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The Polar Express
turns Palestine and Rusk
into Santa's villages

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NEWS

SEE PAGE 16



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December 2025



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Polar Express trains take riders on a magical journey from East Texas to the North Pole.

*By Jan Adamson
Photos by Dave Shafer*

The Dirt Church Down a Dirt Road

While a community rebuilds a historic West Texas church, it learns an ancient tradition.

*By Eileen Mattei
Photos by Erich Schlegel*

ON THE COVER
From left, Remy and Rendon Unger and Kynlee Kampen hope to catch Santa's attention—for all the right reasons.
Photo by Dave Shafer

ABOVE
Friends of the Ruidosa Church carry out their rebuilding mission along the Rio Grande.
Photo by Erich Schlegel

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Live, From Austin ...



Lorne Michaels, from left, watches a sketch rehearsal featuring Madeline Kahn, Will Ferrell and Cheri Oteri.

THE LEGACY OF LORNE MICHAELS, best known as the creator and producer of the long-running TV show *Saturday Night Live*, is the focus of an exhibit at the University of Texas' Harry Ransom Center in Austin.

On display are scripts, production notes, props and costumes from the iconic show that has changed pop culture since it went on the air in October 1975.

Live from New York: The Lorne Michaels Collection runs through March 20, 2026. Admission is free.



For Heaven's Sake

The Hail Mary pass unofficially turns 50 this month, though the Notre Dame football team referred to desperation plays as Hail Marys as early as 1922.

But Roger Staubach's 45-yard heave that fell into the hands of receiver Drew Pearson for the Dallas Cowboys' game-winning touchdown over the Minnesota Vikings in the 1975 NFL playoffs made the name of a Catholic prayer into a signature play.

As Staubach, left, explained, "They asked me, 'What were you thinking about when you threw the ball?' I said, 'When I closed my eyes, I said a Hail Mary.'"

TCP Contests and More

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Mom's Favorites

FOCUS ON TEXAS PHOTOS

Gates

RECOMMENDED READING

We think of Santa as bearing gifts. But do you know about the time he was naughty? Read *Naughty Santa* from December 2014 at TexasCoopPower.com.



ENTER ONLINE

FINISH THIS SENTENCE

Dear Santa,
I would like ...

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 responses to our October prompt: **The best food I've ever had at a fair is ...**

Frito pie served in a chip bag, as God intended.

ROBIN THOMPSON PERRY
VIA FACEBOOK

Fletcher's corny dog, State Fair of Texas—1953, 14 years old and new to Texas.

CAROL MERCER
GRAYSON-COLLIN EC
FAIRVIEW

A burger between a split Krispy Kreme doughnut for the bun at the State Fair of Texas. Weirdly good.

KATHY WHITBY
CHEROKEE COUNTY EC
FLINT

Smoked turkey leg, Shakespearean festival, July 2021, Kalispell, Montana.

TED HENDRIX
VIA FACEBOOK

Funnel cakes drizzled with chocolate sauce, topped with fresh strawberries and lots of whipped cream.

JANICE EHLERS
GVEC
SEGUIN

Gumbo at a seafood festival in south Louisiana.

WALT HUDSON
VIA FACEBOOK

Visit our website to see more responses.

Catching Up With a Friend

“We just returned after five months outside of Texas, and I’m catching up on your magazine. Interesting stories: the missile silos, goats, flour, Frisbees and grapes.”

J. BAILEY
BANDERA EC
UTOPIA



ERICH SCHLEGEL

Two Bits and a Bag of Chips

From 1956 to 1960, I worked at the G.F. Wacker variety store in Levelland [*It's in the Bag*, September 2025]. The Fritos chili pie was sold daily—with a Coke and candy bar, all for about 25 cents.

Genie Ballew
Lamb County EC
Levelland

A State for Horses

I moved to Texas thinking it was a state for horses but was astonished to learn there are few places to ride but the roads and private property [*Mounts in the Hills*, September 2025]. In Washington I helped pack families and hunters into the Cascade wilderness, where we could ride for weeks.

While I admire the Texas Equestrian Trail Riders Association for all its work, I think our state forest service should support trail riders as other states have done, for example the rails-to-trails

projects in which the state pays to convert old railroad tracks into riding trails.

Loretta Bedford
Deep East Texas EC
San Augustine

I hope the article results in increased membership in TETRA since they do such awesome and necessary work. I'm not a horse rider, but I can appreciate the importance of maintaining equestrian trails to help keep people in contact with nature.

Elena Rivera
Pedernales EC
Austin

Nature Erases

I did not know the story of the ghost town Eagle Springs [*Ebb and Flow*, September 2025]. The simple beauty of Martha Deering's final paragraph—"evening breeze shivers" and "whispering of voices"—took my breath away. Nature erases, and it reclaims.

Mark Troth
Bluebonnet EC
Chappell Hill



DAVE SHAEFER

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

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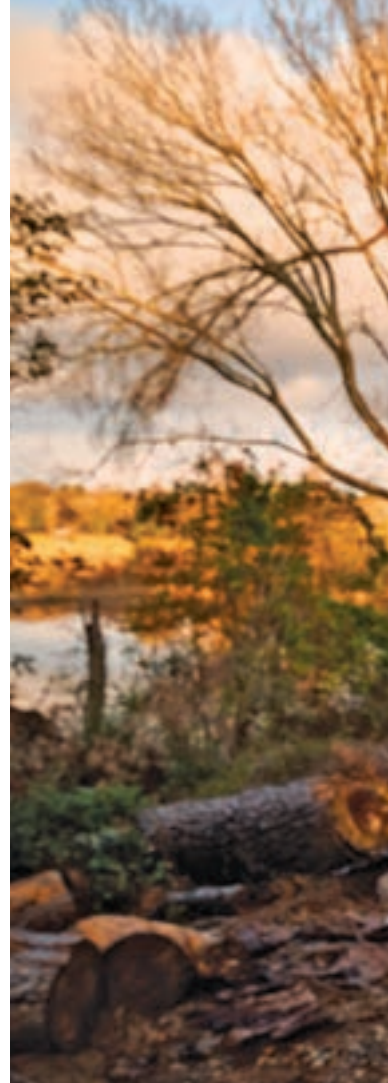
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BY JAN ADAMSON • PHOTOS BY DAVE SHAFER

The More, the Merrier

Polar Express trains take riders on a magical
journey from East Texas to the North Pole





Shhh. Listen.

It's a train whistle—low and long and lonely and romantic. It's a sound that for 150 years has permeated the Pineywoods town of Palestine.

But the whistle heard December 31, 1969, was thought to be the last. That day, Texas South-Eastern Railroad engine No. 22, a 70-ton diesel-electric locomotive, pulled into the station for the last time—the end of a century of regular freight and passenger service in Palestine.

