

Much reflection on meter readers

Meter readers. The people, not the devices, appear to be among the most elusive professions in Finland. After extensive searching, I have found only scattered references to their work throughout the entire history of electricity production in the country. It is easier to find information about operations carried out by the British SAS than about meter readers. The information presented here has been pieced together from small fragments collected from a wide range of sources, so there is always the possibility that some of my conclusions are incorrect. Nor can I be certain that practices were the same in every electricity company's service area. There appears to have been considerable local variation.

Almost from the very beginning of electricity sales, someone—usually a man—travelled from house to house reading electricity meters. According to my sources, this was done either on foot or by bicycle. In winter, they travelled on foot, on skis or by kick sled. At least in Southwest Finland, horses were also used. "Sometimes in winter they even travelled by horse-drawn sleigh," recalls Jouko Mäkinen, whose brother collected electricity payments. In the early years, meter inspectors may even have had access to company cars, although meter readers apparently did not. It seems that in some areas cars only began to be used for meter reading after the Second World War, and even then this was uncommon. By the 1960s and 1970s, meter readers travelling by car had also become a familiar sight in rural areas.

Initially, the meter reader collected payment on the spot. Over time, however, they began writing invoices, which customers then paid in whatever way suited them, usually in cash through a bank. Stories also survive of more unusual arrangements. It is said that somewhere a customer paid an electricity bill by giving the meter reader a new rocking chair, after which the reader paid the bill on the customer's behalf. Eventually, the responsibility for reporting meter readings was transferred to customers themselves. They sent their meter readings to the electricity company by post, and the company returned the invoice by mail. Failure to report readings could result in substantial fines.

Meters were found not only in private homes but also, for example, in industrial facilities. For reasons that are not entirely clear, these were often read by different personnel.

Collector or electricity meter reader?

Occupational safety was not what it is today. Around Rymättylä, one meter inspector is known to have crossed thin early winter ice to read meters located on islands. His only safety equipment was a stick with which he tested the strength of the ice. The meters had to be read, and his sense of duty would not allow him to give up.

During the 1920 s, the terms *collector* or *reader-collector* appear to have been used. Later, once the role consisted mainly of billing rather than collecting payments, the title gradually became simply *electricity meter reader*. Even so, the terminology seems to have varied between localities.

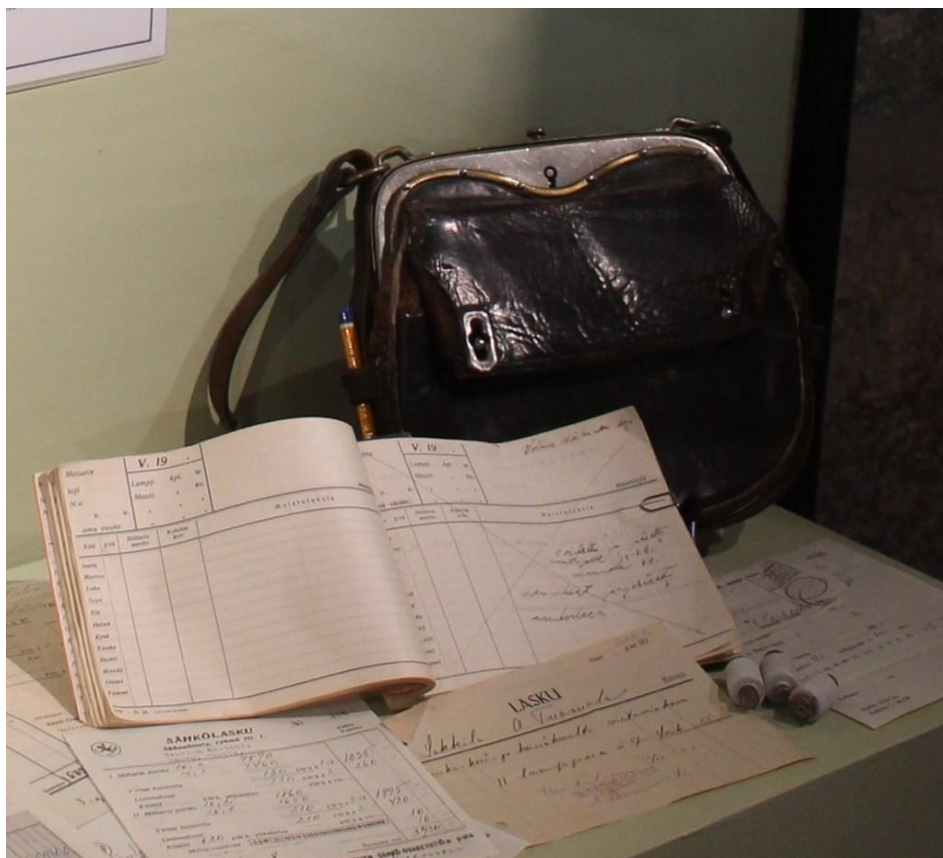
Collectors could, for example, receive a commission of 0.2 per cent. Minutes from the City of Helsinki dating from the late 1930 s indicate that electricity meter readers earned approximately 2,000 Finnish marks per month, suggesting that commission-based pay was more common in

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sparsely populated rural areas. In Paimio, readers were generally paid hourly wages and, later, mileage allowances as cars became more common.

