Eastex Telephone Cooperative, Inc.

MAY/JUNE 2025

CONNECTION

Car Talk

Auto repair goes high-tech

BALLOON RACE

FIREFLIES

NTCA THE RURAL BROADBAND ASSOCIATION

RURAL CONNECTIONS

By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO
NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association

The Journey to Connectivity

NTCA members create broadband networks so fast and reliable that it's easy to take for granted the effort and expertise needed to bring these services to homes and businesses. These professionals do amazing work, particularly when considering the intricate, multi-step journey to build, expand and maintain a network.

It begins with detailed research and careful planning. The broadband provider must learn exactly how many homes and businesses might want service, as well as the challenges posed by the landscape. Then, a thorough review of the numbers determines if the project makes financial sense. It's a puzzle where the pieces are population density, infrastructure costs and potential demand for the service.

Then there's the engineering—design, build and inspect. Detailed maps identify routes for cables, permitting, environmental regulations and access to land. Some of these projects can take two to four years from the first engineering drawing to the first connection.

The work doesn't stop when the network goes live. These networks require maintenance, technology upgrades and customer support.

These networks are lifelines connecting rural communities to telehealth, education, remote work and cutting-edge technologies. With the help of service providers like yours, we're building broadband to last and ensuring no community gets left behind in our increasingly digital world.

To learn more, check out the Foundation for Rural Service and JSI's latest report, "Delivering Broadband From Beginning to 'End,'" at frs.org/delivering-broadband-beginning-end.

Safe Searches

Tips to avoid scams

When you need information fast, a quick check of Google is often the first stop. In fact, some people find it easier to search online for everything, including the addresses for a specific website like a bank, trusted repair service or health care provider.

Unfortunately, scammers know this, too, so they sometimes create bogus sites with addresses confusingly close to the real thing.

Google is aware of this trend, and it touts advanced systems that keep users' search results 99% spam-free. The company also offers a few tips for closing the final security weaknesses.

- Pay close attention to the URL—the specific web address—before clicking any unfamiliar link. Typically, in an email, hovering the cursor over the address will show the complete link. Don't click the link if it looks suspicious.
- The three dots next to the search results in Google can be used to find more details about the webpage, store or business you're considering. You can find clues indicating if the site is legitimate before clicking the link.
- When you're looking for official resources, watch out for unusual address formatting. For example, there's typically only one correct customer service number for a larger company. But not all businesses have customer service numbers, and searching for them requires you to be mindful. Watch for strange formatting in the website address, including unexpected symbols or emojis.

AI-generated Adobe Stock image by h4KunA

A Rockin' RECIPE

Hannah Dasher cooks up an online storm

Performer Hannah Dasher created a countryfied niche for herself on social media.

Photo courtesy of Jeremy Ryan Photography

Story by BRANDI DIXON

Hannah Dasher is a blast of classic country and rock 'n' roll paired with social media influencer. Stepping into the home she calls "Honky-Tonk Graceland" and features on her social media is, as Hannah says, like going back in time to "your meemaw's house."

"Avocado green canisters, gold salt and pepper shakers, brass pots. I love my retro kitchen, and I love that the fans feel right at home," she says, adding that she enjoys entertaining.

Music and songwriting are Hannah's first loves. "I was rehearsing my acceptance speech for best new female vocalist of the year in my mirror at age 10," she says. "I grew up listening to '90s country radio, and knew I wanted to be an entertainer."

Hannah pursued music professionally, taking her big hair and a heaping helping of Southern charm to Nashville, Tennessee. She started out writing songs for other artists, getting some big accolades thanks to collaborations with Brad Paisley, Lainey Wilson and Ian Munsick, to name a few. She continued performing whenever she had the chance.

STAND BY YOUR PAN

In 2020 during the pandemic, Hannah found herself stuck. "All the stages shut down, and I needed a stage," she says. "Talking with some friends I learned a lot of girls my age couldn't cook, so I stumbled into the world of social media, and it was the perfect storm."

Hannah took to TikTok to share her family's beloved recipes and a few of her own, all while sprinkling in a bit of her signature rockin' country flavor. The recipe produced the now-viral Stand By Your Pan social media accounts. More than 1.5 million followers join Hannah daily in her retro kitchen.

"I love that this brought country and noncountry music fans together," she says. "It's hard to pigeonhole into just one world, and I'm glad that I can be this representative of the past and the future via a semicelebrity chef."

ALL THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS

When Hannah Dasher isn't cranking out content, she's picking up a guitar and writing music.

