

JANUARY 2026

# Illinois Country Living



WHERE

# GIANTS

ARE BORN

 Association of Illinois  
Electric Cooperatives

Your Touchstone Energy®  
Member   
aiecc.coop

FEATURE  
The Mop Shop

PRAIRIE TABLE  
Icing on top

FINEST COOKING  
Just soup-er

 CO-OP  
NEWS

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PHOTO COURTESY OF HALL BROTHERS RACING

# Illinois Country Living

JANUARY 2026  
VOLUME 83, NO. 9

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Clean homes, healthy families  
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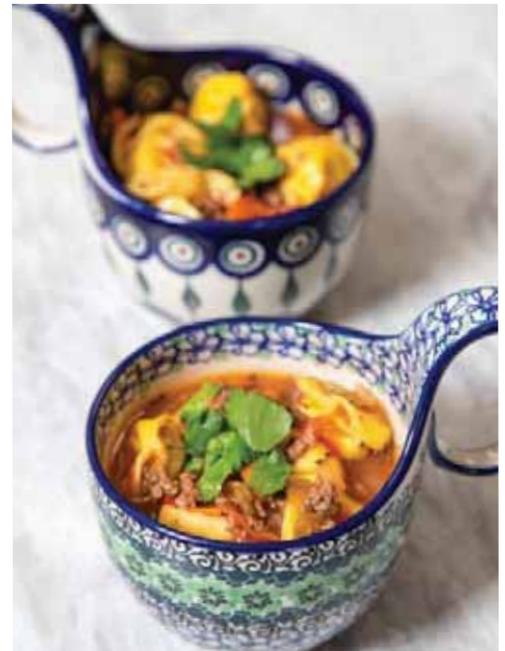


PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM DESCHER

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**On the cover: Against the Grain monster truck, driven by Lee County farmer Brad Shippert.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF 4XFARM MOTORSPORTS LLC



## More than a magazine

A 73-year tradition

EVERY MONTH, ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE members across rural Illinois find Illinois Country Living (ICL) magazine in their mailboxes. In a world of smartphone apps, social media and increasingly short attention spans, print magazines like it have become a rarity.

For some, ICL is a quick flip-through over morning coffee. For others, it's a keepsake. It's often a dog-eared fixture on the kitchen counter — recipes marked and events circled — or a fun activity for families as they hunt for the hidden object or do the crossword puzzle. No matter how you read it, the magazine exists for one simple reason: it's made for you.

Electric cooperatives are built on seven principles, and ICL is an extension of them. It's not just a magazine; it's a connection point. Whether you live in the heart of farm country, along a quiet rural road, or in a small town where everyone offers a friendly wave, your co-op wants you to be informed and involved.

Inside every issue, you'll find stories of rural Illinoisans — farmers, small business owners, volunteers, veterans — possibly someone you know. They remind

us of the best parts of Illinois and all the unique things it has to offer.

The magazine also works to help you live better and safer. Energy efficiency tips can lower your electric bill and make your home more comfortable. Safety articles explain how to stay clear of electrical dangers. The goal is simple: to give you information that makes a real difference in your everyday life.

Then there's the fun stuff — recipes that become family favorites, a calendar full of events across Illinois, gardening advice, puzzles and photos taken by readers that capture the beauty of our state.

Most importantly, ICL is part of your cooperative membership. It's delivered to your home because your co-op believes you deserve more than a monthly bill. You deserve transparency about how your co-op works, updates on projects and improvements, and a clear view of how your membership helps strengthen your community. The magazine keeps that conversation open.

In the increasingly fast-paced world we live in, ICL provides the perfect opportunity to slow down, read about rural Illinois and learn about your electric cooperative family. And, while I might be biased, I think that's well worth opening the mailbox for, whether this is the first time you've received the magazine or you've been a loyal reader for decades. 💡



Colten Bradford is the editor of Illinois Country Living magazine.

Illinois Country Living is a monthly publication serving the communications needs of the locally owned, not-for-profit electric cooperatives of Illinois. With a circulation of more than 200,000, the magazine informs cooperative consumer-members about issues affecting their electric cooperative and the quality of life in rural Illinois.

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# WE WISH YOU A BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL NEW YEAR!

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## JANUARY CHECKLIST

Nationwide, snow shoveling is responsible for thousands of injuries and as many as 100 deaths each year, according to the National Safety Council. Here are tips to stay safe.

**Warm up first.** Cold muscles are more prone to injury. Do some light stretching before you start to get your blood moving.



### Use proper technique.

Lift with your legs, not your back. Keep the shovel close to your body and avoid twisting when throwing snow — turn your whole body instead.



### Pace yourself.

Shoveling is strenuous work. Take frequent breaks, push snow when possible, instead of lifting, and stop if you feel short of breath, dizzy or overly fatigued.



### Know the signs of a heart attack.

Stop immediately and call 911 if you're experiencing any of them. Every minute counts.



PHOTO COURTESY OF TRAVIS DETERDING, EGYPTIAN ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION

## FEMA partnerships help keep the lights on

When a storm rolls through, your electric cooperative is ready to respond. Crews work around the clock to restore power, repair damage and make sure every member's lights come back on as quickly and safely as possible. When that damage is severe, the cost of rebuilding can add up quickly — and that's where the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) steps in to help.

Most people think of FEMA responding to natural disasters that make national news, such as hurricanes or widespread wildfires. But electric co-ops also rely on FEMA after smaller, localized events — the kinds of storms that may not always make national headlines but can still cause significant damage.

A few inches of ice or a sudden flash flood can snap utility poles, damage substations and leave miles of power lines on the ground. In rural areas, where electric co-ops serve fewer members across larger territories, repairing that damage can be especially challenging and expensive. FEMA assistance helps ensure those costs don't fall entirely

on co-op members and that power can be restored quickly without putting financial strain on small communities.

FEMA's Public Assistance program helps co-ops like yours rebuild critical infrastructure after disasters large or small. This essential partnership ensures that the co-op can focus on restoring power and supporting its community instead of worrying about how to fund large-scale repairs.

The FEMA Act of 2025 is making its way through Congress and aims to modernize the agency's programs, making it easier and faster for essential service providers to restore and rebuild. It's an important step toward keeping disaster recovery fair, efficient and focused on the people who depend on reliable electricity every day.

Whether it's a large-scale storm or a localized event that only affects a few towns, FEMA's support helps electric co-ops do what they do best — serve members and keep the lights on, no matter what Mother Nature brings. Learn more at [electric.coop/fema](https://electric.coop/fema). 💡

## Sudoku

by Myles Mellor and Susan Flanagan

Each Sudoku puzzle consists of a 9X9 grid that has been subdivided into nine smaller grids of 3X3 squares. To solve the puzzle, each row, column and box must contain each of the numbers 1 to 9. Puzzles come in three grades: easy, medium and difficult.

Level: Medium

Solution on page 33.

6		9	3			1		
5		7			1	8		
		2			4			
		5	1				8	9
	8			2			7	
3	7				9	5		
			6			7		
		4	9			3		2
	5				3	1		6



## Congress boosts funding for RUS Electric Loan Program

Congress has increased funding from \$6.5 billion to \$7 billion for the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) Electric Loan Program, which helps electric cooperatives pay for construction, improvement and modernization of their systems.

The \$500 million boost was approved as part of the deal that Congress reached to reopen the federal government after a record 45-day shutdown. Lawmakers passed 2026 fiscal year spending bills for three federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture and its RUS programs. President Donald Trump signed the package into law Nov. 12.

The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) and electric co-ops pushed for the funding increase and will continue to advocate for more money for the program after the current spending bill ends on Sept. 30, said Hill Thomas, NRECA vice president for legislative affairs.

“Electric co-ops use RUS loans to help finance infrastructure that provides reliable, affordable service to more than 42 million consumer-members in rural communities throughout America,” Thomas said. “The funding increase approved by Congress will

help co-ops expand their systems to keep up with rising demand for electricity.”

Co-ops also help reduce the federal deficit by paying interest on those loans to the U.S. Treasury, Thomas said. In 2024, they paid nearly \$200 million in interest.

The RUS Electric Loan Program dates back to 1936, when Congress passed the Rural Electrification Act that created electric co-ops. RUS offers loans to not-for-profit co-ops at low interest rates.

“Many co-ops rely on these loans to modernize their systems without having to raise rates dramatically to pay for the improvements,” Thomas said.

As part of the deal to reopen the government, Congress also extended the existing Farm Bill for another year, through Sept. 30, 2026. Lawmakers last passed a five-year Farm Bill in 2018. They have been unable to agree on a new one, opting instead to extend the 2018 legislation each year for the past three years.

The Farm Bill authorizes crucial RUS funding for co-ops and helps accelerate broadband deployment across rural America. 

Erin Kelly, NRECA

## ILLINOIS TRIVIA CHALLENGE

Welcome to our new Illinois Trivia Challenge! Each month, we'll ask readers three questions to test their knowledge of the Prairie State. Enjoy!



- Which historic Illinois town features the oldest Illinois State Capitol building?
  - Chicago
  - Vandalia
  - Alton
- In what year was Illinois organized as a territory?
  - 1809
  - 2025
  - 1776
- What case is arguably Abraham Lincoln's most famous?
  - Kramer vs. Kramer
  - Marbury vs. Madison
  - The Almanac Trial

Answers are on page 33.



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## Where is it?

