

# CONNECTION



## Santa Rides In

Depot brings holiday cheer

PICK YOUR TREE

RELAXING  
GETAWAYS



By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## A Winning Game

Esports brings fun, competition and a future

**N**TCA members are committed to doing more than providing fast, reliable internet service. They strive to enrich the community, including finding new opportunities to help everyone as technologies and online trends evolve.

For example, a growing high school sport unlocks all the traditional benefits of competition, such as team building, while enhancing skills applicable to modern careers. Known as esports, competitive gaming can make a difference in the lives of students.

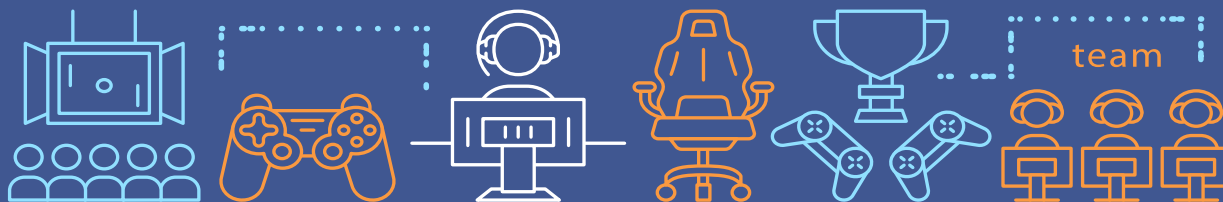
High schools across the nation have embraced esports, and the National Federation of State High School Associations includes esports alongside basketball, football, volleyball and more. Without fast, reliable internet services, however, rural students wouldn't have access. That's the power of providers like yours—they break down barriers and open doors to new opportunities.

Many of the competitions may seem familiar to gamers, ranging from sports games and racing simulations to strategy

and multiplayer battle titles. A growing number of colleges recognize esports and field teams. There's even professional-level competition.

The benefits of esports resemble those found in traditional high school sports. Success relies on teamwork and cooperation. Participants learn life skills and gain a deeper understanding of technology needed for careers ranging from software development to marketing. The broad world of gaming also brings people together, and 61% of gamers say they've met someone they otherwise would not have ever encountered.

Every day broadband uplifts rural America, and we look forward to seeing what innovations and opportunities come next. 🗨️



# ESPORTS

## ESPORTS STATS

Esports is increasingly popular, turning gaming into team competitions at high schools, colleges and even in professional competitions. Some online streaming services offer live coverage of competitions.

### WHO ARE GAMERS?

- 24%** are younger than 18 years old
- 36%** are between the ages of 18-34
- 13%** are between the ages of 35-44
- 12%** are between the ages of 45-54

### WHO ARE ESPORTS SPECTATORS?

- 50%** are between the ages of 25-41
- 26%** are between the ages of 16-24
- 20%** are between the ages of 42-56

### BUILDING SKILLS

Esports creates skills today's students will find marketable.

- Computer network and hardware proficiency
- Digital literacy
- Broadcasting
- Soft skills
- Leadership
- Teamwork
- Problem-solving
- Team building

Source: NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

# A Sound Investment



## System upgrade takes listening to next level

Whether you're gaming, watching a movie or listening to music, a high-quality sound system can take you from casually listening to feeling like you're part of the action. If you've thought about installing a sound system in your home, 'tis the season, to treat yourself to one that easily meets your needs and budget.

All sound systems have two basic components. First, there's the source providing the audio signal. This can be a TV, gaming device or digital music player, like your phone or computer. The second component is the amplifier, which boosts the audio signal. More than just volume, the amplifier improves the overall sound quality with more detail and clarity.

When it comes to speakers, music formats only require two, but the more speakers you have, the more immersive the sound will be. A soundbar, sometimes called a media bar, has multiple speakers enclosed in a single horizontal unit, usually placed above or below the TV. A surround sound system is much more complex, with speakers strategically placed around the room to deliver the best possible sound.

### SOUNDBAR VS. SURROUND SOUND

Soundbars are ready to go right out of the box. They're relatively inexpensive, sleek and easy to install. Soundbars are ideal for smaller spaces because of their minimal visual impact.

When shopping for a soundbar, pay close attention to the number of speakers hidden inside. A larger soundbar doesn't

necessarily mean better sound quality. Look to manufacturers like Bose, Sonos or Vizio for reliable options.

Surround sound is the choice for high fidelity and full dynamic range of sound—think of your listening area as a movie theater with booming audio. It considers factors like room size, acoustics and listening positions to determine the number of speakers and locations. If you already have a basic speaker system at home, upgrading to surround sound might be as simple as adding an extra speaker or two.

### PRICE OF PERFECTION

Very simple sound systems can still deliver a fantastic listening experience, so don't worry if you're starting on a smaller budget. But if you're designing your own setup and need advice on speaker placement or hiding wires behind walls, you'll need an electrician for expert guidance. Installers charge an average of \$50-\$100 an hour, so remember to budget for that.

The most common format for surround sound systems is the 5.1, with six audio channels, five speakers and a subwoofer that delivers the deep, rumbling bass frequencies. A 5.1 setup can cost between \$300 to \$1,700.

