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Versatile, time-tested cookware is reclaiming its spot in home kitchens.

Story and photos by Russell A. Graves

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A breast cancer survivor sends care packages of recovery aids to women all over the world.

*By Laura Tolley
Photos by Scott Van Osdol*

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ON THE COVER

Cast-iron pizza has the perfect crunch.
Photo by Russell A. Graves

ABOVE

Sewing a pocket into the inside of a shirt for the Blessing Box Project.
Photo by Scott Van Osdol

Rural Reporters Making Waves

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY—March 8—is a global celebration of women's social, economic, cultural and political achievements. You can also mark the occasion March 28, when *Writing With Fire* airs on PBS.

The documentary, a selection of the World Cinema Documentary Competition at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival, profiles *Khabar Lahariya*, a newspaper in rural India run by an all-women newsroom. The paper, whose name translates to “waves of news,” employs journalists from Dalit, tribal, and Muslim communities, whose members have historically been marginalized.

Their coverage of rural issues, corruption and gender violence earned a Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation in 2021.

“*[Khabar Lahariya]* has broken barriers to establish women as journalists in small towns and villages where newsmakers have long been men, upper caste and well-connected to the political system,” the foundation wrote.



More than
200

electric co-ops in the U.S. are developing or planning to deploy high-speed internet services for their members, giving them better access to tele-health services, online learning and remote work and attracting new families and businesses.

Selena on Celluloid

Selena, the film about the Tejano music star from Lake Jackson, came out 25 years ago this month. Jennifer Lopez played Selena, below, in the movie, released March 21, 1997.



FINISH THIS SENTENCE

THE WOMAN I ADMIRE MOST IN HISTORY IS ...

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.

Below are some of the responses to our January prompt: **This year I'm finally going to ...**

Build those raised garden beds for my wife. Or pay one of the grandkids while I watch and supervise.

RANDALL HALE
FORT BELKNAP EC
OLNEY

Travel down different Texas roads.

CHUCK BURGESS
HEART OF TEXAS EC
MILANO

Learn to let go of what I can't change.

BARBARA ELLIS
VIA FACEBOOK

Quit smoking, drinking and cussing while fixing that leak.

JOE TREVINO JR.
BARTLETT EC
KILLEEN

Make no resolutions—just do the best I can each day.

LORA HORTON
VIA FACEBOOK

To see more responses, read Currents online.



TCP Contests and More

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Best Burgers

FOCUS ON TEXAS PHOTOS

Morning Glory

RECOMMENDED READING

Texas Independence Day is March 2. A stolen stallion might have doomed Mexico during the revolution's decisive battle at San Jacinto in April 1836. Read *Old Whip: A Headstrong Texas Hero* from January 2009 for the full story.



Burrowing Burros

SCIENTISTS HAVE RECORDED wild donkeys and horses digging wells in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona to reach groundwater to quench their thirst.

The animals use their hooves to carve out holes up to 6 feet deep, and researchers report in *Science* that the wells serve as oases that provide water for dozens of other species, including songbirds, deer and mountain lions.

“Wildflowers are the stuff of my heart!”

—LADY BIRD JOHNSON



DANA SMITH

Dead Certain

“No Monterey High School grad would be caught ‘dead’ in a letter sweater with an L on it. That was for Lubbock High, our crosstown rivals.”

JOYCE PHILLIPS
PEDERNALES EC
BUDA

Dogs Changing Lives

Patriot Paws in Rockwall raises and trains assistance dogs for disabled military veterans [*Furred Responders*, January 2022]. The dogs are trained at their kennels and in several men’s and women’s prisons. This organization has changed the lives of so many veterans and their families.

Lately they have started a program where they take some of their dogs and puppies to police departments (and any organization that requests) to help with stress relief.

Christine Davis
Farmers EC
Rockwall

I made the Chicken and Dumpling Soup [*Soups and Stews*, January 2022], and it is incredible. Well-deserved first-place winner.

CYNTHIA LEIGH
AMAYA
VIA FACEBOOK

Slice of Life

For my mother’s Christmas gift, I treated her to lunch at Rebecca Rather’s place in Fredericksburg, Emma + Ollie [*The Alchemy of Egg Whites*, November 2021]. Rebecca chatted with Mom and me and autographed my copy of her meringue recipe featured in the November issue. It was a wonderful Christmas gift for my 85-year-old mom.

Rhonna Carter
Hamilton County EC
Gatesville

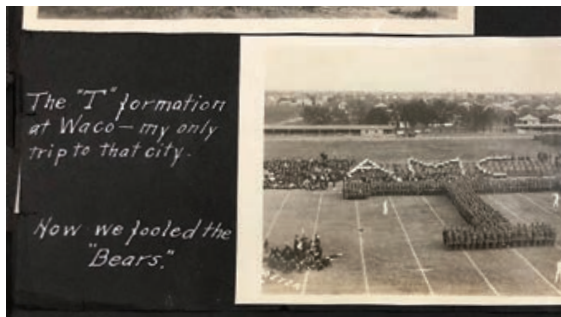
Traveling Texas

Before Bob and Kelli Phillips [*The Domino Effect*, December 2021], there was Frank X. Tolbert, who wrote a column in *The Dallas Morning News* every week about his travels in Texas called Tolbert’s Texas, which ran from 1946 till his death in 1984.

Don Pryor
Bandera EC
Boerne

CORRECTION

A photo with *Aggie Standouts* [January 2022] showing Texas A&M University’s Corps of Cadets’ block Aggie T formation was incorrectly identified. The 1920 photo was taken at a football game against Baylor University at the Cow Palace in Waco, not Kyle Field in College Station. Researchers at Texas A&M’s Cushing Memorial Library & Archives found the photo, right, in a 100-year-old scrapbook, confirming the location.



TCP WRITE TO US

letters@TexasCoopPower.com

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

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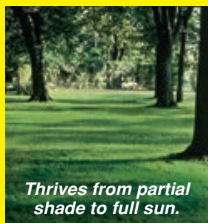
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Cast-Iron Comeback

Versatile, time-tested
cookware is reclaiming its
spot among home chefs



From inside my home,

I could smell the wood smoke wafting across the lawn. It's a delightful blend of post oak and some fruitwood, and just the aroma makes me hungry.

With my smoker keeping a steady temperature of 350 degrees, I preheat a seasoned, 9-inch cast-iron skillet. Because it's an all-metal piece of cookware, I don't have to worry about plastic handles or Teflon coatings getting ruined by the heat.

Soon I've placed some homemade dough, tomato sauce, cheese and pepperoni in the skillet and back into the smoker. The woodsmoke-infused pizza will taste great, and the crunch provided by the cast-iron pan will give the pizza the texture I'm after.

Fifteen minutes later I have (at least in my estimation) pizza perfection, and it was made possible by a piece of cast iron handed down through my family over a couple of generations.

Cast-iron cookware is the ultimate utilitarian piece for the home chef, and while it's been used for nearly 2,000 years in one iteration or another, the venerated cookware is making a comeback because of its versatility and durability.

