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December 2023



06

Strings Attached

A Houston woodworker turns rich woods into custom banjos with a lot of dedication and sandpaper.

Story by Margaret Buranen
Photos by Nathan Lindstrom

10 Counting on Christmas

Matagorda County continues to lead the way in an annual nationwide bird count.

By Pam LeBlanc
Photos by Erich Schlegel

04

Currents

The latest buzz

05

TCP Talk

Readers respond

16

Co-op News

Information plus energy and safety tips from your cooperative

25

Footnotes in Texas History

How Texas Became a Desert
By W.F. Strong

26

TCP Kitchen

Slow Cooker
By Vianney Rodriguez

30

Hit the Road

Art and Parts
By Chet Garner

33

Focus on Texas

Photo Contest: Mailboxes

34

Observations

The Best Christmas Gift I Ever Gave
By W.A. McCormick

ON THE COVER

Slow Cooker Holiday Punch (recipe on Page 26).
Photo by Jason David Page

ABOVE

A banjo handmade by David Getman.
Photo by Nathan Lindstrom



Make Your Tree a Cut Above

CUTTING DOWN your own Christmas tree can be a fun family outing that gets everyone in the holiday spirit.

The Texas Christmas Tree Growers Association website lists dozens of Christmas tree farms in the state. You might find one near you.

Did you know that most trees grown in Texas are between 3 and 6 years old when they're sold as Christmas trees?



A Year in Big Bend

Photographer and writer E. Dan Klepper, an occasional contributor to *TCP*, was selected to provide the photos for the Big Bend National Park 2024 Calendar. Order your copy and support the Big Bend Natural History Association at bbnha.org.

FINISH THIS SENTENCE

Can't I have just one more ...

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 October prompt: **I collect ...**

Memories of people who extend small acts of kindness.

LORETTA BEDFORD
DEEP EAST TEXAS EC
SAN AUGUSTINE

Vintage clothing. I enjoy designing unique outfits. It's like a snapshot of history that lives on.

HEATHER MCMEANS MCCARROLL
VIA FACEBOOK

Nothing. But cats seem to collect me.

VALLEE GREEN
BLUEBONNET EC
ELGIN

Sand from every beach I visit in hopes of retiring to a beach someday.

SHIRLEY WETSEL
SOUTH PLAINS EC
WOLFFORTH

Things my children will throw away someday.

LISA STAPLETON
CENTRAL TEXAS EC
FREDERICKSBURG

Visit our website to see more responses.

TCP Contests and More

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Pollinators

RECOMMENDED RECIPES

Don't let National Cookie Day, December 4, pass without trying—and sharing—some of the cookie recipes on our website. We have dozens. Just search "cookies."

Our Cup of Tea

“I so enjoy your publication. It’s like sitting down with a friend and a cup of tea.”

MAX BERNREUTER
PEDERNALES EC
CEDAR PARK



JULIA ROBINSON

Root of All Evil?

That’s cute—so which one is picking on my fiddle leaf and plumeria [Currents, *Planter Banter*, September 2023]?

Rachelle Shockey
Via Facebook

Three Cheers For ...

I would like to thank Vianney Rodriguez for the spectacularly delicious Three-Bean Salad recipe [October 2023]. This is a keeper!

Laura Fortenberry
Panola-Harrison EC
Carthage

Uplifting Story

It was so much fun to see my hometown high school, McGregor High School (class of 1958), featured for its rocket science project [*It’s Rocket Science (And so Much More)*, October 2023].

McGregor has quite the history in that arena. My great-grandparents had land

that was used during World War II for a bomb plant. Later it was used by Rocketdyne to produce solid jet fuel. Now SpaceX is close by.

Kudos to the teachers who are teaching them to think for themselves and be challenged.

Joan Roberts
CoServ
Denton

These students embody all that makes America the best in the world.

Whenever I encounter a young person who is courteous and has a goal, be it college or a trade school or just a job, I take the time to thank them and let them know that I am proud of them, for they are the future of our country.

Ted Pasche
CoServ
Argyle



SCOTT VAN OSDOL

TCP WRITE TO US
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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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A Houston woodworker turns
rich woods into custom banjos
with a lot of time and sandpaper

Strings Attached





DAVID GETMAN was working in a music store in Brooklyn, New York, in 1997 when a friend gave him a box of banjo parts. The friend suggested that he see what he could make with the pieces.

Getman was intrigued. “I was 22. I had no tools. I wasn’t a woodworker,” he says. “But I liked to tinker.”

After fashioning a banjo from the parts, Getman became more interested in the instrument that has deep roots in North America. “I wasn’t a big fan of bluegrass, but I liked syncopated picking.”

Experimenting with playing and composing his own banjo music led Getman to develop a deep appreciation for the Appalachian style of banjo playing known as frailing or clawhammer. Unlike the three-finger bluegrass style, which typically consists of an up-picking motion by the fingers and down-picking of the thumb, clawhammer is all down-picking with a clawlike hand.

Clawhammer is typically done on an open-back banjo that produces a more mellow sound. Getman likes “the rich, deep notes, like rolling thunder” that these banjos produce.

Seventeen years after that first banjo, Getman discovered rotted floor joists in his Houston home. He bought tools to

do the repair work. Then he wondered what else he could do with his expensive new tools. That led to a new avocation.

Today, as a banjo-maker, restorer and player, Getman, 49, runs Lindale Banjos out of his home in Houston’s Lindale Park neighborhood while working full time as a social science researcher and raising a son and daughter with his wife. He’s proud that the renowned Fiddler’s Green Music Shop in Lockhart accepted one of his banjos in 2021—the first he made that he thought was good enough to sell. The store has been selling his instruments ever since.

“Fiddler’s Green is known to musicians beyond Texas. They have customers from as far away as Japan,” says Getman, who plans to make banjos full time when he retires.

Banjos come in two distinct styles. Bluegrass musicians prefer banjos that have wooden, bowl-shaped attachments called resonators on their backs. A resonator projects the sound outward toward the audience. Getman makes clawhammer banjos with open backs, a style used by musicians who play old-time or Appalachian music.

