Annual Membership Meeting, director A.E. Miller had decided not to seek re-election, and was succeeded by E.L. Stillions of near Earle.

When June rolled around, the cooperative had 4,200 “connected” members, served by 1,300 miles of power line.

Craighead Electric was a million dollar corporation by the first of the year. It had borrowed $1,024,096 from the REA, and had already paid back $55,841. It had also paid $84,841 in interest on the money it had borrowed.

It may have been a million dollar business, but it was still running out of space. In May the board decided to rent a warehouse at 219 Edins Street. Administrative functions would continue to be handled at the present office facility.

When June rolled around, the cooperative had 4,200 “connected” members, served by 1,300 miles of power line. Another 8,000 service applications were on file. Getting service to those 8,000 was going to be a fulltime job. It would require the services of a fulltime manager.

The board had been giving the matter a lot of serious consideration. It wanted a man with electrical utility experience and an interest in rural electrification projects. The decision had been made at the May 18 board meeting. The man the directors wanted was Earl Walden.

Walden had started his electric utility career in the spring of 1920 when he went to work for Wilson Power & Light Company. He got his interest in rural electrification when that firm started spreading out in the areas around Joiner, Turrell, Tyronza, Marked Tree and Lepanto.

When Arkansas Power & Light Company bought the facilities of Wilson Power & Light Company, Walden went along with the other properties. He was local manager for the power company. On July 31, 1945, he took over as Craighead Electric manager.

Walden had told the board he had several objectives in mind as manager: lower operating costs, lower construction costs and load building. At the Aug. 10 board meeting he reported that the mapping of 213 miles of new line had been completed in Lawrence County. The work was ready for contract bidding.

The new year of 1946 brought an upsurge of progress, and got underway with a bang. On Jan. 22 the board opened bids for construction of 209 miles of lines in Sharp, Lawrence, Independence and Craighead counties. K & R Construction Company got the job. It was also the successful bidder on another 216 miles on line in August.

A problem had been in the making for some time. Now that materials were becoming available, who would be “hooked up” first? Walden was determined to get service to members whose applications had the earliest dates, and told Robertson he had until April 10, 1946, to make up his mind one way or the other.

Walden felt there would be a considerable savings in construction using cooperative equipment and personnel. The board agreed.

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1947-1951

The cooperative entered 1947 with 1,573 miles of line serving 6,199 members. The membership was increasing rapidly. Service was better. It was dependable and economical. Rural electrification was here to stay.

If rural electrification was feasible, why not rural telecommunications? Very few people in rural areas had telephone service. It cost too much to build lines in the rural areas. The story had a familiar sound to people who had heard the same thing said about rural electrification.

The early months of 1947 found Craighead Electric joining Southwestern Bell Telephone Company in an experiment designed to see if rural power lines could be used, simultaneously, as telephone lines. It was the first test of the idea.

Four Craighead Electric members were involved. All lived in the Brookland area. They were Witt Dickinson, Gordon Nelm, Carl Robbins and Floyd Bridger. The tests, although completely satisfactory, did not establish the feasibility of such a plan. But it did help get telephone service in rural areas. The story had a familiar sound to people who had heard the same thing said about rural electrification.

By Christmas of 1949 Craighead Electric had two-way radio equipment in operation to make better service possible. Late in 1949 and early 1950, the cooperative completed a system improvement project by building and energizing new substations near Walnut Ridge, Paragould, Lake City and Judd Hill. More changes were coming, too. Improvements all over the system. Bigger lines. Substations with increased capacity to take care of the ever increasing power needs of the members.

A new wholesale power source was also in the works. Craighead Electric joined other Arkansas electric cooperatives to build their own generating facilities. They did so by forming Arkansas Electric Cooperative Corporation, and Craighead Electric began getting power from the federation's electric generating facilities in 1963.

The statistics had been changing rapidly over the years. More lines were built. More members were connected. Folks were using more electricity.

At the start of 1949, Craighead Electric served 11,078 members over a 2,666-mile network of lines. The average member was using 67 kwh each month. Two years later, there were 15,572 members with an average of 81 kwh monthly. The cooperative had 3,671 miles of line.

By the end of 1960, the membership had climbed to 16,812, served by 4,048 miles of line. The use of electricity had soared to a monthly average of 191 kwh.

Financial statistics were changing, too. Aug. 16, 1937, was a long time back. When 1948 had ended, the average member was using 67 kwh. At the start of 1949, Craighead Electric had 3,671 miles of line.

Still Another Craighead Electric director, Garland Arrington, died April 28, 1971. He was succeeded by Jack Heath of Phillips.

There was to be another major change in 1951, too. A change of offices. But it would be the last move for Craighead Electric. It built its own home, a $150,000 office building alongside Highway 39 on the southern edge of Jonesboro. It was formally dedicated July 20, 1951.