OPPOSITE Cast iron gives cornbread a crust you can't get in a baking dish.
ABOVE The cookware can be used on the stovetop or in the oven—paths to a perfect egg.

Old Reliable

Cast iron is a combination of iron, steel and carbon alloys blended in a forge to make iron that's tough and resilient enough to last decades.

Once molten, the steel is poured into a mold of compressed sand, and when cooled, the sand is shaken loose to reveal the nearly finished pan. Once the pan goes through a process to trim off the excess metal and polishing, it's ready for seasoning and use.

The Chinese first used cast iron for cooking nearly 2,000 years ago, and over time the iron casting process has been used to build cannons, architectural elements like bridges, and art. The technology eventually made its way to the Americas.

Colonial Americans used cast iron extensively for cooking, and as American settlers moved west, the cookware made its way across the plains and mountains on the back of chuck wagons.

"The chuck wagon cook is part of our Western heritage," says Kent Rollins, a chuck wagon cook, educator and YouTube personality. Rollins has been a cowboy and cook all his life, so he's got the hard-earned bona fides to have the attention of nearly 2 million subscribers. "If cast iron was good enough for ol' Cookie to take on the trail, it's good enough for me. We have some old cast equipment that's close to 100 years old or older, and it still holds up. If you take care of it, it will never wear out."

As cowboys and cattle peppered the plains in the great cattle drives of the 1880s, the need for portable food preparation was paramount. Camp cooks used Dutch ovens to prepare stocks, stews and even bread. Dutch ovens are pots with a large, flat lid that allows for the even distribution of coals across the top, so that heat comes from both the top and the bottom of the vessel. That even heating is essential for creating bread and cobblers—a staple of chuck wagon cooks everywhere. It's the same oven that Rollins recommends to first-time cast-iron cooks.

He says that if you have a 12-inch skillet and a 12-inch Dutch oven, you can cook just about anything. New cast-



iron cooks should start with cornbread to learn to control the heat from the coals, Rollins advises. Once you've mastered cornbread, other dishes become simple.

The versatility of the Dutch oven makes it a valuable piece of cookware.

"You get what you pay for," Rollins advises. "I always look for cast iron that's made in the USA. It's a bit higher priced than cast iron made elsewhere, but it's a lifelong investment, and it will give you something back every time you cook out of it."

OPPOSITE William Graves, the author's brother, slow-cooks red beans in a cast-iron Dutch oven over a campfire. RIGHT New potatoes are seared before being roasted.

Cooking Up a Story

The post-World War II era brought change to American kitchens. Pans made from newer and lighter materials and with nonstick coatings were appealing, pushing cast iron mostly out of favor.

But in the 21st century, cast iron has made a comeback, earning favor among professional and home chefs everywhere. Aside from its durability, cast iron heats more evenly and holds heat more efficiently than just about every other type of cookware. The simplicity of its design enhances the material's functionality.


In years past, the 9-inch frying pan and the Dutch oven were among the most common cast-iron pieces. But because of the resurgence, many manufacturers now offer skillets of all sizes, a variety of Dutch ovens, and myriad accessories and baking pans. As such, the demand for cast-iron cookware is still a niche of the total cookware market, but it's indeed gaining steam. Even small manufacturers like the Fredericksburg Cast Iron Co. see the potential for bringing a new pan to the marketplace.

"We initially introduced a 10-inch skillet with a smooth, hand-seasoned nonstick cooking surface, which is created using a handcrafted method of finishing and polishing," says Jay Mallinckrodt, founder of the boutique crafter of cast-iron skillets that was established in 2021. "This new approach resulted from the frustration of using so-called modern cookware that wore out quickly and a desire to avoid intimidating rough, coarse and sandpaperlike cast-iron surfaces that proliferate the ironware market. Our result is heavy-duty cast-iron cookware that is 100% made in Texas and can last for generations.

"Very few high-quality cooking products in the market today can be purchased for less than \$200," Mallinckrodt says. "A good cast-iron pan will not only cook your meal, but it will also bring families and friends together. That pan also becomes an heirloom piece and will last for generations."

Wild game chef Jesse Morris, who has cooked in high-end restaurants and hotels in Dallas, swears by cast iron. He advises that any protein you cook in cast iron benefits from the controlled crisping and searing that it provides. Beyond that, he says, cast iron adds to the story of a meal.

"There is an allure of cooking with well-made pans," Morris says. "Cooking is full of romance, and it tells a story. When you take the time to make something special and you're using a grandparent's old skillet or Dutch oven that has been well seasoned and made smooth from years of stirring, it helps add to that story." ■

 Enter online to win a skillet from Fredericksburg Cast Iron Co.



Seasoning and Caring for Cast Iron

BY RUSSELL A. GRAVES

There's something about the flavor when you cook on cast iron that brings food like bacon and eggs alive. I also love cast-iron cornbread, which has a great crust on the bottom, and that brings a flavor that you can't replicate.

Before you cook on cast iron, there's one simple step required: Season the pan. You may wonder why. It's pretty simple: When you season a cast-iron pan, you help protect the metal, and add a little bit of nonstick properties to the cast iron. So as you use your pans over and over, the cookware becomes more and more seasoned.

To start the process, a good washing is in order. I use a stiff dishwashing pad and scrub it as best I can. You'll hear some people say that you shouldn't put soap and water on a cast-iron pan, and while that's true after they've been seasoned, when refurbishing a pan, you'll want to try to get all the dirt and grime off it.

After a good washing, place the pan on a stovetop set to medium heat to evaporate all the water. After a slow cooldown, wipe the pan with a towel to make sure all the moisture is gone.

Next, use some sort of cooking oil (I use shortening) and rub down the entire pan. While coating, preheat your oven to 350 degrees. When the pan is coated, place it in the oven on the middle rack and let it heat evenly for a couple of hours. Once the pan is cooled, you should have a properly seasoned pan. Regular use will continue the seasoning process, and the pan will darken over time.

To clean cast iron, simply wipe it down with a dry towel. If you need to scrub the pan, just reseason it in the oven.



POWER OF OUR PEOPLE

HOPE IN A BOX



A breast cancer survivor sends care packages of recovery aids to women all over the world

The large, unadorned box that arrived on Kim Carpenter's doorstep contained just a few simple items—a big shirt with inside pockets, a long pillow, personal notes of encouragement. But it meant the world to her.

Carpenter had just been through several grueling months of chemotherapy for her breast cancer and was about to undergo a double mastectomy. She felt lost and confused.

"Then you see that box and open it. It's exciting because you know somebody cares enough to send you something that will be helpful," Carpenter says, choking back tears as she recalls that day in January 2021. "It is a blessing, even though it's just a pillow and a shirt and a few other things. It's hope in a box."

Carpenter, who lives in Brookshire, west of Houston, is one of more than 6,700 women who have received a care package from the Blessing Box Project, founded by breast cancer survivor Dawn Compton, a San Bernard Electric Cooperative member who lives in nearby Bellville. And the community of supporters is growing.

