

A brief historical picture



History in the making

LCEC has been serving Southwest Florida's energy needs since 1940 when George Judd sold the Mariana Grove power plant to the members who lived in North Fort Myers. Homer T. Welch was the company's first member of management when Lee County Electric (LCEC) began with 15 miles of distribution line and 158 members ... about 1 percent of Lee County's 1940 population of 17,500.

Within its first year of operation, LCEC offered service to Pine Island, Sanibel and Captiva. In 1941, LCEC retired the Mariana Grove generating plant in North Fort Myers and signed a contract with Florida Power & Light (FPL) to purchase power for members at a wholesale rate.

World War II prevented further expansion, but following the war, LCEC purchased the surplus transmission line running from the Buckingham Air Force Base to Half Way Pond.

By 1951, service had been extended as far south as Chokoloskee Island. In 1953, LCEC acquired the Everglades City Power Plant from Collier County, and then retired the plant when a new distribution line was built to serve the city. In the same period, a new line was extended from Carnestown to serve Marco Island.

In 1955, members from Lehigh Acres began purchasing power from LCEC. In 1958, power was connected to the first six model homes in Cape Coral.

No new service territory was added from the late 1950's until 1986, when LCEC extended power to a rural section of Golden Gate Estates, and 1987, when we "lit up" a new intersection along Alligator Alley.

Today, LCEC serves over 225,000 metered members and has over 8,400 miles of energized line.



Sanibel

In 1513, Juan Ponce de Leon landed on Sanibel's beach looking for treasures. He probably never imagined that 428 years later the island's treasures would be illuminated by electricity from LCEC.

In 1940, Homer Welch became the plant manager of the Marianna Grove Light and Power Company and was asked to organize an electric cooperative and pursue government funding from the Rural Electric Administration. During the rest of that year, and the next, Homer recruited residents of North Fort Myers, Pine Island, Sanibel and Captiva to form LCEC.

Longtime Sanibel residents may recall how Welch went door-to-door talking about the opportunities electricity would bring to their lives, giving residents the opportunity to become members of this new cooperative. At the time, Sanibel was a farming community, and residents were spread out on the island. Homer often paid the \$5 membership fee out of his pocket if a resident could not afford it.

Even when government funding was acquired in 1941, it was a challenge to provide service to the islands. Travel to and from Sanibel was a unique part of the job for LCEC crews. They used the Kinzie ferry, which had been in operation since 1928. Prior to the ferry, it took three days to go from Ft. Myers to Sanibel. The ferry, which ran until the causeway was built in 1963, provided service from Punta Rassa to Sanibel. Work was scheduled on the island according to the ferry schedule. If crews weren't finished by the time the last ferry left, they spent the night on the island.

Beloved Sanibel resident and business owner, Francis Bailey would open his home to the LCEC crews when they needed to stay overnight.”

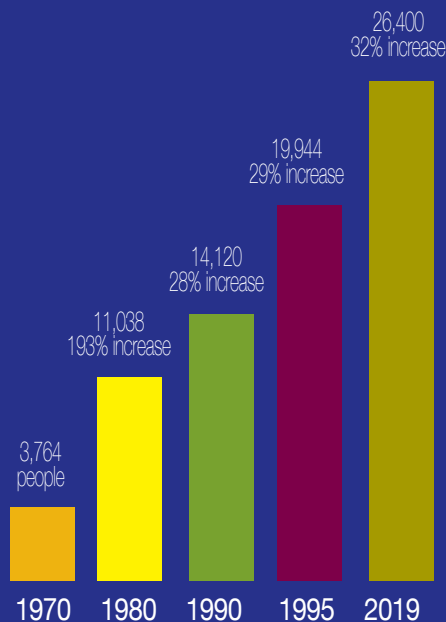
Mr. Bailey who served as an LCEC trustee from 1955 to 1963, shared many stories of his family's store serving as an unofficial reporting station to LCEC crews during the 40's. Before his passing in 2013, Mr. Bailey said that, “There were no phones on the island, and we had the only telegraph machine, so crews would check in here for weather reports or to communicate with headquarters,” Bailey said.

Getting to and from Sanibel is much easier for line crews today. LCEC has a crew assigned to the islands, and they are available around-the-clock for emergencies. Having a designated crew has improved restoration time and allowed employees to become familiar with the unique needs of illuminating the treasures of Sanibel and Captiva Islands.

