

Transcript of Power Chat – In the Electric Lounge

Season 2 – Episode 8 “A Lifetime of Power – Ralph Grant’s 43-Year Journey in the Electric Utility Industry”

August 13, 2026

0:08 – 0:22

Narrator: Power Chat in the Electric Lounge is powered by SECO Energy, an electric distribution cooperative serving over 260,000 members across parts of seven Central Florida counties. For more information about us, visit secoenergy.com.

0:25 – 1:45

Curtis Wynn, SECO Energy Chief Executive Officer: Welcome to another episode of Power Chat in the Electric Lounge. I'm Curtis Wynn, CEO of SECO Energy. I'm glad you've joined us. One of the things I enjoy most about this podcast is introducing you to people behind the power, the leaders and employees whose expertise and dedication help ensure reliable electric service for our members every day. Today's guest is someone who has dedicated 43 years to the electric utility industry. Ralph Grant, our Vice President of Engineering, has built an impressive career that began at Power South in Alabama, continued with 37 years at Florida Power and Light, and now brings that wealth of experience to SECO Energy. Now over four decades, Ralph has witnessed the transformation of our industry from drafting tables and paper maps to smart grid technology, advanced engineering software, automation, and the rapid growth we're seeing across Central Florida today. His perspective spans both the cooperative and investor-owned utility models, making him uniquely qualified to lead engineering at SECO Energy. Ralph, welcome to Power Chat in the Electric Lounge.

1:45 – 1:47

Ralph Grant, Vice President of Engineering & Technical Services: Thanks, Curtis. Good to be here.

1:47 – 2:12

Curtis Wynn: Let's start at the beginning. Let's talk some about your days back at Power South 43 years ago. That's an incredible career for anyone, especially someone in an ever-changing industry like the electric utility industry. What sparked your interest in engineering, and what led you to begin your career at Power South?

2:12 – 2:45

Ralph Grant: Well, my dad had a master's degree in math and physics from FSU. So, I was kind of encouraged, I guess, is the best way to put it, to like math. So, that kind of led me into the engineering field. I started at Auburn in agricultural engineering, got a love for both agriculture and engineering. I had a professor that kind of guided me back into electrical engineering, just strictly electrical engineering. The co-op was just an opportunity that presented itself when I graduated, so I grabbed it and ran with it.

2:46 – 3:07

Curtis Wynn: So Power South is a generation and transmission; we call it a G&T cooperative. So, you started your career on the cooperative side of the business, and what were those early days like, and what lessons did you learn that still influence the way you approach engineering today?

3:08 – 3:48

Ralph Grant: Well, Power South at the time, and I'm assuming it probably still is a pretty compact company. So, you learn a lot just by interacting with your co-workers, your bosses, and the folks that you worked with. Very hands-on, a lot of mentoring, a lot of teaching, right? You come out of school, you don't know anything, right? You kind of know, but you don't know. No computers back then. It was all hand-calculated. You were an engineer, you were a draftsman, you were a construction worker. You did it all, and so that really, to me, was the most intriguing part of that, you got to see it from the time you put it on paper until the time it spun up in a substation.

3:48 – 4:06

Curtis Wynn: So, after Power South, you joined Florida Power and Light. You spent the next 37 years there. That has to be a remarkable chapter in your career. Tell us about that transition and some of the roles that you held during those three-plus decades there at Florida Power and Light.

4:06 – 5:25

Ralph Grant: So, I had a choice when I decided to make the move to Florida Power and Light to be either be a staff engineer or what we call a service planning engineer, which was the field - that's the field people that you go out and meet with developers and homeowners and that was what I wanted to do. I wanted that field. I spent two and a half years at Power South behind a desk. I was like, no, I can't do this anymore. So, started with FPL in that role you know 12 years as an entry-level engineer, kind of learning everything

you know from service to a house to a major commercial development. Worked my way up to Area Manager at FPL. Did that for 16 years. Probably the most significant thing that happened and there was, as you mentioned, there was a number when Maria hit Puerto Rico and just devastated the island. I was tasked to go down and set up in San Juan and Bayamón to bring the IOU crews onto the island to restore service to the island. But outside of that, it was the impact that you saw on folks with no electricity, and really you were like bringing hope back to them, and that was probably the most impactful thing that happened in my career.

5:25 – 5:48

Curtis Wynn: So, over those 37 years working here in Florida, you've witnessed the tremendous growth that's happened here in Florida, and you've also, I would imagine, you've probably watched the electric grid just pretty much transform over that time. Looking back, what were some of the biggest engineering challenges or projects that stand out in your mind?

