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AND FINDING HIS WAY

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November 2024



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Before you hack that serpent to pieces, call someone who can safely take it far away instead.

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Nathan Hawkins with a rattler recovered from a crawl space outside San Angelo.
Photo by Russell A. Graves

ABOVE
Mike Harrell lost his sight at 28 and then found his way around a dominoes table.
Photo by Eric W. Pohl

Making a Splash

FOR THE FIRST time in nearly 30 years, Texas has a new major lake. Bois d'Arc Lake near Bonham, northeast of Dallas, opened for recreation in April after decades of planning and construction.

The reservoir has a surface area of about 26 square miles and offers boating, hunting, picnicking and fishing. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department stocked it with largemouth bass and catfish.

The lake's main purpose is to supply water to a burgeoning North Texas population. To the same end, Lake Ralph Hall is under construction just to the south and is expected to deliver water in 2026.



Are You a Pepper?

Texas doesn't have an official soft drink. But if it did, we all know what it would be.

Now the rest of the country is catching on. Dr Pepper has edged out Pepsi to become the No. 2 soda in America, behind Coke, which has 19.2% of the market. The pride of Waco now has 8.3%.



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Small Spaces

RECOMMENDED READING

Snakes also slithered across these pages in April 2020. Read *A Snake to Love* to become even more s-s-savvy about rattlesnakes.



FINISH THIS SENTENCE

Snakes are ...

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 September prompt: **My first job was ...**

Learning not to be afraid to gather the eggs by running my hand under the sitting hen. I was 4 years old, and my grandmother was teaching me.

PAM HICKS
SOUTH PLAINS EC
LUBBOCK

Setting pins by hand in a bowling alley in 1945 at age 14.

HAROLD CLARK
NUECES EC
KINGSVILLE

Cashier at my father's drugstore. I used to refer to it as the drudge store.

CATHY BLAY
SAM HOUSTON EC
POINT BLANK

Tearing out the beaver dam every evening so the water wouldn't flood our field.

BENNY CALVIT
BOWIE-CASS EC
DE KALB

Visit our website to see more responses.



SCOTT VAN OSDOL

Great School Spirit

I worked at TSD in the 1990s, when Andy Bonheyo became the coach. There is a great school spirit there, and I loved reading about the state championship in 2020. I'm not surprised that TSD would respond to a pandemic by being creative and then win state in six-man football.

Dianne Wheeler
Pedernales EC
Wimberley

Long-Serving Tractor

Like John Terry Wende, I purchased 16 acres 37 years ago, in 1987, near the town of Blue Ridge [*The Farmer's Regret*, September 2024]. A year later I bought a used 1954 Ferguson 30 tractor and rotary cutter for \$1,000.

With lots of TLC and new tires, it still serves me well. I can usually get spare parts at Tractor Supply Co. or from the New Parts for Old Tractors catalog.

Glenn Snyder
Fannin EC
Blue Ridge



DAVID MOORE

SEPTEMBER 2024 Calling an Audible

"I was fascinated with your story about Texas School for the Deaf football and the inspiring coaches who work to support the sport."

MARY HELEN THOMAS DAVENPORT
CENTRAL TEXAS EC
BUCHANAN DAM

Breathtaking Beauty

Wyatt McSpadden's cover photo was truly breathtaking [*Open Roads, Open Eyes*; August 2024]. He captured the atmospheric phenomenon known as the Belt of Venus.

It's visible opposite the sun at sunrise or sunset. The belt is the pink band above the horizon at the end of the rusty red dirt road. The dark blue band below the belt and touching the horizon is actually Earth's shadow.

Ed LaBelle
Pedernales EC
Johnson City

Elevating a Community

When I finished reading Katie Phillips' retelling of her father's quest to start an electric co-op in 1937, I had tears in my eyes [*In the Beginning*, August 2024]. This is the story of an unsung hero who greatly advanced his community's standard of living. We are all still thankful for reliable co-op electricity.

Barbara Barnes
Pedernales EC
Junction

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.

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A Good



Snake

**Before you hack that serpent to pieces,
call someone who can safely take it far away**

BY TOM WIDLOWSKI
PHOTOS BY RUSSELL A. GRAVES

S*nakes never stood much of a chance.*

Even in the early pages of the Bible, the serpent was cursed above all other animals and dealt a troublesome fate: “You will crawl on your belly, and you will eat dust all the days of your life.”

If that lowly lot wasn’t bad enough, from then on they have found themselves on the wrong end of gardening tools and weaponry.

And still they thrive, especially in Texas—home to more than 100 species and subspecies of snakes, including 15 that are venomous.

Their greatest allies, it turns out, are men like Nathan Hawkins and Brett Parker, who themselves crawl on their bellies to remove and safely relocate snakes that encroach on humans’ domain, particularly from crawl spaces under homes.

“There are a lot of rattlesnakes here,” Hawkins says. “A lot more than people realize are here.”

Hawkins and Parker own snake removal businesses, both with an ethos of keeping the snakes, usually rattlers, alive and relocating them to remote habitats. They believe keeping the ecosystem intact and educating people about

Nathan Hawkins, owner of Big Country Snake Removal, with one of the six rattlesnakes he and a co-worker pulled out from under an abandoned house outside San Angelo. He releases most in a remote pasture, but he also has a collection of some 200, including mambas, king cobras, bush-masters and almost every venomous species in North America.

snakes’ role in nature are best for all involved.

The education part can be a challenge.

“A good snake is a dead snake.” Hawkins and Parker hear that almost every day.

“Completely false,” says Hawkins, who owns Big Country Snake Removal outside Abilene. “They’re very important to a healthy ecosystem. And they all deserve life.”

Hawkins, a member of Taylor Electric Cooperative, knows that isn’t what folks want to hear. Most people hate snakes and want them as far away as possible. But Hawkins’ method serves snakes well, helps put food on the table for his wife and young son, and has kept him in business for eight years.

He removed 45 rattlesnakes from under a house in 2019. A story about that ran in *The Washington Post* and elsewhere, and his video from that job went viral, making him somewhat famous. His biggest job to date is 127 rattlers, collected under a house in Seymour, southwest of Wichita Falls.

He removed 80-plus copperheads from a property between Cisco and Cross Plains in 2023. That was a nighttime job, when the snakes became, for Hawkins, easy pickings as they feasted on cicadas emerging from the ground.

Hawkins is a self-taught herpetologist whose love of snakes started when he was a kid in the Abilene area. He loved finding and collecting them, and that passion never waned. Today his collection has grown to include about 200 snakes—90% of them venomous.

He spends much of his free time looking for snakes. For vacation, he travels the Southwest in search of varieties of rattlesnakes (there are 23 subspecies in North America). His hobby is not without hazards. He has been bitten by venomous snakes seven times—twice by copperheads, once by a southwestern speckled rattlesnake in Arizona and the rest by western diamondbacks.





