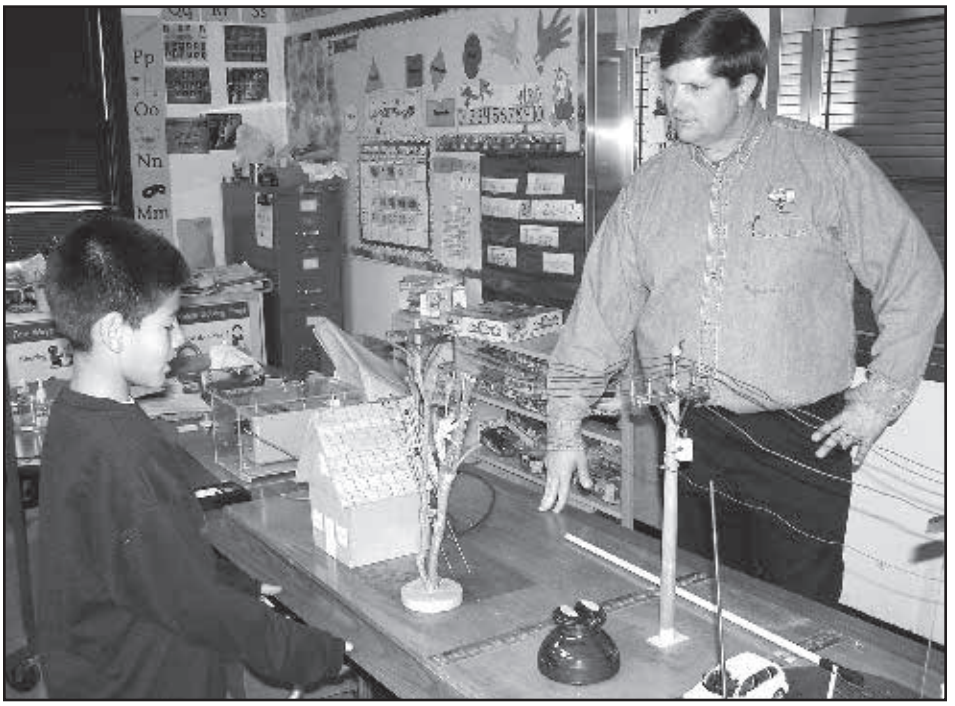
A Life-and-Death Message

The co-op's member services manager hammers home the need to be safe around electricity

By Dana Martin



Above,** Lynn Culp of Surprise Valley Electrification talks with Steven Aceves following an electrical safety demonstration at South Fork Union School in Likely, **opposite page.

Following his electrical safety presentation with students from South Fork Union School in Likely, Lynn Culp of Surprise Valley Electrification Corp (SVEC) asks the students, "What does electricity always try to do?"

He waits for the response, hoping it shows his message was received.

"Electricity is always trying to find the shortest way to the ground," says sixth-grader Charity Potter.

"That's right," confirms Lynn. "Electricity looks for the shortest path to the ground. Its one goal is to find a path to the ground, so don't let it be you."

As Member Services Manager for SVEC, Lynn visits 20 to 25 classrooms a year, delivering his electrical safety message to 300 to 400 students. His goal is to reach every fourth-grade student in the cooperatives service area, which includes schools in California and Oregon.

For the past 14 years, Lynn has presented yearly programs at elementary schools in Alturas, Lakeview and Cedarville. He schedules programs for smaller schools on a rotating basis.

"My goal is to reach every elementary student with this safety program at least once," says Lynn.

Some schools ask for him more often, so many students see his program four to five times.

"I tell the same jokes, but they don't seem to mind," Lynn says.

For Lynn, talking about electrical safety can mean the difference between life and death. He has heard stories of his students preventing potential tragedies, such as the time a car hit a pole and knocked down power lines.

"An adult went to move the wire with a broomstick, and the kids all said not to do it," says Lynn. "They were aware that the broomstick could act as a conductor, and that it would be better to call the power company."

Lynn says power lines that end up on the ground due to storms or accidents seem to be the biggest hazard. He shares stories of how wire fences can be converted to miniature power lines if a downed power line comes into contact.

Lynn begins his student presentation by talking about different forms of electricity and discussing how electricity is used. Students quickly join in, saying it takes electricity to run such things as radios, lights, refrigerators and televisions.

"We use electricity every day, but we usually can't see it," says Lynn.

He then talks about static electricity, and the electricity generated by lightning storms.

Students watch a video that shows different scenarios of children climbing in trees near power lines. The video emphasizes the danger involved when people ignore warning signs around electric plants.

Following the video, Lynn uses a miniature model that features power lines and small figures, including a child flying a kite, a man on a ladder and a farmer with an irrigation pipe.

