

Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives
serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

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Guest Column



Empty nests still use kilowatt-hours

By Travis Kuhstos, *Valley REC Energy Specialist*

THE SNOWBIRDS are returning. Not bluebirds and robins, but co-op members who went south for the winter. Though they left Pennsylvania's ice and snow behind, some may have been surprised at the amount of electricity their empty nest used. Co-op members with other often-vacant properties, like hunting cabins or seasonal residences, can be surprised at how much electricity is used in their absence, too.

It's not uncommon for our offices to get calls from members who think their bill for a vacant property is high. Sometimes a failing piece of electrical equipment is to blame, and the bill really is higher than what should be expected.


In most cases, what's happened is that property owners didn't realize just how much energy a home or cabin uses when they migrate south or close the property for the winter. Any panel box fuse left in the "on" position can lead to consumption. Appliances with digital displays — such as microwaves, entertainment centers and cordless phone chargers — are still using energy.

Many members with vacant properties will leave the heat on but lower the thermostat. Cutting back to 50 degrees is a good way to conserve. However, when overnight temperatures drop to the teens, that system still has a lot of work to do. An absent owner may not realize how many times the heat kicks on.

If you think your use for a seasonal or vacant home is higher than it should be, the first step is a visual inspection. Look around for everything that is "on" and think about how much energy it really uses.

Did you know you can quickly calculate the use, and cost, of an appliance? Let's use a digital alarm clock radio as an example and say it uses three watts. Plugged in for 30 days, it used 2,160 watt-hours (720 hours in a month times three watts). That's 2.16 kilowatt-hours (kWh). Multiplying by our kWh rate of \$.0995 amounts to \$2.15 for the month. To help you determine how much electricity appliances and lighting might use in a month, we offer an energy calculator on our website. Just go to valleyrec.com and click on the "Save Energy" tab.

Members with a high bill complaint often ask if a particular bill was rounded. Valley REC does not estimate bills. In fact, our digital metering infrastructure enables members to keep tabs on their consumption through our SmartHub platform. To access SmartHub, go to valleyrec.com and click on the "Billing Info" dropdown menu.

If you're a snowbird or have a seasonal property, and your use seems to be soaring, take a few minutes to determine what appliances are using energy even when you're not using them. It's a good first step to keep energy efficiency from flying the coop. 

Local *Penn Lines* columnists took winding roads to PREA magazine's pages

Valley REC is proud to claim two of *Penn Lines* magazine's columnists as its own co-op members. Yvonne Butts-Mitchell, a VREC member in Fort Loudon, Franklin County, has penned her bi-monthly "News from the Path Valley Hotel" column since 2016. John Kasun, of Duncansville, Blair County, joined the *Penn Lines* team in February as the new "Punch Lines" columnist, succeeding the illustrious Earl Pitts upon his retirement. Both writers have an interesting tale about how they arrived in your copy of the Pennsylvania Rural Electric Association's statewide publication.

Path Valley Hotel correspondent shares the laughs and loves of everyday connections

RURAL VIEWS: *Penn Lines* columnist and freelance writer Yvonne Butts-Mitchell displays some of her journals over lunch with the author at the Milky Way restaurant in Fort Loudon.



PHOTO BY DOUG ROLES

By Doug Roles

Vice President of Member Services
Penn Lines columnist Yvonne

Butts-Mitchell began her communications career at age 12. She wanted a local newspaper to cover her saddle club's show, so she wrote a press release. While the *Mercersburg Journal* (Franklin County) was the target of the release, some of the ink must have seeped into her veins.

After graduating from James Buchanan High School, Mercersburg, she majored in journalism — in the public relations track, at Shippensburg University — and set out on a career as a corporate communicator. Butts-Mitchell spent 31 years in the telecommunications industry, working "for six gyrations of the same entity."

She considers her post-corporate career as that of a wordsmith and tale weaver, someone who helps others tell

their stories.

"This is my best gig," she says. "How many people get to say, 'I got to do what I wanted.'"

A Saint Thomas native who calls Fort Loudon home, Butts-Mitchell has been a VREC member since 1980. She feels a kinship with the mission of electric co-ops because her father worked as a telecommunications construction supervisor and her phone company career played out in a service area that overlaps Valley's territory.

While still in college, Butts-Mitchell started out as an operator with United Telephone Company of PA. A budding journalist, she took every opportunity to work in the public relations aspects of United, taking on local writing assignments to support the company's magazine. Known locally as "the lady who works for the phone company," she be-

came the face of United and its successors for a seven-county service area in south-central Pennsylvania. She handled media relations, worked as a lobbyist and engaged with dozens of local organizations. What she enjoyed most was serving on various community boards and meeting people through chambers of commerce, economic development corporations, United Way boards and arts councils.

