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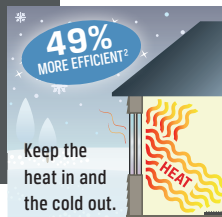
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## 06 Grassroots Movement

Yard work doesn't cut it for the dedicated drivers and DIYers of lawn mower racing.

*Story and Photos by Julia Robinson*

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*By Pam LeBlanc*

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#### ON THE COVER

Jay Jones of College Station hurtles around a track in Gun Barrel City in his souped-up mower.  
*Photo by Julia Robinson*

#### ABOVE

Texas Tech University student Kassidy Edwards hikes her bike out of Fresno Canyon in Big Bend Ranch State Park.  
*Photo by Jerod Foster*



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I Love

**RECOMMENDED READING**

Read *Wiley's Sages* from December 2013 to learn more about the undisputably mighty Wiley College debate team. Melvin B. Tolson organized the team 100 years ago this month, October 28, 1924.

# Latin America Celebrates

**EVER WONDER WHY** National Hispanic Heritage Month, commemorated each September 15–October 15, spans two calendar months?

The celebration begins in the middle of September to coincide with independence days in several Latin American countries: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua celebrate theirs September 15, followed by Mexico on September 16, Chile on September 18 and Belize on September 21. The month also overlaps with Día de la Raza, a Latin American holiday that for some replaces Columbus Day, October 12, to celebrate the region's mixed Indigenous and European heritage.



## Night Vision

Lago Vista, a community nestled along Lake Travis in Central Texas, made history 65 years ago this month. The town, northwest of Austin, became the first rural community in the U.S. to get streetlights, October 20, 1959, thanks to Pedernales Electric Cooperative.

## FINISH THIS SENTENCE

My favorite hand-me-down is ...

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

Here are some of the responses to our August prompt: **I can't wait to learn ...**

How to quilt. Katie Phillips' story has inspired me [*In the Beginning*, August 2024]. It's never too late.

JANET KELLY  
BLUEBONNET EC  
ELGIN

How to make tamales from scratch.

JENNY CARPENTER  
CENTRAL TEXAS EC  
INGRAM

Something new every day so I don't grow old.

KATHY BOLSEN  
PEDERNALES EC  
SPRING BRANCH

About the world from my great-grandchildren.

KAT CROSS  
HOUSTON COUNTY EC  
CROCKETT

Visit our website to see more responses.





WYATT MCSPADDEN

**Getting Electricity**

I was born in 1944 and raised on a farm in southwest Iowa [In the Beginning, August 2024]. We did not get power until 1947 or 1948. Our house was wired for electricity, but all progress toward lighting up the homes stopped when the war started.

We had the light switches, which, of course, did nothing, and my mom would tell me that I played with those switches so much, she wondered if they would still work when we actually did get power. Lucky for me they did.

Sheryl S. McNally  
Pedernales EC  
Marble Falls

**Dimmitt, Darn It**

Having grown up in Earth, the photo on Page 8 caught my eye [Open Roads, Open Eyes; August 2024]. I don't recall silage mounds back in the 1950s, but I do recall Dimmitt being spelled with two T's.

Evelyn McAnelly  
Medina EC  
Hondo



CORBIS | GETTY IMAGES

**AUGUST 2024 Open Roads, Open Eyes**

“Beautiful pictures and a great story. Texas does have wonderful scenery and vistas. We all need to slow down and see what’s out there.”

MARY HENDERSON HARP  
VIA FACEBOOK

**Earthy Elocution**

Lyndon B. Johnson could be earthy in his language at times, and many jokes and stories wouldn't be suitable for a family magazine [Sense and Humor, August 2024].

One of the milder anecdotes involved a crisis in Greek politics between Prime Minister Georgios Papandreou and his son and political opponent Andreas Papandreou. LBJ called the Greek ambassador in to urge the Greeks to get their act together.

LBJ, who wasn't good at lengthy foreign names, told the ambassador, “You tell old Papa-what's-his-name to get together with that other Papa-what's-his-name and work something out.”

Charles Wukasch  
Pedernales EC  
Austin

**Required Reading**

Finish This Sentence in the August issue hit a chord. Elmer Kelton's books are classic, and the one noted, *The Time It Never Rained*, is a must-read.

Charles Patterson  
Navarro County EC  
Corsicana

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letters@TexasCoopPower.com

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1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor  
Austin, TX 78701

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

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# GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT

Yard work doesn't cut it  
for the dedicated drivers and  
DIYers of lawn mower racing







STORY AND PHOTOS BY JULIA ROBINSON

After first responders rushed over to Bobby Lechinger, who was face down on the dirt track after flipping his lawn mower, they tended to his injuries, including a fractured foot.

But Lechinger still had his eyes on a prize.

“Please don’t cut my racing pant leg,” the mower racer from Madisonville told the ambulance crew. “I have to race tomorrow.”

Lawn mower racing may sound like a joke, but the drivers are seriously dedicated to their sport.

With four wheels (mostly on the ground), cutting blades removed and a low center of gravity, lawn mower racing doesn’t make for many crashes, but it can still be dangerous. On this hot June morning in Gun Barrel City, southeast of Dallas, Lechinger was among a dozen drivers hurtling around a small dirt oval track tucked between baseball fields and a Baptist church. This is the home track for the Lone Star Mower Racing Association and for an unexpected blend of grassroots engineering, adrenaline-fueled competition, light-hearted humor and Texas grit.

The competitors don full-body motocross-style racing suits and safety gear and push their minuscule home-built machines to the edge. With the temperature pushing into the mid-90s before racing even starts, everyone is sweating but smiling. A small but curious crowd has filled the bleachers, some huddling under umbrellas for relief from the intense sunshine. As the green flag waves, the competitors roar across the starting line, and the dirt flies.

Lawn mower racing traces its origins, as you might expect, to a laugh in a bar.

In 1973, Irishman Jim Gavin and a group of his mates from West Sussex, in England, were bemoaning the increasing cost of motor sports, with sponsorships and professional drivers pushing out everyday enthusiasts. But they realized they all owned lawn mowers and decided to race them. Eighty competitors showed up for that first gathering of the British Lawn Mower Racing Association.

CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE Kevin Council, a “horsepower junkie,” raced dirt bikes for 20 years before discovering lawn mower racing. Annsley Howard, with her dad, John, has been racing mowers since she was 9. Richard Wooley holds off Jesse Vick during the U.S. Lawn Mower Racing Association national finals in June in Gun Barrel City. Family, friends and curiosity seekers find the action way more exciting than watching grass grow.



