

Hitting the HOG to bring home the bacon

A look at South Dakota Statewide's Line Patrol Charity Ride

By Tracie Bettenhausen



It started out as a casual conversation about the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally in South Dakota. Vic Simmons, Rushmore Electric Cooperative's general manager, Jim Moore, Northern Electric Cooperative's general manager, and others, were wondering how many cooperative people would be there.

"We got to thinking, we should do a co-op ride, we've got so many people who ride," Simmons recalls. "The idea at first was to get the employees to socialize and know each other better. But the more we thought about it, motorcycling has a tradition of supporting charity events, so let's try something bigger."

The first Line Patrol Charity Ride was held in 2003. Forty-three riders raised money for co-op employees who get injured on the job.

But, thankfully, no one was getting injured on the job. Karla Steele, the ride's coordinator and special projects manager at South Dakota Rural Electric Association (SDREA), says they noticed another need.

In May 2007, the three-person committee that oversees the SDREA Victims Assistance Fund changed the guidelines to include co-op employees and their spouses who are facing a major catastrophic event. Since then, they've given out \$26,000 (\$32,000 since the ride began).

"We have one employee whose wife was in a horrible car accident," Steele says. "Grand Electric has an employee whose 10-year-old son is going through chemo. We have one co-op where a husband and wife are both battling cancer."

While the more than 125-mile ride doesn't only help line workers these days, the name of the event won't change. "Its intention was to help people who were hurt on the job. And nine times out of ten that was going to be a lineman. ... Now, we're checking line as we ride," Steele laughs.

Steele says they raise money through raffle tickets, sales from t-shirts sponsored by Basin Electric, East River Electric and Rushmore Electric, co-op donations, and a live auction.

This year, 158 riders were drenched in a cold downpour. "Mother Nature just loves to test how tough co-op people are. ... Some of our guys have ridden in snow. The ride is always the weekend after Labor Day," Steele says. The increased number of riders and support from cooperative directors, employees and suppliers helped raised more than \$20,000 in 2009.

Claire Olson, Basin Electric's senior vice president and General Counsel, has taken his Honda Shadow on six of



The bikers fuel up on a hearty breakfast and coffee before the ride. Joe Connot (far right), West Central Electric, does the live auctioneering each year. Also pictured: Mike Kjose (far left), Clay Union Electric, and Roger Lawien (middle), Moreau-Grand Electric.

the rides. "First of all, I go to support a good cause. But you also get a chance to see some new country from your motorcycle and an opportunity to meet co-op employees," Olson says.

Vic Simmons' Harley-Davidson Ultra Classic has served as his trusty steed for three years now. "The nice thing is, there are directors there, managers there, linemen there, member services people there, office people there, and it doesn't matter. There are no titles. We all just get together and have fun and support a very worthwhile cause."

Shocked on Father's Day

They knew what it was as quickly as it happened. An arc, a shock, a lineman injured on the job.

Mike Davis, journeyman/lineman for Butte Electric Cooperative, and crew were on an outage at 11 p.m. June 21, 2009. Davis lost his footing. He reached up, and 7,200 volts "went in my right arm and came out my right leg. It swung me around the pole, but didn't knock me out or anything," Davis says. "The sound that an arc makes, you never forget it once you've heard it."

By the next morning, he was at Regions Burn Center in St. Paul, MN. Davis had skin grafts on his right arm and leg. He stayed there for eight days, and went back every two weeks for months.

Davis says the funds his family received from the Charity Ride were "an extremely big help. It was amazing to see how people would help me and my family. You just can't thank everybody enough."