

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 050-002**

**Interviewee: Edward Nolte**

**Interviewer: Merri Ann Hartse**

**Date of Interview: circa November 1979**

**Project: Rural Electrification Oral History Project**

*Note: The interviewee is very difficult to hear due the poor audio quality of this interview.*

Edward Nolte: Franklin Roosevelt in 1936, to my knowledge, [unintelligible] the first—

Merri Ann Hartse: Yeah, that's when the first federal REA [Rural Electrification Act] went through.

EN: —Rural Electric Administration was formed. Then through '37, people on these farms organized themselves, by organizing cooperatives. Pretty much all over the United States. Here in Montana, in '37, to my knowledge, only two were formed. One in Billings on that irrigation project. What's the name of that irrigation project over there?

MAH: Wasn't the Sun Valley, was it?

EN: No. That's my problem, [unintelligible] get away from me. Well, anyways, it was near Billings. And was the first co-op energized in Montana. That was in...early in '37. Ours was energized here in [unintelligible] Electric Co-op was the second. It was energized also in '37. I think it was the 31st of December. [unintelligible] We weren't quite...we hadn't quite completed our wiring, and we were energized on New Year's Day, '38.

MAH: Gee, that soon.

EN: [unintelligible], New Year's Day, '38.

MAH: So each farm did their own wiring? Is that how it—

EN: Each farm did their own wiring. Let's see...doggone it, forgot the minimum. Let's see, the minimum for 40 kilowatts was...I think it was three dollars. Anyway, when we were first wired, oh, everybody wanted to keep their minimum cost down to about three bucks. [laughs] They turned on a few lights and a few small appliances, you know, to keep it under the three dollars. But if they got over the three dollars, oh boy, you [unintelligible]. But it wasn't long, by gosh, when you could see that it was the cheapest that we ever had, and everybody started using a lot of it. From that time on, why, they thought different about it. Our bill for, oh, three or four months, it was way down. We didn't have any appliances. The first appliance we had was an electric...got one of these beaters...what do you call it?

MAH: A mixer?

EN: A mixer, mixer, yeah. That's the first appliance we had. The next appliance... [pauses] Let's see, what was that? Well, it was way early that we got it. Not a freezer, but a—

MAH: An electric range?

EN: No, we didn't get an electric range. Most people were too broke to get everything at once, you know. No, it was a refrigerator. We got a refrigerator. The electric range came quite a lot later. Then later, we got a freezer. You know what they are? Really big. They got that one later.

MAH: How did you use electricity for your farm work and ranch work? Did you use it for irrigating, or—

EN: Not really for irrigating, not then. We pumped a little water for the yard, but outside of that we didn't have the big irrigation systems they have now. They came very much later.

MAH: Was there much trouble with Montana Power trying to come in and take over after the cooperative got started?

EN: Yeah, they didn't like us very well. Now, let's get that straight. You know, they helped us set up.

MAH: They did?

EN: Originally, at first. They helped us set up.

MAH: They were eager to help you?

EN: They were eager to help and did help. Yeah. Oh, they were just real nice about it. Then it wasn't very long, they realized what they'd been doing. [laughs] All at once they changed, and they fought us at every turn. For territory, mostly. But you know, people pretty much went along with us, and it's [unintelligible] how we [unintelligible], gained territory. Then later on, territorial protection. We didn't have any territorial protection at first. They could just take loads away from us any time they saw fit. Later on, we gained territorial protection, I can't tell you the date just immediately, but anyway, we had difficulty getting it through the [Montana] Legislature. They told us...I think it took three sessions before we finally got that through. We got that territorial protection. That hasn't been real long. I've got all that material there.

MAH: Okay, we can look for that.

EN: It's so hard to look up there. You know, how soon do you need all this material?

MAH: Well, within a couple weeks.

EN: [unintelligible]. I was going to say, why couldn't I contact you [unintelligible].

MAH: Sure. I might be working on this next quarter at the beginning of the year.

