

OCTOBER 2026

Illinois Country Living

ALL ABOARD

The art of model railroading

FEATURE

Handcrafted with purpose

PRAIRIE TABLE

Amulets and alchemy

GARDENWISE

Don't lose
your gourd



CO-OP
NEWS



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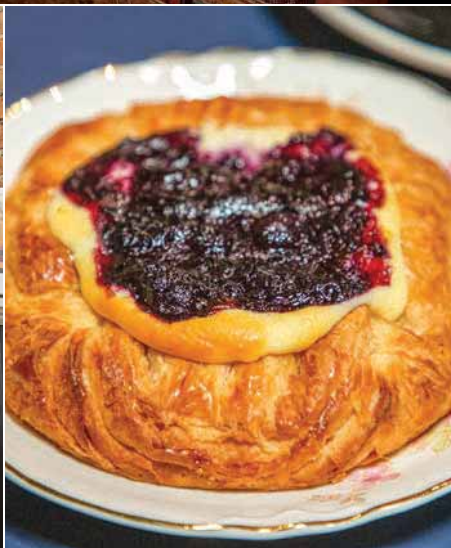
Taylorville

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PHOTO COURTESY OF ROGER HOLMES



Illinois Country Living

OCTOBER 2026
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On the cover: Some model railroad layouts are so detailed it is difficult to tell if the image is a model or real life.

PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVEN HAMILTON





New equipment at G. L. Beaumont Lumber Company

Investing in rural Illinois

Electric co-ops provide local support through USDA

SINCE BEING APPOINTED BY President Trump in January 2025 to serve as U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development Illinois State Director, I've made hundreds of visits as I've traveled across the state, talking with community leaders, business owners and rural Illinoisans.

This outreach has allowed Illinois Rural Development to share resources that are available to our rural communities through our more than 80 programs covering business, housing and community development.

It is an honor and a privilege to support rural prosperity in Illinois. My visits across the state have reinforced my passion to help develop and assist the people of the Land of Lincoln and rural America.

Born and raised in Illinois, I am dedicated to implementing and advancing effective policy to help rural Illinoisans prosper and move our great state forward. I am committed to fostering economic growth and improving quality of life in rural communities through strategic partnerships, unprecedented outreach and process improvements.

Some of the projects I have visited involve electric cooperatives that have utilized USDA's Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program. USDA provides zero-interest loans to local utilities, which they, in turn, pass through to community projects or local businesses for projects that will create and retain employment in rural areas. Our partnerships with cooperatives help bolster rural prosperity by fostering local economic growth, providing essential services and creating jobs.

For example, in Murphysboro, Egyptian Electric Cooperative Association used a Rural Economic Development Loan to relend funds to the Degognia-Fountain Bluff Levee and Drainage District. The district will use the funds

to install four relief wells in the levee system, which runs from Cora City to Fountain Bluff on the Mississippi River and Oakwood Bottoms to Grimsby on the Big Muddy River.

The wells will help relieve underground water pressure, which will help prevent structural damage and help the levee function as designed. Without the new wells, more than 16,000 acres of farmland are in danger of being flooded.

We are grateful to be able to help connect local organizations with resources that support safety and economic stability. This project is an example of how partnerships are key in strengthening rural infrastructure and protecting our communities.

In Ramsey, G. L. Beaumont Lumber Company, a family-owned company since 1919, will use a \$998,500 Rural Economic Development Loan through Southwestern Electric Cooperative to purchase new and modernized equipment for its facility. The new equipment will increase the consistency of edging boards and assist in saving 25 jobs.

This project is a win for the local economy and consumers who want American-made products. At the same time, this project also benefits forest management that is as important as ever in sustaining safe, prosperous rural communities in Illinois.

We are eager to collaborate on projects that aim to improve the lives of people in rural Illinois. If you have initiatives or ideas that could benefit your community, please contact us so we can discuss how our team can best support your efforts.

For more information on USDA Rural Development investments in rural America, visit the Rural Data Gateway. The Rural Data Gateway is an online tool that strengthens USDA Rural Development partnerships with rural people, entrepreneurs, government officials and Congress by making investment data accessible to the public.

To learn more about Rural Development programs, or to find contact information, visit rd.usda.gov/il.



Jesus Ortega is the Illinois State Director for U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development.

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 210,000, 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
Rebecca Barlow

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
Chris Enroth
Peggy Francomb
Colton Leonard
Les O'Dell

SALES REPRESENTATIVE
Cheryl Solomon
Cheryl@amp.coop

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STAIRLIFTS

OCTOBER IS NATIONAL CO-OP MONTH

THE SEVEN COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES



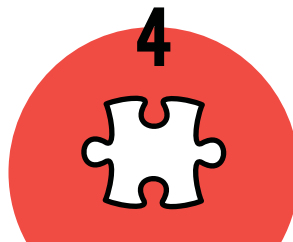
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OCTOBER CHECKLIST

Cybersecurity Awareness Month

Strengthen online accounts.



Make your passwords longer. A long, unique passphrase can be harder for cybercriminals to crack than a short password packed with special characters.



Think before you click.

Stop and look closely at email or text links. Do they look legitimate? When in doubt, contact the company through the official website or by using a trusted phone number.

Watch for impersonation scams.



A scammer may claim your co-op is about to disconnect your service, then demand immediate payment. Stop and call your co-op directly to verify.



Use multifactor authentication.

This adds an extra layer of protection by requiring an additional way to verify your identity — such as a code sent to your phone or an authentication app.



\$60,000 up for grabs

Illinois' electric cooperatives will award 20 scholarships in 2027

Over the past three decades, 230 students from across rural Illinois have received a Thomas H. Moore Illinois Electric Cooperatives Memorial Scholarship. In 2027, Illinois' electric cooperatives will award 20 \$3,000 scholarships to high school seniors in the co-op family.

"These scholarships aren't just financial aid; they are a way to honor the rich legacy of the Illinois electric cooperative community," said Brooke Gross, member services manager at the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives. "We look forward to assisting deserving students every year."

Established in 1994, the first scholarship under the program was awarded in 1996. Since then, the scholarship program has grown, adding both to the number of scholarships awarded and the amount.

In 2027, 19 scholarships will be awarded to high school seniors in the electric cooperative family — 12 designated for those attending a 2- or 4-year college, university or technical school; six for those enrolling at an Illinois community college; and one, the Earl W. Struck Memorial Scholarship, for the child of an Illinois electric cooperative employee or director.

The 20th scholarship, the LaVern and Nola McEntire Memorial Lineworker's Scholarship,

celebrates the legacy of a man who dedicated more than 42 years as a co-op lineworker. The McEntires created this scholarship to help future lineworkers follow in LaVern's footsteps. The scholarship helps offset the cost of attending lineworker school at Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield.

Applicants are judged based on their academic achievements, work and volunteer experience, and community involvement. Creative, thoughtful responses in the required written essay are key to standing out.

"With scholarships like these, Illinois electric cooperatives are powering not just communities, but futures," Gross says. "Whether you dream of becoming

a lineworker or are following a different path to success, these scholarships offer a bright opportunity for deserving students across the state."

If you are an eligible applicant, don't miss your chance. Applications and more information are available through your local electric cooperative, or go to aiec.coop/iec-scholarship. For 19 of the scholarships, the deadline to submit is Dec. 31, 2026. The deadline to apply for the lineworker scholarship is April 30, 2027. 



Application and more information

AIEC

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.

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

ILLINOIS TRIVIA CHALLENGE

It's time to test your knowledge with a new Illinois Trivia Challenge! This month features the sinister side of the Prairie State. Answers are on page 33.



- Which Illinois town is associated with the legend of the Mad Gasser, a mysterious figure blamed for strange nighttime attacks in the 1940s?
A. Mattoon; B. Decatur; C. Danville; D. Effingham
- Illinois-born author Ray Bradbury wrote which novel about a sinister carnival arriving in a small Illinois town?
A. "The October Country"; B. "Something Wicked This Way Comes"; C. "The Illustrated Man"; D. "Dandelion Wine"
- What bigfoot-like creature is central to a famous 1970s legend from the southern Illinois town of Murphysboro?
A. Momo; B. Big Muddy Monster; C. Murphysboro Wild Man; D. Mississippi Mud Man
- Which horror classic film was set in the fictional Illinois town of Haddonfield?
A. "Friday the 13th"; B. "Halloween"; C. "Scream"; D. "A Nightmare on Elm Street"
- What Chicago event in 1893 provided the setting for Erik Larson's "The Devil in the White City," which tells the story of serial killer H.H. Holmes?
A. Century of Progress; B. World's Columbian Exposition; C. Illinois State Fair; D. Great Chicago Exposition



President/CEO Don Taylor (right) has retired after 18 years of service at Corn Belt Energy Corporation. Ryan Campbell (left) has been named his successor.

