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FEATURES

6 Christmas in Texas

Texans deck anything we want to at Christmas—be it babes, beer halls or bouffant hairdos. So inflate your Santa and assemble the toys under the tree, because it's that special time of year again. This photo essay includes offerings from several award-winning photographers.

10 A Healing Journey: Snowball Express Visits Disneyland

By Carol Moczygemba

Marisol Peña and her children are among the hundreds of grieving military families who have enjoyed a program put together on a wing and a prayer in 2006.

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TEXAS CO-OP POWER

Texas Co-op Power is published by your electric cooperative to enhance the quality of life of its member-customers in an educational and entertaining format.

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POWER TALK

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A WEEK MAKES!

Ten East Texas cooperatives were knocked about by Hurricane Ike: 180,498 out of some 300,000 co-op meters were out September 14 due to the storm, which caused the most far-reaching blackout in Texas history. On September 21, only 17,579 meters were still off-line—less than 10 percent of the total outages.

By September 25, all co-ops had restored power.

Gov. Rick Perry, who visited Sam Houston Electric Cooperative (SHECO) on September 18, encouraged members of the cooperative, all of whom were initially left without power by the hurricane, to be patient. “This is not our first rodeo,” he said.

The governor complimented cooperatives statewide for their quick response and unceasing efforts to quickly restore electricity in the wake of Hurricane Ike. “This



Governor Rick Perry greets Marilyn Sutton, Livingston City Manager (center); Kyle Kuntz, Sam Houston EC CEO; and Ronnie Gidley, KBS Management (right), during his visit to SHECO September 18.

spirit of cooperation makes me proud to be a Texan and proud to be associated with those who know how to get things done,” Perry said.

SHECO executives discussed with the governor the importance of strong local leadership during a crisis such as Hurricane Ike and how the combined efforts of all East Texas cooperatives made it possible to restore power to members quickly and effectively.

“In a manner of speaking, Hurricane Rita (three years ago) made us better,” said Kyle Kuntz, SHECO’s general manager and CEO. “The lessons learned from Hurricane Rita enabled us to improve our efforts to effectively and safely restore power to our members in a disaster situation.”

Perry invited SHECO to get together after the Ike restoration to discuss the use of various co-op resources to further improve storm preparedness and response time.

Next month, *Texas Co-op Power* will publish a “Hurricane Ike Diary” and introduce readers to some of the numerous cooperative linemen who rushed from other parts of the state to help in East Texas’ time of crisis.

letters



SHEER BLISS

I very much enjoyed Winter Prosapio’s piece “Tangled Up in Bliss” (September 2008).

Although I have no direct experience with motherhood, I have been married for many years to a woman I consider the greatest mother of them all, and so I’ve at least spent a lot of time observing it. Prosapio’s piece was beautifully written, light and, at the same time, moving.

Thank you to her for writing it and to you for printing it.

ANDREW FORSYTHE

Pedernales Electric Cooperative

HELIUM BLUES

Thank you for your September 2008 article regarding depletion of the natural gas helium. My late father, Claude Pickett, was superintendent of the largest helium plant in the world, Exell Helium Plant, which was located 35 miles north of Amarillo. After Exell’s closure, he was superintendent of the Soncy Helium Plant in Amarillo. My dad frequently expressed dismay, disappointment and concern about what he considered often frivolous and wasteful use of this most precious gas. Many times I heard him ask, “When the helium is gone, it is gone forever and then what will we do?”

CLAUDEANE PICKETT SUBLETT

Wood County Electric Cooperative

WAY TO GO, SBEC

Just a pat on the back for the San Bernard Electric Cooperative guys who worked day and night during and after Hurricane Ike to get the lights up in our area. We always hear about the guys (utility work crews) from Michigan, Canada or wherever, but they (media) seem to forget about the people in the country. I hope all the guys were safe during all that lightning.

CINDY THIESSEN

San Bernard Electric Cooperative

KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK

My entire family watched from our living room as Hurricane Ike pushed closer and closer to our neck of the woods recently. We were all pondering the same question: Would this be another Rita, or could it be worse? After all, this one was forecast to come FAR closer to our home than Rita had.

I returned home a week after Ike hit to far worse than I expected. We had numerous trees down and extensive roof damage. We all wondered how long we would be forced to power our home by generator (I should mention here that we have two, yes, TWO 3-year-olds!). When our electricity was restored on the ninth day following the storm, I was begged by my family members not to follow through on my threats to personally kiss each and every one of the electrical workers in our neighborhood. I am absolutely thrilled with how quickly everyone came together and worked so hard.

I’ve never been more pleased to be a customer of Sam Houston Electric Cooperative. Keep up the good work!

STEPHANIE AMADOR

Sam Houston Electric Cooperative

We want to hear from our readers. Send letters to: Editor, *Texas Co-op Power*, 2550 S. IH-35, Austin, TX 78704, e-mail us at letters@texas-ec.org, or submit online at www.texascoopower.com. Please include the name of your town and electric co-op. Letters may be edited for clarity and length and are printed as space allows. Read additional letters at www.texascoopower.com.

H A P P E N I N G S

Learn about frontier life, finish your Christmas shopping and chat with Santa during **CHRISTMAS AT OLD FORT CONCHO**, set for December 5-7 in San Angelo.

The event will be held at the former U.S. military post built in 1867.

From a Santa's workshop to chuck-wagon cooking classes, the event offers something for every age.

In addition to the workshop, during which youngsters make holiday crafts perfect for gift giving, children can attend sessions about Native American lore and a boot camp in which they "enlist" as soldiers.

All ages enjoy shopping in the historic fort buildings and watching a performance in which actors bring to life soldiers and civilians of the fort era.

Be sure to check out the gingerbread house and Christmas cookie contests and an old-fashioned cowboy church service. Also on tap are live musical performances, including the sounds of Christmas from area church choirs and school entertainers.

For more information, call (325) 481-2646 or go to www.fortconcho.com.



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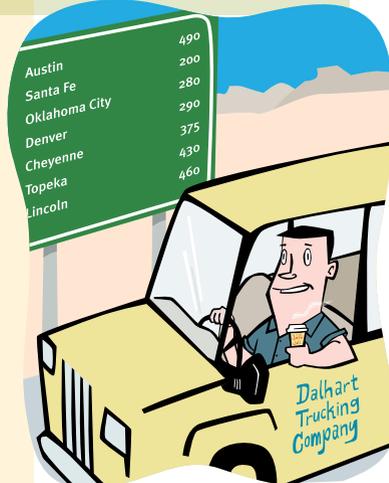
A TASTE OF 1880s AUSTIN

Guests of the ritzy **Driskill Hotel** in downtown Austin, which opened in 1886, once had an expansive view of the hills to the west, the Colorado River to the south and, just five blocks north, the construction of the Texas Capitol. That view is now limited by surrounding condo and office towers, but the hotel, built in grand style by cattleman Col. Jesse Driskill, retains its original luxury. The lobby and mezzanine, awash in white marble and rich carpets, bespeak the millions of dollars spent in restorations to the hotel, which has hosted presidents and many a lawmaker. The hotel's bar, done up in the style of a cattle baron's home with leather sofas and cowhide bar stools, sits next to the award-winning Driskill Grill.

—From *Historic Hotels of Texas: A Traveler's Guide*, Texas A&M University Press, first edition, 2007



WHO KNEW?



It's more exhaustin' to Austin from Dalhart—about 490 miles as the crow flies—than it is from Dalhart, the seat of Dallam County in the Texas Panhandle, to six other state capitals: **Santa Fe, New Mexico** (about 200 miles); **Oklahoma City** (about 280); **Denver, Colorado** (about 290); **Cheyenne, Wyoming** (about 375); **Topeka, Kansas** (about 430); and **Lincoln, Nebraska** (about 460).

Texas Co-op Power (USPS 540-560) is published monthly by Texas Electric Cooperatives (TEC). Periodical Postage Paid at Austin, TX and at additional offices. TEC is the statewide association representing 74 electric cooperatives. *Texas Co-op Power's* website is www.texascoopower.com. Call (512) 454-0311 or e-mail nkorthcott@texas-ec.org.

