

Rachel Johnson ([00:15](#)):

Welcome back to Co-Op Energy Talk. I'm Rachel Johnson, the member relations manager here at Cherry Land Electric Cooperative. And as many of you probably know by now, I am also the incoming CEO of the cooperative, which is a little bit of a messes with my mind to even introduce myself that way because we still are working under the leadership of a CEO who's been here for 20 years and has made such a big impact on the cooperative. And so as we prepare for his retirement, I wanted to sit down with Tony one last time on the podcast and just reflect on his career with the cooperative here at Cherry Land, but also with other cooperatives across the country. Because for those of you who don't know, Tony has, as of August of this year, worked for electric cooperatives for 40 years and dedicated 20 of those to, uh, our members here at Cherry Land.

Rachel Johnson ([01:00](#)):

The 2023 annual meeting on June 15th will mark his last day leading your cooperative. So I encourage you all to come out and see us at the annual meeting at incredible MOS at 4:00 PM and make sure to just take an opportunity to thank Tony for his service to the co-op and for the legacy that he has left. So to celebrate his service, uh, please listen in on this podcast where we take a, a little walk down memory lane to just think through all of the things that we've accomplished under his leadership over the last 20 years. Okay. Well, Tony, thank you for joining me today to talk through your long and storied career with the electric co-ops. Are you ready for this?

Tony Anderson ([01:38](#)):

I'm not ready, but it's time.

Rachel Johnson ([01:40](#)):

It's time. It's been a long goodbye.

Tony Anderson ([01:42](#)):

It has been.

Rachel Johnson ([01:43](#)):

Well, first, why don't you just give our listeners a little bit of background about your career prior to coming to C e C. So kind of tell us how you got started with the co-ops and how it led you here.

Tony Anderson ([01:52](#)):

Sure. Um, I had a college degree and there was an opening in my hometown of Timberlake, South Dakota. Had an electric co-op called Morrow Grande Electric Cooperative. They needed a billing clerk, so I signed on to be billing clerk there in August of 1983. And then, uh, had a couple friends moved to a co-op in, uh, Montana and got recruited up there to be an office manager. So in April of 88, I moved to Sheridan Electric Cooperative in Medicine Lake Montana and had three and a half wonderful years there.

Rachel Johnson ([02:25](#)):

What did you do for them?

Tony Anderson ([02:27](#)):

I was the office manager. Okay. So more of an accountant. I had moved into the accounting field, uh, and in South Dakota and then I moved up to Montana as the accountant and then office manager where you just kinda supervise the office and get the pins and pencils and that type of stuff, <laugh>. And then in um, October of 91, I was given the opportunity to manage a small co-op in Wyoming and I've moved down there to do that. And then from Wyoming I went to, we had 2,500 meters at the co-op in Wyoming, 12 employees. And from there, when did I move? Would've been January of 1998, I moved to, uh, O'Connell Electric Cooperative in O'Connell Falls, Wisconsin as the manager, 30 employees, 8,000 meters. So a little bigger and 35 miles from Lambeau Field. So, uh, <laugh>, we had the Green Bay Packer thing going on there too.

Tony Anderson ([03:18](#)):

And then, uh, spent some time there. And then in uh, March of 2003 I moved to Cherry Land. So just over 20 years ago. And every co-op I managed Wyoming, Wisconsin, and Cherry Land, they had either fired or turned over the managers before me. There was three managers in a couple years in Wyoming before I showed up. There was five managers in 10 years in Wisconsin before I showed up. And um, they had just fired a manager who had been at Cherry Land for about eight or nine years prior to my time coming to Cherry Land. So,

Rachel Johnson ([03:49](#)):

So you kind of made a career out of coming into co-ops that were in a little bit of a crisis and turning them around and bringing them back to stability. Yeah,

Tony Anderson ([03:57](#)):

I like, yeah, I'd like to tell people I made a career out of jumping over a very low bar three times, <laugh>.

Rachel Johnson ([04:03](#)):

So before we move on to talk about your career at Cherry Land, I'm gonna ask you to tell a story cuz it's one of my favorites. Tell the story of when you were offered your first job at the co-op.

