

Willie Goes Home

A fallen tree, a beloved colleague and a most unlikely tribute unite co-ops



LEFT: An uprooted oak tree in northeastern Oklahoma looks like firewood. Ken Macken saw the makings of a mascot

RIGHT: "I was looking at a section that kind of split off, and I thought, 'That's where his legs will be and there's his plug-in,'" Ken said.

Storms can turn trees into villains, blowing them into power lines and poles and cutting off electricity for miles around. That brings out the best in electric cooperatives, especially lineworkers, who relish storm recovery.

Storms can also turn trees into heroes. This is the story of such a tree.

It fell victim to high winds on a remote property in northeastern Oklahoma in late 2025. That set off a sequence of events that brought out the best in electric cooperatives in ways nobody could have anticipated.

This oak tree grew on 40 acres owned by Ken and Malia Macken in Leach, Oklahoma. It might have gone unnoticed, except Ken, the director of safety programs at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, had taken up the hobby of chain saw carving about five years ago. When Ken found that tree, he saw Willie Wiredhand looking up at him.

"I was looking at a section that kind of split off, and I thought, 'That's where his legs will be and there's his plug-in,'" Ken told Victoria A. Rocha, a writer for NRECA.

That set Ken into action, and he spent much of December 2025 carving into that log with uncanny precision. He had promised Texas Electric Cooperatives that he would donate a sculpture to the scholarship auction at the upcoming Loss Control Conference. If all went well, this would be the

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SAVE THE DATE

- Oct. 19–23**
Staking Technician Training Seminar—Phase III
Georgetown, TEC Training Facility
- Oct. 20–23**
Journeyman Refresher School—Apparatuses and Leadership
Merkel, Taylor EC
- Oct. 20–23**
Transformer School
Robstown, Nueces EC
- Oct. 26–30**
Hotline 1–4 Schools
Greenville, Farmers EC
- Oct. 27–30**
Advanced Pole Climbing School
Kaufman, Trinity Valley EC
- Nov. 17–18**
Fundamentals of Electrical Theory for Lineworkers
Tahoka, Lyntegar EC

Find [photos from Loss Control schools](#) on the TEC website.

TEC works to add schools to the [2026 calendar](#) as registrations close when the maximum number of students is reached. Waiting lists are available. Click on the desired school above for details.



SCAN FOR A PDF OF THIS ISSUE



Texas Electric Cooperatives
A Touchstone Energy Cooperative

A BIMONTHLY PUBLICATION FROM TEC LOSS CONTROL



COURTESY MALIA MACKEN



CAVY CALHOUN | TEC

TOP: "When Ken first started chain saw carving many years ago, some of his early carvings weren't the best, and as good friends often do, we loved to give him a hard time about it," says Jason Wood, a former colleague at KAMO Power in Oklahoma. "He would show us a picture of a bear he carved, and I would say, 'Man, you did a good job on that eagle.'"

BOTTOM: Friends always flocked to Ken, but at the 2026 Loss Control Conference, Willie Wiredhand was the main attraction.

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sculpture he hauled more than 500 miles to San Marcos.

"Ken wanted the carving to bring people together at the conference and wherever it landed," Malia says.

In March 2026, Ken arranged for all 6 feet, 4 inches and 350 pounds of Willie to be lugged to Texas, where the sculpture stood tall among 84 other auction items as conferencegoers browsed the donated offerings.

Ken's job took him around the country as he preached safety. His warmth and larger-than-life personality instantly engaged his audiences, which could be a sizable conference or a handful of lineworkers in a co-op training room. People wanted to work more safely, almost more for Ken than for themselves.

And so Ken's smiling Willie Wiredhand garnered much attention in San Marcos.

In an understated way, as is often the co-op way, this Willie represented Cooperation Among Cooperatives. An NRECA leader carved and donated the sculpture. On Willie's hands, made of copper wire, he wore Class 3 rubber gloves, stamped with the year of the mascot's creation, 1950. The gloves, which can sell for \$500 and more, were donated by a subsidiary of Cotton EC in Walters, Oklahoma. His hard hat was donated by SEMO EC in Sikeston, Missouri.

