

Illinois Country Living

PURE GOLD

How Bonnie Blair skated
into Olympic history



Association of Illinois
Electric Cooperatives

Your Touchstone Energy®
Member 
aiec.coop

FEATURE
Rural sleep reset

FINEST COOKING
Let's party

SUPPORT LOCAL
Grain bin to lodging


**CO-OP
NEWS**



Balloons over Bavarian Inn, Frankenmuth, Michigan

May 22nd - 25th, 2026

You'll spend 3 nights at the Bavarian Inn while experiencing glorious sights.

Enjoy the Balloons Over Bavarian Inn on May 22nd through May 25th! Witness beautiful morning and evening flights by more than 20 hot air balloons over Frankenmuth! Nightly balloon glows take place in the grassy field near River Place Shops. We're excited to share that this event will coincide with the Dog Bowl, the world's largest Olympic-style festival for dogs! While we won't be able to bring our own furry friends, it will be fun to experience the festivities.

The festival is part of Frankenmuth Dog Bowl, Inc. – a nonprofit organization that advocates for responsible pet ownership through educational programs and world-class events like the annual Dog Bowl! The nonprofit supports charitable endeavors such as police canine training programs to promote safer communities, defraying medical and adoption costs for families in need, and funding pet-related military and service organizations.



Journey Through Northern Vietnam

February 24th - March 8th, 2027

Discover the near-mythic beauty of Vietnam on an adventure through its breathtaking northern regions. Begin with an overnight flight to Hanoi, where you'll enjoy free time to discover the unique opportunities of the country's capital before exploring Hanoi's Old Quarter and visiting the Ho Chi Minh Complex.

Continue your journey in Mai Chau, a peaceful valley full of rice paddies and stilt houses. Visit Hiep Village for the exceptional opportunity to meet a Vietnam War veteran and their family, hearing firsthand stories that offer a personal lens into the region's past. Learn about a local enterprise that uplifts underprivileged women, and enjoy a traditional dinner in the home of a local family.

In Ninh Binh, visit Vietnam's ancient capital, Hoa Lu, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that dates back to the tenth century. Then, choose between a hike to Hang Mua viewpoint or a relaxing massage at your hotel's spa. Glide through the serene waters of Trang An, another UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its labyrinth of limestone caves and jungle-covered peaks. Connect with locals over a hands-on cooking class before a home-hosted dinner.

Travel to Ha Long Bay and board a cruise boat for two nights. Explore on land by bicycle or electric cart, visit a local community farm to learn about sustainable farming, and try your hand at crafting local delicacies. Take a Tai Chi lesson on the deck of the boat before exploring the area by kayak. Then, visit the Cua Van Floating Village, drifting past colorful homes and fishing boats either by kayak or traditional rowing boat. Choose between expeditions into Sung Sot Cave's 500-meter paved passageway or to Titov Island for a swim, sunbathing, or a hike up the mountain. Bid the bay farewell and return to Hanoi for one last free afternoon before a farewell dinner.



Memories Matter
Call Us Today
1-800-682-8214

Call For a FREE Catalog or Your Closest Departure Point



New York City!

June 11th - 18th, 2026

August 27th - September 3rd, 2026

You haven't truly seen the USA until you've experienced New York City, and seeing it with Timi's Tours makes all the difference. Known for exceptional quality and value, this first-class NYC trip includes a professional tour guide who travels with the group for four full days, offering insight far beyond a typical "step-on" experience. Together, you'll take in the city's iconic sights, sounds, and unforgettable energy.

The experience includes two Broadway shows with excellent seating, offering the quintessential New York tradition of live theater performed by world-class talent. Show titles will be announced closer to departure. Guests will also enjoy a memorable group meal at the famous Carmine's, plus a scenic dinner cruise along the Hudson River featuring city views, entertainment, and a fresh perspective on the skyline.

Italian Vistas

March 28th - April 10th, 2027

Experience the Italy you've always imagined on a 14-day journey through its most iconic destinations. Begin in Rome, exploring landmarks such as the Colosseum, the Pantheon, and Piazza Navona, with an optional visit to the Vatican Museums and St. Peter's Basilica. Continue to Sorrento, enjoying leisure time and an excursion to the Isle of Capri. In Pompeii, choose between a highlights tour or a deeper exploration of lesser-known ruins.



Travel north to Tuscany for a guided walking tour of Florence, cradle of the Italian Renaissance, followed by a visit to Pisa's famous Leaning Tower and a Tuscan winery lunch with wine tastings. Discover Venice, the "Floating City," with St. Mark's Square, a glass-blowing demonstration, and free time to explore. Visit romantic Verona before ending in the Lakes District, with time at the Borromeo Palace or a Swiss Alps excursion, and a farewell dinner on Isola dei Pescatori.

Explore South Africa, Victoria Falls & Botswana

May 12 - 27, 2027

Join us on an extraordinary journey to culturally rich South Africa! Visit vibrant Johannesburg, South Africa's "City of Gold." Witness the stunning beauty of Victoria Falls, renowned for their status as the world's largest single sheet of falling water. Visit national parks where wild game roam and natural vistas inspire awe. Take in beautiful Dutch architecture and marvelous vineyards in the Cape Winelands before discovering dynamic and culturally rich Cape Town. Experience the untamed and unparalleled Africa of your dreams with Timi's Tours!



1-800-682-8214 • Call For A FREE Catalog
Check Our Website For All Our Latest Tours

Contact Us For All Your Motorcoach Transportation Needs

Find us on



PHOTO COURTESY OF GERI MILLER

DEPARTMENTS

4 FIRST THOUGHTS

Make your voice heard

Join Voices for Cooperative Power.

7 CURRENTS

This month's highlights

News/Legislation/Trends/Tips

13 HEALTHY LIVING

Epilepsy Advocacy Network

Bringing epilepsy education to Illinois.

14 SAFETY CHECK

Electricity on the scene

What first responders need to know.

15 ENERGY SOLUTIONS

Check watts, not just price tags

Crunching the numbers on appliance upgrades.

16 POWERED UP

Connected homes

The power of what's plugged in.

18 SUPPORT LOCAL

Checking into The CaBIN

Farmers turn a grain bin into luxury lodging.

30 FINEST COOKING

Let's party

Crowd-pleasing snacks for any gathering.

32 GARDENWISE

Be the sharpest tool in the shed

Prepare saws for tree pruning season (and other tips).

34 SNAPSHOTS

Life of pets

Readers share photos of their cherished pets.

On the cover: Speed skater Bonnie Blair competing in the 1992 Olympic Winter Games in Albertville, France.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PCN PHOTOGRAPHY/ALAMY

Illinois Country Living

FEBRUARY 2026
VOLUME 83, NO. 10

20 Pure gold

How Bonnie Blair skated into Olympic history.

24 Rural sleep reset

Why sleep is getting harder — and ways to fix it.

28 Crafted with care

This month, **PRairie Table** visits Jovalou Cuisine and Cocktails in Fairfield.



Make your voice heard

Join Voices for Cooperative Power

IN JANUARY, ILLINOIS LAWMAKERS returned to Springfield to begin the spring legislative session, which runs through May 31. During the session, there will be discussion and debate on issues impacting communities across the state.

Amid this legislative activity, the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives will be at the Capitol, advocating for the interests of Illinois' electric cooperatives and their consumer-members, and for safe, affordable and reliable electricity.

Our mission is clear — to ensure that new laws and regulations help, rather than hinder, the ability of Illinois' not-for-profit electric cooperatives to provide reliable and affordable electricity to their consumer-members.

A critical element of this mission is maintaining open, constructive communication with elected officials as they shape energy policies. At the heart of this advocacy lies the compelling story of electric cooperatives — a story worth sharing.

Born from the transformative Rural Electrification Act of the 1930s, electric cooperatives emerged as a beacon for rural communities that were previously left in the dark. When investor-owned utilities deemed these areas unprof-

itable, rural citizens united to bring electricity to their own homes and farms. Today, electric cooperatives continue to empower rural Illinois, guided by several important principles.

Member ownership and democratic control: Electric cooperatives are unique in that they are owned by the people they serve. Consumer-members elect directors to represent their interests, ensuring that policies and procedures align with the community's needs and priorities.

Community focus: Cooperatives are more than electricity providers; they are integral to the well-being of rural communities. From delivering reliable energy to supporting education and fostering local development, co-ops are deeply invested in enhancing everyday life.

Not-for-profit commitment: As not-for-profit entities, electric co-ops give any revenue



Nick Reitz is the vice president of government relations for the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives.

back to those they serve. These are called capital credits, and they are returned to members.

In today's rapidly evolving energy landscape, it's more important than ever for elected officials to hear and understand this story — and for your voice to be part of the conversation. By joining Voices for Cooperative Power (VCP), you can play a vital role in advocating for your cooperative and its mission.

VCP is a grassroots network uniting more than 1.1 million advocates nationwide to shape energy policies that keep the lights on. Last year, thousands of electric cooperative members reached out to their legislators through VCP to help protect their cooperative's ability to keep rates affordable and continue planning responsibly for our energy future — and that strong response made a difference.

Through VCP, you'll receive updates on key issues and opportunities and make your voice heard in Springfield, Washington, D.C., and beyond. You'll also have the chance to share your own story about the impact your co-op has on your community. Together, we can ensure that the foundational principles of local democratic control, affordability and reliability remain central to the future of electric cooperatives.

Visit aiec.coop/iclvcp to get involved. Your participation strengthens the collective voice of co-op members throughout Illinois and helps ensure that our rural communities continue to thrive. Let's work together to keep the lights on, the power affordable and the spirit of cooperation alive. ☺

VCP Voices for Cooperative Power



aiec.coop/iclvcp

Illinois Country Living

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.

PRESIDENT/CEO

Craig Sondgeroth

CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

Rick Rubenacker

EDITOR

Colten Bradford

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Lisa Cherry

VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNICATIONS

Chris Reynolds

CREATIVE SERVICES COORDINATOR

Kayla Adkins

GRAPHIC DESIGNERS

Jen Danzinger

Meghan Jenkins

CONTRIBUTORS

Valerie Cheatham

Chris Enroth

Kari Jones

Mary Blye Kramer

Miguel Rios

SALES REPRESENTATIVE

Cheryl Solomon

Cheryl@amp.coop

Illinois Country Living (ISSN number 1086-8062) is published monthly by the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712. The cost is \$2.88 plus postage per year for members of subscribing cooperatives and \$12 per year for all others. Periodical postage paid at Springfield, Illinois, and additional mailing offices.

© 2026 Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited.

COOPERATIVE MEMBERS: Please report changes of address to your electric cooperative. Illinois Country Living staff cannot process address changes.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Illinois Country Living, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712.

