

Centennial Biographies

“We’re Not Isolated Now!” Anna Boe Dahl and the REA

by David Long

Imagine a house full of light. Not a maple-shaded house in town, but a house out, away—a house and a barn and a few sheds, alone on a sea of hard spring wheat. Imagine water from a tap, hot, abundant. Imagine a refrigerator, a toaster, a Hoover. Imagine a little mesh-front Zenith spilling music and talk. Imagine an electric saw, a cooler for milk, a pump to water stock, a motor-driven auger. Forget whatever nostalgia you’re inclined toward: Life before electric power wore lives out. Listen to Anna Dahl, who was there: *When the best years of our lives have been spent carrying coal, wood, ashes and water, and when all the work within and without the home was done by muscle power—if you had it—and by grit if you didn’t, the change to cooking, cleaning, washing and ironing with electricity . . . is almost beyond comprehension.*

A word of background:

The America of Franklin Roosevelt’s first term had become two nations: one urban, connected, aggressively up-to-date; the other isolated by geography, laboring with the tools of an earlier century, feeling increasingly tainted by second-class citizenship. Investor-owned utility companies (IOUs), which had lighted American cities, had snubbed rural America. Shepherding the first rural electrification bill through Congress, Sam Rayburn cited figures from his home state of Texas: Left to their own devices, IOUs had electrified 3 per cent of the farms. Power companies griped about the cost per mile of stringing wire into the country. Critics disputed their figures, showed how lower rates for farmers would pay off handsomely over time. But the will wasn’t there.

We remember FDR’s first hundred days as a blitz of programs, relief acts, and sundry schemes targeted at the Depression’s horrors. One such was the Tennessee Valley Authority. Beyond its other benefits—flood control, development of the dirt-poor Tennessee River Basin, and hydroelectric power—the TVA embodied a landmark notion: that America’s rivers are a natural resources and as such belong to the people. Preference in the sale of power, the act declared, would go to “states, municipalities, and cooperative organizations of citizens or farmers, not organized or doing business for profit, but primarily for the purpose of supplying power to its own citizens or members.”

Roosevelt himself favored the federal government’s taking a hand in rural electrification, but it remained for one of his lieutenants, Morris L. Cooke, to draft the now-famous “12-minute memo” outlining the task. Over five million American farms remained without electricity, Cooke said. He proposed a system of self-liquidating loans to fund local rural electrification projects. This brief, cogent document (which Cooke said could be read in twelve minutes) caught FDR’s full attention and led to his Executive Order setting up the Rural Electrification Administration on May 11, 1935. For the next year conservatives, whipped up by the utility lobby, battled the legislation as it shunted through congressional committees. Compromise prevailed, and Roosevelt signed the Rural Electrification Act in May 1936.

No matter that we’ve grown disgruntled with whopping social programs hatched in Washington, the electrification of rural America remains a miracle. There was zeal and vision at the top, in men like

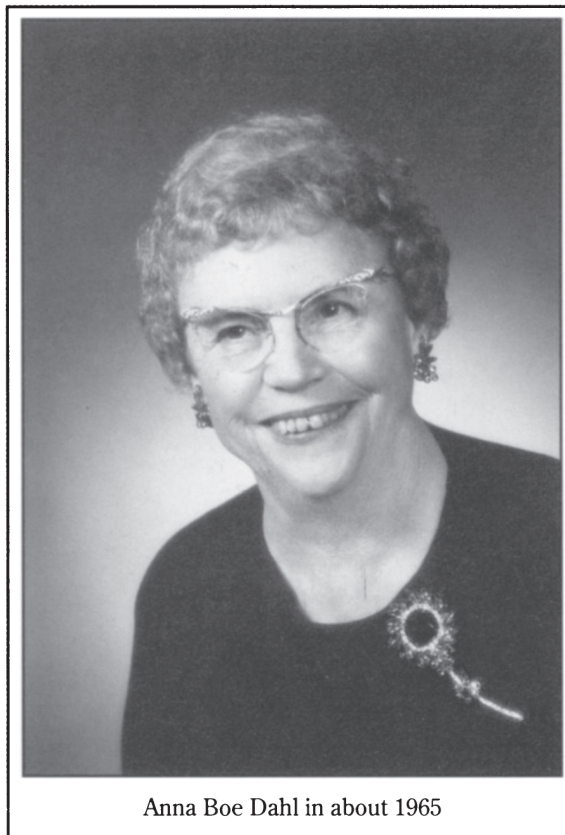
Cooke and Rayburn, Senator George W. Norris of Nebraska, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, and REA administrator John Carmody—men, in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s words, “with an instinct for remedy.” But it was matched a thousand-fold in America’s outback, by private citizens who put their good names on the line, farmers mainly, people like Anna Dahl. It makes a deeply satisfying story.

