



Golden Boy

(continued from previous page)

of “Reddy vs. Willie” to the cooperatives. Not yet knocked out, Reddy and his crew promptly took their arguments to the Fourth U.S.

Circuit Court of Appeals.

“This is the most vicious thing that rural electric systems have yet encountered,” commented then-NRECA General Manager Clyde Ellis. “We’re not fighting one or 10 power companies, we’re fighting more than 100 of them!”

On January 7, 1957, a three-judge panel from the appeals bench issued a unanimous decision in favor of Willie. The court noted similarities between the two characters but added that Reddy “has appeared in thousands of poses doing almost everything possible and in every conceivable activity. The plaintiff has no right to appropriate as its exclusive property all the situations in which figures may be used to illustrate the manifold uses of electricity.”

Out of the victory, Willie came to symbolize more than cooperative friendliness — he was now the true embodiment of cooperative spunk, willing to stand up for consumers in the face of impossible odds against the entrenched might of huge power companies. The phrase, “He’s small, but he’s wiry” became part of the trademark Willie was granted by the U.S. Patent Office in 1957.

Willie Revival

By the 1970s, the popularity of cartoon spokescharacters began to wane, with most of the few survivors relegated to cereal boxes and snack foods. In Reddy Kilowatt’s case, the energy crunch of the decade made life tough. As demand for electricity outstripped supply, most private power companies simply gave him the pink slip, figuring he was no longer needed as a promotional tool.

Willie, on the other hand, rose to meet the energy crisis. He donned a sweater and hopped on a bicycle, caulked windows and weatherstripped doors in new ads pushing energy conservation and efficiency tips. Yet by the

early 1980s, many electric cooperatives began to view Willie as antiquated and placed him on a back shelf like an old appliance.

Then a surprising development took place — animation made a comeback in the advertising/marketing world, starting with Metropolitan Life Insurance using Peanuts characters to sell financial products.

“Much of the rebirth was fueled by the sizable baby boomer market eager to recapture facets of its childhood,” Callcott mentions. “King Features Syndicate even took out ‘work wanted’ ads for old cartoon favorites like Betty Boop, Popeye the Sailor and Blondie, hoping to cash in on the nostalgia craze.”


In response, Willie Wiredhand became the rage in electric cooperative circles once again, though not as a full-fledged marketing vehicle. He had evolved into a pop art celebrity, allowing his image to adorn novelty items like coffee mugs and watches.

Even Reddy Kilowatt returned from exile. In 1998, Minneapolis-based Northern States Power (NSP), which serves 1.4 million customers in Minnesota, Wisconsin, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and the Dakotas, bought exclusive rights to the character from Ashton Collins Jr., son of Reddy’s creator. Reddy was outfitted with new sneakers and given a sidekick, Reddy Flame, to promote NSP’s natural gas operations.

Reddy quickly experienced somewhat of a brownout, though — in August 2000, NSP merged with Denver, Colo.-based New Century Energies to form Xcel Energy. A spokesman for Xcel Energy says, “Reddy is in a bit of a transition with his new employer. Right now, his duties are largely ceremonial — parades and safety demonstrations.”

While Willie and his spokescharacter friends may rise and fall in prominence over time, Callcott believes consumers can be assured that they will never totally fade away.

“The landscape may change, but people do not lose their desire to feel a personal connection to products and services that permeate their lives,” she stresses. “If anything, this need intensifies when distribution channels expand — as they did at the turn of the last century when mass industrialization and transportation arrived on the scene and today, with the introduction of the Internet.”

She concludes, “Unlike human characters, such as Aunt Jemima, Betty Crocker and Uncle Ben, Willie Wiredhand does not require physical updating. As a perky plug, he still represents electricity while allowing cooperatives to leverage their ‘brand’ of reliable, consumer-owned electric power.” 

Richard G. Biever serves as senior editor of Electric Consumer, the statewide electric cooperative publication of Indiana.



A FAMOUS FACE: Willie Wiredhand today lives as a pop art icon. On occasion, he even takes time out of his busy schedule to emcee special events, such as this appearance at the 52nd NRECA Annual Meeting in 1994 to promote the “Friends of Willie” fan club.