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Texas Coop Power

FOR ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE MEMBERS

OCTOBER 2023

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October 2023



06

It's Rocket Science (And so Much More)

High school students learn to problem-solve by building giant, powerful rockets.

*Story by Mark Wangrin
Photos by Scott Van Osdol*

ON THE COVER
The 88-year-old hands of Jimmy Tobolka await their next chance to rope a calf.
Photo by Julia Robinson

ABOVE
Time for McGregor's rocket class to learn whether all its hard work will fly.
Photo by Scott Van Osdol

10 Still in the Saddle Again

Calf roping at 80? Competition—and camaraderie—have no upper limits in the senior rodeo circuit.

Story and photos by Julia Robinson

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By Spike Gillespie



'The Right Thing To Do'

SHORTLY AFTER Mark and Cheryl Brown bought 200 acres near Ammannsville, halfway between Houston and San Antonio, they turned to conservation.

They gave their land a break from grazing, worked on grassland restoration and began networking with fellow landowners on the benefits of habitat management.

"Changing that mindset where people want to be a part of the land rather than dominate the land—it just seems like the right thing to do," says Mark, a member of Fayette Electric Cooperative.

It's been rewarding—for Mother Nature and the Browns.

More than 250 species of native plants thrive on their land, as do bird species with dwindling populations. And in May, the Browns received the Leopold Conservation Award—the state's highest honor for private land conservation—for their prairieland restoration and community outreach.



Concern for Community

Texas electric cooperatives donated nearly \$750,000 to at least 360 volunteer fire departments across the state in 2022. We celebrate that community involvement during October, which is National Co-op Month.

TCP Contests and More

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FINISH THIS SENTENCE

I collect ...

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 August prompt: **Back to school means ...**

Making new memories with my best friends, getting to meet new people, learning and experiencing new things.

ELVIRA PULIDO
MAGIC VALLEY EC
MISSION

An uninterrupted second cup of coffee.

PHYLLIS SUTTLE
MIDSOUTH EC
IOLA

New shoes, cooler weather and FOOTBALL!

MIKE WEBER
UNITED COOPERATIVE SERVICES
GRANBURY

Mother buying each of us boys two pair of Levi's blue jeans for the new school year. (We used them as work jeans at the farm the following summer.)

MANUEL G. TREVIÑO
MEDINA EC
PEARSALL

Visit our website to see more responses.

AUGUST 2023 Charming the Alamo

“There’s a new Alamo cat? Ruby is my favorite part of Alamo history, so good to see they’re continuing the tradition.”

CINDER SCOTT
VIA FACEBOOK



STEPHANIE DALTON COWAN

Good To Hear

Thank you for the audio about Larry McMurtry in *A Page of the Past* [August 2023]. It was much easier and enjoyable to listen to the story than to try to read the small print with my old eyes of 75 years.

Becky Parks
Bluebonnet EC
Maxwell

A Long and Winding Labyrinth

About 20 years ago, my husband built a labyrinth on top of a hill on our 17-acre hobby farm west of Trent [*Circles of Life*, August 2023]. He integrated it into the natural landscape of the hill, resulting in a multilevel path.

The entire labyrinth is approximately a mile walk. At the time it was built, we were told it was the largest one in North America. Visitors can reach us at dancingwithherbs@gmail.com.

Cyndi Hughs
Taylor EC
Trent



LAURA JENKINS

In Defense of Mockingbirds

The mockingbird was chosen by the Legislature to be the state bird of Texas in 1927—chosen because of its courage to protect its home and family even in the face of death [TCP Talk, August 2023]. It stands tall without fear to protect its brood, much like those who fought for Texas independence. That’s why it was chosen.

We have witnessed the mockingbird attacking snakes and hawks. It would serve us all well to take note of the parenting skills, courage and intelligence of these awesome birds.

Tim and Tammy Layman
Coleman County EC
Ballinger

Legislators in 1927 described the mockingbird as “a fighter for the protection of his home, falling if need be, in its defense, like any true Texan.” Need any more be said?

David Snipes
HILCO EC
Aquilla

TCP WRITE TO US
letters@TexasCoopPower.com

Editor, Texas Co-op Power
1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor
Austin, TX 78701

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

Texas Co-op Power

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IT'S ROCKET SCIENCE

(AND SO MUCH MORE)



High school students learn to problem-solve by building giant, powerful rockets

In the predawn hours one Friday in May, a yellow school bus hurtles down U.S. Highway 281 with 19 students, one teacher and a lot of uncertainty.

A few things are known. The juniors and seniors from McGregor High School are heading to the town of Stonewall in the Hill Country. They will launch three rockets they have designed and built based on their own research and calculations—part of a curriculum called SystemsGo, developed by a local STEM teacher in 1996.

And that's where the uncertainty begins.

The science, technology, engineering and math students have never done this before. The year before, a funding mishap robbed them of the chance. This school year, they've done and redone the math, studied and applied the physics, checked the aerodynamics, and then built the rockets based on what they've taught themselves, measuring 100 times if they measured once. Because of the nature of rockets, they haven't been tested outside of computer simulations.

