

LOCAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE EDITION

FEBRUARY 2012

GLOBAL CO-OP SPIRIT

KEYHOLE GARDENING

MOVIE SNACKS

# TEXAS CO-OP POWER

2012: INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF COOPERATIVES

## CAMPGROUND COMRADES

**A Natural Fit: Volunteer Park  
Hosts Are at Home in the Wild**



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# February

# 2012

VOLUME 68 NUMBER 8



# 8

## FEATURES

### 8 Campground Comrades

By Charles Boisseau  
Photos by Woody Welch

*Volunteer park hosts live in recreational vehicles at state and national parks, including across Texas, as they perform any number of chores. As parks struggle with budget cuts, the arrangement seems a perfect example of economic efficiency.*

### 14 Keyhole Gardening

By G. Elaine Acker

*A keyhole garden is the ultimate raised-bed planter: It stands waist high and is notched like a pie with a slice cut away. It can be built with recycled materials and requires less water than a conventional garden.*

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*The following February stories are available on our website.*

**Texas USA** by Beth Henry Watson

*Rural Grocers Stock That Personal Touch*

**Observations** by Marco Perella

*The Physics of Love*



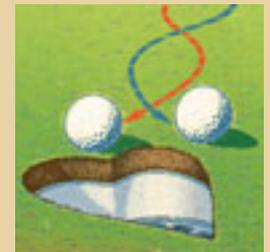
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# TEXAS CO-OP POWER

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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T E X A S ' L A R G E S T R U R A L L E N D E R

# POWERtalk

Letters from Texas Co-op Power Readers

## WHERE'S CHRISTMAS?

In the December 2011 issue, yes, the beautiful church and story ["Sunday Best"] are great, but where's Christmas? No decorated cover—I'm disappointed: The picture could have gone on at any time of the year! Please observe CHRISTMAS. Thanks for all else!

**GLORIA RAMIREZ**

*Nueces Electric Cooperative*

## TECHNICAL CHALLENGES

Suzanne Haberman ["Energy Thieves," December 2011 Power Connections] has much more confidence in directing technical questions to our server (DIRECTV) than we do! I can only imagine the long pause that would follow my asking, "Please send me a schedule of system maintenance ..." That is, if I were able to get a live person in the first place. We are technically challenged when it comes to programming and are reluctant to risk losing anything programmed into our TV by powering it down.

**FRIEDA BAREFIELD**

*Bandera Electric Cooperative*

## WEST OF THE PECOS

The "Judge Roy Bean" story by Martha Deeringer [December 2011] brought back memories. In the early 1990s, my husband and I decided to see some of West Texas. We left San Antonio for Del Rio after work and spent the night there. We left the next day on U.S. Highway 90 West and stopped

at the Pecos River overlook. In stories and movies, you always hear "west of the Pecos." Well, you really do know when you get there.

We also stopped at Langtry. I was surprised how small Judge Roy Bean's Jersey Lilly was. We enjoyed our trip from there to Marathon, to Big Bend National Park and the Chisos Mountains Lodge, then to Alpine, Fort Davis and the Indian Lodge, and McDonald Observatory. I really do suggest people see Texas. We aren't native Texans, but we got here as soon as we could.

**BARBARA SINGLEY**

*Guadalupe Valley Electric Cooperative*

## BARBECUE

Your barbecue story [November 2011] overlooked

one of the finest barbecue establishments in Texas—McMillan's Bar-B-Q in Fannin. For many years, owner Louis McMillan has been serving up some of the most mouth-watering brisket, ribs, sausage and chicken you have ever put in your mouth.

**JOYCE D. SCHAEFER**

*Karnes, Pedernales and Victoria electric cooperatives*

## GET MORE TCP at TexasCoopPower.com

*Find more letters in the February Table of Contents.*

*Sign up for our E-Newsletter for monthly updates, prize drawings and more!*

## 2011: YEAR OF BLESSINGS

The year 2011 brought many blessings. Lamar Electric Cooperative is one of the blessings in our lives. On October 29, 2010, our precious grandson, then-3-year-old Carter Allen Townes, was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Carter

never was sick and was very active. He has done well in his treatment, although there have been times that we were sure he wouldn't make it. Our daughter Timberley is married to Charlie Townes, and in this marriage was born our precious Carter. They are Lamar EC members as are Charlie's parents. Marci Thompson works in the co-op's office, and she started blood drives at their office through Carter Blood Care. Everyone has reached out and given blood to this precious baby boy. All we can say is thank you all from the bottom of our hearts.

**TIM AND DARLENA SHIMPOCK**

*Lamar Electric Cooperative*

## CORRECTION

*An Austin Steam Train Association brakeman was misidentified in the January 2012 Hit the Road article. His name is Jimmie Burleyson.*

## WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

**ONLINE:** TexasCoopPower.com/Share  
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*Please include your town and electric co-op. Letters may be edited for clarity and length.*

## Reporter Dives Deep Into Research

Kudos to Melissa Gaskill for her feature story "Underwater Theater" [December 2011]. I had the pleasure of sharing this time diving the coral reefs of the Flower



Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary with Ms. Gaskill. She is an accomplished scuba diver and tireless story investigator. Ms. Gaskill has presented an accurate vision of this remarkable marine habitat. As a longtime member of Nueces Electric Cooperative, I appreciate Texas Co-op

Power highlighting the adventures of Ms. Gaskill, who traveled 100-plus miles off terra firma to explore the ocean realm that is an important part of Texas. Thank you.

**Quenton R. Dokken**, President/CEO

*Gulf of Mexico Foundation, Corpus Christi*

PHOTO 2011 © KRZYSZTOF ODDIOMEK | BIGSTOCK.COM

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## Co-op Spirit Gone Global

Electric co-ops join worldwide celebration of member-owned businesses during International Year of Cooperatives

By Megan McKoy-Noe

The United Nations General Assembly has designated 2012 as International Year of Cooperatives under the banner “Cooperative Enterprises Build a Better World.” The resolution recognizes the vital role cooperatives play in the economic and social well-being of nations around the globe.

Cooperatives are democratically governed businesses that operate on an at-cost, not-for-profit basis.

“At a time when folks are losing faith in big corporations, International Year of Cooperatives 2012 offers us a great opportunity to showcase the many ways the local, consumer-owned and member-controlled cooperative form of business benefits communities all over the world,” says Glenn English, CEO of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. “It gives cooperatives a perfect venue to contrast how we differ from profit-driven companies.”

### Co-ops Are Everywhere

Every day, more than 29,200 cooperatives supply essential products and services to American consumers, touching our lives in almost every way.

Check your morning newspaper. The articles labeled “Associated Press” or “AP” were written by individual reporters but distributed by a cooperative news organization.

If your breakfast includes freshly squeezed orange juice, it may be from Sunkist, a cooperative formed by California and Arizona citrus growers.

And the list goes on: Land O’ Lakes butter, Ocean Spray cranberry juice, Sun-Maid raisins, Welch’s grape jelly, Nationwide Insurance, Blue Diamond almonds, Ace

Hardware, REI outdoor gear—they are all cooperatives.

Cooperatives, such as your electric co-op, differ from “typical” businesses in a big way: They work for the benefit of their members, not single owners or stockholders.

“When you’re a member of a co-op, you have a real say in the direction of that business. That’s critical—it helps the co-op rapidly respond to changing conditions,” explains Martin Lowery, NRECA executive vice president, external affairs.

### For Example:

- Credit unions fought off the destructive cycle of payday loans by creating salary advance loans with low rates that placed part of the borrowing into a savings account—helping members escape a cycle of debt.

- Marketing cooperatives added food nutrition labels to products long before it was required by federal law.

- Electric cooperatives lead the way in smart-grid implementation—close to half have installed advanced metering infrastructure, with 30 percent integrating it or automated meter-reading devices with various software applications, such as outage management and geographic information systems.

“It’s in every co-op’s DNA to serve members in the best way possible,” says Lowery. “That’s why co-ops remain the best type of business around.”

*Megan McKoy-Noe is an associate editor for the NRECA.*

*To find a cooperative near you, visit [www.go.coop](http://www.go.coop).*

- Co-ops provide 2 million jobs with annual sales of \$652 billion.
- More than 900 electric co-ops deliver electricity to 42 million consumers in 47 states.
- Electric co-ops own and maintain 42 percent of the nation’s electric distribution lines, which cover 75 percent of America’s landmass.
- Two million farmers are members of nearly 3,000 farmer-owned cooperatives.



- More than 7,500 credit unions offer financial services to 91 million members.
- Approximately 233 million people are served by insurance companies organized as or closely affiliated with cooperatives.
- Around 50,000 families use cooperative day care centers.
- Roughly 1.2 million Americans in 31 states are served by 260 telephone cooperatives.
- More than 1.2 million families live in housing owned and operated through cooperative associations.

*Source: International Cooperative Alliance*

**LIGHTBULB STANDARDS DELAYED:** In last month’s article, “Illuminated Thinking,” we wrote about new lightbulb regulations meant to go into effect January 1. After Texas Co-op Power went to press, however, Congress passed a law cutting funding for the regulations through September 30.

# H A P P E N I N G S

## WHO KNEW?

### THE FIRST ENERGIZED CO-OP

Bartlett Electric Cooperative—which originally was called Bartlett Community Light & Power Company—was the first electric co-op in the nation energized under the Rural Electrification Administration. The town of Bartlett had electric service by 1905. But people in nearby rural areas did not start receiving electricity until March 7, 1936, when member Charles Saage—who had paid a \$5 electric meter deposit to the BCL&P—flipped a switch and saw the lights come on at home.



During the cattle drive and open-range days of the 19th century, cowboys relied on a special member of the traveling herd of horses called the remuda: the cutting horse, an exceptional athlete. With its ears pricked and eyes locked on the animal culled from the cat-

tle herd, the cutting horse performed work that would eventually give way to modern methods. But this heritage is not lost, thanks to the National Cutting Horse Association and its premier event: the **MERCURIA NCHA WORLD SERIES OF CUTTING** scheduled for February 10-11 at the San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo (February 9-26).

Horse and rider move as one as they separate a cow from a penned herd. Then, the contestant loosens his or her grip on the reins. Pivoting and sliding to quick stops, the cutting horses seem to be performing an elegant dance. For more information, go to [www.sarodeo.com](http://www.sarodeo.com) or [www.nchacutting.com](http://www.nchacutting.com).

Find hundreds of happenings all across the state at [TexasCoopPower.com](http://TexasCoopPower.com).

## 2012 INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF COOPERATIVES

Benjamin Franklin and fellow firefighters founded what is believed to be the nation's first cooperative: The Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire, which provided insurance to Philadelphia-area homeowners. The company, which issued its first policies in 1752, remains in operation today.

## CO-OP PEOPLE

*All in Good Time: Thiess Donates First Digital Watch to Smithsonian*

BY ISRAEL PEREZ

In 1968, while wearing a \$10.95 Timex wristwatch, engineer George H. Thiess had a vision: Instead of a short hand and a long hand indicating the hour and minute, what if there were a watch that displayed time digitally?

In November, Thiess donated the prototype of the world's first working digital watch to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

"I was hesitant to give it up at first, but I realized that it's a part of history, and people should see it," says the 81-year-old Thiess, a Hillsboro resident who serves as vice president of HILCO Electric Cooperative's board of directors.

