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January 2026



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06 Tiny Dots on a Big Map

Every town in Texas has a story to tell, if you just stop and listen.

*By Carlton Stowers
Illustrations by Elly Walton*

Sites and Insights

Youth Tour sends teens to Washington, D.C., where bonds form and horizons expand.

By Claire Stevens

ON THE COVER
The signs pointing the way to local treasures are everywhere if you pay attention.

Illustration by Elly Walton

ABOVE

From left, Austin Rees, Jolie Cox and Hannah Thetford represent United Cooperative Services at the U.S. Capitol during the 2025 Youth Tour.

Photo by Samantha Bryant / TEC

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As told by Ron Russell to Anna Russell



Strongly Scottish

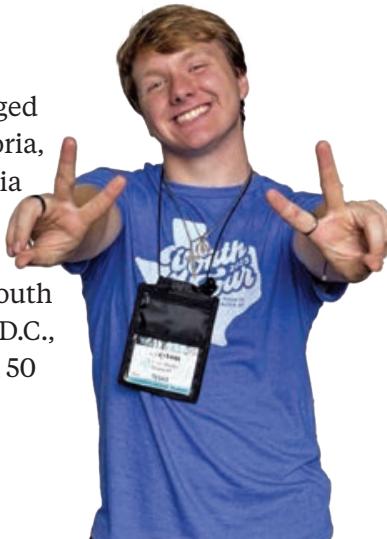
THE OBSERVATIONS ESSAY on Page 34, *Fortune Knocks*, sent us down a rabbit hole about Scots and Scottish traditions, where we learned that Highland games are a hallmark of Scottish gatherings, as are kilts, bagpipes and dancing.

One of the oldest and largest gatherings in Texas takes place every November in Salado, between Waco and Austin. The competitions tend to involve heaving heavy objects, including something called a caber, which looks very much like a power pole. Contestants hold the caber, which can be up to 22 feet long and 200 pounds, upright from the bottom and flip it forward. The goal is for it to land upright then fall forward.

For the record, electric cooperatives prefer their poles remain upright and lodged firmly in the ground.

120,085

The number of steps logged by Layton Shadle of Victoria, right, a delegate of Victoria Electric Cooperative, during his eight-day Government-in-Action Youth Tour trip to Washington, D.C., last June. That's between 50 and 60 miles.



TCP Contests and More

\$500 RECIPE CONTEST

The Art of the Sandwich

FOCUS ON TEXAS PHOTOS

Caught Napping

RECOMMENDED READING

Twenty years ago we looked into the artifacts at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin, including the scrawled words in a reporter's notebook that launched the Watergate investigation. Download the January 2006 issue at TexasCoopPower.com.



ENTER ONLINE

FINISH THIS SENTENCE

I would love to have dinner with ...

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 November prompt: **Changing our clocks twice a year is ...**

Something my dogs just never understand.

JULEY WELCH
GRAYSON-COLLIN EC
FAIRVIEW

An opportunity for me to see the beautiful sunlight an extra hour in the spring and sleep an extra hour in the fall.

CONSUELO M. PEREZ
MEDINA EC
ZAPATA COUNTY

A great reminder to change the batteries in your fire detectors and carbon monoxide detectors.

CATHY MARTEL
SAM HOUSTON EC
LIVINGSTON

About as useless as a screen door on a submarine.

CODY HOOPER
GRAYSON-COLLIN EC
FAIRVIEW

Visit our website to see more responses.



RAUL ARIAS

OCTOBER 2025 On the Dots

“Memories of traveling in the 1950s: My brothers and I took naps but wanted to be awakened to see the polka-dot house in Buna.”

LINDA BELL
CECA
COMANCHE

Good Food, Good Cause

Frito pies have been the gourmet dish of choice in countless Texas stadiums and arenas—chili and chips served on chilly nights by Rotarians, band parents and electric co-op members to raise money for countless important community projects [*It's in the Bag*, September 2025].

Ken Roselle
Wise EC
Decatur

Yodeler's Lore

My dad, born in 1925, and his siblings grew up listening to Jimmie Rodgers [*The Fast Track*, July 2025]. In the '60s, my siblings and I listened to his music on the record player. *T for Texas* comes to mind when I think about those Saturdays and the yodeling we would try to mimic.

Kathy Parker
Pedernales EC
Dripping Springs

My heart sank when the author mentions Cash, Haggard and Tubb and not one mention of Jim Reeves. Reeves was born and raised in Texas. His name carries weight as well.

Carol Racey
Deep East Texas EC
Joaquin

A Tea for Texas

As I told my husband about the interesting *History in a Box* [August 2025], he informed me that he'd visited that very museum years ago. I then immediately remembered the souvenir box that he brought me filled with teas similar to those destroyed.

The information included with the box had the story of the Robinson Half Chest, though it failed to mention the Texas connection.

Ann Fincannon
Pedernales EC
Marble Falls



COURTESY RODGERS FAMILY LEGACY

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.

Texas Co-op Power

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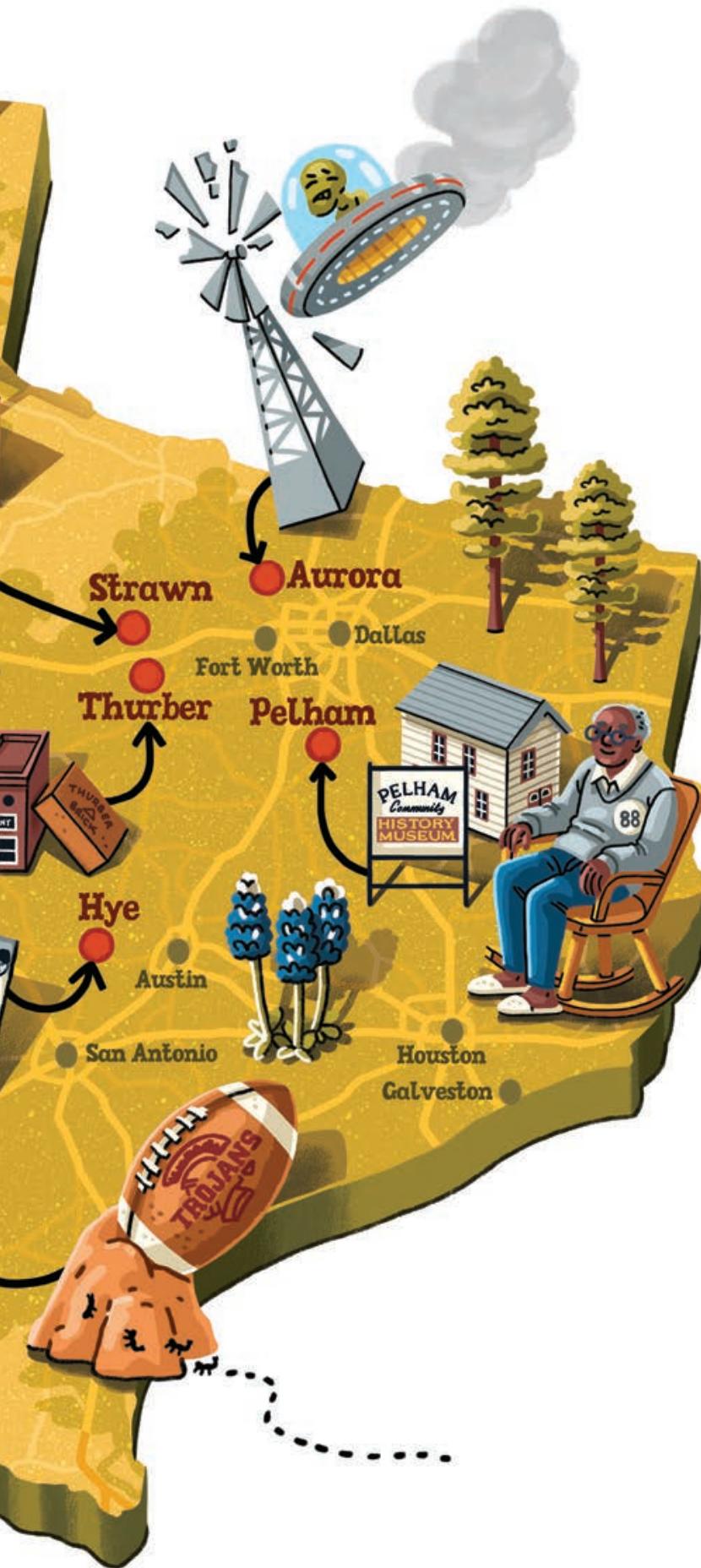


BY CARLTON STOWERS
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLY WALTON

Every town in Texas has a story to tell, if you just stop and listen

Even lifelong Texans haven't heard of many of these towns. They are hidden along isolated country roads, mostly forgotten, without stoplights, traffic jams or shopping malls. Truth be told, they have precious little reason for "being" aside from the fact that those who call them home wouldn't trade for all the big-city comforts you might offer. And they each have stories to tell—colorful, poignant and fascinating.