But listen closely today along the 25-mile track between Palestine and Rusk, to the east, and you'll hear plenty of whistles and maybe even singing, laughter and bells. If you catch a glimpse into a passing train car, you'll see families in matching pajamas, dancing chefs and trays full of hot chocolate.

LEFT Santa doesn't always travel by sleigh—especially when he's in Texas.

ABOVE Remy and Rendon Unger take in the countryside on the way to the North Pole.

Ever since the Palestine-Rusk line reopened as a tourist railway called the Texas State Railroad on June 25, 1976, it has been building a corps of believers. Tens of thousands of them turn out each holiday season for the service's wildly popular Polar Express trips based on the film released in 2004 and the 1985 book by Chris Van Allsburg.

"With the popularity of the film, the Polar Express Train Ride has just grown and grown," says Amy Parady, president of the Texas State Railroad, which launched round-trip Christmas-themed excursions 20 years ago. "Many have made a tradition out of the event, so they come every year."

Like the Corley family from Magnolia.

"We meet new people and sit with different families," Kevin Corley says. "It's very interactive. We've never had a bad experience."

Long before it whisked families to the "North Pole," Palestine began its golden age after the Civil War when the International Railroad and the Houston and Great Northern Railroad opened a route between Hearne and Palestine. The transport of goods and passengers resulted in great wealth, allowing merchants and railroad executives to build massive mansions, especially in Palestine.

In 1881, when a prison was built in Rusk, the line was extended to the east. Shortly thereafter, the Palestine car shop was built to modify and repair freight cars. In 1971, not long after shipments of logging and mining equipment and passengers ceased, local banker Jack R. Stone, a member of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission, and Rusk Mayor Emmett H. Whitehead led a campaign to reopen the railroad as a tourist attraction, and the Texas State Railroad was born.

A \$3 million appropriation went into refurbishing the rails, and Rusk and Palestine built support facilities such as campsites before the two depots were built. The line has been operated by private companies since 2007.

About half of the passenger cars are commuter coaches built in 1923 for other railroads; they're pulled by an assortment of vintage diesel- and steam-powered locomotives.

The railroad hosts a variety of excursions throughout the year. There's Rockin' the Rails, in which passengers attend a concert; the Rusk Turntable Run, which makes use of the 130-year-old, compressed air-powered railcar turntable in Maydelle; and Mother's Day and Father's Day trips. There are autumn- and Halloween-themed trains, dinner excursions, and trips that celebrate local beer and wine.



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP Kynlee Kampen with her silver sleigh bell. The Polar Express departs from the Palestine depot.

RIGHT Engine 30, at 100 years old, comes to life in the early morning before a day's excursions.

But far and away the most popular themed ride is the Polar Express.

"We always have multiple [marriage] proposals and engagements during every season, which is always special," Parady says. "We have had grown individuals who have never seen Santa before, and just to watch the grandparents and parents see the joy in the eyes of the children creates magic every year."

The cars are festooned inside with greenery and twinkling lights, and outside, along the route to the North Pole—did you know it's in Rusk?—Christmas decorations whiz past the windows.

Passengers are encouraged to bring a copy of the book or buy one at the depot, and once aboard, they're served hot chocolate and cookies by dancing chefs who act out various scenes. On arrival at the North Pole, passengers are greeted by Santa and his elves, who bestow the first gift of Christmas: a silver sleigh bell that can only be heard by believers. The chefs lead passengers in Christmas carols on the return trip.

But the experience changes each year. Employees gather to discuss and workshop new ideas and improvements.

An adults-only railcar has club chairs. There's an open-air car with bench seats, an observation dome car, and another with tables and sofas. There's even a car that can be booked for private parties. The cars have the feel of a long-ago time because of the original fixtures retained throughout.

It all makes for a special experience.

"We have a family that started coming the first year we did the Polar Express train ride, and their son was 4 years old," Parady says. "They have never missed a year, and now their son is 22 years old."

Logistically, Polar Express season requires careful orchestration. Within a six-week time frame in November and December, there are typically 105–110 round trips with as many as five trains running a day for 60,000–70,000 passengers. Reservations open in July at texasstaterailroad.net.

"We hire typically 150 additional team members just for our Polar season," Parady says. "It is quite a feat pulling this event off with the ridership we have in such a short time frame."

Performers on the Polar Express have a reputation for the joy and professionalism they bring to the job, making it no wonder that passengers return year after year—and get into the spirit.

"About 95% of our visitors always arrive in matching pajamas," Parady says. "We have had people plan their family



On the Rails

The Texas State Railroad is a movie star, having been featured in more than 35 films, TV series, documentaries and commercials. Most recently, the train and the Palestine depot were part of the first episode of *1883*, the prequel to the *Yellowstone* series. The railroad also starred in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*; *American Outlaws*; *The Great Debaters*; and *The Gambler Returns: The Luck of the Draw*.

reunions around our event. We have multigenerational attendees, meaning great-grandparents, grandparents, parents and children all attending together. Families have become extremely creative with their attire, and many customize their pajamas or even make their own."

The Corley family has made the Polar Express a tradition. Kelly and Kevin Corley and their children, Piper and Carter, have been attending since 2015. "We read the book and watch the film," Kelly says. "It's such a joy to watch the kids' faces light up when they see the story play out in real life."

The Corleys prefer to take a late afternoon excursion so they can experience the sounds and smoke from the train during the daylight, and then, in the evening, they get to see the glowing Christmas lights and decorations on the return trip.

The family has dedicated a whole shelf in their home to train memorabilia. It's filled with cocoa mugs, golden train tickets and more than 20 silver bells.

"We pick out new pajamas every year," Carter says. "Me and Dad match, and Piper and Mom match."

That's an East Texas treasure worth believing in. Shhh. Just listen. ■



The Dirt Church Down a Dirt Road

BY EILEEN MATTEI • PHOTOS BY ERICH SCHLEGEL

While a community rebuilds a historic West Texas church, it learns an ancient tradition

IT'S A BREEZY, overcast 80-degree day in Marfa as a dozen or so volunteers rotate jobs in a brick-making assembly line.

Billy Joe Moore, 12, has the hardest job. He hoists small buckets of clay, sand, straw and water into a gas-powered mixer, like those used for concrete. His mother, Erin Moore, says the homeschooling, beekeeping family from Fort Davis is here to learn about adobe-making by doing it, getting into it.

It's also for a great cause: These bricks will be used in the restoration of a historic church in a remote outpost, turning a former Catholic house of worship into a community center.

"It's so neat to hear about the history of the church and the culture of the region," Erin says. "Who wouldn't want to get involved in this?"

In the ghost town of Ruidosa, 90 minutes southwest of Marfa in far West Texas, the adobe El Corazón Sagrado de la Iglesia de Jesús (Sacred Heart of Jesus Church) is awaiting resurrection.