The Pulsar electronic wristwatch hit the market in 1972 after originating at Electro/Data, a small electronics firm in Garland that Thiess founded in 1966. Thiess, a Korean War veteran who earned a physics engineering degree from Washington University, partnered

George Thiess (left) and his digital watch as featured on the May 1970 cover of *Southwestern Independent Jeweler* magazine.

with the Hamilton Watch Co. in 1969 to jointly develop the Pulsar—a watch many times more accurate than the best mechanical watch.

An early prototype of the Pulsar even appeared on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*. But the watch, which sometimes malfunctioned, was not ready for prime time. Only six such models were made.

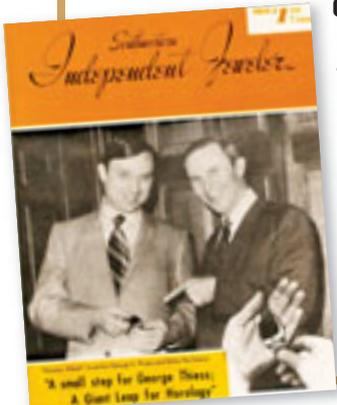
The second-generation watches also failed within months, forcing a recall. Fortunately for the Pulsar, the fix came with little publicity. Despite their hefty \$2,100 price tag—about as much as a small car then—the third-generation, 18-karat-gold Pulsars were a huge success. By 1974, according to Thiess, half of all watches sold in the world were digital.

The Pulsar display was composed of light-emitting diodes "that used so much power that they couldn't be on all the time," Thiess says. "If you wanted to know the time, you pressed a button on the side, and you got it without wasting energy.

"It was better than any Timex watch I had ever had," Thiess laughs. He adds that the watch, with a readout visible in the dark, "was fun ... it was space-age at the time, almost alien-looking."

Israel Perez, editorial intern

Suggest Co-op People ideas at [editor@TexasCoopPower.com](mailto:editor@TexasCoopPower.com).



# CAMPGROUND COMRADES

**Whether it's rappelling down a cliff, canoeing the Rio Grande or mowing the grass, volunteer park hosts are at home in the wild. It's a natural fit.**

They live on public lands. They often roam the country, moving from place to place. And they always bring their own shelter with them.

They're the people who live in recreational vehicles on-site at state and national parks, wildlife refuges and public wilderness areas, including more than 100 locations across Texas.

In exchange for utility services—such as free electricity and water and sewer hookups—these resident volunteers (officially called “hosts” at state parks and “volunteers-in-parks” at national parks) work part time, usually 20 to 30 hours a week.

A cool November evening at Cedar Hill State Park southwest of Dallas calls for warm fellowship among park hosts. Clockwise from left, Danny Wood and Sue Krider (roasting marshmallows) close out a damp day with Sandy Wood—holding her teacup Chihuahua, Miss Kitty—Jeanie Pennington and Laura and John Heiser.



Depending on the location, the uniformed volunteers perform any number of chores: cleaning restrooms, patrolling grounds, mowing grass, painting signs, managing campgrounds, maintaining facilities, enforcing rules, giving tours and operating the front desk. The arrangement seems a perfect example of economic efficiency, matching a demand for inexpensive labor at cash-strapped parks with a supply of footloose volunteers—without any money changing hands.

It's easy to see what recreation managers get out of this deal at a time of near-universal cuts in park operating budgets. "We'd have to shut our doors," if not for the services of volunteers, says Lori Reiley, volunteer coordinator for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

But what about the people who serve as park hosts? I was interested in learning the stories of these itinerant volunteers: What motivates them to pack up and live in a park campground for several months at a time—or longer?

In interviews with a score of volunteers and park officials, I found that, yes, many park hosts fit into a similar box: They are mostly retired couples in their 60s and 70s (occasionally 50s or 80s) who love the outdoors, enjoy working with people and would rather stay busy than idle the hours away.

But I found exceptions, including single people who are going through a life transition, such as the death of a spouse or a divorce. And, the motivations of the park volunteers are seldom identical, just as no two parks are.

While bunches of camp hosts are full-timers—having sold their homes for life on the road—many seek the best of both worlds by volunteering only a portion of the year and returning to their homes at other times.

## SERVING AS THEY GO

La Verne and Harold Soefje fit this profile. I met the part-time hosts at Pedernales Falls State Park, a scenic Hill Country site about an hour's drive west of Austin (and served by Pedernales Electric Cooperative). Their kids grown, their house in Cameron paid off, the Soefjes began hosting after they both retired in 2007. Veteran campers, they long ago upgraded from a tent to a succession of ever-more-fancy recreational vehicles, culminating in their 34-foot fifth-wheel RV. They've served as hosts at half a dozen state parks—from the alligator habitat of Brazos Bend near the Gulf Coast to the woodsy Purtil Creek in Northeast Texas. In 2010, they traveled to South Dakota to volunteer at a recreation area in the Black Hills.

"That's what we can do, see different parts of the country and still be of service," says La Verne, who served as Milam County clerk, an elected position, before she retired.

We sit at a picnic table covered by a red-and-white checked oilcloth under the shade of a canopy adjacent to their RV. Laundry hangs from a nearby clothesline, birds dart around and enjoy seeds from their feeders, and Harold rises occasionally to sell bags of ice to campers.

"I like the outdoors and talking to people and helping people," says Harold, a former volunteer firefighter.

Like many hosts, the Soefjes have made lifelong friends on the road, and they keep up with them via email, Facebook postings and cellphone calls.



**Gary Frable, background, hands T-posts to his wife, Diane, who loads them for transport at Big Bend National Park. Next step: Build fencing to keep livestock out of Rio Grande-vicinity camping areas. The Frables' adventures here and at other national parks come without boundaries: They've encountered a bear, run canoe trips and even rappelled down a cliff.**

## IN FOR THE LONG HAUL

While the Soefjes return to their home in Cameron for stretches, most of the 16 volunteers at Cedar Hill State Park are full-time residents there. Cedar Hill, a 30-minute drive southwest of Dallas, relies on hosts more than any other state park, says Mercy McBrayer, a volunteer coordinator for Texas state parks. And, many serve long-term stints, meaning they are granted waivers to stay longer than three months—the typical maximum stay that state parks allow. The hosts are re-evaluated every quarter. Among the rules: Keep their sites from looking as if they've taken up permanent residence. "We want this to look like a campsite, not a trailer park," McBrayer says during a tour of the busy park.

Jeanie and Dean Pennington moved to Cedar Hill nearly four years ago. Officially, Jeanie is the volunteer while Dean continues working as a truck driver. "In two years, when my husband retires, we plan to travel and see the country," says Jeanie, a former Walmart store manager who works the park entrance gate and organizes geocaching activities, a kind of high-tech treasure hunt involving global positioning devices.

Other hosts include Sue Krider, who moved to the park a decade ago when her husband became a host. After he died of cancer in 2006, Sue stayed to host. She has weathered other heartaches: She lost her possessions when her previous RV burned up in a fire, and even lost her beloved schnauzer when the dog was attacked by a coyote. But she has no intention of moving. "This is where all my friends are," she says.



**TOP:** Nobody can accuse retirees Harold and La Verne Soefje of landing only the plum assignments at Pedernales Falls State Park. But even after cleaning the restrooms, the park hosts still wear smiles for visitors. **BOTTOM:** Park host Bud Cochran walks behind a pickup to monitor the watering of the parched golf course at Lockhart State Park.

The Woods—Danny, 55, and Sandy, 54—moved to the park in March. While they shined with an obvious joy for their decision to retire early and sell their home in a nearby suburb, they admit the lifestyle isn't for everyone. It works for them because they possess three ingredients they say are necessary: They love the outdoors, they were willing to downsize and they adore spending time together. And, with their backyard a state park filled with songbirds, deer and other wildlife, "I think I've died and gone to heaven," says Danny.

## CALL OF THE ROAD

While Cedar Hill hosts mostly stay put, many full-timers cut the tether completely. Among them: Gary and Diane Frable, who lived in the Philadelphia area all their lives before they became nationwide park hosts in 2002.

They had long loved camping and dreamed of really seeing the country, but how to do it on someone else's nickel? Doing research, they learned about park hosting and "workamper" jobs at private campgrounds. They soaked up information from RV dealers and full-timers and attended a "Life on Wheels" class at a community college.

They made the leap after they sold their home and a successful office-supply business. They've since lived everywhere, from Oregon to Michigan to Florida in some of the nation's most beautiful places: Yellowstone, the Grand Tetons and Theodore Roosevelt national parks, and Pea Island (Outer Banks of North Carolina) and J.N. "Ding" Darling (Sanibel Island, Florida) national wildlife refuges.

Along the way, Gary and/or Diane have dressed in period costumes, learned to attach radio collars to bobcats caught in box cages, participated in wildlife studies, trained as a heavy-equipment operator and given interpretative tours as they drove a 68-person tram at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge in the lower Rio Grande Valley. They've rappelled down a 70-foot-high cliff, watched a black bear lumbering through camp and marveled at Sandhill Cranes doing their mating dance. Last September, they returned for another stint at Big Bend National Park to work back-country patrol. In prior years, they ran canoe trips through Santa Elena Canyon along the Rio Grande.

The Frables now work exclusively at public parks after spending grueling months at a privately owned campground in New England. Some private camp operators think they are doing you a favor by scheduling you for extra (paid) work. "They can't quite grasp that I wasn't interested in making more money," Gary Frable says. "I was interested in enjoying myself, and if I wanted to work 40, 50, 60 hours a week, I would have stayed in my business."

Despite some pitfalls, people discover the romance of the road and this kind of life, though outsiders often have a hard time getting their heads around it. Frable recalls a typical exchange last summer with a retired Houston man who parked his RV in an adjacent space at a campground in Colorado.

"Where do you live?" the man asked.

"Right there," Frable said, pointing to his RV.

"Don't you have a house?" the man asked, incredulously.

"Yes, right there."

"Where do you keep your stuff?" the man continued.

“In my home,” Frable said, “which is right there.”

The conversation continued as Frable answered usual questions: how about doctor visits, getting mail and paying taxes? (They go to local doctors wherever they are, use a mail-forwarding service based in Livingston that caters to full-time RVers and, thus, are considered Texans for tax purposes.)

## HEALING HIATUS

The appeal of the nontraditional is sometimes linked to a life-changing event or a change in priorities. Tom Langham, a retired state chemist who lives in Austin, became a park host out of grief. In January 2011, his wife died suddenly of cancer. By July, he had moved temporarily to the quiet of Pedernales Falls. On off days, he is close enough to return to check on his home in the city and visit his aging mother. He has decorated the inside of his motor home with happy photos of his wife and himself traveling the nation’s back roads and visiting national parks in years past.

Chrissy Long, 31, decided to serve as park host at Blanco State Park (served by Pedernales Electric Cooperative) to trim costs and return to Texas State University in San Marcos to complete her bachelor’s degree. Years earlier, she had dropped out of college one semester short of graduating, and in the ensuing years, married and worked long hours as a restaurant manager in Austin.

