

# Connections

October 2019

For the member-owners of Brown County REA



Volume 23, Issue 10

## Local co-op governance works for you

Since Minnesota's first electric cooperative was established in 1935, co-ops have led the way in serving member-owners with safe, reliable, affordable and increasingly green electricity. Since October is Co-op Month, let's review the co-op benefits.


Minnesota is home to 44 distribution cooperatives, including your own, which are served by six generation and transmission cooperatives. Minnesota's electric cooperatives employ more than 3,000 people and serve 1.7 million — or one-third of Minnesota's residents. It's a big responsibility and one we take seriously.

Under the successful and proven cooperative business model, your electric co-op is locally owned by the members served and governed by an elected Board of Directors, who are also member-owners of the co-op. Committed to powering lives and empowering our area, your electric co-op is guided by seven core principles since our founding. You'll see these principles demonstrated in all we do.

### Cooperative Principles

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Members' economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives
7. Concern for community

While all the principles are equally important, one principle really differentiates co-ops from other for-profit utilities — democratic member control. This principle says: Cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting policies and making decisions. The elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In co-ops members have equal



**Co-op members have their hands in the electric co-op. They vote for directors to represent their interests and for policies to keep their electric rates low and to keep their electric service reliable.**

voting rights (one member, one vote). As a member-owner of your electric co-op you always have a vital and valued say in the way we operate.

Directors are elected by members to effectively and efficiently represent members' interests. These directors play a crucial role in determining the strategic direction and priorities of the co-op. Their input and

guidance are key, as the co-op keeps the lights on today and works to anticipate future energy needs.

Through education and training opportunities, industry conferences and independent learning, directors invest a significant amount of time staying informed on the latest challenges, trends, regulations and technologies impacting electric cooperatives. This ranges from environmental laws to financial matters, cybersecurity and technology advancements; yes, the electric utility industry is incredibly complex. In order to effectively govern co-op directors need a thorough understanding of these issues and how they could affect member-owners. The time directors spend on education and training is a mandatory requirement in strategically guiding the cooperative.

Within our Board of Directors officers are elected to fulfill specific responsibilities for the cooperative. Not only are board members trained on energy-related issues, they are also trained to be transparent, accountable to one another and the member-owners we serve; they adhere to the cooperative's bylaws and other applicable rules, regulations and laws. At each meeting the co-op's legal counsel and management are present at the board meetings.

Serving in a governance role for your electric co-op is a privilege and one your directors embrace. If you have questions about our local governance structure or how to run as a director, please contact us. ☎

### At A Glance



**Brown County  
Rural Electrical  
Association**

### Harvest time — be safe and look up for power lines this fall!

Farmers are reminded to stay safe during the fall harvest. Take frequent breaks and be aware of overhead power lines and other electrical equipment in and around your fields. We want you to come home safely each night to your family. ☎



# Home assistants are handy devices to have around, but at what cost?

Have you ever wanted to turn off the lights, listen to the news or order food by simply using your voice? That is the power a home assistant can provide. These handy products made their way into many homes across the country since the first smart speaker became available in late 2014. By the end of 2018, 66.4 million users of smart home assistants or smart home speakers exist in the U.S.

One in four Americans now own a smart speaker. 40 percent of those people also have more than one smart speaker in their homes. The most popular smart speaker is the Amazon Echo, although Google Home products are selling at a rapid rate and even taking over some of the market share from Amazon. Other brands of smart speakers include Apple's HomePod, the Sonos One and the JBL Link 10.

Smart speakers have become the next big thing to hit the residential market. Google Home starts around \$129. The Amazon Echo costs about \$180. However, smaller, more basic versions start at \$25 for the Amazon Echo Dot and \$49 for the Google Home Mini. These smart speakers act as assistants, whether by helping you set reminders, establishing routine commands or informing you of today's top stories. They include additional functions, like helping you order products online, playing music — they can even tell you a joke!

As smart speakers become more prevalent, consumers may wonder



**Home assistants like the Amazon Echo enable you to have your own helper in the home to remind you of appointments, set cooking alarms, look up information and more. Not only are they handy, they are also easy on your electric bill.**

if these products impact energy bills. Tests were conducted to see how much power a smart speaker used, including different modes of use, like when the assistant is on standby mode or listening to a command. Moderate-level actions like playing music at full volume were also tested.

