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December 2026



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ON THE COVER
Food Editor Vianney Rodriguez and her mother, Rafaela Martinez, assemble tamales, as they have for decades: together.
Photo by Jason David Page
ABOVE
Jerry Sims shapes the cab of a toy semitruck in his shop near Amarillo.
Photo by Anna Mazurek



Christmas at Dawn

YOU'LL SEE PORCELAIN Nativity scenes almost everywhere you look this month. Veronica and Kevin Koliba own some of those, but they also have a Christmas scene made of auto parts. That'll make you hit the brakes.

The Kolibas, members of Victoria Electric Cooperative, have collected some 800 Nativity scenes, which they share with visitors to the Red Barn in Port Lavaca during the holidays.

Veronica says her favorite response to the astonishing collection is, "It just isn't your grandma's Nativity exhibit."

Certainly not. The Kolibas hunt for unique displays, and that's why you'll see characters made of pasta (above), pinto beans and dish soap bottles in addition to the more venerable ceramics and wood carvings.

The Annual Nativity Exhibit returns December 4–6, 11–13 and 18–20.

Big Mama Unleashed



Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, a musician in 1950s Houston, was a headliner on the Chitlin' Circuit, a series of venues throughout the South, East Coast and Upper Midwest that provided safe spaces for African American audiences and hundreds of performers during segregation and Jim Crow.

Thornton—born 100 years ago this month, December 11, 1926, in Alabama—made the original recording of *Hound Dog* in her raw, throaty voice. She was paid $500.

Three years later, Elvis Presley had a hit with the song on his way to great fame and fortune. You can find Thornton's version on YouTube.



TCP Contests and More

$500 RECIPE CONTEST
Salsa

FOCUS ON TEXAS PHOTOS
Country Churches

ENTER ONLINE

RECOMMENDED READING
We took you to tamaladas in the Rio Grande Valley in 2019. Check out *The Call of the Tamalada* on our website for more on this tasty tradition.

FINISH THIS SENTENCE

My favorite holiday tradition is . . .

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 responses to our October prompt: **My favorite Halloween costume was . . .**

Flannel pajamas with black cats on it our grandmother got us.
JANE PATTERSON
BOWIE-CASS EC
TEXARKANA

Tin Man using aluminum foil.
GLADYS POLASEK
FAYETTE EC
LA GRANGE

A giant Bayer aspirin tablet. My parents always said I was a big pain!
RAYMOND PAHLER
COSERV
AUBREY

A Nabisco Spoonman costume worn by three siblings before me and three siblings after me.
MIKE WEBER
UNITED COOPERATIVE SERVICES
GRANBURY

Visit our website to see more responses.

PASTA NATIVITY: COURTESY VERONICA KOLIBA. SALSA: BAIBAZ | DREAMSTIME.COM



CHRIS BURROWS

OCTOBER 2026 'That's What We Do'

"What a touching and inspiring story—with a beautifully shot video. The elder talking in Q'eqchi illustrates the gap between Texas and Yalicar that this project bridged."

CARLOS RUMBAUT
PEDERNALES EC
CEDAR PARK

Bridging Worlds

God bless the Guatemala delegation who went and gave of their time and talent to make a life-changing difference in the lives of so many good, poor people [*'That's What We Do,'* October 2026].

Douglas Fater
Fayette EC
Hallettsville

I grew up in Guatemala, albeit under very different circumstances from the people of Yalicar. A big thanks to the linemen who took the time and made the effort to make this happen.

Fernando Urrutia
CoServ
Flower Mound

What a great mission. I served in the Peace Corps in Guatemala during the mid-'90s, and I know how appreciative the Guatemalans can be.

Brad Bianucci
United Cooperative Services
Granbury



ERICH SCHLEGEL

Gulf Shrimping

I find local, wild-caught shrimp to have a sweet taste [*An Old Salt and a Seafaring Diva*, October 2026]. But farm-raised shrimp, regardless of origin, often are fed a diet composed of vegetation. This gives them the taste of crushed lettuce or algae, or no more taste than plain gelatin.

Keep on trawling, Capt. Kunz.

Mary Wicksten
Bryan Texas Utilities
Bryan

EDITOR'S NOTE: We were sad to learn that Capt. Jerome "Pops" Kunz, the shrimper featured in our story, died October 12. He was 93.

Accentuate the Positive

I love this article and am having it framed [*Steinbeck's Texas*, October 2026]. I think I have read all of John Steinbeck's books.

One of my many favorite parts of W.F. Strong's article is how Steinbeck's wife has virtually no Texas accent until she talks to a Texan and reverts to pronouncing yes, air, hair and guess with two syllables: "yayus, ayer, hayer and gayus."

Terry Topham
Bandera EC
Boerne

TCP WRITE TO US
letters@TexasCoopPower.com

Editor, Texas Co-op Power
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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The family holiday tradition that is as extraordinarily rigorous as it is rewarding

A Tamalada's Embrace





BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ
PHOTOS BY JASON DAVID PAGE

As a *cocinera*, no other holiday tradition fills me with so much happiness, pride and other emotions as our annual *tamalada*.

The smells that fill my *cocina* (kitchen) while making dozens of tamales—meat stewing on the stovetop, freshly mixed masa, soaking husks and flavorful steam from huge pots of pozole—simply embrace me.

This sensory experience fills my heart, as do gratefulness for being surrounded by *familia*, pride in everything those who came before me—especially my *abuelita*—accomplished and hope for the next generation. I cry during the planning process, I cry during the prep and I cry at least a dozen times during our tamalada, a time-honored gathering to make large batches of tamales.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Vianney Rodriguez and her mother, Rafaela Martinez, embrace at their annual tamalada. Four generations join the tamalada assembly line in Driscoll, near Corpus Christi. A pot full of steaming tamales.

A dish from Central America and Mexico that dates back more than 10,000 years, tamales have persisted as a food for all seasons. In my house and many others, they feed our souls.

Join my family as we gather to spread, fill, fold and steam dozen after dozen tamales, all while we laugh, cry, share stories and photos, take pictures, and sing. We busy our fingers, young and old, in a treasured ritual using a recipe that has been in our family for three generations.

Just know that a tamalada is a marathon, *pero* a very, very fun marathon. You gather with family and friends and huddle around the kitchen. Everyone has an assigned task for the next 4–6 hours. Get children, who I hope will keep this tradition alive, involved as much as they're willing to help.

It is heavy on labor but loaded with conversation, tequila, connection, tears and song. Sometimes tensions arise, but at the end of the day, when the first bite of a freshly steamed tamale hits your tongue, all is forgiven, all is forgotten.

I have had the honor of hosting our tamalada for the past 10 years. I love hosting, but it entails a ton of preparation, weeks of planning and plenty of willing hands to pull this off.

At first it scared—well, it scared something out of me. The first year there were a few bumps in the process. I didn't make enough fillings for all the masa we made. Another year we ran out of husks midday, and we had to rush from store to store to get more.

Last year my dishwasher exploded, and the entire kitchen flooded. It was a mess. But we fixed the pipe, mopped the floor and kept on with our work.

Whatever might go wrong, our reward is unforgettable—fresh tamales straight from the pot. Piping hot, with a sprinkle of salt. *Delicioso*.

From start to finish, a tamalada can take anywhere from 10 to 12 hours, depending on how many you make, how much you have prepped and how many helping hands join the effort.

