

EMPIRE ELECTRIC ASSOCIATION

Echoes of the Empire

JANUARY 2020



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SITTING IN THE SHADE

BY BOBBE JONES MEMBER SERVICES MANAGER

Visiting my grandparents' cottage-style home in Jackson, Minnesota, was an annual summer event when I was growing up. The long road trip took us past hundreds of acres of corn and soybean fields. When we finally reached the familiar arched brick entrance, my balding grandpa greeted us with a big smile and open arms. Ever the businessman, he sported a quality suit, tie and felt hat and a mustache that emitted the faint odor of sweet pipe tobacco.

After we settled in, he entertained us with barbershop quartet tunes while strumming his banjo. With twinkling eyes, grandpa anxiously waited for one of us to remember that he placed his spare change under a loose brick in the living room fireplace. This finders-keepers event always ended in squeals of joy.

Year-round, he crafted wooden toys for holiday giving to underprivileged children. I admired his community-minded nature. What I didn't know then was how his life and the history of Federated Rural Electric Association were woven together as tightly as the strands of a rope.

The last time I saw my grandpa, I was 12. Yet, he influenced my life in ways I didn't understand until decades later.

I entertained thoughts of becoming a writer and an artist throughout my lifetime. But working at a rural electric co-op? Not really. Yet, I found myself employed as the secretary for Empire Electric Association's engineering department in 1999.

A short time later, I was promoted into the member services department where I learned about the history of rural electrification and how cooperatives were formed. The more I understood about the struggles rural areas faced prior to electrification, the more I wanted to learn about my grandpa.



BOBBE JONES



Mayor Chris Wendt (left) and writer Bobbe Jones' grandpa, Federated Rural Electric Association Manager P.L. Ferguson dig the hole for the first pole for FREA's power line in 1936.

As a young man, my grandpa, Paul Leslie Ferguson, worked for a petroleum cooperative in Wisconsin and managed the stations and bulk plants for Federated Oil Company of Jackson, Minnesota. He organized the Cumberland Cooperative Oil Association, which became an immediate success. Officials of the Midland Cooperative Wholesale at Minneapolis soon spotted the young manager as having a future in the field of cooperatives and sent him as a troubleshooter to reorganize the oil cooperatives into a federated group.

It was 1935. The government was urging the creation of electric cooperatives to take advantage of low interest loans to extend lines into rural areas. Midland had a keen

interest in promoting rural electrification and grandpa was invited to a managers meeting to discuss it.

While listening to the Midland officials, he had a vision. He could see high lines stretching across fertile farmlands, electric lights replacing kerosene lamps and farmers eager to support the plan to organize an electric cooperative. He quit an excellent job at the petroleum company and worked on plans for the new electric cooperative.

The first meeting was a dismal failure with only one person attending to discuss the ways and means of getting the rural electrification program under way in Jackson County. He was disappointed but did not give up. Another chance arose to speak to a ready-made crowd of rural people. At the Farm Bureau meeting, he outlined plans for bringing electricity into the area.

There was serious skepticism from the group. A severe drought had reduced farm income almost to the vanishing point, and the Depression made a dollar bill seem quite large. However, a handful of people did step forward to talk it over with him. They paid the \$3 membership fee and formed the

nucleus of leaders that resulted in the formation of Federated Rural Electric Association.

Grandpa planned and directed activities from the start and became the first manager of Federated REA in 1936. By 1957, Federated REA became the largest cooperative in the state of Minnesota and had a reputation for sound management. Federated received an award for the most efficient operation of all REA internal combustion plants. My grandpa remained the manager until his death in 1963.

His legacy trickled into my career like a slow-flowing undercurrent, not visible on the surface but always there. I admired my grandfather's vision and fortitude, and I thought about his determination and cooperative spirit many times over my 20-year career at EEA.

His story is one of commitment, but it is not unique. Rural electric cooperatives sprouted up all over this country in the mid-1930s thanks to pioneers and visionaries who believed in rural electrification.

