

SSVEC

Currents

LOCAL STORIES ABOUT LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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Wildfire!

Wildland
firefighters
restore hope

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SSVEC Currents

JULY | AUGUST 2026
Volume 5, No. 4

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Rockie's nose knows

Members of the Cochise County Search & Rescue K9 team find humans who wander off and get lost.

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Rowdy the Robot joins the Big Tex crew

Rowdy the Robot, a sleek, waist-high server delivers plates with mechanical precision—and a friendly "Enjoy."

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ON THE COVER

Former area resident Rich Jones, now a Battalion Chief at the Department of Forestry and Fire Management, has an amazing life story and his current work restores hope. See story on page 15.



Jason Bowling, CEO
Sulphur Springs Valley
Electric Cooperative

Ready before **THE STORM**

By the time July arrives in Southern Arizona, summer is already making itself known. Air conditioners are running, afternoon temperatures are high, and the first signs of monsoon season begin to appear on the horizon.

For SSVEC, this is one of the most important times of the year. Our members depend on electricity for cooling, water systems, medical equipment, businesses, schools, farms, ranches, and daily life. That responsibility is always important, but it becomes especially clear during the hottest months of the year.

Reliable service during summer does not happen by accident. Much of the work that keeps the power flowing in July and August happens well before the first storm rolls across our service territory.

Throughout the year, SSVEC crews inspect lines, maintain equipment, replace aging infrastructure, trim vegetation in key areas, test protective devices, and prepare for the conditions we know are coming. These efforts are not always visible, but they matter. A piece of equipment replaced in the spring can help prevent an outage in the summer. A line inspection completed before monsoon season can help identify a problem before high winds make it worse. A properly operating protective device can isolate trouble and help reduce the number of members affected when an outage does occur.

This work also supports affordability. Preventive maintenance is one of the most practical ways to manage costs over time. It is almost always better to address issues before they become emergencies. Planned work gives us more control over materials, labor, scheduling, and member impact. Emergency work is sometimes unavoidable, especially in severe weather, but preparation helps reduce both the frequency and severity of those events.

Members also play an important role in summer readiness. Please stay away from downed power lines and report them immediately. Slow down when you see crews working along roadsides. Make sure generators are installed and operated safely. Keep emergency supplies on hand, especially if someone in your home depends on electricity for medical needs. And when storms move in, please report outages through SSVEC's official outage channels so our teams can respond as efficiently as possible.

I also want to thank our employees, especially the crews and operations teams who work through extreme heat, late-night outages, and difficult weather. Their work is demanding, and their commitment to our members shows in every restoration effort and every project completed before trouble arrives.

Summer will always test an electric system. Heat, wind, lightning, rain, and growing energy demand all create challenges. SSVEC's job is to be ready for those challenges before they arrive.

That is what reliability looks like. It is preparation, planning, maintenance, investment, and people who care about getting the job done right.

Cooperatively,
Jason Bowling

*Jason Bowling is
the Chief Executive
Officer at Sulphur
Springs Valley Electric
Cooperative (SSVEC).
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jbowling@ssvec.com.*

Accountability to SSVEC members highlights Town Halls and Annual Meeting

As a member-owned cooperative, Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative is accountable to the people it serves. That accountability starts with clear communication about how the Cooperative is performing, the challenges it faces, and the work being done on behalf of members.

Throughout May, SSVEC members had several opportunities to hear directly from Cooperative leadership during four town hall meetings and the 88th Annual Meeting.

Town hall meetings were held May 11 in Sierra Vista, May 14 in Elfrida, May 18 in Willcox, and May 21 in Patagonia. The Annual Meeting was held May 28 in Benson.

Members heard from Chief Executive Officer Jason Bowling and Board of Directors President Randy Redmond, along with several members of SSVEC's senior leadership team.

Ron Lee, Vice President of Finance and Accounting, provided an update on the Cooperative's financial standing, including the clean audit opinion SSVEC received from its external auditors.

Nathan Hodges, Senior Vice President of Operations,

discussed system reliability, ongoing maintenance efforts, and wildfire mitigation work across the Cooperative's service territory.

Daniel Wilson, Senior Vice President of Member and Corporate Services, shared updates on power supply efforts and the work of the SSVEC Foundation.

Bowling emphasized that SSVEC, like other Arizona electric cooperatives, remains among the lowest-cost electric utilities in the state, particularly when compared to investor-owned utilities. He credited the cooperative business model, the member-elected Board of Directors, and SSVEC employees for helping keep costs affordable while maintaining strong reliability across the system.

SSVEC reported a reliability rating of 99.984 percent.

Bowling also addressed the Cooperative's recent rate case. He noted that SSVEC had gone more than 10 years without applying to the Arizona Corporation Commission for a base rate increase. During that time, the cost of maintaining infrastructure, operating the electric system, and serving members increased significantly.

"We heard from members through this process," Bowling said.



Cary Orlandi (right) is the proud owner of a retired SSVEC pickup truck, after holding the lucky raffle ticket in the drawing held at the 88th Annual SSVEC meeting May 28. Members who attended one of the four town hall meetings, or the annual meeting in Benson, were eligible to win the truck when they registered. Ron Lee, (left) Vice President of Finance at SSVEC, presented Cary with the keys to the vehicle.

SSVEC Senior Vice President of Member and Corporate Services Daniel Wilson

FAR RIGHT: Cora Retana, SSVEC Member Services Representative Supervisor, and SSVEC Vice President of Member Engagement Cory East, help a member register at the May 18 town hall meeting in Willcox.



SSVEC CEO Jason Bowling



SSVEC HAPPENINGS

“One message was clear: future rate adjustments should be more frequent and more predictable, rather than waiting many years and then facing a larger increase all at once.”

Redmond highlighted SSVEC’s recognition by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, which awarded the Cooperative its Purpose Award for an innovative effort to reduce the financial impact of rising power costs on members.

That recognition reflected a true cooperative effort. Members endured months of elevated fuel adder costs while trusting SSVEC to correct the situation responsibly. Employees across the organization pursued multiple lines of attack to reduce the impact, including applying 100 percent of SSVEC’s 2022 operating margin toward the member fuel bank debt.

Together, those efforts helped address a \$25 million fuel bank deficit created by dramatically higher power costs following international fuel market disruptions in 2023.

Wilson, who also serves as Executive Director of the SSVEC Foundation, shared updates on the Foundation’s youth and community programs. He highlighted the Foundation’s first \$150,000 “jumbo” grant, awarded to the Cochise Area Network of Therapeutic Equestrian Resources, known as CANTER.

The Foundation, which receives its funding from unclaimed and donated Member Equity payments, also supports scholarships for graduating seniors, grants for teachers, the Washington

Youth Tour, and the annual Youth Engineering and Science Fair.

SSVEC also presented four checks of \$7,500 each to four local nonprofit organizations, through the CoBank Sharing Success program. The program allows cooperatives and other eligible organizations to partner with CoBank to support nonprofit organizations serving local communities.

Grants were awarded to the City of Benson Lunchtime CONNECT Program which provides lunches to seniors; the Patagonia Youth Enrichment Center; the Benson Area Food Bank; and the Senior Citizens of Patagonia program.

In addition to updates from Cooperative leadership, members attending the meetings had opportunities to visit with SSVEC representatives, ask questions, receive raffle prizes, and enter the drawing for a retired SSVEC truck.

The winner of the retired truck drawing was Cary Orlandi, who attended the Annual Meeting in Benson.

The town halls and Annual Meeting also provided an opportunity to recognize service to the Cooperative, including the retirement of Director Curtis Nolan from the SSVEC Board of Directors.

“These meetings help us stay connected to the members we serve,” Bowling said. “They give us a chance to explain our work, listen to member concerns, and continue earning the trust that comes with being a member-owned cooperative.”



Lex Herron, (left) Secretary of the SSVEC Board of Directors, performed the swearing-in of appointed and re-elected board members at the 88th Annual Meeting May 28 in Benson. Carmen Neuman took the oath as the newly appointed Director representing District 5; (from left) Tom Goodman, Randy Redmond and John Shaver return to the board representing Districts 4, 11 and 3, respectively.



Flanked by SSVEC Chief Executive Officer Jason Bowling (left) and SSVEC Board of Directors President Randy Redmond (right), retiring SSVEC Director Curtis Nolan spoke at the 88th Annual Meeting on his experiences during 33 years of board service.



Prior to the start of the 88th Annual Meeting on May 28 in Benson, members had an opportunity to learn more about electrical safety during a SSVEC Safety Trailer demonstration.



A matching grant program offered by CoBank, a SSVEC financing partner, has provided local non-profit organizations with substantial donations. At the 88th Annual Meeting on May 28 in Benson, grant awards were announced for the City of Benson Lunchtime CONNECT Program which provides lunches to senior citizens; the Patagonia Youth Enrichment Center, the Benson Area Food Bank, and the Senior Citizens of Patagonia.

Wildfire ready!

How Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative stays ahead of the flames

Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative (SSVEC) Senior Vice President of Operations Nathan Hodges knows Arizona's wildfire risk firsthand.

Last year the Arizona Legislature voted to require utilities complete detailed wildfire mitigation plans. SSVEC was already prepared. The co-op submitted its comprehensive plan to state regulators this spring and is now awaiting formal review and approval.

"We've had a written plan since 2022," Hodges explains. "I went to our CEO and said, 'This is coming. California's been doing it for years, fires happen here, and we had the Monument Fire. Let's get ahead of it.'"

The nine-section document required by the new law covers both defensive and offensive strategies to reduce wildfire ignition and spread across the SSVEC grid.

Drones have become a game-changing tool. Now in the third year of use, the unmanned aircraft provide top-down infrared and visual inspections that

reveal problems not visible from the ground. Crews can find and photograph deteriorated poles, foreign objects on lines, lightning-damaged equipment, and vegetation hazards.

