

Currents



September 2024

Charlevoix's First Family of Public Power



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Charlevoix South Pier Light Station

Charlevoix's First Family of Public Power

By Dennis Hicks
MMEA Currents Editor

With the passing of Ed Whitley at age 74 in February of 2024, the Whitley family, the **Charlevoix Electric Department**, and the entire City of Charlevoix saw the closing of a celebrated chapter in the community's history. In addition, the **Michigan Municipal Electric Association** (MMEA), the **Michigan Public Power Agency** (MPPA), and the entire Michigan Public Power community mourned his loss.



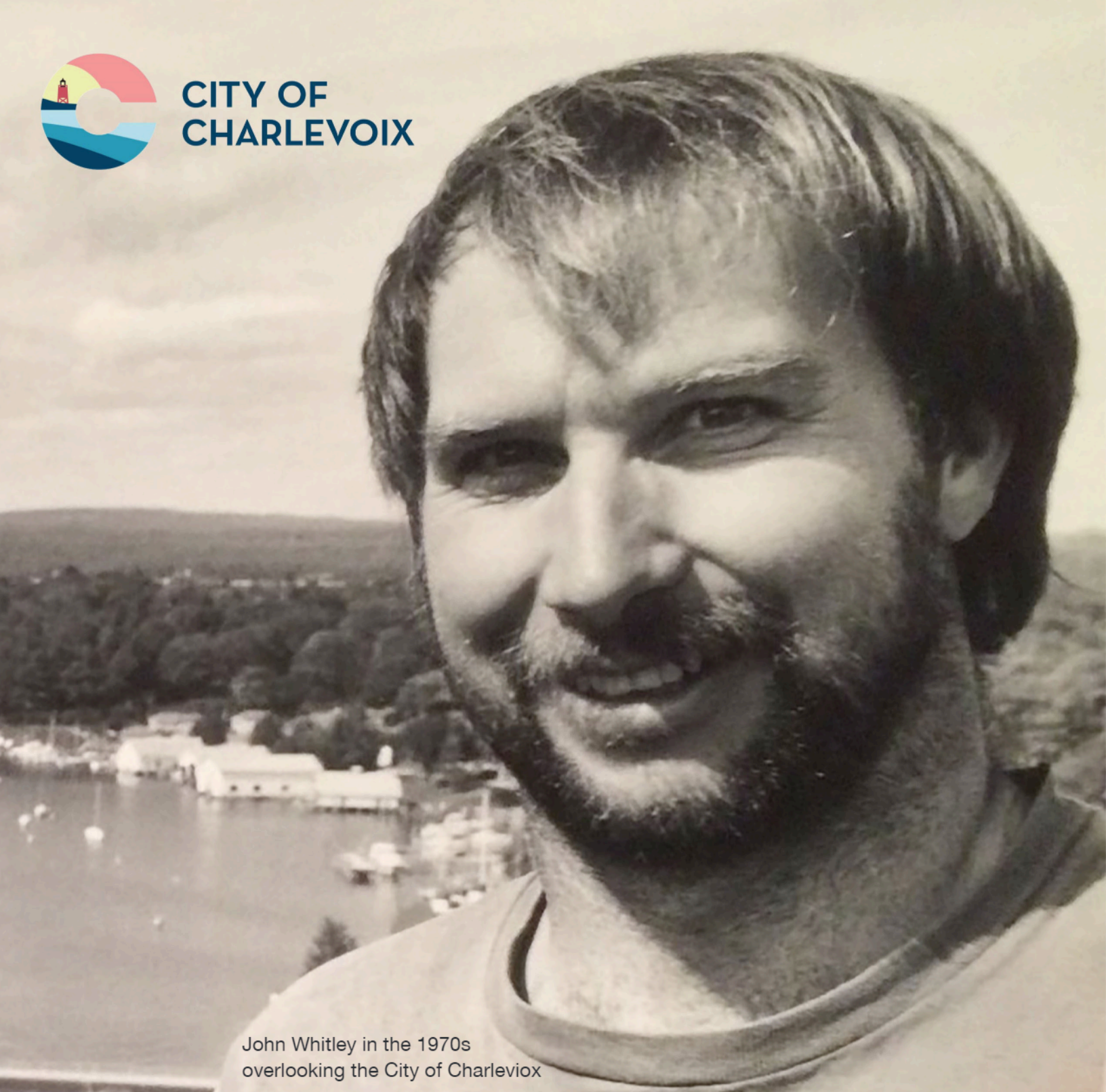
Ed served as a City of Charlevoix Electric and Water Department Superintendent for 30 years. His brother, John, who passed away in 2016, was an Electric Department lineworker and lead lineman for 38 years. The two brothers followed their father, Jim, into the Electric Department. Jim worked for 37 years as a lineman, and as Electrical Water Superintendent. Before that, he served in

