By Shannon Clark

If you lump together electric, telephone, cable television, and to some extent broadband companies into a single description, that term might be utilities. Couple those businesses with water and wastewater and the term utility is widely used.

Utility businesses have enjoyed a long history of operating as regulated monopolies. Their monopoly structure ensured they would be able to capture enough market share to pay for the large capital investments they were required to make. Appropriate regulations made sure utilities didn’t gouge consumers by taking advantage of a competition-free environment. Except for a few cases where regulatory oversight wasn’t adequate, the system resulted in reasonably fair prices and reliable service.

Today, while these utilities are still regulated to some extent, changes in the market are disrupting the status quo and that has some people worried.

Those worries aren’t just among the investment community whose holdings include utility stocks and bonds; regulators and consumer advocates worry that some consumers will be left without service or at a minimum without reliable service.

Entertainment not just about TV anymore

It was only about 20 years ago when rural residents first had the opportunity to subscribe to affordable pay television, via satellite. In-home entertainment options prior to small-dish satellite programming consisted of a few local network television stations delivered via an antenna. Beginning in 1994, members of Richland Electric Cooperative were able to subscribe to television programming that brought 24-hour news and sports, movies without commercial interruption, variety programming, and more for about $25 a month. Satellite-delivered entertainment now serves over 50 million Americans, but if you subscribe you’ll likely pay more than $75 for the same programming that cost $25 in 1994 and you’ll be hard pressed to find many channels that are commercial-free. As the number of channels increased and conglomerates such as Disney®, Viacom®, Discovery®, and the national networks have captured more and more market share, they have indiscriminately raised prices to meet investor demands. Rural consumers had little choice but to pay these higher rates or give up their television service.

Consumers have railed against the huge bundles of channels they were required to receive in order to get the
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requires years to achieve the necessary permits.

Electric utility management teams are challenged by slow growth as non-traditional energy generation such as solar and other renewables are making their way to the consumer sites. This distributed generation results in lower energy sales for many utilities, and in most cases those sales provided the revenue to operate and maintain systems that must exist even for the smallest user. Covering fixed costs of operating an electric system is necessary to ensure that reliable electricity is available to all consumers, whether they are adopting new technology or not.

Conclusions

It’s fair to say technology and innovation are disrupting many utilities as we know them today. What’s not fair to say is that this is a bad thing. It may turn out to be, but it doesn’t have to be. Cooperatively owned utilities are among the best positioned of all. Because they exist to meet their members’ needs instead of meeting investor demands, cooperatives help members access the latest developments in services like electricity, telephone, broadband, or entertainment. There are always challenges, but invariably there are always economies of scale for people who choose to work together cooperatively rather than go it alone.

LOOK UP FOR HAZARDS DURING HARVEST

To stay safe around overhead power lines during harvest season, Safe Electricity urges farm operators and workers to:

- Use a spotter when operating large machinery near power lines.
- Use care when raising augers or the bed of grain trucks around power lines.
- Keep equipment at least 10 feet from power lines—at all times, in all directions.
- Inspect the height of farm equipment to determine clearance.
- Remember to lower extensions when moving loads.
- Never attempt to move a power line out of the way or raise it for clearance.
- If a power line is sagging or low, call Richland Electric Cooperative.
- If contact is made with a power line, stay on the equipment until help arrives. If the equipment is on fire and you must exit, jump off with your feet together, without touching the ground and vehicle at the same time. Hop to safety as you leave the area.
WEATHER VANES

The old weather vanes, some only a few inches tall, some several feet, are reminders of a time before TV weather maps and forecasts. Some were decorative cows or horses, pointing the wind’s direction. It was a time when farmers depended on knowing wind direction for predicting the weather and planning the coming day’s activities.

Weather vanes were often perched on cupolas, the little building-like structures on the top of barn roofs. Lightning rods were often a part of weather vanes, with the lightning rod spike reaching toward the heavens.

On our farm, weather vanes had a major purpose beyond showing wind direction. Our weather vane was a target, a wonderful challenge for my BB gun and a reason for competitive shooting when a neighbor boy came by toting his gun.

Shooting the weather vane with a BB gun seldom evoked much comment from Pa, but if he ever caught one of us shooting at it with a .22 rifle, there was trouble. A .22 rifle bullet made a hole in a weather vane that someone could easily spot from the ground.

On a late fall Saturday afternoon, Pa and Ma had gone to town and my brothers and I were home alone. I doubt anything would have happened except the Kolka boys stopped by for a visit. Jim and Dave were the ages of my brothers and me and they had brought along a .22 rifle.

We got to talking, as kids will, about who was the best shot. Soon the boasts got to claims of lighting kitchen matches at 50 feet and splitting a bullet on a knife blade stuck in a block of wood.

Then Jim said he figured he could hit the weather vane on the barn, standing under the elm tree by the house—a considerable distance. He said he bet I couldn’t. So we stood elbow to elbow with our .22s, aiming at the weather vane. My brothers were counting. When they got to three, we were to shoot. I don’t remember if we talked about how we knew who had hit the metal cow when we both shot at the same time. Discussing details like this sometimes spoiled an otherwise superior competitive event.

At the count of three, we both shot. The weather vane spun around two or three times.

“I hit it!” Jim yelled.

“I’m the one who hit it,” I yelled back.

We could only spot one additional hole in the weather vane, beyond the one that had been there for years. We declared the shooting a tie, each of us claiming victory.

A few days later, Pa asked if I knew whether anybody had shot at the weather vane.

“Why do you ask?” I said, innocently.

“It’s got two holes and it only had one.”

I hadn’t realized that Pa kept such close tabs on something as mundane as a weather vane. From that day forward, we chose other targets for our competitive shooting events.

For more information about Jerry’s books and his TV work go to www.jerryapps.com. For questions or comments, email: jerryappsauthor@gmail.com. His newest book is “Whispers and Shadows: A Naturalist’s Memoir.”