

Washington State Workers  
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Washington State Works: Archie Green Fellows Project, 2012-2013  
Richard D. Johnson interview, 2013-07-02 : interview conducted by  
Deborah Fant  
Interview ID: afc2012032\_00490  
Date: July 2, 2013  
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00:00.0 Debbie Fant interviews Rick Johnson on July 5, 2013, in Port Townsend, WA, where he lives. Johnson is a lineman and a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 77. The original interview was done on July 2, but a malfunction with the recorder obliterated the first half of the interview. This is a redo of that portion, then the original interviews second half continues as part of this file.

0:01:00.3 Rick identifies himself as a journeyman lineman. He's also the president of IBEW Local 77, Vice President of the Washington State Labor Council, Chairman of the PAC Committee, Chairman of the Safety Committee, lots of committees in the union. Also a stone carver and a woodcarver.

00:01:46.2 Different occupations that he had as a kid: First job was picking blackberries with his mom. First social security job was being a box boy for Ralphs Thriftway in Maple Valley. He went to college, dropped out of college, went to work at Kenmore Truck in the Painters Union. One day a guy showed him a diamond chip in his ring--a 30-year-pin that he could barely see, and he thought he didn't want to do 30 years at Kenmore. So he went back to college, got a summer job for King County Flood Control. They'd tear up logjams on the Raging River.

0:03:50.0 After that job he went hitchhiking around the country. Had been on the out of work list at IBEW 77 for two years. Construction rep called Rick up and offered him a job on a tree crew, chipping brush, trimming trees around a power line. Tom Crittenden was his first foreman, an incredible athlete. Describes how Crittenden could press his body up into a handstand while working in a tree.

0:05:44.0 A tree-trimming crew cuts trees that grow too close to a power line. Rick drove the chipper for about a year. Ended up in Bremerton, WA, and then in Poulsbo, WA (both on the Olympic Peninsula).

0:06:35.3 After that he made Book One. There are four Books: Book One is with a year experience from the local experience, Two is with a year experience from anywhere, Three is six months experience, and Four is anybody off the street. He signed the out of work list and took a job in Maple Valley on a transmission crew. They were flying towers in, building a power line over Stampede Pass.

0:07:40.5 The towers hold the electric lines from Grand Coulee Dam to Covington Substation. They have the lines in 30-40 mile sections. Ericsson used big Sikorsky helicopters to assemble sections of the tower in one place and fly them to where they were needed. The first crew would stack the assemblages, the torq crew would come in behind and fill in all the splice plates with bolts.

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0:08:23.0 Story went around about a guy that stuck his finger in a hole of a tower, the steel shifted, and he lost his finger. Then when he came back to work later, somebody asked him what happened, he stuck another finger in the tower and lost it. People tell that story about anybody who's missing a couple of fingers, 'cause guys get 'em blown off or broken. Rick didn't know if it's a true story, but it's a GOOD story.

00:08:57.8 Rick says he was "dumber than a box of rocks" at the time, and the guys on the crew wanted certain length bolts. If he didn't send them the right one, they'd throw it back at him. They're 180 foot towers, and the bolts hurt if they hit him. This was the dead of winter, up in the mountains. They'd drive for an hour in the morning to get to the site, he'd make sure they had coffee and a warm fire when they came down from the towers. He was impressed by the guys.

0:10:16.6 That winter he spent working for Ericsson, got laid off, went down to Camp Riאה in Oregon, an apprenticeship school that taught tree-trimming, bulldozer, truck driving. 0:10:38.6 He was already Book One. Met a bunch of apprentices at Riאה and saw that they drove new trucks, drank good whiskey, smoked the best pot. He wanted that kind of life. The director told him to put in an application, then they'd interview him. The contractor he'd worked for during his tree-trimming time was on the committee for apprenticeships.

0:11:50.1 Rick went to work at a transmission substation at the Centralia Steam Plant in the mid-1970s. There was a "big wobble" because the union wanted to put a pension into their contract, and the old-school guys wanted every dime on their check. They got paid in cash on Fridays. They didn't want checks. There were some guys who demanded gold, but that was "kind of a '70s thing."

