

Meet your Columbia REA Board of Directors



Neil Carpenter
2019 Board Vice President
4th Generation Farmer
Waitsburg, Wash.

Q: When did your family first arrive in this part of the country?

NC: “My great grandfather came out here in the early 1860s from Wisconsin. But he took a bit of an indirect route. He went to Panama, by boat, then took a train across Panama...before the Panama Canal was built. Then he bought a horse and rode all the way up the west coast and ended up mining for gold in California and Virginia City, Nevada. He hit a vein and made \$10,000 in 3 months.

“According to family

lore...I haven’t been able to prove it or find record of it...his roommate over that winter in Virginia City was Mark Twain. The dates do match up with the time that Mark Twain was in that part of the country.”

(editor’s note: Mark Twain wrote the short story that launched his career, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” in 1865. The story is set in Angel’s Camp, Calif., a gold rush town about 120 miles from Virginia City.)

Q: So how did he end up in Waitsburg?

NC: “Well, the gold money kind of dried up. He made some investments and improvements to his mining operation that didn’t exactly work out, so he moved on. He ended up here, and acquired a piece of land through the Federal Homestead Act.

“My grandfather added to that, and the family farm is

now 2,000 acres.”

Q: And is it still a working farm?

NC: “Oh yeah! We grow wheat, barley, peas, canola... whatever I can lose less money at.”

Q: Who is we?

NC: “Good question...I guess it’s pretty much just me and my wife, Kathy. My son has been helping me, but I’m not sure he is in the farm business for the long haul. Sometimes I’ll hire on help during the busiest times, but with technology now, it’s not too bad. One combine can now do what used to take four.”

Q: Speaking of technology, your grandfather had some foresight when it came to building a home and preparing for modern conveniences of the future...?

NC: “When my grandfather built our house on the farm, he had it wired for electricity before the electrical system was created, because he knew electricity was coming. He had a generator that charged batteries, and he ran everything off of battery power.

“When Columbia REA built power lines out to the farm in 1940, he just plugged in and he was ready to go.”

Q: So your family is an original Columbia REA member?



The Carpenter family farm, built by Neil’s grandfather. It was wired for electricity before public utilities were available. Power was provided by batteries charged with a generator.

NC: “Yes. We’ve been REA members at the farm for as long as Columbia REA has been around. I’m not sure whether he was part of that original group that got together in Dayton and formed the REA, but it wouldn’t surprise me.”

Q: How long have you been a Columbia REA Board Member?

NC: “I’m just finishing up my first term, and will be up for re-election next year. It took longer than I wanted it to for me to be eligible for Board membership. We moved to town several years ago, and we got our power from PPL. I wanted to switch to REA right away, because in order to serve on the Board, you have to be a member at your place of residence. We had always dealt with Columbia REA out on the farm. I loved them...great people.

“Finally, about five years ago, we were able to switch to Columbia REA. Once we were REA members at my house, I submitted my own name as a candidate for the Board, and was fortunate enough to be elected. I’ve been on other co-op boards before. I really like them...because a co-op Board is trying to help everybody as best they can.”

Q: What are the big issues for the Columbia REA Board moving forward?

NC: “Well for me, if things turn out, I’ll be Board President in my next term, so that will be a personal challenge that I look forward to. I was treasurer last year. By going through the different positions, you get a little bit closer look at all the things going on with the Cooperative.

“As far as Board issues, I think the thing we always try to keep focused on is keeping the rates down. That’s always an important issue, obviously. We have a lot of miles of line to service, and some of those costs are

beyond our control.”

Q: You mentioned that you’ve been on other Boards. How does the Columbia REA Board compare?

NC: “I’ve been on a lot of Boards. This one is a whole different animal. It’s the most complex Board I’ve been on. You have to put in time. It’s a constant learning experience. I’m just getting comfortable with what I know. It takes a while. You’re hit with a lot of stuff you’ve



The home and farm where Neil grew up, purchased by his grandfather in 1942. The main house was eventually lost to a fire.

never known about. One report we were given for our last Board Meeting was 179 pages long. We had a synopsis of it, but if you wanted to get into it, the whole thing was available to us.”

Q: Farming is hard enough, isn’t it? Why do you do this?

NC: “I think the REA is a great Cooperative. I’ve been around it my whole life, literally. Columbia REA does so much for the community, the people are great...really nice people. And it’s important to know that they’ve got my best interests, as a member, in mind.

“My grandfather’s original barn is still standing out there. It’s pretty cool. We still own my great grandfather’s original homestead property. I’ll always have that. There is a lot of family history there that Columbia REA has been a part of.”