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## **Rural Electrification in Saskatchewan During the 1950s**

**Prepared for  
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## **Rural Electrification in Saskatchewan During the 1950s**

### **I. Introduction:**

Wash day on a Saskatchewan farm. A tired mother hauls water in buckets from the yard well, stokes up the kitchen stove, and fills the wash boiler. Hours later, she struggles with the family wash over a steaming wash tub and scrubbing board, or rhythmically pushes and pulls on the handle that turns the wooden sloshing paddle in the tub.

Supper for a harvest crew. Cream to separate. Butter to churn, working the paddle endlessly. As night falls, blanketing the farm in darkness, there are coal oil lamps to clean and fill; wicks to trim.

Baths for the whole family. More water hauled again and again to fill the wash boiler on the stove. Stoking the fire again to "lift the chill" from the air. A portable bathtub on the kitchen floor. Inevitable splashes on the floor to be mopped up afterwards. Tired beyond the point of exhaustion, and so to bed.

Fifty years ago, before the arrival of electricity, life on Saskatchewan farms offered little in the way of convenience, comfort or leisure time. Rural life was characterized by hardship and backbreaking chores. With the inauguration of the Rural Electrification Program by the Saskatchewan Power Corporation in 1949, all this changed. Gone was the isolation of the long, dark night, lit only by the bobbing lantern as it was carried along from chore to endless chore. With the flick of a switch, the central yard light lit up the farmstead; electric lights shone in the farm house, the barn and all other buildings. Radio, and later television, brought the outside world to the farm. Electric washers lifted the burden of hours of washday work on "Blue Monday." Perishable foods could now be kept fresh in electric refrigerators, with months of additional supplies kept secure in the deep freezer. Children were kept amused with electric toy trains and "high fidelity" record players.

In short, rural electrification produced a revolution on Saskatchewan farms — one that, before its arrival, few farm families had ever even dreamed of. Yet, within a few short years the modern amenities that electricity brought to the farms were taken for granted. It was not long before people could scarcely imagine having lived without the advantages of electric power — advantages that quickly became commonplace.

### **2. Background**

While the province of Saskatchewan is often cited for its "firsts," it was last when it came to rural electrification. Economic and geographic obstacles prevented Saskatchewan from hooking up its farms with electricity until the second half of its 100-year history.

## 2.1 Developments in the United States and Other Canadian Provinces

Saskatchewan and the other two prairie provinces were twenty-five years behind Ontario in developing rural electrification. In the early 1920s, the Ontario Legislature passed the Rural Hydro Electric Distribution Act for the construction of rural power lines in that province. By 1953, 85 out of every 100 Ontario farms were electrified. Sparse population and vast distances kept the western provinces years behind their eastern neighbour.

The Great Depression of the 1930s made rural electrification programs in the West impossible. Unlike the United States, which, as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal," passed the Rural Electrification Act on May 11, 1935, Canada's prairie provinces had to wait until economic conditions improved before they could build electrical lines to rural residents.

Manitoba was the first western province to connect farms to power. In 1945, the Manitoba Power Commission began an ambitious program to link up 35,000 farms within seven years. By 1953, the province had exceeded its original goal, with 39,000 of Manitoba's 50,000 farms hooked up to electricity. By 1955 Manitoba had virtually completed its hook-up program. In Alberta, the generation and distribution of power to rural areas was handled by private utilities, the largest of which was the Calgary Power Company. Local, co-operative rural electrification associations were established to take power from the main transmission lines of the private companies. Farmers in Alberta had to pay the full cost of power line installation -- an average of \$1,100 per farm. By the spring of 1953, about 20,000 Alberta farms had electric power.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.2 Early Conditions on Saskatchewan Farms

Prior to 1949, only about one percent of Saskatchewan's farms were supplied with electricity. Most farmers utilized wind-powered systems or small power plants to supply energy to their farmsteads. In its submission to Saskatchewan's 1955 Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life, the community of Beechy stated:

As early as the 1920s, the small 32 volt electrical units were installed in our community for lighting the farm home. Although these units are satisfactory for lighting our homes, they are not the answer to farm electrification. Financially, they are not economical -- 32 volt appliances cost too much and then only a small number of appliances are available. Today people are demanding more labour savers and conveniences if they are to remain on the farm.<sup>2</sup>

Saskatchewan farmers slowly became aware of the importance of electricity in raising their standard of living. The community of Montmartre, in a brief to the 1955 Royal Commission, recognized that the farm economy was becoming more and more dependent on electrification.

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<sup>1</sup>H.S. Fry, "It's Time to Light Up," in *The Country Guide* (September 1953), 9, 86.

<sup>2</sup>Province of Saskatchewan, Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life (hereafter RCARL), Report No. 11, "Farm Electrification" (Regina: Queen's Printer, 1957), 7.

“While in the past electricity was considered a luxury to be enjoyed by city dwellers,” Montmartre stated, “today electricity is as common a necessity in rural life as is water on the farm.”<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, farm women had the most to benefit from farm electrification. Prior to the 1950s, women on Saskatchewan farms carried gallons of water to fill wash boilers on wash days; heated several irons on wood stoves to iron their family’s clothes; and mended that clothing by lantern light. One farm housewife, in her submission to the Royal Commission of 1955, explained in the following words what the lack of electricity meant for Saskatchewan farm women:

Imagine the extra work involved in just one task -- canning! The home-maker needs [to carry into the house] quantities of water ... Then, wood is required for the cook stove so that must be carried and often split to make a hot fire. There is still the actual canning yet to do. On a farm there are usually quantities of vegetables grown for canning. There are extra men for farm work at various times; so quantities of good food are needed. Isolation and distance make it compulsory to have it stored at home. No time to hurry to the nearest store ... What time has the farm woman for gracious living? Or what energy would she have left?<sup>4</sup>

Many farmers, however, were reluctant to request power service because of the high costs. Others lacked knowledge about the variety of ways in which electricity could help them with so many of the tedious farm chores. The generally prosperous position enjoyed by Saskatchewan agriculture during the 1950s finally permitted farmers to experience the benefits of farm electrification.

### **2.3 Early Power Developments in Saskatchewan**

The transmission of power in Saskatchewan was almost wholly confined to a few urban centres until the late 1940s. Prince Albert was the first community in the province to install an electrical power plant in 1890. By 1926, 114 Saskatchewan communities were served with electricity by private individuals, small companies, and municipalities. Major private power companies, including Northern Light and Power, Dominion Electric Power, and Mid-West Utilities Limited, were established in the late 1920s.

On January 18, 1929, the Power Commission Act created the Saskatchewan Power Commission. Even before the first effects of the Depression were felt, the Commission recognized the difficulty of adequately supplying distant small centres and a thinly distributed population. By the end of the Second World War, the Saskatchewan Reconstruction Council noted the obstacles to farm electrification, compared to Manitoba. “The rural settlement in Saskatchewan is more scattered than in Manitoba, and in many areas farms are so large it might be impossible to give

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 6.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 7.

power coverage,” the 1944 report stated. “It has been estimated that in Saskatchewan, with a saturation of 80 percent, there would be an average of about one customer per mile.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, Saskatchewan had limited access to the best source of low-cost power: water.

