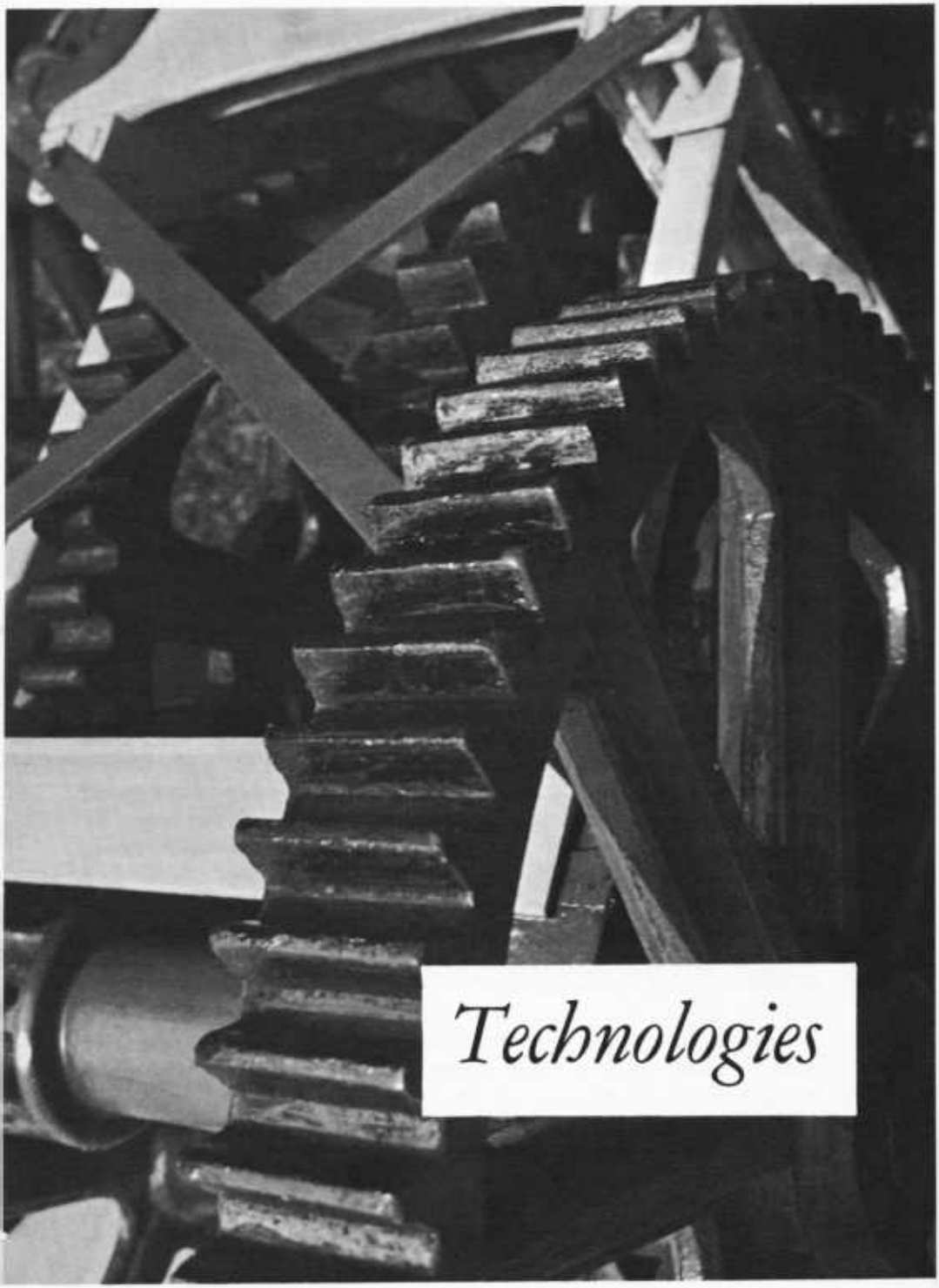

Technologies

Invitation to the 20th Century

THE FARMERS of Williamsburg County in South Carolina received their first invitation to participate in the 20th century on November 24, 1939. That day they were offered their first hope of purchasing electric power, a utility that had been a commonplace in United States towns and cities for several decades. Lacking electricity, rural families had been unable to use the technical innovations of this century and the 19th. They had missed out on the development of the radio. They had had no chance to use Edison's incandescent bulb. Farm women still cooked over wood fires. They washed clothes in black pots and ironed them with flatirons. They pumped and carried water by hand. They had no refrigeration for food. Many people in the South Carolina lowlands will tell you that, aside from events like births and deaths, the coming of rural power was the most important thing that ever happened to them.