Compton's work is rooted in her own experience. She recalls crying all the way home from the doctor after learning she had breast cancer in March 2018. Through the tears, she prayed, asking for the strength to help others in their fights—though she wasn't exactly sure what that meant. She says she's always been a helper. Her motto: Do as much as we can for as many as we can for as long as we can and then rest.

"I was crying and I said: This is not my choice, so it's yours. I will do what I'm supposed to do," Compton says she told God. "I will open every door I'm supposed to go through. Put me in front of whoever needs me, who needs to hear my story."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Blessing Box Project founder Dawn Compton, who often gets help from volunteers. Gabby Smith irons for Blessing Box. Tinley Malota, Compton's granddaughter, and Tinley's aunt, Madi Compton, sew shirts. Belle Ary helps ready a shipment. Kim Carpenter, a recipient of a Blessing Box, sews for the cause.

To keep busy, Compton started knitting caps for women who lost their hair during chemotherapy. As she worked on each one, she prayed for the person who would wear it.

When she found out she would have to undergo a double mastectomy, she scoured the internet for information about what to do after the operation.

She found instructions for making a special shirt to wear and a pillow. The oversized men's shirt called for adding two pockets on the inside to hold lengthy drains that are attached to the breast removal site. The long pillow "hugs" the upper torso, providing comfort as the patient sleeps, rides in vehicles and does other activities.

"I just started out making a couple of pillows to keep my sanity," she says. "Now, it's my life."

Compton also found support through Facebook pages for women undergoing breast cancer treatment. After posting about the two shirts and pillow she made for herself, she got a private message from a Fort Worth woman asking if she would do the same for her. Compton did and sent it to the woman in a box. The woman thanked her online, which prompted several more requests.

Compton kept sewing, and the requests kept coming in. While unloading boxes one day at the post office, a friend asked her what she was doing. Compton explained, and the woman offered to help, as did others. Her first sewing group met in nearby Nelsonville.

"We thought we were knocking the world apart doing 50 boxes that day!" she says.

Her "pink sewing tribe" has since grown and meets on alternating Saturdays at churches in Bellville and Hempstead to make items for Blessing Boxes. On one Saturday, the women met to assemble contents for 125 boxes. They ended up filling 132.

"Everybody just does their own thing," Compton says. "I couldn't do this by myself anymore."

She gets help from beyond her sewing posse. Thrift stores donate collared men's button-down shirts. Volunteers in several other states make pillows and mail them to her, and an elderly woman in nearby Industry contributes about 30 handmade pillows a month. The owner of a dry cleaner has even pressed shirts for the project.

Supporters make other items for the boxes: One crafts pocket crosses with a short Bible verse, and another makes small prayer quilts. Compton also gets pens, socks, keychains and more. "I send out whatever comes in," she says.

Compton declines payment for the items, but she will accept postage costs if the recipient can cover it. Some pay more. People donate items, prompting Compton's daughter to create an Amazon wish list for donations.

Compton has shipped the boxes all over the United States, to Puerto Rico and to several other countries, including South Africa, Afghanistan and Australia.



HOW TO HELP

To send donations or find other ways to help the Blessing Box Project, go to blessingboxproject.com.

TCP POWER OF OUR PEOPLE

To nominate a co-op member who makes a difference in your community, email details to people@texascooppower.com.

“What has really struck me is the kindness I see,” she says. “People have no one, then they open their box and they are moved to tears because someone cares. It’s the difference between walking alone scared to death and knowing somebody is behind you saying you can do this.”

Carpenter felt cared for when she received her box.

After her surgery, it hurt to lower her arms all the way down to her sides. But the pillow eased her pain by wrapping around her front and tucking under her arms so she didn’t have to close them against her body. The shirt held the drains that she called annoying.

Carpenter also was moved by the personal messages written on the pillow and the pockets inside the shirt. The notes told her people were praying for her and that she was strong enough to make it through this ordeal. All Blessing Box Project shirts and pillows have similar messages.

Now, after chemo, surgery and radiation, Carpenter says she’s doing great and helps out when she can with Blessing Boxes—mostly stuffing pillows since she isn’t a seamstress.

“It’s neat to have a bunch of women together working to bless other ladies,” Carpenter says. “It’s amazing what Dawn has done with this project. She’s motivated; she’s hardworking.”

Compton is well known around Bellville for her passion for and commitment to the Blessing Box Project and other community activities, said John Spiess and Lari Samford, employees of San Bernard EC.

“She is extremely active and supportive of a lot of things in our community,” Samford says.

Spiess’ wife, daughter and granddaughter volunteer with the Blessing Box Project.

“Dawn is very much a strong Christian woman, and she puts that into her Blessing Box effort. It’s like a ministry [for her],” says Spiess, who has known Compton since they were in school together. “She was always real sweet, very humble and passionate about what she does. What you see is what you get—beautiful on the inside as well as the outside.” ■

“People have no one, then they open their box and they are moved to tears because someone cares.”



TOP Cancer survivor Susan Scott revels in the company of other volunteers while sewing pillows. ABOVE Erika Guerrero adds pillows to Blessing Boxes.

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2022 Australia Wedge Tailed Eagle: Introduced in 2014, the Wedge-Tailed Eagle is the first-ever collaboration between U.S. Mint designer John Mercanti and a foreign mint. With a new design for 2022, it's struck in 99.9% fine silver at the Perth Mint.

2022 Canada Maple Leaf: Since 1988, the Silver Maple Leaf's elegant design has made it a highly sought-after bullion coin. The 2022 coin features anti-counterfeit security technology—radial lines and a microengraved maple leaf with the number "22". Struck in 99.99% fine silver at the Royal Canadian Mint.

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MESSAGE FROM GENERAL MANAGER/CEO

ALAN LESLEY

Co-ops Show the Beauty in Consistency

WE CAN'T PREDICT what the weather has in store for us this spring—this is Texas, after all—but one thing I’m looking forward to is the abundance of wildflowers. The blue, red, purple, yellow and pink blooms that blanket portions of the state are a sight I savor each year. Their beauty is evident, and they make for a stunning backdrop for countless quintessentially Texan baby photos.

But for me they also herald the arrival of a season of possibility and promise, a time for hope and renewal as we emerge from the chill and quiet of winter.

I hope you feel a similar sense of reassurance when you turn on a lamp to cast a glow against a gloomy day or cozy up with a book, when you prepare a meal for your family, or when you charge a device that helps keep you connected to loved ones



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far and wide. These seemingly mundane actions, enabled by electricity, make for some of our most comforting and sustaining moments.

The power of those moments isn’t lost on us at CECA. It might not be the shiny new thing or have the cachet of the latest gadget, but the safe and reliable provision of electricity to our members inspires us to work every day to keep the power flowing—so you can do everything you need and all of the things that matter to you.

While it might not be as breathtaking as a field full of bluebonnets or as eye-catching as a scattering of firewheel or pink evening primrose in a highway right-of-way, we think there’s beauty in consistency too. That’s just part of why CECA finds such meaning from brightening our community this spring and every season for generations to come. ■



MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Texas Independence Day
Wednesday, March 2

Daylight Saving Time
Sunday, March 13
Set clocks forward one hour.

