

The Rice Lake Cable System

*First Person Report from Earl Cleaveland:
Transcribed from a tape recorded in 1985.*

“The dealers in Rice Lake [Wisconsin] told a newspaper that, because Rice Lake was in a valley (with that big hill southwest of us), we probably never would get television reception here. About that time, I was dickering to put up a tower and try the antenna to see if we could get a television station. Within a week we had a tower up that we bought at a turkey farm down southeast of Canton. We got KSTP fairly well. It sure drew crowds.

“We had little kids sitting all over the living room floor. Every time you came in in the evening, it was dark in the room. They were watching KSTP television. You had to step very carefully to avoid stepping on a kid. They were all well-behaved. They came from all over town. They’d sit there, just as quiet, watching that picture. First thing you’d know, you had adults, too, coming in to watch television.

“So, the dealers had to take back what they’d said about no television reception in Rice Lake. It was marginal, I must admit. At times, it would be bad. But it was acceptable, I thought. We even got San Antonio, Texas, butting in a couple of times in the summer.

“It wasn’t long before our neighbors wanted to hook up onto our antenna. I think I hooked up Abramson, the second one over, and Julian Bijon first, as well as Dr. Southard. He lived up three hundred feet back of us. Then I thought, well, I’ll put up a bigger tower out in the middle of the lot. I put up a 140-foot tower right out in the middle of our field out here. The reception was much better then. All of the neighbors wanted to hook on.

“So, we started hooking on the neighborhood, going from there perhaps two or three blocks each way—with amplifiers, etc. We had Paul’s Sheet Metal make up boxes for the drop lines. We had to design everything. It wasn’t too easy.

“We got most of the east side of town wired for television cable. At the same time, there was an outfit in Milwaukee Sam Shapiro backed that was called Dairyland Booster Cable TV. They put a big tower up out near the radio station and brought cable in. They were competing with us. We had about 115 subscribers to our cable system, and they had around 115 or 120 on the west side. They were trying to get permission to cross the railroad tracks to come over and do part of the east side that wasn’t wired. That was the best section up here, near Craite and Wilson, that we hadn’t yet got to.

“They were delayed by a permit from the railroad, meanwhile, we were waiting on cable. Evidently, there was difficulty getting cable at that time. I was just desperate to get that section wired before they got a permit. When the cable came, Don Knutson and I got busy and started stretching cable up the alley just north of Knapp street. When we got up

the alley between Hammond and Craite, we bumped into Dairyland. They'd got the permit to cross the tracks, and we'd just turned up that alley north from that alley when they got there. You should see them standing there with their hands on their hips. They were too late. We already had the cable going up there. So, they lost out on the east side by a matter of minutes. We strung our cable and ignored them. We got the east side all wired.

“It wasn't long after this that they started to have trouble with their system. They claimed that AC was getting into the line. I had an inkling of what their trouble was, but I wasn't about to tell them. I think at that time I was so short of money that if they had offered me \$5,000, I'd have told them what was wrong with their system. They were getting AC in the line all right, but it wasn't the power company's. They had Westinghouse and General Electric engineers over here, paying them fabulous fees to check out their lines to see if they were grounded properly and everything. They had so much AC in the line that after they got about 135 or 140 subscribers on, people were complaining bitterly about the reception. They had a black-and-white bar going up through the picture. Some of them couldn't hold a picture at all.

“I knew that they were connecting the sets directly to the main line, and each set would feed a little AC into it unless it was isolated with an RF choke or something. I made all of my sets isolated from the line with a little RF transformer. It would pass radio frequencies but not AC 60-cycle.

“So theirs finally got so bad that the city got into the act and forced them either to [improve service or] give the payments back to the customers and take the amplifiers and cables off the poles and get out of town. That's how bad it had gotten. They finally took the amplifiers and shipped them back to Philco. Oh, I didn't tell you that they had Philco engineers here for over a year trying to straighten that thing out. They couldn't. I would laugh up my sleeve all the time. If they'd have offered me \$5,000 I think I'd have taken it and told them what their trouble was.

“They tried everything. When they had amplifiers getting water in them because they ran the cable directly into the ends of the boxes, then they started putting more slack in the cable and putting a canvas bag over the top. Some of those canvas bags I still have. Oh, Man, I thought—with no ventilation those tube amplifiers are going to just burn up. That's what happened. One of them right back of our house burned up when they finally got in here to string cable. On a rare basis, they had a few customers here.

