

CONNECTION

Frohe Weihnachten!

Fredericksburg's German joy at Christmas



TRIMMING THE TREE

PERSONAL ARTISTRY



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Rural broadband thrives in 2022

The commitment and professionalism of rural broadband providers creates lasting and substantive improvements, bringing essential services that bridge the gap in internet performance between rural and metropolitan areas. In many cases, NTCA members offer even more robust services than those available in larger cities.

In recent years, Congress has passed billions in funding for rural broadband. I was fortunate to attend a White House ceremony last year for the signing of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which included over \$60 billion for broadband projects.

NTCA has worked to ensure this funding goes to communities that need it most, as well as to providers, such as yours, with a long history of servicing their neighbors with the highest-quality broadband.

While broadband expansion is a priority, we've continued our focus on advocacy, including working with the Federal Communications Commission to ensure the long-term viability of the Universal Service Fund. It's a program that helps Americans in hard-to-serve areas keep pace with services found in more densely populated communities.

We've also expanded our Smart Rural Community program to highlight the great things robust broadband access brings to rural America — it's not just cities that are "smart!" Over 240 providers are part of the program. Visit smartruralcommunity.org for more information.

As we celebrate our wins from this year, we're looking forward to an even better 2023. 📺

TO ALL WHO BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Thank you

FOR ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL YEAR

Fast internet access is essential for rural communities to thrive in a fast-changing, highly connected world.



High-Speed Internet



Voice Communications



Videoconferencing



Telehealth



Business-level Data Tools



Online Education



Streaming Video & Music

Professionals in your community make this possible — working daily to help you lead a better life.

Thank you for all you do!

Business is booming

Apps help small business owners thrive

Running a small business is no easy task. There's a long list of things to keep track of, from inventory and sales to payroll and budgeting. It can get overwhelming staying ahead of the curve.

Thankfully, there's a wide array of apps geared toward making the life of a small business owner easier. Listed below are some of the best apps in 2022 for small businesses.

POINT OF SALE SYSTEMS

These systems allow small businesses to complete sales and ring up customers. According to NerdWallet, restaurants require POS systems that provide coordination and table management, while a retail store requires inventory management features.

Square — The POS offered by the financial tech company Square meets all these requirements and much more. Square is easy to use, offering transparent pricing, live support and compatibility with iPhone, iPad and Android devices. The first magnetic stripe credit card reader is free, and there is even a free plan available for small businesses that don't require advanced functions. While many payment processors have hidden monthly fees, Square doesn't charge by the month. Instead, you pay 2.6% + 10 cents for each credit card transaction for unlimited devices.

ACCOUNTING AND BUDGETING

Accounting software helps small businesses that may not be able to hire a full-time, in-house accountant. With these apps, you can track profit margins, revenues, expenses and budgets to understand the health of your business.

Intuit QuickBooks — Intuit QuickBooks is the industry standard and leader for small business accounting software in 2022, according to NerdWallet. It offers a multitude of service tiers, so it can easily be scaled to the size of the business it serves. It is accessible anywhere from QuickBooks online to the cloud-based version. Some of QuickBooks' best features include a full suite of reports, double-entry accounting, ease of accessibility and sharing with outside accountants, live service bookkeeping support and easy mobile access. Pricing is \$25 a month with other monthly payment tiers (\$50, \$80 and \$180 respectively).

PAYROLL

Paying employees on time is essential to operating a business. Extra help tracking hours and payments can allow small businesses owners to give attention to many other daily aspects of running their companies.



Patriot Payroll — While there are lots of payroll apps on the market, a majority of them are so high-priced that the cost outweighs the benefit of extra help for smaller companies. Patriot Payroll has an affordable price point — \$10 a month, plus \$4 an employee — while offering the same services and benefits as its more expensive counterparts. These services include a one-month free trial, HR support and coverage for up to 100 employees.

INVENTORY

Tracking inventory is a crucial part of staying ahead of the curve for any business. It is no easy task without help, which is why large corporations dedicate entire teams and extensive software programs just for inventory.

Sortly — With built-in barcode scanning that can track stock across multiple warehouses, Sortly has everything you need to manage inventory on the go. It offers both barcode and QR code scanning, giving you the flexibility to use what works best for your business. It even has an offline mode, so a signal interruption won't slow you down. Keep scanning incoming and outgoing items and seamlessly sync up once you're back online. 🗨️

Annual reflections

Together, we make our community better

As the final days of 2022 unfold and we enter a season of celebration and remembrance, I enjoy the opportunity to reflect on this place we call home and the role of Hill Country Telephone Cooperative.



CRAIG COOK
Chief Executive Officer

Many of us lead lives where it seems the accelerator is always pushed to the floor. Between raising families, bustling careers, volunteering and embracing active pastimes, everyone is flying through life. But the holidays — while busy in their own way — are a chance to take solace and find respite in traditions like sharing family tall tales, great meals and a few belly laughs. We might even find quiet moments, if we're lucky.

