

# OWEN ELECTRIC CONNECTION

April 2022 • Owen Electric • A Touchstone Energy Cooperative

## Lineman Appreciation Day

You've likely noticed Owen Electric's crews out and about, working on power lines and other electrical equipment in our community. It's no secret that a lineman's job is tough—but it's a job that's essential and must be done, often in challenging conditions. This month, as we celebrate Lineman Appreciation Day on April 11, I thought I'd share some interesting facts about electric linemen.

The work can be heavy, in more ways than one. Did you know the equipment and tools that a lineman carries while climbing a utility pole can weigh up to 50 pounds? That's the same as carrying six gallons of water. Speaking of utility poles, linemen are required to climb poles ranging anywhere from 30 to 60 feet tall. Needless to say, if you have a fear of heights, this probably isn't the career path for you.

Linemen must be committed to their career—because it's not just a job, it's a lifestyle. The long hours and ever-present danger can truly take a toll. In fact, being a lineman is listed in the top 10 most hazardous jobs in the U.S.

Linemen often work nontraditional hours, outdoors in difficult conditions. While the job does not require a college degree, it does require technical skills, years of training and hands-on learning.

Did you know that to become a journeyman lineman can take more than 7,000 hours of training—or about four years? That's because working with high-voltage equipment requires specialized skills, experience and an ongoing mental acuity. Shortcuts are not an option, and there is no room for error in this line of work.

Despite the many challenges, Owen Electric's linemen are committed to powering our communities. During severe weather events that bring major power outages, linemen are among the first ones called. They must be ready to leave the comfort of their home and families unexpectedly, and they don't return until the job is done, sometimes days later. That's why a lineman's family is also dedicated to service. They understand the importance of the job to the community.

Nationwide, there are approximately 120,000 electric linemen. Owen Electric has 37 linemen who are responsible for keeping power flowing 24/7, 365 days a year. To do this, they maintain nearly 5,000 miles of power lines across nine counties in north-central Kentucky. In addition to the highly visible tasks linemen perform, their job today goes far beyond climbing utility poles to repair a wire. Today's linemen are information experts who can pinpoint power outages from miles away. Line crews now use laptops, tablets, drones and other technologies to map outages, survey damage and troubleshoot problems.



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Being a lineman may not seem like a glamorous job, but it is absolutely essential to the life of our community. Without the exceptional dedication and commitment of these hardworking men and women, we simply would not have the reliable electricity that we need for everyday life.

So, the next time you see a lineman, please thank them for the work they do to keep power flowing, regardless of the time of day or weather conditions. After all, linemen are the power behind your power. Please join us as we recognize them on April 11, and follow "#ThankALineman" on social media to see how others are recognizing linemen.

President and CEO  
Michael Cobb



A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 

# Honoring Frank Downing

Frank Downing's tenure within the rural electric program in Kentucky is impressive, to say the least. Beginning his career in 1958 at East Kentucky Power Cooperative, in Winchester, he would later move to Owen Electric in 1979, becoming president and CEO. This marked the start of a very progressive and transformative era in the life of the cooperative, thanks in large part to Downing's leadership.

"I grew up on a farm in Fayette County. We had cattle, sheep, work horses and ducks, geese, guineas and turkeys, and all kinds of other animals, so it was an interesting lifetime. We all had chores to do," Downing recalled of his childhood.

Upon graduating from high school, Downing attended the University of Kentucky where he received his degree in agribusiness in 1952.

"1952 was a very busy year for us ... I graduated from the university, received an ROTC commission as second lieutenant in the Army, married in July and went in the Army in August. I moved around the country several times, and I went to Korea in 1953 and 54," Downing said.

Frank Downing, then Owen Electric's president and CEO, visits with Wilbur "Nub" Marksberry, a former serviceman for Grant County. Photo: Owen Electric archive



His son, Frank Jr., was born the day he left for Korea. Downing's wife, Elizabeth (Libby), and son remained with her parents on the farm near Georgetown while he was away.

Returning home, he worked for the University of Kentucky's Extension Service in Clark County. It didn't take long before Downing was recruited to work as a power sales representative for East Kentucky Power, the transmission and generation cooperative for Owen Electric.

"It was a mystery as to what a power sales representative would encompass. At that time, there were only four electrically heated homes on East Kentucky's system—two at Farmers RECC and two in Somerset, and those were 'spillovers' from the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) area," said Downing.

