

A Service of **HomeWorks Tri-County Electric Cooperative**

March 2011

Michigan

COUNTRY LINES



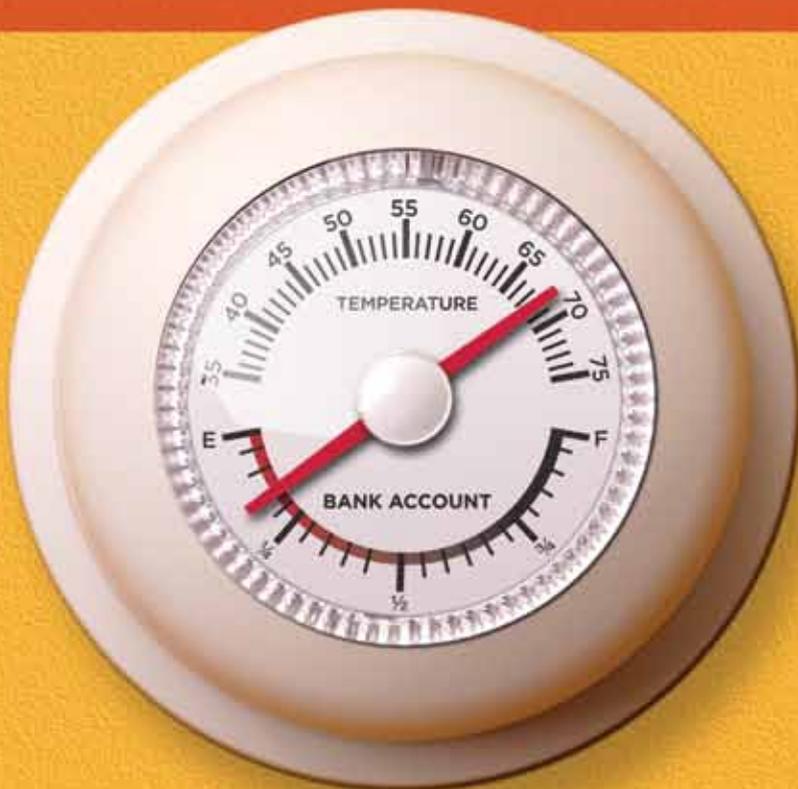
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SPECIAL
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EDITION



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Craig Borr is president and CEO.

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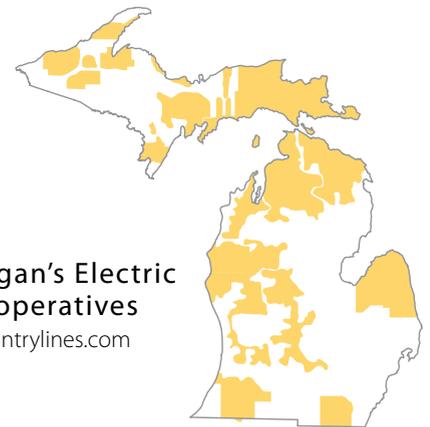
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The Heuers, of mid-Michigan, celebrate their family of biological twins and three adopted daughters. They have been foster parents to nine children.

Photo - Elizabeth Price, pricelessphotography.com

Michigan's Electric
Cooperatives
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Tri-County Electric Cooperative

Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 

Blanchard office:

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7973 E. Grand River Avenue
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Electric bill/account questions:

517-647-7556 or 1-800-562-8232

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Editor: Jayne Graham, CCC

Telling the Co-op's History: Your Help is Needed

March 29, 1937, is the date we consider to be Tri-County Electric Cooperative's birthday.

It was on that Monday, the day after Easter, that the cooperative's first board meeting was held, at its newly-established office on Allegan Street in Lansing. The board members, as recorded in the official minutes, were William V. Clegg, president; Jasper L. Terry, vice-president; Lawton Heeney, secretary; Dorr L. Cady, treasurer; and James E. Houston, director.

Following a special organizational meeting, the board met in regular session to authorize construction of power lines in Eaton, Ingham, Jackson, Livingston, Clinton, Calhoun, Ionia and Washtenaw counties—a total of 350 miles of line to serve 1,975 members.

Seventy-four years later, your cooperative serves 22,193 members and 25,520 meters across 3,338 miles of line, and our "counties served" list heads north to Osceola and Clare counties, rather than south or east—we never extended lines into Livingston, Calhoun or Washtenaw counties, to my knowledge.

So why the history lesson? In preparation for a year of celebrating our 75th Anniversary, starting next March 29, we hope you can provide some co-op history of your own. We're looking for stories, anecdotes, facts and photos—any memories you have of the cooperative's early days.

Did your father help install power poles? Did your mother go to neighbors to recruit them for the co-op? Maybe you attended an annual meeting in the 1950s, or have attended district meetings for 30 years in a row. Do you have a copy of your bill from the 1940s?

We'd love to hear from you. If you want to write up your own story, you can mail it to us, or give us a call and we'll write it down for you. Any photos, bills or artifacts you share will be scanned carefully and returned promptly.

Send your memories to:

HomeWorks Tri-County Electric Cooperative

Attn: Jayne Graham

7973 E. Grand River Avenue

Portland, MI 48875

Or, email them to jayne@homeworks.org. You can also call Jayne at 517-647-1252.

We're hoping to hear from a lot of you. Just as we can't operate this cooperative without your input, we can't truly celebrate our 75th Anniversary without your contributions.



Mark Kappler
General Manager



Join the conversation at
homeworks.org/blog

Meet your cooperative's Board of Directors

Cara Evans: Farm Wife, Mother, Board Member

Cara Evans grew up in Ashley and married shortly after high school graduation. She and her husband, Roger, have two grown children, Treasa and Michael, and a 16-year-old granddaughter, Molly.

Her father kept horses and milked cows, so her work history includes everything from milking cows to putting up hay and straw to shoveling manure. A mother and farm wife, she drives tractor and serves as the go-fer. "I go-fer the parts, supplies, seeds, all those types of things," she says.

How did you become involved with the co-op?

"In 1986, the bylaws required two candidates on the ballot, so I was recruited to fill the slate. My friend Pete Ondrus was the incumbent director, but somehow I ended up with more votes. Fortunately, Pete has stayed involved with the co-op and was district chairman for many years.

"Once I was elected, it was a transition for the men on the board, and the management and staff, to have a woman amongst them. But I had many mentors from the board – Bill Chapin, Willard Haenke, Dick Sandbrook, Keith Sackett, Jim Clarke. Each one was a teacher and a friend. They have a special place in my heart, and so do all the current board members."

What does it mean to you to be on the board?

"I was elected to serve the members, to take their voices and concerns to the co-op, and to be part of a group that helps the co-op to move forward. And we have moved forward.

"I hope we never quit growing or changing. We have to change to grow, we can't stay in the same rut. We might fail, but we learn from it.

"From day one, it has been a learning experience, and continues to this day."

What are some highlights you recall?

"When the cooperative took a risk, and this was a big risk back then (in 1992), to purchase a franchise area to sell DIRECTV. Wow! Co-ops just didn't do that. But it was a new direction we took, and led the co-op to many other diverse services." Beyond the local board, Cara also was elected to the Michigan Electric Cooperative Association board for two terms, and served on the search commit-



tee when MECA hired Mike Peters, its former general manager.

Each HomeWorks Tri-County board member has a laptop and internet connection to keep up with the cooperative's business electronically.

What do you think of member regulation?

"Member regulation is a good thing for the members of Tri-County. It will save the co-op money and time spent doing all the paperwork for a rate case, which is lengthy and time-consuming. We will be able to make adjustments, when needed, in a timely manner."

What challenges do you see ahead?

"Technology is always changing. The world today is computerized in everything. Someone is always creating something better, more efficient, less costly.

"We now have meters that send the reading back to the co-op office, and they have many other possible services computed into them.

"The good thing about this new technology is that we still need people to install it, get it up

and running, operate it, and fix it. We're using this technology to create a great cooperative, because people are the ones that make the cooperative. Our people are creative, problem-solving, hard working people who want this cooperative to be successful.

"The other big challenge facing the co-op is recruiting people to be future directors."

How can members get more involved?

"Please, come to your district meetings. They are *your* meetings. Come and find out what is going on now, and what the cooperative is facing in the future.

"You can talk to the general manager, staff members, and your director if you have questions or concerns, or even compliments. Hey! You can even win prizes."

On your board of directors, Cara represents District 5, including Gratiot and Saginaw counties, and parts of Clinton and Montcalm counties. She was most recently re-elected to the board in 2010.

Watch the mail in late April for an invitation to your district's annual membership meeting.

Your Board In Action

Meeting at Blanchard, Jan. 17, your board of directors:

- Participated in the first of several discussions leading to a rate-making policy for the cooperative.
- Re-elected Wayne Swiler to serve as one of two directors

representing HomeWorks on the Wolverine Power Cooperative Board, and named Cara Evans as voting delegate to Wolverine's annual meeting.

- Re-elected Dean Floria and Mark Kappler to serve as the directors representing HomeWorks on the Michigan Electric Cooperative Association board, as well as voting delegates to MECA's annual meeting.

- Read and approved "Board Policy 301 – Equal Employment Opportunities," and "302 – Employment Practices."
- Reviewed the annual member complaint summary and distribution performance standards reports.
- Discussed the proposed agenda for the March 28 open member meeting.
- Authorized continuing the

cooperative's annual memberships in MECA and the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

- Reviewed December 2010 preliminary financial statements and learned there were 94 new members for the month.
- Acknowledged the December safety report, with three safety meetings listed.



Magazine Online?

I like that you put your articles online, but is there a way to receive our subscription electronically instead of the paper form? Downloading the magazine in one pdf document would be preferable to the paper copy or going to the website and jumping around from one article to another. Hopefully enough members would sign up for this where there would be a significant savings from printing and mailing. Thank you.

— Erik Booth

Good news—a pdf copy is already available online! Go to countrylines.com and click on “Find Your Co-op.” Choose your co-op and click “Download Latest Co-op Magazine PDF.”

We’re working to have a digital edition (maybe even one that can be sent automatically to a smart phone or iPad) and an online archive of back issues available this year, but we would still have to send

a paper copy because of legal notices the state requires your electric co-op to share with you. Also, not all readers have computers. — Ed.

Mystery Photo

I’m answering the Mystery Photo contest (Jan.). Yes, it’s on M-72, Kalkaska County, the old one-room schoolhouse still in use! Now I have entered my name, etc., many times and wondered how many copies and where were they sent before I got mine? I cannot call in, as a senior on fixed income, I don’t do long distance calls, and have no computer email so I have to reply by mail and lose two or three more days before my entry gets there. It’s like, ‘what’s my odds on getting picked...?’

I have been a co-op member for 40 years.

Thanks for everything.

— Thomas Campeau, Frederic

All readers have an equal chance because the winner is chosen by a drawing from names of those who guessed correctly (see note below).

Recycled Paper

As a former printer and International Paper Company employee, I have combined work experience

of over 45 years in making paper and putting ink on it. As a Great Lakes Energy customer, I enjoy reading *Country Lines* magazine.

