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The blueprint for Texas’ iconic lone star is somewhat of a mystery.

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Have you ever said to yourself “I'd love to get a computer, if only I could figure out how to use it.” Well, you’re not alone. Computers were supposed to make our lives simpler, but they've gotten so complicated that they are not worth the trouble. With all of the “pointing and clicking” and “dragging and dropping” you're lucky if you can figure out where you are. Plus, you are constantly worrying about viruses and freeze-ups. If this sounds familiar, we have great news for you. There is finally a computer that's designed for simplicity and ease of use. It’s the WOW Computer, and it was designed with you in mind. This computer is easy-to-use, worry-free and literally puts the world at your fingertips.

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Your VFD Might Need You
In my lifetime, I’ve been a member of five volunteer fire departments [Putting Others First, October 2019]. More than once, I’ve been the only firefighter responding to a fire or wreck in our district, having to rely on manpower and equipment from a neighboring community to assist. Chances are good your local volunteer fire department needs you. Check it out—you might be glad you did.

DOUG EARNEST | CHANDLER
TRINITY VALLEY EC

Fateful Connection to REA
My father, Walter Smith, joined the Rural Electrification Administration in 1949 as a young electrical engineer [Our Fearless Forefather, August 2019]. By 1951, he was running electric service into the Missouri Ozarks for the REA. Family folklore says that Dad attended an REA conference in Salt Lake City in June 1951 and was scheduled to return home on a flight with his REA co-workers.

However, I was born in Missouri while Dad was at the conference, so when a seat opened up on an earlier flight, the REA group nominated Dad to return home early to greet his new-born son. As a result, Dad was not on United Airlines Flight 610 when it crashed, killing six REA employees, including George Haggard. I suspect that Mr. Haggard, as a top REA administrator at the conference, probably had a hand in getting Dad on that earlier flight.

ROD SMITH | NEW BRAUNFELS
PEDERNALES EC

Before He Went Uptown
The lanky, bespectacled, rather shy young man strumming a cheap guitar in my Grandmother “Honey” Elliott’s rooming house in Pecos in the early 1950s was known to us only as Uncle Joe’s helper. Uncle Joe was an entomologist sent by the Texas ag department to inspect the insect population. The easygoing musician was tasked with catching and counting bugs.

Every evening after supper, we would gather in the kitchen for an impromptu concert. I was about 8, and this was just a normal grandparent visit for me. A few years later, when he topped the charts, I realized I had spent the summer with Roy Orbison [Wink’s Spectacle, September 2019]. Ain’t Texas grand?

BRUCE BREEN | MCLEAN
GREENBELT EC

Childhood in the Big Bend
As a young kid who grew up in Coleman, we had many wonderful trips to Alpine, Marfa and the Big Bend—great folks and amazing scenery for sure [Big Bend’s Golden Triangle, September 2019]. My father was a dentist in Coleman for many years and, in the early 1980s, even opened up a small dental office in Alpine for a couple days a week.

TOMMY WHITE | AUBURN
BEND’S GOLDEN TRIANGLE

Remembering Cliburn
In 1959, I was a senior at the El Dorado, Arkansas, high school. Van Cliburn had just won the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow [Charming the Soviets, October 2019]. True to his previously scheduled performances, he played to a full house in El Dorado.

DEPHANIE CATES | LIBERTY HILL | PEDERNALES EC

Fit to a Tee
By the Numbers [Currents item about the odds of a hole-in-one, September 2019] had an extra special meaning to me. My 16-year-old grandson Clayton had just gotten a hole-in-one in his Farmington, Arkansas, high school golf tournament.

HELEN MCCAHEY | WILLIS POINT
TRINITY VALLEY EC

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HAPPENINGS

New Year’s Eve Party in Itasca

Three artists with impressive musical bloodlines will provide the entertainment for a **NEW YEAR’S EVE PARTY** in **ITASCA**. Whey Jennings, grandson of Waylon Jennings, was born and raised in Grand Prairie. Thomas Gabriel is the oldest grandchild of Johnny and June Carter Cash. And Cagney Frizzell, named after James Cagney, is Lefty Frizzell’s nephew.

Guests are welcome to bring their own food and beverages to the HILCO Civic & Event Center party **DECEMBER 31**. The event will include a 50-50 raffle and drawings for other items. Tickets start at $20. For $40, guests get a meet and greet with the musicians.

HILCO Electric Cooperative built the Central Texas venue last year and hosts about 10 community events per month.

**INFO** ➔ **(214) 212-5798, bit.ly/NYEItasca**

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PHILANTHROPY

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ALMANAC

**CO-OPS ARE BORN**

The cooperative movement turns 175 years old December 21. On that date in 1844, 28 workers opened a cooperative store in Rochdale, England. Initially, the store carried four key items: butter, sugar, flour and oatmeal.

**1940s**

1945 Charlie Dunn, bootmaker to the stars, begins his career at Capitol Saddlery in Austin.

1948 *Red River*, a fictional account of the first cattle drive on the Chisholm Trail from Texas to Kansas starring John Wayne, is released.

1948 James A. Michener, who spent the final years of his life in Austin, wins a Pulitzer Prize for his book *Tales of the South Pacific*.

**1950s**

1952 Dancer and actress Cyd Charisse of Amarillo achieves star status opposite Gene Kelly in *Singin’ in the Rain*.

1956 Grace Kelly marries Prince Rainier III of Monaco. Her bridesmaids’ dresses are designed by Neiman Marcus of Dallas.

**1960s**

1960 John Wayne’s *The Alamo* is released.

1966 Katherine Anne Porter, who was born in Indian Creek, wins the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *The Collected Stories*.

1968 Poet and artist Consuelo “Chelo” González Amezcua has a solo exhibition at the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio. It’s the first time she is recognized for her brand of Texas filigree art.

IN THE 75 YEARS since Texas Co-op Power debuted in July 1944, Texas and Texans have left an indelible mark in film, theater, literature and fashion—from Charlie Dunn to Sissy Spacek.

PAIRY ARTS: FOTOMENDER | SHUTTERSTOCK.COM | CHARRO: CAB ARCHIVE | GETTY IMAGES

5 Texas Co-op Power December 2019
Elf in Kaufman Has His Own Toy Story

WHEN JERRY REICHERT sees a 2-by-12-by-12-inch board at a construction site, he knows it is likely to end up on the scrap pile. That is fine with him because the scrap fits into his plans for Christmas.

“When I see that piece of lumber,” Reichert says, “I see a toy.” Actually, he sees one of 22 varieties of toys. These comprise the 5,000 wooden playthings made each year by volunteers at Hobby Crafters and distributed to children in North Texas by more than 20 churches and charities.

