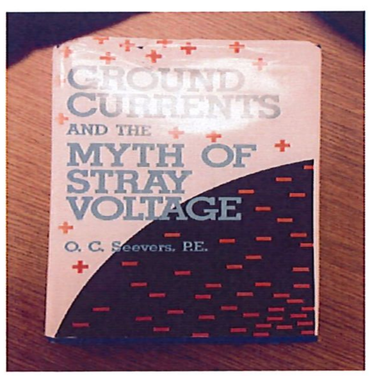
What is “Stray Voltage”?

A very good reference on the subject is the book:

“Ground Currents and the Myth of Stray Voltage” by O. C. Seevers, P.E. Mr. Seevers’ book focuses on stray voltages in dairy farms, but the principles addressed apply to any stray voltage situation.

In chapter 1, Mr. Seevers makes several important comments and observations:

- Stray voltage is “voltage which appeared where it had no business being”.
- Often a farmer experiencing issues with stray voltage concludes “Clearly, the villainous stray voltage was coming from the primary neutral on the transformer pole five hundred feet away up by the farmer’s house”
- “There is no such thing as stray voltage! Voltage does not “stray”. Voltage does not go anywhere. It exists at one location as electrical pressure between two points, A and B.”
- “Nowhere in any of the horror tales which I have studied dealing with “stray voltage” have I seen this simple fact discussed. Nowhere has anyone looked at the distribution system and analyzed how it works. How primary neutral current returns to its source.”



Is Stray Voltage a Problem?

At a minimum, stray voltage can be annoying. At a maximum, stray voltage can be lethal.

Has anyone in the audience had to deal with and resolve a Stray Voltage problem?

Stray Voltage – Definition

One definition I found is:

"**Stray voltage (SV)** is a special case of **neutral to earth voltage (NEV)** which is the voltage measured between the electrical system neutral conductor and anything connected to the earth. NEV exists on all grounded electrical systems and is the result of neutral return current flowing in the earth. Theoretically, approximately 1/3 of the return current in a multi-grounded wye connected system returns to the source through the earth "ground" path. Thus, stray voltage, in reality, is caused by stray current. When this stray current creates a voltage between two points that can be contacted by a human or animal, and is above the threshold of perceptibility, it is referred to as "stray" voltage.

Due to the common grounding of the Utility System and the Customer electrical system, any NEV on the utility system will be transferred to any grounded objects in a building including metal water pipes. If this NEV/SV exceeds "Levels of Concern", it generally occurs when there is something that needs to be corrected either on the utility system or the customer wiring system. Stray voltage is not EMF, ground current, or fault current.

A second definition I found is:

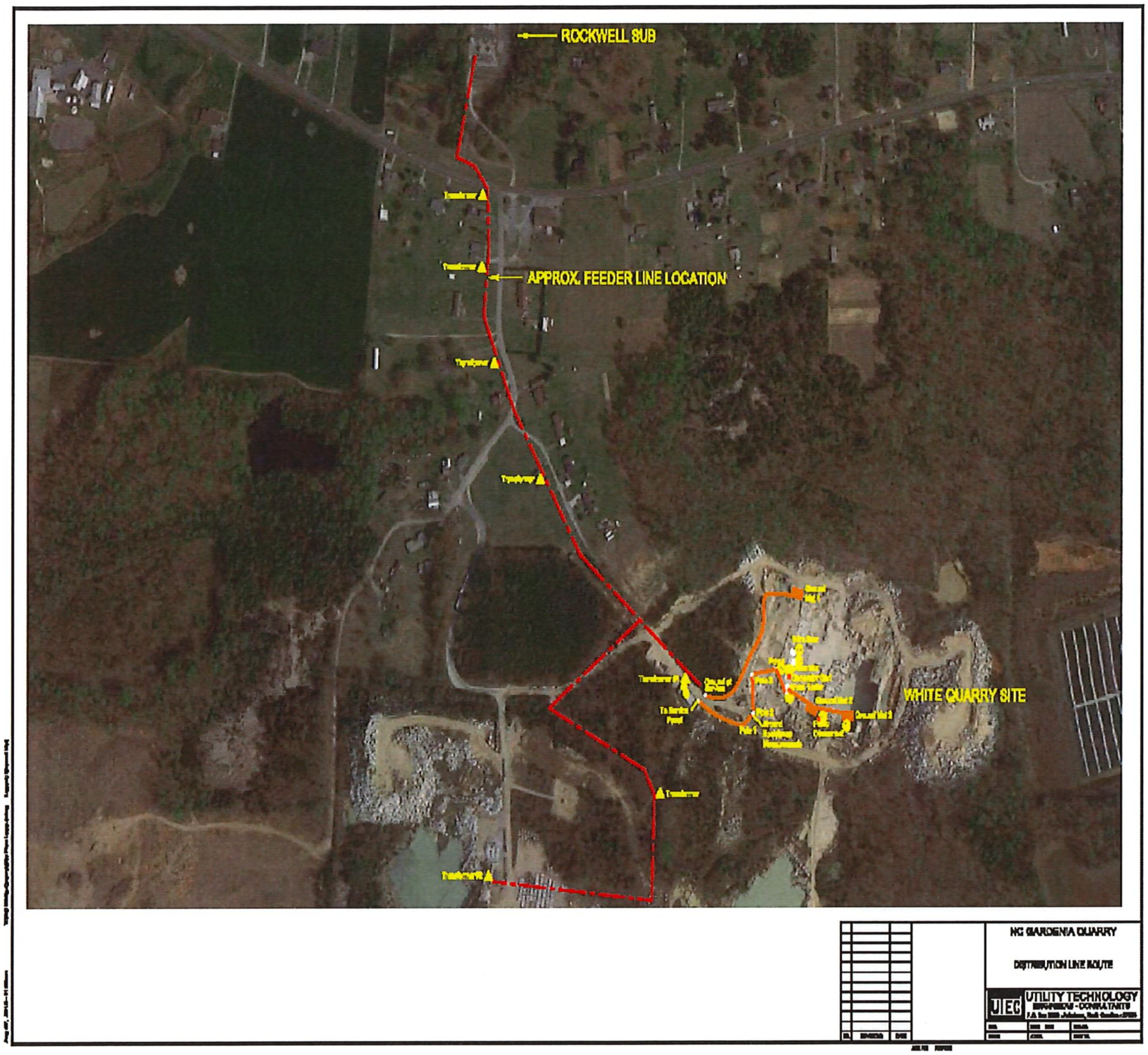
Stray voltage is the occurrence of electrical potential between two objects that ideally should not have any voltage difference between them. Small voltages often exist between two grounded objects in separate locations due to normal current flow in the power system. Large voltages can appear on the enclosures of electrical equipment due to a fault in the electrical power system, such as a failure of insulation.

Examples of Stray Voltages:

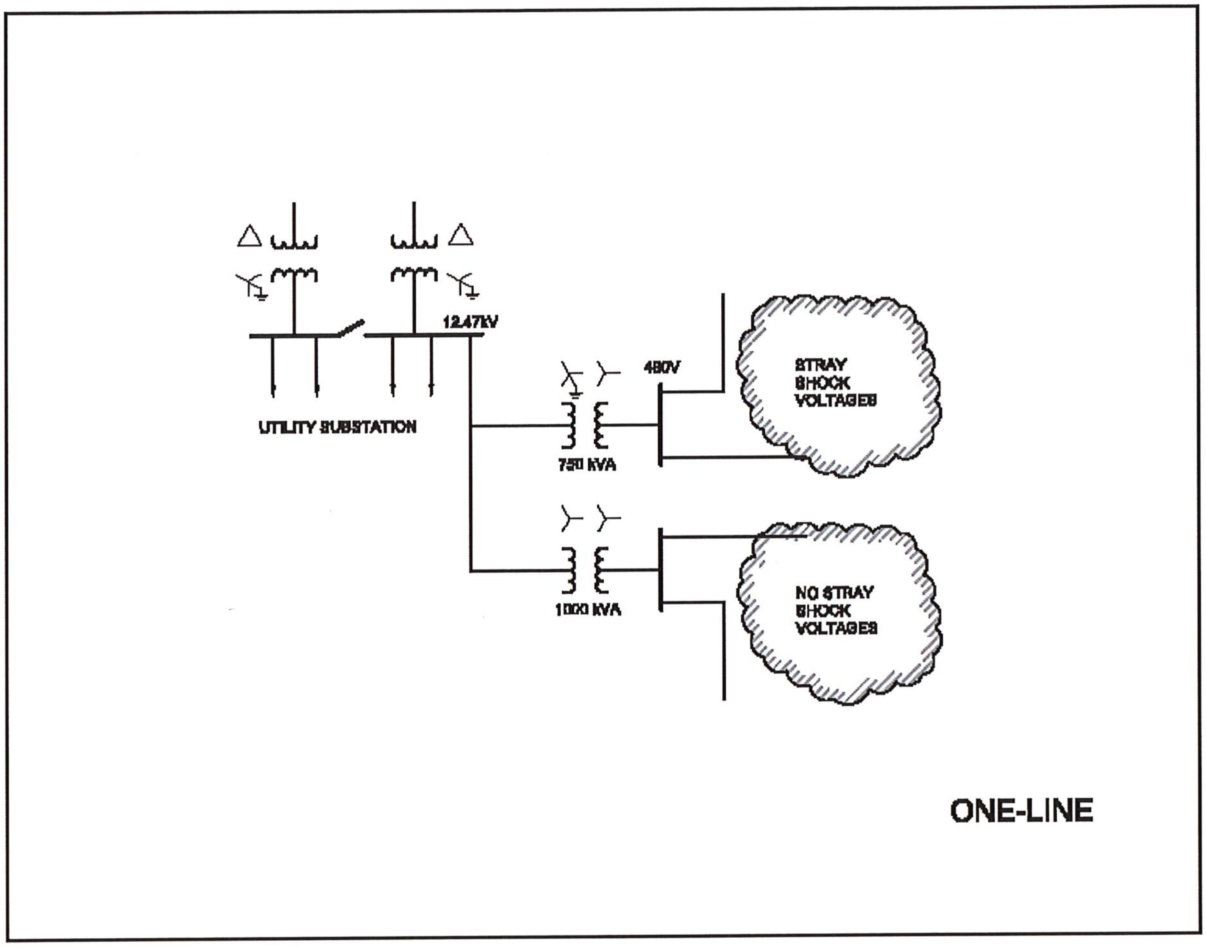
1. Shock when in a swimming pool and touching the metal ladder to get out of the pool
2. Shock when touching a pole down guy wire
3. Shock to cattle when attached to a milking machine or feeding
4. Shock when touching grounded equipment in a rock quarry

Today we are going to spend some time talking about a recent UTEC investigation in which equipment operators working in a rock quarry received shocks when touching grounded equipment.