Instead of thinking about all the work this entails, think of it as the perfect opportunity to intimately connect with family and friends. While keeping quite busy and drinking way too much coffee, we partake in plenty of *chisme* (gossip) and even resolve a few arguments.

My abuelita is no longer with us, so her photo as well as those of others we have lost along the way are placed in the cocina. That way, everyone is here, together. Abuelita guides us, watching her daughter and granddaughter pass along the tradition of the tamalada.



Plan and Prep

I create my menu a few weeks before the tamalada, including the food I plan to serve. You'll be there all day, so be prepared to feed guests and have plenty of snacks on hand.

I also plan my cocktail list because after a few hours of making tamales, a drink keeps everyone motivated. Music is a must-have. Create a playlist and have everyone add their favorite songs. One year we had a musical guest sing my mami's favorite songs while we ate.

I recommend plenty of disposable tableware, napkins and fresh fruit for the kids.

First, I make the food for the day. I always make two types of pozole, red and green. I also whip up a few baked treats. Then I begin working on the fillings: pork, meat and chicken plus a few meatless options. Guests can help by bringing a filling.

Everyone also brings homemade treats to add to the table with my baked goods. We always have a variety of empanadas, cookies, brownies or bars.

Making Masa

I find making the masa, the dough, is the most time-consuming part of the tamalada. I prepare mine a day or two in advance.

Here in South Texas, masa can be found fresh-made daily. It's seasoned with spices and ready to use. Or you can buy it unseasoned and add your spices and chile sauce to customize it according to your family's recipe.

Every familia has its own tricks, tips and rhythm when making masa. This is a pivotal step that took me a few years to become comfortable with. My mami was by my side year after year until I gained my confidence. I can't tell you how many times she walked me through the process over the phone when I lived far from home.

Find the base masa that works best for you. I have used them all and continue to experiment with them.

To test whether masa is ready for spreading, drop a dollop in a glass of cold water. If it floats, you're ready to spread. If it sinks, add more lard and continue mixing.

Ready the Husks

The night before your tamalada, soak your husks. You want them clean, free from all threads, dust and dirt. They should be pliable and ready to take on all that delicious masa.

I use big coolers for soaking, weighing the husks down with a heavy pot or *molcajete* so they don't float back to the surface.

Place husks in and pour hot water over them until submerged. Buy a little more than you think you will need, and do not throw away the little scraps. Place those over your tamales in the pot to help during the steaming process.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Masa gets spread on soaked corn husks before the filling is added. Vianney's family continues a tradition that she began when she was a little girl. Rafaela places raw tamales and some extra corn husks into a pot in preparation for steaming. Rogelio, Vianney's husband, places the first pot of tamales on the stove to steam.



Gather Round

Create a flow and assembly line when making your tamales. I prefer to spread the masa on the husks; my older sister prefers to fill and fold.

This is where I suggest you invite the children to join you. Explain each step of the process and how they can participate. Don't worry if they make a mess or if the smaller kids lose interest quickly.

Focus on sharing this tradition with each passing year and trust they will remember the process and participate more in the future.

The Reward

Now comes the steaming. This can take an hour or two, depending on the size of the steamer. You can tell the tamales are ready when the masa begins to pull away from the husk.

It's then that I put the first tamale on a plate for my mami, the matriarch. Everyone watches, somewhat anxiously, hoping for approval, as she takes the first bite. "They're delicious. Let's eat."

Just like my abuelita 30 years ago: "*Está sabroso. Vamos a comer.*" ■

TCP Want to try Vianney's tamales? She shares her recipe on our website. This QR code delivers it from her cocina to yours.



BY KRISTEN TRIBE • PHOTOS BY ANNA MAZUREK

WORKING WONDERS



Jerry Sims' Panhandle workshop fulfills the Christmas wishes of tiny farmers and ranchers





After the Christmas Eve dinner dishes were cleared, toy maker Jerry Sims gave a subtle nod to his teenage sons, Wesley and Wyatt. They slipped out of the house, and in the blink of an eye, piled all sorts of farm and ranch toys in the back of Jerry's pickup for their annual Yuletide delivery.

With no reindeer in sight, Jerry started the pickup and eased toward the town of Happy, an undeniable twinkle in his eye.

"(Dad would) shut his headlights off when we got close to a house," Wyatt says. "He wouldn't turn in anyone's driveway, so we'd grab the toys from the back, haul tail to the house, drop the toys on the front porch, and haul tail back out there and jump in the pickup.

"Sometimes it was a long run," he continues with a laugh, "but we never got caught. We'd be out until 3 or 4 a.m."

Most of those deliveries were gifts to friends and neighbors, and as the sun started to rise on Christmas Day, Wyatt says Jerry's phone would "blow up" with messages of surprise and thanks.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Jerry Sims in front of the 31 customized hydraulic presses he built to shape metal toys. The first truck Jerry made for his son 27 years ago. Finished pickup trucks.



Jerry, 62, founded the Happy Toy Maker more than 20 years ago, the name a nod to his rural hometown south of Amarillo, and his handmade heirloom farm and ranch toys have topped kids' Christmas lists ever since. Each vehicle and piece of equipment is a scale replica with working parts, enabling little cowboys and cowgirls to set up and run an operation just like mom and dad.

His own boys were following in their father's bootsteps when one year their Christmas wish list included a blue doctoring chute. That toy sparked a business idea and inspired a collection that now includes pickups, semi-trucks, trailers, arenas, corrals, fence panels, dozens of accessories, people and animals.

"Dad had a feedlot at the house, and we were always out there helping him process cattle," says Wesley, now 31, of Lake Placid, Florida. "He had a processing tub, a chute and a snake, and we wanted one just like his."

Jerry set to work and made a chute out of wood. He says it's all the boys played with, so when Wyatt's birthday rolled around the next year, Jerry built a wheel corral for each of them to expand their setup.

"The boys are 18 months apart, and it was hard to give something to one and not the other … so they basically had two birthdays every year," he says with a chuckle.



Every time Jerry built or bought a piece of equipment for himself, the boys wanted one of their own. Wyatt, now 29 and living just north of Happy, in Canyon, remembers that when his dad built a large Quonset barn, he also built a smaller version where they could store their toys.

"He cut a culvert in half and put it on a big piece of wood, so we could pull all our toys in there," Wyatt says. "It was big enough that we could crawl inside.

"To have something just like dad's is always cool for little boys."

The toys resonated with other kids, too, and often the Sims' porch was packed with little ones—friends and neighbors—who would sit and play for hours. Unable to find anything like it in stores, parents hounded Jerry to make and sell the toys, a prospect that coincided with a serious health issue.

"Jerry had a lung that collapsed, and the doctor told him, 'Get out of that feedlot,' " his wife, Patrice, says. This was the push he needed to start building toys full time.

The first year he made one type—the wheel corral—and sold 47.

TALKING SHOP

Today the lineup includes more than 130 designs. Made of metal, all the vehicles and pieces of farm equipment are constructed in Jerry's workshop in Happy, where he is a member of Swisher Electric Cooperative, and sold on his website and at agricultural trade shows and rodeos.

Jerry has no formal training; he says he can simply "look at something and build it." Although he's found ways to automate a few of the steps through the years, production remains largely a handmade process with each toy requiring hours of labor.

