Follow the LINE

A story of Coos-Curry Electric Cooperative, Inc. and how one man's vision and determination changed lives and lifestyles

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ON THE COVER—An Erickson Sky Crane is used to set steel towers in rugged terrain to complete the final phase of the transmission line upgrade project in 2010.

Photo by G.Q. Pelter

Introduction

Coos-Curry Electric Cooperative, Inc. (Coos-Curry Electric) is located on the majestic southern Oregon Coast. The area has a marine climate similar to most of Oregon's coastal areas but has slightly higher temperatures in the summer and winter months. Average rainfall ranges from about 62 inches at North Bend to more than 81 inches at Gold Beach and Brookings. The average annual temperature is about 52 degrees.

Mild temperatures and abundant rainfall have created an excellent environment for growing trees. At one point, the harvest and manufacture of timber constituted the area's major economic activity. The cooperative's service territory is in the heart of the West Coast Plywood industry and adjacent to the deep sea port of Coos Bay, a port through which the world's largest supply of wood products is exported.

Agriculture is second to timber in economic importance. About 25 percent of the land in the cooperative's service territory is located in the many river valleys that exist in the coastal range. The river valleys are used for farming and grazing. The largest of these areas is the Coquille River valley in the northern section of the cooperative's service territory. Livestock and dairy industries are well-suited to the physical characteristics of the coastal landscape. The valley farms with their fertile soil and abundant rainfall could probably support more valuable farm crops if it weren't for the flood conditions that occur during the winter months of the year. Therefore, the lands are used almost entirely for pasture and native hay.

Cranberry cultivation rapidly expanded in the 1960s. The lily bulb and cut-flower industries also developed during World War II.

The coastal towns of Port Orford, Gold Beach and Brookings accommodate small commercial fishing fleets. Though some processing is still done at these locations, the bulk of the catch is shipped to other locations for processing.

Expansion of the tourism industry in this area is thought to have the greatest economic potential in

Oregon Coast landscape looking south from Myers Creek to Crook Point and California from Cape Sebastian.
Photo by G.Q. Pelter

America. The cooperative's service territory includes the world-famous Rogue, Elk and Sixes rivers, all renowned for magnificent salmon and steelhead sport-fishing opportunities.

Coos-Curry Electric serves most of the rural population south and east of Coos Bay in Coos County, all of Curry County except the town of Langlois, and a 2.8-mile distribution line in Douglas County.

The larger towns in Coos County—North Bend, Coos Bay, Coquille, Myrtle Point and Powers—are served by Pacific Power and Light, an investor-owned utility. The city of Bandon and town of Langlois are municipal utility systems that serve themselves. Duplicate electric facilities owned by the city of Bandon and Coos-Curry Electric lie between these two towns and to the west of Highway 101.

In Coos County, the cooperative's distribution system serves the coastline and reaches inland about 40 miles, generally following the course of the Coquille River and its network of tributaries through the narrow, twisting valleys of the coastal range. In Curry County the electric system extends along the length of a slender, broken coastal plain that is seldom more than three miles wide. This narrow section contains virtually all of the county's population. The total electric system includes 52 miles of high-voltage transmission line and approximately 1,100 miles of distribution lines in Curry County, about 500 miles of distribution lines in Coos County and a few spans of line in Douglas County.

Electricity has transformed life on the southern Oregon Coast. Seventy-five years ago, the lives and lifestyles of the people living here were very different.

Coos-Curry Electric has a history rich with stories of the men and women who, through vision, determination and hard work, took control of and defined their future. Ignoring rejection and overcoming challenges, they organized a cooperative that would bring electricity to rural areas that had been denied a lifestyle that people living in America's populated areas enjoyed.

More than just a story about Coos-Curry Electric, this book presents stories about the people who dreamed of a better life in rural America, politicians who paved the way for that better way of life and just a few local people—then and now—who have made life in Coos-Curry Electric's service territory interesting and memorable. Some Coos-Curry Electric employees and a member of the board of directors are descendants of the cooperative's pioneers of yesterday. To tell all their stories would have been nearly impossible and would have filled volumes. Undoubtedly, someone would have been forgotten. Still, focusing on just a few does not diminish the fact that the contributions of a great many people during the past eight decades have shaped this cooperative and the people who now call the southern Oregon Coast home.

