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Overpass Easels

Michael Ford's larger-than-life art merges traffic and culture along Texas highways.

*Story by Sheryl Smith-Rodgers
Photos courtesy Michael Ford*

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Sixes on the Small Screen

The people of the storied Four Sixes Ranch—as seen on 'Yellowstone'—work to preserve its legacy.

*Story by Margaret Buranen
Photos by R.J. Hinkle*

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ON THE COVER

Some of the 700–800 quarter horses at the Four Sixes Ranch.
Photo by R.J. Hinkle

ABOVE

Michael Ford with his sculpted panel that celebrates Wichita Falls' Hotter'N Hell Hundred cycling event.
Photo courtesy Michael Ford



May 16
**National Love
 a Tree Day**

One of Texas' largest and oldest—Big Tree, a live oak at Goose Island State Park near Rockport—is estimated to be up to 1,100 years old.

**FINISH THIS
 SENTENCE**
 Summer means ...

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

Here are some of the responses to our March prompt: **Music makes me ...**

Forget my troubles for a little while.
 RENEE TWEED
 VIA FACEBOOK

Release those wonderful endorphins that make me grab a broom and give a concert for my plants and fish.
 JAMES D. WILLIAMS
 VIA FACEBOOK

Reminisce about the time in my life that the song came out.
 HARRY MACK
 UNITED COOPERATIVE SERVICES
 GRAFORD

Think of the many times I danced with my dad.
 PATTI FISHER
 BOWIE-CASS EC
 TEXARKANA

Connect to yesterday, hope for the future and dance today.
 MICHELLE WINN
 PEDERNALES EC
 KYLE

Visit our website to see more responses.

Wakeboard Wizardry

FUN TIMES for a 6-year-old wakeboarding on Coletto Creek Reservoir outside Victoria turned into a teenager's passion. And for 14 years, Blake Daniel, pictured above, practiced and competed, even as he became a distribution engineer at South Texas Electric Cooperative.

Finally, in September 2023, Daniel reached the pinnacle—capturing a wakeboarding world title in his age group in an international competition in Portugal.

"It was crazy. I can't explain it," he said. "It's something that I feel like we've been working for forever. Finally, to win is an unreal feeling."

Many family members, wearing shirts that read, "I throw Texas-sized tantrums," shared Daniel's joy. In wakeboarding lingo, tantrums are good things—blackflips on a board.

Contests and More

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RECOMMENDED READING
 On National Paranormal Day, May 3, consider the mysterious musical presence that sometimes intrudes upon a Houston library's stillness. Read *Shh!* from December 2020.



DANIEL: COURTESY BLAKE DANIEL; BABY: JOSE MANUEL GELPI DIAZ | DREAMSTIME.COM

MARCH 2024 The Retirement of a Legend

“Danny Williams and his son, Gordon, used to come to Concho Valley Electric Cooperative for safety meetings. If you didn’t learn something from Danny, you weren’t listening.”

TOMMY EARNEST
CONCHO VALLEY EC
SAN ANGELO



DAVE SHAFER

Pier Placement

Buoyed by Vice [March 2024] stated that the Balinese Room “sat atop a pier that jutted into the bay.” I thought it was on the seawall, jutting out over the Gulf of Mexico.

John Eaves
Pedernales EC
Leander

EDITOR’S NOTE You’re correct. We have fixed the story online.

Katy’s Spunk

Gordon Jennings was my husband’s great-great-grandfather [*A Revere of Our Own*, March 2024]. I am writing the story of our family history for our eight grandchildren, and one of them is named Katy. I believe she has as much spunk as the first Katy Jennings!

Judy Jennings
Wise EC
Paradise

Vintage Puzzles

My grandfather made quite a few wooden puzzles in the 1920s and ’30s and apparently sold them, as some have labels from Vincil Novelty Co. [*Puzzling Times*, February 2024]. My brothers, all my cousins and I still have many of them.

Dorothee Johnson
Grayson-Collin EC
Whitesboro

Adorable Donkeys

As a former longtime breeder, trainer and exhibitor of donkeys, it warms my heart whenever something positive is written about these wonderful animals [*Touched by an Angel*, January 2024].

The story of Angel riding on a float during a Christmas parade was priceless.

Sandra Osborne Neeley
United Cooperative Services
Grandview



KATE GLEYZER

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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Sixes ON THE Small Screen

The people of the
storied Four Sixes
Ranch—as seen
on 'Yellowstone'—
work to preserve
its legacy



IF you watched *Yellowstone* spinoff *1883*, you probably saw Joe Leathers. But you likely didn't know it.

He was on screen for about three seconds, driving cattle on horseback.

"It was a long-distance shot, so you couldn't tell it was me," he says.

It was a bit part, but Leathers is the leading man at the ranch that has become a centerpiece for the *Yellowstone* TV series. He has managed West Texas' Four Sixes Ranch since 2008.

The show and its characters are make-believe, but Leathers' work is quite real. He spends "as many days as possible" working cattle with his colleagues at the ranch, though his job keeps him out of the saddle more than he would like.

Yellowstone, created and written by actor Taylor Sheridan, tells the story of a fictional Montana ranch owned by the Dutton family. Four Sixes makes its on-screen debut in the fourth season, when ranch hand Jimmy Hurdstrom is sent away to improve his attitude and cowboy skills. But instead of hating it, Jimmy loves the ranch and wants to stay there.

The real-life Four Sixes covers more than a quarter-million acres, making it one of the 10 largest ranches in Texas.

The main ranch, near Guthrie, east of Lubbock, comprises 142,372 acres and gets its electricity from South Plains Electric Cooperative. In the Panhandle, the Dixon Creek Ranch division in Carson and Hutchinson counties spans another 114,455 acres. A third portion, the Frisco Creek Ranch division, covers 9,428 acres in Sherman County and is served by Rita Blanca Electric Cooperative.

There are plenty of outdoor sights to film at the ranch, including sprawling fields and swift, beautiful horses herding cattle. Wildlife includes quail, deer, Barbary sheep, turkeys, wild hogs, coyotes, bobcats, migrating ducks and geese, songbirds, rattlesnakes, and even some antelope. Every year the main ranch house is surrounded by migrating butterflies for two or three days around Halloween. "It's the most beautiful sight," Leathers says.

The Burnett family established Four Sixes more than 150 years ago and passed it down for four generations.



In 1870, Samuel "Burk" Burnett bought some cattle already branded 6666 (contrary to a legend about the ranch being named for a winning poker hand). He kept on buying more land and more cattle, and the four sixes stuck.

Burnett left the ranch to his only surviving grandchild, Anne Valliant Burnett Hall (later Tandy), in trust for her unborn child. Upon the death of "Miss Anne," as she was known, in 1980, her only child, Anne Burnett Windfohr Marion, inherited her grandfather's and great-grandfather's estates, including Four Sixes.

Nowadays, Four Sixes is a whole lot more than a part-time TV set. It's still a working ranch with large herds of high-quality beef cattle and the quarter horses it breeds.

The ranch raised longhorns, shorthorns and Herefords in its earlier years, but for the past 25 years, the cattle herd has been entirely Black Angus. Leathers says this breed has provided the most consistent quality.

One thing that hasn't changed: The cattle have always been cared for the same way—on horseback. Each of the 16–18 cowboys working the ranch has several quarter horses for their work. Vaquero (Spanish for cow herder) is Leathers' favorite horse. He says the sorrel gelding "has a big motor. He's tough, very athletic and has a lot of cow sense. He's a pretty exceptional horse."

The ranch's use of quarter horses is no wonder given that Marion and Four Sixes have a deep connection with the breed. Marion's mother, Miss Anne, co-founded the American Quarter Horse Association in 1940, and Marion displayed a devotion to her animals.

"Anne [Marion] was a strong woman, a very good businessperson. She knew cattle and horses," Leathers says. "Anne was very giving and very demanding. She didn't set you up for failure. She set you up for success."

OPPOSITE The mare pasture at Four Sixes Ranch in West Texas. ABOVE Joe Leathers has managed Four Sixes, which covers more than a quarter-million acres, since 2008.



'It's a LOVE AFFAIR with the land of WEST TEXAS.'

During one crisis, the drought of 2010–11, the ranch went to great lengths to keep its herd and its acres healthy.

"There was no water between Guthrie and Nebraska," Leathers says. "We ended up taking our cattle to nine ranches in five states, leasing land to make sure we didn't hurt our land. Our herd was not completely back home until 2015."

