

THE DAZZLING PECAN TREE
NEAR FORT WORTH

THE MIGHTY HONEYBEE
IS BUSY AS EVER

REMEMBER THE
GREAT Y2K SCARE?

Texas Coop Power

FOR TRI-COUNTY EC MEMBERS

DECEMBER 2024

Cookie Season

Co-op Country kitchens
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TRI-COUNTY
EC NEWS

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December 2024



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06 Field of Beams

An old pecan tree's dazzling annual metamorphosis becomes a community tradition.

By Pete Alfano
Photos by R.J. Hinkle

Everybody's Beeswax

Texans help each other help the mighty honeybee help the rest of us.

By Claire Stevens
Photos by Eric W. Pohl

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ON THE COVER
The best of our Cookie Exchange recipe contest. Get baking on Page 26.
Photo by Jason David Page
ABOVE
Busy bees at Two Hives Honey in Manor.
Photo by Eric W. Pohl

Y2...What?



THE WORLD SEEMINGLY teetered on turmoil 25 years ago this month at the hands of Y2K, a supposed computer glitch that threatened to stymie systems as the calendar turned from 1999 to 2000. It was quite a big deal—though for TCP's editors and writers, not so much:

Samantha Bryant: *I was at my grandmother's house in Poolville, listening to the news on TV while my siblings and I did a Y2K-proof activity—a puzzle.*

Chris Burrows: *I was making sure our family computer kept ticking (by playing video games all night).*

Alex Dal Santo: *We were with neighbors, watching Space Jam. None of the adults seemed very concerned.*

Claire Stevens: *That was before my time, but my parents didn't even see midnight. I'm told they "went to bed hoping the world and digital appliances would live to see the next day."*

Tom Widlowski: *I was one of the 260,000 revelers packing Congress Avenue in Austin.*

Read *Black-Eyed Peace* on Page 25 to learn more about the experiences of Texans during Y2K.



TCP Contests and More

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Characters

RECOMMENDED READING

Download our issue from December 2004 and enjoy our look at holiday lights. Find it at [texascooppower.com/magazine-archives](https://www.texascooppower.com/magazine-archives).



FINISH THIS SENTENCE

My favorite holiday lights are ...

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

Here are some of the responses to our October prompt: **My favorite hand-me-down is ...**

Old recipes. You get to learn, by trial and error, how much a pinch and a dash actually is.

TABITHA FOUNTAIN
DEEP EAST TEXAS EC
SAN AUGUSTINE

My name. My dad named me after his sister. We both were Yvette Françoise "Sissy" Sherman.

YVETTE COOPER
BANDERA EC
BANDERA

A small screwdriver my dad gave me when I was about 6. I'm 75 and carry it on my key chain every day.

GARY ELLIOTT
VIA FACEBOOK

Visit our website to see more responses.

75 Candles

Three Texans with storied careers in their chosen fields turn 75 this month.

- Hall of Fame golfer **Tom Kite** was born December 9, 1949, in McKinney.
- ZZ Top guitarist **Billy Gibbons** was born December 16 in Houston.
- Academy Award-winning actress **Sissy Spacek** was born December 25 in Quitman.

OCTOBER 2024 There's No Party Like La Pitada

"I extend my gratitude for including such a small town like ours in your amazing magazine—and also the tradition we hold sacred, celebrating our Dallas Cowboys!"

SANTA GARCIA
MAGIC VALLEY EC
BROWNSVILLE



ERICH SCHLEGEL

Hauling Grass

Hadn't seen lawn mower racing in years—since I left the hills of Kentucky [*Grassroots Movement*, October 2024].

Mark Wright
Via Facebook

Come Together

Thanks for the old Beatles memory [*Invading Dallas*, September 2024]. I saw them the night before in Kansas City. I was a sixth grader in Topeka, Kansas.

Larry Chabira
Pedernales EC
San Leanna

The Cactus Experience

I have looked for a book—*Gunsmoke in the Redlands*, about feuds in San Augustine. Felton Cochran said he had the book in his hand, and two days later I had it in my hand [*Texas Book Man*, July 2024].

Buddy Hancock
Deep East Texas EC
Center

I ventured into Cactus Book Shop about 22 years ago. Felton Cochran was so pleasant and welcoming, and I picked out several books totaling well over \$100. Back then, he didn't take credit cards.

I asked him to hold my books until I could come back in a few days with a check, as I was a 100-mile round trip from San Angelo. He insisted I take them with me and mail him a check later. He didn't ask for ID, phone number or anything.

Susan Wellborn
Concho Valley EC
Robert Lee

Saltshaker Logic

I especially enjoyed the last two sentences: "Oh well, even the imperfect ones have purpose. I grabbed the saltshaker." We humans are imperfect and sometimes say or do something that rubs another person the wrong way [*Culling Time*, July 2024].

Instead of getting upset at someone, grab the imaginary saltshaker. Take what the other person said or did with a grain of salt.

Ted Pasche
CoServ
Argyle

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letters@TexasCoopPower.com

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Austin, TX 78701

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

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JULIA ROBINSON

An old pecan tree's dazzling
annual metamorphosis becomes
a community tradition

Field of Beams

BY PETE ALFANO • PHOTOS BY R.J. HINKLE

A family gathering on Thanksgiving culminates in the pasture of a 10-acre ranch where a pair of old geldings, Zephyr and Max, graze during the day. In the middle of this equine playground is a pecan tree, standing like a sentry, having taken root about 30 years after Texas became a state.

But for the past 17 years, the tree has been more than just a vestige of the past; it is the town of Bartonville's symbolic tribute to the holidays.

Without fanfare Barbara Nunneley first lit the nearly 50-foot-tall tree in 2007, when about 60,000 bright LEDs illuminated the darkness and could be seen from 3 miles away. The bright lights attract visitors who admire and photograph it or quietly take in the glow, reflecting on another year coming to an end.

"It's mesmerizing, almost a spiritual thing," says Jaclyn Carrington, mayor of Bartonville, 30 miles northwest of Fort Worth. "It is so black out because there are no streetlights, so all you see is this gigantic, beautiful bright tree. The first time I saw it, I thought, 'Wow, this is magnificent.'"

This month is the 18th renewal of a tradition Nunneley, a retired lawyer, initiated to honor her father, Earl, a larger-than-life personality, she says, who was battling prostate cancer during the early 2000s. She plays host to siblings and their families on Thanksgiving and wanted her father to be there to witness a tree-lighting ceremony that has become as anticipated in Bartonville as the annual tree-lighting event at Rockefeller Center in New York City.