I have particular interest in your use of recycled paper. While I applaud your efforts to do something favorable for the environment, I would ask if you know how much “sludge” waste material is created in recycling paper? The recycling process may have improved since I last visited a recycling paper mill at the beginning of the recycling days. But, when I last visited a recycling mill I saw a fleet of filthy and “grungy” trucks parked nearby. I asked what they were used for and was told they transported the “sludge” created in the recycling process to the dump. My next question was, “How much sludge is created in the process?” The answer was 6 tons for each ton of usable paper. With that much waste to dispose of, what real gain is there in using recycled paper?

— William Sheaffer, Gaylord

Glen Johnson, of FutureMark Paper, our supplier, responds:

The times, and de-inking of reclaimed paper recycling processes have changed, and our numbers are dramatically different than your experience. We reclaimed 115,987 tons of paper in 2010, so we can recover 98.5 percent of the reclaimed paper we buy and process. A dramatic improvement over the 75 percent previous, and a huge improvement over the ’60s-’70s.

We do get some post-consumer

rubbish (collection systems are terrible now) such as cans, staples, glass and plastics. In 2010, this totaled 1.36 percent of the purchased reclaimed paper, and that is compacted and recycled for metal and plastic recovery. — Ed.

Ice Climbing

Article on ice climbing may not have been accurate...visit google.com/search?q=ice+climbing+deaths&rls=com.microsoft:en-us&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&startIndex=&startPage=1

— J. Kuchnicki

Thanks for the catch...it does look from your query that there were some ice climbing-related deaths in the world, although we still found none reported in Michigan. — Ed.

Bad Bugs

I found Don Ingle’s article on foreign insects (*Feb.*) very interesting. There are a few measures we could take to eliminate some of these bugs. Most of the wood shipping pallets are ground up and used as decorative mulch. Talk about moving wood. This stuff is hauled home by unsuspecting homeowners and scattered around their trees and shrubs. This mulch has to be loaded with the eggs of the insects. These pallets should be banned. Only reusable plastic pallets should be allowed for any shipping. It will take an act of Congress to stop foreign countries from using wood products as shipping.

— Dennis Parsons, Bitley

MYSTERY PHOTO

Everyone who identifies the correct location of the photo below by **April 10** will be entered in a drawing for a **\$50 coupon redeemable for electricity from your electric cooperative.**

Call in your entry to *Country Lines* at 517-351-6322, ext. 306, email jhansen@countrylines.com, or mail it to *Country Lines*, 2859 W. Jolly Road, Okemos, 48864. Include your name, address, phone number and co-op. The winner will be announced in the May 2011 issue.

The **January** contest winner is **Cheryl Darlington of Rapid City**, who correctly identified the Crawford Excelsior School on M-72 East in Kalkaska County.



January photo



Do you know where this is? ▶

Scholarships Offered

Each year, the Michigan Electric Cooperative Association awards two \$1,000 scholarships to qualifying applicants. Individuals are chosen based on their scholastic achievement and extracurricular involvement during their high school career.

The applicant’s parent or guardian must be a member or employee of a Michigan electric co-op, and the applicant must be planning to attend a Michigan college or school full-time.

Selection will be based on grade point average, character, leadership, academic achievement, extracurricular and community activities, and essay response.

Applications are available at countrylines.com; click on “Youth,” email wolford@countrylines.com, or call 517-351-6322, ext. 205. Eligible applications must be postmarked by *April 4, 2011.*



© iStockphoto.com/Damian Gadal

Separated at birth? Reader Debby Graham's dog, Tucker (L), and Bandit, adopted by our Ramblings columnist, Mike Buda.

Bandit The Dog

Our family enjoyed Mike Buda's article about Bandit (*Feb.*). We are also blessed with an Australian sheperd named Kiowa. As you were describing Bandit, it was as if you were describing our dog! Good luck with your adoption and many healthy and happy years with your Aussie!
— Scott, Lynda & Carly Holcomb

Thank-you so much for writing this wonderful article [about Bandit]. We have had several phone calls about adopting dogs from the Animal Placement Bureau because of it. Anyone interested in our organization or viewing photos of the dogs that are up for adoption can visit our website at apbpets.com

— Patti Lundy

The Animal Placement Bureau (APB) still has four or five Aussies available. One looks like

Bandit (her name is Jessie), and then we have a red tri-male and a Blue merle female—they are on PetFinder. The others are on the APB website. Thanks.

— Cheryl Thompson

Imagine my surprise after opening the February issue of *Country Lines* and seeing a picture that looked almost exactly like our little Tucker. Our 15-year-old English shepherd died in April 2009, and it really devastated us. We already had a 10-year-old-brown Australian Shepherd and I wanted to get another Aussie. So we picked one out and got him in May 2009.

...I completely know what you mean about Bandit's joy of romping in the snow. That is one of Tucker's favorite things, of course besides the rubber Frisbee and squeaky tennis balls...oh yeah, and did I mention sticks and tree branches? That boy sure can catch – it's amazing.

Bandit is beautiful in his picture in the magazine. After seeing Tucker's picture, you will know why I had to do a double-take at the dog in the picture (see both dogs, above).

— Debby Graham

At least 12 readers sent letters about Mike Buda's February column on his rescue dog, Bandit.

We print as many reader letters as space allows, but MCL stories and more letters can also be read at countrylines.com. Thanks.

Recycled Paper

Michigan Country Lines is printed on recycled paper from FutureMark Paper, which taps the "urban forest" of waste paper thrown out in Chicago every day. Using recycled paper reduces the carbon emitted in paper production, the paper deposited in landfills, and water and air pollution. The energy to produce recycled paper is about one-half that required to make paper from pulp.

GRILLS GONE WILD

Enter Our Crazy BBQ Grill Contest!

Send us a photo of your home-made or custom BBQ grill—the crazier the better—along with a short description of your grilling tradition. If we print your entry in the May issue of *Michigan Country Lines* magazine, you'll receive a \$50 credit on your co-op electric bill.

- Entry deadline is *April 15*; one entry per co-op member. Special consideration will be given to photos with people in them.
- Complete the form below and attach a short description of your grilling tradition. Please identify anyone in your photo.
- **EMAIL** your photo as a high-resolution JPEG file (as an attachment) to photos@countrylines.com, or **MAIL** glossy prints, along with the form below, to: Crazy BBQ Grill Contest, 2859 W. Jolly Rd., Okemos, MI 48879. (Prints will *not* be returned.)

We're looking forward to some grillarious entries!



CRAZY BBQ GRILL CONTEST ENTRY FORM

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Electric Co-op: _____



Top Tool Safety

Keep all tools in good condition with regular maintenance.

Use the right tool for the job.

Examine each tool for damage before use.

Operate according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Use the proper protective equipment.

SOURCE: OSHA

A Safety Checklist Helps Protect Your Family

Our line crews know they can't do their jobs efficiently or safely without the proper tools. A lineworker is required by law to inspect various tools on a consistent basis, usually before use. Inspections are also done on a quarterly basis by a supervisor or by me, in my role as safety coordinator.

But at home, hand tools can be easily taken for granted. We pull them out of a drawer or storage case and just get to work. A hand tool, whether it is a power tool or not, should be treated with respect to prevent accidents.

Here are some of the things we look for:

1. Is it the right tool for the job? The most dangerous tool is a screwdriver because it is so often used incorrectly—to pry or chisel. Another dangerous substitution is using a wrench in place of a hammer.

2. Does it have a loose or cracked handle or is the working surface worn down? Either of these is a sign that the tool could break or cause an injury. The most common injuries from hand tools come from pieces of the tool flying off as it breaks (hint: wearing eye protection helps guard against those pieces getting embedded in your eye.)

Another common problem occurs when the tool slips off the point of contact, causing bruises

and cuts.

The potential hazards multiply when we get into the power tool category.

4. Is the power cord worn, damaged, or frayed? Carrying a tool by its cord, pulling the cord haphazardly from a receptacle, or exposing the cord to heat, oil, and sharp edges can lead to cases of electrical shock.

5. Is the grounding prong intact? Some people remove the grounding prong to make the cord fit into an older, two-prong outlet.

6. Is the tool unplugged and isolated from any power source before it is serviced? Power tools, like all tools, should be kept maintained and cleaned, and operated with good balance, adequate lighting, and safety guards in place. Use the proper personal protective equipment such as safety glasses, gloves and hearing protection. Avoiding an injury is much easier than recovering from one.

Chris O'Neill is HomeWorks Tri-County Electric Cooperative's safety coordinator



Notice to Members of HomeWorks Tri-County Electric Cooperative Special Member Meeting Is Set for 9 a.m., March 28, at the Cooperative's Portland Office

The board of directors will consider several changes to the cooperative's rates and tariffs at its meeting on March 28, 2011, to be held at the cooperative office at 7973 E. Grand River Avenue, Portland, MI. The meeting will start at 9 a.m. and is open to all members of HomeWorks Tri-County Electric Cooperative.

The session will begin with an opportunity for members to provide direct input to the board of directors without filing a formal request under cooperative policy. Members are asked to come to the lobby by 9 a.m. and request to speak to the board; staff will direct interested members to the meeting room. Time constraints on each member's comments will be at the discretion of the board president, but members are asked to keep comments to less than five minutes.

The following items will be considered, and members will have an opportunity to address the board on the proposed changes prior to board action.

1) Reconcile the 2010 Power Supply Cost Recovery Factor (PSCR) collections. The PSCR is applied to Tri-County Electric Cooperative's retail member-customers' monthly kilowatt-hour use. It represents power supply costs as established by the cooperative in conjunction with Wolverine Power Cooperative. The factor is established annually and reviewed monthly.

2) Review a Power Supply Cost Recovery Factor increase to be effective July 1, to meet additional power supply requirements.

3) Revise the cooperative's residential billing rules.

Notice of changes or additions to the cooperative's rates or service rules shall be sent to all members, as required by P.A. 167, by publication in *Michigan Country Lines* at least 30 days prior to their effective date.

Participation: Any interested member may attend and participate. The location of the board meeting is accessible, including handicap-accessible parking. Persons needing any accommodation to participate should contact HomeWorks Tri-County Electric at 800-562-8232 a week in advance to request mobility, visual, hearing or other assistance. Comments may also be made before the meeting date by calling General Manager Mark Kappler at 517-647-1281, or by email to mkappler@homeworks.org.

Notice of the board meeting shall be sent to all members, as required by P.A. 167, by publication in *Michigan Country Lines*.

Yeah, That's How We Roll

Moving forward in the electric co-op world means rolling with the changes.

Change—it's a word we hear frequently these days from our elected officials in both Lansing and Washington, D.C. It also describes the challenges faced by your electric co-op.

From changes in political leaders and issues to the new look of this magazine, the Michigan Electric Cooperative Association (MECA) and its co-op members are seeing change in nearly all facets of the electricity business.

Change is requiring our team to build relationships with the 29 new senators and 58 new representatives in the Michigan Legislature, and our four new members in the U.S. Congress. We are working very closely with all the new legislators representing portions of rural Michigan to help them understand the many unique attributes of electric co-ops and how we differ from other types of utilities. We are also helping them understand the many challenges co-ops face in providing electricity to rural areas, and especially related to the current economic woes faced by rural residents.