Leadership transitions for two electric co-ops

Corn Belt Energy Corporation's (CBEC) board of directors unanimously selected Ryan Campbell as the co-op's next president/CEO, following the retirement of former President/CEO Don Taylor.

Taylor retired after 18 years with CBEC, where he led the co-op since 2013. Throughout his tenure, he helped guide the cooperative through growth and change while fostering a culture centered on safety, innovation, financial responsibility and member service.

"CBEC is an outstanding cooperative with the focus to serve the members," Taylor said. "The entire team is dedicated to serving the members. There is a lot of change in the electric utility world, and I am confident the co-op will continue to meet members' needs into the future."

Campbell brings more than 33 years of experience with CBEC to his new role. Throughout his career, he has served in a variety of operational leadership positions, most recently as vice president of electric distribution. His extensive knowledge of the cooperative, dedication to employees and commitment to member service make him well-positioned to lead CBEC.

Campbell said he is honored by the opportunity to serve as the co-op's next president/CEO. "It is a privilege to continue serving the members, employees and communities of CBEC," Campbell said. "Our cooperative has a strong foundation, and I look forward to building on that legacy while remaining focused on our mission of providing safe, reliable and affordable energy to the people we serve."

Tri-County Electric Cooperative (TCEC) has announced that Danny Hopfinger has been selected as the co-op's next general manager.

Hopfinger has served TCEC and its members faithfully throughout his years with the co-op. His experience, leadership and roots in southern Illinois will help guide TCEC as it continues to provide safe, reliable and affordable electricity while preparing for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

"I am honored and humbled to be selected as the next general manager for TCEC," Hopfinger said. "I look forward to working with our employees and the board to continue providing high-quality service to our members."

Hopfinger most recently served as the co-op's director of engineering. He succeeded interim manager Bob Hunzinger, who led TCEC during its search for a new manager. Hunzinger retired in 2025 as president/CEO of Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative after 11 years in the role and more than 40 in the industry. 📞



Danny Hopfinger

AIEC, CBEC, TCEC



America's Electric Cooperatives PAC

Celebrating 60 years of grassroots advocacy

Sixty years ago, when Lyndon B. Johnson was president, electric cooperative leaders came together to create a political action committee dedicated to ensuring that rural America had a voice in D.C.

That effort became America's Electric Cooperatives PAC, formerly known as ACRE. Supported by more than 25,000 contributors from electric co-ops across the country, the PAC has spent six decades helping elect candidates who understand the unique challenges facing rural communities and the co-ops that serve them.

"It's a true grassroots PAC," said Amy Lewis, the National Rural

Continued on page 10

KENTUCKY

APRIL 29 -
MAY 2, 2027

Derby

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Single	\$8,895	\$4,995	\$3,900

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Join us as we visit Churchill Downs to witness the exhilarating Kentucky Derby as it should be experienced – with a VIP package ensuring ultimate comfort while you watch the Race for the Roses! Enjoy premium perks like covered, reserved seating, offering excellent views for both races; exclusive access to the Affirmed Lounge, featuring gourmet buffets, an open bar, self-service wagering stations and mutuel tellers, live TV coverage of the event, and more; unlimited concessions within the track; and a VIP Fast Access Pass, making it quick and easy to enter the track. With three nights' lodging at the Drury Inn and three included breakfasts you'll have everything you need to make the most of your time in Louisville and your Derby experience. Don't miss your chance to experience world-class racing!

Highlights:

- VIP package exclusive perks
- Covered, reserved seating
- Affirmed Lounge access
- Unlimited in-track concessions
- VIP Fast Access Pass



Where is it?

To celebrate ICL's 1,000th issue, we gave away \$100 gift cards to 10 readers who entered our August 2026 Hidden Object contest. We received more than 2,500 submissions. Congratulations to our lucky winners: Leroy Sparks, Coles-Moultrie Electric Cooperative; Joel Aralikatti, Gretchen Clemmons and Rebecca Hepner, Corn Belt Energy Corporation; Kevin Taylor, Egyptian Electric Cooperative Association; Peggy Kinsey, Illinois Electric Cooperative; Mary Cinto, JCE Co-op; Judy Childress, Norris Electric Cooperative; Ed Klelecka, Rock Energy Cooperative; and Doug McMillen, Western Illinois Electrical Coop.

The tractor hidden in the September 2026 issue was on page 11 in the Datebook 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.

For this month's hidden object search, be on the lookout for Frankenstein's monster, in honor of Halloween. The symbol, pictured above, can vary in size and will NOT be hidden on this page, page 6, a lettered page (the local co-op pages) 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

Electric Cooperative Association's (NRECA) PAC and political engagement director. "Its strength comes from thousands of cooperative leaders and employees who voluntarily invest in advocacy because they understand what's at stake for their members and communities."

Since its founding in 1966, the PAC has evolved alongside the cooperative network it serves, said Kelly Cushman, NRECA's vice president of political programs.

"What began as an effort to help elect policymakers who understood co-ops has become a critical component of NRECA's advocacy strategy, helping ensure that electric cooperatives have a seat at the table on issues ranging from economic development to energy policy," she said.

As NRECA celebrates the PAC's 60th anniversary, America's Electric Cooperatives PAC has raised nearly \$3.4 million during the current election cycle alone for congressional candidates from both political parties, according to Federal Election Commission records through the end of June.

Cushman said the PAC's success reflects a simple principle that has guided cooperatives for generations: Local people working together can achieve more collectively than they can individually.

"Thousands of contributors, each making modest annual investments, have helped create a powerful and respected voice for electric cooperatives in the nation's capital," she said.

"That voice has become increasingly important as policymakers consider issues that directly affect the ability of cooperatives to deliver safe, reliable and affordable electricity to their consumer-members." 💡

Erin Kelly, NRECA



Partial rollback of EPA Power Plant Rule

The Trump administration has repealed major parts of a 2024 rule regulating power plant greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and issued a separate proposal to eliminate all remaining

GHG emissions standards for power plants, providing relief from requirements that the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) has said are legally flawed, unachievable and a risk to electric reliability.

Although the partial repeal is a positive step, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) must "finish the job" and quickly finalize rolling back the rest of the Biden-era rule, NRECA CEO Jim Matheson said, with new natural gas plants still facing severe limits on how often they can run at a time of surging demand from data centers, artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing and electrification.

The EPA finalized a rule to eliminate all Biden administration GHG standards for existing coal-fired units. The final rule also repeals carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) requirements for new natural gas plants. The actions follow extensive NRECA advocacy against the 2024 rule before the EPA, Congress and courts.

Electric co-ops have said the CCS mandates would force them to shut down needed capacity because the required carbon controls are costly and not commercially available. The necessary pipeline infrastructure would also not be available by the compliance deadline.

The now-defunct requirements would have made many existing coal plants and new gas plants capture 90% of their carbon emissions by 2032, effectively mandating CCS.

But other non-CCS-based GHG requirements remain on the books for new gas plants that would limit many units from running more than 40% of the time and others 20%. The EPA has released a new proposal that would overturn those mandates.

Electric co-ops have plans to invest nearly \$29 billion to bring more than 20 gigawatts of new gas generation online, enough to power 17 million American homes. The remaining EPA GHG rules would restrict new gas plants' operations, resulting in higher costs for co-ops and their members.

