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The Origins of the Robertson Electric Cooperative

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October 20, 1947 was a day like many others in central Texas. First-term Congressman Olin Teague announced that he was making a trip to Turkey and Greece, where he would visit King Paul I. Colonel Henry Hutchings, Jr. told directors of the Brazos River Conservation and Reclamation District in Waco that the Army Corps of Engineers was considering building six dams and reservoirs on the lower part of the Brazos River for the purpose of flood control. On the other hand, a bank robbery at Rosebud was foiled by a night watchman and a cotton gin at Brenham was destroyed by fire. But on October 20, 1947, an event occurred that went unnoticed except by those who were affected by it. On that date, the first rural home in Robertson County to be served by the Robertson Electric Cooperative received electricity for the first time.

Robertson County covers 877 square miles of central Texas between the Brazos and Navasota rivers. Its southern boundary is the historic El Camino Real, or Old San Antonio Road. The principal industry of the county is agriculture, with cotton, corn, and sorghum as the chief crops. Livestock-raising is also a significant part of the economy of the county. The main towns are Franklin, the county seat; Hearne, the largest city; Calvert; and Bremond. Having been formed in 1837 and organized in 1838, Robertson County was one of the first created in Texas. It was originally much larger than it is today. In fact, several adjoining counties grew out of Robertson County. The population of Robertson County in 1980 was 14,653.

During the 1930s and 1940s, before REA electricity came to central Texas, the county was very much as it is today. According to the 1940 census, the population was 25,710. Only 9,050 lived in the four main towns. There were many other smaller villages and hamlets that were unincorporated, such as Boone Prairie, Bald Prairie, Tidwell Prairie, Wheelock, Ridge, Easterly, Mumford, and others. Many of these settlements were comprised of nothing more than churches and school buildings. Agriculture was the main industry, although there was some production of oil, coal, and other minerals. The primary products were cotton, feed crops, vegetables, and cattle. Some large plantation holdings were located along the Brazos River, but most of the farms were less than 640 acres in size. According to the 1940 census, Robertson County had a total of 2,181 farms.

The Rural Electrification Administration (REA) had been created in 1936, and the first cooperative in the nation was established at Bartlett, a small town about sixty miles southwest of Franklin. Other rural electric

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cooperatives in central Texas had been established at Rosebud, Itasca, Mart, McGregor, Corsicana, Hamilton, Comanche, and Navasota. Yet five years after the REA had been created, many rural residents of Robertson County still did not have electricity. Of the 4,380 farm dwellings in the county in 1940, only 207 (4.8%) had electricity. By June 30, 1941, only 98,000 farms, or 23.4% of the total in Texas, were receiving central-station electric service. Some farsighted Robertson County individuals recognized the opportunity presented by the REA and concentrated their energies to bring electricity to their area.

Several attempts had been made to bring REA electricity to Robertson County. In 1937, county agent Roger M. Hooker attempted to organize an electric cooperative. But because of apathy and disinterest on the part of many Robertson County residents, the project was unsuccessful. A year later, in 1938, there was another unsuccessful attempt.

The driving force in finally bringing electricity to rural Robertson County was Mr. W.R. Barron. Barron was born in 1899 and spent his youth in rural Robertson County before moving to Calvert around 1915. He experienced firsthand the problems faced by many farm families who did not have electricity. During the height of the New Deal in 1935, Barron left his job as a school teacher because of financial difficulties. Soon thereafter, he took a job as an agricultural engineer with the United States Department of Agriculture at Texas A&M University in College Station. This job required Barron to travel extensively over the state of Texas. In the course of his travels, he encountered several electric cooperatives being financed by the REA. Largely from discussions with county agents, Barron learned about the effort of the REA to bring electricity to farmers.

As he traveled over Texas, Barron continued to gather information about the Rural Electrification Administration. He conferred with Mr. William McElroy, the county agent of Houston County, at Crockett. A rural electric cooperative was being organized in Houston County, and McElroy informed Barron of the procedure for starting one. McElroy told Barron that it would be necessary to call a meeting of Robertson County citizens who were interested in forming a rural electric cooperative. From this meeting, a board of directors would be elected who would hire an attorney who would arrange for the incorporation of the cooperative. The board of directors would then adopt a constitution and bylaws. When these steps had been completed, the directors could begin to collect membership applications. It was necessary for the cooperative to have 400 members who could be served with 200 miles of line before the REA would authorize a loan.

