

ElectricEye

Minnesota Valley Electric Cooperative

August 2024

Flipping the historic switch: MVEC lineman part of cooperative spirit in Guatemala

Turn the page of this issue, and you'll read about the experiences our journeyman lineman Wiley Harris had for two weeks in June with 13 other Minnesota and Iowa linemen on an electrification mission trip to Guatemala.

CEO Update from Marvin Denzer

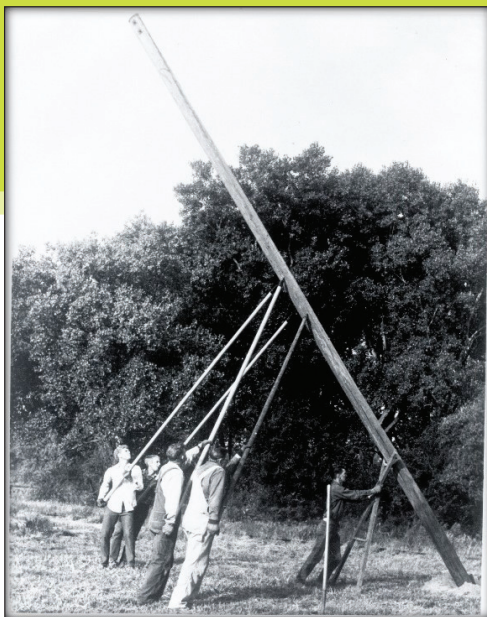


Wiley's efforts in Guatemala remind me of Minnesota – and much of the country – in the 1930s before President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the New Deal legislation in 1936. This allowed

the federal government to give low-cost loans to farmers who had banded together to create non-profit cooperatives with the goal of bringing electricity to rural America. Similarly, the Guatemala trip echoed that spirit of bringing power to a difficult-to-reach area.

Geography plays a part — Though cities in the U.S. had electricity since the late 1880s, the rural areas lagged behind because investor-owned utilities didn't think it was profitable to build infrastructure to serve farms miles apart. The rural, mountainous terrain of Las Penas, Guatemala, the village where Wiley worked, also delayed bringing electricity to the area. Not only is the village far from the local municipal utility that supplies the power, but the span between the three and a half miles of poles needed to connect Jalapa were the longest the U.S. linemen had ever seen. The conditions were rainy, muddy, and often the crew had to park below the mountain and walk a half hour to get to the village.

Making life better — The arrival of rural



LEFT: From the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association archives, farmers in the 1930s set a pole by hand with pulleys. **RIGHT:** The Minnesota-Iowa linemen had to employ old-fashioned methods in Guatemala without the convenience of a bucket truck. (NRECA archives/Joe Miller)



electricity in the 1930s made life on the farm easier. Farmers benefited from time-saving electrical equipment and could enjoy activities beyond the sunrise to sunset workday. Families could replace kerosene lamps with electric light bulbs. Radios and eventually television sets brought news of the world right into homes. Willie Wiredhand became the mascot of rural electrification – his name suggesting electricity was equal to having another hired hand on the farm.



The lighting ceremony in Jalapa on June 16 was life changing and a very happy occasion. There are now 35 homes, a church and a school that have the convenience of electricity, which will allow them to enjoy the modern appliances and devices that go along with it.

Equally as important as the flip of the switch was the connection between the Midwest linemen and the people of the village, many of whom pitched in with the heavy lifting or served as interpreters. In the project's process, two of the seven Cooperative Principles were followed: cooperation among cooperatives and commitment to community which resulted in a connection of people working together to make a small part of the world a better place.

To get the big picture of the Minnesota-Iowa electrification mission trip, I invite you to read Wiley's first-hand account and see the photos of his experience on the following pages of this newsletter.

Thank you for being a member-owner of your long-serving electric cooperative.

Marvin

Additional resources and board meeting highlights available 24/7 at www.mvec.net



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MVEC

MINNESOTA VALLEY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

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Wiring Dreams: MVEC Lineman's Journey



MVEC lineman Wiley Harris (kneeling, fifth from left) shared his experience powering the village of Las Peñas, Guatemala. Wiley also shared many of the photos he took while in Guatemala, including pictures of the homes (top right), the terrain, and what it looked like to climb poles without modern



frequent rain turned the dirt paths that linemen needed to use into muddy tracks. This made travel challenging. After parking their vehicles at the mountain's

base, linemen faced a daily 30-minute hike to reach the work site. On one occasion, they even had to carry a heavy 400-pound transformer along this path. Additionally, the rain shortened their workdays, prompting crews to opt for 10 consecutive workdays without breaks to get the work done.

As an MVEC member in the United States, turning the lights on is simply a flip of a switch. Hundreds, even thousands of times, you've flipped a switch and, without thinking, a lightbulb illuminates your room.

But when the lights were turned on recently in a small Guatemalan village, MVEC lineman Wiley Harris noticed something else.

"Some kids yelled, and there was a scream that came from the other room," said Harris. "My first thought was we messed up and someone got hurt."

In reality, the sounds Harris heard were actually amazement, as the children witnessed electricity for the first time.

In mid-June, Harris was one of 14 lineworkers from Minnesota and Iowa who traveled nearly 3,000 miles to electrify the rural village of Las Peñas, which sits at an elevation of 6,000 feet and consists of a church, a school and 35 homes scattered on a mountainside outside the larger city of Jalapa.

