

YOUTH TOUR'S
LASTING BONDS

THE REALITY OF
FRONTIER DOCTORS

DON'T KNOCK THE LUCK
OF THE SCOTTISH

Texas Coop Power

FOR BLUEBONNET EC MEMBERS

JANUARY 2026



**BLUEBONNET
EC NEWS**

SEE PAGE 16

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January 2026



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Every town in Texas has a story to tell, if you just stop and listen.

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As told by Ron Russell to Anna Russell

ON THE COVER

The signs pointing the way to local treasures are everywhere if you pay attention.

Illustration by Elly Walton

ABOVE

From left, Austin Rees, Jolie Cox and Hannah Thetford represent United Cooperative Services at the U.S. Capitol during the 2025 Youth Tour.

Photo by Samantha Bryant / TEC



New Braunfels physician
Clay Buchanan in the caber
toss at the Scottish Gathering
and Highland Games in Salado.

Strongly Scottish

THE OBSERVATIONS ESSAY on Page 34, *Fortune Knocks*, sent us down a rabbit hole about Scots and Scottish traditions, where we learned that Highland games are a hallmark of Scottish gatherings, as are kilts, bagpipes and dancing.

One of the oldest and largest gatherings in Texas takes place every November in Salado, between Waco and Austin. The competitions tend to involve heaving heavy objects, including something called a caber, which looks very much like a power pole. Contestants hold the caber, which can be up to 22 feet long and 200 pounds, upright from the bottom and flip it forward. The goal is for it to land upright then fall forward.

For the record, electric cooperatives prefer their poles remain upright and lodged firmly in the ground.

120,085

The number of steps logged by Layton Shadle of Victoria, right, a delegate of Victoria Electric Cooperative, during his eight-day Government-in-Action Youth Tour trip to Washington, D.C., last June. That's between 50 and 60 miles.



TCP Contests and More

\$500 RECIPE CONTEST

The Art of the Sandwich

FOCUS ON TEXAS PHOTOS

Caught Napping

RECOMMENDED READING

Twenty years ago we looked into the artifacts at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin, including the scrawled words in a reporter's notebook that launched the Watergate investigation. Download the January 2006 issue at TexasCoopPower.com.



ENTER
ONLINE

FINISH THIS SENTENCE

**I would love to have
dinner with ...**

TCP Tell us how you would finish that sentence. Email your short responses to letters@TexasCoopPower.com or comment on our Facebook post. Include your co-op and town.

Here are some responses to our November prompt: **Changing our clocks twice a year is ...**

Something my dogs just never understand.

JULEY WELCH
GRAYSON-COLLIN EC
FAIRVIEW

An opportunity for me to see the beautiful sunlight an extra hour in the spring and sleep an extra hour in the fall.

CONSUELO M. PEREZ
MEDINA EC
ZAPATA COUNTY

A great reminder to change the batteries in your fire detectors and carbon monoxide detectors.

CATHY MARTEL
SAM HOUSTON EC
LIVINGSTON

About as useless as a screen door on a submarine.

CODY HOOPER
GRAYSON-COLLIN EC
FAIRVIEW

Visit our website to see more responses.

OCTOBER 2025 On the Dots

“Memories of traveling in the 1950s: My brothers and I took naps but wanted to be awakened to see the polka-dot house in Buna.”

LINDA BELL
CECA
COMANCHE



RAUL ARIAS

Good Food, Good Cause

Frito pies have been the gourmet dish of choice in countless Texas stadiums and arenas—chili and chips served on chilly nights by Rotarians, band parents and electric co-op members to raise money for countless important community projects [*It's in the Bag*, September 2025].

Ken Roselle
Wise EC
Decatur

Yodeler's Lore

My dad, born in 1925, and his siblings grew up listening to Jimmie Rodgers [*The Fast Track*, July 2025]. In the '60s, my siblings and I listened to his music on the record player. *T for Texas* comes to mind when I think about those Saturdays and the yodeling we would try to mimic.

Kathy Parker
Pedernales EC
Dripping Springs

My heart sank when the author mentions Cash, Haggard and Tubb and not one mention of Jim Reeves. Reeves was born and raised in Texas. His name carries weight as well.

Carol Racey
Deep East Texas EC
Joaquin

A Tea for Texas

As I told my husband about the interesting *History in a Box* [August 2025], he informed me that he'd visited that very museum years ago. I then immediately remembered the souvenir box that he brought me filled with teas similar to those destroyed.

The information included with the box had the story of the Robinson Half Chest, though it failed to mention the Texas connection.

Ann Fincannon
Pedernales EC
Marble Falls



COURTESY RODGERS FAMILY LEGACY

TCP WRITE TO US
letters@TexasCoopPower.com

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

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

 Texas Co-op Power

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 **Texas Electric Cooperatives**
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BY CARLTON STOWERS
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLY WALTON

Every town in Texas has a story to tell, if you just stop and listen

Even lifelong Texans haven't heard of many of these towns. They are hidden along isolated country roads, mostly forgotten, without stoplights, traffic jams or shopping malls. Truth be told, they have precious little reason for "being" aside from the fact that those who call them home wouldn't trade for all the big-city comforts you might offer. And they each have stories to tell—colorful, poignant and fascinating.

The following are a few of the favorite stops I've made over the years while wandering the state's back roads in search of yet another tale to tell.



Pelham
Navarro County
Population 35

A FORMER FREEDMEN COMMUNITY

WHEN I MET HIM in 2012, 88-year-old Alfred Martin, the self-appointed town historian, lived across FM 744 from what was once the school he attended as a boy. Aside from the time he spent as a flight line crew member for the legendary Tuskegee Airmen during World War II, this was Martin's home.

He could recall when the state's last remaining all-Black community boasted a grocery, dry goods store, church, post office and a population of more than 300. Pelham even had an amateur baseball team that brought home a state championship.

Asked the current ages of his neighbors, Martin smiled and began pointing in the direction of their houses and counting: "Let's see ... 88, 93, 85 ..." Pelham, he admitted, wasn't likely to make it much longer.

When the Emancipation Proclamation freed the nation's slaves following the Civil War, each Black man in town was given 200 acres to call his own. Fields were cleared and tilled, cotton and grain planted, and new lives thrived.

Now, however, the community's well-tended cemetery is the resting place of the majority of past Pelham residents. The aging memorabilia and family histories housed in the school-turned-museum keep alive the memories of better days.

Hye
Blanco County
Population 100

THE ALL-BROTHERS BASEBALL TEAM

INSIDE THE COMBINED Hye General Store and Post Office, a fading black-and-white photo hangs proudly behind the checkout counter. Nine Deike brothers, dressed in spanking new baseball uniforms, smiling for the camera.

It was snapped during the Depression doldrums when leisure time was as scarce as spending money. An endless routine of work awaited on the farms and at the cotton gin. Only on Sundays did the residents take time off to watch their baseball team play rivals from nearby rural communities.

It was called town ball, and it was generally played on makeshift diamonds carved from pastureland. The preacher would even cut his sermon short so members of his congregation wouldn't miss the first pitch.

Only Hye, 60 miles west of Austin, could field nine players from the same family. Fourteen-year-old Victor was the youngest; brother Edwin, 34, was the oldest. That's not to say they weren't occasionally joined by nonfamily members. Regularly, a lanky first baseman named Lyndon Baines Johnson would drive over from nearby Johnson City.

