

F E R G U S

FEATURES

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In Celebration of Linemen

In their own words: An inside look at the lives of Fergus Electric Co-op's linemen

Story by

Charlie Denison
Contributing Writer

In recognition of National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's National Lineman Appreciation Day, we dedicate this month's *Fergus Features* to our linemen.

Dean Lawler, Roundup

A lineman with Fergus Electric Cooperative since 1991, Lawler continues to find much joy in the job.

"I enjoy the challenge," he said. "I also enjoy working outdoors and working with my hands."

Whether it's spotting mountain lions or driving in severe weather conditions, being a lineman outdoors is often adventurous.

"There have been times we've gone out for a power outage and can hardly see the road, let alone see the line," Lawler said. "You get in those situations and you wonder if you're going to get back home."

Come what may, Lawler said, it's always rewarding.

"We know people are out there depending on us," he said. "Sometimes people write us really nice letters. That makes it easy for us to get out in the difficult weather."

Richard Anderson, Roundup

This Roundup native will celebrate 30 years as a lineman next month. During his career, he's covered it all, from blizzards to floods to fires.

"In 2012 we had a charred landscape out here it was burning so bad," he said. "It was terribly hot. They said it was 100 degrees, but it felt like 150."

As awful as that was, Anderson said the 2011 flood was worse.



Foreman Jim Richter energizes a transformer.

"The flooding was more dangerous," he said. "It was hard to get where we needed to go. There were some places we couldn't get to at all."

Being a lineman is hard work, Anderson admitted, but he loves it, and he's glad he was recruited one fateful day at his former place of employment.

"I was working at a gas station in Roundup when a crew came in to fill up," he said. "A friend of mine was with them and told me they'd be looking for linemen in the near

future. He encouraged me to sign up for the 11-month lineman program at Bismarck State College. It worked out quite well... if it weren't for my friend, I would never have thought about being a lineman or doing anything with electricity."

Anderson said he's grateful for his career as a lineman, as he finds the profession satisfying.

"I like the people I work with," he said. "I also like how we're able to see so much country. We go to a different place practically every day. Some days we travel 200 miles roundtrip."

Anderson also finds the job rewarding and appreciates hearing from the members.

"I get a good word every now and then from the members, and that makes me feel good," he said.

Casey Kombol, Roundup

Like Anderson, Kombol found his way to Fergus Electric Cooperative through the advice of friends, and so far, so good for the young apprentice. Wanting to make a career of being a lineman, Kombol is preparing to test for his journeyman lineman card, which consists of two tests and 7,000 recorded hours of work.

Originally from a ranch 25 miles northwest of Roundup, Kombol comes by much of this work naturally, as a lot of it comes down to "working hard" and "helping your neighbors."

"It's a good fit for me," he said, "plus it gives me the opportunity to work in the rural areas of Montana, with the rural people of Montana."

Louie Hould, Lewistown

A Fergus Electric lineman for 18 years, Hould enjoys his fellow linemen

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as well as assisting members with their needs.

“Most of my time is spent working with the members, and they are always great to work with,” he said. “They are laid-back and friendly.”

Originally from Malta, Hould started in mining as a vocation, but was encouraged to pursue line work. The job is often intense, Hould said. That being the case, he is grateful to have a reliable crew at Fergus Electric to set him at ease.

“It can be pretty dangerous work,” Hould said. “It’s important you trust the people you work with.”

There are a number of accomplishments he’s proud of during his time here, namely rebuilding the substation in Hilger.

“That was a big project we did from the ground up,” he said.

Hould said he’s glad to be part of the Fergus Electric team, and that he resides in central Montana.

“I like to hunt and fish a lot,” he said, “so this is a good place for me.”

Dakota Wahl, Lewistown

A Lewistown native, Wahl is glad to be back in his hometown after seven years with Yellowstone Valley Electric Cooperative.

Driving from job to job, Wahl is often reminded how there is “no place like home.”