The following are a few of the favorite stops I've made over the years while wandering the state's back roads in search of yet another tale to tell.



Pelham
Navarro County
Population 35

A FORMER FREEDMEN COMMUNITY

WHEN I MET HIM in 2012, 88-year-old Alfred Martin, the self-appointed town historian, lived across FM 744 from what was once the school he attended as a boy. Aside from the time he spent as a flight line crew member for the legendary Tuskegee Airmen during World War II, this was Martin's home.

He could recall when the state's last remaining all-Black community boasted a grocery, dry goods store, church, post office and a population of more than 300. Pelham even had an amateur baseball team that brought home a state championship.

Asked the current ages of his neighbors, Martin smiled and began pointing in the direction of their houses and counting: "Let's see ... 88, 93, 85 ..." Pelham, he admitted, wasn't likely to make it much longer.

When the Emancipation Proclamation freed the nation's slaves following the Civil War, each Black man in town was given 200 acres to call his own. Fields were cleared and tilled, cotton and grain planted, and new lives thrived.

Now, however, the community's well-tended cemetery is the resting place of the majority of past Pelham residents. The aging memorabilia and family histories housed in the school-turned-museum keep alive the memories of better days.

Hye
Blanco County
Population 100

THE ALL-BROTHERS BASEBALL TEAM

INSIDE THE COMBINED Hye General Store and Post Office, a fading black-and-white photo hangs proudly behind the checkout counter. Nine Deike brothers, dressed in spanking new baseball uniforms, smiling for the camera.

It was snapped during the Depression doldrums when leisure time was as scarce as spending money. An endless routine of work awaited on the farms and at the cotton gin. Only on Sundays did the residents take time off to watch their baseball team play rivals from nearby rural communities.

It was called town ball, and it was generally played on makeshift diamonds carved from pastureland. The preacher would even cut his sermon short so members of his congregation wouldn't miss the first pitch.

Only Hye, 60 miles west of Austin, could field nine players from the same family. Fourteen-year-old Victor was the youngest; brother Edwin, 34, was the oldest. That's not to say they weren't occasionally joined by nonfamily members. Regularly, a lanky first baseman named Lyndon Baines Johnson would drive over from nearby Johnson City.

In 1935, a traveling salesman learned about the Deike brothers and hit on a can't-miss promotional idea. If he could find another all-family team, his Corpus Christi-based Nueces Coffee Co. would promote an exhibition game deciding the All-Brothers Baseball Championship.

Indeed, an opponent was found in Waukegan, Illinois. There, the Stanczak clan had 10 brothers on the same team.

The game would be played in Wichita, Kansas. Provided with their first uniforms and travel expenses, the Deikes made the 14-day trip to Kansas in two Model A Fords. The Stanczaks arrived by bus.

Alas, a perfect ending to the Hye brothers' story wasn't to be. Though they took an early 3-0 lead, the more talented Waukegan team eventually won 11-5. Today, it is their picture on display in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

Still, for the Texas farm boys, it was a time that would long be remembered. A special time, right up there with the day President Johnson came back for a visit to stand in front of Levi Deike's post office and swear in Lawrence O'Brien as the new U.S. postmaster general.



Thurber
Erath County
Population 48

WHEN EVEN THE CIRCUS CAME TO TOWN

IN THE LATE 1800S, Thurber was the most populous town between Fort Worth and El Paso, boasting 10,000 residents. Today, travelers hurrying along Interstate 20 see only a solitary smokestack standing watch over its history.

The only reason to stop is for the home cooking served at Andrea Bennett's red brick Smokestack Restaurant. Inside, the walls are lined with photographs from another time, back when her restaurant was the local mercantile and the townspeople were mining 3,000 tons of bituminous coal and firing 80,000 bricks daily.

Workers and their families came to live in the small frame houses provided by the Texas & Pacific Coal Co. There was a school, a 650-seat opera house, general store, fire station, churches, a weekly newspaper, library, hotel, and a human-made lake for fishing and swimming.

The Thurber baseball team, made up of miners, won the 1896 Texas amateur championship. Each summer a traveling circus came to town.

Thurber bricks were used to build the Galveston seawall and pave many of Fort Worth's early streets. Its coal kept the trains running and homes heated.

Though the exact date isn't official, Thurber died in 1936. The oil boom was the killer, its black gold replacing coal as the nation's favored fuel. The mines began closing, and workers scattered in search of new jobs. The frame houses they had called home were sold off for \$40 each to anyone willing to haul them away.

Now all that remains are the ghost stories, the nostalgic pictures on Bennett's restaurant walls and the nearby 100-year-old town doctor's house where she lives.

O'Donnell
Lynn County
Population 704

WHEN HOSS WAS JUST A COLT

IT IS TRADITION, you know, for small towns to alert passersby to the fact they were once home to somebody famous. Billboards are the favored tool. Even little Abbott had one to remind travelers that it was country music legend Willie Nelson's hometown until, hoping to regain a sense of privacy, he set fire to the sign late one boozy night.

To my dismay the Panhandle community of O'Donnell, just south of Lubbock, had not gotten around to any side-of-the-road celebration of its favorite son.

Back in the *Bonanza* heyday, *TV Guide* expressed interest in learning how this cotton crop way-stop had groomed famed actor Dan Blocker to become the good ol' boy Hoss Cartwright on the popular TV show. I hit the road.

And the townspeople were ever so obliging. Seemed almost everyone I bumped into went to school with Blocker, played football with him, fought with or dated him. Even those who didn't know him firsthand insisted they were faithful viewers of his portrayal of Hoss every Sunday.

Yet friend and farmer Wayne Carroll admitted Blocker's TV role puzzled him. "It's kind of hard to picture Dan on the *Ponderosa*," he said. "Farming and ranching never interested him. He was the guy we all went to for help with our lessons, always studying or reading a book."

His mother, Mary, agreed: "One Christmas we got him a horse and saddle, but he really wasn't interested. After a while, we sold the horse."

When her son didn't have his nose in a book, he worked weekends at his dad's Blocker Grocery & Market. On Friday

nights, he was a standout lineman and kicker for the O'Donnell Eagles. The only kid in town who could lift the rear end of a '47 Plymouth, his strength and size (already 6 feet tall and 200 pounds by age 13) earned him a scholarship to play for what was then Sul Ross State College in Alpine.

Once Blocker earned his degree, his life's goal was to become a teacher. He did teach for a time in high schools in New Mexico. But then Hollywood and the fictional *Ponderosa* beckoned.

Rest assured, Blocker never forgot his roots and came to visit regularly. At the height of his acting career, he even made an appearance at the annual O'Donnell Rodeo. "Biggest crowd we ever had," recalls boyhood pal Bobby Clark.

