

MEEKER COOPERATIVE PIONEER

The official publication of

Meeker
Cooperative
Light and Power Association

VIBRANT
Broadband™

Meeker Co-op is an Equal Opportunity
Provider and Employer

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2023

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25 YEARS WITH MERGEN



**Member Appreciation
Day - Feb 15
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"ENERGIZING AND CONNECTING...ENHANCING YOUR LIFE."



MERGEN'S MESSAGE

BY TIM MERGEN, MEEKER COOPERATIVE, CEO/GENERAL MANAGER

Where to Begin –

It is with mixed emotions that I write my last *Mergen's Message* – mixed emotions in that I'm happy and looking

forward to joining the retired workforce yet I will miss my work at the Co-op, the employees, the Directors and you the membership. I have informed the Board of Directors of my intention to retire in March.

By the time I retire, I will have been the General Manager and Chief Executive Officer for over 25 years, having started here in 1998. Yes, pre-Y2K for those of you who remember that scare.

Since I announced my retirement, I've been asked several times about the biggest successes, accomplishments, memorable items or changes during my tenure. Here are a few highlights, in no particular order, that have meant a lot to me personally or are memorable because of their uniqueness.

The New Headquarters Building –

Completed in December of 2005, it has really been a blessing for our daily work flow and productivity. Consolidating all the equipment, materials and employees from four sites scattered around Litchfield into one main building and pole yard has been a huge benefit for the logistics of our crews and efficiencies for all our employees. The new building has fit our needs remarkably well as we have grown greatly both in terms of electric members and with VIBRANT Broadband. Another nice benefit to our members has been the sharing of the building with AgCountry/Farm Credit Services. Having both businesses located in the same building has made it easy and simple for our shared members.

Government Leaders –

Throughout my tenure, the Co-op has received fantastic support from area legislators representing us in St. Paul. I was fortunate to work closely with the late Senator Steve Dille and Representative Dean Urdahl and to testify before Legislative Committees. The Minnesota "JobZ" law was changed to allow Co-ops access to the program.

The JobZ Program saved the Co-op many, many dollars when we built the new headquarters.

I was also privileged to work with Representative Dave Baker, one of the lead authors, and Senator Scott Newman and again testify at Committee Hearings. The "Local Democracy" legislation passed which allows your locally elected Co-op Board of Directors much more autonomy in making decisions affecting your Cooperative versus it being with the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission.

In 2011, 2012, and again 2013, Meeker Cooperative service territory was hit with devastating storms; all three of which were declared federal disasters. I testified at legislative hearings and worked closely with Representative Urdahl, who championed and authored legislation that was eventually passed, to include electric co-ops as eligible to receive financial aid for disaster restoration after a state-declared disaster. In addition there were the "wins" at the PUC vs. the Railroads and a wind company that was taking advantage of our members and ultimately found guilty in court.



We have also had the honor of hosting two State of Minnesota Governors at the Co-op. First, in 2006, was Governor Tim Pawlenty for our ribbon cutting ceremony for our new building. Then in 2019, Governor Tim Walz came for a lighting ceremony for our VIBRANT Broadband project. Along with that, was the honor of having Governor Jesse Ventura as a member of the Co-op while he was Governor. I think he was always proud to say he was a member of Meeker Cooperative Light and Power Association. I was grateful to be appointed by both Governor Ventura and Governor Pawlenty to the Minnesota State Board of Electricity, and fortunate to become President of the Board while under Governor Pawlenty's appointment.

Along with hosting the two Minnesota Governors, Meeker has been very fortunate to host two Rural Utility Service (RUS) Administrators. It simply is not often a co-op of our size and located far from Washington, D.C., is honored with hosting a RUS Administrator, let alone two. We were fortunate to host Administrator Jim Andrews in 2006 for our new building ribbon cutting ceremony and Ad-

ministrator Ken Johnson in 2019 for the VIBRANT Broadband lighting ceremony.

One thing I've learned is it doesn't matter where you stand politically when you represent a cooperative. You need to set differences aside and work closely with whomever for the betterment of the Co-op and its members.

Minnesota Supreme Court –

A unique experience Meeker became involved in was a case of the State of Minnesota imposing a tax on electric cooperative Capital Credits. Meeker Cooperative was one of two co-ops asked to represent the 45 electric co-ops in the state for this significant case. Unfortunately, the court ruled against us but it is not often an electric co-op is asked to testify before Minnesota's highest court. As a side note, that was the second time in the history of the Co-op that it was before Minnesota's Supreme Court. The other time was in 1956. I hate to say it, but it appears Meeker Cooperative is a bit like the Minnesota Vikings when it comes to the big show, as it lost that one, too.