ADVERTISING: Acceptance of advertising by the magazine does not imply endorsement by the publisher or the electric cooperatives of Illinois of the product or service advertised. Illinois Country Living is not responsible for the performance of the product or service advertised and reserves the right to refuse any advertising. iclp.coop

800-593-2432 info@iclp.coop

 Touchstone Energy® touchstoneenergy.com

Member of AMP network of publications, reaching more than 9 million households and businesses.

 American MainStreet Publications

 Alliance for Audited Media
TRUSTWORTHY WITH TRUST

 EnviroTechink
EnviroTechink is a registered trademark.

SAVE ON WINDOWS AND DOORS!

\$400 OFF EACH WINDOW¹

MINIMUM PURCHASE OF 4

\$850 OFF EACH DOOR¹

MINIMUM PURCHASE OF 4

AND

NO Money Down | NO Monthly Payments | NO Interest for 12 months¹

MINIMUM PURCHASE OF 4 - INTEREST ACCRUES DURING PROMOTIONAL PERIOD BUT IS WAIVED IF PAID IN FULL WITHIN 12 MONTHS



4.7 OUT OF 5 BASED ON 95,000+ REVIEWS

"My overall experience was great. I love the window, and from sales to scheduling, the experience was very good. The installers are highly skilled professionals and I would recommend Renewal by Andersen to all my contacts."

LYNN F. | RENEWAL BY ANDERSEN CUSTOMER



KEEP THE HEAT IN AND THE COLD AIR OUT!

Solving your window problems and having a comfortable home is easy and enjoyable when you choose Renewal by Andersen. Take advantage of this great offer to save money on your window project – and help save on high energy bills for years to come!



Offer Ends March 31

Call for your **FREE** consultation.



855-614-6674

Visit findyourwindow.com



RENEWAL
by **ANDERSEN**

FULL-SERVICE WINDOW & DOOR REPLACEMENT



DETAILS OF OFFER: Offer expires 3/31/2026. Not valid with other offers or prior purchases. Get \$400 off each window and \$850 off each entry/patio door and 12 months no money down, no monthly payments, no interest when you purchase four (4) or more windows or entry/patio doors between 2/1/2026 and 3/31/2026. Subject to credit approval. 12-month Promo Period: while no payments are due, interest accrues but is waived if the loan is paid in full before the Promo Period expires. Any unpaid balance owed after the Promo Period, plus accrued interest, will be paid in installments based on the terms disclosed in the customer's loan agreement. Financing is provided by various financial institutions without regard to age, race, color, religion, national origin, gender, or familial status. Savings comparison based on purchase of a single unit at list price. Available at participating locations and offer applies throughout the service area. See your local Renewal by Andersen location for details. License numbers available at renewalbyandersen.com/license. Some Renewal by Andersen locations are independently owned and operated. ²Values are based on comparison of Renewal by Andersen® double-hung window U-Factor to the U-Factor for clear dual-pane glass non-metal frame default values from the 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015, and 2018 International Energy Conservation Code "Glazed Fenestration" Default Tables. Military discount applies to all active duty, reserves, national guard, veterans, and retired military personnel. Eligibility will be verified through SheerID. Military discount equals \$300 off your entire purchase and applies after all other discounts, only valid on initial visit, no minimum purchase required. "Renewal by Andersen" and all other marks where denoted are trademarks of their respective owners. © 2026 Andersen Corporation. All rights reserved. RBA14201

BE MORE EFFICIENT WITH YOUR ENERGY.

EASY WAYS TO SAVE



APPLIANCES & ELECTRONICS

- Unplug devices or use a smart power strip.
- Choose ENERGY STAR-rated appliances.
- Run dishwashers and washing machines with full loads.
- Use cold water for laundry.



HEATING & COOLING

- Adjust thermostats by a few degrees.
- Use programmable or smart thermostats for automatic adjustments.
- Seal air leaks around doors and windows.
- Use ceiling fans to circulate air and reduce heating/cooling load.



COOKING

- Use a microwave, air fryer or toaster oven for small meals.
- Match pot size to burner size to avoid wasting heat.
- Avoid opening oven door. Each peek loses heat.



Touchstone Energy®
The power of human connections



FEBRUARY CHECKLIST

Here are four heart-healthy tips for American Heart Month.



Move your body every day. Even 30 minutes of walking or light activity helps strengthen your heart.

Eat more fruit and vegetables.



Aim to fill half your plate with colorful produce to support heart health.



Cut back on salt and added sugar.

Too much sodium and sugar can raise blood pressure and heart disease risk.



Know your numbers.

Keep track of your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ERMCO

Kinks in the supply chain

Electric co-ops continue to fight for affordable, reliable service

While supply chain issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (remember the run on toilet paper?) may be in the rearview for regular consumers, new bottlenecks in the flow of goods and services are challenging electric cooperatives nationwide to deliver affordable and reliable service. And the circumstances squeezing the supply chains for electric co-ops are unlikely to ease in the foreseeable future.

First, we're talking about a higher demand for electricity. Plus, the supply of equipment needed to maintain or build more power plants has not kept up. Then there's a skilled labor shortage to get the job done and tariffs on imported materials. All these things add up to delayed energy projects at increased costs.

With all things digital from phones to thermostats, electricity use is up. To sustain the growing digital economy, huge data

centers with appetites for electricity akin to that of a small city are sprouting up across rural America and electric co-ops' service territories. These centers soak up extreme amounts of power to serve the internet's relentless demand for high-speed networking, data storage and AI (artificial intelligence) that make the internet user-friendly.

But even in this post-pandemic world, there still remains a scarcity of materials, equipment and workers to get new power generation sources built.

After the pandemic forced manufacturing to shutter for months in 2020, a lot of experienced employees retired or never even went back to their jobs making transformers and other equipment essential to distributing electricity to consumers. The supply of some transformers has never been fully replenished, and the lack of a competent workforce today makes that a constant game of catch-up.

Continued on page 8

Sudoku

by Myles Mellor and Susan Flanagan

To solve the puzzle, each row, column and box must contain each of the numbers 1 to 9. Level: Medium

Solution on page 33.

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

ILLINOIS TRIVIA CHALLENGE

Test your Illinois trivia knowledge. Here are a few questions in honor of Black History Month. Answers are on page 33.



1. Which Illinois town was founded in 1837 as a haven for formerly enslaved people and abolitionists?
 - a. Nauvoo
 - b. New Philadelphia
 - c. Alton
2. Who was the first African American to serve in the U.S. Senate, representing Illinois?
 - a. Carol Moseley Braun
 - b. Barack Obama
 - c. Roland Burris
3. Which Illinois-born poet became the first Black woman to serve as U.S. Poet Laureate?
 - a. Nikki Giovanni
 - b. Gwendolyn Brooks
 - c. Maya Angelou
4. Which Illinois-born Black Olympian competed in four consecutive Olympic Games and won medals in each?
 - a. Carl Lewis
 - b. Jackie Joyner-Kersee
 - c. Edwin Moses

Continued from page 7

U.S.-based engineering, procurement and construction firms are scrambling to meet work orders for new power projects as there is more demand today than they can keep up with, says Stephanie Crawford, regulatory affairs director at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

Electric co-ops are “finding that these firms cannot respond to requests, they’re charging price premiums, or that planning for projects four years out is already ‘too late,’ she says.

As a result, equipment crucial for electricity projects — from new substations to power plant maintenance and outage repairs after storms hit — is delayed and coming in at much higher prices.

Co-ops are seeing lag times of up to four years between an order for a transformer and its ultimate delivery. Prices are up 70% to 100% compared to 2020. Lead times for new gas turbines for a power plant can range from three to six years and cost 25% more than just three years ago.

According to one industry insider, an electric co-op that spent \$10 million on materials and equipment for electricity projects and maintenance in 2020 had to spend more than \$15.5 million in 2025 to keep up.

So, what is your electric co-op doing to maintain reliable and affordable service?

Collaboration, which is baked into every co-op’s DNA, is key. Co-ops are finding themselves working with equipment suppliers and contractors closer than ever and planning their orders at least a year in advance of construction to work out the snags of the current supply chain.

Knowing their exact inventory and the physical storage space also helps co-ops keep necessary equipment on hand, materials flowing and projects as near to schedule as possible.

By working as a team, electric co-ops, manufacturers and their industry partners will be able to improve forecasting their equipment needs, stay ahead of potential demand changes and experience a smoother supply chain. ☈

Cathy Cash, NRECA



House passes permitting reform bills to boost affordable electricity

The House has passed two significant permitting reform bills that would help protect affordable power nationwide by reducing delays for electric cooperatives making crucial improvements to their systems.

“Federal environmental permitting has become increasingly complex, unpredictable and unworkable over time,” said National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) CEO Jim Matheson. “It interferes with co-op efforts to maintain the infrastructure that is essential to keeping the lights on and meet growing demand. These hurdles delay critical projects and can increase costs for electric co-op consumers.”

House members voted 221-196 on Dec. 18 to approve the bipartisan Standardizing Permitting and Expediting Economic Development (SPEED) Act, which would streamline the requirements imposed by the National Environmental Policy Act on electric co-ops applying for federal permits to build new generation, transmission and distribution capacity, strengthen existing systems or perform crucial maintenance work.

The bill’s lead sponsors, House Natural Resources Chairman Bruce Westerman, R-Ark., and Rep. Jared Golden, D-Maine, say it would shorten permitting timelines and reduce the frequency of “frivolous litigation” that stymies construction of vital infrastructure.

Continued on page 10



PUT YOUR MESSAGE IN OVER 200,000 ILLINOIS MAILBOXES +

Every issue of Illinois Country Living is delivered to the mailboxes of more than 200,000 homes, farms and businesses throughout Illinois. With a readership of more than half a million, no other publication — magazine or newspaper — even comes close to reaching so many potential customers for your product, service or destination. Find out how easy it is to advertise and to take advantage of Illinois' most powerful reach!

Illinois
Country Living

Email info@icl.coop

Designed to Last. *Generations.*

Most companies advertising post-frame buildings are selling you materials produced somewhere else, by someone else. We manufacture our custom designed buildings right here in Illinois. That way we control quality, cost, and time of delivery for you.



Scan the QR Code
or Call:
217-963-7471



Limited Release! Cache of 132 Complete Sets of the Last Large Silver Dollars

Last Large-Sized Dollars

Struck from 1971-1978 to honor President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the "Ike" was the last large-sized circulating dollar struck by the US Mint. It was also the last "silver dollar" struck using a circulating design, with two versions made using 40% silver.

In all, 32 different Ike dollars were struck. To find one today is a challenge. To find 10 different coins is HARD. To find all 32 for a complete collection, well, that's a Herculean task! But fear not, we've done the work for you.