A more extensive option is the 7.1 surround, with two additional audio channels and two more speakers. Comparable to the audio setup found in large cinemas, the cost of this configuration runs anywhere from \$400 to \$4,000. [🔗](#)

# Honoring Those Who Served

## Veterans Day is a holiday for all



**KELLY ALLISON**  
General Manager

I always look forward to the holidays, celebrating the bustle, hustle and joy that come with Thanksgiving and Christmas. For many of us, these are happy weeks, and I'm appreciative of every one of them. But there's also another holiday this season deserving of reflection, gratitude and remembrance.

Every Nov. 11, Veterans Day honors the men and women who served in the armed forces. It's a day that carries a great deal of weight in rural communities like ours, where many families know

intimately about all that our veterans face. This includes our Colorado Valley family that honors the veterans who work here.

Perhaps there are stories handed down from generation to generation about someone who served decades ago. Or maybe a family member recently served or is currently active in the military. Communities like ours always step up when there's a need.

I see daily examples of how our communications services connect us. Even though they've changed over the years, beginning with telephone service and continuing with our fast and reliable broadband network, the thread is still the same—we help you make connections.

Veterans Day gives another opportunity to make a connection that may have a deeper meaning. Consider taking a few minutes to reach out, listen and learn about those who served.

One of the best ways to honor our veterans is by ensuring their stories are never lost. In today's digital-infused world, we have more communications tools than ever. Many online resources allow you to learn more about the experiences of our veterans and contribute to preserving their stories.

For example, the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project is a great resource. The project collects and preserves personal accounts of American war veterans so future generations can hear them. If you have a veteran in your life, consider recording their story and sending it to the project. It's a powerful way to ensure their legacy endures. Visit [loc.gov](http://loc.gov) and search for the Veterans History Project for all the details.

Another valuable resource is the National Archives, [archives.gov](http://archives.gov), which has a wealth of information about military records and veterans' service histories. You can request records, which is particularly useful for those doing genealogy work. Similarly, The Virtual Wall, found at [virtualwall.org](http://virtualwall.org), collects and displays the names and details of service members who died in Vietnam.

For those looking to take on a more direct role in supporting veterans, organizations like the Wounded Warrior Project and many others work to help members of our armed services.

Thank you for joining me in celebrating these valiant men and women. Have a wonderful holiday season and a merry Christmas. 📧

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### Sign up online

To sign up for service, to increase your bandwidth or to let us know where to build out our fiber network next, visit [cvctx.com](http://cvctx.com).

Customers in several parts of our service area can access fiber to the home, while expansion for access is in the works for other locations.

For more information on Colorado Valley's service area, visit [cvctx.com/maps](http://cvctx.com/maps). To learn about the service available at your address, visit [cvctx.com/signup](http://cvctx.com/signup).

Produced for CVCTX by:



### On the Cover:



Santa rides on the front of a train the second Saturday of December every year for Christmas at the Depot. See story on Page 12.

Photo courtesy of Gale Lincke

# Fast, Faster and 'Whoa, Nelly!' Speeds

Colorado Valley Communications offers Multi-Gig internet speeds fast enough to meet the needs of mighty gamers and all the latest smart home technology. Packages include 1 Gig, 2 Gigs and 5 Gigs.

Highly connected households can make do with 1 Gig, while those with folks who work at home or have large families with everyone connected might

prefer 2 Gigs. However, if you are a major gamer who enjoys high-definition graphics and wants to stay connected to your community with no buffering, 5 Gigs is the package for you. Note that 5-Gig plans require customers to provide their own routers, and speeds over 1 Gig aren't currently available in all areas.



## OFFICE CLOSURES

**To allow employees to celebrate the holidays with their families, CVCTX offices will be closed on the following dates:**

