

BIG FLAT — NEWS —

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Looking back when the lines went in

Director Alan Van Voast visits with Leneus Erickson about Big Flat Electric's beginnings

On December 22, the Big Flat area experienced a power outage that lasted into the evening. The high winds and freezing rain worked together to start the power lines dancing, and occasional interruptions of power had many wondering if we were due for an outage. With winds increasing and more power flickers, the lights went out and stayed out.

By that time those with generators were out getting them connected as darkness was soon to close in. I was on my way home from Havre when the lights went out and it was dark by the time I got home. Since the weather was not improving, I drug my own generator out and got the house connected.

Although I am thankful to have a backup source of power to

run some lights and a few other things, it just doesn't compare to having a solid source of power coming down the lines like we get from Big Flat Electric. As I sat babysitting my generator that evening, I got to wondering what it was like before our area had a steady supply of electricity that I was missing, back before the lines went in.

I decided to visit with my neighbor Leneus Erickson, longtime BFEC member, about what he remembered of those days. Lenny spent his early childhood on a farm east of Turner. He recalls the days before electricity including kerosene lamps for a light source, heat supplied by a coal stove right in the middle of the living room, where you hauled coal in and the ash out. Later, his father John upgraded to an oil furnace, but it had no fan. Other than a gas stove to cook on there were no other appliances in the house. After a fire, caused by lightning,

burned the farmhouse down, Lenny said his father moved his family to town.

In those days, Turner had its own electric plant operated by a fellow named Andy Anderson. This plant was powered by a large stationary engine that Andy operated during the day for the folks in town. This plant operated for many years and Lenny recalls they even upgraded the engine to a diesel in later years.

Still, by ten o'clock or so Andy would blink the lights as a warning that he was going to shut off the generator for the night. You had about ten minutes to get ready for bed. Andy would operate the generator later on weekends or special occasions such as dances. I suppose they made sure in those days to keep Andy out on the dance floor as long as they could!

Lenny said the house they moved into in Turner was connected to the generator and had lights. To this day, having lights is what Lenny appreciates

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most about electricity. He recalls that by the late thirties talk had begun about getting power brought in to the Turner-Hogeland area. Committees were formed to try and convince the power company to serve our area. Like every other rural area in the nation, no utility felt they could profitably serve these remote areas. Then World War II hit and everything was put on hold.

Thanks to the Rural Electrification Act, which enabled the formation of co-ops along with low interest loans to these co-ops, members of the Big Flat community began planning and adopting this model as a way to get electricity to our area. Soon after the war ended, efforts were made to sign up members. Lenny recalls that most folks were very excited and eager to join, his father being one of them.

Along with their house in Turner, John Erickson was quick to request power be run to his farmyard east of Turner. With many members committed to purchasing electricity, Big Flat Electric was formed in Turner. The first office was located in the

post office and the machinery was housed in some rented space from the Shockley store across the street.

The Cooperative way was catching on in southern Blaine and Phillips counties and since Big Flat Electric had already been established, it was suggested that these areas join in with BFEC. Unfortunately a fire destroyed the Shockley store, taking the cooperative's warehouse with it. Rather than rebuild, a decision was made to relocate to Malta, a more central location to serve the expanding area.

I went on to discuss with Lenny what changes a steady supply of electricity made in his family's life. As he stated before, lights were the most appreciated. He also mentioned refrigeration, as well as electric water pumps. He said he packed a lot of water into the house as a kid.

The electric pump enabled water to be brought to the house through a pressure system which enabled indoor plumbing. Lenny recalled that it wasn't until the fifties that they added an indoor bathroom to the house.



The old Turner Post Office building housed the first Big Flat Electric Co-op office.

One of the first things Lenny's father purchased once his farm was energized was an electric welder. He said that this made repairs so much quicker and easier than having to totally remove the broken piece and take it to Turner to the Blacksmith. With a smile, Lenny reminded me that the good roads that I get to use weren't around back then, making trips to town even longer.

My discussion with Lenny, along with the outage of that stormy night, helped me relate to the struggles folks experienced prior to rural electrification. Having a steady, reliable source of power to our homes and farms has freed us up to do so much more with our time. The night of the outage, I had the comfort of knowing as soon as the wind went down, they were going to turn the power back on.

Can you imagine the excitement the folks must have felt, once they signed on as members, and saw the lines being built, knowing that power would soon be theirs to use?



NORTH 40 BAR & CAFE WHITEWATER, MT

Driving down Main Street in the small town of Whitewater, Montana you will notice a business named the North 40 Bar and Café. For this rural community 35 miles north of Malta, it is much more than a bar and café. It also serves the area as a place to gather and host events.

The building itself was built in the 1980's. Ownership has evolved through the years and is now in the hands of the North Country Development Cooperative. In 2016, after the establishment had been closed for a few months, community members knew they didn't want to see the bar and café permanently shut down.

Headed by Sue and Allie Olsen and Mike Hammond, the North Country Development Cooperative was established. The cooperative took in subscriptions

and has around 35 members from the Whitewater, Loring, Saco and Malta communities. The North 40 Bar and Café stands on its own and pays rent to the cooperative.

The new ownership is working on updating the building. Sue Olsen said, "This summer, we did some new flooring throughout, new cupboards, and a sliding barn door in the dining room to replace a plastic folding screen. The barn wood on the walls in the bar was added a few years ago. And a new paint job over the last couple years."

Krystina Nielsen manages the North 40. Currently, Jamie Huffman-Labrie, Margaret Pewitt and Cheyenne Stahl work along with Krystina, keeping the bar and café running smoothly.

The café provides Senior Meals on Wednesdays and host dart leagues on Thursdays. The Ryan Olsen Memorial



Cheyenne Stahl greets customers to the North 40 with a cheery hello and a welcoming smile.

Dart Tournament is held every year. There is usually a pool tournament, too. Community events, anniversary celebrations and birthday parties are a common occurrence.

See their Facebook page for the hours open. They are open every day except Sunday. Take out orders are available. Stop in and check out the North 40 Bar and Cafe in Whitewater, Montana.



The North 40 also serves as a community gathering place. Above, a sleigh ride for the kids was organized. (Minus the sleigh from the lack of snow.)



A corner of the banquet room hosts a local lending library.



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