Tony Anderson ([04:13](#)):

Yeah. I, I just, uh, I got a two year associate's degree in May of, uh, 83 and I was gonna go back and get a four year degree, but the job came open at the co-op. So I applied for the job in May of 1983. And I waited all summer long for them to make a decision. I had an interview in May and then June went on and then it was halfway through July and I still hadn't gotten a call and nobody had gotten a call, <laugh>. And then finally in, uh, July I got a phone call. I was working for a rancher at the time and that was my summer job. I was cutting hay and that day I was hauling trees in literally at the end of the co-op line near a town called Isabel, South Dakota. And I had gone in for lunch early cause I was exhausted, tired, and bored of hoeing trees, <laugh>.

Tony Anderson ([04:58](#)):

So I'm in the house by myself and I'm making myself lunch and the phone rings about eleven, eleven thirty and I pick it up and it's the manager from the co-op and he says, we'd, we'd like to hire you. We'd like, when can you start at Marl Grande? And I'd looked at the clock and I thought, it's almost 1130. I gotta finish eating, I gotta shower, I gotta drive there. I told him I could be there by one o'clock <laugh>.

And he says, no, no, that's all right. You two weeks is fine. And I was like, oh crap, I gotta go finish those trees <laugh>. So yeah. Yeah, I didn't know nothing about a two week notice. I was just ready to go.

Rachel Johnson ([05:34](#)):

Well, I think that eagerness has served you well throughout your career. So you came to Cherry Land about 20 years ago. Can you tell us what's kind of your, what are your original memories of starting at Cherry Land? Uh,

Tony Anderson ([05:46](#)):

Well my first memory is, um, Pat Barone was the admin assistant at, at Cherryland. She did HR too. And before I ever even moved here, she sent me a, a drawing of the office and asked me how I wanted my desk and where I wanted my chairs. And so I had this whole office plan set up before I ever got here. So when I walked into my office, it was just as she and I had designed it. So that happened before I ever got in the door. But once I got in the door, it was, it was a little bit of a, it felt a little bit in disarray. They had changed the name to Cherry Land Electric. We were no longer called Cherry Land Rural Electric Cooperative. We were no longer called Cherry Land Electric Cooperative. It was just Cherry Land Electric. They had entered into the propane business and the internet business and then they had an investment in a cell phone company.

Tony Anderson ([06:36](#)):

So they had a lot of stuff going on. So they dropped the cooperative from their name. And I hated that when I walked in the door. Every logo had Cherry Land Electric. And I've spent 20 years trying to change that name. Sometimes people still call us Cherry Land Electric and I have to correct it, but some people had the logos on other peoples didn't have the logos on. We had just all kinds of different stuff going on. And it, it just felt a little bit in disarray and in need of some leadership. And you could just sense that.

Rachel Johnson ([07:07](#)):

So what did you do in those initial years in response to that?

Tony Anderson ([07:11](#)):

Uh, well, I, I insisted the name was Cherry Land Electric Cooperative and I never allowed anybody to say Cherry Land Electric.

Rachel Johnson ([07:18](#)):

And we still kind of police that a little. Yeah,

Tony Anderson ([07:20](#)):

I, I do even at chamber meetings, if I'm introduced as Cherry Land Electric, I'm like, it's Cherry Land Electric Cooperative. I've yelled it from the backer rooms. I've corrected people in mid-sentence cuz it has to be Cherry Land's Electric Cooperative. Um, so that was the first thing. And then we started to unload the, the other stuff. We, we sold the propane company. Uh, we sold the internet company my first annual meeting in June of 2003. I had to tell the membership we were writing off a \$3 million investment in a cell phone company. We were taking a loss, we're writing it off it, the company had gone bankrupt. We only had a 10% stake in it and we weren't getting that money back. And so just started divesting of ourself of all the distractions and focused on being an electric cooperative and

working on our rates, working on our reliability a little bit at a time and started hiring some people, some really good people, fortunately. Yeah.

