What’s Good for the Members Is Good for the Co-op

The effectiveness and vitality of electric cooperatives testify that the cooperative business model is working. One of the amazing facts about electric co-ops is that they have operated in the United States for more than 75 years, and during that time, the basic model hasn't changed.

Electric cooperative members and co-op staff don’t want to miss a single opportunity to keep the cost of electricity to a minimum. For us, that goal involves minimizing expenses and maintaining a quality system that delivers the kind of service members expect and deserve.

The co-op focuses on keeping expenses down without compromising service, and members can also play a role. The most effective way to lower your monthly bill is through energy conservation.

Factors that affect the level of your energy consumption at home include the energy efficiency of your home, the number and type of electric appliances used, and your household’s lifestyle. As a conscientious co-op member, you might want to look at these three areas to find ways to minimize your consumption.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY: The type of home you live in represents a decision to consume a certain range of electricity each month. The energy efficiency of a structure plays a major role in determining how much electricity is actually used. With less-than-recommended insulation, inefficient heating and cooling systems, inefficient appliances, and leaky doors and windows, a smaller home may use more energy than a larger, energy-efficient home. If your home is leaky, weatherstripping and caulking are inexpensive ways to stop air infiltration and are tasks you can do yourself.

QUANTITY AND TYPE OF ELECTRIC APPLIANCES: It's especially important to make sure that appliances—including air-cooling and -heating systems—have good energy-efficiency ratings. As computers and other electronic appliances have become a greater part of household life, their presence adds to the demand for energy. Without really thinking about the additional energy use, families might add TV sets, game systems and computers to the home; over time, the sum of those additions can drive up demand for power. The newest technologies and devices might make our lives easier, but their overall cost involves the electricity necessary to keep them running.

When replacing appliances, look for the Energy Star label to help ensure that those additions to your home are not going to consume any more electricity than necessary. All appliances should be kept in good repair—for safety and efficiency. That’s especially true of your home’s air-conditioning system. A thorough maintenance check by a qualified technician should be an annual ritual. Changing your system’s filters at least monthly is also important. A clean filter allows the system to run more efficiently and do its job properly.

LIFESTYLE AND ENERGY USE: If you’re “hot natured,” you may prefer to frequently cycle the air conditioner. If that’s the case, be aware that your choice has an effect on your electric bill. Similarly, having a lot of people doing things—such as leaving doors open, taking long, hot showers and leaving lights or appliances on when not in use—can drive up the demand for kilowatt-hours. Even with our modest cost per kWh, consuming more power means a higher electric bill.

MESSAGE FROM CEO/GENERAL MANAGER DEBBIE ROBINSON

It’s better to call a pro, but if you’re tackling an electrical repair yourself, be absolutely certain the power is off.

Leave Electrical Work to the Pros

May is National Electrical Safety Month. As its sponsor, the Electrical Safety Foundation International wants you to be safe if your home needs electrical repairs.

Your best bet: Hire a licensed, qualified electrician when your home’s electricity or electric appliances are on the fritz.

Even if you turn your electricity off at the circuit breaker box, it’s not always safe to work on your home’s plugs and wiring. ESFI also recommends that you:

▶ Study your panel’s circuit breakers or fuses so you will know which one controls each switch, light or outlet.

▶ Suit up in safety goggles and gloves before touching electrical components.

▶ Triple-check that you have turned off the right circuits before you start any work. It’s easy to flip the wrong switch by accident.

▶ Make 100 percent sure that the circuit cannot be accidentally turned back on while you are working. Let everyone in the house know the breaker box is off limits until you say otherwise.

▶ Use a circuit tester to verify that the circuit you are working on is operating properly before you turn everything back on.

▶ Even then, consider leaving dangerous electrical work—even small jobs—to a pro who knows the ins and outs of how to stay safe—and keep your home safe—when electrical work is needed.
Rex Fleming, with his ever-present canine friend, Dog, prepares to sew a leather band into a hat.
Growing up in Chapel Hill near Tyler, Rex Fleming spent his childhood around the rodeo circuit with his dad, a photographer who specialized in rodeo work. Rex learned to love the grit and sights of the rodeo circuit, including the distinctive cowboy and Western attire worn by the participants. As he got older, Fleming even attempted one of the most dangerous jobs at the rodeo, clowning, which is the job of protecting the bull-riding cowboys.

Fleming went on to make his career with the U.S. Air Force instead of in the rodeo, but no matter where in the world he went, he retained his admiration for Western style. He remained especially fond of the one piece of iconic Western apparel most closely associated with the cowboy image—the cowboy hat.

