A Service of **Alger Delta Cooperative Electric Association**

July/August 2013

Michigan COUNTRY LINES

Visit Michigan's Underwater Shipwrecks

(For divers & landlubbers, too!)

Celebrating Co-op Independence

July is the time we celebrate our nation's independence. In the midst of apple pies and hot dogs, fireworks shows and parades, I can't help but think about the independent streak that inspired farmers and other rural folks from all across America to band together and improve their quality of life. They did so by forming electric co-ops to bring electricity to the rural countryside—where other utilities refused to go.

Tom Harrell
General Manager

Aside from President Franklin Roosevelt's promise of federal aid in the form of low-interest loans and engineering expertise, rural Americans didn't have much help in bringing electricity to their homes. They pulled themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps and did it themselves.

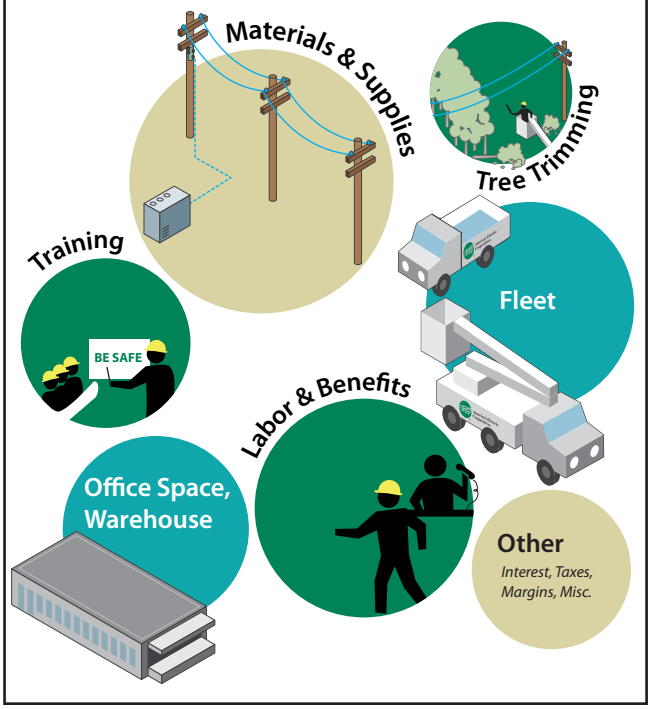
This independence still tends to inspire electric cooperatives today, and it is, in fact, the fourth of seven guiding co-op principles, "Autonomy and Independence," and it means that no matter what contracts Alger Delta Cooperative might enter into, it will always remain an independent entity.

Each year, your co-op's annual meeting becomes an independence celebration, too. At the annual meeting, the members you elected to represent you on the board of directors are "seated"—thereby accepting the duties and responsibilities of governing your co-op. We typically share a meal, talk about co-op business, and provide an opportunity for you to visit with neighbors and friends. On June 19, we did just that with about 250 Alger Delta member-owners attending our annual meeting at Grace Church in Gladstone. Prior to the meeting, the following board members were elected: Mike Nason, District 1 (Big Bay); Paul Sederquist, District 6 (Nathan/White Rapids); and Ron Oberg, District 9 (Hiawatha). Any Alger Delta Co-op member-owner has the opportunity to run for the board in the district in which they take service, which assures local control. As part of this, Alger Delta's annual meeting is also a chance to discuss your concerns with your cooperative's leaders. Several members submitted questions and, expecting this, we had our auditor and other experts available to provide the answers.

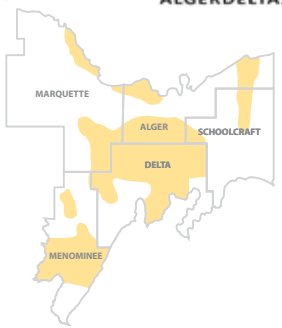
Electric cooperatives form a vast network across the country, from coast to coast. Co-op lines are strung in 47 states, serving 42 million people—a different world from 1935, when much of America remained dark. This Fourth of July, as we recognize the hard-fought war that created the United States, let's also tip our hats to the founders of Alger Delta Co-op, who beat incredible odds to make life better for themselves, their neighbors, and now, you—as a member and owner of this electric co-op.

What Does My Service Charge Cover?

