Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative’s 80th anniversary celebration starts with a look back at Central Texas in 1939

By Clayton Stromberger and Denise Gamino

If you were born at least fourscore and seven or so years ago, and grew up in these parts, you may remember what it was like in 1939.

No one was in a huge rush back then. The highway speed limit was 45 mph — lower for trucks. More than half the state was rural. Kids in the country rode a horse to confirmation class. Air conditioning meant opening a window or sitting on the front porch with a hand-held fan from church. Screen time was for when the mosquitoes came back.

To communicate with faraway friends and family, you wrote long letters by hand and carefully saved the letters you received. To make a telephone call, you usually had to go through a switchboard operator — someone like German-born Selma “Grandma” Schwartz in Burton, who’d been on the job 29 years in her big wooden swivel chair and kept all the party lines straight with constant plugging and unplugging of cords and jacks. Folks read the local weekly news-

Continued on page 20

Bluebonnet line workers in the 1940s take a break from their hazardous and backbreaking work in Giddings, original home to the co-op’s headquarters. From left, William Proske, Walter Urban and Wenceslao Zwereneman. Bluebonnet photo.

Selma “Grandma” Schwartz was an answering machine. In 1910, the same year this German-born mother of seven was widowed, she became the first telephone operator in Burton, running this communications command center. She worked the Burton Telephone Co.’s manual switchboard until 1940. Schwartz worked from a wooden swivel chair in a little clapboard building next to the Schwartz & Schwartz grocery store she built in 1922 at 400 N. Main St. Her sons Walter and Hugo ran the store. Rural residents with telephones shared party lines with 12 to 20 members. Eavesdropping happened — even when locals spoke German. And the telephone operator could always listen in, too. Schwartz had them at “Hello.” Photo courtesy of the family of Annie Maud John Crawford, born a slave on a Manor cotton plantation in Travis County, is immortalized in a book of more than 2,300 first-person slave narratives collected by a New Deal program and given to the Library of Congress in 1939. The oral histories of Crawford and other freed slaves reflect the dialect of that era. “Nobody ever larnt me my ABC’s and I didn’t git no chance at school,” Crawford told the Federal Writers’ Project in the late 1930s at age 81. He remembered being freed and said plantation owner Judge Thompson Rector Sr. was too emotional to speak to the gathered slaves because he “hated to lose his slaves, I reckon.” According to Crawford, Rector’s son-in-law said, “You folks am now free and can go where you wants to go.” Only two slave families stayed. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress

In 1891, the first basketball game was played with peach baskets and a soccer ball. A year later, the women at Smith College in New England were learning the new sport. In 1897, the first female teams were formed in high schools. Just over four decades later, these high school students in McMahan, a small community 10 miles east of Lockhart, were happily embracing the phenomenon of girls’ and women’s basketball — and winning a trophy. The population of McMahan gradually declined in the 1940s, and its schools were consolidated with the Lockhart Independent School District in 1949. Photo courtesy of Harry Annas Collection at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin
Kids buying comics at the town drugstore or perhaps Fred Waring and his orchestra; you might listen to Jack Benny or Bob Wills and the Longhorns and, by season’s end, the national title. On the radio, if you could afford one, somehow everyone survived without Twitter and cell phones.

At the country store, or the town café, people would stand or sit around and talk with neighbors and strangers about the weather or politics or how the Aggies were doing — or the weather. Thoughts about the weather were as ubiquitous as a 20s-Thanksgiving Day drabbling of the Longhorns and, by seasons end, the national title. On the radio, if you could afford one, you might listen to Jack Benny or Bob Wills or perhaps Fred Waring and his orchestra; everyone would gather around when it was time for one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “fireside chats.”

Somehow everyone survived without Twitter and cell phones.