Subscription price is \$3.84 per year for individual members of subscribing cooperatives. If you are not a member of a subscribing cooperative, you can purchase an annual subscription at the nonmember rate of \$7.50. Individual copies and back issues are available for \$3 each.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Texas Co-op Power* (USPS 540-560), 2550 S. IH-35, Austin, TX 78704. Please enclose label from this copy of *Texas Co-op Power* showing old address and key numbers.

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FUTURE TALK

A BETTER WAY TO STORE ELECTRICITY?

One of the major drawbacks to renewable energy is that it is not always available when it is needed.



Researchers at the University of Texas have said they've made a breakthrough that could lead to a storage solution. A carbon-based material called "graphene," which is only one atom thick, has shown the potential to double the current capacity of electricity storage devices called ultracapacitors. Those devices store large amounts of electrical energy and can release it onto the grid on demand, such as when wind or solar sources are not available. This development could help make large-scale renewable generation more practical.

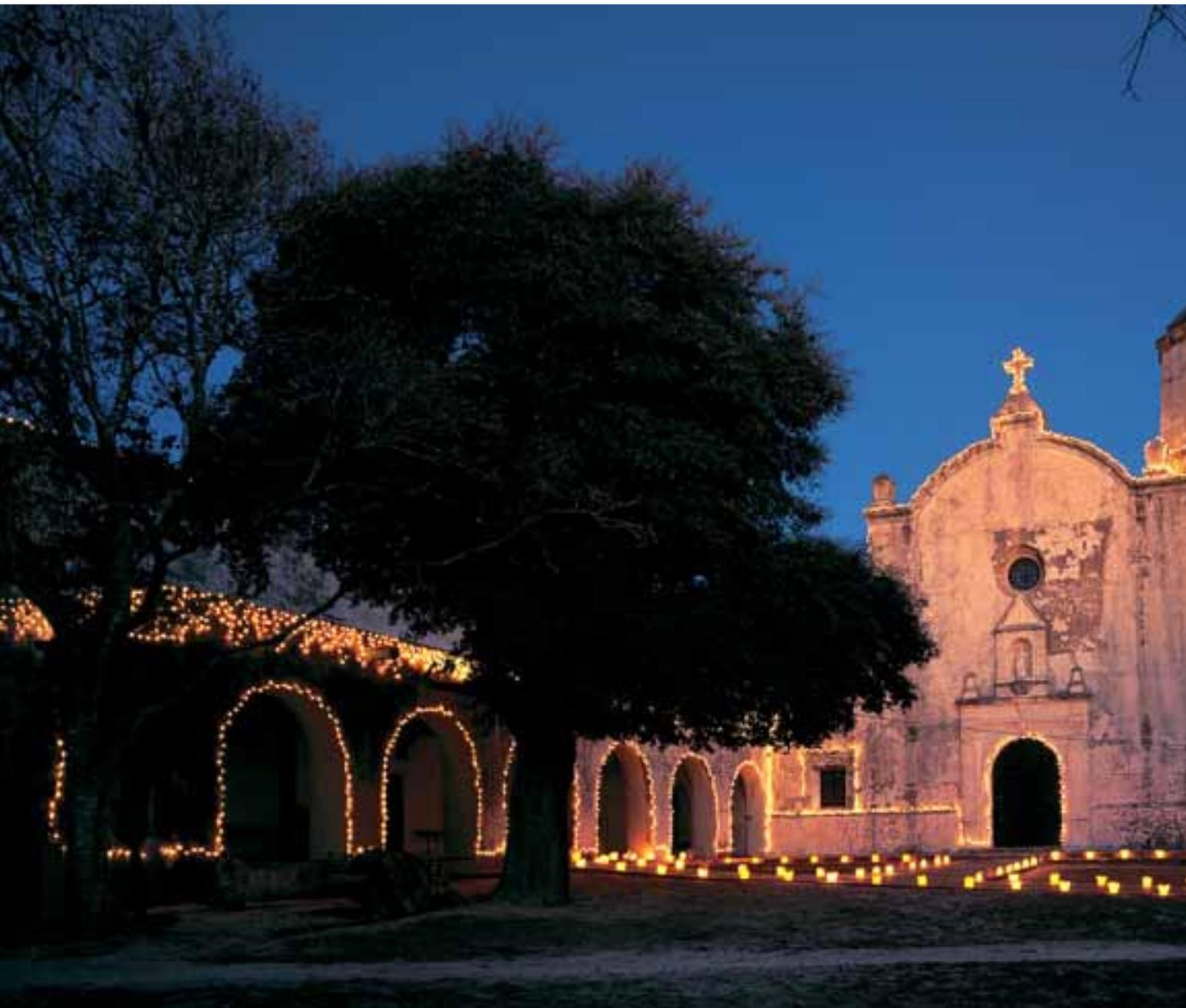
CHRISTMAS IN TEXAS

IS TRADITIONAL ... WACKY ... WONDERFUL!

AS TEXAS' AWARD-WINNING PHOTOGRAPHERS ENJOY SHOWING HERE, THE WEATHER CAN BE TROPICAL OR ARCTIC. A TEXAS TOWN IS AS LIKELY TO DECORATE A MUNICIPAL PALM TREE AS A DOUGLAS FIR. AMID CAROLERS, CHILDREN'S HOLIDAY PRODUCTIONS AND LA POSADAS PROCESSIONS, DON'T BE SURPRISED TO FIND ELVIS LEADING A HOLIDAY PARADE OR RUDOLPH ON A ROAD SIGN. WE DECK ANYTHING WE WANT TO AT CHRISTMAS—BE IT BABES, BEER HALLS OR BOUFFANT HAIRDOS. SO INFLATE YOUR SANTA AND ASSEMBLE THE TOYS UNDER THE TREE, BECAUSE IT'S THAT SPECIAL TIME OF YEAR AGAIN.

MOMENTS OF PEACE AND BLESSING AT THE MISSION NUESTRA SEÑORA DEL ESPÍRITU SANTO DE ZÚÑIGA, GOLIAD

Laurence Parent





LA POSADAS IN McALLEN RE-ENACTS THE SEARCH FOR LODGING IN BETHLEHEM
Bob Daemmrich



A WHITE CHRISTMAS IN MCKITTRICK CANYON, GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS
Laurence Parent



HIGHWAY RUDOLPH
Laurence Parent



DECKING THE HALLS ... GRUENE HALL, THAT IS
Laurence Parent



CHRISTMAS HEADLIGHTS
John Langford



ALL DECKED OUT
Rick Patrick



GETTING IT IN GEAR
Will van Overbeek



A DANCING ELVIS LEADS THE CHRISTMAS PARADE IN EDINBURG
Bob Daemmrich



LIGHTED PALM TREES IN WESLACO
Larry Ditto



NUTCRACKER
Frank Curry



SEE YA NEXT YEAR, SANTA
Ave Bonar

A HEALING JOURNEY

BY CAROL MOCZYGEMBA

Ivan Peña was a wide-eyed, sweet-natured 5-year-old when his dad, U.S. Army Sgt. Roger Peña Jr., was deployed to Afghanistan in January 2006. Peña promised Ivan he would take him and his little brother, Gabriel, to Disney World in Florida when he came back to the States in November for a scheduled leave. It was hard to say goodbye, but the promise of going to Disney World with his family gave Ivan something to hold on to.

Roger Peña, a charismatic, handsome man with intense brown eyes and a legendary comic streak, enlisted in the Army in 2004 because he saw military service as an opportunity to assure a good future for his family. “He wanted the kids to have everything, to have security,” said his wife, Marisol, whose parents, José and Sandra Gomez, are members of Magic Valley Electric Cooperative.

Peña, a champion chess player in his youth, was a natural athlete and devoted husband, father, son, brother and friend—all traits well suited to his work as a combat medic. Peña had some notion of the dangers he would face, and he wanted to protect his family from worry. So he urged Marisol and the children to live in San Antonio with his parents during his tour of duty. There, Marisol resumed her studies in bilingual education, Ivan joined a swimming class, and baby Gabriel grew into a spunky toddler. As much as possible, they carried on without Peña, counting the days until his return.

