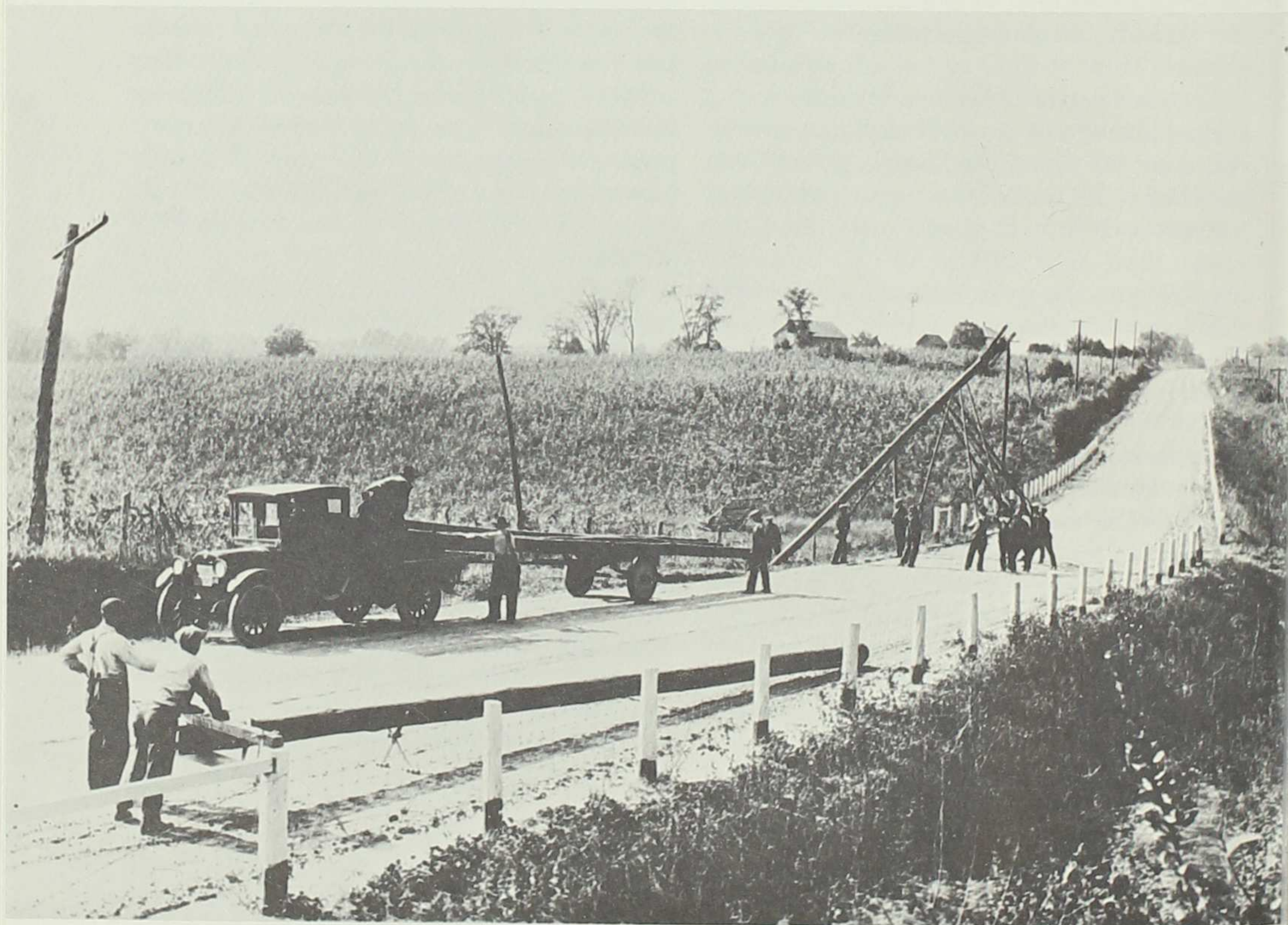


Farm Life When the Power Changed



(courtesy Iowa Electric Light and Power Company)

