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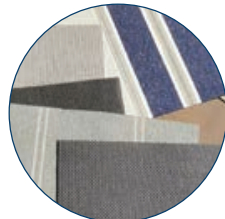
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April 2026



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Growing Tradition

Rio Grande Valley volunteers gather each fall to replant a thorn forest, seedling by seedling.

*By Eileen Mattei
Photos by Larry Ditto*

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Nineteen species of hummingbird call Texas home, and these West Texans can help you see many of them.

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ON THE COVER

A male ruby-throated hummingbird fuels up on a zinnia bloom.

Photo by Laurie Lawler

ABOVE

Reforestation volunteers gather at sunrise on a patch of federal land near the Rio Grande.

Photo by Larry Ditto



Lori and Gregg Belcher

“To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.”
—AUDREY HEPBURN

FINISH THIS SENTENCE

If I could use only one electronic device, it would be ...

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

Here are some of the responses to our February prompt: **The perfect Valentine's gift is ...**

The love shown by Cicero to Olla [*What Love Looks Like*, February 2026].

MARILYN WERKHEISER
BLUEBONNET EC
BASTROP

Giving from the heart and expecting nothing in return.

JIM DUNGAN
VIA FACEBOOK

To be thought of as special by someone.

KAT CROSS
HOUSTON COUNTY EC
CROCKETT

Spending time with the ones you love.

ANITA BURT
BIG COUNTRY EC
SNYDER

Having popcorn and Diet Dr Pepper with my husband of 68 years.

SANDRA LEA
BARTLETT EC
MILANO

Visit our website to see more responses.

Mutual Appreciation

ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES TAKE time every April to recognize the heroes of the power lines on National Lineworker Appreciation Day—April 13 this year.

For one Central Texas lineworker, appreciation came last summer. Gregg Belcher lay in a Dallas hospital after an electrical injury in June 2025. The foreman at Hamilton County Electric Cooperative had suffered horrific burns on his back and chest and lost his left arm.

Co-workers and friends in Hico and Hamilton and at neighboring co-ops rallied to help with expenses, collecting \$93,000 at a benefit event in August and through other donations.

“We were just blown away by the love that people have shown us,” said Lori Belcher, his wife.

TCP Visit our website to read about Gregg Belcher's recovery.

TCP Contests and More

\$500 RECIPE CONTEST
Pancakes and Waffles

FOCUS ON TEXAS PHOTOS
Underwater Life

RECOMMENDED READING
This month's Pancakes and Waffles contest reminds us of *Breakfast in Texas*, our May 2015 feature story. Find it on our website.



ENTER ONLINE



FEBRUARY 2026

“Loved the pics of animals at the rehab center, especially the cross-eyed opossum [Giving a Hoot]. And the artwork by Pete Lloyd was beautiful [What Love Looks Like].”

SANDY KEOGH
PEDERNALES EC
CANYON LAKE



TIFFANY HOFELDT

Noble Deeds

Big thanks to Martha Deeringer and Tiffany Hofeldt for the informative and interesting article on wildlife rehabbers: such noble and generous volunteers [Giving a Hoot, February 2026].

Lee Turner
MidSouth EC
Montgomery

Setting the Record Straight

President Franklin D. Roosevelt did not sign an executive order integrating the armed forces [Currents, February 2026]. While he signed Executive Order 8802 in 1941 to prohibit racial discrimination in the defense industry, he upheld segregation within the military.

The desegregation of the armed forces was achieved later, by President Harry S. Truman via Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948.

Don F. Davison
Central Texas EC
Fredericksburg

Floored by Willie

In 1974 I was a young lieutenant in San Antonio. A friend suggested that we go out to John T. Floore’s Country Store because a guy named Willie Nelson was playing [Honky-Tonk Heaven, February 2026].

For three hours Willie and his band never left the stage. When the band would take a short break, they would just pass a bottle of whiskey around. I’ve been a Willie fan for over 50 years.

Joe Kreimborg
CoServ
Highland Village

Road Trip

My old high school boyfriend lived in an old Army house on Fort McIntosh back in the 1960s, and I also took a couple of classes at Laredo Junior College one summer [From Posts to Pillars, February 2026].

An interesting trip would be to visit each of those old Rio Grande forts.

Sheri Sweet
Bluebonnet EC and Central Texas EC
Lexington and Fredericksburg



PETE LLOYD

TCP WRITE TO US
letters@TexasCoopPower.com

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Austin, TX 78701

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

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FAST and *CURIOUS*



HUMMINGBIRDS THIS SPREAD: LAURIE LAWLER

ABOVE An interaction between ruby-throated hummingbirds.

LEFT A male Allen's hummingbird at rest.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP A male ruby-throated hummingbird. Since the 1990s, Dan and Cathy Brown have been guardians of a thriving hummingbird habitat near Christoval in West Texas.

Nineteen species of hummingbird call Texas home, and these West Texans can help you see many of them

BY SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS

Thousands of black-chinned hummingbirds nest during the summer among the live oak and pecan trees on Dan Brown's family ranch near Christoval in West Texas. And for nearly six decades, Brown has helped feed the tiny birds. Well into his 90s, his hearing has dulled but not his eyesight nor his energy.

One afternoon last June, Dan and his wife, Cathy, take a break from chores and relax in folding chairs in their observation room, an air-conditioned spot for watching the birds zip around sugar water feeders hung beneath roof eaves.

Beyond the room's huge plate-glass windows, a wild bird community is on full display. A painted bunting ruffles his wet feathers on a tiered water feature surrounded by flowering native plants. Black-crested titmice and northern cardinals snatch sunflower seeds and white millet from ball-shaped feeders. From an iron skillet nailed to a live oak, a golden-fronted woodpecker swoops in for a mouthful of suet, then flies off to feed his nestlings.

"This has become more than a hobby," muses Dan, focusing his blue eyes on the various birds. "Here it's developed into an enterprise. I couldn't do it without Cathy."

The couple call their business the Hummer House, a wooded wildlife habitat just east of the South Concho River that includes three rentable guest cottages. Since 1996, visitors from across the country and around the world have come to witness the aerial antics.

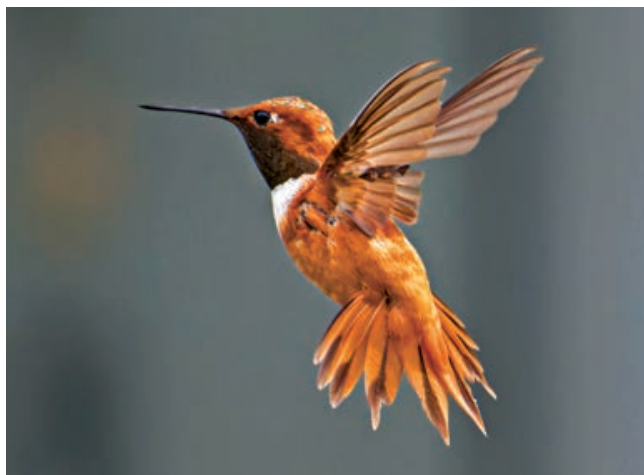
Altogether, the Browns put out 25 gigantic feeders that each hold 48 or 80 ounces of sugar water. Since one 48-ounce feeder lasts only 24 hours, keeping them filled is a daily job.

Production of the hummingbird fuel starts in a storage room, where Dan measures and pours sugar into 1-gallon plastic jugs, then sets them on shelves. As needed, the jugs are carried via golf cart to the observation room. At a sink, Cathy fills the jugs with water and shakes them well. Then she scours empty feeders with a long-handled brush and refills them with fresh sugar water.

