BLOG

Telephone Poles – The More You Know!

By johnhubickey · January 24, 2020 · 3 min read

So, it's that time again! No, it's not "time to get ill" or "time to make the doughnuts" (80's references for all of you millennials), but time to write my newsletter. I always think I'm going to write it ahead of time so it's ready, but then my week comes and I'm scrambling to find a topic. I try to write about something that isn't necessarily "engineering" specific or project related, thinking maybe those of you that receive our newsletter will actually read it rather than clicking on it so it's not left as unread in your inbox. This time I was inspired by driving around and taking notice of something that is right in front of us all the time, but we never give much attention too... Telephone Poles!

Most people only think about them after they've hit one with their car or when the power goes out and they see the bright blue glow of an exploding transformer. As my analytical juices began to flow, I started to wonder just how many poles are out there as they are along almost every single road across our entire country? As I began researching it was quite the eye-opener. There are many different pole heights and diameters which are made of several types of trees. Since there is a ton of information to regurgitate that would most likely cause you to close this link (if you haven't already), I'll just give you a brief generalization of my findings.

Although commonly referred to as "telephone" or "utility" poles, they originated in the mid-1800s as "telegraph" poles for telegraph lines. Nowadays they carry phone, cable, electric and fiber optic lines. It is estimated that 3,000,000 poles are produced annually and there are 100,000,000 poles in use today. To put that in perspective for all you environmentalists, if they were grown in rows, 30' on center, they would require 61,000+ acres per years. That's roughly 100 square miles of forest which is an area 100x's the size of West Chester. Poles typically range from 30 feet to 80 feet in height and have a diameter of 11 to 27 inches at the base. In order to be acceptable for pole use they require 6 rings of growth per inch. This means that your typical 30' tall pole took over 33 years to grow while the 80' pole took roughly 80 years.

Lastly, let's look at the cost of a pole. This is really the most important bit of information because if you break one with your car you will need to pay out of pocket to replace. The cost of the pole is obviously based on the height and quality of the pole. There are different ratings for poles based on their load capacity. But poles themselves range from about $350 to $1,800. The most expensive part of pole replacement is in the labor which could easily exceed $3,000. Well, if I retained your attention long enough to make it to the end, I bet right now you are staring out the window and looking for the nearest utility pole!

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