

# Operation Round Up Turns 25

*Proving year-round that ‘Concern for Community’ means more to co-ops than just words*



## MESSAGE FROM GENERAL MANAGER ALAN LESLEY

**THE HOLIDAY SEASON IS THE NATURAL TIME** to reflect upon all the things we have to be thankful for. It's also a perfect time to consider ways of helping those who are less fortunate than us, so that they can have happy holidays, too. One great way to help is through participating in Comanche Electric Cooperative Association's Operation Round Up program.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of Operation Round Up, the program that offers co-op members the option of having their bills rounded up to the nearest dollar every month, with those extra few cents going to benefit people in need within the co-op's service territory.

What started in 1989 with an idea by Tom Upshaw, CEO of Palmetto Electric Cooperative in Hardeeville, South Carolina, has grown into a nationwide program with 252 electric co-ops using the name. And all that spare change has added up to several hundred million dollars in assistance to charitable causes around the country.

Comanche ECA has offered an Operation Round Up program since 2003, and our participation and disbursement numbers still are steadily climbing.

The help that co-ops have provided through Operation Round Up is an enduring embodiment of the co-op principle of "Concern for Community," proving year-round—and for more than a quarter of a century—that those are more than just words.

### Selfless Intent

The program's founders established some key rules for Operation Round Up that the majority of co-ops have followed since. A separate entity, a trust board, would decide how to disburse the donations. And the assistance would not be restricted to co-op members, but could be provided to anyone or any group within its service territory.

Those decisions were intended to remove any doubt about the selfless intent of the program and make clear that it would not be manipulated for the co-op's benefit. That approach has proved to be one of Operation Round Up's greatest strengths, helping to ensure popular support while spreading the benefits far and wide.

### Bright Ideas

At CECA, we do our best to use Operation Round Up Dona-

tions in ways that best benefit as many members and communities as possible. We do this by making annual donations to each volunteer fire department within our service territory, as well as a one-time donation to any member who has lost his or her residence to fire or flood. We also make annual donations to all 25 schools within our service territory for their Project Graduation.

Recently this program also assisted with the AgTexas Tractor Drive, helping three area schools raise more than \$105,000 to benefit local food pantries. This year, Operation Round Up program funds built two air ambulance landing pads in areas without close access to emergency care.

Additionally, two area students received \$1,000 scholarships, and this year a nontraditional, after-graduation scholarship was awarded to a member who was returning to the classroom to improve the quality of life for her family.

Throughout the year, CECA Operation Round Up Program donated sponsorship funds to activities and fundraisers to benefit charities within our service territory.

### \$6 a Year

On average, an Operation Round Up member donates about \$6 a year by having his or her bills rounded up. It's a small amount, but with program membership rates of 80 percent or more at most participating co-ops, it quickly adds up.

Co-op members recognize the outsized impact garnered by their small sacrifices. As the programs have become established and their benefits publicized, co-ops have also seen additional donations coming in. Some members have left part of their estates to Operation Round Up, while others have donated capital credits.

Looking ahead, many of those now involved with Operation Round Up say they hope more will sign on in the future.

We would like to send a big "thank you" to all the co-op members who help us help our communities through the Operation Round Up program. To opt into the program, please call CECA at 1-800-915-2533, or fill out the form at right and send it to us at P.O. Box 729, Comanche, Texas 76442.



# CECA AMI Installation Update

**CONTRACT CREWS WITH TEXAS METER DEVICE**, an experienced electric system installation service out of Waco, will be installing new, updated electric meters in the CECA service area. Crews are currently or will be replacing all of the meters in areas serviced out of the Rising Star, Holder and Zephyr substations. This area is depicted on the map, right.

The installation of the new meters will cause a brief service disruption, lasting no more than a couple of minutes or less in most cases.

All meters on the CECA system must be changed out. Therefore, each meter location in our service territory will be visited by TMD at some time. As this project progresses, we will continue to inform the CECA membership through Texas Co-op Power about where crews are or will be working.

