

WHERE

THE

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Rural libraries quietly anchor lively community connections. Inside them, the next chapter of small-town life is being written.

Story by Addie Broyles
Photos by Sarah Beal

A century ago, life in our rural communities was simpler. Family, church, school and community formed the foundation for small towns across the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative region.

In the heart of those towns were libraries — quiet places where generations gathered to read, learn and enjoy the quiet company of a good book.

The towns have changed, but the libraries remain, evolving to offer everything from high-speed internet and digital media to classes, meeting spaces and community programs. Books still fill the shelves, but neighbors fill the rooms.

Whether historic landmarks like the Dr. Eugene Clark Library, built in Lockhart in 1899, or relative newcomers like the 16-year-old Garfield Library in Del Valle, libraries remain the beating hearts of the communities around them.

Technology in the digital age has expanded libraries' reach, opening new avenues for patrons.

"We are service workers at heart," said Brenham librarian Tammy Murphy. "If there's a need, we'll try to fill it."

Like many librarians in the Bluebonnet region, Murphy started her career as a teacher before she landed her dream job at the library.

Other area librarians echo Murphy's comments. Small-town libraries act as bridges between schools and social services and area residents, said Jessi Akins, director of Giddings' public library.

Libraries keep people connected, Akins said, and basic digital services, like teaching someone how to pay bills online, help people operate in a tech-reliant world. Many rural residents who work remotely use community library facilities for video conference conversations or to host virtual work meetings.

Libraries serve as learning hubs but are also places where people of all ages gather to express creativity



GIDDINGS



GARFIELD MOBILE LIBRARY

ABOVE: Giddings Public Library director Jessi Akins shows one of her favorite novels, 'Klara and the Sun,' by Kazuo Ishiguro.

INSET ABOVE: Garfield Library's bookmobile makes designated stops for cardholders in its region.

RIGHT: Eileen Sisk, a patron and member of the weekly puzzle club at Luling's J.B. Nickells Memorial Library, works on a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle.



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STORIES

LIVE



BELLVILLE



BRENHAM



SMITHVILLE



LULING



LOCKHART

Dr. Eugene Clark Library

- 217 S. Main St., Lockhart
- Open 8:30 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday, Wednesday and Friday; 8:30 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday; 8:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday. Closed Sunday.
- 512-398-3223
- clark-library-lockhart.org & lockhart-tx.org/page/library_home

Founded in 1899, the Clark Library is Texas' oldest continuously operated library housed in its original building. Named for the medical doctor who bequeathed \$10,000 for its books and construction, the red, two-story brick building was designed by architect T.S. Hodges, who also designed Caldwell County's castlelike jail. Speakers, theatrical productions, recitals and concerts were hosted there for decades. In 1956, performance space gave way to books and community activities.

WHAT SETS IT APART? In addition to its history, the library was expanded in 1996 to include the Masonic Temple next door, now known as the library's annex. The annex's third floor is where Lockhart's City Council meets. The library's interior has been used as a set location for a few movies, including "The Faculty" and "Secondhand Lions."

PROGRAMS: In addition to storytime, children's reading hours, adult craft nights and teen and youth events, the library hosts summer reading and "Fun at the Library" programs. There are several computers with high-speed internet for public use and a reading machine for visually impaired patrons.

HOW TO GET A LIBRARY CARD: Provide proof of residence; free for Lockhart residents or property owners; \$10 annual fee for those living outside Lockhart.

TOP: Lochlan Wolfe, 6, plays a reading game at the Nancy Carol Roberts Memorial Library in Brenham.

ABOVE: Henrietta Lopez is part of a knitters group that meets each week at the Smithville Public Library. The group often knits hats for hospital patients.

CENTER: Troy Cummings, 3, and sister Sariah Cummings, 5, are among many children served by Bellville Public Library's reading programs.

MORE LIBRARY PROFILES
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Nancy Carol Roberts Memorial Library

- 100 Martin Luther King Jr. Pkwy., Brenham
- Open 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday; 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday; closed Sunday.
- 979-337-7201
- cityofbrenham.org/library

The library, which opened in 1901, was the brainchild of The Fortnightly Club, a women's book club established in the late 1800s. Originally housed in the Giddings & Giddings Bank, the library became official with a collection of 1,000 books. It moved to its current location and was renamed after a \$33,000 donation from the parents of Nancy Carol Roberts, who died in a 1971 vehicle accident. The library has been expanded several times, most recently in 2016.

