

# A Country Boy's Dreams

**There was a time in the not-so-distant past when there was a really big difference between a city kid and a country kid. Juan D. Nichols can attest to that.**

Born in 1931, "Juan D." as he's widely known today, grew up in Coke, a rural community between Quitman and Winnsboro. He was the only child of a farmer father and school-teacher mother. The 1930s and the Great Depression era was a difficult time for most, but especially for farmers. "My parents had a very hard time making a good life," Juan D. said.

Without running water or electricity, in those tough economic times, most farm families had mighty struggles—but there was food.

"We grew what we ate, and we ate what we grew," Juan D. said.

As the Nichols family tried to scabble out life on the farm, Juan D. went to school in Coke until the middle of the sixth grade and then attended Pleasant Grove when the family

moved there. Then, in ninth grade, Juan D. attended a "city school," Winnsboro High. That, he says, is when he discovered the real differences between city kids and those from the country.

He said he felt that the city kids looked down on those from the country. After all, city homes had all of the modern conveniences to ease life, including indoor plumbing and appliances run by electricity. These lifestyle differences also made for differences in clothing and even in general life philosophies. So as it happens the world over, decade after decade, cliques formed—the city kids stuck with the city kids, and the farm kids circulated mostly among themselves.

In the end, this situation turned into a benefit, because Juan D. spent time with a group that included a pretty farm girl, Jerry Jordan, who ended up being his girlfriend and later his wife. Juan D. also developed a friendship with the agriculture teacher, R.E. Johnson, who became his mentor and had a lasting positive influence on his life.



**Juan D. Nichols was WCEC's general manager from 1968-97, during a period of vast growth and technological change.**

Contemplating life after graduation from high school, Juan D. absolutely knew he did not want to pursue farming as a career because it had been so hard on his parents. Because he looked up to Johnson so much, he decided he'd attend college to become an ag teacher. After high school, Juan D. headed off to East Texas State Teacher's College in Commerce, where he pursued those studies, and Jerry studied English. Because he had limited means, in his second semester he got a job on the college farm to help pay his way.

The farm supplied all of the chicken, beef, and dairy products for the school cafeteria. The students lived in old Army barracks that had been set up as a dormitory. Juan D.'s first job was in the dairy milking cows at 4 a.m. before classes. He said it was very hard work, especially because most of the dairy heifers had never been milked before and it took them time to get used to it. During what normally would not be

considered a happy event, mending a fence, a co-worker accidentally hit Juan D. with a hammer on his finger, breaking it. After that, Juan D. was assigned to work in the chicken houses, which was a little easier and later in the day than the milking job. And when he tells this story, one can get a sense of how he still appreciates that broken finger.

Life at school and working on the school farm was tough, but also during that time the Korean War was heating up and the military draft was in full swing. There were no draft deferments at the time, and Juan D. and many of his classmates were expecting to be drafted at any moment. In fact, Juan D., after talking with the draft board in Mineola, knew he was slated to be drafted on the next list. To retain some control over their destiny, he and eight of his co-workers and classmates decided to volunteer for the U.S. Air Force. When they discovered that the Air Force was not accepting any more candidates, they signed up with the Navy.

On January 15, 1951, they reported to the Navy boot camp in San Diego. Juan D.'s assignment was the USS Doyle, DMS 34, which was in drydock for repairs at Mare Island Naval Shipyard near San Francisco before being sent back to Korea. Jerry joined him there, and they were married in Vallejo, California.

Juan D. was a gunner's mate, and he and the sailors spent their days sweeping Korean waters and their nights patrolling the coastline to pick out targets. He said they once hit what must have been an ammunition dump, because the explosion gave them a pretty good show. Following minesweeping duty, they spent more time in the Pacific, the Philippines, and Hong Kong. They were also in Hawaii, he said, when the movie "The Caine Mutiny" with Humphrey Bogart was being filmed on the Doyle.

Upon return to the U.S., the ship's port was changed from Long Beach, California, to Charleston, South Carolina, so Juan D. and Jerry headed to Charleston. Juan D. ended up getting shipped to the Mediterranean for six months, and Jerry worked at a job on base there until he returned. Their oldest daughter, Marian, was born in 1954 in Charleston. After that, the Nichols family served in Newport, Rhode Island, and then Brooklyn, New York, before Juan D.'s four-year tour of duty came to a close on December 14, 1954.

