

TEXAS CO-OP POWER



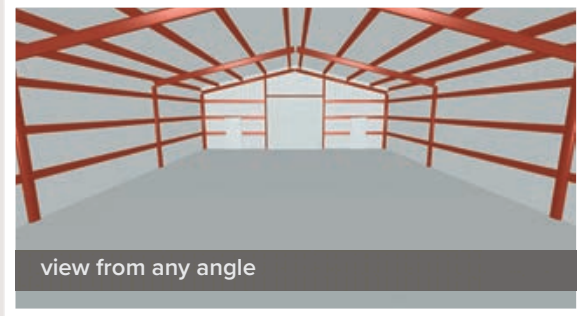
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The dance floor at Twin Sisters welcomes couples from all generations.

FEATURE

8 Hail the Halls Texas dance halls in Co-op Country stand as monuments to history and community.

Story by Sheryl Smith-Rodgers | Photos by Dave Shafer

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NEXT MONTH

Texas: A Blues State Widespread influences created 'a sort of international blues, a United Nations gumbo of sounds.'



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DANCE HALL: DAVE SHAFER. GUITAR: VERESHCHAGIN DMITRY | SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

ON THE COVER Michael McGowan and Elizabeth Yevich enjoy an evening at Twin Sisters Dance Hall outside Blanco. Photo by Dave Shafer

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Chet Garner hits the road to celebrate *Texas Co-op Power* and its 75th anniversary. Starting in April, Chet sends you unforgettable stories of his travels around Texas and co-op country.

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Remembering Veterans

It was good to read about the programs across Texas remembering veterans [*Circle of Life*, November 2018].

People's attitudes have changed since the late 1960s and early '70s. Being a Vietnam veteran, I remember being called baby killer, cursed at and spat upon. It's good to see the changes.

DAVE SWALLOW | SAN MARCOS
PEDERNALES EC

Beauty of a Song

Pretty Paper [November 2018] brought tears to my eyes.

My folks took me to downtown Texarkana each Saturday, and there was a man with no legs selling pencils. He sat on a "car dolly" with wheels.

Later on, I learned he took his three children to school each day as they walked, pushing his dolly with two wooden blocks.

MARIE FREEMAN | SIMMS
BOWIE-CASS EC



Horses and People

Winston Churchill said, "There is nothing so good for the inside of a man as the outside of a horse." Texas wouldn't exist as we know it except for horses and longhorn cattle [*The Healing Power of Horses*, December 2018], so I hope most Texans would still share Churchill's sentiment.

TOM GUINN | WESLACO | NUECES EC

Leonard Brothers, and some of my most cherished memories are of time spent there with Mother and Daddy.

MELISSA PEGRAM | VIA FACEBOOK

I love this song. Never knew who wrote it. Thanks for this lovely story.

KAREN LOMBARDO | VIA FACEBOOK

I love hearing "behind the song" stories. What a story of perseverance!

SUZANNE MORGAN LOUDAMY | VIA FACEBOOK

Such a beautiful story. I do so wish the man would have known the song was written about him. I shopped at Leonard's all my life, and I never saw him.

PAT FLETCHER GARCIA | VIA FACEBOOK

In the song, he was portrayed as a poor outcast because of his weak legs. I love the fact he was a strong, resourceful man able to provide for his family with pride and dignity.

PAULA OWENS | VIA FACEBOOK

Texas and World War I

I was delighted to read Gene Fowler's article *World War I at the Doorstep of Texas* [November 2018]. Far too few native and new Texans are aware of these and other important events in our history.

MARIAN LILES | KINGSLAND
PEDERNALES EC

Pleasant Memory

I was pleasantly surprised to see the picture of Bob's Oil Well [*Abandoned Buildings*, Focus on Texas, November 2018]. As a youngster growing up in Plainview in the 1940s, when we were traveling through Matador, we would always stop so we could see all the rattlesnakes Bob had in the station. I still go through Matador from time to time and remember those days.

CARL BONDS | WHITNEY
HILCO EC

Mammoth Discovery

I found a vertebral bone in 1958 when squirrel hunting on a creek east of Clifton. It was about 10

inches long and 5 inches wide. A big chunk of white bone. I was going to Baylor University at the time and brought it to the Strecker Museum. They studied it and told me it was a mammoth vertebral body, probably a young mammoth. I read Martha Deeringer's *Waco's Mystery Mammoths* [November 2018] with interest.

RONALD T. STANLEY | LINDALE
WOOD COUNTY EC

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   **Texas Co-op Power**



I remember the man Willie Nelson wrote this song about. I saw him many, many times in front of Leonard Brothers, along with the blind couple who sang hymns close by him. We shopped regularly at

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HAPPENINGS

A Chapter in La Bahia's History

Texas history is securely anchored to the Texas Revolution, fought 1835–36, but less noted is Mexico's 1812–13 push to wrest Texas from Spanish control.

Historians will re-enact in **GOLIAD** an encampment depicting the 1812 siege of Presidio La Bahia as part of **UNDER THE GREEN FLAG, FEBRUARY 23–24**.

A Mexican force led by Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara and Augustus William Magee, advancing under an emerald green banner and with U.S. support, took the fort from the Spanish in November 1812 and held it until February 1813.

The revolution was crushed August 18, 1813, in the Battle of Medina.

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HISTORY LESSON

WILEY UPRISING

Police were sent to Wiley College on February 24, 1969, in response to student demonstrations on the East Texas campus. The demonstrations helped integrate public facilities in Marshall.

WORTH REPEATING

“Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history.”

—**CARTER G. WOODSON**, who on February 7, 1926, initiated National Negro Week, now Black History Month

◀ LOOKING BACK AT SPORTS THIS MONTH



TEXAS AND TEXANS have left indelible marks on golf courses, fields, arenas and racetracks since *Texas Co-op Power* first landed in mailboxes in July 1944, including:

1940s

1945 Golfer Byron Nelson of Waxahachie wins 11 consecutive PGA tournaments, a record that still stands.

1948 The Girl's Rodeo Association is formed in San Angelo. Now called the Women's Professional Rodeo Association, it's the oldest of its kind anywhere.



1950s

1954 Duke Washington of Washington State University is the first African-American to play in a football game at the University of Texas.

1955 Jockey Willie Shoemaker of Fabens wins the first of his 11 Triple Crown races as he rides Swaps to victory at the Kentucky Derby.



1960s

1960 The Houston Oilers win the first American Football League championship. They repeated in 1961.

1963 The Texas Longhorns and coach Darrell Royal win the school's first football national championship.

1966 Texas Western plays an all-black starting lineup against all-white Kentucky in the NCAA men's basketball championship game, winning 72-65.



Mark Stubbs works the ropes as David McDowell climbs the pole.

CO-OP PEOPLE

Eye-Opening Experience

MARK STUBBS, general manager at Farmers Electric Cooperative, ventured far afield last October when he temporarily became a lineman, teaming up with two of the best in the state to compete at the International Lineman's Rodeo in Kansas.

"I learned some things that I did not know," Stubbs says.

David McDowell and Danny Moss, who together have won the senior division five times at the Texas Lineman's Rodeo, needed somebody 50 or older for the international competition. They took a chance on Stubbs, their boss.

Stubbs took a chance that his 30 years behind a desk wouldn't belie his fitness for the rigors of line work.

Starting in late August, Stubbs rose at 5:30 a.m. many mornings to practice with McDowell and Moss, whose task was to turn Stubbs into a serviceable groundman for the timed competition.

Stubbs' job was to hoist tools and equipment up to the other two on the pole.

"It really is a brotherhood," Stubbs says. "I was honored to get a glimpse into that."

The trio finished in sixth place out of 11 teams in Kansas, and Stubbs already is talking about improving on that this year.

ALMANAC



150 YEARS AGO: *Harper's Weekly* publishes a cartoon of Uncle Sam with chin whiskers—the first time he appeared this way—February 6, 1869.

