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**PIONEER ELECTRIC
COOPERATIVE**

NEWS

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In Case of an Outage

If your electricity is off for more than a few minutes, call 888-551-4140. After-hours calls will be answered by dispatch and forwarded to standby personnel.

Sy's Stories from the Line

Each strand of line tells a story and no one knows this better than Pioneer Electric retiree (and master storyteller), **SY HILEMAN**. Sy worked with the cooperative for 50 years, ending his career as the operations manager.

“Well, I tell it two different ways,” shared Sy with a sly grin. “I was at Pioneer Electric for about 50 years, but only worked about 40 of those years. The rest of the time, I was just playing around and enjoying myself.”

Sy helped construct and oversee the construction of many miles of line and in return has many stories to share.

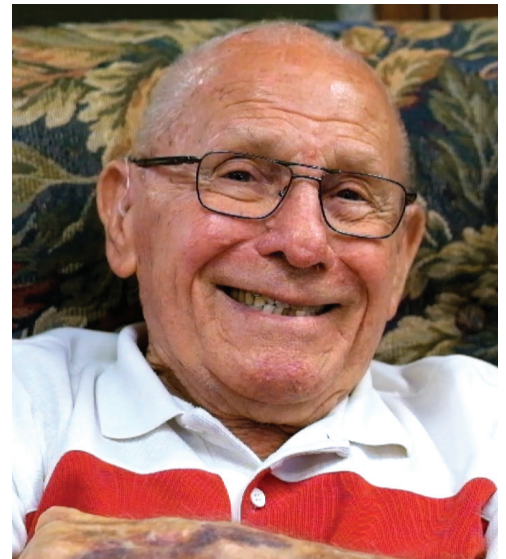
The Early Days

Every story needs an introduction. Picture 1944 when a young Pioneer Electric was trying to get a foothold in southwest Kansas.

“During that time, they didn’t have any line,” explains Sy. “They had just purchased Highland Utility, which serviced the towns of Ulysses, Big Bow and Manter but didn’t power any of the rural communities between them. There were people who lived under the lines for almost 25 years and never had power until Pioneer Electric took over.”

In 1949, Sy had his first interaction with the cooperative. He was working with a contractor commissioned to help construct 500 miles of line stretching from Moscow through Morton County.

“After that, I started working for Pioneer Electric,” said Sy. “So, I had



Retired Operations Manager Sy Hileman shares some stories from the past.

about a year of experience of working for Pioneer before I actually started working at Pioneer Electric.”

Starting in the 50s, Sy worked on the line crew and helped set and maintain various sections of line.

“We had three trucks, five linemen and four in the office when I started,” Sy said. “In those days a lot was done by hand. It would take a lineman about an hour to dig a hole. The poles were then set and the line constructed between them.”

Our manager was very conservative with our spending, so we used what we had. We were driving little Chevy

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Our 2019 Youth Tour winners (from left) Mia Rock, Autumn Deyoe, Leonela Martinez and Tyann Weis.



Extra! Extra! 2019 Youth Tour Delegates Selected

“Let’s walk and talk,” announced Pioneer Electric Communications Specialist Drew Waechter as he greeted four Ulysses High School students outside of Pioneer Electric. The students traded confused glances as their family and cooperative staff began to pour out of the cooperative entrance. Excited (and a little anxious) the students, their families and Pioneer Electric staff made their way toward a parked bucket truck. “Recently, you all participated in some interviews for our Youth Tour program,” said Waechter. “Well, we have a question—do you have any plans for this summer?”

Pioneer Electric is proud to recognize **MIA ROCK, AUTUMN DEYOE, LEONELA MARTINEZ** and **TYANN WEIS** as our 2019 Youth Tour delegates. The four students were selected from 24 applicants from across southwest Kansas. Each was required to complete an application and write about why they would be a good candidate for Youth Tour.

“We want to give each student a fair opportunity to put their best foot forward,” said Waechter. “We redact any identifying information (names, school information, etc.) before sending the applications out to our judges. Applications are then reviewed and 15 finalists are selected for an interview.”

Finalists are required to participate in a formal interview as their final challenge for the trip before winners are selected.

“Interviews are intimidating, but what we want for students is to have the opportunity to go experience an interview,” said Waechter. “I wish I would have taken more opportunities like this when I was younger. Interviewing is a skill that these young adults will take with them throughout their lives.”

Mia and Autumn will be headed to Washington, D.C., for the Electric Cooperative Youth Tour in June. The students will spend a week exploring the sights and sounds of Washington, D.C. In July, Leonela and Tyann will head to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, for the Cooperative Youth Leadership Camp.