"God always sends it from the left side of the sky and out of my mouth," she says of her process. "Sometimes it's melody and lyrics simultaneously, but you just never know, and you always have to be looking for it."

Hannah is on the road this year with her band on The Wanted Tour, featuring stops across the United States, the United Kingdom and Sweden. She encourages fans to spread the word and come see her and her "boys."

Unmatched Performance

No technology beats the speed of our network

There's something magical when technology becomes so advanced that it simply works, without muss, fuss or the need for advanced skills. Your smartphone is a great example, particularly whatever app you prefer for photos. Looking for an image of your cat or dog, a mountain or a beach? Just ask and the search will likely provide shockingly good results.

RUSTY DORMAN
General Manager

That app simply does the job, and our internet service is much the same—it simply works. Fast, reliable and resilient. Thanks to the long-term investments to create a fiber optic network supported by a team of local professionals, we can provide services that unlock the online world. If you consider internet access essential, there's no better option.

Whether you're working from home, attending virtual classes or binge-watching your favorite shows, fiber makes sure everything runs smoothly. Do you have multiple devices online at once, rely on video calls or enjoy challenging online games? No problem. The performance is there whenever you need it.

It's important to remember, not all technologies have the same benefit. They may work, but not as well as fiber. With those other systems, storms might block signals or otherwise create interruptions. However, compared with other technologies, our fiber network is designed to not only stay online more reliably but also bounce back more quickly if there is an outage.

Not every community gets to enjoy this type of internet service. We designed our fiber network for today with features capable of handling future online tools and resources. Considering how quickly technology is advancing, an adaptable network is vital for our community to stay competitive in an increasingly online world.

After all, high-speed internet is more than a nice-to-have luxury. From telehealth services to online education, fiber optic networks give us access to essential resources that fundamentally improve our quality of life. Similarly, reliable, fast internet energizes our economy. From established area businesses to new entrepreneurs, the internet provides the tools needed to compete.

We're committed to bringing these benefits to every corner of our community. And please remember, Eastex is about more than the physical network. The dedicated professionals making up our team live here, believe in our area's future and are committed to providing unparalleled support.

So, this year let's celebrate the progress we've made and look forward to a future where everyone can enjoy the advantages of cutting-edge technology. Our goal is to ensure no one is left behind and that everyone has access to the opportunities high-speed internet provides.

Thank you for your continued support and trust. Together, we're building a brighter, more connected future!

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Eastex Telephone Cooperative, Inc.

A member-owned cooperative dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people in the Henderson, Livingston and Waskom areas.

Eastex is proud to offer broadband through Eastex Net, and security and automation services through ECS Solutions.

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On the Cover:

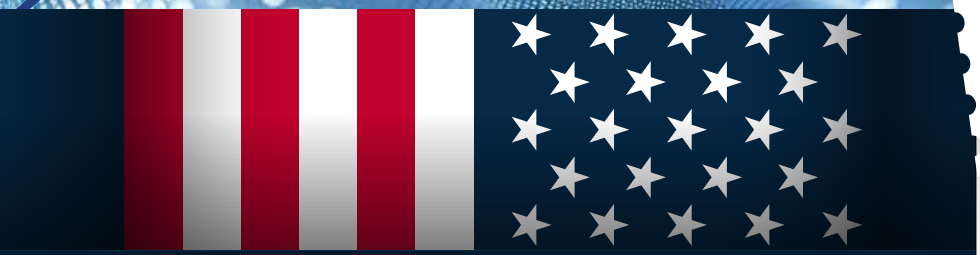
Wesley Smith, owner of Smith Auto Electric in Livingston, relies on Eastex's internet service to run his business.
See story on Page 12.

Photo courtesy of Christy Parrott

Eastex CELEBRATES 75 YEARS

Noticed something different about Eastex's logo lately?

We changed it up this year to commemorate our 75th anniversary of keeping our communities connected. The logo isn't the only way we're marking this remarkable milestone. We will be celebrating in a big way in the coming months. Be on the lookout for information on our Facebook page. Stay tuned, because there may even be prizes involved!



In recognition of **MEMORIAL DAY**, Eastex offices will be closed on **MONDAY, MAY 26**. We honor those who gave their lives in service of this country to protect the freedoms we enjoy.

GAME ON!