BY THE NUMBERS

390,000,000

February 22 is National Skip the Straw Day. Americans use an estimated 390 million plastic straws daily. Put them end to end and they'd circle the Earth nearly twice. At least one Texas company is doing its part to reduce disposable plastic straw waste: Alamo Drafthouse Cinema recently switched to corn-based biodegradable straws at all its locations.

LOOKING AHEAD TO POLITICS NEXT MONTH ▶

1970s

1972 The Dallas Cowboys win Super Bowl VI, the first for a Texas team.

1973 Tennis star Billie Jean King, 29, defeats Bobby Riggs, 55, in three sets at the Astrodome in a match billed as the Battle of the Sexes.



1980s



1984 Sprinter and long jumper Carl Lewis from the University of Houston wins four gold medals at the Olympics in Los Angeles. In all, the four-time Olympian won nine golds.

1990s

1991 Refugio's Nolan Ryan, pitching for the Texas Rangers, records his seventh and final career no-hitter, a major-league record.

1995 Brownfield and Texas Tech star Sheryl Swoopes becomes the first female basketball player to be honored with an eponymous shoe, the Nike Air Swoopes.



1999 The Dallas Stars win the Stanley Cup.

2000s

2013 Simone Biles of Spring wins her first world title. She goes on to become the most decorated gymnast in American history—with 25 combined Olympic and world championship medals.

2014 Leta Andrews retires at Granbury High School with 1,416 career wins, more than any other U.S. high school basketball coach.

2017 The Houston Astros win the World Series.



TEXAS DANCE HALLS STAND AS MONUMENTS TO HISTORY AND COMMUNITY

HAIL *the* HALLS

Imagine this scene in a Texas dance hall:

A band belts out a tune while couples of all ages spin one another around a hardwood floor. Some steal kisses or show off fancy twirls. A little girl, balanced atop her granddaddy's boots, sways in time. Kids knee-high to a grasshopper race around the floor, and no one fusses. At rustic tables, friends and families chat, sip drinks and wave at dancers gliding past. A short reach away, babies and toddlers snooze on blankets spread across the floor.

The folksy scene could describe a dance hosted last month at Anhalt Hall in Spring Branch or one held in the 1890s at Braun Hall in northwest San Antonio.

BY SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS | PHOTOS BY DAVE SHAFER



Dancers can two-step and twirl all evening the first Saturday of every month at Twin Sisters Dance Hall near Blanco.



**Each distinct, the buildings had one common feature:
AN EXPANSIVE WOODEN FLOOR THAT WELCOMED FAMILIES.**

“Dance halls are magical because their culture hasn’t changed since the 1870s, when the first ones were built,” says Patrick Sparks, a structural engineer and historic preservationist based in San Antonio. “Dancing’s as fundamental to Texas as the Alamo, cowboys, longhorns and oil.”

More than 1,000 dance halls built by German, Czech, Polish and a few Swiss immigrants once dotted parts of Texas. In the mid-19th century, the weary newcomers stepped off ships in Texas ports, most often Galveston or Indianola, on their way to settle as far west as the Hill Country.

Living conditions were harsh, and yet these isolated settlers worked hard to establish their unique way of life. To provide their friends and neighbors a place to meet, discuss business, share barbecue dinners and dance, they constructed spacious halls. Each building incorporated the skills of its artisan community, reflecting its customs and musical tastes. Architecture varied from simple, metal-sided barns with window flaps, such as those of Kendalia Halle, to round halls with a center support column, such as Bellville Turnverein Pavilion.

As meeting places, the buildings served the primary interests of their founders. Progress (*fortschritt*) and shooting club (*schützen verein*) members built the whitewashed Nordheim Shooting Club Dance Hall. German businessmen built an ornate dancing pavilion called the Garten Verein (garden club) for Galve-

ston’s German community. Near Burton, one of many German gymnastic clubs (*turn vereins*) built the La Bahia Turn Verein Hall. A German singing society (*gesangverein*) founded the Millheim Harmonic Harmonie Verein Hall in Sealy.

Texas music legend Johnny Bush and his band bid farewell to dancers at Quihi Gun Club and Dance Hall.

In Czech communities, polka dancers kept floors hopping at halls built by two fraternal orders: the SPJST (Fayetteville’s SPJST Hall No. 1) and KJT (Ammannsville’s



German immigrant and rancher Max Krueger built Twin Sisters Dance Hall as a dance pavilion and community center in the mid-1870s.

her 80s, still oversees Sunday night dances on the second floor.

Each distinct, the buildings had one common feature: an expansive wooden floor that welcomed families. “Then and now, that’s what makes a true Texas dance hall,” says Deb Fleming, executive director of Texas Dance Hall Preservation in Austin. “Its largest architectural feature must be the dance floor, and it must also allow children, unlike a saloon or honky tonk.”

Fleming, a San Antonio native who did not grow up around Texas dance halls, discovered her ancestral roots because of one. In 2007, she visited Panna Maria, considered the nation’s oldest Polish settlement, established in 1854, to research the community’s historic hall. At the visitors center, a local woman with a laptop offered to print out Fleming’s genealogy. Her family tree traced back to Johann Rzeppa, Flemings’ great-great-grandfather and one of Panna Maria’s original settlers.

“I had no idea about our family’s connection to Panna Maria,” says Fleming, a Guadalupe Valley Electric Cooperative member. “Neither did my father. The experience made me wonder how many other Texans have their own family connection to a Texas dance hall and don’t even know it.”

Thanks to dance halls, Texas music is known worldwide. Without them, those early brass, string and accordion bands wouldn’t have birthed such genres as western swing, country or conjunto. Eventually, several bands made a good living, traveling from one dance hall to the next. Bob Wills, Willie Nelson, Hank Wilson and Ray Benson are among those who got their starts in dance halls.

Fewer than 400 halls survive in Texas. Of those, about 25 percent stand abandoned, such as Gillespie County’s Cherry Springs Dance Hall, where Elvis Presley, Nat King Cole and Patsy Cline performed. Or they’re used for storage.

In 2008, Preservation Texas collectively identified all Texas dance halls as endangered places

(KJT Hall). Most of the other halls were built by religious or agricultural organizations, and individuals built a few. One example is Sefcik Hall in Seaton, a two-story clapboard building built in 1923 by Tom Sefcik. His daughter Alice Sefcik Sulak, now in

worthy of protection as architectural, historical and cultural landmarks. The nonprofit advocacy group cited neglect, suburban development, highway projects, shrinking grassroots support and lack of public awareness as threats to dance hall survival.

The designation came a year after Sparks, along with historic preservationist Stephanie McDougal and the late Texas music historian Steve Dean, founded the nonprofit Texas Dance Hall Preservation. Since its start, the volunteer group has worked to inventory existing halls, spread the word about their historical importance and partner with owners to keep them afloat.

Dean’s advocacy for dance halls ran deep. In 2014, he asked via social media whether someone could make a documentary about them. Filmmaker Erik McCowan of Rosanky responded.

“First we visited the Round Top Schützen Verein’s annual shooting competition that’s been held every year since 1873,” recalls McCowan, a Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative member. “That’s when I realized the history of these places runs much deeper than I thought. After Steve and I saw what was left of New Bern Helvetia Hall near Taylor, I knew I had to make a film.”

More than three years in the making, *Dance Hall Days* shares the down-home stories of 56 classic halls. Some stand forgotten, such as Cistern Hall in Cistern and Kreutzberg Shooting Club



David Wade holds a 1956 postcard from Cat Spring Agricultural Society’s 100th anniversary.