Special Release - Only 132 Sets Available

Rarcoa®, America's Oldest Coin Company, is announcing the public release of 132 Complete 32 coin sets of the iconic Ike Dollar. Using our deep connections in the coin market, we've painstakingly assembled all 32 coins for you, but it's far more than just a complete set. You get TEN complete sets... Each coin you receive comes in Brilliant Uncirculated or Proof condition, pristine as the day they were struck.



Actual Size
38.1 mm

Sold Nationally for as much as \$1,236

This same Complete 32 piece Ike Dollar Set sells elsewhere for as much as \$1,236. But thanks to Rarcoa's buying power and numismatic expertise, you can own a complete set for only \$597 while supplies last. That's \$639 LESS! That's only \$18.66 per coin!

Complete 32 pc Ike Set.....\$597
plus free shipping and as low as \$199/mo
for three months, interest free.

As low as
\$199
in 3 monthly
installments!

Each set comes in a Bonus
Dansco holder - a \$25 value.
PLUS get FREE SHIPPING
on your order!



Call 1-833-304-6533

Offer Code CKSP110-1

Please mention this code when you call.

Standard domestic shipping only. Not valid on previous purchases. All information is correct as of the date of publication and is subject to change. Coins and other items are sold as collectibles and not as investments. Due to the volatility in the precious metals market, prices are subject to change. © 2025 RARCOA DIRECT



Where is it?

The winners of the December hidden objects contest were David Banister of Menard Electric Cooperative and Brenda Creek-Cooper of Norris Electric Cooperative. Congratulations! Your ICL campfire mugs have been sent.

The blue hat hidden in the January 2026 issue was in the feature story on page 26. 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. The Winter Olympics will be held Feb. 6-22, so be on the lookout for a pair of ice skates, 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 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. ☀

Continued from page 8

In another important change, co-ops would no longer have to go through the NEPA review process every time they get federal grants or other types of funding for an improvement project.

"The passage of the SPEED Act is a win for America," Westerman said. "For too long, America's broken permitting process has stifled economic growth and innovation. To build the infrastructure needed to deliver affordable energy to American families and defend against 21st-century threats, we must fix this process. The SPEED Act will encourage investment, bring certainty to permitting, end abusive litigation, and allow America to build again."

The House also voted 221-205 on Dec. 11 to pass the Promoting Efficient Review for Modern Infrastructure Today (PERMIT) Act, which was introduced by House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman Sam Graves, R-Mo., and Rep. Mike Collins, R-Ga. The

NRECA-supported bill would improve permitting under the Clean Water Act by cutting red tape and providing greater regulatory certainty for co-ops that obtain permits.

"The PERMIT Act is a package of common-sense reforms to Clean Water Act permitting processes that will help lower construction costs and utility bills, speed up infrastructure project timelines and provide greater regulatory certainty," Graves said after the bill passed.

"The reforms in the PERMIT Act will have immediate impact on energy producers, the agriculture industry, home and road builders, water utilities, and everyday Americans who have to navigate complex and confusing permitting processes."

Both bills must still be passed by the Senate and signed into law by President Trump. ☀

Erin Kelly, NRECA

Call for photos

Announcing ICL's new photography contest

From frost-covered fields to sunlit county fairs, Illinois offers photographers endless inspiration in every season. That's why Illinois Country Living invites readers to showcase their best work in its new SnapShots Photography Contest.

The contest celebrates the beauty of the Prairie State throughout the year, with four seasonal categories: Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall. Photographers may submit up to three photos per category, capturing landscapes, rural life, nature or moments that reflect the spirit of each season.

A panel of judges will select first-, second- and third-place winners in each category, along with an overall Grand Champion. Cash prizes will be awarded.

Winning photographs will be featured in the December 2026 issue of Illinois Country Living and showcased in the 2027 Snapshots Calendar, giving photographers statewide

recognition throughout the year. In addition, contest runners-up will be published in the magazine's SnapShots section during 2027.

Important dates and details

- Photos must be taken in Illinois
- Open only to Illinois electric co-op members
- High resolution photos only
- Submission deadline: Aug. 1, 2026
- Entry limit: Three submissions per category

To accommodate the contest, Illinois Country Living will stop accepting new photos for the regular SnapShots section on April 1, 2026. Archived photography will be used in the magazine from June through November 2026.

Whether you're a photographer, an enthusiastic hobbyist or an amateur, this is your chance to share how you see Illinois — one season at a time. ☀

Considering a career as a lineworker?

Apply today for the \$3,000 LaVern and Nola McEntire Memorial Lineworker's Scholarship.

Deadline to apply is April 30, 2026.

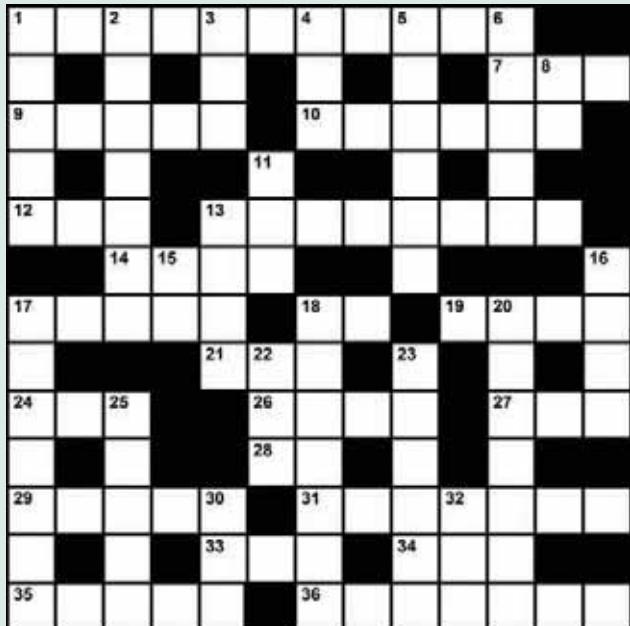
Scan the code for more details:



aiec.coop/lavern-and-nola-lineworkers-scholarship

Across

- 1 Illinois native who won 5 speed skating gold medals at the Winter Olympic Games, 2 words
- 7 Small four-stringed guitar
- 9 Illinois-born skater who won gold at the 2006 and 2010 Winter Olympics, Shani _____
- 10 One of the disciplines in Alpine skiing, 2 words
- 12 Big Apple metropolis, abbr.
- 13 The Winter Olympics 2026 will be broadcast on these _____: NBC, USA network and CNBC
- 14 Dutch cheese
- 17 Olympic medals are decorated metal _____
- 18 Golden state, abbr.
- 19 Revered figure such as Lindsay Vonn or Apolo Ohno
- 21 It's crucial in ski jumping for achieving distance
- 24 "Big Bang Theory" character
- 26 Winter Olympics sport using a small sled
- 27 Marked trail for downhill skiing, ski _____
- 28 Lithium symbol
- 29 It's relayed to the Olympic Games by many runners
- 31 Winter Olympics sport, figure _____
- 33 Winter Olympics sport, hockey



34 Electrically charged particle
15 American capital (initials)

35 Distance measurement
36 Scandinavian nation participating in the 2026 Winter Olympics

Down

- 1 German spa town that hosted the 1936 International Olympic Committee that shaped modern Olympics (it has a repeating name)
- 2 Rookies
- 3 " _____ magic!"
- 4 Large passenger vehicle
- 5 It's also called downhill skiing
- 6 Relating to the countryside
- 8 Kilogram abbreviation
- 11 Unit of electrical resistance
- 13 "Mi _____ es tu _____": phrase of Spanish hospitality
- 15 American capital (initials)
- 16 Privy to secret information, 2 words
- 17 Illinois-born figure skater and 1986 Olympic gold medalist _____ Hamill
- 18 _____ to victory (won easily)
- 20 Resort hosting the 2026 Winter Olympics downhill skiing close to Marmolada, "The Queen of the Dolomites"
- 22 Home state for ice hockey silver medal winners Kendall Schofield and Cammi Granato, abbr.
- 23 Win back the lead, for example
- 25 One of the judges in the Olympic Games
- 30 Greetings
- 32 Mr. Turkey

Solution on page 33.

FEBRUARY/MARCH Datebook

LET'S GO!

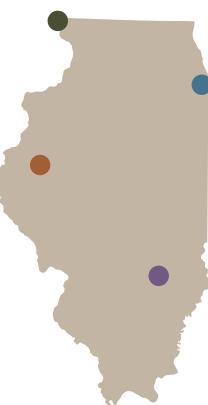
Feb. 13-16
Winter Carnival
Weekend
GALENA
Outdoor winter activities
at Eagle Ridge Resort

Feb. 14
Argenta Ice Fest
ARGENTA
A winter tradition
that brings art and
community together

March 6-7
Manhattan
Irish Fest
MANHATTAN
Celebrate Irish heritage

March 14
St. Patrick's
Day Parade
SPRINGFIELD
The 42nd annual
St. Patrick's Day
parade returns to the
historic downtown

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



WIU Ag Mech Club's 54th Annual Farm Expo

FEBRUARY

7-8

The Farm Expo, one of the largest student-run agricultural events in the country, will include farm tractors and machinery, ag sales and service, ag management, emerging ag technology, livestock and crop supplies, and conservation and ag structures. There will be a variety of craft vendors and free children's activities, including a bouncy house, face painting and glitter tattoos.

Feb. 7, 2026: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and Feb. 8: 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

- Western Hall at Western Illinois University, West University Drive, Macomb
Admission: free
309-298-1080 or bit.ly/4aTQ8mF

Shenandoah Riding Center Winter Carnival

FEBRUARY

14

Embrace the season at Shenandoah Riding Center's Winter Carnival. Enjoy family-friendly activities like wagon rides, crafts and a campfire perfect for roasting marshmallows. Warm up with hot chocolate from the hot chocolate bar. All activities are included in the ticket price, so reserve your space online or pay at the door. For a special experience, book a lead-line ride on horses and ponies for \$25 per child. Reservations are required at the website below.

Feb. 14, 2026: 10 a.m. to noon

- Shenandoah Riding Center, 200 N. Brodrecht Road, Galena
Admission: varies
815-777-9550 or bit.ly/3LKFiOL



PHOTO COURTESY OF VISITCHICAGOSOUTHLAND.COM

Gym Bob's Jamboree '50s and '60s Show

MARCH

1

This month's opry-style live music show features all '50s and '60s music, including hits from music legends such as Elvis, Brenda Lee, Jerry Lee Lewis and much more for the whole family to enjoy.

March 1, 2026: 1-3:30 p.m.

- Gym Bob's, 44 Apostle Lane, Bible Grove
Admission: \$7
615-481-7418 or GymBobs.com



Local Stories of the Underground Railroad

FEBRUARY

28

Presented by the Midwest Underground Railroad Network, this cultural event held at Sand Ridge Nature Center (pictured) uses storytelling and music to explore the people, places and events that shaped the Underground Railroad south of Chicago.

