

Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.  
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FROM THE PRESIDENT & CEO

How much control do we have over rate increases?



by Wayne Miller  
President & CEO

AT THE END of 2012, we informed you of an increase in the “generation and transmission” (G&T) portion of your bill, effective with bills to be mailed in February. Though we consider raising rates only when we absolutely have to and always look for ways to slow the pace of increases, this adjustment was necessary.

When rates have to be raised, it’s helpful to understand what the increase means to your bottom line, why it is needed and what our co-op is doing to contain costs while fulfilling our mission to deliver safe, reliable power.


The \$0.004 per kilowatt-hour (kWh) increase changes the “G&T” rate you pay from \$0.068/kWh to \$0.072. This means if you use 1,000 kWh per month (as the average household does) your total bill will be \$4 more, or an increase of 3.4 percent for this example. Rising costs from our wholesale power supplier, Allegheny Electric Cooperative, Inc., necessitated the increase.

Governed by a board made up of one board member from each of the 13 Pennsylvania electric co-ops (including Valley) and one in New Jersey, Allegheny, like every other utility, operates in an environment of increasing costs — fuel, regulations and market forces to name a few. These costs have to be recouped. Fortunately, Allegheny (and in turn the co-ops it serves) is largely shielded from the volatility of open-market electricity prices because only 30 percent of our power is purchased there. The bulk of our power comes from nuclear and hydroelectric plants owned wholly or in part by Allegheny and through a long-term contract with the New York Power Authority. That’s one way we collectively have some control over rates.

Another way is to be more efficient in the use of that power once it reaches our homes and businesses. For instance, Valley members can participate in our demand response program, which can result in fewer and less dramatic rate increases. Here’s how it works: Placing demand response units (DRUs) on high-use appliances, such as water heaters, reduces the need for power during periods of peak use, when it is more expensive. This is because DRUs installed on electric water heaters (as well as heat pumps and central air conditioning units) temporarily switch off power to the devices when they receive a signal that demand is approaching a high level. This enables the shifting of electric use away from periods of peak demand. The larger the aggregate shift to off-peak periods, the fewer kilowatt-hours purchased at the highest prices.

Also, to get an idea of how efficiently you are using the electricity you’re buying, you could conduct a home energy audit. You can complete a free, online audit at [www.valleyrec.com](http://www.valleyrec.com) by clicking on the “Save Energy” tab of our homepage. Here, you’ll find an energy calculator that will help you determine which rooms of your house use the most energy. There’s also a virtual library covering everything from types of energy used in the U.S. to how to lessen your washing machine’s impact on your budget.

You may also ask our staff energy specialist to provide a free, onsite home energy audit. During this visit, you can find ways to lessen heating and cooling losses and also ask about the use of energy efficient appliances and electronics.

Though the New Year brings changes, it also brings the same resolution for us. As always, we will provide the best possible service at the lowest possible price to you, the members and owners of Valley Rural Electric Cooperative. 

# Artist makes home live-in masterpiece

BY DOUG ROLES

Director of Member Services

**SOME OLD HOUSES** require just a little tender loving care to look good again. And then there are those homes, that with a bigger dose of “TLC,” can be something truly wonderful. Valley Rural Electric Co-op member Jean Murphy lives in one of the latter homes — a piece of Huntingdon County history that she’s restored over the last 20 years using an abundance of vision and creativity.

Her work on the Christian Oyer Jr. House near Saulsburg has produced a renovated model of 1830s Federal-style architecture in a home that once was slowly wilting in solitude, screened from view behind a jungle of overgrowth.

“My daughter and I passed it three times before we realized where it was,” Murphy reports. “When I came, the house had no mechanicals: no heat, no wires and no water at all. There was one lightbulb in the downstairs hall.”

She jokes that the condition of the house was “a great place to start.”

A New York City native who had taught painting and color at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., for 18 years, Murphy first came to central Pennsylvania to visit family. She loved the landscape here, so she contacted a colleague in State College to start a house search, and it was suggested that she look at the Oyer property. In 1990, she made her first trip through the back roads of Barree Township to see the place.