The Amazon Echo speaker uses three watts of electricity while on standby. If it were left on standby mode for one year, the total cost would only be about \$3.15. While moderately active (like telling a joke or playing music at a medium volume), the Amazon Echo uses four watts. At the highest power use (like playing music at full volume), the Amazon Echo still only uses 6.6 watts, which is just slightly more than double its standby

use. If used consistently at this level, it would cost \$6.93 for the year. For comparison the Google Home uses slightly less energy than the Amazon Echo at 2 watts in standby mode, which saves you about \$1 a year in total energy costs.

As you can see, the costs to use smart speakers are minimal. The difference in prices between available products and their abilities are still relatively small. Plenty of reasons exist to buy a smart speaker. The additional cost to your energy bill should not stop you from getting one.

Just check with your internet company to ensure you have sufficient speed, data plan and the router. ©  
— Information courtesy of NCREA's *Straight Talk*

# Go electric SUV for weekend getaways


If you're the average commuter who likes to take regular trips up north, but you are still wary about making a full switch from gasoline to electric, the Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV (plug-in hybrid electric vehicle) may be the best compromise.

The Outlander goes 310 miles total with 22 of those being all electric. It is the only PHEV compatible with DC fast chargers. This means one can feel confident about getting all the way to their favorite long-weekend destination, even Minnesota's North Shore. In 2018 several fast charger stations were installed along I-35 and Highway 61, opening up this family favorite destination to those with a plug-in vehicle.



**The Mitsubishi Outlander offers drivers an electric hybrid vehicle that's a more robust package than other hybrid vehicles. Its 1,500-pound towing capacity makes it a good choice for weekend excursions.**

The Outlander PHEV offers plenty of cargo space to store camping and hiking gear, snacks and more, with 1,500 pounds of towing capacity;

bring along bicycles, kayaks or even a pop-up camper. The Outlander is eligible for a federal tax incentive of \$5,836, bringing its cost to \$28,759. 

## Safety


### *Make safety a priority this harvest season*

**Safety tips for farm workers this fall:**

- Take a few minutes to check your clearances when working around power lines, guy wires and green underground cabinets or transformers. Make sure your augers are lowered when moving them around the yard.
- Be extra careful when working around end rows that border electric poles. Make sure any new equipment you may have can enter field approaches without snagging overhead wires.
- Maintain a 10-foot clearance around all utility equipment in all directions.
- Use a spotter and deploy flags to maintain safe distances from power

lines and other equipment when doing field work.

- If your equipment makes contact with an energized or downed power line, contact us immediately by phone and remain inside the vehicle until the power line is de-energized. In case of smoke or fire, exit the cab by making a solid jump out of the cab, without touching it at the same time and hop away to safety.
- Consider equipment and cargo extensions of your vehicle: lumber, hay, tree limbs, irrigation pipe and even bulk materials can conduct electricity, so keep them out of contact with electrical equipment.

**Make it a safe fall harvest season!** 

# Brown County Briefs

## Operation Round Up



The final 2019 meeting of the Round Up Trust Board will be November

19. Organizations wishing to be considered for funding through Operation Round Up are asked to submit applications before that date. Applications are available at [www.browncountyrea.coop](http://www.browncountyrea.coop) in the *Operation Round Up* section under the *Special Programs* tab.

## Energy-efficiency tip

Cooler weather is on the way! Heating requires more energy than any other system in your home, typically making up about 42 percent of your energy bill. With proper equipment maintenance and upgrades like additional insulation and air sealing, you can save about 30 percent on your energy bill. Source: Energy.gov

## Sign up to receive your Connections via email

In a cost-saving effort, Brown County REA is encouraging members to sign up to receive the *Connections* newsletter via e-mail each month. Call the office at 800-658-2368, (794-3331 local) or e-mail [bcreea@bcreea.coop](mailto:bcreea@bcreea.coop) to share your e-mail address and sign up. You may also write a note with your e-mail address on your bill pay stub and return with your payment. Instead of receiving a printed copy in the mail, you will receive an e-mail with the latest *Connections* edition attached each month. The newsletter is also posted on the co-op's website [www.browncountyrea.coop](http://www.browncountyrea.coop) and on the Facebook page.

