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JANUARY 2024

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Volunteers, including students, build tiny homes for veterans to call their own

**PLUM GROVE
SUBSTATION
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SEE PAGE 22

PLUS

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in 2024

20 Fewer Dead
Trees, Increased
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24 The Sweetest
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Making History

For more than 50 years, artists have been drawn to a quiet, tucked-away studio row in Edom.

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Students and community leaders collaborate to build tiny homes that help veterans become whole again.

Story and photos by Laura Jenkins

ON THE COVER

TJ Phillips at a tiny home at Langetree Retreat and Eco Center near Liberty.
Photo by Laura Jenkins

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Joe Hopps works on a bird-house at his studio in Edom.
Photo by R.J. Hinkle

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Brimming With Wisdom

NATIONAL HAT DAY is January 15, as if Texans ever needed another reason to don a cowboy hat.

Certainly, everyday wearers know this truism, shared with us by Alice M. Wolf, a member of Navasota Valley Electric Cooperative, as she “finished this sentence” back in November 2021:

“A Texan would never ... set his hat down brim down.”

Read more about hats in *Cowboy Hatters*, April 2016, on our website.

Class Is Not Dismissed

In honor of National Classy Day—January 17—*Texas Co-op Power* writers and editors note these esteemed Texans:

Luke Savage, a former Texas Christian University pitcher, started the nonprofit Blessed Feet, which has collected thousands of pairs of used baseball cleats for budding baseballers in the U.S. and Dominican Republic.
—Chris Burrows

Simone Biles, who owns the most gymnastics medals, exhibits poise in her willingness to speak out against sexual abuse and advocate for mental health awareness.
—Jéden Clark

The late singer **Selena Quintanilla Pérez**’s career was brief but impactful, redefining Latin music for a new generation and an expanded audience. Even at her young age, she was involved with charities and humanitarian causes, especially those benefiting Texas children.
—Alex Dal Santo

Mary Kay Ash said about her cosmetics company’s beauty consultants: “Here’s a woman who’s never had any praise at all for anything she’s ever done. Maybe the only applause she’s ever had was when she graduated from high school. She wants recognition. So we praise her for everything good that she does.” The company does good, too—supporting cancer research and survivors of violence.
—Jessica Ridge

Ima Hogg, born in the 19th century, turned her family’s oil money to philanthropy, including the arts and mental health programs.
—Tom Widlowski

FINISH THIS SENTENCE

If I could turn back the clock ...

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 November prompt: **Why doesn't somebody invent ... ?**

A washing machine that dries the clothes, folds them and puts them up.

NANCY BECKER
CONCHO VALLEY EC
PAINT ROCK

A canoe-shaped hotdog bun to hold all the condiments and chili.

MIKE WEBER
UNITED COOPERATIVE SERVICES
GRANBURY

A key fob that could roll up the windows on your vehicle when it starts raining and you are inside at work.

LARENDA BRADSHAW
JASPER-NEWTON EC
JASPER

A smoke alarm that can be serviced at ground level or without a ladder.

FRANK M. WAGNON
FORT BELKNAP EC
SOUTHLAKE

Visit our website to see more responses.

Too Much Latitude?

Look at a map too long and weird details emerge.

For example, Portland, Texas, is nearly equidistant from Portland, Maine (1,852 miles), and Portland, Oregon (1,845 miles).

And this: A giant triangle of these Portlands captures more than 30 other states.



A Passing Notion

AS DRIVERS faced gas shortages and long lines at the pump 50 years ago, President Richard M. Nixon signed an act January 2, 1974, lowering the national speed limit to 55 mph.

That went off the books in 1995, and today Texas boasts the highest speed limit in the country: 85 mph on a stretch of State Highway 130, a toll road between San Antonio and Austin.

TCP Contests and More

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You'll need something special for National Pie Day, January 23. Pick a pie recipe from among the dozens on our website. It's as easy as (searching) "pie."





OCTOBER 2023 Still in the Saddle Again

“After reading about the senior rodeo, my husband and I went to an event. It was wonderful seeing performers from 40 to 80-plus still enjoying what they love to do.”

CARLANNE HICKMAN
TRI-COUNTY EC
HASLET

A Signature Moment

On the reading list for a Texas literature class at Tarleton State University was *The Time It Never Rained* [It Still Reigns, October 2023]. We were told there would be a guest speaker to discuss writing—none other than Elmer Kelton himself.

He was soft-spoken, generous, patient and happy to be with us. I walked away with fond memories and his signature in my own copy, which I still have to this day.

Cole Hooper
Pedernales EC
Wimberley

I don't recognize Elmer Kelton without his hat [It Still Reigns, October 2023]! Have read many of his books, including this gem. He had a way of capturing a time and place and bringing it to life through many characters. An excellent writer and storyteller.

ERNIE BATTLE
VIA FACEBOOK



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A Stunning Memory

I was an elementary student near Austin [A School Day Like No Other, November 2023]. I think most schools were getting out early so parents could take children to see the motorcade. My mother was coming to get me.

Someone came to our room and whispered something to our teacher. Mrs. Griffin put her head down on the desk and began to cry. When she looked up, she said, “President Kennedy has been shot, and he won’t be coming to Austin.” We were stunned.

When my mother came to pick me up, she was crying too. I will never forget that day.

Susie McCalla
Central Texas EC
Kerrville

Family Ties

Frederick Law Olmsted is an ancestor on my mother’s side [Appraising the Texas Landscape, November 2023]. I am from Connecticut and worked my entire career at Hartford Hospital. In nice weather we would often go for walks on its approximately 10-acre beautiful campus, which was designed by Olmsted.

Virginia W. Smith
Nueces EC
Corpus Christi

TCP WRITE TO US
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Austin, TX 78701

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

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TEXAS CO-OP POWER Volume 80, Number 7 (USPS 540-560). *Texas Co-op Power* is published monthly by Texas Electric Cooperatives. Periodical postage paid at Austin, TX, and at additional offices. TEC is the statewide association representing 76 electric cooperatives. *Texas Co-op Power*'s website is TexasCoopPower.com. Call (512) 454-0311 or email editor@TexasCoopPower.com.

SUBSCRIPTIONS Subscription price is \$4.96 per year for individual members of subscribing cooperatives and is paid from equity accruing to the member. If you are not a member of a subscribing cooperative, you can purchase an annual subscription at the nonmember rate of \$7.50. **Co-op members:** Please notify your co-op of address changes or other subscription requests.

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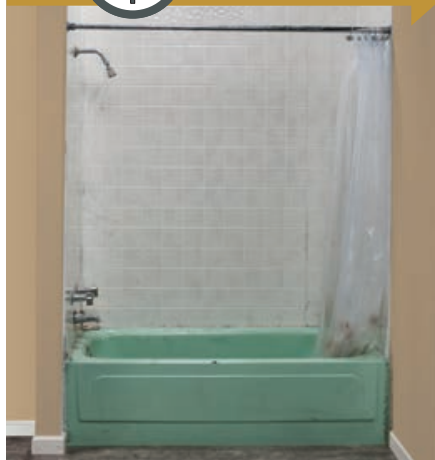
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Making History

For more than 50 years, artists have been drawn to this quiet, tucked-away studio row

BY PATTI PFEIFFER • PHOTOS BY R.J. HINKLE

THE SIGN SAYS Arbor Castle Birdhouses, but within lies an array of fanciful castles that seem perfectly inviting to gnomes and pixies if not birds. Crafted from hollow cedar logs; topped with tall, curvy conical roofs; and adorned in whimsical metal touches, these are more pieces of art than avian abodes.