Operation Round Up® –

I'm so very proud of this program and the huge impact it has had within the Co-op's service territory. The day before my first annual meeting in 1998 parts of southern Minnesota were hit by a tornado and a damaging wind storm. During the Co-op's Annual Meeting the next day, a Co-op member suggested, during the New Business portion of the meeting, for the Co-op to contribute financially to help those in need. This led me to explain the Operation Round Up Program and how it was instituted at my previous electric co-op. This set off a chain of decisions and events that enabled Meeker Cooperative to begin its own Operation Round Up Program in 1998.

The first grant award was made in March 1999, and now, nearly 25 years later, the Meeker Co-op Electric Trust has made over 4,000 grant and scholarship awards to individuals and entities of all types throughout our entire electrical service territory. To date, \$1 million has been given out. And all of this with the average contribution of less than six dollars per year from members that contribute to the program. Small change does make a big difference.

VIBRANT Broadband –

This is the newest program started by the Co-op and "wow" what a program it is turning out to be! The demand for "Rip Snort'n FAST" Internet has been great. As mentioned earlier, in late

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Tim's family at his first Annual Meeting in 1998



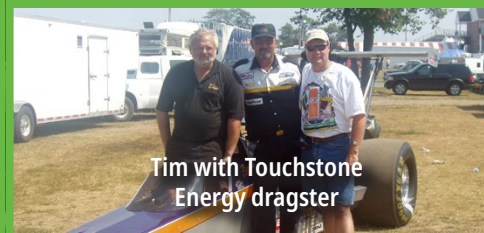
Mergen Memories Meeker Co-op 25 Years



2006 Staff with RUS Administrator Jim Andrews



Tim and Willie Wiredhand
with the Back to the Future
DeLorean



Tim with Touchstone
Energy dragster



2022 Staff

CON'T. FROM PAGE 2

September of 2019, Governor Walz conducted a “VIBRANT lighting ceremony” to formally kick off our VIBRANT Broadband program. In a bit more than three years since that ceremony, we have over half as many VIBRANT customers as electric members. Plus, in 2022, VIBRANT was voted by area residents as the #1 Internet service provider in the area. Simply incredible.

VIBRANT Broadband has provided for customers needing Internet what Meeker Cooperative Light and Power Association provided for farmers and others living in the rural areas needing electricity back in the 1930s. We delivered a very needed service other providers simply were not providing.

Electric Reliability Improvements –

This was one of the first initiatives we embarked on when I became CEO. We began an outage reduction campaign. We installed animal and bird guards on poles, and transformers, and lightning arrestors strategically across our electric system. We began an organized rotation throughout the entire system for tree trimming and right-of-way clearing. We also instituted a similar rotation for pole testing and infrared thermal image testing of substation equipment.

Although all these programs are ongoing, they have proven to be successful as our overall outages have dropped. For example, when comparing 2021 to 1998, outages due to lightning strikes are down by 62 percent, underground cable failure by 26 percent and animal caused outages by 58 percent. No question a solid preventative maintenance program increases reliability.

Darwin and Litchfield Acquisition –

After a year of negotiations and informational meetings, in January of 2008 the Cooperative purchased the electric system from the City of Darwin. Approximately 250 Darwin electric accounts were now Meeker Cooperative members. In conjunction with that acquisition, the Co-op purchased an electrical tie line from the City of Litchfield that ran between the City of Darwin and the City of Litchfield; this meant another 45 customers served off that line were now members of the Co-op.

STAR Energy Ownership –

In 2001, Meeker Cooperative purchased one

quarter ownership of STAR Energy Services. At that time, STAR had one full-time and one part-time employee; today it employs about 50 people full time. STAR provides Meeker with our electrical engineering, system mapping of electrical and fiber lines, IT support and outage software management, safety training and compliance services, pole and substation inspections, underground pad mount equipment inspection and maintenance, stray voltage and neutral isolator testing along with other specialized services.

Heartland Security Services is Formed –

In 1999 Meeker Cooperative joined eight other electric cooperatives and formed Heartland Security Services, LLC. Heartland has grown to provide burglary, fire, environmental and life line monitoring services to over 7,300 customers since its inception.