Feb. 28, 2026: 1-2 p.m.

- Sand Ridge Nature Center, 15891 Paxton Avenue, South Holland
Admission: free
708-868-0606 or bit.ly/49kAcZt



Bringing epilepsy education to Illinois

DID YOU KNOW ONE in 26 people will develop epilepsy in their lifetime and one in 10 will have a seizure? Despite its prevalence, epilepsy remains vastly misunderstood and is often isolating for those impacted by it.

This is where organizations like Epilepsy Advocacy Network (EAN) come in. With a mission to promote community education and awareness, self-advocacy and empowerment, and access to proper care, EAN serves 60 counties in northwest and central Illinois.

Educating yourself about epilepsy helps build communities that are more supportive of those impacted by it. So, what exactly is a seizure, and what is epilepsy? A seizure is an electrical discharge in the brain that can impact movement, sensation, behavior and/or awareness. Epilepsy is a disorder involving recurring seizures. Can you correctly identify some facts and myths about epilepsy?

Fact or myth?

There are more than 20 types of seizures.

This is a fact. Many people recognize only tonic-clonic seizures, previously called grand mal. These are convulsive seizures that often begin with a sudden loss of consciousness, a fall and jerking of the limbs. There are many other types of seizures, which can involve loss of consciousness, vary greatly in duration, and affect behavior rather than body movement.

If you see someone having a seizure, you should put something in their mouth.

This is a myth. A person cannot swallow their tongue while having a seizure. If you see someone having a convulsive seizure, it is important to stay calm, time the seizure, turn the person on their side, and ensure there is nothing on or around them that could injure them.

A seizure is always a medical emergency.

This is a myth. Most seizures are not emergencies and can be managed without a call to 911 or a trip to the hospital. A seizure is an emergency if it is a first-time seizure, or if it looks different or goes longer than the person's typical seizures. Other emergency situations are if a seizure occurs in water or if the person is pregnant.

What you can do

We encourage you to learn more. All EAN services are free to access. Educational services for the community include Seizure Recognition and Response training, which can be offered at schools, organizations or for any other interested groups, Epilepsy 101 training, and awareness events to bring people together to build support for those with epilepsy.

Services for people with epilepsy and their caregivers include:

- Case management, goal setting and referrals to services.

- Referral and assistance for specialty care.
- Support groups, both in-person and virtual.



PHOTO COURTESY OF EPILEPSY ADVOCACY NETWORK

- Programs helping with seizure management, stress reduction and memory concerns.
- Summer camp for children and teens with epilepsy.
- Assistance creating an action plan and advocating for accommodations at school or work.
- Support for those experiencing financial hardship who need assistance obtaining medication or transportation.
- Access to safety devices, including seizure detection watches, anti-suffocation pillows, cooling vests and more.

CamPossible summer camp takes place at Timber Pointe Outdoor Center in Hudson, Ill.

Contact EAN to get connected. If you are in the Chicago area or in southern Illinois, there are similar organizations you can contact for epilepsy services, including Epilepsy Foundation of Greater Chicago and Epilepsy Foundation Greater Southern Illinois. ☺



Kari Jones is the executive director of the Epilepsy Advocacy Network, an organization that works to optimize the life of individuals with epilepsy and seizure disorders.

LEARN MORE

EPILEPSY ADVOCACY NETWORK

815-846-0881

info@epilepsyadvocacynetwork.org

epilepsyadvocacynetwork.org

EPILEPSY FOUNDATION OF GREATER CHICAGO

312-939-8622

info@epilepsychicago.org

epilepsychicago.org

EPILEPSY FOUNDATION GREATER SOUTHERN ILLINOIS

618-236-2181

trudyb@epilepsygsil.org

efgreaersil.org

Electricity on the scene

What first responders need to know

FIRST RESPONDERS MUST MAKE

good judgments, and that requires them to be well versed in potential dangers they may encounter at the scene of a fire or other emergency.

have the challenge of not knowing whether a wire is energized.

Utility professionals always advise first responders to assume a downed wire is dangerous, so they

becoming a path for the electricity to move through one's body, which can cause serious or fatal injuries.

The term potential, as used with electric current, indicates a difference in voltage, and since electricity flows from higher voltage to lower voltage, a person whose body connects those two points will become a path for the current to flow.

A step potential can injure or kill someone walking toward or away from the point where an energized wire makes contact with the ground. As the electricity flows through the soil, which has resistance, the voltage dissipates the farther it goes. By striding across the affected area, an emergency responder could have feet in different voltage zones, and a fatal charge could travel up one leg and down the other to the area of the lesser voltage.

A touch potential can similarly injure someone standing on the ground, which may have a lesser voltage than a vehicle draped with energized wires. While the victims in such a vehicle are at a single voltage, the difference between that and the voltage in the ground can be fatal to an emergency responder.

When responding to an accident scene involving vehicles and downed lines, remember to stay back and warn others to stay back, and make sure the occupants of the car stay inside until the utility has arrived to deenergize the lines.

In a rare circumstance, the vehicle may catch fire. The only way the occupants can safely exit is to jump free and clear without touching the vehicle and ground simultaneously. Advise them to jump and land with feet together then hop away to safety, keeping feet together.

For more information about electrical safety, visit SafeElectricity.org.



Treat all downed power lines as if they are live. They don't always show signs of activity when energized.



Erin Hollinshead is the executive director of Safe Electricity, a program creating a safer, smarter world by providing lifesaving electrical safety education.

Electricity can be an invisible killer, particularly when overhead power lines have fallen and contacted vehicles or the ground. The wire may not be sparking or visibly indicating its lethal characteristics; however, it can energize other objects it touches and send a potentially deadly charge into the ground that will disable or electrocute someone approaching the wire on foot.

Traffic accidents, high winds, ice storms and other events can bring electric transmission and distribution lines within range of pedestrians and vehicles, and first responders

should communicate with utility company personnel as soon as possible to ensure it's safe to proceed.

Once a line is deenergized, it is safe for emergency workers to perform rescue and recovery, provide traffic control, and manage other life-threatening situations.

The first responder to a traffic accident involving downed power lines, whether on the ground or car, faces two possibilities of a deadly electric shock.

One of them is a "step potential," and the other is a "touch potential." In both cases, emergency responders put themselves in danger of



Check watts, not just price tags

Crunching the numbers on appliance upgrades

BUYING A NEW APPLIANCE can feel daunting. Before you hand over your hard-earned money, here's how to choose an appliance that will help you save money over time.

When shopping, keep in mind that not all new appliances are high in energy efficiency and not all old appliances are inefficient. The less efficient your current appliance, the more you will save with an upgrade. The yellow EnergyGuide label on new appliances shows the yearly energy cost, kilowatt-hour electricity use and ENERGY STAR logo, if certified.

Let's look at some appliance examples to see how the costs and savings stack up. Refrigerators have seen major efficiency improvements over the years. New refrigerators use up to 73% less energy than 1970s models and about a third less than 20-year-old models.

My mom proudly shows off her 1980s refrigerator she bought when her 1970s Harvest Gold model died. If her '80s fridge uses 2,000 kWh per year, at 14 cents per kWh, it costs \$280 per year to operate.

New ENERGY STAR-certified refrigerator prices start at \$500 with yearly energy costs ranging from \$38 to \$122. If mom buys a new ENERGY STAR-certified

refrigerator for \$1,000 with \$100 yearly energy cost — saving her \$180 per year — it will pay for itself in less than six years.

If you intend to keep your old appliance, be sure to weigh the additional energy costs. Maximize efficiency and keep your food safe by setting your refrigerator to 37 degrees and your freezer at 0 degrees.

New ENERGY STAR-certified clothes washers and dryers are also more efficient than older models. Use the ENERGY STAR Product Finder at energystar.gov to compare products. Integrated Modified Energy Factor measures the washer's energy efficiency. A higher number is better. Integrated Water Factor measures water efficiency. A lower number is better.

I recently bought a new washing machine when my old front-load machine died. I was considering a top-load machine. When I compared ENERGY STAR-certified top loaders to front loaders, I changed my mind. The front loaders use about 50% less energy and water than top-load agitator washers and about 25% less energy and water than top-load impeller washers that don't have an agitator.

My new washer cost \$698. According to the appliance's

EnergyGuide, based on six loads of laundry a week and an electricity cost of 14 cents per kWh, the yearly energy cost is \$15. Similar non-ENERGY STAR-certified models were \$48 per year. Mine didn't cost much more than non-ENERGY STAR models and will help me save over time.

Then I had to make the decision about buying the matching dryer. My dryer was functional but had features I didn't like. At 14 cents per kWh and running roughly six loads a week for an hour each, my old dryer used \$131.04 per year.

The new matching ENERGY STAR-certified dryer cost \$698 and estimates annual energy use at 607 kWh, which is \$84.98 per year at 14 cents per kWh. With an estimated savings of \$46 per year, the dryer would take 15 years for the savings to cover the price. That's a long time and not worth the cost.

To improve your washer and dryer efficiency, wash in cold water, don't overdry clothes and clean your lint trap between every load.

Whatever appliance you are upgrading or replacing, make an informed decision by comparing the cost of operation and shopping ENERGY STAR models to help lower your electric bill. ☺



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



PHOTO COURTESY OF LG

"Behind the meter" refers to equipment that you own or control that operates on your side of the electric meter. This could include solar panels, battery storage systems or connected devices like EV chargers or smart thermostats.

Connected homes

The power of what's plugged in

OUR HOMES ARE CHANGING, and so is the electric grid. Across the country, more households are becoming "smart" and connected. From thermostats that adjust automatically to electric vehicles that charge overnight, the devices we plug in are becoming intelligent, flexible and increasingly central to how we use and even produce electricity.

For your electric cooperative, this growing network of connected devices creates new ways for co-ops and their members to work together to keep power reliable and affordable.

Each of these tools can help you use energy more efficiently — and when they are managed effectively, or when many homes coordinate and balance their energy use together, they can also help your co-op keep power flowing reliably and affordably for the entire community.

The power you don't see

You might have heard the phrase "behind the meter." This simply refers to energy equipment that you own or control that operates on your side of the electric meter. This could include solar panels, battery storage systems or connected devices like EV chargers or smart thermostats.

Individually, they may seem small, but together they can make a big difference. If hundreds of water heaters slightly delay heating during a peak time of day (when electricity use is high), the co-op can avoid purchasing power at a higher cost, which essentially keeps rates lower for members. If home batteries store

solar-generated energy during the day and release it back to the grid at night, it helps balance the overall supply and demand of electricity.

How connected devices help the grid

Each day, our electric grid must maintain a perfect balance to match the amount of electricity generated with the amount of electricity we are using — all in real time. Because electricity can't easily be stored at scale, this balancing act is constant and complex.