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2			8		3		1	6
	6	8	1	7			3	2
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			5				9	
					7			8
1					2			

ANSWERS

5	6	7	2	3	9	4	8	1
8	2	1	7	6	4	3	5	9
4	9	3	1	8	5	6	2	7
7	4	8	6	5	2	1	9	3
2	3	6	4	7	1	8	6	5
6	1	5	3	9	8	7	4	2
1	7	4	5	2	6	9	3	8
3	8	2	9	4	7	5	1	6
9	5	6	8	1	3	2	7	4

No Stamp Necessary

Paying your Eastex bill doesn't have to mean dropping a check in the mail.

Customers can sign up for e-billing, pay their bill and view account information at eastex.com/paybill. Automatic draft payments are also available, as is paying by phone using a credit or debit card or check.

Customers who sign up for e-billing or automatic draft payments will receive a one-time $5 bill credit. Contact your local Eastex office for details.

Photo illustrations by Mark Gilliland

Minor Leagues MAJOR FUN

Road trip to baseball's most entertaining destinations

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

Ric Sisler admits he misses the annual spring-to-fall marathon of a baseball season. "When it's in your blood, it doesn't matter what you're doing. You're always going to be pulled toward that industry, and I'm certainly no exception," he says. "Going to the ballpark, the camaraderie and being around the yard was just a thrill for me.

"I certainly don't miss tarp pulls and some of those types of things," he says with a laugh, referring to the backbreaking work of getting protective tarps on and off the diamond during rainy weather.

The national pastime is most certainly in Ric's blood. He played for three seasons in the New York Yankees minor league system before running several

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Marketers and merchandisers will say quite a lot. Creative—some may say outlandish—nicknames, mascots and logos are part of the landscape of minor league baseball. Here are a couple of our Texas favorites:

The Sugar Land Space Cowboys became the Triple-A affiliate of the neighboring Houston Astros in 2021, changing the team name from the Skeeters, a reference to mosquitos. The new name fits with the Astros and Houston's history with NASA and may be familiar to rock fans as a classic tune by the Steve Miller Band.

When the San Antonio Missions moved to Amarillo in 2019, the team went in a different direction and became the Amarillo Sod Poodles. Sod Poodles won a name-the-team contest over Boot Scooters, Bronc Busters, Jerky and Long Haulers. Sod poodle is a reference to prairie dogs in West Texas.

Fun fact—in 2015, the then-Skeeters signed former Major Leaguer Rafael Palmeiro to a contract so he could play alongside his son, Patrick. The father-son duo, batting 2-3 in the order, combined to drive in five runs in a 10-4 win over the Camden Riversharks.

Photo courtesy of the Midland Rockhounds

Rocky, the Midland Rockhounds' mascot, poses with fans during a 2024 Texas League game in Midland, Texas.

minor league organizations as a front office executive and as vice president/general manager of the independent South Coast League based in Georgia. His father, Dick Sisler, was a Major League Baseball manager and All-Star player, and his grandfather, George Sisler, is enshrined in the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

Ric, who is still involved in athletics as director of corporate sponsorships at Western Carolina University, says many fans of the game come back season after season.

"Minor league baseball has been part of the fabric of our society in a lot of smaller towns," he says. "It was kind of a binding agent for folks to come watch baseball with their friends and neighbors and just have a wholesome time."

While the minor leagues are about family fun and community pride to many fans, the game is a balance of business and player development for the teams and their MLB affiliates. The minors have long relied on fan-friendly, creative promotions and player interactions to sell tickets, and all of that comes with an affordable price tag.

"I think people have always gone to minor league games because it's affordable," Ric says. "You had great entertainment and could see some potential big-league players there at an affordable price.

Photo courtesy of the Albuquerque Isotopes

The sun sets behind Rio Grande Credit Union Field at Isotopes Park, which is known to fans as "The Lab," home to the Triple-A Pacific Coast League's Albuquerque Isotopes.

You're very close to the field and close to the players. It was a different setting from the Major League parks. I don't want to see that change."

Planning a trip this summer—or maybe even a baseball pilgrimage? There's a game, sports history and tradition, as well as a bunch of fun waiting for you.

STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE IN THE LONE STAR STATE

The Texas League has been in business since 1902 and is a Double-A league with its five South Division teams based in Texas.

North Division teams are in Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Kansas. The Houston Buffaloes, who played in the Texas League from 1903-61 and originated in 1888, won a league-record 16 championships.

Texas League alumni include MLB Hall of Famers Roberto Alomar, Willard Brown, Dennis Eckersley, Hank Greenberg, Chick Hafey, Willie McCovey, Joe Medwick, Joe Morgan, Brooks Robinson, Al Rosen, Ron Santo, Don Sutton, Billy Williams and Dick Williams.