If that isn't enough, weather forecasts call for afternoon thunderstorms in Stonewall, which means their launch window could be compressed.

And it doesn't help that most haven't slept much. Some worked through the night. Others were bothered by an overnight storm; others consumed by what-ifs.

And there are a lot of what-ifs.

Moments after stepping down the bus steps at the Stonewall Chamber of Commerce, where five other classes from five other schools are already gathered, teacher Johnathan Whatley is approached by one of his students. Mario Suarez is wearing a T-shirt with "Never Waste Talent" on the back and a sheepish grin.

"We have a predicament," he says. Of course they do.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP A.J. Jimenez carries a McGregor High School rocket off the bus on launch day. Aaron Olivera checks parachute lines. McGregor rocket club students huddle during the competition. A rocket launches during a SystemsGo event in Stonewall. RIGHT The thrill of a successful launch for members of the McGregor class.

STAGE 1 | Getting Off the Ground

Dozens of high schools participate in the SystemsGo rocketry curriculum, which culminates in competitive launches at the end of the school year. Teachers leave the rocket building and problem-solving up to the students.

Whatley's go-to response is, "That's interesting. What do you think?" The idea is for the students to figure things out on their own, which is how SystemsGo got started.

Brett Williams was a marine fisheries expert at Texas A&M University at Galveston. When he retired in 1996, he became a science teacher at Fredericksburg High School.

"I didn't have lab equipment," Williams says. "I didn't really have anything. I didn't have a curriculum. I was making it all up as I went."

Today—27 years later—65 schools across Texas and New Mexico launch more than 150 rockets each spring at test sites in Texas and New Mexico as part of SystemsGo, Williams' brainchild.

These aren't toy rockets. These are full-fledged 7-foot-long projectiles, some carefully configured to carry a 1-pound payload as close to a mile high as possible or break the sound barrier. The most advanced few among them carry a payload of university research to an altitude of 50,000 feet.

STAGE 2 | Preparing the Mission

A few miles down the road from McGregor is Crawford, home of SpaceX's rocket testing facility. Occasionally, Whatley's class hears the loud roar of ignition.

Last year's class even got to visit. They saw the facilities



McGregor's Kirsten Galle, left, and Isaiah Thomas prepare a rocket. Teacher Johnathan Whatley calls Galle "a mathematical whiz."



and were allowed off the bus just once—to see close-up the first rocket the company landed safely.

"That was the 100th rocket they'd launched," Whatley says. "That's not a cautionary tale, it's a tale of hope. Here are professionals who have it blow up on them. And then they succeed."

After graduating from Baylor University in 2014, Whatley applied for a coaching job at McGregor, also agreeing to teach the rockets class after he was hired.

"It made me really excited for just the possibilities of different types of education," he says. Some students—even the brightest ones—don't learn to think for themselves, and some need to be challenged, he says. So that's what he does.

The fall semester focuses on the basics of flight. During the first weeks of class, Whatley dumps an assortment of rocket parts on a large table and asks the students to build a small rocket that's fitted with a beginner's rocket engine and launched.

"They make some pretty terrible stuff," Whatley says. "They think the more fins the better. They get creative. Like why not? But that's them failing—but then learning from their mistakes."

Their second goal, Whatley says, "is to build a stable rocket." That's the one they'll try to fly in Stonewall.

STAGE 3 | The Race to Launch

It turns out the predicament Suarez mentions is minor. They forgot a section of plastic tubing vital to fueling. "It's a chance to work on your social skills," Whatley says to Suarez. The implication is clear: Ask around.

The group is an amalgam: football players, makers, math nerds and more. But all plan to attend college, many in technical fields.

"This class definitely reshaped the way I went about doing school," says Suarez, who wants to be a hair stylist. "Before, I would slack in classes. But whenever I got to rockets, I understood that you can't do that. There are deadlines that need to be met."

For Williams, there's more than just hard work, or even serendipity, at play with SystemsGo. He recalls cold calling a rocket parts company only to unexpectedly catch the CEO at lunch, reading an article about the program as he ate. He was a yes.

And there was a real long shot—dialing the Pentagon from the middle of nowhere, hoping to find someone to ask about borrowing some launch technology. He reached a general's adjutant, who was in Fredericksburg the week before for a presentation. Impressed, he connected Williams to the general, who said, "I know I'm supposed to say no, but this guy tells me I have to say yes." And he did.

STAGE 4 | Launch, Recovery, Retrospection

The storms do not materialize in Stonewall. After much back and forth with officials examining the rockets, a few close calls, and frantic recalculations, all three McGregor rockets pass muster: They launch and fly straight and high.

None earns an award, though one just misses reaching the 1-mile threshold. The students don't know that as they bus back to McGregor, stopping at the Chick-fil-A in Marble Falls for a celebratory feast.

Once back, the teams do their post-launch analyses, looking at what they did right and what they didn't. Uncertainty will be met with experience next year, when the nucleus of 11th graders returns for a chance to improve.

Schematics will be honed. Math will be tightened. Construction will be polished.