**THANKSGIVING**—Thursday, Nov. 28, and Friday, Nov. 29

**CHRISTMAS**—Tuesday, Dec. 24, and Wednesday, Dec. 25

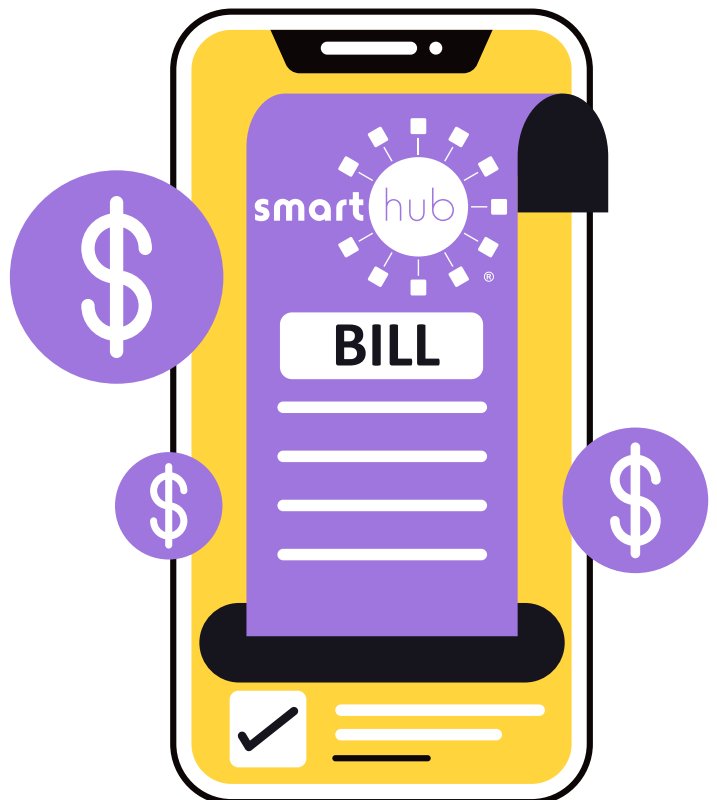
**NEW YEAR'S DAY**—Wednesday, Jan. 1



CVCTX would like to thank everyone who served our country. Your efforts and sacrifices protect our nation and the freedoms we hold dear. Take a moment this **VETERANS DAY, MONDAY, NOV. 11**, to thank a veteran in your life. In honor of Veterans Day, our office will be closed.

## SmartHub Simplifies Life

Use CVCTX's SmartHub to go paperless. Pay your bills online and manage your account on your computer or mobile device. Receive a \$5 credit when you sign up at [cvctx.com/billing](http://cvctx.com/billing).



# Big Bend National Park

## Popularity heats up when days cool down

Story by KATHY DENES

As temperatures fall at Big Bend National Park in Southwest Texas, tourism numbers rise. An incredibly popular destination, the park welcomes more than 500,000 visitors annually, up 50% since 2016. Peak season is October through April, when it's cool enough to fully enjoy river and desert sites and the lows remain bearable even at higher elevations.

The park's 800,000 acres are crisscrossed by hundreds of miles of trails to explore on foot or by bike. Take a short hike up Grapevine Hills to see the iconic Balanced Rock formation. Or, park at the Hot Springs trailhead for the half-mile walk to a 105-degree soak in geothermal mineral-salt waters. Stop by one of Big Bend's five visitor centers, take in its numerous historic sites and keep a lookout for graves and ruins from centuries past.

### HISTORIC TREASURE

Big Bend National Park was established on June 12, 1944, one week after the D-Day invasion half a world away. President Franklin D. Roosevelt turned his attention from the turmoil of war to the wilds of Texas, making sure future generations could enjoy the majesty of this rugged slice of America.

Named for its location by the Rio Grande's southernmost curve, Big Bend retains evidence of its past human inhabitants, ranging from Indigenous peoples of 10,000 years ago to 1930s ranchers and miners. At its heart, rising to nearly 8,000 feet above massive canyons and desert expanses, are the Chisos Mountains, the only U.S. mountain range completely contained within a park.

Big Bend likely contains thousands of archaeological treasures, but two that visitors can check out include the pictographs

at Hot Springs and petroglyphs at the Chimneys volcanic rock formations.

A good resource to help plan excursions is the park's Panther Junction Visitor Center, which opens daily at 8:30 a.m. Exhibits there provide an overview of the park's geology and natural and cultural histories, and it has a theater for viewing a park orientation movie. At the center visitors can get backcountry and river use permits and pay entrance fees. It also houses a Big Bend Natural History Association bookstore, a post office, restrooms and a faucet for filling personal water containers.

### HAPPY CAMPERS

November and December in Big Bend National Park bring cooler temperatures, perfect for outdoor activities during the day. At night this top-rated Dark Sky territory is an ideal spot for stargazing.

Campers can reserve a spot through [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) at the remote Cottonwood Campground, a quiet, shaded oasis open only from November to April along the banks of the Rio Grande. For those who want to be near multiple trailheads and close to "The Window" to see stunning sunsets, the Chisos Basin Campground is a popular option year-round, also available by reservation only.