Marisol remembers June 13, 2006, as the day “my whole world crumbled.” The two men in Army dress uniforms who came to talk with her didn’t have to say anything. The moment she realized what was happening, it was as if she had been struck by lightning. Peña had been killed when his convoy came

under fire during combat in Musa Qulah, Afghanistan.

Grief-stricken, unmoored and lost, Marisol returned to her hometown of Mission, where her parents and siblings lived. Unable to plan for the future or escape her ever-present sorrow, she turned her focus to Ivan and Gabriel. How could she help them through this numbing and confusing time? She remembered her husband’s promise to take Ivan to Disney World, a promise now wrapped in heartache. Marisol, who wanted to learn everything she could about grieving children who have lost a parent in the military, began scouring the Internet for information.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

That’s when she came upon the website for Snowball Express.

“It was too good to be true,” Marisol said. “A free trip to Disneyland for kids of fallen soldiers.” She checked it out further. It was true. Snowball Express, a national, nonprofit program, offered an all-expenses-paid trip to Disneyland in Anaheim, California, for children and spouses of soldiers who died in military service after 9/11. Maybe it wasn’t exactly Disney World, but it was Disney. And Ivan was just as happy for the chance to see Mickey Mouse in California as in Florida.

Retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Roy

White, a member of CoServ Electric, is chairman of the board for Snowball Express. He’s been part of the program since it began in early 2006 as a modest Rotary Club project. As a captain with Southwest Airlines, White managed to persuade the airlines and the pilots union to underwrite more than 100 tickets to get Snowball Express off the ground. “It was all put together with baling wire and lots of other loose ends,” White remembers. A website was created inviting eligible families to come aboard the Snowball Express. “The families showed great courage,” White said. “All they got was a phone call and a couple of e-mails. It was all grassroots, no formal budget and no major media.”

That first year, nearly 900 children and parents from as far away as Australia and Japan and all across the United States, including Marisol and Ivan Peña, were guests of Snowball Express, so named because it takes place around the December holidays. “The families had a great time,” White said. “It was amazing the healing that went on, just with children coming together, healing together, for the first time ever.”

Marisol recalled telling Ivan that even though his dad couldn’t take him to Disney World, they could go to Disneyland instead. “His face lit up



Gabriel and Ivan share memories of their Snowball Express trip to Disneyland last year.

SNOWBALL EXPRESS

Nearly 1,600 attendees are expected to be part of the 2008 Snowball Express experience. American Airlines, in partnership with BP North America, will commission six chartered aircraft to bring 1,000 children and surviving spouses from 19 U.S. cities to the event. American Airlines has also committed to flying 30 attendees from overseas, making the Snowball Express contribution the largest single donation of its kind in the airline's history. Transportation support continues, as well, from Southwest, Airtran and Jet Blue airlines. In addition, hotels in Orange County, California, will donate nearly \$1 million worth of accommodations.

Registration is closed for 2008, but open for 2009. Plans for 2009 are to bring the families to Dallas/Fort Worth for, among other possibilities, a Dallas Cowboys game, a trip to Six Flags over Texas and Dallas Motor Speedway. Snowball Express recently received recognition and a \$5,000 grant at the 2008 Newman's Own Awards ceremony held at the Pentagon to recognize the top 15 home-front organizations making contributions to military quality of life.

For information about Snowball Express and letters from past participants, go to www.snowballexpress.org.



Ivan, Marisol and Gabriel Peña honor the memory of husband and father, Sgt. Roger Peña, with photos, medals of commendation and other mementos in every room of their home.

with a big smile,” she said. “That smile was worth everything to me.”



For Marisol, the trip was more than the fulfillment of Ivan’s Disney dream. It was a small step toward coming to terms with her husband’s death. Surrounded by spouses with similar stories, she felt understood. She wasn’t alone in her struggle to work through her own grief while staying strong for her children. “When Ivan cries that he wishes his father was here, I feel so helpless,” she said. “Sometimes I think it’s all a big mistake, that one day Roger will walk through that door.” She didn’t

have to explain any of that to her Snowball Express companions. Neither did Ivan.

But early in 2007, Snowball Express faced some major challenges. White explained that the volunteer coalition of people and businesses that got the project off the ground had been too loosely organized to guarantee its future. “We’ve got to find a way to keep this going,” he remembers thinking. “There’s too much healing going on to let it go.” So he and a handful of other supporters got to work. “We found some kindred spirits, and when people heard it would continue, we got more corporate spon-

sors. We reorganized and made it simpler.” With just eight weeks to go before Snowball Express 2007 was supposed to take place, the organization faced a shortfall of \$500,000 for airline tickets and other expenses.

Then, almost miraculously, Capt. Jim Palmersheim, an American Airlines pilot, persuaded the airline to donate 500 tickets—three chartered airplanes—to something they had learned about only two weeks earlier. “The cause was what drew them,” White said. On a smaller scale, it also drew Air Tran Airways and Jet Blue. “We had a generous change of fortune,” White said.

Marisol didn’t expect to be eligible for another Snowball Express experience, but she was invited to come back for the 2007 trip. “That time, all three of us went,” she said, “and it was so much better because we were together.” Ivan and Gabriel get animated when they look through their Snowball Express scrapbook, remembering breakfast with Minnie Mouse, holding hands with Goofy and walking down Main Street with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. And then there’s “that blue guy from Winnie the Pooh,” as Gabriel refers to Eeyore.

Huddled together on the sofa, their legs draped with a Disneyland blanket, the boys get a gleam in their eyes when Marisol reminds them that they will be part of the Snowball Express family again this year. “To see those little eyes sparkle and that big, excited smile on their faces is something that I am very thankful to the Snowball team for,” she says. “They do this from the bottom of their hearts, and it shows that there are caring people out there who do not forget the great sacrifice these families have made.”

Carol Moczygemba is executive editor of Texas Co-op Power.

TAPS

More than 4,200 families, encompassing more than 8,500 children, have lost military members in combat or in training since September 11, 2001. Studies have shown that the children of these fallen soldiers are particularly susceptible to anxiety and depression.

Among the organizations offering support is the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), a community of families who have lost a loved one in military service and volunteer their time to support newly bereaved children and spouses. TAPS sponsors “Good Grief Camps,” a healing experience for children. In 2007 one of the camps was held in Salado, near Fort Hood. Many of the services provided by TAPS are free of charge to surviving families and are made possible by the generosity of donors. For information about TAPS programs, go to www.taps.org.

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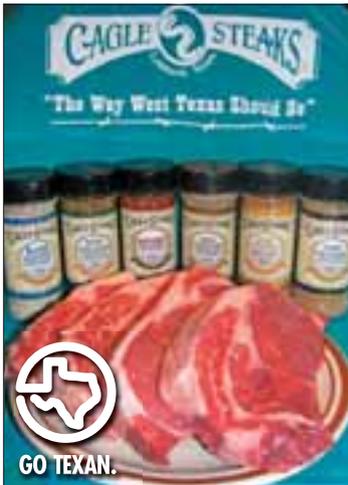
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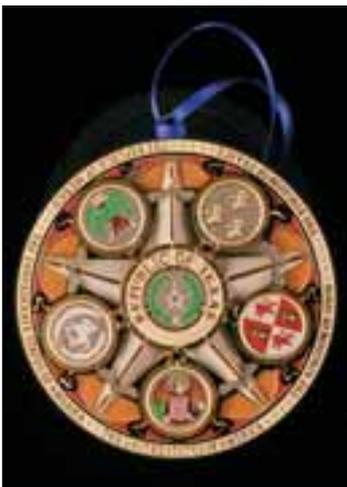
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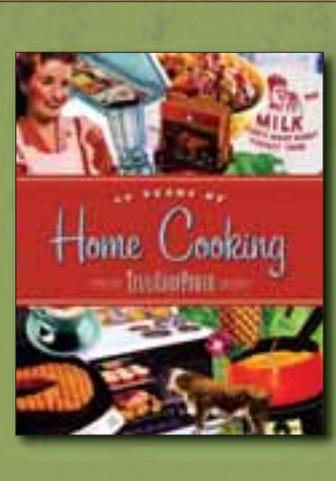


