

The Road Not Taken

By William L. Caynor Sr., Price Electric CEO

If you knew where you wanted to go and all the trials and tribulations it would take to get there, would you choose to go? If it involved impactful change, would you still consider the journey? Twenty years ago, I adopted a mantra from the Robert Frost poem, "The Road Not Taken." Frost writes, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by, and it has made all the difference." Roads are a metaphor for change and those choices when change comes. Choosing an alternative direction that hasn't historically been the norm, in today's electrical environment, has in some cases become the norm.

These days, rapid technology transformations, baby boomer retirements, new millennial work forces, and state and national agendas pertaining to climate change have immersed a normally and predictable state. Never before has so much impacted our industry at any given time and what does the future truly hold? Will most of the electrical grid be sustainable with renewable energy? Will electric vehicles become commonplace as opposed to fuel or gas models? Will there be self-driving vehicles on our WI highways? Will battery storage be available to store home renewable energy generation? I think the answer to all these questions is yes, although the uncertainty is when will this occur?

Electric generation retirements in our industry have grown significantly with the timing and initiation of the Clean Power Plan (CPP). More than 127 GW of generator capacity has been retired in the US since 2005. The Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO), which Dairyland Power Cooperative (DPC) and your cooperative are part of, has seen 11 GW of these retirements. Eleven gigawatts are enough energy to continually power over seven million residential homes, which is more than the population of Wisconsin. These generation retirements are occurring not only with coal, but gas turbines and nuclear as well. Sixty-five percent of the retirements have been coal, while 27% is natural gas. The drivers are not caused strictly by the CPP, but also by the age of the existing plants and the low competitive prices in the marketplace being brought on by renewable resources and low energy prices, such as natural and liquefied petroleum gas.

One major concern with generation plant closures is locality. Although we are tied together within the MISO grid system, any generation removal requires assessment as to whether other sources can adequately serve the consumers through the existing transmission infrastructure. System improvements might be required in order to remove the source. New generation sources, which are mainly renewable and natural gas, need to be situated near infrastructure as well. A combined cycle natural gas plant, such as the 525-550 MW plant DPC is building in Superior, WI would be near current gas and transmission lines.

Now I reflect back to ten years ago, when I met a stranger who through conversation saw the world similar to myself. During the course of this conversation he told me a story of a poet who came to speak to his grade school class in the 1950's and as this poet sat on a desk within reaching distance of him, he read the poem, "The Road Not Taken." This had a huge influence on this stranger's life and he utilized these words throughout his life. This poet was Robert Frost and this stranger I now call friend.