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December 2023



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Strings Attached

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Photos by Nathan Lindstrom

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Photo by Jason David Page

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A banjo handmade by David Getman.
Photo by Nathan Lindstrom



Make Your Tree a Cut Above

CUTTING DOWN your own Christmas tree can be a fun family outing that gets everyone in the holiday spirit.

The Texas Christmas Tree Growers Association website lists dozens of Christmas tree farms in the state. You might find one near you.

Did you know that most trees grown in Texas are between 3 and 6 years old when they're sold as Christmas trees?



A Year in Big Bend

Photographer and writer E. Dan Klepper, an occasional contributor to *TCP*, was selected to provide the photos for the Big Bend National Park 2024 Calendar. Order your copy and support the Big Bend Natural History Association at bbnha.org.

FINISH THIS SENTENCE

Can't I have just one more ...

TCP Tell us how you would finish that sentence. Email your short responses to letters@TexasCoopPower.com or comment on our Facebook post. Include your co-op and town.

Here are some of the responses to our October prompt: **I collect ...**

Memories of people who extend small acts of kindness.

LORETTA BEDFORD
DEEP EAST TEXAS EC
SAN AUGUSTINE

Vintage clothing. I enjoy designing unique outfits. It's like a snapshot of history that lives on.

HEATHER MCMEANS MCCARROLL
VIA FACEBOOK

Nothing. But cats seem to collect me.

VALLEE GREEN
BLUEBONNET EC
ELGIN

Sand from every beach I visit in hopes of retiring to a beach someday.

SHIRLEY WETSEL
SOUTH PLAINS EC
WOLFFORTH

Things my children will throw away someday.

LISA STAPLETON
CENTRAL TEXAS EC
FREDERICKSBURG

Visit our website to see more responses.

TCP Contests and More

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RECOMMENDED RECIPES

Don't let National Cookie Day, December 4, pass without trying—and sharing—some of the cookie recipes on our website. We have dozens. Just search "cookies."

Our Cup of Tea

“I so enjoy your publication. It’s like sitting down with a friend and a cup of tea.”

MAX BERNREUTER
PEDERNALES EC
CEDAR PARK



JULIA ROBINSON

Root of All Evil?

That’s cute—so which one is picking on my fiddle leaf and plumeria [Currents, *Planter Banter*, September 2023]?

Rachelle Shockey
Via Facebook

Three Cheers For ...

I would like to thank Vianney Rodriguez for the spectacularly delicious Three-Bean Salad recipe [October 2023]. This is a keeper!

Laura Fortenberry
Panola-Harrison EC
Carthage

Uplifting Story

It was so much fun to see my hometown high school, McGregor High School (class of 1958), featured for its rocket science project [*It’s Rocket Science (And so Much More)*, October 2023].

McGregor has quite the history in that arena. My great-grandparents had land

that was used during World War II for a bomb plant. Later it was used by Rocketdyne to produce solid jet fuel. Now SpaceX is close by.

Kudos to the teachers who are teaching them to think for themselves and be challenged.

Joan Roberts
CoServ
Denton

These students embody all that makes America the best in the world.

Whenever I encounter a young person who is courteous and has a goal, be it college or a trade school or just a job, I take the time to thank them and let them know that I am proud of them, for they are the future of our country.

Ted Pasche
CoServ
Argyle



SCOTT VAN OSDOL

TCP WRITE TO US
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Austin, TX 78701

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

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TEXAS CO-OP POWER Volume 80, Number 6 (USPS 540-560). *Texas Co-op Power* is published monthly by Texas Electric Cooperatives. Periodical postage paid at Austin, TX, and at additional offices. TEC is the statewide association representing 76 electric cooperatives. *Texas Co-op Power's* website is TexasCoopPower.com. Call (512) 454-0311 or email editor@TexasCoopPower.com.

SUBSCRIPTIONS Subscription price is \$4.44 per year for individual members of subscribing cooperatives and is paid from equity accruing to the member. If you are not a member of a subscribing cooperative, you can purchase an annual subscription at the nonmember rate of \$7.50.

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A Houston woodworker turns
rich woods into custom banjos
with a lot of time and sandpaper

Strings Attached





DAVID GETMAN was working in a music store in Brooklyn, New York, in 1997 when a friend gave him a box of banjo parts. The friend suggested that he see what he could make with the pieces.

Getman was intrigued. “I was 22. I had no tools. I wasn’t a woodworker,” he says. “But I liked to tinker.”

After fashioning a banjo from the parts, Getman became more interested in the instrument that has deep roots in North America. “I wasn’t a big fan of bluegrass, but I liked syncopated picking.”

Experimenting with playing and composing his own banjo music led Getman to develop a deep appreciation for the Appalachian style of banjo playing known as frailing or clawhammer. Unlike the three-finger bluegrass style, which typically consists of an up-picking motion by the fingers and down-picking of the thumb, clawhammer is all down-picking with a clawlike hand.

Clawhammer is typically done on an open-back banjo that produces a more mellow sound. Getman likes “the rich, deep notes, like rolling thunder” that these banjos produce.

Seventeen years after that first banjo, Getman discovered rotted floor joists in his Houston home. He bought tools to

do the repair work. Then he wondered what else he could do with his expensive new tools. That led to a new avocation.

Today, as a banjo-maker, restorer and player, Getman, 49, runs Lindale Banjos out of his home in Houston’s Lindale Park neighborhood while working full time as a social science researcher and raising a son and daughter with his wife. He’s proud that the renowned Fiddler’s Green Music Shop in Lockhart accepted one of his banjos in 2021—the first he made that he thought was good enough to sell. The store has been selling his instruments ever since.

“Fiddler’s Green is known to musicians beyond Texas. They have customers from as far away as Japan,” says Getman, who plans to make banjos full time when he retires.

Banjos come in two distinct styles. Bluegrass musicians prefer banjos that have wooden, bowl-shaped attachments called resonators on their backs. A resonator projects the sound outward toward the audience. Getman makes clawhammer banjos with open backs, a style used by musicians who play old-time or Appalachian music.

Making a banjo of either style is a long, complicated process.

“A guitar is made entirely of wood, but a banjo has both metal and wooden parts,” says Jim Penson, another Texas banjo-maker. “Quality bonding of those two different materials requires quality workmanship.”