"So let's take the little pickup from start to finish," Jerry says of his No. 1 seller. "You'll touch that pickup 117 times."

The work becomes especially frenzied heading into the Christmas season, when almost every order includes requests specifying color and personalization, adding steps to an already labor-intensive process.

"I'll get a random call at 2 in the morning: 'My kid just told me that they want one of your toys with their name on it. We didn't even know you existed,' " Jerry says. "We have a lot of that."





OPPOSITE FROM TOP Hours of labor go into each handmade truck. Metal that Jerry will shape into fenders for a belly-dump trailer

THIS PAGE Patrice, Jerry's wife, pours two-part resin into molds to create toy livestock and humans.

Jerry, who never leaves the shop before 1 or 2 a.m., has just one employee, but he recruits high school kids to work when they can.

"I love these kids coming," he says. "We've had kids out here for years. We're teaching them how to weld, grind, sandblast and paint, giving them shop experience."

Jerry's first helpers were his own boys, who learned how to run computer-aided design software before they were teenagers and later taught their dad how to use the program.

"We spent a lot of time out there after school and on weekends, drawing stuff on the computer, painting everything and helping get stuff shipped," Wesley says. "Wyatt did a lot of the welding. Dad built a lot of hydraulic presses that would bend the pieces, so we'd go bend a lot of parts for him, too."

Wyatt, who's now a horse dentist, says he loves to tell people: "Little do you know, I was an elf in my past life, and I worked in Santa's workshop."

Jerry's mother, Patricia Sims, and his wife, Patrice, are also instrumental. His mother paints a lot of the toys and works diligently behind the scenes, organizing orders, tracking payments and keeping everyone well fed.

Patrice handcrafts all the people and animals. Made from polyresin plastic, the figures are flexible but still sturdy enough to withstand rough play. She first carves figures out of clay and then uses that form to create a mold.

"The first one we made was a bull," Patrice says. "We made bulls for a while, and then the kids were like, 'Well, but I need a cow.' You got a bull; you gotta have a cow. Then we needed horses, and it just kind of grew from there."

MADE WITH LOVE

Wyatt says one of his dad's goals is to build toys that not only encourage kids to use their imaginations but also learn how something works.

"My dad's real big on agriculture and trying to grow that," he says. "That's why he's always been so big on everything being realistic and working like (the real thing). If you can build a toy that they play with and love, then it paves the way for them to follow in the footsteps of the family farm."

In further support of the farm, ranch and rodeo communities, the Happy Toy Maker donates at least 50 pickups and trailers to various organizations annually and creates one-of-a-kind items for some events. His toys have raised $250,000 for the Scottish Rite for Children hospital over the past 11 years, and Jerry regularly raffles toys through his social media pages to benefit families in need.

"Every time I look over my shoulder, if there's a family in crisis or need, he auctions toys," says Amy Potter of the Rocking P Ranch in Latham, Kansas, a longtime customer and friend.

Amy and her husband, Chris, first started buying Jerry's toys for their two kids almost 20 years ago at the World Championship Ranch Rodeo in Amarillo, and now their grandkids are playing with those same toys and starting their own collection.

"(Our toys) are now on their second generation," Amy says. "We're still loving it, ordering it and playing with it.

"I'm really sentimental about Jerry, but it's beyond the toys," she says. "When tragedies happen, Jerry's the first guy to give you a hug."

She says Jerry seemed especially touched when they brought their grandson by his booth at the championship rodeo for the first time.

"He had such a sparkle in his eye watching our grandson crawl all over those trucks," she says. "There's not a better soul than Jerry. He is the real-life Santa Claus." ■

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44	11.58	9.73	15.67	14.10	25	22	41	34
45	12.17	10.15	16.86	15.16	28	24	45	38
46	12.84	10.64	17.85	15.83	30	25	49	40
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51	15.37	13.75	25.30	20.65	45	35	78	62
52	16.36	14.87	27.63	22.13	49	38	87	67
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55	20.70	17.50	37.13	27.85	67	50	121	90
56	22.69	19.48	42.01	31.07	74	53	138	96
57	24.69	20.63	45.81	33.43	81	58	150	107

MONTHLY RATES

Issue Age	$100,000		$250,000		$500,000*		$1,000,000*	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
58	27.70	21.98	50.43	36.04	89	62	169	116
59	30.37	23.51	55.50	38.76	98	67	186	126
60	33.49	24.28	60.76	41.71	109	73	206	136
61	36.49	25.09	66.43	47.10	122	83	236	154
62	39.88	27.91	73.90	51.32	136	92	262	166
63	43.69	34.01	81.54	57.25	153	102	287	187
64	47.91	38.28	90.20	62.32	170	112	323	200
65	52.81	40.88	100.33	68.23	191	125	361	223
66	58.71	44.61	114.29	75.40	211	135	392	242
67	64.59	49.08	125.27	83.64	234	146	436	261
68	72.24	59.65	143.07	105.55	254	173	485	322
69	79.34	64.22	158.23	129.28	288	188	547	352
70	86.85	68.11	177.24	147.66	318	203	595	375
71	102.45	82.60	203.10	159.34	374	235	702	443
72	113.68	93.16	232.46	172.23	427	272	807	512
73	127.55	106.68	267.15	188.15	493	319	937	596
74	142.08	119.36	303.50	204.84	562	367	1074	685
75	159.25	140.48	346.45	224.56	644	424	1235	789
76	200.03	168.51	418.29	276.67	785	530	1489	982
77	249.54	216.74	505.52	339.94	956	658	1797	1215
78	310.70	268.40	613.27	418.11	1167	817	2179	1504
79	374.78	322.52	726.16	500.00	1389	983	2578	1807
80	450.50	386.47	816.15	596.78	1625	1180	3050	2164

* $500,000 and $1,000,000 monthly rates are rounded up to the nearest dollar. Therefore, actual monthly rates at $500,000 and $1,000,000 may be slightly less.

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NATALIA LEBEDINSKAIA | GETTY IMAGES

Another List Worth Checking Twice

SANTA WILL BE checking his list this month, and maybe we should take a cue from him when it comes to preparing for power outages.

Your electric cooperative works hard to keep the lights on in all conditions. But severe weather, like a winter storm, occasionally can mean the power goes out—no matter what we do.

Prepare now by making a checklist for navigating outages.

When the lights go out, your first step should be checking your breaker box to find out if there is a wider outage or an isolated problem with your home. If it's wet outside, be careful and make sure your hands and clothes are dry before touching the breaker box.

Also check if your neighbors are without power. If the whole neighborhood is dark, you're likely dealing with a wider outage.

Once you're sure it's an outage, the next item on your checklist should be reporting the outage to your electric cooperative.

During an outage, remain aware of your surroundings, watching for downed power lines. Report downed lines to the co-op.

Next, unplug any electrical equipment you can and turn off most lights. This will protect your devices from surges or spikes when the power comes back on. Leaving one light turned on can immediately alert you when power is restored.

Consider your food storage. While the power is out, keep fridge and freezer doors closed as much as possible. The more times you open these doors, the faster food will spoil. A full freezer can stay frozen for about 48 hours while a half-full one can last about 24. A full fridge can keep cold about four hours.

If you decide to use a portable generator, plug devices directly into the generator. For a whole-home generator that connects to your electric system, contact an expert to ensure it connects safely. An improperly connected generator can dangerously backfeed electricity, putting lineworkers' lives at risk.

