



Left, Emmett Sampson looks through a family photo album at his White Salmon home. Above, Emmett with his father, Ernie, who died in 1987.

Like Father, Like Son

Working with electricity runs in the family for Ernie and Emmett Sampson

By Jeanie Senior

In the late 1930s, when Ernie Sampson started working as an electrician in Klickitat County, he was a pioneer in a developing field.

“He had pretty interesting stories,” says his son Emmett, also an electrician, who grew up hearing tales about those early days.

Emmett, who bought his father’s electrical contracting firm, Sampson Electric, in 1982, specializes in commercial and industrial work. He has worked on rock crushers at asphalt plants, a logging camp in Alaska, aluminum smelters and a wholesale herb processor.

His specialty is a far cry from the work his father did, at a time when Klickitat County’s electric grid was just being established.

Klickitat PUD was founded in 1938. When the fledgling electric utility energized its first power line in 1941, it had 225 customers and 90 miles of line.

While White Salmon already had power lines, Ernie wired a lot of farms in rural areas as KPUD expanded its distribution system to Trout Lake and Glenwood.

KPUD’s first general manager, Emmet Clouse, often called on Ernie to help out.

“They didn’t have much of a line crew then,” Emmett says. “At that time, the

PUD only had a couple of half-ton pick-up trucks. When they would get behind and couldn’t keep up, he (Clouse) hired my dad to help them for a while.”

Early power line construction—designed, Emmett figures, by engineers back East unfamiliar with this region’s ice storms—meant a fair number of outages due to lines that overloaded with ice or snow, then blew transformers.

“It wasn’t a year-round thing,” Emmett says. “He pretty much was on call in the wintertime, when they had more outages. We used to have more severe snow. Also, they do more tree trimming now. Trees on the line, that was quite common then.”

Emmett recalls his father telling him about one snowy winter evening when a line from the Condit Dam powerhouse went out, then somebody spotted a fireball on top of a hill.

“There was about 3 feet of snow,” Emmet says. “They didn’t have any radios, didn’t have four-wheel-drive pickups. So Emmet Clouse followed the line on the crest of the hill, wearing snowshoes, in 3 feet of snow. He found a place where a tree had come down on the line. The next day, they used dynamite, cleared the tree away and drilled a hole. They cut a tree down and skinned it and used it for a pole, a temporary repair with a green tree that got them through to spring.”

During World War II, a factory in Bingen got a contract to supply tent poles for the military, milled from Washington timber, that were delivered by rail from Aberdeen. Ernie Sampson, as the only electrician in the area, was needed to keep the factory running.

Whenever Ernie got papers to report for duty, “the factory manager would call the authorities and Dad would get deferral papers,” Emmett says. “He was the only one who could keep the factory functional. Wiring, steam—he worked at everything down there.”

Ernie was at the bus station in Bingen, headed to serve in the military, when the war ended.

“He did a lot of sawmill work after that,” Emmett says. “He was very diversified. He worked on radios and televisions. He had to do whatever he could to survive. He worked on anything that ran on electricity: refrigeration systems, heating. There was no work force in the area to work on that stuff when there was a power outage and something would quit.”

Emmett says his father graduated from high school and went to Edison Technical School in Seattle, intending to become a machinist. An instructor intervened, taking him to the machine tool area, where he said, “See those lathes? Look at the floor, see how worn it is. Do you want to spend the rest of your life

standing in front of a machine?”

Ernie decided to take the electrician’s course instead.

After trade school, Ernie came back to White Salmon and went to work for Ed Jewett, doing plumbing, heating and electrical wiring in houses. He ventured out on his own around 1938 or 1939.

“He put his time in,” Emmett says of his father, who retired in 1982 and died in 1987. “Basically, he started in the beginning of the mechanical era and when he retired we were in the electronics era.”



Emmett still uses the logo his father designed. The original graces an outside wall of the company’s office.

Today, he says, multitalented people like his father seem to be a dying breed.

“I remember Dad even used to rewind electric motors,” Emmett says. “In World War II, you couldn’t buy motors unless you had priority, so he would buy copper wire and rewind motors. He did what he had to.”

Emmett’s mother, Dorothy, did the bookkeeping for her husband’s business. She also fixed electric heaters and electric irons, as well as checking and testing television tubes in the days before transistors and solid state.

“His shop—there was so much stuff

in there,” Emmett recalls. “I always considered it junk. Now I know they are treasures. Whatever you had, you had to hang onto. Now, we just throw everything away.”

Emmett started riding along in the truck with his father as soon as he was old enough, and “kind of grew up” with the electrical contracting business.

He worked for Sampson Electric during summer vacations. In the spring of 1972, during his senior year in high school, he went to school half-days because he was “bored with high school.”

The rest of the time, he worked for his father.

“I wired three houses under his supervision that spring,” Emmett says.

Although the electrical contracting business has changed, there is still a strong link to the past: Emmett’s truck bears the logo his dad designed. The firm’s shop still is in the historic brick building on North Main Avenue that once housed White Salmon’s movie theater.

The sign on the building’s south side has been repainted, but it is the same one that identified Ernie’s shop. ■