"It's mesmerizing, almost a spiritual thing," Bartonville Mayor Jaclyn Carrington says of the centuries-old lighted pecan tree on Barbara Nunneley's ranch.

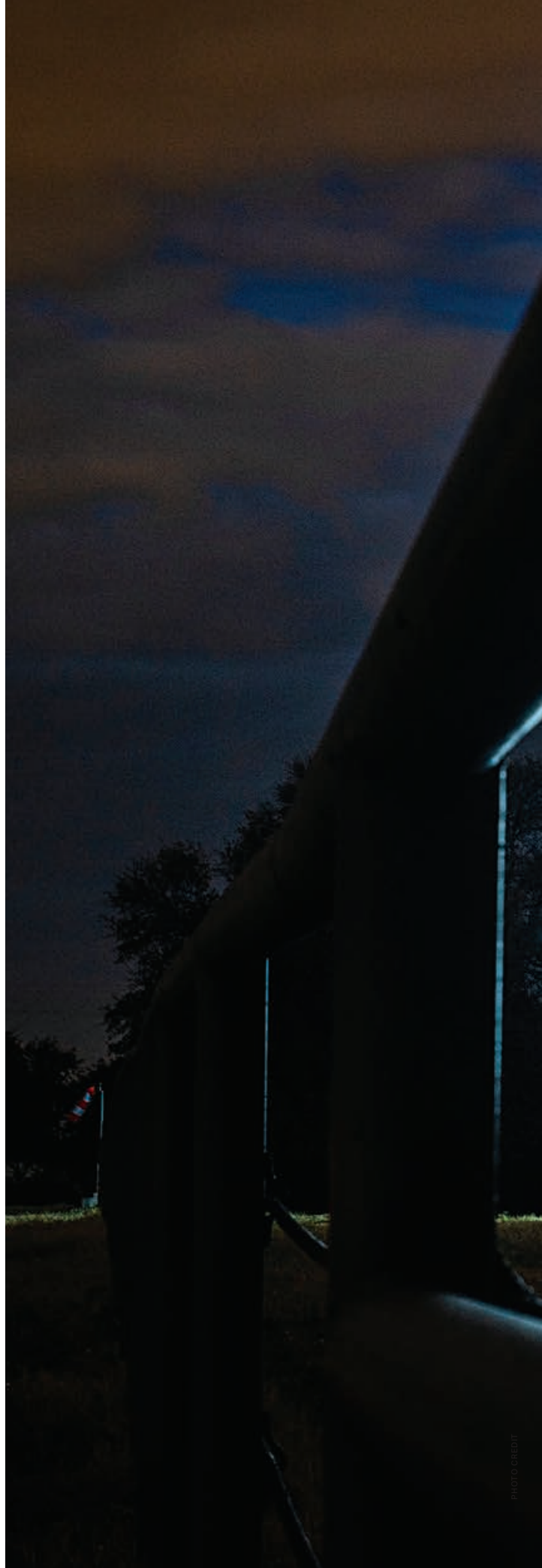


PHOTO CREDIT



“
No one could have predicted that an old and revered pecan tree would become the centerpiece of the holiday season in Bartonville. It has had a life of its own and now, ‘a light of its own.’
”



Her dad, however, was too ill to make the 70-mile trip from Nocona on Thanksgiving in 2007, but with her family gathered around the tree in the pasture after dinner, Nunneley flipped the switch that brought the pecan tree to life.

“There was dead silence for a couple of minutes,” she says. “Then tears.” Her father died the next day, but Nunneley has faith that he has seen the tree from a far loftier perch.

Bill Rathburn, owner of the Christmas Light Co., first suggested lighting the 150-year-old tree in 2005. His crew was there to string lights across the roofline of Nunneley’s sprawling ranch house when he sized up the gangly mass of limbs and branches after the tree had shed its leaves and

dropped its pecans. He pondered what a different kind of Christmas tree it could be.

But Nunneley and her partner, Jan Deatherage, decided against the challenging and costly job of lighting the tree. With her father’s illness progressing, however, and his love for anything over-the-top, Nunneley gave the go-ahead two years later.

Stringing lights on the tree is labor intensive. Rathburn’s crew uses cherry pickers to reach the top, and the project takes a couple of days each year to set up and then take down in early January. Nunneley says a new circuit board had to be installed to handle the power output and that a timer now turns the lights on at dusk and off at midnight.

The tree has had various light colors over the years, but white appears to have the most dramatic impact. CoServ, an electric cooperative based in Denton, provides the electricity for the property and the tree.

Pecan trees are resilient, and this one has obviously survived numerous winters of freezing temperatures and ice storms as well as tornado seasons and Texas’ broiling summer heat. During severe drought, Nunneley runs garden hoses out to the tree from the house to ensure it stays healthy.

Carrington says the famous tree has had a modest economic impact during the holidays as people from the region make the pilgrimage to Bartonville. They eat dinner in the town of about 1,800 and then park along the side of the road fronting the pasture to admire the tree from behind the low fence.

“They make an evening out of it,” Carrington says. “It’s a huge event every year.”

One evening the week before Christmas last year, local Kim Corser stepped out of her car and walked up to the fence to just marvel at the tree. “I was out running errands and realized I hadn’t come to see the tree yet,” she says. “I usually come with my kids, but we’ll come back.”

Some visitors have tried to scale the fence to get even closer to the tree despite a sign that warns against trespassing. “Some high school boys tried to climb it,” Nunneley says. “People sneak in because they think it is on a vacant lot. Parking can be an issue because we’ve had people pulling into our driveway.”

She says a neighbor who works for the Federal Aviation Administration has informed pilots about the tree, which can be seen from planes as they come and go from nearby Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport.

The pecan tree is not just a tourist attraction but a source of inspiration. Deatherage displayed a coffee-table book about the tree compiled by Flower Mound photographer Meredith Butterfield. “It has entries by different photographers with stories of what the tree means to them,” she says. It’s a limited-edition book: The only copy belongs to Nunneley and Deatherage.

One holiday season early on, Nunneley heard a knock on

the front door and found a sheet of legal paper under the doormat. It was left by a young man who wanted to propose to his girlfriend under the tree because she had admired it the year before. But there was no name, phone number or other contact information.

“Several days later, I was walking in the pasture collecting the horses and saw yet another sheet of yellow legal paper,” Nunneley says. “It was the second page of the original letter. Clearly the wind had come up and separated the letter. It had the young man’s name and the way to contact him.” She followed through and gave her blessing to his request.

It happened again years later when a polite young man, about to graduate college, rang the doorbell and nervously asked whether he could propose to his college sweetheart under the tree. “He thought it was a logical place because it was a place of so much light, hope for the future and promise,” Nunneley says.