The winners of the November hidden objects contest were Debbie Kamper of JCE Co-op and Angela Spyles of Egyptian Electric Cooperative Association. Congratulations! Your ICL campfire mugs have been sent.

The Christmas tree hidden in the December 2025 issues was in the Energy Solutions section on page 15 in the centerpiece. Winners' names will be drawn, and they will be notified. Visit Illinois Country Living on Facebook after each month's deadline for a closeup of the object's location and winners' names.

It's time for a new hidden object search. January 15 is National Hat Day, so be on the lookout for a ball cap, pictured above. The symbol can vary in size and will not be hidden on this page, a lettered page or in an ad.

Entries must include your name, address, name of your electric co-op (nonmembers are also eligible), and the page number and location of the symbol. Visit [icl.coop/hiddenobject](http://icl.coop/hiddenobject) and fill out the entry form (also found under Contact Us on the website) or mail a postcard or letter to Illinois Country Living, Hidden Objects, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712. We will NOT accept entries via phone call or email.

All entries must be received by the 25th of the publication month. Only one entry is allowed per household every month. If multiple entries per household are submitted, only the first will be considered. Winners' names and the symbol's location will be published in each month's issue of Illinois Country Living. 💡



A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 

## Dairyland acquires two Illinois gas plants

Dairyland Power Cooperative is diversifying its energy portfolio and expanding its footprint with the acquisition of two gas-fired power plants in Illinois and adding two distribution cooperatives as power supply customers.

The La Crosse, Wisc.-based generation and transmission co-op recently completed the purchase of the 483-megawatt Elgin Energy Center in Elgin and the 334-MW Rocky Road gas plant in East Dundee.

"These strategic investments are essential to position Dairyland to meet the growing resource adequacy and reliability needs of rural communities," said Brent Ridge, Dairyland president and CEO. "As we continue to develop a balanced, diversified energy portfolio to support increased demand across our service territory, these facilities will play a critical role in providing the flexible, dependable energy our members rely on every day."

Dairyland Power will boost its load by more than 100 MW when it begins serving Norris Electric Cooperative, headquartered in Newton, and Wisconsin-based Oconto Electric Cooperative on June 1, 2026. The G&T serves 24 member distribution co-ops in four states, including JCE Co-op, based in northwestern Illinois, and 27 municipal utilities.

The addition of these gas units to its portfolio is key to Dairyland's plans for greater reliability, affordability and sustainability for all its

members, said Katie Thomson, director of communications, member services and stakeholder engagement at the G&T.

"Dairyland Power Cooperative is strengthening its reliability and sustainability for rural communities through strategic investments," said Dan Walsh, NRECA's senior power supply and generation director. "Dairyland's recent acquisition of two natural gas facilities ensures dependable energy to meet growing demand for a more resilient grid." 💡

Cathy Cash, NRECA

## Wilson reelected to Touchstone Energy board

Mike Wilson, vice president of member and community relations at Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative (EIEC), was recently reelected to a three-year term on the board of directors of Touchstone Energy Cooperative, Inc.



Mike Wilson

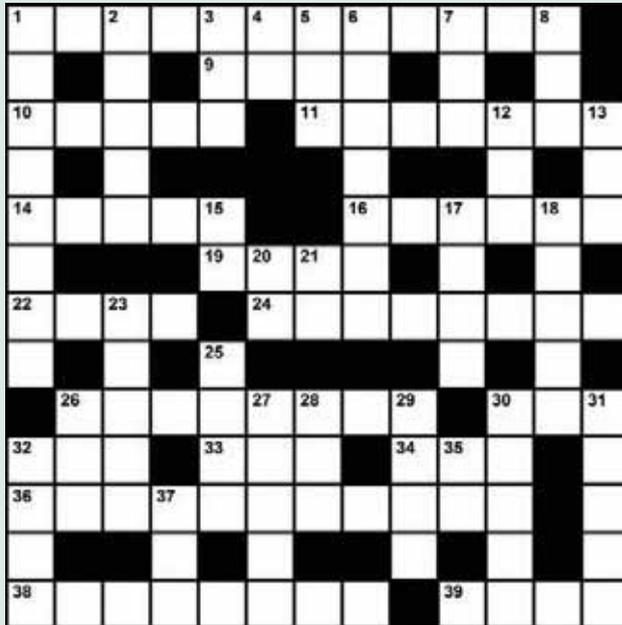
A 25-plus-year electric co-op veteran, Wilson oversees the member-facing departments at EIEC, including member services, billing, communications, marketing and key accounts, and he has been active at the national and regional levels.

Touchstone Energy is a national network of electric cooperatives across 46 states providing research, communications resources and employee training programs that help its member cooperatives serve their members. The Touchstone Energy board of directors consists of 13 members responsible for setting policy, establishing long-term goals, monitoring general operations, approving organizational outcomes and allocating resources. 💡

WISHING YOU A BRIGHT AND HAPPY 2026  
FROM ALL OF US AT ILLINOIS COUNTRY LIVING!

**Across**

- 1 Traditional song to ring in the New Year, 3 words
- 9 Skating jump
- 10 Wet weather description
- 11 Cold like January weather
- 14 Warm neckwear
- 16 Raises glasses for good fortune



- 19 Emerald Isle
- 22 Affectionate gesture at the stroke of midnight
- 24 The area near the hearth, often cozy and warm
- 26 A long sled with a curved front
- 30 Center of a storm
- 32 Pull behind
- 33 Mined material
- 34 Historical period
- 36 Decisions for a better future
- 38 Winter head warmers
- 39 Consumer of services

**Down**

- 1 Social activities and entertainment following a day on the snowy slopes, 2 words
- 2 Luxury camera brand
- 3 Place down
- 4 Chopping tool
- 5 Happy \_\_\_\_ Year!
- 6 Tiny sparkling particles used for decoration
- 7 Still
- 8 Make a mistake
- 12 Naval rank, abbr.
- 13 Affirmative reply
- 15 Santa \_\_\_\_, New Mexico
- 17 Church recess
- 18 Hot alcoholic drink

- 20 Conditional word
- 21 Ocean State, abbr.
- 23 Drops white flakes
- 25 Warm material used for winter wear
- 26 From head to \_\_\_\_
- 27 Brusque, surly and forbidding like Scrooge
- 28 Obtain
- 29 City light type
- 30 Lessens
- 31 Glowing coal in the fire
- 32 Oak or elm
- 35 Nurse, for short
- 37 Original manufacturer's equipment, abbr.

*Solution on page 33.*



**Lineworker scholarship available**

The \$3,000 LaVern and Nola McEntire Memorial Lineworker's Scholarship will help pay for costs to attend the lineworker's school conducted by the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives (AIEC) in conjunction with Lincoln Land Community College (LLCC) in Springfield.

Awarded for the first time in 2011, the scholarship was endowed by the McEntires to assist students attending lineworker's school at LLCC. LaVern served as a lineworker for more than 42 years at McDonough Power Cooperative.

The scholarship is awarded annually to an individual who is related to a rural electric cooperative employee or director in Illinois, is the child of an electric cooperative member in Illinois, is enrolled in the LLCC lineworker's school, or has served or is serving in the U.S. Armed Forces or National Guard. The applicant must have a high school diploma or a GED at the time the scholarship is awarded in July 2026.

Scholarships are awarded based on an essay, a biographical statement, references and a recommendation that will be submitted. The deadline to apply is April 30, 2026. Learn more at [aiec.coop/lavern-and-nola-lineworkers-scholarship](http://aiec.coop/lavern-and-nola-lineworkers-scholarship).💡

## LET'S GO!

**Jan. 24, 31**  
**The Dinner Detective**

SPRINGFIELD  
 Murder mystery shows at  
 Maldaner's Restaurant

**Feb. 1**  
**Gym Bob's Jamboree**

BIBLE GROVE  
 Live opry-style music

**Feb. 13-16**  
**Winter Carnival Weekend**

GALENA  
 Outdoor winter activities  
 at Eagle Ridge Resort

For more  
 information, a  
 complete listing  
 of events or to  
 submit an event,  
 visit [icl.coop/  
 datebook](http://icl.coop/datebook).



## Woodstock Groundhog Days

JANUARY 30-31  
 FEBRUARY 1-2

Celebrate the classic film "Groundhog Day" in Woodstock, where the movie was originally filmed. The annual event offers special activities, appearances from guests and plenty of nostalgia, making it an enjoyable midwinter tradition for fans and visitors alike. Activities include story time for kids, walking tours of the film sites, carving demonstrations and so much more.

Jan. 30-Feb. 2, 2026: all day  
 ● Downtown, 121 W. Van Buren, Woodstock  
[woodstockgroundhog.org](http://woodstockgroundhog.org)

## Southern Illinois Boat and Fishing Show

JANUARY 31  
 FEBRUARY 1

VisitSI and Oasis Outdoors are teaming up to host a show featuring boats, trailers, campers, fishing gear, educational sessions, live entertainment and more. The event will also include a canned goods collection, Friday night door prizes, live entertainment on Saturday afternoon and weekend seminars.

Jan. 31-Feb. 1, 2026: 9 a.m.-3 p.m.  
 ● The Pavilion, 1602 Sioux Drive, Marion  
 Admission: free  
 618-997-3690, [facebook.com/SIBOATSHOW](https://facebook.com/SIBOATSHOW)



## Fulton-Mason Eagle Day

FEBRUARY 7

Celebrate eagles at the annual family-friendly event. In Fulton County, Dickson Mounds Museum will host raptor awareness programs, wildlife viewing and hiking at Emiquon Preserve Wetland Observatory and Therkiltsen Field Station, and a live animal demonstration at the Lewistown Visitor Center. In Mason County, there will be eagle watching at the Havana Riverfront Park and Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge. Some activities depend on weather. Go to the website for more details.