Making a banjo of either style is a long, complicated process.

“A guitar is made entirely of wood, but a banjo has both metal and wooden parts,” says Jim Penson, another Texas banjo-maker. “Quality bonding of those two different materials requires quality workmanship.”

Penson, who also restores, plays and teaches the instrument, makes resonator banjos at his shop in Arlington. He works in intervals of 15–20 minutes that total 80–100 hours for each banjo he produces. Between work sessions, he must

OPPOSITE David Getman plays an all-walnut banjo with a calfskin hide head that he custom-made for a client. ABOVE Getman sands a banjo rim in his Houston workshop.



LEFT Detail of a custom-inlaid headstock on a Getman banjo.
BELOW Forming a perfectly round rim is part of the time-consuming process of constructing a banjo.



allow time for lacquer or glue to dry completely before undertaking the next step.

“The most difficult part is also the least important. It’s finishing the instrument, making it look glossy,” says Penson, 69. “People who spend a lot of money for a custom-made banjo want it to look perfect.”

The Penson family lived in a 120-year-old farmhouse in Illinois, and his father was always restoring something in the house. Watching and helping his dad got him interested in woodworking. He moved to Texas in his 20s and got much more involved with banjos. He played in various bluegrass bands, including one with the late Earl Scruggs, considered the most influential banjo player in the world.

About 25 years ago, he opened Penson String Works, where, amid demand for his custom guitars, he turns out three banjos every year.

“You can use good components and not make a good banjo,” Penson says. “You can have not so good components and good workmanship and get a good banjo. It’s kind of the luck of the draw.”

Long soaks are required to make the wood pliable enough to be formed into the banjo’s round rim. Getman gains back a bit of that time with efficiency: He cuts four of each part before resetting his lathe. Still, it takes several weeks to finish a banjo.

Getman likes to use walnut because it’s sustainable and easy to get, but he also uses cherry. Maple is a popular choice for banjos, but it’s lighter—almost bright, he says, in

appearance and tone. He prefers “the darker woods, walnut and cherry, for both the aesthetics and the tones they give the banjos.”

The most challenging aspect of making a banjo is “the tedium of sanding,” Getman says. “You want the finished wood to look like glass. You sand parts five, six, seven times with different grades of sandpaper until it feels as smooth as it can be.”

And the most difficult part?

“From a technical point, it’s making the part at the end of the neck where it meets the pot,” Getman says. “Cutting that exactly right is next to impossible without the right tool.”

An experienced banjo player looks for an instrument that feels good in their hands, Getman says. The tone and volume should be consistent up and down the range of notes.

Custom banjos can cost \$1,200 or more, and musicians often request custom inlays of ivory, mother of pearl and other expensive materials for the headstock and fretboard.

One of Getman’s customers requested a headstock inlay depicting the night sky. Getman had saved a burl of wood—what looks like a knot when it’s attached to the tree trunk—because he liked its wavy grain. He added black ebony for the sky and cut the burl open to represent ocean waves below.

It’s challenging work but the rewards are plenty.

“Hearing the finished product is the best part,” says Getman, who makes four or five banjos a year. “You take the different pieces and your ideas, and then when it’s finished, you get to hear that banjo’s tone.” ■

TCP Find this story on our website to hear David Getman play one of his banjos.



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Counting on Christmas

I'M sloshing through a marshy field in Matagorda County, along the Texas coast, a pair of binoculars dangling around my neck and cold raindrops pelting my bright blue jacket.

A hundred yards away, ornithologist Rich Kostecke points toward a cluster of what looks to me like a group of white footballs on stilts. I slap a mosquito off my arm and take a closer look: egrets.

We've just ticked off another species in the annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count, which takes place across the country between December 14 and January 5. The event got its start on Christmas Day in 1900. Instead of holding a hunting competition, as was popular at the time, an ornithologist and Audubon Society officer named Frank Chapman came up with a less destructive alternative: Count—but don't shoot—the birds.

The idea caught on. Today, tens of thousands of birders participate in counts in all 50 states and in 20 countries.

During the 2021–22 count, they logged almost 43 million birds at more than 2,000 sites.

I'm new to birding, but I love tromping around outdoors, and I could spend all day watching wildlife. Besides, it feels good to contribute to science, and this annual count provides data that sheds light on long-term avian trends.

But joining the Matagorda County-Mad Island Marsh Preserve count is especially exciting. The plot where I'm birding—a circular area with a 15-mile diameter—almost always records more species than any other area in the country.

The Matagorda County count began 30 years ago when Brent Ortego, then a biologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and Jim Bergan, formerly of the Nature Conservancy, realized they could position a count circle that would incorporate a bit of the Gulf of Mexico, a stretch of coastline and some land along the Colorado River. Much of the 176-square-mile plot is on private land, but it also includes the Nature Conservancy's Clive Runnells Family Mad Island Marsh Preserve and the neighboring



In an annual nationwide bird count, **Matagorda County** has led the US for 15 years in a row

Mad Island Marsh Wildlife Management Area.

It's fertile territory for birding.

"A lot of habitats come together here—coastal prairie, marshes, bay and forest," says Kostecke, who heads the small team to which I've been assigned for the count.

Under the bird count guidelines, teams tally all the species they see during a single calendar day. You don't need any special training or certification to participate, but only birds spotted by knowledgeable birders figure into the official total. Still, newbies like me typically can participate if there's room.

"It's a repeated count at the same time, year after year, so we're getting a snapshot across the nation over that time period," Kostecke says.

In a typical year, birders here log about 230 species during the count. But today's stormy weather doesn't bode well.

About 100 birders are participating in the count this year. Last night we lined up for bowls of chili and hot cornbread and talked strategy.

One group would watch for yellow-headed blackbirds.