EN: You know, I might do that. Get something [unintelligible]. Oh, we put together something a little bit more...well, basic, let's put it that way.

I'm just giving you general stuff, see? Maybe that's good enough.

MAH: That's all right for now. Start like that. That gives me a good idea more what you know.

EN: But getting this territorial protection through the Legislature, that was one of the greatest victories that we ever had. The Power Company sure didn't like that very well, but they had to go along.

But as a whole now, the power companies are cooperating pretty well.

MAH: What did they do? Did they try to—

EN: They took [unintelligible]. They just...you know how they change their minds. [unintelligible sentences]. They did it over in Billings especially. They took roads away from us, they took [unintelligible]. They took those roads away from [unintelligible] in Billings. They tried it here in Silver Star [unintelligible]. They never made it. Well, and some of the power company had [unintelligible]. So, anyway.

They were pretty good people, and they knew that they shouldn't do it. And they'd get the order to go ahead and just come along these roads and you know they talked those big boys out of it.

MAH: They would?

EN: A few [unintelligible] and a few others. By the way, when we organized [unintelligible].

MAH: Guy George (?)?

EN: Yeah, Guy George, and [unintelligible].

MAH: Is that George Rainer (?)?

EN: Rainer, yeah, over here. You know, those guys, finally they changed and wanted to go back to the Power Company, and boy, they were [unintelligible].

MAH: Why do you think they wanted to go back?

EN: Just plain orneriness. [laughs] Do you know that had something to do with the Power Company people [unintelligible]. [unintelligible sentences]

You know, the power company people are not all bad either. [laughs] Are you taping that?

MAH: Yeah, but don't worry about that. No, my grandma said that they had trouble getting the lines down to their place for a long time because there wasn't three farms to every mile or something.

EN: Yeah, three farms to the mile. But in [unintelligible] you have half a dozen farms up here, and only one down here [unintelligible]. That's the way we [unintelligible] did it.

MAH: Oh yea, just averaged?

EN: Yeah. [unintelligible] If it hadn't been for that, we couldn't have gotten it. Then I can't think of that employee's name. He had [unintelligible].

MAH: Well, the Montana Power helped the co-op build the lines or—

EN: No, no. They're just giving moral support. They was a meeting down in Waterloo, most people didn't know how to use their appliances. Didn't know how to use them. They had a meeting down there in Waterloo, and the power company was down there and they had a speaker there and he told folks all about how to use their power. It was a co-op. Oh, they were just real good at first, until finally it got to them and [unintelligible], then they changed right now. They opposed us in the Legislature, and they opposed us nationally. We had a lot of big fights. But you know, most of those [unintelligible], pretty much [unintelligible]. They know where their dollar's going to do the most good, and over the long haul the dollar's going to do more good going along to the co-op than going to the power company. The power company, the only reason they're interested is to make money. Only reason we're interested is to serve the people. There's a difference there.

Oh, I had a lot of fun. [laughs]

MAH: So you came to the board in 1942.

EN: 1942. I was on it [unintelligible]. [unintelligible sentence].

[long pause]

For us in the field of.

MAH: Reads "For Outstanding Service in the Field of Rural Electrification. Edward Nolte. 25 Years Service."

EN: That was 35 years, and then I served as [unintelligible] after I got the plaque.

MAH: Oh, you did? You kept going.

So this the Montana Associated Utilities—

EN: Right, now that's an association of electrical co-ops in the state.

MAH: All of them—

EN: All of them, yeah.

MAH: —joined this finally?

EN: Yeah. It was an association of electric co-ops. We're still...Vigilante and the others are still serving on their own, but they more or less work together through this association.

MAH: When was this formed? About when?

EN: Oh—

MAH: Was there trouble getting this formed, or did most of the co-ops follow—

EN: Yeah, there was, and there were only about half a dozen [unintelligible]. Let's see, there are...I don't know how many co-ops in this state—

MAH: I think about 24 or something.

