

Claverack Rural Electric Cooperative

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Guest Column



Line work: It's not just a job, but a lifestyle

by Doug Nichols, *Director of Operations*

I STARTED my career with Claverack in 1988 as an apprentice lineman in our Tunkhannock District, and over my 32 years in this career field, I've seen an enormous amount of changes. One thing that hasn't changed over the last three decades is what it takes to be a lineworker.

The demand for lineworkers is expected to grow by 9% through 2022 due to an aging workforce. Now it may sound like a negative that the workforce is aging, but it's just the opposite: individuals who choose to do line work for a living tend to spend a long time in the workforce because they enjoy very gratifying careers.

As director of operations, I've had the pleasure of interviewing and hiring many of our lineworkers over the years. One of the questions I ask each potential candidate for a lineworker position is: Do you realize this is not just a job but a lifestyle? Most, if not all, who want to engage in this line of work understand my question.

So what does it really take to become a lineworker?

It takes an individual with a very strong work ethic, a commitment to teamwork and a desire to work safely. It takes an individual with the physical strength to climb a 40-foot pole while wearing a tool belt containing 50 pounds of equipment. It takes an individual with the stamina and tolerance to work long hours, sometimes in the dead of night with the wind howling and the temperatures in the single digits, and other times in the blistering


heat of a summer day, while outfitted from head to toe in protective gear.

In short, it takes a special kind of individual, committed to a way of life that is inherently dangerous and a job that is inherently rewarding for those who enjoy the outdoors and helping others.

Basic line work hasn't changed much over the years, but the equipment and technology used today has made line work safer and more efficient. In the co-op's early days, employees dug holes in which to set poles by hand, and now this is all done with specialized equipment.

In the past 20 years, the continuous deployment of new technologies — from using GPS technology to digitally map and inventory the electric system to flying drones to patrol lines — allows electric cooperatives and their employees to work more efficiently and provide members with better reliability.

April is Lineworker Appreciation Month, and often lineworkers do not receive the recognition they deserve. They work all hours of the day, often in poor weather and hazardous conditions, and they are often called away from their families and personal activities to restore power to your homes when outages occur on weekends and holidays.

If you see one of your cooperative lineworkers, I know they would appreciate any kind words you could share to show your appreciation for their hard work and dedication to keeping your power on. 

Technology making line work safer, more efficient

Veteran linemen reflect on a changing industry

By Jeff Fetzer

AS A fresh-faced apprentice lineman back in the late 1990s, Allen Scott would often start the morning at Claverack's Montrose shop by asking what the crew would be doing that day.

"Setting poles and running wire," was lead lineman Tom Blair's standard reply.

While that simplified description of line work holds true to this day, how lineworkers get the job done today has changed dramatically since Scott broke into ranks as an apprentice in 1998.

"Nobody likes change, but as a whole, with the advances in equipment and the advances in technology, it has allowed us to get things done quicker and safer," says Scott, who serves as crew chief for the Montrose District.

In conjunction with National Lineworker Appreciation Day on Monday, April 13, Scott and fellow veterans of Claverack's operations department reflected on some of the changes they have seen over careers spanning up to 36 years, in the case of Claverack's longest-serving lineworker, Lindsay Chamberlain, crew chief for the Wysox District.

Chamberlain, who began as an apprentice lineman with Claverack in 1984, said the most impactful changes he has seen during his career have centered around advances in equipment.

"We had bucket trucks and diggers back then, but nothing like we have now," he says. "Everything is hydraulic now. When I started, the bucket had a plastic handle that you had to crank yourself in order to turn the bucket. And you had to jump up off the floor of the bucket to get your weight off it just so you could turn it."

Not only are today's line trucks safer, more maneuverable, and have more capabilities than those of 20 years ago, there are also more of them.