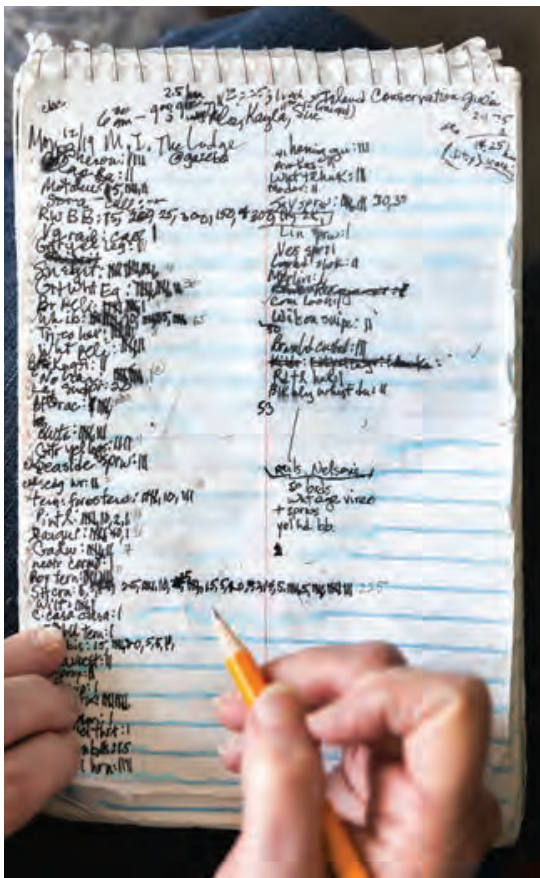
Another would head out at night, hoping to flush out tiny yellow rails and black rails in the darkness. The circle was divided into 16 sectors, with groups assigned to each one. We knew the weather would be a challenge because, like humans, birds hunker down in the rain.

"We may have to work harder to get them out," says Ortego, the official compiler for the event.

The count officially begins at midnight. I'm tucked inside my camper van then, but a hardy group of birders heads into the night to look for owls and other nocturnal birds.

I meet my team—Kostecke, along with ecologist Charlotte Reemts, her husband and their two daughters—early the next morning, which dawns gloomy and damp.

OPPOSITE From left, Rich Kostecke, Charlotte Reemts and author Pam LeBlanc are among about 100 birders who spent a rainy day participating in the Mad Island Marsh Preserve count. ABOVE A painted bunting's breeding grounds include much of Texas.



Since 1970, the population of birds in North America has dropped by 3 billion birds, or nearly 30%.

We pile into two cars then head down a gravel road, stopping periodically to scan the surroundings.

Within 20 minutes, Kostecke has already logged 10 species. He doubles that when we reach a lake, and his list grows further when we hike into the brush and eventually reach the marsh. I love birding but definitely do not know my birds, so I leave the identification to the experts.

We spend all morning admiring turkey vultures perched in trees and great blue herons wading in the water. At noon, we head back to headquarters. Raindrops plunk on the roof; it's foggy outside. Birders peel off soggy rain jackets as they come in for a break.

"What did you get?" someone asks a dripping man who walks in.

"Wet," he responds with a chuckle.

The birders munch leftover chili and discuss what they've spotted. So far, no one has recorded anything that's never been seen here before. But they have logged lots of birds, from Pepto Bismol-colored roseate spoonbills to pelicans, crested caracaras, white ibises and plenty of noisy sandhill cranes.

"There's still quite a few rocks to turn over," preserve manager Steven Goertz says as the birders head out for the rest of the day.

In the end, the Matagorda County-Mad Island Marsh Preserve circle reports 218 species, enough to retain the crown for the most species in the country. A count in San Diego comes in a close second with 213. It marks the 24th time this corner of Texas has come in first or tied for first—and the 15th straight year it has topped the list outright.

But the rain took a toll. A dozen species usually recorded here weren't seen. Still, they got some good ones—the scaly-breasted munia, with its checkerboard chest; a squat-looking bird with an impressively long bill called a green kingfisher; the rose-breasted grosbeak, the male of which

LEFT Unforgiving December weather leaves Sue McBeth Welfel's notebook a bit soggy. ABOVE Sandhill cranes were quite plentiful during the count.



looks like it's wearing a red bandana around its neck; the Western kingbird, with its lemon-colored belly; and the tall, spindly wood stork.

They also found one that I've long wanted to see—the tallest bird in North America, the whooping crane, which stands nearly 5 feet tall and has a wingspan of 7½ feet. Whooping crane numbers dropped to about 20 individuals in the 1940s but, thanks to conservation efforts, a population of about 600 now exists in the wild. They winter near here.

"It's an adrenaline rush," Ortego says of the count he helped start. "It's pride that you had the skills to locate an unusual bird when people are counting on you."

The count has scientific value as well. Biologists have seen a reduction in the raw number of birds in the past 50 years, and the counts provide evidence.

"For us, these data sets are important because the populations of birds that they monitor are not the subject of any formal monitoring program," says Lisa Gonzalez, executive director and vice president of Audubon Texas.

Since 1970, the population of birds in North America has dropped by 3 billion birds, or nearly 30%, she says.

The decline has hit nearly all species. Wetland birds like geese and swans are the exception; their numbers have stayed mostly stable, Gonzalez says.

Much of the loss is due to human activity. "Collisions and impacts are one of the major causes of bird loss, along with overall declines in habitat and a change in environmental conditions driven by climate change," Gonzalez says.

The public can help.

"Share the shore," Gonzalez says. "If you live or recreate along the coast, understand that it doesn't take a lot to disturb birds, especially nesting birds. When you're boating or fishing, steer clear of islands where birds nest—and keep dogs on a leash."

Watch for birds that nest on the ground when you drive on beaches, and turn off unnecessary outdoor lights during spring and fall migrations. And, if you're willing to spend a day outside looking for a flash of feathers, consider joining a bird count in your area.

"It's a fun thing to say we have the No. 1 count, but the count would be fun even if we weren't No. 1," Reemts says. "It's just all about the experience of being out here and seeing stuff." ■

TCP See this story on our website to learn if there is a Christmas Bird Count near you.