With the exception of cotton crops, I learned that conversation is O'Donnell's main byproduct. And the easiest way for a stranger to be assured a generous helping of the latter is to bring up the name Dan Blocker.

"There was once some talk about a billboard," Clark says, "but the more we thought about it, the more convinced we were that Dan wouldn't care much for the idea."

Aurora
Wise County
Population 1,390

LONG BEFORE ROSWELL

THE STORY WAS right there on the front page of *The Dallas Morning News* in April 1897, so it had to be true, right?

S. E. Haydon, the paper's longtime correspondent, had written of an "airship" that flew over the North Texas community of Aurora before crashing into Judge Proctor's windmill and exploding. Aluminum-like debris, Haydon wrote, was scattered everywhere, destroying the judge's water tank and ruining his prized flower garden.

Bear in mind, this report was filed a decade before the Wright brothers got their rickety plane off the ground at Kitty Hawk and predated, by half a century, that famous Roswell, New Mexico, report of the ranchland UFO crash that became the gold standard of otherworldly tales.

And the Aurora story got even better. The child-sized pilot of the craft had been killed in the crash, and kind citizens of the community saw to it that he was given a proper burial in the nearby cemetery the following day. The grave was marked by a large rock featuring a quickly sketched image of "a cigar-shaped ship with three circular windows."

Today a historical marker stands at the entrance to the cemetery, recalling the event.

Is the recounting true or false? People have been asking for over a century. Some say Haydon had a habit of telling whoppers when there was no real news to report and he just invented the spaceman's visit.

But as late as 1973, an aviation journalist named Bill Case visited the community and tracked down a 98-year-old local who recalled visiting the crash site as a child, even viewing the "torn-up body" of the spacecraft's pilot.

At the time, the makeshift headstone was still in place. Case even took a picture of it. But soon after his article was published, the marker vanished. Today, no one in Aurora is certain of the exact location of the infamous grave.

Legendary investigative reporter Jim Marrs, who spent his career researching the strange and spooky, says he was, for years, "undecided" on the matter. In time, however, he found the story compelling enough to produce a full-length documentary on the alleged crash.

"What ultimately got me off-center on the matter," he says, "was seeing the actual edition of the paper in which Haydon's story was published. It wasn't even the lead story that day. Among numerous accounts of strange sightings was one from nearby Stephenville, headlined The Great Aerial Wanderer. In all, the newspaper published 16 stories about UFO sightings that day, from as far south as Austin and north into Oklahoma."

Something, he was convinced, really did happen in Aurora.



Strawn
Palo Pinto County
Population 540

MAGIC AT MARY'S CAFE

NEITHER A FOOD CRITIC nor avowed foodie, fine dining and haute cuisine are foreign to my vocabulary. That said, it is my humble opinion that the Michelin Guide folks have missed a bet. Or maybe they just have something against chicken-fried steak.

In the tiny hamlet of Strawn, just 90 minutes southwest of Dallas, is the mother church of the popular comfort food. At Mary's Cafe every day except Thanksgiving and Christmas, the service station-turned-eatery is jam-packed. The gravel parking lot is filled with traveling biker clubs, church groups or a busload of young athletes in search of a post-game meal.

Owner Mary Tretter estimates that over 90% of her customers are from out of town, arriving from as far away as New Mexico, Colorado and Georgia. Some come wearing the Mary's Cafe T-shirts they purchased on a previous visit.

And while the menu is lengthy and varied, it is the king-sized chicken-fried steak with a bowl of cream gravy and a mound of french fries that is most often requested. Annually, Tretter orders over 48,000 pounds of cutlets that are pounded, floured and cooked into her signature dish.

But don't bother asking for the recipe. It is so heavily guarded that she requires her 30 employees to sign a non-disclosure agreement before stepping into her kitchen. All she will admit is that her chicken-fried steaks are cooked on a flat-iron griddle rather than heavily battered and actually fried.

Tretter was 14 when she started working there as a waitress and dishwasher. The place was known as the Polka Dot then and was struggling mightily. The local bank, preparing to take it over, asked Tretter if she might be interested in buying it. At the time she was neither business savvy nor much of a cook but bought the little 89-seat restaurant. That was in 1986.

She changed the name, hired a staff and went to work. In her fourth decade of ownership, seating capacity is 300—and getting a table isn't without a little wait.

And Tretter gives "hands-on" new meaning. She takes Wednesdays off to spend time with her grandkids. The rest of the week she's in the kitchen cooking or out on the floor, greeting customers and taking orders.

"Our goal," she says, "is simple: Fill the plate with good food, make it look nice and keep the customers happy. If they leave here hungry, it's their fault."

Asherton
Dimmit County
Population 722

FLEETING VICTORY

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED the scene in the movie *The Big Chill* when a reporter explains that he'd just been assigned to do a feature on a blind baton twirler. When asked where in the world such story ideas come from, he shrugs and answers, "Just good investigative reporting."

Personally, I prefer the magic of dumb luck.

To wit: I was awaiting a flight home from Houston, reading the sports section of the local paper, when a small item caught my eye. Asherton High School, it noted, had just won its first basketball game in years. The final sentence added that the same school's football team currently owned the nation's longest losing streak.

Two things immediately occurred to me. First, I had to figure out where Asherton was. Second, what publication would be interested in a story on such a historically hapless team?

The editor of *Parade* magazine bit, and I was soon off to deep South Texas. By the time I arrived, the Trojans had lost 40 football games in a row. A few years earlier, they had endured an entire season without scoring a single point.

Yet what I found was light-years from what I'd expected. A migrant worker community, it was virtually deserted since most families had not yet returned home from following the northern harvests.



The school was in disrepair, jagged cracks in its old brick walls, the 500-seat stadium in worse shape. There was little grass and a huge ant bed spread across the 50-yard line. The scoreboard was a hand-me-down, donated by neighboring Carrizo Springs. A 24-year-old teacher, Terry Harlin, who never played the game, had agreed to coach since no one else wanted the job. School officials agreed to add \$600 to his salary for the extra work.

Thus, the story was not one of laughable ineptness but, rather, a courageous quest against impossible odds.

Readers took the plight of the Trojans to heart. Envelopes bearing small donations began arriving from across the nation. A Houston sporting goods company donated shoulder pads and helmets. Inmates of a Georgia prison adopted Asherton as "their team."

And in the first game of the 1972 season, Asherton won, defeating rival Crystal City 12-6. A film crew, dispatched from a Houston TV station, was there to record the historic event.

The cheers, however, didn't last. In 1999 the Texas Education Agency ordered Asherton High to close, citing its troubled history of financial insolvency. The students bade their old school goodbye and enrolled in the nearby Carrizo Springs Independent School District.

• • •

THERE ARE ENDLESS other nifty towns, like Study Butte, home of the last one-room school in Texas; Luckenbach, where legendary owner-mayor Hondo Crouch held court; Terlingua and its annual chili cook-off; and Cisco, where Conrad Hilton bought his first hotel and Santa Claus robbed the bank.

Get out your map. ■



Youth Tour sends teens to Washington, D.C., where bonds form and horizons expand

SITES *and* INSIGHTS

BY CLAIRE STEVENS

On the drive from her home outside Kerrville to a hotel in Austin, high school junior Ella Robbins had butterflies. She was excited about her upcoming adventure, for sure.

"But I was mostly nervous," Robbins says. "I didn't know anybody, and I was really nervous about what people were going to think of me and just self-conscious."

The nerves lingered as she arrived and checked in June 15, 2025, for the Government-in-Action Youth Tour trip to Washington, D.C. Everyone was friendly, Robbins recalls, though some teens kept to themselves, scrolling on their phones. But the 143 strangers were all about to board the same flight to the nation's capital, where everything would change.

In D.C., Robbins marveled at the towering stained-glass windows of the National Cathedral and felt awe when she

looked out from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and saw the reflection of the Washington Monument. But what really changed her trip was the second day, when she found herself in a bus seat across from Sierra Nickel of Uvalde.