0:12:14.1 That fall of 76, he took an interview for the apprenticeship in Portland, and got accepted later that summer, after he got out of rehab. Drugs and alcohol. Cleaned up and has never used since. July 6, 2013, marks 30 years clean and sober. He was accepted into the apprenticeship--got his acceptance letter when he was in rehab and went to work right after he got out, for L. C. Roth in Everett for a dock crew.

0:13:05.6 A dock crew is an extra crew for the utility. They hire them and can let them go whenever. He lasted a couple of months there, got fired because he got sideways with the foreman, who had wanted his nephew on the job.

0:14:41.5 In Centralia, he had a boss called Red Landes, who had lost both of his legs from the knees down when he was a child. Red became a lineman anyway. He was a legend in the trade back then, "Every generation has their legends." There's not that many linemen in the Northwest, probably 1300-1400 in the whole of Washington. It's a small community, everybody knows everybody or they know somebody that's worked with you, so a reputation means everything. Guys who are unsafe get a reputation and bounce from job to job--"company sucklies" who'll do anything to keep their job. Sucklie is a kiss-ass. they're a pretty strong union because

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the guys are strong. They stick together, you learn who to trust and who not to trust.

0:16:07.9 Safety rules are critical. You don't violate them without paying a price, either in reputation or in injury. The scary people are in a rush to do things all the time and don't think things through. It's called "building a trap for yourself" when you're up in the air working on distribution.

Two kinds of work: TRANSMISSION and DISTRIBUTION. Rick describes transmission and distribution differences.

0:18:33.8 Tools that he used. Spud wrench is like a spike with an open end wrench, 1-1/1/4", used for tower line work. Use a spud wrench, a 2-4 lb. hammer, depending on how strong you are, drifts and pins to line up the steel to get your bolts to go in. Stringing wire on transmission is incredible work because it's all real heavy tensions, and the wire has to be "sagged" just so. The guys who do it really know their stuff. Not much room for error because the loads and strains are so heavy. When you're stringing wire, if you dropped the wire on the ground, Bonneville would make you throw it away. Because if the wire got scratched, it made the static worse.

0:20:26.2 His favorite tool is a hot stick. It's an old-school tool for tying in wires. On a hot wire, you'll have somebody hold it into the saddle of an electrical insulator, and they'll wrap a tie wire, soft aluminum or copper, then you use a hand or a blade to tie it in. He prefers a hand. Different tools require different types of tie wires. If you see someone who knows what they're doing with a hand or a hot stick, they don't waste any moves. The guys who climb a lot are like cats on a pole. They step lightly. They trust their feet, and they trust their equipment.

One time when he was an apprentice, he went up a steel tower in the ice with a guy named Liar Bill. It was nasty cold, with hoar frost all over the steel. He was afraid that he'd fall to his death any minute. Liar Bill was smoking a cigarette when Rick reached him, and Liar Bill had climbed that tower fast for a guy who was in his early 60s. Rick belted off, they were going to hang insulator strings, and Liar Bill said, "You know, I'm 60 years old. And you're about 22. Who do you think is going to have to do all the work up here?" He said, "You'd better quit putting handprints in that steel. Either trust your equipment, or get off the tower. I need somebody that can help me, not somebody I've got to babysit all day long." And that was the attitude then. It wasn't said to be insulting, it was what Liar Bill needed. That's what you learned to listen for and ignore the way something was said. There was no shortage of assholes, but some were mean and some just matter-of-fact. They weren't afraid of cussing.

0:23:08.3 Nicknames. Liar Bill, Snivelin Sam, Cracker, Yogi, Apache. Ed Salazar, people called him Apache. He taught Rick how to do hot work. Ed was from Arizona, a Mescalero Apache. Yogi was from Kentucky. One day they were working some cut-over work back in the 70s. They were finishing up a job, about lunchtime, and Ed said they should go down. It was

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sprinkling. Rick said they just had a little bit more to do. Ed had Rick put his rubber gloves and rain jacket on, and Rick was on the pole. Ed said to backhand that wire a little bit. It was like knives going into Rick. The electricity tracked down the gloves, up the rain gear and into his wrist. It hurt so bad. Then Ed asked, "Now, do you want to still keep working or wait till it's done raining?" It was a lasting moment for Rick. Electricity hurts.