Reichert and his wife, Wilda, live in Kaufman and have been members of Trinity Valley Electric Cooperative since the early 1970s. Two or three days a week, Reichert, 81, drives more than an hour to the Hobby Crafters workshop in Garland where he holds the unofficial title of head elf. “I took over from the guy who founded it,” Reichert says. “That was 38 years ago.”

Hobby Crafters was founded in 1944 by Dallas physician Arch McNeill, who organized friends and patients to produce toys for underprivileged children. Reichert took over in 1981 at McNeill’s request. “It’s always been strictly volunteer,” Reichert says. “You can look at my checkbook and see for yourself.” Reichert retired in 1997 from his 39-year career selling electronics for Toshiba.

The Hobby Crafters workshop houses 39 machines, including a variety of power saws and sanders, but not every one of the 40 volunteers needs to operate a power tool. “I tell people if they can lay a form on a board and draw a line around it, they’re hired,” Reichert says.

INFO ➤ hobbycrafters.org

1970s
1974 Wichita Falls’ Tommy Tune, actor, dancer, singer, choreographer and director, wins the first of his 10 Tony Awards—best featured actor in a musical, for Seesaw.
1974 Cadillac Ranch is created outside Amarillo.

1980s
1980 Comer Cottrell Jr. relocates Pro-Line Corporation, maker of Jheri curl hair products, to Dallas. It becomes the largest black-owned firm in the Southwest.
1981 Sissy Spacek of Quitman wins the best actress Academy Award for her portrayal of Loretta Lynn in Coal Miner’s Daughter.
1986 Larry McMurtry of Archer City wins the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for Lonesome Dove.

1990s
1990 Friday Night Lights by H.G. Bissinger is published. It is adapted into a movie of the same name in 2004 and leads to a widely acclaimed TV series that ran 2006-2011.
1996 The first Texas Book Festival takes place, in Austin.
1997 Arlen isn’t on the Texas map, but when the animated TV series King of the Hill debuts, the characters make it feel like it could be the next town over.

2000s
2002 Kendra Scott starts her eponymous jewelry company in a spare bedroom of her Austin home.
2003 Robert A. Caro wins a Pulitzer Prize in biography for Master of the Senate, one of four biographical volumes he’s written about Lyndon B. Johnson.
2013 The first episode of HGTV’s Fixer Upper, shot in Waco, airs.
A star is born

Texas’ iconic lone star might trace origins to 1817 Mexican coins

By Clay Coppedge

A lone star adorns the Texas state flag and the state seal. It appears on the U.S. Mint’s Texas commemorative quarter, and it is the state’s official gemstone cut. Texas is the Lone Star State because we Texans are proud of our beginnings as an independent republic. According to history and mythology, nothing symbolizes Texas’ spirit more eloquently than a lone five-pointed star.

But who first came up with the idea of the lone star, and who was the first person to use the lone star as a symbol of Texas?

A lone star showed up as a symbol of Texas as early as 1819 on the flag of the ill-fated Long Expedition, an early attempt by Anglo Americans, led by James Long, to wrest control of Texas from Spain. That flag, believed to be the first Texas flag to feature a single star, incorporated 13 alternating red and white stripes with a single white star in the upper left corner. Eli Harris, a frontier Texas printer and a leader of the Long Expedition, believed he invented the symbol and wrote to Texas President Mirabeau Lamar to that effect in 1841. “I established the flag which you now use,” he wrote. “I was proud of being the man to establish the star and flag of Texas.”

George Childress, author of the Texas Declaration of Independence, adopted a resolution at the general convention of the provisional government in 1836 resolving that “a single star of five points, either of gold or silver, be adopted as the peculiar emblem of this republic.” The Texas Congress officially adopted the current lone star flag on January 25, 1839.

According to Houston numismatist James Bevill, the lone star—five-pointed with a dot in the middle—originated with an obscure San Antonio minter in 1817 when the central government in Mexico authorized a series of coins to be minted in San Antonio for local use.
The Mexican government withdrew Barrera’s authority to mint the coins after about 20 months, possibly because minting coins in 1817 was difficult and the volume required presented a challenge. Barrera would have been using a steel die, or mold, to strike an imprint on the blank copper planchet (metal disc from which coins are made) with a hammer. The authority to mint the coins went to José Antonio de la Garza in 1818.

No records confirm how many jolas Barrera and Garza actually minted, but only nine of the crude coins survived. A collector found five of the nine 1817 jolas in 2004 in a coin shop.

The 1817 jolas preceded the Long Expedition by two years and the Texas revolution by almost two decades. So what did the lone star flag and emblem represent before it represented Texas as an independent republic?

According to Alamo historian and curator Bruce Winders, in vexillology—the study of flags—stars traditionally represented kingdoms or sovereigns until the end of the 18th century, when the star became a symbol of republican ideology and thus a good fit for the fledgling Texas government.

But, Winders noted, before Texas was the Lone Star State, it shared a flag—and a star—with the Mexican province of Coahuila. That flag was green, white and red with two gold stars in the middle of a white stripe.

"Prior to the Texas revolution, the Texas star flew alongside the star of Coahuila because Texas lacked a sufficient population for separate statehood as established by the Constitution of 1824," Winders wrote in an email. "Officials designated it the Department of Texas and attached it to Coahuila for purposes of governance."

Bevill says the lone star on the jolas might have carried the same symbolism as the flag. “There were Americans in San Antonio de Bexar who thought of Texas as having a separate identity from Mexico,” he explained.

The idea of a Lone Star State might have been a case of Eli Harris and George Childress thinking alike, but Bevill’s research makes it clear that the 1817 and 1818 coins with the five-pointed star and the distinctive raised dot in the middle created the first imprint of a lone star on Texas, the country and the world.

Clay Coppedge, a member of Bartlett EC, lives near Walburg.

In his 2009 book, Paper Republic: The Struggle for Money, Credit and Independence in the Republic of Texas, Bevill wrote that the star on the reverse side of the humble jola “brings us back to the very essence of Texas symbolism.” (Jola is Spanish slang for a coin of small denomination.)

Acting Spanish Gov. Manuel Pardo received authorization from Mexico City to strike small copper coins for San Antonio (then known as San Fernando de Bexar) and selected Manuel Barrera, a local merchant and administrator, to produce 8,000 jolas. These were worth ½ real, which would be about a nickel today. The copper jolas measured 15–20 millimeters in diameter with the minter’s initials and “½” on the obverse, or front of the coin. On the reverse was a five-pointed star with a raised dot in the center.

“It’s hard to say where the influence for a lone star came from,” Bevill says. “These were Spanish coins, after all. We don’t know if the design was done by Barrera or his helper or maybe the alcalde. But that was the first time the lone star representing what is today Texas first appeared.”
Once upon a time, tamales appeared only at big family Christmas gatherings and special occasions in the Rio Grande Valley. Besides being tasty treats, aromatic tamales link multiple generations with memories of happy times together.

