

## INTERVIEW WITH B. LOISELLE

The most significant changes in the lives of rural folks were brought about by the formation of the Rural Electrification Co. which distributed electric power to the county people. In the general Athabasca area over one hundred miles of power line was built by one local contractor, over a period of 11 years.

Imagine if you can, using coal oil lamps, which had to be filled and cleaned every night before using; the strain on the eyes of students doing homework, or parents trying to keep up on current events, if and when a newspaper was available; the danger of preparing meals on a woodburning cookstove; fueling a furnace with wood or coal. The danger of fire by overheated chimneys was always a source of worry. With the advent of electricity, heating and lighting in the rural homes became most pleasurable instead of a worrisome necessity.

When power lines were put in, people purchased automatic washers and dryers. What a pleasure to put the clothes in the machine and wait for them to come out clean instead of slaving over a wash board (a device with a corrugated tin base) on which the soaped articles were rubbed up and down until clean or until the knuckles were bruised and bleeding. Often it was an all-day job to do a complete washing for a big family. Did you ever try to bring a man's long underwear frozen stiff from the clothesline into the house? Just like a wrestling match! Small wonder the country women began to feel liberated!

The pressing of clothing was done with a flat iron heated on the kitchen stove. No never press in those days! It was difficult to get the iron heated at the proper temperature. If too hot, the clothing was scorched; if not hot enough the article would be more wrinkled than previously. What a joy to see an electric iron that sprinkled clothes as you ironed!

Many electric kitchen gadgets made life easier for the country housewife with the availability of power. Less time and effort was needed to prepare meals with the use of electric tea kettles, coffee percolators, frying pans, mixettes, can openers and microwave ovens to say nothing of the electric range.

The impact of rural electrification on the farmer and rancher was astronomical. Picture these folks going out to the barn with lantern in hand, a blizzard in progress or just a -40 degree

temperature outside, to check on baby pigs, a new calf or a sick horse. The ice had to be broken on the watering tanks each morning and the wood heaters re-lit before it was possible to water the animals. Electrification made it possible to put light in the yards, barns and sheds, and heat and water wherever necessary.

Poultry farmers too, enjoyed a better life. Brooder houses were equipped with electric lights and heaters, instead of the former coal or wood-burning stoves and lantern and lamps. So there was much danger of fire and loss of baby chicks due to variation in temperature. Many times the former heating problem would be increased because high winds and cross drafts caused the fire to be extinguished and several hundred chicks would be lost.

At harvest time when the grain was brought from machine to the granary it was a back-breaking job for the farmer or his helper or on some occasions, his wife, to unload the truck box by shovelling the grain. When power was installed, the grain was unloaded by the use of an electric motor. On happy day!

After the end of World War II many changes came about in the farming area. The first combine, a pull-type, was bought and used by a farmer in the South Athabasca area in 1945. The next year the first self-propelled machine was also purchased by a farmer in the same district. Now almost every farmer owns a combine or has his grain combined by a custom worker. Thus the days of threshing machines, hay racks and large crews were finally at an end. However, this mechanization narrowed the scope of social life as well as improving it. Now one man could harvest several hundred acres of crop by himself.

Big machinery, whether for seeding, haying, harvesting or summerfallowing, took the place of horses and small machines, thus eliminating the hiring of a farm helper. One man became almost self-sufficient in "putting in" and "taking off" the harvest.

But the practice of purchasing large expensive machinery has taken its toll on the financial position of many farmers. Many find themselves deeply in debt and some are even losing their farms because they can neither pay their taxes nor make payments on machinery purchased from the machine companies. While taxes and machinery prices rise, the value of farm products goes down.

Centralization of local schools had a definite impact on the life of rural people--some good and some bad. In all local school districts the "Little Red Schoolhouse" was the social centre as well

as the educational centre. The school was used not only as the "Seat of Learning" but also for many social activities, meetings, school picnics, Hallowe'en parties, Christmas concerts, weddings, showers, etc. All these affairs helped to keep the community together, a "togetherness" which in most instances, has been lost since centralization. After centralization all activities took place in the towns to which the pupils were bussed.

But there were many pluses, especially for the young people. By coming in contact with other groups of children and teachers, their outlook was broadened; they were taught to give and take, their educational opportunities were improved and thus they became better prepared for their future.

Because the country schools were eliminated, the pupils were taken by bus to the central schools. This necessitated the gravelling of roads and constant up-keep which had been gravely neglected previously. Much of the snow plowing which is now done and paid for by the county, was at one time, done by local farmers at their own expense. If the municipal roads were graded more than twice during the year, it was considered a real bonus.

Extra-curricular activities are a big part of the life of a child, whether aesthetically or physically inclined. These pleasures were unavailable in the country school, partly due to the age and grade range of the pupils--probably one or two children in each grade and age range from six to sixteen in grades from one to eight inclusive.

For many years, the Athabasca area was serviced by a Municipal Hospital. This building was once a ministerial home and was added on to several times. It was a two storey building, poorly built, and poorly laid out. The doctors and nurses were forced to make many unnecessary trips up and down the stairs during their daily work. But this hospital served its purpose until 1952 when a new one was built.

In the early years, a farmer who wanted a telephone had to join a rural co-operative organization. Each member was supposed to look after his share of the line, i.e. repairs, untangle wires, etc. This was anything but satisfactory as there was always someone too busy to carry his part of the load. Since then, the government took over the system with wiring placed underground. This method is much more satisfactory. Telephones were not only used for business purposes but many a social affair was organized over the phone. Occasionally a bit of gossip was relayed.

Often we hear folks speak of the "good old days". Although folks worked hard, they also had a lot of fun. I, for one, would not want to go back to the "Good Old Days".

(Vi Kowalchuk)