Ken spoke twice at the Loss Control Conference, hoping at least some of the 300 utility workers in attendance would take his message to heart. With good cheer he insisted complacency, the root of almost all that goes wrong in the field, could be eliminated.

At the auction that Thursday night, Ken posed with Willie. At least one of those photos showed Willie with his new owner, Jeff Lane, general manager and CEO of Trinity Valley EC. Bidding escalated, even as folks from around the state wondered how they would get the hulk of a sculpture home. It topped out at \$1,000, and TVEC had the last hand in the air.

In Vinita, Oklahoma, folks at KAMO Power, a co-op where Ken worked 10 years as safety director, were unaware that a tree from one of their forests was going to stand proudly at a co-op in Texas.

"We wished we would have had an opportunity to bid on it, because there was no way we would have ever let another cooperative go home with it, no matter how high the cost," says Jason Wood, director of field operations at KAMO Power.

Instead, Willie graced the Trinity Valley EC headquarters in Kaufman.

A month after the Loss Control Conference, Ken was one of the key speakers at NRECA's Safety Leadership Summit in St. Louis, where some 1,200 attendees representing more than 400 co-ops again gathered in the quest to eliminate injuries and deaths in the utility industry.

And then, on April 18, just two days after the safety summit, shock waves began stirring the co-op world. Ken Macken was dead. The initial news was that Ken was killed when the car he was driving veered off a rural Oklahoma road, not far from his and Malia's home, and crashed into a fence.

Within days, word spread that Ken had suffered a heart attack, causing the wreck. Social media and instant messaging allowed words of heartache and disbelief to seep into folks' minds.

"We just saw Ken in St. Louis."

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TEC SAFETY WATCH

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"I talked to him in San Marcos."

Says KAMO Power's Wood: "Ken was my friend, my brother, my mentor and my co-worker."

By then, Wood already knew about the Willie sculpture and how it ended up at a co-op in Texas. He began to think to himself, "It's a shame we can't bring Willie home to Oklahoma."

So he emailed contacts at Trinity Valley EC. He wanted to see if KAMO Power could buy Willie from TVEC for \$2,000. "Ken was a force of nature, and he really created a positive culture of safety at our co-op," Wood wrote.

Trinity Valley said no.

In an email, Chad Marshall, manager of safety and loss control at TVEC, said they wanted to donate the sculpture to KAMO Power.

"I was in tears when I read Chad's reply," Wood says.

"I still get emotional when I think about it."

"They are true examples of the cooperative spirit, and their act of kindness brought us some comfort during a sad time and still continues to do so."

On May 12, Wood and Cody Johnson, KAMO Power line superintendent, drove to Kaufman in Ken's old KAMO Chevy work truck to pick up Willie.

Willie was going home.

"Although Willie didn't talk too much on the drive back, we are pretty sure we heard him yell 'Boomer Sooner' once we crossed back over the Red River," Wood says. That would bring a chuckle from Ken, who liked to talk about his beloved Oklahoma Sooners football team and goad University of Texas fans when he made his way south.

Today, Willie stands guard in the KAMO Power lobby.

"When I told Ken's wife, Malia, about the plans to bring Willie back to KAMO, she immediately started crying and said Ken would love that so much," Wood says.

That old oak has turned into a most unexpected totem.

"The whole Willie sculpture story has become bigger than I had realized, and it's been a sweet blessing each time I get to hear from, reconnect with or meet the many friends Ken had through his work," Malia says.

Wood knows exactly what she means.

"His legacy lives through all the cooperative workers that he impacted. This story is just another example of how Ken is still bringing people together, through the lives that he touched



CAY CALHOUN | TEC



KAMO POWER

TOP: Trinity Valley EC won the bidding for Willie at the conference's scholarship auction in March. Ken poses with the sculpture and members of Willie's new family in Texas.

BOTTOM: From left, Sam Macken and his mom, Malia—Ken's son and wife—attend a dedication ceremony at KAMO Power in August as Willie is officially welcomed home. Joining them are Cody Johnson and Jason Wood.

and influenced.

