



Mountain Telephone

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2024

# CONNECTION



## Celebrating the Season

Church hosts live  
Nativity scene

CELTIC  
VILLAGE

RURAL  
WRITERS



By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## A Winning Game

Esports brings fun, competition and a future

**N**TCA members are committed to doing more than providing fast, reliable internet service. They strive to enrich the community, including finding new opportunities to help everyone as technologies and online trends evolve.

For example, a growing high school sport unlocks all the traditional benefits of competition, such as team building, while enhancing skills applicable to modern careers. Known as esports, competitive gaming can make a difference in the lives of students.

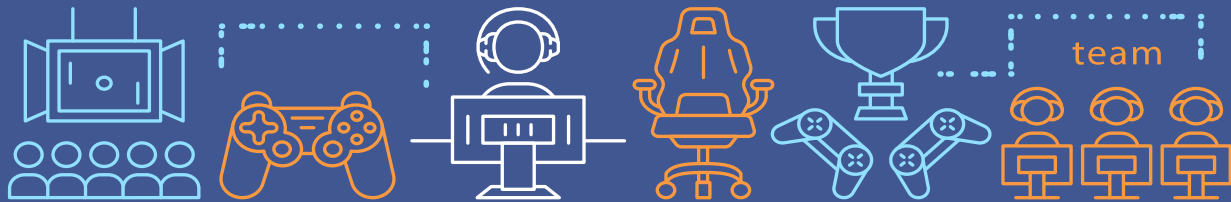
High schools across the nation have embraced esports, and the National Federation of State High School Associations includes esports alongside basketball, football, volleyball and more. Without fast, reliable internet services, however, rural students wouldn't have access. That's the power of providers like yours—they break down barriers and open doors to new opportunities.

Many of the competitions may seem familiar to gamers, ranging from sports games and racing simulations to strategy

and multiplayer battle titles. A growing number of colleges recognize esports and field teams. There's even professional-level competition.

The benefits of esports resemble those found in traditional high school sports. Success relies on teamwork and cooperation. Participants learn life skills and gain a deeper understanding of technology needed for careers ranging from software development to marketing. The broad world of gaming also brings people together, and 61% of gamers say they've met someone they otherwise would not have ever encountered.

Every day broadband uplifts rural America, and we look forward to seeing what innovations and opportunities come next. 🗨️



# ESPORTS

### ESPORTS STATS

Esports is increasingly popular, turning gaming into team competitions at high schools, colleges and even in professional competitions. Some online streaming services offer live coverage of competitions.

#### WHO ARE GAMERS?

- 24%** are younger than 18 years old
- 36%** are between the ages of 18-34
- 13%** are between the ages of 35-44
- 12%** are between the ages of 45-54

#### WHO ARE ESPORTS SPECTATORS?

- 50%** are between the ages of 25-41
- 26%** are between the ages of 16-24
- 20%** are between the ages of 42-56

#### BUILDING SKILLS

Esports creates skills today's students will find marketable.

- Computer network and hardware proficiency
- Digital literacy
- Broadcasting
- Soft skills
- Leadership
- Teamwork
- Problem-solving
- Team building

Source: NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

# A Sound Investment



## System upgrade takes listening to next level

Whether you're gaming, watching a movie or listening to music, a high-quality sound system can take you from casually listening to feeling like you're part of the action. If you've thought about installing a sound system in your home, 'tis the season, to treat yourself to one that easily meets your needs and budget.

All sound systems have two basic components. First, there's the source providing the audio signal. This can be a TV, gaming device or digital music player, like your phone or computer. The second component is the amplifier, which boosts the audio signal. More than just volume, the amplifier improves the overall sound quality with more detail and clarity.

When it comes to speakers, music formats only require two, but the more speakers you have, the more immersive the sound will be. A soundbar, sometimes called a media bar, has multiple speakers enclosed in a single horizontal unit, usually placed above or below the TV. A surround sound system is much more complex, with speakers strategically placed around the room to deliver the best possible sound.