Today the power supplier for 15 thousand rural families in Williamsburg and three adjacent counties is the Santee Electric Cooperative, an independent enterprise with headquarters near Kingstree. The people who receive their power over its lines own and control it. Santee's manager is Basil Ward, a South Carolinian who grew up, as one of nine children, on a tobacco farm not far from Kingstree. He was the cooperative's first paid employee when it organized late in 1939. "On our farm," he said, "we milked our cows by lantern light. We tried to keep our milk cool by pouring it into a jug and lowering the jug on a rope into the well. An electric line ran within sight of our house, but the power wasn't for us. It was going into town, but it might as well have been on the moon. Nobody figured we could pay the light bill. Nobody seemed willing to take a chance on us farmers."

Many city people and a new generation of farm youngsters are incredulous when they discover how recently it was that electricity came to rural America. Only about one farm in ten was electrified in 1935. Even by the end of the Second World War, nearly half of our farms and ranches still lacked power. More than 97 percent were electrified in 1962, along with millions of rural schools, churches, commuters' homes, and business firms. The task of pushing powerlines into every corner of the rural United States was accomplished during the past quarter century, in the years since the Rural Electrification Administration was created. REA was established by

Washday on the farm before electrification.

Executive Order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt on May 11, 1935, and it received statutory authority a year later with passage of the Rural Electrification Act. An agency of the Department of Agriculture since 1939, it makes loans to local organizations, like Santee, to finance the distribution, generation, and transmission of electric power to unserved rural persons. REA has approved more than 4 billion dollars in loans for this purpose; more than a billion dollars had been repaid with interest in 1962. Today REA's borrowers include some one thousand cooperatives, public power districts, and other organizations in 46 States and Puerto Rico. They carry power to more than half of all electrified farms in the United States. The rest are served by power companies or municipal systems. Whatever the source of rural power, there is no longer much question but that it was REA, together with local co-op organizers, that gave voice and substance to the demand of rural people for electricity. It was REA that first pronounced the goal of lighting every farmhouse in America, whether in Maine, Oregon, or South Carolina. Under the REA banner, rural electrification became much more than a Federal agency or program; it became a movement of rural people united in the desire to get themselves admitted to this century.

In his small brick office across the lawn from the Williamsburg County Courthouse, County Agent R. A. Jackson recalled how he helped organize the Santee Co-op in 1939: "Before REA, lots of men in these parts were agreeable if they'd stay alive. Once, when we had to ship hogs out of Kingstree for 5 cents, farmers got frightened and low, but when we got as much as 8 cents, they seemed plumb satisfied. There was no hope; people hadn't any spirit. In some ways, life was even harder on the womenfolks. On

washdays, they'd draw water from the branch and carry it uphill to the pot. They'd heat the pot and scrub the clothes around for awhile, and then they'd boil the clothes and scrub some more. Electricity was the first promise of better times. I helped sign up the first members. I'd come down the road, taking 'em as they came, trying to talk them out of a 5-dollar membership fee. First thing that was hard was to get hold of 5 dollars, because 5 dollars looked as big as this tabletop in 1939. Sometimes I'd take 2 dollars cash and a note for the other 3 dollars. Second thing that was hard was getting people to believe that we could get them electricity. After we got our first REA loan in November and started setting poles, things started to pick up. Once we could show these people that power was on its way, they'd dig around and find 5 dollars hid out somewhere."

Guiding the destiny of the new co-op were nine directors, all farmers in the bright-leaf tobacco country, all serving without pay, all amateurs in the electric power business. They scraped together enough money to hire Basil Ward as an easement solicitor in the fall of 1939. Ward had volunteered to help the co-op sign up members a few months earlier.

"My only experience had been as a farmer and as an employee of the old Agricultural Adjustment Administration," Ward said. "I think I was hired mostly because I knew where people lived. When the time came to drive stakes to mark out the routes of the first lines, I went along to talk people into giving us easements across their property. As we moved along, you could feel the excitement begin to grow."

