

IT'S 3 A.M.

Who Ya Gonna Call?

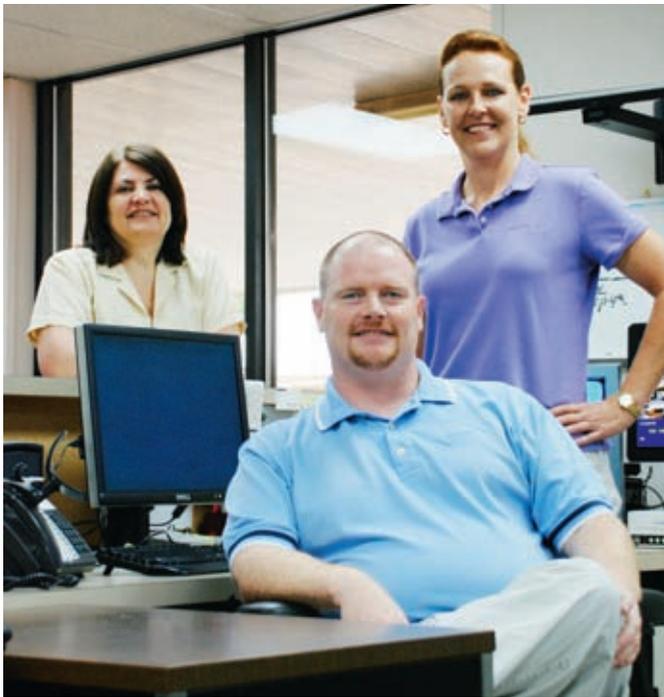
Every task that Wood County Electric Cooperative workers perform in the field has one thing in common: Whether the job is to address an electricity interruption, set a meter or troubleshoot an alarm at a substation—or all of those simultaneously—there's a calm voice that beams over the radio waves to offer constant, rapid, accurate commands to make it happen. And the person who owns that voice must be willing to work irregular hours on nights, weekends and holidays. In fact, that person must be the lone caretaker

of all things WCEC, even in the wee hours, when most of the rest of East Texas is slumbering. That person is called a dispatcher.

At electric cooperatives, a dispatcher is basically the equivalent of the 911 operator, mobilizing the people and processes needed at any given moment. Just like any first-responder unit, at WCEC dispatchers are an integral part of the success of every job. During normal business hours, the phones at WCEC are answered by one of several member services representa-

tives who then, via computer or telephone, relay information to dispatch. Then it's the job of dispatch to send out repair crews, contact the area serviceman, and send out a person to perform a locate for DigTess (the underground utility locator service) or any number of other jobs.

While acting as the nerve center, dispatch is also the lifeline for the men in the field. Dispatch logs every call, keeping track of where all field personnel are at any given time. The linemen and others must log in and out of



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Juleann Holden, Alan Jones and Paula McAfee are three of the pros at dispatch who help keep the cooperative humming, day or night. Jana Smith and Phill Hallman are often in the thick of things as calls come in for restoration or other emergency events. Asa Swaner and John Hamrick know well how to hold down the fort and get people and trucks moving in the right direction.

a job with dispatch. The dispatchers tend to get a feel for the types of jobs that a worker performs and the length of time needed for that type of job. So, if a lineman has been out of contact for some unusual span of time, the dispatcher will call him to ensure his safety.

After regular hours and on holidays, the lone dispatcher is the one to answer all of the calls, as well as initiate the actions. One of these men or women is always on duty. When after-hours outage calls start rolling in, the dispatcher will answer the phone and start logging information into the computer system. As more member outage calls come in, the information assists WCEC's computerized outage management system in predicting more exact outage locations. After the dispatcher gauges the scope of the outage, he will start making calls to various personnel to get them assigned. Because the dispatcher must stop answering phones to arrange for personnel, the automated telephone outage reporting system starts taking the outage reports. Eventually, if the outage is expected to last awhile and affects a large number of members, WCEC member services representatives will have arrived to help answer the telephones.

Just as important as their communications function, the dispatchers are also the eyes of the cooperative, monitoring activity via video surveillance situated in WCEC's command center. These video cameras are set up to track foot and car traffic, both inside and on the cooperative property, and at various substations and kiosks.