### SOUNDBAR VS. SURROUND SOUND

Soundbars are ready to go right out of the box. They're relatively inexpensive, sleek and easy to install. Soundbars are ideal for smaller spaces because of their minimal visual impact.

When shopping for a soundbar, pay close attention to the number of speakers hidden inside. A larger soundbar doesn't

necessarily mean better sound quality. Look to manufacturers like Bose, Sonos or Vizio for reliable options.

Surround sound is the choice for high fidelity and full dynamic range of sound—think of your listening area as a movie theater with booming audio. It considers factors like room size, acoustics and listening positions to determine the number of speakers and locations. If you already have a basic speaker system at home, upgrading to surround sound might be as simple as adding an extra speaker or two.

### PRICE OF PERFECTION

Very simple sound systems can still deliver a fantastic listening experience, so don't worry if you're starting on a smaller budget. But if you're designing your own setup and need advice on speaker placement or hiding wires behind walls, you'll need an electrician for expert guidance. Installers charge an average of \$50-\$100 an hour, so remember to budget for that.

The most common format for surround sound systems is the 5.1, with six audio channels, five speakers and a subwoofer that delivers the deep, rumbling bass frequencies. A 5.1 setup can cost between \$300 to \$1,700.

A more extensive option is the 7.1 surround, with two additional audio channels and two more speakers. Comparable to the audio setup found in large cinemas, the cost of this configuration runs anywhere from \$400 to \$4,000. [🔗](#)

# Honoring Those Who Served

## Veterans Day is a holiday for all

I always look forward to the holidays, celebrating the bustle, hustle and joy that come with Thanksgiving and Christmas. For many of us, these are happy weeks, and I'm appreciative of every one of them. But there's also another holiday this season deserving of reflection, gratitude and remembrance.



**SHAYNE ISON**  
General Manager

Every Nov. 11, Veterans Day honors the men and women who served in the armed forces. It's a day that carries a great deal of weight in rural communities like ours, where many families know intimately about all that our veterans face.

Perhaps there are stories handed down from generation to generation about someone who served decades ago. Or maybe a family member recently served or is currently active in the military. Communities like ours always step up when there's a need.

I see daily examples of how our communications services connect us. Even though they've changed over the years, beginning with telephone service and continuing with our fast and reliable broadband network, the thread is still the same—we help you

make connections.

Veterans Day gives another opportunity to make a connection that may have a deeper meaning. Consider taking a few minutes to reach out, listen and learn about those who served.

One of the best ways to honor our veterans is by ensuring their stories are never lost. In today's digital-infused world, we have more communications tools than ever. Many online resources allow you to learn more about the experiences of our veterans and contribute to preserving their stories.

For example, the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project is a great resource. The project collects and preserves personal accounts of American war veterans so future generations can hear them. If you have a veteran in your life, consider recording their story and sending it to the project. It's a powerful way to ensure their legacy endures. Visit [loc.gov](http://loc.gov) and search for the Veterans History Project for all the details.

Another valuable resource is the National Archives, [archives.gov](http://archives.gov), which has a wealth of information about military records and veterans' service histories. You can request records, which is particularly useful for those doing genealogy work. Similarly, The Virtual Wall, found at [virtualwall.org](http://virtualwall.org), collects and displays the names and details of service members who died in Vietnam.

Thank you for joining me in celebrating these valiant men and women. Have a wonderful holiday season and a merry Christmas. 📞

The Mountain Telephone Connection is a bimonthly newsletter published by Mountain Rural Telephone Cooperative, © 2024. It is distributed without charge to all member/owners of the cooperative.



### Mountain Telephone

Mountain Rural Telephone Cooperative, Inc., is a member-owned cooperative dedicated to providing communications technology to the people of Elliott, Menifee, Morgan, Wolfe and a section of Bath counties. The company covers 1,048 square miles and supplies service to nearly 11,500 members.

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#### On the Cover:



The live Nativity scene, Road to Bethlehem, at Woodsbend Community Church features actors from the church and live animals. See story Page 12.