Penson, who also restores, plays and teaches the instrument, makes resonator banjos at his shop in Arlington. He works in intervals of 15–20 minutes that total 80–100 hours for each banjo he produces. Between work sessions, he must

OPPOSITE David Getman plays an all-walnut banjo with a calfskin hide head that he custom-made for a client. ABOVE Getman sands a banjo rim in his Houston workshop.



LEFT Detail of a custom-inlaid headstock on a Getman banjo.
BELOW Forming a perfectly round rim is part of the time-consuming process of constructing a banjo.



allow time for lacquer or glue to dry completely before undertaking the next step.

“The most difficult part is also the least important. It’s finishing the instrument, making it look glossy,” says Penson, 69. “People who spend a lot of money for a custom-made banjo want it to look perfect.”

The Penson family lived in a 120-year-old farmhouse in Illinois, and his father was always restoring something in the house. Watching and helping his dad got him interested in woodworking. He moved to Texas in his 20s and got much more involved with banjos. He played in various bluegrass bands, including one with the late Earl Scruggs, considered the most influential banjo player in the world.

About 25 years ago, he opened Penson String Works, where, amid demand for his custom guitars, he turns out three banjos every year.

“You can use good components and not make a good banjo,” Penson says. “You can have not so good components and good workmanship and get a good banjo. It’s kind of the luck of the draw.”

Long soaks are required to make the wood pliable enough to be formed into the banjo’s round rim. Getman gains back a bit of that time with efficiency: He cuts four of each part before resetting his lathe. Still, it takes several weeks to finish a banjo.

Getman likes to use walnut because it’s sustainable and easy to get, but he also uses cherry. Maple is a popular choice for banjos, but it’s lighter—almost bright, he says, in

appearance and tone. He prefers “the darker woods, walnut and cherry, for both the aesthetics and the tones they give the banjos.”

The most challenging aspect of making a banjo is “the tedium of sanding,” Getman says. “You want the finished wood to look like glass. You sand parts five, six, seven times with different grades of sandpaper until it feels as smooth as it can be.”

And the most difficult part?

“From a technical point, it’s making the part at the end of the neck where it meets the pot,” Getman says. “Cutting that exactly right is next to impossible without the right tool.”

An experienced banjo player looks for an instrument that feels good in their hands, Getman says. The tone and volume should be consistent up and down the range of notes.

Custom banjos can cost \$1,200 or more, and musicians often request custom inlays of ivory, mother of pearl and other expensive materials for the headstock and fretboard.

One of Getman’s customers requested a headstock inlay depicting the night sky. Getman had saved a burl of wood—what looks like a knot when it’s attached to the tree trunk—because he liked its wavy grain. He added black ebony for the sky and cut the burl open to represent ocean waves below.

It’s challenging work but the rewards are plenty.

“Hearing the finished product is the best part,” says Getman, who makes four or five banjos a year. “You take the different pieces and your ideas, and then when it’s finished, you get to hear that banjo’s tone.” ■

TCP Find this story on our website to hear David Getman play one of his banjos.



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Counting on Christmas

I'M sloshing through a marshy field in Matagorda County, along the Texas coast, a pair of binoculars dangling around my neck and cold raindrops pelting my bright blue jacket.

A hundred yards away, ornithologist Rich Kostecke points toward a cluster of what looks to me like a group of white footballs on stilts. I slap a mosquito off my arm and take a closer look: egrets.

We've just ticked off another species in the annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count, which takes place across the country between December 14 and January 5. The event got its start on Christmas Day in 1900. Instead of holding a hunting competition, as was popular at the time, an ornithologist and Audubon Society officer named Frank Chapman came up with a less destructive alternative: Count—but don't shoot—the birds.

The idea caught on. Today, tens of thousands of birders participate in counts in all 50 states and in 20 countries.

During the 2021–22 count, they logged almost 43 million birds at more than 2,000 sites.

I'm new to birding, but I love tromping around outdoors, and I could spend all day watching wildlife. Besides, it feels good to contribute to science, and this annual count provides data that sheds light on long-term avian trends.

But joining the Matagorda County-Mad Island Marsh Preserve count is especially exciting. The plot where I'm birding—a circular area with a 15-mile diameter—almost always records more species than any other area in the country.

The Matagorda County count began 30 years ago when Brent Ortego, then a biologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and Jim Bergan, formerly of the Nature Conservancy, realized they could position a count circle that would incorporate a bit of the Gulf of Mexico, a stretch of coastline and some land along the Colorado River. Much of the 176-square-mile plot is on private land, but it also includes the Nature Conservancy's Clive Runnells Family Mad Island Marsh Preserve and the neighboring



In an annual nationwide bird count, **Matagorda County** has led the US for 15 years in a row

Mad Island Marsh Wildlife Management Area.

It's fertile territory for birding.

"A lot of habitats come together here—coastal prairie, marshes, bay and forest," says Kostecke, who heads the small team to which I've been assigned for the count.

Under the bird count guidelines, teams tally all the species they see during a single calendar day. You don't need any special training or certification to participate, but only birds spotted by knowledgeable birders figure into the official total. Still, newbies like me typically can participate if there's room.

"It's a repeated count at the same time, year after year, so we're getting a snapshot across the nation over that time period," Kostecke says.

In a typical year, birders here log about 230 species during the count. But today's stormy weather doesn't bode well.

About 100 birders are participating in the count this year. Last night we lined up for bowls of chili and hot cornbread and talked strategy.

One group would watch for yellow-headed blackbirds.

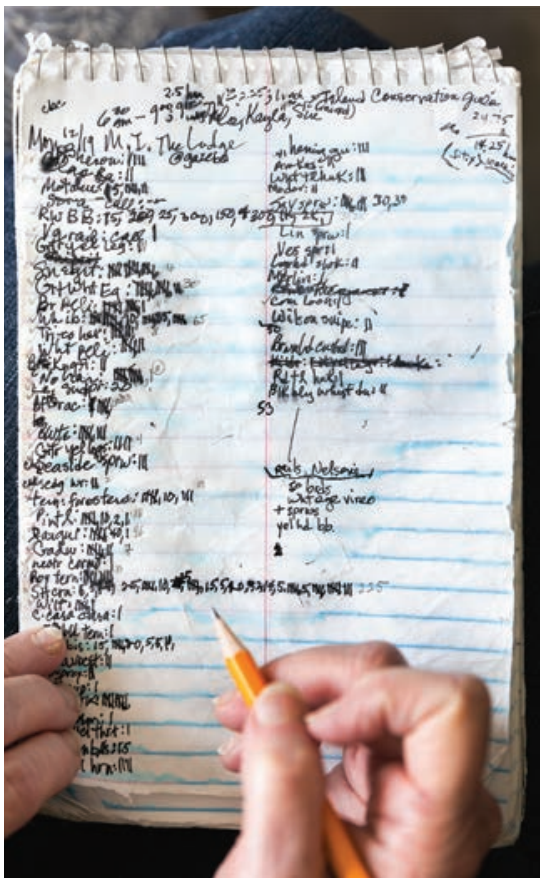
Another would head out at night, hoping to flush out tiny yellow rails and black rails in the darkness. The circle was divided into 16 sectors, with groups assigned to each one. We knew the weather would be a challenge because, like humans, birds hunker down in the rain.