They are always on the lookout for suspicious or abnormal activity, particularly at substations. When necessary, dispatchers are the first point of contact between the cooperative and various emergency and law-enforcement agencies.

WCEC has four full-time dispatchers: Phill Hallman, John Hamrick, Alan Jones and Asa Swaner.

Hallman is the most seasoned dispatcher of the bunch, and he and his wife, Sandy, live in Quitman. They are

the parents of three and grandparents of three. In his spare time, Phill enjoys working with and showing his antique tractors, riding four-wheelers and camping, fishing and hunting.

Hamrick lives in Winnsboro with his wife, Kim, and they are the parents of three and the grandparents of three. When he's not dispatching, he likes to watch all types of sports, collects license plates and enjoys reading anything history-related.

Jones (a twin, by the way) resides in Quitman with wife, Lynita, and together they have four children. When he's not working or studying for his continuing educational pursuits, Alan's hobbies include hunting, fishing and anything with his kids.

Swaner lives in Quitman with his wife, Michelle, and their three girls. Asa's hobbies include taking motorcycle trips, ghost hunting, reading and studying history and playing bass guitar.

In addition to the four full-time dispatchers, there are also three well-trained and longtime relief dispatchers. They include Engineering Secretary Juleann Holden, Mobile Unit Supervisor Paula McAfee and Engineering Assistant Jana Smith. Juleann lives in Lindale and is the mother of three and grandmother of seven. At home she enjoys watching movies and spending time with her family. Paula is a lifelong resident of Yantis and keeps busy in her off time with DIY projects and woodworking, and also enjoys doing some informal target shooting. Jana and her husband, Stanley, live in Quitman and have two children. In her off time, Jana spends time with her family, cooking, and cross-stitching.

It takes a dedicated, quick-thinking and unflappable personality to be able to run the central nervous system of the cooperative. Dispatch is "command central," and dispatchers are the ones who provide the direction that gets truck wheels rolling, no matter the time of day or night and no matter the day of the year. These are the men and women, just a few of them, who are the unsung heroes of WCEC.

10-4 and out.



Keep an eye on your pets when they're near hot surfaces.

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BEWARE

Not All Fire Hazards Are Obvious

When you do a sweep of your home for fire hazards, don't overlook these not-so-common problems in the making:

- **Security bars on the windows.** If you feel you need them, buy the kind that have a quick-release device that opens from the inside.

- **Lightbulbs in closets.** Cleaning out your closet could help prevent a fire. Closets often have a single, exposed lightbulb that can ignite clothes and boxes stacked too close. In fact, 12 percent of house fires start in a closet. Likewise, if you have a skylight in a closet, the sun can literally scorch your clothes. Cover your skylights with UV film.

- **Smoke alarms that don't work.** Locate smoke alarms high on the wall or on the ceiling and have one outside of every bedroom in your house. Install carbon monoxide alarms, too—but place them low on the wall. The best device won't operate properly if you don't install it right—or if the batteries aren't fresh.

- **Pets.** Your cat or dog can knock over candles and space heaters, swat flammables onto a hot stovetop, chew through wires or even accidentally turn on a stove. Create barriers between your pet and potential hazards.



FROM LEFT: The Mineola Nature Preserve is home to all sorts of wildlife, including this dragonfly. Mineola Mayor Bo Whitus. The Mineola Bee Keepers Association. The Pavilion at the Preserve has a spectacular view over gently sloping land and is a r

Nature Nurture

TAKING A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

The Mineola Nature Preserve on the Sabine River tells a story of honoring the land and its natural treasures so that wild things can have wild places and humans for generations to come will be able to appreciate them. It's a story of approximately 3,000 acres set aside to sustain wildlife, to act as an outdoor classroom and to serve as a sanctuary that becalms and rejuvenates the human spirit. It's a story of cooperative and collective efforts by many people, past and present, and work to be done in the future.

The preserve was born of a very human need: The citizens of Mineola needed a new water treatment facility. Initially, the city only wanted to acquire about 100 acres to build an adequate facility, but a deal ended up being struck for an approximately 3,000-acre parcel of undeveloped land that abuts the Sabine River. The water facility was built in the late 1990s, but it took almost a decade before a firm plan was formed for the rest of the land.