WHAT SETS IT APART? The library has a professional video-recording studio, sponsored by Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, with equipment — including a green screen — where patrons can make videos and podcasts. It also hosts a monthly reading hour complete with animals from the local shelter that are up for adoption. A monthly family law clinic is open to anyone.

PROGRAMS: Brenham library patrons can choose from many classes and groups, including teen trivia nights, writing clubs, sewing classes and a monthly teen book club. The highlight might be storytime with Louise Barbour, aka Miss Lou Lou, a master storyteller and musician who has been a library staple for more than 50 years. The library lends Chromebooks and offers



At an adoption event at the library, Annabelle Ransdell, 7, meets Harley, a female dog from the City of Brenham Animal Shelter. Harley was adopted in February.

Wi-Fi hotspots to those needing internet access for school or work. Grants awarded in the past decade have allowed the library to digitize microfilm from the Brenham Banner-Press.

HOW TO GET A LIBRARY CARD: Free for Texas residents age 5+; photo ID required; parent/guardian signature required for kids under 16.

Smithville Public Library

- 507 Main St., Smithville
- Open 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday and Wednesday; 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday; 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday; closed Sunday.
- 512-237-3282, Ext. 6
- smithvillepubliclibrary.org

Founded in 1931 with 500 books courtesy of the Smithville Woman's Club, the first library was on the second floor of a Main Street building. The library changed locations several times until the city assumed control, and a new building opened at Sixth and Main streets in 1971. That space has been expanded twice and today holds 62,000 materials, according to the library's website.

WHAT SETS IT APART? Even though Smithville's library provides technology tools, Wi-Fi access and computer/internet training, it stays loyal to the old-school due-date stamp for borrowed books. "Even though we have a digital record, it's more efficient for us," said head librarian Judy Bergeron. The stamp serves a second purpose: helping the library track books that are not being checked out.

NOTEWORTHY: You'll also find a thriving garden and outdoor classroom, as well as an on-staff peer support specialist who provides mental health and social work support to community members. That resource is courtesy of a grant from the St. David's Foundation Libraries for Health program.



From left, Judy Bergeron, Cheryl McNeil, Judy Grundy and Rita Brayley exercise in a weekly seated yoga class.

PROGRAMS: With book clubs, domino clubs and reading times for visitors of all ages, Smithville's library is a community cultural hub. Patrons can take language classes or enjoy a presentation on birds of prey from a local wildlife ecologist. Supporters have also helped spearhead a new coloring and activity book, "Smitty & Friends Explore Smithville."

HOW TO GET A CARD: Apply in person with a valid photo ID showing current address; children under 16 can receive cards for internet access if a parent/guardian provides an ID; membership is free to Bastrop County residents.

Giddings Public Library and Cultural Center

- 276 N. Orange St., Giddings
- Open 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Friday; 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday; closed Sunday.
- 979-542-2716
- giddingspubliclibrary.org

The library was opened in 1920 by the Giddings Study Club, which started with donated books. It was originally housed in the post office, then in a nearby drugstore. The library was purchased by the city in 1938. Today it is in a former Brookshire Brothers grocery store building.

WHAT SETS IT APART? Jessi Akins, the Giddings Public Library director, took the helm of this 19,000-square-foot facility in 2020. Known as “the biggest little library in Texas” by many, the library produces a quarterly magazine, *Between the Lines*. It maintains cultural exhibits, including a Native American artifact collection donated by Arnold Smith, a former longtime Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative employee and utility pole digger, and the Hilton Lee Smith Collection, recognizing the Giddings-born baseball star of the 1930s and ’40s who reached the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 2001. The library also has board games and a genealogy room filled with local yearbooks and other research materials.

PROGRAMS: Every September the library hosts the Texas Word Wrangler Book Festival, featuring Texas authors. It also hosts



Area resident Larry Teinert says he comes to the Giddings library to do research and genealogy work.

children’s storytime, a monthly community book club with in-person discussion, and other interactive activities such as a puzzle swap.

HOW TO GET A LIBRARY CARD: Provide a valid Texas photo ID with current address (or other proof of address); free for Giddings residents, \$2 for Lee County residents, \$10 for other Texas residents; card is valid for two years; \$2.50 replacement fee.