Completed in 1916, the church fell victim to blowing sand and rain that wore away the adobe before and after the droughts of the 1950s dried up the Rio Grande and the small agricultural community. By 1960, the church and town had been abandoned.

Native salts eroded the foundation. Huia-che branches battered the northeast tower. Attempts to restore the church, which claims the largest traditional adobe arches in Texas, faltered until the nonprofit Friends of the Ruidosa Church acquired the title to the Texas Historic Landmark from Presidio County after it was given the deed from the Diocese of El Paso in 2019.

With ownership, the Friends began work to preserve as much of the original adobe as

possible, to restore structural strength and to repair the damage done over 110 years. That meant making sun-dried adobe blocks—thousands of them, one at a time, starting in 2021.

For more than 10,000 years, adobe has been used as a building material, favored because its high thermal mass absorbs heat during the day and releases it at night.

"In recent generations, adobe-making skills have been lost, since the knowledge is rarely written down," says Joey Benton. His Marfa design and restoration company, Silla, has completed restorations of adobe buildings at Fort Davis National Historic Site and Big Bend National Park.

During the Friends' May Adobe Day, kneeling men and women scoop Billy Joe's fresh adobe mix from tilted wheelbarrows with their bare hands and tamp it into wood forms.

OPPOSITE El Corazón Sagrado de la Iglesia de Jesús in the ghost town of Ruidosa on a September night.

BELOW From left, Terry Bishop, Martin Rivas and Claudio Nuñez load new adobe bricks onto pallets during a Friends of the Ruidosa Church workday.





"You see big smiles on their faces. That's their inner child connecting with making mud pies, getting on their hands and knees, and shaping adobe by hand."



Others lift the forms off the freshly minted 10-by-18-by-3.5-inch blocks. They rinse off the forms in a large water trough and place them on black tarps, ready for the next batch.

The adobe blocks dry for a month in the sun, turned periodically like sunbathers so all

surfaces get exposed. Then the bricks are stacked and set aside. They'll eventually be used to rebuild the bell tower over the church's entrance.

"It's all about community, participating in a traditional activity," says Mike Green, a retired architect and chair of the Friends of the Ruidosa Church. "You see big smiles on their faces. That's their inner child connecting with making mud pies, getting on their hands and knees, and shaping adobe by hand."

"People long for authenticity in their lives and something visible to show at the end of a day of hard work. Adobe-making gives us a deep feeling of achievement."

Hilary Raney, a Marfa resident, mud enthusiast and gardener, spent her third Adobe Day, a mostly monthly event, providing a helping hand and moral support.

"I see new faces every time," she says. "Last month a man in his 80s, whose parents got married in the church, came to Adobe Day. He was so happy to see what we were doing."

Adobe-makers come from El Paso, Houston, New Mexico and, like Steve McKeon, from Oregon. After McKeon opened a restaurant and bar in Marfa, he decided to help make bricks. "Working bubbles out of a block by hand gives you a sense of accomplishment," he says.

The Friends pays the bills for the church, power for which is provided by Rio Grande Electric Cooperative. Co-op power keeps the mortar mixer turning and the diamond saw spinning as it cuts adobe into segments.

Funds from the nonprofit's Community Day fundraiser every November in Ruidosa help pay to transport blocks to the remote site and to bring in masonry specialists to install them. Grants from the Texas Historical Commission and the Summerlee Foundation cover the costs of a historic structure report that guides its preservation.

Conversations with earthen-structure professionals, architects and archaeologists set the stage for the site work.



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP A Friends of the Ruidosa Church work crew. Bishop carries a fresh brick.

ABOVE, FROM LEFT “The earthen-structure community has no secrets or hidden techniques,” says retired architect Mike Green, who is leading the restoration. A view from the top of a hill looking south toward Mexico over the old church.

In 2023, Benton and his skilled crew began critical structural repairs to the church. They stabilized the foundation and installed scaffolding and support frames. They straightened a wall and saved the northeast tower from collapse by repairing adobe blocks and inserting new volunteer-made bricks as needed. In some areas the exterior was so worn that light was visible through the mortar joints.

Green praises Benton and archaeologist David Keller for their contributions to the preservation and restoration efforts.

“The earthen-structure community has no secrets or hidden techniques,” Green says. “We’re on the same journey: trying to restore and save adobes of the Southwest.”

Free for the asking, the adobe recipe mixes clay, sand, silt, chopped straw and water in proportions determined by the soil used. Clay comprises 15%–30% of the mix, acting as the binder, similar to cement’s role in concrete. The majority of the mix is sand and aggregate. Straw allows the adobe to dry more evenly by letting water get out of the block. The mortar



has the same mix as the block but with finer aggregate.

This classic frontier Catholic church, with its substantial bell towers, is a time capsule for the community, says Keller, who is a Friends co-founder and preservation specialist. The church is unique in that the exterior was never plastered—rare for adobe structures, even in arid climates.

Nevertheless, while the church is being restored with historical accuracy, “the integrity of the structure and preservation guidance trumps absolute historical fidelity,” Keller says. So the exterior will be plastered to keep it from deteriorating like it did over the last 100 years. The interior, originally plastered and whitewashed, will be restored to that state.

Green hopes the bell will be restored to the entrance tower next year. In three years, he foresees the restored church telling the rich history of the area as a community center for residents of Brewster and Presidio counties as well as Ojinaga, across the Rio Grande.

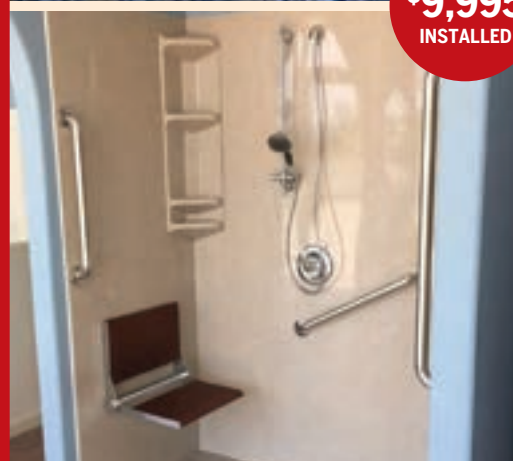
Hands molding clay into architecture have built their own adobe-loving community. At the same time, they have helped restore the heart of a last-century community down a dirt road along the river.

As Green drove around the area over the years, the building often caught his eye. Eventually, his passion for architecture and history prompted him to try to save the old church. Now, the restoration work goes beyond saving the physical structure.

“The church at Ruidosa is the most peaceful place I know,” Green says. “It is so remote, so quiet, so serene. It feels like good spirits are in the air.” ■



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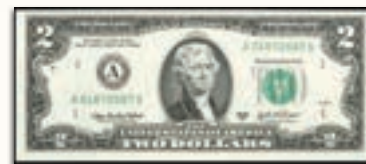
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How to Win at Love

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MESSAGE
FROM
GENERAL
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JEFF LANE

The Season of Giving

WITH THE HOLIDAY SEASON upon us and cheer in the air, we're reminded that this truly is the season of giving. It's a time for gratitude, generosity and looking out for one another—and at Trinity Valley Electric Cooperative, that's something we take to heart year-round.

