Transcripts of interviews conducted by Dominion: 100 Years and Going Strong.

**Life Before Electricity**

Interviewer: In celebration of 100 years of service to the community, Dominion has created an audio series that explores our remarkable journey. This installment is called Life Before Electricity.

For those of us who grew up with electricity at our finger tips, the notion of daily life without power is hard to image. We take reliable, affordable electricity for granted twenty four hours a day seven days a week. But there was a time, and not really that long ago, when electric power was only a dream in rural Virginia. In this segment we’ll hear from someone who remembers what farm life was like before the lights came on.

First, a little background. Because of the high cost of running long power lines, electricity was slow to arrive to the countryside. In 1934 fewer than 8% of Virginia farms had electricity. During the New Deal, the government pushed for rural electrification but progress took time. At the beginning of World War II, still, only one in three Virginia farms had electric power.

Moses Foster Sr.: I call it bad days. They had bad old days. There was a lot more work too. A lot more work to get whatever you wanted done.

Interviewer: I think it is hard for younger people in particular to appreciate how difficult life was.

Moses Foster Sr.: Correct.

Interviewer: But you remember.

Moses Foster Sr.: Oh yes, I do.

Interviewer: Moses Foster Sr. was born on a farm in Prince Edward County, Virginia, a few miles south of Farmville. At the age of 75, his childhood memories are still clear and not the least bit nostalgic.

Moses Foster Sr.: We didn’t have a refrigerator, we what is now known as an ice box. Uh, we would call the ice man, and the ice man would come once a week. Sometime toward the end it was twice a week, Wednesdays and Saturdays. Uh before we got electricity we used to have a radio and a little feel coal. And to keep the radio going we would have to have a car battery. In the kitchen we had nothing but a wood stove. Didn’t have any washing machine. We had to boil the water or heat the water, put it in a tub, get the washboard, and scrub the clothes on the washboard.

We had oil lamps and we had to go the store. Jones Merchandise Store, and get the oil and put it in the lamp. And had to clean the uh the globes. Wash them because they would get smutty after about three or four nights of use. And on top of that there would be the fumes and give off fumes. We would, I guess, we would suffer from Asthma. I guess you would call it, they didn’t know much about it then. But anyway, we would suffer quite a bit from that. And we were glad to see electricity come.

Interviewer: Now, Mr. Foster, I know the day the utility crew arrived to install the electricity at your place was back in the early 1940s and you were 8 years old or so. I bet your family was pretty excited, huh?

Moses Foster Sr.: Oh yes, we were. Quite excited. To know we didn’t have to charge batteries anymore and to know we wouldn’t have to churn with the churn, up and down trying to make butter.

Interviewer: Did it make a difference in your household over night?

Moses Foster Sr.: Yes it did.

Interviewer: In what way?

Moses Foster Sr.: And that we became more modernized than we were before. And of course my mother, was a teacher, she wanted to become more modernized.

We had to get the house wired. They brought the electricity to the pole near the house but you definitely had to get someone to wire your home. And that was struggle then; because they, I think, they were charging about $200. But people didn’t have $200 then.

Interviewer: Did other families get electricity or were you sort of celebrities for a while?

Moses Foster Sr.: And we were at the time. Gradually after they saw what we had, then they would come around. And they would say yes we want it too. And they would get it. But as I said again, money was a factor.

Interviewer: Apart from the money, were people in the country just skeptical about electricity?

Moses Foster Sr.: Yeah well some of them were afraid their houses were going to burn. They were used to heating their iron on the stove. And the going putting it on the iron board and ironing their clothes and then heating it again on the stove and coming back and ironing their clothes. They didn’t know you could just plug an iron into the wall and do it so much faster. They were used to doing it the hard way. But as I said again, people are slow to change. They don’t want to change.

Interviewer: You don’t miss the old days, do you?

Moses Foster Sr.: No, no I don’t. People tell me “I like my good old wood stove. I am going back to my.” I said “No, you can have it. If it gets that bad I am going to try to make it to a motel.”

**Early Technology:**

Interviewer: In celebration of 100 years of service to the community, Dominion has created an audio series that explores our remarkable journey. This installment is called Early Technology.

Just look around your home or office, I’ll bet the tools and equipment you use every day have changed over time. Remember the old black and white TV? Or how about that old rotary phone? Well it is that way in the power business too. In the early days when trolley cars from the Virginia Power Company would break down, conductors would have to get some help from some of these [horses neigh]. Years later the company still need horse power from time to time to haul utility poles, for example, into hard to reach places.