In the Air Force, Fleming was an aircraft mechanic. Although he traveled for the military, he spent most of his duty stateside. In the 1990s, he was stationed in Spokane, Washington, at Fairchild Air Force Base, and he sought out part-time work at a Western store. While he was there, he learned how to operate hat-pressing and -shaping equipment. Later, when he moved to his duty station at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri, he needed to have his favorite hat reshaped. However, he couldn’t find anybody to do it. That’s when he decided to invest in his own equipment for cleaning and shaping. He began a small business out of his garage. He’d also travel to various horse shows where he’d ply his trade. “When I first started out, all of my equipment fit inside a medium Tupperware container,” he said.

As he set his sights on retiring from the Air Force, Fleming knew he wanted to keep practicing hat restoration. In 2008, he had the chance to buy equipment from expert Kansas hat-maker Jim Bilke, who had been in the hat-making business for more than 26 years. Bilke agreed that with the sale of the business, he’d teach Fleming how to use the mostly antique equipment, such as a 1928 sewing machine. Fleming learned what he could and then brought the equipment back to Missouri, where he worked out of his garage making and repairing hats until he retired from the Air Force.

Fleming moved home to Texas in 2010 and went to work for a Western-wear store in Athens and later worked in the oilfield, while still running his hat business on the side. But his dream remained to open up a custom hat-making shop full time. When he heard about the revitalization of the historic town of Ben Wheeler, he thought there might be a place for a
storefront business. So one day, he and his wife, Anna, met with Brooks Gremmels, head of the Ben Wheeler Development Corp., to see whether his shop would fit in. Gremmels was encouraging, and they struck a deal for Fleming to lease a shop. In December, Fleming opened the doors of The Hat Doctor.

His shop looks right at home in a rough-hewn historic building that has the perfect aesthetic for the antique equipment and forms used by Fleming. The shop specializes in cleaning, hat refurbishment and custom-made hats. To refurbish a hat, Fleming tears it down, washes it and rebuilds it. For the basic cleaning, Fleming says, “In most cases, a customer can drop a hat off and walk around town. When you get back, your hat is ready to go.”

For a custom-made hat, a customer picks out the quality and color, and Fleming then orders a felt hat body from a manufacturer in Tennessee. This body, depending on the quality, is made from a mix of the downy under-fur of rabbits, beaver, muskrat, nutria and possibly some wool. The higher the fur content results in a higher grade of material and also a more expensive hat.

Fleming says the process for making the raw hat body is pretty interesting, and he saw it firsthand at the factory. All of the fibers are put in a box that has a blower. The materials are blown around until they weave themselves together. All fur has almost-microscopic barbs on the ends, which aid this process.

Once “blown,” the fibers are made into a cone of material that is shrunk in a forming machine until a basic hat body is formed. The rough hat shape is what Fleming orders, and then he begins his work on it.

He’ll measure the client’s head and pick a block or crown mold in the appropriate size. He has antique crown molds from 6⅝ all the way to 8 inches. The hat is then roughly shaped by wetting it and pulling it over the block and allowing it to shrink to fit the size of the mold. After the hat is the proper size, Fleming painstakingly buffs and sands it by hand to smooth the fabric.

The hat then goes into a brim press for a few days. A leather hatband that is hand-stamped with his shop’s name and the name of the buyer is then sewn in. Next, he hand-trims the brim to the width specified by the purchaser. Finally, he uses the material that was trimmed off of the brim to make a matching hatband.

When the bulk of the work is done, Fleming will then fit and shape the hat to the wearer, and crease it in the style the wearer wants. He offers seven basic creases including a show crease, high and tight, low and slow, and a rodeo crease. He says he can shape the hat virtually any way the wearer wants. He’ll often have customers come in with a photograph to show him, saying something along the lines of, “I want a hat like Steve McQueen wore in ‘Tom Horn.’”
Of his custom hats, he says, “What I tell people is the pricing may be a little bit more. Yes, you can find a hat cheaper, but it won’t fit exactly right. It may very well be crooked on your head. I shape it the way you want it. If you don’t like it, I shape it again.” Of the final product, he says, “A custom hat will make you feel like you have had the hat for 20 years. It will be an extension of you.”

In addition to customers in the United States, Fleming has hat wearers all over the world, including Paris, Germany, Japan and Canada. He has a big following from what he calls, horse-show people. He also counts actor Mike Moroff of “Scarface,” “RoboCop,” and “The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones,” and many other film and TV productions, as a customer. He’s also recently made a hat for singer/songwriter Matt Bradshaw.

In addition to taking pride in his work, Fleming takes pride in customer service. He works on building lifelong customers. For instance, when working with parents to fit a hat on a child for the rodeo, he says he will work to ensure that the child can get several years out of the hat, even as they grow. For all of his jobs, be it custom work or cleaning, he says, “I just want you to be happy. If you aren’t happy, I am not happy.” Looking at the long haul, Fleming says, “I don’t want your money. I want your business.”

