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SEPTEMBER 2026

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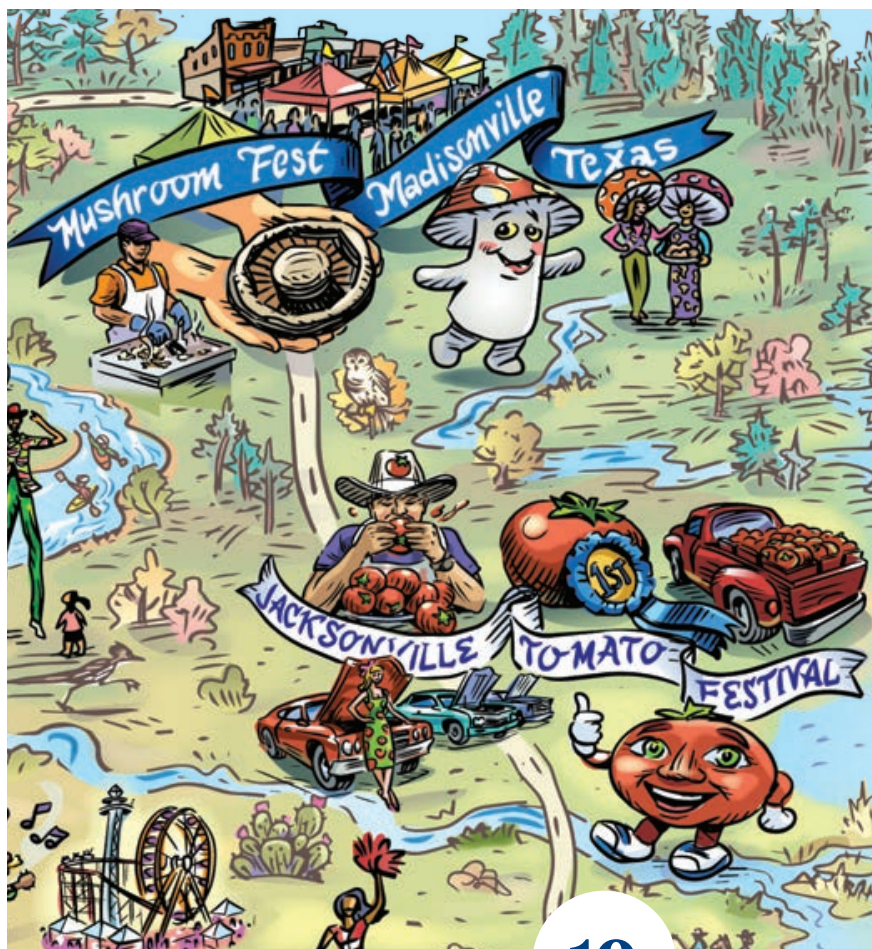
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# September 2026



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Light pollution blotting out the stars? Head to your local planetarium.

By Melissa Gaskill  
Photos by Tiffany Hofeldt

## The Fungus Among Us

The good times just mushroom when small-town festivals celebrate local produce.

By Pam LeBlanc  
Illustrations by Jim Starr

### ON THE COVER

Visitors enjoy a show at the Burke Baker Planetarium in Houston.  
Photo by Tiffany Hofeldt

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Mushrooms and tomatoes are among the dozens of locally grown products celebrated at street festivals.  
Illustration by Jim Starr

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# Among the Trees



Big Jake, the mascot of the Texas State Forest Festival, demonstrates ax throwing.

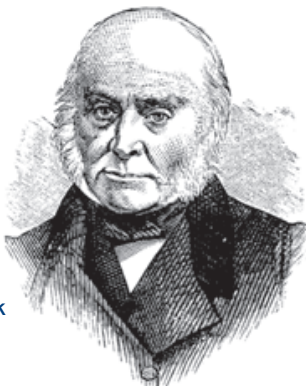
WHEN THE FOUR-DAY Texas State Forest Festival kicks off September 17 in Lufkin, it continues a tradition that began in 1938. The event, in the heart of the Pineywoods, features a variety of activities, including a carnival, barbecue competition, music and chain saw carving.

In 2022, Texas sawmills produced enough lumber to make two-by-fours that could reach the moon and back.

Did you know? Texas has 59 million acres of forestland, more than any other state except Alaska. About 93% of that is privately owned.

## Hair Apparent

Only five elected American Presidents—John Adams; John Quincy Adams, right; Martin Van Buren; James Garfield; and Dwight Eisenhower—were bald or balding. Considering that 85% of men suffer hair loss by age 50, that's perhaps an astonishing record. Something to think about on **National Bald is Beautiful Day, September 13.**



## TCP Contests and More

### \$500 RECIPE CONTEST

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### FOCUS ON TEXAS PHOTOS

Barns

### RECOMMENDED READING

Learn about William Johnson McDonald, the eccentric banker who funded the McDonald Observatory in West Texas against his family's wishes. Find our story from December 2020 on our website.



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## FINISH THIS SENTENCE

When I was a kid ...

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

Here are some responses to our July prompt: **Need a hobby? Learn to ...**

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STEVE YATES  
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WIMBERLEY

Visit our website to see more responses.

## JULY 2026 A Big Leap From Doodles

“I probably have the only one of Jeffie Brewer’s works in San Angelo. It survived a wildfire while being relocated from Alto, New Mexico, to Lubbock.”

ROBIN LONG  
CONCHO VALLEY EC  
SAN ANGELO



## Spotting His Critters

My mom and I recently visited a friend in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I think we ran into Jeffie Brewer’s Orange Cat on an art walk [A Big Leap From Doodles, July 2026]. Now I know the artist’s story. How fun!

Lisa King  
Pedernales EC  
Austin

Our regional bike trail network in east-central Illinois has commissioned several sculptures to place alongside the trails. People love them and even set their routes by the distance between critters. There are designated “critter loops” riders enjoy.

Thanks, Jeffie, for making our rides more fun and whimsical.

Betsy Carlson-Ward  
Via Facebook

## Historic Washout

I remember that Houston Astros rainout because I was at home waiting for my dad to come home from work while listening to what was supposed to be the start of the game on the radio [Currents, Under the Weather, June 2026]. They announced the game was called, noted the historic nature of the event and Dad didn’t get home until about 11 p.m.

Michael Knight  
Via Facebook

## Artifact No-No's

As an archaeology steward for the Texas Historical Commission, I feel it important to remind readers that in the state of Texas, it’s illegal to search for and recover artifacts—be they projectile points or stone tools—on private property without permission and on public lands at all, ever [He Kept Digging, May 2026].

The penalties can be severe, including imprisonment. Readers can research this topic on THC’s website.

Françoise Wilson  
Central Texas EC  
Gillespie County

**TCP WRITE TO US**  
letters@TexasCoopPower.com

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Austin, TX 78701

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

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# MAKING **SPACE** FOR EVERYONE

BY MELISSA GASKILL • PHOTOS BY TIFFANY HOFELDT

**THIS PAGE** The wonders of the night sky are always accessible at the Burke Baker Planetarium in Houston.

**OPPOSITE, FROM TOP** With more than a dozen planetariums around the state, visitors have access to celestial sites that can stir the imagination. Burke Baker was one of the first planetariums in Texas when it opened in 1964.

## Light pollution blotting out the stars? Head to your local planetarium

**I**n the 1950s, Harlingen Air Force Base used a domed planetarium building to teach pilots navigation by the stars. When the base closed in 1962, the building was donated to what is now the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, and it eventually fell into disrepair.

But in 2008, H-E-B funded renovations that added a digital projector system and, in 2012, a new dome. Now regular folks of all ages can visit and get a front-row seat to the stars in Edinburg.

“H-E-B asked that it be free and open to the public,” says Christian Hernandez, program specialist at the UTRGV planetarium. “They wanted to inspire a new generation, and I think they made good on that desire.”