Gold Beach line crew installs a new pole in an area off Carpenterville Road accessible only on foot.

Photo by G.Q. Pelter

Crews tighten large bolts after steel towers in the Carpenterville Road area are set in place in June 2010 during the final phase of the transmission line upgrade project.

Photo by Fred Kraxberger

Chapter 1

Life Before Electricity

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." —Margaret Mead

Before the incandescent light bulb was invented by Thomas Edison in 1878 and long before electricity was made available to the people on the southern Oregon Coast, the Cape Blanco lighthouse warned sailors of the rugged terrain and dangerous offshore reefs in the area that represents the farthest western point of the state. Many lighthouses dot the Pacific coastline from Washington state to southern California; however, the beacon at the Cape Blanco lighthouse is the only one in Oregon and only one of a few across the United States that is powered by an electric cooperative. In 1955, a 120-mph gale swept over the lonely cape, and the beacon rated at over one million candlepower burned steadily as a warning.

But, it wasn't always that way.

Maritime commerce was very important to the state of Oregon's early economic development. Prior to the Cape Blanco lighthouse being built, however, ships traveling near the treacherous coastline often foundered or wrecked on the reefs that were only 12 to 18 feet below the ocean's surface. In 1889, the schooner *Alaskan* foundered. The *J.A. Chanslor* wreck in 1919 occurred in the dark of night as the crew was trying to navigate the reefs along this section of coastline. The wreck claimed 37 lives and spilled 30,000 gallons of oil into the Pacific Ocean.

The Cape Blanco lighthouse has been part of Coos-Curry Electric's image and corporate logo for decades. The story of the lighthouse, however, began in 1603 when Spanish maritime explorers charted the cape area and surrounding 200-foot bluffs that jutted 1½ miles out from the coastline into the Pacific Ocean. According to folklore, Spanish explorer Martin de Aguilar may have been the one to name Cape Blanco because of the white cliffs. The headlands were explored in more depth in the 1850s.

To better warn mariners, a lighthouse was built on the cape in 1870 with bricks made from local soils. The 59-foot double-walled brick tower sits atop a 200-foot cliff. Each lighthouse has its own signal. The Cape Blanco's signal is one flash lasting 1.8 seconds every 18.2 seconds. The original Fresnel lens was manufactured in France and cost $20,000. A Funck hydraulic float pump was first used to produce the light source, which had a 50,000 candlepower rating. Lard oil, and later kerosene, was used before electricity was available. The Funck's pump burned two to three gallons of fuel every night. Three lighthouse keepers worked four-hour shifts every night, monitoring the fuel supply, hauling fuel up about 40 steps to refuel the pump and rewinding the clockworks to keep the light burning. The light source was upgraded in 1910 to a 150,000-candlepower Bunsen lamp. The original Fresnel lens was replaced in 1936 with a smaller, rotating second-order lens that was approximately five feet in diameter and seven feet tall.

All this took place night after night until Coos-Curry Electric brought electricity to the lighthouse in 1942.

The history of the Cape Blanco lighthouse is not the only example of life without electricity. While the more populated areas of Portland, Eugene and even smaller towns such as Coquille and Coos Bay enjoyed the benefits of electricity, rural areas had yet to understand the meaning let alone experience the benefits. Life was very different.

Pioneers living in rural areas worked by the light of day and read by kerosene lamp or candlelight at night. After chopping wood, building a fire and hauling buckets of water from a well or nearby stream, water for bathing, washing clothes or cooking could finally be heated over an open fire. Farmers tended cattle, sheep and poultry during daylight hours or by lantern if they hadn't finished by sunset. They fed and watered livestock by hand. They milked dairy cows by hand and rushed the milk to their customers before it spoiled. Sometimes, dairy farmers

Top, the J.A. Chanslor wrecked near Cape Blanco in 1919 while trying to navigate the treacherous reefs before the Cape Blanco Lighthouse was built. The wreck claimed 37 lives and spilled 30,000 gallons of oil into the Pacific Ocean.