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MESSAGE
FROM
GENERAL
MANAGER

**GARY DON
NIETSCHÉ**

May Your Holiday Season Be Merry and Bright

THE HOLIDAYS ARE a time of year that many of us eagerly anticipate. There are delicious foods, colorful decorations and fabulous festivities. Right here in our community, we look forward to the Christmas parades, lighting ceremonies and much more.

We cherish old family traditions and enjoy creating new ones. For me personally, I look forward to more time spent with family and friends.

Despite the hustle and bustle of the season, the holidays also offer an opportunity to slow down and reflect. From all of us at Fayette Electric Cooperative, we are grateful for you, our members.

One of our founding principles as a co-op is Concern for Community. While our main focus is providing safe, reliable and affordable energy, we also want to support our friends and neighbors—to help our community thrive.

Reflection

In looking back at this past year, I'm grateful we were able to make a positive impact in the community. Through programs such as our Co-op Customer Shred Day, your cooperative and its employees helped make our corner of Texas better.

We're also grateful for the opportunity to partner with local schools and Progressive Ag Day to raise

awareness about the importance of electrical safety. And we continue to work closely with local high schools to award college scholarships to deserving students and to send students on the Youth Tour to Washington, D.C.

These are just some of the ways we show our commitment to our community, alongside providing information about saving energy to lower bills, assessing if solar power is right for you and sharing safety tips. We want you to know we're here to help.

What's Next

Looking ahead to 2024, we hope you'll share your feedback with us. We recognize that our members bring valuable perspective, and that's why we continually seek your input. Whether through community events, our social media channels or the annual meeting, we want to hear from you. We're led by you—the members of the co-op—and we depend on your feedback.

As we prepare for next year, we look forward to the opportunity to serve you and the greater community. On behalf of the entire Fayette EC family, we hope your holidays are indeed merry and bright. ■



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Be Prepared for Winter Storms

WHEN TEMPERATURES DROP and storms hit, it can be challenging to stay safe and warm. Winter storm severity varies depending on where you live, but nearly all Texans are affected by extreme winter weather at some point. Fayette Electric Cooperative cares about your safety, and we want you to be prepared.

Snow and ice can lead to downed power lines, leaving co-op members without power. During extremely low temperatures, this can be dangerous. During a power outage, our crews will continue to work as quickly and safely as possible to restore power, but there are a few things you can do to prepare yourself.

Stay warm. Plan to use a safe alternate heating source, such as a fireplace or wood-burning stove during a power outage. These are great options to keep you and your loved ones warm, but exercise caution when using them, and never leave the heating source unattended. If you are using gasoline-, propane- or natural gas-burning devices to stay warm, never use them indoors. Remember that fuel- and wood-burning sources of heat should always be properly ventilated. Always read the manufacturer's directions before using.

Stay fed. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends having handy several days' supply of food that does not need to be cooked. Crackers, cereal, canned goods and bread are good options. Five gallons of water per person should also be available in the event of an extended power outage.

Stay safe. When an outage occurs, it usually means power lines are down. It's best not to travel during winter storms, but if you must, bring a survival kit along, and don't travel alone. If you encounter downed lines, always assume they are live. Stay as far away from the downed lines as possible, and report the situation to our dispatchers by calling (979) 968-3181. You should also call 911.

Winter weather can be unpredictable and dangerous, and planning ahead can mean the difference between life and death. Fayette EC is ready for what Mother Nature has in store, and we want you to be ready, too. For more winter safety tips, visit ready.gov/winter-weather. ■

Fayette Electric Cooperative

Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 

CONTACT US

357 N. Washington St.
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La Grange, TX 78945
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Toll-Free 1-866-968-3181
Email electric@fayette.coop
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Fayette EC provides *Texas Co-op Power* and 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



Danger! Outlet Overload

EVERY YEAR, U.S. fire departments respond to an estimated 51,000 home electrical fires, which cause nearly 500 deaths, 1,400 injuries and \$1.3 billion in property loss. Thirty-nine percent of home electrical fires involve outlets and receptacles and other electrical wiring.

To ensure safety, you should only use about 80% of the available current for each electrical outlet in your home.

Using powerstrips and surge protectors does not increase the available amperage.

These are common warning signs of an overloaded circuit:

- ▶ Dimming, flickering or blinking lights.
- ▶ Discolored or warm outlet covers and wall plates.
- ▶ A burning smell coming from outlets or switches.
- ▶ Buzzing, sizzling outlets.
- ▶ Small electric shocks from switches or outlets.
- ▶ Breakers frequently tripping.

If you observe any of these signs, contact an electrician immediately to have the potential problem assessed. ■



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Safe and Smart Heating Tips

HEATING A HOME ACCOUNTS for about half of a typical winter electric bill, making it the largest expense for most consumers. You can heat your home this winter in safe and smart ways with these tips from Fayette Electric Cooperative.

Furnace. Inspect your furnace at least annually. Removing built-up dirt can reduce the risk of fire and make your furnace run more efficiently. Also remember to replace your furnace filter regularly during the winter. Replacing a dirty filter will increase the airflow and make your home more energy-efficient.

Thermostat. Turning the thermostat down a few degrees when you are away from home or sleeping also helps reduce your monthly utility bill. To help you do this automatically, consider investing in a programmable thermostat.

Space heaters. Space heaters are not cost-efficient when heating large areas. However, they're a smart option when only one room needs to be heated. Use only certified models that have been tested by an independent laboratory and those with switches that shut them off if they fall over. Always place space heaters on a steady surface away from foot traffic and at least 3 feet from anything flammable.

Electric blankets and heating pads. Familiarize yourself with the manufacturer's instructions and use the product only as intended. Never use an electric blanket that is wet or folded.