Prior to the 1950s, the production of power in the province was almost entirely by steam plants. And, while there were large reserves of coal in the Estevan-Bienfait district of southern Saskatchewan, the development of power from this resource had only just begun. The increased demand for power in the 1950s led to the construction of a number of large generating stations throughout the province.<sup>6</sup>

### **3. *The Rural Electrification Act***

At the end of 1948, only 1,500 farms in Saskatchewan had been wired for power by the Saskatchewan Power Commission. Following up on the recommendations of the 1944 report of the Saskatchewan Reconstruction Council, the Power Commission had spent the years 1945 to 1948 consolidating the various utility properties in an effort to create an integrated provincial power system. During that period the province commissioned studies to help formulate plans for the electrification of all rural Saskatchewan. It was not until 1949 that the Government of Saskatchewan passed *The Rural Electrification Act*, converting the Power Commission into a Crown corporation, the Saskatchewan Power Corporation.

The rural electrification studies caused the Government to conclude that it would be wise to use caution in bringing power to Saskatchewan’s farms. The geographic and economic circumstances that had prevented the province from pursuing rural electrification in previous years convinced the Government that too rapid expansion would lead to heavy burdens for the Power Corporation. In addition, as Clinton O. White points out, there did not appear to be a great market potential for power on the province’s grain farms.

In Saskatchewan wheat may be king, but to an electrical utility the straight grain farmer scarcely rated membership even in the lesser nobility. Over large sections of the province farmers concentrated almost exclusively on grain production, the proportion of such operators being the highest in the country. This form of land utilization is not regarded as conducive to large scale consumption of electricity. Areas devoted to cereal production also generally had low farm population densities and the highest proportion of farmers living or wintering in urban centres.

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<sup>5</sup>Government of Saskatchewan, “Report of the Saskatchewan Reconstruction Council” (Regina: August 2, 1944), 150.

<sup>6</sup>The Queen Elizabeth Power Station at Saskatoon (in 1958); a major thermal station using lignite at Boundary Dam near Estevan (in 1960); the Squaw Rapids hydro-electric project near Nipawin (completed in 1963), and the massive South Saskatchewan (Gardiner) Dam (largely complete by 1963). Richards, J.H. and M.V. Morgan, “History and Development of Electric Power Supply in Saskatchewan,” in *Atlas of Saskatchewan* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 1969), 26 .

Further complicating matters was the fact that Saskatchewan farm incomes were relatively low and extremely variable, with certain areas of the province containing higher than average numbers of low income farms.<sup>7</sup>

Two important principles embodied in *The Rural Electrification Act* were: 1) "with certain exceptions, rural electrification is not a major factor in the farm economy of Saskatchewan;" and 2) "the objective should be to develop rural electrification on a self-supporting basis."<sup>8</sup> Subsidization was not an option due to the financial position of the province. In addition, the government was concerned that, with the apparent trend towards rural depopulation, there was a danger of a high rate of disconnections before capital costs could be recouped. Thus, the Government adopted a conservative position in the Act. The initiative for expansion was placed in the hands of the farmers themselves.

## **4. Saskatchewan Power Corporation**

### **4.1 Organization of the Rural Electrification Program**

With the adoption of *The Rural Electrification Act*, the Saskatchewan Power Corporation set to work. Initially, this work involved administrative tasks such as formulating regulations, setting up a Farm Electrification Department, and the building up of crews suitable for line construction.<sup>9</sup> The Corporation then began the work of rural electrification.

The Power Corporation's goal for connecting rural customers in 1949 was modest -- only 1,200 farms. This low number was due to a late start and to a shortage of materials after the war. It was also a reflection of the Corporation's cautious approach. 1949 was considered a "test year" for rural hook-ups. There was a realization that Saskatchewan, with its large wheat farms, was perhaps the most difficult of all the provinces to electrify and that the costs of getting electric power to farms would be tremendous. "Because of the wide separation between farmsteads," the provincial government reported in 1952, "up to a mile of transmission line must be built for each farm, as compared with a third of a mile or less in more densely settled provinces."<sup>10</sup>

Distance was the most important factor in the provision of farm power in Saskatchewan. The scale of the Power Corporation's expansion involved the erection of 50,000 to 60,000 transmission line poles per year. Each year throughout the decade, hundreds of miles of transmission lines would be built to serve the growing number of rural customers. Distance increased the difficulty of achieving equity in the costs of power services in the province's rural

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<sup>7</sup>Clinton O. White, *Power for a Province; A History of Saskatchewan Power*, Canadian Plains Studies No. 5 (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1976), 268.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 268.

<sup>9</sup>Saskatchewan Power Corporation (hereafter SPC), *Annual Report*, 1949, 5.

<sup>10</sup>Government of Saskatchewan, *Progress 1952*, January 1952.

areas. The Saskatchewan program provided power at the same basic cost per kwh in all rural areas, but differences in installation costs were experienced (ranging between \$500 to \$1,000). The Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life reported that there were also large differences between rural and urban areas in installation and other power-related costs.<sup>11</sup>

In his address to the Rural Electrification Conference of 1952, the Dean of Agriculture of the University of Saskatchewan outlined other challenges facing the Saskatchewan Power Corporation in its early years. These challenges included:

difficulties in securing easements — that is rights-of-way for the power line and the further stumbling block encountered when a few farmers in an area otherwise suitable for central power service, refused to have their farms connected to the line and to inadequate use of electrical current after it had been provided. ... Then there was the problem of what to do with private plants when power came along — there are about 16,000 of these plants in Saskatchewan.<sup>12</sup>

## 4.2 Progress and Expansion

*“Our neighbourhood ...was a mass of construction in 1953. While crews set poles and strung cables, electricians crawled through dusty attics and fed cords through walls filled with shavings and straw.”*

Carl A. Krause, Waldheim area.

At the outset of the rural electrification program, there were three different plans for taking power into farming districts: through individuals, power districts or through rural electrical co-operatives. The Corporation soon abandoned its plans for power district and co-operatives, feeling that they were too “indiscriminate.” Instead, in 1951, *The Rural Electrification Act* was amended to facilitate a new policy called “Area Coverage.” Under this policy, blocks of four or five municipalities were identified and mapped, and a distribution system was planned for the whole area. This allowed the Corporation to provide one set cost for every farm within each area.<sup>13</sup>

It soon became apparent that the number of requests for farm power were exceeding the Power Corporation’s projections for a given year. Further changes were made to the rural electrification program in 1952 to allow for efficient expansion. Using factors such as farm density (considered to be the most important), soil index, wheat yields, land assessment values,

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<sup>11</sup>RCARL, “Farm Electrification; A Summary” (Regina: Queen’s Printer, 1958), 3.

<sup>12</sup>Address of Welcome by Dr. V.E. Graham, Dean of Agriculture, University of Saskatchewan, to the Saskatchewan Farm Electrification Conference, Saskatoon, October 21-22, 1952, in University of Saskatchewan Archives (hereafter UA), Directors’/Deans’ Office Collection, Extension Division: #2106, XXX, K.1.i, “Rural Electrification - 1950-1957.”

<sup>13</sup>White, *Power for a Province*, 268-9; 276. Saskatchewan Power Corporation, *Annual Report* (1955), 20.

and cattle population, the Saskatchewan Power Corporation created an index which it used as a guide for future planning. All areas to be served in a particular year were rated as to the feasibility of farm electrification using the index.<sup>14</sup>

The introduction of the Area Coverage policy in 1951 and the rating index in 1952 greatly simplified procedures for the expansion of electrification in rural Saskatchewan by the Power Corporation. This was fortunate, for the rural electrification program greatly intensified over the course of the next four years.

