

A Lasting Legacy—SME Kids Follow in Their Fathers' Footsteps

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What is in a job? Why do we work? For many, it is an opportunity to provide a better life for a family. In some cases it can also be a way to be part of something more.

The rural electric program has always been about helping families and providing opportunities. Delivering service to the farms and small towns in the 1930s that still did not have electricity was also about advancement. The visionary leaders who established South Mississippi Electric in the 1940s and then brought it to life in the 1960s knew they were creating something of value. The hundreds of individuals who built new transmission lines through the south Mississippi forests and brought brand new plants on line were doing more than working each day—they were ensuring a stable supply of electricity for communities and enhancing the lives of families throughout the area.

Many of the workers who devoted their skills and themselves to helping SME grow over the years have come and gone. In many cases, however, their memories and contributions are still felt and, in several cases, there is a direct link between the past and the present: nearly a dozen second- or third-generation relatives of former employees work for South Mississippi Electric today.

As a child, Shane Morrow, system operator, was intrigued by the knobs and buttons of the control room at Plant Moselle where he often visited his grandfather, Howard Hensarling. Howard, who was hired in 1969 as a plant operator, was later promoted to plant superintendent and served in that role until his retirement in 1992. Just one year after that, as things would work out, Shane was hired as an operator at Plant Moselle.

“I was constantly impressed with what my grandfather was in charge of,” said Shane. “And I always wondered how it worked. After all that time, I finally found out. It is great to reflect on the perspective I had as a child and the responsibility I have as an employee.”

“Working in the same control room as my grandfather was very neat. I truly feel like I am following in his footsteps, and that makes me very proud. We talk often and he is always interested in how things are going here. The biggest difference is probably the technology. What he did manually, I can do with the click of a mouse.”

Mike Hammett, lead relay tech, is also following in footsteps by working for SME. Mike’s father, Emry H. (Em) Hammett, was hired as a shift supervisor in 1969 as a member of the initial staffing at the Moselle facility. He became plant superintendent of the Moselle Station in 1974 and maintained that position until his untimely death in 1983.

“When my dad began working as an operator, there were fewer than 50 employees,” Mike said. “There was always some type of family event going on and I was always there. I felt like I knew just as much, if not more about the plant than many of the employees.”

“My dad was very dedicated to the Association and made hard work a priority in our home. I remember hoping that the lights never went out because I knew that if they did, Dad would have to leave. Now I understand the importance of what he did, and I am proud to be doing the same.”

Greg Chancellor, senior project manager, also had a greater sense of South Mississippi Electric, than most new hires when he came on board in 2006. His father, Freddie Chancellor, was hired at Plant Moselle in 1970.

“I remember when I was nine, I rode with my dad to turn in his application at the plant,” said Chancellor. “The plant was still under construction, and I remember seeing the cranes and other construction equipment. I also visited my dad at the plant once when I was fifteen, and what I saw really impressed me. I grew to develop a deep appreciation for the hardware and machinery and eventually earned a degree in mechanical engineering.”

Freddie was hired as an operator and worked his way through the ranks to a shift supervisor. He retired in 1996 at the age of 62.

“The greatest part of following in my father’s footsteps was seeing how well respected he was during his time here. Several current employees have told me that they learned a great deal from working with my dad. Having watched the plant grow from the ground up, he certainly knew every aspect of what the facility could do.”

Jody Dickinson, vehicle serviceman, is the son of Ed Dickinson, also one of the first employees at Plant Moselle. Ed worked in the warehouse as the plant clerk and was later moved to Plant Morrow in a similar capacity when that facility was being constructed.

“I remember seeing photos of the plants as they were being built,” said Jody. “To remember what it was like and to see what it has become now is incredible. Dad did everything with a pencil and paper; there was no modern machinery.”

Like Mike Hammett, Jody attended numerous employee functions, including watching his father participate on the bowling team.

“I knew all of the guys’ nicknames, and it felt like they were all just a part of the family. The most exciting memories I have are when dad would bring a company car home and hearing the commercials that would say that we were a ‘light in the forest.’ ”

Larry Griffin, land manager, and his father-in-law, Bill Parker, both worked as contractors for SME in the early 1970s. Bill Parker became a full-time employee in 1975 and later became the director of land. He passed away in 1990.

“My father-in-law was the second person to oversee the land department and I am the third,” said Larry. “Having the opportunity to work alongside him and now after him has been an honor. Two people cannot do this job the same way, but I try to carry on his philosophies. He taught me that regardless of the transaction, always leave the landowner smiling. It is important to build such a relationship with the people we work with so that you can go back six months later and have a cup of coffee with them.

“Bill loved the co-op and taught me to have the same feelings. There is a difference in the attitude of the Association – we’re a family.”