Butts-Mitchell had a great career by many metrics, but in June 2009 she received word her job with CenturyLink would end that December due to a merger. The looming sooner-than-expected retirement threatened to erase a big part of her identity. All that time on the job had colored in much of her persona. So, she colored her hair, purple, to express the impending transition.

She'd already decided another traditional full-time job was not in the cards. So, she created a blog and birthed the pen name, Mitchell Kyd (K-y-d represents the first names of herself, her children and husband). She became active in local art and writing groups and participated in seminars. She started Mitchell Kyd Freelance Writing, focusing on biographical writing as well as providing professional writing solutions for businesses. And she began chronicling her adventures in renovating the family cabin, a property vacant for 17 years which she termed "*The Path Valley Hotel*."

Butts-Mitchell says the single most important project she took on during this time was helping a former Mercersburg high school teacher write a book about his World War II experiences. The tome on his quiet war with post-traumatic stress disorder was released in time for his 90th birthday.

"He's still active and selling books," Butts-Mitchell says. "He just turned 95."

Butts-Mitchell has published in multiple editions of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series and is co-author of *Freeing Godiva, A Women's Journey to Self-Empowerment*. She has done freelance work for regional magazines and been a local newspaper columnist. She approached

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Archery adventure led mechanical designer to his fourth career, as outdoor writer and humor columnist

By Doug Roles

Vice President of Member Services

IN THE mid-1960s, John Kasun was a young man seemingly on a career glide-path. He'd graduated from Penn State University with a degree in mechanical engineering, married his high school girlfriend, finished an unplanned stint in the U.S. Army, and landed a job close to home with a company that designed and manufactured paper-handling equipment.

Life, however, wouldn't allow the next several decades to slip by quietly. Opportunities would intersect with Kasun's curiosity and drive and propel him from one challenge to another.

"Sometimes I don't believe my own story," Kasun reflects at the kitchen table of the home he designed when he and his wife, Sandra, settled in Duncansville. "I was always willing to try something new. I never turned away from anything because I didn't like it."

For a humor columnist, Kasun has put some serious effort into multiple overlapping ventures. Many know Kasun as a longtime contributor to the "Straight from the Bowstring" section of the Pennsylvania Game Commission's *Game News* magazine or from his pieces in central Pennsylvania newspapers. Writing is just the latest arrow to be shot from his quiver full of can-do.

Kasun, a 1957 Williamsburg High School graduate, had worked in Williamsport and Waynesboro for two years after graduating from Penn State when he was drafted for three years of active Army service (he was already enlisting as an Army reservist) in 1963 during the Berlin Wall crisis.

Army service began a series of cross-country moves for the couple. They spent most of his enlistment in El Paso, Texas, where he taught an Army electronics course after graduating in the top percentage of the yearlong school. While teaching, Kasun was ordered to a processing station for overseas deployment but he didn't have a full year remaining on his enlistment and was not shipped out. In a winding series of events, he landed back in the same classroom. After having packed and moved, he ended up re-rent-



COURTESY PHOTO

PUNCH LINES: Valley member and *Penn Lines* columnist John Kasun poses with a Pennsylvania archery trophy. His experience with bow hunting dates back to the late 1950s.

ing the same El Paso house.

Back home, Kasun went to work for F. L. Smithe Machine Co., designing machinery that cut and folded envelopes, and he and his wife got back into archery hunting Pennsylvania whitetails. John had killed his first buck with a bow in 1956 at age 16. The Kasuns also got into competitive shooting.

In 1969, bow shops were not plentiful. Kasun and his wife, former state and national shooting champions, drove to a Finger Lakes bow manufacturer to buy two bows. But the shop owner did something that would make the Kasuns' life a lot busier; he made Kasun an offer on eight bows.

"We went up to buy two bows and came back with a dealership," Kasun says. "We hit that exactly at the right time."

The Kasuns turned their basement into an archery shop. The compound bow was about to be made legal for hunting in Pennsylvania and Kasun, with his passion for shooting and his background in mechanical design, quickly became the resident technical expert.

The Kasuns' grand opening saw one customer. Kasun began to worry. He had inventory and the bank note to go with it. But timing was again in his favor; income tax return time was on the horizon and

people were eager to buy.

"One day my cellar filled up with people and my business exploded," he recalls. "We sold quality archery equipment, and our customers could get help from a knowledgeable source. I was sitting on a gold mine, selling the first compound bows. To set our shop apart, I started to customize bows for our customers. Nobody was doing that."

