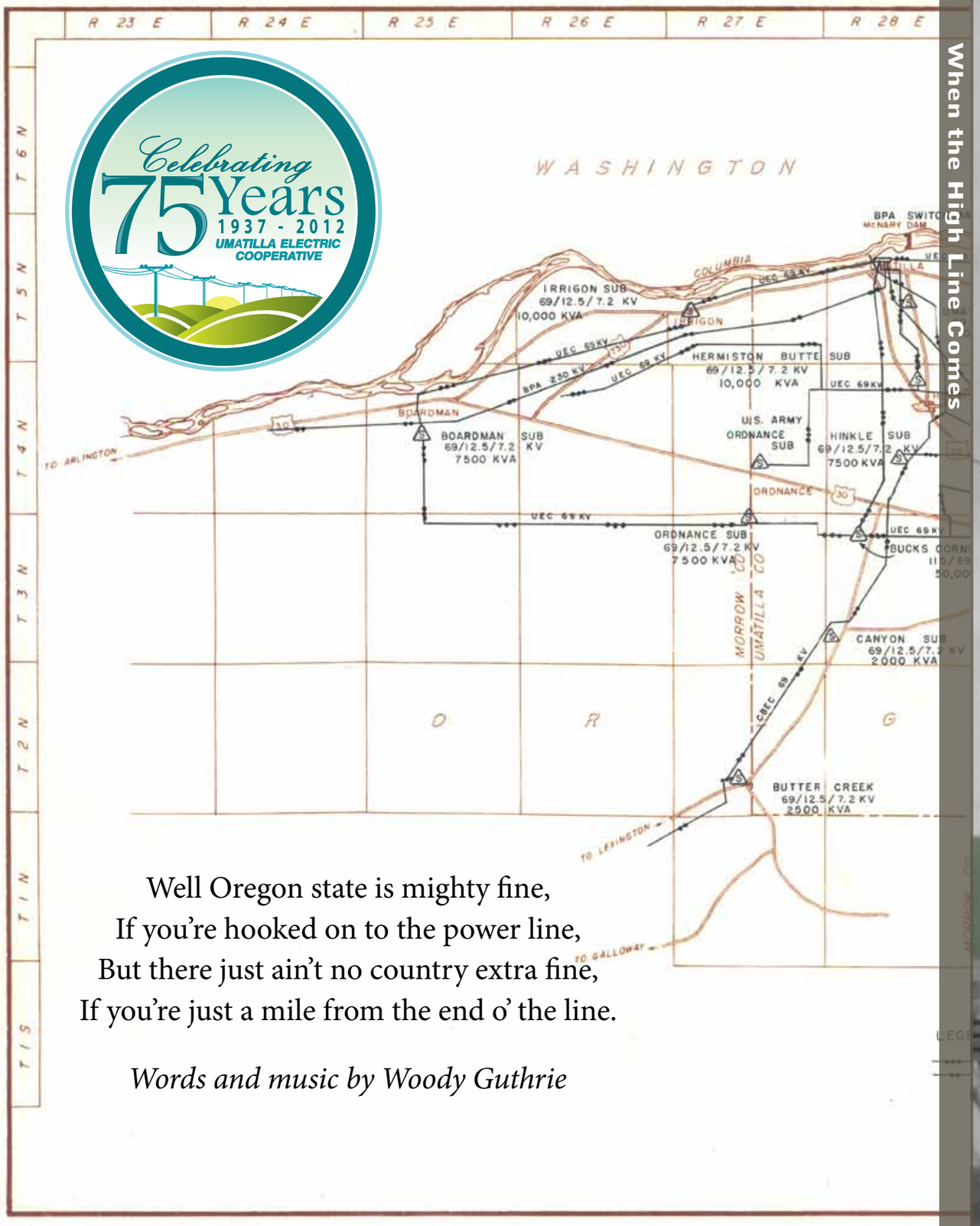


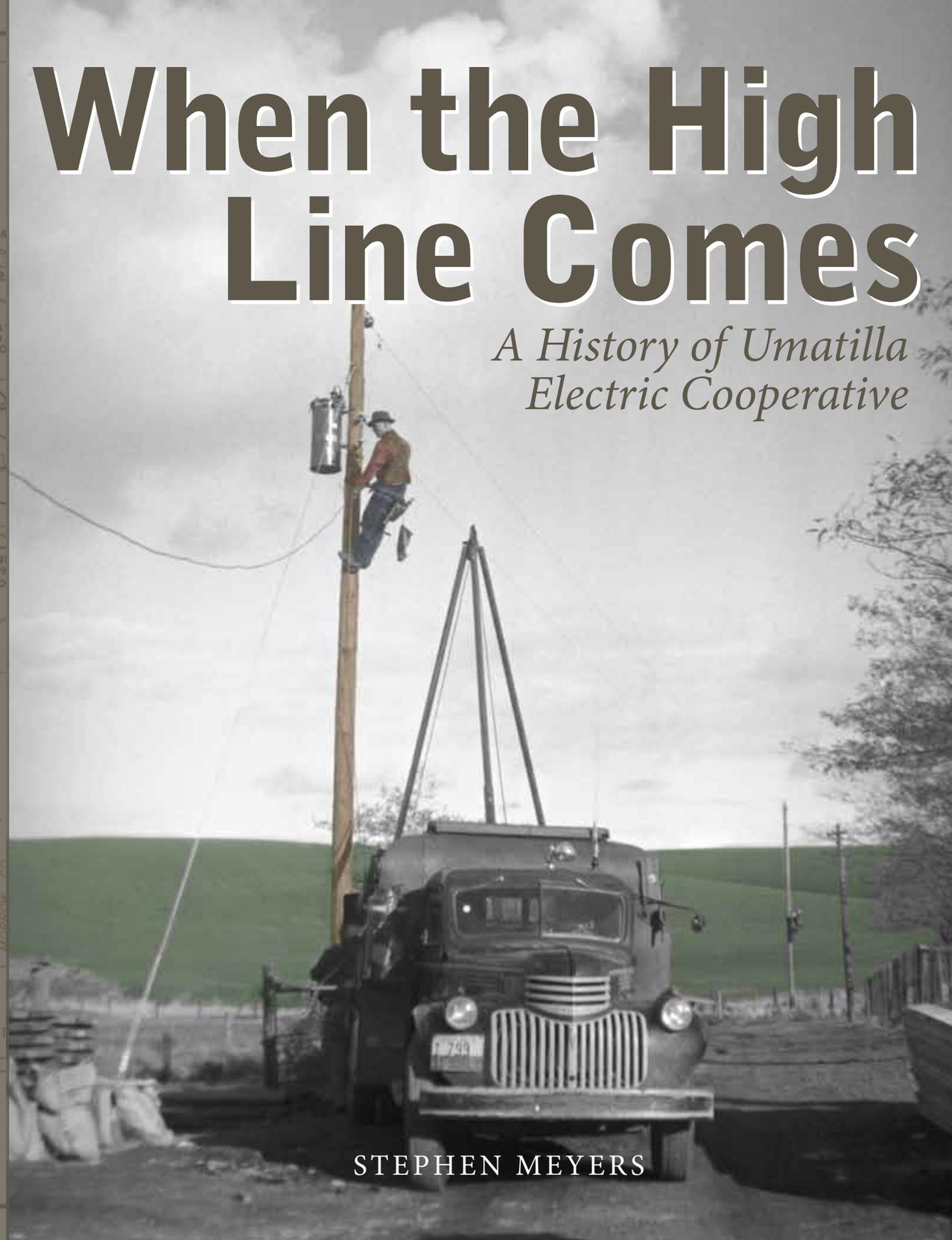
Well Oregon state is mighty fine,
If you're hooked on to the power line,
But there just ain't no country extra fine,
If you're just a mile from the end o' the line.

Words and music by Woody Guthrie

When the High Line Comes

When the High Line Comes

A History of Umatilla Electric Cooperative



STEPHEN MEYERS

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Words and music by Woody Guthrie

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The Dark Ages of Electricity

In September 1880, the steamship *Columbia* arrived in Portland outfitted with Thomas Edison's incandescent lamp. Dynamos from the steamship provided power over wires to a light hanging at a nearby hotel. Thousands watched as the rays lit the neighborhood "to the brightness of day," *The Oregonian* reported. As described by Gene Tollefson in *BPA & The Struggle For Power At Cost*, the contract for the S.S. *Columbia* had been Edison's first commercial order, and the Portland event marked the world's first commercial demonstration of incandescent light. Less than a decade later, in 1889, Portland General Electric began with a generator at Willamette Falls producing power to light street lamps 14 miles upstream in Portland—the first long-distance transmission line in the U.S.

