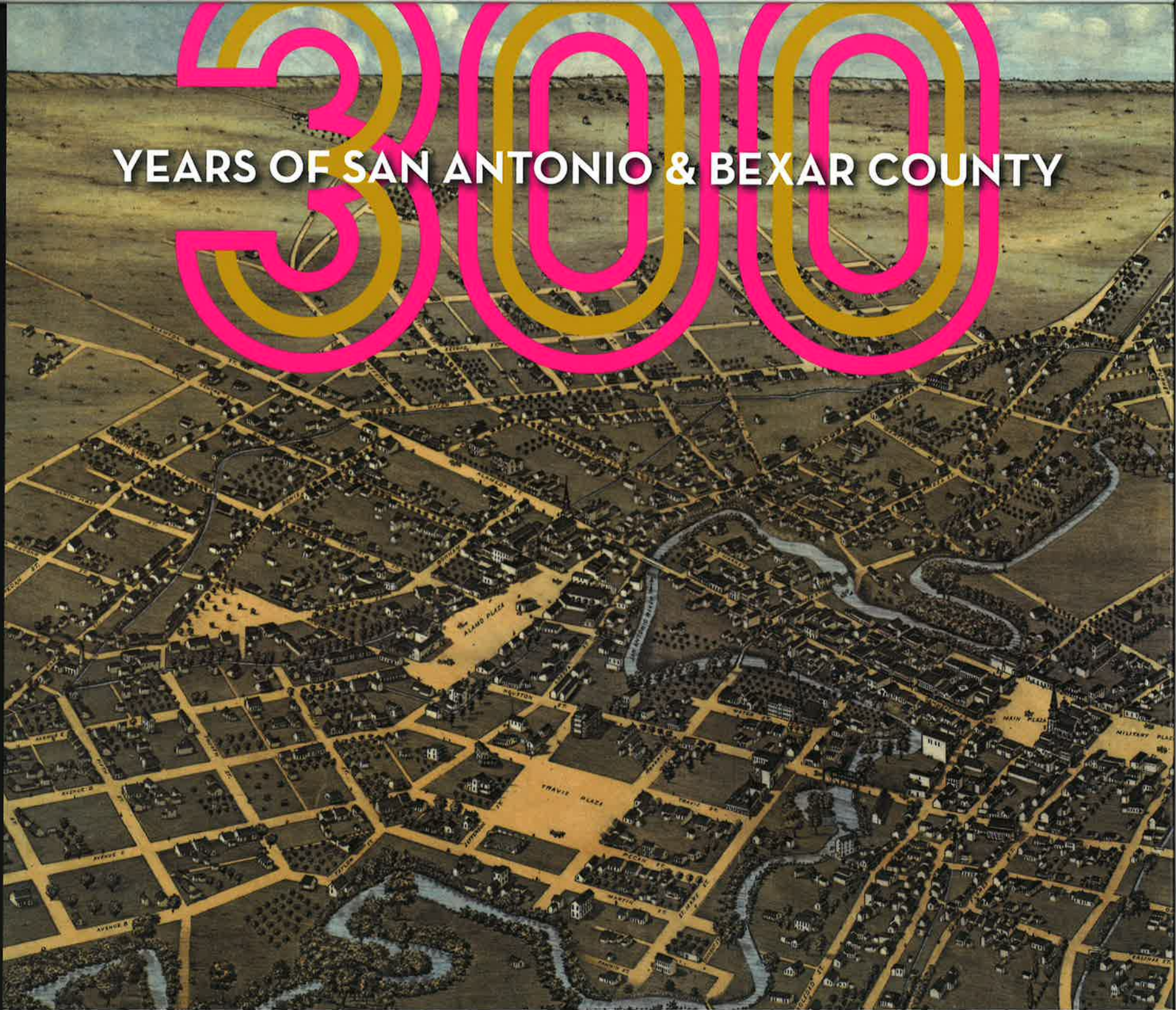


# YEARS OF SAN ANTONIO & BEXAR COUNTY

300





# 300 YEARS of SAN ANTONIO & BEXAR COUNTY

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EDITOR



MAVERICK BOOKS  
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# Consider the Pecan

