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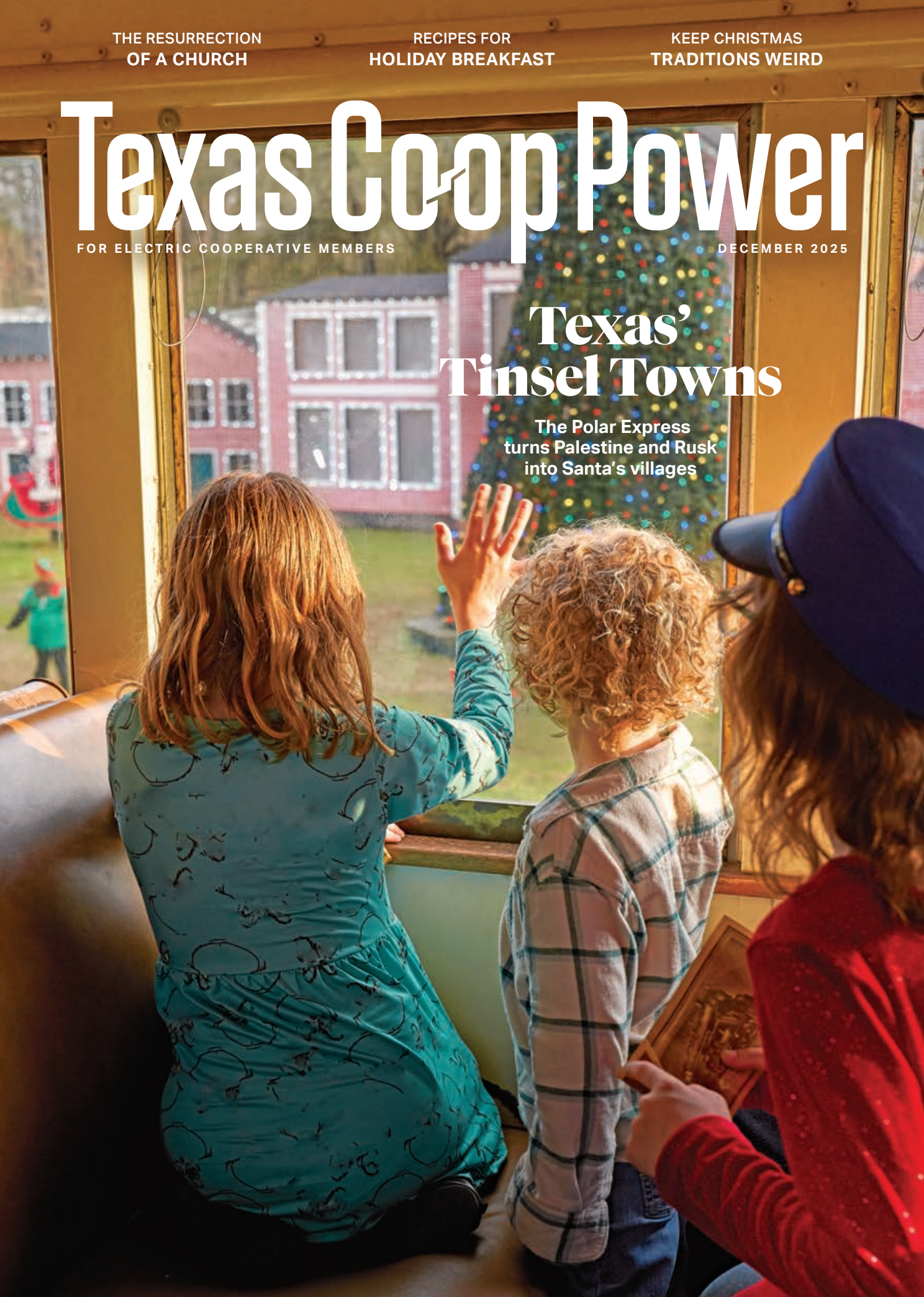
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The Polar Express
turns Palestine and Rusk
into Santa's villages





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December 2025



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Polar Express trains take riders on a magical journey from East Texas to the North Pole.

By Jan Adamson
Photos by Dave Shafer

The Dirt Church Down a Dirt Road

While a community rebuilds a historic West Texas church, it learns an ancient tradition.

By Eileen Mattei
Photos by Erich Schlegel

ON THE COVER
From left, Remy and Rendon Unger and Kynlee Kampen hope to catch Santa's attention—for all the right reasons.
Photo by Dave Shafer

ABOVE
Friends of the Ruidosa Church carry out their rebuilding mission along the Rio Grande.
Photo by Erich Schlegel

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Live, From Austin ...



Lorne Michaels, from left, watches a sketch rehearsal featuring Madeline Kahn, Will Ferrell and Cheri Oteri.

THE LEGACY OF LORNE MICHAELS, best known as the creator and producer of the long-running TV show *Saturday Night Live*, is the focus of an exhibit at the University of Texas' Harry Ransom Center in Austin.

On display are scripts, production notes, props and costumes from the iconic show that has changed pop culture since it went on the air in October 1975.

Live from New York: The Lorne Michaels Collection runs through March 20, 2026. Admission is free.



For Heaven's Sake

The Hail Mary pass unofficially turns 50 this month, though the Notre Dame football team referred to desperation plays as Hail Marys as early as 1922.

But Roger Staubach's 45-yard heave that fell into the hands of receiver Drew Pearson for the Dallas Cowboys' game-winning touchdown over the Minnesota Vikings in the 1975 NFL playoffs made the name of a Catholic prayer into a signature play.

As Staubach, left, explained, "They asked me, 'What were you thinking about when you threw the ball?' I said, 'When I closed my eyes, I said a Hail Mary.'"

TCP Contests and More

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Mom's Favorites

FOCUS ON TEXAS PHOTOS

Gates

RECOMMENDED READING

We think of Santa as bearing gifts. But do you know about the time he was naughty? Read *Naughty Santa* from December 2014 at TexasCoopPower.com.