Tamales were already on the menu in Mexico and Central America 7,000 years ago, prepared for ceremonies and armies on the move. Then and now, making tamales—spiced corn dough holding a filling of meats or vegetables or sweet fruits—is a complicated, labor-intensive process. That often prompts a tamalada—a lively gathering of friends and family toiling in the kitchen preparing dozens and dozens of tamales.

Starting in 1949, Celia Champion would gather 20–25 female friends and relatives for a tamalada at her Brownsville home as Christmas approached. The women—tamaleras for a day—would make as many as 240 dozen tamales. Wearing multicolored smock aprons and white chef hats, they spread out to workstations around the house to peel garlic, grind spices, stir the masa (corn dough) and grind up the slow-cooked pork shoulders. Others would spread the masa on softened corn husks, top it with meat or beans and three raisins, representing the three wise men, before snuggling the corn husk around it all and freezing the raw tamales.

Family snapshots show the tamalada tradition that Celia Champion started in 1949. Opposite, from left: Champion’s daughter, Chickie Samano; great-granddaughter Karolina Rodero; and granddaughter Celia Galindo with a portrait of the family’s matriarch.
Seventy years later, her daughter, Chickie Samano, and her freckled, curly-haired granddaughter Celia Galindo continue the unbroken tamalada tradition. Two original tamaleras (one 104 years old) attended the six-hour work party in 2018, when the fourth generation included a 12-year-old and Champion’s great-granddaughter. “Once you are in, it’s till death do we part,” Samano says.

“When my grandmother was alive, we would go to the Matamoros mercado to get the best leaves, meat and spices,” Galindo recalls. “Now my cousin Cookie peels the garlic. My friend comes from Seguin with the meat grinder. I grind the spices in a blender.” Nevertheless, she treasures her inherited 200-year-old stone molcajete, worn shiny from decades of grinding spices.

Champion’s original tamalada required arduous labor to make nearly 3,000 tamales. That prompted another tradition. “After making the first few dozen, we drink planter’s punch, and the mariachis arrive. Then the gritos [celebratory shouts] get louder,” Samano explains. “Mother was a party animal, always cooking. On her deathbed, she made me promise we would keep the tamalada.”

But traditions adapt to the times, so the tamalada now gathers in Galindo’s catering business kitchen. “The ladies want to do less and party more, so we make about 50–60 dozen tamales,” she says. Still, that’s 720 tamales. The women and their families eat the tamales at a Christmas Eve open house, on the religious feast of Candelaria on February 2 and later that month during Charro Days, a celebration of binational cultures and traditions.

The tamaleras also meet on January 6, Three Kings Day or the Epiphany, to eat the wreath-shaped sweet bread called rosca.
Inside De Alba Bakery, smiles of a happy crowd get wider as the tamale aroma envelops them. They know from experience the subtly spiced masa of the tamales is as soft as butter and surrounds a savory filling inside the wrapper. De Alba makes 14 different types of tamales, from perennial favorites pork and chicken to Oaxacan vegetarian and bean or combos like cheese paired with jalapeno, beans, pork or chicken.

To satisfy a sweet tooth, De Alba Bakery makes a fudgy Mexican chocolate tamale that comes with Kahlúa sauce as well as a not-too-sweet vanilla-butter tamale common in central Mexico and a scrumptious raisin and cinnamon tamale. As a bakery, it also has shelves brimming with fresh Mexican pastries: empanadas, conchas and hornitos.

Ana de Alba’s grandmother made tortillas and tamales in a de reyes. The three who find baby Jesus dolls in their slices take charge of organizing the next tamalada.

Luis Reyes became part of a tamale-making team as a boy, joining cousins, parents, aunts and uncles, all under the direction of his grandmother. “Tamale making is an all-day activity. The whole family works together before Christmas,” says Reyes, communications manager for Magic Valley Electric Cooperative in Mercedes.

“Now the family is so big we make tamales twice a year,” he says. “My grandmother loves the American tradition of a family Thanksgiving. She blended that with the Mexican tradition of family tamale making, so we have tamales with the turkey at Thanksgiving.”

Rio Grande Valley parents once warned their unruly children: “Behave or the only thing you will unwrap at Christmas will be a tamale.” Sure, Christmas still finds Hispanic families at feasts anchored by mountains of beef, pork, chicken and bean tamales. But people readily acknowledge that making tamales at home is a time-consuming, fading art, while the convenience of buying ready-made ones is priceless. Hundreds of dozens of the foil-wrapped packets of tamales sell on a daily basis at various commercial tamale-making kitchens, like the one the de Alba family runs in Pharr.

Below: A De Alba Bakery tamale with shredded beef and green tomatillo salsa is wrapped in masa and a banana leaf. Bottom: A vegetable Oaxacan tamale at De Alba includes zucchini, corn, carrots, peas, onion and a bit of mozzarella cheese.
small San Benito shop in the 1960s. Her parents expanded that into De Alba Bakery in the 1980s and soon after made tamales available year-round. Today, she is CEO of the bakery, which has two Valley locations, an online store and a staff that has spanned four generations of the de Alba family.

“We’re so blessed to have the border next door to get all the quality, natural ingredients we want—corn leaves, dried chile pods and spices,” de Alba says. The kitchen crew makes the masa from scratch, cooking dried corn for one to two hours before grinding it. Spices and chiles are added to the cooked meats and other fillings, which with the masa are fed into equipment that forms the tamales. Hand wrapping the corn husk around the tamale is the final step.

“Our tamales are stuffed with more meat than the industry average,” de Alba says. “Pleasing our customer comes first, and the bottom line takes care of itself.” In the same vein, De Alba Bakery limits what it ships coast to coast from its website and through Amazon. “Some things won’t ship well without preservatives, and we won’t use them.”

The bakery sells about 50–100 dozen daily, but during the holiday season, it switches to double shifts and brings in additional equipment to meet the demand for thousands of dozens of tamales. Orders for 10–20 dozen are common, although some customers request 100–200 dozen tamales for parties.

“Winter Texans were asking for beef tamales, so we decided to try it,” de Alba says. Dora de Alba, Ana’s mother, who is in charge of tamale quality control and recipe innovation, perfected the beef brisket tamale.

“Mom knew that Mexican women love cooking. She was the first one to provide made-from-scratch masa for sale. That made it simple for women to take prepared masa home and make tamales with their kids without slaving all day,” Ana de Alba says. Making it even easier, De Alba Bakery offers recipes for tamales and other treats in their online blog and stocks cumin, oregano, anise and chiles in the bakery.