Nowhere has that made a bigger difference than along the Fairbank line. The area, located next to the San Pedro River and under the authority of multiple overlapping agencies had been a 13-year never-ending negotiation. SSVEC had repeatedly asked to replace aging poles, but approval was deferred again and again.

SSVEC's engineering services department used the newly acquired drone photos while working with the permitting agencies to help show the gravity of the situation. The images showed deteriorated poles in a dense riparian zone where a single failure could ignite a catastrophic wildfire. The photos helped tell the story and the rebuild was approved.

The technology hasn't replaced decades of ground-line inspections or

line-crew expertise; it has made them dramatically more efficient.

"The story isn't the drones," Hodges notes. "The story is our ongoing maintenance program. Drones simply let us see more of the system, prioritize the highest-risk fixes, and direct resources exactly where they're needed."

Members play a vital role too. If something looks out of place — hanging branches, leaning poles, or debris on lines — Hodges urges them to call the co-op.

"It's a free safety check," he says. "We'd rather find it before it becomes a problem."

As wildfire season gives way to the approaching monsoon, SSVEC's proactive approach delivers measurable reliability: average outage restoration times of about 90 minutes and real-time outage maps on the website. Thanks to forward thinking, steady maintenance, and a little help from the drones above, the co-op and its members are staying safer—one inspection at a time.



A public hearing held Thursday, April 30, offered the opportunity for input and review of the SSVEC Wildfire Mitigation plan. Nathan Hodges (far right), Senior Vice President of Operations at SSVEC, outlined the plan for those attending, including City of Sierra Vista Fire Chief Brian Jones (far left).

Stay connected with your cooperative



**By Kate Cox,
Media
Coordinator**

In today's fast-moving digital world, staying connected matters more than ever. That's why Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative (SSVEC) uses Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to keep members informed, engaged, and connected through @YourSSVEC.

Via social media, SSVEC shares community events, cooperative education, energy updates, outage information, employee stories, and programs available to members. Our platforms help explain what it means to be part of a cooperative and remind members that they are not just customers — they are owners.

One popular campaign is Matt the Safety Guy, featuring SSVEC Safety Manager, Matt Riesgo, sharing practical, easy-to-follow safety tips throughout

the year. From electrical safety and digging awareness to holiday and everyday precautions, these short videos help keep safety top of mind for our members and communities.

Another spotlight series, From the Line, gives members a behind-the-scenes look at the experiences of our lineworkers and field employees. Told directly by the employees themselves, these authentic stories highlight the dedication, challenges, and commitment it takes to safely deliver reliable power every day.

Social media also supports SSVEC's commitment to cooperative education by helping members learn about youth programs, rebates, energy-saving opportunities, Operation Round-Up, Membership Equity, and more.

Whether it's learning a new safety tip from Matt the Safety Guy or seeing our crews in action through From the Line, SSVEC's social media platforms help members stay informed, connected, and engaged with their Cooperative. View, follow, like, and share @YourSSVEC on



Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube — because staying connected keeps you informed, empowered, and part of the Cooperative story every day.

Stay Curious! Kate

SSVEC apprentices shine at Internal Lineman Rodeo

SSVEC recently hosted its annual Internal Lineman Rodeo at the Tech Services yard in Willcox, giving apprentices a high-energy opportunity to demonstrate their skills and earn a spot at the prestigious International Lineman's Rodeo in Kansas City.

The competition featured a demanding mix of events designed to mirror real-world line work: a timed written test, pole top (hurt man) rescue, obstacle course, pole climb, and a mystery challenge requiring competitors to change a dead-end polymer. Each event reinforced critical safety protocols while building technical proficiency and muscle memory essential for field operations.

Safety remained the cornerstone of the day, with every activity serving dual purposes as both friendly competition and hands-on training for the next generation of skilled lineworkers.

Top finishers who will represent SSVEC in Kansas City were:

- 1st Place: Marcus Olivares
- 2nd Place: Sean Hahn
- 3rd Place: Austin Barney

Sawyer McDonald, who finished fourth, would have served as



From the left, Area Operations Manager Jorge Garcia with linemen Marcus Olivares, Sean Hahn, Austin Barney, Jonathan Palomino, and Senior Vice President of Operations, Nathan Hodges

alternate but is completing his apprenticeship before the international event, making him ineligible. Fifth-place finisher Jonathan Palomino will step in as alternate.

All participants earned high praise for their professionalism, effort, and dedication, highlighting the strength of SSVEC's apprenticeship program. Special thanks went to the judges and volunteers whose planning, and coordination made the event a resounding success.

SSVEC Foundation scholarships



Forty area high school seniors were celebrated Wednesday evening, April 29, at the annual Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative (SSVEC) Foundation scholarship dinner, where awards of \$4,000 were presented to further educational pursuits in trade and academic studies.

The annual dinner invited graduating seniors and their families to dinner at the Multipurpose facility on the Benson High School campus.

"This event is a highlight every year for the SSVEC Foundation," said Randy Redmond, President of the foundation board of directors. "Utilizing funds generated from unclaimed Member Equity to further the skills and studies of local

students is an important mission for the Foundation."

Ten area high schools were represented by students who attended the dinner and ceremony. Qualifying students applying for traditional scholarships ranked academically in the top 20 percent of their class. All students were evaluated based on participation in school extracurricular activities, community involvement, volunteer work, leadership, character, and promise.

"Celebrating and supporting these students in furthering their academic and trade education is a significant contribution to the betterment of our community," said Daniel Wilson, Executive Director of the Foundation and Senior Vice President of Member and Corporate

Services at SSVEC. "The Foundation continues to focus on making a positive difference in the lives of our members and their families."

Students earning scholarships, and the school they represent, included Samuel Daines and Ava Williams of American Leadership Academy; Julie Rodriguez, Willow Pralgo, and Emma Wilson, at large students; Kellen Deskins,

Rawley Evans, Dawson Judd,

Addilyn McFadden and Celine Grenoble of Benson High School; Gretchen Adams, Alana Danielson, Kyline Duckett, Fatima Figueroa, Zion McLin, Alannah Murphy, Ramon Rubio, Zarra Schmidt, Nadia Valeri, Danny Joy, and Aidan Taylor of Buena High School; Noah Gallardo and Brianna Majalca of Patagonia High School; Evelyn Lopez, Joel Martinez and Peter Esquivias of San Simon High School; Emelynn Jacquez, Cedar Haynie, Anna Daley and Aaron Edington of St. David High School; Abigail Satterfield, Nevaeh Allyn, Teyla Izzo and Calvin King of Tombstone High School; Christopher Gonzalez of Valley Union High School; Cristyn Bell, Taylen Evans-Nunez, Ayla Mefford, Sawyer Thompson and Cienna Ward of Willcox High School.

SSVEC resumes drone inspection program

Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative (SSVEC) is launching its third year of drone-based inspections of high-voltage power lines and infrastructure. The program aims to strengthen service reliability and improve community safety across the Cooperative's service territory.

Building on the success of the 2024 pilot program, SSVEC has once again partnered with Firmatek, a San Antonio, Texas-based leader in utility drone inspections.

"Last year's inspections of more than 8,250 poles allowed us to identify several significant issues and make proactive repairs that reduced outages and enhanced safety," said Nathan Hodges, Senior Vice President of Operations at SSVEC. "We're excited to continue this important work with Firmatek."

Inspections are scheduled to begin on June 15 and are expected to wrap up by the end of July. All Firmatek pilots are FAA-certified and bring thousands of hours of flight experience to the program.

The drones will fly approximately 10 feet above poles located primarily along public highways and roads. They will capture still photographs only — no video or audio will be recorded. Firmatek vehicles are clearly marked with company logos, and pilots will carry proper identification. Traffic disruptions are not anticipated.

SSVEC members seeking more information about the drone program are encouraged to contact the Cooperative at droneinspections@ssvec.com.

SSVEC members to see REST credits returned beginning in June

New bill line item will provide summer energy cost relief for members

Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative (SSVEC) members will begin seeing a new line item labeled “REST” on their monthly electric bills starting in June. The line item reflects the return of Renewable Energy Standard Tariff (REST) funds directly back to members through summer bill credits designed to help offset higher energy costs during the hottest months of the year.

Earlier this year, the Arizona Corporation Commission (ACC) approved SSVEC’s request to eliminate the REST surcharge and return existing REST funds to members in ways that provide direct and meaningful value. That decision results in three important changes for members:

1. **Elimination** of the REST fee from member bills
2. **Creation** of a \$2.5 million renewable energy grant program
3. **Return** of approximately \$7 million to members through bill credits

Beginning this summer, the returned funds will help offset rising power costs through the Wholesale Power and Fuel Cost Adjuster. The average residential member is expected to see approximately \$10 per month in bill savings during the summer months.

“These funds belong to our members, and we believe the best use of the money is returning it in a way that provides meaningful relief when electricity use is at its highest,” said Jason Bowling, Chief Executive Officer of SSVEC. “This approach allows us to help lower costs for our members while continuing to invest in community-focused energy projects.”

The REST charge was originally established under Arizona’s Renewable Energy Standard and Tariff rules to support renewable energy programs and projects. Over time, SSVEC accumulated REST funds designated for renewable energy development and related initiatives.

In addition to returning funds directly to members, SSVEC will establish a \$2.5 million renewable energy grant program to support local projects across the cooperative’s service territory. The program will provide opportunities for schools, nonprofits, municipalities, fire districts, and other qualifying organizations to apply for funding for projects such as solar installations, battery storage, and renewable energy improvements that benefit local communities.

SSVEC leadership says the overall plan balances immediate member bill relief with long-term investments that support energy reliability, community resilience, and local renewable energy development.

Members will begin seeing the REST line item and associated credits on bills issued starting in June and continuing through the summer months.

For more information about REST credits and member billing, contact your local SSVEC office or visit www.ssvec.org.

