

SOUTHEAST ELECTRIC Cooperative



PO BOX 369, EKALAKA, MT 59324 • PH 406-775-8762 • WWW.SEECOOP.COM

290 YEARS AND COUNTING

Several Ekalaka businesses have withstood the test of time

COLUMN BY **VICKI L. FIX** | SOUTHEAST ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

A few months back, I talked about the up and coming and building up of our little community, Ekalaka. We also need to remember those who have built resilient successful businesses, such as A&A Stieg Wholesale, Wagon Wheel Café, The Hair Affair, Fruit Service and Repair, and *The Ekalaka Eagle*. That's a combined total of approximately 290 years!

The Ekalaka Eagle

On Friday, January 1, 1909, the new publisher, Oscar August Dahl, greeted his readers with the first issue of the *Ekalaka Eagle*. Dahl was just 19 years old. The annual subscription was \$2 per year. Dahl passed away in 1942 and his wife, Idella, continued to publish the *Eagle* until 1946, when Tom and Gladys Taylor took over. Tom and Gladys operated the *Eagle* until 1985, when Brice and Lois Lambert were looking for a new direction. Tom would end his journalism career as one of the longest surviving newspapermen in the state. Lambert's first publication of the *Eagle* was on Oct. 4, 1985. He and Lois

continued to run the paper until May 2014, when Eric Lovec purchased the *Eagle* and moved the publication to an office located inside Summit National Bank. Lovec, a Carter County native, published his first issue on July 4, 2014. Lovec continues to keep the community informed on all the area news. As a matter of fact, Lovec has provided most of the history for this article.

A&A Stieg Wholesale

In 2021 A&A Stieg Wholesale celebrated its 50th year in business. Alfred and Avis Stieg moved back to Ekalaka in 1971 and took over the Amoco from a local person. They named it A&A Standard Oil. When Amoco left Montana, Al and Avis renamed their business A&A Stieg Wholesale. They built a propane plant in 1976, and ran the business out of their home until 1989, when they bought the old Fairview Hotel on Main Street in Ekalaka. Al and Avis' son Doug and his wife Sandy then bought the business.

In 1994, Stiegs purchased the bulk fuel portion of the Old Farmer's Union

and added another bulk plant to their operation. In 1995, the building next to the hotel was purchased and Stiegs expanded their business to include hardware items, oil and filters. Today, you can find a variety of products, including hardware, plumbing, greeting cards and a whole lot more. Doug and Sandy's children Jennifer and Justin also play vital roles in the business.

Wagon Wheel Café

In October 1980 Lu Strangford opened the doors to a 34-year career feeding friends, family and visitors at the Wagon Wheel Café. Lou now visits the café, but her niece Trish Bishop and her husband Denise own the business and continue to run an establishment with great food and a family atmosphere. Denise and Trish have great lunch specials, Thursday breakfast night, prime-rib nights and Fish Fridays in the spring, but you can also just grab a good old-fashioned burger. They have also branched out to include catering services.

The Wagon Wheel has been known

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for its morning coffee crowd and the inexpensive menu. Lou told one of her customers that she loved hunting season, but she hated that she had to print new menus because the hunters would take the menus home to prove to their friends and family that they really could get a burger for \$1.

Fruit Service & Repair

Fruit Service & Repair is approaching 39 years of business. In 1984 Troy and Mikel Fruit bought a small gas station on Main Street and then expanded their business in 1994, by purchasing the Old Ekalaka Farmer's Union station on Highway 323. They offer NAPA parts, livestock feed products, crop chemicals, fertilizer, mechanic services and a tire shop. In an interview for the local paper, Troy stated that he didn't think they would make it out of the 80s and the 90s were just a blur. Mikel stated they were going to run the business as long as it

took to get the kids through college. Now they have six grandchildren that they want to see more of, and they are ready to retire.

Hair Affair

Graduating from cosmetology school in 1979, Sonja Bruski went to work for Tre-Schic in Billings. After one year, Sonja moved home to work part-time with Karen Carroll at her salon, which was located in the front office of the theater in Ekalaka. In October 1981 Sonja purchased the salon from Karen, but only two months after purchase, the building burned to the ground. Sonja started the new year looking for a new location for her business. She decided to turn her grandmother's house into the Hair Affair, and the rest is history. She has rented out space to three other cosmetologists and two massage therapists. Sonja offers cuts, colors, sets and nails. She pierces ears, does wedding and prom hair, and makes absolutely beautiful braids. She said she has even pulled a few teeth

(little ones, of course).

She wishes she would have written a book as she was remembering her first few months when a man came in fresh off a sheep-shearing crew. He sauntered in and told her in a long drawn-out drawl "There might be a little sheep **** in my hair." When she went to comb his hair out for the cut, she said she found a very large piece of sheep dung behind his ear and immediately decided he probably needed a shampoo and a cut.

When asked why she has stuck with it for this long, she simply said, "The people."

It is with such pride that these businesses and others support our community through serving on boards and committees, donations to activities and people in need, and scholarships. They have always gone above and beyond. We are truly blessed in this little part of Montana. RM

Thank you to Eric Lovec and The Ekalaka Eagle for historical information.

Medora or bust!

MEDORA is located in the Badlands of North Dakota and is the gateway to the south unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park, an outdoor enthusiast's dream, offering amazing biking and hiking trails, camping and relaxation. Wildlife, including bison, deer, prairie dogs, wild horses and eagles, are plentiful. Check out Painted Canyon and be amazed at the natural beauty.

With many options to choose from, there is no "typical" day in Medora. Your visit might include a horseback ride in the Badlands at the edge of town, a visit to the North Dakota Cowboy Hall of Fame or perhaps 18 holes at Bully Pulpit Golf Course. You can then head over to Tjaden Terrace on the bluffs overlooking Medora for a tasty pitchfork steak dinner with all

the trimmings. Then settle in for the nightly Medora Musical at the Burning Hills Amphitheatre, where the Burning Hills Singers entertain the crowd with music from the golden oldies to today's Top 10.

If you are a member of Southeast Electric Cooperative, you can use the code "TOUCH2023" for a 15-percent discount off Medora Musical tickets, Pitchfork Steak Fondue, Bully Pulpit Golf Course, Gospel Brunch tickets, Old Town Theater shows and lodging at all Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation properties (Badlands Motel, Elkhorn Quarters, Rough Riders Hotel and Medora Campground).

The code is good for reservations made by phone, website or in-person. RM

REMINDER

SOUTHEAST ELECTRIC
COOPERATIVE

ANNUAL MEETING

JUNE 16, 2023

4 P.M.: REGISTRATION

5 P.M.: SUPPER

6 P.M.: BUSINESS MEETING

**TWO \$500 CASH PRIZES
TO BE AWARDED**