

Recognizing Long-Time Professionals



Have you ever wondered why you became involved with the work of your water district or city council or any other community activity?

If the question isn't new to you, and more than likely it isn't, then surely the answer must lie in your feeling of obligation to promote the general welfare of your community. It certainly cannot be the compensation you have received!

The two paragraphs above are how I started an article in the July 1987 issue of this magazine. The title of the article was "Be a professional!" I will restate some of the article here as it still seems relevant.

I referred to avoiding the trap that Louisa May Alcott described of her father, Bronson, and the men of Fruitlands, a short-lived communal experiment in Massachusetts. Alcott remembered the men of the community as "so busy discussing and defining the great duties that they forgot to perform the small ones".

And so it is. In your rural water district or city, the board or council members and staff should learn about the utility. Board and council members should take an active interest in the affairs of the utility. It is doing the little things that allows larger goals to be met. It's making sure the utility is run like a business. It means addressing tough issues such as rate adjustments. It means handling all the issues with consistency even when neighbors and friends, or even worse, relatives are sure to disagree with your proposals. Good decision-makers don't duck the issues.

I have attended many RWD board meetings and council meetings. In many cases, the utility department representatives sit on the sideline and aren't given much opportunity to report to the governing body. It doesn't take a lot of effort to summarize the monthly operations and the governing bodies should want and expect to receive that, especially in the smaller systems. Good administration requires good information. For utility managers, administrators or operators, that means doing homework before the public meeting to supplement the discussions concerning options that decision-makers may be considering.

Communication is also critical. When a new mayor or council member or RWD board member is elected, these folks should try to become familiar with the utilities they have control of. Maybe visit the water plant or learn where the wells are located for starters.

Obligations – and critics

Obligation is the word that perhaps best describes the reciprocation and bonds which are formed among community members and their acknowledgment of the greater good for the community as a whole. It should not be "What's in it for me or my buddies?" Every community has its critics. There are two types – those who offer constructive ideas and, those who never investigate their sources for accuracy but think they have the answers. Opposite of the men of Fruitlands, this latter group is always debating the small details – and they then entirely miss the bigger pictures.

We should all try to be "professional". The modern-day professional is someone who can be objective about other people's problems because he or she does not become involved personally. Instead, a professional uses specialized knowledge to make the interests of those served paramount. Professionals do not take advantage of others' lack of information. An ethic of service reassures those you serve that you as a professional will remain objective in trying to effectively meet the needs of the community. Just by remaining objective, professionals automatically rise above any critics and the small-town politics. No one should cede their responsibilities to someone else. Competence and objectivity, combined with the ethic of service, are the basis for the exercise of responsibilities.

Honoring real professionals

It was an absolute pleasure to have KRWA give recognition at the 2022 conference to people who have been dedicated to their water systems for decades. Not just 20 or 30 years, but 50 plus years.

Leo Wiederholt, the operator at Franklin RWD 3, keeps that small water system in shape. Leo is 89 years old. He started in 1965 when "they needed a secretary to do the paperwork," he said. He assumed that role in the late 1990s when he retired from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency. He is no longer on the board but remains the district's sole certified operator.

"I didn't have a good excuse to run and hide," he said. "I took the test to be a certified operator, and I don't know how I passed because I really didn't study for it, but I think most of the answers were common sense."

Leo doesn't charge the district for his time; his brother Frank, who is a district board member, helps him check the system's 55 meters.

“If you have some good help, try to keep them around, Part-time workers can often be some of the best workers because of their ability to juggle multiple jobs at once, he said. “If you take on too many jobs, sometimes you can’t do them all justice,” he said. “But usually having several jobs keeps you hopping, keeps you alert, and keeps you out of mischief.”

“It needs to be done, and I can do it,” Leo says.

He has watched the world change. When he started with the USDA, he measured fields using averages to figure out the area used for terraces. Now, he said, photo maps of fields make that an easy task.

“I got to see that all evolve, and it was pretty interesting,” he said.

His advice to rural water systems?

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Alfred and Beverly Otter

KRWA also applauded the work of Alfred and Beverly Otter who have been with Norton County RWD No. 1 since 1965. This small system serves the town of New Almelo which is located northeast of Norton. Alfred has been operator for the district all those years and his wife Beverly has been bookkeeper. They have volunteered all their work for the district over the decades.

Small systems have their challenges and Norton RWD 1 is no exception. For example, during the winter of 1973, the standpipe froze solid three different times. An oil well company steamed it to thaw it open. The district installed a circulating pump and the outside was sprayed with foam insulation. However, woodpeckers found the insulation to be great nesting material. The foam was repaired and the standpipe was wrapped with hail screen. Because the moisture had gotten behind the foam the standpipe was rusting. In 1999, the screen was removed and the foam was sandblasted off and the tank was repaired.

In the fall of 2018, with the help of a Grant from Norton County Foundation, a Kohler standby generator was installed at the pump house. There were two times the customers

survived on the 14,000 gallons of water in the tank for a week and the second time for six days because of an ice storm and a blizzard that downed power poles.

\$5 a month!

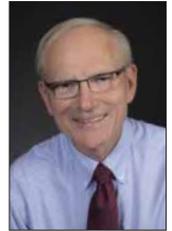
A life-long resident of Buffalo, Kan., Jerry Robinson was also recognized by KRWA for his decades of service to the city. Robinson was first elected to the Buffalo city council in 1993. He became mayor in 2000 and since then has been involved in many water and wastewater projects from start to finish for the city.

Robinson works daily for the city, and since the mayor cannot be their own boss or pay themselves, Robinson works for the mayor's pay of \$5.00 per meeting! Council meetings are held once per month.

In his spare time, Robinson likes working in his garden. Robinson is always willing to help people and he volunteers any remaining his time to help anyone in the community who needs a hand.

Leo Wiederholt, Alfred and Beverly Otter, and Jerry Robinson exemplify what it means to be “real” professionals.

Elmer Ronnebaum is KRWA General Manager; he has been employed by KRWA since 1983. He served seven years on the KRWA board of directors prior to that. He also helped develop a large RWD and served for fourteen years on a water district board of directors.





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