

midwest MENTALITY

Midwesterners are grounded by their rural roots and their loyalty to what others call a “fly-over-state.” TOM MITCHELL, former FreeState Electric Cooperative Line Superintendent, is one such individual who says he owes his entire career to his Midwestern roots.

Mitchell, the eldest of Earl and Mary Mitchell's six children, grew up on a dairy farm in Girard. He remembers waking up before the break of day to help his father milk cows at 3 a.m. and then again after returning from school.

He was no stranger to hard work. “I take after my father in that aspect,” Mitchell said. “I never saw him miss a day's worth of work—not even once.”

This work ethic and dedication is what drove Mitchell to enlist in the United States Navy upon his graduation from Girard High School in 1970.

“I served in the Navy as a machinist mate for about four years and did two tours in Vietnam,” said Mitchell. “It was hard, but I met men who I'd trust with my life. They reminded me of the close-knit community I'd always known from back home.”

In addition to his tours in Vietnam, Mitchell was stationed at Pearl Harbor and had the chance to return home on leave in between—leading him to meet the love of his life, Lee.

“I went to visit my brothers at college in Independence, and while I was there, they asked if I was interested in going on a date with this girl they knew,” Mitchell recalled.

He didn't know it at the time, but his brothers had conspired with their mother to set him up on the blind date weeks prior.

“The only one who didn't know about it

was ‘ol Tom. But, it worked,” laughed Mitchell. “Lee and I married after I was released from service in 1975.”

Mitchell and his wife were married for 40 years before her passing in 2016. Their son, Joshua, followed in his father's footsteps and is currently serving in the Navy as a cryptologic technician.

He and his family stayed close to his home in Girard upon his return home from service, and his dedication to work never faltered as he was immediately hired to work at a foundry in Pittsburg.

“All I remember is that I returned home on that Friday and went to work the following Monday,” said Mitchell.

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Tom Mitchell (right) retired from a 41-year career in the electric cooperative industry. His commitment was celebrated on Jan. 12, 2018 with family, friends and co-workers.

Midwest Mentality

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Mitchell spent the next two years melting metal and creating castings for the foundry, but when rumors of layoffs started, he began to search for an alternative.

“I was actually walking home when I saw an electric cooperative truck drive by, and I realized everyone is always going to need power. So I went and dropped off my application,” said Mitchell.

His 41-year career with electric cooperatives began in 1977 at SeKan Electric Cooperative Association (now Heartland), in Girard, as an apprentice lineman.

“I remember as a first-grader thinking it was so amazing to see the linemen climb up poles and the idea of electricity,” said Mitchell. “At that time, I never imagined I'd end up being one of them years later.”

Once again, Mitchell's perseverance and drive for success pushed him to work his way up to journeyman lineman and then line foreman.

For 18 years, Mitchell dedicated his career to restoring power and helping others in the community he had always called home. However, his passion for the living in the country led him to pack up his family and move to McLouth, where he began working for Leavenworth-Jefferson

Electric Cooperative (now FreeState).

“I missed the country and wanted to move back to a rural area,” said Mitchell. “I knew it meant I would have to start over as a journeyman lineman, but I just made up my mind and decided that I would just work my way back up.”

Keeping his word, Mitchell worked his way through the ranks during his 22-year career at Leavenworth-Jefferson Electric Cooperative. This year, Mitchell will retire as a line superintendent. Throughout his career, he said the

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“All of the guys and line superintendents I have met over the years are always willing to offer advice and support. No matter who or where you were, help was always a phone call away,” said Mitchell.

Mitchell said his career with the cooperative has been successful and one of which he is proud of. He said while there have been a few rough moments, “it's been a decent life.”

Contributing the majority of his success to his family and Midwestern roots, Mitchell is satisfied he has left an impression on those he helped throughout his career as he reflects on his retirement on Jan. 12, 2018.

“Being able to make things better after the storm has been the most rewarding part of my cooperative career.”

FreeState thanks Mitchell for his years of service and dedication to our country, our co-op and our members.

Member Advocacy “Under the Dome”

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amount of time they can give to deal with other matters.

We know that there are issues to be addressed this session, and some will be impacting co-ops. One of those issues we'll be watching is retail wheeling. This is something that we monitored and provided testimony on in 2017, and will continue to monitor this session. The other piece of legislation we'll be looking at is the retail electric service territory termination process.

Just know that FreeState is committed to advocating for our members under the dome, and we'll continue to communicate significant developments.

We are blessed to have involved legislators in Topeka that represent the members of FreeState Electric Cooperative. We may not always agree with policies, but I can tell you that I have had positive and constructive dialogue with most of our representation. I can tell you that they want input, they want information, and they want constituents to communicate with them. We elect them, and they do represent us, so we should take some responsibility in guiding their decision-making.

Our members are our priority and we work to protect you from legislation and regulations that would negatively impact the coop-

erative, and our members. It works the same way in your local community, county, Topeka or Washington.

