

FOR MEMBERS OF ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES OF MISSISSIPPI

TODAY IN MISSISSIPPI

Christmas at the MANSION

LIGHTS ON
THE WATER

WREATHS
YOU CAN EAT

BIRD WATCHING
101

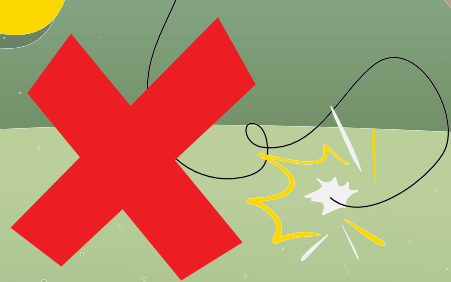
DECEMBER 2025

SPARKMAN REMINDS YOU:

A superhero character named Sparkman stands in a forest. He wears a yellow hard hat, blue goggles, a light blue shirt with a yellow lightning bolt emblem, a yellow cape, and blue pants. He is holding a black glove in his right hand. A speech bubble points to him.

Always treat downed lines as **energized** and **dangerous**.

Always treat a downed power line as energized. Keep a far distance away from it and call 911 immediately.

A downed power line lies on the ground, marked with a large red 'X' and a small explosion icon, indicating it is dangerous.

Stop. Stay away. **CALL 911!**

a safety message from your local electric cooperative

A gift for Jackson and Mississippi

Electric Cooperatives of Mississippi CEO Michael Callahan was feeling a little under the weather when it came time to pen this month's column.

He asked me to follow up on a cover story we featured in our October 2025 issue.

Something extraordinary happened in Mississippi the weekend of Nov. 7.

Specifically, downtown Jackson was transformed into the cultural and artistic capital of the nation.

For the first time in its 82-year history, The National Folk Festival was held in the Deep South.

The free, three-day outdoor multicultural celebration of music, dance, and traditional arts event set up a three-year residency in downtown Jackson.

That means if you missed it this year, you are in luck.

My wife and I attended all three days, and it was a wonder.

There were six stages with constant live music playing from artists from all over the country.

There were gospel groups, a zydeco band from Opelousas, Louisiana, a bluegrass singer from Kentucky, a country and western band from Montana, salsa and flamenco bands, Korean drummers from Chicago, southern soul artists, and a Washington, D.C. go go/funk band.

Not only did the nation introduce some of their artists to Mississippi, but Mississippi had the opportunity to show off some of its own musical heroes to the visitors.

The weekend kicked off with a march from the Sonic Boom, Jackson State University's legendary marching band. The night was headlined by another Mississippi legend — blues and R&B singer Bobby Rush. The crowd went crazy for the 92-year-old vocalist who had just been nominated for his 8th Grammy Award earlier in the day.

Over the weekend, we watched Greenville bluesman Keith Johnson, known as "The Prince of the Delta Blues" and Muddy Waters' great nephew, play sizzling electric guitar.

Speaking of Waters, one of his sidemen, Chicago guitarist John Primer, was honored on stage with a Mississippi Blues Trail marker. Primer, from Camden, Mississippi, then played an electrifying set with his band, the Real Deal Blues Band.

I could go on and on.

Did I already say this entire event was free?

The only moment I felt a twinge of sadness is when I spotted empty seats. The crowds were solid but could have been so much better.

The weather was gorgeous. The environment was extremely safe. I realize there were home games in Oxford and Starkville, but something like the National Folk Festival doesn't come around very often, much less to our home state.

The National Folk Festival was a true gift to the state, the city, and all its people.

A big thanks to the city of Jackson, the state of Mississippi, city, county, and state law enforcement and first responders, all the amazing volunteers, and the National Council for Traditional Arts for choosing our state.

I hope more Mississippians take advantage of the event over the next two years.

Jackson has had its issues. I know because I live there. But it's also our capital city. The key word is "our."

Merry Christmas and I hope you enjoy the issue. ❁



by Steven Ward

Editor — Today in Mississippi



Members of the Korean Performing Arts Institute of Chicago performed at the National Folk Festival Nov. 9 in downtown Jackson.



Mississippi is...

Linemen

*They climb the poles at any hour
to fix the wires that give us power.*

In emergencies,

when we have no electricity

the linemen climb way up high

and fix the problems in the blink of an eye.

They never let the weather get them down,

And you can see their trucks all over town.

After storms in other towns, our men get their trucks

And go right on down.

Then, when we need others to help us out,

All we have to do is give a shout.

They are so necessary, there high-wire friends,

that we pray God's special care of our linemen.

by Betty Thomas,
a resident of Hattiesburg,
and a member of
Pearl River Valley Electric.

What's Mississippi to you?

What do you treasure most about life in our state? Send your brief thoughts to Today in Mississippi, news@ecm.coop or mail to P.O. Box 3300, Ridgeland, MS 39158.

Submit your beautiful digital photo of life in Mississippi to Today in Mississippi, news@ecm.coop

In This Issue



6

6 Southern Gardening

It's poinsettia time

8 Outdoors Today

Learning to bird

10 Scene Around the 'Sip

Christmas on the bayou



20

15 Local News

20 Feature

First Lady Elee Reeves opens the doors of the mansion for the holidays



28

28 On the Menu

How about eating a Christmas wreath?

31 Mississippi Seen

Endings and beginnings

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On the cover

An outside shot of the governor's mansion during Christmas in downtown Jackson. Photo provided by the staff of the governor's mansion.

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FCC's Gomez meets with Mississippi co-ops on broadband issues



Electric Cooperatives of Mississippi CEO Michael Callhan meets Anna M. Gomez, a commissioner of the Federal Communication Commission, at a recent meeting at NE SPARC in Oxford between Mississippi co-ops and Gomez to discuss expanding broadband. Photo by Kevin Wood.

by Molly Christian - NRECA

Federal Communications Commissioner Anna Gomez met recently with leaders from six electric cooperatives in Mississippi to discuss their top policy priorities and work to expand high-speed internet access in the state.