## *Carya illinoensis*

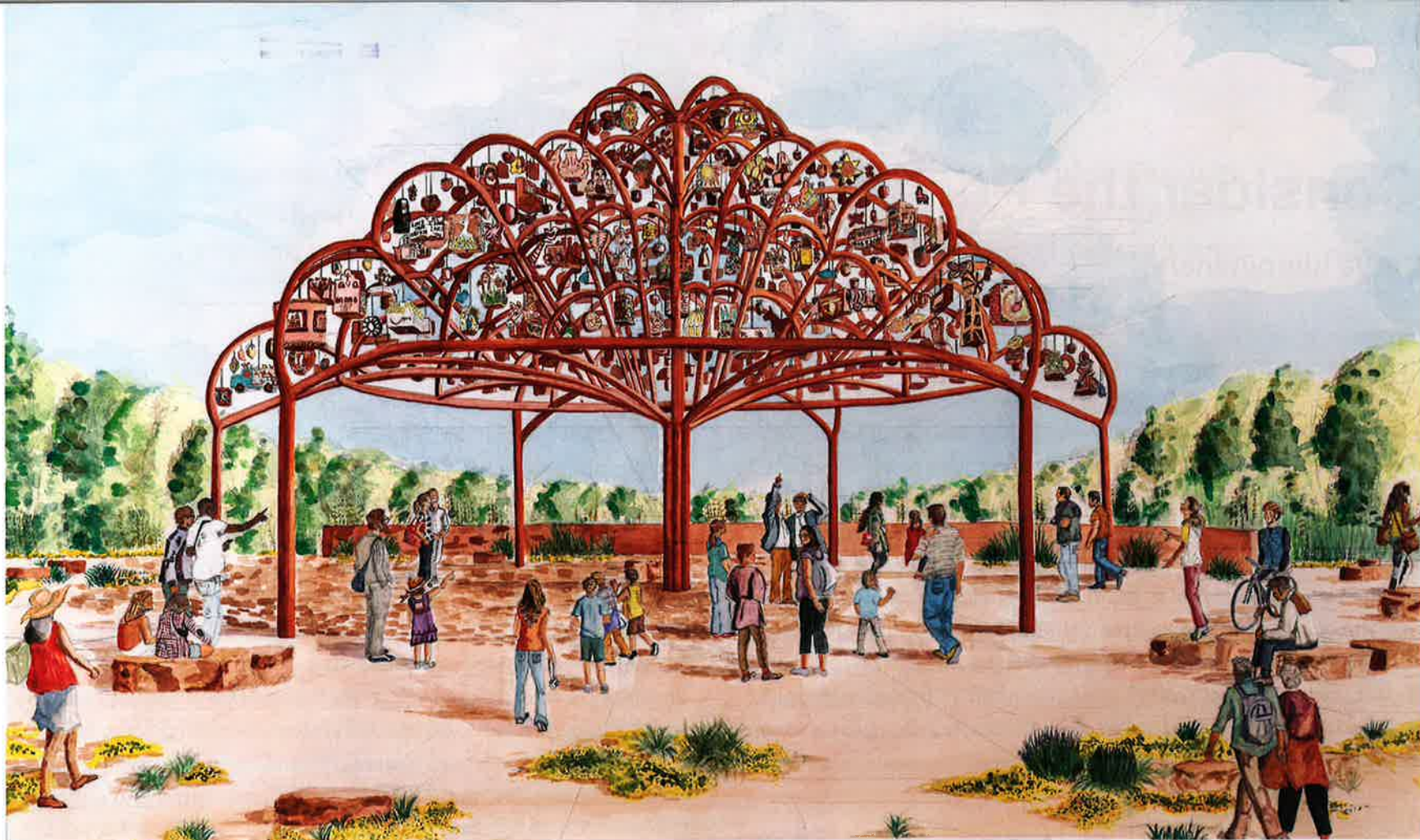
**THOSE WHO COMMUNE** with pecan trees share a common taste for imperfection. No one would call pecans radical, or even controversial, but they do require extra understanding. They're messy. They don't stay evergreen like loquats, waft grape fragrance like mountain laurels, or announce coveted breezes like palms. The pecan itself, left uneaten, is unpredictable: it may rise up from soil to tower in shady abundance, or decompose without fanfare among rotting leaves. Ask a tree-climbing Texas child, and you'll hear that though a pecan tree is great to hang a swing from, it's hard to shimmy up; the lanky trunks bear flaking bark and high limbs, unlike a thick, hunching live oak or multiarmed magnolia that small monkey hands can easily maneuver.