During these times of reflection, I appreciate a theme that runs through our community — neighbors helping neighbors. In so many ways, these connections are what make rural places like ours special. We rally together in hard times. We celebrate good times as a community. We also embrace the teamwork needed to build for the future, which is at the core of HCTC's mission.

I will never forget this company's history or the role it plays, because it's far different than that of the for-profit businesses serving our nation's metropolitan areas. Rather than focusing on stock prices or maximizing profits, HCTC was created to support our hometowns. When larger national companies ignored us, calling our communities too rural and small to be a sound investment, our founders stepped up. It began with telephone lines connecting homes and businesses. But the work did not stop there. Now, we provide a suite of modern communications tools and a fast and dependable internet network that would create envy in many of the largest cities.

This network is not the sole accomplishment of our management and staff. It's a creation made possible by you and the people you see every day at the grocery store or at school events. An elected board of directors — residents who, just like you, depend on our services — set the standards and long-term goals we strive to achieve. We are a company made up of people devoted to helping their neighbors. Few other communications companies can say the same.

Does that make HCTC special? Certainly, we're proud of the work we do because it benefits others. However, I fully appreciate that we're far from alone in having a goal of uplifting those around us. Our places of worship, schools, locally owned businesses, first responders and more bring that same spirit to their day-to-day missions.

It's this sentiment that also reminds me to appreciate those who served and sacrificed in the name of our nation. Veterans Day is Nov. 11. Please take a few minutes, at least, to appreciate the sons and daughters of this community who made the choice to serve. Rural areas like ours have a long history of service to the armed forces, something we should never forget. Truly, are there more profound examples of neighbors helping neighbors?

And during this time of celebration, I must thank everyone who is part of the HCTC family. Every department — every individual — plays a vital part in bringing you the services you need in this fast-paced world.

From everyone at HCTC, have a wonderful Thanksgiving and a merry Christmas. 📧

The HCTC Connection is a bimonthly magazine published by Hill Country Telephone Cooperative © 2022. It is distributed without charge to all member/owners of the cooperative.



HCTC is more than a provider of state-of-the-art telecommunications products and services. We are a member-owned cooperative with an elected board of directors who govern our organization using our bylaws, member input and business and industry conditions to guide their decisions. We are proud residents of the communities we serve, and we're dedicated to not only providing the best services possible, but doing so in a way that is ethical, safe and productive for our friends and neighbors. This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Mission Statement: To be the premier provider of modern telecommunications and broadband services throughout our region.

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Ingram, TX 78025
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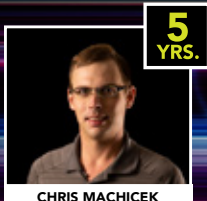
Fredericksburg's Marktplatz is ready for the holidays, with a German Weihnachtspyramide, also known as a Christmas Pyramid. See story Page 9.

Photo by Trish Rawls



EMPLOYEE SERVICE AWARDS

Every Annual Meeting HCTC recognizes those employees who have reached another 5-year anniversary. We appreciate their hard work and dedication to provide the highest quality of service to our members.



5 YRS.

CHRIS MACHICEK



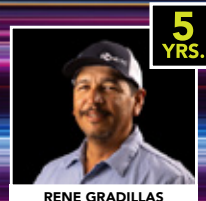
5 YRS.

RONALD FOLEY



5 YRS.

LAURA WIMBERLY



5 YRS.

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5 YRS.

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5 YRS.

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15 YRS.

LISA OTTMERS



15 YRS.

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15 YRS.

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15 YRS.

JAMES HEIMANN



20 YRS.

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20 YRS.

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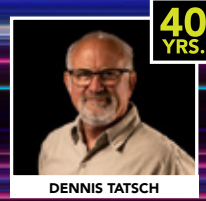
20 YRS.

STEVE COPP



25 YRS.

ROLAND MICHEL



40 YRS.

DENNIS TATSCH



A SALUTE TO SERVICE

HCTC deeply appreciates the service and the sacrifices of all our veterans and their families. Take a moment on Veterans Day, Friday, Nov. 11, to thank a veteran in your life.

Holiday Closings

The employees of HCTC are grateful for the support of our loyal members. We hope you enjoy a holiday season filled with family and friends. Our offices will be closed on the following holidays:

Thanksgiving

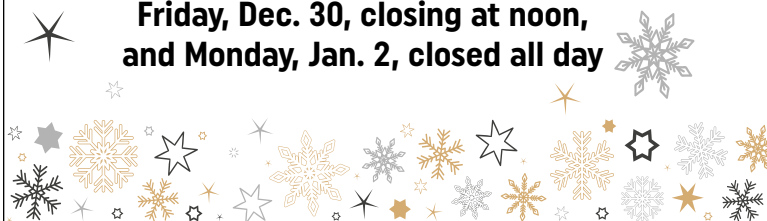
Thursday, Nov. 24, and Friday, Nov. 25

Christmas

Friday, Dec. 23, closing at noon, and Monday, Dec. 26, closed all day

New Year's Eve

Friday, Dec. 30, closing at noon, and Monday, Jan. 2, closed all day



Don't get your tinsel in a tangle

Story by ANNE BRALY

Decorating the Christmas tree is a beloved holiday tradition, but before you can hang the ornaments, take photos of the grandkids beneath those resplendent boughs or open presents beside it, you've got to find one.