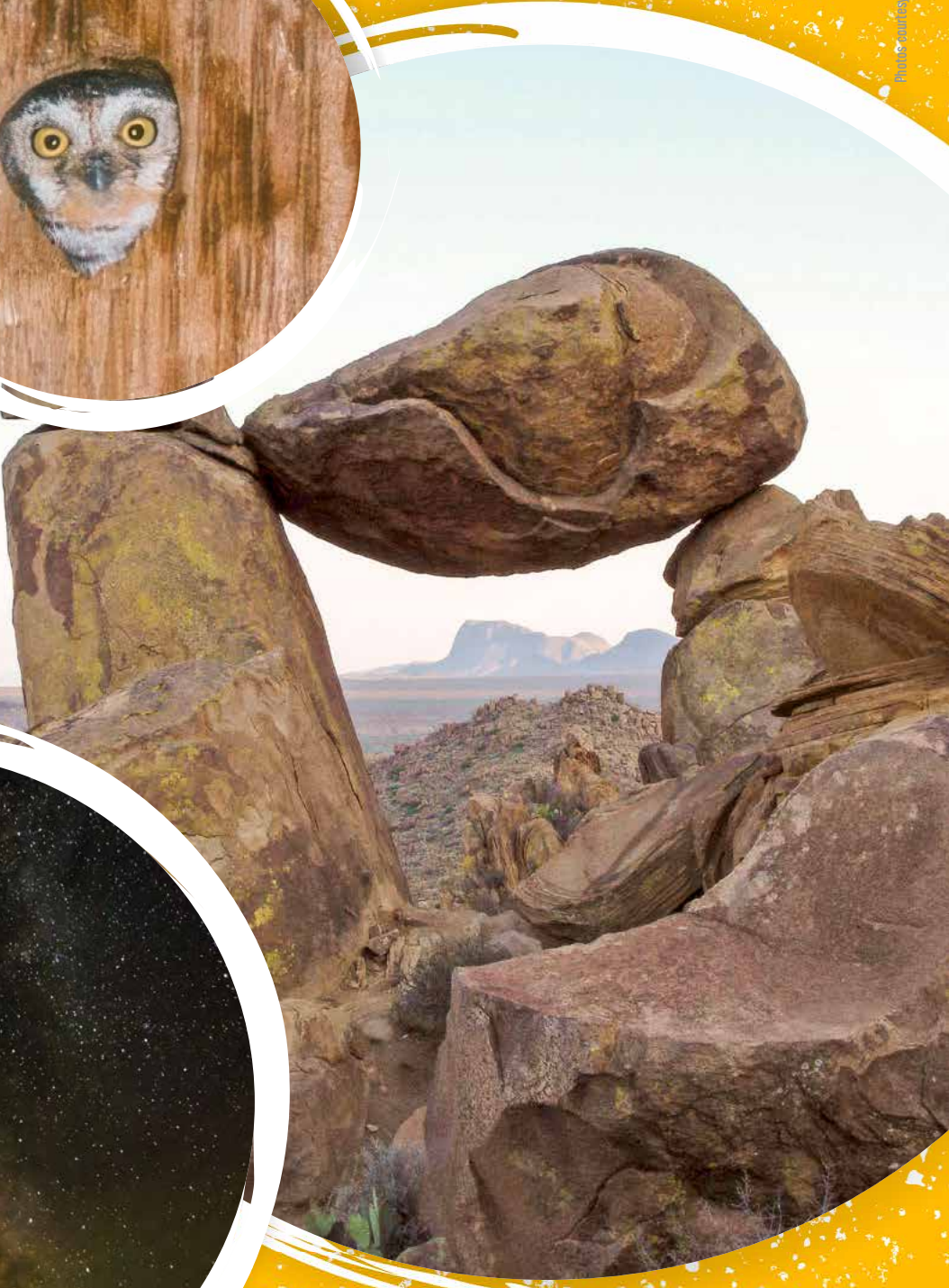
RV campers looking for desert seclusion opt for primitive road-side campgrounds like Croton Springs and Hannold Draw, which provide unobstructed views of the Chisos Mountains and starry skies. These no-amenities sites require a backcountry permit and a reservation, offered through [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov). Croton Springs doesn't allow horses, but Hannold Draw does, and it even has a corral that can hold eight. 🐾

### KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- The Big Bend National Park Entrance fee, good for seven days, is \$30 per vehicle or \$15 for an individual unless you have a park pass.
- Bring plenty of water. Even with cooler temperatures, the dry desert air can lead to dehydration. Also, keep a park map handy, since cellphone and GPS service is spotty.
- Reservations are required for camping, with a limit of 14 consecutive nights. For RV campers, full hookups are only available at Rio Grande RV Campground.
- Backcountry camping requires a backcountry permit, as do river trips.
- No campfires are allowed in the park. Charcoal can be used for cooking in provided campground grills.

- Pets are only allowed wherever vehicles can go, never on hiking trails, and they must be on a leash when outside.
- Primitive dirt roads through the backcountry can be accessed by street-legal vehicles with high clearance and four-wheel drive.
- Chisos Mountains Lodge is the only option for indoor lodging within the park. Open year-round, it offers rooms and cottages, plus a dining room, camper store and gift shop. For lodge info, call 855-765-1324 or 432-477-2291.
- The nearby town of Terlingua offers unique lodging options, ranging from historic to modern. Vacancies may be in short supply in this "ghost town" the first weekend of November, though, when Terlingua draws in thousands of "chili heads" for its annual chili cook-off.

LEFT: An elf owl finds refuge in a power pole at Big Bend National Park.



ABOVE: The iconic Balanced Rock formation is reached via the Grapevine Hills Trail.

LEFT: Big Bend National Park is a top Dark Sky location, providing stunning views like this one of the Milky Way from Panther Junction.



# Don't Sleep

Visitors at upscale lodgings boost local economy

Story by MELANIE JONES

**S**earch the internet for vacation stays in Fayette County and plenty of options show up. The area is a hotbed for bed-and-breakfasts, boutique hotels and vacation rentals. Some say the antique shows at Round Top are the attraction, while others believe it's all the quaint shops, restaurants and unique attractions like the Painted Churches of Texas.

Whatever the reason, Fayette County is a popular place to stay and play.

Julie Stroup, Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce administrator, says all those B&Bs bring money into the city's coffers through the 7% hotel occupancy tax. That revenue is earmarked for tourism—used for everything from advertising to historic preservation—so it brings in more business for the innkeepers in turn.