by
James Hearst

Laying the Cascade line

James Hearst has been called Iowa's major poet. In addition to his many books of poems and his prose articles, he will soon have a novel, Bonesetters Brawl, published by Dorrance and Co. His work is exciting and his fans and his friends legion and loyal. He has lived most of his life in and around Cedar Falls, and his sense of place and of history is as finely honed as the poetry he creates from it. Here he writes of the change in farm life experienced by him and his contemporaries in a century marked by the transformation of existence by technology. — Ed.

The change in the kinds and application of power came slowly to our farm. In my boyhood the farm supported itself as an independent country bound to the outside world of town and city only by the roads. We lived amidst a rich harvest of food. The yield of garden and orchard filled every corner of storage space, every mason jar, each jelly glass, and every wooden peg in the smokehouse. We boys were mother's "hired men," helping weed and pick and carry in all the vegetables and fruit needed for a family of six, eight, ten — depending on the number of hired girls and hired men that lived with us. No one ever went hungry, but almost everyone complained of the work necessary to bring the produce to cellar and bin. It was an autumn of discontent and a winter of fulfillment.

As soon as his boys were old enough to operate the farm, Grandfather went his own way. He planted a huge apple orchard of yellow spicy-smelling Grimes Goldens, Black Ox-fords, whose seeds rattled when you shook the apple if it was ripe, the Oldenbergs, hard as baseballs and about as tasteless, then all the usual kinds: Russet, Snow, Dutchess, Jonathan, and especially cherished by us children, Whitney Crab. He even planted a Whitney Crab in the pasture, and when I went for the cows, I stopped to pick a pocketful. When the low-hanging ones were gone, I stood on the little mare's back to reach for more. Once she went off and left me hanging from the branches, strange fruit for the tree to bear. Grandfather also found room for early and late cherry trees and four kinds of plums. To this day I can still smell the odor of plums rotting and fermenting under the trees and hear my gasp as a cherry limb broke and let me with my pail of cherries plummet to the ground.

The blackberry patch, four rows ten rods long, never failed to load us with its shiny black fruit. And the bounty of raspberry patch, the

two kinds of currants, red and white, and two long rows of grapes, early white ones and the purple Concords. Sometimes if the grapes hung too long and a rain came, they split open. A few days of sun fermented them and we children used to go out and watch the goldfinches and warblers, slightly drunk, cheep and flutter along the ground, too intoxicated to become airborne. We never tried to catch them, though. We respected their right to freedom.

A row of rhubarb, first fruit of the spring: how we looked forward to it! We used it for medicine when we played doctor, dipping the stalks in sugar we stole from the kitchen. We wove the leaves into hats and wore them pinned together with twigs. The asparagus patch was large enough to support ten families, and so was the strawberry bed. Mother hated the strawberry bed because it harbored, she said, garter snakes. In the vegetable garden we planted row after row of carrots, beans, peas, celery, radishes, lettuce, onions, turnips, parsley, and parsnips that we left out all winter and dug up in the spring (I still can't stand the stuff).

In these days of supermarkets and packaged foods, no one knows how many hours of work went into preparing our winter supply. Sweet corn, cut off the cob and covered with netting to keep the flies off, dried in the sun on the porch roof. In the winter the hard dry kernels, cooked and creamed, gave a special touch to many a meal. I still can imagine that taste — like nuts baked in cream. Making sun-cured strawberry jam, we spread berries on an old table that had each of its legs in a can of water to keep ants from crawling up to the fruit. The canning, jellies, preserves, and watermelon and cucumber pickles boiled and sizzled on the big range.