5:49 – 7:00

Ralph Grant: I would say probably after 04, Charlie, Francis, Gene, and Wilma. FPL, we stepped back and did an analysis of our system because it did not perform. It did not perform at all. What we determined was with all of the growth that had happened in our system at that time, we had not upgraded our systems. And so, when I say systems, I'm talking poles, wire, just basic infrastructure. It did not hold up. That was a long-term plan that you really had to revise your standards, understand the needs, develop the budgets, and then develop the plan on how you were going to implement it. The second one would be distribution automation, right? So as all this new technology has come on to the forefront. You have to understand there's a lot of technology involved, but you have to be strategic about how you apply it. The capital investments required for that are not insignificant, but when you can improve your reliability indicators by 35 to 40%, you got to balance it and that's what we're striving to do.

7:00 – 7:26

Curtis Wynn: Yeah. So, in the introduction I mentioned some of the changes or how things have transformed and really evolved over the years in this space. What do you consider some of the biggest transformative or transformation activities that you've seen over your career in the past four decades in the engineering field? What are some of those things?

7:26 – 8:19

Ralph Grant: It's got to be the technology. The technology when I started was pencil and paper, right? Your curves for your protection schemes, right? You laid it out, and you sketched it out. There was no computer. There was no cell phone. There weren't even pagers. So that's the biggest; it seems like ancient history now. It really does when you look back; I know we had talked earlier, right? It seems like time just flies, but on the technology front it does. What used to be generational every seven years is now probably generational every year and a half. But what we're implementing now with this technology and bringing information back from the grid gives us operational information; it gives us planning information; it gives us real-time data, which we did not have five years ago. So, we're making those steps.

8:20 – 8:54

Curtis Wynn: Yeah. You and your team are part of what we've described as our 10-year technology roadmap. And the sad thing about that is that over the 10 years is probably going to change at least three or four times over that time frame. So, you started in the co-op world at Power South. You spent 37 years there at Florida Power and Light. Now you're back here with SECO, back to where it all started, back on the cooperative side of the business. So, what attracted you to return back to the cooperative model?

8:54 – 10:13

Ralph Grant: Probably goes back prior to my birth; Mom's first job was Colquitt EMC in Moltry, Georgia, front desk clerk. So, it was the best job she ever had, great people, and enjoyed it. I can remember my dad and uncle that grew up outside Georgia, talking about when they were stringing the lines bringing electricity out to rural Georgia. Those are, you know, those are statements when you hear them as a youngster you don't think much about, but as you get a little bit older and start reflecting it, it's a difference maker. When I left Power South and went to the IOU, the decision-making matrixes are different. What you're focused on at IOU is different than what we're focused on as a member-focused cooperative. And sometimes you make those decisions and you just kind of shake your head. You're not involved with the strategic direction. You're handed a strategy and go execute, and you don't really have any feed into that. So that's the part I love about SECO, and the cooperative model, is that you know you're the folks making the strategy and the decision because you're that close to the membership.

10:13 – 10:45

Curtis Wynn: Yeah, we are very close to the membership. We have probably the best information feed system we could ever have through our Board of Trustees because they're close to the members, and they're close to us, and we bring it all together for the members.

You're unique, Ralph, having experienced both the investor-owned side of the business and the electric cooperative side of the business. From your perspective, what are some of the biggest differences, and what do you enjoy most about the member-owned cooperative model?

10:46 – 11:24

Ralph Grant: Because it is member-focused, right? And you see it from our board meetings, right? How focused our board is on the member, how focused our team is on the member. We do our best to make the right decisions for those members on every front, whether it's engineering, operations, right? That is strictly our singular focus, and I think that is the most important thing we develop strategies. You mentioned it earlier, our strategic roadmap, right? Our strategy is how do we do the best for the member.

11:25 – 12:14

Curtis Wynn: Right. It's very much centered around the member. It's all about the member, and you know one of the things that makes SECO unique is the incredible growth that we're seeing across our service territory. Every day, you and your team, we as an organization, we work with residential builders. We have commercial businesses; we have industrial businesses that come to the area, and we also have developers who are looking to establish service for a plethora of what will become members of our co-op. Now, walk us through what happens after someone makes that first step and they submit an application for service between that time and the time they actually get to become a proud SECO Energy member.

12:14 – 13:05

Ralph Grant: Well, the engineer will make that contact and try to understand, right? If it's a single-family home, it's not that much of an involvement unless there's a line extension involved. Where we really get into it is the larger development; you mentioned the growth we see, right? The large residential and somewhat large commercial growth. You have to assess the impact on the system. What upgrades do we need to do? What's the line extension? Is there a contribution native construction for that development? Right, that's CIAC contribution-native construction to mitigate the impact on the system from the new load, so the existing members are not shouldering that additional load and those infrastructure upgrades.