### **A Brief History of Pecans**

Pecans' history is as long as their taproots are deep, and it infiltrates our collective culture. Found in fossils that predate Native Americans, they are indigenous to all areas of Texas except the high plains and Trans-Pecos regions. The word "pecan" is a Native American Algonquin word used to describe all nuts needing a stone to crack. The first recorded description of Texas pecans is from 1533, after Spaniard Cabeza de Vaca was shipwrecked near Galveston and captured by Karankawa Native Americans, and then wandered with them through Texas for seven years. In his diary, de Vaca wrote that tribes gathered every other winter along certain riverbanks to subsist on "nueces,"

which meant "nuts" or more specifically "walnuts" in Spanish, as there was no existing Spanish word for pecan. The reason they gathered every other year is that pecan trees produce on a biennial cycle, alternating each year between low- and high-yield harvests. This impacted people dependent on them for fat and calories, whose diets were otherwise low in both. Pecans' rich meat is nutritious and caloric, making it prime survival food not just for humans, but also for creatures such as squirrels, opossums, javelinas, raccoons, and birds that can crack the nuts, like blue jays and crows. Each nut is rich in vegetable oil, which can be pressed and extracted and whose neutral flavor takes on seasonings' flavors. Pecans' high energy and low water content make them a compact and immediately storable food source, also important to Native Americans who had few pack animals or efficient processing means. Many pecan varieties are named for Native American tribes, such as the Pawnee, Caddo, Choctaw, and Cheyenne.

Like others living in Texas, pecan trees are thirsty. Their deep taproots seek even deeper water tables, and they thrive in rich riparian zone soils along streams and rivers in east and central Texas, where the moist soil is slightly acidic. South Texas riverbeds and stream beds also house thousands of acres of native pecan stands. In the 1600s, Mexican explorer Alonso de León named the Nueces River for the abundant pecan groves along its banks. At that time, the Nueces River was where Mexico drew its border with Texas, farther north than the



*Arbol de la Vida: Voces de Tierra* by Margarita Cabrera.

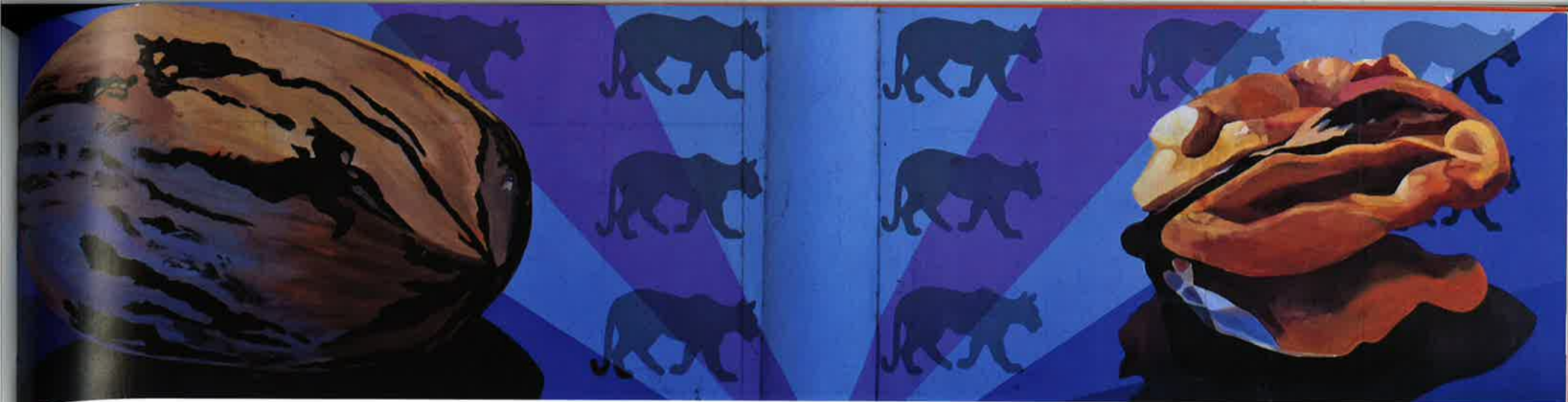
A gift of the Ramona and Lee Bass Family in partnership with the San Antonio River Foundation and the City of San Antonio's Department of Arts and Culture

Rio Grande—a dispute unsettled until the Battle of San Jacinto. To this day, in many Texas-Mexican borderlands, “nueces” remains the most common name for pecans.

Today, an aged pecan tree behind the Alamo towers 80 feet high and 81 feet wide in canopy, with a 3-foot trunk diameter. Planted in

1850 by explorer, rancher, and entrepreneur Peter Gallagher, it holds bragging rights as the oldest tree at the Alamo, and it produces prolific crops of nuts, though very small ones—typical of native pecan trees, as compared with improved varieties. Even without big nuts, the Alamo still enjoys the old tree's generous shade and dappled beauty.