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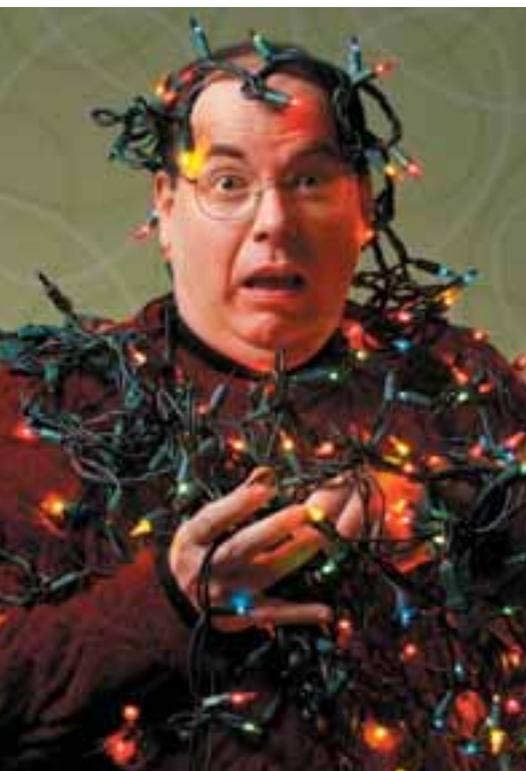
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Have a Jolly and Safe Holiday Season

Decorating the home for the holiday season is a great tradition, but an essential part of stringing the lights and putting up the tree is keeping an eye on electrical safety. Here are simple steps that everyone can take to enjoy a safe and happy holiday season.



Carefully checking (and untangling) every string of lights before you hang them is an important safety step.

DON'T OVERLOAD YOUR ELECTRIC CIRCUITS. Check fuses or circuit-breaker panels to see what your home can handle and stay well within the limits.

AVOID PUTTING TOO MANY STRINGS OF LIGHTS TOGETHER and plugging them into a single outlet.

WATCH FOR FLICKERING LIGHTS, sparks from appliances or wall outlets, warm plates, plugs or outlets, and dimming lights or television screens. These signal potential danger spots that could cause an electrical fire.

MAKE SURE THERE'S A BULB IN EACH SOCKET. If a bulb is burned out, leave it in until you have a replacement. Immediately replace any broken bulbs that have exposed filaments.

USE ONLY UL-LISTED EQUIPMENT. Check for frayed cords, cracked insulation and damaged plugs.

SURGE PROTECTOR STRIPS ARE A SAFE OPTION if you need more outlets.

MATCH PLUGS WITH OUTLETS. Never force a three-pronged plug into a two-hole outlet or extension cord.

DON'T RUN EXTENSION CORDS UNDER RUGS, around furniture legs or across doorways.

USE SAFETY CAPS TO COVER OUTLETS. If you have children in the house or are expecting young visitors, inspect your home for cracked or missing outlet covers.

KEEP YOUR NATURAL TREE WELL WATERED to prevent bulbs from igniting dry branches. Check to make sure an artificial tree is inflammable.

FASTEN OUTDOOR LIGHTS SECURELY to trees, house walls or other firm supports using insulated staples, or run them through hooks to protect lights from wind damage. Do not nail, tack, pinch, nick or stress wiring.

OUTDOOR LIGHTING SHOULD HAVE INSULATED ELECTRICAL CORDS and be plugged into a ground-fault circuit interrupter-protected receptacle only. Keep all plugs and connectors off the ground, away from puddles and snow.

NEVER USE ELECTRIC LIGHTS ON A METALLIC TREE. The tree can become charged with electricity from faulty lights, and a person touching a branch could be electrocuted. Instead, place colored spotlights beside or above the tree.

NEVER USE LIGHTED CANDLES ON A TREE or near other evergreens. Always use nonflammable holders and place candles where there is no risk of them being knocked down.

Is Your Home Bundled Up for Winter?

Proper Insulation Is Key to Efficiency

One of the simplest ways to reduce your home's heating and cooling costs—and improve comfort—involves installing proper insulation. Doing so provides resistance to heat flow. The more heat-flow resistance your insulation provides, the lower your heating and cooling costs.

Heat flows naturally from a warmer to a cooler space. In winter, heat moves directly from heated living spaces to adjacent unheated areas and even outdoors. It can also travel indirectly through interior ceilings, walls and floors—wherever there is a difference in temperature.

To maintain comfort, heat lost in the winter must be replaced by your heating system. Proper insulation decreases heat loss.

Heat flow resistance is measured or rated in terms of its R-value. The higher the R-value, the greater the insulation's effectiveness.

When calculating the R-value of a multilayered insulation, add R-values of individual layers. Installing more insulation in your home increases the R-value.

The effectiveness of insulation also depends on how and where it's installed. For example, insulation that gets compressed will not provide its full rated R-value. The overall R-value of a wall or ceiling will be somewhat different from the R-value of the insulation because some heat flows around the insulation through studs and joists. Therefore, it's important to properly install your insulation to achieve the maximum R-value.

Finding Shelter from the Storm

As many people living along the Gulf Coast and in East Texas who were in the path of Hurricane Ike can attest firsthand, life without electricity is difficult at best. Electricity, once considered a luxury for wealthy urbanites, is an integral part of modern society.

These days, we are so dependent on electricity in almost every aspect of life that an outage leaves businesses hobbled, traffic snarled and families not only in the dark, but also at the mercy of the elements.

Electric cooperatives like yours know how much communities depend on their power lifeline. That's why co-op crews, with the help of workers from across Texas and other states, leapt into action in September

to help restore electricity to members left powerless by Hurricane Ike, which left one co-op completely without power and nine others with outages over parts of their systems.

Hard work and smart planning by those co-ops paid off, and less than two weeks later, the lights were back on for all but a few individual members. Some customers of investor-owned utilities, on the other hand, endured blackouts that stretched into October.

The co-ops' quick turnaround not only is a credit to hard-working linemen and others, but it also demonstrates one of the advantages of



Co-op crews help restore power after Hurricane Ike.

electric cooperatives, which follow the principle of Cooperation Among Cooperatives. If disaster strikes, co-ops are there for one another just like a good neighbor would be.

Going Green This Holiday Season

While the holiday season brings great joy, it can also be expensive. Shopping, entertaining, big meals and decorating can take a toll on our pocket-books and the environment. Here are some tips to help make this holiday season a little bit greener for you and your family.

- Remember to turn holiday lights off before you go to bed or put them on a timer.

- Make your own wrapping paper and gift bags. Give new life to brown paper bags by decorating them with last year's Christmas cards. Or use the cards to make "to" and "from" tags.

- Use strings of LED lights, which look the same as conventional incandescent bulbs but last longer and use 80 to 90 percent less energy.



Use real tableware instead of disposable to help reduce landfill waste.

- Use shredded paper for packing material for fragile gifts.

- It's hard to let go of the tradition of mailing holiday cards, but a personalized e-card lets you stay in touch while saving trees, gas and money.

- Use your microwave oven whenever possible; it cuts cooking time and saves energy.

- Instead of buying something new, think about recycling things that have value to the recipient. Compile a book of favorite recipes to share or create a box of dress-up clothes (from thrift stores and garage sales) for young kids on your list.

- Use metal flatware and real glasses and dishes rather than disposable options. They look better, your guests will appreciate it, and you're not creating any waste in the landfill.

- And, when the holidays are done, recycle your Christmas tree. Instead of tossing it out for the garbage service to take, find out where you can have it chipped up for mulch or compost. Or, you can purchase a living tree that can be planted outside after the holidays are over.

Mama's Christmas Cactus

I couldn't leave the plant for strangers; it belonged with us.

BY PAT LEE MATHEWS

After Mama passed away, we sadly sold her small, white, frame house in the community of Bryans Mill and cleared it out for new owners. As I slowly prepared to close the house that held such wonderful memories for me and my family, I saw it: Mama's Christmas cactus. I just couldn't bear to throw it out like so many of her other things.

