“Reedy 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 trade-union’s lexicon as a code word for fighting one or 10 power companies, we’re fighting more than 100 of them!”

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.

“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.