The Milky Way shines high above in September, with the constellation Pegasus rising in the east. Venus will be bright in early evening, with Jupiter most visible at dawn. But if it’s cloudy or you live near a big city or industry, you won’t be able to see any of it.

At a planetarium, you can enjoy these constellations and planets as well as other astronomical wonders from a comfy chair with no worries about light pollution from cities or satellites, cloudy skies, heat or cold, bugs, or the hard ground. And in Texas—with at least 15 permanent planetariums



across the state—chances are good that there’s one just down the road from you and with technological advances you might not expect.

## Space Over Time

The first modern planetarium opened in Munich, Germany, in 1925, displaying 4,500 stars and the planets of our solar system. Five years later, the first facility in the U.S., the Adler Planetarium, opened in Chicago. More quickly followed in Philadelphia, Los Angeles and New York City. Texas got its first, Fort Worth’s 40-foot-diameter Noble Planetarium, in 1955, and soon Houston and Abilene had their own.

Planetarium popularity soared after the Soviet Union’s Sputnik 1 satellite launched in 1957 and during the 1960s race to the moon. These days, as artificial light drowns out more of the night sky, folks flock to planetariums to see what they’re missing outside.

Those early planetariums used mechanical star projectors that beamed light through slides patterned with tiny holes to depict celestial bodies on a domed ceiling. Gears and motors simulated the movements of stars and planets, creating astonishingly realistic night skies.

Such machines, made by Zeiss, a German company that produced the original Munich projector, and Pennsylvania-based Spitz Laboratories, which developed its first system in the 1940s, remain in use at many planetariums.

But now most facilities have digital projector systems that





Sunset at the Burke Baker Planetarium, where, indoors, it can always be nighttime.

“Under the dome, phenomena that can seem abstract or distant become tangible and awe-inspiring. It’s like a time machine, looking back at how the universe was.”

blend multiple high-resolution images into an uninterrupted scene covering the entire dome. These systems can produce the likenesses of millions of stars and extremely detailed 3D objects and events in deep space. Advances in sound and control systems and improved dome surfaces help make planetarium experiences even more immersive and realistic.

For example, the Stephen F. Austin State University Planetarium in Nacogdoches, which opened in 2018, features a state-of-the-art 4K Digistar system, says Director Dan Bruton.

Abilene’s Morgan Jones Planetarium upgraded in 2004 from its original Spitz Star Projector to a digital projector, says Jason Barber, planetarium director, and in 2019, it installed a laser system.

“With modern projectors, you can go into the stars, you can model the entire Milky Way,” Barber explains. “It’s kind of like a video game, but the shape of a dome creates a 3D effect, so you feel like you’re there. It’s like being in a spaceship.”

## Beyond Space

Nowadays, planetarium experiences go well beyond tours of the night sky, popular as those are. You can fly visually through space and time and view immersive films about the Great Barrier Reef, dinosaurs or Mars. Experience a laser light show set to music from artists like Pink Floyd, Queen and Taylor Swift.

The H-E-B Planetarium in South Texas shows educational films about space, Hernandez says, and others just for entertainment.

Bruton says SFASU designed its planetarium to connect the university with its East Texas community and make science accessible and engaging for all ages. Astronomy students at the university keep track of what’s currently visible in the sky—perhaps a constellation, planet or comet—and program the Digistar system to show it. Immersive shows include *Dark Universe*, which explores dark matter, dark

energy and the structure of the universe, and *Antarctica*, a dive into one of the most extreme environments on Earth.

Abilene presents monthly public shows, and Barber’s favorite is one produced by the European Southern Observatory in Chile, called *Unveiling the Invisible Universe*. It uses actual time-lapse imagery of stars, not a computer model, he says. Another, *Messengers of Time and Space*, shows how astronomers use land-based telescopes along with space-based facilities like NASA’s James Webb Space Telescope, currently orbiting the sun 1 million miles away from Earth, and Hubble, circling 300 miles above Earth since 1990.

“Planetariums give people a sense of perspective,” Hernandez says. “It’s one thing to talk about the scale of the universe, but that 360-degree dome screen does an amazing job of letting you feel it. Watching a film about searching for the edge of the solar system, it really hits you how big the solar system is.

“Films that go into the universe, dark holes and cosmic matter really put into perspective that we are a blue dot in a grand tapestry of planets and stars. It’s an important and humbling experience.”

Bruton agrees. “Under the dome, phenomena that can seem abstract or distant become tangible and awe-inspiring. It’s like a time machine, looking back at how the universe was.”

So grab one of those comfy chairs at your local planetarium. You’re bound to have a stellar experience. ■



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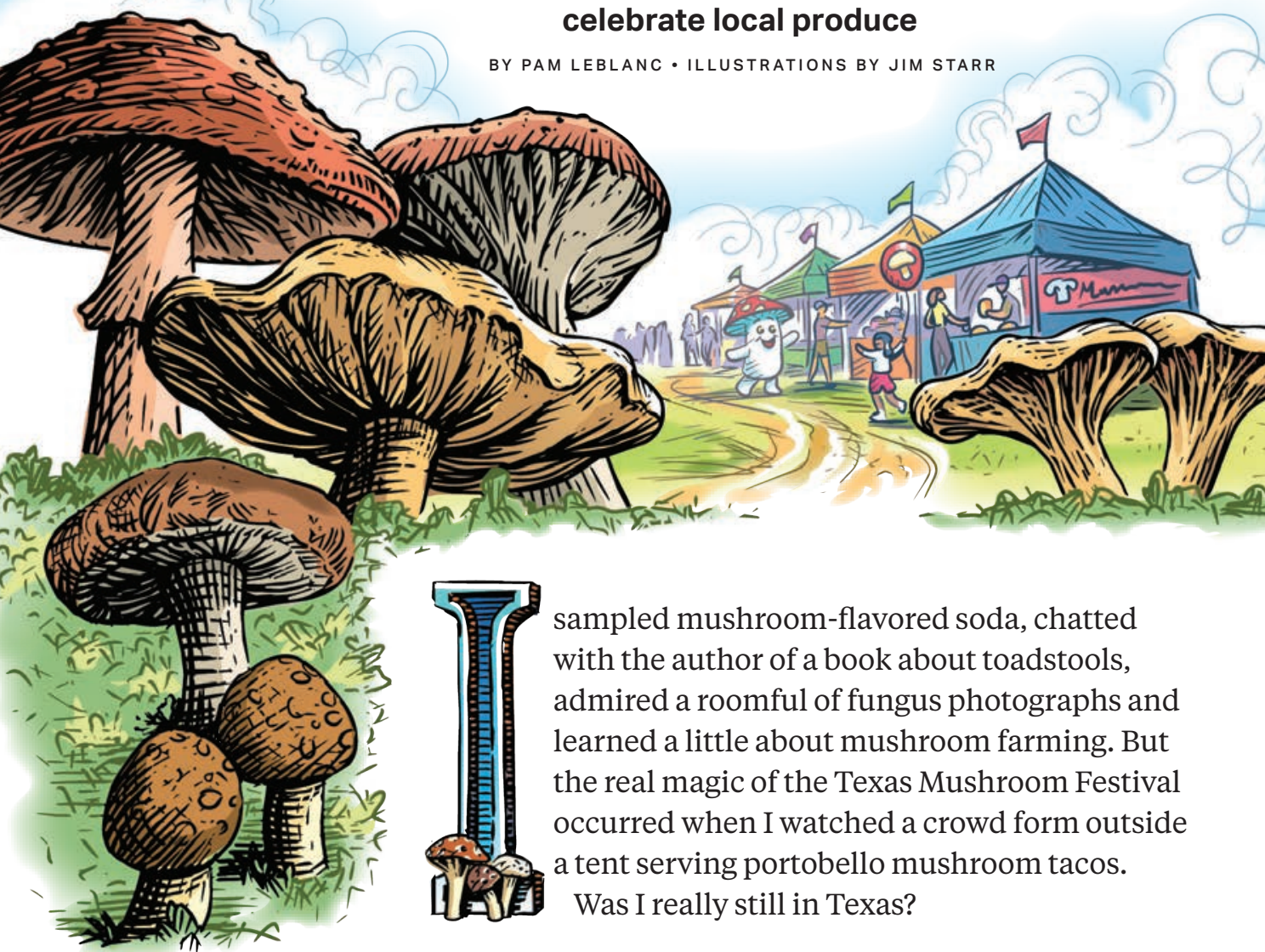
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# THE FUNGUS AMONG US

The good times just mushroom  
when small-town festivals  
celebrate local produce

BY PAM LEBLANC • ILLUSTRATIONS BY JIM STARR



I sampled mushroom-flavored soda, chatted with the author of a book about toadstools, admired a roomful of fungus photographs and learned a little about mushroom farming. But the real magic of the Texas Mushroom Festival occurred when I watched a crowd form outside a tent serving portobello mushroom tacos. Was I really still in Texas?