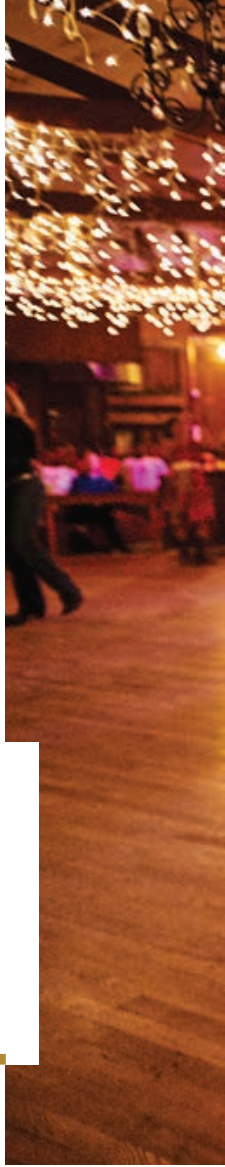
Dance Halls and Electric Co-ops

Only two Texas dance halls host live music nearly every day. Built in 1878, **Gruene Hall** in New Braunfels stands as one of the state’s oldest dance halls. The iconic **Luckenbach Dance Hall**, immortalized by singer Waylon Jennings, draws visitors from around the world.

After Medina EC formed in 1938, one of its first customers was the **Quihi Gun Club and Dance Hall**. “The co-op put electricity in the dance hall to show farmers how it worked,” says Clyde Muennink, club secretary-treasurer.

San Bernard EC approved the **Cat Spring Agricultural Society** as a member in March 1941, says David Wade, society treasurer. “The society paid \$115.39 to have the building wired for electricity,” he says. “In 2007, matching grants helped us pay \$85,000 to have everything rewired.”

In 2015, Bluebonnet EC awarded the **Kovar Osveta SPJST Lodge #38** a \$17,500 capital grant to fund hall renovations.



A dancer who came all the way from California on a dance hall tour looks over photos at Quihi Gun Club and Dance Hall.

Hall near Boerne. Fire destroyed several, including the Fredericksburg Social Turn Verein Hall in 2016 (members voted to rebuild). Siblings restored their family's Park Hall (now called Hruska's at Park) near Fayetteville, and Renck Hall in Warrenton hosts antique sales. But dancing still ranks No. 1 at many others, including the Albert Dance Hall in Albert and Schroeder Hall in Goliad.

Throughout the 82-minute film, Dean steps in and out of halls, sharing his hopes and wisdom. Sadly, he died April 28, 2018, the day after *Dance Hall Days* won Best Texas Film at the Hill Country Film Festival in Fredericksburg.

Rich stories captured by McCowan's film abound within the walls of Texas dance halls. "These places live and breathe the stories of Texas," Fleming says. "They're melting pots of our state's culture. Every time we lose one, we lose a piece of Texas history."

Twin Sisters Dance Hall

BLANCO | SERVED BY PEDERNALES EC

Fewer than a dozen couples two-stepped across the hardwood floor one summer night in 2015. Jo Nell Haas, watching from her perch by an open door, thought back to monthly dances when crowds jammed the checkerboard tinsided Twin Sisters Dance Hall.

German immigrant and rancher Max Krueger built the hall, 7 miles south of Blanco, as a dance pavilion and community center in the mid-1870s. Severe drought later forced Krueger to sell the building. Subsequent owner Henry Bruemmer Jr. sold the hall and surrounding land in 1918 for \$5 to Twin Sisters Hall Club, a nonprofit group that still runs the facility.

Through the years, countless families have gathered at Twin

Sisters, once the site of a German community named for a pair of nearby hills. In the 1970s, Haas met her husband, Joe, on the oak floor. Like many other couples, they taught their children how to dance there, and their families celebrated weddings beneath its arched blue ceiling.

Recent attendance at dances, however, had waned to the point where Haas, club president, considered closing the doors. She knew the night's ticket sales would barely pay the band. Frustrated, Haas slipped outside that night in 2015 and tapped a familiar number into her cellphone.

On the other end, Steve Dean picked up. He listened as Haas unloaded her worries. Then his passion for historic halls took hold. "Keep your head up," he yelled. "Don't give up! I'll rob a bank if I have to, to keep Twin Sisters open. But don't you shut those doors!"

Three summers later, Haas reflects back on that night. "I thought we'd have to shut down," she says, seated at one of Twin Sisters' wooden tables. "But then the TDHP showed us how to up our marketing and book bands that are more popular."

Nowadays, big crowds turn out for Twin Sisters' monthly first Saturday dances. Hall rentals for weddings, proms, parties and reunions have boosted revenues. In March 2018, the club replaced Twin Sisters' leaky metal roof with money from fundraisers and grants, including a community grant awarded by Pedernales EC.

"Twin Sisters Dance Hall has always been about family and community," Haas says. "All of us volunteers work hard to continue that tradition."

Twin Sisters Dance Hall, 6720 Highway 281 S., Blanco, 78606; (830) 833-5773; twinsistershall@gmail.com; twinsistersdancehall.com.

WEB EXTRAS

► Read this story on our website to see a map of 130 dance halls still in use. Plus, enjoy a slideshow of the halls featured here.



**Bob Wills, Willie Nelson, Hank Wilson and Ray Benson
ARE AMONG THOSE WHO GOT THEIR STARTS IN DANCE HALLS.**

Cat Spring Agricultural Society Hall

CAT SPRING | SERVED BY SAN BERNARD EC

Many of the German and Czech immigrants who settled Cat Spring in the 1850s had education but no farming know-how. They joined together in 1856 as the Agricultural Society of Austin County, later renamed for Cat Spring. The men met regularly to trade information and acquire garden seeds. They and their families tended fruit orchards, canned vegetables, compared fences and experimented with growing tea and coffee.

“We were the first extension service before Texas A&M University,” says David Wade, Cat Spring Agricultural Society treasurer and a San Bernard EC member. “The U.S. Patent Office would send seeds to the society for testing, and members reported back on how they performed.”

In 1902, German carpenter Joachim Hintz built the group’s 12-sided, white-clapboard social center, the largest of the three round halls he built in Austin County, including the Bellville Turnverein Pavilion and Peters-Hacienda Community Hall in Sealy. During dances, couples proceed counterclockwise on the pine floor around the center pole, which supports the beamed ceiling.

In addition to public dances, the hall hosts weddings, anniversaries and events for Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, the Texas

Farm Bureau and other ag groups.

Approximately 200 society members pay \$10 annual dues. Up until the 1950s, minutes were recorded in German. Even though women always were involved in the organization’s affairs, they were allowed to join the society just over a decade ago.

“I serve as secretary, and my brother Malcolm Dittert is president,” says Marilyn Nelson, a San Bernard EC member. “Before him, our father, grandfather and great-grandfather were presidents, too. I’ve gone to the hall all my life. While my parents danced, we kids would sleep on pallets under benches, on tables and in the kitchen.”

Since 1856, families have come together for the society’s annual June Fest. The activity-packed evening includes a barbecue supper, live auction, petting zoo and a free dance. “Traditionally, June Fest was held the first Sunday of June,” Nelson says. “But we had to change it to Saturday to make it more convenient for people who travel.

“It’s hard to keep the community involved with the hall and agricultural society,” she adds. “We’re trying to keep it all going. We’ve got to.”

Cat Spring Agricultural Society Hall, 13035 Hall Road, Cat Spring, 78933; (979) 865-2540; catspringagsociety.org.

Folks have gathered at the site of Quihi Gun Club and Dance Hall in Medina County since 1890.

The spacious interior of the 12-sided dance hall in Cat Spring.

Quihi Gun Club and Dance Hall

QUIHI | SERVED BY MEDINA EC

On a horse-themed calendar, third-grader Savannah Grohman marks birthdays and upcoming dances at the Quihi Gun Club and Dance Hall. “She’s been going there all her life,” says mom Jackie Grohman, a Medina EC member. “Sometimes, Savannah helps her grandparents stock sodas and water. Or she and I dance together in a corner.”

Family traditions keep alive country western dances at the tin-sided hall, set on cedar posts among live oaks near Quihi Creek in Medina County. Folks have gathered at the same place since 1890, when German



Fayette’s Frolicking

Fayette EC is believed to be the electric co-op with the most historic dance halls in its service area, including:

- Ammannville KJT Hall, Ammannville
- Cistern Hall, Cistern
- Dubina KJT Hall #6, Dubina
- Freyburg Hall, Freyburg
- Harmonie Hall, Shelby
- Hruska’s at Park, Fayetteville
- Round Top Schützen Verein, Round Top
- Swiss Alp Hall, Swiss Alp

settlers founded the Quihi Schützen Verein for community protection against frontier-era threats. These days, Quihi Gun Club members, who number about 600, still meet regularly to hone their rifle skills and compete in annual shoots.