During all the years of its existence, Craighead Electric had been looking for a home. Nobody seemed to know it had a home all the time. In the hearts of the people who “got the lights.”
People did not drive in the Thirties. They motored. Highway 39, in those days, was nothing to brag about, either.

It was, however, a big improvement over the wagon track that had served traffic in the area prior to 1930. Traffic moved slowly in those days. But it did move. It had to.

It was over the gravel stretch from Jonesboro to Valley View and beyond that Oscar Robinson and Robert Cherry’s car moved as they motored away from the Craighead Electric board meeting on Nov. 30, 1937, in search of potential members for the cooperative.

People did not drive in the Thirties. They motored. There were no power lines alongside the road in the area around Valley View in 1937.

One of the houses that knew the dust and mud of Highway 39 was the home of J.A. McDaniel, and it was there Robinson and Cherry stopped first in their search for cooperative members.

McDaniel had known Highway 39 as a wagon track. From the fields adjoining the house, or from its front porch, he may have watched the gravel put down on the road in 1930. He might have watched the later improvements, too, including the 1941 work that saw the first hard surface pounded onto the gravel to transform the road into an early version of a modern highway.

The McDaniel home was just a short distance east of the cooperative-power company metering point. Trucks moving up and down the highway to work on the cooperative power lines passed his home frequently in 1938 and later years. He must have seen them many times.

Anyone motoring along Highway 39 past the McDaniel home the night of Dec. 12, 1938, would have seen electric lights in use there for the first time. When the lines were energized that day, the electric service came as a kind of advance birthday present for farmer McDaniel. His 57th birthday was only six days away.

McDaniel would enjoy the benefits of electricity in his home alongside Highway 39 for the next 32 years and six days before the lights of this world, for him, went out forever.

Late the night of Dec. 18, 1970, farmer McDaniel started to walk across Highway 39 just west of his home and stepped into the path of an oncoming car. His death occurred, ironically, on his birthday. He was 89 years old.

During his 32 years and 18 days as a member of Craighead Electric, he had seen it grow from an outgrowth of the talks was formation of Arkansas Electric Cooperative Corporation (AECC), a federation of 16 electric distribution cooperatives. The federation’s first power plant went into operation in 1940. Although a relatively small generating plant, it was a start.

The plant, located at Ozark, Arkansas, was linked to the grid of the federal Southwestern Power Administration, making possible delivery of some of its power output to Arkansas Missouri Power Company for further delivery to Craighead Electric Cooperative’s northern service area. Other distribution cooperatives in North Arkansas got power from the plant, too, as did others up and down the state’s western border.

Three years after the first plant went into operation another AECC generating unit went on the line at Augusta, and some of its power became available for use by Craighead Electric Cooperative in its southern service area.

Power company-owned substations that had earlier served the cooperatives began disappearing and were replaced by cooperative-owned substations. By the close of 1970, Craighead Electric had substations of its own at Earle, McCornick, Lake City, Jonesboro, Cash, Paragould, Light, Black Rock, Marked Tree, Marmaduke, Walnut Ridge, Monette, Apt, Farville and Crowley’s Ridge.

Craighead Electric was in the power business to stay. It had been since that day back in 1937 when Claude Gregory, Oscar Robinson, W.C. Beck, W.C. Craig, Ode Chipman and A.R. Sullivan had joined attorney John A. Sherill in Little Rock for a meeting that ended when the cooperative’s articles of incorporation were drawn up and filed with the Secretary of State.

There had been those who doubted a cooperative power system could be made to work. It is doubtful if there are still any skeptics.

By the end of 1941, the same year the hard surface was put on Highway 39 in the Valley View area, Craighead Electric members’ use of electricity stood at an annual rate of 1,459,289 kwh.

There had been those who doubted a cooperative power system could be made to work. It is doubtful if there are still any skeptics.

Engineer estimates foresee an annual use of 193,000,000 kwh by 1979. There will be more lines to build. Capacity of many lines will have to be increased. It will take time.
The cooperative touted the modern device as “the last word in heating and air conditioning comfort.”

Craighead Electric's office on Southeast Drive, circa 1970s.

By the 1970s Craighead Electric had expanded to 4,146 miles of distribution lines and served approximately 16,584 members. The cooperative offered many services to its growing membership including appliance repair service. The service was offered without a charge for labor or service call. Appliances included were ranges, dishwashers, clothes dryers, water heaters, refrigerators, freezers and air conditioners. This service was offered with the members only responsible for only cost of parts. Members could also bring the appliances to the office for repair.