Before an outage happens, put together a kit with emergency supplies. The American Red Cross recommends these items for an emergency kit:

- Water—1 gallon per person, per day (three-day supply for evacuation, two-week supply for home)
- Food—nonperishable, easy-to-prepare items
- Flashlight (Don't use candles during a power outage due to the risk of fire.)
- Battery-powered or hand-crank radio (a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration weather radio, if possible)
- Extra batteries
- First-aid kit, medications (a seven-day supply) and medical items
- Multipurpose tool
- Sanitation and personal hygiene items
- Copies of personal documents (medication list and pertinent medical information, deed/lease to home, birth certificates, insurance policies)
- Cellphone with chargers
- Family and emergency contact information

Power outages are generally rare and brief, but a little preparation can help you stay safe when they do occur. ■

Space Heater or Electric Blanket: Which Is Right for You?

ON A CHILLY winter night, it's tempting to reach for a portable space heater to ward off the cold. And if you're looking to heat a small space for a limited time, a space heater could use less power than using central heat to warm your whole house.

But before you plug one in, it pays to understand the hidden energy cost on your monthly bill—and what other options are out there.

A standard plug-in space heater typically pulls around 1,500 watts of power. If you run one for eight hours a night, while sleeping, it can add significantly to your power bill by the end of the month.

An electric blanket, on the other hand, operates using a fraction of that energy. Most modern electric heating blankets draw only 50–200 watts, depending on the size.

By heating your bed directly rather than attempting to warm the air in an entire room, you get the same cozy comfort while using roughly 90% less electricity.

If every bedroom in your house needs heating, those energy savings stack up even more.

If you do choose to use a space heater, always follow fundamental electrical safety rules.

Plug space heaters directly into a wall outlet rather than an extension cord or power strip, which can overheat under heavy electrical loads. Turn them off whenever you leave the room or go to sleep.

But keep safety in mind with electric blankets too. Look for models with the ability to automatically shut off after a set amount of time, and check wires for signs of wear and tear. ■



FREER LAW | GETTY IMAGES



DON NICHOLS

Power Back On Safely

WHEN YOU LOSE power, a portable generator can provide electricity to keep your home warm and power appliances. However, used improperly, a generator can present serious hazards.

Before using a generator, read the instructions and specifications. It should have more capacity than the combined wattage of the electronics you plan to plug into it. Make sure nothing is plugged into the generator when starting it up.

Never connect a portable generator directly to home wiring. This can result in potentially deadly backfeed, when electricity gets fed back through the electrical system and meter into power lines, creating a hazard to lineworkers and others near downed lines.

Never use a portable generator indoors. Carbon monoxide emissions can be deadly. Operate the generator outside in an open but protected space from which fumes can dissipate harmlessly.

Install a carbon monoxide detector, and watch for the signs of CO poisoning. Symptoms include dizziness, nausea, headaches and lethargy. If you or someone else is showing these symptoms, move into fresh air and seek medical attention.

To check that it's working properly and will be ready if you need it, run your generator once a month for 10 minutes. ■



ICE ISN'T ALWAYS NICE

Although much of the state is unaccustomed to snow and ice, temperatures can fall below freezing even in South Texas, potentially causing power outages.

PHOTO: PHOTOS.COM

Follow these tips to keep your family safe and comfortable during a power outage:

Report any outages.

Turn off electrical appliances that were operating at the time the power went off. Leave one light on so you'll know when service has been restored.

Keep warm by closing off rooms you don't need and use only safe sources of heat, like a wood stove. Do not burn charcoal indoors. If you operate lanterns or fuel-fired cook stoves or heaters, make sure that you have adequate ventilation.

Don't drive unless absolutely necessary until conditions improve. If you must drive, go slowly.

Your electric cooperative encourages you to always practice safety.



Beachcombing at home.

Texas Co-op Power presents an illustrated *Seashells of Texas* poster by artist Aletha St. Romain, 20x16 inches, suitable for framing.

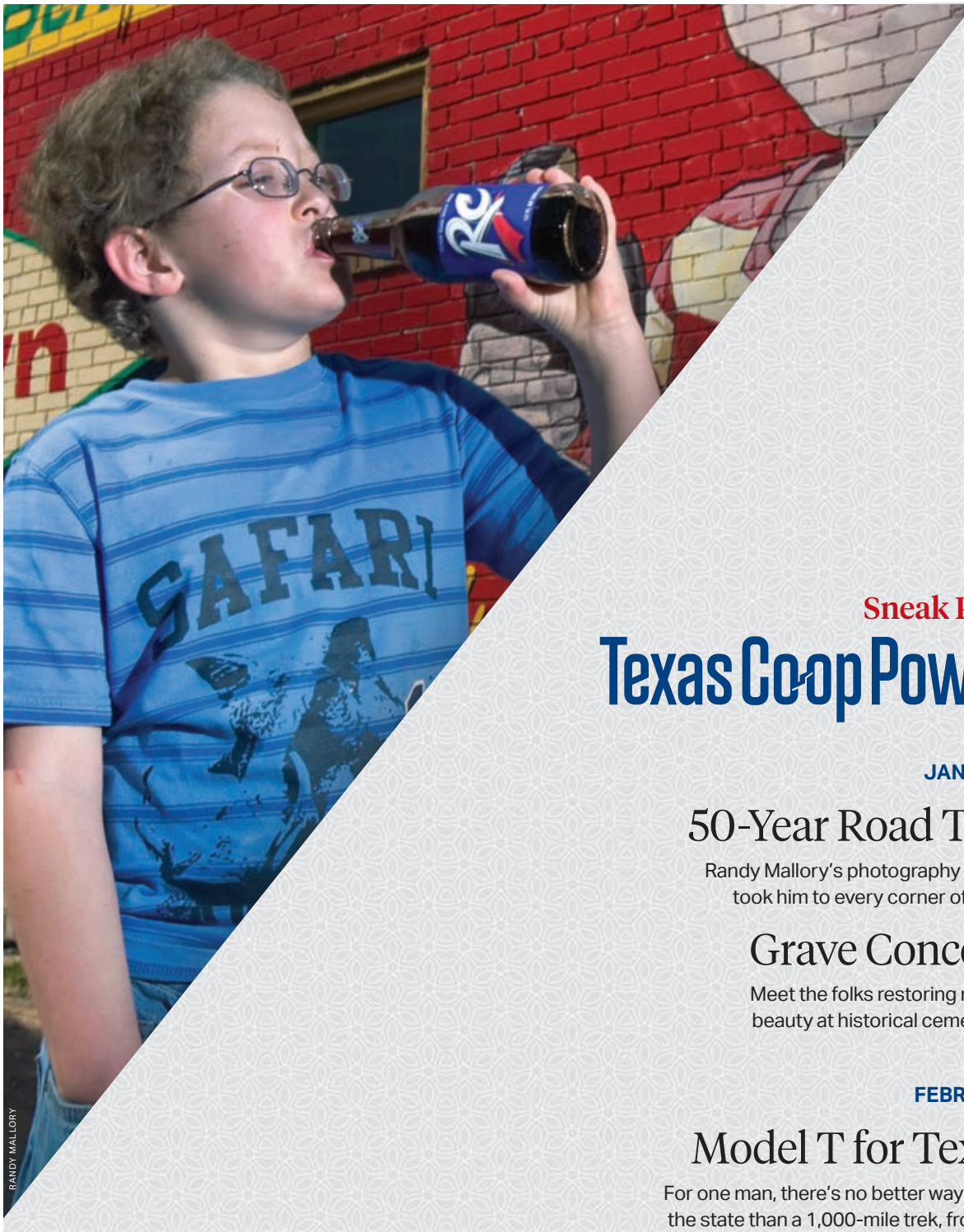
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Stories Fit for a Frame

Prolific painter Greg Doster has a tale for each of his thousands of works

BY MOLLIE KASPER • PHOTO BY R.J. HINKLE

GREG DOSTER POINTS to his artwork and says, "Let me show you some stories."