The young Romeo kept it a secret from his girlfriend when they came to view the tree. He convinced her that he knew the owners and it would be OK to trespass and take photos under the blinding canopy.

When they went over the fence and walked up to the tree, his family and hers drove from around the corner and watched as the young man dropped to one knee and proposed. “There were celebratory handshakes and hugs and lots and lots of flash camera pictures,” Nunneley says.

No one could have predicted that an old and revered pecan tree would become the centerpiece of the holiday season in Bartonville. It has had a life of its own and now, “a light of its own,” Nunneley says. ■



OPPOSITE Nunneley began the tree-lighting tradition in 2007 to honor her father.
THIS PAGE The 60,000 LEDs have made the tree a famous attraction over the holidays.





Everybody's

BY CLAIRE STEVENS
PHOTOS BY ERIC W. POHL

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Michele Jaquier, a tour guide at Two Hives Honey in Manor, shows guests a beehive frame loaded with bees and honey. Jaquier captures a sample of honey. Atlas, owner Tara Chapman's son, helps with the smoker. Honey production in the U.S. was up last year even as bees face a range of threats.

For years now, all eyes have been on the bees. In the mid-2000s entire colonies of worker bees started disappearing suddenly and mysteriously, raising alarm bells around the world. Since then, there has been serious concern for the insects we depend on to pollinate our crops and native flora. Bees are up against a whole host of threats, including habitat destruction and fragmentation, invasive parasites, and extreme weather.

But things might finally be looking up for honeybees. In the U.S., honey production was up 11% in 2023 after three years of decline, according to the Department of Agriculture.

That's due, at least in part, to the many dedicated defenders of these critical pollinators. Across Texas a growing movement



Beeswax

**Texans help each other
help the mighty honeybee
help the rest of us**

of beekeepers, educators and researchers are working to save the bees. One such defender—Juliana Rangel, a professor of apiculture who runs the Texas A&M University honeybee lab—says those efforts are starting to pay off.

The biggest threat facing the bees, Rangel says, is the varroa mite, a tiny parasite that feeds on bees and spreads viruses among colonies worldwide. Despite measuring just over a millimeter, the pests have devastated U.S. honeybee populations as they've spread since the late 1980s. Some insecticides are effective against varroa but can also have negative effects on bees.

Making matters worse, increasing urbanization has left wild and managed bees with less forage.

Bees also must contend with extreme weather amid a changing climate. The February 2021 winter storm in Texas impacted bee populations unequipped for the cold and delayed the spring blooms they rely on for food. In addition, increasingly hot summers and droughts have left many bees starving. Beekeepers can keep them alive, but they'll struggle in the heat, with poor nutrition leading to no honey yields.

Against these threats, it's impressive that bees can survive in the wild. While beekeepers keep honeybees almost exclusively, native wild bees often live secluded, in nests, making them much harder to study. But they face many of the same challenges as their managed counterparts.

"I love feral colonies because they are kind of like a beacon of not just diversity but also resilience against all of these issues," Rangel says. "If they're alive, it's because they've been able to survive on their own."

Luckily, not all bees have to do it on their own. Beekeepers across the state dedicate themselves to the pollinators.

Suzanne Truhlicka, a Lyntegar Electric Cooperative member who lives in Tahoka, just south of Lubbock, was hooked after a neighbor took her along for a hive removal in 2019. "I just became addicted to bees," Truhlicka says. "The bees are like therapy to me. They're a challenge, every day."

She now maintains 12 hives and sells honey and beeswax products online and at local shops through her business, Flying Fancy Bees. She's one of many Texans who have picked up the trade in recent years. In fact, the number of farms with bees in Texas more than quadrupled from 2012 to 2022, according to the USDA's Census of Agriculture. Texas had 8,939 farms with bees—more than twice as many as the next highest state, Ohio.

One leading contributor to Texas' honeybee craze is a 2012 state law that allows folks with 5–20 acres of land to get a property tax break under an agricultural exemption if they keep bees.

That tax break was what originally prompted Susan Allen to put hives on her North Texas property, deciding that tending bees was going to be a whole lot easier than maintaining



RIGHT Chapman has become focused on beekeeping education.
BELOW A collection of hives in September at Two Hives Honey. The smoke keeps the bees calm while keepers perform hive inspections.



Save the Bees

If you want to do your part to help bees, here are a few steps you can take:

- **Grow native plants.** While a perfectly manicured lawn might be your homeowners association's preference, having a "wild" portion of your lawn where native plants and wildflowers can grow is much preferred by bees.
- **Plant large patches of the same flower.** Bees have site fidelity, meaning they prefer to return to the same patch of flowers again and again. Having a large patch of one species, rather than just a few of each kind of flower, makes it easier for them to do so.

- **If you're ready to begin caring for your own hives,**

now is the ideal time to learn and order a nucleus colony, often just called a nuc, to get started.

Nucs are typically delivered in late spring but often must be ordered in advance.

- **Support local beekeepers.** Find a map of Texas honey retailers on the Texas Beekeepers Association's website, texasbeekeepers.org.



the hay the land had been used for. But what started as a smart financial move quickly grew into a passion as Allen, a Grayson-Collin Electric Cooperative member, became more and more involved in beekeeping, connecting with other local beekeepers through the Grayson County Beekeepers Association.

The more Allen learned about bees, the more she was invested. "They're just so stinking smart," Allen says. "They're fascinating. That's what keeps me going. It's just learning more and more about them."

Beekeeping clubs exist all over Texas, gathering in churches, community centers, restaurants and homes to educate, discuss challenges and collaborate.

Best friends Rosie Lund and Meredith Pace started their honey and beekeeping supply business, Apis Supply, in 2023 and quickly realized they needed a bee club in their neck of West Texas, where high winds and dry weather make keeping bees particularly tricky. The duo helped organize curious beekeepers into the Permian Basin Beekeeping Association, which now meets monthly in Seminole.

"It's a family, really," says Pace, a Lyntegar EC member. "We all just kind of support each other. It's like, 'Oh, hey, I have an extra frame,' or 'I have an extra box,' until you can get stuff in the mail because everything takes a week to get here."

Much like the community inside a hive, the community of beekeepers depends on each other. And they depend especially on people like Tara Chapman, whose beekeeping venture goes well beyond honey production, aiming to get more people informed and excited about bees.

Chapman took a beekeeping class in 2013 while looking for a new career after 10 years at the CIA. She became fascinated with bees and decided to trade war zones for worker bees, starting with just two hives maintained by her and a friend. Her operation has grown to more than 300 hives at Two Hives Honey in Manor, just east of Austin.