Kids learn about electrical safety with SSVEC



Ms. Outlet (Kristin Gray) and Ms. Toast (Hannah Oldfield) visited local schools within the SSVEC service territory recently to teach kids about electrical safety. In addition to costumes that captured attention, the presentation included a hands-on “Hazard Hamlet,” and a safety interactive game to engage the students. Ms. Gray, Community Relations Manager, and Ms. Oldfield, Member Engagement Intern, made 15 presentations in just five days, and capped off the week with a demonstration at STEM night at Colonel Smith Middle School on Fort Huachuca.

Wide open spaces

Arizona's grasslands are home sweet home for pronghorns

By Shar Porier

On the wind-brushed grasslands of Cochise County, the pronghorn seems less to run than to pour across the open country, a flash of tan and white built for distance. With long legs, wide sightlines and astonishing speed, it can sprint nearly 60 miles per hour and keep moving long after danger has fallen behind.

That graceful presence carries the weight of a hard-won comeback. More than a century of intensive hunting once drove pronghorns toward disappearance. Today, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Arizona Antelope Foundation and Arizona Game and Fish Department have helped return them to the state's open spaces. Arizona now holds the nation's third-largest pronghorn population, behind Wyoming and New Mexico.

In Cochise County, small bands appear near Fort Huachuca, Elgin and Sonoita, while larger herds drift through the eastern grasslands. Animals released at the San Bernardino Wildlife Refuge, the Chiricahua foothills and the Willcox area have thrived enough to help seed new herds elsewhere.

For pronghorns, openness is life. They depend on distance to see danger coming, so crews have cleared mesquite and encouraged native plants to return. Even fences have been reimagined: because pronghorns usually crawl under barriers rather than leap them, bottom strands of barbed wire are often replaced with smooth wire about 16 inches above the ground.

The San Bernardino Valley effort began in 1984, when 113 animals arrived from Marfa, Texas. Since then, volunteers and agencies have tended water sources, improved fencing and strengthened native vegetation. Funding, Arizona Game and Fish terrestrial wildlife specialist Rana Murphy noted, comes largely from sportsmen's dollars and federal excise taxes on outdoor equipment.

Genetics, too, have become part of the restoration story. Glenn Dickens, Arizona Antelope Foundation vice president and retired Arizona Game and Fish wildlife biologist, said broad genetic diversity gives herds a better chance against drought, disease and the fierce demands of desert life.

The numbers now tell their own quiet story: nearly 300 pronghorns in far southeastern Cochise County, including a record 271 in the San Bernardino area. With fawns surviving and summer rains greening the range, travelers

“Sportsmen's dollars and federal excise taxes on outdoor equipment are helping sustain pronghorn recovery in southeastern Arizona.”

— Rana Murphy, Arizona Game and Fish Department

near U.S. Route 80, Willcox and the Chiricahua foothills may catch a glimpse of them grazing beneath the big sky.

Here, the pronghorn is more than an emblem of the West. It is motion made visible, and proof that patient cooperation can bring a vanishing wildness back to the land. ■





Jan Groth (second from left), Cochise County Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Instructor/Program Coordinator, sits with volunteers at the Kartchner Cavern Discovery Garden.

Master Gardeners keep butterfly garden **FLOURISHING AT KARTCHNER CAVERNS**

By R.J. Cohn

As spectacular as the 2½ miles of limestone passages and 50,000-year-old speleothems inside Kartchner Caverns State Park are, what's growing outside the caverns has become a showpiece of its own.

Thanks to Cochise County Master Gardeners, a quarter-acre patch outside the Visitor Center has been transformed into what Park Ranger Erika Way calls a "desert island oasis," a flourishing garden that wows visitors nearly as much as the caverns themselves.

Known as the Butterfly Garden for the flocks of butterflies drawn when cacti bloom, the garden has been an ongoing labor of love led by volunteers and supported by Cochise County Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Instructor/Program Coordinator Jan Groth.

The work began shortly after Arizona State Parks installed the garden and its meandering brick path when the park

opened to the public in 1999.

"The volunteers have just been fabulous, committed to making this garden into a desert island oasis," Way said. "They've turned this little piece of land in front of the Visitor Center into a showpiece of desert plant life that has had a 'wow effect' on so many visitors. Their dedication has been immeasurable."

With 11 inches of rain from October to January and nearly 100 new native pollinating plants and cacti, the Butterfly Garden is as close to a perfect desert garden as it gets.

Many hands have shaped it. Soldiers from Fort Huachuca helped clean the area in September, digging irrigation ditches and water lines, while the University of Arizona helped contour garden areas to retain rainwater.

Master Gardener Olivia Sinks took on the project from the beginning. Evelyn Green then tended it for 13 years before retiring in 2025, adding plants whenever fundraisers, donations or park support

made it possible.

"The biggest challenge was taking on the legacy of maintaining this jewel that Olivia basically started," Green said. "Along with Park Ranger Heidi Lauchstedt, it took three plantings of milkweed to attract butterflies. Now it's about maintaining the garden and educating the public."

When Green retired, Groth asked her Master Gardener class if anyone wanted to volunteer. "Three pairs of hands were quickly raised before I hardly finished the sentence," she said.

Since January, Sherry Hortner, Steve Urserty and Jeff Ott have stepped in, trimming trees, weeding, clearing rocks and planting new life.

"They've been indispensable with how they maintain this garden and make it thrive," Way said. "It's become as much a showcase to visitors as the caverns. And when it's in full bloom, it's an absolute marvel to behold and enjoy away from the noise of the world." ■

It's about mo

By Michelle Hunter

The Huachuca Art Association is creating more than just art, members are cultivating community, friendships, education, skills, and memories in their quaint gallery situated in the middle of Sierra Vista. Inside, you will be welcomed by warm, gracious smiles and limitless colorful pieces, each crafted by local artists.

No matter your level of creativity, everyone has an appreciation of art. The beauty of art is the endless opportunities and ways in which it can be displayed. It is ever changing, with new ideas, methods, mediums and techniques waiting to be explored. There are as many ideas left to be discovered as there are people, leaving endless opportunities for appreciation to be had.

Back in 1969, Dale Boatman who taught an art class in Sierra Vista in the 60's and 70's began to build "The Huachuca Art Association" in partnership with Frank Ivey. Though

Frank was not an artist himself, he contributed largely to the club's growth and vision. Later the club worked towards the 501(c)(3) status as an officially formed non-profit. Since then, the association has thrived in the community, welcoming artists from all backgrounds, skillsets, mediums, and creativity. Now operating as a non-profit for over 50 years and famously known for hosting Art in the Park, this local gallery boasts more than 40 different artists local to the area. Stepping into the gallery, it is apparent that a community of sorts has been fostered within itself, feeling more like a family than anything. Several members affirmed that volunteering is easy to do for an organization such as this, with a love for being in the gallery and surrounded by other creatives, the duty to preserve this club is resilient.

Whether you are creative yourself, or just appreciate the handiwork of others who are, the Huachuca Art Association



More than art



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diane Given Hayes posed with her prized piece, *Wild Mustang*. Founding Association member, Elizabeth “Liz” Horning’s Oil Paintings to benefit memorial scholarship fund. Various artists work displayed in the gallery. Robin Redding surrounded by a slice of her ceramic collection. Elaine Wells with her collection of Navajo photos she has brought life to through color interpretation. Elaine Wells with her collection of Navajo photos she has brought life to through color interpretation.

has something for you. The gallery is vast, ranging from paintings, photography, handcrafted gifts, postcards, mugs, ceramics/pottery and jewelry with new items brought in regularly. Enjoy meandering through the gallery at your leisure Tuesday through Saturday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

A classroom studio is well equipped in the rear of the gallery, laid out optimally for any student artist. Youth art classes are instructed by Nathan Zoret-Russell on Tuesdays-Thursdays, from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. All art materials are included, no registration requirements, and all ages are welcome! Nathan is passionate about guiding students to new techniques, then encouraging them to lean into what suits their creative desires. Students are taught various elements of art and receive one-on-one coaching to help guide their visions to a reality. In addition to youth art classes, weekly oil painting classes are taught by Joanne Berry on

Tuesdays from 9 a.m. to noon, and monthly classes teaching the technique of alcohol inks are offered at beginner, intermediate, or advanced levels. The Association proudly offers these classes, as well as watercolor and acrylics classes. Drop in to register or visit their website for more information Events/Classes | Huachucaag.

The Huachuca Art Association gives back to the youth in the community in an honorable way by providing scholarship opportunities to local artists. Paintings in memory of dedicated loyal members can be purchased in their tribute, which directly benefits the scholarship program. ■

For more information about the gallery, events, classes, or featured artists, visit them at 1835 Paseo San Luis, Sierra Vista, AZ, or online at <https://www.huachuca-art.com/> or call (520) 803-1078.

Email haamessaging@gmail.com to be added to the association’s emailing list.

Rockie's nose knows

Inside Cochise County Search & Rescue K9 Team

By Larry Scott

My name is Rockie, and I'm a proud K9 member of the Cochise County Search & Rescue team. My job? Finding humans who wander off and get lost.

Between us, people have some serious handicaps. Delicate bare skin means they can't step outside without clothes to fend off sun or cold. Tender feet demand fancy footwear just to walk a trail.

And direction? Forget it. In a world exploding with scents, they seem nose blind. Still, they're always thrilled when we find them. Gotta love 'em!

Recently, at the invitation of K9 Team Leader Ursula Ritchie, I tagged along to Brown Canyon Ranch for a training session. Three handler-and-dog teams showed up, along with "trail setters" — volunteers who hiked off to hide. One by one, handlers gave their dogs the lost person's scent at the starting point. Then the real work began.



