

Winnetka Power Stays Relevant

It is hard to imagine what it would be like if all electric power were suddenly gone. But 100 years ago, there were frequent power interruptions. Of course there were no electric refrigerators, air conditioners, televisions or computers. The supply of candles was put to work and life carried on.

The story of how the power industry evolved to power up a nation can seem like Olympian drama. Yet Winnetka's home-grown utility has its own special chapter.

Having survived the early wave of consolidation that swept up nearly every other municipal power utility, Winnetka's electric plant would face two more battles for survival.

More Power, Mr. Scott!

As electrical appliances filled homes in the booming 1950s, our coal-fired power plant struggled to add capacity to meet demand. Village Council, anticipating millions of dollars of investment in the next few years to expand operations, decided to seek bids for selling the plant.

Local headlines sketched the all-too-human drama that ensued. The Village Council and the Caucus each formed a committee to study the issue. The Caucus conducted a poll on the issue. They all supported the sale. The Caucus agreed to change its long-standing platform that had entrenched municipal ownership of its utilities.

Then came the uproar. Opponents organized. Hundreds of citizens assembled for panel discussions. Independent candidates ran against the Caucus slate. When they lost, suit was brought contesting the results. In the end, the issue was put to a public referendum where it was summarily defeated.

With the issue settled politically, the plant spent millions of dollars to expand its capacity. But what villagers had not realized was that inventions such as the air conditioner would cause demand to skyrocket. As a small operator, Winnetka saw its profitability shrink with higher fuel and labor costs. Meanwhile, ComEd built a nuclear power plant near Joliet.

Costs and Regulations

In the 1970s it became clear that Winnetka's electric utility would need to rethink its sources of power. The first step came in 1971 when it tied-in with ComEd, enabling the purchase of power. But rates for ComEd power were extremely expensive and demand pushed Winnetka to purchase up to 80% of its total demand.

Beginning in the 1960s and coming to a boil in the 1970s, other pressures threatened the utility. New environmental regulations placed expensive requirements for pollution testing and control devices, and forced utilities to switch fuel sources. Fuel costs and supply availability meant that small utilities such as Winnetka's were paying through the nose.

Then Winnetka's visionary utility superintendent, Gary Zimmerman, started thinking big. He had dreams of building a hydroelectric power plant on the Mississippi River to supply Winnetka's power. So he left Winnetka to found the Illinois Municipal Electric Agency (IMEA), a consortium of municipal utilities. The IMEA combines the purchasing power of its members to negotiate better rates and to buy into new power generating facilities, including power plants and even a wind farm.

Joining Forces

Winnetka has been a member of IMEA since 1991. As part of its contract, it purchases all its power through the agency. But Winnetka's power plant continues to operate, providing the IMEA system with capacity to handle peak loads and quick-start operation in times of emergency. For this, the village utility receives an annual credit of \$1.5 million toward its power purchases.

With a triple-redundant power supply – IMEA, ComEd and the Winnetka power plant – Winnetka's residents and businesses can be confident of quick recovery in the event of a major outage. And with its IMEA contract, they can be assured of fair rates.

Today Winnetka's electric plant is relevant in the power industry as one of a variety of smaller producers who efficiently provide peak load capacity and emergency generation availability. And it is relevant as part of Winnetka's village services, enabling the village to efficiently staff the combined operations of the water and electric plant, and providing us the Winnetka-first type of customer service we take for granted.



Winnetka linemen have kept the village powered up for 115 years. PHOTO COURTESY WINNETKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.