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STAYING CONNECTED — AND PROTECTED — IN THE DIGITAL AGE



by Craig Buros, CEO & General Manager

In the electric utility world, we've always been familiar with storms. Our crews are trained and ready when trees fall on power lines or a lightning strike damages equipment. These are the kinds of challenges electric cooperatives have faced for decades and we know how to respond.

But there's another kind of threat facing Vernon Electric Cooperative and co-ops across the country. It doesn't come from the weather. It doesn't leave a visible path of destruction. It travels through the internet and it can strike without warning.

I'm talking about *cybersecurity* — and while it may not involve linemen in hard hats, it's just as critical to keeping your lights on.

The Modern Grid Is Digital — and That's a Good Thing

Over the past decade, Vernon Electric Cooperative has made significant investments in technology to serve you better. Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) meters, digital mapping systems, load management receivers, and member online platforms, allow us to restore outages more quickly, improve efficiency, and plan for future growth. But as we modernize, we also become more connected and that creates more opportunities for cyber threats.

Hackers and cybercriminals are increasingly targeting utilities, including rural co-ops. In fact, electric cooperatives are part of what's known as the nation's critical infrastructure — systems essential to daily life and national security. That means VEC must be just as vigilant as the largest power companies when it comes to protecting our systems, our data, and your personal information.

What VEC Is Doing

Cybersecurity isn't a one-time fix, it's an ongoing effort that requires planning, resources, and constant awareness. At VEC, we've made it a top priority by:

- Conducting regular cybersecurity training for all employees. Human error is still the number one way hackers get in, so we're investing in our people to recognize and avoid suspicious activity, such as phishing emails.
- Using multi-layered security tools, including firewalls, antivirus protection, encrypted



communications, and real-time threat monitoring. We segment critical systems so that even if one area is compromised, others remain protected.

- Implementing multi-factor authentication (MFA) across our internal systems, ensuring that accessing sensitive data requires more than just a password.
- Participating in national and regional cybersecurity initiatives through our membership in the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA), Dairyland Power Cooperative, and our statewide partners. These programs allow us to share intelligence, run cyber drills, and stay up to date with evolving threats.
- Reviewing and testing our incident response plan, so that in the unlikely event of a cyberattack, we're prepared to respond quickly and minimize the impact to our members.

These steps are just part of our larger effort to keep our cooperative secure, responsive, and future-ready.

What You Can Do

Cybersecurity isn't just the responsibility of the utility, it's something we all need to be aware of. As technology becomes more integrated into our daily lives, there are steps you can take to help protect your information and avoid falling victim to scams:

- Watch out for utility scams. VEC will never call or email you demanding immediate payment or threatening disconnection without notice. If something doesn't feel right, hang up and call us directly.
- Use strong passwords for your SmartHub or other online

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PRESERVING THE PAST: INSIDE THE COULEE ANTIQUE ENGINE CLUB

By Leah Call

Yeah, we'll take it." That's the typical reply from Coulee Antique Engine Club president John Wangen when someone offers up a weathered old tractor, vintage diesel engine, or even dusty old sign or milk can collection. "It's the past. You're not going to get that back," said Wangen. "You don't get a second chance, so you better take it when you can."

That philosophy drives the club's mission to preserve the region's agricultural and mechanical heritage — one rescued relic at a time.

As the saying goes, one man's trash is another man's treasure. Wangen and his fellow Coulee Antique Engine Club members restore donated treasures to their former glory and display them at their annual show as a tribute to the area's rural past.

A visit to the club's 40-acre grounds on Highway 27, just two miles north of Westby, is a chance to step into the past. Surrounded by rolling green hills, the property is the perfect setting to showcase antique tractors, vintage engines, and farming equipment that once powered Wisconsin farms and communities.

Room to Grow

The Coulee Antique Engine Club was formed in 1970, and soon after held its first antique engine show in a parking lot in downtown Viroqua. Subsequent shows were held in various locations, including a long run at the Vernon County Fairgrounds from 1975 to 2004.

As membership and show attendance grew, club members raised money to purchase its current grounds in 2004. "Having

that property has allowed us to grow," noted Wangen.

