

Tennessee CONNECTIONS

FALL 2025 | CUSTOMER FOCUSED ⚡ COMMUNITY DRIVEN

The Heart of Public Power

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ALSO
INSIDE

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to Combat Them

Erwin Utilities' crews
work on utility line
restoration in the
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Locally owned. Community driven.

As your local power provider, we're dedicated to helping our hometown thrive. We are locally owned, community driven and thankful for the opportunity to serve you.



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The Heart of Public Power

A story of service, sacrifice, and strength



Lee H. Brown

Story by Lee H. Brown, President and CEO of Erwin Utilities

What is Public Power? Does it truly matter?

Public Power and public utilities are more than a system of wires, pipes, and fiber. They're a promise—a commitment that the electricity you use to cook dinner, the water that fills your children's bath, the sewer system that is available every time you flush the toilet, the fiber optic network that connects your home and classroom to the world are there not because they're profitable, but because they're essential.

Public Power is community power and community utilities.

In Erwin, Tennessee, Public Power means that your utilities—electricity, water, wastewater, and fiber—are provided by people who live here, raise their families here, and walk the same streets as you. Erwin Utilities and Erwin Fiber are not driven by stock prices or distant shareholders. We're driven by purpose, by people, and by pride in serving our neighbors. Every dollar earned goes back

into the very systems that support our lives, our homes, and our future.

A powerful example of this spirit came to life with the creation of Erwin Fiber. When profit-driven companies declined to invest in reliable internet for our community, we stepped in. We built something better—something built to serve, not to profit. That's Public Power in action.

You may not think about it often—what happens behind the scenes when you flip a switch, turn the faucet on, flush the toilet, or connect to Wi-Fi—but at Erwin Utilities, every moment of your comfort and convenience is built on care, commitment, and constant service.

And when disaster struck, that commitment became our lifeline.

One Year Later: The Storm That Changed Us

September 27, 2024, is a date etched into our hearts.

Hurricane Helene was the worst natural disaster in our history. It didn't just tear through homes and businesses. It shattered normalcy. It took lives. It left families without shelter, and entire neighborhoods without the basic comforts we once took for granted. The devastation was overwhelming.

But in that darkness, the light of Public Power shone brighter than ever.

Before the flood waters receded, the men and women of Erwin Utilities were already at work. With no time to process their own losses, they answered the call to serve. They worked through wreckage and heartbreak—restoring services, rebuilding infrastructure, and renewing hope.

Line crews braved danger to replace hundreds of broken poles and miles of downed lines. Fiber crews, engineers, water and wastewater specialists, and support staff labored through the chaos, rebuilding one connection at a time. They

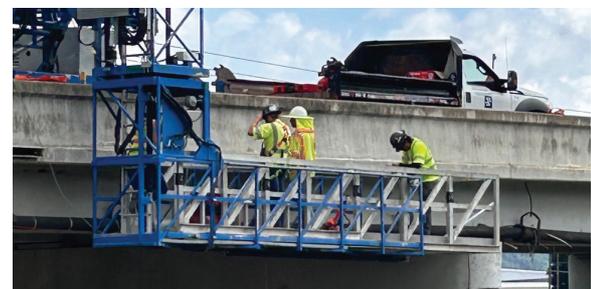


Erwin Utilities' Water Treatment Supervisor Clay Hepburn collecting water samples for essential testing after Hurricane Helene.

Erwin Utilities' SCADA Engineer, Wes Millhorn, surveying the aftermath of Hurricane Helene in Erwin's Riverview Industrial Park.



ABOVE: Erwin Utilities' lineman, Luke Blackmon, boarding a Black Hawk helicopter with the National Guard to reach Little Germany, an area heavily impacted by the storm.



devised solutions on the fly—like building a microgrid in Bumpus Cove to restore power, or using drones and whitewater paddlers to access unreachable areas, and installing temporary water and sewer lines across the Nolichucky River and through Riverview Industrial Park.

It wasn't just repair. It was resurrection.

Every sleepless night. Every aching muscle. Every tear shed in private while smiles were offered in public. It was service in its truest, most human form.

What We Rebuilt—Together

- **Electric:** 238 poles, 23 miles of wire, 77 transformers, countless service drops.
- **Fiber:** Over 28,000 feet of new fiber line.
- **Water:** Over 16,600 feet of water pipe, including critical infrastructure at Jackson Love Bridge and in our Riverview Industrial Park.
- **Wastewater:** More than 3,400 feet of pipe replaced, 20,000 feet inspected, and 1,500 feet cleaned.

Our community answered the call of service. Law enforcement officers were there to help direct traffic, Emergency Management, Search and Rescue, the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) and the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) rendered aid. The Unicoi County and Washington County Highway departments and local contractors removed mountains of debris before our work could begin. In addition, other Public Power providers and

public utilities from across Tennessee and Alabama answered the call for help to rebuild.

When our industries were cut off from Riverview Industrial Park, we didn't give up. We partnered with the Joint Economic Development Board of Unicoi County to secure \$350,000 to construct a temporary access road—because business and livelihoods had to continue.

When the financial burden became nearly impossible, we found support. Thanks to the tireless advocacy of State Representative Renea Jones and Senator Steve Southerland, \$20 million in state funding was secured for our wastewater treatment plant to help us rebuild what FEMA will not cover.

The Legacy of Service

The dedication of our employees has been recognized statewide. From electric to water operations, the awards are many, but each one is a symbol of the real reward—the restored homes, the warm meals, the school assignments completed, and the families who could breathe easier again.

We still face challenges. The full rebuild of the wastewater treatment plant is still ahead. But our mission is unchanged: to provide safe, reliable, and efficient services—every day, no matter what comes.

This Is Why Public Power Matters

So—what is Public Power? And does it matter?

Ask the lineman or the fiber team member who waded through mud and debris to restore your electricity and fiber. Ask the water technician who tested samples at dawn to ensure your drinking water was safe. Ask the water crews who installed temporary water and sewer lines across the river. Ask the wastewater men who worked tirelessly to remove the mud and silt from every treatment basin and every pipe at the treatment plant. Ask the office worker who stayed late to field emergency calls, making sure everyone had something to eat, making sure everyone who came to help from out of town had a place to sleep, and clean clothes. Ask the families who, because of this work, could finally return home.

Public Power is not just wires, water, wastewater, and fiber. It's people.

Local people who serve with pride. A board of directors who live in the neighborhoods they serve. A community that puts people first, not profit. In Erwin, Unicoi, and Unicoi County, we answer only to you—our neighbors, our families, our friends.

Yes, Public Power matters.

And through every storm, every setback, and every triumph—we will be here. Not because it's easy. But because it's right. That is the Tennessee Valley way. That is the Erwin Utilities - Erwin Fiber way.

And we are building a brighter future—together. ■



ABOVE: Erwin Utilities' Fiber Crew scaling the side of a washed-away road in an effort to restore essential services.