A quick glance at the boots- and hat-wearing folks surrounding me as I strolled the courthouse square in Madisonville assured me I hadn't wandered off course. This city of 4,400, located 40 miles northeast of Bryan, is home to one of several farms operated by California-based Monterey Mushrooms, and in 2005, the Texas Legislature named it the official Mushroom Capital of the Lone Star State.

Madisonville clearly loves fungus, and its annual celebration draws mobs of mycophiles.

The Texas Mushroom Festival is one of dozens of street festivals around the state that celebrate local produce and growers. You can toast tomatoes in Jacksonville, salute strawberries in Poteet and Pasadena, honor onions in Weslaco, praise peaches in Stonewall and Weatherford, recognize rice in Winnie—and a whole lot more.

Many of the events have deep roots in Texas, which is known as a leading producer of specialty crops such as pecans, sweet potatoes, blueberries, watermelons and citrus. Each has its own quirky traditions.

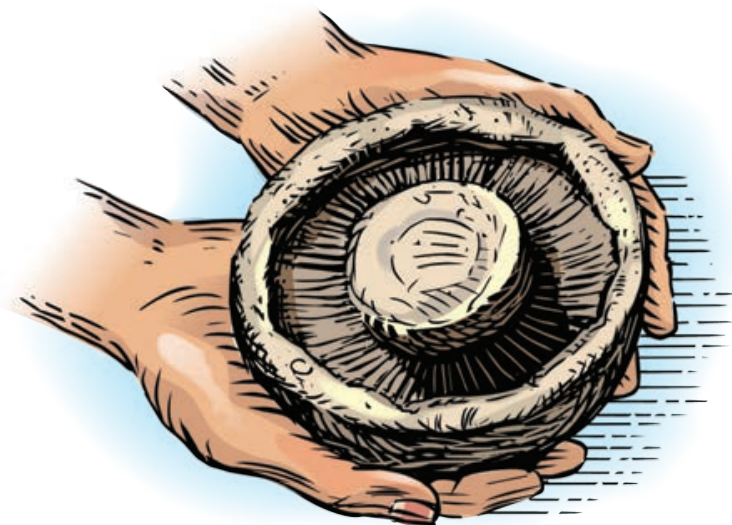
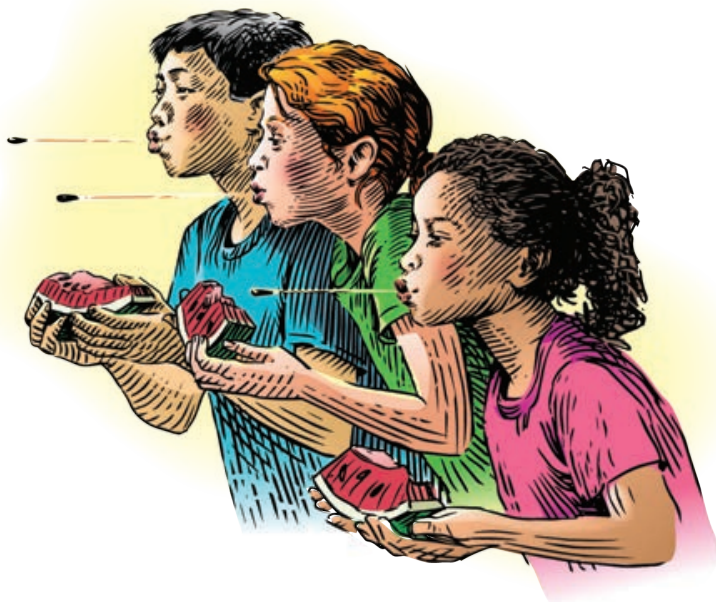
The Texas Citrus Fiesta in Mission, which started in 1932 as a nod to the Rio Grande Valley's winter harvest of grapefruit and oranges, has long included a style show featuring elaborate gowns made from citrus leaves, stems, fruit and peels that have been pulverized, dehydrated, blended and microwaved.

Visitors race to see how many tomatoes they can peel—using only their teeth—at the Jacksonville Tomato Fest. Growers compete to see who can bring the best price for their harvest during the auction at the Poteet Strawberry Festival. The Texas Onion Fest in Weslaco draws more than 25,000 attendees, all who come to celebrate the sweet Texas 1015 onion, the state vegetable of Texas, named for its suggested planting date of October 15.

**W**asher pitching, mutton bustin' and a full-blown rodeo are part of the action at the Stonewall Peach JAMboree, which also features peach pit spitting and peach eating contests. And at the Luling Watermelon Thump, which dates to 1954, visitors can pucker up for the watermelon seed spitting contest or square off in an (impressively messy) watermelon eating competition.

With all that to choose from, I couldn't resist the idea of spending a fall day in a small town, focusing on something that grows from a microscopic spore into one of nature's most perfect pizza toppings.

The Texas Mushroom Festival officially began in 2001 under a single tent, with a few vendors, a sole musician and about a dozen fungus-themed T-shirts. This year's event, set for October 17, is expected to draw between 10,000 and 15,000 visitors and 150 vendors. The day starts with the Shiitake 5K Run and includes such attractions as a quilt show, an automobile showcase, beer and wine tasting, live music, a kids' zone, silent auction, and mushroom picking contest.



"It just kind of sparked into this monster," says festival director (and confirmed mushroom lover) Dennon Hudson, who was watching the action at last year's event from a sidewalk at the edge of the square, where she waxed poetic about edible fungus. "I love mushrooms any way—fried, grilled, sautéed, raw. And we have lots of pickled mushrooms here as well."

But mushrooms are an acquired taste for some. A few minutes after arriving at the festival on a muggy October afternoon, I spotted Miss Mushroom, Allie Brewer of

Centerville. The 20-year-old pageant winner, wearing a bedazzled silver crown, a rose-colored shirt, gold sandals and a red sash, confessed she doesn't much like them.

"But I'd be up for trying some of them for sure," she added quickly. Then she showed me her finds from a few laps through the festival's mushroom market—a pair of earrings, a shirt and a lavender lemonade snow cone.

Next, I wandered over to the Monterey Mushroom tent, where white, thumb-shaped shrooms sprouted from a mound of soft, dark soil. The farm's growing manager, Armando Juarez, told me that the company's local facility, located about 5 miles south of town, grows white, portobello and specialty mushrooms such as shiitake and oyster. It also makes dried mushrooms. In all, the facility produces more than a half-million pounds of the fleshy, spore-bearing fruits of fungus each week.

"They're extremely healthy," he told me, noting that mushrooms contain vitamin D and potassium. They're also low in calories and rich in fiber.

I learned a few other facts about mushrooms at the festival. Besides coming in handy for cooking—and dang, those portobello tacos were tasty—they're used for medicinal purposes and have been for thousands of years.

