

KERRVILLE FOLK
FESTIVAL TURNS 50

RECIPES: PRESERVING
FRESH FLAVORS

THE BLACK WRITER WHO
CHANGED NEWSPAPERS

Texas Co-op Power

FOR BLUEBONNET EC MEMBERS

MAY 2022

Dolly's Books

Imagination Library
delivers the gift
of reading



**BLUEBONNET
EC NEWS**

SEE PAGE 18



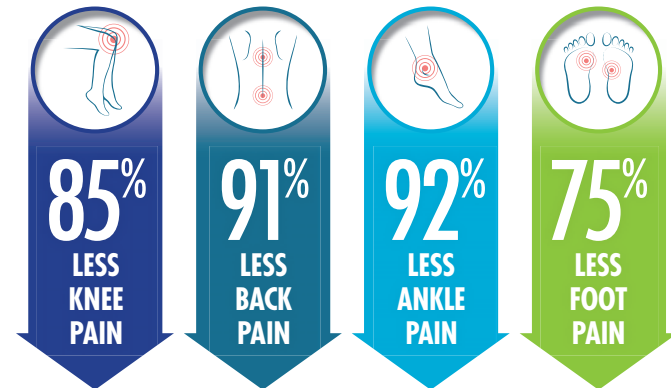
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May 2022



10

08 Folk's Golden Hour

How the Kerrville Folk Festival has launched careers and brought people together for 50 years.

*By Bobby Bridger
Illustration by Stephanie Cowan Dalton*

'A Little Source of Joy'

Nonprofits work with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library to spark an early love of reading.

By Jessica Ridge and Chris Burrows

04

Currents
The latest buzz

06

TCP Talk
Readers respond

18

Co-op News
Information plus energy and safety tips from your cooperative

29

Footnotes in Texas History
A Deep Dive
By W.F. Strong

30

TCP Kitchen
Pickles and Jams
By Megan Myers

34

Hit the Road
Something Fishy
By Chet Garner

37

Focus on Texas
Photo Contest: Feathered Friends

38

Observations
Community Crusader
By Kathleen McElroy

ON THE COVER

Dolly Parton has been supplying children with free books since 1995.
Courtesy the Dollywood Foundation

ABOVE

The Wantland family enjoys Imagination Library books in Round Top.
Photo by Erich Schlegel

Eye on Language

MERRIAM-WEBSTER added “doorbell camera” to its dictionary in 2021 as more consumers incorporate home security measures.

A two-word term added to the dictionary 100 years ago was “eye shadow.” Even though ancient Egyptians are known to have worn eye makeup, cosmetics use emerged as a trend in the U.S. in the years after World War I. Thus, eye shadow made it into the lexicon in 1922.



Merchandising Mom

Shoppers spent an average of \$220 on Mother’s Day gifts in 2021. Her special day is May 8 this year. Sorry, dads: Father’s Day gifts averaged \$174.



Danger of Downed Lines

Never touch or even approach a downed power line. Here’s why:

Even though it’s on the ground, it can still be energized. You can’t see or hear whether the line is live.

Overhead lines are rarely insulated, so there is no protection from electrocution.

The ground near a downed line can be energized.

Never forget these guidelines and share them with friends and family, especially during May—National Electrical Safety Month.

TCP Contests and More

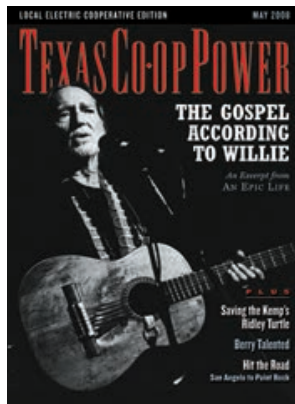
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Light and Shadow

RECOMMENDED READING
Featuring Dolly on our cover is a treat, as was Willie in May 2008 for *The Gospel According to Willie*.



FINISH THIS SENTENCE

THREE WORDS THAT BRIGHTEN MY DAY 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.

Below are some of the responses to our March prompt: **The woman I admire most in history is ...**

Harriet Tubman.

DONNA FALDYN
VIA FACEBOOK

Rosa Parks.

SANDRA LONGORIA
VIA FACEBOOK

Sacagawea, who helped make the Lewis and Clark expedition a great success.

ALFRED WILSON
COSERV
NORTHLAKE

Barbara Jordan, the first African American woman elected to the Texas Senate.

DEBORAH MILLER
CHEROKEE COUNTY EC
CUSHING

Mother Teresa.

JOHN TINOCO
VICTORIA EC
VICTORIA

To see more responses, read Currents online.



IN THE RED

Mars can't yet sustain humans, but it can sustain ketchup. Heinz teamed up with researchers to grow tomatoes in a Mars-like environment—with soil, climate and water conditions similar to the red planet—to fill bottles of its experimental Heinz Tomato Ketchup Marz Edition. It's not available for purchase, but Mars' first Texans will probably pack their own Whataburger spicy ketchup anyway.



Head of the Class

IN CELEBRATION of National Teacher Appreciation Day—May 3—*Texas Co-op Power* staffers fondly remember our influential teachers.

Chris Burrows: Jazz legend Maynard Ferguson played at my high school after an invite from my band teacher, instilling in me a love of America's music.

Travis Hill: My middle school Old Testament teacher introduced a world of avant-garde art, film and music that altered my worldview.

Jessica Ridge: My fifth grade teacher cheered me on from the auditorium as I competed in the city spelling bee, the year she taught me and the next.

Jane Sharpe: My third grade art teacher inspired me to design "magazines" on notebook pages bound with yarn.

Tom Widlowski: A high school teacher sparked my love for language and writing, which I turned into a career.

Is Your AC OK?

Now is a perfect time to schedule the annual tuneup for your home's cooling system. Your electric cooperative wants to help you save money, and a tuneup will help your AC run efficiently.



COURTESY ARLINGTON CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

A Whole New Ballgame
 “Schreiner University has a varsity esports program, prompted by students who wanted to compete at intramural and intercollegiate levels.”

**BILL REID
 PEDERNALES EC
 HORSESHOE BAY**

Moved to Tears

The Shoes [March 2022] moved me to tears. I’m a wife and mother of career soldiers whom I lost after their combat tours. My husband took his own life due to addiction to opioid meds in 2009. He was a Vietnam veteran who had two tours there.

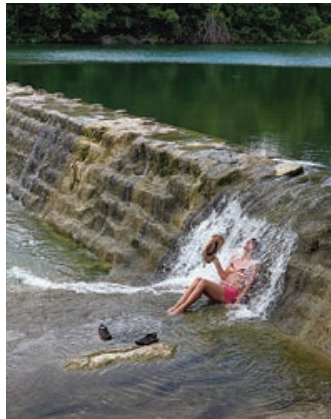
My son was a retired veteran who was in Panama and Desert Storm. He died in a motorcycle accident in 2016.

I am remarried to an Air Force retiree.

Suzanne Cornett
 Pedernales EC
 Lakeway

Truly a blessing
[Hope in a Box,
 March 2022].

LAWRENCE AND
 CINDY HRACHOVY
 VIA FACEBOOK



COURTESY CHRIS LEBLANC

Always Worth It

To Pam LeBlanc’s exhortation to *Just Add Adventure* [March 2022], I offer a hearty “amen.” In my 50s, I began competing in triathlons. I learned white-water kayaking. I married for a second time—an adventure to rival rappelling down a 38-story building.

In my 70s now, I often sense a vague resistance to the unfamiliar, to the potentially uncomfortable. I’ve learned to ignore the feeling and forge ahead. The payoffs, even if I fall on my face, literally or figuratively, are always worth it.

Patty Moynahan
 Pedernales EC
 Austin

Country Cooking

We are miles away from cities and only have Dollar Store and maybe one or two grocery stores that do not sell the exotic ingredients sometimes featured in your recipes.

Please remember that we grow some of our food and meat, so please publish “country people” recipes.

Nancy Lynch
 Deep East Texas EC
 Jasper-Newton EC
 San Augustine

TCP WRITE TO US
 letters@TexasCoopPower.com

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 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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FOLK'S GOLDEN HOUR

Musician Bobby Bridger has seen the **Kerrville Folk Festival** launch careers and bring people together for 50 years

BY BOBBY BRIDGER • ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE COWAN DALTON

The festival is the longest continuously running folk festival in America. It has played a significant role in launching the careers of scores of international musical stars and, in doing so, continues to shape the trajectory of American folk music.

BUFFALO BILL made a fortune and built his Wild West show into an international empire by following one simple rule: Perform where people are already gathering.

So in 1972, when the people behind the inaugural Texas State Arts and Crafts Fair reached out to music impresario Rod Kennedy about providing entertainment for their Memorial Day weekend event in Kerrville, Kennedy saw an opportunity. Between the folks gathering in the Hill Country and the large contingent of artists, musicians and students in nearby Austin, the Kerrville Folk Festival was meant to be.

Now, as the festival approaches its 50th anniversary, time has proved that Kennedy picked the perfect location for an annual celebration of songwriters. It's the longest continuously running folk festival in America. It has played a significant role in launching the careers of scores of international musical stars and, in doing so, continues to shape the trajectory of American folk music. This year's milestone fest runs May 26–June 12.

Back in 1972, America had entered a new era of music festivals. The Monterey International Pop Festival in California and Woodstock in New York were defining events of the counterculture era of the late 1960s.

Even then, Austin clubs attracted a range of talented singers and songwriters who found success on the fringes of the recording industry but felt it constricted their musical vision. This community of musicians and the University of Texas students who filled out their shows created a culture conducive to Kennedy's next move.

Kennedy and Peter Yarrow of folk trio Peter, Paul and Mary got to work, and in May 1972, Steven Fromholz, Carolyn Hester, Bill and Bonnie Hearne, John Lomax Jr., Mance Lipscomb, Michael Martin Murphey, and eight other acts performed on the main stage at the first Kerrville Folk Festival. Former President Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird were in the audience with Longhorns football coach Darrell Royal that year, when the fest was still held at the Kerrville Municipal Auditorium downtown.