Rachel Johnson ([08:16](#)):

It helps to, to build a good team. But change like that does often take a long time. Like when was the moment when you thought, oh hey, I actually think this is gonna work. Like, you know, I mean does that question make sense? Like Sure. When was that time? When, because it's, and, and you may not have shown that you were doubting whether it would work, but everybody doubts early on. Oh,

Tony Anderson ([08:34](#)):

A absolutely. Well luckily I hired Frank Seker in, in May of 2003. And I get choked up about it 20 years later because he was the first guy I hired and he was so talented. And with him on board, we got the operations, we started to get them handled and that, that obviously took some time, but we had some people leave and, and we slowly got that side handled. That was my weakest side was operations. And I had a guy I could trust and a guy I could build on. And then it was less than a year later, Jim Carpenter came back and he handled the, the Lion crews and, and he, he helped get the outside together as well, or at least starting to get together. And so we started to formulate a team, um, slowly and then you could see it build mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And when we got all the distractions out of the way, you could just see, see stuff build and, but it, uh, Frank was the turning point.

Rachel Johnson ([09:49](#)):

I love that story. And, and he still is such an important part of our team. Um, so any other big challenges you faced along the way? It's been 20 years.

Tony Anderson ([09:59](#)):

Uh, we were not retiring Capital Credits because of all the investments in the other businesses. We weren't retiring Capital credits. Our members didn't know what a cooperative was cause we hadn't retired Capital Credits in a very long while. And 2009, six years into it, we made our first capital credit retirement. And um, that was a big day and a huge turning point as well. Cuz as everybody knows, cause we told them we've, we've retired over 30 million in capital credits since 2009. I think it's 31 or 32 right now. So, uh, that, that was a turning point too. Just six years in, we divested it again. I, we've divested everything. We got to be in a co-op. We got our rates kind of straightened out or reliability was improving. And, uh, yeah, giving back capital credits was a big day.

Rachel Johnson ([10:46](#)):

So then as you look back over the 20 years, what would you, how, what would be a few of your proudest moments that you would point to?

Tony Anderson ([10:54](#)):

Uh, a few of the proudest moments, but not the proudest moment? Well, every time I hired somebody that made a difference, that's obviously a proud moment. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, you know, Frank came, Jim came, uh, Mark Wilson came Kerry Cale 13 years ago, Rachel Johnson, 10 years ago, uh, Jeff Puffer, what, eight, nine years ago. E every hire when we started hiring good people and you could see the energy and we started building a team. Then all those people, it's the people are the proudest moments. We did some stuff, but it was never doing the stuff. It was all about the people we had in place to get things done. So I, I guess every, every important hire, uh, was a proud moment. And the

proudest moment hasn't happened yet. The proudest moment is gonna be June 15th. When I hand it off to those people, that's absolutely positively gonna be the proudest moment when I hand this over to Rachel Johnson.

Rachel Johnson ([12:01](#)):

Well, geez, Tony and now are gonna make me cry. You know, it's tough because I feel like all of us who are on your team have that same feeling of such, I, I don't know how to explain it. I've never worked on a team where I felt such comradery with my team and such a strong sense of just trust and knowing that we, we might not always agree on everything, but we'll always have each other's backs. And that to me feels like the thing that you built here, that you're handing off to us as we move forward is that we have a culture of trust and we have a really strong team that truly has each other's backs.

Tony Anderson ([12:36](#)):

Yeah. I, I absolutely believe that. And yeah, we, we haven't always agreed. We've had a few fights here and there,

Rachel Johnson ([12:42](#)):

Even you and I, every once in a while, I, I know people would not believe that two people with fiery tempers like ours, whatever, not get along.

Tony Anderson ([12:48](#)):

Yeah. But we've, we've always circled back to, we're on the same side, we're on the same team. And we've only had disagreements because we were all so passionate about because we cared, because we cared. And, um, that's absolutely it. I've, I've always had confidence that we could do absolutely anything, any storm, any project, any crazy idea we could get done because of the people we had here and extremely confident in everybody here. And yeah, it, it's, it's a great feeling.

Rachel Johnson ([13:17](#)):

It's interesting because I think sometimes leadership books, they try really hard to make leadership incredibly complex. That's how they sell books <laugh>. But at the end of the day, hire good people, give them what they need, get out of their way, believe in the team. Right. Like, it's, it's not rocket science. It's, it's a surprisingly simple, um, equation if you Yeah. If

Tony Anderson ([13:35](#)):

You can. Yeah. I, I made a great career of, uh, around hiding behind really good people.