13:06 – 13:39

Curtis Wynn: Yeah, and I did say proud member earlier because I think we strive every day to make our members proud to be a SECO member, and they're only proud if we provide

them with good electric service for years to come after they become a member. So, how do you balance meeting the needs of all this new growth that we see happening? How do you balance that while you continue to provide the reliability that our existing members expect and really demand of SECO Energy?

13:39 – 14:57

Ralph Grant: There's a couple of answers to that question. Number one is making sure you're doing the right planning, making sure you're doing the right assessments, and you're evaluating the load correctly. The second part of it is your engineering design standards. As I mentioned before, after 04 at FPL, we looked at all of it and reassessed all of it. I did the same thing when I started here. I sat down with our design and planning team, and we went through the standards, identified some areas we thought we could improve, and we've changed those standards. So, as we build new, overhead is built to the new standards. We've got a 7-year pole inspection program that we go through as we inspect and do replacements on those poles; we build those to those standards. Underground by its nature is and unless you're in a flood area is more resilient. Probably 90% of our new construction because of the large residential is underground. So, I mean, we're 50/50 right now: overhead/underground on the top of a total system. So, as we continue to build, upgrade, and maintain the older overhead system, those reliability numbers are going to keep getting better.

14:57 – 15:11

Curtis Wynn: Yeah, there probably could be statistically validated that underground service is going to provide better reliability than what we've done in the past with overhead, which is why we're doing 90% of it.

15:11 – 15:18

Ralph Grant: That's correct. That is more expensive by its nature, which drives the CIAC's that the existing members are not paying for.

15:19 – 15:47

Curtis Wynn: Right. So, what I think one of the drivers behind that is the impact that weather has on overhead line construction and those structures that are still out there that are overhead. How much of your team's focus is on storm hardening and building that more reliable and resilient electrical system that we strive to have here at SECO?

15:48 – 16:11

Ralph Grant: It's a daily; you can't program your way into reliability. That's got to be part of your daily work. That's the reason we upgraded our standards. That's the reason our vegetation team does their trimming every year, right? Their programmatic trimming. You have to do it. You have to build it into the standards. So, it's just part of your daily business.

16:12 – 16:45

Curtis Wynn: I'm going to throw out some buzzwords here that people hear a lot about. As we look towards the future, we're hearing a lot about electric vehicles, EVs, battery storage, distributed energy resources, DER, automation, AI, artificial intelligence, and grid modernization. Those are buzzwords in the industry that we talk a lot about, and we hear a lot about. Which of these developments do you think will have the greatest impact on utilities over the next decade?

16:46 – 18:16

Ralph Grant: That's a lot, right. We read, study, go to conferences to try to learn about this, right? Batteries, to me, with the advances we've seen in the technology and the more efficient they get whether you're charging them from solar or charging them from the grid to give you that ability to shave the peaks and keep us in that sweet spot of our purchase power agreements. I think those are probably the most cost-effective and easily deployable solutions, whether they're ours or whether they're members. You mentioned distributed energy, right? The Tesla battery walls, the solar, all of those things contribute to that. But I think for batteries, the utility batteries are probably the most effective because we have complete control of those. You mentioned AI, grid modernization. My eyes kind of glazed when I hear AI because it means so many different things, but grid modernization paired with AI as we deploy all these advanced sensors and bring that information back. AI is going to enable us to do things. We just don't know what yet. But we've got to get the tools out there because we do have the ability right now to make some differences with grid modernization. I think in the future and by the future, I mean two to five years. I don't mean 15 to 20. I mean two to five I think is going to be where it's at.

18:16 – 18:34

Curtis Wynn: Yeah. The word "future" ain't what it used to be. It's not what it used to be. So, with all that change as the head of engineering here at SECO, what keeps you excited about coming to work every day?

18:34 – 19:25

Ralph Grant: I enjoy the teamwork. You see us, you've built this executive team, you see us interact. We don't always get along, right? It's what I call healthy friction. If you all get

along, then you're not making decisions. It's groupthink. But the team is fun, it really is. The team that I have in my departments are incredibly talented. I've got more professional engineers in my organization than I ever encountered at an IOU. I'll just put it like that. They are sharp and extremely talented, extremely hardworking, and I mean our team spans distribution engineering, distribution planning, transmission substation, transmission planning, and metering. We cover the gamut. So, there's no shortage of things to work on every day.

19:26 – 19:57

Curtis Wynn: Yeah, you do have an awesome team. I interact with them, see them, and we walk past each other in the hallways. We always try to stop and have a conversation, and they're excited. I'll just tell you, they're excited. They are really engaged with what you've got going on. You were once an engineer. You learned a lot, and now you're leading engineers. So, as you lead that team, what is your philosophy in leading the team that you've assembled?