Feb. 7, 2026: 9 a.m.-4 p.m.  
 ● Dickson Mounds Museum, 10956 N. Dickson Mounds Road, Lewistown  
 Admission: free  
 309-547-3721, [illinoisstatemuseum.org/events/dickson-mounds-events/  
 2026/fulton-mason-eagle-day.html](http://illinoisstatemuseum.org/events/dickson-mounds-events/2026/fulton-mason-eagle-day.html)

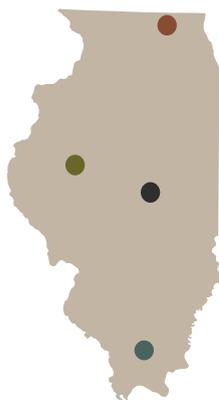


## Argenta IceFest

FEBRUARY 14

Argenta is gearing up for its 10th annual Argenta IceFest, a winter tradition that brings art and community together. Walk through the village as skilled ice carvers turn large blocks of ice into impressive sculptures. Between sculptures, warm up with food and drinks from local vendors and browse the village shops. Throughout the day, there will be activities and family-friendly fun.

Feb. 14, 2026: 11 a.m.-6 p.m.  
 ● Downtown Argenta  
 Admission: free  
[argentafest.org](http://argentafest.org)





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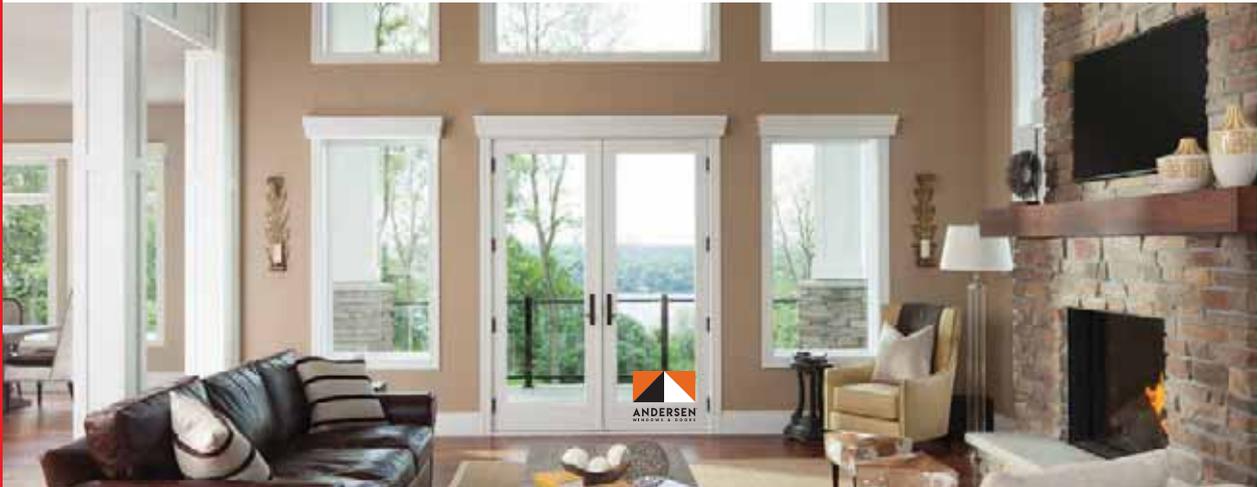
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## Plug in, get cozy

Stay safe and warm with electric blankets

**WHEN COLD WEATHER HITS**, electric blankets can be a quick and cozy way to get warm. But while they bring comfort, they also require careful handling to keep you and your home safe. Safe Electricity

Older blankets, especially those more than a decade old, are more likely to have worn wiring, which contributes to injuries and fire each year. Do not donate old electric blankets; discard them safely.

pets on them or place comforters or other heavy bedding on top while the blanket is operating, as this can cause overheating.

Avoid tucking the blanket in tightly; excessive heat buildup can create fire hazards. And never use a wet or soiled blanket. When it is time to put the blanket away for the season, avoid folding it for storage; instead, roll it or store it flat to reduce stress on internal wires.

### Caring for your blanket

Electric blankets require a bit more care than traditional blankets. To help extend the life of your electric blanket and reduce safety risks, always follow the manufacturer's instructions for cleaning, drying and storage, as improper washing or folding can damage internal wiring. Regularly check the cord, plug and blanket surface for signs of wear, fraying or hot spots, and stop using the blanket if you notice any damage.

### Extra safety measures

An electric blanket should always be plugged directly into a wall outlet and never into an extension cord or power strip, which can overheat and increase the risk of fire. Keep the blanket and cord away from water sources, and avoid using it if the blanket appears damaged.

As with any electrical device, basic fire safety is essential. Test smoke detectors monthly and replace batteries at least once a year. Make sure everyone in your household knows what to do in the event of a fire by developing and practicing an escape plan.

Electric blankets can make winter nights warm and comfortable, but safety must come first. For more electrical safety tips, visit [SafeElectricity.org](http://SafeElectricity.org). 



encourages users to understand the risks and follow safety guidelines to prevent accidents.

### Inspect before using

Before plugging in an electric blanket, inspect it carefully. Look for frayed, brittle or cracked cords, and check the blanket itself for charred or dark spots. Even a newer blanket can have wiring issues, so test it before use and inspect it regularly once in operation.

If any signs of wear or damage are present, it's time to replace it.

### Choose a safe blanket

When purchasing a new electric blanket, make sure it has been tested by a reputable laboratory, such as Underwriters Laboratories (UL), and follow all manufacturer instructions. Avoid used blankets, as they may be damaged or may not have up-to-date safety features.

### Usage tips

To use an electric blanket safely, be sure to turn it off when not in use or before going to sleep. Never leave it unattended. Do not allow



As Executive Director at Safe Electricity, **Erin Hollinshead** has a profound passion for saving lives through education. She holds a master's degree in public administration from the University of Illinois and a grad certificate in management of nonprofit organizations.

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# JUST RELEASED!

## Cache of 789 1922 Peace Silver Dollars Still Pristine As The Day They Were Struck

No coin embodies the spirit of the 1920s and 30s more than the Peace Silver Dollar. First struck in 1921, the Peace Dollar was a celebration of the end of WWI and was the silver dollar of choice for prohibition bootleggers and bank robbers like John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde. The hefty Peace Silver Dollar holds a special place in American history, as the silver dollar helped America through the Great Depression.

It's no wonder collectors and history buffs alike clamor to get their hands on them. That is, if they can get their hands on them.

### Last Circulating Silver Dollar

Collectors love "lasts" and the Peace Dollar was the last 90% silver dollar struck for circulation. Little did designer Anthony de Francisci know the legacy he was creating when he designed what has become known as "The King of Prohibition Dollars" but it came to an end 90 years ago when the last circulating Peace Dollar was officially struck and released to the public.

### Public Release - Only 789 Coins Available

Rarcoa®, America's Oldest Coin Company, is announcing the public release of 789 of the 1922 Peace Silver Dollar, struck at the iconic "Mother Mint" in Philadelphia, the birthplace of American coinage. Each coin comes in Brilliant Uncirculated condition, pristine as the day they were struck!

### Hold 103 Years of American History

Struck in 1922, each coin carries one hundred and three years of American history. Could Al Capone have paid for a load of illegal whiskey with your coin? Or maybe your great-grandfather carried it while storming the beaches of Normandy during World War II before ending up in a small coin shop in Little Rock, Arkansas. Each coin has its own unique history and you can hold 103 years of American history when you buy yours today!



Did you know in 1922 for \$1 you could make 2 gallons of whiskey and sell them for \$6 each?

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Coin experts estimate that only 15%-20% of Peace dollars still survive today due to multiple mass-meltings over the years, particularly in 1980 when the Hunt brothers tried to corner the silver market, shooting silver up to almost \$50 per ounce.

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# Pay attention to smoke signals

Efficiency upgrades for wood and pellet stoves

**THERE IS SOMETHING SPECIAL** about the heat of a fire — especially during a winter chill. It's cozy, comforting and a heat source for households

doesn't have an EPA label, it's likely more than 30 years old.

Next, start comparing equipment to find the best fit using

A pellet stove is another option to consider. It burns compressed pellets made of wood or other biomass materials. Like a wood stove, there are freestanding units or inserts. They can burn cleaner and don't require hauling wood.

Pellets are loaded into the hopper, which feeds them into the combustion chamber for burning. Most pellet stoves use electricity for the hopper and a fan to push warm air into the room. Plan to power them during an outage if needed. Some models come with battery backup. An EPA-certified pellet stove has a 70% to 83% higher heating value.

In addition, make sure the wood or pellet stove you select is properly sized for your home and heating needs, and consider the cost of the fuel source — whether you have to buy wood, harvest it yourself or stock up on a specific type of pellet.

Reduce fuel consumption and smoke by burning wood that is dry and seasoned, meaning it is split, covered and aged for at least six months. Do not burn trash or treated lumber indoors. It can create indoor air pollution and damage your wood stove. Also avoid burning softwood — it can lead to creosote buildup, which can cause chimney fires.

