

# Illinois Country Living

## CROWNING MOMENTS

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Electric Cooperatives

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FEATURE  
A revival  
happening NOW

PRAIRIE TABLE  
Perfect in every bite

FINEST COOKING  
Ingredients  
for summer

 CO-OP  
NEWS

# ~~TOO GOOD TO BE~~ TRUE



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# Illinois Country Living

JUNE 2026  
VOLUME 84, NO. 2



## 20 Crowning moments

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

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Illinois' 2025 Youth Tour group in Washington, D.C.

## Making connections

YLC reflects on his time representing Illinois

**OVER THE PAST YEAR,** I have had the most incredible opportunity to serve as Illinois' representative on the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's (NRECA) Youth Leadership Council (YLC). This experience completely changed my life and the trajectory of my future.

When I was selected to attend Youth Day in Springfield, I had no idea what I was signing up for. I spent the day going to the Illinois State Capitol, visiting the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, and hearing from numerous speakers. One of those speakers was the YLC from two years prior, Paris Van Dyke. I was in awe of her ability to speak in front of a room of that size. What I did not know then was that I would be doing the same a year later.

After our interviews on Youth Day, I got the news that I was chosen to attend Youth Tour. This seven-day trip to Washington, D.C., was one of the most amazing experiences I have ever had. On our first night in D.C., I was elected by my peers to be Illinois' YLC. Throughout the rest of the week, we were busy visiting different memorials and historical sites. While the architecture and history were extraordinary to see,

something stood out above all of that — the connections I made.

When I delivered that speech to be elected as YLC, I gave it to a room full of strangers. By the end of the week, those strangers had become lifelong friends. This theme continued throughout my year as YLC.

I flew back to D.C. in July to meet other YLC representatives for a week of speakers and leadership development. This gave me the chance to network and realize the importance of my role as YLC. Upon my return, I delivered a speech at the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives' annual meeting. The skills I learned in D.C. helped me to do this with confidence and clarity.

For my service project in October, I organized a blood drive through the Red Cross. The experience showed me the power that my cooperative, Adams Telephone Co-Operative, has to bring together an event like this. I also went to Nashville, Tenn., to attend PowerXchange, NRECA's annual meeting, which allowed me to connect with cooperative leaders from across the country.

Through YLC, I have grown so much. However, I learned something much more important. I learned the importance of electric cooperatives. They do more than just turn the lights on — they invest in their communities and young people like me. I would not be where I am today without Adams Telephone Co-Operative, the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives, NRECA, and all the mentors and friends I made along the journey. 💡



**Micah Anderson**, a recent graduate of Brown County High School, will attend John Wood Community College and later Lincoln Land Community College for the cardiovascular sonography program. He represented Adams Telephone Co-Operative during the 2025 Youth Tour and was the 2025-26 Youth Leadership Council representative for Illinois.



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# POWER YOU CAN COUNT ON



## BECAUSE YOU ARE A MEMBER

As a member of your electric cooperative, you're more than a customer – you're an owner. That means reliable service, local decision-making and rates designed with your best interest in mind. Your membership powers investments in our community, supports local jobs and ensures your voice is heard.

**That's the value of membership. That's the cooperative difference.**



## JUNE CHECKLIST

Right-of-Way Professionals Week is June 8-14.



Call the professionals for tree trimming.

If your tree limbs are in contact with power lines, contact your co-op to cut them back. Never do it yourself.

Slow down and move over.



Crews are often working roadside. Be aware of temporary traffic changes, flaggers and workers as you make your commute so everyone gets home safely.



Plant trees in the right place.

Don't plant trees near

power lines as they will grow into big problems.

Thank right-of-way crews.



They work year-round to manage vegetation and play a critical role in preventing power outages.



**Top:** Cooperative leaders gather in front of the State Capitol Building before meeting with their elected officials during Lobby Day. **Bottom row, left to right:** State Senator Jil Tracy, State Representative Dave Severin and State Representative Adam Niemerg meet with co-op leaders to discuss co-op issues and legislation.

## Co-op voices in Springfield and D.C.

Electric cooperative leaders, employees and advocates from across the state gathered April 14 at the Illinois State Capitol for Lobby Day, hosted by the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives (AIEC). April 26-29, co-op leaders gathered in Washington, D.C., for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's (NRECA) Legislative Conference to address Congress.

"These annual events provide an opportunity for cooperative representatives to meet with elected officials to discuss key energy issues affecting rural Illinois," said Nick Reitz, vice president of government relations at the AIEC.

More than 60 leaders from 25 entities representing Illinois electric co-ops lobbied for rural Illinois during Lobby Day in Springfield. Participants went to the Capitol to thank lawmakers for their engagement during last year's energy omnibus bill discussions, emphasizing

that their leadership helped ensure electric co-op members had a voice in shaping policy.

During meetings with legislators, co-op representatives outlined several priority issues, including the opposition of House Bill 3762, which would impose additional costs and operational constraints, and the support of House Bill 5195, which would create the Illinois Future of Energy Choice and Economic Impact Commission to bring together industry stakeholders and state agencies to address emerging energy challenges.

Reliability concerns were also a central focus of Lobby Day, as cooperative leaders warned about the premature retirement of always-available baseload generation resources and the risk it poses to grid stability.

"Throughout the day, cooperative representatives reinforced their commitment to the member-owners they serve, urging policymakers to consider the real-world

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

"Co-op voices" continued from page 7



Clockwise starting from top: Congresswoman Mary Miller, Senators Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth, and Congressman Darin LaHood meet with Illinois co-op leaders to discuss current key legislation and issues.

## ILLINOIS TRIVIA CHALLENGE



It's time to test your knowledge with a new Illinois Trivia Challenge! This month, we're featuring Illinois record holders.

- Which Chicago skyscraper was once the tallest building in the world?
  - Willis Tower/Sears Tower
  - Trump International Hotel and Tower
  - 875 North Michigan Avenue/ John Hancock Center
- Which Illinois city is the record-holder for the hottest temperature ever recorded in the state at 117 degrees Fahrenheit on July 14, 1954?
  - Cairo
  - Quincy
  - East St. Louis
- What native Illinois fish is the largest in the state, reaching more than 8 feet in length and more than 300 pounds?
  - Blue Catfish
  - Flathead Catfish
  - Alligator Gar
- Known as the "Giant of Illinois" and standing at 8 feet, 11 inches, what is the name of the Guinness World Record-holder of the World's Tallest Man?
  - Robert Wadlow
  - Abraham Lincoln
  - Dick Butkus

Answers are on page 33.

impacts of legislation on reliability and affordability," Reitz added.

The Legislative Conference in D.C. focused on the top federal issues affecting co-ops and provided strategies for how to engage effectively with members of Congress and agency officials. Nearly 40 Illinois co-op leaders were present for the national event.

"There's no more effective advocacy than a co-op leader who is also a constituent coming to D.C. to talk to his or her members of Congress about what's most important to them," said Hill Thomas, NRECA's vice president of legislative affairs.

The issue of reliability is becoming increasingly urgent, with the North American Electric Reliability Corp. warning that the U.S. grid reliability outlook is worsening amid projections of more power plant retirements and surging demand from data centers and other large loads in the next decade. In addition, other primary topics included the following:

- Pass FEMA reform. The bipartisan Fixing Emergency Management for Americans (FEMA) Act would

streamline the agency and dramatically speed up delivery of crucial disaster relief funds to electric cooperatives devastated by natural disasters.

- Pass permitting reform legislation. This would help protect affordable power nationwide by reducing delays for co-ops seeking federal approval to make crucial improvements to their systems.
- Increase funding for the Rural Utilities Service Electric Loan Program. This essential program helps electric cooperatives pay for construction, improvement and modernization of their systems. Co-ops are asking Congress to continue to boost funding and urging RUS to raise its loan cap to help meet demand for the program.