In 1935, a traveling salesman learned about the Deike brothers and hit on a can't-miss promotional idea. If he could find another all-family team, his Corpus Christi-based Nueces Coffee Co. would promote an exhibition game deciding the All-Brothers Baseball Championship.

Indeed, an opponent was found in Waukegan, Illinois. There, the Stanczak clan had 10 brothers on the same team.

The game would be played in Wichita, Kansas. Provided with their first uniforms and travel expenses, the Deikes made the 14-day trip to Kansas in two Model A Fords. The Stanczaks arrived by bus.

Alas, a perfect ending to the Hye brothers' story wasn't to be. Though they took an early 3-0 lead, the more talented Waukegan team eventually won 11-5. Today, it is their picture on display in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

Still, for the Texas farm boys, it was a time that would long be remembered. A special time, right up there with the day President Johnson came back for a visit to stand in front of Levi Deike's post office and swear in Lawrence O'Brien as the new U.S. postmaster general.



Thurber
Erath County
Population 48

WHEN EVEN THE CIRCUS CAME TO TOWN

IN THE LATE 1800S, Thurber was the most populous town between Fort Worth and El Paso, boasting 10,000 residents. Today, travelers hurrying along Interstate 20 see only a solitary smokestack standing watch over its history.

The only reason to stop is for the home cooking served at Andrea Bennett's red brick Smokestack Restaurant. Inside, the walls are lined with photographs from another time, back when her restaurant was the local mercantile and the townspeople were mining 3,000 tons of bituminous coal and firing 80,000 bricks daily.

Workers and their families came to live in the small frame houses provided by the Texas & Pacific Coal Co. There was a school, a 650-seat opera house, general store, fire station, churches, a weekly newspaper, library, hotel, and a human-made lake for fishing and swimming.

The Thurber baseball team, made up of miners, won the 1896 Texas amateur championship. Each summer a traveling circus came to town.

Thurber bricks were used to build the Galveston seawall and pave many of Fort Worth's early streets. Its coal kept the trains running and homes heated.

Though the exact date isn't official, Thurber died in 1936. The oil boom was the killer, its black gold replacing coal as the nation's favored fuel. The mines began closing, and workers scattered in search of new jobs. The frame houses they had called home were sold off for \$40 each to anyone willing to haul them away.

Now all that remains are the ghost stories, the nostalgic pictures on Bennett's restaurant walls and the nearby 100-year-old town doctor's house where she lives.



WHEN HOSS WAS JUST A COLT

IT IS TRADITION, you know, for small towns to alert passersby to the fact they were once home to somebody famous. Billboards are the favored tool. Even little Abbott had one to remind travelers that it was country music legend Willie Nelson's hometown until, hoping to regain a sense of privacy, he set fire to the sign late one boozy night.

To my dismay the Panhandle community of O'Donnell, just south of Lubbock, had not gotten around to any side-of-the-road celebration of its favorite son.

Back in the *Bonanza* heyday, *TV Guide* expressed interest in learning how this cotton crop way-stop had groomed famed actor Dan Blocker to become the good ol' boy Hoss Cartwright on the popular TV show. I hit the road.

And the townspeople were ever so obliging. Seemed almost everyone I bumped into went to school with Blocker, played football with him, fought with or dated him. Even those who didn't know him firsthand insisted they were faithful viewers of his portrayal of Hoss every Sunday.

Yet friend and farmer Wayne Carroll admitted Blocker's TV role puzzled him. "It's kind of hard to picture Dan on the Ponderosa," he said. "Farming and ranching never interested him. He was the guy we all went to for help with our lessons, always studying or reading a book."

His mother, Mary, agreed: "One Christmas we got him a horse and saddle, but he really wasn't interested. After a while, we sold the horse."

When her son didn't have his nose in a book, he worked weekends at his dad's Blocker Grocery & Market. On Friday

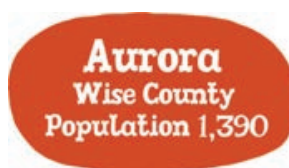
nights, he was a standout lineman and kicker for the O'Donnell Eagles. The only kid in town who could lift the rear end of a '47 Plymouth, his strength and size (already 6 feet tall and 200 pounds by age 13) earned him a scholarship to play for what was then Sul Ross State College in Alpine.

Once Blocker earned his degree, his life's goal was to become a teacher. He did teach for a time in high schools in New Mexico. But then Hollywood and the fictional Ponderosa beckoned.

Rest assured, Blocker never forgot his roots and came to visit regularly. At the height of his acting career, he even made an appearance at the annual O'Donnell Rodeo. "Biggest crowd we ever had," recalls boyhood pal Bobby Clark.

With the exception of cotton crops, I learned that conversation is O'Donnell's main byproduct. And the easiest way for a stranger to be assured a generous helping of the latter is to bring up the name Dan Blocker.

"There was once some talk about a billboard," Clark says, "but the more we thought about it, the more convinced we were that Dan wouldn't care much for the idea."



LONG BEFORE ROSWELL

THE STORY WAS right there on the front page of *The Dallas Morning News* in April 1897, so it had to be true, right?

S. E. Haydon, the paper's longtime correspondent, had written of an "airship" that flew over the North Texas community of Aurora before crashing into Judge Proctor's windmill and exploding. Aluminum-like debris, Haydon wrote, was scattered everywhere, destroying the judge's water tank and ruining his prized flower garden.

Bear in mind, this report was filed a decade before the Wright brothers got their rickety plane off the ground at Kitty Hawk and predated, by half a century, that famous Roswell, New Mexico, report of the ranchland UFO crash that became the gold standard of otherworldly tales.

And the Aurora story got even better. The child-sized pilot of the craft had been killed in the crash, and kind citizens of the community saw to it that he was given a proper burial in the nearby cemetery the following day. The grave was marked by a large rock featuring a quickly sketched image of "a cigar-shaped ship with three circular windows."

Today a historical marker stands at the entrance to the cemetery, recalling the event.

Is the recounting true or false? People have been asking for over a century. Some say Haydon had a habit of telling whoppers when there was no real news to report and he just invented the spaceman's visit.

But as late as 1973, an aviation journalist named Bill Case visited the community and tracked down a 98-year-old local who recalled visiting the crash site as a child, even viewing the "torn-up body" of the spacecraft's pilot.

At the time, the makeshift headstone was still in place. Case even took a picture of it. But soon after his article was published, the marker vanished. Today, no one in Aurora is certain of the exact location of the infamous grave.

Legendary investigative reporter Jim Marrs, who spent his career researching the strange and spooky, says he was, for years, "undecided" on the matter. In time, however, he found the story compelling enough to produce a full-length documentary on the alleged crash.

"What ultimately got me off-center on the matter," he says, "was seeing the actual edition of the paper in which Haydon's story was published. It wasn't even the lead story that day. Among numerous accounts of strange sightings was one from nearby Stephenville, headlined The Great Aerial Wanderer. In all, the newspaper published 16 stories about UFO sightings that day, from as far south as Austin and north into Oklahoma."

Something, he was convinced, really did happen in Aurora.



MAGIC AT MARY'S CAFE

NEITHER A FOOD CRITIC nor avowed foodie, fine dining and haute cuisine are foreign to my vocabulary. That said, it is my humble opinion that the Michelin Guide folks have missed a bet. Or maybe they just have something against chicken-fried steak.

