

Shirley (Bullock) Brim

Remembering when the lights came on...

For many people today, electricity is something they never have to think about. Flip a switch, push a button or plug something in, and power is there waiting. But for Shirley (Bullock) Brim, electricity is a milestone she can still vividly recall because she remembers what life was like before it ever reached her home.

Shirley graduated from Houston High School in 1954. The year before, in 1953, electricity finally came to her family's home east of Raymondville in the Friendship School area. Until then, she and her family lived the way many rural families did for generations — relying on hard work, ingenuity and each other to get through every day.

Her connection to the early days of rural electrification runs even deeper. After high school, Shirley went to work for Wade Chipps at MO Wood Treating in Raymondville — the same company that came to Intercounty Electric's rescue during its early years when the co-op needed poles to build its electric system. Her father cut the poles, her mother measured them, and Shirley and her two sisters helped peel the trees by hand using peeling knives. She remembers that Henry York owned the land where her daddy cut the poles.

"We just did what we had to do back then," Shirley said.

Before electricity arrived though, evenings were lit by the glow of kerosene lanterns. Shirley remembers doing homework by lantern light after the sun went down. The family drew water from a dug well, with a lead trough running from the house to help collect water.

Laundry was a hands-on chore during Shirley's early years. Clothes were scrubbed on a washboard in a galvanized tub, hung outside to dry, and pressed with cast iron irons. During droughts, when water was scarce, they hitched horses to the wagon, loaded up their laundry and headed to the pond to wash clothes. Afterward, the freshly washed clothes were spread across bushes to dry in the sun. You might be surprised to know Shirley continued hanging clothes outside to dry until just four years ago, when her great-nephew wired electricity for a dryer.

Entertainment was simple, but it was never lacking. Shirley's mother was a talented musician who knew how to play piano and taught herself to play guitar. She provided the evening entertainment as Shirley and her sisters sang and danced along.

Shirley also looked forward to the Bookmobile that visited once a month during the summer. She could check out books and swap selections when the Bookmobile came back the following month.

Life on the farm required everyone to contribute. The family heated their home with a wood stove and cooked meals on a wood cookstove. Shirley remembers many cold winter nights spent gathering wood chips and kindling to keep the fire burning. A dolly outside the house helped haul wood inside for the stove.

Shirley's mother was a "jack-of-all-trades" — someone who could fix nearly anything and keep the household running. While Shirley's middle sister helped more with household tasks like cooking, Shirley preferred being outdoors working alongside her dad.

The family raised much of what they needed. They had a large garden, chickens, a milk cow or two, and occasionally a butcher hog. They canned and preserved food throughout the summer to prepare for

winter. Leftovers from meals were placed into containers and stored in a shallow cellar, or dugout, on the north side of the house. This shallow cellar was covered with a door, and each morning fresh well water was poured onto the ground inside to help keep items like milk, butter and leftovers cool.

Food preservation was a major part of life. The family canned meat and cured what they could in a small smokehouse. During the summer months, Shirley's mother spent countless hours canning food through the water bath method — keeping the fire going and the water boiling for 4-5 hours to properly preserve each batch.

After Shirley married, she learned about another convenience that would make life easier: the pressure cooker. Her mother-in-law taught her how to use one, and Shirley said she has appreciated having one ever since.

"I just wouldn't can without one now," she said.

The arrival of electricity brought a series of changes, each one making daily life a little easier. The first electric item the family received was a simple pull-chain light. After that came an electric radio, then a refrigerator — a luxury that meant food could stay cold and fresh without constant worry. Eventually, they added a ringier washing machine, which helped make laundry day less demanding.

But even after electricity arrived, modern conveniences came slowly. Shirley was well into her marriage before her home ever had indoor plumbing.

Her husband also understood the challenges of rural living. During droughts, he had a water tank on his truck and would purchase water from Raymondville to haul to families whose dug wells had gone dry.

Today, Shirley still enjoys gardening, although she has traded the large garden of her younger years for raised mineral tubs. She continues to grow beans, cucumbers, squash and zucchini. She's known to grow gourds just about as tall as she is!

When she looks back, Shirley remembers a time when nothing was wasted and every task required effort. There were no shortcuts, no conveniences and no guarantees — just families working together and making the most of what they had.

Her memories serve as a reminder of just how much electricity changed rural life. It brought more than lights to homes; it brought opportunity, comfort and a new way of living.

For Shirley Brim, the flip of a switch was not just the arrival of power. It marked the beginning of a new chapter — one she still remembers with gratitude.