A great team! K9 Handler Jasmine Hull with Rockie who loves trailing — and singing, K9 Handler Ursula Ritchie with Alto, K9 Handler Audrey Reece with Pippi, and Trail Setter AJ (Alvo) Lyons with Hades.

The dogs cast about, picking up the airborne trail that drifts onto grass and brush rather than sticking to the ground. At forks or turns, they circled to pinpoint direction before surging ahead. Handlers watched intently for "changes of behavior" — head lifts, sudden slows, tail wags, breathing shifts, or intense pulling — that signal the dog is on track or needs to reacquire the scent.

Some dogs worked on leash (Trailing K9s); others, like Human Remains Detection specialists, worked off-lead. Off-lead teams require sharp handler observation — head snaps, air scenting, bracketing, speed changes — to read subtle cues. Success means a ball chase, favorite toy, or tasty treat, whatever lights up that particular dog.

Our dogs come from all backgrounds: keen-nosed hounds, shepherds, rescues, and even a short-legged dachshund who tackled rough country with heart. The real test isn't just nose power — it's focus. Deer, javelina, coyotes, mountain lions, or fresher human scents can tempt even the best. Only those who stay on task make the team.

Training is relentless. Handlers practice daily, building on team sessions with tailored plans for new and seasoned dogs. Experienced members coach newcomers. When ready, dogs face demanding all-day certification tests. Every dog belongs to its handler, forging a deep personal bond. Owners cover expenses, but team donations are always welcome.

In the end, K9 search and rescue is a precisely managed partnership of dedication, science, and love. Next time someone gets lost in the Arizona wilds, remember: a wagging tail and an incredible nose may be their best hope. ■

Cochise County Search & Rescue team, K9 team

NAME	POSITION	DOG	SPECIALTY
Jasmine Hull	K9 Handler	Rockie	Trailing
		Sherlock	Trailing in Training
Ursula Ritchie	K9 Handler	Alto	Human Remains Detection (HRD)
		Hades	Trailing in Training
Audrey Reece	K9 Handler	Pippi	Trailing in Training
Ashley Tyler	K9 Handler	Z	Wilderness Search
Laci Tulk	K9 Handler	Oliver	Wilderness Search &
		Ruby	Trailing in Training
			Human Remains Detection (HRD)
Allison Mendoza	K9 Handler	Whiskey Jr.	Wilderness Search in Training
Eric Williams	K9 Handler	Sophie	Trailing
Sue Haveruck	K9 Handler	Whiskey	Human Remains Detection (HRD)
Trail Setters:	Selby Rupe, Bill Jordan, Jim Gideon		
Team Founder:	Denise Rice, K9 Handler	Daisy (bloodhound)	Trailing

Grab the fire by the tail!

Wildland firefighters restore hope

By Larry Scott

“It’s a smokin’ hot summer afternoon,” says Rich Jones. “Not a cloud in the sky — just smoke. We’ve been at it since 6 a.m., 60-pound packs on our backs, chainsaws in hand, building a fire line one grueling step at a time. Sixteen-hour days. Haven’t seen my family in a week. You don’t have to be crazy to do this job... but it might help.”

Rich Jones is Battalion Chief 7-3-2 with the Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management. His story, and the program he serves, reveals far more than just fighting flames.

Wildland firefighting is dramatically different from structural firefighting. Teams hike deep into rugged terrain with heavy gear, clearing combustible vegetation by hand to create barriers that stop the fire’s spread. During the off-season, they perform critical fuel reduction — removing dead trees, underbrush, and low branches to make future fires less destructive.

Arizona fields 12 such teams, sponsored by the Department of Forestry and Fire Management and the Department of Rehab and Reentry. Many team members begin as carefully selected prison inmate volunteers. As they complete their sentences, many stay on as paid state employees.

“The program’s core values are duty, respect, integrity — and incredibly hard work,” Rich explains. “It’s changing lives. These men earn respect and become productive members of society.”

For Rich, the transformation is personal. Twelve years ago, he was incarcerated at Fort Grant, serving five years. There, through Prison Chaplain Mark Stevens and his wife Kathy, he met Christ and experienced a life-changing turnaround. He applied for the wildland fire team, trained hard, and rose through the ranks — from team member to Team Leader to his current role as Suppression Battalion Chief.

Rich now leads “tailgate sessions,” gathering his crew around his pickup for motivational pep talks.

“This work is hard — sometimes painful — but we’re tough! We make a difference. Put the past behind you and build a brand-new life. Never look back!”

The results speak for themselves: roughly 90 percent of participants successfully rebuild their lives. Some move into other careers; others continue as professional firefighters.

“Our teams grab the fire by the tail,” Rich says, “to save lives, property, and — most importantly — restore hope.” ■

Members of the Department of Forestry and Fire work as a team to build a fire break.



Walking Around Willcox: One man's love letter to a small town

Eddie Browning never set out to become a podcaster.

But one afternoon, while being interviewed by the Arizona Humanities Organization, his gift for gab turned into something bigger.

The interviewer listened to him spin stories about Willcox, then stopped him cold: “You need to do a podcast. Just walk around town and talk about what you find.”

That advice stuck. Today, Browning’s Walking Around Willcox — available on YouTube — has released 24 episodes and built a loyal local following. With roughly 130 subscribers and an average of 250 views per episode, the show isn’t chasing national fame. It’s doing something rarer: making a tight-knit desert town feel seen.

The format is simple and heartfelt. Each Wednesday episode opens with a live studio guest — often a local business owner or coach — then moves into high-school sports results, upcoming events, and a signature “Walking Around Willcox” segment in which Browning explores the community he clearly adores.

He has profiled everything from the Double-S Steakhouse to Southwest Arizona Steel, Apple Annie’s Country Store, and the livestock-auction café. Many listeners tell him they had no idea those businesses even existed in town.

What really lights up the numbers, though, are the kids. Browning invites young athletes — rodeo qualifiers,

cross-country runners, soccer players — into his surprisingly professional-looking studio.

They arrive nervous, then leave beaming. “They go ‘Whoa,’” he laughs, “but once we start talking about their events, their families, and what they love, they relax. Next time it’s easier.”

One episode featuring seven junior-high and high-school rodeo athletes who had qualified for state finals exploded to 1,800 views after being shared on the Arizona High School Rodeo site.

His very first episode, an interview with world-class team roper Colter Todd — a man famous for avoiding the press — still draws listeners from far beyond Willcox.

Sponsors are starting to notice. After starting by self-funding, Browning finally heard the words he’d been hoping for: “I want to sponsor this.” For a guy whose original goal was simply to give kids confidence and shine a light on overlooked local stories, that moment felt like validation.

Small numbers? Maybe. But in a town where everyone knows everyone, Walking Around Willcox is proving that sometimes the biggest stories are the ones happening right outside your door. ■

“Walking Around Willcox” can be found by typing the name of the program in the search box at [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com).



Host Eddie Browning interviews members of the Willcox Junior Rodeo Association, including Director Kayla Shores-Wilson.



Getting clean: **Community Health Services** gets lives back on track

By R.J. Cohn

It's more than a lifeline for getting clean.

Sierra Vista's Community Health Services has been a lifesaver for those trying to free themselves from opioid addiction and lead productive lives since the outpatient treatment program opened its doors in 2019.

And for the thousands who have been derailed by fentanyl, heroin, oxycodone and kratom, who have sought help with medical assistant treatment at the clinic on El Camino Real, the end result has been enormously positive.

Not just in turning lives around but saving them as well.

"We've been extremely successful," said clinic manager Jenny Adams. "When it comes to harm reduction, we've been 85% successful. That's a tremendous number. Sure, some who are discharged come back. But they're returning because they know the program works, and they want to get better. We're making inroads in people's lives. That's what this is all about."

With 82 clinics nationwide, what the for-profit clinics are all about is focusing on treatment for opioid addiction that has become so widespread in the U.S. that over 6 million people had an opioid use disorder in 2022 – including 80,000 deaths – so patients can focus on recovery and living healthy lives.

Adams and community impact specialist Theodore McGuire say the clinic is seeing about 85 patients daily from across Cochise County with fentanyl as the most abused opioid. CMS has also been tracking a large uptick of kratom users as well.

"People come here because they want to get clean," said McGuire, who creates partnerships with other behavioral health agencies to spread the word that there's not just help, but hope at CMS. "We just don't dish out methadone or suboxone and send people out the door. We provide counseling, peer support, services for veterans and partner with correctional teams (courts and parole officers) to keep people out of trouble. What we're all about is a continuity of care."

Adams calls CMS one of the best kept secrets for helping people break the grip of opioids.

"No one does the capacity of treatment or sees the volume of patients that we do," she said. "Prison inmates with opioid issues being released are also under our care. The amount of people we're seeing on a daily basis has increased tremendously over the years, primarily because of the availability of fentanyl. We have the ability to utilize every resource to treat people and get them well."

Nationally, CMS boasts overwhelming results. Outcomes in the first 60-90 days of methadone treatment show average unemployment rates dropped 12%, unstable housing fell 6% while depression and anxiety declined close to 9 percent. Its 2024 census claims the clinics are saving 1.8 lives a day.

"When people first come to us, we're treating them a lot," said Adams. "Some people can phase up quickly and in the best case scenario, can start getting well in 28 days through a tri-weekly, weekly, bi-monthly and monthly methadone treatment, or with suboxone. Methadone will get you stable. The hope is they continue to take their meds and work their way out."

The walk-in intake accepts most insurances and also operates on a sliding scale fee with no appointments necessary. ■



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Serving community at the heart of Legacy Foundation

The Legacy Foundation of Southeast Arizona, a private 501(c)(3) philanthropic organization, has a mission to Promote Population Health and Community Wellness Throughout Southeast Arizona. The Foundation achieves its mission by partnering with other area nonprofits in four priority areas: philanthropy, capacity-building, collaboration, and innovation.