Connected devices give electric co-ops powerful new tools to help manage this complexity. Traditionally, electricity use was simple: flip a switch and power flows instantly. But today, many devices can shift when and how they use energy, also known as load flexibility. Load flexibility allows you and your co-op to better align energy use during times when electricity is more affordable, without sacrificing comfort or convenience. ☀



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.

What is a connected home?

A connected home is one where everyday appliances and devices can communicate with each other, you or even with your electric co-op. These could include thermostats that adjust to your patterns and preferences, water heaters that operate when electricity is cheaper, home batteries that store solar-generated power for later use or air-source heat pumps that efficiently heat and cool your home.

Throw Yourself a Bone

Full tang stainless steel blade with natural bone handle —now ONLY \$79!

The very best hunting knives possess a perfect balance of form and function. They're carefully constructed from fine materials, but also have that little something extra to connect the owner with nature.

If you're on the hunt for a knife that combines impeccable craftsmanship with a sense of wonder, the **\$79 Huntsman Blade** is the trophy you're looking for.

The blade is full tang, meaning it doesn't stop at the handle but extends to the length of the grip for the ultimate in strength. The blade is made from 420 surgical steel, famed for its sharpness and its resistance to corrosion.

The handle is made from genuine natural bone, and features decorative wood spacers and a hand-carved motif of two overlapping feathers—a reminder for you to respect and connect with the natural world.

This fusion of substance and style can garner a high price tag out in the marketplace. In fact, we found full tang, stainless steel blades with bone handles in excess of \$2,000. Well, that won't cut it around here. We have mastered the hunt for the best deal, and in turn pass the spoils on to our customers.

But we don't stop there. While supplies last, we'll include a pair of \$99 30x60 HD power pocket binoculars *and* a genuine leather sheath **FREE** when you purchase the **Huntsman Blade**.

Your satisfaction is 100% guaranteed. Feel the knife in your hands, wear it on your hip, inspect the impeccable craftsmanship. If you don't feel like we cut you a fair deal, send it back within 30 days for a complete refund of the item price.

Limited Reserves. A deal like this won't last long. We have only 1120 **Huntsman Blades** for this ad only. Don't let this beauty slip through your fingers. Call today!

Huntsman Blade \$249*

Offer Code Price Only **\$79** + S&P Save **\$170**

1-800-333-2045

Your Insider Offer Code: **HBK296-03**

You must use the insider offer code to get our special price.

Stauer® 14091 Southcross Drive W., Dept. HBK296-03
Burnsville, Minnesota 55337 www.stauer.com

*Discount is only for customers who use the offer code versus the listed original Stauer.com price.

California residents please call 1-800-333-2045 regarding Proposition 65 regulations before purchasing this product.

- 12" overall length; 6 1/2" stainless steel full tang blade • Genuine bone handle with brass hand guard & bolsters • Includes genuine leather sheath

**EXCLUSIVE
FREE**

Stauer® 30x60
HD Pocket
Binoculars
-a \$99 value-
with purchase of
Huntsman Blade



BONUS! Call today and you'll also receive this genuine leather sheath!

**What Stauer Clients
Are Saying About
Our Knives**



"This knife is beautiful!"

— J., La Crescent, MN



"The feel of this knife is unbelievable...this is an incredibly fine instrument."

— H., Arvada, CO



Rating of A+

Stauer... *Afford the Extraordinary.*®



Checking into The CaBIN

Farmers turn a grain bin into luxury lodging

By Kayla Adkins

JUST OUTSIDE OF CHARLESTON is a grain silo that no longer houses grain. Instead, it has been turned into a home, albeit a temporary one. The CaBIN, an Airbnb constructed by the father/son duo of Michael and Drake Sweeney, sits nestled within the trees of their property. The Sweeneys are seventh-generation farmers and Coles-Moultrie Electric Cooperative members.

The idea for the Airbnb sparked from an online post. "I saw it on Facebook one time and just thought it'd be fun to try," Drake says, adding that he and his father had talked about building a cabin on that land, anyway.

The pair moved the grain bin from a different location and reconstructed it in 2023, adding all the touches of home. Being full-time farmers, the Sweeneys were only able to work on it during nights and weekends, thus it took two years to complete. Their first guests stayed Aug. 1, 2025, and almost every weekend since then it has been booked.

The pair continues to modify the silo — next on the list is a porch. The CaBIN can host eight guests and has one bedroom and two bathrooms, with pullout couches available. A fully functioning kitchen, outdoor firepit and heating/air conditioning make the building feel like home. The second-floor loft area is open except for the bathroom, and motion lights shine under the steps to light the way.

The project wasn't easy to construct. The round shape of the building posed several challenges. "It's not measure twice, cut once. It's measure four, maybe five times, cut two or three times," Drake jokes.



The CaBIN has one bedroom and two bathrooms, with pullout couches available.

Both men are impressed with how the project turned out. "The ceiling, that's probably one of my biggest [sources of] pride — when we did it, we didn't waste any lumber," Michael explains. The design of the ceiling incorporates beams and a fan constructed from a grain spreader. "We've tried to keep the nostalgia," he says.

The Sweeneys agree that their main goal is to provide a comfortable place for guests to stay. "We want something for people to make them feel at home, with the goal being getting out in nature," Michael says.

The community has been supportive, with several people coming to view the property during their open house event. Local artist Suzanna Fairley of Country Classic Oils painted a scene of the CaBIN on a turkey feather and framed it in barn wood. It now hangs on a wall in the silo's living room.

Moving forward, the Sweeneys plan to dig a pond on the property to enhance the relaxing view among the trees. If the house proves popular enough, they say they will look at adding another property in the future. 

SHOW SUPPORT

The CaBIN

To book a stay, go to airbnb.com/h/theca-bin.

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.



**Voices for
Cooperative
Power**



Tell Illinois
Lawmakers
**PROTECT
AFFORDABLE
ENERGY**



VISIT AIEC.COOP/ICLVCP TO HELP!

PURE GOLD

How Bonnie Blair skated into Olympic history

By Valerie Cheatham

AS SHE BROUGHT THE tip of her skate to the starting line, she assumed her position. The starting gun went off. She raced the first 100 meters and could hear the public address announcer state the split times. She knew she was hundredths of a second ahead — her biggest opponent was typically faster. She remembers thinking that if she could skate a regular lap, she should be able to beat her. As she crossed the finish line, the crowd knew before she did. As the saying goes, the rest is history.

Born for the ice

No one could have foreseen the 2-year-old, whose feet were so small she had to wear shoes inside her skates, going on to win Olympic gold. Bonnie Blair grew up in Champaign in a family of skaters, but unlike her siblings who chose to pursue college degrees, Bonnie chose to persist.

Bonnie can't recall ever going on a family vacation; instead they traveled many weekends to skating competitions. Equipment and travel, both stateside and international, are expensive. Bonnie credits the community support she received as an impetus to push forward.

As a teen during summer, Bonnie played recreational softball. Her coach worked for the Champaign Police Department and inquired about her skating and the costs involved. After

meeting with Bonnie and her father Charlie, the police department offered its support.

"The Champaign Police Department hosted different fundraising events around town. I think of it as my whole hometown being my sponsor, because they showed up to support me," she explains.

Typically, around the first of October, Bonnie would travel to Germany because it would have the earliest ice.

This was at a time when practice was outside.

Even when she started winning and was able to fend for herself financially, the community still took interest in this kid that grew up in Champaign. They started hosting "watch parties" before they were popular.

"I want to think that my community spearheaded these things," she says. "Back in 1988 and '92, those things weren't happening, but they were in Champaign."

She qualified for her first Olympics in 1984. At the time, she was competing in both short- and long-track events, eventually switching over to the long-track 500-, 1,000- and 1,500-meter races.

At the 1988 Winter Olympic Games in Calgary, Canada, she was up against strong competitors on the Chinese and East German teams, including Olympian Christa Rothenburger. Choking up at the memory, she recalls her feelings when she crossed that finish line.





"Winning doesn't always mean being first. Winning means you're doing better than you've ever done before."

"I beat her by two one-hundredths of a second — that's about 10.5 inches. We had the exact same lap time, but I beat her in the first hundred meters," she recounts. She took the gold medal and set a new world record at the same time. She went on to earn a bronze medal in the 1,000-meter race.

At the 1992 Winter Olympics in Albertville, France, Bonnie swept the gold medals in the 500- and 1,000-meter races. It was the first time a woman had successfully defended her title in the 500. At the Lillehammer, Norway, Olympics in 1994, she not only won the 500 but put up a 1.38-second margin of victory, the largest in Olympic history. She missed the bronze medal at 1,500-meters but set an American record — the fastest she had ever skated.

"Race per race, that was my best executed race at the Lillehammer games. I was just as excited for that race as I was for the other two because I set a personal best," she explains. "I accomplished the goals I had set out for that race. Winning doesn't always mean being first. Winning means you're doing better than you've ever done before."

U.S. Coach Peter Mueller, a 1976 Olympic gold medalist in the 1,000-meters, commented, "It's like she was born on ice. Her long strides make her the best technician in the world, man or woman, over the sprint distances."

A member of four Olympic Speed Skating teams, Bonnie won five Olympic gold medals and one bronze from 1988 to 1994 and holds numerous world records. To date, she is the most decorated American female Winter Olympian.

After her success in 1992, Bonnie continued to compete. She moved to Milwaukee, Wis., and began training

at the Pettit National Ice Center, a newly opened, state-of-the-art indoor ice rink. She competed in the 1995 World Championships on her 31st birthday, March 18, 1995, won the 500, and shortly after, retired.

The following year, she married David Cruikshank, her former teammate and fellow speed skater. And, although she retired from the sport, she was never far from it.

The road to the Olympics

Other than talent, in order to become an Olympic-caliber athlete, Bonnie says it also takes drive, passion, a willingness to listen and be coached, and people who will be there to support you and help you chase what you want to do.

She compares it to a tire on a bike. "They all have spokes, and they all have to be tightened in a good way to make it roll in a perfect circle," she explains. "Having a core group around you is what creates that balance and makes success possible."

It takes a desire to work every day, even when you aren't having a great day. It's about digging down deep inside to get it done.

"For instance, my husband was in four Olympics. Between the two of us, we have five gold and a bronze, and yes, they're all mine," says Bonnie. "But guess what? He knows he put in the blood, sweat and tears to be the best he could be. He can hold his head high knowing he tried, executed and learned so many things in life. It's about perspective."

Bonnie Blair Cruikshank and her husband are passionate about furthering the future of speed skating. Through the DASH program, youth are given the opportunity to explore and pursue the sport with professional coaching. Bonnie also cheers on and coaches her daughter, Blair, also a speed skater.