With his GI Bill in hand, Juan D. returned to college in Texas. But before completing his degree, because the monthly salary for his family of three was only \$160, they were eventually "starved out." He went to work in Winnsboro at a feed store and while they lived there in 1958 their twins, David and Carolyn, were born. After two years Juan D. realized that he was not really progressing. He sought the advice of a friend, R.G. Jarred, who recommended he talk with the fertilizer plant

in Sulphur Springs. They hired him as a salesman in their South Texas territory, and he and Jerry moved to Cuero.

Following that, he worked briefly for Swift and Co. in Waco, before learning they were going out of business. Once again R.G. helped, telling him about a position at Wood County Electric Cooperative for a power use advisor. The job would be promoting the use of vapor lights, as well as all-electric homes. R.G. told Juan D., "Go talk to Mr. Shaw and tell him I sent you."

Virgil Shaw, the general manager of the cooperative, met with Juan D. and told him about the job. He also asked to meet Jerry. Once that introduction took place, Virgil hired Juan D. in February 1962. The family moved to Quitman, where their daughter D'Ann was born in 1970.

While he was working at the cooperative, Juan D. was able to take Saturday and night courses to finish his degree in agribusiness. After a few years, in planning for his retirement, Virgil made him the assistant manager. Then on January 1, 1968, Juan D. became the general manager.

In total, he worked at the cooperative for 35 years, retiring on February 19, 1997. Of his time at the cooperative he says, "The co-op was very good to me."

As history can attest, Juan D. was also pretty good for the co-op. Since the inception of WCEC in 1938, there have only been three general managers. "Here at the cooperative, the manager influences what is most needed," Juan D. said. "During the time I was here, most of my time was [dedicated to] building substations and purchasing power. We also started building transmission lines. If you have your own substations and transmission lines, you can buy power a lot cheaper than



Juan D. Nichols, third from left, is seated with his key staff in the mid-1980s: Line Superintendent Kenneth Swann, Accountant Debbie Robinson (currently GM/CEO), Nichols, Chief Engineer Jim Dozier, Office Manager Steve Cates and Human Resources Manager Jerry Murphy.

just taking it off of the metering point.”

In addition to keeping power prices low, Juan D. always had a love of machinery. He said, “I bought the first digger truck. It cost \$16,000 for the digger, hydraulics, and boom. But when I first came here every hole was dug by hand. I have always believed that good equipment does not cost you money, but it saves you money because it cuts down on your labor so much.”

Juan D. was also the manager when the computer age descended. “I bought the first computer, and it was humongous, and it did not seem to do much,” he said. “It had punch cards and was for billing.”

Also, he says, “We used to read all of our meters by hand, and it was an expensive ordeal not only because of the labor, but the wear and tear and maintenance and miles on the trucks. When I was manger, we put Turtles [an automatic meter-reading system] in.” Under Juan D.’s tenure, there were many other firsts for the cooperative, including upgraded radios for communications and the first mobile substation, bought in partnership with another cooperative.

He installed the first 24/7 dispatch center, which was a giant leap from how members notified the cooperative of their outages.

“When I first came to the cooperative, members were given post-cards to mail in to tell you about their power outage.” Then, they had to wait several days for the card to reach the cooperative, and then for someone to be assigned to restore their power.

Juan D. also bought the first tree-trimming machines and orchestrated the first mobile office. He also started standardizing all of the equipment for maintenance savings and to offer a cohesive presence and uniformed field personnel for safety.

Looking back, Juan D. thinks his biggest accomplishment was to help change the way all of the co-ops in this area bought power. By working together they were all stronger. He was instrumental in founding Northeast Texas Electric Cooperative, Inc. That model worked so well that he then helped form two other generation and transmission cooperatives: one called Tex-La Electric Cooperative of Texas, Inc., where he served as president until he retired, and also East Texas Electric Cooperative, Inc., where he served as president until retirement. These three organizations, which Juan D. helped charter, are now the backbone of WCEC’s energy supply and offer a secure and affordable energy future.