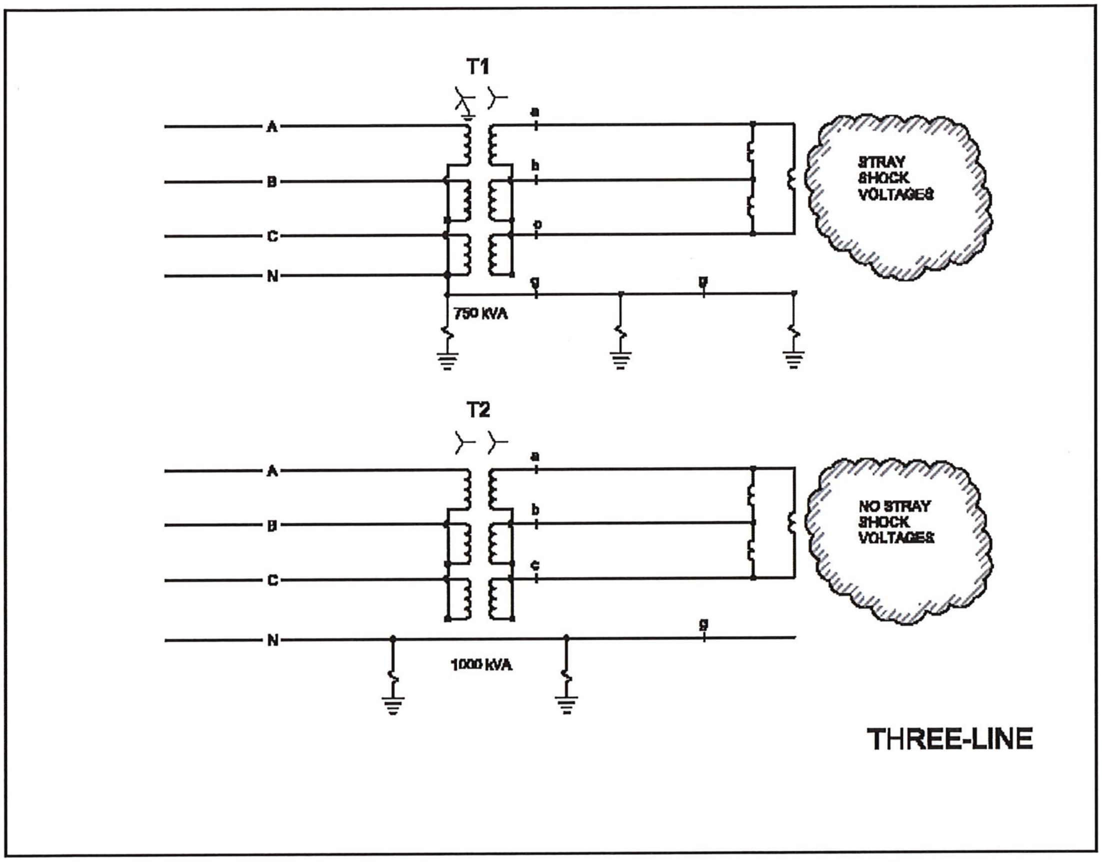
Aerial View of Project Site and Electric Lines



Electric System One-Line



Electric System Three-Line



Power Supply Utility Substation Loads

The Power Supply Utility serves five primary distribution circuits from the substation that feeds the quarry. Three of the primary feeders are well balanced among phases. Two of the primary feeders are not well balanced. Following are the typical currents for the two unbalanced phases:

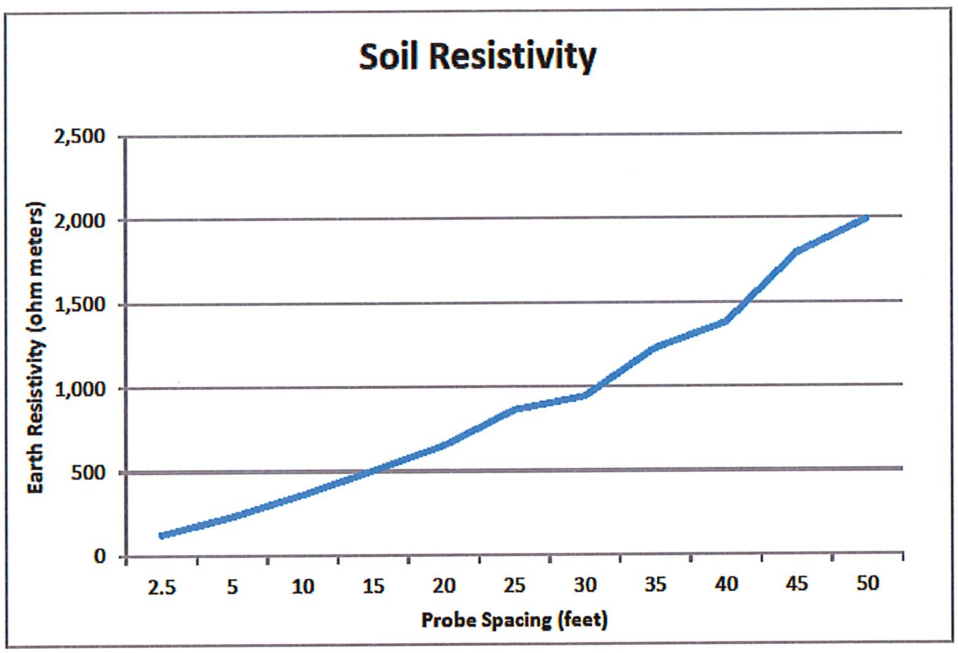
Unbalanced Primary Distribution Circuits	Ph. A amps	Ph. B amps	Ph. C amps
Circuit 1	117	179	86
Circuit 2	160	115	63
Total unbalanced Current	277	294	149