ENTER ONLINE

FINISH THIS SENTENCE

Dear Santa,
I would like ...

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

Here are some responses to our October prompt: **The best food I've ever had at a fair is ...**

Frito pie served in a chip bag, as God intended.

ROBIN THOMPSON PERRY
VIA FACEBOOK

Fletcher's corny dog, State Fair of Texas—1953, 14 years old and new to Texas.

CAROL MERCER
GRAYSON-COLLIN EC
FAIRVIEW

A burger between a split Krispy Kreme doughnut for the bun at the State Fair of Texas. Weirdly good.

KATHY WHITBY
CHEROKEE COUNTY EC
FLINT

Smoked turkey leg, Shakespearean festival, July 2021, Kalispell, Montana.

TED HENDRIX
VIA FACEBOOK

Funnel cakes drizzled with chocolate sauce, topped with fresh strawberries and lots of whipped cream.

JANICE EHLERS
GVEC
SEGUIN

Gumbo at a seafood festival in south Louisiana.

WALT HUDSON
VIA FACEBOOK

Visit our website to see more responses.

Catching Up With a Friend

“We just returned after five months outside of Texas, and I’m catching up on your magazine. Interesting stories: the missile silos, goats, flour, Frisbees and grapes.”

J. BAILEY
BANDERA EC
UTOPIA



ERICH SCHLEGEL

Two Bits and a Bag of Chips

From 1956 to 1960, I worked at the G.F. Wacker variety store in Levelland [It's in the Bag, September 2025]. The Fritos chili pie was sold daily—with a Coke and candy bar, all for about 25 cents.

Genie Ballew
Lamb County EC
Levelland

A State for Horses

I moved to Texas thinking it was a state for horses but was astonished to learn there are few places to ride but the roads and private property [Mounts in the Hills, September 2025]. In Washington I helped pack families and hunters into the Cascade wilderness, where we could ride for weeks.

While I admire the Texas Equestrian Trail Riders Association for all its work, I think our state forest service should support trail riders as other states have done, for example the rails-to-trails

projects in which the state pays to convert old railroad tracks into riding trails.

Loretta Bedford
Deep East Texas EC
San Augustine

I hope the article results in increased membership in TETRA since they do such awesome and necessary work. I'm not a horse rider, but I can appreciate the importance of maintaining equestrian trails to help keep people in contact with nature.

Elena Rivera
Pedernales EC
Austin

Nature Erases

I did not know the story of the ghost town Eagle Springs [Ebb and Flow, September 2025]. The simple beauty of Martha Deering's final paragraph—"evening breeze shivers" and "whispering of voices"—took my breath away. Nature erases, and it reclaims.

Mark Troth
Bluebonnet EC
Chappell Hill



DAVE SHAEFER

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

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BY JAN ADAMSON • PHOTOS BY DAVE SHAFER

The More, the Merrier

Polar Express trains take riders on a magical journey from East Texas to the North Pole





Shhh. Listen.

It's a train whistle—low and long and lonely and romantic. It's a sound that for 150 years has permeated the Pineywoods town of Palestine.

But the whistle heard December 31, 1969, was thought to be the last. That day, Texas South-Eastern Railroad engine No. 22, a 70-ton diesel-electric locomotive, pulled into the station for the last time—the end of a century of regular freight and passenger service in Palestine.

But listen closely today along the 25-mile track between Palestine and Rusk, to the east, and you'll hear plenty of whistles and maybe even singing, laughter and bells. If you catch a glimpse into a passing train car, you'll see families in matching pajamas, dancing chefs and trays full of hot chocolate.

LEFT Santa doesn't always travel by sleigh—especially when he's in Texas.

ABOVE Remy and Rendon Unger take in the countryside on the way to the North Pole.

Ever since the Palestine-Rusk line reopened as a tourist railway called the Texas State Railroad on June 25, 1976, it has been building a corps of believers. Tens of thousands of them turn out each holiday season for the service's wildly popular Polar Express trips based on the film released in 2004 and the 1985 book by Chris Van Allsburg.

"With the popularity of the film, the Polar Express Train Ride has just grown and grown," says Amy Parady, president of the Texas State Railroad, which launched round-trip Christmas-themed excursions 20 years ago. "Many have made a tradition out of the event, so they come every year."

Like the Corley family from Magnolia.

"We meet new people and sit with different families," Kevin Corley says. "It's very interactive. We've never had a bad experience."

Long before it whisked families to the "North Pole," Palestine began its golden age after the Civil War when the International Railroad and the Houston and Great Northern Railroad opened a route between Hearne and Palestine. The transport of goods and passengers resulted in great wealth, allowing merchants and railroad executives to build massive mansions, especially in Palestine.

In 1881, when a prison was built in Rusk, the line was extended to the east. Shortly thereafter, the Palestine car shop was built to modify and repair freight cars. In 1971, not long after shipments of logging and mining equipment and passengers ceased, local banker Jack R. Stone, a member of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission, and Rusk Mayor Emmett H. Whitehead led a campaign to reopen the railroad as a tourist attraction, and the Texas State Railroad was born.

A \$3 million appropriation went into refurbishing the rails, and Rusk and Palestine built support facilities such as campsites before the two depots were built. The line has been operated by private companies since 2007.

About half of the passenger cars are commuter coaches built in 1923 for other railroads; they're pulled by an assortment of vintage diesel- and steam-powered locomotives.

The railroad hosts a variety of excursions throughout the year. There's Rockin' the Rails, in which passengers attend a concert; the Rusk Turntable Run, which makes use of the 130-year-old, compressed air-powered railcar turntable in Maydelle; and Mother's Day and Father's Day trips. There are autumn- and Halloween-themed trains, dinner excursions, and trips that celebrate local beer and wine.



