

Almost two generations of Cotabateños have grown up under the illumination and convenience that electric power brings, delivered to their homes, schools, workplaces, businesses and streets by the **Cotabato Light & Power Company**, or **Cotabato Light**.

Now, acknowledged as among the best-managed electric utilities in the country, today's Cotabato Light is the product of a bold venture made 70 years ago by **Don Ramon Aboitiz**.

Leafing back through the history, it was only in 1895 that Manila was energized, or 16 years after Edison gave the world its first incandescent bulb.

In 1930, then, electric power was still a novelty elsewhere in the country, if not totally unknown. Don Ramon was a stranger to the power industry, but he had the courage, the cash and the commitment to venture into this new field. That year, he bought the small Ormoc Electric Light Company and its ice plant.

But courage, cash and commitment were not the only assets Don Ramon had. So was the valuable friendship of a Spanish ship engineer, **Francisco "Paco" Such**. It was Paco who persuaded Don Ramon to venture into the energy business.

With Paco as partner, Don Ramon in 1935 bought the Jolo Power Company from retired American soldier P.A. Frank. Then Don Ramon bought the **Cotabato Light and Power Company**, which Frank earlier acquired, from the Wong family of Cotabato. Don Ramon entrusted the operation of the Jolo and Cotabato power firms to, naturally, Paco.

It was a time when frontiers in Mindanao were being opened. The Commonwealth Government, inaugurated in November 1935, at President Manuel L. Quezon's urging, funded the construction of the Cotabato-Davao National Highway. It would not be long before Paco would take that road.

On June 18, 1939, the National Assembly granted a 25-year franchise to COLIGHT, covering the Municipality of Cotabato, through Commonwealth Act No. 487. That year also saw the coming of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate to Cotabato led by the Canadian priest Fr. Gerard Mongeau.

Early in December 1941, Paco negotiated for Don Ramon the purchase of the **Davao Light and Power Company** and other interests of P.A. Frank in Davao. World War II disrupted the talks. On December 8, Japanese planes bombed Davao City, and on December 19, their warships landed troops and tanks in the area.

In Cotabato, at dawn of April 29, 1942, Japanese ships bombarded the coast and landed troops. **Cotabato Light**, as a key facility and being on the high ground favored by the defenders, was a prime target. That day, retreating defenders burned homes and structures to deny shelter and comfort to the enemy. Then, in September 1944, American planes bombed the enemy-held town; **Cotabato Light** was totally destroyed during the war.

After the war, Paco, then already in his 60s, shuttled back and forth in an old sea-craft, through squalls and pirate-infested seas, trying to put the Jolo and Cotabato plants back in operation. He provided the spark, assisted by **Gorgonio Riego de Dios**, who later became manager of the company.

The postwar period was difficult. **Cotabato Light** was not immediately able to resume the 24-hour power service of the pre-war days, due to fuel hoarding. Without fuel, **Cotabato Light**'s engines could not produce power for the capital town of over 20,000 souls.

It was a time when demand for both power and fuel were growing. That 1948, the Notre Dame College had just opened. In mid-year, the Mindanao Motor Line fielded 15 new buses, and planned to have 38 more by year's end. (MML operated by Aboitiz, succumbed in five years time to destructive roads and sabotage by hostile locals).

Paco Such, in 1952, finally got some rest. **Edson Canova** was sent to take over Davao Light as resident manager, freeing Paco to focus on the Jolo plant partly owned by him. After Edson came, **Luis “Louie” Aboitiz, Jr.**, eldest son of the late Don Luis, Louie brought along expertise, having taken mechanical engineering from the University of Sta. Clara and electrical engineering from the Cebu Institute of Technology. Louie and Edson raised Davao Light’s peak capacity by 18% yearly, from 10,500 kilowatt-hours to 26,500-kilowatt hours by 1970.

Don Ramon got some rest as well. Starting in 1952, direct management was entrusted to Edson, Louie and **Ernesto “Ernie” Aboitiz**.

In 1955, Ernie, also an electrical engineering product of the University of Sta. Clara, added expertise to Davao Light. Edson meanwhile, helped raise demand for electricity by setting up an agency selling electric appliances.

Back in Cotabato, in 1958, Cotabato Light was having a different problem: heavy demand in relation to its output. In the January 25 issue of the Mindanao Cross, Cotabato Light advised the public to conserve power to avert “possibly severe rationing”.