The meeting, organized in partnership with NRECA, was held at the Oxford-based headquarters of North East Mississippi Electric Power Association. Attendees discussed co-op efforts to bring affordable, quality broadband to local communities, with more than 200 rural co-ops across the country working to bridge the digital divide.

The FCC supports those efforts through the Universal Service Fund and other measures to expand broadband access.

"We are honored to welcome FCC Commissioner Gomez to our office," said Randall Abel, CEO of NE SPARC, the broadband division of NEMEP. "Mississippi is on the forefront of investing in this technology, and we are proud to be part of the effort to bring reliable, high-speed internet to the people we serve."

The meeting touched on Mississippi electric co-ops' successful push in 2019 to advance state legislation that allowed them to offer high-speed internet service for the first time.

Since then, co-ops there have been hard at work expanding broadband networks, leveraging the co-op model to quickly and effectively serve their communities.

Across the state, Mississippi co-ops have made \$1.39 billion in broadband investments since 2020, installed 41,914 miles of fiber, and signed up 230,788 subscribers, representing 49.3% of potential customers.

Gomez praised their progress, saying Mississippi is a great example for other states.

"I always am impressed with the work of electric cooperatives," she said.

Gomez also got an update on MS Fiber LLC's initiative to build middle mile infrastructure that connects local networks that

serve homes, businesses and other end users to the core internet backbone.

Mississippi co-ops providing broadband have historically relied on third-party middle mile networks, a costlier option that gave them less control over those systems. To address those issues, a collection of 17 co-ops launched MS Fiber, which could start taking its first customers early next year.

Gomez and co-op leaders also discussed FCC funding programs, internet affordability, and issues with FCC broadband data collection and maps.

Co-ops at the meeting praised federal initiatives such as the Affordable Connectivity Program, which ran out of funding in 2024, and urged support for programs to make high-speed internet more accessible for low-income households.

They also complimented the FCC's efforts to improve data collection and mapping of internet speeds and availability, which can guide federal investment in broadband infrastructure. But co-op leaders said the FCC must do more to ensure accuracy, pointing to concerns with the commission's reliance on providers' advertised internet speeds.

Meeting participants included Abel and Delta Electric Power Association CEO Harold Pittman, East Mississippi EPA CEO Randy Carroll, Electric Cooperatives of Mississippi CEO Michael Callahan, NE SPARC Chief Technology Officer Nathan Robbins, Tallahatchie Valley EPA CEO Brad Robison, Tishomingo County EPA CEO Cody Durham, and Tombigbee EPA CEO Scott Hendrix.

"Electric co-ops have always been about seeing a need and finding a way to address it," Robison said. "From bringing electricity to rural Mississippi in the 1930s to bringing high speed internet to the most rural parts of Mississippi today, our goal has always been to make Mississippi better, and to improve the quality of life for all Mississippians."

Try Unusual Poinsettias in *Christmas Decorations*

Christmas Beauty Pink offers a soft, romantic approach to seasonal decorating. Its pastel pink bracts create a layered, watercolor-like effect.

Other than Christmas trees, nothing announces the Christmas season more visually than poinsettias. If you use red ones every year in your decorations, this might be the year to branch out into something new.

During a recent visit to the Mississippi State University South Mississippi Branch Experiment Station in Poplarville, I had the opportunity to explore their poinsettia research project. This year, the station is cultivating an impressive 60 varieties, from traditional reds and pristine whites to a dazzling array of non-traditional colors that bring fresh excitement to holiday decor.

One standout variety, Orange Glow, enchants with its warm orange bracts, accented by coral and peach undertones. These sunlit tones are perfectly complemented by deep green foliage, making this poinsettia an eye-catching choice for modern or eclectic holiday displays.

The unique color of Orange Glow adds a cozy warmth, effortlessly standing out among more conventional holiday plants.

A personal favorite, Christmas Beauty Pink, offers a softer, more romantic approach to seasonal decorating. Its pastel pink bracts,

adorned with subtle veining, create a layered, watercolor-like effect that adds to their charm. The gentle pink contrasts beautifully with the plant's rich green leaves, creating an elegant blend of colors.

This variety shines in feminine or romantic decor, whether used in table arrangements or as a standalone display piece.

One of the most unique varieties, Autumn Leaves, captures the spirit of fall with its warm, earthy tones. The bracts transition seamlessly from soft peach to rich amber, with hints of apricot and coral. The color changes in a stunning gradient reminiscent of autumn foliage.

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Other than Christmas trees, nothing announces the Christmas season more visually than poinsettias. If you use red ones every year in your decorations, this might be the year to branch out into something new.

Some bracts of Autumn Leaves have delicate pink undertones, adding depth and dimension to its appearance. This versatile variety bridges the seasons, making it a perfect choice for transitional decor.

These remarkable poinsettias are highly adaptable, complementing decorating styles ranging from classic holiday themes to bold, contemporary designs.

To keep your poinsettias vibrant and healthy, place them in bright, indirect sunlight for 6 to 8 hours daily, avoiding direct sunlight that can scorch their delicate bracts. Maintain a consistent indoor temperature of 65 to 75 degrees, keeping them away from cold drafts, heaters or vents to minimize stress.

Water the plant when the top inch of soil feels dry, ensuring the pot has proper drainage to prevent root rot. Always remove any excess water from decorative wraps or saucers.

As tropical plants, poinsettias thrive in moderate humidity. You can create a suitable environment by using a pebble tray or humidifier in dry indoor conditions. Handle the bracts gently, as these are prone to bruising or tearing.

For those who wish to keep poinsettias beyond the holiday season, trim the plant back in early spring, repot if necessary and move it outdoors to partial shade once temperatures remain consistently above 60 degrees.

By following these care tips, your poinsettias can remain beautiful and thriving, adding seasonal cheer to your home for weeks or even months to come. 🌿



The Orange Glow poinsettia has bracts in sunlit shades of warm orange with coral and peach undertones.



by Dr. Eddie Smith

Southern Gardening columnist Dr. Eddie Smith, a gardening specialist and Pearl River County coordinator with the Mississippi State University Extension Service, is an internationally certified arborist, Produce Safety Alliance certified trainer, and one of the developers of the Mississippi Smart Landscapes program that encourages the use of native plants in the landscape.