# Lawn mower racing embodies the spirit of Texas itself: bold, resilient and unapologetically fun.

In the U.S., there's an annual lawn mower race in Indiana that started in 1963, and there had been a few one-off races over the years at county fairs and rodeo sideshows. But nothing was formalized until 1992, when STA-BIL, an engine fuel additives brand, announced a publicity stunt on April Fool's Day: the first U.S. Lawn Mower Racing Association competition.

The promotion was a surprising success and 32 years on, lawn mower racing is still finding new fans and competitors, attracting racers from other motor sports drawn to the affordability and do-it-yourself engineering.

The Texas chapter—the Lone Star Mower Racing Association—formed in 1998, with a racing season that runs from roughly Labor Day to Memorial Day, skipping the hottest months when engine (and driver) performance suffers. Boerne, Bonham, Bulverde, Caldwell, Madisonville, Whitesboro and Wortham also host races and exhibitions. The rules are fairly simple: remove the cutting blades, build your mower to regulation rules and go faster than everyone else.

At its core, lawn mower racing is a celebration of ingenuity and resourcefulness. With strict regulations governing engine size and modifications, racers must get creative to gain a competitive edge. Each mower is a testament to its owner's craftsmanship and dedication.

There are eight classes of competition based on engine size, horsepower, wheelbase and other specs. Kids as young as 6 can compete with stock mowers (6.5 horsepower or less) and top speeds around 20 mph. The fastest classes are the factory experimental classes—the Formula 1 of mowers—with FXS (single cylinder) and FXT (twin cylinder) machines that can exceed 100 mph.

Kevin Council, president of the LSMRA and a member of Houston County Electric Cooperative, competes in the fastest FXT class. Dressed in a red, white and blue NASCAR-style suit, Council greets me in front of his travel trailer, home to four mowers. He spent 20 years racing dirt bikes before retiring from the sport.

He saw his first LSMRA race in 2021, and “before the race



ABOVE Philip Fallis of Willis chats with fans after a race. OPPOSITE Council says he saw his first race in 2021 and “before the race was even over, I was on the internet looking for a mower.”

was even over, I was on the internet looking for a mower. Two weeks later we drove to Michigan to pick it up, and that was four lawn mowers ago,” Council says with a laugh. “I’m a horsepower junkie at heart, and there’s nothing more redneck than going lawn mower racing.”

He jokes that his racing number, 12K, is the start-up cost for his new racing habit but is quick to point out how accessible and affordable lawn mowers are compared to other motor sports. “This is really one of the cheapest sports you can get into horsepowerwise. The entry level is probably \$1,000–\$1,500.”

Lawn mower racing thrives on the participation of everyday Texans who have formed and foster a tightly knit community of gearheads. There’s more camaraderie than cutthroat competition. Sure, racers are eager to win, but they’re just as likely to lend a helping hand to a fellow competitor. In the pits, racers swap tips, share tools and forge lasting friendships. There are no cash prizes in the sport—just trophies and bragging rights.





Back on the track, competitors have started the feature races, which have been shortened to 15 laps instead of the usual 20 due to the heat.

Brandi Vercher from Highlands is one of three women racing today and takes her first checkered flag after years of coming in second and third place in the GPT class.

Annsley Howard, 17, from New Ulm, takes first in the FXS class on her machine painted black and green. Howard, the 2023 state champion in the FXS class, has been racing since she was 9. "It's just fun. It's an adrenaline rush," she says with a smile.

Her father, John Howard, got involved with racing when a friend asked for help from his welding shop. "Two and a half weeks later, I built a mower that I couldn't even fit on," John says. "I had to get someone else to drive it. And then it just snowballed from there."

Lots of drivers have a story like this, in which a friend or family member enticed them into the sport. Sammie Neel, LSMRA secretary-treasurer and a customer of Bryan Texas Utilities, also races in the FXS class. "I like to say we've been ruining lawns since 1992!"

Neel's husband got into the sport first, then warmed her onto the track.

"Whenever I finally got out there, I was going slow," she says, drawing out the word "slow." "I got lapped like five times, and I was so mad when I got off the track, I said, 'You make that sucker go. If I'm going to be out here, I'm racing.'"

Then she couldn't stop. "You think you're just going to go out there and putt around, but once—and I mean once—somebody passes you, you're like, 'Ahh, I'm ready to go!'"

The timekeeper and scoring judge today is Kerry Evans, the USLMRA president, who drove in from Alabama. He's been in the sport since 1998 and has two national championships.

"When we started in the '90s, we had 30- and 40-mph lawn mowers," Evans says. "People started experimenting and tinkering, and in September of 2010, a group of us went to the Bonneville Salt Flats and set the land-speed record on the lawn mower at 96½ miles an hour."

Today's FXT mowers can surpass 100 mph. "It's just been rock and mow ever since," Evans says.

The spirit of the sport's April Fool's origin has never left, and many early racers had punny monikers: Sir Lawns A Lot, the Lawn Ranger, Blade Runner, Prograsstinator. These days everyone runs under their actual names, but the sport still gets chuckles.

"We tell people, hey, we race lawn mowers, and they'll just start laughing," Neel says. "And we're like, seriously, you know, laugh if you want, but come out to the races because they go fast."

"And then once they come out, they get excited. They're a fan after that."

Lawn mower racing embodies the spirit of Texas itself: bold, resilient and unapologetically fun. As long as there are lawns to mow and racers with a need for speed, the roar of mowers will continue to remind us that, sometimes, the most extraordinary adventures can be found in the most unexpected places.

"The mow, the merrier," Evans says. ■

College professors are taking students  
way out of the classroom for educational adventures

# LEARNING *the* HARD WAY

BY PAM LEBLANC

**SOME OF THE MOST** important lessons of college didn't come in a classroom for Thira Schlegel. They came during a 10-day trip to Tanzania in January, when the Southwestern University senior and 11 other students climbed to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro.

During the trip, part of the university's Outdoor Adventure Program, Schlegel befriended a Tanzanian porter, a young man named Good Luck, who, like her, is an artist. Arriving in camp after difficult days of hiking at high elevations, Schlegel would unpack her art supplies and take in the rugged surroundings.

"I'd find a spot that inspired me and invite Good Luck to join," Schlegel says. "We painted the same scene together, sometimes in silence and sometimes talking about our lives and how they're similar and different."