Each fall, usually after cornhusking, we butchered a hog. We children watched in a kind of morbid fascination how the pig, with a rope around one hind leg to keep it from run-

ning away, was gently herded toward an improvised platform beside a barrel of steaming hot water. Father shot it in the forehead with a .22 rifle, and after it collapsed the hired man stuck a knife in its throat to bleed it.

Father prepared the hog for butchering and hung the carcass overnight to cool. Cut up the next day, the hams and bacon sides went to the smokehouse, the meat from the head sliced out and used for headcheese, scraps and strips of meat run through the grinder for sausage, and all the fat divided into chunks to be melted down for lard. It was a greasy day in the kitchen, with the boiling kettle sending up clouds of stinking smells, the kitchen table slippery and piled with chunks of fat yet to be rendered, the floor stained and spotted with grease. The decks of the *Pequod* never slopped awash with more grease than our kitchen at butchering time. But when the day ended, the lard and sausage packed away, the green hickory sticks smoldering in the smokehouse, we could be thankful for a winter's supply of meat.

Mother raised purebred Plymouth Rock chickens. Carefully choosing the proper bloodlines, she bought her roosters from a Mr. Hemingway in Waterloo. The Plymouth Rocks grew to be big solid chickens, and when a hen quit laying she became the meat course for our Sunday dinner. We children waited for the day when a rooster outlived his usefulness and ended up in a kettle to be boiled all day long on the stove because he was so tough. Then Mother made noodles, rolling the dough so thin you could almost see through it, and hung it on the backs of the dining room chairs to dry. She cut the dough into very thin strips, which she cooked with the chicken broth. The rooster, tough or not, made a feast we could hardly wait to devour.

A backward glance shows me that Mother must have found more hours in a day than most women today. It seems a kind of miracle she could accomplish so much without a vacuum cleaner, refrigerator, or electric lights. True,

she often had a hired girl to help out, and as her children grew older they pitched in, gathering eggs and bringing in baskets of wood. But there were hired men to cook for as well as the family. We always ate in the dining room, a linen tablecloth on the table, the linen napkins all washed and ironed by hand. I am ashamed to think I complained about running the washing machine on Monday morning, while Mother sorted, rinsed, and hung the clothes on the line even in freezing weather. I wish she could have had the electric washer and dryer we have now. Granted, Father worked hard — put in long days of labor, taught us patiently how to harness a horse, milk a cow, help a sow deliver her pigs — but he vanished into the barn before the threat of helping around the house. Mother depended on her children — and a hired girl, when she had one — for help.

In the early morning, while Father built a fire in the range, Mother dressed by lamplight and then came down to prepare a big breakfast for her family and hired men — oatmeal, fried eggs and bacon, sometimes sausage and pancakes, coffee, and toast. She packed our four lunches by eight o'clock, then made the beds, filled the kerosene lamps and lanterns and cleaned their chimneys. By 12 o'clock she had dinner ready.

But this was routine. She also found time to read to us when we were little and to tend her flower garden. She was president of the Ladies Aid in the Congregational church, a member of the P.E.O., drove a horse to town for the meetings, and brought home groceries and books from the library. She taught us manners — savages that we were — and tried to instill an appreciation of good books, good music, good pictures, and good speech in our grubby little souls. So, by precept and example, we learned to take off our caps in the house, to wipe our feet before coming in, and to control our appetite until everyone was seated and served. We learned to remain quiet in church and not to speak until spoken to. Courtesy, said Mother,

was the sign of a civilized, educated person. Practice it, she said, and meant it. Almost without being told, we knew we should help with the work — the everlasting chores.

We might complain, but we did what had to be done. As soon as we were old enough, my brother Bob and I graduated to barn and farm work. Here Father took over, teaching us the mechanics of the farm. Though two years younger than I, Bob was bigger, and could sling those heavy breaching harnesses over the rump and back of ton-size workhorses as well as I could — or couldn't. We had to grow into that job. We milked cows, fed the pigs, carried corn, and threw down hay. But so did all the other boys in the neighborhood. We just followed farm custom.