Installation by a certified technician ensures the job is done right, preventing chimney fires and indoor smoke. Follow the manufacturer's specifications for operation, install carbon monoxide detectors and have the stove cleaned and inspected annually by a professional.

If your stove is acting up or not supplying enough heat for your home, consider upgrading to a new model to increase efficiency and keep your home comfortable this winter. ❄️



**New wood stoves release more heat from the same amount of wood while reducing indoor air pollution.**

across the country. Whether it provides primary or supplemental heat, a wood or pellet stove must operate safely and efficiently.

There are several signs your stove may need to be replaced, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA):

- You often smell smoke in the house with all the windows closed.
- Smoke comes out of the chimney more than 15 minutes after a cold start or reload.
- Watery eyes and stuffy noses are common in your household when operating the wood stove.
- You must continually feed the stove with wood.

the EPA Certified Wood Heater Database. It provides a list of wood and pellet stoves with efficiency ratings, sizes, heat outputs and other details. Local retailers can help, too. Work with a reputable dealer who can explain the features, and don't forget to ask about the most efficient models.

There are several items to consider when choosing a new wood or pellet stove. Modern wood stoves require less wood, produce less ash and emit almost no smoke. They come in catalytic and noncatalytic options.

In catalytic models, smoke gases and particles are burned in a coated ceramic honeycomb, thereby increasing burn time and reducing air pollution. The operation of noncatalytic models is more standard. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, new catalytic wood stoves have efficiencies of up to 83% higher heating value — or amount of heat released — while noncatalytic models are typically in the 65% to 75% range.

The EPA recommends replacing wood stoves manufactured before 1990 with cleaner, more efficient models. This can save money and make your home safer by reducing fire risk and improving indoor air quality. It also reduces outdoor air pollution. If the back of your stove



**Miranda Boutelle** is the director of operations and customer engagement at Efficiency Services Group in Oregon, a cooperatively owned energy efficiency company.

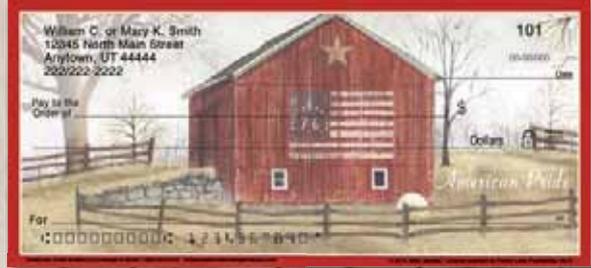
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## The big charge

What battery storage can do for you and your electric co-op

**NOT LONG AGO, WHEN** people talked about batteries, they meant the kind that powered flashlights, phones or watches. Today, batteries are transforming the way we power

lithium-ion batteries. These are lighter, longer lasting and capable of storing more energy in less space. Initially used in laptops and mobile phones, lithium-ion technology

help balance supply and demand and improve grid stability.

They also provide an alternative to traditional infrastructure upgrades. In areas where energy use is growing, a strategically placed battery can handle short-term peaks in demand, reducing the need for new substations or extended power lines. This can lower capital costs and reduce construction timelines.

More than 70 electric cooperatives in 24 states have installed or are testing battery energy storage systems, according to the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. Most systems currently in use are designed to deliver power for up to eight hours. However, long-duration energy storage (LDES) technologies are emerging that can store energy for 10 hours or more, and in some cases, multiple days.

These battery storage systems could help utilities manage extended periods of low renewable generation or respond to prolonged grid stress events, especially in remote or weather-sensitive areas.

Battery storage may also offer benefits to co-op consumer-members. Residential systems can provide backup power during outages, keeping essential equipment like lights, refrigerators and medical devices running. For homes with rooftop solar, batteries allow excess energy to be stored during the day and used at night.

These technologies are helping electric co-ops improve reliability, integrate renewable energy and manage infrastructure costs. For co-op members, batteries offer greater control over energy use and added resilience during outages. Together, these developments can contribute to a more flexible and dependable electric system that supports entire communities. ♻️



PHOTO COURTESY OF BASE POWER

**Often paired with rooftop solar panels, residential battery storage systems can provide backup power during outages, keeping essential equipment like lights, refrigerators and medical devices running.**

our homes, farms and even the electric grid that keeps our lights on. Across the country, battery energy storage is helping electric cooperatives keep power more reliable, affordable and resilient.

The journey began with early rechargeable batteries like lead-acid models, which were used in vehicles, tractors and backup systems for lighting or telephones. These systems were bulky, short-lived and required frequent maintenance. Later, nickel-cadmium and nickel-metal hydride batteries became popular in cordless tools, early electronics and hybrid vehicles. While they marked a step forward, they remained expensive and weren't well suited for large-scale energy applications.

A major turning point came with the development of

now powers most electric vehicles and many of the grid-scale systems that can keep thousands of homes running for hours.

Innovation hasn't stopped there. Researchers are now exploring solid-state and sodium-ion batteries, which use safer, more abundant materials and promise to make battery energy storage even more affordable and accessible. Each advancement brings batteries closer to becoming a foundational part of everyday life.

Across the country, electric co-ops are deploying battery energy storage systems to support grid operations and manage local demand. Batteries can store excess electricity from renewable sources like solar and wind, then discharge it when demand rises, which can



**Jennah Denney** writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives.



## Up close with gentle giants

### Meet the Clydesdales of JFP Equine

By Jim Winnerman

EVER SINCE JIM POOLE was 5 years old, growing up on a ranch in Manitoba, Canada, with a herd of 40 Belgian draft horses and a few Clydesdales, he has been enamored with the huge animals.

Each New Year's Day after he was done with his farm chores, he remembers running into the house to watch the Anheuser-Busch eight-horse hitch pulling the immaculate red wagon in the Rose Bowl parade.

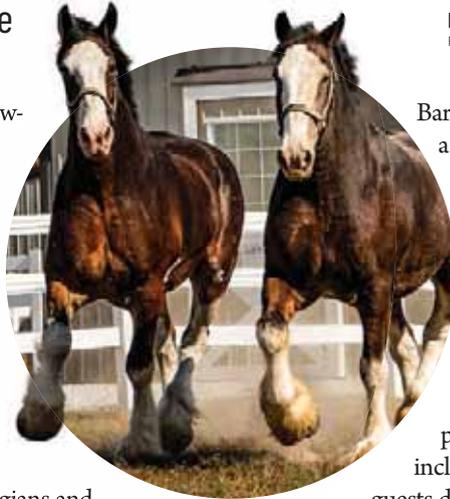
Years later, after decades of showing and selling championship Clydesdales, Belgians and Percherons throughout North America, Poole was recruited to St. Louis to oversee one of the most well-known corporate icons on the planet, the same Budweiser Clydesdales he had admired in his childhood.

He held that one-of-a-kind position at Anheuser-Busch for 25 years until retiring in 2011, when he started his own stable, supplying Clydesdales and consulting with clients throughout North America who are in the Clydesdale industry.

His love for the breed and his knowledge of how a 2,000-pound horse brings smiles to people led him to share the unique experience of being up close and personal to a Clydesdale with the public. In 2023, he and his son Barclay began offering two different private programs to let the public interact with the gentle giants at their business, JFP Equine, which is on Monroe County Electric Cooperative lines.

A Clydesdale meet and greet is \$250, with a maximum of 10 participants per group. The experience includes 45 minutes to an hour of what Barclay says is filled with meeting, greeting, petting and picture taking with the horse.

The "Ultimate Clydesdale Experience" is \$99 a person and is, "what we like to call 2 hours of Clydesdale awesomeness,"



Above: Jim (left) and Barclay Poole

PHOTO COURTESY OF DANIEL ZOERNIG PHOTOGRAPHY

Below: Ace and Dexter enjoy a gallop in the paddock.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM DESCHER PHOTOGRAPHY

Barclay says. "No more than four people at a time participate."

In the Ultimate Experience, guests participate in the full grooming process — combing, brushing and even vacuuming the horses for a deep cleaning that leaves their coat shiny. Guests also mix feed and then hand feed the horses, as well as halter them, along with whatever else Jim and Barclay can pack into the time period. Both programs include as many selfies with the horses as guests desire.

While there are typically four to eight Clydesdales in the barn, three horses are usually involved in the two programs. "Ace is the star of the barn," Barclay says. "When guests groom him and braid his mane and tail, a sparkle appears in his eye, and he seems to be looking forward to showing off. Fred is a certified snuggler, and Flame is just, well, huge."

Sometimes the experience can be quite emotional. "I cannot tell you how many times people have teared up soon after getting close to our horses and helping groom them," Barclay says.

Jim credits the public's love and fondness for Clydesdales to the Anheuser-Busch commitment to the quality, pride and craftsmanship the firm has put into their horses in public appearances and commercials.

"When the 'Here Comes the King' music accompanies the appearance of the eight-horse hitch, the effect is magical," Jim says. "There is not a person who is not familiar with it."

"We love to see the smiles on the faces of people in our barn as they experience a Clydesdale in person and in private," Barclay says. "It makes us happy to see people happy. We enjoy raising Clydesdales as much as we do sharing the experience with visitors." 🧠

## SHOW SUPPORT

Small business owners can request to be featured in the Support Local section of Illinois Country Living magazine by submitting the form at [icl.coop/local](http://icl.coop/local).