Should you have any questions or concerns in relation to this project, you may contact CECA's metering department at 1-800-915-2533 or via email at [meterdata@ceca.coop](mailto:meterdata@ceca.coop).



## CECA

P.O. Box 729  
Comanche, TX 76442

*Operating in Brown, Callahan, Comanche, Eastland, Mills, Shackelford and Stephens counties*

### HEADQUARTERS

201 W. Wrights Ave.  
Comanche, TX 76442

### EARLY OFFICE

1801 CR 338  
Early, TX 76801

### EASTLAND OFFICE

1311 W. Main St.  
Eastland, TX 76448

### OFFICE HOURS

**Comanche Office:** Monday through Friday 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

**Early Office:** Monday, Wednesday and Friday 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., closed from 1 to 2 p.m.

**Eastland Office:** Tuesday and Thursday 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

### YOUR LOCAL PAGES

This section of Texas Co-op Power is produced by CECA each month to provide you with information about current events, special programs and other activities of the cooperative. If you have any comments or suggestions, please contact Shirley at the Comanche office or at [sdukes@ceca.coop](mailto:sdukes@ceca.coop).



## Neighbor Helping Neighbor

Yes! I want to be a part of Operation Round Up.

We appreciate your taking time to consider participating in Operation Round Up. To enroll, please complete this form and return it to CECA.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Account number \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_



## CONTACT US

### CALL US

**(325) 356-2533** local or  
**1-800-915-2533** toll-free

### FIND US ON THE WEB

[www.ceca.coop](http://www.ceca.coop)

 [facebook.com/CECA.coop](https://facebook.com/CECA.coop)

# Meet Your CECA Employees



**Brandon Kidwell**

**BRANDON KIDWELL BEGAN WORKING IN THE STAKING** Department of CECA in July and will be assisting with new construction and upgrades in all seven counties of the CECA territory. Kidwell lives in Comanche with his girlfriend, Jennifer, and her two children, Danny and Ryan. He is a sports fanatic and a diehard Green Bay Packers and Texas Tech Red Raiders fan. When he is not at work, he is working on his firewood business or spending time with the kids while coaching baseball and basketball for Comanche Youth Council.



**Ryan Harris**

**RYAN HARRIS IS CECA'S NEWEST APPRENTICE LINEMAN,** working out of our Eastland office. Harris grew up in Eastland, where he participated in football and track. He graduated from Eastland High in 2014. In his spare time, he likes to fish and hunt. "I am thankful for the opportunity to work with CECA," Harris said.



## Miranda Millwee Awarded CECA Operation Round Up Nontraditional Scholarship

**CONGRATULATIONS TO** Miranda Millwee on being awarded CECA's first Operation Round Up Nontraditional Scholarship. This scholarship was designed for adults returning to college or attending college for the first time. Milwee is attending Tarleton State University to obtain a bachelor's degree in education with a certification to teach English as a second language. She is a stay-at-home mom with two children, ages 5 and 10. "I love teaching, and continuing my education will get me back in the classroom," Milwee said. "I am going to start volunteering at the Stephenville Head Start for one of my classes to work with children in need."

## Erwin Honored for Dedication to Member Service



**Congratulations to Doug Erwin, CECA member services director, right, who was presented the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2014 TEC Member Services Conference in Austin. Pictured with Erwin are Alan Lesley, CECA general manager, left, and Shirley Dukes, CECA communications/public information specialist.**



# Merry Christmas

CECA wishes you and yours a richly blessed Christmas season.  
To allow our employees to enjoy the holiday with their families,  
our offices will be closed December 25–26 and January 1.

# The Santa Claus Bank Robbery

BY LUCHESE GORDON

**TODAY'S CISCO, TEXAS, MAY NOT LOOK** like a scene of much adventure or danger, but in 1927, it was the home of one of the most famous bank robberies and the biggest manhunt in Texas history. The bumbling robbery attempt by Marshall Ratliff and his men would have been humorous if the results had not been so bloody.