"We may have to work harder to get them out," says Ortego, the official compiler for the event.

The count officially begins at midnight. I'm tucked inside my camper van then, but a hardy group of birders heads into the night to look for owls and other nocturnal birds.

I meet my team—Kostecke, along with ecologist Charlotte Reemts, her husband and their two daughters—early the next morning, which dawns gloomy and damp.

OPPOSITE From left, Rich Kostecke, Charlotte Reemts and author Pam LeBlanc are among about 100 birders who spent a rainy day participating in the Mad Island Marsh Preserve count. ABOVE A painted bunting's breeding grounds include much of Texas.



Since 1970, the population of birds in North America has dropped by 3 billion birds, or nearly 30%.

We pile into two cars then head down a gravel road, stopping periodically to scan the surroundings.

Within 20 minutes, Kostecke has already logged 10 species. He doubles that when we reach a lake, and his list grows further when we hike into the brush and eventually reach the marsh. I love birding but definitely do not know my birds, so I leave the identification to the experts.

We spend all morning admiring turkey vultures perched in trees and great blue herons wading in the water. At noon, we head back to headquarters. Raindrops plunk on the roof; it's foggy outside. Birders peel off soggy rain jackets as they come in for a break.

"What did you get?" someone asks a dripping man who walks in.

"Wet," he responds with a chuckle.

The birders munch leftover chili and discuss what they've spotted. So far, no one has recorded anything that's never been seen here before. But they have logged lots of birds, from Pepto Bismol-colored roseate spoonbills to pelicans, crested caracaras, white ibises and plenty of noisy sandhill cranes.

"There's still quite a few rocks to turn over," preserve manager Steven Goertz says as the birders head out for the rest of the day.

In the end, the Matagorda County-Mad Island Marsh Preserve circle reports 218 species, enough to retain the crown for the most species in the country. A count in San Diego comes in a close second with 213. It marks the 24th time this corner of Texas has come in first or tied for first—and the 15th straight year it has topped the list outright.

But the rain took a toll. A dozen species usually recorded here weren't seen. Still, they got some good ones—the scaly-breasted munia, with its checkerboard chest; a squat-looking bird with an impressively long bill called a green kingfisher; the rose-breasted grosbeak, the male of which

LEFT Unforgiving December weather leaves Sue McBeth Welfel's notebook a bit soggy. ABOVE Sandhill cranes were quite plentiful during the count.



looks like it's wearing a red bandana around its neck; the Western kingbird, with its lemon-colored belly; and the tall, spindly wood stork.

They also found one that I've long wanted to see—the tallest bird in North America, the whooping crane, which stands nearly 5 feet tall and has a wingspan of 7½ feet. Whooping crane numbers dropped to about 20 individuals in the 1940s but, thanks to conservation efforts, a population of about 600 now exists in the wild. They winter near here.

"It's an adrenaline rush," Ortego says of the count he helped start. "It's pride that you had the skills to locate an unusual bird when people are counting on you."

The count has scientific value as well. Biologists have seen a reduction in the raw number of birds in the past 50 years, and the counts provide evidence.

"For us, these data sets are important because the populations of birds that they monitor are not the subject of any formal monitoring program," says Lisa Gonzalez, executive director and vice president of Audubon Texas.

Since 1970, the population of birds in North America has dropped by 3 billion birds, or nearly 30%, she says.

The decline has hit nearly all species. Wetland birds like geese and swans are the exception; their numbers have stayed mostly stable, Gonzalez says.

Much of the loss is due to human activity. "Collisions and impacts are one of the major causes of bird loss, along with overall declines in habitat and a change in environmental conditions driven by climate change," Gonzalez says.

The public can help.

"Share the shore," Gonzalez says. "If you live or recreate along the coast, understand that it doesn't take a lot to disturb birds, especially nesting birds. When you're boating or fishing, steer clear of islands where birds nest—and keep dogs on a leash."

Watch for birds that nest on the ground when you drive on beaches, and turn off unnecessary outdoor lights during spring and fall migrations. And, if you're willing to spend a day outside looking for a flash of feathers, consider joining a bird count in your area.

"It's a fun thing to say we have the No. 1 count, but the count would be fun even if we weren't No. 1," Reemts says. "It's just all about the experience of being out here and seeing stuff." ■

TCP See this story on our website to learn if there is a Christmas Bird Count near you.