“Until 1950, you had to speak and read German in order to become a member,” says Clyde Muennink, club secretary-treasurer and Savannah’s grandfather. “We require that members be men at least 21 years old and have lived in Medina County for one year. Since 1890, our club has had a burial fund. When a

member passes, we each give a dollar toward burial costs.”

Floods washed away the hall a few times. In the 1960s, the group enlarged the building and set it on 5-foot posts. In a May 2010 flood, 2 feet of water got inside. By the next weekend, members had it cleaned up for a party for a family that had no place else to go.

“I’ve been going to the hall since I was a week old,” says Muennink, a Medina EC member who’s managed the place where he met his wife, Kathy, for 27 years. “My parents met and married there. So did my wife’s. My mother still dances at the hall, and she’s in her 90s. We all grew up there. It’s like home to us. Maybe because it is.”

Quihi Gun Club and Dance Hall, County Road 4517, Hondo, 78861; (830) 426-2859; quihidancehall.com.

As a teen, writer **Sheryl Smith-Rodgers** of Blanco two-stepped at Robstown Community Hall, which is served by Nueces EC.



Actual size
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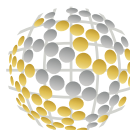
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ARE YOUR ELECTRICAL OUTLETS OVERSTUFFED WITH POWER strips, extension cords and outlet splitters? That's not just an unsightly tripping hazard—it's a fire hazard.

Every year, U.S. fire departments respond to an estimated 25,900 home electrical fires. These fires cause an estimated 280 deaths, 1,125 injuries and \$1.1 billion in property loss. Thirty-nine percent of home electrical fires involve outlets or other electrical wiring.

Plugging more appliances, lights and electronics into a single outlet than its circuit is meant to handle can cause the receptacle or cords to overheat and can potentially start an electrical fire. The Consumer Product Safety Commission attributes 3,500 fires each year to outlet issues.

How do you know if you're pushing your outlets and home wiring to the brink? Check for these common indicators of potential electrical hazards:

Hot outlets. If you can't touch a cord, plug or faceplate for more than five seconds without saying "Ouch!" the outlet is overloaded.

Shocks. Small shocks from touching appliances or outlets could point to danger.

Blown fuses. If fuses continue to blow after you replace

them, or circuit breakers constantly trip, the wiring cannot handle the outlet's load.

Flickering lights. Flickering or dimming lights could indicate an overloaded outlet.

Wavering screens. Similarly, if your computer or TV screen wavers when a large appliance is plugged in, it could mean the outlet is overstressed.

Odd smells. An odd smell coming from an outlet or your fuse box or breaker can be a sign of a serious problem.

Sparking. This is never a good sign. If a breaker panel, fuse box or outlet is sparking, get an electrician in ASAP.

Buzzing. What does electricity sound like? When things are working properly, nothing. Loose prongs or outlets or fraying wire can cause the current to jump, producing a buzzing sound.

Too many extension cords. If extension cords are necessary for your daily routine, your home's wiring is inadequate. When it comes to high-wattage appliances, such as refrigerators or dryers, never plug them into extension cords.

Any of these symptoms could mean your home's wiring can't keep up with the increasing energy demands of your large appliances and electronics. Call a licensed electrician to give you an estimate for wiring repairs or upgrades.

Be a Safety Champion on Super Bowl Sunday

A SAFETY IS WORTH TWO POINTS IN A FOOTBALL GAME, BUT PRACTICING ELECTRICAL safety during your Super Bowl festivities—and all year long—could be worth a lot more. It could spare a loved one from a fire or accident.

No matter who you are rooting for or if you're just in it for the commercials, make sure electrical safety is in your lineup this Super Bowl Sunday—and always.

A Cold Snap

If you need to add a little warmth to your home with space heaters, place them at least 3 feet away from all flammable materials and plug them directly into wall outlets. Never use extension cords of any kind with a space heater and never leave a heater unattended when in use.

Tight Belts and Tight Ends

Super Bowl Sunday ranks second for food consumption after Thanksgiving. (Fans will consume more than 1 billion chicken wings!) Practice safety by arranging all countertop appliances away from the sink and keeping cords, potholders and towels away from hot surfaces. Even if it means missing a play or two, stay in the kitchen when food is cooking on the stovetop, and turn off burners if you have to leave the room.



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high-traffic areas or under carpets, rugs or furniture, and don't nail or staple them to anything. Use a surge protector to protect your TV and other electronics from damage, and keep all liquids away from electrical items.



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Tune Up Your Home Office

THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO WORK from home offices is quickly growing. Whether it's your job, for school or just a place to pay bills, make sure your office is efficient.

- ▶ It's tempting to leave your computer on all the time for quick access, but shut it down overnight. Like burning a light in an empty room, an idle but on computer wastes energy.

- ▶ Enable your computer's power-management options. These are the features that automatically put your computer into a more efficient standby mode when it's not in use for brief periods.

- ▶ Shut off printers, copiers, scanners and other devices when you leave your home office. If you plug them into one power strip, you can turn them off with the flick of a single switch. Some power strips now come with timers that you can set to automatically turn equipment off each evening.

- ▶ Buying new home office equipment? Look for the Energy Star label on computers, printers, copiers and fax machines. Energy Star appliances use less energy.

- ▶ Light your office with LED bulbs, which use less energy and last for years.

Convictions and Concrete

Ray's Ornamental Gardens, a roadside attraction in Stephenville, presented philosophy and art

BY GENE FOWLER

IN THE EARLY 1950S, A YOUNG COUPLE strolled through the wonderland of Ray's Ornamental Gardens, a roadside folk art experience in Stephenville, according to a story in a 1957 issue of *The J-TAC*, the student newspaper at Tarleton State College. "That man must be crazy to do such a thing as this," remarked the young lady as she surveyed concrete sculptures decorated with radio tubes, colored glass, tile, shell and petrified wood. From speakers that wafted gospel music through the gardens, they heard, "Well what difference does it make? A man's got to be crazy about something."

The disembodied voice belonged to George Ellis Ray, a folk artist and philosopher who created the elaborate sculpture garden of stars, hearts, lyres and "designs never before thought of," according to a 1961 issue of *The J-TAC*. The article described a "mecca for lovers of the unusual and the bizarre." Ray operated a grocery, café and feed store in Stephenville, but his life's work was this expansive display of yard art that included signs proclaiming his homespun proverbs.

"What a man does comes from what he's thinking about," read one. "Prejudice parks in an empty heart," another read. "No man is above what he says about others." And "The further out on the sea of thought we go, the more we see that we don't know."

"Oh, yes, it was very popular," says Wayne Sherrod, a member of the Stephenville Historical House Museum board of directors. "People would go to Minnesota to see the giant ball of twine,

to Illinois to see the giant rocking chair and then to Stephenville to see Ray's Ornamental Gardens."

According to his obituary, Ray, a native of Tennessee, came to the Cross Timbers country of Erath County in 1912 with his first wife, Melissa, who died in 1935. He bought property on a hill above the Bosque River in 1939. Pillars in the open-air gallery spelled "R-U-T-H" in tribute to his second wife.

The rarefied tastes of the art world cognoscenti found the site intriguing. Dallas artist Martin Delabano says that his father, Barney Charles Delabano, also an artist, first saw it when he was working at the Dallas Museum of Art. Delabano believes the museum's former director, celebrated regional painter Jerry Bywaters, also visited the site.

Stephenville folks found Ray's Ornamental Gardens just as intriguing. "My father would take us out there at night, when it glowed with all the lights," recalls Sherrod. From the age of 5 until 10, resident Sheri Smith visited often with her Girl Scout troop. "Our scout leader, Mrs. Willis, would take us," Smith says. "She was a fortuneteller. I barely remember seeing Mr. Ray working on the ornate displays. It reminded me a little bit of a





sculptor working on Mount Rushmore.”