“I really like this service area,” Wahl



Foreman Dean Lawler rescues a dummy during a safety exercise.



MANAGER'S MESSAGE

From Scott Sweeney

Lineman Appreciation

National Rural Electric Cooperative Association has set aside the second Monday of each April as National Lineman Appreciation Day. In this month’s *Fergus Features*, our linemen were given the opportunity to tell a little about their work. Our linemen are committed to working safe under dangerous conditions to build,

said. “It’s awesome.”

An avid hunter, Wahl always wanted to come back to central Montana, and he’s grateful to Fergus Electric for giving him the opportunity.

“It’s a fun job and I get to see a lot of different things,” he said. “There are some really cool spots around here, whether it’s animal eyes or sunsets, and I enjoy getting to explore them.”

Tyson Ruff, Lewistown

Ruff is a second-generation lineman. However, he didn’t fall into the job right away.

“I played football at Western and Rocky...then my dad called and asked, ‘what do you want to do with your life?’” Ruff said. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I knew I wanted to work outside, not inside. That’s when I decided I was going to line school.”

Reflecting on his 19-year career, it doesn’t surprise Ruff that he chose this path. After all, he has fond memories of shadowing his father at an early age.

“I used to go out on calls with him and ride in the cab with him,” Ruff said. “It was a lot of fun.”

A former employee of Holy Cross Energy in Colorado, Ruff said he’s honored to be a part of Fergus Electric, as there’s nowhere he’d rather be than central Montana.

“I called [Fergus Electric General Manager] Scott Sweeney about once a year to see if they were hiring, and I must have annoyed them enough that they gave me an interview and hired

maintain and repair Fergus Electric Cooperative’s infrastructure. We are grateful to our linemen, and thank them for the work they do throughout the year to get power back on after storms and to make sure the conditions are safe for all the co-op’s members. We dedicate this month’s *Fergus Features* to our hardworking linemen.

Enjoy their stories.



Left to right – Jake Grensten, Louie Hould and Curt Olson perform CPR on a dummy.

me,” said Ruff. “It’s a good company to work for. I’m proud to be a member.”

Curtis Olson, Lewistown

A Malta native with a background in construction, Olson has enjoyed his 15 years with Fergus Electric. As foreman, he welcomes the challenges, of which there are many.

“Storms are tough,” he said. “When there are power outages we are working for days on end, don’t get much sleep and are physically exhausted.”

It’s critical during these stressful outings for the linemen to be on the same page, and that’s one of Olson’s main roles: to keep the communication constant.

“We are constantly communicating,” he said. “There’s no substitute.”

Although the lineman profession is sometimes extreme, there are many moments out and about where he is captivated by the scenery and wildlife,

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which are the parts of the job he loves the most.

"I saw a wolf last fall down by the N Bar in the Little Snowies," he said. "I've seen some mountain lions, bobcats, rattlesnakes, elk, deer, even skunks."

Ryan d'Autremont, Lewistown

A lineman for the past 21 years, d'Autremont said the job has helped familiarize him with his hometown.

"I don't know where everybody lives, but I know where most people live," he said.

d'Autremont said he takes pride in being able to help people during severe weather.

"We've had some pretty bad winter storms where we've been out working, and people have been very appreciative of us coming out and doing our job," he said. "People don't expect us to be out there, but we are, and when people get their lights back on, they're pretty happy."

Getting to the site is often half the battle.

"We've traveled some sketchy roads with one guy sticking his head out the window looking for the fog line," he said. "It gets a little dicey."

These kinds of adventures are what make the linemen close, and d'Autremont is grateful for the friendships he's formed.

"You get to know pretty much everybody's dramas, you know what their kids are up to, it's pretty tight-knit," he explained. "There isn't one person who wouldn't do anything for anybody...all you have to do is ask."

Brian Godbey, Lewistown

A Lewistown native, Godbey started his line career in Wyoming, but had the good fortune of moving his family to Lewistown when a job became



Curt Olson and Bret Neller at a safety meeting.