Next May, the sky's the limit (weather permitting). ■



HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

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Still in the Saddle Again



CALF ROPING AT 80? COMPETITION—AND CAMARADERIE— HAVE NO UPPER LIMITS IN THE SENIOR RODEO CIRCUIT

Competitors pace their horses before a barrel racing event on a warm October day at Circle T Arena. It's the statewide finals, and competitors are wearing their finest—spotless boots, hats and tack. Their high-strung mounts trot back and forth at the dusty arena in Hamilton, about 70 miles west of Waco, awaiting their call times.

When the clock starts, horse and rider burst from the gate in a blaze of energy and graying hair. Precision turns, pivots and raw speed streak through the arena. Cheers of support rise from the grandstands: "You got this, Grandma!" and "Let's go, Gram!"

It's all over in a few blinks.

Billie Bright, 63, takes the win with a time of 15.8—only 2.5 seconds slower than the current national champion, who is about 35 years younger. Not bad for an oldster. Four-time National Finals Rodeo world champion Hailey Kinsel, 29, holds the fastest barrel time—13.34 seconds.

Today's statewide finals are one of the 23 events the Texas Senior Pro Rodeo Association, celebrating 45 years in 2023, hosts for competitors 40 and older. Rex Sandifer's father, Morris, was one of the founding members of the organization in Waco in 1978.

"There were lots of amateur rodeos at the time, but it's just difficult as a 40-year-old to compete against 20-year-olds," Sandifer says. So Morris and a few other aging cowboys organized calf roping events for the older crowd. That grew into steer dogging, bareback and bull riding. "And all of them said, well, why don't we just go in and make a rodeo association out of it?"

The TSPRA put on full rodeos, including bull and bronc riding, in the 1980s. "There were probably two or three of those guys that were pretty good bull riders, and then the rest of the guys were people who wished that they were bull riders earlier in their lives," Sandifer says with a laugh.

The decision was made to drop the more dangerous events from the schedule but not because they didn't have competitors. "It was hard to get producers to haul animals for eight or 10 people," says Sandifer, a member of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative.

Today, many of TSPRA's 300-plus members are former pro rodeo riders, ropers and barrel racers from Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. Ages range from the association minimum into the 80s, and competitors are grouped by age. But some old-timers can still beat the young whippersnappers, and many older members choose to compete in multiple younger divisions.

"Some people join and think it's going to be easy because it's all old-timers, but we have cowboys and cowgirls that are still going to circuit finals and winning open rodeos," says Beverly Shoaf, secretary of the TSPRA board of directors.

Bright, a member of Taylor Electric Cooperative from Baird, has been competing in rodeos for 50 years and is one of the top barrel racers in the 60-plus division. She has had to refine her approach.

"For me, at my age, I've learned that I can't ride just every horse that comes around," she says. "I have to look for a



OPPOSITE J.J. Jolley of Stephenville whips around a barrel during the Texas Senior Pro Rodeo Association finals last October in Hamilton. ABOVE Karen Little of San Saba gets a hug from her grandson Asher.



"It's real important to have these rodeos because if you ever quit, you're done." —REX SANDIFER

horse that moves a little smoother and doesn't throw a whole lot of torque."

Earlier in her career, Bright could spend hours training on horseback, but these days, she rides for half an hour before giving her knees a break. "We have to have a lot of core strength to do what we do at our age," she says. "Your hand-eye coordination needs to be real sharp. And if you don't compete fairly often, like every two weeks or so, you get slower and slower."

But Bright says other skills have only improved. Her ability to read animals gives her a competitive advantage that came with age. "You can anticipate nearly what a horse is fixing to do from each step that they take," she says. "Each stride that they take, they're telling you something if you're really listening."

Tomm Owens, vice president of the TSPRA board and a member of Heart of Texas Electric Cooperative, didn't join the association until he was 50.

Rex Sandifer of Elgin prepares his lasso. His father, Morris, was one of the founders of the senior circuit in 1978.

"I was competing in [pro] events when I was 35, 40, 45. I was one of them that held out," says Owens, who's trying to convince his friends to join. "Their pride just won't let them be old yet."

For Owens, aging into a new bracket is part of the fun. "You kind of get excited again," he says, "because you're going to be the youngest in the group, and you're hoping you're one of the best."

Like Bright, he says his experience gives him a competitive advantage—but for a different reason. "Mentally it's easier as I get older. I don't get as frustrated when things don't go right," Owens says. "You learn not to let the little things bother you."

But he admits that the physical aspect only gets tougher. "Once you get out of shape, it's really hard at 55–60 to get back into shape," he says. "I do 20–30 minutes of stretching every morning and then some situps and pushups."

Jimmy Tobolka is living proof that bodies in motion tend to stay in motion. At 88, he's TSPRA's oldest member and still competes in the 80-plus breakaway, where a mounted rider ropes a running calf.



ABOVE Pat and Jimmy Tobolka of Caldwell are regular TSPRA competitors. Jimmy, at 88, is the circuit's oldest member. LEFT Doug Richards of Bedias closes in on a calf.



"Once you start doing it, it's hard to get quit doing it, you know?" he says. "It's helped keep me going all these years."