Creator Joe Hopps has been carving birdhouses for 25 years and started quite simply.

"I saw a hollow log, had an idea, created one, entered it into a birdhouse competition in Oklahoma where I was living, and it won first place," he explains.

Hopps recently added brushes to his repertoire, returning to another of his passions, acrylic abstract painting. "I began painting in the early '70s and began again recently because of a saw accident, which nearly cut off several fingers."

His canvases were showcased at the grand opening of a new art gallery, O3 Collective, just down the road from his shop in the small community of Edom, west of Tyler.



With a population of fewer than 400, what Edom (pronounced “E-dum”) lacks in size, it more than makes up for in gifted artists. From one-of-a-kind jewelry to high-end art and unique pottery, the small town’s main drag, FM 279, is a treasure trove of rare items and artisans eager to share their stories.

It all started a couple of doors down from Arbor Castle, at Potters Brown Collective. Once a grocery store, the wooden structure was for five decades the studio of Doug Brown, a California transplant who moved to Edom in 1970 and founded this artisan community.

A cluster of artists’ studios continues Brown’s vision. His widow, Beth Brown, a potter herself, lives next door to the studio today.

“Doug was a very humble man and wanted somewhere he and his friends could create and sell their goods and felt if he opened a place, others would follow,” Beth says. “Immedi-

ately upon seeing Edom, he knew this was where he wanted to set up shop, start an artists’ community—and he wanted it to be a true community.”

Brown wasted no time turning his dream into reality—buying buildings, setting up his pottery studio and pitching his vision to artisan friends. And they did follow.

In 1972, Brown organized the first Edom Art Festival, which drew more than 3,000 attendees. Since then, every second weekend in October, a sprawling meadow behind studio row is transformed into a bustling venue. Crafters, musicians and festivalgoers from near and far gather to enjoy the sights, sounds, food and festivities of the two-day

OPPOSITE Beth Brown is the director of the Edom Art Festival. ABOVE Arbor Castle Birdhouses along the main drag.



Zeke Zewick, right, creates jewelry using uncommon materials, above. "Not all jewelry has to be gold, diamonds and sparkly," he says.

event that includes a wine-tasting garden featuring local vineyards, musicians and crafting for kids. The festival has grown in content and count, attracting some 15,000 visitors in 2023.

After Brown's death in 2020, his building was eventually sold, but it still bears his name and remains a pottery center that sells ceramics from local makers.

And the community is still going strong.

Stepping outside, my eyes were drawn to a jewelry store of a different sort: Zeke & Marty. Even the door handles are distinctive, custom-made from sika deer antlers from Japan and carved by the owner, Zeke Zewick.

I marveled at the array of custom jewelry of every material, size and sort—even dyed bone pieces inlaid with unique gems, dispelling the adage that diamonds are a girl's best friend.

Using woolly mammoth teeth from Siberia, Turkish agates, shells from the Sea of Cortez, antlers and bones, Zewick prides himself in creating one-of-a-kind pieces.

"Not all jewelry has to be gold, diamonds and sparkly," he says. "Different material provides for different thoughts for pieces. Oxide steel is what some throw away as trash,

but I like the contrast of it with sterling."

He especially likes working with bone, which is malleable and easy to grind and polish, dyeing it with alcohol inks. The materials are uncommon, and so are his pieces.

Zewick, one of the original Edom artists, has been creating since 1969, first with leather but spending the past half-century as a jeweler. He knew Brown and received one of his original invites.

"He knew I was looking for a place to move after graduating art school," Zewick says. "This place had trees and water, and being from Lubbock, I felt we were in heaven."

Prompted by a desire to "get out of the city and move back home to a simpler, less stressful way of life," Shanna Wiggins relocated here from Austin three years ago.





She used to own a succulents shop on FM 279, and like other residents, she was eager to share her story.

“Originally, the locals were hesitant, feeling hippies didn’t belong here,” she says, “but we all love each other, so it doesn’t matter.”

For the traveler looking for a slower slice of life, Edom has a couple of restaurants serving home-cooked meals. Sips offers hand-crafted coffees, sodas and other nonalcoholic drinks.

Edom is eccentric and inviting and a true “poke-n-plumb” place: By the time you poke your head out of the vehicle, you’re plumb outta town, which adds to its charm. It’s a place where strangers don’t exist. ■

ABOVE Whimsy is a dominant feature of Joe Hopps’ birdhouses.
RIGHT A signpost helps visitors to the East Texas town find their way.

East of Edom

Other attractions along FM 279.

Green Goat Winery A cozy tasting room and covered patio overlook 7 acres of vines.

Blue Moon Gardens This 6-acre gardener’s paradise sells plants, tools and supplies.

Coltharp-Beall House The 175-year-old home has housed itinerant preachers and stagecoach travelers.



DREAMING

BIG

Students and community leaders
collaborate to build tiny homes that
help veterans become whole again





What the heck are you doing?"

The sharp sound of his girlfriend's voice jolted TJ Phillips awake. But the bigger shock came when he opened his eyes.

"I had my knee on her neck," says Phillips, shaking his head. "And I was going through the motions of putting flex cuffs on her. She laughed it off after I explained that I'd been dreaming about being on active duty again. But I wasn't laughing. I knew I needed help."

Phillips, an Army sergeant who served 1991–99 and was honorably discharged, says he made an appointment with Veterans Affairs to address his post-traumatic stress disorder. But he felt like he was too young to be on all the medications they prescribed.

Instead, as many do, he turned to alcohol. And he eventually decided to live in his truck so he could save money. Ten years and five DWIs later, he was in the Montgomery County jail, awaiting a trial that was certain to yield an extended prison sentence, when he got the news that his arresting officer had suddenly died. He was free to go.

"And that's when Miss Barbara took me in," he says after an emotional pause. "Now I'm safe. I'm sober. And everything I need to get healthy again is right here."

OPPOSITE Langetree Retreat and Eco Center's community of tiny homes and assistance has helped change TJ Phillips' life. "Everything I need to get healthy again is right here." ABOVE Instructor James Gaylord and his Humble students in front of a tiny home they built.

Barbara Lange gave Phillips, 54, the key to a tiny home at the Langetree Retreat and Eco Center near Liberty, between Houston and Beaumont. But she'll be the first to tell you that she's only one of many who are making Phillips' recovery possible.

"Somehow we all got the memo independently of one another," Lange says. "And then somehow we all found each other. What are the odds?"

There was no actual memo, of course. But indeed, several people in the same corner of Texas had a similar idea around the same time.

At the outset, none of them knew each other—or even about each other. They were simply focused on the same goal: to support veterans by providing them with tiny homes. Their collaboration has no name. There's no one in charge. But it has yielded something much greater than the sum of its parts.