FUN FACTS

John Robert "Red" Murff, a native of Burlington, made his 1956 MLB debut with the Milwaukee Braves as a 35-year-old rookie. He was named Minor League Pitcher of the Year by The Sporting News and Texas League Pitcher of the Year in 1955 after going 27-11 for the Dallas Eagles. He threw a no-hitter for the Texas City Texans in 1951 and pitched 19 2/3 innings of a 3-2 20-inning loss to the Texarkana Bears in 1952.

Homer Peel, originally from Port Sullivan, hit .300 for more than a dozen minor league seasons during the 1920s and '30s and was known as "the Ty Cobb of the Texas League." He won a World Series title with the New York Giants in 1933.

A Texas League team called the Atz Cats, managed by namesake Jake Atz and playing out of Fort Worth, won six straight league titles from 1920-25. Cats player John "Ziggy" Sears became a Major League umpire and also appeared in two movies, "The Stratton Story" and "The Babe Ruth Story," in 1948 and 1949, respectively, playing umpires in both films.

Flying High

Great Texas Balloon Race takes to the skies

Story by JEN CALHOUN

Two of the nation's most prestigious hot air balloon competitions are set to converge on Longview when the Balloon Federation of America's U.S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship and the Great Texas Balloon Race take off the second week of June.

Both competitions showcase some of the most accomplished hot air balloon pilots in the country while also making way for a third race—GTBR's Young Guns competition. Young Guns is a contest for balloon pilots aged 29 and under who don't have enough flight hours to compete nationally.

The U.S. Nationals is a six-day event that kicks off Tuesday, June 10. The GTBR and Young Guns competitions run from Friday, June 13, through Sunday, June 15. All race events take place in the early mornings when atmospheric conditions are best for ballooning.

"The pilots for each of the contests are going to be flying different tasks, and they'll all be scored separately," says Gai Bennett, GTBR chairperson. "But they're all going on at the same time, so the morning sky over Longview is going to be filled with hot air balloons all week long."

Spectators can view the competitions from the ground every morning for free, but the real fun gets started when the gates at the Longview Convention Complex open at 4 p.m. on Friday for the Great Texas Balloon Race Festival. Activities include live music, food, beer and retail vendors, the popular sundown balloon glow, a drone show with lights and a children's area with bouncy houses, climbing walls and more.

HOW DO HOT AIR BALLOONS RACE?

Hot air balloon competitions put pilots' skills to the test, so the balloons aren't necessarily racing across the sky. "There are a lot of balloon events, and lots of times they're called fiestas or festivals, where the balloons just come and show off," Bennett says. "But our competitions and the Nationals are based on navigational tasks."

During the events, professional balloon pilots complete assignments that test their navigational and strategic thinking abilities, as well as their endurance.

"We'll put targets on the ground and in the air that these balloon pilots are trying to navigate to and through," she says. "They might have to drop something into a target on the ground, for instance. The thing is, they're just riding the wind. But if you're really good at that, you can look at the conditions and know how to get where you need to be."

The Great Texas Balloon Race includes a competition in the early mornings and festival activities in the evenings.

Photos courtesy of Great Texas Balloon Race

Unique and fun balloon designs bring a touch of whimsy.

A line of drones parks on a landing strip. The festival includes a high-tech drone show.

U.S. NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

Organized by the Balloon Federation of America, the U.S. Nationals features about 50 pilots from all over the country, including some who often participate in the Great Texas Balloon Race. The top four or five winners of the event go on to compete in world championships, which take place in Poland this year.

The competition generally moves to different cities throughout the country every few years. This year is the third consecutive year Longview has hosted the event. The Nationals will move to a different location next year.

"This is the second time in recent years that we've hosted the U.S. Nationals for a run," Bennett says. "The first time we did it was from 2012 to 2015."

GREAT TEXAS BALLOON RACE

The Great Texas Balloon Race got its start in the late 1970s, when local dentist and hot air balloon pilot Bill Bussey was asked to bring his balloon to celebrate the opening of Longview Mall. Bussey enjoyed the event so much that he and a few friends decided to expand on it the following year. It wasn't long before the Great Texas Balloon Race and its festival became a tradition.

As a result, the city of Longview eventually earned the title of "Hot Air Balloon Capital of Texas." These days, it's not unusual to see hot air balloons floating across the sky at different times of the year.

"If the weather is good on a Saturday morning, you might see six or eight or 10 hot air balloons floating over Longview," Bennett says. "It's kind of our thing."

