



Electrifying Changes

Clarence J. Anderson



I'll start this narrative of my early days in the electrical field with a little bit of history about my interest in radios. My family moved to Falmouth in 1912, the year I was born. When I was a child, I used to go to the few houses in town that had radios to listen to them. Maurice Watson, Sr. was in the radio field long before me. I often went to his house at Watson's corner to see his radio equipment when I was very small. Maurice was meter installer and meter reader for the Cape and Vineyard Electric Co. for many years. He and Chandler Jones, who lived in the Katharine Lee Bates house, were the earliest radio tinkerers in Falmouth that I can remember.

There were no plug-in radios then; they were operated by batteries, big, expensive A and B batteries. The A batteries were 6 volt storage batteries like a car battery. The B batteries were two big battery blocks, each 45 volts for a total of 90 volts.

At that time, radios had no speakers and people used earphones, the old earmuff style with a metal band across your head. The radio would have multiple plugs so four people could sit around, pretty close together at the end of their five-foot cords, and listen to the news or the music. Speakers arrived in the mid-20s; the first ones were those big horns that sat on a separate table from the radio.

Charles R. Nichols took care of 80 street lights in Falmouth Village in 1907. He was paid \$399.96, used 1,337 gallons of oil costing \$180.67, needed one new 10 cent chimney and \$3.15 worth of matches and wicks for the year. This photo was taken on October 10, 1907 on Main Street. 1909 was his last year as lamplighter. The Village streets were all electrified by 1910. By the end of 1914 even the outlying villages had electric streetlights and the era of the lamplighter ended in Falmouth. Photo by Mamie Handy. Courtesy Patricia Handy Malley Lauber, first cousin twice removed of the photographer.

Clarence Anderson with the
"apple picker's basket."
Photo by Bruce Chalmers.



I remember listening to hours of organ or violin music. There were no advertisements at all, just station identification announcements. In those days some radio stations were owned and operated by the different radio manufacturers who were running the station so their customers would have a reason to buy their radios! That was true of R.C.A. and W.L.W., the Crosley Radio Company of Cincinnati. It was all AM, of course, in the 1920s; Major Armstrong invented FM in the 1930s.

Before battery radios came along, there were crystal sets and they used no batteries or any kind of power. Almost every kid built a crystal set, but their range was very limited. The only thing we could get on our little sets was a small private broadcasting station at Colonel Green's estate at South Dartmouth across Buzzards Bay. It was the Round Hills Broadcasting Corporation and its call letters were W.M.A.F. To get anything else, a tube type radio was needed.

People with the big radios, radios with two or three or possibly five tubes, used to listen to station KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pa., one of the first radio stations in America. Next came WBZ in Boston, and soon after that stations sprang up all over the country. There was WLS, the World's Largest Store, a station owned by Sears Roebuck & Co. Most famous of all was WSM of Nashville, Tennessee, the station owned by the National Life and Accident Insurance Company. In Falmouth, the race was on to see who could build the best radio that would receive the stations farthest away. Antenna wires were put up as high as possible and were between 100 and 150 feet long.

Many radios were home made in those days and people talked about radios a lot, it was everyday conversation. I think the paper would print a different radio circuit two or three times a week. In school I would sit and dream about a radio circuit of some sort. After

school when the other kids would be playing ball I would be tinkering with a radio. But it was not until my father died that I got one in the house.

My father died in 1925 when I was 13. He had been sick for about two years so by this time there was no money in the house. I lived with my mother, but I left school at 14 to work for Cape Cod Electric Company, a branch of Rezendes Electric Co. of New Bedford. They had just opened up a shop next to Davis' furniture store on Main Street.

"Oh boy, I am a big shot now, I am an electrician!" I thought. Well, you know, the first job they gave me was to dig a 200 foot trench for an underground service in the Acapesket area. What a disappointment that was. In those days you dug trenches by hand, no machines then. I had to dig from a pole on Menauhant Road to a new house on the Vineyard Sound side.

Electricity had come to Falmouth in 1909, three years before I was born. It came to private buildings first, with street lighting just a little later. The town fathers at that time were mostly retired whaling captains who did not take kindly to that new contraption called electricity when there was still plenty of whale oil around and coal oil (kerosene) had just become very plentiful.

Henry Taylor was the superintendent of the first electric light plant. Later he became the first electrical inspector for the town of Falmouth and we used to call him Gumshoe Taylor. The power plant on Falmouth Harbor had been dismantled before my time, but I do know there was a power transfer substation still there as late as 1927 with a man named Link Robbins in charge of the building. I used to go in there once in a while with Ernest Cardoza, Sr., who was the maintenance foreman for the Cape and Vineyard Electric Co.

Mr. Cardoza often picked me up and we would go around at night to replace burned out street light bulbs. We would drive all over Falmouth in a truck, up to Cataumet, Pocasset and Monument Beach. We had a long pole with an "apple picker's basket" on the end of it. When we found a burned out street light, we would pull it out, socket and all, unscrew the old bulb, screw in a new one and poke it back up into place. I still have one of those old "apple picker" poles.