My mama had been so proud of that plant. As I sat there alone in the empty kitchen, with tears welling up in my eyes, I thought about Mama. She was Margie Fae Abston Lee, born into a pioneer Cass County family in 1923 in Bryans Mill. She had lived in that area all her life—as a small child, housewife and mother, and then as a widow. Her claim to fame was her wonderful cooking and her unconditional love for her family. She had married the love of her life, my dad, J.D. (Buddy) Lee, more than 50 years before, and together they created a simple life in the carefree country setting they both loved so much. I was their only child, and I learned so much from both of them.

She was a wonderful wife, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. At every Christmas lunch, she would ask, "Did you all see the pretty Christmas cactus? It is blooming again." And we would quickly say, "Oh yeah, it's pretty," thinking more about her special chicken and dressing and her chocolate pie baked in that flaky crust that was coming soon. We should have taken more time to appreciate that blooming gem. She had forced it to bloom for us at just the right time. But Mama never showed any disappointment in our lack of interest; she was just so happy that all her babies were there with her on this special day.

This precious old green plant had been in her simple kitchen on an old metal TV tray under the window air conditioner for as long as I could remember.

Mama had a green thumb. She cultivated blooming flowers in front of her house for passing drivers to see. After my father died, her passion for gardening helped fill her lonely days without him. She enjoyed sharing with her neighbors the large red tomatoes, the yellow crookneck squash and the spicy hot peppers that grew on either side of the concrete doorsteps leading up to her back porch. She always saved that first tomato of the season for me.

So, I took that dusty old cactus. It had lacked care and attention in the past months with Mama being sick and then with her death. I couldn't throw it out. And I didn't want to leave it there for strangers; it belonged with us. Driving from

Bryans Mill to my home in Texarkana that late Sunday afternoon, I decided that I would try my best to keep Mama's tradition alive and hoped that I could appreciate what Mama had for so many years.

Today, with the joyous Christmas season approaching and a chilling winter wind blowing outside, I took the old plant out of our guest room's dark closet. I had read, or perhaps Mama had told me, that for a Christmas cactus to bloom, it should be placed in darkness for several weeks. After a period without light, I retrieved the plant, decorated its pot in shiny red paper and tied a large green bow around it. When I put it on our family's dining room table, it seemed to come alive. Soon it was full of pinkish-red buds, just bursting to bloom for us, as it had so many times before for Mama. I whispered quietly, "Mama, do you see your Christmas cactus? It's blooming again."

I'll be so proud and happy to show off Mama's plant to our friends and neighbors who stop by during the holidays, and I'll share with them the precious memories associated with it. Christmas should be a time for families and friends to share their wonderful memories and to anticipate their dreams for the future while we celebrate the glorious birth of our Savior on that first Christmas so many years ago.

Thanks, Mama, for the precious memories.

Pat Lee Mathews is a retired schoolteacher and member of Bowie-Cass Electric Cooperative. This is her first published work.



BLANCO

Say Cheese

*Chrissy Omo milks
her goat business
for all it's worth*

**By Sheryl
Smith-Rodgers**



As soon as Model the Alpine milk goat scrambles through the door, she eagerly bumps her head into a plastic bucket filled with mixed grains. Behind her on the concrete floor, Chrissy Omo—outfitted in black rubber boots, a tank top and jeans—squats on a low stool, wipes the goat's bulging udder with disinfectant and attaches the milking machine.

"She walks just so, like she's a model," Omo says, explaining the goat's name while she waits for the commercial milker to finish its job. Soon the machine's steady chugging stops. Briskly, Omo detaches the apparatus and escorts the still-munching animal to an outside pen filled with a small herd of baaing goats. Within minutes, she returns with another impatient goat in a hurry to get to that bucket.

It takes at least three hours to get all the goats milked. About 9 a.m., Omo—with her black hair tucked beneath a brown netting—heads into the adjacent production room, where she sets to work again. Now it's time to salt today's batch of fresh chèvre, one of many specialty cheeses that Omo hand-makes and markets under her own label—CKC Farms. The farm is just east of Blanco.

This could be just another narrative about a hard-working Texas farmer. But what sets this one apart is Omo's age: She's only 20.

Oh, that age thing again. Omo shrugs. She's used to folks making a fuss. But honestly, so what if she was just 16 when she bought her first milk goats and began making cheese in her mom's kitchen at their home east of Blanco? "I just thought it was fun," says the Pedernales Electric Cooperative member.

Fun, indeed. Try getting up every morning at 5:30 to milk 30 or so goats. By day's end, they've got to be milked again. Add to that another 130 goats to feed and water twice daily. Not to mention making, packaging and delivering the cheese. All that takes lots of hours. No problem. Omo—with help from younger brothers Kenny, 12, and Conner, 4, along with parents Adriana and Daniel—handles the work and attends Texas State University in San Marcos.

The impetus behind CKC Farms—named for the three Omo siblings—sprang from a six-month stay in Europe in 2004. "My dad had a job over there, and we went, too," Omo recalls. "We'd stop in restaurants and taste local meats, cheeses and breads. One day, I met a lady near the German border who had goats, and she gave me my first insight into cheese making."

After the family's return home, she and her mother went cheese hunting. "I kept looking for that same fresh flavor I'd tasted in Europe," Omo says.

Their search proved futile. So Omo came up with an idea: Why not buy a few milk goats and make their own cheese? Sure, said her parents, but first find out what such an endeavor might involve. Encouraged, Omo read books, researched the Internet and snagged some farm chores at Pure Luck Farm and Dairy, a goat dairy a few miles west of Dripping Springs. Undaunted by the hard work, Omo sat back down with her parents and outlined a plan. In January 2005, she bought 10 Alpine goats. By fall, she was taking cheese plates to her teachers at Blanco High School.



Chrissy Omo with brother Conner and goat Mochita

That's not to say her cheese-making expertise came effortlessly.

"I must have made five or six batches at first, and they all turned out like cream cheese," Omo laughs. "So we made cheesecakes. We were giving them away to everyone. It took a lot of trial and error before I developed my own processes."

From there, Omo became proficient at turning out fresh chèvre, a basic goat milk cheese that's soft, creamy and mild in taste. To add variety, she rolled some cheese rounds in fresh herbs and others in edible charcoal, a French-style cheese with a firmer texture that she dubbed "Midnight." From there, she branched out to feta and baby caprino.

Samples given to teachers and friends led to orders for her cheese. Her facility cleared inspections by the Texas Department of State Health Services, which allowed local markets to sell CKC Farms products.

Bolstered by growing demand for her goat cheese, Omo designed a 1,500-square-foot production facility that went online before she graduated from high school in May 2006. Her "shop"—a metal building a short walk from the Omos' home—includes a cheese-making room, walk-in cooler, milking area and tasting room.

As the business has grown, so has the CKC Farms product line. It includes Baby Blue (an Italian-style blue cheese), an aged caprino Romano, a jalapeño and artichoke spread and her best seller—seasoned feta, chunks of delicate feta marinated in extra-virgin olive oil, rosemary, sun-dried tomatoes and roasted garlic. "I produce at least 100 pounds of cheese a week," says Omo, whose retail business does not handle mail orders.

These days, the busy young woman divides time among her goats, cheese-making, family, dating (she's smitten with a young chef from Wichita Falls) and college. By 2011, she plans to finish her bachelor's degree in international business and food nutrition. "I go part time in the spring and full time in the fall because we don't milk as heavily then," she says.

"I don't know where it's going," Omo adds. "Life's just going to have to unfold. There are a lot of factors to think about, but with the business courses I'm taking, I'll be able to figure things out."

No doubt, she will.

Sheryl Smith-Rodgers is a frequent contributor to Texas Co-op Power.



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Holiday Recipe Contest

SPONSORED BY PIONEER BRAND

BY KEVIN HARGIS With \$5,000 in prizes at stake, cooks from all over co-op country baked, boiled and braised to create more than 300 recipes for *Texas Co-op Power's* annual Holiday Recipe Contest, sponsored by Pioneer Brand products.

With so many home chefs incorporating clever combinations of Pioneer's gravies and dry mixes to make tantalizing-looking recipes, I found whittling them down to the top few a daunting task. Texas boasts a lot of creative culinary talent, and the entries reflected it.

I think you'll be pleased with these winners, which cover appetizer, main dish, side and dessert. The grand prizewinner is a familiar name, Donna Deteau, a runner-up the past two years. Creativity runs deep in Deteau's creations, and her Kickin' Christmas Confetti bars deliver a complex sweet with a bite.