Keep all poinsettias healthy, including these Autumn Leaves, by supplying 6 to 8 hours of bright, indirect sunlight daily and maintaining a consistent indoor temperature of 65 to 75 degrees.



BEGINNER

Birding

DOUBLE
CRESTED
CORMORANTS

Magnolia State offers abundant places to see birds

At the southern terminus of the Mississippi Flyway, the Magnolia State attracts countless birds that winter here or pass through on their way elsewhere.

“Any location in Mississippi would be good for winter birding,” explains Mitchell Robinson from Holly Springs, the Mississippi Ornithological Society vice president. “Even resident birds like woodpeckers become more active during the winter because food is scarce, so they go looking for something to eat. In the winter, many species move in foraging flocks for safety. Flocks might contain several species feeding together.”

Founded in Jackson in 1955, the society exists to promote a greater appreciation and protection of native birds. The organization helps connect birders to local opportunities throughout Mississippi.

Birders today can download a free app called Merlin to identify birds. The Cornell University Lab of Ornithology launched the app, which accesses a worldwide database. People can record bird sounds. The program analyzes those sounds and determines what species made it.

“Merlin gives information on what bird species should be in that area so people can identify them in real time on their phones,” Robinson says. “It’s a great way to get started learning how to identify birds using technology. People could look up on ebird.org and see places close to them where they might spot different bird species.”

Anyone can get into birdwatching for practically no cost. People commonly see numerous bird species in their backyards. Many people place bird feeders around their homes to attract birds. Others plant native vegetation that creates bird food all year long.



OSPREY

“Many birds eat insects,” Robinson states. “Most people rake their leaves in the fall. Numerous insects stay in leaf litter all winter. People can make brush piles with leaf material and branches to create warmth and cover for birds.”

Millions of birds live throughout the state, but a few public places stand out for birding. These include Tishomingo State Park and Hall Doxey State Park. All major lakes, like Ross Barnett, offer great opportunities to see various bird species. In Grenada, visit Lee Tartt Nature Preserve.

On the coast, people see species not found elsewhere in the state. Follow the Mississippi Coast Birding Trail to more than 40 sites. Most of the Mississippi subspecies of sandhill crane population lives on or near the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge near Gautier.

Even urban areas often contain parks and other places where birds gather. In Jackson, LeFleur’s Bluff State Park covers 305 acres and includes nature trails good for birding.

“Some species, like red-breasted nuthatches, come through or overwinter here,” Robinson says. “Another notable species, cedar wax wings are strikingly beautiful birds. They almost look like someone wearing eye mascara with a crest like a cardinal.”

Birders might want to participate in Christmas Bird Counts. Conducted by the National Audubon Society since 1900, the count runs from Dec. 14 through Jan. 5. Volunteers record the different species they spot to compile data on wintering bird population densities and distribution. ❁

“

Many birds eat insects. Most people rake their leaves in the fall. Numerous insects stay in leaf litter all winter. People can make brush piles with leaf material and branches to create warmth and cover for birds.

OSPREY ON THE NEST



A PAIR OF SANDHILL CRANES



by John N. Felsher

John N. Felsher is a professional freelance writer, broadcaster, photographer, and editor who lives in Alabama. An avid sportsman, he's written more than 3,300 articles for more than 170 different magazines on a wide variety of outdoors topics. Contact him at j.felsher@hotmail.com.



Christmas Lights ON THE BAYOU

by Lici Beveridge

Christmas on the Bayou is a longtime family tradition, now with a third generation of revelers participating in the holiday festivities.

Jennifer Wittman, one of the event organizers, said her parents were part of the original Bernard Bayou Boating Club, which started the event in 2000.

“When Christmas on the Bayou started, it was just a group of neighbors who decided that we had a really great area where we could have a parade,” she said. “We had all these houses on the water.”

Now her husband and 11-year-old son are getting in on the action, Wittman said. And so is her sister and her sister’s 8-year-old daughter. Her parents still participate in the parade, too.

It has grown from being a neighborhood event to a celebrated attraction, including a nod from the Southeastern Tourism Society as a Top 20 event in the Southeast.

“When it first started, it was regular Christmas lights, and they were towing generators on boats back behind them,” Wittman said. “Now with LED, a lot of people just put a converter on their boats, and with all the colors and the blowups, it’s pretty amazing.”

Unlike Christmas on the Water, another holiday event on the Coast, the bayou parade gives a more intimate look.

“The boats can interact with people on shore,” Wittman said. “You can see the people.”

Dozens of vessels of all sizes participate in the event held along Bayou Bernard in Gulfport. Judges vote for their favorites in the pontoon, 25-feet and under and vessels 26-feet or longer categories. In addition to the winners in each category, one vessel is chosen as the overall winner.

The number of vessels participating can vary, with an average of 50 to 60 boats each year, Wittman said.

The 26th annual Christmas on the Bayou is set for 6 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 12, starting and ending at Gulfport Lake, traveling through Bernard Bayou, and the Industrial Seaway before returning to the lake.

“It’s really great from a safety perspective,” Wittman said. “We don’t have people trying to turn around.”

Local and state law enforcement have vessels on the water, too, to make sure

There are several public areas to view the parade as well as a few restaurants, like Captain Al’s Steak and Seafood and Blow Fly Bar and Grill, along the parade route that offer viewing areas for their guests.

Three public viewing areas along the parade route include the bleachers at Bayou Vista Golf Course, the Gulfport Lake boat launch area, and James Hill Park. The viewing areas will have public restrooms or port-a-potties for visitors.

At Captain Al’s, guests can take photos with Santa, enjoy live music and have a prime view of the fireworks during its Christmas at the Captain’s Wharf Marina and Boat Launch, beginning at 5 p.m.