Kennedy ran the festival with input from the performers. He was a former big band singer and race car driver, a Marine, and a lover of classical and folk music. He was a singular character of the era who could convince folk artists to work for a vision instead of money and come together for what he called "music from the heart."

That love for music and songwriting held the Kerrville Folk Festival together during its very rough first two decades.

The main stage lineup in 1973 included Allen Wayne Damron, Willie Nelson, Robert Shaw, B.W. Stevenson, Kenneth Threadgill, Townes Van Zandt, Jerry Jeff Walker

and me. I also played the inaugural festival—and the next 26 fests. In 1972 I wasn't on the main stage but played as part of the New Folk Concert,

held outdoors at Schreiner College in those early years.

The idea behind the New Folk Concerts was to create a platform to showcase lesser-known talent, and the concerts later became a competition for folk performers and contributed greatly to the success of artists including Robert Earl Keen, Lyle Lovett, Nanci Griffith and John Gorka.

Since 1974, the festival has been held outdoors at the Quiet Valley Ranch, about 16 miles outside Kerrville.

Songwriters Steve Young and Van Zandt and I were the judges for the New Folk Concert in 1977. After we made our choices for the top three songs and I had announced the winner, I took Kennedy aside and told him that the judges agreed the New Folk Concert was no longer a simple showcase for new singers and songwriters. It had become a launch pad for careers in folk music. I suggested we needed a new venue to showcase unrecognized talent and put forth Chapel Hill, which had a lovely oak that could also be a great location for a "ballad tree," where unknown artists could perform a couple of songs for a concert hosted by a main stage artist. Kennedy liked the idea, and it became a staple of the annual festival. In the mid-1980s, someone recorded Michelle Shocked performing at the tree, and the recording launched her into stardom.

In 1979, I was rehearsing with musicians David Amram and John Inmon backstage at the festival preparing to go onstage. I was teaching them a new song of mine called *Heal in the Wisdom*. Kennedy heard us rehearsing and told me he wanted the song to be the festival's official anthem. We celebrated the anthem's 40th anniversary in 2019.

Drawing on the hardscrabble drive that keeps folk musicians afloat, Kennedy willed the Kerrville Folk Festival through floods and other hardships until his death in 2014. Folk singers and songwriters have since kept alive his vision and determination, keeping it going through the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the festival to resort to livestreaming for the past two years.

We couldn't let a virus get in the way of decades of coming together to celebrate singers and songwriters. And we still found a way to meet people where they were already gathering—online—and celebrate our sacred music from the heart. ■



Jihyun and John Wantland with daughter Lilianna and son Noah visit the Round Top Family Library, which partners with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library program.



BY JESSICA RIDGE AND CHRIS BURROWS

Co-ops and other nonprofits work with ***Dolly Parton's Imagination Library*** to spark an early love of reading

John Wantland opens a slim volume at a sturdy wooden table at the Round Top Family Library, his family gathered around him. “There’s a log on the bottom of the lake, there’s a log on the bottom of the lake, there’s a log? There’s a log! There’s a log log log, there’s a log on the bottom of the lake,” he reads aloud, displaying the pages’ nature-inflected palette of green, gold and brown.

“And that would be the first refrain. It’s a sing-songy call-and-response story, and it builds on itself,” says Wantland, a ranch manager who lives near Round Top in east Central Texas. *There’s a Hole in the Log on the Bottom of the Lake*, written and illustrated by Loren Long, introduces elements with each successive refrain, including a frog, fly and gnat. “So by the end of it, you’re just out of breath and laughing,” Wantland says.

The tale is a favorite of Lilianna’s, John and Jihyun Wantland’s 4-year-old daughter, who received it as one of more than 1.9 million participants in Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library. Every child enrolled in the program receives a free, personalized, age-appropriate book in the mail each month.

Parton started the program in 1995 to supply books to children in her Tennessee hometown, and over 27 years it has grown exponentially with the help of 3,745 community partners in five countries.

When Lilianna was born, the family bought and was given many books, John says. But as their home library grew familiar, Lilianna’s interest in spending time together reading began to wane.

All that’s changed thanks to the Imagination Library.

“It’s certainly a special treat for her to get a book once a month,” Jihyun says. “We have 100 books for her, but she was tired of some.”

The fresh reads spark excitement for Lilianna and her younger brother, Noah. “Whenever these books come in, she’s like mailbox to the chair, and let’s read it now,” says John, a member of Fayette Electric Cooperative.

The Wantlands and some 17,000 other Texas children take part in that same magical trip to the mailbox each month thanks to the more than 1.7 million Imagination Library books that have been delivered in the state over the years. The whole goal is to get kids reading early so they’re

‘A Little Source of Joy’

ABOVE Dolly’s program has grown to reach more than 1.9 million children.

TCP Join Dolly Parton as she reads *There’s a Hole in the Log on the Bottom of the Lake*.





“My daddy could not read or write, so I grew up with seeing how limiting it can be. I often say he was the smartest man I have ever known, but I always wonder what else he could have done if he knew how to read.” —DOLLY PARTON

more prepared for school and better equipped for a lifetime of success.

“Over the years, we learned a lot about what works, but the one thing I knew for sure is that to have even a remote chance for success, you have to know how to read and write,” Parton says. “And the best way to learn is to love books and love reading.”

An author herself, Parton founded the program as a tribute to her father.

“My daddy could not read or write, so I grew up with seeing how limiting it can be,” she says. “I often say he was the smartest man I have ever known, but I always wonder what else he could have done if he knew how to read.”

Community investment is at the core of the Imagination Library, which partners with nonprofits—Lions Clubs, library foundations, electric cooperatives and other organizations—to fund and administer the program at the local level. Parton’s Dollywood Foundation handles the rest, tapping a committee of early childhood experts to select books focused on values including kindness, respect, acceptance and inclusion.

Children can receive the free reads from birth until age 5,

when they head off to school. The selections change as readers age to expand on their abilities; two titles per year are English-Spanish bilingual, and every book includes reading tips that extend the engagement and interaction between child and caregiver.

The Imagination Library has found that participants are nearly twice as likely to read every day, more than 85% read at least three times a week and participants outperform their peers on assessments when they get to school. Reading aloud with an adult adds to those benefits, helping children build empathy, expand their vocabulary and recognize emotions.

Jihyun, who is from South Korea and not a native English speaker, has found that she and Lilianna learn from each other when they read together. “She will correct my pronunciation,” Jihyun says, smiling.

Despite all the good that books can provide, some 60% of U.S. children living in poverty don’t have a single children’s



LEFT Dolly reads *Coat of Many Colors*, her book based on the song she wrote and the Imagination Library's 100 millionth donation, during a 2018 ceremony at the Library of Congress. BELOW Enrolled children receive a new book in the mail every month.



book in their homes. The Imagination Library is working to change that, especially among rural children who often have less access to public libraries.

"We know that receiving monthly books has a positive and significant impact on family literacy habits, kindergarten readiness and grade-level reading by third grade," said Nora Briggs, executive director of the Dollywood Foundation. "DPIL puts country kids on more equal footing with their big-city peers."

Parton reads aloud stories on the Imagination Library's YouTube channel. Those videos spurred Emily Shisler to enroll her daughters, Eleanor, 4, and Victoria, 2, in the program. "I watched them with my daughters when they would get up from their naps during the worst of the pandemic," says the educational consultant from Houston and Fayette EC member. "And it was a little source of joy."

The Shisler and Wantland families participate in the Imagination Library through its partnership with the Round Top Family Library, which has registered dozens of children in a five-ZIP code swath of Fayette and Washington counties since April 2020.

Julie Wantland, a member of the RTFL board and grandmother to Lilianna and Noah, implemented and coordinates the program at the community library. Despite the

disruption caused by the pandemic, including a months-long closure of the Round Top library, its collaboration with the Imagination Library meant it could continue to bring books to children, she says. "It really was one of the few things not terribly affected."

Not all DPIL programs are supported by a physical library; all that's required is investment from a local nonprofit. "It's actually pretty easy to fundraise for because it's such a wonderful program," says Julie, also a member of Fayette EC. Neighboring organizations have pitched in to help cover the program's costs, a portion of which each Imagination Library affiliate bears. The Round Top Lions Club contributed a year's worth of funding last summer.

Several electric cooperatives across the U.S. have also found ways to fund local programs and bring free books to their youngest members. That's what Maegan Caffey did for the folks in Comanche Electric Cooperative Association's service area, which reaches parts of seven counties southwest of Fort Worth.

Caffey's 4-year-old son, Oliver, is obsessed with books, she says, but she was disappointed to find that they didn't have a local Imagination Library affiliate to feed his appetite. So the resident of the town of Comanche, between Waco and Abi-



Some 60% of U.S. children living in poverty don't have a single children's book in their homes. The Imagination Library is working to change that.

lene, made it her mission to start her own. When Caffey realized the goals of the DPIL align with that of the co-op, where she works as a communications and public relations specialist, she knew she had to act.

“This was a good way to show that we are not just the normal electric provider,” she says.

Caffey says it was an easy sell for the co-op’s general manager and the board that oversees its community giving program. They immediately recognized the value for the co-op’s some 10,000 members and the greater community.

“They loved it,” she says. “A lot of the board members either have kids or grandkids, and so the idea of being able to bring that to families who may not have that opportunity was just a no-brainer for us. We wanted everyone to get that opportunity.”

The co-op funds its books with donations from members and partnered with the public library in nearby Eastland to bring the program to fruition in January. Eastland librarian Kathy Druesedow, a CECA member, is thrilled.

“The sad truth is that many children are unable to go to a library until they have access to their school library,” she says. “Dolly Parton and CECA are putting books straight into the hands of children who would otherwise not have the opportunity to touch or read a book until they attend school.”

Beyond preparing students for school, some parents have found that the books provide shared experiences that children can hopefully build on when they start kindergarten.