After Marion assumed control of Four Sixes in 1980, she hired Dr. Glenn "Doc" Blodgett as the ranch's resident veterinarian and horse division manager. Together they established a first-class quarter horse breeding program. Adding artificial insemination services for Four Sixes' stallions allowed mares across the U.S. to be bred to them.

Today, Dr. Nathan Canaday fills Blodgett's role. He and two associate veterinarians care for the ranch's herd of 700–800 quarter horses.

Canaday first came to the ranch in 2006 as a college intern at the veterinary hospital. He returned the next summer. The experience "convinced me to become a veterinarian," he says. "I thought if I could become a veterinarian at a large ranch like Four Sixes, I would have my dream job." Canaday became a full-time vet at Four Sixes in 2011 and assumed his current role in 2022, after Blodgett died.

The veterinary team works out of a clinic with state-of-the-art imaging and other equipment. The hospital also serves

other residents in the area, including several big ranches. Canaday says he and his team are the only vets within 60 miles. They treat the region's horses for colic and lameness, do dentistry work, and even provide breeding services.

"We keep the history and culture of ranching, but we operate on the cutting edge of veterinary medicine," Canaday says.

When Sheridan decided to add the Texas storyline to *Yellowstone*, he secured Marion's permission to film at Four Sixes. Though shooting the show means bringing a small army of hundreds of cast and crew members to the ranch, it "really doesn't interfere with ranch work," Leathers says. "There's a lot of people, equipment and vehicles, but they get it done and then they're gone."

Pandemic restrictions delayed the filming of Season 4 until August 2020, and it began to air in late 2021. Sadly, Marion didn't live to see her beloved ranch on TV. She died in February 2020 at the age of 81. Her will stipulated that all her ranch holdings be sold.



OPPOSITE Boots O'Neal has been a working cowboy for more than 75 years, including 30-plus years at Four Sixes. LEFT Two of the thousands of Black Angus cattle that make up the ranch's herd.

As Seen on TV

Before it was a backdrop for *Yellowstone*, Four Sixes was a setting for several Marlboro cigarette commercials during the 1960s. *Yellowstone's* final six episodes are set to premiere in November.

That meant Four Sixes would not be Burnett family-owned for the first time since its founding. Fortunately, a new owner who shared the family's values was interested. Sheridan, who was raised in Fort Worth, put together a group of investors and became the majority owner in 2022.

Sheridan also has a ranch down the road, in Weatherford, and another in Wyoming. But this one is special for him.

"It's a love affair with the land of West Texas," Sheridan told *Fort Worth Magazine* in 2022. "There's a tremendous amount of discipline that it takes to build a ranch like this. It takes strength, excellence, integrity and faith, and that's the main mission statement of the ranch. We're going to live up to that."

Leathers says that having all of Four Sixes under one owner helped the ranch exist for 150 years. Now that the ranch is in Sheridan's hands, "he's determined for it to be here for another 150 years," Leathers says.

"You have to make money for the ranch to be successful,

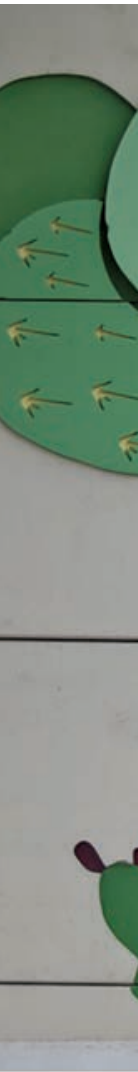
but you can still hold on to the traditions. Taylor has a passion for the cowboy life. Four Sixes will continue it on. We'll continue to be a leader in breeding and ranching."

Protecting that legacy means protecting the animals and the land of Four Sixes through conservation. The ranch works with an environmental firm and employs a variety of best practices.

To prevent soil erosion and save precious water, workers have built dams to create small lakes and ponds. They've cleared 100,000 acres of invasive mesquite and cedar. Composted manure from the barns is the only fertilizer used.

Leathers is proud of how they're caring for the land that has served generations of Texans.

"The cattle and the wildlife are not just coexisting," he says. "They're both thriving." ■



- O - V - E - R - P - A - S - S - - E -

Munday Mayor Robert Bowen still remembers when he showed up at City Hall nearly two decades ago to have his picture taken. More than 350 other residents of the small Knox County town between Abilene and Wichita Falls were also there. Everyone had agreed to pose to help with the creation of a bridge mural—part of a highway project to widen and reroute U.S. 277, which now runs through the east part of town.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Munday residents are depicted in the silhouettes that detail an American flag mural in town. Michael Ford, in front of a cactus wall in San Antonio, with his signature gecko just to his right. Pelicans in Corpus Christi and cotton bolls in Lubbock.

Carvings of the residents' silhouettes now form the textured red stripes of a huge depiction of an American flag that unfurls across an overpass retaining wall where U.S. 277 crosses Texas 222. There's a boy bouncing a basketball, a wife kissing her firefighter husband, two girls holding watermelon slices, a cowboy toting his saddle. Bowen—who's still mayor—stands with two neighbors.

"Like any small town, we were worried when the highway went around us," he recalls. "But we've done OK, and we've enjoyed our mural. It's unique."

Munday's road art is among more than 50 pieces across Texas that Michael Ford designed over the course of about 14 years of working for the Texas Department of Transportation. "I've been retired 10 years, and I still get to talk



A-S-E-L-S

about my public art,” quips Ford, who lives near Wimberley and is a Pedernales Electric Cooperative member. “I like to say my hobby became my job.”

Artistic since childhood, he served as a medical illustrator while in the Army and later worked 10 years for a civil engineering firm. In 1994, TxDOT’s bridge division in Austin hired Ford as a draftsman. Soon he was helping engineers create graphics for their presentations. In the meantime, his wife, Betsy, signed him up for a stone-carving class.

“During lunch at work, I’d pull out my limestone block and chisel on it,” Ford recalls. “When my boss saw my gargoyle sculpture, he said, ‘Somehow, someday, we’re going to put one on a bridge.’”

Michael Ford’s larger-than-life art merges traffic and culture along Texas highways

A few months later, Ford had his chance. When TxDOT’s Lubbock division wanted a whimsical logo to dress up a new east-west freeway, he offered to do the work himself. The project became his. He also acquired a new job title—graphics artist. That was in 1998.

Using his own furrowed brow as a model, Ford sculpted Windy Man as a symbol of Lubbock’s infamous gusts and dust. With flowing hair and puffy cheeks, the 3D concrete face blows a dust cloud through pursed lips. However, after the first of a planned 20 went up in 2004—after years of highway design and construction—opponents demanded that the “pagan” Windy Man be removed.

Eventually, TxDOT tried again and installed one Windy Man at the intersection of the Marsha Sharp Freeway and

Avenue L in 2011. He blows dust high above an arts district bridge mural, also designed by Ford. Lubbock overpasses also display red yuccas and a Buddy Holly tribute, courtesy of Ford.

“They all have stories,” Ford says. “Their main purpose has always been to give residents something that’s unique to their community.”

Town by town, Ford worked with mayors and residents to design what they desired. About five years before *Windy Man*, Childress debuted Ford’s talents. Just west of the town, on the edge of the Panhandle near the Oklahoma border, a gigantic stagecoach, windmill and wheat heads—set into overpass retaining walls on U.S. 287 at County Road 9—symbolize the town’s strong ties to agriculture.

Similarly, Goree in Knox County and Robstown in Nueces County chose cotton bolls to grace their highway walls.

And, like Munday, Goree showcases an American flag and Texas flag in addition to cotton. Sinton, just north of Corpus Christi, features a cattle drive on all four overpass ramps as U.S. 181 comes into town from the east.

In Wichita Falls, concrete bicyclists in helmets race across retaining walls in celebration of the city’s annual *Hotter’N Hell Hundred* cycling event. Comanche residents chose rolling hills, live oaks and Native Americans on

horseback to honor their natural heritage.

Kemp’s ridley sea turtles adorn concrete pillars of an overhead sign on the John F. Kennedy Memorial Causeway in Corpus Christi. White-tailed bucks and does pose among prickly pear cactuses in Laredo.

During an Interstate 35 expansion project, TxDOT offered cities the chance to have their own bridge art along frontage roads. Jump off the freeway at Salado to see a stagecoach driven by three cowboys and six horses. At Troy, a bird flits from fence post to post in a series of four windmill murals.

Farther north in West, three murals depict twirling Czech dancers and a polka band, reflecting the city’s cultural roots. In Abbott, silhouettes of a farmer on a tractor and a windmill behind a derelict barn stretch across retaining walls.