**BEFORE AND AFTER:** Valley REC member Jean Murphy spent 20 years refurbishing the 1800s Christian Oyer Jr. House in Huntingdon County. Her efforts have provided her a beautiful home and placed the property on the National Park Service Register of Historic Places. The undated photo, below left, shows the house at its worst. Notice the dormers are missing. (Photos by Doug Roles)

“It had been abandoned for about 20 years,” she recalls. “The back door was hanging open. Birds were everywhere. There was a family of cats living in the attic. But I knew right away it was something special.”

Murphy said she also knew it would take a lot of work to bring the home back to life. She had just spent over 10 years designing and building one of the first earth-sheltered homes in Indiana when this opportunity arose. She immediately put that home on the market and, in the year it took to persuade the owner to sell, she went through 10 years of magazines such as *Old House Journal* to learn what to do and what not to do in her renovations. Keeping in mind the strict criteria for having a home placed on the National Park Service Register of Historic Places, she began her work by shoveling out debris.

Murphy said there were 52 missing glass panes when she arrived. At one point she had 42 pans in the attic to catch leaks.

“It’s a really special old house; it’s a spectacular old house,” Murphy says. “I restored it from almost past repair, for 20 years, to its present state. It came together in pieces.”

While in the process of selling her Indiana home, Murphy initially directed work at the Oyer house by phone. A previous owner thankfully had completed some critical structural repairs about 1970, installing steel beams and a concrete floor in the basement.

Murphy said she is grateful for the know-how of a number of talented local contractors who took on various parts of the project. A contracted crew spent three months on drywall and plaster work to the stucco-stone structure. When upgrades (such as the modernization of the kitchen, installation of baths and the addition of chasers for heating, plumbing and electrical runs) were made, Murphy planned them so that they could be removed if a future owner ever wanted a certain room to go back to the actual 19th-century state. The flues of the limestone fireplaces have been plugged to prevent heat loss, but otherwise are functional. Murphy installed a coal burner for heat and installed storm windows for energy conservation. But the windows do not detract from the appearance of the original pane glass.

She put a galley kitchen and bath in the attic. While working there, she discovered that six dormers had been removed during some previous roofing project. When she noticed wider spacing between some of the roof beams than others, Murphy knew



something was amiss because in the Federal building, the spacing should have been even. Finding the remains of mortise and tenon joints in the roof structure confirmed

revealed that the entire room was adorned with decorative stenciling, a rarity in this area for homes of the period. Murphy restored the stenciling by cutting 13 different cardboard patterns of the original. Complicating the restoration was the discovery that some of the original work was done with a water-soluble paint, making cleaning of the walls a delicate task.

Murphy left a “document” — a patch of untouched, though faded, original stencil — in the room. Restoring the stencil took three solid months of effort. Though Murphy had furnished her Indiana home with a mix of contemporary and antique furniture, she filled this house with a collection of antiques and hand-sewn quilts.

“Here it’s all antique,” she reports. “What could work in some settings won’t in another, so I sold my Nakashima furniture.”

Each bedroom has a different color for the fireplace mantles and wood molding around windows and doors. Murphy is especially fond of the vinegar painting on the maple doors of a floor-to-ceiling closet in the master bedroom and another maple door to her office.

“All the rooms have these great big windows,” she says, noting that the large windows show the Federal style at a time when smaller windows would have kept more heat in the home.

Murphy believes the house was built more with beauty than utility in mind.

Murphy added a sunroom at the rear entrance of the home, but kept an original look by having the semi-circular fanlight above the new back door mirror the design of the original doorway and sidelights. Murphy’s son-in-law constructed an outbuilding that serves as a two-car garage next to the house. Murphy chose to build it with barn boards and cedar siding and painted it to complement the appearance of the house.

The 10-room, 32-foot by 42-foot house sets on 1.8 acres and is surrounded by the Gibboney dairy farm. A small pond adjacent to the home was constructed by Murphy on Gibboney property with the owner’s

approval. There are double chimneys on each end, and the front and rear of the house are mirror images as well. There are four bedrooms, three baths and seven fireplaces. The ceilings are 9-foot, 10 inches high.