Picture Plentywood, Montana, in 1917. Sheep had grazed on this land, and before them open-range cattle, territory once prime hunting ground of the Assiniboines. But since 1908 immigrant families—Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, Germans—had spilled into northeastern Montana prodigiously, enticed by free land and a juggernaut of rosy advertisements from the Great Northern Railway. The optimism of these would-be farmers was fueled by a run of years when rain fell plentifully—wheat yields topped twenty-five bushels an acre and sold at prices swollen by the Great War in Europe. Plentywood was a boom town: new county seat, trading center, hotbed of left-leaning political talk.

Suddenly, in 1917, the weather turned blistering. The ground cracked, grain heads shriveled. Then the grasshoppers descended—“Dark sky-waves, clacking, fluttering, and gushing,” in K. Ross Toole’s words. “They settled on everything like an obscene blanket.” This drought would last into the 1920s—failed crops, the post-war crash of grain prices, and the ensuing wave of small-bank failures would accomplish a drastic winnowing of homestead farmers in Montana—but that first summer, 1917, it could be reasoned away as a fluke. Hope flourished. People still arrived to inaugurate new lives.

Born of Norwegian parents in the northwoods Wisconsin town of Spooner, Anna Boe followed a brother out to Plentywood that year. She liked what she found. It seemed the antidote for a way of life she remembered almost seventy years later as oppressively tight and close-minded. “There was no way you could spread out and improve yourself and get anywhere,” she said. But there was something about Sheridan County: “It was so new and everybody was working hard and going ahead. That’s what I wanted to do.”

Anna was a small woman, dark-haired and dark-eyed, with a quick step and a quick mind, proud of her Norwegian ancestry. During her first two years in Montana, she was mistress of the Haaven school, northeast of the small community of Dagmar. In September 1919, she married Andrew Dahl—clerk of the school board, emigré of Cavalier County, North Dakota, a thin, hard-working, red-headed man with a deep voice. For almost fifty years the



Anna Boe Dahl in about 1965

Courtesy of Lucille Jensen

Dahls lived on the 640-acre farm near Coalridge that Andrew and a cousin had homesteaded in 1909, raising five children: Helen, Lucille, Harriet, Thelma, and Leslie (called Bud).

Drought returned to Sheridan County in 1929: rainless summers, open winters, relentless hot dusty winds, once more the grasshoppers, followed now by army worms, cutworms, wireworms. It’s hard to imagine how anyone lasted through the worst of this.* For ten years the Dahls had puny harvests—one to three bushels an acre wasn’t uncommon. They mortgaged, bought seed and feed, remodeled Andrew’s original farmhouse for their burgeoning family, and lived with the worry. They could at least feed themselves—there were cattle and pigs, potatoes they could grow by hauling water to the kitchen garden. The summer of 1934 they couldn’t buy gasoline to run the combine—Andrew and his brother went back to harvesting with a team of horses. There was no money for such amenities as a daily paper. Anna had her one good dress for church. You can believe how it seemed to the Dahls that it would simply never end. They watched as desperation stripped away other families—Sheridan County suffered a major out-migration during

*For a truly harrowing account of how these years treated a young family that farmed rented land, see Charles Vindex’s “Survival on the High Plains, 1929-1934,” *Montana, the Magazine of Western History* 28 (Autumn 1978): 2-11.



Courtesy of Sheridan Electric Co-op, Inc.