Soon electric utilities, public and private, appeared in towns across the Northwest. "Pendleton first marveled at electric light in 1887," wrote Mildred Allison in a paper archived at the Umatilla County Museum. "There were no varieties of light bulbs…The total output of the electric plant would have been about enough to supply a single modern home." In 1888, two small operations consolidated and became Pendleton Electric Light & Power. Initially, the cost was a flat $5 per month. When electric meters were installed a short time later, the rates rose to 20 cents per kilowatt hour.

In 1910, Pacific Power & Light began supplying energy to Pendleton as well as Astoria, Yakima, Walla Walla and a system near The Dalles. Electricity arrived at Heppner in 1892, Condon in 1905, Ione in 1906 and Arlington in 1914. An entity known as the Umatilla Electric Power Company had filed as a corporation in 1904; it was no relation to the later UEC. Jayne Frink, writing for the Umatilla County Historical Society *Pioneer Trails*, described Hermiston's efforts to obtain electricity in the early 1900s: "It was still the dark ages of electricity in the desert. Every morning the women had to clean the lamp chimneys, fill the lamps with coal oil and trim the candle wicks. Soon H.G. Hurlburt induced two young brothers to install a small electric plant on the Umatilla. The site was on a tract of his land two miles west of town where there was a waterfall. They set up a hydroelectric plant at a cost of $1,600. They had 'juice' in no time from that little dam."

By mid-1910, the Hermiston City Council awarded a franchise to Hermiston Light & Power, owned by B.A. and G.A. Chislom. The fee was set at 15 cents per kilowatt hour. By March 1911, the plant was in operation, fed by the generator on the Umatilla River west of town.

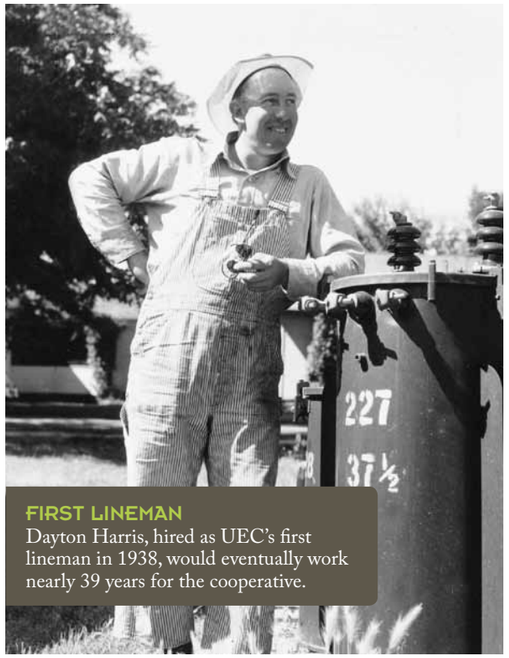
Outside of the towns, some rural electrification was also underway in Umatilla County before the first World War, when electric lines were built to Rieth and towards Helix. Then, in 1921, a line was built from Pendleton to Pilot Rock, and eight years later another reached out toward Mission. But for most farmers, life still started at sunrise and ended at sunset. By 1935, only 10 percent of America's rural population was electrified, compared to 65 percent and higher for many European countries.

Enterprising companies and local improvisers devised alternatives for those still living off the power grid. Built for rural America, the Delco-Light Farm Electric Plant appeared in 1916—a small, gas-powered engine coupled to a generator and batteries. The company also developed lights, appliances and pumps to run off of a 32-volt direct current. Henry Kopacz of Hermiston, who bought one of the plants in 1928, recalled in *Ruralite*, "It was a single-cylinder gas, and it sounded thump, thump, thump like a heartbeat. Generally it ran at chore time and in the early part of the evening, but as the lights went off we could drop down and draw off the batteries."

Quiet and needing no fuel, wind generators were developed to compete with the electric plants, and farmers used them in enterprising ways. Born in 1929, Fred Thompson's earliest memories growing up outside of Stanfield include one of his dad connecting their windmill to a car battery as a way to run the radio. His dad, who once made a tractor out of a Model A truck, "could get anything to going." Said Russ Dorran, who was raised on a Helix wheat ranch, "It wasn't unusual for a rancher to have a little portable electric motor on a cart, and bring it around and hook it up to whatever they might want. Pumping water out of a well, that was a biggie. But the generator wasn't central station power, and it was limited, and if you wanted to do all this stuff you had to start the generator."

