

# Engineering the Right Path

*Ernie Thomas' 35 Year Journey at OREMC*

System Engineer Ernie Thomas grew up across the street from Okefenoke REMC and next door to the Middleton family; as in home of former General Manager Emory Middleton and friends John Middleton, OREMC's current general manager, and Mark Middleton, recently retired consumer accounting specialist. Despite the early exposure to the co-op world, Ernie didn't consider working at OREMC as he had plans to be a pharmacist.

After high school Ernie attended classes at the Brunswick Junior College (now College of Coastal Georgia) before transferring to Georgia College in Milledgeville to pursue his degree in pharmacy. But he soon realized becoming a pharmacist wasn't the right fit. Ernie worked for an air conditioning contractor while taking classes and then for a BTC contractor putting in fiber. He says, "Electronics and mechanics were far more interesting to me and something I had always had an interest in."

On February 27, 1986, Ernie landed a job on the right of way crew at OREMC. "OREMC was considered a good place to work," notes Ernie. "My parents were teachers, but I did not believe teaching was my calling. Based on my previous experience and my interest in the electrical field, I felt I wanted to work in the utility industry to some degree." For three months he cut trees and fed the grinder before moving into staking. He notes, "Having some college helped me to move into the entry-level staking position."

Ernie became an engineering technician in 1993 and then began taking night classes in electronics at Coastal Pines Technical College. He moved up to the engineer II position in 1996, he while formalized formalizing his program of study by pursuing a degree in electronics engineering and technology through Troy University. He graduated with his bachelor's in 1998 and progressed to engineering supervisor in 2000 and manager of engineering in 2006.

Reflecting on his work over the years at OREMC, Ernie takes comfort in the steady and stable nature of his job, "Engineering is a good balance of working inside and out and I enjoy that. And the people here at OREMC are great. It is very much a family atmosphere."

So, what has changed in engineering in the last 35 years? "Everything," Ernie exclaims. "Computers changed everything. Back then we had a 5 X 7 notepad that had a statement at the top of each page that read 'Don't say it. Write it.' I guess you could say that was the email equivalent in those days. Everything was paper and now we have evolved to be virtually paperless."

Ernie admits technology has resulted in better engineering outcomes but says like most new things, it did take a while to adapt and adjust. He explains, "We were already using Milsoft Software for system planning studies, but then it expanded into mapping, meter reading, outage management, staking, and SCADA. It improved our work planning processes, accuracy, results and efficiencies. Our substation equipment has also undergone a dramatic change from the older technology analog controls to modern, microprocessor based relays and controls. More recently we have been implementing distribution automation on our system that Kane Lee is overseeing, and I am proud of that progress."

At the same time, Ernie felt his path diverging as he was being pulled in a different direction. In 2020 he stepped down from being the manager of engineering to system engineer. He was feeling called to preach and needed time to study God's word. He says the Lord intervened and made it all work out. "The changes in Engineering have been a good fit for everyone. I am blessed to have a secular career, to be of service to the Lord and find a right balance between the two."