

# F E R G U S

## FEATURES

Member Newsletter ♦ Fergus Electric Cooperative, Inc., Lewistown, MT

## Geyser-area rancher writes music as a sideline

Story and photos  
by Judy Byrne

In conversation, Mike Croston is a quiet fellow – the strong silent type who only talks when it really matters. Put a guitar in his hands, however, and the words flow like a mountain stream – simple, clean, and clear.

This businessman-turned-rancher grew up in Pennsylvania.

In 1988 he visited Montana with his father and immediately knew this was home. He planned to attend college at MSU-Bozeman.

Unfortunately, out-of-state tuition was more than he could handle, so Mike stayed back East and earned his degree at Penn State.

Searching for job opportunities, Mike found a perfect opening in Havre for his knowledge of agricultural business and animal science. He soon relocated and signed on with the Milk River Cooperative. In addition to the job, Mike found a wife, who happened to be his secretary, Kelsie.

“I wanted to be in Montana, ranching and running cattle, being where there’s less people,” says Mike. “I really hit the jackpot here.”

Mike now lives on a ranch in the Highlands near Geyser, where he and Kelsie are making their home. For the last five years, he has managed the ranch operation while Kelsie tends to household chores and takes care of their two daughters, Addison and Rilee.

Although she has experience in drafting and engineering, Kelsie likes being on the ranch with her girls. She enjoys the cooking, cleaning and the peaceful solitude of ranch life. “I grew up on a



*Mike Croston sings of real heroes and laughs about the grandiose schemes of youth. “Ain’t it funny when you realize you don’t know it all? And the big ol’ dreams now just seem kinda small?”*

ranch in the middle of nowhere,” she says. “It’s really nice being back where I feel at home.”

The Crostons could be living an entirely different lifestyle, maybe even in Nashville. Besides being a businessman-rancher, Mike is an accomplished singer-songwriter.

Even as a boy, Mike was a singer, and he started performing at age 16. “Somebody dared me to enter a talent show, and I just kept doing it,” he shrugs. “Started writing at a young age, too, but it was all junk. Gotta have some life experience to write songs.”

With two CDs on the market and sales doing well, Mike could have a career as a musician. He recorded his

first album in Nashville where he also performed at the Country Music Association’s Music Fest.

“They advised me how to get moving in the music business,” he explains, “but it’s pretty hard to get on radio stations in the U.S. if you don’t want to do it full time. It’s a tough business, and what I really want to do is ranch. Music is just a sideline, something to do for fun in the winter when I can’t be working outdoors.”

His second album, nearly all original songs, comes from his own experiences, and each tells a true story. His sound is country-western with lyrics that talk of his family, his faith and his life. Whether it’s a rhythmic two-step or a flowing waltz, his melodies get the toes tapping, and his words bring a nod of recognition.

He sings of real heroes and laughs about the grandiose schemes of youth. “Ain’t it funny when you realize you don’t know it all? And the big ol’ dreams now just seem kinda small?”

Simple truths and simple tales from an honest man living a simple, hard-working life.

He sings:

*Money’s all gone, the droughts been too long.*

*Can’t make it there’s bills to pay.*

*Tractor sits still no hay in the fields,  
There’s only the dust and the sage.*

*Dust and the sage are all that gets saved*

*When the land is burned by the sun,  
And it’s all that I have when the cattle are gone*

*Riding broken through dust and the sage.*

*In the end I’m just dust in the sage.*

*Continued on page 5*



# MANAGER'S MESSAGE

From Scott Sweeney

## Energy conservation

As we move into winter, I want to encourage everyone to use electricity wisely. Electricity is a great asset for farmers, ranchers, home owners, small businesses and all members of the cooperative. Conservation of this valuable resource is a benefit for all of us – none of us want to pay too much for the energy we use.

A timer on engine heaters for cars, pickups and tractors is one way to save energy. Turning the heater on for several hours versus leaving it on all night is efficient. Livestock water tanks should be properly insulated or be drained and turned off for winter. When the temperature drops below zero, a tank heater on an open stock tank with little insulation uses a lot of energy.

One common complaint the co-op hears is, how much the power bill goes up when the new “magic box” infrared electric heaters are plugged in. If the heater is rated at 1500 watts, it uses about 1095 kWh per month when it runs 24 hours a day, seven days per week. This heater, alone, could add \$114 to \$136 to the monthly power bill.

Electricity is a great tool for all of us and the cooperative encourages everyone to use power wisely in order to control costs on their monthly bill.

## Southern Montana and Highwood Generating Station

Our power supplier, Southern Montana Electric G & T is pleased to report that the Highwood Station is now operational. Phase 1 of HGS, a 40 MW peaking plant, operates as it is needed. I toured the plant for its dedication Sept. 15 and again on Oct. 6 for the Montana Electric Cooperatives’ tour. Both times the station was operating at full capacity – 40 megawatts.

