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DECEMBER 2023

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NEWS

SEE PAGE 16

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December 2023



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Strings Attached

A Houston woodworker turns rich woods into custom banjos with a lot of dedication and sandpaper.

Story by Margaret Buranen
Photos by Nathan Lindstrom

10 Counting on Christmas

Matagorda County continues to lead the way in an annual nationwide bird count.

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Slow Cooker Holiday
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Photo by Jason David Page

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A banjo handmade by
David Getman.
Photo by Nathan Lindstrom



Make Your Tree a Cut Above

CUTTING DOWN your own Christmas tree can be a fun family outing that gets everyone in the holiday spirit.

The Texas Christmas Tree Growers Association website lists dozens of Christmas tree farms in the state. You might find one near you.

Did you know that most trees grown in Texas are between 3 and 6 years old when they're sold as Christmas trees?



A Year in Big Bend

Photographer and writer E. Dan Klepper, an occasional contributor to *TCP*, was selected to provide the photos for the Big Bend National Park 2024 Calendar. Order your copy and support the Big Bend Natural History Association at bbnha.org.

FINISH THIS SENTENCE

Can't I have just one more ...

TCP Tell us how you would finish that sentence. Email your short responses to letters@TexasCoopPower.com or comment on our Facebook post. Include your co-op and town.

Here are some of the responses to our October prompt: **I collect ...**

Memories of people who extend small acts of kindness.

LORETTA BEDFORD
DEEP EAST TEXAS EC
SAN AUGUSTINE

Vintage clothing. I enjoy designing unique outfits. It's like a snapshot of history that lives on.

HEATHER MCMEANS MCCARROLL
VIA FACEBOOK

Nothing. But cats seem to collect me.

VALLEE GREEN
BLUEBONNET EC
ELGIN

Sand from every beach I visit in hopes of retiring to a beach someday.

SHIRLEY WETSEL
SOUTH PLAINS EC
WOLFFORTH

Things my children will throw away someday.

LISA STAPLETON
CENTRAL TEXAS EC
FREDERICKSBURG

Visit our website to see more responses.

TCP Contests and More

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Pollinators

RECOMMENDED RECIPES

Don't let National Cookie Day, December 4, pass without trying—and sharing—some of the cookie recipes on our website. We have dozens. Just search "cookies."



Our Cup of Tea

"I so enjoy your publication. It's like sitting down with a friend and a cup of tea."

MAX BERNREUTER
PEDERNALES EC
CEDAR PARK



JULIA ROBINSON

Root of All Evil?

That's cute—so which one is picking on my fiddle leaf and plumeria [Currents, *Planter Banter*, September 2023]?

Rachelle Shockey
Via Facebook

Three Cheers For ...

I would like to thank Vianney Rodriguez for the spectacularly delicious Three-Bean Salad recipe [October 2023]. This is a keeper!

Laura Fortenberry
Panola-Harrison EC
Carthage

Uplifting Story

It was so much fun to see my hometown high school, McGregor High School (class of 1958), featured for its rocket science project [*It's Rocket Science (And so Much More)*, October 2023].

McGregor has quite the history in that arena. My great-grandparents had land

that was used during World War II for a bomb plant. Later it was used by Rocketdyne to produce solid jet fuel. Now SpaceX is close by.

Kudos to the teachers who are teaching them to think for themselves and be challenged.

Joan Roberts
CoServ
Denton

These students embody all that makes America the best in the world.

Whenever I encounter a young person who is courteous and has a goal, be it college or a trade school or just a job, I take the time to thank them and let them know that I am proud of them, for they are the future of our country.

Ted Pasche
CoServ
Argyle



SCOTT VAN OSDOL

TCP WRITE TO US
letters@TexasCoopPower.com

Editor, Texas Co-op Power
1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor
Austin, TX 78701

Please include your electric co-op and town. Letters may be edited for clarity and length.

Texas Co-op Power

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A Houston woodworker turns
rich woods into custom banjos
with a lot of time and sandpaper

Strings Attached





DAVID GETMAN was working in a music store in Brooklyn, New York, in 1997 when a friend gave him a box of banjo parts. The friend suggested that he see what he could make with the pieces.

Getman was intrigued. “I was 22. I had no tools. I wasn’t a woodworker,” he says. “But I liked to tinker.”

After fashioning a banjo from the parts, Getman became more interested in the instrument that has deep roots in North America. “I wasn’t a big fan of bluegrass, but I liked syncopated picking.”

Experimenting with playing and composing his own banjo music led Getman to develop a deep appreciation for the Appalachian style of banjo playing known as frailing or clawhammer. Unlike the three-finger bluegrass style, which typically consists of an up-picking motion by the fingers and down-picking of the thumb, clawhammer is all down-picking with a clawlike hand.

Clawhammer is typically done on an open-back banjo that produces a more mellow sound. Getman likes “the rich, deep notes, like rolling thunder” that these banjos produce.

Seventeen years after that first banjo, Getman discovered rotted floor joists in his Houston home. He bought tools to

do the repair work. Then he wondered what else he could do with his expensive new tools. That led to a new avocation.

Today, as a banjo-maker, restorer and player, Getman, 49, runs Lindale Banjos out of his home in Houston’s Lindale Park neighborhood while working full time as a social science researcher and raising a son and daughter with his wife. He’s proud that the renowned Fiddler’s Green Music Shop in Lockhart accepted one of his banjos in 2021—the first he made that he thought was good enough to sell. The store has been selling his instruments ever since.

“Fiddler’s Green is known to musicians beyond Texas. They have customers from as far away as Japan,” says Getman, who plans to make banjos full time when he retires.

Banjos come in two distinct styles. Bluegrass musicians prefer banjos that have wooden, bowl-shaped attachments called resonators on their backs. A resonator projects the sound outward toward the audience. Getman makes clawhammer banjos with open backs, a style used by musicians who play old-time or Appalachian music.

Making a banjo of either style is a long, complicated process.

“A guitar is made entirely of wood, but a banjo has both metal and wooden parts,” says Jim Penson, another Texas banjo-maker. “Quality bonding of those two different materials requires quality workmanship.”

Penson, who also restores, plays and teaches the instrument, makes resonator banjos at his shop in Arlington. He works in intervals of 15–20 minutes that total 80–100 hours for each banjo he produces. Between work sessions, he must

OPPOSITE David Getman plays an all-walnut banjo with a calfskin hide head that he custom-made for a client. ABOVE Getman sands a banjo rim in his Houston workshop.



LEFT Detail of a custom-inlaid headstock on a Getman banjo.
BELOW Forming a perfectly round rim is part of the time-consuming process of constructing a banjo.



allow time for lacquer or glue to dry completely before undertaking the next step.

“The most difficult part is also the least important. It’s finishing the instrument, making it look glossy,” says Penson, 69. “People who spend a lot of money for a custom-made banjo want it to look perfect.”