Chapman doesn't get to spend as much time "in bees" as she used to but now focuses on beekeeping education. In addition to tours of the honey ranch, honey tastings and

beekeeping classes, Two Hives offers a six-month hands-on "beek" apprenticeship program. Last month Chapman published *For the Bees: A Handbook for Happy Beekeeping*.

"Beekeeping is the most nuanced form of ag there is," she says. "I will argue to my death that that is true, and it's not totally intuitive to everybody."

Chapman set out to teach people about the "bananas" world of bees, making sure they understand basic bee biology first. Inside each hive is an entire society, she explains, with a queen at the center. But the queen, while important, isn't really in charge. Honeybees make decisions democratically, communicating through pheromones and "waggle dances."

"It just so defies logic of how humans live and exist," she says. Understanding the foreign world of bees is one of the things that can make keeping them so challenging.

"I've made every mistake, and I think it's why my greatest asset is my ability to teach beekeeping," Chapman says. Those mistakes have included an incident in which an improperly secured box resulted in roughly 50 pounds of spilled honey in the back of Chapman's truck.

Luckily, she says, bees will quickly come to take care of any honey that's just sitting there for the taking, but "while they're taking care of it, it's going to be a terrifying sight for the layman that happens to be walking by your driveway."

Chapman's and others' efforts haven't been in vain. Rangel says the increased awareness and interest have been important and that honeybees are doing better now than when the public first learned about collapsing colonies—though it's too soon to say they're in the clear. Honeybee numbers can fluctuate year-to-year as environmental factors change, but Rangel says there's been a trend of about a 1% increase in the U.S. managed population each year.

"In the last 15 years, the number of studies on honeybees and honeybee health have grown exponentially, which increases our understanding of all the issues that they face," she says.

"Increased awareness by the public and the farming community, I think, is what's mostly helping." ■

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WINTER STORM URI DEBT QUESTIONS

Two of the most frequent questions I hear from members are when will Tri-County Electric Cooperative (TCEC) pay off the Winter Storm Uri debt and how much debt has been paid off.

During the 2024 Annual Meeting and the September *Current Conversations*, I covered TCEC’s other debt, how it was incurred and how it is being addressed. We acknowledged that one or two market events in ERCOT with high wholesale power prices could have pushed TCEC over the financial edge in 2024. So, now we will address the Winter Storm Uri debt, and how TCEC is moving from the problem to the solution.

TCEC WINTER STORM URI DEBT

TRANCHE	ORIGINAL	CURRENT BALANCE AS OF 9/30/24	INITIAL REPAYMENT PERIOD	REVISED DUE DATE
1	\$60 Million	\$58,379,772	Fall 2024	2047
2	\$50 Million	\$48,087,147	2025	2047
3	\$50 Million	\$48,435,454	2025	2047
4	\$50 Million	\$48,376,796	2032	TBD*
5	\$50 Million	\$48,421,531	2032	TBD*
6	\$60 Million	\$58,190,905	2032	TBD*
7	\$100 Million	\$97,108,504	2037	TBD*
8	\$65 Million	\$63,162,490	2042	TBD*

**Anticipated refinancing of debt for full 25-year period ending in 2047*

The first \$60 million of the \$485 million debt from Winter Storm Uri and the subsequent 2022 Brazos bankruptcy was coming due in October. In 2025, two additional \$50 million loan payments would be due.

The Winter Storm Uri debt was structured into eight tranches, or slices of debt, each with different terms, due dates, and risk profiles. This allowed the cooperative to meet an urgent financial need in 2022, but it kicked the can down the road until the bill came due.

The bill was now due, and TCEC did not have the cash to pay it.

The Brazos Rider, the monthly fee established to help pay down this debt over a period of 25 years, had not generated the cash flow needed to make this large lump sum payment. It was never designed to.

When it was initially established, the rider was structured to generate a reliable, though variable income stream based on members’ energy usage to pay down the debt over 25 years.

TCEC faced a mismatch in revenue from the rider revenue and debt expense. Further complicating the financial picture was that the initial \$60 million loan due in October had been an interest-only loan, meaning virtually all of the principal was coming due.

Under this debt structure, TCEC would not have been able to pay off the debt in 25 years. Perhaps not even in 50 years. Debt payments would have been used to cover interest costs first, making it difficult to pay down the original loan amount.

TCEC’s management team needed a plan to relieve the financial pressure. Fast.

With support from the Board of Directors, the management team consolidated the first three loans in October. In doing so, the cooperative will be able to lock in a fixed interest rate and extend the payment

deadlines to align with the 23 remaining years of the Brazos Rider. Now, the incoming revenue stream matches payment term for these three loans. The cooperative can now pay down the principal faster while safeguarding against inflationary pressures.

I am proud to share that multiple lenders competed to refinance the Winter Storm Uri debt. The loans were placed with Farm Credit Services (FCS) and facilitated by CoBank, one of the largest private credit providers to the U.S. rural economy.

FCS acknowledged TCEC’s steps in shoring up its finances and reducing its overall debt load by selling off underutilized assets (land, vehicles, substations), which would not impact our distribution system’s reliability. They recognized the cooperative for implementing financial controls and increasing budget transparency. FCS also looked favorably on TCEC’s long-term sustainable power supply plan for 2025-2029. This pricing certainty gave FCS the confidence to refinance the Winter Storm Uri debt with favorable terms.

Looking forward, TCEC will likely restructure the remaining Winter Storm Uri debt following the same process and pattern as with the first three loans. In the near term, the focus is implementing the new power supply strategy, an essential step in supporting the cooperative’s financial health. I’ll provide additional details on these plans in December’s *Current Conversations*.



Scott Spence
President & CEO

TCEC MEMBER CONNECTION

With a commitment to transparency in mind, Tri-County Electric Cooperative (TCEC) is excited to launch Member Connection, a series of informal, in-person meetings designed to foster open dialogue between TCEC and its members.

Starting this January, members will have the opportunity to bring questions, comments, and concerns directly to TCEC’s leadership team, ensuring their voices are heard and considered as we plan for the cooperative’s future.

Recognizing the diverse needs and interests of TCEC’s membership, Member Connection aims to increase understanding around important topics including cooperative plans, member services, and operations. In each session, members will gain insights into how TCEC is working to meet the challenges of today’s energy landscape while providing affordable and reliable electric service.

Meetings will be held in communities across TCEC’s districts to make participation convenient for all members. Keep an eye on future issues of *Texas Co-op Power* magazine and *Current Conversations* for more details on timing and locations. TCEC’s leadership looks forward to connecting with members and working together to shape the cooperative’s path forward.