First Day of Spring
Sunday, March 20

International Waffle Day
Friday, March 25

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Empowering Students for a Better Tomorrow

CECA WILL award eight scholarships to local students to assist with educational expenses. Applicants must be a member or a dependent of a member of the cooperative and can be a graduating senior or currently enrolled at a qualifying school.

The cooperative will award five \$2,000 Scholarships for Excellence and two \$2,000 Operation Round Up scholarships, all to be paid over four semesters. In addition, Operation Round Up has added \$1,000 technical scholarships, the number of which will be determined by the number of applicants and which will be paid over two semesters.

To apply for a scholarship, visit ceca.coop/scholarships. The deadline for applications is April 1. For more information, contact Maegan Caffey at mcaffey@ceca.coop or 1-800-915-2533. ■

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349 Industrial Blvd.
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24/7 Outage Hotline

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ABOUT CECA

CECA operates in Brown, Callahan, Comanche, Eastland, Mills, Shackelford and Stephens counties.

OFFICE LOCATIONS

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Early

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MAKE A difference

BY MAEGAN CAFFEY

COOPERATIVES ARE DRIVEN by a set of core principles and values known as the Seven Cooperative Principles.

These seven principles encompass who we are, not only on a local level but also on state and national levels. Being member-owned and not-for-profit allows every cooperative, big or small, to be shaped to the specific needs of the communities they serve. CECA is no different.

Operation Round Up is an opportunity for CECA members to show the power of cooperation by banding together around a single cause: to improve the communities we live in. Members can join the cooperative in improving their communities by rounding up their bill each month to support the program.

These donations are placed into CECA's Operation Round Up fund, to be distributed for community service efforts to support members and neighbors across our service territory. Donations stay in CECA's seven-county area.

While the COVID-19 pandemic may have hindered almost every aspect of life for the past two years, CECA's Operation Round Up program never wavered. Donations have been made throughout our service area to volunteer fire departments and organizations such as Good Samaritans, Community Rehab and Court Appointed Special Advocates as well as directly to members when the unthinkable happens.

We take the education of our youths very seriously, and we strive to encourage young people to continue their education. As part of that initiative, the CECA Operation Round Up Trust Board awarded two \$2,000 Operation Round Up scholarships, \$1,000 technical school scholarships (the number awarded varies based on applications received each year) and five \$1,000 teacher grants intended to enhance the education of students.

There is also one \$5,000 Impact Project grant awarded each year. This grant has been used to put helipads in Wayland, Gunsight, Mullin and Harbor Point and for park enhancement projects such as the Early Sound Garden and the Comanche Toddler Park.

None of this would be possible without CECA members. The average co-op member donates \$6 to the program each year. This may not seem like a large amount, but when combined with similar amounts from hundreds of other members, it adds up to make a significant impact.

CECA's Operation Round Up program is governed by a board of volunteers separate from the co-op's board of directors. This ensures that decisions are made in the best interest

of the community.

If you do not participate in Operation Round Up and would like to do so, contact CECA at 1-800-915-2533, or visit ceca.coop/operation-round to join the program. ■



Charlotte Cooper, Debbie Solsbery and Michelle Wells with CASA in the Heart of Texas with backpacks filled with school supplies, hygiene kits and blankets for kids in Brown, Comanche and Mills counties.



Whitney Curry, Isabel Talamantes, Mindy Wooley and Kristen Riola with CASA for the Cross Timbers Area with backpacks filled with school supplies, hygiene kits and blankets for Eastland County kids.

Thanks to the generosity of CECA members, the Operation Round Up trust board was able to present checks totaling \$24,318.37 in 2021 to area members and organizations.

These donations would not be possible without the pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters from members' rounded-up electricity bills each month.

How Your Money Was Spent

House Fires and Medical Care	\$8,214.04
Organization Donations	\$7,229.33
Scholarships	\$2,500.00
Schools	\$1,625.00
Volunteer Fire Departments	\$4,750.00

LOCAL CUTS

MEAT CO.

BY MAEGAN CAFFEY

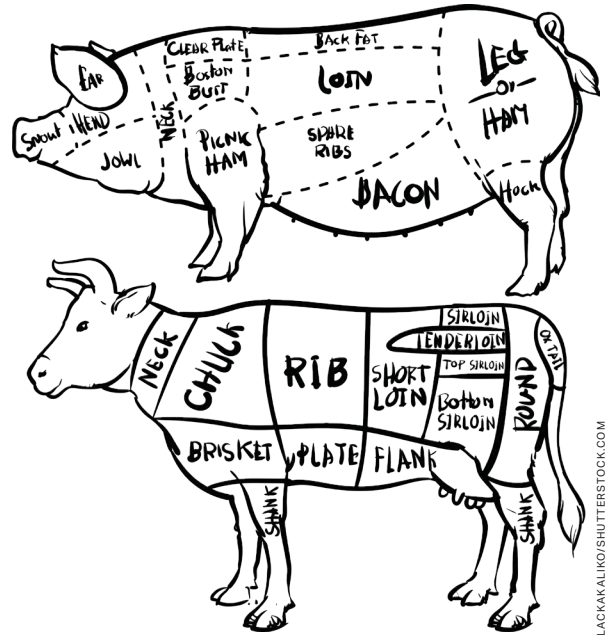
WHEN AN INDUSTRY with limited competition has been around for a while, it can begin to prize profits over satisfaction. The meat processing industry hit that roadblock awhile back, according to Mike Crawford, president of Local Cuts Meat Company in Zephyr, leaving its customers with few choices but to take it or leave it. After two decades of watching the meat processing industry go in that direction, Crawford had enough and resolved to change the way meat processing is done in Central Texas.

Local Cuts Meat Company in Zephyr prides itself on being customer-centered. Rancher-owned and -operated, the business was created with ranchers in mind.

For convenience, there is a drive-thru to drop animals off, eliminating the need to back in with a trailer. Information is logged electronically, enabling a more streamlined process, and the product is packaged exactly as the customer requests. And for those with less experience in the “gate to the plate” livestock business, professionals are always on standby to assist the customer in any way they can.

The business’s processing facility also houses a fully stocked meat market where freshly cut meat is available for purchase.

When Crawford set out to build the business, he knew that being customer-focused would need to extend outside his four walls. He wanted to provide an opportunity for



A representation of where cuts of meat originate. When you do business with Local Cuts Meat Company, a professional is readily available to assist.

BLACKAKAIKO/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



locals to have good jobs close to home. Benefits, weekends off and part-time opportunities for high school students are just a few of the employment advantages offered by Local Cuts Meat Company.

If you’re traveling through Zephyr, this federally-inspected meat processing facility is a must-see, one-stop shop. Local Cuts Meat Company is determined to change the way meat processing is done, at least locally, and by all accounts its founders have the fortitude and knowledge to do just that.

