

Don't get conned  
by fake demands to pay bills

# Be SCAM smart

By Will Holford

**L**ike death and taxes, scams are inescapable, so consumers should be wary. Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative members have recently reported an increase in fraudulent attempts to get them to make immediate payments for supposedly delinquent accounts, threatening to disconnect their power.

The recent attempts to scam Bluebonnet members have primarily been by phone, but one family in the Elgin area in Bastrop County had a person at their home, claiming to work for Bluebonnet and demanding payment. So far, the most recent fraud attempts have been unsuccessful.

"One characteristic of the most recent attempts to collect fraudulent payments by phone is to demand payment by 7 p.m.," said Barbara Seilheimer, Bluebonnet's manager of member services. "Our business hours end at 5:30 p.m., so anyone claiming to be a Bluebonnet employee or contractor telling you to pay after our business hours should be an immediate indication something is not right. And we never send contractors to our members' homes or businesses to collect payments."

Bluebonnet wants its members to know co-op procedures in order to protect themselves from fraud. The co-op makes at least two attempts — by mail and by courtesy call — to remind members if their payment is past due. The automated courtesy calls are made only during business hours, identify Bluebonnet by name as the caller, remind the member the payment is past due, and give the member the option to talk to a member

service representative or make a payment. The calls are not made after business hours and do not demand payment or threaten immediate disconnect. Those reminders are made within two weeks of the payment's due date.

If you get a call demanding immediate payment, do not pay and do not provide any personal or account information. If you have not received a reminder in the mail or a courtesy call about your account, and someone claiming to be from Bluebonnet calls attempting to collect a payment, don't pay or provide information, Seilheimer advised.

"If something doesn't sound right or looks suspicious, call us at 800-842-7708," Seilheimer said. "We'd much rather our members be safe and sure than be taken by the people operating these scams."

If someone comes to your home and says he or she is from Bluebonnet, there are ways to confirm this. Bluebonnet's linemen and service crews drive white trucks with Bluebonnet logos on the hood and doors, and they wear Bluebonnet uniforms — usually a khaki shirt with a Bluebonnet logo and their name embroidered on the chest, or a blue T-shirt with Bluebonnet's name and logo on the chest. Bluebonnet employees also carry company identification cards as credentials to verify their employment.

Bluebonnet uses contractors for construction, tree trimming and other service work — never to collect payments. Bluebonnet's contractors drive company vehicles marked with a Bluebonnet logo and they wear their company uniforms. Bluebonnet's employees or contractors visit property owners in advance of doing right-of-way maintenance.

If no one is home, they leave a gate or door hanger detailing the service work to be done, when it will be done and a number to call with questions.

If members have questions about a Bluebonnet employee or contractor on their property, they can call member

services at 800-842-7708, 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday.

If someone tries to scam a Bluebonnet member by phone, that member should get as much information about the caller as possible, including the phone number from which he or she is calling by checking the caller ID, Seilheimer said. Call Bluebonnet at 800-842-7708 between 7 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, and also local law enforcement, as soon as possible.

"The more information we have about the people doing this, the more likely we will be to prevent any further fraud and to catch the people responsible for it," Seilheimer said. "Being aware of this scam is the best way to stop it. We encourage everyone to know the current status of their account and to tell the other people in their household or business who might also pay the bills so they don't fall victim to this scam." ■



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## Make your fireplace more energy efficient

Even if you love the crackle and warmth of a wood-burning fire on the hearth, you probably could live without the added cost to your energy bill.

Sure, the flickering flames make you feel warm while you're sitting nearby, but wood-burning fires are not efficient. They emit little or no warmth into a room and send warm air up the chimney.

Wood-burning fires also can create particles that pollute the air indoors and outdoors, and could poison the house with carbon monoxide.

That doesn't mean you have to close your fireplace up forever, though. Instead, try improving the efficiency and safety of your beloved hearth:

- Close the fireplace damper when you're not burning wood. This will cut down on the loss of warm room air through the chimney.
- Cover the front of the fireplace with tempered glass doors, which seal the fireplace opening and prevent air in the room from escaping through it. Fireplace inserts are another option for converting fireplaces into efficient heating systems.
- Hire a professional to sweep your chimney.
- Use artificial logs, which reduce pollutant emissions by almost 80 percent.
- Replace wood with electric "logs" that you can insert into the fireplace, or plug in an electric fireplace instead of burning wood. ■



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In addition to the papers and photos, the collection includes cotton sacks cut into fabric for dresses, several colorful church fans with illustrations of Jesus, a calfskin wallet and a powder puff that still contains traces of powder.

The family also kept an 1857 book about the immorality of slavery: "God Against Slavery: And the Freedom and Duty of the Pulpit to Rebuke It, as a Sin Against God," by abolitionist clergyman George B. Cheever of New York.

Preserved poll tax receipts show that Rhone family members believed their votes were important. The Rhones also were active members of the Concord Missionary Baptist Church in Round Top, founded by African-Americans in Round Top in 1867 and still active today. Calvin and Lucia Rhone also belonged to several African-American chapters of fraternal societies such as the Order of Knights of Pythias, Sisters of the Mysterious Ten and the Grand Court Order of Calanthe, organized in Houston in 1897 to provide burial insurance for blacks.

And six of the Rhone children attended Prairie View and became teachers, UT records show.

Urisa Rhone Brown owned a 1924 Model T and paid \$11.25 on Jan. 24, 1925, for state license fees, according to the old receipt.

She earned a bachelor's degree in 1947 and a master's degree in 1955, according to Prairie View A&M University records. Her master's thesis focused on Round Top High School's graduation and drop out rates. She concluded that guidance services, classes and student extracurricular activities needed to be improved.

One class paper she wrote as a graduate student in 1950 examined racial inequities: "To my way of thinking, there (are) no essential mental differences in races." She called racial inferiority a scar "usually caused by shock, disappointment and humiliation." She argued that a person should be advised that "the color of his skin and/or the texture of his hair does not necessitate his being inferior."

She wrote those words five years before Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white person in Montgomery, Ala.

"There are still so many stories and aspects of African-American history that need to be revealed, and the Rhone family papers are excellent examples of that," said Hurd, the Prairie View historian whose institute was created by the Texas Legislature to collect and preserve African-American history and culture in Texas.

"Regardless of where the artifacts were found, so much of them speaks to the family's understanding back then of the importance of preservation — telling their story." ■