Allen Segura, who recently retired as assistant principal and director of career and technology education for Summer Creek High School, says the idea to integrate building tiny homes into the Humble school district's curriculum came from a bout of insomnia in 2018.

"Late one night I was scrolling through Facebook and saw some people in St. Louis who were building tiny homes for homeless veterans," Segura remembers. "And the simple thought came: 'I wonder if our students could do that?'"

He bounced the idea off James Gaylord and Missi Taylor, who teach CTE classes in construction, architecture and design at high schools in Humble, a Houston suburb whose name is pronounced "Umble." They were in.

"We had been teaching these classes for years, but it was mostly theoretical," Segura says. "Actually building houses would not only let them put what they're learning into practice, it would also help them understand the importance of serving others."

Under the supervision of the three educators, the students developed a presentation and pitched it to Superintendent Elizabeth Fagen, who took it to the school board for approval. Thus, in 2018, Humble ISD's Big Heroes, Tiny Homes program was born.

Meanwhile, about 40 minutes east of Humble, Lange, a retired social worker, was teaching leadership and environmental sustainability at the retreat center she and her husband built in 2004.

Their doors have always been open to people in crisis. They housed numerous people after Hurricane Katrina's devastation in 2005. They took in referrals from Tri-County Behavioral Healthcare, a community-based nonprofit serving those living with mental illness and intellectual disabilities. More recently, Lange had begun working with



Kingwood Park High School students work on a tiny home.

several Veterans of Foreign Wars chapters in an effort to address the crisis of homelessness among veterans.

"I had already started converting a shipping container into a tiny home for one of the veterans I was assisting when I came across a newspaper article about Missi," Lange remembers. "A VFW volunteer named Mark Bowen said, 'Barbara, why don't you go to Kingwood Park and tell those people that they can give us the houses?'"

Never one to leave a stone unturned, Lange went to visit the teachers in Humble. Once they saw her vast experience and her devotion to veterans, the district agreed to donate their tiny homes to Lange's effort.

Since 2005, Operation Finally Home has been improving and constructing mortgage-free homes for wounded veterans, first responders and their families. But it wasn't until spring 2020 that Lee Kirgan, vice president of project management for OFH, learned about Humble ISD's big idea and suggested to President Rusty Carroll that they consider getting involved.

Six months later, Carroll surprised Segura with the news that OFH, based in New Braunfels, had secured a grant from big-box retailer Lowe's, which would provide all the building materials for Big Heroes, Tiny Homes for the foreseeable future.

"Humble ISD had a vision to build tiny homes for home-

less veterans, but they didn't have a sustainable way to source the materials," Carroll says. "By partnering them with Lowe's, we were able to lengthen their runway.

"People have been telling me for years that they wanted to build tiny homes for homeless veterans, but if they're transitional, there has to be some sort of infrastructure to support those living in them. Barbara supplied that missing piece."

Lange's infrastructure is deeply rooted in community. There are currently 10 tiny homes on her property and 27 agencies providing residents with such services as job coaching, counseling, legal aid and palliative care.

But creating a communal environment is one of her highest priorities. When she conveyed that to the people at OFH—who are helping her clear and prepare her land to receive 20 more houses over the next five to seven years—they recommended putting them in pods of six, which will serve as micro communities.

"We now know from a scientific point of view that loneliness can be as harmful to the body as cigarette smoking," Lange says. "When you're in a community of people who've been where you've been, when you're living with others who are going through what you're going through, you're less likely to feel like a freak.

"It advances the healing process."

Humble ISD is expanding Big Heroes, Tiny Homes to five high schools. The program offers students a hands-on building experience with mentoring by professionals—architects, plumbers, electricians, general contractors—giving the teens invaluable work experience and the opportunity to explore various career paths.

Due to its resounding success, other school districts and universities have reached out to Humble ISD to find out how the project works.

"Our instructors are willing to talk to your instructors," Segura says. "We are happy to connect your principals to our principals, your superintendent to our superintendent. Let us tell you how we did this."

Lange estimates that most residents will transition into permanent housing within two years. Phillips, who is approaching that milestone, may stay longer because he's become a strong leader in the community. Though he now has a job as a heating and air conditioning tech, he serves as a liaison and an advocate for the other veterans. He also assists with some of the property's maintenance and administrative needs.

"Veterans aren't homeless because they're not gifted, intelligent or experienced," Lange says. "They are broken. When you connect them with the resources they need and provide a safe place to heal, many will find their way back to the person they were before the trauma. All veterans deserve that chance." ■



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A close-up photograph of a dog's head and front paws resting on a light-colored, textured rug. The dog has black, white, and tan fur. To the right of the dog, a portion of a white space heater is visible, with its glowing orange mesh screen emitting a warm light that illuminates the dog's face and the rug. The background is dark, making the warm light from the heater the primary light source.

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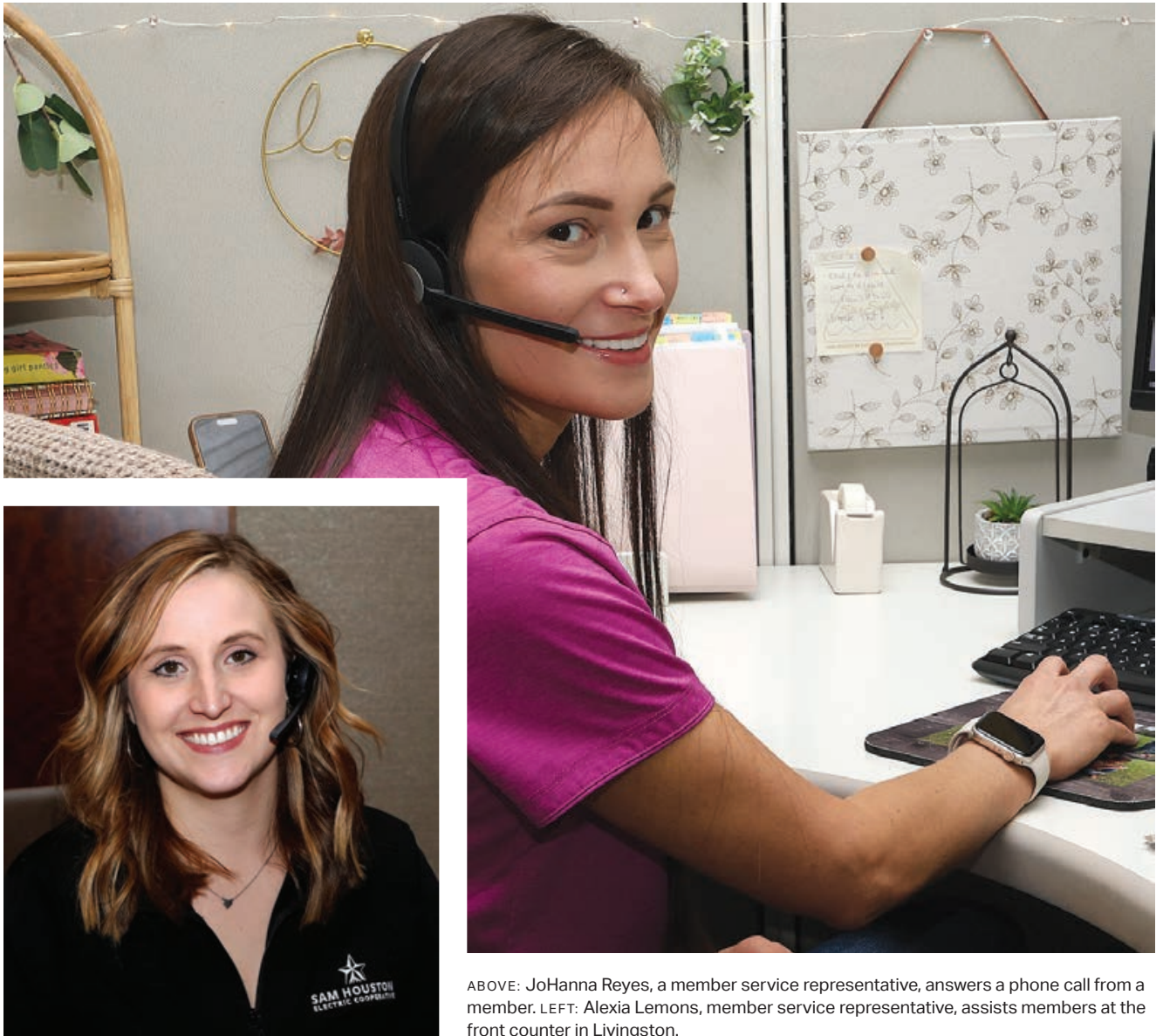
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ABOVE: JoHanna Reyes, a member service representative, answers a phone call from a member. LEFT: Alexia Lemons, member service representative, assists members at the front counter in Livingston.

