

Along the Line



Published monthly by **Baker Electric Cooperative, Inc.**

Cando, N. D.

Palmer Stadum— a man with a dream

by Lisa Swanson Faleide

What instills a dream in a man? What drive causes him to pursue it against great odds? What adrenaline keeps a man plodding after his goal when others have laughed, shaken their heads, clucked their tongues?

Palmer Stadum was a man with a dream. He believed in and pursued the idea of rural electrification at a time when farmers and everyone else in the country were mired in the middle of the Great Depression. And he succeeded. He has received the entire credit, in many quarters, for being the first man to bring electricity to rural North Dakota, has been called the "Father of Rural Electrification" in North Dakota.

Many of us have no memory of life without electricity. It is, and always has been, present in our lives. We take it as a given, something that will always be there at the touch of a button or the flick of a switch. And for those who do remember life without electricity, it is a dim memory. Most cannot now imagine how they got along without it. With electricity so taken for granted in modern-day America, it is hard to remember or imagine what it was like when the lights first went on, difficult to imagine the anticipation, excitement and, perhaps, skepticism those witnessing the miracle of electricity for the first time might have experienced. But Palmer remembers. He remembers well those early, uncertain days. He remembers long hours and no pay. He remembers the disappointment of the drawbacks and the euphoria of small triumphs. And yet, he remains modest about his accomplishment, and claims "anybody could have done it if they'd really tried." But could they have?

Palmer Stadum grew up near Baker, a small town in central North Dakota. His parents were farmers. At a very early age, Palmer showed an interest in electrical things. He built his first radio when he was in eighth grade and started fixing radios for others while in high school. Later, he and some friends, Gaylord Landis and Einar Solberg, started the Baker Technical Club. "We used to be experimenters," Palmer recalls. "I think we started (the club) about 1930. We rented the old bank building in Baker. We were going to invent things. We never did invent anything that sold. We did sell some blueprints once, enough to pay for an ad. I think we got 35 cents apiece." The Baker Technical Club often had visitors—Lloyd Stadig, Russell Marlenee, Harold Blegen, Albert Johnson. Many nights they'd sit and discuss the problems and ideas. They would all dream together.



Signe and Palmer Stadum in their home in Minot.

Soon the idea of rural electrification caught their fancy, particularly for Palmer and Gaylord Landis. At first, Gaylord and Palmer thought of starting their own power company. They made a trip to Devils Lake to check into buying a steam generating plant from the Fairmont Creamery, but it cost \$1,100, money nobody had at that time. The generator was small, only 60 kilowatts. "That would about take care of a good sized farm now," Palmer comments.

In the fall of 1935, Palmer saw an ad in *Grit* newspaper giving a name and address to contact for anyone interested in rural electrification. Gaylord wrote a letter expressing interest and received a reply from the Rural Electrification Administration (REA). The REA said, in a letter dated Sept. 6, 1935, "We are ready and willing to loan up to 100 percent of the cost of the construction of new line extensions to a responsible local body which will undertake to construct these lines." The letter went on further to suggest contacting all possible persons interested in being power consumers and to send a representative to the nearest power company to see to what extent it would cooperate with service and rates.

Palmer was soon doing a great deal of traveling to hold informational meetings and find prospective customers. The work wasn't easy. "You'd call a meeting," Palmer says.

(Continued on next page)