Live entertainment will be provided at Captain Al’s by The Project, a Coast-based cover band, from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Blow Fly will offer a public viewing area underneath the restaurant area, where visitors can bring lawn chairs to comfortably watch the parade.

Boat slips are available at Captain’s Wharf Marina for those who want to view the festivities from their vessels.

The parade is free to watch, but some of the private venues may charge a small per-vehicle fee for access.

Visitors can find more information and a map of the parade route at christmasonthebayou.org. ❄️

Lici Beveridge is a freelance writer based in Hattiesburg.

“

When it first started, it was regular Christmas lights, and they were towing generators on boats back behind them. Now with LED, a lot of people just put a converter on their boats, and with all the colors and the blowups, it’s pretty amazing.



Visit christmasonthebayou.org



BATTERY DISPOSAL AND RECYCLING

Larger lithium-ion batteries — like those in electric vehicles (EVs) or other e-transportation vehicles — should be handled by dealers, repair shops, or the manufacturer.

by Steph Joven

Batteries are part of everyday life — from the ones in our TV remotes and flashlights to the big ones that power electric vehicles and even energy storage systems used by electric utilities. But when batteries are disposed the wrong way, they can leak harmful chemicals, catch fire, and waste valuable materials that we need to recycle.

Globally, electronic waste (also known as “e-waste”) is one of the fastest-growing types of trash. In 2022, people worldwide threw away more than 62 billion kilograms of it. In the U.S. alone, that adds up to 21 kilograms (about 46 pounds) of e-waste per person each year. Yet only about 22% of that waste is recycled properly.

The good news: safe disposal and recycling options are available, and you can help make a difference.





Lithium-based batteries should never be thrown away in regular trash or recycling bins because they can spark fires.

BATTERY TYPES AND HOW TO DISPOSE OF THEM

Not all batteries are the same, and how you get rid of them depends on their components. Some batteries can be recycled easily, while others can be dangerous if tossed in the wrong place — they may leak toxic chemicals or even start fires. That's why the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends following local rules or using national collection programs like Call2Recycle, Earth911 or drop-off bins at hardware stores to make sure batteries are handled safely.

SINGLE-USE BATTERIES

Single-use batteries are designed to be used once, then replaced. These include alkaline and zinc-carbon batteries — the common AA, AAA, C, D and 9-volt sizes used in remotes, flashlights, and other small devices. Some areas allow these batteries to go in household trash, but recycling is always the better choice. Button or coin batteries (used in watches, hearing aids and car key fobs) are often lithium-based. These should never be thrown away in regular trash or recycling bins because they can spark fires. Instead, cover the battery terminals with tape or seal them in small bags, and take them to a certified recycling facility.

RECHARGEABLE BATTERIES

Rechargeable batteries power many of our everyday devices — cordless tools, phones, laptops, cameras and even scooters. Types include nickel-cadmium (Ni-Cd), lithium-ion (Li-ion), nickel-metal hydride (Ni-MH), nickel-zinc (Ni-Zn) and small sealed lead-acid batteries. While these look different, they all share one rule: never throw them in the trash. They must go to a recycling facility. For devices with built-in, non-removable batteries, recycle the entire device, making sure the battery ends are taped or bagged to prevent sparks.

AUTOMOTIVE AND LARGE BATTERIES

Automotive and large batteries are more powerful and require special care. Lead-acid batteries, found in cars, boats, motorcycles and ATVs, contain lead and acid, which are hazardous. These should always be returned to a retailer, repair shop or a local hazardous waste program. Larger lithium-ion batteries — like those in electric vehicles (EVs) and home or utility-scale energy storage systems — are even more complex. They should only be handled by dealers, repair shops, or the manufacturer. These should never be discarded in curbside waste or recycling.

Proper battery disposal is less about danger and more about opportunity. By recycling, we can recover valuable materials, reduce waste and support reliable energy systems in our communities. With a few simple steps, each of us can do our part — and together, we can keep our homes and community a little cleaner and safer.

If you have questions about battery disposal, check out programs like Call2Recycle or Earth911 for guidance. 🌱

Steph Joven writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.



Many areas allow single-use batteries to be disposed in household trash, but recycling is always the better choice.

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Merry Christmas & HAPPY NEW YEAR

HOLIDAY CLOSINGS

We hope you have a wonderful holiday season, and we wish you a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! As we gather with those we love, let us not forget the greatest love of all – the love of our Heavenly Father.

**Pontotoc Electric will be closed
Dec. 24 - 26, 2025, for Christmas
Jan. 1, 2026, for New Year's Day.**

To report a power outage after hours or during the holiday, please call:
662-489-6711 (Pontotoc) or 662-983-2727 (Bruce)

CONGRATULATIONS CHUCK HOWELL

PEPA Retired General Manager Chuck Howell has been elevated to the grade of senior member of IEEE, the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. This is the highest professional grade of IEEE for which a member may apply. Only 10% of the nearly half-million members have achieved this level. We offer our congratulations.



HATCHER RELAXES

with paint brush in hand



Pontotoc resident Tammy Hatcher paints her whimsical Santas every year.



Hatcher's baby stroller painting features shades of pink and gold.



A large frosted ornament Hatcher painted hangs on a Christmas tree.

by Jennifer Johnson

PEPA Member Tammy Hatcher has always seen the world as beautiful scenes just waiting for a canvas. Growing up tending to animals on a farm, Hatcher saw the beauty of God's creation and thought to herself, "I could paint that." From driving a truck while her dad hauled hay to bush hogging the fields as a teen, Hatcher did her part to help her family, but she knew when the day was done, she was ready to paint.

She said her sister Barbara was a huge influence on her art as a child. "She was 19 years older than me, and I always watched her paint. She gave me tips and taught me a lot over the years."

Even as a child, Hatcher loved coloring, and she was excited to finish up her chores and have some time to be creative. As she grew up, she found myriad ways to enjoy her artistry. "I used to watch Bob Ross and try to paint something in 30 minutes like he did. I painted decorative designs on gourds for a few years. I found someone in Alabama who had good clay, and I dabbled in pottery for a while. I also made handmade earrings."