### 4.3 CCF's 1952 election promise

In the 1952 provincial election campaign, the Douglas administration, encouraged by the initial successes of the rural electrification program, promised to increase electrical service from 4,000 to 40,000 farms in four years. Power Corporation officials were surprised by this political development. "The Farm Electrification program as laid out prior to the last election is tremendous almost beyond belief," wrote Charles E. Smith, rural electrification superintendent. "*Forty thousand farms in the next four years* is a goal that will tax our resources to the utmost and calls for the most extreme degree of organization and planning."<sup>15</sup>

Basically, the CCF's election promise meant that 28,000 farms would have to be hooked up to power, an average of 7,000 farms per year -- double the number of farms in the Corporation's annual program for 1951. In an effort to achieve this objective, the Power Corporation initiated a number of promotional programs in the mid-1950s to increase awareness about the benefits of farm electrification (see Section 6). Additional staff were hired to organize rural electrification field days and demonstrations at agricultural fairs throughout the province. And as a financial incentive, starting in 1953 farmers agreeing to take power when the initial sign-up for a project was under way received a fifty dollar discount.<sup>16</sup>

The introduction of aerial surveys in 1953 greatly speeded up rural electrification. "In this type of survey," the Power Corporation explained, "planes fly over proposed areas and chart such things as habitable dwellings, topography and problems which are encountered in construction of lines."<sup>17</sup>

With the addition of 7,800 new farms, 1956 proved to be the peak year for rural electrification in Saskatchewan. By the end of that year the Douglas administration's election promise had been achieved: 40,000 Saskatchewan farms (roughly 47 percent) were being served by high line power. In addition, hundreds of non-farm customers in rural areas were given service, including

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<sup>14</sup>SPC, *Annual Report* (1955), 20. RCARL, Report No. 11, "Farm Electrification" (1957), 35.

<sup>15</sup>Memorandum on Rural Electrification policies by C.E. Smith, 16 July 1952, as quoted in White, *Power for a Province*, 280. Emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup>White, 281.

<sup>17</sup>SPC, *Annual Report* (1955), 20.

schools, churches, and community halls.<sup>18</sup>

In subsequent years, expansion took place at a decreasing tempo. The Power Corporation introduced a three-year program called "Operation Complete Coverage" in 1959 in an attempt to expand service into more isolated areas of the province such as the Meadow Lake area and the extreme southwest portion of the province. During the 1960s, Saskatchewan farms continued to connect to power at a rate of about one thousand to two thousand per year, finally stabilizing at a total of 66,000 connected farms by 1966.<sup>19</sup>

As the Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life predicted, even though new connections became less important in the overall picture, power consumption in Saskatchewan would continue growing at a rapid rate "because...(a) farms are far from reaching saturation levels in terms of appliances and equipment which are heavy consumers of electricity, and (b) farmers will probably replace gasoline powered equipment with electric motors when this equipment is worn out."<sup>20</sup>

## **5. Farmers' Contributions to Rural Electrification**

### **5.1 "Self-Help" Approach**

In keeping with the Power Corporation's principle that the rural electrification program be self-supporting, farmers were expected to cover a significant portion of the capital costs of the rural distribution system, and to pay a minimum charge (\$5.00 per month) for energy consumption. In addition, at the beginning of the program, in an effort to keep actual payments as low as possible, farmers were encouraged to build their own lines under the supervision of Corporation engineers. As White points out, the conservative position of the provincial government was evident in this self-help approach.

If farmers sought power through a cooperative, they assumed all costs. If they chose to be supplied as individuals or members of a power district, their share worked out to approximately sixty percent. They had also to perform much of the organizational work preparatory to establishing power districts and cooperatives. And since applications for service had to be made before the Corporation took any action, initiative for expansion was in their hands.<sup>21</sup>

When Saskatchewan Power Corporation dropped its plans for power districts and co-operatives and introduced Area Coverage, farmers were still expected to assist with the program delivery.

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<sup>18</sup>SPC, *Annual Reports* (1951 to 1959).

<sup>19</sup>White, 285.

<sup>20</sup>RCARL, "Farm Electrification: A Summary," 10.

<sup>21</sup>White, 270.

As the Power Corporation's *Annual Report* for 1955 explains: "They were urged to get together and form local committees to sign up individual farmers, prepare mappings of the area to be served, assist in arranging easement right-of-way for transmission lines, and work in close co-operation with the utility in every phase of farm electrification."<sup>22</sup> The farmers' committees also assisted in the collection of initial contributions of farmers for power line construction costs.<sup>23</sup>

In some areas, farmers built their own power lines, in keeping with the "self-help" approach of the Power Corporation. According to White, however, the task of actual line construction did not prove to be very popular with farmers. "Though quite a lot of work was done in certain districts, such as the Kelvington-Wadena-Rose Valley area," he writes, "the idea did not really catch on."<sup>24</sup> In 1954, for example, while over 6,500 farms were connected, only 200 of these were served by farmer-built lines.<sup>25</sup> White also points out that, "In line with the self-help nature of rural services, customers were required to read their own meters and submit the figures to the Corporation."<sup>26</sup>

## 5.2 Financial Costs to Farmers

The costs of bringing electricity of Saskatchewan farms were shared between the Saskatchewan Power Corporation and the farmers. The Power Corporation provided the materials for all lines along the road allowances--about two thirds of the cost. The farmers paid the labour charges for installation of this material--the remaining one-third, plus the total cost of his "tap-off" from the line on the road allowance up to and including the transformer in the centre of his yard.<sup>27</sup>

With the introduction of the Area Coverage policy in 1951, the line construction costs borne by farmers were shared equally among all farmers in the area selected for electrification. However, two thirds of those wanting power had to make full payment of their share of installation costs. By the mid-1950s, the Power Corporation introduced a more lenient credit policy which allowed sixty percent of the farmers in a particular area to finance their initial capital construction through a loan plan. Under this plan the farmer paid twenty-five percent in cash with the remainder payable over a period of six years at five percent.<sup>28</sup>

In 1955, the community of Churchbridge provided the Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life with a good summary of the costs of rural electrification. "From past experiences of the farmers and the Power Corporation in bringing power to farms we find that the initial outlay for a farmer will be approximately from \$1,400 to \$1,600," Churchbridge reported. Its

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<sup>22</sup>SPC, *Annual Report* (1955), 20.

<sup>23</sup>RCARL, Report 11, 34.

<sup>24</sup>White, 282.

<sup>25</sup>SPC, *Annual Report* (1954), 4.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. 277.

<sup>27</sup>SPC, *Annual Report* (1955), 20.

<sup>28</sup>RCARL, "Farm Electrification; A Summary," 8.

breakdown of these figures was as follows: \$500 to Saskatchewan Power Corporation for bringing power into the yard; \$400 for wiring the farmstead; and \$600 for the appliances and motors "which are necessary in order to make economical use of electricity."<sup>29</sup> The community's representatives felt that these costs were too high for smaller farms.