“I think there’s something really cool about the girls reading the same books that kids from all over the place are reading,” Shisler says. “It’s kind of this connected web: Here are all these kids from these different rural and other communities that are all having read *The Little Engine That Could*. And I think that’s a really special thing to be a part of.”

But for every individual young reader, there’s a much greater benefit found between pages. “I think they can learn so much from books,” Shisler says. “A world that’s a little different from theirs—different people, different cultures, different places. Books open a world of possibility.” ■

FIND OUT MORE

Go to imaginationlibrary.com to see if there’s an Imagination Library affiliate in your area.

ABOVE Dozens of Texas counties have affiliates that partner with the Imagination Library.

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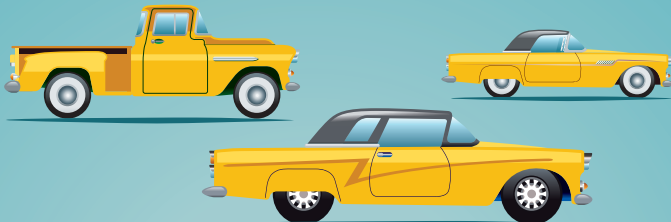
ANNUAL

MEETING

MAY 10, 2022

The Silos on 77
1031 County Road 223
Giddings, Texas

1:30-3:30 P.M.



ANNUAL MEETING NOTICE

Dear Member:

Pursuant to its Bylaws, the Annual Membership Meeting of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, Inc. will be held on May 10, 2022, at 1:30 p.m. at The Silos on 77, 1031 County Road 223, Giddings, Texas. The Board of Directors at its March 2022, regular meeting resolved to hold the Annual Meeting as a drive-through event, affording members the opportunity to receive Cooperative information, ask questions and receive refreshments. No in-person voting will take place at the Annual Meeting. Business coming before the meeting will be conducted on behalf of Bluebonnet's members via proxies directed to the Board and the Proxy Committee and registered with the Cooperative on or before May 3, 2022.

Three director seats, District 1, District 3 and District 5, were up for election. The incumbent directors, Milton Shaw, District 1, Debbi Goertz, District 3 and Ben Flencher, District 5, timely filed nominations by filing fee, qualified and were not opposed. The incumbent directors will be elected by general consent in accordance with Article II, Section 6 of the Bylaws. Other business that may come before the meeting will also be addressed.

Sincerely yours,

Robert Mikeska
Secretary/Treasurer
Bluebonnet Board of Directors

BRING YOUR APRIL BILL
with the QR code
to the Annual Meeting
to
BREEZE THROUGH
REGISTRATION!



Every member who votes by proxy or who registers at the drive-through Annual Meeting will be entered in drawings to win one of dozens of door prizes, including three Cub Cadet riding lawnmowers!*

**Bluebonnet employees, members of the Board of Directors and spouses are ineligible to win.*

2022 ANNUAL MEETING FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why is it important to attend the Annual Meeting?

Bluebonnet's Annual Meeting, held each year in May, is one of the many benefits of being a member of an electric cooperative. The 2022 meeting will be a drive-through event, and members will have the opportunity to receive co-op information, get refreshments and ask questions.

What information do I need to bring with me to register at the Annual Meeting?

If you bring your April bill with the QR code on it, you'll breeze through the drive-through registration tent. If you misplaced your paper bill, you can use a computer to log in at bluebonnet.coop, go to the Billing & Payments tab, then Billing History to find the April bill and print a copy to bring to the meeting. On our mobile app, log in, go to the Bill & Pay tab, then Billing History to pull up your April bill. Otherwise, you'll go through the same account verification process as the one performed any time members transact business on their accounts. A member service representative will ask for any two of the following pieces of information about your account: the name(s) listed on the account, your Bluebonnet account number, your birthday, last four digits of your Social Security number, your driver's license number or your mailing address.

Could there be a vote?

No voting will take place at the Annual Meeting this year, and there were no ballot items to be voted on at the time this material was printed. Proxy designations submitted by the deadline will be used to vote on any items added to the Annual Meeting agenda on or before May 3, 2022.

This year's Annual Meeting will be from 1:30-3:30 p.m. May 10 at The Silos on 77, 1031 County Road 223 in Giddings, Texas. There will be drive-through registration & materials distribution, as well as refreshments.

Materials that will be distributed to members during the drive-through Annual Meeting include:

- Secretary-Treasurer's report
- Chairman/President's report
- General Manager's report
- New Business if necessary

If there is a vote, who administers the election?

Election Services Co., which is a third-party, independent vendor that specializes in administering corporate elections nationwide. It has the skills, experience and equipment to efficiently and accurately tally proxies and votes while adhering to the Federal Trade Commission's Red Flag requirements that protect members' confidential account information.

Can I change my address or do other business at the Annual Meeting?

Representatives will be able to help members with most of their co-op business and answer questions they would normally handle at a member service center or by phone. If your question would take some time to answer, they will record it and have someone contact you later that week.

Get more information at bluebonnet.coop/annualmeeting, email memberservices@bluebonnet.coop or call 800-842-7708 (Monday-Friday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m.).



Milton Shaw
District 1,
Caldwell,
Hays,
Guadalupe,
Gonzales
counties



Debbi Goertz
District 3,
Bastrop
County



Ben Flencher
District 5,
Burleson
County

Which Board of Director seats were up for election?

The Board of Director seats up for election were for District 1, Caldwell, Hays, Guadalupe, Gonzales counties; District 3, Bastrop County and District 5, Burleson County. Because the three incumbent directors were unopposed, they will be elected by general consent in accordance with Bluebonnet's bylaws. The incumbent for District 1 is Milton Shaw, who has served on the Bluebonnet Board of Directors since 2010. The incumbent for District 3 is Debbi Goertz, who joined the Board in 2017. The incumbent for District 5 is Ben Flencher, chairman of the Board, who has served on the electric cooperative's Board since 1987.



Whitney Whitsel, above, in a selfie in front of the U.S. Capitol during her 2016 government youth tour trip to Washington, D.C. Judges selected her to represent Bluebonnet on the tour, 58 years after her grandfather went on the inaugural trip. Read about her memories and where she is now, Page 20D. Esther Dominguez, at right, surrounded by some of the Texas teens in front of the White House in 2018. She is Texas Electric Cooperatives' youth tour coordinator and has been involved with the program since 1994. This year Texas will send 124 teens and 19 chaperones to Washington. Photos courtesy Whitney Whitsel and Esther Dominguez



CAPITOL GA THE YOUTH TO

Stories by Melissa Segrest

AN ANNUAL WHIRLWIND history lesson that began more than half a century ago for thousands of teenagers from across Texas and the nation is back after a two-year pandemic pause.

This June, the Government-in-Action Youth Tour is returning to Washington, D.C., and hundreds of electric cooperative-funded high school students will swarm the nation's capital to see historical spots and learn how our democracy works.

Texas cooperatives are sending 124 students, who will join about 1,000 students from other states at the nation's capital for an all-expenses-paid deep dive into up-close learning. They will be accompanied by chaperones, program directors and staff. During their weeklong visits, the students will see some of America's most famous landmarks, museums and memorials. They'll also visit their elected officials in Congress, and – for extra credit – some students will create friendships that last a lifetime.

Texas Electric Cooperatives, the statewide organization that represents 76 co-ops, oversees the large Texas teen delegation. Esther Dominguez is ready to go. She has been involved with the program since 1994 and began working as Texas' youth tour director in 2011.

"I'm more than excited," she said. "When you are physically there, it's amazing. The students actually feel that history, see where it all takes place. It's just huge. Seeing and learning about all that helps them bond as a group and as friends. They don't want to leave."

Participants don't just win a competition to take this trip. "These kids earned it," Dominguez said. "They had to write

TAL IN

OUR RETURNS

The Government-in-Action event, a storied tradition offered by electric cooperatives, is back after a 2-year hiatus. Meet Bluebonnet's next winners, and alumni sharing D.C. memories.

In 1958, before the Government-in-Action Youth Tour was official, six Central Texas teens spent time in Washington, D.C., helping in the office of then-Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson. Below, they posed with him on the Capitol steps. On the front row, from left: Marilyn Dallmeyer of Burton, representing the Lower Colorado River Electric Cooperative, which would later become Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative; Mary Price of Bertram, representing Pedernales Electric Cooperative; Sen. Johnson; Mary Francis Slett of New Waverley, representing Sam Houston Electric Cooperative; Mrs. C.H. Wallace of Gatesville, group chaperone. On the back row, from left, are Gordon White of Cleveland, representing Sam Houston, Mike Simmang of Giddings, representing LCREC (Bluebonnet) and Jimmy McBride of Leander, representing Pedernales. Read Mike Simmang's memories of that trip and the years after, Page 20D.

essays, be interviewed by judges, compete against other students. They compete because they want it."

The youth tour will resume this year for cooperatives nationwide, according to Beth Knudsen, youth programs manager for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. She said 28 states are participating, down from the 43 states represented on the tour before the COVID-19 pandemic. The two-year break was the only time in program history that co-op teens had not gone to Washington, D.C.

In addition to coordination and support, NRECA offers courses for students on the tour and helps with Youth Day rallies. There may be some changes to the 2022 activity schedule, but Knudson said it will still be an "incredible, life-changing experience" for all.

Jim Matheson, NRECA's chief executive officer, is also enthusiastic about the return of the teens. "After two years of not having our youth tour groups out in Washington, D.C., we are excited to welcome back so many of our participating states this June," he said. "The theme for this year is 'Charge On!' — and that is exactly what we intend to do!"

Although the tour became official in Texas in 1965, the first version of it occurred in 1958, when then-U.S. Senate majority leader and future President Lyndon B. Johnson selected six high school students from three Texas cooperatives to spend six weeks shadowing him in D.C. Those students represented Bluebonnet (then called the Lower Colorado River Electric Cooperative), Pedernales and Sam Houston electric cooperatives. Bluebonnet records show that the cooperative has sent 112 high school students to Washington, D.C., since 1958.