“Everybody has become accustomed to eating fresh tamales for lunch and dinner all year long,” she adds. “Tamales are faster than hamburgers and taste better, too.”

Eileen Mattei, a Nueces EC member, is a Texas master naturalist in Harlingen.

---

### DE ALBA BAKERY’S CHICKEN TAMALES

20–30 corn husks  
4 cups water  
5 pounds whole chicken (skinless and cut up)  
1 onion, cut in half  
6 cloves garlic  
1 tablespoon salt  
1–1½ teaspoons powdered cumin, to taste  
1–1½ teaspoons ground black pepper, to taste  
5 pounds prepared De Alba tamale dough (available at dealbabakery.com), divided use

1. Soak corn husks in a container of hot water 1–2 hours to make them pliable. Keep them submerged.  
2. Boil 4 cups water in a pot. Add chicken, onion, garlic and salt. Reduce to medium-low heat and simmer 30 minutes or until cooked. Remove chicken from broth, cool, debone and shred or cut up. In a blender, mix the leftover broth with 2 tablespoons of tamale dough (also called masa). Pour broth mixture back into pot and add meat, cumin and black pepper. Stir and simmer 15–20 minutes to thicken the filling mixture.  
3. Drain corn husks and stand them in a container with narrow ends up. Husks have a rough and smooth side. Spread dough on the smooth side, starting in the middle, about 3–4 inches from the bottom—the wider end—and then spread to the bottom and sides. This should be a thin layer of dough, about ⅛ inch thick. Spoon 2–3 tablespoons of meat mixture. After spreading meat mixture onto dough, you can add optional ingredients before rolling it. Optional ingredients include corn, squash, roasted peppers and cheese. Roll husk over from one side to the other and overlap. Now fold top of husk down and squeeze bottom of tamale. Every tamale can be individually tied with string or left- over thin strips of husk. Also, tamales can be tied in bundles of a half-dozen.  
4. Position tamales, folded part down, in a steamer basket that is deep enough. If not, just lay on basket carefully with folded points facing down. Position basket in pot with 2–3 inches of water and bring to a boil then cover well with tightfitting lid. Lower heat and steam on medium-low for 1 hour. If necessary, add more water during the cooking process but let the tamales steam an extra 15 minutes to make up for lost heat.  
5. Turn off heat and let tamales set, covered, 10 minutes before handling to avoid breaking them.  

Makes 20–30 tamales.

**COOK’S TIP** For better, fresher flavor, uncooked tamales can be kept frozen and cooked as needed.
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MESSAGE FROM CEO MARK ROLLANS

IT’S BEEN MORE THAN 80 YEARS SINCE THE rural electrification program began. To prosper over that time takes considerable strength, the involvement of members like you and the support of elected officials. Like it or not, politics are part of every business. The electric industry is no exception.

I think the reason we have had the support of elected officials over the years is because we deliver a crucial service to people and rural communities that might have never gotten electricity otherwise.

Electric distribution cooperatives like Medina EC were born in politics, and we must be sure we stay involved in politics if we want our members’ bills to stay affordable.

When it comes to legislative issues, perhaps the easiest way our members can support Medina EC and other electric cooperatives in Texas and across the nation is by supporting Rural Friends and ACRE. Members can join Rural Friends, ACRE or both. These nonpartisan political action committees financially contribute to candidates seeking a seat in the Texas Legislature or the U.S. Congress and have historically supported cooperatives.

Under the watchful eye of a locally elected board of directors, Medina EC focuses on delivering high-quality, reliable and affordable electricity to those we serve. Members have a say in who represents them on the board of directors by participating in nominating meetings held in February—you can find more information on those meetings on Page 23.

While we have a say in local representation, we must have legislators at the state and federal level who know electric cooperatives are important to rural communities.

You can donate to Rural Friends and ACRE by giving a one-time check or by having a donation of as little as $2.25 added to your monthly bill. Our entire board are members of Rural Friends and ACRE and 95% of our employees have chosen to donate this year. They feel it is important that there are advocates for the needs of our members and cooperatives talking to elected officials, and they have put their money behind that.

There are very few people who really enjoy politics—and most of those people are politicians. But like it or not, it is important that our cooperatives are recognized in D.C. and the halls of the Capitol.

Sincerely,
Mark Rollans

For more information, please write: Rural Friends, 1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor, Austin, TX 78701.
Board Approves Tariff Changes Affecting Large Commercial and Industrial Rate Classes

AT RECENT MEETINGS, the Medina EC board of directors approved changes to the Medina EC tariff that go into effect January 1, 2020. These changes will impact members who have meters billed on the large commercial and industrial rates. The changes institute new, more specific criteria for meters that are included in those rate classes. For the large commercial rate, it also changes the power factor adjustment from 90% to the Electric Reliability Council of Texas mandated 97%.

All members who will be moved to a new rate class or otherwise impacted by the changes have been directly contacted by Medina EC staff. You can read Medina EC’s current tariff and view other important cooperative documents at MedinaEC.org/CorpDoc. Rates for all rate classes can be viewed at MedinaEC.org/Rates.

If you have questions on if these tariff changes could impact you, please contact us at 1-866-MEC-ELEC or Info@MedinaEC.org.

We wish you a Christmas filled with family and friends.

To allow our employees to enjoy the holidays with their families, Medina EC will close at noon on Tuesday, December 24, and all day Wednesday, December 25, for Christmas and all day on Wednesday, January 1, for New Year’s.
Life-Support Registry

ELECTRICITY IS IMPORTANT to everyone, but for some people it is a medical necessity. If you or someone in your home depends on an electrically operated health aid, Medina EC can place your account on our Life-Support Registry.

Being on the Life-Support Registry will not keep your account from being disconnected for non-payment. It also does not guarantee uninterrupted electrical service. Outages can occur for reasons outside of the cooperative’s control and are unavoidable.

To be placed on the Life-Support Registry, follow the steps at MedinaEC.org/Registry

Generators

Members who have a generator may be interested in having a GenerLink device installed. This safe and easy solution is $15 per month. Medina EC crews will visit your home and install the device.

Generators that aren’t connected correctly create a safety hazard for people in the home and for Medina EC employees working to restore power.

Interested? Call us at 1-866-MEC-ELEC.

Common Causes of Outages

IT IS A UNIVERSAL TRUTH THAT POWER OUTAGES HAPPEN AT THE LEAST CONVENIENT TIMES, like the fourth quarter of a football game or just before the Times Square Ball drops in New York City, but many people don’t know the causes of the outages.

Weather. Weather is one of the most common causes of power outages for our members. From lightning to wind or ice, weather impacts Medina EC’s equipment. When the weather involves high winds or flooding, it can also delay our crew’s response times.