That experience, Schlegel says, made her realize the privilege she has at home in Texas and inspired a series of paintings that incorporate themes of sustainability and adventure.

It also gave her confidence she'll carry with her the rest of her life.

## TOP OF THE CLASS

**S**chlegel and the others' ascension of Kilimanjaro, which at 19,341 feet is the tallest peak in Africa, was part of a program led by mountaineer Brannndon Bargo. He's Southwestern's assistant director for outdoor adventure and executive producer and host of *The Highpointers*, a PBS series about Bargo and his brother, Greg, climbing the highest peaks in all 50 states.

The trip capped a year of shorter excursions that included mountain biking, kayaking, horseback riding and caving—all designed to help students feel more comfortable outdoors, find community and hone their leadership skills along the way.

"We want them to have fun but learn something," Brannndon Bargo says of the extracurricular program, which he hopes will eventually become a for-credit class at the



ABOVE Southwestern University student Thira Schlegel, left, with Good Luck, a Tanzanian porter she befriended on her trip to Africa. OPPOSITE Members of Southwestern's Outdoor Adventure Program at the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro.

university in Georgetown, north of Austin.

Baylor University, Texas A&M University, the University of Texas at Austin and other campuses also offer various forms of outdoor activities to round out their students' education.

"It's a way to retain students," Bargo says. "During COVID, we learned kids get really stressed out. They need a way to have community and find friends and de-stress. The university realizes this is a way to do that—and get students outdoors. They're putting an emphasis on it and money toward it."









CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Anna DesHotels, a student in Texas Tech University's Adventure Media course, splashes through a muddy stretch of the Brazos River during a training ride. Tech's Jacob Hoebelheinrich, left, and Ryan Steele pitch a tent in Big Bend Ranch State Park. Tech students gather along a ridge overlooking the Madrid Falls watershed in the park.



## RESPECTING THE UNEXPECTED

At Texas Tech University, students in the Adventure Media class, offered in the spring semester, bicycled 100 miles through the rugged canyons and cactus-studded plateaus of West Texas this year, gathering video and photos and collecting scientific data to create a three-part YouTube series about desert botanicals.

Jerod Foster co-teaches the program, created in 2014 and originally geared toward students interested in working in outdoor media. Today it's offered as an elective to students in all majors, but they must apply and interview for a spot.

"About half the class are folks interested in media production and storytelling, and the other half are folks from engineering, business, arts and humanities who are interested in a unique experience that lets them dive into areas their majors don't let them focus on," Foster says.

The signature experience of each session is a bike backpacking trip during spring break. Last year students biked 150 miles through New Mexico. This year's class pedaled 100 miles through prickly Big Bend Ranch State Park, along the Rio Grande.

"The primary takeaway is for them to get a very real-world taste of what it's like to go into the field as a professional and work through an incredibly intense challenge, then get to the other side and produce a quality project," Foster says. "They grow in confidence and resilience, both physically and mentally. They become a lot more aware of the purpose they are driving themselves toward."

It's something that today's students, whether they realize it or not, are craving, says Foster, who's also a prolific travel and nature photographer. "They want to be pushed out of

their comfort zone. This lets them experience a reality that's not augmented, and that's a precious commodity."

Such programs might look and feel foreign compared to the traditional classroom experience, but—particularly post-pandemic—institutions that are not adopting such immersive, hands-on experiences are getting left behind, Foster says.

"Students learn incredibly well in these settings," he says. "We need more of these things. They're not for everybody. We've had to deal with concussions and crashes. Some of these students have never ridden a bike before this class, and we don't go to adventure-light locations."

But students learn what not to sweat and how to deal with the unexpected.

"They have to be adaptive," Foster says. "We tell them, 'This is not going to go the way you imagined it, and that's OK.' It makes for great experience."

And that, perhaps, is the most important lesson of all.





PHOTOS COURTESY JERROD FOSTER

# GETTING OFF-CAMPUS

## Other outdoor adventure programming at Texas universities:

**Baylor University's** Outdoor Adventure Living-Learning Community offers a for-credit adventure sport class that includes climbing, mountain biking and outdoor living.

**Texas A&M University** offers about 15 climbing, paddling, hiking and camping trips each year through its Outdoor Adventures program.

**Texas State University's** mass communication department offers a for-credit Mobile Storytelling in the Outdoors course. Students use smartphones and other mobile tools to produce video and social content.

**The University of Texas'** Outdoor Recreation program offers trips each semester. Past excursions have included canoeing Buffalo National River in Arkansas and backpacking in Hawaii.

## UPHILL ONE WAY

**A**t Southwestern, 82 students applied for the Kilimanjaro trip. Bargo whittled it down to a dozen, looking for people interested not only in the physical challenge but those who wanted to learn about other cultures too. It wasn't easy, but ultimately all 12 students reached the summit.

"We had cold rain every day, even though it wasn't rainy season," Bargo says. "They did well as the trip started, but as they passed 14,000 feet, nearly everyone struggled. One of the greatest things was seeing how they rose to the occasion and helped each other."

The students arrived quiet, nervous and unfamiliar with one another but returned talking and laughing. "It gives them a sense of place and community," Bargo says. "It helps them learn who they are and builds perseverance and determination."

For Schlegel, who graduated in May, the adventure marked her first trip overseas.

"I went to Kilimanjaro and saw how big the world truly is," she says. "It was the hardest thing I've ever done."

But besides instilling confidence, it inspired new themes in her artwork.

"I read about how shoes are such a big contributor to our carbon footprint," she says. "I got the idea to cut up old running shoes to use the sole and fabric to imprint onto landscape paintings."

Schlegel gathered pieces of running shoes she found while inching her way up the mountain. The porters often wear shoes given to them by hikers and use them until they fall apart. She dipped those bits of rubber soles—still with dirt on them—into paint and pressed them onto landscapes to imprint a metaphorical carbon footprint onto her paintings.

"It allowed my artwork to carry a totally different meaning, even deeper than it was before," she says. "I realize we need to sustain the things we have for as long as we can and be grateful for all the gear we use and use it sustainably."

Schlegel says she hopes to donate proceeds from some of her Kilimanjaro-inspired work to an organization that supports the porters or an elementary school in Africa.