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP Kynlee Kampen with her silver sleigh bell. The Polar Express departs from the Palestine depot.

RIGHT Engine 30, at 100 years old, comes to life in the early morning before a day's excursions.

But far and away the most popular themed ride is the Polar Express.

"We always have multiple [marriage] proposals and engagements during every season, which is always special," Parady says. "We have had grown individuals who have never seen Santa before, and just to watch the grandparents and parents see the joy in the eyes of the children creates magic every year."

The cars are festooned inside with greenery and twinkling lights, and outside, along the route to the North Pole—did you know it's in Rusk?—Christmas decorations whiz past the windows.

Passengers are encouraged to bring a copy of the book or buy one at the depot, and once aboard, they're served hot chocolate and cookies by dancing chefs who act out various scenes. On arrival at the North Pole, passengers are greeted by Santa and his elves, who bestow the first gift of Christmas: a silver sleigh bell that can only be heard by believers. The chefs lead passengers in Christmas carols on the return trip.

But the experience changes each year. Employees gather to discuss and workshop new ideas and improvements.

An adults-only railcar has club chairs. There's an open-air car with bench seats, an observation dome car, and another with tables and sofas. There's even a car that can be booked for private parties. The cars have the feel of a long-ago time because of the original fixtures retained throughout.

It all makes for a special experience.

"We have a family that started coming the first year we did the Polar Express train ride, and their son was 4 years old," Parady says. "They have never missed a year, and now their son is 22 years old."

Logistically, Polar Express season requires careful orchestration. Within a six-week time frame in November and December, there are typically 105–110 round trips with as many as five trains running a day for 60,000–70,000 passengers. Reservations open in July at texasstaterailroad.net.

"We hire typically 150 additional team members just for our Polar season," Parady says. "It is quite a feat pulling this event off with the ridership we have in such a short time frame."

Performers on the Polar Express have a reputation for the joy and professionalism they bring to the job, making it no wonder that passengers return year after year—and get into the spirit.

"About 95% of our visitors always arrive in matching pajamas," Parady says. "We have had people plan their family



On the Rails

The Texas State Railroad is a movie star, having been featured in more than 35 films, TV series, documentaries and commercials. Most recently, the train and the Palestine depot were part of the first episode of *1883*, the prequel to the *Yellowstone* series. The railroad also starred in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*; *American Outlaws*; *The Great Debaters*; and *The Gambler Returns: The Luck of the Draw*.

reunions around our event. We have multigenerational attendees, meaning great-grandparents, grandparents, parents and children all attending together. Families have become extremely creative with their attire, and many customize their pajamas or even make their own."

The Corley family has made the Polar Express a tradition. Kelly and Kevin Corley and their children, Piper and Carter, have been attending since 2015. "We read the book and watch the film," Kelly says. "It's such a joy to watch the kids' faces light up when they see the story play out in real life."

The Corleys prefer to take a late afternoon excursion so they can experience the sounds and smoke from the train during the daylight, and then, in the evening, they get to see the glowing Christmas lights and decorations on the return trip.

The family has dedicated a whole shelf in their home to train memorabilia. It's filled with cocoa mugs, golden train tickets and more than 20 silver bells.

"We pick out new pajamas every year," Carter says. "Me and Dad match, and Piper and Mom match."

That's an East Texas treasure worth believing in. Shhh. Just listen. ■



The Dirt Church Down a Dirt Road

BY EILEEN MATTEI • PHOTOS BY ERICH SCHLEGEL

While a community rebuilds a historic West Texas church, it learns an ancient tradition

IT'S A BREEZY, overcast 80-degree day in Marfa as a dozen or so volunteers rotate jobs in a brick-making assembly line.

Billy Joe Moore, 12, has the hardest job. He hoists small buckets of clay, sand, straw and water into a gas-powered mixer, like those used for concrete. His mother, Erin Moore, says the homeschooling, beekeeping family from Fort Davis is here to learn about adobe-making by doing it, getting into it.

It's also for a great cause: These bricks will be used in the restoration of a historic church in a remote outpost, turning a former Catholic house of worship into a community center.

"It's so neat to hear about the history of the church and the culture of the region," Erin says. "Who wouldn't want to get involved in this?"

In the ghost town of Ruidosa, 90 minutes southwest of Marfa in far West Texas, the adobe El Corazón Sagrado de la Iglesia de Jesús (Sacred Heart of Jesus Church) is awaiting resurrection.

Completed in 1916, the church fell victim to blowing sand and rain that wore away the adobe before and after the droughts of the 1950s dried up the Rio Grande and the small agricultural community. By 1960, the church and town had been abandoned.

Native salts eroded the foundation. Huia-che branches battered the northeast tower. Attempts to restore the church, which claims the largest traditional adobe arches in Texas, faltered until the nonprofit Friends of the Ruidosa Church acquired the title to the Texas Historic Landmark from Presidio County after it was given the deed from the Diocese of El Paso in 2019.

With ownership, the Friends began work to preserve as much of the original adobe as

possible, to restore structural strength and to repair the damage done over 110 years. That meant making sun-dried adobe blocks—thousands of them, one at a time, starting in 2021.

For more than 10,000 years, adobe has been used as a building material, favored because its high thermal mass absorbs heat during the day and releases it at night.

"In recent generations, adobe-making skills have been lost, since the knowledge is rarely written down," says Joey Benton. His Marfa design and restoration company, Silla, has completed restorations of adobe buildings at Fort Davis National Historic Site and Big Bend National Park.

During the Friends' May Adobe Day, kneeling men and women scoop Billy Joe's fresh adobe mix from tilted wheelbarrows with their bare hands and tamp it into wood forms.

OPPOSITE El Corazón Sagrado de la Iglesia de Jesús in the ghost town of Ruidosa on a September night.