One of the youngest members of the association is Seth Smithson, the president of the board, who turns 40 in December. "I think it's a breath of fresh air from the hustle and bustle," he says. The 2023 TSPRA statewide finals are October 19–21 at Circle T Arena in Hamilton. "You come hang out with the older crowd and watch these guys compete and see how great they are with their horses, and you can definitely learn a thing or two."

The TSPRA's prizes aren't much—trophy saddles and buckles—but that's not the main reason any of these competitors are here.

"Nobody's going to get rich at our rodeos," Owens says. "So much of it is just being able to see all the guys you used to rodeo with, cook steaks out back at the trailers and eat a meal Saturday night with maybe 10 or 15 people at every other trailer. That's a big, big part of it."

But no one can question the enthusiasm and the dedication these athletes have for their sport—for continuing to hone their craft, even as their bodies falter.

"We're all just very grateful to still be able to throw a leg over a horse," Bright says. "And when you have that gratitude of still being able to do it, nobody's moaning and groaning about winning." ■

SPECIAL ISSUE FOR THE 84TH ANNUAL MEETING OF MEMBERS!

Texas Coop Power

FOR HOUSTON COUNTY EC MEMBERS

OCTOBER 2023

2023

annual meeting

T U E S D A Y

10 | 24 | 23

OPEN UP FOR IMPORTANT ANNUAL MEETING INFORMATION





OFFICIAL NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING

HOUSTON COUNTY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE, INC.
TO: ALL MEMBERS OF HOUSTON COUNTY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN THAT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MEMBERS OF HOUSTON COUNTY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE, INC. WILL BE HELD ON TUESDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2023.

EVERY FALL, HCEC MEMBERS, DIRECTORS, AND EMPLOYEES GATHER TO DISCUSS COOPERATIVE BUSINESS. IT IS IMPORTANT THAT A QUORUM IS PRESENT AT THE MEETING, EITHER THROUGH YOUR ATTENDANCE OR BY YOUR SUBMISSION OF A SIGNED PROXY CARD.

IF YOU ARE UNABLE TO ATTEND THIS YEAR'S MEETING, PLEASE SIGN, DATE, AND RETURN THE POSTAGE-PAID PROXY CARD ON THIS MAGAZINE COVER. BY RETURNING YOUR SIGNED PROXY CARD, YOU AUTHORIZE THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS TO REPRESENT YOU AT YOUR COOPERATIVE'S ANNUAL MEETING AND TO CAST A VOTE ON YOUR BEHALF.

IMPORTANT NOTE: THE DAY OF THE WEEK WE CONDUCT OUR MEETING WILL BE ON **TUESDAY THIS YEAR**

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2023

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LIVE MUSIC BY COLE WHITTLESEY.....	4:00 - 5:45 PM
CATFISH DINNER.....	4:00 - 5:45 PM
BUSINESS MEETING.....	6:00 PM



LIVE MUSIC BY:
Cole Whittlesey

To be eligible for prize drawings, you must register before the meeting begins.

OFFICIAL NOTICE OF THE 84TH ANNUAL MEETING OF MEMBERS

Election of the Board of Directors

No petitions were received for this year's Board of Director Elections. The following members were nominated by the nominating committee and accepted the nominations as candidates for the Houston County EC Board of Directors:

Houston County District 1: William Emmons

Madison County District: Mary Pearl Adams

At-Large District: Dan Courmier



WILLIAM EMMONS



MARY PEARL ADAMS



DAN COURMIER

Houston County Electric Cooperative's nine-county service area is divided into nine director districts. Each year, one-third of the directors are up for election and elected to three-year terms.

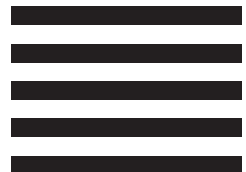


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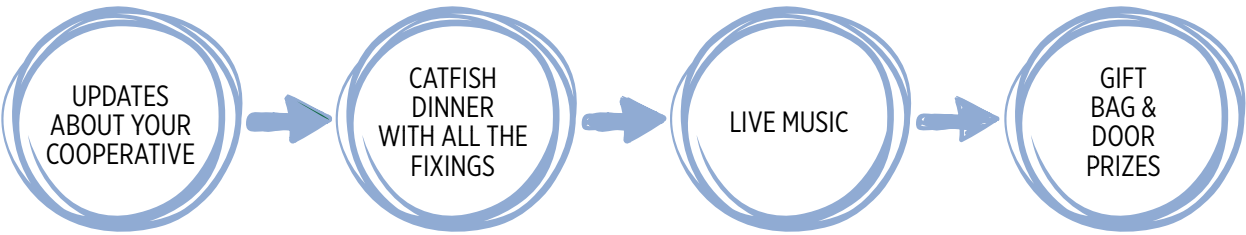


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Drop your proxy card in the mail or bring it by the HCEC office during business hours. By returning your signed proxy card, you authorize the board of directors to represent you at your cooperative's annual meeting and cast a vote on your behalf.

It is the responsibility of each member to attend the annual meeting or return your proxy card so that a quorum will be represented to transact the business of the cooperative.

To be eligible for the prize drawings, you must be registered at the sign-in booth prior to the 6 p.m. start of the meeting.



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your voice counts!