The Illinois delegation met with Senators Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth and U.S. Representatives Mike Bost, Nikki Budzinski, Mary Miller and Darin LaHood, and the staff of Representative Eric Sorensen to discuss these issues. 🗨️

AIEC, NRECA



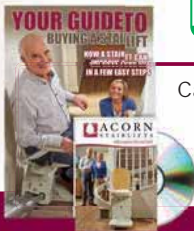
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## Where is it?

The winners of the April hidden object contest were Dean Boan of Egyptian Electric Cooperative Association and Martha Rients of Corn Belt Energy Corporation. Congratulations! Your ICL campfire mugs have been sent.

The camera hidden in the May 2026 issue was on page 32 in the GardenWise section. 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. To celebrate National Dairy Month in June, be on the lookout for a carton of milk. The symbol is pictured above. It can vary in size and will not be hidden on this page, a lettered page or in an ad.

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

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



## Plan for the future of housing in your community

When communities work to improve residents' quality of life, they often focus on schools, jobs, parks or health. But the common foundation beneath each of these concerns is housing.

The location, affordability and overall quality of housing in your community determines access to strong schools, quality healthcare and steady employment. Housing influences how far you travel to work, how you save for retirement, and what kinds of opportunities are available to your family.

Housing matters, and any plans for the future of Illinois should reflect the different housing needs and opportunities that exist across our state, from dense urban neighborhoods, to growing suburban communities, to the smaller towns and rural areas that anchor our economy.

The Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA) is setting out to do this with the Illinois Housing Blueprint, a statewide planning effort designed to elevate the voices of residents, businesses and local governments as they inform policy and investment decisions in the years ahead.

Through a combination of statewide surveys and community listening sessions, this initiative invites individuals and organizations to share their experiences, challenges and ideas related to housing in their communities. Whether it is the availability of affordable rental housing, workforce housing needs, opportunities for older residents to age in place, or related issues, the Blueprint hopes to capture your thoughts on what is working, and what is needed.

For Illinois residents, this effort is a meaningful opportunity to influence decisions that affect their daily lives. By participating, they can help ensure that future housing investments reflect real needs and local preferences, from affordability and accessibility to location and amenities.

Businesses are also encouraged to participate in this process. A strong local housing stock supports workforce recruitment and retention, and employers can provide valuable insight into how housing availability impacts their operations and the communities where they invest.

Municipalities and local leaders play a critical role as well, as the Blueprint offers a platform to highlight regional priorities, infrastructure needs and development opportunities. By contributing local knowledge and data, communities can help align state resources with on-the-ground realities.

The Illinois Housing Blueprint is more than a planning exercise. It is a collaborative roadmap for the future. Take the survey today to share your thoughts or find a public listening session near you at [ILHousingBlueprint.org](http://ILHousingBlueprint.org). 📍

### Illinois Housing Development Authority



## Take the pledge, become a co-op voter

Electric cooperatives have been powering America for generations: keeping the lights on, supporting local economies and putting their communities first. Your co-op is here for you every single day.

This election season, it's time to show lawmakers that rural voters care about protecting the energy that powers our way of life. When you vote with co-op interests in mind, you're voting for safe, affordable and reliable power. You're voting for your community.

Elections shape energy policy. The decisions made by lawmakers — from your local officials to Congress — directly impact your co-op. That's why we're encouraging co-op members to vote with these values in mind.

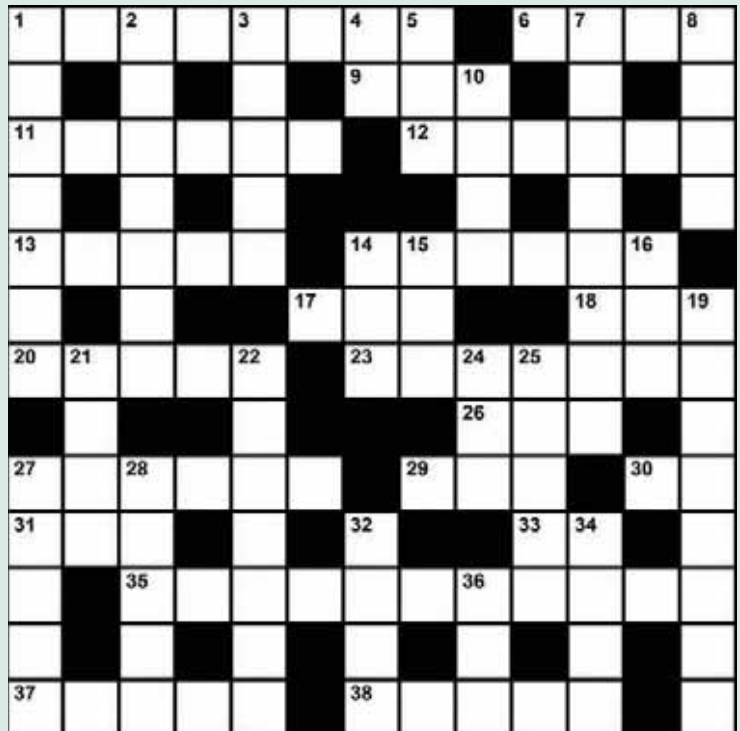
When rural voters show up and vote for co-op members' interests, we send a powerful message to decision makers. By taking this pledge, you're joining a growing network of voters committed to protecting the energy that powers our communities. Together, we're showing lawmakers that co-op issues deserve a seat at the table.

Ready to be a co-op voter? Sign the pledge and commit to voting for candidates and policies that support your co-op. Together, we can work toward smart energy policies that keep the lights on. Go to [vote.coop/voterpledge](http://vote.coop/voterpledge) to help support America's electric cooperatives. 📍

### Voices for Cooperative Power

**Across**

- 1 Illinois Brewers Festival location, 2 words
- 6 Blown away
- 9 Employment position
- 11 Acted as MC for
- 12 Enjoy the water slides at Six Flags Hurricane Harbor in \_\_\_\_\_
- 13 Musical tones
- 14 The Shawnee Shuttle transports you on a professional wine trail tour in the area of this Illinois village
- 17 Ornamental pond fish
- 18 Brewed drink
- 20 Tall tales
- 23 You might need one for a picnic
- 26 Towing org.
- 27 Site of the Ellwood House Museum
- 29 Comedienne Margaret
- 30 “\_\_\_\_, myself and I” Beyonce
- 31 Recommended daily intake figure, abbr.
- 33 Twin cities state, abbr.
- 35 City where President Lincoln’s historic home sits
- 37 Chicago’s major airport
- 38 Illinois town that boasts Riverfront Park
- 7 Village north of Chicago holding an eclectic music festival in June
- 8 Forest grazing animal
- 10 Daffodil’s beginning
- 14 Corn on the \_\_\_\_
- 15 Spa liquid
- 16 Name before married
- 19 Was present at
- 21 Passed with flying colors
- 22 Spend extravagantly
- 24 Exclamation of satisfaction
- 25 Supermodel Campbell
- 27 Harry Potter’s enemy, \_\_\_\_ Malfoy
- 28 Buckwheat dish
- 32 Frozen princess voiced by Kristen Bell
- 34 Bright glowing sign
- 36 In good physical shape



*Solution on page 33.*

**Down**

- 1 The thrilling \_\_\_\_\_ County fairgrounds in Woodstock
- 2 Tourist
- 3 Fishing line holders
- 4 Breakfast drink, briefly
- 5 Festive drink, egg \_\_\_\_\_

**VCP** **Voices for Cooperative Power**

**PROTECT AFFORDABLE ENERGY**

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## LET'S GO!