“I always designed on a dime,” says Ford, who used pencil sketches and computer software to construct his images that, when enlarged, measure up to 100 feet wide and 50 feet high. Instead of expensive rubber, he carved sheets of extruded foam to form molds that precast concrete companies used to make 5-by-10-foot concrete panels. At work sites, construction crews pieced the panels into place like a puzzle.

And like any good puzzle, some of Ford’s artworks contain a secret.



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE A stagecoach seems to be charging through Salado. Ford with bas-relief troops just east of Copperas Cove on Fort Cavazos. Ford sculpts Windy Man in extruded foam. Czech dancers in West.



“If the design allowed, I’d hide a tiny gecko, like in the oak leaves of a state seal and Windy Man’s hair,” he says. “That became my maker’s mark and the brand name that I continue to use as an artist—Art Gecko.”

Nowadays Ford pours his creativity into crafting sculptures from gourds. Since his retirement from TxDOT, he’s transformed the hard-shelled fruits—kin to pumpkins and melons—into award-winning pieces, such as fairy houses, abstract sculptures, a fanged monster mask and a retro spaceship on the moon.

As Ford and his wife make their way to gourd festivals, they sometimes pass his bridge art. His reaction is what he hopes other travelers have.

“They always bring a smile,” he says. “And I love it when I get messages and photos from people who have spotted one of my walls. Life doesn’t get much better than that.” ■

TCP Find this story on our website for a map of Ford’s highway art and direct links to each of the pieces mentioned.



Ford’s Favorite Five

U.S. flag wall, Munday Etched into the U.S. 277 overpass at Texas 222.

Czech dancers, West Along the Interstate 35 frontage road, where it crosses West Oak Street/T M W Parkway.

Windmill, wheat and a covered wagon, Childress Cast into the north side of Highway 287, where it crosses Farm to Market Road 164/County Road 9.

Stagecoach walls, Salado Along the Interstate 35 frontage road near Williams Road/Salado Plaza Road.

Pilot walls, Kingsville Where East Caesar Avenue runs under U.S. 77.



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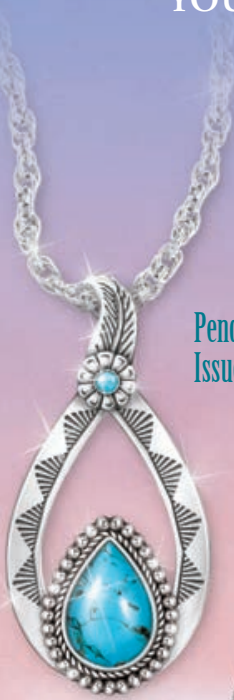
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EMBRACING TOMORROW: A MESSAGE FROM OUR NEW CEO

Eighty-five years ago, a few hundred determined North Texans came together to bring electricity to their rural homes, farms, and businesses because other utilities would not serve them. It's inspiring to see how this history of humble beginnings laid the groundwork for our growing membership that now spans 16 counties.

Those residents shared a vision that built the cooperative model by working toward a common goal which is now a solid foundation for the Tri-County Electric Cooperative. Much like them, I believe we have a shared purpose: to make a positive impact on the communities in which we live and serve. To us that means providing safe, reliable power at the lowest -possible cost for you today while looking for ways we can grow and improve for tomorrow.

It is an honor and a privilege to serve as the new President and CEO of Tri-County Electric. As I step into this role, I am thankful for those who have gone before us and excited to partner with this talented team to support you even better in the future.

The world is rapidly changing, and the demand for innovative energy solutions is greater than ever. It will take dedication, careful planning and willingness to adapt to ensure safe, affordable and reliable electric service for decades to come.

The best chance for us to succeed is by working together. At the end of the day, everything we do is in service to you. And while many things around us will change over time, that will not.

Together, we can shape the cooperative's future to ensure it remains a sustainable and vibrant part of our community for the generations to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Scott Spence'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Scott Spence
President & CEO

DIRECTOR NOMINATIONS

Democratic member control is one of the seven cooperative principles that make our business model special. Tri-County Electric Cooperative is governed and regulated by a board of directors that equitably represents our diverse communities. Each director who sits on the board is a member of the cooperative. As a Tri-County Electric Cooperative member, you have the opportunity to vote on those who represent you in the board room each year.

This year director districts 3, 6 and 8 are up for election. Director nomination applications for members seeking nomination by committee were due on Wednesday, March 13. The Committee on Nominations & Qualifications report is below. The deadline for members seeking nomination by member petition was Wednesday, April 10, and will be reviewed by the cooperative attorney. The approved slate of candidates will be published in the June *Texas Co-op Power* magazine.

2024 ELECTION

While director candidates are nominated from those in their district, every member can vote in the director election. Under the cooperative business model, every member is entitled to an equal vote – one member, one vote. We partnered with Survey and Ballot Systems, a third-party election service to conduct the election. You can expect to receive your official 2024 election ballot on the back of the September *Texas Co-op Power*. If you have a valid email on file with the cooperative, you will also receive an email with a personalized link to your ballot on Sept. 1 inviting you to participate in the election. To add an email or review the email on file, please log into your online member portal via tcectexas.com

Director Elections will begin in September. Watch for more info in future *Texas Co-op Power* issues.

COMMITTEE ON NOMINATIONS & QUALIFICATIONS REPORT

The Committee on Nominations & Qualifications met on Monday, March 18, to accept and review applications from members seeking nomination to the board. The Committee reviewed applications and recommended the following candidates to the board of directors:

DISTRICT 3

Steve Bartley, nomination candidate
Curtis Nager, nomination candidate
David Manning, nomination candidate
Michael Brasovan, nomination candidate

DISTRICT 6

John Killough, incumbent
Brenda Wilde, nomination candidate
Timmy Yeary, nomination candidate

DISTRICT 8

Mike Sivertsen, incumbent
Jarrett Armstrong, nomination candidate



2024 COMMITTEE ON NOMINATIONS AND QUALIFICATIONS MEMBERS

Jeffrey Bass, District 1 | **Mallory Goff**, District 2 | **Vacant**, District 3 | **Edward Daugherty**, District 4 | **Ramey Keeth**, District 5, Chairman | **Danny Tuggle**, District 6 | **Ranell Scott**, District 7 | **Paula Baron**, District 8 | **Wayne Parkman**, District 9



WHY WE REPLACE UTILITY POLES

You might not pay much attention to the thousands of utility poles found throughout Tri-County Electric Cooperative's service territory, but did you know these tall structures are the backbone of our distribution network?

Strong, sturdy utility poles ensure a reliable electric system, which is why we routinely inspect the poles on our lines. Throughout the year, our crews and contractors check poles for decay caused by exposure to the elements. They know which poles are oldest and conduct inspections through a rotational process. Typically, a standard wooden distribution pole is expected to last more than 50 years.

Occasionally, poles need to be replaced for other reasons besides decay and old age. Weather disasters, power line relocation and car crashes are potential causes for immediate replacement.

Here's a quick breakdown of how crews replace a utility pole:

When a pole needs to be replaced, crews will start the process by digging a hole, typically next to the pole being replaced. The depth of the hole must be at least 15% of the new pole's height.

Next, the new pole must be fitted with bolts, cross arms, insulators, ground wires and arm braces—all of the necessary parts for delivering safe and reliable electricity. Crews then safely detach the power lines from the old pole. The new pole is then raised and guided carefully into position, and the lines are attached, leaving the new pole to do its job.

So the next time you come across a cooperative crew inspecting or replacing a pole, use caution and know that this process ensures a more reliable electric system for you, our members.



COMING THIS JUNE!

This summer Tri-County Electric Cooperative is launching Power Engage+, a residential generator program. Members who already have residential Generac standby generators or members who wish to install one can participate in the program. Benefits of home standby generators will be accentuated by utility program incentives. Perks of the program are designed to cover initial inspection fees, annual maintenance costs and fuel displacement during months when generators are used.

Home standby generators help members hedge against unexpected power loss during utility outages. When installed properly, they are safe sources of backup power that are typically sized to power entire homes. These solutions can provide members with the assurance of reliable power, even during storms. However, standby generators are also a significant investment. Tri-County Electric Cooperative's Power Engage+ program is designed so members can leverage their generators to gain additional value.