Along the same lines Craighead Electric began promoting all-electric homes throughout its service territory. A key component of the homes was the electric heat pump. The cooperative touted the modern device as “the last word in heating and air conditioning comfort.” According to an article in the May 1971 edition of Rural Arkansas magazine, one thermostat determines the indoor temperature month after month regardless of the weather outside. “The heat pump is so automatic that it will heat your house in the morning, cool it in the afternoon and heat it again in the evening when outside temperatures change rapidly as they do in this area during spring and fall days.” The article featured the all-electric homes of Dennis Mathes of Jonesboro, Walter Sharp of Leachville and Jack Jones of Minturn. The article covered the energy efficiency applications deployed in the homes and the members’ great level of satisfaction with the all-electric homes.

“In 1971 we expanded our appliance repair shop and began installing a lot of heat pumps,” said Roger Blankenship, who worked for Craighead Electric from 1967 through 1999. According to Earl Walden, manager of the cooperative, the 1971 annual membership meeting held at Crowley’s Ridge State Park near Walcott was attended by only 50 of the cooperative’s 16,000 members. The 50 that attended the event enjoyed an appearance by “The Monarchs,” a popular group from Jonesboro who performed gospel music, and a show by “The Lonesome Rhodes” of Memphis. The fun events were intended to ensure that a large number of the cooperative’s members attended the event to participate in voting on the cooperative’s business matters, including the democratic election of directors.

Due to declining attendance, Craighead Electric held its final annual meeting that included entertainment, prizes and a carnival-like atmosphere in 1972. The 1972 Annual Membership Meeting was held at Luke Charles State Park located near Powhatan on Aug. 4. After this meeting members began casting ballots by mail. Each member received a ballot with official notice of the cooperative’s annual meeting and annual report. Members who returned ballots by the July 31 deadline were eligible for a drawing for a color television. Results were printed in Rural Arkansas magazine.

In early 1972 Craighead Electric made the final payment on its original loan to the Rural Electrification Administration. Manager Walden stated that all payments had been made on a time or in advance of the date due. Oscar Robinson, who was secretary-treasurer of the Craighead Electric board of directors at this time, had signed the original loan for $200,000 with the late Claude Gregory, Gregory, who was president of the cooperative when it was organized in 1937. The cooperative used this loan to build power lines, buy transformers, meters and other necessary equipment to provide electricity to 200 farm homes in Craighead, Greene and Poinsett Counties.

By 1973 the number of total-electric homes served by Craighead Electric continued to grow with 300 added in 1972 alone. This figure was a reflection of the increasing costs and scarcity of other fuels including natural gas and fuel oil.

“In 1972, when the oil embargo hit, we made a strong push to steer cooperative members toward budget (levelized) billing,” Blankenship said.

Walden communicated to Craighead’s membership in July 1973 that utilities across the nation were experiencing “drastically curtailed” supplies of natural gas used to generate electricity and the cost of fuel oil was skyrocketing out of control. The cooperatives in Arkansas, with the approval of the Arkansas Public Service Commission, implemented a power cost adjustment on member’s billing statements. The adjustment was a direct result of the increased cost of generating electricity. “The power cost adjustment will be added only when the generating electricity makes it necessary. So, it is possible this cost will not be added each month,” stated an article in the July 1973 edition of Rural Arkansas magazine. This wholesale cost of power and resulting impact on not only cooperatives, but all electric utilities and other industries across America continued for many years. The cause of this issue was the oil embargo of 1973. During this time oil prices soared from $3 to $40 a barrel.

In 1974 Craighead Electric began aggressively promoting energy efficiency tips to assist members in cutting costs on their power bills. The cooperative stated that energy conservation had become a way of life for employees and members by April 1974. Walden said, “Craighead Electric will continue to provide electricity in the face of steadily rising costs with members being reminded that nothing gives more value than electricity.” The cooperative continued to stress conservation and the value of electricity for many years.

Craighead, Greene and Poinsett Counties.

“All utilities in this part of the country were frantic,” said Louis Fish, manager of AECG’s power plant operations. Until this time, many wholesale energy suppliers relied heavily on natural gas. He added that wholesale suppliers were desperately searching for a solution and they found it in coal.

“Everyone decided that we needed to build coal plants using Wyoming low-sulfur coal,” he said. AECG entered a partnership with SWEPSCO to build the Flint Creek Power Plant at Gentry. This plant began supplying power in 1978. The migration to coal-based generation was fueled by the rising costs of other fuels and the passage of federal legislation in 1974 that prohibited electric utilities from using natural gas in power plants.

In order to comply and meet the growing supply needs of Arkansas' cooperatives, AECG partnered with Arkansas Power and Light (now Entergy) to construct the 1,659-megawatt White Bluff Steam Station at Redfield and the 1,678-megawatt Independence Steam Electric Station (ISES) at Newark. White Bluff began commercial operation in 1980-81, while ISES was brought online in 1983-84.