"As soon as I started talking to her, it was really great," Robbins says. She can't quite remember what they talked about in that first conversation where they clicked so easily, maybe Taylor Swift—who else?—but the two became fast friends. Robbins soon found herself getting lost in the excitement and packed schedule of the trip, frequently with Nickel at her side.

"I kind of stopped worrying about what people were thinking of me," Robbins says.

For 60 years, electric cooperatives across Texas have sent high school students to Washington for this all-expenses-paid

week of sightseeing and learning. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience in which little moments—like that one on the bus—lead to unexpected memories and friendships.

With growing confidence, Robbins, sent by Heart of Texas Electric Cooperative, and her new friend, sent by Medina Electric Cooperative, explored the monuments and memorials of the National Mall, museums and Capitol Hill. At the Capitol, Robbins was able to do what she'd come here for.

In U.S. Rep. August Pfluger's office, Robbins got a peek into the day-to-day functions of a congressional office.

She wanted to ask about the process of applying for disability insurance and legislation relating to service dogs. The topic was close to her heart—her father is blind and uses a guide dog. She was concerned about his difficulty securing resources and the hostility he sometimes faces when bringing his dog into public spaces. At the Capitol, she shared her ideas with one of Pfluger's aides.

"He was actually interested in having a conversation, and that was really nice. I was informing him of some

OPPOSITE Students representing five electric cooperatives at the National Mall on their first day in Washington, D.C. Fifty-eight Texas co-ops sent teens on Youth Tour.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP Texas students participate in a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. Ella Robbins from Heart of Texas EC holds up her Youth Tour challenge coin, which students were awarded for going above and beyond.



CLAIRE STEVENS | TEC



SAMANTHA BRYANT | TEC

things, and he was telling me more about the legislative side," Robbins says. "He says they try and pass lots and lots of bills, and occasionally they'll just get one or two. It's just a very difficult process. I didn't realize."

That was one learning opportunity among many. Some students sat down with and heard from survivors at the Holocaust Memorial Museum. Participants had the opportunity to obtain a library card at the Library of Congress, visited George Washington's home at Mount Vernon and danced together in front of the White House.

On the last day in D.C., they toured Arlington National Cemetery, where they witnessed a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

"That was one of the reasons I wanted to go, was to honor our fallen soldiers who didn't get recognized," says James Bell of Aspermont, one of four Texas students selected to lay the wreath. "My great-grandparents were buried at the Arlington cemetery, so that was awesome, to have that much of an honor to do that where they're buried."

The cemetery requires silence at the tomb, a memorial for fallen U.S. soldiers whose remains have not been identified. In a solemn ceremony, Bell and the three other students stepped in sync with one of the tomb's guards before placing a wreath of red and white flowers in front of the marble monument.

"Laying the wreath was amazing," says Bell, who was sponsored by Big Country Electric Cooperative. Watching Bell was his brother, Jack, who had gone on the tour two years before, and his uncle, a retired Army chief warrant officer, both of whom unexpectedly showed up at the ceremony. "It was a really big surprise."

By the time the teens boarded the flight home, the early nerves were nowhere to be seen. No longer strangers, they left with unexpected bonds that span the state.

"My favorite part—it sounds cliché—it's the people," says Eli Felcman, a delegate from Concho Valley Electric Cooperative. "I met lifelong friends." ■

Ready To Hit the Road?

For more information on Youth Tour and how you can apply, contact your electric cooperative.

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Stay Safe and Warm During a Winter Storm

PAST WINTERS HAVE shown us how a polar vortex can bring high winds, subzero temperatures and ice to many parts of the country, even those not accustomed to winter weather. This severe weather can cause hazardous road conditions, downed power lines and extended power outages. That's why it's important to prepare well before a winter storm hits.

Winter storms are deceptive killers because most deaths are indirectly related to the storm itself. Many hazards can remain after the storm has passed, and in cases of particularly severe weather, you may be in for a prolonged outage as utility crews work to get the lights back on.

Your electric cooperative works hard to maintain and restore power but offers these tips for staying warm during a winter power outage.

Be sure to have a storm preparedness kit ready before a storm strikes to help get you and your family through a power outage. This kit should include bottled water, nonperishable food, blankets, warm clothing, a first-aid kit, flashlight, radio, extra batteries, toiletries and essential medications.

Stay inside and dress warmly. If you must go outside, use caution and treat all downed and sagging lines as if they're energized. Downed power lines could be submerged in snow

and ice, making them difficult to see. Stay away, warn others to stay away and immediately contact your co-op.

Be aware of the temperature in your home. Infants and older adults are more susceptible to the cold. You may want to stay with friends or relatives or go to a shelter if you can't keep your home warm enough.

Close off unoccupied rooms and place draft blocks at the bottom of doors to minimize cold air entering the house. Cover windows at night.

When the power is restored, there may be a power surge. To protect your circuits and appliances, switch off lights and unplug appliances. Leave one light switched on as a quick indicator that the power is restored.

If you're using an alternative heating source during a power outage, be sure to know how to use it safely and gather supplies for it beforehand. You should have enough supplies in your preparedness kit to last up to a week.

If you're using a generator during an outage, it should be outdoors and well-ventilated. The carbon monoxide released by a generator can be deadly. ■

Properly Sizing Your HVAC Unit

AN IMPROPERLY SIZED heater or air conditioner can wreak havoc on your home, causing your system to “short cycle”—continuously turn on and off—or run constantly. However, a properly sized one can maintain comfort, increase energy efficiency and provide years of service.

Here are some factors to consider when choosing an HVAC system that works best for your home.

Size matters. The square footage of your home can help determine the load capacity of your HVAC unit, but it shouldn’t be the only factor considered when reviewing unit sizes. Enlist the help of a licensed professional to choose the best unit for your home.

Geographical location. The region in which your home is located will factor into how much capacity you need per square foot. A system running in a hot, humid climate will need more British thermal units than a system running in a dry, cool climate.

Home orientation. How sunlight hits your home during different times of the day impacts the load capacity required to properly heat or cool your home.

Insulation effectiveness. The better insulated your home is, the less heating or cooling power it will need to stay at the desired temperature.

Other factors that affect HVAC size requirements include ceiling height, ductwork, heat-generating appliances, home facade and occupancy. A good baseline for determining the size of the air conditioner needed is square footage of the home multiplied by 20. The result is the number of British thermal units you’ll need.

Your electric cooperative—your trusted energy partner—is happy to help you determine how each of these factors affect your system’s load capacity. ■



5 New Year's Resolutions for Your Home

1. Clean every appliance in your house. Your refrigerator’s coils can get dusty and clogged, which makes it work harder. The inside of your microwave should be free of splatters and crumbs; if it’s not, the machine is using energy to cook leftover food particles that nobody wants to eat. Even your dishwasher and washing machine need cleaning—inside and out.

2. Snake your clothes dryer vent. Do this at least twice a year to rid it of lint and debris, which can catch on fire if it clogs the vent and prevents airflow.

3. Clear the area around your water heater and your outdoor air-conditioning unit. If you’ve got boxes, suitcases, Christmas decorations or plants stacked up against them, they can’t do their jobs efficiently.

4. Have your heating and air-conditioning systems checked out by an HVAC professional, who can tell you if they need repairs. Ask the tech to check your filters and change them if they’re clogged with dust.