"My mindset has totally changed after this trip. I have this yearning to give back." ■

# Myth Busting with Geothermal Heat Pumps

by Brian Shaw, Texas Territory Manager  
WaterFurnace

**“Well, you could have a geothermal heat pump, but...”**

**...You Need a Bunch of Land**

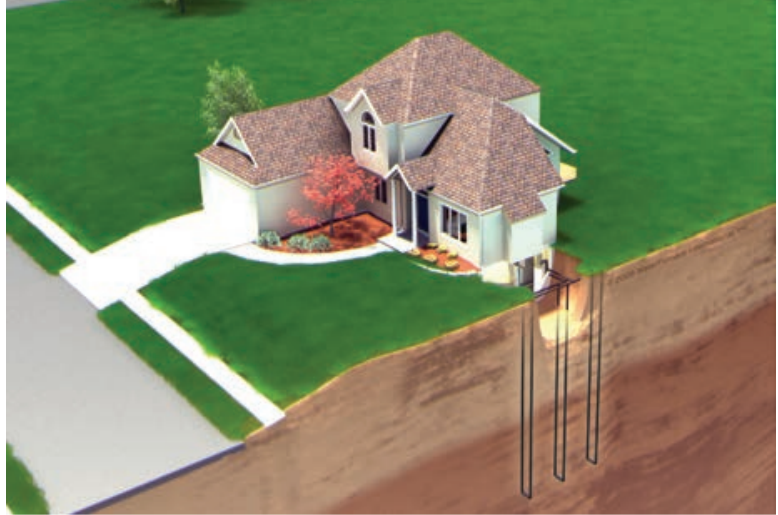
**A**s one old timer put it, “If you have a lawn mower, then I can put in a geo unit.” With numerous options for the underground loop systems, that’s actually true. A vertical loop is often installed under driveways or even 10’ x 10’ patches of ground. There are many other options including using an existing water well, a pond, or if in fact you have more than ½ an acre, a long horizontal ditch is a great solution. If you Google “ground heat exchanger options” you will find a variety of solutions that might work for you.

**...It Isn’t Safe**

Since geothermal heat pumps are 100% electrical, there is no combustion of gas or oil in the home for heating. So, there’s no chance of smelly fumes, explosions, or carbon monoxide poisoning. Because heat pumps are certified by independent laboratories, they include safety cutoff switches for every circuit in the system.



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When using a geothermal unit, about 75% of the heating and cooling energy comes from the earth.

**...Electric Heat is Expensive to Operate**

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**...It’s Too Expensive to Install**

Installing geothermal heating and

cooling for your home or building is an investment, no doubt about it.

Geo system owners quickly realize their systems are saving so much money they are recouping their investments in 5-7 years. With the 30% tax credit and other incentives geo can even cost less than a new boiler or HVAC system to install. When you consider the loop will outlive anyone alive today and the heat pump will deliver twice the useful life of most alternatives, that makes for a much more attractive investment.



State of Texas

MONTHLY AVERAGE<sup>1</sup>

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1. 14.5¢ kWh - June 2024 Texa's Monthly Electricity Rate Average | Actual data powered by Symphony

2. ENERGY STAR rated units qualify for 30% through 2032, 26% through 2033 and 22% through 2034



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## Play It Safe Online

And stay a step ahead of cybercriminals

**NOWADAYS, MOST OF US** don't leave the front door unlocked. We protect our homes, loved ones and valuables from intruders with locks, alarms and other security measures.

Cybersecurity is no different. It's the practice of protecting valuables—your identity, banking and health records, and other sensitive information—from digital attacks and theft.

October is Cybersecurity Awareness Month, a great time to share helpful cybersecurity reminders with our members, especially given our increased reliance on internet-connected devices and gadgets.

**There are four important steps to keeping you and your family safe online.**

**1. Implement multifactor authentication** (also known as two-step verification) on your accounts. The additional layer of protection makes it much harder for criminals to access your information. Even if a hacker has your password, they'll still be stopped if multistep verification is enabled.

**2. Update your software.** This is one of the easiest ways to protect your personal data. When downloading a software update, make sure it's coming straight from the company that created it. Beware of fake pop-ups that request urgent down-

loads. Better yet, turn on automatic updates.

**3. Think before you click.**

Most successful cyberattacks start with a phishing email. Don't take the bait when cybercriminals go phishing. Avoid emails or texts that look too good to be true, oddly urgent, poorly crafted or include unusual requests.

**4. Create strong passwords,** using long, unique and complex words or phrases. Consider using a password manager to save time across devices, protect your identity and notify you of potential phishing websites.

### Include Your Kids

Just as you would talk with your children about safety in the physical world, discuss ways to stay safe online.

Help them understand the public nature of the internet. Young people need to know early on that what is shared online stays online and is difficult (if not impossible) to take back.

You guard your money and valuables, so teach your kids to guard their personal information, especially on social networks.

Help your children learn about and use the privacy and security settings on social networks and gaming sites.

### Keeping the Grid Secure

We're doing our share on the cyberfront. Part of offering excellent service is keeping that service secure and reliable.

For your electric cooperative, reliability means repairing wear and tear, upgrading our equipment to withstand storms and severe weather, and using technology and best practices to keep our system secure.

We also work together with co-ops across the country to develop new technologies and infrastructure, learn from each other, and keep the grid's network secure.

While we can't stop a storm or predict every disruption, as a co-op, we do everything we can to keep the lights on and our members protected.

Because if we all do our part, our interconnected world will be safer and more secure for everyone. ■



# 7 Ways To Save on Water Heating

**NEXT TO HEATING** and cooling your home, heating the water your family uses eats up more energy than anything else. Here are several ways to cut down on your use of hot water, which could shave a few bucks off your energy bill.

**Take shorter showers.** Set a timer for four minutes before you hop into the shower. You'll have plenty of time to lather up and rinse off without wasting hot water.

**Wash dishes in the dishwasher instead of by hand.** The dishwasher uses less energy and less water than hand-washing. It also does a better job of sanitizing dishes because it operates at higher temperatures than you typically get with hand-washing.

**Fix leaky faucets.** That tiny drip—even at a rate of one drip per second—can add \$35 per year to your energy bill and waste more than 1,600 gallons of water.

**Wash clothes in cold water.** Most laundry detergents clean clothes just as well in cold or warm water as they do in hot water. Your clothes will get just as clean without the extra energy use.

**Wait until the dishwasher and the clothes washer are full before running them.** The fewer loads you run, the less hot water you'll use.

**Although some households like to set their water heater temperature to 140 degrees,** most families are satisfied with a 120-degree setting, which is much safer.