In the 1990s, Dan bought sugar in annual amounts that ranged from 390 to 685 pounds. "Now we average about 1,500 pounds of pure cane sugar each year," Cathy says.



TIFFANY HOFELDT



HUMMINGBIRDS: LAURIE LAWLER

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT A male Anna's hummingbird, with its iridescent pink-red throat; male rufous hummingbird; and male broad-billed hummingbird, with its black-tipped, long red bill.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP A female ruby-throated hummingbird feeds at a red salvia plant. The Browns found this hummingbird nest, built from plant fibers, lichen and spider silk, on their property.

"We're a very large nesting site for black-chinned hummingbirds. Within a quarter-mile radius, we estimate that there are probably about 3,000 hummingbirds."

But they're not just here for the sugar water. "Hummingbirds are insectivores," Cathy explains. "We have thousands of native pecan trees that have aphids. Aphids are like T-bone steaks to hummingbirds. They're very high in protein and very sweet. You could take down every one of these feeders, and we'd still have hummingbirds."

Fueling Fighter Jets

The next time a hummingbird streaks past, imagine you've been buzzed by a miniature fighter jet. That's how fast nature's smallest bird can fly relative to its size. In flight, a hummingbird beats its wings in a figure eight up to 40 times or more per second. This rapid motion enables it to spin, hover, and fly backward and upside down at speeds of 30 mph or more.

To fuel such a high metabolism, a hummingbird, which can weigh 2–20 grams, slurps up nectar that's at least double its weight every day. One fill-up lasts 20 minutes, then it's off to find more flowers and insects or return to a feeder—dining territory that a hummer will fiercely defend, even remembering which blooms it has already drained (and pollinated).

At night, a hummer may go into torpor to stave off starvation. During this deep sleep, its heart slows from 1,200 beats a minute down to 50.

Nineteen hummingbird species have been recorded across Texas. In summer breeding months, the two most common species are black-chinned hummers in West Texas and ruby-throated hummingbirds in East Texas. Depending on the species, hummingbirds can breed as far away as Alaska and Canada and migrate as far south as Central America.



Since 2010, federally licensed bird bander Charles Floyd and other permitted volunteers have banded more than 10,000 hummingbirds at the Hummer House. Based on his research, about 95% of all the black-chinned hummers there are returning females from prior years.

"It wouldn't make a difference if the Browns hung a thousand feeders," says Floyd, a retired school principal who lives nearby. "What matters most is that the Browns are preserving the trees, the understory and the natural habitat."

Floyd and his banding partner—master bander and retired biologist Kelly Bryan of Rockport—collect banding data for West Texas Avian Research, a nonprofit they founded in 2011 to support bird banding research and bird conservation in West Texas.

"Banding has led me to understand the life cycle and migratory habits of hummingbirds," Floyd says. "Their established pattern of habits and movements has continued for centuries. Certain factors, such as the widespread introduction of feeders, have made some changes in that behavior. But overall patterns have remained the same."

So far, Floyd has banded 162 bird species at the Hummer

House, including half of Texas' hummingbird species. Many are banded Saturday mornings April through July at the ranch. That's when the Browns welcome visitors free of charge to watch Floyd and his wife, Nancy, band hummers and other species. Children and overnight guests are often allowed to release birds after they've been banded.

Travel Plans

At the Hummer House, male black-chinned hummingbirds arrive first in mid-March and stake out their breeding territories. By April, females show up and begin gathering unbleached cotton the Browns put out for nest building. "They keep pulling it through mid-July," Cathy says. "That's a good indication that they breed twice."

Males woo mates by performing dramatic aerial dives and buzzing their tails. They also flash their iridescent gorget, the colorful throat patch that sets males apart.

Female hummers—drably feathered for camouflage—build nests and tend the young with no help from mates. Their tiny nests are made of plant materials and held together with spiderwebs. Mothers usually lay two white eggs smaller than jelly beans and feed their hatchlings regurgitated insects and nectar.

By late June and into July, males start leaving. "They've proven through banding that they may go out west or to the Hill Country," Cathy says. "They take their time migrating back to southern Mexico for the winter. During that time, we may see male hummingbirds from farther north."

From the second week in May through the end of June, "we have a constant population of hummers," Cathy continues. "But after that, a lot of males have started to migrate. Then ruby-throated males come through. The last to leave are black-chinned females and their young ones. Our population is ever evolving."

In late August, more ruby-throated hummingbirds than black-chinneds show up. "We're on the western edge of ruby-throated migration, so we see a lot of those," Cathy says. "During fall migration, you'll see the biggest variety here, like Allen's and rufous, but not in great numbers."

The Browns get up from their chairs in the observation room and head off to refill sugar water feeders. "It's like having a dairy farm," Cathy says. "You make the circles in the morning and fill what's empty. Then in the evening, you do it all again."

Dan smiles. "If you love to work," he says, "this is the place to fall in love with." ■

TCP Watch the video on our website and get to know Dan and Cathy Brown and the hummingbirds they love.



LAURIE LAWLER

LURING LONG BEAKS

Hummer-friendly gardens provide a variety of nectar sources to meet the birds' high energy needs. They're drawn to red tubular flowers, such as salvias and honeysuckles. The trumpet shape accommodates their long bills and forked tongues. Once they discover nectar sources, hummers will also feed on other shapes, sizes and colors of flowers. Try these Texas natives:

- Autumn sage (salvia)
- Trumpet creeper
- Coral honeysuckle
- Turk's cap
- Flame acanthus



TIFFANY HOFELDT

Valley volunteers gather each fall to replant a thorn forest, seedling by seedling

Growing Tradition

BY EILEEN MATTEI • PHOTOS BY LARRY DITTO

David Alvarado remembers digging holes alongside other volunteers near the Rio Grande when he was in high school, almost 20 years ago. Nowadays he has lots of little helpers.

“I wanted to share this with my family,” says the San Juan resident, plunging his shovel into the earth again—this time with the help of his 14-year-old son, Jeremiah. His daughter, Adalee, 3, uses a trowel and her hands to pat soil around freshly planted seedlings that his wife, Berenize, places in the ground and backfills.



The Alvarados are among some 1,800 volunteers on this October morning who traveled to this 9-acre patch of federal land south of the rusty-red slats of the border wall and less than a mile north of the Rio Grande. They’re here with a lofty goal: plant 10,000 native seedlings.

The 2025 gathering marked the 31st year volunteers have come out to revegetate a piece of the Lower Rio Grande Valley on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service land. The Tamaulipan thorn forest once covered 1 million acres along the Rio Grande, but just 10% of it remains intact today.

Green Goals

By reintroducing native seedlings like Texas ebony, wild olive, fiddlewood and snake-eyes to former farm fields, the Rio Reforestation project aims to restore the thorn forest. The plants attract bugs, which bring birds, rabbits, snakes, bobcats, tortoises and javelinas. Extending the wildlife corridor allows plant and animal populations to thrive and avoid genetic isolation.

“Rio Reforestation is the biggest community planting event in the U.S. Nothing else comes close,” says Jon Dale, a senior director for American Forests. The nonprofit collects seeds and grows native plants for the USFWS at Marinoff Nursery in Alamo.

“In the last 30 years, we have restored 18,500 acres of USFWS-owned farmland by planting over 10 million native thornscrub seedlings,” says Imer de la Garza, a USFWS project leader.

Over those years, they discovered best practices that increase seedlings’ chance of survival, now around 90%. One factor is high-density planting: 10,000 plants on 9 acres works out to more than 1,000 per acre.