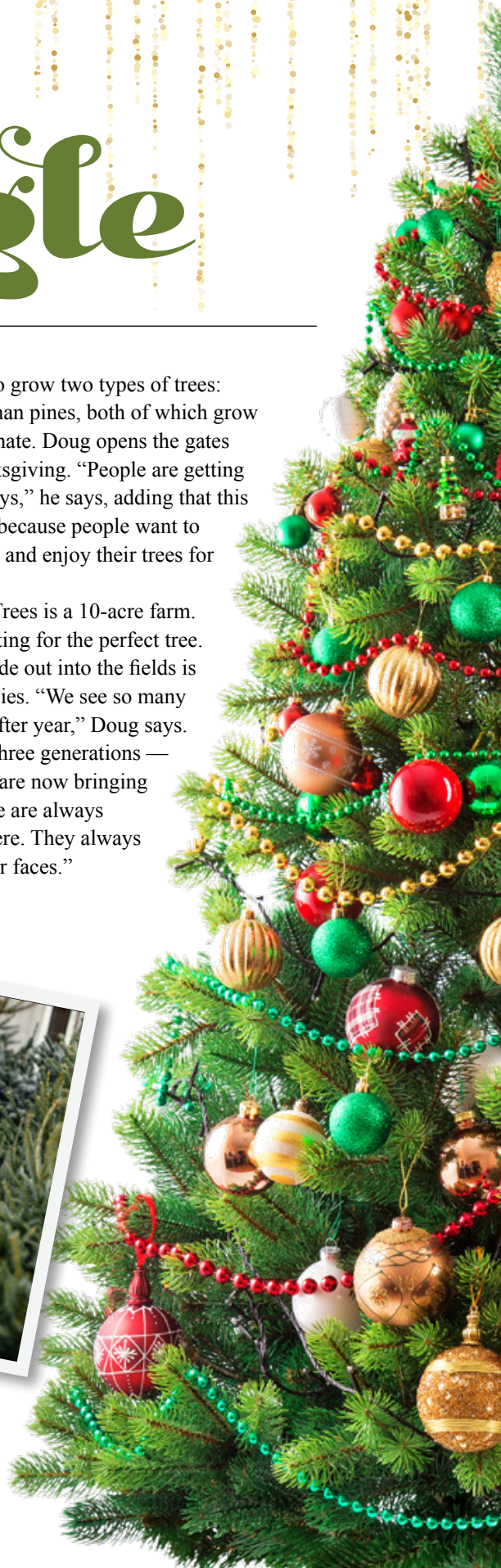
Visiting a Christmas tree farm can put you in the spirit of the season as you make family memories while supporting a local business. And you'll bring home the absolute freshest trees, wreaths and greenery, so everything will last much longer. The fact that Texas isn't overloaded with tree farms makes a trip to a farm to cut down your own tree all the more special for families, says Doug Hingst, owner of Pipe Creek Christmas Trees, who, along with his father, Jim, opened their farm to the public in 1991 after Jim retired. "He was looking for something to do after he retired from the oil business and bought the farm from a friend who had the idea of starting a tree farm. My father took it from there," Doug says.

Now, the father-son duo grow two types of trees: Leyland cypress and Afghan pines, both of which grow well in the hot, Texas climate. Doug opens the gates the Monday before Thanksgiving. "People are getting their trees earlier these days," he says, adding that this practice may be trending because people want to extend the holiday season and enjoy their trees for a longer period of time.

Pipe Creek Christmas Trees is a 10-acre farm. It's a long hike when hunting for the perfect tree. That's why taking a hayride out into the fields is a popular option for families. "We see so many of the same people year after year," Doug says. "And now, we're seeing three generations — people who came as kids are now bringing their own children. People are always happy when they come here. They always come with a smile on their faces."



Tree varieties at places like Pipe Creek Christmas Trees may include Afghan pines and Leyland cypress. Precut Fraser firs are also often available.





Tree farms around the Lone Star State

Here are some farms around Texas that provide all you need to cut your own Christmas tree and create or continue a favorite family tradition. A word to the wise: Get your tree early in the season to get your pick of the best.

Evergreen Farms, Elgin — After cutting the perfect tree, visit the concession stand for hot chocolate and snacks. Pick up fixings for s'mores, and then roast your marshmallows by the campfire. Tree varieties include Leyland cypress, Virginia pine and Arizona cypress. Fraser firs and noble firs are precut and brought in from other states. Learn more at evergreen-farms.com.

