

Reflections of a Water Operator

By Randy Hellbusch, Circuit Rider

Nebraska Rural Water has published several articles recently about the aging workforce and the need to recruit qualified people into the water profession. One of the realizations we have come to is that people outside of the profession have little or no idea about what being a water operator entails. We have decided to get some information first hand from some water operators around the state to hopefully educate others on what running a water system is all about.

I had an opportunity recently to sit down with Clint Johnson from the City of Pawnee City. Clint also is the certified water and sewer operator for the Village of Burchard and sewer operator for the Village of Steinauer. Clint has worked for the City of Pawnee City for 14 years. When asked for his official title, Clint chuckled and said whatever is required on any certain day. He is actually the City Zoning Administrator and Maintenance Superintendent. Clint also added that the City of Pawnee City isn't real big on titles. Everyone just pitches in where they are needed.

Most days start with phone calls and paper work. After mid-morning, every day varies from water shutoffs or turning water on to a new residence to hydrant flushing, etc. Normal work days begin at 8 a.m. and end at 4:30 p.m. When an emergency arises or during times of snow, these times can vary a great deal.



Clint is a Grade 3 water operator certified by the State of Nebraska. This enables him to be in responsible charge of a community water system with a population of up to 15,000, or a water system of up to 2,000 population that treats water to remove harmful materials or to improve the aesthetic quality of the delivered water.

To obtain a Grade 3 license, an individual must complete a validated exam recommended by the State Advisory Council on Public Water Supply and approved by the Director, possess a high school diploma and have a minimum of two years responsible charge of a community water supply system or three years operation of a system under the supervision of a person possessing a Grade 3 license. Clint stated that three years of college isn't for everyone, and being a water operator is one way to have a good paying job in your local community that can be very rewarding.



Clint says that dealing with the people and the challenges each day brings are very enjoyable to him. He enjoys being outdoors and doing something different each day. Each day brings a different challenge. Clint at one time held an assembly line position and says he hopes to never have to return to that again. The changes in day-to-day operations and flexibility of the water operator job are much more rewarding.

The downside of the job is repairing a water main in minus 10-degree weather. You have no choice though - it must be done. Some town's people also sometimes will try to take advantage of you and expect the city to solve every problem they have. Those cases are rare however. Another part of the job that Clint says is getting more demanding is the paper work aspect. He much more enjoys the hands-on aspect of the job as well as working with the public.

Clint would advise any young person that would like to remain in their community and be a huge part of the community's future, to visit with their current city staff. It is a very rewarding job and it does not require a 4-year college education; yet you work with science, biology, public relations, as well as all of the hands on duties.

One of the major challenges Clint sees for small systems in the future is consolidation. Many towns will not have a choice. The cost of meeting future regulations will be prohibitive. EPA regulations are getting to the point that systems are almost required to provide sterilized water. More and more mandates will require small systems to work cooperatively.

Some of the major changes Clint has seen in his last 14 years are the testing requirements and paper work required to do the job successfully. A water operator has the ability to affect thousands of people's lives on a daily basis. The job doesn't necessarily carry a lot of prestige, but when people don't realize you exist is when you are doing your job the best. It is a job where you must care about more than just a paycheck. You are not only responsible for supplying safe drinking water to all of the residents in town, but that also includes your own family and friends.