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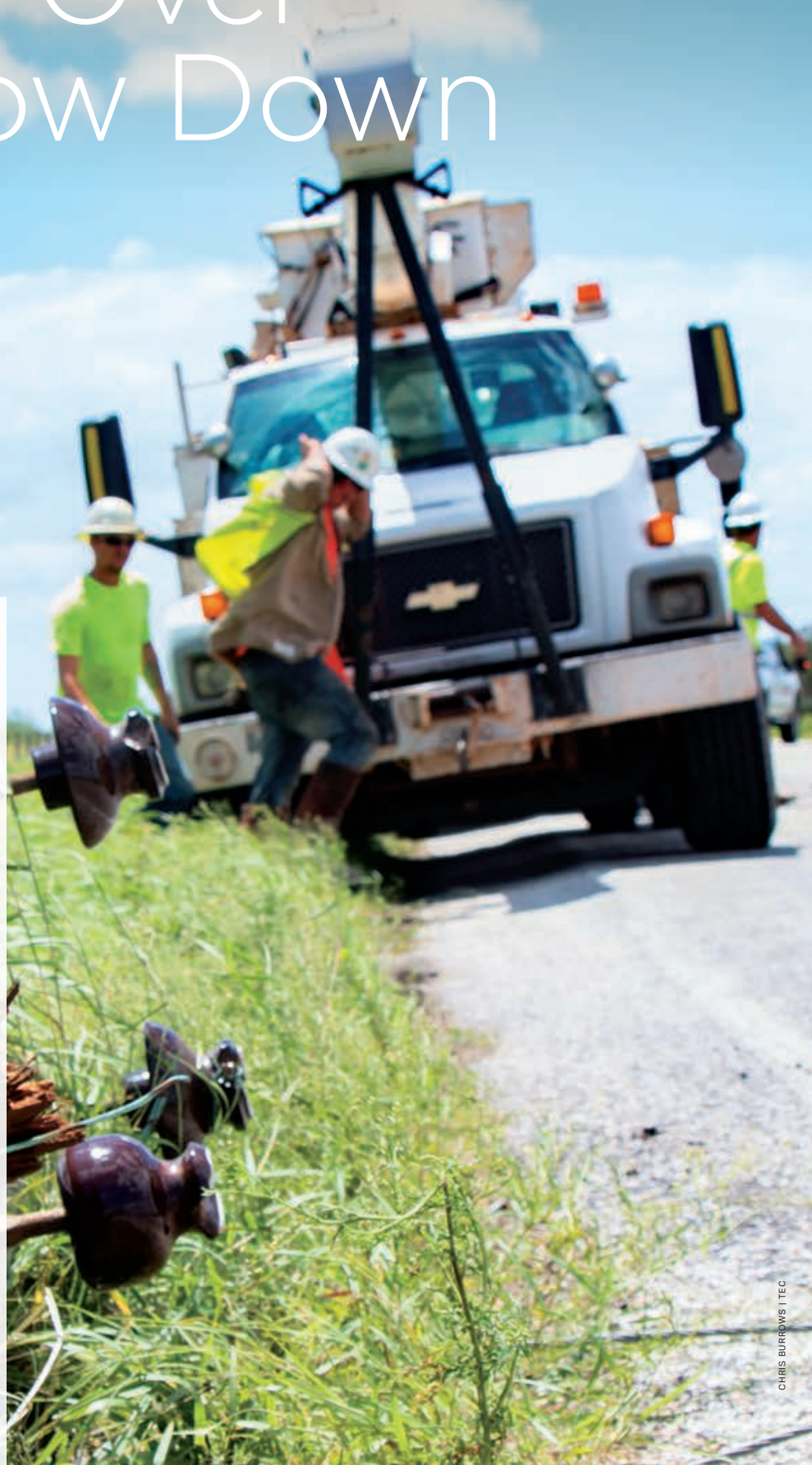
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Is Your Holiday Lighting Naughty or Nice?

WE ALL WANT to be on Santa's nice list, but if it's been a while since you replaced your holiday lights, you could be on the naughty list for wasting electricity. Don't worry, you don't need to nix your holiday light show—at least not entirely. There are a lot of easy steps you can take to make your festive displays more energy-efficient.

If you haven't strung your twinkling lights, be sure to use LED strands. LEDs consume far less energy than incandescent lights, and they can last 40 holiday seasons. LED lights come in various colors, including a warm white for that old-time holiday glow. They're also safer because they're made with epoxy lenses, not glass, making them more resistant to breaking—and they're cool to the touch, so no burnt fingers.

The energy savings can really add up: Using an LED bulb over the holidays will cost you an estimated 45¢ compared to \$5 for mini incandescent string lights and \$75 for large incandescent string lights.

You can also save energy with a programmable light timer. Most models cost between \$10 and \$25 and can be purchased through online retailers like Amazon or at big-box stores like Lowe's or Walmart. With a light timer, you can easily program when you want your holiday lights to turn on and off, which will save you time, money and energy. If you're using a timer for exterior lighting, make sure it's weatherproof and intended for outdoor use. Or try smart holiday lighting that you can control with your smartphone for even more customizable settings.

Turn off ambient lights. Chances are, you don't need to have your illuminated Christmas tree shining brightly and your house lights on. Adjust your indoor lighting to account for your décor, especially when you have glowing decorations.

If Clark Griswold's Christmas décor style is a bit much for your taste, consider a more natural approach. Many Christmas tree farms, and even retailers like Lowe's and Home Depot, give away greenery clippings from recently trimmed trees. With a little twine, extra ornaments and some sparkly ribbon, you can create beautiful garlands and wreaths to hang over your front door or windows.

To add extra twinkle at night, install solar-powered spotlights to illuminate your new (essentially free) greenery. Solar spotlights can vary in price, but you should be able to purchase a quality set of four for about \$30—and because they run on energy from the sun, there's no additional cost to your energy bill. For interior lighting options, consider LED candles to add a holiday glow.

There are many ways to decorate that require no electricity at all. Reflective decorations like tinsel and mirrors can glimmer just as brightly as lightbulbs. The holidays are also a great time to get crafty with your family and make homemade decorations like paper chains and popcorn strings. ■

Safe and Smart Heating Tips

HEATING A HOME ACCOUNTS for about half of a typical winter electric bill, making it the largest expense for most consumers. You can heat your home this winter in safe and smart ways with these tips from your electric cooperative.

Furnace. Inspect your furnace at least annually. Removing built-up dirt can reduce the risk of fire and make your furnace run more efficiently. Also remember to replace your furnace filter regularly during the winter. Replacing a dirty filter will increase the airflow and make your home more energy-efficient.

Thermostat. Turning the thermostat down a few degrees when you are away from home or sleeping also helps reduce your monthly utility bill. To help you do this automatically, consider investing in a programmable thermostat.

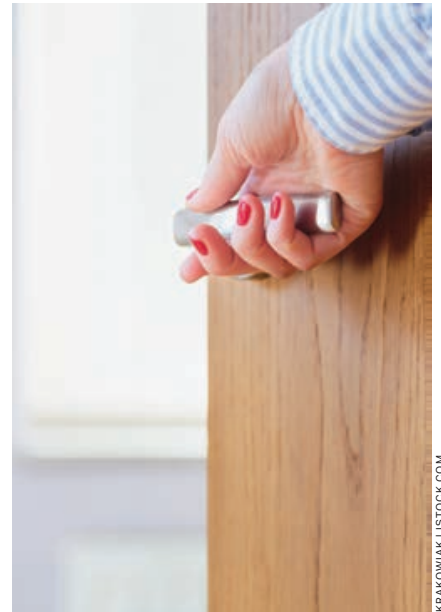
Space heaters. Space heaters are not cost-efficient when heating large areas. However, they're a smart option when only one room needs to be heated. Use only certified models that have been tested by an independent laboratory and those with switches that shut them off if they fall over. Always place space heaters on a steady surface away from foot traffic and at least 3 feet from anything flammable.