Assuming 120° phase rotation separation among the three phases, the total neutral/ground current resulting from the unbalanced currents is 137 amps at -66 degrees. This neutral/ground current will produce surface voltage profile along the ground for the multi-grounded distribution system served from the substation.

Soil Resistivity Analysis

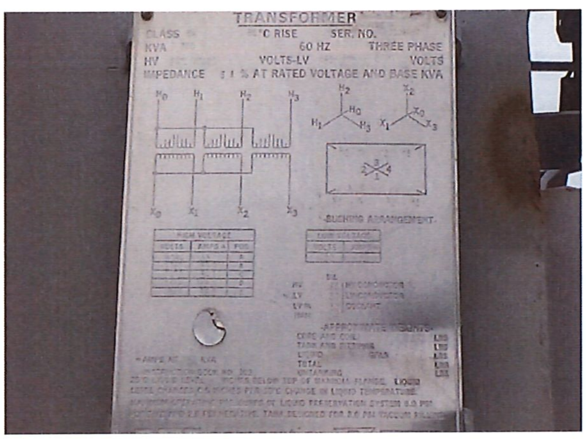
UTEC performed a set of Soil Resistivity tests on site. Following is a chart of the Average Soil Resistivity in Ohm-Meters versus depth. UTEC also used its SAFE Engineering software to determine the equivalent 2-layer soil model. The equivalent 2-layer soil model is:

- 71.7 ohm-meters for a depth of 2.5 feet
- 10,870.5 ohm-meters infinitely deep below 2.5 feet



Photographs

Transformer T1



Transformer T1 Nameplate

T1 Service Conductors

T1 Service Wire Way and Grounding Trough

3-Phase Flexible Cables

Observations:

1. Two 3-phase delivery, or service, points
   - **Service Point 1**
     - 750 kVA, 12.47 / 7.2 kV **grounded wye** to 277/480 ungrounded wye transformer
     - Messenger cable of 600 volt quadriplex conductors metallically connected to power utility primary neutral and on customer end connected to a pre-fab metal building using steel eye bolts
     - Customer has two ground rods installed outside its metal building with bare copper ground conductor brought into metal enclosure where attached to the metal building
     - The metal building provided a metallic connection between the power utility primary neutral and the customer ground
     - Customer service into the quarry uses flexible 3-phase cables with no. 6 copper insulated conductors per phase, no. 6 insulated ground conductor, designed to lie on the ground, extending 1000 to 1500 feet from the service ground
     - Customer ground conductor connected to equipment frames, disconnect switch support structures, within the quarry
     - Operating personnel would frequently be shocked in the quarry when touching metallic structures and equipment frames
     - UTEC measured as much as 21 volts from the ground conductor in the quarry and a probe stuck in the ground adjacent to equipment
   - **Service Point 2**
     - 1000 kVA, 12.47 / 7.2 kV **ungrounded** wye to 277/480 ungrounded wye transformer
     - Messenger cable of 600 volt quadriplex conductors metallically connected to power utility primary neutral and on customer end connected to customer service panel ground bus and customer ground rod
     - No reported shock voltages in service point 2 area