Garfield Library

- 5121 Albert Brown Drive, Del Valle
- Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday
- 512-247-7371
- dvllibraries.org

Established in 2010, the Garfield Library is the second in the East Travis Gateway Library District, formed in 2006 to serve surrounding communities. The district’s first library in

Elroy opened in 1983. The libraries offer books to residents of Del Valle, Elroy, Creedmoor, Pilot Knob, Garfield, Cedar Creek and other nearby locations.

WHAT SETS IT APART? The building dates to 1892, starting as a school. Del Valle ISD closed the school in 1966. The building sat vacant on the north side of busy State Highway 71 until it reopened as a library in 2010. The library offers public computers and notary services, as well as a mobile library outreach program that includes a bookmobile and home delivery for cardholders who live within 10 miles of Elroy.

PROGRAMS: In addition to a monthly book club for adults, this library hosts a Spanish-language Babies and Books hour on Fridays, a chess club and seasonal arts and crafts, such as tie-dyeing. The Book-a-Librarian program can schedule a one-on-one session to help visitors learn how to use a particular tool or service.

HOW TO GET A LIBRARY CARD: Government-issued photo ID required; card valid for two years; minors ages 5-17 can have joint accounts with parent/guardian.



Raquel Reyna drives the bookmobile, delivering books, magazines, new parent information and even plant seeds to designated locations. Details are at dvllibraries.org.



Charlotte McDaniel, 3, shows off books she’s interested in at the Bellville Public Library.

SIGN UP FOR SUMMER

Summer reading programs start soon, and nearly every library hosts the community-engagement programs that are popular ways to encourage children to read when school is not in session. Participants are asked to keep a log of their summer reading and number of pages read, to help libraries track the number of program participants and end the summer with a celebration.

Bellville Public Library

- 12 W. Palm St., Bellville
- Open 1:30-5:30 p.m. Monday; 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday; closed Sunday.
- 979-865-3731
- bpltx.org

Established in 1886 during a boom period in Austin County after the railroad reached the town. The library was built a year before the county courthouse.

WHAT SETS IT APART? With one of the largest collections of Austin County historical records, the library draws genealogical researchers. It is also one of the few community libraries that offers free membership to anyone in the state. Longtime librarian Jenell Zettel said that for many decades the library has had a memorial program allowing people to designate a book or books in someone's honor. "Some people will buy a specific book in the person's honor, or, if they give money, we go and buy a nice set of books with their names in it," Zettel said.

PROGRAMS: In addition to summer reading and children's reading programs, the library offers the popular Kanopy streaming service and in-person events, like magic shows.



Children's librarian Jill Wicklein reads to a group of children.

HOW TO GET A LIBRARY CARD: ID and proof of address required; free for any Texas resident over 18; one card per address.

J.B. Nickells Memorial Library

- 215 S. Pecan Ave., Luling
- Open 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday; 8 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesday; 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesday-Friday; 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday; closed Sunday.
- 830-875-2813, Ext.1
- cityofluling.net/214/Public-Library

The library was established in 1969. Now, every Tuesday evening, visitors can find engaging adult programming, from community poetry to an adult coloring club.

WHAT SETS IT APART? Teen- and kid-focused activities are on Thursdays, movie nights on Mondays and folks socialize over games on Friendly Fridays. Librarian Dayton Bailey said the consistent programming keeps people coming back. "I have a second-grader and a fifth-grader playing Life here right now," he said on a recent Friday.

PROGRAMS: Patrons can read e-books via the Libby app and explore a genealogy collection overseen by Caldwell County's Genealogical & Historical Society, which is headquartered in the



Part-time clerk Maggie Rodriguez, right, helps a library patron check out a book.

library. Around the holidays, the library hosts recipe and cookie swaps, and new craft activities are planned for this year.

HOW TO GET A LIBRARY CARD: Requires valid ID and proof of current address; free for Luling residents and those living within 20 miles.

Continued from Page 16

and find a sense of community. Lego clubs, sewing classes and writing groups are among the many ways Bluebonnet-area libraries attract residents.

Head librarian Judy Bergeron has worked at the Smithville Public Library for 18 years and has seen more than just the transition from a physical card catalog to a digital one.

"It's not uncommon to hear that we're not going to need libraries because nobody reads anymore, but we are so much more than just books," Bergeron said.