5. Change the batteries in your home’s smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors. If you don’t have those devices, move this item to the top of your list of resolutions and install them today. ■

SEASHELLS of TEXAS

Illustrations by Aletha St. Romain

Labels on the poster:

- Fig. 1 BANDED TUSK (Terebridae) bivalve
- Fig. 2 BROWN-LINE MUREX (Muricidae) bivalve
- Fig. 3 NORTHERN LION'S PAW (Littorinidae) bivalve
- Fig. 4 MASTICATOR (Murex pecten) (Muricidae) bivalve
- Fig. 5 RAMP'S HORN (Quadrupedidae) bivalve
- Fig. 6 JAZZ (Littorinidae) bivalve
- Fig. 7 LIGHTNING WHELK (Turbidae) bivalve
- Fig. 8 TEXAS MUREX (Muricidae) bivalve
- Fig. 9 PLATE MUREX (Muricidae) bivalve
- Fig. 10 EASTERN MUREX (Muricidae) bivalve
- Fig. 11 MITCHELL'S WENTLETRAP (Littorinidae) bivalve
- Fig. 12 WESTERN MUREX (Muricidae) bivalve
- Fig. 13 PEONY COCKLE (Pectinidae) bivalve
- Fig. 14 COMMON SUNSHELL (Volutidae) univalve
- Fig. 15 EMBELLISSING WREATH (Volutidae) univalve
- Fig. 16 ANGELWING (Volutidae) univalve
- Fig. 17 COMMON BUTTERFLY (Conulariidae) univalve
- Fig. 18 BLAZED WENTLETRAP (Littorinidae) bivalve
- Fig. 19 ATLANTIC DEER CONCH (Strombidae) univalve

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ICE ISN'T ALWAYS NICE

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

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.



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A Dandy Debut

Don Meredith, the first and perhaps most beloved Dallas Cowboy, found his second calling in the booth

EXCERPT BY DAVE LIEBER • ILLUSTRATION BY MARK FREDRICKSON

PEOPLE MAY THINK the debut of ABC's *Monday Night Football* marked the first time football was played under the lights at night. They are off by 78 years. The original night game was at the 1892 Great Mansfield Fair in Tioga County, Pennsylvania. Attendees were promised that they would see electric lights brighten the night sky. Thomas Edison, who invented the modern light bulb 13 years earlier and created General Electric, sent his Thomson-Houston machine with its 30-bulb capacity.

The two teams were Mansfield State Normal and Wyoming Seminary. At sunset the field grew dark. A pole carrying lights was moved to the middle of the field. Difficult to see the players, the referee called the game over. Final score: a 0-0 tie.

Flash forward to September 1970. A different kind of historic nighttime football is about to launch. A bevy of naysayers including the press, network executives and National Football League team owners believe ABC's vanity project, *Monday Night Football*, is destined to fail.

The show, created by television legend Roone Arledge, is designed to break all the sports broadcasting rules. Rule No. 1 is the concept that sporting events must have two announcers in the broadcast booth. Arledge wanted three.

The first play-by-play announcer on *MNF* would be Keith Jackson, ol' reliable no matter the sport. (He'd be replaced with Frank Gifford by season two.) The second man in the booth would be commentator Howard Cosell, credited as the inventor of hard-hitting TV sports journalism.

The third man in the booth? Don Meredith, former quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys. Born in Mount Vernon, Texas, Meredith was no stranger to those Americans who followed NFL football. What nobody saw besides Arledge was that the northern lawyer and the southern quarterback would become the most liked American comedy team since Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. Nobody said a football game had to be serious, Arledge complained. "I'm tired of football being treated like a religion. The games aren't played in Westminster Abbey."

Monday Night Football, because of the comedic conflicts between Cosell and Meredith, propelled to the top of the ratings. The show was a monster hit,

changed the way sports are covered on TV and gave ABC its first profit in a decade.

When the huge production team from *MNF* rolled into an NFL town before a game, it was as big as the game itself. Banquets were held in their honor. The announcers were often given the key to the city. It was a spectacle bigger than the game. What teams are playing? Didn't matter. Cosell and Meredith were in town! Meredith dubbed it "Mother Love's Traveling Freak Show."

But before the September 21, 1970, on-air debut, there was a practice game involving the Lions and the Chiefs. This rehearsal was never broadcast. Good thing. Mother Love was not pleased.

Arledge told what happened in his autobiography, *Roone: A Memoir*.

"Don had problems. He was talking in clichés. ('Hello football fans everywhere.') Using 10 sentences to say what could be said in three, analyzing the obvious, and because he hadn't done his homework, having a tough time keeping track of who was whom and on which team."

Hearing this criticism, Meredith stood, threw down his earpiece and said, "Screw this." He acted as if he were going to leave. They convinced him to stay.

But the next day, after a second harsh critique, it happened again.

"Look fellas," he said, again standing up. "This really isn't my bag, and I don't even know that much about football. I only know the X's and O's Mr. [Tom] Landry taught me in Texas. So I'll just leave."

Arledge and *MNF* director Chet Forte made it clear to Meredith that this was a natural process, and their notes were only suggestions for improvements.

Meredith left and Cosell ran after him. He persuaded Meredith to have a drink before he left for the airport. Then in a reminder of his signature phrase—"tell it like it is"—Cosell tried to do just that.

"Don," Cosell said, according to his autobiography, *Howard Cosell*, "in my opinion you'll be making the biggest mistake of your life if you even think about leaving us. You're going to come out of this a hero. Middle America will love you. Southern America will love you. ... You'll wear the white hat. I'll wear the black hat, and you'll have no problems from the very beginning."

All of which turned out to be 100% accurate.



"Dandy lifted his glass," Cosell wrote. "By golly. I'm with you, Coach. All the way."

On debut night, at precisely 9 p.m. Eastern time, the flashy opening video showed the countdown in the game truck outside. It focused on the inner workings of the production team, sending a message that this game would be different.

The first words from Jackson: "From Municipal Stadium in Cleveland, Ohio, two powers in professional football meet for the first time ever as members of the new American conference of the National Football League." He introduced the sponsors, Ford, Marlboro and Goodyear.

Then Cosell did a welcome: "It's a hot, sultry, almost windless night where the Browns will play host to the New York Jets. Good evening everyone. I'm Howard Cosell, and welcome to ABC's Monday night prime-time National Football League series."

What happened next surprised Meredith. He heard "roll the tape" in his earpiece, and then was surprised to see a video montage about him when he was the Cowboys' quarterback. It showed his sacks, interceptions, fumbles and botched handoffs. ABC did it to "set up Meredith's comic persona," according to co-authors

Marc Gunther and Bill Carter in their book, *Monday Night Mayhem: The Inside Story Behind ABC's Monday Night Football*.

"The gag worked," they wrote. "It sparked sympathy immediately for the just-folks new announcer, even if it presented a grossly distorted picture of Meredith's mostly stellar career on the field.

"Meredith didn't know he was going to be roasted in the film clip, but his aw-shucks reaction furnished the first impression: Cosell came on sour; Meredith came on sweet. Black hat/white hat. An act was born."

Now was the time to shine for the ex-player who introduced himself to America on Monday nights this way: "I'm Billy Jack's little brother, Jeff and Hazel's baby boy, and I'm from Mount Vernon, Texas."

He would become one of the most famous and beloved men in America. But that would take a few more weeks. ■

Text excerpted from *Dandy Don Meredith* (Yankee Cowboy Publishing, 2024).