She's done lots of paintings, including textured ones using a pallet knife. She's even painted a few wall murals. "I did one with quails on my son's wall, and I painted the background for a baptistry at a church."

Her paintings range in price from around \$26-\$27 for something smaller, or \$40-\$50 for a larger piece. She paints a lot of whimsical Santas around Christmas time, but her portfolio has everything from a large pink butterfly set of paintings (perfect for a little girl's room) to a beautiful church scene added to a large ornament for the tree.

Hatcher graduated from Pontotoc High School and went on to college, but the career she saw herself with wasn't behind a desk or painting at an easel. "I love to paint because it's a stress reliever." After a few years of college, Hatcher went back to her original plan to become a hair stylist, graduating from the Jeffie Lyles Cosmetology School in Oxford.

She said she's always been good with styling hair, even cutting the long hair of friends in high school and college before she had any training. "They trusted me, and I think they were excited about the results."

Over the years — 43 to be exact — Hatcher said she couldn't say how many times she has done hair for weekly customers and for weddings, pageants, and proms. Now, she's starting to slow down some with the salon. "I'm doing it part time, so I have time to keep my grandchildren." Adeline, 5, Gracie, 2, and newborn Sunnie keep her schedule full and her heart happy.

And where does this artist/cosmetologist/country girl see the future? She laughed and said, "Keeping those grands... and hopefully having more!"

For art inquiries, call Tammy at 662-419-5757.



'Tis the Season FOR SAVING *(energy)!*



by Jennifer Johnson

Having friends and family over for Christmas this season? We've put together some energy efficiency tips that could save you money on your electric bill, while still rolling out the red and green carpet for your guests.

- Program slightly lower temperatures when your home is empty and raise it slightly so it can warm up when guests are starting to arrive.
- Lower your thermostat when cooking. Let your oven and other appliances help keep your home warm.
- Any dishes you can make ahead? You'll only need to heat those up when guests arrive.
- Put drinks in a cooler. This limits the number of times your refrigerator gets opened at party time.
- Add lighting timers for your Christmas décor. Save energy by having them turn off during the night.



FESTIVE FOODS

for friends and family

Let's fill the table with holiday favorites that are perfect for entertaining guests (or eating as leftovers later).

Cheese Ring

Michal Pennington, PEPA Accountant

- 1 (12 ounces) package. bacon
- 1 pound mild cheddar cheese, grated
- 1 bunch green onions
- 2 cups Hellman's mayonnaise
- ½ to 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ½ cup toasted, slivered almonds
- Strawberry preserves

Fry bacon until crisp. Drain well and crumble into small pieces. In medium mixing bowl, combine bacon, cheese, green onions, mayonnaise, and cayenne pepper. Mix thoroughly. Place toasted almonds in the bottom of an oiled seven-cup ring mold, and press cheese mixture into mold. Refrigerate overnight, and unmold cheese ring onto platter. Place a small custard cup filled with strawberry preserves in the center of the ring. Serve with crackers and strawberry preserves.

Easy-As-Pie Cheese Straws

Lavonia Lackey, PEPA Mgr. of Customer Accounts

- 1 (11 ounces) package pie crust mix
- ½ teaspoon ground red pepper
- 1 (5 ounces) jar sharp process cheese spread
- ¼ teaspoon dry mustard

Process all ingredients in a food processor for 30 seconds or until mixture forms a ball, stopping twice to scrape down sides. Use a cookie press fitted with a bar-shaped disc to shape dough into 2 ½ inch straws following manufacturer's instructions. Or divide dough in half, and shape each portion into a 7-inch log; wrap in plastic wrap and chill one hour. Cut logs into ¼ inch slices. Place cheese straws on greased baking sheets. Bake at 375 degrees for 8 minutes or until golden. Remove to wire racks to cool. Store in an airtight container. *Yield: 5 dozen.*

Tea Cakes

Teresa Petty, PEPA Receptionist

- 4 eggs, beaten
- 1¼ cups oil
- 4 teaspoons vanilla
- 2 cups sugar
- 4 cups self-rising flour

Mix eggs, oil, and vanilla. Then add flour and sugar. Drop by teaspoon full onto cookie sheet. Bake at 325 degrees on the top rack. Bake until edges are brown. Remove from cookie sheet as soon as you take them out of the oven.

Chocolate Punch Bowl Cake

Curtis (PEPA Retiree) and Seretha Gregory

- 1 box milk chocolate cake mix
- 1 tub cool whip
- 3 boxes chocolate pudding
- 1 cup chocolate chips
- Chocolate syrup as desired

Bake cake according to directions. Mix pudding according to directions. Break cake apart. Distribute into punch bowl. Add a layer of pudding. Next a layer of cool whip. Top with chocolate chips. Repeat layers. Top with chocolate syrup if desired.



If you're tired of having knee pain and want to talk to a doctor that can virtually give you your life back if knee pain is an issue, call Dr. Rob Acord... as he's the only doctor in the area... who has this newly discovered knee pain reduction technology.

"Chronic, Painful, Knee Pain Reduced in Less Than 8 Minutes?"

If you have knee pain, can't walk because of an old injury, or you just think it's part of getting old, you might want to read this article.

Knee pain is something that disables a lot of people every single year, but most people don't know what to do about it.

What Are Your Choices?

Some people immediately opt in for surgery, then some people watch TV and end up buying something they wrap their knee with-hoping it will help, and others just follow orders and take medications which simply block the pain signals while the underlying condition often progresses.

What Works Best?

All I'm saying is this. There are a lot of ways to TREAT your knee pain, but which one will really work?

If you've done your research, you know that there are not a lot of things that really work when it comes to actually helping align the knee, taking nerve pressure off the knee, and reducing the pain and swelling.

What if there was a "real solution" that worked from DAY ONE?

Hi, I'm *Dr. Rob Acord* and I'm here to tell you about a new device called the K.P.R.

I stumbled onto this one-of-a-kind machine at a recent medical conference and tried it myself.

THE RESULTS: My knees have never felt so good, and that was after.... just one treatment.