At its booth, Viking Farms, based in nearby Normangee, was selling an array of tinctures that purport to ease symptoms of menopause, improve mental clarity and boost recovery from injury. It also was selling a colorful lineup of gourmet mushrooms used for cooking, including pink and blue oysters, black pearl kings, shiitakes, and lion's manes, which look more like softball-sized pompoms than something you'd toss in a sauté pan.

I also learned that unless you're making soup or a liquid-based one-pot meal, you don't have to wash mushrooms. That just makes the caps slimy. Instead, brush off any dirt and wipe them with a damp paper towel.

At another booth I sampled mushroom coffee, which I can only describe as "earthy." (I'll stick to hot tea, thanks.) I perused a display of mushroom honey, a rack of mushroom jerky and bottles of mushroom kombucha. One vendor peddled energy shots made with a root-like fungal structure called mycelium, which looks like a wad of unspooled thread.

I chatted with Alisha Gabriel, author of the picture book *Fungi Are ... More Than Mushrooms*, and spent a few minutes listening to singer Wade Phillips belt out a few numbers next to the courthouse steps.

That's a lot of mushroom madness.

I ended my day at the Texas Mushroom Festival with a full belly and a newfound respect for the funky fungus. Who knew a *lowly* mushroom could do so many things?

The experience reminded me of the importance of Texas agriculture. Food doesn't magically appear in the grocery store; it comes from farms. And Texas farmers work hard to bring their crops to market.

Get out and celebrate them. If you're not into mushrooms, get fired up for Hill Country peaches or East Texas yams. And as a bonus, you'll get a side of small-town Texas, delivered with pride. ■

## Best of the Fests

Across Texas, communities celebrate their annual harvests with old-fashioned festivals. Here are some of the better known.

**Texas Citrus Fiesta**  
Mission, January

**Texas Onion Fest**  
Weslaco, March

**Poteet Strawberry Festival**  
Poteet, April

**Pasadena Strawberry Festival**  
Pasadena, May

**Jacksonville Tomato Fest**  
Jacksonville, June

**Texas Blueberry Festival**  
Nacogdoches, June

**Stonewall Peach JAMBoree & Rodeo**  
Stonewall, June

**Watermelon Jubilee**  
Stockdale, June

**Luling Watermelon Thump**  
Luling, June

**Holland Corn Festival**  
Holland, June

**Parker County Peach Festival**  
Weatherford, July

**Gorman Peanut Festival**  
Gorman, September 12

**Grapefest**  
Grapevine, September 17–20

**Texas Rice Festival**  
Winnie, September 30–October 3

**Floresville Peanut Festival**  
Floresville, October 6–10

**Groves Pecan Festival**  
Groves, October 8–11

**Avocado Festival**  
Pharr, October 10

**East Texas Yamboree**  
Gilmer, October 14–17

**Texas Mushroom Festival**  
Madisonville, October 17

**Golden Sweet Potato Festival**  
Golden, October 24





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MESSAGE  
FROM  
GENERAL  
MANAGER

DOUG  
LAMBERT

## Reliability, Community Highlight Annual Meeting

**LARRY SULAK** WAS ready for the throng of members who would stream into the KC Community Center in La Grange.

“You’ll meet new members and new people, and you’ll see old ones,” said Sulak, the safety compliance director who, at 41 years, is the current longest-serving Fayette Electric Cooperative employee. He’s been to most every FEC annual meeting in that time, and he wasn’t a bit surprised that members began lining up two hours before the doors opened.

Sulak shook a lot of hands July 15 as members found their seats for the meeting, which shares news and other information about the co-op.

Sulak was never far from the most expensively dressed member of the Fayette EC team—John

glomerates,” Robert said, noting their records of service and reliability.

The Holubs were among 372 registered members and 500-plus total in attendance at the meeting, where business is conducted, election of directors held and door prizes awarded. Before the meeting, members snacked on cookies handed out—and some home-baked—by 4-H students and collected FEC-branded tchotchkes.

Democratic Member Control is one of the Seven Cooperative Principles by which all co-ops operate. That means Fayette EC members elect their board of directors. Two incumbent directors—Clayton Wessels in District 6 and David A. Stancik in District 7—were nominated in district meetings in May and,

because they were unopposed, were reelected by acclamation.

Fayette EC leaders presented an annual report via video, pointing out accomplishments and challenges.

“Over the past year, our focus has been clear and deliberate: protect the long-term strength of your cooperative, improve our financial position and continue investing in the reliability of the system you depend on every day,” said Doug Lambert, general manager and CEO.

“Like many electric cooperatives across Texas and the country, we are operating in an environment of rising costs,

growing load and increasing expectations for reliability. Rather than reacting, your cooperative has taken a proactive, disciplined approach.

“We spent the last 12 months aligning our strategy around three priorities: long-term financial stability, operational excellence and positioning Fayette Electric Cooperative to serve this community for decades to come.”

James Kielty, accounting and finance manager and chief financial officer, explained that Fayette EC has made significant long-term investments in recent years, most notably in infrastructure and facilities designed to support growth, efficiency and employee retention.

“While necessary, these investments placed



JESSICA MONTEZ | FAYETTE EC

Henry. Henry is a mannequin outfitted with much of the gear and protective clothing that lineworkers wear on the job, probably close to \$6,000 worth, Sulak said. He pointed out the heavy rubber sleeves at \$900 a pair, gloves at \$500 a pair, tool belt and hooks at about \$3,500, and fire-retardant shirts and pants that can cost as much as \$100 each.

Fayette EC members count on their electricity staying on and outages being addressed quickly and safely. John Henry’s outfit showed that the co-op takes those matters seriously too.

Mary Ellen and Robert Holub of Weimar have been co-op members, first San Bernard Electric Cooperative and now Fayette EC, for decades. “I think co-ops are just so much better than these con-

short-term pressure on our financial metrics,” he said. “Recognizing that reality, we implemented a comprehensive financial recovery and planning strategy that included a cost-of-service study, a detailed rate analysis and tighter controls on operating expenses.”

Brandon Pieper, assistant general manager and chief operating officer, said the ice storm in January reminded the co-op’s 47 employees how important their work is in the face of foul weather. The primary cause of the outages during that time was vegetation—trees and limbs weighed down by ice coming into contact with power lines.

“That’s why we are investing in advanced vegetation management, including a project we call AiDash,” Pieper said. “By using artificial intelligence and data-driven tools, we’re able to identify high-risk areas earlier, prioritize trimming more effectively and focus our resources where they will make the greatest difference. This proactive approach helps reduce outages before they happen and strengthens reliability across our entire system.”

Pieper noted that Fayette EC maintains over 3,000 miles of overhead lines, and every pole is inspected on a 10-year cycle to ensure strength and reliability. He said FEC has recently moved to a five-year cycle to clear-cut rights-of-way to further reduce wildfire risk.

Education, Training and Information and Concern for Community are two other co-op principles, and they drive Fayette EC’s dedication to area youths and service agencies.

Four high school graduates were introduced as recipients of academic scholarships, and two others were introduced as recipients of trade and technical school scholarships. At the meeting, a drawing was held for yet another scholarship, and that went to Sophie Vinklerek from Smithville High School.

Fayette EC also sent two high school students to Washington, D.C., for a week as part of the Government-in-Action Youth Tour in June. They were among 144 Texas students and nearly 2,000 other teens from 43 states on the annual educational adventure.

“From the moment we arrived in Washington, every day was filled with unforgettable experiences,” said Gretchen Sacks of Round Top-Carmine High School. “I returned with a greater appreciation of our nation’s history, a deeper understanding of leadership and public service, and friendships that will last for years to come.”

Laney Bludau, of Hallettsville High School, said one of her favorite experiences was visiting the Library of Congress and getting her very own library card. Mount Vernon was a major highlight too.