“Anyway, the city kept after them, and they finally had to take all the amplifiers down and pay the money back to the customers. They had charged \$150 a connection.

“Dairyland Booster Cable TV had borrowed money from the Dairy State Bank for cable and all this stuff. The bank called me to find out if I wanted their stuff. Evidently, somebody else had bought all the remaining cable and stuff that (Dairyland) had in stock. The bank sold them the whole works for \$1500. People said to this fellow, 'What are you going to do with all this stuff? You don't know anything about television (and he didn't).'

So, he finally stopped payment on the check. That's when the bank call me and wanted to know if I wanted it. I went down and talked to them. They sold me the whole works for \$400. That included all the cable on the poles on the west side and parts of the east side, the downtown area. (They said it was going to cost them \$4,000 to take it down, so they'd save that much, anyway.) I think they expected me to take the cable down, but I made a deal with the city and the telephone company to pay rent on the poles and continue the use of the cable. Then all I had to do was correct each subscriber's terminal and get amplifiers for the cable system. We put up a 140-foot tower on the hill on Anderson's property way out on Augusta. When we got the amplifiers from California, we wired this thing up and everything worked beautifully.

“One of the engineers for Dairyland cable system kept warning me. ‘Just wait until you get to Cornell Avenue. You’ll have trouble, because that’s where our trouble started.’ I didn’t think I would, and we didn’t. We went all the way into town and hooked up the other system on the east side to that cable system. Then we had a successful cable system. No bitching about that.

“We did have a lot of trouble for awhile with radiation. The cable at that time was single-jacket covered—i.e., a single copper jacket over it. It would radiate. The people that did have their own antennas would get a double picture, one from the cable and one from the station. It was making them holler to the city that we were interfering with their television reception. We had quite a hassle about that. I finally offered to take in their television antennas and give them a cable connection for them. That went over. We eliminated that problem, but it was a real headache for awhile, and it looked as if we were going to lose the whole works. That’s when I signed the house and property over to Catherine to make sure it stayed put. I was incorporated on the business side. That took care of that problem, and I could get off that phenobarbital I was taking to get a little sleep. That was such a hectic time for awhile.

“At the start of winter in 1952, I was carrying this 36-foot wooden extension ladder around the corner of the house and slipped on the ice. I wrenched my back, and it really went out. My left leg was almost paralyzed, and it started to get cold and shrink around the calf and the thigh. I was in the hospital up here at Rice Lake. They put me in traction, etc. They put a heat-up outfit over my leg, even blistered the skin. It wasn’t doing any good.

“After about a week, I got the heck out of there. I came home and called Doc Hawke. He came up give me adjustments as many as four times a day. That would relieve the pain so I could get some sleep without sleeping tablets. He must have given me forty or forty-five adjustments, but he couldn’t keep it ‘in.’ Apparently, I had two discs that were ruptured. When I’d get up to walk around a little bit, one or the other would slip out again. The pain would then be back.

“I finally got in touch with a doctor about getting an appointment at Mayo’s. It was in January that Catherine and I went to Mayo’s, where they did some tests on my back.

They said I had to have an operation right away because scar tissue would form on the nerve there, and then I would not be able to walk at all.

“They scheduled the operation the very next morning. Just to show you how many things can go wrong in a hospital, I had this myelogram (on the tilt-table), and they didn’t tell me that you’re not supposed to sit up after that. While I had the myelogram, this guy turned around after putting a little sticker on my back to close the hole where he had put the dye in and let it drain out after the myelogram. He turned around to do something else, and I felt liquid trickling down my side, so I told him about it. He said, ‘Oh, the thing opened up again.’ I think my brain was running out the back. Anyway, he closed it up again. They wheeled me out in the hall, close to a window. It was in the wintertime. It was snowing and looked kind of pretty out. I was sitting up watching the snow. Then another cart came in alongside of me. This fellow was lying down. He said, ‘You didn’t have a myelogram, did you?’ I told him I had. He said, ‘Didn’t they tell you not to sit up after it. I’m a doctor, and I just had a myelogram, too. Boy, you’re going to have one splitting headache!’ Sure enough, I did. I had an awful headache after that. That’s one booboo.