Manager of Field Operations Bucky



BACK IN THE DAY: Wysox Crew Chief Lindsay Chamberlain works atop a pole in 2005, when most electric lineworkers climbed poles using just the gaffs attached to their boots and their hands. Once they reached the work area, a leather safety strap would be wrapped around the pole to hold them in place and free their hands. Today, lineworkers must wear a protective device called a wood pole fall restraint when climbing and working on poles. It's one of the many changes Chamberlain has seen during his 36 years with the cooperative.

Camburn recalls that when he began working for Claverack in 1997, the co-op owned just three bucket trucks, with one bucket housed at each district building — Montrose, Tunkhannock and Wysox. The bucket trucks were used primarily for line construction work. For service work and outage repairs, lineworkers typically climbed poles.

Today, each district has three buckets, including a bucket mounted on a standard-size pickup truck, which

has become the go-to truck for crews responding to service calls and outages.

"That little bucket has changed line work," says Tunkhannock Crew Chief John McKernan. "We can take that bucket just about anywhere. That's why there is way less climbing than there used to be."

Chamberlain concurs, noting that early in his career, it wasn't uncommon for a lineworker to climb 20 to 25 poles each day.

"Today, a lineman might climb a couple of poles in a day's work," he says. "They still climb, but it's nothing like we used to do."

Even the method of climbing has changed.

Until 2016, most co-op lineworkers used a technique called free climbing to ascend and descend utility poles. To free climb, a lineworker would dig gaffs attached to his boots into the wooden pole while hanging onto the pole with his hands. Once the work area of the pole was reached, a safety strap would be used to keep the lineworker in place and free up his hands to perform the required work.

Free climbing is no longer permitted, and lineworkers today must wear a safety device known as a BuckSqueeze wood pole fall protection restraint when they are climbing.

"Climbing has changed dramatically with the fall restraint," Chamberlain says. "With the old climbing techniques, you were a free climber, so you learned to climb and you had that fear of falling. It was much simpler and easier to free climb — a little scarier, but more fluid than with the fall restraints."

Scott says while he would prefer to still be able to free climb because it's much quicker and provides greater maneuverability, he understands the requirement to wear the fall restraint is meant to protect lineworkers from falls.

"Our new guys have no fear of falling because they can't fall when you

use a fall restraint,” Scott says. “People falling get hurt, and I get it, so there’s definitely a positive with it.”

McKernan says while lineworker safety has always been stressed at the co-op, that focus has escalated significantly over the course of his 16 years as a Claverack lineworker.

While the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) mandated some of those changes in the last decade — wearing fall restraints while climbing, wearing fire-retardant clothing at all times, wearing rubber protective overshoes in energized areas — the game changer has been bringing an in-house safety professional, Director of Safety and Compliance Pete Yastishock, on board.

“We did not have a safety director when I started here,” says McKernan. “Pete is very good at his job and he brought this up to the safety level it should be at.”

To help create a culture of safety in the workplace, Yastishock mandated that a safety briefing, known as a tailgate, take place before work commences on any job.

“Every job starts with a tailgate,” says Scott. “The crew chief or desig-

nated leader for the job will talk about what’s going on, who’s doing what, where they are going and potential safety hazards, so everyone is on the same page.”

In addition to the inherent dangers of a profession that entails working from heights around high-voltage electric lines, sometimes in hazardous weather conditions, a lifetime of line work can be physically taxing. Changes in technology are changing that for the better, as well.

“Just about every lineman from my generation and before had the typical bad shoulders, bad back,” Chamberlain says, noting the shoulder problems, in particular, stemmed from years of using a long-handled crimping device often referred to as a nutcracker. “The old hand presses we used to connect wire, you’d do them 100 times a day, day in and day out. Now it’s all battery-operated squeezers.”

While Chamberlain admits to being



CHECKING THE MAP: Claverack Manager of Field Operations Bucky Camburn, left, holds a computer tablet containing a map of the cooperative distribution system while Tunkhannock Crew Chief John McKernan displays the paper maps lineworkers traditionally used to navigate the system. The GPS-based digital maps enable crews to locate member homes more efficiently. However, the paper maps are still carried with work crews for back-up purposes and to provide a larger visual overview of the system.