### June 18–July 4 Southern Illinois Music Festival

CARBONDALE  
Commemorates  
"America 250" with  
three centuries of  
American composers

### June 27–28 35th Annual Decatur Train Fair

DECATUR

Train enthusiasts gather  
for a weekend of fun

### July 5

#### Gym Bob's Jamboree

BIBLE GROVE  
Monthly Opry-style  
live music show  
featuring songs from  
the '50s and '60s

### July 14

#### Hooves and Honey

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## Great Galena Balloon Race

JUNE  
19–21

The Great Galena Balloon Race returns for a weekend of colorful hot air balloon launches, live music, family activities and classic cars — all while supporting Breakthrough T1D and Camp Hertko Hollow. Evening festivities Friday and Saturday begin at 5 p.m. with food vendors and live entertainment, followed by balloon launches around 6 p.m. and the Night Glow Extravaganza at 8:30 p.m. Sunrise "Crack of Dawn" balloon launches are also planned for Saturday and Sunday mornings at 5 a.m.

June 19–20, 2026: 5–10 p.m., June 20–21: 5 a.m. for Crack of Dawn Balloon Launch

- Eagle Ridge Resort, 444 Eagle Ridge Drive, Galena  
Admission: \$5  
[greatgalenaballoonrace.com](http://greatgalenaballoonrace.com)

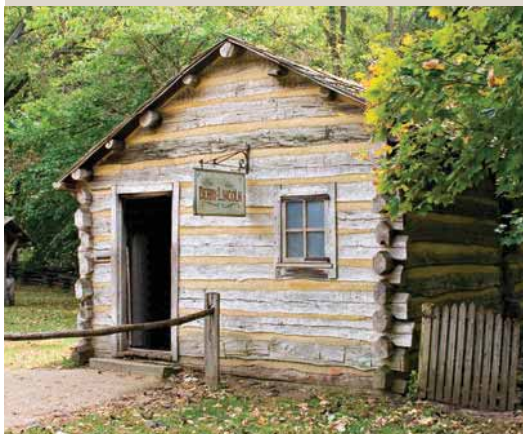
## Big Muddy Monster Festival

JUNE  
20

Celebrating the local legend, the Big Muddy Monster Festival returns to historic downtown Murphysboro. The festival features an open-air cryptid market along 13th Street, Food Truck Row and downtown restaurants offering themed menu items. Visitors can also enjoy speakers and storytelling sessions at the historic Liberty Theater, plus a 13th Street Shop Hop showcasing local businesses joining in the festivities. Rooted in the region's famous monster sightings, the event offers a full day of family-friendly fun.

June 20, 2026: 10 a.m.–4 p.m.

- Downtown Murphysboro, 13th and Walnut streets, Murphysboro  
[bigmuddymonsterfestival.com](http://bigmuddymonsterfestival.com)



## Independence Day Celebration at Lincoln's New Salem

JULY  
2–4

Spend the Fourth of July at Lincoln's New Salem, a historic site reconstructed where Abraham Lincoln once lived and now acting as a living museum. There will be frontier-era demonstrations presented by historical reenactors throughout the event, along with readings of the Declaration of Independence.

July 2–4, 2026: 10 a.m.–4 p.m.

- Lincoln's New Salem, 15588 History Lane, Petersburg  
Admission: free, but donations appreciated  
[visitspringfieldillinois.com/EventDetails/?id=38703](http://visitspringfieldillinois.com/EventDetails/?id=38703)

## Freedom Fest

JULY  
4

The village of Goreville will host a full day of activities to celebrate Independence Day. The day will be filled with activities, including a gospel show, a parade, a free concert, food vendors, local businesses and much more. Capping off the event is one of the largest fireworks displays in southern Illinois, starting at dusk.

July 4, 2026: 10 a.m. to dusk

- Goreville Village Park, 600 W. Main St., Goreville  
[villageofgoreville.gov/visit/freedom-fest](http://villageofgoreville.gov/visit/freedom-fest)

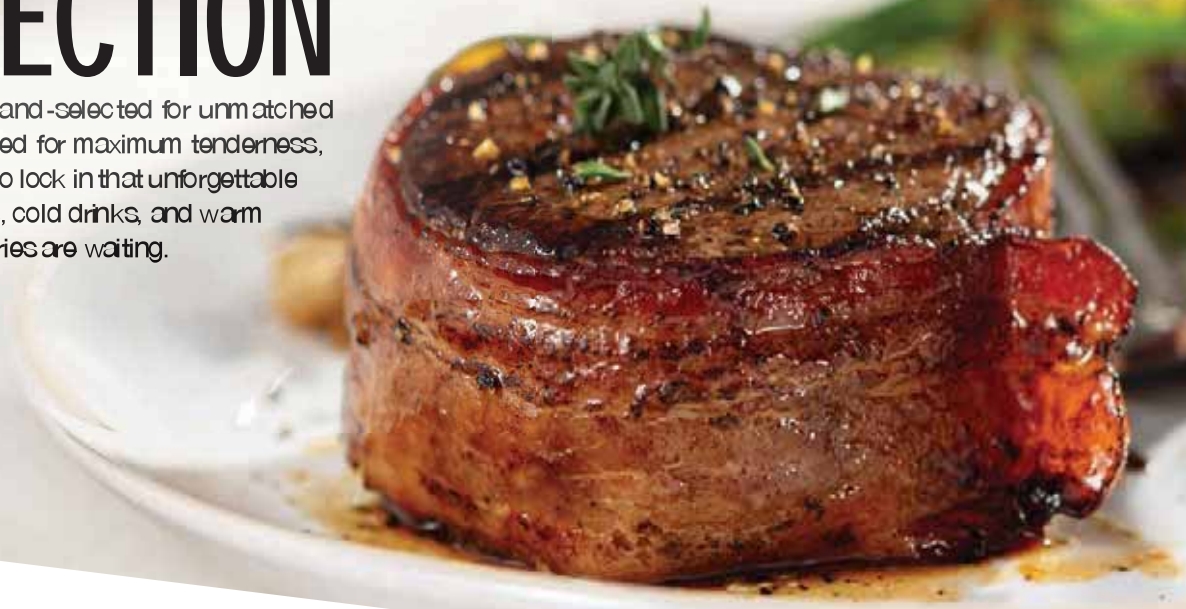




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## Game over

No sport is worth getting struck by lightning

**PERHAPS YOU'VE BEEN A** parent, coach or player at an outdoor sporting event in a similar predicament — the clouds roll in and the sky gets dark, but you have finish-game-itis.

About 20 people are killed by lightning each year and hundreds more are injured, some suffering devastating and permanent neurological injuries. About two-thirds

- **Once in play, when should the sporting event be stopped?** The short answer: when you see lightning, hear thunder or the skies look threatening.

- **Where should participants, officials and spectators go for safety?** No place outside is safe. Substantial buildings with wiring and plumbing are ideal. Small outdoor buildings, including dugouts, rain shelters, sheds and pavilions are NOT safe places to seek shelter.

- **When should activities be resumed?** A minimum of 30 minutes after the last clap of thunder. Electrical charges can linger in clouds after a storm has seemingly passed.

- **Who should monitor the weather and make decisions about play?** A level-headed, objective person should be the designated weather monitor. This should NOT be the coach, umpire or referee. They should know the weather safety guidelines and be empowered by teams, parents, coaches and spectators to make decisions.

- **What should be done if someone is struck by lightning?** Call 911 for immediate medical attention. Victims do not carry an electrical charge. CPR or an AED may be needed if the individual's breathing or heart has stopped.

The NWS webpage on lightning safety and outdoor sports activities answers these questions in more detail. Don't make decisions on when to call the game or match based on personal experience or pressure from others.

For more information on electrical safety, visit [SafeElectricity.org](http://SafeElectricity.org).



After all, it will only take a few more minutes. Or, not wanting to appear overly cautious or paranoid, you wait for others to give the signal.

This is one situation when finishing the game, match or inning is not worth the risk. Each year, thunderstorms produce an estimated 20 to 25 million cloud-to-ground lightning flashes in the U.S., each of which is a potential killer, according to the National Weather Service (NWS).