## BCREA promotes electrical safety tips at the September Safety Day Camp



BCREA Metering Foreman Adam Fischer demonstrated the danger of touching an auger that has come in contact with a power line and showed students the safety gear he and fellow line workers wear while working on power lines. The presentation was part of the Sleepy Eye Safety Day Camp, attended by 220 fourth grade students from area schools.



## Control times change for storage strategy



Members who have a water heater or electric heat load that is controlled through the Electric Thermal Storage (ETS) or storage strategy will see a slight change in control times during the 2019-2020 winter season.

The ETS schedules for water heat and space heat will be shedding load from 6 a.m. through 10 p.m. from October 1, 2019 through April 30, 2020. This is a change from previous winters where the control schedules had been shedding load from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Please contact the office with questions.

## Kerkhoff is co-op's newest journeyman lineman



Brady Kerkhoff, journeyman lineman

Congratulations to Brady Kerkhoff, who recently passed his final exam to become Brown County REA's newest Journeyman Lineman.

The Morgan native completed the powerline technology training at Minnesota West Community and Technical College in Jackson, in 2015. He worked as a summer helper at BCREA in 2015 and joined the line crew as an apprentice lineman in November 2015. Brady recently completed the Dennis Merchant Job Training and Safety Program four-year course of study and has logged 7,500 hours of work experience to successfully become a Journeyman Lineman.

# Retirement takes ‘A-Peeling’ twist

Oxford Dictionaries describes retirement as “the period of one’s life after leaving one’s job and ceasing to work.” Chris and Sue Blake’s first three years of retirement have involved renovating a 3,700 square-foot house, tending to a 500-tree apple orchard and store and adding other irons to the fire since purchasing A-Peeling Acres, on Brown County REA’s service lines in rural New Ulm.

“It comes down to what the two of us can handle,” said Sue, explaining they grow raspberries, which they pick and take to farmer’s markets, planted strawberries last summer and recently added a few cherry trees to their five-acre orchard. “It will never be a massive orchard.”

The orchard contains 15 apple varieties from the popular Honeycrisp to more vintage varieties like Haralson, Beacon, McIntosh, Regents and Northwest Greening. Chris describes it as a heritage-type orchard growing sought-after varieties used in pies and other traditional recipes.

“That sets us apart with a purpose. We have a value in what we’re doing,” he said.

Though not beekeepers, the Blakes wanted pollinators for the trees and connected up with Mike and Julie Brown of Honeycomb Acres. Kindergarteners who recently made a field trip to the orchard dipped their fingers and tasted honey right out of the comb after Sue explained the antibacterial properties of honey.

The Blakes retired in 2016 from a career serving area schools’ photography needs through Lifetouch. They purchased the orchard and began their new venture, starting with restoration of the house.

Built in 1955, the house features two layers of brick; one layer inside and one outside. A large trench was dug through the house to replace the water lines. Conversions were made so that each of the four bedrooms has access to a bathroom. A new wood-burning insert was installed in



**Visit Chris and Sue Blake, New Ulm, at the A-Peeling Acres apple orchard or rent their vacation house on site with this artstone fireplace.**

one wood-burning fireplace while an artstone fireplace in the library remains in original condition.

Baseboard electric heat provides the home’s primary heating, which prompted the Blakes to install a solar array, currently under construction. They also added ductless mini-split heat pumps this summer for cooling and supplemental heat in the house used primarily as a VRBO (Vacation Rental By Owner). “We’ve had good response through VRBO on the house,” Sue said.

The spacious back yard has served as a venue for some small weddings, though not a business they are actively pursuing. Family reunions, groups of friends, wedding parties and a bell choir are among clientele renting the large house that is bordered by the oldest part of the orchard.

Planted in 1985, many trees in this section show effects of a harsh winter. Walking by Sweet 16 and Beacon, some of the earliest producers, and

a picturesque Connell Red, which bears the orchard’s largest fruit, the Blakes describe the process of pruning the numerous trees. Together they work, usually four hours a day, with two battery-powered electric chain saws — one on a 16-foot pole and one on the ground. They start pruning in January and continue into April.