Joyce Whitis moved to Stephenville from Dallas with her husband in 1952 to escape the big-city traffic and buy a farm. “One of the first things I heard about when I got here was Ray’s,” she says. “I still have the decorative plaster of Paris items I bought at the gardens’ shop.” Longtime Tarleton librarian Glenda Stone did Christmas shopping at Ray’s. The late Bill Stem, a longtime Stephenville banker, popped the question to his sweetie, Jo, at the gardens’ fountain.

Very little of Ray’s Gardens remains today, and even those fragments are in ruins after decades of disrepair.

Martin Delabano visited the Ornamental Gardens as a child as part of a family

road trip in the early 1960s. “It was sort of in decline then,” he says. “My wife, who is from Stephenville, took me back early in our courting. It was pretty much gone except for the remains of the foundation of the garden. A big orb sat in the middle, made up of huge chunks of glass. I think it had been wired. It must have looked like a glowing comet that landed in the middle

of the garden at night. My wife said it was a favorite place for Tarleton rodeo cowboys to practice their roping.”

Writer Gene Fowler specializes in Texas travel and history.

WEB EXTRAS

► Read this story on our website to learn more about Ray’s philosophy.

King of Cakes

The colorful Carnival confection with US roots in New Orleans abounds in the Lone Star State

BY MELISSA GASKILL

I EXPERIENCED MY FIRST KING CAKE about 20 years ago on a visit to Monterrey, Mexico, where my brother lived. The cake was served for Epiphany, January 6, which many Christian churches celebrate as the day the three wise men, or kings, arrived to visit the baby Jesus. Unexpectedly, my piece of the *rosca de reyes*, as they call it in Mexico, contained a little plastic baby. By local tradition, that made me responsible for providing next year's cake.

I didn't get the chance to do that, but a few years later, I discovered the king cake phenomenon along the Texas Gulf Coast. There, the circular, sugary cake is served throughout Carnival season. It begins Epiphany Eve and lasts until Mardi Gras, a day of feasting and revelry on the eve of Lent, a 40-day observance that culminates the day before Easter.

The Gulf Coast king cake tradition likely came from France first to New Orleans, as did many other aspects of that city's culture, and spread from there. Cakes in this region typically sport icing in the official colors of Mardi Gras: purple for justice, green for faith and gold for power. The finder of the baby or other trinket inside the cake often is crowned king or queen of Mardi Gras (which may require providing subsequent cakes).

Even though I grew up on the Texas coast, I somehow missed out on the tradition. After my initiation in Mexico, I spied king cakes in the bakery section of my neighborhood H-E-B grocery store and decided to spare my kids the same fate. The cakes included a plastic baby and Mardi Gras beads. The beads provided a

distraction so I could forgo the ritual with the baby in the interest of family peace. (Have you ever seen three kids fight over something insignificant?)

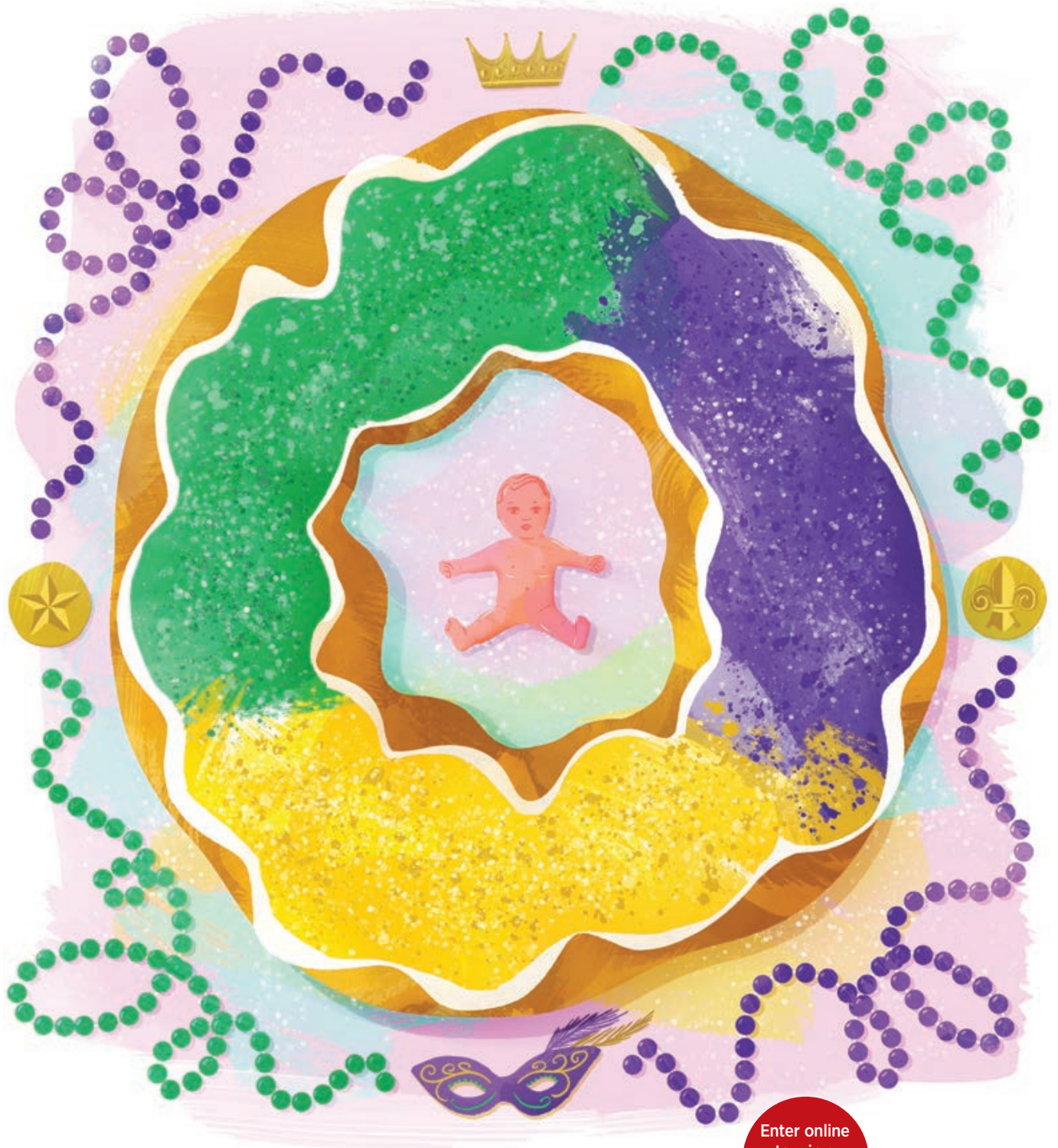
Felicia Peña, with H-E-B's public affairs office, explains that all their stores (including Central Markets) make the cakes in-house using a version of a New Orleans recipe. Whole Foods Markets also sell king cakes, but many aficionados have their favorite sources, including Acadian Bakers in Houston, Sawyer & Co. in Austin and Valentine's Bakery in El Paso.

While I can't personally vouch for those, a few years ago, I found myself in Beaumont during Carnival. Residents of the area will express no surprise that because of that trip, my favorite king cake comes from Rao's Bakery.

Opened by the Rao family in 1941, the bakery had several owners before Jake Tortorice bought it in 1998. He had celebrated many a Mardi Gras in New Orleans and considered keeping king cakes at Rao's an obvious decision.

"King cake was just a natural; I didn't have to think about it," he says. "Remember how close we are to Louisiana, and scads of people from there live in the Beaumont area. Everybody knew something about king cakes. The previous owners were offering cinnamon in one size, only during the week of Mardi Gras. We just took it to another level."

Tortorice starts baking cakes the week after Christmas and sells them through Fat Tuesday. "In January, when everything else is slow, we might sell 20 a day in each store," he says. "It just keeps growing."



Enter online to win a Rao's Bakery king cake.

After tasting Rao's version, I can see why. The bakery uses a sweet Danish-type dough and adds its own cream cheese filling and icing. In addition to cinnamon, Rao's offers blueberry, strawberry and chocolate varieties.

