

NEWS, NOTES & VIEWS 10/18

Meet Your Board of Directors

*Kevin Brannan,
Secretary*

Kevin Brannan, Board Secretary, on his farm near Eldred.



Kevin Brannan joined Illinois Electric Cooperative's Board of Directors in 2001, making him the fourth-longest serving director today. He spent much of his professional career at Carrollton High School, where he taught agriculture and served as the FFA advisor for 33 years, retiring in 2013.

Aside from his time as an educator, Kevin has farmed and served in numerous community and area roles throughout his lifetime, which include various boards and committees. He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives (AIEC) in Springfield, where he serves as Vice President.

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Seventeen years ago, Kevin was somewhat unprepared to be approached about becoming an Illinois Electric Director. “It kind of surprised me, one night I just got a phone call and they asked if I’d be interested,” he remembers. His knowledge of electric cooperatives was limited to information he had received at annual meetings. “I knew what went on with this board...I did know about co-ops, but I didn’t know a lot of stuff about electric co-ops.”

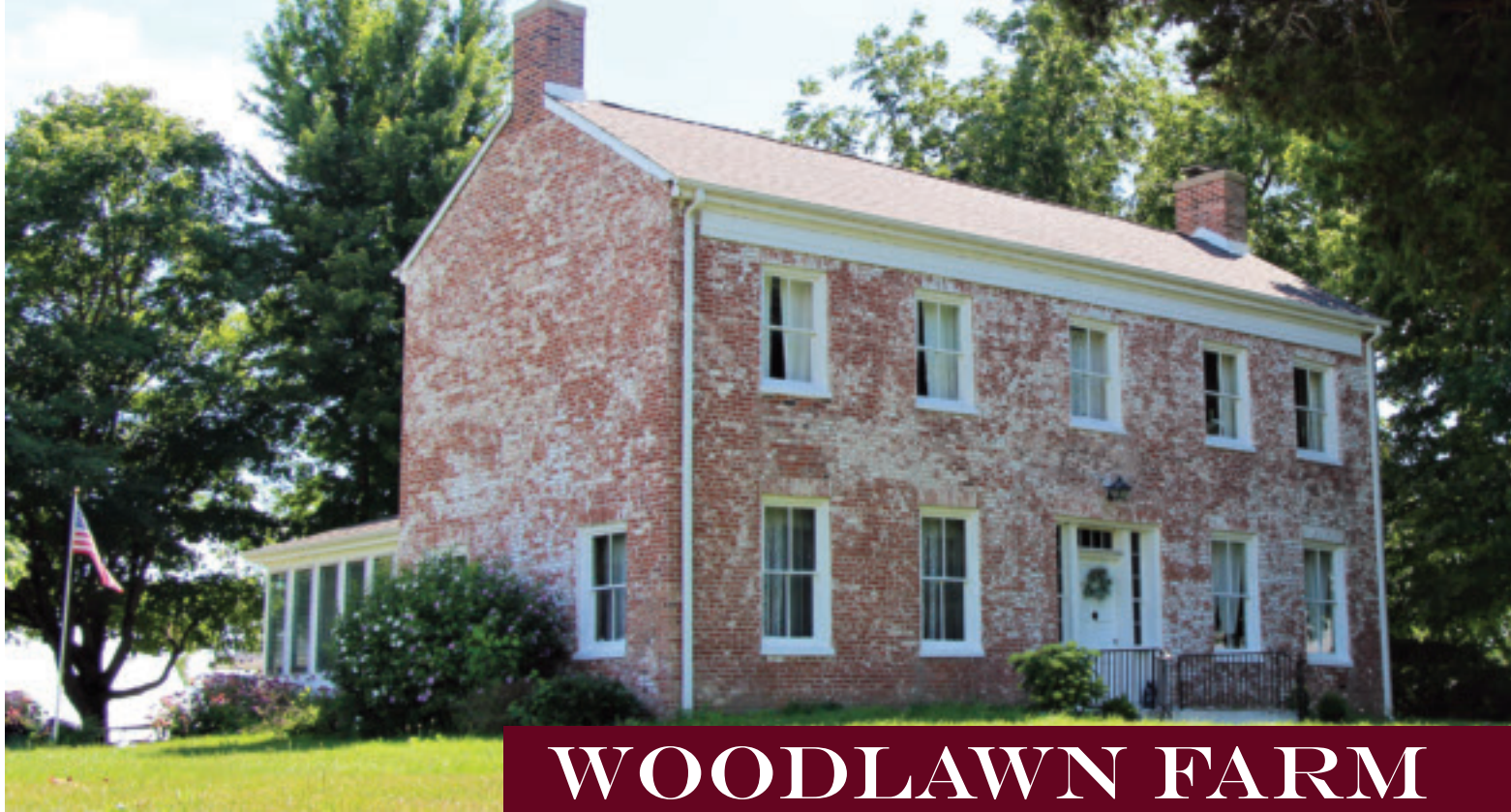
Kevin has learned a lot in his time as a director, and he remains enthusiastic about his position. “I just find it interesting, and there’s always something changing.” This change is one thing he believes the co-op will have to face down the road. In fact, there are many challenges and opportunities Illinois Electric will confront in the future. “I think staying ahead of technology is always going to be one thing.” In addition to constant technological developments in the field, especially in internet-related areas, Kevin sees constant policy and legislative updates, as well as leadership within the cooperative, as topics which will need to be addressed in the coming years. “Trying to keep members informed is the best thing we can do...and trying to be fair to the members.”

