



VEC LINEWORKERS SAVE LOCAL FARMER

“I noticed the tractor stop. Then it started rolling backward down the hill and came to a rest with its trailer jackknifed. As this was happening, I could see the farmer’s head roll back and forth, then slump to the side. I immediately knew something bad was happening,” said VEC lineworker Matt Hirschfield in describing the scene on September 20, 2021, at about 11 a.m. Matt and another VEC lineworker, Mike Berger, were located a few miles south of Leon, on County Highway J, repairing an underground junction box that had been damaged the previous day.

Just before going unconscious, Joe Schaitel remembers not feeling right and trying to idle the tractor down. “I tried to push the floor pedals with my feet to stop the tractor, but my



This is where Joe’s tractor ended up after he went unconscious at the wheel.

Pictured l to r: Pam Brady, Joe’s daughter; Mike Arnold, Sparta District Fire Chief; Mike Berger, VEC lineworker; Joe Schaitel; Alice Schaitel, Joe’s wife; Matt Hirschfield, VEC lineworker; Bryan Brady, one of Joe’s sons; Marcia Iverson, Bryan’s girlfriend; and Leah Brady, Joe’s granddaughter.

legs wouldn’t move,” Joe said. The last thing Joe remembers was Matt next to him in the tractor cab asking him if he was alright.

As soon as Matt realized Joe was unresponsive, he immediately dialed 911 and got through to Monroe County dispatcher Shelly Muller, who began dispatching emergency vehicles to the location. Matt then used his truck radio to declare a Mayday situation to all Vernon Electric Co-op (VEC) personnel and to call over Mike Berger, who was working nearby and had an automated external defibrillator (AED) on his truck. Working together they pulled Joe’s limp body out of the tractor cab and onto the ground where they began cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

Matt had visited Joe’s house that morning, prior to the incident, and spoke with Joe’s wife, Alice, to tell her their power would be off-line for a bit while they did their repair work. Even though Alice usually could see Joe in his tractor from the house most of the time, the tractor ended up in a spot out of her view. “I heard the sirens and saw the emergency vehicles coming our way. I immediately thought one of the lineworkers was injured. But then when I saw where the emergency vehicles stopped and saw the shoes of the person lying on the ground, I thought, ‘Oh no, it’s my husband!’ ”

Sparta Fire Chief Mike Arnold was on the scene in about 8 minutes and said Matt and Mike had already used the AED on Joe at least three times. Shelly, the dispatcher, was on Matt's cell phone the whole time helping with the situation and giving instructions through the phone's hands-free speaker. Mike Arnold, who has been working in the emergency services field for over 50 years, observed Joe, who also happened to be a good friend. "Joe didn't look good. I started praying. I didn't think he was going to make it. I was amazed when the ambulance paramedics told me later that Joe had a good heartbeat just before speeding him off to the hospital. Initially I requested the MedLink, but it was inclement weather that day and the helicopter was grounded, so ambulance transport had to do."



Initially it didn't look good for Joe's survival, but quick action, the right equipment, and the right training provided for a happy ending.

Joe was stabilized at the hospital and by about 6:30 p.m. that same day he was awake and doing well enough to be taken off ventilation. Joe's daughter, Pam Brady, who happens to be a hospital caregiver, was surprised at how quickly Joe began recovering. The paramedics, doctors, and Mike Arnold are sure Joe would have died without the first aid provided by Matt Hirschfield and Mike Berger.

Joe's granddaughter, Leah Brady, says her grandfather has nine lives. Joe is a Vietnam veteran and received the Purple Heart medal after a landmine

exploded near him, wounding himself and killing two soldiers, and friends, next to him. Heart problems run in his family, and Joe's lost five of his nine siblings to heart problems. One of his brothers passed away from cardiac arrest just three weeks after this incident.

In November Joe and his family stopped by Vernon Electric's office to reunite with his rescuers. And he had some words to share with everyone. "Thank you to Matt Hirschfield and Mike Berger for their quick actions and saving my life. Thank you to Vernon Electric for providing the training to its employees that helped them to immediately know what to do to save my life. Thank you for having an AED in their truck. And thank you to Vernon Electric's board of directors for their decision to put an AED in every co-op vehicle. Everyone should know how to do CPR and AED's save lives. Take care of your heart and eat healthy, like I'm starting to do now."

Mike Arnold shared Joe's sentiments with Vernon Electric's employees and presented plaques from the Sparta Area Fire District to Matt Hirschfield and Mike Berger. The awards recognize Matt and Mike for their "courageous and quick actions during an emergency situation. You came to the aid of Joe Schaitel and saved his life."



Joe and his granddaughter, Leah, who, by the time you read this will have had his great-grandchild.

Joe and his wife, Alice, live about five miles south of Sparta, in the Town of Leon, near Hwy. 27. He has served his community over the years in many ways, including 16 years on the Monroe County Board of Supervisors. Ironically, he was also instrumental in bringing 911 capabilities to Monroe County as the chairman of the Law Enforcement Committee many years ago. We're glad Joe is on the mend and doing well.



Mike Berger, left, and Matt Hirschfield accepted plaques of recognition from Mike Arnold, Sparta District Fire Chief, for their life-saving efforts.



THE COTTER PIN OFFERS UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

By Leah Call

You may want to add a visit to The Cotter Pin in Leon, Wisconsin, to your 2022 to-do list. This restaurant/bar in the Vernon Electric Cooperative service territory checks a lot of boxes.

