
U.S. Representative

John Spratt

South Carolina # 5th District

News Release

May 16, 2001, For Immediate Release

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**Remarks of U.S. Rep. John Spratt (D-SC)
York Electric Cooperative, 60th Anniversary
May 16, 2001
York, South Carolina**

I enjoy coming to co-op meetings, because in government we dwell so much on problems, and as a people we rail so much at government, that it's good to come see one government-backed program that's a flat-out success.

In fact, REA and coops are such a success that we take for granted what they have accomplished. Sixty years ago, when York Electric Coop was founded, there were still two Americas: one urban, one rural. Most people in cities had electricity; most people in the country didn't.

And those in the rural south lucky enough to have electricity paid dearly for it. Franklin Roosevelt said that he understood the need for REA when he compared his bill for electricity at Warm Springs with his bill at Hyde Park. Electricity cost 18 cents a kilowatt hour at Warm Springs, 4 times what FDR was paying in Hyde Park.

Most of us have forgotten how America was once rural and without electricity and other amenities. But not my wife. Jane remembers. She grew up on a farm near Filbert and remembers well the day they got electricity. It came after the war, and the Stacys and their neighbors would not have gotten it then but for REA and the York County Electric Cooperative. What did it mean to them? Jane remembers holding hands with her family and dancing in a circle around the new light bulb mounted on their living room ceiling. It lit up their lives.

The seat I hold in Congress was once held by a man from York by the name of D. E. Finley. He authored the bill providing Rural Free Delivery of mail; and after it was adopted, whenever he campaigned, he didn't call himself D. E., he called himself, R. F. D. Finley.

In 1900, that was good politics. But times have changed. Years ago, when Fritz Hollings first ran against Olin D. Johnston, I was at a stump speaking in Rock Hill, and heard Olin D. Johnston tell how one morning he picked up the telephone and called Harry Hopkins at the White House, and he said, "Harry, we've got to have electricity for our farms down in South Carolina." And that, he said, was the spark that lit rural South Carolina, the beginning of rural electrification in our state. Fritz followed Olin Johnston to the podium, and said, "My Lord, if you listen to Olin

D. tell it, you wouldn't even think that Thomas Alva Edison had anything to do with it."

I tell that story for a purpose. Though it happened forty years ago, people had already come to take rural electrification for granted. To Olin Johnston, it was something to tout, something to talk about on the stump; something the federal government, on his watch, had done for them. But already by 1962, people had forgotten. They seemed to assume, as we do today, that the South pulled itself up by its own bootstraps; developed of its own volition; and that the REA, or for that matter, the Farmers Home or the Soil Conservation Service, had little to do with it.

In truth, these programs worked so well that we now take them for granted. And of all the rural development programs, none has succeeded like the REA. Just sixty years ago, only 12% of all American farms were served by electricity. Today, 99% of rural America has electricity. There are rural electric co-ops in 2,600 counties serving more than 25 million Americans.

How York Electric Cooperative itself came to be is a story worth re-telling on its birthday, because it's a story of how government works best when it helps people help themselves. In 1941, a couple of hundred people gathered at a meeting at the York County Court House. Duke Power Company had been generating electricity in York County for the better part of this century, but these folks did not have electricity. Duke couldn't justify the cost of rural service. The crowd at the Court House decided they needed professional help, so a few folks stepped across Congress Street to the law office of Gist Finley, the son of D. E. Finley. They told Gist what they wanted and how many were meeting in the court room. Gist joined them, and the rest is history. He helped them assemble an application to the REA, and was the general counsel of York Electric Coop until his death. Today, his former partner, Melvin McKeown, carries on in the same capacity, and having practiced law with Melvin for ten years, I can tell you, you could not find better legal counsel.

My good friend Willie Hall describes York Electric in its infancy in his book, "A Far Cry." He remembers that York County Electric Cooperative opened up on the corner of Roosevelt and East Liberty, where they stayed for the next thirty years. Mr. Bonnett was the first director. He had two linemen, Monroe Carter and Glen Fowler. They and Hattie Lou Caldwell, who would work here for years, were the mainstays of the company. For rolling stock, they had a Chevrolet coupe, with a rumble seat, where they carried all their tools. I have heard Bill Wray, who soon joined Mr. Bonnett, tell how they dragged poles with that old Chevrolet, one by one, to wherever they were stringing wire. After the war, they traded up to a used truck. Today, York Electric Coop. has 87 employees, working for 30,000 members, 50 times the number they started with.

In Willie Hall's words, "From a small acorn has grown a large oak."

It has grown because of good leadership, good management. Bob Williams, who came to the co-op in 1960, and has been here for 2/3 of its life, has assembled a great management team, and they have moved this company into the modern world. I remember when Bob built the building just behind us, which he is about to sell to the school district. I was here for open house, and I don't think Bob thought that the co-cop would grow out of this building on his watch here, but it's a tribute to his management team that they are trading up again.

REA not only made America more prosperous; it also helped spread prosperity around. Now, after 60 years, the REA is in a sense a victim of its own success. By closing the gap between rural America and urban America, REA made the need for rural development policies seem less compelling. There are those in Washington who look upon the REA, now the RUS, as another bureaucracy that has outlived its purpose. With 99% of rural America electrified, they think it is time to cut the apron strings.

I will not recount all the battles we've fought in Congress on behalf of the co-ops. I will just say that I begin every debate by offering an invitation to my district to any member who thinks that co-ops have outlived their purpose. I invite them to come see what York Electric and Pee Dee Electric and Black River Electric and Fairfield Electric do for the communities they serve.

--I think they will see that when an enterprise is customer-owned and customer-managed, it makes a difference in customer service.

--I think they will see that this model is worth preserving, if for no other reason that it allow us a yardstick by which to measure the cost and efficiency of investor-owned utilities. This will be more and more important as the investor-owned utilities become energy conglomerates.

--I think they will see how the co-ops put their financial muscle to good purpose, in helping us promote industrial development.

Sixty years is a long time, but I think this is just one of many milestones York Electric will pass. York Co-Op has many more milestones in our lifetimes and beyond, particularly if they are run and managed as they have been in the past sixty years.

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