In Lansing, we are working hard to evaluate and understand the impact of the many proposed changes in how our state's revenues are collected from

residents and businesses. And, how the Snyder Administration is proposing those monies be allocated to the varied state departments and agencies that provide services to our residents.

The changes proposed by Gov. Snyder are bold and intended to place our state and its residents on a sound financial footing for the future. However, they will be very painful for all of us. Michigan's electric co-ops look forward to engaging in the political dialogue as many of these measures work their way through the Legislature.

In Washington, D.C., change is coming swiftly in the form of many proposals for new rules from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. While Michigan's electric co-ops are proud of their environmental stewardship, a number of these rulemaking proposals are very problematic and could result in significant, and in some cases, unnecessary costs for power plants that generate electricity throughout the Midwest.

These proposals involve actions such as limiting the operating hours of the small generators some co-ops use as backup power during times of high electricity demand to more stringent regulation of

Craig Borr is the president and CEO of the Michigan Electric Cooperative Association. His email is cborr@countrylines.com



combustion byproducts from fossil-fuel generation plants.

The MECA team is working very closely with our colleagues from the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association to ensure that these provisions are not overly burdensome on the power generation plants that co-ops rely on to provide you with affordable electricity.

You are also seeing change in the look of this magazine (see editor's note below), which is published specifically for you as an electric co-op member-owner. The new format is intended to help you, our readers, better view the magazine's content.

It's good to know that some things won't change, however, like the quality of service and reliability that you receive from your electric co-op. As for all of us that serve you through your electric co-op, we'll keep rolling with the changes.



A Fresh New Look

Welcome to the new face of *Michigan Country Lines*!

This magazine is published especially for you, because you get your electric service from a nonprofit cooperative. Besides sharing interesting stories about Michigan people, places and

things, it's the most economical way for you to get important news about your electric co-op, of which you are also an owner.

In a time when many printed publications are experiencing declining readership, surveys have shown that our reader participation rate is the second-highest of the 32 co-op statewide magazines in the country. But we'll still continue working to improve the

quality of *Michigan Country Lines*.

You'll notice that the cover masthead has a cleaner, bolder typeface. The headlines running along the bottom of the cover are larger and easier to read. Inside, the contents page is reorganized and simplified, so you can quickly find the stories you want to read.

But don't worry, the things you enjoy most about the magazine haven't changed. It will continue to be packed full of interesting stories, tips for saving energy and money on your electric bill, news about your co-op, and—of course—recipes!

We'd love to hear what you think about our new look. Send me an email at knudtson@countrylines.com.

Thanks for reading with us!

— Gail Knudtson, editor



Finding a 'Forever Family'

Some Michigan families are turning foster homes into "forever" homes.
Linda Wacyk & Lisa Doublestein

What could be a more natural wish for a child than having a family to call your own? For more than 15,000 Michigan children, however, that's a wish still waiting to be fulfilled.

These are children who have been removed from their biological homes—most often due to abuse or neglect. About one-third of them live with relatives. The others live with unrelated foster care families or in other settings supervised by the Department of Human Services (DHS).

No matter where they live now, though, all these children have one common desire: they want their own "forever family."

"Foster care is seen as a short-term solution to an emergency situation," says Edward Woods III, a DHS spokesperson who manages foster care and adoption. "It is founded on the premise that all children have the right to physical care and educational and emotional nurturance."

The Heuer family, who lives in mid-Michigan, is one of more than 7,000 licensed family foster care homes, providing a substitute family life experience for children in need. Andrew, 40, and Renatta, 41, along with biological 12-year-old twins Ian and Evan, have fostered nine children over the years.

"We both grew up in Africa as missionary kids," Renatta explains, "and we both saw the need for homes for kids in poverty."

How Does Foster Care Work?

When a child is taken from his or her family, a team of foster care workers, foster parents and the courts work with parents for up to a year to correct what-

ever problems caused them to lose custody: getting a job, going to rehab, secure housing, or more.

"The primary goal during foster care is to reunite the child with his or her parents," Woods says. "The foster family plays an important role in the treatment plan for the child and family."

If parents progress and begin meeting those needs, they can start visiting their child. When the child cannot be reunited with the parents, the children are prepared for permanent placement with relatives or unrelated adoptive families. Under certain circumstances, a foster family may adopt children in their care.

Three of the Heuers' foster daughters found their "forever family" through adoption by their foster family.

"Our littlest daughter, Naomi, we got straight from the hospital," Renatta explains. She was a crystal meth baby; she and her mom tested positive, and she was pulled from her mom right away. I look at her now at age 6, and it's a joy to know that she has no issues."

Older daughters Niki, 12, and Ikeya, 8, were 9 and 5 when they arrived at the Heuers' home. Their mother was first pregnant at age 15.

"Where would they be now if we hadn't taken them in? Men would be coming in and out. We know we've done something to prevent that cycle from continuing with them."

Waiting for "Forever"

About 4,000 Michigan foster children are currently available for adoption, meaning a court has terminated their parents' rights. And DHS is working hard to find permanent homes for all of them.

"We know that children do best when they are placed

in a safe, loving and stable home,” Woods says. “Adoption is a great way for children to achieve permanency.”

The Heuers stress that foster parents are under no obligation to adopt, but many make that choice. And unlike international adoptions, the state picks up adoption costs for children in foster care, making it more affordable for families. But the process is not without its price.

“The biggest issue is the heartache of the children’s situations,” Renatta admits. When you see what some of these children are living through, just the hopelessness of it—those things, for me, are the hardest.”

Then there is the risk that birth parents could appeal a court’s termination, derailing the adoption.

“We had twin babies last fall for a year,” Renatta says. “When we went to court to terminate the parents’ rights, it was overturned on a technicality. It was very fast, all in one day, and it was a shock. We were planning to adopt them. And then, the mother lost them again. It still is heartbreaking.”

The Heuers currently are preparing to say goodbye to a 3-and-a-half-year-old son who will soon be adopted by a local family.

“Our attitude was, ‘This is our responsibility—to be their family for however long they need us. We don’t know if we’re going to be able to keep them, but we’re going to love them every day until we have to give them back,’” Renatta says.

Michigan Recession Takes a Toll

Finding safe, stable and loving homes for over 15,000 children would be a challenge at any time. But tackling it in the midst of a deep recession has exacted a price—on children, their families, and the state itself.

“We lost a lot of workers in 2002. Caseload ratio went higher than the remaining staff could manage,” explains Woods, who applauds people still working in the field.

In 2006, Michigan operated the nation’s seventh largest foster care system, with about 19,000 children in its custody. At that time, the New York-based Children’s Rights Advocacy Group filed a class action lawsuit in federal court alleging that the state violated children’s rights by failing to find enough safe foster homes, allowing delays in adoption referrals, and providing inadequate services for children aging out of the system. Moreover, they charged that too many foster children lacked adequate mental health care or even routine medical and dental exams, citing at least five children who died in foster care.

The state settled the case with a 2008 binding agreement that calls for sweeping reforms. Now, Michigan has made significant progress in reuniting families, completing adoptions, and working with partners to improve access to adequate health care. In fact, Woods says, 3,030 children were adopted from foster care in 2009—more than any other year, and also earning the state a \$3.5 million federal adoption incentive award.

Yet, a second round of early incentives in 2010 has left DHS scrambling for workers once again. But

the department, now directed by Maura Corrigan, is determined to live up to its commitment to find safe, stable and loving homes for every child who needs one.

“We are hiring up to 700 workers for Michigan’s



Photos – Elizabeth Price, pricelessphotography.com

children,” Woods says. We need foster care workers, people with backgrounds in social work, sociology and psychology. We want to recruit the best and the brightest to stay here in Michigan.”

The Need is Great

Despite improvements, between 500 and 600 children each year age-out of Michigan’s foster care system when they turn 18. On their own with little support, some end up homeless or in jail. That is just one of the reasons it is so important to get them out of the system and into loving homes.

Foster families are needed in every sort of community: rural, suburban and urban, he adds, and the primary goal is to find homes that best fit a child’s interests and needs. The DHS is also recruiting mentors (michigan.gov/mentormichigan)—adults who are not ready for full-time parenting, but have love and support to offer a child. Volunteers are also needed to advocate for the best interests of children in court. Your local court clerk should be able to get you started.

“You don’t have to be rich, married or own your own home to be a foster or adoptive parent,” Woods says. “There is little to no cost to adopting, and most expenses are reimbursed. Foster and adoptive parents may also receive support toward the cost for caring for the child, and the child has insurance for medical care.”

Renatta admits that providing foster care was way out of her comfort zone, but she was motivated by the extreme needs that she saw.

“If somebody doesn’t love these children, they may never have love,” she adds. “Even if it’s for five months, if that child doesn’t go into a loving home, they never have had love. Our little boy is going to leave us, yes, but he’s going to leave knowing that he was a treasured child in my home.”

Opposite, left: The Heuers enjoy some backyard fun for the camera.

Above: Renatta and Andrew Heuer enjoy a card game with their family of biological twin boys and three daughters they fostered and later adopted.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

BECOME A FOSTER PARENT. Michigan needs many more foster parents, and foster parenting can open doors to adoption. Learn more at adoptuskids.org or call 888-200-4005.

MAKE THEM VISIBLE. Learn and share the facts about Michigan’s waiting children. View selected profiles at mare.org.

Say 'Hello' to A No-Dig Garden



Photo - Judy Thomas, cvog.blogspot.com

Say goodbye to tilling, digging and costly garden chemicals, and say hello to no-dig gardening. Use this proven method to grow vegetables and flowers naturally—and with less work.

The rationale for traditional row gardening and tilling is to remove weeds, loosen and aerate the soil, and bury organic matter. Tilling can remove existing weeds, but it almost always brings dormant weed seeds to the surface where they can germinate. When organic materials are moved deeper, less oxygen is available for converting the materials into nutrients. Since the nutrients then need to be replaced, traditional gardeners usually rely on synthetic fertilizers.

No-dig gardening lets nature do the work. It uses worms, bugs and microbes to provide nutrients and disease prevention. Plants deliver part of the carbon energy they produce into the soil, and microbes convert this energy into organic materials and minerals that plants need.

"I remember my own 'Ahhhh!' moment," says no-dig gardening author Patricia Lanza, "when I put all the pieces together that allowed me to make wonderful growing

spaces without the use of power tools or purchased material."

With no-dig methods, Lanza says, there's less fuss over the planting area. Free organic material, such as grass clippings and compost, are used in layers on top of a newspaper ground cover. Don't cut through the paper before planting.

One strategy is to first remove all weeds and grass from a garden area. Materials such as rotten manure, decayed sawdust or compost go straight on the surface as a layer of mulch 2 to 6 inches deep. Worms, beneficial bugs and microbes get busy beefing up the soil. They create a healthy habitat for roots to flourish.

Sheet Mulching

One no-dig method is sheet mulching. Newspaper or cardboard is spread out on the garden area and topped with landscape mulch. Again, weeds should be removed first if there's no time to let them die out and decay under a new blanket of sheet mulch.