When rural electrification on a massive scale came to a close at the end of the 1950s, it was calculated that the total cost of the program was \$47,500,000, of which farmers contributed just over \$25 million. The average cost per Saskatchewan farmer had been \$500. "All in all," White writes, "fewer than 900 farmers paid the Corporation over \$600 to obtain electricity."<sup>30</sup>

### **5.3 Father Matthew Michel: "A Power Pioneer"**

Late in 1948, before the passage of Saskatchewan's *Rural Electrification Act*, Father Matthew Michel of St. Peter's Colony was donning overalls to help bring power to farms in the Anaheim district. The successful "self-help" pilot project that he initiated played a key role in the expansion of service by the Saskatchewan Power Corporation. Father Matthew and the farmers of Anaheim showed the Crown corporation that it could be done -- that it was possible to bring high tension power lines to Saskatchewan's farms.

In his travels as a parish priest, Father Matthew grew concerned about the lack of electric power on the farms in his district. At a time when the towns and cities of Saskatchewan took electricity for granted, farmers were still using lanterns to light their way at night. In the summer of 1948, he organized a delegation to meet with officials of the Power Corporation in Regina. "What about the farmers?" he asked the chairman, H.F. Berry. "Will you give us a chance?"<sup>31</sup> Berry, impressed by Father Matthew's offer of local farmers to put up the power poles, authorized Father Matthew and his men to go ahead and build Anaheim a power line.

In a 1962 interview for the National Archives, Father Matthew described what happened next:

*I called a meeting of farmers between St. Gregor and Anaheim, including Anaheim burgesses. Furthermore, I went to each home [55 in total] for private discussions. Personally, I surveyed the whole area, with an assistant, down to the fraction of a foot.*

*Many details, tedious to a novice, had to be noted for accurate estimates of materials needed. They were ordered and the poles arrived from British Columbia within 60 days. This was the opening of our pilot project.*

*Most of the work was done by my own fellows [farmers]. I hired them and hired them, and as I entered their names on my time sheets each day, they were automatically*

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<sup>29</sup>RCARL, Report 11, 8.

<sup>30</sup>White, 284.

<sup>31</sup>Saskatchewan Archives Board: Oral History: R-A 1462, 1463, 1464 [Cassette - Sides 4 and 5], "St. Peter's Abbey - Father Matthew Michel," interviewed August 1978.

*covered by insurance. I was out there in my overalls day after day. Every morning and in the evening I recited my breviary, then attended to parish matters.*

*There was no curling for me that winter. I hired Brockman's snow-clearing outfit, but even he was unable to open some of the heavily drifted roads, and periodically I commandeered farmers' teams and sleighs, ropes and chains to drag our materials onward and outward. Weather did not stop us, though some days progress was hampered somewhat by snow and cold. We worked in 10 to 40 degrees below zero. All these men got was 60 cents an hour ... but our self-help plan paid off.<sup>32</sup>*

By February 8, 1949, there was electric light in Annaheim. Father Matthew and his crew, which consisted of about five Power Commission men and eight local men, then began the work of taking the lines to the farmers. Father Matthew would make an appointment with each farm the day before the crews arrived. "Every farmer whom I'd called — they treated us to a banquet the best of hotels couldn't compare with," he recalled. "It was a relief — we worked so hard."<sup>33</sup>

The success of the pilot project in the Annaheim district led to more line construction projects to connect farms in the Humboldt area, including farms around Muenster, Engelfeld, Leroy, and Naicam. Father Matthew's role in all of these projects was the principal organizer. He helped the local communities to draw up detailed maps; arranged prospective customer sign-ups; appointed local help when needed; acted as the liaison between Power Corporation and the farmers, keeping the farmers informed about corporation policies; saw to it that roads were open; and generally kept "all moving along in harmony."<sup>34</sup>

Sometimes Father Matthew did all the collecting. "One noon I went to St. James, where farmers expected me," he said. "I went from one farm to another and at ten o'clock that evening I returned home, my pockets bulging with \$15,000 in personal cheques, grain cheques, and cash."

The impact of Father Matthew's pioneering activities was expressed in a 1949 article in the *Humboldt Journal*. "Amenities not ordinarily associated with the never-ending labors of the prairie farmer promise fast to become an indispensable aid to mixed farming, a comfort in the home which ought to help stem the tide of young people from wholesome farm life to the city," the local newspaper stated. "Power on the place ought to encourage mixed farming, in recent times so sadly neglected."

In the 1960s, Father Matthew looked back on his rural electrification work with a great deal of satisfaction. He saw the results of his efforts leading toward ever-increasing efficiency and convenience on the many farms in his area. As an expression of their gratitude, the people of Annaheim made donations to the parish treasury to help defray expenses of rewiring the church

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<sup>32</sup>"The Priest and the Power Lines - Feb. 1962; Father Matthew Michel Donned Overalls to Bring Electricity to the Farms", <[www.collections.ic.gc.ca/humboldt/stpeters/frmat03a.htm](http://www.collections.ic.gc.ca/humboldt/stpeters/frmat03a.htm)>.

<sup>33</sup>Interview with Father Matthew, 1978.

<sup>34</sup>"Electric Power Comes to Annaheim," *The Humboldt Journal*, Feb. 24, 1949.

and rectory. "You won't find Annaheim on the map," *The Humblodt Journal* exclaimed in 1949, "but you will find it on the power line, which is worth a great deal more!"<sup>35</sup>

## 6. Education and Promotion of Rural Electrification

*"It must be demonstrated to the farmer that he can benefit from electricity before he will use it."*

Report of Saskatchewan Reconstruction Council, 1944, 151.

The Rural Electrification Program was off to a strong start in the early 1950s, but its success was by no means assured. For many farmers — especially straight grain farmers — many electrical appliances and equipment seemed unnecessary. Given the high cost of bringing power to Saskatchewan farms, it was difficult for many farmers to see the financial benefits that might accrue from the initial outlays of wiring buildings and purchasing household and farm equipment. The Saskatchewan Power Corporation soon realized that it would have to promote the farm electrification program. "Simply making power available to the agricultural community was seen to be insufficient; rural inhabitants had also to be educated in its use," White explains. "Compared with other services, there was a serious lack of appreciation of the value of electricity."<sup>36</sup>

Active encouragement of electrical consumption on Saskatchewan farms by the Power Corporation began in 1950. A corporation bulletin, "Power Talks," was enclosed with every customer account. In addition, every farmer receiving service was given a subscription to the American magazine, *Electricity on the Farm*.<sup>37</sup>

The Power Corporation distributed a Canadian publication more relevant to local conditions, also called *Electricity on the Farm*. This glossy magazine-type booklet, published by the Electrical Industry of Canada, emphasized the role of electric power in making farming more profitable. "Machines have helped to make farming better, easier and more profitable," page one of the booklet reminded farmers. "The disturbing truth is that we, as an agricultural nation, are far behind in our use of electric power...one of the most effective ways known for reducing farm labour and raising net farm income."<sup>38</sup> The booklet further stated:

Every physical task on the farm is part of the cost of production. Every time you, or your hired help, pump and carry water, turn a feed grinder, saw, chop and carry wood for your own fires, fork hay into a loft, clean the gutters of a barn, or do any farm chore, you add to your cost of production. YOU HAVE LESS TIME TO DO MORE PROFITABLE WORK.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>White, 282.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, 282-3.

<sup>38</sup>Electrical Industry of Canada, *Electricity on the Farm*, ca 1950, 1.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid, 4. Emphasis in original.