Some flashes strike directly under the storm. Other times, the flashes reach away from the storm in places where the perceived threat is low or nonexistent and catch people off guard.

of those deaths are associated with outdoor recreational activities.

The NWS recommends that outdoor recreation organizers have an established lightning safety plan and follow it every time inclement weather conditions are present.

As part of the plan, coaches or organizers should establish a designated person who will listen to the latest accurate weather forecasts prior to a sporting event. It should also be clear who will make the decision to postpone or cancel if necessary, and the decision must be respected.

The lightning safety guidelines should also address the following questions, according to the NWS:



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

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# Improving home comfort on the cheap

Low- to no-cost ways to save energy

**SAVING ENERGY DOESN'T HAVE** to be expensive or time consuming. You don't need to spend thousands of dollars or get the newest technology to use less energy. There are several ways to lower energy use, even on a tight budget.

hire a pro to fix it, turn the shutoff valve under the sink to stop the leak until you can get it fixed.

Wash clothes in cold water to avoid using the energy required to heat it. Washing on hot or warm settings can really add up, especially if

the home. Inside, seal trim on windows and exterior doors with caulk for about \$4 a tube. Buy paintable caulk so you can touch it up when it dries, if needed.

A can of spray foam is about \$5 and seals gaps around plumbing lines. It's great for sealing gaps around pipes under sinks and in the crawlspace or basement. Cold air can travel up through those spaces, causing drafts and wasting energy. Air sealing these areas gets bonus points for stopping insects and rodents from using these gaps to enter your home.

Spray foam is messy and nearly impossible to get off whatever it touches, so wear disposable gloves and clothes you don't mind dirtying and use dropcloths to protect finished floors. Be careful if you're

working with spray foam overhead. If you get it in your hair, it's not coming out with anything less than a haircut.

Move any items and clean surfaces of dust and debris in areas you intend to seal before cracking open a can. Put the can in a cardboard box to carry throughout the house so you don't leave a trail of spray foam.

For \$10 to \$15, you can buy weatherstripping to improve the seal on exterior doors. If you can see light around doors or feel a draft between the door and the doorjamb when the door is closed, weatherstripping will help.

Try these easy, low- and no-cost methods to reduce energy waste and improve comfort in your home. 💡



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARK GILLILAND

**Spray foam seals gaps around pipes to prevent cold air from traveling up through those spaces, causing drafts and wasting energy.**

## No-cost ways

Adjusting the thermostat is an easy way to save. Nudge the thermostat a few degrees closer to the outside temperature, especially on extreme weather days. I often hear people say, "I didn't change anything, and my bill is higher."

On the hottest and coldest days, your heating and cooling equipment must work much harder and use more energy to maintain the same temperature. Add an extra layer of clothes or some cozy slippers in the winter and lighter layers in summer.

Fix any hot water leaks or dripping faucets. Those tiny drips can add up to big energy waste, not to mention water waste. If you need to

you have a top-load or older washing machine that uses more water.

Adjusting the temperature on your water heater can save energy and money, too. Depending on the water heater, this is either an easy adjustment or something a little more complicated that requires removing access panels. If you don't know how, consult a professional.

## Low-cost ways

Air sealing is a do-it-yourself, beginner-friendly project that improves comfort and reduces energy waste. For around \$20 and a couple of hours of time, you can fill gaps, cracks and holes to prevent air from leaking in and out of



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

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## Driving ahead

EV sales dip, but co-ops stay the course

**HEADLINES MAY SAY THAT** electric vehicle (EV) sales have taken a significant spill, but electric cooperatives and their members have nothing to worry about. See, it's in co-ops' DNA

serve. Having available and convenient charging stations is considered a real amenity in small towns.

Owners of EVs with a bidirectional capacity battery can tap their

For co-ops with EVs on their lines, or if you're a member who owns an EV, it's a great time to contribute to an affordable and reliable grid.

"You have so many ways to benefit from an electric vehicle that you may not have had before," says Denney. "The benefits to owning an EV, that's one thing that hasn't changed despite all of the sales hype."

Many co-ops across the country with EV load are partnering with local government and business and community leaders to install chargers in prominent places in their electric footprint, such as county buildings, community centers, large restaurants, shopping areas, museums and the like.

"EV drivers want confidence about where they will be able to charge, and some co-ops realize that these communities would be left behind if they didn't install EV chargers," says Denney. "Our mission as co-ops is concern for community and improving the communities we serve. So, if there's somewhere that brings families together, that's also an opportunity to provide EV chargers."

Plus, electric transportation is projected to make up the second largest tranche of electrification between now and 2050, according to the Electric Power Research Institute. While we don't have a crystal ball, Denney notes co-ops' success comes from being stalwart and loyal to their members, their communities and their load — and that includes EVs.

"Electric co-ops are showing up to serve growing needs in our territories, and that means using scenario process improvements to plan for what comes next," says Denney. "We've seen a lot of fluctuations, and that will be a story that continues to evolve." 💡



PHOTO COURTESY OF EGYPTIAN ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION

**Egyptian Electric Cooperative Association's charging stations at Walker's Bluff Casino Resort in Carterville.**

to be strategic and flexible to meet energy demand ups and downs while fulfilling the seven cooperative principles that advocate affordable, reliable and safe electricity.

"Co-ops have internal processes and plans for what really does show up as load versus what's in the headlines," says Jennah Denney, NRECA's senior program manager for technology integration.

She sees no adverse impacts just because EV sales dropped by half between last September and December, according to industry data. What's more, the benefits of EV ownership remain strong, and co-ops are no small player in that.

Charging stations owned and operated by co-ops have become valuable assets in supporting grid reliability and the communities they

vehicle like a generator to deliver backup power to their home in case of a power outage. Then there's fuel economy and low maintenance of EV motors.

Fully charged EV batteries provide an average of about 300 miles of driving nowadays, which has eased past "range anxiety" for drivers switching from cars and pickups that run on gasoline. That means longer drives with fewer fueling stops and no worries about the escalating price at the pump.

"Many people don't realize until they're an EV driver how nice it is to not go into a gas station," says Denney.

A lot of EV models carry higher upfront costs, but the lower-priced, pre-owned vehicle market is growing, and more of these vehicles can be found in co-op service territories.



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

# Survival of the Sharpest

When it's you against nature, there's only one tool you need: the tempered steel Stag Hunter from Stauer—now **ONLY \$59!**

That first crack of thunder sounded like a bomb just fell on Ramshorn Peak. Black clouds rolled in and the wind shook the trees. I had ventured off the trail on my own, gambled with the weather and now I was trapped in the forest. Miles from camp. Surrounded by wilderness and watching eyes. I knew that if I was going to make it through the night I needed to find shelter and build a fire... fast. As the first raindrops fell, I reached for my **Stag Hunter Knife**.

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Left to right: Rae Stucki, Aubrey Lawson and Paris Van Dyke reminisce. Sophia Hartke was unavailable for photos.

# CROWNING MOMENTS

## YOUTH TOUR DELEGATES REIGN TRIUMPHANT

By Lisa Cherry

**MOMENTS PRIOR TO BOARDING** the bus for the annual Electric and Telephone Cooperatives Youth Tour to Washington in 2023, Aubrey Lawson was feeling a little nervous. It was a long way from Springfield, Ill., to the nation's capital, and she didn't know anyone. Aubrey needn't have worried. She and three other girls — Sophia Hartke, Rae Stucki and Paris Van Dyke — became fast friends. They had no idea that their paths would cross again, and on yet another unique adventure.

According to the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA), the idea for an electric cooperative youth tour originated at the organization's annual meeting in 1957. It was there that then Senator Lyndon Johnson addressed members, stating, "If one thing comes out of this meeting, it will be sending youngsters to the national capital where they can actually see what the flag stands for and represents."

"[Youth Tour] is so much more than sightseeing," says Brooke Gross, facilitator of youth programs at the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives (AIEC), which organizes the annual event. "It's about building

relationships, learning leadership and showing that [kids] have the power to shape their communities and futures."