The shop was open evenings and Saturdays. Kasun worked on his lunch hours, too. The couple eventually employed six people and stocked 100 bows and accessories. They operated the shop 13 years before selling the business.

While growing the business, Kasun decided to promote his shop by renting a booth at a sportsman's show in Altoona's Jaffa Shrine. The show featured subject matter experts as speakers. He worked out a trade. He would be a seminar speaker in return for a free booth. Once again, his timing was perfect, because the venue's timing was off. A scheduling snafu had overlapped presenters and backed up the program. Kasun offered to lend a hand with getting the lineup sorted out. He got the schedule back on track so deftly that he was asked to take over that aspect of the annual show. His 20-year career speak-
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Path Valley

Penn Lines because she thought her material might be a good fit for Pennsylvania Rural Electric Association's magazine.

Butts-Mitchell believes things happen "as they're supposed to." She says her earlier-than-planned departure from the corporate world gave her more time with her husband, Doug Mitchell, and her father, Jim Butts, before they passed on.

"I don't plan anything out; planning is when you run into trouble," she offers. "I'm a big proponent of 'Things don't happen to us; they happen for us.'"

Followers of Butts-Mitchell's work know she puts a lot of wit into her writing. She terms her style "sassy and fresh." It's a mash equal parts Erma Bombeck, Ya-Ya Sisterhood and Sweet Potato Queens, a

blend of insight, irreverence and sauciness. But the COVID-19 pandemic caused her to question if readers would continue to be receptive to her brand of humor.

"The single most difficult thing I've had to do was this past year of *Penn Lines* columns," Butts-Mitchell says. "I just didn't feel I could be flip."

Butts-Mitchell's next big goal is to publish a collection of her best works under the title *News from the Path Valley Hotel*. Butts-Mitchell enjoys hearing from those who have found a touchpoint in one of her columns. *Path Valley* followers know Kyd has a knack for noticing unspoken connections — such as the empowerment common to Jeep drivers or the storage struggles shared by homeowners.

Butts-Mitchell gets a variety of feedback from fans, including a *Penn Lines* reader who sent her information on spaying and neutering after seeing her column about the Path Valley Hotel spring tradition of raising stray kittens — in the bathtub. For all her national exposure, Butts-Mitchell found it a big compliment recently when a local church asked permission to reprint one of her writings in their bulletin.

True to form, Butts-Mitchell says she doesn't set a specific time for writing. She still meets deadlines, but she trusts that material will come to her from living life as it happens.

"Everything I write is based on real-life experiences," she says. "I just kind of allow it." 🌞

Archery

ing and booking speakers was born.

His archery shop led to another success. One of his customers admired his operation and how he interacted with his employees and customers. The man handled hiring for Conrail and asked Kasun to oversee a program in which the railroad would utilize a \$20 million federal grant to make upgrades. Kasun worked 17 years for Conrail, spending the last four as one of 17 employees chosen companywide to launch a total quality management program across the company for all 26,000 employees.

Kasun had been doing more speaking engagements about the technical aspects of archery equipment. He garnered national exposure when a *Field & Stream* writer approached him for a feature on his bowhunting techniques and gear. As the subject matter expert, though, Kasun had to help edit the piece. The author would win an award for the nine-page spread, but Kasun's involvement led to his interest in writing and his joining the Pennsylvania Outdoor Writers Association and Outdoors Writers Association of America.

Kasun retired from his full-time job with Conrail in 1996 and became the business editor of *Arrow Trade Magazine*, a publication for which he had been a contributor. He remained in that position until 2019, when the magazine was sold.

He also became a regular contributor

to *Game News* in 1996 after an earlier conversation with esteemed former editor Bob Bell who requested Kasun do an article for the magazine. (Bell passed away in February 2019). Sometime after Kasun's first feature appeared in the *Game News*, he found himself seated next to news ed-



OFTEN FEATURED: Sandra Kasun is a former state and national shooting champion. Her exploits afield are often featured in husband John's outdoor writings.

itor Bob Mitchell at a writer's conference. Kasun had hoped to broach the subject of submitting additional material, but before he got the chance, Mitchell turned to him and made the offer for Kasun to be a regular contributor.

In 2005, Kasun began contributing to a Centre County-based seniors magazine. He was submitting serious-minded, retirement-oriented material, but one month he says he "ran dry of ideas." The big event on the home front had been his decision to rearrange the kitchen cabinets for better efficiency, while his wife was

recuperating from an operation and was none the wiser. Kasun says it's hard to believe a smart man could make a move so dangerous to marital harmony. But it worked for column fodder.

