

MANY CHANGES SEEN OVER 30 YEARS

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April 11, 1977 was one of those days when a decision was made that would have a continuing impact on the future of South Mississippi Electric. With Plant Morrow under construction and moving toward commercial operation status within a year, twenty employees were hired that day as junior operators. Today, five of those 20 still faithfully serve the Association in various positions: Norman Broom, operations supervisor; Trevor Cameron, coal and utility supervisor; and shift supervisors Joe Fortenberry, Richard King, and Larry Willis.

These five, plus 42 others throughout the Association, have been employed for 30 or more years, combining for 1,560 years of service to SME.

Broom credits the increasing knowledge and experience of his fellow employees with much of the change that has occurred during his 34-year tenure. "When we all first came here, we had very little knowledge and experience," said Broom. "We did not always know the best way to avoid or minimize the problems we encountered. Now, years of experience have helped us determine ways to prevent problems or deal with them the best way possible. For instance, in the early days, when it rained, no one really knew how to operate the units with wet coal. Now we know how to handle wet coal properly.

"I believe our biggest asset at Plant Morrow is the knowledge and experience of employees in all of the departments. The majority of our current staff came onboard looking for a career, not just a job. This way of thinking has made everyone look more toward the success and the future of the Association, rather than just a means of earning a paycheck. Everyone takes pride in their work and everything they do."

Technology has also played a powerful role in changing operations over the last three decades. "In 1996, we implemented a new Digital Control System (DCS), replacing the former analog operation system that was installed when the plant was constructed," said Broom. "DCS is a faster, more efficient way of accomplishing the same tasks we performed before, although we do occasionally revert back to manual operations if necessary. Now, however, there is an automatic mode for almost any situation."

"When I first started, we employed only a handful of engineers," said Jeff Ladner, substation maintenance supervisor, who joined SME as an electronics trainee in February 1979. "They designed the construction projects by hand, made the prints, gave the prints directly to us, and we returned them directly back to them. Now, everything is done over the computer. That first computer we had seemed like it was the size of the whole Field Operations Center. The capabilities were amazing to us, but it was only a matter of time before we were hauling it off to make way for newer, smaller computers."

When Robin Harris, engineering assistant, began work in May 1979 as a drafter, plan and profile sheets, substation drawings and wiring diagrams were drawn by hand on paper with a pen and ink, taking hours to complete. Over the years, the department revolutionized the process with computers, plotters, and AutoCAD, enabling drawings to be completed in a fraction of the time and stored for future reference.

"It was a big deal when we got our first plotter," said Harris. "We were amazed at how it worked and the speed at which it worked. Computers also allowed us to move from manually putting diagrams on the map board, one piece at a time with symbols and lines, to completing or

changing the whole diagram from our desktop. Now, we have been drawing on computers for 25 years or more.”

Boby Spiers, meter and substation inspection supervisor, remembers the days when metering crews read every meter by hand on the first of every month, manually changing out large cassette tapes that recorded load data. “Rain, sleet, or snow, holidays or not, we read the meters on the first of the month,” said Spiers. “In the early 1990s, first generation electronic meters were installed, which were connected to cell phones or land lines, enabling the meters to be read remotely by computer. We were happy—no more meter runs on the first.

“We are now in the process of installing second generation electronic meters with Smart Grid Technology throughout the entire system. We are still using cell phones at most locations, but plan to have most all converted to microwave communications in the near future.”

Kenny Clinton, operations supervisor at Plant Moselle, began as a laborer at the plant in 1973 before quickly moving into the operations department. At the time, Moselle operated three steam units, producing a total of 177 MW, in addition to the units at Paulding and Benndale.

Clinton agrees with the notion that technology has fueled many changes at the Association since the early days. “We are now in the information age,” said Clinton. “We depend on emails for communication, and we stay in constant and immediate contact through phones and computers. In the past decade we have also advanced the way we do things operationally, converting from an old bench board switch system to the new Digital Control System.”

