

Putting the Pieces Together

There's no rehearsal, no way to prepare, for a surprise like the Big Wind. It was a sneak attack, and a successful one.

But when it was over, a counter-offensive had to be launched. For the battle in the Eau Claire area, Stan Radunzel was commander in chief of the forces.

"Our first step was to patrol the system to assess the damage," recalls Radunzel, electric distribution superintendent. "The destruction was overwhelming and by midnight we realized we needed more help than we ourselves had available."

Operating with just emergency power at the Service Center (two spotlights, radios and phones), Radunzel began formulating an attack plan to be launched at dawn. At the same time, Jerry Kripps, executive vice president-operations, was on the phones in the darkened dispatch office seeking assistance from other utilities.



Radunzel



Coulthurst

much a guy can do under abnormal conditions."

Providing meals for all the line crews was a problem, too, especially during the first several days when few businesses had power. When he wasn't helping Sandvig man the radios, Pat Watkins, consumer services manager, was ordering Big Macs and chicken from the Colonel, lining up delivery service from Chippewa Falls restaurants to the work sites, and handling the details of paying the bills.

"We had crews scattered around in almost every motel in town that had power," Watkins said. "We set up a laundry service for outside crews with the help of some wives who used laundromats or even took it to their homes. It wasn't quite like One-Hour Martinizing, but we usually provided same-day service."

Watkins also lined up workers to man the phones on a 24-hours-a-day basis and coordinated the assignment of "bird dogs". These were people from consumer services and other departments who patrolled for



Watkins



Sandvig

By 8 a.m. that morning, NSP crews had already spent several hours at the front lines (the 69 kV loop around the city). Trucks from Wisconsin Public Service Corp. were rolling toward Eau Claire and were soon joined by others from Wisconsin Power & Light, NSP-Minnesota, Donovan Construction, and a number of private tree trimming firms.

"Counting our own support staff, we had more than 320 people working on the clean-up," Radunzel said. "Our game plan was to get the most customers back in service in the least amount of time."

In addition to the overall coordination, Radunzel handled scheduling and dispatching of outside crews while distribution supervisor Gordon Johnson handled scheduling of NSP crews.

Engineering assistant Ron Sandvig was primarily responsible for handling the continuous stream of calls from the more than 60 radio-equipped crews and plotting their progress on the location map.

"After 12 or 14 hours of non-stop talking, it got a little difficult to spit out terms like 'ground tree trimming crew'," Sandvig said. "We frequently missed meals without realizing it but all of us found out how

damage, provided outside crews with directions to work sites, and ferried food and supplies.

Maintaining an overview of all these services was the job of Gary Coulthurst, general superintendent. In addition to charting repair progress, he handled customer relations and worked with the information department in keeping the news media updated. His biggest problem, he said, was trying to explain to people why they didn't have power when their next door neighbor did.

"All the line crews we had put a tremendous strain on our maintenance, warehouse and stores people," Radunzel says. "I've always known we have good people here, but the dedication following the storm tops anything I've seen in my 34 years with the company."

The dedication Radunzel observed wasn't limited to NSP employees in Eau Claire. It was a characteristic exhibited by employees throughout the company who were battling against similar odds.

"The spirit that everybody had was fantastic," says Gordon Englund, central division general manager. "The cooperation and determination of our people was as memorable as the storm itself."