The launch of Tri-County Electric Cooperative's Power Engage+ program marks an exciting step towards enhancing resilience and value for our members. By leveraging residential generators as a tool for demand response, we not only empower homeowners with reliable backup power but also contribute to the stability and efficiency of our electrical grid. As we embark on this journey, we recognize the evolving landscape of energy management in Texas and our role within it. By closely monitoring developments with other utilities and ERCOT, we position ourselves to maximize the benefits of our program for our members and the broader community. Through program incentives and benefits, we aim to make participation both accessible and financially rewarding.

Keep an eye out for more details in the June issue of the *Texas Co-op Power* magazine and join us as we pioneer a new era of energy innovation and reliability together. The June magazine will contain more information about how to sign up for this program if you already have a compatible generator. There will also be information about our local installer, should you wish to purchase a Generac standby generator to participate. All members that buy a new generator through the program will receive a discount on the equipment and an extended warranty as additional benefits.

HOW IT WORKS

During strategic times throughout the year, the cooperative will signal Power Engage+ enrolled generators to turn on and serve members' homes. These "events" will not last longer than three hours at a time. Members will always have the choice to opt out of an event, and program participation does not forfeit the ability to control your generator at any time. During events, generators will only serve the load of the home and will not back-feed the electric grid—they will be fully isolated, similar to generator operation during outages.

CONFIRM COMPATIBILITY

To participate in the program, your generator must:

- Be a Generac standby generator, Guardian or Protector series
- Be properly interconnected and maintained
- Have a valid manufacturer's warranty
- Pass an initial 40-point inspection

ADDRESSING CONCERNS

- You will retain full control of your generator
- Power Engage+ events will not coincide with utility outages
- Program terms are three years
- If you have any further questions, don't hesitate to reach out to our team at gridservices@tcectexas.com.



ALPACAS PUT A DIFFERENT FACE ON THE FARM

They are members of the camel family. They stand about 5 feet tall from their padded feet to the tips of their ears, and weigh from 110 to 180 pounds.

They don't eat much, have few medical needs and walk so softly they don't even tear up a pasture. Their silky fleece is compared to cashmere, and it comes in so many colors naturally that it is seldom dyed. It's hypo-allergenic, naturally water-resistant and warmer than wool.

But there's more.

Their luminous brown eyes are so big they look like something from a Disney movie, and a split upper lip makes it seem like they are always smiling—a wise, kind smile with a mischievous sense of humor behind it.

When you meet one, it gently brings its face so close to yours that your noses touch. That's a kiss.

They have names like Praline, Treasure, Dewdrop, Princess Tiara, Black Dove, Rocky, Sumptuous, Purple Rain and Avalanche.

And they hum. A calm, reassuring hum, like your grandmother in the kitchen.

They are alpacas—natives of the Altiplano, the Andean plateau in Peru, Chile and Bolivia. Since 2008, this herd has made its home in Keller, where their barn gets its electricity from Tri-County Electric Cooperative.

In that sense, they're members, although Jim and Debbie Conkle pay the bill.

"They're very, very nice animals," Jim said. "They have their own personalities. Each one is different. Just being around them, it's like everything just kind of melts away."

DJ's Classic Alpacas is a six-and-a-half-acre farm in the middle of Keller. Debbie and Jim care for, buy and sell alpacas, harvest their fleece and hold several "farm events" each year—typically in March and September, with a couple just prior to

Christmas. Those events give locals a chance to come out, meet the animals, and shop.

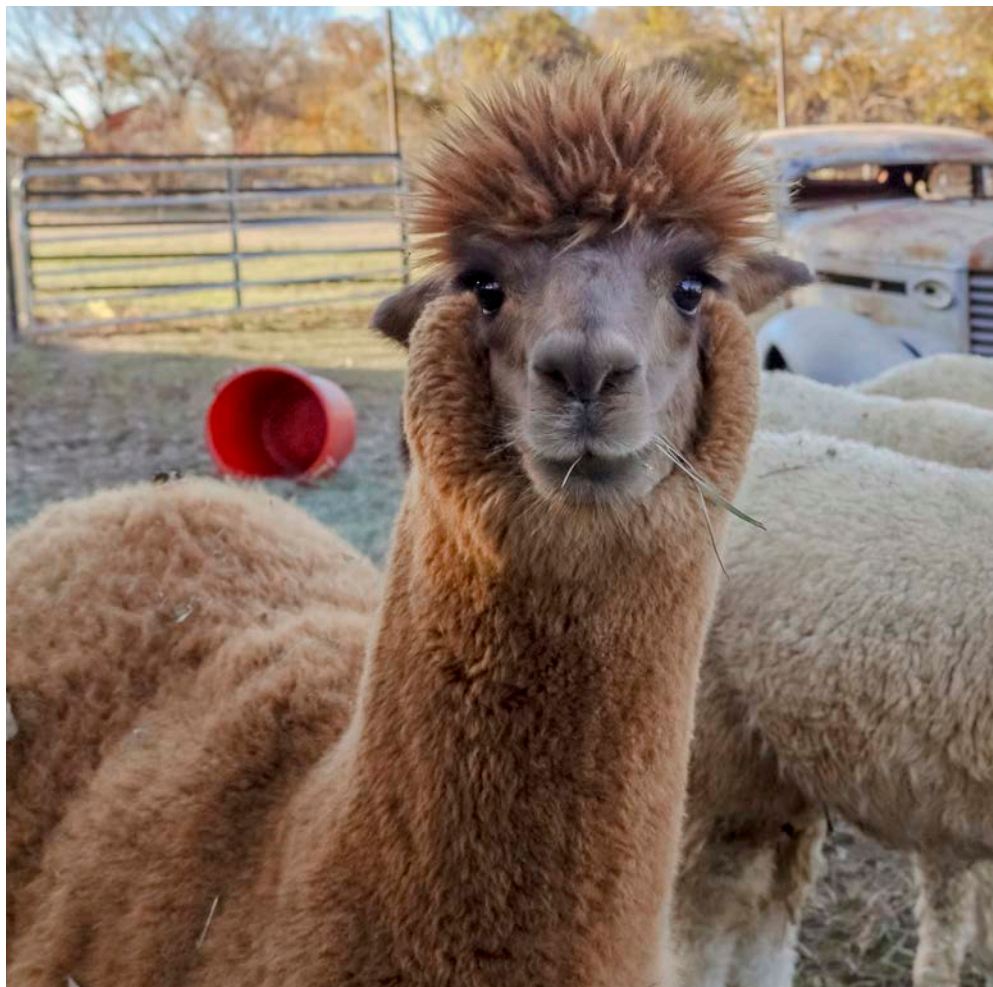
But this farm is a labor of love.

"We're a mile-and-a-half from Super-Walmart, Super-Target, Super-Kroger, and all the stuff that goes with it," Jim said. "But would you know that, standing here in the middle of these animals? This is our little piece of heaven, right square in the middle of the city."

SHEAR DELIGHT

Alpacas live from 15 to 20 years. Every April, they get sheared by a professional.

"We invite other alpaca farmers to come in," Debbie said. "It's cheaper for them to do that versus paying the setup fee





when they only have three or four alpacas.” The Conkles have 42 animals, but it’s not unusual for them to host 80 to 100 on shearing day.

Each alpaca will produce four to six pounds of fiber, in various grades depending on what part of the alpaca it comes from. That gets sold, either to a specialized mill, or directly to artisans who spin it into yarn and hand-weave everything from sweaters to one-of-a-kind rugs. Among the multitude of other products are hats, gloves, socks, scarves, shawls and blankets.

At DJ’s farm events you can also buy alpaca puppets and plush toys, rope, dryer balls, alpaca certified organic soap and skeins of yarn from specific members of the herd.

They even sell the poop—which is called “beans.” It’s virtually odorless, great for gardens, and of course the alpacas politely deposit it in a central area, so it’s easy to pick up.

THE ALPACA JOURNEY

In the 16th century, alpacas were nearly wiped out by the Spanish conquistadors. Fortunately, the Quechua, Aymara and Incas took some and hid them in the high mountain desert, and the herd survived.

Today, there are about 175,000 alpacas in the U.S., and four million in Peru. That’s why it’s cheaper to import most alpaca items from South America than it is to buy those hand-crafted in the U.S. There’s not enough alpaca fleece here to warrant large-scale milling, and hand-knitting is time-consuming and expensive.

To Jim and Debbie, the alpacas are more than livestock—they’re family. Watching them race around, seeing the little ones “pronk” like gazelles in the morning, or the silhouette of the self-appointed guardian as he stands on a hill in the setting sun—those are things they never take for granted.