In the tiny hamlet of Strawn, just 90 minutes southwest of Dallas, is the mother church of the popular comfort food. At Mary's Cafe every day except Thanksgiving and Christmas, the service station-turned-eatery is jam-packed. The gravel parking lot is filled with traveling biker clubs, church groups or a busload of young athletes in search of a post-game meal.

Owner Mary Tretter estimates that over 90% of her customers are from out of town, arriving from as far away as New Mexico, Colorado and Georgia. Some come wearing the Mary's Cafe T-shirts they purchased on a previous visit.

And while the menu is lengthy and varied, it is the king-sized chicken-fried steak with a bowl of cream gravy and a mound of french fries that is most often requested. Annually, Tretter orders over 48,000 pounds of cutlets that are pounded, floured and cooked into her signature dish.

But don't bother asking for the recipe. It is so heavily guarded that she requires her 30 employees to sign a non-disclosure agreement before stepping into her kitchen. All she will admit is that her chicken-fried steaks are cooked on a flat-iron griddle rather than heavily battered and actually fried.



Tretter was 14 when she started working there as a waitress and dishwasher. The place was known as the Polka Dot then and was struggling mightily. The local bank, preparing to take it over, asked Tretter if she might be interested in buying it. At the time she was neither business savvy nor much of a cook but bought the little 89-seat restaurant. That was in 1986.

She changed the name, hired a staff and went to work. In her fourth decade of ownership, seating capacity is 300—and getting a table isn’t without a little wait.

And Tretter gives “hands-on” new meaning. She takes Wednesdays off to spend time with her grandkids. The rest of the week she’s in the kitchen cooking or out on the floor, greeting customers and taking orders.

“Our goal,” she says, “is simple: Fill the plate with good food, make it look nice and keep the customers happy. If they leave here hungry, it’s their fault.”



FLEETING VICTORY

I’VE ALWAYS LOVED the scene in the movie *The Big Chill* when a reporter explains that he’d just been assigned to do a feature on a blind baton twirler. When asked where in the world such story ideas come from, he shrugs and answers, “Just good investigative reporting.”

Personally, I prefer the magic of dumb luck.

To wit: I was awaiting a flight home from Houston, reading the sports section of the local paper, when a small item caught my eye. Asherton High School, it noted, had just won its first basketball game in years. The final sentence added that the same school’s football team currently owned the nation’s longest losing streak.

Two things immediately occurred to me. First, I had to figure out where Asherton was. Second, what publication would be interested in a story on such a historically hapless team?

The editor of *Parade* magazine bit, and I was soon off to deep South Texas. By the time I arrived, the Trojans had lost 40 football games in a row. A few years earlier, they had endured an entire season without scoring a single point.

Yet what I found was light-years from what I’d expected. A migrant worker community, it was virtually deserted since most families had not yet returned home from following the northern harvests.

The school was in disrepair, jagged cracks in its old brick walls, the 500-seat stadium in worse shape. There was little grass and a huge ant bed spread across the 50-yard line. The scoreboard was a hand-me-down, donated by neighboring Carrizo Springs. A 24-year-old teacher, Terry Harlin, who never played the game, had agreed to coach since no one else wanted the job. School officials agreed to add \$600 to his salary for the extra work.

Thus, the story was not one of laughable ineptness but, rather, a courageous quest against impossible odds.

Readers took the plight of the Trojans to heart. Envelopes bearing small donations began arriving from across the nation. A Houston sporting goods company donated shoulder pads and helmets. Inmates of a Georgia prison adopted Asherton as “their team.”

And in the first game of the 1972 season, Asherton won, defeating rival Crystal City 12-6. A film crew, dispatched from a Houston TV station, was there to record the historic event.

The cheers, however, didn’t last. In 1999 the Texas Education Agency ordered Asherton High to close, citing its troubled history of financial insolvency. The students bade their old school goodbye and enrolled in the nearby Carrizo Springs Independent School District.

• • •

THERE ARE ENDLESS other nifty towns, like Study Butte, home of the last one-room school in Texas; Luckenbach, where legendary owner-mayor Hondo Crouch held court; Terlingua and its annual chili cook-off; and Cisco, where Conrad Hilton bought his first hotel and Santa Claus robbed the bank.

Get out your map. ■



SAMANTHA BRYANT | TEC

Youth Tour sends teens to Washington, D.C.,
where bonds form and horizons expand

SITES *and* INSIGHTS

BY CLAIRE STEVENS

On the drive from her home outside Kerrville to a hotel in Austin, high school junior Ella Robbins had butterflies. She was excited about her upcoming adventure, for sure.

“But I was mostly nervous,” Robbins says. “I didn’t know anybody, and I was really nervous about what people were going to think of me and just self-conscious.”

The nerves lingered as she arrived and checked in June 15, 2025, for the Government-in-Action Youth Tour trip to Washington, D.C. Everyone was friendly, Robbins recalls, though some teens kept to themselves, scrolling on their phones. But the 143 strangers were all about to board the same flight to the nation’s capital, where everything would change.

In D.C., Robbins marveled at the towering stained-glass windows of the National Cathedral and felt awe when she

looked out from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and saw the reflection of the Washington Monument. But what really changed her trip was the second day, when she found herself in a bus seat across from Sierra Nickel of Uvalde.

“As soon as I started talking to her, it was really great,” Robbins says. She can’t quite remember what they talked about in that first conversation where they clicked so easily, maybe Taylor Swift—who else?—but the two became fast friends. Robbins soon found herself getting lost in the excitement and packed schedule of the trip, frequently with Nickel at her side.

“I kind of stopped worrying about what people were thinking of me,” Robbins says.

For 60 years, electric cooperatives across Texas have sent high school students to Washington for this all-expenses-paid

week of sightseeing and learning. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience in which little moments—like that one on the bus—lead to unexpected memories and friendships.

With growing confidence, Robbins, sent by Heart of Texas Electric Cooperative, and her new friend, sent by Medina Electric Cooperative, explored the monuments and memorials of the National Mall, museums and Capitol Hill. At the Capitol, Robbins was able to do what she'd come here for.

In U.S. Rep. August Pfluger's office, Robbins got a peek into the day-to-day functions of a congressional office.

She wanted to ask about the process of applying for disability insurance and legislation relating to service dogs. The topic was close to her heart—her father is blind and uses a guide dog. She was concerned about his difficulty securing resources and the hostility he sometimes faces when bringing his dog into public spaces. At the Capitol, she shared her ideas with one of Pfluger's aides.

"He was actually interested in having a conversation, and that was really nice. I was informing him of some

OPPOSITE Students representing five electric cooperatives at the National Mall on their first day in Washington, D.C. Fifty-eight Texas co-ops sent teens on Youth Tour.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP Texas students participate in a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. Ella Robbins from Heart of Texas EC holds up her Youth Tour challenge coin, which students were awarded for going above and beyond.



CLAIRE STEVENS | TEC



SAMANTHA BRYANT | TEC

things, and he was telling me more about the legislative side," Robbins says. "He says they try and pass lots and lots of bills, and occasionally they'll just get one or two. It's just a very difficult process. I didn't realize."

That was one learning opportunity among many. Some students sat down with and heard from survivors at the Holocaust Memorial Museum. Participants had the opportunity to obtain a library card at the Library of Congress, visited George Washington's home at Mount Vernon and danced together in front of the White House.