PROXY CARD

As a member of Houston County Electric Cooperative ("cooperative"), I hereby appoint the board of directors of the cooperative as my agent and proxy to represent me at the cooperative's annual meeting of members to be held at 6 p.m., Tuesday, October 24, 2023. I authorize the cooperative's board of directors, as my agent and proxy, to cast my vote on all matters coming before the cooperative's annual meeting of the members.

PRINT PRINTED NAME OF HCEC MEMBER ABOVE

SIGNED SIGNATURE OF HCEC MEMBER MUST BE THE SAME AS PRINTED ABOVE

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MESSAGE
FROM
GENERAL
MANAGER

KATHI
CALVERT

Electric Co-ops Grow for the Communities They Serve

OCTOBER IS NATIONAL CO-OP MONTH, and Houston County Electric Cooperative is joining cooperatives across the U.S. to celebrate. Co-ops come in all shapes and sizes, but they each have a common goal: to provide goods or services for the members of the co-op.

Electric co-ops, including Houston County EC, exist to serve their members. Our priority is to provide affordable, reliable energy to our local communities. Because we are led by you, the members we serve, we can evolve to meet your needs.

This October, as we celebrate Co-op Month, we're focusing on the ways co-ops grow for their members.

Co-ops grow communities. Co-ops help communities grow by promoting economic empowerment, fostering community engagement and supporting the unique needs of co-op members. Concern for Community is one of our core principles—and being community-focused is essential to everything we do.

Co-ops grow together. Co-ops are all about cooperation, not competition. That's why electric co-ops

work together to share lessons learned, successful strategies and better ways to serve our members. We're better when we grow together!

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Proudly Mr. Crappie

Plumber-turned-fishing master to be honored for success in and promotion of the sport he loves

BY LAURA TOLLEY

WALLY MARSHALL can talk crappie all day long.

Crappie the freshwater game fish, that is. Marshall wins tournaments catching crappie, including a national title in 2003; teaches young people how to lure in the fish; organizes angling events of his own; and sells rods, reels and lures under his trade-marked name—Mr. Crappie.

Marshall is so synonymous with the sport he loves that he'll be cast into the Texas Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame on October 6 as the hall's 38th inductee—and that's no fishing tale. The Grayson-Collin Electric Cooperative member is humbled by the honor.

"I tell you what, it's something else," says the jovial angler from Anna, in North Texas. "I never thought this would happen to me in my wildest dreams. I have to rate it right up there with my first bicycle—and that's pretty special."

Marshall, who grew up in Garland hunting birds and fishing, has spent decades building a crappie ministry of sorts, launching a fishing guide service and heralding the sport at countless other opportunities. Go to a tournament, go to a boat show, turn on a radio or a TV show about the outdoors, and you'll likely encounter Mr. Crappie. He puts some 90,000 miles a year on his truck spreading the word about the oval-shaped fish with a downturned mouth and spiny fins. Small and silvery with dark or black markings, the fish is pronounced "croppie."

"I want to help other people catch more crappie. It makes me happy," says Marshall, 67. "I'm the winner when other people are successful at crappie fishing." His efforts include creating a long line of products for crappie fishing, including rods, tackle boxes, buckets and lures with such fanciful names as Krappie Kickers and Slabalicious. "I do everything to catch a crappie."

His mission to educate anglers and his generosity in giving his time and resources to the fishing community earned him unanimous support for the state honor, said Dan Kessler, chairman of the Texas Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame's selection committee.

"Wally Marshall's outstanding accomplishments as a trailblazer in the sport of crappie fishing are unparalleled," Kessler says.

Marshall didn't really get hooked on crappie fishing until 1982, when he went on a memorable trip with a friend to nearby Lavon Lake. Two decades

later, realizing his hobby had gotten bigger than his day job, he says, he resigned as the plumbing superintendent at Garland Independent School District, telling his boss: "I can't chase my dreams here."

He went full time preaching the gospel of crappie. His work has included establishing the Mr. Crappie Big Crappie Classic Tournament in 2004, with adult and youth divisions, and the Crappie Expo, a three-day consumer show that includes a \$300,000 invitational tournament, a giant crappie fish fry and more than 100 exhibitors each September.

"He's always looking for ways to get more people, especially young people, interested in crappie fishing," says John Barns, who nominated Marshall for the hall of fame. Barns is the former president of Strike King, a lure company that carries Marshall's products.

At the heart of Marshall's passion for crappie is the fact that it's a family sport, one he enjoyed with his daughter when she was a child. You can do it until they "lay you in the ground," he says. Plus, it's a lot of fun.

"Once you find crappie, you can catch a lot of them," Marshall says, adding that there's not much waiting around time. "With crappie fishing, you can catch your limit." (That's 25 a day in Texas, and all must be at least 10 inches long from closed mouth to pinched tail.)

When going out to hunt crappie—he says the docks around Gun Barrel City on Cedar Creek Reservoir is a favorite spot—he urges anglers to slow down and observe their surroundings. Look for bushes, trees, tall grass and lily pads. Crappie like nice shade, just like people do.

Successful crappie fishing also requires the right equipment. Luckily, Marshall can sell you some.

He's a promoter, to be sure, but the fact is, he really loves the sport.