Sheet mulch blocks daylight and suffocates existing grass and weeds that decompose over time (before the actual sheets do) to become part of the biosphere that garden plants need

to thrive. Ideally, the newspaper or cardboard should be spread out before a heavy rain, but a garden hose can also do what's needed to keep the sheet thoroughly wet. When ready to plant, use a hand shovel to cut out holes for planting seeds or seedlings.

Straw-bale Gardening

This is a simple twist to the no-dig method and similarly, it requires no herbicides, insecticides or fungicides. A wide variety of vegetables (except top-heavy ones like corn), fruits and flowers can be planted in conditioned straw bales.

On the minus side, the bales eventually need to be replaced and the aesthetics may not be suitable for yards in suburban subdivisions.

Straw baled in plastic twine is preferable to bales with sisal twine or wire because plastic does not decompose or rust. Straw that has begun to decompose is ideal, since it shortens the conditioning time that fresh straw needs.

The bales need to be placed over a mesh or other barrier to prevent pests such as moles from pilfering the plants. Also, place the bale so that the twine binding runs parallel around the sides of the bale to help preserve its shape. Thoroughly watering the bale and adding a high-nitrogen fertilizer on top begins the conditioning process, lasting five to seven days.

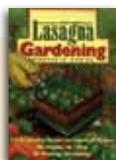
Keeping the straw bale moist is a must. A layer of nursery mix, garden soil or compost on top creates a planting medium for seedlings and seeds. One bale can host two tomato plants, six cucumber plants, or 12 bean plants.

Raised-bed Method

Planting in wood or masonry containers filled with compost or manufactured soils—known as raised-bed gardening—has been in practice for centuries. Like other no-dig methods, this approach keeps the soil aerated, allows more crops to grow in less space, reduces weeding, and requires less fertilizer than traditional row gardens.

Using raised beds that are 4-foot-wide puts the working space within easy reach from both sides, but beds can be narrower for

Required Reading



"Lasagna Gardening for Small Spaces"
Patricia Lanza
Rodale Press, Inc.



"No-Dig Gardening & Leaves of Life"
Esther Dean
HarperCollins Publishers



"All New Square Foot Gardening: Grow More in Less Space!"
Mel Bartholomew
Cool Springs Press



"Weedless Gardening"
Lee Reich
Workman Publishing

3 Easy Steps to Your Own No-Dig Garden

- 1 CHOOSE:** Pick a spot and mark it. Keep in mind that a garden should receive six to eight hours of sunlight and not be subject to strong wind.
- 2 PREPARE:** Cover the area with thick layers of wet newspapers, overlapped. Cover the paper with several inches each of peat moss, compost, grass clippings, chipped leaves, humus, spoiled hay, seaweed, aged manure or whatever is handy. Water the layers of organic material until they feel like a squeezed-out sponge.
- 3 PLANT:** Pull a section of the layers back, down to the paper. Put the plant on the paper, move the organic material back around the roots and press the soil to remove excess air and water. Try to use one part nitrogen-rich material (grass clippings, compost or manure) to four parts carbon-rich material (chopped leaves, peat moss, straw, spoiled hay or peat humus) for a perfect mix. Use what is readily available and free!

kids to help. Bed length can vary according to preference, and they can be elevated on tables or other platforms to ease accessibility for folks who find it uncomfortable to stoop or kneel.

Square-foot Gardening

This is a spin on the raised-bed method. A typical setup uses a framed 4-foot-square raised bed, divided into 16, 1-foot squares – ideal for limited space. Wooden strips divide the bed into a grid that provides plants in each square enough growing room and separation. Plant a different crop in each section. The number of seeds or seedlings per square varies according to plant size.

Upside-down Gardening

This is another limited-space, no-dig alternative. Start with 5-gallon buckets for tomatoes or cucumbers. Drill a 2-inch hole in the bottom, place a slit coffee filter over the hole, then insert an inverted seedling through the slit (root ball faces up). Fill the bucket with a compost-soil mixture and hang the bucket from a tall post in a sunny spot. Low-growing spices or flowers can grow in the top of the bucket. Kits are also sold for upside-down gardening.



Grow a Delicious Landscape

Tough economic times have spurred a comeback for fruit and vegetable gardening. More and more electric co-op members with little or no gardening experience are looking to their yards as a source of produce. And, the resurgence of using edible plants as ornamentals is reshaping the face of gardening. Planting produce in front yards and along walkways also adds convenience and accessibility.

Simply put, edible landscaping puts food-producing ornamental plants in the home landscape. Most edible plants need well-drained soil and a minimum of six hours in full sun daily, but some tolerate partial shade. Do some plant research to make sure you pick the proper locations, and examples of tasty landscaping plants and recipes follow.

Often described as a plant to deter squash bugs, beetles and aphids, **nasturtium** is an annual or perennial flowering plant. Its attractive, edible flowers and leaves are eaten in salads and dressings.

Nasturtium Salad Dressing

- 1 c. mayonnaise
- 2 T. lemon juice
- 2 T. honey
- 1 T. salad oil
- 1/4 t. dry mustard
- 4 nasturtiums flowers
- nasturtium leaves
- pinch curry powder

Place all ingredients in blender for 45 seconds. Makes 1½ cups.

Jerusalem artichokes, or sunchokes, can liven a landscape with their bright yellow blossoms. American Indians grew them for their edible tubers long before European settlers arrived. French explorer Samuel de Champlain found cultivated plants on Cape Cod in 1605. The sunchoke was

named “best soup vegetable” at the 2002 French cuisine festival in Nice. They can also be roasted.

Sunchoke Soup

- 1 lb. sunchokes
- 1 large shallot, diced
- 4 T. butter
- 4 c. chicken stock
- 1/2 t. dried thyme
- 1 bay leaf
- 1/2 c. heavy cream
- salt and pepper

Scrub sunchokes and peel off blemishes. Cube into 1-inch pieces. In a large pot, melt butter and sauté shallot until translucent. Add sunchokes, thyme, salt and pepper. Sauté 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Stir in stock with bay leaf and bring to boil. Reduce heat. Cover and simmer 20 to 30 minutes or until sunchokes are tender. Remove bay leaf. Let the mixture cool and purée in a blender. Return to pot and add cream. Salt and pepper to taste.

The first varieties of **Swiss chard**, a popular leafy vegetable, have been traced to Sicily. Fresh, young chard is good raw in salads; mature chard is usually sautéed. Bitterness in the leaves and stalks fades with cooking, and its refined flavor is more delicate than spinach.

Sautéed Swiss Chard

- 1 bunch Swiss chard
- 3 T. virgin olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 8-ounce can tomato sauce
- salt and pepper

Wash chard and remove stems. In a skillet, sauté garlic in olive oil. When garlic turns golden, add chard and sauté until wilted. Add tomato sauce and simmer 10 minutes. Salt and pepper to taste.

Continued on page 17

Energy Efficiency Doesn't Have to be Expensive

Energy Efficiency Shopping List

Planning energy efficiency upgrades at home? Take this handy shopping list with you to your local home improvement store.

CFLs (4-pack)	\$6
Caulk	\$2
Weatherstripping	\$4
Outlet sealing kit (10)	\$20
Attic door insulator kit	\$40
Programmable thermostat	\$40
Mastic	\$12
Water heater blanket	\$20

Investment: **\$144**

Potential Annual Savings:

\$700

Sources:

HomeDepot.com,
TogetherWeSave.com

It's easy to get overwhelmed by two words: energy efficiency. What should I do? How should I do it? Do I have to replace my entire heating and cooling system to see savings?

The easy answer is no, you can do a lot of upgrading with little money.

On your next trip to the home improvement or local hardware store, take this shopping guide with you. It lists five areas where a few simple energy efficiency investments will produce savings right away.

Lighting

Since lighting accounts for about 11 percent of home energy use, switch your traditional incandescent lightbulbs with compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs). An Energy Star®-qualified CFL uses about 75 percent less energy than a traditional bulb, lasts up to 10 times longer, and can save about \$40 in energy costs over its lifetime. A four-pack of 14-watt CFLs (equivalent to 60-watt incandescents) runs about \$6.

Filling the Cracks

A tube of caulk and a roll of weather stripping can go a long way toward saving money on your electricity bill. It's easy to find where cold air leaks in around doors and windows—simply hold your hand out and feel. Caulk around windows, dryer vents and fans for about \$2 a tube, and weatherstrip around doors for about \$4 a roll.

There are also some not-so obvious places for air to flow in and out of your home, notably outlets and behind switch plates. To see if you have air flowing through your outlets or switch plates, light a stick of incense, hold it in front, and watch for the smoke to be disrupted. You can find special sealing kits for outlets and switch plates for about \$2.

And don't forget about applying weatherstripping around your attic hatch or pull-down stairs. You may also want to install an insulator box to place over the opening. A kit costs around \$40.

Sealing these cracks can save you around \$200 a year, according to TogetherWeSave.com, a website by Touchstone Energy® cooperatives, the branding program of the nation's electric co-ops, that shows how little changes add up to big savings.

Programmable Thermostat

Beginning at \$40, a programmable thermostat is a larger investment, but you could save \$180

a year with the proper settings. For the biggest impact, program your thermostat to raise the temperature during summer and lower in the winter while you're out of the house. You can also program it to dip lower at night while sleeping. The thermostat can be set to automatically revert to a comfortable setting shortly before you arrive home or wake up.

While programmable thermostats are helpful, they're not for everyone. These gadgets are best for people who are away from home for extended periods throughout the week.

Sealing Ductwork

More than 40 percent of your home's energy use goes for heating and cooling, so it's important to keep that air in the home. Leaky ductwork remains one of the main culprits of hot and cold air loss.

If your home's ducts are exposed, inspect them for leaks and seal them. Look for holes and joints that have separated, and then seal them with foil-backed tape, about \$6 a roll, or mastic, a type of sealant that costs about \$12 a tub.

You can apply the mastic with a regular paintbrush. Make sure the tape is marked with the Underwriters Laboratories, Inc., "UL" symbol, which means it has been independently tested for safety.

Properly sealing ductwork can save about \$170 a year, according to TogetherWeSave.com.

Water Heater Insulation

Blankets aren't just for keeping people warm. A water heater blanket can save you 4 percent to 9 percent in water heating costs—a big ticket item since 12 percent of your home's energy use goes toward water heating. How do you know if your water heater needs more insulation? Touch it. If it's warm, wrap it. Choose a blanket with an insulating value of at least R-8, which runs about \$20.

TogetherWeSave.com also reports that you can save more than \$70 per year by keeping your water heater's thermostat set at 120 degrees F.

Larger Projects

If you want to make larger investments in your home, adding insulation or upgrading appliances are great starters. For more information on insulation, visit EnergySavers.gov. To learn about the most energy-efficient appliances, visit EnergyStar.gov.