“As a member of my school’s FFA floriculture team, I especially enjoyed exploring the beautiful gardens and learning more about George Washington’s life,” Bludau said. “Growing up in the country and planning to study animal science and veterinary medicine, I appreciated seeing how closely connected he was to agriculture, nature and the land.”

Fayette EC is also introducing Power of Change, a program that allows members to round up their monthly bills to the nearest dollar, with that spare change going into a fund that benefits neighbors in the seven counties served by the co-op.

Of course, door prizes are always a main attraction at the annual meeting. Gift cards, bill credits and big-screen TVs were among the 71 prizes handed out. The Holubs went home to Weimar with a \$50 gift card for Farmers Lumber in their pocket. They also returned happy with Fayette EC’s reliable service.

“Oh, yes we are,” Robert said as his wife, Mary Ellen, nodded in agreement. “Because we bought a whole-house generator, and we don’t have to use it.” ■

# Fayette Electric Cooperative

Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 

## CONTACT US

2111 N. Von Minden Rd.

P.O. Box 490

La Grange, TX 78945

**Local** (979) 968-3181

**Toll-Free** 1-866-968-3181

**Email** [electric@fayette.coop](mailto:electric@fayette.coop)

**Web** [fayette.coop](http://fayette.coop)

## Your Board of Directors

Joseph D. Kruppa, President

Gale Lincke, Vice President

James A. Anderle, Secretary-Treasurer

David A. Stancik

Clayton Wessels

Scott Schultz

Jonathan Treptow

## Your General Manager

Doug Lambert

24/7

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## TEXAS CO-OP POWER

Fayette EC provides *Texas Co-op Power* and [TexasCoopPower.com](http://TexasCoopPower.com) to give you information about events, safety, special programs and other activities of your cooperative. If you have any comments or suggestions, please contact the co-op office.

## VISIT US ONLINE

[fayette.coop](http://fayette.coop)







1. Lezli Thomas and Emily Purdy, member service representatives, welcome members and assist with registration before FEC's annual membership meeting.
2. Doug Lambert, left, FEC general manager and CEO, and Dennis Geesaman, candidate for the Texas House of Representatives.
3. Amy Rackley, systems operator, welcomes a member to try their luck at the Plinko game.
4. A member tries her luck at the Wheel of Fortune game with Corey Brown, journeyman lineworker.
5. A young attendee demonstrates her safety knowledge to Jared Surman, technical services specialist, at the safety booth.
6. Youth Tour delegate Gretchen Sacks shares how the trip strengthened her understanding of history, leadership and public service.
7. Incumbent directors Clayton Wessels, left, District 6, and David A. Stancik, District 7, were reelected by acclamation after running unopposed.
8. Helen Janda proudly accepts a \$500 H-E-B gift card after she was selected as one of the lucky prizewinners.
9. Fayette County 4-H clubs serve refreshments to members and their guests.
10. A young attendee happily accepts her prize.





## LUCK OF THE DRAW SCHOLARSHIP

Congratulations to Smithville High School graduate Sophie Vinklarek, daughter of Sarah & Matthew Vinklarek. Sophie's name was drawn at the annual meeting to receive one \$1,500 scholarship. She will be attending Texas A&M University in the fall.



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## CO-OP SHRED DAY



Friday, October 30



8:30am – 11:30am



KC Community Center (parking lot)  
190 S. Brown Street, La Grange, TX 78945

- Cooperative Shred Day Hosted by FEC and CVTC
- Donations will be accepted to support **Senior Connections**.

What is allowed: Paper

What is not allowed: Cardboard, plastic, binders, binder clips, hard bound books, hard drives, cell phones, laptops, iPads, any metal (a FEW paper clips are ok), CDs or floppy disks. Spiral notebooks need to have the metal spiral removed.



fayette.coop



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## ANNUAL MEETING

# DOOR PRIZE WINNERS



## *Thank You!*

A special thank you to the suppliers and service providers who generously donated door prizes for Fayette Electric Cooperative's annual meeting. We appreciate their support and valued partnerships.

*AiDash*  
*Carlton Industries, LP*  
*CTL Tree Service*  
*Irby Utilities*  
*KBS Electrical Distributors, Inc.*  
*Pike Electric*  
*SEnergy*  
*Smith Power Line Construction, LLC*  
*Techline*  
*Utility Sales Agents of South Texas*  
*Wesco*

## *Congratulations* TO ALL OF OUR WINNERS!

### **\$50 Certificate of Credit**

- Joe J. Hanzelka
- Lanna Fishbeck
- Earlene Muenster
- Kenneth Rabel
- Warren Meischen
- James Holub
- Cathy Goerig
- Derek J. Schwenke
- Harvey Hollas
- Henry G. Miksch Jr.
- Ferdinand N. Khater
- Michael Winkler
- Richard A. Schielack
- Lana Limmer

### **\$50 Farmers Lumber Gift Card**

- Nicholas J. Macik and Shirley K. Macik
- Robert Lane Holub

### **\$50 H-E-B Gift Card**

- Derek B. Wied
- Charles E. Learned
- Daniel L. Platt
- Douglas C. Mueller
- Ira Richard Marx
- Linda M. Anders
- John R. Cook
- John Michael Gatlin
- Jerry E. Raabe
- Stuart Naumann
- Clement Cernosek Jr.

### **\$50 Walmart Gift Card**

Edgar Dudensing Jr.

### **\$75 Certificate of Credit**

- Mary Kelly
- David F. Walla
- Nancy J. Trump
- Jody Supak

### **\$100 Amazon Gift Card**

- Leonard M. Dybala
- Ryan P. Hentschel

### **\$100 Certificate of Credit**

- Mary L. Dybala
- Jerry Simek Jr.
- Margie L. Collins
- Corey M. Brown

### **\$100 H-E-B Gift Card**

- Adrienne E. Kobza
- Roy G. Noska
- Juan C. Ortiz
- Gilbert P. Mican
- Lorene Hasse
- Thomas E. Mueller MD
- Byron Citzler
- Clarence Faldyn
- Henry Kutac
- Betty Jean Fillip

### **\$100 Mastercard Gift Card**

- Jo Ann Konvicka
- Andrew Kutac

### **\$100 Visa Gift Card**

Kenneth R. Mache

### **\$100 Walmart Gift Card**

Doris A. Lidiak

### **\$150 Certificate of Credit**

Kathy L. Norwood

### **\$200 Walmart Gift Card**

- Marilyn Kothmann
- Beatrice A. Patek
- Donald E. Templin
- Janice G. Smajstrla
- Dorothy A. Kaspar

### **\$250 Certificate of Credit**

Weldon Hartmann

### **\$500 H-E-B Gift Card**

Helen Janda

### **32 Qt Ultra Lite RTIC Cooler**

Rocky III Farm  
by Marian Chamrad

### **50" ONN Smart TV**

- James R. Simpson
- Frank Wick Jr.

### **75" Hisense Smart TV**

Patricia J. Janda

### **Blackstone 28" XL Griddle w/cover**

Leo John Rainosek

### **ONN Portable Boombox Speaker**

- New Bielau Community Center  
by Mariette Bellamy
- Michael A. Sacks and  
Jacquelyn R. Sacks

### **Turtlebox Ranger Speaker**

Donald R. Wood and  
Delores A. Wood

### **Yeti 15 Qt Roadie Cooler**

Margie Stardig

### **Yeti 35 Qt Tundra Cooler**

Gary Antosh

### **Yeti Day Trip Tote Bag**

Wayman R. Krueger

### **Children's Prize Winners**

- Jake Young
- Taylor Laslie
- Rylee Hentschel
- Hudson Holub
- Ava Wied



## Local Organizations Receive \$30,000 in Grants

**FAYETTE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE** and CoBank recently awarded \$30,000 in matching grants to four local organizations through the cooperative's Sharing Success Grant Program, supporting projects that strengthen communities and improve quality of life across the cooperative's service area. The grants were announced during Fayette EC's annual membership meeting July 15 in La Grange.