Ever wondered what your monthly service charge supports? It takes a solid infrastructure and great people to keep safe, reliable, and affordable power flowing to your home. Here's what your service charge supports at Alger Delta Electric Co-op:



Alger Delta Electric
ALGERDELTA.COM



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The co-op office will be closed on LABOR DAY, Sept. 2, 2013. Please call 1-800-562-0950 to report an outage.

Energy Optimization Program Is Proven Winner With Businesses

Banks Hardwoods, the latest to take advantage, plans future energy-saving projects.

Banks Hardwoods Inc., headquartered in White Pigeon, MI, with additional facilities in Newberry, and Menomonie, WI, is a supplier of sustainable, quality hardwood lumber. The company ships about 65 million board feet annually from its 28 drying kilns to customers making a variety of products, including moulding and furniture, throughout the Midwest. And, like most small to medium-size businesses, they are always on the hunt for energy efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Addressing energy waste has proved to be a viable way for them to cut costs without cutting jobs.

"Energy use is our largest variable expense after employee wages. We needed to be more efficient with our variable costs so we wouldn't be negatively affected during the down economy," explains Jim Clarke, the company's chief financial officer. "Becoming more energy efficient also better aligns with our other sustainable business practices, like utilizing wind energy credits and selecting sustainable timber for our product lines."

Since 2010, Banks Hardwoods has implemented three major energy efficiency projects through the Energy Optimization Commercial and Industrial program offered by Midwest Energy Cooperative. Twelve electricity providers throughout Michigan offer Energy Optimization (EO) rebate programs for residents, businesses and farms (visit michigan-energy.org to see all participating utilities – including Alger Delta Cooperative).

Thanks to the Energy Optimization program, Banks Hardwoods now saves 256,000 kilowatt hours (kWh) or $24,000 in energy costs every year!

Project Details

Banks Hardwoods chose projects that would have the biggest impact on their expenses. First, they replaced 18 high-bay HID (high intensity discharge) light fixtures with 6-lamp T8 fluorescent fixtures. Next, their kiln fan controls were upgraded with variable speed drives. This simple step not only proved to be more energy efficient, but provided a higher quality wood-drying process. They also outfitted the combustion draft fans on one of their wood-fired boilers with variable speed drives to allow the fans to run at a rate consistent with demand. In other words, fans no longer run full-speed all of the time.

"The energy savings from these projects have substantially exceeded our expectations," notes Clarke. "We are saving 25 to 30 percent on energy costs associated with the project work areas, so we are very pleased."

Looking Ahead

Now that Banks Hardwoods has seen a significant return on investment from its energy-saving efforts, they plan to keep going, and three more projects are underway. They will add variable speed drives to seven more wood-drying kilns and another boiler, and are experimenting with replacing outdoor HID lights with light emitting diode (LED) fixtures. Occupancy sensors installed throughout the plant will automatically shut off lights if no one is in a particular area.

The company also intends to improve the energy efficiency of their two satellite facilities, most likely starting with lighting retrofits at the Newberry plant, which is served by Cloverland Electric Cooperative. Another project they are considering is adding variable controls to their dust collection system in the mill room, which would allow the system to slow down based on the equipment that is operating at any given time.

Co-op Member Spotlight

Jim Clarke, CFO

Company: Banks Hardwoods Inc.

Energy-Saving Actions:

- Replaced high-bay high intensity discharge (HID) light fixtures with T8 fluorescents
- Installed variable frequency drives (VFDs) on four boiler fan motors
- Added VFDs on circulation fan motors for six kilns

Rebate Amount: ▲ $17,160

Results:

- Stopped wasting 256,000 kWh of electricity per year
- Saving $24,000 in energy costs per year

Claim Your Reward

Find out how saving energy can benefit your business. There are programs and rebates with your name on them. Call 877-296-4319 or visit michigan-energy.org to discover energy-saving options that are ideal for your business, farm or home.

How to Plant the Right Trees, Shrubs

Whether you're planting trees to provide a wind break, reduce carbon in the environment or beautify your landscape, it's important to plant them away from power lines.

Besides causing power outages, trees that grow too close to electric lines can create shock and fire hazards. Trees (and wood in general) conduct electricity, and power outages or short interruptions can occur when branches contact with overhead lines, and electrical sparking from a wire to a nearby branch can cause fires. This is why children should be taught never to climb trees near power lines, and adults should never trim trees that are close to power lines (leave it to professionals). Accidental contact of electric wires with a tree limb while playing or trimming around a tree can be fatal.