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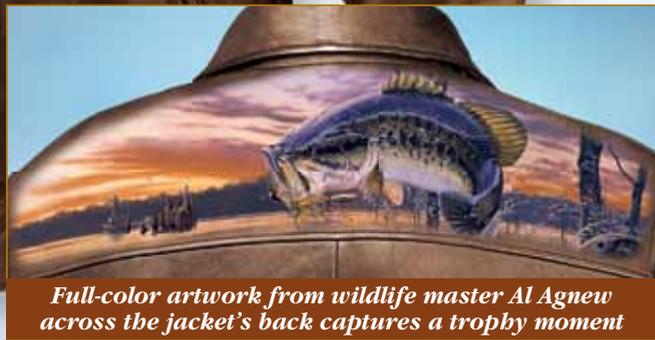
With striking full-color images from wildlife artist and tournament fisherman Al Agnew practically jumping off the back, as well as embroidered on the chest, this brown bomber-style leather jacket is one that proud fishermen will enjoy wearing. The jacket is styled in a classic waist-length full cut, with knit cuffs and waistband to keep out the cold.

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Full-color artwork from wildlife master Al Agnew across the jacket's back captures a trophy moment

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Game On!

A toy collector celebrates Michigan-made Carrom board games.

Paul Kruska simply loves toys, and he loves Michigan, too. That's why, even at his adult age, the Shepherd resident owns many antique Michigan-made toys and still wants more.

Kruska still has board games he played with as a child that were made by the Carrom™ (CARE-om) Company. These boards, on which kids can play up to 100 different games from bowling to checkers, are probably the oldest of all his antique toys, which he says is a testament to how well-made they are.

"I have the original Carrom board that I owned as a child, plus a few other games made by Carrom," Kruska says. "As kids, we all played Carroms. If you played too long, your 'flicking' finger would get sore." He recalls a mechanical shooter the company made to alleviate that problem. His Carrom collection also includes a golf game, skittles, and a bagatelle game.

Carrom is still making the same high quality games they have since 1890, plus some new ones that continue to earn them orders. Kruska says Carrom products are highly sought by toy and board game collectors who appreciate their uniqueness and durability.

With just 20 employees in Ludington, the company churns out about 10,000 Carrom board games a year, plus 40,000 other games such as Nok Hockey™, bowling, shuffleboard, skittles, and more (carrom.com). They also produce 3,000 table games such as basketball, foosball and stick hockey.

Following a few slower years in this poor economy, "Carrom experienced a great 2010 Christmas season," says operations director, Sharon McCumber. She credits excellent employees who "take real pride in the fact that Carrom products are still mostly handmade."

Kruska regards toys as more than playthings, and theorizes that toys we use as kids may shape what we become. For example,



This 100-year-old Carrom game board is from the company's historical collection. Admiring its condition are collectors Ben Nelson (L), a member of Great Lakes Energy from Scottville, and Paul Kruska, a member of HomeWorks Tri-County Electric Co-op, who has 12 Carrom games in his antique toy collection.

he and his brother had fun with chemistry and erector sets. Kruska became a pharmacist and his brother is an engineer.

Dating back to the 1800s, Kruska has discovered 209 toy companies besides Carrom that made toys here, and this hobby connects him with fellow toy collectors who appreciate the history represented by their collections.

"The fun part of this is finding and visiting different towns that had toy manufacturers," he says. They include Wyandotte Toy Co. near Detroit (metal trucks and cars); an old building in Jonesville where they made Suzy

Goose play sets; and the Daisy® BB gun factory in Plymouth, which left in 1958.

Antique toys remind people of simpler times when they bonded during the friendly competition of a board game after dinner.

Kruska plans to share what he's learned by publishing a book about Michigan toy companies and is seeking more information and sources (contact pkruska@yahoo.com). His dream project, however, is to create a mini-museum in Shepherd featuring collectible toys made by Michigan companies and a few other manufacturers.

MADE IN MICHIGAN

Tell us about *your* favorite Michigan-made product and we may write about it. Please share why you like it, and if you have a unique story to go with it, please include that by **March 20 to czuker@countrylines.com or send to *Michigan Country Lines*, 2859 W. Jolly Rd., Okemos, MI 48864. Thanks to Paul Kruska for telling us about Carrom games.**

Grow a Landscape, from p. 13

The violet blossoms of **chives** add a splash of color to any landscape. Chopped chive leaves are a delicate condiment for soups and other dishes, and the round tufted flowers are used as garnishes whole and broken apart in salads, cooked vegetables and casseroles.

Asiago-Chive Biscuits

2 c. biscuit mix
2/3 c. 2 percent or skim milk
1/4 c. melted butter
3/4 c. grated Asiago cheese
1/2 c. finely chopped fresh chives

Toss ingredients in a large bowl. Turn onto a floured surface. Roll to 1-inch thick. Cut into 12 squares. Space apart on a cookie sheet and bake at 400 degrees for 12 to 15 minutes.

Gardeners and gourmets are rediscovering the delicious **daylily**. Not to be confused with true lilies, daylilies grow from tuberous, fleshy roots rather than bulbs. Asians have enjoyed them for centuries, and the roots can be eaten raw or added to salads, soups and stews. The flavor is similar to asparagus. Raw or boiled, stir-fried or steamed, they are

good with other vegetables. The blossoms add a flowery zest to soups and vegetable dishes.

Stuffed Daylilies

1 c. diced cooked chicken
1/4 c. mayonnaise
1 3-oz. pkg. cream cheese (softened)
1/4 c. diced celery
1/2 t. lemon zest
2 t. ranch dressing

Mix well. Fills about 8 large or 12 small daylily blossoms.

More Edible Ideas

- Incorporate plants such as lettuce, radish or cabbage into your flowerbeds and borders.
- Plant herbs with flowers in a container.
- Use gooseberries instead of barberry for a good hedge, and train raspberries up a fence.
- Plant flowering cabbage in the fall as an alternative to mums.
- Design an edible flower garden using nasturtium, violas, borage and calendula.

Add food-producing plants to your landscape by simply replacing a strictly ornamental plant with an edible one. Or, add annual and perennial herbs and veggies into existing landscape areas to add interest.

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Say CHEESE!



This commonplace food never goes out of style, and the varieties are endless! Thanks to all who sent in their favorite cheese recipes. Find hundreds more recipes at countrylines.com.

Cream Puffies

1/2 c. softened butter
8 oz. shredded sharp cheese
1/2 t. Worcestershire® Sauce
dash of cayenne or Tabasco
sauce
chopped pepperoni or sausage,
optional
1/2 c. sifted flour
1/2 t. baking powder

In a large bowl, mix together butter, cheese, Worcestershire sauce, cayenne pepper, pepperoni or sausage, if using. Combine flour and baking powder; work into mixture in bowl, mixing well. Shape into a ball; wrap in wax paper and chill. Shape into balls the size of large marbles. Place balls on an ungreased baking sheet about 2 inches apart. Bake at 450° for 7 minutes. Serve warm.

Pam Schriener, Watervliet

Homemade Cheese Sticks

1 pkg. won ton wrappers
2 eggs
1/4 c. milk
1/2 lb. block mozzarella or
pepper Jack cheese
Italian bread crumbs

wash. On a sheet of waxed paper, brush one side of wrappers with wash. Place one cheese stick on each wrapper. Roll wrapper up around cheese, folding in ends to seal. Dip each stick back in egg wash and roll in bread crumbs. Deep fry at 350° about 3 minutes until golden brown. Serve with dipping sauce. Leftovers can be frozen for later use.

Alden Argersinger, Elsie

Cut cheese into 1/2 x 1/2 x 5-inch-long strips. Whisk eggs and milk together to make an egg

Salmon and Cream Cheese Frittata

8 large eggs
1/2 c. milk
1/4 c. fresh chives or 1 t. dried
salt and pepper to taste
2 t. olive or salad oil
2 oz. cold cream cheese, cut in
1/2-inch pieces
2 T. chopped red or sweet
onion, optional
3 oz. thinly sliced salmon or
smoked salmon, chopped

Whisk together eggs, milk, chives, basil, onion, salt and pepper. Heat oil in a 12-inch, oven-proof frying pan. Pour egg mixture into pan. Scatter cream cheese and onion over top. When eggs are set on bottom and top is almost set but still moist, remove from heat. Sprinkle salmon over top of frittata and press. Place frittata under broiler, about 6 inches from heat. Broil until set, slightly puffed and golden, about 1 1/2 minutes. Cool 5 minutes; slide onto platter and cut into wedges.

Diane & Ed Strzelinski,
Boyne City

▶ **Send in your recipes!** If published, you'll receive a kitchen gadget. Send in: **BBQ recipes by April 15**, **CASSEROLE & POT PIE recipes by May 15**, and **EGGPLANT recipes by June 15**. Mail to: Country Lines Recipes, 2859 W. Jolly Rd., Okemos, MI 48864; or email jhansen@countrylines.com.

Cup-a-Dip

1 c. finely chopped onion
1 c. Hellman's Mayo®
1 c. grated sharp cheddar
cheese

Mix ingredients well; put in a pie pan. Bake at 350° for 30 minutes. Serve with crackers of choice. Keeps well and reheats well.

Joyce Runberg, Beaver
Island

Gorgonzola Butter

8 ozs. gorgonzola cheese
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 stick unsalted butter, softened
1 T. fresh tarragon, minced
1 T. fresh basil, minced
1/2 t. ground pepper

Place all ingredients in a food processor; process until well blended. Serve on crusty bread or breadsticks or use as a steak topping. Serves 8-12.

Eva Braganini, Mattawan

Baked Cheese Grits

2 1/2 c. milk
3/4 c. uncooked regular grits
1/2 t. butter or margarine
1/2 t. salt
1/3 c. fresh-grated Parmesan
cheese
1 5-oz. jar Old English
cheddar cheese spread

In a saucepan, bring milk to a boil; add grits and cook until thick, about 10 minutes, stirring often. Stir in butter, salt and cheeses. Spoon into a lightly greased 1-quart casserole dish. Bake at 325° for 20 minutes. Yields 6-8 servings.

Jacqueline Muma, Hastings

Cheese Bread

1 3/4 c. milk, scalded
3 c. shredded cheddar cheese
1/4 c. sugar
2 t. salt
2 T. butter
1 pkg. dry yeast
1/4 c. warm water
5 c. flour

Combine hot milk, cheese, sugar, salt and butter; stir until cheese melts; let cool. Dissolve yeast in warm water; add to milk mixture; let stand 3 minutes. Add flour and

mix well. Turn dough onto a lightly floured surface; knead until smooth and elastic. Place dough in a large greased bowl; turn dough over to grease other side. Cover and let rise in a warm place until doubled in size, about 1 1/2 hours. Punch down; divide in half. Cover and let rest 10 minutes. Shape into two loaves; place in greased 9x5x3-inch loaf pans. Cover and let rise until doubled in size, about 1/2 hour. Bake at 350° for 35-45 minutes. Remove from pans and cool on wire racks.