"It's about getting out in the great wilderness, by yourself, going mano a mano with the crappie," he says. And when a crappie takes the bait, there's this little thump.

"I live for the thump." ■

Wally Marshall lands a crappie on Ray Roberts Lake north of Denton.



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



It Still Reigns

At 50, Elmer Kelton's 'The Time It Never Rained' remains 'a book of the heart'

BY W.F. STRONG

WE SHOULD ALL BE grateful that Elmer Kelton was a poor cowboy. When he was a young man, the now-famous writer said his inability to rope and ride well pushed him toward reading and then writing. Had he been a better cowboy, he told a reporter in 1984, "I'd still be working out on some ranch on the Pecos River."

It's been 50 years since *The Time It Never Rained*, Kelton's classic novel, was published. Many Texas literary critics consider it one of the best novels written by a Texan about Texas. It was also Kelton's favorite book and what he called his signature work—of the nearly 50 novels he wrote before he died in 2009.

The novel received the Spur Award

and the Western Heritage Award.

The book is not your run-of-the-mill Western. There are no shootouts. No one dies. Wallace Kaufman, who taught at Duke University, wrote that the novel should rank "with Faulkner's work as the local made universal."

Author Shelley Armitage grew up in the 1950s in the Texas Panhandle, when and where the novel takes place.

"To see oneself and one's landscape so accurately and aesthetically rendered was life-changing—as it remains today: a book of the heart," Armitage says.

Mike Cox, author of 14 books on Texas and the West, notes that Kelton covered the terrible 1950s drought for the *San Angelo Standard-Times* and began

writing fiction on the side.

"He used what he knew about the dry spell for *The Time It Never Rained*, a novel I don't believe he ever expected to become a classic," Cox says. "I predict that as the West continues to get drier and drier due to global warming, his book will become even more important."

For prolific author Wyman Meinzer, Texas' official state photographer who once shared a book signing with Kelton, his "words conjured memories of blinding dust storms, dry stock tanks and a land void of palatable grass."

Jac Darsnek, the man behind the much-loved *Traces of Texas* accounts on social media and a ubiquitous traveler and photographer of Texas, was 17 when he discovered the novel. He still draws inspiration from Charlie Flagg, the novel's admirable protagonist, whom Kelton created from his own cowboy father.

"Elmer Kelton's tale of hardship and endurance and main character Charlie Flagg's astonishing self-reliance resonated within me in a place I never knew I had, and his descriptions of ranch life spoke to my inner Texan," Darsnek said. "Decades later, when confronted with some obstacle or tough choice, I'll ask myself, 'What would Charlie Flagg do?'"

Steve Davis, curator of the Southwestern writers collection at the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University, says *The Time It Never Rained* is one of the most important Texas novels and a masterful example of eyewitness literature.

"Kelton was on the front lines when the great drought devastated the land and people he knew intimately," Davis says. "His resulting novel, richly observed and deeply empathetic, stands as the truest, most profound portrait of that era." ■

Beans

Versatility turns this kitchen staple into a star

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

A quick and easy mixture of green, black and red beans tossed in a delicious, tangy dressing, this three-bean salad is great the day you make it, but it's even better to enjoy the next day for lunch.

Three-Bean Salad

4 teaspoons salt, divided use
12 ounces fresh green beans,
rinsed and cut into 1-inch pieces
6 tablespoons olive oil
6 tablespoons lemon juice
1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon ground black pepper
1 can black beans (15 ounces),
drained and rinsed
1 can red beans (15 ounces),
drained and rinsed
¼ cup finely diced red onion
1 cucumber, diced
1 cup finely diced carrot
¼ cup chopped fresh parsley
4 tablespoons chopped fresh dill

1. Fill a pot halfway with water, add 2 teaspoons salt and bring to a boil.
2. Add green beans and cook for 3 minutes. Drain and pat dry.
3. In a large bowl, whisk together olive oil, lemon juice, Dijon mustard, cumin, pepper and remaining 2 teaspoons salt.
4. Add green beans, black beans and red beans to bowl. Stir to combine, then stir in red onion, cucumber and carrot.
5. Cover and chill until ready to serve. Before serving, stir in parsley and dill.

SERVES 6

TCP Follow Vianney Rodriguez while she cooks in Cocina Gris at sweetlifebake.com, where she features a recipe for Roasted Tomatillo Garbanzo Salad.





Little Pots of Red Beans With Sour Cream

ALEXANDRA DIBRELL
CENTRAL TEXAS EC

Sometimes cooking for two can be tricky. Don't worry—Dibrell has hungry twosomes covered with a simple one-pot dinner idea. Bacon, beans and a little jalapeño kick, served warm and topped with sour cream, are pure comfort.

- 2 strips bacon, diced**
- 1 tablespoon olive oil**
- ½ small red onion, finely diced**
- 1 jalapeño pepper, seeded and finely diced**
- ½ teaspoon salt**
- ¾ cup chicken broth or stock**
- 1 can kidney beans (15.5 ounces), drained**
- 4 tablespoons sour cream**
- Fresh cilantro sprigs, for garnish**

- 1.** In a skillet, cook bacon until crisp. Remove from pan and drain.
- 2.** Add olive oil, onion, jalapeño and salt. Sauté until soft and translucent.
- 3.** Pour in chicken broth or stock and return bacon to skillet, bringing to a simmer.
- 4.** Stir in beans and simmer until warmed through.
- 5.** Ladle the beans into two bowls and top each with sour cream and cilantro.