"NRECA will continue to advocate for EPA to repeal the remaining parts of the 2024 rule so co-ops can build and run new state-of-the-art natural gas plants to meet unprecedented demand growth and ensure affordable, reliable power for their members," said Dan Bosch, NRECA's director of regulatory affairs. 💡

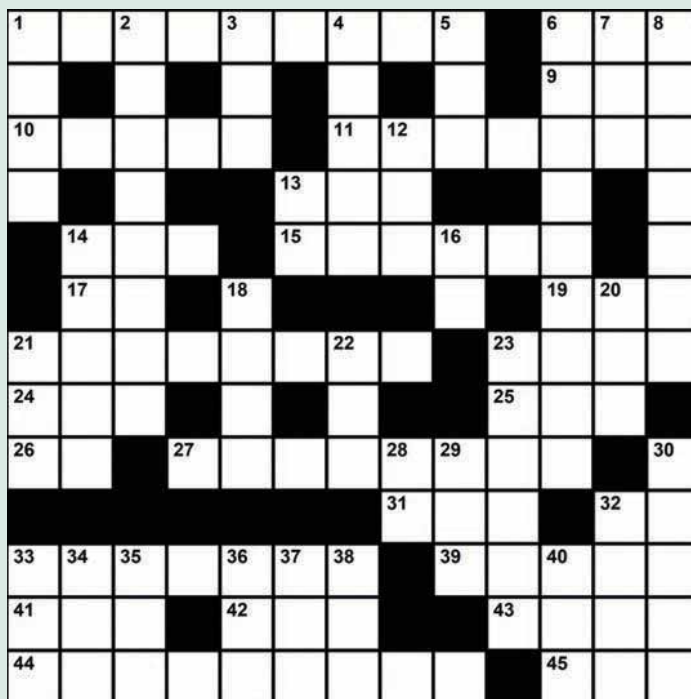
Molly Christian, NRECA

Across

- 1 Haunted house in Downers Grove near Chicago
- 6 Network that co-produced "Tales from the Crypt" TV series
- 9 Consume
- 10 Horror movie directed by Ridley Scott
- 11 Covert operation
- 13 Environmentally friendly, for short
- 14 Witch's curse
- 15 Apparitions in a haunted house
- 17 Infrared, briefly
- 19 Country lass
- 21 Bony Halloween costume
- 23 Mafia boss
- 24 Guided
- 25 Gobbled up
- 26 Twelve months, abbr.
- 27 Terrifying haunted house in Montgomery, Ill.
- 31 Toyota SUV model
- 32 Salvation Army, briefly
- 33 Bloodsucking creature of the night
- 39 Sheds tears
- 41 Towering peak in Europe
- 42 Knight's title
- 43 Mild exclamation of annoyance
- 44 Terrifying dream
- 45 Pig's pen
- 5 Woman's secret
- 6 Haunted house in Lockport
- 7 Halloween flying decoration
- 8 Shakespearean tragedy
- 12 Also
- 13 For example, abbr.
- 14 Trail walker
- 16 Street, for short
- 18 Prefix with byte
- 20 Big galoot
- 21 Cunning and crafty
- 22 Surgery ctrs., abbr.
- 23 Sculpted from wood
- 28 Chemical symbol for argon
- 29 Crow's cry
- 30 Spiteful
- 32 Minor quarrel
- 33 He fought against Dracula, Abraham _____ Helsing

Down

- 1 Basement of the ____: haunted house in Aurora
- 2 Trembled with fright
- 3 Vessel for ashes
- 4 Dutch painter known for nightmarish works, Hieronymus



- 34 Boxing legend Muhammad
- 35 Fuel efficiency measure, abbr.
- 36 Suffix denoting a believer or practitioner
- 37 Boundary
- 38 Historical time period
- 40 Medical drama sites, abbr.

Solution on page 33.



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ENERGY**

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OCTOBER/NOVEMBER **Datebook**

LET'S GO!

Oct. 24 Halloween Pony Party GALENA

Get ready for pony rides, fun games with ponies and a Halloween craft

Nov. 1 Gym Bob's Jamboree BIBLE GROVE

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

Nov. 6 PotterFest DANVILLE

A magical evening filled with wizarding activities and mystical treats

Nov. 6-7 Hobnob Holiday Market SPRINGFIELD

Festive shopping at the Illinois State Fairgrounds

For more information, a complete listing of events or to submit an event, visit icl.coop/datebook.



Night of the Living Health Fair

OCTOBER
23

Rural Health, Inc. will host its fifth Halloween-themed health fair for kids of all ages. With the theme "Movie Monsters and TV Terrors," everyone is invited to come dressed as their favorite horror character for a night of healthy, spooky fun. Visitors will enjoy trick-or-treating, playing games, and learning about the many healthcare services and programs in southern Illinois from local providers. Food and beverages will be available for purchase.

Oct. 23, 2026: 5:30-7:30 p.m.

- Rural Health, Inc., 513 N. Main St., Anna
Admission: free
ruralhealthinc.org or facebook.com/ruralhealthinc

Pulaski Pecan Bonanza

OCTOBER
24

Go nuts for the annual festival celebrating all things pecan. There will be free parking, food, vendors, music, the Pulaski Pecan Parade Senior Pageant, a 50/50 drawing and more. The event will be fun for all ages. Go to the Pulaski Pecan Bonanza's Facebook page for more information.

Oct. 24, 2026: all day

- Pulaski County Fairgrounds, 497 W. Commercial Ave., Pulaski
Admission: free
facebook.com/PulaskiPecanBonanza



Mount Carroll Pumpkin Fest

OCTOBER
31

Get into the Halloween spirit with a variety of free, family-friendly activities, including story time at the library, pumpkin painting, dancing witches, mini gourd build-n-race track, giant inflatable games, a variety of activities for kids and a ping-pong ball drop. The farmers market opens at 8 a.m. with many vendors, food options and live music.

Oct. 31, 2026: 8 a.m.-1 p.m.

- Downtown Mount Carroll, 320 N. Main St., Mount Carroll
Admission: free
facebook.com/events/1065174135874524

Friends of Carbondale Public Library Book Sale

NOVEMBER
7-8

The Friends of Carbondale Public Library holds periodic book sales in the Brush Building — the large brick building located in the library's parking lot with a book mural painted on the north side. There will be eight rooms full of books, and most cost \$1. The half-price sale is on Sunday. Access to the parking lot is on Monroe Street.

Nov. 7, 2026: 8 a.m.-3 p.m. and Nov. 8: 1-4 p.m.

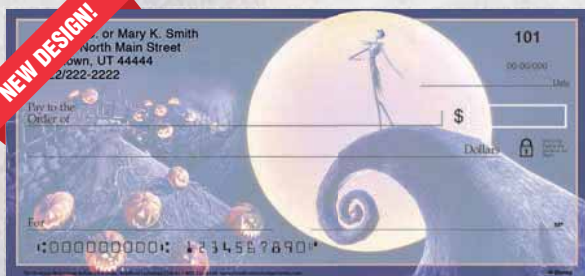
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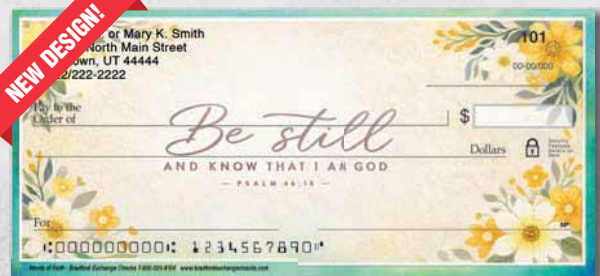
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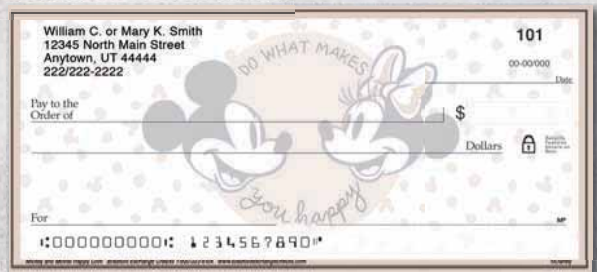
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Before the cold sets in

Prepare your home for winter

WHILE WE MAY STILL be recovering from the heat waves of summer, now is the time to prepare for winter. From furnaces to fireplaces, there's a lot to consider and safety tips to remember before cold temperatures set in.

Cold weather means more time indoors and increased use of heating equipment, fireplaces and kitchen appliances. A few simple precautions can help prevent fires, electrical hazards and carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning while keeping your home warm and safe this winter.

Use heating equipment safely. Keep anything that can burn at least 3 feet away from furnaces, radiators, fireplaces, electric or wood-burning stoves, and space heaters. Maintain a 3-foot kid- and pet-free zone around heating equipment, and only use the fuel specified by the manufacturer.