But after her marriage failed, she entered a period of soul searching. While on a prayerful hike in a wilderness preserve in New Mexico, she dreamed up her plan. Her application was approved to serve as a park host in August and September, sweltering months when the Blanco park is often short of volunteers, says Mary Alice Partain, the park’s volunteer coordinator.

Long lives in a 19-foot trailer she borrowed from an uncle. Her trailer is parked next to the eight-ton fifth-wheel owned by the Bells—Alton, 81, and Anne, 78—who have worked as hosts for more than a decade.

When not attending classes or studying, Long patrols campgrounds and cleans restrooms. “I like the solitude and the flexible schedule,” she says. “It couldn’t be more ideal.”

## SOCIAL STATUS DISAPPEARS

Living in the midst of wildlife and with a constant flow of campers, the work is seldom routine.

On the same day I was visiting Pedernales Falls and Blanco parks, two couples serving as park hosts at Bastrop State Park (served by Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative) were being evacuated as a wildfire swept through the park’s pine forest. It became the most destructive fire in Texas history, ravaging parkland and destroying more than 1,600 homes and 34,000 acres in Bastrop County.

A couple of weeks later, I caught up with two sets of Bastrop park hosts, Bud and Diane Cochran and Billy and Dorothy Harding. The couples had been relocated to Lockhart State Park, where they found work. Among the chores: filling a 500-gallon water tank and watering the parched putting greens at the golf course, the only one managed by the state park system.

On a Saturday afternoon, the two couples gather inside

the Hardings’ comfy fifth-wheel, along with Deborah Rupprecht, who is in her first stint as a host after she and her husband, Peter, became full-time RVers eight years ago. Peter, a traveling Lutheran minister, joins us in his bare feet after returning from a San Marcos River canoe trip with a youth group. He is serving temporarily at a local church whose minister retired.

With Boston terriers underfoot in the Hardings’ roomy RV, we munch homemade coffee cake and talk about their lives as roving park residents. There is much cheer, laughter and goodwill—like we’re sitting around a virtual campfire. Talk ranges from comparisons of their RVs to the places they’ve traveled to the work they’ve done. (Billy, an electrician, specializes in keeping park lights on, and Diane helps at a Bastrop shop that makes signs for all the state’s parks.) There are stories about park mishaps (like the time a snake crawled up and surprised a man using a toilet). Ironically, they say, if they were “home” or visiting children, they’d often feel isolated, surrounded by busy people in walled-off suburbs. Here, living in a park, they are surrounded by nature and wildlife—with like-minded souls only steps away. “There is camaraderie,” says Diane.

“When you’re in a campground, social status disappears,” Deborah adds. “You’re all the same.”

*Charles Boisseau is an Austin-based writer.*

### On TexasCoopPower.com

To attract volunteers, some parks are offering even more amenities, such as free laundry facilities and recreational rooms.



Danny and Sandy Wood and their cat—a Cornish rex named Tony—moved to Cedar Hill State Park almost a year ago. The couple says the park-host lifestyle works for them because they love the outdoors, they were willing to downsize, and they adore spending time together. ‘I think I’ve died and gone to heaven,’ Danny says of their backyard: a state park teeming with wildlife.

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# REVEALED: Massive Hoard Makes Silver Dollar History

## American Entrepreneur Sells off Silver Fortune

When miners found silver in Virginia City in 1857, they knew they'd struck the mother lode. For the next twenty years, silver flowed faster than water out of the Nevada desert. It was a Wild West bonanza. After years of frenzied mining, the vein began to dry up and the town slowly died with it. It seemed like there was no more silver to be found in those hills.

Until I got a call from a Wild West friend.

He was sitting on a collection of silver coins, minted just after silver was found in Virginia City. With the silver market as strong as it is, he decided that it was time to sell off his collection. We had hit the mother lode again.

### A 'few bags' become *thirty!*

To call my friend a coin collector is an understatement. When he said he had a few 1000-coin bags of silver coins I was interested. When those silver coins turned out to be New Orleans Mint Morgan Silver Dollars from the 1880's I was intrigued. And when those few bags turned out to be thirty, I was astounded. My buddy wasn't sitting on a collection, he had a hoard!

For a man who loves only the best things in life, I guess I shouldn't have been so surprised.

### One of the largest Silver Dollar hoards in decades

For serious numismatists, hoards can come around once in a lifetime. Silver hoards are enormous collections of coins that have been stored away, often secretly, for safekeeping. With silver prices steadily rising over the past few years, many silver hoards have been sold off.

Most assumed that hoards of Morgan Silver Dollars were a thing of the past... until now.

Morgan Dollars are some of the most coveted coins on the market today. And with the hot silver market, most dealers cannot keep Morgan Dollars around for long. Due to this heavy demand, especially for the finest quality pieces, the price



Actual size is 38.1 mm

of many Morgan dollars has gone up dramatically in the last six months alone. But because of the sheer scale of this massive hoard, we have been able to keep the price at a pre-frenzy level.

### 120-year-old Silver Dollars for as little as \$85!

Each of these silver dollars from the McClaren Collection Hoard (named for my friend's beloved Mercedes SLR McLaren Supercar) are Brilliant Uncirculated Morgan dollars that look as fresh as they did when they were struck by the U.S. Mint in New Orleans over 120 years ago. The coins were submitted to the Professional Coin Grading Service (PCGS) for certification, grading and encapsulation. Once inspected, they were given a Choice Uncirculated grade for their superior quality.

My Wild West friend worked for 25 years to amass this huge collection. He scoured the country looking for the finest Morgan Silver Dollars. He did that work for you—and this hidden silver treasure is now within your reach. These coins are over 100 years old—but they can now be yours for a little as \$85!

These Morgan Dollars have been extraordinary pieces of American history for

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Facts and figures were deemed accurate as of December 2011. ©GovMint.com, 2012



# keyhole

# Gardening

Unlocking the secrets of drought-hardy gardens

BY G. ELAINE ACKER • PHOTOS BY BILL SMITH

**D**uring a drought, Texas has a lot in common with southern Africa. Scorching heat, thin layers of topsoil and elusive rainfall can make for a brutal summer when gardening is not for the faint of heart. Recent Texas droughts are the most severe on record, and the National Weather Service warns that the long-term forecast is drier still.

So it's nothing short of amazing that the community of Clifton in Bosque County has been transformed into an oasis in this gardening desert with help from creative landscape architect Deb Tolman. Leaning on her 30 years of experience in landscape design, doctoral studies in environmental science and research on African survival strategies, Tolman has teamed with local ranch owners Jim and Mary Lou Starnater to unlock the secrets of sustainable gardening.

Affectionately known as "Dr. Deb," Tolman lives "one block off the grid." Living on the Starnaters' StarHaven Ranch in a 10-by-10-foot converted oat

bin, Tolman has access to electricity from United Cooperative Services, which serves the ranch, but uses no other public utilities. She grows her own food—even in hot, dry conditions—cooks in an outdoor oven, and every month hosts sustainability workshops on topics from rainwater harvesting to her most popular class—keyhole gardening.

## Lessons from Africa

A keyhole garden is the ultimate raised-bed planter. It is often built in the shape of a circle measuring about 6 feet in diameter that stands waist-high and is notched like a pie with a slice cut away. A hole in the center holds a composting basket that moistens and nourishes the soil. The garden, which from above looks like a keyhole, can be built with recycled materials and requires less water than a conventional garden.

"It works well in places far drier than we are here on the edge of the Hill Country," says Tolman, who discovered the technique five years ago.



Demonstration model used in workshops

The sustainable gardening method was developed by a humanitarian aid organization in southern Africa, where resources are scarce and the climate unforgiving. There, three keyhole gardens can feed a family of 10 all year long, reports the BBC.

In her area of North Central Texas, Tolman has added a twist to keyhole gardens, making beds almost entirely of compost. Some of the soil is composed of recycled newspapers, telephone books and cardboard, which she says adds carbon, nitrogen and air to the soil. In Tolman's garden, cardboard is gold, and what it buys is priceless.

"You don't have to spend \$400 a month on groceries when you can grow healthy produce at home," she says. "In the summertime, I grow Malabar spinach, which loves the heat. The chard's been going all year. I can eat a

Creative landscape architect Deb Tolman tends more than 10 keyhole gardens on StarHaven Ranch in Bosque County, where she lives in a 10-by-10-foot converted oat bin. Most of her garden designs incorporate Central Texas' bountiful limestone and include a frame to support a shade cloth during the hottest months.



power snack of French green beans right off the vine.” Her harvest also includes carrots, kale, tomatoes, berries and more, rivaling Texas farmers markets. “I eat year-round from these gardens,” says Tolman.

### Texas Keyhole Gardens

Tolman is sharing these ideas with the community, and Clifton now has about 60 keyhole gardens.

“My first keyhole garden here in Clifton was at Ace Hardware,” says Tolman, describing a demonstration garden maintained by the hardware store. “We used native rock and clay to build the walls, and recycled paper and manure to make soil. In just four weeks, 129 phone books were no longer discernable, and half a Dumpster load of cardboard from Ace Hardware had become soil.”

Jim Starnater has helped build three community keyhole gardens in Clifton and has built several on his ranch. He was skeptical when he first attended one of Tolman’s workshops and saw

photos of a beautifully productive raised-bed garden built on a mutual friend’s property. “I thought that garden was several years old,” he says. “But it had been planted just seven months before. You’re not going to start anything else in Bosque County that grows like that.”

While the keyhole provides easy access to the composting basket in the center, almost any raised bed about 6 feet in diameter will work. “You can adapt the concept to whatever you have available,” Starnater says. “We’ve experimented with various things, from old, leaking cattle water troughs to tractor and truck tires. Personally, I’m not into ‘pretty.’ I’m into function and efficiency. I’m interested in how to produce the largest amount of nutritious, organic food in the least amount of space with the least amount of water.”

Tolman, who appreciates both form and function, has worked with Starnater to turn an old ski boat and a bathtub into gardens in addition to her more traditional stone designs.

### Drought Hardy

Clifton resident Rosa Peitz met Tolman through the Clifton Garden Club. “I’d never heard of keyhole gardens before Dr. Deb’s workshop,” says Peitz, “but I liked the idea of a garden where I didn’t have to bend over and that would only use a gallon or two of water every day.”

Tolman had suggested using rocks and cob, a mixture of clay and straw, but Peitz didn’t have either. Instead, she and her son used broken concrete from a house remodeling project, mortaring it with cement to create a frame for her now-prosperous garden. “This year, he’s got eight or nine different kinds of peppers growing in it, and we’ll easily harvest several thousand peppers,” Peitz says. “During the drought, when almost everyone had given up on their gardens, the keyhole gardens were thriving.”