In his first inaugural address (1933), FDR had declared that "our greatest task is to put people back to work." The next summer he decided to build Bonneville and Grand Coulee dams in the Northwest to create jobs, but soon saw more potential in the projects. In August 1934, FDR visited Grand Coulee and told a crowd of 25,000: "We are going to see…electricity and power made so cheap that they will become a standard article

LIGHTING EASTERN OREGON
A Pacific Power crew strings line through the Columbia River Gorge to provide power to Eastern Oregon.
Umatilla County Historical Society photo



FIRST LINEMAN
Dayton Harris, hired as UEC's first lineman in 1938, would eventually work nearly 39 years for the cooperative.

of use, not merely for agriculture and manufacturing, but for every home within the reach of an electric transmission line." FDR said much the same on September 28, 1937, at the Bonneville Dam dedication. Upriver from Bonneville, the three-month-old UEC was busy fulfilling its part in that vision.

With the official organization of UEC now complete, Penney and the rest of the board stepped up to do the work. On June 26, they hired J. Edgar Saylor of Echo as project superintendent at a monthly salary of $100. On July 8, they leased an "upstairs corner large room" from the Hermiston Irrigation District for $5 a month, heat and light furnished. The office was in the Reclamation Building on Hurlburt Avenue, which had been built about 1915, its concrete and stucco architecture a blend of Italian Renaissance and Prairie styles. The property had enough open space for UEC to store transformers and other equipment.

The board approved a $5 fee to join UEC. They compiled a list of the co-op's first 28 members. Then, on July 24, they hired the engineering firm of Baar and Cunningham to survey 120 miles of power lines in rural areas surrounding Umatilla, Hermiston, Stanfield, Irrigon and Boardman. Citizens Lyle Tilden, Joe Myer, C.A. Tannehill and A.C. Houghton were hired to survey their communities for 40 cents per hour and 5 cents per mile. Penney arranged community meetings to explain the path ahead at Boardman and Stanfield grange halls, Columbia School House, Hermiston Union Hall and Irrigon School. County maps were consulted to chart the most efficient route lines.

Recalled Penney to *Ruralite,* "After prospective members were talked into the idea of electricity we still had to collect $5 from them to make it official and satisfy our REA rules. That was the difficult part, because $5 was hard to come by. Most jobs paid a dollar a day. Five dollars for the commitment, and sometimes it took a little while for a person to make that commitment. The hardest nut to crack was one fellow, I'm not naming names, who lived up Butter Creek. He wasn't sold on the idea of a cooperative; he refused to sign until all his neighbors did. Then he was more or less forced to."

As the membership approached the minimum needed to satisfy the REA, a $129,000 loan was secured to provide 120 miles of line. In short, the government said it would put its faith in UEC by providing a 100 percent loan of the project's engineering and construction costs.

Easements were secured by E.P. Dodd, who was 68 years old when he began working for Umatilla Electric. With bits of Buffalo Bill and P.T. Barnum in his colorful personality, Elmer Perry Dodd was among the founding fathers of Hermiston. Jayne Frink tells the tale in *Pioneer Trails*: Dodd was born in 1869 in a log cabin in the Boise Valley. His father had arrived earlier to prospect for gold, and he stayed and farmed for 60 years. Nearby stood a cottonwood fort where the women and children slept during the Bannock Indian War of 1878. At age 9, Dodd carried a gun during the war but wasn't allowed to shoot it. He spent a year at Stanford and three at the University of Indiana before he caught the same sniffles as his parents had a generation before—gold fever.

E.P. Dodd, 1952

On his way to the Klondike, however, Dodd stopped in Pendleton and wound up buying the *Pendleton Tribune.* As its publisher, he supported the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's plan to irrigate the Hermiston area. Dodd and family moved to Hermiston in 1906, and the next year he helped form the electric company that proposed a power site on the Umatilla River. He built a home, opened a hardware store and realty office, and began planting a fruit orchard. By 1908 settlers were growing apples, pears, and other crops on irrigated farms, but Dodd's own dreams were dashed when a winter freeze damaged his 33 acres of fruit trees.

Undaunted, Dodd would spend a lifetime promoting public works projects. He supported the construction of McKay Dam to provide stored water for the Stanfield and Westland projects. In 1923, he made his first of a multitude of speeches promoting the building of the Umatilla Rapids (later McNary) dam. He led the Commercial Club as president, served on the Hermiston City Council and presided as Justice of the Peace. He served in the Oregon Legislature and ran in the 1934 primary for governor. In short, Dodd was smart, educated, and in the words of a *Ruralite* profile, "an extremely good talker."