But first, this year’s crop will be picked by Chris, using an apple picker and a ladder. After washing and sorting, any blemished fruit is set aside for Sue to use in baked goods she takes to farmer’s markets in New Ulm and St. Peter. She also makes apple cider and apple cider syrup to sell. Bags of apples will soon fill the new cooler in the store. They are open every day, except Tuesday and Thursday, from 12:30 to 5 p.m. through MEA weekend, maybe longer. Then, the Blakes can go into retirement until they begin pruning trees in the orchard in January.

“It’s a lot of work, but this is our job,” Sue said. ☺

# CTV works to provide local, affordable TV service

Your electric cooperative wants to say thank you for being a loyal CTV subscriber. This summer CTV received more phone calls than usual about poor reception issues, which are explained below.

CTV consists of four electric cooperatives: BENCO Electric, Brown County REA, Federated REA and South Central REA; they combined efforts in 1992 to create Cooperative Television Association (CTV). CTV operates three UHF towers located at Godahl, Jackson and Frost re-broadcasting more than 40 UHF channels.

## Reception issues two-fold

- Atmospheric issues, especially from mid-July through harvest, affect CTV signals the most. Believe it or not, moisture, cornfields and humidity cause interference. Once corn reaches its maximum height, it emits a lot of moisture into the air that hinders UHF signal, particularly in the mornings and evenings. Google “tropospheric propagation” for technical details on this. The moisture from hazy, humid days and foggy days also deflects the UHF signal reducing CTV’s reach.

- Another major reception issue arose last year when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) auctioned off to cellular companies the UHF frequency spectrum used by CTV. Last fall, CTV was required to move to a different spectrum with a smaller bandwidth and cram all 40 of its channel signals into a more compact space. Along with this “repack,” CTV was mandated by the FCC to lower its power output on some channels to lessen interference with other broadcasters. There are now more channels operating on the same lower power frequencies. They compete for bandwidth so when weather conditions exist, more stations are impacted. In essence, many channels are operating on fewer frequencies.

## Moving forward

CTV cannot do anything about weather-related issues. However, CTV petitioned the FCC to allow



**Have you noticed pixelated channels on CTV this past summer? The reasons for that are two-fold: weather conditions in the atmosphere and FCC requirements.**



it to increase the power slightly on three channels. CTV is now waiting for the green light to proceed. These power increases would happen at the Godahl Tower first. Is this a silver bullet solution? No, but it is a step in the right direction.

CTV will keep pressure on the FCC to work on these reception issues. CTV also has a representative on the national board, which is also addressing this issue on the national level.

Reception issues have caused some viewers to drop their paid subscription. CTV regrets this, but hopes to win back such viewers. The \$8 monthly CTV charge on the co-op’s electric bill or \$96 billed once a year is minimal compared to what major TV vendors charge. Subscriptions help CTV with operational expenses in this everchanging world. CTV’s expenses related to the FCC auction and channel repack totalled more than \$100,000.

Upgrades included installing amplifiers, filters and transmitters in a short period to limit shutdown time as much as possible. Paid subscriptions allow CTV to operate and pay for these changes. Broadcasting approximately 40 channels from three towers is an expensive operation, but CTV has talented technicians, engineers and attorneys working on its behalf to keep moving forward. If you are not a CTV subscriber, please consider it; call your local co-op to join or visit their website for a channel listing.

The electric cooperative’s staff and governance teams are sympathetic to viewers’ concerns and are doing everything possible to improve reception. Clearly, CTV cannot control Mother Nature, the FCC and cellular companies. These factors affect CTV’s ability to operate its very affordable, basic TV programming service in southwestern and south central Minnesota. CTV hopes viewers now have a better understanding of the challenges we all face and realize that CTV wants to provide good service and will continue to work toward improving reception. ☺

## Satisfy your home's cookie monster with these recipes

Cookies! Satisfy the cookie monster in your home with some new cookie recipes. Share recipes for chocolate chip, peanut butter, oatmeal, cut-out, monster, snicker doodle and more. Send to: Editor, Federated Rural Electric, PO Box 69, Jackson MN 56143-0069 or e-mail to christoffer@federatedrea.coop by October 28. Add your name and phone number. Thanks for sharing with us! ☺

### Apple Cream Cheese Dessert by Sharon Rosen, Welcome

Toss together until apples are coated and then set aside: 1 tsp. cinnamon  
6 c. peeled & diced apples 1/3 c. sugar 2 T. flour 1/4 tsp. salt

#### Crust/topping:

Combine first four ingredients and cut in the butter until crumbly.