Seiler Christmas Tree Farm, Seguin — Playground and candy canes for the kids, snacks for all. Take home a live wreath for your front door, too. Tree varieties include Leyland cypress, Carolina Sapphire, Virginia and Loblolly pines. Learn more at seilerschristmastrees.com.

High Star Christmas Tree Farm, Hockley — A barn filled with premade and made-to-order wreaths. Ride on the Merry Tree Express Train, and bring your own marshmallows and hot dogs to cook over the campfire — roasting

sticks provided. There are also hay rides and more fun for the whole family. Tree varieties include Virginia pine, plus precut Fraser and balsam firs. Details at highstarfarm.com.

Elgin Christmas Trees, Elgin — Take a hayride around the farm to pick out the perfect tree. Tag it, cut it and someone else will haul it for you. Kids will enjoy the farm animals. Shop the Christmas Cottage for a wide variety of holiday crafts. Tree varieties include Virginia pine and Leyland cypress. Learn more at elginchristmastreefarm.com.

Pipe Creek Christmas Trees, Pipe Creek — Hayrides on the weekend, and fresh wreaths for sale, too. Tree varieties include Afghan pines and Leyland cypress. Precut Fraser firs are also available. Learn more at pipecreekchristmastrees.com.

Lee County Christmas Trees, Lincoln — Play area for the kids, along with hayrides, hot chocolate and a farm shop filled with ornaments and decorations. Tree varieties include Carolina Sapphire, Virginia pine and Murray cypress. Online at leecountychristmastrees.com. 📞

Keeping your tree fresh

A newly cut Christmas tree is going to be fresher than one that's been sitting on a lot for a while, but it still needs some TLC to last through the holiday season. Here are some tips to make that happen.

- ▲ Start with a healthy, vibrant tree. Be sure to trim any lower limbs or dead branches.
- ▲ Give the tree a clean, straight cut across the bottom. Most tree farms will do this for you, as well as drill a hole in the bottom if you have the kind of tree stand that needs one.
- ▲ It can't be said enough: water, water, water. Get the tree in water as soon as you come home, and continue to water it daily.
- ▲ Keep the tree cool and away from any heat source that will dry it out.
- ▲ Use LED lights. They don't get as hot, though they won't give the traditional light you may desire.
- ▲ When the holidays are over, recycle your Christmas tree in the garden, woods or an area pond. Many towns offer a service to turn Christmas trees into mulch to be used around town.

©Timmarly/Adobe Stock



Hi, I'm
Kerry
Sutton

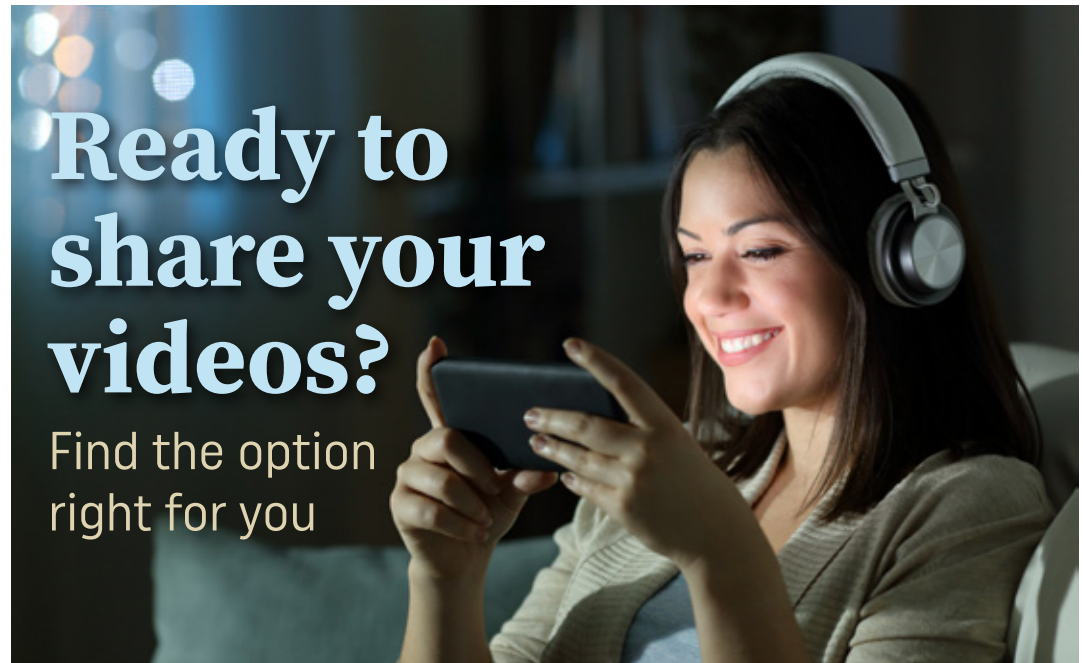
Want to hear more from the folks you read about in Connection? Then head over to hctc.net/resources/podcast for "Inside the Connection" and "10 Minute Tech Tips," our podcasts hosted by Kerry Sutton.