This is my first year handling the contest, and I certainly had my work cut out for me. But I also had a lot of help from my friends and co-workers here at Texas Electric Cooperatives and *Texas Co-op Power*. Many thanks to those who cooked and tasted and to former *TCP* Food Editor Shannon Oelrich, who offered me invaluable advice. And thanks especially to C.H. Guenther & Son, Inc., the Pioneer Brand manufacturer, for sponsoring the contest and to Guenther's Julie Lyssy and the food research staff, who helped choose the semifinalists.

\$3,000 GRAND PRIZEWINNER:
Donna Deteau
Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative



Donna, who lives in the small town of Paige, 15 miles northeast of Bastrop, is a woman of many hats. She works with the Children's Advocacy Center in Bastrop and has sidelines catering and remodeling. She also keeps her willing cadre of taste testers busy trying new culinary creations. They must have finely honed taste buds. In 2006, her recipe for Chipotle Bean Burrito Cheese Tarts was a runner-up in the Holiday Recipe Contest, and last year, her Double Corn Casserole also brought her runner-up honors. Her breakthrough dish, Kickin' Christmas Confetti, was named by one of her testers.

The inspiration came from a pecan pie recipe, which through trial and error she turned into something quite different.

"I think I only did four versions of that," she joked of her process of testing and revising.

She said it was a last-minute decision to add cayenne to the glaze, giving her bars the "kick" that several of our testers remarked upon. "I like to experiment with different flavors. When it comes to cooking, I think outside the box," she said.

That out-of-the-box thinking brought her the grand prize: \$3,000.

"Boy, howdy, man oh man, I am just so excited!" she exclaimed. "This is my biggest win so far."

KICKIN' CHRISTMAS CONFETTI

- 1/2 cups plus 2 tablespoons Pioneer Buttermilk Biscuit and Baking Mix, divided
- 3/4 cup oatmeal
- 1 cup dry roasted pistachios, chopped, divided
- 1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons butter
- 1/2 cups light brown sugar, divided
- 1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons light corn syrup, divided
- 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract, divided
- 3 beaten eggs
- 1 packed cup flaked coconut
- 1 cup sweetened dried cranberries, chopped, divided
- 1 cup powdered sugar
- Juice and zest of 1 lime
- 2 squares vanilla almond bark
- 1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In medium mixing bowl, stir together 1 1/2 cups Pioneer mix, oatmeal and 2/3 cup chopped pistachios. In small saucepan, bring 1/2 cup butter, 1 cup brown sugar and 2 tablespoons corn syrup to boil over medium-high heat. Remove from heat and add 1/2 teaspoon vanilla. Pour over dry ingredients and stir until everything is moist. With fingers, press into bottom of a 9x9-inch pan. Bake for 7 minutes, then remove from oven.

While first layer is baking, mix in same bowl eggs, 1/2 cup brown sugar and 1/2 cup corn syrup. Beat well for 1 minute. Add 2 tablespoons butter, 2 tablespoons Pioneer mix, coconut, 2/3 cup cranberries and 1 teaspoon vanilla and mix well. Pour over hot, baked layer, return to oven and cook 30 minutes. When cool, cover with glaze made by mixing powdered sugar, lime juice and lime zest. Meanwhile, melt bark according to package directions and mix with cayenne. Drizzle over top of glaze, then, before it sets, sprinkle remaining pistachios and cranberries over top. Cut into 16 bars.

Serving size: 1 bar. Per serving: 395 calories, 4.8 g protein, 14.4 g fat, 62.8 g carbohydrates, 2.4 g fiber, 259 mg sodium, 58 mg cholesterol

\$500 RUNNER-UP: Martha Polasek Wharton County Electric Cooperative

Martha and her husband have lived in Clemville, west of Bay City, for seven years, having moved there from Brazoria. She tried this recipe long ago and liked it.

"I never thought I would win," she said. But she did with these cheesy quiche-like creations.



SHRIMP PETITES

- 2 cups plus 2 tablespoons Pioneer Buttermilk Biscuit and Baking Mix, divided
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup milk
- $\frac{1}{2}$ pound cooked shrimp
- 4 slices bacon, cooked crisp
- 2 slices Swiss cheese (about 2 ounces)
- 2 eggs
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup evaporated milk
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon Tabasco sauce (or more to taste)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- Dash pepper

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Combine 2 cups Pioneer mix and $\frac{2}{3}$ cup milk. Form into ball and knead on floured surface until smooth. Dough will be sticky, so use plenty of flour as you roll out thin and cut into 24 rounds using 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch biscuit cutter. Place each round in greased cup of muffin tin and mold to fit bottom and sides. Or, if desired, use a miniature muffin pan and instead of rolling out dough, make small (1-inch) dough balls and press into cups. Set aside.

Shell and devein shrimp, then chop, leaving small shrimp intact. Divide shrimp evenly among muffin cups.

Crumble bacon and divide evenly over top of shrimp. Chop cheese finely and sprinkle over top of bacon. Mix eggs, evaporated milk, 2 tablespoons Pioneer mix, Tabasco, salt and pepper and pour even amount into each cup. Bake 20 to 25 minutes or until cheese begins to brown.

Serving size: 1 piece. Per serving: 112 calories, 5.8 g protein, 4 g fat, 13.2 g carbohydrates, 1.3 g fiber, 279 mg sodium, 38 mg cholesterol

\$500 RUNNER-UP: Mary Lawhon Heart of Texas Electric Cooperative

A productive fig tree at the Cameron home of Mary and John Thomas Lawhon was the inspiration for these easy-to-make, luscious bars. "When our fig tree produced more fruit than I could possibly eat fresh, I had to come up with a recipe my husband would like," she said. Her final creation, with oatmeal adding body and lemon tempering the figs' sweetness, makes a moist, tender treat.

TOM'S FIG BARS

- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup shortening
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup brown sugar
- 1 egg
- 1 cup quick oats
- 1 cup Pioneer Biscuit and Baking Mix
- Zest from 1 lemon (about 2 teaspoons)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cream shortening and sugar. Add egg and beat until fluffy. Add oats, baking mix and zest from lemon. Divide in half and press half into 8-inch square baking dish that has been prepared with cooking spray and pat lightly. Pour filling over dough, then top with remaining batter. Bake 30 minutes.



FILLING

- 3 cups fresh figs
- Juice from 1 lemon (about 2 tablespoons)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped pecans
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

In medium saucepan, combine figs, lemon juice, sugar and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup water. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until thickened. Remove from heat and stir in pecans and vanilla.

Serving size: 1 bar. Per serving: 198 calories, 2.3 g protein, 8.1 g fat, 29.3 g carbohydrates, 1.3 g fiber, 139 mg sodium, 15 mg cholesterol

\$500 RUNNER-UP: Sandra Metoyer Bryan Texas Utilities

Sandra's recipe evolved from her version of chicken pot pie and added a Texas twang with beef, corn and black beans. "I think marinating the beef in the gravy and wine and using the Pioneer gravy as the roux for the filling makes the taste truly special and delicious," she said.

TEXAS COWBOY PIE

- 1 pound beef sirloin tips
- 2 packages Pioneer Brown Gravy Mix, divided
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup red wine
- 1 medium green pepper, coarsely diced
- 1 medium yellow onion, coarsely diced
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup butter
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup milk
- 1 can (11 ounces) corn kernels, rinsed and drained
- 1 can (11 ounces) black beans, rinsed and drained
- 1 package Pioneer Yellow Cornbread Mix
- 1 egg
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup milk

Slice beef thinly. Dissolve one package Pioneer gravy mix in wine. Add beef to mixture and marinate overnight in refrigerator. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Spray large, deep skillet with nonstick spray and heat on high. Remove meat and pour remaining marinade into measuring cup. Add enough water to equal $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups liquid. Brown steak for 3 minutes on each side in hot skillet, remove and set aside. When cooled, cut into bite-sized pieces. Use

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ORANGE-GLAZED PECANS

- 4 cups (about a pound) pecan halves
- 1/2 cup frozen orange juice concentrate, undiluted
- 1 1/2 cups sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon

Allow orange juice concentrate to thaw. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Bake pecans in a shallow pan, stirring occasionally, 10 to 15 minutes, until well toasted. Bring juice concentrate, sugar and cinnamon to a boil in a large, heavy saucepan. Boil, stirring constantly, about 1 minute. Remove from heat and stir in pecans.