Fleming and Anna, best friends and business partners, are members of Wood County Electric Cooperative. Their business, The Hat Doctor, is located at 1560 FM 279 in Ben Wheeler. Fleming can be reached at (903) 802-HATS (4287) and more information about his service can be found at txhatdoctor.com.
These days, there aren’t many linemen who have been around as long as C.O. Love, otherwise known as Peanut. And there absolutely aren’t any WCEC linemen who have been. Love was born in 1924 in Stormville, a rural community about seven miles north of Quitman. He was one of nine siblings raised there on a farm, and he attended school nearby in Gamblin, which is a small community near Yantis. Peanut said he went to school there until the eighth grade, and then he was needed on the farm.

Gamblin was also the community where Love got his lifelong nickname, which came about because he liked to carry peanuts around in his pocket. Gamblin is also where he met Elsie, who would become his wife. Peanut was living with his uncle and helping out on the farm at the time he and Elsie married.

“I was making a living farming,” he said. “It was hard work. Back then we used a team of mules or horses to plow. There wasn’t no such thing as a tractor. We farmed corn and cotton.”

So he felt pretty lucky to get a job with the cooperative clearing rights-of-way in July 1945. But that work was pretty demanding as well. “We used a chop axe and a cross-cut saw,” he said. “Now, that was hard work!” But, Peanut was the industrious sort, so he continued for two years, until he was asked to work on foreman Howard Blackwell’s line crew. He said there were five men on the crew. Back then, all crews had five men because they had to be able to carry the power poles. He said they also had just one A-frame truck, and it was used to carry the poles and sometimes to help set them. “If we could get to the spot, we would back it up and use a buckboard or a plant or maneuver it.”

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on a string to make sure they were straight. To build the line, they’d string the wire out alongside the poles, and then they’d climb each pole to set the wire. Bucket trucks were a thing of the much distant future. Once on Howard’s crew, Peanut persevered through his lineman career progression, earning his stripes as lineman III, II and then first-class lineman.

Through the years, Peanut became a crew foreman, and then he became a service-man working in various areas: Quitman, Yantis, Mount Vernon and finally Grand Saline. Servicemen are some of the most crucial employees, because they live in and learn all about a particular territory. They’d set and pull meters for their region and also are the first to troubleshoot any outages. In those days, they also read meters.

Peanut said he worked on many big jobs over the years. “It was a growing co-op,” he said.

One of his biggest jobs, he said, was as a lineman in the Mount Vernon area. He said that the crew had to hand-set 50 to 60 poles that ran about five miles. He said they worked that job off and on for a whole summer, and when other crews caught up with what they were working on, they’d come lend a hand, too.

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He also remembers another big job south of Van near Redland. He said on that one, he dug eight holes in one day, and it was clay all of the way. Looking at the linemen today, he says with a smile, “They need to get out and work. They THINK they work.” Then he gives them a nod, and says, “Well, they do, in a way.” But he can’t help himself and winds up by saying, “They gotta set a pole by hand and dig by hand to know. Then they will know what we went through.”

The whole time Peanut talks, Elsie nods and agrees, and she also emphasizes how hard the work was. But, she likely had a job herself, raising their six children and a grandchild. Their oldest, Buford, came to work at WCEC, where he also became a first-class lineman. Elsie said Peanut first taught Buford how to climb a pole right in their front yard. Buford was only 18 when he signed on at the cooperative. Ultimately he became a serviceman, too, and then retired after 40 years of service.

Over the years, like all linemen, Peanut had his times of working in the dark, the heat, the rain, sleet and snow. He was also bitten by a dog one time after he’d already finished reading a meter. He went back because the lady of the house wanted him to show her how to read the meter. He said her little black dog got him on the calf. Peanut has also stumbled into other hazards of the trade, like a mess of bumblebees and yellow jackets while clearing rights-of-way. And he hung himself on a fence by his pant leg, causing him a lifelong knee problem. But, as he looks back, that’s not what he emphasizes. What he says about his job is, “I loved it! After 41 years I’m bound to have liked it!”

Today, the Loves spend their time with family that now includes 12 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren. They enjoy gardening and Peanut, at 89, still tills their garden plot himself. Together, the Loves like to fish, usually chasing crappie or catfish. And when able, Peanut enjoys squirrel hunting.

Looking back, Peanut says, “I was grown and gone before the first electricity ever came to my house. We did everything by coal-oil lamp.” What a testament, then, that he spent his life’s work ensuring that everybody else would enjoy the ease of life that electricity bequeaths.