

Basin Electric's 50-year anniversary book celebrates

A vision for giant power

By Julie Slag



American 19th century author Herman Melville once wrote, “To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme.” A half century ago in Bismarck, ND, Missouri River basin farmers and ranchers set in motion a story that encompasses the mighty themes of self-governance and ownership of electric resources, and now we have a book that tells their story.

“Generation for Generations” is the title for the Basin Electric 50-year history book, written by North Dakota author Stan Stelter. It’s his second book for the cooperative. In 2001, Stelter wrote “The Synfuels Energy Pioneers,” a history of Dakota Gasification Company’s Great Plains Synfuels Plant, which is still in demand today. In 2007, he was selected to write the Basin Electric history.

Basin Electric CEO and General Manager Ron Harper says the history book is part of the cooperative’s 50-year anniversary commemoration, which will be celebrated in November. “Anytime a business reaches 50 years, there should be a tremendous celebration,” he says. “Particularly for cooperatives – their long history of member involvement reinforces the cooperative business model. We’re celebrating visionary leaders who guided this great organization through challenges and opportunities to become what we are today.”

Stelter, currently serving as development director for the Abused Adult Resource Center in Bismarck, was

formerly a senior writer and editor at Basin Electric, and a logical choice to write the cooperative’s story, according to Floyd Robb, Basin Electric vice president of communications and marketing support. “Stan’s writing and research skills have been honed by decades of experience as a newspaper journalist, freelance writer and book author,” Robb says.

“To the original incorporators and co-op leaders throughout the years, I want to say ‘thank you’ for having the vision to see what lies ahead, and acting on that vision. Because of your efforts and dedication to rural electrification, we have an organization that has withstood the tests of time. Basin Electric is well positioned to meet the challenges of the next 50 years.”

Ron Harper, Basin Electric

this book covers only the basics – anything more would have required a larger book. There are so many stories I knew wouldn’t make it into the book, and that was difficult.”

Stelter says he enjoyed researching how Basin Electric’s three general managers were chosen, and wished he had been on staff when Jim Grahl was general manager. Through reading about him and from personal interviews, Stelter says he senses a true devotion to Grahl.

“It’s become a recognizable theme in the history book that Basin Electric always seems to find the leadership it needs for the times,”

Stelter says it took him about three and half years of part-time research and writing. “This book is different from the Synfuels book, which covered a shorter time frame. The Basin Electric history book involves this entire region, so research was much more difficult.” Some of his research involved contacting other cooperative organizations and leaders who had information about Basin Electric’s beginnings.

“The biggest challenge for me was not being able to tell the whole story,” Stelter says. “Basin Electric’s history is so rich and deep that

Stelter says. “I am impressed with what I learned about Jim Grahl’s quiet leadership. He somehow instinctively found the staff to build something that didn’t exist, and grew it. Then there was Bob McPhail, using his bureaucratic skills to streamline the organization. With Ron Harper, the organization returned to its co-op roots, and he took Basin Electric into the next century.”

Stelter says the history book is better than what he envisioned. He credits Basin Electric communications employees for providing invaluable assistance. “Ken Yetter’s graphic artist skills and Kathi Risch’s tremendous knowledge of the history, her diligence, and editorial skills were so valuable to this effort. I enjoyed writing the book because I was familiar with the people, their culture and industry.”

Stelter says the membership is what Basin Electric is all about. “I hope communities in this region become more aware of what went into creating Basin Electric. In some ways, the cooperative model is complicated, yet simple. Young people today may think they are working for a corporation, but they’re not – they’re working for a cooperative. That’s an important distinction.”

Robb chose Kathi Risch, Basin Electric senior staff writer/editor, as the book’s coordinator and editor. A 30-year employee, Risch has written 15 of the last 20 annual reports. As such, she’s familiar with many of the decisions that forged policy and direction throughout the years. “I think I am in the unique position of having worked with all three Basin Electric general managers, having interviewed them for different projects or articles,” she says.

In preparation for a possible book, Risch says Basin Electric’s writing staff completed about 10 interviews with retired Basin Electric managers and co-op leaders in 2006. Additional transcripts came from interviews done by Bruce Carlson, general manager of Verendrye Electric Cooperative in Minot, ND, for his cooperative’s history book, and interviews for the Basin Electric 25-year history book conducted by Pat Dahl, who was a writer at both Basin Electric and the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. Risch coordinated with Basin Electric’s records management and communications employees to gather or produce copies of prior years’ annual reports, REPORT and Basin Today magazines, and other archival resources for Stelter to use. Besides editing the text, Risch prepared the appendices, helped select photos, wrote the photo captions, and worked closely with graphic designer Ken Yetter.

“I started working at Basin Electric in 1981. Everyone knew a lot about the organization’s history because the organization



Author Stan Stelter (center) holds the final draft of Basin Electric’s 50th anniversary book, “Generation for Generations.” Kathi Risch (left) edited the book and Ken Yetter (right) did the design and layout.

was very young. People who lived the history handed it down through storytelling,” Risch says. Now, she notes, many former employees are gone and older employees are retiring so those stories are being forgotten. Risch hopes the book will give newer employees a better sense of the organization, “. . . and feel the pride that I do working for Basin Electric.

“I feel very privileged to have worked on the history book,” Risch says. “I think it was a very worthwhile endeavor, and I thank management and the board of directors for entrusting me with its coordination.”

Ken Yetter, multimedia specialist III/senior graphic designer, designed the book. He says it’s the biggest project he’s tackled. “Given the fact that I’ve been an employee for the past 36 of Basin’s 50 years, much of it was very familiar to me. Even so, it’s all really interesting,” Yetter agrees with Stelter’s comments about Grahl. “Jim Grahl stands out, as do the efforts of the early co-op leaders.”

Other Basin Electric staff contributed to the history book. Julie Ness, multimedia specialist III/senior graphic designer, edited the book’s graphic elements and found a fast indexing program. Erin Huntimer, staff writer/editor, helped proofread the 240-page book. Recently retired communications archivist, Terry Diekman, completed a five-year project that involved archiving, labeling and researching thousands of historic cooperative photographs and digitized them. She collaborated with Olmstead Adams, multimedia technician, in coordinating the transfer of various types of tape media and film into digital format for Basin Electric and North Dakota State Historical Society archives.

The Basin Electric history book is dedicated to the people who made Basin Electric a success. It will be available in November.