Possible Causes of the Stray Voltage Investigated

1. Faulty Customer 600 Volt Cables
2. Longitudinal Magnetically Induced Voltage in Insulated Ground Conductor
3. Electric Field Capacitive Induced Voltage in Ground Conductor
4. Power Utility Neutral Voltage from Transformer Charging Current
5. Power Utility Neutral Voltage from 60 Hz Single-Phase Load Current
6. High resistance, or open point, in Power Utility Primary Neutral Conductor
7. Stray Ground Currents from Outside Source

Computer Model / Analysis Results

Two options to model the circuit: Loop Equations and Nodal Equations

UTEC chose nodal equations with the current sources being the various transformer primary currents flowing into the primary neutrals (magnetizing current and load current). Each neutral span is modeled using the classical Carson and Campbell equations for line impedance with earth return. These equations include the variables soil resistivity and frequency and develop the effective depth of an imaginary return conductor.

For a deep soil resistivity of 10,000 ohm-meters, the effective depth of return is:

- Fundamental Frequency (60 Hz) – 5.28 miles
- 3rd Harmonic Frequency (180 Hz) – 3.05 miles

The Nodal Model is as follows:

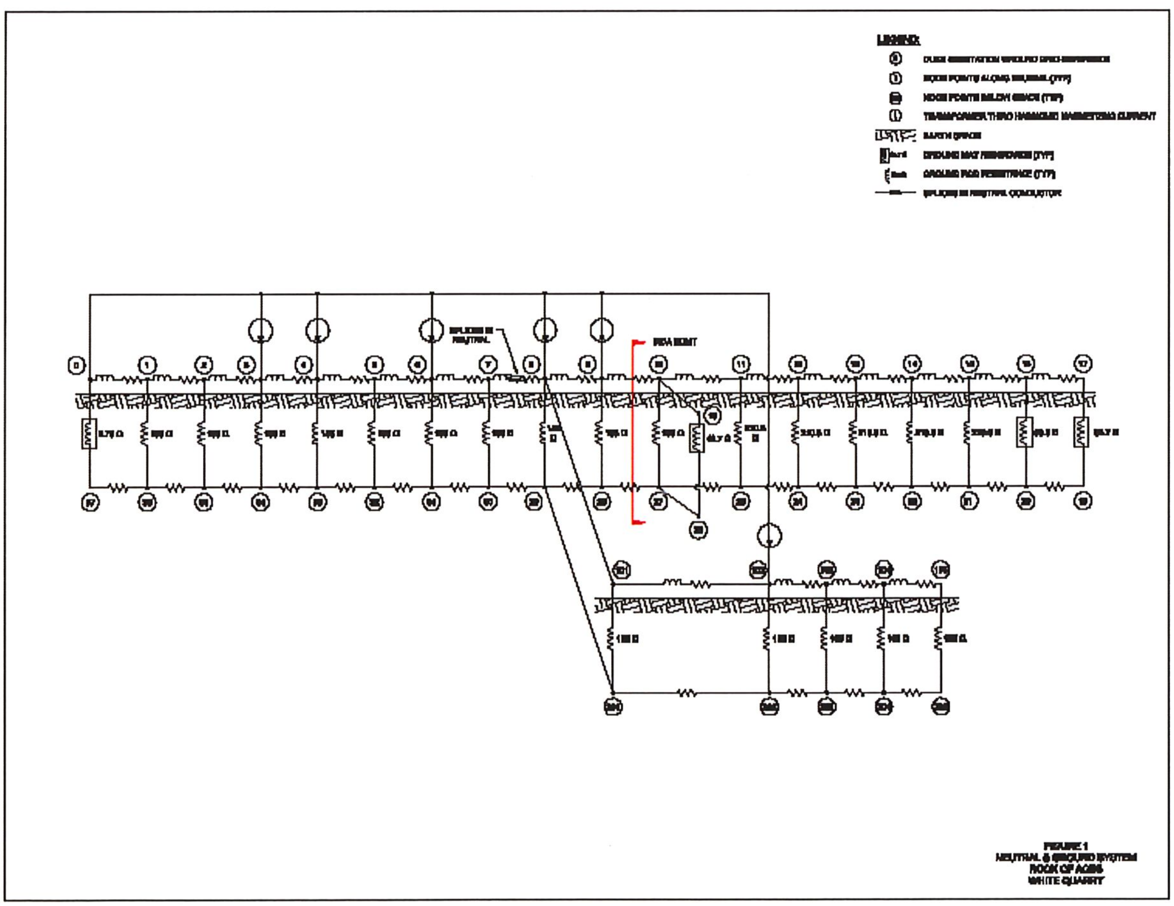


FIGURE 1
NEUTRAL & GROUND SYSTEM
ROCK OF AGES
WHITE QUARRY

Mitigation Modifications and Results

UTEC requested the Power Utility modify its service conductor connections to the metal building, insulating the messenger from the building and thus separating the utility neutral from the quarry ground system. UTEC made voltage measurements between the quarry ground system conductor and a disconnect switch support structure in the quarry about 1500 feet away from the T1 service before and after the modification as follows.

- Before modification – 21 V RMS
- After modification – 10.9 V RMS

The modification reduced the stray voltage by about 50%.

The next question was, "What is causing the remaining 10.9 volts of surface voltage?

There are several possible reasons for the remaining voltage as follows:

1. Mutual surface potential resulting from the 3rd harmonic portion of the charging current for T1 flowing into the T1 ground
2. Power utility neutral/ground current in the tap serving the quarry resulting from high resistance in one or all of three different identified neutral conductor splices
3. Overall power utility neutral voltage to remote earth resulting from the large phase imbalance of the two utility distribution circuits
4. Stray Ground Currents from "Outside Sources"