SERVICE
OF THE
MONTH



Financial tracking apps like **Truebill** (truebill.com) and **Trim** (asktrim.com) help keep your finances in order by showing you where your money is going. You can even save some cash by canceling unused digital subscriptions and negotiating for lower prices.

These apps are easy to use and offer free services, although they usually ask for a percentage of any savings you earn from bill reductions.



Ready to share your videos?

Find the option right for you

Sharing a video can be as easy as posting it to social media, but what if you want to share privately with your friends and family? Here are some of the best services available.

YOUTUBE

This is the big dog in video hosting. Once you upload a video on YouTube, you can designate your video as "private," which means only those who have been invited can view the footage. The limitation on this method is that only up to 50 people can receive access.

The second way is to upload your video as "unlisted." This means it will not show up in any search, but anyone with the link, which you can share through email, can watch it.

VIMEO

A YouTube competitor, Vimeo offers similar privacy options but also includes a password feature. However, you'll need a paid subscription for the more comprehensive security features. The free version allows you to upload up to 500MB of videos per week for a total of 5GB per account. Premium plans range from \$7 to \$75 a month.

Why would you choose paid Vimeo over free YouTube? Vimeo supports better-quality audio, better video encoding and a higher bit rate.

GOOGLE PHOTOS/APPLE ICLOUD

Google Photos, included in every Android phone and tablet, is an easy way to share video.

It offers the ability to create a shared folder with your family and friends and notifies each member when there is a new image or video. Google Photos can also be accessed on the web, and there is an iOS app.


For those who prefer to stick to Apple devices, iCloud allows users to share a folder, which can be viewed, downloaded and updated across devices. iOS users can also create a shared folder inside their Photos app by going to "albums" and hitting the + in the top left corner.

DROPBOX

One of the most popular cloud storage options also makes it easy to share a video folder with family and friends, either by granting them individual access or by creating a link that anyone can use to view the folder.

Dropbox's free service limits users to 2GB of storage, but that should be enough for most family users. Those chronicling every day in their lives may want to splurge on an upgrade. Paid plans start at \$9.99 a month, giving you 2TB of storage space.

FACEBOOK

Wait, wasn't social media off the table? Not if you use Facebook Messenger, which allows you to create groups where you can privately share photos and video. You can easily add and delete members to the group, and Messenger can notify everyone about new content. 

Making the season bright

Fredericksburg shines for the holiday season

Story by KATIE NORRIS

Christmas traditions in Fredericksburg date back to its founding by German immigrants in the mid-1800s. The Gillespie County Historical Society showcases nostalgic customs like Santa Claus and stockings at Kinderfest. Local traditions now encompass events like Light the Night Christmas Parade and Fredericksburg's Christmas Nights of Lights nightly tree lighting.

Even after 175 years, "German culture and heritage is still alive and well in the town," says Sean Doerre, the communications and digital content manager at the Fredericksburg Convention and Visitor Bureau.

Fredericksburg boasts a Singing Christmas Tree — a 26-foot-tall metal-framed tree that serves as the stage for a chorus — as well as a larger-than-life wooden Christmas pyramid made by German artisans. Visitors can also experience the town's outdoor ice skating rink, shops, restaurants and nearby wineries. Even Southern Living magazine has recognized Fredericksburg as one of the most festive small towns in the South.

The Light the Night Christmas Parade has been running for 30 years and keeps getting better. The parade is first and foremost "a celebration of light and the community spirit," Fredericksburg Cham-



Holiday revelers enjoy seeing the floats during the annual Light the Night Christmas parade.

Photo by Trish Rawls

ber of Commerce President & CEO Penny McBride says. Chamber members started it, and the parade's first year had only a few participants. Now, it draws well over 100 entries annually, and CBS Austin televises the event. "It is very much a parade that is powered by volunteers," Penny says.

Sammy Segner, owner of Segner's Jewelers, plans the lineup and coordinates logistics. Sponsored by H-E-B grocery stores, the parade also has support from the city and county. "Any funds we generate help us do work that's important to our membership base," Penny says.

The chamber represents over 900 members and is a great economic generator for the community, she adds. Visitors are welcome to stay for AfterGlow, the post-parade party on Marktplatz, the Fredericksburg

town square. This event includes activities for children, food and beverage booths, and nonprofit vendors. "Marktplatz has just hundreds of thousands of lights, if I had to guess. That makes for a pretty incredible backdrop," Penny says.

Beginning in 2009, the Marktplatz Christmas Tree Lighting used to last for one night each holiday season. Hosted by the Fredericksburg Convention and Visitor Bureau, it became a nightly event, complete with music and a countdown, in 2020. "We have people who come back year after year," Sean says. The lights have even served as a romantic setting for several marriage proposals.