LEFT: Erwin Utilities' crews began working to restore permanent water and sewer lines across the Nolichucky River at the Jackson Love Bridge in July 2025.

RIGHT: Pictured from left are Rep. Diana Harshbarger, Rep. Renea Jones, and Erwin Utilities' President and CEO Lee Brown touring EU's damaged Wastewater Treatment Plant and Laboratory after the storm.

BELOW: Erwin Utilities' line crew working on utility pole restorations in Riverview Industrial Park in July 2025.



Sharing What M

National festival keeps storytelling tradition alive

By Trish Milburn

Telling stories is as old as humanity itself. As language developed, the oral storytelling tradition was born and gradually came into its own. From William Shakespeare to Ernest Hemingway to Maya Angelou to your grandpa's memories about life during the Great Depression, humanity's stories span the entirety of human experience.

"Stories are windows into 'Who are we?' and 'Where did we come from?'" says Donald Davis, of Ocracoke, North Carolina. Donald will take part in his 45th National Storytelling Festival this fall.

A Festival is Born

Thanks to radio, TV, the internet and

social media, ways to share stories are constantly evolving. But the attraction of oral storytelling remains powerful.

Armed with this knowledge and some big dreams, Jimmy Neil Smith organized the first National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough in 1973. His purpose, in part, was to help revitalize Tennessee's oldest town. Like many other small-town Main Streets, Jonesborough's had seen better days. No one attending that first festival—with the possible exception of Jimmy himself—could have predicted what it would eventually come to mean to the town.

Despite the fact about 60 to 100 people attended and the venue had hay bales for

seating, Jimmy gave the festival the ambitious moniker of National Storytelling Festival right from the beginning. A small inaugural crowd grew to about 10,000 festivalgoers each year.

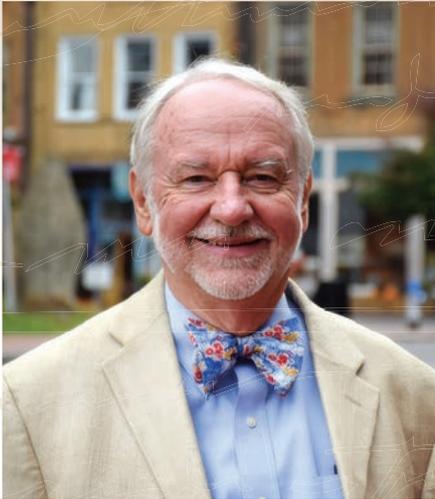
The event has only been canceled twice in its 52-year history—once in 2020 due to the pandemic, and again last year in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

Angela White, communications associate for the International Storytelling Center, the nonprofit parent organization that runs the festival, says Hurricane Helene hit the area five days before the festival began. The event was canceled so the crowds didn't strain resources that were needed elsewhere.



Thousands of visitors arrive in Jonesborough each October to enjoy the yarns spun by featured storytellers. PHOTOS COURTESY OF INTERNATIONAL STORYTELLING CENTER

Makes Us Human



ABOVE: Storyteller Donald Davis is a festival favorite. **RIGHT:** A young festival attendee has her photo taken at the Story Spot.



Growth and a Mission

All of downtown Jonesborough is now dedicated to the festival, which takes place Oct. 3-5 this year. Venues evolved from the court square and residents' backyards to several circus-style tents now needed to accommodate all the attendees.

"In the early years, we couldn't have imagined them shutting down Main Street," Donald says.

Donald saw the ISC offices moving into the historic Chester Inn. He was there for the construction of the Mary B. Martin Storytelling Hall that houses a theater, gift shop, library and rooms that can be rented for private events, and the creation of the 3-acre Jimmy Neil Smith Park—known for its storytelling focus—that surrounds it.

"A better world through the power of storytelling" is ISC's mission. The staff, volunteers and storytellers want to inspire people to tell their own stories, listen to others and to use the power of storytelling to affect positive change.

The ISC and the annual festival made Jonesborough their home, but their reach extends far beyond its borders.

Tales From Around the Globe

Storytellers and attendees arrive from around the world. In 2023, festivalgoers came from all 50 states as well as several countries. Factor in the virtual aspects of the festival, implemented after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the festival's reach spreads even wider.

Some of the featured international tellers have included Peter Chand, an Englishman of Indian descent who told Punjabi folktales. Clare Muireann Murphy shared stories of life in Ireland, and Mara Menzies brought tales related to her Scottish and Kenyan heritage.

Rich cultural backgrounds will be part of the 2025 festival once again, from Dovie Thomason's stories of her Lakota, Apache and Scottish Traveller heritage to the Japanese, Korean and Hawaiian tales told by Alton Takiyama-Chung.

Storytellers come from all walks of life, but there's something universal about the experience of hearing someone share a part of their life, a legend or a piece of history.

"Storytelling is the art of the people," storyteller Tim Lowry says.

Tim will travel from Summerville, South Carolina, to share stories at the festival for the seventh time this year.

"I once heard the festival referred to as America's biggest family reunion," Tim says. "It has an atmosphere unlike any other arts event I've been to, one to be envied by other arts events."

In fact, the National Storytelling Festival inspired the creation of other events across the country, such as the Timpanogos Storytelling Festival in Lehi, Utah, and the Cave Run Storytelling Festival in Morehead, Kentucky, both in September.

This increase in the interest in storytelling events has made it possible for many storytellers to make their living by performing at festivals and leading workshops. Donald attends more than 40 weekend events and single theater nights each year and gives seven weeklong workshops.

Asheville, North Carolina's, Connie Regan-Black took part in every National Storytelling Festival and traveled to 19 countries with her storytelling. Though she has cut back on her traveling in recent years, there was a time when she was away from home 10-20 days a month. Now she does a lot of one-on-one coaching, teaching the power of storytelling to a variety of people from up-and-coming storytellers to lawyers and accountants.



ABOVE: Storyteller Sheila Arnold leads a pre-festival storytelling workshop. **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Teller Motoko shares the ancient Japanese tradition of origami. Audience members laugh at a teller's humorous tale. Some storytellers mix music with their stories. The Mary B. Martin Storytelling Hall is where the Legacy Series is held. Spooky is the name of the game at the special Ghost Stories programs. Festivalgoers move between the five circus-style tents throughout the event.

"There's a circular energy of telling and listening," she says of events like the National Storytelling Festival. "I can feel the energy of the audience. I call it breathing together. Storytelling is a part of our DNA."

The Lay of the Land

National Storytelling Festival attendees will hear folktales, personal narratives, legends, stories from history and more. The storytelling tents are within walking distance of one another, and performances run simultaneously, so festivalgoers must keep their schedules handy. The festival also features food courts, dining tents and a marketplace.

In addition to one-, two- or three-day festival tickets, other special events require separate tickets, including a Wednesday night performance by Donald and a Thursday night show by The Uncalled for Trio.

