Mary (Cooper) Hunt

Remembering when the lights came on…

Mary (Cooper) Hunt was about seven years old when the lights first came on in her family's farmhouse near Lenox. The pole was already standing in the yard when they moved in, but one day her mother sent her outside to see what all the commotion was about. Back then, if you saw an Intercounty truck rolling down the road, you knew power was coming. And that's exactly what was happening! The Hall boys were there, working to hook up electricity.

Inside the house hung a single ceiling light in the center of the front room. Not long after, they got a refrigerator. No longer did they need to lower milk down in the cool cistern to keep it from spoiling. Still, electricity inside didn't mean light outside. "There weren't pole lights like there are now," she said. "When it was dark, it was dark."

The family heated their home entirely with wood. The same stove that warmed the house also cooked their meals. Each morning took effort — getting the fire going strong enough to bake biscuits and fry eggs and gravy. As one of the oldest of seven children, Mary carried responsibility early. She and her sister helped their mother every morning — one milking cows, the other helping cook breakfast. The milk driver came daily to pick up what the family sold, and the children needed to eat before walking to Stony Point Schoolhouse, where they were always eager to see Ms. Nelson.

Mary's father worked construction and was often gone a week at a time. That meant the children helped their mother manage both house and farm. It also meant the family vehicle was often gone. If they needed to use a telephone, they trapesed through the fields to a house on the Dent and Texas County line — the closest phone around. "We didn't abuse the telephone," Mary said. "It was only used in emergencies, like calling Dr. B.J. Myers, who made house calls."

Most everyday medical needs however, were handled by Mary's grandmother. Mary remembers being so sick once with a fever that all her hair fell out. Her grandmother mixed up a home remedy, including tree bark, and gave her a spoonful whenever she stirred or whimpered. Mary recalls hearing her father quietly ask if she would be okay. Her grandmother replied, "It'll either kill her or cure her." And, cure her it did!

Grandmother also made a powerful chest salve — though it required someone first kill a skunk before it sprayed. The rendered lard was mixed with kerosene and rubbed on chests at the first sign of a cough or wheeze. It was potent, but effective.

In her grandparents' home sat a large battery-powered radio, the battery "about the size of a cinder block." When it wore out, Grandmother kept it and the children used it as a booster seat at the kitchen table. "Nothing was wasted," Mary said.

The family kept a large garden and livestock. Trips to town happened once a month for staples like flour and sugar. Canning filled the shelves. Meat was processed in their own smokehouse. Neighbors helped neighbors though, especially at wheat harvest time. Few owned a threshing machine, and those who did went farm to farm without ever expecting payment.

Water had to be drawn from a well by bucket, and for many years there was no indoor plumbing — only an outhouse. Eventually, a hand pump replaced the bucket, which felt like a major upgrade. But, when the well ran dry, water had to be hauled in.

Laundry day was especially hard when water was scarce. They'd haul water from the pond and wash clothes by hand, hanging them along fence rows to dry. The next day was ironing day. Without electricity, irons were heated two ways. Her grandmother used a heavy cast-iron flat iron heated on the cookstove. Her mother had a self-heating kerosene iron, pumped to pressurize the small fuel tank and lit with a flame inside. Mary still remembers the fumes on ironing day. She was about nine or ten when they got their first electric iron — and she still remembers her mother teaching her how to use it.

Even after indoor plumbing was installed, they kept the outhouse "just in case." Mary laughs that sometimes it was simply easier to use it. If you know Mary, ask her about the mean old turkey gobbler that used to wait outside the outhouse door — and how he eventually met his fate.

Mary was a teenager before electricity reached their barn. It simply wasn't a priority. But once it did, everything changed. They got their first milking machine, and chores became far less grueling.

Decades after watching the Hall boys string that first line to her family's home, Mary looks back with gratitude for the conveniences electricity has brought — lights at the flip of a switch, refrigeration, modern appliances, running water. But she also reflects fondly on what hasn't carried forward quite as easily. The slower pace. The shared work. The way neighbors showed up without being asked. The understanding that nothing should be wasted. Mary shares, "People just always had time for people."