

Phyllis (Pownall) Caton

Remembering when the lights came on...

For Phyllis Caton, one of the most unforgettable days of her childhood wasn't marked by a birthday or holiday. It was the day she came home from school in 1951 and discovered that electricity had finally reached her family's farm.

Phyllis was just 8 years old, attending school in Plato. Every afternoon, she rode the bus home with a neighbor boy named Dean. Their families were both waiting on Intercounty Electric to connect power to their homes. Each day after getting off the bus, Dean raced toward his house to flip the porch light switch. Nothing happened...until one December afternoon.



"The day Dean got off the bus and his porch light came on, I knew what was waiting for me at home," Phyllis recalled. Sure enough, when she walked through her own front door, the lights worked too. It was the beginning of a new chapter for her family, though many of the old ways remained.

Growing up, nothing went to waste. "My momma could make anything out of anything," Phyllis said. Feed sacks became clothing. Her mother would bleach the cotton sacks white to sew the family's underwear and dye others a rich royal blue to make her dad's work shirts. She sewed lots of pretty clothes for the girls (including their prom dresses) from flour feed sacks and, using a loom built by Phyllis's father, even wove rugs for their home. Even the string from the feed sacks was repurposed and used to crochet pot holders.

Her parents certainly knew the value of hard work. In the same year electricity came to the farm, Phyllis's father suffered a serious injury while sawing wood that permanently disabled his left hand. Just four years later, he was accidentally shot while field dressing a deer during hunting season. Yet Phyllis never remembers hearing him complain. "He could milk a cow faster than you could whip a cat!" she laughed.

Despite his injuries, Phyllis' dad continued cutting firewood for both the wood cookstove and the heating stove, worked in the hayfields alongside his neighbors, and took great pride in providing for his family.

Hay season remains one of Phyllis's fondest memories. "It wasn't just our family putting up hay," she remembered. "The neighbors all helped each other." The men arrived with tractors, wagons and equipment while the women brought tables full of homemade food.

No one kept score of who owed whom. "It was just what neighbors did," Phyllis said. "You helped each other because you knew someday you'd need help too."

Life before electricity required planning and plenty of elbow grease. The family washed clothes in their little outside wash house. Water was pumped by hand from the cistern before being heated in a large cast-iron black kettle. This is, if there was enough rain to catch between laundry days! They had a little wagon they'd use to haul the clothes to hang on the line. Before ironing, Phyllis's mother sprinkled water onto dry clothes using a soda bottle fitted with a sprinkler cork on top. Eventually they graduated from a washboard to a wringer washer, though the old washboard was never thrown away.

There was no indoor plumbing either. An outhouse served the family's daily needs, while a portable potty stayed indoors for nighttime emergencies. They did have a cased well they used for drinking, cooking and bathing water. Phyllis remembers their #3 round they used for a tub. In the winter, they'd place it close to the wood heat stove, and their summer-time shower was made from a gallon bucket with holes punched in the bottom. Her momma could use water that had set in the sun to warm.

Their kitchen was just as resourceful. Before electricity, food stayed cold in a gas refrigerator powered by replaceable gas bottles. One bottle ran the refrigerator while another stood ready when the first ran empty. Years later, after electricity arrived, the family eventually added a gas tank and an indoor water heater. They also had a new well drilled and water piped to the kitchen; however, there was no drain to pour the water through, so they had to manually pour it out by bucket at the edge of the yard.

The family relied heavily on what they could grow, raise and preserve themselves. Phyllis's mother canned vegetables, chicken, pork and countless jars of homemade jelly. Phyllis remembers one batch of elderberry and wild grape jelly that never quite thickened. "It was the best syrup I ever had," Phyllis laughed. Shelves in the cellar held the family's canned goods through the winter months.

They raised chickens for eggs and butchered hogs each year. The hens stayed to keep laying while the roosters often ended up on the dinner table. "Sometimes we'd have baby fried chicken for breakfast," Phyllis recalled. No one ever left the table hungry!

Even after electricity came, one of the first improvements on the farm wasn't for the family at all—it was for the chickens. A simple heated blanket gave the birds a warm place to gather during the coldest winter weather, making life a little easier for both the flock and the family.