For some people, Texas' snake population feels like it's of biblical proportions.

"If you're a carpenter, you're going to hit your thumb with a hammer at some point, and when you mess with snakes as often as I do, it's bound to happen sooner or later," says Hawkins, who is quick to point out he has never been bitten on the job.

He conducts workplace training for folks in the oil and energy industries who spend a lot of time in rugged terrain. He meets annually with Texas Department of Transportation employees to teach them about handling run-ins with snakes. He trains dogs to help them avoid snake encounters.



He'll also visit schools, youth camps and birthday parties.

Winter is the busiest time for Hawkins and Parker, who owns Hill Country Snake Removal outside Austin. That's when snakes become sluggish and enter a state of brumation,

similar to hibernation. They gather into dens, including crawl spaces under homes, where they are protected from the weather and where the stagnant air keeps their body temperature regulated.

Though their businesses are about 240 miles apart, Hawkins and Parker sometimes team up for jobs. That was the case in January, when Hawkins was hired to remove rattlesnakes from under an abandoned house outside San Angelo.

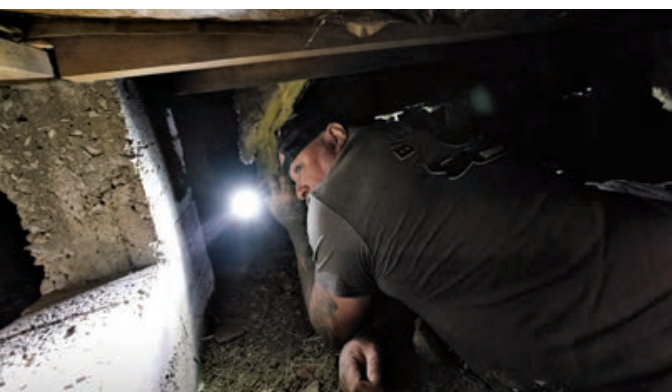
Hawkins, who played a season of football at McMurry University, stayed above ground, and the more slightly built Parker put on his headlamp, grabbed his snake tongs and wiggled into the darkness through a small hole in a closet floor.

First came the offensive odor, likely from the raccoons and skunks also living underground. After a bit of cautiously crawling around, Parker found snakes—six of them—resting under a piece of plywood.

Using tongs, Parker handed them one by one up through the floor to Hawkins. They ended up in a covered 5-gallon bucket in the back of Hawkins' pickup.

After lunch, they headed up to Anson, just north of Abilene, for a job at the home of Kevin and Jolee Karle, members of Big Country Electric Cooperative.

The Karles knew they had snakes. Before hiring Hawkins, Kevin had killed 10 of them with a shotgun. With two horses



and a dog, dispatching snakes around his house was a guilt-free decision. “Oh, no,” Kevin says. “I wanted to protect the family.”

The snakes, one or two at a time, were placed into a sealable piece of 4-inch PVC pipe that Parker handed to Hawkins. “There’s still more in here,” came Parker’s muffled voice from deep in the void.

Eventually, the snakes were coming out three or four at a time. It was near dusk when Parker finally emerged, behind snake No. 29.

“We couldn’t believe there were that many under there,” Jolee says. “The way I look at it, I grew up in the country, so the fact that we’re going to have snakes in the country doesn’t bother me.”

But 29 rattlers? Just a foot or two below your bed? “That’s just a part of country life,” she says.

That part of country life doesn’t sit well with some people. Sarah McLen leads member services at Big Country EC. She lives about 25 miles southwest of Anson.

She and her husband keep a hoe or shovel at each of their exterior doors and by the door to a workshop. The McLens are not, she notes, big-time gardeners.

“We use the tools for their normal purposes,” McLen says. “We’ve killed multiple snakes in a variety of sizes in just about every area of our yard. We kill the rattlesnakes because they multiply, and we have dogs to protect.

“My husband picks on me because I whack them to pieces! But as far as I’m concerned, the more dead they are, the better!” Because a good snake is a dead snake.

“It’s very, very common here,” Hawkins acknowledges. “Very common.

OPPOSITE Brett Parker, who helps Hawkins on occasion, owns Hill Country Snake Removal. He’s also a captain with Canyon Lake Fire and EMS. ABOVE In winter, when snakes enter a state of brumation, which is similar to hibernation, Hawkins gets called out to many jobs. “You just never know where a snake’s going to be,” he says. “You never do.”

“I have absolutely no right to tell somebody how to protect their house, how to protect their pets. If you feel that’s the right thing to do, then go for it. And I’ll give you a high-five.”

Hawkins just wants people to be aware of the bigger picture, and that’s where his mission to educate kicks in. As part of a stable ecosystem, snakes keep rodent populations in check, and they also are a food source for raptors, large mammals and even other snakes. “At least be a little bit open-minded,” he says.

For some people, though, Texas’ snake population feels like it’s of biblical proportions.

“I feel like I probably walk the yard with my ‘weapon’ held high, like Moses did with his staff when he parted the Red Sea,” McLen says.

Meanwhile, Hawkins carries on with the staff of his choosing, snake tongs that he wields with a light touch.

“The only good snake is a live snake,” he says. ■

TCP Watch the video on our website and crawl around with our experts—and the snakes.



How Mike Harrell reenvisioned hope and happiness
through the subtle touch of dominoes

TRICKS FOR ENDURING

STORY BY MARK WANGRIN • PHOTOS BY ERIC W. POHL



EDITOR'S NOTE *This story includes discussion of suicide. If you or someone you know needs help, the national suicide and crisis lifeline in the U.S. is available by calling or texting 988. There is also an online chat at 988lifeline.org.*

MIKE HARRELL GREW up like many in rural Texas in the 1960s, with a passion for sports and the outdoors but most of all hunting and the solace it provided. Particularly the solace.

As a boy, he'd ramble through the Central Texas flatlands north of Austin, stalking whatever was in season. Alone time. Just him, the quarry and his thoughts.

After Harrell graduated in 1974 from Florence High School, where he was a standout in track, baseball and football, he needed to find a vocation to match his avocation. His father, Milton, owned an electric shop, so he went to work for him.

Harrell didn't mind the work. "What I didn't like was dealing with people, especially service calls," he recalls five decades later. "It got to the point I told him I wasn't going on any more service calls."

So like any good electrician, Milton completed the circuit by removing the barrier. Harrell would only work on wiring new houses and rewiring uninhabited ones.

The hardest job was yet to come. By 28, Mike Harrell would be completely blind. Now he had to rewire himself.