Technology Advancements –

When I started back in 1998 electric meters were self-read by the member. Imagine that in today's world, members actually going out to the meter pole or pedestal and writing down the meter reading and sending it in for the Co-op to calculate the next bill. In 2001, we began using a Turtle Meter Reading system. It was slow (hence the name Turtle) as it would take more than a day for the meter reading to be transmitted across the lines and downloaded at our office. Today's meters send in readings in real time and allow for two-way communication.

Overall, the technology advancements are too numerous to cover in depth but just has technology has developed and changed every other aspect of society it has also changed in the electric cooperative world. From transformers, personal computers, cell phones, equipment, electric vehicles to virtual meetings – all have helped to ensure this isn't your granddad's (or even your father's) electric co-op anymore.

Honorable Mentions –

The formation of the Co-op's member education program Co-op 101, starting Member Appreciation Day (MAD) and holding it at unique locations around the Co-op's service territory. Also Coffee with the Co-op and again holding those at various locations throughout the service territory, my election to the National Rural Telecommunications Cooperative without which I doubt we would have moved forward in starting VIBRANT

Broadband, and meeting President Clinton and Vice President Mike Pence.

I also need to acknowledge Roger Tipka, Don Nordlie and Stan Mortensen, the three service men that entrusted me to tell their personal story and involvement in the battle of Iwo Jima during WWII. Although it may not seem that this is connected to the Co-op, it was a Top Secret map of Iwo Jima I received while on a Co-op legislative trip in Washington, D.C., that started that very special bond and relationships for which I shall be forever grateful.

The Great Employees –

I could not write this article without mentioning the many great employees that I have had the opportunity to work with through the years. Without them none of the successes of the Co-op would have been possible. Whether it was storm damage and working through the night to restore power, adapting to technology changes, or shuffling work duties, devoted, passionate employees with a servant's heart have stepped up time and time again to get the job done and keep the electricity flowing and the data downloading.

Of course, the most important part of an electric co-op General Manager's job is to do all you can to ensure the employees work safely and go home to their families every day. Again, I was blessed as in all these years I never needed to go visit an employee in the hospital because of a work related “accident.” I thank the Lord for answering that prayer and all the employees for their commitment to safety.

In Closing –

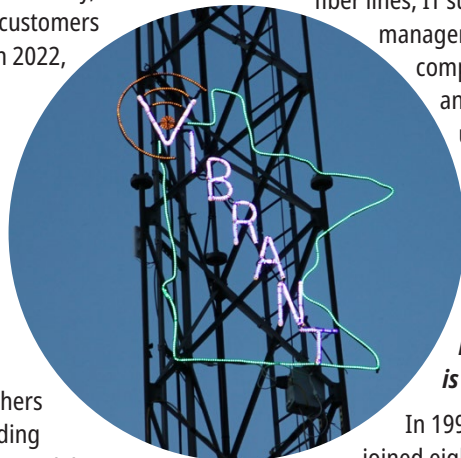
Many of these things may have happened behind the everyday scenes of the day-to-day operation of the Co-op but they all helped grow and make the Co-op prosper and serve you – our members and customers – better.

As I stated in my resignation letter to the Board of Directors, through the years I've been blessed with good direction from the Board of Directors, the assistance of dedicated and passionate employees and a supportive membership. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for that and the opportunity to help lead your electric Co-op for the past 25 years.

One final note. Thank you to my family: my wife Lynn and our daughters Lisa, Lauren, and Leah, for their endless love and support throughout my career. LoveDad.

May God bless you all and keep you safe.

Cooperatively and VIBRANTLY,
Tim Mergen



Member Appreciation Day

Feb 15 at Powder Ridge, 3 - 9 P.M.

15015 93rd Ave, Kimball (just North of Kimball on highway 15)

Members, come and enjoy a day on the slopes! Get a **one-hour tubing pass** or a **discounted ski lift ticket** (member is responsible for their own ski equipment rental or lessons). #10-22-427

Meeker employees will be making S'mores by the warming fire. Hot dogs, chips and pop will also be provided. **See you there!**

- **Tubing**
- **Skiing**
- **Snacks**
- **S'mores**



COFFEE ON THE CO-OP A FAVORITE WITH MEMBERS

Meeker Cooperative held its Coffee on the Co-op in December in four locations (Watkins, Paynesville, Dassel, and Litchfield). People stopped in to enjoy a hot cup of coffee, warm apple cider, and a treat. Coloring contest entrees were voted on by members with a winner chosen in each age group (see back page for winners).

