

By Jan Rahn

Managing Editor

As warm weather approaches and summer nears, a series of barbecues will be held across the state as a way for Great Plains Communications to say ‘thank you’ to the many customers it has served over the years.

Having just celebrated 100 years of service with an event in Omaha, the company will continue to expand on that celebration by involving towns across Nebraska.

Great Plains Communications (GPC) is now in its fourth generation of family ownership and is the largest privately-owned communications provider in Nebraska, serving 30,000 customers in 90 rural communities and covering more than 14,099 square miles.

The 100th anniversary celebration in Omaha gave its 200 employees statewide a great chance to catch up with co-workers and retirees, said Kevin Poppe of Grant, regional manager overseeing outside plant operations in the western three districts.

The Feb. 4-5 event also commemorated the centennial and strategic planning for the company’s future.

Besides Poppe and his wife, Monica, others from area who attended the celebration included Toby and Clem Hansen, Kenny and Patsy Wykert, Brandon and Amanda Wood, Ryan and Michaela Potts, and Jason and Brooke Grigg. Jason, from McCook, is the district manager for Grant and Venango.

“We had an excellent meeting,” said Poppe. Approximately 500 in attendance heard opening

from Governor Heineman and a keynote address by 1979 Oshkosh graduate and athlete Melanie Mills.

Poppe said seeing Mills was a pleasant and unexpected surprise, as his brothers had graduated from Oshkosh and they had fun catching up on life. She attended Southern Methodist University on a basketball scholarship, later returning to Colorado and was honored as Colorado Teacher of the Year. She joined a professional speaking firm and now has her own company.

The highlight of the evening was a comment made by the five-year-old great-grandson of Robert Hunt, who founded GPC in 1910. After showing a video and members of the family giving comments, the child had one of his own. The son of parents who live in London said in a strong British accent, "I'm going to move to America and work for the phone company,"—which brought the house down, said Poppe.

Western communities served by GPC include Chadron, Gordon, Rushville, Hay Springs, Cody-Kilgore, Arnold, Callaway, Stapleton, Tryon, Sutherland, Broken Bow, Grant, Venango, Imperial, Indianola, Trenton, Stratton, Culbertson, Hayes Center, Palisade and McCook.

Poppe, who has worked for GPC 28 years, said his role also includes working with community development.

Communication needs will be driven by the constant demand for more bandwidth, said Poppe. For example the bandwidth delivered to one household via cable modem or DSL would have been more than enough to handle all voice traffic of the entire city before the Internet. "We are nearing completion of our own statewide network that will handle our communities' future bandwidth through new fiber placement and electronics," said Poppe. "We have a skilled and well trained staff that will meet our customers' future needs."

Traditional voice lines still have a role in rural areas, he said. Advantages are the physical security of a wired line and the reliability of having the phone work even during power outage.

“Also, being able to look up your neighbor’s number in the phone book has more appeal here than in a large metro area, said Poppe. “If a customer has a friend overseas they may use a video Skype call, but will dial up the neighbor on a land line to see how much rain they got—much like I can do without the Omaha World Herald and can read it online, but can’t wait to pick up the Grant Tribune to see what happened locally the past week.”

Todd Foje, chief executive officer, said, “Knowledgeable employees committed to serving our customers well have been the most important ingredient in achieving the milestone of 100 years in business. We owe a tremendous thanks to all of our customers in rural Nebraska and to our many business partners who have supported us. It is an honor to work in an organization with such a rich history.”