DASH

Bonnie and Dave are passionate about advancing the sport of speed skating.

Bonnie is currently the director of community engagement for The DASH Project, Inc., a 501c(3) organization with a mission to grow speed skating. DASH stands for Developing Athletes for Speedskating High-Performance. Dave is president and head coach of the organization.

The organization's Gold Medal Advisory Board is a who's who of gold medal speed skating excellence: Bonnie Blair-Cruikshank '88, '92, '94; Dan Jansen '94, Joey Cheek '06, Chris Witty '02, Chad Hedrick '06, and Casey FitzRandolph '02.

"Dave and I dream of getting more athletes into the sport," says Bonnie. "It isn't a typical sport like football or basketball, nor is it collegiate based. It takes a lot of commitment from parents and athletes alike."

"Dave's mother would drive him from the Chicago suburbs to Milwaukee every single day while he did his homework in the car. That's the story of so many speed skaters. It's hard to find parents and kids who are willing to commit that time, but we're always trying and are up to the task."

The couple is always looking at public ice-skating sessions for kids who look like they could have that desire. The number of individuals chasing the medal podium is dwindling,

and the DASH program offers ways for them to try out the ice. They work with some hockey groups where kids come try speed skating on evenings when they aren't practicing.

Specialized skates are available to those who want to try speed skating, and races are set for them to get on the ice and try it. The students don't have to buy into U.S. speed skating unless they get to the point where they want to move up. The group wants to be proactive. The sport isn't cheap, but by eliminating a possible deterrent, it allows kids the opportunity to try. If their feet grow, they can get a larger size skate.

Skaters vary in age from those just learning to skate and race to a junior group that has made a bigger commitment to the sport. Dave works with the more advanced group.

Practice involves more than time on the ice, it's about physical literacy and learning to move their bodies.

"It's more encompassing than just giving them the experience of the sport Dave and I thoroughly loved, grew up in and are still embedded in. We hope we're getting kids moving, teaching them life lessons and giving them the experience of a good, wholesome, healthful sport," says Bonnie. "We want to touch kids' lives and put a smile on their faces. When you see them racing and how excited they get, that's priceless."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GERI MILLER

Who to watch in 2026

The 2026 Winter Olympics will be held in Milan-Cortina in northern Italy Feb. 6-22, and the U.S. has several athletes who could be medal contenders. The 2026 U.S. Olympic Speedskating Trials were held Jan. 2-5 in Milwaukee. Visit usspeedskating.org for a full team listing.

Keep an eye on Jordan Stoltz, the youngest world champion in the sport's history and the reigning World Cup champion. Watch for him in the 500-, 1,000- and 1,500-meter and mass start races.

Brittany Bowe is a two-time Olympic bronze medalist and will compete in the 1,500-meter and team pursuit races. Erin Jackson is the reigning 500-meter champion and the first Black woman to win an individual gold medal in Olympic history. She should be a gold contender in the 500. Casey

Dawson set his third national record in 5,000-meters on the way to his first World Cup in Calgary.

The U.S. men's team pursuit consisting of Dawson, Emery Lehman and Ethan Cepuran set a new world record at the Salt Lake City World Cup race. Both Lehman and Cepuran are Illinoisans, from Oak Park and Glen Ellyn, respectively. In addition to Lehman and Cepuran, Sarah Warren made her first Olympic team. She is from Chicago and will compete in the 500-meter race.

While not vying for a medal in 2026, Bonnie and Dave's daughter, Blair, is currently "sitting around sixth or seventh in the 500 and is working on her turns," explains Bonnie. "If her desire and everything is still there, she's looking at 2034 when the Olympics are in Salt Lake City, Utah." ☈



Jordan Stoltz



Brittany Bowe



Erin Jackson



Emery Lehman (front) and Ethan Cepuran



Rural sleep reset

Why sleep is getting harder –
and ways to fix it

By Miguel Rios

BEING WELL RESTED MATTERS, but across rural America, sleep is quietly becoming harder to come by. Shift work, long commutes, caregiving duties, economic pressures and nonstop screen time all chip away at rest — and the consequences ripple through families, workplaces and communities.

Sleep is a basic health need, not a luxury. Irregular schedules disrupt the circadian rhythm, and chronic sleep loss increases many health risks. However, it is important to understand that a sleep problem is not a personal failure. Change is possible.

Rural sleep under pressure

For Curtis Chlouber, a construction foreman at Cimarron Electric Cooperative in Oklahoma, routine is important for quality sleep, especially in his line of work where safety is crucial.

"When you're dragging the day after not getting good sleep, you miss little things," he says. "Every day is a little different, so you have to be ready to adapt and be alert even if it's something you've done a hundred times."

Chlouber wakes at 5:30 a.m. and is on the job by 7 a.m. Some weeks, his job means long drives to distant parts of the system before the real work even begins. After finishing his workday around 4:30 p.m., he heads straight to the gym, then home to help with dinner, baths, homework and bedtime for his three young children. Most nights, he's in bed by 9 or 10 p.m. But once a week, he's on call, which can disrupt his routine.

"The hardest thing is getting called in the middle of the night after you've been sleeping for a few hours," Chlouber says. "I take precautions and don't hesitate to pull over just to walk laps around my car and wake myself up."

Mikala Jordan is the sleep lab supervisor for Mercy Health. She says that kind of disruption is common in rural occupations, and it interrupts the body's natural sleep rhythm.

"The main issue with shift workers is they're not getting that natural sunlight at the normal hours of the day," she says. "As a shift worker, you might be jumping back and forth between schedules. Or if you're on your last shift of the week and you come home, and instead of going to sleep, you make yourself stay awake to spend time with family or do other things. But having a set schedule and sticking to it is super helpful to avoid negative long-term effects."

Add potentially long commutes, seasonal workloads, financial stress and caregiving responsibilities, and quality sleep becomes even harder to protect.

Taryn Edwards is an executive assistant for Great Plains Sleep Specialist and a sleep lab supervisor for Oklahoma State University's sleep center. She says sleep disorders are often underdiagnosed in rural areas.

"People just don't realize that their symptoms are medical issues, or they might not have access to sleep specialists," she says.

Sleep apnea affects nearly 30 million Americans, and an estimated 80% of cases remain undiagnosed.

The cost of poor sleep

Experts warn that the cost of poor sleep is much greater than people may think. Over time, chronic sleep loss is linked to increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, depression, obesity and cognitive decline, according to the National Institutes of Health. Harvard Medical School research also found it raises the likelihood of workplace errors, leading to injuries and motor vehicle accidents.

Edwards says lack of sleep also affects people mentally and emotionally, even if they might not realize it's sleep-related.

"People might be more irritable, forgetful, they can't think straight or focus," she says. "Sleep isn't a luxury, it's a basic health need. When sleep disorders go untreated, they also affect someone's family, workplace or school and even other people on the road."

"Thankfully, sleep disorders are very treatable. They just rarely get better on their own, so the earlier people address them, the better the outcome."

CPAP machines are the gold standard for treating sleep apnea.



Sleep better, and use less energy

- **Lower the thermostat at night.** Temperatures at 68 degrees and lower support better sleep.
- **Use fans.** Ceiling or box fans improve air circulation and lower the need for air conditioning. In cooler months, remember to reverse ceiling fan direction to distribute warm air.
- **Dim the lights.** Dimming the lights after sunset supports natural sleep rhythms and uses less electricity. Warmer light bulbs are also better for supporting sleep.
- **Keep it dark.** A dark, cool bedroom is ideal for better sleep, and it often means less lights, appliances and systems running overnight.
- **Block disruptions out.** Blackout curtains or thick shades keep outdoor light out and help regulate room temperature, keeping bedrooms darker, cooler and more comfortable.

A sleep reset

Jordan emphasizes that there are simple ways to improve your sleep without expensive or unrealistic means. Small, practical changes can make a measurable difference.

- **Protect your schedule.** One of the biggest things to improve sleep quality is having a schedule that you're sticking to as much as possible. Consistency matters more than perfection, so going to bed and waking up at roughly the same time helps reset the body's internal clock. If you get an unexpected wake-up call, Jordan recommends going back to the normal routine as soon as possible.
- **Mind your lighting.** Bright, cool-toned bulbs and screens in the evening signal the brain to stay alert, so avoid them if possible. Ideally, that means no TV or phone time 30-60 minutes before bed.
- **Create a sleep sanctuary.** To improve sleep, your room should be dark and cool with a comfortable mattress and pillow. Jordan also recommends some sort of white noise and only using your bedroom to sleep. That means you're not watching TV while you're in your bed.

"Your circadian rhythm takes a while to reset. If you're consistent with the changes, I'd say give it about a week before you might start to notice improvements," Jordan says. "If you're still experiencing a lot of sleep issues after making consistent changes, I would definitely seek additional help to make sure there's not any underlying issues."

When and how to ask for help

Sometimes, sleep problems aren't just about habits. Experts warn that underlying conditions could include things like narcolepsy and restless leg syndrome. However, one of the most prevalent sleep disorders is sleep apnea. According to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, sleep apnea affects nearly 30 million Americans, and an estimated 80% of cases remain undiagnosed.

"Sleep apnea is incredibly common, especially among men," Jordan says. "And many people put off testing because they don't want to deal with a CPAP machine, which is the gold standard for treatment."

But not addressing a potential sleep disorder could lead to worse health outcomes down the road, and today, testing options are more accessible than ever. Patients can complete a home sleep study, picking up a small device to wear overnight and returning it the next day. Follow-up care and monitoring are often available through telehealth.

"If something feels off, talk to your primary care provider," Jordan says. "Write symptoms down. Bring a partner who's noticed changes. Your doctor is there to help, not judge." ☺

GRAB YOUR PIECE OF AMERICA'S SILVER LEGACY



Actual size is
30.6 x 50.4 mm

FILL YOUR VAULT WITH MORGAN SILVER BARS

Not only are these hefty bars one full Troy ounce of real, .999 precious silver, they're also beautiful, featuring the crisp image of a Morgan Silver Dollar struck onto the surface. That collectible image adds interest and makes these Silver Bars even more desirable. Minted in the U.S.A. from shimmering American silver, these one-ounce 99.9% fine silver bars are a great alternative to one-ounce silver coins or rounds. Plus, they offer great savings compared to other bullion options like one-ounce sovereign silver coins. Take advantage of our special offer for new customers only and save \$10.00 off our regular prices.

Morgan Silver Dollars Are Among the Most Iconic Coins in U.S. History

What makes them iconic? The Morgan Silver Dollar is the legendary coin that built the Wild West. It exemplifies the American spirit like few other coins, and was created using silver mined from the famous Comstock Lode in Nevada. In fact, when travelers approached the mountains around the boomtown of

Virginia City, Nevada in the 1850s, they were startled to see the hills shining in the sunlight like a mirror. A mirage caused by weary eyes? No, rather the effect came from tiny flecks of silver glinting in the sun.

