

# Rural Electric Youth

**“Part of the program is to help create better citizens. By exposing our students to government in action, it empowers them to be more involved in their own communities.”**

by Brenda Kleinjan

**I**T OFTEN STARTS WITH A SIMPLE ESSAY. THE END result is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

It is the Rural Electric Youth Tour.

“Until I started doing the research for the essay, I hadn’t thought that much about cooperatives,” said Steve Smeenck, who wrote an essay to become one of Butte Electric Cooperative’s participants on the 1965 Rural Electric Youth Tour. A quarter century after that trip, he would embark upon another journey, this time as a director for the very cooperative that had invested in him as a teen.

“The Youth Tour gave me a pretty positive feeling for the cooperatives, which I remember thinking about when I ran for the board in 1989,” said Smeenck, who also served nine years as a director for Rushmore Electric Power Cooperative in Rapid City, S.D., along with the more than 16 years for the Newell, S.D.-based Butte Electric.

“It probably opened my eyes up to the world more than anything. That got me more open to other things like serving on the co-op board, the county commission. It opened you up to the thought that there is more out there than just western South Dakota and it got me involved,” said Smeenck.

Inspiring that awakening is one of the very reasons that electric cooperatives invest in the program.

“Part of the program is to help create better citizens. By exposing our students to government in action, it

empowers them to be more involved in their own communities,” said Randy Dwyer, director of grassroots advocacy for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association in Arlington, Va. Dwyer’s department is responsible for coordinating the national Youth Tour which brings about 1,400 students from more than 40 states to the nation’s capitol.

Both Smeenck and his wife, Kay, remember meeting the elected officials of the day while on tour. Kay (Shaffer) represented West River Electric Association in Wall, S.D., on the 1966 tour. Little did she know that one of her fellow tour mates – Lyn Smeenck – would one day be her brother-in-law.

“We were the first ones in line to shake hands with the president, Lyndon Baines Johnson. We met both Lyndon and Lady Bird – that was really impressive,” said Kay Smeenck.

Since South Dakota first began participating in the program in the early 1960s, the state’s electric cooperatives have sent more than 850 high school students into Washington, D.C., each June for the program. While some aspects of the tour change from year to year, others remain the same. There is still sightseeing, interacting with teens from other parts of the country and the opportunity to learn more about electric cooperatives. There are also meetings with the state’s delegation, which often has a lasting impression on the students.



# Tour

Forty years later, the Smeenks' experiences are echoed by Butte's 2005 representative, Clay Sloan.

"I thought it was a really good experience on the whole," said Sloan, a senior at Belle Fourche High School who joined 32 other South Dakota teens on the 2005 Youth Tour.

Among the things that struck Sloan were the size of the monuments and being able to visit them in person.

"It was exciting to be in a big city – I'd never been in the heart of a city," said Sloan.

Both Sloan and the Smeenks listed meeting with their elected officials as a highlight of the trip.

Sloan participated in a job shadow program where Youth Tour participants are assigned to one of the state's two Senate offices or the House of Representative's office. During the program, students get an up-close feel for the work done by staff members behind the scenes to keep the senators and representative informed about current issues.

"We helped in opening the mail – even though it was a mundane task, it was cool!" said Sloan.

In 1993, Adam Healy was in Sloan's shoes. The Irene, S.D., native represented Bon Homme Yankton Electric Association on the 1993 Rural Electric Youth Tour and was able to get a behind-the-scenes look at government which only helped fuel his already keen interest in politics.

"My most exciting moment was going to the Capitol and visiting the congressional delegation," said Healy, who is now a staff member for Sen. Tim Johnson, D-S.D.

Healy is not alone as a Youth Tour alum on Capitol Hill. Letcher, S.D.,-native Andrea Fouberg, who represented Central Electric Cooperative, Mitchell, S.D., on the 1994 tour, is a staff member for Sen. John Thune, R-S.D.

For Healy, he enjoys that his Youth Tour experience is relevant in his current work.

"Its kind of neat to see how it can come full circle," said Healy, who noted that the program is still important for those students who might not be as interested in politics.

"It's good for all citizens to have an awareness of the issues and how government works," said Healy. "They not only get to do sightseeing but also get a sense of what their government is all about and the government programs that might affect them."

For 1973 Youth Tour alum Kenneth Hellevang, the electric cooperative tie that he first experienced on the Youth Tour is one that he has repeatedly faced through his career.

"It's a nice foundation that I've thought about different times through the years," said Hellevang, an extension engineer for the North Dakota State University's Agriculture Extension Service. Hellevang, a native of Eden, S.D., represented Lake Region Electric Association, Webster, S.D., on the tour. He then earned engineering degrees at South Dakota State University before receiving his doctorate at NDSU. His job takes him around the region providing education and technical



**Above:** During the job shadow day, Clay Sloan, second from left, representing Butte Electric Cooperative in Newell, S.D., reviews a letter with a fellow Youth Tour student to determine what interest area the letter should be assigned to. **Top:** South Dakota's representatives to the 1969 Rural Electric Youth Tour pose for a photo at the U.S. Capitol. **Cover photo:** the 2005 South Dakota Rural Electric Youth Tour delegation takes a group photo on the east steps of the U.S. Capitol. **Opposite Page and Cover:** Youth Tour students visited the FDR memorial in 2005.

information to citizens about a variety of issues, particularly on grain storage and facilities.

"Growing up in rural South Dakota and getting an opportunity to go to Washington, D.C., – it was quite an opportunity to expand your horizons," said Hellevang.

"I remember different parts of the touring. We had breakfast one morning with our congressmen. That was a big deal to me at the time to sit down with the senators and congressmen," said Hellevang.

Though his career has allowed him to travel across the United States and return numerous times to Washington, he still remembers the Youth Tour experience.

"It gave me a familiarity with rural electrics that I continue to use today," said Hellevang.

For more information on the Youth Tour and other programs such as scholarships offered for area youth, contact your local electric cooperative.