*Winter, Pecan, Mountain Lion* by Cristina Sosa Noriega. Photo by Claudia Guerra

The first native-born white governor of Texas, James Hogg, loved pecans so much that he requested a pecan tree be planted on his grave when he died, which occurred in 1906. This planting awoke renewed interest in pecan trees and prompted an act by the Texas Legislature in 1919, declaring the pecan the state tree of Texas.

The pecan also took a role in the 1930s' Texas labor movement. At that time, Texas pecans made up roughly 50 percent of the nation's production, and of that, roughly 50 percent of commercial pecan groves grew within a 250-mile radius of San Antonio. San Antonio offered plentiful and cheap hand labor, undercutting even new mechanized options. One business in particular, Southern Pecan Company, dominated the market. But wages and conditions were neither fair nor livable; contracted wages could sink as low as a penny a pound for pieces, with typical wages between two and three dollars a week. Some contracted workers shelled in their own homes, with elderly and children shelling together for low wages. Alternative factory conditions were horrendous: air and surfaces thick with fine shell dust thought to contribute to San Antonio's high tuberculosis rate, low light and ventilation, and no indoor toilets or washbowls. In January

of 1938, twelve thousand San Antonio pecan shellers, mostly Hispanic women, walked off their jobs. This commenced a three-month historic strike, rife with street pickets, mass arrests, jail overcrowding, communist conspiracy theories, Mexican American racial tensions, labor union negotiations, and finally, arbitration between employers and workers, raising pay to seven cents a pound for pieces, and eight cents for intact halves.

Unfortunately, shellers didn't enjoy wage increases for long. Shortly thereafter, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, creating an hourly minimum wage of twenty-five cents. At this wage, factory owners deemed it cheaper to mechanize the industry, and cracking machines replaced more than ten thousand San Antonio pecan-shelling jobs.

Today, pecans remain a vital commercial American nut, and Texas is the largest commercial producer of native pecans in the nation, second only to Georgia in orchard hybrid production. Improved papershell varieties can be hand-crushed and offer more meat per pound. The eight native species of Texas are hard to tell apart, and they hybridize freely. Pecans' resiliency has paid off.

## A Family Tree

Many families today still shell pecans together and use the state tree resourcefully. Rich, buttery nuts compose savory stuffings, crumb toppings, and glazes for meat, fish, or poultry, as well as a wide range of sweet confections like ice cream, cookies, pies, and candies. Syrupy pecan pie likely evolved from Louisiana French settlers' chess pie experimentations, but it migrated into a staple at Texas barbecue joints and holiday tables. The French also brought almond pralines, which morphed regionally into pecan pralines, still omnipresent in Mexican food restaurants.

Pecan's hickory wood and chips make great firewood, and they infuse smoky flavor to meats and fish. Carpenters know pecan wood is hard and durable, takes stain well, and builds sturdy furniture, tool handles, and floorboards. Nurseries and landscapers sell empty, durable shells as premium mulch. Some resourceful artisans take felled pecan tree trunks to create or commission custom tabletops, cutting-boards, and more, depending on size.

And of course, many families, consciously or not, avail pecan trees for family memories. It is fitting that along the San Antonio River, where native pecans and other trees root deeply, artist Margarita Cabrera is currently finishing an enormous "Arbol de la Vida," laden with hundreds of 2- to 3-foot-tall clay ornaments representing varied regional stories, crafted by a cross section of local community members. One ornament is a large pecan sculpted by local artist Desirée Muñoz, emblazoned with deep pink roses, a stucco house, and a dancing couple illustrating her family memories. Muñoz had originally struggled with how to structure the artwork, but she realized, while watching her grandfather crack pecans at the kitchen table, that a pecan should form the base, as it played regular roles throughout their family's multigenerational memories. Pecan trees had always

canopied the family's yard for casual barbecues, holiday gatherings, weddings, and daily conversations. Every fall, her grandfather summons grandkids, cousins, and the revolving door of family and friends to collect their yards' pecans. Retired, he employs himself full-time cracking shells at the kitchen table, joined by anybody who stops in. "He just cracks pecans until he can't crack pecans anymore," Muñoz says. "Then all year long, we have these Ziplock bags of pecans in the freezer, and we use them throughout the year for baking bread and cookies, for munching on, and throwing in our lunch sacks." Each Thanksgiving, her mother head-chefs the meal of three turkeys and a spread of pecan-inspired baked goods to feed the family's five living generations. Muñoz adds, "My cousins who are teenagers right now, and anyone else who doesn't want to cook: If you come over to the house and you're going to watch TV, your job is to crack pecans while you watch TV. Otherwise, you can go to your own house to watch TV, because that's how many pecans we need." Even the animals embody pecan memories: her brother's great dane dog plops his head on the table and begs for them; violent squirrels skillfully and regularly throw pecans at people sitting outside. In general, the pecan simply symbolizes family life for Muñoz: "I remember this one huge pecan tree in the backyard, and it was so huge it took up the entire space. And we set up a tire swing out there and had happy, warm, memories. And that's what I think of when I think of San Antonio."