His paintings adorn every wall of the North Texas home in Kaufman he shares with his wife, Venetia, and are stacked in corners in the bedrooms. He estimates he has created 3,000–4,000 watercolors, oils and acrylics in the 50-plus years he has been honing his craft, although he has painted full time only since his retirement in 2017.

He is very particular about what he calls this endeavor.

"Art is my passion," Doster declares. "Not a hobby." But for him, art isn't just about aesthetics; it's a vehicle for storytelling.

A native of North Louisiana, Doster began painting soon after high school. He earned a degree in architecture from Louisiana Tech University. From there, his varied career included a city planning office, 10 years at the Federal Reserve, head of land maintenance at the planned Superconducting Super Collider near Waxahachie and director of real estate for Verizon.

Doster dismisses all of this labor with a wave of a hand. "Different story, different world." During those years, Doster refined his painting skills in the evenings and on weekends, taking lessons from artists Jerry Nelson Haynes and Bud Biggs.

Perhaps his greatest influence, however, is Zoltan Szabo, a Canadian watercolor artist. Doster studied Szabo's work intensely, and a row of books by the artist lines a shelf in Doster's studio.

Doster's work encompasses a variety of styles, but he considers *Kentucky Derby 2018—Justify at the End* his signature piece. Currently on display at Lone Star Park, a racetrack in Grand Prairie, the oil painting illustrates the finish of the race with Justify ahead by a nose.

From left to right, the image moves from abstract to concrete, from black and white to color.

"I had this idea of capturing a scene within a painting that generally defines the word 'clarity' in a sports realm," Doster says. "This happens when hard work, talent, discipline and some luck come together at the same moment."

Each horse in the painting represents a specific, real-life thoroughbred. Doster studied more than 150 images of racing champions and took three years to create the 4-by-8-foot masterpiece.

One painting, *A Beautiful Walk*, tells part of Doster's own story.

In 1993, Doster, Venetia and their two small children were driving to a birthday party when a young motorist crossed the center line and hit them head-on. The motorist was killed, and Doster suffered 15 broken bones, including a leg, both hips and both arms.

The accident thrust Doster into "a lot of troubling times." While still trying to climb out of the emotional depths, he learned that a distant relative had died in a farming accident. Though he didn't know the man well, he still felt the loss and created the painting, which features a path through the fall woods.

Longtime friend Pam Rogers, who has purchased several prints, was particularly moved by this piece. "His paintings are so beautiful and have so much meaning for anybody that takes the time to let them resonate," she says.

The accident also inspired the painting *Fireman's Touch*. A volunteer fire chief was the first on the scene that fateful day in 1993. To thank the emergency personnel, Doster created the painting, which features a firefighter reaching toward a young girl, a representation of community and innocence.

More recently, Doster lost his brother to cancer. To work through his feelings, he rendered *An Empty Chair*. Prominently displayed in this acrylic painting is a wooden chair, illuminated by light streaming through an open window. A pair of tennis shoes sits at the base of the chair.

"His earthly spirit within me had to leave, so I opened the window, which left an empty chair," Doster says. "Those shoes will be hard to fill."

At 75, Doster keeps "the lever on full blast." He still paints and still shows his work.

"You can have somebody else mow your grass and move this, do that," he says, but then, "you have convinced yourself that you're old. I just have to say I've been in a process. I haven't arrived yet. If I've got another opportunity to create some more work, that's what I'm going to do."

There are more stories to paint.

"But it's not my story, it's your story. I want the painting I do to make you remember something about who you are," he says. "And I just pray to God to give me something else to paint." ■



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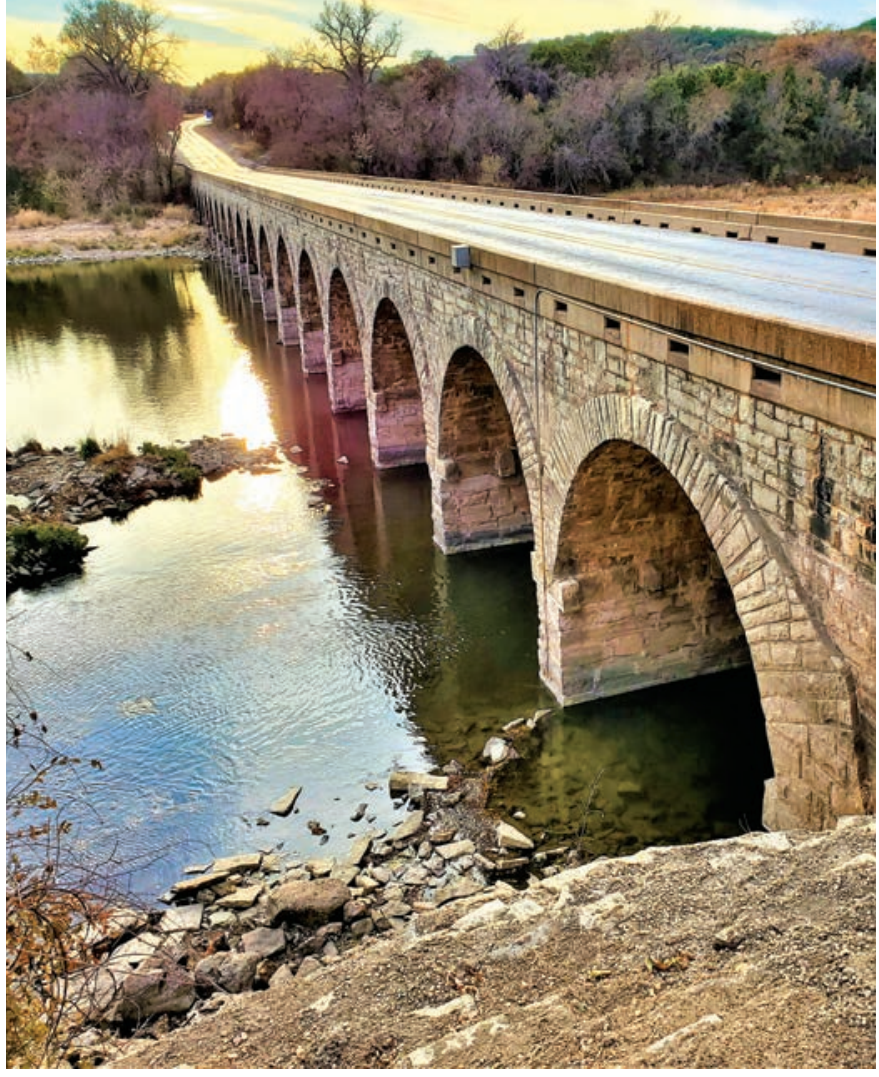
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SCAN TO BUY



Kingdom's Arches

Ancient engineering and Texas workmanship combine in a beautiful bridge

BY KEVIN D. VANDUSER • PHOTO BY JAMES SPRINGER

MOST DRIVERS ON State Highway 16 likely don't even realize it as they whiz over the Brazos River on their way to Possum Kingdom Lake in North Texas. And locals like me take it for granted when we cross the structure.