BELOW From left, Terry Bishop, Martin Rivas and Claudio Nuñez load new adobe bricks onto pallets during a Friends of the Ruidosa Church workday.





"You see big smiles on their faces. That's their inner child connecting with making mud pies, getting on their hands and knees, and shaping adobe by hand."



Others lift the forms off the freshly minted 10-by-18-by-3.5-inch blocks. They rinse off the forms in a large water trough and place them on black tarps, ready for the next batch.

The adobe blocks dry for a month in the sun, turned periodically like sunbathers so all

surfaces get exposed. Then the bricks are stacked and set aside. They'll eventually be used to rebuild the bell tower over the church's entrance.

"It's all about community, participating in a traditional activity," says Mike Green, a retired architect and chair of the Friends of the Ruidosa Church. "You see big smiles on their faces. That's their inner child connecting with making mud pies, getting on their hands and knees, and shaping adobe by hand."

"People long for authenticity in their lives and something visible to show at the end of a day of hard work. Adobe-making gives us a deep feeling of achievement."

Hilary Raney, a Marfa resident, mud enthusiast and gardener, spent her third Adobe Day, a mostly monthly event, providing a helping hand and moral support.

"I see new faces every time," she says. "Last month a man in his 80s, whose parents got married in the church, came to Adobe Day. He was so happy to see what we were doing."

Adobe-makers come from El Paso, Houston, New Mexico and, like Steve McKeon, from Oregon. After McKeon opened a restaurant and bar in Marfa, he decided to help make bricks. "Working bubbles out of a block by hand gives you a sense of accomplishment," he says.

The Friends pays the bills for the church, power for which is provided by Rio Grande Electric Cooperative. Co-op power keeps the mortar mixer turning and the diamond saw spinning as it cuts adobe into segments.

Funds from the nonprofit's Community Day fundraiser every November in Ruidosa help pay to transport blocks to the remote site and to bring in masonry specialists to install them. Grants from the Texas Historical Commission and the Summerlee Foundation cover the costs of a historic structure report that guides its preservation.

Conversations with earthen-structure professionals, architects and archaeologists set the stage for the site work.



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP A Friends of the Ruidosa Church work crew. Bishop carries a fresh brick.

ABOVE, FROM LEFT "The earthen-structure community has no secrets or hidden techniques," says retired architect Mike Green, who is leading the restoration. A view from the top of a hill looking south toward Mexico over the old church.

In 2023, Benton and his skilled crew began critical structural repairs to the church. They stabilized the foundation and installed scaffolding and support frames. They straightened a wall and saved the northeast tower from collapse by repairing adobe blocks and inserting new volunteer-made bricks as needed. In some areas the exterior was so worn that light was visible through the mortar joints.

Green praises Benton and archaeologist David Keller for their contributions to the preservation and restoration efforts.

"The earthen-structure community has no secrets or hidden techniques," Green says. "We're on the same journey: trying to restore and save adobes of the Southwest."

Free for the asking, the adobe recipe mixes clay, sand, silt, chopped straw and water in proportions determined by the soil used. Clay comprises 15%–30% of the mix, acting as the binder, similar to cement's role in concrete. The majority of the mix is sand and aggregate. Straw allows the adobe to dry more evenly by letting water get out of the block. The mortar



has the same mix as the block but with finer aggregate.

This classic frontier Catholic church, with its substantial bell towers, is a time capsule for the community, says Keller, who is a Friends co-founder and preservation specialist. The church is unique in that the exterior was never plastered—rare for adobe structures, even in arid climates.

Nevertheless, while the church is being restored with historical accuracy, "the integrity of the structure and preservation guidance trumps absolute historical fidelity," Keller says. So the exterior will be plastered to keep it from deteriorating like it did over the last 100 years. The interior, originally plastered and whitewashed, will be restored to that state.

Green hopes the bell will be restored to the entrance tower next year. In three years, he foresees the restored church telling the rich history of the area as a community center for residents of Brewster and Presidio counties as well as Ojinaga, across the Rio Grande.

Hands molding clay into architecture have built their own adobe-loving community. At the same time, they have helped restore the heart of a last-century community down a dirt road along the river.

As Green drove around the area over the years, the building often caught his eye. Eventually, his passion for architecture and history prompted him to try to save the old church. Now, the restoration work goes beyond saving the physical structure.

"The church at Ruidosa is the most peaceful place I know," Green says. "It is so remote, so quiet, so serene. It feels like good spirits are in the air." ■



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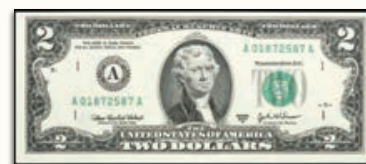
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How to Win at Love

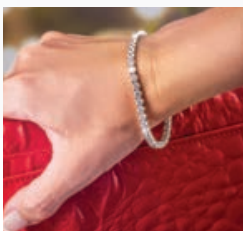
A classic tennis bracelet serves up over 10 carats of sparkle for a guaranteed win

It was the jewelry piece that made the world stop and take notice. In the middle of a long volley during the big American tennis tournament, the chic blonde athlete had to stop play because her delicate diamond bracelet had broken and she had to find it. The tennis star recovered her beloved bracelet, but the world would never be the same.

From that moment on, the tennis bracelet has been on the lips and on the wrists of women in the know. Once called eternity bracelets, these bands of diamonds were known from then on as tennis bracelets, and remain *the* hot ticket item with jewelers.

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D Flawless diamonds from another company that costs \$57,000!

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Locally based cooperatives believe this special bond and obligation play an integral role in creating community. Houston County EC understands that you can't sell electricity to a business that has closed its doors or to people who have left the area because there aren't enough local opportunities. Electricity

is a critical need, but it takes much more than poles, wires and kilowatt-hours to make a community.

