



A young annual meeting attendee draws door prize tickets at the Graham County Electric Cooperative Annual Meeting in 1967.

# Three GMs Tell Their GCEC Stories

By Dan Curtis

Past Graham County Electric Cooperative General Managers Nelson Peck and Steve Lines, and current GM Kirk Gray, provide a retrospective on how the co-op began, the changes and growth, and the future. Managers' podcast is on [GilaValleyCentral.net](http://GilaValleyCentral.net), under Voice of the Valley.



**Nelson Peck—Beginnings of the Co-op, General Manager from 1998 to 2001**

Nelson Peck began his career on the line crew in 1965. The co-op had been in existence for just 20 years at that time. Back then, the line crews didn't have any heavy equipment to help with their job. Postholes were dug by hand with shovels. The original electrical grid was crude, but it served the needs of the community at the time.

One of the early challenges Nelson faced as a lineman was river flooding.

"The river crossings we had at that time were not very reliable," Nelson says.

"Everything north of the river lost its power, sometimes for weeks."

Nelson became general manager of the co-op in 1998. Just after he started in his new position, a microburst took out power for most of the valley. Crews managed to get power back on in most places fairly quickly, but some of the outlying areas—such as Pima and residences across the river—were out for nearly 48 hours.

Up to that time, maintenance was done

only when something was broken. Nelson recognized improvements were needed to make the system more reliable.

Technology rapidly changed during Nelson's tenure as general manager. His work maintaining and improving the line and equipment set the stage for major improvements.

Nelson retired in January 2001 after 36 years with GCEC.



**Steve Lines—Reliable Power and Building Up the Co-op, General Manager from 2001 to 2016**

Steve Lines succeeded Nelson as general manager in January 2001. He picked up right where Nelson left off.

Like his predecessor, Steve grew up in Pima. After attending Eastern Arizona College for a couple of years, he was offered a four-year lineman apprenticeship at Phelps Dodge (now Freeport McMoran). In February 1979, Steve went

to work for Graham County Electric Co-op as a certified lineman.

Shortly after completing a business degree through EAC in 1997, Steve was promoted to administrative assistant. In April 2000, he was promoted to assistant general manager. When Nelson retired in 2001, Steve was promoted to general manager.

Following in Nelson's footsteps, Steve went to work on system reliability. The Gila Valley was starting to grow and the current electric system was showing symptoms of overload.

Steve secured low-interest loans to upgrade the system. The co-op began using steel poles to handle bigger electrical wires. Several substations were rebuilt to handle a bigger load and three substations were added to the system, bringing the total number of substations to nine. A substation was added on the north side of the river to better serve the area.

All the upgrades and improvements not only provided power to a rapidly growing community, but improved the quality of electrical service the co-op provided to its members.

The old system wires were not stout enough to handle the load, which created a line loss throughout the system. Line loss occurs when electrical

power turns into heat and is dissipated from the system. Line loss cost the co-op a substantial amount of money. Prior to the improvements, line loss was about 13%. The improvements brought line loss down to 4%.

"Our savings in line loss was just about paying for our system upgrades," Steve says.

After spending 15 years aggressively upgrading the electrical system, Steve retired in January 2016.



**Kirk Gray—Future of the Industry and Changes, General Manager and CEO, 2016 to Present**

Kirk Gray succeeded Steve Lines as general manager and CEO in February 2016. Kirk is a certified public accountant by trade and had a private accounting practice before coming to the co-op.

In 2010, Kirk was offered the finance manager position. In mid 2015, he was offered the assistant general manager's job with the understanding he would succeed Steve when he retired. The additional title of CEO allowed more leeway in executing contracts for the co-op as an officer of the corporation.

The system was in good shape when Kirk took over. Operating procedures were changed to ensure continued system reliability and safe operation of the utility. The co-op has moved from repair maintenance to preventive maintenance.

The co-op is now more proactive, doing pole inspections and replacing lines before they become a problem. Line inspections are conducted with infrared cameras that show hotspots and allow crews to fix problematic connections before they cause outages.

Since Kirk came on board, the co-op has stopped borrowing money to maintain the system. No money has been borrowed for nine or 10 years. In fact, it built a \$2 million substation without borrowing money.

Kirk says the future of the co-op is automation. Meter reading will eventually be done from the office via computer network. Currently, approximately 16% of the system's 8,000 meter readings can be collected while driving down the road. The new automation will allow the meter readings to be taken automatically at the office.

Kirk has tremendous confidence in his staff.

"I believe we have the greatest group of professional employees that I've ever been associated with in my 45 years of being in business," he says. "We have some great people working here looking out for the member's interests." ■

**See page 8 for a timeline for the co-op.**



Some of the crew in front of the old GCEC office building. This building was replaced in 2008.

# Celebrating 75 Years

Graham County Electric Cooperative recently celebrated 75 years of providing power to the membership in Graham County.

GCEC was formed after acquiring rural properties from Arizona General Utilities and lines from Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative, with support from the Rural Electrification Administration.

There were 1,025 consumers and 366 miles of distribution line. The first office was the old Pima Bank building, where the Eastern Arizona Museum is now.

GCEC went from buying power from the City of Safford to building its first generation plant in Thatcher. Initially, one substation in Thatcher kept up with demand. Through the years, GCEC has added eight more substations to keep pace with demand and population growth.

Following is a timeline of the past 75 years.

- 1945** Co-op formed.
- 1947** Constructed first generating plant in Thatcher; was buying power from City of Safford.
- 1947** First 6-cylinder atmospheric gas-diesel engine to drive 500-kilowatt generator was put into service.
- 1948** First annual meeting.
- 1952** Awarded the inaugural Diesel Progress Award for the most efficiently operated plant of all REA internal combustion plants for 1951 operations.