But there's a marvel of history and engineering holding up this roadway—the longest stone arch bridge in Texas.

The Possum Kingdom Stone Arch Bridge used a keystone arch design perfected by the ancient Romans. The Work Projects Administration completed the bridge in 1942, designed to withstand floodwaters released from the Morris Sheppard Dam, about a mile upriver.

Workers were brought in and returned home on converted cattle trucks. Most of the more than 300 workers were unemployed coal miners from the Mingus, Strawn and Thurber areas who had experience cutting stone.

Sand and gravel for the bridge's mortar and concrete came from the riverbed near the site. Lumber and other materials left over from the dam construction were used for form boards, temporary bracing and scaffolding.

The design of the structure uses a special wedge-shaped stone to lock in place all other stones in the arch to convey heavy weight along the curves to the hard, gray sandstone bedrock. Abutments keep the bottom sections from sliding apart.

The bridge is 433 feet, 4 inches long and contains more than 7,200 cubic yards of local limestone with 18 arches spanning 23–30 feet each. Areas inside the stone framework are filled with layers of compacted soil.

An unimproved access area by the bridge is a popular launch point for canoers and kayakers embarking on a journey down one of the most scenic sections of the Brazos River. The Texas Legislature created the John Graves Scenic Riverway in 2005 to ensure water quality by bringing greater oversight to keep quarries and industrial activities from degrading the river. The riverway begins below the dam and extends about 116 river miles, nearly to Lake Granbury.

It's a favorite site for fishing, wading, bird and wildlife watching, and picnicking. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department stocks the river with rainbow trout from December to February. Catfish, bass and sunfish can also be caught. Large striped bass have been caught in designated areas below the dam, a popular spot for fly-fishers.

The flowing waters and rocky riffles in the river below the bridge are perfect habitat for the harmless Brazos water snake, a threatened species found only in this region.

An 8.4-mile section of State Highway 16, including the stone arch bridge, has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Texas historian T. Lindsay Baker included the bridge in his book, *Building the Lone Star: An Illustrated Guide to Historic Sites*. Elsewhere, Baker has named it as one of the 100 most interesting and historic engineering examples. "It's an extraordinary bridge," he said. "I would call it spectacular."

The bridge and its surroundings occupy a special place in Texas history, enduring the test of time. Our obligation is to enjoy and maintain it by leaving no trace and preserving the site for future Texans and visitors. ■

Holiday Traditions

Add an entrée, app and desserts to your seasonal favorites

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

In my house, the holidays are not the holidays without flautas! Flautas are rolled tacos fried until golden and crispy. Their name is said to hail from the Spanish word for flute, and they can be found in most restaurants throughout Mexico. Mine are filled with juicy shredded chicken for a quick and easy dinner.

Chicken Flautas

2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts or thighs
½ medium yellow onion
1 sliced medium tomato, plus chopped tomato for garnish
2 cloves garlic
2 teaspoons kosher salt
1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1 teaspoon ground cumin
16 corn tortillas
Toothpicks
Vegetable oil
Shredded lettuce, for serving
Crema, for serving
Queso fresco, crumbled, for serving

1. To a large pot or stock pot, add chicken, onion, sliced tomato, garlic, salt, pepper and cumin. Add enough water to completely cover chicken by 1 inch. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat and simmer until chicken is fully cooked and fork-tender, about 20–30 minutes.

2. Transfer chicken to a cutting board. Shred with 2 forks and set aside.

3. Warm tortillas on a comal over medium heat until pliable. Or stack tortillas on a plate and cover with a damp towel and microwave until pliable, 10–15 seconds.

4. Spoon a portion of chicken onto a tortilla. Roll tortilla up tightly and secure with a toothpick so the filling does not fall out during frying. Place on a plate and repeat with remaining tortillas.

5. Add 2 inches of oil to a Dutch oven. Heat over medium-high heat until oil reaches 375 degrees.

6. Preheat oven to 200 degrees. Using tongs and working in batches of 4, carefully place flautas into the oil and fry until golden-brown and crispy, flipping halfway through, 2–4 minutes total. Transfer flautas to a baking sheet and keep warm in oven until all flautas have been fried.

7. Serve warm with lettuce, crema, chopped tomato and queso fresco.

MAKES 16 FLAUTAS

TCP Follow Vianney Rodriguez as she cooks in Cocina Gris at sweetlifebake.com, where she features a recipe for Blackberry Coconut Tamales with Lime Glaze.



Holiday Sausage Roll-Ups

BRENDA MAYTUM
BANDERA EC

Three simple ingredients create this crowd-pleaser! Maytum serves these as an appetizer on Christmas Eve and any leftovers with breakfast on Christmas morning. I plan to add these roll-ups to my holiday app list. They are delicious—and I foresee no leftovers!

1 pound spicy pork breakfast sausage
1 package cream cheese (8 ounces), softened
2 cans crescent roll dough (8 count each)

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper.

2. In a large skillet over medium-high heat, cook sausage, breaking it up with a spoon, until fully cooked. Drain.

3. In a large bowl, combine sausage and cream cheese. Stir to thoroughly combine.

4. Spread 1 can crescent dough in 1 piece onto a large sheet of parchment paper. Pinch perforations together, and use a rolling pin to roll sheet of dough into a 10-by-12-inch rectangle. Repeat process with second can of dough.

5. Spread half of the sausage mixture onto each dough sheet, leaving approximately a 1-inch margin on each edge. Using the parchment paper to help with rolling, begin on the long side of each dough sheet and roll up as tightly as you can. Seal the rolled dough roll by pressing the clean edge into the roll. Refrigerate rolled dough 15 minutes.

6. Using a sharp knife, cut rolls into

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28 >

RECIPE PHOTOS: JASON DAVID PAGE. WINNER PHOTO: COURTESY KATHY ICENOGLE



$500 WINNER

Cream Cheese Pie

KATHY ICENOGLE
PEDERNALES EC



Never have I ever topped a pie with a sweet sour cream mixture, but, wow, was I pleasantly surprised how delicious this fuss-free pie is. And it's so simple to make using a store-bought graham cracker crust.

PIE

2 packages cream cheese (8 ounces each), softened
¾ cup sugar
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
2 eggs, lightly beaten
½ tablespoon lemon juice
1 graham cracker pie crust (9 inches)

TOPPING

1 cup sour cream
3½ tablespoons sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1. PIE Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a large bowl, beat cream cheese, sugar and vanilla on medium speed until smooth. Add eggs and lemon juice. Beat until just incorporated.

2. Pour cream cheese mixture into graham cracker crust. Bake 20–25 minutes or until firm when moved and starting to show cracks toward the edges. Remove from oven and let cool 5 minutes.

3. TOPPING In a small bowl, stir together sour cream, sugar and vanilla. Pour over top of cooked pie, return to oven and bake 10 additional minutes.