"Trees provide many aesthetic, environmental and economic benefits, including energy-efficient shade and cooling during hot summer months, or natural windbreaks against winter winds," says Molly Hall, executive director of Safe Electricity (safeelectricity.org). For example, trees reduce pollution by absorbing and removing carbon dioxide from the air and storing it in the wood and ground. "But everyone needs to be aware of the dangers and risks created when trees grow into power lines, and the importance of calling the utility or utility locator service before beginning any landscaping project," Hall continues. "Landowners also need to understand utility line clearance practices and why they are important to safe and reliable electric service."

Research which trees and bushes offer shade, color and screening, but won't grow to interfere with your electric service. Local tree nurseries can help in designing a beautiful, shade-filled yard with trees appropriate for each section. You can also find planting help at arborfoundation.org or call the National Arbor Day Foundation at 1-888-448-7337.

If you have existing trees that appear to be growing into the power lines, call your electric co-op, and *never try to prune them yourself*. Utilities have or can recommend professionals trained to safely prune and trim trees for electric line clearance.

There are many beautiful varieties of low-growing trees and shrubs, Hall says, "Consider planting the types of trees that co-exist well with power lines and the environment."

Please don't plant close to power lines!

For your safety, follow these planting tips:

1) Before digging, **dial 811** to ask the utility locator service to mark the location of underground utilities so that accidental contact, damage and injuries can be avoided.

2) **Never plant a tree that could grow to 25 feet or more near a power line.** Tall-growing trees should be planted a minimum of 20 feet away from power lines, and 50 feet away to avoid future pruning. A mature height of less than 15 feet is recommended for trees planted near power lines.

3) **Do not plant near underground utility services.** Tree roots can grow to interfere with underground pipes, cables and wires. Future repairs to these facilities could also damage the health and beauty of nearby plants and trees.

4) **Keep areas around electric meters, transformers or other electrical equipment free of any vegetation** that could limit utility service access.

Check the Arborday.org Tree Guide for expected mature height and crown spread of trees you are considering.

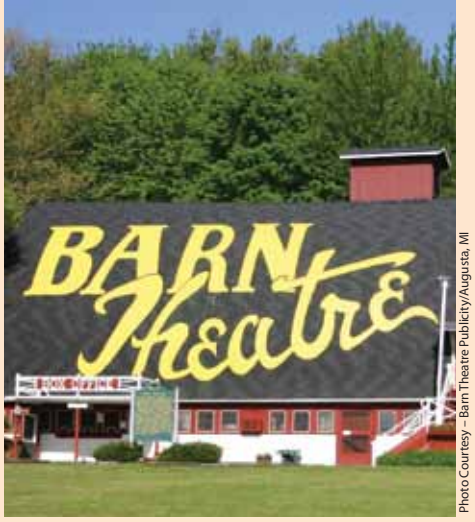

Photo Courtesy – Barn Theatre Publicity/Augusta, MI

The Barn Theatre of Augusta sits proudly in between Kalamazoo and Battle Creek.

Photo – Susan K. Park

Delilah de Wylde plays famous country western singer Patsy Cline in a summer theatre production at the Red Barn Playhouse in Saugatuck.


Photo Courtesy – Barn Theatre Publicity/Augusta, MI

A shot from The Barn Theatre (Augusta) production of the musical comedy "SPAMALOT" in 2012. It's a parody of the King Arthur legend.

Summer Stock Theatre:
Barn Again in Michigan

With today's many entertainment options, it's surprising that the "let's put on a show!" spirit of 1930s-era movies lives on in barn theatres (and other theatre buildings) across the country. The summer stock theatre tradition actually dates to 1919 when shows—mostly lighter musicals, comedies and mysteries—were performed by touring troupes or resident companies that launched careers on stages outdoors, under tents, and in barns.

Michigan is home to three barn theatres, including one of the country's few remaining Actors Equity (union) summer stock houses. As the Barn Theatre of Augusta launches its 67th season, producer/director Brendan Ragotzy relates how his parents founded the original Village Players in neighboring Richland in 1946, but three years later were forced to move.