The native seedlings are drought- and heat-tolerant as well as freeze-, flood- and fire-resistant. Reforestation goes beyond canopy trees like mesquite and Texas persimmon to include understory plants such as allthorn, cenizo and coyotillo, plus ground covers like heliotrope and frogfruit.

LEFT After a selfie, volunteers will get the waiting plants into the ground.

OPPOSITE Three-year-old Adalee Alvarado does her part as a Rio Reforestation volunteer. She says she had a great time “playing with dirt.”





It takes a year of preparation to put crates jammed with an assortment of 35 native species into the field with an army of volunteers. Seeds are collected from the wild and Marinoff's orchard year-round, with ripe seeds intercepted before the wind or animals carry them off.

Many seeds require finicky processing techniques for successful germination. For example, wolfberry fruit must be squeezed to disgorge the seeds. Texas persimmon fruits are rolled on hardware cloth to release their large seeds. Hard ebony seeds are abraded with sandpaper.

“In the last 30 years, we have restored 18,500 acres of USFWS-owned farmland by planting over 10 million native thornscrub seedlings.”

Marinoff staff fills biodegradable plant bands with a mixture of vermiculite, local soil, fertilizer and a seed in the spring. Through the summer the plants sit on grow-out benches under shade cloth. Rio Reforestation's fall planting gives seedlings months to establish strong root systems before the next summer's heat.

The nursery contracts with private growers to help it supply this project and the other 185,000 native seedlings USFWS needs to revegetate about 200 acres annually.

From Field to Forest

Last year the 9 acres of the Milagro tract produced a crop of organic cabbage for Rio Fresh, a third-generation produce grower and packer. Before the Reforestation volunteers arrive, a tractor has plowed the soil into east-west rows. A dense thicket of 100-year-old mesquites, ebony trees and understory bushes borders the tract to the west and north.



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP The planting crews use 6-foot ropes to ensure adequate spacing between seedlings. A manzanita fruit is collected at Marinoff Nursery in Alamo, where seeds are prepared for planting.

RIGHT A volunteer plants a Texas ebony seedling.

Volunteers sign in near a banner that reads, “Let’s Restore the Thornforest Together.” It outlines the work ahead: Get your shovel. Go to one of the 200 rows where a leader awaits. Pick up a blue crate. Use a 6-foot rope to measure the distance between seedling holes. Dig a hole as deep as the top of the plant band. Put it in and backfill.

Small groups of family or friends work eastward down each row. Some organize a division of labor: the leads measuring the spacing and wielding shovels or post-hole diggers. Then come the planters with a crate of seedlings. In other rows, two or three dig, then plant and then measure to the next site. Dragonflies flit past while a turkey vulture tilts overhead.

Wearing hats and leather gloves, Mitchell, Michelle, Lindsey and Joaquin Sternberg of Mission show they know about getting down and dirty. “It’s different every year—the people, the location, the weather,” says Mitchell, who has been participating since the 1990s.

School buses of elementary, middle and high school students arrive. Idea Los Encinos of McAllen sends three buses of students. Another school sends nearly 200 students.

Berta Palacios of Pharr oversees 20 Hidalgo County 4-H kids participating as a community service project. She spies high-spirited fifth graders larking and asks them, “Is that safe, the way you’re holding that shovel?”

Low humidity and a constant breeze temper the 85-degree air, which is filled with happy chatter. “It’s really fun, something to do on the weekend with friends. We all like doing it,” says Jennavie Juarez, one of 15 from the Weslaco High School National Honor Society here for their third year.

Girl Scout Troop 269 from La Feria has returned as well. “The girls enjoy it,” says Krystal Cruz, a scout leader and parent of a volunteer. “This is something we hope to continue every year.”

Maria Ortega and her three young children tackle a row themselves. “This is the very first time we have planted anything,” she says. Near them Victor Ostolaza Jr. is digging holes with his father while his wife, Cynthia, and daughter Kiara follow with the seedlings. He explains that Kiara’s school involvement brought them out. “We participated before because of her.”

Row leader Chad Wilmoth, a retired Rio Hondo science teacher and member of Magic Valley Electric Cooperative, grew some of the seedlings Marinoff distributes. Row leaders know not to fuss if seedlings are not planted at the exact spacing or depth. Volunteers familiar with the event under-



stand that engaging and energizing the community is an important part of the work.

A young boy jumps on a shovel his mom holds steady, upright. A teen girl empties her water bottle onto a newly planted Western soapberry. After completing their rows, 23 kids in the Green Club of Idea Mission lean on their shovels, listening to Tejano music from a small speaker.

“It’s controlled chaos,” Dale says as the event winds down. “Survival could be 100% this time since the tract is surrounded by agriculture and its moisture. Tight proximity results in a more diverse habitat.”

Set Up for Success

Dropped gloves and empty crates litter the field as volunteers head home after picking up a boxed lunch. If they want, workers can take home a pot of chile pequin, crucita or Mexican hat. After all, they now know how to plant them.

Soon after Rio Reforestation, contractors insert a 3-foot-tall durable tree tube around each plant. Besides thwarting plant nibblers, morning moisture collects on the tubes and trickles down to the seedlings. That’s the only moisture the young plants get besides rain.

Over time, wild seedlings will pop up under the taller trees, taking advantage of the shade and moisture. Insects, birds and other creatures will spread out into restored habitat. ■



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MESSAGE FROM GENERAL MANAGER/CEO KATHI CALVERT

Lives on the Line

EVERY YEAR, WE take time to thank our extraordinary linemen who dedicate their lives to keeping lights bright as we recognize National Lineworker Appreciation Day on April 13. In reality, we depend on our entire staff to keep Houston County Electric Cooperative running smoothly. Across Houston County EC's service territory, 68 employees, including 32 linemen, maintain 5,300 miles of line to provide electricity to each and every member. Without them, our world would be dark.

From the moment a person contacts Houston County EC, they are greeted by a member service agent who is intent on providing electric service to new and existing homes or businesses. Expert staking technicians are sent to design lines for new construction, while warehouse and purchasing personnel ensure we have construction material. Our construction and service crews are specialists in the art of building and energizing new lines, a craft learned with years of experience.

However, service and maintenance continue long after your meter is first installed. We have a right-of-

way crew to assist with maintaining easements and clearing hazardous trees. Mapping professionals ensure our electric distribution system is accurately documented to support operations. While member service personnel and dispatchers are always willing to assist with anything from billing questions to an outage.

Behind the scenes, other personnel ensure that technology systems are operational and secure against cyberthreats and that Houston County EC is financially sound.

Our linemen fill a remarkable role. No matter the time—day or night, weekday or weekend—if the lights go out, so do they. They work in conditions that many of us, including myself, cannot imagine. From freezing, icy conditions through the sweltering heat of summer, our linemen go above and beyond.

Additionally, Houston County EC employees go the extra mile for our members. We are a team. We all put our lives on the line, in our own way, to serve you. ■



CALENDAR *photo* CONTEST



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TAKEN IN THE HCEC SERVICE
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LINEMAN APPRECIATION DAY

MONDAY APRIL 13

LINEMAN QUIZ:

ANSWERS ON OPPOSITE PAGE, IN BOTTOM RIGHT CORNER

WHAT IS THE COMBINED TOTAL OF YEARS OF SERVICE FOR ALL 31 HCEC LINEMEN?

- A. 286 YEARS
- B. 74 YEARS
- C. 322 YEARS
- D. 504 YEARS

HOW MANY MILES DID HCEC LINEMEN DRIVE IN 2025?

- A. 512,267 MILES
- B. 208,986 MILES
- C. 1,090,945 MILES
- D. 990,238 MILES

WHEN IT COMES TO LINEMAN SLANG, WHAT IS A "HARD HEAD"?