1 1/2 c. oatmeal 1 1/3 c. flour 1 c. brown sugar  
2 tsp. cinnamon 3/4 c. cold butter or margarine

Put half the mixture in a 9x13" pan that was sprayed with Pam. Set aside half the crumb mixture for the topping. Layer the apple mixture on the crust.

#### Filling:

8 oz. cream cheese, softened 1/2 c. sugar 2 eggs  
2 T. flour 2 T. milk

Mix and beat until mixture is spreadable. Spread cream cheese filling on the apple layer. Sprinkle the remaining crust mixture over the cream cheese filling evenly. Bake 20 minutes at 350° until gold brown and the apples are tender. Cool. ☺

### Pella Apple Bread by Lorie Ploehn, Alpha

Cream: 1 c. sugar 1/2 c. Crisco  
Add: 1/4 c. buttermilk and 1 tsp. baking soda, mixed 2 eggs  
1 tsp. vanilla 2 c. flour 1/2 tsp. salt  
Fold in: 2 c. raw apple, chopped  
Pour batter into a regular-sized bread pan sprayed with Pam.  
Top: 2 T. butter 2 T. sugar 2 T. flour 1/2 tsp. cinnamon  
Bake at 350° for 45 to 50 minutes until done in the center. ☺

### Apple Pie Cake by Mary Ellen Stenzel, Heron Lake

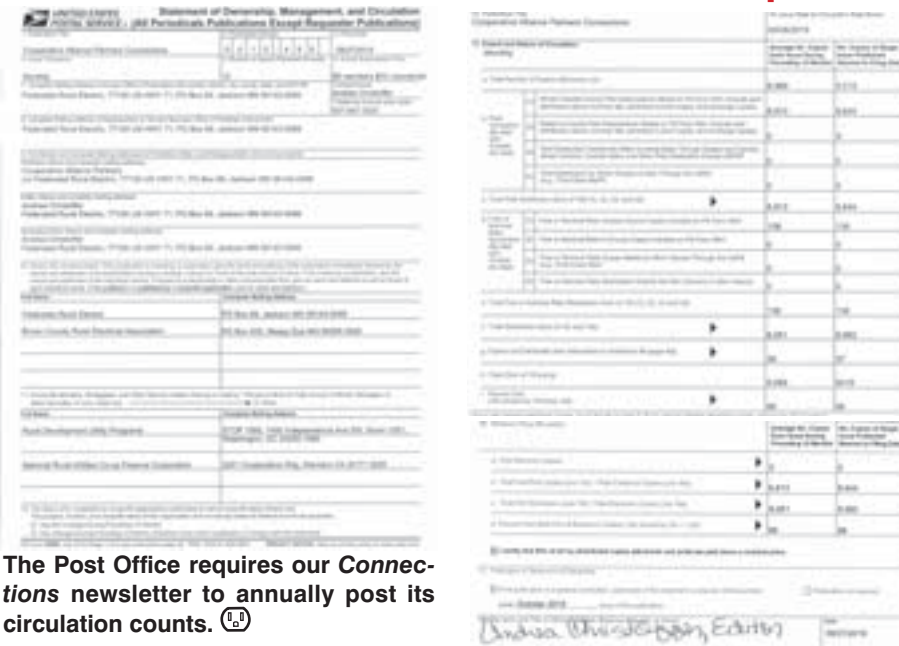
Mix these ingredients in this order:

1 c. sugar  
1/4 c. shortening  
1 egg  
1/4 tsp. salt  
1 tsp. cinnamon  
1/2 tsp. nutmeg  
1 tsp. soda  
1 c. flour  
1/2 c. nuts  
2 1/2 c. diced apples  
2 T. hot water  
1 tsp vanilla

Put in a greased 9" square pan. Bake 45 minutes at 350°. Serve with whipped cream over butter sauce.

