

McLENNAN COUNTY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative



P.O. Box 357 • McGregor, TX 76657 • www.mclennanelectric.com • (254) 840-2871

SOUTHERN COMFORT ON THE TEXAS PRAIRIE

Joe Ahlers and Ingrid Martine have built an energy-efficient, ecologically friendly home just outside Valley Mills.



Ingrid Martine

Ingrid, who was born in Germany, wanted to have a sustainable home that had the feel of European construction, which typically features thicker walls and more durable materials. They chose a Southwestern theme, wanting the house to fit in with the surrounding Texas prairie. It was constructed to have a minimum of chemicals and allergens within the home.

Ingrid credits Mike Pearson for translating their unique vision into reality. They have recently formed a consulting/construction company, Southern Comfort Building Services, Inc., that favors less conventional and more sustainable, healthy building methods.

The house has a steel structure to support the weight of the roof. A total of 500 straw bales make up the outside walls. Once the bales were stacked, they were sewn together to help increase the strength and stability of the walls. Bamboo stakes are vertically spaced approximately every 2 feet on both sides of the wall. The stakes are laced together with horizontal wires. The stake and wire framework is then sewed together through the bales to hold the inside and outside lattices together. The result is a surprisingly stable type of wall that has historically even resisted

earthquakes. Ingrid also notes that the compressed straw is less combustible than traditional wood walls, making the home more resistant to fire damage.

Straw walls do require some special care to prevent problems.

Water is the biggest concern with straw bale

houses. Bales that come into contact with water eventually begin to decompose, causing structural problems. Wet straw also encourages mold growth and attracts insects. The foundation is somewhat raised to prevent small-scale flooding from soaking the bottom layer of bales. The overhang on the roof is longer than on most traditional homes to protect the walls from contact with rain and snow. The bottom layer of bales is sealed with Tyvek to prevent water penetration.

The walls are simply decorated. One of the challenges of straw walls is the limited ability to support the weight



Truth window



Dining area



of wall-mounted objects such as framed pictures. Anything hung from the wall must be extremely light. The creative mind finds other alternatives. Pictures can be hung on wires that hang from support beams in the attic. Wall niches are another alternative common to straw-house construction. The thickness of the wall allows for great variety in the size and depth of niches, which can then display sculpture, photographs or other featured items.

For anyone who doubts that the house is actually built with straw, there is a "truth window" in the study. The simple pane of framed glass displays the innards of the wall.

The ground-level floors are scored concrete stained in a rich, earth-tone brown. The upstairs floors are recycled boxcar floors. While conducting research for building material suppliers, Ingrid saw mahogany, oak and maple boxcar floors advertised by Cunningham Construction in Hillsboro. The ad merited investigation, and they ended up buying all of the recycled doors, door hardware and other major components of the house from those materials.

The interior walls are made of sheet rock, which is

coated with earthen plaster to blend in with the exterior walls.

All appliances have a highly efficient, European design. They are now available to accommodate American electrical systems. Because the house is so well insulated with straw walls, attic insulation and shade trees, they were able to install a 3-ton geothermal air conditioning unit instead of the recommended 5-ton unit, with no loss of efficiency. The house was designed to be energy efficient, and the electric bills reflect it. The average bill for the house is approximately \$78 per month.

All water used within the home is collected rainwater. The roof of the house and garage channel water into a 10,000-gallon holding tank. The water is filtered in the garage to remove impurities with a system of micron filters and UV light filters. The taste rivals that of expensive purified water.

This straw bale house proves that being environmentally conscious does not have to mean sacrificing modern conveniences and comforts; it can be just as beautiful and comfortable as creative thinkers make it.

Anyone wishing to view the house can contact Joe Ahlers or Ingrid Martine at (254) 932-6745.

Southern Comfort Building Services, Inc.

Member of the
Better Business
Bureau



**Outside The Box
Building
Practices**

Mike Pearson
254-405-1305
Fax: 254-755-0267

321 Sundown
Waco, Texas 76712
E-mail: pearsons5@earthlink.net

ATTIC INSULATION: A MUST FOR ANY SEASON

The insulation in your attic not only keeps winter's icy fingers from reaching into your attic, it also keeps hot air out during summer.

A poorly insulated attic wastes energy, which can raise your utility bills. If the insulation in your attic measures less than 6 inches thick or has an R-value of less than 20, consider adding more. An ideal amount is between 12 and 20 inches (R-35 to R-50).

Before installing it yourself, repair any leaks on the roof, which can let in water that will damage your home

and your insulation.

Likewise, seal any air leaks—common near chimneys, light fixtures and pipes—to minimize heat gain in the summer and heat loss in the winter.

In addition, the wiring in your attic should be modern and plastic-coated. Hire a licensed electrician to update old wiring, as it's a fire hazard.

Construct a barrier around the opening to your attic so insulation doesn't fall into your home when you open it—especially if you use loose-fill insulation.



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1111 S. Johnson Dr. • McGregor, Texas 76657
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www.mclennanelectric.coop

Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative



Services and Products Provided by Your Co-op

SURGE PROTECTION

Is your electronic equipment protected against lightning?