For Aubrey, Sophia, Rae and Paris, truer words were never spoken.

In 1958, Illinois sent students for the first time. Today, more than 1,500 kids from across the nation take part each year. One important aspect of the annual event is the selection of each state's Youth Leadership Council representative.

In the 1970s, NRECA created a youth board to broaden the impact of youth programs beyond the annual tour. In the late '90s, that board became the Youth Leadership Council (YLC), which focuses on developing the skillsets of its 45 delegates, particularly in the areas of leadership, advocacy and communications, as well as the cooperative spirit of service and collaboration.

During the 2023 trip, Paris was selected by her peers to represent Illinois. "Before going on Youth Tour, I had a friend, [a former] YLC, and he had reached out to me and told me about the opportunity. So, before going on the trip, I was thinking, 'I really want to apply for this,'" she explains.

To be selected, applicants must deliver a speech to their peers. Paris chose to share her experience on a missionary trip to Mexico with her fellow attendees.

“I served with a mission called Casas por Cristo, where we build homes for Christ. ... They taught you how to do electrical; they taught you how to do drywall and all of that,” explains Paris. “It was great, because I had this story to be able to tell. Looking back, I realized it all happened for a reason, because when we were on the trip, [they] asked, ‘Okay, who wants to do the electrical?’ No one raised their hand, so I’m like, ‘I’ll give it a shot.’ So, they taught me how to wire the house, and I wired the whole house.

“That really put it into perspective [regarding] electric cooperatives, so I talked about power and electricity in the speech,” she continues. “I went on to use that when I was the YLC, to apply to be the national spokesperson at PowerXchange. ... It was neat to see how that all played a part in the journey.”

“I specifically remember Paris’ speech ... There were maybe five people who interviewed,” says Rae. “Her confidence and poise ... I was like, ‘She’s going to be the president.’”

## “I FEEL LIKE PAGEANTS GET THE STEREOTYPE THAT [THEY ARE] SUPERFICIAL ... IT’S MORE ABOUT SERVICE AND BEING A PART OF YOUR COMMUNITY.”

During the trip, Rae, Aubrey and Sophia discovered Paris had also been Little Miss Clay County Fair Queen in 2012 and Junior Miss in 2017. She says the experience she gained competing in those pageants, among other things, helped prepare her for the YLC interview and her time on the council.

“I grew up doing [FFA] Creed Speaking and 4-H [and] pageantry,” she explains. “I was given so many opportunities to make connections, to learn how to have those one-on-one conversations with people, and just networking.”

Like Paris, the rest of the girls were also involved in Future Farmers of America (FFA) and 4-H. And soon after that trip to D.C., all four young women would possess something else in common — a crown.

Paris, who was sponsored by Wabash Communications CO-OP to go on the 2023 Youth Tour and whose parents are Clay County Electric Co-operative members, was crowned Miss Clay County Fair Queen in 2024.

Aubrey, sponsored by EnerStar Electric Cooperative for the 2023 trip, was crowned Miss Edgar County Fair Queen in 2024.

Rae, sponsored by Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative, was crowned Miss Iroquois County Fair Queen in 2025.

And Sophia, also sponsored by Eastern Illini, was crowned Miss Champaign County Fair Queen in 2025.



From right: Rae Stucki, Sophia Hartke and Aubrey Lawson board the Youth Tour bus to Washington, D.C.



2023 Youth Tour delegates pose with a bust of Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg.



Left to right: Rae Stucki, Paris Van Dyke and Aubrey Lawson remember attending Youth Day in 2023.



“A previous fair queen encouraged me to do it, so the thought was in my head,” says Rae of a conversation they had on the trip. “But at the same time, I had a stereotyped idea of pageants. ... It wasn’t until I talked to more down-to-earth girls that I [realized] this is actually a good experience, something I want to take part in.”

“I feel like pageants get the stereotype that [they are] superficial. You’re wearing a dress, you’re wearing heels, like you have to be this beauty queen,” Aubrey elaborates. “But the county fair system is not like that at all. It’s more about service and being a part of your community. It’s [on] a much deeper level than people think.”

Sophia says Aubrey encouraged her to give her county fair pageant a chance. “I know nothing about dresses or makeup or how to be on a stage ... so that really wasn’t up my alley, but she talked me into it. She said you get to practice your interview skills, [that] it’s a great leadership opportunity, [and] you get to make great connections with the girls you’re competing with,” she recalls.

“I had to learn how to do makeup and how to curl my hair ... I was a hot mess,” Sophia laughs. “[But] I really did

like the agriculture part of it. I noticed that much like a co-op board, a fair board is in it as a team. They’re not in it to make money — they do it because they love the community that a county fair builds. ... I feel like that’s really similar with how a co-op functions, because they do it for the benefit of the people they serve.”

“[Another] big parallel [is] just how much one member of a community can make a huge impact across the board,” says Aubrey. “I had a chaperone that worked [at my cooperative] who took me to Youth Day. That’s just the same as meeting a member of your county fair board ... just being able to see the individual people who are putting in the work behind the scenes, and how it plays into a broader picture. Like, this is EnerStar Electric Cooperative, and this is AIEC ... and then the same with my county fair board, and then this is the Illinois Association of Agricultural Affairs.”

Rae adds that the connections made during Youth Tour and pageants pop up in the most random of places. “You’re going to see each other in [different] scenarios.”

“You can see it with me, Rae, Sophia and Paris,” Aubrey explains. “We’ve met multiple times. We wanted to be involved in our cooperatives. We wanted to be involved in ag affairs. It’s cool to see how people intertwine if they care about their county.”

Paris draws an unexpected comparison; one she experienced when she introduced herself to thousands of attendees at NRECA’s annual PowerXChange. “It was like a Miss Universe moment. ... I’ve always dreamt of being Miss Universe,” she laughs.

Beyond the poise and polish, however, these ladies are not afraid to get dirty. That could mean catching a greased pig, showing sheep or participating in the annual barnyard scramble — crown and all. “I grew up chasing pigs at home,” says Paris. “So, nothing new, you just chase the pig and catch it.”

Rae’s favorite event at the county fair has always been the demolition derby, and as queen, she had the opportunity to



Sophia Hartke was crowned Miss Champaign County Fair Queen in 2025.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SOPHIA HARTKE





PHOTOS COURTESY OF PARIS VAN DYKE

## “YOU HAVE ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO LOSE AND EVERYTHING TO GAIN BY PARTICIPATING IN EITHER ONE OR BOTH OF THOSE EXPERIENCES.”

enjoy the show from the stage. “I was so excited,” she laughs. “[But] I was so mad, because no mud was flying at me.”

Paris remembers her favorite moment vividly. “I had just competed at state in the prelims ... I walked into this room, and there’s 85 people from my county who came to watch me at the pageant, and I just started sobbing, because I realized how many people love and support me,” she says. “That was the moment I realized, this is what it’s about. It’s about community. It’s about being the type of leader people not only want to show up for but support. ... It’s a beautiful thing to be a part of.”

Likewise, Sophia was given a box full of letters. “[It was] like everyone who had ever met me in my life showed up to support me and to write me a nice message,” she says. “I still have that box, and I’m going to keep it forever, because that was the kindest thing I’ve ever experienced.”

“It sounds crazy that four of us from the same trip became fair queens, but I really don’t think it’s a coincidence at all,” says Rae, noting their similar personalities. “I remember we were walking [on Youth Tour] ... there were a bunch of Marines, and we all just stopped and had the longest conversation with them. ... [We] like to take the time to talk to people.”

Aubrey says it’s about being able to take the initiative to have these experiences.

“It takes initiative to apply to Youth Tour, [and] it takes initiative to compete in a pageant — [and] having the desire to lead and the desire to be put in opportunities to grow, we all shared that, too,” she adds. “It will probably bring us back together multiple times.”