A Special Way For You to Stock Up On Precious Silver
While no one can predict the future value of silver in an uncertain economy, many Americans are rushing to get their hands on as much silver as possible, putting it away for themselves and their loved ones. You'll enjoy owning these Silver Bars. They're tangible. They feel good when you hold them. You'll relish the design and thinking about all it represents. These Morgan Design One-Ounce Bars make appreciated gifts for birthdays, anniversaries and graduations, creating a legacy sure to be cherished for a lifetime.

Order More and SAVE

You can save \$10.00 off our regular price when you buy now. There is a limit of 25 Bars per customer, which means with this special offer, you can save up to \$250.



Hurry—Secure Yours Now

Call right now to secure your .999 fine silver Morgan Design One-Ounce Silver Bars. You'll be glad you did. One-Ounce Silver Morgan Design Bar \$97.95 ea.

Special offer - \$87.95 ea. +s/h

SAVE \$10 - \$250

**BUY MORE
SAVE MORE!**

Limit of 25 bars per customer

Free 1-oz Silver Bullet – .45 Caliber Pistol Round Replica with every order over \$599 (Over a \$100 value!)



FREE SHIPPING over \$99!

Limited time only. Product total over \$99 before taxes (if any). Standard domestic shipping only. Not valid on previous purchases.

SPECIAL CALL-IN ONLY OFFER

1-888-201-7144

Offer Code MSB387-38
Please mention this code when you call.

GOVMINT

GOVMINT • 1300 Corporate Center Curve, Dept. MSB387-38, Eagan, MN 55121

GOVMINT® is a brand of Asset Marketing Services, LLC (AMS). AMS is a retail distributor of coin and currency issues and is not affiliated with the U.S. government. The collectible coin market is unregulated, highly speculative and involves risk. Prices, facts, figures and populations deemed accurate as of the date of publication but may change significantly over time. All purchases are expressly conditioned upon your acceptance of our Terms and Conditions (www.amsi-corp.com/terms-conditions); to decline, return your purchase pursuant to our 30 day Return Policy (www.amsi-corp.com/product-return-policy). ©2025 Asset Marketing Services, LLC.

Crafted with care

A Main Street dream takes shape at Jovalou

By Mary Blye Kramer

LISA KONOPASEK, A REGULAR customer at Jovalou Cuisine and Cocktails, snaps open a napkin as a server places a steamy plate of Atlantic salmon on her table. As she takes her first bite, the expression on her face indicates that it's grilled to perfection, lightly seasoned with a cedar and citrus blend.

A friend sitting across from Lisa digs into her wings, one of the most popular dishes at the restaurant. She's able to choose between 15 sauces and nine dressings, and Jenny, their server, helps her choose a perfect pairing.

Weekends generally find Jovalou, a trendy diner in Fairfield, busy. One of its many draws is the weekend special, the reason why customers Ralph and Melissa Barbre eat at the bistro nearly every Friday night it's open.

"I can try a lot of different dishes," says Ralph. "I don't have to worry about looking through the menu and choosing. I love everything they create."

Niki Casper, co-owner of Jovalou, started working in diners in Mill Shoals, where she grew up. At a very young age, she found herself washing dishes, waiting tables and doing



A beef burger with lettuce, tomato, pepper jack cheese, bacon, onion rings and a drizzle of house made mango habanero BBQ sauce was a past Burger of the Month option.



whatever was needed. In her late 20s, she moved to Texas to help a friend open his own restaurant, and it was there that she began to see how the restaurant business worked and how, were she ever to open her own business, she wanted to run one.

Then, one day after returning to Illinois, Niki noticed a vacant suite on Main Street in Fairfield. Years earlier, she'd reflected that if she ever opened her own business, she would love to have a diner in that precise location.

She loved the porthole-shaped window set inside the recessed entryway of the old A-frame. "It had both a classy and a nostalgic look," Niki says. Soon after, she signed a lease, and her family pitched in to help fix the place up.

Her dad had replicas made of some beautiful tables that Niki had found online, while her mom, whom Niki describes as "the queen of small touches," arranged decor that, as Niki says, defined various spaces inside the restaurant. Everything came together to what can be described as atmospheric, unique, inviting and peaceful.

In choosing the name of the restaurant, Niki took the names of her two daughters (Livi Lou, as they call her, and Addison Jo), as well as her niece Ava, and came up with Jovalou. "It sounded French," says Niki, "and I love French cuisine, so it was perfect."

Customers rave over just about everything at Jovalou. The Burger of the Month is a huge favorite. Niki and her husband Michael have come up with nearly 50 varieties for it. The alfredo sauce

is a standout. Red snapper with creole sauce, buffalo chicken, beef and noodles, pot roast — the list of customer favorites goes on and on.

"Even their vegetables are amazing," says Ralph. "Niki and Michael put so much effort into everything, and their sauces and seasonings are the best."

Niki agrees that she and Michael sink a lot of thought and time into crafting each menu item. "I can smell how dishes and sauces blend together," she says. "I'm always adding depth and layers, and looking for the perfect blend of sweet, acidity and heat."

Cocktails are also a big draw at Jovalou, and Niki and Michael are careful to use fresh ingredients, just as they do with their menu items. Along with their staff of seven, the couple arrange occasional brainstorming sessions to come up with new cocktails, which can also be enjoyed without alcohol.

Favorites include the Strawberry Basil Pineapple Smash, various flavors of mojitos, and the Pineapple Upside Down Martini. Lavender in season, fragrant basil, mint, rosemary and freshly squeezed lemon make their drinks stand out.

While the hours can be grueling, Niki and Michael own two more restaurants and are at work at one of them pretty much every day, all day. Niki says there's nothing like watching her customers laughing and enjoying a family meal that she and her team worked so hard to make.

"It's magical to know you've provided an atmosphere and food and laughter inside a place that you've created," she says. ☀

Left: Summer Breeze — a blend of strawberry, vanilla, pineapple and vodka.

Right: Wings with fries

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOVALOU

LET'S EAT!

Jovalou Cuisine & Cocktails

112 E. Main St., Fairfield

618-599-8704

Facebook.com/jovalou112

Hours

Wed-Thurs: 11 a.m.-8 p.m.

Fri-Sat: 11 a.m.-9 p.m.



Let's party

WHETHER IT'S A SUPER Bowl gathering, a Winter Olympics watch party or just a fun game night, every party needs snacks. But really, who needs an excuse for a good snack? So, whether you want to take down a bowl of salsa yourself or share that bag of pretzels in your pantry with friends and family, here are some crowd-pleasing snacks that will set the tone, no matter the gathering. ☺

WE NEED RECIPES!

Pastries

Sugar-free

Quick and easy dinners

New favorites

Please email recipe submissions or questions to 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.



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



Party Mix

Submitted by Jalayne Luckett, SouthEastern Illinois Electric Cooperative
Servings: 16-24

11 ounces pretzels	1 cup sugar	2 tablespoons vanilla extract
10-1/2 ounces miniature peanut butter-filled crackers	1/2 cup butter	1 teaspoon baking soda
1 cup dry roasted peanuts	1/2 cup light corn syrup	1 10-ounce package M&M's candies

Preheat oven to 250 F. In a large bowl, combine pretzels, crackers and peanuts. In a large saucepan, combine sugar, butter and corn syrup. Bring to a boil over medium heat. Boil for 5 minutes. Remove from heat, stir in vanilla and baking soda. The mixture will foam. Pour over pretzel mixture and stir until coated. Spread onto a greased or parchment paper-lined rimmed baking sheet. Bake for 45 minutes. Break apart and toss with M&M's while still warm. Cool completely and store in an airtight container.

Real Vegetable Dip

Submitted by Joan Teal, Southern Illinois Electric Cooperative
Servings: 8-10

8 ounces mayonnaise	2 tablespoons green bell pepper, finely chopped	2 tablespoons onion, finely chopped
8 ounces sour cream	2 tablespoons cucumber, finely chopped	2 tablespoons radish, finely chopped
1 teaspoon salt	2 tablespoons carrot, finely chopped	1 dash powdered garlic
1 teaspoon sugar		

In a medium-sized bowl, stir the first four items into a creamy mixture. Stir in the finely chopped vegetables and garlic. Refrigerate for a few hours to allow flavors to blend. Serve with fresh vegetables or potato chips.



Piglets in an Everything Bagel Blanket

Makes: 24

1 8-ounce can crescent
roll dough
24 smoked cocktail sausages

1 egg
2 tablespoons everything bagel
seasoning

Preheat oven to 375 F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Unroll can of dough and separate the perforated triangles. Cut each triangle into three strips, cutting from tip to base. There should be 24 narrow triangles in total. Roll the dough around the sausages starting with the widest end. Place rolled sausages on the prepared sheet with the seam facing down. Leave about 2 inches between each. In a small bowl, beat the egg and brush the tops of the rolls with an egg wash. Sprinkle everything bagel seasoning on the tops of each. Bake for 10-12 minutes, or until crescent rolls are light brown. Serve warm with favorite dipping sauces, such as ketchup, mustard or barbecue sauce.

Spicy Pretzels

Submitted by Kathy Carroll, Corn Belt Energy Corporation

Servings: 6-8

1 bag mini pretzel twists	1 tablespoon garlic with parsley seasoning
3/4 cup canola oil	2 tablespoons lemon pepper seasoning
3 tablespoons ranch dressing dry mix	1 tablespoon cayenne pepper

Cut small corner off bottom of pretzel bag. Shake to remove as much loose salt and crumbs from the bag as possible. Transfer pretzels to resealable gallon-sized bag. Mix oil, dry ranch mix, garlic with parsley, lemon pepper and cayenne in small bowl. Adjust cayenne depending on personal preference. Stir well until there are no lumps. Let stand for 10 minutes for flavors to blend. Stir again and pour oil mixture into bag with pretzels. Seal bag and massage pretzels to distribute mixture and coat pretzels evenly. Flip and massage pretzels every 15 minutes for the next 2 hours.

Note: While ready to serve immediately, the flavor is better next day. Store in airtight container. Do not refrigerate or bake the pretzels.



Sweet Heat Salsa

Submitted by Kai Herbert, Rural Electric Convenience Cooperative
Servings: 6-8

1 16-ounce can diced tomatoes, do not drain	3 tablespoons dried parsley
1/4 red onion	Pickled jalapenos, to taste
2 cloves garlic	2 tablespoons frozen pineapple juice concentrate
1 pinch salt	

Place tomatoes, onion, garlic, salt and parsley in blender or food processor and blend until smooth. Add jalapenos and blend. Taste to make sure it has enough heat. Add the juice concentrate and blend. Taste to make sure it's sweet enough. Pour into bowl and serve with tortilla chips.