SOMETIMES PEOPLE MEET the sturdy 68-year-old retiree—whether it's at a Texas 42 dominoes tournament or



LEFT Mike Harrell of Florence has been blind since he was 28. Soon after, he rediscovered his love of the dominoes game Texas 42. He's become an expert at reading the pips—indentations—on his pieces by touch. RIGHT Salado Creek Saloon is one of his regular stops for friendly games.



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representing Florence as a volunteer city council member or anyplace outdoors, really—and before long, they’ll drop words like “amazing” and “impressive.” But Harrell isn’t impressed.

“I’ve been told that before,” he says. “But I’m just like everybody else.”

Except Harrell lost the sight in his left eye in a hunting accident when he was 16. Walking in the darkness, a branch whacked his face. “It hurt,” he says, “but it really didn’t bother me a lot.”

Monday came and the pain was worse, and his sight was blurry. It kept worsening, and doctors couldn’t stop it. Pretty soon the eye stopped seeing, the result of inflammation of the optic nerve.

Harrell adapted. He could still excel as a one-eyed tight end and defensive end in football, and he stayed formidable in track, running the hurdles. He did it by studying his motions between steps, memorizing every nuance, until he ran them by rote.

He began working as a roughneck locally and then on an offshore rig reachable only by helicopter. He settled down, got married and started a family.

One day, while welding a broken trailer latch, he thought he’d gotten something in his right eye. He looked at it in the rearview mirror, and it was bloodshot.

An ophthalmologist prescribed corticosteroids to fight the inflammation. “All I could see is if you look at the sun and it looks like a damn light bulb,” Harrell says.

So he had his first operation. “I could tell what color hair people had or what color their clothes were,” he says. “I got excited.”

Neither the excitement nor rudimentary vision lasted. His retina wouldn’t attach correctly, not with a second or third operation. Then came the dreaded words: “There’s nothing else we can do.”

“I WAS DEVASTATED,” Harrell says. “I didn’t depend on nobody for nothing. I did everything myself. Now I can’t even drive. Can’t see my family. I can’t see my kids.

“It was pretty rough.”

Friends wanted him to go to the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center, a state facility in Austin that trains people with limited vision to have productive lives, but the only facility he was interested in served equal parts alcohol and self-pity.

For a year and a half, he drank and couldn’t find work. One night he took out a shotgun and sat on the bed, when he heard the voice of his toddler son.

“I didn’t know my son was in the bed,” Harrell recalls solemnly. “He grabbed me around the neck said, ‘Dad, don’t do it.’”

Harrell pauses in reflection.

“I didn’t know whether I would have pulled the trigger if he hadn’t been there,” says Harrell, who’s estranged from his first family. “I never told anybody about that and don’t know if he’s old enough to remember or not. I don’t know.”



THIS PAGE Harrell, a Florence City Council member, memorizes his pieces as he feels the pips. OPPOSITE Harrell and partner Keith Kyle with their second-place trophy won at the 2023 Texas State Championship Domino Tournament. “I think I’m a dagburn good player,” Harrell says.





A BIT BEFORE Harrell turned 30, he gave himself a present: self-awareness.

“That’s the time where I said, ‘You know, I’m gonna have to do something about this,’” he recalls. “I remembered sitting with my grandma, and she was telling me, ‘I know it’s a terrible thing you lost. But you know, if you just look around, there’s always somebody in worse condition than you are, and most of the time, you don’t have to look very far.’”

He found it at the CCRC. Harrell couldn’t master Braille because his fingertips were too calloused from oil field work, but he learned woodworking and other manual skills, though he could never figure out why he was required to wear safety goggles.

He patched up his relationship with his higher power, discovering hidden blessings in his experience. Ultimately, he also found a career. He decided on transmission building and repair, tactile but challenging, applying the same memory skills he learned while running hurdles in high school.

Gradually he learned to make money from it, started his own shop, got remarried, started a second family, got divorced again and finally retired five years ago. At 4:30 a.m. every weekday he hitches a ride to the local gym to work out.

“Some people with disabilities feel stuck,” says Jessica Kovarna, one of his two daughters from his second marriage. “He’s the opposite. It’s like he doesn’t have one, just a minor inconvenience.”

Former Mayor Mary Condon, who remembers meeting Harrell when she first moved to Florence in 1978, says he has evolved into a man steeped in faith and self-acceptance.

“Because he’s blind, people tend to tiptoe around him,”

she says. “Mike just replies by making fun of himself.”

One day at church, a well-intentioned guy offered to help him find his way. “No, I don’t need help,” Harrell said brusquely.

The pastor overheard Harrell and cornered him. “If you won’t let that person help you,” the pastor said, “you are taking a blessing from someone.”

Harrell accepted that help.

WHEN HARRELL WAS a child, he watched his mom and her siblings play Texas 42. He studied the game, joined in when he was in high school and kept playing until he lost his sight.

At CCRC, he discovered a set of dominoes. Excited at something familiar in his hands, he resumed playing and even bought a set with the dots raised instead of indented.

Decades later, his dominoes schedule is full. A typical week has Sunday games at his aunt’s house, Monday at Salado Creek Saloon, Tuesday in Liberty Hill, Wednesday at his church, Friday warmup for a Saturday tournament and tournament play on Saturday at spots around Texas.

“I like competition,” Harrell says. “One reason I chose automatic transmissions to rebuild was because of the challenge doing that and being blind. That’s the same reason I play dominoes. The competition and the challenge.”

Harrell gets a couple of accommodations for 42. He’s allowed to feel the dominoes to identify the numbers they carry. And he can also ask what tiles have been played. “He keeps what’s been played in his head,” frequent partner Keith Kyle marvels. “His memory is amazing.”

In 2023, he and Kyle took second place at the state 42 dominoes tournament in Hallettsville, winning \$115, matching trophies and some admiration. They expect to try again for the state title next spring.

YOU MIGHT NOT think a city of 1,170 people requires a city council meeting lasting almost three hours, but the folks entrusted to shepherd the interests of Florence are nothing if not thorough.

During the July meeting, Harrell sits in the overstuffed chair at the dais and mutters a whole lot of “seconds” and “yesses” and not much else.

“And you thought I talked a lot,” he says to the only public spectator who stayed for the duration.

Condon finishes up a conversation with the current mayor and finds Harrell.

“You ready to go?” she asks.

Harrell puts his hand on her shoulder, and they set out for her pickup truck. “I was ready 2½ hours ago,” he cracks.