We caught up with one of those original six touring Texas students as well as other Bluebonnet youth tour participants from previous decades.

Read their stories starting on Page 23 and meet Bluebonnet's 2022 Government-in-Action Youth Tour ambassadors, Page 20B.



High school seniors to represent Bluebonnet at 2022 youth tour

By Alyssa Dussetschleger

A 4-H LIVESTOCK Ambassador who plans to be a policy analyst for agriculture and a budding entrepreneur who hopes to become a real estate agent will head to Washington, D.C., this summer as recipients of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's 2022 Government-in-Action Youth Tour awards.

Keely Mikolajchak, a senior at Brenham High School, and Jada Martin, a senior at Cedar Creek High School, will represent Bluebonnet on the tour that has been an annual event for many decades. Creed Whitfill, a senior at Bastrop High School, is the alternate representative and will join the tour if one of the winners is unable to attend.

The recipients will each receive a \$1,000 scholarship and tour the Texas Capitol and the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin before flying to Washington, D.C. The tour dates are June 12-21.

The two recipients and alternate were among eight finalists who applied and submitted a video on the topic: "What is the greatest energy issue facing your generation, and how can youths be a part of the solution?" Recipients were selected based on video presentations, extracurricular involvement, and school and community service.

Mikolajchak, 17, of Chappell Hill picked up the political bug after participating in an oratorical speech contest. It challenged her to discuss the role of the U. S. Constitution in her daily life. She became interested in agriculture economics and policy after visiting with state representatives at the Texas Capitol.

She is also involved with youth agriculture organizations, including 4-H and FFA. Mikolajchak has served in leadership roles as state 4-H Livestock Ambassador, Washington County 4-H president, and vice president of Area XI Future Farmers of America, which represents high schools in southeast Texas counties. She is also Brenham High School's FFA president. In the fall, she'll attend Texas A&M University and study agriculture economics.

During her video presentation, Mikolajchak discussed the potential of young people's impact on innovative renewable energy resources. "As youths, we are the next leaders of our communities, nation and world," she said. "We must take a stand and empower our society to look beyond traditional energy sources and look into the future of sustainability."

Martin, 18, of Cedar Creek volunteers



for the holiday Adopt-a-Family program in Cedar Creek as part of her involvement in National Honor Society. She also volunteers at the Bastrop Animal Shelter and at a City of Bastrop vaccine clinic. She held leadership roles for school organizations, including the National Honor Society, student council and LEO club, a youth organization of Lions Clubs International. Martin also played volleyball, tennis and ran track for the Cedar Creek Eagles. She plans to attend the University of Texas at San Antonio in the fall and major in business. After college, she plans to return to Bastrop County and open a real estate firm.

Martin became interested in government after meeting City of Bastrop Mayor Connie Schroeder while volunteering at the city's vaccine clinic.

"I loved seeing our local politicians out in the community helping the citizens, and I

realized there is a lot of good done behind the scenes," she said. "When I heard about the Government-in-Action Youth Tour, I thought it would be a great opportunity to learn even more about the great things that are done for my generation at a higher level of government."

Whitfill, 18, of Bastrop, is involved with Peer Assistance and Leadership at Bastrop ISD, as well as mentorship programs at his church. He has been involved with fundraisers, including the Peer Assistance and Leadership basketball fundraiser and Cougar Moats fishing tournament, which raises money for graduating high school students in Bastrop County.

Whitfill has also participated in community service projects, picking up trash and recyclables in Bastrop County and collecting canned foods for Thanksgiving meals for families in need. He plans to attend the

Representing Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative this June on the youth tour will be Jada Martin, below left, a senior at Cedar Creek High School, and Keely Mikolajchak, below right, a senior at Brenham High School. Creed Whitfill, below center, is the alternate. He is a senior at Bastrop High School. *Sarah Beal photo*



University of Mary Hardin-Baylor and study small business entrepreneurship and business management.

Mikolajchak and Martin will join 122 young people representing other Texas electric cooperatives and about 1,000 teens from other states in the nation's capital, where they will visit historical sites and the U.S. Capitol, meet members of Congress and attend events hosted by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. NRECA represents more than 900 electric cooperatives across America.

The youth tour program has more than 50,000 alumni, including CEOs, state and national elected officials, and countless business and community leaders.

For more information, visit bluebonnet.coop/scholarships-youth-tour. Look for 2023 applications in the fall.



Bluebonnet's representatives on the government youth tour in 1972, at left, were Roxanne Caperton and Paul Ehlert. Paul, of Brenham, went on to the University of Texas and its law school. He practiced as an attorney with his father, William J. Ehlert. He joined the staff of Germania Farm Mutual Insurance Association in 2004 and today is the president and CEO. *1972 photo courtesy of Paul Ehlert; photo of Ehlert now by Sarah Beal.*



Paul Ehlert

Paul Ehlert, 1972

IT'S BEEN 50 YEARS since Paul Ehlert of Brenham gave his speech to government youth tour judges in an attempt to win a chance to visit Washington, D.C.

"I remember I'd incorporated a poem," he said.

"The Bridge Builder," by Will Allen Dromgoole, was that poem, about an older man, near the end of his life, who crossed a chasm and, once on the other side, decides to build a bridge he no longer needs. A younger man who followed him questions his decision. "You've crossed the chasm, deep and wide, / Why build this bridge at evening tide?"

The man explains that he is building the bridge for future travelers.

"He, too, must cross in the twilight dim; / Good friend, I am building this bridge for him!"

In his speech in Giddings on that day five decades ago, Paul likened the message of the poem to the role of Bluebonnet and other electric cooperatives in bringing light to those who came after them, in helping others to build lives in rural areas like his hometown.

"The public speaking part of it was a good experience for me as I went forward. I built a lot of confidence in myself and, truthfully, opened up some doors that I probably wouldn't have had opened," Paul said. "I really enjoyed it."

Paul was 17, a student at Brenham High School in Washington County. He remembers how he and the other Bluebonnet-sponsored winner in 1972, Roxanne Caperton of Caldwell in Burleson County, joined the other Texas teens traveling for days on buses. It was Paul's first trip to Washington.

"I think we may have stopped in Tennessee. When we got to D.C., we went to some of the landmarks, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial," he said. "I definitely remember the Smithsonian. We saw the Wrights' airplane." That was brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright's 1903 Flyer, the first powered, heavier-than-air flying machine that introduced the flying age at Kitty Hawk, N.C. on Dec. 17, 1903.

After high school Paul went to the University of Texas at Austin, then UT law school. After graduating in 1978, he began his practice as an attorney in Brenham with his father, William J. Ehlert.

Paul began representing Germania Farm Mutual Insurance Association in Brenham, then joined the Germania staff in 2004. He became the company's president and CEO in 2011. "Last year, the company celebrated its 125th anniversary of providing insurance protection to Texans. Germania now insures 200,000 families across the state," he said. "We have over \$900 million in assets and provide \$77 billion in insurance protection."

Paul and his wife, Rhonda, whom he met in Brenham before going to law school, have two children and four grandchildren.

Paul has traveled extensively for Germania and has done plenty of public speaking since 1972. "We would go up to Washington, D.C., to meet with Texas congressmen and senators to talk about insurance issues," he said.

His advice for the government youth tour winners of today: "The relationships you build with the people you go with can't be beat. And by all means, take in the breadth of history that's there and be thankful that you are able to do it."

MIKE SIMMANG, 1958 and WHITNEY WHITSEL, 2016

BEFORE IT WAS officially called the Government-in-Action Youth Tour, before hundreds of teens descended on Washington, D.C., every summer from across the country, Mike Simmang of Giddings and five other teens from rural Central Texas towns were on a working trip to the nation's capital.

It was 1958, and Mike was 16.

One year before, Lyndon B. Johnson, then U.S. Senate majority leader, spoke at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's annual meeting in Chicago. The future U.S. president said, "If one thing comes out of this meeting, it will be sending youngsters to the national capital where they can actually see what the flag stands for and represents."

LBJ's words sparked a movement. Almost 60 years after her grandfather Mike's journey to Washington, Whitney Whitsel, who grew up in the community of Ledbetter, also attended the government youth tour — in 2016.

Although their experiences differed, both learned history and came home with a lifetime of memories.

Mike recalls that Johnson got things rolling in 1958 by asking three Central Texas cooperatives to send two teens to spend time in D.C. with him. The new program was called "Government in Action" scholarships. Mike and Marilyn Dallmeyer of Burton represented Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative (then named the Lower Colorado River Electric Cooperative). Pedernales Electric Cooperative and Sam Houston Electric Cooperative also sent local high school students.

It wasn't exactly a tour.

Mike's trip was an immersion into the daily workings of one of America's most persuasive and powerful politicians, an insider's look at how things worked during the decades of Democratic control of the U.S. House and the Senate, when Texans held some of the highest seats of government. The Texas teens spent six weeks on the trip, helping out in Johnson's Senate office and in the office of Homer Thornberry, the U.S. congressman from the 10th congressional district at that time — LBJ's former House seat.

They read through Texas newspapers looking for articles that might be of interest to Johnson and helped with mail and routine office duties for both lawmakers.

"I met Sam Rayburn, the speaker of the House of Representatives. Texans ran the country then. Johnson knew who to talk to and what to tell them," Mike said. Johnson "was very tall. I never saw him lose



Mike Simmang, above at left, with his father, Judge John S. Simmang. Father, then son, served as general counsel for Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative. Undated photo from Bluebonnet archives

his temper, though folks said he had a bad temper. He had a sense of humor. I didn't feel intimidated."

The six teens saw historic sites, and they saw sights not on today's youth tour agenda.

"In the afternoon we had LBJ's limousine and driver. He took us here and there," Mike said. "We went to the Supreme Court and met some of the justices.

"We went to Philadelphia and saw the Liberty Bell and all the things you see there," he said. "Like 'American Bandstand.'"



