There is a special place under the bold East Texas sun that is mostly about helping children develop a life map. It’s about teaching them with encouragement and inspiration. It’s a camp with a noble purpose: to invest in the character building and faith of children with the purpose of helping them develop into model contributors. Sky Ranch in Van is that place, and annually, it serves more than 50,000 children, teens and adults. It’s also a wondrous place that can accommodate more than 800 overnight guests on a 500-acre wooded complex that encompasses everything from jet skiing to horseback riding to high-tech presentations. But it was not always so.

The vision for Sky Ranch began a long time ago in the middle of a battle on foreign soil at the height of World War II. As wars do, this event motivated one foxholed soldier, Mel Brewer, to contemplate his purpose and seek the will of God in his life. His answer, he felt, was to develop a camp ministry for children. He chronicled these plans in one of his letters to his stateside sweetheart, Winkie. As the best stories go, there seemed to be a bit of fate and maybe the hand of God at work. Because simultaneously, Winkie’s own letter to Mel was puttering across the ocean to him. In it, she’d stated her own life’s purpose—and it was also to be dedicated to working with children and making a difference in their lives.

Luckily, Mel made it home safe and sound from the war and married Winkie, the girl who shared his dream. Then, far from the foxhole, he held tight to his pact with his maker to develop a ministry for children. Mel worked in Denton as an accountant, so in 1955, he and Winkie opened up their first backyard camp there. Initially, Sky Ranch was just a summer camp, and in its first year it hosted 66 participants. With the passing years, the reputation of the ranch and the life-changing lessons grew, and the Brewers felt inspired to expand their service. As the next step, they began to look for land.

In 1974 they found the perfect piece of property in Van, but there was a hitch. The land was for sale, but it already had a contract on it from another buyer. That was only a little matter to the Brewers, who decided to walk to the center of the land and kneel, and ask God to give them a hand in acquiring it. Weeks later, back in Denton, they received a call, seemingly out of the blue. It was from a Realtor who said he’d heard they were looking for property and had just the place for them. It turns out, it was the exact property they’d knelt on and prayed for. The previous real estate deal had fallen through, and the land was clear for them to purchase.

Land acquired and the first very rustic outdoor camping retreats behind them, the Sky Ranch team managed to...
raise enough money to build the first cabins and was looking forward to hosting a first retreat. The only problem was that the ranch’s newly built, 93-acre lake was bone dry. So what do you think Winkie and Mel did about it? They prayed. And the lake did fill. And it’s always been full since.

That’s a story that Sam Hasz, the director of facilities at Sky Ranch enjoys telling, almost as much as he enjoys showing off the expansive facilities as his golf cart zips through hidden trails and paths that lead from one experience to the other. The menu of activities is seemingly endless, and it begins with the expected tried-and-true camping activities such as canoeing, swimming, fishing and trail-riding on horseback. But other year-round activities include a massive jumping pillow, high rope activities for team building, zip lines, a pendulum swing and miniature golf. In addition, there is a nature center, sports field and gymnasium. Activities in the summer abound, and in addition to the above, there are multiple water activities around the lake with its super slide, the “blob” and the “iceberg,” a vertical playground, jet skiing and sailing. More water fun can be had in either of the two swimming pools. Oh, and let’s not forget the paintball, petting zoo, climbing wall and crafts.

There’s great fun at Sky Ranch, but there is also great meaning. A Sky Ranch experience is meant to ease the journey from childhood into young adulthood by infusing the trip along the way with the Christian faith. To do that, one of their methods is to employ about 400 culturally relevant role models. Most of those are college-aged, young adults who attended Sky Ranch in previous years and developed the character and enthusiasm of a servant’s heart. But there is also the day-to-day staff that runs the Van world headquarters for Sky Ranch. Year round, the camp employs about 80 full-time employees in various corporate positions and support roles to coordinate three divisions—retreats, summer camps, day camps and school programs. Of the operations, Sam says, “Our message is that God created us, and He wants us to have a personal relationship with Him in our lives.”

Chris Witt, executive director at Sky Ranch, says, “We are not affiliated with any particular denomination. We serve all Christian churches.”

He explains that the ranch also has facilities for family reunions, weddings, special events, corporate retreats, proms, and almost any other type of gathering. They can tailor staff, programs and accommodations to suit just about any educational or corporate need. And if a client can’t accomplish that at the fabulous Sky Ranch in Van, there are now two other camps that could possibly accommodate—Sky Ranch Cave Springs in Oklahoma and Sky Ranch Ute Trail in the Colorado Rockies.

