

The Front Porch

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May/June 2026



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The Front Porch

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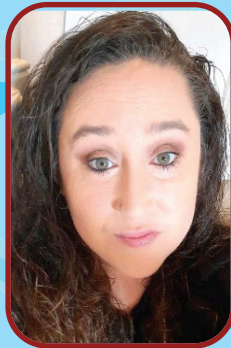
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SITTIN' ON THE PORCH WITH...

DONNA SMITH

Story and Photography by
Crystal Goodwin

Donna Smith is a vision of hometown comfort. Seated on her porch, at ease with the slow and steady passage of time, Smith reflects on a life fully lived.

"That was the AA Bishop House," Smith explains of the property next door with a glorious white house standing tall in the distance.

"They had 21 grandkids," Smith says, "and my grandmother was one of the 21. So, we were all born over there. It used to have magnolia trees and pecan trees on both sides."

Smith has spent her entire life in Aucilla. At 85 years old, she carries herself with the quiet grace of someone deeply rooted in place, and her smile blossoms as she recalls stories from her youth.

"This is a front porch of many tales," Smith shares, glancing across the yard where decades of memories have quietly unfolded. Filled with love, laughter and kindness, this porch has been the centerpiece of a robust family with stories to share.

"I used to host our family reunion every other year," she says. "We had a fish fry on Saturday with dancing and music in the yard, and then the reunion on Sunday."

Family has always remained at the center of Smith's life, and her pride in her children is evident when she reflects on their accomplishments.

"I have five children, 10 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren."

Though all of her children played sports at one time in school, Bobby and Leonard Thigpen received athletic scholarships.

"Bobby got drafted by the Chicago White Sox, and Leonard got drafted by the Yankees," Smith tells proudly.

Of the two, Bobby pitched in Major League Baseball and gained national recognition as a standout relief pitcher.

"We saw the world through baseball. He brought Bill and I to Japan when he was playing there," she says, fondly recalling her international experience.

"That was a trip I'll never forget. Their baseball in Japan was like a football game out there at FSU."

When they weren't traveling internationally for baseball, Smith attended games across the country with her sister and other family members.

"We went to Omaha, Nebraska, when Mississippi State went to the World Series. We had a tag on the front of the van that said we were The A-Team!" she recalls.

Back home, Smith has witnessed many changes during her lifetime, from the depot and post office moving, to families coming in and out of Aucilla. The biggest changes, she says, are with the school and church community.

"My favorite job I ever had ... was a telephone operator ... I put the call through to WMEN radio station when President Kennedy got shot."

- Donna Smith

"The school has grown and the church has grown," she explains. "The church had to add a big old new building onto it. I guess more people have come into Aucilla because there is nothing vacant down here."

Of the school system, to which Smith has deep connections, Smith recalls her time at Aucilla.

"Aucilla used to be a public school. We went to school there until the eighth grade, and we graduated in the eighth grade, and then rode the bus to Monticello for high school."

Smith recalls attending prom and wearing a beautiful white dress designed by the mother of a young man who stayed at the jail for a short time.

"My dad was sheriff of Jefferson County in the late '50s and early '60s. We lived in the jail in Aucilla," she explains of her time there.

"Now, when they do this ghost haunt in Monticello, they always say the jail is haunted. Well, all the years we lived there, we never saw any ghosts," she says with a chuckle. "I graduated in 1958 from Jefferson and went to Lively Technical in Tallahassee and took a cosmetology course. I worked over there in a couple beauty shops."

Smith's career hit the ground running and never slowed down.

"At one time, I was doing six different little jobs when I had all my kids in Aucilla," Smith says.

"I had the store open, and I had a single-wide trailer out here on the other side as my beauty shop. I ran the beauty shop in the nursing home in Greenville for half a day on Thursdays. I sold Avon, and I wrote an article for the *Monticello News*."

Though members of the community remember her fondly at the Aucilla store where many students would stop by after school, Smith's career took many twists and turns.

"I worked at Jefferson Corrections for 15 years and retired as Sergeant Smith," she says. "I drove the school bus at Aucilla Christian for 18 years, and that's where I met most of the kids."

Throughout all of her different roles in the community, one job stands out.

"My favorite job I ever had," Smith says excitedly, "I was a telephone operator for SouthEast in Tallahassee. I put the call through to WMEN radio station when President Kennedy got shot. I put the call through for them to verify that he had been killed. I loved that job."

At the core of her career is the desire to help others and connect with community members, no matter what role she found herself in. Most recently, she worked at the Florida Education Association (FEA).

"That was my last job until I had my accident," she explains. "I really liked that and made lots of friends there. I was the receptionist. I let people in and out through the front door and answered the

telephone.”

Though her time in the workforce is now over, Smith reflects on the impact she has made in her community.

Known affectionately by many as the “mom of Aucilla,” Smith’s presence extends far beyond her own front porch.

For decades, she has been a familiar and comforting figure in the community, embracing her role as someone who watched children grow up, offered encouragement, shared stories and welcomed neighbors with warmth.

“I love that they feel comfortable in calling me mom,” Smith says, and she hopes that she will be remembered as someone “caring and lighthearted.”

“Back then,” she recalls, “it was the cooking. My little miniature pecan pies! I must make a hundred of them around Christmas time.”