## 6.1 Adequate Farm Wiring

The first issue addressed by the Power Corporation in its "load promotion" activities was adequate farm wiring. The booklet, *Electricity on the Farm*, outlined the five steps involved in achieving adequate wiring on a farmstead.

Step 1) Electric supply must be carried from the power company's pole to your meter by main feed lines (heavy duty wire), heavy enough to handle all the electricity you will need in the future. Step 2) Power pole is placed in the farmyard so that the distance to each building will be as nearly the same as possible. This does away with long stretches of overhanging wires and is more economical. Step 3) Branch feeder lines from the power pole to each main building must be heavy enough to carry all the electricity you will ever want to use in that building, plus power drawn from it by equipment or lights in nearby sheds. Step 4) Circuits in each main building will be run from the branch feeder lines. There may be one or more circuits depending on the amount of electricity needed for lights and equipment. Step 5) Outlets should be conveniently placed within easy reach so that you can plug in your portable equipment. Lighting outlets and switches must be handy and in the right place.<sup>40</sup>

A Wiring Supervisor was hired by Saskatchewan Power Corporation in 1951 to organize meetings with farm groups to emphasize the importance of adequate wiring installations which would allow full use of the power in future years. A handbook on farm wiring requirements was also prepared.<sup>41</sup>

The following year, a College of Agriculture graduate was added to the staff whose duties were "to study the uses of electricity on the farm and to promote its use by means of field days, short courses and consultation carried on in co-operation with the Agricultural Representatives."<sup>42</sup> A significant development in this respect was a two-week short course in farm electrification at the University of Saskatchewan (see below). The first annual Saskatchewan Farm Electrification Conference, promoted by the Corporation, was held in Saskatoon in the fall of 1952 (see below).

Additional load promotion programs were introduced in 1953. A Saskatchewan Power Corporation display van provided farm and home wiring demonstrations at Class "B" fairs and Farm Electrification Field Days. The Power Corporation sponsored the formation of the Electric Service League of Saskatchewan. In addition, fifty-one rural meetings on farm electrification were held throughout the province, attended by over 2,000 farmers.<sup>43</sup>

The response of the farming community to promotional activities proved encouraging. By 1952,

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<sup>40</sup>Electrical Industry of Canada, 22.

<sup>41</sup>SPC, *Annual Report*, 1951.

<sup>42</sup>SPC, *Annual Report*, 1952.

<sup>43</sup>SPC, *Annual Report*, 1953.

Saskatchewan Power Corporation was noticing “a vastly increased awareness of farm electrification needs and problems.”<sup>44</sup> The adequate wiring campaign produced significant results, and, as well, average per farm consumption of power rose appreciably.<sup>45</sup>

## 6.2 Rural Electrification Short Courses

In March of 1952 the Saskatchewan Power Corporation helped organize a two-week short course in rural electrification through the Extension Division of the University of Saskatchewan. Topics of instruction included: fundamentals of electricity (simple circuits, kilowatt hour, meters, load, voltage and amperage); service interruptions (lightning); adequate wiring of house and farm buildings; fundamentals of lamps and lighting; information on electric motors, water pumps, sewage and plumbing systems; uses of electricity in livestock and poultry raising; electrification of the farm shop; basic refrigeration; welding on the farm; and appliance repairs.<sup>46</sup>

In a memorandum to one of the short course instructors who would be dealing with the need to sell the advantages of electrification to farmers, Charles Smith, Rural Electrification Superintendent for Saskatchewan Power Corporation, stated:

I would imagine here one angle you could very well take would be the fact that some farmers in the province are still not sold on the fact that farm electrification is rapidly becoming a must, if they are going to compete with farmers throughout the continent who are already electrified. The need of the students to become salesmen themselves in putting across this valuable point in their respective home communities, would be one development of this topic.<sup>47</sup>

Forty farmers took the short course in 1952. Only two of them had any experience with electricity; the rest were expecting power hook-up in the near future. At least three days of the two-week course were devoted to wiring, and students were requested to bring a screw driver and pliers. The following year, the short course in farm electrification was offered again. The organizers were only able to accept forty students, turning away over half of those who applied. The course continued to be offered in 1954 and 1955.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>SPC, *Annual Report*, 1952.

<sup>45</sup>White, 284. White notes that by 1965 average consumption exceeded 5,000 kilowatt-hours per farm, and increase from about 1,300 Kilowatt hours per farm in 1952.

<sup>46</sup>Schedule of Instruction - Rural Electrification Short Course, March 3-15, 1952, at C.V.T.S, Saskatoon,” in UA: Directors’/Deans’ Office Collection, Extension Division: #2106, XXX, K.1.i, “Rural Electrification - 1950-1957.”

<sup>47</sup>Memorandum from C.E. Smith, Rural Electrification Superintendent, to D. Dojack, Saskatoon, February 6, 1952, Re: Farm Short Course, in UA: Directors’/Deans’ Office Collection, Extension Division: #2106, XXX, K.1.i, “Rural Electrification - 1950-1957.”

<sup>48</sup>Letter from D.L. Trapp, Agricultural Engineering, U of S, to Dr. L.C. Paul, Extension Specialist, U of S, March 25, 1952; Minutes of the Rural Electrification Short Course Committee

The organizers of the university short course were careful to ensure that “the women’s angle should not be forgotten.”<sup>49</sup> The course was designed to include a section dealing with the electrification of the farm home, including a session called “What Women Expect of Electricity.” Apparently, the farmers were uneasy during this session. An evaluation of the 1954 course noted that “the men seem embarrassed or uncomfortable at first.” Some of them went so far as to request that the session be dropped from the course.<sup>50</sup> One can only speculate on the reasons for the farmers’ discomfiture, but it is somewhat ironic given the fact that rural electrification had its greatest impact in the farm home, greatly improving the quality of life for farm women (see below).

### **6.3 Saskatchewan Farm Electrification Conferences**

In the fall of 1952, the Saskatchewan Power Corporation was instrumental in organizing a conference on farm electrification in the province. The primary concern of the conference organizers was the fact that most farmers were not using electricity to its full potential; they were using it for lighting and small appliances only. They wanted to find out why.

Representatives from a variety of sectors, including provincial government departments (Agriculture, Education, Health and Labor), the university, electrical suppliers and retailers, farm women and farm men, attended the conference. The objective of the Saskatchewan Farm Electrification Conference was as follows: “To search for, discuss and promote tools and methods designed to assist agriculture through the increased efficient and economic use of electricity.”

Panel discussion topics at the first conference included “Meeting the Problems of Education and Promotion;” “Water on the Farm;” “Safe and Adequate Wiring to Assure Successful Farm Electrification;” “Problems of Farm Retailers;” and “Why Aren’t More Farm Women Using More Electrical Equipment? (see below)” The topics at the second Saskatchewan Farm Electrification Conference held in 1954 were: “Electricity in Poultry Production;” “Electric Hog Brooders;” “The Safe Use of Electricity;” “Adequate Wiring and Your Electrification Program;” “What a Farm Woman Should Expect from Electricity;” “Problems with Locating and Maintaining Power Lines;” “Farmers Experience Problems with Electricity;” and “What Household Equipment Should I Buy? (see below).”