On June 16, 1961, the Cotabato Light franchise was amended by Republic Act No. 3341,

extending the coverage area to Datu Odin Sinsuat (formerly Dinaig) and Sultan Kudarat (Nuling). On November 15, 1963, a Mirrless diesel engine was commissioned. It was then the biggest, with a rated capacity of 1,080 kilowatts (kW), versus the 1,150kW combined capacity of four Fairbanks Morse diesel engines, which were eventually sold in 1970.

On October 19, 1965, a second Mirrless engine was commissioned, raising the total generating capacity at that time to 3,310 KW. In 1966, the capacity of the Ice Plant Department was raised to 15 tons per day.

On June 16, 1967, Republic Act No. 3217 extended Cotabato Light's franchise for another 25 years. In September that year a 1,000 kW Enterprise engine was commissioned.

In March 1968, a more powerful Mirrless at 1,713 kW, was brought on line, raising Cotabato Light's generating capacity to 8,548 kW.

In 1970, Ernie Aboitiz was elected President of both Cotabato Light and Davao Light. Edson Canova, in Cebu, became Chairman. Louie Aboitiz became General Manager of the Cotabato and Ormoc plants. Don Ramon was Treasurer.

In July 1971, another powerful Mirrless engine (2,525 kW) boosted Cotabato Light's generating capacity to 9,923 kW, over a thousand times the 9.25 kW, which is still the current generating capacity, was more than enough to satisfy the peak demand of 7,000 kW in 1971 and 7,800 kW until 1982.

In May 1984, with the Mindanao Grid reaching Cotabato City, Cotabato Light started tapping hydroelectric power from the National Power Corporation (NAPOCOR). This allowed Cotabato Light to place its diesel engines on standby.

In December 1984, Cotabato Light, adhering to corporate citizenship, started its Streetlight Program, providing 40-watt fluorescent fixtures for the community's streets. Cotabato Light also became a founding member of the Philippine Electric Plant Owners Association, a charter member of the Philippine Business for Social Progress, and a member of the Regional Utilities Industry Board of Region XII. Cotabato Light's officers also became members of civic, religious, professional and other community service oriented organizations.

In 1989, the National Electrification Administration, in NEC Case No. 88-02, renewed Cotabato Light's franchise covering Cotabato City, a portion of Datu Odin Sinsuat (formerly Dinaig - up to Tanuel) and a portion of Sultan Kudarat (up to Simuay).

In 1989, the Company institutionalized its commitment to excellence and loyalty among its workforce, by launching the Annual Employee Recognition Program. That July, to prepare for security contingencies, Cotabato Light also signed a memorandum of agreement with the armed Forces of the Philippines, for the creation and training of the 87-member Cotabato Light Philippine Army Affiliated Reserve Unit.

By 1991, **Cotabato Light** had over 15,000 customers, who enjoyed almost continuous power even as the rest of Mindanao suffered extended blackouts as the flow of hydroelectric power from NAPOCOR slowed to trickles.

In 1992, peak demand jumped to 12,000 kW, almost 55% over the 1982 level. This created a shortfall of 2,075 kW beyond the rated output of **Cotabato Light**'s diesel engines, at a time when supply from NAPOCOR is becoming acutely shorter.

With power so precious, Cotabato Light focused on cutting systems losses down to 6.46% in September, and improvement over the 1991 level of 8.06% and well within the industry

standard of 14% maximum for a power firm to be categorized as efficient. Efficiency enables the company to offer lower power rates compared to nearby electric cooperatives with larger franchise areas, despite the reality and other taxes Cotabato Light is required to pay.

Born from the vision of Don Ramon, nurtured by the dedication of Paco Such, developed with the expertise of the younger Aboitizes, and supported by loyal and competent managers and workers, Cotabato Light has come a long way. It has matured into a dependable and socially responsible company.

The demand for power in its franchise area, given ambitious economic development blueprints, will sharply rise towards the end of this century. Cotabato Light has done its share better than most electric utilities elsewhere, and will continue to serve with the utmost efficiency. But the power crisis the country faces is formidable. And so the people, empowered, must do their share, directly and through the Government, to invest in new power generation projects – much as Don Ramon did 70 years ago.

Today, with passion and constant innovation Cotabato Light lives up to its brand of being an Aboitiz company. It continuously rises up to the challenge to deliver its promise of quality service and reliable power, providing better solutions in a better way. Adhering to company's vision-mission and core values, the Cotabato Light team is always driven – driven to lead, driven to excel and driven to serve. //