Tolman’s and Starnater’s gardens also continued to produce during the 2011 drought, although extra water and care were required. “If you go through a Texas summer with more

# Unlock your own keyhole garden

Follow these guidelines to get started:

1. Measure a 6-foot diameter circle to define the inside wall of your garden.
2. Notch the circle (like cutting a wedge of pie) so you can access the basket at the center.
3. Construct the exterior wall about 3 feet high using rocks, metal, timbers or any material that can support the weight of wet soil.
4. Use wire mesh to create a tube about 1 foot in diameter and about 4 feet high. Stand the tube in the center of the circle.
5. Line the outer walls with cardboard and fill the garden area (but not the wire mesh tube in the center), with layers of compostable materials, wetting it down as you go. Fill the last few inches with compost or potting soil. The soil should slope from a high point at the top of the center basket downward to the edges of the garden.
6. Fill the center basket with alternating layers of compostable material, along with layers of kitchen scraps and herbaceous weeds that provide the plants with moisture and nutrients.
7. Water the center basket and the garden only when the plants will not survive without it. This forces the plants' roots down toward the center basket.
8. Feed the garden by adding more kitchen scraps, lawn clippings, etc., to the center basket.
9. Consider arching a framework of thin wires over the garden. During the hottest months, the wires can support a shade cloth, and in winter, plastic sheeting creates an instant greenhouse.
10. Enjoy the fruits (and vegetables!) of your labor.

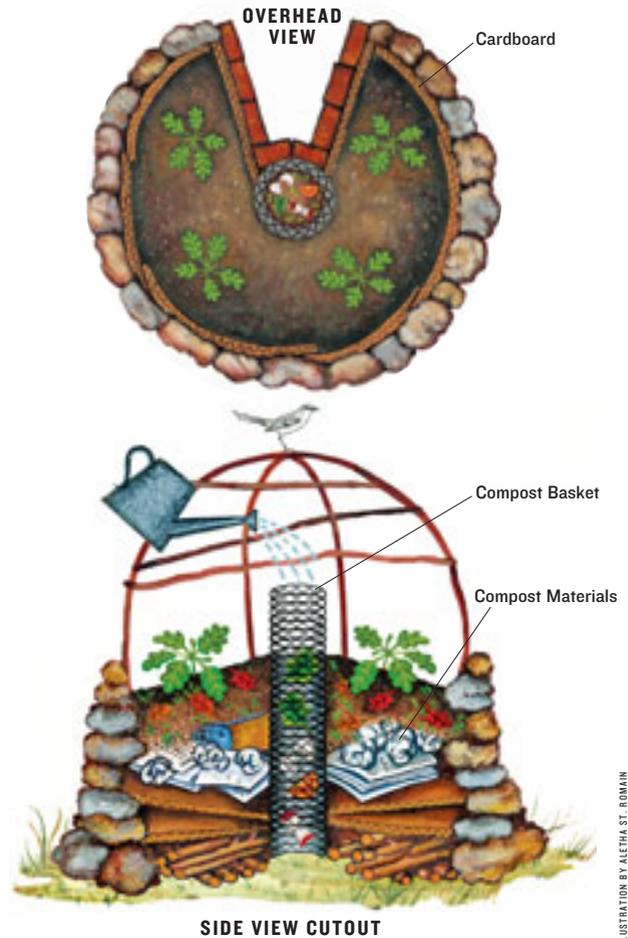
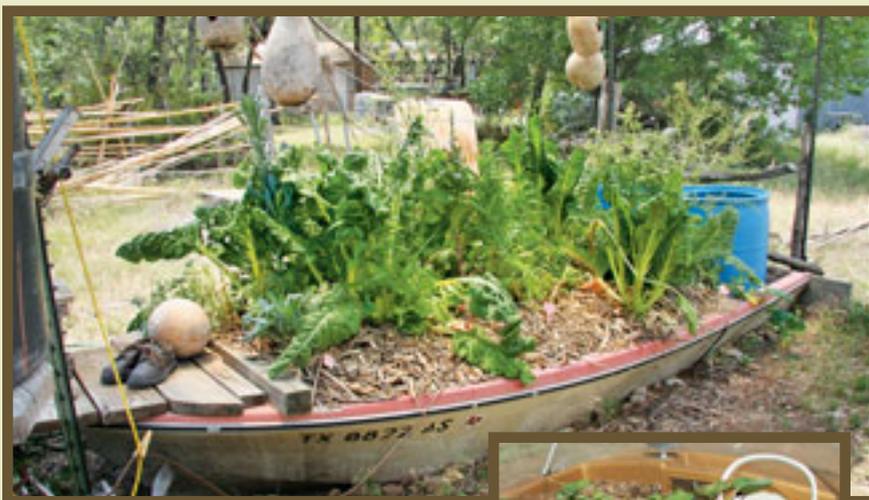


ILLUSTRATION BY ALETHA ST. ROMAN



**ABOVE:** Even old boats can be filled with compost and turned into keyhole gardens. This mix of Swiss chard, kale and Malabar spinach has grown prolifically, including during extreme summer heat. **RIGHT:** Thick layers of mulch hold in moisture from drip irrigation, help plants get started and minimize the amount of water required.



than 60 days over 100 degrees, nothing's going to grow if you don't water it," says Starnater. "But we used drip irrigation and a thick layer of mulch, which reduced the amount of water required by about 30 percent. We also created umbrellas to shade the plants and reduce the heat and sun exposure by about 60 percent. That makes a big difference."

Because keyhole gardens can both weather the drought and take a big bite out of the grocery bill, they're a welcome gift from Africans to Texans for bountiful seasons to come.

*G. Elaine Acker is a freelance writer and occasional blogger who divides her time between Texas and New Mexico.*

*Visit [debtolman.com](http://debtolman.com) for more information on keyhole gardening.*



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## Space Heater Safety

Many people turn to space heaters as a convenient source of warmth in winter months. However, space heaters can be dangerous if not used properly.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that more than 25,000 residential fires every year are associated with space heaters. More than 300 people die in these fires. In addition, an estimated 6,000 people annually receive hospital emergency care for burn injuries connected with space heaters.

Space heater hazards stem not just from fires caused by contact with or close proximity to heating elements. They also include fires started by flammable fuels used in the heater, defective wiring in the appliance, and carbon monoxide poisoning caused by improper venting or an incomplete combustion of fuels.

Here are some tips for using your electric space heater safely:

- Keep the heater at least 3 feet from flammable items such as curtains, furniture or bedspreads.
- Select a space heater with a guard around the heating element.
- When buying a heater, choose one that has been tested and certified by a nationally recognized testing institution such as Underwriters Laboratories.

- Buy a heater that can handle the area you want to heat.
- Read and follow the manufacturer's operating instructions.
- Keep children and pets away from space heaters.
- Never leave a space heater unattended.
- Never go to sleep with a space heater on.
- Never use or store flammable liquids near a space heater.
- Do not use a heater in a bathroom—it's a high-moisture area that could damage the appliance.
- Keep heaters away from water to prevent electrocution.
- Do not use an extension cord with a space heater.
- Do not use the heater to dry clothes.
- Be sure the heater's plug fits snugly in an outlet. The cord and plug may feel warm when operating because the unit draws so much power, but they should not feel hot. If they do, unplug the heater and have a qualified repair person check for problems.
- Do not attempt to repair a broken heater yourself. It should be checked and repaired by a qualified appliance service center.

*Source: The Consumer Product Safety Commission*

## *The Secret's in the* **SEALING**

If you read about the Texas Co-op Power Home Energy Makeover contest winners in our October issue you might have noticed a trend: The winners felt a difference as soon as their heating and cooling ducts were sealed. Want to feel a difference, too?

Start making improvements today. Making improvements to your duct system can:

**IMPROVE COMFORT.** Sealing and insulating ducts can help with common comfort problems such as rooms that are too hot in the summer or too cold in the winter.

**ENHANCE INDOOR AIR QUALITY.** Fumes from household and garden chemicals, insulation particles and dust can enter your duct system, aggravating asthma and allergy problems. Sealing ducts can improve indoor air quality by reducing the risk of pollutants entering ducts and circulating through your home.

**PROMOTE SAFETY.** Gas appliances such as water heaters, clothes dryers and furnaces release combustion gases like carbon monoxide through their venting systems. Leaky ductwork in your system can cause "backdrafting," drawing gases back into the living space rather than expelling them outdoors. Sealing leaks can reduce this risk.

**SAVE MONEY.** Leaky ducts can reduce heating and cooling system efficiency by as much as 20 percent. Sealing and insulating ducts increases efficiency, lowers bills and will eventually pay for itself in energy savings. Plus, if you're in the market for new heating and cooling equipment, a well-sealed duct system may allow you to downsize to a smaller, less expensive unit.



# Protect Electronic Devices from Power Surges

**DEAR JIM:** We have many electronic gadgets in our house, and I am concerned about a voltage surge ruining them. Are there whole-house surge suppressors that will protect everything electric in our house? —*Sandi S.*

**DEAR SANDI:** People often think of only electronic gadgets, such as computers, game consoles and audiovisual items, as being at risk from electrical surges. Actually, nearly every electric item in a house has some sort of sensitive electronics that can be damaged by a surge.

A common source of an electrical surge is lightning. The voltage and current surge from just a single lightning strike are enormous, and there are typically many for the duration of a storm. If your house and wiring experience a direct or very nearby hit by lightning, even a good surge suppressor will probably not be able to protect all electronic items.

When a storm is forecast and you begin to hear thunder, unplug as many of your electronic devices as possible. Just switching them off may not be adequate protection from voltage and current surges.

Many times, it's the repeated smaller electrical surges that damage the majority of electronic equipment. Some of these smaller surges can be generated by motors from your own vacuum cleaner, refrigerator compressor or clothes washer.

It usually takes a long time for these numerous smaller surges to cause failures. One common result is that the wire and circuit board insulation slowly breaks down from each small surge and normal aging. Eventually, a wire may short out or the electronic component may malfunction, and the device fails. These surges



This whole-house surge suppressor is mounted beneath the circuit breaker panel.

can also reduce the life of lightbulbs.

There are several types of whole-house surge suppressors available designed to protect all of the wiring circuits in a home. Some mount on the circuit breaker panel indoors or are built into a circuit breaker. Others are designed to mount at the base of the electric meter.

There are differences in the protection provided by various surge suppressors. A common design uses metal oxide varistors, a type of electrical resistor, to dissipate the surge before it flows through the wiring.

You can conceptualize this as a floodgate. At normal voltages, the gate is closed, preventing leaks. But if the voltage gets too high, the gate opens, allowing the excess damaging current

to pass to ground, protecting the equipment.

If the components (including electrical resistor) in a surge suppressor are too small, they can't handle the surge and they fail. Using larger components rated to handle more energy allows the suppressor to safely dissipate a larger surge. When comparing surge suppressors, a higher number is better for the total energy dissipation. Clamping voltage is the voltage required for the "floodgate" to open—for the electrical resistor to conduct electricity. A lower number for this is usually better.

Even though the surge suppressor protected your electronics, a large surge may burn out the electrical resistor in the surge suppressor. Many models have a light on them to indicate whether it is still functioning properly. Check it regularly, and especially after thunderstorms.

It's also important to note that many electronic devices such as computers and entertainment systems have multiple connections, including satellite, cable, phone or network inputs. Any of these can serve as a path for a surge to enter the device and cause damage. Surge suppression installed only on the power line doesn't guarantee protection on the other paths.

For the most sensitive electronic devices, you should also use point-of-use surge suppressors for extra protection. They are not expensive and make it convenient to completely switch off the power to save electricity when the device is not being used. When purchasing one of these surge suppressors, look for models labeled UL, meaning they are tested for compliance with Underwriters Laboratories Standard 1449.