On the last day in D.C., they toured Arlington National Cemetery, where they witnessed a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

"That was one of the reasons I wanted to go, was to honor our fallen soldiers who didn't get recognized," says James Bell of Aspermont, one of four Texas students selected to lay the wreath. "My great-grandparents were buried at the Arlington cemetery, so that was awesome, to have that much of an honor to do that where they're buried."

The cemetery requires silence at the tomb, a memorial for fallen U.S. soldiers whose remains have not been identified. In a solemn ceremony, Bell and the three other students stepped in sync with one of the tomb's guards before placing a wreath of red and white flowers in front of the marble monument.

"Laying the wreath was amazing," says Bell, who was sponsored by Big Country Electric Cooperative. Watching Bell was his brother, Jack, who had gone on the tour two years before, and his uncle, a retired Army chief warrant officer, both of whom unexpectedly showed up at the ceremony. "It was a really big surprise."

By the time the teens boarded the flight home, the early nerves were nowhere to be seen. No longer strangers, they left with unexpected bonds that span the state.

"My favorite part—it sounds cliché—it's the people," says Eli Felcman, a delegate from Concho Valley Electric Cooperative. "I met lifelong friends." ■

Ready To Hit the Road?

For more information on Youth Tour and how you can apply, contact your electric cooperative.



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Journeyman lineworker Rudy Garcia wears two uniforms — and many hats — as a Bluebonnet employee and assistant fire chief for the Giddings Fire Department. This photo illustration shows Garcia dressed for his dual callings while standing at the fire department’s station on Independence street. He has served with Bluebonnet and the Giddings Fire Department for more than three decades.

Two UNIFORMS, ONE CALLING

They work to keep the lights on — and stand ready for another call. Fifteen Bluebonnet employees are committed to community service through their work with volunteer fire departments and first responder units.

Story by **Connie Juarez** • Photos by **Sarah Beal**

Russell Tiner and his wife were dressed and ready to leave their home in Lockhart to head out for their 20th wedding anniversary dinner. Then his pager went off. The call wasn't about his job as a lineworker at Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative.

This was about a fire in the grain and corn bins at Livengood Feeds in Lockhart. Instead of celebrating over a meal, Tiner spent hours unloading corn and knocking back hot spots alongside the Lockhart Fire Rescue crew. "My wife understood," he said with a laugh about that event 16 years ago. "We never made it to dinner that night."

Tiner has worked for Bluebonnet for 27 years. As a journeyman lineworker, he builds and maintains power lines and restores electric service.

He has also volunteered as a firefighter for the last 36 years, 25 of them as a certified emergency medical technician with Lockhart Fire Rescue and Mid-County Fire/Rescue. The departments cover 72 square miles between Luling and Lockhart in Caldwell County. Lockhart Fire Rescue, in operation for more than 135 years, has 17 firefighters, and Mid-County, founded in 1983, has 16.

Tiner contributes about 20 hours of volunteer service each month, assisting with some of the approximately 40 calls the two departments receive monthly. He has battled grass fires, applied tourniquets and

treated severe wounds.

His expertise with Bluebonnet's electric infrastructure has been an asset during emergency responses. If power lines are down around a structure fire or car wreck, he can quickly assess the scene and disconnect power before other first responders arrive. "I hear the call, and I'll pull up right behind them," Tiner said. "I can make the scene safe and get people where they need to be. Responders in Caldwell County have come to know me for that."

The Bluebonnet region is served by more than 100 first-responder divisions, agencies, districts and teams, with origins dating back as far as 1848. Fifteen Bluebonnet employees, including Tiner, volunteer with a dozen fire departments and emer-

gency units spread across the cooperative's 3,800-square-mile service area.

By day — and sometimes night — they restore electricity and ensure homes, farms and businesses have power. When duty calls, they put on another uniform and come to the aid of their communities. Their work stretches from Lockhart to Giddings, from Milano in Milam County to Carmine in Fayette County.

For residents in Bluebonnet's rural service area — where larger fire departments or ambulance services may be miles away — help often comes from hundreds of local volunteer first responders ready to save lives and protect property.

"Volunteers are the lifeblood and the first line of defense for emergency management response, whether that's a fire or a medical emergency," said James Altgelt, coordinator of Bastrop County's Office of Emergency Management. "Volunteer fire departments arrive quickly, bring every resource they have and often stop a situation from becoming catastrophic."

Restoring electricity and responding to emergencies require similar mindsets, skills and commitments to the job. Both require keen situational awareness, strict safety protocols, teamwork under pressure and technical skills. Whether climbing poles in a storm

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TIPS FOR EMERGENCY FIRST AID

You don't have to be a trained first responder to know some basic first-aid steps for home, work or elsewhere. One of the most important things you can do is keep well-stocked first-aid kits in your home and vehicle — so you're ready to respond quickly if needed. Follow these tips to keep yourself and others safe.

1 Call 911 immediately if you believe someone needs medical attention. Before you provide first aid to someone else, keep yourself safe by evaluating the scene of an incident and the area around someone who needs first aid or medical attention.

2 When providing first aid, wear personal protective equipment

such as gloves, masks and goggles.

3 If there are others around, delegate tasks to ensure the best help is provided.

4 Check to see whether the person is breathing, has a pulse and is responsive. If not, and you have certified training, start CPR. Rotate the work of CPR among others who are certified, if possible, to avoid exhaustion.

5 If you think someone is in contact with a source of electricity and is being shocked, first call 911, then unplug the device or shut off electricity at the breaker. Do not touch the person in contact with electricity.

6 Stop minor bleeding by applying pressure using sterile bandages or cloths.

7 Use the RICE method for sprains or suspected fractures:

- REST the injured area
- ICE to reduce swelling
- COMPRESS with a bandage
- ELEVATE limb to minimize swelling

8 If someone has a minor burn:

- Run cool water over the affected area for at least 10 minutes.
- Do not apply ice.
- Loosely cover the burn with a clean, nonstick dressing.
- Call 911 for a more severe burn.

At the Fedor Volunteer Fire Department's annual fish fry in Lee County, Scott Iselt, an engineering project coordinator at Bluebonnet and a longtime firefighter for Fedor VFD, hands Taronda Schulz tickets for the fundraiser. The department has hosted the event for 42 years at the Old Picnic Grounds on FM 1624 south of Lexington to support its volunteer operations.



DOUBLE DUTIES

15 Bluebonnet employees volunteer with fire departments and first-responder units

SHAWN BIGON

Apprentice lineworker

Years at Bluebonnet: 3

Volunteer: Assistant chief, South Lee County Volunteer Fire Department

Years of service: 14

"I joined the fire department to help protect my community. My favorite memory is entering my first structure fire and putting all the training I went through to use."



MICHAEL BLAND

Engineering inspector

Years at Bluebonnet: 2

Volunteer: Battalion chief, Bastrop County Emergency Services District No. 2

Years of service: 15

"It has been a great experience getting to know many people in the community, being part of the best volunteer department in Texas and serving with the greatest volunteers in the country."



KYLE KASPER

Lineworker crew supervisor

Years at Bluebonnet: 20

Volunteer: Firefighter, South Lee County Volunteer Fire Department

Years of service: 18

"Between being on call for Bluebonnet and all the other things going on, it can be hard to find time for everything — but we do our best to make it work."