It virtually reduced my knee stiffness by 95%, so I am positive it'll help your knee pain, help you walk better as soon as you get your first treatment, plus help you do some things you used to do without the help of a walker, cane, or someone else helping you.



Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not guaranteeing a miracle if you haven't walked in many years.... but this just may be the answer you've been looking for.

Better late than never for sure. You should entertain this option... no matter what's happened to you in the past!

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- **Get up and down better**
- **Get out of chairs easier**
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"What if my knee(s) are BONE ON BONE?"

Here's all I can tell you. If you're bone on bone, and surgery is not an option for you, or surgery didn't work, this may be the exact treatment you've been needing.

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Christmas
at
the MANSION

Sharing the holidays
with Mississippi



Gingerbread replica of the governor's mansion by Madison native Beth Hennington.



Photos provided by the staff of the governor's mansion.



by Steven Ward

Mississippi First Lady Elee Reeves cherishes each December because she and the family get to share the governor's mansion with Mississippians.

The December event she looks forward to each year is Christmas at the Mansion.

"The feedback we receive from visitors has been really positive. Our team works incredibly hard to make it a great, welcoming experience for everyone who visits," Reeves told *Today in Mississippi*.

"This will be our sixth Christmas at the Mansion, and each year has given us new memories and experiences."

Each year, Mississippi florists and designers are invited to submit proposals to decorate the governor's mansion that highlight an annual theme.

This year's theme is "A Season of Success: Celebrating Mississippi Students, Teachers, and Education Gains." Reeves said the theme was chosen to highlight the state's educational achievements over recent years.

"We chose this theme to celebrate our students, teachers, and parents who have helped our state become a national leader in education. We're incredibly proud of the progress we've made, and I cannot wait to celebrate these fantastic achievements," Reeves said.

After the theme was announced, Reeves put out a call to Mississippi students to submit ornaments that represent their school to be incorporated into this year's decorations.

The feedback we receive from visitors has been really positive. Our team works incredibly hard to make it a great, welcoming experience for everyone who visits. This will be our sixth Christmas at the Mansion, and each year has given us new memories and experiences.

Over the years, Reeves said, Christmas at the Mansion has honored first responders and frontline workers, celebrated Mississippi children, Mississippi towns and traditions, the state's rich musical legacy, and the businesses that help move the state forward.

"We spend a lot of time talking and working to come up with themes that represent the very best of Mississippi. Here in Mississippi, we have many great things happening and so much to

celebrate, so coming up with a theme usually isn't too difficult. I, along with members of my team, will usually come up with several possible ideas that we will discuss and build out. As we discuss, we all typically begin to gravitate toward one specific idea, and that is usually how our themes come to be," Reeves said.

Once the theme is chosen, Reeves and husband, Gov. Tate

Reeves, hold a press conference in July to announce the theme and begin the search for a decorator.

"The talent and creativity found here in Mississippi is truly unmatched! We receive the most fabulous proposals, each with their own unique take of the chosen theme," Reeves said.

"We always say that this is the hardest part of planning for Christmas at the Mansion, because of the details, talent, and uniqueness placed in each proposal."



From left, florist Madden Gray and Mississippi First Lady Elee Reeves.



Florist Madden Gray at his shop, MG & Company, in Philadelphia.

THE DECORATOR

This year's decorator is florist and designer Madden Gray. Gray owns and operates MG & Company in downtown Philadelphia.

"When I received the call, I was overwhelmed with excitement and gratitude. The governor's mansion is not just a residence; it's a symbol of our state's history and hospitality. So being trusted to bring it to life for the holidays is incredibly meaningful to me," Madden said.

Madden was born and raised in Philadelphia. He said growing up in Mississippi taught him "the beauty of tradition, hospitality, and a strong sense of home."

"From an early age, I was drawn to how flowers and décor could bring people together and tell a story. Whether it was a Sunday table set just right, or a front porch dressed for the seasons," Madden said.

"I began MG & Company with a passion for creating designs that celebrate Southern charm and heartfelt beauty. Over the years, I've had the privilege of working on everything from weddings and events to large-scale holiday designs. My goal is always to create spaces that feel warm, welcoming, and personal."

Madden said his Christmas at the Mansion design will feature rich seasonal color palettes, natural greenery, and handcrafted ornaments and art by Mississippi students.

"Personally, this opportunity feels like a beautiful blend of everything I love: tradition, community, and creativity. It's a dream project that allows me to celebrate the season while representing Mississippi's artistry and tradition," Madden said.



VISITS

Although a variety of Christmas trees are placed all over the mansion, other unique displays and decorations adorn the home.

In past years, decorators have featured ornaments made by Mississippi artists, children, and towns and communities. In 2023, the theme revolved around Mississippi being the Birthplace of America's Music. The mansion partnered with numerous museums from around the state that loaned artifacts belonging to famous Mississippi artists like B.B. King, Charley Pride, Jimmy Buffett, Marty Stuart, and others.

"Last year, we were able to partner with a number of Mississippi companies to display Mississippi made products. We even had a huge gingerbread replica of the mansion made by Madison native, Beth Hennington, owner of The Vanillan," Reeves said.

Reeves said her favorite display each year is the family's nativity set.

"It's beautiful and serves as a wonderful reminder of the reason for the season."

The city of Jackson's annual Christmas by Candlelight Tour is on Dec. 5 at 4 p.m. The event includes a holiday-themed tour of the governor's mansion, the Mississippi State Capitol, the Old Capitol Museum, and the Two Mississippi Museums.

Reeves said her favorite part of the entire Christmas at the Mansion event is what happens after the decorations and displays have been put in place.

"That's when we get to share it with Mississippians. It's so special getting to visit with them during the annual Candlelight Tour and getting to see their reactions to the decorations," Reeves said. ❁



The city of Jackson's annual Christmas by Candlelight Tour is on Dec. 5 at 4 p.m. For more information about Jackson's Christmas by Candlelight Tour, visit mdah.ms.gov/event/christmas-candlelight-tour-3.

