NEW TECHNOLOGY enhances REC

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Technology. A word that can be exciting and stressful at the exact same time. It may be that you bought a new smartphone only to have the newest model come out a few days later. Or that you purchased an item that you know will help you but you can’t get past the instructions.

Technology is changing so rapidly that we hardly have time to catch up to the technology that was new a year ago. I have a picture hanging in my office that states, “Everything that can be invented already has been.” This statement was released by the U.S. Patent Office in 1899. The name of this photo is the Essence of Innovation, and it goes on to read, “If these ‘experts’ ran the world we would still be sitting in the dark. It is our responsibility to shatter outdated thinking and explore the realm of the untested; It is here that the breakthrough opportunities are waiting to be discovered.”

Here at Richland Electric we pride ourselves on being innovative. Our vision statement is “Richland Electric Cooperative shall be the trusted provider of power and leadership to enrich the lives of people in the communities it serves.” We are willing to try new things that we believe may benefit our members and employees. Our most recent update in technology is our new meter technology. With the new meter system we are now able to receive 15-minute-interval data. This not only helps our members understand how they are using energy, but it also helps REC. We can more easily diagnose issues and better assist our members to find more efficient ways of using their energy.
It is amazing how often we take our energy usage for granted. We often do not understand how much energy a dryer may use, or how big box stores sucker you into buying space heaters. Not saying that space heaters are bad, but they are definitely not the most efficient in terms of heating. That is why it is so important for us to stay up to date on the latest technology trends.

Like most technology trends, the newest items will often be out of the daily consumers’ price range. Remember when LED light bulbs hit the market? It was by far one of the most beneficial energy savers of our time; however, many people, myself included, could not justify spending $20 on a single lightbulb. But like most technology, the LED bulb has come down drastically. My house is now 100 percent LED and I do not have to worry about changing a light bulb in the next 10 to 15 years. We strongly believe in the technology of LED light bulbs, which is why for the last few years we have given them as attendance gifts at our annual meeting.

By now you may have heard of “smart homes,” which can be taught your tendencies with some simple programming. I hope there are some millennials out there like myself who can even reference the 1999 Disney movie “Smart House.” That movie was based on the idea that the house could do everything you asked it to do for you, from preparing meals, packing lunches, cleaning floors, measuring health levels, and even talking! Although talking in technology is not exactly new anymore thanks to Amazon’s Alexa and Apple’s Siri. It’s hard to believe that in 1999 all of these ideas seemed so far-fetched.

Probably the most notable smart home technology is Google’s Nest thermostat. This thermostat is programmable and learns the tendencies of the household. For example, if you leave your house at 7 a.m., the thermostat will reduce the heat (saving energy) until you return at the end of the day. The thermostat will begin increasing the heat before you arrive back home so you may never even notice, except that your energy bill may have lowered. Saving energy without having to do anything sounds very appealing to me. This is the most common purpose of smart home technology, and although I can’t promise that this smart home technology will take over your home, I can say with a fair amount of certainty that it won’t.

With all these improvements one can’t help but wonder when the Marty McFly power laces and hover board from “Back to the Future 2” will become available. Nike has developed a shoe with power laces that can be bought for about $10,000 or more. However, I have yet to see a true hover board make its appearance. And I’m not talking about the hover board with wheels that should almost require an insurance policy when purchasing because of the painful falls. Although painful, they are quite funny to watch. Don’t know what I’m talking about? Just go to YouTube and search hover board fails. I am holding out hope that one day a real hover board will be invented. In the future of “Back to the Future 2,” the date was 2015 so it would appear the director missed the mark by only a few years.

On top of the new meter technology and the LED light bulbs, what other advances is REC making?

This summer REC will be taking its advances in technology to the sky. We
have purchased a small drone with the idea that it will help us be more efficient in locating exactly where lines may be down in long rights-of-way. Our linemen often have to walk through tough terrain without having any idea where a power line may be down. This is not a safe scenario, and our number-one priority at REC is safety. The drone will also be used to assess storm damage, record video, take photos, and help us promote the Richland County community. REC is the first electric cooperative throughout the Dairyland Power service territory to have a certified remote pilot. We have this reputation here at REC that we like to be first. Very rarely do we follow. We are very much innovators and leaders in our community and with other electric cooperatives.

Every day someone is working on an invention of his or her own. It may not be related to technology, but more often than not technology will be used in the process. Hollywood often vilifies technology by having it turn against us in big movie productions. But they never really focus on how much it has helped us move forward as a society. It is up to us as a cooperative to make sure that we are constantly advancing for our members. Change may be hard for a lot of people, but it does not have to be. You may have heard of the quote “work smarter, not harder.” This is not saying don’t work hard, but to find more ways of working efficiently. Here at Richland Electric Cooperative we are not only working hard, but working smart to make sure we are enriching the lives of the people in our community.

Top 10 Home Electrical Safety Tips

- Use a qualified electrician for repair work
- Repair loose outlets; replace cracked, worn electric cords
- Watch for hot or discolored switch plates, flickering lights, or buzzing sounds.
- Get regular check-ups for older homes
- Use bulbs with correct wattage for the fixtures
- Unplug electrics if you smell something burning
- Use extension cords temporarily, not as permanent wiring
- Educate the household on electrical safety
- Keep cords out of walkways and high traffic areas

Learn more about home electrical safety at SafeElectricity.org
The coming of spring break brings back many memories for me. When I was a freshman at UW-Madison, I could hardly wait for spring break. Not that I had plans for traveling to Florida and the beach, as many college kids were doing. I looked forward to spending a week at the home farm and helping with spring planting. Spring break in those days was usually in mid-April, the time of the year when we planted oats.

Pa had recently bought a tractor, a Farmall H, and I looked forward to driving it on the disc to “work up” the oat ground—a 20-acre field that Pa had plowed in the fall. On a sunny Saturday, the first day of spring break, I was driving the tractor up and down the plowed field, leveling it, and turning up stones. Lots of stones. Once more I could smell richly turned soil, a pleasant smell of spring. I spotted Meadowlarks sitting on the fence wires as I worked along, and sometimes a bluebird. The warm sun on my back and all of the smells of the farm and spring helped me realize what I had missed by traipsing off to Madison and the university.

With the discing finished, Pa hitched the team to the stoneboat, and Pa, my brothers and I spent most of a day lifting, pushing, prying, and loading stones on the stone boat. Even with a tractor now doing the heavy work on the farm, Pa never sold the horses. They now pulled the stoneboat, one of those tasks that horses could do better than a tractor. A tractor required that you climb off and on the machine. Stone picking was hard, miserable, dirty work, but necessary before planting anything.

Next came smoothing the field with a drag, a metal dust-making machine with numerous tines that helped level rough ground. Frank and Charlie pulled the drag, and I would walk behind, in a vast cloud of dust.

Meanwhile, Pa and my brothers were working in the granary, cleaning the seed oats with a hand-powered fanning mill. The fanning mill removed the chaff and weed seeds from the oats that Pa had saved from the oat bin for spring planting.

Pa hitched the grain drill to the back of the tractor and he took over. He wanted to make sure that every inch of the field was planted. The last thing he wanted was a wisecracking neighbor to drive by and say, “Well, Herm, looks like you ain’t quite got the knack of that new tractor.” “How so?” Pa would ask. “You missed planting a big swath in your oat field.”

So now my week-long spring vacation had come to an end. Back in school on Monday, my college friends, who had gone to the beach, and I compared suntans. “Well what beach did you go to? You’ve got a great tan,” a friend asked.

I answered, “No beach, but I had a good time, how about you?”

Once a farmer, always a farmer.