- 1955** Thatcher Substation energized.
- 1958** Office built across the street from the original building.
- 1961** GCEC joined with three other Southern Arizona co-ops to form a generation and transmission co-op (AEPCO) to provide additional power to GCEC.
- 1965** Cork Substation energized.
- 1970** Cactus Substation energized.
- 1973** Hooker Substation energized.
- 1974** San Jose Substation energized.
- 1996** Freeman Substation energized.
- 1999** First year participating in Washington Youth Tour.
- 2005** Swift Trail Substation energized.
- 2005** Sun Watts rebate program created to meet Renewable Energy Standard & Tariff mandates.
- 2006** Floods wash out 2 miles of power lines in hard-to-reach Aravaipa Canyon.
- 2008** Groundbreaking for new office in February; moved in November.
- 2008** City of Safford and GCEC sign service territory agreement after 62 years of negotiating.
- 2011** Pima Substation energized.
- 2013** Talley Substation energized.
- 2014** Retired first capital credits since 1971.
- 2017** GCEC Foundation 501(c)(3) was formed for community charitable purposes. ■



**KWH SOLD**

1949  
5,503,500  
  
2019  
121,751,000

**CONSUMERS/MILES OF LINES**

1949  
*1,025 consumers for 366 miles of distribution lines*  
  
2019  
*9,207 consumers for 1,030 miles of distribution and transmission lines*

**GCEC Managers Through the Years**

- 1946-Charles Seemann
- 1950-Howard Helmers
- 1964-Jack Prince
- 1985-Paul Rawson
- 1993-Clifford Cauthen
- 1998-Nelson Peck
- 2001-Steve Lines
- 2016-Kirk Gray



The original office building for Graham County Electric Cooperative when it began in 1945.



# Area Business Steps Up

2,000 pounds of food helps families during COVID-19 pandemic

By Diane Junion

Our community faces challenging and uncertain times during the COVID-19 crisis. Many people have reached out and helped their neighbor.

Gila Valley Polaris-Gila Outdoors is one business that has helped the community. The company provided more than 2,000 pounds of food to more than 300 people in the Gila Valley on March 31.

Lance Shupe, owner of Gila Valley Polaris-Gila Outdoors in Thatcher, partnered with the owners of Branding Iron Restaurant and Shane's Place to buy food in bulk. Employees divided the large quantities into smaller grocery bags filled with potatoes, oats, rice, beans, spaghetti, salt and sugar. Several rolls of toilet paper were given specifically to the elderly.

"We didn't know this would snowball with comments and attention," Lance says. "We just felt so privileged to help out the Gila Valley during this crazy time."

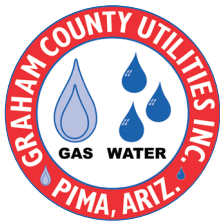
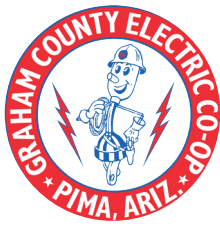
He says he hopes everyone is doing well.

When the call went out on social media for face masks for the medical community, several churches stepped up to fill the need. Church members made and delivered hundreds of masks to local clinics and the hospital.

While we can't thank everyone in our community for their continued help during this crisis, we want to thank our members for their patience during our lobby closure. We hope everyone continues to be safe and healthy. ■



**ABOVE: ATVs are filled with food divided and ready to share with people in the Gila Valley. TOP: More than 300 community members picked up food donated by Gila Valley Polaris-Gila Outdoors owner Lance Shupe.**



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**Manager's Message**

# Concern for Community

During this particularly difficult time in our local communities, state and nation, Graham County Electric Cooperative Inc. and Graham County Utilities Inc. have temporarily suspended disconnecting utility services for nonpayment. Late payment penalties and interest have been suspended as well.

It should be noted that suspending payment **does not** relieve our members of the responsibility to pay their utility bills, but is intended to defer payment until economic conditions improve. GCEC/GCU staff highly recommends that, if possible, members pay something toward their utility bill balance. This will help reduce large deferred payment arrangements once conditions improve and the payment suspension is lifted.

GCEC/GCU has taken additional steps to reduce potential spread of the COVID-19 virus. GCEC/GCU has closed our Pima office lobby to all in-person contact. Our night drop box and drive-thru window are great alternatives for payments or member services at our office in Pima. Members may still pay utility bills online or by phone using a credit or debit card. Of course, you can still pay by mail or use bill payment services provided by your bank.

The easiest, safest and most cost-effective way to pay your bill is with the SurePay electronic funds transfer. When you sign up for SurePay, GCEC/GCU will withdraw from the account you designate the exact amount of your bill on or about the 10th of each month. With SurePay, there are no checks to write, no need for stamps to mail your payment, no convenience charges,



no need to remember utility bill due dates and no waiting in line to pay your utility bill. You can sign up for SurePay by going to [www.gce.coop](http://www.gce.coop). Click on the "Member Services" tab and select "Payment Options."

GCEC/GCU supports local businesses during these difficult times. Several major pieces of federal legislation were passed to aid small businesses. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act are two of the most substantial laws passed to help small businesses survive the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19

pandemic. These economic aid packages are briefly explained on our website. Go to [www.gce.coop](http://www.gce.coop), click on "About Us," click on "News and Events," then click on "Current News and Press Releases."

The programs, activities and decisions incorporated above in response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the Seventh Cooperative Principle, which states, "While focusing on member needs, cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies accepted by their membership."

Observe physical distancing but stay socially connected with your co-op by visiting our website or Facebook page. We will get through this pandemic together because that is what rural communities and their cooperatives do during trying times.

**Kirk Gray**