Evenings before electricity were illuminated by kerosene and Aladdin lamps, while a flashlight was reserved for emergencies. Entertainment came from a battery-powered radio that filled the house with music and laughter. Phyllis still remembers gathering around it to listen to Minnie Pearl on the Grand Ole Opry.

Looking back, Phyllis doesn't remember life without electricity as difficult. It was simply the way things were.

Her memories are filled not with hardship, but with ingenuity, resilience and community—a time when families made do with what they had, neighbors worked side by side, and every new convenience was deeply appreciated.

When the lights finally came on in 1951, they didn't erase those values. They simply made life a little brighter.

Coming full circle: From waiting for the lights to keeping them on

When 8-year-old Phyllis raced home from school in 1951 to find electricity waiting at her family's farm, she couldn't have imagined that just over a decade later she'd begin a career with the very cooperative that changed her childhood.



On October 1, 1962, Phyllis walked through Intercounty Electric's doors as a new employee. Fresh out of Draughon's Business College in Springfield, and a short stint as a bookkeeper at Nehi-Royal Crown, she had accepted a position as a billing clerk at the cooperative.

There was just one problem. She didn't own a car. In fact, she didn't even have a place of her own to live yet. Fortunately, a great-aunt and great-uncle lived on Green Street, so on her very first day of work, Phyllis slipped on her heels and walked to the co-op.

"I didn't know a soul," she recalled. It also happened to be payday, meaning she'd have to work an entire month before earning her first paycheck. But before the day was over, she already felt like she belonged. The office ladies invited the new employee to join them for lunch at the school cafeteria. "We had ham and beans," Phyllis remembered. It was a simple meal, but one she never forgot because it was her first taste of the cooperative family.

Not long afterward, she rented an apartment in a nearby two-story house, settling into both her new home and her new career.

As the years passed, the cooperative evolved, and so did Phyllis's role.

She began in billing, but as technology transformed the electric utility industry, she embraced every change. Eventually, she became Intercounty's data center coordinator, helping guide the cooperative through decades of rapid technological advancements.

When she first began working with computers, they looked nothing like today's sleek laptops. "The first computer equipment took up several rooms," she laughed.

Over the years, she watched punch cards give way to terminals, and massive machines evolve into increasingly sophisticated computer systems that transformed how the cooperative served its members.

One of her closest coworkers during those years was fellow computer programmer, Hubert. The pair worked together for nearly 16 years before Hubert retired in 1979. The following year, they were married. The very weekend after their marriage, Phyllis joined Darlene Reed, Ruth Jackson and Norma Jean Ray for a week's worth of training in South Carolina to learn all about the new computer equipment upgrades that were coming. A worthwhile sacrifice for the newlyweds, as that training allowed Phyllis the opportunity to become the co-op's "go-to" for all technology and computer related questions.

For Phyllis, one memorable moment of her career came as the calendar turned to January 1, 2000. Like businesses across the country, Intercounty prepared for the uncertainty surrounding the Y2K computer bug. She and another co-worker stayed at the office through the night, ready to respond if the cooperative's systems failed when the clocks rolled over to the new millennium. Thankfully, there was little excitement. "The lights didn't even blink," Phyllis said with a grin.

After more than four decades of service, Phyllis retired from Intercounty Electric in 2003, closing a remarkable 41-year career. But retirement didn't mean saying goodbye. For another 22 years, she continued volunteering as an election teller during the cooperative's annual meeting, faithfully serving members until 2025.

Looking back, Phyllis witnessed nearly every chapter of the cooperative's growth—from handwritten records and room-sized computers to the digital age. Yet through all the technological advances, one thing remained constant. "The people," she said.

The same cooperative that brought electricity to her family's farm welcomed a young woman who arrived on foot with no car, no home of her own and few possessions. In return, Phyllis gave the cooperative decades of dedication, helping ensure that members received accurate bills, dependable service and a utility prepared for the future.

It's a story that has come full circle. The little girl who once waited for the lights to come on spent the next 41 years helping make sure they stayed on for everyone else.