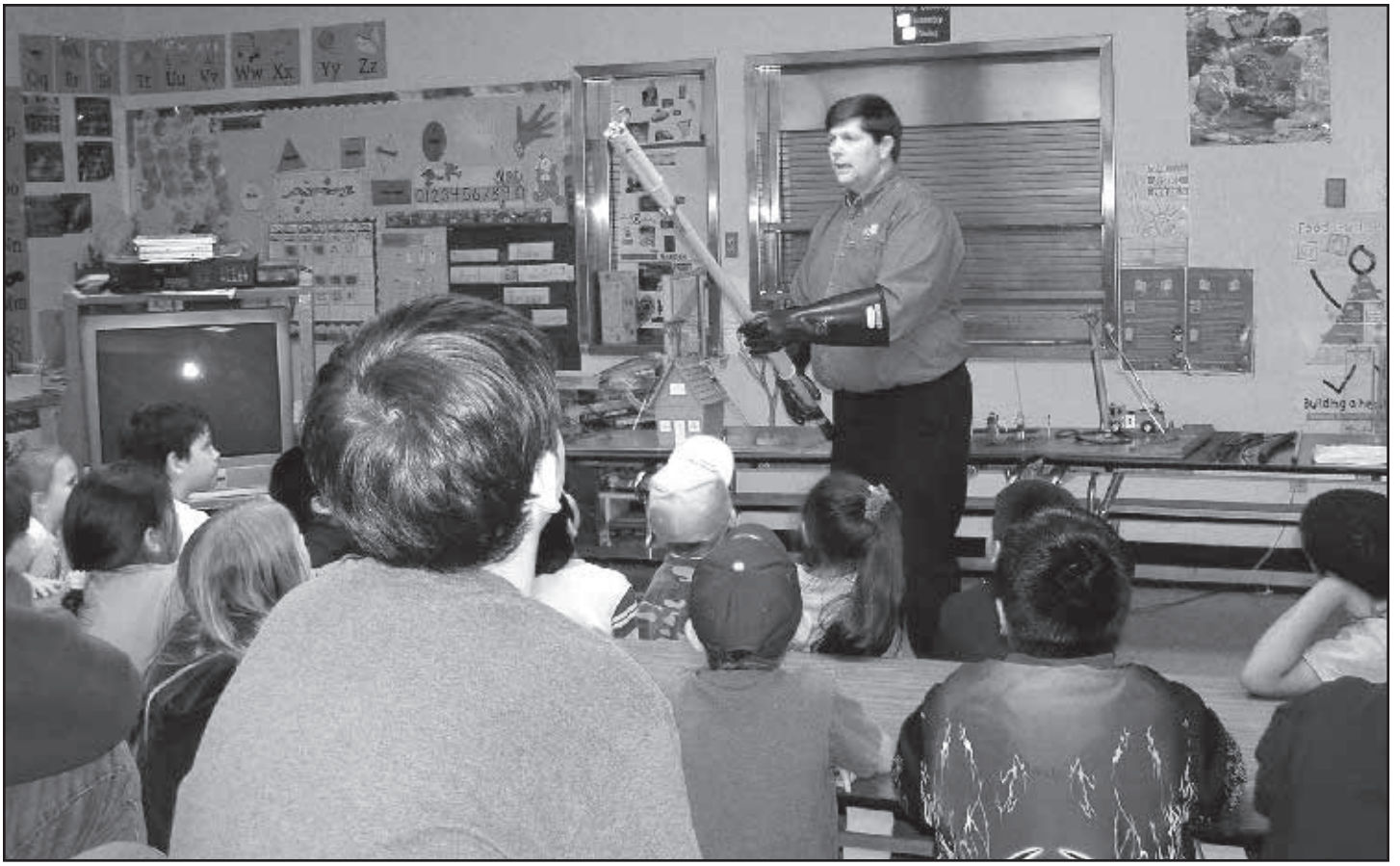
Once the lines are activated, Lynn shows electricity arcing through the wire. He emphasizes the power of electricity, showing how it travels to the ground through whatever source is available.

"Remember what electricity is always trying to do?" he asks.

Lynn explains that electricity travels easily through water, metal and our bodies, because our bodies are mostly water.

"Something that electricity moves easily through is called a conductor," says Lynn.

He shows students the types of wire used in overhead and underground power lines and adds, "We



want electricity to move through wire easily so it can get to your homes and school so you can have power."

Lynn talks about insulators—materials electricity does not easily move through. Insulators include plastic, rubber and glass.

He points out how rubber gloves are used by linemen when working with power lines. He shows how glass insulators help keep the wire apart from power poles.

"We want to keep electricity up in the wire and glass insulators help us do that," he says, noting it is dangerous for everyone when people use glass insulators for target practice.

Lynn demonstrates a powerful message by using a child figure flying a kite. When the kite touches the power line, electricity travels through the string, then through the person flying the kite.

"Some kite string is made of plastic, so it may not always be a conductor, but if that string is wet or dirty, the water on the string makes it a pathway," Lynn says.

He demonstrates what can happen when someone touches a power line with an irrigation pipe.

"You should always look up before putting a pipe up in the air, because what will happen if the pipe touches the power line?" asks Lynn. "The irrigation pipe and you become the pathway to the ground. Remember: Electricity is always trying to find a pathway to the ground."

Lynn explains how muscles contract when being shocked. While your mind may tell you to let go, your muscles will not let you.

He emphasizes it is important to practice safety inside the home.

"If your toaster is plugged in, you should never try to dig out your toast with a fork," he says. "Always unplug the toaster first."

As a final lesson, Lynn explains how birds can safely sit on wire because electricity passes through the bird at the same level as the wire.

"If the bird touches the pole and the wire at the same time, zap, it is fried chicken," he says. He compares that example with the situation when a live wire falls across a car.

"You are safest if you stay in the car," Lynn says, noting the car is grounded. "If you leave the car and touch the ground while still touching the car, your body becomes the conductor. If you do have to get out of the car because of a fire or something, you should hop out with both feet touching the ground at the same time and then shuffle away, keeping your feet close together. You can't outrun electricity."

In addition to schools, Lynn does electrical safety presentations for adult groups, including rural fire departments, the California Department of Forestry, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and other first responders.

Safety is important for everyone. Through the presentations, SVEC hopes to make a difference.

"If you make one single mistake, you're done," eighth-grader Ruth Diaz points out. "I learned that you better call a lineman if a power line is down, because they know what they're doing." ■