



# Golden Boy



Still “plugging along,” Willie Wiredhand celebrates 50 years of lighting up electric cooperative promotional efforts

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A touch of tarnish may be creeping across his brass-plated crown. And the roundness of his waistline is a sure indication that this child of the 1950s is reaching his 50s.

But the twinkle in his eye, the smile on his face, the ever-present wave will never age — nor will his dedicated service to electric cooperatives and their consumers.

Willie Wiredhand, complete with a light-socket head, push-button nose and an old-fashioned electrical plug filling out his lower half, celebrates a half century as the official mascot and “spokescharacter” of electric cooperatives this year. The friendly and inspirational figure has come to symbolize dependable, local, consumer-owned electricity all over the world. (In Latin America, for example, he is known as “Electro Pepe.”)

“Willie” has appeared on just about every type of cooperative promotional item over the years — signage for buildings and substations, T-shirts, ball caps, golf balls, Christmas ornaments, beach towels, night lights and much more. Although his presence on both the local and national stage has declined in recent years in the face of more aggressive cooperative marketing activities,



**COOPERATIVE SPOKESPLUG:** From top, a 1968 comic book featured Willie Wiredhand showing a city family the benefits of cooperative membership; the nation’s electric cooperatives teamed up with Sylvania in 1957 to produce and sell light bulbs featuring Willie; in a February 1957 editorial cartoon, Willie’s creator, Drew McLay, could not resist taking a shot at arch nemesis Reddy Kilowatt and his private power company supporters following years of legal wrangling.



Willie Wiredhand remains a viable and valuable connection between cooperatives and their consumers.

“Willie is one of a long line of industrial spokescharacters that have been used to identify and personalize industrial products and services,” notes Margaret Callcott, a research manager for Scripps Networks in Nashville, Tenn., who has written extensively on advertising subjects. “Most companies would love to have a symbol as recognizable as Willie Wiredhand to distinguish them in the marketplace.”

### Origins of an Icon

Willie Wiredhand was “born” October 30, 1950, the creation of the late Andrew “Drew” McLay, an entomologist-turned-freelance-artist working for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA), based at the time in Washington, D.C. NRECA is the service organization for the nation’s 900-plus electric cooperatives.

“We were toying with ideas for an electric cooperative symbol,” recalls William Roberts, who in the 1950s served as editor of NRECA’s trade publication *Rural Electrification*. “I had tossed out the idea that the symbol ought to portray rural electric service as the farmer’s hired hand, which in those days was almost the whole public relations story we wanted to get across. Drew picked up on the idea at my home one night after a couple of beers.”

Sprawled out on Roberts’ living room floor with a sketchpad, McLay created “Willie the Wired Hand.” NRECA’s membership then selected the symbol, shortened to “Willie Wiredhand,” as their animated ambassador in 1951.

Willie came along in the heyday of “cartoon” advertising, when hundreds of lovable characters — Mr. Clean, Mr. Peanut, Mr. Salty, the Jolly Green Giant and Elsie the Cow — promoted everything from food and household cleaners to stomach antacids. (The first animated “pitchman” dates from 1890s France — the Michelin Man, a guy made of stacked tires.)

“These characters exhibited personality — a friendly face and jolly demeanor with which consumers could

develop a positive relationship,” Callcott remarks, explaining that with the rise of mass production and mass transportation, companies needed a way to make their products stand out and at the same time build consumer loyalty.

“For whatever reason, people connect and respond to these characters — they touch a human need to personify things,” she adds. “By the time we reach adulthood, personification is ingrained in our psyche: we name our vehicles, plants, even our guns. We are always seeking to relate to them on some human level, never quite believing that somehow they do not have a soul of their own.”

Callcott emphasizes that utilities in particular needed to personalize a very intangible product.

“Willie Wiredhand, Reddy Kilowatt, Katie Kord, Handy Heat and Miss Flame were among the many characters electric and gas companies developed to address this challenge,” she says.

### Reddy vs. Willie

Electric cooperatives initially wanted to use Reddy Kilowatt as their spokescharacter. Reddy — depicted with a body, arms and legs of jagged red lightning bolts and a round head equipped with a light bulb nose and outlets for ears — had been around since 1926 and was being used by 188 of the nation’s private power companies as of 1951.

However, Reddy’s creator — Ashton B. Collins, who had licensed his character to the private utilities — believed that electric cooperatives were “socialistic” because they borrowed money from the federal government. Not only did Collins refuse to let Reddy be associated with cooperatives, he instructed his lawyers to warn NRECA that any rival

character cooperatives might develop would infringe on his exclusive trademarks.

Believing that Willie — with his UL-approved (for the era) body — was different enough from Reddy, electric cooperatives pressed ahead with his introduction. “Any similarity between trim, efficient Willie Wiredhand and the shocking figure of Reddy Kilowatt is purely coincidental,” NRECA said.

After several years of angry exchanges, Collins and a coalition of 109 private power companies formed Reddy Kilowatt, Inc. and on July 14, 1953, filed a federal lawsuit against a South Carolina electric cooperative that was using Willie. Their brief accused electric cooperatives of copyright infringement and unfair competitive practices. For relief, they asked coopera-

tives to scrap any use of Willie in their advertising efforts and to pay damages.

The gist of Reddy’s case was not in how Willie looked, but rather private power company concerns that in marketing electricity “Willie’s poses” would cause public confusion. Willie’s attorneys, however, countered that long before Reddy, other animated characters had seen widespread use in the electric industry as trademarks and promotions. In fact, testimony revealed that Reddy’s handlers had acted like B-grade movie gangsters over the years, using threats of legal action to “unplug” other spokescharacters such as Arkansas Power & Light’s “The Willing Watt,” Boston Edison’s “Eddie Edison,” Bradford Electric Company’s “Mr. Watts-His-Name” and “Elec-Tric” of Cincinnati Gas and Electric.

Finally in June 1956, after a weeklong trial, a federal district court judge in South Carolina awarded the first round  
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**STICKING POINT:** Patches and stickers featuring Willie Wiredhand were (and still are) commonplace on many uniforms and hard hats, even displayed on toolboxes and vehicles, of electric cooperative line workers and employees around the U.S.