Some libraries create teen programming to attract young people interested in everything from crafts to filmmaking. In Brenham, a teen advisory board helps the library develop classes and activities for young people. Smithville's library offers teen-oriented activities like tie-dyeing and driving-test prep as well as open art studio time for elementary-aged kids after school, followed by a teen video game night.

"It's like that old Cicero quote," Bergeron said, speaking of the Roman philosopher and statesman. "If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need." ■



The Round Top Family Library inside a beautiful restored church which was originally built in the 1920s.

Round Top Family Library

- 206 W. Mill St., Round Top
- Open 1:30-5:30 p.m. Monday; 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Friday; 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday; closed Sunday.
- 979-249-2700
- llovetoread.org

Opened in 2000, the almost entirely privately funded library has become a pillar of this corner of Fayette County, with a robust slate of programs that includes one of the largest free after-school programs in the county, according to Katey Crowley, Executive Director. Monday through Thursday, a bus ride from the local school to the library is provided for students who participate in activities. The library also hosts classes during the day for homeschoolers in subjects including sign language, quilting and theater. A new children's wing is scheduled to open in 2026.

WHAT SETS IT APART? With five buildings sitting on around four acres, this isn't just a library — it's a community center. The library started as a modest children's library in the historic Rummel Haus, which dates to 1872. The library has grown and now the Main Library, located in the restored church, allows the library to offer activities for adults and children alike, including mahjong classes, community fitness groups and a lecture series, to name a few.

PROGRAMS: Classes for adults include mahjong, yoga, a monthly garden workday, computer instruction, senior gaming parties and social hours. There are also book clubs, lectures, author visits and — for more than 20 years — a fundraiser chili cook-off every January and an annual gala at the Windy Knoll Ranch venue in Round Top.

HOW TO GET A LIBRARY CARD: Valid ID and proof of address required; free for residents.

FIND MORE ONLINE

Find librarians' must-read recommendations, little free libraries, a photo gallery and more at bluebonnet.coop/libraries.

CAPITAL CREDITS

More than \$11.9 million returned to members as credit on May bills*



Bluebonnet members will see a credit on their May bills. That 'capital credit' represents revenue, above the costs of operating the cooperative, that is returned to members every year.

BEING A MEMBER of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative has its perks, including getting money back. In the last 10 years, Bluebonnet has returned \$78.59 million to members through capital credits.

Members will see a capital credit on their May electric bills. Capital credits represent your share of the cooperative's margins. Instead of sending profits to outside shareholders, as for-profit utilities do, Bluebonnet returns those dollars to the members who helped create them.

That's because when you receive electric service from Bluebonnet, you're more than a customer — you're an owner. Each year the cooperative allocates margins to members based on how much electricity they used and how long they have been part of the co-op. The credit you see on your bill reflects that ownership.

If you have questions about capital credits or your bill, contact a member services representative at memberservices@bluebonnet.coop or call 800-842-7708 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

**This amount has been corrected from the printed version after the error was discovered following magazine printing.*

OFFICE CLOSINGS

Bluebonnet offices will be closed Monday, May 25, for Memorial Day. If your power goes out, you can report it by texting OUT to 44141, online at bluebonnet.coop, on the MyBluebonnet mobile app or by calling 800-949-4414. You can pay your bills anytime on-line, on the mobile app or by calling 800-842-7708 (select option 2 when prompted).



NEXT STOP: WASHINGTON

Bluebonnet-area students earn spots on the Government-in-Action Youth Tour, a weeklong leadership trip to the nation's capital



From left, Sofia Robles of Bastrop, Emma Meachen of Giddings and Emory Burton of Lockhart were selected to represent the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative area in the Government-in-Action Youth Tour program. Burton and Meachen will travel to Washington, D.C., this summer, with Robles serving as the alternate. Sarah Beal photo

By Connie Juarez

THIS SUMMER, two Bluebonnet-area students will get a front-row seat to where history is made: Washington, D.C.

Emma Meachen and Emory Burton have been chosen to represent Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative for the Government-in-Action Youth Tour, a weeklong leadership program that introduces students to the inner workings of American government.

Meachen, a junior at Giddings High School, and Burton, a homeschooled senior from Lockhart, were selected from a competitive pool of 15 applicants. Sofia Robles, a junior at Bastrop High School, was named alternate and will join the tour if one of the others is unable to attend.

Along with a weeklong, all-expenses-paid trip to the nation's capital, each student will receive a \$1,000 educational scholarship from Bluebonnet.