Photo courtesy of Hannah Fugate



**HOLIDAY CLOSURES ANNOUNCED**

From the staff and board at MRTC, we wish you and your family a happy Thanksgiving, a merry Christmas and a joyful New Year. In recognition of the holidays, our office will be closed on the following days:

**Veterans Day**—Monday, Nov. 11

**Thanksgiving**—Thursday, Nov. 28, and Friday, Nov. 29

**Christmas**—Tuesday, Dec. 24, and Wednesday, Dec. 25

**New Year's Day**—Wednesday, Jan. 1



**DECEMBER DELIGHTS  
COURTESY OF MRTC**

Mountain will spread Christmas cheer all month. Sign up for these services in December and get free gifts!

- **New customers:** Add any MRTC broadband package and get one month of free internet service—plus a Kozy Kit!\*
- **Existing customers:** Upgrade your broadband package and get one free month of internet service—plus a Kozy Kit!\*
- Subscribe to MRTC's state-of-the-art security system and get a free fire extinguisher and one month of service for free!

Call us to get started.  
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\*Kozy Kits include gift items to help make your winter snug and warm.



**Mountain Telephone**

Offer valid only through December.

# Blast Off

Go on a holiday adventure at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

Looking for an out-of-this-world family experience this holiday season? The U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama, will capture everyone's imagination, from kids to adults.

The center was first conceived as Wernher von Braun and his team of rocket scientists were in the final months of refining the Saturn V rocket that would send Apollo astronauts to the moon. As director of the nearby Marshall Space Flight Center, von Braun saw the need for a permanent exhibit to showcase the hardware of the space program.

He petitioned the Alabama Legislature to create a museum with the help of the U.S. Army Missile Command and NASA. The U.S. Army donated land for the museum, and the U.S. Space & Rocket Center opened its doors in 1970, the year after Apollo 11 successfully carried astronauts to the moon and back.

Since then, the center has hosted more than 650,000 visitors each year from as many as 64 different countries. Visitors can get an up-close look at an authentic Saturn V rocket, one of only three in the world, as well as Pathfinder, the world's only fully stacked space shuttle display.

## A HELPING HAND

While the holidays often bring hope and happiness, for many people achieving those peaceful goals are elusive. That's particularly true this year, as communities throughout the Southeast strive to recover from damaging winds and devastating floods.

Dolly Parton, Walmart and countless others have contributed to organizations supporting these rural areas in need. If you wish to contribute, consider these options:

American Red Cross: [redcross.org](https://www.redcross.org)

The Salvation Army: [salvationarmyusa.org](https://www.salvationarmyusa.org)

## SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE TO EXPLORE

Not only is the USSRC an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, but it is also the official NASA Visitor Center for Marshall Space Flight Center. The museum offers regular bus tours highlighting the facility where the Space Launch System is in development to carry astronauts to Mars, asteroids and even deeper into space.

In addition to exhibits detailing the most complete chronology of launch vehicles in the country, the center's Apollo 16 command module, real Apollo 12 moon rock and daily STEM on Stage performances let visitors interact with artifacts and exhibits.

Children under 8 can explore an International Space Station-themed playground at Kids Cosmos, and every Saturday kids 12 and up are invited to the Maker Lab for hands-on projects that incorporate lessons on topics like solar energy and robotics. Adrenaline junkies can ride the G-Force Accelerator to experience three times the force of gravity or take the Moon Shot to see what a rocket launch feels like as you fly 140 feet straight up in 2.5 seconds.

**"The Space & Rocket really an amazing feast for the eyes. It's a place to learn about the past, the present and the future of space exploration."**

—Pat Ammons, senior director of public and media relations

## AN ASTRONOMICAL CHRISTMAS

One of the USSRC's most popular attractions is the INTUITIVE Planetarium, which features a state-of-the-art digital dome theater. Each screening is unique as a team of live astrophysicists takes visitors on a tour of the solar system.