Top: Pioneer Electric’s Drew Waechter (far right) surprises the co-op’s 2019 Youth Tour delegates. Pioneer plans to send the four Ulysses students on all-expense-paid trips this summer. Bottom: Your 2019 delegates take a couple of minutes to celebrate winning their trips.



MALEAH WALKER
\$2,000
Ulysses H.S.



VIVIAN TITUS
\$2,000
Hugoton H.S.



REBECCA JOHNSON
\$1,500
Hugoton H.S.



SLATER HEGLIN
\$1,500
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\$1,500
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MEGAN NEWLON
\$1,500
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CLAIRE CLARK
\$1,000
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RAFAEL GRANILLO
\$1,000
Moscow H.S.



KEYLEIGH VELASQUEZ
\$1,000
Ulysses H.S.



NICOLE WILKEN
\$1,000
Ulysses H.S.



JALEN TUCKER
\$1,000
Stanton Co. H.S.



DEVIN WALKER
\$1,000
Ulysses H.S.



SHAYDEN HANES
\$1,000
Elkhart H.S.



CALLIE NICHOLS
\$1,000
Syracuse H.S.



RILEY BAKER
\$1,000
Syracuse H.S.



JENNY AMERIN
\$1,000
Stanton Co. H.S.



GETTY IMAGES/ANDREY POPOV

2019 Pioneer Electric Scholarship Recipients

Stories from the Line

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pickups and didn't have much else."

It wasn't until the 60s that the cooperative purchased its first digger derrick and high line bucket trucks.

As for training, Sy had minimal exposure to line work outside of his past as an electrician.

"I was given a pair of hooks and a belt and was told to get work," said Sy. "There really wasn't much training."

Service and Storms

As a lineman, you know how to weather a storm. Pioneer crews have seen their fair share of storms and Sy is no exception. However, one storm still stands out in his mind.

"It always seemed like the bigger the storm, the more we stuck together and worked," said Sy.

"In '57 we had an ice storm that came through the western part of the state and we lost over 2,700 poles. Three of us made it to the office but we couldn't leave the town for about two days. Once we could get crews out, we had tractors go out in front of our trucks to help push snow off the roads. Luckily, we didn't have the state department calling us up for driving a bulldozer on their highway. We called in crews from Colorado, Indiana and Oklahoma (I knew a lot of those crews from Oklahoma) and we went from normally having 40 people working with us to about 300. There was one guy from Indiana that was working around Elkhart with three other crews. He'd been there about a week before I even had the opportunity to speak with him. We caught up with them and I asked him how it was going. 'We're working 16-hour days and are resting a little bit before we get back on the project,' he said. I told him that I knew where they were needing to go but had other orders, and he told me, 'Well, just turn them over to me and I'll work these three crews for you.' We had an outpost lineman show them where they needed to go and they went on from there. It's moments



Sy Hileman (center, white shirt) stands with the last group of linemen and staff that he managed at Pioneer Electric.

like that you learn to trust people. It was interesting to work with 120 guys that had never been out in southwest Kansas but were eager to help us get the power back on."

Outside of storm season, crews shared many other adventures out on the line.

"We used to change out wire with 30-foot hot-sticks. We had a guy working the lower sticks, he was about 15 to 20 feet off the ground, when his climbing hooks slipped out and he was straddling the pole. He just leaned back in his safety belt and worked his way down the pole. When he got near the bottom, a couple of younger guys grabbed him by the legs, set his hooks and he just started climbing back up the pole.

Another story Sy shared was how the crews used to get around by using landmarks. "Up by Coolidge was a sinkhole that had a little 'rock house' by it. We also had a 'rock barn' by the Richfield community, and I was sending a crew to go to the rock house to help with an outage. Well, I wait a while and get a call from these folks saying that they were still out of power. I called the crew up on the radio and asked them where they were and they replied back, 'we just arrived at the rock barn.' I then had to tell them that they were about 50 miles out of where they needed to be."

Lessons in Stories

We share stories for a number of reasons, whether to teach or entertain, or as a way to continue and reflect on our heritage. In listening to Sy's stories a single theme rings from each chuckle and smile—community. No matter the changes or growth, community has been at the heart of Sy's Pioneer experience.

"I just loved the people," said Sy. "There was a time that I could go out into our communities and speak with someone and I'd know their dad or brother. I knew a lot of the area farmers and their families. However, in terms of friendship, I really enjoyed working with the folks around the Colusa community. The kindness they would show during outages—they'd provide us gas or help move things with tractors—was humbling."

The cooperative became a family for Sy, with each employee leaving an impact on him and giving him ample opportunity to share new stories.

"Past and present, we've had some great people involved with the co-op," Sy said. "Kids I've worked with and those who have moved on; all good people. I have some stories to share about them, but I think this is enough for today."