EN: Yeah.

MAH: Twenty-two or twenty-four.

EN: We had trouble getting them together. First, it was only about half a dozen, and finally got up to about [unintelligible], by god, it stayed there and the rest of them wouldn't go along. They were [unintelligible], just plain wouldn't go along. But through the years, one come along, maybe two or three. To my knowledge, now, there's only one. They all belong to the association. To my knowledge there's only one, and I think that's Red Lodge. But I'm not sure. Don't quote me on that.

MAH: How about during the war, World War Two.

EN: [unintelligible].

MAH: Did work slack off some.

EN: We just [unintelligible]. We planned on electrifying that. But during the war time, we couldn't get the materials. We did do a little work on just a few, just a [unintelligible]. But we couldn't go any further. The Power Company, boy, they had all the materials they wanted, even during the war time. They could get anything they wanted, and they thought [unintelligible] so we lost that. That was too bad. That hurt. But we got everything from here between Twin Bridges and Dillon. And during the centennial, into Idaho. Then, of course, down this way and Broadwater County.

MAH: Well, Vigilante is one of the bigger co-ops—

EN: It's one of the bigger co-ops in the state. Some in Meagher County and Gallatin County and Jefferson County, [unintelligible] County. Oh, Broadwater County. Even north of Helena and this side of Helena [unintelligible]. Clancy?

MAH: Yeah, Clancy's over there.

EN: We're not serving in Clancy proper, but there's some surrounding area that we serve.

MAH: I was wondering about who were the people who built the lines? Were they the farmers or—

EN: No, contractors.

MAH: You contract?

EN: All the time. [unintelligible sentences]. No, it was all contract work. And we got along pretty well building it. We always had a real good labor force, and we always got along well with our laborers, real well. Never had a problem. Oh, they come along and want more money once in a while, which you couldn't blame them. Everything was [unintelligible], but everybody wants more money. Including me. [laughs]

Well, ask me another question.

MAH: Well, let me think.

Did you know, ever heard the name Armand Hill (?), Armand J. Hill? I was reading he was appointed extension agent or a specialist. But I think he was terminated in about 1941. He was, I think, the federal administration appointed him. I think he might have worked out of

Bozeman. I was reading, he used to set up schools for some of the co-ops just to help get them started.

EN: Well, that could have been—

MAH: Of course, the Vigilante was—

EN: [unintelligible]

MAH: Maybe not since you were one of the first to get going.

EN: No, no, we never had any contact with him that I know of. We did have extension workers that [unintelligible].

MAH: What did they do exactly?

EN: Oh, mostly they worked with the members, showing them how to handle the power. Mostly that. When I was on the board the big irrigation loads, why, before they knew about them, but they were just beginning to get started when I was on the board. [unintelligible], but I had nothing to do with it.

That's when they really started [unintelligible] power and irrigation loads—sprinkler systems.

MAH: Especially Montana here.

EN: Yeah, especially here. You know, when [unintelligible sentence]. So I did. [unintelligible sentence]. I just wanted to see what they were doing. I visited three or four days. [unintelligible sentence]. Some of the board members had [unintelligible]. They didn't think much of it either. They couldn't pay, and so it was so discouraging.

[unintelligible section]. Well, they just almost took the whole country. Conventional irrigation was almost forgotten, [unintelligible]. Very discouraging, especially [unintelligible] when I was on the board. Just about that time was the time that I retired. [unintelligible sentence].

MAH: I'm sort of curious on how the cooperative rates were compared with Montana Power once they finally got going. Were they about the same?

EN: Originally they were. When we first set up they were lower...no, higher. They had to be. Now the power company in town, they now serve 24 [unintelligible]. That's because they're so [unintelligible] with the...their's have more wires. Just imagine bringing power to...well, even to Silver Star. There aren't very many [unintelligible] in Silver Star. When they bring the power from Twin Bridges and also from Whitehall to serve these few. But down here in Whitehall, you see the [unintelligible] they have. They just put them in one place. [unintelligible] Twin Bridges.