Float Fest

Longview's signature event, the Great Texas Balloon Race, is extra special this year because it coincides with the Balloon Federation of America's U.S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship and GTBR's Young Guns Championship. The Nationals run from June 10-16, while GTBR and Young Guns and their accompanying festival happen June 13-15.

GTBR's festival kicks off Friday, June 13, at 4 p.m. at the Longview Convention Complex, 1123 Jaycee Drive. Tickets are $15 Friday night and $20 Saturday night, or $30 for a two-night pass. Children under 12 get in free. Tickets can be bought at the gate or online.

For more information, including a link to purchase tickets and a full schedule of events, visit gtbr.net or the Great Texas Balloon Race Facebook or Instagram pages.

LOOK TOWARD THE Light

Whatever you call them, fireflies mesmerize

Story by SARA DIAMOND PATTERSON

Catching lightning bugs in a Mason jar with holes punched in the lid is a summer ritual for kids across the country. Watching their light show together is often a time for families to slow down, which is what Lynn Frierson Faust's family began doing in the Great Smoky Mountains during the 1960s.

They marveled for years at the unique light display, as the flying beetles blinked on and off at the same time for several hours after dark. When Lynn heard the August 1991 edition of Science News magazine featured an article on fireflies that blink in unison, she figured she would finally find out why and how they made their magic.

"I remember thinking, 'Oh cool, a lightning bug feature. It'll talk about our light show.' Only it didn't mention one thing," she says. In fact, the authors said the Western Hemisphere had no species of fireflies that blinked synchronously.

Lynn let them know they were mistaken and invited them to come to the Smokies to see the show for themselves. The scientists did and agreed Lynn was right, lighting the way for her life's work.

'JUST SO DARN FUN'

As "The Lightning Bug Lady," Lynn is internationally known for her research on the ecology and habits of the more than 125 species of U.S. fireflies, helping

THE LOWDOWN

HOW: Fireflies produce their magical flashes through bioluminescence, a chemical reaction.

WHY: Each of the more than 125 species of fireflies in the United States—2,000 worldwide—has a unique signature flash pattern the males use to attract females of their specific type.

WHERE: Everywhere. Many Western species do not flash or fly, but they're out there.

WHEN: Warm summer nights.

AI-generated artwork by Firefly

LEND A HAND

Pesticides and habitat reduction have taken a toll on firefly populations. Maintaining a "wild" area of your yard with a little water, native vegetation and undisturbed soil will make your home more firefly friendly. But the easiest way to help is simply by turning out the lights during their active period. Visit xerces.org or firefly.org for more tips.

Photo courtesy of Lynn Frierson Faust

A BBC crew takes a break from filming in 2019. Naturalist Lynn Frierson Faust examines equipment she and Mark Zloba, ecological manager at the Edge of Appalachia, use to gather fireflies at the preserve outside of Cincinnati.

to raise awareness of their unique life cycles and importance within ecosystems.

She scrambles to 14 states each year to catch them emerging during their eight-week active season, usually early June to late July. For 18 years, she has been the worldwide go-to on the subject, serving as on-site scientific consultant for BBC Earth, Discovery, National Geographic and other international film crews. Lynn's 2017 book, "Fireflies, Glow-worms, and Lightning Bugs," was the first-ever comprehensive firefly field guide and shared the results of her nearly three decades of research on behalf of museums, universities, state and national parks and nature centers.

"I'm not a scientist per se, but I've done the research, a whole lot of research," she says. "I'm just a regular person obsessed with these and fortunate to have the time and a little knowledge to build on."

Throughout history, fireflies have symbolized hope and mystery, serving as transient reminders that life is fleeting. In some cultures, people see them as their lost ancestors, a sacred connection between the earthly and spiritual worlds.

When she began, Lynn didn't have much research to start with. "There were just a bunch of dusty old scientific papers, but that's about it," she says. "There's just not been that much research done on them since they aren't harmful or helpful to people or crops."

They are, however, a great indicator species for the health of ecosystems. "When they disappear, we have to know why and where to look." And Lynn says they will always serve as a nostalgic reminder of days gone by.

"Lightning bugs are fantastic ambassadors leading people back into nature and to a better understanding of the connectedness of it all," she says. "Plus, they're just so darn fun."

HERE THEY ARE!

No matter where you are, you don't have to go far to find the magic. You can look for lightning bugs anywhere from your own woods or backyard to wildlife management areas or wooded parks, avoiding light pollution and areas that spray for mosquitos.