Mike Simmang still lives in Giddings today, 64 years after being part of the inaugural youth tour.

The most popular bands in America played the show, usually lip syncing their hits to an adoring crowd of "teeny-boppers."

But that's not all. The six teens from Texas also went to New York and saw a Broadway play. They also saw and listened to a meeting at the United Nations. "There were headphones at every seat and they were broadcasting in five languages," he said.

Mike was inspired by everything he saw. He graduated from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, followed by law school at the University of Texas in Austin. He completed his law degree at St. Mary's School of Law in San Antonio, then followed in the footsteps of his grandfather and father, both lawyers. Mike's father, John Simmang, was Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's co-counsel for 27 years. He also served as Lee County judge and served five months as a district judge. After his father died, Mike served as Bluebonnet's assistant counsel for about 7 years, then became general counsel in 1976,

he recalled. He retired in 2011.

The 1958 inaugural youth tour "led me to believe and continue to believe that this is the greatest country in the world . . . and that voting is not a privilege. It is a duty," Mike said. "I learned that those people up there are real people, and that is why it's so important to know who they are and know about them so you can make an intelligent vote."

Mike is 80, still living in Giddings on the same family land he grew up on. He's been lucky, he said. He and wife Mary Ellen have been married almost 59 years. They had six children, although two have died. One of his daughters is Mary Ellen Whitsel, who works at Bluebonnet in the new service department. Whitney Whitsel is her daughter.

Like her grandfather, Whitney was also a student at Giddings High School when she was selected for the government youth tour



Whitney Whitsel, Simmang's granddaughter, is working on her master's degree in San Angelo.

"I'm a very outgoing person, so I wasn't super nervous," she said.

"It was a very eye-opening experience for me. I had not traveled out of Texas very much, so getting to go to the Capitol and all of those things, I probably would never have

Continued on page 22

Shayne Markwardt Kirts, 2002

TWENTY YEARS AGO, Shayne Markwardt made her first trip to Washington, D.C., and it took her breath away. She was 18, had graduated from Round Top-Carmine High School and was one of two students selected by Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative for the Government-in-Action Youth Tour.

She had traveled to other states before, but this was different.

“You always learned about it in textbooks, read about it, but to see it firsthand was a completely different experience,” she said. “It brought it to life for me.”

Shayne’s last name is Kirts now, and even though it’s been two decades, she clearly remembers going to see the White House, seeing “a huge flag at the Smithsonian that had been flown at the White House,” spending time at the U.S. Capitol and watching members of Congress go about their work.

One of her most vivid memories is of watching the solemn ceremonial laying of the wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery. “When you just hear about the numbers there, it doesn’t really have an impact on you. But seeing all of those graves, all these people who had fought for your freedom, it’s a huge experience and made me proud to be an American and to live where we live.” Today, there are more than 400,000 graves on Arlington’s 639 acres.

Shayne also made plenty of friends during the trip, which consisted of multiday bus rides (with stops in between) from Texas to D.C. and back. “I encountered some of them again in college and connected with some of them in my professional life,” she said. “Those relationships started (on the youth tour).”

She went to Blinn College in Brenham to earn an associate degree in science and art, then to Texas A&M University for a bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary studies focused on education. She earned a master’s degree from Lamar University.

Shayne taught science to fifth-, seventh- and eighth-graders in La Grange in Fayette County, working there for 11 years before becoming assistant principal at Giddings Intermediate School in Lee County, then at Giddings Elementary.

Today, she is the principal of the elementary school.

“I love children and always wanted to make an impact on their lives, but after going to Washington, D.C., you’re so proud of what other people have sacrificed for you. It made me want to be a leader, to be that positive impact on kids’

lives,” Shayne said. She wanted to teach, but realized she also wanted to do more. “I want to be a superintendent at some point,” she said.

Shayne met her future husband, Bryan, early in her studies at Blinn. They’ve been married almost 14 years and live in Round Top. They have two children, 9-year-old Kooper and 2½-year-old Kollyns.

Always active in her community, Shayne wants to teach her children the importance of giving back. “The experience I had (on the youth tour) helped ensure that I stayed on the right path and continued my education,” she said, adding that she hopes her children get a sense of that and apply for the Government Youth Tour when they are old enough.



Shayne Markwardt Kirts, above, with some of her students at Giddings Elementary School, where she is principal. Back row, from left, are Brandon Villegas, Katelyn Snyder and Robert Nicks; second row, from left, are Adalyn Christiansen, Noah Villegas, Hudson Adams and Nolan Adams; front row, from left, are Wyatt Irwin, Emery Adams and River Anderson. At right, Shayne in her high school senior portrait, and below, with other members of the 2002 tour. She is third from right. *Sarah Beal photo above; other photos courtesy Shayne Markwardt Kirts*



Madison Iselt, 2018

THE BIGGEST THING about Madison Iselt's 2018 trip to Washington, D.C., was just how big it all was.

"There was so much. We were there seven days and I didn't get to see all the things we were planning to see," she said. "That surprised me the most."

There were other surprises for Madison when she represented Bluebonnet on the government youth tour four years ago. She was 18 then and had just graduated from Lexington High School in Lee County.

"We got to take pictures in front of the White House. We held the Texas flag there . . . We got to meet a congressman," she said. She enjoyed a murder mystery play and ate dinner aboard a big boat on the Potomac River.

Madison also remembers two moving and vivid moments.

One was attending a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery, where she could watch the precise steps and solemn protocol of infantry members who guard the tomb 24 hours a day, every day of every year.

"You have to be silent the whole time. You see the guards walking back and forth, which they have to do all day. It was really amazing," Madison said.

Her other vivid memory is a visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The museum's exhibits reveal scenes and stories of the murder of 6 million Jewish men, women and children by the Nazi regime and its allies during World War II.

"It was so very emotional and sad. The stories and pictures were really telling. It left an incredible impact on me," Madison said.

The government youth tour helped her learn what America's flag and Washington's memorials represent. It also helped her become more of a leader. "I interacted with so many people. Learning everything about them helped me with my speaking skills and in making relationships," she said.

She went on to Blinn College in Brenham for two years to complete nursing school prerequisite courses, then entered the nursing program at Concordia University Texas in Austin. She graduated in April at age 22.

"My plan is to work in a hospital as an RN. If I really love it, I'll stay, although I've also thought about travel nursing, or getting my master's and becoming a nurse practitioner, maybe at a women's services center," she said. Madison plans to take a job at Ascension Seton Williamson Hospital in Round Rock.

Madison equates seeing the remarkable Washington, D.C., tour sites in person to going from studying nursing to working as a nurse. "You learn in high school about government, but it's hard to understand some of these things just by reading a textbook." She said. "Nursing school is hard, and you learn as much as you can, but once you get to work on the (hospital) floor, that's where you really learn."



Madison Iselt, above, recently graduated from Concordia University in Austin with a nursing degree. At left, on the youth tour in 2018, Madison, on the right, and Gillian Nietzsche, left, were Bluebonnet's representatives. Madison graduated from Lexington High School and Nietzsche from Giddings High School. On the youth tour, they were joined by 147 other Texas teens. *Sarah Beal photo and photo courtesy of Madison Iselt*

Continued from page 20D

done that on my own," she said.

She was struck by the size and population of Washington, "especially when you come from a small town," she said. Whitney recalls the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian museums, their nice hotel and most of all, making new friends.

The Texas delegation outnumbered any other state, as it often does, and she enjoyed seeing the Texas teens all wearing the same type of shirts. "We were easy to see," she said. Whitney participated in trading pins with teens from other states, an old youth tour tradition. "You definitely meet people from all over Texas. I still connect with people in

my group. I went to A&M with some of the people who were on the tour with me. I still keep up with them," she said.

At Texas A&M University, Whitney earned a bachelor's degree in animal science in May 2020. In college, she worked with the AgriLife Extension program, which sponsors Texas 4-H. She served on the reserve national championship team for 4-H wool judging, helped coach the next year's team, helped organize events for Texas 4-H Livestock Ambassadors, and held two internships with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

She traveled beyond Washington, D.C., to study in Scotland, England and Ireland during her sophomore year. She will finish work in August on her master's degree in animal

science while working at the Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension center in San Angelo. Whitney plans to continue working there for a few years, she said.

Whitney also plans to stay in the agriculture industry and, as her experience shows, she enjoys working with and teaching children about the importance of raising animals.

Her experience on the government youth tour was eye-opening and helped prepare her for college. Whitney's advice for this year's tour participants: "Take advantage of everything that's being offered to you. This is probably something you'll never be able to do on your own again. We would never have gotten to go to all of those places in five days without this trip."



An impressive sight: the Texas contingent on the Government-in-Action Youth Tour in front of the White House in 2019. Photo courtesy of [texasouthtour.com](https://www.texasouthtour.com).

- Texas teenagers start their youth tour with a trip to Austin to tour the Texas Capitol and the Bullock Texas State History Museum.
- Texas youth tour teens fly on a chartered plane to start their Washington, D.C., adventure. Before 2004, they traveled for several days on buses.
- More than 1,100 teens from 28 states, including Texas, will participate in the government youth tour this summer.
- See videos of past years' youth tours at <https://www.texasouthtour.com>

Michael Willette, 1993

ABOUT THREE YEARS AGO, Michael Willette took his two teenage children, Erin and Connor, to Washington, D.C., to see the monuments, history, ceremonies and all the other symbols of patriotism.

He wanted them to see what he saw when he represented Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative on the Government-in-Action Youth Tour almost 30 years ago.



Michael Willette

"The kids were 15 and 13 at the time," he said. "The youngest one was only about 3, too young to understand. We did a tour of the Capitol, the monuments, the Smithsonian."

He used his experience from the Youth Tour to guide them. "I remember how much it impacted me," he said.

Michael was selected by judges to represent Bluebonnet on the tour in 1993, after he finished his junior year at Lockhart High School. He was 17.