Before we were big enough to handle the tough jobs individually, Bob and I teamed up. He drove the horses on the cultivator; I managed the shovels. We husked corn as a pair and many a time we chased Father or one of the hired men until we caught up and made them turn out to let us through. We went threshing together, two of us on the same bundle wagon, and, not only kept our place in the routine, but even hustled some of the older men who did not enjoy being hustled.

A metamorphosis was slowly taking place in farm life. We did not know it then, but technology was about to shove aside the way of life we knew. The heavy workhorses and their harnesses, complicated in the summertime with fly nets (how we boys struggled with them), the horse shoes — sharp caulks for winter, smooth plates for summer — the breast strap driving harness with its fancy leather fly net, saddles, riding bridles, halters, and currycombs — all these were slowly disappearing.

The change came slowly at first. One neighbor installed an acetylene plant — no more kerosene lamps and lanterns for him. Another neighbor bought a Waterloo Boy trac-

tor (the forerunner of the famous John Deere) and a two-bottom plow. Perhaps Bob's death — he died from cancer at 22 — and my hospitalization after a diving accident hastened change on our farm. One Sunday when I was home for dinner, Chuck drove up to the house on a Cletrac — an endless tread tractor — with a three-bottom plow. We sold some of the horses now — the ponies had long ago been sold to the Clyde Miller Circus. Our house burned down and we wired the new house for electricity. The manager of the Public Service Company, an old friend of Father's, promised us an electric line if we would permit the company to erect its poles along our fence. Father gladly gave permission, but the electricity never came.

We all shrugged it off, except Father, who felt he had been betrayed. When Uncle Will (Dr. W.L. Hearst) was elected to the city council, he suggested that the Municipal Utilities run a line out 27th Street. The manager, Clark Streeter, promoted the idea as a way to unite the farm people with the town. These political theories did not mean anything to us — we just wanted juice in our lines. Eventually the day came when the posthole diggers began to move our way. Because of regulations, Iowa Public Service took one side of the road, and the Cedar Falls Municipal Utilities had to take the other. This meant the telephone lines had to come down and go up on the electric light poles. We owned our own telephone lines and phones, so there was no problem there. But Northwestern Bell did not want lines coming into their switchboard that hung under electric lines. Finally safety fuses were agreed to and the problem settled.

Every time we drove to town we watched the progress of the line of poles, and every Saturday when Father came home from Des Moines he would walk around the house and snap the switches as if electricity appeared by osmosis. The day finally came when the switch at the plant sent the juice through the wires and the lights came on. Farm life took on a new dimen-

sion. Not even the telephone changed our way of living, thinking, and acting as much as the coming of electricity. This break with the past seemed an entrance to the modern world. Later we learned of some of the risks involved in our loss of independence. But right now farm life bloomed under an aura of light that came out of a wire, a bright spreading light, not the dim glow of smoky lanterns and old-fashioned lamps.

Iowa State University sent a man from the Extension Department to show us the cost and voltage of toasters, refrigerators (goodbye old icebox!), vacuum cleaners (goodbye brooms!), and motors to run washing machines, milking machines, and the pump at the wellhead. We kept the windmill for years, mainly because the radio antenna was fastened to it, but the storage battery that powered the radio gave way to generated electricity. Mother approved of this: once the acid in the battery had leaked and had eaten a hole in her carpet.

Horses were still important on the farm. The tractor plowed, disked, and sometimes harrowed. But horses still pulled the oat seeder, the corn planter, and wagons filled with hay, corn, and oats at threshing time. But machinery had begun to supplant the horses. We found it more to our liking to grease and oil machines than to repair harnesses and take care of horses. We bought a grinder and a belt and hitched them up to the tractor to grind our own livestock feed. Trucks began to haul livestock to the stockyards and packing house. We no longer rose at daylight to drive a load of steers on foot and horseback through main street to the Illinois Central stockyards.

