

# Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

## Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

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## Guest Column



### Stay alert to scams

By Doug Roles, *Vice President of Member Services*

YEARS AGO, I worked with a crew at a local manufacturing plant. One morning, as everyone was sipping coffee and getting tools ready, one of the guys excitedly reported that he had won a huge lottery prize. He had received the phone call the previous day. All he needed to do was send a money order for a couple hundred dollars to the outfit to cover processing costs — and he had already sent the fee!

You guessed it: He never received a prize. And he never got anywhere trying to prosecute the “lottery” folks.

It’s a sad scenario that plays out all too often. As a utility, Valley Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) is frequently contacted by members reporting suspicious calls.

Consumers with a water, gas or electricity connection have long been targets for utility scams, but fraudsters have changed their tactics since the COVID-19 pandemic. As consumers became more reliant on technology for work, school, and commerce, scammers noted these shifts and adapted their tactics to this changed environment.

Imposter scams are the No. 1 type of fraud reported to the Federal Trade Commission. While scam artists may still come to your door posing as a “power company” worker, in today’s more connected world, attempts are more likely to come through an electronic device, via email, phone or text.

A scammer may claim you are overdue on your electric bill and threaten to disconnect your service if you don’t

pay immediately. Whether this is done in-person, by phone, text or email, the scammers want to scare you into immediate payment so you don’t have time to think clearly.

If this happens over the phone, simply hang up. If you’re concerned about your bill, call us at 800-432-0680. If the scam is by email or text, delete it before taking any action. Remember, Valley REC will never attempt to demand immediate payment after just one notice.

Some scammers may also falsely claim you have been overcharged on your bill and say they want to give you a refund. It sounds easy. All you have to do is click or press a button to initiate the process. If you proceed, you will be prompted to provide banking or other personal information. Instead of money going into your bank account, the scammers will be able to drain your account and use your personal information, such as a Social Security number, for identity theft.

If this “refund” scam happens over the phone, just hang up and block the phone number to prevent future robocalls. If this scam attempt occurs via email or text, do not click any links. Instead, delete it, and if possible, block the sender. If you do happen to overpay on your electric bill, Valley REC will automatically apply the credit to your next billing cycle or, in some cases, contact you about the amount overpaid.

Sadly, there seems to be no end in sight to scams. Hopefully, if we all remain vigilant, we can make business bad for the fraudsters. ❁

# Couple begins tiny home construction & sales business

By Doug Roles  
*Vice President of Member Services*

A NORTHERN Huntingdon County couple who has started a business building tiny homes hopes the houses will spur local interest in the national trend of living simply. Brian and Lauren Spicher, Valley Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) members near McAlevy's Fort, finished building their first two units this spring.

Through their business, PA Tiny Timbers, they have aspirations of selling the houses and perhaps eventually creating a tiny home community in the area, populated by a mix of seasonal renters and tiny home owners.

"Tiny home communities are popping up all over the country," Brian says. "People are looking for options."

"There are a lot of older people looking for communities with shared gardens and other common spaces," Lauren adds.

Brian says the "hipster mobile homes" appeal to minimalists who like to travel, whether they're young couples who can work remotely or retirees who want to downsize. Lauren says clusters of tiny homes create the camaraderie of a campground. The structures work well for in-laws quarters, too.

Tiny homes are a new direction for the Spichers, who have four children, three boys and a girl ranging in age from 2 to 9. Brian grew up in Huntingdon County but spent the past decade in the Lancaster area as a roofing and siding contractor, working 60 to 70 hours a week.

"This is so different from what I used to do," Brian says. "We kind of took a leap of faith, and everything came together. My heart was always here."

Lauren is a Long Island, N.Y., native, who attended Alvernia College in Reading, Pa., to become an athletic trainer. She was the head athletic trainer at Ephrata High School.

Three years ago, the Spichers purchased a cabin and 40 acres on Valley REC lines near Brian's family. The couple bought the property to have a place to bring the kids and because Brian had a dream of living in a cabin in the woods. The COVID-19 pandemic saw them spending more time at the property. Brian sold his business, and the family moved to Huntingdon County in July 2021. They renovated the cabin then built a timber-frame barn.

The mortise and tenon construction project, paired with Lauren's growing interest in tiny homes, led the couple to the idea of building



TOP PHOTO: Brian and Lauren Spicher of McAlevy's Fort completed construction of their first two tiny homes this spring. They hope to build six more this year. ABOVE PHOTO: The tiny home features a loft for sleeping and storage. Additional storage space is built into the steps in this unit.





tiny homes with a cabin look. Several large pine trees, cut from the property and milled on site, provided enough lumber for four units.