The Penson family lived in a 120-year-old farmhouse in Illinois, and his father was always restoring something in the house. Watching and helping his dad got him interested in woodworking. He moved to Texas in his 20s and got much more involved with banjos. He played in various bluegrass bands, including one with the late Earl Scruggs, considered the most influential banjo player in the world.

About 25 years ago, he opened Penson String Works, where, amid demand for his custom guitars, he turns out three banjos every year.

“You can use good components and not make a good banjo,” Penson says. “You can have not so good components and good workmanship and get a good banjo. It’s kind of the luck of the draw.”

Long soaks are required to make the wood pliable enough to be formed into the banjo’s round rim. Getman gains back a bit of that time with efficiency: He cuts four of each part before resetting his lathe. Still, it takes several weeks to finish a banjo.

Getman likes to use walnut because it’s sustainable and easy to get, but he also uses cherry. Maple is a popular choice for banjos, but it’s lighter—almost bright, he says, in

appearance and tone. He prefers “the darker woods, walnut and cherry, for both the aesthetics and the tones they give the banjos.”

The most challenging aspect of making a banjo is “the tedium of sanding,” Getman says. “You want the finished wood to look like glass. You sand parts five, six, seven times with different grades of sandpaper until it feels as smooth as it can be.”

And the most difficult part?

“From a technical point, it’s making the part at the end of the neck where it meets the pot,” Getman says. “Cutting that exactly right is next to impossible without the right tool.”

An experienced banjo player looks for an instrument that feels good in their hands, Getman says. The tone and volume should be consistent up and down the range of notes.

Custom banjos can cost \$1,200 or more, and musicians often request custom inlays of ivory, mother of pearl and other expensive materials for the headstock and fretboard.

One of Getman’s customers requested a headstock inlay depicting the night sky. Getman had saved a burl of wood—what looks like a knot when it’s attached to the tree trunk—because he liked its wavy grain. He added black ebony for the sky and cut the burl open to represent ocean waves below.

It’s challenging work but the rewards are plenty.

“Hearing the finished product is the best part,” says Getman, who makes four or five banjos a year. “You take the different pieces and your ideas, and then when it’s finished, you get to hear that banjo’s tone.” ■

TCP Find this story on our website to hear David Getman play one of his banjos.



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Counting on Christmas

I'M sloshing through a marshy field in Matagorda County, along the Texas coast, a pair of binoculars dangling around my neck and cold raindrops pelting my bright blue jacket.

A hundred yards away, ornithologist Rich Kostecke points toward a cluster of what looks to me like a group of white footballs on stilts. I slap a mosquito off my arm and take a closer look: egrets.

We've just ticked off another species in the annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count, which takes place across the country between December 14 and January 5. The event got its start on Christmas Day in 1900. Instead of holding a hunting competition, as was popular at the time, an ornithologist and Audubon Society officer named Frank Chapman came up with a less destructive alternative: Count—but don't shoot—the birds.

The idea caught on. Today, tens of thousands of birders participate in counts in all 50 states and in 20 countries.

During the 2021–22 count, they logged almost 43 million birds at more than 2,000 sites.

I'm new to birding, but I love tromping around outdoors, and I could spend all day watching wildlife. Besides, it feels good to contribute to science, and this annual count provides data that sheds light on long-term avian trends.

But joining the Matagorda County-Mad Island Marsh Preserve count is especially exciting. The plot where I'm birding—a circular area with a 15-mile diameter—almost always records more species than any other area in the country.

The Matagorda County count began 30 years ago when Brent Ortego, then a biologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and Jim Bergan, formerly of the Nature Conservancy, realized they could position a count circle that would incorporate a bit of the Gulf of Mexico, a stretch of coastline and some land along the Colorado River. Much of the 176-square-mile plot is on private land, but it also includes the Nature Conservancy's Clive Runnells Family Mad Island Marsh Preserve and the neighboring



In an annual nation-wide bird count, **Matagorda County** has led the US for 15 years in a row

Mad Island Marsh Wildlife Management Area.

It's fertile territory for birding.

"A lot of habitats come together here—coastal prairie, marshes, bay and forest," says Kostecke, who heads the small team to which I've been assigned for the count.

Under the bird count guidelines, teams tally all the species they see during a single calendar day. You don't need any special training or certification to participate, but only birds spotted by knowledgeable birders figure into the official total. Still, newbies like me typically can participate if there's room.

"It's a repeated count at the same time, year after year, so we're getting a snapshot across the nation over that time period," Kostecke says.

In a typical year, birders here log about 230 species during the count. But today's stormy weather doesn't bode well.

About 100 birders are participating in the count this year. Last night we lined up for bowls of chili and hot cornbread and talked strategy.

One group would watch for yellow-headed blackbirds.

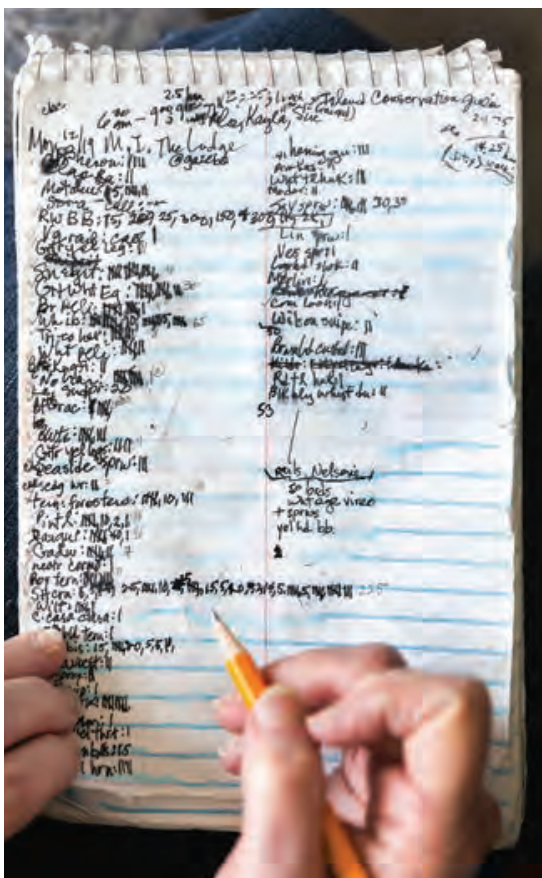
Another would head out at night, hoping to flush out tiny yellow rails and black rails in the darkness. The circle was divided into 16 sectors, with groups assigned to each one. We knew the weather would be a challenge because, like humans, birds hunker down in the rain.

"We may have to work harder to get them out," says Ortego, the official compiler for the event.

The count officially begins at midnight. I'm tucked inside my camper van then, but a hardy group of birders heads into the night to look for owls and other nocturnal birds.

I meet my team—Kostecke, along with ecologist Charlotte Reemts, her husband and their two daughters—early the next morning, which dawns gloomy and damp.

OPPOSITE From left, Rich Kostecke, Charlotte Reemts and author Pam LeBlanc are among about 100 birders who spent a rainy day participating in the Mad Island Marsh Preserve count. ABOVE A painted bunting's breeding grounds include much of Texas.