Among the most excited was Mrs. Kizzie Wilson, a schoolteacher in Clarendon County. After school, she trudged up roads to sign up members herself.

"I felt that people's lives were at stake," she said. "Before power came, whenever there was a public affair at the schoolhouse, everybody brought his own lantern to light up the building. There was always a lantern on the front seat of the buggy anyway, so that the driver could hold it over his wheels when a buggy passed coming the other way. We lit up the schoolhouse with them, but it was dangerous. In 1926, at Camden, S.C., a child knocked over a lamp, and it set the Cleveland School on fire. There was a lodge meeting upstairs and only one narrow curved staircase down. People piled up there, smothering and trampling one another. As I recall, at least 100 people lost their lives. In our own Hebron School, we heated our classrooms with potbellied stoves. On winter days, children would sit close to the windows, trying to see their books. There was a pump in the yard, and I used to urge the children to carry their own folding cups so that they wouldn't have to share the common dipper. There was no radio to hear educational programs;

Typical REA-financed construction on the farm of T. L. Burgess in Clarendon County, S.C. The pole is used also by the telephone cooperative.

Santee Electric Cooperative's Board of Directors (left to right): P. C. Stoll, S. C. Cooper, R. S. Burgess, Jr., J. D. Munnerlyn, W. L. Harrington, Board President B. C. Fitch, Manager Basil Ward, G. D. Jones, Amos A. Cribb, W. B. Davis, and F. H. Poston. All are farmers.

A church near Lake City, S.C., receives free yard light from the Santee Electric Cooperative.

Mrs. Kizzie Wilson, teacher of the first grade in Hebron School, remembers a fire in 1926, when a child knocked over a lamp in a schoolhouse.

Cecil Johnson, vocational agriculture teacher, shows boys in Hebron High School how to do electric welding.

no record player to teach music. Some children complained that they got tired of studying by a kerosene lamp, and others didn't even have lamps at home. Some had to read by the chimneyside. To my mind, the coming of electricity began a new kind of life for most of us. I don't know how to say it, but it meant much more than gadgets and appliances. Tenant children used to quit school in the third grade. Now they go through high school, and many finish college. It all happened after Santee's lines came through."

Certainly electricity touched every life in the South Carolina lowlands. Gene Lane, Santee's young adviser on power use, starts out early to introduce you to some of the co-op members. At 8 a.m., Moultrie Bagnal O'Bryan unlocks the door of the Jordan Mercantile Co., his general store in Clarendon County, dodges an old kerosene lamp swinging from the ceiling, and gropes his way to a light bulb hanging over the soda-pop cooler. His is an old-fashioned crossroads store, filled with heavy boots, mule halters, and wood-burning stoves, but electric refrigeration has changed many of his goods. He sells soft drinks now, ice cream, fresh meat. "Before power," he said, "I sold salt meat only—pork and mackerel. I never saw any beef at all." Another storekeeper, W. B. Davis, a member of the Santee board, remembers: "We used to eat pork ribs until we were sick of the sight of them—just to save them from spoiling. For a while I bought ice to cool soda pop. Today my whole electric bill runs about the same as the cost of that ice alone."

As he roars up backroads, Gene Lane gives a few statistics: "Santee began with only 250 miles of line and 800 members. Today it serves 15 thousand, mostly farmers, over 3 thousand miles of pole lines. It began with only Mr. Ward. Now Santee has 65 employees and an annual payroll of more than 250 thousand dollars. We have 22 trucks and automobiles, and we have put more than 4 million dollars' worth of REA loans into our plant. Our rates are competitive. You could say that the folks around here started with less than nothing. Now, considering we've paid more than 2 million dollars in principal and interest to REA, we own 30 percent of our cooperative. More than 1 million dollars have gone back to members in patronage refunds. The Government doesn't own our co-op; we do."

Mr. Lane says that the chief worry when Santee started was whether farmers would use enough power to justify the expense of building lines in areas where there were only four homes to the mile. Many feared that farmers would buy a few light bulbs—and stop there. "They needn't have worried," he added. "By 1960, some 86 percent of our members had electric refrigerators; 81 percent had radios; 84 percent had electric washing machines; average usage was 268 kilowatt-hours a month—and climbing all the time."