Walden, who joined Craighead Electric as manager in 1945, retired in June 1976. At the time of his retirement he held the distinction of more years of service than any of the state's other 18 distribution cooperative managers. Walden began his electric power career in 1920 with Wilson Power and Light, which was later bought by Arkansas Power and Light. He served in leadership positions with several industry and civic organizations during his time with the cooperative. During his tenure, the cooperative experienced a great amount of growth and investment in infrastructure and equipment.
As northeast Arkansas saw population growth in the 1980s, Craighead Electric responded to a corresponding growth in new home construction, commercial operations and increased demand for irrigation wells due to a drought. According to Donald Combs, who worked at the cooperative from 1969 through 2012, new member connections were so numerous that a two to three week waiting period was standard.

“We worked almost every Saturday due to the huge housing growth,” Combs said. “We had some automated equipment, but we did quite a bit of the work with posthole diggers.”

In the midst of the wholesale rate adjustments, Craighead Electric announced in the March 1982 issue of Rural Arkansas magazine that the cooperative was filing for a nine percent rate increase in order to meet the financial requirements of the Rural Electrification Administration and the National Rural Utilities Cooperative Finance Corporation. The APSC approved an interim rate increase of 6.25 percent in June 1982.

By March 1983 Craighead Electric had more than 22,000 meter locations in eight counties. And, a modest 1.6 percent rate adjustment was implemented. Members were advised that the ISES plant loan payments would be implemented this same year and that bills would be revised automatically under a formula approved by the APSC. Fowler wrote that the cost of producing electric energy from coal-fired plants was less than the cost of producing energy from gas or oil-fired plants. He added, “even with the anticipated increase in the cost of wholesale power, the consumer will pay much less for his electric service than he would be required to pay if electric energy were produced at gas or gas-fired plants. It seems reasonable to believe that with an upturn in the nation’s economy and with the present lower rate of inflation, wholesale power rates should become fairly stable for a while.”

To fund the White Bluff and ISES coal-based plants, AECO filed for a 36 percent increase in the early 1980s, resulting in a retail rate increase of approximately 25 percent to Craighead Electric members. Fowler wrote that the rate increase was an investment for the future and the investment in the coal-based plants would benefit Arkansans in the forthcoming years. The column indicated that the fuel cost to produce one kwh of electricity by coal generation was 2 cents in 1982 compared to a cost of 4.2 cents/kwh by oil generation and 3.6 cents/kwh by natural gas generation. His column stated that, “Arkansas electric cooperatives are no longer dependent on other utilities as a source of electric supply” and “There is no shortage of power in Arkansas.” As late as 1980 there was serious concern about shortages of electrical power. Although cooperative members were not happy with the large rate adjustment, they were reassured that Arkansas was one of the few regions in the United States that was completely independent of foreign oil for electric generation.

In 1983, many utilities were only beginning to switch from oil generation to coal generation and their consumers were paying the very high price of oil generation energy, followed by higher rates due to inflated construction costs and interest rates.

In June 1984 AECC filed for an additional rate increase of 11 to 12 percent to fund the final construction costs of a second unit at ISES. The pass-through increase for Craighead Electric members was approximately 8 to 8.5 percent. Members were assured that the amount could be reduced if additional generation capacity could be sold to other utilities desiring the lower costs excess energy produced at the coal-based plants. Members were told that Arkansas’ rates compared favorably with neighboring utilities, no further rate increases were anticipated for the 1980s and “the future looks bright” due to the foresight of AECO’s board of directors’ decision to construct the coal-based plants in the 1970s. Cooperative members received great news in April 1985. Due to diligent efforts to reduce the impact of the rate adjustment, Craighead Electric’s members would only see a 2 percent increase on their bills in 1985 opposed to the previously projected 8.5 percent.

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1980s

In 1985, Craighead Electric surveyed members about the quality of service provided, policies and rate-making, and other issues. More than 1,400 members responded with 1,210 rating their electric service as good or excellent. Members were also positive about their dealings with cooperative personnel with 973 rating them as courteous and helpful.

Irrigation load control was implemented in the 1980s to assist farmers in decreasing their cost of electricity and controlling the demand for wholesale power at peak periods. Farmers were asked to select among four rate options with each rate designed for different usage levels. Craighead Electric assisted farmers by offering rate comparisons on previous year’s usage or projected usage. The service was free and enabled rates to be selected before service was connected to a well.