- Philanthropy, grant-giving, is a major part of the Legacy Foundation's mission. Offering several grant cycles throughout the year to nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations and certain government entities, the Foundation gives grants for projects that support its mission.

- Capacity-building is supporting the growth and sustainability of nonprofits through grants, education, networking, and convening. This includes free monthly technical support, education focused

on topics such as fundraising, board development, grant writing, and finance.

- Collaboration encourages organizations to be stronger together.

- Innovation is the art of thinking outside the box. It's doing old things in a new way. Its new partnerships, new programs, and new results.

In addition to the four priority areas above, the Legacy Foundation provides information on over 500 community resources in its Community Resource Guide. Housing, food, behavioral health and substance abuse services, veterans' services, children and youth services, and so much more, can be found at your fingertips in the Community Resource Guide. Available online or through Google Play or the App Store, the Guide is free and updated on a regular basis.

Finally, the Legacy Foundation recently completed a new,

state-of-the-art Event Center. Designed for nonprofits, the space is a breathtaking fundraising venue, conference space, and meeting location. Located in Sierra Vista, the Event Center seats up to 160, offers a commercial kitchen, state-of-the-art technology including lights and sound, and a roomy relaxing atmosphere both indoors and out. Across the plaza from the Event Center is the Retreat Center. The Retreat Center offers a board room with conference tables and seating for 58 and a more relaxing meeting space with couches and lounge chairs, TVs and a massage chair. Feeling stressed? The Spa Room offers a private full-body massage chair with quiet music and a relaxing ambiance. ■

For more information about the Legacy Foundation, visit our website: LFSAZ.org or call 520-335-6015. Our physical location is 302 El Camino Real, Sierra Vista.





ROWDY THE ROBOT

joins the Big Tex crew

By R.J. Cohn

You've been served by polished maitres d' and smiling hosts, but at Big Tex Barbecue in Willcox, the next step in table service rolls straight to your seat. Meet Rowdy the Robot, a sleek, waist-high server delivering plates of smoked brisket, ribs and rib-eye with mechanical precision—and a friendly “Enjoy.”

Housed inside a bright red railway car reminiscent of early 20th-century rail diners, Big Tex has long drawn barbecue lovers from Nogales to Tucson. Now owner Jeff Willey has added a modern twist. Rowdy autonomously glides from kitchen to table, deposits orders on cue, and heads back for the next delivery — no breaks, no complaints.

“I wanted something different and unique,” Willey said. “People are really enjoying it. We plug him in, and he goes.”

Rowdy doesn't cook or ring up orders, but he shines at what he does best: moving food quickly and efficiently. Willey says the robot helps staff avoid repeated trips to the kitchen and eases the strain of hiring in a tight labor market.

Nationwide, restaurant robots are gaining traction as an answer to staffing shortages, with tens of thousands now in use worldwide. Still, they're no replacement for human hospitality — robots can't take orders, climb stairs or navigate patios.

At Big Tex, though, Rowdy fits right in. Customers are delighted, staff are relieved, and Willey is optimistic. “Someone called in sick last week,” he said. “We plugged in Rowdy, and he was ready to work.”

Quirky? Maybe. Effective? Absolutely. And soon, Rowdy just might learn to sing “Happy Birthday.” ■



Digital LIBRARY

Library apps Libby and Hoopla are revolutionizing reading in Cochise County

By R.J. Cohn

While a University of Florida and University College London study reports that daily reading for pleasure in the U.S. has plummeted more than 40 percent over the past two decades, libraries in Cochise County are bucking the national trend.

Thanks to the digital platforms Libby and Hoopla, local patrons are checking out electronic books, audiobooks, magazines, movies, and more.

“Libby and Hoopla are the fastest-growing segments in the Sierra Vista Public Library,” says Library Manager Emily Duchon. “It’s wild. People love it.”

Launched in 2017, Libby functions as a digital library card, giving cardholders access to millions of titles from a consortium of Arizona libraries spanning Apache to Yuma counties. Patrons can borrow ebooks, audiobooks, and eperiodicals on their smartphones or tablets with no late fees — the material simply disappears from their devices on the due date. Users may check out up to 10 titles at a time.

Hoopla, available at Sierra Vista Public Library, complements Libby by offering instant streaming access to movies, TV shows, comics, and additional media without waitlists.

The convenience has proven transformative. “It’s a great resource, especially for those who are homebound or travel,” notes Copper Queen Library Director Jason Macoviak. “They have an entire library at their fingertips.”

Usage numbers tell a compelling story. Copper Queen Library’s digital checkouts grew from about 2,300 in 2019 to more than 4,500 in 2024, with further increases expected. Through September 2024, Sierra Vista’s combined Libby and Hoopla checkouts reached 6,146, adding significantly to its 18,664 physical checkouts.

Both directors credit the pandemic with accelerating adoption, but say momentum continues. New cardholders receive guidance, and staff happily assist first-timers. Families particularly appreciate the ability to borrow ebooks, audiobooks, and children’s titles simultaneously without leaving home.

Yet success brings challenges. Digital content costs have risen sharply — some ebooks have doubled in price — putting pressure on library budgets. Sierra Vista, which maintains both print and robust electronic collections, spends the most in the county on digital materials. Duchon plans to request additional funding to sustain growth.

Despite the financial hurdles, library leaders remain optimistic. “Patron usage of Libby and Hoopla isn’t going away,” Duchon says. “It’s only going to increase. And that’s a good thing.”

In Cochise County, technology is not replacing traditional libraries—it’s expanding their reach, proving that reading remains alive and thriving, one digital book at a time. ■

BARBARA LANG: Championing public health in Cochise County

By Shar Porier

Barbara Lang, Director of Cochise Health and Social Services (CHSS), has dedicated more than 25 years to public service.

Her outstanding leadership recently earned her the 2025 Arizona Public Health Association's Pete Wertheim Public Health Leadership Award, which honors "exemplary leadership and innovative solutions that measurably improve health outcomes across Arizona."

"I was overcome and humbled," Lang said after receiving the award. "I never feel like I do enough. I just want to help my community be the best it can be. This award belongs to the teams and partners who show up every day for Cochise County."

Lang's impressive career spans executive leadership of organizations with up to 450 staff and budgets exceeding \$100 million. As Arizona's former Chief of Behavioral Health Licensing and Administrator, she spearheaded the creation of the administrative code governing more than 1,200 behavioral health organizations.

Her rural health efforts earned her the 2017 Women in Rural Health Award for expanding integrated care to underserved communities. Nationally, she has contributed to the National Quality Forum board for Behavioral and Substance Abuse and helped shape crisis-services standards through CARF accreditation work.

She has also driven legislative initiatives for foster youth and victims' rights while scaling a behavioral health nonprofit from 5 to 48 locations across multiple states.

Since taking the helm of CHSS just three years ago, Lang has launched a whirlwind of initiatives focused on health promotion, prevention, and safety. Her team delivers technical assistance, training, and community outreach to schools, businesses, and residents of all ages.

Key partnerships include the Farm to School program, which brings locally sourced fresh produce, meats, and dairy to county schools through collaboration with the Local Co-op in McNeal. The Women, Infants and Children (WIC)

"We have so many talented people here," Lang said. "We just need to tap those resources."

Through pragmatic, outcome-driven leadership, Barbara Lang continues to transform public health in Cochise County — proving that dedicated collaboration can create healthier, stronger communities. ■



Barbara Lange, Director of Cochise Health and Social Services, was awarded the 2025 Arizona Public Health Association's Pete Wertheim Public Health Leadership Award.

program has embraced technology and workforce development to better serve families. To address the growing homeless population, Lang works closely with Cochise Harm Reduction, providing hygiene kits, clothing, clean needles, and connections to mental health support. Veterans and schoolchildren also benefit from targeted services, including required vaccinations (with religious exemption options). CHSS serves as a vital hub, connecting residents to resources that strengthen wellness.

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Barbara Lang career highlights over the years in Public Service include:

- Executive leadership: Managed organizations of up to 450 staff and budgets exceeding \$100 million.
- Behavioral health leadership: As Arizona's Chief of Behavioral Health Licensing and Administrator, led creation of the administrative code governing 1,200+ behavioral health organizations.
- Rural impact: Recipient of the Women in Rural Health Award (2017) for expanding integrated care to rural and underserved communities.
- National standards: Selected for the National Quality Forum board for Behavioral and Substance Abuse and the CARF accreditation workgroup, contributing to national crisis-services standards.
- Transformative results: Drove laws and regulatory improvements affecting foster youth, victims' rights, and health-care governance; helped scale a behavioral health nonprofit from 5 to 48 locations across multiple states.

Like the Energizer Bunny: **Sierra Vista's watchmaker keeps ticking**

By R.J. Cohn



In an age when door-to-door salesmen, milkmen, and neighborhood ice cream trucks have vanished, one old-world craft refuses to wind down. Watchmaking — once a staple of American main streets — has dwindled dramatically, yet in Sierra Vista, Theo Gheorghe continues the tradition with quiet precision.

A third-generation European watchmaker with more than 40 years of experience, Gheorghe opened Theo's Watch Repair Service in Madera Plaza in 2020, right at the height of the pandemic. The Romanian-born craftsman learned the trade from his father and later passed it to his son, Eric, who now runs his own shop in Tucson.

"Everything you do as a watchmaker has to be precise," Gheorghe says. "You almost have to be married to this. It's that kind of love and dedication."

The numbers tell a sobering story. Sixty years ago, America had more than 50,000 independent watchmakers. By 2021, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported just over 2,100 nationwide, most clustered in large cities. Small communities like Sierra Vista are lucky to have even one. Gheorghe, who holds the prestigious Watchmaker 21 certification from the American Watchmakers-Clockmakers Institute, is that rare find.

His workbench reflects the demand. With a steady two-to-four-week backlog, he repairs timepieces from across Cochise County, Tucson, and even New Mexico. Whether it's a complex Rolex with its intricate movements or a vintage piece that's been repaired multiple times before, Gheorghe approaches each with patience and skill.