Company retirees took time during luncheons and picnics to share their memories about their job of bringing power to the people. Charles Ellison came to work for the company as a groundsman in Petersburg in 1951.

Mr. Ellison, I know there are still plenty of really physically demanding jobs at Dominion these days. What was it like almost 60 years ago?

Charles Ellison: I started out when we used to dig holes by hand and we would get off the truck in the morning. And we’d have a tool called a typerighter because you turned it to the right and we would start to dig anchor holes all day long. Didn’t have any equipment that would dig them by machine. You had to do it by hand. As we would do that all day long until we got the holes dug and set the poles in and start building the lines.

Interviewer: It sounds like a lot of hard manual labor.

Charles Ellison: It was. In fact they had a name for the men who worked on the ground. They called them grunts; you did a lot of grunting.

Interviewer: Was being a lineman a much more prestigious job?

Charles Ellison: Oh much more than being a grunt. Everyone was working to become a lineman.

Interviewer: Well let’s hear from a retired lineman, John Croslin. Mr. Croslin, you spent most of your 35 years with the company in Northern Virginia and you started in 1973. What was that like?

John Croslin: Just about anybody has a bucket truck these days but back in those days you’d start work in the morning you’d climb the pole all about 9 o’clock, 8:30 and you didn’t come down until lunch time. You would stay on the pole and then you would go back after lunch and you would stay on the pole until 3 or 3:30. When I started back then distribution, transmission were all combined. If anybody worked six months, climbed distribution poles, which are 35, 40, 45 foot poles, and then you might work six months climbing 75, 90 foot poles.

Interviewer: I guess it was not a good area for somebody who had a fear of heights?

John Croslin: Uh no.

Interviewer: JJ Horde has also seen tremendous change. He worked for the company for 36 years. Mr. Horde you came to the company right out of the service after the Second World War You worked mainly in substation maintenance, right?

JJ Horde: I was what you called a junker. I made all kind of things. For some of the smaller jobs they didn’t even send a list of materials, we had to scrounge it, make our way through it. And there is plenty stuff right here at Chesterfield in some of the yards around here, there is plenty of metal that you can use. And I am sure they do.

Interviewer: So you were resourceful?

JJ Horde: Oh yeah you had to be resourceful.

Anna Brookes: Believe it or not there was a page for each pole.

Interviewer: Anna Brookes also told us that the tools of the trade were also changing in the office too. Mrs. Brookes you joined VEPCO in 1964 in the Petersburg Billing Office, right?

Anna Brookes: All of your book keeping was by hand, all of your typing was on a manual typewriter, you used to have to fight a memograph machine, some people don’t even know what they are anymore, and I remember when we got our first Xerox machine. I mean that was like, jee, you know it was one of those wet paper, where you had to run it through the water. That was really something to behold for us, to get away from that memograph machine.

Interviewer: Randy McCeever came to the company out of engineering school in 1959. And he helped to design, maintain, and operate massive power transmission lines. Mr. McCeever I bet in your 32 years with the company, you worked with a lot of different technologies.

Randy McCeeker: As I recall in my early engineering days the company didn’t have any computers. And so the engineering group got a computer from some place and we were using it in right away, to help with the right away, the purchase of a right away. And somehow or another the county department found out we had a computer, and it wasn’t long that we could work the computer only at night. And then eventually we couldn’t use the computer because the county people were always using it all of the time.

Interviewer: Francis Daniel you told me you went to work at VEPCO as a clerk typist in 1952. What was the gear like?

Francis Daniel: Well we started with the whole typewriter, old add machine, I used to do the payroll when I first started. And every other Monday we had to figure out the salary here in Petersburg. It was quite difficult because most of the time you had to work overtime just to finish it and get it to Richmond.

Interviewer: Do you think people in offices have it pretty easy?

Francis Daniel: Oh they certainly do.

John Thurston: I became a foreman in February 1952

Interviewer: John Thurston knows firsthand that his 40 years with the company touched a lot of lives.

John Thurston: Well, we built lines to people and hooked electricity up all out in Powatan to Chesapeake where people never had no lights before.

Interviewer: I would have imagined that the people who got that service, must have changed life for them a lot.

John Thurston: When we would turn the lights on they would go turn the lights on. And cheer. They had never seen lights. I don’t think my own kids believe what everyone was doing back in those times. I mean it was just beyond imagination. They just think, “You lying. That didn’t happen.” But it did.