The trip was part of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's International Program, which has been providing volunteers to power villages and homes in impoverished countries around the world since 1962.

The Minnesota-Iowa contingent helped build more than three miles of powerline and wired the homes for electric service.

Mountainous Terrain

While Harris is used to working among the small hills of the Minnesota River Valley, the Jalapa mountains presented quite a challenge for him and his fellow lineworkers. The enormous peaks and valleys allow for very few good spots to place a pole, leading to very large spans – the distance wire travels from pole to pole. For MVEC, the average span is around 270 feet. In Guatemala, nine spans covered nearly three miles.

"Our shortest span was easily double of what we do around here, some others were well over 1,000 feet," said Harris, who added the spans occasionally were strung 1,000-feet high above the valley below them.

Running all that cable would be an issue here in the Minnesota Valley, let alone in the jungles and mountains of Guatemala. To help with this hurdle, Harris and crews relied on the locals, who were more than willing to help.

"They were really great to us," Harris said of the villagers. "They cleared paths, cut tree limbs and helped pull the wire for us. I think most of the guys were pretty impressed with how quickly they worked and how eager they were to help."

Battling Mother Nature

Weather significantly impacted the two-week trip. The village lacked proper roads, and

"I think most of us got there, saw the conditions and, when we realized how often it's going to rain, just wanted to get as much done as possible," Harris said of working straight through the week.

Along with building line, the crews also wired the houses with lightbulbs, light switches and two outlets. With the opportunity to use electricity for the first time growing closer, locals continued to offer help as linemen wired the houses.

"One woman sat under where we were drilling in case we dropped a screw or needed a piece of equipment. A grandmother tried paying me what she could as we wired the home," said Harris. "It was amazing to see how grateful they were and excited for something we just have and take for granted."

On the last day up the mountain, the crews met the locals outside the village for a small ceremony and to say their goodbyes.

The leader of the village spoke on behalf of the community, expressing their gratitude to the team. "Thank you to everyone who helped," he said. "You bring happiness for the hope that we can do more now with electricity."

A local municipality will now manage the lines and serve the village. The introduction of electricity will bring meaningful change to the community. In rural villages, boys often attend school while girls are kept home to do housework and food preparation. With electricity, girls can join the boys attending school. Additionally, electricity brings numerous other benefits including better health, fewer open fires in kitchens, refrigeration of food, economic growth and more.



...y to Bring Power to a Guatemalan Village

“It was amazing to see how grateful they were and excited for something we just have and take for granted.”

— Wiley Harris



MVEC hits the links to support injured linemen



MVEC Linemen Bruce, Chad, Kevin and Joe are swinging for a cause!

MVEC recently took part in the 19th Annual Burn Center Golf Benefit, an annual event by the Minnesota Rural Electric Association and at Pebble Creek Golf Club in Becker. Joining electric co-ops and vendors from across the state, MVEC sent a team of linemen Kevin Rens, Joe McKernon, Chad McGowan and Bruce Klehr.

The Burn Center Tourney's mission is to provide relief for co-op linemen burn victims and aid families during difficult times while assisting hospitals with advanced technology for optimal treatment. Utility line work is in the top 10 of the most hazardous jobs in America, and electrical contacts can result in severe burns. Burn victims from rural areas often travel significant distances for care at specialty burn centers. Minnesota has three: Regions Hospital, Hennepin County Medical Center and Essentia Health.

This year's benefit raised a record-setting \$64,606 — which brings the tournament's total to more than \$500,000 — to help families with medical expenses, transportation, and other needs. It was a great day for electric co-op staff and associates to be on the links. Additional funds were donated to the MREA's Rural Electric Cooperative Fund, which is used in times of personal crises for Minnesota's co-op families.

Twins Clinic a Grand Slam

Local youth joined MVEC at the PlayBall! MN Youth Baseball Clinic.

For the second consecutive year, MVEC, with the help of wholesale energy provider Great River Energy, hosted a Minnesota Twins PlayBall! Clinic on July 13. While last year's rain brought the event indoors, this summer's event was able to be held outdoors on the Jordan High School ball fields where young, aspiring ballplayers received expert coaching on hitting, throwing, and fielding from the Twins staff with assistance from MVEC staff, including CEO Marvin Denzer. The clinic is part of the Minnesota Twins Community Fund, which established the program nearly 20 years ago. Thanks also to Jordan Community Ed and Recreation for promotion and use of the fields.



Operation RoundUp seeks board trustee replacement

If you are interested in giving back to the cooperative community by volunteering your time to serve on the Operation RoundUp Trustee board, There is an opening in District 2, which includes portions of Carver, Scott, and Sibley counties.

This nine-person group of MVEC members helps research and decide how to distribute grant money. You must be able to attend one evening meeting per quarter (usually the third Monday of February, May, August, and November) and have time to research three or four grant requests before each meeting.



Those interested may apply at www.mvec.net/operation-round-up/.

The Electric Eye is the official publication of Minnesota Valley Electric Cooperative
Chief Executive Officer: Marvin Denzer

Editor: Dan Ring • Contributors: Jessica Heinz, Susan Larson
www.mvec.net • info@mvec.net
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Office Hours: M - F: 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
24-Hour Dispatch/Outages:
952.492.8255 or 800.232.2328

Contact Member Service:
952.492.2313 or 800.282.6832
Pay By Phone: 866.999.4504

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125 Minnesota Valley Electric Drive
Jordan, MN 55352