Contact Center Staffing Hours Change

SAM HOUSTON ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE is changing our phone call-in hours, starting this month. The Cooperative has a full staff of member service representatives dedicated to answering calls with a friendly voice to greet members. The contact center will be staffed with live agents 7:30 a.m.–5 p.m. Mondays–Fridays and 8 a.m.–noon Saturdays.

Previously, members could call until 6 p.m. on Mondays. “We have been monitoring the phone traffic between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. [on Mondays] for a couple of years, and there is not enough activity to justify the cost,” said Ricky Harrell, chief member services officer. “The few calls received can be handled through the automated systems available to members.”

More technology will also be offered in 2023 than in years past. According to Valerie Berry, contact center office supervi-

sor, it didn’t make sense to keep the phone lines open later on Mondays because of the wide variety of options and resources available to members.

“Members have SmartHub, the mobile mySamHouston app and a wide variety of pay stations available to them,” Berry said. “Because of all this, the new schedule will make it easier and more cost-effective in the long run.”

The new hours were implemented January 1. Members who have questions about the new hours can contact the Co-op at 1-800-458-0381 or learn more on the website. ■

A Strong Start to 2024

SAM HOUSTON ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE strives to not only be your power provider, but also a bright light of relief for the more than 65,000 consumer-members who receive service from the Co-op.

When members open their January bill, they will see that the price per kilowatt-hour is lower than it was a year ago. Check out the usage graph on your bill or on the mySamHouston app or portal to see how your home consumed electricity over the past 13 months.

According to a recent report, a Sam Houston EC member’s bill is \$7–\$24 less than other electric utilities’ bills in Texas, based on an industry average of 1,000 kWh usage.

“We still encourage our members to conserve energy as often as possible,” said Communications Specialist Chad Simon. “The less our members use, the lower their bill will be. They truly have the power in their hands to control their bill.”

Simon offered tips to decrease power usage.

“Doing full loads of laundry and switching to LED lightbulbs helps,” he said. “Changing your air filter every month will make it easier on your HVAC system, and opening blinds to let the direct sun in during the winter months will warm your house. Our members can do a lot of little things that add up to big savings.”

Sam Houston EC is not profit-driven. The Co-op exists to serve our members well and provide reliable electricity. Then, if any margins remain at the end of the year, they are invested into the electric distribution system and returned to our members as capital credits, such as those that were distributed on the September 2023 bills.

“We feel it is a great business model, and it fits well with our workplace culture and employees’ service-minded nature,” Simon added. “We are here to provide the best possible service at the lowest possible price.” ■



MARK YOUR CALENDAR

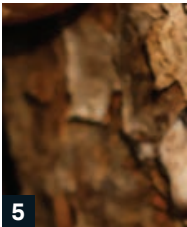
New Year’s Day
Monday, January 1
Our offices will be closed for the holiday.

Law Enforcement Appreciation Day
Tuesday, January 9

Martin Luther King Jr. Day
Monday, January 15
Our offices will be closed for the holiday.

National Hot Chocolate Day
Wednesday, January 31

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Cutting Dead Trees To Keep Power On

DROUGHTS ARE A NATURAL OCCURRENCE, and East Texans are familiar with the damage that comes with a lack of rain.

Lakes and rivers are noticeably lower during a drought, and shallow ponds and small streams may even completely dry up. Yards that were once green and lush turn brown and crunchy. Trees may be resilient at first but they, too, can become stressed and die during a drought.

Janay Jones, Sam Houston Electric Cooperative utility forester, said stressed pine trees become susceptible to beetle damage, which can kill a towering 80-foot-tall tree. Healthy pine (and even hardwood) trees can be infected by beetles and die in a matter of months.

“Beetles are always in and around trees,” Jones said. “They are part of the ecosystem. But, during droughts like we had in part of 2022 and in 2023, the trees become stressed and susceptible to dying from the beetles.”

The dead trees are potentially a large threat to the reliability of Sam Houston EC’s vast distribution system. The Co-op maintains more than 6,500 miles of power lines and the trees near them. The robust program is a primary reason why the

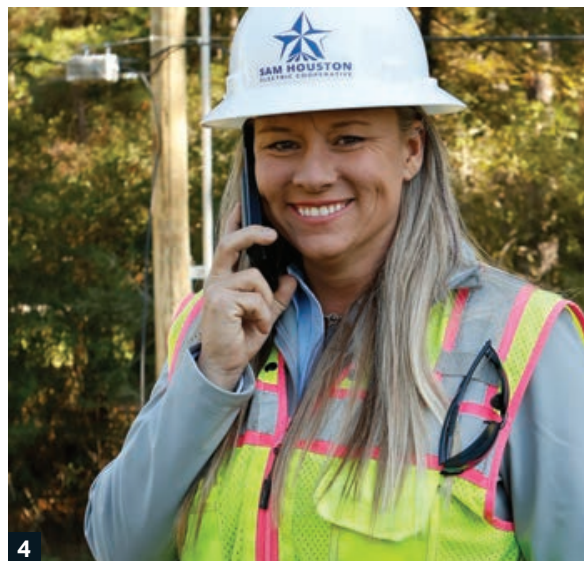
Co-op’s distribution system maintains high reliability year-round.

In addition to maintaining a 10-foot clearance on each side of more than 177,000 power poles, the Co-op also identifies hazardous trees that are likely to fall on power lines. Sam Houston EC’s right-of-way and dead tree maintenance program is nationally recognized for improving service reliability.

In an average year, the Co-op cuts down about 7,000 hazardous trees that threaten power lines and outages. However, Jones said, the Co-op had contractors cut 25,000 trees to keep the system healthy in 2023.