Armed with this information, Barron returned to Robertson County and talked with influential persons about organizing an electric cooperative. Among those persons Barron contacted were Howard Mitchell at Boone Prairie, B.W. Lawson at Goodland, Clarence Bristow at Calvert, and Joe Marshall at Owensville. These men, and others who were
interested in bringing electricity to Robertson County, met on several occasions at Barron’s home in Franklin to discuss and share ideas. Finally, in April 1941, they implored county agent Roger M. Hooker to hold a meeting of interested citizens for the purpose of discussing the possibility of establishing a rural electric cooperative in Robertson County.¹³

On April 18, 1941, with county agent Hooker presiding, a gathering at the courthouse in Franklin elected a seven-man board to direct what was to become the Robertson Electric Cooperative. These men were B.W. Lawson of Hearne, Walter H. Mitchell of Boone Prairie, Joe J. Marshall of Owensville, W.C. Bristow of Calvert, W.W. Smith of Franklin, O.P. Sandifer of Franklin, and G.S. Ross of Easterly.¹⁴

After the election, these men met in executive session at the Love Building in Franklin. B.W. Lawson called the meeting to order and was chosen chairman unanimously. One of the first orders of business was the election of officers. Lawson was elected president; O.P. Sandifer, vice president; and Howard Mitchell, secretary-treasurer. They would serve until the first meeting of the board of directors after the adjournment of the next annual meeting of members, or until their successors were elected and qualified for office. Each of the seven incorporators paid a $5 cash membership fee, thereby becoming a member of the cooperative.¹⁵

Shortly thereafter, the newly-elected board of directors retained Judge Ben L. Parten to advise them on legal matters, such as drafting a set of bylaws and adopting a charter. With Parten’s help, and following guidelines from the REA, they produced a set of bylaws.¹⁶ These bylaws consisted of fourteen articles concerning such matters as the qualifications of directors and members, finances, and the function of officers. As the need arose in following years, various sections of the bylaws were amended. Parten was also instrumental in securing a charter for the fledgling cooperative.¹⁷ When Congress passed the Rural Electrification Act in 1936, a rural electric cooperative was illegal under the laws of the state of Texas. It was not until April 1, 1937 that the state legislature passed a law making it legal for a cooperative to be formed in Texas.¹⁸ Parten obtained a charter, or certificate of incorporation, for the Robertson Electric Cooperative from the Texas Secretary of State. This charter was dated April 15, 1941.¹⁹

Among other matters discussed at the inaugural meeting was the selection of an insurance plan, the adoption of membership applications and membership certificates, and the procedure for dispersing funds. Membership certificates were issued, signed, and delivered to the seven incorporators and their wives.²⁰

Another event of the April 18 meeting was the appointment of W.R. Barron as temporary Project Survey Coordinator. He had the responsibility of coordinating the recruitment of new members.²¹ To accomplish this task, Barron took a temporary leave of absence from the USDA. In trying
to sign up prospective members, he received aid from several members of the board of directors, most notably Howard Mitchell.²² Barron’s appointment as coordinator was not to exceed two months. Yet at a special meeting of the board of June 7, 1941, he reported that the fledgling cooperative was still far short of the four hundred members that were needed. Therefore, Barron and the board decided to hold a mass meeting in Franklin to create interest.²³

There were many reasons for people over the entire nation, as well as in Robertson County, to avoid joining an electric cooperative. One of the primary reasons was the required $5 membership fee. In 1941, $5 represented a substantial sum of money, regardless of the purpose for which it might be used. Many persons were skeptical about having electricity in their homes. They did not believe that it could do all of the wonderous things claimed by its advocates. Other people believed they did not need electricity and could get along just fine without it. Others were afraid of electricity and did not want it in their homes, no matter how much it might improve their life.²⁴

While the signup campaign was under way, two REA field representatives from Waco, B.W. Chesser and L.C. Roenick, helped the incorporators prepare maps of Robertson County. Each time a new member enlisted for electric service and gave the cooperative a right-of-way easement, his location was plotted on a survey map. These maps were used to plot the most logical locations for stringing power lines.²⁵ The board hired the Texas Engineering Company of Austin to make an official pre-allotment survey of these locations. This survey would be submitted to the REA to support a loan application.²⁶

In the meantime, the United States entered World War II. For all practical purposes, the activities of the Robertson Electric Cooperative ceased for the duration of the war.²⁷ Barron, who served as a kind of acting manager, entered the Army in 1942. County agent Roger M. Hooker assumed some of the managerial duties of the cooperative.²⁸ Cutbacks of material to cooperatives started in late 1941. With the creation of the War Production Board (WPB) in January 1942, a stiff system of priorities went into effect. At first, any cooperative that had completed forty percent of its construction by December 5, 1941 was allowed to finish. In August 1942, the WPB withdrew this order and froze the construction of all rural electric lines and the delivery of materials necessary for their construction. Thereafter, rural electric cooperatives could obtain materials only by proving that their construction would be beneficial to the war effort.²⁹