He laughed at the memory of his essay

strategy. "In the true spirit of Michael Willette, I waited until the night before to write it," he said. "I ran in to type it up and turned it in just in time. Several weeks later I was told I was a finalist." Michael was interviewed later by judges at Bluebonnet's headquarters, then in Giddings, and he got their votes.

His essay theme featured the importance of knowing and understanding history, and how it helps people make better decisions. He recalls referencing the famous saying attributed to multiple political leaders: "Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

Michael and the large Texas contingent of students rode in two commercial buses for two days to get to Washington. "We stayed in hotels at night," he said. "It was like a camp — everyone was having a great time. You got to know everyone on your bus."

Even though Michael grew up as a "military brat," he said, "I'd never been to a town like D.C." He enjoyed talking

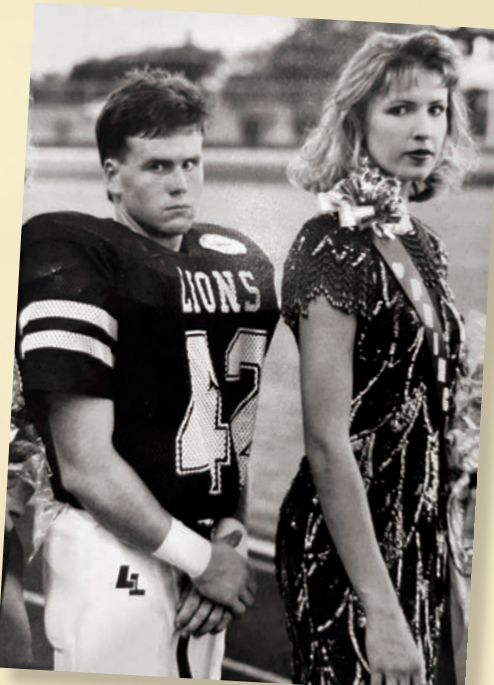
with then-U.S. Rep. J.J. "Jake" Pickle, who represented Texas' 10th congressional district for 32 years. Michael remembers seeing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the precision of the wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.

He tried a variety of jobs after high school and then went to college, graduating in 2002 from what is now Texas State University in San Marcos with a degree in mathematics and computer science. A few years before, he had taken a computer programming course and "it kind of clicked," he said. "I knew this is what I want to be doing for a living."

He started working from his home in Lockhart for San Antonio-based USAA, the massive financial and insurance company with services that are available only to members of the military and their families. He started as a software engineer for marketing systems and worked his way up to become a senior executive of data and analytics.

He's still married to his high school sweetheart, Kathy Rodgers, and they stayed in Lockhart until 2013, when they moved to San Antonio. "We may move back to Lockhart someday," he said.

Michael thinks back on his trip with his children to Washington and the things they learned there. He hopes the symbolism of the monuments, museums and historical buildings stick with them. Today, daughter Erin is 18, and sons Connor is 15 and Nolan is 6.



They went to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, too, which left a deep impression. "I wanted them to ask about why we put people in harm's way, and about the nature of evil," Michael said. He recalled another famous (and often misattributed) quote: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

His advice for this year's youth tour participants? "Be a sponge. Set aside any preconceived notions, just enjoy it and use the opportunity to meet a lot of diverse people with diverse views of the world. It's not often you have an opportunity like that at that age," he said. ■

At left, teenagers Michael Willette and his future wife, Kathy Rodgers, at their Lockhart High School senior homecoming in 1993. Willette had gone on the youth tour that summer. Today, he is a senior executive of data and analytics for USAA in San Antonio, and he and Kathy have three children.



Not a
big fan
of the
dog days
of summer?



Bluebonnet's 6 TIPS TO SAVE POWER THIS SUMMER

TURN IT UP

Set the thermostat to 78° (or 80° when not home), especially from 3 to 7 p.m. Save as much as 10% on your bill.

TURN 'EM OFF

Lights can eat up a chunk of your electric bill. If you're leaving the room, close curtains to block the sun's heat.

GET SMART

Upgrade to a programmable or smart thermostat to better control your temperature settings. A smart thermostat lets you remotely adjust the temperature, and some can even learn and adapt to your habits.

TRACK YOUR USE

Log in to your online account at bluebonnet.coop or on our mobile app and see how much electricity you're using. Try the tips and see how much your power use drops.

KILL THE VAMPIRES

Gadgets silently eat electricity, even in standby mode. Plug them into an advanced power strip and turn them off when not in use.

LEAVE THE HOUSE

Can't stand 78 degrees? Go someplace cool during the hottest part of the day: the library, grocery store, mall, gym, coffee shop.



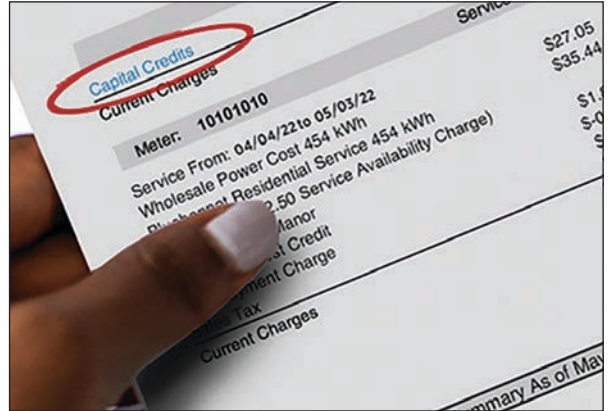
HOLIDAY CLOSINGS

Bluebonnet offices will be closed May 30 for Memorial Day. If you have a power outage, you can report it by texting OUT to 85700 (to register, text BBOUTAGE to that number), online at bluebonnet.coop, via our mobile app or by calling 800-949-4414. You can pay bills any time online, on our mobile app or call 800-842-7708 (press option 2 when prompted).

Bluebonnet returns excess revenue to members via capital credits

MOST BLUEBONNET members will see a credit on their bill in May. It's called "capital credits," and it is one of the benefits of being a member of an electric cooperative.

The co-op shares with its members money it collects above what is required to run the business. The amount that members receive depends on how much electricity they used in the previous years and how long they have been Bluebonnet members. Questions? Contact a member service representative at memberservices@bluebonnet.coop or 800-842-7708, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.

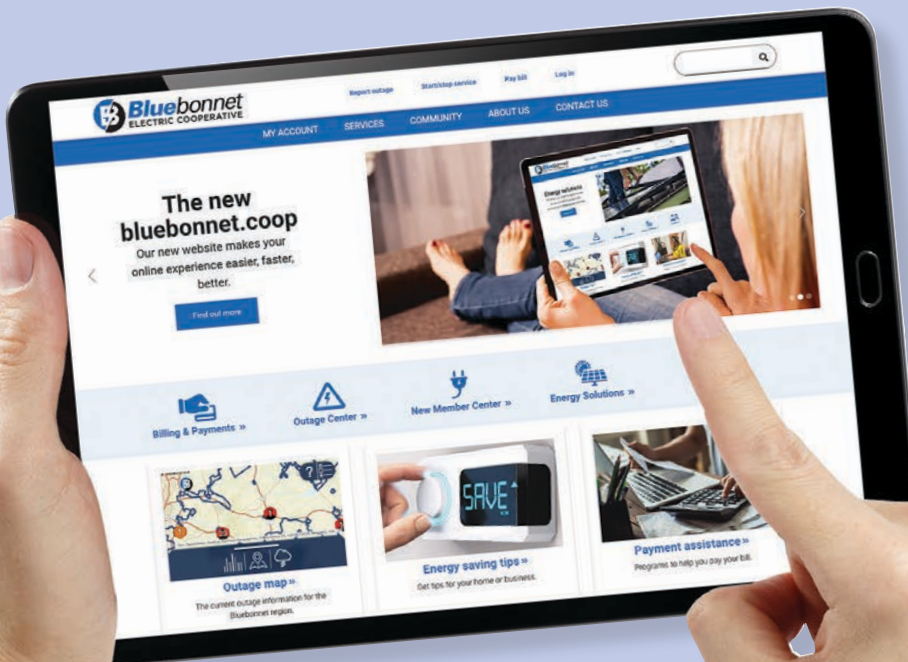


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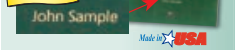
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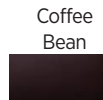
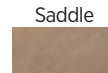
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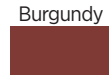
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A Deep Dive

Explorers map the recent history of the state's deepest ancient cave

BY W.F. STRONG • ILLUSTRATION BY BRAVE UNION

THERE'S A 10-FOOT-WIDE river in West Texas that almost no one can reach. That's because the Sirion River is on private land near Sanderson—and at the bottom of the deepest cave in the state. The Sorcerer's Cave descends about 570 feet, or as a Texan might put it, “damn near two football fields deep.”

The first part of the cave goes down quickly. Explorers have to negotiate a series of steep, dramatic drops totaling 500 feet—50 stories—to reach the Sirion, so named because one of its discoverers, Randy M. Waters, was a huge fan of author J.R.R. Tolkien. The underground river reminded Waters of the fictional river of the same name. Texas' Sirion flows a long way through the cave system, descending 70 feet or more and

passing over two short waterfalls before disappearing beneath a rock wall.

George Veni, executive director of the National Cave and Karst Research Institute in New Mexico, is said to know more about the cave than anyone and is credited as the discoverer of its record-setting depth. He said the water of the Sirion is very clean. “You could drink from it if you wanted to,” he said, “though to be perfectly safe, you probably shouldn't.” The water at that depth might have fallen as rain on the surface decades or even hundreds of years ago, he said, and likely flows another 40 miles into the Rio Grande. If fully explored, the Sorcerer's Cave could be the longest cave in Texas, Veni believes.

He fondly remembers the day in 1979

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



when he was rappelling down the cave's deepest shaft and hollered with delight to his friends above when he realized he had set the depth record for caves in Texas, a record that remains intact today. Since then, he has been one of the primary mappers of the tunnel system.