The Co-op cut 11,000 trees in 2022 as the drought set in and magnified the hazards posed by trees already stressed from the February 2021 winter storm. Another 25,000 hazardous trees are expected to be cut in 2024.

“There are a lot of reasons to cut the trees,” Jones said. “They can impact our equipment, but these trees can also impact [members’] personal property and comfort as well. They can damage property, utility lines, other utilities, cause fatalities or disable access to a road or our right-of-way.”



1. Sawdust flies from a chainsaw as a trained professional cuts down a dead pine tree in November.
2. Planners drive each segment of line and mark dead trees with red dots on a digital map. Cutting crews change the dots to green after dead trees have been cut down.
3. A professionally trained tree cutter maneuvers a bucket to cut dead trees near distribution lines in Onalaska in November. It was the second time that portion of the system was cut in 2023.
4. Janay Jones, a utility forester, speaks with many Sam Houston EC members about hazardous trees on the Co-op's lines.
5. A pitch tube is an indication of Ips beetles.
6. Black trails indicate where beetles entered a tree.
7. A hole in the bark of a pine tree where a beetle entered a tree. Due to a drought, tens of thousands of pines were stressed and died when beetles entered the trees.

Cutting 25,000 trees comes at a cost, but Sam Houston EC uses a systematic approach to canvas the system—approximately the size of Connecticut—to mitigate the financial impact. Planners start on the western edge of the system and drive along each segment of line while plotting trees to be cut down. They move east throughout the year. In 2023, one-third of the system was cut twice just to keep pace with the dying trees.

“We are here to keep the lights on, but we want to do it at an affordable price,” Jones said. “Using the marked trees from planners, crews cut anywhere from 100 to 150 trees a day. That comes out to about 10–15 trees a day for a single crew. If we base the cutting schedule on phone calls and tickets made, a single crew may waste time by driving across the system each day. They may only cut three to five trees a day that way.”

Professional tree-cutting crews follow behind the planners seven to 10 days later.

“It is astounding how many trees are dying and how fast they are dying,” Jones said. “We had a planner go through a line and then, a week later, when the crews went to start cutting, one property had six dead trees. They were green the week before.”

Sam Houston EC wants and needs the trees to be cut at a rapid rate but not at the cost of quality or safety to property or the tree cutters. Each crew has received special training and

accreditation to work near power lines, and they’re very familiar with the Co-op’s system.

“Some crews have been working on our system for 20 years, and they have cut hundreds of thousands of trees for us,” Jones said. “Cutting dead trees is one of the most hazardous jobs, so we do safety audits to ensure they are doing their job safely, and all our crews have good equipment.”

While the drought has taken a toll on the region, it is nowhere near as damaging as the 2012 drought, when the Co-op had to cut more than a quarter-million trees.

The systematic approach is working to keep pace with the dying trees. Dead trees do not become hazardous in a matter of weeks or even a few months. The Co-op is aware of the situation and will continue to cut the dead trees until the drought is behind us and the trees begin to recover.

“We do not want our members to take it upon themselves to cut down trees,” Simon said. “If they are near a power line, please stay away. Cutting trees near power lines is very dangerous, and only trained professionals should attempt it.” ■



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4

1. A substation transformer is in place within the Plum Grove substation. The transformer will step down electricity from high-voltage transmission lines to the distribution system. 2. A transformer will rest on the concrete base, and the containment reservoir will hold any liquids in the unlikely event of a spill. 3. Matt Foxworth, substation technician, operates a switch within the substation. 4. Metal cables connect a transformer to switches within the Plum Grove substation.

Plum Grove Substation Begins To Power Members

THE PLUM GROVE SUBSTATION began powering homes in the Santa Fe subdivision in the most southern portion of Sam Houston Electric Cooperative's service area November 14, 2023.

"The substation will increase reliability by reducing the amount of line exposure for the members," Chief Engineer Joel Colston said. "Members in the northern portion of Santa Fe are now served by lines 7 miles from the substation. Previously, they were served by lines that were almost 17 miles away."

The fast-growing subdivision previously received power from the Long John substation, just north of Dayton, nearly 10 miles from the entrance to the Santa Fe community. The lines had to cross Luce Bayou, and the area's rugged landscape made it susceptible to power outages and longer restoration times.

Currently, the Co-op powers nearly 3,500 homes in the Santa Fe community. The Co-op also provides power for two elementary schools, a middle school and a leadership academy. A pub-

lic high school, another leadership academy (serving grades one through eight) and a leadership academy high school are planned for the area as well.

According to Colston, the substation houses the two largest transformers on the Co-op's system, which will allow Sam Houston EC to serve the expected growth in the community with no major infrastructure additions.

Planning for the substation began in 2018, with construction starting in the first half of 2022. Supply chain issues slowed the construction process, and the extreme summer heat delayed energizing the substation until November. Colston said "the wait was worth it" for residents, students and businesses who now have reliable power for the future. ■

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5c Peanut
Butter Bar—
Popular best selling
bar... good to eat the year
'round. Packed 24 bars to the color-
ful merchandising box. 16 boxes
to the shipping case. Also available in the
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1c Peanut
Butter Bar—
Unusually good 1c
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cash register item. A tremendous
year 'round seller. Packed 120 individually
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in two tasty varieties—the popular
mint sticks... and the delicious
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of Atkinson's superb candy craftsmanship.
Packed 120 sticks to the box. 16 boxes to the shipping case.



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FRESH... and stays fresh...
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the merchandising box. 16 boxes
to the shipping case. Also available
in the 120 count "Vend-Pac".

5¢ CHICKO-STICKS

A fascinating combination of our own
delicious, fresh peanut butter and
golden roasted tropical coconut.
Yummy! A new year-round taste
treat! A fast-moving... profit-maker!
Packed 24 sticks to the box.
16 boxes to the shipping case.



5¢ PECO BRITTLE

A delicious little combining selected
crunchy, flavorful peanuts and the
tenderest flakes of Tropical Coconut.
Packed 24 bars to the colorful sales box.
16 boxes to the shipping case.



1

The Sweetest Family

Atkinson Candy Co. is still churning out smiles from the heart of East Texas

BY JEFFREE WYN ITRICH

THE PEOPLE OF LUFKIN know that a bit of Willy Wonka magic dwells in their midst, but few outsiders know of its existence.

For 92 years, Atkinson Candy Co. has been sweetening lives in all 50 states and several other countries. Some know the company for their hit candies from decades ago: Chick-O-Stick, Slo Poke, Black Cow, Mint Twists and Long Boys, to name a few. But it's still churning out sweets in East Texas, and it's still owned by the same family.

Third- and fourth-generation members of the Atkinson family and more than 150 employees crank out candy at their nondescript factory on West Frank Avenue. A shop there sells candy and other merchandise, though factory tours are no longer offered.

Eric Atkinson, the company's president and grandson of its

founders, B.E. and Mabel Atkinson, says his grandparents were seeking a way to make a living during the Great Depression. His grandfather often said that even when money was scarce, nearly everyone had a penny—and penny candy was an affordable extravagance even for those down on their luck.

Although the company has been around since 1932, Eric is quick to point out the family didn't start manufacturing candy until the 1950s.