The Youth Tour, scheduled for June 14-22, gives students a chance to experience the nation's capital while learning about civic engagement and public service. Participants visit landmarks and historic sites, tour the U.S. Capitol and attend educational sessions hosted by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association and Texas Electric Cooperatives, the program's sponsors.

Vice president of her class, Meachen, 17,

is active in Student Council, Interact Club, Beta Club, the Lee County swim team and prom committee. Her favorites, however, are FFA and Giddings High School BBQ Club. "FFA gives me a chance to give back through service projects, and BBQ Club lets me be creative in the kitchen," Meachen said.

She would like to attend Texas A&M University and apply to the Mays Business School. She hopes to one day help run her father's trucking company. "Watching my dad succeed inspired me. I want to be part of that and eventually help grow it myself," she said.

Meachen said her sister played a big role in her decision to apply for the trip. "My sister Ruby went on Youth Tour last year, and hearing about all the incredible experiences she had made me want to apply. She told me to take lots of pictures because there's so much to take in."

Burton, 18, is involved in 4-H and varsity theater at Lockhart High School. She also plays cello in her church youth band, volunteers in her church nursery and serves as president of the Caldwell County 4-H Council.

Raising and showing lambs is what Burton enjoys most. "It's incredibly rewarding. Seeing the results of months of hard work is fulfilling," she said.

She plans to attend Tarleton State Uni-

versity this fall to study sports medicine, with a long-term goal of opening a wellness practice. Her interest in the field stems from a volleyball injury in freshman year that required extensive rehabilitation. "I want to help young athletes get the care they need so they don't go through what I did," Burton said.

Robles, 17, looks forward to supporting the program as the alternate representative. She is a junior at Bastrop High School and is involved in 4-H, pastoral council, National Honor Society, cheerleading, band and softball. Her older sister, Mayra, was a Youth Tour winner in 2020, inspiring Robles to apply.

Meachen and Burton said they are most looking forward to experiencing government firsthand. "I turn 18 next year and will be able to vote. I want to understand how our government works so I can make informed decisions and be a responsible voter," Meachen said. Burton added, "I want to represent our area responsibly and take full advantage of everything the experience has to offer."

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the Government-in-Action Youth Tour, which has more than 50,000 alumni, including CEOs, elected officials, and countless other business and community leaders. ■

Join us
at the

ANNUAL



MEETING

TUESDAY, MAY 12, 2026

ANNUAL MEETING NOTICE

Dear Bluebonnet member:

Pursuant to its Bylaws, the Annual Membership Meeting of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, Inc. will be held Tuesday, May 12, 2026, at The Silos on 77, 1031 County Road 223, Giddings, Texas 78942. Registration will begin at 1:30 p.m. and end at 2:30 p.m. The meeting will start at 2:30 p.m. Business coming before the meeting will be conducted by members in attendance in person or by proxy.

Three director seats, District 3, District 4 and District 6, are up for election. The incumbent directors — Roderick Emanuel, District 3, Bastrop County; Russell Jurk, District 4, Lee, Milam and Williamson counties; and Byron Balke, District 6, Austin, Colorado and Fayette counties — filed their nominations before the deadline, qualified and were unopposed. The incumbent directors will be elected by general consent in accordance with Article III, Section 6 of the cooperative's Bylaws. Other business that may come before the meeting will also be addressed.

Sincerely yours,

Robert Mikeska
Secretary/Treasurer
Bluebonnet Board of Directors

2026 Annual Meeting Agenda

May 12, 2026

1:30 p.m.-2:30 p.m.: Registration

2:30 p.m.: Welcome and introductions

Call to Order: Ben Flencher, Board Chairman

Invocation and Pledge of Allegiance: Roderick Emanuel,
Board Vice President/Vice Chairman

Secretary/Treasurer's Report: Robert Mikeska, Board Secretary/Treasurer

General Manager's Report: Matt Bentke, General Manager/CEO

Door prize drawings

Report on Directors Elected by General Consent:
Sarah Newman-Altamirano, General Counsel

Adjourn

BRING
YOUR
APRIL
BILL

with the QR code
to the Annual Meeting
for

QUICK
& EASY
REGISTRATION!



SUBMIT YOUR PROXY
BY MAY 5

or attend the
Annual Meeting on May 12

for a chance to win a prize,
including this

Cub Cadet
zero-turn
lawnmower.