**Try insulating your water heater tank with an insulating blanket.** Combined with insulating exposed water heater pipes, the effort can increase water temperature 2–4 degrees, according to the Department of Energy. Additionally, insulating pipes helps keep water warmer for when it's delivered to your faucet so you don't have to let it run as long to get warm. ■



RICHARD VILLALON | ISTOCK.COM



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## Electrify Your Cooking

**AN ELECTRIC STOVE** can save you money and offers health benefits, according to the Department of Energy. Here are some reasons you should cook electric.

### Electric cooktops:

Are more energy-efficient and typically cheaper to run because electricity rates are more stable and predictable than gas prices.

Produce zero emissions, improving indoor air quality, whereas gas stoves can release combustion byproducts into your home.

May have a smooth surface that's easier to clean and often come with enhanced safety features, like automatic shut-off timers and child locks.

Typically have longer life spans and require less maintenance.

Don't require as powerful a ventilation system to clear the air.

Can be more affordable than gas ranges and offer styles featuring ceramic coils that are the least expensive.

Can be eligible for rebates that help offset the upfront cost of buying new appliances. ■



# Give friends and family the Best of Texas this holiday season.



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# The Oracle of Bob Wills

Charles R. Townsend made a life out of chronicling the King of Western Swing

BY BILL SANDERSON • ILLUSTRATION BY JULIAN RENTZSCH

**CHARLES R. TOWNSEND** only quit talking about Bob Wills when his own life ended in 2023 in Canyon in the Panhandle. He was 93. As long as the retired American history professor at West Texas A&M University had breath, he taught, chronicled and celebrated Wills and his music.

Townsend wrote the acclaimed 1976 biography *San Antonio Rose: The Life and Music of Bob Wills* and authored the liner notes for Wills' final album, *For the Last Time*, for which Townsend won a Grammy in 1975. Both provided a road map to the life and career of an American original whose Western swing music, pioneered with his Texas Playboys, lit the world with its danceability for five decades. Wills was 70 when he died in 1975.

Townsend's life had been interwoven with Wills' since the mid-1960s, when he began studying and chronicling the musician, who began performing regularly in the late 1920s and formed his Texas Playboys in 1933. Townsend emceed the annual Bob Wills Day celebration in Turkey, Wills' hometown, for 50 years, and at his last throwdown, in 2022, they renamed the outdoor stage in Townsend's honor.

Wills, with his magnetic personality and high, lonesome holler, was as well-known as Coca-Cola in his heyday. *New San Antonio Rose*, one of his greatest hits, released in 1940, echoed through taverns around the world where U.S. servicemen sang along. One Texas boy said he thought it was the national anthem until he left the farm and joined the Army.

Yet a couple of decades later, and despite the Wills mania, Townsend learned the hard way about music pioneer biographies when he landed at West Texas A&M (then West Texas State) in 1967. He was told books about popular music history weren't legitimate.

"I thought they were going to fire me when they learned I was going to write a book on Bob Wills," Townsend said. "That was so far ahead of its time. The history department really looked down on that because it had never been done. And I was called in a time or two, but I had tenure, so I could write the book, and my gosh, look what it's done."

The publisher sold 10,000 copies of the book in six months in 1976.

"At the time it was published, it was the biggest selling book at the University of Illinois Press,"

Townsend said. "I don't say that bragging. It was Bob Wills who sold the book."

Townsend believed that Wills chose him from among other writers for his eclectic musical tastes. "The reason he wanted me to write the book was that he knew he'd have someone to talk music with," Townsend said. "It was the main topic of conversation, and if you tried to change the subject, he'd always come back to music."

Once Wills gave him the go-ahead, Townsend and his wife, Mary, ranged from their home near Palo Duro Canyon State Park to Tulsa and Fort Worth to spend time with Bob and Betty Wills.

Invariably Bob Wills would be listening to music when Townsend walked in the door, maybe admiring Jerry Lee Lewis' piano work or the vocally gracious Patsy Cline, who took a turn on both *New San Antonio Rose* and *Faded Love*.

As the biographer-biographee relationship grew, it evolved into mutual admiration. Wills, who already had suffered one stroke, was warned to expect a second, and that shifted Townsend's thinking.

"I thought, well, one of these days he may have another stroke, and I'd like for him to know what he's going to have in his book," Townsend said. "When I got the book in manuscript, I had each chapter written out in longhand—I went over every chapter with him.

"I went all the way through the book, every chapter, and he listened intently and never said a word. When I got to the end, I said, 'Bob, what do you think?' He said, 'It's 100%.' That's a story that has never been published. I didn't interview him too many times after that. He had his final stroke maybe a year afterward, when we were doing the sessions for Bob Wills' *For the Last Time*."

Those 1973 recording sessions featured Townsend introducing Wills and his Texas Playboys for the LP. The evening after the first day of recording, the album title proved fateful as the King of Western Swing had another stroke, at his Fort Worth residence, putting him in a coma.

"Before he died, he knew what was going to be in his biography," Townsend said. "And I'm so glad he did." ■





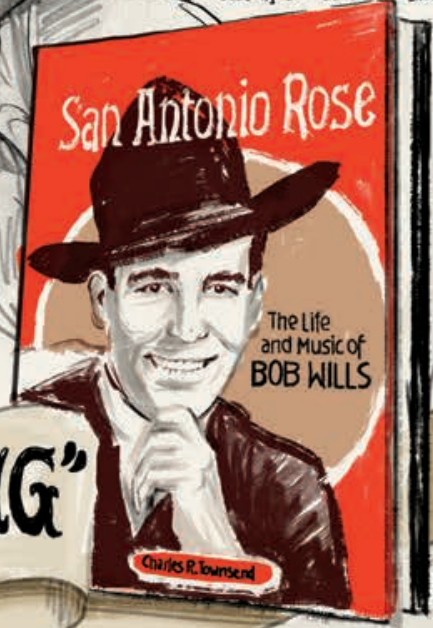
Words & music by Bob Wills



I. Deep with -

there I

the blue up a - bove. A moon-lit



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# The Flapper Bandit

She finally fooled bank employees and briefly absconded with a stack of cash

BY MARTHA DEERINGER

**REBECCA BRADLEY ROGERS** was a 21-year-old graduate student at the University of Texas and a stenographer in the office of the attorney general in December 1926 when she ran out of tuition money.