"I've always said Texas needs its own guidebook," firefly expert Lynn Frierson Faust says. "It's such a huge state and they have so many habitats, an adult firefly species is probably active year-round."

Houston's 2,500-acre urban wilderness, Armand Bayou Nature Center, is one of the best places in the country to catch light shows and learn more about their purpose.

"Three amazing ladies just became interested in the fireflies there on their own and began documenting them and leading firefly walks," Lynn says. They are among the many amateur researchers throughout the state who work with Lynn.

"It's just so big, but I have a really good glimpse into at least seven little spots throughout the state, and everywhere I go, I'm amazed," she says.

Lynn once found a "super rare" firefly along the banks of the Steinhagen Reservoir and says, "Caddo Lake is the ultimate spot. They have all sorts of good stuff there."

NAME GAME

Officially known as Lampyridae, worldwide fireflies are called blinkies, glowflies, moon bugs, peeney wallies, blinkin' bees, hoturu, fire beetles and candle flies. Here at home, "lightning bug" is more common in the South and Midwest, while "firefly" is typically heard in the West and large cities in the East. Some researchers attribute the differences to weather. While lightning is most active in the South and Midwest, the West sees the most wildfires.

Adobe AI-generated image by ranchuryukin

CAR TALK

Auto shop combines high-tech tools with hometown service

Story by JEN CALHOUN

Wesley Smith studied the inner workings of automobiles ever since he was tall enough to peer under a hood.

"It was just a family thing," says Wesley, owner of Smith Auto Electric in Livingston. "My dad, Robert, came here in the late '70s and opened a mechanic shop that built starters and alternators and did mechanic work. He had always done that, and I helped him."

Today, Wesley's full-service auto repair shop can fix just about any problem with a car or truck. The shop works on so many aspects of a vehicle, he says, that it's easier to tell people what they don't do—state inspections and exhaust work. Both require equipment that's a little too big for the shop's space on U.S. Highway 190.

A DIFFERENT WORLD

When Wesley's shop opened in 2003, computerized functions in cars were common, but mechanics could still open the hood to diagnose the problem. That's not the case today.

"It's totally different than it was when I was growing up," he says. "You can't just pull a car in the shop anymore, pop the hood and check something."

These days, mechanics generally need to review a vehicle's computer, put it in service mode, then tell the car what they'll be checking. "A lot of cars—especially the newer ones—you have to consult the car's computer," he says. "If you don't do that, it throws the car's program off."

Wesley estimates the shop went digital about 15 years ago. Now, his crew would be lost without their Eastex internet connection. "Without internet, we're in a bind," he says. "We do all our invoicing by computer, and we order parts online. Our diagnostic machine for vehicles hooks to our Wi-Fi. From the time a customer walks in until the time they're checking out and paying, we're using the internet."