0:25:51.0 Hot work is when you use a hot stick to work on high voltage. If you can shut the power off to work on a pole, you do that. But in most cases people don't want to lose power, so you have to keep everything hot, or live. If you're stringing bigger wire, and the loads have gone up, they'll put fiberglass arms out on the end of the cross arms of a pole, take the existing wire and lay them out and build jumpers so that everything can reach them. String new wire down the middle over travelers, which are wheels mounted on poles.

0:27:21.6 Talks about people he's worked with, how you have to learn to get along. He spent the last 10 years in Port Townsend working with a guy that he didn't like much. But they managed to work together and keep each other "out of the bite." Rick understood the limits he could trust the guy. There were only two of them as service linemen in Jefferson County. That's the work he's done for the past ten years. Troubleshooting, figuring out why lights went out, figuring out what to do in a certain situation, getting the cavalry to come and fix it if need be.

0:29:31.2 Rick is retired. He took a disability retirement. He broke his leg and trashed his knee about two years ago. He had Parkinson's, and it accelerated while he was laid up with his leg and made it impossible to work the long hours. He misses the job. He loved it. He had a big truck, even the firemen were happy to see them when they'd show up. After 2-3 days without power, people will give you their first-born child, their daughter, or their WIFE! If you just get the lights back on!

0:30:37.6 Rick describes a fire at Aldrich's Store in Port Townsend that he worked on alone. It was the second year he was up there, and the other fellow was on vacation. It was early morning, a call for a house fire. They call the lineman to come and disconnect the power to houses that are on fire so that firemen can begin hosing them down without getting electrocuted. Usually the firemen don't do much until the linemen arrive. Aldrich's was on fire, and he had to kill it at the primary. And as he was taking down some wire near the store, the building collapsed around him, and it was pretty dramatic. A photographer took a series of time-lapse photos of the situation. (Those photos are part of the supplementary materials submitted with this interview) Rick used those photos in his campaign when he ran for president of the Local.

0:32:25.2 Describes the Linemen's Rodeo. In 1988 he went to work for the union as a rep for the construction crew, and they worked alongside the permanent Puget Sound crew. He got to know all the people at Puget Sound. He'd been working construction for many years, which involved traveling a lot. He was trying to stay married, so he decided to settle down. Charlie Smith and Bob Bodie, Puget Sound reps, helped him find a job in Renton. The company was going to have a lineman's rodeo out at the company

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picnic. Rick and Ari Roberts and George Coleman opted to do the rodeo. Rick had been running a tree business on the side for 12 years already, so he had been climbing after work and on the weekends. He was pretty good "in the hooks" (climbing gear). They went to the company picnic, and out of a dozen teams, their team won.

0:35:22.5 The different events are a speed climb up a 40-foot pole with a raw egg in your mouth. You climb up with it in a little canvas bag hanging out of your mouth, and when you get to the top of the pole you take the egg out of the bag and climb back down. The egg is just to keep a guy from dropping 20 feet at a pop. It's to keep you controlled, because if you break the egg, you lose. There's a hurt-man rescue. They hang a dummy up on the pole and simulate that he's been electrocuted, and you go up and rig him and check him and talk to him. There's a whole routine that you've got to go through.

0:36:58.1 Rick, George, and Ari won the lineman's rode four years in a row. People weren't going to compete anymore because they couldn't beat them. Then Rick left Puget and didn't compete for several years.

0:38:02.8 Tells the story of competing in a rodeo where the groundman called the night before the rodeo to say he couldn't make it. The next morning Todd Proudlock, who Rick helped get in the union, called him. Todd had just climbed Mt. Rainier and was at the summit. Rick asked what time he thought he could get down from the mountain. Todd made it down and competed. Rick and Ari won the speed climb, almost won the rodeo. He thought it was extraordinary that Todd had climbed Mt. Rainier in the morning, then came down and competed with them in the rodeo.

0:39:33.1 There's now a rodeo in Wenatchee, WA, every year. Rick doesn't compete because his knee is shot. Rodeos are fun because no one really knows what a lineman does. The lights go out, and people just call and bitch until they come back on. But most of the time the linemen are out working in the dark. Rick has had a generator at his house for six years, bought it right after the bad winter of 2006. But he hasn't needed it because he was never home. If the wind was blowing and the power was out, Rick was out fixing the power. His neighbors still call him when the power goes out.