"It is truly an extraordinary, absolutely world-class planetarium," says Senior Director of Public and Media Relations Pat Ammons. "It's all live and interactive. They take you on a personal tour, you can ask questions and it's highly interactive."

Throughout the holidays, the planetarium also screens a special feature called "The Star of Bethlehem," which explores both the science and religion behind the famous celestial phenomenon. 📺

Photos courtesy of the U.S. Space & Rocket Center

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media relations

LEFT: The U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama, is a holiday destination for the family.



Photo courtesy of Neil Ardrey



ABOVE: Finn Cushing, 2, tries an astronaut's suit on for size.

LEFT: See a piece of the moon, a rock brought home by astronauts.





# A Renaissance IN EASTERN KENTUCKY

## Couple plans for a Celtic village in Hazel Green

Story by JEN CALHOUN

Photography by WILLIAM LEMASTER

**J**oe Bowen loves a city with a theme. It started back in the 1960s, when the cycling enthusiast first rode his bike from Vandenberg Air Force Base, where he was stationed as a young airman, into the California town of Solvang. Settled by Danes in the early 1800s, Solvang was—and is—so rooted in Danish history, culture and architecture that it calls itself “The Danish Capital of America.”

Not long after, the Eastern Kentucky native would see more theme towns during a 14,000-mile bicycle ride across North America. “I remember the little town of Leavenworth, Washington,” he says of the Bavarian-styled village that boasts nearly as many sausages, chalets and Weizenbier as Munich itself. “At the time, they only had three buildings done, but I fell in love with that idea, with that concept.”

### CELTIC COUNTRY

The notion of a theme town came back to Joe in 2021. He and his wife, Linda, purchased a dilapidated, 4,000-square-foot Victorian-era home in Hazel Green with plans to restore it and create a bed-and-breakfast.

“I’ve always thought that a theme town could work in this part of the state. Then a friend of mine suggested Hazel Green could

become a Celtic village,” Joe says. He notes that nearly 80% of the families in Eastern Kentucky descended from Celtic lands, namely Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall in England and Brittany in France.

The Bowens also found a recent economic impact study commissioned by the state and the Appalachian Regional Commission. It suggested that an Eastern Kentucky town with a theme could bring tourist dollars to the region.

### CARETAKING

When the Bowens bought the house, they thought it would take two years to restore, but it wound up taking more than three. Built in the 1880s by prominent businessman Jesse Taylor Day, the house was abandoned by the turn of this century.

“It sat empty for 26 years,” Joe says. Trees grew from the foundation and into the house. The front porch was sagging about 8 to 10 inches. The house was rotting down.

“The family who sold it to us also had a dream, but health issues changed things for them,” he says. “We are so glad that we have been given this opportunity to bring this old house back to life.”

By late August 2024, Joe and Linda had finished all the structural repairs. They fixed the hand-carved stone foundation, replaced the roof, removed all the rotted wood, painted the outside and replaced the decorative elements on the front of the home.



**LEFT:** This 4,000-square-foot Victorian home in Hazel Green is expected to be the center of the town's rebranding as the Celtic Village on the Red (River).



**ABOVE:** The home's original staircase features crafted woodwork created with an ornate Victorian style.

**TOP LEFT:** Joe and Linda Bowen take a rest on the front porch of the historic home.

**LEFT:** This antique piano is nearly as old the home.



## IF YOU BUILD IT

In addition to the home, the Bowens bought two more lots across the street. They plan to build several structures with an emphasis on stonework to create a feeling of cohesion—similar to a village from the old world.

Joe hopes it will draw visitors and investors to the small town that once boasted the much-respected Hazel Green Academy. The prep school, established in 1880, helped many children from the region gain access to higher education. “There are three or four empty shop buildings on the main street and other lots that could be restored,” he says. “We’re trying to find money to rebuild the sidewalks, too.”

The couple also plans to start an annual Celtic festival in the spring. Joe learned there are more than 130 Celtic celebrations across the country. The 36-year-old Dublin Irish Festival in Ohio, for example, attracts more than 100,000 visitors over three days.