"We visited with TVA and got a lot of their ideas as far as insulation requirements, heating types and systems. At that time, the only choices we had were ceiling cable, wall mounted units and baseboards, so it was an interesting concept. East Kentucky moved to start developing incentive programs for electrical heat, then moved to water heaters, washers, dryers, ranges and all other types of major appliances and users of electricity," Downing said. "We developed all types of advertising materials, including bill inserts, radio spots, newspaper ads, and dealer kits for the member systems. A short time later, we had requests from co-ops nationwide to buy our material, which we supplied."

With the use of electricity within the home growing quickly, Downing and East Kentucky Power began developing other programs, including one to partner with and train contractors, certifying them as electric heat contractors. This would prove valuable in building relationships between electric cooperatives and contractors across the state, helping electric incentive programs thrive.

"In the fall of 1978, Roy Gray, an Owen Electric board member, and Marvin Keith, the CEO at the time, came to me at one



of the East Kentucky board meetings and said Marvin was planning on retiring at the beginning of the year and wanted to know if I was interested in becoming the next manager at Owen Electric," said Downing.

That encounter would be the first of several Downing would have with Keith and the board of directors. In November, Downing accepted their offer of becoming the next president and CEO of Owen Electric, starting January 1, 1979.

"The first three months were the most challenging in my life ... We were buying a new home, moving the family, and then as far as the cooperative was concerned, we had a number of retirements as I was coming in. We had to fill those positions, had a new union contract and a rate increase—they all came in that first three months of 1979," Downing said. "We will always be thankful to the board of directors, employees and certainly the co-op members for their assistance during this transition period."

"My family was very supportive in moving and being in a new community. Libby became involved and was elected president of the statewide WIRE (Women in Rural Electric). Our son, Frank Jr., and daughter, Sue, graduated high school in Winchester, and Margaret, our youngest, was a sophomore in high school."

Downing's time spent at East Kentucky Power Cooperative helped shape the management approach he took at Owen Electric.

"I had an opportunity to visit several times a year with each of the cooperatives



Current and former Owen president and CEOs Mike Cobb, left, and Frank Downing enjoy a visit. Photo: Whitney Duvall



Downing takes a moment to check in with fellow employees, clockwise from right, Morgan Chandler, construction superintendent; Nelson Popham, serviceman for Boone County; and Johnny Pruitt, construction superintendent for Owen Electric's northern-most service territory. Photo: Owen Electric archive

in Kentucky to establish marketing programs. I was able to study and see the different management techniques, programs being used and was able to use many of those ideas in the management of Owen Electric," Downing said.

He found additional enrichment by immersing himself in state and national member services committees, bringing back ideas and concepts from co-ops across the country. Downing also attributes much of the success of his career and of the cooperative to education.

"Education has been very important in my life; it opened doors for where I am today, and it became the base rock for the employees of the cooperative," Downing said. "I'm very proud that we had five individuals who got their Master of Business Administration degrees and were then able to develop different programs that helped Owen Electric lead the country in many respects."

Meter reading and the implementation of computer technology for billing are just a couple of the examples Downing references, attributing this period of "fast-track" advances in operations to those who pursued advanced degrees, as well as the "dedication and willingness of the employees to build for the next century."

Another significant achievement was the beginning of capital credit refunds in 1990. Since then, Owen Electric has refunded more than \$33,600,000 to its members.

Culture was another key aspect Downing sought to improve upon.

"The cooperatives operated on a short financial string, purchasing used pickup trucks, used line trucks, and many pieces of equipment that were worn out. We changed this by acquiring additional financing to get the equipment we needed," said Downing.

This, paired with an innovative flat-rate program Owen Electric debuted in 1982, helped the co-op keep its rates untouched for nearly 20 years. A testament to forward thinking, Owen Electric was able to maintain these rates even though its wholesale power supplier experienced rate increases throughout the time due to the construction of new generating facilities and other large expenditures.

Accelerated growth in northern Kentucky also factored in to the cooperative's ability to maintain rates.

"In 1979, we provided service to about 20,000 members ... today the co-op is approaching 65,000," said Downing. "You can see the tremendous growth that's gone on, and we've been very fortunate for it."

This growth helped inspire and foster relationships the cooperative had with local chambers of commerce and its role in industrial development. Owen Electric was a charter member of the Kentucky Industrial Development Council.

"It's been a real pleasure to see all the growth that we've seen, not only

physically, but the human growth as far as the ability of the employees, and the activity of the board of directors. They've been very supportive and have gone through a lot of the learning process and training programs," Downing said. "It's been a real pleasure to be here."