Through the Sharing Success Program, FEC and CoBank partner to support community organizations, public service agencies and local initiatives that make a positive impact throughout Central Texas.

Shelby Volunteer Fire Department received \$5,000 to assist with the purchase of a new pumper truck. Fayette EC provided a \$2,500 grant, which was matched by CoBank.

Thanks to matching grants from FEC and CoBank, Round Top Schützen Verein Preservation received \$5,000 for renovation projects at its historic hall.

Matching grants totaling \$6,000 went to Greater Fayette Community Foundation for the Fayette County Semiquincentennial Commission's Liberty Tree Project to support county-wide tree-planting efforts.

Matching grants worth \$14,000 went to the Fayette County EMS Foundation for the installation of drinking water stations at emergency medical services agency locations.

The Fayette County EMS Foundation received \$14,000 for the installation of drinking water stations at emergency medical services agency locations.

"These projects reflect the spirit of community investment and local partnership," said Doug Lambert, FEC general manager and CEO. "By working together with CoBank, we can support organizations that provide vital services, preserve local heritage and enhance the quality of life for the people we serve."

The Sharing Success Program is one of the many ways Fayette EC supports communities throughout its seven-county service area. Through partnerships, educational initiatives and community investment programs, the cooperative remains committed to strengthening the area its members call home.

Fayette EC provides safe, reliable electric service to more than 10,700 members across seven counties in Central Texas and remains committed to improving quality of life through service, innovation and community involvement. ■



1



2



3

1. The Shelby Volunteer Fire Department received a \$5,000 grant to help purchase a new pumper truck. From left: Blake Moehlmann; Joseph Kruppa, FEC board president; Charles Atkins; and Dennis Gaskins.

2. The Round Top Schuetzen Verein Preservation received a \$5,000 grant for historic hall renovations. From left: Kruppa and Michael Sacks.

3. The Greater Fayette Community Foundation for the Fayette County Semiquincentennial Commission's Liberty Tree Project received a \$6,000 grant. From left: Larry Jackson, Kruppa, Diana Wilson, Karen Mahoney-Woods and Glenn Altwein.

## Thanks for Transporting Our Members in Style!

A **BIG THANK YOU** to Ewald Kubota of La Grange and Kleiber Tractor & Equipment for providing the use of their utility vehicles to transport our members from the parking lot to the front steps of the KC Community Center. We appreciate your support!



### MARK YOUR CALENDAR

#### Labor Day

Monday, September 7  
Our office will be closed in observance of the holiday.

#### Patriot Day

Rosh Hashanah Begins  
Friday, September 11

#### National Voter Registration Day

Tuesday, September 15

#### Autumn Begins

Tuesday, September 22

ROMOLO TAVANI | GETTY IMAGES.COM

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Reverse

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Reverse

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Reverse

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# The Line in the Sand

Where does West Texas begin? The 100th meridian, more or less

BY W.F. STRONG • ILLUSTRATION BY THE BRAVE UNION

**IF YOU EXAMINE** any good map of Texas, you'll notice a natural division of East and West Texas that runs from the eastern edge of the Panhandle down to Abilene and San Angelo and on past Uvalde to Carrizo Springs and Laredo.

On the west side of that line is arid land, and on the east side, it's wetter and greener. It becomes increasingly dry as you go west and wet and humid as you go east.

This line is better known as the 100th meridian, and it maintains this calculus of wet and dry lands all the way up into Canada.

John Wesley Powell, famous for exploring and mapping the Colorado River and the Grand Canyon over 150 years ago, was one of the first conservationists to see that the 100th meridian served as a demarcation.

"Passing from east to west across this belt a wonderful transformation is observed," he wrote. "On the east a luxuriant growth of grass is seen, and the gaudy flowers ... make the prairie landscape beautiful.

"Passing westward, species after species of luxuriant grass and brilliant flowering plants disappear; the ground

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



gradually becomes naked, with bunch grasses here and there; now and then a thorny cactus is seen, and the yucca plant thrusts out its sharp bayonets."

Powell, for whom Lake Powell in Arizona and Utah is named, would become the head of the U.S. Geological Survey in 1881. He used his knowledge of the West to create a prescriptive map for water management.

Powell took his map to a Senate committee in 1890 and suggested dividing the Western U.S. into water districts that would be managed by the people living along the rivers rather than the states. He advocated for need over greed.

The senators practically rioted, as this flew in the face of the fever dream of Darwinian development that had dominated the Western states. The gold must be mined, the forests harvested, the rivers dammed and the railroads built.

Powell argued for sustainability and good stewardship of the Earth. Powell was against big dams—ironic, given that his namesake lake was created by Glen Canyon Dam. He preferred smaller, more democratic irrigation systems that he believed would be more efficient for the land and serve more people more equitably.

As we know, the arid West was not developed as Powell envisioned, but it's interesting to consider what might have been if Powell had had his way.

What's more interesting to me are the facts on the ground these days. The geological truths that defined the 100th meridian in Texas a century and a half ago are now truer for the 98th meridian, running just west of Fort Worth, east of San Antonio and west of Corpus Christi. This tells us that the Texas water challenges of the future will be far greater than any our ancestors faced. ■

# Pancakes and Waffles

Breakfast will never be the same after tasting these morning staples

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

Growing up, there was always a jar of applesauce in our fridge. One morning we were greeted with apple pancakes, and I haven't looked at applesauce the same since. These are thicker and cakier than your typical pancake, but isn't cake for breakfast simply sweeter?

## Apple Pancakes

### TOPPING

**4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter,**  
plus more for serving  
**2 medium apples, cored and diced**  
**¼ cup brown sugar**  
**½ teaspoon ground cinnamon**  
**1 teaspoon salt**

### PANCAKES

**1½ cups complete buttermilk**  
**pancake mix**  
**1 teaspoon ground cinnamon**  
**1 cup cinnamon applesauce**  
**¼ cup water, plus more as needed**

- 1. TOPPING** In a skillet over medium heat, melt butter. Add apples, brown sugar, cinnamon and salt. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the apples start to soften and the sugar is dissolved and syrupy, 3–5 minutes. Remove from heat until ready to serve pancakes.
- 2. PANCAKES** Preheat oven to 200 degrees. In a bowl, combine pancake mix and cinnamon. Stir in applesauce and water until just moistened. If batter is too thick to pour, add water. Preheat and lightly grease a nonstick skillet or griddle over medium heat.
- 3.** Pour ¼ cup batter onto skillet or griddle, repeating as allowed for pan size. Cook each pancake until bubbles form on the surface. Flip and cook until the second side is golden brown, 1–3 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low if the pancakes are cooking too quickly.
- 4.** Keep cooked pancakes warm in preheated oven, and repeat with remaining batter. Serve warm with butter and reheated apple topping.

**SERVES 4**

**TCP** Follow Vianney Rodriguez as she cooks in Cocina Gris at [sweetlifebake.com](http://sweetlifebake.com), where she features a recipe for Poblano Breakfast Scramble.



## Oatmeal Waffles

BEVERLY ANTHES  
FANNIN EC

Anthes' easy waffles are a delicious breakfast. They're crisp on the outside and fluffy inside. Serve warm, topped with fresh fruit or maple syrup.

- 1½ cups flour**
- 1 cup quick-cooking oats**
- 1 tablespoon baking powder**
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- 1½ cups milk**
- 2 eggs, slightly beaten**
- ⅛ teaspoon vanilla extract**
- 6 tablespoons (¾ stick) butter, melted**
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar**

1. Preheat oven to 200 degrees. In a large mixing bowl, stir together flour, oats, baking powder and cinnamon.
2. In a small mixing bowl, whisk together milk, eggs, vanilla, butter and brown sugar.
3. Add wet ingredients to flour mixture and stir to combine.
4. Preheat and lightly grease waffle iron. Pour batter into waffle iron, close and cook according to manufacturer's directions. Keep cooked waffles warm in preheated oven, and repeat with remaining batter.