The limited photographic evidence does not suggest that meter readers wore any distinctive uniform, at least not in rural districts. Some sources indicate that readers employed by city electricity companies may have worn more formal work clothing. Once companies began issuing official workwear, meter readers also wore company jackets to show they were carrying out official duties. In the countryside, however, everyone already knew who the meter readers were, so there was little need for uniforms or badges.

Nevertheless, they seem to have been rather unusual visitors. My older relatives still speak of the meter reader's visit as though it made the day somehow special—a touch of excitement, perhaps. Even today, this is easy to understand. Who does not open an electricity bill—or especially a transmission bill—with their pulse rising slightly? I remember that as a child in the early 1980s, the relative who looked after me asked whether I could be a little quieter in the hallway because the meter reader was coming that day. At the same time, she carefully swept the entrance hall where the meter was located. Everything had to be clean, and the meter reader needed peace to carry out this important task. In a poetic sense, these visits could almost be compared to the traditional Finnish *nuuttipukki*: a little ceremonial, a little intimidating, and a welcome break from everyday life.



In Paimio, a former bus conductor's bag was used when collecting electricity payments.

During the Continuation War, electricity payments in Paimio were collected by a fourteen-year-old boy, who was replaced after the war by a major returning from military service. The

collection bag in the museum's collection belonged to this very boy. Originally it had been a bus conductor's bag, given to him by a local bus operator. At times, the young collector carried surprisingly large sums of money. Apparently this caused little concern.

Meter readers were occasionally robbed, although no such incidents are known from Paimio. Rural postmen, for example, were authorised to carry revolvers when necessary until the Second World War, and firearms were still mentioned in the 1935 regulations governing rural postal delivery. I have found no comparable regulations concerning meter readers, but individual readers could carry pistols. Even minors did so in some cases. These were neither secret nor illegal weapons. According to the accounts I have heard, the local sheriff had granted permits for carrying them.

As for robberies, there are also stories suggesting that, on occasion, the "robber" behind the mask was the meter reader himself, using a fabricated robbery story to keep the money. None of the people mentioned here, of course. Theft was nevertheless one of the reasons why electricity companies rapidly abandoned cash collection in favour of invoicing.

A summer job for young people

As already mentioned, during wartime meter reading was also carried out by young people. Wartime blurred traditional gender divisions in employment, and young women as well as young men undertook meter reading and billing. During peacetime, however, the meter reader-biller was generally an adult and, most often, a man. Fortunately, this changed over the decades.

Sources indicate that even in the 1990s many young people worked as meter readers during the summer on a commission basis. Electricity had become an ordinary part of everyday life, and so had meter reading. The belief that only an adult man could perform the work had faded away.

Although summer meter readers were paid by commission, I doubt they enjoyed the same benefit as one reader working in the 1920s. In addition to his wages, he received free electricity for two lamps. Electricity billing in the 1920s differed greatly from modern practice. Electricity consumption was much lower, and both billing and metering methods were still undeveloped. At first, customers were simply charged according to the number of electrical outlets they had. This meant that the employee could draw electricity free of charge from two outlets. Of course, these outlets could be fitted with a primitive distribution box known as an *Eeriksonni*, allowing several appliances to be connected to a single source. However, the device posed a serious fire hazard and was soon prohibited.

Electricity meters themselves have always attracted attempts at tampering. Some of the more dramatic methods reportedly included firing a shotgun directly at the meter or driving a car into the wall to which it was attached. The meter repair workshop at Juntola in

Sähkölähteenmäki therefore had to deal with more than routine recalibrations from time to time.

It would be fascinating to know how people attempted to influence meter readers—and how successful they were. Especially in the early years, record-keeping was rather less rigorous than it is today. I would not be surprised if some customers managed to persuade, charm or perhaps even intimidate inspectors into recording lower consumption figures than the unforgiving meter actually showed. Or perhaps meter readers themselves were threatened with shotguns or cars? It is difficult to answer for the whole country. According to local recollections, however, meter readers in the Paimio region were generally welcomed warmly, although there were always a few difficult customers.

The first step on a career path

Meter reading also appears to have served as the starting point of a career for some people. Many began working in the electricity industry as meter readers before moving on to other positions as they gained experience. Particularly in the early years, meter reading and payment collection did not provide full-time employment because there simply were not enough customers. Outside the meter-reading season, readers might work on power lines or perform other duties for the electricity company.

Full-time meter readers became more common only after the Second World War as electricity consumption spread more widely, and even then the change happened gradually.

Today, meter readers exist mainly in electronic form, connected remotely to the electricity network. Electricity companies send invoices by post—or increasingly by email—and customers usually pay them electronically. No one has to walk from house to house in rain or sunshine reading meters anymore. Given the enormous growth in both population and electricity consumption, this is probably for the best. Few people today would volunteer to climb through every meter room in a large apartment complex consisting of six-storey buildings.

Although the profession is disappearing, not every former meter reader has retired or changed careers. Many still perform other duties within electricity companies, and there are still occasions when someone needs to visit a property in person.

Elsewhere in the world, however, there are still many meter readers, often working under conditions very different from those in Finland. According to one legend, a meter reader in Indonesia was once eaten by a Komodo dragon. No equally dramatic legends have reached us from Finland—at least not yet.

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Sources

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