From the tiniest tots to the oldest adults, Fredericksburg has something special for everyone this festive season. 📩

If you go

Light the Night Christmas Parade and the Marktplatz Christmas Tree Lighting are free and open to the public. Visitors have the option to reserve bleacher seating for the parade online at fredericksburg-texas.com/lightthenightchristmasparade.

Light the Night Christmas Parade
Dec. 2 at 6:30 p.m.

Marktplatz Christmas Tree Lighting
Nov. 22 to Jan. 5.

Music starts at 5 p.m. Lights come on around 6:10 p.m. after the program begins at 6 p.m.

Plan your holiday in Fredericksburg at visitfredericksburgtx.com/events/holiday.

Your *connected* gift guide

6 gift ideas that make the most of your high-speed internet

The holiday shopping season is here, and there has never been a better time to find the perfect gadget that takes advantage of your high-speed internet connection. From tools that make working from home look good to devices to unwind with, high-speed service will help these gifts shine for the techie in your life.

1. Google Nest Hub, \$50

Give the gift of better mornings with the Google

Nest Hub. Designed for the bedside, it can track sleep quality, update you on the weather and your calendar, stream music and video and control any smart home appliances you might have. It even has a built-in light sensor to make sure the screen is never too bright. Let's see an alarm clock do that.



2. Sonos Roam, \$180

The Roam is the perfect portable speaker for anyone on the move. Stream music, podcasts and more with great audio quality and take them from one room to the next with ease. Roam's Wi-Fi support automatically joins any other Sonos speakers around the house and also works as a smart speaker, connecting to Amazon's Alexa or Google Assistant.



3. Kindle Paperwhite, \$140

For the bookworm in the family, the Kindle Paperwhite is still the best e-reader around. The glare-free display is just like reading on real paper, while the 2021 model adds a warm light option to make reading at night easier on the eyes. Purchase new books or download old favorites in seconds without ever leaving your



favorite reading chair.

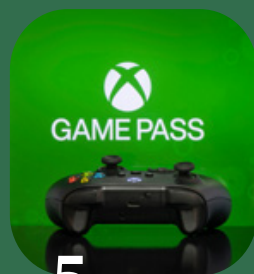
4. Logitech C920S Webcam, \$74

More people are working from home than ever before, so help the remote workers in your life look good while being productive. This Logitech webcam will offer a big upgrade over any built-in camera. It's also ideal for the livestreamers, offering great video quality at an affordable price.



5. Xbox Game Pass, \$9.99/month

If you're giving or receiving an Xbox Series X, Game Pass is a no-brainer. Essentially Netflix for games, the service offers hundreds of games on demand, from the biggest Xbox exclusives available on launch day to creative indies from your favorite developers. Download games in minutes with a fiber connection and discover something new.



6. Apple AirTag, \$30

Know someone who's always losing their keys? These tiny Bluetooth trackers are here to help. Attach them to your keys or anything else you're prone to misplacing, and the AirTag will leverage the network of nearby Apple devices to locate it — in some cases, within inches. For the Android user, the Tile Mate is just as handy. 📱



Tasty app-etizers

6 digital tools to level up your kitchen skills

Even the most experienced home cooks can use a little inspiration now and then. Fortunately, it's never been easier to find. The wide variety of cooking apps and websites available today make it easy to plan meals and even eat healthier. Whether you're looking to ditch the stacks of faded recipes, make something new or find video instructions to walk you through every step, these tools will bring a little extra flavor to your kitchen.



SideChef — If you're just starting out in the kitchen, SideChef is great for learning the basics. A cooking novice created the app for beginners, and it does away with fancy culinary terminology and instead offers dynamic guidance through recipes, providing step-by-step photos, hands-free voice commands and built-in timers. There are over 18,000 interactive smart recipes to try out, so pick your favorite and get cooking.



Food Network Kitchen — Craving something you just saw on the Food Network? The Food Network Kitchen features recipes from fan-favorite personalities and food writers, along with prep time, cook time and difficulty level. Any fan of the network will feel right at home in the app, which lets you search more than 80,000 recipes for categories like grilling, baking, kid-friendly and dairy-free.



Cookpad — For those looking for a more social cooking experience, Cookpad offers a community of home chefs around the world. Discover new ideas, share photos, ask questions and exchange advice. You can even take part in cooking challenges or online cooking classes. And since Cookpad's user base is global, there are plenty of international recipes to satisfy an adventurous palate.



Forks — From vegan lifestyle site Forks Over Knives, the Forks app offers over 600 recipes for anyone sticking to a plant-based diet. What the app lacks in quantity it makes up for in quality, convenience and ease of use. There are new recipes each week, and you can export your favorites to have a ready-made shopping list for your next grocery trip.



Mealime — Meal planning can be a headache, but Mealime makes it easy. The app curates recipe suggestions based on your preferences to help you find healthy new favorites. They're all guaranteed to take 30 minutes or less to cook, but you can also import recipes from the web to add more options.