I recently read a quote from Warren Buffett that reads, "Someone's sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree

a long time ago." This rings true of rural electric cooperatives; most were created in the 1930s and here we are decades later enjoying the shade.

Another thing that holds true is the cooperative spirit that lives on through the board of directors and staff at EEA. They keep the co-op's mission and principles alive and well with energy programs and policies that consider the entire membership and not a select few.

I encourage you to let your voice be heard at our locally owned and controlled co-op. Be engaged and informed about co-op issues. Attend the annual meetings. Participate in our democratic business and remember to vote as election time rolls around. EEA will continue to listen and make every attempt to meet your needs.

I am thankful for my heritage and for the opportunity to grow professionally as a writer and manager with a rural electric cooperative. This month, I am entering the retirement phase of my life where I plan to pursue art, spend more time with my family and simply enjoy sitting in the shade.

Photo Contest Winner for January



 **Lightfoot Trail**
by David Lee Reineke

Co-op Calendar

January 1

New Year's Day, office closed

January 10

Empire's board meeting begins at 8:30 a.m. at its headquarters in Cortez. The agenda is posted 10 days in advance of the meeting at eea.coop. Members are reminded that public comment is heard at the beginning of the meeting.

January 20

Martin Luther King Jr. Day



Hospice of Montezuma Receives Donation

Denise Moore (far left above), communications specialist, presents a check for \$1,530 to Hospice of Montezuma. This contribution was made on behalf of Empire Electric Association, Inc., a Touchstone Energy® Cooperative, to bring the Touchstone Energy Hot Air Balloon to the 2019 Cortez Rendezvous Balloon Rally.

Touchstone Energy Cooperatives is a national alliance of local, consumer-owned electric utilities across the country committed to providing high standards of service to customers large and small.

Touchstone Energy Cooperatives serve electric co-op consumer-members with integrity, accountability, innovation and a long-standing commitment to communities.

Since 2000, the hot air balloon has served as a goodwill ambassador, demonstrating good corporate citizenship at local civic and philanthropic events. Every day the balloon is flown, a monetary contribution is made to a local charity on behalf of the sponsoring cooperative.

My Co-op Employees

Congratulations to the following employees on their retirements and promotions



Member Services Manager Bobbe Jones is retiring on January 24, 2020, after 20 years of service with EEA. Bobbe started as a part-time department secretary. She was promoted to member services representative, assistant member services manager and is completing her career as member services manager.

member engagement manager position in November. Andy will be focused on ways that EEA can better serve its members.

Engineering Technician Mark Winkles is retiring from EEA's engineering department on February 3, 2020. "Mark provided excellent service to our cooperative and to our members over the past 15 years," said General Manager Josh Dellinger. "Mark has surely done his part in making EEA a great place to work and a great place for our members to do business. He will be missed."



Energy Management Advisor Andy Carter accepted the newly formed



Steve Gritz accepted the system operator position and started on November 11, 2019. His prior positions included lineman, meterman and trouble crewman.

My Co-op Advantage

The Member Appreciation Day on October 31, 2019, was well attended. EEA provided a light lunch and an opportunity to win one of two \$100 credits. The winners were Bill and Mitzi Byers and Steve and Carolyn Millhorn.



Andy Carter presents Mitzi Byers with a \$100 gift certificate.



Steve and Carolyn Millhorn enjoy the member appreciation lunch.

New this year, applications can be filled out on-line. www.eea.coop

EMPIRE ELECTRIC SCHOLARSHIPS



Student and Adult Scholarship Applications are Due February 17, 2020

Electrical Related Trade Scholarships \$500
Lineman School Scholarships \$1000
Student Scholarships \$1000
Adult Scholarships \$1000



January 2020

Energy Efficiency

Tip of the Month

Let the sunshine in!
For additional warmth, open drapes covering windows that receive sunlight during the day. Close them at night, which can reduce heat loss from a warm room up to 10%.

Source: energy.gov