

## A STORY OF PRIVATE INITIATIVE AND LOCAL CAPITAL

## Chapter I

## NORTHERN ILLINOIS • 1911

HOW well can you remember back twenty years? Amundsen was discovering the South Pole. Goethals was gouging the way for the Panama Canal.

Automobilists wore goggles and wrapped themselves up in linen dusters. Flying was a stunt for daredevils.

Electric lights were only for families living in metropolitan centers or in the most up-and-coming outlying communities. In northern Illinois, outside the city limits of Chicago, there were probably 100 towns receiving electricity. Their service was timed by the clock and subject to the whims of the weather. At five in the evening lights were turned on. At eleven o'clock lights blinked a curfew warning—and service was discontinued for the night. Storms cut off service indefinitely.

This was 1911. In August of that year, the Public Service Company of Northern Illinois was organized. Today, in the territory surrounding Chicago there are 318 cities and towns and nearly 7,000 intervening farms receiving gas and electric service twenty-four hours a day.

Two decades have produced this change. Believing that a review of these twenty years will disclose many facts of interest to its customers, the Public Service Company is beginning this series of stories that will appear in these pages from week to week. They will make up a kind of autobiography.

The story of gas and electric service in northern Illinois really begins about five years before the Civil War when the Ottawa Gas

Company was founded to manufacture gas for lighting purposes. Its two miles of gas mains served 150 customers. In 1867 a second gas company was granted a charter in Evanston. Later a few others began operations.

Following Thomas A. Edison's invention of the incandescent lamp in 1879—an invention that for the first time made electric light practical for homes—a few scattered local companies were organized to supply electric service of a sort.

Even after twenty years of development this service was very erratic. Progress was restricted not so much by lack of engineering equipment as by lack of money. The local companies were always just a jump ahead of the sheriff. Frequently the sheriff caught up. Machinery for producing electricity was installed in whatever abandoned building could be leased. Usually the company selling the equipment had to share in the financing of the local plant. Managerships changed often. Bankruptcies were numerous. For days at a time service would be interrupted. At the end of the year there was never money left over for improvement of facilities.

Thus was northern Illinois before 1911.

The "Lake County Experiment" which first demonstrated the economies of transmitting electricity produced in a centrally located plant to scattered suburban and rural communities—which was directly responsible for the organization of the Public Service Company of Northern Illinois—is the subject of next week's story.

## PUBLIC SERVICE COMPANY OF NORTHERN ILLINOIS

*Supplying Electricity and Gas to 6,000 square miles, including the Metropolitan Area into which Chicago is growing*

TWO DECADES IN THE SERVICE OF NORTHERN ILLINOIS