"In 1932, we were a candy jobber," he explains. "That's how we started off." His grandfather made two-day trips to Houston, where he purchased candy and then sold the treats to mom-and-pop shops on the return trip.

Later on his grandfather decided to start making his own candy. He bought machines and started producing



SAM HOUSTON EC
2



SAM HOUSTON EC
3



COURTESY ATKINSON CANDY CO.

1. Atkinson Candy Company marketing from the 1950s. 2. This mural is a visual reminder of the famous candy produced in East Texas. 3. The Atkinson's star is proudly displayed with oversized candy circling it at the facility where the public can still come in and purchase candy. 4. Atkinson Candy Company employees make and sort candy in the Lufkin building in an undated photo.

confections. At first, it didn't go well.

"My uncle, Joe Atkinson, stepped up to the plate," Eric explains. "He was more mechanically minded. And within a few weeks, he made the candy profitable."

Though Eric was born and raised in Dallas, he spent a lot of time in Lufkin. He has fond memories of visiting as a kid, crawling around on burlap bags of peanuts that would sometimes topple over and spill.

"Once I got into big trouble because I decided to go swimming in the big vat of roasted peanuts," he says. "The supervisor, he didn't know what to do. Granddaddy came over like I was in trouble. I had peanut oil all over me."

Another time, when he was older, Eric was driving the forklift in the warehouse, stacking pallets and not paying attention to where he was stacking them.

"I didn't realize I had stacked them all the way up to the roof," he says. "That was the last time they let me drive the forklift for a long time."

Turns out he's a better leader than forklift operator. In 2022, the company produced over 9.5 million pounds of candy.

"We still make our candy using the batch process, in small batches, and we're still the same family that's always made this product," says Eric, who has a son learning to be a candymaker

and whose daughter is the executive officer who runs the day-to-day operations.

"That sort of consistency is being lost when the private equity companies buy out family businesses," he says. "They really aren't into the manufacturing aspect; they're into making money. Sadly, that's when those brands lose their soul because it's no longer about the quality, it's about the money."

Atkinson Candy Co. is still small by comparison, even after opening a facility in Guatemala in 2010 and a 30,000-square-foot expansion of their Lufkin plant a few years ago. The Guatemala plant allowed the company to take advantage of lower sugar prices available in Central America during a time when sugar was becoming more difficult to source in the U.S.

That's a lot of numbers and business, but there is a magical aspect to the place.

After all, they've been creating joy for 92 years—back to when a penny bought a piece of candy. Willy Wonka does make an appearance once a year, during Halloween, when Eric—in costume—and his employees give out candy to the children of Lufkin.

No one can tell those kids that Willy Wonka doesn't exist. ■

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This fusion of substance and style can garner a high price tag out in the marketplace. In fact, we found full tang, stainless steel blades with bone handles in excess of \$2,000. Well, that won't cut it around here. We have mastered the hunt for the best deal, and in turn pass the spoils on to our customers.

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



St. Patrick's Day 1949 for his monolithic hotel. He wanted Hollywood stars but was told that the only way Hollywood would come was if there was a movie opening to attend. But no big studio would launch a film in Texas in those days.

So McCarthy decided to fund his own film—*The Green Promise*, starring Walter Brennan and a young Natalie Wood. In so doing, he had the premiere and hotel grand opening at the same time. Brilliant.

And Hollywood came. Howard Hughes gave McCarthy a good deal on one of his planes so he could fly stars to Houston. McCarthy also chartered a party train that brought in hundreds of celebrities for the opening.

The evening was regarded as the most prestigious event in Houston's social history. And it likely remains so. Everyone who was anyone was there. Ginger Rogers was there. So was Errol Flynn. It was partially broadcast live on national radio by NBC and hosted by actress, singer and World War II pinup girl Dorothy Lamour—until the hotel crowd got out of hand.

Many loved the Shamrock for its sheer size and art deco style: the Emerald Room, where Frank Sinatra sang; the Cork Club that overlooked Houston; and the hotel's grand devotion to its Irish theme.

But not everyone was impressed. Renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright called the Shamrock's 63 shades of Irish green an "architectural venereal disease."

The Shamrock was sold to Conrad Hilton in 1955 and was known as the Shamrock Hilton until it was demolished in 1987. Today, the Texas A&M Health Science Center sits on the site.

I think McCarthy would like that. He was, after all, an Aggie. ■

The Green Carpet

The grand opening of Houston's lavish and large—but short-lived—Shamrock Hotel

BY W.F. STRONG

THERE'S A SCENE in the 1956 movie *Giant* when Jett Rink, played by James Dean, tells the characters played by Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor that he's struck oil. And not only that, he insinuates, it's payback time.

Rink is a hard-drinkin', fierce-brawlin', tough-talkin', uncultured Texas oil well driller who strikes it rich. But everybody in Texas knew that Dean was really playing Glenn McCarthy, a Houston wildcatter who struck it rich—cover of *Time* magazine rich.

The fictional Rink spent millions of dollars building the Emperor, the biggest hotel in Texas. The real-life McCarthy did the same. But McCarthy

called his the Shamrock Hotel.

The Shamrock, nicknamed the Houston Riviera, was the grandest hotel in Texas when it was built in 1947 and the largest outside of New York or Los Angeles.

It was 20 stories tall, counting the two-story emerald Shamrock sign on top, and it towered over southwest Houston. The hotel cost \$21 million to build in the 1940s—or about \$300 million in today's money. It had the biggest hotel pool on the planet—so large that people water-skied in it. There were 1,100 rooms, all air-conditioned and each with a TV and radio, which was remarkably high-tech luxury back then.

McCarthy planned a grand opening for

Texas Citrus

A variety of dishes come alive with the state's prized produce

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

South Texas is home to the delicious ruby red grapefruit. From marinades and salads to cocktails and cakes, ruby reds are so versatile. This grapefruit loaf cake, one of my favorite ways to bake with them, is brimming with the fruit's tart and sweet goodness.



Grapefruit Loaf Cake

CAKE

- 3 eggs
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup plain yogurt
- 1 cup light brown sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon grapefruit zest
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup grapefruit juice
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups flour
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt

GLAZE

- 1 cup powdered sugar
- 2 tablespoons grapefruit juice
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon vanilla extract
- Thinly sliced grapefruit, for garnish

1. CAKE Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Coat a 5-by-9-inch loaf pan with nonstick cooking spray.
2. In a bowl, whisk together eggs, yogurt, brown sugar, oil, grapefruit zest, grapefruit juice, cinnamon and vanilla.
3. In another bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder and salt.
4. Pour the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients and mix until just combined. Avoid overmixing.
5. Pour batter into prepared loaf pan. Bake 30–35 minutes or until a toothpick inserted comes out clean.
6. Remove from oven, allow to cool for 10 minutes, and carefully remove cake from pan.
7. GLAZE Whisk together powdered sugar, grapefruit juice and vanilla.
8. Place grapefruit slices on cake and drizzle with glaze.

SERVES 8

TCP Follow Vianney Rodriguez while she cooks in Cocina Gris at sweetlifebake.com, where she features a recipe for Ruby Red Grapefruit Salsa.