Once a cave has a theme, Veni said, the naming of its features continues to be inspired by that theme. That's why the Sorcerer's Cave includes a Poltergeist Pit, Demon Drop and Mormoops Chamber, named for the ghost-faced bats that live there. The theme even extends to another cave in the area—the Wizard's Well.

Bill Steele, another internationally known caver who has explored and helped to map the Sorcerer's Cave, said it's a fun cave to explore because of its numerous and substantial vertical drops. For the “properly equipped vertical caver, it's not dangerous, but for the inexperienced, it certainly would be,” he said.

Steele has spent 45 years exploring and mapping the deepest cave in this hemisphere, Sistema Huautla in Oaxaca, Mexico. At nearly a mile deep, Huautla is nine times as deep as the Texas cave. But Steele said Sorcerer's Cave is still important beyond its record depth. Ancient drawings and mortar holes used for grinding at the entrance show it was used as a shelter, with one item dated to the year 700. Human bones found in the Sirion River, almost certainly washed down from above, are the deepest human remains known in North America.

That important history helps form the basis for the caver's motto: Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints, kill nothing but time. ■

Pickles and Jams

Canning captures the delightful flavors of today for use later

BY MEGAN MYERS, FOOD EDITOR

Making strawberry jam is a yearly tradition in my house that began after we started taking the kids to Sweet Berry Farm in Marble Falls. We've explored all kinds of jams, jellies, pickles and preserves, but we still make this Strawberry-Vanilla Jam every year. We love the warm floral flavor the vanilla brings to the berries. If you're new to making preserves, be sure to follow the directions on the pectin box for safe canning practices, or store your jars in the refrigerator.

Strawberry-Vanilla Jam

7 cups sugar
8 cups whole strawberries
¼ cup lemon juice
1 box (1.75 ounces) powdered fruit pectin
1 7-inch vanilla bean

1. Prepare a water bath canner and heat to boiling, adding jars to sterilize.
2. Measure sugar into a large bowl and set aside.
3. Wash and hull strawberries. In a large bowl, crush berries one layer at a time using a potato masher, leaving some chunks. Pour berries and juices into a large pot and stir in lemon juice.
4. Heat over medium-high heat, then stir in pectin. Continue heating until it reaches a rapid boil, then add sugar all at once, stirring to dissolve.
5. Split the vanilla bean, scrape out the insides and add to the jam. Bring jam back to a rapid boil that cannot be stirred down, and boil 1 minute.
6. Test for doneness by spooning some jam onto a chilled plate and letting it cool. Touch to see if a skin is forming and feels gellike; if so, jam is ready. Remove from heat.
7. Ladle jam into jars, leaving about ¼-inch headspace. Wipe edges clean and place lids on top, securing with screw bands. Return jars into hot-water bath and boil 10 minutes, then remove to counter and let rest until completely cooled. Store any unsealed jars in the refrigerator.

MAKES 8 HALF-PINT JARS

TCP Follow along with Megan Myers and her adventures in the kitchen at stetted.com, where she features a recipe for Pickled Red Onions.



Zingy Candied Jalapeños

MYRA HUNSICKER
MEDINA EC

You won't have any trouble finding ways to enjoy these sweet and spicy candied jalapeños. Hunsucker recommends using them on eggs and nachos or over cream cheese as a dip. She uses the leftover syrup for marinating meats.

- 1½ pounds fresh jalapeños**
- 1 cup cider vinegar**
- 3 cups sugar**
- 1½ teaspoons garlic powder**
- ½ teaspoon ground cayenne pepper**
- ¼ teaspoon ground turmeric**
- ¼ teaspoon celery seeds**

1. Wash jalapeños, remove stems, and slice into rings or chop in a food processor.
2. In a large pot over medium-high heat, combine vinegar, sugar, garlic powder, cayenne, turmeric and celery seeds and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer 4 minutes. Add sliced jalapeños and simmer another 4 minutes.
3. Scoop into heated jars, packing semi-firmly and leaving ¼-inch headspace. Ladle syrup into jars. Use a chopstick or wooden dowel to remove air bubbles, pressing down on jalapeños, then place lids.
4. Let jars cool to room temperature, then store in the refrigerator.

MAKES 2 PINT JARS

MORE RECIPES >



\$500 WINNER

Gigi's Bourbon Blueberry and Pear Jam

TAMERA BUSSEY
TRINITY VALLEY EC



Reminiscent of blueberry pie, this jam is wonderful for lovers of the fruit. The bourbon adds depth of flavor, but you can leave it out if you prefer.

MAKES 12 HALF-PINT JARS

- 10 cups blueberries**
- ¼ cup diced pear**
- ½ cup powdered fruit pectin**
- ⅓ cup lemon juice**
- ¼ cup bourbon**
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract**
- ½ teaspoon almond extract**
- 6½ cups sugar**

1. Prepare a water bath canner and heat to boiling, adding jars to sterilize.
2. In a large pot, stir together blueberries, pear and pectin, crushing fruit as you mix. Stir in lemon juice, bourbon, and vanilla and almond extracts.
3. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, stirring frequently. Add sugar all at once and bring jam back to a full rolling boil, stirring constantly. Hard boil for 1 minute, then remove from heat.
4. Ladle jam into warm jars, leaving ¼-inch headspace, and apply lids. Process in canner for 10 minutes, then remove and let rest until completely cooled.

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

NUTS ABOUT NUTS DUE MAY 10

We want to know the many ways readers use nuts in the kitchen. Submit your recipes on our website by May 10 for a chance to win \$500.





Carrot Cake Jam

CATHY TOWER
HAMILTON COUNTY EC

Carrot cake lovers will delight in this unique jam.

- 1 can (20 ounces) crushed pineapple in juice, undrained**
- 1½ cups shredded carrots**
- 1½ cups peeled and chopped ripe pears**
- 3 tablespoons lemon juice**

- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves**
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg**
- 1 box (1.75 ounces) powdered fruit pectin**
- 6½ cups sugar**

- 1.** Prepare a water bath canner and heat to boiling, adding jars to sterilize.
- 2.** In a large pot over medium-high heat, combine pineapple, carrots, pears, lemon juice, cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover and simmer until pears are tender, 15–20 minutes, stirring occasionally.
- 3.** Stir in the pectin and bring to a boil over high heat, continuing to stir. Stir in the sugar all at once and return to a full rolling boil that cannot be stirred down. Boil 1 minute, then remove from heat and skim off foam if desired.
- 4.** Ladle jam into heated jars, leaving ¼-inch headspace. Using a chopstick or wooden dowel, remove air bubbles and add additional jam if necessary. Place lids and process in canner for 10 minutes. Remove jars and let cool.

MAKES 8 HALF-PINT JARS

Essential Canning Tools

BY MEGAN MYERS

Canning doesn't have to be complicated, but you'll want to have these basics before you start.

Large pot: You don't need a special water bath canning pot; any pot large enough to hold jars covered with water will do.

Jar holder: These special tongs help you transfer hot jars into and out of the water bath.

Wooden dowel or chopstick: Use either of these implements instead of a knife to remove air bubbles to prevent scratching the inside of the jar.

Fresh canning lids: Wax seal lids cannot be reused, so be sure to have enough on hand. Rings can be reused until they start to rust.



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She's been around for thousands of years, but she's never gone out of fashion. We're talking turquoise, one of the world's most ancient gems. Egyptian queens adorned themselves with turquoise jewelry more than 3,000 years ago. And the blue beauty is even more coveted now than she was a millennia ago.

Do you know someone who's even more beautiful now than when you first met? Then the Timeless Turquoise Pendant is for them — a stylish circle formed from seven total carats of natural turquoise and exquisite sterling silver metalwork. And the price? Let's just say we made sure timeless was attainable for less than you'd think.

Time is running out for timeless turquoise. Just because turquoise is timeless, doesn't mean supplies of it will last forever. Turquoise is only found a few places on Earth. Typically unearthed in arid climates like the American Southwest and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, turquoise requires a delicate balance of minerals and water to achieve its gorgeous range of blues. But even when conditions are optimal for turquoise to form, finding stones of gem-worthy quality is a challenge. There are very few turquoise mines left, and then, less than 5% of turquoise mined worldwide is of jewelry condition, making it rarer to come by than even diamonds.

There are turquoise and sterling silver pendants out there for over \$1,200. And while genuine turquoise can garner a pretty penny, there's no reason to be paying a designer price when we can bring you designer pieces for a remarkable price.

100% Satisfaction Guaranteed. Try the Timeless Turquoise Pendant for 30 days. If it fails to delight, just send it back for a refund of the item price.

Limited Availability. These are handcrafted artisan pieces, and we only have so many. Call today.

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| Pendant & Chain \$378† | \$99 +s&p Save \$279 |
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B.

A.

Pendant enlarged to show luxurious color

"...turquoise is becoming rarer and more valuable because less of it is being discovered... the very best turquoise is more valuable than diamonds."

— The Jewellery Editor, 2021



C.



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COURTESY CHET GARNER

Something Fishy

Lampasas sculpture garden gets feet—and minds—meandering

BY CHET GARNER

FOR CENTURIES FOLKS have flocked to Lampasas to take a dip in natural springs that supposedly possess life-giving properties. I'm not sure they can heal the sick, but they seem to have stimulated creativity and inspired artists to fill a small city park with larger-than-life sculptures.

When I cruised through Lampasas, I discovered all the trappings of a charming Texas town—a historic courthouse, inviting businesses and the sort of pie that makes your eyes roll back in your head. But then I discovered something that I've never seen in any small town: an old rusty truck laden with a giant metal catfish stretching from the windshield to beyond the tailgate. I needed an explanation.

Apparently I had stumbled upon the Hanna Springs Sculpture Garden that fills Campbell Park. The city built the park around Hanna Springs, which pushes crystal clear and pungent-smelling—like an old shoe—water out of the ground and into a large pool. The sulfur spring is stunning to see—and smell.