4. Allow to cool. Refrigerate at least 5 hours before serving.

SERVES 8

TCP *$500 Recipe Contest*

SALSA DUE DEC 10
Time to turn the heat on. We have chips but we need your best salsa. We'll run the top entries in the May issue, and the winner gets $500.
C'MON OVER DUE JAN 10

ENTER ONLINE

1-inch-thick discs. Place discs on lined baking sheets. Bake 15–20 minutes or until lightly browned. Serve warm or at room temperature.

SERVES 8

Love Cookies

LISA BORTNER
BLUEBONNET EC

Bortner's husband shared this recipe with her when they met. It was a cherished childhood recipe his mother made every Christmas. Over the years, it has become one of their most beloved holiday traditions. Warm from the oven and drizzled with an orange glaze, these cookies taste of pure L-O-V-E. I was instantly enamored.

2 cups flour
½ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon baking powder



1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 cup plus 3 tablespoons water, divided use
½ cup (1 stick) butter
1 cup chopped raisins
1 cup sugar
½ cup chopped nuts
½ cup powdered sugar
1 small orange, zested and juiced

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Grease and flour a 9-by-13-inch baking pan.

2. In a bowl, sift together flour, salt, baking powder and cinnamon.

3. In another bowl, whisk together baking soda and 3 tablespoons water until baking soda dissolves. In a large saucepan, combine remaining 1 cup water, butter, raisins and sugar. Bring to a boil over high heat, then reduce heat to simmer and cook 5 more minutes. Remove from heat and stir in baking soda mixture. Add flour mixture and nuts and stir to combine.

4. Spread batter into prepared pan. Bake 15–20 minutes or until a toothpick inserted comes out clean.

5. In another bowl, combine powdered sugar and 1 teaspoon orange zest. Slowly whisk in 1 tablespoon orange juice until smooth. Add additional juice as needed until glaze reaches pourable consistency.

6. Coat cookies in glaze. Slice cookies into triangles to serve.

MAKES 1 DOZEN COOKIES



HOLIDAY GIFT TCP GUIDE

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COURTESY CHET GARNER

Cisco's Sinister Santa

Little more than stories remain of a small town's desperate bank heist

BY CHET GARNER

ON DECEMBER 23, 1927, Santa Claus walked into the First National Bank of Cisco looking for more than cookies. He wanted cold, hard cash, and what followed became one of the most infamous bank robberies in Texas history.

I traveled to this small town about 45 miles east of Abilene to find where this Christmas crime unfolded.

It took me a while to realize that the old bank is now a vacant auto parts store on Conrad Hilton Boulevard (named for the hotel magnate who bought his first inn down the street). As I read the building's historical marker, the strange and tragic events of that day began to take shape.

It was Christmas Eve eve, and downtown Cisco must have been bustling with last-minute shoppers when Marshall Ratliff, a convicted bank robber dressed as Santa, strolled toward the bank with excited children following behind. But before he could hear any Christmas wishes, Ratliff and his band of four not-so-merry elves pulled guns and ordered bank employees to fill Santa's sack. A customer escaped, the alarm spread, and within minutes police officers and armed citizens surrounded the bank.

The robbers fought their way outside, grabbed hostages and attempted to flee, only to discover their getaway car was low on fuel and had a tire shot out. Wounded and desperate, they abandoned the loot—including more than $12,000 in cash—and the hostages before escaping on foot and triggering one of the largest manhunts in Texas history. Within days, the robbers were captured. The final toll was six dead and eight injured.

Travelers can head to Eastland, about 10 miles east of Cisco, to learn more at the Eastland County Museum and visit the old jail connected to Ratliff's grim final chapter. It is a Christmas tale unlikely to become a holiday classic—and proof that even Santa can land on the naughty list. ■

ABOVE Chet re-creates Cisco's bank heist, which turned tragic almost as soon as the robbers pulled their guns.

TCP Watch the video on our website and see all of Chet's 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.

DECEMBER

1

Goldthwaite [1–31] Lights and Luminarias, (325) 648-2750, legacyplaza.org

3

Palestine [3–6, 9–13, 15–16, 18–23, 26–28] The Polar Express Train Ride, (855) 632-7729, texasstaterailroad.net

4

Carrollton [4–7] Community Nativity Celebration, (214) 868-9868, thecommunitynativity.com

Port Lavaca [4–6, 11–13, 18–20] Annual Nativity Exhibit, (361) 935-8032, bit.ly/nativity_exhibit

5

Palestine [5–6, 12–13, 18–20] Grinch's Lair, (903) 373-7384, txjailhouse.com

7

Grapevine Merry & Bright Drone Show, (817) 410-3185, grapevinetexasusa.com

10

Corsicana *Dean Lives: Dean Martin Story Christmas Special,* (903) 874-7792, corsicanapalace.com

Fort Worth [10–13] *Sister's Christmas Catechism,* (817) 212-4280, basshall.com

11

Bastrop Rendezvous Gala, (512) 303-0904, bastropcountyhistoricalsociety.com

12

Burnet **Christmas on the Square,** (512) 756-4297, burnetchamber.org

Eagle Lake **Christmas Lighted Parade,** (979) 234-2780, visiteaglelake.com

Goldthwaite **Pop-up Beading Workshop With Raven Price-Smith,** (325) 648-2750, legacyplaza.org

Grapevine **Victorian Christmas at Nash Farm,** (817) 410-3185, grapevinetexasusa.com

Mason **Los Texmaniacs,** (325) 347-9010, theodeontheater.com

Montgomery **Christmas in Historic Montgomery,** (936) 597-4360, mhs-tx.org

Sabine Pass **A Very Marshy Christmas,** (409) 971-2559, visitportarthurtx.com

15

El Campo **Blessing Cup Trim-a-Tree Food Drive Contest,** (979) 543-8203, facebook.com/blessingcupstorehouse

19

Bastrop **Caroling Tour on Main,** (512) 303-0904, bastropcountyhistoricalsociety.com