"I've never not been able to fix one," he says.

After following his father from Romania to New York, Gheorghe found the big-city pace too frantic. Southern California offered shop work for years, but Sierra Vista's slower rhythm called to him. He visited, fell in love with the area, and opened his doors — display cases of new watches up front, but repairs remain the heart of the business.

Theo at work at his watch repair service store, at 1010 E. Fry Boulevard in Sierra Vista.

Though retirement looms one day, Gheorghe knows he won't fully step away.

"I'll always have my hand in repairing watches," he says.

And with Eric carrying the family tradition in Tucson, the Gheorghe legacy continues. In a profession slowly ticking away, this father-and-son duo proves that some crafts, like fine timepieces, are built to last.

Though he has display cases of new watches, it's the watchmaker's repair service — one that's slowly vanishing — that's Gheorghe's bread-and-butter.

"I know I'll retire one day, but I'll always have my hand in repairing watches," he said. "Now that my son has a shop, I'm sure I'll be helping him when he runs into problems. I'm proud not only of what he's doing, but that he's carrying on the family tradition of watchmaking." ■



A bell ringer gong wild

From discarded metal packs, Tom Keifer creates 100-pound gongs

By R.J. Cohn

If the kids can't hear you calling them for dinner no matter how loud you yell, Tom Keifer has the answer with one of the most innovative dinner bells that could turn the heads of a herd of cows stampeding across the San Pedro Valley.

Repurposed from blown-out compression tanks and discarded oxygen cylinders found on the side of the road, Keifer – a custom metal fabricator and former cabinet maker — came up with a novel idea.

He took his plasma cutter, sliced the end caps off the tanks and cylinders, welded a nifty-looking rebar support base, added 40 feet of a once-rusted anchor chain to one of his welded structures, fashioned a felt buffing wheel onto a pipe that serves as a striker, and voila – the Hereford welder has created some of the most dazzling gongs and conversation pieces you're ever going to come across in Cochise County.

He's even taken cylindrical pipe remnants workers discarded building the border wall and turned them into smaller-sized gongs that still pack a ringing echo you could hear while plowing the back 40.

"I kind of have a knack for building things," says Keifer, who recently fabricated an intricate circular metal staircase. "If I can see it in my head, I can make it, doesn't matter what it is. Sometimes I look at pictures of things and think, I can

do that. But finding scrap metal or empty tanks and then turning them into something like this is pretty neat. Especially when you make something that has these great ringing sounds."

Ranging from 5 ½ feet to 7 feet in height, Keifer's gongs are showstoppers with their bright-red, mushroom-style caps over the copper-colored cylinders. These aren't your lawn variety hanging chimes. His free-standing gongs – which he sells at the Sierra Vista

Farmers Market the first Thursday of each month – vary in weight from 75 to 180 pounds, including the rebar base, anchor chain and suspended cylinder he fabricates in his 40-foot-by-40-foot shop. His 7-foot gong, which sells for \$1,400, has the sound of a church bell echoing across the Swiss Alps, while the smaller ones start around \$175.

"I don't know what kind of sound these things are going to make until I cut the ends of the tanks off and strike it," he says. "Sometimes the sound is really outstanding. But they all have a very beautiful sound. Hard to imagine that things people throw out on the road or don't want can turn into something like these."

Welded sculptures like Keifer's and other creations made from metal grew as an art form in the mid-20th Century. In the 1950s and 1960s, large-scale industrial materials like steel beams and metal plates were

used to construct monumental sculptures that soon became an established form of contemporary art with artists like Keifer pushing the boundaries of what's possible with modern materials and technology.

Keifer's repurposed gongs are just part of a vast reservoir of Keifer's talents with a welding torch. The guy can put together just about anything you can come up with. For more information, call 408-348-4522. ■



Tom Keifer rings a bell at his workshop in Hereford.

ARE UAPs (UFOS) ALIENS?

By Ted Forte

The news these days is full of the newly released government files on what used to be called UFOs and are now called UAPs (Unidentified Aerial Phenomena). The released documents go all the way back to the 1947 Roswell N.M. incident that spawned a UFO craze and an entire community of believers, and continue to recent reports from military and commercial pilots with rather convincing videos of anomalous sightings of weird phenomena complete with radar data.

Both the government and the scientific community are taking the reports seriously and investigating every credible account. With a few sitting members of Congress and high-ranking military personnel convinced that we are seeing

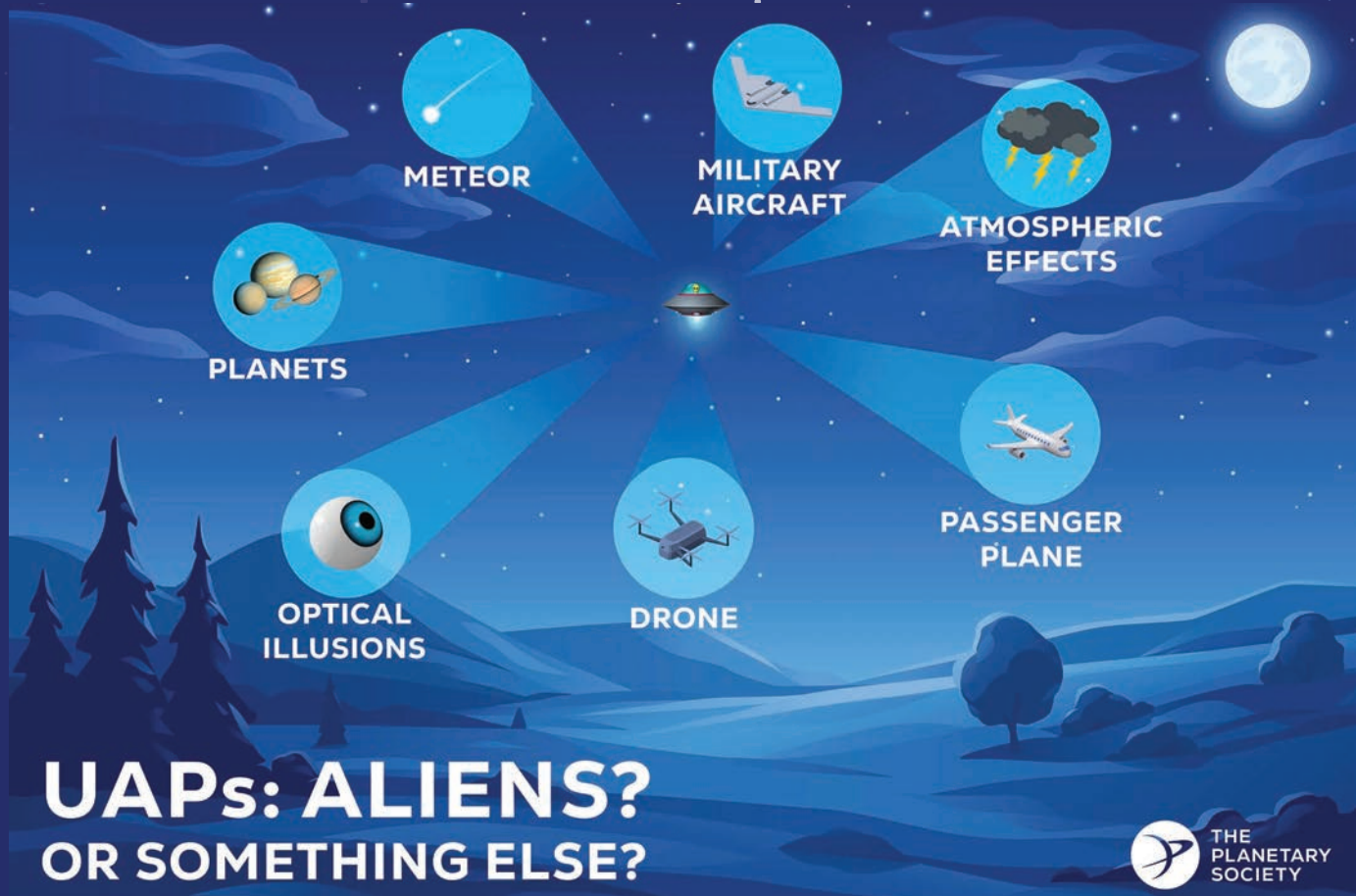
evidence of alien visitation, it's no wonder the public seems fascinated. Are we being visited by craft from another world? The thought is both exciting and terrifying.

Few scientists doubt that life on other planets is possible, some would say likely. Theorists speculate that there could be hundreds if not thousands of planets with advanced life in our galaxy alone. And there are about two trillion galaxies in the observable universe. There should be countless more beyond that detectable horizon. In such a vast universe, anything than can happen, should happen. Is it possible that there are aliens in our skies or under our seas? Certainly.

Here's the "but." It's quite a deductive leap from "we see things in the sky that we can't explain" to "we're being visited by aliens from another world". In reality,

almost all of these anomalous sightings eventually get explained: natural objects like planets, clouds and ball lightning, drones, balloons, military aircraft, etc. Isn't it a bit suspicious that these UAPs seem to fit our preconceived notion of what an alien UFO should look like? Many of the reports are simple errors, instrument malfunctions or explainable visual effects. Some could actually be intentional jamming or other deceptions.

A large number of these events occur near military installations. Is that proof that clandestine aliens are spying on our bases, or is it that tests of state of the art experimental or secret aircraft, jammers, countermeasures or instruments are at the root of some sightings? The US budget includes a black budget of tens of billions of dollars going into secret engineering



Most UAP's can be explained by ordinary phenomena.
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PLANETARY SOCIETY

ALIEN SPACECRAFT?

projects identified only by code names. They likely produce things that are not communicated to other branches or units.