After the festival wraps up for the night on Friday, fan-favorite Kevin Kling and accordion player Simone Perrin take the stage for a storytelling and musical performance. Parents are encouraged to

leave the kids at home for this event.

Ghost stories will be shared on Friday and Saturday nights, and festivalgoers can enjoy tasty treats while mixing and mingling with the storytellers during the Yarnspinners' Party on Saturday night. For a full list of events and to buy tickets, go to storytellingcenter.net.

The Legacy Series

One special event during the festival does not feature any professional storytellers. The Legacy Series takes place in the ISC's indoor theater and showcases powerful personal stories that preserve pieces of history.

These storytellers are "regular people who have had extraordinary experiences," according to ISC. Among past Legacy Series speakers are Holocaust survivor Tova Friedman, Navajo Code Talker Peter MacDonald and Apollo 13 pilot Fred Haise.

Sometimes the Legacy Series features a group of people who share certain important aspects of their personal stories. One such group was the quilters of Gee's Bend, Alabama, a largely isolated

community of the descendants of formerly enslaved people. Stella Mae Pettway, Mary Ann Pettway, Lucy Witherspoon and Gloria Hoppins shared stories of their community and the stunning quilts that are true works of art.

The Legacy Series also featured Leona Tate, Gail Etienne and Tessie Prevost who, as children, integrated McDonogh Elementary School in New Orleans six years after the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision declared the segregation of public schools unconstitutional. They recounted being escorted to school by federal marshals, about the crowd screaming at them and what it was like to live through that turbulent time.

"The Legacy Series is wonderful," Tim says. "To be a human is to have a story to tell, and it's important to capture that story before it's gone."

Each of these past Legacy Series presentations is available to watch on the ISC's YouTube channel, the links to which are on the organization's website.



Beyond the Festival

While the National Storytelling Festival is the ISC's big showcase event each fall, the organization sponsors a wealth of other programming. Student outreach programs help to spread the message of storytelling and to help young people explore their potential for storytelling.

Other programs highlight how storytelling isn't just for entertainment or historical purposes. Stories can be a method for bringing about change. People can connect and understand topics more easily if they are explained in story form. Projects such as "Freedom Stories: Unearthing the Black Heritage of Appalachia" shine a light on underrepresented aspects of American history and culture.

The ISC hosts around 150 events each year, mostly through its Storytelling Live programming that brings Tellers-in-Residence to Jonesborough for weeklong

engagements with daily matinees Tuesday-Saturday. Though the so-called storytelling season ends in October, the ISC hosts some special holiday events toward the end of the year.

The Future

Like arts organizations across the country, the ISC has lost a large amount of federal funding, including an annual \$30,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts that was used for the Storytelling Live program. Storytelling Live brings around 16,000 people to Jonesborough and contributes \$8 million to Northeast Tennessee's economy annually. The grant also helped cover the costs of community and youth outreach.

Combined with having to cancel the festival last year, it's been a difficult one-two punch.

"We're surviving without it thanks to our amazing donors and supporters," Angela says.

However, the decrease in funding will likely mean some changes. Angela says

the ISC tries to make children's events free, but there may need to be small fees in the future. It also may have to cut some of the programs that go out into the community.

Remembering the Visionary

This year's National Storytelling Festival will be the first one without Jimmy, who died in March after a long illness. There will no doubt be some sadness, but there will also be many loving stories about the man who Connie says "saw the magic happening" and created the festival that was the turning point for the city of Jonesborough and celebrates the tradition of storytelling.

While many consider Jimmy a visionary, he once described himself as "a country boy with a dream." ■

The National Storytelling Festival is Oct. 3-5 in Jonesborough. For details, visit storytellingcenter.net/festival/main.

SCAMMS

AND HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY COMBAT THEM

Protect your identity and finances from utility scams with this guide

By Christina Sawyer

Online and phone scams have escalated in recent years, leaving people vulnerable to identity theft and financial loss. Particularly concerning are the devious tactics scam artists employ to target customers of utility services, threatening to shut off power unless immediate payment is made.

These scams often involve a phone call from someone posing as a utility representative. They may claim your power is about to be disconnected due to unpaid bills. The caller insists on immediate payment. Scammers create a sense of urgency or panic, demanding instant payment to avoid service disruption, typically through untraceable methods like prepaid cards or wire transfers. It's fear tactics like this that keep consumers from thinking clearly.

Legitimate utilities do not require payments mentioned above, including prepaid debit cards, gift cards or cryptocurrencies. Customer service representatives at your utility will never use intimidation tactics to pressure you into paying.

Seniors and Scam Vulnerability

Senior members of our communities often become prime targets for utility scammers who exploit their trust and routine lifestyles. To combat this, it is essential to strengthen awareness and safeguards for those in this vulnerable demographic.

Seniors are often disproportionately affected by fraudulent schemes due to their trusting nature. Scammers manipulate this trust, using aggressive tactics that can be very intimidating.

Family members and caregivers should talk with parents and grandparents, reminding them to scrutinize unsolicited requests for personal or financial information and reinforce the correct procedures for handling billing inquiries.

Verify All Communication

If you receive a suspicious call or message, hang up and call your utility directly.

Scammers may ask for social security numbers, bank account details or utility account numbers. Never provide personal information in response to unsolicited requests. Pay bills through authorized methods only, such as through the utility's official website or by mail. Payments over the phone are only safe when you initiate the call using a verified phone number. Spread awareness by discussing these scams with friends and family.

We take the education of our consumers seriously regarding fraud attempts. All official correspondence will come through verified channels and multiple payment options are available to ensure customer security.

Reporting Scam Activities

If you believe you have received a scam call, do not hesitate to report the incident to the police and your utility. Reporting these fraudulent activities assists in preventing future scams and helps protect the community at large. When reporting, provide the following information, if available:

- **Date and time of contact:** Record the specific time and date the scam attempt occurred.



- **Caller ID information:** Note any phone number or name that appeared on the caller ID.
- **Nature of the request:** Describe the request made by the scammer, particularly any mention of immediate payment or personal information.
 - **Payment methods mentioned:** Document any payment methods the scammer directed you to use.

- **Suspicious details:** Relay any additional details that seemed out of the ordinary or raised suspicion.

By documenting these details, consumers aid in creating a thorough report that can be used in the investigation and prevention of future scam attempts. Consumers are encouraged to promptly contact their utility's customer service representatives using official communication channels.

Scammers are unrelenting, but by staying informed and vigilant, you can protect yourself against these fraudulent schemes.

Remember, no legitimate company will pressure you for immediate payment through suspicious means or threaten you in any way. Always take a moment to verify any demands for payment, especially those related to your utility bills. Your utility is a service partner, not a source of threat, and we are committed to keeping your identity and finances secure. ■



Mindful SHOWST

Simple recipes that wow crowds

By Anne Braly

There are times that call for big fancy cakes, such as weddings and other special events. But most of the time, we want cakes that are simple, can easily feed a crowd and can be cut into slivers for snacks and slices for parties.