In 1987 Craighead Electric began offering heat pump and water heater rebates to members. Members could receive up to $150 for purchasing an electric water heater and $150 for a high efficiency heat pump. The program was funded by AESG as an incentive to encourage members to invest in energy efficient water heaters and heat pumps. Despite its great success and service to cooperative members, the Arkansas Public Service Commission (APSC) issued an order to cease the rebate program on May 8, 1992. The APSC ruled that the rebate program was a “marketing and promotional practice program” designed to influence a consumer’s decision on energy-efficient appliances which would be used for water heaters and heating units.

Craighead Electric marked its 50th anniversary in July 1987. The cooperative was providing electric service to more than 23,000 meter locations in eight counties with more than 5,000 miles of distribution lines.

In November 1988, Craighead Electric learned that the City of Jonesboro planned to annex approximately 16 percent of the cooperative’s service territory. As a municipal utility, Jonesboro City Water and Light would acquire the territory and accompanying accounts.

In the December 1988 edition of Rural Arkansas magazine, Fowler wrote that if the annexation was approved by voters, “damage to Craighead Electric would occur in several ways. One is the loss of 3,360 members from the cooperative’s load. This is in Craighead’s area of highest density.” The cooperative launched a campaign entitled, “WHOL” (We’re Helping Oppose Annexation) in an effort to preserve the cooperative’s investment in proposed annexation territory.

“We worked many, many hours out of a vacant building on Highland Drive,” Blankenship said. “We had a big bank of phones for people to call members to urge them to vote against the annexation.”

Blankenship added that the vote on the issue only included the citizens of Jonesboro, and the much smaller number of Craighead Electric members. Despite countless hours of employees volunteering during their off-duty hours and from other electric cooperatives, Jonesboro voters approved the annexation.

“We didn’t know what to think,” Combs said shaking his head, when asked about the annexation vote. “I guess it all turned out alright.”

After multiple rate increases in the 1980s, Craighead Electric announced a five percent rate reduction in the summer of 1989. The rate reduction was made possible due to a reduction of wholesale power costs from AESG. AESG had realized margins above its budget and as a not-for-profit cooperative, passed the savings on to its members. The decision was made to make the rate decrease permanent after thorough studies of margin projections.

1990-2000

After 45 years of service to Craighead Electric, General Manager and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Hubert Fowler retired on Jan. 4, 1991. During his tenure, Fowler organized the cooperative’s first engineering department, earned increased responsibilities and was named general manager in 1976. He dealt with challenges of escalating energy costs followed by a period of slow load growth, then the annexation of about 20 percent of the cooperative’s most populated service area.

Fowler’s replacement was Wayne Honeycutt. Honeycutt brought 28 years of experience with electric cooperatives to the position of general manager and CEO of Craighead Electric. At the time of his appointment, he said, “I am so thankful for the opportunity to serve as general manager of Craighead Electric Cooperative. I am looking forward to working with each of you, employees and members alike. By working together we can continue to provide the excellent service which our members expect of their cooperative.”

In the 1990s, Craighead Electric made a move to increase the level of service offered to its growing member base. To provide an even stronger local presence in the communities served by the cooperative, district offices were opened in Walnut Ridge (1991) and Paragould (1992).

“We opened two branch offices not long after I came here,” Honeycutt said. “Meanwhile Entergy was shutting down their local offices.”

To provide an even stronger local presence in the communities served by the cooperative, district offices were opened in Walnut Ridge (1991) and Paragould (1992).
Craighed Electric told members that the cost of electricity had actually dropped in terms of constant dollars over the eleven year period from 1985. Honeycutt began to consider the concept of district offices after analyzing the vastness and geographic diversity of the cooperative’s service territory. When members were hit with multiple rate increases due to heavy reliance on foreign oil and financing of coal-based generation in the 1980s, cooperative officials assured them that things would eventually get better. True to their word, after a rate reduction at the end of the 1980s, additional rate reductions were announced in March and Aug. 1996. The reductions totaled approximately 15 percent for members. Honeycutt said, “This is just another example of the cooperative’s board of directors and management working diligently for the benefit of our members, as we are pleased to be able to reduce the price of electricity to them.” The cooperative’s rates had remained stable since 1985 and members were beginning to see the value of the investment in coal-based generation. Craighead Electric told members that the cost of electricity had actually dropped in terms of constant dollars over the eleven year period from 1985. If Craighead Electric’s rates had increased with the rate of inflation, a $100 electric bill in 1985 would have cost about $150 in 1996.

Employees were also cross-trained during this time period to increase the positive relations with the members. “We stressed to the employees the importance of letting members know how much we appreciate them and their loyalty to the cooperative,” Honeycutt said.

Craighead Electric implemented an AutoCAD system in the mid-1990s to automate system maps and integrate other related computer-based systems. According to Chuck Hardin, supervisor of information technology for Craighead Electric, prior to the AutoCAD system, work orders were hand drawn on vellum maps after completion, then photographed to be printed as map books.

