

Melva (DeWeese) Watson

Remembering when the lights came on...

Melva (DeWeese) Watson still smiles when she talks about the days before electricity—days that were harder, yes, but full of a kind of simple rhythm that shaped who she became.

Back in 1940, when Melva was just a young girl, her family moved to the Maples area into a brand-new house her daddy had built with his own hands. It was a good house, sturdy and full of promise—but it didn't have electricity. Life there required work, creativity, and a whole lot of determination.

Water came from a cistern, and keeping food fresh meant lowering milk down into its cool depths. Everything else had to be preserved the old-fashioned way. Melva's family canned their food on a wood stove, putting up fruits and vegetables from the big garden they worked together. They raised pigs for pork, cows for milk, and chickens for eggs—everything they needed, they made or grew themselves. Eventually, they got an icebox, and ice was delivered every other day or so. It was a small luxury, but a welcome one.

Even with a wood stove, a wood cookstove, and a fireplace, winter mornings could still be bitterly cold. Melva remembers how her daddy would rise early, before the rest of the house stirred, to build a fire and chase away the chill. By the time the girls woke up, warmth had begun to creep into the rooms.

Chores followed a steady weekly rhythm. Monday was wash day. Clothes were scrubbed by hand on a washboard and hung carefully on the line to dry. Tuesday was ironing day. Her mother used a heavy cast-iron iron, heating it on the wood stove before pressing each piece of clothing smooth.

Melva's mother was a talented and resourceful woman. She made dresses for Melva and her sisters, often starting with something as simple as a catalog. Melva can still picture it—the Sears and Roebuck catalog tossed onto the floor, the girls gathered around, pointing to their favorite styles. Once they made their choice, their mother would sketch out patterns on newspaper, carefully measuring, cutting, and fitting each dress until it was just right.

Most of their clothes were made from old feed sacks, and nothing went to waste. Scraps were saved and later stitched into quilts—beautiful, practical reminders of hard work and love. Her mother's treadle sewing machine was one of her most treasured possessions, and it was there that Melva first learned to quilt—a skill she still cherishes today. Even at 95, her sewing machine is always within reach, though these days she enjoys working with finer fabrics than feed sacks.

School was another part of daily life that required effort. Melva and her sisters walked to Concord School, crossing fields and fences along the way. Her daddy had built fence stiles to help them climb over easily, and the neighbors didn't mind a bit. On especially cold winter days, her daddy would walk the girls to school, carrying their lunch buckets so their hands could stay warm.

The family didn't have a car, but her daddy had a bicycle—and he put it to good use. In the summers, he would ride all the way from Maples to Raymondville to shear sheep. With his hand

shears, he could shear up to 90 sheep in a single day. When the work was done, he'd climb back onto his bicycle and make the long trip home.

When Melva was around 11 or 12, everything changed. The family moved into town. They left behind the farm, the garden, and the familiar routines of country life for something new—a house with electricity.

It wasn't entirely modern. They still had an outhouse, but inside the home, there was something wonderful: light. Bright, steady light. For Melva, who loved school, it made all the difference. No more straining to read or do homework by lantern or Aladdin lamp. Now she could study clearly, comfortably, and for as long as she needed. They brought their radio with them, too, and Saturday nights were still spent listening to the Grand Ole Opry on WSM, the music filling their home and providing entertainment that Melva said lasted them all week until the next Saturday evening.

Her daddy found work in town as well. He first worked at a restaurant on Main Street, where the local library stands today. Later, he became the school janitor, and around 1945, he went to work for Intercounty Electric. Melva sometimes rode along with him in the big truck as he traveled to Dunn to pick up utility poles delivered by rail. They'd load up and head back to Licking, playing a part in bringing electricity to more and more homes—something Melva knew firsthand would change lives.

In the evenings and on weekends, her daddy wired houses for extra income. But Sundays were always set aside. "The Lord's day," Melva says. No extra work—just church and time together as a family. Her mother went to work at the factory and then later Melva's parents opened a restaurant down by the four-way stop. As she grew older and entered high school, Melva found ways to contribute, too. Each day from 11 to 1, she would walk downtown during her study hall and lunch period to work at the restaurant, then head back to school to finish her classes. It was a busy life, but one she reflects fondly on.

Looking back, Melva doesn't see the early years without electricity as a hardship, but rather just her foundation. They were years of learning, even though she might not have realized it then—how to work, how to make do, how to care for one another, and how to find joy in the simple things.

Still today, as her sewing machine often hums softly by her window, those early lessons remain stitched into every part of her life.