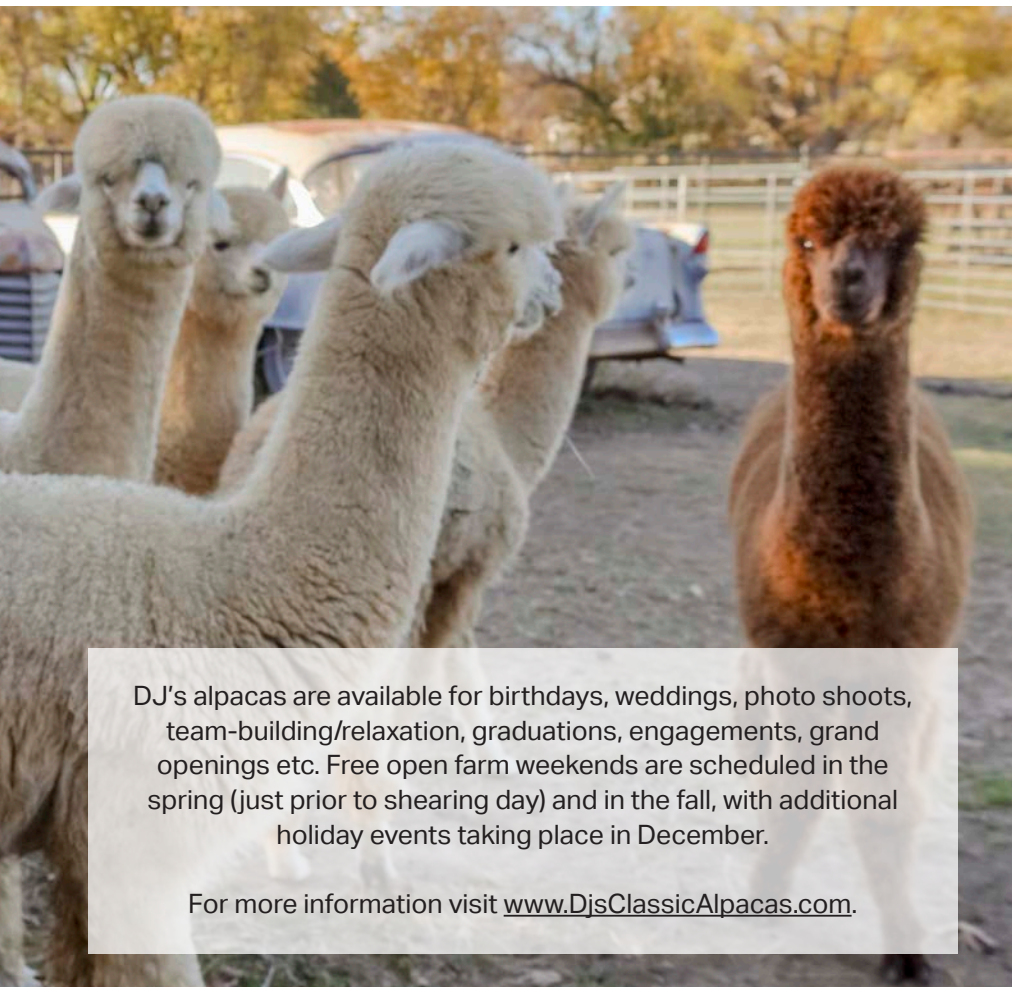
When we visited, two babies had just arrived, and six more were on the way. After an 11-month pregnancy, alpacas usually have single births, and human intervention is rarely needed. Jim and Debbie don’t sell the babies unless you’re also buying the mama—and some are simply not for sale.

“Some of them are just kind of our favorites,” Jim said. “They’re part of the core group.”

Jim said he and Debbie have only one regret.

“That we didn’t start sooner,” he laughed. “We’ve been blessed with these animals, and with the people we’ve met through them. We just try to share those blessings where we can.”

If you’re lucky enough to gaze into those big, brown eyes, share an alpaca’s smile – or steal a kiss – you’ll understand.



DJ’s alpacas are available for birthdays, weddings, photo shoots, team-building/relaxation, graduations, engagements, grand openings etc. Free open farm weekends are scheduled in the spring (just prior to shearing day) and in the fall, with additional holiday events taking place in December.

For more information visit www.DjsClassicAlpacas.com.



A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 

MEMBER ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

Tri-County Electric Cooperative will be attending community events in our service territory in an effort to connect with more of our membership. Visit our bright red tent for a chance to win a bill credit. Bring the event ticket below to our booth and you will take home a member-exclusive gift.

Check out the upcoming events below to find one near you!

Visit tcctexas.com/MEE for more dates and information

UPCOMING EVENTS



May 4

500 S. Oak St.
Roanoke, Texas

SEYMOUR RODEO

July 13

Rodeo Grounds
Seymour, Texas

PARKER COUNTY PEACH FESTIVAL®

July 13

Historic Downtown
Weatherford, Texas

Tri-County Electric Cooperative

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative

CONTACT US

200 Bailey Ranch Road

Aledo, TX 76008

Phone 817-444-3201

Web tcectexas.com

President & Chief Executive Officer

Scott Spence

Board of Directors

Max Waddell, District 9 - Chairman

John Killough, District 6 - Vice Chairman

Margaret Koprek, District 2 - Secretary/Treasurer

Kevin Ingle, District 1

VACANT, District 3

David Miller, District 4

Steve V. Harris, District 5

Sommer Portwood, District 7

Michael Sivertsen, District 8

24/7

Outage Reporting

For information and to report outages, please contact us.

Online: oms.tcectexas.com

App: MyTriCountyTX

Phone: 817-444-3201

Text: OUTAGE to 25069

ABOUT TRI-COUNTY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

Tri-County Electric Cooperative owns and maintains more than 10,000 miles of line to provide electric service to more than 107,000 members in Archer, Baylor, Denton, Foard, Haskell, Hood, Jack, King, Knox, Palo Pinto, Parker, Stonewall, Tarrant, Throckmorton, Wilbarger and Wise counties.

OFFICE LOCATIONS

Aledo

200 Bailey Ranch Road, Aledo 76008

Azle

600 NW Parkway, Azle 76020

Granbury

1623 Weatherford Highway, Granbury 76048

Keller

4900 Keller-Hicks Road, Fort Worth 76244

Seymour

419 N. Main, Seymour 76380

VISIT US ONLINE

tcectexas.com

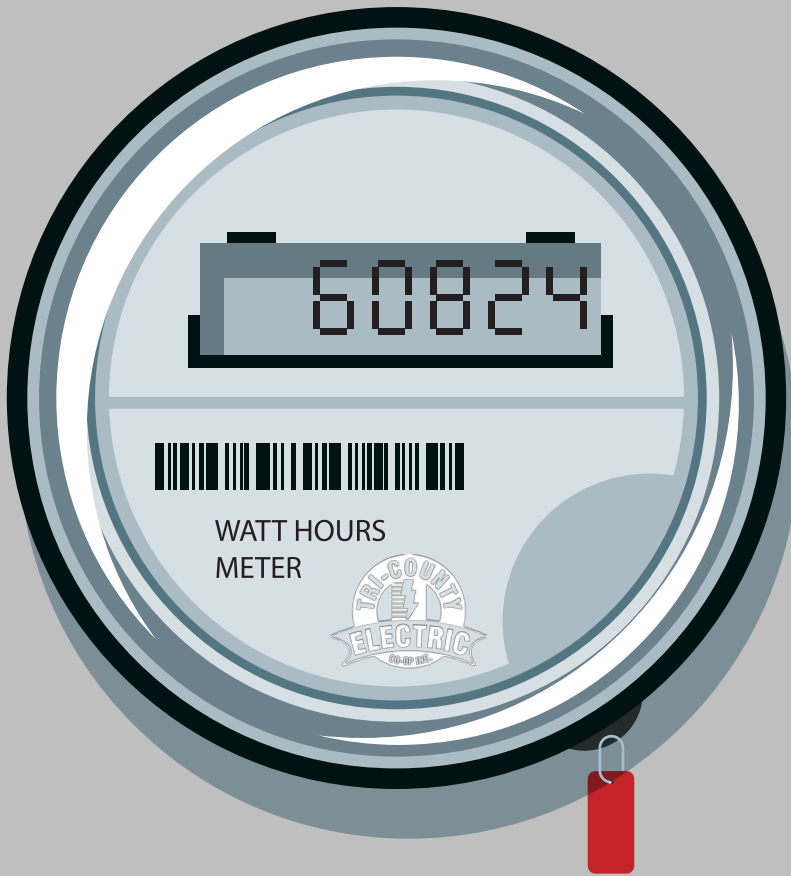
[Facebook.com/TCECTexas](https://www.facebook.com/TCECTexas)

Replacing a breaker or meter base?