Rachel Johnson ([13:42](#)):

Well, I'm looking forward to continuing the legacy <laugh>. Yeah.

Tony Anderson ([13:45](#)):

Yeah.

Rachel Johnson ([13:46](#)):

So talk about, and, and I I, we've already kind of probably touched on some of these things, but what, what do you think you'll miss the most once you retire?

Tony Anderson ([13:54](#)):

I'll miss the people. I'll miss the projects. Uh, I'll miss the, the joy of, um, watching the storm restored, watching people do good things. And I'll, I'll miss the, the members and, uh, every occasionally I get a handwritten letter from some, some member they pop in randomly over the years and then they're wonderful. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And so it's just the connection with the people, the members, the employees, the community. I am immensely proud of our, our reputation in the community. That's, we've all built that over a long period of years. And I'll, I'll miss that. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Rachel Johnson ([14:30](#)):

I don't, you know, it's interesting cuz I see some of those letters that come in from members as well. And I don't think our members realize how impactful that is. But when you are doing a job like yours and you're constantly communicating out about issues impacting the co-op and you know, obviously you're, you're well known for your, your manager's columns, sometimes it can feel like you're communicating into the abyss. So when someone reaches back out and says, Hey, I heard you. I agree, I disagree, I'm grateful, whatever. Right? Like, it's, it's just that they're just little touchpoints that remind you like, okay, I'm doing all this work and it is helping our members be more engaged. It is giving them a better experience and helping them see the cooperative as different than other utilities. Because there are no other utilities out there where your CEO is going to write a manager's column and then interact with you in the comments on the blog post that that doesn't happen everywhere.

Tony Anderson ([15:18](#)):

Right. Yeah. I, I enjoy the, the member interaction and my manager's column has been competing with the recipes for years <laugh> in the Country Lines magazine. And when somebody tells me they read my column before they went to the recipes Yeah, that's that's a good day. Yeah.

Rachel Johnson ([15:33](#)):

Take your wins where you can.

Tony Anderson ([15:34](#)):

Yeah. It doesn't happen that often. So often it's, oh, I love the recipes. I'm like, did you read that column <laugh>? No, you read that column. Um, but yeah, the interaction and then some of the interaction is negative. You know, people want to challenge you. People don't like you and, and that's okay. You can't make everybody happy, but it's lonely over in the manager's corner. And when you get that good positive feedback once in a while, it, it, sometimes it comes on the absolutely best day. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, uh, cuz you know, you're doing the right thing and when it reaches one person, it's a good day.

Rachel Johnson ([16:09](#)):

I feel like. Um, and we've talked about a lot of different things you've done to help turn the co-op around, but for me, and I obviously this is not surprising coming from my background, but for me, I look at the way that everyone here now thinks about the member first. It's become such, uh, it's so ingrained culturally here with how we make decisions. And I think that happened because of your focus on the member. And you know, even something as simple as, we're not gonna call it Cherry Land Electric, cuz that's not reflective of who we are or who we're going to become. And we're gonna call it Cherry Land Electric Cooperative because we make decisions for members. And I, I, that's something I'm really proud of here.

Tony Anderson ([16:45](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. And, and the employees have to grab onto that. And I feel like they all have. And that's, that's why my proudest moment is when I'm gonna look out at all the employees. We have 60 employees. I've hired 57 of 'em. There's only three that were here from when I started 20 years ago. And they've all grabbed onto that and mm-hmm. <affirmative> and I know that'll continue. I have no doubt that'll continue when I'm gone. And so that's Yeah. I that's gonna be tough to put into words when I look at those people Yeah. On that last day. That's

Rachel Johnson ([17:15](#)):

Quite the legacy. So let's, let's switch a little in, um, tell our listeners what's next for you as you move into what is not really a full retirement. It's, uh,

Tony Anderson ([17:24](#)):

Yeah,

Rachel Johnson ([17:24](#)):

Hybrid.