"I also know he would get a kick out of knowing all the miles that Willie has traveled and all the trouble it took to bring him back home." ■

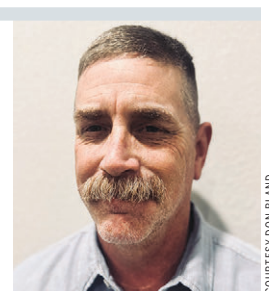
TEC Adds Instructor

DON BLAND JOINED the TEC Loss Control staff as an instructor in July after working more than 24 years at Farmers EC.

"I had some friends lose their lives to this industry and had friends seriously injured as well," said Bland, who started at Farmers EC as a groundman and worked his way up to crew foreman.

"I feel if I can make a difference in linemen's outlook on being

safe, then I would feel like I accomplished something. I just want these men to go home to their families safe because their families are counting on them to come home." ■



COURTESY DON BLAND

Mutual Aid Steps in After Wildfires and Storms

WILDFIRES AND SUMMER storms wreaked havoc in parts of the state, knocking out power for some cooperatives and sending others into the damaged areas to offer mutual aid.

The Ross Fire, sparked Aug. 24 near Palo Pinto, scorched nearly 90,000 acres in three weeks, destroying at least 167 structures and an estimated 350 United Cooperative Services poles. Some 300 members lost power, but some poles had to be replaced more than once as fires flared up again. Crews from nearby CECA and Heart of Texas EC helped United lineworkers.

When more than 100,000 homes and businesses in Bexar County lost power Aug. 28 after 75 mph winds struck, Pedernales EC answered the call for help from CPS Energy, sending 50 line and support personnel to assist San Antonio's municipal utility.

Tropical Storm Edouard made landfall just east of the Louisiana state line Sept. 1, delivering 2 feet of water as it slowly churned through Sam Houston EC territory. At the peak of the storm, the co-op lost power to about 20,000 meters, but the outages didn't last long. HILCO, Jasper-Newton, MidSouth, Navasota Valley and Wharton County ECs all took part in the mutual aid effort. ■



UNITED COOPERATIVE SERVICES

The Ross Fire burned nearly 90,000 acres in North Texas, charring portions of United Cooperative Services' territory.

NRECA Hires Safety Director

DWIGHT MILLER HAS been hired as director of safety programs at NRECA. He replaces Ken Macken, who died in April.

Miller retired from Ohio's Electric Cooperatives in July after 19 years there. He began his career more than 40 years ago as an apprentice lineworker.

"I'm energized to work with cooperative leaders all across this great nation on a national strategy to help get every worker home safe, every single day," Miller said.

Nearly four decades ago, Miller climbed a pole to rescue a fellow lineworker who had made contact with an energized line. The injuries were bad, and although his co-worker survived, the scene haunted Miller's sleep for weeks.

"It totally changed my outlook on everything. I became an advocate for safety that day." ■



NRECA

TEC LOSS CONTROL UPDATE

Record Attendance in 2026

TEC Loss Control set a school attendance record of 1,286 students in 2026. The program hit the mark in August through 102 schools as it continues to bring safety and skills training across the state.

Injury and Safety Information Needed

TEC requests your organization's data for 2026. The Injury/Incident Report forms will be available Nov. 1 on the [TEC website](#).

Lifesaving Award and 24/7 Good Samaritan Award nomination forms are available now on the [TEC website](#).

Important Deadlines

Dec. 1: Nominations for 2026 TEC Loss Control Lifesaving Awards and 24/7 Good Samaritan Awards. **Late nominations will not be accepted.**

Jan. 29, 2027: 2026 Injury/Incident Report. This report includes all employee recognitions and award nominations.

2027 Loss Control School Registration

Registration opens Oct. 21 for 2027 TEC Loss Control schools. The 2027 school calendar is available on the [Events Calendar](#) page of the TEC website. Note that TEC asks organizations that register three or more students in a single hotline school to provide a guest instructor and double-bucket truck for that school.

Emergency Contact List

The [TEC Emergency Contact List](#) is updated as needed and is located on the TEC website. Organizations are asked to review their information regularly and contact Tami Knipstein at tknipstein@texas-ec.org with any changes.

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