Since purchasing the property, the club has added multiple buildings — all funded through donations — to house and protect their growing collection. Inside those buildings, members store and restore dozens of donated pieces, including a large two-cylinder Fairbanks-Morse engine once marked for the scrapyard. "A couple of young guys came up to me and asked, 'if we can get it running, can we run it during the show?'" recalled Wangen. "I told them, 'Boys, you've got the job!'"



Coulee Region Engine Club President John Wangen (left) visits with a guest at the annual show.

That engine is now a star attraction, drawing large crowds as the huge machine rumbles to life.

Other prized pieces include a tobacco planter that sat in the Ronald Reagan Museum in California for years before returning to its roots in Westby. Also stored in the La Crosse Plow Co. building is the City of Westby's first fire engine, a 1919 Stoughton; and a turbine generator that powered the first electricity in Timber Coulee.

Show Time

The club's signature event, the Coulee Antique Engine Show, takes place the first weekend of August. This year's show, August 1-3, is expected to draw over 2000 visitors.

More than 200 tractors will be on display at the family-friendly event, along with working demonstrations of the club's restored saw mill, steam engines, and threshing machine. A flea market, tractor pull, kids' activities, food and ice cream round out the weekend's events.

Join the Club

The antique engine club currently has about 200 members — primarily local, but some from across the state and beyond. Members gather every 3rd Tuesday of the month for meetings held



on the club grounds in warmer months and at members' homes in winter.

Saturday workdays follow each meeting, especially leading up to the big show. Workdays consist of maintaining the grounds and buildings, as well as repairing donated pieces and bringing forgotten machines back to life.

Anyone interested in joining this crew of engine revivers should attend a meeting or reach out through the club's Facebook page for more information. The cost is minimal, just \$70 the first year and \$20 annually after that.

The group works to engage younger generations through scholarships and hosting visits from 4-H clubs and area ag classes.

"We are preserving the past for the future," noted Wangen. "You would be surprised how many young people don't understand farming and the work their grandfathers and great-grandfathers did to provide food for our country."

So when someone offers up a rusted relic from days gone by, you can bet on Wangen's response. "Yeah, we'll take it."



accounts, and avoid using the same password across multiple sites.

- Be cautious when opening emails or clicking links, especially if they claim to be from VEC but have odd formatting, spelling mistakes, or urgent language. We're happy to confirm any communications with you directly.
- Keep your devices updated with the latest software and security patches. This helps close vulnerabilities that cybercriminals exploit.
- Enable two-factor authentication on your email, bank, and utility accounts when possible.

The more we all stay informed, the safer we are as a community.

Looking Ahead

The energy industry is changing rapidly. Technologies like smart appliances, electric vehicles, and home solar systems

are becoming more common. These innovations bring great benefits, but also increase the importance of secure, well-managed systems.

Vernon Electric is committed to leading this transition with care, integrity, and an unwavering focus on reliability and security. Just as we've upgraded poles and wires over the years, we are now investing in the digital backbone of our system — because keeping your lights on and your data safe go hand in hand.

If you ever have concerns about cybersecurity or believe you've been targeted by a scam related to your electric service, please reach out to us. We're here to help and would rather hear from you early than have you deal with a potential security issue alone.

Together, we can make sure that our cooperative — and our community — remains strong, connected, and secure in this new digital age.

A LITTLE CHANGE CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

Through this program you can volunteer to have your electric bill “rounded up” to the nearest dollar and have that change donated to the Operation Round Up Trust Fund. For example, if your electric bill was \$90.51, we would round it up to \$91.00 and put \$0.49 in the TrustFund. On average, you would be donating about \$6.00 per year if you participated. Vernon Electric Co-op has about 10,000 members. By doing the math you can see that if everyone participated we could do

tremendous things and make this an even better place to live than it already is.

One of the best reasons to sign up is that all the money stays local. All you need to do to participate in the program is to check the Operation Round Up box on your electric bill, send us an e-mail (info@vernonelectric.org), or fill out the form below and return it to us. Once you've signed up you may opt out of the program at any time.

Yes, I'd like to participate in Operation Round Up®.
Please round up my electric bill to the next whole dollar.

Name _____

Account Number _____

Phone Number _____

Signature _____ Date _____



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