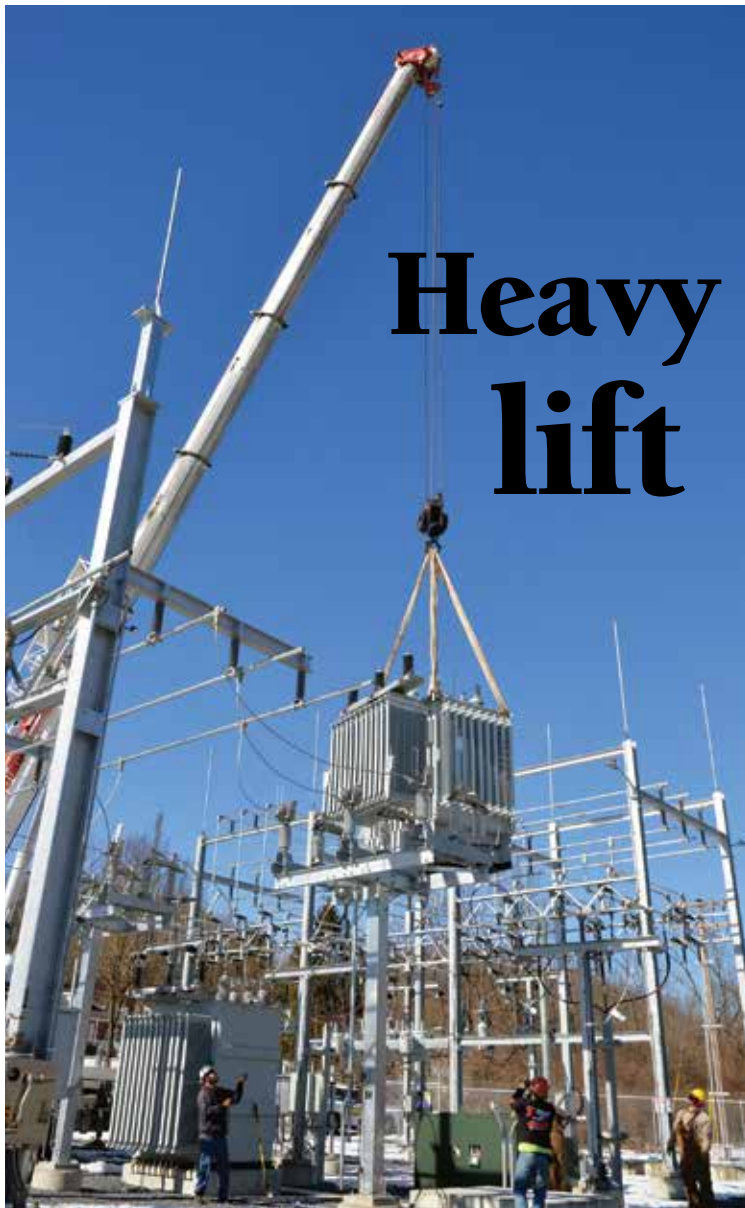
"The next month, I went back to the serious stuff and the magazine was flooded with demands for more funny stuff," Kasun explains. "My humor column was born and has received extensive exposure in various publications for well over 15 years."

Kasun contacted the Pennsylvania Rural Electric Association when he saw the retirement story about Gary Burbank and his Earl Pitts alias. He thought his material might be a good fit. Kasun's column first appeared in *Penn Lines* in February.

"I saw it as an opportunity and a challenge," Kasun explains. "They were gracious enough to give me an opportunity. I'm certainly a different person than Earl Pitts. I can't be him and he can't be me."

Kasun says writers must keep their personalities in their pieces and develop a flavor. He admits that one of his first *Game News* articles he edited into "uncooked oatmeal." He believes his humorous material is as important as anything else he's done.

"You can use humor to diffuse a tense situation, and you can use humor to get someone's attention," Kasun says. "To me, life is truly funny. Some people take it way too seriously." 🌞



Heavy lift



A Greiner Industries crane crew lowers a spare transformer back into Valley REC's new Path Valley Substation Feb. 24, 2021. The unit had been removed for repairs due to a manufacturer's defect. The substation in Franklin County serves members in the Fort Loudon and Cowans Gap areas. Photos by Doug Roles



Lineworker Appreciation Day - April 12, 2021

To our heroes in hard hats, thank you for keeping the lights on.



2021 Annual Meeting

Drive-thru event at the Huntingdon County Fairgrounds

4-7 p.m., Friday, April 9

Elections - Districts 2, 4 & 6

Due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings, Valley REC's 2021 annual meeting will follow a drive-thru format.

Members can arrive at the fairgrounds anytime from 4-7 p.m. Participants will receive a ballot, an annual report and a \$25 bill credit.