For more information about the governor's mansion, visit mdah.ms.gov/explore-mississippi/governors-mansion.



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- J.P. Morgan

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STATE'S PEANUT CROP LOOKS GOOD NEAR HARVEST END

Mississippi's peanut crop was mostly harvested by the end of October, and yields appear to be average or slightly above. Photo by MSU Extension Service/Brendan Zurweller.

by **Bonnie Coblentz - MSU Extension Service**

The majority of Mississippi's peanut crop is out of the ground and looking good, with rain across the state in late October slowing harvest progress.

Brendan Zurweller, peanut specialist with the Mississippi State University Extension Service, said harvest was about 75% complete by the last week of October.

"Overall, it's looking like we will have a slightly above-average crop across the state," Zurweller said. "The greatest risk with rain this late in the season is the soils don't dry very fast, so you never know how much longer you will be able to dig peanuts."

Yields and quality depended largely on how much rain the crop got early in the year.

"We were very wet early in the season, and that caused some fields to have to be replanted," he said. "The rains also delayed planting, as the majority of our acres were planted in the latter half of May."

"The earliest peanuts were planted the latter half of April and already harvested," Zurweller said. "This accounted for about 20% of the total crop."

After heavy spring rains caused the late and slow start of the growing season, the weather became hot and dry in late summer.

“Dry and hot weather late in the season typically slows down crop development and maturation,” he said. “Places that were planted later and had extended dry spells late in the season had fewer pods form and reduced yields.”

Disease is always an issue each year for peanuts. Leaf spot showed up at normal levels and white mold hurt a few fields in the southern half of the state. Southern blight presented above average pressure in some fields, helped along by warm, dry weather in September.



Mississippi growers planted 19,807 acres, down from the 25,000 acres they planned to plant. This puts acres this year about the same as 2024, but they would have been up except for rain that prevented planting.

Malcolm Broome, executive director of the Mississippi Peanut Growers Association, said the crop is averaging 4,000 to 6,000 pounds per acre, which is between average to a little above average for the state.

“Mississippi growers planted 19,807 acres, down from the 25,000 acres they planned to plant,” Broome said. “This puts acres this year about the same as 2024, but they would have been up except for rain that prevented planting.”

The majority of the peanut acres are in the southeastern part of the state and along the Highway 82 corridor. Peanuts are typically cultivated in 30 counties across the state.

Broome said peanuts are sold by the ton. Spring contract prices averaged \$500 per ton this year, which is close to what it was in 2024. 🌱



A wet planting season delayed the crop and pushed harvest a little late, but Mississippi peanut crop is averaging 4,000-6,000 pounds per acre. Photo by MSU Extension Service/Brendan Zurweller.

Plated

with Rebecca Turner

You can eat these Christmas wreaths. Really.

Creating edible Christmas wreaths is a festive and enjoyable activity, with options ranging from simple, no-bake versions to scrumptious baked creations. By arranging ingredients in a circular, wreath-like shape, you create a stunning and shareable display.

For the base, use a round platter or board — such as a serving tray, wooden board, pizza pan, or lazy Susan. A round platter helps maintain the wreath shape, and the size can be adjusted based on the platter's dimensions. Spruce it up by lining the edges with fresh greenery, such as rosemary, romaine, or butterhead lettuce leaves, along with other fresh herbs, to give it a festive wreath look and fill in the gaps.

Create a fruit wreath by arranging a variety of festive fruits, such as grapes, kiwi slices, and berries, on a round platter. Place a small bowl of fruit dip in the center. Mix fruits, vegetables, sliced salami, and pepperoni with cheeses and olives for a charcuterie wreath.

A savory appetizer is always a crowd-pleaser, from antipasto skewers to warm, baked pull-apart pastry rings. Crescent roll dough provides the perfect base for a variety of delicious fillings. Arrange crescent roll triangles in a circle, overlapping the shorter sides, and leave a round opening in the middle. Press the seams together to form a solid ring.

Spread the dough with a classic filling, such as spinach and artichoke, or mix cream cheese with sausage or ham and cheese. Fold the points of the dough over the filling and tuck them under the ring. Bake until golden brown. Serve warm with a dipping sauce.

Graham cracker wreaths are a fun activity for children. Start with whole graham cracker squares. Spread them with green frosting, then add red candies, such as M&M's, Red Hots, cinnamon imperials, or candy pearls for berries. ❁



by Rebecca Turner

Rebecca Turner is an author, registered dietitian, radio host, television presenter, and board-certified in Lifestyle Medicine. She is a lifelong Mississippian and a member of the Central Electric Co-op in Brandon. Find her on social media @RebeccaTurnerTalks or online at RebeccaTurnerNutrition.com.



Cream Cheese Sausage Wreath

INGREDIENTS

2 cans crescent roll dough, such as Pillsbury
1 block of cream cheese, softened
1 pound of ground sausage

2 large eggs, lightly beaten
Fresh rosemary sprigs

Preheat oven to 350 degrees

In a medium pan, brown sausage and discard fat renderings.

Turn heat to low, add softened cream cheese to cooked sausage and mix well. Remove from heat.

On a greased, or parchment paper lined, pizza pan, unroll crescent rolls, separating each one. Arrange the crescent roll triangles with the thick end of the dough toward the inside, in a sunburst pattern. The base of the triangles should overlap so the wreath seals well.

Spoon in the cream cheese sausage mixture on the thickest part of the overlapping crescents, leaving a small margin in the center.

Fold triangle tips over and tuck extra dough underneath to secure. This will make a ring. Take a look at the shape, and gently adjust to form an even circle, if needed, before baking.

Whisk eggs together in a small bowl and brush liberally over dough.

Bake for 15-20 minutes until golden brown. Turn your pan in the oven halfway through to promote even browning.

Allow to cool for at least 15 minutes, then carefully transport the wreath to your serving platter, and set a bowl of sauce in the center. Garnish with sprigs of fresh rosemary.