You've probably heard us talk about our concern for community. It's not just a nice phrase—it's one of the core principles that makes electric cooperatives like ours different from other utilities. We're not just here to keep the lights on (though of course, we're always working hard to do that). We're here to make life better for the people we serve—our members, neighbors and friends.

Over the years, we've faced challenges together, and every time, our co-op family has stepped up. We've come together to support those in need, to keep our community strong and to build something better for the future. That spirit of generosity is especially evident during the holidays.

Take our Operation Round Up program, for example. Thanks to the generosity of members who round up their electric bills, we're able to provide real help to local families that need it. Every little bit adds up—and it makes a big difference.

We're also proud to support local students through the Government-in-Action Youth Tour, and East Texas Rural Electric Youth Seminar, where we send some of our community's brightest young

people to learn leadership skills, build networks and dream about their futures. That's giving in a meaningful way—by investing in tomorrow's leaders.

And because we care deeply about safety, we also spend time visiting schools throughout the communities we serve, teaching folks of all ages how to stay safe around electricity. We believe knowledge is a gift, too—and we love sharing it.

You'll also find our team out in the community beyond work—coaching youth sports, volunteering at local events, serving on nonprofit boards and partnering with other local organizations to keep our local economy strong. Because when you're part of a co-op, giving back isn't a requirement—it's just what you do.

While the holiday season is a festive time, we understand these can be tough times for many. If you need advice on saving energy to reduce your energy bill, want to explore payment plan options, or you simply have questions—please don't hesitate to reach out. We're here to help.

At TVEC, we believe Concern for Community is more than a value—it's the heart of who we are. And during this season of giving, we're especially grateful to be part of such a caring, generous community.

From all of us at TVEC, we wish you and your loved ones a joyful, safe and bright holiday season. ■



VLADIMIR VLADIMIROV | ISTOCK.COM

TVEC To Return \$4.3 Million in Capital Credits

TRINITY VALLEY ELECTRIC CO-OP is a 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 uses that capital for 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 2025, the TVEC Board of Directors has approved the return of just over \$4.3 million in capital credits.

This amount will include all remaining credits from 1996. Members who joined after 1996 will not see a refund this year.

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.

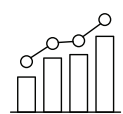
While credit amounts will vary greatly depending on how long you have been a member and how much electricity you have purchased, the return of capital credits is an important part of the financial stewardship of the co-op.

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

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 1996 will be retired.



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.

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

Board of Directors

Howard Tillison, Chairman, District 6

Carolyn Minor, Vice Chairwoman, District 1

Derrick Hoelscher, District 4

Jeff Priest, District 2

Paul Weatherford, District 3

Edward Reeve, Secretary, District 5

Jack Endres, District 7

General Manager/CEO

Jeff Lane

24/7

Outage Hotline Numbers

For information and to report outages, please call us.

TOLL-FREE

1-800-967-9324

AUTOMATED ASSISTANCE

1-800-720-3584

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

tvec.net

A Touchstone Energy



TVEC Assistant General Manager/COO Tony Watson gave updates on the co-op's operations and outreach efforts, and announced his upcoming retirement after more than 41 years of service.

Annual Meeting Breaks Attendance Record

THE 2025 TRINITY VALLEY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE Annual Membership Meeting brought a record crowd to the Canton Civic Center October 16, with 972 co-op members and guests in attendance.

A light dinner for attendees was accompanied by Willie Nelson impersonator Terry Edwards, giving everyone a dose of classic country while they ate.

Getting down to business, TVEC board members and company leaders gave updates on the business of providing power.

Assistant General Manager and Chief Operations Officer Tony Watson noted that growth remains strong in the area, including both residential and commercial development projects.

“In 2024 we had 27 residential developments totaling 2,729 lots, and in 2025 so far we’ve added eleven more with 944 lots,” Watson said. “We have also supported several large commercial projects including a grocery store, battery manufacturer, schools and distribution warehouses.”

Watson praised the co-op’s commitment to personal connection in serving members with our member services and communications efforts, noting a low 3.4% call abandonment rate while serving more than 130,000 calls in 2025.

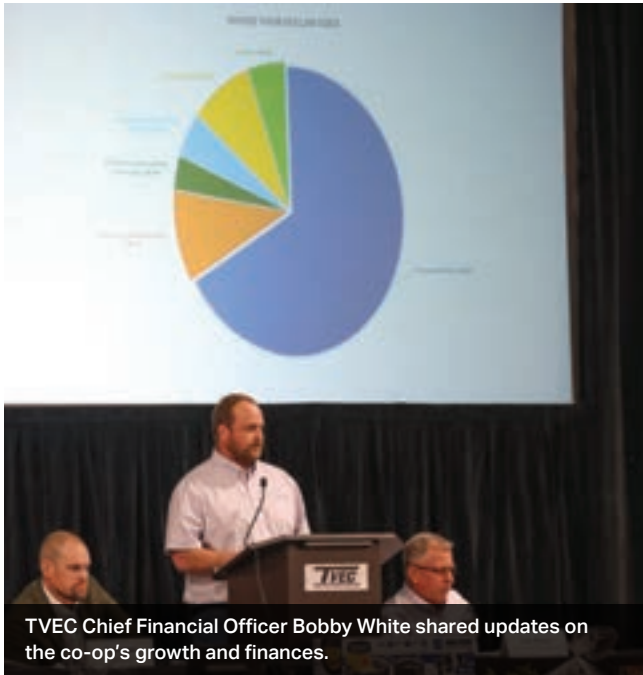
“We also continue to actively engage with local, state and national representatives to stay informed on legislative and regulatory development affecting electric cooperatives especially those impacting our local operations,” Watson said.



The annual meeting goodie bag is always popular with attendees.



Andy Lopez, TVEC meter technician, doubles as a driver welcoming members arriving at the Canton Civic Center.



TVEC Chief Financial Officer Bobby White shared updates on the co-op's growth and finances.



mitigating factors. The Cliff's Notes version of that is, demand for electricity is forecast to outpace supply."

Given those trends, Lane touted generation and transmission provider Rayburn Electric Cooperative, which has several generation projects underway, including winning funding for projects from the Texas Energy Fund established and passed by Texas voters in 2023.

"We are also continuing to invest in the latest technologies to make us more efficient and improve reliability," he said. "We are using artificial intelligence to optimize and execute our vegetation management plan," along with addition technology for self-healing grids and automated systems for routing power around damaged areas to minimize outages.

"Overall I'm excited about where we are, and look forward to continue improving the value of the service the co-op provides," Lane said.

