

# Linemen Reflect on the Changes in Utility Work

Veterans and apprentices voice their views on the effect of technology on the industry and the value of experience.

By **Tonia Jurbin**, *Contributing Writer*

**T**echnology has transformed the lives of linemen over the last few decades. Rather than climbing poles, linemen often rely on bucket trucks. While some of the newer workers applaud this change, a few of the veteran linemen prefer the old way of doing things.

For example, Stan Plutt, a lineman with 42 years in the trade, has worked in more than 20 states. He said he has seen it all, and he's not shy about sharing.

"I feel like the heritage of my trade is changing for good; it's being lost," he said. "Before bucket trucks were used for everything, you couldn't tell a lineman that something couldn't be done. In fact, that was a sure way to get us to figure out how to rig something for a job. Now if something 'can't be done,' the engineers will go off and redesign it or design a tool

that can be used to do the job while the crews sit in the shop. Climbing is not a priority anymore; that's taking away what we were all about."

## Shift from Climbing to Bucket Trucks

Climbing helps linemen get into a better work position, and as such, some contractors are continuing to encourage climbing because it's faster. With double belting, climbing is also safer than it had been in the past.

For many utilities, however, the bucket truck is now a standard part of their fleet. The bucket truck has been the single biggest change to the heritage of the trade — it seems everything can be done with a truck, and there is a truck for everything.

Bucket trucks typically cost about \$250,000, last about 10



Colorado Springs Utilities linemen change insulators and crossarms on a 34.5-kV line in Colorado Springs following a snowstorm.



Colorado Springs Utilities linemen work on a mountain pole changeout and transfer on a 12.4-kV system.



years and cost about \$10,000 a year to maintain and run. This does not include the cost to tool it up and add all the hydraulic labor-, shoulder- and arm-saving devices.

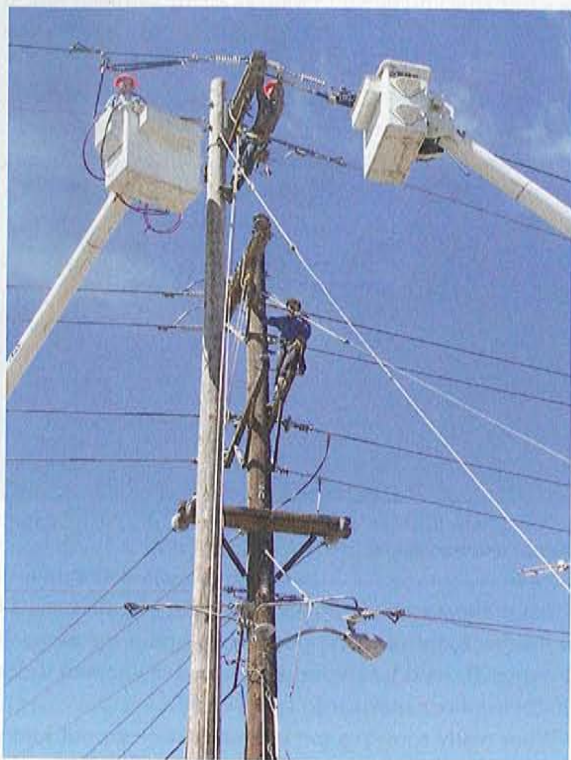
Typical bucket trucks carry at least 25 hydraulic tools. The housing for the tools' pistons, hydraulics and triggers tend to make them larger than the traditional equivalents. For that reason, linemen must take more care when working in an energized environment, because contact is more likely between the tool and the adjacent components or between the tool and the bucket partner.

While the addition of these tools adds extra weight to the trucks, most linemen who use the hydraulic and battery-powered tools would agree that it's worth the extra time and money to have them.

### Sharing Knowledge

In addition to the advent of the bucket truck, other tools and technology are also transforming the way linemen do everyday projects out in the field.

For example, Plutt has noticed that more linemen are doing less and less rigging out in the field. In the past, if he had to install a 10-kVA transformer in a backyard, he would use belts, hooks, hand lines and shim blocks. Many of the younger linemen, however, wouldn't know how to do that because they could get a boom truck or an easement trailer. As a result, he said linemen are losing their skills in climbing, rigging and ropes.



Colorado Springs Utilities linemen and apprentices perform a double-circuit pole changeout and transfer.



Colorado Springs linemen engage in baker board training during a pole changeout and transfer.

This is also a concern for Jeremy Auch, who is 32 years old and has been out of the apprentice program for more than four years. He said it's important for newer linemen to learn from their more experienced coworkers.

"What really concerns me is if we have to go out into the mountains and do something different, are we going to be able to do it?" he asks. "Every time I get to work with one of the older guys, I learn something new and it sticks."

Brian Wilfong, a 30-year-old power line technician with three years out of the apprenticeship program, said he knows a few workers who don't have much regard for the experience of older linemen because they don't need to know what they had to know. Many of the workers know their knotting skills aren't up to snuff, but they're able to handle the basics. If they need an unusual solution, they often get a new tool or have an existing tool re-engineered.

Wilfong, however, said he agrees with Plutt about the importance of the heritage of the trade. As such, he chooses to climb a few times a week.

"When I was younger I respected Stan because of his age, but now I understand, as I become more experienced, the value of his experience," he said.

In fact, Wilfong once openly challenged Plutt to continue working on overhead projects because he had so much knowledge to pass on. In his view, it wasn't right for Plutt not to keep working with the younger workers.

### Protecting the Workers of Today and Tomorrow

While veteran linemen have a lot they can teach apprentices, they also often contend with injuries that the younger generation may not have to face. Because of tools and technology, the younger generation of linemen often feel like they'll be better off than the veteran workers.

For example, Plutt has had four surgeries, one on each





Warren Stewart and Jeremy Auch, Colorado Springs linemen, wrap up the end of a long day out in the field.

hand and arm from repetitive strain, mostly from using manual presses. That's a big chunk of time off for surgery and recovery, followed by months or at least weeks of light-duty work. Not to mention that whoever is standing in for him has to be paid, too.

While Plutt is proud of his battle wounds and where he's been, the apprentices and young journeymen of today are looking forward to long, injury-free careers without multiple surgeries and retirement with able, healthy bodies.

Wilfong and his colleague Jeremy Auch both expect long,

safe and healthy careers as power line technicians and a good quality of life after retirement.

### Looking Ahead

The trend across most construction trades and related industries is men and women who have higher expectations of their employers and their employment conditions, and a sense of entitlement that makes them unembarrassed to stop working if they feel unsafe or if they are hurt. This attitude enables them to ask for cleaner conditions, better safety gear and training, mud rooms, running water and flush toilets — even separate toilets for women on the large job sites.

The payoff for offering these amenities is more articulate, intelligent workers and the expectation that these apprentices and journeymen will work smarter and eventually change the culture of the line worker trade. At the same time, employers will get more professional linemen who appreciate environmental and cultural sensitivities, and who are more comfortable with technology.

By investing in the latest tools and technology and encouraging young apprentices to learn from veteran linemen, utilities can pave the way to a safer and more productive future for all their workers. **TDW**

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