Fairfield **Jingle All the Way,** (903) 389-5792, fairfieldtexaschamber.com

31

Fredericksburg **New Year's Eve Ball Drop,** (830) 997-4202, fbgtx.org

JANUARY

2

Wimberley **Polar Bear Plunge & 5K,** (512) 660-9111, wimberleyparksandrec.com

TCP *Submit Your Event*

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

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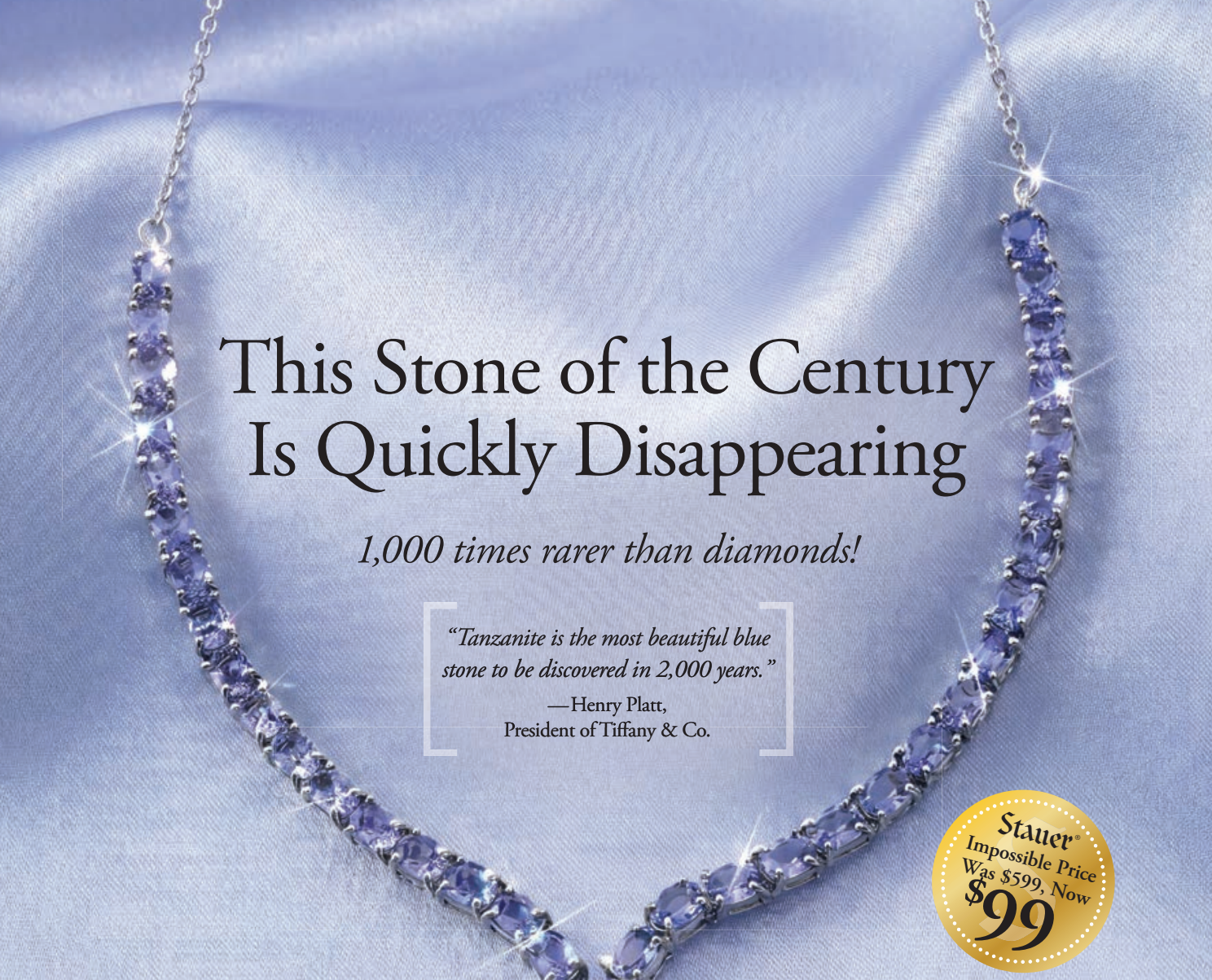
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Christmas Fails

Santa's going to need a little help from his elves and all the holiday cheer you can spare to wrangle these young'uns. Sometimes the festivities don't go according to plan. Thankfully, mom's there to snap a photo when it all goes south.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ







1 MARSHA PADILLA
BLUEBONNET EC
"Who forgot the stockings?"

2 CHERYL BERAN
VICTORIA EC
"When visiting my 3-year-old granddaughter in Odessa last December, her mother and I attempted to take her to a photo shoot with Santa."

3 ARNOLD CATES
JASPER-NEWTON EC
"First came the stare, then the tears. Santa held on. Mom kept snapping pictures, and memories were made anyway."

4 CRIS PETERSON
PEDERNALES EC
"My 1-year-old grandson did not enjoy his first encounter with Santa, even with all the support of his cousins."



Upcoming Contests

COUNTRY CHURCHES DUE DEC 10
REPETITION DUE JAN 10
AROUND THE RANCH DUE FEB 10

ENTER ONLINE

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



I Didn't Know Beans

A mother's secret shame was her son's private treasure

BY STEVEN VESTAL

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN KACHIK

WHEN I CALLED my mother to ask for her recipe for bean burger sandwiches, the silence on the other end lasted long enough for me to wonder if we'd been disconnected.

Then: "Why?"

Not the warm, nostalgic "why" you'd expect when someone asks about a childhood favorite. This "why" carried the weight of confusion, maybe even a little horror.

"It's one of my favorite memories from childhood," I said, already sensing I'd stumbled into unexpected territory. "I want to make them again."

Another pause. Then my mother's voice, quieter now, caught somewhere between disbelief and amusement: "Honey, we made those because we didn't have ground beef. We made them out of pure necessity."

TCP Scan the QR code or find this story on our website for the recipe.

And just like that, a beloved childhood memory revealed itself to be something else entirely.

She went on, her tone shifting to something almost apologetic. "Your Aunt Tootles—Juanita—she's the one who came up with it. We were broke. Your father was ... well, you remember. We had to make do with whatever was in the pantry."

I did remember. Sort of. But not the way she remembered.

What she recalled as desperation, I remembered as magic.

Growing up, I didn't know we were poor. I knew my father was gone a lot—in and out of places we didn't talk about at the dinner table. I knew the pantry was small, and the choices were limited. I knew my mother's face sometimes looked tired in a way that went deeper than needing sleep.

But I didn't know those things added up to poor.

To me, being poor was something that happened to other people—people in movies or in faraway places. We had a roof, a table and each other. We had Aunt Tootles stopping by with her loud laugh and her knack for turning nothing into something. We had bean burgers.

And bean burgers, to a kid who didn't know any better, were a delicacy.

So here's to the bean burger—impossible, unlikely, born of nothing and somehow unforgettable.

May we all be so lucky to taste love in such unexpected packages. ■



Actual size is 40.6 mm

250 COLLECTION

FIRST-EVER 1776–2026 DUAL-DATED SILVER EAGLE

One-Year-Only, 250th Anniversary Silver Dollar You Need to Own—Most Will Miss Out!

For 40 years, America's Silver Eagle has stood as the world's most collected modern coin. This coin enters a new era of significance this year with an added feature collectors have never seen before. For the first time in the history of the annual series—and the first time in 50 years on any U.S. coin—the 2026-W Silver Eagle Proof bears a true dual date: 1776–2026. This un-precedented feature instantly sets this release apart as the most historic Silver Eagle ever struck. In addition, a one-year-only Liberty Bell 250 privy mark has been added to the design, further elevating it to the upper pantheon of U.S. coins.



A Once-in-a-Generation Opportunity

Some coins mark time. Others make history. The 2026-W American Silver Eagle Proof does both. For people who remember the excitement surrounding dual-dated 1976 Bicentennial coinage, the significance of 2026 needs no explanation. For those new to the scene, this represents an opportunity that won't come again in our lifetimes.

Don't Miss Out on a True Legacy

Even before the official release date of February 26, single 2026-W Proof American Silver Eagles recorded pre-sales of just over 209,000 coins, or about 42% of its stated 500,000 mintage before the coin was even available. The remaining coins from the first allotment have since been sold. While the Mint does intend to strike the remaining authorized mintage, don't run the risk of missing out on acquiring a true legacy for you and your family that will be prized for generations to come.

To add one of these first-ever dual-dated 2026-W American Silver Eagle Proofs with Liberty Bell 250 Privy Mark to your collection, call 1-800-517-6468 to secure yours now.

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