

Where are they now?

Original incorporator edition: Roger F. Johnson



Roger Johnson from his South Dakota co-op days

Compiled by Kathi Risch

As the cooperative approaches its 50-year anniversary in May 2011, Basin Today will occasionally highlight some of the 69 original incorporators who were inspired to form Basin Electric.

When Roger F. Johnson was born on June 8, 1911, millions of American homes were enjoying electric lights, but not his family near Goodwin, SD. Like nine out of 10 rural dwellers, they depended on kerosene lamps and lanterns.

By the time Johnson was old enough to vote, the electric light situation hadn't improved much for most rural people, but forces were at work that ultimately would result in farms and ranches getting electricity.

The Depression that paralyzed the nation in the 1930s was one of these forces. President Franklin D. Roosevelt formed the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) to get people back to work and extend power lines to rural areas.

Little did young Johnson know he would someday help advance rural electrification. Electricity, however, was farthest from Johnson's mind while growing up. He farmed and later went to work for Swift & Co. as a produce buyer at Mountain Lake in southwestern Minnesota.

He entered the Army during World War II, advancing to the rank of staff sergeant during his three-year stint in the Signal Corps. Discharged in 1946, Johnson returned to civilian life in Clear Lake, SD, where his father was operating a service station and an apiary.

Johnson expanded his limited formal education through night school and correspondence courses, studying bookkeeping and accounting. He later served as deputy county auditor.

His rural electric career started at H-D Electric Cooperative at Clear Lake on March 1, 1948, where he started as the assistant bookkeeper and moved up to office manager. Johnson went on to serve as manager of Douglas Electric Cooperative of Armour, SD, from 1955-1962. It was during this time he became an original incorporator of Basin Electric.

In 1962 he was hired to serve as manager of Northern Electric Cooperative Association in Minnesota. Johnson said there was quite a contrast between Douglas Electric and Northern Electric. "Douglas had about 1,000 members and seven employees, and Northern had about 20,000

members and 40 employees," he said. "More sleepless nights and difficult terrain; I left the prairie for trees, ledge rocks and bogs. We also served mining and logging operations."

Leo Wilenius, manager, energy & environmental services, Lake Country Power*, said, "Roger had a lasting impact on people; stories on his decisions and philosophies are still circulated around the office by those who worked with him. He believed you need to 'watch pennies and the dollars will take care of themselves.' This is a doctrine that I still hold as important . . . and one that, perhaps, could be more appreciated."

Wilenius said Johnson and his generation were on the forefront of many of the issues cooperatives continue to deal with today: power cost adjustments, rising rates, securing energy needs, energy conservation, and even fighting for the very existence of the rural electrification program (now RUS).

"Business-like, but approachable; conservative, yet progressive; attributes that served him and Northern Electric Cooperative very well," Wilenius said.

Johnson retired after 14 years at Northern Electric Cooperative in September 1976 and spent the next 10 years in Rapid City, SD. He currently resides in Clear Lake, SD.

Editor's note: A large portion of this profile is excerpted from a June 1976 bicentennial souvenir issue of the Northern Electric (Virginia, MN) Newsletter, "Electricity and People." The article was provided by Leo Wilenius; its author is unknown. The article has been edited and updated.

* Lake Country Power was formed on Jan. 1, 1997, when the memberships of three Minnesota electric cooperatives, Northern Electric Cooperative Association in Virginia, Carlton County Cooperative Power Association in Kettle River, and Dairyland Electric Cooperative in Grand Rapids, voted to consolidate.