Chief Financial Officer Bobby White updated members about the co-op's financial condition, followed by a report by a representative from the co-op's auditor. More information can be found in the annual meeting program on tvec.net.

The TVEC board of directors election results were announced, with three incumbents — Jeff Priest, Howard

Tillison and Jack Endres — running unopposed and winning their respective seats. More than 3,400 TVEC members, or about 5%, voted in the election, surpassing the 3% quorum requirement for the meeting.

Then it was time for door prizes, with more than 100 separate prize items to be won, wrapping up a night for the TVEC record books.

We look forward to seeing you at next year's meeting, tentatively scheduled for October 8, 2026. ■

"We are continuously working to improve your cooperative, and remain committed to transparency, safety, reliability and service excellence."

Jeff Lane, TVEC general manager and chief executive officer, also talked about government involvement in the electric utility space. In particular, he discussed legislative efforts affecting generation and transmission projects and the rapidly growing electrical demands in the state from uses like crypto mining, data centers and large industrial loads.

"In the upcoming winter, ERCOT expects enough generation to meet customer demand," Lane said. "However, the most recent CDR (capacity, demand and reserves) report indicates a trend of eroding resource adequacy in the absence of major



Greg Treadwell, TVEC senior contractor coordinator, shares a laugh with a member prior to the annual meeting October 16.



MARYVIOLET | ISTOCK.COM



TVEC MANAGER
OF DER & GRID
INTEGRATION

CHRIS WALKER

Your Home's 5 Biggest Energy Hogs

A HOME'S HUNGRIEST energy consumers are the appliances left running all day or for days at a time. Here's a look at the top five electricity eaters and some tips on how to stave off their appetites:

The No. 1 home energy hog is the heating system. Ways to control your heater's energy consumption include using a programmable

thermostat, upgrading to a more efficient unit, sealing ducts and replacing filters.

Next up is the cooling system. You can improve the efficiency of your air conditioner by having a technician service it every year, using a programmable thermostat and ensuring adequate attic insulation.

Third is the water heater, which can account for up to 12% of a home's energy bill. Actual energy demand for water heating depends on the model of water heater you have. Yet no matter the type of unit, these habits can help you conserve: taking quick showers, washing clothes in cold water, setting the water temperature to 120 degrees, insulating the storage tank and regularly draining sediment.

Next on the list are dehumidifiers, which typically run constantly to discourage mold growth and preserve stored items. To make sure your dehumidifier isn't wasting energy, close off the room where the machine is operating, set it at a reasonable level and consider upgrading to an energy-star certified model.

Fifth on the list—but still major power users—are refrigerators and freezers. Fridges generally are the top-consuming kitchen appliance, especially those that are a few decades old. Regardless of model, you can save energy by setting the temperature to 36–38 degrees for the refrigerator and zero to 5 degrees for the freezer, discarding freezer ice thicker than a quarter inch, checking seals, and cooling hot food before putting it inside. ■

Two-Prong Outlets Are Missing a Grounding Wire

MOST NEW APPLIANCES and electronics come with three-prong plugs. If your older house is equipped only with two-prong receptacles, you're probably using adapters with three-prong holes in two-prong plugs.

This will let you fit your plug into the outlet, but it's not necessarily safe. A better solution is to replace your two-prong receptacles with three-prong models.

The third hole in a three-prong receptacle provides a safety barrier, offering a path for excess electricity to go away from the device and user. These receptacles are standard in modern homes.

When you buy the replacement receptacles, choose models that include a ground-fault circuit interrupter. They can greatly reduce the chance of an electric shock.

It's a good idea to use GFCI receptacles wherever you replace two-prong outlets in your house, but it's especially important in the kitchen, bathroom, laundry room and garage, where you use water and electricity in the same room.

Replacing receptacles is a fairly straightforward task for a knowledgeable homeowner with trustworthy instructions (and power turned off at the breaker), but for utmost safety and proper installation, consider hiring a licensed electrician. ■



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Home Lighting 101

LIGHTING IS SOMETHING most of us don't think much about—until it's wrong. Maybe the living room feels too dim for reading, or the kitchen lights cast an odd yellow glow. We often grab whatever bulb is convenient without considering how it will perform in the space. But with a little planning, you can make your home brighter, cozier and more energy-efficient.

Watts vs. Lumens

When you're shopping for light bulbs, it's easy to focus on watts, but watts only measure how much energy a bulb uses. When it comes to brightness, what really matters is the lumen count. Lumens measure the actual light output.

For example, an 800-lumen bulb gives off about the same amount of light as an old-fashioned 60-watt incandescent bulb. (You've likely replaced all incandescent bulbs with long-lasting, energy-efficient LEDs, but if not—it's time to make the switch!)

A helpful rule of thumb: higher lumens mean brighter light, while lower watts mean less energy consumed. Remember to check wattage ratings for fixtures and only install bulbs that meet the fixture's wattage safety requirements.

Color Temperature and Consistency

Light bulbs also vary in color temperature, which ranges from warm yellow to cool white or even bluish tones.

This detail often gets overlooked, so if mismatched tones drive you crazy, consider buying and installing bulbs of the same brand and wattage in a room at the same time. That way you won't be stuck hunting for a perfect match later.

Dimmers and Switches

Installing dimmers instead of standard on/off switches gives you more control over brightness and helps save energy. Not all bulbs are dimmable, so double-check labels.

While you're thinking about switches, consider whether you have enough of them—and in the right places. A light you can only turn off from one end of a hallway quickly becomes annoying. Consider hiring a licensed electrician to install additional switches.

Form Meets Function

Bulbs are only part of the equation—fixtures matter too. Each type serves a purpose. Ambient lighting, such as sconces or glass-covered ceiling fixtures, provides general illumination. Task lighting, such as pendants, desk lamps or track lighting, focuses light where you need it most.

When choosing a fixture, think beyond looks. Ask yourself: Does this light provide the right amount of brightness for the space? A beautiful chandelier might look perfect over the dining table but leave the room too dim. Alternatively, an oversized fixture could flood the room with more light than you need, wasting energy and money.

Smart Lighting

Smart lighting adds another layer of control for illuminating your home. But the real magic is convenience. With smart bulbs, you can adjust brightness, set schedules or even change colors—all from your phone or a voice assistant like Alexa. Want the lights to dim automatically for movie night or turn on before you get home? Smart bulbs make it easy.

Smart lighting also lets you personalize your space. You can go classic with warm white tones or experiment with colors to set the mood—anything from a softer glow for winding down to vibrant hues for a party. Smart bulbs still rely on power from your wall switch, which needs to stay in the “on” position for remote controls to work. If you prefer using a physical switch, consider pairing smart bulbs with a smart light switch.