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WHERE

# GIANTS

ARE  
BORN

Monster  
trucks  
of the  
Midwest

*By Les O'Dell*

EVEN BY STRETCHING UP and standing on the tips of his toes, Rich Inman couldn't reach the top of the tires. Still, he was enthralled, not just with the wheels, but with all that his 8-year-old senses were absorbing — the thunderous rumbles, the gleaming metal, the smell of energy hanging in the air and the all-encompassing ambiance of power.

Nearly four decades later, he remembers being too excited to sit in his seat in St. Louis' old Checkerdome, he was so enamored with the super-sized pickup trucks on the arena's floor.





“When those trucks came out, I thought, ‘Holy cow! That’s what I want to do,’” Inman recalls. “It’s been my passion ever since.”

He got his start in the early 1990s, working on one of the first monster trucks before purchasing a “ride truck” (a truck built to carry passengers eager for the monster truck experience). Inman then built his own competition-ready monster truck, which he later sold.

The truck’s new owner reached back out to Inman, asking him to build some spare parts. The rest, as they say, is history. Today, Inman’s Concussion Motorsports is a leading manufacturer of chassis, parts and components for monster trucks.

### Big trucks, big business

Legend has it that monster trucks began when Bob Chandler started modifying his 1974 Ford F-250 pickup truck in Missouri, not far from the St. Louis Checkerdome. Within a few years, the changes to the pickup were so extensive that his truck — called Bigfoot — was regarded as the first monster truck.

Modern monster trucks feature four-wheel drive, four-wheel steering, high-horsepower engines, full roll cages and elaborate suspension systems. Yet, monster trucks are more than modified vehicles; they are an industry unto themselves. Monster Jam, the nation’s largest organizer and promoter, reports more than 4 million attendees at more than 130 events annually, and it’s estimated that the company generates nearly \$2 billion in revenue.

Not only are many of the behemoth vehicles built in places like Inman’s Randolph County shop, but fans across Illinois flock to monster truck events, where they often can cheer on drivers hailing from the Prairie State.

Sometimes events are simple exhibitions where monster trucks traverse jumps and tight corners, crushing junk cars in their path. Most, however, are races where drivers compete against one another in heat-style brackets or run against the clock to complete designated courses in the least time.

Trained as a welder, Inman knows the business from the inside out. Before turning his attention to turning wrenches full-time, he was behind the wheel of some of the most recognizable monster trucks on the competition circuit: Bigfoot, Monster Patrol, Extreme Overkill and Shock Therapy.

A neck injury keeps Inman from driving monster trucks competitively now, but his focus is on keeping others’ big wheels rolling. Bumper to bumper, Concussion Motorsports manufactures everything for monster trucks.

“Everything that’s fabricated on a truck, we build,” Inman explains. “We even do some turn-key trucks; when we’re done with them, they drive right out of the shop and can go straight to the show. We build everything in-house.”

Inman and his team have built a couple of Bigfoots, worked on “Grave Digger” and were behind the “Cadaver” truck, a special project for television’s Jesse James of “West Coast Choppers” fame.

While the big V-8 engines are at the heart of these giant vehicles, the heartbeat of monster trucks also pulses from central Illinois. Just north of Champaign and a couple of monster tire rotations from Interstate 57 is the Hall Brothers shop. Here, brothers Mark and Tim Hall oversee, well, a monster monster truck business.

“We started in 1987 with four-wheel drive trucks, going to mud races,” Tim recalls. “Back then, you would drive to the races in your truck, race, and hope you didn’t tear it up so bad you couldn’t get back home.”

He says one thing led to another, and they found themselves building bigger and bigger trucks and traveling to events most weekends. “We thought it would be pretty cool if we could make a living doing this, and here we are, 40 years later, still out on the monster truck circuit with more trucks.”

They landed a local sponsor in 1987, then, a few years later, Chrysler’s Dodge Division reached out to promote Ram trucks through their operation. The Hall Brothers and Ram continue their partnership. Tim calls it one of the longest business relationships in motorsports.

***“The real joy is seeing how kids light up when they see these trucks. It’s the size, it’s the color, it’s the loudness, it’s this massive thing that they see doing extraordinary things that’s just mind-boggling.”***

Today, the pair has a fleet of monster trucks and a convoy of tractor-trailers to haul them. They have even specialized in their own roles — Mark does the welding and fabricating work and serves as one of the team’s drivers. Tim, who drove one of the team’s trucks for several years, now handles all the business aspects and serves as crew chief, specializing in transmissions and suspensions.

“My driving experience gives me a little bit of perspective, so I’m able to know when something’s going on,” Tim says. “I can see things from the sidelines and understand what the drivers are telling me. It’s helped.”

It certainly has. As a driver, Mark won 26 national monster truck

series titles (a couple of Hall Brothers’ other drivers also have championship titles), and they are enshrined in the Monster Truck Hall of Fame.

Tim compares the operation to a multi-car NASCAR team. They currently have four racing trucks (including the flagship “Raminator” and “Ramdemption”), two show trucks that exhibit primarily at Ram events and dealerships and one ride-along truck, like the first monster truck Inman owned.

### **Behind the wheel**

Ask the Halls or Inman, and they’ll tell you building a monster truck is a big job, but driving one of these beasts is, to say the least, challenging. First, drivers have to climb up — not in, but up — to strap into a race-car style seat and buckle into head and neck support braces.

And, while the trucks may look like new pickups on the dealer lot, they’re not even close. First, these trucks run on methanol, not gasoline or diesel, and they boast nearly 600 cubic inches of displacement in supercharged aluminum V-8 engines.

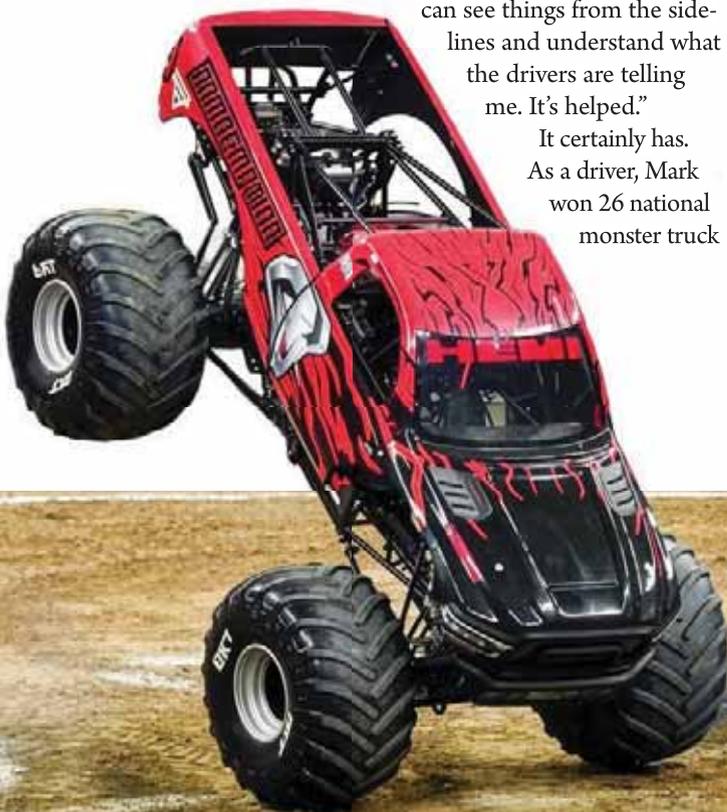
The custom suspension system features 26 inches or more of travel — much more than standard shock absorbers. Even the steering system is souped up, with hydraulic-controlled rear steering that allows the rear wheels to “crab steer” (turn in the same direction as the front wheels) or turn in the opposite direction, making for extra tight turning.

So, is there anything on these trucks that matches the pickups you can buy? “Yes,” Tim admits. “The emblems.” The sticker prices aren’t similar either. He says each monster truck is valued at upwards of \$350,000. But the real difference is in driving one.

“Driving a monster truck is pretty fascinating,” Tim shares. “You really don’t have a lot of vision. Imagine having a 6-foot-tall guy standing right in front of you and not being able to see him. ... You must anticipate when you’re going to hit the jumps. It’s really amazing how these guys can drive these things at such high speeds and with such precision.”

Tim knows about the speed. His brother Mark has been listed in the Guinness Book of World Records with the fastest speed ever in a monster truck: 99.1 mph.

“These trucks run remarkable speeds, especially when you consider that they weigh 11,000 pounds, and they’re built to run in football stadiums and hockey rinks,” Tim says, adding that track conditions are never the same. “The drag strip is always the drag strip, and NASCAR has specific cars for specific



tracks. We don't have that luxury. We have to be able to adapt. We might be running 50 feet this week and 500 feet next week. Maybe there's big jumps, or maybe they're little jumps. We have to tune the little things and make it all work wherever we are."

Then, after every weekend, it is time for more tuning and more fixing. He says trucks undergo a top-to-bottom inspection, so that teams can "get ahead of failures." He adds that they look at every piece of the truck, looking for wear, cracks and anything that could be the difference between winning the following week and a breakdown.

### The appeal

Just as Inman was mesmerized by monster trucks as a youth, the large machines garner a lot of attention and appeal to a broad audience. "They're just larger than life," Inman says. "They're loud, and people love demolition derbies, and this is what the trucks are all about. Every time one of them goes out, people — especially kids and 'big kids' — love them."