Since its inception as a backyard summer camp, Sky Ranch has grown larger, more effective and more powerful than its two founders probably ever dreamed could be possible. Witt tells the story of how the Colorado and Oklahoma facilities came about, and they, too, seem as if ordained. Both facilities were independently owned and run as nonprofits,
The TAKS, also known as the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, can strike fear into the hearts of students, teachers and administrators. Basically, TAKS is government-speak for a test designed to measure students’ learning and their ability to apply that knowledge at any given grade level. There’s a lot riding on the TAKS test for a student, and it can mean a pass or fail. For teachers, as well as administrators, poor student scores can end a career.

That’s why educators want to make sure their kids “really get” the material. Not only will the lessons serve them for life, but the knowledge will help them jump the immediate hurdle of the TAKS test and allow them to graduate to the next class.

For several years, the Quitman Independent School District has supplemented science instruction with some positive reinforcement by taking its fifth graders to Sky Ranch outdoor school for hands-on learning taught by certified instructors. Each learning camp is customized for specific educational outcomes, and Quitman Elementary has always been pleased with the exciting learning environment. Because of budget cuts, however, for the first time in many years, this latest crop of fifth graders was going to miss out on the Sky Ranch experience.

When fifth-grade science teacher Gatha Smith learned of this, she decided to see what she could do about it.

“It’s such a neat place. The grounds are beautiful and the hands-on learning is so effective. Also, some of these children will NEVER get to do something like this in their lifetime,” she said.

Smith was saddened at the thought that this latest group of children would not get to experience such a lively and reinforcing learning experience, so she started making her views known in the community. It wasn’t long before individuals and businesses stepped up to help.

In a matter of months, the community raised the amount needed to send the 75 fifth-grade Quitman students to camp, and Smith was happily making reservations for their two-day Sky Ranch learning experience. Then Smith, along with teachers Laura Driver, Meredith Lancaster and Marilyn Burrow, worked to complete the preparations for the students. With the great help of parent chaperones, the camp was a huge success.

During camp, the excitement was palpable on each child’s face. In limnology, the study of fresh water, the children learned about water quality and life cycles and were able to observe and hold aquatic creatures. They learned about the nitrogen cycle and decomposition. They made field collections, and then conducted experiments with laboratory equipment. They also learned about the forces of nature.

In particular, Smith also had her own learning reinforced as
she was outfitted with different weights and sent down a four-story zip line at varying speeds—to the delight of the students. Hey, who wouldn’t want to see their teacher propelled at high speeds through the air squealing? It was tangible fun. But, there was a “weighty” lesson there too about gravity and velocity. Neither the students—nor Smith—are likely to forget it.

The class also learned about gases and pressure during the building and launching of air rockets, and they were taught the effects of weathering agents and erosion and deposition on our landscape in an instructive nature walk.

“Sky Ranch is such a powerful learning experience,” Smith said. “The kids can see and put their hands right in their lessons. They get to see the habitats of animals and even guess what animals would eat by examining skulls and teeth structures. We even dissected an owl pellet to learn about the food chain. I am so grateful they were able to experience this.”

The instructors at Sky Ranch are all board-certified by the State of Texas. Todd Witt, the school program director, along with his staff, are well versed in the curriculum required for each grade level on the TAKS test. But they also know that not all schools are the same, and they have different needs, so they work closely with a school’s curriculum director to meet the needs of an individual school.

And, while the school education began with the sciences and outdoor programs, Sky Ranch also now teaches Texas history and has a class in Native American studies, among others. They will develop just about any curriculum to help a teacher succeed.

Mary Ann Nichols, principal at Quitman Elementary, wants every student to excel, and she said she thinks the Sky Ranch experience is part of that.

“We are so blessed to have such a supportive community,” she said. “We feel like this opportunity for the kids is so special, not only academically, but to help them build character for a lifetime.”
Going on Vacation?

Give Your Electric Meter a Break, Too

In 2011, Americans are expected to spend $683 billion on travel, according to the U.S. Travel Association. If you’re heading out on a summer trip or weekend getaway, save a few dollars by leaving your home in an energy-efficient state. From lighting to air conditioning, turning electronic equipment off or down can save energy and money.

Air conditioners don’t need to run full tilt while the home is vacant. Consider turning the air-conditioning unit off to maximize savings, or at least adjusting the thermostat to save money on what could be your largest single energy expense.