Director Jack Ragotzy and actress Betty Ebert Ragotzy searched in vain for a new theatre home until, just two weeks before their 1949 season, they found a never-used dairy barn. "It was a grey day when they turned onto the farm's dirt driveway," tells Brendan. "When they saw the barn, the clouds opened up, the sun beamed down… Kismet!" The handsome structure, its soaring ceiling made of curved beams with no cross-bracing, had a single lightbulb and no running water. Yet, within two weeks the show went on and, with the exception of 2010 when it was dark due to the economy, this Barn Theatre has operated continuously. "It's a gorgeous gal," Brendan says of the 484-seat venue, which is a Michigan Historic Site.

Its professional company draws on the talent of apprentices from the Barn Theatre School, which each season accepts 24 students who have completed at least one year of college. "Barnies" learn and work behind the scenes and on-stage with the pros in an intense summer of honing their craft. Alumni include Johnathan Larson, who went on to create "Rent", and actors Jennifer Garner, Lauren Graham, Tom Wopat and Robert Newman. After each of the six main-stage shows, apprentices and seasoned talent perform in a cabaret setting.

At The Red Barn Playhouse in Saugatuck, the Lakeshore Arts Alliance (LAA) is also working to keep the house lights on. Housed in a 1914 horse barn, it was converted to a theatre in 1948 and over the years, says LAA Board Chairman John Huyge, "It has been opened and closed a half-dozen times." Now leased by the LAA as a home for arts education and performance, volunteers remodeled the 250-seat theatre into a year-round venue that includes films and concerts.

The LAA is working to buy The Red Barn and open a performing arts academy similar to the intern program of its heyday. "This barn was an important part of the entertainment in the community," says John. "It reflects back to a time in history when things were less complicated."

Keeping things simple in a 150-year old venue, the community theatre group at The Barn Theatre in Port Sanilac has entertained summer audiences on a shoestring budget since 1980. Andy Fabian, village council president and owner/chef at The Van Camp House restaurant says, "People come from miles around to have dinner and go to a show. It's really a great little happening." The Thumb area venue is in a casual, rustic setting with six performances between June and September, and he assures, "It's the most genuinely cool place to be."

Of course, there are a number of cool theatres that play here in summer—many also historical—that aren't housed in barns. From the **Calumet** (calumettheatre.com or 906-337-2610) and **Ironwood** (ironwoodtheatre.com or 906-932-0618) theatres in the U.P., to The Opera House (theoperahouse.org or 231-627-5432) in **Cheboygan**, or the Riverwalk in **Lansing**, there's probably one near enough to you.

Try michiganweb.com/theater.html for a list of community theatres or Google "community theatre" along with the town name.

Kath Usitalo writes about destinations and the Great Lakes State. Her blog is greatlakesgazette.wordpress.com.

Check their 2013 schedules:

The Barn Theatre
barntheatre.com
13351 West M-96, Augusta
269-731-4545

Red Barn Playhouse
redbarnsaugatuck.com
3657 63rd St. at Blue Star Highway,
Saugatuck, 269-857-5300
lakeshorearts@comcast.net

The Barn Theatre
barntheatre.net
242 S. Ridge St., Port Sanilac
810-622-9114

4 Easy Ways To Reduce Your Cooling Costs

If you're a business owner, you have a lot on your plate, and the commercial refrigerators at your facility are probably the last things on your mind. However, an old refrigerator—or one that isn't equipped with modern controls or technologies—could be using up to 35 percent more energy than necessary. This is money that could be invested elsewhere.

It is also important to understand the basics of energy-efficient commercial refrigeration. Read below to find out how your business can start saving more energy!

1 Anti-sweat heater controls

Reach-in freezer and cooler cases usually include electric heaters that prevent frost and condensation from forming on the glass. The problem is that anti-sweat heaters run all the time. The reality is that these heaters only need to kick on when it's extremely humid. Otherwise, you're just wasting energy.

THE FIX? Anti-sweat heater controls. They automatically sense humidity levels and selectively run the heaters as needed. Energy Optimization rebate: $80 per door.

2 LED cooler case lighting

Ironically, older coolers contain fluorescent lights that waste most of their energy generating heat instead of light. In turn, the refrigeration system has to work harder to remove the excess heat.

THE FIX? New light-emitting diode (LED) technology literally provides cooler light. LED case lights use significantly less electricity and produce 50 percent less heat. Energy Optimization rebate: $25 per door.