© James Dullely

# Long Shelf Life: Rural Grocers

*Even as supercenters claim some customers, rural stores stock something the big guys can't—that personal touch.*

**By Beth  
Henry Watson**



Wanda Lee can't imagine life without Coats Grocery. "In your community, your schools and churches are most important," says this lifelong Gause resident, a retired hairdresser. "We add Coats Grocery to that."

The oldest of five children, Lee as a young girl walked across town to pick up necessities when the store was Ely's Grocery, started in 1940 by the father of current owner Wanda Coats. Back then, Gause boasted three grocery stores, she says. Now only Coats remains, the business anchor in this small, unincorporated community about 85 miles northeast of Austin.

Lee and others note that Wanda Coats and her husband, Al, champion any local cause, whether it's 4-H, a project at the elementary school or the needs of an individual.

Jimmy Sanders experienced the Coats' generosity firsthand. The former pastor of Gause Baptist Church has lived in the area for 24 years. "When we were getting started in the ministry here, there were some pretty lean times," Sanders says. "They helped us out with groceries. They've probably helped more people than anybody knows about."

Customers shop the tiny, two-aisle store for hand-cut steaks and fresh, sliced lunchmeat. Coats also offers produce and dairy basics as well as feed and plumbing supplies.

Due to lack of space, shoppers lay their purchases right on the checkout counter rather than using carts. Crunched confines notwithstanding, a bench and chairs sit near the Blue Bell ice cream case where locals visit over 25-cent cups of coffee and freshly made burgers.

"If you want to know what's going on in Gause, you can come right down to Coats Grocery," Sanders says. "The economy's been solved many times, and many Cowboys and Oilers games have been replayed."

Lee also shops at Coats to find out who needs to be on the church prayer list.

"It's kind of a center of the community in a way—the center of a lot of things," Wanda Coats says.

Its proprietors hope the store serves the community for another generation (their daughter works with them full time now). But with supermarkets 10 to 12 miles in any direction, Coats Grocery, like so many other family-run rural stores, contends with shoppers' willingness to drive the extra distance for more product variety.

Wanda Coats likes to think customers count on her and Al, but larger Texas towns have lost their grocers in the past few years. Rick Johnson, president of the Texas Grocery and Convenience Association, says the number of small-town grocery stores in Texas has been in decline for the past 30 years. Population shifts away from rural areas means "there is not as much demand for the product or service these small retailers are providing, which means not enough income to keep the doors open," he says.

Maybe the demand is lower, but for people like Lee the value is still pretty high.

“When you run out of milk or a loaf of bread, you’d have to drive 10 miles to get it if Coats wasn’t there,” she says. “And if they’re closed and you’re in dire straits, you can call them and they’ll open up for you.”

Halfway across the state, west of Fort Worth, Ray’s Grocery and Market in Breckenridge battles another consumer trend: shoppers’ eagerness to save a few pennies at a chain store.

Just out of high school and married less than a year, owner Lee Olson went into the grocery business in 1974 with his father-in-law, the late Ray Turner. Both men had worked at chain grocery stores, but they made their careers cultivating shopping as a community experience.

“When you go to a supercenter, who do you ask?” Olson wonders. “You stand there and beat on a window.”

“We emphasize to our employees that everyone has a name,” adds Craig Olson, Lee and Beverly Olson’s son, who at 30 represents the third generation of Ray’s leadership. “When you’re not a supercenter and can’t win on price, you have to be better at the things you can.”

A regional chain supermarket does a brisk business just one block to the west. To stay competitive, Ray’s packs services under its 5,000-square-foot roof: drop-off catering, a tiny deli serving breakfast and barbecue lunches, a meat market and wild game processing.

But it’s the personal relationships and camaraderie with fellow shoppers that matter to customers like Louvenia “Lou” Burton. A retired domestic worker living on a fixed income, Burton uses her Ray’s charge account to control her food budget.

“Most of us elderly people, we depend on Ray’s,” says Burton, who moved to Breckenridge after she got married in 1946. “They’re like family. Without Ray’s it just wouldn’t seem like Breckenridge anymore.”

Ray’s eight aisles supply most families’ basics. And a letter-sized sign announces early closings for Breckenridge Buckaroos home football games.

Customer Elizabeth McMillan’s father and brother were ranchers who sold fresh beef to local stores, including Ray’s predecessor, Stewart and Peeks. She and her late husband used Ray’s to cater meals for their oil company employees, and their three children always stopped in after school to charge sodas on the family account.

And just like their grandmother, McMillan’s grandchildren love Ray’s meat market, where everything arrives minimally processed. Behind the thigh-high meat counter, a Ray’s butcher—often Lee Olson himself—customizes any ribeye, strip or roast order.

Before she broke her hip about five years ago, McMillan stopped in the store every morning or afternoon. Now either of two helpers goes in her place, but if those women aren’t on duty, she knows which store in Breckenridge will make a special home delivery.

“If I need something, I just call Lee,” she says. “I’d be awfully lost without Ray’s.”



Owner Lee Olson, working the meat counter, entered the grocery business in 1974 with his father-in-law, the late Ray Turner. Almost four decades later, the store they opened in Breckenridge—Ray’s Grocery and Market—remains competitive with a nearby regional chain supermarket by packing lots of services under its 5,000-square-foot roof.

*Writer and editor Beth Henary Watson lives in Mineral Wells.*

# The Physics of Love

*Quantum leap of fate: Here's one happy couple that beat the odds.*

BY MARCO PERELLA

**T**his is a true story. The names have been changed so I won't get punched by my friends. And don't worry ... this *is* a love story, perfect for Valentine's Day. But it starts with a short burst of quantum physics, a nutty world in which they talk about something called quantum entanglement. What that means is basically something can happen over *here*, and something else will happen over *there*, simultaneously with no real reason or explanation.

Physicists discovered this by separating twin photons and isolating them from each other.

Whatever they did to one of the twins happened *simultaneously* to the other without regard to space or time. (This is officially known as Bell's Theorem, named for the scientist who first performed the experiment.)

So those of you who think that the universe is a chaotic mess, and we just stumble around until we die, you'd better listen up.

After a bad divorce, my friend Chris had been single for two years. Like a lot of middle-aged singles, she was getting bored. Not to say desperate. She's not a bar person. She doesn't join clubs. And all the men she flirted with at the grocery store turned out to be married.

Chris spends a lot of time on the Internet. So I guess it was inevitable that she'd eventually get up the nerve to try one of those online dating services.

Here's how the story goes: She chooses just about the safest one she can find. She posts her inquiry with her description and then screens all the replies from potential suitors. Then she writes back, still anonymously, to anyone who strikes a spark.

If you're single and computer savvy, you probably already know what I'm talking about. If you're married, like me, you make fun of people like Chris who think they can find true love from a cyberspace search. I'm her biggest critic:

"It's dangerous! Anyway, people lie! Go back to the grocery store and hang out next to the magazine rack! You'll meet somebody eventually!"

But Chris is stubbornly committed to giving it a shot. She lists her interests and attributes. To me, it sounds like every other personal ad you've ever read: "Looking for someone with a sense of humor who likes to take long walks in the park and doesn't smoke. I like classical music and Lonesome Dove ..." etc., etc.

As an afterthought she adds that she plays golf. Well, evidently "golf" is the magic word out there where middle-aged, single manhood roams wild and free.

Chris receives over 200 responses. And almost all of them mention golf.

I guess a single woman golfer is a pretty desirable commodity for a certain kind of male. I'm talking about Golf Guy. I know Golf Guy. I *am* Golf Guy. I'm the married kind of Golf Guy, but the breed runs true.

Golf Guy would rather play golf than eat. Nothing can inflame his passions as much as the obsessive pursuit of the little white widow-maker.

The idea that somewhere out there is a woman who might *understand* and *accept* his compulsions excites him enough to turn off the Golf Channel and write an email to this mysterious Internet creature.

So there's Chris trying to sort through 200 emails for somebody interesting enough to write back to. All of her friends, me included, are laughing at her: "Tell 'em what your handicap is Chris! Then maybe they'll leave you alone!"

Actually, most of the letters are pretty lame. (There's a reason these guys are single.) Chris only finds a handful that intrigue her at all.

But she screws her courage to the sticking place and writes back to the most promising Golf Guy, a divorced engineer who works for the city and is a bird-watcher. (Believe it or not, this is exactly the kind of guy that makes Chris' heart go pitty-pat.) The guy's name is Kerry, and he and Chris strike up a kind of shy and tentative email exchange that finally leads to the moment of truth: The First Date.

We all cluck around her like hens and tell her to choose a crowded, well-lit place. Poor Chris escapes our overweening clutches and goes out to meet the enemy.

Kerry turns out to be a quiet, earnest kind of guy with glasses and a sense of humor. He was the city amateur golf champion a few years ago. So the golf conversation gets them through the first half hour, and then they go on to Golden-cheeked Warblers for a while. He's read Lonesome Dove.

Then Chris says, "I used to know a guy named Kerry in grade school. I had a big crush on him."

"That's funny," Kerry says. "I had a crush on a girl named Chris. Where did you go to grade school?"

"Mathews Elementary over in Clarksville," she replies.

"Wait a minute," he says. "That's where I went ..."

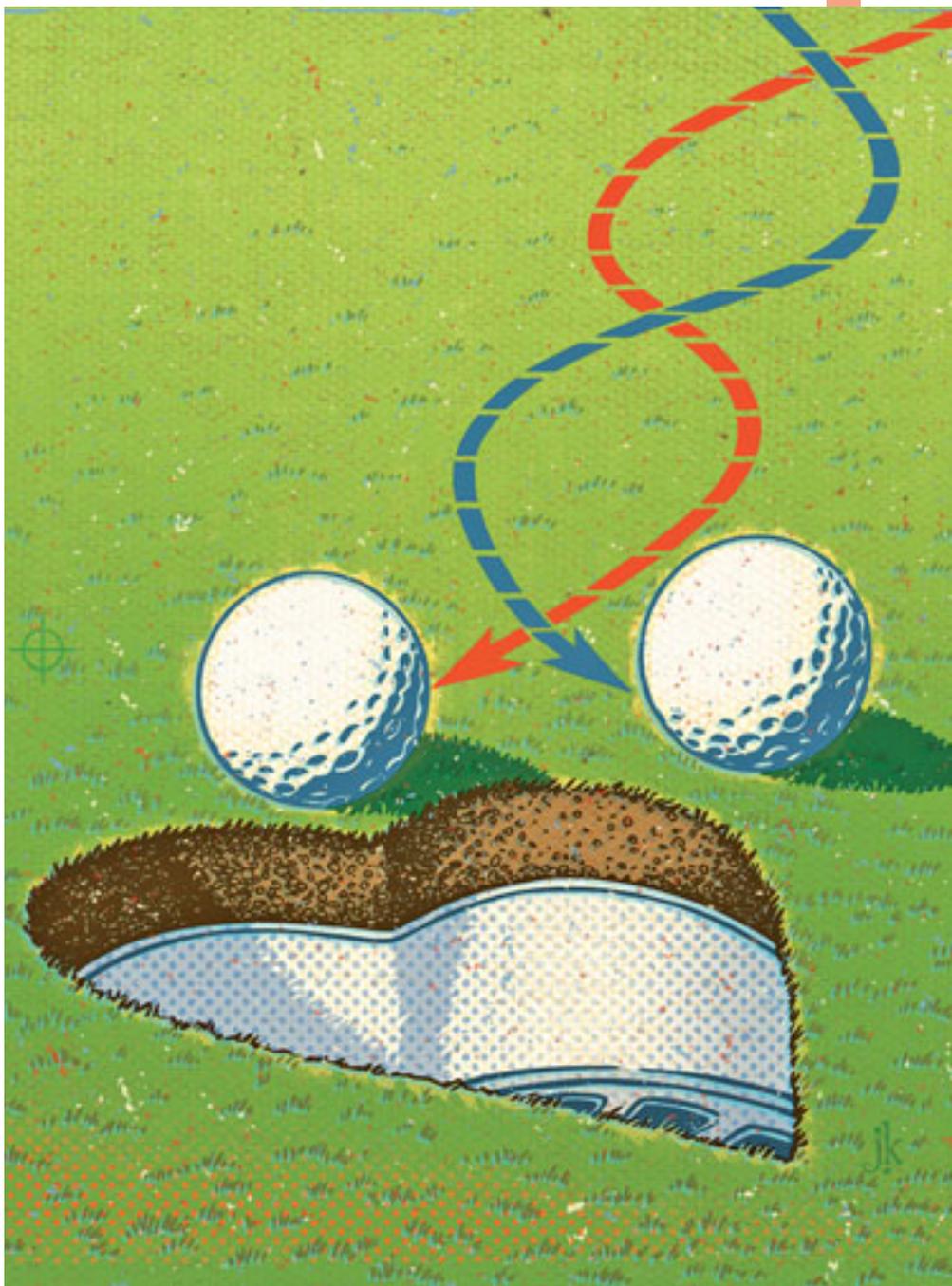
What are the odds? Tell me again how everything is random?