Sheet cakes come in all kinds of flavors and

toppings that can impress your guests in the same manner that layer cakes with fancy fondants do.

From bake sales in the fall to cakes you will be proud to put on a holiday table, here are some recipes that really take the cake.



APPLE SHEET CAKE

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup oil
- 2 cups sugar
- 3 eggs
- 2½ cups flour
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 3 cups chopped apples
- 1 cup chopped walnuts or pecans, more for garnish (optional)

CREAM CHEESE FROSTING:

- 1 8-ounce package cream cheese
- 3½ cups powdered sugar
- ½ cup (1 stick) butter
- 2 teaspoons vanilla

FOR THE CAKE:

- Preheat oven to 350 F.
- Peel and chop apples and chop nuts. Set aside.

Start with oil in a large bowl or bowl of a stand mixer; add sugar and eggs and beat until combined. Sift together flour with cinnamon, baking soda, baking powder and salt. Add to creamed mixture, beating well. Add vanilla. Fold in apples and nuts. Bake in a greased 9-by-13-inch pan for 50 minutes or until cake tests done. Cool before frosting.

FOR FROSTING:

Combine frosting ingredients, mixing until well combined. Garnish with nuts, if desired.

TOPPERS

COCONUT POKE CAKE

- 1 15.25-ounce package white cake mix
- 1 14-ounce can cream of coconut
- 1 14-ounce can sweetened condensed milk
- 1 16-ounce package frozen whipped topping, thawed
- 1 8-ounce package flaked coconut

Prepare and bake white cake mix in a 9-by-13-inch dish according to package directions. While cake is still hot, poke holes with a fork all over the top.

Mix cream of coconut and sweetened condensed milk together in a bowl. Pour over the top of hot cake. Let cake cool completely.

Frost cake with whipped topping and cover with flaked coconut, toasted, if desired. Keep cake chilled in the refrigerator.

RED VELVET SHEET CAKE

FOR CAKE:

- ½ cup butter, softened
- 1½ cups granulated sugar
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 2 eggs, at room temperature
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2½ cups cake flour
- 2 tablespoons cocoa powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 cup buttermilk room temperature
- 1 tablespoon white vinegar
- 1 teaspoon red food coloring

FOR THE FROSTING:

- 1 8-ounce package cream cheese, softened
- ½ cup butter, softened
- 4 cups powdered sugar
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1 tablespoon heavy cream or half-and-half
- Raspberries, optional garnish

REESE'S PEANUT BUTTER POKE CAKE

FOR THE CAKE:

- 1 box devil's food cake, plus ingredients called for on box
- 2 cups peanut butter, melted

FOR THE FROSTING:

- 1 cup unsalted butter
- 3½ cups powdered sugar
- ½ cup cocoa powder
- 3 tablespoons heavy cream
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt

TOPPING:

- 1 cup chopped Reese's Peanut Butter Cups
- 1 cup Reese's Pieces

Heat oven to 350 F. Spray a 9-by-13-inch cake pan with cooking spray. Prepare cake batter according to package instructions and pour into prepared pan.

Bake until a toothpick inserted into the middle of the cake comes out clean, about 25 minutes. Let cake cool completely. Using the back of a wooden spoon, poke holes all over the cake. Pour melted peanut butter over the entire cake, filling the holes. Set aside.

FOR FROSTING:

In a large bowl, using an electric mixer, beat butter until creamy. Add remaining ingredients, beating on low for 30 seconds. Increase speed to high and beat for 1 minute. Add ¼ cup more powdered sugar or cocoa powder, if needed, to thicken frosting or another tablespoon of cream to thin it out.

Spread frosting all over the top of the cake. Top with chopped peanut butter cups and Reese's Pieces.

Preheat oven to 325 F. Grease and flour a 9-by-13-inch baking pan or line with parchment for easy removal. In the bowl of a stand mixer, cream the butter and sugar together for 3-5 minutes until light and fluffy. Add in the vanilla extract, eggs and vegetable oil.

In a separate bowl, whisk together the flour, cocoa powder, baking soda and salt. Add the dry mixture to the stand mixer and mix on low. Pour in the buttermilk and white vinegar and mix until just combined. Add 1 teaspoon of red food dye and mix, adding a little more at a time to reach desired color. The color will be brighter after it bakes. Pour batter into the prepared pan and smooth the top evenly.

Bake for 40-50 minutes until just baked through. Let cool completely before frosting.

FOR THE FROSTING:

Once the cake has completely cooled, beat the cream cheese and butter together until smooth. Slowly add powdered sugar, mixing until fluffy. Stir in vanilla and heavy cream. Garnish with raspberries, if desired. Store in the refrigerator for up to five days.



Star Light, Star Bright

What stars and planets can you see tonight?

By Pamela A. Keene

Could you find the Big Dipper, Orion and Cassiopeia as a child? Did you wonder what lay beyond your naked-eye view of the universe? Did it seem like there were more stars then?

“The Milky Way has always been a popular stargazing subject, but over the past 50 years, it seems to be slowly disappearing,” says Theo Wellington, a board member of Tennessee Starry Skies, the local DarkSky chapter. DarkSky International is a global organization that advocates for restoration of the nighttime environment and protects communities from the harmful effects of light pollution.

“The reality, of course, is that the stars aren’t disappearing,” Theo says. “It just seems that way because increasing light pollution at night is blocking the view.”

The Benefits of Darkness

For Theo and other advocates of reducing light pollution, the benefits extend far beyond stargazing.

“Obviously, the darker the area, the more stars are visible,” she says. “But all the artificial light at night has become disruptive to nature. The natural behaviors of birds, insects and mammals are being altered, from migratory patterns to disrupted reproduction. All of these changes have long-term effects on the ecosystem and the ability of plants and animals to survive.”

The good news is truly dark places still exist in Tennessee, particularly at state parks, national forests, and wild and scenic destinations.

In 2015, DarkSky International designated Jamestown’s Pickett CCC Memorial State Park and Pogue Creek Canyon State Natural Area as Tennessee’s first official International DarkSky Park. In 2017, Tennessee added a second DarkSky Park, the Obed Wild and Scenic River near Wartburg.

About DarkSky

DarkSky International was founded in 1988, chiefly to protect the night sky from light pollution and protect wildlife. Its International Dark Sky Places designations highlight sites around the globe that provide the best opportunities for stargazing. Flagstaff, Arizona, was named

the first DarkSky City in 2001, and since then, more than 230 places have been certified in 22 countries.

In 2019, the group developed a plan to help slow the growth of light pollution.

“So many people now live in cities where streetlights and other light pollution can make it difficult to pick out even some of the brightest constellations in the night sky,” Theo says. “Many streetlights and security lights send light up into the night sky. One of our most effective suggestions is to install lights that face downward to cut off any direct lighting upward.”