Trees. An overgrowth of vegetation can cause outages by coming into contact with power lines. Medina EC performs right-of-way work, including cutting brush and trees, within 40 feet of power lines while being respectful of the landscape. In 2015, Medina EC began a seven-year vegetation management program, hoping to inspect and clear all rights-of-way in our service area every seven years. With more than 9,000 miles of line, this goal will be a challenge. If you notice trees or branches that might interfere with power lines or pose a serious threat, please call 1-866-MEC-ELEC (632-3532).

Vehicles. Car accidents and vehicles colliding with power poles have been known to cause outages, as have farm equipment that runs into power lines. One such accident occurred October 26 in the Hondo area, affecting more than 5,000 meters in Hondo and Uvalde—some of which were without power for nearly an hour.

Animals. Due to the rural nature of the cooperative’s service area, both wild and domestic animals cause power outages. These animals range in size from insects and squirrels to deer and cows. Cows like to use poles and lower hanging wires to scratch, and birds like to perch on the lines and poles—all of which can cause an outage if the lines involved are energized or broken as a result. Animals also impact our members in the fall around dove season due to the increase of doves perching on the lines. When a large group of doves fly off the wires, it can cause the wires to jump and hit each other, resulting in blinks. As of October, close to 11% of Medina EC’s outages so far this year were caused by small animals or birds.

Balloons. While mylar balloons make parties more festive, when released these balloons can cause big problems for power lines and substations. Not only will these metallic beauties leave you without power, but mylar balloons have also been known to start large fires. In 2013, mylar balloons came in contact with a power line, ignited and caused a fire in California known as the Deer Fire, which burned more than 11,000 acres.

Planned Maintenance. Sometimes outages are necessary to upgrade or replace equipment, such as poles, restringing wire or changing out meters. Depending on the situation, crews sometimes plan a power outage so that the work can be performed in the safest possible environment. In those cases, members are notified in advance.

Equipment Failure. We strive to update our equipment before it can cause outages, but failure does occur with equipment on more than 9,000 miles of line.

No matter the reason, time of day or weather, Medina EC’s crews are dedicated to restoring our members’ power as fast as possible during all outages.

Need to Report an Outage?
• Call 1-866-MEC-ELEC (632-3532)
• SmartHub Online (MedinaEC.org)
• SmartHub app

To be placed on the Life-Support Registry, follow the steps at MedinaEC.org/Registry
We are sending three teens on a **FREE** trip to Austin and Washington, D.C., in June 2020, and giving them a **$500** scholarship. They will see national treasures, make new friends and have unforgettable experiences.

**Apply** for the Government-in-Action Youth Tour **NOW!**

Application and eligibility information can be found at MedinaEC.org/YouthTour.
24 Days of Holiday Advice

In the tradition of an Advent calendar, here are 24 tidbits to promote safety, efficiency and overall well-being during the hectic holiday season.

1. Set realistic expectations. Don’t try to do everything.
2. Test smoke alarms before holiday visitors arrive.
3. Keep halls and stairs free of clutter and well illuminated.
4. Have mobility-impaired guests sleep on the ground floor.
5. Water live Christmas trees daily.
6. Rethink giving: Experiences make better gifts than stuff.
7. Keep all decorations three feet from heat sources.
8. Place hazardous items out of pets’ and young visitor’s reach.
9. Don’t overload electrical outlets.
10. Unplug decorations before leaving the house or going to bed.
11. Look for a holiday event that you can volunteer for or donate to.
12. Don’t leave a space heater running unattended.
13. Never leave an open flame, including a fireplace, unattended.
15. Indulge in holiday goodies in moderation.
16. Stay in the kitchen when grilling, frying or broiling.
17. Keep towels and potholders away from hot surfaces.
18. Turn off overhead lights when the Christmas tree is lit to reduce energy use.
19. Turn the thermostat down. Guests generate warmth themselves.
20. Take a walk to look at Christmas lights for a break from hosting.
21. Use a slow cooker to make apple cider or mulled wine.
22. Bake dishes at the same time to conserve energy.
23. Wrap gifts in reusables, such as a scarf, tea towel or canvas bag.
24. Breathe, look around and enjoy. You’re at the holiday finish line.
Kids, Cookies and Christmas, Oh My!

Christmas cookie season is upon us. Making the sweet treats can be one of the most pleasant ways to pass a chilly, indoor afternoon with your children or grandchildren.

Baking with kids teaches them kitchen skills that they’ll use for the rest of their lives. You also can use the opportunity to pass along some lessons about choosing healthy ingredients, practicing portion control and the joy of giving gifts baked with love when someone nearby needs a little cheering up.

Here are six tips for baking with kids:

- **Be present.** If you usually watch TV while you bake, turn it off and give your full attention to your children. Baking can be a time to teach and bond with them.

- **Take your time.** Choose a day when you want to bake, not one when you have to—because six dozen cookies are due at your kids’ school the next day. Make it an event, not a chore.

- **Don’t sweat the small stuff.** So what if the cookies are all different sizes and there’s sticky dough all over the countertop? Embrace the magic; don’t expect perfection.

- **Assign tasks based on your children’s ages.** Little ones can stir cookie dough and add the chocolate chips. Kids who are a little older can scoop the dough onto baking sheets. As they grow, show them how to use an electric mixer, turn on an oven and safely slide baking sheets onto heated racks.

- **Teach along the way.** For example, you can have the kids separate eggs, even if the recipe doesn’t call for it. That way, it doesn’t matter if the yolks spill into the whites as they practice.

- **Clean up as you go.** Putting away the ingredients and wiping off counters after you finish each step of the prep is a good habit for any young baker or cook to form. And it will save you from cleaning up a mess once the fun is done.

While sharing this special time with your children, don’t forget to set a good example by following cooking safety rules.

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**Mark Your Calendars: Nominating Meetings**

| District 1 | February 19 - Hondo  
| Medina EC corporate office |
| District 2 | February 18 - Dilley  
| Medina EC office |
| District 3 | February 17 - Rio Grande City  
| Medina EC office |

**MEDINA ELECTRIC MEMBERS** should make plans to attend their District Nominating Meeting. This is where members interested in serving on the board of directors can learn more and be nominated for election. If you are interested in running but can’t make the meeting, you can also be placed on the ballot by petition.

Cooperatives like Medina EC were founded on the Seven Cooperative Principles, one of which is Democratic Member Control. Like any successful democracy, active member participation is crucial.

A director from each voting district is elected each September, and results are announced at the annual membership meeting. The service territory is divided into three voting districts, and three members from each district sit on the board.