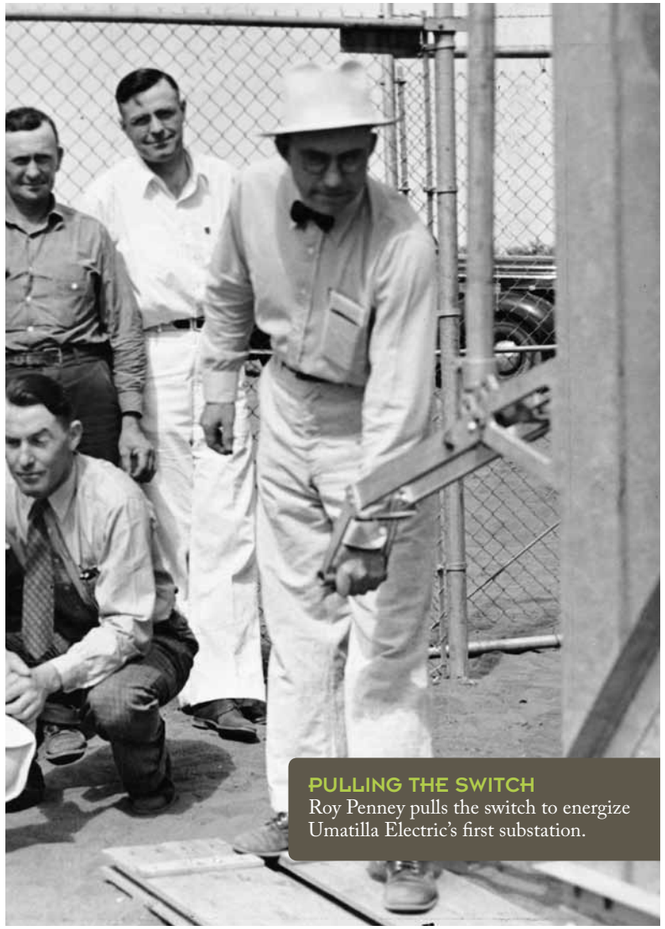
Because UEC didn't have money to buy rights-of-way, Dodd was directed to talk farmers into giving them free so that all would benefit from the lower costs. He was paid $5 per day and 5 cents per mile. After considering a diesel generating plant, the UEC board negotiated a power supply contract with Pacific Power. By October 27, 1937, with 252 paid members, the board could direct its superintendent to spend most of his time seeking new members and collecting from those already signed. On November 4, at 10 a.m., eight sealed bids for construction of the power lines were opened.

Penney remembered, "Each bid was a little different. The one we liked the best was from a Portland outfit, Newport, Kern & Kibbie. They proposed to use copper wire, and it was just enough cheaper that way that it swung us toward their bid." The bid was for $107,625.48, the *Herald* reported.

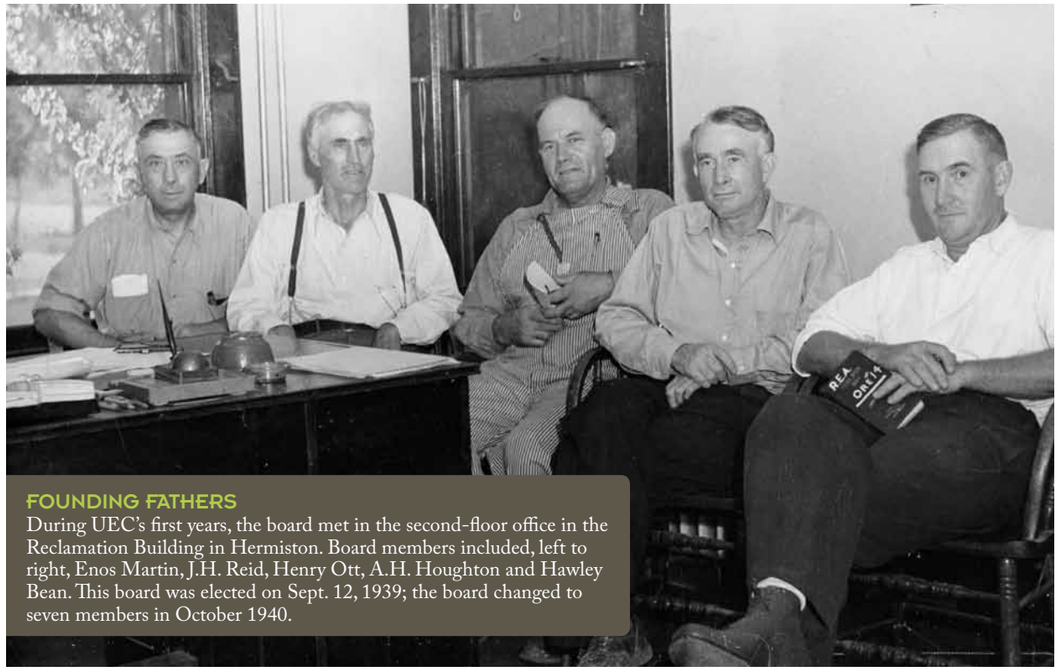
For its headquarters, the contracting firm leased a building west of the Hermiston Creamery from the city, and poles, wire, transformers, meters and other materials began to arrive. On December 16, the *Herald* alerted the community that UEC had received the following telegram: "Construction contract, Oregon 14, approved. You are authorized to notify contractors to begin construction. J.M. Carmody, Administrator REA." Eighty miles of lines had already been staked.