Find the Darkness

Although Tennessee can only boast two official DarkSky sites, the state has nearly a dozen places that offer better-than-average stargazing opportunities.

“One of the best ways to participate in stargazing events is to contact one of Tennessee’s eight astronomy clubs and attend a night-sky event with them,” Theo says. “Members bring telescopes, night-sky maps and high-powered cameras especially when a meteor shower happens, an eclipse of the moon occurs or various planets can be more readily viewed.”

Clubs’ regular meetings feature programs to educate the public about where to view



A lone amateur astronomer is silhouetted against the night sky.
PHOTO BY THEO WELLINGTON

the best dark skies, offer guidance about purchasing a telescope and discuss the most recent developments in space.

“You’ll be surprised how welcoming amateur astronomers will be at these events,” Theo says. “Most are happy to give advice about the best ways to pick out celestial objects in the sky and some will offer a chance to view planets, nebulas, galaxies and star clusters through their telescopes.”

Tennessee’s Astronomy Clubs

Eight amateur astronomy clubs in Tennessee provide opportunities to learn more about the night sky. Check out their websites to join, find out about celestial events or take part in programs.

Barnard Astronomical Society, Chattanooga, barnardastronomy.org

Barnard-Seyfert Astronomical Society, Nashville, bsasnashville.com

Bays Mountain Astronomy Club, Kingsport, go-astronomy.com/astronomy-club.php?ID=85

Cumberland Astronomical Society, Gallatin, cumberlandastronomicalsociety.org

Knoxville Observers Astronomy Club, Knoxville, go-astronomy.com/astronomy-club.php?ID=274

Memphis Astronomical Society, Memphis, memphisastro.org

ORION, Oak Ridge, go-astronomy.com/astronomy-club.php?ID=476

Smoky Mountain Astronomical Society, Knoxville, go-astronomy.com/astronomy-club.php?ID=476

Humans have been looking at the stars for centuries—to guide their travels, to try to predict the future, to figure out the best time for planting, to seek spiritual messages and to keep time.

We ought not to lose that through simple inattention.

“Light pollution is the equivalent of spray-painting graffiti on the window through which we can see out into the universe,” Theo says. “It doesn’t get dark

when the sun sets. Instead, the fog of light lifts, and thousands of stars appear. The planets dance, meteors surprise us, comets round the sun and disappear. I would argue that our lives—and our children’s lives—will be immeasurably poorer if we take away the glorious view into infinity that is set before all of us every clear night.” ■

Visit tennesseestarryskies.org for more information.



Astrophotographer Keith Rainey captured multiple exposures over many nights to create this spectacular image of M33, the Triangulum Galaxy. PHOTO BY KEITH RAINEY



A photo through a fish-eye camera lens shows a horizon-to-horizon view. On the left, the first glimpse of the moon is visible as it rises; the Milky Way is in the lower right-hand corner. PHOTO BY THEO WELLINGTON

Look to the Skies

Here are Tennessee’s top stargazing locations, according to go-astronomy.com:

Big Hill Pond State Park, Pocahtontas, tnstateparks.com/parks/big-hill-pond

Bledsoe Creek, Gallatin, tnstateparks.com/parks/bledsoe-creek

Fall Creek Falls, Spencer, tnstateparks.com/parks/fall-creek-falls

Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Newfound Cap Trailhead, Clingmans Dome, Foothills Parkway, smokymountainnationalpark.com

Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park, Millington, tnstateparks.com/parks/meeman-shelby

Mousetail Landing State Park, Linden, tnstateparks.com/parks/mousetail-landing

Obed Wild & Scenic River National Reserve, nps.gov/obed/learn/nature/lightscapes.htm

Pickett CCC Memorial State Park, Jamestown, tnstateparks.com/parks/activity-detail/pickett-interpretive-programs

Pin Oak Campground at Natchez Trace State Park, tnstateparks.com/parks/natchez-trace



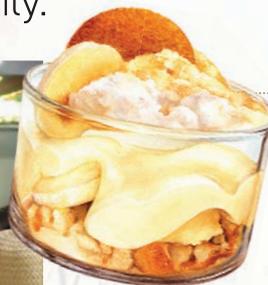
An Earth Day setup with telescopes and other equipment provides solar observing during the daylight hours. PHOTO BY THEO WELLINGTON



TENNESSEE CONNECTIONS

PLANNER

From soulful hip-hop nights and sweet banana pudding cook-offs to bluegrass tributes and sparkling Christmas parades, autumn in Tennessee delivers a festival for every family.



CENTERVILLE

Oct. 4-5

National Banana Pudding Festival

Sample 10 prize-winning recipes on the famous Puddin' Path, cheer on the National Pudding Cook-off and enjoy two stages of live entertainment. Shop at nearly 100 Southern craft vendors and let your children of all ages have fun in the Little 'Nanners Kids' Area. The 16th annual festival runs 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday and noon-5 p.m. Sunday at the Hickman County Ag Pavilion, with proceeds benefiting local nonprofits.

bananapuddingfest.org

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL BANANA PUDDING FESTIVAL

HALLS

Sept. 10-13

Lauderdale County Fair

Enjoy four days of classic small-town fun at the Dyersburg Army Air Base grounds, with free gate admission and evening start times. Livestock shows, midway rides, truck pulls, pageants and a petting zoo pack the Sept. 10-13 schedule. Gates open at 5 p.m. Wednesday through Friday, giving families plenty of after-work time to take in the action.

lauderdalecountyttn.org/tourism/events

MORRISTOWN

Sept. 12

Live at Rose Center: Black Atticus

Knoxville poet and emcee Black Atticus brings his socially conscious lyrics to Morristown's Rose Center & Council for the Arts. VIP doors open at 5:30 p.m., general admission opens at 6:30, and the show starts at 7. Expect clever wordplay, interactive storytelling and a laid-back listening-room vibe the whole family can enjoy.

rosecenter.org/events

SPRINGFIELD

Oct. 3

First Fridays—Fall Finale

Downtown Springfield caps its 2025 First Friday series with live music, 80-plus vendors, food trucks, a kids zone and a cruise-in from 6-9 p.m. Proceeds support downtown beautification projects, making this night of small-town fun a win-win for families and the community.

realspringfieldtn.com/main-street/1st-fridays

LEWISBURG

Oct. 10-11

Goats, Music & More Fair

Fainting goat shows, goat races, live country and rock acts, and dozens of craft and food vendors fill Rock Creek Park from 10 a.m. to late evening both days. Aaron Tippin is set to perform at 8:30 p.m. on Saturday. Entry is free.

goatsmusicandmore.com

SPARTA

Oct. 11

Liberty Square: A Lester Flatt Celebration

Bluegrass takes center stage on Sparta's courthouse square from 9 a.m. until approximately 7 p.m. National touring bands honor hometown legends Lester Flatt and Benny Martin while 100-plus food and craft booths keep bellies full. The free event draws a crowd of up to 5,000 annually.

sparta-tn.gov/lesterflatt

BROWNSVILLE

Oct. 18

Hatchie Fall Fest

Historic Court Square buzzes with live music, kids' games, pie-baking contests and more than 100 artisan booths during this all-day, admission-free celebration of Haywood County culture.

hatchiefallfest.com

For a complete list of what's happening in Tennessee, visit tnvacation.com/calendar.