Chris and Kerry have been together several years now. They go birding. They watch Lonesome Dove. And sometimes the Golf Channel. He gives her golf lessons, and her game has really improved. I think they're truly in love.

So you might call it luck. Or coincidence. Or you could get all new age and call it synchronicity. But me, I call it physics. Sometimes the twin photons will just do their thing.

---

*Actor and writer Marco Perella lives in Austin.*





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# Dr. Sofie Herzog

BY GENE FOWLER

You may write something about me if you will,” said the lady physician to a reporter at the 1915 Texas State Medical Association convention. “I don’t believe in this humbuggery of saying that doctors don’t want their names in the paper.”

While news about Dr. Sofie Herzog made the area papers from time to time, she was probably more likely to be discussed by Brazoria’s wagging tongues.

It was shocking enough for a woman to expound freely on such explicit anatomical detail as is required of the medical profession. And though she soon won Brazoria’s residents over as a skilled and caring physician, “Dr. Sofie” perplexed locals further by riding a horse astride and wearing a divided skirt instead of using the customary sidesaddle. And her big, broad-brimmed hat struck many as a man’s hat.

Then there was the personal museum in her office, filled with medical specimens and stuffed birds and reptiles. Rattlesnake skins were hung on red satin ribbons after they were skinned by Dr. Sofie herself.

Born Sofie Dalia in Vienna, Austria, in 1846, she married Dr. Moritz Herzog at about age 14; most historical accounts state his first name as August, but Dortha Pekar, a Brazoria County historian who portrays Dr. Sofie in monologue, found the name Moritz (and Moriz) Herzog on five of his children’s marriage licenses.

The couple had 15 children, including three sets of twins; eight of their children died in infancy.

In 1886, the Herzogs immigrated to New York City, where Moritz had accepted a position with the United States Naval Hospital. In time, Sofie, who according to some historical sources received medical training before coming to America, also felt the call to heal. She practiced medicine in Hoboken, New Jersey, for several years and then graduated from the Eclectic Medical College of the City of New York in 1894.

After her husband’s death around 1895, Dr. Sofie moved to Brazoria, southwest of Galveston, where her youngest daughter, Elfriede, lived with her husband, Randolph Prell. For a time, Dr. Sofie stayed with her daughter and son-in-law and practiced medicine in their home. But after Randolph objected to the presence of a smallpox patient, whom Dr. Sofie was treating with an experimental ointment she had concocted herself, she built her own residence and medical office on Brazoria’s Market Street. The structure included an operating room for her surgical practice and a drugstore where she mixed her own medicines—and, of course, her museum of medical specimens, animal skins and wild critters stuffed and posed just as they had looked in life.

When she expressed curiosity about alligators, an acquaintance delivered a 7-footer to her office. The still-alive beast kept Dr. Sofie awake all night until she had it added to her collection of skins (it’s not clear who finally killed it). And her fashionable alligator handbag made from a smaller reptile featured two of its legs, with feet and claws attached.

Though located in southeast Texas, Brazoria County remained infested with Wild West characters, and Dr. Sofie perfected the art of removing bullets from folks who found themselves on the wrong end of a six-shooter. She grew fond of boasting that she had never lost a patient after removing a bullet and even had a lucky-charm necklace made from 24 retrieved slugs of lead.

The doctor invested in Brazoria County real estate, building a hotel—the Southern, which became the social center of Brazoria—and an Episcopalian church that served the town until a hurricane destroyed it in 1932.

Around the turn of the century, when Uriah Lott’s St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway was laying tracks through Dr. Sofie’s stretch of the coastal plains, she often was called to construction sites to treat injured or ill railroad workers. She rode any transportation available, including train engines and boxcars. Soon, railway officials offered her the post of chief surgeon—but when Eastern railroad officials learned that she was a woman, they asked her to resign.

“I’ll keep this job as long as I give satisfaction,” she replied. “If I fail, then you can free me.” She remained on the job until just a few months before she died, telling reporters that she was “the only woman surgeon for a railroad in the world.”

After Dr. Sofie’s death in 1925 at the age of 79, part of her museum collection went to John Sealy Hospital in Galveston; her alligator bag can be seen upon request in the Brazoria County Historical Museum in Angleton. But don’t look for the 24-bullet necklace. Dr. Sofie wore that good-luck piece to the world beyond.

*Austinite Gene Fowler is the author of Mavericks—A Gallery of Texas Characters, published by University of Texas Press.*



Dr. Sofie Herzog



Gingered Peanut-Beef Potstickers

2012 © ELKE DENNIS. IMAGE FROM BISTOCK.COM

together beef, peanuts, onion, ginger, salt and 3 tablespoons of peanut butter sauce. Reserve remaining sauce to serve with potstickers. Place 2 teaspoons of filling in center of egg-roll wrapper. Wet edges with water. Fold wrapper in half to enclose filling, pressing edges together to stick. Set on work surface seam side up; pleat seam and press potsticker gently into work surface so it will stand flat with pleated seam up. Repeat with remaining filling. In large nonstick frying pan, heat 1 tablespoon of peanut oil over medium heat. Add half of potstickers, pinched side up, allowing space between each. Add enough water so potstickers are three-quarters covered. Cover pan and cook over high heat for about 6 minutes, or until water evaporates. There will be some floury oil left around base of potstickers. Uncover and cook over medium heat about 3 minutes, or until bottoms are golden and crusty. Transfer potstickers to serving dish, taking care not to tear them when removing them from pan. Repeat with remaining oil and potstickers. Serve warm with remaining peanut butter sauce.

Servings: 4. Serving size: 3 potstickers. Per serving: 382 calories, 20.4 g protein, 22.7 g fat, 21.9 g carbohydrates, 2.7 g dietary fiber, 797 mg sodium, 2.1 g sugars, 40 mg cholesterol

**SPICY ROASTED PEANUTS WITH GREEN ONIONS**

- 2 cups roasted peanuts
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 1/2 tablespoons peanut oil
- 1 1/2 teaspoons kosher salt, or to taste
- 1 tablespoon five-spice powder
- 1 tablespoon red chili powder, or to taste
- 1/2 cup chopped green onion

Place peanuts and sugar in nonstick pan over medium-low heat. Stir until sugar starts to melt, about 5 to 7 minutes. Drizzle oil on peanuts and add salt, five-spice powder and chili powder. Stir another 3 to 5 minutes, until sugar begins to harden and become crunchy. Remove from heat and add onion. Toss thoroughly and transfer to cookie sheet to cool.

Servings: 4. Serving size: 1/2 cup. Per serving: 583 calories, 18.1 g protein, 39.8 g fat, 43.5 g carbohydrates, 7.1 g dietary fiber, 911 mg sodium, 28.4 g sugars

# Lights! Camera! Snacktion!

**BY KEVIN HARGIS** The weather is cold, and the nights are long. Sounds like a perfect time to hunker down in front of the television and let some movie magic take you away for a couple of hours.

Whether it's a family cartoon night with the kids or a romantic snuggle for two, food and films just seem to go together. Just look at the lines at the concession stand the next time you visit a cinema multiplex.

But at home, snacking as you watch a video doesn't have to involve a big bowl of sweet stuff or a bowl of plain ol' popcorn.

With a little preparation, you can enjoy a mini-meal or a healthier type of snack. Here are some ideas from the American Peanut Council ([www.peanutsusa.com](http://www.peanutsusa.com)) for building a film-night menu.

The Texas Peanut Producers Board, which sponsored this month's contest, offers a downloadable recipe book with some different entrée ideas. Look for it at [www.texaspeanutboard.com/nutrition-recipes.html](http://www.texaspeanutboard.com/nutrition-recipes.html).

**GINGERED PEANUT-BEEF POTSTICKERS**

- |                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| 2 cloves garlic, minced            | 1/4 cup salted blanched peanuts, finely chopped |
| 1/4 cup chicken or beef stock      | 1 green onion, finely diced                     |
| 2 tablespoons soy sauce            | 1 tablespoon ginger root, minced                |
| 2 teaspoons sesame oil             | 12 3-inch-square egg-roll wrappers              |
| Pinch hot pepper flakes            | 2 tablespoons peanut oil                        |
| 2 tablespoons smooth peanut butter | Pinch salt                                      |
| 8 ounces lean ground beef          |   |

In small bowl, combine garlic, stock, soy sauce, sesame oil, pepper flakes and peanut butter. Microwave for 30 seconds on high; whisk until smooth. In separate bowl, mix



**SUSAN BRASHIER**, *San Bernard Electric Cooperative*

Prize-winning recipe: **Pecan Praline Crunch**

Snack at your home cinema with these recipes for sweet, savory and all-around satisfying snacks served up by Texas Co-op Power readers. The movie snacks contest was sponsored by the Texas Peanut Producers Board.

## PECAN PRALINE CRUNCH

- 1 box (12 ounces) Quaker Oats Cereal
- 2 cups pecan pieces
- 1/2 cup light corn syrup
- 1/2 cup light brown sugar
- 1/4 cup butter
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda

Heat oven to 250 degrees. Mix cereal and nuts and set aside. Mix syrup, sugar and butter in microwavable bowl and microwave for 1 1/2 minutes. Stir and microwave another 30 seconds to 1 minute or until boiling. Add vanilla and baking soda. Pour over cereal until well coated. Spread on large cookie sheet. Bake for 1 hour, stirring every 20 minutes. When done, pour onto waxed paper and allow to cool. Store in resealable containers.