*(opposite)* Pecan shellers.

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## Emma Tenayuca

The Pecan Sheller Strike, the largest strike in San Antonio history, was led by San Antonio political activist and union organizer, Emma Tenayuca. Her passionate defense of San Antonio's poor earned her the name "La Pasionaria." Tenayuca had deep roots as a San Antonio native. According to family legend, she was a descendant of Los Adaes, a group of early settlers who were sent to San Antonio in the late 1700s when their colony in what is now Louisiana failed. A child of the Depression, Emma witnessed great suffering in the west side barrio where she lived with her grandparents. She and her grandparents would visit the Plaza de Zacate (now Milam Park) on Sundays to listen to political commentary by survivors of the Mexican Revolution who spoke against injustices perpetrated on the Mexican American population. These experiences informed her leadership of the strikers who demanded better wages and improved working conditions. In 1937 she was accused of inciting a riot and was tried for unlawful assembly and disturbing the peace. In 1938, she led thousands of workers out of shelling plants in protest. They picketed for thirty-seven days. They were gassed, arrested, and jailed. The strike ended after the city's pecan operators agreed to arbitration. In Emma's own words, "What started out as a movement for organization for equal wages turned into a mass movement for civil rights, and it changed the character of west side San Antonio." Tenayuca eventually left San Antonio after receiving death threats, though she returned in the late 60s.



Emma Tenayuca and her attorney, Everett Looney, in the courtroom during her 1937 trial. General Photograph Collection, UTSA Special Collections

## The Joy of Pecan Sex

Consider, in return, that pecans—to anthropomorphize—seem to value family. A pecan is one of the trees whose offspring resembles the parent; the lime-green casings with inner brown, striated shells and meat reflect the color palette of the tree's green crescent leaves and brown reptilian bark. This nut fruit, the young child, may be

eaten, be reabsorbed into the earth's obscurity, or sprout into a sapling competing for nutrients, water, and light to photosynthesize in its chlorophyll-filled leaves and produce annual rings of new bark. Pecan trees are prepubescent for the first three to twelve years (depending on type), then become moody and produce both male and female flowers on the same tree. Their "flowers," like those of many



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**—Desirée Muñoz**

other angiosperm seed plants, don't fit the typical showy, aromatic profile of a table arrangement, but they are necessary for plant reproduction. Male pecan flowers (catkins) form those pea-green, drooping tassels that sprout in April and produce pollen—the stamen studs of nature's seduction dance. Female flowers (pistils) emerge shortly afterward as smaller star-shaped spikes with enlarged, sticky, stigmatic surfaces that catch airborne male pollen ushered by the wind, which acts as Cupid, ensuring boy meets the girl and not just on the same tree. In fact, cross-pollination begets bigger nut spawn. But pecan sex can be a messy business; pollen tassels also drop on cars, driveways, decks, and sidewalks, creating hazy green dust films and messes for homeowners, plus sinus torture for pecan allergy sufferers, the unintended victims of pecan pollen's sexual prowess. Wind-pollinated plants may not need showy or scented flowers but do need large quantities of stamens and a matching large exposure of stigmas. Female flowers either get fertilized and develop into the nut fruit, or shrivel and harden, and turn brown, showing receptivity has passed—like pecan menopause, rumored to be accompanied by night sweats, hot flashes, sluggishness, and weight gain. If the female

flower is fertilized, however, the outer part of the female flower grows into a moisture-saturated shuck, proportionate to the developing nut, and similar to a human amniotic fluid sac, splitting apart as the nut reaches maturity.

If there is a lot of rain during April and May, the months when male flowers produce the most pollen, there will be fewer pecans in the next production cycle, as pollen has a hard time transferring via wind when wet, plus damp conditions foster leaf and nut husk diseases. Likewise, a drought year often heralds a pecan bumper crop, not just because of more pollination and less disease, but because trees under duress produce more nuts to ensure species survival.

A healthy pecan tree can produce pecans for more than a hundred years. With that age span, large old pecans are survivors, sage elders who've lived through droughts and storms. And at the top of many strong human families is a strong elder, a matriarch or patriarch, who casts a model for the other generations to heed. San Antonio is an old city that doesn't mind getting messy to get its jobs done. We value resiliency, history, culture, cuisine, and family. No wonder the pecan tree represents us so well. [JS]