Small-scale strategies. Remember not to overlook minor changes to help you stay warm this winter. When possible, dress in layers with clothes that are tight and close to the skin so that they can trap heat near the body. Switch your ceiling fan's rotation so it circles in a clockwise direction, creating an updraft to circulate warm air around the room. Additionally, use curtains to help block out the cold air when closed at night and to let in the sun's heat when parted during the day. ■



"A child is born to us. A son is given to us. And he will be our ruler. He will be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
—Isaiah 9:6

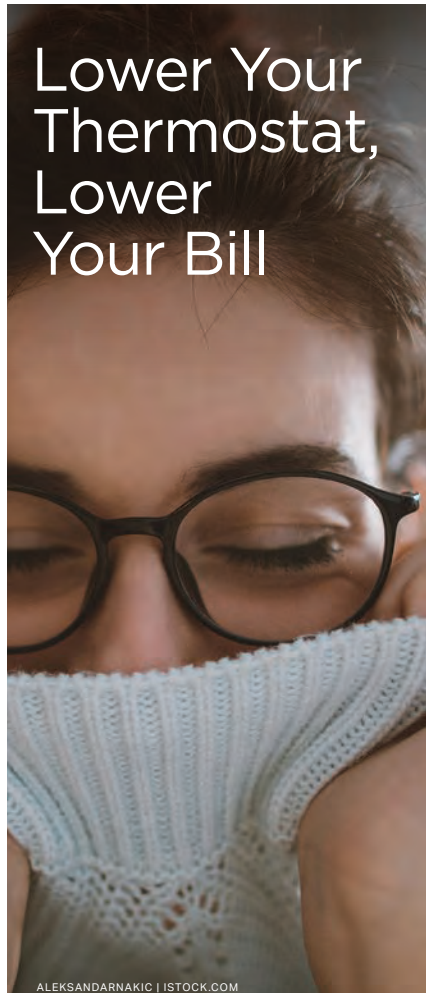
Merry Christmas

from Fayette Electric Cooperative

From our co-op family to yours, wishing you a joyous holiday season and a happy and peaceful new year.

Our office will be closed Monday–Tuesday, December 25–26, and Monday, January 1, for the holidays.

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Close shades and blinds at night to reduce heat loss.

Open them to capture solar heat on sunny days.

Avoid using electric space heaters.

Change furnace filters.

Weatherstrip or caulk doors and windows.

Fayette EC encourages you to always use energy efficiently.



Texas Youth Tour: Empowering Siblings To See D.C.

BY JESSICA MONTEZ

MOVE ASIDE, run-of-the-mill presents! What’s better than a trip of a lifetime for the holidays? How about sharing one with your siblings? That’s exactly what Jessie, Emma and Charles Neuendorff of Fayetteville did on the Government-in-Action Youth Tour. This incredible adventure brought them even closer together, creating memories they’ll cherish forever.

Since 1965, Fayette Electric Cooperative has sponsored the Government-in-Action Youth Tour for youths serviced by the cooperative. Often called the “trip of a lifetime,” Youth Tour brings local students up-close to monuments, museums, art and historical sites in and around Washington, D.C., and provides a firsthand look at how our federal government works with visits to the U.S. Capitol and congressional representatives.

For the Neuendorff family, the first sibling to go on this immersive trip in 2010 was the oldest, Jessie (Neuendorff) Gibbons, who now runs two businesses—XOXOart & Co. and Papergarten. She applied for the trip after hearing some of her older mentors who had gone on the trip talk about how fun and full of opportunities it was.

“They encouraged me to apply and, on my trip, it was really refreshing to meet others from such a variety of places,” Jessie said. “I loved the chance to convene in one place and help get kids out of their shells.” Once she came back home, she knew this was an experience her siblings had to have. “Being the oldest, I encouraged them to apply



Jessie (Neuendorff) Gibbons went on the Government-in-Action Youth Tour in 2010 and was the first of her siblings to go. She knew as soon as she came back home her siblings had to go, too.



Emma Neuendorff (third from right) works as a mechanical design engineer for new product development of medical devices at Stryker in Michigan. Touring Washington, D.C., in 2012 was one of the first times she traveled without the rest of her family, and it made her appreciate taking the time to observe historical sites when she travels today.

after I was lucky enough to go, and it was really exciting that my siblings had the chance to attend as well.”

Next to follow in her sister’s footsteps in 2012 was mechanical design engineer, Emma.

“My sister had gone on the trip before me and had great things to say about the experience,” Emma said. “My parents were also encouraging all of us to apply.” She especially remembers the days of the trip being filled with activities, sightseeing and learning new, interesting facts about her cooperative. “I remember being very busy and seeing all the monuments and museums,” she said. “It was also a cool way to see the breakdown of how many electric co-ops there are in each state, and that was reflected in how many students attended from each state. Texas students were a large portion of participants on the trip once we arrived in D.C.”

The youngest Neuendorff, Charles, an investment analyst and business owner, went in 2014 and, unlike his sisters’ experiences on the trip, he experienced something he didn’t expect. “One thing that stands out the most thinking back on the trip wasn’t the thing I thought would stand out,” Charles said. “My experience was tied to the social impact of coming from a small town and going on an expedition with new people my age, and that’s more valuable than you would think. It taught me how to interact with the world and about how the world works.”

And, as you might expect, each sibling had a different favorite part of the trip. “Museums are my favorite,” said Jessie. “I was in awe of the Smithsonian exhibits.” Charles’ favorite activity was the cruise on the Potomac River. “We rented an entire boat, big enough for the 200+ people on the trip to have dinner and conversation for two or three hours,” he said. “It was great because it was a time for me and the friends I made to enjoy great food and discuss our lives while looking out at the bay.”

One of Emma’s favorite parts of the trip that she remembers well was visiting Mount Vernon and making college friends. “I really enjoyed getting to walk through that property and seeing it,” Emma said. “Outside of that, I met a lot of great people who I ended up seeing again when I entered college. Several of the other students went to the University of Texas at Austin.”

While some time has passed since their time on the trip, there is one thing that hasn’t changed—the lasting effect it has had on them.