MORRISTOWN

PHOTO COURTESY OF MORRISTOWN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Dec. 4

Morrystown Christmas Parade

Downtown glows as floats, bands and twinkling light displays roll out at 7 p.m. along West Main and Jackson streets. Bundle up, bring lawn chairs and welcome the holiday season in style. Registration for parade floats opens Oct. 1.

morrystownchamber.com



Include Your Upcoming Event

Want to share an event with the readers of Tennessee Connections? Please visit tinyurl.com/TennesseeEvents or scan the QR code to submit the details. Thank you.

MORRISTOWN

Oct. 24-26

49th Mountain Makins Festival

Rose Center's signature Appalachian festival brings 70-plus juried artisans, two stages of roots music and storytelling, and hands-on demos from blacksmithing to kettle apple butter. Kids' crafts and Southern comfort fare keep families busy. A Friday-night preview party from 6:40-9 p.m. kicks off the weekend; regular hours run 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday. Passes are \$10 a day, \$15 for the weekend, or \$40 for the preview party and three-day bundle. Children 12 and under get in free.

rosecenter.org/mountain-makins

DICKSON

Nov. 1-2

Christmas in the Country

Marking its 50th year, this indoor craft fair fills Dickson County High School with regional artisans, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Sunday. Admission: \$2, kids 10 and under free.

facebook.com/CICGFWDICKSON

SEVIERVILLE

Dec. 6

63rd Annual Sevierville Christmas Parade

Downtown Sevierville decks the streets for its hometown Christmas parade, stepping off at 11 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 6. Expect light-strewn floats, marching bands, baton twirlers and a wave from Santa as the procession rolls along Forks of the River Parkway. Arrive early for curbside views and hot chocolate stands on the square.

pigeonforgewinterfest.com/event/christmas-parade-sevierville



ERWIN

Oct. 3

Unicoi County Apple Festival

More than 400 vendors, two stages of live music and sweet-tart treats line downtown Erwin as 120,000 visitors celebrate 48 years of apple-flavored tradition. Kids' zones, baking and decorating contests, a tennis tournament and mountain views round out one of the Southeast's top autumn events.

unicoicountyapplefestival.com

PHOTO COURTESY OF UNICOI COUNTY APPLE FESTIVAL





Step back in time at the Museum of Appalachia

What Is It?

Spread across 65 wooded acres near Clinton, the Museum of Appalachia is a living-history farm village. Its 35 log cabins, barns, churches and a one-room school-house are stocked with more than 250,000 artifacts and roamed by peacocks, sheep and other barnyard animals. Think quilts and moonshine stills, but also fiddles, folk art and a working blacksmith forge.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF APPALACHIA

History

Cultural historian John Rice Irwin opened the museum in 1969, moving threatened pioneer buildings to the site and filling them with everyday objects he'd collected throughout Southern Appalachia. Today the Smithsonian Affiliate keeps his vision alive with daily demonstrations and seasonal events.

What to See

Stroll cabin-lined lanes, poke into the Appalachian Hall of Fame, and linger at the woodworking and spinning barns. On fall Fridays and select school-year dates, the grounds buzz with sorghum-making, blacksmithing and old-time music during Fall Heritage Days—kid-friendly, camera-ready and heavy on kettle-corn aroma. Come autumn, long strings of pumpkin rings hang on cabin railings to dry, an old Appalachian way of preserving winter squash.

Beyond the Museum

Ten minutes north, Norris Dam State Park offers leaf-framed lake views and easy shoreline trails. Head south into Clinton's antique district for cafes and vintage shops, or continue 25 minutes to Knoxville's Market Square for live music and farm-to-table fare.

More Info

The museum is open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day in September. Starting in October, the museum closes at 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Winter hours and holiday closures vary, so check ahead. General admission is \$20 for adults, \$18 for seniors and military, and \$10 for ages 6–17; children 5 and younger get in free. Special-event pricing may differ. Parking is free, and the on-site restaurant dishes Southern staples from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. You'll find the grounds at 2819 Andersonville Highway, Clinton. For schedules, tickets or more details, visit museumofappalachia.org or call 865-494-7680.

Tennessee Extension Master Gardeners

Across the state, there is a select group of specially trained volunteers who have a strong passion for serving and educating their communities. Tennessee Extension Master Gardeners wear their green badges with great pride as they grow plants, cultivate relationships and teach others the joys of gardening.

Part of Master Gardeners' purpose is to support the Tennessee Cooperative Extension Service, which really sets the program apart from others. While their mission is rooted in serving the community, there are also many benefits to being a Master Gardener volunteer. Participants can network with other gardening enthusiasts, receive formal training in horticulture and gain hands-on experience through volunteering at local Master Gardener projects. Additionally, they can access a variety of continuing education opportunities offered by the Tennessee Extension.

How to Get Started

The first step to becoming a Master Gardener is to contact the local UT-TSU Extension office. Extension agents will walk prospective Master Gardeners through the application process, offer details about upcoming training dates and list any volunteer opportunities. In most counties, training is typically held from January through April, so fall is an ideal time to start the application process, which helps ensure course deadlines are met.

Once the training classes begin, applicants attend lectures

covering the history of extension, botany, soil health and nutrition, woody and herbaceous ornamentals, fruit and vegetable production, weed management, integrated pest management and wildlife management.

In addition to the lectures, applicants take part in a variety of other hands-on activities and labs to support them. Upon completion of the initial 40 hours of training, applicants are considered Master Gardener Interns.

Getting Certified

After finishing the training course, interns still need to complete at least 40 hours of volunteer time and eight hours of continued education to get their initial Master Gardener certification. These hours are typically served at local projects and events, which are led by volunteer leaders and approved by the county's Master Gardener coordinator.

Once the minimum hour requirement is met, interns receive the coveted green badge and officially become certified Tennessee Extension Master Gardeners.

Clearing Up Misconceptions

There are some common misconceptions about the Master Gardener program that need to be dispelled.

Some people believe Master Gardener applicants must be an expert gardener to take part in the program. While having a background in horticulture is beneficial, it is not required. All that's necessary is a passion for volunteerism, learning and serving the community. The Master Gardener program is designed to help individuals succeed, regardless of their level of experience.

Another misconception is that volunteer hours can be completed at any garden location. Local Master Gardener groups have specific projects within their communities that have been approved by the coordinating extension agents. These projects serve an identified educational need in the community and provide structure for Master Gardener volunteers.