SERVES 2

[MORE RECIPES >](#)



\$500 WINNER

Hurry Up Stew

EDITH FORSHAGE
GVEC



A filling, hearty meal that's easy to prepare at the end of a busy day, Forshage's Hurry Up Stew is pantry-friendly and can be whipped up in under 30 minutes.

SERVES 6

- 1 pound ground beef**
- 2 tablespoons dried beef bouillon**
- 1 can diced tomatoes with green chilis (15 ounces)**
- 1 carton chicken, beef or vegetable broth (32 ounces)**
- 1 can pinto beans (15 ounces), drained**
- 1 can garbanzo beans (15 ounces), drained**
- 1 can hominy (15 ounces), drained**
- 1 can potatoes (15 ounces), drained**
- 1 can diced carrots (15 ounces), drained**
- 2 teaspoons salt**
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper**

- 1.** In a nonstick pot, brown ground beef and drain.
- 2.** Stir in bouillon, diced tomatoes and broth.
- 3.** Add pinto beans, garbanzo beans, hominy, potatoes and carrots.
- 4.** Add salt and pepper.
- 5.** Simmer for 20 minutes to thoroughly heat ingredients.

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

BEST BRUNCH DUE OCTOBER 10

Brunch is at your place this time. What will you serve? We're looking for the best recipes in Texas. Submit your favorite online by October 10 for a chance to win \$500.





Homemade Bean Dip

KAREN YEOMAN
SAN PATRICIO EC

Yeoman has been cooking up this family-favorite dip for 40 years for family gatherings, church functions and parties. It's easy and delicious, and we're excited to share it with you.

2 cups fully cooked pinto beans
2 tablespoons picante sauce
½ teaspoon garlic powder

¼ pound processed cheese product
2 tablespoons (¼ stick) butter
Tortilla or corn chips, for serving

1. Place beans, picante sauce and garlic powder into a blender. Blend until smooth.
2. In a glass bowl, melt cheese and butter in microwave, stirring at 30-second to 1-minute intervals until smooth.
3. Stir bean mixture into the cheese mixture until smooth. Microwave dip for 30-second to 1-minute intervals until thoroughly heated.
4. Serve warm dip with chips.

SERVES 10

TCP Among the more than 1,000 recipes in our online archive are dozens that include beans—even some for chili. You can find them all on our website.

Fabulous and Versatile Beans

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ

Canned beans, a pantry staple, are not only delicious, they also are extremely versatile and budget-friendly, can shine as a main dish or side, and even work in desserts.

Try these ideas to get more from your pantry beans:

Blend them into a creamy dip.

Stir some into your favorite stew.
(And they really are even OK in chili.)

Use beans as a satisfying filling for your next taco night.

Consider them as a meatless option for making burgers.

Mix into cold salads for potlucks.

Bake puréed beans into brownies for added protein.



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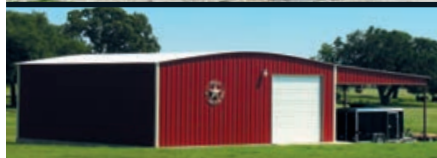
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Puffy Taco Trailblazer

Legendary Ray's Drive Inn was the first and remains the best

BY CHET GARNER

WHEN I HEAR the term “drive-in,” I immediately envision greasy cheeseburgers, thick milkshakes and smiling carhops. But Ray's Drive Inn on the west side of San Antonio isn't that kind of joint. Sure, it's full of nostalgia, an old jukebox and belly-pleasing food. But Ray's has a magical, signature dish that separates it from all others—puffy tacos. After hearing the legend, I took a day trip to the Alamo City to try them for myself.

Ray's opened in 1956 as the entrepreneurial dream of Raymond Lopez. Legend holds that one day, Ray's grandmother was frying corn masa for tostadas. She stepped away from the fryer and a wooden stick (no doubt guided by the hand of God) fell from a shelf and folded the masa into a tacolike form. The family started selling these crispy yet fluffy shells full of meat, cheese, lettuce and tomatoes. In no time, a legend was born.

After almost 70 years, the restaurant is still family owned and operated by the children of Arturo Lopez, Ray's younger brother.

I found the restaurant far from the beaten path and could smell the deep-fried tortillas as soon as I stepped out of my truck. Inside, the walls were a menagerie of family photos, taxidermy and even a neon altar to the Virgin Mary. I ordered up a platter of three puffy tacos (beef, chicken, and bean and avocado) and found a table tucked below a painting of Ray, Arturo and their three other brothers.

One bite let me know that this was unlike any taco I had ever eaten. It was crunchy but soft and perfectly greasy. I had no choice but to order a few more with different fillings. You know, for research. ■

ABOVE Chet shows a close-up of a puffy taco before making it disappear.