“The AutoCAD provided us with a clean copy every time it was printed and allowed better productivity,” he said. “After the map books were created Craighead Electric began transferring staking sheets to AutoCAD in a GIS format. After four years the GIS map was completed and ready for use in field staking and outage management integrations.”

He said the integrations allowed Craighead Electric to add vehicle tracking, AMR and Google maps as tools for the GIS.

The cooperative celebrated its 60th anniversary in July 1997 and moved into a new headquarters building and warehouse facility located at 4314 Stadium Blvd. in Jonesboro. The cooperative’s operations had been based at offices at 325 Southwest Drive since 1951. The new office and warehouses were built in two phases. The warehouse and outside operations moved to the new warehouse in Sept. 1995, while the office staff moved to their new work place in January 1998.

The latest in energy saving technologies were deployed into the design of both buildings. Technologies included energy efficient lighting and geothermal heating and cooling.

A big step in member service was made in late 1998 when Craighead Electric began around the clock dispatching from the Jonesboro headquarters.

Prior to implementation of this solution, dispatching involved members contacting an “on-call” serviceman at his residence, according to Keith Blocker, vice president of engineering and operations for the cooperative.

“As our technology expanded and tools available to dispatch moved forward, it was evident that dispatching would be much more efficient from the dispatch center than from homes,” he said. “Calls could be answered with our automated system, “PORCHIE” (Power Outage Resource Call Handling Equipment).

He said the capabilities of this system gathered information in a shorter time than a single individual, as it was equipped with eight lines completely devoted to outages. The implemented system included large monitors to display the location of outages, based on the information gathered from the PORCHIE system.

“Call has multipurpose,” he said. “They have several programs operating simultaneously, including Automated Vehicle Locating, AutoCad, Google maps, Fault Current Information, AMR and SCADA.

These systems, along with our consumer database, work together and assist the dispatcher in assessing the magnitude of the outage. These systems transpired into quicker response time and shorter outages for the members.”

To encourage members to utilize the latest in energy efficiency techniques, Craighead Electric began participation in an energy efficient all-electric model home program in cooperation with AECG in 1999. Craighead Electric’s first model home built under this program was located in Trumann. The program involved “The King of Caulk and Talk” Doug Rye, a syndicated energy efficiency expert, who consulted with the cooperative and AECG on the construction. Rye guaranteed the home’s heating and cooling bills for two years to show his confidence in the energy efficiency practices. The program had been implemented by AECG in 1997 and Craighead Electric’s model home was the third constructed in the state. Some of the construction techniques that were used for the home included cellulose insulation, low E-glass, energy efficient T’s and corner framing, extensive caulking and a geothermal heating and cooling system. The home was completed in the summer of 2000. Thousands of consumers toured the home and gained a great amount of knowledge of the money-saving techniques utilized during construction.

The cooperative celebrated its 60th anniversary in July 1997 and moved into a new headquarters building and warehouse facility located at 4314 Stadium Blvd. in Jonesboro.

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“attended a school board meeting at the northern end of our service territory and began thinking of the amount of time that a member would have to wait for a response to a service call,” he said. “The board agreed and we opened the district offices.”

When members were hit with multiple rate increases due to heavy reliance on foreign oil and financing of coal-based generation in the 1980s, cooperative officials assured them that things would eventually get better. True to their word, after a rate reduction at the end of the 1980s, additional rate reductions were announced in March and Aug. 1996. The reductions totaled approximately 15 percent for members. Honeycutt said, “This is just another example of the cooperative’s board of directors and management working diligently for the benefit of our members, as we are pleased to be able to reduce the price of electricity to them.” The cooperative’s rates had remained stable since 1985 and members were beginning to see the value of the investment in coal-based generation. Craighead Electric told members that the cost of electricity had actually dropped in terms of constant dollars over the eleven year period from 1985. If Craighead Electric’s rates had increased with the rate of inflation, a $100 electric bill in 1985 would have cost about $150 in 1996.

Employees were also cross-trained during this time period to increase the positive relations with the members. “We stressed to the employees the importance of letting members know how much we appreciate them and their loyalty to the cooperative,” Honeycutt said.

Craighead Electric implemented an AutoCAD system in the mid-1990s to automate system maps and integrate other related computer-based systems. According to Chuck Hardin, supervisor of information technology for Craighead Electric, prior to the AutoCAD system, work orders were hand drawn on vellum maps after completion, then photographed to be printed as map books.

“The AutoCAD provided us with a clean copy every time it was printed and allowed better productivity,” he said. “After the map books were created Craighead Electric began transferring staking sheets to AutoCAD in a GIS format. After four years the GIS map was completed and ready for use in field staking and outage management integrations.”