Changes jarred and jolted and scraped feelings. Perhaps change can never happen without resistance and harsh criticisms, and we all felt its impact in threshing season. The original threshing ring took in a lot of territory. The machines we used — the big steam engine and a separator with a 46-inch cylinder — could

knock out 4,000 bushels a day, threshing out the oats as fast as we could throw in the bundles. Sometimes we used two spike pitchers which meant that four men had to throw bundles into the machine. We exchanged help with each other, and in a big ring like ours there was always plenty of help. But when the gasoline-powered tractor appeared, the days of the steam engine came to an end.

Because a tractor could only power a smaller separator, more time was spent at each farm to thresh the grain. So the big threshing ring broke up into several small ones. It was difficult to find enough manpower. We hired extra help when we could, but men willing to put in a day's work out in the August sun were not easily found. Then the bickering began. If one man with 20 acres of oats threshed his crop in half a day, why should he spend more than half a day helping the rest of his neighbors? But his help was needed and when he did not show up, the rest of us had to work harder to fill the vacancy. The 20-acre man had logic on his side, but there still existed an obligation to stay with the work until it was finished.

Our crop was the largest, Art Larsen's on the Jewell farm came next. When the machine reached our farm only a skeleton crew showed up. Art was mad. He had sent four men and so had we, which made plenty of help for the small jobs. Neighborhood cooperation went a little sour. We said to Art, "Never again."

"What will you do?" he asked.

"Try one of the small combines."

This move had no precedent. Large combines had been used for years on the western plains, but there the dry ground could support them and the wheat stood up — dry and hard. But small combines in the Midwest, where it often rained during the harvest season, had never been tried. The implement companies were still experimenting with manufacturing a small combine for the Midwest farmer.

My brother Charles and I traded our last four horses (and cash) for a small tractor, a disk, and

a combine. Our experience with it could fill a book. We did not let the grain stand long enough to ripen thoroughly. We tried to combine it at the same stage when we had cut it with a grain binder, forgetting that it cured in the shock. When it rained we started to combine before the grain was completely dry. Then the cylinder would plug and a man could break his back trying to turn the cylinder back a few inches so he could pull out the wad of damp straw. More than once we pulled the combine up to the house, damp straw hanging from it like wool from the jaws of a sheep-killing dog. But we eventually learned how to harvest the crop.

The days of neighborhood threshing were over. In a few years anyone who did not own a combine hired a custom operator to come in and combine his grain. When the country schools closed and the school district began to bus country children to town schools, the neighborhood lost its center and was no longer a close-knit entity.

The coming of power machinery and electricity relieved the farmer of much back-breaking physical labor, and it lightened the

load of the farm wife beyond measure. It angers me to think of the extra steps farm women walked day after day just to carry water from the well while women in town merely turned a faucet. If an enlightened government or private corporation had sent electricity to the rural areas years earlier, farm women might have had the same benefits.

The neighborhood became a number of private homes and farm operations, the group feeling disappeared, the cohesion of people in a kind of social entity dissolved. And, the independence of the farm eroded. Now a single copper wire took the place of the woodpile and windmill. The farm no longer existed as a self-sustaining unit. We had learned to depend on electricity. The helplessness of a farm without electricity came home to me when the power failed after an ice storm, and the city fire trucks had to haul water out to the farms for the livestock until the lines could be repaired.

But the destiny that fires the boilers of technology does not ask if change makes life better or worse for people. We may call it progress, but back in our minds the feeling persists that the cost of the changes must be reckoned with, too. □

CONTRIBUTORS

ALAN AXELROD was born in New York and grew up in Chicago. He was educated at Northeastern Illinois University and at the University of Iowa, where he took a Ph.D. in English this year. Former editorial assistant for the Division of the State Historical Society, he now teaches American literature at Lake Forest College, Lake Forest, Illinois.