Plant Moselle converted to DCS in 2002, requiring the control room operators to learn new methods of performing the tasks they had been doing for 32 years. “Where we used to flip switches or start pumps manually, we now click through a series of functions on a computer screen to do the same job,” said Clinton. “The mechanisms automatically set by DCS also provide greater control of the system.”

“Along with the change in technology are new regulations for all of our work,” said Ladner. “We used to have the freedom to be on a jobsite, see something that needed to be done, call in and get permission to do the work. Now, there are numerous steps and safeguards required to complete the same process.

“I also remember being a young kid—six months on the job—when Hurricane Frederick was heading to the Gulf Coast. I had worked the previous summer as a co-op student from Pearl River Junior College, but still did not know much. Vernon Bowling sent me to man the Benndale combustion unit the day before Frederick hit and, over the radio, walked me through the steps to start it up. That was the longest night of my life, but it is probably not something that would ever be done today by someone so young and inexperienced.”

Spiers' first experience on SME's newly formed meter crew occurred when the Association made an agreement with Mississippi Power and Light (now Entergy Mississippi) to start serving Members in the off-system area. “We learned on the run,” said Spiers. “When we took over the meters at the substations that Entergy previously served, everything had to be rewired and new equipment installed. We had an old load box with a meter standard (a device to test meters), some books, and were told to figure it out. Those were some wild times—it was hard enough just trying to find a substation in the middle of a cotton field 150 miles from home, much less wiring equipment we were not familiar with.”

Eddie Hill, electronics supervisor, has witnessed the same kind of growth within his division since he began as an electronics technician in 1974. "When I came on board, all of the metering, substation, electronics, and communications work was being performed by less than ten employees," said Hill. "They were primarily Air Force retirees with a lot of electronics knowledge, which they would ultimately pass along. Within a few years, four of us current employees (Ladner, Bobby Spiers, Randy Hutto, and Hill) were hired to expand the group and separate into our different divisions. Now, due to the expansion of the system and growth in our work load, I have a total of eleven guys in just the communications division."

Randy Lee, mechanic I at Plant Moselle, began work as a helper at Plant Morrow in 1980. Since transferring to Moselle in 1993, the Association has added Silver Creek, Sylvarena, and Moselle's Units 4 and 5, in addition to the plant's current repower project. "SMEPA is a tremendously bigger organization than it was when I started," said Lee. "We have added new generation and a lot more employees. Equipment and inventory that used to be stored here is now housed at the Field Operations Center. The good thing is that even though everything has grown, it seems like we have more and more opportunities to see and get to know the employees from other locations."

Another tremendous growth noted by Lee and Broom is the enhanced safety program at SME. "We have always been safety-oriented at SMEPA," said Broom. "Now, we just have more of an emphasis on safety than ever before. Every employee, no matter what the position, has bought into our safety program, making it their first priority."

"The safety program has come a long way in making safety a top priority for everyone," said Lee. "Our employees have always done what they need to do to get the job done; now, safety is first and foremost in that process."

One thing that has remained the same for these employees over the years is the reason for their service and dedication to the Association. "SMEPA to me was a promise of a secure job that would allow me to stay at home with my family," said Broom. "It also provided me with an opportunity for advancement and good benefits. Now that I am nearing retirement, I am realizing the true value of our retirement benefits. I also appreciate the friends I have made here and the good people I have the opportunity to work with. This is one of the best jobs in the area. Overall, the best way to describe why I have chosen to spend my career here is security."

"I never imagined that I would be here for 32 years," said Harris. "It has been a blessing, with all of the benefits and being able to work in a job I like. The people I work with, the benefits and being treated like family are why I have stayed here for all of these years."

"Thirty years have gone by fast," said Lee. "I guess I got so busy with my family and making a living that the time flew by. When I first started, I remember seeing the retirement date 2019 and thinking how far off that was. Now, that date is just right down the road."