

Pioneering a power system

Longtime residents reflect on the building of Peninsula Light Co.

It was a land of berry bushes, tall timber, chicken ranches and fishing boats. Accessible only by water and populated only by a hardy sort, the Peninsula area during the early 1900s was still very much a frontier.

The people who called this area home were a self-determined, independent-thinking breed. Scandinavians, Slavonians and native Indians each survived in their own communities. As the area grew, so did the demands for services, commerce and, eventually, electricity. As a frontier made the slow transition to civilization, the progressives among this land realized they could not afford to be left out of industry's evolution toward electrical power. After all, the age of steam would one day end.

Soon it became obvious that no outside agency was going to provide an electrical utility in the Peninsula area. Municipal power companies wanted no part of the sparsely populated Peninsula area. A handful of local residents realized that if they were to ever see lights in their chicken sheds and their homes, they would have to make it happen themselves.

"You couldn't get any money from Wall Street. They thought it was all Indians out here," said Oak Lodholm, General Manager of Peninsula Light from the 1930s to 1973.

Original Board members like Chris Thompson, Fred Smythe, Lee Makovich, Floyd Hunt and Earl Knapp took the responsibility for building the utility from scratch. They helped form a non-profit, mutual corporation on July 14, 1925. It would be called Peninsula Light Company. The goal was simple: Muster enough money and backbone to build a local utility so power could be provided to the Peninsula.

They would campaign among the citizens of their community for a \$100 membership fee. (This fee at that time could buy up to 50 acres of property on the Key Peninsula.) The membership payment would entitle the member to power and provide the capital needed to run a line to the member's farm or home. Lodholm himself worked 25 eight-hour days to earn his membership.

"They couldn't do nothin' until they raised some money," said Maurice Hunt, the 82-year-old Fox Islander whose father Floyd (Capt.) Hunt built and first managed the original service lines. "It was hard to talk someone out of \$100 back then. They really had to work to get the ball rolling."

Hunt said his father had best results from chicken farmers,



Recalling the early years were former employees, from left, Richard Johnson, Maurice Hunt, Oak Lodholm and Vern Kauppila.

who needed the electric lights to keep their chickens producing eggs during the short winter days.

"Without light, the chickens would sluff off on the layin' and you'd be out of business," said Hunt.

Many locals who could not afford the membership fee earned their rights to power by joining work crews to install the first cedar power poles. Equipped only with shovels, a wooden tripod and seven pike poles, the crews would dig holes and use the pike poles to raise the power pole until it slid along a board into the hole. Many of the chicken ranchers earned \$1 per hole digging for poles. It was hard work, but then again, they wanted the power.

"They just wanted lights. That was one way they could do it," said Hunt. "Many of them didn't have any cash."

Hunt said his father worked on the system with a vengeance. A former steamboat captain, Floyd Hunt gave up the business of running his boat when one of his sons (Maurice's brother) drowned after falling overboard. After selling his steamboat, Floyd Hunt directed all his energies into carving out the lines for Peninsula Light Company.

Lodholm, now 81, hired on at age 18 to help build the mutual utility. He recalls his first wage of 50 cents per hour or \$4 per day.

Linemen received 75 cents per hour. He also remembers when Ruth Ryan, wife of Gig Harbor's first mayor, worked in the front office of the utility.

"She was and still is a real sweetheart," said Lodholm.

Lodholm eventually became General Manager of the utility until his retirement in 1973. He said the gradual growth of the utility was fueled by raw determination, hard work and the economic need for electricity. The commitment and determina-



Centennial retrospect

See Power Pioneers on facing page

Tracking the changes : Board veterans look at the past

After 25 years on the Peninsula Light Company Board of Directors, Sheldon Stutz and Paul Alvestad have seen the local utility undergo a vast number of changes.

The pair of longtime board members both joined the utility board in 1963, at a time when board members were appointed rather than elected. In 1971, new legislation allowed the utility to switch from the appointment process to general election of board members by mailed ballots. Now board members are nominated and elected by membership of the utility.

"It was a real improvement — a more democratic process," said Alvestad.

Another major change came in 1975 when the Supreme Court handed down the Otter Tail Decision. In effect, this decision required Tacoma City Light to open its lines to Peninsula Light Company since the lines ran directly through Peninsula Light territory. The net effect was that Peninsula Light could begin buying their power directly from BPA, thereby avoiding the middle link of Tacoma City Light.

"We knew we could get the power for less from BPA," said Stutz.

A year later, the board would make a conservative decision which would prove wise in later years. The rush to BPA for power had caused the regional power broker to issue warnings about impending power shortages. With this came the onset of the ill-fated Washington Public Power Supply System (WPPSS) and the rush to build nuclear power plants.

"We had the opportunity to join WPPSS but, being a pretty conservative board, we said no," said Stutz.

Alvestad said the board felt at the time they would receive sufficient power because of their status as a "preferred customer" with BPA. What they didn't realize was the decision to back away from WPPSS would save them \$3-4 million in payouts because of the eventual default of WPPSS.



Sheldon Stutz and Paul Alvestad

Both board members admit some luck was involved.

The pair also recalls a few major internal changes within the utility's system. The number of substations serving the area has grown from two to five. In 1970, a new larger underwater cable was installed to increase power to Fox Island. Several years ago, a parallel line was added on the bridge structure as a backup to the underwater cable.

"Otherwise, Fox Island was vulnerable. If the underwater cable went out, they were without power," said Stutz.

More recently, the board has moved to a more efficient committee structure and more of a strict policy-making role. "We establish policy and leave the management to the managers," said Alvestad.

The board's latest challenge lies in hiring a new general manager. Les Hein, General Manager for the past 10 years, announced he will retire at the end of the year. The board has hired a consultant to screen job applicants and to help conduct personnel research in the final decision-making process. They anticipate hiring a new general manager early in 1989.

This new hiring will be one more in a series of changes Alvestad and Stutz have seen in their past 25 years of service.

Peninsula Light Company M · A · G · A · Z · I · N · E

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cover photo: The Pioneer Days Parade. Board member Patt Lovrovich and Erik Marvik ride in the bucket of a Peninsula Light service truck.