

## Kerosene, Kilowatts, and Crops

Mark A. Smith, Carroll County Historian

In my childhood growing up on a farm west of Flora, Indiana, I have vivid memories of various lightning storms which would extinguish the electricity in our home necessitating the use of the kerosene lamp which my parents Received as a wedding present on that unique occasion of their marriage on September eighteenth, 1937. I have fond memories of my mother relating her dealings with that form of illumination, which was all too common until the late nineteen-thirties and early forties. While kerosene, which was a form of illumination pioneered by the late John D. Rockefeller who created the Standard Oil monopoly, was a vast improvement over hand-dipped candles, using a kerosene lamp necessitated great care, according to my late mother. Filling the lamp was always performed on the back porch or in an area externally located from the interior of the home, otherwise spills could accidentally occur, leaving behind a very noxious odor which if inhaled could be harmful to one's health. Cleaning the lamp chimney was accomplished by using old newspaper to restore that part of the lamp to a sheen which would allow the unfettered emission of the illumination, and trimming the wick was also a necessity to prevent undue flare-ups which would blacken the chimney. Although my parents weren't favored by

such an apparatus, another form of kerosene lamp was the Aladdin variety, which usually omitted a light similar to that of a seventy-five watt bulb. Other forms of non-electric light could be had from white gas lamps, similar to the Coleman lanterns usually used in camping. Lanterns were usually used in barns prior to electrical illumination, which left the barn fair game for disastrous destruction due to fires should the lantern be dropped in a hay-filled mow. My father related to me that he was acquainted with a barn which boasted of a wire for suspending the lantern in front of the manger, thus avoiding such a conflagration.

Another facet of the pre-electricity time period was for the housewife, who trudged along with irons heated on the cook stove, and beating her cookie and cake dough by hand. It was obvious that grandma's activities in the kitchen were such as to negate using a gym or physical fitness center in that way. Grandpa's activities were similar in nature due to chopping wood and other such manly activities. Kerosene cook stoves were also a feature of the typical housewife's kitchen and they were replaced by—you guessed it—electric ranges. I have fond memories of Thanksgiving and other seasonal banquets being prepared on my paternal grandmother's electric range—far safer and less prone to explosion and fires. The local REMC kitchenette was graced by Elaine Kull(Liley) , Home Extension Agent (from 1957-1964) to instruct the housewives in the fine

art of using electric mixers and other such relatively new appliances. I also have fond memories of my parents' receiving the "Kilowatt Hours" with a card for reading the meter and sending it in for billing purposes.

I think one can see the blessing that the REA under Claude Raymond Wickard was, bringing the miracle of electricity to rural areas thus avoiding not only tragic conflagrations but expediting the world of not only farming but extending the productivity of the entire agricultural world and altering the lifestyle of the typical agricultural community.

Prior to his role as REA head he served as Agriculture Secretary and was responsible for not only administering the Agriculture Department but in working in tandem with the War Department toward the goal of winning World War Two. Can you imagine his shock at receiving a call to meet with the President post-Pearl Harbor?

Pertinent to crops, I also have fond memories of my late mother's employment at the local ASCS office in Delphi, Indiana for eighteen years under the late Ralph Tyler. Having no career until that date, she was able to assume the reins of Production Clerk, learning how to use planimeters on the large black and white aerial photos to ascertain the acreage of the farmer's fields. Her employment there carried her through eighteen years of loyal service to not only the Federal Government but

the county which she adopted upon her marriage to my father. Her alacritous memory aided in this employment, enabling her to remember each farmer and his farm number upon entry to the office. My mother was able to impart to me her knowledge of the county at large which I quite sure enhances my service to it as County Historian.

It has been my pleasure to share this small vignette of history which affected not only the locality but the state and nation.