The first meeting of the board of directors after the war ended took place on July 30, 1945. The REA had made a loan of $245,000 to the Robertson Electric Cooperative. This loan was dated July 5, 1945 and was the subject of this meeting. Lawson suggested that the cooperative begin the construction of facilities to bring electricity to the rural areas. This
construction would be financed by this and other loans that the cooperative would receive from time to time from the REA. The board directed Lawson to execute all notes connected with the loans and to mortgage the property of the cooperative as collateral to obtain the loans. The board also decided that the cooperative's loans from the REA should not exceed $5 million.30

It was the intent of the board of directors to establish a cooperative to bring electricity to rural Robertson County, but before long the citizens in neighboring Leon County also expressed a desire for a rural electric cooperative. One day in late 1945, Barron received a call from Chesser, who was at a grocery store in the small Leon County town of Newby. Chesser had been talking with many Leon County residents who wanted a cooperative, and he asked Barron to come over there and talk to them. Barron, who was still in uniform, suggested to these people that they join the Robertson Electric Cooperative and request the cooperative to survey their area. It was not long before many inhabitants of western Leon County enrolled. It proved to be easier to recruit people in Leon County than in Robertson County. When the signup campaign was being conducted in Robertson County, all Barron and the other directors could point to was the distant prospect of organizing a cooperative. By the time recruitment began in Leon County, the cooperative was organized and well on the way toward building facilities for transmitting electricity.31

The loan of $245,000 from the REA held a rate of two percent interest and was to be repaid over a period of thirty-five years. This loan would be used in the construction of "A" Section, which would cover 220 miles in Robertson County and fifty-eight miles in the western part of Leon County. Over five hundred people would receive electric service when the project, officially designated as "122A1-Robertson" by the REA, was completed. The cooperative awarded the contract for the construction of the electric lines to the Taylor Construction Company of Taylor, Texas, on September 14, 1945.32

On November 13, 1945, the board of directors of the Robertson Electric Cooperative decided to join the Brazos River Transmission Electric Cooperative.33 Brazos, as it was called, was organized on February 27, 1941 and headquartered in Fort Worth. It consisted of eleven rural electric cooperatives. It was the responsibility of Brazos to purchase electricity and transmit it to its member cooperatives.34 Although the cooperative joined the Brazos System in 1945, it was four years before Brazos electricity reached Robertson County. Brazos built a substation about a half-mile north of Franklin in the spring and summer of 1949. This substation was energized for the first time on June 13, 1949.35

The board of directors of the Robertson Electric Cooperative appointed Barron to represent the cooperative on the board of directors of Brazos. Barron's main duty on the board was to arrange for the Robertson Electric Cooperative to buy electricity from the Fort Worth-based
cooperative. In addition to this and other duties, the board appointed Barron to serve as the manager of the Robertson Electric Cooperative for a period of one year, beginning March 1, 1946.

With the groundwork finally completed on "A" Section, Barron and the board went to work on "B" Section. The board formally submitted "B" Section, which covered 178 miles in Robertson County and forty-two miles in Leon County, along with a request for a loan for "B" Section, to the REA on May 3, 1946. The cooperative received this loan, which amounted to $275,000 several months later. The loan was dated July 6, 1946 and bore a rate of two percent interest, to be repaid over a period of thirty-five years. According to the provisions of this loan, 1,046 persons in Robertson and Leon Counties, as well as parts of Brazos and Falls Counties, were to receive electric service.

The membership of the Robertson Electric Cooperative increased markedly in 1946. At the time of the first annual meeting of the members in April, 740 people were paid members of the Robertson Electric Cooperative. This figure increased from 1,090 in July to 1,245 in October. While the membership of the cooperative grew at a rapid pace, the same could not be said for the construction of lines to bring electricity to these people. The first difficulty in starting construction involved poles. Taylor Construction Company had a contract with a creosote pole plant at Navasota. For some reason, this plant was slow to supply poles. Barron intervened several times to try to get poles, but achieved few results. It was not until Barron located another source of poles in East Texas that the Taylor Construction Company began to receive poles to start construction. The delay postponed the construction of electric lines by over a year.

Other bottlenecks followed in the acquisition of wire, conductors, and insulators, but these problems were resolved without difficulty. The next major problem occurred when the cooperative tried to obtain transformers. Barron was certain that the Taylor Construction Company had transformers, but they were going to other projects. When these projects were finished, the Taylor Construction Company would send what transformers were left to the Robertson Electric Cooperative. The situation became so crucial that in May 1947, the board of directors requested Claude Wickard, REA administrator, to determine why materials necessary in the struction of electric lines were not available. These delays in construction created openings which the private utilities in Robertson and Leon Counties, Gulf States Utilities, and Texas Power and Light exploited to the fullest.