The Master Gardener journey is intense and rewarding. If you have a passion for service and a love for gardening, be sure to reach out to your local UT-TSU Extension office and inquire about the Tennessee Extension Master Gardener program. ■



Rylan Thompson is a Tennessee State University Agricultural and Natural Resources/4-H Extension agent in Knox County. He specializes in residential/consumer horticulture and 4-H and is the Knox County Master Gardener coordinator.





ADOBE STOCK ILLUSTRATION BY JOHANNES

Don't Let Cybersecurity Scare You!

Halloween is creeping closer, but ghosts and ghouls aren't the only things lurking in the shadows. Scammers are out there too—ready to give you a real fright. October is Cybersecurity Awareness Month, so let's delve into some tips on how you can stay safe online.

John Fredericks, Director of Information Technology and Erwin Fiber at Erwin Utilities, says some of the fastest growing scams being seen involve generative artificial intelligence.

"It becomes much more difficult to discern what's real versus fake using traditional methods," he explains. "Generative AI is often highly targeted, crafted to appear as though it's coming from within an organization. It might impersonate an employee or reference a specific department, like accounting, with messages such as, 'Hey, this is [employee name], and

I need to update my bank information for direct deposit.'"

Fredericks warns that scammers often gather details from social media to mimic communication styles and make their messages appear legitimate.

"I would not give out private or personal information over email, even if requested from somebody you think is real," he says. "Call that person first, don't be afraid to question things."

Steven Smith, IT/Network Manager at Erwin Utilities echoes the same warnings when it comes to being approached about sensitive information.

"Assume everything is bad," he says. "If you get something that seems strange, just call that person rather than trying to get back to them through email. It takes a few minutes, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

Scams don't stop at email—text message

phishing is also on the rise. One common example involves fake messages about unpaid toll fees. The bottom line: Don't click any links in suspicious texts.

Both experts say password security is key to protecting your accounts. It's recommended that you use a different password for every account and that you avoid reusing them.

"There's a plethora of password managers on the market that are safe and secure," Smith says. "It really just means you have to have one really secure password to open up your password manager."

If you suspect you've been hacked, Smith and Fredericks advise changing your passwords immediately and contacting the proper authorities. Even if you haven't noticed anything unusual, it's smart to check your bank accounts a few times a week for unexpected activity. ■

Stay safe, stay smart, and remember: not everything online is what it seems. Happy Cybersecurity Awareness Month—and Happy Halloween!

APPLE CAKE *Recipe*



INGREDIENTS

- 1-½ cup oil
- 2 cups sugar
- 3 eggs
- 1 cup nuts
- 3 cups flour
- 2 teaspoon vanilla
- 3 cups diced apples
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon

DIRECTIONS

- Mix oil, sugar and eggs.
- Add flour, vanilla, apples, nuts, and cinnamon.
- Bake in a greased 9-by-13 pan for 50 minutes at 325 F.

APPLE CAKE ICING RECIPE

INGREDIENTS

- 1 stick of butter
- ½ cup cream
- 1 cup brown sugar

DIRECTIONS

- Cook for two minutes and cool.
- Beat and pour over cake.
- May add coconut if desired.

ADOBE STOCK ILLUSTRATION BY MANYAKOTIC



Employee Spotlight

SHARON KIDD

JOB TITLE: Senior Laboratory & Water Quality Specialist

YEARS AT EU: 12

FAVORITE PART OF THE JOB:

"I love knowing that the performance of my job responsibilities has a significant impact on my community's and other surrounding communities' drinking water."



ADAM "PETIE" JOHNSON

JOB TITLE: Groundman/Operator

YEARS AT EU: 12

FAVORITE PART OF THE JOB:

"My favorite part about my job is hooking up new services."



REGINA TILSON

JOB TITLE: Accountant

YEARS AT EU: 12

FAVORITE PART OF THE JOB:

"Accounting allows me to work in a profession where every detail matters, and I find that incredibly fulfilling."



Celebrating Customer Service Week Oct. 6-10



Celebrating Public Power Week Oct. 5-11





Passing on Traditions

Teaching skills to the next generation of hunters

Many youngsters, and even some adults who have never hunted before, will take to the woods for the first time this fall. Most usually follow a relative or friend who can teach them what to do.

When hunting with youngsters, make it all about them. Don't expect children to hunt like Davy Crockett. They will make mistakes, but people learn best through their mistakes. Don't do everything for them. Teach them how to do things correctly. Then let them do it, as long as it's safe. Just supervise and correct as necessary.

Make outings interesting and enjoyable for children. Youngsters get bored sitting still and quiet for long hours. Stay active to keep their attention. Squirrel season offers an outstanding opportunity to introduce youths to hunting. Hunting as a team also allows socialization, creating a superb way to introduce children to the sport and build lasting bonds.

First, learn how to spot the "gray ghosts" of the forest. Squirrels can quickly disappear in big trees. These masters of concealment often fool even the most experienced woodsmen. Before the season begins, take children to a park with squirrels. Pretend to hunt. Let them practice spotting squirrels and sneaking close.

When the season opens, take the child to a hardwood or mixed forest. Cover ground slowly. Take a few steps. Then, stop, look and listen. Scan the trees for movement or odd shapes on trunks and branches. Without making quick movements, advance a few more steps and stop again.

Periodically, find a fallen log or comfortable tree trunk and sit down. Remain still and quiet while scanning and listening. After a while, move a short distance and repeat. A good pair of binoculars helps spot well-concealed squirrels hiding in trees.

Sportsmen frequently hear squirrels long before seeing them. Listen for the distinctive sound of claws scratching on rough bark, shaking branches or objects hitting the ground. Squirrels commonly bark to proclaim their territory. Such barking can give away their positions.

Alerted squirrels habitually put tree trunks, large branches or other cover between themselves and hunters. However, smart sportsmen can take advantage of a squirrel's innate curiosity.

When a squirrel hides, the more experienced hunter could walk around the tree making noise while the youngster remains in place and keeps quiet. The squirrel will naturally focus its attention on the moving person and try to hide from that individual. That might prompt the squirrel to move slightly, giving away its position. That squirrel could jump to a new location that offers the youngster an excellent shot.

Squirrels don't always stay in trees. They regularly forage on the ground, especially on windy days and later in the season. Listen for them scampering over dry leaves. An experienced hunter can help beginners learn to recognize those sounds.