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Meeting, December 22, 1952; and Rural Electrification Two Week Course, Summary of appraisal of course, March 13, 1953, in UA: Directors’/Deans’ Office Collection, Extension Division: #2106, XXX, K.1.i, “Rural Electrification - 1950-1957.”

<sup>49</sup>Letter from J.R. Sarsfield, Business Manager of SPC, to Prof. J.G. Rayner, Director of Extension Services, U of S, October 3, 1951, in UA: Directors’/Deans’ Office Collection, Extension Division: #2106, XXX, K.1.i, “Rural Electrification - 1950-1957.”

<sup>50</sup>Report of the Rural Electrification Courses at C.V.T.S., March 1-12 and March 15-16, 1954, in UA; Directors’/Deans’ Office Collection, Extension Division: #2106, XXX, K.1.i, “Rural Electrification - 1950-1957.”

## 6.4 Penny Powers

Farm men were not the only target audience for Saskatchewan Power Corporation's education and promotion programs. Many Saskatchewan residents will remember the "Penny Powers" character created in 1956 by the Power Corporation to help farm women adapt to the new electrical appliances that were arriving on their farmsteads along with the power lines. The first Penny Powers, Lillian McConnell, was on the road five days a week, taking her knowledge to fairs, schools and community halls across rural Saskatchewan. In a recent interview with *The Western Producer*, McConnell claimed that "Penny Powers" was "the best known name in the province" for fifteen years. As the demand for information grew, as many as four "Penny Powers" worked the summer fair circuit. They would demonstrate to rural homemakers how to use the new kitchen gadgets, and show them how to adapt their recipes to the new technology.

Electrical appliances presented a challenge for many farm women who were accustomed to using wood stoves, and who were canning most of their garden produce. "The first thing homemakers wanted was an iron," McConnell recalls. "The second thing was a refrigerator."<sup>51</sup> March 29, 2001.

## 7. Impact on Family Farms

*"For many farmers, including my parents, rural electrification represented the essence of growth and prosperity. A remarkable source of power and convenience, electricity also provided a benefit that our urban cousins had enjoyed for years. No more were we to be their poor country relations."*

Carl A. Krause, Waldheim area.

The benefits of rural electrification for Saskatchewan farms were quickly demonstrated. The savings in labour, especially for women, soon led farm people to view electricity as a necessity rather than as a luxury. "Although most electrified Saskatchewan farms have been connected for a relatively short time," the Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life reported, "interview data reveal clearly that farm people feel electrification has improved their living standards, and, in some cases, their farming efficiency."<sup>52</sup> In addition, rural electrification brought social benefits to farm life in the province. "By reducing the disparity between urban and rural life," *The Western Producer* pointed out, "electricity will add much to the contentment of the farm family and check the drift of its younger members to the towns."

### 7.1 Farming Ease and Efficiency

In the 1940s and 1950s it was generally agreed that mixed farms were more suited to the use of electric power than were grain farms. The special rural electrification issue of *The Western*

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<sup>51</sup>Diane Rogers, "Electrical Cooking: Old Days Remembered," in *The Western Producer*,

<sup>52</sup>RCARL, "Rural Electrification; A Summary," 11.

*Producer* in 1949 stated: "Wheat farm areas such as exist in Saskatchewan where the farms are large, customers few per mile, and where electricity is used usually only for lights and radios...do not make for the advance of rural electrification."<sup>53</sup>

Once Saskatchewan's Rural Electrification Program was well underway, the perception that electricity was not a major factor in increasing operating efficiency on wheat farms seemed to be confirmed. In 1953 H.S. Fry, editor of *The Country Guide*, cited several possible uses of electricity on straight grain farms, including an electric refrigerator, a deep freezer, a seed cleaner, grain elevator, electrically operated shop tools, fertilizer mixers, seed treaters and perhaps irrigation equipment for the garden or special seed plot. Fry conceded, however, that "Broadly speaking, around two-thirds of the electric energy used even on a diversified farm, is required for the home, and most of the remainder is required in connection with livestock and poultry."<sup>54</sup>

The Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life found in the mid-1950s that the impact of rural electrification on Saskatchewan agriculture was minimal. "To date, electric power has been used primarily in the farm home and the farm workshop," the Commission reported. "In the future, it could result in easing the task of caring for and feeding livestock."<sup>55</sup> The Commission concluded that, assuming equitable incomes, "mixed farming areas could be expected to have a higher proportion of farmers who wish to make use of electricity."<sup>56</sup>

On mixed farms, electricity really could be a servant to the farmer. As the community of Goodsoil (a mixed farming area) stated in its brief to the Royal Commission, "anyone knows that doing chores by a smoking lantern is no fun, yet many have to do it because there is no electricity."<sup>57</sup> In addition to lighting, applications of electric power in dairy barns included ventilation, livestock watering systems, milking machines, clippers, sprayers and other aids to cleanliness so important in milk production. In poultry farming, electricity was used for the automatic regulation of drinking water, the lighting of poultry houses in winter to increase egg production, feed crushing, and electric incubators and brooders.

The Royal Commission commended the efforts that were being made to acquaint rural people with the advantages offered by electricity as a source of farm power. It felt, however, that much more education, research and testing of electrical equipment were necessary if the consumption of electric power was to increase in the rural areas of the province. Its report on rural electrification called for the extension of the provisions of the *Farm Implement Act* to cover electrical equipment for farm use. It also recommended that "extension agencies in the province

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<sup>53</sup>"Expanding Network of Rural Lines," in *The Western Producer*, Nov. 10, 1949, 13.

<sup>54</sup>Fry, 87.

<sup>55</sup>Province of Saskatchewan, RCARL, "Mechanization and Farm Costs," Report No. 2 (Regina: Queen's Printer, 1955) 19.

<sup>56</sup>RCARL, "Farm Electrification; A Summary," 4.

<sup>57</sup>RCARL, Report 11, 6.

place greater stress upon education and practical demonstration of proper selection and use of electrical appliances and equipment.”<sup>58</sup>

## 7.2 Modernization of the Farm Home

The Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life estimated that ninety percent of the power consumed on Saskatchewan’s farms in the mid-1950s was used in the farm home. For this reason, the Commission reported, the social effects created by the introduction of electric power on the farm were more important than the economic effects — at least in the early stages of rural electrification.

One of the first things to occur after the power pole was erected on the farmstead was the improving or remodeling of the farm house. “The farm home always receives top priority in wiring,” the Royal Commission stated, “thus making possible more comfortable and convenient living through the introduction of such items as good lights, labour saving machines for cooking and cleaning, record players and television receivers.”<sup>59</sup>

Articles in farm journals and other publications counseled farm residents to plan their home wiring carefully, exclaiming: “Wire once ... not once a year!”<sup>60</sup> Too many farmers had been forced to tear out perfectly good wiring and replace it because they had failed to take future needs into account. Sit down and plan, Rose Ducie advised farm women in *The Western Producer*. “Even a bare light bulb hung from the ceiling and operated by a pull chain seems wonderful,” she wrote. “But that is only the beginning and even if you decide that is enough for the upstairs bedrooms it won’t be long before you wish you had a convenient wall switch from which you can turn on the lights as you enter a room and eliminate groping in the dark for a pull chain.”<sup>61</sup>

Consider amount of lighting needed for the various activities that go on in each room, the appliances to be used, and the number of outlets needed, Ducie continued. For example, consider the entrances to the farm house. “You’ll need lighting fixtures at both the front and rear entrances,” she wrote. “Then you can light up the front steps for your guests and the back for dad when he’s bringing in the milk pails or the egg baskets. It’s handy to be able to turn on a light instead of peering out into the darkness to see who is calling.”