Renovating your home?

Installing a generator?

Installing solar?



Effective May 1, only Tri-County Electric Cooperative personnel are authorized to remove your meter. Please call us if you need your meter temporarily disconnected.

Please give at least two (2) business days notice for a disconnect request. There are no fees for temporarily disconnecting your meter.



150 Years of
Iconic U.S. Silver
Dollars

Peace

Silver Eagle
Type 1

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SOUGHT-AFTER U.S. SILVER
DOLLARS, IN ONE SET!



Dates
will vary

Morgan



Eisenhower



Silver Eagle
Type 2



Actual sizes:
38.1-40.6 mm

YOUR ULTIMATE SILVER DOLLAR SET

150 Years of Iconic U.S. Silver Dollars from the Morgan to the Silver Eagle in One Master Collection!

The heritage of American Silver Dollars is rich and diverse, marked by stunningly beautiful designs, leading to an enduring desirability in the hearts of collectors around the world. In this iconic U.S. Silver Dollar set, spanning nearly 150 years, you're getting FIVE American Silver Dollars issued over the last 15 decades that each reflect the history, culture and economic aspects of the United States.

We've Done the Work for You with this Extraordinary 5-Pc. U.S. Silver Dollar Set

Each of these U.S. Silver Dollars is sought-after by collectors individually, but this set includes every design of U.S. Silver Dollar in American history, issued from 1878 to 2024!

Morgan Silver Dollar: First struck 146 years ago in 1878, the Morgan has a historic legacy as the coin that helped build the American West. Minted until 1904, then again in 1921, this 90% silver coin with its iconic Lady Liberty design is the most collected vintage Silver Dollar in the world. Extremely Fine (XF) condition coin included in set.

Peace Silver Dollar: With a beautiful design memorializing peace following the end of World War I, the 90% silver Peace Dollar was intended as a one-year only release struck in 1921—but it proved so popular with the American people, it was struck until 1928, then again in 1934-35. Extremely Fine (XF) condition coin included in set.

Eisenhower Dollar: The last circulating U.S. dollar coin, the Eisenhower Dollar, aka the "Ike Dollar," was prized by Americans, with its design featuring war hero President Dwight D. Eisenhower, backed by an image symbolizing the Apollo II moon landing. First struck with silver 1971-1976, the Eisenhower Dollar in this set was struck in 40% silver for collectors, and you will receive a coin in Brilliant Uncirculated (BU) condition.

Silver Eagle Type 1: The first-ever U.S. Silver Dollar minted in 99.9% silver, these coins were first minted in 1986 following President Ronald Reagan's signing of the Liberty Coin Act into law on July 9, 1985, which authorized the U.S. Mint to strike America's new silver bullion coin. This gorgeous Silver Dollar features the original, revered Type 1 "Heraldic Eagle" reverse design by John Mercanti, 12th Chief Engraver of the U.S. Mint. Brilliant Uncirculated (BU) condition coin included in set.

Silver Eagle Type 2: In honor of the popular 99.9% silver coin's 35th anniversary in 2021, the Silver Eagle received a new, esteemed Type 2 "Eagle Landing" reverse design. This is the current issued coin by the U.S. Mint. Brilliant Uncirculated (BU) condition coin included in set.

SAVE with this Ultimate U.S. Silver Dollar Set!

You'll save both time and money on this 150 Year U.S. Silver Dollar Set, with FREE SHIPPING and a BONUS presentation case, plus a new and informative 150 Years U.S. Silver Dollars booklet! Call right now to get yours before they're gone!

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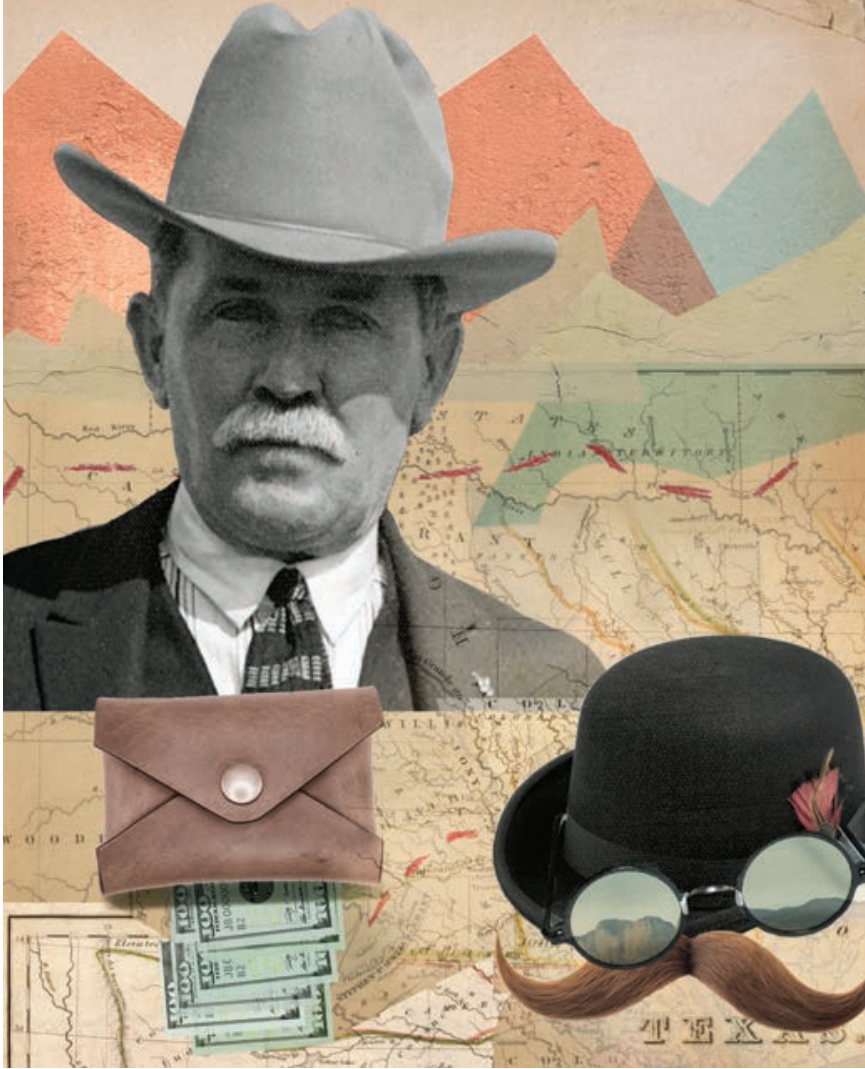
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TCP Listen as W.F. Strong narrates this story on our website.



be interested in his land. That person, Spencer, magically appeared and said they would need to go to the Adolphus Hotel to see another man.

When they sat down in the lobby to wait, Spencer cleverly steered Norfleet so that he'd sit in just the right place to discover a man's pocketbook "lost" in the crevice of the couch. Stetson was the name on an ID card inside. Spencer and Norfleet inquired at the front desk for a Mr. Stetson, got his room number and returned the pocketbook to him.

Stetson (Furey) offered them both \$100 rewards. When Norfleet refused, Stetson told him that he was a stockbroker with the Dallas exchange and said, "Would you mind me placing that money on the market and would you accept what money it might earn?"

Later that day, Stetson gave Norfleet \$800 as the amount his \$100 earned. And that's how the hook was set. From there, Norfleet handed over his own money and eventually cash guarantees, hoping to grow his wealth in the fake exchange. When the con men cleared out on the last round, absconding with all of Norfleet's money, he was left repeating to himself in a stunned haze: "\$45,000 gone, \$90,000 in debt, 54 years old." They stole nearly \$750,000 in today's money.

Norfleet tells the story of his cross-country pursuit of Furey—which took him all the way to Mexico, California, Canada and Florida—in his fast-moving autobiography, *Norfleet*, published in 1924. It's a great adventure and demonstrates an old cowboy's enormous creativity and grit. Or read a more modern version historically contextualized in Amy Reading's *The Mark Inside*.