Actual construction began on January 18, 1938. Authors Rick and Kristi Steber, writing in a 1985 *Ruralite*, described the construction phase:

> "Trucks loaded with cedar poles came around and dropped a 300-pound pole at every stake. Beside the pole was placed insulators, nuts and bolts, a transformer, guys and anchors. Next came post-hole diggers, powder monkeys and mechanics. If the digging was easy hand shovels were used, but if it were more difficult dynamite first loosened the rock. The mechanics assembled the hardware and then another group of men arrived to set the pole, using boom trucks to maneuver the poles. Following them came linemen to secure conductors, hang transformers and prepare the line for service.
>
> "The labor in most cases was accomplished with local help. Over three hundred men



PULLING THE SWITCH
Roy Penney pulls the switch to energize Umatilla Electric's first substation.



FOUNDING FATHERS
During UEC's first years, the board met in the second-floor office in the Reclamation Building in Hermiston. Board members included, left to right, Enos Martin, J.H. Reid, Henry Ott, A.H. Houghton and Hawley Bean. This board was elected on Sept. 12, 1939; the board changed to seven members in October 1940.

applied for work; a force of fifty men was maintained with farmers taking turns working as a line progressed through their neighborhood. That way each had a chance at making a few extra dollars and the worker force remained fresh and energetic."

To *Ruralite*, Penney recalled, "Three fellows came down from Seattle. They were from the union – big, burly types. They told me they wanted to unionize our workers. I said, 'You can't. We're just a bunch of farmers in a co-op working for the benefit of all.' They didn't know how to answer that. They hung around a day or two before they gave up and went back to Seattle."

Ralph Saylor recalled that some people refused to allow their trees to be cut back during construction. "But Elmer Dodd was a very diplomatic man. In most situations he was able to resolve it to the people's satisfaction. Only a time or two did we have to go out and around."

Dayton Harris, who graduated from Hermiston in 1934 and had worked for the railroad, recalled to *Ruralite*, "I came into the picture at the time the poles were set and the wires strung. About two months before I figured they were going to have to hire someone to climb poles and attach the wire to the insulators. It's a tiring job, and I knew the boomers were not going to want to stick around to do it, so I borrowed a set of hooks and practiced on a locust tree.

"I bluffed my way into the job with Newport, Kern & Kibbie, told them I was experienced at climbing but never volunteered it was obtained on a locust tree. The first paycheck I drew was $80 and boy did that look good because it was twice as much as I ever earned before. I made thirty-five cents an hour, and if I remember I sold the car I had bought for seventeen bucks and got into something a little more substantial.

"The way it worked was the foreman would drop me off on the line. He would leave my lunch and water jug 30 poles away and I would work there before breaking for lunch. Most days I climbed sixty poles. I was in good shape."

