



**Graceville resident Gertha Simpson could be considered “the mother of WFEC.” She helped give birth to the Co-op 63 years ago and remains actively involved in it at age 95.**

## Founding member plays key role in Co-op past and present

If West Florida Electric Cooperative has a matriarch, the title might belong to Gertha Simpson, of Graceville. From the Co-op’s beginning in 1937, she’s played an integral part, both as a founding member and as the wife of one of its first employees. Today, as one of WFEC’s oldest charter members at age 95, she maintains the same active involvement in the Co-op, as well as her commitment to helping others in the community, as in those earlier days.

### Looking back

Over nearly a century, Simpson has witnessed a lifetime of change in the rural areas now served by WFEC. Some Co-op members probably share her recollections of what life was like before WFEC provided electricity to the countryside. “We just had a fireplace for heat, and had kerosene lamps and lanterns sitting around for light. The oil lamps smelled!” she recalled. “We washed clothes in a big wash pot by a hand pump, and we had to use a scrub board. Then we hung them out on the clothesline.”

### Serving others

Simpson and her husband, A. D., now deceased, were among the area residents who collected the signatures needed to get WFEC established. “We talked to everyone we saw. Even when we went to church, we mentioned, ‘You can get lights.’ That was the magic word – Everybody liked lights,” she explained. WFEC began actual operation in 1939, receiving its first federal Rural Electrification Administration loan to build 262 miles of line to serve 712 members.

Simpson’s husband began earning 25 cents an hour as WFEC’s right-of-way foreman, serving 21 years before retiring and becoming a board member. The men who built the Co-op’s first lines endured hardships to make life easier for their families and neighbors. “I remember my husband coming home at night with his pants frozen to his knees from wading in the cold rain,” she said. Before a bridge crossed the Choctawhatchee River, the crews had to transport equipment in small boats to build lines for the members on the other side, she added.

At that time, the minimum monthly bill per WFEC account was \$1.98; the Simpsons paid about \$30 to have their house wired for a 60-amp box, she said. “My first appliance was a refrigerator, and the next thing I got was a smoothing iron.”

From the beginning, Simpson has faithfully attended WFEC’s annual meetings. “The first one was at the school house [in Graceville], where the gym is. Each member brought a covered dish,” she said. “The next meeting, we had a fish fry. The men members fried the fish and cornbread, and the women

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made potato salad.”

### **Still going strong**

At WFEC’s most recent annual meeting, Simpson was recognized as the oldest member present. “Since they started, I’ve only missed two, and that was because I had a business and just couldn’t leave it,” she noted.

Simpson owned and operated a restaurant for 30 years. “We always served the linemen when the crews would be restoring power after a hurricane,” she said. Simpson has catered for schools, churches, businesses and events over the years, as well.

Maintaining a long-time leading role in the Graceville Lions Club, she served as its president in 1998 at age 92. Among her many awards and achievements is being named Woman of the Year by the Lion’s Club in 1975. She has two children, five grandchildren and several great-grandchildren.



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