But the restoration and the village and the festivals are about more than economic development. Joe has long resented the way large news outlets will pop into Eastern Kentucky and write an article about poverty and ignorance without fully understanding the people. “We’ve been guilty of letting them identify us, but we can identify ourselves,” he says.

He wants to build a village where visitors can enjoy the music, the storytelling and the art of the region. “We’ll introduce them to a different world,” he says. “We can show them that we are incredible people.” 📍

They also completed a good bit of work inside the home, which will ultimately include five bedrooms, five bathrooms, an office, a kitchen, a dining room, a parlor and two large foyers—one upstairs and one downstairs. The couple did most of the restoration themselves.

Their project stirred curiosity across the county and beyond. Since they started, about 300 people have wandered in to catch a glimpse of the stately home. “For whatever reason, the locals never got to visit the house before,” Joe says. “By spring, the Celtic Village Inn will be open to the public.”

He speaks figuratively, but he means it. “The house belongs to the community,” he says. “We bought it, and we pay taxes. But really, we just get to be the people who live in it. We’re caretakers, that’s all. Just like when Jesse Taylor Day lived here. Sure, he built it, but he’s gone and this house is still here. It’s still part of Hazel Green.”

# THE ART OF SELF- RELIANCE

## Rural writers get a boost from the internet

Story by JEN CALHOUN



Photo courtesy of Shawna Holly



Shawna Holly was researching how to publish her first novel when she ran into a type of writer’s block she’d never experienced. This particular block had nothing to do with plot holes or mental tangles. Instead, it centered around the relatively slow-moving churn of books through the nation’s traditional publishing houses.

“The industry—from my perspective—is very busy, like so many other businesses right now,” Shawna says. “There are very few literary agents and acquisitions editors compared to how many debut authors are seeking representation, and they’re all overworked. As a result, the path to traditional publishing is slow. For authors seeking a faster solution, self-publishing is the answer.”

So, that’s what she did. In June 2023, the Boerne, Texas-based writer published her first novel, “The Stories We Keep,” via a self-publishing platform that distributes paperbacks and e-books all over the world. Her second book, “When We’re Broken,” came out earlier this fall. Both books are in the genre of women’s literary fiction.

### TAKING CHARGE

Shawna is among a growing number of writers embracing self-publishing

platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers and speed up the book publishing process. This is especially true for writers from small or rural towns who may have a harder time finding an agent or fostering connections to publishing houses in larger cities.

“Agents receive thousands of queries a year, and they’re only taking on maybe two or three new authors in addition to the clients they already have to manage,” Shawna says. “It just makes it darn near impossible to find that magic match. I just thought, ‘I’m in my 40s and have more stories to write. I don’t want to wait.’”

Best-selling authors who famously self-published before landing big book deals and film adaptations include Amanda Brown, who wrote “Legally Blonde,” and Andy Weir, who wrote “The Martian.” Colleen Hoover, the East Texas author of the blockbuster “It Ends with Us,” also self-published her first book, “Slammed,” in 2012. She increased her audience by giving away free books and by posting regularly on social media.

Even those self-published writers who don’t reach traditional literary heights have profited in the world of self-publishing. The Alliance of Independent Authors published a survey in 2023 reporting that

self-published authors earned a median income of \$12,749—more than double that of traditionally published authors. They also made up more than 50% of Kindle’s Top 400 books of 2023, the survey found.

### UNTANGLING THE WEB


Self-publishing isn’t the only internet tool that sparks creativity, however. Connie Clyburn is an East Tennessee-based writer of several books, including “Wisdom from the Doublewide” and the devotional “Aging Fabulously.” Connie found fellowship online through video calls with other writers from as far away as Ireland.

From her home in Telford, Tennessee—which she describes as “a little wide place in the road between Jonesborough and Greeneville”—she also uses the internet to connect with others through her online magazine. Called *ah law, y’all*, the quarterly publication highlights the Southern Appalachian area.