He said the integrations allowed Craighead Electric to add vehicle tracking, AMR and Google maps as tools for the GIS.

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2000-2010

As the new millennium arrived, Craighead Electric continued to grow and increase the products and services offered to members. The cooperative began offering members surge protection devices as the latest electronics were often sensitive to power surges. In the area of energy efficiency, members were educated about a water heater that was designed, built and warranted not to leak as long as they owned their home – the Marathon Water Heater. The high efficiency electric units were well received and eventually Arkansas’ electric cooperatives would become the number one distributor of the product in the United States. The cooperative also began promoting compact fluorescent lights. The bulbs were reported to use one-third as much electricity as incandescent lights and last up to ten times longer.

Along the lines of member education, the cooperative launched its first website in 2001. The site offered a new level and avenue of member service to the cooperative’s members. Since the 1990s the coal-based plants owned by AECC had provided a reliable, reasonably priced source of wholesale power to Craighead Electric and the state’s 16 other electric distribution cooperatives. Craighead Electric members experienced higher than normal bills over a period of 2005-2008 as the cooperative was forced to add one to two cents per kwh in the form of an energy cost adjustment. This issue was caused by railroad companies failing to deliver contracted amounts of coal to the cooperative’s power generation facilities. With a lack of coal, AECC was forced to turn to natural gas and import coal from foreign countries to meet the base load generation needs of its members. Over time the issue of delivery subsided, however the cooperatives and other organizations that rely on rail-based shipping continued to push for federal regulation of America’s railroads.

A new district office was opened in Walnut Ridge on Oct. 2, 2006. The new office included a drive-up window with employees providing a full array of services to members ranging from applying for new service to maintenance requests to billing questions.

In an ongoing effort to provide members with a high level of member service, Craighead Electric implemented an automated meter reading (AMR) system in 2007. Duncan had worked for Craighead Electric for 27 years before assuming the CEO role at the cooperative. When he was named CEO, Craighead Electric served approximately 27,000 members in eight counties in Northeast Arkansas and had 108 employees and currently has 98 employees.

“I want customer service to be second to none,” the new CEO said. “I think we have a wonderful group of employees. I am looking forward to leading such a dedicated group of employees.”

In an ongoing effort to provide members with a high level of member service, Craighead Electric implemented an automated meter reading (AMR) system in 2007.

Wayne Honeycutt retired from Craighead Electric in January 2007 after 16 years at the helm. He was replaced by Brian Duncan, who began working for Craighead Electric in 1978. In announcing the transition of leadership, Tom Sloan, president of the Craighead Electric board of directors said, “Wayne Honeycutt has been instrumental in guiding Craighead Electric in a professional manner over the past 16 years. His dedication to the members of the cooperative will be felt for many years to come. The board looks forward to continued growth and service under the leadership of the new manager, Brian Duncan.”

In an ongoing effort to provide members with a high level of member service, Craighead Electric implemented an automated meter reading (AMR) system in 2007.
2000s

On Jan. 26, 2009, Craighead Electric employees, along with employees of other electric cooperatives across the northern one-third of Arkansas, began preparing for what was projected to be a very strong ice storm. As ice began coating the power lines and trees, cooperatives hoped for the best, but prepared for the worst.

The “worst” turned out to be one of the worst disasters in the history of Craighead Electric. Craighead Electric and 11 of Arkansas’ other distribution cooperatives began restoration efforts on Jan. 27 in the wake of the crippling ice storm.

Craighead Electric had a peak outage number of approximately 25,000 members out of a total membership of 28,000. More than 8,000 poles were damaged or destroyed throughout the cooperative’s service territory. The situation just north of Craighead Electric’s service area was even worse. Neighboring cooperative Clay County Electric reported approximately 12,788 of its 12,800 members were without power on the morning after the storm.

The “worst” turned out to be one of the worst disasters in the history of Craighead Electric.

By Feb. 10, approximately 1,000 line workers and support staff had converged to assist Craighead Electric restore service to members.

William Riley, lineman from DEMCO, an electric cooperative located in Southern Louisiana said, “This ice storm is worse than any hurricane restoration I have ever worked. The only difference, the houses are still standing.”

As restoration work progressed, the assessment from impacted cooperatives became complete. Electrical service to approximately 215,700 members was disrupted by the ice storm and 34,225 poles were destroyed. Approximately 4,200 workers from Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas had motored into the disaster areas to restore service.

Duncan praised the Craighead Electric employees as they worked tirelessly during the restoration efforts. “I want to thank our office and support staff for the many, many hours that these employees have completed,” he said. “Without them, the restoration process would not be as smooth as it has been. This ice storm certainly goes down as one of the worst disasters in Arkansas. At Craighead Electric, it took more than 70 years to construct the distribution system and only a few hours to destroy much of it.”