Since 1970,
the **population**
of birds in North
America has
dropped by
3 billion birds,
or **nearly 30%.**

We pile into two cars then head down a gravel road, stopping periodically to scan the surroundings.

Within 20 minutes, Kostecke has already logged 10 species. He doubles that when we reach a lake, and his list grows further when we hike into the brush and eventually reach the marsh. I love birding but definitely do not know my birds, so I leave the identification to the experts.

We spend all morning admiring turkey vultures perched in trees and great blue herons wading in the water. At noon, we head back to headquarters. Raindrops plunk on the roof; it's foggy outside. Birders peel off soggy rain jackets as they come in for a break.

"What did you get?" someone asks a dripping man who walks in.

"Wet," he responds with a chuckle.



The birders munch leftover chili and discuss what they've spotted. So far, no one has recorded anything that's never been seen here before. But they have logged lots of birds, from Pepto Bismol-colored roseate spoonbills to pelicans, crested caracaras, white ibises and plenty of noisy sandhill cranes.

"There's still quite a few rocks to turn over," preserve manager Steven Goertz says as the birders head out for the rest of the day.

In the end, the Matagorda County-Mad Island Marsh Preserve circle reports 218 species, enough to retain the crown for the most species in the country. A count in San Diego comes in a close second with 213. It marks the 24th time this corner of Texas has come in first or tied for first—and the 15th straight year it has topped the list outright.

But the rain took a toll. A dozen species usually recorded here weren't seen. Still, they got some good ones—the scaly-breasted munia, with its checkerboard chest; a squat-looking bird with an impressively long bill called a green kingfisher; the rose-breasted grosbeak, the male of which

LEFT Unforgiving December weather leaves Sue McBeth Welfel's notebook a bit soggy.

ABOVE Sandhill cranes were quite plentiful during the count.



looks like it's wearing a red bandana around its neck; the Western kingbird, with its lemon-colored belly; and the tall, spindly wood stork.

They also found one that I've long wanted to see—the tallest bird in North America, the whooping crane, which stands nearly 5 feet tall and has a wingspan of 7½ feet. Whooping crane numbers dropped to about 20 individuals in the 1940s but, thanks to conservation efforts, a population of about 600 now exists in the wild. They winter near here.

"It's an adrenaline rush," Ortego says of the count he helped start. "It's pride that you had the skills to locate an unusual bird when people are counting on you."

The count has scientific value as well. Biologists have seen a reduction in the raw number of birds in the past 50 years, and the counts provide evidence.

"For us, these data sets are important because the populations of birds that they monitor are not the subject of any formal monitoring program," says Lisa Gonzalez, executive director and vice president of Audubon Texas.

Since 1970, the population of birds in North America has dropped by 3 billion birds, or nearly 30%, she says.

The decline has hit nearly all species. Wetland birds like geese and swans are the exception; their numbers have stayed mostly stable, Gonzalez says.

Much of the loss is due to human activity. "Collisions and impacts are one of the major causes of bird loss, along with overall declines in habitat and a change in environmental conditions driven by climate change," Gonzalez says.

The public can help.

"Share the shore," Gonzalez says. "If you live or recreate along the coast, understand that it doesn't take a lot to disturb birds, especially nesting birds. When you're boating or fishing, steer clear of islands where birds nest—and keep dogs on a leash."

Watch for birds that nest on the ground when you drive on beaches, and turn off unnecessary outdoor lights during spring and fall migrations. And, if you're willing to spend a day outside looking for a flash of feathers, consider joining a bird count in your area.

"It's a fun thing to say we have the No. 1 count, but the count would be fun even if we weren't No. 1," Reemts says. "It's just all about the experience of being out here and seeing stuff." ■

TCP See this story on our website to learn if there is a Christmas Bird Count near you.

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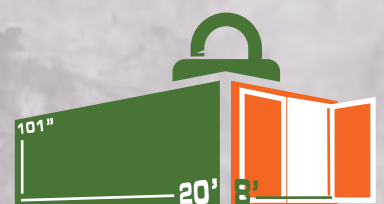
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MESSAGE
FROM
GENERAL
MANAGER/
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JEFF LANE

May Your Holiday Season Be Merry and Bright

THE HOLIDAYS ARE a time of year that many of us eagerly anticipate. There are delicious foods, colorful decorations and fabulous festivities. Right here in our community, we look forward to the Christmas parades, lighting ceremonies and much more.

We cherish old family traditions and enjoy creating new ones. For me personally, I look forward to more time spent with family and friends.

Despite the hustle and bustle of the season, the holidays also offer an opportunity to slow down and reflect. From all of us at Trinity Valley Electric Cooperative, we are grateful for you, our members.

One of our founding principles as a co-op is Concern for Community. While our main focus is providing safe, reliable and affordable energy, we also want to support our friends and neighbors—to help our community thrive.

Reflection

In looking back at this past year, I'm grateful we were able to make a positive impact in the community. Through several programs, your cooperative and its employees helped make our corner of Texas better.

We're also grateful for the opportunity to partner with local schools to raise awareness about the

importance of electrical safety. And we continue to work closely with local high schools to award college scholarships to deserving students.

These are just some of the ways we show our commitment to our community, alongside providing information about saving energy to lower bills, assessing if solar power is right for you and sharing safety tips. We want you to know we're here to help. 160153001

