

Viola (Ward) Bailie

Remembering when the lights came on...

Viola (Ward) Bailie doesn't need a history book to remember what life was like before electricity—she lived it. At 101 years old, her memories are still sharp, bound together with the rhythm of hard work, family, and a way of life that feels almost unimaginable today.

She was born and raised in Oklahoma, in a home where there were no light switches to flip, no humming appliances in the background—just the glow of lanterns and the steady routines of a self-sufficient life. The very afternoon she graduated high school, everything changed. Vi, her younger brother, and her parents packed up and moved to Missouri, settling into a small rent house in Licking that, like her childhood home, had no electricity. It wasn't unusual then. It was just life.

Vi's mother taught her how to bake, cook, can, and keep house. Work was hard, but it had to get done, and sometimes it could even be dangerous. Vi recalls cooking inside one day while her mother washed laundry on the front porch. Her mother's scream sent her running outside, and Vi found that her mother's hair had gotten stuck in the ringer. In the confusion of the situation, Vi may have made it worse before figuring out how to help.



At 19, Vi married Loy, and together they started building a life of their own. They bought a 40-acre farm east of town, along with an old farmhouse that came with more character than convenience. The deal was a simple monthly payment for one year. After that, grandma and grandpa considered the debt paid, and the farm was theirs. It was a good deal. But it still didn't come with electricity.

So, Vi stepped into her twenties much the same way she had lived her childhood—working hard, making do, and finding joy in the middle of it all. Vi and Loy believed in something simple and powerful: save first and do what you can with what you have. Before electricity ever reached their home, they had already saved enough to build something they truly needed—a big, beautiful red barn with white stripes and a loft. It stood as a symbol of their determination, and it quickly became the center of their daily work. Because the work didn't stop when the sun started to dip.

Loy worked at Fort Wood, and Vi remembers how he would come home, barely pausing long enough to change clothes before heading right back out to the farm. There were chores waiting and more work up the road helping his parents on their farm too. Even though she was no bigger “than a pound of soap,” Vi was right there beside him!

After they got a Ford tractor and trailer, the pace only picked up. She recalls long, exhausting days in the cornfields—walking alongside the trailer, hand-gathering corn and tossing it in. When the trailer was full, they’d drive it back to the farm. Loy would start unloading into the corn cribs, and Vi would hurry inside to cook a quick meal on the wood stove. Then it was right back out to do it all again.

Vi was never afraid of hard work. She was tough—“tough as nails,” as anyone who knows her would say—and she credits that strength to her mother. Her mother was a hard worker in every sense, and that example stuck. Growing up with brothers didn’t hurt either. She laughs when she tells the story of dealing with her older brother, knocking him out cold with a rock—the bullying seemed to ease up quite a bit after that.

Much of Vi’s life was filled with the quiet satisfaction of providing for her family. There was always a big garden. Rows of vegetables stretching under the Missouri sun, promising food for the months ahead. Having learned early from her mother how to can and cook, she took pride in doing both well. As a young girl, she was already known as a good baker, and that only grew over time.

As an adult, she had two seven-jar pressure cookers, storing up food for the winter. Down in the cellar, shelves filled with jars of carefully preserved vegetables stood as proof of long days’ work. But the cellar had its own dangers. Copperheads. Vi recalls cool summer nights on that farm when you had to think twice before stepping out in the dark. One evening, she went down to the cellar to grab a few jars and found a copperhead stretched out across the tops of them. She didn’t scream. She didn’t panic. She just turned around and left. “I wasn’t about to try to kill that snake and break my jars,” she said.

Water came from a cistern. Light came from lamps and lanterns. And entertainment came from a big battery-operated radio that connected them, in its own way, to the wider world. Then one day, Loy came home from town with something new—an icebox. It wasn’t quite the miracle of a modern refrigerator. The ice had to be replaced often, and it took planning to make it work. But to Vi, it was an improvement all the same. Certainly better than lowering food down into the cool darkness of the cistern to keep it from spoiling.

And then, eventually, something even bigger came. Electricity.

After saving and planning, Vi and Loy finally had power brought to their home. The first things they bought were a refrigerator and a television. “Loy,” she said with a smile, “just had to have a TV.” One evening that TV served the whole community. A couple of neighbor girls had the chance to travel to Springfield to sing on television; Vi and Loy’s home filled up. They had the only TV around, and neighbors crowded in to watch, sharing in a moment that felt big and exciting for everyone.

Little by little, life grew easier. They saved up again and had a deep well drilled. Vi’s eyes still light up when she talks about it—how wonderful it was to have that clean, reliable “deep well water.” Not long after, they bought an electric washing machine, and for someone who had spent years scrubbing and wringing clothes by hand, it was nothing short of a blessing.

But even with those conveniences, Vi never forgot the life she had lived before them. Some of her best memories were cooking on that old wood cookstove. She baked and prepared meals that filled both the house and the hearts of those around her. When asked her favorite thing to make, she didn't hesitate. Chocolate cake. Chocolate pies. And with a smile, she added, "I was a good baker, and my husband was a good eater." It's a simple line, but it says everything.

Vi's life wasn't built on convenience. It was built on resilience, resourcefulness, and a deep sense of care—for her home, her family, and the life she was creating day by day. Electricity changed her world. It brought light, ease, and connection in ways she could never have imagined as a young girl.

But the truth is, Vi Bailie had already learned how to shine long before the light ever came on.