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Electricity Comes to Shew Hollow

Betty Matalavage

My early childhood was spent on a dairy farm in Shew Hollow. We didn't have electricity, but we had a small sawmill powered by the water in the Little Minekill River. Aside from this, any machinery we had was powered by gasoline engines. There was an engine in the barn that ran the milking machines, and this is now in the collection of Tim Brainerd. We also had a smaller engine in the wood shed under the big farmhouse. This engine charged twenty glass Delco batteries that were mounted on the side of the farmhouse and that operated lights in the house, but the lights grew dimmer during the long winter nights and so bedtime came early in December and January.

In the 1930s, a commercial electric power company ran lines on Route 30; my grandfather, John Souer, contacted them about running lines up Shew Hollow Road to our farm. They agreed to do it at a cost of \$100 a pole, which he felt was too expensive.

When he heard about the rural electrification effort in Delhi [later, it became the Delaware County Electrical Cooperative (DCEC)], he and my mother, Jessie Hamilton, went down to talk with them about expanding their lines into our area. They agreed to do it if they could get free right-of-ways for their lines.

My grandfather agreed to furnish my mother with a car, and my mother agreed to get authorization for their lines. For the next few weeks, she and Ray Meehan (our neighbor who also wanted the electricity) called on all the property owners along the proposed right-of-way to get their consent to let the line go through their property freely. Most of the time they went together, leaving early in the morning and staying out until late afternoon. My mother did the driving and encountered badly maintained roads, unfriendly dogs and billy goats, and aggressive geese and roosters.

Most owners were at first very interested and therefore very cooperative, but there were a number who had to be persuaded and this sometimes involved several visits with reinforcements from their neighbors on each side of their property. I remember my mother being at times quite discouraged by some of these hesitant owners—but neither she nor Ray gave up. As soon as she had a number of contracts signed, she would take them to the office in Delhi and give them to Arthur Kludis, the man in charge of obtaining the right-of-ways. He would always encourage her to continue with the last holdouts.

After gathering the permissions, she also agreed to room and board the linemen in our home for several weeks as they put in the lines and rewired the farm buildings. Some of them had worked on the Tennessee Valley Authority and all were out-of-staters—they were our guests seven days a week, with Mother giving them a hearty breakfast, packing their lunches, and making dinner for them at night.

As well as I can recall, this was sometime between 1939 and 1940. We enjoyed the workmen's stories and they became very comfortable in our home for the duration of their stay in our area. The numbers varied from week to week, depending on where they were working and what they were doing, but two or three were always there and sometimes as many as six or seven.

A brochure about DCEC was published on the 50th anniversary of the organization. Many names were cited as being responsible for its success, but I was bothered by the omission of the names of my mother and Ray Meehan. It turns out that they had made their contribution before the cooperative was even formed in 1941.

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