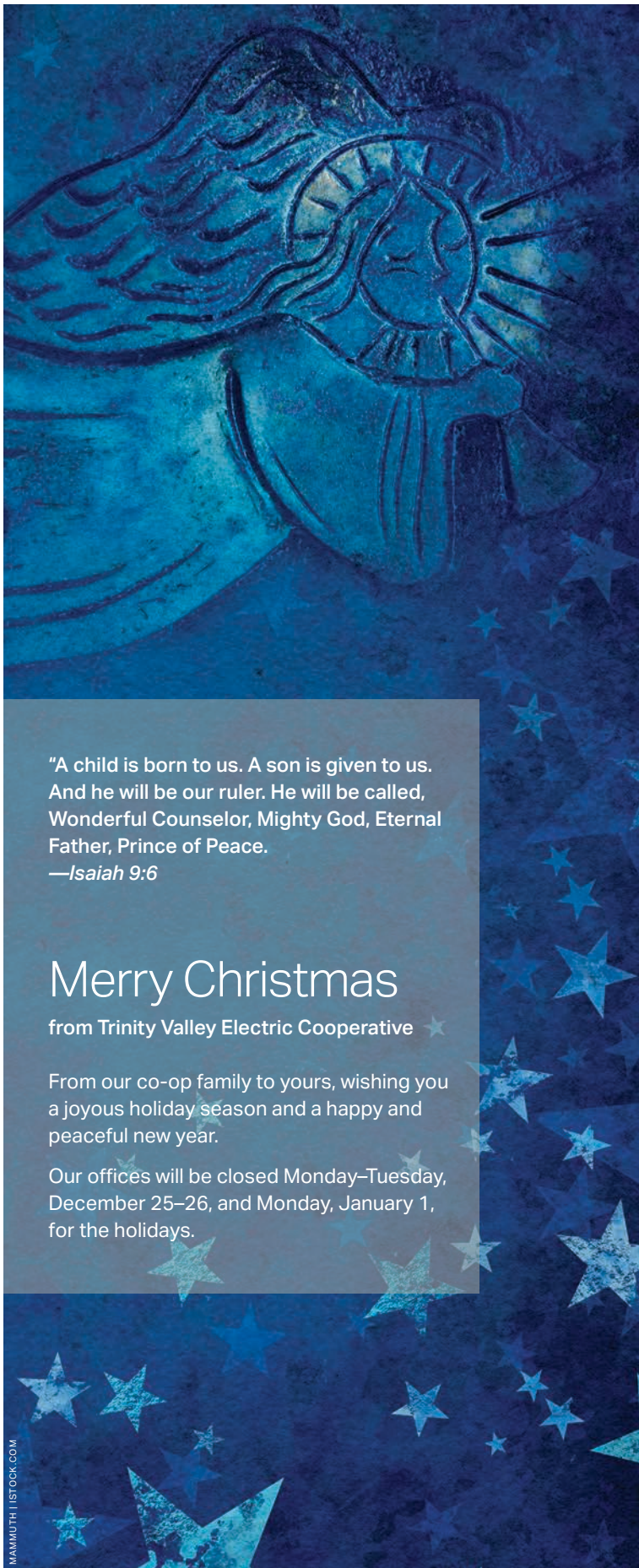
What's Next

Looking ahead to 2024, we hope you'll share your feedback with us. We recognize that our members bring valuable perspective, and that's why we continually seek your input. Whether through community events, our social media channels or the annual meeting, we want to hear from you. We're led by you—the members of the co-op—and we depend on your feedback.

As we prepare for next year, we look forward to the opportunity to serve you and the greater community. On behalf of the entire TVEC family, we hope your holidays are indeed merry and bright. ■



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"A child is born to us. A son is given to us.
And he will be our ruler. He will be called,
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal
Father, Prince of Peace.
—Isaiah 9:6


Merry Christmas

from Trinity Valley Electric Cooperative

From our co-op family to yours, wishing you
a joyous holiday season and a happy and
peaceful new year.

Our offices will be closed Monday–Tuesday,
December 25–26, and Monday, January 1,
for the holidays.

Trinity Valley Electric Cooperative

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 

CONTACT US

1800 E. Highway 243
Kaufman, Texas
Local (972) 932-2214
Toll-Free 1-800-766-9576
Web tvec.net

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24/7

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to report outages,
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ABOUT TRINITY VALLEY EC

TVEC operates in Anderson, Dallas, Henderson,
Hunt, Kaufman and Van Zandt counties.

OFFICE LOCATIONS

Kaufman District Headquarters

1800 E. Highway 243, Kaufman

Athens District Office

909 W. Larkin St., Athens

Cedar Creek District Office

1012 W. Main St., Ste. 102
Gun Barrel City

Wills Point District Office

582 N. Fourth St., Wills Point

Lobby Hours

8:15 a.m.–4:45 p.m.

VISIT US ONLINE

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TVEC ENERGY
MANAGEMENT ADVISER

CHRIS WALKER, BAP

Is Your Holiday Lighting Naughty or Nice?

WE ALL WANT to be on Santa's nice list, but if it's been a while since you replaced your holiday lights, you could be on the naughty list for wasting electricity. Don't worry, you don't need to nix your holiday light

show—at least not entirely. There are a lot of easy steps you can take to make your festive displays more energy-efficient.

If you haven't strung your twinkling lights, be sure to use LED strands. LEDs consume far less energy than incandescent lights, and they can last 40 holiday seasons. LED lights come in various colors, including a warm white for that old-time holiday glow. They're also safer because they're made with epoxy lenses, not glass, making them more resistant to breaking—and they're cool to the touch, so no burnt fingers.

The energy savings can really add up: Using an LED bulb over the holidays will cost you an estimated 45¢ compared to \$5 for mini incandescent string lights and \$75 for large incandescent string lights.

You can also save energy with a programmable light timer. Most models cost between \$10 to \$25 and can be purchased through online retailers like Amazon or at big-box stores like Lowe's or Walmart. With a light timer, you can easily program when you want your holiday lights to turn on and off, which will save you time, money and energy. If you're using a timer for exterior lighting, make sure it's weatherproof and intended for

outdoor use. Or try smart holiday lighting that you can control with your smartphone for even more customizable settings.

Turn off ambient lights. Chances are, you don't need to have your illuminated Christmas tree shining brightly and your house lights on. Adjust your indoor lighting to account for your décor, especially when you have glowing decorations.

If Clark Griswold's Christmas décor style is a bit much for your taste, consider a more natural approach. Many Christmas tree farms, and even retailers like Lowe's and Home Depot, give away greenery clippings from recently trimmed trees. With a little twine, extra ornaments and some sparkly ribbon, you can create beautiful garlands and wreaths to hang over your front door or windows.

To add extra twinkle at night, install solar-powered spotlights to illuminate your new (essentially free) greenery. Solar spotlights can vary in price, but you should be able to purchase a quality set of four for about \$30—and because they run on energy from the sun, there's no additional cost to your energy bill. For interior lighting options, consider LED candles to add a holiday glow.

There are many ways to decorate that require no electricity at all. Reflective decorations like tinsel and mirrors can glimmer just as brightly as lightbulbs. The holidays are also a great time to get crafty with your family and make homemade decorations like paper chains and popcorn strings. ■

Apply soon! Applications close on January 15, 2024 at 5:00 PM

YOUTH TOUR 2024



TRAVEL FROM
TEXAS TO
WASHINGTON D.C.
ON YOUTH TOUR



SCAN ME



WHY SHOULD YOU APPLY?

From museums and memorials to the majestic U.S. Capitol and Supreme Court, there's a little bit of something for everyone on the Government-in-Action Youth Tour 2024! Join more than 1,800 youth delegates & chaperones from around the nation on this 9-day summer adventure jam-packed with splendid sights and memories in the making. Did we mention that it is **FREE**?

That's right! All current freshmen, sophomores and juniors from the TVEC service area are eligible to enter and two applicants will win an all-expenses-paid trip to Washington, D.C.

Youth Tour 2024 is sure to be the trip of a lifetime!

JUMPING FOR JOY
ON YOUTH TOUR



MORE INFORMATION AT WWW.TVEC.NET/YOUTH-TOUR/

TVEC To Return \$4.6 Million in Capital Credits

How Capital Credits Work



At the end of each year, if TVEC has received more revenue than was necessary to cover expenses, the difference is allocated back to members as capital credits based on each member's share of electricity purchased.