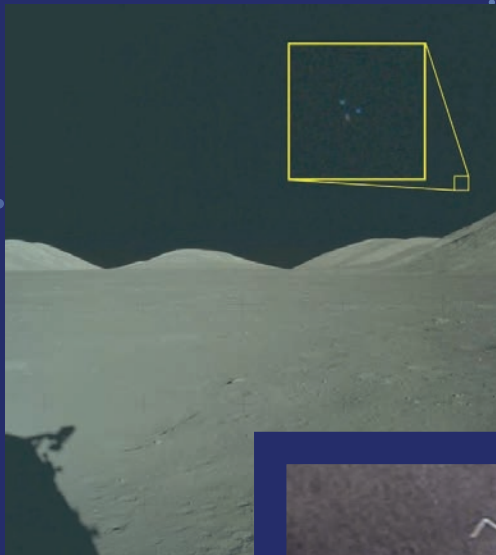
Interstellar travel is extremely difficult. It's completely beyond our capability at present and looks to remain so for the foreseeable future. Our current understanding of physics makes clear that the speed of light is immutable. If that premise is correct, then travel between stars is impractical for any biological entity similar to us because the distances are so insurmountable. The evidence, so far, is that physics and chemistry are the same everywhere. If that is true, then, biology is also likely to be the same. ETs probably have the same sort of limitations we do. I wonder if it's even possible for complex life to travel between stars. In any case, it would be extraordinarily expensive in resources and require

unreasonable amounts of energy. And it requires shielding worthy of any sci-fi novel; when traveling at even 1% the speed of light, encountering so much as a proton would be catastrophic. Of course, a much more advanced civilization might be able to solve all of the problems. I think we all hope that is the case (for our own spacefaring future), but I'm skeptical.

As I said above, almost all of the UAP sightings have been explained. Almost. The few that have not been explained are keeping our military planners concerned, and our scientific community captivated. Some of these sightings seem to be actual material objects that exhibit incredible capabilities. If real, they represent a significant danger to our national security regardless of whether they are extraterrestrial or our earthly adversaries. It's a

valid government interest to investigate these sightings. However, the events that remain unresolved, are by definition, the hardest ones to explain. It could be that they just have the weakest data or are the result of extraordinary coincidences.

Mystery is the fuel to scientific curiosity and so it's certain that these anomalous observations will continue to enthrall members of the scientific community. In all likelihood, most of the remaining unresolved sightings will be explained. Without direct evidence of an alien origin, there is no reason to assume that aliens are behind any of these sightings. In fact, aliens are the least likely explanation of all the many possibilities. Yet I think most of us would actually want it to be alien visitation – after all, swamp gas is such an unexciting explanation, isn't it? ■



ABOVE: NASA's Apollo 17 crew reported seeing three mysterious dots in a triangular formation. PHOTO COURTESY OF NASA



ABOVE: Orion test capsule on the ground. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PLANETARY SOCIETY



LEFT: A still from a video showing an unidentified object as recorded by a U.S. Navy jet. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF WAR

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JULY 18

Cochise Crafters At the Mall **11 a.m. to 3 p.m.**

Cochise Crafters will be hosting a craft and small business event on Saturday, July 18, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Mall at Sierra Vista. Everything from hand sewn items, soaps and lotions to home improvement and jacuzzis. Arizona Department of Transportation will also be there seeking your opinion on upcoming road projects. Great chance to do some Christmas in July shopping. Don't forget to stop by our full-time kiosk — Mesquite Mercantile — for a great assortment of gifts and check out the new arrivals for fall! To sign up for this or any of our other events, go to <http://www.cochisecrafters.com>. Only contact person is Arlette Mendenhall (520) 678.4852.

SIERRA VISTA



JULY 20 to JULY 24

VBS Summer Camp | 9 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Village Meadows Baptist Church, 1407 El Camino Real, in Sierra Vista, is hosting Illumination Station a fun and engaging summer program. All children who have completed Kindergarten through 6th grade are invited! Your child will enjoy crafts, music, recreational activities, and a daily bible lesson. This event is completely free to the community. Please register at www.villagemeadowschurch.com

SIERRA VISTA



AUGUST 5 to
AUGUST 8

Southwest Wings | 35th **Birding and Nature** **Summer Festival**

The 35th Southwest Wings Summer Birding and Nature Festival will be based at The Mall at Sierra Vista, 2200 El Mercado Loop, Sierra Vista. This family friendly event offers expertly guided field trips, pre-festival Jamboree, free programs, including some new ones just for kids, exhibitors, vendors, live animals and Keynote Buffet Dinner. A non-refundable registration fee (\$25) is required

if you want to join field trips and attend the welcome Jamboree. The small-group guided field trips will be mainly in group vans but there will also be several car caravans, in participants' own vehicles, to nearby easily-accessible locations. Each trip is led by an expert guide and this year we welcome two special guest guides, Greg Homel and Peg Abbott. For more information, visit the website www.swwings.org.

SIERRA VISTA

AUGUST 8

Uncorked & Under Cover Indoor Wine Festival

Escape the summer heat and uncork something extraordinary. Uncorked & Under Cover is an indoor wine festival in the heart of Willcox Wine Country, bringing together five Arizona wineries, each with unique Arizona wine perspectives, under one cool roof for a day of exceptional pours, great food, music, and local art. Participating Wineries: Golden Rule Vineyards · Skyhaven Wines · 1764 Vineyards · Desert Blossom Winery · Mountain Thunder Wines. Location: Golden Rule Vineyards Tasting Room, 469 S. Haskell Ave, Willcox, Arizona 85643. Time: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Cost: \$20 for 10 tastings, \$25 at the door. Want to go deeper? Skyhaven winemaker Chris Brinkmaker will lead a wine-pairing activity that will expand horizons. Two sessions, an extra \$10 for wine, nibbles, and new wine appreciation. Full details and tickets are available at www.skyhavenwines.com/event-list or email bridget@skyhavenwines.com.

WILLCOX

SEPTEMBER 19

9th Annual Lantern Festival

People from all walks of life join together to light the sky with hopes, dreams, milestones or celebrate the lives of loved ones. On September 19, we will come together for an incredible experience you won't

UPCOMING EVENTS

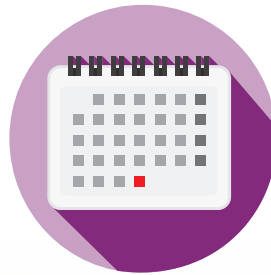
want to miss! The Lantern Festival brings individuals of all ages (free entry for ages 5 and under), backgrounds and walks of life together for one awe-inspiring evening. At San Pedro Golf Course, there will be music, dancing, merchandise, arts & crafts and food & beverage vendors, and a great (free) Kids Zone with complimentary face painting, a balloon twister, climbing wall and several inflatable features! When the time is just right, we will light the sky with our highest hopes, deepest desires, and fondest memories. Mark milestones, set goals or celebrate the life of a loved one in Heaven. Visit our Facebook page for additional information and updates: The Lantern Festival - Benson, Arizona

BENSON

OCTOBER 24 Spooktacular Bash

"Wondering "witch" way to celebrate Halloween this year? Join the Education Foundation of Sierra Vista at their annual Spooktacular Bash on October 24, at Stan Greer's Old Door Shop. Festivities go from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. (doors open at 5:45 p.m.). Tickets are \$60 and include dinner by Pizzeria Mimosa, two drink tickets, desserts by Buena Culinary Chefs, music, dancing, silent auctions, costume contest and much more! Proceeds help support SVUSD teachers and students. Tickets go on sale August 1st online at Eventbrite.com.

SIERRA VISTA



We welcome your upcoming calendar events for the next issue!

For the **September / October 2026** edition, we have to receive the information by not later than **August 1, 2026**. The publication is due in mailboxes around **September 15, 2026**. Events should be dated to occur no earlier than **September 25, 2026**.

If you are looking to promote your event

SUBMIT
TO **events**
epetermann@ssvec.com

There is no charge for contributions to the calendar.

The K Palace Theater PRESENTS

COMEDY NIGHT

FRIDAY JULY 31ST 7:00PM SHOWTIME

With Andy Beningo

NBC DRYBAR comedy LAUGH USA THE BOB & TOM SHOW

For Tickets: TheKPalaceTheater.com 290 S Huachuca Blvd Huachuca City, AZ

WILLCOX SKY FEST & HEAVY EQUIPMENT EXPO

SEPTEMBER 4, 5, 6 2026

WILLCOX RIVERVIEW

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CITY OF WILLCOX ARIZONA

TICKETS AVAILABLE NOW

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SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE NOW!!!

CONTACT JAI AT (520) 270-3924

HOSTED AT QUAIL PARK, WILLCOX ARIZONA



LIVE IN WILLCOX!

See Wild Swans July 25th!

Center of Art and Heritage | 134 N Railroad Ave
7:00pm

See the Wild Swans right here in Willcox as they perform their "Summer Roads" concert featuring traditional Irish songs and stories about summertime! Enjoy an amazing live show perfect for the whole family, July 25th at the Center of Art and Heritage!

ANT HILL DRIVE-IN

The end of our Summer drive-in movies is almost here! Be sure not to miss out on our final two FREE movies at the Ant Hill Drive-In!

Showing Aug 7/8:

WONKA

Showing Aug 14/15:

THE GOLDEN VOYAGE OF SINDBAD

All Movies Start at Sundown 247 E Stewart St.
Willcox, AZ

A huge thank you to our August sponsor,
Valley Telecom, for making this possible!

LIVE ON STAGE!

September - April

Center of Art and Heritage 134 N Railroad Ave

Get ready for a whole brand new season of live events, performances, and more coming straight to Willcox! From September to April, you can expect all kinds of experiences, perfect for the whole family!