The second floor has five windows, which run above the central door and four windows of the first floor. The pane glass windows feature three rows of three panes in the upper sash over two rows of three panes in the lower.

“It’s so typical of a Federal house in every way,” Murphy says.

She believes the home had an eighth fireplace in the basement, where the linear edges in a portion of stonework are evident. She also believes the property had a root cellar or a tunnel entrance on the east end of the home because of stonework she discovered in the yard.

Murphy found period shutters from an antique shop to replace those that were missing. The house has its original floors and hardware.

Murphy speculates that the second-



Jean Murphy, bottom, left, displays a stencil template she made. The bedroom, kitchen and dining room (also shown at left, in order from top,) are filled with Murphy’s antiques and hand-sewn quilts. Above, right: Late afternoon sun streams into The Stencil Room.



that dormers were originally tied into the rafters. New dormers, erected in 1994, were modeled after those on the Curtin mansion at Curtin Village near Milesburg.

The Oyer home has been featured in *The Daily News*, Huntingdon; *Common Ground*, McVeytown and in Ann Eckert Brown’s 2003 book, “American Wall Stenciling 1790-1840.”

In the back parlor (named The Stencil Room by Murphy), peeling wallpaper



**VIEW OF HALLWAYS:** Ornamental rugs and wall hangings adorn the hallways. A chase was added to each side of the front doorway to contain heating, plumbing and electric service.



**REFLECTIONS:** The east end of the Oyer house is reflected in the neighboring pond. The home was built circa 1830. (Photo by Doug Roles)

floor room she converted into a bathroom may have been a sewing room. For her office space, she uses a small nook off a large bedroom, which she believes had served as the home's nursery. The walls of the home are thick enough that Murphy was able to have a very small half bath installed in the exterior wall of the kitchen.

Nancy Shedd, former director of the Huntingdon County Historical Society, says the house is one of the most unusual homes in Huntingdon County. She says it's rare to see a house where the front and rear facades are the same.

"Another thing that's so unusual, generally speaking, is it seems like there was a guardian angel watching over it," Shedd notes. "It was abandoned and no one ever took the hardware. No one ever ever painted over original work. And there were also signs that kids were in it and built fires and it never burned down. And then to have Jean come along and do such a gorgeous restoration. Who else but a former art teacher could have done what she did with the stencil work? She was just the right person with the perfect touch."

"It's sort of a miracle that not only did it survive a period of neglect but then someone came on the scene unexpectedly," Shedd adds.

Based on building records of other local structures of the time period, Shedd estimates the construction time at about two years, considering that many materi-

als had to be brought in from elsewhere.

Shedd credits Murphy for taking a sensible approach to making the house livable. She recalls the story Murphy told her about first seeing the home, when Murphy clasped her hand to her head in a combination of dismay at the condition of the house and awe at the potential.

"She knew she was fated to do that house," Shedd says.

Murphy succeeded in having the house placed on the registry. She noted in her Park Service application that the original locks on the front and rear door are stamped "L. Gotta." Huntingdon County historians have used this information to help date the construction of the house to the years 1825-1830 since a locksmith of that name worked in Huntingdon during that time.

Murphy ran a bed and breakfast in the home for several years, catering to Penn State traffic, but eventually decided to unburden herself of those demands and more fully enjoy retirement. She has placed the Oyer house on the market and

is weighing a move to the State College area or out of state. But her next move will not include a project of this scope.

"I've put so much in this house," she says. "Time. Money. Love."

Shedd says she's hopeful someone who fully appreciates all that has been done will purchase the home — someone who likes the Federal period but not the work of bringing the past back to life. ☀

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# SAVE THE DATE

2013 Valley Rural Electric Co-op District Nominating Meetings

**District 7: Hustontown Fire Hall, 6 p.m. Feb. 4**

**District 8: Shade Gap Fire Co. Ladies Auxilliary Building, 6 p.m. Feb. 5.**

**District 9: Geeseytown Fire Hall, 6 p.m. Feb. 7**

Invitations to District Nominating Meetings were mailed to members in Districts 7, 8 and 9 earlier this month.

Return your reservation card today!