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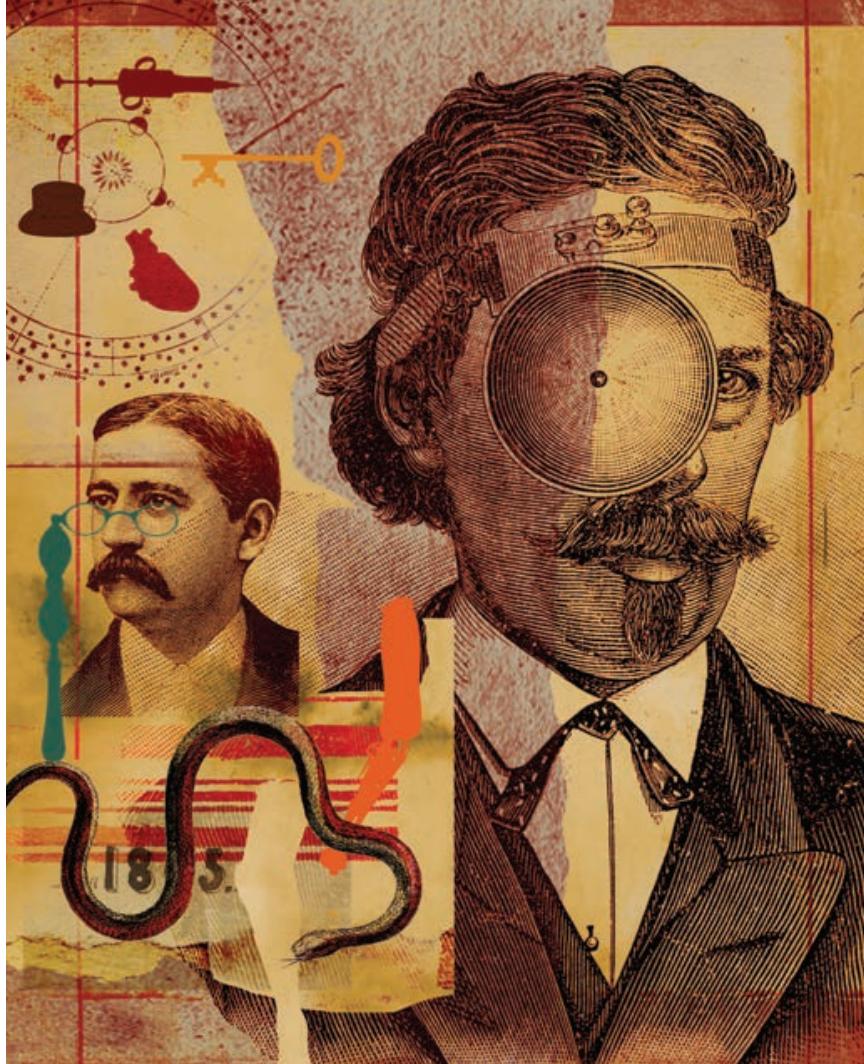
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Doctoring Reality

Frontier physicians relied on confidence more than credentials

BY CLAY COPPEDGE • ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE DALTON COWAN

BECOMING A DOCTOR was a lot simpler in frontier times, when you didn't have to go to school for a long time or even know much about medicine. You could just call yourself a doctor. And if your first consideration was to cause no harm and you were blessed with at least a modicum of common sense, other people would call you a doctor too.

"Dr." John F. Webber is a case in point. Born in Vermont and a veteran of the War of 1812, Webber settled in Stephen F. Austin's colony, in what was then Mexico, by 1824.

Along with Texas chronicler Noah Smithwick and two other men, Webber took part in a tobacco-smuggling operation farther south in Mexico. Webber wasn't a trained doctor, but he played

one to avoid answering a bunch of annoying questions about the nature of his visit. Posing as a doctor was easier than explaining 1,000 pounds of leaf tobacco to the authorities.

In one town Webber advertised his services as a physician. Smithwick was fairly fluent in Spanish, so he accompanied the "doctor" as he tended to patients. "With an air of importance that would have done credit to a professional, Webber noted the symptoms, shaking his head, knitting his brows, and otherwise impressing the patient with the seriousness of his condition," Smithwick later wrote.

Smithwick and Webber had a sampling of medicines, mostly quinine, calomel and tartar emetic, a poisonous compound that some brave souls took to induce

vomiting; it made Webber's patients feel different, if not better. "The doctor's fame went abroad, and he soon had a large practice, same as imposters of the present day," Smithwick wrote.

Smithwick also knew the inventor Gail Borden Jr. before Borden patented the process for making condensed milk and became known as Dairyman to the World. They knew each other first in San Felipe and later in Burnet County, where Smithwick operated a mill.

Borden was looking for gold on Sandy Creek and also advertising himself as a doctor when he stayed a few days with Smithwick and described to his host how he practiced medicine. "It is no use to be a doctor unless you put on the airs of one," he said. "Nine times out of 10 sickness is caused by overeating, or eating unwholesome food, but a patient gets angry if you tell him so; you must humor him."

Borden humored his patients by administering tiny bits of calomel with enough starch to turn it into a pellet. He glazed the pellets with sugar to make the medicine taste more like a doughnut. Borden said most people who abstained from "hurtful articles of food" felt better as a result.

Unlike Borden or Webber, Dr. Johnson Calhoun Hunter, a native of South Carolina and one of the Old Three Hundred colonists, received a diploma in medicine around 1805, when he was just 18. He was in Texas, in what is now Harris County, by the early 1820s with his wife and the first five of their eventual 11 children. He did a lot more than doctoring when he got here.

Historian Mike Cox wrote that Hunter "could deliver a baby, ride a plow, go hungry, trade with the Indians, run a traverse, pilot a scow, adjudicate a case ... cut a bull, teach a school ... and deliver mail."

They don't make general practitioners like that anymore. ■

Oodles of Noodles

Heaps of flavor that will keep your forks twirling

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

My friends are always nervous about inviting me to a meal because I cook for a living, but that's exactly why you should invite me. I will never turn down being cooked for. I was recently invited to dinner and served this deliciousness. I immediately asked for the recipe, because I had to share with y'all.

Ginger Pork Noodles

1 package rice noodles (14 ounces)

½ cup soy sauce

¼ cup light brown sugar

¼ cup rice vinegar

1 tablespoon chili garlic sauce

1 tablespoon minced ginger

1 tablespoon olive oil

2 cloves garlic, minced

2 pounds lean ground pork

2 tablespoons water

1 tablespoon cornstarch

1 cup shredded carrots

**1 cucumber, halved lengthwise
and thinly sliced**

Sesame seeds, for garnish

Fresh cilantro, for garnish

Lime wedges, for garnish

1. Cook noodles according to package directions and set aside.

2. In a bowl, whisk together soy sauce, brown sugar, rice vinegar, chili garlic sauce and ginger. Set aside.

3. Heat oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Cook garlic and pork, breaking up with a spoon, until fully cooked, about 7 minutes.

4. Reduce heat to low and stir in prepared sauce. Simmer 3 minutes.

5. While the pork simmers, whisk together water and cornstarch in a small bowl until well blended. Stir into pork and continue to simmer, stirring occasionally, until sauce thickens.

6. Stir in cooked noodles. Serve warm, topped with carrots and cucumbers. Garnish with sesame seeds, cilantro and lime wedges.

SERVES 4

TCP Follow Vianney Rodriguez as she cooks in Cocina Gris at sweetlifebake.com, where she features a recipe for Sopa de Fideo con Garbanzos.





Garlic Spaghetti

JANET EAKINS
NAVASOTA VALLEY EC

We all need a go-to recipe in our back pocket for when the to-do list is never-ending, the kids are starving and you must get dinner on the table. This garlic spaghetti is quick and easy, but it packs a punch in the flavor department. Some nights, a bowl of pasta like this is just what we need.

8 ounces uncooked spaghetti
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons minced garlic
2 tablespoons minced parsley
1 tablespoon lemon zest
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon ground black pepper
1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes
1/2 cup crumbled feta cheese

1. Cook spaghetti according to package directions, reserving 1/2 cup of pasta water when draining.
2. In the same pot, heat oil over medium-high. Add garlic and cook 30 seconds.
3. Stir in pasta water, parsley, lemon zest and spaghetti and toss to coat. Season with salt, pepper and red pepper flakes. Stir in feta.

SERVES 4

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28 >

\$500 WINNER

Slow Cooker Chicken Lo Mein

JENNY ZACHMAN-
REICHARDT
HAMILTON COUNTY EC



Pull out those slow cookers, and get to tossing this lo mein together! I loved-loved this recipe and plan to make it on repeat. And don't let me find you skimping on the baby bok choy—it's the star of this dish.