Tri-County Electric Cooperative’s 2025
SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM
*Available to high school seniors

FIFTY \$5,000 SCHOLARSHIPS



APPLY TODAY!

The TCEC Scholarship Program is not funded by members’ electric bills. It is paid for using unclaimed funds, such as capital credit checks, that have not been cashed in three years. Texas law permits electric cooperatives to use a portion of these funds for limited purposes such as scholarships. These dollars would go to the state’s general funds if TCEC did not repurpose them and reinvest the funds back into the local community.

STAYING INFORMED WITH CURRENT CONVERSATIONS AND MYTRICOUNTYTX

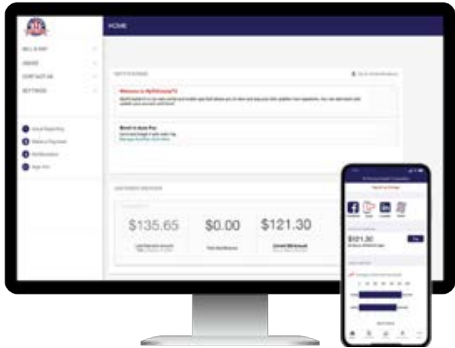
Keeping up with the latest news, events, and announcements is easier than ever for Tri-County Electric Cooperative (TCEC) members. Both launched in 2024, TCEC’s online member portal and monthly e-newsletter help members stay informed and connected from anywhere.

MYTRICOUNTYTX: ONLINE MEMBER PORTAL

Nearly 80% of TCEC members have signed up to use MyTriCountyTX, a one-stop source for managing account details with the click of a button. The online portal is an easy tool for members to stay up-to-date on their accounts and access services anytime.

MyTriCountyTX, members can check account balances, review billing and payment history, and track energy usage over time. Setting up online bill pay is easy, and members can enroll in notifications to stay aware of due dates, outages, and more.

If you are signed up for MyTriCountyTX, you are automatically signed up to receive *Current Conversations*, TCEC’s monthly newsletter.



CURRENT CONVERSATIONS: A MONTHLY NEWSLETTER JUST FOR MEMBERS

Every month, *Current Conversations* brings relevant cooperative news directly to members. The newsletter provides timely commentary and news briefs about what is happening at TCEC and pertinent information and reminders so members can get the most out of their membership.

With *Current Conversations* and MyTriCountyTX, members can stay informed and make the most of their cooperative membership. Whether checking in on the latest news or accessing account details from home, members now have two powerful tools to keep them connected to TCEC.

Not receiving *Current Conversations*? Go to MyTriCountyTX.com to sign up now.



YOUTH TOUR

Your best summer yet starts here

Available to high school
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TCEC will be sponsoring 4 high school students on Youth Tour as part of the cooperative’s commitment to supporting the growth and development of young people in our communities.



WINTER STORM PREPAREDNESS GUIDE FOR TEXAS

As winter approaches, members can stay prepared and informed about severe weather-related risks. The following resources are available and offer helpful information on how to stay prepared and stay warm this winter season.

1. Stay Informed

- Weather Alerts: Local weather reports supply real-time weather alerts, like NOAA Weather Radar at weather.gov.
- Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS): DPS provides resources for statewide weather alerts and road closures at drivetexas.org.

2. Prepare Your Home

- Insulate Pipes: Texas Department of Insurance offers tips on how to prevent your pipes from freezing. Search frozen pipes at tdi.texas.gov.
- Emergency Kit: Check texasready.gov for information on how to develop an emergency kit with essentials, including flashlights, batteries, blankets, and non-perishable food.

3. Prepare Your Vehicle

- Emergency Kit for Your Car: A Car Kit Guide, available on ready.gov, recommends among other items keeping a first aid kit, jumper cables, cell phone charger, ice scraper, snow brush, and more in your car in case of an emergency.

4. Useful Texas and Federal Resources

- Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM): Statewide emergency plans and resources are available at tdem.texas.gov.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): The CDC provides advice on what to do before, during, and after a winter storm at cdc.gov/winter-weather.

Tri-County Electric Cooperative

CONTACT US

200 Bailey Ranch Road

Aledo, Texas 76008

Phone 817-444-3201

Office Hours Monday - Friday, 8 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Web tcectexas.com

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In observance of
the holidays, TCEC
offices will be closed:

Tuesday, Dec. 24

Wednesday, Dec. 25

Wednesday, Jan. 1

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Dear Santa

Small-town Texas children had meager requests in 100-year-old letters to St. Nick

BY BARBARA FINLAY • ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS WORMELL

IN THE HUSTLE and bustle of the holiday season, we often hear nostalgic wishes for the simplicity of Christmases past. It sometimes seems the season has always been a time of stress, hectic shopping, expensive decoration and frantic preparation.

The old folks who grew up in rural Texas know better.

I happened on some powerful reminders of their experiences as I was looking through old newspapers in search of information on my hometown, Fife, 85 miles south of Abilene.

Now almost deserted, Fife in 1910 had more than 500 residents, two general stores, a working gin, post office, two schools and assorted churches.

The spirit of a Texas Christmas in the early 20th century is well captured by letters that Fife children of that era wrote to Santa, letters that were published in pre-Christmas editions of *The Brady Standard*. As is still true today in many small towns, children would write their local paper

with their Christmas wishes.

Their letters are revealing for not only what they say but also for what they don't say. Unlike today's letters to Santa, there were no references to brand-name items—the media-driven advertising age had not yet hit. The children's wishes then were much simpler—often they asked for only one or two items.

The generosity of the children is striking, as they often expressed modest wishes for themselves but also asked Santa to remember children who were less well off.

As I read through the letters, sometimes recognizing names of people I knew only as adults, I feel a wonderful sense of their childhood holiday spirit come to me.

I share a few of these letters, written by Fife children in the 1920s and early 1930s, in the hope that readers might recapture some of the same spirit of generosity, simplicity and fellowship in this holiday season. ■

Dear Santa:

As Christmas is near at hand we thought we would write and let you know the things which we would like most as presents. W.D. wants a school dinner bucket, a big rubber ball; Nellie Fay wants a doll, sand bucket and ball; Gladys wants a doll and we also want some nuts, apples and oranges.

Your little friends,

W.D., Nellie Fay and Gladys Bradley (1920)

Please bring me a pop gun, a sack of marbles and some candy and nuts.

Your little friend,

Cyril Farmer (1920)

After reading your letter in *The Brady Standard* I thought it was about time to write to you. I hardly know what to ask you for as you have been so good to me every Xmas. The only thing I select is a pair of bedroom slippers.