“You don’t always think about how vital the internet is as a writer,” says Connie, who infuses her writing with scripture and ways to apply it to everyday life. “But, as a rural writer, it has opened up a big world. Anything that I come up with



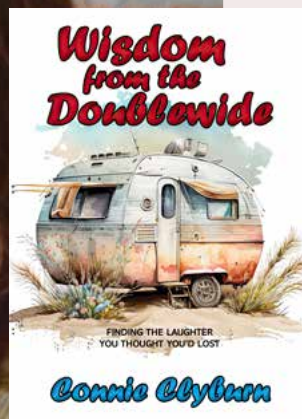
Photo courtesy of Connie Clyburn

that I want to read about or research or just connect with is right there at your fingertips.” 

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For more information on Connie Clyburn, look up her blog, “Wisdom from the Doublewide,” and the online magazine *ah law*, y’all.

Find out more about Shawna Holly and her books at [shawnaholly.com](http://shawnaholly.com).



LEFT: Connie Clyburn got her start as a journalist, and now she writes books, a blog and a newsletter from her home in East Tennessee near Jonesborough. Connie turned her blog into the book “Wisdom from the Doublewide.”

OPPOSITE PAGE: Shawna Holly lives outside of San Antonio, in a town of about 15,000 people. An Air Force veteran, Shawna self-published her book, “The Stories We Keep,” to avoid the sometimes long and tedious process of finding an agent and a publisher.

## GET A START WITH SELF-PUBLISHING

Most writers learn quickly that finding a publisher is often harder than writing the book itself. Books are meant to be read, but the steps involved with finding an agent and publisher can waste valuable time and resources. As a result, many writers self-publish. The comprehensive book and writers' blog “What We Reading” lists several self-publishing platforms. We've listed a few resources here for e-books. Visit [whatwewereading.com](http://whatwewereading.com) for more information on self-publishing print books.

### Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, also known as KDP

- Highest market share and sales in the self-publishing industry.
- Writers earn royalties of between 35% and 70% depending on the price of the book.
- It's important to note there's another option called KDP Select, which is different than KDP. KDP Select users get certain marketing perks that can help sell their books. In exchange, they can't publish their work with any other self-publishing company.

### Apple Books

- Writers earn royalties of 70% on all e-books.
- Second-biggest player in the industry after Amazon's KDP.
- No upfront fees for authors once they have an iTunes account.

### Barnes & Noble Press, also known as B&N

- Writers earn 70% on e-books above 99 cents.
- B&N is considered one of the easiest platforms to use.
- Completely free to use, and it does not require exclusivity.

Other platforms include Kobo Writing Life, Draft2Digital, StreetLib, IngramSpark and PublishDrive, some of which have different pricing models and royalty distributions. Each of these platforms generally offers distribution to all the major e-book retailers, so it's important to research all options.

Source: “15 Best Self-Publishing Platforms for Your Book” from the blog “What We Reading.”

# Telling the Story ✨

*Woodsbend Community Church's Road to Bethlehem is a local tradition*



Story by JEN CALHOUN

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, many churches worried their congregations would miss traditional Christmas events. Woodsbend Community Church in West Liberty was no different.

“For years, we’d done a play inside the church,” Pastor Jason Moore says. “There were always close to 100 people in attendance, and it was our tradition. But during the worst of the coronavirus, we just couldn’t do it. We were too worried to have that many people in the sanctuary so close together.”

Instead of canceling the Christmas events altogether, church leaders got together and looked for another way to celebrate the birth of Christ. “Someone said they’d seen a drive-thru Nativity

scene,” Jason recalls. “Then we just started thinking on it and praying about it until we decided to try it.”

Today, Woodsbend’s live drive-thru Nativity scene, the Road to Bethlehem, is a must-see event celebrated by the church and the community alike. The entire congregation takes part, building the sets, acting in the scenes and making sure the firepits are lit to keep the actors warm.

The event includes several live-action scenes posted at different sections of the church’s U-shaped loop of a driveway. It starts with a sign at the bottom of the drive that says, “Welcome to the Road to Bethlehem.” From there, drivers move to the first scene with the three wise men on real horses. “We have them all decorated like they’re royalty,” Jason says.