LOCAL SUPPORT POWERS VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS

Volunteer fire and emergency departments across Bluebonnet's service area depend on the people around them for support. That often comes in the form of fundraisers that combine food and social connection.

For many Texans, the volunteer fire department fish fry is a much-loved tradition.

The Fedor Volunteer Fire Department Fish Fry occurs annually on the fourth Saturday of September at the Old Picnic Grounds in Fedor. "Our little community goes from a couple hundred to around 2,000," Scott Iselt said. "We've got an auction, a live band and a country store selling baked goods. The event really keeps the department running."

The Carmine VFD hosts an annual fried chicken drive-through and raffle in July at its station that draws thousands of people every year. Jason Carmean and others in the department rely on such events to help pay for equipment, training and other essential needs.

The Giddings Fire Department also organizes popular community fundraisers. Each September, the weekend before Sept. 11, firefighters host their Patriot Day BBQ Cook-off at Firemen's Park. They also hold a Fourth of July barbecue and fireworks celebration.

These departments also rely heavily on donations from individuals and businesses. Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative supports local fire departments through financial grants. In October 2025, the cooperative's Board of Directors awarded \$1,000 grants to each of the 64 departments across its 14-county service area.

Several departments, including Mid-County Fire/Rescue and the Carmine Volunteer Fire Department, have received support through Community Development Partnership Program grants given by Bluebonnet and the Lower Colorado River Authority. Those grants help area volunteer fire departments, emergency responders and other nonprofit groups pay for capital improvement projects such as purchases of vehicles, emergency generators and vehicle extrication tools.



Russell Tiner serves Caldwell County in many ways. He is a Bluebonnet journeyman lineworker, volunteer firefighter, EMT and chaplain with both Lockhart Fire Rescue and Mid-County Fire/Rescue. At Lockhart's Station No. 2, he helps operate Quint 2, the department's largest vehicle.

ERIN KIESCHNICK

New service operations supervisor

Years at

Bluebonnet: 15

Volunteer: Board member, former secretary, Lincoln Volunteer Fire Department

Years of service: 10

"At work, we often talk about wearing many hats — and volunteering is no different. Whether it's directing traffic, organizing volunteers or showing up on scene with water and food, you step up where you're needed."



KYLE KIESCHNICK

Substation construction project manager

Years at

Bluebonnet: 7

Volunteer: Captain, Lincoln Volunteer Fire Department

Years of service: 18

"Managing time is a constant juggling act. Lots of late nights, early mornings and staying focused during the day."



More profiles, Page 20

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or stabilizing a patient at a crash scene, these employees bring the same precision and dedication to every call.

"We're incredibly proud of the number of employees who show up when their communities need them most, serving as volunteer first responders outside of work," said Eric Kocian, Bluebonnet's chief engineer/systems operations officer. "Safety is a top priority for Bluebonnet. That commitment carries over beyond the workplace — these individuals take the same care and focus when volunteering, ensuring neighbors stay safe. That deep sense of duty and service is who we are. Safety, commitment and community are at the heart of everything we do."

Another journeyman lineworker, Rudy Garcia, has been at Bluebonnet for 30 years and a volunteer firefighter for 31. Garcia, who lives in Giddings, serves as assistant chief of the Giddings Fire Department's 34 active members. Most are volunteers; two are paid firefighters. In 2025, the department responded to about 370 calls, mostly vehicle accidents and grass or structure fires.

Linework and firefighting require planning and the ability to assess many aspects of a situation. "You can't get tunnel vision. Just like at Bluebonnet, you get a call, and you don't know what it is," Garcia said. "Same with fire. You have to clear your head, figure out whether people are still inside, how you're going to approach it and who's going to be on the nozzle."

Garcia remembers one particularly difficult call in 2015. It was around 7 on a chilly April morning, just after a downpour. His fire department responded to a vehicle crash and water rescue at Yegua Creek in Lincoln. A driver had been trapped inside his semi-truck cab after it rolled off Texas Highway 21 into the rushing creek. Fifteen firefighters from the Giddings department and about 10 from Lincoln VFD worked together on the rescue. "We tied 100-foot-long ropes around ourselves so we wouldn't get swept away," Garcia recalled. "We cut the roof off the truck, used the Jaws of Life to pry open the door and pulled him to safety. He was not injured at all."

Others bring teamwork skills they hone at Bluebonnet to their volunteer firefighting work. Scott Iselt, who lives in Fedor, is a project manager in Bluebonnet's engineering department and has been with the cooperative 20 years. He has served with the Fedor Volunteer Fire Department for three decades. The department covers a 46-square-mile rural area in north-central Lee County south of Lexington.

"Most of the calls we respond to are grass fires, some motor vehicle accidents and a lot of traffic control," Iselt said. With 15 volunteer firefighters, knowing a team's limitations is key. "Often, our response team is just two men — one driver, one working



Jason Carmean, a Bluebonnet lineworker crew supervisor in Brenham, stands outside the Carmine Volunteer Fire Department in Fayette County, where he has volunteered for 22 years. Jason, 51, a Bluebonnet employee for 32 years and Carmine resident, has responded to countless emergencies, from farm accidents to oil well incidents.

the hose." That makes mutual aid and radio coordination important. Iselt's previous background training with the Texas Department of Public Safety enhances his ability to interact with the public during incidents. "This translates to effective traffic management and clear, authoritative communication with people at emergency scenes," he said. Whether working to restore power for Bluebonnet or responding to a fire, Iselt said, safety requires keeping everyone on the same page and maintaining good teamwork.

Jason Carmean has been a Bluebonnet employee for 32 years. He is a lineworker crew supervisor and lives in Carmine, where he has been a part of the Carmine Volunteer Fire Department for 22 years. The department, established in 1890, has 16 active volunteers. The small community straddles U.S. 290 in Fayette County north of Round Top.

Carmean was fire chief there for six years, and has seen nearly every type of emergency, from farm accidents to oil well incidents.

He recalled stabilizing an injured passenger who was trapped inside a vehicle after a crash. "I crawled into the back seat, held his neck, gave oxygen and kept him stable until STAR Flight arrived." Doctors later told Carmean that without his patience and support, the patient could have been paralyzed.

For Carmean, safety is a priority in both linework and first-responder work. "At Bluebonnet, I supervise crews and make sure they're safe. It's the same on fire calls. Leadership and awareness carry over both ways."

That sense of responsibility isn't limited to the job site — it extends to every fire call. For Garcia, the connection between leading crews and answering emergency calls runs deep, rooted in a

DOUBLE DUTIES

LOGAN LANCASTER

Lineworker
crew supervisor

Years at

Bluebonnet: 12

Volunteer: Fedor
Volunteer Fire
Department

Years of service: 8

"Someone asked me if I would be willing to help out, and I was willing to do what was needed to raise funds to support the department."



JUSTIN LEWIS

Apprentice lineworker
Years at

Bluebonnet: 3

Volunteer: Firefighter,
Ellinger Volunteer Fire
Department

Years of service: 1.5

"Bluebonnet is a very community-friendly organization. I get a good feeling of helping others when I restore power, and I get that same feeling when helping individuals in the community while volunteering."





Sherry Murphy, Bluebonnet's Giddings-area community and development representative, has volunteered with Winchester Area Volunteer Fire Department for 17 years and currently serves as the board treasurer. The department purchased this F-550 SuperDuty 4x4 truck for emergency and wildland fire response through fundraising and a community grant provided by Bluebonnet and LCRA in 2015.

