

See History of Electric Service Through Mr. Dowdey's Eyes

BY SHIRLEY DUKES

It is a pleasant day in July, and I am traveling to the community of Newburg with Mr. E. Hoyt Dowdey. Mr. Dowdey called yesterday and told me that he can remember when the power lines were built from Comanche to Newburg. We are on our way out to the old homeplace to see where he was raised and for him to tell me his story about the day that “The Lights Came On in Newburg.” As we are traveling down Texas Highway 16 South toward Newburg, Mr. Dowdey says he remembers, and shows me the exact spot, where the pavement once ended and the dirt road began. He said that at that time it was the only remaining stretch of dirt highway left between Canada and Mexico.

E. Hoyt Dowdey was born in Newburg on June 27, 1929. Ten years later, he was present when Comanche Electric Cooperative (then Comanche County Electric Cooperative) laid the first electric line to Newburg. He remembers watching and assisting the men who were digging the holes and laying the line. This, of course, was before the times of bucket trucks and digger trucks, and these men were being paid \$1 per day to dig the holes by hand. The ground began getting so hard that they would pay Mr. Dowdey and the other young boys 5 cents per day to bring 5-gallon buckets of water to help soften the ground so that they could dig.

In 1939, the wire they used was copper-clad steel.

Mr. Dowdey showed me the pole that was the dead-end pole. They

then came off that pole to go on down the pasture to the Dowdey homestead. It was farther off the main line than Comanche County Electric Cooperative was allowed to go at that time, so the Dowdeys had to pay an additional 25 cents per month to get them to run power on down to the house.

“Dad sure made us watch the amount of watts we used” said Mr. Dowdey. “He kept a close eye on those

around midnight when they returned home, and Mr. Dowdey can remember his father going into the house with a flashlight to flip the breakers on. The first light that was turned on was the porch light so they would have light to unpack the car.

Mr. Dowdey remembers a funny story about one of his neighbors. Emma Johnson walked a substantial distance from her house to theirs to see whether they had a light bulb. It

seems that they had gotten power to their home but did not have a bulb. The light socket was above the bed, and Mrs. Johnson was afraid that the electric juice would drip out of the socket and ruin her bed.

Mr. Dowdey said his father at first told her that she would have to stick her finger up in there to prevent the juice from dripping out. Thankfully, though, they gave her a bulb and told her NOT to stick her fingers in the outlets.

We went to the old homestead where Mr. Dowdey was raised, and

he gave me a tour of the house. The entire original wiring that his father had installed is still intact in the old house. The ironing board that his mother so painstakingly ironed on is still propped against a wall. It did not have legs like our modern ironing boards do. However, the chairs that she would lay the board across to do her ironing were also still in the house.

The old wood-burning cookstove, which I must add is a most beautiful piece of white and green porcelain, is now sitting in Mr. Dowdey's barn apartment. After electricity was run to the home, the woodbox of the stove was converted to an electric box to



The old wood-burning cookstove that was converted to electricity still sits in Mr. Dowdey's barn apartment.

lights in the house.”

A few years later, they came off that same dead-end pole and ran wire on down the pasture for Bruce and Era Lane and for Allen Cunningham. This was after the war, and at that time, they had begun to use copper wire instead of the copper-clad steel.

During the time they were waiting for the lines to be built, Mr. Dowdey's father, Henry Grady Dowdey, bought and read a book on electrical wiring and wired the house himself. The main line was energized in June 1939, but the Dowdeys were in Alabama and did not turn on their breakers till they returned in August. It was

cook on. Mr. Dowdey still has the woodbox and parts, and the stove could easily be converted back again to a wood stove.

In December 1939, the Dowdey household had its first lighted Christmas tree. Mr. Dowdey's father went out and bought a single strand of Christmas lights that when one bulb burned out, the entire string was rendered useless until that bulb was replaced.

Most likely, as with most of their Christmases, a turkey was shot for the traditional Christmas dinner and cooked in that old wood-burning stove that now sits in the barn. Mr. Dowdey remembers very well the scooter that he got for Christmas that year, ordered out of the Montgomery Ward catalogue.

That was the Christmas that they got their first radio. Mr. Dowdey's father insisted that they get a short-wave radio. Hitler had already invaded Poland, and his father would listen to all the news out of Europe. Mr. Dowdey would listen to Slim Rinehart's broadcast late at night as well as Jack Armstrong the All-American Boy, Tom Mix and the Pepper Cadets, the Cow Bells, and the Crazy Water Gang.

Electricity had a positive effect on the school system as well. Newburg at that time still had a school, and Mr. Dowdey attended the fourth grade there. The classes put on a Christmas play on a stage on the second floor of the Woodmen of the World Lodge, beneath the recently installed incandescent lighting. The school also had its first lighted Christmas tree that year. It was certainly a moment to remember for the children of the Newburg school, as many of them still had not received electric power to their rural homes.

Christmas was not the only thing that was different at the school that year. As with most schools, Newburg had an outdoor basketball court. In previous years, when the sun went down, the kids went home. But with the addition of electric lighting, kids were able to stay out past dark and



Mr. Dowdey's daughter, Dr. Diane Dowdey Watson, and his wife, Shirley Dowdey, stand on the front porch beneath the first electric light that was turned on at the Dowdey homestead.

play ball. Pie pans were put up behind and around the lights to help protect them from flying balls.

Time marches on, and everything changes.

Comanche Electric Cooperative is constantly changing and upgrading the lines as it is needed, and the line going to the little community of Newburg is no exception. The original single-phase line that fed Newburg in 1939 has since been upgraded to three-phase. Poles and wires have been changed out and upgraded numerous times, and, of course, countless meter service additions have been made in the community of Newburg and will continue to be added as needed.

The rural communities in the Comanche Electric Cooperative service area are what this company was built on, and the cooperative strives, and will continue to strive, to offer the best service possible to our members who have made us what we are today.



HAPPY HOLIDAYS
FROM
**COMANCHE ELECTRIC
COOPERATIVE**

Our offices will be closed Monday,
December 25, for Christmas.