SERVES 6



\$500 WINNER

## Sweet Potato Waffles

TRACEY STEWART  
SAM HOUSTON EC



This is the most delicious way to transform dinner leftovers into brunch. Hearty, crispy and lightly spiced, I was blown away by these waffles. After testing this recipe, you can surely find me cooking up an extra batch of mashed sweet potatoes to whip up these waffles on the weekend.

- 2½ cups flour**
- ¼ cup sugar**
- 1 tablespoon baking powder**
- ½ teaspoon baking soda**
- ½ teaspoon salt**
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon**

- 1 cup mashed sweet potatoes**
- 1½ cups buttermilk**
- 4 eggs**
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract**
- ½ cup (1 stick) melted butter, cooled**
- Maple syrup, for serving**

1. Preheat oven to 200 degrees. In a large bowl, combine flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, salt and cinnamon.
2. In another large bowl, whisk together sweet potatoes, buttermilk, eggs, vanilla and butter.
3. Add the flour mixture to the sweet potato mixture and stir to combine, being careful not to overmix. If the batter is too thick, gradually add 2–4 tablespoons water.
4. Preheat and lightly grease waffle iron. Ladle batter onto waffle iron, being careful not to overfill, close and cook according to manufacturer's directions.
5. Keep cooked waffles warm in preheated oven, and repeat with remaining batter.
6. Serve warm with maple syrup.

SERVES 4

## TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

LEMONY DELIGHTS DUE SEP 10

When life gives you lemons, what do you make? Submit your delicious citrus treats for a chance at an easy-peasy \$500. Watch for the recipes in February 2027.

UPCOMING: WINNER, WINNER CHICKEN DINNER DUE OCT 10



CONTINUED ON PAGE 28 >

## Pineapple Upside Down Pancake With Pineapple Cream Syrup

JAN BOX  
TRINITY VALLEY EC

Dessert for breakfast? Sign me up! I loved the presentation of these pancakes. They do take a little patience when flipping, but once you get the hang of it, these pancakes are so much fun to make—and even better to eat.

**1 can pineapple slices (16 ounces) in syrup**  
**1 cup sugar**  
**4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter**  
**6 tablespoons heavy cream**  
**1 teaspoon salt**  
**1 teaspoon ground cinnamon**  
**2 cups prepared pancake batter**  
**Maraschino cherries, for topping**  
**Whipped cream, for topping**

**1.** Preheat oven to 200 degrees. Drain pineapple slices, reserving syrup. To a



saucepan, add reserved syrup and sugar. Cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, at a soft boil about 25 minutes or until syrup turns golden. Remove from heat and stir in butter, heavy cream, salt and cinnamon.

**2.** Preheat and lightly grease skillet over medium-high heat. Pour about ⅓ cup pancake batter onto skillet.

### Don't Overdo It

Take care to mix pancake or waffle ingredients just until combined. A few lumps in the batter are OK. But overmixing overworks the gluten, which results in a dense pancake. Go easy and enjoy tender, fluffier pancakes and waffles.

—Vianney Rodriguez

**3.** Cook until bubbles form on the surface of the pancake. Place a pineapple ring into batter and press slightly. Flip pancake and press into skillet and finish cooking. Keep cooked pancakes warm in preheated oven, and repeat with remaining batter.

**4.** Serve warm with a cherry, pineapple syrup and a dollop of whipped cream on each pancake.

**SERVES 6**

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COURTESY CHET GARNER

## The Mother of All State Parks

Explore history amid peace and quiet along the Leon River

BY CHET GARNER

**EVERYONE WHO VISITS** Texas' first official state park feels like they've been let in on a quiet secret. This 400-acre hideaway between Temple and Waco doesn't get the attention (or crowds) of Hill Country destinations like Enchanted Rock State Natural Area or Garner State Park.

But from its quiet perch along the Leon River, Mother Neff State Park waits patiently, like a front porch swing, inviting you to slow down and breathe in some fresh air—and maybe put your phone away for a little while.

The story of this park—and really our entire state park system—goes back to Isabella “Mother” Neff and her son, Gov. Pat Neff. The family owned this stretch of riverfront land that became a local hot spot for picnicking, swimming and fishing long before a “state park” was even a thing. When Mother Neff died in 1921, she made a very Texas-sized decision to leave the land to the state so everyone else could enjoy it too. Not a bad legacy.

I started my visit by hitting the limestone trails, winding beneath a canopy of oaks before dropping into a shady ravine. That's where I found one of the park's rock shelters—massive stone overhangs that Native American tribes used for thousands of years. Turns out, good real estate along the Leon River has always been in demand.

From there, I made my way to the park's iconic stone water tower, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The climb to the observation deck on top isn't exactly Mount Everest, but it's enough to earn a view of the sprawling valley below—and justify a solid snack afterward.

Mother Neff State Park may not be the biggest or flashiest, but it just might be the most meaningful—a place where history, nature and a mother's generosity quietly collide. ■

ABOVE Chet at Mother Neff State Park, which used to be the property of Gov. Pat Neff's family. Neff held office in the 1920s.

**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.

## SEPTEMBER

6

**New Berlin Sausage Festival**, (210) 343-9570, [facebook.com/nbtksausagefest](https://facebook.com/nbtksausagefest)

10

**Abilene [10–19] West Texas Fair and Rodeo**, (325) 677-4376, [westtexasfairrodeo.com](https://westtexasfairrodeo.com)

**Corsicana [10–13, 17–20] The Guys**, (903) 872-5421, [thewlac.com](https://thewlac.com)

11

**Brenham [11–19] Washington County Fair**, (979) 836-4112, [washingtoncofair.com](https://washingtoncofair.com)

12

**Chappell Hill Airing of the Quilts**, (979) 337-9910, [chappellhilltx.com](https://chappellhilltx.com)

**Fairfield Show of Wheels**, (903) 389-5792, [fairfieldtexaschamber.com](https://fairfieldtexaschamber.com)

**Luling Luling Foundation Youth Grill-Off**, (830) 875-2438, [lulingfoundation.org](https://lulingfoundation.org)

**Stephenville Morgan Mill Arts and Crafts Fair**, (972) 467-8646, [bit.ly/mmartsandcrafts](https://bit.ly/mmartsandcrafts)

18

**Royse City [18–19] North Texas Antique Tractor & Engine Club Show & Pull**, (214) 934-2414, [north-texas-antique-tractor-and-engine-club.net](https://north-texas-antique-tractor-and-engine-club.net)

19

**Azle Silver Creek Lord's Acre**, (817) 607-8039, [facebook.com/silvercreekmc](https://facebook.com/silvercreekmc)

**Blanco Classic Car Show**, (512) 632-0648, [blancoclassiccarshow.com](https://blancoclassiccarshow.com)



## Pick of the Month

### Salt Festival

Grand Saline, September 24–26

gssaltfestival@gmail.com

facebook.com/gssaltfest

Celebrate the heritage, community and spirit that define this corner of East Texas. The festival includes street dances, cornhole and horseshoe tournaments, yoga, a parade, petting zoo, classic car show, 5K race, and three nights of live music. Country music artist Tracy Byrd, above, headlines Saturday night.

**Fredericksburg Classic Car & Truck Show**, (830) 990-4433, pecangrovestore.com

**Fort Worth [19–20] Bluey's Big Play**, (817) 212-4280, basshall.com

25

**Giddings [25–26] Texas Word Wrangler Book Festival**, (979) 542-2716, www.giddingspubliclibrary.org

26

**Bertram Oatmeal Festival**, (512) 882-2992, oatmealfestival.org

**Bryan Brazos Valley Beekeepers Association Bee School**, (979) 218-3070, bvbeeks.org

MORE EVENTS >

## TCP Submit Your Event

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



## Experience Texas Wine Month in Grapevine!

Sip your way along the Urban Wine Trail while exploring Grapevine's Historic Main Street District lined with one-of-a-kind cafés, boutiques and art galleries.