Electric blankets and heating pads. Familiarize yourself with the manufacturer's instructions and use the product only as intended. Never use an electric blanket that is wet or folded.

Small-scale strategies. Remember not to overlook minor changes to help you stay warm this winter. When possible, dress in layers with clothes that are tight and close to the skin so that they can trap heat near the body. Switch your ceiling fan's rotation so it circles in a clockwise direction, creating an updraft to circulate warm air around the room. Additionally, use curtains to help block out the cold air when closed at night and to let in the sun's heat when parted during the day. ■



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Should I Close Off Unused Rooms During Winter?

IT MAKES SENSE that if you close the door to an unused room, you can avoid paying to heat it, right?

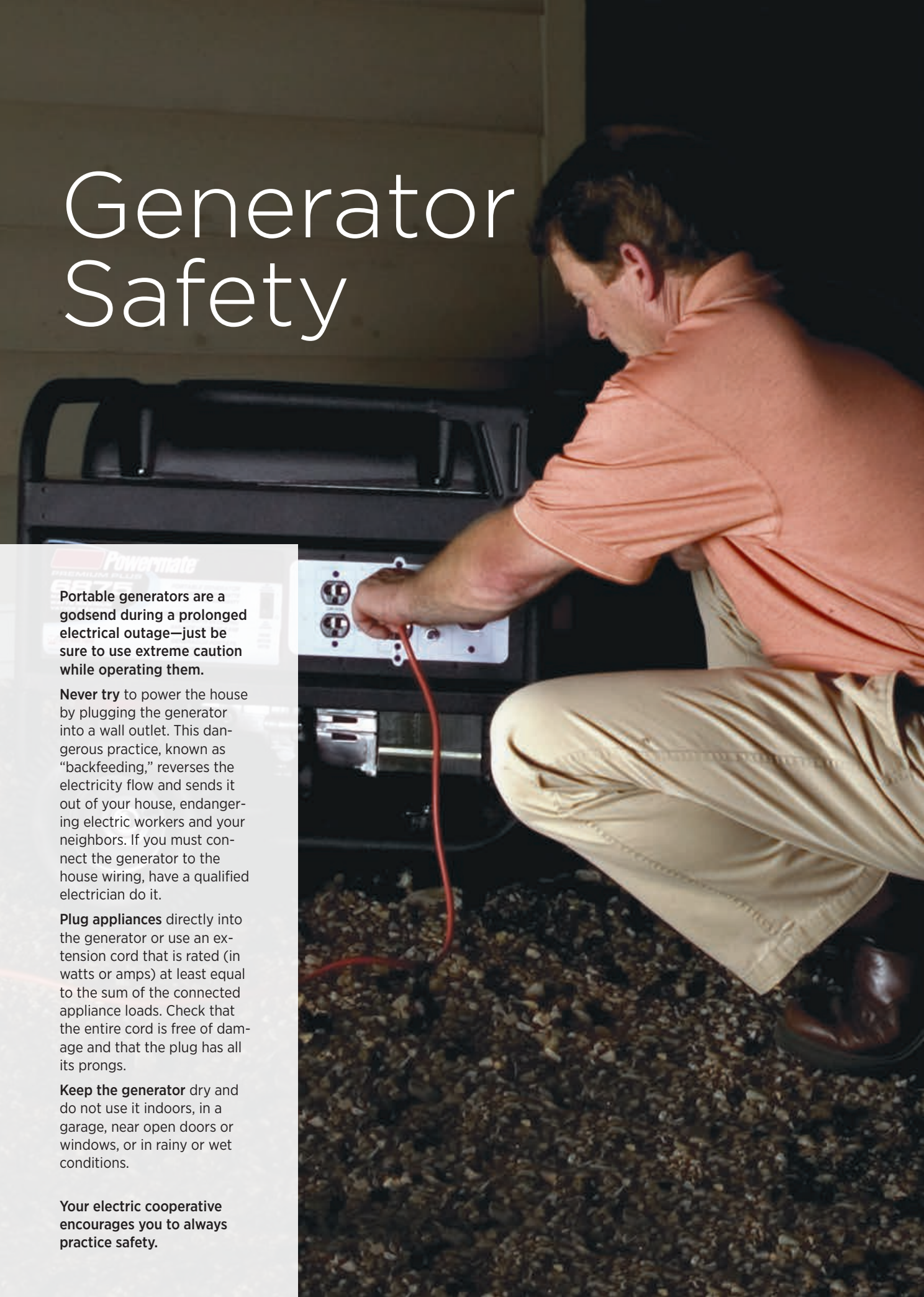
The opposite is true. When you close off an interior room or if you close the air vents in that room, your heating system has to work harder and can even break down as a result.

The reason: Your home's HVAC system is designed to keep the whole house comfortable by distributing heat evenly throughout. If you close off a room or a duct, you reduce the airflow to that room and force your system to work harder to heat it up.

That can cause a pressure imbalance, which can damage your ducts or your heating system.

Here's a better idea: Save money and energy by using caulk to seal air leaks around windows and holes in walls where cables enter the house. Add insulation to the attic. Install thermally insulated curtains. Replace your outdated thermostat with a programmable one that will lower the temperature at bedtime and when everyone leaves the house in the morning. ■

Generator Safety



Portable generators are a godsend during a prolonged electrical outage—just be sure to use extreme caution while operating them.

Never try to power the house by plugging the generator into a wall outlet. This dangerous practice, known as “backfeeding,” reverses the electricity flow and sends it out of your house, endangering electric workers and your neighbors. If you must connect the generator to the house wiring, have a qualified electrician do it.

Plug appliances directly into the generator or use an extension cord that is rated (in watts or amps) at least equal to the sum of the connected appliance loads. Check that the entire cord is free of damage and that the plug has all its prongs.

Keep the generator dry and do not use it indoors, in a garage, near open doors or windows, or in rainy or wet conditions.

Your electric cooperative encourages you to always practice safety.



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A close-up photograph of a dog's head and front paws resting on a textured, light-colored rug. The dog has black, white, and tan fur. To the right, a white space heater with a glowing orange mesh is visible, casting a warm light on the dog and the rug. The background is dark, making the dog and the heater stand out.