In addition to the management of Owen Electric, Downing served 17 years on the Board of Regents at Northern Kentucky University, including a term as chairman. He also served on the University of Kentucky Alumni Board, as well as its College of Agriculture Alumni Association, where he served a term as president. Downing served as executive director of the Owen County Chamber of Commerce from 2002 until 2018.

Family and friends were saddened by the death of Libby in 2013, leaving Downing, her husband of 61 years, her three children, Frank Jr., Sue, and Margaret, along with seven grandchildren who lovingly called her "Nano."

Aside from his appreciation of family and three great-grandchildren he's welcomed in recent years, much of Downing's gratification comes in the form of serving and seeing former staff further their careers and excel.

"It's a real honor to see former employees at Owen Electric now serving as president and CEOs of three electric cooperatives in Kentucky...Bill

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Former President and CEO Frank Downing, front right, shares his thoughts and observations on the utility industry at a recent Owen Electric board meeting. Looking on, from left, director Bob True, President and CEO Mike Cobb, Board Chair John Grant and legal counsel Jim Crawford. Photo: Whitney Duvall

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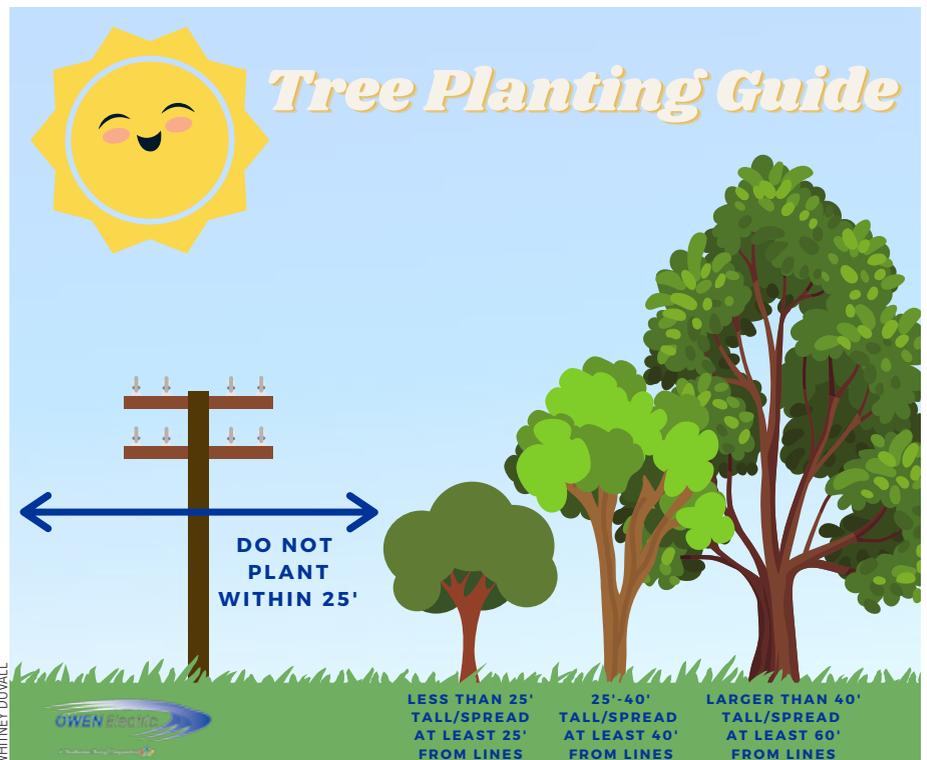
Prather at Farmers RECC in Glasgow; Mike Cobb at Owen Electric; and Jack Bragg at Shelby Energy in Shelbyville,” Downing said.

A transformational leader and visionary, Downing’s influence carried beyond the development of the cooperative infrastructure and has left a lasting impression on those who worked with him.

“I began my career with Owen Electric in 1987 and have witnessed firsthand a multitude of improvements shepherded in under the strong leadership of Frank

Downing,” Mike Cobb, current president and CEO, said. “When I was named president and CEO of the cooperative, one of the first to offer congratulations and support was Mr. Downing.

“His support and encouragement means a lot to me both personally and professionally. I’ve always said this cooperative’s history can be categorized by ‘BD’ and ‘AD’—before Downing and after Downing—because of his vision and remarkable accomplishments in moving the organization forward to become widely recognized as one of the most respected cooperatives in the nation.”



WHITNEY DUVALL