Ratliff robbed his first bank in the mid-1920s. Together he and his little brother Lee made off with sacks full of cash from a bank in Valera and hightailed it to Abilene to enjoy their booty. The heist was initially an easy success, but the two Ratliffs were far too proud of their accomplishment to lay low. Their shameless bragging and careless spending made an easy trail for a Valera County sheriff, and before long, they were seated securely behind bars. The robbery that would transform this small-town boy from Cisco into a sensational headline would not come for a long while.

By December 1927, Ratliff had been out of the Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville for a while and was ready to try his



luck again. From Wichita Falls, he planned a way to take on his next target: the First National Bank in his own hometown. Lee was unavailable on account of incarceration, but Ratliff pulled in three other men to form what he probably imagined was an elite team of criminals. Henry Helms was the oldest and most experienced of the group. A hot-tempered ex-convict, Helms had met Ratliff in Huntsville. The second man was Robert Hill, also an ex-convict. Orphaned early in life, Hill had spent much of his childhood in a reformatory, which, despite its optimistic name, apparently did little to reform his sense of morality.

When the third man chosen came down with the flu at the

last minute, Louis Davis filled in. Davis was neither a lifelong troublemaker like Ratliff, an experienced criminal like Helms nor an orphan like Hill. He was a stable family man from Wichita Falls who had never been involved in criminal activity. But Davis was in desperate times financially. Quick, easy money was too tempting.

The foursome arrived in Cisco on the day before Christmas Eve in a luxurious Buick—stolen, of course. Realizing that he could be recognized by any number of people in his hometown, Ratliff had acquired the only costume that could cover his face without drawing suspicion: a Santa Claus suit. Hill parked the car in an alley that ran alongside the First National. At the appointed hour, Ratliff donned the suit and strolled into the bank.

“Hello, Santa!” the teller greeted him.

Santa didn’t respond.

“Hello, Santa!” he tried again.

This time he was answered, but not by Ratliff. Helms, Hill and Davis were all in place by now. They pulled out their weapons and began shouting orders. St. Nick walked behind the teller’s desk and dug around until he found a pistol in one of the drawers. The story goes that the teller’s first thought was that this was another of the Lions Club’s over-the-top pranks, but he soon realized the men weren’t kidding. One began stuffing a potato sack with whatever money he could lay his hands on. Though the bulk of what he selected (\$150,000 of it) was in nonnegotiable securities and thus useless to him, the heist was going smoothly until Mrs. B.P. Blasengame and her daughter, Frances, entered the bank.

Mrs. Blasengame and Frances had hurried across the street for the sole purpose of seeing Santa Claus. When she found herself in the middle of a holdup rather than a peaceful Christmas scene, Mrs. Blasengame panicked and ran for the bookkeeping room, pushing Frances inside first. Reluctant to shoot a woman or simply too startled to act, Helms and Hill shouted orders to stop but made no actual move to block their escape. From the bookkeeping room, the two fled out into the street and rushed to alert the authorities.

Led by Bit Bedford, Cisco’s police chief, police officers and armed citizens arranged themselves around the bank. Reports vary as to who fired the first shot inside the bank—whether Hill shot into the ceiling to warn the police that they were armed or Ratliff fired at a passerby snooping through the window—but soon there was a rain of gunfire both inside and out. More than a hundred rounds were fired before Ratliff, Helms, Hill and Davis rounded up a small group of hostages



The First National Bank of Cisco as it looked in 1927

and pushed them toward the alley door at gunpoint.

The four criminals were incredibly inept for having three seasoned ex-convicts among them. Of all of the prisoners, they were able to hold only two little girls in check. The six other hostages were able to make a run for it as soon as they got out the door. The robbers opened the doors of the sedan and shoved in Emma May Robinson and Laverne Comer, 10- and 12-year-old friends who had been attempting to withdraw money Laverne had earned raising calves with her sister.

The shooting continued to come from both sides as the robbers got into the car Hill was trying to start. The robbers returned fire, but before they could escape down the main street, they had to get past Bedford, who was standing in the opening of the alley without any attempt at cover. Bedford was a big man with a big personality and a reputation for bravery and fairness. He had worked as a peace officer in that area for 25 years. But now his 6-foot-4-inch frame became their principal target. Five shots found him before he fell. Hill sped out of the alley and down the street.