To prevent CO buildup inside the home, keep snow and debris clear of outdoor furnaces and appliance vents, and never use

fuel-burning heaters in enclosed spaces unless they are designed and properly vented for indoor use.

CO is a deadly, odorless, colorless gas. Be sure to learn symptoms of CO poisoning, which include headache, dizziness, weakness, upset stomach, vomiting, chest pain and confusion.

Hire a qualified professional to install and service stationary heating equipment and water heaters according to the manufacturer's instructions. Have your heating system, vents and chimneys cleaned and inspected every year by a qualified professional.

To prevent electrical hazards, plug heaters and electric fireplaces directly into wall outlets. Never use extension cords or power strips. Plug only one heat-producing appliance into an electrical outlet at a time, as electrical overload can cause shocks and start fires.

Turn off portable space heaters when leaving the room or going to

bed, and unplug them when not in use. Be sure to keep electric cords out of walkways and high-traffic areas. Inspect cords and plugs regularly for damage, fraying or other signs of wear and tear, and replace damaged equipment.

You should be prepared year-round for an emergency. Install CO and fire alarms on every level and outside sleeping areas. Devices should be tested monthly. Leave your home immediately if the CO detector goes off, and call 911. Create and practice a home fire escape plan with your family.

Finally, always be prepared for weather-related emergencies, including power outages. Be sure to have plenty of nonperishable food on hand and extra water stored in clean containers. If bad weather is forecasted, avoid travel, fully charge your cell phone, and keep an up-to-date emergency kit on hand.

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



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

Get your ducts in a row

Tips to seal in savings

IF YOU LIVE IN a home with a forced air furnace, the biggest energy waster may be out of sight. Improve your home's efficiency and comfort by repairing and sealing ductwork.

Around 20% to 30% of the air you pay to heat or cool is lost through leaks, holes or poorly installed ductwork in the average home, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. This results in wasted energy and uncomfortable homes, regardless of the thermostat setting.

Properly sealing ducts can reduce energy waste. If you have a room that is cold in winter and hot in summer, the culprit might be a leaky or disconnected duct.

Duct sealing also helps with indoor air quality. Leaky return ducts can pull air from the spaces they run through, such as attics and crawl spaces. You don't want to breathe in dirt, dust and insulation. If you have gas appliances, such as a gas water heater, dryer or furnace, leaky return ducts can inadvertently cause backdraft, introducing combustion gases back into the home instead of outdoors where they belong.

You can seal ducts yourself or hire a professional. For the do-it-yourself approach, start with a visual inspection to determine your duct type. Most homes have flexible or metal ducts.

Metal ductwork comes in various shapes and sizes, including round and rectangular, and with various options for turns and connections. Ducts should be insulated when they run through unconditioned spaces, such as crawl spaces, attics and garages. If your metal ducts are insulated, you must remove the insulation to properly seal them, then reinsulate.

Flexible ducts typically have an inner and outer layer with

insulation in between. The inner layer is made of bendable plastic reinforced with wire, like a stretched-out Slinky covered in plastic. The outer layer holds the insulation in place. The inner liner in flexible ducts can become brittle over time, cracking easily and causing leaks. If your inner liner is in bad shape, replace the flexible duct.

Check for any obvious disconnections, gaps, extra bends or sagging ducts. Improve airflow by using short, straight, taut runs. Avoid sags and excess turns.

Metal ductwork should be fastened together at each joint using sheet metal screws. Make sure your ducts are properly supported to keep the joints from separating over time. For flexible ducts, use Panduit straps. These are heavy-duty nylon zip ties that offer long-term durability and a tensioning tool specifically designed to tighten them.

When it comes to sealing ducts, use products designed for the job. Seal every joint and seam using duct-sealing mastic — a thick paste that can be applied with a paintbrush or gloved hand. When it dries, mastic creates a flexible, airtight seal, eliminating duct leakage.

Use mesh tape to bridge larger gaps before applying mastic. Remove register covers inside the home to seal the joints and seams there. You also want a good seal where the duct meets drywall or flooring.

In easier-to-reach areas, you can opt to use UL-listed foil-backed tape designed for ductwork. Do not



A side-by-side comparison shows where to apply mesh tape and sealant to close gaps around metal ducts.

use duct tape. Fluctuations in temperature cause the adhesive to fail.

Duct sealing is messy, so make sure to protect yourself and your home. Use drop cloths to protect flooring. Metal tape and the edges of metal ducts are sharp, so put on coated work or garden gloves underneath nitrile or latex disposable gloves. To protect your arms, wear a long-sleeved shirt tucked into your gloves.

After air sealing, have an HVAC professional test the airflow during your next annual maintenance visit.

If you don't feel comfortable getting your hands dirty, hire a professional. Most companies that install ductwork or heating and cooling systems can also seal ducts. 💡



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

Password
123456

Sailboat lemon fire pillow

And other ways to make passwords difficult to crack

MANY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE MEMBERS manage important parts of their lives online. They pay electric bills, participate in efficiency programs, monitor energy use through member portals and receive outage alerts through co-op apps and websites. Protecting those accounts starts with a strong password.

With October recognized as National Cybersecurity Awareness Month, it's a good reminder that one of the easiest ways to protect yourself is by revisiting how you think about passwords. Many of the rules we learned about creating them are now outdated.

Mix in a capital letter. Add a number. Throw in a symbol like a dollar sign. We were told that a password full of strange characters was a strong password. It turns out that advice was only half right, and the half that got left out matters more than you might think.

Here's the surprising truth: The length of your password protects you more than how complicated it is. A short password packed with symbols can be cracked by a computer in seconds. A longer password made of several unrelated words is far harder to break.

The reason comes down to math. Computers crack passwords by guessing, and modern ones try billions of combinations every second. Every extra character multiplies the guesses a hacker must make, far more than swapping an "a" for an "@" ever could.

Think of it like a bike lock. A short combination is quick to spin through, but a longer one simply has too many settings to try.

The nation's top security experts agree. The National Institute of Standards and Technology, which sets the standards many companies follow, now recommends longer passwords and has dropped the old rules that recommended a mix of symbols and numbers.

Why the change? Because those rules often backfire. When told to add symbols, people do predictable things, like ending with an exclamation mark. Hackers know these tricks and check for them first. The rules made passwords harder for humans to remember but easier for criminals to guess.

So, what should you do? Whether you are logging into your electric co-op's member portal, your online banking account, healthcare provider or favorite shopping site, the same advice applies. Think in phrases, not single words.

A passphrase is just several words strung together, like "Sailboat lemon fire pillow." The trick is to pick words that have nothing to do with each other. The stranger the mix, the better. Avoid song lyrics, common sayings or anything tied to you, since those are easier to guess. Aim for at least 15 characters when you can.

What about sites that still demand a number or a symbol? You don't have to give up your passphrase. Just work the extra character

into a spot you will remember, like "Sailboat7 lemon fire pillow." Don't simply tack a "1" or "!" onto the end. That's the first thing criminals check.

A few more simple habits will keep you safe. Avoid personal details like your birthday, address or pet's name, since those are easy for others to find. Use a different password for every account, including your electric co-op's member portal.

Companies get hacked, and criminals try the stolen passwords on other sites, so one password should never unlock your whole life. If remembering them all feels like too much, a password manager can store them for you. And turn on multifactor authentication whenever it is offered, where a website texts a code to your phone or an app, adding an extra layer of security.

You may also start seeing passkeys. This newer option lets you sign in with your face, fingerprint or a PIN instead of a password. Because there is no password to steal or guess, passkeys are secure and worth using whenever offered.

As more services move online, good password habits are becoming an important part of everyday cybersecurity. You don't need to be a technology expert to protect yourself. A longer password or passphrase is one of the simplest and most effective steps you can take. Pick a phrase you can remember, keep it unique for every account, and you will be much harder for criminals to target. 💡



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

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money comes in and out. Start by reviewing one month of expenses. Separate your needs from your wants, and look for at least one area to cut back on.

The goal isn't to eliminate everything you enjoy. It's to create (and increase) a gap between what you

capital can build wealth — but high-interest debt creates massive fees that will drag you down.

List your debts by balance and interest rate. Pay off the highest-interest debt first while making minimum payments on everything else. This saves money on interest and frees up cash flow.

Invest early and consistently

Building wealth is like the fable of the tortoise and the hare. Even if others make more money, you can win the long-term financial race through strategy and dedication.