After 25 days of work, Craighead Electric Cooperative had restored power to all members. Total estimated damages for Craighead Electric were more than $44 million. The state total was $2,154,413,306 for the 12 cooperatives impacted by the storm.

Craighead Electric implemented an innovative service to its members in 2009, the Cooperative Connections Card program. The Cooperative Connections Card program allows cooperative members to receive discounts on products and services.

“With costs of everything going up we thought this would be a way to help our members save and help add additional value to their cooperative membership,” said Monty Williams, vice president of marketing and communications for Craighead Electric.

Williams said that the cooperative's membership was very receptive to the program with many members reporting savings of up to 85 percent on prescription drugs. The average member typically realizes a savings of 38 percent on prescriptions.

“We plan to add new discounts each year as the program grows,” he said. “Our plans include adding member discounts for vision, hearing, dental, lab, imaging and chiropractic with savings up to 85%.”

During the first three years of the Cooperative Connections Card program Craighead Electric members have saved more than $3,211,000 on prescription drugs alone.

Comprehensive integration of the cooperative’s AutoCAD system had continued since 1996 and with vehicle tracking, AMR and Google maps added as tools for the GIS. Craighead Electric added a map viewer tool in 2010 to allow employees access to GIS maps while in service trucks. Additionally, a tool was implemented to pinpoint service orders on the AutoCAD-generated mapping system.

“This allows the servicemen to see where the jobs are located as they are entered into the system,” Hardin said. “It also allows them to update and return service orders electronically.”

2010-2012

After 18 years at 202 North 35th Avenue, Craighead Electric opened a new Paragould district office in 2011. The new office and warehouse enabled Craighead Electric’s 11 Paragould district employees to continue to serve the needs of members in northern Craighead and Greene Counties. The new offices and warehouse were located at 7277 Highway 69, just east of Highway 49 South on Highway 69. The facility included a 65,000 sq. ft. pole/supply yard, in addition to 3,000 sq. ft. of office space and 4,500 sq. ft. of warehouse storage. The state-of-the-art facility used many of the energy-saving components which are commonly recommended by the cooperative, including high-efficient air-source heat pumps for heating and cooling; cellulose insulation; a super-high efficient heat pump water heaters; and energy efficient lighting.

A chilling image from the 2009 ice storm.

The cooperative suffered approximately $44 million in damages during the 2009 ice storm. During the 25-day outage restoration effort, more than 900 crew members restored electric service to 25,000 members.
As the cooperative continued to implement a comprehensive AMR system, more and more potential services for members were realized.

“From the start we realized the potential of a system that could communicate with meters in three to ten seconds,” Blocker said. “AMR was seen as a tool for dispatch, servicemen, engineering, member services and billing. Dispatch can quickly pinpoint outages with the integration of AMR and the OMS (Outage Monitoring System).”

Craighead Electric staff members developed software that takes the calls from the “Porche” system and communicates to get the volts for locations being queried. If volts are not returned, the system makes additional attempts for the same device and if it doesn’t get a return, the automated system follows a protocol until a return is achieved. It then predicts the last device with no return as the fault device with the active number of meters affected.

“This improves outage response times,” Hinson said. “Servicemen use the AMR for voltage readings and blink counts where they have noticed reliability issues. This helps pinpoint issues in a very efficient manner.”

Engineering utilizes the demand readings for locations on transformers for loading information, making resizing transformers much more accurate. The engineering department also monitors voltages for accounts when lines are automatically fed to assure power quality to members. The customized AMR system allows cooperative staff members to extract hourly kwh for members with high bills to pinpoint usage and help reduce billing issues.

“Our billing department uses the AMR for more than just readings,” Blocker said. “They are able to catch big changes in usage that may be a bad thermostat or things left on in cabins and empty rental property. The AMR system has benefited our membership in many ways.”

By 2012 Craighead Electric maintained approximately 3,500 miles of overhead lines on 68 circuits. The cooperative employs its own right-of-way crews as well as contractors to maintain the cooperative’s ever-expanding distribution line infrastructure.

“On average we cover approximately 350 miles per year which is a ten year cycle,” said Steve Hinson, Craighead Electric’s supervisor of maintenance. “We are working to achieve a target cycle time of seven to eight years to provide members with even more reliable service.”

On Aug. 13, 2012, Craighead Electric Cooperative celebrated its 75th Anniversary. The cooperative promoted the anniversary with special anniversary decals on cooperative vehicles and an array of special events.

“Going forward, we will continue to serve our members with the safest and reliable low cost electricity while utilizing the latest technology,” Duncan said.

“We are here for our members today and in the future.”