They hadn't been running long before they realized they had made yet another ridiculous mistake. They had forgotten to fill up their car, and it was almost out of gas. A little way from town, they stopped a car driven by Woodrow Wilson

Harris—nicknamed Woody—a 14-year-old boy from Rising Star. They ordered him out of the car, and he fled across a field toward his family's home.

Davis, who had received the most serious wounds of the group, was by now unconscious. The other three loaded him, the two girls and the money into the new car before they realized that they had been duped. Woody had taken the keys with him when he ran.

Frustrated, they moved back to the original getaway car and started off again, leaving Davis behind to be captured by their pursuers. They turned off onto a private road, which soon turned into two tracks through a pasture and eventually dead-ended in overgrown brush. The men climbed out and decided to continue on foot. The three thieves ordered Emma May and Laverne not to look outside the car and took off into the bushes.

Meanwhile, the informal posse chasing the four criminals had reached the Harris car and found Davis—as well as all the stolen money. In yet another display of their intelligence, the three had accidentally left it behind. Davis was interrogated upon regaining consciousness, but he refused to identify any of his companions. He was rushed to a hospital in Fort Worth, where he died that night. The search for the remaining three continued.



**The triumphant posse with their prisoners. Robert Hill and Henry Helms are the two men standing in the front row, just the right of the center, looking at the ground.**

Searchers found the abandoned car and the two girls a few miles from town. Telling the two hostages not to peek had no more success for Ratliff, Hill and Helms than it has ever had in the history of little girls, so when the men arrived to rescue them, Emma May and Laverne were able to report the direction the robbers had fled.

By the next morning, about 100 county sheriffs, deputies, policemen, Texas Rangers and other lawmen were involved in the manhunt. The hunted men stole another car, continuing their pattern of stealing a vehicle, running it until something went wrong and then stealing a new one, until they were ambushed at South Bend as they tried to cross the Brazos River in their fifth car. In the chase that followed, Ratliff was shot down. Hill and Helms ran on.

The lawmen who captured Ratliff found six handguns, a shotgun, three full cartridge belts, a Bowie knife and one weak, starving man. Ratliff had multiple wounds and had not eaten for several days.

Hill and Helms would be captured only a few days later. They were hotly pursued by lawmen from all over Texas (the extensive search even included an airplane—remember that this is 1927), but they evaded arrest until the day they attempted to stroll innocently into Graham and find lodging for the night. An officer took them into custody without a fight.

Davis was dead. Bedford and another police officer would also die from their wounds. Six citizens had been injured during the robbery and two more during the manhunt and, of course, Ratliff, Hill and Helms were seriously wounded. But even then, the fiasco was not complete.

The trials went on for two years. Hill capitalized on the fact

that no one could actually prove that he had killed anyone. After pleading that his orphaned childhood had never given him a chance, he was given 99 years in prison. Helms and Ratliff were not so lucky. There was a complicated series of trials and retrials (Ratliff claimed double jeopardy) over multiple charges, but in the end, they were both sentenced to death by electrocution and placed on Texas' death row.

In a last-ditch attempt to save his guilty client from the electric chair, the lawyer of another convict dusted off and presented to the court a forgotten statute that said if a prisoner lost his sanity after being convicted, he could not be executed until he had regained it.

Virtually every man on death row promptly went insane.

It was a little too obvious to work, however, especially when Harry Leahy, the very first prisoner to attempt it, gave up and admitted he had been pretending. "I just couldn't act the part," he is said to have told Helms.

"Well, watch me put it over," Helms replied.

Helms certainly did put on a show. He let his hair and whiskers grow out to look wild and began to incessantly repeat a mumbling sing-song. When guards left newspapers in his cell, he methodically shredded them to bits. He did the same to a Bible someone had left him. During his sanity hearing, he continued his chant, punctuated with cries of "Hey, captain!"

In the end, however, it was not enough. Whether because he slipped in his act when he thought no one was around, or because the shave and haircut the guards forced on him detracted from his performance, or because he started too soon after the discovery of the sanity law to be believable, the court found him sane. He was electrocuted on September 6, 1929.