Good lighting doesn't just make your home look better—it makes it feel better too. Whether you stick to traditional bulbs and fixtures or explore the flexibility of smart lighting, thoughtful choices today will brighten your home for years to come. ■



Colunga's Meat Market Offers More Than Convenience

WITH LESS THAN 700 FEET separating the Trinity Valley Electric Cooperative parking lot and the drive-thru window at Colunga's Meat Market, it is no wonder that many TVEC employees are on a first-name basis with the eatery's staff. 67506001

Colunga's is a longstanding community favorite in Kaufman, both for the quick and easy breakfast, lunch and dinner choices and the selection of meats, vegetables and more inside the store.

A few tables are available for dining in, with the bustle of the market as ambiance.

"Besides the great convenience, I think the food is really good," said Victor Garcia, journeyman lineman. "I go for the ham breakfast burritos, and for lunch the tortas and nachos are worth the stop."

Fresh tortillas and cane sugar sodas round out any Mexican meal, but call ahead for fastest service at the drive thru.

Colunga's Meat Market is located at 1619 E. Mulberry Street in Kaufman.

Find them online at facebook.com/colungameatmarket. ■



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 31 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



How much of U.S. power generation is nuclear energy?

A. 50%

B. 19%

C. 6-7%

Win **\$100!**

SOURCE: EIA.GOV

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** issue.

November Energy Quiz: AI Search

THE ARTIFICIAL intelligence revolution is changing the way we use the internet, and it is changing how much power is required to maintain the services we've come to rely on.

Each AI-powered internet search currently uses about 10 times the energy of a standard search engine inquiry.

While in each case a single search is still very low in energy requirements, the overall computing power for AI is increasing rapidly as the technology grows and evolves.

Congratulations to our October Energy Quiz winner, Thomas Shaffer, of LaRue.

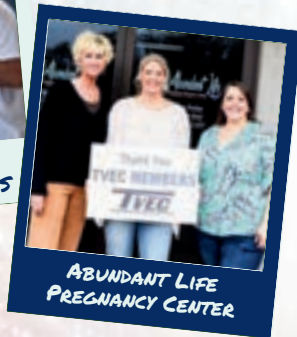
Look for the winner of this month's contest in the February issue of **Texas Co-op Power**. ■



OCTOBER 2025 Operation Round Up Awards



Thank you for turning your coins into change!



Grants

Abundant Life Pregnancy Center	\$4,000
Alzheimer's Coalition of Henderson Co.	\$5,000
Bee Happy Day Habilitation	\$5,000
Celebrate Forever Families	\$3,000
Crandall Education Foundation	\$3,000
Jake E's Riding Round Up	\$3,000
Sharon's Place	\$5,000
Texas Star Quilt Guild	\$4,000

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B.

A.

"I never expected it to be so beautiful that it takes your breath away."

— Kaya C., on Stauer Opals

In a quaint village, nestled between rolling hills, lived a young woman with a deep appreciation for gemstones. Her grandmother gifted her a delicate cross pendant adorned with opals. The opals shimmered with a mesmerizing play of colors, reflecting hues of blues, greens, and fiery oranges. Her grandmother shared the legend of the opals, believed to bring hope, purity, and luck to those who wore them.

Using this story as inspiration, Stauer brings you the **Opal Spirit Cross Pendant**. With over 2 total carats of Kyocera lab-created opals set in .925 sterling silver encased in yellow gold, this pendant is a radiant celebration of beauty and craftsmanship. Each opal captivates with a kaleidoscopic dance of fiery oranges blending into oceanic blues, streaked with flashes of vibrant green that seem to come alive with every movement. The shimmering opals are skillfully arranged to create an enchanting, otherworldly glow, embodying the spirit of hope and harmony.

This breathtaking combination of color and craftsmanship is available as a limited availability of only 930 pieces, making it a rare and treasured addition

to your jewelry collection. Plus, when you order today, you'll receive the **Opal Spirit Cross Pendant** at an impossible price of just \$59 normally ~~\$149~~!

Don't miss your chance to own this exclusive tribute to timeless elegance and meaningful symbolism.

Jewelry Specifications:

- Pendant: 2 1/2 ctw. Kyocera lab opals and DiamondAura® accents. Yellow gold-finished .925 sterling silver setting
- Chain: 18" gold-clad .925 sterling silver chain

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- | | | | |
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| B. 18" Gold Clad Chain | \$59* | + S&P | |
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Turn of Fortune

A family's legacy far exceeds its pilfered buried treasure

BY W.F. STRONG • ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT NEUBECKER

A LONG TIME AGO, a woman tried to sell me her home, hinting at the prospect of gold treasure long hidden and lost within.

She told me her husband had died suddenly, and his last words to her were: "There's gold coins behind the wall in the bedroom closet." She was willing to split anything found.

I didn't bite on that strange sales pitch, but it reminded me of another similar case, even more interesting, up the country a ways.

In the little Texas town of San Diego, about an hour west of Corpus Christi, there once lived a Dr. Jose García. In 1933, he was the primary doctor in town and preferred to store his wealth in the form of gold coins. He hid it in a tight crawl

space beneath a trapdoor in his kitchen.

No one knew of this treasure except García and his daughter, Gloria. He told her the coins were hers to use, for taking care of her disabled brother later in life.

When the good doctor eventually died, Gloria asked her husband, Hector López, to find the coins. After Hector's repeated determined explorations into the tight crawl space—even with a metal detector—he couldn't find the coins.

Since García had suffered from dementia late in life, Gloria and Hector began thinking the gold coins had been the invention of an imaginative mind or a mind that forgot he had moved the coins.

Years later, Gloria and Hector sold the house. Then, more than 20 years after

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



that, a plumbing leak sprang up underneath it.

A plumber went through that old trapdoor the doctor had created almost 100 years before. While laying in a new line through the muddy soil, the plumber saw a flicker of something shiny.

He brushed away the mud and discovered a very old gold coin. He dug deeper and found a gold mine: some 500 coins in various sizes and denominations.

He was elated, of course, but he didn't alert the homeowner. He calmly asked his assistant to get him an empty coffee can and absconded with the coins—worth about \$500,000 at the time.

But the plumber didn't handle it well. He went around paying for things with gold coins within the little community. The gossip erupted immediately, and Hector and Gloria soon got word.

They sued the plumber, saying the coins belonged to Gloria.

The new homeowner, too, sued for ownership, but after a long legal battle, a jury in Duval County decided that the coins belonged to Gloria.

Next, something even more unexpected and beautiful happened: Gloria and Hector gave the coins to the Museum of South Texas History in Edinburg.

As it turned out, the coins were a small part of Gloria and Hector López's wealth. They both graduated from the University of Texas in the 1940s, and then Hector earned a law degree and amassed a \$275 million portfolio while working in the oil and gas industry.