- ✓ Try a new dining experience – check
- ✓ Support a small business – check
- ✓ Sample some locally produced beers and wines – check, check

“The Cotter Pin is kind of a destination place—it’s more than just your local tavern,” said owner Neil Schaitel of the business he created from concept to construction in 2015. “We offer a variety of both wine and craft beer. And we have a unique mix of customers as well.”

When you enter The Cotter Pin, on Highway 27 three miles south of Sparta, there’s a comfy hometown pub feel. Sturdy Amish-made wooden tables and chairs crafted at nearby H&L Rustic Reclaim in Cashton add to the ambience in the clean, well-lit dining space.

“We wanted a rustic but clean-looking establishment,” noted Schaitel of the intentional interior design. “The



Cotter Pin owner, Neil Schaitel, preparing to serve a cold, fresh, local brew.

furniture, window frames, chair rail, everything is done in reclaimed wood.”

Metal craft beer signs adorn the walls and there’s even a fireplace in the corner, which Schaitel says keeps customers toasty warm on winter days.

Drink Local, Eat Local

Near the bar, a large monitor displays currently available wines and beers—a list that is ever-changing. “It rotates constantly,” affirmed Schaitel. “We usually have three IPAs, and Spotted Cow is always on tap. We have a cider line, ambers—you name the variety and we’ve had it.”

In addition to numerous draft and bottled beer offerings, The Cotter Pin has a large variety of wines by the bottle and the glass from regional wineries, including Wisconsin-based Vernon Vineyards, Elmaro, and Wollersheim.

“We try to stay as local as possible. We have beer from breweries like Hillsboro that is 45 minutes away and wine from Lost Island that is right down the road in Onalaska,” added Schaitel, who defines local as the tri-state area [Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa].

Schaitel’s interest in craft beers was piqued after dabbling in home brewing with his cousin, who recently opened his own craft brewing establishment, Alchemy, right next door to The Cotter Pin. Schaitel now serves Alchemy brews, when available. You can’t get more local than that.

Cotter Pin customers can also enjoy a bite



of food with their beverage of choice. The menu includes a mix of sandwiches, wraps, and pizza, with some specialty fare offered on Friday nights. Occasional live entertainment on select weekends adds to the popularity of this venue. The current menu and upcoming live music events can be viewed on The Cotter Pin's Facebook page.

Community support

Hometown roots run deep for Schaitel, third-generation resident of Leon, population 858. Named after Schaitel's father, whose nickname was Cotter, The Cotter Pin sits in the center of this rural community. Leon is a tight-knit community where neighbors help neighbors, something Schaitel experienced firsthand during the COVID shut-down in 2020.



"When we were shut down for those three months, I was here every day taking calls, doing carryout orders. It was enough to keep us afloat," said Schaitel. "People realized this type of business was hurting and they wanted to help."

Like most restaurants throughout the state, staffing remains a key challenge for Schaitel. The Cotter Pin is hiring all positions: servers, bartenders, and cooks. "We are getting some good people in now and will be back up and moving, but not where I would like to be."

To combat staffing shortages, Schaitel has streamlined his menu and upgraded kitchen equipment to increase efficiencies. Despite challenges, he remains optimistic about the unique venue he's created. "I like the freedom of being able to do my own thing, to take something and excel and make it better. It's been hard, but we're still standing."

SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE FROM VEC

In 2022, scholarships will be made available to students whose parents or legal guardians are members of Vernon Electric Cooperative. Seniors will each receive a \$750 scholarship for the college or university they decide to attend. Funding for the scholarships comes from unclaimed capital credit checks which are forfeited to the Federated Youth Foundation. This Foundation, in turn, makes this money available for youth scholarships to Vernon Electric Cooperative. A Non-Traditional and Line Worker scholarship will also be offered.



Applicants from each of the high schools listed below, plus one at-large applicant, will be chosen in a random drawing at the January board meeting from all the completed and verified applications received. Each applicant, or one of the applicant's parents or legal guardians, are welcome, but not required, to be present during the drawing.

- Aquinas
- Brookwood
- Cashton
- Cornerstone Christian Academy
- De Soto
- Hillsboro
- Kickapoo
- La Crosse Central
- La Farge
- Luther
- Royal
- Sparta
- Viroqua
- Westby
- Wonewoc
- Youth Initiative High School

Of all the seniors, six will be eligible to attend the Youth Leadership Congress (YLC) at UW-Stout, in July 2022 on a first come, first serve basis. The YLC is a first-class event put on by the Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association (WECA), and the students are chaperoned and transported by a Vernon Electric representative. The students who attend the YLC will receive an additional \$250 added to their VEC scholarship. Students will have the option to enter the WECA's Youth Leadership Congress Essay Contest and win \$1,000 for first place, \$500 for second, or \$250 for third. One student from VEC's service territory could potentially win a total of \$2,000 worth of scholarship money.

\$750 Non-Traditional Scholarship This scholarship is awarded to a member who is returning to school in a two- or four-year program at least three years after graduating from high school.

\$1,000 Line Worker Scholarship This scholarship is awarded to a high school senior or older and an active member of Vernon Electric Co-op. If the applicant is a high school senior, their parent or legal guardian must be an active member. Enrollment in a full-time power line program is required with a minimum grade point average of 2.0.

Scholarship applications are due January 19 and are available from www.vernonelectric.org/scholarships-applications, by calling our office, or through school counselors.

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