the Army during World War II, and was awarded the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star.

“When I moved to Charlevoix, I learned that the Whitley family is dedicated to the community and to Public Power,” said John Griffith, City of Charlevoix Electric Department Director. “I first met Ed Whitley through the MMEA. His nephew,



CITY OF
CHARLEVOIX



John Whitley in the 1970s
overlooking the City of Charlevoix

Andrew Whitley, is a lineman for the city, as were Andrew's father and grandfather. I think this speaks highly of the dedication, pride, and sense of service of individuals choosing a career in Public Power."

"Between my dad, my Uncle Ed, and my grandfather, I think they gave 105 years of service

to the City," said Andrew Whitley. "Except for a four month break between my dad's retirement and me being hired, we have served the Electric Department continuously for three generations."

"I knew all three generations," said Scott Blanchard, retired Electric Department crew chief. "Jim hired me, and I worked with John and



Jim and Bessie Faye Whitley
circa 1945

Ed. I also worked some with Andrew during his apprenticeship. Honestly, you couldn't meet a nicer family. Ed was the Superintendent, but he only took the job with the understanding that he would continue to work in the field. He was out there with the crews climbing poles. Ed was the one who set up the work plans. John was the one who looked at the plans and figured out the best way to get it done."

Don Swem, a retired Electric Department Superintendent who took over from Ed, echoes

the view of John and Ed's practical approach. Ed was the all-around boss. He knew what to do and how to do it. John could look at the plans and say 'No, we're doing it this way.' And John's way was always better. He was the one who kept the ship moving forward."

"My dad had no formal schooling past high school," said Andrew. "He just had a mindset to make things work. I worked on small, random projects with him and he just had an always-moving-forward attitude. Don't let something

hang you up. If there's an issue, get past it. We have a big family—my grandfather, Jim, had ten kids—so there were a lot of uncles, and a lot of knowledge available.”

For Andrew, that deep well of practical knowledge was on full display when his dad came up with an idea to build a portable hunting camp. “My dad was talking to Don Swem about this idea, and asking for input, because Swem was an engineer. But Swem couldn't get his mind around it so my dad made a model. It's so hard to describe, but this whole big contraption folds up, with bunks in it. They'd run it up to the U.P. and unfold it, throw a tarp over it and they'd have a big, portable cabin on wheels. Watching my dad and Swem work on it and modify it over the years was like an old time comedy skit, the way they would poke at each other. But they built it, and it turned out to be a great product.”

Cindy Whitley, Ed's wife, remembers Jim, John, and Ed as very hard workers. “Ed's father, Jim, would do his job for the city, and then do electrical work for people who were building homes,” she said. “Ed would work with his dad, which taught him a lot. When Ed joined the Navy, they recognized his skills and put him to work on electrical jobs. After four years in the Navy, he came to work for the City. Till the day he died, he was still doing electrical work for our neighbors down in Florida.”