“The next one came when they wheeled me out for the operation. Evidently, they were so busy on the one floor that they wheeled me up on another floor. Just as a guy with blood all over his apron was putting on his rubber gloves and were ready to put the thing over my nose and face, he read my name off a tab on my forehead. He says to the other one, ‘This is Clieland.’ ‘Hey, wait a minute,’ I said, ‘it’s Cleaveland.’ He says, ‘Cleaveland?’ He looked again and said, ‘Oh, this isn’t the right fellow. He’s got to go down on another floor.’ I found out that they were going to operate on my heart. If I hadn’t heard them say Clieland, maybe I’d have had a heart transplant.

“Anyway, after the operation, I was in bed. I had half of the left shinbone taken out and a pressure bandage wrapped around the leg. Boy, that thing hurt like mad. Finally, an intern came in and I said, ‘Isn’t there any way to relieve the pain in that leg?’ He said, ‘Oh, yeah,’ he said, ‘they’ve got that bandage much too tight. He loosened it up, but it slipped back a bit. He said, ‘How’s that?’ I said, ‘Oh, that’s much better.’ I was just about to go to sleep and then I thought that my left foot seemed wet. I could feel it between my toes. I thought that I’d better call the nurse before I dropped off to sleep. I lit the hall light. When she came in, I told her she’d better look at my foot, that it felt wet down there. She threw the covers back, and she said, ‘Oh, my God,’ and she ran out. A bunch of them came in. They wrapped my leg up tighter again. Here I’d been bleeding to death. There were a couple of quarts of blood in the bed. Then I had to have three pints of blood to replace what I lost in the bed. If I’d dropped off to sleep, that would have been the end of me, for sure.

“Then, for over two weeks, I couldn’t stand the sound or sight of food or water, so they had to feed me intravenously. Every time somebody would mention my having a glass of water, I would feel like throwing up. I was gagging something terrible. There was a Canadian in my room with me, and I remember that one day he told the nurse (after I had

been doing this for three or four days), ‘You’ll have to get me out of here. This guy gags twenty-four hours a day.’

“I thought sure I was going to croak. They couldn’t seem to find the reason for all this stomach upset. I thought I had a cast iron stomach before that. Finally, a bunch of doctors came in and discussed this situation at the foot of the bed. I remember that one of them suggested taking me off penicillin. They agreed. So, they stopped the penicillin, and that was the end of my stomach upset. What a relief. Within a few days after that, I was feeling much better but was still a little weak. I said to Catherine who was there: ‘You know what I’d like? A steak sandwich and a beer.’ She said, ‘I’ll get one at the restaurant across the way. She got a steak sandwich for me and one for the guy (a different one) in the other bed and a beer. Boy, I felt just like jumping right up out of that bed and going home right then. The next day, the doctor was in, and he said, ‘Boy, you look pretty good.’ I said, ‘You know what I had yesterday? I had a steak sandwich and a beer.’

“ ‘Oh, that’s what did it,’ he said. ‘We can’t serve that in the hospital.’

“The next day, I got out of there, but some of the things that happened there were really something. Once, I was in the next bed to a guy named Louie. This woman came in who’d had an operation on her head. She’d had a brain tumor removed. She was a little bit out of her noodle. Anyway, she came in and sat down in the big easy chair there in the room. She started to tear a newspaper into strips. I wondered what in the world she was going to do. I was on my back, unable to turn over or anything. Louie said, ‘I think you’re in the wrong room.’ ‘No,’ she says, ‘I’m not either. Do you think I’m crazy or something? I found a room with two nice guys in it.’ We laughed, but we lit the light for the nurse to come.

“Meanwhile, here she’s tearing up this paper and hanging the strips over the edge of the chair. Then she pulled up her gown like she was going to go to the toilet right in that chair.

“The nurse got there just in time. She says, ‘Oh, Mrs. Williamson. You don’t belong in here. C’mon, get out of here. You’re in a room with two men.’ Mrs. Williamson said, ‘That’s what I wanted,’ as they took her out.