According to Mineola Mayor Bo Whitus, the idea for the land to become a preserve was realized by a grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department of \$500,000, payable if at least 1,000 acres was designated a preserve. Since that initial generous bequest, Whitus said, "We've been so very fortunate to have so many generous donors and partners."

Since the TPWD's first grant, the entity has granted another \$100,000 for the development of walking and horse trails and another \$50,000 for water features.

Another significant partner has been the Nestle Company, the parent company of Ozarka, which pledged \$100,000 to be given over five years. But, Whitus says, "to list all entities that have significantly given, there would be well over 50. To start trying to name them all would be almost impossible."

Whitus can't keep himself from talking about a few, though, stressing all the while that no contribution goes unnoticed. In particular, he told of a lifelong East Texan, Mrs. Johnnie Bendy, who's lived in Mineola since she was 2. In the 1920s, Whitus said, Bendy spent some of the happiest times of her childhood fishing up and down the Sabine and wandering the woods that are now part of the preserve. It was natural, then, that she became one of the first members of the Parks and Open Spaces Board that would help set the course for the preserve. Bendy drew on her childhood memories to recall the original names of the various natural features, such as Turkey Island, Goggle Eye Pond, Ten Mile Creek, Beaver Pond and the I&GN Slough, named for the International and Great Northern Railroad. Due to Bendy's recall, signs have been placed throughout the preserve at various important locations. For that wonderful contribution, she's also rightly gained a little fame herself, with a sign proclaiming the main walking trail at the preserve as Johnnie Bendy Trail.

The mayor says that the individuals, organizations and



or Bo Whitus shows off one of the many partnership projects, a working beehive maintained by the East Texas
estful spot to refresh, hold a picnic or just observe the land and wildlife runs stretched out below.

clubs that have greatly affected the development of the Preserve can be listed “All the way from A to ... well ... W, including the Audubon Society on through the Wood County Master Gardeners and Wood County Master Naturalists.”

In addition to all of the monetary donations, he says, “It’s simply astounding, just astounding, the many thousands of hours that have been put in.” There are and have been Eagle Scout projects, high school VOTAG projects and large individual contributors.

The progress made at the preserve in just a short time is also astounding. All things in the preserve represent human sweat equity or financial capital, but today’s results are nothing short of priceless. The preserve has now become a destination spot for outdoors lovers who want to ride horses, hike, fish, bird-watch, learn a little about East Texas history, or just enjoy nature.

At the main entrance of the preserve, there is now a spacious parking area close to a large covered pavilion, picnic tables and restrooms. Just down the way is a stocked fishing pond and entrances to the equestrian and walking trails. The walking trails are handicapped-accessible, and all along the 4 developed miles there are observation platforms and wildlife viewing platforms and blinds. The other areas of interest include delights like an old-fashioned rope bridge, a beehive, and a buffalo and longhorn cattle meadow.

Visitors are apt to see innumerable types of birds and animals, including deer, beaver, coyote, feral hogs, nutria, eagles, vultures, egrets, roadrunners, and just about any other native to East Texas. Most of the creatures aren’t given pet names, but there is one among the many reptilian creatures: He’s a locally infamous alligator named Taylor who took up residence when the Sabine River’s banks overflowed. He now lives in Beaver Pond on the preserve, and it’s rumored that he may be behind the sudden exodus of

the beaver from the pond that still bears their name.

Throughout Texas, the preserve is becoming better known, visited and appreciated. Increasingly, special events are being held at the pavilion, including weddings, family reunions, church events and more. One thing that makes it so very popular are the well-kept facilities in such a beautiful environment, along with the fact that reserving the facilities is absolutely free. For large group reservations, a deposit is required, but returned if the group leaves the site clean and in as good repair as when it arrived. The preserve is open from 7 a.m. until sunset each day, but the lighted pavilion can be rented after-hours if prior arrangements are made.