0:41:09.4 Linemen are like the elves of the world. They go out in the middle of the night and fix things, and the lights are on when people wake up in the morning. And if they're not, they're out there doing something about it. Rick has always loved storms. They're "blood money." There are fewer accidents during storms or difficult situations than in the normal day-to-day stuff where people relax and let their guard down. During storms, everyone has their antennae up and they're paying attention. They're being careful.

0:42:36.1 Sayings about line work: "See you on the Big Job." Means either see you on the next job or in heaven. "Stay out of the Bite," stay out of the bite of the line, where if the rigging breaks, you'll be hurt bad.

0:43:28.2 Women on the job: When Rick hired in at Puget Sound Energy, they had a grunt named Cathy Deering. Rick pressured her to take an

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apprenticeship because she had the seniority. She took an apprenticeship in the early '90s. Cathy was good and smart, she and Rick used to do the *New York Times* crossword puzzle together. She wasn't much in the hooks, but he's known other women who were. Amy Sansaver, Stephanie Criswell, Stephanie Swann.

0:46:49.4 City Light has been very aggressive about bringing women into the trades. The union has opened up. Used to be it was resisted, the union was a private club. Most of the trades were. Pretty much equal opportunity these days. No way to get your kid in the trade anymore unless he goes through the system.

0:47:50.3 You go to the union hall, take a written and oral exam, get your journeyman's card. That means you've fulfilled the requirements. So a "ticket" (journeyman's card) in Local 77 means a lot. The Northwest linemen are highly respected because they can hot stick. They have a good apprenticeship program in the Northwest. There's a line school in Riala that costs \$4,000-\$5,000. There's one in Idaho that's a "rat" training school. A rat is a derogatory term for someone who's non-union.

0:49:29.6 It's a great trade. Big trucks, high voltage, electricity, things blow up every once in a while, you get paid well, you get to do things that most anybody with a lick of sense wouldn't want to do. It's just a lot of fun, being part of a crew. Being part of the cavalry. I used to say I'd take a dollar an hour pay cut if they'd give me a siren. I've got the flashing lights but no siren! We developed a T-shirt this past winter that shows a lineman on a pole and says, "Even Firemen Need Heroes." Kind of a poke in the eye, poke in the chest. To be a good fireman, you've got to like fire. You've got to be intrigued by fire. And to be a good lineman, you've got to like electricity. You've got to like to make high voltage arc. On a good summer night, like last night when it's clear out, its dark, wed shut all the lights off on the trucks and we'd tease it, make that big blue arc go on and off and on. It's just pretty. And when it goes to ground it's just the nastiest thing you've ever heard. A really big bellow. Not a zap like on TV, a really rumbling bellow when electricity goes to ground. I've been caught in a few explosions over the years, but never caught in a fatality. I've seen a guy get electrocuted a couple of times, but nobody seriously. It's unforgiving.

**End of July 5 interview Beginning of July 2 interview**

0:00:05.6 A journeyman lineman is the guy who does the climbing and all the work. They're the guys who are actually "in the bite," which means if things go wrong, they're going to get hurt. If you put a line though a block and it's at 90 degrees, anything in that 90 degrees is "the bite." That's where the rope is going to go if the rigging breaks. Anyone in there will get hurt. People talk about staying in or out of the bite.

0:01:09.1 Names of jobs: Line equipment operators, backhoe operators. A "sagger" is a guy who calculates the belly and the wire in a big transmission job. Because the wire from point A to point B droops, you have to keep a certain amount of tension. Pretty intricate, computers do

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it nowadays but the programmers used to figure it out on a piece of paper and then a calculator. Rick went through Sagging school after he got his journeyman's card because he wanted to run the Big Steel. He took a year of algebra in order to do this. Electricity and algebra work together. The math in the one is similar to the math in the other. A certain abstract thinking. Some guys can figure it all in their heads without calculators.

0:03:09.0 Rick most enjoyed being a service lineman. Troubleshooting, working alone most of the time. In the middle of the night, figuring out why somebody's lights aren't on. "We do our best work in the dark," is how the old joke goes. In the late '70s, when he was younger, he worked a couple of big ice storms in Portland. First exposure to "assholes and elbows, just go go go." Go as long as you can and then sleep for a little while, then go back to work. Work round the clock. Those storms lasted a week and a half to two weeks.