Texas Citrus Ceviche

TANNER FULLMER
BANDERA EC

Fullmer's ceviche is a refreshing no-cook appetizer that will wow your guests. Citrus juices cure the shrimp while jalapeño lends spice and avocado adds a touch of creaminess. Serve this bright and flavorful ceviche chilled and with tortilla chips for a beautiful presentation.

- 1 pound wild-caught Gulf shrimp, peeled and deveined**
- 1 cup lime juice**
- ¼ cup lemon juice**
- 1-inch ginger piece, peeled and minced**
- 1 red onion, diced**
- 3 cloves garlic, minced**
- 1½ oranges, peeled and diced**
- 1 grapefruit, peeled and diced**
- 1 cucumber, peeled and diced**
- 1 large avocado, pitted and diced**
- 1 bunch cilantro, chopped**
- 1 jalapeño, seeds removed and diced**
- 1½ teaspoons salt**
- Tortilla chips**

1. Cut shrimp into desired size and place into a large, nonreactive bowl. Add lime juice, lemon juice and minced ginger. Stir to combine. Cover bowl with plastic wrap and refrigerate 45 minutes.
2. Remove bowl from fridge. Stir in red onion, garlic, oranges, grapefruit, cucumber, avocado, cilantro, jalapeño and salt.
3. Return ceviche to the fridge to chill an additional 15 minutes.
4. Serve with tortilla chips.

SERVES 6

MORE RECIPES >

\$500 WINNER

Moroccan Chicken Skewers

CARRIE RAY
HEART OF TEXAS EC



Marinated in a blend of citrus juice and spices and broiled to perfection, Ray's Moroccan chicken skewers are a tender, mouthwatering dish that's perfect for a weeknight meal or entertaining. Couscous and yogurt complement the skewers and round out the dish.

SERVES 6



- Zest and juice of 1 lemon**
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil**
- 2 tablespoons honey, plus more for drizzling**
- 1 tablespoon finely grated fresh ginger**
- 1 tablespoon ground coriander**
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin**
- 2 teaspoons salt**
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper**
- 2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs or breasts, cut into large pieces**
- 2 lemons, halved**
- Fresh flat-leaf parsley, chopped**
- Couscous (optional)**
- Yogurt (optional)**

1. In a bowl, stir together lemon zest and juice, olive oil, honey, ginger, coriander, cumin, salt, and pepper for the marinade. Set aside 2 tablespoons.
2. Add chicken to marinade, turning to coat evenly.
3. Preheat broiler.
4. Place chicken onto wooden or metal skewers, then place skewers onto a foil-lined sheet pan. Add one lemon half to each corner of the sheet pan.
5. Place baking sheet in oven 4 inches from heating element. Broil until charred, about 12 minutes, turning skewers over halfway through.
6. Remove from oven, spoon the reserved marinade onto the chicken and sprinkle with parsley. Drizzle the lemon halves with honey and serve alongside for squeezing over the chicken.
7. Serve with couscous and yogurt, if desired.

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

SIMPLY SALADS DUE JANUARY 10

Come summer, we'll all be looking to escape the heat of the kitchen. Your best salad recipe could win a cool \$500. Go online and submit your favorite by January 10.





Texas Meyer Lemon Pie

RHAE BROWN
SAM HOUSTON EC

Lemon lovers, this easy pie is for y'all! It's jam-packed with heavenly tartness and bakes in a store-bought pie crust. Simple and sublime, Brown's lemon pie is sure to impress.

3 eggs, room temperature
1¼ cups sugar
½ cup Meyer lemon juice
4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter, melted
1 deep-dish frozen pie crust, unbaked
Whipped topping (optional)

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Whisk eggs, sugar and lemon juice until smooth. Add melted butter and whisk to combine.
3. Pour mixture into pie crust and place on sheet pan. Bake 30–35 minutes.
4. Cool completely before serving. Serve with whipped topping if desired.

SERVES 8

TCP Find hundreds more recipes that feature citrus fruits and juices in our bountiful archive online.

Citrus With the Assist

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ

Use fresh citrus in marinades for grilling or in dressings for salads.

Brighten baked goods by adding a touch of lemon or orange zest.

Fold orange segments into pancakes, waffles or warm oatmeal.

Add lime zest to salt for a festive salt rim for margaritas.

Add a splash of fresh citrus juice to your water for a refreshing twist.

Tuck lemon slices into the cavity of a chicken for a juicy roast chicken.

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COURTESY CHET GARNER

Moment's Notice

A history museum in Laredo marks a short-lived republic's capital

BY CHET GARNER

TRAVELING TO DOWNTOWN Laredo feels like visiting a different country. Maybe that's because it was at one point in history! I'm not talking about the fact that Laredo was once part of Mexico (all of Texas was). I'm talking about the lesser-known Republic of the Rio Grande that existed for 11 short months in 1840 with Laredo as its capital.

It's a story that reads more like a movie and is best explored at its former capitol-turned-museum.

I started my travels in the San Agustin de Laredo Historic District with a chile relleno smothered in queso from El Mesón de San Agustin, a local favorite, and then set out to explore the 269-year-old neighborhood's adobe buildings surrounding a Spanish-style plaza.

One of the most significant buildings is a simple, single-story structure that was once the capitol of a new nation. Today it's the Republic of the Rio Grande Museum. I ducked my head as I stepped through the low wooden door frame and was immediately transported back in time.

The story of this short-lived nation starts in 1836, after Texas won its independence from Mexico. Residents between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande sought to quell instability along the border and decided to form their own country made up of the Mexican states of Coahuila, Nuevo León and Tamaulipas. The armies of the new nation tried to fend off Mexican President Antonio López de Santa Anna's forces, but after a betrayal, a beheading and 283 days, the republic ended.

The museum showcases memorabilia from that time with displays, pictures, books and furniture. There are three restored rooms: an office and sitting area, a bedroom, and kitchen. The republic is gone, but I could still feel a spirit of independence permeating the museum and entire town. ■

ABOVE Chet waves the Republic of the Rio Grande flag.

TCP Follow along as Chet learns about the nation that was centered in Laredo. See the video on our website and see all his Texplorations 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.

JANUARY

09

Orange On Your Feet: The Story of Emilio & Gloria Estefan, (409) 886-5535, lutchter.org

11

Harlingen Sounds of Silence Tribute, (956) 392-9757, harlingenconcert.com

Bandera [11-13] Bandera County Junior Livestock Show, (210) 260-8224, bcjlsa.com

Sweetwater [11-13] Nolan County Stock Show, (325) 235-3484, nolancc.com

12

Fort Worth [12-13] Carter Anderson, (512) 817-9535, blcomedy.com

La Grange [12-13] Ray Wylie Hubbard, (979) 968-9944, thebugleboy.org

Kerrville [12-14] Star Crossed, (210) 492-9519, cameratas.org

Fort Worth [12-Feb. 3] Stock Show and Rodeo, (817) 877-2400, fwssr.com

13

Abilene Don Juan by the Sea, (325) 677-6710, abiphil.com

Brenham Uptown Swirl Downtown Brenham, (979) 337-7580, cityofbrenham.org

Fredericksburg Hill Country Indian Artifact Show, (830) 329-2636, hillcountryindianartifacts.com