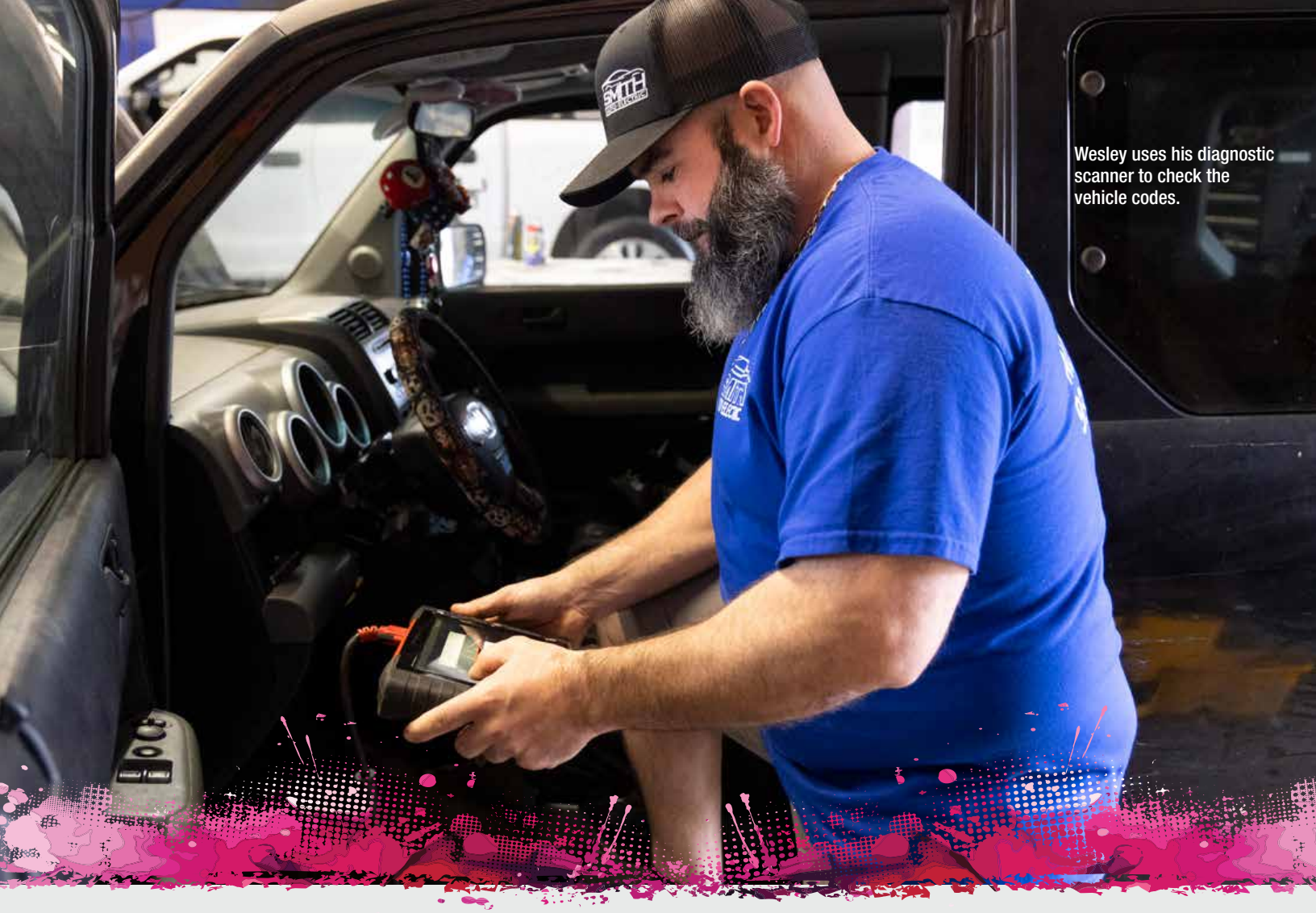
LOCAL CONNECTIONS

High-speed broadband service isn't the only kind of connection important to Smith Auto Electric, however.

Wesley and his staff pride themselves on treating their customers like old friends. "We don't want you to walk in the door like a stranger," he says. "We want you to walk in the door and understand we're a mom-and-pop shop. You can sit down and

Photos courtesy of Christy Parrott

Keith Lanning, left, and Wesley Smith work to fix a customer's vehicle.



Wesley uses his diagnostic scanner to check the vehicle codes.

be comfortable and watch TV. We want it to feel more like family than a big corporate-type place."

A relationship between a motorist and mechanic is an important one, and it requires a certain amount of trust. But that trust must be earned, Wesley says. "Some people have been burned at other places, and I understand that," he says.

Sometimes new clients will test his staff by marking their spark plugs or another part, then asking them to change out those parts. "They want to see if we'll actually change it," Wesley says. "It happens all the time. But after seeing us a few more times, they start trusting us to do what we say we're going to do. Pretty soon they're handing us the keys and walking away as they say, 'Figure out what's wrong with it.'"

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Breakdowns and car problems can be highly stressful in our vehicle-dependent world, so Wesley says he tries to reduce some of the pressure his clients and staff are feeling.

"The way I run my shop—I know everybody's doing the same grind every day," he says. "You can't know all the things other people are dealing with. So, when you come in here, I don't want to add to your stress."

When employees are faced with a difficult task, Wesley likes to remind them that even complex jobs can be broken down into easy-to-manage pieces. "I tell them, 'Let's just do it one step at a time. Keep it simple. Don't make it too confusing for yourself, and it will work out.'"

He also knows people are generally already aggravated by their situation by the time they arrive at any kind of auto repair shop. The important thing to remember is honesty and empathy. "We're all in this world together," Wesley says. "We're going to try to make that experience as stress-free as possible. That's our goal."

Adobe AI-generated image by Kamenso

Pit Stop

Smith Auto Electric is a full-service, locally owned and operated automotive repair shop at 3820 U.S. 190 in Livingston. For more information on the shop, as well as informational videos about cars and common car problems, visit the Smith Auto Electric Facebook page. The shop's phone number is 936-967-5696.