- A. YOUR CO-WORKER
- B. A CATFISH
- C. A LAG SCREW
- D. PROTECTIVE HEAD WEAR

ACCORDING TO ISHN, WHERE DO LINEMEN RANK WHEN IT COMES TO BEING A "DANGEROUS JOB"?

- A. 32ND PLACE
- B. 3RD PLACE
- C. 25TH PLACE
- D. 10TH PLACE

HOW MANY MILES OF LINE ARE HCEC LINEMEN RESPONSIBLE FOR?

- A. 1,485 MILES
- B. 5,319 MILES
- C. 3,864 MILES
- D. 9,864 MILES

#thankalinenman



LINEMAN QUICK FACTS:

IN 2026, THE STATE WITH THE LARGEST NUMBER OF LINEMEN IS **TEXAS**.

THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY **120,376** LINEMEN WORKING IN THE U.S.

THERE ARE AN ESTIMATED **180 MILLION** DISTRIBUTION POLES IN THE U.S. TODAY

AMERICA HAS ROUGHLY **450,000 MILES** OF POWER LINES AND **9 MILLION** MILES OF WIRE.

POWER LINEMAN TRADE BEGAN IN **1879** WITH THE INVENTION OF THE EDISON LIGHTBULB

ANSWERS: A. 286 YEARS; D. 990,238 MILES; C. A LAG SCREW; D. 10TH PLACE; B. 5,319 MILES

WHEN POWER IS STOLEN, EVERYONE PAYS THE PRICE

Tampering with your electric meter can lead to severe consequences that go beyond just financial costs. Altering your electrical equipment is illegal, highly dangerous, and expensive. It can result in electrocution or fire, which may cause injury, property damage, or even death.



Meter tampering is an act that ultimately affects all members of the community. Why? Because stealing electricity raises everyone's rates, and honest members are the ones who end up paying the price.

What are the potential consequences of attempting to steal electricity? Both the thief and the Cooperative personnel are at risk of serious injuries. Meter tampering is not only

- dangerous but also illegal and costly. If tampering is detected, the Cooperative reserves the right to disconnect electric service without prior notice. Additionally, the Cooperative requires payment for the stolen electricity, the costs incurred for investigating the incident, and any damages caused before service can be restored.

At Houston County Electric Cooperative, we take meter tampering very seriously and train our personnel to identify and prevent energy theft. You can also play a role in this effort. If you suspect that someone is stealing electricity, please report it immediately to us.

NEVER REMOVE AN HCEC METER. If you need a meter installed or reconnected, call 1-936-544-5641. HCEC will disconnect your service safely before you perform electrical repairs or install a generator. Only trained HCEC personnel should remove a meter at your location.

What counts as power theft?

- Actions that prevent a meter from correctly registering electricity use.
- Any method used to divert electricity.
- Breaking the meter seal, opening the meter base, removing the meter, or altering service in any way that results in or could result in theft.

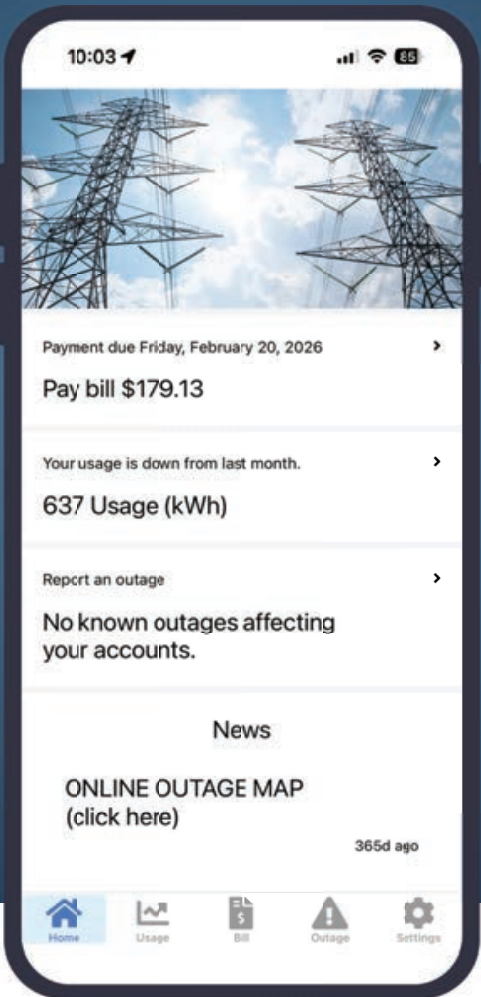
What happens if tampering is found?

- Service will be disconnected.
- Reconnection will require payment of fees before service is restored.

METER TAMPERING AFFECTS EVERYONE BY DRIVING UP COSTS AND CREATING SAFETY RISKS. BY LEAVING METERS IN THE HANDS OF HCEC'S TRAINED TECHNICIANS, YOU HELP PROTECT YOURSELF, YOUR FAMILY, AND YOUR NEIGHBORS.

REPORT ANY SUSPECTED TAMPERING TO: 936-544-5641 | 800-657-2445 | hcec@houstoncountyelec.com

DOWNLOAD THE MYHCEC APP



The image shows a smartphone displaying the myHCEC app interface. The screen shows the time 10:03, signal strength, Wi-Fi, and battery icons at the top. Below the status bar is a header image of power lines. The main content area includes: 'Payment due Friday, February 20, 2026' with a right arrow; 'Pay bill \$179.13'; 'Your usage is down from last month.' with a right arrow; '637 Usage (kWh)'; 'Report an outage' with a right arrow; and 'No known outages affecting your accounts.' Below this is a 'News' section with the title 'ONLINE OUTAGE MAP (click here)' and '365d ago'. At the bottom is a navigation bar with five icons: Home, Usage, Bill, Outage, and Settings. Four callout boxes with arrows point to specific features: 'VIEW YOUR DAILY & MONTHLY USAGE' points to the usage section; 'GET NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS FROM HCEC' points to the news section; 'INSTANTLY REPORT OUTAGES & MONITOR OUTAGE STATUSES' points to the 'Report an outage' button; and 'MAKE & SCHEDULE PAYMENTS' points to the 'Pay bill' section.

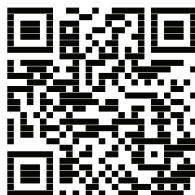
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GET NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS FROM HCEC

INSTANTLY REPORT OUTAGES & MONITOR OUTAGE STATUSES

MAKE & SCHEDULE PAYMENTS

**SEARCH myHCEC IN THE APP STORE
OR SCAN BELOW**



Uneasy Riders

Once in a while, the backseat drivers are at least half right

BY CLAY COPPEDGE • ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN KACHIK

WE WERE CRUISING into Kansas, me and half a dozen Southwestern University cheerleaders, when the radio broadcast the first of what would be many tornado warnings on March 13, 1990.

I was driving us to Missouri for a men's basketball tournament, which I would be covering for the *Williamson County Sun*. The university had offered to pay my expenses in exchange for me driving the cheerleaders to Kansas City in a rented van. What could go wrong?

If you traced on a map the route from Georgetown to Kansas City up Interstate 35, you would draw a more or less straight line through the heart of Tornado Alley. Not that I gave a second thought to the weather that day.

We cruised through Texas and Oklahoma without incident, but the way I remember it now, the skies turned dark and the wind began to howl the very second we crossed the border into Kansas.

