

Guy documentary premieres in June

By Kathi Risch



Jean and Bill Guy

As Basin Electric Power Cooperative nears the half-century mark on May 5, 2011, there may be others more directly involved than William L. Guy in its development, but few can say they've been at all the critical junctures—or seen the cooperative's progress from such diverse vantage points.

William Lewis “Bill” Guy was the governor of North Dakota when Basin Electric was incorporated and during its childhood (1961-1973). He was employed by Basin Electric as a resource consultant as it came of age (1979-1985), and served as a director of subsidiary Dakota Gasification Company (DGC) as the cooperative became a mature organization (1988-2000).

To honor Guy's service to Basin Electric and the region, the cooperative is underwriting a portion of the costs to produce a documentary about the lives of Gov. William and First Lady Jean Guy. The documentary, called “The Charisma of Competence,”¹ is a presentation of The Dakota Institute of the Lewis & Clark Fort Mandan Foundation and Prairie

Public Broadcasting. It will premiere at 7 p.m. June 15, 2010, at the Fargo Theatre, in Fargo, ND, and on June 22 at 7 p.m. at the Belle Mehus Auditorium in Bismarck, ND. Clay Jenkinson and David Swenson are producing the documentary. David Borlaug is the executive producer.

Paul Sukut, Basin Electric deputy general manager and senior vice president, says Basin Electric is helping to underwrite this documentary to honor Bill Guy for his vision and support of the cooperative and the region for nearly 50 years.

“You don't meet people very often in life who are so visionary,” Sukut says. “Governor Guy had a vision for what coal and energy development would mean to the people of the region. A lot of benefits that we're seeing in energy and agriculture were the result of what Governor Guy did when he was in office. We're reaping the benefits of his work today.

“From a personal standpoint, he was so supportive of us; no matter how dark the day or how low the (natural gas) prices were, he supported our

small DGC management team to keep that (Great Plain Synfuels) plant alive,” says Sukut, who was DGC vice president for finance and administration when Guy served as a director for the subsidiary.

Bill Guy and Basin Electric

(Compiled from published and unpublished Basin Electric documents and William L. Guy's memoir, “Where Seldom Was Heard A Discouraging Word.”)

Born in Devils Lake, ND, in 1919, Guy grew up in the community of Amenia, ND. He graduated from the North Dakota Agricultural College in Fargo and served in the U.S. Navy, surviving the sinking of the destroyer USS William D. Porter after Japanese kamikaze attack near Okinawa in 1945. After World War II, Guy earned a master's degree in agricultural economics from the University of Minnesota.

Guy was elected to the state legislature in 1958, and in 1960 became the first member of the Democratic-NPL Party to be elected North Dakota

¹The late historian Larry Remele reportedly coined the phrase “the charisma of competence” to describe William L. Guy.



Guy and Pres. Kennedy visit the University of North Dakota in September 1963. Kennedy received an honorary law degree and gave a conservation speech.



Guy speaks at Leland Olds Station groundbreaking on June 22, 1963.



Guy accepts the cooperative's highest honor, the Cornerstone Award, at the 2006 Basin Electric annual meeting.

governor. He was elected four times, serving two two-year terms and two four-year terms.

When compromise failed between two power groups—Lignite Electric and Basin Electric—vying for the first Rural Electrification Administration (REA) loan to build a lignite-fueled power plant in North Dakota, Guy threw his support in 1962 to the more regional, open-membership approach to power supply Basin Electric was offering.

In a 2006 interview, Guy said Basin Electric's plan was broader and more inclusive, stretching across more of the area served by the federal hydroelectric system. It also advocated a postage-stamp wholesale power rate, meaning all members would get the same rate throughout the system. Guy saw this plan as a better boost for the area's economy and also a way to draw the states in the region together, increasing their political strength.

In a 2005 letter to Sukut relaying some early Basin Electric history, Guy said in the next election after he supported the Basin Electric concept, "My political opponents were on my back for supporting the postage-

stamp pricing concept. They accused me of 'selling North Dakota down the river.'" Guy went on to speak at both the groundbreaking and dedication of Leland Olds Station Unit 1.

In late 1972, the first plans for a coal gasification plant in North Dakota surfaced. Art Seder of American Natural Resources Company called on Guy at the state Capitol and revealed his company's plans to develop large-scale coal gasification in North Dakota. Asked what the state's position might be, Guy responded the project would be supported if the corporate sponsors demonstrated a high level of responsibility and paid their own way.

In 1974, Guy lost a U.S. Senate race to the incumbent Sen. Milton R. Young by 186 votes. Guy then left politics, but continued to be active in the issues of electric power, water usage and economic development.

In 1979, Guy accepted an invitation to work as a resource consultant for Basin Electric, focusing on water resources, coal resources and locations for power plants. "It was an intense period of time in which the 10-year lead time needed to bring a coal-fired electric generator on line could hardly keep up with the upward spiral of

5-percent annual increases in the electric power demand requirement studies," he said. "One of these intense requirements for Basin Electric was to build generating capacity in its system to serve a 90-megawatt demand of the flagship coal gasification plant well into construction in North Dakota."

While at Basin Electric, Guy was also named by the Basin Electric board of directors to serve as the Missouri Basin Power Project's representative to the Platte River Whooping Crane Habitat Maintenance Trust in March 1982. He served in that position until he left Basin Electric June 1, 1985.

The gasification plant began operating in 1984. When the consortium that built the plant abandoned it, the federal government put it up for sale to the private sector. Basin Electric purchased it through a new subsidiary, Dakota Gasification Company, in 1988. Guy was elected to DGC's first board of directors and continued as a director until 2000.

(Editor's note: For those interested in more on the history of Basin Electric Power Cooperative, a book documenting the first 50 years is being written and will be available in 2011.)