“old-school” when it comes to his preference for climbing and working off hooks over using a bucket for overhead line work, he says he’s a big fan of the battery-operated tools like the wire crimpers.

“It will make the linemen better as they age,” he says. “The next generation of linemen will be more physically capable as they age than I think I am or the guys that came before me.”

The new generation of lineworkers also has a lot more information available to them on the job site through new technologies Claverack has deployed in recent years, such as digital mapping and inventorying, smart meters, and supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA), a computer system that gathers and analyzes real-time data about the electric system.

“You can be out in the field and get a ton of information that you used to have to call in to get,” says Chamberlain. “And that’s wonderful, I love to have it. But the down side of that is that you don’t have to know your way

(continues on page 12d)



LINE RELOCATION: Montrose Crew Chief Allen Scott, left, and Manager of Field Operations Bucky Camburn discuss details of a line relocation project near Lawton in Bradford County in January. Scott and Camburn began working for the co-op in 1998 and 1997, respectively.

Veteran linemen

(continued from page 12c)

physically around the system, or know the lines inside and out, because it's so easy to rely on that tablet in your truck."

This spring, every co-op lineworker is being issued a computer tablet that will give them access to real-time system information, the co-op's outage management system, and digital mapping of the distribution system.

"It will make everything totally paperless. Work orders will be paperless. Everything will be sent over a computer," Camburn says. "The biggest thing for us is that all the information you need to know you'll be able to get off of that computer, without bothering engineering or member services back at the office."

Camburn says while the change over to digital may be challenging for veteran lineworkers, who were used to using paper maps and worker orders sent over a fax machine, he believes the cooperative's embrace of digital technology is beneficial to the co-op line crews and its members.

Scott agrees, explaining that just a few years ago, every time a line crew went on a service call, they had rely on large paper maps to locate the member's service location, and once there, they had to write down a detailed description of the property, including

the color and features of the home, and the location of phone, cable and internet lines, and propane and heating oil tanks.

Claverack collected global positioning satellite (GPS) locations for all of its member locations as part of a digital mapping project several years ago. While Scott's crew still carry paper system maps on their trucks for backup, the crew chief admits that locating member homes has been made much easier thanks to GPS technology.

"Before I go out on a job, I will Google the location and look right at that house," Scott says. "We have pictures of every pole, so I can look at that pole before I get to the job site. That's a huge upgrade. It's light years ahead of where we used to be, when you were lucky to have an address. It makes us much more efficient."

McKernan says having immediate access to mapping and system information via smartphones and tablets is particularly helpful during power outages.

"With GPS in the truck, you punch a pole number in and it takes you right to the pole," he says. "With SCADA, they can control some of the switches remotely from the office and it also helps with troubleshooting."

Camburn adds that from his phone, he receives alerts about outages as they are entered into the co-op's outage

management system, and when a breaker on the electric system opens up, he receives an alert on his phone through the SCADA system.

"As something comes in, it's spot on," Camburn says. "You don't have to wait until you get into the shop at night to get something on the fax machine. The information is instantaneous."

When Camburn, 45, began working for the co-op as a lineman in the Tukhannock district in 1997, there was no cellphone service in the region. Computer tablets were more than a decade away. And power outages were managed by the district supervisor using a yellow legal pad and paper maps.

"There have been a lot of the changes within last 10 years," he says. "There were no computers. We used paper maps. And meters were not electronic. If it continues at the speed we are going, I can't even imagine what it's going to be like 10 years from now."

Chamberlain says most of the changes he has witnessed during his 36-year career have been positive for the employees and co-op members.

"The whole industry is changing, and it's changing in every way," he says. "But the line work itself hasn't changed since they started doing it. It's still the same work that guys were doing 80-90 years ago — and I love that."

"No matter what way you package it," adds Scott, "we're still setting poles and running wire." 🌞

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OFFICE CLOSING
 All Claverack offices will be closed Friday, April 10, in observance of Good Friday.