Other scenes have included singing angels, King Herod’s anger at the news of Jesus’ birth, the inn with no vacancy and, of course, the Nativity—the stable where

Jesus was born. Throughout the drive, paper bag lanterns light the way and music fills the air.

“We usually try to add a new scene or change something and make it a little different every time,” Jason says. “The first year, we didn’t have the inn, so we added it the second year, and it became a tradition.”

## THE BIRTH OF A TRADITION

When Woodsbend started the drive-thru Nativity scene in 2020, church officials weren’t sure how it would be received. But on the night of the event, they were shocked at how many people in the community showed up.

“Our first year, we had about 200-something cars come through, and we were just floored,” Jason says. “I think everybody just wanted to get out and do something. This way, they were safe in their car.”

From there, word spread fast from person to person and via social media.

A livestream on Facebook pulled in about 1,400 views. “It wasn’t just our church that embraced it,” the pastor says. “It was the whole community. We just couldn’t believe it.”

And while the 2021 event was slow due to a gloomy rain, the event rebounded in 2022. That year, the church estimated anywhere from 250-280 vehicles from all over the region drove through the Nativity scene.

### DON'T CALL IT A COMEBACK

In 2023, however, the church members decided they needed a break. They canceled the Nativity scene and went back to performing an indoor Christmas play.

The reasoning was simple enough, Jason says. The one-night-only production takes a great amount of time to develop, and work generally starts in October. “We have to build each set and organize the whole thing, then we have to take it all down at the end,” he says. “Then we also have to work around everyone’s schedules, because they’re volunteering, and they have so many other obligations. Everybody was just worn out.”

But when 2023 came and Woodsbend didn’t hold its drive-thru Nativity, Jason heard about it. “I got so many phone calls from people who really missed it,” he says with a laugh. “They basically let me know that we would be holding it again.”

This year, Woodsbend hopes to partner with West Liberty Christian Church to share some of the workload. “We’ve always just done it for one night, because



Photos courtesy of Hannah Fugate

ABOVE: Angels sing for the birth of Jesus during Woodsbend Community Church’s Road to Bethlehem, a live, drive-thru Nativity scene in West Liberty.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Shepherds played by church members stand watch at the drive-thru Nativity scene.

it’s so hard to do,” Jason says. “As of now, Pastor Hunter Fraley is asking for volunteers to help us with it.”

Despite the hard work, Jason says the church members get excited about bringing it to the community. “It’s a blessing,” he says. “It really is.” 📩

### COME CELEBRATE THE SEASON

Woodsbend Community Church is at 4605 Highway 705 W., West Liberty. For more information on this year’s live, drive-thru Nativity scene, including dates, times and more, visit the Woodsbend Community Church Facebook page.

“IT WASN’T JUST OUR CHURCH THAT EMBRACED IT. IT WAS THE WHOLE COMMUNITY.”



—PASTOR JASON MOORE, WOODSBEND COMMUNITY CHURCH

# Holiday Simplicity

Breakfast casseroles are a gift for busy hosts

**M**ake-ahead casseroles can make the difference between holiday stress and satisfaction. From sweet to savory, there are many choices. Here are several to try this season.



**Food Editor  
Anne P. Braly  
is a native of  
Chattanooga,  
Tennessee.**

## BLUEBERRY PANCAKE CASSEROLE

### Crumb Topping:

- 1/2 cup flour
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

### Pancakes:

- 2 1/2 cups flour
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/2 tablespoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 large eggs
- 2 cups whole buttermilk
- 1/2 cup milk
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1-2 teaspoons finely grated lemon zest
- 2 cups blueberries
- Maple syrup, for serving

**Crumb topping:** The day before, in a medium bowl, combine flour, sugars, cinnamon and salt. Add melted butter and stir until fully incorporated. Cover and refrigerate.

**Pancakes:** Preheat the oven to 350 F. Grease a 9-by-13-inch baking dish and set aside.

In a large bowl, combine flour, sugar, salt, baking powder and baking soda.