Legislation advocacy is more than going to the statehouse and meeting with our legislators, it's taking an active role in protecting our members by educating and communicating with decision-makers. We stand up for our cooperative, and the member-owners we serve “under the dome.”

If you have any questions on the information presented in this column, or this publication we encourage you to contact us at customerservice@freestate.coop or call 800-794-1989.



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FROM THE CEO

Member Advocacy “Under the Dome”

Monday, Jan. 8 was the opening of the 2018 Kansas Legislative Session, and it is shaping up to be a very interesting session this time around.

This year is an election year for all 125 members of the House of Representatives. Election year politics are animated years as those holding spots, and those looking to reposition themselves for the next election cycle start making more or less noise. It is hard to predict what will happen in Topeka this session with all of the seats vulnerable.

FreeState Electric Cooperative monitors key issues of the session with updates from our statewide organization, Kansas Electric Cooperatives (KEC). They have staff in the capitol monitoring, educating, and working on behalf of all electric cooperatives across Kansas. They report back to the cooperatives, and then we can take action on key issues that will impact our members—especially on issues related to utilities. We reach out to our legislators, and we provide information to those elected officials in the form of written letters, emails, and face-to-face meetings. It is not lobbying that we're doing. It is much more than that. It's grassroots legislative advocacy.

We can impact change by being engaged and take an active role in communicating and educating those who represent us at all levels of government about issues that are important to us. We can all provide information to our representatives on how regulations or new or revised laws impact our daily lives.

The key issues this session will be meeting the Kansas Supreme Court's deadline for a new K-12 funding mechanism. It may not sound like it impacts an electric cooperative, but how the revenue will be generated and how funds will be allocated are major components of the new finance plan. In addition, legislators will be working tirelessly on this item and that impacts the

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Steve Foss

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Where Are They Now?

Before consolidation in January 2017, the youth of LJEC and Kaw Valley Electric returned home from the Cooperative Youth Leadership Camp (CYLC) as leaders. So where are our alumni now, and how did their experience set them up for success? To apply for a chance to win the 2018 CYLC in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, visit www.freestate.coop or call 800-794-1989. Applications are due February 14.



Molly (Adams) Behne

MOLLY (ADAMS) BEHNE, a 2009 Cooperative Youth Leadership Camp alum, graduated in 2010 from Pleasant Ridge High School before attending Washburn University.

After camp, Behne came home for her senior year and made it her goal to expand her leadership experiences. She held multiple leadership positions including class vice president, school newspaper editor and more—and her determination didn't end there.

"In college, I became the secretary of the Early Childhood Education Association at Washburn (WU-OMEPE). Now, I'm utilizing leadership skills every day in my classroom," said Behne.

Behne graduated from Washburn University in 2014 with a degree in elementary education with an emphasis in early childhood. She now teaches second grade at Lansing Elementary, and uses lessons learned from CYLC on a daily basis.

"At camp, I had to work on my leadership skills while working with people from different backgrounds. It forced me out of my comfort zone, which was beneficial as I now work with a team of teachers," said Behne. "We all work together for the best interest of our students."

She uses the skills she developed at camp to collaborate with paraprofessionals to ensure her class of 22 to 24 students have a healthy and safe learning-environment.

As for current high school students who are eligible to apply for camp, Behne says she highly encourages them to apply.

"You get to meet so many great people while learning so much about yourself. Go for it!"



Sarah Smith

Understanding the power of networking and building relationships is something **SARAH SMITH** of Tonganoxie realized during her time at camp and continues to pursue.

The 2007 CYLC alumna graduated from Tonganoxie High School in 2008 and attended Kansas State University, earning a degree in life sciences. Later, Smith attended the University of Phoenix to complete her master's in health care and administration.

Smith said CYLC helped her transition to college with a clear plan for the future, and opened doors she never previously considered.

"The opportunity to attend CYLC allowed me to broaden my understanding of the world and exposed me to more people and careers than I thought possible," said Smith.

Even though a decade has passed since Smith's camp experience, the lessons she learned continue to direct her actions and choices.

"Many of the team building exercises we did at camp prepared me for working with individuals of varying knowledge and skill sets—a life lesson that will be valued for years to come," said Smith.

Smith is currently working temporarily at Smith Veterinary Clinic in Tonganoxie before pursuing a position in veterinary sales.

FreeState is proud to continue to offer this opportunity to area youth. We are dedicated to improving the futures of students in our community because they are next in line to lead the way.

2018 FreeState Electric Board of Trustee Elections

The FreeState board of trustee election process is underway. Our trustees have fiduciary responsibility and are tasked with setting policy for the operation of FreeState. The board has prioritized the importance of recognizing the fair and balanced election process between the east and west districts. Their focus was to ensure adequate representation for all members.