When the co-op's financial condition permits, the board of directors may decide to retire, or pay back, some of the capital credits. This year, all outstanding capital credits from 1995 will be retired as well as 10% of outstanding capital credits from 2022.



Capital credits are returned to current and former members. For current members, this year's disbursement will be applied as a credit on bills mailed in December. Former members will receive a check.

Capital Credits: Your Ownership in the Co-op

WHEN YOU JOINED Trinity Valley Electric Cooperative, you began investing in the company's electrical infrastructure, equipment, facilities and growth. Member ownership is one of the key differences between co-ops and retail providers, and with each electric bill you pay, your equity in the co-op grows.

TVEC is a nonprofit, member-owned co-op, so any operating margin is allocated to each member based on the amount of electricity purchased each year. It is a fair way to show each member's investment, and the co-op has that capital available to assist in funding growth and important projects to improve service and reliability.

As the co-op's financial condition allows, your elected board members refund these capital credits to members. For 2023, the TVEC Board of Directors has approved the return of almost \$4.6 million in capital credits.

This amount will include all remaining credits from 1995 and 10% of all

other credits for members from 2022. Members who joined in 2023 have not yet been allocated any credits and therefore will not see a refund.

Current members will receive refunds as credits on the electric bills mailed from the co-op in December. Former members will receive a check at the address we have on file.

While credit amounts will vary

greatly depending on how long you have been a member and how much electricity you have purchased, the return of capital credits is an important part of the financial stewardship of the co-op.

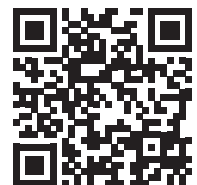
If you have any questions regarding capital credits, please contact TVEC at 972-932-2214 or email memberrelations@tvec.coop. ■

If You Ever Move, Keep Your Address Updated at TVEC

The capital credits system means that you will have money in the co-op for years to come. If you move out of co-op territory it is important to keep us updated with a current mailing address for capital credit checks and other communications.

If you, or someone you know may have capital credit refunds that have not been received please contact us.

For capital credit refunds more than three years old, visit claimtexas.org. The State of Texas maintains the website for the return of unclaimed funds, including capital credits.



claimtexas.org



VIOLETASTOIMENOVA | ISTOCK.COM

Is Your Fridge Up to the Task?

IF CHRISTMAS DINNER is at your house this year, your guests aren't the only ones who will be stuffed. So will your refrigerator.

Is it up to the task?

If your fridge is more than a decade old, it might not be. Today's models—those bearing the Energy Star label, at least—use at least 15% less energy than current federal standards require, and 40% less than models from the early 2000s, according to the Department of Energy.

Yet more than 60 million households have refrigerators that are more than 10 years old, DOE says. By replacing it with a new, energy-efficient model, you could save up to \$300 in electricity charges over the appliance's lifetime.

When shopping for a new refrigerator or freezer, read the EnergyGuide label. It tells you how many kilowatt-hours of electricity the unit will consume over a year of operation. The smaller the number, the better. Look for refrigerators that have a freezer on the bottom or the top, as side-by-side designs consume more energy. Chest freezers are typically better insulated than upright models.

Whether you're buying a new fridge this year or not, follow these tips for more efficient use around the holidays:

- ▶ Brush or vacuum your fridge's coils regularly to improve efficiency by as much as 30%.
- ▶ Leftovers may be your friend. Keeping your refrigerator full will help your unit retain cold better. If you have trouble keeping it stocked, fill the extra space with bottles or containers of water.
- ▶ If your milk is frosty in the morning, reduce the fridge's temperature. Refrigerators should be set between 36 degrees and 40 degrees. Freezers should stay between zero degrees and 5 degrees.
- ▶ Put a dollar bill in the door's seal to see if it is airtight. If the dollar slips out easily, so will cold air.
- ▶ Avoid putting hot leftovers in the refrigerator. It raises the overall temperature in the fridge and makes it have to work harder to cool down. Instead, let leftovers cool slightly on the counter before storing them. Just don't leave them out so long that bacteria has a chance to grow. ■

Decorate With Safety in Mind

DON'T LET THE rush and excitement of holiday decorating distract you from taking important safety precautions. Your electric cooperative offers these tips for safe holiday decorating.

Never place your Christmas tree—artificial or real—near heat-emitting devices, such as space heaters, which can create a fire hazard.

Lights that are hung inside or outside should be certified by an accredited independent testing laboratory. Check for a seal that confirms its certification.

Also, make sure holiday lights and extension cords are made for the location in which they will be used—whether indoors or out.

When decorating outside, always look up and double-check that you and any equipment, such as a ladder, are at least 10 feet away from overhead power lines.

Outdoor lights and decorations should be plugged into an outlet with ground-fault circuit interrupter protection.

Be sure to turn off all lights before leaving your home or going to sleep. A timer can help you do this. ■



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5 Tips for Hiring an Electrician

HIRING A LICENSED electrician is an important step in any home project, from lighting upgrades to full remodels. Because these projects can be dangerous, it's crucial to hire a professional.

Electricians can help with any issue tied into your home's electrical system, like adding outlets, installing fixtures, replacing circuit breakers, rewiring and more. Finding the right electrician for your project will require research.

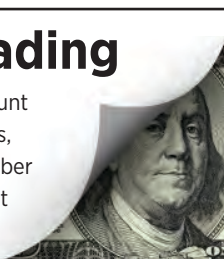
Keep the following tips in mind if you're looking to hire an electrician.

- 1. Hire a licensed, qualified electrician for the job.** Look for a master electrician to manage the project. They have the most experience and will often oversee the work of a journey-level electrician or apprentice.
- 2. Make sure the electrician is insured.** Seasoned electricians know the importance of protecting your home, themselves, their employees and equipment in case of an accident.
- 3. Read reviews.** Hire an electrician who has several positive reviews—not just one or two. Read reviews on different websites, like Nextdoor, Yelp and HomeAdvisor, and consider asking your neighbors for their recommendations.
- 4. Determine your budget.** Knowing your budget upfront helps move the process along. Prices can vary greatly, so get at least two quotes.
- 5. Talk timeline.** Some electricians accidentally overbook projects. If your job is time-sensitive, convey that early on and discuss a realistic timeline with the electrician.

Be sure to investigate further before hiring the first electrician you find. To find the right person, you'll need to compare multiple electricians, read reviews and check credentials. Asking the right questions will help you weed out the workers who aren't up for the job. ■

Win \$100 Just for Reading

Somewhere, hidden on pages 16–23, is a TVEC account number. Read closely. If the account number is yours, contact the member services department by December 29 to receive a \$100 credit on your electric bill. Don't miss out—you could be our winner.



TVEC
TRINITY VALLEY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE
Energy Quiz



Alternating Current power was developed and promoted by which famous inventor?

- A • Thomas Edison**
- B • William Stanley Jr.**
- C • Nikola Tesla**
- D • Lee de Forest**

Win \$100!