Tony Anderson ([17:25](#)):

Yeah, we, we've called it the long goodbye cuz it's, it is a long goodbye. So what's next? I, I have two years to serve as president of N R E C A and N R E C A as the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. It's the National Trade Association for all 900 co-ops in 48 states. The only thing I've ever done is work at electric co-ops for 40 years. So my last two years in the co-op world, I get a chair of the board of the National Association where they've been part of my life for the entire 40 years. So I'm incredibly blessed to have that be part of the long goodbye. And that's one of the reasons I'm stepping away in June, is so I can focus on that and do that the right way and not cheat chair land out of my time or cheat them out of my time.

Tony Anderson ([18:09](#)):

It's being the board chair at N R E C is about a hundred days a year on the road. I'm, I'm retiring on June 15th and then I think on the 19th I go to a meeting for, uh, I'm on a bank board as part of the N R E C A being an officer. I'm on a board of, uh, uh, co-op bank called the Cooperative Finance Corporation, C F C we call it. So Retire on June 15th, June 19th. I go to a C F C meeting for four days, and then I get back from that for I think one or two days. And then I'm off to the June summer board meeting at N R E C A. So my first two weeks of retirement, I've only got a couple days at home, aren't gonna feel very retiree. Nope. They're gonna feel just like normal. What's what's, that's okay too.

Tony Anderson ([18:48](#)):

That's the, that's what I've signed up for. I've been on the N E C A board since 2008 as the Michigan representative and very grateful to the Michigan co-ops who have allowed me to serve for that that long. But so that's, that's my first thing after retirement. And my, my second thing is the, uh, cooperative Family Fund. We started this in December. It kind of was born out of the work I did for Big Brothers Big Sisters. The Cooperative Family Fund is, it's a board of seven people from across the country from seven different co-ops and one retired guy. And I'm gonna be the second retired guy on the board. But what

we set up the Cooperative Family Fund to do is when a full-time cooperative employee passes away for any reason, heart attack, car wreck on the job, off the job, cancer, suicide, whatever, it doesn't matter.

Tony Anderson ([19:36](#)):

Any employee from any part of the Cooper World Accountants member, services managers, linemen, the entire cooperative family, if any full-time cooperative employee passes away and has kids under the age of 18, the Cooperative Family Fund is gonna set aside \$10,000 in an investment for those kids. And they will get that investment when they turn 18. So that \$10,000 will grow a little more for the four year old than it will for the 12 year old. But our goal is to take care of the cooperative family and when they need us the most, the other thing the family fund will do is we'll put together a memory book of every parent that passes. So that two year old or that 10 year old has a book of all the stories from the funeral and notes from, uh, the parents' coworkers and just a, a book that they can put their hands on and, and feel the parent.

Tony Anderson ([20:27](#)):

And the third thing the family fund will do is encourage employees to show up at their Christmas concert or the ball game or wherever that kid is at, and remind them that they are part of the family and their, that their parent is not forgotten. So the, the Family Fund is a, a entirely volunteer project and volunteering my time in retirement, cherry land staff here are doing the bookkeeping for it and other, other people are helping at the statewide, there's a lady by the name of Casey Clark who's doing the website and the the online donation. So we have a volunteer group Ofop people from across the country that are gonna put this together and that have put it together. And I'm, for the next 10 years, at least in retirement, I'm gonna make sure the Cooperative Family Fund becomes a household name to the 900 co-ops in 48 states. So we can grow that and take care of these kids. And I can give back a little to the industry that has given me 40 years and is about to gimme a great retirement.

Rachel Johnson ([21:23](#)):

Uh, you know, and I I I think the thing that I love about the Cooperative Family Fund is two things. One, the fact that it was just a kind of a grassroots, organic thing that emerged out of a recognized need. And now you have all this support from across the country for it, which shows me that electric cooperatives truly are different the way we think about our commitment to each other, regardless of whether I've ever met that employee and their family in Iowa, for example. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I still feel a comradery there, which is something I love about the co-ops ev ever since I've come here. It's just so different the way co-op <laugh> Yeah. It, it sounds a little culty, but co-op people really are different. Like the way that we teach treat each other and take care of one another. And this kind of like willingness to share whatever has helped someone else is, is just a really, really cool thing that is shared across the country by co-ops.