Tim adds, "I think anyone who has ever been stuck in a traffic jam has wished they could just drive over the other cars. It's that feeling." He says monster trucks encompass a variety of motorsports, comparing it to a mix of circle track racing, drag racing, demolition derby and motocross.

"It's fun watching what the drivers can do with these trucks and how they almost crash regularly but avoid them. The challenge of what they do is some of the appeal," Tim says.

### Against the Grain

One of those drivers is Brad Shippert. Like many others, he grew up watching monster trucks and always said he wanted to drive one but never had the opportunity. That is, until life shifted gears.

After losing his first wife to pancreatic cancer and later battling through his own chronic myelogenous leukemia followed by a stem cell transplant, the Lee County farmer decided to, in his words, "chase the dream."

He purchased the former "Big Dawg" monster truck and opted to take the vehicle down a unique path — with an approach to monster trucks that differs from most others. For him, monster trucks are a vehicle to share a positive message of hope and family, packaged with faith and farming. The result is the "Against the Grain" truck, which reflects his way of doing things differently.

"Through the monster truck, I can tell my story and my testimony," he says. "How many people can say that they went through cancer and now are driving a monster truck?"

Shippert drives his monster truck when he's not behind the wheel of a tractor, combine or grain truck. His 1,000-acre grain farm is his primary enterprise. The truck comes second, but it's more than a hobby.

"It's a job. I treat it as a business because you can't play around with it; there's too much involved. 'Against the Grain' is a brand, and we're trying to build it up, saying, 'Hey, we're doing something different by being outspoken about our faith,'" he explains.

"Something different" means you won't find Shippert on the Monster Jam circuit. "That's not the scope we want to operate in. With the farm and my family, I don't want to be gone every single weekend," he says.

Those weekends when he does travel with the truck, you may find him at competitions, sometimes at festivals and often doing static displays or fundraising events. He adds that when he's not repairing agricultural equipment, he's working on the truck. It's hard work, but he says he really enjoys it.

"The real fun of this isn't necessarily driving the truck," he says. "When you drive, you're getting slammed around. You're in a fire suit, you're hot, and it's not the most comfortable thing in the world. The real joy is seeing how kids light up when they see these trucks. It's the size, it's the color, it's the loudness, it's this massive thing that they see doing extraordinary things that's just mind-boggling."

Weekend after weekend, drivers like Shippert are wowing crowds, and they aren't slowing down. In fact, Inman says he thinks the industry will continue to rev up.

"The trucks are just going to keep getting bigger and louder," he says. "Any old monster truck guy will tell you that they thought they'd only have a job for a little while and that monster trucks were going to fade out, but that's far from the case. There's just no end in sight." 🗣️



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HALL BROTHERS RACING



# The Mop Shop

Clean homes,  
healthy families  
and stronger  
communities

*By Lisa Cherry*

**DURING THE WINTER HOLIDAY** season more than a decade ago, twin sisters Mindy and Missy Dalgarn were standing in line at what was then the Galena State Bank. While they waited, the sisters took in the local angel tree, bedecked with the gift requests of local children and families in need of assistance. Reading their requests, Mindy and Missy were shocked to realize that many people in the community weren't asking for the type of presents typically found under the tree.

"We were surprised, and quite frankly, saddened by the number of people, both men and women, between the ages of about 25 and 85, who were asking for cleaning supplies for Christmas," says Mindy, who is a JCE Co-op member. The sisters felt compelled to investigate the situation further and reached out to community leaders. "Missy presented a proposal to the president of Elizabeth and his directors, and they were very encouraging."

Volunteer Jan Hoedebecke sets out an open sign for The Mop Shop.

That proposal outlined the Dalgarns' plan to diminish the need they had witnessed through the formation of a nonprofit, much like a food pantry, that would provide friends and neighbors with the basic cleaning supplies they needed. The sisters were offered a small space in a local school, just 8 feet by 13 feet, and in 2014, Missy and Mindy opened the doors to The Mop Shop.

"We were there for nine years, and it worked out well. We were right next to the [Elizabeth] Food Basket, so it was kind of a one-stop shop for our clients," explains Mindy. The nonprofit eventually outgrew the space, however, and, in 2023, moved to a new location inside Lord of Love Lutheran Church in Galena.

"We opened with 20 clients representing 34 family members, and we now [have] 1,961 clients and family members from 10 communities within Jo Daviess County," she adds. "There's a growing need, and it's increasing, as you can imagine."

The Mop Shop's reach has been fueled through conversations with and support from civic leaders, local business owners, friends and neighbors. "It's just evolved," says Mindy. "We look to help people and encourage people in other communities, in other counties, to start to think about establishing mop shops. Right now, we have three rooms, [but] we didn't start that way. We started with two little shelving units [and] grew it depending on what our clients needed."

Products most in demand include items often taken for granted, like paper towels, disinfecting wipes, dish soap and laundry detergent. The Mop Shop also carries everything from multi-surface cleaner and furniture polish, garbage bags and baking soda to fabric softener, toilet bowl cleaner and glass cleaner — and, of course, mops, brooms and buckets, among other items. Verification of need is



not required of clients. "If an individual says they're in need, they're in need," explains Mindy.

Nia McCarthy, a client, heard about The Mop Shop from her neighbor and has been going there for more than a year. "Believe me, living on my own at 74 years old, you know, with prices the way they are, they've been a godsend," she says. "They treat everybody the same, [with] compassion and empathy and respect. Some people who go there are in really dire straits, [and] they're not made to feel any less of a person."

Jan Hoedebecke, a volunteer at The Mop Shop, was enamored of the concept when she first heard about it. "Making your home a warm and safe and welcoming place just means a lot," she says. "You hear about food banks, and even though that's still a tremendous need, this was a niche that just kind of spoke to me. I said, 'This is something that we can really build upon, and I'd love to be a part of it.'"

"There are so many people who are tucked away, and you don't see

them, and they just need a little help," adds Hoedebecke. "It's just heartwarming to see the humanity in people, no matter where they are on the socio-economic scale. They're lovely people, and I'm so happy we can help them."

Mindy believes the most important role of volunteers is serving as ambassadors within the community. "Spreading the word, developing relationships with not just our clients and not just our donors ... but with the community at large, is incredibly important," she explains. "I spend a good deal of time working to cultivate those relationships and recognize people for how they help us and how they help our community. ... I want people to know that we couldn't do what we do without them."

According to Alana Turner, a local business owner and Mop Shop donor, the work of the nonprofit brings along with it a client's pride in his or her home. "Just having a cleaner home allows you to be healthier every day," she says. "It allows you to feel good about yourself each day."

**Mindy Dalgarn founded The Mop Shop with her twin sister Missy.**



Turner felt led to contribute through her Galena business, Poopsie's, a unique gift shop whose mission is to create joy through service. "One way is partnering with places like The Mop Shop and helping them move into different areas that they've never dreamed of," she explains. "Over the last number of years, we've committed to giving 1% of our sales back to regional charities."

People have supported the cause in many creative ways. The owner of the local Piggly Wiggly has donated cases of product since the beginning; Jo Daviess County Transit provides transportation to clients who need it; and Kreider Services delivers prepackaged bags to individuals who are unable to come in person due to health constraints, to name just a few.

Pastor Robin Luckey of Lord of Love Lutheran Church, JCE Co-op

member and home to the non-profit, says there are multiple points of connection between church members, volunteers and the community, explaining that one of those connections led to sharing an area of their building.

"It's a space in Galena that's well known to people. It's right next to the nursing home, and it's adjacent to the food pantry," she says. "There are a lot of crossover clients who come to Welcome Table [a bimonthly free lunch program] and find out about The Mop Shop and vice versa, so it's a natural fit. They dovetail well."

Luckey agrees with Turner that The Mop Shop provides its clients with a sense of dignity — as well as a source of connection.

"It brings us dignity to care for our homes or our apartments or our dwellings," she explains. "[The Mop Shop has also] become a social

gathering for people ... folks look forward to it. Relationships have been formed ... people don't just come in and get their stuff and leave."

There are a few things needed to make an endeavor like this one a success, says Mindy — space, dedicated volunteers, generous donors, leadership and community support. "Everybody applauds the concept, no question. Great idea. But you need those ingredients," she elaborates. "Fortunately, we're in a place where we have it in abundance."

Though her sister Missy has since passed, Mindy continues their mission. "Our goal, from the get-go, was that this would be the first mop shop, and they would spring up and become as prolific as food pantries are. We thought, 'How hard can it be?' I mean, if we can do it, every community should have a mop shop," she says. 💡

**Clockwise: Cindy Moser restocks laundry detergent; Karen Landoch and Micki Lubcke pack up supplies; and Jan Hoedebecke prepares bags of cleaning supplies for those in need.**





Founder Mindy Dalgarn (second from left) with just a few of The Mop Shop's volunteers. Pictured left to right are Cindy Moser, Jan Hoedebecke, Micki Lubcke and Karen Landoch.

## Mindy's guide to starting a mop shop

### Step 1

Identify a space that is available at no or low cost. Consider an open room in churches, schools, community buildings or even shelves in an existing food pantry. Be especially sensitive to the possible needs of potential clients: seek space that allows easy access to the building — a first-floor location is recommended, along with parking and a limited number of steps. If there's a bus stop nearby, all the better. Remember, start small and grow your program.

### Step 2

Share your plan with friends, family and neighbors. Ask to speak at churches, civic organizations, athletic leagues, etc. Submit stories to local newspapers and magazines. Request interviews with local radio and television stations. Post notices in local banks, grocery stores, thrift shops, laundromats, hair salons and gas stations.