Your friend,

Voncile Duderstadt (1920)

I would like to have some chocolate candy and bananas and oranges and apples and peaches.

Your friend,

Lillian Roberts (1921)

Will you please bring my little brother and I a knife and a pair of nice leather gloves. And Santa, if you will, please bring me a nice fountain pen and my little brother a car. I have a little sister 3 years old. Bring her a doll that will say mamma and a little doll bed and lots of nuts and candy.

Love to Santa,

Charles and Floyd Tedder (1923)

Will you please bring me a scooter-scoot, a horn, a football, a blackboard and a box of handkerchiefs for Christmas and if you have anything else for me send it to some other little boy who has no parents. I try to be a good boy.

Your loving friend,

A. M. Finlay, Jr. (1924)

We have tried to be good little children. Please bring me a velocipede, a tinker toy set, some fire crackers, a ball and some caps for my gun you brought me last Christmas. Please bring Little Sister a kiddie car, a doll that says "Mamma," and a doll bed. Please bring us lots of fruit, nuts and candy. Bye-bye, Santa.

From

John Gordon and Elizabeth Maurine Tedder (1924)

I will tell you what I want. I want an embroidery set, set of dishes and a doll. I won't ask for too much, as I'm afraid you can't get around to all the children.

Your friend,

Una Ranne (1925)

I will write you a little letter and tell you of a few things I would like to have. I would like to have a new doll, as my old one has lost a leg, and I want a doll bed. I want a doll that can walk and talk, and I would like to have some little dresses, also.

Dear Santa, don't forget my little brothers, J.D. and Sid, they want a coaster wagon.

Lovingly,

Charlotte Painter (1925)

I thought I would write while I have time. I want a watch and a pistol. I want a toy flute and a toy truck and a pencil sharpener. Thank you.

From your friend,

Tom Bradley, Jr. (1927)

I've been the very best little boy lately, and if you don't hurry and come, I don't know if I can stay good much longer. I just want a few things this year, as Daddy says Santa is as poor as he is. I'd like a tractor, a car, a ball, a bat, gloves, and a lot of fruit and candy and nuts.

From

Leeman Roberts (1930)

I sent a letter to *The Brady Standard*. I want you to know I am going to write to *The Brady Standard* every Christmas. I want you to bring me a cap and a sweater for my doll and a big ball. There are many other little boys and girls that want Christmas presents. So I will go now.

Yours truly,

Golda Eileen Utsey (1930)

I have been a good little boy. Will you please bring me a velocipede, a flashlight, some apples and candy. Bring Grandpa a pair of socks and I'll put some corn at the gate for your reindeer.

Your friend,

Robert Pearce (1930)

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Black-Eyed Peace

Y2K upended New Year's traditions for Texans ready for anything

BY CHRIS BURROWS • ILLUSTRATION BY TARA JACOBY

AS KATIE WILLIAMS shopped in the run-up to Christmas 1999, the holiday wasn't on her list. The Kaufman resident had loaded up her cart with flashlights and batteries, toilet paper, water, and crates of food.

"I really think something's going to happen," Williams told *The Dallas Morning News*. "We have a pond in case we run out of water for the toilet. We can boil it if we have to drink it."

Michelle Quintiliani and her family were planning to hit the road after Christmas, leaving behind their home near the Comanche Peak nuclear plant southwest of Fort Worth.

"We're going to open our presents and then we're gone," Quintiliani told the *Waco Tribune-Herald*. "It's probably

stupid, but I don't want to chance it."

By December 30, shoppers in Victoria were hitting H-E-B hard.

"Today is busier than expected," a store manager told the *Victoria Advocate*. "This is the kind of day we expected tomorrow."

Twenty-five years ago this month, in the weeks before a new millennium, hardy Texans joined the rest of the world in making anxious last-minute preparations.

Computer experts had spent months warning that the Y2K bug might take down computer systems—and a society that was increasingly reliant on them—at the stroke of midnight. Breathless coverage took stock of the preparations as global industries—banks, utilities,

airlines—assured folks that the lights would stay on if everybody did their part to gird against glitches caused by computer systems not built with the foresight to handle the "00" in "2000."

For its part, the state of Texas spent a quarter-billion dollars on upgrades; the U.S. more than \$100 billion; and across the world, \$300 billion.

Texans weren't overly concerned though. The results of a statewide poll in October 1999 found 55% weren't worried about serious problems. One in 3 expected the lights to go out.

But they didn't.

On New Year's Eve, celebrations in Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth and Houston tallied more than 320,000 total revelers.

Headline writers were ready. In the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*: "Y2K? Why Worry?"

San Angelo Standard-Times: "Y(awn)2K-Fear'd bug doesn't bite."

Wichita Falls' *Times Record News*: "It wasn't the night the lights went out in Texas after all."

The bug may have been a bust, but Leon Kappelmann, a University of North Texas professor who worked on several technical committees in preparation for Y2K, says the world learned a lot.

"In terms of IT management, many of us learned what a mess we had just about everywhere and realized it was past time to professionalize and improve our practices," he said. "IT had proliferated so quickly and completely over the 40 years prior to 1995, our ability to effectively and efficiently manage it had simply not kept up."

And besides, some Texans hadn't wasted any worries on Y2K.

C.M. Dehtam told the *Tribune-Herald* that he planned to be selling fruit out of his pickup on New Year's Eve.

"If it's going to happen, it's going to happen," he said. "It's not something I have any control over. I got other things to worry about, like what I'm going to eat tonight." ■

Cookie Exchange

Be the star of the swap with these family gems

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

One of my favorite cake flavors transforms into cookies for a delicious addition to your cookie exchange. With a vibrant Christmas red hue; soft, chewy texture; and a crunchy topping, they're decadent enough to feel indulgent and light enough to enjoy more than one on Christmas morning.

Red Velvet Cookies

1½ cups flour
2 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
¾ teaspoon baking powder
½ teaspoon salt
½ cup (1 stick) butter, softened
1 cup sugar
1 egg
1 tablespoon buttermilk
1 tablespoon red food color
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
½ cup white chocolate chips
½ cup semisweet chocolate chunks
White sanding sugar

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.
2. In a bowl, whisk together flour, cocoa powder, baking powder and salt.
3. In another bowl, cream butter and sugar with a hand mixer on medium speed until light and fluffy. Reduce mixer speed to low and add egg, buttermilk, food color and vanilla.
4. Add flour mixture in two batches, scraping down the sides and bottom of the bowl and mixing until well combined. Fold in the white chocolate chips and semisweet chocolate chunks. Cover and chill the dough in the refrigerator at least 1 hour.
5. Place 2-tablespoon scoops of dough 2 inches apart on baking sheets. Use the bottom of a glass to gently press cookies to about ½ inch thick. Sprinkle with sanding sugar.
6. Bake 10–12 minutes, until cookies are slightly puffy and set on the edges. Allow cookies to cool and sprinkle with additional sanding sugar if desired.