Rogers had taken a second job working for a professor who handled business affairs for the Texas State Historical Association, but she mismanaged the funds while the professor was on summer vacation and ended up owing \$1,200 (more than \$21,000 in today's money) to TSHA. To make matters worse, Rogers' mother, who had been fired from her job in Fort Worth, moved in with her and was spending Rogers' paychecks freely.

Deep in debt, Rogers decided she had one option to solve her financial woes:

rob a bank.

Her first attempt, which involved setting fire to a house in Round Rock, north of Austin, as a distraction and then hustling into the nearby bank and yelling "fire!" failed. None of the bank's employees raced outside so she could grab cash in the chaos.

She had better success at Farmers National Bank in Buda, south of the capital, the very next day.

A pretty, petite young lady dressed in the distinctive fashion of the Roaring '20s, Rogers posed as a newspaper reporter in the bank lobby, asking questions of customers and recording their responses. Then she asked to use a typewriter in the tellers' cage and, once inside, pulled out a pistol. She locked

two male employees in the safe at gunpoint after grabbing \$1,000 in new \$5 bills, but first she asked politely if they would have enough air to survive for 30 minutes inside the vault.

Alas, someone wrote down Rogers' license number as she drove away with the cash in her Ford Model T. On the way back to Austin, her car got stuck in the mud and had to be pulled out by a passing dairyman and a team of horses. She took the Ford to be washed upon her return to Austin, and when she came back to get it, the sheriff was waiting for her.

Rogers was arrested and thrown in the clink. She was supposedly still wearing her muddy satin slippers.

Secretly married for over a year to Amarillo lawyer Otis Rogers, Rebecca at first denied that she was married but had to fess up when her husband arrived to help with her defense. The Flapper Bandit or Girl Bandit, as newspapers nationwide labeled her, pleaded insanity, but the prosecutor replied, "Insanity is a disease that criminals get when they are caught."

Otis had his wife examined by three psychologists who testified that she suffered from dementia praecox, which makes a patient unable to determine right from wrong. Today dementia praecox is known as schizophrenia. Many sympathized with the pretty young thief, and it was difficult to find jurors willing to participate in her trials.

Her armed robbery and arson trials both ultimately ended in hung juries—after a successful appeal overturned a robbery conviction and then an insanity plea won over enough jurors. After seven years of litigation, Rogers got off scot-free.

She and her husband moved to Fort Worth, where the fame Otis gained during his wife's trials led to a lucrative criminal defense practice. Rebecca, despite her shady dealings with the law, served as his legal secretary. ■



# Pumpkin and Spice

Kick-start your holiday baking with these seasonal treats

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

Indulge in the flavors of fall with this delightful dessert. It combines the moist, spiced richness of pumpkin cake with the sweet crunch of pecans, creating a perfect blend. Ideal for gatherings, this treat brings a festive touch to any occasion.

## Texas Pumpkin Sheet Cake With Candied Pecans

### CAKE

- 2 cups flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon pumpkin pie spice
- 4 eggs
- 2 cups sugar
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 1 can pumpkin purée (15 ounces)

### FROSTING

- 1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened
- 1 package cream cheese (8 ounces), softened
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 3 cups powdered sugar

### CANDIED PECANS

- ½ cup brown sugar
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 tablespoons water
- 1 cup chopped pecans

1. **CAKE:** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Coat a 13-by-18-inch rimmed baking sheet with cooking spray.
2. In a bowl, whisk together flour, baking soda, salt, baking powder, cinnamon and pumpkin pie spice. In another bowl, combine eggs, sugar, vegetable oil and pumpkin purée until fully incorporated. Slowly add the flour mixture, stirring well after each addition, until fully incorporated.
3. Pour the batter onto the prepared baking sheet and spread evenly. Bake 25–30 minutes or until a toothpick inserted comes out clean. Let cool completely.
4. **FROSTING:** Cream together butter and cream cheese in a mixing bowl until light and fluffy. Add vanilla and powdered sugar, and mix until smooth.
5. **CANDIED PECANS:** Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. In a skillet over medium-high heat, combine brown sugar, salt, cinnamon and water. Cook, stirring 1–2 minutes or until the sugar dissolves and the mixture is slightly bubbling.
6. Stir in pecans and cook for an additional 2 minutes, stirring to coat pecans. Remove from heat and spread pecans evenly on parchment paper. Allow to cool completely.
7. Spread frosting evenly over cooled cake and sprinkle with candied pecans.

SERVES 24

**TCP** Follow Vianney Rodriguez as she cooks in Cocina Gris at [sweetlifebake.com](http://sweetlifebake.com), where she features a recipe for Pumpkin Cream Cheese Tamales.





## Pumpkin Praline Pie

BECKY FRASER  
UNITED COOPERATIVE SERVICES

This pie is the perfect addition to your fall baking. The combination of creamy pumpkin filling and a crunchy praline pecan topping creates a symphony of textures and flavors. Try this if you can't decide between a pumpkin pie or pecan pie.

### PIE

- 1 can pumpkin purée (15 ounces)**
- 1 can sweetened condensed milk (14 ounces)**
- 1 egg**
- ½ teaspoon salt**
- ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg**
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger**
- ¾ teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- 1 9-inch frozen pie crust, unbaked**

### CRUMBLE

- ¾ cup pecan halves**
- ½ cup brown sugar**
- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter, at room temperature**

- 1. PIE:** Preheat oven to 375 degrees. In a bowl, stir together pumpkin purée, sweetened condensed milk, egg, salt, nutmeg, ginger and cinnamon. Pour into unbaked pie shell. Place filled pie on a baking sheet and bake 25 minutes.
- 2. CRUMBLE:** While pie bakes, stir together pecans, brown sugar and butter in a bowl until well incorporated.
- 3.** Remove pie from oven and sprinkle crumble over the top. Return pie to oven and bake an additional 30 minutes. Remove from oven and cool completely. Place in fridge and chill 1 hour before serving.

SERVES 8

[MORE RECIPES >](#)

\$500 WINNER

## Cinnamon Streusel Pumpkin Coffee Cake

KIM PRYOR  
FARMERS EC



Great with coffee, this irresistibly delicious cake is sure to become a seasonal favorite.