With new, innovative businesses like this moving into our community, it’s encouraging to see growth moving forward in the places we all love so dearly. ■

A fresh selection of German sausages, boneless New York strips, chuck roasts, sirloin cutlets and briskets for sale at the meat market. All meat can be cut to fit a customer’s needs.

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To get your Co-op Connections card, call CECA at 1-800-915-2533 or visit ceca.coop/co-op-connections.



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Reuben Quesadillas

- ½ cup Thousand Island dressing
- 4 burrito-size flour tortillas
- 12 ounces corned beef, sliced thin
- 1 cup shredded Swiss cheese
- 2 cups sauerkraut, drained
- ½ teaspoon pepper (optional)

1. Spread 2 tablespoons of dressing on each tortilla. Divide corned beef equally between two tortillas, then sprinkle each with half of the cheese. Top each with half of the sauerkraut and pepper, if using, then place tortilla on top of each.
2. Heat a griddle over medium heat. Use cooking spray if needed, and grill the filled tortillas, one at a time, 4 minutes on one side, then flip and grill 4 minutes longer.
3. When quesadillas are done, slice each into 6 pieces.

SERVES 4

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

The Shoes

Two Marine families become linked on a sorrowful path

BY ALEX A. RAMON JR. • ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN KACHIK

SEVERAL YEARS AGO our son, Staff Sgt. Alex A. Ramon III, received the dreadful news of the passing of a close Marine friend, Cpl. John C. Flynn. They had previously served together on one of many combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Alex was John's squad leader—and the only son of my wife, Drucilla, and me.

With tears in his eyes, our son slowly said, "Dad, one gets calloused in seeing awful things in war, but you never get used to seeing a fellow Marine die."

Our son was processing the news when he got another phone call. The family of Cpl. Flynn was requesting our son's presence. A Marine was needed to supervise and assist the funeral home on the proper placement of their son in his dress blue uniform. Our son left to support his friend's family.

Arriving in Arkansas, Alex immersed himself in the sorrowful task at hand. At the funeral home, he immediately noticed that John's shoes for his dress blues were missing. A call to the family requesting the shoes provided no results. Without further burdening the family, our son took the initiative and acted quickly to remedy the situation in time for the funeral. Alex subsequently kept in touch with John's family and provided them comfort the best he could.

Two years later, the unimaginable occurred—our son passed away. Alex died December 6, 2015, from cardiac arrest caused by mixing alcohol with opioids he was prescribed to treat post-traumatic stress disorder.

How can you understand or explain the pain of losing a child? Nothing can prepare you. Remembering what our son endured emotionally with the task of supervising the preparation of his friend for the funeral, we requested the Marine assigned to this duty not be a friend or an acquaintance of Alex. We did not want to inflict more sorrow on any of Alex's friends.

Funeral arrangements had to be made, and we were numb. The sudden loss placed us in limbo, but as with John's family, we received a call from the funeral director, who said, "We have received the uniform, but we still need his shoes." We had no idea where our son's shoes were.

As the arrangements were progressing, minus the shoes, one of the Marines who came by to give his condolences had been contacted by John's family

and said they wanted to speak with us. John's dad told us his family was coming from Arkansas and would like to attend our son's funeral. I said, "Of course, this would be nice. My wife and I would be extremely grateful and would surely welcome the support."

John's father paused—then proceeded to request a favor. He said, "It would be an honor if you would allow Alex to wear John's shoes." At this point I was stunned since I knew the funeral home needed shoes for our son's uniform. Had John's father spoken to the funeral home? I was confused but at the same time relieved. "Of course we would do it; it would be an honor," I answered.

John's father recounted the story of how his family could not locate John's shoes before their son's funeral. Now that time had passed, they had unexpectedly found the shoes, and he went on to describe the unselfish act our son performed the day of their son's funeral. Knowing John's shoes were missing, Alex had taken immediate action, removing his shoes and placing them on his friend. We had no idea all this had occurred. Our son never mentioned what he had done.

We told John's family that we could not find Alex's shoes to give to the funeral home. Now we knew why.

The burial proceeded, and our son was buried with John's shoes.

Although it has been years since our son's funeral, it feels like yesterday. An invisible wound remains, but faith remains the best remedy for the pain, especially believing that God intervened in the lives of these two Marines and made this amazing story possible. Two different families, from two close friends, were tasked to walk in each other's shoes.

What is left now are loving, indelible memories of our sons and a living testament of the bond Marines share that transcends explanation. ■

Reprinted and edited from the December 2019 issue of *Leatherneck*, a Marine Corps Association monthly magazine.

OPPOSITE Illustration of Alex A. Ramon III in Iraq based on a photo provided by his family.



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A D V E R T I S E M E N T

Clogged, Backed—up Septic System...Can anything Restore It?

DEAR DARRYL: My home is about 10 years old, and so is my septic system. I have always taken pride in keeping my home and property in top shape. In fact, my neighbors and I are always kidding each other about who keeps their home and yard nicest. Lately, however, I have had a horrible smell in my yard, and also in one of my bathrooms, coming from the shower drain. My grass is muddy and all the drains in my home are very slow.



My wife is on my back to make the bathroom stop smelling and as you can imagine, my neighbors are having a field day, kidding me about the mud pit and sewage stench in my yard. It's humiliating. I called a plumber buddy of mine, who recommended pumping (and maybe even replacing) my septic system. But at the potential cost of thousands of dollars, I hate to explore that option.

I tried the store bought, so called, Septic treatments out there, and they did Nothing to clear up my problem. Is there anything on the market I can pour or flush into my system that will restore it to normal, and keep it maintained?

Clogged and Smelly – El Paso, TX

DEAR CLOGGED AND SMELLY: As a reader of my column, I am sure you are aware that I have a great deal of experience in this particular field. You will be glad to know that there IS a septic solution that will solve your back-up and effectively restore your entire system from interior piping throughout the septic system and even unclog the drain field as well. **SeptiCleanse® Shock and Maintenance Programs** deliver your system the fast active bacteria and enzymes needed to liquefy solid waste and free the clogs causing your back-up.

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SeptiCleanse® Shock and Maintenance Programs are designed to work on any septic system regardless of design or age. From modern day systems to sand mounds, and systems installed generations ago, I have personally seen SeptiCleanse unclog and restore these systems in a matter of weeks. I highly recommend that you try it before spending any money on repairs. SeptiCleanse products are available online at **www.septicleanse.com** or you can order or learn more by calling **toll free at 1-888-899-8345**. If you use the promo code "TXS15", you can get a free shock treatment, added to your order, which normally costs \$169. So, make sure you use that code when you call or buy online.

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The Inside Track

Railroads scattered—and united—early communities across the state

BY W.F. STRONG • ILLUSTRATION BY TRACI DABERKO

THE EARLIEST TEXAS towns took hold alongside protected bays (Galveston and Corpus Christi) and riverbanks (San Antonio and El Paso). But by the late 1800s, railroads were planting the seeds that raised towns. More than any other technology, trains ushered Texas into the industrial age.

The railroads got a slow start in Texas, but an attractive funding program allocated the railroad companies more than 10,000 acres of land and a \$6,000 loan for every mile of track.

