

Stadum, mechanical & electrical genius, was father of Baker Elec.

With the death of Palmer Stadum, 89, on Jan. 19, North Dakota lost a true pioneer. Stadum, a native of the Baker area was actually the "father" of Baker Electric, North Dakota's first rural electric cooperative. He could easily be described as a mechanical & electrical genius. His later years he lived in Minot.

The following article appeared in The Minot Daily News in 1978. It was passed on to the Farmers Press by Phil Eberle of Rugby, formerly of Baker, who was a friend of Stadum.

BY LEONARD LUND

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The Minot Daily News

Palmer Stadum, 519-11th Ave. SE, has a strong claim to the title of being the originator of rural electrification in North Dakota.

Stadum—now retired as an electrician from Main Electric in Minot—was the inspiration behind the organization of the Baker Electric Cooperative in his home town of Baker 40 years ago in Benson County.

Relocated from Baker to Cando in 1942, Baker Electric, the oldest electric cooperative in the state, on Thanksgiving Day marked the 40th anniversary of providing service to its first customer, the late Ralph Pierson.

Pierson, who died Oct. 13 in Minot, lived 3½ miles south of York. His farm was the first in North Dakota to receive rural electric power.

Olaf Pierson, his father, was one of the original homesteaders in Beaver Township & before his death had developed one of the largest farms in Benson County. Stadum was a pallbearer for Ralph Pierson's funeral.

From July 7, 1937, until 1953, except for taking a leave of absence during World War II for Navy service, Stadum served as the first manager for Baker Electric.

He watched the beginning of rural electrification in North Dakota which received its impetus from the creation of REA May 11, 1935, by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who signed Executive Order 7037, less than 2 pages long.

In the order REA was granted powers "to initiate, formulate, administer & superintend a program of approved projects with respect to the generation, transmission & distribution of energy in rural areas." Morris Cooke was appointed first REA administrator May 23 of that year.

Stadum, however, was unaware of those significant events in

Washington at that time.

Rearred on a farm 5½ miles southwest of Baker, Stadum began repairing & building radios at home when he was in the 8th grade.

He had learned about radios from Harold Sheets, former principal at Baker High School, now living in Grand Forks.

After graduating from Baker High School in 1928, Stadum farmed with his father, John Stadum, for a few years. He later turned the farm over to a brother, Arthur, & moved into Baker where he started a shop for the repair of radios in a former brick bank building.

With Gaylord Landis, now deceased, & Einer Solberg, who still farms east of Baker, Stadum purchased tools.

Their workshop became a gathering place for young men with an interest in radio, electricity & mechanics. Landis was the son of Charles Landis, who had farmed & was a blacksmith in town.

Others who joined them were Harold Blegen, Russel Marlenee & Lloyd Stadig, a neighbor, who died 1½ years ago. Lloyd's widow, Doris Stadig, now living in Bismarck, has been doing research for a book, *Acorn to Oak*, on the growth of rural electrification in North Dakota for publication this winter.

A logical place to begin the story of Stadum's involvement in the early REA movement is at the time when Stadum & his friends worked for the revival of Baker Day, for which they conceived a number of unusual parade entries.

Blegen designed Leaping Lena, a car hinged in the middle so that when the driver stepped on the gas it would rear up in the air.

Others in the group were even more ingenious. Starting with a child's wagon, they came up with a radio-controlled car.

Marlenee made the body, Stadig & Landis the mechanical parts & Stadum the electronic brain.

Crowds lined the streets to watch the marvel but Stadum, who lacked a license, was afraid to use enough power for broadcasting. But later in the day, with not as many around, Stadum demonstrated how he could make the car go forward, turn, reverse & stop without a driver.

Intrigued by the versatility of electricity, Landis & Stadum began promoting rural power lines. Stadum wanted to bring central electric service to Baker &

surrounding farms back in 1934. His farm home had been equipped with a 32-volt electric plant.

They checked with a Devils Lake creamery, which had a 60-kilowatt steam generating plant for sale for \$1,100. Realizing there was no chance of raising that amount of money, they temporarily shelved the idea.

Pooling their equipment & work, Landis & Stadum joined Solberg, Stadum's radio shop associate, to form what they called the Baker Technical Club.

Stadum ran an ad in a mechanical magazine & sold blueprints for a model steam engine for 35 cents, but the response was not enough to pay for the advertising. He & Landis both made tiny models of motors which operated on compressed air & placed them in the window of their shop.

Landis also drew plans for a meeting hall & supervised its construction with labor provided under the Works Progress Administration program.

In 1935 Stadum answered an advertisement in the Grit newspaper which provided a name & Washington, D.C., address where persons could write for information on rural electrification.

Landis wrote Sept. 9 & one week later he received a reply from N.L. Marfield, chief correspondent for REA, which had its headquarters in a house which had been converted to an office at 2000 Massachusetts Ave.

Marfield advised Landis that REA is "ready & willing to loan up to 100% of the cost of construction of new line extensions to a responsible local body which will undertake to construct these lines."

He suggested that Landis get in touch with all possible persons in the district who would be prospective consumers.

For the next 1½ years Stadum was on the road in a car borrowed from his sister, Ida, promoting the idea of power for farms & rural areas. His expenses were paid with money he earned fixing radios.