Each cake comes with a plastic baby and beads. "We also include a sheet about what the heck a king cake is and what it

means," Tortorice says. "We ship these to New Jersey, California and all over.

"A king cake is just a fun product," he adds. "Bring someone a king cake and you'll get a smile."

Unless, like me, they're too busy eating it.

See more of **Melissa Gaskill's** work at melissagaskill.blogspot.com.



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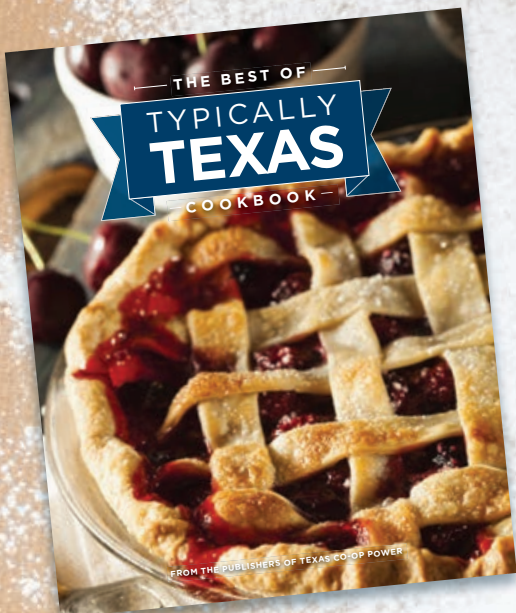
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Clogged, Backed—up Septic System...Can anything Restore It?

DEAR DARRYL: My home is about 10 years old, and so is my septic system. I have always taken pride in keeping my home and property in top shape. In fact, my neighbors and I are always kidding each other about who keeps their home and yard nicest. Lately, however, I have had a horrible smell in my yard, and also in one of my bathrooms, coming from the shower drain. My grass is muddy and all the drains in my home are very slow.



My wife is on my back to make the bathroom stop smelling and as you can imagine, my neighbors are having a field day, kidding me about the mud pit and sewage stench in my yard. It's humiliating. I called a plumber buddy of mine, who recommended pumping (and maybe even replacing) my septic system. But at the potential cost of thousands of dollars, I hate to explore that option.

I tried the store bought, so called, Septic treatments out there, and they did Nothing to clear up my problem. Is there anything on the market I can pour or flush into my system that will restore it to normal, and keep it maintained?

Clogged and Smelly – Austin , TX

DEAR CLOGGED AND SMELLY: As a reader of my column, I am sure you are aware that I have a great deal of experience in this particular field. You will be glad to know that there IS a septic solution that will solve your back-up and effectively restore your entire system from interior piping throughout the septic system and even unclog the drain field as well. **SeptiCleanse® Shock and Maintenance Programs** deliver your system the fast active bacteria and enzymes needed to liquefy solid waste and free the clogs causing your back-up.

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SCHLITTERBAHN WATERPARKS AND RESORTS

The Bugs That Make You See Red

Aztecs and Europeans treasured the radiant hue produced by cochineals living on prickly pear cactuses

BY MARTHA DEERING

RED LIPS, RED FLAGS, RED LIGHTS, RED dresses, red sports cars.

The color catches our eye, accelerates our heartbeat and quickens our breath. It's the color of power, passion and excitement—and for centuries, a tiny insect that thrives in Texas, the American southwest and Mexico has produced the brightest, clearest reds. Extract from cochineal insects still colors foods, cosmetics and clothing throughout the world.

Before the Texas Revolution, Col. Juan Almonte noted that the cochineal crop, gathered twice yearly in Texas, was hauled to Laredo and shipped to agents of the British crown. They needed it to color their red coats. When the Lone Star flag was adopted in 1839, the red field was dyed with cochineals.

Cochineals belong to the scale family. The parasitic bugs are about one-third the size of a ladybug and feed on the spiny pads of prickly pear cactuses. A glance will tell you if cochineals have infested a cactus: The pads are covered with bits of white fluff. Females possess carminic acid, which is distasteful to ants and grubs that might otherwise find them delicious. It is also what creates her carmine, or red pigment.

Even though the insect appears white, crushing the female cochineal releases the dark red liquid. Aztecs discovered this and already were doing a land-office business in cochineals when Spain claimed the New World. Spanish ships soon carried dried cochineals to Europe alongside plundered silver and gold. Cochineal created more intense and permanent color than any previously known red pigments, so the dye was immediately in demand for silks, velvets and tapestries.

According to Amy Butler Greenfield,



author of *A Perfect Red*, artists Titian, Rubens, Van Dyck, Rembrandt and Van Gogh adopted cochineal red. As Mexicans skillfully cultivated the insects, they developed a new species, *Dactylopius coccus*, which was twice the size of wild cochineals and more profitable. In addition to producing striking scarlets and crimsons, cochineal also could be formulated to create shades of soft pink and rose that resisted fading.

Europeans also used cochineal powder to make cosmetics to stain their lips and cheeks. The vivid reds created an outstanding contrast to their pale faces, which they whitened with lead powder. Along

WEB EXTRAS

► Read this story on our website to learn the deep secret to imperial purple coloring.

the way, medical uses became popular, and apothecaries concocted their own secret formulas, which they touted as antidepressants.

In spite of the

best efforts of pirates who tried to steal cochineals and establish farms in Europe, the temperamental little bug resisted transfer to new climes. Collected specimens died in cold, rain, heat and other environmental changes, as did the cactuses on which they thrived. A few of these early industrial pirates lost fortunes when their entire stolen crop of cochineal-infested cactus rotted in the holds of ships during the voyage to Europe.

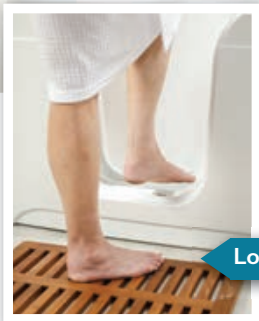
When bright aniline dyes made from coal tar were developed in the 1850s and '60s, the cochineal industry took a hit. Today, the use of cochineals is approved by the Food and Drug Administration to produce a natural red color for fruit juices, gelatins, candies, shampoos, cosmetics, yogurt, maraschino cherries, popsicles, and even pink tequila and lemonade. Read the label. Does it say cochineal, carmine, carminic acid or Natural Red 4? Any way you say it, that means bug red.

Martha Deering, a member of Heart of Texas EC, lives near McGregor.

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Cozy Casseroles

CASSEROLES HAVE TIMELESS APPEAL for good reason. Most can be prepared with inexpensive ingredients, are easy to assemble and serve a crowd. Case in point: Lone Star Casserole, a hearty mix of beef and vegetables braised in creamy tomato sauce that appeared in the April 1965 *Texas Co-op Power*. The dish relies on round steak. To update the dish, I browned the meat in olive oil instead of shortening and replaced canned mushrooms with cremini. I couldn't resist adding a bit of smoky bacon and fresh herbs to make the results richer and more fragrant. As the original recipe suggests, serve the dish with noodles or rice.

PAULA DISBROWE, FOOD EDITOR

Lone Star Casserole

- 2 pounds round steak, cubed
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 strips thick-cut bacon, diced
- 2 carrots, sliced
- 1 large onion, chopped
- ½ cup thinly sliced celery
- 10–12 cremini mushrooms, stemmed and sliced
- 3 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh (or 1½ teaspoons dried) rosemary or thyme
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1 cup sour cream
- 1 can (8 ounces) tomato sauce
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce

1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees.
2. Season the steak with salt and pepper. Heat the olive oil in a large, deep skillet over medium-high heat. When the oil is hot and shimmering, add the steak and bacon and cook, stirring, until browned, about 7–9 minutes. Transfer the meat to a plate and set aside.
3. Add the carrots, onion, celery, mushrooms, garlic and fresh herbs to the skillet and cook, stirring, until

CONTINUED ON PAGE 32

Retro Recipes

Cozy Casseroles

THIS MONTH'S RECIPE CONTEST WINNER

MARTHA JO WHITT | GUADALUPE VALLEY EC



This crowd pleaser was given to Whitt by her college roommate, Jane Caddel Brewer (a Pedernales EC member),

whose father, Charles

Caddel, served for decades as a director at San Patricio EC. This dish is a snap to assemble and hits all the comfort notes.