“I don’t think you can fail if you’re trying,” says Paris. “Just because you don’t get the crown, or the business

doesn’t end up working out, whatever it may be, you’re still learning and growing from that, and that’s winning in life, in my opinion.”

Aubrey believes Youth Tour cultivated their inherent skills. “We were able to talk to our state representatives. We had the opportunity, as teenage girls, to meet these people,” she says. “It made me realize how big, but how small, the world is ... as long as you’re going out there and making an effort, you are able to impact people.”

“It built our confidence so much,” adds Rae.

All four agree that these kinds of opportunities are safe spaces to grow. “[There’s not] too much fear of failure,” says Aubrey.

“I think that being a part of the co-op trip and being a fair queen, it just really resonated with me that community service is something that you can keep doing no matter what your goals are in life,” says Sophia. “It instilled in me that you can serve your community no matter what you are doing or what stage of life you’re in. ... You grow along with it.”

On a more personal level, she adds that she learned more about herself than anything. “I learned a lot about what it means to be a part of [a co-op], and what it means to advocate for agriculture by being a fair queen,” she adds. “Those are all wonderful things that I learned, but I would say more than anything, I grew in myself and in my character.”

To students thinking about Youth Tour — or those considering pageantry, Sophia says, “You have absolutely nothing to lose and everything to gain by participating in either one or both of those experiences. You have to just take it all in ... and appreciate the fact that you get to go on one of these trips, because it really [is] a gift,” she adds. “I will remember stories from my bus forever.”💡

# A revival happening NOW

Economic development in  
Illinois' southernmost region

By Nat Williams

**ILLINOIS CENTRE MALL IN** Marion lost its luster years ago. Like many other malls throughout the nation, it fell victim to changes in consumer behavior, including the rise of online shopping. The once bustling Williamson County retail mecca shed specialty shops, its food court and all but two anchor stores.

Now, it is being brought back to life and more, thanks to a public-private deal made possible by a pioneering state law geared at juicing economic development.

One side of the mall has been transformed into ThrillHouse Family Entertainment Center, a 100,000-square-foot recreation center that offers such activities as go-kart racing, bowling, laser tag, axe throwing and high-tech miniature golf. A full-service restaurant offering meals and drinks is prominent. On the grounds north of the mall, other recreational venues are being constructed.

Much of the new development is the result of Illinois' first Star Bond, an innovative economic tool aimed at drawing visitors from other states, along with their money. The law allows the issuance of bonds by private investors, in this case Rodney Cabaness and Shad Zimbardo, partners in other ventures that are separate from the Star Bond project.

Projects include motorcycle and RV dealerships, a golf course, a baseball stadium, a golf driving range game similar to Top Golf, and an amateur sports venue with multiple baseball, softball and pickleball fields, including a domed stadium.

"In a nutshell, the (Star Bonds) legislation allows for a municipality to choose a private developer and make a partnership with them, so long as it meets certain statutory requirements," says Marion Mayor Mike Absher. "A percentage of customers have to come from certain miles away. The idea is to get people from out of state, from Kentucky, southeast Missouri and southwest Indiana."

The project dovetails with efforts by a new economic development organization to draw industry to the region. Southern Illinois Now — often referred to as SI Now — was formed a few years ago by business leaders, political figures and other stakeholders who tout the region's scenery, recreation areas, transportation system and educational opportunities. It encompasses 17 of the southernmost counties in Illinois.

Deb Barnett, SI Now's chief executive officer, points to the "Four Rs": rivers, roads, rails and runways. Two major rivers — the Mississippi and Ohio — frame the southern point of Illinois. In addition, there are five Class 1 rail lines, Amtrak stations, a network of interstate highways and commercial air service to Chicago via Marion's Veterans Airport of Southern Illinois.

"That central location and those transportation and logistics assets have really put southern Illinois on the radar when companies look to get closer to customers," Barnett says. "We're five hours from major markets and a two-day trucking distance of 80 percent of the U.S. population."



While market access is a big draw for business, cost of living may be even bigger.

“Lower cost of living is definitely a key asset that we have,” Barnett says. “Those of us who have lived here all our lives know that buying a home here is very affordable. And there is the hometown and neighborly feel. Plus, you can get to many major cities quickly.”

According to real estate companies like Redfin and Zillow, the average home price in the region is about half that of the state average.

SI Now is not the first economic development group in southern Illinois, but Barnett believes this one has widespread support across the region.

“There have been several regional initiatives over the years,” she says. “But in 2017, a group of business leaders came together and realized the need for growth. They have their own economic development staff, but for the most part, the region as a whole was being left out when looking to expand in the area. We were not on their radar.”

Barnett and others cite the abundance of recreational activities as a lure for economic development. The Shawnee National Forest — Illinois’ only national forest — is an outdoorsman’s paradise. The nearly half-million-acre forest stretching across the southern tip of Illinois offers hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, rock climbing and other activities.

Just north of the Shawnee, spanning parts of Franklin and Jefferson counties, lies Rend Lake. At 18,000 acres, it is the state’s second largest reservoir. Not only does the lake offer multiple recreational opportunities, it supplies water to more than 30 communities.

Absher got the initial idea for the transformation of Illinois Centre Mall after a family visit to Gatlinburg in the Smoky Mountains. He believes southern Illinois can also be a major draw.

“We have this great natural resource,” he said. “Any one of these towns could be the Gatlinburg of the Shawnee [National Forest]. I think it’s one of the biggest opportunities out there.”

Illinois Rep. Patrick Windhorst, R-Metropolis, agrees. “Just the natural beauty of southern Illinois is a tremendous positive for our region,” he says. “The Shawnee National Forest is a great draw for tourism and for people to live here. They can enjoy a laid-back lifestyle with beautiful scenery.”

SI Now’s main focus is on attracting industry to the region. That involves marketing the region and educating the workforce. The group hosts task forces that include 100 stakeholders covering 17 counties, from Massac on the southern tip to Jefferson on the northern edge.

“We make sure all counties are well represented, from our largest communities to our smallest communities,” Barnett says. “We also want to focus on internal promotion, to ensure that those in southern Illinois appreciate what we have, telling stories of our region.”

The organization utilizes multiple media outlets to get out the message, including social media and an in-house magazine.

In Marion, the novel Star Bond project is the funding source of the nearly \$250 million entertainment complex in and around the mall, on the west side of the city. Unlike municipal bonds, Star Bonds allow the creation of private-public partnerships with most of the risk being held by the private partner, in this case Cabaness and Zimbro.

“We’re collateralizing future sales tax that comes out of it,” Absher says. “They’re not general obligation bonds. Bond buyers understand up front that this is prospective; it’s riskier than loaning us money to buy a firetruck. There is a higher interest rate because it’s riskier.”

Indeed, those investors purchasing bonds can expect returns of 6% to 6.75% — about twice the return of a

***“Those of us who have lived here all our lives know that buying a home here is very affordable. And there is the hometown and neighborly feel.” - SI Now CEO Deb Barnett***





***“Any one of these towns could be the Gatlinburg of the Shawnee [National Forest]. I think it’s one of the biggest opportunities out there.” - Marion Mayor Mike Absher***

standard municipal bond. The developers are on the hook for any losses, though the city also has a financial stake because of temporary abeyance of sales taxes.

The future of the mall — where external surroundings are highly developed with retail establishments, hotels and restaurants — was long a hot topic for politicians. In his run for mayor in 2018, Absher made its future one of his top priorities.

“The city didn’t own it, so it was not necessarily our responsibility,” he says. “But we had invested probably \$20 million over the years in infrastructure — roads, sewer lines, etc. So, we had a vested interest to see that it did not become an economic black hole. It was in bankruptcy at the time, and the parking lot was owned by another entity. It was a real hornets’ nest.”

