

Highline Electric to celebrate 75 years Tuesday

Written by Darci Tomky

It's been 75 years of history in the making, and Highline Electric Association is set to celebrate its anniversary at the annual meeting Tuesday, March 26 at Phillips County Event Center in Holyoke.

The celebration kicks off with a meal at 5 p.m., allowing plenty of time for members to view an impressive display of photos highlighting the history of the rural electric company.

It'll be a fun night to reminisce, said event organizers Nancy Berges, Highline member services director, and Dixie Fagerlin, member services specialist.

"It's a good way to capture the history and not let it be forgotten," said Fagerlin, noting the fun they've had looking through old photos and having former employees help identify just who and what those photos contained.



Boyce Wernet and Ron Morgan demonstrate at a Highline display during the 1971 annual meeting.

In addition to the display, a history booklet will be handed out, and a video will showcase interviews about how far Highline has come in the past 75 years.

The business meeting will start at 6:30 p.m. when 2012 will be reviewed and members will be

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updated on the issues Highline sees for 2013 and beyond.

There will be an election for one director from Districts 1, 2, 3 and 4. The four incumbents seeking election are Leo Brekel, District 1; Steve Oestman, District 2; Ted Carter, District 3; and Merl Miller, District 4. The election will be by voice vote, as allowed in the bylaws, if there is not competition for the office to be filled.

The celebration evening will be completed with lots of door prizes as well as some entertainment. Child-sitting services will be provided during the business portion of the meeting.

Johnson, Nelson first consider rural electrification in 1930s

Today, Highline Electric Association serves 11 counties in northeast Colorado and southwest Nebraska, with over 50 employees out of offices in Holyoke, Sterling and Ovid.

Highline serves 10,751 meters and covers 5,141 miles of line, with total revenue for 2012 at \$53,981,243.

Through 2012, Highline's accrued patronage capital was \$92,062,159, including \$45,579,987 of equity in Tri-State. Refunds total \$35,004,505, leaving \$57,057,654 of unrefunded capital credits.

"What a world we live in, and with that, how things have changed since the first farmsteads of our communities were electrified," said board president Mike Bennett. It took many years for the invention of the incandescent light bulb in 1879 and the first central power station in 1881 to become useful tools for rural communities.

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The Rural Electrification Act of 1936 provided federal loans for electrical distribution systems in rural areas, said Bennett, but this was only the beginning. “The hard work of our predecessors at Highline Electric Association and the many farmers and ranchers who helped string the wire and install the poles greatly improved the lifestyle we now take for granted on a daily basis.”



A Highline Electric Association employee does hot line work in 1953.

According to the Highline history book, it all began the spring of 1937 in the office of the Paoli Cooperative Oil Company with Eph Johnson, the manager of the cooperative, and Earle Nelson, manager of the Harris Grain Elevator in Paoli. (Earle is the grandfather of Elon Nelson, current Highline metering superintendent and a 36-year employee of the cooperative.)

As Paoli was emerging from the Depression, the town needed a larger generator to cope with increasing demand.

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Johnson and Nelson sought financing from the Rural Electrification Administration to build a transmission line from the electric plant at Haxtun 10 miles away, only to find out REA wouldn't consider a distribution line less than 100 miles long.

Despite the huge obstacle they faced, the first meeting for those interested in rural electrification was held April 10, 1937, in Paoli. However, even though the many advantages of electricity on a farm had been cited in the meeting, more than a year passed before anything substantial happened.

Finally in November 1938, the history book said the Holyoke newspaper reported the REA had given "preliminary consideration" to an application for an \$80,000 loan to construct 75 miles of rural lines for serving 190 farms in Phillips and Sedgwick counties.

Highline is incorporated

Highline Electric Association was incorporated Dec. 19, 1938. A contract was signed between the town of Holyoke, which would be the wholesale power supplier, and the new cooperative for the proposed rural electrification project, to serve Amherst, Paoli and Fairfield in Colorado as well as Lamar, Neb. Should the project be approved by REA, 205 patrons had signed for the service.

Officers elected for the association that evening were Eph C. Johnson of Paoli, chairman; Martinus Olsen of Amherst, vice chairman; Keith Craig of Paoli, secretary; and Otto C. Nierman of Amherst, treasurer.

Another setback occurred three months later when they received word from the REA that the number of patrons needed to increase.

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