It takes more than a single business to make a community. It takes a focus on the greater good and recognizing it is more than "me" and "I." When we shift our focus to "us" and "we," lifting each other up and helping each other out, we can strengthen our community.

This Christmas season remember you are not only an owner in Houston County EC, a local business supporting local jobs, you are also an owner in our community. Take care of our community, support local businesses, volunteer with local organizations and help neighbors in need. We all have a role to play.

We're committed to doing our part for the community. Together we can create opportunities to help our local area thrive.

Wishing you and yours a very Merry Christmas. ■



Happy Holidays

From Houston County
Electric Cooperative

Wishing you peace, love and joy
this holiday season.

Our offices will be closed Thursday,
December 25; Friday, December
26; and Thursday, January 1, for the
holidays.

Houston County Electric Cooperative

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 

CONTACT US

P.O. Box 52
Crockett, TX 75835
Local (936) 544-5641
Toll-Free 1-800-657-2445
Web houstoncountyelec.com

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ABOUT HOUSTON COUNTY EC

HCEC owns and maintains more than 5,100 miles of line to provide electric service to more than 15,000 members in Anderson, Angelina, Cherokee, Freestone, Houston, Leon, Madison, Trinit y and Walker counties.

BUSINESS HOURS

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BOARD MEETING

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*Subject to change. To verify, please call.

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- To report an outage, press 1.
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- To speak to a member services representative regarding your account, press 4.
- Para hablar con un representante de habla español, presione 5.
- To connect, disconnect or transfer service, press 6.
- To report outdoor lighting issues or other nonemergencies regarding your electric service, press 7.

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2

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2

6

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How Do Capital Credits Work?



When you pay your electric bill, HCEC uses the money to maintain and deliver reliable electric service to its members. Revenue in excess of expenses for the year is the margin.



Cooperative margins are allocated to individual members based on the amount of kilowatt-hours used in the form of a capital credit.



Your Board of Directors analyzes the financial position of the cooperative and retires or refunds capital credits to members. The retirement of capital credits is how we return your ownership interest in HCEC.

How Do I Get My Capital Credit Refund?



Eligible Active Members will receive their refund as a credit on their December billing statement. Eligible Inactive Members will receive their refund in the form of a check to the last address we have on file.

AMOUNT BEING
RETIRED IN 2025:

\$1.9 million

YEARS BEING
RETIRED IN 2025:

**1996 &
part of 2024**



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SUBMISSIONS DUE
JANUARY 30, 2026

Spiced Banana Muffins

2 cups all-purpose flour
1 cup whole-wheat flour
2 teaspoons baking soda
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon ground nutmeg
½ teaspoon ground cardamom
¼ teaspoon ground cloves
½ teaspoon salt
½ cup (1 stick) butter, softened
½ cup brown sugar
1 ½ cups sugar
4 eggs
5–6 ripe bananas, mashed
½ cup vegetable oil
2 teaspoons vanilla extract

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Apply cooking spray to 2 muffin tins or line with paper baking cups.
2. Whisk together flours, baking soda, spices and salt in a medium bowl.
3. In another bowl, cream butter and sugars. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each. Add bananas, oil and vanilla; mix well. Add dry ingredients and mix until moistened, being careful not to overmix.
4. Spoon batter into muffin tins. Bake 15–17 minutes or until a toothpick comes out clean.
5. Remove from oven and cool muffins in tins 5 minutes. Invert and finish cooling right side up on a wire rack.

MAKES 2 DOZEN MUFFINS

 Find this and more delicious recipes online at TexasCoopPower.com.

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Eyes on the Ball

Devotees ensure Anson's historic Cowboys' Christmas Ball stays true to the original

STORY AND PHOTO BY ANNA MAZUREK

EVERY DECEMBER, John Milsap Compere dresses in a cowboy hat, blue jeans, a white shirt, black vest and Western string tie—traditional 1880s attire—and makes his way to Pioneer Hall, a historic dance hall in Anson, north of Abilene, for the town's annual three-day reenactment of the 1885 Texas Cowboys' Christmas Ball.

"Anson was a new community on the frontier. That was the end of civilization," says Compere, an 84-year-old retired Army brigadier general and judge and the historian for the Texas Cowboys' Christmas Ball Association.

One hundred and forty years ago, the owner of the town's lone hotel, the Star, hosted a ball, supposedly to honor a newlywed couple, and invited all the locals. Compere's great-grandfather and namesake, John Milsap, attended and invited his friend, author and rancher William Lawrence Chittenden.

Chittenden was so impressed by the ball that he wrote a poem titled *The Cowboys' Christmas Ball* in 1890, which would later make the event famous thanks to its inclusion in folklorist John A. Lomax's 1910 book *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*.

The ball became an annual tradition, and when the hotel burned down, it was held at local ranches before World War I halted it.

Two schoolteachers, Leonora Barrett and Hybernia Grace, revived the ball in 1934, organizing a historical reenactment in a high school gym. An Anson city ordinance prohibiting dancing had become law the year before, but an exemption was granted for the three nights of the event.

The reenactment was such a success that Pioneer Hall was constructed to host it in 1940. The 8,591-square-foot building with a stone facade is a designated state historic site but had to be padlocked 362 days a year due to the dancing ban. The ball, itself an official state historic event, has been held annually on the Thursday, Friday and Saturday before Christmas—December 18–20 this year—except for a one-year pandemic hiatus.

The association that organizes and runs the event was established in 1937 and ensures the tradition is carefully preserved, namely its cowboy dances. The Paul Jones, schottische, Virginia reel, heel-and-toe polka and waltz are among the dances performed each year.

"They wanted the old-time, old-fashioned dances and music," Compere says. "We still go by those rules and our bylaws that were written back in the '30s."

Per those 140-year-old rules, there's no alcohol, smoking, horse riding, shooting, spitting, cussing or fighting. On the dance floor, women must wear dresses (skirts can be borrowed at the cloakroom), and men are required to check hats, spurs and guns. The dress code only applies to women on the dance floor, not those watching from the built-in wooden bleachers that line the sides of the hall.