A couple of my passengers expressed alarm over the sudden change in the weather and insisted I turn up the van's AM radio. The static was pretty bad, but we all heard the announcement that a tornado had been spotted in a certain Kansas county. I don't remember the name of the county, only that a road sign had welcomed us to that very county no more than a mile previous.

Somebody asked me what county we were in.

"I have no idea," I lied.

Then somebody in the back of the van shouted, "There it is! *That's the tornado!*"

In the rearview mirror, I saw the cheerleaders leaning toward a window, looking up at the sky, where, yes, a suspicious-looking cloud was hanging low and ominous over the flat farmland.

This was one of nearly 60 tornadoes that would form over the central U.S. that day.

Several of my fellow travelers voiced the opinion that we needed to stop. And do what? Wait for the tornado to come down from the sky and whisk us away to Oz?

"Relax," I said with more confidence than I actually felt. "I'm from Lubbock. I was outrunning tornadoes when y'all weren't even in first grade. It's all going to be OK."

At the instant I stopped talking, this warning came across the radio: "Do not try to outrun a torna-

do. Tornadoes can change direction at any moment. If you're in a vehicle, stop the vehicle and get out. Do not get under your vehicle. Lie down in a flat gully, ditch or low spot on the ground."

A clear majority of the cheerleaders now begged me to stop the van. A couple of them ordered me to. "We ain't stopping," I announced and turned the radio off. Somebody in the back of the van said things about me and my IQ that I'm sure she has always regretted.

It got worse. Minutes later, for reasons I still can't fathom, my uneasy riders pleaded with me to stop at a Hardee's (or maybe it was a Pizza Hut) on the other side of the highway. Otherwise, they said, we would all die, and it would be my fault. (Several archived news stories I recently scrolled through mentioned a Pizza Hut on I-35 that was destroyed by a tornado that day, but I found nothing about a demolished Hardee's.)

At Wichita, we veered northeast and soon put the worst of the violent weather behind us.

The entire Southwestern men's basketball team was lined up outside the hotel in Kansas City, waiting for us, when I wheeled the van to the passenger drop-off point and turned off the engine. The team had just seen TV news footage of an EF5 tornado crossing I-35, right smack dab in the middle of our route, and, well, they sure were relieved to see those cheerleaders!

The front page of the next day's *Kansas City Star* had a picture of the massive twister crossing the highway. Then the tournament began, and it was a welcome distraction.

Any hard feelings that might have lingered between me and the cheerleaders seemed forgotten a few days later when we began our return trip to Central Texas.

The van was full of happy chatter early on, but it got real quiet when we cruised past the spot where I had refused to stop a few days previous. Now, where a fast-food restaurant had once promised false refuge, there was nothing but a pile of bricks and rubble.

I considered giving the cheerleaders a heavy dose of I-told-you-so, but, for once, I restrained myself. Offering thanks, rather than asking for it, seemed like the more proper play here. I stayed quiet and did what had got us that far—I kept driving. ■



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



He bought land, studied soil types and planted test plots. He tinkered endlessly, building equipment that didn't exist and modifying machinery that did. He risked much and slept little. When something failed, he tried again.

He eventually had a gorgeous field of bluebonnets every spring, and he noticed people stopped in droves to photograph them. His entrepreneurial side said, "These folks need a place to get out of the sun and have a Coke and enjoy the view." He created such a place for them.

Over the next decade, Wildseed Farms blossomed—literally and figuratively. In 1993, he moved his operation to Fredericksburg, building what would become the largest working wildflower farm in the U.S.

Visitors who come in March or April see fields so bright they seem backlit by divine intervention. People stroll among the blooms, sip a little Hill Country wine and buy packets of seeds to take a piece of Texas home with them.

Thomas designed the J-Thom 42 Wild-seeder, a contraption that can sow a dozen species or more at once without damaging delicate seeds. He built a vacuum harvester that collects seeds by suction instead of by force, which preserves their fragile husks. Those inventions made large-scale wildflower farming possible.

Today, more than 20 states use Thomas' seeds to color their highways each spring. And Wildseed, which now fills hundreds of Hill Country acres, also grows grapes and sells its own wine.

But for all his business acumen, Thomas remains a farmer at heart. His face still turns upward when he hears thunder. As we sat in his pickup that spring afternoon, he squinted toward the horizon and said, "There's a cloud building out west. Maybe it'll come this way." ■

Painting by Numbers

His countless big ideas brought dazzling color to hills and highways

BY W.F. STRONG • ILLUSTRATION BY JASON RAISH

WE WERE SITTING in John R. Thomas' big pickup overlooking about 60 acres of bluebonnets in bloom when he said something I'll always remember. "If we could get a good rain in the next day or two," he said, "it would be a million-dollar rain."

I asked Thomas just how a rain could be worth \$1 million. He said, "It'll push those bluebonnets up another few inches and double their seed yield."

Thomas owns Wildseed Farms, southeast of Fredericksburg in the Hill Country. He doesn't grow those enormous plots of petals just for their photographic beauty. He grows them for the seeds—bluebonnet, Indian blanket, Texas paintbrush and dozens of other native varieties.

The seeds are harvested with processes he pioneered and machines he invented. They're bagged and sold in his big country store along U.S. Highway 290 then shipped to customers around the world.

Thomas grew up on a ranch near Eagle Lake, west of Houston, where he learned early that the land could break your back and your heart in the same season. He studied business at Sam Houston State University before coming home to start a grass-seeding company that restored eroded land along highways.

People began asking him for wildflower seed—especially bluebonnets—but there was no dependable source. That was all the spark he needed.

In 1981, Thomas began experimenting.

Five-Ingredient Dinners

Five stars for dishes that minimize ingredients and maximize flavor

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

After a long day of editing recipes, there's nothing I crave more than an oven-baked meal. This recipe, which I can pull together in a snap, hits the spot every single time with its spice and citrus notes. Be sure to store the leftover chipotles in the fridge.

Orange Chipotle Baked Salmon

1 pound salmon fillet
1 chipotle pepper in adobo sauce, with 4 teaspoons adobo sauce reserved
1 cup orange juice
½ teaspoon salt
Steamed rice, for serving

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Place salmon on a baking sheet.
2. Finely dice chipotle. In a small bowl, combine chipotle, reserved adobo sauce, orange juice and salt. Spoon sauce over salmon.
3. Bake salmon until it flakes easily with a fork, about 15–20 minutes.
4. Serve over rice.

SERVES 4

TCP Follow Vianney Rodriguez as she cooks in Cocina Gris at sweetlifebake.com, where she features a recipe for Creamy Chipotle Lime Shrimp.





Pea Salad

GINGER CLARDY
BANDERA EC

I was skeptical when I first tested this recipe, but little did I know this classic salad is the perfect virtually no-cook dinner. The salad is creamy with crunchy pieces of onion and chunks of cheese. Next time I will definitely double the recipe to enjoy with my family.

- 1 can English peas (15 ounces), drained**
- 2 tablespoons chopped onion**
- ¼ cup diced cheddar cheese**
- ½ boiled egg, diced**
- ¾ cup mayonnaise**

1. In a bowl, mix together peas, onion, cheddar, egg and mayonnaise.
2. Cover and refrigerate. Serve chilled.

SERVES 2



\$500 WINNER

Birds

LORI KIRKPATRICK
GRAYSON-COLLIN EC



This recipe was given to Kirkpatrick 30 years ago by a dear friend and has remained a family favorite. I see why Birds has stood the test of time in her household. Buttery crescents filled with chicken and swimming in a cream sauce hit all the comfort food notes. Kirkpatrick likes to serve the birds over steamed rice.