Since they had no children, the Lópezes left their fortune to the children of Texas in the form of the Hector and Gloria López Foundation, which provides college tuition—especially for Hispanic and first-generation students, known proudly as López Scholars. ■

Holiday Breakfast

Be warned: Santa might stick around for these dishes

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

Making chilaquiles is a treasured tradition for my family. Chilaquiles are fried corn tortillas simmered in a creamy salsa verde and topped with eggs. Our girls love them; I love prepping everything in advance; and my husband loves a heaping plate of hearty goodness after the piles of wrapping paper.

Chilaquiles Verdes

¼ cup vegetable oil, or more as needed
12 corn tortillas, cut into 4 wedges each
2 teaspoons salt, or more to taste
4 cups salsa verde, plus more for serving
1 cup heavy cream
4 eggs
Diced red onion
Cilantro
Queso fresco, crumbled

1. In a large skillet over medium-high heat, heat oil until shimmering. Add about a quarter of the tortilla wedges and cook, flipping once, until lightly brown and crisp.
2. Drain the freshly fried tortilla chips on a paper towel-lined baking sheet. Sprinkle lightly with salt. Repeat this process until all tortillas are fried, adding more oil as needed.
3. Drain oil and wipe skillet. Heat 4 cups salsa verde and heavy cream in the skillet over medium-high heat until warmed through. Add chips and gently stir to coat chips in sauce. Reduce heat, cover and simmer 2 minutes.
4. In another skillet, scramble or fry eggs to your preference.
5. Divide the chilaquiles between four plates and top with eggs. Sprinkle with red onion, cilantro and queso fresco. Serve with additional salsa verde.

SERVES 4

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



Artichoke-Cheese Frittata

WILLIAM P. LOYD
UNITED COOPERATIVE SERVICES

I feel strongly that Christmas mornings should be laid-back, meaning coffee, family time, gifts and a delicious breakfast that was prepped in advance.

- 1 tablespoon (1/8 stick) butter, melted
- 6 green onions, diced
- 1/2 cup diced green bell pepper
- 5 eggs
- 1 1/2 cups milk
- 1/2 teaspoon dry mustard
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon onion powder
- 3–4 slices bread, cubed, divided use
- 3/4 cup shredded cheese (cheddar, Monterey Jack, pepper jack or a combination works well), divided use
- 1 jar marinated artichoke hearts (12 ounces), drained and chopped into bite-size pieces, divided use
- 1 jar diced pimientos (4 ounces), drained, divided use

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a 1 1/2-quart baking dish.
2. In a skillet over medium-high heat, cook butter, green onions and bell pepper, stirring occasionally until tender, about 2–3 minutes.
3. In a bowl, whisk together eggs, milk, mustard, salt and onion powder.
4. In the prepared baking dish, layer half the bread, half the onion-pepper mixture, half the cheese, half the artichokes and half the pimientos. Pour half the egg mixture over first layer.
5. Repeat layering with the remaining bread, onion-pepper mixture, cheese,



\$500 WINNER

Cranberry Orange White Chocolate Baked Oatmeal

MELISSA TURLEY
BANDERA EC



Looking for a cozy Christmas breakfast to feed a crowd? This is it. Imagine a holiday buffet table filled with baked oatmeal, bacon, sausage, scrambled eggs and fruit. And invite me because I would drive for hours for this baked oatmeal. The oatmeal can be prepped the day before, refrigerated overnight and baked the next morning.

- 6 cups old-fashioned oats
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 cup dried cranberries
- 1 cup white chocolate chips
- 2 cups orange juice
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 4 eggs

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a 9-by-13-inch baking pan.
2. In a large bowl or stand mixer, combine oats, sugar, baking powder, salt, dried cranberries and white chocolate chips.
3. In another bowl, whisk together orange juice, oil, vanilla and eggs.
4. While mixing on low, slowly add wet ingredients to dry ingredients until thoroughly mixed.
5. Pour into prepared pan and bake 35–40 minutes or until golden brown.

SERVES 10–12

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

MOM'S FAVORITES DUE DEC 10

Everything is better when it's made with love by Mom. What recipe do you remember your mother by? Send us your favorite for a shot at \$500 and a spot in our May issue.

UPCOMING: THE ART OF THE SANDWICH DUE JAN 10



CONTINUED ON PAGE 28 >

RECIPES CONTINUED

artichokes, pimientos and egg mixture.

6. If making in advance, cover and refrigerate. Allow to come to room temperature before baking.

7. Bake 30–40 minutes, until eggs are set and frittata is firm.

SERVES 6

French Toast Bake
With Caramel Banana
Cream Topping

MARIAN EVONIUK
PEDERNALES EC

Brioche coated in a creamy eggy mixture, baked until golden and topped with whipped cream, bananas and caramel is the only gift I want this holiday season.

FRENCH TOAST BAKE

6 eggs

1 cup heavy cream

2 tablespoons maple syrup



1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

½ teaspoon salt

1 loaf brioche, sliced and cubed

TOPPING

2 cups heavy cream

½ cup powdered sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

4 large bananas, sliced

Caramel sauce

1. **FRENCH TOAST BAKE** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Coat an 8-by-8-inch baking dish with butter or cooking spray and set aside.

2. In a large bowl, whisk together eggs, 1 cup heavy cream, maple syrup, 1 teaspoon vanilla, lemon juice, cinnamon and salt. Add brioche and stir to coat. Pour into prepared baking dish.

3. Place baking dish on center rack of oven and bake 30–40 minutes, until mixture is set, puffy and light golden brown on top. Tent loosely with foil if top is browning too quickly. Remove from oven and allow to cool slightly.

4. **TOPPING** In a large bowl, combine 2 cups heavy cream, powdered sugar and 1 teaspoon vanilla. Beat at medium-high until soft peaks form. Set aside.

5. To serve, cut the bake into squares and top with a large dollop of whipped cream, banana slices and a drizzle of caramel sauce.

SERVES 4–6

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Policy Form #SRTC/SRTC R13 or R17, or #SRTC90MA in MA

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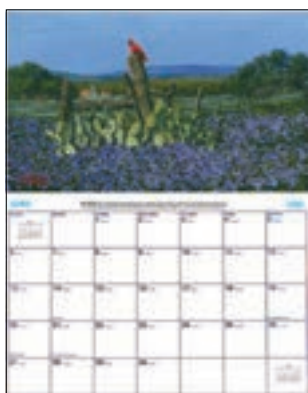
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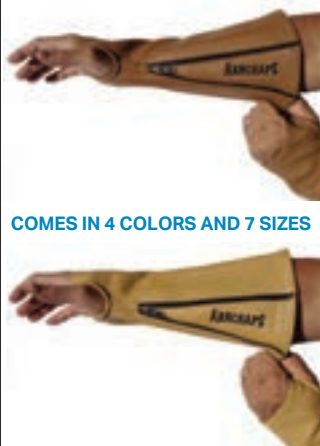
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Slabs of Strudel

The oldest bakery in Texas came from humble beginnings

BY CHET GARNER

I **DIDN'T KNOW** what to expect from the oldest bakery in Texas, but it certainly wasn't a giant slab of cherry strudel bigger than a roof shingle. And yet that's exactly what I found at Naegelin's Bakery in New Braunfels—along with a line out the door, a heavenly yeasty smell that could lead a blindfolded squirrel to town and a friendly cashier who was happy to explain the unfamiliar pastries laid out before me.