Cook with Amber — Teenage cook Amber Kelley has been encouraging kids to get in the kitchen since 2012. Today, college keeps her pretty busy. But her YouTube channel, Cook with Amber, still features years' worth of videos that walk kids through their own healthy and delicious kitchen adventures so you can make dinner and memories together. 🗨️



DEEP MEANING

Showcasing your spirit with ink

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

Danielle Lang spent the better part of two decades smashing glass ceilings with a needle.

The owner and operator of Sweet Dee & Co. in Kerrville, Danielle started working in a local tattoo shop after graduating high school. She soon left town to create her own opportunities. “I moved to Houston as fast as I could to try something different,” she says. “I wanted to get out of the Hill Country for a little bit and test the waters in a big city.”

She entered a male-dominated profession. A recent Columbia University study found that about 1 out of 6 tattoo artists are women, and even fewer women are shop owners. “When I first started tattooing, women weren’t really big in the industry,” Danielle says. “It was really uncommon. I didn’t work with another woman in the tattoo industry until the last five years. It’s always just been me and a bunch of guys.”

Not anymore. Sweet Dee & Co. has an all-female staff of six, with each woman bringing different styles and talents.

In 2017, Hurricane Harvey left Danielle homeless and altered the trajectory of her career. She returned to Kerrville, working as an artist in local shops. During the COVID-19 lockdown, she took care of her father, Donald Lang, who’s since died. Together, they picked out the name for Sweet Dee & Co., which opened in May 2021. They wanted it to sound like his favorite rockers, Bad Company. “The last thing we got to do together was name the shop, which was pretty awesome,” Danielle says.

PAYING HER DUES

As tattoos have become more mainstream, a few tattoo schools have opened. But the majority of tattoo artists in the U.S. started like Danielle did — as an apprentice. “I got to work under some really amazing artists and at some of my dream shops,” Danielle says. “I ended up working at some very high-traffic shops. Sometimes I’d start at 10 a.m. and would finish up about 4 a.m. Then, I’d come back the next day and do it again.”



Sweet Dee and Co.
owner Danielle Lang

All the while, Danielle was learning about customers and her own abilities as an artist. “I kind of learned that my art wasn’t necessarily like what people were getting tattooed, so I learned how to draw in a way tailored to my clientele,” she says.

She quickly learned how competitive the tattoo world can be, particularly as millennials and Gen Zers sought out artists. Improved color inks and creativity became hallmarks. “In Houston, there’s a million people there, and there’s a handful of artists that everybody wants to get tattooed by, so you’ve got to make sure you stand out and get noticed,” she says.

While able to work in several different styles, Danielle embraces color and a new era of artistry in the business



Customer Lucky Waters gets a tattoo from Sweet Dee and Co. owner Danielle Lang.



Artist Aurora Joleen works with customer Indigo Rector.

Photos by Gabbe Herrera

that is far from barbed-wire armbands and Tweety Birds. “When the stigma of tattoos started washing away and people started getting a little more artistic, the artwork kind of took off with me, personally,” she says. “When I started, I was doing a lot of biker tattoos — solid black — a lot of tribal and simpler designs. It’s kind of like I became a human copy machine, but your style can evolve. I’m doing portraits and things like that now. I like to tell people that it took me 10 years to learn how to draw something in 10 minutes.”

Danielle and her artists use social media, especially Facebook and Instagram, as virtual galleries for photos of their finished products like a shark-inspired cover-up, a cartoonish frog and

entire tattoo sleeves that cover some dedicated clients’ arms.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Danielle gets special satisfaction out of creating cover-up tattoos, helping clients correct an otherwise permanent mistake or lose the name of an old flame. Some of her cover-ups have been life changing. One client got a Nazi symbol on his chest as a teenager to fit in with his older brother and his friends — it cost him jobs and relationships. “That tattoo wasn’t who he was. He had never been that,” she says. “When it was gone, you could almost see a weight lifted off of him.”

After the shooting in Uvalde, Sweet Dee & Co. held a benefit car wash and bake sale, raising over \$3,700 for

the victims’ families. For Danielle, participating in causes and community activities is part of being involved in a town that has embraced her since she returned home. “After the hurricane, I literally didn’t even have a pair of shoes. I was sick, and my son was sick. We didn’t fare well, and Kerrville people were the first to come to my aid,” she says. “Girls from my Girl Scout troop when I was 10 years old came to get a tattoo. It was pretty touching and pretty amazing that they would be willing to do that. If the people here had chosen to be selfish instead of selfless, things may have been a little different for me, so I’m really grateful to everybody here in town that continue to come and support myself and the people I work with.” 📧

A tasty tradition

Celebrate the season with sweet holiday treats

Baking is a time-honored tradition in so many households this time of year. Kids love sprinkles, and holiday hosts appreciate having sweets on hand for unexpected guests and tasty gifts for neighbors and friends.