Butter sauce: combine 1 c. sugar, 1/4 c. butter, 1/2 c. sweet cream and 1/2 tsp. vanilla. Boil just a few minutes. ☺

## Annual Connections Post Office form posted



The Post Office requires our *Connections* newsletter to annually post its circulation counts. ☺

**Call Gopher State  
One Call before  
digging!**

**1-800-252-1166**



Call Gopher State One Call before doing any digging more than 12" deep — 48 hours before digging for foundations, trees, tiling and more. You can also register at [www.gopherstate-onecall.org](http://www.gopherstate-onecall.org) or call 811. Call a licensed electrician to locate the underground lines on your side of the meter. ☺



**Mike Heidemann**  
Chief Executive  
Officer

# Staff notes

## By the members, for the members — October is National Co-op Month

When you think of October, crop harvest, pumpkins, Halloween and beautiful fall foliage naturally come to mind. But October is notable for another reason — it's National Co-op Month! This is the time of year when cooperatives across the country, including Brown County REA, celebrate who we are and more importantly, the members we serve.

Cooperatives are different than other types of businesses. When the market declines to offer a product or service, or does so at a very high price, co-ops intervene to fill the need. Two examples would be our subsidiaries CTV and Heartland Security.

Similar to how Brown County REA was built by members to bring electricity to the rural areas, your electric co-op provides safe, reliable and affordable energy to you, the members of the co-op. Equally important is our mission to enrich the lives of the members we serve.

As a co-op, we are well-suited to meet the needs of the community because we are locally governed. Brown County REA's leadership team and employees live right here in the area. Our Board of Directors, who help set long-term priorities for the co-op, were elected by neighbors like you.

We know our members have a valuable perspective. That's why we seek your input. Whether through community events, Member Advisory Council, social media or our Annual Meeting, we want to hear from you.

Our close connection to the community ensures we get a first-hand perspective on local priorities, thereby enabling us to make more informed decisions on long-term investments, such as equipment, technology upgrades and electric vehicle programs.

Another feature that sets our co-op apart from a traditional utility is one of our core principles, "Concern for Community." We partner with local organizations like the Sleepy Eye Chamber of Commerce, Brown County Public Health, Sleepy Eye Medical Center and Sleepy Eye Community Education for Safety Day, Community Health Day and other worthy programs. We participate in the Electric Cooperative Youth Tour, where we send a local student to Washington, D.C. for a week-long immersion to experience democracy in action. Ultimately, the larger community benefits from these programs. You empower the co-op through your membership and through your participation in and support of these programs.

We hope you will think of Brown County REA as more than your energy provider, but instead as a local business that supports this community and powers economic development and prosperity for our members.

We will continue to learn from our members about their priorities so that we can better serve you — because your electric co-op was built by the members, for the members. ☺



**Brown County  
Rural Electrical  
Association**

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Phone: 507-794-3331 or 800-658-2368

Office hours: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday

Mike Heidemann, Chief Executive Officer

### Board of Directors

James Mickelson, President — 794-6298

William Berg, Vice President — 354-4895

James D. Hanson, Sec.-Treasurer — 829-6756

Brad Sprenger — 877-2633

Allen Hanson — 276-0691

Thomas Hayes — 228-8954

Reuben Kokesch — 359-2112

Greg Mages — 794-3540

Joel Christensen — 828-4550

The Board of Directors meets the last Thursday of each month.

# Board meeting highlights

The Brown County REA Board of Directors held its monthly board meeting September 26, 2019 at the Brown County REA office in Sleepy Eye.

Discussion and/or action were taken on the following agenda items:

- Reviewed progress on summer construction including completion of one of the largest work plan projects at Highway 257 and Highway 15.
- Performed the annual review of the co-op's Limited English Proficiency (LEP) plan.
- Reviewed the recent Member Advisory Council meeting and discussed holding an electric vehicle ride and drive event.
- Updated on pending member-owned solar project installations.
- Reviewed the co-op's 2018 Key Ratio Trend Analysis, as presented by Sarah Bullock from Cooperative Finance Corporation.
- Reviewed and approved Policy 212 Member Relations and Policy 213 Member Advisory Council. Policy 211 Line Extensions was tabled until the October meeting.
- Reviewed Great River Energy's Master Other Services Agreement.

The next board meeting will be October 31, 2019. ☺