Soon pressed for space, on February 9, 1938, the board leased from the irrigation district an adjoining white building on Hurlburt Avenue "together with sufficient ground around it for pole storage for the sum of $10 per month, the building to be roofed and put in good condition by the irrigation district." At the same meeting, a Boardman delegation asked for electrical service. By spring 1938, more than 50 miles of power lines had been built. On March 23, the board adopted its first Residential and Farm Service rate schedule, a model of simplicity. *(See chart at right)*

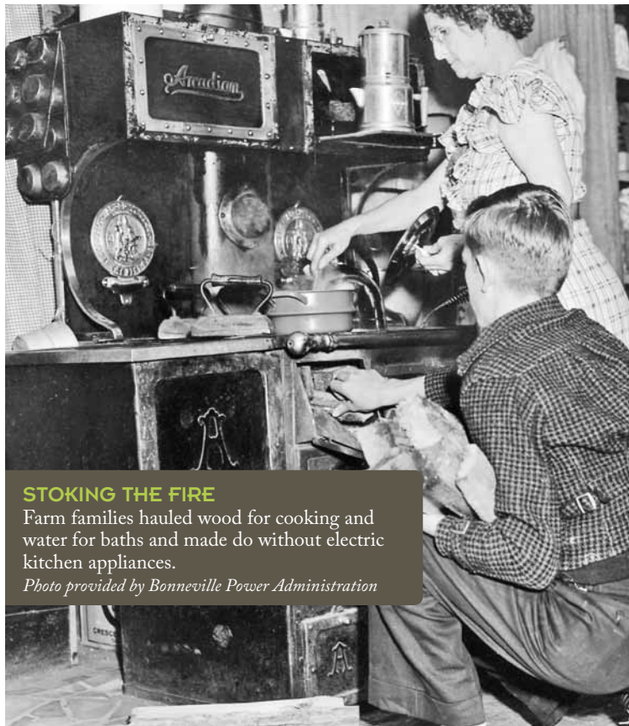
Chapter 2 | The Dark Ages of Electricity

FIRST OFFICE BUILDINGS
UEC's first office buildings included the white building in the foreground and the Reclamation Building in the background, both on Hurlburt Avenue in Hermiston. UEC occupied the site until 1955.

First 12 kWh (or less) per month	1 dollar per month
Next 28 kWh per month	.07 cents per kWh
Next 40 kWh per month	.05 cents per kWh
Next 120 kWh per month	.025 cents per kWh
Over 200 kWh per month	.0175 cents per kWh

On May 5, 1938, the board hired Clarence Kennison as "lineman and manager" for $125 a month. He replaced Edgar Saylor, UEC's project superintendent, who left to build a men's clothing store on Main Street. Careful with every dollar, the board bought a half-ton Chevy pickup for $740 and a Burroughs adding machine for $110. Although people were eager to receive power, Penney and his board decided the new system would not be energized until it was 100 percent complete.

As the lines were built, electricians wired houses and outbuildings on contract through loans from the Electric Home Farm Authority. Owners were also



STOKING THE FIRE
Farm families hauled wood for cooking and water for baths and made do without electric kitchen appliances.
Photo provided by Bonneville Power Administration

UEC FIRST DAY
Dignitaries gather at UEC's first substation north of Hermiston on July 15, 1938; the power was turned on the following day. Standing from left are G.V. Robinson, project engineer; Ross Newport, line contractor; Enos Martin, UEC vice president; Roy Penney, UEC president; C.A. Kennison, UEC manager; Homer Beale, Pacific Power; Henry Anderson, contractor line foreman.
Umatilla County Historical Society photo

WARM EMBRACE
An electric brooder gives baby chicks a toasty start around the start of rural electrification in the U.S., helping farm families with "chicken and egg" money.
Photo provided by BPA/TVA

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who created REA in 1935 and dedicated Bonneville Dam in July 1937, visits the Northwest in 1942. *Photo provided by BPA*

encouraged to wire their own homes, with a required state inspection "before the juice will be turned on," the *Herald* reported.

During the spring of 1938, the newspaper published a series of articles from REA, "When the High Line Comes," explaining how residents could plan and install their wiring. Topics included service entrances and the necessity of using heavy-duty circuits for kitchen stoves, water heaters and large motors.

Unlike buying a tractor or a plow, "electricity doesn't come in a single package," the REA advised. "And there is much more to its proper use than just the flip of a switch." For those interested in thoroughly exploring the conveniences of the electrified lifestyle, five percent loans to buy appliances were made available.