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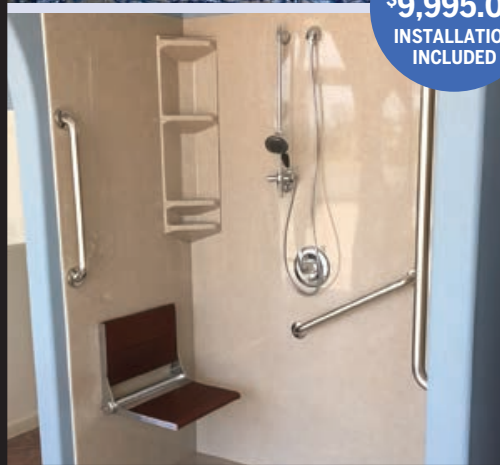
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MESSAGE
FROM
GENERAL
MANAGER

ALAN
LESLEY

Give Thanks for the Comforts of Electricity

EVERY THANKSGIVING, when my family gathers around the table, we take turns sharing what we're thankful for. Some of these expressions of gratitude may seem trivial, while others can be humorous or deeply touching.

I always walk away from the table—slowly, after overindulging—and wonder why we do that only once a year. Are we really only appreciative when the calendar tells us we should be?

easy, the knowledge that the work we do here at your co-op makes our members' lives better is deeply fulfilling.

Nowhere in the business world will you find a more dedicated and hardworking group of employees. Our lineworkers risk life and limb every single day in their efforts to keep power flowing to each and every home and business on our system. Other employees provide critical behind-the-scenes support to make sure every-

thing runs smoothly.

Working in this business, I learned quickly not to take for granted a constant supply of electricity and to be grateful for the convenience and comfort it provides. While it's never fun to be without power, it does give us a moment to reflect on just how much we rely on this invisible servant.

Sometimes it's just a convenience we miss, like hot popcorn made in minutes. Other times, outages can be life-threatening, such as for folks who need a breathing machine or other vital medical equipment.

When the power does go out, I'm grateful we have skilled crews available 24/7 to fix the problem, as well as understanding members who patiently await repairs.

Author William Arthur Ward is credited with say-

ing, "Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it."

I'm going to do my best throughout the year to make sure every gift I wrap gets delivered.

I wish you and your family a richly blessed Thanksgiving. ■



DRAZEN ZIGIC | ISTOCK.COM

I suspect we let the hustle and bustle of day-to-day life get in the way of taking time to appreciate how blessed we are—and expressing to those responsible for those blessings how much we appreciate them.

Like most of you, when asked what I'm grateful for, I'll mention family, friends, a comfortable bed to sleep in, good health and a home to shelter my loved ones.

But that's an awfully short list for someone who has so much. I'm fortunate to have a job that I love—general manager of CECA. While some days aren't



Important Notice: Upcoming CECA Rate Adjustment

FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE 2017, CECA will implement a rate adjustment, effective on January 2025 billing statements. CECA and its energy consultants conducted a lengthy and comprehensive rate study that began in January, and the results were presented and approved by the CECA Board of Directors in August.

Before any adjustment of CECA's rates, it's the cooperative's goal to ensure our members fully understand how they will be impacted. CECA customer service representatives and member services staff are available during regular business hours to discuss at length these changes and how they may impact our members. We encourage all members with questions not answered by this notice to call and visit with our team.

The rate study evaluates the cooperative's operating expenses against the revenue collected through kilowatt-hour sales and requires adjustment as those values change over time. The study found that operating expenses have increased substantially since 2017, primarily due to increased fixed costs like trucks, poles, transformers and labor.

This evaluation leads to a 2025 adjustment that will reflect a 5.6% increase in the cooperative's required total revenue across all rate classes. The rate adjustment will allow the co-op to meet the increase in operating expenses.

The adjustment will affect rate classes differently. The majority of these changes impact the fixed-cost portions of the rates, where the greatest expense increases were identified through the rate study. In general, member families living on CECA

lines with typical usage of 1,000 kWh per month will notice a \$5 increase in the monthly availability charge. However, this increase will largely be offset by a reduction in power costs to the cooperative, which is passed on to our members through the Power Cost Recovery Factor (PCRF). As a result, typical residential members will see little to no change in their energy bill when the new rate is implemented in January. Other rate classes will be impacted differently, depending on the energy used in a given month.

Have Questions?
Energy consultants will be at the town hall to answer member questions.

For more specific questions regarding any adjustment across individual rate classes, we encourage members to call or come by our offices to speak with our team. CECA will hold a meeting at **10 a.m. Thursday, November 14**, at the CECA headquarters in Comanche, where the energy consultants who conducted the rate study will be available to answer any further questions members may have.

It's important to CECA that our members have an opportunity to ask questions, share concerns and receive detailed explanations from our team and our energy consultants about this adjustment. ■



2099

Truck 2099: 2015 Chevrolet Silverado 3500 heavy-duty crew cab

VIN: 1GB4KYCG0FF510734

Minimum bid: \$11,000

Style: work truck pickup, four-door, 8 feet

Engine: V-8, EcoTec3, FF, 5.3 liter

Transmission: automatic, six-speed HD with overdrive

Drivetrain: four-wheel drive

Mileage: 152,084 as of August 27



33

Truck 33: 2016 Chevrolet Silverado 2500 heavy-duty crew cab

VIN: 1GC1KUEG4GF185530

Minimum bid: \$7,000

Style: work truck pickup, four-door, 6½ feet

Engine: V-8, EcoTec3, FF, 5.3 liter

Transmission: automatic, six-speed HD with overdrive

Drivetrain: four-wheel drive

Mileage: 187,367 as of August 27



3

Truck 3: 2020 Ford F250 super-duty crew cab

VIN: 1FT7W2B62LED40428

Minimum bid: \$15,000

Style: extra-large pickup, four-door, 8 feet

Engine: V-8, flex fuel, 6.2 liter

Transmission: automatic, six-speed

Drivetrain: four-wheel drive

Mileage: 133,186 as of August 27



24

Truck 24: 2018 Chevrolet Silverado 1500 double cab

VIN: 1GCVKNEC4JZ152957

Minimum Bid: \$10,000

Style: work truck pickup, four-door, 6½ feet

Engine: V-8, EcoTec3, 5.3 liter

Transmission: automatic, six-speed, HD with overdrive

Drivetrain: four-wheel drive

Mileage: 134,841 as of August 27

CECA Vehicles To Be Auctioned

CECA HAS FOUR RETIRED vehicles that will be auctioned through a closed bid process. These vehicles have a few battle scars and are well broken in, as you would expect from any work vehicle.

You may come by the shop yard at 201 W. Wrights Ave. in Comanche to inspect the trucks in person.

Please include the truck year and model in your bid, and bid in uneven numbers, including cents. Sealed bids can be mailed to CECA, Attn: Sealed Vehicle Bid, P.O. Box 729, Comanche, TX 76442.

Bids can also be dropped off in person at the co-op office at 349 Industrial Blvd. Please include a phone number where you can be reached in all correspondence.