Founded in 1868, the bakery was started by a man named Edouard Naegelin who emigrated from eastern France, arriving in town with a sack of flour and less than a dollar in his pocket.

For more than 155 years, it has kept the town outside San Antonio well-supplied with loaves of fresh bread, cakes and an assortment of European cookies I could barely pronounce. Pfeffernüse, anyone? But the undeniable star of the show was their homemade strudel, coming in apple, cherry and peach with buttery layers so soft you could use it as a pillow.

Inside, the décor is a delightful cross between a German Alpine lodge and grandma's kitchen circa 1952. In the name of "research," I ordered almost everything: kolache (both fruit and sausage), cinnamon rolls, danishes, lebkuchen, springerle, and each flavor of strudel.

I sat at one of the small tables outside and proceeded to make every one of my fingers sticky with icing and every thread of my shirt dusted with powdered sugar. It was a badge of honor earned in a pastry-filled battle of the bulge. In the end, the strudel won, but it was worth it.

Whether you're a hungry local, a curious traveler or an overambitious pastry juggler, Naegelin's is here to welcome you with open arms just like it has for generations. ■

ABOVE Chet's eyes are bigger than his stomach at Naegelin's Bakery in New Braunfels.

TCP Watch the video on our website and see all of Chet's 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

7

San Antonio Cowboy Christmas, (210) 299-4499, briscoemuseum.org

Waxahachie [7, 12-14] Bethlehem Revisited, (469) 309-4040, waxahachiecvb.com

Port Lavaca [7, 12-14, 19-21, 26-28] Nativity Exhibit, (361) 935-8032, bit.ly/nativityexhibit

9

Lufkin The Texas Tenors: Deep in the Heart of Christmas, (936) 633-5454, angelinaarts.org

11

El Paso Los Murales de Segundo Barrio, (915) 533-0048, tomlea.com

Marshall [11, 19] Fireside Feast: Cooking Up History at Maplecroft, (903) 935-3044, visitstarrfamilyhome.com

12

Kyle [12-14] A Night in Bethlehem, (512) 268-7044, f-pc.org

Smithville [12-14, 19-22] Dinah 4 Christmas, (512) 304-0666, dinah4.com

13

Bastrop Historic Homes Tour, (512) 303-0904, bastropcountyhistoricalsociety.com

Burnet Christmas on the Square, (512) 756-4297, burnetchamber.org

Chappell Hill Teddy Bear Parade, (979) 337-9910, chappellhilltx.com

Kerrville Christmas Concert, (830) 321-0303, hillcountrychorale.org

Waxahachie [13-14] Historic Waxahachie Christmas Tour of Homes, historicwaxahachie.com

Corsicana CelloVoci, (903) 874-7792, corsicanapalace.com

Richardson Rocky Mountain High Experience: A John Denver Christmas, (972) 744-4650, eisemanncenter.com

Levelland [19-21] Christmas Cash Classic, (806) 786-8683, facebook.com/christmascashclassic

Brenham Top of the World, A Carpenters Christmas, (979) 337-7240, thebarnhillcenter.com

Fairfield Jingle All the Way, (903) 389-5792, fairfieldtexaschamber.com

Grapevine The Nuttier Cracker, (817) 410-3100, grapevinetexasusa.com

Eastland New Year's Eve Casino Night, (254) 631-0437, eastlandcountymuseum.com

Palestine Dash & Splash 5K, (903) 729-3139, palestineymca.org

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CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ

1 SCOTT BOWMAN
PEDERNALES EC

"Young mini-Nubian goats enjoy breakfast in the barn."

2 AMY BOGS
NAVASOTA VALLEY EC

"One of our calves got a little too excited about the new hay and wedged himself between two bales."

3 KYLE BIGGERSTAFF
LIGHTHOUSE EC

"Hayden Biggerstaff and Jude the cow dog finish pushing cattle to a new pasture at sunset in Crosby County."

4 CAROLYN GULLY
PEDERNALES EC

"My great-granddaughter, Leighton Gully, and her friend, Annabelle, take a break on the farm."



Upcoming Contests

GATES DUE DEC 10

CAUGHT NAPPING DUE JAN 10

MAKING A SPLASH DUE FEB 10



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



Our Kind of Weird

The best Christmas mornings include a one-of-a-kind family dish

BY SHANE TORNO

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN KACHIK

I SUPPOSE EVERY FAMILY has a favorite dish—a meal with special significance. In my family's case, we had a special meal that my mom, the one who did the cooking in our house, didn't care for. I wonder if this is common.

The meal was a breakfast dish known to us as biscuits and pudding. In my youth, I believed that this was unique to my family since everyone I ever asked about it had never heard of such a thing.

However, just recently I learned that the meal is actually known in the rural south as biscuits and chocolate gravy.

To be sure, the chocolate pudding we used was stove-cooked and served hot, so calling it chocolate gravy makes sense. My online research tells me that the dish has its origins in the Great Depression, when powdered cocoa

became readily available as a baking product. There are origin stories associated with Appalachia, the Tennessee Valley, western Oklahoma and Arkansas.

I have no idea how it could have come into contact with a German family settling in Dime Box in Central Texas and then relocating to deep South Texas.

Ignorant of any of this history, I enjoyed this breakfast whenever my father could convince my mom to get up early and prepare it.

A few tips if you decide to try this yourself on a cold morning. The biscuits need to be buttermilk with a consistent texture all the way through, not the canned biscuits that produce lots of flaky individual layers. Those flaky layers make eating the pudding-covered biscuits a messy and unappealing operation. Also, the meal is best when both the biscuits and the pudding are served hot.

Grab a couple (or three) biscuits and cut them in half so you have the biscuits lying open-faced. Add a pat of butter to each biscuit half and then douse with the pudding. As the butter melts under the hot pudding, it liquefies and seeps through the pudding to create some beautiful yellow puddles.

If you have a sweet tooth, this will beat the best biscuits and gravy meal you have ever had.

As I said, my mom didn't care for the meal, possibly because it was passed down from my father's family. Or maybe because she didn't like getting up early to bake on Christmas morning. To her credit, she made them well (as did her mom, my dad's mom and my Aunt Joy).

On those special mornings when they were available, we all made big plates of it while Mom stood back and ate her biscuit with jelly like a normal human. If you listened carefully above the racket of forks on plates, you might even hear her mutter something about a bunch of weirdos. ■

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