

Computer Corner

New Technology Dream Turned Costly Nightmare – The Rest Of The Story

In the last issue of *The Kansas Lifeline*, we told of a saga experienced by one Kansas rural water district. The article began, “Once upon a time, there was a progressive water district that, just as water boards should do, was always looking for the best and most cost-effective ways to provide quality service”. The article detailed the RWD’s experience attempting to upgrade from driving a truck around the countryside for radio read meters to, what sounded like a dream, being able to simply download customers’ new readings each month from the cloud. The district would be dealing with two companies to accomplish this: 1) a meter distributor that had been around for many years (Company A); and, 2) a data collection company the distributor partnered with for this endeavor (Company B).

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The installations were not completed on schedule, but Larry, Moe and Curly made it sound like it wouldn't be much longer. But, a few days turned into a week and longer, and

soon, the next billing date was looming.

After being put off repeatedly, the district finally decided it would need to produce minimum bills, for no usage, with the plan that all usage would be caught up in the next cycle, as that time was less than a full month away. But the next billing time came and went. Once again, the district was told the team needed more time. Again, the bills would be terribly delayed. The new electronic system was still not in service. But, there was a glimmer of hope as Larry, Moe and Curly were now ready to hand over the spreadsheet containing the final reads on the old meters which had been pulled. That glimmer faded as the district learned the prior readings were not logged for hundreds of accounts and many that were logged were clearly not accurate. Some were reading far lower than the latest verified reading for the account. Some were wildly high, suggesting ordinary people had managed to use as much or more than a million gallons since the latest verified reading.

The district's maintenance person came to the rescue by sitting outside where the old meters were in piles, painstakingly logging the meter number and the final reading for each meter. Those readings were provided to the district's office manager, who had to go to a backup of the software to learn what accounts matched each meter reading.

Even with all this work to achieve an accurate accounting of the last of the usage of the old meters, this still left patrons with no calculation for any usage since the new meters were installed. If the office had been able to have the readings on the new meters, the district could have had the computer figure the use for the end-of-life meter and pair that with the usage on the new meter to provide the customers with a charge for their total consumption. But, as the usages on the new meters were unknown, all that could be accomplished was to let the computer calculate the final usage of the old and cause the new read to land on zero when the new meter would go into service.

Four months and still not able to bill properly!

The hope was that by the next billing, the system would be operating correctly, and the bills would show the usage for each account from the time each new meter was installed. Since each monthly billing had been delayed from the start of the project, the next scheduled billing came up quickly. Some of the new meters had been installed for nearly four months without billing the patron for any usage on the new meter. That meant many customers would have received exceedingly small bills for the latest billing, but it also meant that once the readings from the new meters could actually be accessed the resulting bill would likely be quite large, representing multiple months of usage.

Finally, after many phone calls, Company B came through with new readings on the new meters. There were accurate readings for hundreds of meters, but for several hundred more, there was NOTHING and no word of encouragement that this was being resolved.

To address this, the office manager supplied the district's maintenance person with a list of all the unread meters. He headed out with clipboard in hand to read each one. Once again the bills were going out exceedingly late and some represented as much as four months of usage.

The following month a large number of electronic transmissions failed again. Rather than excessively holding up billing yet again, taking an extra week to read by hand those meters that failed to electronically report, many of the bills were estimated, AGAIN.

The district's staff hoped that the next billing would improve – and that the goal of simply transferring data from a website to their billing software and printing bills

might finally be realized. These hopes were dashed when the office manager found that she could not access the website and could not reach anyone with Company B by phone. Then she learned that Company A could not contact anyone with Company B either.

Rumors were circulating that Company B had suddenly gone out of business, which proved to be true. The water district met with Company A to discuss the matter and consider options to address this quandary. The only option offered to the board was to return to radio-read but instead of driving around in a truck to pick up signals for all their customers, the plan would be to mount a receiver on the district's water storage tank. If any couldn't be read that way, the drive-around method would need to be used.

Everything, and more, mentioned to this point was contained in our original article on the subject, so, this is where the saga stood as of the March publication in *The Lifeline*.

A lot went on between the time the story was sent in for publication and when the magazine was in the hands of readers. That meeting with Company A was the board's only meeting with them. Company A had entangled the district with Company B, yet it didn't seem the people with that business were assuming the proper responsibility

for this nightmare. The district's governing body could not see suffering through months of problems and going to all this expense just to end up using the same technology they had intended to replace. They asked Company A for other options but instead found, once again, they were being put off.

Meanwhile their office manager was hard at work researching options to present at the numerous special board meetings called to discuss their next move. Plans involving various companies were evaluated. One stood out because the district would be able to leave the new meters in the ground and simply replace the endpoints. This option was attractive both from a financial standpoint and for efficiency. The district also noted how professional and helpful the people at this company appeared to be.

So, the decision was made and the water district began a new "Once upon a time", with a new business. Since we have referred to the other companies as A and B, with B turning out to stand for Bankruptcy and A for Apathetic, let's call this Company C, hoping it can stand for "Can Do",

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or, maybe, since we began this tale with Once Upon a Time, C for Champion, the shining knight coming to the rescue.

Of course, the water district's office manager has not merely behaved as a damsel in distress for all her woes during this epic. She just started in this position in the last year. Still, she hit the ground running, diligently seeking solutions for this situation and learning how to improve office efficiency and provide better service to the district's customers.

She was excited about attending her first Kansas Rural Water Association Conference and says she is already looking forward to 2024. Clearly quite a few people who attended the 2023 conference had read the article as it was a subject that came up in a discussion and during that dialogue another attendee exclaimed, "You were the one from that article, weren't you?"

We are nearing the end of the tale. Nearly all the new endpoints are installed and most are now providing readings for this month's billing. I asked the office manager to send me an update. She wrote:

- These folks are quite the TEAM!!!
- No more calls for help with a reply: "You know we have other customers, right?"

- They have been known to pull someone out of a meeting to answer our questions.
- They check in with us often to ensure we see progress and understand our training.
- The lady who trained me actually started out as an office manager / billing clerk so she has sat in my chair and understands my end of things. We speak the same language. She is a Rock Star!!!
- The very first test run went seamlessly.
- Approximately 75 percent of the meters are reading correctly, and they are verifying what problems may exist with those that are not.
- The team will be working to ensure that by the end of June 2023, the system will be at 100 percent.
- Any replacements needed will be done at no additional expense to the water district.
- We are financing the project and though the paperwork has not gone through yet, Company C has not worried about receiving advance payment.

Obviously, Company C is financially sound. They seem to be on top of things. They show their appreciation for our patience and faith in them. They are also helping another system that went through very much the same thing.

On the day this story is being wrapped up the water district in sending out electronically read bills to their customers at last. This long awaited event was not without it's glitches, even in these last few days, but, with immediate technical assistance, readily and blessedly available to the office manager now, the bills will be in the hands of her customers soon.

The original project started in August 2022 but it appears, at last, we can bring the story to a close with the words... And They All Lived Happily Ever After!

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