In a separate bowl, combine eggs, buttermilk, milk, melted butter, lemon zest and vanilla extract. Whisk wet ingredients until well combined. Add wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and stir until just combined. The batter will be lumpy. Do not overmix.

Pour the batter into the greased baking dish. Sprinkle the blueberries over the top. Remove the crumb topping from the fridge and crumble over the top of the blueberries and batter. Bake for 35-45 minutes, until puffed and light golden brown. Use a toothpick to check the center for doneness. Serve warm with maple syrup.

## SCRAMBLED EGG BAKE

- 4 slices bacon
- 8 ounces dried beef
- 2 4-ounce cans mushrooms, drained
- 1/2 cup butter, divided
- 1/2 cup flour
- 4 cups whole milk
- 16 eggs
- 1 cup evaporated milk

Saute the bacon until almost done. Add dried beef, mushrooms and 1/4 cup butter. While hot, add flour and stir in whole milk. Simmer sauce until thickened and smooth, stirring constantly.

Beat eggs with evaporated milk and salt. Scramble in remaining 1/4 cup butter.

Grease a 9-by-13-inch baking dish. Ladle a layer of sauce into the dish followed by a layer of scrambled eggs. Repeat layers, ending with a layer of sauce. Garnish with mushrooms and bacon. Cover with foil and bake at 275 F for 1 hour.

To make ahead: Make casserole, cover and refrigerate. Bake as directed.



## FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE

- 1 12- to 14-ounce loaf French or sour-dough bread. Stale bread works great.
- 1 8-ounce package full-fat cream cheese, softened
- 2 tablespoons powdered sugar
- 3 teaspoons vanilla extract, divided
- 8 eggs
- 2/3 cup packed brown sugar
- 3/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 1/4 cups whole milk

### Topping:

- 1/3 cup packed light brown sugar
- 1/3 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, cold and cubed
- Maple syrup and/or powdered sugar for topping

Grease a 9-by-13-inch casserole with nonstick spray. Either cut the bread into 1-inch cubes or tear it into preferred size. Spread half of the cubes into prepared baking pan.

Using a hand-held or stand mixer with a whisk attachment, beat the cream cheese

on medium-high speed until completely smooth. Beat in the powdered sugar and 1/4 teaspoon vanilla until combined. Drop random spoonfuls of cream cheese mixture on top of the bread. Layer the remaining bread cubes on top of cream cheese. Make sure some cream cheese is still exposed on top. Set aside.

Whisk the eggs, milk, cinnamon, brown sugar and remaining vanilla together until no brown sugar lumps remain. Pour evenly over the bread. Cover the pan tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 3-4 hours or up to 24 hours. Overnight is best.

When ready to bake, remove from the refrigerator and uncover while you make the topping.

Mix the brown sugar, flour and cinnamon. Then, use a pastry cutter or your hands to cut the cold butter into the topping mixture until crumbly.

Bake at 350 F for 45-60 minutes. You can use a knife to check the French toast—it should come out mostly clean when the dish is ready. Avoid putting the knife into the cream cheese dollop, which could give a false reading.

## SAVORY RICE CEREAL CASSEROLE

- 2 pounds pork sausage
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 cups cooked rice
- 3 cups Rice Krispies
- 3 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 6 eggs
- 2 cans cream of celery soup
- 1/2 cup milk



In a skillet, cook sausage with onion until meat is no longer pink and onions are tender; drain. Transfer mixture to a lightly greased 9-by-13-inch casserole. Top with layers of rice, cereal and cheese. In a bowl beat the eggs with the soup and milk. Spread mixture on top. Cover with foil and refrigerate overnight.

Preheat oven to 350 F. Remove foil and bake for 45 minutes to 1 hour or until a knife inserted in center comes out clean. Let stand for 5-10 minutes before serving.

Note: Making this a day ahead helps to soften the cereal. It can be baked right away, but the cereal may still be crispy. 📺



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