19:57 – 21:01

Ralph Grant: So, I've worked with a lot of great leaders and some not great leaders, right? That's just a part of life. So, over my time, my dad was a quiet leader, right? He was very influential, but if you walked into the room, you wouldn't have picked him out, but he was an influential leader. I think over time, you take pieces and parts from people, from their style and their skills. I think a servant leader is probably where I strive to be. I don't know that I always hit that mark. I think Colin Powell's book should be required reading. There's a gentleman who worked his way up from a second lieutenant all the way to Secretary of State. I like his book. I like his style. There's humor in it, which I think you have to be as a leader. You have to have some humor because life can't be serious all the time. And so, I think that's probably Colin Powell's book would be recommended reading for me.

21:02 – 21:31

Curtis Wynn: I love that example. That is an extraordinary story of a person who worked his way from the bottom all the way to the top, if you will. So, you have the opportunity to interview prospective team members who are wanting to be a part of the SECO engineering team. What characteristics are you looking for when you sit down with that young aspiring engineering professional who wants to be a part of your team?

21:32 – 22:55

Ralph Grant: I'm a little old-school. I like work ethic. I think it matters. I think it matters especially in the industry we're in. This is not a Monday through Friday 9-4 9-5 job, right?

This industry and this job can call you any day or time, and this time of year frequently does. I was doing on-campus interviews at my favorite school many years ago and I interviewed a young lady who was working her way through Auburn on a Cracker Barrel waitress salary, and her GPA wasn't the best, but seeing what she was doing and listening to her story told me all I needed to know about her. She's still at FPL working. She's an Area Manager now. And you know, it's been 20 years, but that told me what I needed to know about that person. Future leaders, that's a little bit tricky. You have to understand what their why is. Why do they want to be a leader? How do they treat people? How do they treat people that they work with? How do they treat people that they don't work with that really don't have any influence on their career? To me, that is the most important part is how do you treat your people and how you treat people whether they work for you or don't work for you.

22:55 – 23:07

Curtis Wynn: Yeah. Well, I would imagine every time you sit in front of an aspiring engineer whom you want to hire, they probably have options. The good ones have options.

23:08 – 23:08

Ralph Grant: Absolutely yes.

23:09 – 23:26

Curtis Wynn: So, why do you think they'd want to choose SECO Energy as their choice when they have these options in front of them or the electric utility industry as a whole?

23:27 – 24:21

Ralph Grant: Engineers by nature are nerdy; it's just what we are. It's the kind of characteristics, right, the profile, not necessarily true, especially now. When I started in the industry, it was kind of stagnant, right? The power plant boom being built was kind of fading out, and it was really moving, and so I would say if you're looking for an industry that's got change, yet you enjoy working with people, meeting with people, I think this is your industry. I really do. If you want to do AI and that's your game, go for it. But if you want to meet people, work with people, and make a difference in people's lives, I think this is the industry you stay with.

24:21 – 24:25

Curtis Wynn: And not to mention they get a chance to work with an awesome boss.

24:25 – 24:27

Ralph Grant: Yeah. Well, you know, I can't argue with that.

24:28 – 26:32

Curtis Wynn: Well, Ralph, it's been a pleasure having you here in the Electric Lounge with our Power Chat today. Thank you for sharing all of your insights. Thank you for sharing your journey and the experiences that have shaped your remarkable 43-year career in the electric utility industry. From your early days at Power South in Alabama through three decades at Florida Power and Light and now here at SECO Energy, you've had a front row seat to the evolution of our industry. Yet one thing has remained constant. Our commitment to safely delivering reliable electricity to the communities we serve. I especially appreciate you giving our listeners a glimpse into the work your engineering team does every day. Whether it's planning for future growth, strengthening our electric system, supporting economic development, or helping a family move into a new home or a business open its doors. Your team is laying the foundation long before the lights ever come on. As our communities continue to grow, engineering will remain at the heart of SECO Energy's ability to meet our members needs today while preparing for tomorrow. It's exciting to know that we have experienced leaders like you, Ralph, helping guide that future. Thanks again for joining us, and thank you to everyone who has joined us for this episode of Power Chat in the Electric Lounge. We hope you enjoyed getting to know Ralph and learning more about the people and the planning behind the reliable electric service you depend on every day. Now, if you've enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to subscribe and follow Power Chat in the Electric Lounge wherever you listen to podcasts. We'll continue bringing you conversations with people, projects, and innovations that are powering SECO Energy and the communities we proudly serve. Until next time, I'm Curtis Wynn. Thanks for listening and as always, thank you for being a valued member of SECO Energy.