The deadline for bids is noon November 25. Auction winners will be notified November 26.

CECA reserves the right to reject any or all bids at the discretion of the board. Mileage for all vehicles was current as of August 27 but is subject to change as vehicles could still be used.

For any questions about the vehicles, call Dale Ogle at 1-800-915-2533. To view the trucks online, visit ceca.coop/retired-fleet-trucks. ■

CECA Offers Residential Solar Solutions for Members

DID YOU KNOW that CECA installs and sells solar power arrays? We have trained professionals who can evaluate your electricity use and property to provide the perfect fit for your home or business based on your usage patterns. We encourage members to include CECA in their solar array installation plans from start to finish.

CECA offers various options, from backup generators and battery systems to roof- and ground-mount arrays. Energy efficiency has progressed with new technologies, allowing members to take a more active role in optimizing their energy consumption. We're beyond the days of just turning off the lights or adjusting the thermostat when leaving the house.

If you're interested in optimizing your household's energy consumption, call Riley Hilliard at 1-800-915-2533 to set up a free energy audit and solar power analysis. Solar power may not be a good fit for everyone, but under the right circumstances, it can save CECA members money on their monthly bills.

There are many companies marketing the installation of solar panel arrays in every county CECA serves, and this has created confusion around solar buyback plans and raised concerns about fair pricing in a new and changing industry.

We're here to help our members navigate this confusion, and if they feel solar may be a good option for them, we can handle the sale and installation as well.

CECA does require that an application process be completed before interconnection with our system to ensure proper safety, liability and metering standards are met. Regardless of the solar power vendor you choose, please contact us before you start your project to be sure that your plans are compliant and that your project goes smoothly.

You can always discuss your solar project plans with CECA staff for general information or specific needs. Solar power can be a great energy efficiency tool, and we applaud our members who are working to conserve power.

Call us at 1-800-915-2533 to learn more about how we can help. ■



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Phil Taylor, District 7

24/7 Outage Hotline Number

CECA crews are available 24/7 in the event of a power quality issue.

TOLL-FREE
1-800-915-2533

ABOUT CECA

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

This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Esta institución es un proveedor de servicios con igualdad de oportunidades.

OFFICE LOCATIONS

Headquarters

349 Industrial Blvd., Comanche, TX 76442
Monday–Friday, 7:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

Early

1801 CR 338, Early, TX 76801
Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 7:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m. Closed from 1–2 p.m.

Eastland

1311 W. Main St., Eastland, TX 76448
Tuesday and Thursday, 8 a.m.–4 p.m.

VISIT US ONLINE

ceca.coop



Check us out at
TexasCoopPower.com/comanche



Sign Up Your Child for the Imagination Library

FOSTER A LOVE OF READING in your child by signing up for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Sponsored by CECA's Operation Round-Up, the program is available at no cost to children younger than 5 who reside in CECA's service territory.

The Imagination Library puts books into the hands and hearts of children worldwide by partnering with local communities to provide specially selected high-quality books each month to participating children from birth to age 5.

Personalized with the recipients' names and mailed directly to their homes, these books create an exciting reading experience and encourage families to spend time enjoying books together.

Each book is carefully chosen by a panel of childhood literacy experts and includes tips on the inside cover for enhancing engagement and interaction between the child and their caregiver. The Imagination Library also sends two Spanish-English bilingual titles per age group each year, helping your child discover the joy of language learning.

Don't miss this wonderful opportunity! To sign up your child, visit CECA's Imagination Library sign-up page at ceca.coop/imagination-library or scan the QR code above. ■



MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Daylight Saving Time Ends

Sunday, November 3
Set clocks back 1 hour.

Veterans Day

Monday, November 11
Our office will be closed for the holiday.

Thanksgiving

Thursday, November 28
Our office will be closed November 28–29 for the holiday.

JENIFOTO | ISTOCK.COM

Cast-Iron Skillet Giveaway Contest



To celebrate 80 years of *Texas Co-op Power*, we're giving away 80 handcrafted, heirloom-quality No. 12 skillets from Fredericksburg Cast Iron Co.

TCP *Enter Today*

TexasCoopPower.com/contests



Dial 811 Before You Plant a Tree

Arbor Day in Texas is November 1

SPRING MIGHT SEEM like the optimal time of year to create a landscape masterpiece, but in Texas, Arbor Day is celebrated the first Friday in November. Planting trees and shrubs in early fall gives the plants a head start at establishing roots in the season's cool, moist soil.

Maybe you're planning to build a new deck to enjoy those cool autumn evenings instead. If any of your fall projects require digging—such as planting trees or shrubs or setting posts—remember to dial 811 first.

Underground utilities, such as buried gas, water, electric or communications lines, can be a shovel's thrust away from turning a fall project into a disaster.

Play it safe by dialing 811 a few days before digging to find out where utility lines run on your property. Your call will be routed to a local call center. Tell the operator where you're planning to dig and what type of work you will be doing, and the affected local utilities will be notified.

In a few days, a locator will arrive to designate the approximate location of any underground lines, pipes and cables. These areas will be marked with flags or paint so you'll know what's below. Then the safe digging can begin.

Although many homeowners tackling do-it-yourself digging projects are aware of 811 services, most don't take advantage. A national survey showed that only 50% of homeowners called to have their lines marked before they started digging projects, according to the Common Ground Alliance. CGA data also shows that an underground utility line is damaged every six minutes, on average, in the U.S. because someone decided to dig without first dialing 811.

Even simple tasks such as installing a new mailbox post can damage utility lines, which can disrupt service to an entire neighborhood, harm diggers and potentially result in fines and repair costs.

Never assume you know the location or depth of underground utility lines. There's no need: The 811 service is free, prevents the inconvenience of having utilities interrupted and can help you avoid serious injury.

For more information about local services, visit texas811.org. ■




STEPHANIEFREY | ISTOCK.COM

Sweet Potato Cornbread

- 2 cups self-rising cornmeal mix**
- ¼ cup sugar**
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- 1½ cups milk**
- 1 cup mashed, cooked sweet potato**
- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter, melted**
- 1 egg, beaten**

1. Preheat oven to 425 degrees.
2. Combine all ingredients, whisking together until dry ingredients are just moistened.
3. Spoon batter into a greased 8-inch cast-iron skillet or baking pan.
4. Bake 20–25 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in center comes out clean.

SERVES 8

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

Scholarships Available

Don't Miss These Opportunities!

- Scholarship for Excellence
- ORU Technical

CECA

**Apply
Today!**

SCAN ME



Deadline: April 7th



KAREN ROACH | ADOBE STOCK

CECA Scholarship Applications Open for 2025

CECA IS DEDICATED TO empowering local students through its Scholarship for Excellence and Operation Round-Up scholarship programs. These initiatives offer financial support to students pursuing higher education or trade skills. Scholarship applications are now being accepted for 2025.