There are a few important tips that can make your holiday baking a stress-free experience and perhaps a little more rewarding for those who will be enjoying the results of your efforts. Many of us have had baking disasters that weren't funny at the time but made for entertaining stories later. That doesn't need to be the case, though, if you:

▶ **Organize** — Make lists of all the things

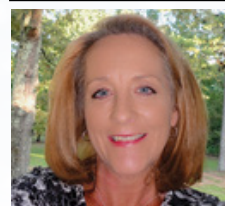
you want to bake and the ingredients you'll need. Do this a couple of days ahead of time so you can decide what will need to be frozen and used in coming weeks, such as cookie dough.

▶ **Check your pantry for the essentials** — Make sure you have plenty of sugar, flour, butter, eggs and the all-important extracts of the holiday season: vanilla, almond and, oh, yes, peppermint. There's nothing more aggravating than getting halfway through a recipe only to open the sugar bag and discover it's nearly empty. Don't forget cooking spray and parchment paper, too. You'll be needing them.

▶ **Make sure you have plenty of room in your refrigerator** — Some baked goods need to be chilled. This is a good time to throw out what's been in the fridge a little too long or to use up any leftovers.

▶ **Ponder presentation** — Check your closets and cabinets for decorative cookie tins. You'll need them for more than just cookies, they're also great for caramel corn, fudge, brownies and bars. A colorful holiday tin is so much more festive than a zip-top bag with a stick-on bow.

Now, get baking. It's almost Christmas!



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HOLIDAY CARAMEL CORN

One word of caution: be sure to weed out all of the unpopped kernels so there are no unexpectedly hard bites in this delicious, sweet-salty snack.

- 3 quarts popped popcorn (about 2 bags microwave popcorn, popped)
- 1/2 cup (1 stick) butter (no substitute)
- 1 cup brown sugar, firmly packed
- 1/4 cup dark corn syrup
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 cups mixed nuts

Heat oven to 250 F.

Place popped popcorn into a large, 4-inch-deep buttered baking pan, and place it in the oven to keep warm. In a large saucepan, melt the butter over

low heat. Stir in brown sugar, corn syrup and salt. Bring to a soft boil, stirring constantly. Boil without stirring for 5 minutes. Remove from heat, and quickly stir in the baking soda and vanilla.

Remove popcorn from the oven. Slowly pour syrup mixture over popcorn, and add nuts, mixing well. This may prove a bit difficult at first, as the caramel mixture hardens quickly once removed from the heat. But as you stir it while it's baking in the oven, it will soften and get much easier to stir.

Butter a large cookie sheet, and turn the popcorn mixture into the pan. Bake for 45 minutes to 1 hour, stirring every 15 minutes. You don't want the popcorn to get overly browned. Remove from the oven and cool completely. Break apart. Store in tightly covered tins.



CRANBERRY ORANGE HOLIDAY NUT BREAD

- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/4 cup butter, softened
- 1 tablespoon grated orange peel
- 3/4 cup orange juice
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup fresh or frozen cranberries
- 6 ounces chopped pecans

Preheat the oven to 350 F. Grease the bottom of a 9-by-5-inch loaf pan and set aside.

In a large bowl, mix the flour, sugar, baking powder, salt and baking soda. Stir in the butter until the mixture is crumbly. Stir

in the orange peel, orange juice, vanilla and eggs, just until the batter comes together. Be careful not to overmix. Fold in the fresh cranberries and nuts.

Transfer the batter to the prepared baking pan. Bake until a wooden toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean: about 50 minutes to 1 hour. Cool in the pan for 5 minutes before loosening the sides of the loaf from the pan. Transfer the loaf to a rack to cool completely before slicing. Let cool completely and wrap with plastic wrap.



PEANUT BUTTER STARS

A classic holiday cookie. These freeze well, so make plenty to enjoy throughout the season.

- 1/2 cup shortening
- 1/2 cup peanut butter
- 3/4 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup packed brown sugar

- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/8 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 egg
- 2 tablespoons milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/4 cup granulated sugar
- Chocolate kisses or stars

Preheat the oven to 350 F.

In a large mixing bowl, beat shortening and peanut butter with an electric mixer on medium-high speed for 30 seconds. Add 1/2 cup of the granulated sugar, along with the brown sugar, baking powder and baking soda. Beat until combined, scraping sides of bowl occasionally. Beat in egg, milk and vanilla until combined. Beat in as much of the flour as you can with the mixer. Stir in any remaining flour.

Shape dough into 1-inch balls. Roll balls in 1/4 cup granulated sugar. Place 2 inches apart on an ungreased cookie sheet. Bake for 10-12 minutes or until edges are firm and bottoms are lightly browned. Immediately press a chocolate star or kiss into the center of each cookie. Transfer to a wire rack and let cool. Store in airtight containers. Makes 54 cookies. 📄



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