Janice Harvey, Charlevoix

Three Cheese Enchiladas

1 1/2 c. shredded Monterey Jack cheese
1 1/2 c. shredded cheddar cheese
3 oz. cream cheese, softened
1 c. picanté sauce, divided
1 med. red or green bell pepper, chopped
1/2 c. sliced green onions
1 t. ground cumin
8 7-or-8-inch flour tortillas
shredded lettuce, chopped
tomato, sliced black olives

Combine 1 cup Monterey Jack cheese, 1 cup cheddar cheese, cream cheese, 1/4

cup picanté sauce, chopped peppers, onions and cumin; mix well. Spoon 1/4 cup of this mixture down the center of each tortilla; roll up and place seam side down in a well greased 9x13-inch baking dish. Spoon remaining picanté sauce evenly over enchiladas; cover with remaining cheeses. Bake at 350° for 20 minutes or until hot. Top with lettuce, tomato and black olives; serve with additional picanté sauce if desired. Yield 2-4 servings.

Janice Thompson, Martin

Spirited Apricot Brie

1/2 c. or more apricot jam
1 T. grated orange peel
1 T. brandy or orange juice
1 T. lemon juice
1/4 t. cinnamon
1 1/2 lbs. Brie

Mix jam, orange peel, brandy, lemon juice and cinnamon in a shallow microwavable dish just large enough to also hold

the brie. Cover and microwave 1-2 minutes until it starts to bubble. Add brie; return to microwave and cook, uncovered about 1 minute, being careful not to liquefy brie. Turn onto a plate and pour sauce over brie. Serve with crisp green apple slices, grapes, baguette rounds, crackers, etc.

Kim Jared, Petoskey



Warm Seafood Cheese Dip

8 oz. block Monterey Jack cheese
8 oz. block sharp cheddar cheese
8 oz. Velveeta Cheese®
1/4 c. milk
1 T. garlic powder
2 T. white wine
2 T. brandy
2 cans shredded crab meat
1 can tiny shrimp

Melt all cheeses in a saucepan over low heat. Add milk, garlic powder, wine and brandy; mix well. Stir in crab meat and shrimp; cook over low heat or transfer to a crock pot to keep warm. Serve with crackers or pour into a round bread bowl. Serve with assorted breads cut in cubes for dipping.

Barbara Alwine, Jones

Roasted Beet and Walnut Salad with Blue Cheese

8-10 med.-sized beets, about 2 lbs.
2 T. cider vinegar
1 1/2 t. Dijon mustard
1/2 t. sugar
salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
1/4 c. olive oil
1/2 c. coarsely chopped walnuts, toasted
4 oz. blue cheese, coarsely crumbled

Rinse beets; trim stem ends and roots to 1 inch. Wrap beets individually in aluminum foil. Place beets on a baking sheet and roast at 350° until tender, about 1 hour; remove from

oven and set aside until cool enough to handle. Wearing latex gloves, unwrap beets and remove skins. Whisk together vinegar, mustard, sugar, salt and pepper in a small bowl. Whisking constantly, slowly drizzle in olive oil; continue whisking until thickened. Set aside. Cut beets into 1/2-inch diced pieces; place in bowl. Add dressing; toss well to coat. Just before serving, toss beets with walnuts. Transfer to a shallow serving dish. Sprinkle with blue cheese. Serves 8.

Dianne Wittbrodt Keelan, Williamsburg

Specialty Cheese Cake

1 3/4 c. graham cracker crumbs
1/4 c. chopped walnuts or pecans, optional
1 1/2 t. cinnamon
1/2 c. melted butter
3 eggs, well beaten
2 8-oz. pkgs. cream cheese, softened
1 c. sugar
1/4 t. salt
1/4 t. almond extract
3 t. vanilla
3 c. sour cream

In a 2-quart glass baking pan, mix together graham crumbs, nuts, cinnamon and butter. Pack firmly on bottom and up sides of pan. On medium speed, beat together eggs, cream cheese, sugar, salt, almond extract and vanilla. Stir in sour cream; mix well. Pour mixture into crust. Bake at 375° for 25-35 minutes. Top will begin to brown. Refrigerate until cool before serving.

Kathy Spalding, Thompsonville

Spring's Little Stinkers

Pest-control advice from an old friend backfires in the worst way.

The Skunk Files



Musk

The official name for that unmistakable “skunk smell.”

8-15 Feet

Distance a skunk is able to expel musk, creating a mist that extends even farther.

62-66 Days

The skunk's gestational period. Skunks mate in late February to early March. Females will deliver between two and 12 young.

Kit

A young skunk, born from early May to early June.

2-4 Weeks

Age at which a kit is able to spray musk from its glands.

You can get an early hint of spring's approach by sniffing the air. The clear and unmistakable scent of a skunk often confirms the season's change—but not in a way most prefer.

A member of the large family of weasels, skunks are armed with scent glands that should be classed as “weapons of mass disruption.” The common skunk is one of the first critters to shake off winter's torpor, making his presence known wherever his travels take him.

And, encounters between skunks and humans *will* occur. At such times, skunks hold the edge since getting sprayed with a little of their juice is a daunting thing, and sometimes there is no choice when one decides your home surroundings are a good place to hang out. From experience, I can attest that getting reliable advice on handling such situations is important, but choose your advisor with care.

A skunk found a garage door at my home that wouldn't close all the way down, and took up residence. I had to evict the intruder, but entering the garage and confronting the little stinker seemed not the best way to go. So, I turned to a local conservation officer for advice. Unfortunately, that was “Duff” Laubaugh, Michigan's only one-eyed C.O. (in a confrontation with a miscreant, the bad guy's gun discharged and Duff lost an eye). Duff passed on years ago, but left a memory about who to trust.

To get rid of the skunk, Duff advised putting

a trickle of garbage out at night and leading away from the garage to a deeper pile in the backyard. “Then, replace the backyard light with a red spotlight bulb, open the window, and put a sandbag or other brace on the sill, sit in the dark with a scoped .22 rifle and wait for the skunk to come out and follow the garbage trail.

“When he's busy eating on the pile, aim steady and shoot him in the head,” he explained. “A head shot will stop its brain from letting the tail come up to release the scent. And that will take care of it.”

I followed his instructions to the letter, and on the night of the skunk's assassination the critter did as predicted. A careful aim and steady squeeze put a .22 round through its head and it dropped on the pile of old food scraps...but not before it let out every ounce of pent-up stink juice it had.

Skunk stink began wafting in the windows and under the doors, producing a gagging reflex that was beyond belief. I scrambled to stuff towels under the door jambs, packed every sill with more cloth, and used up four cans of odor spray while trying to see through eyes filled with skunk-activated tears.

It was then I remembered that old Duff also had a notorious reputation for practical jokes, and I had been the star of his latest. Right about then I would have shot his other eye out if he had dared to put in an appearance.

It is this prelude to warmer spring that gets the skunk to move out from its winter quarters—unfortunately, it's often under the crawl spaces or unintended entryways into or near homes. When you add that this is also breeding season for many skunks, their return to a more active stage is heralded by that unmistakable calling-card scent.

The best advice of all is to keep your yard clean, crawl spaces and garages closed tight, and hope the little stinkers don't decide they like your neighborhood.

Skunk Smell Remover

- 1 pint 3% hydrogen peroxide
- 1/8 c. baking soda
- 1 T. grease-cutting dish soap

Should you (or your pet) have the misfortune of getting sprayed by a skunk, measure ingredients critically, mix all together, and use at once—the formula's reaction lasts a limited time.

Don Ingle is an avid outdoorsman and award-winning outdoors writer that submits regularly for Michigan Country Lines.



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Balance Your Home's Efficiency with Comfort

You are wise to think about the livability of a house in addition to efficiency measures.

While building a small, simple house with thick insulation and very few windows would save energy, it likely would not suit most typical American families. You should balance a home's energy efficient aspects with comfort and convenience. Often, by making minor lifestyle changes, your family can dramatically reduce utility bills even in a less efficient house.

The typical "to-code" stick-built house—a home constructed entirely or largely on-site—is not very energy efficient, but this does not necessarily mean all stick-built homes are inefficient. With adequate (more than to-code) insulation, high-quality windows and doors, and attention to construction details, a typical lumber-framed house can be very efficient. Attention to detail, such as sealing all the vapor/air barriers, is particularly important as it relates to the airtightness of a house.

Several new construction methods are much more efficient than a rectangular lumber stick-built house. These include round panelized, geodesic dome, steel-framing, foam block/concrete, structural insulated panels (SIPS), and post-and-beam houses.

A round house is particularly energy efficient for several reasons. A circle provides the greatest amount of indoor floor space with the least amount of exterior wall surface area. Since heat loss (or gain) from a house is directly related to wall surface area, less wall area results in less potential loss. Also, wind tends to flow smoothly over the exterior, resulting in fewer air leaks into and out of a house.

A circular panelized house, such as ones made by Deltec Homes (deltechomes.com), uses a series of 8-foot wide flat panels to create the round house. These panels are made specifically to your house plans and delivered to your building site ready to assemble. A

combination of insulation inside the hollow panels and thick foam sheathing on the exterior results in a high level of insulation. Being manufactured in a controlled factory environment, the panels fit perfectly together for an airtight house.

The roof is self-supporting using trusses. This provides the opportunity to have a open



These insulated concrete forms use webs between the foam side to create the width of the gap for the concrete.

floor plan which is an efficiency advantage with solar or other alternative heating methods. Many house manufacturers have energy efficiency experts on staff, such as Deltec's "Green Team," to help you design a super-efficient round house. These companies also offer pre-designed green home packages and super-insulated wall designs.

Geodesic dome houses are the ultimate in circular design for the least overall exterior surface area, but the interior living space is quite different from a typical house. The most efficient and strongest ones are made of a combination of triangular foam pieces covered with concrete. Because of their shape, both circular panelized and dome houses are inherently resistant to damage from severe weather such as hurricanes.

Although it seems counterintuitive because metal conducts heat, steel-framed houses provided by folks like Kodiak Steel Homes

(kodiaksteelhomes.com) are very energy efficient. Since the steel members replace the lumber in the walls, these houses can look identical to a standard stick-built lumber house. The only difference is the walls may look thicker, only noticeable at the window and door openings.

The most efficient steel-framed houses use large steel-framing members (called red iron) spaced very far apart. This greatly reduces the amount of thermal bridges (no insulation at studs) inside the walls. The steel members are very strong and stable, so the house stays airtight without the settling typical with lumber framing.

Foam block houses are assembled somewhat similar to hollow Legos. The lightweight foam blocks are stacked on top of one another to create the walls. When stacked together, open channels are created throughout the blocks. A concrete truck pumps concrete into the top of the wall and it flows throughout the wall. When it sets up, the wall is extremely strong. The foam blocks provide superhigh insulation levels. This construction method offers much architectural design flexibility and the homeowner can easily help with the basic construction.

SIPS are very strong panels with thick insulating foam in the center. They are also called stress skin panels because the interior and exterior skins provide the structural strength for the house. These long panels are factory-crafted to fit your house plans. With the high insulation level and few joints needed between the panels, these houses are efficient.

Standard form core wall panels are similar except the skins are not strong enough to be self-supporting. These panels are often attached over attractive post-and-beam framing which supports the house.

Have a question for Jim? Send inquiries to James Dulley, Michigan Country Lines, 6906 Royalgreen Dr., Cincinnati, OH 45244 or visit dulley.com.