Towns developed along railroads for many reasons—one being that every 20 miles or so, steam locomotives required water. So water depots were built as needed, regardless of whether a favorable place for a town to prosper was nearby.

The far West Texas town of Valentine is such a case. The stop for the water depot was given that name because a railroad crew arrived there on Valentine's Day 1882. Some say, however, that the town was named for John Valentine, a major stockholder in the railroad. Both could be true (a twofer, you might say). The town of 130 or so people still exists, and the post office does a booming business for, you guessed it, Valentine's Day.

Some towns sprang up haphazardly because a construction camp lasted long enough for communal roots to grow. Langtry, along the Mexico border, was such a place. A tent town developed where the railroad builders lived while the project was underway, and the town was named for George Langtry, a railroad engineer for the Southern Pacific.

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



But Judge Roy Bean, famous as the Law West of the Pecos, rewrote that history to suit his own narrative. He sold worldwide the fiction that he had named the town for Lillie Langtry, the British American actress. He was so successful in selling this myth that she stopped to visit the town shortly after Bean died.

Abilene was created by the construction of the Texas and Pacific Railway line, with cattlemen and developers collaborating to establish a cattle market similar to Abilene, Kansas (for which Abilene was named). They needed room to build the cattle market, so the railroad bypassed Buffalo Gap, a more established community, prompting many in Buffalo Gap to relocate, since the railroad lines were the lifeblood of commerce in those days. Alongside those tracks on the first day of lot selling, the First Presbyterian Church was founded, and that prophesied the reputation of Abilene as having more churches per capita than any other town in Texas, not to mention three Christian colleges.

In 1860 the Houston and Texas Central Railway built a line through East Texas and created a depot that would become College Station. The school that would become Texas A&M University opened its doors in 1876. The next year the U.S. Postal Service designated the town College Station because that was the name of the railroad passenger depot. The railroad is still there, bifurcating the enormous 5,200-acre campus that it once bordered only on the west side.

The age of railroad dominance in Texas development is gone now, but the Lone Star State still boasts an important claim: Texas holds more miles of railroad than any state in the union—10,539—which still move the state's commerce. ■

Texas' Best

Turn this lineup of Lone Star icons into staples in your kitchen

BY MEGAN MYERS, FOOD EDITOR

So many things come to mind when one thinks of Texas food that it's hard to distill it into a few distinct dishes. Beyond that, each region puts its own spin on things, resulting in a wonderfully vibrant food culture from top to tip. Texas caviar is a dish that many folks have made their own since it first appeared in the 1940s. I add crisp bacon and avocado, though you can skip the bacon if you want to keep it vegetarian.

Texas Caviar With Bacon and Avocado

CAVIAR

- 1 can (15 ounces) black-eyed peas, rinsed and drained**
- 1 can (15 ounces) black beans, rinsed and drained**
- 1 cup corn kernels, thawed if frozen**
- 1 red bell pepper, seeded and diced**
- ½ cup diced red onion**
- 1 cup halved grape tomatoes**
- 2 slices crisp-cooked bacon, chopped**
- ¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro**
- 1 avocado, diced**

DRESSING

- ½ cup olive oil**
- ¼ cup red wine vinegar**
- 1 tablespoon lime juice**
- 1 teaspoon sugar**
- 1 teaspoon salt**
- ½ teaspoon cumin**
- ½ teaspoon pepper**

1. CAVIAR In a large bowl, stir together black-eyed peas, beans, corn, bell pepper, onion, tomatoes, bacon and cilantro.

2. DRESSING In a small bowl, whisk together dressing ingredients. Pour half the dressing over salad and mix well. Add more dressing to taste.

3. Gently stir in diced avocado just before serving.

SERVES 8

TCP Follow along with Megan Myers and her adventures in the kitchen at stetted.com, where she features a recipe for Chili Beef Pie.





Pinto Beans and Jalapeño Sausage

SHARON CRISMAN-PARKER
CENTRAL TEXAS EC
SAN BERNARD EC

This hearty dish is perfect for showcasing locally made sausage. Crisman-Parker has been making this dish for more than 35 years and recommends the jalapeño sausage from Krolczyk Meat Market in Hempstead.

- 1 pound dry pinto beans**
- 2 slices bacon or salt pork**
- 1 teaspoon olive oil**
- ½ cup chopped onion**
- ½ cup chopped fresh cilantro**
- 1½ teaspoons minced garlic**
- ½ teaspoon cumin**
- 1 teaspoon garlic pepper**
- Pinch ground cayenne pepper**
- 4 tablespoons chili powder**
- 2 teaspoons salt**
- 1 tablespoon pepper**
- 1 package smoked jalapeño sausage, sliced**

1. Soak beans 45 minutes–1 hour. Drain and rinse beans, then pour into a stockpot or Dutch oven. Add enough water to cover beans.
2. Add bacon and olive oil, and cook on low 15 minutes.
3. Add onion, cilantro, garlic, cumin, garlic pepper and cayenne. Cover and continue to cook on low 15 minutes, adding water if needed to keep beans submerged. Stir in chili powder, salt and pepper and continue to cook on low until beans begin to soften, adding water as needed. When beans are starting to

\$500 WINNER

Texas Praline Sheet Cake

SHIRLEY SMITH
PEDERNALES EC



The aroma of the cooked icing for this sheet cake is irresistible, so don't be surprised if you sneak a taste while spreading it onto the cake. Skipping the usual chocolate addition helps Texas pecans shine in this crowd-pleasing dessert.

SERVES 24



CAKE

- 1 cup (2 sticks) butter**
- 1 cup water**
- 2½ cups flour**
- 1 cup loosely packed brown sugar**
- 1 cup sugar**
- 1 teaspoon baking soda**
- ½ cup buttermilk**
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract**
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten**

ICING

- 1 cup (2 sticks) butter**
- 2 cups loosely packed brown sugar**
- ½ cup half-and-half**
- 4 cups unsifted powdered sugar**
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract**
- 2 cups pecans, toasted and chopped**

1. **CAKE** Preheat oven to 350 degrees and grease a deep 18-by-13-inch baking sheet or jelly roll pan.
2. In a small saucepan, combine butter and water and bring to a boil, then remove from heat.
3. In a large bowl, mix together flour, sugars and baking soda. Stir in buttermilk, vanilla and eggs; mixture will be thick and sticky. Carefully mix in the butter-water mixture and stir until smooth.
4. Pour batter onto prepared baking sheet and spread evenly to edges. Bake 20 minutes, until golden brown.
5. **ICING** In a large saucepan over medium-high heat, melt the butter and brown sugar, stirring to melt evenly. Boil 2 minutes. Stir in the half-and-half and bring back to a boil, then remove from heat. Whisk in powdered sugar until melted and icing is thick and creamy. Fold in vanilla and pecans. While cake and icing are still warm, pour icing on cake and spread to edges. Let cool before serving.

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

BEST BURGERS DUE MARCH 10

What's going on your grill this spring? Submit your recipes at TexasCoopPower.com/contests by March 10 for a chance to win \$500.



