

Learning and Fun

By Pat Petersen, Training Specialist

Last year as we pulled up to the Gering Civic Center in mid-September the thermometer on the marquee out front read 96 degrees. This year as we rolled in it read 72 degrees. After a 6.5 hour drive and a long, hot summer the crisp fresh air of western Nebraska was, to say the least, refreshing! It was fall conference time in Gering. Some operators like this conference because of its relaxed atmosphere and its different extra-curricular activities. It is a more relaxed conference but the learning, sharing and problem-solving amongst operators and board members is similar to the annual conference. It's just on a smaller scale. The people in the western part of the state and the Gering Civic Center are such gracious hosts that if I was still an operator today, I would ask my leaders for a chance to attend.

The fall conference is set up a little bit different than the annual conference. On Tuesday, there is a stand-alone "pre-conference" that allows operators the chance to attend a 5 hour session that is focused on the same topic. This year, although some may think it is not important, safety was the main topic. The presenter for the 5-hour session was Bob Hessler with Safetyline Consultants. Bob has a special way of getting the operators' attention and then getting his point across. Bob has done similar pre-conferences for the Nebraska Rural Water Association in the past and this year he continued his tradition of a great pre-conference. Thanks, Bob!

Wednesday is the "kick-off" for the actual conference. Board member, Greg Bouc, welcomed all of those in attendance and led the Pledge of Allegiance to start the show. Traditionally, the drinking water administrator will give a regulation update. This year was no different. Howard Isaacs, Drinking Water Administrator with the Department of Health, gave his update and shared his time with Natalie Furrow with USDA/RD who gave her update. Bill Podraza gave us all some good advice on "Customer Relations" and Rich Koenig finished the first day of the conference by moderating an operator forum which allowed operators to share stories, ask questions and, overall, just learn from what the other operators may be going through or having a tough time with. The day went by fast and furiously and then it was time to relax with some good food, good drinks and a few awards.

The banquet was held Wednesday night. Mike Stanzel, NeRWA Circuit Rider, was the MC and gave the microphone up to Andy Kahle to present this year's Western Conference Outstanding Operator Award. This year's award went to Patrick Closson from the City of Gering. This is an outstanding tribute to a fantastic water operator! Congratulations, Pat! Wednesday night's banquet ended with the golf, trapshoot and poker run awards. The "fun stuff" was very well attended and, most of all, the generous support of our vendors and exhibitors made all of these things happen!

The final day of the conference is always the earliest and the busiest. Let's just say the cleaning lady at the Civic Center let me in "early" to get the day started. Breakfast is served at 6:30 and training sessions begin at 7:30. This year's breakfast was very well attended and the food was fantastic.

Training sessions started at 7:30 AM and concluded at 3:30 PM on Thursday. All sessions were very well attended and the presenters all did a wonderful job! Operators, whether they were there for water, well drillers, wastewater or backflow, had a chance to grab 5 or 6 more hours towards their licenses. Some of the presentations included a course on locating, math, utility technology, emergency response, trenching and shoring and a round table with the area NDHHS Field Reps.

So before I closed the tailgate on my pickup and started heading east I thought about all of the operators, vendors and companies that are associated with water/wastewater that make our fall western conference and our annual conference a success year in and year out. This year's golf sponsors were Barco Municipal Products, Hawkins Inc., HD Supply, Maguire Iron, Midco Diving, Miller and Associates, Sargent Drilling and MC Schaff and Associates. Trapshoot sponsors were Municipal Automation and Johnson Service. The social hour was sponsored by HD Supply. Also, this year the Poker Run had a sponsor, Municipal Supply.

Throughout the day on Wednesday and Thursday, operators were given the chance to win various door prizes that were given out by the exhibitors and vendors. Prizes ranged from hats, flashlights, pullovers, tackle boxes and many other items. The list of winners was quite long. If you were lucky enough to win a prize, congratulations, and if you didn't, we will have a bunch of prizes again next year!

The Gering Civic Center has a staff that goes above and beyond to help our organization. Whether there is an audio/video issue or the registration table needs coffee, it gets taken care of! The operators don't always get to see the great people that actually make these facilities work but I will say that Rick and Judy Keller are two of the best and they have a remarkable staff. Thanks, Rick and Judy!

Another very important group that complements our organization is the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Health Drinking Water Division. We work hand in hand with the NDHHS and they are always willing to offer training, advice and support when necessary. Thank you, Howard and your crew!

Finally, how can I forget my own team? Barney, Randy, both Mike's, Doug and the office staff of Salli, Carol, and Amy. You guys do it right. Thanks for making it fun and easy!

Many of you may have noticed that our Source Water Specialist, Doug Buresh, was not in attendance. Doug fell ill the week before the conference and is slowly on his way to recovery. We need to get you back, Doug. The annual conference is right around the corner and we need a full team to run it. Get well soon! I'm sure many operators wish you the same.

Now, is Christmas less than TWO MONTHS AWAY?? HO, HO, HO....