The many lodging options also bring people into the county to shop, dine and visit the area's entertainment venues. Visitors spend money to support local shops and restaurants, boosting sales tax revenue and supporting the city and county.

## FAMILY TIES

Lori Beth and Allen Jurecka settled in Fayetteville in 2020 and opened Roline's Guest House three years ago. But the couple's ties to the community go back much further. In fact, Allen is the fifth generation of Jureckas to live in Fayetteville.

That family history was part of the appeal, Allen says, but the Jureckas were also drawn back by all the Fayetteville area has to offer. They started the B&B because of the house itself, which was last remodeled in 2003. When they moved in, Allen and Lori Beth were impressed by how well the renovations were done. "We were just in awe when we first looked at it, the way it was remodeled and the detail they did and how elegant and vintage looking," Allen says.

"It's very Victorian and historic," Lori Beth adds. "The restoration was amazingly done."

Allen is the B&B's chef, preparing a delicious hot breakfast every morning. The guesthouse attracts visitors from all over Texas and farther afield. A guest from New Jersey traveled the farthest, and another guest lives in Montana. While the Round Top Antiques Fairs are the major draw for guests, Lori Beth says they're starting to see visitors book stays year-round.

"We just had a couple from Kansas come, and they spent three days here celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary," she says. "They just loved the Fayetteville area. All they did each day was just drive a different way and just sightsee in all the little communities and shop at all the little stores."

Women on a recent visit enjoyed touring the Painted Churches of Texas—the local small-town churches covered with beautiful murals inside—and another couple came for a second visit in July. Lori Beth



Photo courtesy of Lori Beth and Allen Jurecka

The large Victorian home makes Roline's perfect for a bed-and-breakfast.



# On B&Bs

Photo courtesy of Lori Beth and Allen Jurecka



The owners of Roline's Guest House plan to host more high tea events.

ventures that the folks who are attracted to the Painted Churches are also attracted to the murals at Roline's Guest House.

Roline's is also an event venue for everything from bridal showers to small weddings. The innkeepers hosted their first high tea this year and plan to do that again. "This is all about where God is wanting us, and it's evolving," Lori Beth says.

## LOCAL APPEAL

The Frenchie Boutique Hotel's owner lives in San Antonio, but the Round Top hotel is doing quite nicely locally under the management of Aimee Kraemer.

The hotel isn't exactly a B&B, but it does offer upscale, contemporary lodging, five-course gourmet dinners prepared by a classically trained chef and massages. Its appeal isn't limited to out-of-towners. Locals have been known to book a stay, as well. "It's just a fun place to come and relax," Aimee says. There's room service and a pool, as well as pickleball courts and a hot tub. "You can just hang out with your girlfriends or take a couple's trip."

## FARMHOUSE FEELING

Farmstead offers both lodging and event



Photo courtesy of Blake Neitzke

Rooms at the Farmstead have a luxury farmhouse feel.

space. "What really makes the property unique is that it's designed around having a place to gather," owner Blake Neitzke says. "Then people can retreat in the evenings for a private space."

Retreat is what Farmstead is all about. It gives guests a place to get away from the hustle and bustle of life, hectic jobs and the demands of the city. It's a quiet place with no deadlines.

Farmstead features individual rooms and rental homes on the same property, with a pool, gas firepits and a plan to put in pickleball courts. The event space features a renovated, full kitchen and seating for 42 guests.

The property hosts weddings, rehearsal dinners and bridal showers. The University of Texas rented it for a retreat, as has the marketing department for global energy company Shell. Church groups rent the entire property for retreats, and families come for reunions.

"We're a small family business," Blake says. "That makes it all that much more meaningful."

These small businesses are preserving the homes of Fayette County. And these families are making a difference. 🗨️

## A Cozy Retreat Awaits You

**Roline's Guest House**  
rolinestx.com

**Frenchie Boutique Hotel**  
roundtopxhotels.com

**Farmstead**  
farmsteadatroundtop.com

**Round Top Inn**  
roundtopinn.com

**Wander Inn**  
gypsyville.com/wander-inn

**Warrenton Inn**  
warrentoninn.com

**Red and White Inn**  
713-818-9766



Photo courtesy of Blake Neitzke

Frenchie Boutique Hotel is a popular spot for girlfriend getaways.



Photo courtesy of Blake Neitzke

Guests can rent full cottages at Farmstead.



Photo courtesy of Lori Beth and Allen Jurecka

Roline's is decorated in Victorian style.

# THE ART OF SELF- RELIANCE

## Rural writers get a boost from the internet

Story by JEN CALHOUN

Shawna Holly was researching how to publish her first novel when she ran into a type of writer’s block she’d never experienced. This particular block had nothing to do with plot holes or mental tangles. Instead, it centered around the relatively slow-moving churn of books through the nation’s traditional publishing houses.

“The industry—from my perspective—is very busy, like so many other businesses right now,” Shawna says. “There are very few literary agents and acquisitions editors compared to how many debut authors are seeking representation, and they’re all overworked. As a result, the path to traditional publishing is slow. For authors seeking a faster solution, self-publishing is the answer.”