Send your answer and contact information to **contest@tvec.coop** or contact TVEC Member Services by December 31. One \$100 bill credit winner will be chosen from all correct replies. Look for the correct answer in a future **Texas Co-op Power**.

November Energy Quiz: How Much is a kWh Anyway?

IT CAN BE HARD TO QUANTIFY how much energy it takes to run certain appliances or electrical devices. And often, even two of the same types of product from different manufacturers may use power differently.

It all comes down to math: How much energy is used, multiplied by how much time it draws that power.

For the quiz, one kWh is equivalent to baking a cake for about one hour in a 1,500 watt oven.

Congratulations to October Energy Quiz winner, Donna Price, of Mabank.

Look for the winner of this month's contest in the February issue of **Texas Co-op Power**. ■



Your Generosity in Action

Operation Round Up Spotlight: Reach Child Placing Agency

NOVEMBER WAS NATIONAL ADOPTION MONTH, a perfect match for an Operation Round Up Grant to REACH Child Placing Agency. Since 2018, REACH has served as a link between local families who are willing to help kids in a time of crisis and Texas Department of Family and Protective Services offices in Kaufman, Rockwall, Hunt and Van Zandt counties.

REACH founder Tammy Pargoud has partnered with local churches and agencies to create a broad organization that supports both kids in need and families in crisis.

“If we can prevent a child from coming into foster care, we will provide tangible items to extended family members to make sure those needs are met,” Pargoud said. “And if a child does need foster care, we have loving homes that can take those children, sometimes for as long as 18 months.”

Another highlight of the agency’s efforts is coming up with the Gift of Hope program. Children are referred by local agencies and schools to receive a Christmas shopping trip along with volunteers from local law enforcement and first responder groups.



REACH Child Placing Agency Founder Tammy Pargoud accepts a TVEC Charitable Foundation Grant from Laura Melton, TVEC public relations supervisor.

“Each child gets a gift card and an opportunity to go shopping, which is great by itself,” Pargoud said. “But the most important part of this is that the kids have an opportunity to interact and get to know those who are sworn to protect and serve them. They build relationships so that when children need help, they are not afraid to reach out to the resources in our community.”

For TVEC members who would like to assist in REACH’s efforts in the community, donations are always welcome.

“Donating to the general fund or attending our March fundraiser are the easiest ways to help,” Pargoud said. “We also encourage donations of items for care packages. These kids come into our care with nothing, so things like pajamas, shoes, toiletries and clothes help make that transition possible.

Find out more about REACH, the March fundraiser and ways to help at reachcpatx.org. ■

October 2023 Operation Round Up Grants Awarded

Grants

- Andrews Center - \$5,000
- Henderson County Retired School Personnel - \$2,000
- Isaiah 40:31 Foundation - \$4,000
- REACH Child Placing Agency - \$5,000

Food and Bill Assistance

- Helping Hands, FUMC Mabank - \$5,000
- Salvation Army, Malakoff - \$3,000
- Faith in Action Outreach - \$2,000

A Time of Porpoise

A memorable beach moment: You're basking in the warm sun, toes in the sand, letting the gentle turn of the foam-capped waves lull you into a state of complete relaxation. As your eyes scan the endless horizon of blue on blue, you're rewarded with a pod of dolphins making their way across the sea.

There's no denying their signature shape as they leap from the water. If you don't see anything else extraordinary the rest of day, you can take solace knowing you've witnessed one of nature's most playful and human-like creatures in their natural habitat.

Why not re-create that special moment with our **Balinese Dolphin Pendant**? We've captured two dolphins mid-jump in sterling silver crafted in the Balinese style. Tucked between these beloved sea mammals is a full carat of shimmering blue topaz. Made by some of Indonesia's finest artisans, this pendant is an absolute steal at **JUST \$29!** That's what we call our Stauer **IMPOSSIBLE PRICE!**

Nothing captures the shimmering color of the ocean in the midday sun like blue topaz. With its sparkling, clear blue color and high reflective index, blue topaz is one of the world's top-selling gemstones. The Gemological Institute of America lauds topaz for its hardness, noting that blue topaz is known for its intense color that's better than aquamarine. With this special price, you can score quite the catch.

Satisfaction guaranteed or your money back. Enjoy the Balinese Dolphin Pendant for 30 days. If it doesn't pass the test swimmingly, send it back for a full refund of the item price.

Limited reserves. This pendant is already one of our best sellers this year. A full carat of genuine blue topaz set in .925 sterling silver for this price is as rare as a dolphin sighting. We cannot guarantee availability for long. Call today! This offer is limited to the first 1,900 responders to this ad!

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TCP Listen as W.F. Strong narrates this story on our website.



How Texas Became a Desert

Films shot in Arizona, Utah and Spain gave the world some wrong impressions

BY W.F. STRONG

TO MUCH OF THE WORLD—and to many Americans who have never been to Texas—the state is a vast desert.

It's not the Sahara but a high-plateaus arid region studded with rocky mesas, sweeping wall-like cliffs and dusty canyons—and sometimes adorned with thousands of saguaro cactuses (native to Arizona, not Texas).

And, yes, certainly there are parts of West Texas that fulfill some aspects of these images, but more than half the state is green, with rolling hills, lush forests and vibrant coastal plains. Yet desert images dominate minds in distant

lands. For that, we can thank Hollywood.

There are many John Wayne Westerns with storylines that meander through Texas, but those films were mostly shot in Utah and Arizona. The most jarring example to me is *The Searchers*.

"Someday this country's gonna be a fine, good place to be," Mrs. Jorgensen, a tough frontierswoman, says in one scene. As she says this on her front porch, Jorgensen is facing Monument Valley, which is in Arizona and Utah.

Wayne made five movies in Monument Valley, even though two of them, *The Searchers* and *Rio Grande*, had story-

lines based in Texas. "Monument Valley is the place where God put the West," Wayne said.

Another Wayne film that is shocking to a Texan is *The Comancheros*. Wayne plays Texas Ranger Jake Cutter.

In one scene, he arrests an outlaw on a boat arriving in Galveston. As Cutter exits the boat with his handcuffed prisoner in tow, he walks right into eastern Utah, where the film was shot. It was stunning country for CinemaScope technology to capture, but it's not Texas.

Rio Bravo and *El Dorado* were two Wayne films with Texas settings shot in and around the Sonoran Desert west of Tucson. The landscape there is dominated by saguaros, enormous 40-foot-tall cactuses called the sentinels of the desert. Such sights don't exist in Texas.

Clint Eastwood's *For a Few Dollars More* is set in and around El Paso, but it was actually shot in the Tabernas Desert near Almería, Spain, and in Italy. Fort Bravo, also called Texas Hollywood, is a movie set town built in Almería in the 1960s that has served as a backdrop for many classic Western films.

Two films more true to Texas in landscape were *Giant*, shot mostly around Marfa, and *No Country for Old Men*, filmed around Marfa and Las Vegas, New Mexico. A 2015 miniseries called *Texas Rising* troubled some Texans for two reasons: It was shot almost entirely in Mexico and it depicted rugged mountain terrain near Victoria, where there are only coastal plains.

