

THE BUILDERS

(A story of STATEWIDE as written for the monthly magazine of the Municipal Ownership League of America)

Generations of dreams of rural electrification crystallized into reality in 1935 with the energetic and voluntary cooperation of Wisconsin farmers who knew that electrification was more than bright city lights—it was energy that could be harnessed to make their work that much more effectual in producing the urgent wants of an inter-dependent society.

To the friendly, neighborly farmers of the state, electric cooperatives were the natural way. Along main highways and on small roads they trudged through fall mud and winter snow to carry their message. By April of the following year several electric cooperatives had been organized and they were anticipating the construction of lines.

But now a real problem arose. Where could each of these little separate groups secure engineering services compatible with reliable construction at a cost consistent with the cooperative spirit? With true cooperative intent they sent representatives to a congress in Madison. It was here, then, that their ideas on their separate needs for strength and protection met and merged in a unified whole in the organization of the WISCONSIN RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION—a cooperative of and for cooperatives—which has become familiarly known as "STATEWIDE", and now furnishes guidance and supervision through engineering, managerial and accounting services to its member cooperatives, with the aim and purpose of expediting electric service to all of rural Wisconsin.

The new electric cooperatives became members of STATEWIDE and elected directors and officers to guide their policies and steer their course in the path of cooperative principles. Mr. B. W. Huiskamp, and later Mr. J. A. Becker served as part time managers of the organization, and in February, 1937, the Board of Directors appointed Mr. J. Morgan Wilson as full time manager. Mr. Wilson is an electrical engineer with experience in construction and operation of cooperatively owned and managed distribution lines.

In the spring of 1937, five projects totaling about 2,000 miles, were under construction. These lines are now energized through the engineering supervision of the WISCONSIN RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION. It is of interest to note that the location of these original units is in the extreme north, the extreme south and through the central part of the state. As the picture develops, and projects spring up in all the areas which had long been neglected, the state becomes a network of gleaming wires. During the season just past, eleven additional electric cooperatives have brought their projects into the construction stage with several soon to energize. New cooperatives, a municipal extension, and extensions to original projects now brings the total to twenty projects, 5,000 miles and 15,000 farm houses. A new venture in our state, the WISCONSIN POWER COOPERATIVE, which has a membership of ten cooperatives in the northwestern part of the state, is building 243 miles of transmission lines under the supervision of STATEWIDE, to serve, at present, eight of its member groups.

The cooperative builders have found that theirs is a "forward" movement with an unlimited future. The scope of their activity is like a giant magnetic field, which draws alike the liberal and the conservative. Cooperative achievement has shown that the type of individual leadership which produces socialized effort, successfully brings about the happy economic

condition of service for all. Through the office which has been established in Madison, departmental heads and office assistants, and in the field the supervisory engineers and the resident engineers, continue to help the farmers bring their plans to reality and their cherished hope to fruition.

All electric cooperatives in Wisconsin, with one exception, have availed themselves of the services obtainable through STATEWIDE. The CHIPPEWA VALLEY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE had signed an engineering contract before the organization of this central cooperative, but has since that time become a member. The municipality of Bangor, although it cannot become a member, because of the by-law limitations of STATEWIDE, has nevertheless manifested its confidence in the WRECA by arranging for its services to supervise the construction of the village's rural extensions.

Not long ago, Mr. H. O. Melby, president of the WISCONSIN RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION, voiced the sentiments of the hard-working, thrifty, clear-thinking farmers of Wisconsin in the following words:

“It seems to me that the cooperators who have built these electric distribution lines in rural areas, have brought about an epoch for the farmers. I believe it is unifying rural and urban parts of our country, raising the standard of living, and making us all one community of neighbors.”