Jane's H-Bar-C Casserole

- 1½ pounds ground meat (beef or turkey)
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 green bell pepper, stemmed, seeded and chopped
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 can (15 ounces) hominy, drained
- 1 can (15 ounces) chili (beans or no beans, as desired)
- 1 can (10.5 ounces) mushroom soup
- 1 can (4 ounces) chopped green chiles
- 1 pound Velveeta Mexican cheese
- Fritos (or other corn chips) for topping

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Combine the meat, onion and bell pepper in a large skillet over medium-high heat, season generously with salt and pepper, and cook until the meat is browned and the vegetables have softened. Add the hominy, chili, mushroom soup and green chiles to the meat mixture and simmer, stirring, until combined. Pour the mixture into a buttered 9-by-13-inch casserole and top with processed cheese (sliced, cubed or grated, as desired) and a layer of crushed Fritos. Bake 30–40 minutes, until bubbly. ▶ Serves 10–12.

\$100 Recipe Contest

July's recipe contest topic is **Cooking With Texas Gulf Shrimp**. We're casting a net for the state's tastiest shrimp dishes. What's yours? The deadline is **February 10**. Readers whose recipes are featured will receive a special *Texas Co-op Power* apron.

ENTER ONLINE at TexasCoopPower.com/contests; MAIL to 1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor, Austin, TX 78701; FAX to (512) 763-3401. Include your name, address and phone number, plus your co-op and the name of the contest you are entering.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

softened and golden. Return the meat to the skillet (and any juices), sprinkle with flour and stir until the ingredients are coated. Add the remaining ingredients, stir to combine and then pour into a buttered 9-by-13-inch casserole. Bake about 1½ hours, until the meat is tender. Serve warm, with noodles, rice or crusty bread. ▶ Serves 8.

Ranch Hand Chicken Casserole

ROBIN WANTLAND | LAMAR EC

"This is a great do-ahead casserole," Wantland says, and we agree—especially when you want to feed a hearty, satisfying dish to a crowd. You can use a store-bought roasted chicken or simmer your own and use the homemade stock. To intensify the flavor, serve this casserole with wedges of lime, your favorite hot sauce and freshly chopped cilantro.

- 1 whole cooked chicken
- 2 poblano peppers
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 small onion, minced
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 can (14.5 ounces) corn, drained
- 1 can (14.5 ounces) diced tomatoes
- 1 can (15 ounces) black beans
- 1 teaspoon cumin

Salt and pepper, to taste

- ¼ cup (½ stick) unsalted butter
- ¼ cup flour
- 1 cup milk
- ½ cup chicken stock, plus more for tortillas
- 12 corn tortillas
- 4 cups grated cheddar cheese (regular or sharp)

1. Remove meat from the chicken and set aside.
2. Roast the poblanos under a broiler or over a gas flame on a stovetop, turning them evenly as needed until blackened. Allow them to cool in a bowl covered with a dishcloth. Then peel, seed, stem and dice them and set aside.
3. Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat and sauté the onion and garlic 3–5 minutes, until softened and fragrant. Add the corn, tomatoes, poblanos, black beans, cumin, and a sprinkling of salt and pepper;

sauté 1–2 minutes and then remove from heat.

4. In a separate saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat; add the flour and whisk until lightly browned and smooth. Gradually add the milk and chicken stock, stirring until the sauce is thick and smooth. Pour the sauce over the vegetables, stir to combine, and season to taste with additional salt and pepper.
5. Heat oven to 350 degrees and butter or apply cooking spray to a 9-by-13-inch casserole.
6. Dip tortillas in additional chicken stock to soften, then slice each tortilla into four strips. Place ⅓ of the tortilla strips in the bottom of the prepared dish and cover with half the chicken. Pour half of the vegetable mixture over the chicken and sprinkle half of the grated cheese. Place another ⅓ of the tortilla strips over the cheese, cover with the remaining chicken, then cover with the remaining vegetable mixture. Top with the remaining tortilla strips, sprinkle the remaining cheese and cover tightly with foil.
7. Bake the casserole 20 minutes, then remove the foil and bake another 20 minutes. ▶ Serves 8–10.

COOK'S TIP Add a smoky flavor by using diced fire-roasted tomatoes.

Gefüllter Kohl (Filled Cabbage Rolls)

BELINDA GRAMS | PEDERNALES EC

Cultures find comfort in various ways, and Grams avows the following dish as "a truly savory, truly authentic German casserole." The recipe traveled from northern Germany with her great-grandmother, Hattie Elsa Pfeiffer Keidel, and first appeared in the *PTA Fredericksburg Home Kitchen Cookbook* in 1916. Consider serving the hearty, meat-filled rolls with German-fried potatoes made with bacon, onion and green pepper.

CABBAGE ROLLS

- 1 small cabbage
- ½ pound ground beef
- ½ pound ground pork
- ½ cup breadcrumbs, softened with as much water as they will absorb
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- 2 tablespoons milk

- Salt and pepper, to taste
 2 tablespoons (¼ stick) butter, softened to room temperature

SAUCE

- 2 tablespoons (¼ stick) butter
 2 tablespoons flour
 Salt and pepper, to taste
 Pinch grated nutmeg
 1 egg yolk

- 1. CABBAGE ROLLS:** Preheat oven to 300 degrees.
- Separate larger cabbage leaves; core and quarter smaller center. Place the leaves in boiling water 2–3 minutes, then remove from heat and let them stand 5–10 minutes (reserve liquid).
- Rinse leaves in cold water and drain. Combine the beef and pork with the breadcrumbs, eggs, milk and seasonings.
- Coat an 8-by-8-inch casserole with butter.
- Place about ⅓ cup of meat mixture in the center of each cabbage leaf and wrap into a snug bundle; place the bundle

seam-side down in the casserole dish. Repeat with remaining meat and cabbage leaves. Cover the dish with foil and bake 75 minutes. Remove foil and continue to bake 15–20 minutes, or until the cabbage is tender, basting occasionally with cooking juices. Invert the stuffed rolls onto a platter, reserving the liquid. Tent cabbage rolls with foil or place in oven at low heat to keep warm.

6. SAUCE: Melt the butter in a skillet. Add the flour and enough of the reserved liquid (cooking juices and cabbage water) to make a smooth sauce. Season with salt, pepper and nutmeg; whisk in egg yolk and pour the mixture over the cabbage rolls. ▶ Serves 4.

COOK'S TIP To make a deconstructed version, layer cabbage leaves and the meat mixture in a buttered slow cooker and cook on high 4 hours.

WEB EXTRAS

▶ Read these recipes on our website to see the original Lone Star Casserole recipe from April 1965.

WANT THE CONSUMMATE CASSEROLE?

Choose the right dish: Shallow baking dishes are best for creating a crunchy topping, whereas deeper roasting pans are good for preserving moisture.

Undercook your pasta: For the best texture, boil noodles 2–3 minutes fewer than the package indicates to allow the pasta to finish cooking in the oven.

Choose the right cheese: Aged cheeses like Parmesan, Asiago and feta offer sharp and tangy flavors, but they won't create a creamy texture. For an ooey-goopy consistency, go with meltable cheeses like cheddar, asadero and Gruyère.

Brighten rich flavors: Finely grated lemon zest, a tablespoon of Dijon mustard or a few dashes of your favorite vinegar-based hot sauce will make flavors pop. —PD

TEXAS CO-OP POWER

NEXT MONTH

TEXAS: A BLUES STATE Widespread influences created 'a sort of international blues, a United Nations gumbo of sounds.'

A HERO IN ANY LANGUAGE

Mexican immigrant Marcelino Serna became the most decorated Texan of World War I.

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WEB EXTRAS ▶ See Focus on Texas on our website for more photos from readers.