Visit [GrapevineTexasUSA.com](http://GrapevineTexasUSA.com) to plan your Texas Wine Month Getaway.



## Hit the Road

### Event Calendar

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

**TCP Plan now**  
[TexasCoopPower.com/events](http://TexasCoopPower.com/events)

## Restoring and Preserving Our History

*The Friends of Gillespie County Country Schools*

In the heart of the Texas Hill Country visit 17 historic one-room schools built between 1847 and 1936 by following the 120 mile Gillespie County Country Schools Driving Trail through the scenic Fredericksburg, Texas countryside.

A Driving Tour map and an Open House schedule are available on our website.

[WWW.HISTORICSCHOOLS.ORG](http://WWW.HISTORICSCHOOLS.ORG) 

All schools listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Member of Country School Association of America.

### SEPTEMBER EVENTS CONTINUED

**Fairfield Breakfast With Santa**, (903) 389-5792, [fairfieldtexaschamber.com](http://fairfieldtexaschamber.com)

**Lakehills Medina Lake Cajun Festival**, (830) 460-0600, [cajunfestival-medina-lake.com](http://cajunfestival-medina-lake.com)

**Kerrville [26-27] Supertri Kerrville**, [kerrvilletri.com](http://kerrvilletri.com)

27

**Giddings Texas Wendish Fest**, (979) 366-2441, [texaswends.org](http://texaswends.org)

**Luling Quilts & Cars**, (512) 567-5091, [facebook.com/quiltsandcars](http://facebook.com/quiltsandcars)

**Meyersville Sts. Peter & Paul Catholic Church Fall Festival**, (361) 275-3868, [stspeterpaulalloysius.org](http://stspeterpaulalloysius.org)

## OCTOBER

1

**Smithville [1-Nov. 15] Airing of the Quilts**, (979) 540-9222, [bit.ly/airingofthequilts](http://bit.ly/airingofthequilts)

2

**Stephenville [2-3] Town N Country Quilt Guild Quilt Show**, (817) 676-5165, [bit.ly/townncountryquiltguild](http://bit.ly/townncountryquiltguild)

3

**Granbury Romancing the Monarch**, (817) 579-3280, [lakegranburymastergardeners.org](http://lakegranburymastergardeners.org)

5

**Corsicana [5-29] Piece-makers' Quilt Guild of Corsicana Quilt Show**, [corsicanaquiltguild.com](http://corsicanaquiltguild.com)

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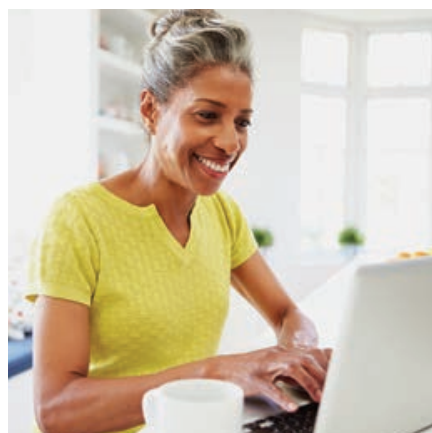
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# Rodeo

Texans young and old love a rodeo. Despite the pain, the mud and the blood, competition and camaraderie keep us coming back for more. Everyone to the main arena; these fearless competitors are ready to ride.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ



1

**1 MIKE ZARELLA**  
PEDERNALES EC

"Youngsters gather on the arena railings for a better view of the opening ceremonies of the Blanco County Fair & Rodeo."

**2 HOLLY BUFKIN**  
BIG COUNTRY EC

"Unwavering grit as this paint bronc shows the untamed heart that defines rodeo."

**3 BOB NORRIS**  
PEDERNALES EC

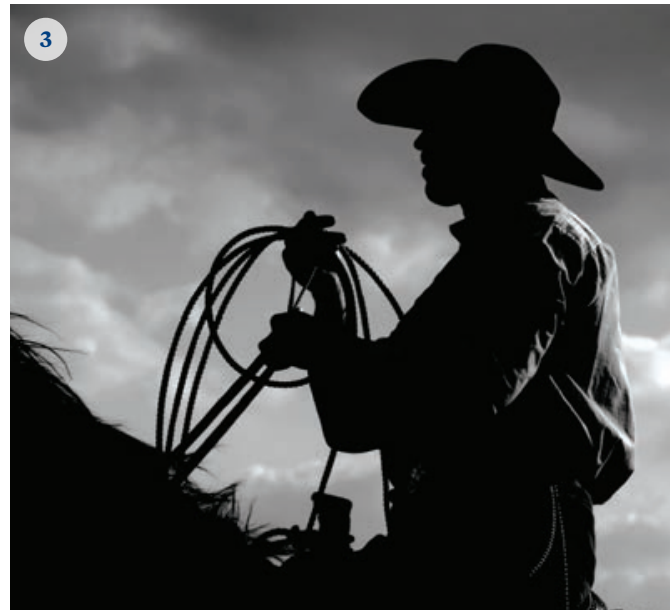
A silhouette of a cowboy at a rodeo.

**4 LAURA BREWER**  
COSERV

North Texas Fair & Rodeo cowboys wait their turn to ride.



2



3



4

## Upcoming Contests

**BARNs** DUE SEP 10

**SWAMPS** DUE OCT 10

**IN THE GARDEN** DUE NOV 10



ENTER  
ONLINE

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



## Speaking of Long Commutes

Finding silver linings—and snacks—when it's hard to find childcare

BY ERICA FLOCKE

ILLUSTRATION BY  
GWEN KERAVAL

"HOW WAS YOUR day today?"

No response. "Did you have fun?" Still nothing.

At the stoplight on Ranch Road 12 and Hunter Road in San Marcos, I laughed to myself and thought about how silly this one-sided conversation must sound. I glanced in the mirror clipped to the backseat headrest and caught my 13-month-old daughter's grin. She can't talk yet, but I can't wait for the day she finally answers back.

I live and work in Wimberley, a town that prides itself on being family friendly. And it is—except when it comes to daycare. There's only one option in town for babies her age, and I've been on the waitlist for more than a year. So every weekday we make the 30-minute drive to San Marcos, where she goes to daycare. That

adds up to two hours of commuting each day: one hour with my daughter, one hour solo.

We've learned to make the most of it. Together we listen to audiobooks and albums I think she should know. While some babies get *The Wheels on the Bus*, mine gets Turnpike Troubadours. I like to tell myself it's making her smarter, or at least building character. Only time will tell.

I narrate the drive like a tour guide: "Look at that bird!" or "We're going over the river." She probably understands none of it, yet she looks at me and smiles like she's clued in anyway.

Some days, traffic crawls along so slowly that I have to break out the emergency snack stash I keep in the car. Fruit bars or a lone teething cookie. By the time we reach the next stoplight, she's happily munching or asleep.

I notice the same cars each morning and afternoon, their drivers as familiar to me as neighbors at this point. I wonder about the people inside. Do they have a baby in the backseat listening to a Lyle Lovett album for the very first time too?

I imagine a tiny community of parents and children, each of us on our own little journey, connected by the same roads, the same traffic lights, the same shared struggle of making it work.

Sometimes I think about it more broadly. In a state as rural as Texas, countless parents are on even longer drives for childcare, and I can't help but wonder how they fill those hours.

I know this is just a phase. We won't be commuting forever, and one day I know I'm going to miss these drives and how my baby smiled at me from the backseat. But for now, I think my daughter knows every curve of Ranch Road 12 better than most grown-ups. When she does learn to talk, she'll probably have plenty to say about it. ■



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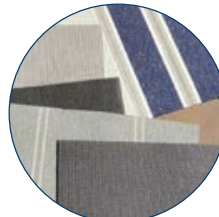
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