0:04:58.1 He hired in at Puget Power, now Puget Sound Energy, in 1991. Inaugural Day Storm was the first big storm on Inauguration Day of 1992 when Clinton became President, huge windstorm that blew through Northwest. Describes how working in a storm is difficult.

0:06:50.2 Rick ran a tree business, topping and falling, for 20 years. He likes cutting trees.

0:08:28.1 Squirrels and crows caused most of the usual trouble he had to deal with. Squirrels would crawl up on top of transformers, touch a high voltage wire, blow up a transformer. In spring and early summer, most of the outage calls. The funnier ones were the pot-growing operations. Get to see all the police and their SWAT gear. Police would call linemen because people would steal power to grow pot.

0:09:42.3 Rick describes the big Aldrich Store fire again. He loves doing line work. Troubleshooting very gratifying. Underground cable outages-- they use a machine called a Thumper. It sends a pulse down the cable until it hits the bad spot in the wire, then it goes to ground. The echo of that can be read by a machine and tell you how many feet away to the bad spot in the cable, then you dig it up and fix it. It involves a lot of shovel work, not his favorite thing.

0:11:06.8 Cable above ground and cable below ground. Most linemen don't like working underground--they like overhead. Snivelin Sam out of Portland used to say, "I don't like Underground or anybody who likes Underground." Rick thinks of underground that way. But there's money in it and its part of the trade. Linemen don't mind getting dirty but they prefer to climb a pole and get dirty to getting in the mud.

0:12:31.4 Cautionary tales. Periodically accidents or fatalities or people lose an arm or a leg. Those stories go around. He tells the story again of the fellow on the tower who lost a finger.

0:13:42.8 Jokes: Every apprentice is asked to go find a "Sky Hook." There is no such thing, but they don't know that. Sounds like a typical term. Every tool and piece of equipment has a nickname. A service bale, the

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metal thing that attaches a service wire to a house, can be a chicken catcher or cowboy or anyone of a dozen other names, depending where you're at in the U.S. We hot-stick everything, one of these fiberglass poles and tools in the Northwest, one of the last corners of the country that uses hot sticks. Everyone else uses rubber gloves. In Washington, by law, you can't rubber-glove anything over 5,000 volts. It's dangerous. If he has something high voltage in his hand and he touches it to the wrong thing, it blows up at about 2 feet away from his face. If he uses a hot stick, which is 6 feet long, it blows up 6 feet from his face. Plus it rains a lot in the Northwest, and wet rubber gloves will kill you. And they hurt real bad if you have them on at the wrong time. But every lineman has a pair of rubber gloves, and you wear them to put do certain things with. Most of the work is done with hot sticks.

0:15:33.5 Rick was good at hot sticking. Hot work, distribution. Clipping. He was on a good wire crew when he topped out--when he finished his apprenticeship, became a journeyman lineman in 1980.

0:16:04.4 When you've topped out, you go to the union hall and take a test. You've completed your hour requirement--7,500 hours. That makes you a journeyman lineman. Some of the best linemen in the country come out of the Northwest, because everyone respects the skills that the linemen in the Northwest have and the way they do their work. Have to deal with everything--mountains to the ocean, and the deserts in eastern WA. Lots of steel. It's easier to go from hot sticking to rubber gloving than vice versa.

0:17:21.1 Use the term "power pole," not "telephone pole!" He has a stack of cross arms at his house. Most linemen in the country have piles of cross arms, bolts, hardware at their houses. He uses it for materials. He built a stairway from his house down to the beach, made of power poles, cross arms, regular lumber. He knows how to use the materials, likes to be innovative and creative, which is a part of the job. If you have all the right tools and equipment, anybody can do the job. But in difficult weather, missing a couple key parts and still getting the job done, it's the essence of line work.

0:19:29.7 Discussion of line crews working in Port Townsend at the time of the interview.

0:19:49.1 Most dramatic storm: Inaugural Day Storm in 1992. He chose to keep working when everybody else went home. His apprentice was a woman named Cathy Deering. They did "little ol lady" patrol, all the people who were crying about their power being out, went to see if there were some way to get it back on. Sometimes a branch will take out the service to the house, a crew will get the whole neighborhood back on but they'll miss something. So they'd fix those things.