After digging that 200 foot trench for the Cape Cod Electric Co., I soon got to wiring houses. By then all the houses in the center of town were already electrified and most of Woods Hole and Falmouth Heights, but there were still many people using kerosene lamps in the outlying districts. I can remember the gas light system still in place in St. Barnabas Church after they had installed electricity. They had an acetylene gas generator down in the cellar. You would put carbide and water in the machine which then made acetylene gas and piped it up to the gas lights where you would open a valve and light the gas with a match.

I started to work at house wiring at just about the time when knob and tube type wiring was coming to an end. I did a few additions that way and that was all. Romex and BX were just coming in then and that was all we used from then on. My boss believed in letting me learn by doing. He showed me once how to wire a house and then let me work at it alone. When he came back he'd say this part was OK, but I should change that part. I learned.

I electrified many old houses and new ones too. When they first put electricity into houses in the 20s and early 30s, they usually put one light in the middle of the ceiling with a pull chain to turn it on and off. Very few wall outlets were provided: one in the kitchen, and perhaps one or two more in the rest of the house. Almost all lighting was done from a central suspended

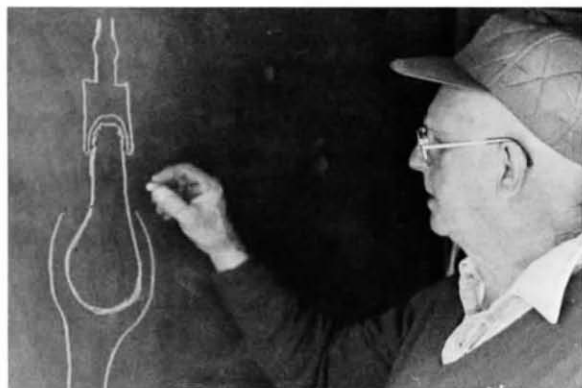
ceiling fixture. A lot of the wiring I did in older houses was to add wall switches and outlets to the different rooms. Old houses or new, I can still see the happy faces of people as I would tell them "Watch, here it comes!" and I would flip on a switch and there would be light.

We did not have electricity in my mother's house and that became one of my early projects. I can still remember when it came time to turn on the brand new lights. My mother would not touch any of the switches. I had to turn them on myself, and then she went from room to room turning lights off and on. She was speechless for a while.

I think back to how my mother used to complain about me wasting electricity when the total electric light bill was about \$2.86 a month, and how she would run around after me and shut off lights. She also learned a new trick which I soon caught onto: she would put in smaller light bulbs when I wasn't looking.

In the late 20s, electric refrigerators were just coming into use. The first ones were wooden iceboxes converted to electricity by installing an electric compressor in the cellar and running copper tubing up to the kitchen to the cooling unit in the ice box. The early units were filled with sulphur dioxide, a gas that could suffocate you; in working on them, more than once we would drive people out of a house. I remember well doing just that in Santuit at 1 a.m. after spending all evening trying to discover the leak or the plug or whatever was wrong with it. Often the fire department would be called to get a leaking refrigerator out of a house.

My first encounter with the evil sulphur dioxide *ice box* (we didn't call them refrigerators then) was when The Moors was being developed. Every house there



Clarence Anderson explains how the "apple picker's basket" was used to replace burned out street light bulbs.
Photo by Bruce Chalmers.

had one. But within three or four years they were being replaced by the wonderful new General Electric Monitor Top all sealed electric refrigerator. General Electric really cornered the market for a while with that thing, but others soon caught on and at last, no more ice boxes.

There were many interruptions in electrical power in those days, more so than now. Everybody still kept their kerosene lamps ready in case of need. Some people had very ornate kerosene lamps that they wanted converted to electricity. This became an added source of income for the electric shop. David Quinn was the first electrician I remember in Falmouth. He went out to California for a number of years, coming back to Falmouth in the late 30s. Falmouth Electric on Main Street near Cahoon Court operated by Carl Howland was the first electric shop I can remember.

For many years after getting electricity into homes, radios were still battery powered with the old A and B batteries. In the mid-20s, battery eliminators came along. You could hook up the A battery eliminator and the B battery eliminator and then plug the eliminators into the house current through a light socket. We thought that was marvelous. But by the late 20s all electric sets came along. Like the ice box, the battery radio was doomed and a new era had come.

Clarence J. Anderson grew up in a more primitive Falmouth that had changed little in 200 years. There was no electricity; running water was not prevalent; horses were used for transportation, especially in the winter, and there were many open fields to raise the hay for them. There was a bigger market for kerosene than for gasoline; people raised more food than they bought and considered canned vegetables a delicacy. Mr. Anderson worked for Dr. Warbasse's father often, changing the storm windows at "Gladheim" and making carpentry repairs there.