Galveston Yaga's Chili Quest and Beer Fest,
(409) 770-0999,
yagaschiliquest.com

Marfa Star Party in the Badlands, (432) 424-3327,
tpwd.texas.gov

Mesquite Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration,
(972) 216-8132,
mesquiteartscenter.org

Round Top Houston Jazz Orchestra, (979) 249-3129,
festivalhill.org

Houston MLK Grande Parade, mlkgrandeparade.org

New Caney [19-20] Hold 'Em & Hit 'Em Barbecue Cook-Off, hhclub.org

Fredericksburg [19-21] Trade Days, (210) 846-4094,
fbgtradedays.com

Bastrop [19-21, 26-28, Feb. 2-4] Freaky Friday,
(512) 200-3826,
bastropoperahouse.org

Victoria Lyle Lovett and His Large Band, (361) 576-4500,
victoriasymphony.com

Plano [20-21] Dallas Area Train Show, (972) 941-5840,
dfwtrainshows.com

Amarillo Bert Kreischer,
1-800-692-1338,
amarillotheater.com

Richards Guthrie Jones,
(936) 436-9050,
wscwinery.com

Raymondville [24-27] Willacy County Livestock Show & Fair, wclsf.com

MORE EVENTS >

TCP Submit Your Event

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




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Event Calendar

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Pick of the Month

Goosebump Jump

Granbury, January 20
(817) 573-5548
visitgranbury.com

Help kick off the winter tourism season with a jump into the frigid waters of Lake Granbury. The forecast includes a 100% chance of snow and shivers, and an after-party will warm you up with coffee, cocoa and cookies.

JANUARY EVENTS CONTINUED

26

La Grange Marcia Ball,
(979) 968-9944,
thebugleboy.org

**Fulton [26-27] Cruising
the Coast Quilt Show**,
piecemakersbythebay.org

**South Padre Island
[26-28] Market Days**,
spimarketdays.com

27

**Jefferson Mardi
Gras Queen Mab Ball**,
(903) 665-3733,
mardigrasupriver.com

**Port Aransas Garden Club
Home Tour**, (361) 834-4130,
portaransasgardenclub.org

**Round Top Asleep at the
Wheel**, (979) 249-3129,
festivalhill.org

29

**Johnson City [29-Feb. 23]
Wine Lovers Celebration**,
(872) 216-9463,
texashillcountrywineries.org

30

**Harlingen Barbara
Padilla**, (956) 392-9757
harlingenconcert.com

FEBRUARY

01

**Frisco East-West Shrine
Bowl**, (813) 281-8686,
shrinebowl.com

**Bandera [1-3] Cowboy
Mardi Gras**, (830) 796-4849,
11thstcowboybar.com

02

**Fredericksburg First Friday
Art Walk**, (830) 990-8160,
visitfredericksburgtx.com

**Granbury Aquatic Wild
Workshop**, (650) 471-3285,
tpwd.texas.gov

**Lake Jackson Colbie
Caillat**, (979) 230-3658,
brazosport.edu

**Temple [2-3] Father
Daughter Dance**,
(254) 298-5690,
templeparks.com

Humble [2-4] Rodeo,
(281) 241-7436,
humbleroдео.com

**Galveston [2-13] Mardi
Gras**, (409) 770-0999,
mardigrasgalveston.com

03

**North Zulch Volunteer
Fire Department Chili
Cookoff**, (979) 488-9214,
facebook.com/nzvf

**Sweetwater Lift
Every Voice**,
sweetwaterauditorium.org

Local Landmarks

They define our landscapes, become guideposts when giving directions, and are a point of pride in communities large and small. Texas landmarks are as full of character and charm as the Texans who create them.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ

1 CASE RAMIREZ-MELTON
LAMAR ELECTRIC

Sunset at the Eiffel Tower in Texas' Paris.

2 CARL BURNHAM
PEDERNALES EC

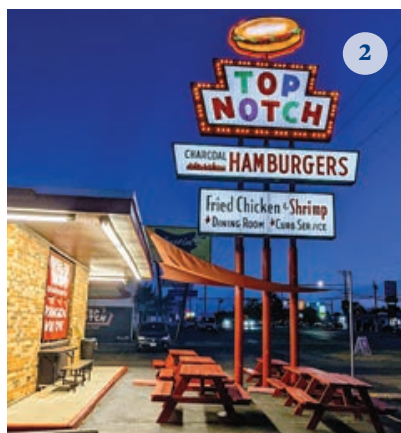
A longtime Austin favorite, Top Notch has been grilling up burgers and other fare since 1971.

3 MARK BONAME
JACKSON EC

You can see these Easter Island statue replicas on the loop in Victoria.

4 DENNIS MURPHY
UNITED COOPERATIVE SERVICES

The blueprints mistakenly had inches instead of feet, and the builder in Wichita Falls made it as it was written.



Upcoming Contests

DUE JAN 10 Rides
DUE FEB 10 Food and Cooking
DUE MAR 10 Shells and Scales



Enter online at TexasCoopPower.com/contests.

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



Touched by an Angel

An unflappable donkey imparts peace on a farm

BY MARTHA DEERING
ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN TOMAC

GROWING UP, my family lived on a tree-lined street in Waco but longed for the country life, so my parents bought land in nearby Rosenthal. It was only 24 acres, but we called it “the farm.”

Excitement at the farm escalated when our next-door neighbor—who owned a real farm—came home one day with a trailer load of donkeys. They were a sight to behold—all those impossibly long ears sticking up above the sides of the trailer.

I was smitten. My grandmother had just read Marguerite Henry’s *Brighty of the Grand Canyon* (about a burro that lived in the gorge) aloud to me, and this load of donkeys made my heart ache. I begged my parents to buy one.

Unloaded into a pen, the donkeys were a mixed bag—fat, thin, gentle,

grumpy, young and ancient—but one little brown jenny with shaggy hair and a white nose poked her head through the fence. Her kind brown eyes gazed right into mine. My parents, imagining the word “babysitter” printed in large letters on her forehead, cheerfully handed over \$25. I named her Bright Angel, after the donkey in Henry’s book.

Bright Angel was no Secretariat. She had one speed, a slow walk. She was kind-hearted and quiet and held no animosity toward any living thing. Eventually, she became my best friend.

If I rode her down the gravel road to the little gas station on the corner, she waited patiently outside while I went in to get a Grapette and a Zero candy bar. She won best supporting actress for many a flickery homemade Western after my older brother got an 8 mm movie camera for his birthday.

When Christmas approached, my school, St. Alban’s in Waco, decided to enter a float in the citywide parade. My parents volunteered Angel to ride on the float and carry the Virgin Mary to Bethlehem.

When we loaded her onto the flatbed trailer, she didn’t twitch an ear. I was the Virgin Mary, a most exalted role for a 6-year-old. A large man dressed as the angel Gabriel stood near the front of the float with a tinfoil trumpet in case of unanticipated excitement, but even the bands and the firetruck’s siren left Angel unperturbed.

She got a cinnamon roll for her fine performance.

Eventually my brothers and I graduated to horses and our parents to larger farms, but Angel lived a long and peaceful life as a cherished member of the family, proving that even the most unlikely of best friends can be a lifelong treasure. ■



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