LCEC shines on island treasures



A brief electrifying history



Immokalee

Immokalee began as a cow-ranching town in the late 1800's. Its name wasn't always Immokalee, though. Some sources say Immokalee was called, Gopher Ridge, and some sources say it was called Allen's Place. Either way, the Seminoles later changed the name to Immokalee, which means "my home."

Immokalee is a multi-cultural, rural community. Guests and residents alike enjoy fishing, boating, horseback riding, sampling ethnic cuisine and nature tours.

Immokalee is located northeast of Naples and about 38 miles east of I-75.

Immokalee's population has grown steadily over the years and is now home to one of Florida's newest universities, Ave Maria University.

Documents obtained from the Collier County Museum, written by Doris Moody Lewis, detail some of the early history of electricity in Immokalee.

Three powerful tales from the archives

- A prospective business man, named C.A. Johnson came to Immokalee in the early 1930's and built a store with living quarters overhead. He later bought more property, built a larger store and stocked up with dry goods, groceries and hardware. He built a rooming house over that store for travelers and visitors. Eventually, Johnson installed his own electric plant to provide for his business.

- Frank Whisnant came to Immokalee in 1933. He too started his own grocery store. He also farmed and built an ice plant. Whisnant provided his own electricity for his ice plant until LCEC was contacted and brought service to Immokalee. Frank's nephew, Jack Whisnant, used to visit Immokalee to spend time with his uncle. Jack Whisnant moved to Immokalee in 1939 and became an LCEC Trustee and remembered how his uncle generated his own electricity for his business.

"There was no electricity at that time," he said. "Then I went to college and into the army after that, and then I went overseas. When I came back around 1945, there was electricity."

Whisnant recalled a man by the name of William Sherrod, who assisted LCEC's General Manager Homer T. Welch in bringing the power lines to Immokalee. William's daughter Mildred Sherrod recalled fine memories of Welch. "He was a great man," she said.

- In 1939, Wallace Spooner and Fred Edenfield set out to bring electricity to Immokalee. They contacted the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) and LCEC in 1940, but the effort temporarily failed because World War II broke out, and LCEC did not have materials to build power lines until the war ended. Finally, in 1946, the power lines were completed.

Marco Island

Editor's note: The following story was written based on LCEC archives and a story printed in the Fort Myers News-Press on Sunday, March 27, 1977.

LCEC hadn't considered providing power to Collier County until Sam and Miles Collier contacted Homer Welch in the late 1940's. The Collier brothers had been generating electricity there and said they wanted to get out of the business; but they had a strong concern about Marco Island. They said the Island badly needed power.

Homer agreed to take over their plant, and he set out to \$100,000 in financing to build the lines. He had a difficult time explaining the deal and the need to the Rural Electrification Association (REA), but they finally agreed. Unfortunately, the Collier brothers never knew the deal went through. One was killed in an accident, and the other died of polio the night before Homer returned with the news. But, after negotiations with the person in charge of the Collier's property, Homer and his crews went to work building the lines.

To his dismay, by the time he had built the power lines into Everglades City, the Collier county seat, it had moved to Naples. But Homer pushed on. He eventually built power lines to two fishing villages on Marco Island.

LCEC ventures into Collier County and lights Marco Island



How Cape Coral got electricity

Cape Coral

It all started when LCEC Manager Homer T. Welch, Jr. and Gulf Guaranty Land & Title Company President Leonard Rosen shook hands in 1957.

The handshake symbolized a promise between Welch and Rosen. Welch agreed to return Rosen's \$3,000 deposit, for the cost to run electricity eight miles down Del Prado Boulevard, after Rosen had 24 homes built and hooked up to LCEC's electric service.

Rosen got his money back in less than a year, and the first resident of Cape Coral, Kenneth Schwartz, was living in his brand new home in June of 1958.

Schwartz was a Gulf American vice president and was sent to Southwest Florida from Baltimore to build Cape Coral.

Schwartz's home no longer stands in Cape Coral, but it was at the corner of Cape Coral Parkway and Coronado. "There were 17 lamp posts down Del Prado Boulevard, and I used to patrol them and let LCEC know when a bulb burned out," Schwartz said, during an interview prior to LCEC's 60th anniversary.