Whichever you choose, cinch up your saddles nice and snug. It's a wild ride. ■

Payback Time

When a Texas rancher was conned, he spent years tracking down the swindlers

BY W.F. STRONG • ILLUSTRATION BY DANA SMITH

THE YEAR WAS 1921. J. Frank Norfleet, after two years and 30,000 miles of pursuit, finally slapped handcuffs on "Mr. Stetson" in Florida. Stetson—real name Joe Furey—had swindled Norfleet out of \$45,000 in North Texas.

"Well, you old trail hound, I never expected to see you out here," Stetson said. "I thought we left you in Fort Worth, broke."

Norfleet had no experience in law enforcement, city life or sophisticated cons. He was a rancher, a man who had always lived on the edge of the Texas frontier. So when he made up his mind to pursue the band of bunco men who conned him, he used the only tools he had: unfathomable patience, cutting for

sign, camouflage by way of disguises and weaponry. He out-conned the con men.

Norfleet grew up on the Texas plains. He was a trail herder in his early days and eventually managed to buy his own ranch, near Lubbock. By the age of 54, he had finally accumulated some real wealth.

So he went to Dallas with the intent of selling his ranch to buy a bigger one. It was there that con men ensnared him in their sophisticated plot. It went like this.

Norfleet got into a seemingly casual conversation about mules in the lobby of the St. George Hotel in Dallas with a man named Hamlin. Upon hearing Norfleet had a ranch to sell, Hamlin said he just happened to know someone who might

Spring Cakes

Celebrate every occasion with fresh and fruity flavors of the season

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

Spring is here! Bring on the light, fluffy and lemony desserts. My Strawberry Pecan Icebox Cake captures the season in every bite. There's nothing more satisfying than a simple yet elegant dessert you can easily whip up. The best part of this one: It requires no baking.

Strawberry Pecan Icebox Cake

8 ounces cream cheese, room temperature

1 cup powdered sugar

3 cups heavy cream

1 tablespoon vanilla extract

1 tablespoon lemon zest

1 tablespoon lemon juice

1 box graham crackers (14.4 ounces)

4 cups sliced strawberries

½ cup chopped pecans

1. In a large bowl, beat cream cheese at medium speed until smooth. Gradually add powdered sugar and continue beating until smooth.
2. Add 1 cup heavy cream and beat at low speed until smooth. Add remaining 2 cups heavy cream and mix at medium speed until light and fluffy, increasing the speed as the mixture begins to thicken. Fold in the vanilla, lemon zest and lemon juice.
3. Coat the bottom of a 9-by-13-inch pan with cooking spray. Line the bottom of the pan with ⅓ of the graham crackers.
4. Spread ⅓ of the mixture over graham crackers followed by ⅓ of the strawberries and pecans. Repeat layers two times using remaining ingredients, ending with strawberries and pecans.
5. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 4 hours or up to overnight.

SERVES 8-12

TCP Follow Vianney Rodriguez as she cooks in Cocina Gris at sweetlifebake.com, where she features a recipe for Concha Icebox Cake.





Poppy Seed Cake

PATTI CROW
FANNIN EC

Once I bit into Crow's Poppy Seed Cake, I knew why my *abuelita* (grandma) enjoyed these tiny gems. This light, moist cake boasts a sweet nutty flavor. I love snacking on it with my afternoon tea.

- 1 package yellow cake mix (15.25 ounces)**
- 1 package lemon pudding mix (3.4 ounces)**
- ½ cup orange juice**
- ½ cup vegetable oil**
- ½ cup water**
- 2 tablespoons poppy seeds**
- 4 eggs**
- ½ cup lemon juice**
- 2 cups powdered sugar**

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Coat a Bundt pan with cooking spray.
2. In a large bowl, beat the cake mix, pudding mix, orange juice, vegetable oil, water, poppy seeds and eggs at medium speed 5 minutes. Pour into prepared pan.
3. Bake 45 minutes or until a toothpick inserted comes out clean.
4. In a small saucepan, bring lemon juice and powdered sugar to a boil.
5. Remove cake from pan and poke holes throughout top with a fork. Pour hot glaze over cake. Allow to cool before serving.

SERVES 10-12

MORE RECIPES >

\$500 WINNER

Mandarin Crush Cake

DEBRA GIFFORD
PEDERNALES EC



Hello spring ... hello yum!
This cake is pure happiness. A touch of citrus with a pop of pineapple make Gifford's layered cake simply delightful.

SERVES 10



CAKE

- 1 can mandarin oranges (15 ounces), undrained**
- 1 package yellow cake mix (15.25 ounces)**
- ¾ cup vegetable oil**
- 4 eggs**
- 1 teaspoon orange extract**

FROSTING

- 1 package vanilla pudding mix (3.4 ounces)**
- 2 cans crushed pineapple (8 ounces each), undrained**
- 1 container whipped topping (8 ounces)**
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract**

1. **CAKE** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Coat two 8-inch round baking pans with cooking spray.
2. Reserve a few mandarin segments to decorate cake. In a large bowl, beat remaining mandarin oranges and their liquid, cake mix, oil, eggs, and orange extract at medium speed about 3 minutes.
3. Pour batter evenly into cake pans. Bake 20-25 minutes or until a toothpick inserted comes out clean.
4. **FROSTING** In another bowl, mix pudding mix, pineapple and its liquid, whipped topping, and vanilla until smooth. Place in fridge to chill at least 1 hour.
5. Once cakes are cooled, place 1 cake layer on a serving plate and spread half the frosting on top. Place the remaining cake layer on top and spread remaining frosting over top and sides of cake, then place reserved mandarin slices on top to decorate.
6. Chill until ready to serve.

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

PUMPKIN AND SPICE DUE MAY 10
We're looking for something special for our October recipes. Send us your best by May 10 for a chance to win \$500.





Mary Smith's Coconut Cake

MB WATSON
FANNIN EC

This cake is a sweet tribute to Watson's friend Mary, who was a world-class hostess. No one turned down an invitation to her home or for any of her baked desserts. This cross between a cake and a macaroon is soft and chewy on the inside, crisp and golden on the outside. It's also the ultimate coconut lover's dream.

- 2 cups flour
- 1½ cups shredded coconut
- 3 cups sugar, divided use
- 1 cup solid vegetable shortening
- 6 eggs
- 3 teaspoons orange extract, divided use
- ½ cup water

1. Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Coat a 9-by-13-inch pan with cooking spray.
2. In a medium bowl, combine flour with coconut and set aside.
3. In a large bowl, cream 2 cups sugar and shortening together at medium speed until light and fluffy, about 5 minutes. Reduce speed to low and alternate adding eggs, one at a time, and flour until all eggs and flour are mixed. Add 1 teaspoon orange extract, beating until well mixed.
4. Spoon batter into prepared pan. Bake 45 minutes or until a toothpick inserted comes out clean. Remove pan from oven and set aside.

5. In a saucepan over medium-high heat, bring water, remaining 1 cup sugar and remaining 2 teaspoons orange extract to a boil. Continue boiling for 1 minute. Carefully pour over cake.

6. Allow cake to cool completely before serving.

SERVES 16

TCP Search "cake" on our website and you'll find dozens of recipes. Whatever you crave this spring, we have you covered.

SACRED STONE OF THE SOUTHWEST IS ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION

We found a limited supply of turquoise from Arizona and snatched it up for our *Sedona Turquoise Collection*. Inspired by the work of ancient craftsmen and designed to showcase the exceptional blue stone, each stabilized vibrant cabochon features a unique, one-of-a-kind matrix surrounded in Bali metalwork. You could drop over \$1,200 on a turquoise pendant, or you could secure 26 carats of genuine Arizona turquoise for **just \$99**.

Jewelry Specifications:

• *Arizona turquoise* • *Silver-finished settings*

Sedona Turquoise Collection

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COURTESY CHET GARNER

Breaking News

Take a sledgehammer to a printer in Kyle's 'rage room'

BY CHET GARNER

IF YOU WERE to envision a day trip to the Pie Capital of Texas, you might picture homey cafés, cozy cups of coffee and buttery crusts filled with sugary happiness. And you can certainly find those things in Kyle, south of Austin. But you can also smash pie plates into tiny bits and shatter coffee cups into smithereens—legally (and safely)—at Uncharted Adventures, a unique indoor entertainment center.

I stepped into what looked like an inconspicuous warehouse on the outskirts of town and met owner Damon Fogley. He started a junk removal business after serving in the Army and soon learned about a phenomenon called rage rooms, where folks can pay to break stuff.

Fogley had more than enough junk for the job, and the concept was born in Kyle. But to create a full-on destination, he added two escape rooms, a zombie shooting range, splatter-paint lounge and plenty of Instagram-worthy backdrops. It's unconventional family fun at its finest.