Directors set policies and make decisions for the cooperative. Watch for additional details on these meetings in the January issue of *Texas Co-op Power.*
Rooted in the Onion Business:
Dixondale Farms

JUST OUTSIDE MEDINA EC’S SERVICE AREA in Dimmit County sits the oldest and largest onion plant farm in the entire United States: Dixondale Farms. It’s an impressive feat for a small South Texas county many people from outside of Texas might mistake for a curse word.

You may not have heard of them, but if you grow onions in your garden or eat onions, there’s a chance they got their start at Dixondale. Their onion plants are shipped across the U.S., and in an average year, they will put 800 million onions in the mail. Onion plants go to backyard gardeners, farmers and garden centers.

Dixondale Farms got its start in 1913, when John Mabson McClendon relocated his family to the area from Central Texas. They purchased a small plot of land and began farming, growing onion transplants that they sent to farmers across the U.S. by train.

Earl McClendon, John’s son, had been farming since he was 15 and took over operations when his dad passed away. His wife, Lula, started the company’s early mail-order business in the 1940s, and the sale of onions was boosted by the push during World War II for victory gardens—small gardens at residences that could take some pressure off the public food supply. The mail-order business that supplied small growers continued until the mid-1950s, when the local railroad in Carrizo Springs stopped running, which took Dixondale back to its roots of solely growing transplants for large onion farms.

By the late 1960s, Dixondale had tried many crops and made the choice to focus on the two that proved to be the most profitable in their area: onion plants and cantaloupes. Wallace Martin, who was married to Mary Louise “Sissy” McClendon, daughter of Lula and Earl, was running the farm during these years.
Martin’s daughter, Jeanie, grew up on the farm. Her childhood is peppered with memories of hanging out at the onion sheds, where they prepared onions for shipping, jumping into the husks with her siblings and of shelling freshly picked black-eyed peas on her grandmother Lula’s front porch.

In the early 1980s, Martin asked Bruce Frasier, who had married Jeanie and served in the U.S. Army, to join the operation. Despite his lack of farm experience, Frasier began learning the business, plant by plant.

From its small beginnings in the early 1900s, Dixondale Farms has grown substantially. It now covers 2,200 acres and has become a go-to in the world of onions.

When UPS began servicing the Carrizo Springs area in 1990, Frasier saw an opportunity to re-enter the mail-order business. A single sheet of letter-sized paper, the first “mail order catalog” for Dixondale Farms, was sent to potential customers. Since then, the mail-order business has ballooned, and the catalog has evolved into a 20-page, glossy, full color production that customers look forward to getting in their mailboxes.

Dixondale doesn’t just sell onions. Their staff is knowledgeable on the best varieties for specific gardens and can even help diagnose pest and disease issues over the phone, so even an onion beginner has a good place to start. They also sell fertilizers and growing aids specifically formulated for onion growing. They are truly the onion experts.

They are also experts in their other crop: cantaloupes, which are marketed under Carrizo Cantaloupes and sold in grocery stores across the state in June and July.

Bruce and Jeanie continue to run the business today. In 2015, they hired Brian and Emily King to manage the farm, handle day-to-day operations of the farms and eventually carry on the business.

What began as a small farm more than 100 years ago now provides work for people throughout Dimmit County and plants for people throughout the U.S.
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Co-op life has never been easy. During the early decades of rural electrification, cooperatives in America had to defend themselves from special interests, with private electric companies and politicians often leading the charge.

Possibly the highest-profile attack on co-ops began just after Christmas in 1972. The Nixon administration directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture to announce that, effective January 1, 1973, it would deny funds already authorized by Congress for the Rural Electrification Administration’s upcoming fiscal year and then terminate the agency’s direct loan program. For 36 years, this program had enabled the REA to offer loans to co-ops at 2% interest.

President Richard M. Nixon’s plan was to replace the federally funded REA loans with commercially backed loans that would be offered at 5% interest. This move, designed to cut more than $200 million in federal spending, would gut the rural co-op system by impounding the federal funds already allocated to hundreds of electric and telephone co-ops. In addition to taking away the loans that had been approved, this action would more than double the interest rates others would have to pay on new loans.

Robert D. Partridge, then-general manager of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, said the action would “wipe out many of the more than 1,000 rural electric systems and... threaten the welfare of millions of consumers who depend on them.” Many co-ops would no longer be able to offer service to people in outlying areas. That same winter, co-op systems across the country were suffering severe damage from ice storms, but they were left without access to the emergency funding customarily offered by the REA.

Co-ops didn’t take the new policy lying down. On January 23, three weeks after the USDA’s announcement, 1,400 electric co-op representatives from the 46 states across the country with electric cooperatives (including 135 Texans) converged on Washington, D.C. Participants traveled to the Rural Electric Rally to persuade their representatives in Congress to restore the REA direct loan program.

Lawmakers rode to co-ops’ rescue with legislation that would allow the REA to extend loans in the full amount authorized each year. They also established the Rural Electrification and Telephone Revolving Fund that allowed for a standard interest rate of 5%, plus a special interest rate of 2% for those eligible. The Senate and House bills both passed quickly, and the fate of co-ops hung on Nixon’s pen.

Finally, on the REA’s 38th birthday—May 11, 1973, exactly 19 weeks after first issuing the order that would have crippled the agency out of his “concern for the nation’s economy”—Nixon signed the new legislation implementing a modified direct loan program for the REA. Ironically, this new arrangement resulted in greater co-op financing than ever.

More than $1.2 billion was made available to rural electric and telephone co-ops in 1973, the highest amount of loans granted in the program’s history. The REA administrator’s report from that year notes, “Fiscal 1973 was a remarkable year in the history of the Rural Electrification Administration.”

Ellen Stader is a writer in Austin.
It’s Time To Bake Pecan Treats for the Holidays!

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Cookies & Candies

This recipe for Caramel Popcorn graced the pages of our magazine in December 1997, but its nostalgic, Cracker Jack appeal is timeless—especially this time of year. The original recipe calls for margarine, but use butter for the best flavor. To balance the sweetness and create an eye-catching, giftable mix, I up the salty crunch with pecans (or use your favorite nut) and pepitas. For a kick of spice, add a pinch of cayenne to the sugar syrup, or use Picosos Hot Chile Peanuts (made in Helotes). You can pop your own kernels in a neutral vegetable oil or use store-bought popcorn.

PAULA DISBROWE, FOOD EDITOR

Caramel Popcorn

1. Preheat oven to 250 degrees.
2. Melt the butter in a large, deep pan. Stir in the sugar, syrup and salt and bring to a boil. Boil 5 minutes without stirring. Remove from heat and stir in baking soda and vanilla (mixture will foam).
3. Pour the mixture over the popcorn and nuts in a large roasting pan and use a rubber spatula to combine until the ingredients are thoroughly coated.
4. Bake 1 hour, stirring every 15 minutes. Transfer the hot mixture.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 32
**Cookies & Candy**

**THIS MONTH’S RECIPE CONTEST WINNER**

SUE WEST | WISE COUNTY EC

These cookies will make your house smell like Christmas while baking and will please young and old when served. Spices, citrus zest and a crackled top with sugar coating—these treats meld all the holiday flavors into one delicious whole.