So far, the project is going well. ThrillHouse opened in April and has generated widespread interest. Developers hope that the other activities around it will draw people from all over. The Thrillville Thrillbillies play in the collegiate Prospect League. Home games are played at Mtn. Dew Stadium, with a capacity of more than 5,000. It is the centerpiece of a large youth sports development that will draw 50 to 100 traveling teams each weekend. In addition, the complex is expected to host collegiate baseball and softball tournaments.

“Whenever they’re playing, we’re incentivizing them to come here to the ThrillHouse and play,” says Bryce Cabaness, who is involved in the development. “It includes everything from coach-pitch to 18-year-olds in summer travel ball.”

Such ancillary projects fit right in with SI Now’s goals of providing tools to empower the private sector. It is funded solely through contributions by businesses. Southern Illinois Healthcare provides in-kind support, offering space in University Mall in Carbondale. Like Illinois Centre in Marion, University Mall has also lost many of its tenants. The nonprofit healthcare company purchased a large section to house its offices.

“We have 15 partners, and new ones are coming on all the time,” Barnett says.

SI Now promotes the region as what it is — a rural area that can draw workers from long distances. Employees at two of southern Illinois’ largest employers — Continental Tire in Mt. Vernon and Aisin Manufacturing in Marion — travel as far as 60 or more miles. Barnett makes sure prospective employers recognize the mobile nature of the workforce.

“That’s what we’ve had to do in educating site selectors,” she says. “They’re looking for a certain population. We have to educate them that we’re a commuter region. People will drive 45 minutes or an hour for a good-paying job. We have to tell that story. In southern Illinois, we’re heads-down, humble people with a strong work ethic. We always have them talk to our employers so they can hear about their experience with the workforce.”

One hurdle may be the state of Illinois itself. Windhorst says the government sometimes gets in the way of progress. “The biggest thing I see is that the state needs to be more business-friendly,” he adds. “One of my responsibilities of being an elected representative is to try to overcome that with collaboration within the region. We are promoting the possibilities, not dwelling on the negatives.”

Indeed, a newfound unity of cooperation is a common thread. In the past, the region struggled with Balkanization. That is changing, according to Absher.

“I can say very confidently, for the first time in my lifetime, there is an absence of outright animosity toward somebody else,” he says. “I’ve grown up here and know about some of the snarkiness. We’ve all made great strides to establish relationships with neighboring towns. It’s not uncommon for me to call the mayor of Herrin or Carbondale, or for them to contact me about opportunities opening up.”

Barnett agrees. “We thought competition would be a problem, and it has not been,” she says. “I was a little surprised by that, to be honest. Historically, as in any area, there is this competition between communities. We promote heavily that a win for one is a win for all.”

**ThrillHouse Family Entertainment Center, a 100,000-square-foot recreation center that offers such activities as go-kart racing, bowling, laser tag, axe throwing and high-tech miniature golf, is the latest development at Illinois Centre Mall in Marion.**





# 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 Snap-Shots section in 2027

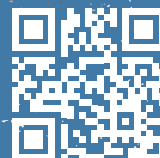
### KEY DETAILS:

- 📷 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



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For more information or to submit entries, go to [icl.coop/snapshots](http://icl.coop/snapshots).



# Perfect in every bite

*Fresh ingredients, inventive dishes at State Street on LaSalle*

By Mary Blye Kramer

**YOU MIGHT THINK A** salad is just a salad until you’ve had one at State Street on LaSalle in Elsah. The freshest vegetables, purchased daily, finely chopped and tossed so that you get a taste of everything in each bite, drizzled with a house-made dressing created by the owners, offer the perfect blend of flavors, regardless of which salad you choose.

Of course, that’s just the beginning. From the Bourbon-Peppercorn Filet and Moroccan Salmon to the Chicken Saltimbocca Roulade (available depending on both the season and the time of day), the options are original and seemingly endless. A meal isn’t complete without dessert — the refreshing Key Lime Pie or a slice of the Ultimate Chocolate Cake are both great options.

State Street on LaSalle, a cozy restaurant and bar in the historic village of Elsah, is owned by Terri and Glenn “Beau” Beaubien. The ambience is both chic and warm. Originally State Street Market in Alton, the Beaubiens moved their restaurant to Elsah in spring 2025, after purchasing and renovating the entire building.

The dining area is defined by soft earth tones, a charming mantel with rustic decor, and tables spaced to allow both a sense of community and personal space. The bar is a lively area with additional seating that serves regular menu items as well as a variety of imaginative cocktails and other drinks.

After early careers in food service (Beau) and marketing/business development (Terri), the couple purchased State

Street Market in Alton in 2015. For the first few years they operated as a casual lunch spot, then developed and added a dinner menu and a bar.

Unforeseen circumstances forced them to leave their location in Alton in late fall 2024, and the Beaubiens weren’t sure what they were going to do. As the couple searched for their next step, Terri learned of a vacant space in Elsah and talks began with Mayor Mike Pitchford, who was excited about the possibility of the Beaubiens purchasing the building and moving their restaurant to Elsah.

For two months following the purchase, Terri and Beau put in countless hours renovating the space to accommodate their restaurant, and most of the work they did themselves. They installed a kitchen, upgraded the bathrooms and remodeled the upstairs area to serve as their living space. They brought the bar, tables and a few other items from their Alton restaurant.

Both Terri and Beau love to experiment with new dishes. Some of their menu items, such as their Elote Corn Dip, Terri came up with when she was experimenting with a new snack for her and Beau. Other menu items the couple devised while planning private parties or cooking for themselves. If it’s a hit, then it may become part of the restaurant’s menu.

Consistency, however, is very important, Terri says. Many customers have their favorite dishes, and it would be an unwelcome surprise to find that it tastes different on subsequent visits.



**Top:** Beef and Boar Bolognese – gnocchi coated in a savory ragu and finished with fresh burrata

**Bottom left:** Elote Corn Dip

**Bottom right:** Refreshing, house-made Key Lime Pie

On the other hand, Terri explains that food is subjective. Everyone has their likes and dislikes. With that in mind, the staff makes each dish fresh so ingredients can be adjusted according to the customer's requests.

"Our veggie sandwich is truly unique, because we toss our greens the same way we do our salads so the flavors all meld together," Terri says. "But if a guest dislikes something on it, we're happy to accommodate them whenever possible."

It's no surprise that State Street on LaSalle has won so many awards: Favorite Lunch Spot, Small Business of the Month and Favorite Wine Selection, to name a few.

Terri is thrilled that they've never had to take out a single ad because word of mouth keeps their restaurant growing and thriving, with new customers coming in every week. One couple, says Terri, is trying to work their

way through every item on the menu, which changes throughout the year.

While the lunch menu is consistent, the dinner menu changes seasonally and is served beginning at 5 p.m. Brunch is available on the weekends.

She also credits the restaurant's success to the dedicated staff. "They are honest and loyal, and our guests love them," she says, and it's clear she isn't just being nice. The warmth of the entire staff is evident the moment you walk through the door. They're attentive and enthusiastic about the food, which is prepared fresh and beautifully laid out on the table.

Terri often strolls through the dining room, checking on guests and chatting with patrons who spot her making the rounds between courses. As she moves from table to table, the room fills with the same response again and again: "Perfect, perfect, perfect." 🍷

## LET'S EAT!

### State Street on LaSalle

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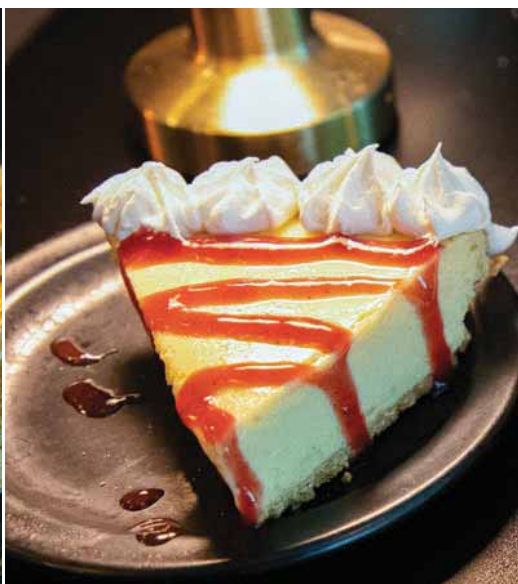
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Fri: 11 a.m.-10 p.m.