TCP Follow along as Chet enjoys puffy perfection. See the video on our website and see all his Texplorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



Know Before You Go

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OCTOBER 07

Boerne Book Festival, (830) 249-3053, boernebookfest.com

Grapevine Celebra
Grapevine, (813) 807-3382, latinosingrapevine.org

Huntington Catfish
Festival, (936) 635-3306, shophuntingtontx.com

San Marcos [7–8] Sacred
Springs Powwow, (512) 393-5930, sspowwow.com

Weatherford [7–Dec. 2]
Spirit of the West, (817) 599-6168, weatherfordart.com

12

Corsicana 175th Anniversary
Time Capsule
Ceremony, (903) 654-4850, corsicana175years.com

13

Albany [13–14] Living History
Days, (512) 463-6100, thc.texas.gov

Ingram [13, 15, 20–22,
26–29] Frankenstein, (830) 367-5121, hcacaf.com

14

Fredericksburg Monarch
Celebration, (830) 990-1393, wildseedfarms.com

19

Tyler [19–22] Texas Rose
Festival, (903) 531-1212, texasrosefestival.com

20

Brenham Brass Transit, (979) 337-7240, thebarnhillcenter.com

21

Cisco TX Pie Fest, (254) 334-9621, ciscotxpiefest.com

27

San Marcos Eddie Durham Jazz Fest, (512) 217-0600, facebook.com/calaboosmuseum

28

Waco Oakwood Cemetery's Walking Tales, (254) 717-1763, facebook.com/heartoftexasstorytellingguild

Galveston [27-28] Oktoberfest, (409) 762-8477, galvestonoktoberfest.com

Cibolo Cibolofest, (210) 619-3104, cibolotx.gov

Point Venture Holiday Bazaar, (781) 363-7161, facebook.com/pvholidaybazaar

Sanger Sellabration, (940) 458-7702, sangertexas.com

Waxahachie Texas Country Reporter Festival, (469) 309-4045, waxahachiecvb.com

31

Johnson City Trunk-or-Treat at the Square, (830) 868-7111, johnsoncitytx.org

NOVEMBER

03

Oakville Dobie Dichos, (361) 319-3067, dobiechichos.com

04

Cottonwood Shores Legends of the Falls Festival, (225) 747-0730, cottonwoodshores.org

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1

1 HANNAH WESTERVELT
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"My son and husband working on his truck."

2 KERI NAKAMURA
TRI-COUNTY EC

"A son takes his 93-year-old mother on an evening walk."

3 BRANDON EMBRY
DEAF SMITH EC

"I always liked this photo of my grandpa with my son trailing him around. We were getting ready to harvest wheat, and my kids always liked hanging out with Pop."

4 LINDSAY HUMPHREYS
SOUTH PLAINS EC

"The beauty of raising kids in West Texas is they get to experience traditional branding and working cattle."



2



3



4

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Noteworthy Grace

When the pandemic paused events, a tiny chapel celebrated kindness

BY SPIKE GILLESPIE
PHOTO BY WYATT MCSPADDEN

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I bought an abandoned ranch just east of Austin. I dreamed of one day converting it to a meditation center, providing space for people of all walks to gather and sit in peace.

Running a ranch, even a small one, is pricey though. So I put my dream on hold and instead created a small wedding venue, a more lucrative way to support the place.

The crown jewel was a tiny chapel I had moved here from Luling. Couples loved the rustic feel and unique beauty of the building, fashioned from reclaimed wood and antique stained glass.

During the pandemic, business fell off and grumpiness befell some of the couples who proceeded with their plans. Frustrated with how the pandemic forced unwanted change—some had to reschedule, others watched guest lists

dwindle—they sometimes took out their aggravation on me. Overwhelmed by this negativity, sometimes I snapped back.

For a spell, after a particularly enraged bride eviscerated me because of the weather, I shut down altogether. Dismayed at how joyful celebrations had become overshadowed, I knew I needed to make a change.

A flash of an idea struck me. I recalled a Vermont chapel where people make pilgrimages to honor their dogs who have passed. I remembered a little chapel in Mexico where visitors leave notes of gratitude and *milagros* (prayer offerings) for St. Francis. I dubbed my itty-bitty church the Tiny Chapel of Kindness and invited people to send stories of kindness to adorn the walls.

And they did.

Their notes run the gamut from heartwarming to heartbreaking to flat-out hilarious. One describes being saved from a car wreck by strangers. Another hails an internet stranger who sent free motorcycle parts to a fellow tinkerer. One details the discovery, late in life, of a long-lost half-brother who embraced his “new” sister wholeheartedly (the siblings had been kept secret from each other because of the sins of their father).

I had many stories of my own to share, finally settling on one. Last fall, one of my longhorns went into labor. It was a bad journey. Unable to assist her alone, I called a neighbor for help. We cried as we worked together to deliver the stillborn calf. Then he administered penicillin so the mom would survive.

Grateful visitors come to read the stories and leave notes of their own. This is not the meditation center I’d envisioned when I first laid eyes on an old run-down property, but in our own fashion, we each meditate on the power of kindness. Powerful indeed.

As I had hoped, my attitude has shifted back to positive and, inspired by others, my anger has been replaced by joy and gratitude. ■

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