Be Cool With Space Heaters

Space heaters are meant to provide supplemental heat, not replace your home's heating system. If used incorrectly, space heaters can pose fire and burn risks. When using your portable heater, heed these rules:

Read and follow the manufacturer's warnings and the operation and care guidelines before using a space heater.

Space heaters need space. Keep them at least 3 feet away from any combustible materials such as bedding, drapes and furniture.

Never use space heaters around unsupervised children or pets.

Always turn the heater off and unplug it when leaving the room or going to sleep.

Plug space heaters directly into an outlet. Do not use an extension cord.

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Pooling Together

After a tornado destroyed a small town's historic landmarks, residents unite to rebuild

BY AMANDA OGLE • ILLUSTRATION BY DANA SMITH

JUST BEFORE 5 A.M. on March 24, a pair of EF1 tornadoes spun down in northern Parker County, west of Fort Worth. Both cut tracks of more than 5 miles with winds that peaked at 100 mph, toppling trees and power lines, damaging homes, and injuring folks near the small community of Poolville.

One of them carved a path through history.

That tornado toppled the steeple at the Oak Tree Baptist Church as it moved northeast through town and headed straight for the historic Poolville Cemetery. There the town's 120-year-old tabernacle—and an even older oak tree—were flattened, strewn among headstones.

Poolville, population 2,300, was established in the early 1880s and named for a large pool in the Clear Fork of the Trinity River that was fed by cold springs. The pool was a popular place for early settlers to gather. Over time the town grew, and around 1903 a tabernacle made of bois d'arc wood was built for the community.

The tabernacle's dirt floor (until concrete was laid in the early 1950s) was the meeting place for the community. Revivals, church services, funerals and just about anything that you could call a gathering was held under the 50-by-75-foot structure. "Up until it was destroyed by the tornado, it was still being used for sunrise Easter services, weddings and hootenannies," says Denise Yankie, a fifth-generation Poolville resident and retired teacher and coach.

"It was the only open, public structure that could be used for funerals, and it was loved and appreciated by everyone in the community," says Chris Van Rite, a 35-year resident. "Even the kids would go and have ice cream socials there. You just got this reverent feeling when you walked in. It was special."

Doris Sanders has lived in Poolville for 64 years. "Everybody grew up with the tabernacle," she says. "It was the landmark of Poolville."

Towering over the old wooden structure was a giant, sprawling post oak tree. Yankie, a member of Tri-County Electric Cooperative, believes the tree was 150–200 years old when it was ripped from its roots by the tornado.

The tree fell toward the Methodist church, and the tabernacle flew about 50 feet north, with part of the roof resting on the slab. The town sprang into action. "We had the tabernacle down within a day,

and people were already coming down, wanting to take pieces of it," Yankie says.

But the locals knew they couldn't let Mother Nature take this piece of history away from them.

The salvageable pieces of the tabernacle were stored away, awaiting the day they could be used in construction of a new tabernacle. But before that can happen, a lot of funds are needed.

It's believed that the new structure will cost at least \$150,000. In late June, the community held its first tabernacle fundraiser, with food trucks and a concert. They have raised about \$81,000 so far plus pledges for most of the remainder. Wood slabs from the oak tree—some of them hand-painted by Van Rite's mother-in-law, some laser etched—were sold at the event, adding about \$2,600 to the total.

Another fundraiser was held at the annual Lord's Acre community festival in October. Much of the wood from the oak tree was also saved, so more woodworks will be built and sold, including table-tops from the larger pieces. "It had an unusual burl in it, with all these curlicues throughout the grain," says Van Rite, who is leading that effort.

Once funds are in hand, construction on the new tabernacle can begin. Van Rite, a member of Wise EC, says it might be a year before that happens, but there are plans to use as much of the old building as possible. All the original timber posts were saved, and the rusty old tin roof might be placed underneath the new roof—and visible from below. They were even able to salvage an end piece from a pew that resided under the tabernacle, so new pews will be modeled on the old ones.

Until the June fundraiser, it wasn't clear if Poolville residents would be able to raise enough money for the new structure, but the outpouring of support from the community and surrounding towns proved otherwise.

"We've already had a lot of contractors volunteer to help build it when the time comes," Yankie says.

"Businesses in Weatherford have contributed large sums, and the outpouring of support from the community has been so inspiring," Van Rite says.

"It really shows just what a community can do when they come together." ■

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How Texas Became a Desert

Films shot in Arizona, Utah and Spain gave the world some wrong impressions

BY W.F. STRONG

TO MUCH OF THE WORLD—and to many Americans who have never been to Texas—the state is a vast desert.

It's not the Sahara but a high-plains arid region studded with rocky mesas, sweeping wall-like cliffs and dusty canyons—and sometimes adorned with thousands of saguaro cactuses (native to Arizona, not Texas).

And, yes, certainly there are parts of West Texas that fulfill some aspects of these images, but more than half the state is green, with rolling hills, lush forests and vibrant coastal plains. Yet desert images dominate minds in distant

lands. For that, we can thank Hollywood.

There are many John Wayne Westerns with storylines that meander through Texas, but those films were mostly shot in Utah and Arizona. The most jarring example to me is *The Searchers*.

“Someday this country’s gonna be a fine, good place to be,” Mrs. Jorgensen, a tough frontierswoman, says in one scene. As she says this on her front porch, Jorgensen is facing Monument Valley, which is in Arizona and Utah.

Wayne made five movies in Monument Valley, even though two of them, *The Searchers* and *Rio Grande*, had story-

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



lines based in Texas. “Monument Valley is the place where God put the West,” Wayne said.

Another Wayne film that is shocking to a Texan is *The Comancheros*. Wayne plays Texas Ranger Jake Cutter.

In one scene, he arrests an outlaw on a boat arriving in Galveston. As Cutter exits the boat with his handcuffed prisoner in tow, he walks right into eastern Utah, where the film was shot. It was stunning country for CinemaScope technology to capture, but it’s not Texas.

Rio Bravo and *El Dorado* were two Wayne films with Texas settings shot in and around the Sonoran Desert west of Tucson. The landscape there is dominated by saguaros, enormous 40-foot-tall cactuses called the sentinels of the desert. Such sights don’t exist in Texas.

Clint Eastwood’s *For a Few Dollars More* is set in and around El Paso, but it was actually shot in the Tabernas Desert near Almería, Spain, and in Italy. Fort Bravo, also called Texas Hollywood, is a movie set town built in Almería in the 1960s that has served as a backdrop for many classic Western films.

