



Flip A Switch - Turn On The Light

By Gordon W. Warren

Once again I have been asked by the folks at KJPW to write an article for the Old Settlers Gazette. It is difficult to realize that what to me are the happenings of childhood and youth are to readers of this publication ancient history. If at the age of ten I listened to my Grandfather speak of his Civil War experiences as a Captain in the Union Army, he was harking back forty six years. My 1917 memories of World War I now span eighty four years. I am convinced that the only thing that does not change is change itself. Plant and animal agricultural and horticultural sciences have improved our food and fiber products to the extent that their names are all that remain the same. Modern transportation has brought the far corners of the earth within reach of all. The total volume of knowledge has increased beyond the scope of human imagination. This brief

reference to certain of my memories of bygone days might be likened to a glimmer of light in a cave of darkness. I decided to trace the development of a daily essential we take for granted, namely electricity. Folks in California are now learning that flipping the switch does not always produce a light but they still have the switch and the hope. I remember when there was no switch.

The first electric power plant and distribution system in Richland was built and owned by Bud Woodward and his son Ernest, who was nicknamed Butch. The generating plant was located adjacent to what is now Highway 7 on West Washington near the junction of Highway A. The power plant consisted of a single kerosene burning stationary engine whose fly wheel turned the generator by means of a huge belt. The distribution system was all insulated copper wire. Wooden cross arms and wooden pegs which held glass insulators



graced the poles. Linemen wore spikes and leather safety belts for installation and maintenance work. It was unlawful to put a nail in a an electric pole because it could interfere with a climber's spikes and cause an injury. Cherry pickers had not entered the minds

of even the most ambitious trouble shooter. Electrical service was available from sunset to sunrise only. There was an open field adjacent to the power plant and a large pole was in the middle of the field. It was a common joke that when it became so dark Butch could not see that pole he would start the power plant.

The first electrical appliance to come to Richland was the electric iron. From time immemorial the housewife had been heating the sad irons on the kitchen stove. One in use on the ironing board and the other on the stove waiting its turn to replace the first. The electric iron became so popular that Butch started running the power plant Tuesday mornings from nine to twelve o'clock. Wash day being Monday, the laundry could be sprinkled Monday evening, put in the laundry basket over night and ready for ironing the next morning. The first irons were bare bones; no heat adjustment and certainly no steam or spray fixture. The



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sprinkling took care of that. The next appliance to make its debut was the vacuum cleaner. Butch's wife Monta (Davis) Woodward had the agency for the Eureka Vacuum Cleaner. Her demonstrations were usually given at night because that was the housewife's only free time when electricity was available. Only the homes that had carpet or rugs were potential users. In time the power plant was expanded and 24 hour service was provided.

In the early 1920's Richland suffered a mid winter ice storm that destroyed trees, electric and telephone lines. This proved to be a crippling blow to Butch Woodward's electrical distribution system, which led to his decision to sell. In the mid 20's Missouri Electric bought the Richland system and when a transmission line was completed the local power plant was supplanted by a sub station. Missouri Electric engaged in an active sales program of appliances including ranges. Propane gas had not yet appeared on the scene. Monopoly charges were brought against Missouri Electric Company which forced it to sell the Richland facility among other holdings. The Sho Me Electric Co-op became the owner of the Richland system.

Richland Leaders had taken note of the creation of Springfield Public Utilities as well as Rolla, Missouri. Under Dave Caldwell as Mayor, it was decided to call an election to vote bonds to buy the electrical distribution system from Sho Me. This was a hard fought battle. Sho Me placed a full time representative in Richland to work against the bond issue. The bond issue carried, a deal was struck with Sho Me, \$99,000.00 in bonds were issued and Richland was in the electrical distribution business. The transition was not made without some pains of trial and error. I was elected Mayor in 1953 with a personal, not campaign promise, to create a smooth working utility system.

City Attorney Claude T. Wood was a personal and professional friend of Achmon P. Stone, Springfield Attorney who had drawn the legal plan for both Springfield and Rolla. The two collaborated to write for Richland an ordinance to create a Utility Board separate from but subservient to the Board of Aldermen. Four of the leading business men in Richland, Clarence Hendricks, Barney Brown, Ralph Dustin and Ray Hillhouse became the original members of the board. Under their

Guidance the utilities became a successful asset to the city. Marshall Magee, former manager for Missouri Electric and Sho Me Electric, served as the local manager for a number of years and put the business on a sound footing. Rates have been maintained at a competitive level but profits have remained in Richland to fund needed improvements and development.

A strange sequence of events led to the spread of the Richland Electric Utility plan to St. Robert and Waynesville. This is my story for you to believe or not believe. In the mid 1950's Ozark Air Lines initiated passenger service to Forney Field. To celebrate the initial flight a group of Pulaski County citizens, including myself, were invited to Fort Wood. We boarded a bus, rode to St. Louis, transferred to an Ozark Airlines plane and flew to Fort Wood for the initial landing ceremony. Enroute to St. Louis and on return to Fort Wood I shared a seat with Herman Paulette, Mayor of St. Robert. We called him Mr. Jodie because his wife owned and operated Jodie's Cafe. Mayor

Paulette quizzed me extensively about the Richland electric system. At my invitation Mayor Paulette, future Mayor P. R. Lynch and other aldermen came to Richland one evening for an exploratory meeting. We met at the utility office with Marshall Magee, manager, and some of our council and utility board members. The Richland books and records were opened and all results were made available to the visitors. Not long after that meeting, St. Robert entered into negotiations and bought its electrical distribution system. Following the St. Robert purchase, the same took place in Waynesville. Some years ago Crocker held an election to accomplish the same purpose but the proposal was defeated. Keeping electricity available at the flip of a switch is important enough to draw the full attention of our U. S. Senate Leaders, President and Governors.

With the present capability of taking your cell phone out of your pocket and turning on your coffee pot one hundred miles away it would be difficult to tell a member of the younger generation that Butch Woodward waited until dusk to start generating electricity.



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