“Anyway, we had some good years with the cable business. Then Don and Pat got into a mess so they decided to separate. I decided to sell the business. I was dickering with [a couple of men]. I was going to sell the whole system to them for \$260,000. Anyway, [the first fellow] kept working on a deal where he wouldn’t have to pay too much down. He said he was trying to borrow the money. I found out later he could have borrowed it without any trouble from Sam Parker, but he wanted to get it at a lower rate of interest. While we were dickering, WCCO sent an attorney over. When he arrived, I was on a service call. Catherine told him where I was, and he drove down there and was waiting for me when I came out of the house. He told me WCCO was interested in getting into the cable business. He said, ‘What would it take to shut off everybody else that’s dickering and call it a deal?’ I said, ‘Three hundred forty thousand dollars,’ and he said,

‘OK, I’ll go back, and we’ll call you at six o’clock to tell you whether it is or isn’t a deal. That’ll be a cash deal.’

“So, I called up [the first fellow] and told him what was up. I think he thought I was trying to pressure him into hurrying up and signing up, give me the dough, etc. I was telling the truth, and he didn’t believe it. I told him, this guy’s going to call at six o’clock, and I couldn’t back out if I accepted it.

“At six o’clock right on the nose, the telephone rang. The attorney was on the phone, and he said, ‘You’ve got a deal. It’s sold.

“About two minutes after six, [the first fellow] called up. I told him, and oh, man, was he mad. Then [the other fellow] called up from up at the lake where he was. He tried to talk me out of it. I told him what I had told [the first fellow] -- who was handling most of his affairs for the matter — that that was it, there was no way to back out. I saw Sam Parker later and Parker said, ‘I told him I’d loan him the money for the whole thing so he could pay the whole thing cash — but, no, he wanted to see if he couldn’t get ¼ per cent less interest rate or something. So he was dickering with banks in Minneapolis.

“One interesting but kind of embarrassing thing occurred when Don and I went over to settle up with them as far as the paperwork was concerned in New Richmond, where the WCCO Chairman of the Board had offices (in a big home there). Mr. Doyle (the attorney) was with us, and he said, ‘Well, we might as well park here and walk over to the house.’ It was a great big home, with gardeners and everything—an estate, really. We walked over, and it was an awfully hot day, perhaps 95 degrees. We had our suit coats off, and our ties off, and our shirts open. We went in our shirtsleeves because I couldn’t stand that heat.

“We walked over to this house, and he took us down in the basement. You should see the room for the conference—all leather-upholstered, deep-cushioned chairs and an 15- or 18-foot long black walnut, hand-carved table. There was the old Chairman of the Board, about 90 years old, in a white Palm Beach suit, white tie, white shirt. He looked immaculate. All of the officers of the corporation had suits and ties. They looked great. The Chairman said, ‘You sit down at the end of the table, Mr. Cleaveland.’ With Don and I in our shirt sleeves, I felt like crawling under the table.

“That was when we wound up the deal. In December of ’65, it was finished entirely, and we got the money for it.

“One interesting note is that early in the days when I had the cable system, I needed more money for amplifiers, etc., and I couldn’t borrow a nickel from anybody. I tried to borrow some from Norman Stein, and he was willing to loan it on a percentage basis. At one time, I was pretty desperate so I told him I’d sell him half of the cable system for \$5,000. He tried to get the money from his dad, who said, ‘But Norman (he talked kind of broken English), you don’t know nothin’ about TB.’ He called it TB, like tuberculosis. Norman says to him, ‘I don’t have to know anything about TV, Cleaveland knows all about TV.

'No, no', the father said, 'You have to know something about the business you're going in.'

"Shortly after, I got things straightened out, and I was over at Stein's house on a service call. The old man was there, and Norman. Norman looked out the window and said, 'What kind of a car are you making service calls in?' I said, 'A Chrysler New Yorker.' He says, 'See, Dad. Look, now he's driving a New Yorker.' Then he said, 'How many customers have you got?' I said, 'Two hundred fifty.' Let's see, we were getting \$2.50 a month then. He did some rapid calculation and said, 'See, look, Dad. He's got 250 customers and he makes \$2.50 apiece. He said to his dad, 'And you wouldn't let me loan him \$5,000 for half of this! Oh, Dad, that's the biggest booboo you ever pulled.'

"Part of the agreement we made was that Don would stay on as Manager. I didn't know how long he would manage it, but he's still on today. It's 1985 now, so he's been with them a long time and getting a good salary.

"When we finally sold, we had 1700 homes wired for television cable, and, of course, the rates were a little higher. We were getting \$75 for a connection at first and \$2.50 a month. We changed that because a lot of people couldn't dig up the \$75. We offered them the choice between that or paying \$15 for the connection and \$3.50 a month. That's what the majority of them did.