The Electric Trust Board also distributed \$9,525 in Operation Round Up grants to qualifying non-profit organizations.



COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE: CO-OPS HELPING CO-OPS

December proved to be challenging when a winter storm sent waves of wet heavy snow through Minnesota. The snow and ice stuck to trees and overhead wires causing dangerous conditions between Hinckley and Lake

Superior. Meeker Cooperative and other co-ops helped East Central Co-op keep the electricity flowing to its members. Meeker Cooperative linemen, Al Resemen, Brady Hoppe, Jake Smothers, and Nate Glimsdal helped with trimming trees, clearing the lines, repairs and maintenance. #16-09-40



OPERATION ROUND UP® RECIPIENTS



Community Service

Ecumen RSVP.....	\$700
Forest City Threshers.....	\$1,000
Grtr Litchfield Opera House Assn	\$875
Historical Society, Eden Valley Area.....	\$1,000
Library, Eden Valley Area	\$1,250
Living at Home/BN Prog.,	
Grove City C.A.R.E.	\$500
Police Department, Eden Valley.....	\$1,000
United Community Action	
Partnership	\$2,700*
*Gas Vouchers	\$500
*Energy Assistance.....	\$2,200

Education and Youth

Post Prom, Kimball	\$500
Total	\$9,525

High School Scholarships – Two - \$1,000 scholarships per school as eligible

Atwater-Cosmos-Grove City; BOLD; Dassel-Cokato; Eden Valley-Watkins; Hutchinson; Kimball; Litchfield; and Paynesville

VIBRANT BROADBAND INSTALLS 4000TH SUBSCRIBER

In 2016, Meeker Cooperative decided to bring the best Internet technologies available to its members. VIBRANT Broadband installed the first subscriber on June 26, 2019. Members soon discovered how “Rip Snort’n FAST” and reliable VIBRANT Broadband is and the word spread.

VIBRANT is the first widespread fiber-optic Internet available in Meeker County and the Meeker Cooperative service area.

On December 30, 2022, our 4000th install took place in Litchfield at Lincoln

Apartments. It was the main office and included VIBRANT’s Business Phone service.

Mike Flaata and Cody Schiroo performed the installation. Ten more installs took place that day, making our total for the end of the year at 4010!



VIBRANT-U ADDS MORE DREAMING OF STREAMING EVENTS IN 2023



Streaming services like Hulu with Live TV, DirecTV Stream and YouTube TV offer local channels. People are able to “cut the cord” or “ditch the dish” and save without giving up a lot of their entertainment choices.

Our VIBRANT-U Dreaming of Streaming demonstrations have become very popular. #23-25-203

Monthly events have been scheduled in Litchfield through May with more events to be announced.

Upcoming *Dreaming of Streaming* events will be held the following dates:

Feb 15, Mar 16, Apr 19, and May 10

All events are from **5:30-6:30** at Meeker Cooperative, 1725 HWY 12 E, Litchfield.

Dreaming of Streaming includes a presentation followed by a live demonstration in a casual Q&A setting. We also give away a Roku streaming device at each event.

If you are unable to make any of the events, you can stop in our office during regular business hours and a VIBRANT Broadband representative can answer your streaming questions or watch the presentation online at vibrantbroadband.com/streaming



COGENERATION AND SMALL POWER PRODUCTION GOVERNED BY MINNESOTA RULES

Meeker Cooperative is obligated by Minnesota Rules pts. 7835 to interconnect with and purchase electricity from any cogenerators and/or small power producers. We also are required to provide information free of charge to any and all members who may be interested in entering into an interconnection agreement with the Co-op. In compliance with Minnesota adopted rules relating to cogeneration and small power production, all interconnections require an application and approval to become a qualifying facility.

meeker.coop/cogen



“VIBRANT service was always on time or earlier as they completed the steps of installing my new Internet, which is a pleasant surprise this day and age.

Servicemen have been very polite and professional, people in your office have been very nice to work with.

So far I would refer anyone to VIBRANT.” - Bonnie Z

Featured Recipe

Congratulations to **Michele Boreen** for submitting this issue’s winning recipe for Stew.