- 1 can refrigerated crescent rolls (8 ounces)**
- 2 cups cooked chicken, diced**
- 1 can cream of chicken soup (10.5 ounces)**
- 1 can chicken broth (10.5 ounces)**
- 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese**

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a 9-by-13-inch pan.
2. Unroll the crescent rolls and separate into 8 triangles. Place ¼ cup chicken on the wide end of each triangle, roll up dough and place in pan.
3. In a bowl, whisk together soup and broth. Pour over the prepared crescents. Top each crescent with 2 tablespoons cheddar.
4. Cover with foil and bake 20 minutes. Uncover and bake an additional 20 minutes.

SERVES 4

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

PANCAKES AND WAFFLES DUE APR 10

Never mind which is better doused in syrup—we'll take either! The winning recipe will stack up \$500. We'll share our favorites in the September issue.

CAMPFIRE FAVORITES DUE MAY 10



ENTER ONLINE

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28 >

Parmesan Ranch Chicken

CINDY HANDY
GRAYSON-COLLIN EC

Nothing beats oven-baked chicken, especially when it's coated in ranch dressing. I loved the ease of this recipe—no frying and coating the chicken in a plastic bag makes for less cleanup. Handy says this recipe works best with shelf-stable Parmesan that comes in a shaker. Serve with a salad or mashed potatoes for an easy weeknight meal.

- 1/3 cup flour**
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese**
- 1/3 cup Italian-style breadcrumbs**
- 1/2 cup ranch dressing**
- 5 chicken drumsticks**

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
2. Line a rimmed baking sheet with foil and coat with cooking spray.
3. In a large, resealable plastic bag combine flour, Parmesan and bread-



crumbs. In a large bowl, add ranch dressing.

4. Dip a drumstick into ranch dressing and coat well. Seal drumstick in plastic bag.
5. Shake bag to coat drumstick, and place on prepared baking sheet. Repeat with remaining drumsticks.

Keep Your Cool

A well-stocked freezer keeps me sane through a hectic week. Knowing I have food on hand makes meal planning easier. Here's what you'll find in my freezer.

PROTEIN: Chicken thighs and breasts, ground beef and turkey, shrimp, salmon

VEGGIES: Corn, peas, asparagus, broccoli, cauliflower

FRUIT: Berries, mangoes, peaches

READY TO BAKE: Pie crusts, pizza dough, bread, rolls

CONVENIENCE: Fries, Tater Tots, steamed rice, burger patties, waffles, meatballs

—Vianney Rodriguez

6. Bake 20 minutes, turn drumsticks over and bake an additional 20 minutes.

SERVES 2



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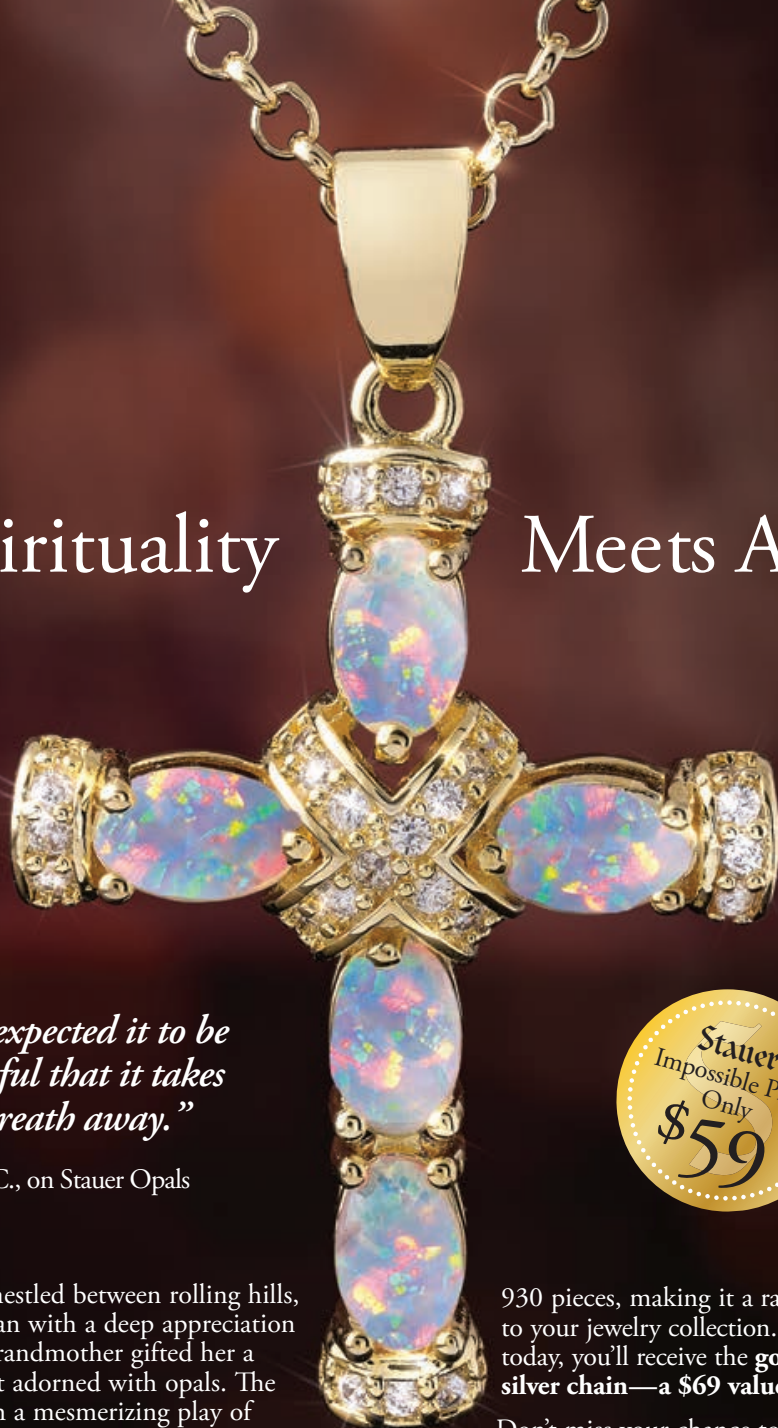
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— Kaya C., on Stauer Opals



In a quaint village, nestled between rolling hills, lived a young woman with a deep appreciation for gemstones. Her grandmother gifted her a delicate cross pendant adorned with opals. The opals shimmered with a mesmerizing play of colors, reflecting hues of blues, greens, and fiery oranges. Her grandmother shared the legend of the opals, believed to bring hope, purity, and luck to those who wore them.

Using this story as inspiration, Stauer brings you the **Opal Spirit Cross Pendant**. With over 2 total carats of Kyocera lab-created opals set in .925 sterling silver encased in yellow gold, this pendant is a radiant celebration of beauty and craftsmanship. Each opal captivates with a kaleidoscopic dance of fiery oranges blending into oceanic blues, streaked with flashes of vibrant green that seem to come alive with every movement. The shimmering opals are skillfully arranged to create an enchanting, otherworldly glow, embodying the spirit of hope and harmony.

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COURTESY CHET GARNER

Tragedy on the Prairie

Step into the hard life of frontier Texas at Old Fort Parker

BY CHET GARNER

JUST OUTSIDE THE SMALL TOWN of Groesbeck, east of Waco, tucked between cow pastures and the Navasota River, stands an old wooden fort that feels less like a destination and more like the stories of Jamestown and Plymouth Rock.

The spiked, wooden palisades of Old Fort Parker rise from the prairie grass like a movie set, but this isn't Hollywood—it's the site of a pivotal and tragic moment. You can almost hear the creak of the gate and the echo of gunfire that changed the course of a family and history.