James Dulley is a nationally recognized mechanical engineer writing about home energy issues for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.



Truly Unique



Time travel at the speed of a 1935 Speedster?

The 1930s brought unprecedented innovation in machine-age technology and materials. Industrial designers from the auto industry translated the principles of aerodynamics and streamlining into everyday objects like radios and toasters. It was also a decade when an unequaled variety of watch cases and movements came into being. In lieu of hands to tell time, one such complication, called a jumping mechanism, utilized numerals on a disc viewed through a window. With its striking resemblance to the dashboard gauges and radio dials of the decade, the jump hour watch was indeed "in tune" with the times!

The Stauer 1930s Dashtronic deftly blends the modern functionality of a 21-jewel automatic movement and 3-ATM water resistance with the distinctive, retro look of a jumping display (not an actual



True to Machine Art esthetics, the sleek brushed stainless steel case is clear on the back, allowing a peek at the inner workings.

jumping complication). The stainless steel 1 1/2" case is complemented with a black alligator-embossed leather band. The band is 9 1/2" long and will fit a 7-8 1/2" diameter wrist.

Try the Stauer 1930s Dashtronic Watch for 30 days and if you are not receiving compliments, please return the watch for

a full refund of the purchase price. If you have an appreciation for classic design with precision accuracy, the 1930s Dashtronic Watch is built for you. This watch is a limited edition, so please act quickly. Our last two limited edition watches are totally sold out!

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Wolverine Sets New Record for Annual Energy Sales to Members

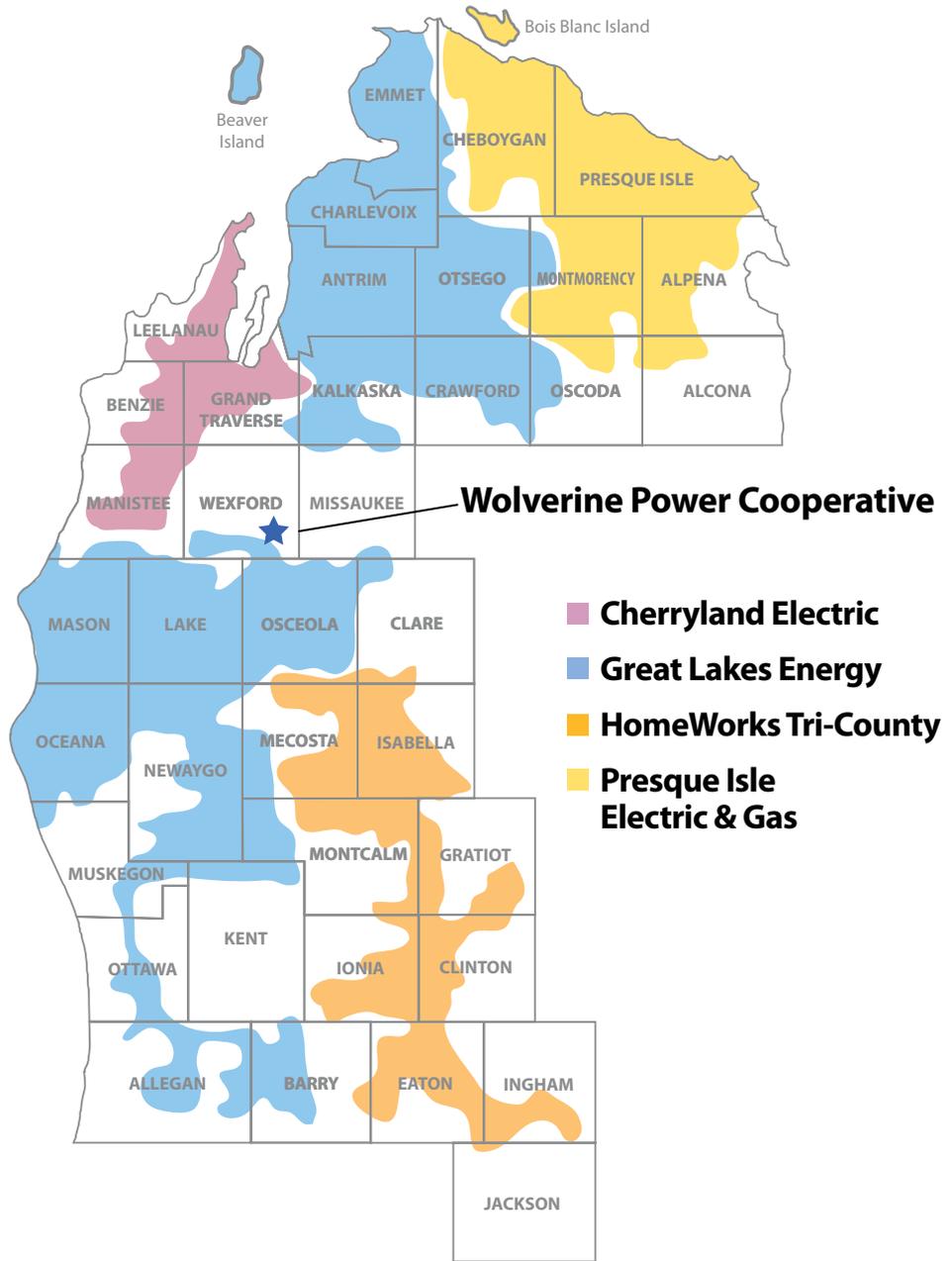
Wolverine Power Cooperative set a new record in 2010 for annual megawatt hour (MWh) energy sales to four of its members. Sales to Cherryland Electric Cooperative, Great Lakes Energy, HomeWorks Tri-County Electric Cooperative and Presque Isle Electric & Gas Co-op were 2,379,259 MWh from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31, 2010. Wolverine's previous annual energy sales record was set in 2007.

Additional records were set throughout the year. A new peak of 435.5 megawatts (MW) was recorded in the month of December. This exceeds the previous December record of 427.1 MW from 2008. Other milestones marked in 2010 include a new peak record for January, and monthly energy sales records in May, July, August and December.

"These new records reflect the strong, steady growth in the electric demands of our members," said Eric Baker, president and CEO of Wolverine. "While other utilities in the state have experienced declining electric loads, our members' loads continue to grow."

To meet members' increasing energy demands, Wolverine continues to explore power supply options and secure generating assets. The cooperative recently purchased a 150-MW baseload interest in the Ohio Valley Electric Corporation from FirstEnergy Generation Corp. Wolverine also added the 340-MW Sumpter plant to its peaking fleet in March 2010.

Baseload power plants typically generate electricity 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Peaking plants are operated during periods of high demand. In addition to Sumpter, Wolverine owns and operates peaking plants in Tower, Gaylord, Hersey, Vestaburg and Burnips.



The electric demands of members served by Cherryland Electric Cooperative, Great Lakes Energy, HomeWorks Tri-County Electric Cooperative, and Presque Isle Electric & Gas Co-op continue to increase. Other utilities in the state have seen declining electric loads in recent years.

Court Rules on WCEV Air Permit

Wolverine has received an opinion from the Missaukee County Circuit Court regarding the air quality permit for the proposed Wolverine Clean Energy Venture (WCEV) power plant. The court ordered the return of the air quality permit to the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) for reconsideration, stating the permit could not be denied based on "need" for the project.

Wolverine's project team is reviewing the court opinion and working with MDEQ staff to determine the next steps. Wolverine announced the WCEV in May 2006. The proposed development has two components—a baseload power plant using circulating fluidized bed technology and a wind turbine farm.

HomeWorks members have used Co-op Connections® Card pharmacy benefits 2,727 times, saving \$66,452.11



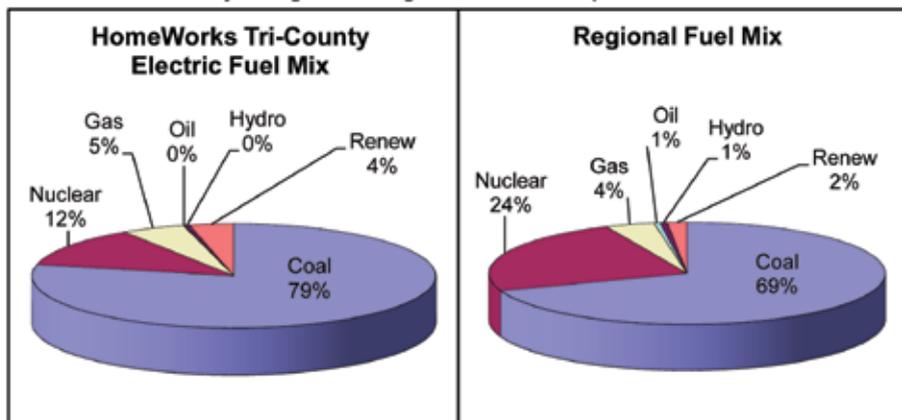
If your local business can offer HomeWorks members a Co-op Connections discount on your products or services, call Jayne Graham at 517-647-1252, or email jayne@homeworks.org.

HomeWorks Tri-County Electric Cooperative

The environmental characteristics of your electricity as required by Public Act 141 of 2000.

Comparison of the Fuel Sources Used to Generate Electricity

HomeWorks Tri-County vs. regional average for the 12-month period ended 12/31/2010



Fuel Sources	Percentage of fuel types used to produce HomeWorks Tri-County electricity.	Percentage of fuel type used to produce electricity in Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin (12/31/08).
Coal	78.5	69.4
Nuclear	12.4	23.9
Gas	5.1	4
Oil	0.1	0.5
Hydroelectric	0.4	0.6
Total Renewable Fuels	3.5	1.6
Biomass	0	0
Biofuel	0	0
Solid Waste Incineration	0.1	0.6
Wind	3.2	0.3
Wood	0.2	0.7
Solar	0	0

Note: (1) Biomass above excludes wood; solid waste incineration includes landfill gas, and (2) Inclusion of long-term renewable (wind) purchase power contract in Wolverine's mix.

Airborne Emissions and High-Level Nuclear Waste Comparison

HomeWorks Tri-County vs. regional average for the 12-month period ended 12/31/2010.

Type of emission/waste	HomeWorks Tri-County average lbs/MWh	A regional average of all generation in Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin (12/31/08).
Sulfur Dioxide	6.8	10.4
Carbon Dioxide	1,824	2,049
Oxides of Nitrogen	2.3	3.1
High-level nuclear waste	0.0042	0.0083

Note: HomeWorks Tri-County purchases 100% of its electricity from Wolverine Power Cooperative, which provided this fuel mix and environmental data.

People Fund helps stock food pantries

Food pantries in Portland and Barryton will be able to re-stock their shelves thanks to your donations to the Tri-County Electric People Fund.