Gulf States and Texas Power and Light had been in this area for some time, but had not made any effort to provide electric service to the rural areas. They built lines only into areas that had a high density of consumers per mile and were not interested in areas that had only one or two consumers per mile. They were interested in obtaining a high return for a low investment.
The advent of the Robertson Electric Cooperative changed all of this. On more than one occasion, these utility companies built "spite" lines along routes that had been staked by the cooperative. For example, the cooperative staked lines along the north side of the Old San Antonio Road between the town of Benchley and Wheelock in southern Robertson County. The city of Bryan provided electric service to Benchley, Wheelock, and the area south of the OSR. Other people along the OSR had been trying without success to obtain electricity from the city of Bryan for a number of years. These people then asked the Robertson Electric Cooperative to provide them with electric service. The cooperative surveyed their area and staked a line along the north side of the OSR. It was not long before the city of Bryan began work on a line on the south side of the OSR, directly across from the cooperative's line. After several members of the board conferred with Mayor Roland Dansby and Brazos County Judge F.L. Henderson, the cooperative withdrew this line. The two sides reached a compromise by which the city agreed to furnish immediate electric service to those people along the OSR between Wheelock and Benchley.45

Gulf States gave the Robertson Electric Cooperative problems. For example, Gulf States built and energized a line that ran north from Franklin along the Owensville road and northeast along the old Boone Prairie road. This line cost the cooperative many active and potential members.46 In several cases, Gulf States placed meters on the houses of people who were interested in obtaining electricity from the Robertson Electric Cooperative. Under the terms of the Rural Electrification Act of 1936, a cooperative could not furnish electricity to anyone who was receiving central-station electric service from another source. By placing meters on these houses, Gulf States assured themselves that these people would have to obtain their electricity from Gulf States and not from the Robertson Electric Cooperative!47

In trying to promote the Robertson Electric Cooperative, Barron received little cooperation from the local newspapers. On several occasions, Barron supplied what he considered news items about the cooperative to the Franklin Texan. The newspaper's representative told Barron that these were not news items but advertising. They wanted Barron to pay for them. On the other hand, the Texan printed similar items submitted by the private utilities.48

The Beavers and Lodal Engineering Company of San Antonio started staking the first line in December 1945. By May 1946, they had staked 162 miles of line, but had to stop because they were far ahead of the actual construction.49 The Taylor Construction Company began work on the first line in September 1946 between Franklin and Hearne.50 By the following month, lines were built between Venetia, in southwestern Leon County, with the Navasota River bottom and Marquez and a location just west of New Baden, a small town four miles east of Franklin, being in-
cluded. By November 1, 1946, 140 miles of line had been strung. At one time, the pace of construction had increased to a point where poles were being set and strung as quickly as they were staked. In June 1947, the cooperative increased "A" Section by approximately seven miles. This increase took place in the Brazos River bottom, where a large number of tenant houses on some of the cotton plantations could receive electricity for a minimum of $1.50 a month. By adding these seven miles, the cooperative almost doubled — from 400 to 730 — the number of people who would receive electric service.

On January 7, 1946, the Robertson Electric Cooperative entered into a wholesale power agreement with Gulf States. Soon thereafter, Barron arranged with Gulf States to buy electricity from a temporary installation at a prisoner-of-war camp just outside of Hearne. This installation had a transformer that Gulf States was about to retire from service. Gulf States agreed to sell the Robertson Electric Cooperative electricity produced by that transformer until Brazos could provide electric service to the cooperative.

On October 20, 1947, a new phase in the lives of rural residents of Robertson County began. On that date, the home of Robert C. Richards, located near the entrance of the prisoner-of-war camp, received electricity for the first time. No longer would rural people be relegated to the way of life endured by their parents and grandparents. Electricity from the Robertson Electric Cooperative made a pronounced change in their standard of living.

NOTES

1Bryan Daily Eagle, October 20-21, 1947.
3Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1941-1942 (Dallas: A.H. Belo Corporation, 1940, 499.
6Texas Almanac, 1941-1942, 499.
10Barron interview, February 14, 1981.
11Barron interview, February 14, 1981.
12Barron interview, February 14, 1981.
13Barron interview, February 14, 1981.
14Barron interview, February 14, 1981.
Robertson Electric Cooperative Minutes, April 18, 1941, Robertson Electric Cooperative, Franklin, Texas (hereinafter cited as REC Minutes).

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REC Minutes, April 18, 1941.

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W.R. Barron, interview, Marlin, Texas, March 7, 1981.

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REC Minutes, July 8, 1941.

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Barron interview, March 7, 1981.

REC Minutes, September 14, 1945.

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"Barron Interview, March 7, 1981.

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REC Minutes, April 1, 1946; July 1946 Manager's Report; October 1946 Manager's Report.

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