Tony Anderson ([22:09](#)):

Yes. No, I'm, I'm, I'm proud of the, the family fund since Thanksgiving, uh, 20 co-op kids have lost a parent in, uh, five different states. Six different parents have been lost in since Thanksgiving. So then the need is there and it, it does put action into the Word family in, in the co-op world. And I'm proud of that and I'm proud of the response we've gotten so far. And we just made our first, um, investment for, uh, nine kids just, uh, just today. The, the money went into the accounts today.

Rachel Johnson ([22:40](#)):



That's awesome. I mean, it's horrible that it has to exist, but that's awesome that as a, as a collection of cooperatives that we're doing that mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, and I also wanna point out that I, I think that what you're doing with N R E C A it on two levels, one, I think it's awesome. It's an awesome way to end your career. Right? Like what a, what a pinnacle to end on mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And also when I look at the things the co-ops have, the challenges we will face in the coming years, many of those challenges will require regulatory and policy reform. And you are gonna be at the front line of that with the work you do with N R E C A. So even though you won't technically be working at Cherry Land anymore, you'll be doing probably more impactful work on behalf of Cherry Land's members during that time as well. So

Tony Anderson ([23:21](#)):

Yeah. To any of the haters who are happy to see me retiring, <laugh>, it's gonna be a couple years before you're going to, uh, escape my voice in my reach <laugh>. Cause it's, I'm, I'm going national and

Rachel Johnson ([23:32](#)):

I would assume we'll see you at a, a few annual meetings going forward. Yeah,

Tony Anderson ([23:36](#)):

Yeah. I'll be, I'll be poking around. And I also have a couple boys in the co-op world too. So there's gonna be a couple Andersons, uh, working to keep your lights on there. You go over at Wolverine. Power at

Rachel Johnson ([23:46](#)):

Wolverine. Yeah. So, uh, I add, I added a question. I sent you the agenda in advance and I added a question since then. Yeah. But anyway, here's my final question for you. Do you have any advice for people just starting with the co-op that you would like to share?

Tony Anderson ([23:59](#)):

Um, don't leave it, stay in the co-op world. Um, if you don't like the co-op you're at, find another co-op. But don't leave the co-op world. You know, our, our pence and our 401K travels with you from co-op to co-op. Uh, don't leave it and make it better. Uh, we need all the good people we can get in the cooperative world and, uh, I embrace it and dive in and don't ever leave it cuz it will treat you well.

Rachel Johnson ([24:23](#)):

And I think your career is really a reflection of that, Tony. That and I, and I really, I sincerely believe this, for someone who is ambitious and willing to work hard and take risks, there is no limit to what they can do working for electric cooperatives. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And that's what you've done over the course of four now 40 years in August.

Tony Anderson ([24:41](#)):

It's quite a while. Yeah. I, and yeah, what I tell people, it's amazing, every co-op I left is still open <laugh> some, somehow they survive without you <laugh>. But I'm also proud of the fact that I have friends at every co-op I've worked at, at all five of the co-ops. And I'm, I'm looking forward to the day when I walk into Cherryland and see all my old friends and Yeah,

Rachel Johnson ([25:03](#)):

You always have an open invitation to come back.

Tony Anderson ([25:05](#)):

Yeah. Yep. And I will, I will take a, I will take advantage of that.

Rachel Johnson ([25:11](#)):

Well, I guess I, I will just end by saying, I think I speak for everyone here when I say thank you. That's such an insufficient way to acknowledge what you've done here, but you have not only changed the co-op, but when I look around, I see to your point, people who are so proud to work here. And that is not what it looked like when you came, which means that pride came from decisions you made and the team you built. And so thank you for that. Thank you on behalf of our members for all of the work you've done to continue to meet our mission and to provide reliable, affordable power that puts the members at the forefront of our decisions. So thank

Tony Anderson ([25:44](#)):

You. Well, but yeah, you're, you're very welcome. I, I appreciate those gracious words, but it, everybody has to know it. I didn't do this by myself and we had, we, to everybody's credit, who was here when I started, we had some pride when we started, but it just grew and grew and I'm so grateful for that and so thankful that I had a good team that you can't do anything by yourself. And, and I had the best people in the all game at the, at the right time. Yeah.

Rachel Johnson ([26:15](#)):

Well, I, I give you my word. We will do everything we can to continue that moving forward for the next 20 years.

Tony Anderson ([26:21](#)):

I, I don't doubt that one bit.