



HOLMES-WAYNE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE LOCAL PAGES

On the cover: (from left to right) Brent Schrock, Ward Vaughn, and Al Schonauer

“Bittersweet”

Three longtime Holmes-Wayne Electric employees retire

BY LAURIE SIDLE

They came in as three young men establishing their careers and are leaving as a tight-knit group, having dedicated a combined 120 years of service to the Holmes-Wayne Electric Cooperative.

Retiring on Jan. 5 are Ward Vaughn, line supervisor with 43 years of service; Albert Schonauer, operation line technician with 42 years of service; and Brent Schrock, right-of-way supervisor and arborist with 35 years of service.

While Vaughn and Schonauer are of retirement age, Schrock chose to retire with them for a couple reasons. He wants to focus on his own consulting business, plus he feels a strong connection to his coworkers.

“I feel like I grew up here with these guys, and we were always pretty tight. I thought it would be fun to go together.”

In a company that averages 40 to 42 employees, losing the three of them all at once will have a big impact, said Robyn Tate, human resources/community relations director.

Those sentiments were echoed by their supervisor, John Porter, vice president of engineering and operations for Holmes-Wayne Electric.

“It’s a bittersweet moment to see all three guys retiring at the end of the year,” he said. “On one hand, having worked with all three guys for 35 years, I’m excited and

happy to see them reach this milestone and be able to enjoy life without having to worry about keeping the lights on 24 hours a day. On the other hand, they are taking 120 years of experience with them, which in today’s world, is hard to replace. I personally will miss their dedication and hard work as well as the camaraderie they have shared throughout the years.”

Vaughn and Schrock were in high school when they both got their starts at Holmes-Wayne Electric Cooperative, mowing yards for the co-op’s substations.

Schonauer was hired as an equipment operator for the cooperative. He and Vaughn went on to complete apprenticeships to become lineworkers.

“This was my dream job, for the most part,” Schonauer said.

Despite working in one of the most dangerous industries, which sometimes requires 500 to 1,000 hours of overtime in a year, all three men remained dedicated to their jobs.

“It gets in your blood,” Schrock said. “It doesn’t matter what’s going on out there, you want to go (get power restored). You’re determined to get that last customer on.”

Safety is vital, Schonauer said. “You’ve always got to be thinking three steps ahead in everything you do.”

During their careers, all three men answered mutual aid calls to other states for power outages caused by major storms, including Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane



Ward Vaughan, getting a hug from granddaughter Leighton.

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Albert Schonauer in an ice storm in December 2004.

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Irene. Some of their toughest challenges, however, were right here at home during the ice storm in 2004 and the derecho (a powerful cluster of thunderstorms) in 2022.

The ice storm struck just before Christmas, leaving thousands of residents without power in the midst of a frigid holiday weekend.

“When it first happened, trees were falling on our trucks as we were trying to drive over trees (to get to the downed lines),” Schonauer said. “Everywhere we went, trees were falling across the road. They were falling in front of us and behind us.”

“The time of year made it difficult to get power restored,” Vaughn explained. “It was the shortest span of daylight. The temperature got extremely cold and stayed bitter cold.”



Brent Schrock in the 2005 Antique Festival Parade.



Ward Vaughan at a 4-H safety demonstration.

Faced with a massive number of downed trees after the derecho's straight-line winds, Schrock's number of tree-trimming contractors grew from 17 to 85 overnight.

Long hours on the job have meant missed family events for Vaughn, Schonauer, and Schrock, but all three said their families understood what their jobs required.

“There were more than a few missed ball games, holidays, and birthdays,” Schonauer said.

“I missed my kids growing up,” Vaughn admitted, “but I’m making it up with my grandkids.”

The number of cooperative customers has more than doubled since the three men started their jobs, and industry changes have resulted in safer protective gear; improved equipment, tools, and training; and more reasonable shifts during major power outages.

They all agree their funniest moment together occurred while they were moving a hollow log on a right-of-way. Suddenly, one of the linemen began frantically jumping up and down, because a mouse was running up one of his pant legs and down the other.

“The mouse went back and forth and back and forth until he caught it,” Vaughn said. “We laughed for two days.”

It's a memory they will take with them into retirement. Schrock plans to travel with his wife, help his children with home projects, and volunteer for his church and Eight Days of Hope in disaster response teams. Schonauer wants to do a little traveling and spend more time with his granddaughter.

Their ties to each other will remain strong. As Vaughn noted:

“You have your family and your co-op family.”



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