

# MEC: How It All Began

Electricity was nothing new for rural towns in Virginia in the 1930s. An estimated 90 percent of the homes in cities and towns had already gone electric. The conveniences offered by electricity, however, did not extend much farther than the town limits. The privately owned utility companies of the day believed that the technical and financial challenges of running lines throughout the countryside were too great for a service that would only have a few customers per mile. As a result, less than eight out of 100 farms in 1934 had electric service.

When Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1933, the country was still reeling from the Great Depression. The new president fought the depression with groundbreaking and often controversial projects in an attempt to get the national economy going again. One of these projects was the Rural Electrification Administration, created by executive order on May 11, 1935.

The REA's mission was to bring electricity to rural areas. It was believed the new technology would provide new jobs, stimulate manufacturing and help the farmers. A year later, Congress passed the Norris-Rayburn Act, providing \$410 million for a 10-year program to bring electricity to rural areas.

The REA was largely a financing agency, making loans available to corporations to construct distribution lines into rural areas. When the utility companies failed to show interest in providing the service to rural areas, rural citizens banded together to form cooperatives to get the job done.

In Mecklenburg, county agent Norman H. Williams, Jr. is credited with being the driving force to bringing electricity to rural Southside. With the support and cooperation of leading farmers from around the region, the group organized and requested an official charter from the State Corporation Commission.

In February of 1938, Williams and Jack Smith went to Washington to secure a loan for \$129,000 to build 136 miles of line and two substations to serve 436 members.

A month later, the State Corporation Commission granted the charter request, and the newly formed Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative was authorized to serve Mecklenburg, Brunswick, Charlotte and Lunenburg. Before the year was out,

the Charter would be amended to allow MEC to serve Appomattox, Bedford, Campbell, Franklin, Halifax, Henry, Price Edward and Pittsylvania. The following year, the Charter was once again amended to include Greensville, Southampton and Sussex.

In October of 1938, the first lines of Mecklenburg Cooperative were energized, and the boom was on. Special programs were brought into play to keep up with the demand to wire rural homes for electricity. In many rural homes today, you can still see the original ceramic insulators used when the houses were first wired for power.

A typical REA installation in those days would have consisted of a 60-amp, 230-volt fuse panel with one 60-amp range circuit, a 20-amp circuit in the kitchen and two or three 15 amp light circuits for the rest of the house. A ceiling mounted light fixture was installed in each room, controlled by a single switch. One outlet per room was considered standard because appliances were expensive and rare.

The growth of Mecklenburg Electric in the early years was astounding. In 1939, loans were secured to extend service into Brunswick and Lunenburg. In 1940, additional funds were borrowed to take service into Greensville, Sussex and Southampton.

World War II put the brakes on the rapid growth of electrical service to rural areas. With all available manpower and resources needed for the war effort, work on new lines virtually came to a stop. When the war ended, and soldiers returned home in late 1945, the boom resumed at even greater speed.

The Rural Virginia magazine for October of 1946 reported that unable to find power poles for new lines, Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative hired three crews to cut their own utility poles. The six man crews were said to be producing about 50 poles a day.

At the time of the 1946 article, MEC had plans to build another 560 miles of line. Expansion and growth continued with an ever-increasing number of farmers and rural residents able to take advantage of the conveniences and comforts offered by the availability of electric service.

Through the years, Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative continued to grow. Today, MEC provides electric service to over

## How Much Things Cost In 1938

Average cost of new house \$3,900.00

Average wages per year \$1,730.00

Cost of a gallon of gas 10 cents

Average cost for house rent \$27.00 per month

A loaf of bread 9 cents

A pound of hamburger meat 13 cents

Average price for new car \$763.00

Blanket \$5.00

Liptons Noodle Soup 10 cents

Below are some prices for UK guides in Pounds Sterling

Average house price 545

## What events happened In 1938

•New England Hurricane of 1938 (or Great New England Hurricane or Long Island Express)

•Freak Waves at Bondi Beach, Sydney, Australia cause 300 swimmers to be dragged out to sea

•The State of Israel is founded

•Floods and Landslides in Los Angeles cause 200 deaths

•The First use of A seeing eye dogs occurs

•German troops enter Austria

•Agricultural Adjustment Act is passed helping farmers affected by Dust Bowl

•Germany begins its persecution of Jews

•March of Dimes Polio Foundation Created.

•A 450 metric ton meteorite struck the earth in an empty field near Chicora, Pennsylvania

•Italy wins the 1938 World Cup in France defeating Hungary

30,000 users.