### Step 3

Identify those who support your efforts and are eager to serve as volunteers. You may be surprised how many people are interested as the word spreads. Note that volunteers serve as community ambassadors. Communication with them is essential to your success. Make certain they are well-informed.

### Step 4

Gain support from area churches, banks, businesses, civic organizations, athletic clubs and youth groups such as school clubs, 4-H, etc. Collect cleaning supplies through donation drives. Always acknowledge gifts from those who support your efforts. This is critical — thank-you notes to donors go a long way. Word spreads, relationships develop and community support grows quickly.

### Step 5

Keep your eyes open for sales. That should be your *modus operandi* as you prepare to stock and restock your shelves. Look for bargains and work to develop relationships within your community.

### Step 6

Seek out grant opportunities.

For more information, visit [themopshop.org](http://themopshop.org) or contact Mindy at 815-281-1995.



# Icing on top

## *The sweet tradition of Larry's House of Cakes*

By Mary Blye Kramer

**HOW COULD SOMEONE CHOOSE** just one dessert when first walking through the door at Larry's House of Cakes? Italian cream cakes (one of its bestsellers) fill an entire shelf. Other cakes sit on the shelf below — red velvet iced with buttercream, carrot, strawberry, German chocolate with caramel, and coconut with walnut icing. On a good Saturday, Larry's will receive around 100 special orders just for cakes.

The case of cookies showcases an array of colors and flavors — pink and orange frosted cookies, snickerdoodles, orange cranberry oatmeal, red velvet and, of course, chocolate chip. Cupcakes, muffins, cannoli oozing with a creamy filling and a variety of donuts sit on racks, gradually disappearing into bags as customers come and go.

In the back of the bakery, several staff members work alongside David Clayton, one of the owners, who arranges a line of crisply cooked bacon soon to be covered in chocolate. A decorator works on a special-order

cake, piping pale blue and lavender icing to form perfect flowers. David says he doesn't mind if someone messes up a red velvet cake with cream cheese icing, because when that happens, he nabs his treat for the day.

David's dad, Larry Clayton, first opened his doors for business in Marion in 1963 after working at Dixie Cream Donut Shop in West Frankfort. Larry's Donuts, as it was called at the time, initially sold only donuts, but Larry, with the help of his wife Francis, gradually expanded the business to include cupcakes, cakes and other pastries, and in the early '70s, he changed the name of his business to Larry's House of Cakes.

In 2007, when Larry and Francis retired, their three sons — David, Dale and Neil — took over the business, and in 2009, the brothers opened a second location in Carbondale. Sadly, Neil passed away in 2023, and David and Dale took over his responsibilities. They supervise, train new staff and roll up their sleeves to help bake.





They also decorate, order supplies and handle the business side of the bakeries. Both work at the Marion location, and then either David or Dale head to the Carbondale store. The brothers work six days a week and occasionally pop in on Sundays to prepare for the upcoming week. Although the hours of operation at both locations vary slightly, the kitchens remain busy for six to 12 hours a day, six days a week.

Lobbies at both locations hold a few tables for patrons who stop by for coffee and a sweet breakfast before heading to work. Some customers sit quietly with a pastry and a book. However, approximately 75% of Larry's business comes from special orders.

Order a dozen "specialty cupcakes," and each one will be a mouthwatering surprise — the peanut butter delight, for instance, is made with chocolate cake, iced with chocolate buttercream and filled with peanut butter. Larry's Favorite is drizzled with fudge and filled with angel cream. Unfilled varieties include lemon, red velvet, strawberry and pumpkin. Individual cupcakes, baked fresh each morning, are also available.

Larry's outsources only a few items — the muffins are ordered and the donuts come from Dixie Cream, where Larry worked as a young man. However, everything else is made by a dedicated staff who begin shifts early in the morning, often-times before day-break, to be sure custom orders and bestsellers are ready.

The two bestsellers are Italian cream cakes and pink iced sugar cookies, both of which Larry developed from recipes he ran across then tweaked. Cupcakes, especially the cookies and cream variety, are also a customer favorite.

Larry Clayton himself may have retired years ago, but he still ducks into both locations regularly. He knows his sons do a great job of running the bakeries on their own, but he still feels a deep attachment to the business that he built years ago.

After greeting each staff member individually, Larry checks out the new cake designs, gently offers advice, if needed, and generally just looks everything over. And, like his son, he can't really complain if an occasional cookie breaks, because he's always up for a treat. 🍪



## LET'S EAT!

### Larry's House of Cakes

905 S. Court St., Marion

618-993-3906

[larryshouseofcakes618.com](http://larryshouseofcakes618.com)

#### HOURS

Mon-Sat: 6 a.m.-6 p.m.

1807 W. Main St., Carbondale

618-519-9378

#### HOURS

Mon-Sat: 7 a.m.-7 p.m.



## Just soup-er

### WHO LOVES COLD WEATHER?

Certainly not me. But one thing that does help as temperatures drop is a nice cup of hot, delicious and nutritious soup. It can warm the hands and the soul. Plus, if you make a big pot of soup, it can feed you for a few days. That's less time in the kitchen and more time buried in blankets. So, here are a few soup recipes to try to help get you through a cold winter. 💡

### WE NEED RECIPES!

- Pastries
- Sugar-free
- Quick and easy dinners
- New favorites

Please email recipe submissions or questions to [finestcooking@icl.coop](mailto:finestcooking@icl.coop) or mail them to Finest Cooking c/o Illinois Country Living, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712. Please include your name, address, phone number (for questions), and the name of your electric cooperative. Additional recipes can be found on our website at [finestcooking.com](http://finestcooking.com).



Recipes are prepared, tasted and photographed by **Colten Bradford**, Illinois Country Living editor.



### Tortellini Soup ▲

Submitted by Patricia Mahoney, Menard Electric Cooperative  
Servings: 6-8

- |                                |                                 |  |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| 1 pound ground beef            | 3/4 cup ketchup                 | 1-1/2 teaspoons seasoned garlic powder |
| 3/4 cup carrots, thinly sliced | 2 15-ounce cans stewed tomatoes | 1 tablespoon basil                     |
| 3/4 cup celery, thinly sliced  | 1 teaspoon sugar                | 1/4 teaspoon pepper                    |
| 1/2 cup diced onion            | 4 bay leaves                    | 2 cups cheese tortellini               |
| 7 cups beef broth              |                                 |  |

In a large pot, brown ground beef and drain fat. While beef is draining, saute carrots, celery and onion in the same pot, about 5-7 minutes. Return the beef to the pot and add broth, ketchup, tomatoes, sugar, bay leaves and spices. Bring mixture to a boil and reduce heat. Cover soup and simmer for 20 minutes. Remove lid, add tortellini and simmer an additional 10-15 minutes. Remove bay leaves and serve.

### Tomato Soup ►

Submitted by Brenda A. Mochring, Corn Belt Energy Corporation  
Servings: 3-4

- |                                 |                                   |                     |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| 4 cups fresh tomatoes, chopped  | 2 cups chicken broth              | 1 teaspoon salt     |
| 1 onion, chopped                | 2 tablespoons margarine or butter | 1-2 teaspoons sugar |
| 2-3 teaspoons Italian seasoning | 2 tablespoons flour               |                     |

In a stock pot over medium heat, combine tomatoes, onion, Italian seasoning and broth. Bring to a boil and simmer for 20 minutes to blend flavors. Remove from heat and run through a food mill. Discard what is left in the food mill. In a stock pot, melt margarine or butter and stir in flour until browned. Gradually whisk in the tomato mixture. Season with salt and sugar, to taste.

## John's Make-A-Meal Soup ▶

Submitted by Francine Anderson, Corn Belt Energy Corporation

Servings: 6-8

- |                                     |  |                                     |
|-------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1 pound ground turkey               | 1 bay leaf                               | 3 tablespoons uncooked rice         |
| 1 onion, chopped                    | 1/2 teaspoon powdered thyme              | 1 8-ounce can tomato sauce          |
| 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil | 3 carrots, diced                         | 1 15-ounce can red beans, undrained |
| 4 cups water                        | 3 celery stalks, diced                   | 1 28-ounce can diced tomatoes       |
| 3 chicken bouillon cubes            | 1/4 head cabbage, cut into 1-inch chunks |                                     |
| 1 teaspoon salt                     |  |                                     |
| 1/4 teaspoon pepper                 |  |                                     |

In a Dutch oven or large pot, cook ground turkey and onion in oil until onion is tender and turkey is cooked. Add remaining ingredients. Bring to a boil. Cover and simmer for 30 minutes. Remove bay leaf before serving.

## Shrimp & Chorizo Stew ▶

Submitted by Jalayne Luckett, SouthEastern Illinois Electric Cooperative

Servings: 4-6

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| 1/8 cup extra virgin olive oil                   | 2 15-ounce cans petite diced tomatoes         | 2 cups water   |
| 1 large onion, diced                             | 2 bay leaves                                  | 1 small bunch kale, stems removed and leaves chopped |
| 5 cloves garlic, smashed                         | 1/4 teaspoon dried thyme                      | 1 pound medium shrimp, peeled and deveined           |
| 1 12-ounce package beef chorizo, casings removed | 1/4 teaspoon dried oregano                    |  |
| 2 teaspoons smoked paprika                       | 2 russet potatoes, peeled and cut into chunks |  |

Heat oil in a Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the onion and garlic and cook about 5 minutes. Add the chorizo and paprika and cook about 10 minutes while breaking up the chorizo. Add the tomatoes, bay leaves, thyme and oregano. Cook 1 minute more. Add the potatoes and 2 cups water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer about 15 minutes. Add the kale and cook an additional 10 minutes. Stir in shrimp and simmer about 3 minutes. Discard bay leaves before serving.