- 2 to 3 lbs beef stew
- 5 to 6 medium potatoes chopped into even chunks
- 4 carrots peeled and chopped into even chunks
- 2 stalks of celery chopped into even chunks
- 10-12 small fresh mushrooms (or a can of mushrooms)
- 1 medium onion (diced)
- 1 packet of Crockery Gourmet-Seasoning Mix for Beef
- 2 cups of water

Crockpot Beef Stew

1. Mix together seasoning packet with water and set aside. Add meat then potatoes, celery, carrots, mushrooms and onion to your Crockpot. Pour the seasoning mixed with water over everything.
2. Cover and cook for about 4 to 5 hours on high or 6 to 7 hours on low.
3. If you prefer a thicker stew, you can take out a half cup of the broth during the last half hour of cooking and mix with some flour (about a ¼ cup) to make a roux. Pour the roux back into the stew, stir and cook for another 30 minutes.



Submit your favorite **Rhubarb** recipe for our next issue! Please include a photo if you are able.

The chosen winner will receive a \$10 credit to their account. DEADLINE: February 10, 2023.

Email to: szeppelin@meeker.coop | Mail to: Meeker Coop, ATTN: Shane 1725 US Hwy 12 E, Ste 100, Litchfield, MN 55355

SCHOLARSHIP GRANT APPLICATION DEADLINES

**\$1000 College Scholarship
funded by Basin Electric Power
Cooperative deadline:**
February 1, 2023.

**\$1000 Meeker Cooperative
Electric Trust Non-Traditional
Student Scholarship deadline:**
February 2, 2023.

**Download information and
applications at**
meeker.coop/download-forms

WILLIE WIREDHAND'S ELECTRICITY FUN FACT



*The term electricity
comes from
the Greek word
elektron, which
means amber.*

*This is a reference to the
experiments performed by
Thales on pieces of amber,
resulting in the discovery of
static electricity.*

RATE CHANGES TO BEGIN MARCH 1, 2023

At its December meeting, Meeker Cooperative's Board of Directors approved the 2023 budget. The budget included a rate increase of five percent in revenue for 2023. As I mentioned in the previous issue of the *Pioneer*, rate increases are not good news for anyone - certainly not how I, nor the board, would prefer to start out the new year or how I would like to end my career (See *Mergen's Message*).

As we are all aware of the increases every kind of good or service has experienced over the past few years, a rate adjustment is just plain necessary. The last time the Co-op had a rate increase was six years ago.

The rate increase is set to begin with electric usage starting March 1, 2023. This will first affect the electric payment you make in April. The rate increase will be a twofold approach. Specifically, the Power Cost Adjustment (PCA) will go up by .0034 mills or three point four tenths of a cent per Kilowatt Hour (kWh). The PCA increase will be the same for all rate classes.

The Fixed Charge will go up by eight dollars a month for the Single-Phase General Service Rate. The monthly Fixed Charge for all other rate classes will go up proportionally as well.

agement make any other adjustment(s) to each rate class. The last rate analysis was conducted about 15 years ago. A lot has changed over that time such as electric usage by certain rate classes, power supply, and technology. In addition, there is the need to plan ahead as to how electricity might be used in the future. For example, should or will there be a need to develop new rate classes for electric vehicles? Regardless of where you stand on electric vehicles, they are here to stay and the Co-op needs to plan accordingly, both in infrastructure needs and with rates.

Unquestionably, any rate increase will hit certain members financially harder than others. If you are experiencing difficulty paying your bill please call and let us know. We will work with you making payment arrangements and helping you to apply for and obtain financial assistance to pay your electric bills through the various government resources. See Energy Assistance Providers on this page.

I thank you for your understanding of this difficult rate increase, and if you have not been able to read my *Mergen's Message* from the last issue of the *Pioneer*, I encourage you to go back to do so. It provides insights into what we are seeing as cost drivers for a rate increase. Past

kWh Used	\$ Increase in PCA	\$ Fixed Charge Increase	\$ Monthly Total Increase	\$ Annual Total Increase
800	\$2.72	\$8.00	\$10.72	\$128.64
1000	\$3.40	\$8.00	\$11.40	\$136.80
1500	\$5.10	\$8.00	\$13.10	\$157.20

The chart shows a sample of how the rate increase will affect a Single-Phase General Service account at various levels of kWh usage in a month.

The Co-op is planning to conduct a comprehensive rate analysis, sometimes referred to as a Cost-of-Service Study, of all its rates later this year. Once complete, this study will help the board and man-

issues of the *Pioneer* can be found on our web site at Meeker.coop. They are under the *News & Classifieds* heading.

I have always maintained electricity is one of best values around and I believe it still is.