Aim to consistently invest a portion of your income, increasing that amount as your finances allow. Consider consistently investing in tax-advantaged accounts such as a Roth IRA, and leverage employer matching contributions when available.

Set clear goals

Don't shoot the basketball if there's no hoop. Setting short-, medium- and long-term goals gives your financial plan direction and keeps you motivated. That might mean saving \$1,000 for an emergency, paying off a credit card by July or saving \$100,000 for a down payment on a house.

Break large targets into small milestones with clear timelines. This allows you to calculate actionable steps — like your required contributions every month.

A brick seems insignificant until thousands of them together form a house. Building financial freedom is the same — you don't need to change your entire life overnight. Start by choosing one of these five steps now and begin laying bricks for a solid financial foundation. Small habits repeated for decades can change your financial trajectory. 💡



Financial freedom does not require extraordinary luck, a substantial salary or even deep technical knowledge. For most people, it starts with discipline and consistency.

Your financial journey requires delayed gratification and self-discipline — small, consistent decisions that compound over time to yield financial freedom. That freedom begins with your next decision, not your next raise. After becoming enthralled with the subject of personal finance, I have outlined five steps to achieve financial freedom.

Build a budget

To make a boat float, you must plug the leaks. Know how much

earn and spend. This gap can be used to save, invest and build wealth.

Create an emergency fund

Life is like the film "Titanic." You never know when you will hit an iceberg. Once your budget creates some breathing room, you should work toward saving three to six months' worth of expenses in a high-yield savings account. This emergency fund can cover costs like car repairs or unexpected medical bills without derailing long-term goals.

Pay down high-interest debt

Don't build a house on a foundation infested with termites. Not all debt is bad — low-interest



Colton Leonard represents Illinois on NRECA's Youth Leadership Council. He is a student dedicated to financial literacy, placing third nationally in FBLA Personal Finance, serving as Global Director of Finance for the Junior Economic Club, and helping raise more than \$250,000 for SIPO, an organization teaching financial literacy.

The Incogni logo, featuring the word "incogni" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The letter "o" is replaced by a solid black circle.A light blue, star-shaped badge with a white border. Inside, the text "60% off today!" is written in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The "60%" is significantly larger than the rest of the text.

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ALL ABOARD

The art of model railroading

PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEVEN HAMILTON



By Les O'Dell

AN ELECTRIC TRAIN SET is a classic gift for kids. Along with building systems, dollhouses and board games, model railroads have been unwrapped for decades. Across Illinois, model railroaders tell how a love of a gifted train led to a lifelong pastime — and more.

“The train on Christmas is an entry point for a lot of people, but it’s a pursuit that many of us have taken beyond a toy train,” explains Steven Hamilton of Flora-based TAG Trains, a retailer of model railroading equipment at meets and shows throughout the Midwest.

Even working as a switchman and engine foreman for the Illinois Central Railroad could not quench Chuck McCabe’s love for hobby trains. He has shared that love as the owner of Chuck’s Depot, a hobby shop in Marion since 1994. “I started a layout at home, and I couldn’t buy the products I wanted locally, so I decided to put in a hobby shop,” he recalls.

The lower level of his shop is home to his own layout. “The basement is 64 feet long. That’s a scale mile,” he explains, talking about the basement layout that features dozens of engines and hundreds of boxcars, flatbeds and tankers, as well as railyards, communities and roads. “There are five tracks going the full length of that side — the main lines.”

Springfield’s Roger Holmes also fell in love with model railroading as a child. He shares stories of his 4-foot-by-8-foot model railroad,

which he started in an apartment while in law school.

“It has grown several times since then,” he says with a smile. “I’ve been in the same house since 1996, with a finished basement that is 13 by 21. When I ran out of space for my trains, I had more basement dug.”

Today, Holmes’ layout features a depiction of Chicago (complete with accurate models of skyscrapers and other landmarks), as well as a suburban setting and a rural community, just like the many throughout the Prairie State. Unlike his law school apartment’s layout, he can control this entire panorama and the trains on it from one device in the palm of his hand.

Complete control

Dave Macomber, president of the Burlington Model Railroad Engineers Society (BMRES), says the control systems, called DCC for digital command control, are a far cry from the hardwired transformers many kids had years ago. DCC is a computerized system where tracks are fully powered, and each engine has an onboard computer chip that decodes digital messages sent through the rails.

Signals are sent from portable handheld controllers rather than a lever alongside the tracks. Because each decoder has its own unique address, multiple trains can run on the same layout at the same time, each doing different things. DCC has added realism and functionality to model train layouts.

“The DCC is a little computer box and booster that puts current on the tracks, and there are little chips in the locomotives themselves that tell that particular locomotive what they need to use the power for — turn the lights on, go half-throttle, full speed or whatever,” Macomber says. “We have radio controllers that send signals to the locomotives to increase speed, decrease speed, blow the horn, ring the bell and turn on track sounds. We do all of that with the engines now.”

The system has revolutionized large-scale layouts like those operated by clubs. At these gatherings, hobbyists share their love of railroading and often develop extensive layouts. Macomber’s group, BMRES, is an example.

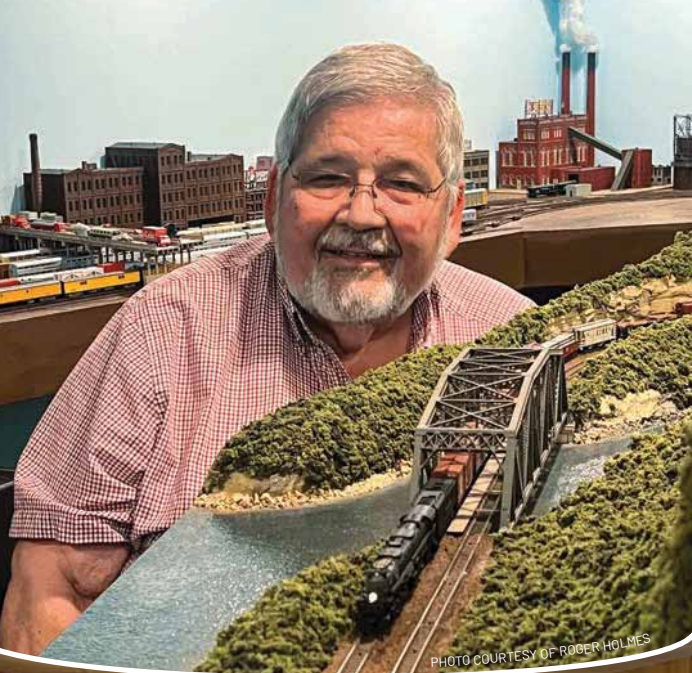
The club moniker comes not from the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, which has lines not far from the group’s headquarters, but rather from Burlington, Iowa, where the club got its start. Today, this club has its own building on Western Illinois Electrical Coop. lines near Gladstone in Henderson County.

“We started out in Burlington, but when we lost our room in the back of a hobby shop, we actually were able to purchase a lot of land,” says Macomber, the club’s president, adding that club members built an 1,800-square-foot garage-like structure in 2001 specifically for model railroading.

He says club members gather every weekend to work on layouts

Left: Steven Hamilton’s goal with his model railroad is to accurately depict real railways in Illinois.

Top: An Amtrak train makes its way across the Greene River in Steven Hamilton’s model railway layout. Notice the detailed weathering and dirt on the locomotive.



Top: Roger Holmes with the Chicago skyline portion of his N scale model railroad layout in his Springfield home.

Bottom: Members of the Northwestern Illinois Model Railroad Club

and “run trains” on the five-level layout, adding that they have trains on tracks anywhere from 24 inches off the floor all the way up to 6 inches from the ceiling.

“For a club layout like ours, the DCC lets all of the members be their own engineers,” Macomber explains. “That means we have to have a centralized dispatch, so if you’re running your train around the layout, you have to tell dispatch where you are and where you are going because the dispatcher has to throw the turnouts (what you might call railroad switches) for you, or you won’t get where you want your train to go. We try to make it like the real thing.”

Home hobbyists appreciate DCC, too. Holmes says the newer technology brings with it more realism to layouts. “With digital command control, you can have

multiple engines on the same track and control the speed of each, plus it gives you the opportunity for all of the sounds,” he says. “It adds a lot of interest and realism.”