Photo by Joe Stafford

When Iselt got the address, he realized it was the home of his uncle, whom he learned was unresponsive after a fall. "We raced over there, prepared the landing zone — finding a spot free of power lines, trees and cars — then fenced off the perimeter with our trucks," he said. "It was pitch dark, but I helped get him safely onto the helicopter."

Before he heads out on a call, Garcia has a little ritual. "I always give my wife, Amber, a kiss. It's not just a sentimental gesture. In this line of volunteer work there is always some risk involved."

A first responder may face a set of challenges that can hit harder than those of a lineworker — situations that are often unsettling. Carmean has learned how to manage the pressure of emergency response while staying focused and grounded. "I tell my teams that you can respond to calls and come back without carrying the weight of it with you," he said.

For particularly traumatic emergency response situations, support is available to first responders, he said. Carmean has learned ways to cope. "When I leave, I leave it behind," he said. His emergency response training has given him tools to stay calm, even on the toughest calls.

Community support keeps fire departments equipped, but the bonds among responders keep them going.

"It takes a certain kind of person to do this work," Carmean said. "You have to be willing to get up in the middle of the night or suit up in 104-degree weather after a full day's work — for no pay. But the camaraderie makes it worth it. The fire department is like a brotherhood, just like the linemen at Bluebonnet."

There's a larger calling at the heart of volunteer work that has carried these volunteers through decades of responding to calls that could be dangerous. "I actually have a passion for this," Garcia said. "To me, it's always felt like a God-given talent. This is why I'm still able to do it after all these years."

lifelong passion for helping others.

Garcia's interest in emergency response started as a child growing up in South Texas, where he watched the fire station near his school. "When the sirens would go off, I'd go to the window and look. I was like, 'You know, I want to be a fireman.'"

Years later, a friend encouraged him to join the Giddings Fire Department.

Tiner's path to emergency services began when he was 5, and a neighbor's house in Austin caught on fire. A child was trapped inside, and Tiner watched fire trucks race to the scene. "I watched a fireman go in and come back out with that baby in his hands. Everything turned out all right, but I never forgot that," he said.

The Bluebonnet employees shared their desire to help neighbors and give back to the places they call home. They have a chance to

make a real difference, protect property and save lives.

Balancing full-time work at Bluebonnet with volunteer work requires personal and family sacrifices. Long nights, interrupted holidays and early mornings are common. Tiner recalls one Christmas morning when a call came in: "We were gathered around the tree, opening presents, and I got a call for a fire on San Antonio Street in Lockhart. My wife looked at me and said, 'Let's go.' My family loaded up in the family truck with me. The kids brought their stockings and opened them on the way."

For Iselt, volunteering in his community of Fedor, 17 miles northwest of Giddings in Lee County, has even meant responding to a family member's emergency. One night in 2017, he recalled, his crew was called to provide a landing spot for a medevac helicopter.

BRIAN MITSCHKE

Technical services superintendent

Years at Bluebonnet: 21
Volunteer: Firefighter, Dime Box Volunteer Fire Department
Years of service: 10

"I assisted first responders when a wreck occurred right in front of me one day many years ago and have volunteered with Dime Box VFD ever since."



PHILIP THARP

Journeyman lineworker

Years at Bluebonnet: 11
Volunteer: Firefighter and cook, South Lee County Volunteer Fire Department
Years of service: 15

"There really is no time management as a first responder. If you can go to a call, you go."



BRYAN WOODS

Lineworker crew supervisor

Years at Bluebonnet: 3
Volunteer: Firefighter, Milano Volunteer Fire Department
Years of service: 9

"Some moments are tough, but there's plenty of good ones too. Once I pulled a lady out of a flipped car, and she hugged me and said I was an angel."



INTERESTED IN BECOMING A VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER?

PREREQUISITES

- Be 18 or older
- Have a high school diploma or GED
- Live or work within a reasonable distance of the desired fire station
- Maintain a valid Texas driver's license and satisfactory driving record
- Pass a background check, drug test and physical examination

TO APPLY

- Contact your local fire department to learn about volunteer openings and other application requirements
- Complete an application
- Participate in an interview, if required

TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION

- Attend basic training sessions, through either the fire station or a fire academy
- Earn Texas Commission on Fire Protection firefighter certification
- Obtain emergency medical technician (EMT) certification, if required



FREEZE READY Five safety tips for winter weather

Winter weather can be unpredictable in Central Texas, especially in January and February. Temperatures can quickly swing from mild to freezing. Cold snaps and icy conditions can last for hours or stretch on for days. Here are five ways to stay safe during a Texas cold snap:

1 Trust the warnings, not your windshield: Things may look fine, but icy conditions could be headed your way. Regularly check weather forecasts: Use multiple sources — a trusted local TV or radio station, a weather app and emergency alerts — so you aren't caught off guard.

2 Dress in layers: Start with a moisture-wicking base, add an insulating middle layer like fleece or flannel and top it off with a wind- and waterproof jacket. Wear gloves and warm socks, along with a knit cap and headband or neck gaiter.

3 Avoid driving on icy roads: The best plan is to not drive, but if you must, remember ice is a particularly dangerous road hazard in Texas. Ice can form quickly and be hard to see — especially on bridges. Go slow, brake gently, avoid sudden moves and plan for longer travel times.



4 Keep your vehicle winter-ready: Keep the gas tank at least half full and stock the vehicle with a few cold-weather items, such as bottled water, snacks, a blanket, a phone charger, a flashlight and an ice scraper; share travel plans with loved ones.

5 Prepare your home and yourself: You probably know the three P's: Protect pipes, pets and plants. Stay safe by watching your step, wearing the right shoes and avoiding getting wet or staying outside too long.

For more tips, go to texasready.gov/be-informed or bluebonnet.coop/winter-tips.

OFFICE CLOSINGS

Bluebonnet offices will be closed Thursday, Jan. 1, for New Year's Day; Monday, Jan. 19, for Martin Luther King Jr. Day; and Friday, Jan. 23, for a companywide meeting. If your power goes out, you can report it by texting

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Doctoring Reality

Frontier physicians relied on confidence more than credentials

BY CLAY COPPEDGE • ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE DALTON COWAN

BECOMING A DOCTOR was a lot simpler in frontier times, when you didn't have to go to school for a long time or even know much about medicine. You could just call yourself a doctor. And if your first consideration was to cause no harm and you were blessed with at least a modicum of common sense, other people would call you a doctor too.

"Dr." John F. Webber is a case in point. Born in Vermont and a veteran of the War of 1812, Webber settled in Stephen F. Austin's colony, in what was then Mexico, by 1824.

Along with Texas chronicler Noah Smithwick and two other men, Webber took part in a tobacco-smuggling operation farther south in Mexico. Webber wasn't a trained doctor, but he played

one to avoid answering a bunch of annoying questions about the nature of his visit. Posing as a doctor was easier than explaining 1,000 pounds of leaf tobacco to the authorities.

In one town Webber advertised his services as a physician. Smithwick was fairly fluent in Spanish, so he accompanied the "doctor" as he tended to patients. "With an air of importance that would have done credit to a professional, Webber noted the symptoms, shaking his head, knitting his brows, and otherwise impressing the patient with the seriousness of his condition," Smithwick later wrote.