There have been a few rule testers and breakers over the years. Two cowboys had a few too many drinks elsewhere and rode their horses into the hall in 2005. At the 2015 ball, the high schoolers staffing the coatroom were surprised when a historical gun reenactment group checked all their unloaded rifles, handguns and derringers at the door.

Musical traditions are another centerpiece. Each night a grand march honors a newlywed couple, a tribute to the ball's origins. Chittenden's poem is performed by a soloist, a tradition started in 1946 when Colorado folklorist Gordon Graham set it to music. The song was recorded in 1985 by Grammy Award nominee Michael Martin Murphey, who will make his 32nd ball appearance this year.

In the 1970s, an updated but now defunct citywide dancing ban included a unique exception for the ball.

While the dance draws roughly 300 people a night, Compere considers it a family tradition with children "dancing with their parents and grandparents" as he did. When his first grandchild was 2 months old, she became the sixth generation to attend. He took her onto the dance floor and kissed her under the mistletoe draped from the wagon wheel chandeliers.

Engaging younger generations is a priority. High school students traditionally work the cloakroom and concession stand. The association sponsors a writing contest for students, who write about the history of the ball, and a holiday pageant. Pageant winners are honored on the final night of the ball, a family affair with an appearance by a cowboy Santa Claus.

"As long as people will support it," Compere says, there will always be Christmas dancing in Anson. ■

John Milsap Compere's ancestors attended the first Cowboys' Christmas Ball in 1885.



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B.

A.

"I never expected it to be so beautiful that it takes your breath away."

— Kaya C., on Stauer Opals

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Turn of Fortune

A family's legacy far exceeds its pilfered buried treasure

BY W.F. STRONG • ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT NEUBECKER

A LONG TIME AGO, a woman tried to sell me her home, hinting at the prospect of gold treasure long hidden and lost within.

She told me her husband had died suddenly, and his last words to her were: "There's gold coins behind the wall in the bedroom closet." She was willing to split anything found.

I didn't bite on that strange sales pitch, but it reminded me of another similar case, even more interesting, up the country a ways.

In the little Texas town of San Diego, about an hour west of Corpus Christi, there once lived a Dr. Jose García. In 1933, he was the primary doctor in town and preferred to store his wealth in the form of gold coins. He hid it in a tight crawl

space beneath a trapdoor in his kitchen.

No one knew of this treasure except García and his daughter, Gloria. He told her the coins were hers to use, for taking care of her disabled brother later in life.

When the good doctor eventually died, Gloria asked her husband, Hector López, to find the coins. After Hector's repeated determined explorations into the tight crawl space—even with a metal detector—he couldn't find the coins.

Since García had suffered from dementia late in life, Gloria and Hector began thinking the gold coins had been the invention of an imaginative mind or a mind that forgot he had moved the coins.

Years later, Gloria and Hector sold the house. Then, more than 20 years after

TCP Listen as W.F. Strong narrates this story on our website.



that, a plumbing leak sprang up underneath it.

A plumber went through that old trapdoor the doctor had created almost 100 years before. While laying in a new line through the muddy soil, the plumber saw a flicker of something shiny.

He brushed away the mud and discovered a very old gold coin. He dug deeper and found a gold mine: some 500 coins in various sizes and denominations.

He was elated, of course, but he didn't alert the homeowner. He calmly asked his assistant to get him an empty coffee can and absconded with the coins—worth about \$500,000 at the time.

But the plumber didn't handle it well. He went around paying for things with gold coins within the little community. The gossip erupted immediately, and Hector and Gloria soon got word.

They sued the plumber, saying the coins belonged to Gloria.

The new homeowner, too, sued for ownership, but after a long legal battle, a jury in Duval County decided that the coins belonged to Gloria.

Next, something even more unexpected and beautiful happened: Gloria and Hector gave the coins to the Museum of South Texas History in Edinburg.

As it turned out, the coins were a small part of Gloria and Hector López's wealth. They both graduated from the University of Texas in the 1940s, and then Hector earned a law degree and amassed a \$275 million portfolio while working in the oil and gas industry.

Since they had no children, the Lópezes left their fortune to the children of Texas in the form of the Hector and Gloria López Foundation, which provides college tuition—especially for Hispanic and first-generation students, known proudly as López Scholars. ■

Holiday Breakfast

Be warned: Santa might stick around for these dishes

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

Making chilaquiles is a treasured tradition for my family. Chilaquiles are fried corn tortillas simmered in a creamy salsa verde and topped with eggs. Our girls love them; I love prepping everything in advance; and my husband loves a heaping plate of hearty goodness after the piles of wrapping paper.

Chilaquiles Verdes

¼ cup vegetable oil, or more as needed
12 corn tortillas, cut into 4 wedges each
2 teaspoons salt, or more to taste
4 cups salsa verde, plus more for serving
1 cup heavy cream
4 eggs
Diced red onion
Cilantro
Queso fresco, crumbled

1. In a large skillet over medium-high heat, heat oil until shimmering. Add about a quarter of the tortilla wedges and cook, flipping once, until lightly brown and crisp.
2. Drain the freshly fried tortilla chips on a paper towel-lined baking sheet. Sprinkle lightly with salt. Repeat this process until all tortillas are fried, adding more oil as needed.
3. Drain oil and wipe skillet. Heat 4 cups salsa verde and heavy cream in the skillet over medium-high heat until warmed through. Add chips and gently stir to coat chips in sauce. Reduce heat, cover and simmer 2 minutes.
4. In another skillet, scramble or fry eggs to your preference.
5. Divide the chilaquiles between four plates and top with eggs. Sprinkle with red onion, cilantro and queso fresco. Serve with additional salsa verde.

