

# Back in the Saddle

By Pat Petersen, Training and Technical Assistance Specialist

Looking back at the past few months is like looking at a blurry picture. Blurry because we really didn't know how the COVID-19 virus was going to affect all of us then and how it continues to affect us now. Our annual conference was the last time our organization was involved in one of the most important things for our members, the training of water and waste water operators. That was March 11!! Then three months after the COVID pandemic was declared, we could train operators again in person, but with strict guidelines and measures to follow. It didn't matter what I had to do, this is what I signed up for when I took this job.

After cancelling the April (Mitchell) and the May (Hartington) classes, it was time to move forward with planning the Sutton water operator class. This class has become my highest attended class for the past several years. Last year 53 operators were in attendance and there was no way we were going to all fit in the Fox Hollow Clubhouse if we had to "social distance" this year. After visiting with Gary, Sutton's water operator, we came up with a plan. We would use the Sutton Community Center, a gymnasium!

When I arrived in Sutton I had some ideas on how I would set up the gym for the class. Little did I know that each one of those ideas would end up in a different configuration on the gym floor. Finally, 2 and a half hours later it was ready to go. The attendees would be social distanced, and we would not be close to the actual capacity of the building. When I left the community center that afternoon it felt good to have the feeling of normalcy knowing we were going to have a class in the morning.

On the morning of June 25, rescheduled from June 10, we were back in action! All 32 of the pre-registered operators were there. As I made some announcements at the beginning of the session, it was made clear to me that this is how these men and women want to gain their recertification hours. They want it to be personal, to be able to talk to other operators and to just be a part of the group. I felt the same way, this is how we do it!!

One thing we did do at this class was some "hands-on" type learning. We learned some theories of how to locate utilities right away in the morning and then we actually went outside and saw how it is done. Some of the operators brought their own locators and were given instructions on how to use them. It went well. Hand in hand with the locating, operators were given an in-depth overview on what is new at Nebraska 811. Just like that, the morning session was over.

The afternoon flew by. We actually took time to listen to operators' experiences and how the pandemic has not only changed their lives but how they do things as operators. Sampling techniques and proper procedures when dealing with the customers were two discussion points. The discussion was real and it meant something to everyone. It was a great day!

Although the picture still remains a little blurry on where we are heading, at least we have achieved some normalcy to how we are doing things. I really appreciated the flexibility and understanding of the attendees and presenters. Also, Gary and the City of Sutton helped me out tremendously when it came to finding a different venue. Who knows, maybe next year we'll be back out at Fox Hollow....