CONTINUED >

RECIPES CONTINUED

soften, after about 30 minutes, add the sausage.

4. Continue cooking, covered, on low until beans are tender. Serve with cornbread.

SERVES 6-8

South Texas-Style Migas

CELESTE SMITH
PEDERNALES EC

Smith's South Texas roots informed her recipe for migas, which she has been making for her family for years. Enjoy the dish on its own or tuck it into flour tortillas and serve with refried beans.

Vegetable oil

- 1 green bell pepper, diced
- 1 small onion, diced
- 1 serrano or jalapeño pepper, seeded and diced
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 3 large plum tomatoes, peeled



- ¼ cup chicken broth
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- 1 teaspoon salt, divided use
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 6 5-inch corn tortillas
- 4 eggs, lightly beaten
- ½ cup shredded cheddar cheese

1. In a saucepan over medium heat, warm 1 teaspoon oil, then add bell pepper, onion, and serrano or jalapeño. Sauté 5 minutes, until onion is transparent, then add garlic and cook 1 minute more.

2. Pulse peeled tomatoes in a food processor until chunky but not watery, then add to the saucepan along with broth, cumin, ½ teaspoon salt and pepper. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer partially covered for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove the sauce from heat and set aside.

3. Cut tortillas into 1-inch strips, then cut in half crosswise. Cover the bottom of a large skillet with about 1 inch of oil and heat over medium. Cook tortilla strips until crisp, 7-10 minutes, then place on paper towels to drain excess oil.

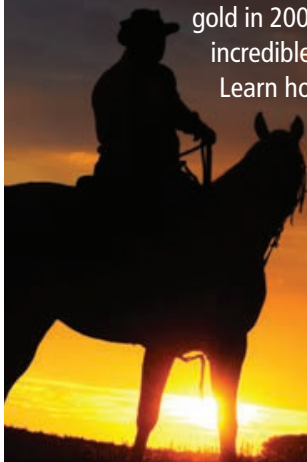
4. Drain all but 1 tablespoon of oil and add eggs to warm skillet. Cook without stirring until eggs begin to set on the bottom, then draw a spatula across the bottom to form large curds. Sprinkle with remaining salt and return tortilla strips to the pan. Stir well and cook until eggs are set but still moist. Remove from heat, top with the sauce and cheese and serve.

SERVES 2

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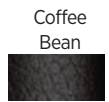
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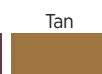
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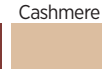
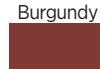
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COURTESY CHET GARNER

Chomping at the Trip

Beaumont's Gator Country gives travelers a taste of the wild side

BY CHET GARNER

GROWING UP IN Southeast Texas, I always had a fascination with alligators. Every time my family drove past a marsh (which was a lot), I would eagerly scan, hoping to see a pair of eyes peeking above the water. Occasionally I would spot one and nearly burst with giddy excitement.

With that early influence in mind, you can imagine my thrill when I discovered Gator Country Adventure Park—home to more than 450 alligators, crocodiles and other reptiles just outside Beaumont.

My adventure started with a walk across a bridge spanning a pond packed with more alligators than I could count and continued with exhibits featuring snakes and turtles and at least six outdoor habitats. The pond for large gators had residents that measured more than 12 feet long, including one named Kong.

But no gator in the park can hold a candle to Big Al and Big Tex—two creatures so intimidating they each get a personal pond. Big Al measures more than 13 feet long and weighs a half ton. He was the largest gator in captivity in America until the arrival of Big Tex, measuring an inch shy of 14 feet.

Like most of the gators here, Big Al and Big Tex were rescued after being deemed nuisances and a danger to the public. For owner Gary Saurage, the park is a place where alligators can be cared for and serve as tools to educate the public instead of being killed.

Even though I found a new level of love and respect for these prehistoric creatures, I couldn't leave without also tasting alligator meat (sourced from a farm, not the park). So I ordered a basket of fried gator bites from the snack bar and marveled at how powerful—and delicious—alligators truly are. ■

ABOVE Chet keeps Jana Saurage of Gator Country between him and Bruce.

TCP Watch Chet get giddy for gators in our video. And catch all his Texplorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



Know Before You Go

Call ahead or check an event's website for scheduling details.

MARCH

01

Canyon [1–19] Southwest Abstractions of Emil Bisttram, (806) 651-2244, panhandleplains.org

Austin [1–20] Daniel Johnston: I Live My Broken Dreams, (512) 453-5312, thecontemporaryaustin.org

Alpine [1–April 2] Texas as Art, (432) 837-8145, museumofthebigbend.com

Burnet [1–April 30] Birds, Bees & Butterflies, (512) 334-2070, canyonoftheeagles.com

08

Bandera [8–12] Fiber and Arts Week and Festival, (949) 400-4225, banderafiberandarts.com

10

Brenham Texas A&M Singing Cadets, (979) 337-7240, thebarnhillcenter.com

11

Grand Prairie No Cap Comedy Tour, (972) 854-5050, texastrustcutheatre.com

12

Burton Texas Ranger Day, (979) 803-0393, burtonheritagesociety.org

17

Canton [17–19] Van Zandt County Bluegrass Festival, (214) 802-5999, facebook.com/vzbluegrass

18

Round Top [18–19] Herb Society Pioneer Unit Annual Plant Sale, (832) 867-9617, herbsocietypioneer.org/events

19

Tolar [18-19] Ceramic Expo & Handcrafted Items, (254) 716-5227, westceramicshow.com

Fredericksburg [18-20] Trade Days, (210) 846-4094, fbgtradedays.com

Fredericksburg Mud Dauber Festival & Chili Cook-Off, (830) 997-3224, luckenbachtexas.com

Lufkin Viva Momix, (936) 633-5454, angelinaarts.org

McKinney [19-20] Collin County Master Gardeners Garden Show, (214) 502-8276, ccmgatx.org/thegardenshow

Woodville [19-20, 25-26, April 2] Tyler County Dogwood Festival, (409) 283-2234, tylercountydogwoodfestival.org

24

Corsicana The Ahn Trio, (903) 874-7792, corsicanapalace.com

Lufkin The Malpass Brothers, (936) 633-5454, angelinaarts.org

Wimberley Moonlight Swing, (281) 773-8874, wimberleyvalleybigband.org

Beaumont [24-April 3] South Texas State Fair & Rodeo, (409) 832-9991, beaumontcvb.com

25

Brenham Michael Martin Murphey, (979) 337-7240, thebarnhillcenter.com

Georgetown [25-26] Tropical Garden Quilt Show, (512) 658-6973, handcraftsunlimited.com

MORE EVENTS >

TCP *Submit Your Event*

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



Fredericksburg

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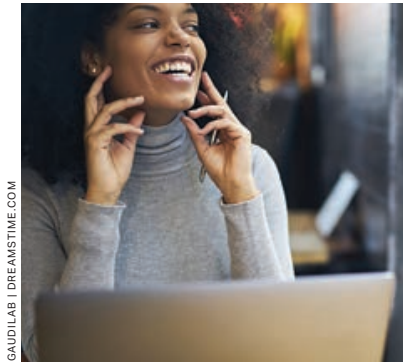
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Pick of the Month

Texas Storytelling Festival

Denton, March 10-13
(940) 380-9320
tejasstorytelling.com

The Tejas Storytelling Association's signature event goes virtual this year. More than 50 storytellers will share ghost stories and Texas tales, and a liars contest and concerts are also on tap.