Each month when you round up your energy bill to the next dollar, you help support grants like these, made by the People Fund board January 19:

Eight grants totaling \$12,850, including:

- \$1,500 to First Congregational Church, Portland, for food pantry expenses;
- \$1,250 to the Clinton County Senior Center, for their Nutritional Bingo program;
- \$1,600 to Barryton Area Mobile Food Pantry, for food pantry expenses;
- \$2,000 to the John Goodrow Fund in Mt. Pleasant, in support of their emergency utility program;
- \$5,000 to the Clinton Area Transit System, to help establish a New Freedom program for the frail and disabled;
- \$500 to a Montcalm County family, toward housing expenses;
- \$500 to an Isabella County family, toward housing expenses; and
- \$500 to another Isabella County family



How To Apply For a Grant

Write to 7973 E. Grand River Avenue, Portland, MI 48875. We'll send you an application form, grant guidelines, and other helpful information. You'll also find information and application forms on our Web site at homeworks.org.

How You Can Help

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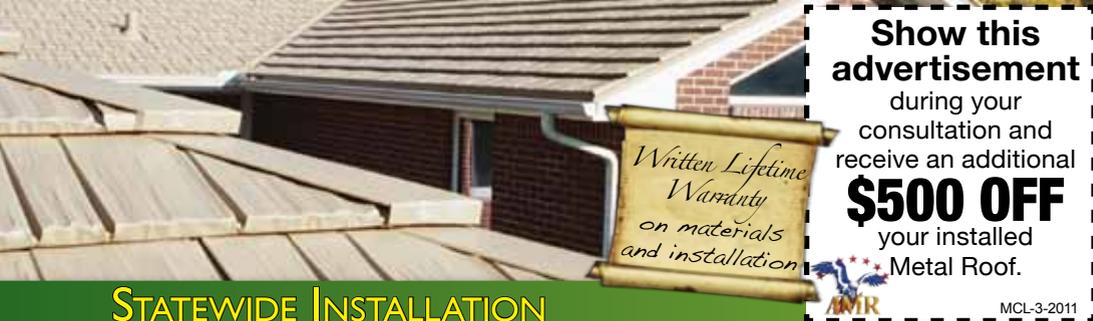
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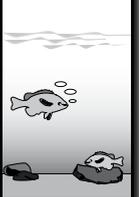
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If you're like me, you prefer doing business with a company you can trust; one that values you and gives you good value in return.

Along with a competitive, capped price and reliable service, we've found that many of our Tri-County Propane customers appreciate the value of doing business locally.

You may not know that we are a locally-owned company, headquartered right here in mid-Michigan.

Our only two offices are in Blanchard and Portland; we don't have corporate offices near the gas fields in Kansas and Texas.

And the money you pay us for the LP gas stays right here, too, invested back into the communities where we live and serve.

Of course we hire local people to set tanks and deliver propane; since they live in the area, their paychecks support local stores and restaurants. Those dollars boost the local economy as they are spent again in the area.

We also purchase our supplies locally whenever we can, doing business with other local businesses. When something we need isn't available in our home towns of Portland and

Blanchard, we can usually find a Michigan-based supplier to fill our needs, whether it's for training, delivery trucks or other specialized equipment.

And as part of the communities we serve, we are pleased to sponsor local teams and events, from a Little League team coached by an employee to entering a truck and driver in a Fourth of July parade.

We're part of Blanchard Days and the Portland sports boosters for the same reasons you are part of your community events. It's because we enjoy having fun with our neighbors, and feeling that small town spirit.

As I said earlier, you have many more reasons to choose Tri-County Propane as your supplier. Our rates are as competitive as anyone in this market, but beyond that, we cap your winter heating rates at no extra cost or obligation to you.

We offer an auto-fill program that uses the latest technology to help us forecast your use so we can deliver propane to you on a timely basis. It's so accurate our reliability rate is 99.99% for our auto-fill customers.

We offer some convenient payment plans, too. Our budget billing season will start later this spring, so if you're interested in spreading your payments over the year, give us a call and we'll contact you to set something up when the season is here. Or, you can pay electronically and we'll give you a penny-per-gallon discount for signing up for an autopay plan from your bank account.

Our folks are trained and certified to the propane industry's highest standards. You can rely on them to do the right things to keep you and your family safe while using propane.

If you're happy with buying locally from HomeWorks Tri-County Propane, tell your friends. We'll give you a \$50 credit for anyone who signs up for our auto-fill or metered service when they start taking service from us.

Randy Halstead is the propane manager at HomeWorks Tri-County Propane, a wholly-owned subsidiary of HomeWorks Tri-County Electric Cooperative



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Our 2011 Energy Optimization (EO) programs are now available for you, including some new options.

The EO programs help you save energy and earn cash rewards in the form of rebates. Visit michigan-energy.org for details on every program and to download any rebate forms you need.

About the Rebates

Why did these particular items get picked for this year's rebates? Energy experts tell us these appliances and lightbulbs will give us the best combination of potential energy savings and number of members participating.

And, the featured appliances are ones that will make a real difference in your energy use over time. A qualifying high-efficiency clothes washer, clothes dryer or dishwasher will use less power and save you money on operating costs.

The real benefit comes when everyone's energy savings are added together and we find that the entire state has accomplished the goal of reducing the need for future power plants.

Smart Power Strips

HomeWorks is currently offering a \$20 rebate for qualifying smart strips. While you're probably familiar with the traditional power strip, you might be wondering what makes a smart power strip so smart.

One source says in an average home, up to 75 percent of the electricity used for electronics and appliances (computers, TVs, sound systems, DVD players) is consumed while they are turned off. Smart strips help eliminate this waste. Here's how:

A smart strip has one master outlet and several controlled outlets. If you're setting up an entertainment system, for example, plug the TV into the master outlet, and any supporting electronics, such as your DVD player or game system, into the controlled outlets. When you turn off the TV, the smart strip senses the change and also turns off power to the peripherals.

Same thing with your home office—plug the computer tower or docking station into the master outlet, and the monitor, printer, speakers and external drives into the con-



trolled outlets. When you power your computer down, or when it goes into sleep mode, the rest of the electronics will also turn off.

Most smart strips include one or two outlets that are not controlled. Use these for electronics that need continuous power, such as a DVR or cable box, wireless router, cordless phone or alarm clock. Some smart strips also come with surge protection to protect your electronics.

With a smart strip, saving energy—and money—becomes automatic. And taking advantage of our \$20 rebate is smart, too!

*Nick Rusnell is
HomeWorks Tri-County
Electric Cooperative's
energy advisor*



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Learn more at homeworks.org or by calling 800-562-8232.

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Who's Got Mail?

We lost our mailbox this winter. In early January, someone snapped the post with the front end of their vehicle. (New and dark blue, based on the piece of plastic bumper left behind.)

I tried to drive a temporary metal post in the ground to hold a new box, but this winter even the ground in the Lansing area seems as impenetrable as it is in the Keweenaw Peninsula. There's no driving *anything* into it.

So, we make a daily postal run. The folks at the Mason Post Office are friendly and understanding. "Do you want to start up your mail?" they ask after retrieving the bundle left behind by our carrier, who has to contend with other route customers who lost their mailboxes to errant drivers or snowplows. "When the ground thaws," I usually respond.

Though not quite a relic, that mailbox doesn't seem as necessary as it once did. It was, with the phone, our lifeline to the wide world. Important things were found there: cards and letters from far-flung family and friends, gifts for birthdays and anniversaries, bills from utilities and banks, draft notices, school reports, and magazines with fresh news and comment.

Obviously, we still get and send mail, but not much of any value. Like many people, we pay our bills online and most of our written correspondence is by email. Catalogs and junk mail seem to make up the bulk of our mailbox stash now.

This pattern of disuse is repeated all over America, which is why this once vital and venerated service is in a death spiral. Plummeting mail volume leads to a chronic revenue shortage, which leads to increasing rates to raise revenue, which leads to an additional reduction in mail volume. The Postal Service says mail traffic peaked in 2006 at 213 billion pieces, then fell 20 percent by 2010.

The result is the announcement in January that the Postal Service might close up to 2,000 post offices nationwide to help stem losses of \$23 million a day. But this is not new. You might be surprised to learn that post offices have closed every year,

but two, since 1901, when their number peaked at 76,945. Today, there are less than 34,000.

Many of the post offices under closure review are in rural or smaller suburban areas. Michigan will have its share. This means some of you will be driving farther to do business with your no-longer-local post office.

Are we watching the slow death of one of our country's most iconic institutions? Starting with Benjamin Franklin, the first postmaster general, the Post Office gave us universal service at a simple rate, made mail-order possible, enabled business expansion, and provided rural delivery. (Some of this information is from "The United States Postal Service—An American History 1775–2006," which is available on usps.com, but apparently not through the mail.)

In 1890, 65 percent of Americans lived in rural areas. Although many city dwellers had enjoyed free home delivery since 1863, rural citizens had to pick up their mail at the Post Office, leading one farmer to ask: "Why should the cities have fancy mail service and the old colonial system still prevail in the country districts?"

Does this sound familiar? This cry was repeated for electricity in the 1920s and '30s (think electric co-ops), and is repeated again today for broadband internet service.

Even the arguments sound the same. Postmaster General John Wanamaker, who led the Post Office Department from 1889 to 1893, "thought it made more sense to have one person deliver mail than to have 50 people ride into town to collect their mail." He cited business logic and social philosophy as reasons to give rural dwellers free delivery. Businesses could expand their markets. Rural people needed the important information provided by newspapers but did not always have time to walk or ride to the Post Office. And, young people might stay on the farm if correspondence and magazines eased their isolation.

Although one Kansas farmer expressed concern that "rural people would become lazy if they did not have to pick



up their mail," more typical were reactions such as those of the Colorado woman who was "glad to have our mail fresh instead of stale."

"Farmers helped by putting out boxes for the rural carriers—everything from lard pails and syrup cans to old apple, soap and cigar boxes." In 1901, postal officials decided a standardized box would improve service, and so we ended up with today's mailbox.

When the Post Office offered package delivery in 1913, it triggered an economic boom, spurring the growth of the great mail-order houses: Montgomery Ward, in 1872, and Sears, Roebuck and Company in 1893. The year parcel post began, Sears handled five times as many orders, and five years later their revenues doubled.

By 1963, 80 percent of all U.S. mail was business mail. The development of the computer brought centralized accounting and sent a growing mass of utility bills and payments, bank deposits and receipts, advertising, magazines, credit card transactions, mortgage bills and payments, and Social Security checks through the mail.

Now, the internet is taking away more business than it's adding.

Some mail is bad. On Oct. 15, 2001, a letter containing deadly anthrax was post-marked in Trenton, NJ, and delivered to the Hart Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C. I was in the building then, along with Mike Peters, former CEO of the Michigan Electric Cooperative Association, visiting Sen. Debbie Stabenow's office. We were among the last to leave the building, but it wasn't clear until later what a close call that really was.

Of course, some mail is good, like this magazine, which depends on the Postal Service to get it to your mailbox.

Thanks for joining us.

Mike Buda is editor emeritus of Country Lines. His wife, Barbara, uses the mail much more than he does. Comment on Mike's columns at countrylines.com/column/ramblings/ or email him at mbuda@countrylines.com





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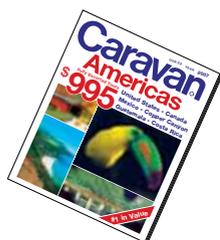
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