Cranberry Puff Pastry Wreath

INGREDIENTS

1 sheet puff pastry, thawed
4-5 ounces brie, sliced
½ cup of cranberry sauce

½ cup diced pecans or pistachios
1 egg, whisked

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees

Place a large piece of baking paper on the bench then place your sheet of puff pastry on top.

Use a medium sized bowl to create a wreath shape for the pastry. Set aside extra pastry.

Take a much smaller bowl and press it down in the center of the pastry to make a mark. Remove the bowl, then in the center of the circle, make 4 cuts as if cutting a pizza into 8 pieces.

In a wreath shape, around this circle, spread the cranberry sauce. Layer up the sliced brie and sprinkle on the nuts on top of the sauce.

Take one piece of pastry from the center, over the top of the filling and connect in with the edge of the wreath. Press down to seal. Repeat until the wreath is fully formed.

Brush the pastry with the whisked egg.

Place the wreath and baking paper on a baking tray then bake for 25 minutes or until golden and cooked through.

Remove from the oven and allow to rest for 5 minutes before cutting into pieces.

Events open to the public will be published free of charge as space allows. Submit details at least two months prior to the event date. Submissions must include a phone number with area code for publication. Email to news@ecm.coop. **Events are subject to change.**

Turkey shoot. Dec. 6. Vancleave. Will be held at the Daisy Masonic Lodge No. 421. Starts at 8 a.m. 2570 School House Road. Details: 228-990-3365.

13th Annual Life of Christ Presentation. Dec. 12. Monticello. 5:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. Atwood Water Park. Drive through live depictions of scenes from the life of Christ. Admission is free. Details: 601-431-9317.

Journey to Bethlehem. Dec. 13 and 14. Pelahatchie. From 5:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. at 2394 Shiloh Rd. Admission is free. Drive through event with live animals and more than 200 characters. Details: 601-854-8158.

Indoor Community Market. Jan. 7 and Feb. 4. Biloxi. The event will be held at the St. Martin Community Center at 15008 Lemoyne Blvd. The market is a mixture of arts, crafts, food, clothing, handmade goods, and resell items. 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Free parking and entry. Details: 228-217-8033.

"Diary of a Wimpy Kid -The Musical" Feb. 12-15. Pearl. Pearl Community Theatre will put on the production at The Pirate Auditorium, 180 Mary Ann Dr. Details: 601-214-1888 or visit pearlcommunitytheatrems.org.

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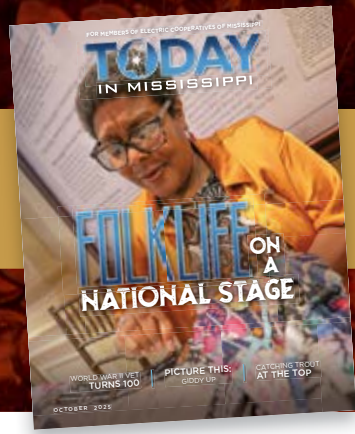
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Endings and Beginnings

When exactly does the Christmas season begin?

For some people it never ends. Our old friends in Ridgeland, Gay and Luther Street kept a Christmas tree up year-round in their house. Gay made Christmas ornaments, and although it tended to be seasonal, she was in her workshop 12 months out of the year. Luther cut the blanks from a quarter-inch thick piece of fine grade plywood. Then Gay would do her magic with her pens and paint. So, the tree in the living room sort of kept them in the spirit of the season all year.

For others, there is a definite beginning to the Christmas season. For years, Teresa White in Brandon has had a ritual for the day after Halloween — take down the ghosts and put up the reindeer. Teresa doesn't just decorate a room or two. Her whole house has ornaments, garland, and angels on the mantle and over the doors. It even spills out into the yard. Teresa says husband Jimmy may not be as gung-ho over the decorations as she is, but he tolerates it because he knows Santa is watching and doesn't want to be put on the naughty list for being a grinch.

But our buddy Larry Massey says he has observed a definite beginning of the Christmas season. He should know. Larry and his wife Sue run the Rosebud Christmas Tree Farm near Walnut Grove in Leake County. Larry says Thanksgiving afternoon is his busiest day of the year. As soon as the table is cleared after Thanksgiving dinner, families pile into their cars and go get a Christmas tree to decorate that evening.

I like the logic Larry applied to opening a Christmas tree farm after he retired from raising cattle. He said he wanted to find something everybody needed at least "one" of to sell. He settled on Christmas trees.

My daddy was a big fan of Christmas. When I was a kid, we'd have a tree up the first week of December. Daddy would let me help put a string of "big" lights on the boxwood beside the front steps. My older sisters made snow with Ivory soap flakes and put it on the tree one year. I could feel the Christmas spirit of anticipation all month long. Mostly because of the tree.

This year, well — the kids are long gone. They've all grown up and live in Texas and Alabama while a couple of them still live here in the area. We don't get to see the grands and great grands all that often. People (including us) are too busy. So, it's hard to conjure up and sustain the Christmas spirit anymore.

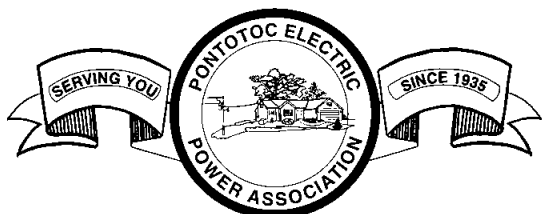


My hope for Christmas is that we'd all find a spark of hope in our hearts that can't be dashed by our environments. And we'd pass that spirit along to others. Seeing smiles on faces that come from deep within would be a great gift for all of us! ❄️



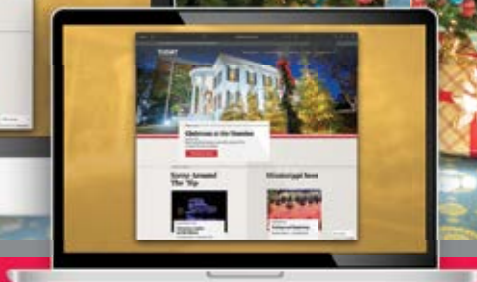
by Walt Grayson

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