Ed and Cindy's daughter Jamie, now a High School science teacher, recalled her father's dedication to his work when she was a child. “My mom's family had a restaurant so she worked evenings. When my dad had to respond to an outage after work hours, there were often times when he would put my brother and I in the back of our old station wagon. He had a bed set up in the back and we would sleep there until my mom got off work to pick us up. That always seemed so cool to me as a kid. I love that Andrew is working for the Department now, and keeping the tradition going.”

Jamie, who was awarded Petoskey High School's Teacher of the Year in 2019, also works with alternative education students. “Our school has a Career and Technical Education program where students can get into a contract for lineworker training.”

Whitley traditions are not limited to work. Some time in the 1970s, Ed and John decided to trek across the Lake Michigan ice from Charlevoix to Beaver Island and back in one day—a 50 mile round trip. In 2014, Andrew, his brother Nicholas, and brother-in-law Paul Beauvais decided to follow in their footsteps. “The ice wasn't smooth,” said Andrew. It was very choppy, so it was like walking on gravel. We roped off to each other in case of emergency, and we each carried another person's extra clothes in case someone got wet. It's something I'm glad I did, but I wouldn't do it again.”

Scott Blanchard feels that the Electric Department is in good hands with Andrew's generation. “I think the younger people in the industry now are smarter than we were, because the schooling is better. In our day, you learned on the job, and the training was something you picked up from the experienced hands,” he said.

Don Swem agrees. “We were such a small time operation, with not much formal training, and much more isolated in the past,” he said. “I don't know how Jim Whitley and his generation did it. Today, there is more, and broader, formal training, and the system is more reliable, thanks to the updating done by Ed and John, and their crews. The work is safer, too. Back then, there was a lot of pole climbing where today, bucket trucks make the work faster and safer.”

Cindy Whitley can attest to the difference in safety between Ed's generation and Andrew's. “One day, Ed was working and a pole went down with him on it,” she said. “He ended up in the hospital with a concussion. He got out the same day and went right back to work.”



Ed Whitley

“Ed and I drove to Lansing for meetings every month, for years. We would talk about everything or nothing, about quantum physics, and things you wouldn’t believe. He and John were great to work with, and I miss them both.”

Don Swem

While this scenario might play out differently today, it does speak to Ed’s resilience, toughness, and the work ethic for which the Whitleys are known. Ed was a working boss, who led by example and didn’t want to sit behind a desk. He did, however, spend countless hours behind the wheel traveling to Lansing to represent Charlevoix at MMEA and MPPA meetings.

“Ed and I drove to Lansing for meetings every month, for years,” said Don Swem. “We would talk about everything or nothing, about quantum physics, and things you wouldn’t believe. He and John were great to work with, and I miss them both.”

Jamie Whitley also has memories of Ed’s trips to Lansing. “I was a student at Michigan State University during that time and for me, his visits usually meant a dinner out and money for groceries. As a student, that meant a lot to me,” she said.

There are many in the community who miss Ed and John. The two were beloved for their deep

commitment to the community that went beyond the power lines. “I feel that sense of legacy,” said Andrew. “It’s more out in the community than in the shop. People recognize me as a Whitley. We have a distance facial construction, so they’ll ask who my dad is. They’ll always have a story about my dad or my uncle Ed, and tell me how great my family is. It reminds me to do my best and try to live up to that reputation so that in the future people will still see the family the way they do now.”

Ed used to tell Andrew: “It goes beyond the power lines. You work for the community. Even if you see someone’s garbage blown into the street, it doesn’t take much to pull the truck over and stand the garbage can back up and put it in the driveway.”

A lot of community noticed, and respected the Electric Department for those little services to the community back then. Andrew, and the rest of the Electric Department, want to continue that tradition as well.

“A lot of the current crew worked with my dad,” said Andrew. “Some of them worked with my uncle Ed. We all feel the legacy they left behind. They were not just hard workers, they were community oriented and we all work to uphold that spirit. I feel the legacy a little bit as a family thing, but I also feel it as a Department thing. We all try to insure that we are looked at favorably by the community, and that includes doing the little things.” 💡