SERVES 4

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



Artichoke-Cheese Frittata

WILLIAM P. LOYD
UNITED COOPERATIVE SERVICES

I feel strongly that Christmas mornings should be laid-back, meaning coffee, family time, gifts and a delicious breakfast that was prepped in advance.

- 1 tablespoon (1/8 stick) butter, melted
- 6 green onions, diced
- 1/2 cup diced green bell pepper
- 5 eggs
- 1 1/2 cups milk
- 1/2 teaspoon dry mustard
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon onion powder
- 3-4 slices bread, cubed, divided use
- 3/4 cup shredded cheese (cheddar, Monterey Jack, pepper jack or a combination works well), divided use
- 1 jar marinated artichoke hearts (12 ounces), drained and chopped into bite-size pieces, divided use
- 1 jar diced pimientos (4 ounces), drained, divided use

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a 1 1/2-quart baking dish.
2. In a skillet over medium-high heat, cook butter, green onions and bell pepper, stirring occasionally until tender, about 2-3 minutes.
3. In a bowl, whisk together eggs, milk, mustard, salt and onion powder.
4. In the prepared baking dish, layer half the bread, half the onion-pepper mixture, half the cheese, half the artichokes and half the pimientos. Pour half the egg mixture over first layer.
5. Repeat layering with the remaining bread, onion-pepper mixture, cheese,



\$500 WINNER

Cranberry Orange White Chocolate Baked Oatmeal

MELISSA TURLEY
BANDERA EC



Looking for a cozy Christmas breakfast to feed a crowd? This is it. Imagine a holiday buffet table filled with baked oatmeal, bacon, sausage, scrambled eggs and fruit. And invite me because I would drive for hours for this baked oatmeal. The oatmeal can be prepped the day before, refrigerated overnight and baked the next morning.

- 6 cups old-fashioned oats
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 cup dried cranberries
- 1 cup white chocolate chips
- 2 cups orange juice
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 4 eggs

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a 9-by-13-inch baking pan.
2. In a large bowl or stand mixer, combine oats, sugar, baking powder, salt, dried cranberries and white chocolate chips.
3. In another bowl, whisk together orange juice, oil, vanilla and eggs.
4. While mixing on low, slowly add wet ingredients to dry ingredients until thoroughly mixed.
5. Pour into prepared pan and bake 35-40 minutes or until golden brown.

SERVES 10-12

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

MOM'S FAVORITES DUE DEC 10
Everything is better when it's made with love by Mom. What recipe do you remember your mother by? Send us your favorite for a shot at \$500 and a spot in our May issue.
UPCOMING: THE ART OF THE SANDWICH DUE JAN 10



CONTINUED ON PAGE 28 >

RECIPE PHOTOS: JASON DAVID PAGE. WINNER PHOTO: COURTESY MELISSA TURLEY

RECIPES CONTINUED

artichokes, pimientos and egg mixture.

6. If making in advance, cover and refrigerate. Allow to come to room temperature before baking.

7. Bake 30–40 minutes, until eggs are set and frittata is firm.

SERVES 6

French Toast Bake
With Caramel Banana
Cream Topping

MARIAN EVONIUK
PEDERNALES EC

Brioche coated in a creamy eggy mixture, baked until golden and topped with whipped cream, bananas and caramel is the only gift I want this holiday season.

FRENCH TOAST BAKE

6 eggs

1 cup heavy cream

2 tablespoons maple syrup



1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

½ teaspoon salt

1 loaf brioche, sliced and cubed

TOPPING

2 cups heavy cream

½ cup powdered sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

4 large bananas, sliced

Caramel sauce

1. **FRENCH TOAST BAKE** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Coat an 8-by-8-inch baking dish with butter or cooking spray and set aside.

2. In a large bowl, whisk together eggs, 1 cup heavy cream, maple syrup, 1 teaspoon vanilla, lemon juice, cinnamon and salt. Add brioche and stir to coat. Pour into prepared baking dish.

3. Place baking dish on center rack of oven and bake 30–40 minutes, until mixture is set, puffy and light golden brown on top. Tent loosely with foil if top is browning too quickly. Remove from oven and allow to cool slightly.

4. **TOPPING** In a large bowl, combine 2 cups heavy cream, powdered sugar and 1 teaspoon vanilla. Beat at medium-high until soft peaks form. Set aside.

5. To serve, cut the bake into squares and top with a large dollop of whipped cream, banana slices and a drizzle of caramel sauce.

SERVES 4–6

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HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

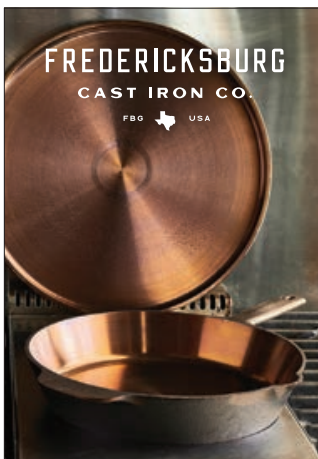
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COURTESY TODD WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY

Slabs of Strudel

The oldest bakery in Texas came from humble beginnings

BY CHET GARNER

I **DIDN'T KNOW** what to expect from the oldest bakery in Texas, but it certainly wasn't a giant slab of cherry strudel bigger than a roof shingle. And yet that's exactly what I found at Naegelin's Bakery in New Braunfels—along with a line out the door, a heavenly yeasty smell that could lead a blindfolded squirrel to town and a friendly cashier who was happy to explain the unfamiliar pastries laid out before me.

Founded in 1868, the bakery was started by a man named Edouard Naegelin who emigrated from eastern France, arriving in town with a sack of flour and less than a dollar in his pocket.

For more than 155 years, it has kept the town outside San Antonio well-supplied with loaves of fresh bread, cakes and an assortment of European cookies I could barely pronounce. Pfeffernüse, anyone? But the undeniable star of the show was their homemade strudel, coming in apple, cherry and peach with buttery layers so soft you could use it as a pillow.