Tim Mergen, CEO/General Manager

ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS

Kandiyohi, McLeod & Meeker Counties

United Community Action Partnership

PO Box 1359,
200 4th St. SW
Willmar, MN 56201

218 Main St. S.,
Suite 108,
Hutchinson, MN 55350

Toll free:
(800) 992-1710

Willmar:
(320) 235-0850

Hutchinson:
(320) 587-5244

McLeod County area

McLeod County Social Service Center

1805 Ford Ave. N.
Glencoe, MN 55336

(320) 864-3144
(320) 484-4330

Toll free:
(800) 247-1756

Renville County area

United Community Action Partnership

500 E. DePue Ave.
Olivia, MN 56277

(320) 523-1842
(800) 363-2533

Wright County area

Wright County Community Action

130 West
Division Street
Maple Lake, MN 55358
(320) 963-6500

Stearns County area

Stearns Tri-County Action Programs

1210 23rd Ave. So.
P.O. Box 683
Waite Park, MN 56387

(320) 251-1612
(888) 765-5597

FIND YOUR LOCATION NUMBER



Four location numbers are hidden within this *Pioneer* and four more are placed in articles published on our website between now and the next *Pioneer* mailing. If you find your number and claim it by **calling** Meeker Co-op before **February 28**, you will receive a \$10 credit to your account! When you call, verify your information is correct in our system and you will also receive an additional bill credit equal to one month's output from a Member Solar Panel. **Good luck!**

Mark Your Calendar!



**Meeker Cooperative
88th Annual Meeting**
Business Only Meeting
at Meeker Headquarters,
Monday, April 24, 2023
at 9 a.m.

IS YOUR ACCOUNT INFORMATION UP-TO-DATE?

Please take a moment to
update your information.

Visit our website:
www.meeker.coop/update-my-info
or call us at 320-693-3231.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Brad Donnay, President — District 3
Luxemburg, Maine Prairie,
South Maine Prairie in Stearns;
Forest Prairie in Meeker

Mark Larson, Vice President — District 6
Harrison, Kandiyohi, Genessee, Fahlun,
Lake Elizabeth, E. Lake Lillian in Kandiyohi;
Cosmos, Acton, Danielson, Swede Grove
in Meeker; Brookfield, Boon Lake in Renville

Larry Huhn, Secretary — District 8
Darwin, Ellsworth in Meeker

Paul Bugbee, Treasurer — District 1
Roseville, Irving in Kandiyohi;
Paynesville in Stearns;
Union Grove in Meeker

Karen Becker — District 2
Eden Lake in Stearns;
Harvey, Manannah in Meeker

Kevin Issendorf — District 4
Litchfield, Greenleaf in Meeker

Stephen Plaisance — District 5
Fairhaven in Stearns;
Cokato, Southside, French Lake in Wright;
Dassel in Meeker

Randy Bryant — District 7
Collinwood, Cedar Mills in Meeker;
Stockholm in Wright;
Acoma, Hutchinson in McLeod

Jesse Turck — District 9
North Kingston, Kingston,
Forest City in Meeker

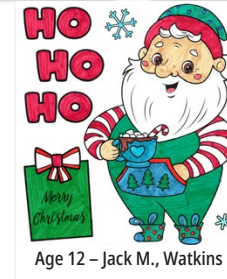
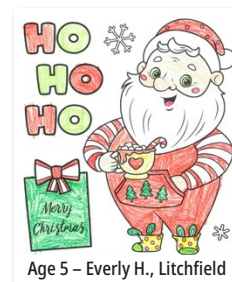
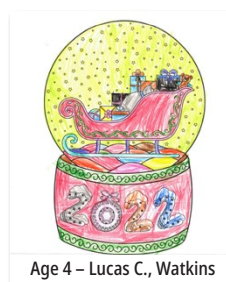
Chad Felstul, Attorney

Meeker Cooperative

Light and Power Association

COLORING CONTEST WINNERS

Congratulations to our winners of the 2022 Co-op Coloring Contest. Voting took place by the Members at our Coffee on the Co-op events in December. Each winner, one from each age group 2-12, received a \$10 Walmart gift card. We had over 90 entries! Thank you to all the wonderful young artists that participated. #28-12-109



View the full-sized version on our website: meeker.coop/2022-color-contest

OFFICE HOURS

Monday - Friday 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

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**Meeker
Cooperative**
Light and Power Association

VIBRANT
Broadband™

**Heartland
Security**

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following our Facebook pages



/meeker.coop



/vibrantbb.net

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Send Attention: Editor at the address above.