Electronics with digital displays and standby power settings, such as digital clocks, TVs, DVD players, stereos and coffeemakers, should be unplugged to prevent phantom energy use, drawing electricity even when not switched on.

Fountains, hot tubs and other outdoor waterworks that use electricity can be turned off.

Lights can be switched off. If planning to use timers or motion-detecting lights to create the illusion of being at home, use energy-efficient lightbulbs in the fixtures that are set to light up.

Outbuildings such as garages, shops, sheds and studios should be checked for lights left on and appliances that can be unplugged.

Refrigerators can be made more energy efficient by adjusting the temperature to make them slightly warmer. Food left in the fridge will likely stay preserved at 38 degrees. Also, filling empty spaces with non-perishable beverages or containers filled with water helps keep the temperature consistent. If vacationing for a long period of time, empty the refrigerator and freezer, and unplug them to maximize savings.

Water heaters can be turned off to save electricity. Writing down the temperature setting can help you remember where to set it (120 degrees is an ideal temperature) when you turn it back on.

Windows let in light, which creates excess heat. Close blinds and curtains to moderate the temperature.

Read the electric meter before and after a vacation to see how much energy was saved. Then use the savings on your next vacation.

ELECTRIC SAFETY VACATION CHECKLIST

We look forward to the fun and relaxation of summer vacations all year long. But while we’re away, fires can start when lighting storms strike houses, sparking flames in electronics or small appliances, and burglaries tend to increase because folks aren’t at home.

To protect your home while away, implement this safety checklist before you leave to help decrease the risk of problems:

- Turn off and unplug electric appliances, including toaster ovens, stoves and curling irons. It’s especially important to unplug television sets and computers, as these items are more susceptible to lightning and power surges.
- Use a timer on indoor lights.
- Look for one that can be set to a random pattern rather than one that cycles the same pattern throughout the day.
- Install motion-detecting lights outdoors.
- Give your house key to a trusted neighbor, and make sure he or she has a phone number where you can be reached.

Unplugging electronics before you leave is one of the best things you can do to help protect your home.
Tariff Change to Rates A, GS and LP

The Board of Directors (“Board”) of Wood County Electric Cooperative, Inc., (“WCEC”) passed a resolution on April 18, 2011, approving proposed revisions to the WCEC Tariff (“Tariff”).

The revisions are underlined below:

SINGLE-PHASE SERVICE - SCHEDULE A
Availability
Available to: All single-phase residential consumers subject to all established Terms and Conditions of Membership.

All single-phase nonresidential consumers with load consistently below 50 KW demand per meter subject to all established Terms and Conditions of Membership. This load will be determined on an annual basis each December. Nonresidential consumers with load more than 50 KW demand for at least three of the previous twelve (12) months will be subject to review. Consistent variance greater than 10 percent (10%) of 50 KW may cause the consumer to subsequently be placed on the most appropriate rate.

GENERAL SERVICE UP TO 50 KW - SCHEDULE GS
Availability
Available to: All three-phase residential consumers subject to all established Terms and Conditions of Membership.

All three-phase nonresidential consumers with load consistently below 50 KW demand per meter subject to all established Terms and Conditions of Membership. This load will be determined on an annual basis each December. Nonresidential consumers with load greater than 50 KW demand for at least three of the previous 12 months will be subject to review. Consistent variance greater than 10 percent (10%) of 50 KW may cause account to subsequently be placed on the most appropriate rate.

LARGE POWER SERVICE - SCHEDULE LP
Determination of Billing Demand
The billing demand shall be the maximum KW demand established by the member for any period of 15 consecutive minutes during the month for which the bill is rendered, as indicated or recorded by a demand meter and adjusted for power factor as provided hereafter, but in no event less than 60 percent (60%) of the highest demand established during the preceding eleven (11) months.

Active churches and other faith-based houses of worship will be excluded from the “Determination of Billing Demand” provision of this rate schedule. Qualifying facilities include sanctuaries, temples, synagogues, mosques, cathedrals, chapels, shrines, classrooms, fellowship halls and gyms that are used predominately for worship. Nonqualifying facilities are those on primary meter or administration buildings, dorms, cafeterias and entertainment/amusement attractions. Nonqualifying facilities are subject to the Determination of Billing Demand provisions in this rate schedule.

Revision to the Tariff will become effective on August 1, 2011. A copy of the proposed revision to the Tariff will be available for inspection at WCEC headquarters, 501 S. Main Street, Quitman 75783, in the mobile unit, or on the WCEC website at www.wcec.org.