The Sheridan Electric Co-op first board of trustees at the Westby office on October 1, 1946: from left, Cecial Wigness, Arthur Rehmer, Mikkel Paulsen, Peter G. Thuesen, Folmer R. Christensen, Arthur Jonasen, Anna Boe Dahl, P. G. Anderson, Fred Herman.

those years—but for the Dahls the only thing that made sense was staying, resolute, a family. “Anyway,” she said, “we had nothing to go *with*.”

How the Dahls hung on when many didn’t is a matter for conjecture. They were better fixed than some—the mid-1920s had been good years for the Dahls (motorized equipment, diversified crops, and refined dryland farming methods allowed farmers like the Dahls a measure of prosperity between Montana’s droughts). They were better educated (in Anna’s case—Andrew had had to quit school after sixth grade). They were resourceful, driven by a passion for what Anna called *advancement*. They were well-spoken and politically savvy. Andrew would later serve a term as state representative from Sheridan County, a liberal Democrat, then twelve years in the Montana Senate. During the 1930s, with Andrew’s constant support (theirs was a remarkable partnership), Anna began to move outside the family. She taught night classes in English and general farm economics for the Works Projects Administration, “. . . so people could wise themselves up about what they could *do*.” It was paid work, and she loved it. She had always been good at explaining things.

She and Andrew had been vocal supporters of the Farmers Union in Montana (Anna had carried the memory of the Union with her from Wisconsin). Cooperative oil stations and elevators had gone up

in Montana, and the Union members gathered every month for a business meeting and potluck. Anna became a field worker for the Union—recruiting members and teaching at camps for farm youth—then a delegate to the state meetings. She was adamant in her belief that farmers should stick together. Later she would recall some wariness—outside of Billings, for example—but around Sheridan County, support was heavy. People there were more willing, she felt, to push themselves forward if they could, to try new things.

Rural electrification had been on people’s minds in northeastern Montana ever since work had started on the Fort Peck dam in 1933. As REA projects began to blossom elsewhere, the topic crept more frequently into local talk. “They had phones, you see,” she said. “They knew all about it.” The co-op idea was tailor-made for such a place. Myth paints Montana settlers as wildly self-reliant, but they had an equal passion for cooperation. Besides the major collective endeavors of the Farmers Union there were Community Club projects, quilting bees, Lutheran get-togethers. Neighbors formed cooperatives to dig coal from shallow-lying veins around the county. They joined together to fix each other’s wells or to mix the wet bran mash and arsenic concoction used to poison grasshop-



Anna Boe Dahl and other members of the Sheridan Electric Co-op board of trustees watch as one of the first poles is erected in Sheridan County in 1947.

Courtesy of Sheridan Electric Co-op, Inc.

pers. They bartered and traded, they borrowed bulls and roosters for siring, they lent machinery back and forth, and they sent their boys to neighboring farms to fill in when sickness hit. Isolation demanded these things. It was no accident, either, that so many of these farmers were Danes or Swedes or Norwegians—the cooperative movement had long been a fact of life in Scandinavia.

Sheridan County had a history of hot, left-leaning political talk. The hard times after the First World War had radicalized many small farmers in the northeastern counties, and a fledgling communist movement had flourished there under the encouragement of *The Producers News*, published by Charles E. “Red Flag” Taylor. But most, like the Dahls, found their progressive sensibilities best served by the Farmers Union. By 1941, when Anna Dahl began her fervent lobbying for the REA, *The Producers News* was defunct and the earlier radicalism, though remembered, was no longer a force. The Dahls considered themselves good church people—good Lutherans—not radical. They simply believed in advancement, Anna said. And by 1941 the dry years were gone. It was amazing how fast the crops came back—“Because the ground was rested, you see,” Anna remembered. Suddenly people could buy things. It was a new world.

The work of rallying farmers behind REA was going on throughout rural America. Organizers like the Dahls drove from farm to farm, spoke at schools

and Farmers Union locals—anywhere people would gather and listen. The fears expressed by the REA’s vitriolic opponents in Washington—that the REA wasn’t doing the embattled farmer any favors, that he’d now be even less able to pay his bills, and so on—were echoed locally. At first there was widespread ignorance about what electricity could do for a farm operation. People feared the fine print. They worried about easements. Some feared electricity itself—children or livestock could be electrocuted. And they had a deep-in-the-bone horror of debt.