27

Galveston The Queen's Cartoonists,
1-800-821-1894,
thegrand.com

Grand Prairie Ana Gabriel, (972) 854-5050,
texastrustcutheatre.com

Lufkin David Phelps,
(936) 633-5454,
angelinaarts.org

31

Beaumont Music in the Gardens, (409) 832-2134,
mcfaddin-ward.org

Port Aransas Texas Plastic Pollution Symposium,
(361) 749-3046,
portaransas.org

APRIL

01

Galveston A Bronx Tale: Chazz Palminteri,
1-800-821-1894,
thegrand.com

McAllen Art Crawl,
(832) 202-4881,
exploremcallen.com

02

Corsicana Texas Country Boys, (903) 874-7792,
corsicanapalace.com

Port Arthur [2-3] Cajun Heritage Fest,
(409) 835-2787,
cajunheritagefest.com

03

Abilene Dog Man: The Musical, (325) 677-1161,
cpasabilene.org

05

Canyon [5-7] Week of the Young Child: Choose Your Class Adventures,
(806) 651-2244,
panhandleplains.org

07

Fort Worth [7-10] Main Street Fort Worth Arts Festival, (817) 336-2787,
mainstreetartsfest.org

MARCH EVENTS CONTINUED

25

Marshall [25-26] East Texas Square and Round Dance Association Festival, (903) 922-3692,
etsrda.com

Burton [25-April 2] La Bahia Antique Show,
(979) 289-2684,
labahiaantiques.com

26

Burnet Hill Country Lawn and Garden Show,
(512) 756-3059,
burnetcountyhighlandlakesmastergardener.org

Fredericksburg Hill Country Indian Artifact Show, (830) 329-2636,
hillcountryindianartifacts.com

Huntsville Herb Festival at the Wynne Home,
(936) 891-5024,
texasthymeunit.org

Lufkin Citizens at Last, (936) 633-5454,
angelinaarts.org

College Station [26-27] Living History Weekend,
(979) 690-0501,
americangimuseum.org

The Texas Experience

Farming, wildlife, scenic views and music—there's a lot to love about Texas. Grab a chair, pour a glass of iced tea and take a look at how sweet life here is.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ



1

1 CANDACE PAULY
HAMILTON COUNTY EC

As Pauly and her husband bring native Texas species back to their ranch, they were subjected to a ragweed awakening.

2 JULIANA WALTER
CENTRAL TEXAS EC

Greetings from a young, adorable longhorn in Salado.

3 TRISH FERGUSON
HEART OF TEXAS EC

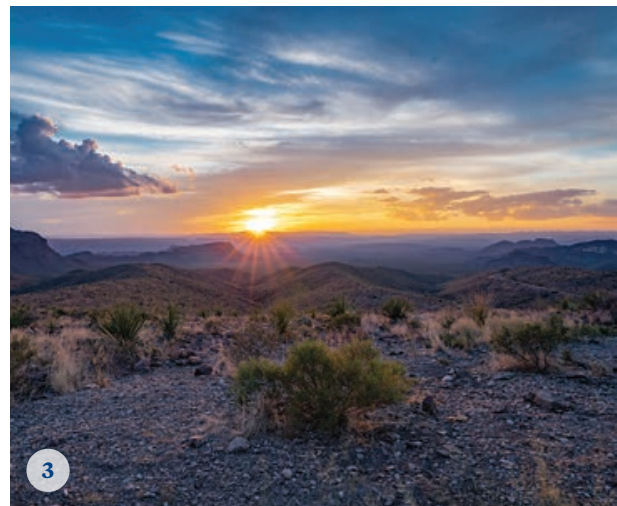
Sunset at Sotol Vista in Big Bend National Park, one of Texas' hidden treasures.

4 SUE ROGERS
BRYAN TEXAS UTILITIES

"Fiddling Ann Leonard (sadly recently deceased) and banjo picker Sue Rogers playing some Texas tunes under the trees."



2



3

Upcoming Contests

- DUE MAR 10 **Morning Glory**
- DUE APR 10 **Motorsports**
- DUE MAY 10 **Light and Shadow**



Enter online at TexasCoopPower.com/contests.

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



4



The author at Blanco State Park.

TCP Tell us about your flying leaps into the unknown: letters@texascooppower.com.

jacket and helmet.

I'm not an adrenaline junkie. I don't take unnecessary risks. But for me, living means doing things that make me a tad nervous. It's why I scuba dive, backpack and try new things. Sometimes I succeed, sometimes I look like an idiot, but I always feel my heart beat and my mind expand.

The go-for-it mindset stems from my upbringing. When I was a kid, my dad took me on pint-size adventures. We explored the woodsy canyon at the end of our street, hopped cedar fences to gaze at dinosaur tracks, took a long drive to scout out a Volkswagen-size boulder balanced on the side of the highway. My dad found wonder in the simplest things, a trait I admire.

A few years ago, after returning from a 15-day backpacking trip on California's John Muir Trail with my husband, who has also clung with me by a metal hook to an ocean reef while hundreds of hammerhead sharks schooled overhead, I declared it my year of adventure. For 12 months I did things that scared me—from jumping off a 10-meter platform into a swimming pool to rappelling down a 38-story building while dressed as Wonder Woman and running a naked (except for a cowboy hat and shoes) 5K.

Injecting adventure into everyday life doesn't have to be extreme. It might be as simple as exploring a new neighborhood or swimming in the dark. It just takes a little creativity.

Search out a park you've never visited. Eat a food you've never tasted. Get on your bicycle and start pedaling. You might end up with a scraped shin or a bruised ego. I've suffered both, hundreds of times over.

But I've also logged some of the most memorable experiences of my life, including that dip in churning water in the Grand Canyon. ■

Just Add Adventure

Flying leaps into the unknown—above or underwater—are the spice of life

BY PAM LEBLANC
PHOTO BY CHRIS LEBLANC

FOR A NANOSECOND, as I sailed over the side of an 18-foot rubber raft churning through a swirling rapid at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, I second-guessed a personal mantra I adopted a decade ago: Get your hair wet.

Maybe whitewater rafting through waves as big as school buses on a 15-day trip organized by friends wasn't such a good idea. Then I caught a rope on the side of the boat, managed to hoist myself ungracefully back onto the bobbing yellow vessel and saw that my pal Jimmy, who'd also been pitched out, was getting a kayak tow to shore. That's when my belief was reaffirmed.

Yes, it's way better to take a flying leap into the unknown than it is to sit on the sidelines and watch everybody else have fun—as long as you're wearing a life

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