---

**Cinnamon Crackles**

1. Cream butter, shortening and sugars thoroughly in a large bowl. Add egg and extracts; mix well.
2. In a separate bowl, combine flour, cinnamon, baking soda, cream of tartar, nutmeg, salt and zests. Add by heaping spoonfuls into butter and sugar mixture and stir until combined (or use the low setting on an electric mixer).
3. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Put about ½ cup sugar into a bowl. Shape dough into 1-inch balls and roll in sugar. Place balls 2 inches apart on an ungreased baking sheet. Bake 12–15 minutes or until cracked and very lightly browned. ▶ Makes 6 dozen cookies.

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**Browned Butter Cherry Almond Chocolate Chip Cookies**

MARIAN EVONIUK | PEDERNALES EC

This “everything” cookie will keep you coming back for more. The cookie has a crunchy texture from the almonds and oats, but then you get a bite with chocolate or a tart cherry and know you’re going to eat another one (or two).

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**TexasCoopPower.com**

May’s recipe contest topic is Spring Celebrations. Send your favorite dish for showers and graduations. The deadline is December 10.

**ENTER ONLINE** at TexasCoopPower.com/contests; **MAIL** to 1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor, Austin, TX 78701; **FAX** to (512) 783-5481. Include your name, address and phone number, plus your co-op and the name of the contest you are entering.

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**$100 Recipe Contest**

If your recipe is featured, you’ll win a TCP apron!
5. Using a metal scoop (cookie-size for small cookies, ice cream-size for giant cookies), drop cookie dough 2½ inches apart on a parchment-lined baking sheet. Bake 10–12 minutes, until edges are a light golden brown. Remove and allow cookies to cool on baking sheet 5 minutes before enjoying. ◮ Makes 18–24 cookies.

COOK’S TIP Dried cranberries or raisins can be substituted for the cherries.

Chocolate Lemon Balls
CHRISTINE HENDERSON | GUADALUPE VALLEY EC
“A few years back, I visited Italy and fell in love with their chocolate and lemon candies,” Henderson says. “This is my reimagined version of the flavors I found there.”

1 cup white chocolate chips  
½ cup finely chopped slivered almonds  
½ cup finely crumbled lemon cookies  
½ teaspoon lemon extract  
1 cup semisweet or dark chocolate chips  
Sugar sprinkles (any color)

1. Put the white chocolate chips into a heatproof bowl and microwave on 50% power 30 seconds, then take it out and stir. Continue microwaving in 30-second intervals at 50% power, stirring as needed. Once the pieces are mostly melted, remove from the microwave and let the remaining bits melt as you stir. This should take about 1–2 minutes. (Don’t try to cook at higher power, which creates a less spreadable consistency.)

2. Once the white chocolate is melted, add the chopped almonds, cookies and lemon extract to the white chocolate and stir until smooth. Let sit 1–3 minutes, until a doughlike texture develops.

3. Wearing plastic disposable gloves or wetting your hands so the dough doesn’t stick to them, form dough into 1-inch balls, rolling them in your hands until they are nicely rounded. Place balls on waxed paper in a sealed plastic container (single layer) and freeze 1 hour or longer.

4. Melt semisweet or dark chips using the same method as the white chocolate chips. Place a wire cookie rack over a cookie sheet. Remove lemon balls from the freezer. Drop a lemon ball into the liquid chocolate mixture and quickly turn to coat. Use a fork to remove the dipped balls and place on wire rack. Repeat with each ball until done. Then cover with sugar sprinkles.

5. Refrigerate chocolate lemon balls on the rack for about 15 minutes. Cover and refrigerate until ready to eat, at least 15 minutes more. Remaining balls should be kept in a cool place in an airtight container. ◮ Makes 20 balls.

COOK’S TIP Cookies and almonds can be pulsed together in a food processor. Don’t use lemon sandwich cookies.

WEB EXTRAS
◆ Read these recipes on our website to see the original Caramel Popcorn recipe from December 1997 and find a recipe for I Almost Ate Fruitcake Cookies.

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**Deserts**

Texas settlers have for millennia braved the harsh terrain of the Chihuahuan Desert. It’s the kind of place where you shake out your boots before wearing them and look twice before stepping (or sitting). Enjoy the terrain where yucca, creosote, mesquite, agave and ocotillo dot the landscape and mountains loom in the distance. **GRACE FULTZ**

**WEB EXTRAS**  See Focus on Texas on our website for more photos from readers.

▲ **KAY BELL**, Nueces EC: “The century plant, havard agave, grows in the higher elevations of the Chihuahuan Desert in the Big Bend.”

▲ **J. REAGAN FERGUSON**, Central Texas EC: “Enjoying a peaceful sunset in Guadalupe Mountains National Park.”

▲ **MARK HOLLY**, Bandera EC: “It was a beautiful spring day in one of my favorite national parks, Big Bend.”

▲ **MIKE PRESTIGIACOMO**, Bartlett EC: “Once upon a time—a tree.”

▲ **MATTHEW CROTWELL**, Guadalupe Valley EC: “Nighthawk awaiting dusk for feeding time.”
December

7
- **Conroe** Bark for Life Dog Walk, 1-800-227-2345, relayforlife.org/barkconroeandwalkercotx
- **Frisco** Hope for the Holidays Masquerade, (972) 977-6064, melodyofhope.org/gala
- **Hubbard** Magnolia & Mistletoe: A Victorian Christmas, (254) 625-0258, hubbardcity.com
- **Johnson City** Lamplight Tours of LBJ’s Boyhood Home and a Frontier Christmas, (830) 868-7128
- **Keller** Epoch Christmas, 1-888-385-8024, kellerchamber.org
- **Rusk** Cherokee Craft & Trade Fair, (903) 268-1598
- **Santo** Community Christmas Craft Show, (940) 659-3990
- **Taylor** Mistletoe Market, (512) 666-9003, artoffcenter.com
- **Dripping Springs** [7–8] Redbud Artisan Market, (512) 660-3328
- **Keller** [7–8] Keller High School Indianettes Craft Show, (925) 708-7383, indianettes.com/craft-show

8
- **Fort Worth** Woman’s Club Holiday Open House, (817) 335-3525, thewomansclubfw.com
- **Moody** Mother Neff Christmas, (254) 853-2389

**December 19**

Taylors Mistletoe Market

A quintet of singers from Ireland highlights a show that includes instrumentalists and Irish dancing. The set list includes traditional Christmas carols and Irish favorites. The event is part of the premiere season for the Memorial City Hall Performance Center, built in 1907 and former home to municipal offices and courts.

