

# Big Flat News

September 2017

[www.bigflatelectric.com](http://www.bigflatelectric.com)

## The Big Flat – A community with a “can-do” attitude

*The cooperative spirit is alive and well on the Big Flat*

Ever wondered how Big Flat Electric got its name? If you are from the Turner/Hogeland area it's obvious. The geographic area surrounding the two towns is wide open and level and is called the Big Flat. It could be known as the “Can Do” area. This was evident since 1940 when far sighted citizens from the area considered bringing electric power to the farming and ranching communities of the Big Flat in northern Blaine County, Montana.

With the signing of the Rural Electrification Act in 1936 that provided federal loans for the installation of electrical distribution, electricity in every home became a possibility. But it would take a community effort and a lot of persuasion and hard work to make it happen. Big Flat Electric Co-op. incorporated in 1941 and the first services went on line in 1947 serving 216 consumers in the northern Blaine County.

Look ahead 70 years and this same willingness to accept and meet challenges is still evident in the Big Flat community. Turner's only grocery store was struggling to stay open in a mobile world. A steering committee met off and on for 4-5 years to see what could be done.

The situation became serious in May of 2012 when the last private owners closed the doors. Without a local grocery store, it was a pain even buying milk. “I would buy six gallons at a time and go home and freeze them,” says Shannon Van Voast, one of the driving forces behind the opening of the grocery cooperative.



*Keith Cowan stops by Big Flat Grocery for a refreshment as he goes through town. Linda Hutton, right, manages the grocery cooperative. Keith's grandmother, Virginia McCracken owned the local grocery store for many years. Martha Warren and Linda Heppe work part time.*

When you need to drive 35 miles to the nearest store or 80 miles to the closest chain store to get the simplest items, it gets old fast. Shannon, married to Big Flat Electric's director Alan Van Voast, is the secretary of the grocery cooperative's board. Michelle Keller is the current President. The rest of the five person board consists of David Jones, Max Cederberg, and Bobbie Beck.

The Big Flat Grocery Cooperative was born when it incorporated in June 2013. The community had help starting the cooperative from MDCDC (Montana Cooperative Development Center) and Bear Paw Development in Havre. The cooperative boasts 73 shareholders, both individuals and ag corporations.

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# The Big Flat – A community with a “can-do” attitude

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One year after the store closed, the building reopened as the Big Flat Grocery in January 2014. Kurt and Julie Welsh who owned the building went above and beyond during the transition.

They replaced the roof, ceiling tiles and windows. Community volunteers replaced the dark old hardwood floors with bright new linoleum. Continuing to upgrade the building, a stucco project was completed this summer with help from grants.

One of the major obstacles starting a new grocery cooperative was finding suppliers that would deliver at the end of the line. Turner, Montana is not on the main road to anywhere. Suppliers fell through at the beginning. Then Doug McCracken from the EZ Mart in Harlem helped them get hooked up with Coremark, a company that delivers convenience store type products.

With any startup there are challenges and growing pains. Computer issues make for many late nights. Guessing what people are going to want is difficult. And you can't order too much or it goes to waste. Linda Hutton, manager since December 2016, promotes the products that come in on Big Flat Grocery's Facebook page, which has helped sales. Linda says, "It's a balancing act."

Many individuals help when asked. Linda Hutton recalls the time the store ran out of ice on the Fourth of July. Her son, Guy Hutton volunteered to bring ice up to Turner.

He stuffed a pallet (135 bags) of ice into his car. The ice didn't melt. Guy didn't either. The next time she asked him to bring ice up, he told her, "Not again." That time water was dripping out of his pickup by the time he got to the store.

Locals want to support the store, even though it might be more expensive. They know just how inconvenient it is without a hometown store. According to Shannon Van Voast, "It's a snowball effect when stores close. It's harder to hire teachers for the school when there are no local conveniences. Without the school, a community loses its identity. Young

families can't farm or ranch because they have to leave for school." The list goes on and on.

The school buys a certain amount of supplies for their hot lunch program and concessions. Buses often stop after school for the youngsters to get a snack for the way home. The Turner HS National Honor Society has a Santa Bag project that supporters donate candy to at the store.