When running, the plant is very quiet. The staff reported that emissions are low – considerably less than the limits set in the Air Permit from the Montana Department of Environment Quality (DEQ).

Southern Montana has a trial date with Yellowstone Valley Electric Cooperative on Nov. 9. I believe it will be beneficial for both sides to get the issues between YVEC and its power supplier resolved.

## Cooperative activities

Office staff is working on the new computer conversion. This is a large task that will take about six months to complete.

Outside crews and office staff are doing the annual inventory of material to ensure that our work order process is accurate in accounting for material – poles, insulators, wire, etc.

The co-op’s line crews are busy completing as many jobs as possible before winter weather slows construction. Crews are working to finish the 1.5 miles of transmission line near Hilger and to replace three transmission poles near Winnett Junction that broke in April’s snow/ice storm.

Crews are also working to complete approximately 10 lines which will provide new services for members wanting power as soon as possible. We are still trying to complete several projects related to flood damages from May and June.

The co-op certainly has a busy fall schedule. I hope the weather cooperates, so we can complete the planned projects.



Let us not forget: *“We are the home of the free, because of the brave.”*

## Accident-free record

Fergus Electric’s employees and management received recognition for their outstanding achievement of an accident-free work record at the MECA annual meeting in Great Falls. Pictured back left to right: Tom Simons, Guy Johnson, Brian Godbey, Dave Phifer, Murray Matthews, Ryan

d’Autremont, Jim Richter. Front: Tyson Ruff, Curt Olson, Mark Schwomeyer, Bret Ophus, Scott Sweeney.

Not pictured are Dale Rikala, Louie Hould, Kerby Durbin, Don Criswell, Dean Lawler, Richard Anderson, Monte Obert and Tyler Hodge.



## Identify account number

*Win a \$32.50 credit*

If one of the following account numbers is yours, call Fergus Electric (406-538-3465) and identify yourself and your account number.

*Account 389153*

*Account 318100*

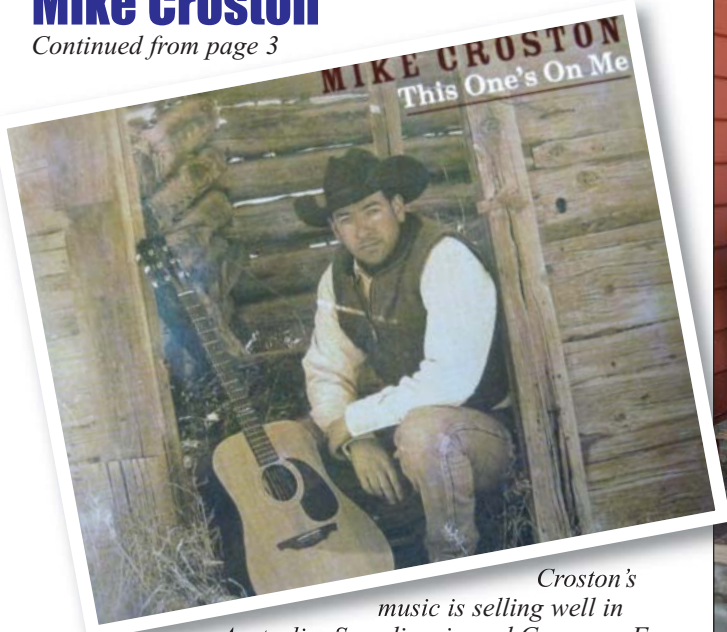
*Account 154704*

You will receive a \$32.50 credit on next month’s statement.

**Dave Rutan** of Roundup was last month’s winner.

# Mike Croston

Continued from page 3



*Croston's music is selling well in Australia, Scandinavia and Germany. For the last five years, Mike has managed the ranch operation while Kelsie tends to household chores and takes care of their daughters, Addison, 7, and Rilee, 3 years old.*



His experience vibrates through his songs and touches that bit of cowboy in everyone. From his honky-tonk version of "Just Right" to his mealtime prayer "God is Grace," Mike's songs speak of things that make life worth living.

His voice is pure, never overpowered by his backup band, and his words ring true. Lewistown's Sue Kalina recently heard his CD and was astonished to learn he was a local Montana musician. She calls him a really good artist with a very nice bluegrass sound.

Fergus Electric Cooperative's Board President, Bob Evans,

heard Mike perform in Great Falls and says, "Mike is very, very good."

Mike's albums are available online at CDBaby, Amazon, and iTunes or directly from him ([mkcroston26@3riversdbb.net](mailto:mkcroston26@3riversdbb.net)). Watching over the business end of things, Kelsie reports his music is selling very well in Australia, Scandinavia, and Germany. "He can write a song in 10 minutes, with music and words, sometimes when we're just driving down the road. He tells me to grab a pen and write whatever he says."