Drop pecans a half-inch apart onto an aluminum foil-lined baking sheet. Let stand until firm.



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CAJUN CORNBREAD CASSEROLE

- 2 packages Pioneer Yellow Cornbread Mix (plus ingredients as directed on package)
- 1/2 cup butter
- 1/2 cup onion, chopped
- 1/2 cup celery, chopped
- 1/2 cup bell pepper, chopped
- 1 package (1 pound) frozen crawfish tails or 1 pound shrimp, cooked, peeled and deveined
- 1/2 cup milk
- 1 can (11 ounces) cream-style corn
- 2 eggs
- 1 jar pimientos
- 1 cup cheddar cheese, shredded

remaining beef fat to brown green pepper and onion in same skillet. Add 1/2 cup water and cook on medium heat until peppers and onions are soft. Add butter and reduce heat to low. When butter melts, stir in second package of gravy mix. Gradually add reserved marinade and milk, cooking and stirring until thick and bubbly. Remove from heat and add beef, corn and black beans; mix well. Spoon into 8x8x2-inch casserole dish. Combine cornbread mix, egg and milk and pour over beef mixture. Bake 35 to 45 minutes or until crust is golden brown. Remove from oven and allow to stand for 15 minutes before serving.

Serving size: 1 cup. Per serving: 433 calories, 27 g protein, 20.2 g fat, 27.6 g carbohydrates, 4 g fiber, 715 mg sodium, 134 mg cholesterol

\$500 RUNNER-UP:

Debra Harris Johnson

Jasper-Newton Electric Cooperative

Debra and her husband, Richard, have been Jasper-Newton Electric members for more than 30 years.

Debra is an avid cook, combining Cajun creole from her Louisiana heritage with country dishes. She says cooking is almost a spiritual calling for her.



Serving size: 1 cup. Per serving: 208 calories, 11.8 g protein, 12 g fat, 12 g carbohydrates, 1.2 g fiber, 268 mg sodium, 12 mg cholesterol

RECIPE CONTEST

April's recipe contest topic is **SMALL BITES**. Whether you call it tapas, botanas or just plain finger food, good appetizers pack big flavor in small portions. Share some of your favorites. The deadline is December 10.

Send recipes to Home Cooking, 2550 S. IH-35, Austin, TX 78704. You may also fax them to (512) 486-6254, e-mail them to recipes@texas-ec.org, or submit online at www.texascoopower.com. Please include your name, address and phone number, as well as the name of your electric co-op. The top winner will receive a copy of *60 Years of Home Cooking* and a Texas-shaped trivet. Runners-up will also receive a prize.

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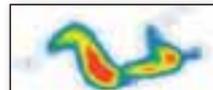
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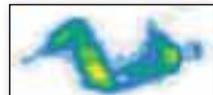
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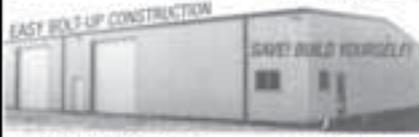
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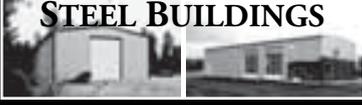
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▲ United Cooperative Services member **Karen Charles** snapped this photo of her husband, **Mike**, dressed as an 1880s Father Christmas riding aboard a stagecoach to greet the good children in the Old West town of Buck Creek.

► Sometimes pumpkin patches hold a cute, sleepy little surprise! **Daniel** and **Sheri Clifton** dressed their then 4-week-old son **Luke** for the annual tradition of pumpkin-picking at their nearby church in Cedar Park. “He slept during the entire outing,” Daniel said. They are members of Pedernales Electric Cooperative.



◀ Every time we looked at this photo, it cried: “Pick me! Pick me!” Grayson-Collin Electric Cooperative members **Pat** and **Debby Crowder** showed off their impeccable representations of the world’s favorite cartoon ogres, Shrek and Princess Fiona, at a Halloween party in Collinsville.

COSTUMES

We sifted through the many photos of ghouls, ghosts, goblins and fairies to find you these four equally deserving entries. It was nearly impossible to choose, but in the end we decided to bring you a bit of diversity, including costumes for Halloween, Christmas and performance.

—ASHLEY CLARY

▼ The young dance members of **Ballet Folklórico Los Altos de Jalisco** of Bryan pose happily in full dress with their trophies, won at a competition in Bastrop. The agency is a member of Bryan Texas Utilities.

Upcoming in **Focus on Texas**

ISSUE	SUBJECT	DEADLINE
Feb	Silly Poses	Dec 10
Mar	Caught in the Act	Jan 10
Apr	Bridges	Feb 10
May	At the (Texas) Beach	Mar 10
June	Stained Glass Windows	Apr 10
July	Vacation Photos	May 10

SILLY POSES is the topic for our **FEBRUARY 2009** issue. Send your photo—along with your name, address, daytime phone, co-op affiliation and a brief description—to **Silly Poses, Focus on Texas, 2550 S. IH-35, Austin, TX 78704**, before **December 10**. A stamped, self-addressed envelope must be included if you want your entry returned (approximately six weeks). Please do not submit irreplaceable photographs—send a copy or duplicate. We regret that **Texas Co-op Power** cannot be responsible for photos that are lost in the mail or not received by the deadline. Please note that we cannot provide individual critiques of submitted photos. If you use a digital camera, e-mail your highest-resolution images to focus@texas-ec.org, or submit them on our website at www.texascoopower.com.



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DECEMBER

01 CARTHAGE
Christmas Parade,
(903) 693-6634

04 BRYAN
Celtic Christmas Cooking
Class, (979) 778 9463,
www.messinahof.com

HENDERSON
Christmas Parade,
(903) 657-5528,
www.hendersontx.com

04 SHINER
Christmas in the Park,
(361) 594-4180,
www.shinertx.com

LEVELLAND [4, 11]
Christmas on the Square,
(806) 894-3157

PARIS [4-7, 11-14]
Holiday in Paris,
(903) 784-2501,
www.paristexas.com

05 AMARILLO
Electric Light Parade,
(806) 372-6744

BURNET [5-7, 12-14]
Main Street Bethlehem,
(512) 756-4481,
www.fbcburnet.org

CLIFTON [5-7]
Christmas at the
Conservatory,
(254) 675-3724,
www.bosqueconservatory
.com

LEDBETTER [5-6, 12-13,
19-20] Christmas Lane of
Lights, (979) 412-4167

05 SANTA ANNA [5-6]
2 Nights of Christmas
in a Small Town,
(325) 348-3134

SONORA
More the Merrier
Christmas Bazaar,
(325) 387-2880,
www.sonoratchamber
.com

06 ELGIN
Holiday by the Tracks,
(512) 281-5724, ext. 27,
www.elgintx.com

GOLDTHWAITE
Parade of Lights Craft
Festival, (325) 648-3619,
www.goldthwaite.biz

GRUENE
Town Lighting,
(830) 629-5077

HICO
Christmas Market,
1-800-361-4426

HUNTSVILLE
Sunmart Endurance Run,
(936) 295-5644

06 PALESTINE
Christmas Parade of
Lights, (903) 723-3014

PILOT POINT
Christmas on the Square,
(940) 391-1438

ROUND TOP
Tour of Homes & Historic
Places, (979) 249-4042,
www.roundtop.org

STRATFORD
Pheasant Hunters
Breakfast, (806) 396-2631

BUDA [6-7]
Budafest, (512) 268-7862,
www.budafest.org

07 FREDERICKSBURG
Pearl Harbor Day
Anniversary,
(830) 992-2785,
www.nimitz-museum.org

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- 12-13 Christmas Under the Stars
- 14 Las Posadas
- 20-21 Country Christmas

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11 GAINESVILLE [11-13]
Victorian Stroll Weekend, (940) 668-4531