Schwartz speaks very highly of Welch and LCEC. He said Welch was always available to help expand the community. "He and Gulf American's President Mr. Rosen had a very strong bond, and Welch was very responsive to the needs of Gulf American," Schwartz said. "Homer consistently extended a hand of trust, and he assumed you were a trustworthy person."

Cape Coral grew rapidly over the next 10 years. The city started in December 1958 with one resident and boasted 10,000 residents on its 10th birthday in 1968. By 1980, Cape Coral had grown to 34,000 people, and in 1990, the city reached 75,000 residents. The 1999 census showed 96,000 Cape Coral residents and as of 2020 more than 156,981.

As Cape Coral grew, so did LCEC ... constantly improving service and reliability.

Schwartz has moved away from Cape Coral and now resides in Hollywood, Florida, but he was back in Cape Coral to bury a millennium time capsule. He says he still has strong emotional ties to Cape Coral and is very proud to see how far the city has come and how well LCEC is doing.



Lehigh Acres

In 1954, a wealthy industrialist, oilman and inventor, by the name of Lee Ratner, decided to carve a town from his "Lucky Lee Ranch". He created the Lee County Land and Title Co. to develop his dream, Lehigh Acres.

He launched the community in 1955, and by the beginning of 1960, the Lee County Land and Title Co. had built about 500 homes.

Lehigh Acres grew by leaps and bounds and became more well known after the Book of Knowledge ran a contest to find the All-American Family in 1960. The winners of the contest, chosen from nominations that came in from all over the country, would receive a free home in Lehigh Acres.

In order to choose the All-American family, one family from each state came to live with the judges for one week.

The prized house was touted as a Westinghouse Total Electric Gold Medallion home. The newspaper said the home had "the maximum in electricity controlled automatic devices plus perfectly controlled lighting under all conditions."

Lehigh Acres continued to grow after the All-American Family contest, and in 1961, the town had grown large enough to have representation on LCEC's Board of Trustees.

In July of 1962, the Lehigh Acres News Weekly reported that a new substation and transmission line were being tested and put into service in Lehigh Acres. LCEC worked skillfully to make the transition, so that when the substation was put into operation, there would be no interruption in power supply. The news article explained that LCEC employees were going to utilize walkie-talkies to communicate during the changeover, so that when the previous power facilities were de-energized and the new ones were put into operation, there would only be a momentary interruption.

The substation was needed because Lehigh's power was coming all the way from the Orange River generating plant to Immokalee and then to Lehigh.

The substation was 3,000 kw, more than three times the required capacity needed at the time. This was in anticipation of continued growth in the community.

Later, the capacity of the substation was upgraded to 5,000 KW, then in 1966 the capacity was increased to 10,000 KW.

Today, Lehigh Acres is still growing and home to about 87,000 residents. Lehigh consists of more than 100 square miles, many lakes and ponds and 175 miles of canals.

*Lucky
Lehigh Acres
gets the
all-american
family*



LCEC

illuminates Golden Gate



Golden Gate

In 1986, LCEC extended power lines to a small pocket of residents who were living without electricity in Golden Gate Estates, 11 miles outside Immokalee.

Although the area was within FPL boundaries, the utilities agreed that this territory would be better served by LCEC because the nature of a cooperative is to provide electric service to areas that aren't populated enough for a profit-minded, investor-owned utility to serve.

Sandra and Frances Miller initiated the request that led to the territory agreement. The young couple lived in Immokalee and wanted to move to the country, so they built a home and soon realized that there was no electricity available.

"When we decided to build in the country, electricity was the farthest thing from our minds," Sandra Miller said. "We figured they would have to give us power once we built the house."

However, FPL said the Millers would have to pay an aid to construction fee, which the Millers considered very expensive. Instead, they installed a gas water heater and stove and purchased a small generator to power their water pump, lights, and a few appliances.

"The generator was inconvenient and expensive," Sandra Miller said. She was determined to get power for her home.

"I wrote and called everyone I could think of, including the Public Service Commission, Sen. Paula Hawkins and Governor Graham. Finally, someone suggested I call Lee County Electric Cooperative," Sandra Miller said. "I asked if LCEC would build the lines to our home, and when they called back several weeks later and said they'd arrange it with FPL, I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming."

Sandra Miller was so ecstatic to get electricity at last that she vowed she'd "turn on all the lights and let them burn for a month."

"They connected the meter at 5 o'clock and my husband had an air conditioner contractor out here by 6," she said. "I don't care how much it costs, I'll never complain about the electric bill."