Inside, the décor is a delightful cross between a German Alpine lodge and grandma's kitchen circa 1952. In the name of "research," I ordered almost everything: kolache (both fruit and sausage), cinnamon rolls, danishes, lebkuchen, springerle, and each flavor of strudel.

I sat at one of the small tables outside and proceeded to make every one of my fingers sticky with icing and every thread of my shirt dusted with powdered sugar. It was a badge of honor earned in a pastry-filled battle of the bulge. In the end, the strudel won, but it was worth it.

Whether you're a hungry local, a curious traveler or an overambitious pastry juggler, Naegelin's is here to welcome you with open arms just like it has for generations. ■

ABOVE Chet's eyes are bigger than his stomach at Naegelin's Bakery in New Braunfels.

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



Know Before You Go

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

DECEMBER

7

San Antonio Cowboy Christmas, (210) 299-4499, briscoemuseum.org

Waxahachie [7, 12-14] Bethlehem Revisited, (469) 309-4040, waxahachiecvb.com

Port Lavaca [7, 12-14, 19-21, 26-28] Nativity Exhibit, (361) 935-8032, bit.ly/nativityexhibit

9

Lufkin The Texas Tenors: Deep in the Heart of Christmas, (936) 633-5454, angelinaarts.org

11

El Paso Los Murales de Segundo Barrio, (915) 533-0048, tomlea.com

Marshall [11, 19] Fireside Feast: Cooking Up History at Maplecroft, (903) 935-3044, visitstarrfamilyhome.com

12

Kyle [12-14] A Night in Bethlehem, (512) 268-7044, f-pc.org

Smithville [12-14, 19-22] Dinah 4 Christmas, (512) 304-0666, dinah4.com

13

Bastrop Historic Homes Tour, (512) 303-0904, bastropcountyhistoricalsociety.com

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

Chappell Hill Teddy Bear Parade, (979) 337-9910, chappellhilltx.com

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

Waxahachie [13-14] Historic Waxahachie Christmas Tour of Homes, historicwaxahachie.com

Corsicana CelloVoci, (903) 874-7792, corsicanapalace.com

Richardson Rocky Mountain High Experience: A John Denver Christmas, (972) 744-4650, eisemanncenter.com

Levelland [19-21] Christmas Cash Classic, (806) 786-8683, facebook.com/christmascashclassic

Brenham Top of the World, A Carpenters Christmas, (979) 337-7240, thebarnhillcenter.com

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

Grapevine The Nuttier Cracker, (817) 410-3100, grapevinetexasusa.com

Eastland New Year's Eve Casino Night, (254) 631-0437, eastlandcountymuseum.com

Palestine Dash & Splash 5K, (903) 729-3139, palestineymca.org

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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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1 SCOTT BOWMAN
PEDERNALES EC

"Young mini-Nubian goats enjoy breakfast in the barn."

2 AMY BOGS
NAVASOTA VALLEY EC

"One of our calves got a little too excited about the new hay and wedged himself between two bales."

3 KYLE BIGGERSTAFF
LIGHTHOUSE EC

"Hayden Biggerstaff and Jude the cow dog finish pushing cattle to a new pasture at sunset in Crosby County."

4 CAROLYN GULLY
PEDERNALES EC

"My great-granddaughter, Leighton Gully, and her friend, Annabelle, take a break on the farm."



Upcoming Contests

GATES DUE DEC 10

CAUGHT NAPPING DUE JAN 10

MAKING A SPLASH DUE FEB 10



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TCP See Focus on Texas on our website for many more Country Life photos from readers.



Our Kind of Weird

The best Christmas mornings include a one-of-a-kind family dish

BY SHANE TORNO
ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN KACHIK

I SUPPOSE EVERY FAMILY has a favorite dish—a meal with special significance. In my family’s case, we had a special meal that my mom, the one who did the cooking in our house, didn’t care for. I wonder if this is common.

The meal was a breakfast dish known to us as biscuits and pudding. In my youth, I believed that this was unique to my family since everyone I ever asked about it had never heard of such a thing.

However, just recently I learned that the meal is actually known in the rural south as biscuits and chocolate gravy.

To be sure, the chocolate pudding we used was stove-cooked and served hot, so calling it chocolate gravy makes sense. My online research tells me that the dish has its origins in the Great Depression, when powdered cocoa

became readily available as a baking product. There are origin stories associated with Appalachia, the Tennessee Valley, western Oklahoma and Arkansas.

I have no idea how it could have come into contact with a German family settling in Dime Box in Central Texas and then relocating to deep South Texas.

Ignorant of any of this history, I enjoyed this breakfast whenever my father could convince my mom to get up early and prepare it.

A few tips if you decide to try this yourself on a cold morning. The biscuits need to be buttermilk with a consistent texture all the way through, not the canned biscuits that produce lots of flaky individual layers. Those flaky layers make eating the pudding-covered biscuits a messy and unappealing operation. Also, the meal is best when both the biscuits and the pudding are served hot.

Grab a couple (or three) biscuits and cut them in half so you have the biscuits lying open-faced. Add a pat of butter to each biscuit half and then douse with the pudding. As the butter melts under the hot pudding, it liquefies and seeps through the pudding to create some beautiful yellow puddles.

If you have a sweet tooth, this will beat the best biscuits and gravy meal you have ever had.

As I said, my mom didn’t care for the meal, possibly because it was passed down from my father’s family. Or maybe because she didn’t like getting up early to bake on Christmas morning. To her credit, she made them well (as did her mom, my dad’s mom and my Aunt Joy).

On those special mornings when they were available, we all made big plates of it while Mom stood back and ate her biscuit with jelly like a normal human. If you listened carefully above the racket of forks on plates, you might even hear her mutter something about a bunch of weirdos. ■

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