Two films more true to Texas in landscape were *Giant*, shot mostly around Marfa, and *No Country for Old Men*, filmed around Marfa and Las Vegas, New Mexico. A 2015 miniseries called *Texas Rising* troubled some Texans for two reasons: It was shot almost entirely in Mexico and it depicted rugged mountain terrain near Victoria, where there are only coastal plains.

Movie Texas depicts a greater diversity of desert land than Texas actually has within it. To the world, we are Arizona, Utah and New Mexico, and we are Mexico, Italy and Spain. Mostly desert. ■

Slow Cooker

The handy appliance that comes through in so many ways

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

My slow cooker punch is my favorite festive drink to serve when hosting for the holidays. This vibrant and bubbly beverage is brimming with holiday flavors. It's always a hit at parties.

Slow Cooker Holiday Punch

6 cups cranberry juice
4 cups apple juice
2 cups orange juice
1 cup grapefruit juice
4 cinnamon sticks
4 cups cranberries, divided use
1 liter ginger ale, chilled
Orange slices
Grapefruit slices

1. Add all juices to a 6-quart slow cooker.
2. Add cinnamon sticks and 2 cups cranberries. Cover and cook on low 4 hours.
3. Allow punch to cool, then pour into a punch bowl. Top with ginger ale.
4. Before guests arrive add orange slices, grapefruit slices and the remaining 2 cups cranberries.
5. Serve over ice.

SERVES 12

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





Crockpot Apple Pie Cinnamon Roll Casserole

SHELLEY JANIK
SAN BERNARD EC

Celebrate the holidays on the sweetest note with Janik's casserole. Cinnamon rolls and apple filling topped with a creamy brown sugar glaze are amazing for Christmas morning or even better after a holiday meal.

- 1½ cups canned apple pie filling**
- 2 tubes refrigerated cinnamon rolls (17.5 ounces each)**
- 2 eggs**
- ¼ cup heavy cream**
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar**
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract**

1. Dice apples from apple pie filling. Coat the inside of a slow cooker with cooking spray.
2. Remove cinnamon rolls from tubes, place icing aside and cut each cinnamon roll into four pieces. Place half of the cinnamon roll pieces on bottom of slow cooker.
3. Spoon half the apple pie filling over cinnamon roll pieces. Top with remaining cinnamon roll pieces.
4. Whisk together eggs, cream, brown sugar, cinnamon and vanilla. Pour over cinnamon rolls.
5. Spoon the remaining apple pie filling on top. Cover and cook on low 2½–3 hours.
6. Spread the icing that came with the cinnamon rolls on top of the casserole and serve warm.

SERVES 8

[MORE RECIPES >](#)

\$500 WINNER

Slow Cooker Cabbage Rolls

WENDY ZWIENER
SAN BERNARD EC



The tangy citrus tomato sauce here evokes the beauty of treasured holiday recipes that have been passed down through the years.

SERVES 6



- 12 cabbage leaves, removed from stem**
- 1 pound ground beef**
- 1 cup cooked white rice**
- 1 egg, beaten**
- ¼ cup milk**
- ¼ cup finely minced onion**
- 1¼ teaspoons salt**
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper**
- 1 can tomato sauce (8 ounces)**
- 1 tablespoon light brown sugar**
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce**
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice**

1. Cut out the thick vein from the bottom of each cabbage leaf, making a V-shaped notch.
2. Blanch leaves for a few minutes in boiling water until slightly softened, then separate leaves and set aside.
3. In a large bowl, combine ground beef, rice, egg, milk, onion, salt and pepper.
4. In a small saucepan over low heat, simmer tomato sauce, brown sugar, Worcestershire sauce and lemon juice. Stir to combine.
5. Place a cabbage leaf on a flat surface and place a tablespoon or more of the meat mixture in the center of the leaf.
6. Roll from the bottom of the cabbage leaf and tuck in the edges as you roll.
7. Continue until you use all leaves and meat.
8. Coat the inside of a slow cooker with cooking spray and place rolls seam side down into it. Pour the sauce mixture over the rolls, then cover and cook on low 6 hours.

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

SPRING CAKES DUE DECEMBER 10

Some cakes just pair perfectly with a spring day. Send us your best spring cake recipe and you could win \$500. Submit your favorite online by December 10.





Easy BBQ Chicken Sliders

MELISSA ECKHOFF
COSERV

Looking for a quick and easy holiday appetizer or New Year's Eve bite? We've got you covered with Eckhoff's sliders. Shredded chicken bathed in a creamy sauce will take you into 2024 the right way.

- 4 boneless chicken breasts
- 1 bottle barbecue sauce (18 ounces)

- 1 can cream of chicken soup (10.5 ounces)
- 12 slider buns
- Sliced pickles

1. Coat the inside of a slow cooker with cooking spray and place chicken breasts into it.
2. In a bowl, stir together barbecue sauce and cream of chicken soup. Pour mixture over chicken.
3. Cover slow cooker and cook on low 6 hours.
4. Shred chicken with two forks and serve on slider buns, topped with sliced pickles.

MAKES 12 SLIDERS

TCP Want quick solutions to your slow cooker desires? We can help. Among the more than 1,000 recipes from Co-op Country in our archives, you'll find dozens that call for slow cookers. They're all on our website.

Quick Tips for Slow Cooking

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ

If you're feeding two, go for a 3-quart slow cooker. A 5-quart will feed a family of four, and a 6-quart slow cooker can feed a crowd or handle big batches.

Keep it closed. Opening the lid can cause the cooker to lose heat, adding to the cooking time.

Make cleanup a snap. Coat the inside with nonstick spray or use a liner for easy cleanup.

Enliven a dish by adding fresh herbs in the last 15 minutes of cooking time.

Sear meat before adding it to the slow cooker to deepen its flavor.



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COURTESY CHET GARNER

Art and Parts

A Liberty Hill artist diverts discarded toys from the trash heap

BY CHET GARNER

YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD to play with toys. That's the lesson I learned standing next to an 8-foot banana made entirely of plastic dolls, space aliens and rebar. I had tripped to visit off-the-grid artist Terry "Tunes" Parks, 72, who created his own Texas-style island of misfit toys just north of Liberty Hill, outside Austin.

At first, I wasn't sure if I was headed in the right direction. Then I saw a fence line covered in sun-bleached Barbie dolls. This was the place.