CECA and Operation Round-Up award \$2,000 Scholarships for Excellence to students attending traditional four-year universities and \$1,000 scholarships for students aiming to learn a trade at a technical school.

To qualify for the scholarships, students must be dependents of active CECA members who live on the co-op's lines full time,

maintain a minimum GPA of 2.5 on a 4.0 scale and meet general entrance requirements at an accredited institution.

Applications are due by 11:59 p.m. Monday, April 7, 2025. Applicants must write a 300- to 500-word essay on why they chose their field of study and why they should receive the scholarship, provide two letters of recommendation, include a current official high school or college transcript, and submit a high-resolution headshot photo for the announcement of winners.

Visit ceca.coop/scholarships for more information. ■



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CECA

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Free Photo Op With Santa

**Join us for Pictures, Hot
Cocoa & Treats**

5pm–7pm

**Tuesday,
December 10th**



**At CECA Headquarters
349 Industrial Blvd,
Comanche, Texas**



SUBMIT YOUR RECIPES

for our CECA Member Cookbook



Categories for Recipes :

Appetizers & Beverages
Soups & Salads
Bread, Spreads & Sauces
Vegetable & Side Dishes
Meats & Main Dishes
Desserts



Submit your recipes by scanning QR code, emailing or mailing in to

Email:

tmcgehee@ceca.coop

Mail to: CECA

C/O: Triston McGehee

P.O. Box 729, Comanche, TX 76442

Submit a recipe for a chance to win a \$50 bill credit.



BERNARD BODOC.COM | ADOBESTOCK.COM

Calling All Cooks! Share Your Favorite Recipes with CECA!

Got a family recipe that's been passed down through generations or a dish that never fails to impress at gatherings? We want to hear from you. CECA is gathering recipes from our members for our member cookbook.

Whether your recipe is a savory soup, a dessert or anything in between, we have a spot for you to share it. Here's how to do it:

1. Choose Your Category

Appetizers & Beverages
Soups & Salads
Bread, Spreads & Sauces
Vegetable & Side Dishes
Meats & Main Dishes
Desserts

2. Prepare Your Recipe

- ▶ Include your name and member number.
- ▶ Tell us a bit about your recipe and list the ingredients: Is it a family favorite? A new creation?

3. Submit Your Recipe

- ▶ Mail it to: CECA
C/O Triston McGehee
P.O. Box 729
Comanche, TX 76442
- ▶ Email it to: Triston McGehee at tmcgehee@ceca.coop.
- ▶ Scan the QR code on the previous page or visit our online submission form at ceca.coop/form/recipe-submission-form.

We can't wait to see (and taste) what you've been cooking up! ■



State of Texas

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1. 14.5¢ kWh – June 2024 Texa's Monthly Electricity Rate Average | Actual data powered by Symphony
2. ENERGY STAR rated units qualify for 30% through 2032, 26% through 2033 and 22% through 2034



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



shade for travelers and cattle. In fact, range cattle gathered beneath it so much that they created a large depression in the ground there. Thus, it was more properly known then as El Encino del Pozo, the oak in the hole. Encino became a stage-coach stop, but sadly, the namesake tree died long ago.

Palacios, the enchanting town on the Gulf of Mexico, means palaces. There are some lovely homes there but no palaces. The town's original name was Trespalacios, for the first governor of the Mexican state of Texas, José Félix Trespalacios.

Refugio means refuge in Spanish, and the name indeed tells of the town's historical—and even present—significance. Well over 200 years ago, it was a refuge for travelers, a safe haven for those traveling across the frontier to San Antonio or Austin's colonies or south to Corpus or Matamoros.

Today it still functions as a refuge as the halfway point between the Rio Grande Valley and Houston. For its size, it has an unexpectedly large number of restaurants, gas stations and hotels, all teeming with travelers.

The Nueces River, meaning the river of nuts, was so named because of the plentiful pecan trees that grew along its banks.

Agua Dulce of South Texas has a sister city in West Texas—Sweetwater. Both were named for what was a highly prized type of water: Sweet water, as distinguished from brackish or salty water, was, naturally, greatly preferred. It was the sort of attribute chambers of commerce could use to market a town, or name it.

Here's some homework for you. See if you can figure out what Pecos means. It's a hard translation to pin down, with more twists and turns than the river itself has. *Buena suerte, amigos.* ■

Found in Translation

Spanish influence can be traced across Texas as you follow a map

BY W.F. STRONG • ILLUSTRATION BY NICK LU

FOR THOSE WHO have at least a rudimentary knowledge of Spanish, traveling Texas becomes quite interesting because the Spanish names of places reveal, or hint at, their histories.

For instance, Alamo means cottonwood, as in cottonwood trees. The mission was named after the hometown of the Mexican soldiers who served there in the early 1800s—Alamo de Parras.

San Antonio is named for St. Anthony. The Spanish explorers who came upon the river and springs there in 1691 arrived on the Feast of St. Anthony, June 13, and used the occasion to honor him.

Corpus Christi has a similar naming story. Latin for body of Christ, the city was named for the Feast of Corpus Christi, which is 60 days after Easter. Legend has

it that's the day that explorer Alonso Álvarez de Pineda first laid eyes on the sparkling tropical bay.

San Jacinto, in English, would be St. Hyacinth. The battle of that name was fought near the San Jacinto River, which was named either for the hyacinths that grew there so bountifully and bloomed so beautifully, or for St. Hyacinth, the patron saint of those in danger of drowning. Perhaps it was named for both.

Many merely wide places along the trail became small towns and were named for the original attractions that put them on the map.

Encino, 46 miles north of Edinburg, is such a case. *Encino* means oak. In the 1800s it had an ancient, sprawling oak tree that provided much-appreciated

Holiday Bites

Share these flavorful snacks with friends—and be prepared to share the recipes

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

I don't think I've ever made a more tried-and-true appetizer than these cranberry meatballs. All the flavors of Thanksgiving in a bite-size appetizer without spending hours in the kitchen. They are always a part of my holiday spread and definitely hold their own alongside other festive bites.

Cranberry Turkey Meatballs

MEATBALLS

- 1 pound ground turkey
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ¼ cup finely diced onion
- 2 tablespoons minced parsley
- 1 teaspoon orange zest
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 egg, slightly beaten
- ½ cup breadcrumbs

CRANBERRY SAUCE

- 3 cups fresh or frozen cranberries
- 1 cup light brown sugar
- ¾ cup orange juice
- 1 tablespoon orange zest
- 1 teaspoon crushed dried rosemary
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper

1. MEATBALLS Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

2. In a large bowl, combine meatball ingredients and mix until well combined. With damp hands, shape into 1-inch meatballs and place on prepared baking sheet. Bake 20 minutes.