Season Tickets On Sale Now at willcoxtheater.com

**Keep an eye on our website as
summer approaches for more
information and registry!**

(520) 766-3335

willcoxtheater@gmail.com

willcoxtheater.com



Victory Over Addiction and Walk for Recovery

Addiction. The beginnings are sneaky and insidious. Maybe it starts with a prescription drug taken in response to an injury or surgery. Maybe a friend gives you a pill or a drink that makes you feel 'normal' for the first time in your young life. Maybe it's a way to escape emotional pain, forget the past, numb the world around you. The starting is easy. The stopping is a hard-fought battle that takes its toll on everyone involved. The battle is worth the fight.

The stopping, aka recovery, is possible. I am here to tell you there is hope. There are resources across Cochise County for people struggling with addiction. There are people in recovery who are passionate about helping others. Nobody is beyond help if they want it bad enough. Check out these Stories of Hope:

On September 5, 2026, a recovery event called Victory Over Addiction and Walk for Recovery takes place at Veterans Memorial Park in Sierra Vista from 8:30 AM to 11:30 AM. The event is free to attend and features a variety of community resources such as sober living homes, rehab services, family services, legal aid, harm reduction services, medication-assisted treatment services, counseling, peer support services, mental health services, and more.

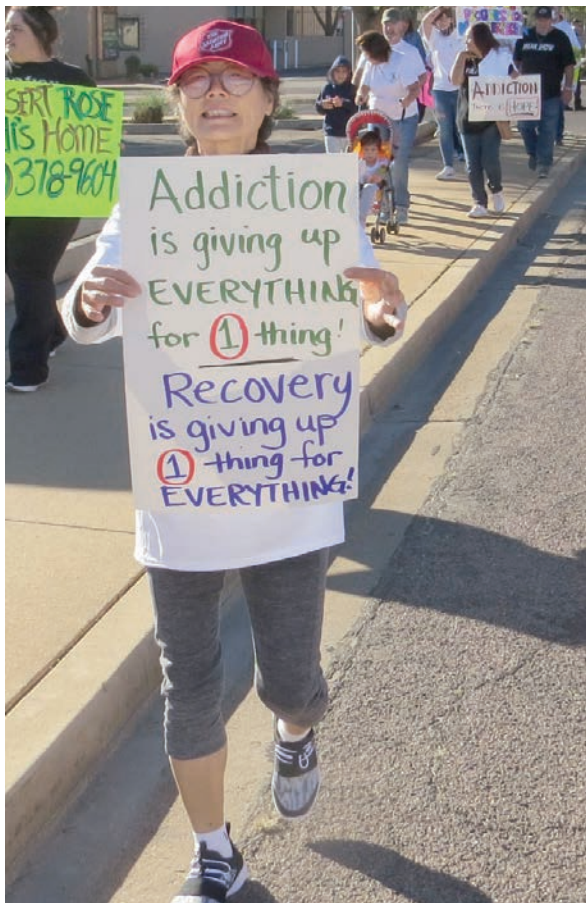
The Walk for Recovery begins at 9:30 AM, featuring boisterous walkers carrying signs promoting hope, healing, support, encouragement, and connection. The walk is fun and intended to raise awareness that recovery is possible. Come out and help us win the battle!

If you are a family member or friend of

an adult struggling with drug or alcohol addiction, Parents of Addicted Loved Ones (PAL) is here for you. Families and friends are collateral damage and need support too. PAL offers evidence-based education and peer support to help navigate the roller coaster ride of having a loved one in addiction. PAL meets every Monday at 6:00 PM at Calvary Chapel, 1155 Wilcox Drive, Sierra Vista. For our loved ones in recovery, SOBER Project meets in the room next to PAL at the same time and same location.

For more information contact Becky Smyth at 520-559-1350. ■

Check out
Stories of Hope:



One of the many 2025 participants in the annual Walk for Recovery event, set for September 5 in Sierra Vista.

THE SALVATION ARMY and
PARENTS OF ADDICTED LOVED ONES (PAL)

invite you to attend

VICTORY over ADDICTION

and **WALK FOR RECOVERY**

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 5
8:30 AM TO 11:30 AM
VETERANS PARK, SIERRA VISTA

VETERANS PARK IS THE PLACE TO BE FOR ALL THINGS RECOVERY!

EVENT INCLUDES:

- ✓ **HOPE** for a brighter future
- ✓ **Community Resources:** Support Groups, Counseling, Rehab Centers, Sober Living Homes, Harm Reduction, Housing, Legal Aid, Peer Support, MAT Services, Mental Health Support, Family Services, and more
- ✓ **People who care!**

CONTACT: Becky - 520-559-1350

Let's Toast to

By Chef Chris

ClownChef@Yahoo.com

I was having a chat with an English friend once about the joys of travel, and the joy of going home again afterward. She told me that the first thing she wants to eat upon return is “beans on toast.” Now, it may be a uniquely British comfort food, but I absolutely get it. Especially the toast part.

When we were sick, mom would make us toast with tea, or toast with ginger ale if we had a funny tummy. When she was pressed for time or hadn't made it to the commissary, we might end up with SOS, or chipped beef on toast. Everyone was always happy with that, even if its nickname implies something unsavory. Toast to the rescue!

My father would have us make him peanut butter toast that he insisted be topped with butter, so it wouldn't stick to the roof of his mouth. Add a glass of milk and he was happy as a clam. Some grocery stores have started putting the PB & J near the bread for the very reason that it's one of the quickest meals possible. But there are so many more imaginative things we can be putting on toast. We can also go way beyond avocado.

When cooking for one or two, in particular in the heat of summer, toast can actually be transformed into something quite elevated, culinarily speaking. The bruschetta for example, is a simple way to entertain that always satisfies the guests. Toast points can be topped with pâté or fine cheese for an officially fancy fête — especially when spelled in that way.

For those avoiding bread, myself included at times, there are some wonderful “crisp breads” out there

which give great crunch. They are sometimes hiding near the deli section or in the cracker aisle. Since they have a longer shelf life than a loaf of bread that I can't get through quickly enough, I always have some on hand, ready to be topped for a light meal and I don't even have to put the toaster on!

Another favorite alternative of mine for bread is sweet potatoes. I've been using them sliced into rounds for hors d'oeuvre for some time now, but they can be topped with any number of delicious and nutritious toppings. Best of all, they give us a good dose of fiber, a hot topic these days for many reasons. They cook quickly in a toaster oven, or an air fryer if you roll that way.

Mushrooms on toast will always be a favorite. I didn't dislike the concoction made from dried meat in plastic bags in the fridge, but when I want “easy” and something like a real meal, it's perfect. The co-op might be able to get you frozen mushrooms that are ever ready in a pinch.

Welsh rarebit is classic made with cheese and spinach jazzed up with mustard and worcestershire sauce. It might be best on better bread, but all's fair in getting dinner on the table during the dog days of summer. In fact, why not turn your leftovers into a little something-something on toast. I would definitely eat spaghetti toast topped with melty parmesan.

Add a salad to any of these, if you have the makings, or just enjoy dinner on a salad plate. ■

TOAST TOPPING COMBOS

Some of these can be popped back into the toaster oven to melt the cheese.

Marinated artichoke hearts and parmesan
Smashed peas with feta
Arugula, feta, beet
Asparagus, ham, cheese
Fresh mozzarella, tomato, basil
Small can of baked beans
Kippers or sardines with shallot and mayo
Open faced “sloppy Joes”
Creamed corn and salsa
Broccoli and cheddar



a light and lovely meal



CHICKPEA SALAD ON TOAST

The chickpeas are seasoned as if they were tuna, so you could make this with your own tuna recipe. I think the pickle relish makes it, but you are the chef. Cut the celery as finely as possible. I sometimes just dip tortilla chips into it rather than toast, or put it on crackers. You can also use it on top of fresh greens for a hearty salad. Makes 2 cups.

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 can chickpeas, drained | 1 Tbsp. sweet pickle relish |
| 1 Tbsp. olive oil | 1 rib celery, finely chopped |
| 1 Tbsp. mayonnaise | 2 tsp. Dijon Mustard |
| 1 Tbsp. olive oil | 1 tsp. Dill |

Put the chickpeas in a medium bowl and mash with a potato masher or a fork, leaving a few whole beans. Add the remaining ingredients and a little salt, and mix well. Taste and adjust seasoning.



TUSCAN TOAST

Ricotta is what makes this toast so comforting. Sometimes I splurge on good ricotta, but the grocery store variety is fine. Better olives also elevate this, but as you like. I used garlic stuffed green olives because, garlic... Fresh pesto will make a big difference, and the leftovers are easy to use. Makes about 4 toasts.

- 4 pieces of bread or crisp bread
- ½ cup ricotta
- ½ cup white beans, pat dry
- 8 olives, sliced
- ¼ cup pesto

Toast your bread. Divide ricotta between toasts. Divide beans between toasts, then top with olives. Drizzle on pesto and season with salt and pepper.



SWEET POTATO TOAST WITH BEETS AND MOZZARELLA

These will be a new favorite of yours. You can slice your sweet potatoes on the bias for bigger “toasts” or make them small, as pictured. I had tiny mozzarella balls, so I went small. I scrub them well and leave the skins on as they can get a bit soft if over baked. Roasted beets can be found in the produce section, or roast your own. Any nut will do to finish. 2 Servings.

- 1 medium sweet potato
- 1-2 small roasted beets
- About 4 oz. fresh mozzarella
- 2-3 Tbsp. pesto
- 4-6 walnuts
- Olive oil

Slice the sweet potatoes into scant ½ inch slices. Brush with olive oil and bake in the toaster oven until just softened, about 8-10 minutes. Try to not overcook.

Slice the beets thinly and arrange on the potatoes. Top with mozzarella, then pesto, and finish with nuts and a tiny drizzle of olive oil. Season with salt as desired.

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With the summer months upon us, Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative wants to remind you about a **FREE** service to help you boost energy efficiency and save money.

FREE FOR MEMBERS!

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