So, that’s what she did. In June 2023, the Boerne, Texas-based writer published her first novel, “The Stories We Keep,” via a self-publishing platform that distributes paperbacks and e-books all over the world. Her second book, “When We’re Broken,” came out earlier this fall. Both books are in the genre of women’s literary fiction.

### TAKING CHARGE

Shawna is among a growing number of writers embracing self-publishing

platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers and speed up the book publishing process. This is especially true for writers from small or rural towns who may have a harder time finding an agent or fostering connections to publishing houses in larger cities.

“Agents receive thousands of queries a year, and they’re only taking on maybe two or three new authors in addition to the clients they already have to manage,” Shawna says. “It just makes it darn near impossible to find that magic match. I just thought, ‘I’m in my 40s and have more stories to write. I don’t want to wait.’”

Best-selling authors who famously self-published before landing big book deals and film adaptations include Amanda Brown, who wrote “Legally Blonde,” and Andy Weir, who wrote “The Martian.” Colleen Hoover, the East Texas author of the blockbuster “It Ends with Us,” also self-published her first book, “Slammed,” in 2012. She increased her audience by giving away free books and by posting regularly on social media.

Even those self-published writers who don’t reach traditional literary heights have profited in the world of self-publishing. The Alliance of Independent Authors published a survey in 2023 reporting that

self-published authors earned a median income of \$12,749—more than double that of traditionally published authors. They also made up more than 50% of Kindle’s Top 400 books of 2023, the survey found.

### UNTANGLING THE WEB

Self-publishing isn’t the only internet tool that sparks creativity, however. Connie Clyburn is an East Tennessee-based writer of several books, including “Wisdom from the Doublewide” and the devotional “Aging Fabulously.” Connie found fellowship online through video calls with other writers from as far away as Ireland.

From her home in Telford, Tennessee—which she describes as “a little wide place in the road between Jonesborough and Greeneville”—she also uses the internet to connect with others through her online magazine. Called *ah law, y’all*, the quarterly publication highlights the Southern Appalachian area.

“You don’t always think about how vital the internet is as a writer,” says Connie, who infuses her writing with scripture and ways to apply it to everyday life. “But, as a rural writer, it has opened up a big world. Anything that I come up with



Photo courtesy of Shawna Holly





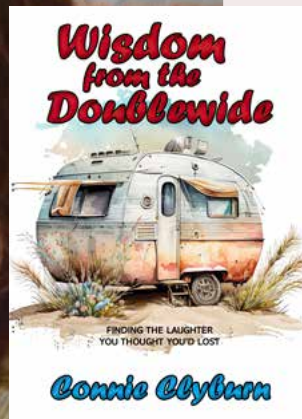
Photo courtesy of Connie Clyburn

that I want to read about or research or just connect with is right there at your fingertips.” 🗨️

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For more information on Connie Clyburn, look up her blog, “Wisdom from the Doublewide,” and the online magazine *ah law*, y’all.

Find out more about Shawna Holly and her books at [shawnaholly.com](http://shawnaholly.com).



FAR LEFT: Shawna Holly lives outside of San Antonio, in a town of about 15,000 people. An Air Force veteran, Shawna self-published her book, “The Stories We Keep,” to avoid the sometimes long and tedious process of finding an agent and a publisher.

LEFT: Connie Clyburn got her start as a journalist, and now she writes books, a blog and a newsletter from her home in East Tennessee near Jonesborough. Connie turned her blog into the book “Wisdom from the Doublewide.”

## GET A START WITH SELF-PUBLISHING

Most writers learn quickly that finding a publisher is often harder than writing the book itself. Books are meant to be read, but the steps involved with finding an agent and publisher can waste valuable time and resources. As a result, many writers self-publish. The comprehensive book and writers' blog “What We Reading” lists several self-publishing platforms. We've listed a few resources here for e-books. For information on self-publishing print books, visit [whatwewreading.com](http://whatwewreading.com).

### Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, also known as KDP

- Highest market share and sales in the self-publishing industry.
- Writers earn royalties of between 35% and 70% depending on the price of the book.
- It's important to note there's another option called KDP Select, which is different than KDP. KDP Select users get certain marketing perks that can help sell their books. In exchange, they can't publish their work with any other self-publishing company.

### Apple Books

- Writers earn royalties of 70% on all e-books.
- Second-biggest player in the industry after Amazon's KDP.
- No upfront fees for authors once they have an iTunes account.

### Barnes & Noble Press, also known as B&N

- Writers earn 70% on e-books above 99 cents.
- B&N is considered one of the easiest platforms to use.
- Completely free to use, and it does not require exclusivity.

Other platforms include Kobo Writing Life, Draft2Digital, StreetLib, IngramSpark and PublishDrive, some of which have different pricing models and royalty distributions. Each of these platforms generally offers distribution to all the major e-book retailers, so it's important to research all options.

Source: “15 Best Self-Publishing Platforms for Your Book” from the blog “What We Reading.”

# Christmas Is Pulling Into the Station

La Grange depot museum hosts annual visit from Santa

Story by MELANIE JONES



The Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad Depot Museum in La Grange is decked out for the holidays.