3. CRANBERRY SAUCE In a large skillet over medium-high heat, combine sauce ingredients. Cook 8–10 minutes, stirring occasionally until sugar has dissolved, cranberries have burst and sauce has slightly thickened.

4. Serve meatballs warm with cranberry sauce.

SERVES 14

TCP Follow Vianney Rodriguez as she cooks in *Cocina Gris* at sweetlifebake.com, where she features a recipe for Pickled Jalapeño Shrimp Ceviche.



Olive Cheese Balls

BETSY STRIEGLER
BLUEBONNET EC

Cheese-wrapped olives, baked to perfection, are a wonderful pick-up appetizer. Striegler learned this recipe in a college food and nutrition class where the students prepared thousands for the dean's reception. It's a family favorite to this day.

- 2 cups grated sharp cheddar cheese
- ½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened
- 1¼ cups sifted flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground cayenne pepper
- 48 pimiento-stuffed green olives, drained

COOK'S TIP Once the prepared olives have been frozen one hour, they can be placed in a zip-close bag and stored. When you're ready, simply place olives on a baking sheet and bake according to directions.

1. In a food processor, blend cheese with butter until smooth. Add flour, salt and cayenne and process into cheese mixture until well blended.
2. Pat dry the olives with a paper towel.
3. Wrap 1 teaspoon dough around each olive. Place each olive approximately 1 inch apart on a baking sheet. Freeze at least 1 hour.
4. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Remove olives from freezer and bake 15 minutes.

MAKES 48



\$500 WINNER

Feta and Dill Stuffed Shrimp

ANN CYCHOSZ
WISE EC



Meet your new favorite appetizer! Go beyond the typical shrimp cocktail with this creamy, delicious snack. The feta dill filling comes together in minutes, and you can assemble these succulent bites the night before. I love the contrasting tastes and textures of these delightful shrimp, which add a festive touch to your holiday parties.

- 4 ounces cream cheese, softened
- 4 ounces crumbled feta cheese
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice

- 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh dill or 2 teaspoons dried dill
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ⅓ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ⅓ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1½ pounds large raw shrimp
- Fresh dill sprigs, for garnish (optional)
- Cocktail sauce (optional)

1. In a bowl, mix cream cheese and feta cheese until well blended. Stir in the lemon juice, dill, salt, cayenne and black pepper. Chill mixture 1 hour.
2. Remove shrimp shells, leaving the tails on. Cut a slit down the length of the outside curve of each shrimp and devein.
3. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add shrimp and cook 90 seconds or until they turn pink and are fully cooked inside. Drain shrimp, rinse under cold water and pat dry.
4. Transfer the cheese mixture to a pastry bag or a plastic sandwich bag with a corner of the bag snipped off. Pipe the cream cheese and feta cheese mixture into the slit of each shrimp.
5. Arrange on a platter and chill 1 hour. Garnish with fresh dill and serve with cocktail sauce, if desired.

SERVES 6

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

EGGS DUE NOVEMBER 10

Scrambled, poached, deviled, fried or boiled, we'll eat eggs for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Tell us how you like your eggs, and your recipe could win you egg-zactly \$500. Enter by November 10.

UPCOMING: THE WHOLE ENCHILADA DUE DECEMBER 10



MORE RECIPES >

Pork and Cream Cheese Stuffed Mushrooms

SUSAN RODGERS
PEDERNALES EC

The savory richness of ground pork, tanginess of cream cheese and earthy depth of mushrooms come together in this bite-sized delight.

- 1 pound cremini mushrooms
- 12 slices bacon
- 1 pound pork breakfast sausage
- ½ cup chopped onion
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- 2 teaspoons steak seasoning
- 1 package cream cheese (8 ounces), softened

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Coat a baking sheet with cooking spray. Remove stems from mushrooms and discard. With a paper towel, gently wipe off the caps and place on baking sheet with the cavity side up.



3. In a skillet over medium heat, cook bacon a few slices at a time until crispy and drain on a paper towel.
4. Reserve 2 tablespoons of bacon grease in skillet and add pork sausage and onion. Cook, breaking up sausage with a spoon until well done. Stir in garlic and steak seasoning. Reduce heat to low and cook 2 minutes, then remove skillet from heat.
5. Dice bacon, reserving 2 slices, and add to a bowl along with cream cheese and sausage mixture. Mix until well combined.
6. Fill each mushroom cap with filling and

App-ropos Tips

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ

Here are a few ideas to make serving appetizers more fun:

Lettuce leaves have a natural cup shape and can be used instead of a plate.

Dips, meatballs, ceviche and soups can be served in **martini glasses** instead of bowls.

Crackers add crunch and are sturdy enough to hold salads and dips.

Easily create a beautiful display using **skewers**, which can hold meats, cheeses and veggies.

return to baking sheet. Bake 20 minutes, then allow to cool 10 minutes.

7. Crumble reserved bacon slices. Garnish mushrooms with bacon before serving.

SERVES 8



80
TEXAS CO-OP POWER
1944-2024

Cast-Iron Skillet Giveaway Contest

To celebrate 80 years of *Texas Co-op Power*, we're giving away 80 handcrafted, heirloom-quality No. 12 skillets from Fredericksburg Cast Iron Co.

LAST
CHANCE
ENTER
NOW!

TCP Enter Today
TexasCoopPower.com/contests



Emporium Brand Chili Kit

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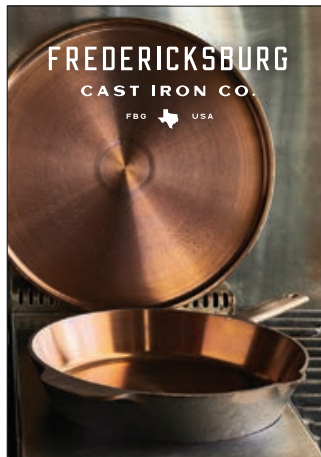
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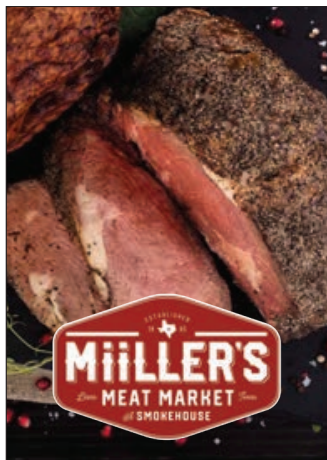
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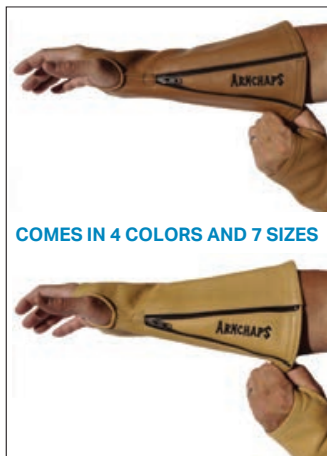
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COURTESY CHET GARNER

A Den, and Then Some

Animal World & Snake Farm Zoo boasts more than 500 tame and terrifying species

BY CHET GARNER

THERE'S ALMOST NO better way to break up a road trip than popping into a strange, offbeat roadside attraction. But this famous destination on Interstate 35 north of San Antonio is the king cobra of them all. I don't suffer from ophidiophobia (the fear of snakes), but even I was nervous stepping into a building full of the world's most venomous vipers.