3 Occupancy sensors

We tell kids (and maybe even employees) to turn off the lights when they're not using them. Yet, reach-in coolers leave the lights on indefinitely.

THE FIX? LED occupancy sensors. LEDs aren't affected when turned on and off in a cold environment. With instant-on capabilities, they light up when a shopper approaches the cooler, or they can be programmed to stay on for a set amount of time and then shut off. Energy Optimization rebate: $10 per door.

4 ECM motor

Did you know commercial refrigeration systems use fans to circulate cold air inside reach-in or walk-in coolers or freezers? Like the old electric heaters mentioned in our first tip, these fans run non-stop, wasting energy and putting extra wear and tear on the equipment.

THE FIX? Electronically commutated motors (ECMs). Through the magic of modern technology, ECMs are design to use electricity sparingly and therefore reduce the load on your refrigerator. In many cases, you can swap out the existing motor for an ECM motor and get a full return on your investment in less than a year! Energy Optimization rebate: $30-70 per motor.

Interested in more ways to save energy? Alger Delta Electric offers numerous rebates and resources to reward businesses and residents for saving energy. Check out the latest incentives at michigan-energy.org or call 877-296-4319 for more information.

Stealing Copper is a Crime and It's *Very* Dangerous!

Soaring metal prices have been blamed for an increase in thefts of copper and aluminum, primary components of electric distribution lines. Michigan electric co-ops (including Cloverland Electric, in the U.P.) have also been subject to this crime, which can lead to power outages, additional maintenance and expenses, diminished system reliability, and even serious injury or death.

Copper in wire is appealing to thieves who seek to sell the metal for scrap. Burglars will often climb power poles, scale fences and break into buildings to steal the precious metal. The soaring metal prices have prompted thieves to become bolder and more inventive.

"Stealing copper may seem like a quick way to make a buck, but it's illegal, costly and life threatening," says Mike Roush, vice president of operations at Midwest Energy Cooperative, which has been directly affected. "Working with metal and electricity is a dangerous combination, even for trained employees using proper equipment."

Thieves may not understand that they are risking their lives by taking copper from substations, where high transmission voltage is stepped down to a lower current for distribution lines. All the lines have a potentially deadly charge.

As a co-op member-owner, your local electric co-op urges you to help stop this crime by using the following guidelines to guard against electrical dangers and prevent copper theft.

▶ Never enter or touch equipment inside a substation; stay away from power lines and anything touching a power line.

Attempts to steal copper wire can cause serious injury or death.

▶ If you notice anything unusual with electric facilities, such as an open substation gate, open equipment or hanging wire, contact us immediately.

▶ If you see anyone around electric substations or electric facilities other than utility personnel or contractors, call the police.

▶ Install motion-sensor lights on the outside of your house and business to deter possible thieves.

▶ Store tools and wire cutters in a secure location, and never leave them out while you are away.

▶ If you work in construction, do not leave any wires unattended or leave loose wire at the job site, especially overnight.

▶ Help spread the word about the deadly consequences that can result from trying to steal copper or aluminum.

▶ If you have any information regarding stolen co-op property or equipment, please contact the police and your electric co-op immediately.

Kids and Finances

Reap the benefits of college planning today.

While you may be unable to avoid the "Mom, can I borrow $20 for gas?" questions that eat into your budget as your kids grow up, there's one thing you can do to help you (and them) get ready for tomorrow's financial demands: Prepare for college expenses now.

Two-thirds of 2011 college graduates had an average of $26,600 in student loan debt, according to the Institute for College Access & Success. No matter how young or old your kids are, consider these five options to prepare for future expenses.