In 1833, the fort was strategically built beside a natural spring with fertile soil in every direction. The settlers, led by brothers James and Silas Parker, had come to claim a piece of the frontier and begin a new life. However, in May 1836 their dream became a nightmare when a coalition of Native American warriors attacked the fort, killing several settlers and abducting 9-year-old Cynthia Ann Parker, her younger brother and three others.

The fort was abandoned, but over the next 24 years Cynthia assimilated into the Comanche tribe and married Chief Peta Nocona, becoming the mother of famed Chief Quanah Parker—the last great Comanche war leader.

Today, the replica fort, built in the 1930s and renovated in 1967, stands as a stark reminder of life nearly 200 years ago. It feels like a living time capsule, especially on special weekends when it's full of reenactors showing visitors how to do everything from blacksmithing to shucking corn.

You can wander through the cabins, peek through the rifle lookouts and imagine the fort bustling with frontier life. There's even a small museum detailing the Parker family saga, complete with artifacts and old maps. Here, among the oak trees and whispering prairie wind, history feels close enough to touch. ■

ABOVE Chet pulls guard duty, at least for this photo, at Old Fort Parker outside Groesbeck.

TCP Watch the video on our website as Chet visits the replica of Fort Parker. And find all of his Texplorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



Know Before You Go

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

APRIL

9

Fort Worth [9–12] Late Nite Catechism, (817) 212-4280, www.basshall.com

10

Richardson The Boho Market, info@thebohohomarket.com, thebohohomarket.com

Canton [10–11] Tractor Show & Swap Meet, (214) 837-8861, lonestarihc25.org/canton

11

Comfort Why Old Places Matter Tour, (830) 995-2641, comforthheritagefoundation.com

Jacksonville Flamin' J BBQ Fest, jvillecpaaa@gmail.com, facebook.com/jvillecpaaa

Levelland Centennial Celebration, (806) 894-0113, bit.ly/levellandcentennial

Schulenburg Sausagefest, (979) 743-4514, schulenburgsausagefest.com

Spicewood Asleep at the Wheel, (512) 264-2820, spicewoodarts.org

12

Fredericksburg Friends of Gillespie County Country Schools BBQ Meal and Raffle, (830) 685-3321, historicschools.org

17

Granbury [17–19] North Texas Gourd Festival, texasgourdsociety@hotmail.com, texasgourdsociety.org

18

Burton Cotton Gin Festival, (979) 289-3378, cottonginmuseum.org



Pick of the Month

Art, Herb & Wine Festival
Bertram, April 25-26
 (512) 882-2992
 bertramchamber.com

At this festival northwest of Austin, attendees can enjoy artisan and herbal vendors, free seminars and demonstrations, Texas wine, food trucks, craft beer, an artist showcase, a 5K run, and live music throughout the week-end. Children can participate in the art zone.

Fort Worth Bubble Run,
 (602) 926-0995, bubblerun.com

McKinney [18-19] Spring Native Plant Sale,
 (972) 562-5566,
 heardmuseum.org

19 **Lufkin Dr. Seuss' Cat in the Hat,** (936) 633-5454,
 angelinaarts.org

22 **Corsicana [22-25] Derrick Days,** (903) 654-4850,
 derrickdays.com

23 **Levelland [23-25] Caprock Region South Plains College Rodeo,** (254) 396-1341,
 caprockregionrodeo.com

MORE EVENTS >

Submit Your Event

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



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Schools

In the heart of the Texas Hill Country visit 17 historic one-room schools built between 1847 and 1936 by following the 120 mile Gillespie County Country Schools Driving Trail through the scenic Fredericksburg, Texas countryside.

A Driving Tour map and an Open House schedule are available on our website.

WWW.HISTORICSCHOOLS.ORG 

All schools listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Member of Country School Association of America.

APRIL EVENTS CONTINUED

24

Kerrville [24–June 6] Roundup Exhibition and Sale, (830) 896-2553, museumofwesternart.com

25

Avinger Wildflower Trails, (903) 562-2222, avingertxchamber.org

Huntsville Gen. Sam Houston Day, (936) 294-1832, samhoustonmemorialmuseum.com

Lakehills Medina Lake Volunteer Fire Department BBQ, (830) 751-2525, facebook.com/medinalakevfd

Temple [25–26] Texas State Button Society Spring Show and Sale, (325) 247-4955, texasstatebuttonssociety.com

MAY

1

Gun Barrel City [1–2] Gun Barrel Quilters Guild Quilt Show, (817) 896-7891, gunbarrelquiltersguild.org

Sargent [1–2] Volunteer Fire & Rescue BBQ Cookoff, (281) 794-4933, facebook.com/sargentvolunteerfiredept

2

Vernon Doan's May Picnic, (214) 244-1883, doansmaypicnic.com

Willow City Volunteer Fire & Rescue Department Benefit, (830) 685-3376, willowcityfd.com

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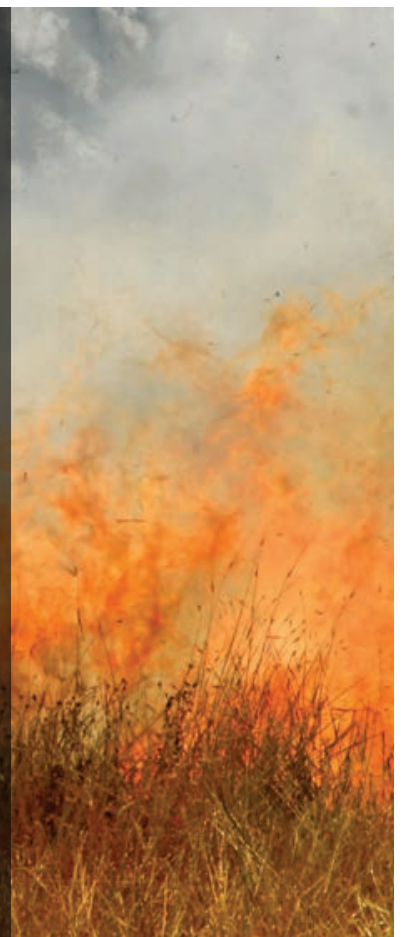
Create defensible space around your home.

Identify two evacuation routes incase one becomes compromised.

Communicate with local officials and learn how they will send emergency notifications.



tfsweb.tamu.edu/PreventWildfire



Gates

It's been said that the creaking gate hangs the longest, and these readers made themselves heard. Whether they're keeping someone in or out, Texas gates are as unique as the folks behind them. So take a detour with us this month and, as the dust settles, let's see what awaits us at the gates.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ



1

1 JODY SEDGWICK
PEDERNALES EC
"Springtime at a Hill Country gate. Flowers, deer and a kitty."

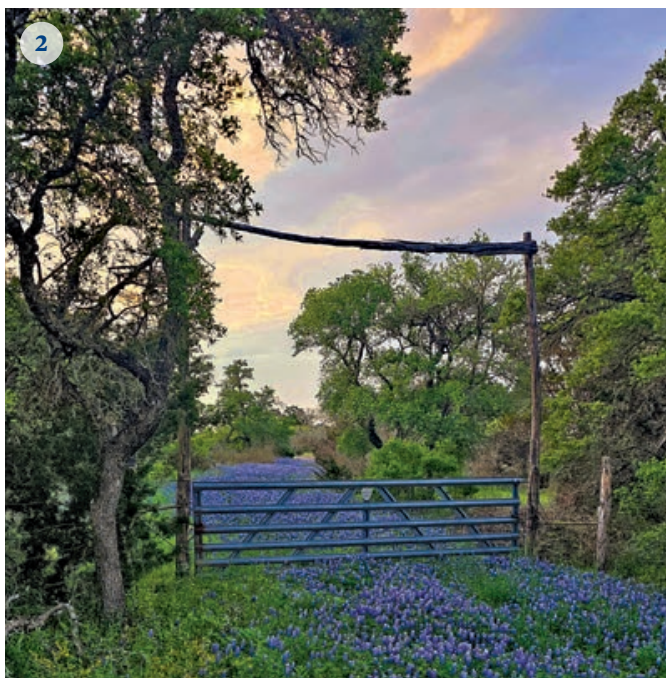
2 DEANNE LAUMER
PEDERNALES EC
"Bluebonnets on a back road."