Since it opened in 1967, the legend of the Snake Farm has grown far and wide, helped along by the well-known Ray Wylie Hubbard song that it inspired in 2006. Based on the lyrics, I was expecting a "nasty" and dimly lit den of danger.

What I discovered was a full-blown zoo with more than 500 species of animals ranging from mambas to mammals. It turns out that the owners who took over in 2007 had a new vision and a new name: Animal World & Snake Farm Zoo.

I started inside the front building, staring down the likes of death adders, rattlers and one of the world's deadliest snakes: the inland taipan. If you come for slithering serpents, you won't be disappointed as this zoo boasts hundreds.

The real surprises came when I wandered outside and past habitats with some of the world's most curious creatures. I said "howdy" to a pair of white lions and even got to feed the resident bison. There were otters and jaguars right next to monkeys and hyenas.

But nothing entertained the crowds more than when a staff member jumped into the gator pit with more than a dozen hungry alligators chomping for the raw chicken in his hand. I'm not sure if that was bravery, negligence or just good old-fashioned showmanship.

The best roadside stops provide visitors with a dose of the unexpected, and this one certainly delivered. ■

ABOVE Chet with Jarrod Forthman and an enormous albino Burmese python at the Snake Farm.

TCP Watch the video on our website to explore the place that inspired a song. And find all Chet's Texplorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



Know Before You Go

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

NOVEMBER

7

Lake Jackson [7-8] Mums & Mistletoe Market, (979) 297-3041, smlj.org

8

Bastrop [8-9] Heroes & Hot Rods, bastropareacruisers.com

Buda [8-9] Buda Bee Club Quilt Show, (512) 295-3413, ocsbuda.org

Fredericksburg [8-10] Die Künstler von Fredericksburg Art Show and Sale, (830) 739-2875, dkfredericksburg.org

9

Blanco Gem of the Hills 40th Birthday Bash, (830) 833-2713, gemofthehills.org

Corsicana Texas Veterans Parade, (214) 537-9311, texasveteransparade.com

Mason Wild Game Dinner, (325) 347-5758, masontx.org

Smithville Tour of Homes, facebook.com/smithvillegardenclub

Surfside Beach Kites and Castles, (979) 233-1531, visitsurfsidebeachtx.org

16

Brenham Winter Dance Party, (979) 337-7240, thebarnhillcenter.com

Smithville Reel Film Expo, (512) 237-2313, smithvilletx.org

23

Luling Winter Wonderland Arts & Crafts Show, (830) 875-0123, lulingcc.org

24

Giddings Sip & Shop Christmas Market, (979) 542-3455, giddingstx.com

25

Grapevine Carol of Lights, (817) 410-3450, gograpevine.com

26

Jasper Pioneer Day, (409) 384-5231, tpwd.texas.gov

29

Granbury Night of Lights Christmas Parade, (682) 936-4550, granburysquare.com

30

Liberty Hill Holiday Around the Hill, facebook.com/holidayaroundthehill

DECEMBER

6

Fredericksburg Light the Night Christmas Parade, (830) 997-5000, fredericksburg-texas.com

Castroville [6-7] Old Fashion Christmas, (830) 538-3142, castroville.com

McKinney [6-7] Holidays at the Heard, (972) 562-5566, heardmuseum.org

7

Palestine Christmas on Main, (903) 723-3014, facebook.com/palestinemainstreet

Woodville Christmas Twilight Tour, (409) 283-2272, heritage-village.org

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

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



The Lease of Our Concerns

Time together is time well spent—with prized lessons, if not always deer

BY MARK TROTH
ILLUSTRATION BY
HOKYOUNG KIM

WE CALLED IT simply “the lease.”

At 10, I may not have understood the concept of my father’s financial agreement with a property owner that allowed us to enjoy the benefits of his ranch. But it was apparent to me that we could do a lot of cool things on this 1,000-acre piece of Brazos County heaven, including hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, stargazing and exploring.

Our accommodation was an old, one-bedroom wooden shack with a kitchen and fireplace.

I was not the appropriate age to shoot a deer, according to my dad. But I would accompany him on hunts and learn valuable lessons of wildlife conservation and gun safety.

I was with him, and that was all that mattered.

Late one afternoon we decided to hunt a more wooded site. We drove for about 30 minutes along a fence line and then parked our International Scout. We walked through a gate, crossed a pasture and followed a game trail into the woods.

We found the deer blind and settled in. It was cold, and we saw no deer. Then came the rain. At dusk we headed out of the trees with flashlights in hand.

We were working our way through the dense, wet grass and shrubbery when we lost the trail. Although Dad didn’t admit it, he was completely turned around and didn’t know which direction it was to the pasture, the gate, the fence line—or the car.

More surprisingly though, especially knowing my father, he didn’t have a compass with him. We continued our way through the woods, trying to maintain a consistent direction. Time was a mystery to me.

Finally, we came to the pasture. We quickened our steps and reached the fence line. But now—which direction? Without hesitation, Dad made a right turn.

I asked him, “How far, Dad?”

“Not too far, Mark. Are you still good?” he said.

“I’m fine. Just a little tired.”

“And hungry too, I bet.” It was the levity we both needed.

A huge lightning bolt struck, sending countless fingers to the horizon. “There!” Dad exclaimed and pointed. “I just saw the Scout.”

There was no conversation on the ride back. At the shack we changed clothes and ate biscuits with butter and honey. In my eyes, it was a feast to rival no other.

“Were we in trouble?” I inquired.

“No,” he reassured me. “But we may have had to spend the night out there. We would have made out OK. Probably built a fire.”

I contemplated the possibilities. “Thanks, Dad.”

He smiled and put his arm around my shoulder. It was a rare show of physical affection from the man. “Remember though. Always bring your compass.”

Another lesson learned. ■

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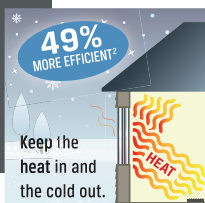
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