**December 7**

**Taylor** Mistletoe Market

**December 8**

**Fort Worth** Woman’s Club Holiday Open House, (817) 335-3525, thewomansclubfw.com

**Moody** Mother Neff Christmas, (254) 853-2389

Tell us about somebody who improves the quality of life in your community. Email your nomination to people@texascooppower.com. Include the person’s name, co-op affiliation and a short description of his or her work in the community. Featured nominees will receive a $100 donation for their cause.

**Pick of the Month**

**Celtic Angels Christmas**

**Marshall** December 19

(903) 934-7992, memorialcityhall.com

A quintet of singers from Ireland highlights a show that includes instrumentalists and Irish dancing. The set list includes traditional Christmas carols and Irish favorites. The event is part of the premiere season for the Memorial City Hall Performance Center, built in 1907 and former home to municipal offices and courts.
Submit Your Event!

We pick events for the magazine directly from TexasCoopPower.com. Submit your event online for February by December 10, and it just might be featured in this calendar.

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**December 28–January 2**

**South Padre Island**

*New Year’s at the Beach*

(254) 681-2354, singlesinagriculture.org

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Yours FREE!

**Elvis Presley U.S. Half-Dollar**

*85th Birthday Tribute to the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll*

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Send today and you’ll also receive special collector’s information and other interesting Elvis coins on approval. Your satisfaction is guaranteed.

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**Palo Pinto** Frontier Christmas,

(940) 769-2600, palopintohistory.com

**Ransom Canyon** Christmas Tour of Homes,

(806) 829-2637, ransomcanyonchapel.com

13

**Cuero**[13–14] Christmas in Downtown,

(361) 485-8008, cueromainstreet.com

**Levelland**[13–14] South Plains Showdown,

(806) 894-4161, malleteventcenter.com/events

**Chandler**[13–15] Night in Bethlehem,

(903) 849-6042, nib.wlbcc.com

14

**Athens** Wreaths Across America,

(903) 670-1031, wreathswacrossamerica.org/tx0725

**Burnet** Christmas at Old Fort Croghan,

(512) 756-8281, highlandlakesoffburnetcounty.com

**Chappell Hill** Garden Club Christmas Home Tour,

(713) 562-6191

**Gainesville** All That Glitters Holiday Home Tour,

(940) 668-8900, mortonmuseum.org

**Jacksonville** Cherokee Craft & Trade Fair,

(903) 268-1598

**Sanger** Sanger High Craft Show,

(940) 206-0007

15

**Stonewall** 50th Annual LBJ Christmas Tree Lighting,

(830) 644-2252

December 28–January 2

South Padre Island

New Year’s at the Beach

19

**Seguin** Third Thursday in Downtown Seguin,

(830) 379-0730, seguindba.org

**Anson**[19–21] Texas Cowboys’ Christmas Ball,

(325) 696-9040, texasccb.com

**New Braunfels**[19–22] The Nutcracker,

(830) 627-0808, brauntex.org

21

**Boerne** Winter Solstice Celebration Circle,

(830) 537-4212, visitboerne.org

**Morgan Mill** Live Nativity,

(214) 793-9698, morganmillumc.com

28

**South Padre Island**[28–Jan. 2]

New Year’s at the Beach,

(254) 681-2354, singlesinagriculture.org

31

**Fredericksburg** Countdown to 2020,

(830) 997-7521, fbgtx.org

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NY State residents add sales tax.

Now you can get a desirable US Half-Dollar honoring the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll for FREE. Send just $2.95 for shipping and guaranteed delivery.
With credits to burn during my senior year at the University of Texas, I enrolled in a class on the history of rock ‘n’ roll, expecting to listen to Led Zeppelin and ride an easy A into the burnt orange sunset. When the professor played a song from a scratchy blues record from 1926 by an artist I had never heard of, I realized I was in for more than I bargained for. The class turned out to be tough, but it set fire to my blues-loving soul.

That track was Match Box Blues by Blind Lemon Jefferson. It was a raw, visceral song with a clanging guitar and haunting vocals. I had never heard anything like it, and when I learned Jefferson was from Texas, I was hooked. My love for the blues drove me to East Texas and historic Camp Street in Crockett.

When I found Camp Street, a few blocks from the Houston County Courthouse square, I wasn’t sure if I was in the right spot until I noticed a mural of Jefferson painted on a brick wall. Next to Jefferson were more musicians, including T-Bone Walker, Big Mama Thornton and Sam “Lightnin’” Hopkins, who all played in Crockett when it was a stop for blues artists traveling the Chitlin’ Circuit between Houston and Dallas.

In the 1930s, Camp Street hummed as one of the most vibrant business districts in East Texas. Both sides of the street were lined with businesses: a beauty parlor, an all-night laundry, a shoe repair shop and a juke joint named the Jolly Joy. And there in the middle of the action, you’d find the Starlight—now called Camp Street Café, the town’s only remaining blues-era stalwart.

The quaint building with its red sheet metal exterior and large front porch was built in 1931 by a local rancher named V.H. “Hoyt” Porter. On the porch were three doors: Through the middle door was a barbershop and through the left door, a pool hall. Through the right door was a café and taxi stand that featured a dice table and bar. On any given night in the 1940s, you might find bluesman Lightnin’ Hopkins playing for tips. In the ’50s or ’60s, you might find B.B. King or Fats Domino enjoying a beer after a show at the nearby Paradise Inn.

The café was closed for many years, but in 2008 it got a second chance. Porter’s grandsons, Guy and Pipp Gillette, bought the property and turned it into a listening room to honor Crockett’s musical legacy. Since then, this small stage has hosted artists including Michael Martin Murphy, Kinky Friedman and Ruthie Foster. On the night of my visit, Pipp, a singer and songwriter himself, was scheduled to perform.

I found a room packed with people at small square tables enjoying wine (it’s BYOB) and munching on snacks from a counter in the back. When Pipp took the stage, a hush fell over the crowd. For the next hour or so, Pipp played one song after another, woven together with his stories and meandering thoughts. The experience epitomized why I love a good listening room, as the only sounds coming from the crowd were applause and laughs at Pipp’s jokes.

As I enjoyed the show, I imagined the room in decades past, as the greatest blues legends played guitar and told stories of the road. I left feeling anything but blue.

Chet Garner shares his Texplorations as the host of The Daytripper on PBS.

WEB EXTRAS ➤ Read this story on our website to see Chet’s video of his visit to Camp Street Café. Also, for more about the blues, read Texas: A Blues State in our March 2019 issue.
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