While some enthusiasts are drawn to the logistics of dispatch, others just love watching and running the trains. Some hobbyists are fascinated by making the layout realistic. “With any model railroad club, there are a couple of distinct groups within the club,” explains Duane Imel of the Northwestern Illinois Model Railroad Club in Chadwick and JCE Co-op member. “One is the operators who like to run trains, and then there’s the modelers who build the layouts, build the scenery and tie it all together.”

Scales and eras

No matter what niche of the hobby they are drawn to, would-be model railroaders who take to the tracks must first decide which tracks. Model trains, rails and tracks come in a variety of sizes, known as scales.

According to the National Model Railroad Association, scales imply a “scaled-down” version of trains, buildings and accessories. A wide variety of sizes are manufactured worldwide, with a few more common in the U.S.

McCabe says he prefers what is known as HO scale, the most popular size of model trains. He says more HO trains and accessories are available than any other size, and the scale makes up 78% of all model railroading sales.

HO engines and rolling stock are 1/87 the size of the real thing — meaning a model track about 60 feet long equals a real mile of rail. To put it another way, most full-size diesel locomotives are about 16 feet tall; in an HO scale model layout, these engines stand about 2 inches high.

It is also among the most familiar model train scales. Many of the trains sold over the years

by manufacturers such as Atlas, Bachmann, Life-Like, Tyco, Athearn and Walthers have been HO scale.

For those wanting something smaller, Z scale is a popular option. “Z scale is the most common commercialized small scale,” Hamilton explains. “It is very small, but you can fit a lot of layout in a briefcase.” Officially, Z scale is 1:220. One step up is N scale at 1:160. Hamilton says it is the second most popular model railroading size in the U.S. Holmes’ basement layout is N scale.

“I liked N scale from the beginning because it was smaller, and you can model much broader scenes. I can fit Chicago in a 13-foot-wide, 3-foot-deep space. There are probably 20 buildings in my Chicago area, whereas if I was in HO scale, there would only be eight or nine,” the retired circuit court judge says, adding that N scale allows for longer trains. “A freight train looks like a real freight train.”

Larger than HO is O scale. The popular Lionel brand of trains is O scale, which is 1:48, roughly twice the size of HO. With the increased size, O scale models offer more opportunity for detail, but, of course, these layouts take up much more space.

Hobbyists who want to take their railroad outside often lean toward G scale (think Garden scale), which varies between 1:20 and 1:32, depending on the manufacturer. A typical G scale boxcar is about 8 inches tall. These models are often developed for backyard layouts.

Many model railroaders also choose to depict a certain time-frame with their layouts. Some like the look of turn-of-the-century steam locomotives, while others select more recent decades.

“I generally see people modeling the so-called ‘Golden Era’ of the 1980s and ‘90s, before all of the railroad mergers,” Hamilton explains. “There’s also a subset that’s modern. That’s what I do — model what I go out and see today.”

Details, details, details

Regardless of the size of the train and the era of modeling, for many enthusiasts, model railroading is all about the details. Hamilton says his mom, a crafting enthusiast, introduced him to the pastime. “She loved having the little buildings and trees and all of the details,” he recalls. “For her, the train was just an animated part of a larger crafted thing; for me, I was enamored with the trains.”

His fondness for trains extends to real railroads, and Hamilton says he often watches trains go down the line before turning to his own layout. “I will often observe real railroad operations, and then come home and try to replicate some of the details of what I saw on my model,” he says.

Sometimes it is nearly impossible to distinguish model railroad layouts and trains from real ones. Some hobbyists’ creations are detail-driven: Train cars are customized to look dirty, weathered and old; some, like real rolling stock, even feature graffiti. Highways in layouts are complete with construction zones, patches and potholes; electric lines scatter from transfer stations, and modeled industrial

areas are complete with piles of scrap and even litter.

Other hobbyists go even further. “There are individuals in the hobby,” Hamilton, a member of Wayne-White Counties Electric Cooperative, explains, “who are so expressly detail-oriented that they’ve been given the nickname of ‘rivet counters.’ They want a model to be 100% accurate — not just to the type or model of a locomotive, but to the exact accuracy of a particular cab number of the original from the real world, right down to the number of links in the chain on a railing to the style of window wipers.”

The advent of 3D printing is giving many model railroaders another option for designing accessories and layouts. Hamilton says that a wide variety of landscaping and models are also available commercially for those who are hesitant to design, paint or craft their own.

“This is one of those hobbies where you can learn all sorts of skills that apply to other areas of your life,” Hamilton explains. “Through model railroading, I’ve learned electrical, computer programming, carpentry, civil engineering, a little bit of machining, and, of course, art.”

Enthusiasts recommend those thinking about model railroading do some research. Hamilton says the National Model Railroad Association has numerous resources on its website and can lead one to clubs and clinics nearby. He also suggests YouTube to see what is possible in model railroading and learn some basics. Of course, finding clubs and individual hobbyists is a great way to start as well.

Holmes says the appeal of model railroading is simple: “It’s the chance to create and be the master of your own world in your own basement,” he says, adding that model railroading offers something for everyone.

“We have a lot of great modelers,” McCabe explains. “It’s people from every industry and occupation — doctors, college presidents, lawyers, mechanics, laborers, every type of industry. This is a release for people,” he says.

Hamilton adds, “We’re seeing people from all walks of life, men and women, old and young, from all over the world, and that is encouraging. I’m always meeting people who are into model trains. Model railroading is very much alive and well.”

Left: Roger Holmes demonstrates the use of a digital command controller, the device that controls all of the locomotives on his model railroad layout.

Right: Steven Hamilton works on some of the finer details of his HO scale model railroad.



PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVEN HAMILTON



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROGER HOLMES

Handcrafted with Purpose

Galena Spoon Company carves a new chapter

By Peggy Francomb

MORNING LIGHT POURS THROUGH the storefront windows of Galena Spoon Company as Paul Pendola works at a three-legged log workbench, transforming a piece of wood into a spoon with a few hand tools. The quiet hands-on nature of the craft contrasts with his former corporate career in hospitality, a world he stepped away from after realizing he wanted a different kind of life.

Launching the business in 2014 in Dundee as the Fox River Spoon Co., Pendola began exploring whether the craft he was drawn to could support a new way of living.

"I can't say in the beginning there was a clear goal," says the JCE Co-op member. "I had a strong desire to simplify my life and fell in love with the simplicity and authenticity of the green wood spoon carving craft."

Today, Galena Spoon Company reflects that shift from corporate career to an intentional, handcrafted business rooted in a historic town whose landscape, 19th-century architecture and vibrant Main Street create the perfect backdrop. The shop features Pendola's spoons, boards and other utensils alongside carefully curated woodenware by other makers from around the Midwest.

"I love the process of demonstrating the craft, engaging with customers about the design and production process, sharing kitchen and cooking stories," Pendola says.

His appreciation for woodcarving began while living in London where spoon carving, specifically traditional green woodworking, is popular, he explains. "I'm certain I got the bug when I was there," he adds.

Before carving spoons, Pendola hadn't done any woodworking. "I never took a shop class, never had a wood shop at home," he says. "I was a creative spirit, but never did woodworking."

After returning to the U.S., he often carried a few tools in his backpack during walks along the Fox River and carved spoons to give to friends. Their encouragement sparked the idea that the craft could become something more.

It took a few years to build up confidence to sell at farmers markets and fairs. He started to see a path toward making it into a full-time business. Already familiar with Galena, he moved there in 2017 where he bought a house at the top of the Green Street stairs. He spent weekends



carving and selling spoons from a small tent on the side patio of “The Spoon Carver Cottage.”

“The trolleys would go by, people would see me and then hike up the stairs to figure out what this guy was doing up there carving spoons,” Pendola recalled.

Although the cottage setup was “perfect,” his goal was to open a brick-and-mortar “meet the maker” store where he could carve in the window and sell his wares. By 2019, he had enough momentum to leave his corporate job and open his first Galena Spoon Company shop on Hill Street, just off Main. That little store quickly became an off-the-beaten-path destination. The Illinois Office of Tourism recognized him as an Illinois Made Maker.

“For a little maker like me, that was significant,” he says. “It was a confidence boost, and I got a tremendous amount of publicity from that.”

Pendola started teaching classes and added small wholesale accounts, custom projects and an online shop, but the little store was barely breaking even. He knew it needed Main Street visibility.