For the time being, on the other hand, Kevin feels his time as a director has been rewarding for multiple reasons. He is especially proud to be involved in projects involving solar power, as well as the construction of a wind turbine in Pike County. “What I find rewarding is... the same problems other co-ops are facing throughout the nation are things we’ve already dealt with. I think the directors, the management, and the staff are always looking for new things.”

Kevin also appreciates the diversity within the board. He appreciates how directors have been carefully selected to represent different experiences and backgrounds, so not everyone has the same opinion or point of view on every issue. “Everyone has an opinion, but will also listen to different opinions.” As for being one of the more experienced directors, Kevin is aware others may look up to him. “I find it kind of humbling to look around and know I’m the fourth-longest serving person on the board,” he says, aware of the value of his experience to newer colleagues.

While Kevin Brannan may technically be “retired,” it should not be assumed he does not keep himself quite busy. Along with his farming and board positions, he has children who are grown, as well as younger kids. He is also husband to his wife, Amber. As far as managing personal and professional responsibilities, Kevin feels the needs of his and other area communities are worth his time and efforts. When asked why he is willing to set aside additional time to tackle Illinois Electric duties, he replies: “I think it’s more of what needs to be done, or what has to be done. It’s community involvement.” It is clear, then, that Kevin is not only a hard worker and dedicated family man, he is also a man committed to helping his community and the people in it.

This article on Kevin Brannan is the second in a series of written profiles on Illinois Electric Cooperative’s Board of Directors, which have been compiled and written by Noah Sellars, one of our college interns.



WOODLAWN FARM

The past is rarely as distant from the present as it appears. In fact, history frequently surrounds us, in places and ways we often fail to realize. Our local communities are full of rich stories from the past, and we need not always look far to uncover them. Just east of Jacksonville, at 1463 Gierke Lane, sits Woodlawn Farm, a spot owned by the Morgan County Historical Society, and managed by the Jacksonville Underground Railroad Committee. This property—featuring a home, barn, and a number of sheds—embodies the very definition of local history, and its story is one worth sharing and remembering.

In 1821, Kentucky resident Michael Huffaker journeyed to Illinois, searching for the unknown, unrealized opportunities which open land seemed to promise. Illness soon forced his return to Kentucky, but in 1823 Huffaker returned to Illinois. The following year, he purchased a piece of property 5 miles east of present-day Jacksonville, on which he began to build a new home, and, even more significantly, a new life. He named his homestead Woodlawn Farm, and spent his lifetime working it and raising his family on it through much of the mid-19th century. The home which stands on the property today was constructed by Huffaker in 1840.

But it is not only the longevity of Woodlawn which prompts the necessity to preserve its story. The years preceding the Civil War witnessed a number of escaped slaves from the South fleeing to Northern States, using a chain of cooperating homes, people, and property to arrive in a land where they could break free from slavery. This system, called the Underground Railroad, took place all across the country, but it was especially active and vital in states like Illinois—free states which bordered slave states.

It is here where Woodlawn Farm comes into the historical spotlight. Michael Huffaker's experiences living in Kentucky had accustomed him to the plight of black men and women in the South; he employed a number of free blacks at Woodlawn for many years. The presence of free black workers, as well as Huffaker's known anti-slavery sentiments, made Woodlawn Farm an ideal stop for escaped slaves; as they quietly blended in with the free workers, they were assumed to be free.



Eyewitness testimony and historical records strengthen the Farm's connections to the Underground Railroad. Indeed, Woodlawn Farm is but one of the area's historic sites regarding the Underground Railroad, as there existed several stops around Jacksonville, Springfield, and surrounding communities.

Following the Huffaker family's residency on the property, further owners made the home and surrounding farm their own. Throughout the remainder of the 19th and much of the 20th centuries, especially in the 1920's, Woodlawn Farm underwent a series of extensive renovations and upgrades, while maintaining the original character of the home. The result has been a visible blending of styles and traditions encompassing the home's near two centuries of vibrant and ever-changing life. While Woodlawn Farm's outer appearance may have changed slightly, its history remained strongly intact. The Morgan County Historical Society purchased the property in 2003, and Woodlawn Farm was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2007—for its association with the Underground Railroad, as well as the historical value of the home and accompanying 20th-century dairy barn.

But, nearly two centuries of vibrant life have taken their toll on the property. The home, though a stunningly well-built structure, is in need of various costly repairs and touch-ups, in order to ensure its

most effective preservation for the future. In 2024, Woodlawn Farm will celebrate its 200th birthday, reminding all of us the value in conserving places of special historical relevance. Remarkably, the work to maintain the site thus far has been done in large part by the dedicated members of the Jacksonville Underground Railroad Committee, aided only by the donations of private citizens and frequent tour guests to the property.

If you are interested in contributing to the effort of protecting this valuable part of local history, contact the Underground Railroad Committee at P.O. Box 116, Jacksonville, IL 62651, or call Barbara at 309-678-7716, or Terry at 217-473-4457. Woodlawn Farm is always tremendously appreciative of volunteers, to aid with landscaping, cleaning, and picking up around the property, and giving tours. Perhaps the very best way to begin to be of service to this piece of history is to schedule a visit to the home and museum, or tell others about the opportunity to visit the site, where tours are given on Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, from 1 to 4 pm, May to September—though dates outside of this window may be arranged. The Underground Railroad Committee will also be conducting an Underground Railroad Fall Bus Tour on Sunday, October 14, giving people of all ages the opportunity to explore numerous Underground Railroad sites in Jacksonville, including Woodlawn Farm, Illinois College, and various historical homes. To reserve your spot for this exciting tour, call 217-479-4144.

We must always remember the importance of keeping history alive today. Far from being only dusty facts, peoples, and events from days gone by, history is the story of what has been, and a guide for what is to come.

Preserve the past, and we enrich our present and ensure our future.

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