

Cranking The Pedals At The Municipal Power Plant

In case you haven't yet thought about what you'll be doing exactly eleven months from today (November 8, 2005), it will be a Tuesday, Election Day.

Besides the usual complement of rascals and scalawags on the ballot, you'll have your chance to vote for or against an initiative to empower the City Council of Iowa City to establish a municipal electric utility system (if it feels frisky).

Most people agree that our gas and electric service is pretty reliable. Certain malcontents believe that they are paying too much for what they're getting, but I'm sure they feel the same way every time they have pay for something that can only be purchased from one source (i.e. cable TV, water & sewer services, inflatable Britney Spears dolls, etc.).

On the other hand, there are those who believe that the City of Iowa City cannot be trusted to operate anything more complex than a lemonade stand.

I'm sure that MidAmerican Energy will be interested to know that my own opinion about the desirability of creating a municipal power company is entirely dependent on the caliber of our current meter reader.

Our natural gas meter is indoors - as are most folks' - so once each month someone comes by to take a reading. Our current meter reader is a prince. He always comes on the correct day, and if we aren't home, he'll leave a notice about how to phone in the reading.

If we remember to put out the reading card with the little clock faces with movable hands, he'll reset them all to zero so we'll know he's been there. There is a special place for him in Heaven.

In contrast, the meter reader we had a few years ago - let's call him Otto - was (I'll be generous) less than consistent.

You may be aware that if a monthly reading doesn't occur for any reason, your bill will be "estimated" for that month. I don't know what the good folks at MidAmerican thought LuAnn and I were up to, but their estimated gas readings indicated they believed we were operating a branch foundry for U.S. Steel in our basement.

Eight consecutive estimated readings occurred one year before we were able to trap Otto, drag him into our basement and press his nose against our gas meter. Two days later, our corrected bill arrived in the mail (another monopoly!) with a credit for eight months of overbillings on gas usage alone - \$842.19.

Being overcharged about \$100 per month for estimated gas usage was enough incentive for us to do our best to try to connect with Otto, but he was very clever.

LuAnn is a Registered Nurse who works part-time, so she was often home on meter reading days. Either Otto would regularly skip our visit, or he knocked so softly she couldn't hear him. Sometimes she would hear something and get to the door just in time to see him disappearing in his truck.

It was to the point that she became convinced that Otto was psychologically stalking her. "This is not a small man," LuAnn would say. "Most teenagers who ring your doorbell as a prank can't disappear that fast."

To add insult to injury, we would periodically get testy letters from MidAmerican saying it had been too long since their last official reading and we needed to make arrangements with them to remedy the situation. LuAnn would get, uh, "agitated" every time we received one.

One time after we received a letter she called a supervisor at MidAmerican and made it clear that if Otto wanted to continue to be able to father children, he'd better try harder next time to find out if someone was home.

So the next meter-reading day, Otto (ignoring the illuminated door bell button) banged loudly on the back door until LuAnn appeared – he must have been informed about his uncertain future in procreation.

Unfortunately, our hopes for consistent meter readings were dashed the following month – the designated day passed with no sign of him.

That's all old voltage through the fuse box, and Otto doesn't work there any more. I suspect that he has moved on to a promising career as a software support technician for Microsoft.

But back to the referendum. I guarantee that if Otto were still around, I would insist on personally cranking the pedals attached to any municipal power generator. But as long we have our current meter reader, MidAmerican and I will get along fine.