In 2005 the Lampasas Association for the Arts decided it was time to add a little more flash to the underutilized park. The group commissioned three artists to carve large limestone sculptures. There's a couch, a gateway and one that's ... open to interpretation. After this, the creativity started to flow faster than the springs. The sculpture garden now boasts more than 20 sculptures ranging from abstract spinning shapes to a painted tractor that kids can climb on. The fun comes in walking through the garden and letting your mind wander along with your feet.

It's the sort of unexpected delight you find when you hit the road, and it defies the stereotype that art is just for big-city galleries. In fact, some of the best art can be found in the great outdoors of small-town Texas. ■

ABOVE Chet finds himself hooked on the funky art at Hanna Springs Sculpture Garden.

TOP See what else caught Chet's eye in Lampasas on our website. Watch all his Texplorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



Know Before You Go

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

MAY
07

Abilene Abilene Philharmonic: 1812 Overture, (325) 677-6710, abilenephilharmonic.org

Bellville Farmers Market, (979) 865-3407, bellvillefarmersmarket.com

Galveston Michael Cavanaugh: The Music of Billy Joel and Elton John, 1-800-821-1894, thegrand.com

Kerrville Mother and Son Dance, (830) 257-7300, kerrvilletx.gov

Mesquite Cinco de Mayo Celebration, (972) 329-8331, visitmesquitetx.com

New Ulm Honey Bee Jubilee, (713) 568-5584, newulmtexas.com

South Padre Island Jailbreak Beach Escape, (956) 761-5900, runthejailbreak.com

Temple National Train Day, (254) 298-5172, discovertemple.com

The Colony Up, Up and Away! Festival of Flight, (972) 625-1106, thecolonytx.gov

Dallas [7, 14, 21] Dinner Detective Interactive Mystery Dinner, 1-866-496-0535, thedinnerdetective.com/dallas

08

New Ulm Sts. Peter & Paul Catholic Church-Frelsburg 175th Anniversary & Country Festival, (979) 732-3430, peterandpaulparish.com/country-festival

12

Lufkin Orquesta Akokán,
(936) 633-5454,
angelinaarts.org

**Abilene [12-15] Western
Heritage Classic,**
(325) 677-4376,
westernheritageclassic.com

13

**Coolidge [13-14] Mesquite
Tree Festival,** (254) 203-8531,
facebook.com/
mesquitetreefestival

**Stafford [13-15, 20-22]
The Hunchback of Notre
Dame,** (713) 302-5329,
inspirationstage.com

14

**Boerne Hill Country Mini
Milkers Texas Two-Step,**
(830) 964-4155,
hillcountryminimilkers.org

Celina Cajun Fest,
(972) 382-2682,
lifeincelinatx.com/cajunfest

**Grand Prairie Roberto
Carlos,** (972) 854-5050,
texastrustcutheatre.com

**Irving Las Colinas
Symphony Orchestra: Eldred
Marshall,** (972) 252-4800,
lascolinassymphony.org

**La Grange Bluff Schuetzen-
Fest,** (979) 968-5658,
friendsofkreischebrewery.org
/schuetzenfest

McKinney Night Hike,
(972) 562-5566,
heardmuseum.org

**New Braunfels Cooder
Graw,** (830) 606-1281,
gruenehall.com

15

Dallas Flora Fest,
(214) 428-7476,
txdg.org/flora-fest

MORE EVENTS >

TCP *Submit Your Event*

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



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Hit the Road

Event Calendar

Fairs, festivals, food and family fun! Pick your region. Pick your month. Pick your event.

With hundreds of events across Texas listed every month, TexasCoopPower.com has something for you.

TCP Plan now
[TexasCoopPower.com/events](https://www.texascooppower.com/events)

19

Corsicana Jim Brickman, (903) 874-7792, corsicanapalace.com

20

Kyle Ash Pavilion Family Skate Night, (512) 262-3939, cityofkyle.com/recreation

Columbus [20-21] Magnolia Days Festival, (979) 732-8385, magnoliadays.org

Fredericksburg [20-22] Trade Days, (210) 846-4094, fbgradedays.com

21

Amarillo Eli Young Band, (806) 372-6000, bigtexas.com

Brenham Ronstadt Revue With Special Guest John Beland, (979) 337-7240, thebarnhillcenter.com/events

Clifton Bosque Tour de Norway, (254) 675-3720, tourdenorway.com

Frisco National Soccer Hall of Fame Induction Weekend Concert: Zac Brown Band, (469) 365-0043, nationalsoccerhof.com

Hilltop Lakes Run Fore the Roses Golf Tournament, (713) 503-0470

Lake Jackson Bird Banding, (979) 480-0999, gcbo.org

Mesquite Mesquite Symphony Orchestra: An Ode to Joy, (972) 216-6444, visitmesquitetx.com

25

College Station [25-29] Remembering the Fallen, (979) 690-0501, americangimuseum.org

26

Kerrville [26-July 9] Southwest Gourd & Fiber Fine Art Show, (830) 895-2911, kacckerrville.com

27

Smithville [27-28] Lost Pines BBQ Showdown, (713) 540-1695, bastroprotrary.com

Fredericksburg [27-29] Crawfish Festival, (830) 997-6523, fbjaycees.com/crawfish-festival

28

Hunt Mike Donnell, (830) 238-4441, cridersrandd.com

Rockport Wine Festival, (361) 729-1271, texasmaritimemuseum.org/rockportwinefestival

29

Abilene Waitress, 1-800-869-1451, celebrityattractions.com

Brazoria River Wine Festival, (979) 964-3167, riverrendezview.com

Lewisville Fiesta Charra, (972) 219-3401, cityoflewisville.com

JUNE

02

Fredericksburg [2-5] Hill Country Film Festival, 1-866-224-7714, hillcountryff.com

03

Stephenville [3-4] Moo-La Fest, (254) 552-1222, visitstephenville.com/moo-la-fest

04

Fredericksburg Car Fest, (830) 997-6523, fredericksburgcarfest.com

San Marcos Heritage Tour of Homes, (512) 392-4295, heritagesanmarcos.org

Austin [4-5] Pond and Garden Tour, publicity@austinpondsociety.org, austinpondsociety.org

Feathered Friends

We're not ones to get our feathers ruffled, but we've been surprised by how many entries flew in from all over Texas.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ

1 ROSS HINES
GRAYSON-COLLIN EC

"The February 2021 winter storm brought purple finches to my feeder."

2 MARK CHAPMAN
HEART OF TEXAS EC

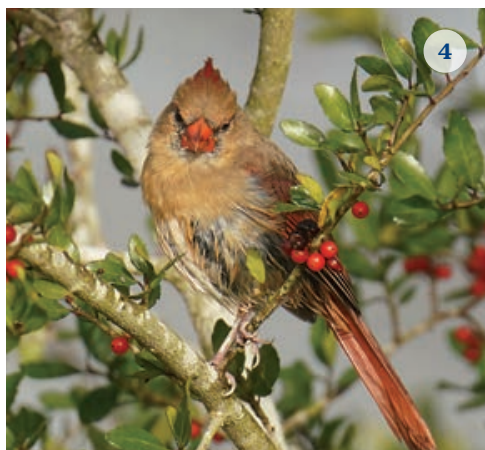
"I located a mated pair of barred owls in a heavily wooded creek and watched for several hours before capturing this image."

3 PAMELA SLAUGHTER
FANNIN COUNTY EC

Granddaughter Rachel loves her chickens but has taken a special liking to this hard-to-catch banty rooster.

4 CHRIS WEYLAND
TRINITY VALLEY EC

Female northern cardinal.



Upcoming Contests

DUE MAY 10 **Light and Shadow**

DUE JUN 10 **Hometown Pride**

DUE JUL 10 **Aerials**



Enter online at TexasCoopPower.com/contests.

TCP See Focus on Texas on our website for a whole flock of Feathered Friends photos from readers.



Community Crusader

Remembering journalism stalwart George McElroy on his birth's centennial

BY KATHLEEN MCELROY
ILLUSTRATION BY TAYLOR CALLERY

SOMETIMES, BEING the first of anything is beside the point.

George McElroy, my father, accumulated a lot of firsts as a pioneering African American journalist in Texas. As the Texas State Historical Association points out, he was the first Black journalist at a mainstream daily newspaper in Texas, *The Houston Post*; first to earn a master's degree from the University of Missouri's prestigious school of journalism; first to be a member of the Houston Press Club; first to teach journalism at the University of Houston; and first to be inducted into the Texas Newspaper Hall of Fame.

But as much as Dad enjoyed accolades from big-time journalism, his true journalistic love was his community newspaper, *The Houston Informer and Texas*

Freeman, the first African American newspaper published west of the Mississippi River. He started reporting there at age 16 and never really left until he died at 84 in 2006.

At the *Informer*, Dad was dogged as the eyes and ears of Houston's Black communities and cherished the opportunity to report back on the world beyond their neighborhoods. He kept every press badge he ever carried, pinning them on the paneled walls of our den.

The *Informer*, a storied part of the Black press, shared much with community and rural papers across the state. For Dad, it was home—located in a neighborhood where he lived most of his life. Mainstream newspapers might call its coverage hyperlocal: weddings and deaths, scholarship announcements, photos of smiling children and corsaged ladies. It's the kind of journalism that Texas community papers—ethnic and rural—have been practicing for more than a century.

Dad was probably most proud when the Texas Gulf Coast Press awarded him first place for editorial writing. Like any good small-town publisher and editor, he chose his words wisely and lovingly, knowing that the person reading them might be sitting in the next pew or barbershop chair.

In the centennial year of my father's birth, I'm part of two projects that honor the kind of journalism he practiced: the Headliners Foundation's George McElroy Scholarship (yes, the first Black person to be so honored by the prestigious nonprofit) and the University of Texas at Austin's Rural Journalism Pipeline Project, which seeks to sustain rural Texas newspapers by finding successors for aging publishers.

Whether it's Houston's bustling Third Ward or a one-stoplight town in the Panhandle, we're all richer living in a place where that one journalist knows your name. ■



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