0:20:54.3 One time when he was a journeyman, he was working aerial dead-ending down in Oregon. That involves a big fiberglass ladder, you run it up the tower, hang it on an arm, then flatten it out so it's straight out along the wire. Then set up the rigging to attach it and cut the wire, then attach it permanently. You have to ground the wire because it gets a lot of static electricity. They had a disagreement with employer over



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money, Rick and a couple other guys quit. Two days later, an apprentice forgot to attach his ground, got hung up in the static and the foreman went out to knock him off the line and lost his footing. The foreman fell to his death. The weekend after that an apprentice went out and jumped off the tower, committed suicide. He's known too many guys who've been hurt or maimed over the years.

0:22:31.7 In 2003, there was an earthquake in Washington. He was climbing down the pole for lunch at that time. His partner was on the truck. He's usually a pretty smooth climber, doesn't rattle things. The pole was really shaking, he didn't know why, "What's going on? I'm not a Fat Foot!" and saw the bucket truck was waving, then realized it wasn't him, it was an earthquake. So he kept climbing down the pole.

0:23:34.3 His favorite tool to use, that attaches to the end of his Hot Stick, is a Hand. It has a little crooked finger, gaps with Vs in them, used for tying in copper and aluminum. A hot stick has different tools that you can attach to the end. A hand, an alligator, used for hanging grips in distribution work.

0:24:59.9 How has job changed over years? Rick doesn't think it's changed that much. Basic line work, there's more underground because people want underground lines. Underground may not go out as often, but when it does, it goes out twice as long because it's harder to find, you have to dig it up to repair it. Underground probably the biggest change. Some new tools, but "the essence of line work is diggin holes, settin poles, stringin wire, climbin up and and down. Not getting killed, going home with all your fingers and making sure everyone you know does as well."

0:26:12.7 He's been on the safety committee, is president of the union local, was an organizer and a business rep. He visits a lot of guys in the hospital. Saw one guy who was driving a line truck, a digger-derrick, he pulled out in front of a tanker truck, the boom swung around and hit the fuel truck and it blew up. He was in Medford or Grants Pass. He got burnt. He told Rick he hit the door three times and was just about to give up but then he thought about his kids. He hit it one more time and got out of the truck. But he was burned all over, and he lived. Rick has great admiration for the people at the Burn Unit at Harborview Hospital in Seattle. Electricity burns you from the inside out. If your elbow were to make contact and your other elbow were in contact with a ground, it would travel through your bones and your blood across your body. Probably go through your heart and blow it up. It's like a microwave, burns things from the inside out. Electricity follows its easiest path, and blood is salty and a relatively good conductor.

0:28:10.5 Rick has three kids. Boys have worked out of the union as grunts, but none are in the trade. Nephew is an apprentice lineman, and he was at the Folklife festival. Rick hired in at Puget Power in 1991 so he could stay home and raise his family, but it felt like giving in because he liked traveling and doing line work. He learned to stay at home.

0:29:38.3 Rick is President of IBEW Local 77. He ran because he thought the guy who was president before him wasn't doing his job.

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(Tape stops for a break, Rick takes Debbie on a tour of his yard and points out all of the things he's made with the materials that he's collected on the job over the years, his stairway down to the beach, decorations made from insulators, as well as his sculpture studio and some of his stone and wood sculptures.)

Rick describes what he showed Debbie: Fog glass, johnny balls, dead-end bells, box-end insulators, box cut-outs. An anchor rod that he put a triple helix torq into.

0:31:29.6 Advice about going to work as a lineman: Anybody with a lick of sense is afraid of electricity and heights. You have to be a little bit intrigued by things and not too put off by danger, the hazards. There's an inherent risk to anything we do, and the safety record of the people who do line work is incredible. Talented, hardworking, intelligent people. Best advice? Don't let what you think get in the way of what is. Anybody can do the job if you've got the right tools. A journeyman lineman is not a four-year apprenticeship. In his heart, it's the first time you learn to say, "No, I don't think I want to do it that way." You think for yourself. If you listen to somebody else too much, they'll put you in the bite. Think for yourself and take responsibility for everything that you do.

0:33:39.4 Rick is a journeyman lineman and proud of it. He digs holes, sets poles, strings wire, goes out in the worst of all weather and fixes power lines. He keeps the lights on and doesn't worry about who gets the credit for what.

END OF INTERVIEW