

# Enlightening the Thumb: The Electrical Revolution

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## The Importance of Rural America

The United States' agricultural regions are the backbone of our country. According to the United States Census Bureau, one-fifth of our country's population inhabits rural areas. The same group accounts for a staggering eighty-six percent of our yearly agricultural production, per the United States Department of Agriculture. This shows the importance rural America has on the everyday function of the country. While family farmers only comprise two percent of the population in the United States, they account for ninety-eight percent of the two million farms across the country. You may be asking yourself, "What is the significance of this matter?" The reality is that not long ago, and holding true to modern day, rural Americans, despite their importance, continually face an extreme disparity. The disparity being the absence of electrical infrastructure, which has persistently plagued our communities. However, here in the Thumb of Michigan lies an organization who for over eighty-years has been committed to eliminating inequality by providing electrical aid and communal support.

## The Rural Electrical Disparity

Imagine a time when only ten percent of rural America had access to electricity. According to Cornell University, this was rural America's reality in the 1930s. Kerosene lamps were the only source of light at night. There was no running water, there were no milking machines, and a wood burning stove alone is what gave the beacon of hope that one would survive the long, brutal Michigan winter. Despite the darkness of rural America, nine out of ten urban homes already had access to electricity. As a nation, only fifteen years removed from the bloodshed of World War I, we were fighting to solidify ourselves as a key player on the world stage. However, only thirty-five percent of homes in the U.S were able to claim they had electricity, compared to two-thirds in England. As a country, we were undoubtedly falling behind when it came to technological advancements. Having more land to cover, it was uneconomical for taxpayers and private entities to run lines to provide service to those few and far between. Moreover, we were also going through what was arguably one of the greatest economic downturns a single country had ever experienced. All the while, President Franklin D. Roosevelt instilled hope in Americans and was committed to promptly closing the gap.

## The New Deal, and the Rural Electric Administration

On May 11, 1935, as a part of his New Deal policies, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 7037. This Executive Order would officially establish the Rural Electric Administration (REA), and only a short year later, the effects of this order would start to take place. In 1937, the

Electric Cooperative Corporation Act was drafted by the REA. This model law allowed rural communities to do something unprecedented, which was giving states the ability to assist in the setup of non-profit electric cooperatives. Only half of a year later, there was a meeting held in the old Wadsworth school, a one room schoolhouse located in Huron County. Led by Chairman Frank Wilson, the group of approximately thirty individuals, all from various cities in Huron and Tuscola counties, worked to find a feasible way to obtain a loan from the federal government. For Wilson, this meant making the trek to Washington and Lansing. In an era where long-distance travel was difficult, Wilson would make the journey over twelve times, showing his dedication to advocating for electrical funding in Michigan's Thumb region. The group quickly gained widespread support, and at one point even hosted approximately six hundred people at a mass meeting in Bad Axe.

## The Lead Up to Electrification

Though Thumb Electric was ready to start their operations, they initially did not receive full gubernatorial support. However, after the next election, the Thumb was able to boast a Harbor Beach native as the incoming governor. In no time, this would make the Thumb of Michigan a favorable place in the eyes of the government. Governor William Francis Murphy, better known as Frank Murphy, was dedicated to making sure the Thumb received the benefits they desperately needed. He had a close relationship with President Roosevelt, which benefited Wilson and his team. Meeting with Governor Murphy on multiple occasions, Wilson hoped Murphy would help advocate for the region, and that he did. In March of 1937, over five thousand Thumb residents had officially applied for their homes and properties to be serviced with electricity. Due to the applications, and support from Governor Murphy, on April 30, 1937, a two-million dollar loan was approved by the federal government. Adjusted for inflation, that is equivalent to \$42.6 million today. At that time, the Thumb was able to claim the largest electrical cooperative in the entire country, while also having rights to the first REA powerline (located in Ubyly) installed in the state of Michigan. Between the months of September 1937 and June 1938, approximately fourteen hundred miles of electrical line were laid, a generating plant and three substations were built as well.

## A Historic Spectacle

On June 18, 1938, the lines were energized for the first time; the monumental occasion was covered by *Time Magazine*. They stated that the many men, women, children, and chickens of Huron, Sanilac, and Tuscola County all gathered for events such as concerts and baseball games. The article, published on July 4, 1938, expressed that the event was larger than any county fair hosted by the respective counties. The crowds gathered for the long-awaited celebration. However, the main event was the 3,000-horsepower generator, which had its electricity released by Governor Murphy. As Murphy himself put it, "This is to be a new social order for the Thumb." What he meant by this was evident, the generator allowed the 752 farm families who

initially ran their wiring, to at last gain electricity. For the first time ever, the same men, women, children, and chickens would have the privilege of electrical amenities.