SERVES 8-10

### STREUSEL

- ½ cup flour**
- ½ cup packed brown sugar**
- ¾ teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- ⅛ teaspoon ground nutmeg**
- ⅛ teaspoon ground cloves**
- ⅛ teaspoon ground ginger**
- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter, melted**
- ¼ cup chopped pecans**



### CAKE

- ½ cup sugar**
- 6 tablespoons (¾ stick) butter, at room temperature**
- ¾ cup pumpkin purée**
- 2 tablespoons milk**
- 2 tablespoons sour cream**
- 1 egg**

- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract**
- 1 cup flour**
- 1¼ teaspoons baking powder**
- 1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon**
- ¾ teaspoon ground nutmeg**
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves**
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger**

### GLAZE

- ¾ cup powdered sugar**
- ½ teaspoon maple extract**
- 1 tablespoon milk, or more as needed**
- Chopped pecans, for garnish**

- 1.** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line a 9-inch round cake pan with a circle of parchment paper in the bottom and coat with cooking spray.
- 2. STREUSEL:** In a bowl, combine all but the pecans, and mix with a fork until all ingredients are incorporated. Set aside.
- 3. CAKE:** In a bowl, beat sugar and butter until light and fluffy, 3–4 minutes. Add pumpkin purée, milk and sour cream, and mix until well incorporated. Add egg and vanilla extract and mix until smooth. In another bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves and ginger. Add dry ingredients to batter and mix until smooth.
- 4.** Spread half the cake batter in the bottom of the prepared cake pan. Top batter with about half the streusel mixture. Spread remaining cake batter over streusel. Sprinkle chopped pecans and remaining streusel over the top of the cake batter.
- 5.** Bake 24–26 minutes or until a toothpick inserted comes out with only a few crumbs. Remove cake from oven and allow to cool in the pan about 5 minutes. Remove to finish cooling on a cooling rack.
- 6. GLAZE:** Combine powdered sugar, maple extract and milk in a small bowl and whisk until smooth. You can always add a little more milk or sugar, if needed. Drizzle the glaze over the coffee cake. Garnish with chopped pecans.

## \$500 Recipe Contest

**PIES, PIES, PIES** DUE OCTOBER 10

We hated math until we learned about Pi Day (3/14). Celebrate with us by sharing your favorite pie recipe, and you just might be adding \$500 to your name. Enter by October 10.



## Pumpkin Cornbread With Whipped Cinnamon Honey Butter

PAM KINKEMA  
UNITED COOPERATIVE SERVICES

This seasonal twist on classic cornbread features the rich, earthy flavors of pumpkin and a light, fluffy texture. Topped with creamy, spiced honey butter, it's a great addition to any meal, offering warmth and comfort in every bite.

### CORNBREAD

1 cup flour  
1 cup cornmeal  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
½ teaspoon baking soda  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon  
½ teaspoon ground ginger  
¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg  
¼ teaspoon ground cloves  
½ cup light brown sugar  
4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter, melted



1 cup canned pumpkin purée (15 ounces)  
½ cup sour cream  
2 eggs

### CINNAMON HONEY BUTTER

½ cup (1 stick) butter  
⅓ cup honey  
¼ cup powdered sugar  
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1. CORNBREAD: Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Coat an 8-by-8-inch baking dish

with cooking spray.

2. In a bowl, whisk together flour, cornmeal, baking powder, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg and cloves. Make a well in center of flour mixture and set aside.

3. In a separate bowl, stir together brown sugar, melted butter and pumpkin purée. Add in sour cream and eggs, and stir until well blended. Pour mixture into well of flour mixture and fold until just combined and no streaks of flour remain.

4. Spread batter in an even layer in prepared pan. Bake 25–30 minutes, until toothpick inserted comes out clean. Cool slightly on wire rack, then cut into squares.

5. CINNAMON HONEY BUTTER: Whip butter with mixer until smooth. Add honey, powdered sugar and cinnamon, and mix on low speed until combined, then increase to high speed and whip until light and fluffy.

6. Serve bread with whipped butter.

SERVES 9

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[divinitybydave.etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com/shop/divinitybydave)





COURTESY CHET GARNER

## Dragons Not Included

Newman's Castle near Bellville puts visitors in a real-life fairy tale

BY CHET GARNER

**LIKE MANY YOUNG** boys, I grew up pretending to be a medieval knight, fighting dragons and rescuing damsels in distress. My castle was usually a cardboard box or a pile of couch cushions. Mike Newman had the same boyhood fantasies but was brave enough to turn them into a royal reality.

Nestled in the woods outside of Bellville, a town of about 4,200 residents about an hour west of Houston, lies the architectural wonder known as Newman's Castle. Newman started the project in 1998, and over the next decade, the local baker personally constructed the castle that would make any fairy tale king jealous. There's a moat and fortified walls protecting the place Newman built as his private home powered by San Bernard Electric Cooperative.

Sadly, the hero of our tale died in March, but his castle is still open for tours, which can be reserved by calling Newman's Bakery. My tour started at the Bellville bakery, followed by a group caravan to the castle, where we were given wooden swords and knighted into the king's court. After crossing the moat, I was tasked with raising the drawbridge by running inside a human-sized hamster wheel. I immediately regretted the extra kolach I had eaten on the drive over.

Once inside the walls, we toured the chapel, ate in the banquet hall and climbed to the top of the 60-foot bell tower. We even got to try out the castle's dungeon of medieval torture devices, including a mythical iron maiden, stocks and a bed of nails. As the grand finale, we launched stones at imaginary dragons using a massive historically accurate trebuchet.

It felt like a real trip into the depths of Newman's ingenuity. His lasting legacy helps us realize that the make-believe doesn't always have to stay in our imagination. ■

ABOVE Chet, left, and the late Mike Newman at Newman's Castle.