The preserve, as it stands, is well worth a visit, but the City of Mineola, the nonprofit Friends of the Preserve, and the many partners and supporters have only just begun with plans and development. Future plans include a mountain bike trail and further development of the walking trails that lead to a rest area and observation point at the river. There are also plans for more foot trails and the development of a mini-ecosystem geared for educational purposes, such as developing future programs to support science education at regional schools.

Want to be a part of the development of the preserve? For those who have a little bit of time and a little bit of talent, or even just a love of nature, there are ambitious plans and more than enough work to go around. No matter the outdoor interest—be it plant life, reptiles, birds, insects, or just a nice, long, healthy walk or jog—the preserve is a crown jewel in our region, waiting to be discovered by visitors and residents alike. As the good mayor would say, “It’s simply astounding!”

The Mineola Nature Preserve on the Sabine River is served by WCEC. For more information on the preserve, contact the parks director at www.mineola.com.

A Talented Bunch ‘Moves History’ at the Preserve

As part of the requirement for The Mineola Nature Preserve on the Sabine River to acquire grants from the TPWD, the community must be willing and able to raise money and in-kind labor and materials donations. On one such project, Wood County Electric Cooperative and its employees stepped up in a big way. For many years, the City of Mineola had been looking for a home for a historic bridge that the state no longer had a

Transportation decided in 2002 to replace the steel truss bridge with a lower-maintenance concrete structure, the City of Mineola requested the bridge, and it's been in storage on preserve property ever since, waiting for a purpose.

Just such a place was found on the preserve with the idea of expanding the walking trails over a gorge, and what better way to do that than to place the historic truss bridge at the location? To

plus degree weather, placing the poles exactly where the city workers had marked and staked.

A seven-man crew from WCEC undertook the pole job: Fleet Manager Craig Kizer, Construction Foremen Bradly Martin and Wesley Price, Linemen Jason Cobb and Kody Keith, and Journeymen Chris McKnight and Daniel Miller.

“It’s going to be a really neat thing when they get through with this project,” Kizer said. “Especially when the river gets up and you will be able to stand on the bridge and look over the river.”

Like all preserve projects, this one was a cooperative effort from beginning to end, starting with the Landmark Commission’s securing the gift of the bridge to Mineola by the state. It’s important to note that this particular project was also sponsored by many corporate and private sponsors including J&L Utilities, which donated the pilings, and Union Pacific Railroad, which donated the rails. Another significant benefactor of the project was Marilyn Thomas, who did so in memory of her beloved husband, Dr. John Thomas, for whom the bridge will now be named. And let’s not forget Mineola city workers Buster Green and Johnny McCoy, who took on the job of transporting the bridge through the hills and dales to actually get it to the work site.

One project at a time, and with the work of thousands of minds, hands, and strong backs, the Mineola Nature Preserve on the Sabine River is becoming a world-class destination spot—and it’s right in our East Texas backyard. It’s a tribute to nature and God’s handiwork. It’s a monument to our local history and heritage. And most importantly, it’s the most beautiful illustration of a collective and cooperative spirit and the wonders that it can achieve.



The WCEC crew members that helped relocate a historic bridge are: on the digger truck, Jason Cobb, and standing, from left: Chris McKnight, Kody Keith, Bradly Martin, Craig Kizer, Daniel Miller and Wesley Price.

use for but that had a notable local heritage. This particular bridge first saw duty in the 1930s, joining the towns of Pine Mills and Little Hope across Big Sandy Creek. Eventually, after more than 20 years of service at the original location, the bridge was moved to serve another location on FM 2869, where it stayed until 1975.

In 1975 it found a new home, once again acting as a crossing over Sandy Creek, this time on FM 3689. It was named Snider Bridge for a nearby family. When the Texas Department of

prepare the area, the 60-foot-long and approximately 30,000-pound bridge would first need a sturdy piling structure as foundation. So, during a couple of recent midsummer days, a crew of men from WCEC worked their way along the old I&GN railroad bed into the heavily wooded work site with a digger truck to dig the holes for 27 poles that are the foundation for the bridge and walkway. As team members on the project, the WCEC workers offered expert equipment operation and quite a bit of sweat equity in 100-



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October is Cooperative Month. And even though electric co-ops have been around for a while, we're still finding new ways for you to save money. Find out how the little changes add up at TogetherWeSave.com.

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