Canadian traffic ebbs and flows with the exchange rate. Tobacco products are a hot selling ticket as those products are very expensive in Canada.

Amazingly for a startup project, Big Flat Grocery posts a profit and they are debt free. Management thought they would have trouble keeping up with Coremark's weekly minimum order requirement, but it's never been a problem. All because of the local community support of the store. Many customers won't buy products elsewhere if they know Big Flat Grocery carries those items.

An older couple was out of town and the lady wanted to buy ingredients to bake some cookies. The gentleman told her, no, you can get that in Turner at the store. But the wife said, "They don't carry everything I need for these cookies." He told her, "Make a different kind." Now, that's loyalty.

Big Flat Grocery is open Monday through Friday 8-5 and Saturdays from 9-3.



Sitting at the store's coffee corner is Shannon Van Voast, one of the motivating forces behind Big Flat Grocery. The store sells brand name greeting cards, toys, Montana made goods and other local items.

2017 Irrigators  
Billing Schedule  
Cut off is  
midnight of:

October 1 (for Sept.)  
October 31

A photograph of a large center pivot irrigation system stretching across a green field under a clear blue sky.

## Meet the Members



### **Maddox, Michelle, Olivia, and Conrad Keller with their dog Rocky**

Michelle and Raymond Keller, Turner Area, have been members of Big Flat Electric for 5 years. Although they don't normally attend Big Flat's Annual Meeting, Raymond has served on the nominating committee in the past.

Michelle, a math teacher at Turner Public Schools, recalls her most memorable outage story as the time she was snowed out of Turner and couldn't back home.

They recommend energy efficient windows, floor heat and spray foam insulation to save energy costs.

## **Committee will meet to nominate co-op directors**

**A meeting of the nomination committee delegates will be held on Wednesday evening, August 30, 2017, at 6:00 p.m. at Big Flat Electric's headquarters building on 333 South 7th Street in Malta, Montana. This committee will nominate members for the election of officers from the following districts.**

- |             |                                 |
|-------------|---------------------------------|
| District #3 | Loring/Whitewater/<br>Saco Area |
| District #5 | Malta Area                      |
| District #7 | Missouri River Area             |



### **Carla, Izzy, Hannah and Jack Van Voast**

Turner area residents Carla and Jack Van Voast, shown above with twin granddaughters Hannah and Izzy, know who their district director is — son, Alan Van Voast. They have been members since 1963.

Jack recalls riding around as a child in the 1940's with his father, Jess Van Voast, talking to neighbors about signing up for the REA. Jess was Big Flat Electric's Secretary/Treasurer in the early stages of the cooperative.

The area needed so many people to pledge \$5 to \$10 per month to bring the electric lines in. Those that said "no" at first soon changed that to a "yes" when they saw it was a real possibility to receive clean, reliable power at their rural homes. The initial engineering had to be resurveyed to add all the additional customers. People joked about having readily available power. "It will keep the chickens up all night!"

The Van Voasts gave sound conservation advice, "Don't be wasteful just because you have it and remember to shut the pump off!"



## Big Flat supports 4-H and FFA youth



**Wade Schneider**  
**Blaine County Fair**



**Sam Mitchell**  
**Phillips County Fair**

**School is starting. Watch out for the children.**

### BIG FLAT ELECTRIC BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

Alan Wasson, President  
Loring/Whitewater/Saco  
674-5574

Roger Solberg, Vice Pres. - Malta  
658-2106

Betty Campbell, Sec/Treas. - Hays  
673-3111

Duane Klindworth - Hogeland  
379-2542

Alan Van Voast - Turner  
379-2243

Patty Quisno - Fort Belknap  
673-3132

Clyde Robinson - Missouri River  
673-3442

### OUTAGE REPORTING

Call 654-2040

(1-800-242-2040 Saco area)

M-F 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

### AFTER HOURS ONLY OUTAGE #

654-7400

DARREN DEMARAIS

Line Superintendent...654-7261



## Energy Wise

Cooler temps will be here soon! No matter what kind of heating system you have in your home, you can save money and increase your comfort by properly maintaining and upgrading your equipment. Contact a licensed professional to inspect your system before the winter chill arrives.

Source: U.S Department of Energy



*"Big Flat Electric Co-op. is an equal opportunity provider and employer."*

