

Close-Up



Warm Milk and Cold Showers

Ted Laursen stared out the kitchen window of his storm-darkened house. In the intermittent flashes of lightning he could see the uprooted hackberry tree that minutes earlier had crashed onto the patio.

"This is a bad one," he told his wife, Phyllis. "This is a bad one."

When the phone rang ten minutes later, Laursen was already in his work clothes.

"We've got problems," supervisor Gordy Johnson's voice crackled over the line. "You'd better come on in."

Laursen glanced at his calendar watch as he cradled the receiver. It was 9:32 p.m., July 15.

Storms are nothing new for Ted Laursen. In his 20 years as an NSP lineman he's had to put up with thunderstorms, mop up after floods and pick up after tornados.

In 1976, he spent six days in southeastern Wisconsin helping repair damage from the state's worst ice storm. For two of those days he worked with teen cartilage in his right knee which required surgery when he returned home.

But Ted knew this storm was different. As he backed his Olds out of the driveway that night, he had to swerve to avoid hitting some of

the 30 uprooted and busted trees that now littered the two-acre lot. Through the static of the car radio he heard the continuing tornado and high winds warnings being broadcast by the only local station still on the air.

On his way to the service center, Ted swung through Eau Claire's third ward area to pick up fellow lineman Don Stygar. He couldn't believe the destruction. Downed trees, poles and lines blocked streets and created an eerie web that was nearly impassable in the blackness. Not until later would he realize that hardly a block in the city had escaped the wrath of the Big Wind.

From midnight to dawn that first long night, Laursen patrolled on foot the west end of the 69 kV loop that circles the city. In just one stretch he found eight structures toppled, one of them on top of a house. He manually switched out a portion of the line but was unable to report the bad news because his two-way radio broke down.

At daybreak, Laursen worked with other crews on a Madison St. feeder in order to restore power to the central dispatch office. When that job was completed shortly after noon, Laursen had his first meal since the previous day — warm milk and cinnamon rolls from one of the few stores that was open. Then he went on to another job, and another.

Darkness and fatigue set in early that night but not until 1 a.m., after 27 hours on the job, did Ted go home. After a cold shower in the dark and a sandwich by candle light, he climbed into bed where sleep came easy.

Three hours later, Laursen was back at the service center getting his assignment for the day — work with a crew from Neillsville to rebuild the line into paper mill village where five 3-phase poles were down. That job turned into a pleasant surprise for Laursen since one of those crew members was his son, Chris, who became an NSP apprentice lineman just three months ago.

Except for that, Thursday was much like the preceding day for Ted, and like the many long days to follow. Work until 1 a.m., report back at 5 a.m. Pick up your feeder assignment and follow the line down until the job is done. Cut down the trees and limbs; haywire the system back together. Start over again.

Two weeks later, Laursen is back to nearly normal hours but working six days a week. He now spends his time on jobs that should have been done before the storm but frequently has to interrupt that schedule to make reconnects.

"You can still feel it inside, the winding down from that hectic pace," Laursen says as he steps his orange service-trouble-truck next to the driveway where an electrician's van is parked. "It'll be a while before any of us can really relax again."

Laursen hops down from the cab and straps on a belt laden with tools. A man wearing only jeans and a look of relief leads him around to the back of the house.