George A. Lewis, REA representative from Washington, spoke to Farmers Union members April 19, 1936, at Baker & on April 29 to a meeting of 200 persons. William Sosalla, then school principal at Baker, served as the presiding officer.

"Intense interest was shown," Lewis said. "In fact, I had never before had the pleasure of appearing before an audience that was so happy for information about the

program & the use of appliances, as this group."

Sosalla provided transportation for Stadum when he visited Otter Tail Power Co. offices in Devils Lake, Grand Forks & Fergus Falls on possible service & dates.

Otter Tail officials advised Stadum that a survey of farmers along their lines, made after the government had announced that loans would be made at low interest for rural electrification, showed farmers were not interested because they could not afford the power.

Stadum & his supporters were not subdued.

Cooperative Electric Service Co. of Baker, a name chosen on the spur of the moment, on June 1 was allotted \$96,000 from REA, including \$36,000 for a diesel generating plant & \$60,000 for line construction.

When a name was needed for incorporation, Stadum said: "It began in Baker so let's call it Baker Electric Cooperative."

When studies showed that buying power wholesale from Otter Tail would be cheaper & more practical, the original \$96,000 allotment was rescinded & another made for \$60,000 to cover the cost of lines.

Three men agreed to join Stadum & Sosalla as incorporators & directors for the cooperative. They were C.O. Lunde of Harlow, T.C. Golberg of Fillmore & D.D. Johnson of Esmond. Officers elected May 15, 1937, were Stadum, president; Lunde, vice president; & Sosalla, secretary-treasurer.

They first needed an engineer to design the line. Stadum went to Maddock which had rebuilt its distribution system with Mike Hyland, young engineer from Fargo, in charge of the work.

Stadum rode with Elmer Tuft of Harlow when he hauled livestock to Fargo & contacted Hyland at his office in his home.

"I have \$60,000 to build a high line. Are you interested?" Stadum asked Hyland. He was hired subject to REA approval.

Maps were prepared with the names of all the farmers along the Soo Line branch from Harlow to Baker, Fillmore, Silva, Balta & Orrin. Orrin, however, was subsequently deleted from the original plan.

Stadum first contacted James Little, an attorney at Minnewaukan, regarding legal matters for the cooperative & he later hired Henry B. Senn & A.R. Jongewaard of Rugby to handle the legal work.

Donovan Construction Co. of St. Paul built the first line from Harlow to Balta & constructed a substation at York which was connected to the Otter Tail line at York.

Power was purchased for 2.08 cents a kilowatt from Otter Tail & by the end of 1937 Baker Electric, established in the bank building which Stadum had purchased for a shop, had 112 customers, including 62 residences, 12 farms & 38 commercial, along 40 miles of line.

Stadum recalls how the Ralph Pierson children had turned on all the lights when rural power came into their home on the day before Thanksgiving.

"It was an exciting time for many of the farmers," recalls Stadum. "We often worked half the night to hook up people."

Pierson had one advantage in that he was the first farmer living along the line from York.

From those modest beginnings in 1937, Baker Electric has now grown to 3,106 miles of line, mostly built when Stadum served as manager, for 4,735 customers in Benson & Towner & parts of Pierce, Wells, Rolette & Ramsey counties.

Annual consumption of electric-

ity has increased from 4,476 to 81,552,547 kilowatt hours while the cost of power to Baker, now furnished through the Central Power Electric Co-op Inc. of Minot, had been reduced to 1.26 cents per kilowatt hour at the end of 1976.

To keep in contact with their members, the manager & directors published a news bulletin, a 1-sheet mimeographed report of developments.

Mrs. Andrew Solheim of Orrin, now deceased, won a contest for submitting the best name, "Along the Line," for the bulletin.

"Along the Line" received national recognition in the early 1940s by Ray Tucker in his column, "The State of the Nation," in the Minneapolis Tribune.

Tucker commented that REA had answered the postwar question of "How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm, now that they have seen Pardee?"

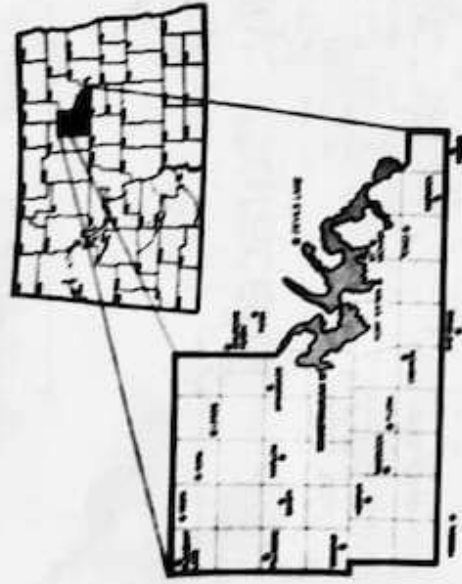
"Along the Line" reported on those who had installed electric stoves in their homes or purchased other appliances. Andrew Berg of Maddock was commended for installing a radio in his barn.

Tucker said "the most regular & enthusiastic reader of this 'Bing-

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Palmer Stadum astride one of the toys he made in his retirement, a working, scale model of a locomotive.



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