“I would say the biggest impact this trip had on me was that it gave me a glimpse into how big the world is,” said Charles. “Coming from a small town and growing up on a ranch, you think everyone is the same as you. Before the trip, I was under the impression that everyone had access to silence that comes with a wide-open space, and the responsibility that comes with owning

cattle. The more people I talked to, the more I realized we all come from different arenas and have different skills and passions. The lasting impact of the trip is that it taught me more about the world around me.”



Catherine Pieratt and Charles Neuendorff were the two delegates sponsored by Fayette Electric Cooperative in 2014.

Emma's main takeaway had her looking toward her future.

"I think overall, it was a great development opportunity for me," Emma said. "It was one of the first times I traveled without the rest of my family, and it inspired me to continue doing that later in life. It also made me appreciate taking the time to observe historical sites when I have the option as I travel today."

All three siblings do agree the trip was not only a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but also a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "It's a wonderful opportunity to get students to explore beyond the comfort and familiarity of Texas," said Jessie. Charles thinks the students who should apply for this trip are not just the ones looking for an adventure. "I know from experience that students struggling to step outside their comfort zone will find great value in this opportunity," he said. "It's nerve-wracking and scary, but more than that, it's a thrilling experience that will help you become the person you want to be." Emma adds, "It is a great opportunity to take advantage of a free trip and learn things in the process." ■



For the Neuendorff family, participating in the all-expenses-paid Government-in-Action Youth Tour trip to Washington, D.C., remains a valuable bond between them. Become part of the legacy and empower yourself. Apply today! It will be the best gift you receive this holiday season, and it will last a lifetime.

APPLY FOR A TRIP OF A LIFETIME



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- Developing life-long friendships with delegates from across the country!

HOW TO APPLY

- Applicants must be a sophomore, junior or senior in high school.
- You and your parents or guardian must be served by Fayette Electric Cooperative.
- The deadline to apply is January 19, 2024.

LEARN MORE AT [FAYETTE.COOP/YOUTH-TOUR](https://fayette.coop/youth-tour)
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Have questions? Contact Tracy Denton at (979)968-3181 or tracya@fayette.coop.

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



How Texas Became a Desert

Films shot in Arizona, Utah and Spain gave the world some wrong impressions

BY W.F. STRONG

TO MUCH OF THE WORLD—and to many Americans who have never been to Texas—the state is a vast desert.

It's not the Sahara but a high-plain arid region studded with rocky mesas, sweeping wall-like cliffs and dusty canyons—and sometimes adorned with thousands of saguaro cactuses (native to Arizona, not Texas).

And, yes, certainly there are parts of West Texas that fulfill some aspects of these images, but more than half the state is green, with rolling hills, lush forests and vibrant coastal plains. Yet desert images dominate minds in distant

lands. For that, we can thank Hollywood.

There are many John Wayne Westerns with storylines that meander through Texas, but those films were mostly shot in Utah and Arizona. The most jarring example to me is *The Searchers*.

"Someday this country's gonna be a fine, good place to be," Mrs. Jorgensen, a tough frontierswoman, says in one scene. As she says this on her front porch, Jorgensen is facing Monument Valley, which is in Arizona and Utah.

Wayne made five movies in Monument Valley, even though two of them, *The Searchers* and *Rio Grande*, had story-

lines based in Texas. "Monument Valley is the place where God put the West," Wayne said.

Another Wayne film that is shocking to a Texan is *The Comancheros*. Wayne plays Texas Ranger Jake Cutter.

In one scene, he arrests an outlaw on a boat arriving in Galveston. As Cutter exits the boat with his handcuffed prisoner in tow, he walks right into eastern Utah, where the film was shot. It was stunning country for CinemaScope technology to capture, but it's not Texas.

Rio Bravo and *El Dorado* were two Wayne films with Texas settings shot in and around the Sonoran Desert west of Tucson. The landscape there is dominated by saguaros, enormous 40-foot-tall cactuses called the sentinels of the desert. Such sights don't exist in Texas.

Clint Eastwood's *For a Few Dollars More* is set in and around El Paso, but it was actually shot in the Tabernas Desert near Almería, Spain, and in Italy. Fort Bravo, also called Texas Hollywood, is a movie set town built in Almería in the 1960s that has served as a backdrop for many classic Western films.

Two films more true to Texas in landscape were *Giant*, shot mostly around Marfa, and *No Country for Old Men*, filmed around Marfa and Las Vegas, New Mexico. A 2015 miniseries called *Texas Rising* troubled some Texans for two reasons: It was shot almost entirely in Mexico and it depicted rugged mountain terrain near Victoria, where there are only coastal plains.

Movie Texas depicts a greater diversity of desert land than Texas actually has within it. To the world, we are Arizona, Utah and New Mexico, and we are Mexico, Italy and Spain. Mostly desert. ■

Slow Cooker

The handy appliance that comes through in so many ways

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

My slow cooker punch is my favorite festive drink to serve when hosting for the holidays. This vibrant and bubbly beverage is brimming with holiday flavors. It's always a hit at parties.



Slow Cooker Holiday Punch

6 cups cranberry juice
4 cups apple juice
2 cups orange juice
1 cup grapefruit juice
4 cinnamon sticks
4 cups cranberries, divided use
1 liter ginger ale, chilled
Orange slices
Grapefruit slices

1. Add all juices to a 6-quart slow cooker.
2. Add cinnamon sticks and 2 cups cranberries. Cover and cook on low 4 hours.
3. Allow punch to cool, then pour into a punch bowl. Top with ginger ale.
4. Before guests arrive add orange slices, grapefruit slices and the remaining 2 cups cranberries.
5. Serve over ice.

SERVES 12

TCP Follow Vianney Rodriguez while she cooks in Cocina Gris at sweetlifebake.com, where she features a recipe for Mexican Christmas Eve Salad.