**TCP** See the castle for yourself with the video on our website. Find all his Texplorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



## Know Before You Go

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

## OCTOBER

10

**Corsicana Bellamy Brothers**, (903) 874-7792, corsicanapalace.com

11

**Grapevine Barn Dance**, (817) 410-3185, grapevinetexasusa.com

12

**Burnet Texas State Button Society Fall Workshop & Sale**, (214) 808-5610, texasstatebuttonociety.com

**Corsicana Airsho**, (903) 654-4847, coyotesquadron.org

**Granbury Monarch Fest**, (817) 326-6005, actonnaturecenter.org

**Luling Night in Old Luling**, facebook.com/nightinoldluling 2022

**McKinney Halloween at the Heard**, (972) 562-5566, heardmuseum.org

**Chappell Hill [12-13] Scarecrow Festival**, (979) 836-6033, chappellhillhistoricalsociety.com

**Edom [12-13] Art Festival**, (903) 258-5192, edomarts.com

16

**Corpus Christi Lobster Feast**, (361) 883-8405, corpuschristi seamenscenter.org

18

**Fairfield [18-19] Big T Memorial State Championship BBQ Cookoff**, bigtmemorial cookoff@gmail.com, goldencircletx.com

**Levelland [18-19] Petticoats on the Prairie Premier Vintage Market**, (806) 894-4161, facebook.com/petticoatsontheprairie



**Woodville [18-19] Harvest Festival**, (409) 283-2272, heritage-village.org

**Brenham [18-20] Texas Arts and Music Festival**, (979) 337-7580, texasartsandmusicfestival.com

19

**Giddings Cars & Coffee**, (979) 542-3455, giddingstx.com

**New Braunfels Dia de los Muertos Festival**, (830) 625-2385, nbchamber.com

**Fayetteville [19-20] Lickskillet Days**, (979) 378-2800, greaterfayettevillechamber.org

25

**Brenham [25-26] heARTfest**, (979) 836-7248, facebook.com/heartfestbrenham

26

**Sanger Sellabration**, (940) 222-9440, sangertexas.com

**Weatherford Fall Fling Car, Truck and Motorcycle Show**, parkercountycruisers.com

**Granbury [26-27] Harvest Moon Festival of the Arts**, (682) 936-4550, granburysquare.com

31

**Levelland Trunk or Treat**, (806) 894-9079, downtownlevelland.com

## NOVEMBER

1

**Oakville Dobie Dichos**, (361) 319-3067, dobedichos.com

**Ingram [1-3] Texas Arts and Crafts Fair**, (830) 367-5121, txartsandcraftsfair.com

### TCP Submit Your Event

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



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### FESTIVAL DATES

Saturday, October 19, 2024  
W.G. JONES STATE FOREST  
Saturday, April 26, 2025  
I.D. FAIRCHILD STATE FOREST  
Coming Fall 2025  
E.O. SIECKE STATE FOREST



DETAILS AT  
tfsweb.tamu.edu/StateForest100.aspx



# STRENGTH OF THE WEST

## Men's Turquoise Bracelet



Impressively Sized Genuine  
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Genuine Black  
Leather

## Capturing the Proud Heritage of AMERICA'S WILD WEST

This black genuine leather bracelet is hand-crafted of solid stainless steel and ion-plated 24K-gold accents, and features an impressively sized genuine turquoise cabochon at the center. One of the oldest stones known to man, and used extensively in jewelry from America's Southwest, it makes a strong statement along with the images of American bison.

The turquoise center stone is surrounded by a raised twisted rope design along with impressive scrollwork accents. On either side of the turquoise stone, you'll find masterfully sculpted images of the majestic bison on a black ion-plated background also framed by a raised twisted rope border. Decorative Western-style art motifs honoring the American

West complete the distinctive look. Adding to the meaning and value, the words "Strength of the West," are boldly etched on the back. A magnetic clasp allows for easy wear and it's designed to fit most wrists.

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# Climbing High

There are lots of reasons to climb high: to get a better view, to reach something in need of repair or simply to prove to oneself that it can be done. This month, let's crane our necks and see who has scrambled their way to the top.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ

**1** KAYLE GRAHAM  
TRI-COUNTY EC

"My dog, Cooper, and I love to hike. We always try to find a really high rock to climb and enjoy the views."

**2** NICKI KLEIN  
BLUEBONNET EC

Colorado River climber.

**3** MEAGAN BENAVIDES  
NUECES EC

"DJ climbs a pole as he competes for his chance to join the NEC rodeo team."

**4** GUYNA POLASEK  
GVEC

"Just had it set up and wanted a closer look."



## Upcoming Contests

- DUE OCT 10** I Love
- DUE NOV 10** Small Spaces
- DUE DEC 10** Characters



Enter online at [TexasCoopPower.com/contests](https://TexasCoopPower.com/contests).

**TCP** See Focus on Texas on our website for many more Climbing High photos from readers.





## There's No Party Like La Pitada

After a Cowboys win, the biggest grassroots celebration is way down south

BY W.F. STRONG  
PHOTO BY ERICH SCHLEGEL

MORE THAN 500 miles from AT&T Stadium, there's a Dallas Cowboys tradition that's unlike any other. You might expect it in Dallas or Arlington, but to find it in a Brownsville neighborhood, in far South Texas, is surprising, loud and heartwarming. It's called La Pitada.

The name means "the honking." After every Cowboys victory, hundreds of vehicles and a few thousand people hit Southmost Road in a cacophony of honking, whistling, music and victorious *gritos* (shouts). It's a moving feast, a mobile tailgate, an impromptu parade—a sacred rite of celebration for the Cowboys faithful.

Fans drive slowly, honking vigorously, windows down, collectively expressing their joy. And to make it all the more joyful, taquerias fill the air with the scent of their aromatic spices.

I went to a recent *pitada* with photographer and friend Erich Schlegel so that he could capture the display of chaotic bliss for *Texas Co-op Power*. He took photos like a combat photographer while I held the light, risking our lives in the middle of the street for the perfect shot.

I like that there is no official organization behind La Pitada. There's nothing top-down about it. It's a grassroots tradition, of the people, by the people and for the people.

All that's needed is a Cowboys win. As soon as that happens, *la gente* jump into whatever vehicle is handy—including hot-rods and low-riders—wearing Cowboys hats, caps or helmets and take off with window flags flapping.

Some kids stand up through sunroofs, waving pennants. Pickups mount 6-foot Cowboys flags that billow to full length. Motorcyclists, sometimes with faux Cowboys cheerleaders riding behind them, rev their engines. There's even a house along the route painted in silver and blue.

La Pitada is raucous but peaceful. Celebratory whistles never cease. "Go Cowboys" is heard often, but the most common mantra uses more colorful verbiage.

La Pitada started in the glory days of the 1990s when the Cowboys won three Super Bowls. In the late '70s, the Cowboys came to be known as America's Team, but they also became Mexico's team after Spanish-language broadcasts of the games aired in Mexico. It helped that the Cowboys for decades had kickers with roots in Mexico and soccer: Efen Herrera, Rafael Septién and Danny Villanueva.

Southmost is an old immigrant community where Spanish is the first language of the majority of people. They have strong familial ties to Mexico.

If the Cowboys ever win the Super Bowl again, La Pitada that day will be legendary. Might just be bigger than Dallas! ■



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