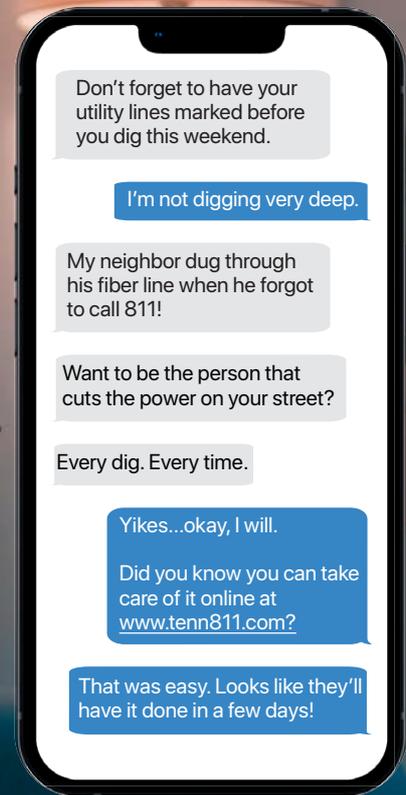
Tennessee allows a long squirrel season with generous limits. Taking a youngster out in the woods builds lasting memories. Visit tn.gov/twra/hunting/small-game-regulations.html for more information on small game hunting. ■



John N. Felsher is a professional freelance writer, broadcaster, photographer, editor and consultant. An avid sportsman, he's written more than 3,600 articles for more than 170 different magazines on a wide variety of outdoors topics. He also hosts an outdoors tips show for WAVH-FM Talk 106.5 radio station in Mobile, Alabama. Contact him at j.felsher@hotmail.com or through Facebook.



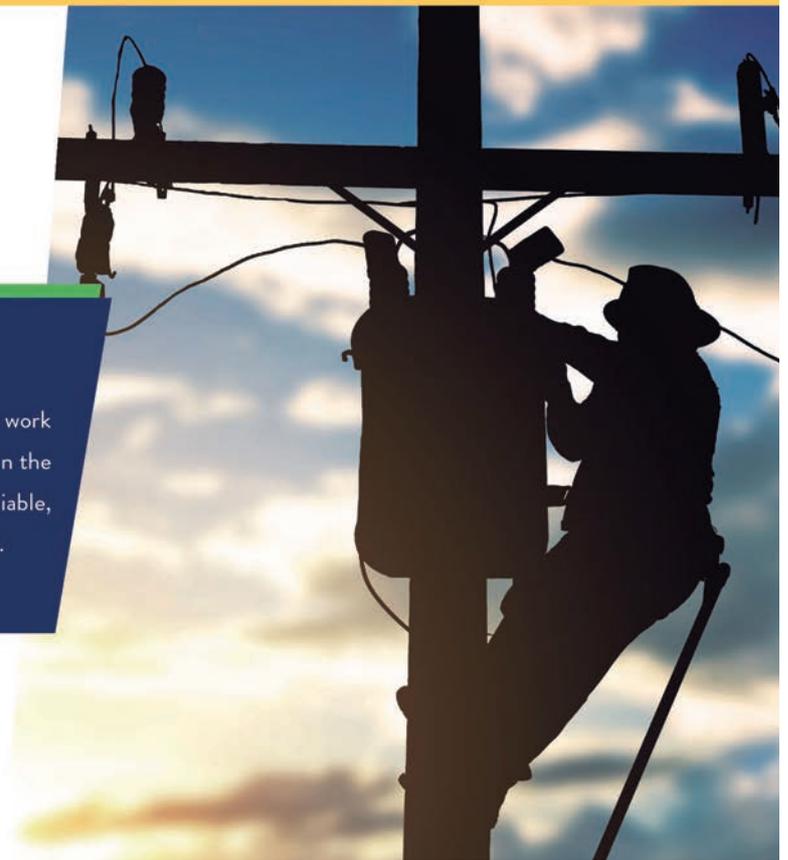
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OFFICE CLOSINGS:

Apple Festival: Oct. 3
Thanksgiving: Nov. 27-28

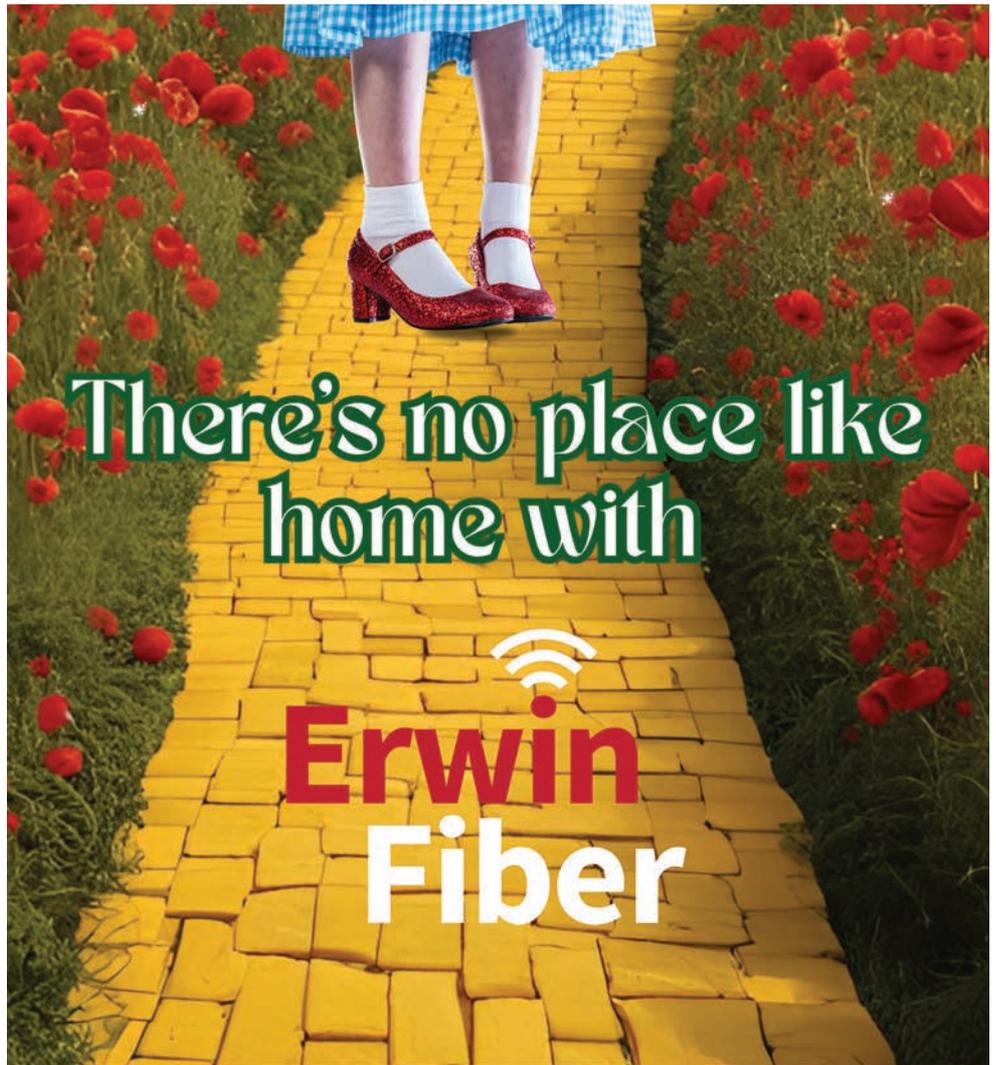
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