F. C. Winkelmann immigrated to New York from Germany as a teen in 1890, caught a steamer to Galveston, and made his way to Brenham, where he worked for two years in a furniture factory. In 1894, he realized his dream of opening a photo studio. Winkelmann’s Studio captured the civic title of the Brenham area for the next six decades, from births to funerals. It became a tradition for brides and grooms in Washington County to make the trip into town and stand in front of Winkelmann’s camera. The couple at right is identified on the negative, taken in 1939, as Mr. and Mrs. Jose Ortega. Today the entire Winkelmann Collection of prints and negatives resides at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin — an invaluable window on the comings and goings of a community for almost a century. Photos courtesy of Winkelmann Photo Collection at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin.
1939
THE MUSIC

A moment of innocence in the fall of 1939 was captured in the annual football team photo of the Smithville Junior High Tigers, below. War was approaching, and in September, as the boys suited up for their first game, German tanks were rolling into Poland, ushering in a war that would affect them all. Several of them served in World War II, and two made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. Photo courtesy of the Smithville Heritage Society

1939
THE MOVIES

Gone with the Wind — Starring Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh, Thomas Mitchell, Barbara O'Neill and Hattie McDaniel. Directed by Victor Fleming, George Cukor and Sam Wood. Eight Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress, Best Director, Art Direction, Cinematography, Film Editing and Screenplay


Mr. Smith Goes to Washington — Starring James Stewart, Jean Arthur, Claude Rains and Eddie Arnold. Directed by Frank Capra. Academy Award for Musical Scoring and Best Original Story

Stagecoach — Starring John Wayne, Claire Trevor, Andy Devine and John Carradine. Directed by John Ford. Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor
The war, known then as “the war to end all wars,” had started just 25 years earlier, and some of its veterans living in Central Texas were still in their early 40s. In fact, that terrible conflict dragged on a new name in June of 1939, when a magazine grimly dubbed it “World War I” with a gloomy eye to “World War II” building in Europe.

Other changes, as a tumultuous decade entered its final year. On Jan. 17, radio host and flour mill owner W. Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel was sworn in as the state’s 34th governor with great hoopla at Memorial Stadium in Austin with 17 marching bands and an attendance of 60,000. O’Daniel replaced James V. Allred, who late in his second term was nominated by President Roosevelt to a federal district judgeship.

In Giddings, a new mural was unveiled on the wall of the U.S. Post Office. The artist hired by a federal New Deal jobs program had painted cowboys opening mail at a rural mailbox, including one who received a package of red cowboy boots. The painting shows mountains in flat Lee County, but the postman called the mural “a first class job.” New Deal post office murals were also completed in 1939 in Elgin, Lockhart, Smithville, La Grange and Caldwell. In Lockhart, the young men of the Civilian Conservation Corps built the pool in what is now Lockhart State Park. It was 95 degrees on the Fourth of July, 1941, opening day for the pool next to Clear Fork Creek. The pool’s proximity to the creek caused persistent problems: flooding after heavy rains and the occasional snake. Lifeguards had to shovel mud into buckets and throw it back into the creek. The pool closed in the early 1970s. The old pool site now is a grassy area with picnic tables where the bathhouse once stood. Photo courtesy of Harry Annas Collection at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin.

Continued from page 22

Central Texas has a smokin’ hot reputation for outstanding slow-cooked barbecue, with a pedigree that dates to German and Czech settlers who arrived in the mid-1800s. Back then, local meat markets would wood-smoke meat that had not been sold to prevent spoiling. The oldest barbecue shop in Central Texas is Southside Market in Elgin, above, which opened in 1882. By 1939, Southside and several other old barbecue joints were still popular then open daily, including two in Lockhart: Kreuz Market (opened in 1900) and Black’s Barbecue (opened in 1932 under a different name). By 1941, Giddings had City Meat Market, which is still serving today. Central Texas barbecue continues to lure world travelers to these famous 5-star spots as well as “younger” barbecue shops across Bluebonnet’s service area. After all, different smokes for different folks. Photo courtesy of Southside Market.