Well, that's clear over to [unintelligible] or to Missoula to see the loads they had in just that small area. They can afford to serve [unintelligible]. Just as good of service for less, if they wanted. But now since the co-ops, since that time now, [unintelligible] since '37...yeah, or '38, power rates are pretty much comparable. Pretty much. Some of our rates are lower, especially in the industrial areas. They're lower. Not the big industrial, but like businesses in town and stores. They're lower than the power company's. Power retail rates are higher. Not much higher. But it's just a little higher because it costs more to get power to us. So I wouldn't say [unintelligible], but I'd say it's fairly comparable.

That's this co-op. Now, of course, there are other co-ops [unintelligible]. Some of them can get lower and some get a little higher.

MAH: Do you have any idea how many arms are served in this co-op? [unintelligible].

EN: I did know—

MAH: Must be quite a few. That was such a big area.

EN: [unintelligible sentence]. But I was going to say, now, I can sure contact you, and I can get [unintelligible]. All I have to do is go up to Billings, or I can get them on the phone.

MAH: That's where headquarters is?

EN: Yeah.

MAH: In Billings?

EN: Yeah. If you give me your phone number [unintelligible].

MAH: Thank you!

EN: Yeah, I can give you [unintelligible]. I don't know what they've been doing since I've been off the board. A lot of stuff that I did when I was on the board that I've sort of forgotten about. But now the [unintelligible] right here. [unintelligible sentence]. Then of course, no power on the farm [unintelligible].

MAH: I imagine almost all the farmers were eager to get—

EN: Oh, yeah. [unintelligible sentence]. You know, they had to sign up. [unintelligible sentence].

MAH: But you were going to use—

EN: [unintelligible sentence]. But we had to get something from [unintelligible], if you're going to use that power and water, you have to pay your bill. You know it's surprising, some of those people wouldn't sign up.

MAH: What were they afraid of, I wonder?

EN: They were afraid of losing their place. You see, they had to sign up for their power, and [unintelligible] their place or something went wrong, they'd lose their ranch. Regular [unintelligible], some of them. Some [unintelligible], didn't want to go along. Didn't like the co-op. The co-ops are more or less, they're members, [unintelligible] Communists, you know.

We had that to fight to. That was really pretty tough. We had [unintelligible].

MAH: Yeah, they just associated cooperative with Communists.

EN: We had a lot of trouble with [unintelligible]. But that's all over now. You don't hear about that no more. I was one of the better Communists [laughs] than some of the other board members. We didn't like it very well, because we knew we weren't. Everybody knew we weren't, but somebody had to give us that name, you know?

MAH: Had to see how it worked before they changed their opinion.

EN: Yeah. [laughs]

MAH: Now, were most of the board members farmers, or were they all—

EN: Most of them, yes. When I was on the board, all of them were. But on some boards [unintelligible].

[long pause]

Oh, I made a lot of contacts when I was on the board. So did the others. We met so many people that if we hadn't had [unintelligible], we would never have known about it. People from all over the United States. Even the president of the United States. [unintelligible sentence].

MAH: So you would go to—

EN: Meetings.

MAH: National?

EN: Yeah, we would go to [unintelligible]. I went to [unintelligible], well, three or four times. [unintelligible sentence].

MAH: When did the co-op start having a lot of contact with each other? Was it right away?

EN: Immediately [unintelligible]. [unintelligible sentence] that made all these co-ops.  
[unintelligible sentence]. Who was it?

MAH: Franklin Roosevelt.

EN: Yeah, Franklin Roosevelt. He saw the problem and made a proclamation.

[unintelligible section]

MAH: Tried a lot of dirty things.

EN: [unintelligible]

MAH: So the electrification was really successful.

EN: Very, very successful. It made living on farms...sometimes [unintelligible]. I don't say that's necessarily true [unintelligible], but nevertheless, it [unintelligible].

[End of Interview]