“I knew it could work if I could get the shop down to Main Street. That was the key. I needed the audience there,” he says.

While considering a 150-square-foot window display — essentially a storefront without a store — at the DeSoto House, Pendola learned that Root Beer Revelry, a craft soda shop, was for sale. He was encouraged to buy and merge the two spaces. However, he had already had his eye on the root beer business and soon he found himself with two stores in the DeSoto House, the root beer shop and the spoon shop.

As he focused on the root beer business, he kept the spoon store “on simmer,” carving and selling spoons at the small shop on weekends or by chance. Soon, the tiny window location was generating more business than the Hill Street shop.

“It was everything I wanted,” Pendola says. “But it wasn’t big enough.”

The search continued for a new location. He found it at 305 S. Main St., what he calls its “new and forever home.” The store is large enough for him to carve in the window while expanding the shop’s offerings.

Besides spoons, the company produces a wide range of handcrafted woodware including spatulas, boards and serving utensils. All items are made from locally sourced wood.

Along with Pendola’s creations, the shop features handcrafted products from other makers such as the Holland Bowl Mill of Holland, Mich., Whetstone Woodenware of Silverlake, Ind., Edward Wohl Studios of Spring Green, Wis., and Gina DeSantis Ceramics, among others. Stressing it is not a kitchenware store, he notes shoppers will also find a thoughtfully chosen selection of gourmet foods and kitchenware.

As Pendola says, there is more than meets the eye to the Galena Spoon Company. With the shop on the main level, the upstairs houses offices, warehouse space, and packing and shipping operations for the online store. He also maintains a traditional woodworking shop just outside Galena but plans to move it back to the Spoon Carver Cottage mid-2027.

The cottage is currently his home and is where he teaches and hosts artist events and spoon carving workshops, now paused but returning in 2027. The goal is to convert the space over the next five years into a 30-plus day artist rental where makers can create and connect.

“Our mantra is ‘meet the artist and discover the artist in you,’” Pendola says. “Hopefully visitors will leave the store or one of our workshops inspired to reconnect with themselves or others by making something in the kitchen or craft room.”

To learn more about the shop, featured makers or spoon-carving workshops, or to make online purchases, visit galenaspoonco.com. 



Left: Galena Spoon Company owner and woodcarver Paul Pendola

Right: Some of Pendola’s spoons are made entirely by hand with the one, two, three method: one piece of wood, two hands and three tools — an axe, straight knife and hook.



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Amulets and alchemy

Supporting local comes full circle

By Lisa Cherry

FOR KELSEY HARMS AND Justen Hughes, opportunity came knocking just as another door was closing. Kelsey, lead pastry chef, and Justen, former bar manager, were vacationing together when they learned that the restaurant on Petersburg Square where the couple met — and where Kelsey still worked — was closing.

"We were in Arizona when I got the call from the owner," she says, mentioning that it was scary to hear her job wouldn't be there when she returned. As luck would have it, however, shortly after receiving the news, someone else reached out to her.

That person was Liz Carter, an owner of First and Third Boutique and Wine Bar, also located on the square, who shared with Kelsey that their building would soon be for sale. "I bartended for her a little bit, and she allowed me to do some bakery pop-ups, because I'd started a cottage kitchen," says Kelsey. "She knew I wanted my own place one day. Before she put it on the market, she reached out to me and said, 'Hey, are you interested?'"

A month later, her parents Jim and Ellie Harms, longtime Menard Electric Cooperative members, purchased the building, and it was all hands on deck creating its new identity

as Cafe Amulet. The name pays homage to the Talisman at Broadgauge, the bakery where Kelsey previously worked. "An amulet is a type of talisman. ... I gained a lot of experience there, and I'm grateful for that," she says.

Jim, who did interior remodeling prior to retirement, lent his expertise to the new venture. "I've been retired for about four years. Now I say I work for free for our kids," he laughs. "Our kids always have a project going on. [I get paid] in coffee and cookies now."

"We all worked hard to get it up and going," says Ellie. What family and friends were unable to do, the Harms hired local professionals for. The project involved converting the basement into a kitchen and running plumbing and electricity into parts of the building, as well as moving commercial refrigerator/freezers and 600-pound ovens down the stairs into that new basement kitchen.

Even the health inspector was helpful during the building's overhaul, guiding the young business owners through the process. The work included putting in a drop ceiling and painting the kitchen so everything was washable, as well as putting in a three-bowl sink and a separate handwashing sink.

The family was also surprised at the amount of help offered by members of the community prior to opening. Jim's former business partner helped with painting and fabricating counter-tops; men from a neighboring business helped move equipment; Hand of Fate Brewing Company offered a helping hand on more than one occasion; the antique shop owner next door gave them a key to get easier access to their roof; Kelsey's friend created the logo based on her cat Henry (who sadly passed in January 2025); and Ellie's florist friend designed flowerboxes out front — just to name a few examples.

"Everyone just jumped in and helped without being asked," Ellie adds. "I think we'd still be working on it [without them]. ... It's just been a magnet for good things here."

Kelsey and Justen eventually plan to buy the building from her parents. "They've got that on their radar," says Ellie. "We didn't buy the building as a money-making venture," adds Jim. "She pays us rent, but we don't charge her a ton. We want to let her get going."

The structure, like others on the square, was surveyed by Abraham Lincoln. "We found out another Harms owned [it] years ago," Jim says. "We haven't been able to find [out] whether we're related." The building has served several different purposes over the years — a furniture store, a senior citizen center, a restaurant and a Gamble's Hardware Store.

These days, Cafe Amulet just celebrated its first anniversary, Kelsey and Justen are now married, and the business has transitioned from receiving help from the community to supporting other locally owned businesses — Rolling Lawns Farm milk, Janie's Mill flour, Jefferies Orchard produce, Farms of Illinois collective products, Arrowroot coffee, Ben's Spring Creek honey, Good Seeds Flower Farm, Sand Prairie Blooms ... the list goes on.

In addition, the cafe — a combination of coffee shop, bakery and wine bar — offers event space for fundraisers, paint nights, live music, yoga classes, CPR classes and parties of all kinds. The building is also home to the self-serve Wildflower & Rose Bookstore, and provides a place local artists can display their work for sale.

"I had these ideas in my head, because we have so much space," says Kelsey. "[I want] to do a little market here, too, which we might work up to at some point. Just having seasonal goods to sell that are from local farmers."

At the heart of things, however, remain good food and drink.

Kelsey's passion for pastry originated while attending Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. "I started working at a bakery there," she says. "They taught me most of what I have learned about croissant dough and production baking in general. ... I learned a lot from them, and they also sent me to the San Francisco Baking Institute."

It was while at the Edwardsville bakery that she discovered her love of baking. "I just thought, 'Oh, this is it. This is what I want to do,'" Kelsey says. "I'm not a morning person, and I had to be there at 4 a.m. ... I didn't complain, and my parents were like, 'What?'" That feeling hasn't waned. "There are days ... but I get here and I get to doing things, and I'm like, this is still it."

The cafe employs two kitchen helpers and four baristas. "They're incredible. We are so lucky to have the team that we do. Everyone is supportive of each other. [If] someone can't be here, someone's picking up that shift," says Kelsey. "It's wonderful to be able to rely on them. ... They care a lot about the product we're putting out and the people who come in."

Kelsey and Justen say the community has been receptive. "I think we've become like what we call your 'third

Left: Justen Hughes and Kelsey Harms, owners of Cafe Amulet in Petersburg

Clockwise from top right: Jim and Ellie Harms; the cafe's signature latte; products from other local businesses; a cozy nook in the bookstore; and Kelsey preparing croissant dough.





Tasty options include a roasted tomato and herbed goat cheese Danish with balsamic drizzle, and customer favorites like the cinnamon roll, croissant and toffee chocolate chip cookie.



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spot.' It's not work, and it's not home, but it's some other place you can go and just be," Kelsey explains. "That's one of the things I enjoy most about our space ... you come in, buy a cookie or a small thing ... [and] hang out as long as you want. We have people that do their work from home stuff here all day."

That said, the pastries and drinks alone are worth the visit. "Cinnamon rolls are our biggest seller, along with toffee chocolate chip cookies," she says. "We make the toffee in little batches, because store-bought toffee usually has nuts in it, and I want it to be allergen-friendly." They also sell a lot of lattes.