Sheridan County had its skeptics, too. Although most farmers badly wanted electrification, many were reluctant to sign up until they truly believed it could happen. Anna Dahl spoke and spoke, she wore people down with her impassioned logic. “No self-respecting hog in Norway would live in a hog house without electric lights,” she told them. She preached—as she had for the Farmers Union—the gospel of solidarity. Her confidence was infectious.

One afternoon in August 1941, a group of organizers drove to Westby to gather support from several of that town’s movers and shakers. Anna had thought that Andrew would be the one to go, but he looked at her and said, “You know more about it than I do now—you go.” She did. Later that night, a couple of dozen people met back at the Dagmar store—which was itself a cooperative—and the Sheridan County Electric Cooperative was born. Anna chaired the first meeting. A board of directors

was set up, and she was its first secretary—not surprising, perhaps, as she was a woman. But she would prove to be the nuts and bolts of the Sheridan project, its unfailing center of energy for years, and in 1956 she became the second woman to be elected president of an electric co-op in the U.S.

A dozen of Montana's electric co-ops managed to energize lines before America's entry into World War II, but Sheridan's plans were backburnered by the war effort. In the meantime, the Board had a mass of legal, financial, and engineering expertise to acquire. The State Water Board, REA field men, state Extension agents, and a host of others helped. For the first few years, during the war, the Sheridan co-op operated out of Anna Dahl's house in a downstairs bedroom off the kitchen. Board members worked religiously, afraid any slacking off would sink the project. "We met just as faithfully as *daylight*—nobody missed a board meeting, no sir."

The REA, though considered a relief act at first, was never a government giveaway—it empowered local co-ops through loans. To win approval, Rural Electric Co-operatives had to prove they had the members per mile and that members would use enough power to satisfy the debt. Many co-ops teetered between making it and falling short. Thus, it was all the more galling, now that rural electrification lay within reach, when private utilities suddenly nosed into territory they had for many years ignored. They approached farmers in the least isolated of these areas—the cream—and offered hook-ups. These "spite-lines" were the undoing of a number of REA projects nationwide; and though relations between some RECs and IOUs were cordial and workaday, many remained testy for years. "If they could get in and talk someone into taking power from them instead of waiting for us, they'd do it every time," Anna remembered. "They'd leave us the scrub that the United States government wouldn't give us money for. Oh, it was dog eat dog, I tell you—at the beginning." To Anna and her like-minded Board members, solidarity was only common sense. "We can all get it if you stick with us," she urged. "But if you're going to go with the power company and cut us up in chunks, we won't any of us get it."

The paperwork for Sheridan's first REA loan was finally ready in 1945. Anna Dahl traveled to Washington—first-class, at her Board's insistence—and hand-delivered the documents to officials. Lines began to go up along Sheridan County roads in 1946; and by the time they were energized in 1948, Sheridan had over six hundred consumer-members. The co-op had moved to Westby and the following year switched to larger quarters in Medicine Lake. Eventually, the co-op's service area stretched out to include all of Sheridan County, sections of Roosevelt and Daniels counties, and into Divide County in



Andrew and Anna Dahl in Plentywood in 1969

Courtesy of Lucille Jensen

North Dakota. Anna remained on the Board and eventually served as an REA lobbyist in Helena.

Sheridan was the first co-op in Montana to take its gripe with a private utility company—over turf-encroachment—to the state Supreme Court. Sheridan lost the case (which had to do with serving oil fields), but the stage was set for another confrontation.