Children chatter excitedly as they line up along the depot fence, their eyes glued to the horizon watching for the train to come around the bend. They're not waiting for a friend to arrive or anticipating a visit from Grandma. Rather, they're eager to catch a glimpse of the jolly old elf in a red suit hanging on to the front of the engine. Santa Claus is coming to town.

"We call it Santa at the Depot, and it's always the second Saturday of December, and Santa always comes at 10 a.m. if possible," says Gale Lincke, a Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad Depot Museum board member. "It's railroad time, so he might be there at 9:30 or he might be there at 11:30, but we post it as 10."

Time and weather permitting, depot workers also bring out a children's antique train for the Christmas gathering, so kids can take a ride of their own. "The kind of neat thing is, for those kids who don't relish sitting on Santa's lap or even looking at him at close range, they can be there, they can watch Santa Claus come in, then they can go ride the train," Gale says. "They can still have a really good time."

## KEEPING HISTORY ALIVE

The La Grange location is the oldest MKT Depot in Texas that still sits in its original spot by the rails, Gale says. The others have been moved or torn down. When the railroad was looking to unload the building, the La Grange Area Chamber of Commerce bought it and leased out the space to different businesses.

"In 1999, the executive director of the chamber called me one day and said, 'Gale, the chamber board has decided to get out of the business of real estate. They're going to put the depot up

for sale. Do you think anybody's going to be interested?'" Gale says. "And I said, 'For heaven's sake, yes! Consider me a bid.'"

So, four couples—including Gale and her husband, Gary—formed a nonprofit that now maintains the depot and manages the museum of local railroad history year-round.

Board member Bill Karisch says his favorite attractions there are the two cabooses. He bought one before the museum came to be. The other is a yellow caboose featured in the Matthew McConaughey movie "The Newton Boys." "As a matter of fact, I tell people that the reason I'm a docent with the museum is I look so dang much like Matthew McConaughey," Bill jokes. "When he's 74, we may be spittin' images."

Gale and Bill are pleased Colorado Valley Communications' reliable, high-speed internet service makes it possible for them to install a rail cam so the depot can be among those featured on the SouthWest RailCams channel on YouTube. "We're really looking forward to it, and it's only because of Colorado Valley that we can have that done," Gale says. 📺



Santa greets children at MKT Depot Museum.

## MKT DEPOT MUSEUM

260 N. Washington St., La Grange

### HOURS:

Thursday-Friday: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Saturday: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

[lgmktdepotmuseum.com](http://lgmktdepotmuseum.com)

# OH, Christmas Tree!

Cut your own holiday centerpiece at Lee County Christmas Trees



A family wraps a tree in a net to take it home for Christmas.



Festivities at Lee County Tree Farm start with pumpkin sales in October.

Photos courtesy of Dan and Susan Schaefer

Story by MELANIE JONES

When Dan and Susan Schaefer moved to Lee County in 1998 to work at Immanuel Lutheran School, they had no hint they would become the area's preeminent suppliers of Christmas trees.

When the owners of Fritsche's Farm, Gene and Rose Fritsche, decided to retire in 2001, Dan and Susan made plans to buy a piece of the Lincoln farm and learn the business. In 2006, they bought the entire place and changed the name to Lee County Christmas Trees.

Over the next several years, Dan and Susan served as apprentice farmers under Gene and Rose's guidance, learning the ways of tending trees. Now they run it on their own with their three grown children and their spouses, as well as with help from their grandkids.

## FUN FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

But Lee County Christmas Trees is more than a place to cut and buy some beautiful trees. It's a destination for fun and great family photos, and in October it's home to a popular pumpkin patch.

The Schaefers don't grow their own pumpkins—the 12-acre farm is dedicated to trees and hay—so they bring some in for fun family outings, field trips and pumpkin sales.

Whether it's pumpkin picking in October or Christmas celebrations in December, the fun is always free. The only charge is for the purchase of trees, pumpkins or items in the gift shop. "We want to be totally focused on families enjoying themselves as a family," Dan says.

To that end, the farm offers hayrides and has a playground, but not one with seesaws and monkey bars. The play area features homespun, old-fashioned games such as Hula-Hoop, tetherball, hopscotch, kickball and fowling—throwing a football at bowling pins.

When it gets too chilly to play outside, folks can enjoy a game of checkers by the stove in the gift shop while sipping some complimentary hot chocolate. There's no charge for families to take their own photos at the farm, and professional photographers can call and contract the site for their work.

## HOLIDAY SEASON HITS HIGH GEAR

The first three weekends after Thanksgiving usually keep the Schaefers busy. Tree sales open the day after Thanksgiving. They grow Virginia pines, Murray cypress and Carolina sapphire cypress.

For these field trees, Dan, Susan and their crew provide measuring poles and a small handsaw so guests can cut down their own trees. For holiday revelers who prefer a Fraser fir, Lee County Christmas Trees has some shipped in from Crossnore, North Carolina.

Susan makes wreaths from Fraser firs as well, available at the gift shop or made to order, along with an assortment of jellies she makes from scratch. Guests can also find handmade items like jewelry, toys, dishes, decorations and bookmarks, along with some antiques and vintage Christmas items. "It's a pretty eclectic mix in there," Susan says.