◀ **MIKE DOWNEY**, Bryan Texas Utilities: “My son Davis is wheeling after my late father, Sherwood Downey, one day on the farm many years ago.”



◀ **CHARLES BAXTER**, CoServ: “Two Texas state birds with the same thing in mind.”

▼ **LINDA LEE BICKFORD**, Grayson-Collin EC: Bickford’s nephews, Dustin and Daniel.



▲ **SALIMA ASARIA**, CoServ: “Charmed, are we?”

▼ **MARY RUST**, Comanche EC: “Two fawns out for an early-morning adventure.”



UPCOMING CONTESTS

| | |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| JUNE FEEDIN' TIME | DUE FEBRUARY 10 |
| JULY TRUCKS | DUE MARCH 10 |
| AUGUST FAMILY TIES | DUE APRIL 10 |

All entries must include name, address, daytime phone and co-op affiliation, plus the contest topic and a brief description of your photo.

ONLINE: Submit highest-resolution digital images at TexasCoopPower.com/contests. **MAIL:** Focus on Texas, 1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor, Austin, TX 78701. 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 do not accept entries via email. We regret that *Texas Co-op Power* cannot be responsible for photos that are lost in the mail or not received by the deadline.



Pick of the Month Wine Swirl

Nacogdoches February 9
(936) 564-7351, visitnacogdoches.org

This Saturday evening wine and food pairing event sponsored by the city's Main Street program showcases Texas wineries and local and regional food trucks along historic brick streets downtown. Wineries will be stationed in booths outside of shops.

WINE: DENIZ BAYRAM | DREAMSTIME.COM. KIMONO: SUPAWAT BURSUK | SHUTTERSTOCK.COM. MASK: MICHAEL FLIPPO | DREAMSTIME.COM

February

7

McKinney Black History Month: A Conversation With Author Zachary Wood, (972) 540-5067, mckinneytexas.org

8

Levelland [8-9] High Plains Cowboy Church in the Dirt Series, (806) 894-4161, malleteventcenter.com

Port Lavaca [8-9] South Texas Square & Round Dance Association February Frenzy, (361) 575-2665, squaredancetx.com

Fredericksburg [8-24] Wine Lovers Celebration, (872) 216-9463, texaswinetrail.com

9

Austin Rodeo Austin Gala & Youth Art Auction, (512) 919-3000, rodeoaustin.com

Ennis Czech Music Festival, (972) 878-4748, ennisczechmusicfestival.com

San Antonio Asian Festival, (210) 458-2300, asianfestivalsa.com

10

Bastrop Rockne Historical Association Fundraiser, (512) 304-8379, facebook.com/rharockne

15

Luckenbach [15-16] Hug-In and Valentine Ball, (830) 997-3224, luckenbachtexas.com

February 9
San Antonio
Asian Festival



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TRAVEL
ISSUE

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Rosenberg [15-17] Houston Glass Show, (713) 410-4780, maxmillerantiques.com

16

College Station Eisenhower Dance
Detroit, (979) 862-5766,
academyarts.tamu.edu

Denison Celebrate With the Presidents,
(903) 465-8908,
visiteisenhowerbirthplace.com

Port Arthur Rotary Club Taste of Gumbo,
(409) 985-7822

17

Crockett Cinderella, (936) 544-4276,
pwfaa.org

21

Nacogdoches [21-23] Nacogdoches
Film Festival, (936) 645-1499,
nacogdochesfilmfestival.com

Edinburg [21-24] Fiesta Edinburg,
(956) 383-4974, edinburg.com

22

Galveston [22-March 5] Mardi Gras!
Galveston, (409) 770-0999,
mardigrasgalveston.com



February 28
Port Arthur
Mardi Gras
Southeast Texas

23

Fredericksburg Historic Cave Creek
School Open House, (830) 990-1017,
historicschools.org

Henderson Mardi Gras/Gumbo Cook-Off,
(903) 392-8232, visithenderson.tx.com

Palestine Mardi Gras Parade,
(903) 723-3014, visitpalestine.com

28

Kerrville A New World: Classical Music
Lands in America, (830) 792-7469,
symphonyofthehills.org

Port Arthur [28-March 3] Mardi Gras
Southeast Texas, (409) 721-8717,
mardigras.portarthur.com

March

2

Lago Vista [2-3] La Primavera Race,
(512) 267-7952, lagovista.org

3

San Antonio Bexar County Czech Heritage
Society Annual Dance, (210) 494-5171,
bexarcounyczechheritagesociety.com

7

Mansfield [7-17] Arts Week, (817) 804-5796,
visitmansfieldtexas.com

Submit Your Event!

We pick events for the magazine directly from TexasCoopPower.com. Submit your event online for April by February 10, and it just might be featured in this calendar.



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A Close-Up With Nature

Corpus Christi botanical gardens put visitors eye to eye with flora and fauna

BY EILEEN MATTEI

INSIDE THE ORCHID CONSERVATORY AT the South Texas Botanical Gardens & Nature Center, I'm curious about a bananalike pod dangling from a vine climbing the 14-foot-high walls. "That's a vanilla bean," explains volunteer Jorge Garcia. "Vanilla is an orchid native to the Americas."

Benches in the center of the conservatory overflow with hundreds of orchids parading purple, yellow, pink, red and white flowers. Aerial roots hang down from vanda orchids like long, wavy hairs. "Orchid roots like to come out of the pot," Garcia says.

Nearby, a screened butterfly house shelters plants that attract monarchs, queens, gulf fritillaries and black swallow-tails. Signs identify tropical milkweed, hibiscus and butterfly bushes that butterflies visit to sip nectar or lay eggs. A buck-eye with multiple eye spots on its wings flutters around my knees.

My husband, Guy, relaxes on a swinging bench under a cedar elm as I wander through the sensory garden, touching a sandpaper tree, sniffing scented geraniums and marveling at the bright purple clusters of American beautyberry.

We stroll through the bromeliad collection—pineapples, ball moss and living walls of plants—to the hummingbird garden. I spot yellow-striped bumblebees and a buff-bellied hummingbird zipping around the mealy blue sage and Turk's cap.

Michael Womack, the gardens' executive director, meets us at the rose garden and guides us down a nature trail's crushed granite path. Meandering through 165 acres of native thorn scrub and wetlands,



Charlie is one of the playful macaws that call the center home.

the trail sports large interpretive panels that feature photographs of wetland animals from the botanical gardens' Wildlife in Focus contest.

"We are trying to preserve a natural spot in the middle of Corpus Christi," Womack says. "This is a safe place to experience nature and see its diversity."

From the bird tower overlooking a gator lake, we spot coots and black-necked stilts. Boardwalks lead us to a wetland gazebo, where we watch tricolored herons, roseate spoonbills and ibises.

Ecosystems support more than plants and birds, and I'm thrilled to have a slender vine snake twine around my wrist in the visitors center, where guests can interact with about 55 reptiles and 30 parrots.

"Resident reptiles help people see the native reptiles in our region and appreciate brush country habitats," Womack says.

Huckleberry, a cockatoo, leans into Guy's hand, tilting upside down to have his neck stroked. I fall for Ivan, a 12-pound green iguana with iridescent orange

scales and long claws.

"Tortoises and snakes are the big deal for kids," says Dedra Benedict, an animal care specialist. "Adults prefer the birds." Benedict leads parrot talks on Friday, Saturday and Sunday afternoons, showing off the personalities of some of the birds. "They need a lot of attention. People think the parrots are going to do the talking here, but they refuse to learn the script. Macaws, cockatoos and other parrots behave like 2-year-olds."

Tequila, a blue-and-gold macaw, has a reputation as a dancer, so I wiggle my shoulders at him. Perched on the back of a chair, he begins swaying and bouncing like a bobblehead doll. What a colorful dance partner!

"We want people to make the connection that exotic parrots and reptiles are linked to plants," Womack says. "The parrots live in forests, which are home to many of our tropical plants."

Eileen Mattei, a Nueces EC member, is a Texas master naturalist in Harlingen.

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