I wandered into Parks' yard, which doubles as his public gallery. Dozens of sculptures cover the space, each comprising hundreds of tiny toys organized into larger-than-life shapes—guitars, pyramids and even an Easter Island head. Dolls commingled with gardening tools hang from tree branches. It might have been terrifying if it wasn't so playful.

Parks started creating around 2010, after he was diagnosed with cancer and doctors told him he didn't have much time to live. The art served as therapy, helping him make his recovery while working tirelessly beside his brother Scott. Both are self-admitted music nuts, which explains why most of the art pieces are inspired by Texas artists like Willie Nelson, Frank Zappa and psychedelic pioneers the 13th Floor Elevators.

Every week, visitors and the local mission resale shop bring Parks—a member of Pedernales Electric Cooperative—boxes of unwanted toys that sit and wait for him to turn them into something bigger than the sum of their doll parts.

Parks' art isn't commissioned by highfalutin patrons and doesn't exist to fill big-city galleries. Instead, the sculptures serve a higher purpose: making us smile, scratch our heads and remember when we played with toys too. ■

ABOVE Terry "Tunes" Parks shows Chet a pyramid assembled with a mind-boggling array of toys.

TCP Join Chet as he discovers what old toys turn into. We have the video online. And see all his Explorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



Know Before You Go

Call ahead or check an event's website for scheduling details, and check our website for many more upcoming events.

DECEMBER

01

Burnet [1-3, 8-10] Main Street Bethlehem, (512) 756-4481, fbcburnet.org

02

Wimberley [2-26] Trail of Lights, (512) 847-6969, emilyann.org

07

Columbus Ladies Night Out, (979) 732-8385, columbus.texas.org

New Braunfels Christmas Market at Historic Old Town, (830) 629-2943, newbraunfelsconservation.org

08

Dallas Mistletoe Market at Preston Hollow Village, thebohohmarket.com

Lake Jackson Easton Corbin, (979) 230-3156, brazosport.edu

Fort Worth [8-9] Connor King, (512) 817-9535, blcomedy.com

Fredericksburg [8-9] A Christmas Journey, (830) 997-2069, bethanyfbg.com

McKinney [8-9] Holidays at the Heard, (972) 562-5566, heardmuseum.org

Clute [8-10, 15-17] The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, (979) 265-7661, brazosport.org

09

Comanche Santa Comes to Town, (325) 356-3233, comanchechamber.org

Llano Snow Day, (325) 247-5354, llanostarrystarrynights.com

San Saba Sip N' Stroll and Lighted Christmas Parade,
(325) 372-5141,
sansabachamber.org

Sattler Canyon Lake Noon Lions Christmas Parade,
(806) 420-4824,
facebook.com/
canyonlakelakeoonlionsclub

Surfside Beach Nighttime Holiday Kites,
(979) 233-1531,
visitsurfsidebeachtx.org

Marble Falls Movie in the Park, (830) 693-4449,
visitmarblefalls.org

Brenham Dailey & Vincent,
(979) 337-7240,
thebarnhillcenter.com

Johnson City Jingle Jaunt 5K & Kids K, (830) 868-7111,
johnsoncitytx.org

Lake Jackson Bird Banding,
(979) 480-0999, gcbo.org

Surfside Beach Surfing Santas, (979) 233-1531,
visitsurfsidebeachtx.org

West Columbia Candlelight Christmas, (979) 345-4656,
thc.texas.gov

Stonewall Tree Lighting,
(830) 644-2252,
tpwd.texas.gov

Round Top Linda Patterson and Friends Concert,
(979) 249-3129,
festivalhill.org

15

16

17

JANUARY

01

TCP Submit Your Event

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Mailboxes

Readers certainly didn't mail it in this month, but some got boxed out by the competition. So gather 'round and let's see what's been delivered, as Texans show their colors and a little country flair.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ

1 ROB DANIEL
TRI-COUNTY EC

"First responders often use mailboxes to hang gear on while in rehab after fighting fires."

2 DON BUGH
NAVASOTA VALLEY EC

"Tierra Linda Ranch community mailboxes in the Kerrville area at dusk."

3 VANDY MORGAN
BLUEBONNET EC

Texas wildflower mailbox.

4 JANIS HENDRIX
PEDERNALES EC

A mailbox mounted on a retired 1942 fire hydrant during the February freeze.



Upcoming Contests

DUE DEC 10 Pollinators

DUE JAN 10 Rides

DUE FEB 10 Food and Cooking



Enter online at TexasCoopPower.com/contests.

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



The Best Christmas Gift I Ever Gave

A simple offering made generations ago yields lifetime returns

BY W.A. MCCORMICK
ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID MOORE

WHEN I WAS ABOUT 8 or 10 years old, back in the 1950s, an old man moved into a little shack of a house about a quarter-mile from my family's little, very modest house. He was alone, and I worried about him.

Maybe my folks had mentioned that he was having hard times, but I don't remember for sure.

We had several big native pecan trees, and during the holidays we usually had an abundance of the delicious nuts.

One year when Christmas was coming up, the old man was in the back of my mind. I told my grandmother that I wanted to give him something for Christmas because otherwise he probably wouldn't get anything.

It was the first time in my life that I had thought about giving a gift, but I knew

how a gift could brighten my day. My grandmother suggested that I give the man a paper bag full of pecans, probably a pound or two.

That seemed so wrong to me. Gifts should be bright and shiny. But pecans were so common to me that they were like biscuits. The bag was just plain brown and didn't even have a ribbon.

Nevertheless, Grandma handed it to me and told me to go give it to the old man. I was almost embarrassed about the gift that seemed so unlike Christmas to me, but I did as Grandma said.

When I knocked on the door, the old man came, and I gave him the bag and told him I wanted him to have it for Christmas. He opened the bag and looked inside.

A big, beautiful smile spread across his face, and he told me that his Christmas wish for me was that I would have a "double header." I went back home puzzled about what a double header was until my grandfather explained that it was twice as much good as I might expect.

I learned later that the old man did not have any type of heat in that shack of his, and both his feet froze that winter. He died not long after that.

I have given a lot of gifts in my 76 years, but that one is at the top of my list of memorable gifts. I wish I (we) had done a lot more for a lonely, cold, probably hungry old man.

His wish for me has followed me all my life and kept me warm. ■

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On a recent trip to Tucson, we spoke with fourth generation turquoise traders who explained that less than five percent of turquoise mined worldwide can be set into jewelry and only about twenty mines in the Southwest supply gem-quality turquoise. Once a thriving industry, many Southwest mines have run dry and are now closed.

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