

Line work is not a job. It is not a title on a business card or simply a means to a paycheck. Work as a lineman is much more. It is in the soul of those who love it. It is their way of life. It is who they are. It is a brotherhood and only a special few are admitted.

The work of a lineman does not fit neatly into an 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. work day. It means you start before dawn and do not quit until the job is done. There is no three-piece suit, but rather flame-resistant clothing, insulated gloves and a hardhat.

The life of a lineman is not for the faint of heart. His office is nestled in the midst of high-voltage electric lines, exposed to the best and worst nature has to offer. When severe weather sends most people running for cover, linemen are preparing to head out. As the saying goes, “when the lights go out, so do they.” Family dinners, ballet recitals, ball games and birthdays—all sacrificed in service to others. Bone-chilling cold, scorching heat, the sweat and the mud—all part of a day’s work.

completed work at the Columbia 69/161KV Substation to relocate structures on Lines 46, 168B and 53 to accommodate a reroute of Highway 44. The project included the removal of existing structures in the proposed path of the highway and the construction of new, taller structures 30 feet above the line’s original height to allow for proper clearance over traffic on the highway.

The linemen also conduct routine inspections of each of SME’s nearly 23,000 poles on a four-year rotating basis to assess the integrity of the structure and equipment. Critical lines are inspected every two years. Preventive maintenance and other general upkeep measures are performed as necessary.

electric lines demand that linemen possess a strong sense of calm under pressure, as well as swift work accuracy. Equally important is the level of trust linemen must have in their coworkers—a level of trust that is unparalleled in most other professions. “You cannot be scared or then you will get hurt,” said Carl McSwain, lead lineman and 15-year veteran of SME’s line crews, when asked about the dangers of the job.

Each crew’s work resembles that of a fine-tuned machine. Each member knows what role he is to fill, and works in unison with his counterparts around him to complete each task. Although you rarely hear a lineman called by his birth name and good-natured banter is constant, beneath the tough exteriors are a true band of brothers who have each other’s backs, and values each crew member’s safety as much as their own.

“Once you get line work in your blood, nothing else will satisfy you,” said James Evans, director transmission maintenance and 25-year lineman. All along the highways and byways of Mississippi and off many beaten paths stand wood, concrete and steel monuments to SME’s linemen. Each one standing as something these men can point to with pride as they say to their wives and kids, “Daddy built that.”

DEPARTMENTAL FOCUS: LINE CREWS

LIFE ON THE LINE

Three line crews keep the lights on for South Mississippi Electric (SME). Foremen Jason Davis, Matt Ready and Bill Regan lead 15 fellow linemen and linemen helpers and three heavy equipment operators in the construction and maintenance of more than 1,742 miles of transmission lines that weave across the state, connecting homes and businesses from the Coast to the Delta with the electricity that enables members’ quality of life.

Fair weather days are spent on a series of tasks: constructing new lines; relocating existing lines; or, performing routine maintenance. With three crews, Transmission Maintenance is able to construct several new lines each year to meet the demands of load growth or needed replacement. Other new lines are constructed to provide redundancy in the delivery path of electricity from a generation source to the substations.

The linemen sometimes relocate existing lines to accommodate changes that have occurred since the original construction of the line. The path of the Pearl River near Columbia has forced the relocation of a portion of Line 52 twice in the line’s history, most recently in 2013. The river’s changing course has threatened the integrity of structures that support the line, demanding that the line be reset on a new path near the river crossing. Matt Ready’s crew, pictured throughout this article, recently

It is the not-so-fair-weather days that separate the linemen from the boys. Routine work is often done in extreme temperatures or other harsh weather conditions. Storms, snow and ice bring with them the greatest incidence of outages, and those require immediate attention. Although the crews rotate shifts on and off call, large-scale damage or outages demand that all crews report for duty.

Weather often determines when crews can take lines out of service for work. Cold snaps and heat waves, for example, cause drastic increases in load. The increased loads dictate if and when lines can be removed from service.

Line crew work is now also subject to the direction of the Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO), SME’s new regional transmission organization. Projected load forecasts coupled with unit dispatch for all MISO members directs when lines can or cannot be removed from service. For instance, MISO postponed all transmission work during January’s polar vortex to ensure system reliability. This change in control creates problems with contractors, who want to be paid to de-mobilize and mobilize, but SME’s crews can move back and forth from construction to maintenance, a significant economic advantage.

The imminent threats posed by the unpredictable weather, rugged terrain, great heights and high-voltage



Left to right: Corey Gipson, Michael Servolini, Danny Hight, Sherman Smith, Carl McSwain, Matt Ready, Daniel Riley, Doug Breazeale, Colton Williams