12 LOCKHART
Lunch at the Library, (512) 398-3223

GAINESVILLE
Victorian Stroll Weekend



12 COMANCHE [12-14]
Cora's Christmas, (325) 356-3233

KERRVILLE [12-14]
Hill Country Dog Show, (830) 792-4728

13 CANYON LAKE
Parade of Lights on Canyon Lake, (210) 344-1081

CARTHAGE
Breakfast with Santa, (903) 693-3461

CHAPPELL HILL
Holiday Home Tour & Teddy Bear Parade, (979) 836-6033, www.chappellhillmuseum.org

COLDSPRING
Christmas on the Square & Evening Parade, (936) 653-2184

FRISCO
Holidays in Oldtown, (972) 292-5657, www.friscoheritage.org



CHAPPELL HILL
Teddy Bear Parade

13 TAFT
Calixto Garcia Christmas Festival & Parade, (361) 528-3230

WINCHESTER
Christmas Home Tour, (979) 242-5646

WINEDALE
Christmas at Winedale, (979) 278-3530

21 JOHNSON CITY
Christmas Lights at the LBJ Ranch, (830) 868-7128

22 CONROE
Outlets at Conroe Tree Lighting, (936) 567-0904

31 ROUND TOP
New Year's Eve Gala, (979) 249-3129, www.roundtop.org

JANUARY

09 STEPHENVILLE
[9-11, 23-25] Chicken House Flea Market, (254) 592-6674

Events are listed according to space available; see the full listing at www.texascooppower.com.

Event information can be mailed to *Around Texas*, 2550 S. IH-35, Austin, TX 78704, faxed to (512) 486-6254, e-mailed to aroundtx@texas-ec.org, or submitted on our website at www.texascooppower.com. Please submit events for February by December 10.

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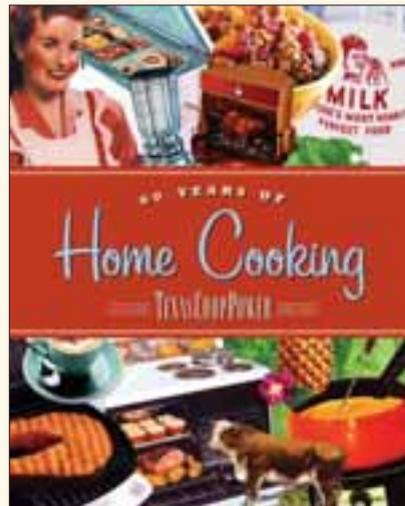
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Prairie grass once grew as tall as a horse's belly on the Coastal Plains where land—and history—mean everything.

More than a century ago, this land meant survival for the Karankawas and Tonkawas and the early settlers who joined colonist Stephen F. Austin. It sustained cowboys, cattle, crops and the New York, Texas and Mexican Railroad.

I saw land and more land on a 75-mile tour of Colorado and Wharton counties that brought me face to face with the Coastal Plains' rich history. I saw fields white with cotton and cattle grazing grasslands. And in the tallest grass of all, at the **ATTWATER PRAIRIE CHICKEN NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE** that's served by San Bernard Electric Cooperative, I learned about the plight of an endangered bird on the brink of extinction.

EAGLE LAKE

Known locally as the Goose Hunting Capital of the World, historic Eagle Lake is marked on early Texas maps. The city, which is bisected by U.S. Highway 90A, preserves its history in the **PRAIRIE EDGE MUSEUM** where what at the time might have been the longest alligator ever measured in Texas—a 13-foot, 8-inch beauty—is on mounted display. It was captured in the lake on the city's edge in 1990.

Seven miles northeast of Eagle Lake on FM 3013, officials at the Attwater refuge are trying to keep a tiny population of birds alive. In 1890 there were 1 million Attwater's prairie chickens. But as native grasslands disappeared, so did the birds. The 2008 spring count yielded 72 birds in the wild in Texas, including 52 at the Attwater refuge. Your best chance of seeing the reclusive birds at the refuge is during the Attwater's Prairie Chicken Festival, tentatively set for April 4-5.

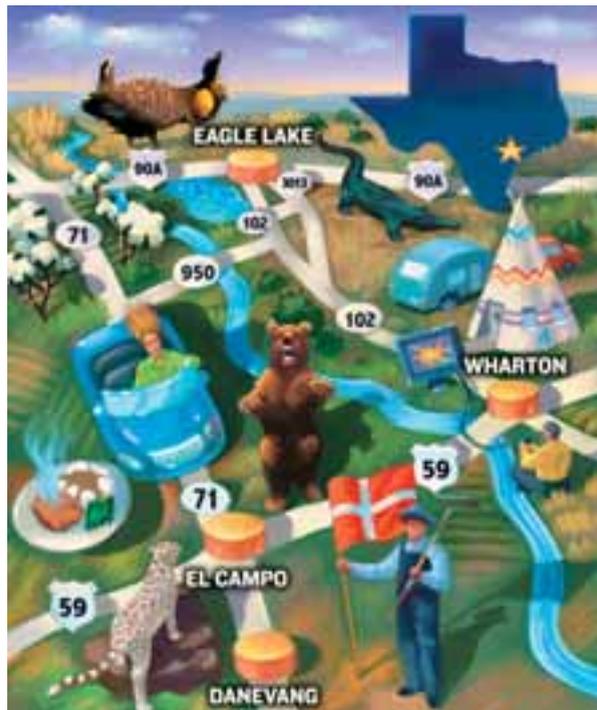
Eagle Lake Chamber of Commerce, (979) 234-2780, www.visiteaglelake.com

Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge, (979) 234-3021, www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/attwater/index.html

EAGLE LAKE to DANEVANG

From colonists to cowboys, the Coastal Plains sustains a rich history.

BY CAMILLE WHEELER



EL CAMPO

From Eagle Lake, I drove scenic back roads—FM 3013 south, Matthews Store Road west, FM 102 south, FM 950 southwest and State Highway 71 southeast—to El Campo, headquarters for Wharton County Electric Cooperative.

El Campo's beginnings—depicted in 24 murals around town—date to 1882, when a railroad camp called Prairie Switch sat where the city now stands. In 1890, Mexican cowboys renamed the railroad camp El Campo.

A surprising find is the **EL CAMPO MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY**, which features big-game animals from around the world mounted in life-size dioramas.

For good food, try the **FIRE HOUSE BAR AND GRILL**, inside the city's former fire station built in 1925, and **GREEK BROS. OYSTER BAR AND SALOON**. Fire House serves up a tender ribeye

chicken-fried steak that I cut with my fork. I also recommend Greek Bros.'s sautéed shrimp kicked up a notch with cayenne pepper.

El Campo Chamber of Commerce, (979) 543-2713, www.elcampochamber.com

El Campo Museum of Natural History, (979) 543-6885, www.elcampomuseum.com

WHARTON

Ever wanted to sleep inside a teepee? Well, you can at the Tee Pee Motel and RV Park, which first opened in 1942. The motel's 10 concrete and stucco teepees, about 25 feet tall, feature the comforts of a regular hotel room, including a microwave, refrigerator and three windows.

Wharton, 14 miles northeast of El Campo on U.S. Highway 59, also shows off its history in murals and takes great pride in its restored courthouse that originally was built in 1889.

I had great fun at the **20TH CENTURY TECHNOLOGY MUSEUM**, a hands-on place where you can play 1970s and '80s video games and see the evolution of a mind-boggling number of devices and appliances, from dishwashers to telephones.

Wharton Chamber of Commerce, (979) 532-1862, www.whartonchamber.com

Tee Pee Motel and RV Park, (979) 282-8474, www.teepeemotel.net

20th Century Technology Museum, (979) 282-8810, www.20thcenturytech.com

DANEVANG

Danevang—pronounced Dan-uh-vang—is about 22 miles southwest of Wharton and eight miles southeast of El Campo on State Highway 71. Named the Danish Capital of Texas by the state Legislature, this tiny farming community showcases its history in the **DANISH HERITAGE MUSEUM**. Danevang, which means Danish field, was established in 1894 as the first successful Danish community in Texas.

Danish Heritage Museum, (979) 578-0808

Camille Wheeler is the staff writer for Texas Co-op Power.

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