Crockpot Apple Pie Cinnamon Roll Casserole

SHELLEY JANIK
SAN BERNARD EC

Celebrate the holidays on the sweetest note with Janik's casserole. Cinnamon rolls and apple filling topped with a creamy brown sugar glaze are amazing for Christmas morning or even better after a holiday meal.

- 1½ cups canned apple pie filling**
- 2 tubes refrigerated cinnamon rolls (17.5 ounces each)**
- 2 eggs**
- ¼ cup heavy cream**
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar**
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon**
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract**

1. Dice apples from apple pie filling. Coat the inside of a slow cooker with cooking spray.
2. Remove cinnamon rolls from tubes, place icing aside and cut each cinnamon roll into four pieces. Place half of the cinnamon roll pieces on bottom of slow cooker.
3. Spoon half the apple pie filling over cinnamon roll pieces. Top with remaining cinnamon roll pieces.
4. Whisk together eggs, cream, brown sugar, cinnamon and vanilla. Pour over cinnamon rolls.
5. Spoon the remaining apple pie filling on top. Cover and cook on low 2½–3 hours.
6. Spread the icing that came with the cinnamon rolls on top of the casserole and serve warm.

SERVES 8

[MORE RECIPES >](#)

\$500 WINNER

Slow Cooker Cabbage Rolls

WENDY ZWIENER
SAN BERNARD EC



The tangy citrus tomato sauce here evokes the beauty of treasured holiday recipes that have been passed down through the years.

SERVES 6



- 12 cabbage leaves, removed from stem**
- 1 pound ground beef**
- 1 cup cooked white rice**
- 1 egg, beaten**
- ¼ cup milk**
- ¼ cup finely minced onion**
- 1¼ teaspoons salt**
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper**
- 1 can tomato sauce (8 ounces)**
- 1 tablespoon light brown sugar**
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce**
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice**

1. Cut out the thick vein from the bottom of each cabbage leaf, making a V-shaped notch.
2. Blanch leaves for a few minutes in boiling water until slightly softened, then separate leaves and set aside.
3. In a large bowl, combine ground beef, rice, egg, milk, onion, salt and pepper.
4. In a small saucepan over low heat, simmer tomato sauce, brown sugar, Worcestershire sauce and lemon juice. Stir to combine.
5. Place a cabbage leaf on a flat surface and place a tablespoon or more of the meat mixture in the center of the leaf.
6. Roll from the bottom of the cabbage leaf and tuck in the edges as you roll.
7. Continue until you use all leaves and meat.
8. Coat the inside of a slow cooker with cooking spray and place rolls seam side down into it. Pour the sauce mixture over the rolls, then cover and cook on low 6 hours.

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

SPRING CAKES DUE DECEMBER 10

Some cakes just pair perfectly with a spring day. Send us your best spring cake recipe and you could win \$500. Submit your favorite online by December 10.





Easy BBQ Chicken Sliders

MELISSA ECKHOFF
COSERV

Looking for a quick and easy holiday appetizer or New Year's Eve bite? We've got you covered with Eckhoff's sliders. Shredded chicken bathed in a creamy sauce will take you into 2024 the right way.

- 4 boneless chicken breasts
- 1 bottle barbecue sauce (18 ounces)

- 1 can cream of chicken soup (10.5 ounces)
- 12 slider buns
- Sliced pickles

1. Coat the inside of a slow cooker with cooking spray and place chicken breasts into it.
2. In a bowl, stir together barbecue sauce and cream of chicken soup. Pour mixture over chicken.
3. Cover slow cooker and cook on low 6 hours.
4. Shred chicken with two forks and serve on slider buns, topped with sliced pickles.

MAKES 12 SLIDERS

TCP Want quick solutions to your slow cooker desires? We can help. Among the more than 1,000 recipes from Co-op Country in our archives, you'll find dozens that call for slow cookers. They're all on our website.

Quick Tips for Slow Cooking

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ

If you're feeding two, go for a 3-quart slow cooker. A 5-quart will feed a family of four, and a 6-quart slow cooker can feed a crowd or handle big batches.

Keep it closed. Opening the lid can cause the cooker to lose heat, adding to the cooking time.

Make cleanup a snap. Coat the inside with nonstick spray or use a liner for easy cleanup.

Enliven a dish by adding fresh herbs in the last 15 minutes of cooking time.

Sear meat before adding it to the slow cooker to deepen its flavor.



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HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

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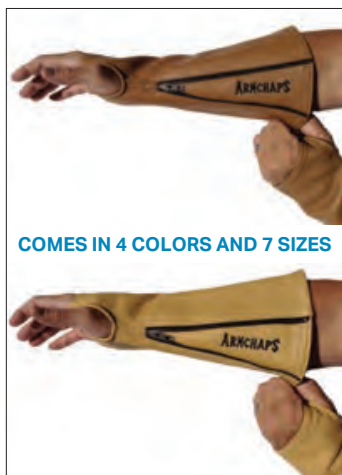
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COURTESY CHET GARNER

Art and Parts

A Liberty Hill artist diverts discarded toys from the trash heap

BY CHET GARNER

YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD to play with toys. That's the lesson I learned standing next to an 8-foot banana made entirely of plastic dolls, space aliens and rebar. I had tripped to visit off-the-grid artist Terry "Tunes" Parks, 72, who created his own Texas-style island of misfit toys just north of Liberty Hill, outside Austin.

At first, I wasn't sure if I was headed in the right direction. Then I saw a fence line covered in sun-bleached Barbie dolls. This was the place.

I wandered into Parks' yard, which doubles as his public gallery. Dozens of sculptures cover the space, each comprising hundreds of tiny toys organized into larger-than-life shapes—guitars, pyramids and even an Easter Island head. Dolls commingled with gardening tools hang from tree branches. It might have been terrifying if it wasn't so playful.

Parks started creating around 2010, after he was diagnosed with cancer and doctors told him he didn't have much time to live. The art served as therapy, helping him make his recovery while working tirelessly beside his brother Scott. Both are self-admitted music nuts, which explains why most of the art pieces are inspired by Texas artists like Willie Nelson, Frank Zappa and psychedelic pioneers the 13th Floor Elevators.