Movie Texas depicts a greater diversity of desert land than Texas actually has within it. To the world, we are Arizona, Utah and New Mexico, and we are Mexico, Italy and Spain. Mostly desert. ■

Slow Cooker

The handy appliance that comes through in so many ways

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

My slow cooker punch is my favorite festive drink to serve when hosting for the holidays. This vibrant and bubbly beverage is brimming with holiday flavors. It's always a hit at parties.

Slow Cooker Holiday Punch

6 cups cranberry juice
4 cups apple juice
2 cups orange juice
1 cup grapefruit juice
4 cinnamon sticks
4 cups cranberries, divided use
1 liter ginger ale, chilled
Orange slices
Grapefruit slices

1. Add all juices to a 6-quart slow cooker.
2. Add cinnamon sticks and 2 cups cranberries. Cover and cook on low 4 hours.
3. Allow punch to cool, then pour into a punch bowl. Top with ginger ale.
4. Before guests arrive add orange slices, grapefruit slices and the remaining 2 cups cranberries.
5. Serve over ice.

SERVES 12

TCP Follow Vianney Rodriguez while she cooks in Cocina Gris at sweetlifebake.com, where she features a recipe for Mexican Christmas Eve Salad.





Crockpot Apple Pie Cinnamon Roll Casserole

SHELLEY JANIK
SAN BERNARD EC

Celebrate the holidays on the sweetest note with Janik's casserole. Cinnamon rolls and apple filling topped with a creamy brown sugar glaze are amazing for Christmas morning or even better after a holiday meal.

- 1½ cups canned apple pie filling**
- 2 tubes refrigerated cinnamon rolls (17.5 ounces each)**
- 2 eggs**
- ¼ cup heavy cream**
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar**
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract**

1. Dice apples from apple pie filling. Coat the inside of a slow cooker with cooking spray.
2. Remove cinnamon rolls from tubes, place icing aside and cut each cinnamon roll into four pieces. Place half of the cinnamon roll pieces on bottom of slow cooker.
3. Spoon half the apple pie filling over cinnamon roll pieces. Top with remaining cinnamon roll pieces.
4. Whisk together eggs, cream, brown sugar, cinnamon and vanilla. Pour over cinnamon rolls.
5. Spoon the remaining apple pie filling on top. Cover and cook on low 2½–3 hours.
6. Spread the icing that came with the cinnamon rolls on top of the casserole and serve warm.

SERVES 8

[MORE RECIPES >](#)

\$500 WINNER

Slow Cooker Cabbage Rolls

WENDY ZWIENER
SAN BERNARD EC



The tangy citrus tomato sauce here evokes the beauty of treasured holiday recipes that have been passed down through the years.

SERVES 6

- 12 cabbage leaves, removed from stem**
- 1 pound ground beef**
- 1 cup cooked white rice**
- 1 egg, beaten**
- ¼ cup milk**
- ¼ cup finely minced onion**
- 1¼ teaspoons salt**
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper**
- 1 can tomato sauce (8 ounces)**
- 1 tablespoon light brown sugar**
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce**
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice**

1. Cut out the thick vein from the bottom of each cabbage leaf, making a V-shaped notch.
2. Blanch leaves for a few minutes in boiling water until slightly softened, then separate leaves and set aside.
3. In a large bowl, combine ground beef, rice, egg, milk, onion, salt and pepper.
4. In a small saucepan over low heat, simmer tomato sauce, brown sugar, Worcestershire sauce and lemon juice. Stir to combine.
5. Place a cabbage leaf on a flat surface and place a tablespoon or more of the meat mixture in the center of the leaf.
6. Roll from the bottom of the cabbage leaf and tuck in the edges as you roll.
7. Continue until you use all leaves and meat.
8. Coat the inside of a slow cooker with cooking spray and place rolls seam side down into it. Pour the sauce mixture over the rolls, then cover and cook on low 6 hours.



TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

SPRING CAKES DUE DECEMBER 10

Some cakes just pair perfectly with a spring day. Send us your best spring cake recipe and you could win \$500. Submit your favorite online by December 10.





Easy BBQ Chicken Sliders

MELISSA ECKHOFF
COSERV

Looking for a quick and easy holiday appetizer or New Year's Eve bite? We've got you covered with Eckhoff's sliders. Shredded chicken bathed in a creamy sauce will take you into 2024 the right way.

4 boneless chicken breasts
1 bottle barbecue sauce (18 ounces)

**1 can cream of chicken soup
(10.5 ounces)**
12 slider buns
Sliced pickles

1. Coat the inside of a slow cooker with cooking spray and place chicken breasts into it.
2. In a bowl, stir together barbecue sauce and cream of chicken soup. Pour mixture over chicken.
3. Cover slow cooker and cook on low 6 hours.
4. Shred chicken with two forks and serve on slider buns, topped with sliced pickles.

MAKES 12 SLIDERS

TCP Want quick solutions to your slow cooker desires? We can help. Among the more than 1,000 recipes from Co-op Country in our archives, you'll find dozens that call for slow cookers. They're all on our website.

Quick Tips for Slow Cooking

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ

If you're feeding two, go for a 3-quart slow cooker. A 5-quart will feed a family of four, and a 6-quart slow cooker can feed a crowd or handle big batches.

Keep it closed. Opening the lid can cause the cooker to lose heat, adding to the cooking time.

Make cleanup a snap. Coat the inside with nonstick spray or use a liner for easy cleanup.

Enliven a dish by adding fresh herbs in the last 15 minutes of cooking time.

Sear meat before adding it to the slow cooker to deepen its flavor.

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GIFT GUIDE

In the magazine and on [TexasCoopPower.com](https://www.texascooppower.com), we make it easy to shop for friends and family.



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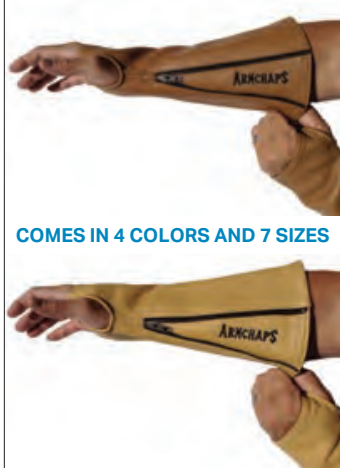
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1950s Flashback Calendar

Large 20-by-15-inch calendar with 12 watercolor scenes. Revisit the past with these iconic '50s settings by Texas State Artist George Boutwell. \$15 plus tax and \$3.50 shipping. See website for quantity pricing.

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COURTESY CHET GARNER

Art and Parts

A Liberty Hill artist diverts discarded toys from the trash heap

BY CHET GARNER

YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD to play with toys. That's the lesson I learned standing next to an 8-foot banana made entirely of plastic dolls, space aliens and rebar. I had tripped to visit off-the-grid artist Terry "Tunes" Parks, 72, who created his own Texas-style island of misfit toys just north of Liberty Hill, outside Austin.