We have surge protection equipment available for purchase that will offer peace of mind when those storms roll in. Call the MCEC office at (254) 840-2871 and ask for Ron Poston.



WATER HEATERS

Your co-op handles quality A.O. Smith water heaters. We carry various sizes in stock and offer a \$50 rebate on these heaters. Offering very competitive prices along with friendly, courteous service, we are here to help you. Call or come by for more information on these water heaters.



REMINDER PHOTOS WELCOME

If you have a photo of a child, grandchild, or something of interest, please send it to editor@mclennanelectric.coop or to Neil Johnson, P.O. Box 357, McGregor, TX 76657. Please enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you would like the photo returned.



FLAG DAY

Flag Day is a day for all Americans to celebrate and show respect for our flag, its designers and makers. Our flag is representative of our independence and our unity as a nation ... one nation, under God, indivisible. Our flag has a proud and glorious history. It was at the lead of every battle fought by Americans. Many people have died protecting it. It even stands proudly on the surface of the moon.

As Americans, we have every right to be proud of our culture, our nation and our flag. So raise the flag today and every day with pride!

The flag is normally flown from sunrise to sunset. In the morning, raise the flag briskly. At sunset, lower it slowly. Always raise and lower it ceremoniously. The flag should not

be flown at night without a light on it. The flag should not be flown in rain or inclement weather. After a tragedy or death, the flag is flown at half-staff for 30 days. It's called "half-staff" on land and "half-mast" on a ship.

When flown vertically on a pole, the stars and blue field, or "union," is at the top and at the end of the pole (away from your house). The American flag is always flown at the top of the pole. Your state flag and other flags fly below it. The union is always on top. When displayed in print, the stars and blue field are always on the left. Never let



your flag touch the ground. Fold your flag when storing. Don't just stuff it in a drawer or box. When your flag is old and has seen better days, it is time to retire it. Old flags should be burned or buried. Please do not throw it in the trash.

The Co-op Way Brings Out the Best in All of Us

How is a cooperative—specifically, an electric co-op—different from any other business that provides the same service? Electric cooperatives, like most other types of co-ops, were born out of necessity. In the early 1900s, rural communities did not have electricity, a service that was available in the larger cities. Big companies were not interested in investing in rural areas, where there were too many miles of line per customer to make a profit.

The emotional reaction that came with electric power was overwhelming. For decades, men and women have told stories of how tears came to their eyes when the lights came on in their homes. A farmer giving witness in a Tennessee church in the early 1940s said, “Brothers and sisters, I want to tell you this: The greatest thing on earth is to have the love of God in your heart, and the next greatest thing is to have electricity in your house.”

The lights came on after hard work and cooperation between neighbors. They worked together to organize the cooperative by signing up members. They held endless meetings to determine where the power lines would go. They worked with employees of the Rural Electrification Administration (now the Rural Utilities Service) to make sure all criteria were met for low-interest loans to construct the lines and buildings.

There was no doubt this was their cooperative because they had organized it. They had built it with their own hands, minds, words and money. Today that same spirit continues in the operation

of McLennan County Electric Cooperative.

How do cooperatives keep their members feeling like owners? In our part of Texas, McLennan County Electric Cooperative provides a good example of how utility cooperatives can keep members involved. To start with, this cooperative, headquartered in McLennan County, has returned \$1,679,127 in capital credits to its member-owners during the past 52 years.

Approximately 196 members attend our co-op’s annual meeting, held every year in October. Attendance at the annual meeting is boosted by valuable door prizes such as multiple credit gift certificates, crockery set, kitchen kettle, Hamilton Beach grill deep fryer, drill, *Texas Co-op Power* dominoes, skill saw, coffeemaker, DVD/CD/VCR player and a digital camera with printer. Members come to have a good time, see friends and find out what has been going on in the communities served by the cooperative. Your cooperative does a good job planning the annual meeting program, mixing a business meeting with entertainment and reports. Speakers convey what is happening locally with an overview of the national scene.

People feel a strong involvement in McLennan County Electric Co-op because of effective communications between the members and the cooperative. Information on local cooperative activity is found each month here in *Texas Co-op Power*, the publication for rural electric cooperatives in Texas. Other information is distributed through bill stuffers,

newspaper ads and articles, and radio and TV announcements.

Your cooperative participates in the community. Employees are encouraged to become involved in civic activities. They serve as local elected officials, volunteer firefighters, school board members and Little League coaches. The co-op conducts public demonstrations and school programs on safety.

The cooperative sponsors courses in first aid and CPR. It sponsors one high school student to Washington, D.C., every year as a part of the Government-in-Action Youth Tour. Your cooperative also provides scholarships for rural youth and supports local youth groups, such as FFA, 4-H and Scouts.

All these activities are done because the cooperative’s members and board of directors understand the importance of a strong community. It’s the co-op way.

Keep in mind that this is just one rural electric cooperative. There are more than 900 other rural electric co-ops across the nation providing the same types of services and leadership to rural communities. In the same way citizens worked together to bring the services of the first rural electric cooperatives, members today are working together to ensure that their communities have access to the quality of life in education, health care, housing and business development needed in today’s world. Leadership by local citizens continues to be the most valuable resource in rural America today.

The co-op way brings out the best in all of us.