

A Look Inside

STORM CHASERS

An early winter storm swept through New Jersey in November 1951, leaving a trail of destruction throughout the northeast part of the state. Trees crashed down, carrying with them distribution and transmission lines; some poles snapped like twigs, while others listed with the heavy gale. By the time the winds, sleet, and snow had ceased, 70,000 of Jersey Central Power and Light Company's 80,000 customers were without electric service.

Within 24 hours, crews from VEPCO were already on their way to help. They worked in freezing rain — the storm was still raging when they arrived — and mountainous sections covered in knee-deep snow. Most of the digging was done in frozen ground and broken rock, and stabilizing trees with guy wires was standard practice. Working day and night with little time for sleeping and eating, the crews finally returned home 12 days after being beckoned by the storm.

That scenario has been repeated countless times since, because the ability to create and deliver electricity hinges on an unpredictable and unavoidable factor: the weather. When Mother Nature doesn't cooperate, utilities rely on their relationships with



Predictions of tropical storms and hurricanes trigger evacuations for most of the population. Not so for Dominion employees, who are ready to serve. Ray Golding Jr., a lineman from Virginia Beach, Virginia, is a veteran of hurricanes, as evidenced by his truck tally. When a catastrophe occurs, crews often work hundreds of miles away from their homes.

fellow utilities to get the power on as soon as possible. Known as *mutual aid*, this reciprocal relationship is unique to the utility industry. It's the golden rule in action. "We are at our best during these events," said Keith Wooldridge, retired vice president-Energy Conservation and Customer Solutions. "You don't see a lot of mistakes; you see a lot of focus."

Dominion's first participation in mutual aid projects is unknown, but given that an obligation to serve the public is a like-minded mission for all utilities, it is probably a practice as old as the

company itself. Formal mutual aid most likely began sometime after 1933, when VEPCO joined the Southeastern Electric Exchange as a founding member. VEPCO participated in the 1950s creation of the first storm planning/mutual aid committee, and was later active in developing the first mutual aid assistance guidelines for the group.

The earliest record of VEPCO answering the call for help is 1938, when eight employees were dispatched to Providence, Rhode Island, to help the Blackstone Valley Gas and Electric Company restore power after a hurricane and tidal waves pounded the coast from Long Island Sound to Vermont. Blackstone Valley's president, David Daly, praised the men for their conduct and efficiency, noting that:

I was immediately impressed by their fine appearance as they looked like a football squad starting out to win. We heard nothing but high praise of their training and ability as linemen, and our operating forces were particularly impressed by the ease in which they tackled our distribution system and dovetailed into our line organization.

VEPCO line crews and their special airplane provided mutual aid to Rhode Island after a 1938 hurricane. The crew could cover 600 miles of ground in two-and-a-half hours by air. "Not one man lost one single day due to his inability to make it, and the men never forgot they were gentlemen," touted a story in a 1938 *Vepevian*.



DOMINION'S FIRST CENTURY

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In March 1962, Richmond was hit with its worst snowstorm in 20 years. Seventy crews from outlying locations in Virginia and North Carolina, as well as independent crews from Richmond and Lynchburg, worked around the clock to restore service in four days. A few days later, a rain and windstorm hit the coast with 80-mile-per-hour winds and some of the highest tides in the area's history. The damage was so severe that President John F. Kennedy declared it a disaster area.

John Thurston, who retired in 1986 as central division supervisor of construction after 40 years with the company, remembered working on a crew sent to help out with a particularly harsh snowstorm in Maryland. "The people were just devastated," he said. "They were burning up the porch furniture and burning up the railings just to keep warm ... because they didn't have electricity. If they could, any way at all, they'd come out and bring cookies and clap and carry on when they saw you coming in. They were glad to see us."

Just as Dominion has sent crews throughout the United States, the company also has been on the receiving end of such aid. While Hurricane Katrina indirectly affected Dominion's employees in the southeastern part of the United States, it was Hurricane Isabel in 2003 that caused the most damage to date to the company's electric service area. Concentrated in Dominion's service area, Isabel toppled hundreds of thousands — if not millions — of trees. Drenching rains flooded hundreds of homes and businesses. More than 1.8 million of Dominion's 2.2 million electric distribution customers were without power — a whopping 81 percent.

Eighteen utilities came to Dominion's aid from two mutual-aid agreement groups — Edison Electric Institute and the Southeastern Electric Exchange — that supply workers to help in a major outage. In the end, Dominion deployed 3,000 contractors and 3,500 mutual-aid workers to rebuild the infrastructure of a 30,000-square-mile service area, almost from the ground up. At the peak of the restoration, 12,000 workers were on the job, and in all, 63,000 hotel rooms were booked. A thousand truckloads brought materials from as far away as Colorado, with Dominion using 10,705 poles, 14,610 crossarms, 1,000 miles of wire, and 7,900 transformers — a supply that would have normally lasted from one to two years. "To have gone through a million man-hours of work, under extreme pressure and in the media spotlight, and to not have a serious accident or fatality, is a tribute to Dominion," said Wooldridge.

After the first week, the company met its goal of restoring service to more than 75 percent of the customers affected. In all, it took around-the-clock manpower for two weeks, with many workers putting in 14- to 16-hour days. "It's not one company in

these storms; it's not one person — it's everybody helping everybody," said Ed Bushee, who retired as Safety department superintendent in 1985 after 36 years with the company. "In Katrina, we had crews all the way from Canada and the far side of the Midwest. When Isabel hit our own system, crews showed up from as far away as Oklahoma Gas & Electric, Hydro-Québec, and Florida Power & Light. The same people that you worked for, in turn, show up and are here working for you. Everybody does their share." ■

No one appreciates a utility worker more than a customer who has been without power for an extended length of time. Signs, homemade cookies, hot chocolate, sandwiches, handshakes, and hugs are a few of the ways customers say "thank you."



On April 26, 1937, waters of the Rappahannock River reached the highest stage ever recorded, cresting at 38.21 feet above the mean sea level at Embrey Power Station in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The surging waters carried away almost everything in their path, including three sections of the Free Bridge connecting Fredericksburg with Stafford and King George Counties. Thanks to quick-thinking workers who kept the station functioning, service was interrupted for only five hours.



POWERING RELATIONSHIPS

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Dominion's First Century: A Legacy of Service

A history-within-a-history is just the ticket for some topics.

So many of the 100+ interviewees for Dominion's book and podcasts told stories about mutual aid—the tradition of utility companies from different regions assisting each other in times of disaster—that we spotlighted the subject in a "Storm Chasers" spread.

Author Heidi King uncovered the company's first recorded act of mutual aid. In 1938, eight workers flew from Virginia to Rhode Island to help restore electrical power after a hurricane. A photo scanned from the employee newsletter depicts the use of the airplane, astonishing at the time. Heidi's research yielded a priceless quote, too: "The men never forgot they were gentlemen."

The spread also covers storms as recent as Hurricanes Isabel and Katrina.



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