At first, I wasn't sure if I was headed in the right direction. Then I saw a fence line covered in sun-bleached Barbie dolls. This was the place.

I wandered into Parks' yard, which doubles as his public gallery. Dozens of sculptures cover the space, each comprising hundreds of tiny toys organized into larger-than-life shapes—guitars, pyramids and even an Easter Island head. Dolls commingled with gardening tools hang from tree branches. It might have been terrifying if it wasn't so playful.

Parks started creating around 2010, after he was diagnosed with cancer and doctors told him he didn't have much time to live. The art served as therapy, helping him make his recovery while working tirelessly beside his brother Scott. Both are self-admitted music nuts, which explains why most of the art pieces are inspired by Texas artists like Willie Nelson, Frank Zappa and psychedelic pioneers the 13th Floor Elevators.

Every week, visitors and the local mission resale shop bring Parks—a member of Pedernales Electric Cooperative—boxes of unwanted toys that sit and wait for him to turn them into something bigger than the sum of their doll parts.

Parks' art isn't commissioned by highfalutin patrons and doesn't exist to fill big-city galleries. Instead, the sculptures serve a higher purpose: making us smile, scratch our heads and remember when we played with toys too. ■

ABOVE Terry "Tunes" Parks shows Chet a pyramid assembled with a mind-boggling array of toys.

TCP Join Chet as he discovers what old toys turn into. We have the video online. And see all his Explorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



Know Before You Go

Call ahead or check an event's website for scheduling details, and check our website for many more upcoming events.

DECEMBER

01

Burnet [1–3, 8–10] Main Street Bethlehem, (512) 756-4481, fbcburnet.org

02

Wimberley [2–26] Trail of Lights, (512) 847-6969, emilyann.org

07

Columbus Ladies Night Out, (979) 732-8385, columbus.texas.org

New Braunfels Christmas Market at Historic Old Town, (830) 629-2943, newbraunfelsconservation.org

08

Dallas Mistletoe Market at Preston Hollow Village, thebohohmarket.com

Lake Jackson Easton Corbin, (979) 230-3156, brazosport.edu

Fort Worth [8–9] Connor King, (512) 817-9535, blcomed.com

Fredericksburg [8–9] A Christmas Journey, (830) 997-2069, bethanyfbg.com

McKinney [8–9] Holidays at the Heard, (972) 562-5566, heardmuseum.org

Clute [8–10, 15–17] The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, (979) 265-7661, brazosport.org

09

Comanche Santa Comes to Town, (325) 356-3233, comanchechamber.org

Llano Snow Day, (325) 247-5354, llanostarrystarrynights.com

San Saba Sip N' Stroll and Lighted Christmas Parade,
(325) 372-5141,
sansabachamber.org

Sattler Canyon Lake Noon Lions Christmas Parade,
(806) 420-4824,
facebook.com/
canyonlakenoonlionsclub

Surfside Beach Nighttime Holiday Kites,
(979) 233-1531,
visitsurfsidebeachtx.org

Marble Falls Movie in the Park, (830) 693-4449,
visitmarblefalls.org

Brenham Dailey & Vincent,
(979) 337-7240,
thebarnhillcenter.com

Johnson City Jingle Jaunt 5K & Kids K, (830) 868-7111,
johnsoncitytx.org

Lake Jackson Bird Banding,
(979) 480-0999, gcbo.org

Surfside Beach Surfing Santas, (979) 233-1531,
visitsurfsidebeachtx.org

West Columbia Candlelight Christmas, (979) 345-4656,
thc.texas.gov

Stonewall Tree Lighting,
(830) 644-2252,
tpwd.texas.gov

Round Top Linda Patterson and Friends Concert,
(979) 249-3129,
festivalhill.org

TCP Submit Your Event

We pick events for the magazine directly from TexasCoopPower.com. Submit your March event by January 1, and it just might be featured in this calendar.



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La Grange, TX

Kreische Brewery & Monument Hill's

Trail of Lights

Festival Nights: Dec. 8, 9, 15, 16, & 17
Encore Nights: Dec. 19 - 23
5:30 to 8:00 pm
FriendsOfKBMH.org
for details and ticket information

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Mailboxes

Readers certainly didn't mail it in this month, but some got boxed out by the competition. So gather 'round and let's see what's been delivered, as Texans show their colors and a little country flair.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ

1 ROB DANIEL
TRI-COUNTY EC

"First responders often use mailboxes to hang gear on while in rehab after fighting fires."

2 DON BUGH
NAVASOTA VALLEY EC

"Tierra Linda Ranch community mailboxes in the Kerrville area at dusk."

3 VANDY MORGAN
BLUEBONNET EC

Texas wildflower mailbox.

4 JANIS HENDRIX
PEDERNALES EC

A mailbox mounted on a retired 1942 fire hydrant during the February freeze.



Upcoming Contests

DUE DEC 10 Pollinators

DUE JAN 10 Rides

DUE FEB 10 Food and Cooking



Enter online at TexasCoopPower.com/contests.

TCP See Focus on Texas on our website for many more Mailboxes photos from readers.



The Best Christmas Gift I Ever Gave

A simple offering made generations ago yields lifetime returns

BY W.A. MCCORMICK
ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID MOORE

WHEN I WAS ABOUT 8 or 10 years old, back in the 1950s, an old man moved into a little shack of a house about a quarter-mile from my family's little, very modest house. He was alone, and I worried about him.

Maybe my folks had mentioned that he was having hard times, but I don't remember for sure.

We had several big native pecan trees, and during the holidays we usually had an abundance of the delicious nuts.

One year when Christmas was coming up, the old man was in the back of my mind. I told my grandmother that I wanted to give him something for Christmas because otherwise he probably wouldn't get anything.

It was the first time in my life that I had thought about giving a gift, but I knew

how a gift could brighten my day. My grandmother suggested that I give the man a paper bag full of pecans, probably a pound or two.

That seemed so wrong to me. Gifts should be bright and shiny. But pecans were so common to me that they were like biscuits. The bag was just plain brown and didn't even have a ribbon.

Nevertheless, Grandma handed it to me and told me to go give it to the old man. I was almost embarrassed about the gift that seemed so unlike Christmas to me, but I did as Grandma said.

When I knocked on the door, the old man came, and I gave him the bag and told him I wanted him to have it for Christmas. He opened the bag and looked inside.

A big, beautiful smile spread across his face, and he told me that his Christmas wish for me was that I would have a "double header." I went back home puzzled about what a double header was until my grandfather explained that it was twice as much good as I might expect.

I learned later that the old man did not have any type of heat in that shack of his, and both his feet froze that winter. He died not long after that.

I have given a lot of gifts in my 76 years, but that one is at the top of my list of memorable gifts. I wish I (we) had done a lot more for a lonely, cold, probably hungry old man.

His wish for me has followed me all my life and kept me warm. ■

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