In 1955, the Department of Defense announced it would build a Semi-Automatic Ground Environment (SAGE) radar base near Whitetail. Sheridan's lines passed within a mile of the site, and it could easily accommodate the 36,000 kwh load per month. An agreement seemed at hand, but then the Department of Defense went mysteriously silent. It transpired that Montana-Dakota Utilities had been given the contract—even though it would mean construction of duplicate lines. Outraged, Anna Dahl fired off a communique to Montana Congressman Lee Metcalf. Metcalf discovered that not only would taxpayers be soaked for the extra lines, but that RECs were consistently being bypassed in such a fashion—at horrific expense. Metcalf's subsequent legislation allowed co-ops around the country to win contracts from the Department of Defense. And Anna Dahl was extolled in the national press as the writer of "the \$830,000,000 letter."

Anna Dahl retired from the Sheridan Board in 1967 with a list of plaudits as long as your arm:

president of the Sheridan co-op; first woman on the Montana Associated Utilities and the Northwest Public Power Association Boards; first woman to speak at a national meeting of the National Rural Electric Co-operative Association (in 1957); first woman given a distinguished service award by the Western States Water and Power Conference; Montana director (and first woman) on the board of the seven-state Wisconsin Electric Co-op. She was listed in *Who's Who of American Women* and *Mothers of Achievement in American History*.

Anna took her honors like a true Norwegian, proud, with self-effacing humor. She always shared the credit with Andrew. It was a rare husband, she said, who would encourage his wife to travel and speak out as he had—meeting after meeting she'd be the only woman. It tickled her to remember overhearing one power-company lobbyist at the legislature say to another, "She's done an awful lot of damage." Her family would tease her about all the money she was making giving speeches. "Just think," she'd tell them, "you can hear me for free." Around the house they'd call her Eleanor Roosevelt.

Toward the end of her life (she died in 1986 at the age of ninety-three), Anna was interviewed by Montana oral historian Laurie Mercier. In those tapes, you hear the voice of a woman who has outlived her husband and two of her children—it's frail, but the backbone persists. "These are the things that happen in life," she says. "You have to accept what comes to you." You hear her knot with

frustration as she fights to remember Burton K. Wheeler's name, but suddenly the day rushes back to her, how Wheeler welcomed her to his Senate office, how he sent out for lunch. . . . From this distance, the public and private lives spill together, the mundane and the wonderful. You hear how proud she is that she could keep her family presentable, making over clothes time and again, and that her youngest, Bud, could go to college when the economy came back. She remembers crisscrossing the Sheridan project in a small plane and looking down at Dagmar, amazed at the concentration of light. For years, she remembered, the power company had told them they were too isolated. "Well, we're not isolated now!" she says, triumph lifting her voice. She pauses. "It's such a temptation to talk about these things," she says. "I'm just sure people are bored to tears with me, because it doesn't mean anything to them anymore. . . . But it does to me. It's history."

DAVID LONG, a writer in Kalispell, Montana, received an MFA from the University of Montana. He is the author of two books of short stories, *Home Fires* (1982) and *The Flood of '64* (1987). His essay, "Testimony," appeared in the Spring 1987 issue of *Montana*. In writing this essay, Long used Laurie Mercier's oral history interview with Anna Dahl (in October 1982), part of the Montanans At Work Oral History Project for the Montana Historical Society. Long wishes to express thanks to Helen Rue for generously sharing the details from her mother's life, to Donna Tompt of the Sheridan Electric Co-op, and to George Donaldson, Sheridan's long-time manager.

Thomas H. Carter, Spokesman for Western Development

by Richard B. Roeder

On September 18, 1911, Montana's press carried stories about the death of Thomas H. Carter, former U.S. senator from Montana. In commenting on Carter's unexpected death on September 17, the *Washington Post* reported that Carter had been "one of the best loved men in public life" and that the news came "with a sense of shock and personal loss," not just to citizens in Washington, D.C., and Montana but also to the country as a whole.

On Sunday afternoon, October 15, Montana citizens crowded into Helena's Auditorium to pay their

final respects to Carter. The nondenominational services included a moving eulogy by Carter's friend and former Senate colleague, Lee Mantle. Carter's life and public career reflected "the true elements of greatness," Mantle declared, and he predicted that Carter's memory would "long remain an influence for good, an incentive to patriotism . . . high resolves and noble effort." Two small towns, a county, and a glacier and peak in Glacier National Park are named after Carter, but few people associate those place names with one of the most important public ca-