MAKES 2 DOZEN COOKIES

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



Grandma Melton's Sand Tarts

LAURA MCNABB
PEDERNALES EC

These are considered the official cookies of Texas, at least according to McNabb's family. A crescent-shaped cookie that melts in your mouth, leaving a hint of sweetness and buttery goodness, they have a tender, crumbly texture that pairs perfectly with their light, nutty flavor. The delicate powdered sugar coating gives them a festive, snow-dusted appearance, making them a perfect addition to your holiday cookie platter.

- 1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened
- 1 cup powdered sugar, plus more for dusting
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 2 cups flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup finely chopped pecans

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.
2. Using an electric mixer on medium speed, beat butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Add vanilla and mix well. Reduce mixer speed to low. Add flour and salt, mixing until almost combined.
3. Gently fold in pecans with hands, being careful not to overmix. Chill dough 30 minutes.
4. With floured hands, shape 1 tablespoon of dough at a time into a crescent. Place crescents 1 inch apart on baking sheets.
5. Bake 12–14 minutes or until the edges are lightly browned. Allow cookies to cool about 5 minutes on baking sheets then transfer to cooling racks. While the cookies are still warm, dust with powdered sugar.

MAKES 3 DOZEN COOKIES



\$500 WINNER

Flonnie's Orange Slice Cookies

JENNIFER KEITH
WOOD COUNTY EC



Keith found her grandmother Flonnie's recipe for these cookies in her mama's recipe box, and they have become a holiday staple in her house. These cookies are a delightful and nostalgic treat. The candies melt slightly during baking, creating pockets of gooey, fruity goodness throughout. A soft, chewy cookie with bursts of citrusy flavor in each bite is the merriest sweet for gifting this holiday season.

MAKES 5 DOZEN COOKIES

- 2 cups (4 sticks) butter, softened
- 1 cup sugar
- 2¼ cups brown sugar
- 3 eggs
- 2 teaspoons baking soda
- 3 tablespoons warm water
- 6 cups flour
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 2 cups sweetened coconut flakes
- 2 cups chopped walnuts
- 1 package orange slices candy (10 ounces), diced

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.
2. In a large bowl, cream butter, sugar and brown sugar until light and fluffy. Add eggs one at a time, scraping down sides of bowl after each addition.
3. In a small bowl, dissolve baking soda in warm water.
4. To the large bowl, add baking soda mixture, flour and cinnamon and mix until incorporated. Fold in coconut, walnuts and candy slices.
5. Use a medium cookie scoop to place dough onto a baking sheet, leaving 1 inch between each cookie.
6. Bake 11–14 minutes, until lightly golden brown.

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

THE WHOLE ENCHILADA DUE DECEMBER 10
There are endless ways to fill an enchilada. Share your favorite filling to roll up in a tortilla and you could win \$500. Enter by December 10.
UPCOMING: SUMMER PASTAS DUE JANUARY 10



RECIPE PHOTOS: JASON DAVID PAGE. WINNER PHOTO: COURTESY JENNIFER KEITH

CONTINUED ON PAGE 29 >



HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

In the magazine and on [TexasCoopPower.com](https://www.texascooppower.com), we make it easy to shop for friends and family.



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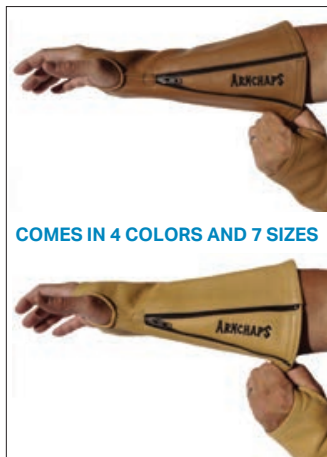
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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27

Grandma's Italian Chocolate Spice Cookies

MARY BOLSINGER
GRAYSON-COLLIN EC

These cookies have a firm, slightly crunchy exterior that gives way to a soft, cakelike interior. The harmonious blend of cocoa, cinnamon, cloves and vanilla creates a warm, spiced flavor that's perfect for the season. Chocolate is complemented by the subtle warmth of coffee, making each bite a cozy experience.

COOKIES

- 2 cups flour
- ½ cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 2½ teaspoons baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground cloves
- 2 eggs
- ½ cup sugar
- ½ cup olive oil



- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 4 tablespoons brewed black coffee, at room temperature
- ½ cup chopped walnuts

ICING

- 2¼ cups powdered sugar
- 3–4 tablespoons milk
- Sprinkles (optional)

- 1. COOKIES:** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.
- 2.** In a bowl, sift together flour, cocoa, baking powder, salt, cinnamon and cloves.
- 3.** In another bowl, whisk together eggs and sugar until sugar is dissolved. Stir in olive oil, vanilla and coffee.
- 4.** Add the flour mixture and stir until smooth. Stir in the walnuts.
- 5.** Scoop the dough with a medium cookie scoop. Roll into balls with floured hands. Place on baking sheets about 2 inches apart.
- 6.** Bake 10–12 minutes.
- 7. ICING:** Whisk together powdered sugar and milk until smooth.
- 8.** Dip the tops of cookies into the icing mixture and top with sprinkles.

MAKES 4 DOZEN COOKIES



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Experience Tres Palacios Bay like a French explorer—without the sinking

BY CHET GARNER

THERE I STOOD in the middle of Tres Palacios Bay, part of Matagorda Bay, aboard a sailing vessel named La Petite Belle. The crew and I had set out from Palacios into the same gulf waters that French explorer René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, had sailed 338 years before.

Hopefully, our seafaring adventure wouldn't meet the same fate as the French explorer's crew.

Our expedition started in the town's historic district at the City by the Sea Museum, where every era of Palacios' colorful past is brought to life through exhibits and artifacts. Most interesting (and tragic) is the story of La Salle's doomed voyage to Texas. La Belle, one of his four ships, wrecked on a sandbar and sank into the bay's muddy bottom in 1686. Luckily the Frenchman was already on land, exploring Texas.

In the 1990s, archaeologists found the ship and resurrected its hull along with 1.6 million French artifacts. The preserved remains are on display at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin.