Smithwick and Webber had a sampling of medicines, mostly quinine, calomel and tartar emetic, a poisonous compound that some brave souls took to induce

vomiting; it made Webber's patients feel different, if not better. "The doctor's fame went abroad, and he soon had a large practice, same as imposters of the present day," Smithwick wrote.

Smithwick also knew the inventor Gail Borden Jr. before Borden patented the process for making condensed milk and became known as Dairyman to the World. They knew each other first in San Felipe and later in Burnet County, where Smithwick operated a mill.

Borden was looking for gold on Sandy Creek and also advertising himself as a doctor when he stayed a few days with Smithwick and described to his host how he practiced medicine. "It is no use to be a doctor unless you put on the airs of one," he said. "Nine times out of 10 sickness is caused by overeating, or eating unwholesome food, but a patient gets angry if you tell him so; you must humor him."

Borden humored his patients by administering tiny bits of calomel with enough starch to turn it into a pellet. He glazed the pellets with sugar to make the medicine taste more like a doughnut. Borden said most people who abstained from "hurtful articles of food" felt better as a result.

Unlike Borden or Webber, Dr. Johnson Calhoun Hunter, a native of South Carolina and one of the Old Three Hundred colonists, received a diploma in medicine around 1805, when he was just 18. He was in Texas, in what is now Harris County, by the early 1820s with his wife and the first five of their eventual 11 children. He did a lot more than doctoring when he got here.

Historian Mike Cox wrote that Hunter "could deliver a baby, ride a plow, go hungry, trade with the Indians, run a traverse, pilot a scow, adjudicate a case ... cut a bull, teach a school ... and deliver mail."

They don't make general practitioners like that anymore. ■

Ooodles of Noodles

Heaps of flavor that will keep your forks twirling

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

My friends are always nervous about inviting me to a meal because I cook for a living, but that's exactly why you should invite me. I will never turn down being cooked for. I was recently invited to dinner and served this deliciousness. I immediately asked for the recipe, because I had to share with y'all.

Ginger Pork Noodles

1 package rice noodles (14 ounces)
½ cup soy sauce
¼ cup light brown sugar
¼ cup rice vinegar
1 tablespoon chili garlic sauce
1 tablespoon minced ginger
1 tablespoon olive oil
2 cloves garlic, minced
2 pounds lean ground pork
2 tablespoons water
1 tablespoon cornstarch
1 cup shredded carrots
1 cucumber, halved lengthwise and thinly sliced
Sesame seeds, for garnish
Fresh cilantro, for garnish
Lime wedges, for garnish

1. Cook noodles according to package directions and set aside.
2. In a bowl, whisk together soy sauce, brown sugar, rice vinegar, chili garlic sauce and ginger. Set aside.
3. Heat oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Cook garlic and pork, breaking up with a spoon, until fully cooked, about 7 minutes.
4. Reduce heat to low and stir in prepared sauce. Simmer 3 minutes.
5. While the pork simmers, whisk together water and cornstarch in a small bowl until well blended. Stir into pork and continue to simmer, stirring occasionally, until sauce thickens.
6. Stir in cooked noodles. Serve warm, topped with carrots and cucumbers. Garnish with sesame seeds, cilantro and lime wedges.

SERVES 4

TCP Follow Vianney Rodriguez as she cooks in Cocina Gris at sweetlifebake.com, where she features a recipe for *Sopa de Fideo con Garbanzos*.





Garlic Spaghetti

JANET EAKINS
NAVASOTA VALLEY EC

We all need a go-to recipe in our back pocket for when the to-do list is never-ending, the kids are starving and you must get dinner on the table. This garlic spaghetti is quick and easy, but it packs a punch in the flavor department. Some nights, a bowl of pasta like this is just what we need.

8 ounces uncooked spaghetti
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons minced garlic
2 tablespoons minced parsley
1 tablespoon lemon zest
¼ teaspoon salt
⅛ teaspoon ground black pepper
¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
½ cup crumbled feta cheese

1. Cook spaghetti according to package directions, reserving ½ cup of pasta water when draining.
2. In the same pot, heat oil over medium-high. Add garlic and cook 30 seconds.
3. Stir in pasta water, parsley, lemon zest and spaghetti and toss to coat. Season with salt, pepper and red pepper flakes. Stir in feta.

SERVES 4

\$500 WINNER

Slow Cooker Chicken Lo Mein

JENNY ZACHMAN-REICHARDT
HAMILTON COUNTY EC



Pull out those slow cookers, and get to tossing this lo mein together! I loved-loved this recipe and plan to make it on repeat. And don't let me find you skimping on the baby bok choy—it's the star of this dish.



1 pound boneless, skinless chicken thighs
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon ground black pepper
¾ cup low-sodium chicken broth
3 tablespoons oyster sauce
2 tablespoons low-sodium soy sauce
3 teaspoons hoisin sauce
2 teaspoons honey
2 cloves garlic, minced
½ tablespoon minced ginger
½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
1 package lo mein noodles (8 ounces)
2 tablespoons cornstarch
3 tablespoons cold water
2 cups sliced baby bok choy, washed
1 red bell pepper, seeded and thinly sliced
½ cup matchstick carrots
Sesame seeds, for garnish

1. Lightly coat a 4- to 5-quart slow cooker with cooking spray. Add chicken and season with salt and pepper.
2. In a bowl, whisk together chicken broth, oyster sauce, soy sauce, hoisin sauce, honey, garlic, ginger and red pepper flakes. Pour over chicken and stir to coat evenly.
3. Cook on high 1½–2 hours or on low 3–4 hours. Meanwhile, cook noodles according to package directions and set aside.
4. Remove chicken from slow cooker and shred or dice. In a small bowl, whisk together cornstarch and water, and stir into remaining sauce in slow cooker.
5. Return chicken to slow cooker and add baby bok choy, bell pepper and carrots. Stir to combine. Cover and cook on high an additional 20–30 minutes or until sauce thickens.
6. Stir in noodles. Serve warm, garnished with sesame seeds.

SERVES 6

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

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UPCOMING: DON'T SKIMP ON SHRIMP DUE FEB 10



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CONTINUED ON PAGE 28 >

SACRED STONE OF THE SOUTHWEST IS ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION



Centuries ago, Persians, Tibetans and Mayans considered turquoise a gemstone of the heavens, believing the striking blue stones were sacred pieces of sky. Today, the rarest and most valuable turquoise is found in the American Southwest— but the future of the blue beauty is unclear.

On a recent trip to Tucson, we spoke with fourth generation turquoise traders who explained that less than five percent of turquoise mined worldwide can be set into jewelry and only about twenty mines in the Southwest supply gem-quality turquoise. Once a thriving industry, many Southwest mines have run dry and are now closed.

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COURTESY CHET GARNER

A Tip of the Hat to Paris

France's Eiffel Tower is taller and older, sure, but it's rather bare

BY CHET GARNER

NOT EVERYTHING IS BIGGER in Texas. Case in point: our Eiffel Tower in our Paris. But that didn't stop me from breaking out my beret and heading to the Northeast Texas "City of Love" to see our rendition of France's most famous landmark.

The French built theirs of iron in 1889 for the world's fair. Texans—never ones to sit quietly while another Paris hogs the spotlight—answered in 1993 with a scaled-down steel replica that has way more Texas swagger.

I rolled into town craving a crêpe and a glass of wine, but those had to wait. First stop was my *petit* pilgrimage to the petite tower. I found it standing proudly on the south side of town, wedged between the civic center and the impressive Red River Valley Veterans Memorial.

