

POWER SOURCE

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Serving a Diverse Market

The Importance of Providing a Full Spectrum of Electrical Services

By Tom McTavish, Business Manager, IBEW Local 117



When I became an apprentice in Local 117, it was a different time. The construction boom had not yet crossed the Fox River, and we had a membership of less than three hundred electricians. Our contractors would take on all manner of work, whether it was commercial, industrial, residential, or service. Whatever the type of project, we did it, and we did

it well. Consequently, our members had to be skilled in all facets of electrical work. On Monday, we might be crawling around in the attic of an old house reworking the knob and tube electrical system; on Tuesday, we would be pouring bases for parking lot lights; and later in the week, we would be sent to a manufacturing plant to troubleshoot a machine.

In the 1990s, however, many things changed. Suddenly, we had more work than we had ever seen in the history of Local 117. Mile after mile of retail centers were being built along our traffic corridors. New construction included schools, office buildings, medical facilities, and large residential developments being built by national home builders. There was so much work that many of our contractors and members began to specialize. Some of our contractors would now only bid on big box retail, or schools, or warehouse and manufacturing. Some of our members only wanted to work in new construction, or to install big pipe. We abandoned some of our smaller developers and builders, and much of our less desirable work was left for others to do. As a whole, we were

not inclined to do the service work or the remodeling anymore.

We can now look across our nation and see that our situation is not unique. At the same time, we can also see what the consequences are of turning our backs on the service work and remodeling jobs. There will always be someone else to do that work. In the last two years, we have experienced a downturn in construction as well as some unemployment. Our contractors are diligently searching for projects to bid, and 2006 appears to offer some hope for growth in the commercial sector.

Construction has never been an easy business – there are so many factors beyond our control, and profit margins are continually being squeezed. In addition, new technology is forcing changes in the way we do business, and the acquiring of new skills is imperative in order to succeed in our industry. We must embrace new technology and be ready to adapt to changes in our industry, but we must not forget the less glamorous work. We must be able to serve all customers, or they will find someone who will. ■

IBEW Electrician Exhibits a Real Drive for Antique Tractors



Oswego, IL, a small town an hour southwest of Chicago, used to be famed for the Oswego Drag Strip. The racing venue has long been gone, but Oswego remains home to another unexpected treasure: the twenty antique tractors restored by long-time IBEW member Ken Wolf. A proud union electrician, Ken has been a member of IBEW Local 461 ever since he began his electrical career thirty years ago. During the day, he runs a service truck for NECA/IBEW member contractor D.L. Cook Electric; during his evenings, Ken pursues a passion: restoring old tractors and antique farm machinery, including plows, hay bailers, and lawnmowers.

When Ken brought home his first tractor in 1995 – a 1952 John Deere A – his wife Jane studied him and asked, “What are we going to do with this piece of junk?” Ten years later, Jane’s most frequent comment is, “When are we doing the next

tractor show?” Indeed, Ken exhibits his tractors in various shows every summer, averaging about ten shows a year—and well he should, for the sixteen tractors housed in the 1,800 square foot shed at his farm in Oswego are true pieces of art. Some of the tractors he restores partially, adding a new engine or tires; others need to be rebuilt completely from the ground up. Recently, Ken was offered \$10,000 for a red 1937 F-30 tractor. “I’d pulled it out of a guy’s woods—it had a tree growing in the middle of it that had to be cut out with a chainsaw for me to even be able to pull the thing out,” says Ken. Ken spent two and a half years restoring the F-30, a true feat of dedication and love for his hobby.

Asked about the reason for his interest in antique tractors, Ken says that it’s a hobby that has grown naturally out of his life’s experiences. “I was born and raised on a cattle

farm, and have always been around agriculture,” states Ken. His cousin across the way owned a dairy farm, and as a kid, Ken would work on the farm, riding around on old tractors all day. He drove his very first tractor on the farm grounds at the age of nine – an Oliver 88 that many years later his cousin presented to him as a gift. After he completed the NECA/IBEW apprenticeship training program and became an electrician, Ken began looking for something to do in his free time. “I bought an old tractor, and then the first thing I knew, I had fifteen of them,” he says.