The heat rose to 104, the hottest day of 1938, as

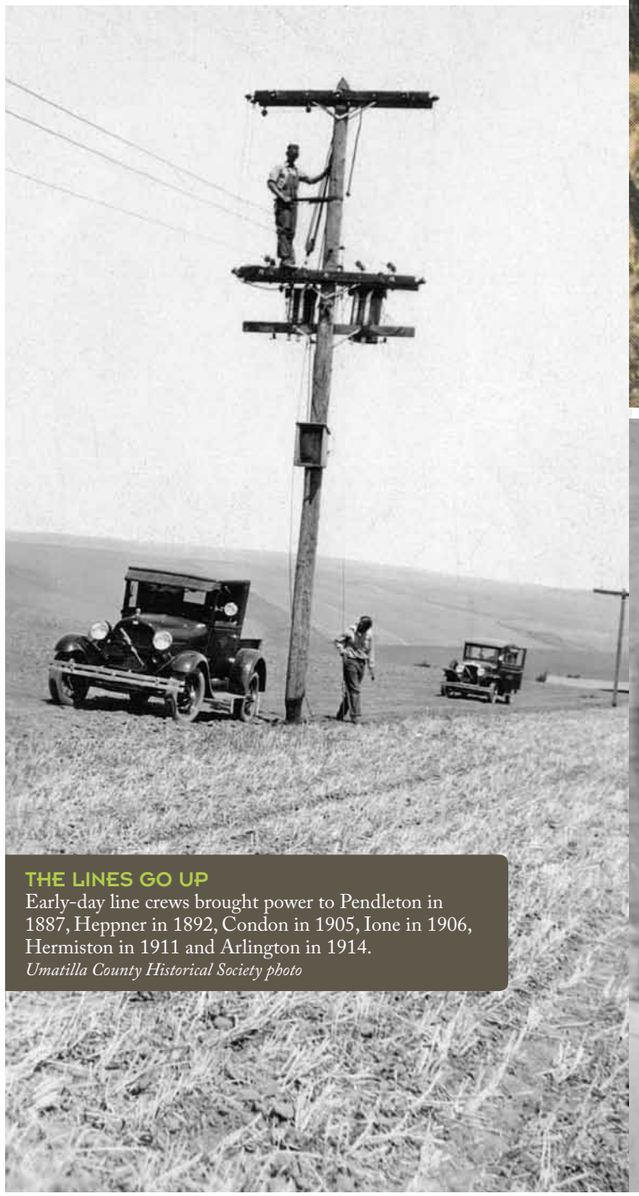
At long last, decades after the cities had received central station power, lights began to flicker throughout the countryside.

dignitaries assembled in Hermiston for a ceremony on Friday, July 15, to energize Umatilla Electric's power system. The ceremony would take place at the cooperative's first substation, built north of Hermiston near the intersection of present-day Punkin Center and Sagebrush roads. Speakers included U.S. Congressman Walter Pierce of La Grande, assistant county agent Jay Pierson, former assistant county agent W.A. Sawyer (who had made the first survey of users), REA representative Richard Dell, and contractor Ross Newport.

Dressed in light clothes for the heat, dapper in a felt hat and a bow tie, Penney was given the honor of pulling the switch to energize the line.

A photograph of the event appeared that afternoon on the *East Oregonian's* front page, next to a headline about a ticker tape parade in New York City honoring Howard Hughes for breaking the speed record for flying around the world. "A bit of electrical history was made this morning at Hermiston when power was turned into the 157 miles of line of the Umatilla Electrical Cooperative," the *East Oregonian* said.

As it turned out, the paper reported later, UEC actually energized its lines at 3 p.m. the following day, July 16. Clearances from Pacific Telegraph & Telephone (it didn't say what for) had been expected on Friday but failed to arrive. But at long last, decades after the surrounding cities had received central station power, lights began to flicker throughout the countryside.



THE LINES GO UP
Early-day line crews brought power to Pendleton in 1887, Heppner in 1892, Condon in 1905, Ione in 1906, Hermiston in 1911 and Arlington in 1914.
Umatilla County Historical Society photo

Chapter 2 | The Dark Ages of Electricity

POWER BRIGADE
Shown celebrating UEC's first day of operation in July 1938 in this *East Oregonian* news article are, front row from left, E.P. Dodd, right-of-way man; J.T. Pierson, assistant county agent; Richard Dell, REA; Congressman Walter Pierce; J.H. Reid, UEC director; Ross Newport, contractor. Back row, lineman-manager Clarence Kennison, UEC directors Enos Martin and Roy Penney, former assistant county agent W.A. Sawyer.

LIGHTENING THE LOAD
Rural electrification greatly improved the time-consuming task of producing and storing milk.
Photo provided by BPA/TVA