Once the home wiring had been completed, farm people were thrilled to press a button and see a light go on. One farm woman said, “I tried all the switches and then I carried the coal oil lamps

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<sup>58</sup>RCARL, “Farm Electrification; A Summary,” 15.

<sup>59</sup>RCARL, Report 11, 1.

<sup>60</sup>“Make Sure That Circuits Will Carry Enough Load for Future Requirements,” in *The Western Producer*, Rural Electrification Issue (Nov. 10, 1949), 12.

<sup>61</sup>Rose Ducie, “Plan Ahead for the Big Day When You Turn on the Lights,” in *The Western Producer* (November 12, 1953), 3.

down to the basement, singing a triumphant little chant about ‘No more lamp glasses to clean, no more lamps to fill’.” Another expressed her relief over safety concerns: “It’s wonderful to go out for an evening without warning the children to be careful with the lamps, not to carry them around or knock them off the tables.”<sup>62</sup>

### 7.3 Impact on the Lives of Farm Women

With rural electrification, the amenities of good living finally came to Saskatchewan’s farm women. From the time of settlement until well into the 1950s, drudgery had been too much a part of their lives. Because the farm family’s first priority was economic security, labour-saving devices that would alleviate the burden of the farm housewife were slow in coming. As the authors of *A Harvest Yet to Reap* point out, “any extra money was less likely to be spent on household conveniences than on efficient machinery for producing the cash crop.... Long after the farm work had been taken over by horses and machines, many farm homes ran on womanpower.”<sup>63</sup>

H.S. Fry of *The Country Guide* wrote in 1953 that one of the greatest services of rural electrification was to remind people that “farming, more than almost any other business one can think of, is a partnership between the farmer and his wife.” Fry continued:

The lady of the farm house customarily does much more than ‘keep house’ for her family. The garden and poultry are often, if not generally, the responsibility of the farm wife, to say nothing of the dairy, or the fact that meals are more numerous, washings heavier ironing bigger, and cleaning necessary more often. Making the housework easier is one way of achieving an intangible kind of profit from electricity, which could become very real if it prevents sickness, saves doctor and hospital bills and make rest and recreation easier to secure.<sup>64</sup>

Many farmers were initially reluctant to spend money on electrifying their farms, feeling that the labour-saving appliances were luxuries they could not afford. The post-war prosperity of the 1950s allowed them to “splurge” a little, opening the door to an easier life as new washing machines and electric stoves were purchased.

A summary of a panel discussion at the 1952 Saskatchewan Farm Electrification Conference shows that farm women generally agreed with farm men when it came to spending priorities. The panelists — all farm women — for the session “Why Aren’t More Farm Women Using More Electrical Equipment?” felt that it was “essential that farm equipment must come first. By the time this is paid for,” the women stated, “household equipment must be cut to a minimum

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<sup>62</sup>Quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>63</sup>Linda Rasmussen, Lorna Rasmussen, Candace Savage, and Anne Wheeler, *A Harvest Yet to Reap; A History of Prairie Women* (Toronto: The Women’s Press, 1976), 42.

<sup>64</sup>Fry, 87.

...Women must make more use of the devices they have on hand," the panelists felt, "waxing floors with an attachment on the vacuum cleaner, drying hair with vacuum cleaner, etc."<sup>65</sup>

The point of view that farm machinery should come before home improvement was echoed by the Women Directors of the Saskatchewan Farmers Union in their brief to the Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life. "Generally," the Commission reported, "farm women felt that mechanization must come first, as any modernization of the home was only economically feasible on the basis of an efficient production unit."<sup>66</sup>

In 1939 Canadian General Electric published a booklet which outlined the changes that electricity brought to the lives of farm women. "There is no place where [electricity] can do more to lighten labour than in the farm kitchen, the workshop of the home," the company wrote.

It has been estimated that the number of steps taken by a woman in doing the household farm work equals and sometimes exceeds that of the man on the farm. This itself may seem an astonishing statement but it must be remembered that farm work is often done by power equipment — tractors, trucks and cars. There are no tractors in the farm house.<sup>67</sup>

The booklet goes on to extol the virtues of running water, the electric stove, the refrigerator, and most of all, the washing machine. The following excerpts reveal the dramatic contrast between the old and the new ways of doing housework on the farm:

After electric lighting, the most useful improvement and greatest labour saver is a supply of running water. ...[T]o pump and carry a year's water supply required for the whole farm would keep one person working eight hours a day, for a whole month. The job of keeping a water supply available in the farm home largely falls to the farm wife. An electric pump can do all this work for her ... and she will save a month every year for other work, of just to rest from her labours.

Nothing in the field of electric appliances works a more complete change in the home than an electric range. When it is installed, the dust, grease and dirt that coal, gas, oil, or wood burning stoves create, are gone forever. There is no fuel to be carried — nor ashes to be removed. The electric range is safe — an important advantage on the farm. You make your oven as hot as you like. You don't struggle with a stubborn fire. You simply switch on current, and the heat is there.

The latest-type ranges have a thermostat to turn electricity on and off, big storage drawers

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<sup>65</sup>Panel discussion: "Why Aren't More Farm Women Using More Electrical Equipment?" Rural Electrification Conference, October 21, 1952, in UA; Directors'/Deans' Office Collection, Extension Division: #2106, XXX, K.1.i, "Rural Electrification - 1950-1957."

<sup>66</sup>RCARL, "Movement of Farm People," Report No. 7 (Regina: Queen's Printer, 1956), 118.

<sup>67</sup>Canadian General Electric, *Electric Helpers for the Farm Family*, Ontario, 1939, 18.

for cooking utensils — everything spic and span and stainless. The exterior is glistening white enamel which means an end to blacking the stove. There are no unsightly stove pipes; the exterior of the range doesn't become hot — only the places where cooking is going on. There is no dust or soot to make your kitchen walls messy — no black or grimy kettles to scour. Is it any wonder that thousands of women have adopted electric cooking and that not one of them would ever willingly go back to the old-fashioned method?

From the standpoint of actual money saving, there is no question that the electric refrigerator is well at the head of the list. ... It is a household cold storage plant way ahead of the old-fashioned ice-box without the necessity of filling it every day from the ice-house. ... It is entirely automatic, practically silent in its operation; the safety zone between 35 and 50 degrees will be constantly maintained. Bacterial growth in milk and cream are checked. Fresh meat, eggs, and poultry, either raw or cooked, are preserved in good condition for days. Cubes of ice are always available.

...[P]robably the most disliked task of all housework is washing the family clothes. The weekly wash day is a dreaded thing. This is especially true on farms because there are more heavy clothes and they are more soiled than in city homes. Home laundry equipment, electrically operated, is undoubtedly what every farm woman needs. The best proof is that when electricity comes to a farm, an electric washer and iron are among the first purchases.