Although ranching occupies his time and his mind, Mike is considering what his future might bring. Currently working towards a master's degree from Colorado State University in integrated resource management, he hopes to start a consulting business.

Oriented toward sustainable ranching practices, he wants to help landowners optimize their properties while maintaining the rugged beauty of the land. He feels he can provide full-spectrum assistance in balancing the animals, range, and recreation for Montana's agricultural businessmen.

He also might take another shot at Nashville. "Maybe I'll go back and peddle some of my songs, see if some other artist will record 'em," he says. "I'd say more, but my wife usually does most of the talking. Maybe I can just sing you a song."

## Apprentice lineman hired

**M**ark Schwomeyer comes to the cooperative from NorthWestern Energy. He completed the pre-apprenticeship program at Montana Tech in Butte and is currently enrolled in the apprenticeship program sponsored by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW).

When asked what he likes best about line work he said, "I like the men I work with. They are willing to teach and share their experiences. I also like working with our members and I enjoy the countryside. Every day is interesting and exciting and I look forward to coming to work."



In his free time, Mark likes to spend time with his wife, Tammi, and enjoying the outdoors, bow hunting, fishing, hiking and camping. He grew up in Indiana and has been in Lewistown for 11 years.

*In observance of Thanksgiving, Fergus Electric's offices in Lewistown and Roundup will be closed Nov. 24 and 25. The office will also close for Veterans Day Nov. 11.*



## READERS WRITE



So much to be thankful for...

**EDITOR'S COMMENT:** *At Thanksgiving, we are thankful for many things for many reasons. To Fergus Electric, Thanksgiving is an occasion to express appreciation for the opportunity to serve our membership and to wish everyone a pleasant holiday. Letters expressing appreciation are reprinted here.*

A big thank you to our FEC crew and all those who make sure we have electricity – especially while we are isolated by flooding.

*Mary Brower, Roundup*

Sally and Fergus Electric –

Thank you so much for your donation to the RSVP appreciation dinner. We are grateful for your generosity.

*Norma Thomas, Lewistown*

Fergus Electric Line Crew,

Thank you for getting power up and running for my parents, Steve and Luetta Hall. Your service is DEEPLY appreciated!

*Sincerely, Cindy Hall, Lewistown*

## Dave Phifer receives service award

Manager Scott Sweeney presents foreman Dave Phifer with a plaque recognizing his 30 years of cooperative service. He was honored at this year's Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association's annual meeting in Great Falls. Along with rural electric associates from across Montana, these individuals were remembered for outstanding service to Montana's rural electric community and to the national rural electric program.

Dear Fergus Electric,

I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate the \$600 scholarship. I can't tell you how excited I was to have my name drawn. Thank you for giving back to the community.

*Sincerely, Sarah Spear, Buffalo*

Thank you very much for your gift to the Musselshell Valley Community Foundation. Your support is important and appreciated.

Dear Fergus Electric Cooperative,

Thank you for awarding the annual meeting scholarship.

*Sincerely, Nicholis L. Metcalfe, Moccasin*

Thank you all for the great dinner we had at the Annual Meeting and for the cutlery set and cute flashing pins. Harold was really happy about the 1/2 inch drill I won in the drawing.

*Sincerely, June Donaldson, Denton*

On behalf of Snowy Mountain Industries, we would like to thank you for your support of the "Hand Up Building Campaign" for the developmentally disabled.

*Sincerely, Frank Sennett, SMI Area Manager*

A big thank you to the crew that turned the lights on in the wee hours a few weeks ago in the Dovetail community.

*Weingarts of the Swinging H Cattle Company, Winnett*

Just a note to thank you for the great job of keeping our power on during the awful flooding.

*Respectfully, Jerry and Thelma Cole, Musselshell*



## Bob Evans honored with Hard Ridin' Award

At the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association's annual meeting awards breakfast, Bob Evans was recognized for his 10 years as president of the association. He represented Fergus Electric on the MECA Board for 22 years. Bob currently serves as president of Fergus Electric's board of which he has been a representative for District 7, Stanford/Geyser areas, for 26 years.





**LEWISTOWN, MT**

Your Touchstone Energy® Partner 

### FOR OUTAGES

**First:** Check the fuses or breakers in the building in which the electricity is off.

**Second:** Check the breaker below the meter.

**Third:** If electricity is still out, call a neighbor to see if they have electricity.

**Fourth:** Call **406-538-3465** day or night or:

|                              |              |
|------------------------------|--------------|
| Dale Rikala .....            | 406-535-5192 |
| Guy Johnson.....             | 406-535-5132 |
| Scott Sweeney .....          | 406-538-7218 |
| Don Criswell (Roundup) ..... | 406-323-3426 |
| Monte Obert .....            | 406-425-1288 |

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