Lineman Mark Schwomeyer prepares to perform a pole top rescue.

available in 2000.

Known by many as a "Mr. Fix-It" type, Godbey specializes in the technological aspects of the position and was recently promoted to serviceman/meter technician. The job is often challenging, but Godbey likes it that way.

"I often tell my friends you have to go to work, but I get to go to work," he said. "It's a blessing. The co-op treats its employees very well. You're not employee number 555, you have a name."

The scenery isn't bad, either.

"We work in the best part of the world," Godbey added. "We get to see country a lot of people don't know exists, and we get to see it almost every day."

Jim Richter, Lewistown

A lineman with Fergus Electric for 38 years, Richter can't seem to get enough of the job. He could have retired by now, but if he still likes what he's doing, why stop?

"This co-op is an awesome place to work," he said. "There are a lot of benefits to the job. For one, we get to work outside, which is great, except when it's not nice out."

Richter recalled one storm in the '90s that was particularly challenging.

"It was 20 degrees below, but the winds were so strong we could hardly stand," he said. "I believe the wind chill was around 80 below. Every one of us

got a little frostbite."

It's not easy being a lineman, Richter said. The job is dangerous and physically taxing. It's demanding work. But Richter loves it, and he loves giving back to the people of the community. Although he's from North Dakota originally, central Montana is home now, and he's thrilled to be part of a team that ensures the people here have what they need.

"We have some of the best customers here at Fergus Electric," he said, "and we go out of our way for them."

Jake Grensten, Lewistown

For Jake Grensten, there's no place like home.

After working as a lineman in North Dakota, North Carolina and Virginia, the Lewistown native was happy to explore other parts of the country, but before long he felt a longing to return to central Montana.

"I wanted to see what else was out there, and I liked having a warmer climate, but I discovered I missed the mountains more than I liked the ocean," he said.

Grensten first made his way back to Montana through PAR Electrical

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Lineman Tyson Ruff repairs a power line during a storm.

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Contractors, Inc. When the opportunity arrived at Fergus Electric, however, he applied and was welcomed on board.

He couldn't be happier.

"I've always loved Montana,"

Grensten said. "It's a dream come true to be back home."

Mark Schwomeyer, Lewistown

Indiana native Mark Schwomeyer has been with Fergus Electric since 2011, and has been a journeyman lineman since December 2014. Proud to be part of the team, Schwomeyer said he's continually amazed by the community aspect of the co-op.

"We are a big family," he said.

"Everyone helps everybody."

This was especially the case in June 2016, when Schwomeyer and other linemen went to Roy to help restore transmission lines after a devastatingly large storm hit.

"We had people out there for days at a time," he said. "Every day we got more people on."

Schwomeyer said he couldn't believe how the Roy community responded to the linemen.

"Jayme Durbin opened up a tab for us at the bar and bought us all dinner," he said. "The community really came together. People like Gary Smith and others really expressed a lot of gratitude, and this is just one example.



Bret Nellermoe watches a pole top rescue.

I feel there's a sense of community just about everywhere we go."

Bret Nellermoe, Roundup

Bret Nellermoe of Wibaux wasn't sure what he wanted to do once he graduated from high school and headed off to the "real world," but after some conversations with a friend's lineman father, Nellermoe thought he'd give the trade a try, and he's glad he did.

"It's a job where you don't have to do the same thing every day," he said. "Every outage is different."

Nellermoe has been a lineman since 2004, working for Park Electric Cooperative in Livingston, and eastern Montana's Goldenwest Electric Cooperative. In 2015, he applied for a position at Fergus Electric, and he "hasn't looked back since."

"It's been a great job," he said.

Nellermoe said he finds being a lineman satisfying, albeit arduous.

"It takes hard work," he said. "We don't look for the easiest way; we look for the safest way."



Casey Kombol works bucket controls.

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