3 LISA WOODS
UNITED COOPERATIVE SERVICES
"Next to the Steel Bender off-road trail in Moab, Utah."

4 GAYLEE WATSON
FARMERS EC
"Two paints and a mule waiting at the gate for treats."



3



2



4

Upcoming Contests

- UNDERWATER LIFE** DUE APR 10
- RODEO** DUE MAY 10
- TAILGATING** DUE JUN 10



ENTER ONLINE

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



Kickin' Ashe

The perfect spring workout awaits in the Hill Country

BY BOB MCCULLOUGH
ILLUSTRATION BY DAVE URBAN

A RANGE OF CELEBRITIES market workout routines that promise to burn calories and slow the aging process—for a price.

I'm certainly no celebrity, but as a ranch resident of the Hill Country with its ubiquitous, evergreen Ashe juniper (or mountain cedar), I myself have developed a workout that delivers heart-pumpin', muscle-buildin', weight-sheddin' results at no charge.

Cedar is an easy enemy. The prolific pollen producer native to the Edwards Plateau punishes seasonal allergy sufferers with "cedar fever." It's also incredibly thirsty, soaking up scarce rainfall to the detriment of other vegetation.

Cutting it back is like peeling an onion. You keep removing the trees' relatively soft wooden outgrowths—or layers, if you will—until you achieve the desired

clearance for trails, pathways and roads. Hand-to-branch combat fosters fitness as well as fulfillment. To take advantage of the Ashe-Kickin' Workout, I have some field-tested recommendations.

Check, please! Cedar-slaying can be strenuous, so check with your doctor and get the OK before beginning any exercise regimen.

Rags to britches: Attire yourself in the oldest, toughest, raggediest clothing in your closet because this workout surely will damage whatever you're wearing.

Covering all the spaces: Speaking of attire, opt for long sleeves and heavy pants or jeans to minimize cuts and scratches. And wear sunscreen and a wide-brimmed hat to prevent sunburns. Thick leather gloves complete the ensemble.

Make no mis-snake: Cedar survives in rugged territory where snakes also thrive, so boots should be worn for extra protection.

Bug off: Likewise, bugs and other creepy crawlers could cross your path. Spraying repellent on pants, gloves or tops of boots helps.

The cutting edges: The workout requires relatively inexpensive tools—21-inch bow saws for cuts up to 5 inches and 31-inch lopping shears for overhead branches. Chain saws are strictly prohibited in the interest of maximizing fitness!

Bind the wounds: Now and then, an oak tree will get in the way, and oak trimming should be followed immediately with pruning paint to prevent the spread of deadly oak wilt.

Muscles in knead: After a vigorous session with cedar, the ultimate reward is an appointment with a massage therapist or a sympathetic spouse who can soothe away any soreness.

Through sawing, stretching, stooping and bending, the Ashe-Kickin' Workout offers an inexpensive way to stay fit throughout the calendar year. So if you're looking for me, chances are, I'm just cuttin' up in the great outdoors. ■



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Mexico Ancient Civilizations	10	1695

USA and Canada Tours	Days	Price
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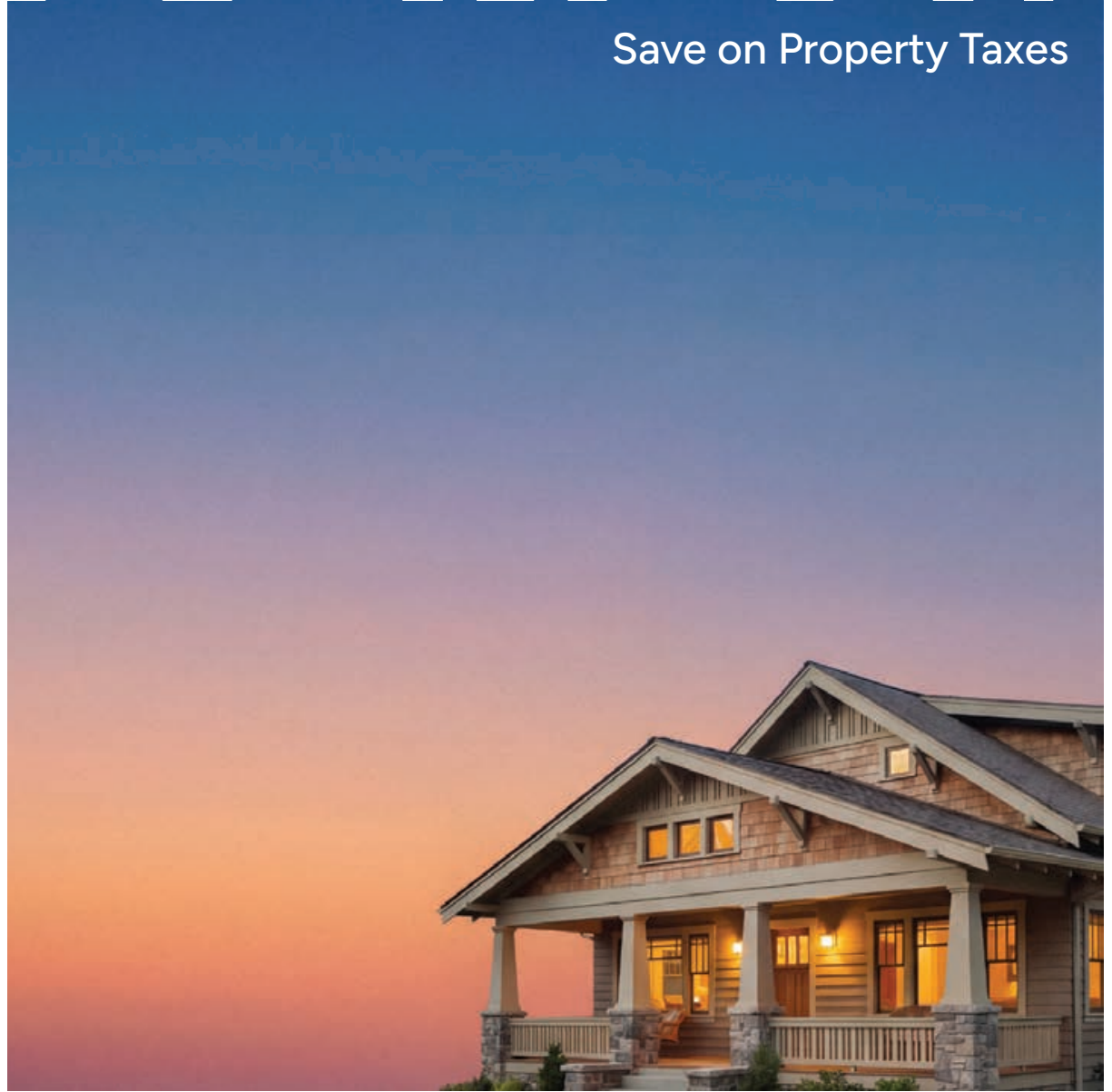
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