Savory menu items include quiche and certain Danishes. "Right now, we're doing a roasted tomato and herbed goat cheese with a balsamic drizzle," she adds. "I do a ham and cheddar croissant. We get the cheese from our local dairy farm. It's really yummy."

In the fall and winter, the cafe has soups, and currently chicken salad croissants and chicken Caesar wraps are available for lunch. As far as specials go, it depends on what's in season locally.

It's similar with the drinks Justen creates. "Whatever flavors she brings in, I try to complement. We have fresh peaches now, so I've made a peach and rosemary syrup," he says. "I think syrups are like enhancers, so I will put them in any drink that somebody wants." A recent

example was a blueberry sage syrup that patrons particularly enjoyed in a margarita.

Justen has also created signature lattes reminiscent of the name Amulet, including the Moonstone (vanilla, hazelnut honey syrup and whole milk), the Amethyst (botanical syrup, honey syrup and oat milk), and the Tiger's Eye (caramel, chocolate spiced syrup and almond milk). He has done the same with five signature cocktails.

"I get inspired by alchemy, so the five cocktails are the path to the Philosopher's Stone," he explains. "The drinks are based on the colors that they're representing, and they kind of are [those colors] actually."

They include the Nigredo (black), a carajillo; the Albedo (white), a mojito; the Citrinitas (yellow), a margarita; the Rubedo (red), an old-fashioned; and the Opus, a famous Prohibition-era cocktail called the Last Word.

It was important to the couple that the patrons of the former wine bar still had a place to go. "We wanted to make sure that place still existed for people," says Justen.

While the historical meaning of the word alchemy inspires the drink menu, its figurative meaning applies to the evolution of the new business as well — a process that changes ordinary things into something special.

"We just made the place we wanted to go to," says Justen. ☞

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No tricks, just easy treats

RECIPES THIS MONTH MAY be a little chilling. Not because we are amid spooky season, but because most of these recipes go in the freezer. While the frozen recipes aren't the obvious choice for this time of year, I was looking for recipes that are scary easy to make, and many just so happened to belong in the freezer. So, whether or not you like to bake, there are options here for you. Enjoy! 🧊

WE NEED RECIPES!

Sugar-free pies

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.



Pink (or Green) Elephant Dessert ▲

Submitted by Julie Douglas, Shelby Electric Cooperative
Servings: 12

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 13-ounce package chocolate sandwich cookies | 5 tablespoons butter, melted |
| 1 6-pack Butterfinger candy bars | 1 pint peppermint stick or mint chocolate chip ice cream, softened |

Spray a 9x13-inch dish with cooking spray. Set aside. Crush cookies and candy bars in a food processor and place in a bowl. Mix cookie mixture with melted butter until combined and press 3/4 of the mixture into the bottom and up the sides of the prepared pan. Spread softened ice cream on the crust and sprinkle the remaining cookie mixture over the top. Cover and freeze. Let thaw for 30 minutes before serving. Freeze all leftovers.

Easy Hershey Candy Bar Pie ►

Submitted by Julie Willmes, Southern Illinois Electric Cooperative
Servings: 8

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| 6 Hershey bars | 1 9-inch graham cracker crust |
| 1 8-ounce container frozen whipped topping, thawed | |

Melt Hershey bars in microwave. In a large bowl, fold chocolate in the whipped topping until combined. Pour into crust, cover and freeze. Optional, top with chocolate syrup before serving.

Rocky Road Freeze ►

Submitted by Pat Mahoney, Menard Electric Cooperative

Yields: 1-1/2 quarts

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| 1 14-ounce can sweetened condensed milk | 1 cup miniature marshmallows |
| 1/2 cup chocolate syrup | 1/2 cup miniature chocolate chips |
| 2 cups whipping cream | 1/2 cup salted peanuts |

In a small bowl, combine the milk and chocolate syrup. Set aside. In a mixing bowl, beat cream until stiff peaks form. Fold in chocolate mixture, marshmallows, chocolate chips and peanuts. Transfer to a freezer-safe container. Cover and freeze for 5 hours, or until firm.



Pecan Tarts ►

Submitted by H. Martin, Southern Illinois Electric Cooperative

Servings: 24

Crust:

- 1 8-ounce package cream cheese, softened
- 2-2/3 sticks butter or margarine, softened
- 2-2/3 cups flour

Filling:

- 4 eggs
- 3 cups brown sugar
- 4 tablespoons butter, melted
- 1 pinch salt
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 2 cups pecans, chopped

Preheat oven to 350 F. In a large bowl, cream together cream cheese and butter/margarine. Mix in flour until combined. Divide dough into 24 equal parts and shape into greased muffin tins. Mix the filling ingredients together until combined. Fill the shells. Bake for 30 minutes.



Pistachio Dessert

Submitted by Ryanne Jacoby, Western Illinois Electrical Coop.

Servings: 12

Crust:

- 2 sleeves buttery round crackers, crushed
- 1/2 cup unsalted butter, melted

Topping:

- 1/2 gallon vanilla ice cream, softened

1-1/2 cups milk

- 2 3-ounce packages instant pistachio pudding mix
- 1 8-ounce container frozen whipped topping, thawed
- 1/4 cup chocolate-covered toffee bits

Preheat the oven to 350 F. Combine cracker crumbs and melted butter in a bowl. Mix until well combined and press into the bottom of a 9x13-inch baking dish. Bake for about 15 minutes, or until crust is lightly browned. Remove from the oven and cool completely. Combine ice cream, milk and pudding mix in a bowl and spread evenly onto prepared crust. Spread whipped topping over ice cream mixture. Sprinkle toffee bits over the top. Place in freezer until frozen, at least 1 hour.





Don't lose your gourd

How to pick a pumpkin that lasts through Halloween

I DON'T THINK IT'S possible to pick the perfect pumpkin. Pumpkins today aren't like those plain orange vegetables of my youth. Today, they come in a variety of shapes, sizes and colors. Some have warts, and others have mottled coloring from green to white.

My own kids have deliberately picked misshapen pumpkins and made some creative Halloween decor for the front porch. While the perfect pumpkin is in the eye of the beholder, a few details when exploring the pumpkin patch can help you pick a lasting, handsome gourd.

When hunting for pumpkins, whether in a field or a large bin at the grocery store, the first thing to look for is if the stem is firmly attached to the pumpkin. A stem 2 to 4 inches long is just the right size. However, avoid the temptation to carry the pumpkin by the stem. Doing so risks tearing it off and creating an opening for rot to set in.

Avoid pumpkins with holes, cuts or soft spots. Inspect each pumpkin top to bottom and brush off

any soil that may be hiding a soft spot. While these small imperfections may seem minor, they are chinks in the pumpkin's armor that allow fungi and bacteria to enter and begin the decomposition process. This is especially important for those who buy pumpkins early in the fall, hoping they last until Halloween or even Thanksgiving.

The rind should feel firm and resist pressure from your fingernail. A strong rind is a sign that the pumpkin is mature and is likely to last longer.

Now that you have brought your pumpkins home, it's time to decorate. If your pumpkins will be decorative, enjoy clustering, stacking and placing them however your inner designer feels.

If you plan to carve your pumpkins, look at the calendar and weather. A carved pumpkin can last anywhere from five to 10 days before it turns into a flattened mush ball, and that's assuming ideal weather conditions.

Before carving, check the weather forecast. If temperatures

remain cool but above freezing, your pumpkin will last longer. Warm weather speeds decomposition, while freezing temperatures can damage pumpkin tissue and shorten its display life.

Optional steps include rinsing and drying your pumpkin before carving, but avoid using any soap or cleaners. Coat the inside and cut areas of the pumpkin with petroleum jelly to slow decomposition.

One last tip for extending the life of your jack-o'-lantern is to use battery-operated candles. Real wax candles emit a lot of heat, cooking the pumpkin's flesh and shortening its lifespan. That explains why, as a kid, my pumpkins only lasted Halloween night, and then they were mush.

Once Halloween ends, it's time to dispose of your pumpkins. Illinois Extension has partnered with SCARCE and several local organizations to offer pumpkin smashes across Illinois. Visit SCARCE.org/pumpkins to find a pumpkin smash nearest you. 💡



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.

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INFORMATION

Submissions to SnapShots are currently closed. Stay tuned for information about Illinois Country Living's 2027 Photography Contest. 2026 contest winners will be announced in December.

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