Of his time at the cooperative, he said, “I was very fortunate. I served under two different boards. Both were very good boards and they would listen, and if you needed something, they would get it for you.” He also said of his fortune, “I had

very good people that worked with me. It was a team effort, and you must have that to be successful in any business. The people that work for WCEC ran the daily operations, which allowed me to concentrate on the substations and the transmission.”

One of the people who influenced him the most, beyond his own parents and his ag teacher, he said, was Virgil Shaw.

“Mr. Shaw not only knew the history of the cooperative, but he knew the history of all the surrounding counties. He was the one who organized the cooperative,” Juan D. said.

As the second general manager, Juan D. says he made his mark with the transmission, but then he also talks about Debbie Robinson, his successor and the current CEO and general manager. “Debbie has concentrated on continuing to improve technology, which has greatly improved service,” he said. “I’ve enjoyed my relationship with Debbie and the cooperative since I’ve retired. They are a good bunch of people, and they want to

serve. To me, that is what the cooperative is all about—service!”

Now that Juan D. is retired, he says, “I miss the relationship I had with the employees and with the people in the communities. But I sure don’t miss the ice storms and the critical decisions. But I do miss the people. I enjoy people. Everybody has a story to tell.”

Even though Juan D. has retired, he is still very much active in the life of the community, participating in church, Rotary, Christmas Sharing, and the Masonic Lodge. He also is chairman of the board of Bank Texas. He and Jerry enjoy traveling and spending time with their four children, eight grandchildren, and great-grandchild.

One of the achievements of which he is most proud, he says, is “My children grew up knowing that

the cooperative was the most important thing in our lives. My kids today still believe in the cooperative because I believed in it so much, and still do.”

Looking back, Juan D. credits three things as having vastly improved rural life during his lifetime: electric cooperatives, farm-to-market roads, and the telephone cooperatives.

“Today, what people accept and know is only out of the dreams of people from yesteryear,” he said.

Isn’t it something that a farm boy in East Texas once dreamed of a time and a life when the difference between city kids and farm kids would not be so vast? Isn’t it something that he grew to be that same man who was so instrumental in equalizing the two, by helping to further the modern convenience, comforts, and necessities that electricity has offered? Today, many people live the rural life by choice. And they can and do because all things modern are just as open to them as those in the cities.





If your attic insulation has seen better days, replacing or adding to it will help reduce summer and winter energy bills.

# Invest in Efficiency

If you're remodeling your kitchen or undergoing another home-improvement project, take the opportunity to make your home more energy efficient.

Energy improvements aren't inexpensive, but they pay off in a big way. First, they can lower your cooling bill during the summer and your heating bill when it's cold outside. Second, energy-efficient products make your home feel more comfortable. And third, they add value to your home when you're ready to sell it.

Here are five worthwhile energy-saving home improvements:

**1. OUTDOOR WINDOW SHADES.** Shade screens and awnings keep the sun from beaming directly through your home's windows and into its air-conditioned rooms. Place them on south-facing windows to reduce solar heat gain by up to 65 percent and on west-facing panes to save 77 percent, estimates the U.S. Department of Energy.

**2. WHOLE-HOUSE FAN.** Installed in your attic, this enormous fan pulls cool air in through open windows around the house and then forces hot air out through attic vents. Open windows on opposite sides of the house when you run the fan, and you'll enjoy a cool cross breeze as your home airs out. The DOE says a house fan can cut your air-conditioning bill by up to 5 percent.

**3. ATTIC INSULATION.** Even if your attic has plenty of insulation, it's likely it has shifted over the years. Insulation is effective only when it touches the surface it's supposed to cover. If it droops or falls, it's not doing you any good. Reattach the insulation and add more in places where the original application has thinned out.

**4. ENERGY-EFFICIENT AIR CONDITIONER.** The older yours is, the harder it's working to keep your home cool. Newer models are designed to cool your home more efficiently. In fact, you can save up to 10 percent on cooling bills if you replace an inefficient air-conditioning system with a model approved by Energy Star.

**5. SEALED DUCTWORK.** The ductwork attached to the air-conditioning system in most homes leaks. Next time you have a technician in to do routine maintenance, have those ducts inspected and sealed. You can knock up to 25 percent from your cooling costs if you do. Note that sealing ductwork is different from cleaning it. Sealing—with the right materials—is the key to energy savings.



## Wood County Electric Cooperative

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