Ratliff's act was a little more complex. He began the day Helms was executed, mumbling deliriously and crying that he had sinned against the Holy Ghost. He appeared to gradually lose the use of his hands and feet, forcing the guards to take care of him. His mother filed for a sanity hearing.

Local authorities were infuriated at the idea that Ratliff might get out through an insanity plea, so they brought him back to Eastland County to stand trial for the armed robbery of the Harris car, which had somehow been overlooked in the mess of everything else he had stolen.

Undoubtedly, Ratliff thought this was a lucky break. He had been moved from his closely guarded cell in the Huntsville penitentiary to the Eastland jail, where only two jailers were employed: Pack Kilbourn, who had served as a peace officer or sheriff in the area for a total of 30 years, and "Uncle Tom" Jones, a well-respected local farmer hired for extra help at the temporarily full jail.

Once in the Eastland jail, Ratliff seemed to succumb to almost complete paralysis, hanging limp when Kilbourn and Jones moved him. The only motion he made was to swallow the food they spooned into his mouth. They were forced not only to feed him, but to bathe him and take him to the toilet.

Suspicious, the two formed tests for Ratliff. They would cross one of his feet over the other when they laid him on the bunk at night to see if he had moved when they returned the next morning. He never did. Once, Kilbourn unexpectedly shoved a fork toward Ratliff's face, as if to stab his eye, stopping only at the last second. He didn't flinch. On another occasion, Kilbourn and Jones, without any warning to Ratliff, released him from the standing position they had been holding him in. He fell like a stone, with no attempt to catch himself. After that, their consciences forbade any more tests. Reluctantly, they admitted to each other that he could not possibly be faking paralysis that well.

One night, secure in this belief, one of them accidentally left the door to Ratliff's cell ajar. He crept down to the main area of the jail and found a revolver before they realized he was loose—and no longer pretending to be helpless. When Kilbourn came through the door, Ratliff jumped out and demanded the keys. Unarmed, Kilbourn's only chance was to run. He sprang behind partial cover and then ran back down the hall. Ratliff fired after him but then turned down a different way to cut him off.

Jones came running when he heard the shots. Ratliff shot him, but Jones still managed to get close enough to try to grapple the pistol away from him. He was unsuccessful. Ratliff shot him twice more and he fell down a flight of stairs. Kilbourn returned and jumped Ratliff from behind, wrestling him to the ground and somehow avoiding the shots Ratliff fired at him. Kilbourn finally managed to rip the gun from Ratliff's grasp and beat him with the butt of the weapon until he stopped fighting. Kilbourn returned Ratliff to his cell and rushed Jones to a doctor.

Jones' condition was serious. A lot of angry, threatening talk began to circulate around the town. The next morning, a crowd gathered outside the jail. By evening, it had grown to a



**Louis Davis died from his injuries.**



**When the robbery and manhunt became headline news, the bank tellers who had been on duty during the robbery posed together at the scene of the crime.**

mob. Kilbourn appeared and tried to reason with them, but the sight of him only made the situation worse. "We've waited long enough," one person cried out. Another yelled, "Don't give him a chance to kill another good man!"

Suddenly, 15 or 20 men rushed the protesting Kilbourn, overpowered him, and took his keys. They found Ratliff, who had resumed his paralysis act. Dragging him outside, they stripped him of his clothes and began hunting for a rope.

The crowd watched with enthusiasm as the men tossed a rope over a guy wire in the nearest empty lot. The first time Ratliff was strung up, the rope broke, and he fell to the ground, alive and moaning. The crowd found a stouter rope and swung him again. This time it held.

Marshall Ratliff, the leader of the Cisco bank robbers, died on November 19, 1929. His body was placed on display in a furniture store, where it was viewed by large crowds until the judge ordered it locked up. Newspapers of the day denounced it as "deplorable," but there were those who claimed, even years later, that they had no regrets.

Special thanks to John Waggoner and the Cisco Chamber of Commerce for providing so much helpful information for this article.