Before letting out my inner Hulk on inanimate objects, I tried the zombie shooting range. Armed with a gun that shot tiny gel balls, I took aim at zombie robots jumping out from an apocalyptic set. I don't think I killed any of them (they are undead, after all), but it felt great.

Finally, it was time to rage. And so, donning full-body coveralls and a face shield, I stepped into a room full of bottles, vases, TVs and printers. I picked up a sledgehammer and, with a Neanderthal's scream, I swung it straight into a coffee maker. It flew across the room, hit the wall and broke into pieces.

It was awesome. I'm not angry by nature, but this was a strange kind of therapy that I think everyone could use. ■

ABOVE Chet poses in an Instagram-worthy setting. (No, that is not videotape of *The Daytripper* show.)

TCP Readers know Chet is a smashing success. See for yourself with the video on our website. Find all his Texplorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



Know Before You Go

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

MAY

07

Lewisville The Elton Johns with the She, (972) 219-3401, cityoflewisville.com

09

Corsicana 50 Years of Rock and Roll, (903) 874-7792, corsicanapalace.com

10

Alamo [10–11] Watermelon Festival & BBQ Cook-Off, (956) 787-0006, alamotexas.org

New Braunfels [10–11] Ballet Texas Presents *Peter Pan*, (830) 627-0808, brauntex.org

15

Lakeway Lakeway Photography Club Meeting, (512) 263-2885, lakewayphotographyclub.com

16

Luling Field Day, (830) 875-2438, lulingfoundation.org

Giddings [16–18] Lee County Fair, leecountyfairtx.com

17

Columbus [17–18] Magnolia Days Festival, (979) 732-8385, magnoliadays.org

18

La Grange Bluff Schuetzen-Fest, friendsofkbmh.org

23

Kerrville [23–June 9] Kerrville Folk Festival, (830) 257-3600, kerrvillefolkfestival.org

24

Fredericksburg [24–26] Crawfish Festival, fbgcrawfishfestival.com

25

Brenham Elvis! by Vince King and the Vegas Mafia Band, (979) 337-7240, thebarnhillcenter.com

Chappell Hill Art Walk, (979) 337-9910, chappellhilltx.com

26

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

New Braunfels Antique Barn Sale and Makers Market, (830) 629-2943, newbraunfelsconservation.org

31

Kerrville [31-June 1] The Comedy of Errors, (830) 896-9393, caillouperformingarts.com

JUNE

01

Graham Food Truck Championship of Texas, (940) 549-0401, foodtruckchampionshipoftexas.com

Leander Old Town Street Festival, (512) 259-1907, oldtownstreetfestival.com

Waxahachie [1-2] Gingerbread Trail Tour of Homes, (972) 937-0681, elliscountymuseum.org

07

Fredericksburg [7-8] Craft Beer Festival, fbcraftbeerfestival.com

Blanco [7-9] Lavender Festival, (830) 833-5101, blancolavenderfest.com

Ingram [7-8, 13-15, 20-22] Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, (830) 367-5121, hcaf.com

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2 LINDSAY HUMPHREYS
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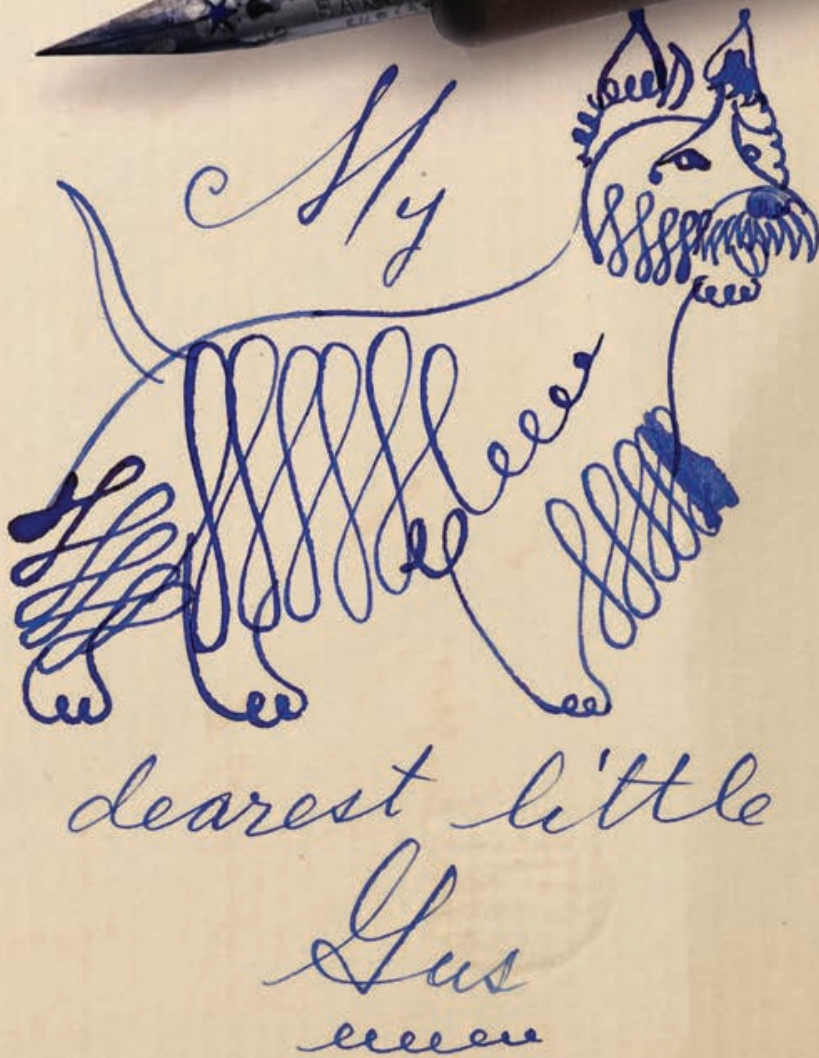
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TCP See Focus on Texas on our website for many more Rides photos from readers.



Grandma's Best Friend

Life is better when people and dogs can age together

BY MARTHA DEERINGER
ILLUSTRATION BY
ELVIS SWIFT

WHEN MY MOTHER finally made the difficult decision to move in with my family in her early 80s, she harbored plenty of misgivings, deciding on the move only when her rheumatoid arthritis and congestive heart failure made it unsafe for her to live alone. Mother brought along her aging West Highland white terrier, Gus, a bone cancer survivor who hopped gamely through the house on his three remaining legs.

Mother left behind a sprawling brick home in town where she had lived for 30 years and took up residence with us in the country in an addition designed to accommodate her needs. Suddenly she was 20 miles from the nearest hub of civilization.

There were plenty of people to take care of her here. Still, she missed her

independence and the opportunity to go out to lunch with friends or run errands on a moment's notice.

Our grandchildren doted on their great-grandma. They drank her Ensure, did somersaults on her couch, fed Gus their cookies and badgered her to read stories. Since her addition was attached to the main house, she had to install a latch on the inside of her door in order to catch uninterrupted naps.

Gus was also unsettled by the move, his lush St. Augustine lawn replaced by spiky Bermuda grass with cows across the fence. He viewed these large animals with deep suspicion and barked ferociously when they approached his empire, a small separate yard he accessed through a doggie door.

Most of Gus' time was spent curled beside the swivel rocker where Mother read biographies and watched our pair of free-ranging peacocks, who chose the porch rail outside her window to preen themselves and admire their reflections in the glass.

For a couple of years after she came to live with us, Mother was able to drive to town for haircuts, church and social occasions, but as her health slipped, she stayed home more. Her friends, also in their 80s, came to visit less often.

But she had Gus, and scientists have known for decades that older adults who own pets reap vast benefits.

In good weather Mother strolled our long driveway with Gus' lead slipped over the handle of her walker. She could talk to Gus about anything. Unlike her great-grandchildren, he never interrupted.

Gus seemed to know the help he provided, and he was always there beside her, sporting a whiskery grin and waving tail.

She celebrated five Mother's Days with us before she died, giving three generations of our family the chance to benefit from her wisdom and to learn to honor and appreciate the life lessons older folks can teach us all.

Gus passed away peacefully a few weeks after she did. ■

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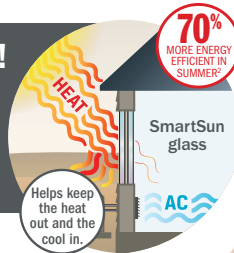
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