“We wanted to go more rustic,” Lauren says. “Our homes have an exposed-wood, timber-frame interior.”

Jay Yoder, a talented carpenter and owner of McBurney Manor, a bed and breakfast in McAlevy’s Fort, builds the window shutters and staircases. The Spichers’ homes feature 2-by-6-foot tongue-and-groove flooring.

The venture has been a learning experience for Lauren as she has gotten into social media marketing to promote their tiny home business and to stay abreast of new designs.

“There are a lot of options as far as utilities are concerned,” Brian says. “The more I learn about them, the more I like them. I would live in one of these.”

The units use 220-amp service and tie into septic and electrical systems at campsites just like a recreational vehicle. A propane water heater is standard, along with an electric rangetop and LED lighting. A ductless, mini-split system provides heating and air conditioning.

Brian puts lap siding and cedar shutters on his units and builds with energy efficiency in mind, realizing an “R” rating of 10 in the walls, 30 in the floor and six in the ceiling. At 8.5-by-26-feet, the living space is a tenth the size of a typical home and requires a lot less heating and cooling. Running the water line in the insulation protects it from cold temperatures.

Storage space is key. The treads of the larger, lower steps flip up while the sides of the upper steps open. A pocket door to the bathroom also is a space saver.

Though the units are not meant to be as

mobile as a camper, they can be relocated. They’re built on steel-plated trailers specifically designed for tiny homes. Brian says many owners of tiny homes will build a deck around their houses after getting them in place.

PA Tiny Timbers offers four different styles of homes. Build time on a unit is about six weeks. The Spichers started their first unit Feb. 11 and hope to build eight this year.

“We’re learning. We’re kind of seeing where it goes,” Brian says. “Time will tell.”

*For more information go to, [rustictinyhome.com](http://rustictinyhome.com). ❁*



# Meet your employees

**HIGHLIGHTED** in this column is a recent addition to the Valley Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) team, Curtis Starr. He joined Valley REC in December 2021 and works in the Shade Gap district as a fourth-year lineman apprentice.

Curtis is a 2012 graduate of Southern Huntingdon County High School. After school, he went to work for J.R. Wyles, a James Creek-based utility line construction company, now E.G. Anderson of Blairs Mills. He did not have a background in electrical work, but did have an interest in line construction.

“I just learned from going to work. I started as a ground hand and worked for John [Wyles] until 2020, and then for Ethan [Anderson] for a year,” Curtis says, adding his time with the companies was spent doing line work for Adams Electric Cooperative (EC) near Gettysburg. He worked in the Gettysburg, Shippensburg and York areas.

“That’s kind of how I got familiar with co-ops,” Curtis says.

Curtis grew up in Shade Gap and now lives in the Three Springs area. He was commuting from there to Adams County. When he heard Valley REC was hiring lineworkers to fill vacancies due to the retirement of some longtime employees, Curtis applied through PA Careerlink. He says he’s glad to have a job as a lineworker closer to home. Curtis says there are many similarities in line work from one co-op to another, the biggest one being the areas served by rural electric cooperatives.

“It’s all off the beaten path,” Curtis jokes.

Curtis does a mix of service work and line maintenance and construction for Valley REC. In April, he attended a course on substation regulators, offered through the Pennsylvania Rural Electric Association’s (PREA) Job Training & Safety Program.



**WELCOME:** Curtis Starr joined the Valley REC team in December 2021. A Three Springs-area resident, he works as a lineman apprentice at the co-op’s Shade Gap district office.

Last month, he attended PREA’s weeklong intermediate hot stick course, which builds familiarity with the telescoping fiberglass poles used in working with energized lines.

Curtis noted that when he worked on the Adams EC system, jobs involving energized 7,200-volt lines could be done with rubber gloves and sleeves. Since Valley REC’s system includes 14,400-volt lines, “hot stick” training is essential.

In his spare time, Curtis likes taking his camper to state parks with his wife, Hunter, and their goldendoodle, Remi. He also enjoys hunting and trapping.

Curtis is looking forward to becoming a journeyman lineman and plans on a rewarding career with the co-op.

“It’s close to home, and the people are nice,” he says. “I get to meet members, and I like to get people’s lights back on.”

Valley REC is glad to have Curtis on the team that keeps the lights on. He’s one of the people you can count on. ✿