Every week, visitors and the local mission resale shop bring Parks—a member of Pedernales Electric Cooperative—boxes of unwanted toys that sit and wait for him to turn them into something bigger than the sum of their doll parts.

Parks' art isn't commissioned by highfalutin patrons and doesn't exist to fill big-city galleries. Instead, the sculptures serve a higher purpose: making us smile, scratch our heads and remember when we played with toys too. ■

ABOVE Terry "Tunes" Parks shows Chet a pyramid assembled with a mind-boggling array of toys.

TCP Join Chet as he discovers what old toys turn into. We have the video online. And see all his 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.

DECEMBER

01

Burnet [1-3, 8-10] Main Street Bethlehem, (512) 756-4481, fbcburnet.org

02

Wimberley [2-26] Trail of Lights, (512) 847-6969, emilyann.org

07

Columbus Ladies Night Out, (979) 732-8385, columbus.texas.org

New Braunfels Christmas Market at Historic Old Town, (830) 629-2943, newbraunfelsconservation.org

08

Dallas Mistletoe Market at Preston Hollow Village, thebohohmarket.com

Lake Jackson Easton Corbin, (979) 230-3156, brazosport.edu

Fort Worth [8-9] Connor King, (512) 817-9535, blcomedy.com

Fredericksburg [8-9] A Christmas Journey, (830) 997-2069, bethanyfbg.com

McKinney [8-9] Holidays at the Heard, (972) 562-5566, heardmuseum.org

Clute [8-10, 15-17] The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, (979) 265-7661, brazosport.org

09

Comanche Santa Comes to Town, (325) 356-3233, comanchechamber.org

Llano Snow Day, (325) 247-5354, llanostarrystarrynights.com

San Saba Sip N' Stroll and Lighted Christmas Parade,
(325) 372-5141,
sansabachamber.org

Sattler Canyon Lake Noon Lions Christmas Parade,
(806) 420-4824,
facebook.com/
canyonlakelakeoonlionsclub

Surfside Beach Nighttime Holiday Kites,
(979) 233-1531,
visitsurfsidebeachtx.org

Marble Falls Movie in the Park, (830) 693-4449,
visitmarblefalls.org

Brenham Dailey & Vincent,
(979) 337-7240,
thebarnhillcenter.com

Johnson City Jingle Jaunt 5K & Kids K, (830) 868-7111,
johnsoncitytx.org

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

Surfside Beach Surfing Santas, (979) 233-1531,
visitsurfsidebeachtx.org

West Columbia Candlelight Christmas, (979) 345-4656,
thc.texas.gov

Stonewall Tree Lighting,
(830) 644-2252,
tpwd.texas.gov

Round Top Linda Patterson and Friends Concert,
(979) 249-3129,
festivalhill.org

15

16

17

JANUARY

01

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La Grange, TX



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Encore Nights: Dec. 19 - 23
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Mailboxes

Readers certainly didn't mail it in this month, but some got boxed out by the competition. So gather 'round and let's see what's been delivered, as Texans show their colors and a little country flair.

CURATED BY GRACE FULTZ

1 ROB DANIEL
TRI-COUNTY EC

"First responders often use mailboxes to hang gear on while in rehab after fighting fires."

2 DON BUGH
NAVASOTA VALLEY EC

"Tierra Linda Ranch community mailboxes in the Kerrville area at dusk."

3 VANDY MORGAN
BLUEBONNET EC

Texas wildflower mailbox.

4 JANIS HENDRIX
PEDERNALES EC

A mailbox mounted on a retired 1942 fire hydrant during the February freeze.



Upcoming Contests

DUE DEC 10 Pollinators

DUE JAN 10 Rides

DUE FEB 10 Food and Cooking



Enter online at TexasCoopPower.com/contests.

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



The Best Christmas Gift I Ever Gave

A simple offering made generations ago yields lifetime returns

BY W.A. MCCORMICK
ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID MOORE

WHEN I WAS ABOUT 8 or 10 years old, back in the 1950s, an old man moved into a little shack of a house about a quarter-mile from my family's little, very modest house. He was alone, and I worried about him.

Maybe my folks had mentioned that he was having hard times, but I don't remember for sure.

We had several big native pecan trees, and during the holidays we usually had an abundance of the delicious nuts.

One year when Christmas was coming up, the old man was in the back of my mind. I told my grandmother that I wanted to give him something for Christmas because otherwise he probably wouldn't get anything.

It was the first time in my life that I had thought about giving a gift, but I knew

how a gift could brighten my day. My grandmother suggested that I give the man a paper bag full of pecans, probably a pound or two.

That seemed so wrong to me. Gifts should be bright and shiny. But pecans were so common to me that they were like biscuits. The bag was just plain brown and didn't even have a ribbon.

Nevertheless, Grandma handed it to me and told me to go give it to the old man. I was almost embarrassed about the gift that seemed so unlike Christmas to me, but I did as Grandma said.

When I knocked on the door, the old man came, and I gave him the bag and told him I wanted him to have it for Christmas. He opened the bag and looked inside.

A big, beautiful smile spread across his face, and he told me that his Christmas wish for me was that I would have a "double header." I went back home puzzled about what a double header was until my grandfather explained that it was twice as much good as I might expect.

I learned later that the old man did not have any type of heat in that shack of his, and both his feet froze that winter. He died not long after that.

I have given a lot of gifts in my 76 years, but that one is at the top of my list of memorable gifts. I wish I (we) had done a lot more for a lonely, cold, probably hungry old man.

His wish for me has followed me all my life and kept me warm. ■

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

We found a limited supply of turquoise from Arizona and purchased it for our *Sedona Turquoise Collection*. Inspired by the work of those 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.



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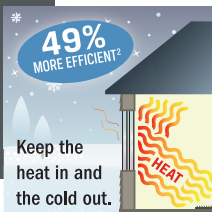


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