The work of struggling with the family wash over a steaming wash tub and scrubbing board is a brutal task for any woman — a job fully as hard as anything a man must do on the farm. With an electric washer equipped with the new type wringer, the backache is taken out of Blue Monday. The electric washer cuts down the time to about one-third of that required by hand washing.<sup>68</sup>

At the second annual Saskatchewan Farm Electrification Conference in the fall of 1953, farmers were asked: "What would you miss most if power were taken away from you?" Answers varied from the vacuum cleaner with its "unusual uses — cleaning seed, drill, drying hair, defrost refrigerator, run forge," to the electric hoist for unloading the farm truck. "All members felt there were so many things they would miss that it was very difficult to decide what they would miss most," the conference report stated. However, the "automatic water system [was] decided to be most important single advantage of having power."<sup>69</sup>

At the same conference, a panel of farm women discussed the topic: "What Household Equipment Should I Buy?" The following is the list of items they came up with:

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid, 18-21.

<sup>69</sup>"Second Annual Meeting of the Saskatchewan Farm Electrification Conference, Conference Proceedings, October 20-21, 1953," in UA; Directors'/Deans' Office Collection, Extension Division: #2106, XXX, K.1.i, "Rural Electrification - 1950-1957."

- 👍 Washing machine “an essential”
- 👍 Iron “opinion divided as to steam iron vs standard automatic iron”
- 👍 Tea kettle “very fast and efficient”
- 👍 Refrigerator
- 👍 Deep freeze “need if possibly can afford to buy”
- 👍 Electric range “many farm homes require kitchen stove for heating. House remodeling sometimes done when an old house is wired.”
- 👍 Floor polisher
- 👍 Electric food mixer “high on Christmas list”
- 👍 Automatic washer
- 👍 Dryer “considered very convenient — becoming more important”
- 👍 Electric vs treadle sewing machine — opinion divided
- 👍 Electric fan “one lady uses two fans to distribute heat from annex stove and space heater”
- 👍 Toasters “one complaint — homemade bread won’t fit in most of them
- 👍 Heating pad “considered almost an essential”
- 👍 Clock
- 👍 Roaster oven
- 👍 Deep fryer
- 👍 Automatic coffee maker
- 👍 Dishwasher - “Women were of opinion that too much water needed but wanted reliable information on this point. One woman from floor of meeting said she had a dishwasher and would buy one ahead of automatic laundry equipment.”

#### **7.4 Reduction of Gulf Between Rural and Urban Saskatchewan**

The Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life found that, with the greater interchange between rural and urban people, farm families were adopting urban values. “They are not content with the disparity in material levels of living and the quality of public and commercial services between rural and urban life,” the 1956 report states.<sup>70</sup> One consequence of this growing urban outlook was the movement of farm people to urban centres. A survey conducted by the Royal Commission of eighty families actively farming from town found that their main reasons for moving to town were school problems and health concerns. Twelve percent, however, cited

“No conveniences on farm, no power or water, hard life on the farm” as their main reason for moving to town. Another nine percent gave “Poor farm housing” as their reason.<sup>71</sup>

The report entitled “Movement of Farm People” describes two types of urbanization trends in rural Saskatchewan: “on-farm” and “off-farm.” Off-farm urbanization involved the complete or seasonal movement off the farm. On-farm urbanization “consists of the acquisition of urban

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<sup>70</sup>Province of Saskatchewan, Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life, “Movement of Farm People,” Report No. 7 (Regina: Queen’s Printer, 1956), 1.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid, Table 31, 90.

conveniences and public services for the farmstead,” the report observes. This included the acquisition of electrical equipment and appliances. “The extension of rural electrification has permitted the installation of work-saving machinery as well as other valued conveniences.”<sup>72</sup>

The Commission found “a deep anxiety in farm people” about the permanent movement of young people away from Saskatchewan farms.<sup>73</sup> It was hoped that electricity on the farm would slow the movement of young farm people to the city by bringing to the farm most advantages and comforts that were enjoyed by urban residents. Many publications of the day highlighted rural electrification as a means of keeping young people on the farm. “With running water, water heating and farm lighting, the farm home can be every bit as modern as the city home,” a 1949 article in *The Western Producer* asserted. “With the same installations in the farm community buildings — the rink, curling rink, community hall, churches and schools — can all be modernized so that the ‘night life’ organized by the community can be as attractive as the ‘night life’ offered in the city.”<sup>74</sup>

“Yes! An electrified farm home will go a long way toward keeping your family together,” an electrical industry booklet advised. “[W]e can guess that you or your neighbour has a son who is determined he is going to leave the farm. If it is because he wants modern living and envies city life, the strongest argument you can give him is an electrified home.”<sup>75</sup>

In her presentation to the 1953 conference on farm electrification regarding “What a Farm Woman Should Expect from Electricity,” Mrs. Libke of Zelma did not simply discuss the benefits of running water and electrical appliances. She began by reporting that, since the arrival of electrical power on her farm, home life was more enjoyable, enabling her teenagers to enjoy more satisfactory entertainment at home rather than seeking their entertainment in the neighboring towns.<sup>76</sup>

Clearly, a side effect of rural electrification was to reduce the gap in quality of life between rural and urban life, in many cases creating a life entirely different from that which had been experienced on Saskatchewan farms prior to the arrival of power service.

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid, 31-2.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid, 6.

<sup>74</sup>“Electrification Brings New Life to the Farmer,” in *The Western Producer*, Rural Electrification Issue (Nov. 10, 1949), 11.

<sup>75</sup>Electrical Industry of Canada, 5.

<sup>76</sup>Second Annual Meeting of the Saskatchewan Farm Electrification Conference, Conference Proceedings, October 20, 1953, in UA; Directors’/Deans’ Office Collection, Extension Division: #2106, XXX, K.1.i, “Rural Electrification - 1950-1957.”

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### **Chronology for Rural Electrification in Saskatchewan**

- 1890 - First electrical power plant in province installed at Prince Albert
- 1918 - 63 communities supplied with electricity
- 1926 - 114 communities served with electricity
- 1928 - First major private company established in province: Northern Light and Power. Three others soon followed, including Dominion Electric Power. (All later bought out by Saskatchewan Power Commission in the late 1940s)
- 1929 - Power Commission Act created the Saskatchewan Power Commission
- 1948 - Only 1,500 farm homes wired by SPC
- 1949 - Rural Electrification Act was passed;** SK Power Commission became Saskatchewan Power Corporation
- 1950 - Over 2,000 new farms connected
- 1951 - 3,000 farms connected for a total of 7,500 farm homes served with electricity
- 1952 - Over 4,000 new farms connected for a total of 12,000 farm homes electrified; Two-week short course on farm electrification at University of Saskatchewan  
First annual Farm Electrification Conference held in Saskatoon in October
- 1953 - 5,700 new farms connected; over 400 non-farm customers in farm areas given service (including schools, churches, community halls, and gas stations); Saskatchewan Power Corporation display van used for demonstrations at fairs and farm electrification field days around the province.
- 1954 - Over 6,500 farms connected; over 500 non-farm customers served in farm areas
- 1956 - Peak year for rural electrification in Saskatchewan:** With the addition of 7,800 new farms, 40,000 Saskatchewan farms had electric power
- 1957 - Service provided to 6,591 new farms, for a total of 46,000 farms in the province
- 1958 - 5,191 new farms connected, for more than 50,000 rural power customers
- 1959 - "Operation Complete Coverage" - Service extended to 3,775 farms
- 1960s Saskatchewan farms continued to connect at a rate of one to two thousand per year.