1 pound boneless, skinless chicken thighs
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon ground black pepper
2/3 cup low-sodium chicken broth
3 tablespoons oyster sauce
2 tablespoons low-sodium soy sauce
3 teaspoons hoisin sauce
2 teaspoons honey
2 cloves garlic, minced
1/2 tablespoon minced ginger
1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes
1 package lo mein noodles (8 ounces)
2 tablespoons cornstarch
3 tablespoons cold water
2 cups sliced baby bok choy, washed
1 red bell pepper, seeded and thinly sliced
1/2 cup matchstick carrots
Sesame seeds, for garnish

1. Lightly coat a 4- to 5-quart slow cooker with cooking spray. Add chicken and season with salt and pepper.
2. In a bowl, whisk together chicken broth, oyster sauce, soy sauce, hoisin sauce, honey, garlic, ginger and red pepper flakes. Pour over chicken and stir to coat evenly.
3. Cook on high 1 1/2–2 hours or on low 3–4 hours. Meanwhile, cook noodles according to package directions and set aside.
4. Remove chicken from slow cooker and shred or dice. In a small bowl, whisk together cornstarch and water, and stir into remaining sauce in slow cooker.
5. Return chicken to slow cooker and add baby bok choy, bell pepper and carrots. Stir to combine. Cover and cook on high an additional 20–30 minutes or until sauce thickens.
6. Stir in noodles. Serve warm, garnished with sesame seeds.

SERVES 6

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Mom's Best Hamburger Noodle Casserole

JULIE PIERANTONI
PEDERNALES EC

Casseroles are all about comfort and nourishment, and no one understands this better than Mom. This dish is all comfort. Hearty, filling and a snap to whip up, it's delicious—Mom knows best!

**12 ounces uncooked egg noodles
1½ pounds ground beef
½ cup chopped white onion
1 can corn (12 ounces), drained
1 can cream of chicken soup (10.5 ounces)
1 can cream of mushroom soup (10.5 ounces)
1 cup sour cream
¾ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
½ teaspoon meat tenderizer
1 cup fresh breadcrumbs
3 tablespoons (½ stick) butter, melted**

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly coat a 9-by-13-inch baking dish with cooking spray.
2. Cook noodles according to package directions, drain and allow to cool.
3. In a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat, add ground beef and break up with a spoon. Add onion and cook until onion is tender and ground beef is fully cooked. Drain grease.
4. Stir in corn, soups, sour cream, salt, pepper, tenderizer and cooked egg noodles. Pour into prepared baking dish.
5. In a bowl, mix together breadcrumbs and melted butter. Sprinkle over top of casserole.
6. Bake 30 minutes or until breadcrumbs are slightly crispy.

Noodle Knowledge

Store unopened noodles in a cool, dry area, away from appliances that generate heat, to prevent exposure to excess moisture.

Store opened noodles in an airtight container.

Store cooked noodles in an airtight container in the fridge and eat within three days.

—Vianney Rodriguez

pepper, tenderizer and cooked egg noodles. Pour into prepared baking dish.

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly coat a 9-by-13-inch baking dish with cooking spray.
2. Cook noodles according to package directions, drain and allow to cool.
3. In a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat, add ground beef and break up with a spoon. Add onion and cook until onion is tender and ground beef is fully cooked. Drain grease.
4. Stir in corn, soups, sour cream, salt, pepper, tenderizer and cooked egg noodles. Pour into prepared baking dish.
5. In a bowl, mix together breadcrumbs and melted butter. Sprinkle over top of casserole.
6. Bake 30 minutes or until breadcrumbs are slightly crispy.

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

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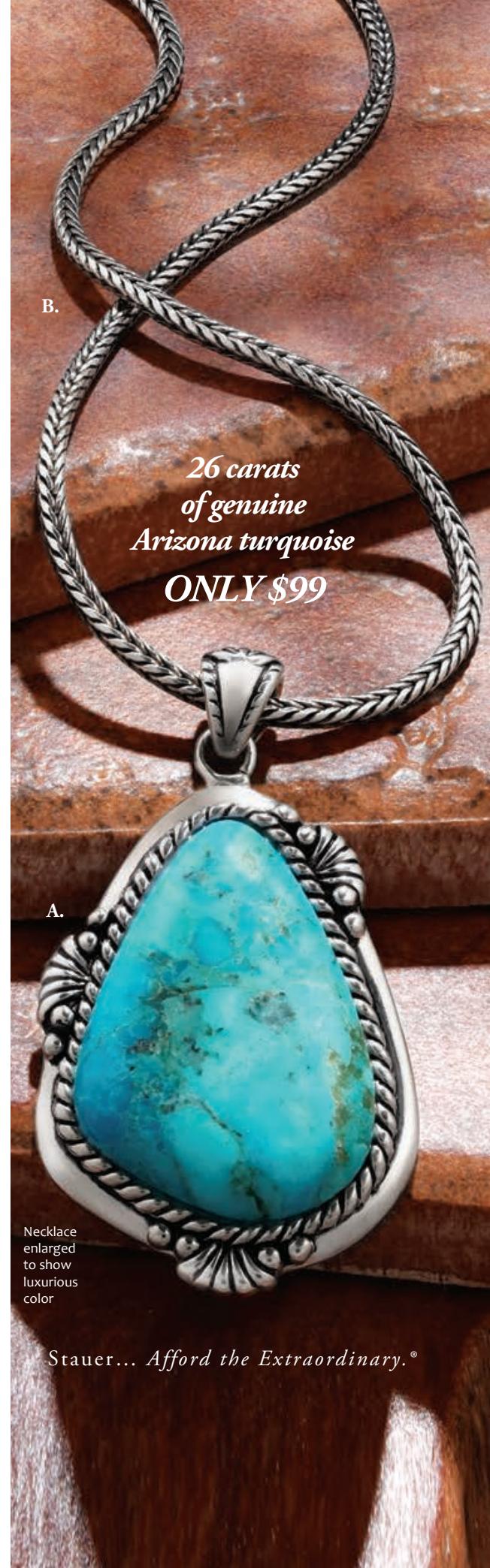
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COURTESY CHET GARNER

A Tip of the Hat to Paris

France's Eiffel Tower is taller and older, sure, but it's rather bare

BY CHET GARNER

NOT EVERYTHING IS BIGGER in Texas. Case in point: our Eiffel Tower in our Paris. But that didn't stop me from breaking out my beret and heading to the Northeast Texas "City of Love" to see our rendition of France's most famous landmark.

The French built theirs of iron in 1889 for the world's fair. Texans—never ones to sit quietly while another Paris hogs the spotlight—answered in 1993 with a scaled-down steel replica that has way more Texas swagger.

I rolled into town craving a crêpe and a glass of wine, but those had to wait. First stop was my *petit* pilgrimage to the petite tower. I found it standing proudly on the south side of town, wedged between the civic center and the impressive Red River Valley Veterans Memorial.

I wasn't alone. Dozens of folks were lined up for their chance at the ultimate French-Texan selfie.

Of course, the first thing anyone notices is the bright red cowboy hat perched on top. It wasn't there originally. Locals say that after rival Paris, Tennessee, built a tower a smidge taller, Texans did what Texans do—we added a hat and claimed victory.

With the topper, our tower clocks in at 65 feet, proudly earning the title of second-tallest Eiffel Tower in a city named Paris. (The French original stands about 16 times that height at more than 1,000 feet, so first place wasn't exactly in reach.)

Up close, it looks a bit like a radio antenna's artsy cousin who studied abroad, but the vibe is pure Parisian picnic. Families sprawled in the grass, kids craned their necks to the top, and couples kissed beneath its steel beams as if the Seine were flowing nearby.

So if you find yourself in Northeast Texas, make the detour. And remember—when in Paris (Texas), the dress code is cowboy casual. ■

ABOVE Chet lands in Paris—no passport required.