I wasn't alone. Dozens of folks were lined up for their chance at the ultimate French-Texan selfie.

Of course, the first thing anyone notices is the bright red cowboy hat perched on top. It wasn't there originally. Locals say that after rival Paris, Tennessee, built a tower a smidge taller, Texans did what Texans do—we added a hat and claimed victory.

With the topper, our tower clocks in at 65 feet, proudly earning the title of second-tallest Eiffel Tower in a city named Paris. (The French original stands about 16 times that height at more than 1,000 feet, so first place wasn't exactly in reach.)

Up close, it looks a bit like a radio antenna's artsy cousin who studied abroad, but the vibe is pure Parisian picnic. Families sprawled in the grass, kids craned their necks to the top, and couples kissed beneath its steel beams as if the Seine were flowing nearby.

So if you find yourself in Northeast Texas, make the detour. And remember—when in Paris (Texas), the dress code is cowboy casual. ■

ABOVE Chet lands in Paris—no passport required.

TCP Watch the video on our website and see all of Chet's Explorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



Know Before You Go

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

JANUARY

8

Dallas [8–11] Hadestown: Teen Edition, (214) 526-4076, juniorplayers.org

10

Amarillo Serenading the High Plains, (806) 376-8782, amarillosymphony.org

Corsicana Mimosas at the Market, (903) 654-4850, visitcorsicana.com

Palestine [10–11, 17–18, 24–25, 31–Feb. 1] Faire of Champions, contact@faireofchampions.com, faireofchampions.com

15

Lufkin T.G. Sheppard, (936) 633-5454, angelinaarts.org

16

Galveston [16–17] Yaga's Chili Quest, Beers & Cheers; (409) 770-0999; yagaschiliquest.com

Lubbock [16–18] Water for Elephants, (806) 792-8339, americantheatreguild.com

17

Brenham Uptown Swirl, (979) 337-7239, downtownbrenham.com

El Paso Veterans Create, (915) 533-0048, tomlea.com

Fredericksburg Book Festival, (830) 997-6513, fredericksburgbookfestival.org

Gonzales Come and Take It Makers Market, (830) 888-6800, bit.ly/makersmarket26

Plano [17–18] Dallas Area Train Show, (214) 906-8092, dfwtrainshow.com

18

Fredericksburg Texas
Guitar Quartet, fredericksburg
musicclub.com

19

Elgin Martin Luther King Jr.
Walk, (512) 281-5724,
elgintexas.gov

22

El Paso Tom Lea's *Twelve
Travelers Through the
Pass of the North Exhibit
Opening*, (915) 533-0048,
tomlea.com

Fort Worth Mah Jongg
Tournament, (817) 335-3525,
thewomansclubfw.com

Paris [22-24] Tower
City Comedy Festival,
(903) 785-5233, towercity
comedyfestival.com

24

Jefferson Queen Mab Ball,
(903) 240-6809,
mardigrasupriver.com

29

Brenham [29-Feb. 1,
5-8, 12-15] Ken Ludwig's
Dear Jack, Dear Louise,
(979) 830-8358,
unitybrenham.org

FEBRUARY

4

Laredo [4-7] Birding
Festival, (956) 964-4102,
laredobirdingfestival.org

6

Lufkin The Jazz Legacy
Project Presents the
Life & Music of Billie Holiday,
(936) 633-5454,
angelinaarts.org

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

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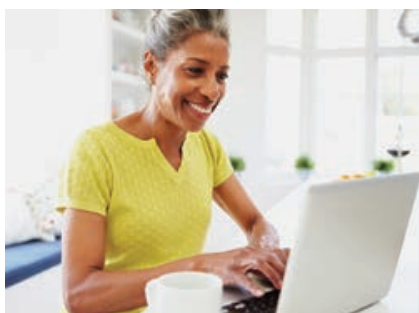
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Snakes Alive!

Not to get you rattled, but off the beaten path you'll find more than a few snakes in the grass. These readers took their chances and didn't roll snake eyes. We've balanced the scales, and the winners were so close, they may strike!

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ



1 ALAN ABAIR
COSERV

A western diamondback rattlesnake.

2 JOSHUA TREVINO
BRYAN TEXAS UTILITIES

A Sunda Island pit viper.

3 CHARLES BAXTER
COSERV

"An eastern racer under a crape myrtle tree in Argyle."

4 SHARON CARTER
PEDERNALES EC

"I saw this beauty resting in the woods next to my Wimberley home."



Upcoming Contests

CAUGHT NAPPING DUE JAN 10
MAKING A SPLASH DUE FEB 10
SEASONED SNAPS DUE MAR 10



TCP See Focus on Texas on our website for many more Snakes Alive! photos from readers.



Fortune Knocks

Scottish tradition holds that good luck comes through the front door on New Year's

AS TOLD BY RON RUSSELL
TO ANNA RUSSELL
ILLUSTRATION BY TARA JACOBY

IN THE SUMMER of 1954, when my family's neighbor Brad Proctor asked me to help with farm work, I did not know it would lead to me becoming a first footer.

I pedaled my bike 1 ½ miles to help Brad put up hay. From then on, year-round, every afternoon, I milked cows and mucked stalls.

His mother-in-law, Mrs. Harris, lived with them. And whenever I ventured into the kitchen for a drink, Mrs. Harris told me tales of her youth in Scotland. Eventually, they decided to move Mrs. Harris to a nearby, almost secluded, house.

A few days before the end of the year, I stopped for another visit with Mrs. Harris. She clasped my hand. "I want you to be my first footer," she said.

Well, I knew a lot about farm life, farm animals and an abundance of chores.

However, I had no idea how to be a first footer. I did not want to insult Mrs. Harris. I squirmed before I asked, "Please, what is a first footer?"

"My great-great-great-grandparents passed the Scottish tradition through the family to me," she said, explaining that a tall, dark-haired man must be the first to set foot in a house in the new year. "Because you are a dark-haired man, when ..."

I interrupted her. "But I'm only 14 years old. That leaves me out."

Mrs. Harris raised her hand to stop me. "The worst is for a woman to be my first visitor. Oh, Lordy, that'd guarantee bad luck all year." She looked me up and down as she nodded her head. "Now, if you had red or blond hair, fear would shiver me with alarm at the sight of you on New Year's Day."

She chuckled. "However you do qualify. You're the size of a man, and you have dark hair, so when your foot hits my threshold, you will bring me good fortune for the coming year."

She winked. "Best you bring a gift, say bread, salt or coal. OK?"

When I got home, Mom listened to Mrs. Harris' proposal to me. Then she said, "We have Scottish blood, too. Remember the cabbage, carrot and onion soup that we eat at noon each New Year's Day? It's also a custom that my Scottish ancestors practiced."

"Why cabbage? I hate cabbage."

"Cabbage represents abundance to some people." Mom elbowed me aside to remove bread from the oven.

I did not want to take Mrs. Harris a lump of coal or a piece of firewood. And my Grandpa Ed would not like me taking his whiskey bottle. Ah, the perfect gift was on the kitchen counter.

Allowing that Mrs. Harris would be awake at 9 o'clock on New Year's morning, I knocked on the door. Her wide grin almost stretched to the door sills.

She waved me in. I handed her a loaf of Mom's fresh-baked bread.

I am a first footer! ■

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