Servings: 16. Serving size: 1/2 cup. Per serving: 229 calories, 2.8 g protein, 13.3 g fat, 27.8 g carbohydrates, 2.3 g dietary fiber, 110 mg sodium, 12.4 g sugars, 7 mg cholesterol

**COOK'S TIP:** This recipe can also be stored in the freezer. When ready to serve, thaw at room temperature 15 to 20 minutes.

## SPINACH DIP

- 1 tablespoon chopped jalapeño
- 3/4 cup chopped onion
- 2 tomatoes, chopped
- 10 ounces frozen, chopped spinach, thawed and drained
- 8 ounces softened cream cheese
- 8 ounces Monterey jack cheese, shredded
- 1/2 cup half and half

Combine all ingredients and pour into buttered, ovenproof dish. Bake at 400 degrees for 20 to 25 minutes. Serve with chips.

Servings: 12. Serving size: 1/2 cup. Per serving: 163 calories, 7.2 g protein, 12.2 g fat, 4.1 g carbohydrates, 1.2 g dietary fiber, 215 mg sodium, 1.9 g sugars, 41 mg cholesterol

**SHANNON DITZENBERTIER**

*CoSero Electric*

## SWEET 'N' SALTY CRUNCH POP

- 8 slices bacon
- 1/2 cup popcorn kernels
- 1 cup roasted unsalted peanuts
- 1/2 cup butter
- 1 cup light brown sugar
- 1/3 cup light corn syrup
- 1/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper

Preheat oven to 200 degrees. Lightly coat large baking sheet with cooking spray. In large skillet over medium heat, gently brown bacon until crisp, about 8 to 10 minutes, flipping frequently. Remove skillet from heat, remove cooked bacon and set aside. Once bacon is cool enough to handle, crumble into small pieces. Pour bacon fat from skillet into large pot (at least 5 quarts) with lid. Heat over medium-high heat and add popcorn. Cover and pop popcorn, shaking frequently to distribute kernels. Once popping has stopped, remove from heat and transfer popcorn into large mixing bowl, taking care to discard unpopped kernels. Add crumbled bacon and peanuts and mix well. In medium saucepan over medium-high heat, melt butter. Add sugar and corn syrup and stir until sugar has dissolved. Bring to boil, then remove from heat. Add baking soda, salt and pepper. Pour sugar mixture slowly over the popcorn, stirring constantly. Once popcorn mixture is

coated, spread it on prepared sheet and bake for 20 minutes, stirring every 5 minutes. Remove from oven and allow to cool completely. Break into bite-sized pieces and serve.

Servings: 6. Serving size: 3/4 cup. Per serving: 565 calories, 10.6 g protein, 31.6 g fat, 60.4 g carbohydrates, 2.8 g dietary fiber, 582 mg sodium, 41.7 g sugars, 52 mg cholesterol

**KRISTIE MORGAN**

*Central Texas Electric Cooperative*

**COOK'S TIP:** If a spicier snack is desired, add a bit of cayenne pepper.

## CHOCOLATE PEANUT BUTTER BOMBES

- 8 ounces cream cheese
- 3 tablespoons chocolate syrup
- 1/2 cup powdered sugar
- 12 ounces frozen whipped topping, thawed
- 8 miniature peanut butter cups
- 1/2 cup hot fudge ice cream topping, warmed
- 2 tablespoons chopped salted peanuts

Line eight 6-ounce ramekins or custard cups with plastic wrap; set aside. In a large bowl, beat cream cheese and chocolate syrup until smooth. Beat in sugar; fold in whipped topping. Spoon into prepared cups and insert peanut butter cup into the center of each. Cover and freeze 4 to 5 hours or until firm. Invert bombes into dessert dishes; remove cups and plastic wrap. Drizzle with hot fudge topping and sprinkle with peanuts.

Servings: 8. Serving size: 1 bombe. Per serving: 455 calories, 5.8 g protein, 26.8 g fat, 45.1 g carbohydrates, 1.6 g dietary fiber, 261 mg sodium, 36.3 g sugars, 32 mg cholesterol

**TRACI ALTMAN**

*Pedernales Electric Cooperative*

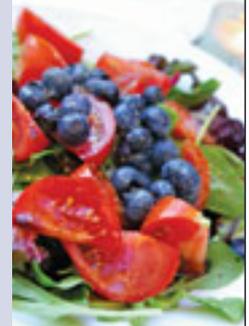
## WIN 2 NIGHTS AT A HISTORIC B&B IN NACOGDOCHES

June's recipe contest topic is **Blueberries**. These plump little delights are good for more than muffins these days. Show us your favorite true-blue recipes. The deadline is February 10.

**SPONSORED BY THE TEXAS BLUEBERRY FESTIVAL.** THE TOP WINNER WILL RECEIVE A TEXAS BLUEBERRY FESTIVAL PRIZE PACKAGE, INCLUDING A TWO-NIGHT STAY AT THE HISTORIC HARDEMAN HOUSE BED-AND-BREAKFAST IN NACOGDOCHES.

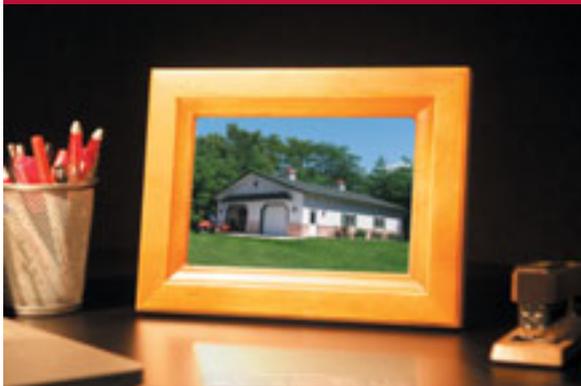
Submit recipes online at [TexasCoopPower.com/Contests](http://TexasCoopPower.com/Contests). Or mail them to Home Cooking, 1122 Colorado, 24th Floor, Austin, TX 78701. You may also fax them to (512) 763-3408. Please include your name, address and phone number, as well as the name of your electric co-op. Also, let us know where you found the recipe or whether it's one you developed yourself. Runners-up will also receive a prize.

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# Loose Saggy Neck Skin - Can Any Cream Cure Turkey Neck?

**DEAR DORRIS:** I'm a woman who is 64 years young who suffers from really loose skin under my chin and on my lower neck. I hate the term, but my grandkids say I have "turkey neck" and frankly, I've had enough of it!



I have tried some creams designed to help tighten and firm that loose, saggy skin, but they did not work. Is there any cream out there that can truly help my loose neck skin?

*Turkey Neck, Bexar County*

**DEAR TURKEY-NECK:** In fact, there is a very potent cream on the market that firms, tightens and regenerates new skin cells on the neck area. It is called the **Dermagist Neck Restoration Cream®**. This cream contains an instant lift

ingredient that tightens the skin naturally, as well as deep moisturizing ingredients to firm the skin and make it more supple. Amazingly, the **Dermagist Neck Restoration Cream®** also has Stem Cells taken from Malus Domestica, a special apple from Switzerland.

These stem cells are actually unprogrammed cells that can mimic those of young skin that stays tight, firm and wrinkle free. As an alternative to the scary surgeries or face lifts that many people resort to, this cream really packs a big punch on the loose saggy skin of the neck.

The **Dermagist Neck Restoration Cream®** is available online at [Dermagist.com](http://Dermagist.com) or you can order or learn more by calling toll-free, **888-771-5355**. Oh, I almost forgot... I was given a promo code when I placed my order that gave me **11% off**. The code was "TXN4". It's worth a try to see if it still work.



▲ South Plains Electric Cooperative member **Faith Howard** says her little brother, 6-year-old **Joshua Stock**, is nuts about swimming.

Long live the Peanut Queen **Katey Thackerson**, center, and her court **Annesty Rainey**, left, and **Kayce Dodd**. Katey's grandfather, Comanche Electric Cooperative member **Jimmy Hampton**, snapped the photo of the young ladies reigning over the Gorman Christmas parade. ▶



## GOING NUTS

We didn't know what to expect with this Focus on Texas topic. We thought we'd throw it out there in honor of the Texas Peanut Producers Board, the sponsor of this month's reader-submitted photo contest. As you can see, not everyone has the same idea when it comes to Going Nuts. —ASHLEY CLARY-CARPENTER

Two-year-old **Alis Martinez** is nutty for Texas peanuts and loves to crack them open, says grandmother **Judy O'Kelley**, a member of Nueces Electric Cooperative. ▶



◀ Bowie-Cass Electric Cooperative member **Angela Coffey** has trained this Tufted Titmouse—for this situation, it has laid down its prominent crest feathers to adopt a sleek look—to eat peanuts out of her hand.

The late **Kenneth Stephens** farmed peanuts in Atascosa County north of Poteet for most of his life. This photo was taken about four years ago with a good crop of runners, says his wife, Karnes Electric Cooperative member **Sunny Stephens**. ▼



### Upcoming in Focus on Texas

ISSUE	SUBJECT	DEADLINE
Apr	Easter	Feb 10
May	Everything's Bigger in Texas	Mar 10
Jun	Hard at Work	Apr 10
Jul	Yard Art	May 10
Aug	Up Close and Personal	Jun 10
Sep	Pet Tricks	Jul 10

**EASTER** is the topic for our **APRIL 2012** issue. Send your photo—along with your name, address, daytime phone, co-op affiliation and a brief description—to **Easter, Focus on Texas, 1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor, Austin, TX 78701**, before **FEBRUARY 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.** If you use a digital camera, submit your highest-resolution images online at [TexasCoopPower.com/Contests](http://TexasCoopPower.com/Contests). 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.

# AROUND TEXAS AROUND TEXAS

This is just a sampling of the events and festivals around Texas. For the complete listing, please visit [TexasCoopPower.com/Events](http://TexasCoopPower.com/Events).