"And that's part of the fun," Dan says, "allowing families to enjoy a little bit of everything traditionally Christmas.

"We try to keep it family friendly and homegrown," he says. 🗨️

# Holiday Simplicity

Breakfast casseroles are a gift for busy hosts

**M**ake-ahead casseroles can make the difference between holiday stress and satisfaction. From sweet to savory, there are many choices. Here are several to try this season.



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## BLUEBERRY PANCAKE CASSEROLE

### Crumb Topping:

- 1/2 cup flour
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

### Pancakes:

- 2 1/2 cups flour
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/2 tablespoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 large eggs
- 2 cups whole buttermilk
- 1/2 cup milk
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1-2 teaspoons finely grated lemon zest
- 2 cups blueberries
- Maple syrup, for serving

## SCRAMBLED EGG BAKE

- 4 slices bacon
- 8 ounces dried beef
- 2 4-ounce cans mushrooms, drained
- 1/2 cup butter, divided
- 1/2 cup flour
- 4 cups whole milk
- 16 eggs
- 1 cup evaporated milk

Saute the bacon until almost done. Add dried beef, mushrooms and 1/4 cup butter. While hot, add flour and stir in whole milk. Simmer sauce until thickened and smooth, stirring constantly.

Beat eggs with evaporated milk and salt. Scramble in remaining 1/4 cup butter.

Grease a 9-by-13-inch baking dish. Ladle a layer of sauce into the dish followed by a layer of scrambled eggs. Repeat layers, ending with a layer of sauce. Garnish with mushrooms and bacon. Cover with foil and bake at 275 F for 1 hour.

To make ahead: Make casserole, cover and refrigerate. Bake as directed.

**Crumb topping:** The day before, in a medium bowl, combine flour, sugars, cinnamon and salt. Add melted butter and stir until fully incorporated. Cover and refrigerate.

**Pancakes:** Preheat the oven to 350 F. Grease a 9-by-13-inch baking dish and set aside.

In a large bowl, combine flour, sugar, salt, baking powder and baking soda.

In a separate bowl, combine eggs, buttermilk, milk, melted butter, lemon zest and vanilla extract. Whisk wet ingredients until well combined. Add wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and stir until just combined. The batter will be lumpy. Do not overmix.

Pour the batter into the greased baking dish. Sprinkle the blueberries over the top. Remove the crumb topping from the fridge and crumble over the top of the blueberries and batter. Bake for 35-45 minutes, until puffed and light golden brown. Use a toothpick to check the center for doneness. Serve warm with maple syrup.



## FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE

- 1 12- to 14-ounce loaf French or sour-dough bread. Stale bread works great.
- 1 8-ounce package full-fat cream cheese, softened
- 2 tablespoons powdered sugar
- 3 teaspoons vanilla extract, divided
- 8 eggs
- 2/3 cup packed brown sugar
- 3/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 1/4 cups whole milk

### Topping:

- 1/3 cup packed light brown sugar
- 1/3 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, cold and cubed
- Maple syrup and/or powdered sugar for topping

Grease a 9-by-13-inch casserole with nonstick spray. Either cut the bread into 1-inch cubes or tear it into preferred size. Spread half of the cubes into prepared baking pan.

Using a hand-held or stand mixer with a whisk attachment, beat the cream cheese

on medium-high speed until completely smooth. Beat in the powdered sugar and 1/4 teaspoon vanilla until combined. Drop random spoonfuls of cream cheese mixture on top of the bread. Layer the remaining bread cubes on top of cream cheese. Make sure some cream cheese is still exposed on top. Set aside.

Whisk the eggs, milk, cinnamon, brown sugar and remaining vanilla together until no brown sugar lumps remain. Pour evenly over the bread. Cover the pan tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 3-4 hours or up to 24 hours. Overnight is best.

When ready to bake, remove from the refrigerator and uncover while you make the topping.

Mix the brown sugar, flour and cinnamon. Then, use a pastry cutter or your hands to cut the cold butter into the topping mixture until crumbly.

Bake at 350 F for 45-60 minutes. You can use a knife to check the French toast—it should come out mostly clean when the dish is ready. Avoid putting the knife into the cream cheese dollop, which could give a false reading.

## SAVORY RICE CEREAL CASSEROLE

- 2 pounds pork sausage
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 cups cooked rice
- 3 cups Rice Krispies
- 3 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 6 eggs
- 2 cans cream of celery soup
- 1/2 cup milk



In a skillet, cook sausage with onion until meat is no longer pink and onions are tender; drain. Transfer mixture to a lightly greased 9-by-13-inch casserole. Top with layers of rice, cereal and cheese. In a bowl beat the eggs with the soup and milk. Spread mixture on top. Cover with foil and refrigerate overnight.

Preheat oven to 350 F. Remove foil and bake for 45 minutes to 1 hour or until a knife inserted in center comes out clean. Let stand for 5-10 minutes before serving.

Note: Making this a day ahead helps to soften the cereal. It can be baked right away, but the cereal may still be crispy. 📺

# EVEN *Santa* NEEDS HIS FIBER

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