- **Start a regular savings account that's earmarked for college.** Both you and your kids can contribute to this account, and your relatives can give you or your kids money to deposit, as well. It's easy and convenient: You can set up an account anywhere—at your local bank, credit union, or through an online bank. Even setting aside small amounts regularly can add up to a lot of money over time. For example, Bankrate.com's Simple Savings calculator shows that $100 monthly saved over 15 years could add up to $20,972.66, assuming a 2 percent yield on your savings, compounded monthly.
- **Start a Section 529 Plan.** This is an education savings plan operated by a state or educational institution designed to help families set aside money for college. The money is controlled by the account owner, not the child. Anyone can contribute to these plans on the child's behalf, and contributions may be tax exempt.
- **Open a Coverdell education savings account.** This is a custodial account that can be used to save for elementary and secondary school, and college-related expenses. Income maximums apply, so not everyone will qualify for this account type. The money deposited grows tax-deferred until it is used for educational expenses. Withdrawals from the account may be tax free if used for tuition, fees, books, and other expenses. Any money not used for education must eventually be distributed to your child.
- **Open a Uniform Gift to Minors Account or a Uniform Transfer to Minors Account** (UGMA or UTMA; the title differs by state). Under this, a parent or grandparent typically will gift money to the account. The money is owned by the child but controlled by the custodian until the child reaches the age of majority, which is set by state law. At that point, your child assumes control of the account. You can't restrict how the money is used, and the account cannot be transferred to another beneficiary.
- **Buy U.S. savings bonds.** Certain savings bonds can be purchased to pay for college tuition and fees without having to pay federal income tax on some or all of the interest during the year the bonds are redeemed. Certain restrictions apply—visit TreasuryDirect.gov to learn more.

College costs will undoubtedly continue to rise. By starting a savings program today, you and your child can better handle those expenses. For more planning help—including how financial tools noted in this article should be titled, and the tax ramifications of certain options—ask a financial or tax professional.

– Doreen Friel

Prevent Deadly Shocks — Check Your Boats & Docks

Don't be the common ground between water and electricity!

Safe Electricity (SafeElectricity.org) urges boat owners to have dockside electrical systems installed by professional electricians guided by the National Electrical Code, and have them inspected regularly to avoid tragedy.

For a fun, safe season on the water, there are items you must legally have on-board your watercraft—life vests, a fire extinguisher, a throwable floatation device, and properly working lights. But the list should not end there when it comes to helping prevent a tragedy, so make sure the boat itself and the dock is safe, too!

July 2012 saw some horrific fatal accidents near boats and docks. A 26-year-old woman was swimming in Lake of the Ozarks and was electrocuted when she touched an energized dock ladder, and a 13-year-old girl and her 8-year-old brother received fatal shocks while swimming near a lighted dock with an improperly grounded circuit.

Two young Tennessee boys died from electric shock while swimming between house boats when current from an on-board generator entered the water through frayed wires under the boat.

In Michigan, a 20-year-old Port Huron man entered the water behind a moored boat and became disabled as he tried to climb onto the swim platform. Friends trying to pull him onboard reported getting shocks. He could not be resuscitated. An investigation confirmed voltage behind the boat, caused by an AC to DC fault in the battery charger that energized the underwater gear; and there was no AC to DC bonding connection.

To help prevent such tragedies, it's important to ensure proper installation and maintenance of electrical equipment and inspect all electrical systems on or near the water. Also, remember that ropes, string, masts and rigging can also conduct electricity.

✓ Check your dock and the neighbor's, too!

Safe Electricity (safelectricity.org), in conjunction with the American Boat and Yacht Council (ABYC) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers/National Electrical Contractors Association, recommends these steps:

- At a minimum, all electrical installations should comply with the 2011 National Electrical Code (article 553-residential docks, and 555-commercial), which mandates a ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) on all dock receptacles. A GFCI measures the current in a circuit and senses any imbalance, such as a discharge into the water, that trips the GFCI and cuts off the power.
- The GFCI should be tested at least monthly, or per the manufacturer's specifications. Locate the GFCI somewhere along the ramp to the dock so it can be easily found and tested by local fire departments, as needed.
- Metal dock frames should have "bonding jumpers" that connect all metal parts to an on-shore grounding rod. This ensures that any part of the metal dock that becomes energized because of electrical malfunction will trip the GFCI or circuit breaker.
- Neighboring docks can also be a shock hazard to you. Talk to your neighbors about ensuring that their dockside electrical systems are Code compliant and inspected, too.
- All electrical installations should be performed by a professional electrical contractor.
- Docks are exposed to the elements so their electrical systems should be inspected at least once a year.
- Even if you are renting the dock, it is important to notify the owner of any safety violations so they can be fixed immediately.

If the owner will not make the corrections or properly maintain the dock, you might strongly consider moving your boat to another place.