Sat: 10 a.m.-10 p.m.

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Reservations recommended.



# Ingredients for summer

**SUMMER IS THE SEASON** of abundance. Backyard gardens often overflow with cucumbers and zucchini. Roadside produce stands and farmers markets brim with the freshest herbs, fruits and vegetables. With so many fresh ingredients at their peak, it's the perfect time to let them shine in every meal. From salads to refreshing drinks, summer recipes celebrate the best of local harvests. 💡

## WE NEED RECIPES!

New and old favorites

Side dishes

Sugar-free recipes

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



## Zucchini Pie

Submitted by Eileen Culberson, Shelby Electric Cooperative

Servings: 6-8

- |                                 |                                   |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 4 cups zucchini, about 2 or 3   | 1-1/2 teaspoons cinnamon          |
| 1/4 cup water                   | 1 teaspoon butter, melted         |
| 1-1/2 teaspoons cream of tartar | 1 9-inch pie shell                |
| 1 dash salt                     | <b>Topping:</b>                   |
| 2 tablespoons flour             | 1 stick butter, cubed and chilled |
| 1 tablespoon lemon juice        | 1 cup flour                       |
| 1-1/4 cups sugar                | 1/2 cup sugar                     |

Preheat oven to 375 F. Peel zucchini, cut lengthwise, scoop out the seeds and slice into chunks. On a stovetop, cook zucchini over medium heat in a skillet for 10 minutes with 1/4 cup water. Add a little more water if it gets too dry. Drain. In a small bowl, mix tartar, salt, flour, lemon juice, sugar, cinnamon and melted butter. Pour over cooked zucchini and mix until incorporated. Pour mixture into a 9-inch uncooked pie shell. In a medium bowl, mix the topping ingredients by using a fork or pastry cutter to combine. Add crumble mixture over the top of the zucchini. Bake 45 minutes.

## Brats in Pita Pockets

Submitted by Sarah Cannon, Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative

Servings: 3

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1 tablespoon cooking oil                       | 3 precooked brats, cut in half lengthwise and sliced |
| 1 stalk celery, chopped                        | 1 clove garlic, minced                               |
| 1/4 cup onion, chopped                         | 3 pita pockets                                       |
| 2-4 mushrooms, chopped                         | Sour cream and/or salsa, for serving                 |
| 1 small carrot, julienned or coarsely shredded |  |

Heat oil in a skillet over medium heat. Saute celery for 2 minutes. Stir in onion, mushrooms and carrots. Saute for an additional 2 minutes. Add brats and garlic, cook until heated through. Serve brat mixture in pita pockets with sour cream and/or salsa. **Note:** Adding or substituting shredded cabbage or chopped summer squash during cooking is another variation.



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



## Balsamic Tomato Salad

Servings: 4

- 2 pints cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1 shallot, thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1/2 ounce fresh basil leaves, sliced into thin ribbons
- 6 ounces feta cheese

In a large bowl, stir together tomatoes and shallots. In a small bowl, mix olive oil, vinegar, garlic, salt and pepper. Stir dressing into tomato mixture. Fold in basil leaves and feta cheese, reserving some for topping. Chill for 20 minutes. Before serving, top with remaining basil and feta cheese.

## Creamy Cucumber Salad

Servings: 4

- 1/2 cup plain Greek yogurt
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- 2 tablespoons fresh dill, chopped
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
- 2 cucumbers, thinly sliced
- 1 shallot, thinly sliced

In a large bowl, combine yogurt, olive oil, vinegar, dill, salt and pepper. Fold in the cucumbers and shallots. Add additional salt and pepper to taste. Chill for 20-30 minutes before serving.

## Red Lemonade

Submitted by *Lara Borgerson, Menard Electric Cooperative*  
Servings: 4-6

- 6 cups seedless watermelon
- 1 cup water
- 1/3 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup lemon juice, about 3 lemons

Place watermelon and water in a blender and process until smooth. Strain and add sugar and lemon juice. Stir well and chill.



## Learn a bit about cucurbits

Growing cucumbers in the home garden

**DOES ANYONE REMEMBER WHEN** they learned pickles are just preserved cucumbers? I don't recall my specific moment of cucumber epiph-

many delicious cucumbers are vining types, which put on substantial growth and require some type of trellising system.

fall harvest may be done in mid- to late-summer.

Cucumber plants have shallow roots and require consistent soil moisture throughout the growing season, especially during flowering and fruit development. For best yields, incorporate compost or well-rotted manure before planting.

Side-dress with nitrogen fertilizer when the plants begin to vine. In small gardens, the vines may be trained on a trellis or fence. When the long, burpless varieties are supported, the cucumbers hang free and develop straight fruits. Winds whipping the plants can make vertical training impractical, however. Wire cages can also be used to support the plants. Avoid working with plants when they are wet to reduce the spread of plant diseases.

When harvesting, pickled cucumber types should be picked frequently (often daily) so they can retain an adequate size for pickling. Slicing cucumbers can be harvested as needed. Often, it is recommended to pick slicing cucumbers when they are under 8 inches long. Refer to your seed packet for specific variety recommendations.

Leaving cucumbers on the plant too long produces tough, bitter fruit. Mature cucumbers turn yellow in color. Make sure to remove overripe fruit, as they can significantly reduce further production as the plant shifts energy toward seed development.

Cucumber plants can put on a hefty yield that may cause you to swear off ever eating another cucumber. But by the time we make our way through winter and back into spring, you will likely again have a craving for cucumbers. It may be wise to stock up on cucumber recipes. Pickles or cucumber sandwiches, anyone? 🍷



any, but it sure is fun to tell kids their favorite pickled snack is actually the cucumber they turn their nose up to when it is on their plate.

Most gardeners' exposure to cucumbers begins with growing them to eat raw in salads or on sandwiches. Depending on your culinary destination, you can either slice cucumbers (raw) or pickle them.

Cucumbers belong to the cucurbit family, which also includes squash, pumpkins and melons. They are warm-season crops and will grow best during the summer months. While cucurbits as a group are often referred to as vining crops, there are cucumber varieties that are bush-type and suited to smaller garden spaces. However,

Some cucumbers are marketed as burpless. These tend to have few to no seeds, and their skin is typically thinner. Some individuals are thought to react to cucurbitacin, a compound found in the seeds and skin, resulting in excess gas and "burping" after eating the fruits.

Cucumbers are usually started by planting seeds directly in the garden, though you can also start the seeds indoors 3 to 4 weeks before planting. Plant after the danger of frost has passed and the soil has warmed in the spring. Warm soil is necessary for the germination of cucumber seeds and proper plant growth. With ample soil moisture, cucumbers thrive in warm summer weather. A second planting for



**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](http://go.illinois.edu/GoodGrowing).



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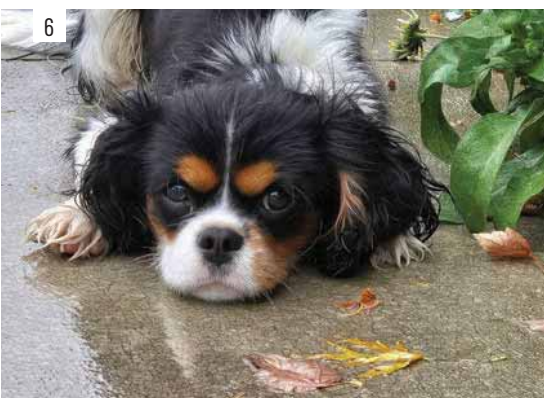
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