Fantastic Frying

Flavorful chicken with the finest sides

Many say munching on piping-hot, crispy fried chicken is a joy like no other. Whether it's juicy white meat from the breast or the wings or the deep, engaging flavors of the dark meat found in thighs and legs, when it comes to fried chicken, most everyone has a preference. But there are a few things that good pieces of fried chicken have in common—the skin must stay on, and it must be crispy.

That's not too much to ask, but it's something that many cooks cannot achieve. There's a knack to it that may take a few extra steps, but the endgame is well worth it.

Serve the chicken alongside a big spoonful of potato salad and finish with a bowl of banana pudding and you have a meal fit for a beautiful summer evening.

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Photography by ***Mark Gilliland***
Food Styling by ***Rhonda Gilliland***

CRISPY FRIED CHICKEN

- 1 (4-pound) chicken, cut into pieces
- 1 cup whole milk buttermilk
- 2 cups all-purpose flour for coating
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 2 quarts vegetable oil for frying

Dry chicken with paper towels. Put the flour in a large plastic bag. Let the amount of chicken you are cooking dictate the amount of flour you use. Season the flour with paprika, garlic powder, salt and pepper to taste. Paprika helps to brown the chicken.

Dip chicken pieces in buttermilk then, a few at a time, put them in the bag with the flour, seal the bag and shake to coat well.

Place the coated chicken on a cookie sheet or tray, and cover with a clean dish towel or waxed paper. Let sit until the flour reaches a paste-like consistency. This step is important to ensure that the skin will be crispy and adhere to the chicken.

Fill a large skillet (cast iron is best) about 1/3 to 1/2 full of vegetable oil. Heat until very hot.

Put in as many chicken pieces as the skillet can hold. Brown the chicken in hot oil on both sides.

When browned, reduce heat and cover the skillet. Let cook for 30 minutes (the chicken will be cooked through but not crispy). Remove cover, raise heat again and continue to fry until crispy. Drain the fried chicken on paper towels. Depending on how much chicken you have, you may have to fry it in a few batches. Keep the finished chicken in a slightly warm oven while preparing the rest.

LOADED BAKED POTATO SALAD

- 4 pounds russet potatoes
- 1-2 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 3/4 cup sour cream or full-fat Greek yogurt
- 1/2 cup cheddar cheese
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 12 ounces bacon, cooked, cooled and chopped
- 6 green onions, whites and green parts, chopped

Preheat the oven to 400 F. Place cleaned potatoes on a baking sheet and pierce four to five times with a fork. Lightly coat with olive oil, sprinkle with kosher salt and cook for 50-60 minutes or until easily pierced with a cake tester or skewer. Remove from the oven and let cool for 5 minutes. When cool enough to handle, peel the potatoes and cut into 1-inch chunks, discarding the potato skins. The potato flesh may crumble and get shaggy, and that's OK—transfer it all to a large mixing bowl. While still warm, sprinkle the potatoes with the apple cider vinegar. Set aside for 15-30 minutes or until the potatoes are cooled.

Meanwhile, cook the bacon in a large skillet or in the oven, drain and let cool. Crumble into bite-size pieces.

In a small bowl, mix the mayonnaise and sour cream. Season with the kosher salt and pepper.

When the potatoes are cool, pour the mayonnaise mix over them with the crumbled bacon, green onion and cheddar cheese. Gently fold the ingredients together. Season with more salt and pepper to taste. Refrigerate for 3 hours up to overnight before serving. Store in the refrigerator for up to four days.

NUTTER BUTTER 'NANA PUDDING

- 8 ounces softened cream cheese
- 1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk
- 2 (3.4-ounce) boxes instant vanilla pudding
- 2 3/4 cups cold milk
- 8 ounces whipped topping divided
- 1 (1-pound) package Nutter Butter or other peanut butter sandwich cookies
- 5-7 ripe bananas, sliced

In a large mixing bowl, beat the softened cream cheese until smooth. Add the condensed milk and mix until there are no lumps.

In a second bowl, mix the pudding mix and milk together until smooth. Pour the pudding into the cream cheese mixture and mix until completely combined. Fold in half of the whipped topping.

Line the bottom of a trifle dish with a layer of Nutter Butter cookies. Add a layer of banana slices on top of the cookies. Spread a layer of the pudding mixture evenly over the bananas. Repeat 1-3 times, depending on the size of your dish.

Spread the remaining whipped topping on top of the pudding. Cover and chill for at least 4 hours but overnight is best.

Crush a few Nutter Butters on top of the whipped topping immediately before serving.

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