Be the sharpest tool in the shed

Prepare your saws for tree pruning season (and other tips)

"TODAY IS THE DAY!" I say, as I inspect my loppers, hand pruner and pruning saw. For tree care professionals and many homeowners,



winter is pruning season for deciduous trees and shrubs, with much of it occurring in February and March before leaves emerge.

There are many advantages to pruning in the winter. My favorite reason? Leaves are heavy. A large branch devoid of leaves is easier on the back. The more important reasons for pruning in the winter involve plant health.

Strategic cuts

A tree naked of leaves reveals the underlying branching structure. Before pruning, plan out the cuts. While woody plants tolerate pruning, it can be overdone.



Chris Enroth is a horticulture educator with the University of Illinois Extension, serving Henderson, Knox, McDonough and Warren counties. This column also appears in the "Good Growing" blog at go.illinois.edu/GoodGrowing.

The goal is to make as few cuts as possible and to keep wounds as small as possible. But, there is a balance to that. A tree will struggle to seal off one large wound as opposed to multiple smaller wounds.

In a perfect world, we would be pruning our newly planted shade trees the second year after they get planted and each year after. This proactive pruning would address small problems before they become big problems hanging over your garage.

Of course, we rarely get to play a role in the structural pruning of our young trees. Issues develop over time and are passed from one homeowner to the next.

Strategically planning your cuts can help avoid removing more than 25% of the living canopy at one time. Deadwood does not count.

Stored energy

Trees and shrubs dormant in the winter have stored energy as they await spring growth. Spring sees a surge in vegetative growth in most woody plants, which facilitates sealing where we made our pruning cuts earlier in the winter.

Certain species, like maples, also have a lot of stored sap. In the past, many folks, including Illinois Extension professionals, avoided pruning maples in the late winter, as it would often trigger sap to flow out of the wounds like a fountain.

After studying this effect, tree experts determined that pruning maples in the winter and triggering sap flow did not affect the health of the plant. So, prune away on your maples this month.

Pests and diseases

Let's face it, pruning creates wounds on a living thing. There are certain insects and diseases that can use these wounds to infect a tree.

Fortunately, there are few active pests in the winter, so open wounds have little to attract.

However, our own pruning tools can be a source of a problem. Some diseases, such as bacterial fire blight, can spread from one infected branch to an entire tree canopy by a contaminated saw.

In the winter, this disease is dormant and less likely to be spread to open wounds. Sanitize pruning tools between cuts using rubbing alcohol, especially on trees with suspected disease.

When to call an arborist

I personally do not do tree work in my large shade trees. One bad fall and a lucky landing made me realize it is dangerous work. Now, when canopy work is needed, I call the pros. Here are tips for when you need to call a certified arborist:

- If your feet need to leave the ground to make a cut.
- If the tree is near a structure or power lines.
- To remove limbs larger than 6 inches in diameter.
- If there are major structural issues, decay or root problems.
- To address storm-damaged trees.

To find local certified arborists, check out TreesAreGood.org and search by zip code.

With pruners on my belt and loppers in my hand, I head outside, only to be met by a howling February wind that quickly subdues my motivation. After retreating to the warmth of my home, I decide, like the proverbial groundhog, that today is not the day for pruning. Let's give it another try after a few more weeks of winter.

For more gardening tips, go to extension.illinois.edu.



HODGSON
LUMBER & LAND IMPROVEMENT

Buyers of Standing Timber and Cut Logs

Todd Cole Gary
217-473-1009 217-801-3088 217-801-7975

21046 CR 800 N. • Kilbourne, IL 62655

Illinois Country Living

CONNECT WITH US 
VISIT OUR WEBSITE [ICL.COOP](http://icl.coop)

To advertise in
Illinois Country Living
email info@icl.coop



ENERGIZED
— GRAPHICS —

PROMOTIONAL
MATERIALS NOW AVAILABLE



YOUR SOURCE FOR AFFORDABLE
PRINT AND WEB DESIGN.

energizedgraphics.com

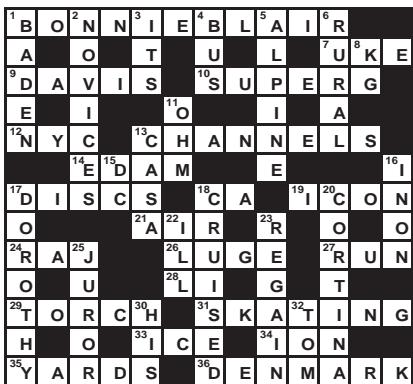


RIVER CRUISE VACATIONS
Experience the beauty and history of
Canada's rivers. 4, 5, 6, 7 nights of
small ship river cruising with departures
from Kingston, Ottawa, and Quebec City.
Call to request our free travel brochure.
1-800-267-7868
www.StLawrenceCruiseLines.com

Insulation. 4x8 sheets, foil-backed foam. All factory seconds. www.nichols5.com. Contact Ken Nichols, 800-424-1256.



DIMENSION BUILDINGS
Best Buildings at the Best Price
For a Complete 30x50 Deluxe Pole Barn Package **only \$3,650**
not building pictured
CALL (618) 997-9568
www.dimensionbldgs.com
All Sizes Available Marion, IL



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

TRIVIA ANSWERS:
1) B. NEW PHILADELPHIA; 2) A. CAROL MOSELEY BRAUN; 3) B. GWENDOLYN BROOKS; 4) B. JACKIE JOYNER-KERSEE



WE LOVE OUR READERS.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Life of pets

1. JEFF KARLIN

Corn Belt Energy Corporation
Mr. Buddy napping in the sunshine

2. ELIZABETH BREMER

Southern Illinois Electric Cooperative
Ellie celebrating her birthday

3. CASEY KLEIN

JCE Co-op
Rosie in the window

4. MIKE LADD

SouthEastern Illinois Electric Cooperative
Little Bit resting on top of Doc

5. ELDON CANNON

Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative
Newly adopted puppy

6. SANDY COOPER

Coles-Moultrie Electric Cooperative
Bernie enjoying the outdoors

UPCOMING THEMES

April – Pop of color

May – Flora and fauna

SUBMIT A PHOTO

Online: icl.coop/snapshots

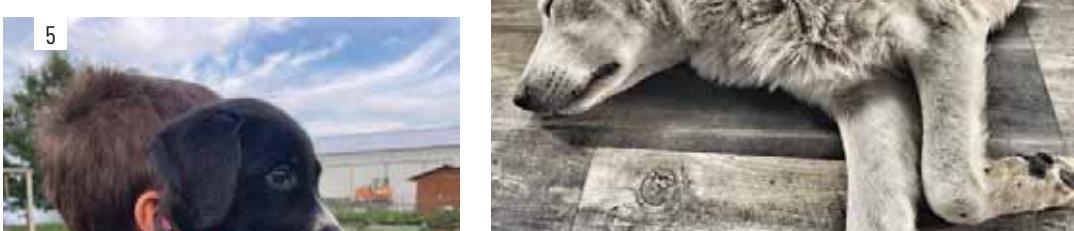
Email: cbradford@aiec.coop

Rules: Include high-quality digital files. When submitting, include details about the photo, artist's name and the co-op name.

Deadlines: Submissions are due 30 days before the publication month.

Terms of use: By submitting any photos to Snapshots, whether online or by email, you agree to grant Illinois Country Living and icl.coop royalty-free, perpetual and nonexclusive rights to use, display, edit, publish or archive it in whole or in part online or in print. You further warrant that you have all legal, moral and other rights that may be necessary to grant the license specified above.

Visit icl.coop/snapshots for full terms and conditions.





Illinois Seasons

SnapShots Photography Contest

From the cityscape of Chicago to the forests of southern Illinois, the Land of Lincoln is beautiful in every season.

Illinois Country Living is enhancing its **SnapShots** section and is accepting entries for its 2026 Photography Contest, featuring four categories:

Winter • Spring • Summer • Fall

WHAT YOU COULD WIN:

- ⌚ Cash prizes
- ⌚ Publication in the December 2026 issue of Illinois Country Living
- ⌚ Inclusion in the 2027 SnapShots Calendar
- ⌚ Statewide exposure for your photography

CONTEST HIGHLIGHTS:

- ⌚ One Grand Champion
- ⌚ 1st, 2nd and 3rd place winners in each category
- ⌚ Runners-up will be published in the SnapShots section in 2027

KEY DETAILS:

- ⌚ Photos must be taken in Illinois
- ⌚ Open only to Illinois electric co-op members
- ⌚ Deadline: Aug. 1, 2026
- ⌚ Limit: Three submissions per category
- ⌚ Photos must be high-res digital files



Don't miss your chance to have your work seen across Illinois – and celebrated all year long.

Enter today. Capture the seasons.



Go to page 10 for more information or submit entries at icl.coop/snapshots.

Saving is believing.



Think you can't afford a geothermal heat pump?

After a closer look, you may be surprised at its overall affordability.

Tax rebates can quickly bring down the initial costs of purchase and installation. And a geothermal heat pump is much cheaper to run than the most efficient furnaces and air conditioners. In fact, your energy bills can be cut by as much as 70%. As a result, many geothermal homeowners see a return on investment of 10-20% over the life of their system. When you crunch the numbers, you'll see WaterFurnace is the money-saving choice. To learn more, contact your local WaterFurnace dealer today.

Geothermal is the only renewable that provides reliable operation 24 hours a day,

7 days a week, 365 days a year.



YOUR LOCAL WATERFURNACE DEALERS

Bloomington/Normal
Design Air
(217) 423-4713

Hinrichsen Htg & A/C
(309) 965-2604

Popejoy Plb, Htg,
Elct & Geo
(815) 692-4471

Carbondale
D&C Htg & Clg
(618) 997-6577

Champaign/Urbana
Hoveln Htg & Clg
(217) 643-2125

Damiansville
Toennies Service Co.
(618) 248-5130

Decatur
Design Air
(217) 423-4713

Fairbury
Popejoy Pbg,
Htg & Elct.
(815) 692-4471

Gifford
Duden & Silver
(217) 568-7954

Goodfield
Hinrichsen Htg & A/C
(309) 965-2604

Harrisburg
D&C Htg & Clg
(618) 997-6577

Macomb
Arnold Bros. Htg & Clg
(309) 833-2852

Marion
D & C Htg & Clg
(618) 997-6577

Parker Htg & Clg
(618) 357-8951

Paxton/Gibson City
Houston Plmb,
Htg & A/C
(217) 379-2329

Springfield/Virden
Snell Pbg & Htg
(217) 965-3911



visit us at waterfurnace.com

The Reliable Renewable is a trademark of WaterFurnace International, Inc.
©2025 WaterFurnace International, Inc.