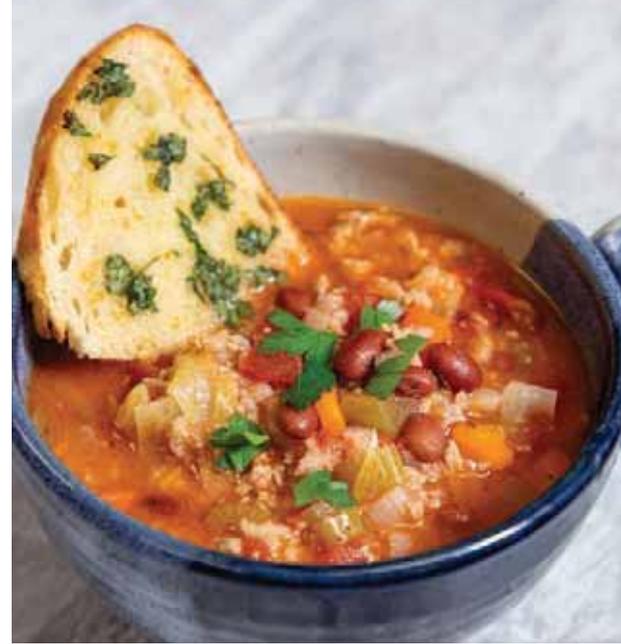
## Vegan Cream of Broccoli Soup

Adapted from a recipe submitted by Shirley Keyes, Rock Energy Cooperative

Servings: 4-6

- |                           |  |   |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| 3 broccoli stems          | 1/4 teaspoon salt                                      | 3-1/2 cups vegetable broth                            |
| 1 tablespoon olive oil    | 1/2 teaspoon black pepper                              | 1 cup unsweetened, unflavored non-dairy milk, divided |
| 1 cup yellow onion, diced | 2 tablespoons nutritional yeast                        | Fresh chopped parsley for garnish, optional           |
| 1 cup carrot, diced       | 1 pound potatoes, peeled and diced into 1/2-inch cubes |   |
| 2 celery stalks, chopped  |  |   |
| 3 cloves garlic, sliced   |  |   |

Remove florets from broccoli stems and set aside for other use. Trim stems and slice into thin coins. Heat olive oil in a large pot and saute broccoli stems, onions, carrots and celery, about 7-10 minutes. Add garlic and saute until fragrant. Add salt, pepper, nutritional yeast, potatoes and vegetable broth. Bring to a boil and simmer for 20 minutes. Turn off heat and stir in 1/2 cup milk. Use an immersion blender or blender to puree the soup. Once blended, add another 1/2 cup of milk to thin, if needed. Add salt and pepper, to taste. Garnish with roasted broccoli florets, fresh parsley, additional nutritional yeast for "cheesiness," and serve with crackers.



# Pet fur-friendly houseplants

Know what's safe and what's not

**HOUSEPLANTS CAN ADD A** vibrant, natural touch to any indoor space with their lush green foliage. However, pet owners should be cautious since many popular houseplants are toxic to animals. The level of toxicity varies by plant — some may cause mild gastrointestinal discomfort, while others can be life-threatening.

Several common houseplants should be kept out of reach of pets due to their toxic properties. These include pothos, aloe vera, lilies (such as calla and peace lilies), dieffenbachia, schefflera, monstera, kalanchoe, English ivy, caladiums, anthurium and aglaonema (Chinese evergreen). Additionally, popular holiday plants like poinsettias, cyclamen and Easter lilies can also pose risks to pets and should be handled with care.

Beautiful, pet-safe houseplants to consider growing include a variety of nontoxic options that add greenery without putting your beloved animals at risk.



## Peperomia

With more than 1,000 varieties, peperomia plants offer a range of leaf shapes, textures, colors and sizes, giving each one a unique appearance. They thrive in low to medium light, especially near east- or north-facing windows. Peperomia are sensitive to over-watering, so allow the soil to dry

slightly between waterings to prevent root rot.

Compact and ideal for small spaces, they typically grow just 6 to 12 inches tall. Pests or diseases are rarely a problem with their thick, fleshy foliage. Peperomia can be propagated easily through division or leaf cuttings.



## Spider plant

A longtime favorite houseplant, spider plants are known for their arching stems that produce small plantlets, making them easy to propagate. Their white and green variegated foliage forms a dense, attractive clump in containers. Spider plants thrive in bright, indirect light and prefer their soil to dry slightly between waterings.



## Prayer plant

Known for its striking, patterned foliage, the prayer plant adds

a vibrant touch of color and texture to any indoor space. When grown in bright, indirect light, it can reach up to 18 inches tall indoors. For healthy growth, it requires high humidity and consistently moist soil. To boost humidity, especially during winter, place the pot on a tray filled with water and pebbles or lightly mist the leaves to prevent browning or curling edges.



## Air plant

These low-maintenance epiphytes absorb water and nutrients through their leaves rather than roots. With more than 500 species, they thrive in bright, indirect light and good air circulation. These silver-green tufts range from 1 to 6 inches wide and can be misted, rinsed or soaked for hydration. Signs of dehydration include curling leaves, dull color and browning tips. Since they don't require soil, air plants can be displayed creatively on wood, rocks or in terrariums, making them a versatile addition to any space.

Take a walk through your home and ensure all houseplants are safe for Fido and friends. This winter, consider adding a few pet-friendly plants to your collection for a touch of greenery that is safe for everyone. 💡



**Brittnay Haag** is a Horticulture Educator for the University of Illinois Extension serving Livingston, McLean and Woodford counties. Her work focuses on youth horticulture education through school gardens and Jr. Master Gardener programs.



# Human moments

1. **FRANK W. GOUDY**  
*Spoon River Electric Cooperative  
Tohono O'odham Nation rodeo near  
Tucson, Ariz.*
2. **MARCI CAMPBELL**  
*Shelby Electric Cooperative  
Granddaughter on her great-great-  
grandfather's Farmall A tractor*
3. **RILEY BARKER**  
*Egyptian Electric Cooperative  
Association  
Wedding in DuQuoin*
4. **PATTY GILLESPIE**  
*Norris Electric Cooperative  
First combine ride*
5. **JAN DIAL**  
*Corn Belt Energy Corporation  
Grandson with Raven the dog*
6. **DEBRA HORN**  
*SouthEastern Illinois Electric  
Cooperative  
Granddaughter picking blueberries at  
Hallsberry Farms*

**UPCOMING THEMES**

- March — Old buildings
- April — Pop of color
- May — Flora and fauna

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# Eye Doctor Helps Illinois Legally Blind To See

*High Technology For Low Vision Patients Allows Many To Drive Again*



**F**or many patients with macular degeneration and other vision-related conditions, the loss of central visual detail also signals the end to one of the last bastions of independence: driving. A Mascoutah optometrist, Dr. Marianne McDaniel, is using miniaturized telescopes that are mounted in glasses to help people who have lost vision from macular degeneration and other eye conditions.

"Some of my patients consider me the last stop for people who have vision loss," said Dr. McDaniel, one of only a few doctors in the world who specialize in fitting bioptic telescopes to help those who have lost vision due to macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, and other debilitating eye diseases.

Imagine a pair of glasses that can improve your vision enough to change your life. If you're a low vision patient, you've probably not only imagined them, but have been searching for

them. Bioptic telescopes may be the breakthrough in optical technology that will give you the independence you've been looking for. Patients with vision in the 20/200 range can many times be improved to 20/50 or better.

Macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness and vision loss in people over 50. Despite this, most adults are not familiar with the



*A scene as it might be viewed by a person with age-related macular degeneration.*

condition. As many as 25% of those over the age of 50 have some degree of macular degeneration. The macula is only one small part of the retina; however, it is the most sensitive and gives us sharp central vision. When it degenerates, macular degeneration leaves a blind spot right in the center of vision, making it difficult or impossible to recognize faces, read a book, or pass the driver's vision test.

Nine out of 10 people who have macular degeneration have the dry form. New research suggests vitamins can help. The British medical journal BMC Ophthalmology recently reported that 56% of patients treated with a high-dose combination of vitamins experienced improved vision after six months.

While age is the most significant risk factor for developing the disease, heredity, smoking, cardiovascular disease, and high blood pressure have also been identified as risk factors.

Macular degeneration accounts for 90% of new legal blindness in the U.S. While there is currently no cure, promising research is being done on many fronts. "My job is to figure out everything and anything possible to keep a person functioning, especially driving," says Dr. McDaniel.

"Bioptic telescopes can cost over \$2,000," said Dr. McDaniel, "especially if we build them with an automatic sunglass."

"The major benefit of the bioptic telescope is that the lens automatically focuses on whatever you're looking at," said Dr. McDaniel. "It's like a self-focusing camera, but much more precise."

To learn more about bioptic telescopes or to schedule a consultation, give Dr. McDaniel a call. You can also visit our websites.

[www.mascoutaheyecare.com](http://www.mascoutaheyecare.com)

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