Photo courtesy of the Curry Historical Society

Above and right, prior to electricity and modern-day washing machines, clothes were washed by hand and hung outside on clothes lines to dry. Dairy cows were milked by hand and the milk had to be delivered quickly before it spoiled.

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would use ice to keep the milk cool during transport, but this took a lot of time to organize and was very costly. Helen Dawn Miller Nelson recalled helping her mother milk cows by hand twice each day so the milk could be picked up by truck every morning and transported to the Sixes Cheese Factory.

Before electricity, all of these tasks had to happen day after day, regardless of weather conditions or an individual's health.

At the end of World War I, the gasoline engine made a small improvement in the pioneer lifestyle. Although the fuel was expensive and inefficient, gasoline engines could be used to run a few light bulbs, pump water or even pull a plow.

Mr. and Mrs. Thor Jamsgard remembered farming in Coos County before electricity became available. The family came from Norway in 1928 and moved to Coos County in 1947. According to Thor, Norway at the time was "the most electrified country in the world." In an interview with Ruralite magazine, the Jamsgards were surprised to arrive in the United States and find most of the rural people still dragging kerosene lamps around. The Jamsgards had 135 acres and tended 1,000

hens, 30 dairy cows and 60 sheep. Forty dozen eggs were sold locally every day. The butterfat they collected was sold to the Superior Cheese Company in Myrtle Point to make cheese.

Further south, the Ralph LeClair operation also had about 1,000 laying hens and was selling about 450 dozen eggs a week to customers from Neisika Beach to Brookings. The family venture started because of a chick-buying error that landed 400 chicks on their doorstep. To manage the chicks that were scattered in the upstairs bedroom and out in their chicken house, they bought an electric brooder and also installed automatically controlled lights in the laying house. Both became indispensable in their success.

Roy Liles, a dairy farmer near the Winchuck River, remembered the days before his dairy had electricity in a Ruralite story. Electricity brought power to pump and heat the thousands of gallons of water needed to produce his 350 gallons of bottled raw milk every week. Lighting was installed in the stall barn and other buildings to enable work to go on before sunrise or after dark. Electricity meant refrigeration to preserve the milk and irrigation for the fields in the dry summer months. Electricity made it easier for the Liles family dairy to deliver fresh raw milk along a 45-mile route, to better care for their animals and be more profitable.

Even branding cattle became easier. In a 1970 Ruralite story about Tom Guerin, a Myrtle Point rancher, Guerin said that they used to have to build a wood fire, and then wait for the iron to heat, even if they only had a couple of cattle to brand. "This was a lot of trouble for just a few animals; and now, all we do is plug in our new electric branding iron and wait three to five minutes for it to heat," Guerin said. Electricity was a real convenience.

Former Coos-Curry Electric board members recall the early days of electricity. Monte Lund remembers carrying lanterns to do the barn work, watching horses pull logs up over the hills and walking to school. Later, his family used a generator to power lights and a gas-powered washing machine to wash clothes. Grant Combs and his wife Mapril, who was from Dora, remember using kerosene lamps. They also remember the most amazing thing that enriched the lives of women at that time—the electric washing machine and electric dryer. "Prior to that, we either had clothes drying all over the house or were running outside to take them off the line before the rain soaked them once again," Mapril said in a 2014 interview. Grant added that the electric stove liberated men from the burden of chopping wood for the stove.

Daryl Robison recalls working on his father's 5-acre cranberry bog before the farm had electricity. "The most critical part was trying to make sure we could irrigate for frost control," Robison said. Before electricity, that meant packing equipment and diesel fuel down the hill so the pump could be primed and water would flow. Electricity changed Robison's life in many ways. One was the way it transformed life in the cranberry business and the other was the way he learned about it as an employee of the cooperative. "Bill Cook called me in 1970 and asked me to come to work as a work order accountant for $6.02 an hour," Robison said in a 2014 interview. "I thought that was great." He held various positions before leaving in 1981 to follow in his father's footsteps in the cranberry industry. The cooperative philosophy is in his blood. He started a cranberry cooperative that has been very successful, and he is currently on the Coos-Curry Electric board of directors. "The goal of every cooperative is the same," he said, "Whatever is earned goes to those who contribute, whether it is a cranberry grower or an electric consumer."