La Petite Belle, a half-sized, 30-foot-long re-creation of the original, now sails the high seas of Texas, giving tourists a taste of maritime history and adventure. The jolly crew of museum volunteers seemed seaworthy as they called out commands across the deck and navigated our ship using 17th-century techniques.

I simply walked around, rattling ropes and trying not to expose my greenhorn lack of sailing knowledge. While this isn't a pirate ship, I jumped with excitement when the crew announced it was time to fire the cannons. We loaded them up with pyrotechnics and yelled "fire in the hole" as we shot at imaginary ships.

The ship is small, but the adventure is surely Texas-sized. ■

ABOVE Chet, aboard La Petite Belle, ponders a 17th-century existence.

TCP Watch the video on our website and see all his Explorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



Know Before You Go

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

DECEMBER

7

Castroville **Castroville Conservation Society Candlelight Home Tour**, (830) 708-5680, castrovilleconservationsociety.org

Fredericksburg **Pearl Harbor Commemoration**, (830) 997-8600, pacificwarmuseum.org

Kerrville **Christmas Concert**, (830) 321-0303, hillcountrychorale.org

La Grange **Beat Root Revival**, (979) 968-9944, thebugleboy.org

Marble Falls **Christmas Home Tour**, (830) 798-2157, fallsmuseum.org

Palestine **Christmas on Main**, (903) 723-3014, visitpalestine.com

Sealy **Fantasy of Lights Parade**, (979) 885-3222, sealychamber.com

Woodville **Christmas Twilight Tour**, (409) 283-2272, heritage-village.org

Richardson **[7, 14] Hot Cocoa Crawl**, citylinedfw.com

8

George West **Church to Church Christmas Story Stroll**, (361) 449-5396, facebook.com/firstbaptistgeorgewest

12

New Braunfels **New Braunfels Conservation Society Christmas Market**, (830) 629-2943, newbraunfelsconservation.org

13

Seguin **[13-14] Country Christmas**, (830) 379-0933, texagedu.org

Shiner [13-14] Christmas Village, (361) 594-3830, shinerfumc.org

Kyle [13-15] A Night in Bethlehem, (512) 268-7044, f-pc.org

Montalba [13-15] Walk Through Bethlehem, (903) 549-2319, montalbabaptistchurch.com

Palestine [13-15] A Seussified Christmas Carol and Variety Show, (903) 394-2173, thetexas theater.com

Brenham The 3 Redneck Tenors Christmas, (979) 337-7240, thebarnhillcenter.com

Coldspring Christmas on the Square, (936) 653-2184, coldspringtexas.org

Frankston Frankston Garden Club Christmas Tour of Homes, (817) 913-1982, frankstongardenclubtx.com

Jasper Country Lights, (409) 384-5231, tpwd.texas.gov

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

Corsicana Santa's Sip & Stroll, (903) 654-4851, facebook.com/corsicana mainstreet

Richardson [19-22] Christmas With C.S. Lewis, (972) 744-4650, eisemanncenter.com

Fredericksburg Countdown to 2025: New Year's Eve, (830) 990-2044, fbgtx.org

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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Young Photographers

Slow down a moment and take in the world through the lens of a child. These young photographers are honing their skills and having a great time doing it. One thing's clear: The future of Texas photography is in good hands.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ



1 CRYSTAL CANTU
VICTORIA EC

"I heard a frog and went on an adventure to find him," says Magi Jo, 15.

2 CARLY LATHAM
HEART OF TEXAS EC

"The fascinated bluebonnets are so exciting to find. My sister and I always try to see who can find the most variations," says Byron Ace Latham, 10.

3 MARK GARTON
BRYAN TEXAS UTILITIES

My son, 9, learns to take pictures of Texas bluebonnets at Fort Parker State Park.

4 LAURA DAVIS
BANDERA EC

Blakely Barton, 2, has an impromptu photo session with her papa, Brad Davis.



Upcoming Contests

DUE DEC 10 Characters

DUE JAN 10 Patterns

DUE FEB 10 Family Vacation



Enter online at TexasCoopPower.com/contests.

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



Emily's Wish

Christmas feels bleak when a family's hearts are in two places

BY FRED AFFLERBACH
ILLUSTRATION BY
THE BRAVE UNION

ON CHRISTMAS EVE 2022, it was my honor to tuck into bed my 6-year-old granddaughter, Emily. We said nighttime prayers, then she asked Santa for a bigger bike, stick-on earrings and an art set. I thought she was finished, but after a pause, she continued.

"I wish Mommy would be home from the hospital so that the whole family can be together for Christmas."

I closed Emily's door behind me. But I left pieces of my heart scattered on her bedroom floor.

Emily's mother, my daughter-in-law, Kim Afflerbach, delivered healthy twin boys five days before at St. David's Women's Center of Texas in Austin. Shortly after delivery, she experienced cardiac arrest. The cesarean section surgery apparently opened a Pandora's

box of stagnant blood clots that gushed throughout her body.

Her heart stopped beating after one nefarious clot lodged in her main artery. Fast-acting nurses and doctors performed CPR and rushed her to the intensive care unit, where she remained Christmas Eve.

Christmas morning, Emily held little sister Avery's hand as they walked downstairs together. Her shiny new bike awaited. Avery rushed to a Peppa Pig playhouse, dropped to her knees and squealed in delight.

The tree glowed in the early-morning light, and their nana removed golden-brown pigs in a blanket from the oven. I sipped hot coffee laced with Irish cream.

It looked like Christmas. It smelled like Christmas. It even tasted like Christmas. But it didn't feel like Christmas. There was something missing—Mommy.

Christmas Day at a hospital is a rather solemn occasion. Folks carry on the best they can. A skeleton crew in the cafeteria dishes out turkey and dressing and gravy. Doctors and nurses and families of patients smile while passing in corridors and sharing elevators.

Kim remained sedated. She had received multiple transfusions by then and would need more. Yet doctors remained optimistic. They eschewed invasive surgery. And we waited.

Finally, Kim moved out of the ICU on New Year's Eve and into a private room.

Come January 5, Emily's father, Eric, pushed Kim's wheelchair down hospital hallways toward the valet parking. Nurses, doctors and staff lined their exit route, clapping and waving, holding out flowers and balloons, and offering heartfelt goodbyes.

It's often said that a request delayed is a request denied. But that's not always so! Emily's entire family celebrated Christmas 2023 at home together. Emily and Avery, twin brothers Bryson and Jackson, Daddy—and especially Mommy.

Although a year late, Emily's Christmas wish came true. ■



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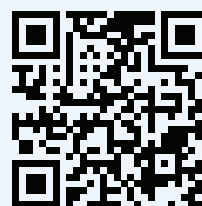
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