TCP Watch the video on our website and see all of Chet's Explorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



Know Before You Go

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

JANUARY

8

Dallas [8–11] *Hadestown: Teen Edition*, (214) 526-4076, juniorplayers.org

10

Amarillo Serenading the High Plains, (806) 376-8782, amarillosymphony.org

Corsicana Mimosas at the Market, (903) 654-4850, visitcorsicana.com

Palestine [10–11, 17–18, 24–25, 31–Feb. 1] *Faire of Champions*, contact@faireofchampions.com, faireofchampions.com

15

Lufkin T.G. Sheppard, (936) 633-5454, angelinaarts.org

16

Galveston [16–17] *Yaga's Chili Quest, Beers & Cheers*; (409) 770-0999; yagachiliquest.com

Lubbock [16–18] *Water for Elephants*, (806) 792-8339, americantheatreguild.com

17

Brenham Uptown Swirl, (979) 337-7239, downtownbrenham.com

El Paso Veterans Create, (915) 533-0048, tomlea.com

Fredericksburg Book Festival, (830) 997-6513, fredericksburgbookfestival.org

Gonzales Come and Take It Makers Market, (830) 888-6800, bit.ly/makersmarket26

Plano [17–18] *Dallas Area Train Show*, (214) 906-8092, dfwtrainshows.com

18

Fredericksburg Texas
Guitar Quartet, fredericksburgmusicclub.com

19

Elgin Martin Luther King Jr. Walk, (512) 281-5724, elgintexas.gov

22

El Paso Tom Lea's *Twelve Travelers Through the Pass of the North* Exhibit Opening, (915) 533-0048, tomlea.com

Fort Worth Mah Jongg Tournament, (817) 335-3525, thewomansclubfw.com

Paris [22-24] Tower City Comedy Festival, (903) 785-5233, towercitycomedyfestival.com

24

Jefferson Queen Mab Ball, (903) 240-6809, mardigrasupriver.com

29

Brenham [29-Feb. 1, 5-8, 12-15] Ken Ludwig's *Dear Jack, Dear Louise*, (979) 830-8358, unitybrenham.org

FEBRUARY

4

Laredo [4-7] Birding Festival, (956) 964-4102, laredobirdingfestival.org

6

Lufkin The Jazz Legacy Project Presents the Life & Music of Billie Holiday, (936) 633-5454, angelinarts.org

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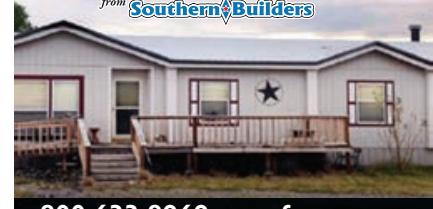
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**1 ALAN ABAIR
COSERV**

A western diamondback rattlesnake.

**2 JOSHUA TREVINO
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A Sunda Island pit viper.

**3 CHARLES BAXTER
COSERV**

"An eastern racer under a crape myrtle tree in Argyle."

**4 SHARON CARTER
PEDERNALES EC**

"I saw this beauty resting in the woods next to my Wimberley home."



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TCP See Focus on Texas on our website for many more Snakes Alive! photos from readers.



Fortune Knocks

Scottish tradition holds that good luck comes through the front door on New Year's

AS TOLD BY RON RUSSELL
TO ANNA RUSSELL
ILLUSTRATION BY TARA JACOBY

IN THE SUMMER of 1954, when my family's neighbor Brad Proctor asked me to help with farm work, I did not know it would lead to me becoming a first footer.

I pedaled my bike 1½ miles to help Brad put up hay. From then on, year-round, every afternoon, I milked cows and mucked stalls.

His mother-in-law, Mrs. Harris, lived with them. And whenever I ventured into the kitchen for a drink, Mrs. Harris told me tales of her youth in Scotland. Eventually, they decided to move Mrs. Harris to a nearby, almost secluded, house.

A few days before the end of the year, I stopped for another visit with Mrs. Harris. She clasped my hand. "I want you to be my first footer," she said.

Well, I knew a lot about farm life, farm animals and an abundance of chores.

However, I had no idea how to be a first footer. I did not want to insult Mrs. Harris. I squirmed before I asked, "Please, what is a first footer?"

"My great-great-grandparents passed the Scottish tradition through the family to me," she said, explaining that a tall, dark-haired man must be the first to set foot in a house in the new year. "Because you are a dark-haired man, when ..."

I interrupted her. "But I'm only 14 years old. That leaves me out."

Mrs. Harris raised her hand to stop me. "The worst is for a woman to be my first visitor. Oh, Lordy, that'd guarantee bad luck all year." She looked me up and down as she nodded her head. "Now, if you had red or blond hair, fear would shiver me with alarm at the sight of you on New Year's Day."

She chuckled. "However you do qualify. You're the size of a man, and you have dark hair, so when your foot hits my threshold, you will bring me good fortune for the coming year."

She winked. "Best you bring a gift, say bread, salt or coal. OK?"

When I got home, Mom listened to Mrs. Harris' proposal to me. Then she said, "We have Scottish blood, too. Remember the cabbage, carrot and onion soup that we eat at noon each New Year's Day? It's also a custom that my Scottish ancestors practiced."

"Why cabbage? I hate cabbage."

"Cabbage represents abundance to some people." Mom elbowed me aside to remove bread from the oven.

I did not want to take Mrs. Harris a lump of coal or a piece of firewood. And my Grandpa Ed would not like me taking his whiskey bottle. Ah, the perfect gift was on the kitchen counter.

Allowing that Mrs. Harris would be awake at 9 o'clock on New Year's morning, I knocked on the door. Her wide grin almost stretched to the door sills.

She waved me in. I handed her a loaf of Mom's fresh-baked bread.

I am a first footer! ■

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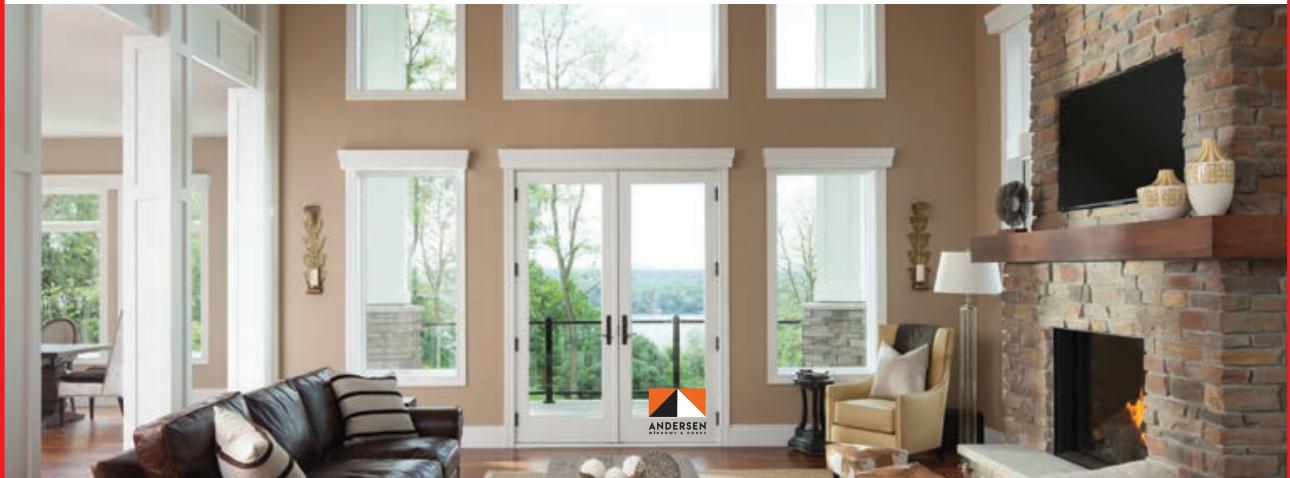
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