Lionel train advertisement. Circa 1950.

Retired lineman Terry Timeus recalled "lights out" at 9 p.m. or whenever it got dark. One of his fondest memories of electricity was getting an electric Lionel train for Christmas. His father, H.E. "Heck" Timeus recalls the days of stoking wood on the fire, tending to a huge vegetable garden and preserving food for winter by drying or canning, as there were no refrigerators or deep freezers. He remembered well the evening the house blazed from top to bottom with electric light. Electricity replaced the flickering, smoking kerosene and gasoline lamps that had for many years been the only light source available once the sun had set.

Cape Blanco Lighthouse and U.S. Coast Guard Station buildings where lighthouse keepers and their families were stationed. Circa 1940.
Photo Coos-Curry Electric archives

Before electricity came to Curry County, Dr. William Cartwright made his rounds from Port Orford to Brookings in a horse and buggy. Many of his patients, some victims of accident or violence, had no transportation and were located in isolated areas. Cartwright had to journey over poor roads often in extreme weather conditions to offer medical attention. He was even known to care for animals. Modern conveniences such as gasoline and electricity made tending to the needy much faster and easier.

Edna Bolt Riley recalled life in Arkansas before electricity during an interview at age 92 with local author Walt Schroeder. Riley commented that young people today had a hard time realizing what life was like without telephones, television or other conveniences powered by electricity.

Yvonne Pettyjohn remembers fondly her great-grandparents, Frank and Anna Lowry, who owned the Lowry Lodge just downriver from Agness. The lodge had a generator. Yvonne's great-grandfather was an expert boatman, and often navigated the Rogue River to deliver mail, passengers and other commodities. Frank was the first person to transport a car, by boat, from Gold Beach to Agness. "That wasn't easy and it took a lot of skill to be able to navigate the rocks and treacherous river conditions that were known to occur," Yvonne said. Yvonne remembers days before and after electricity. "I remember reading by kerosene lamps and taking baths in water that had been heated over a wood stove," she said in a 2014 interview. "All I can say is that when electricity came, it was wonderful." Yvonne now keeps the rich history of this area alive through her work at the Curry Historical Society .

The Pioneer Life was About to Change

The pioneer way of life in rural America would soon change as a result of World War I, the growing interest in using electricity to power everyday tasks and an evolving interest by government to eliminate the disparity between urban and rural living. The dream was to create a better way of life for all citizens, regardless of where they chose to live.

President Theodore Roosevelt formed the Country Life Commission (CLC) in 1908. The commission identified three movements needed to eliminate the disparity between urban and rural living. The first was to take stock of country life; the second was to establish a nationalized extension service through state colleges of agriculture and the third was to implement a campaign for rural progress. To Roosevelt, the increasing disparity between the services and conveniences extended to urban living and the lack of the same essential services for those in rural America was a "national disgrace." Through his CLC, 500,000 farmers nationwide were surveyed. The result was a report with suggested reforms ranging from road improvement to providing essential services such as telephone and electricity.

This would have meant an end of kerosene lamps, pump handles, water buckets, coal stoves and countless other daily tasks of drudgery. The U.S. Congress failed to support the initiatives; however, many of the suggested reform measures resulted in significant programs and improvements in farming and rural life.

Thus, the way of life in rural America and on the southern Oregon Coast began to change.

"People just seem to follow the line," Ivan Laird, the founder of Coos-Curry Electric Cooperative used to say.

The development potential of this majestic coastal area had been there all along. Electricity transformed lives and lifestyles into what is enjoyed today.

Coos-Curry Electric Cooperative, Inc.
75 Years
Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative
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