But restoring the tractors is by no means just a way of whittling away the hours after work. White haired and lanky, proudly sporting his IBEW jacket, Ken reveals that a number of factors have contributed to his passion. For one thing, Ken feels that it is a financially sound investment. In his view, “antique tractors are better than the stock market—you’re



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never going to lose money." He may well be right—the market for antique tractors is growing increasingly hot. "Before," Ken states, "you could go to an antique farm auction and there'd be no one there bidding on these things; now there's a lot more competition."

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- Ken Wolf -

So, like all good investors, Ken keeps a keen eye on the market, mostly through newsletters circulating in the antique tractor collectors'

from all over the country. "I've gone out to Minnesota and South Dakota to pick them up," he says.

Ken's sons, Troy, 18, and Trent, 16, frequently accompany him on his journeys out of state to obtain tractors and parts. This is the third, and by far the most important, factor in Ken's pursuit of his hobby: family. Outside of the trips, which sometimes take up to three days, his sons share in the process of rebuilding the antique machinery. The John Deere 1952 A now belongs to Troy. Ken has given Trent the second tractor he ever rebuilt, a McCormick Farmall M 1945. Ken's father-in-law, a retired mechanic, visits the Wolfs often and regularly gives Ken advice. As for Jane, she appreciates the

where he has come in third twice. According to Ken, winning is based on straightness of row, and "how neat the land is after you're done plowing."

Dedication and sincere enjoyment of his hobby have led to other rewards for Ken as well. This year, he was chosen to participate in a promotion for the Willie Nelson Farm Aid concert in Chicago, and, along with twenty-nine other owners of antique tractors, paraded his tractor all the way down Michigan Avenue. "Not a lot of guys can say they've driven their tractor through downtown Chicago," says Ken with a proud smile. "We had a police escort and everything."

A first-class electrician, Ken bought his two and a half acres in Oswego twenty years ago, where his family



community, as well as keeps his ears open for any word-of-mouth tractor news. "There are quite a few collectors in the area," he says, and affirms that he knows them all. This sense of belonging to a larger community is the second of the factors that drive Ken's interest. "It's bigger than you'd think," he says. "There's a nationwide community of antique tractor restorers...there are magazines through which I stay in touch with the national community." The tractor aficionados exchange information on the location of tractors and parts – Ken has purchased both

happiness that rebuilding the tractors gives her husband, and uses the family garage to pursue a hobby of her own—collecting and selling antiques.

Outside of the family togetherness, there is another element that is an exciting part of Ken's activities: competition. He does not merely rebuild the tractors, he actively enters them in plowing matches in the area, particularly the "Big Rock Plowing Match" in Big Rock, IL. Ken won in 2000 and 2001 in his category, and has since then been moved up to the "sweepstakes runners" class,

now lives in a house on which he performed all of the electrical work himself. At the end of the day, Ken is happy tinkering with his "toys," working down a checklist of the things that need to be done on a given day. He owns John Deeres, Massey-Harrises, Farmalls, Olivers, Allis Chalmers, and a Minneapolis Moline, but is not partial. "I love them all," he says. With the help of his well-earned IBEW retirement plan, Ken looks forward to his future retirement and to devoting himself full time to his tractors. ■

The Telecommunications Revolution

It was only fifteen years ago that the Information Age took over, altering and improving our ability to communicate. These alterations in our lifestyle have affected the electrical industry substantially. As the Technology Revolution speeds ever forward, the telecommunications and data communications industries continue to advance at a rapid pace. Businesses are constantly investing in data, voice, and video communications networks, while individual use of the Internet keeps climbing. Business owners, managers, and employees alike – in almost any field across the country – are learning the skills

necessary to keep communication flowing smoothly.

Moreover, the industry keeps changing, as new technological advances are introduced at a fast rate. In this environment, the electrical industry has benefited, as contractors and electricians are constantly called upon for their skills and expertise. Union contractors and electricians help design and install the wiring and cable systems without which these telecommunications and data networks could not function.

The housing boom in particular has benefited the electrical industry in this respect, as more and more

new homes are being wired for data communications and Internet access during the construction process. This type of work involves installing coaxial or fiber optic cable for computers and other telecommunications equipment. Business and industrial complexes, too, are requiring the installation of these electronic systems controls for their equipment. According to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, these developments will ensure continued growth in the electrical industry for the foreseeable future. And NECA/IBEW contractors and electricians are trained and ready for that future! ■

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