## Thumb Electric Cooperative Today

Still in operation eighty-six years later, Thumb Electric Cooperative works tirelessly every day to ensure that we are given the same electrical opportunities as those in urban areas. As time has passed and technology has progressed, TEC has successfully kept up with the evolving industry. Most recently, they are working to expand the nature of their services, being on pace to soon lay just under 1,700 miles of fiber optic cable. These cables will introduce broadband services to the Thumb, which will allow for high-speed internet. According to Thumb Electric's communications specialist, Mitchell Hirn, Thumb Electric is targeted to have these services available by 2026. Similarly to the electrical disparity faced by rural Americans in the 1930s, the lack of high-speed internet has a ripple effect in the Thumb, being evident in most if not all aspects of everyday life. From a student's inability to complete online schoolwork, to discouraging people from working from home, or simply creating a barrier to access information, entertainment and leisure, high-speed internet is nothing less than a necessity today. Broadband benefits our agricultural workers as well, by making their business practices more efficient and allowing them to expedite their online transactions. The process of installing this technology is "not the hard part," says Thumb Electric General Manager, Brad Essenmacher. However, the difficulty lies in the timeline. Between installing underground lines and receiving the proper permits, there will be a wait. Residents in the Thumb region will soon enough see the perks of receiving high speed internet. This service will not only benefit members, but a host of non-members as well, showing the cooperative's true concern for the community.

## A Unique Business Model

Thumb Electric follows a unique business model that is rooted in progression and compassion. The cooperative business model adheres to seven principles, originating from England circa 1844. The principles effectively illustrate the cooperative's beliefs, their pivotal role in the community, as well as granting them the ability to succeed. These principles are voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, capital control among members, autonomy and independence, cooperation among cooperatives, education training and information, and concern for community. To begin, Thumb Electric operates with voluntary and open membership, meaning that everyone open and willing to participate can do so, regardless of religious creed, sexual orientation, and race. Thumb Electric ensures that not only its employees, but their members are granted civil rights. They do this by staying in compliance with Federal civil rights laws, and by complying with the U.S Department of Agriculture's civil rights regulations and policies. Thumb Electric, similarly to every cooperative nationwide, is democratically run which allows each participating member to get a vote. On the same note, Thumb Electric's capital is also controlled by its members, meaning that members contribute equally to the co-op's financial

dealings. Autonomy and independence is the fifth principle, which implies that each co-op is its own entity. Conversely, the next principle states that cooperatives are expected to collaborate with one another on the local, state, national, and international levels. Cooperatives are also devoted to education and training, be it their employees, members of their cooperative, or anyone in the pursuit of knowledge.

Thumb Electric has been known to provide interactive electrical safety to its service area's youth. By doing this, TEC has helped reduce the risk of preventable accidents among youth. Moreover, as a reflection of their commitment to their communities, co-ops are expected to engage in community outreach, and public service. Thumb Electric has proven this by sending a local high school representative to Washington D.C in 2023, a program they intend to continue. I have had the privilege of attending Youth Tour, and I strongly encourage anyone who is thinking of applying to do so. Youth Tour is the opportunity of a lifetime for America's rural youth who would like to work in government, for a cooperative, or anyone who would like to spend a week in our nation's capital! Not only will you spend time learning about the extensive history with an all-inclusive trip to D.C, but you will also meet numerous great people. If you enjoy the trip, the NRECA (National Rural Electric Cooperative Association) provides further opportunities for leadership and public speaking on the national level. I had the privilege of being selected as Michigan's only representative for the NRECA's Youth Leadership Council, in this position I will work with TEC to reinforce the concern for community principle. I also will have the opportunity to attend MECA's (Michigan Electric Cooperative Association) statewide meeting, as well as the NRECA's national Powerxchange national meeting in San Antonio, Texas. All of these opportunities stemmed from simply deciding to apply to Youth Tour, and getting TEC's unwavering support.

## A Guiding Light

As rural areas continue to face the challenges that come with advancements in technology, the Thumb area is fortunate to be serviced by Thumb Electric. Their adherence to the seven cooperative principles, their rich history, and their commitment to the community provide ample reasons why it is imperative to provide them support. Together, we can use Thumb Electric as the guiding light they have historically been, to ensure that rural communities stay on the forefront of infrastructure progress, narrow the gap between urban and rural, and give hope for the opportunities of a better tomorrow.