We performed additional field tests that eliminated possible reasons 1 and 2. The power utility was scheduled to perform work to re-balance the two unbalanced circuits in two separate projects. The utility performed this work and the ROA contractor performed ground voltage measurements at the same disconnect switch support structure to identify the effect of the modification.

- Before rebalancing the circuits – 10.9 V RMS
- After modification – 6 V RMS

The rebalancing of other primary distribution circuits reduced the remaining surface voltage by about 55%. We also noted that the remaining 6 V was predominantly 3rd harmonic, or 180 Hz. This information indicates that the remaining surface voltages are likely due to reason 4 above. In this case, the "outside source" is probably the 3rd harmonic charging current for all transformers served by the substation, not just transformers served by the circuit to the quarry. The soil resistivity in the service area of the utility substation is likely very high. In the quarry, the average value to a depth of 50

feet was determined to be around 2000 ohm-meters, and the two layer model indicated that in the quarry below 2.5 feet, the soil resistivity is effectively 10,000 ohm-meters. Because of the high soil resistivity, the return 3rd harmonic ground currents are spread out and effectively return in a hypothetical conductor over 3 miles deep in the earth. We believe that for the high soil resistivity of the substation service area, and in particular the quarry, the return 3rd harmonic magnetizing currents spread out over a large cross section of earth volume and create surface voltage in the entire area flowing back to the substation ground grid.

Conclusions

1. The modifications made to the T1 service, separating the utility neutral from the customer ground system, significantly reduced the measured surface voltages.
2. Significantly unbalanced phase currents in all circuits served by a solidly grounded substation transformer results in high neutral and ground currents. These ground currents flow back to the source substation through the large cross-section of the earth's volume and produce voltage potential as the currents flow.
3. High soil resistivity results in ground currents spreading out across the earth cross-section and being less concentrated near the surface of the earth in following the circuit back to the substation.
4. Balancing distribution circuits reduces surface potential
5. It may be difficult and nearly impossible to eliminate all surface voltages. However, for the magnitude of surface voltages remaining in the quarry for this project, no danger exists to humans.