✓ Check Your Boat

When it comes to a boat's electrical system, particularly those with onboard generators, use these tips:

- If you are unsure about how to install something, call an ABYC electrical certified technician.
- Household wire is not suitable for boats, as houses are motionless and generally dry. Even marine-rated wire that is not supported along its length will break with constant motion stress.
- Do *not* use wire nuts or splice connectors! (Wire nuts are for solid conductor wire, which should never be on a boat, and splice connectors can cut wire strands.)
- Fuses are rated to protect the wire, not the stereo. If a fuse blows continuously, it should not be replaced with a larger one just to keep it from blowing again—something else is wrong.
- Have your boat's electrical system checked at least once a year, and also when something is added or removed from it.

Most wet environments are dangerous when it comes to electricity, but related drownings can be prevented by regularly inspecting for ground-fault failure and strictly enforcing the National Electrical Code through frequent pool, dock and boat inspections.

Marathon Paddler: 'Amazing Al' is Ready to Go the Distance

Al Widing and Hailey McMahon as they near the finish of the 2012 Spike Challenge race.

Photo - Mark Sloan

There is little to compare with the spectacle at the start of the annual AuSable River Canoe Marathon. Thousands of cheering fans line the river's banks in downtown Grayling. Their collective din reaches a crescendo when the start gun goes off as racers run to the river's edge carrying their canoes, primed for the 120-mile paddling adventure that finishes well after sunrise in Oscoda.

Al Widing has been among the toned, young athletes for 40 years, so he's the oldest paddler in pack. And when the 2013 AuSable River Canoe marathon begins July 27, the 88-year old Mio resident plans to be there again.

"I am looking forward to it. I'd just love to finish," says Widing in typical, understated fashion, conveying little sense of having become a legend in competitive paddling circles.

Widing's first AuSable marathon was in 1955, and he holds the record for being the oldest paddler to finish. His fastest race was in 1999 when at 74, along with Robert Bradford, of Lapeer, he set the senior division record finishing in 15 hours, 21 minutes and 22 seconds.

Widing and Oscoda paddler, Bob Gillings, also won back-to-back first-place finishes in the 1964 and 1965 Texas Water Safari, a punishing 260-mile marathon billed as "The World's Toughest Canoe Race."

"He's definitely a humble guy," says Ryan Matthews, of Oscoda, the marathon statistician. "We call him 'Amazing Al', but he hasn't embraced the nickname. He always said he is just an average guy who likes to paddle. But, there is no denying that what he does at this age is amazing."

Widing likes the challenge. The race requires extreme endurance, the ability to sit for hours paddling at a rapid pace, trying to edge out over 70 teams of top professional paddlers from around North America.

The course winds downstream for 120 miles. The race goes on no matter what weather. Paddlers in the money keep a grueling pace of 60 to 75 paddle strokes per minute. They have to navigate in the dark and negotiate the river's natural obstructions along with portaging around dams.

"The toughest part of the race is when I have quit because (my paddling partner) is hurt," Widing says while sitting in the comfort of his den in the home he built along the AuSable River. Widing lives there with his wife, Dorothy, his 12th grade sweetheart and mother of their six children.

Strangely, Widing doesn't consider himself tough. He smiles and says: "'Tough' is meat you can't chew. I do it because I like the challenge."

But Hailey McMahon knows another Al Widing. She is the 21-year-old nursing student from Grayling who teamed up with him for the 2012 AuSable Canoe Marathon.

"Anyone who paddles with Al will tell you he is hard to train with. He pounds out every mile on six-hour training paddles," McMahon explains. "He is an amazing guy and super nice. He has a hard exterior, but if you can get him to laugh, he melts."

A lifelong vegetarian who grew up on a Holly farm and later became a carpenter, Widing remembers his first canoe. It was a beat-up wooden vessel that cost $25. He and his brother Roy entered the 1955 AuSable Marathon with it, a pair of homemade paddles, and a pocketful of hopes. But their aspirations were dampened just 14 miles downstream.

"We didn't finish," Widing says softly. "We had put a good hole in the bottom. There was water all around our feet."

"It's always fun and funny racing with Al," says Lynne Witte, of Mt. Clemens. Witte is president of the Michigan Canoe Racing Association (MCRA), an organization founded in 1956 and built by Widing and others. "He's headstrong but not hard to get along with. I've paddled in the bow with him.

"Michigan has always been a huge canoe-racing state, and Al brought more than I could ever say to MCRA and the sport of professional paddling. None of us made any real money in canoe racing, but he's won the Texas Safari and that was a big deal."

See ausablecanoemarathon.org or call 989-348-4425 for details about the canoe marathon.

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