Behind those figures is a changing way of life. You find E. I. Lawrence, a former teacher, at home. He resigned a few years ago

An old lamp reminds Moultrie B. O'Bryan of the days before his store had electricity, and he carried no fresh meat or dairy products.

A Santee crew, working while the lines are hot, installs a new cross arm on a pole.

At Santee's headquarters, Mrs. Agnes Wilkins takes payments from co-op members Jessie Gaines and L. O. McCutchen.

Cooking dinner in her own electrified home, Mrs. E. I. Lawrence practices what she preaches to members of Home Demonstration and 4-H Clubs.

to run his father's tobacco farms. Mrs. Lawrence is the Negro Home Demonstration Agent for Williamsburg County. A graduate of South Carolina State College, she spends much of her time working with 300 adult members of 13 Home Demonstration Clubs and with some 650 4-H Club members. "Electricity has changed so many things for us," she says, "that it's hard to say which is most important. Certainly washing machines. Certainly running water. But deep freezers are important, too. I know what families around here used to eat in the winter—dried peas, cornbread, rice, and sweet milk. A little salt pork. Now it's summer year-round for people with freezers. Peaches, greens, beans, even sweetpotatoes, cooked and ready for pies. I've taught women to raise 100 frying chickens at one time, to kill and dress them at one time, and to freeze them. Then they start another flock. There's no comparison between the old diet and the new one." Mrs. Lawrence's major objective for the 1960's is indoor plumbing, running water, and elimination of the privy: "Someday they'll all be switched over." As 1960 began, some 32 percent of Santee's consumers had modern plumbing.

Purchases of wiring, plumbing, and electric appliances on Santee's

lines have been financed almost entirely through REA Section 5 loans. Santee has borrowed about 600 thousand dollars to finance the purchase of home equipment, and it has lent it in turn to several thousand customers, who buy their equipment from local dealers. The credit record of members has been good, on the whole, although the co-op once was forced to accept a live goat in lieu of a cash payment.

There seems to be no end in sight to the amount of power Santee's consumers will buy. Mrs. W. L. Harrington, wife of a Santee board member, shows you through her home, built shortly after the Civil War, and heated today by 23 electric panels. She has 21 electric appliances.

The promise of rural electrification, however, extends far beyond the rural home. You call on Randolph J. Matthews. A veteran of the Second World War with big plans, he moved to Lake Marion in Santee's area in 1945, a year before the powerlines finally pushed through the woods to the lakeshore. "I wanted to build a resort," he declared, "but it wouldn't work without power. I bought a GI surplus generator, but I spent more time cussing it and fooling with it than using it. Now, with electricity, we have 30 units, 15 with electric heat and air conditioning. We have a lighted dock, the whole works. Fifteen years ago, there was nothing here at all. Fifteen years from now, the whole shore may be filled. This is just the beginning."

Near Lake City, S.C., W. A. Nolen switches on his two-way radio and drawls orders to his lumber crew in the pine woods. Behind his office, you can hear the motor start and the sound of the big saw ripping into pine logs. "For years, I used a diesel engine to run my saw," reports this lumber company owner. "When it broke down, I switched to an electric motor. We had to learn to saw all over again, because we couldn't tell how we were doing by the sound of the motor any more. But we learned, and now nobody could pay me to switch back."

Sixty miles away, on a plantation near the ocean at Georgetown, Jack Hazzard takes you on a tour of inspection of his 32 thousand laying hens and 18 thousand pullets. "I run the biggest egg factory in the State," he says. "I've substituted electric power for manpower everyplace I can find. Electricity runs the whole business, and I just keep the books. Power grinds and mixes feed; carries food and water to the hens; cleans, grades, candles, and cools the eggs."

Santee consumers like Hazzard, Nolen, and Matthews already realize that with electricity it is possible today to do anything in the country that can be done in the city. Rural electrification, together with paved roads and expanding communications, has extended the frontiers of the 20th century to every corner of America. *(Hubert W. Kelley)*

A concrete-block plant on Santee's lines is typical of small rural industries that are springing up in the electrified countryside.

A lumber company now has an electric motor.

R. A. Jackson, the County Agent of Williamsburg County, helped found the rural electric cooperative in 1939.