The following trustees are up for reelection at the annual meeting on April 24, 2018.

- ▶ **West District – BILL CONLEY**
- ▶ **West District – ROBERT SAGE**
- ▶ **East District – MARK GRATNY**

The nominating committee, made up of a member appointed by each of the board of trustees, met Feb. 5, 2018. This

committee reviewed the names submitted for consideration and presented a slate of nominees to be presented to the membership at the annual meeting in April for election.

More information on the slate of candidates and the annual meeting will be available in next month's centerspread and on our website, www.freestate.coop.

We Are FreeState

Operations Department Part 2

As a member-owner of FreeState Electric Cooperative, your knowledge and engagement with our cooperative is our priority. We strive to help you better understand the services available to you while getting to know those who are continuously working to provide you with safe, reliable, and efficient power. FreeState will bring our members a year-long series focusing on our individual departments and the employees that are member-driven. This series will be published monthly in The Outlet, on our social media channels, and on our website www.freestate.coop, where exclusive web content will be featured. Our goal is to help our members relate to our employees and to put faces and names behind your electric service because we work for you. We are FreeState Electric Cooperative.

While many members may associate linemen as providing them with reliable power, the linemen rely heavily on another side of the operations department—the right-of-way crew (FreeState Electric Cooperative's tree crew).

FreeState is technically just over a year old, but our policies, crews and employees have been working for our members for decades. What started as a new program for Leavenworth-Jefferson Electric Cooperative in 2000, has become the norm for FreeState in our goal to provide the best service to our members.

"The tree crew began when I was hired on at LJEC to start a new program of clearing trees from the power lines," said Randy Wager, right-of-way superintendent. "Once they announced the consolidation of LJEC and Kaw Valley, I began overseeing the program for the west district as well so that we had fully-staffed tree crews at each location."

The right-of-way crews were established with members in mind as trees can play a frustrating role in the reliability of power and functionality of power lines.

"Nearly 15 percent of member outages involve trees," Wager said. "It is in all of our best

interests to reduce that number."

Outages are not the sole reason the co-op makes right-of-way clearance an important part of the daily operations. Line loss is another key factor. Trees are a major contributor to line loss because tree limbs in the line become grounded and suck energy from the line before it makes it to the member—making it costly for the co-op and membership.

"Line loss is wasted energy," said Wager. "We work to decrease that loss."

While tree clearing can oftentimes be inconvenient for the membership, the work our tree crews do is crucial in keeping lines clear of vegetation.

"If trees and vegetation aren't cleared, the power can be knocked out and our members are left in the dark," said Mat Frye, tree crew foreman.

The success of reducing outages and power interruptions for our members relies heavily on the collaboration of tree and line crews to communicate work orders and plans of execution for each department.

"We want to make sure we take care of our members," said Jeff Werner, tree trimmer.

"To do that we have to go out and make sure we keep the power lines clear and that keeps outages down. That's the goal."

The process of tree crews going out and clearing the power lines starts with prioritizing service orders.

"The first priority we have is always the outages," Wager said. "If the line crew needs our help, then everything else is put on hold until power is restored."

Next in line are areas where storm or other damage to areas require clearing before line work can begin.

"We try to clear these areas to be sure that our linemen are able to do their work safely and efficiently," Wager will then analyze new construction or areas where line rebuilds are needed.

Lines that experience frequent outages and member requests for clearing are typically addressed last, although as soon as these work orders are brought to the crew's attention, they try to get them cleared as quickly as possible.

As one of the tree crew foreman, John Hamm, initiates the process once an order is delivered to his crew.

"I get the guys together and go out to the job site to do a safety briefing and find the trees that need to be cut," Hamm said. "It is my job to ensure my crew stays safe and the job gets done correctly."

While each day can bring a new challenge and unexpected

situations may arise, no day is the same in the life of a tree trimmer. Hamm says some days are spent on the ground, some days are spent in a bucket, and other days are a combination, but no matter where the work is done, the crews take their responsibility very seriously.

"We work hard to keep everyone safe," said Scott Shepherd, groundsman. "That's our main focus."

FreeState's right-of-way department personnel start with a four-year apprenticeship to becoming a tree trimmer. Over the four years, tree trimmers can work their way up. These stages are explained in detail on our website at www.freestate.coop.

Each right-of-way role plays a significant part in providing our

We work hard to keep everyone safe. That's our main focus.

SCOTT SHEPHERD, GROUNDSMAN

members with reliable service. Today, FreeState's right-of-way department is made up of three groundsman, two second-year tree trimmers, one third-year tree trimmer, three tree trimmers, two crew foremen, one right-of-way superintendent, and one operations manager who oversee the entire department.

Each person in our right-of-way department works diligently to keep your lights on, no matter the task. Here at FreeState, we aren't just member owned, we're member driven.



Tree Trimmer, Danny Merhoff, evaluates right-of-way clearance of a project while at a job site.