## PICK OF THE MONTH

### FEBRUARY 11 NEW BRAUNFELS

Backyard Vegetable Gardening Seminar, (830) 620-3440  
<http://txmg.org/comal/future-events/seminar>



## FEBRUARY



4

**VICTORIA**  
The Family Outdoor Expo

04 **VICTORIA**  
The Family Outdoor Expo,  
(361) 575-1268

09 **ROUND TOP**  
Festival Institute Library  
Benefit & Concert,  
(979) 249-3129,  
[www.festivalhill.org](http://www.festivalhill.org)

10 **SEGUIN**  
Sweetheart Dance, (830)  
303-3712, <http://almostpatsyclineband.com>

**HUNTSVILLE** [10-12, 17-19]  
"Dixie Swim Club,"  
(936) 291-7933,  
[www.huntsvillecommunitytheatre.org](http://www.huntsvillecommunitytheatre.org)

11 **COLUMBUS**  
Dinner Theater at The  
Stafford Opera House,  
(979) 732-8385,  
[www.columbustexas.org](http://www.columbustexas.org)

**LIVE OAK**  
San Antonio Looking  
Glass Show/Sale,  
(972) 672-6213,  
[www.meyershows.com](http://www.meyershows.com)

16 **BULVERDE** [16-18, 23-26,  
3/1-3/4] "Closure,"  
(830) 438-2339,  
[www.stagebulverde.org](http://www.stagebulverde.org)

17 **MARBLE FALLS** [17-18]  
From the Heart Quilt  
Show, (830) 798-9290

18 **COLEMAN**  
Search for the Stars,  
(325) 625-3455,  
[www.chhalefoundation.com](http://www.chhalefoundation.com)

**GORDONVILLE**  
Arctic Blast Featuring the  
Polar Bear Plunge, (903)  
523-5982, <http://texomapolarplunge.org>

10

**HUNTSVILLE**  
'Dixie Swim Club'



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- ✓ Obtain the health care premium tax credit (for small businesses)

Texas

## CHAP

Consumer Health Assistance Program

1-855-TEX-CHAP (1-855-839-2427) toll-free  
[www.texashealthoptions.com](http://www.texashealthoptions.com)

The Texas Consumer Health Assistance Program (TEX CHAP) is operated by the Texas Department of Insurance to help Texas consumers with health insurance issues. We do not sell insurance. TEX CHAP is part of a network of state consumer assistance programs funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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# AROUND TEXAS AROUND TEXAS



19

**MCKINNEY**  
Krewe of Barkus Dog  
Costume Parade

23

**PORT ARANSAS** [23-26]  
Whooping Crane Festival,  
1-800-452-6278,  
[www.portaransas.org](http://www.portaransas.org)

24

**LA GRANGE** [24-25]  
Best Little Quilt Show in  
Texas, (979) 968-8804,  
[www.cvquiltguild.com](http://www.cvquiltguild.com)

25

**SHERMAN**  
The Turtle Island Quartet,  
(903) 813-2251,  
[www.communityseries.com](http://www.communityseries.com)

**BOERNE** [25-26]  
Optimist Antiques Show,  
(830) 995-3670, <http://texasantiqueshows.com>

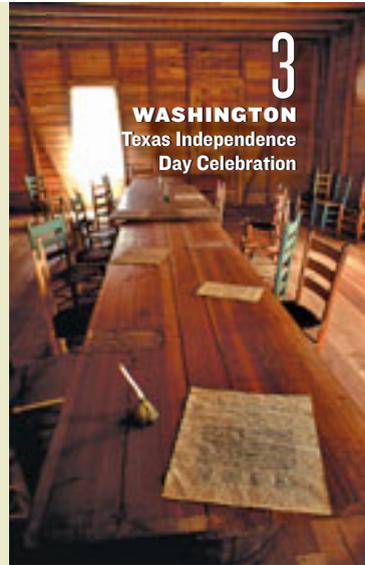
03

**ROBSTOWN** [3-4]  
Gulf Coast Gem & Mineral  
Show, (361) 510-6235,  
[www.gcgms.org](http://www.gcgms.org)

**WASHINGTON** [3-4]  
Texas Independence  
Day Celebration,  
1-888-273-6426,  
[www.birthplaceoftexas.com](http://www.birthplaceoftexas.com)

3

**ROBSTOWN**  
Gulf Coast Gem &  
Mineral Show



3

**WASHINGTON**  
Texas Independence  
Day Celebration

19

**MCKINNEY**  
Krewe of Barkus Dog  
Costume Parade, (972)  
547-2660, [www.down  
townmckinney.com](http://www.down<br/>townmckinney.com)

**GRAPEVINE** [19-20]  
Divine Consign,  
(214) 384-2716,  
[www.divineconsign.net](http://www.divineconsign.net)

## MARCH

03

**CROCKETT**  
Country Royalty Tribute  
to Hank Williams & Patsy  
Cline, (936) 544-4276,  
[www.pwfaa.org](http://www.pwfaa.org)

We pick events for the magazine directly from [TexasCoopPower.com](http://TexasCoopPower.com). Submit your event for April by February 10, and it just might be featured in this calendar!

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Balmorhea State Park annually draws 250,000 visitors from all corners of the globe. This desert oasis—mere minutes from the Davis Mountains—attracts outdoor and nature enthusiasts and those simply wanting to get away.



## DON'T FORGET TO LOOK DOWN

*At Balmorhea, the first jump is the deepest.*

**BY ASHLEY CLARY-CARPENTER**

My fingers wrap around the railing of the high board platform a little tighter, and my toes dig in until they turn white, as if they can anchor me to the fiberglass board. My friend Annie watches from the sweet sanctuary of the concrete sidewalk below and offers up encouragement.

“JUMP!”

Easy for her to say. Let's put this in perspective: The spring-fed pool at Balmorhea (pronounced bal-mor-Ay) State Park—a lush oasis nestled in the foothills of the Davis Mountains in the otherwise sparse and dusty, shrub-filled far West Texas desert—is not just any pool. The board is almost 10 feet above the water, which is an unbelievably clear, crystalline, aquamarine blue that allows you to see all the way to the bottom. How deep? Seemingly infinitely deep. It's the darn Great Abyss.

Through the pristine waters, I can see tiny and big rocks, some weighing 300 pounds, lining the pool's bottom. I can see little fish swimming lackadaisically, blissfully unaware of the human jumper about to invade their space. I can see the

grate on the pool bottom directly underneath the diving board, creating the illusion that I'm about to jump into the center of the Earth. I must be nuts!

OK, I tell myself. *You can do this.*

I let go of the railing. I take a deep breath, hold my nose and leap ... into what instantly becomes my favorite place in Texas. What was I so afraid of? As soon as I break the surface, plunging into the 17-foot-deep water beneath the board, I know: I'm hooked. What a rush!

The pool—25 feet at its deepest point—is by far the park's main attraction, drawing 250,000 visitors annually. Outflow from the **SAN SOLOMON SPRINGS**, a system of eight to 10 springs that bubbles up in the pool's depths, keeps the water a refreshing 74 to 76 degrees year-round. Even during drought, approximately 20 million gallons of water flow daily through the pool and out to canals that irrigate area farms and replenish the park's desert wetland and nearby **BALMORHEA LAKE**.

Because of its incredible clarity, scuba divers and snorkelers from all over the world travel to this

Chihuahuan Desert oasis to explore and check out the aquatic life, including two types of tiny endangered fish: the **PECOS GAMBUSIA**, which helps keep the mosquito population in check by eating the insects' larvae; and the **COMANCHE SPRINGS PUFFISH** (which nibbled on my toes) that's found only in spring-fed waters near Balmorhea.

The pool was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1935, along with a limestone concession building, two wooden bathhouses (now cinderblock), an adobe superintendent's residence and the **SAN SOLOMON COURTS**, an early “modern-day” motel that was our home for two days. RV hookups and primitive camping sites are also available.

With pruny fingers and toes after swimming, Annie and I made our way back to our charming room for dinner. (We had made sure to book one with a kitchen—and to load up with groceries before the trip.) We fired up the barbecue pit, threw on some burgers, and dined in the serene twilight.

In the morning we visited the **CIENEGA**, the re-creation of a desert wetland, and serenity segued to a symphony provided by coots, swallows and other birds hiding out in the cattails. The desert wetland also supports a wide variety of aquatic life, including catfish, the Mexican tetra fish and the Texas spiny softshell turtle, which can be observed from the viewing deck or by walking down a ramp and peering through a viewing glass built beneath the water's level.

As we left, we stopped by the headquarters building to view the many photos and memorabilia of the park's construction and early days. We said goodbye to Office Manager Brenda Iniguez, who has been plunging into these spring-fed waters since childhood and now brings her kids here. “We LOVE to go swimming in the winter,” she says with a smile. “Just remember to bring warm clothes. It's warm when you're in the water, but when you get out ...”

Guess I know when my next trip will be. Balmorhea 2012 or bust! Next time, I'll remember my goggles.

*Ashley Clary-Carpenter, field editor*

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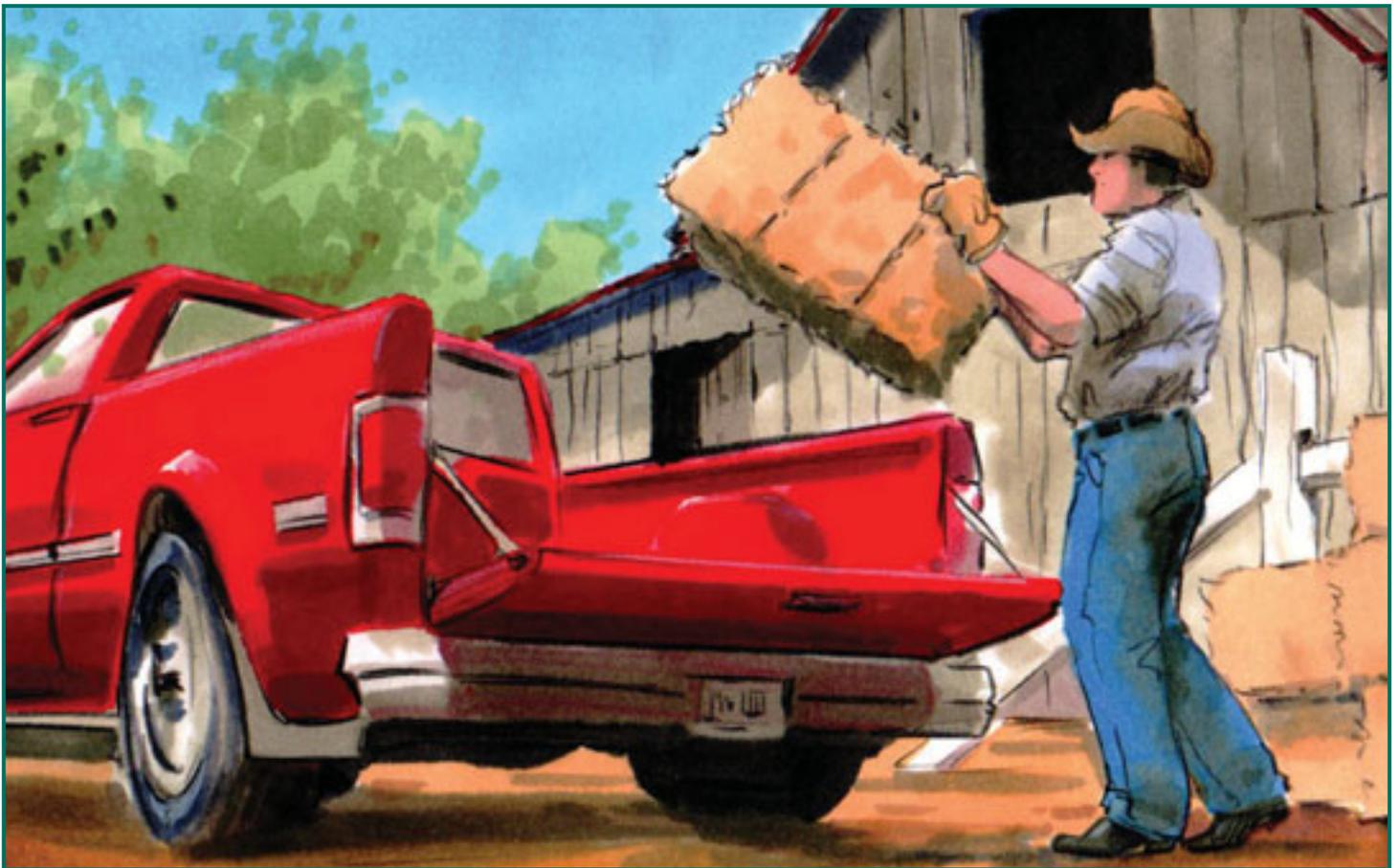
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