Through love and nurturing of both the body and soul, Smith’s home became a natural gathering place, and her steady kindness helped shape the sense of the closeness that defines Aucilla.

“I would help you any way I could. Anything I could do for you. I just want people to remember that I was a fun-loving person.”

Central to Smith’s kind heart is her love for the Lord and what God has given to her.

“I’m a member of Southern Baptist Church and I love my God,” she says. “God gave his son Jesus to die on the cross to save us for our sins, and then he raised him back up. I truly believe in that.”

With a homely nature and easy smile, Smith has become not just a neighbor, but a maternal presence to many in the community. Her experiences reflect a generation that valued hard work, adaptability and connection.

Whether it was running a beauty shop, driving a bus, working at the correctional institution or answering phones, Smith approached each role with the same dedication.

Donna Smith’s story is one of resilience, faith and community. Her life reflects the strength found in staying rooted in your community and living life to the fullest.

On her porch, surrounded by memories and the gentle pace of a small town, the stories continue. ■





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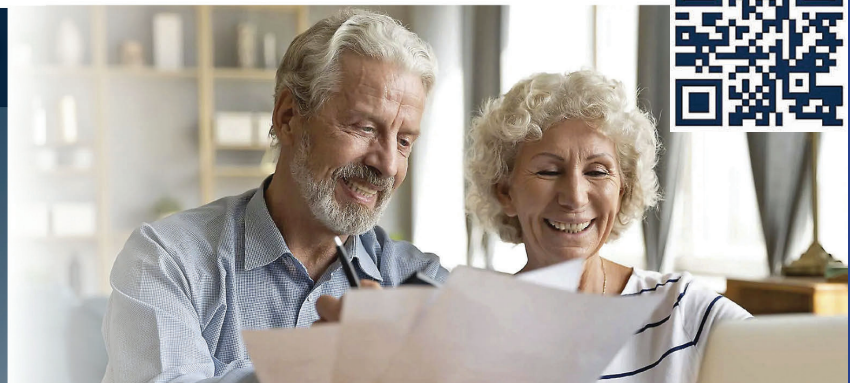
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COVER STORY

Celebrating *the* **FRUITS** *of* **FREEDOM**



Sponsored Content Story by Laura Young

Unfurl your Old Glory's stars and stripes, roll out a thumping ripe watermelon, light up a handful of snapping sparklers – it's time to celebrate America's 250th Independence Day! This summer, there'll be a special kind of patriotic vibe radiating out from homes to main streets through towns across regions all around the United States.

For the communities of Jefferson County, Florida, America's 250th follows right on the heels of another milestone celebration: the 75th anniversary of the Monticello Watermelon Festival. The county is named for Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of our Declaration of Independence, and the Watermelon Festival grew out of the county's historical fame of once being the largest producer of watermelon seed stock in the world. As Watermelon Festival events mingle this year with activities celebrating America's 250th, locals welcome visitors from near and far to join in on a delightful mix of themed festivities with roots that burrow deep in time.

The momentum has been building all year and won't slow down through May and June until fireworks boom into the night sky above the hometown stadium on the Fourth of July.

Events kicked off in April when Jefferson Arts Gallery – a Best of Florida top winner – opened its doors to display a collection of WWI posters that traveled from the Smithsonian Institution (the world's largest museum) to one of Florida's most rural areas. The *World War I: Lessons and Legacies* exhibit offered a unique way to explore America in the early 1900s through viewing historic ads and images on a range of wartime topics – advances in industry, military technology, medical improvement, the role of women and minorities, the Great Migration, the 1918 flu pandemic and worker unionization. Supplemental memorabilia provided by members of the community connected the local wartime experience with global events.

Also in April, the *Monticello News* offered writing and art contests to engage students with Independence Day ideas through themed stories, reflective letters, essays on freedom, parade decoration designs, flag mosaics and scenic paintings. Judging is happening now!

In mid-May, the Watermelon Festival begins its celebration of America's favorite summertime fruit that, by the time all is said and done in late June, will include games, pageants, a fashion show, a race, a downtown party, two parades, a pop-up marketplace, a kids'

musical and more, all organized by the Watermelon Festival Committee and the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce. The 2026 theme of "Stars, Slices and Stripes" links the festival's 75th anniversary with America's 250th. See the sidebar for a listing of the supporters who are making it all possible.

Check monticellowatermelonfestival.com for information and updates about the various festival events described below. For updates on Jefferson County's activities for America's 250th described below, see the Facebook page entitled "Monticello, Jefferson County, Florida: Celebrating 250 Years of Independence."

Pickleball Tournament – May 16-17

First in the line-up is the Watermelon Pickleball Tournament on May 16-17, which channels the growing popularity of pickleball into excitement for the festival. Saturday's competitions are Mixed Doubles and 4.5+ Money Ball; on Sunday, it's Men's and Women's Doubles Round Robin. All games take place at the new pickleball courts at Jefferson Recreation Dept., 1380 Mamie Scott Dr., Monticello.

Watermelon Pageants – June 6

Monticello has been crowning a Watermelon Queen since 1950, with other royalty added to her court over the years. While some of the judging criteria may have changed with the times, the Watermelon Pageants have always aimed to showcase locally

talented people who represent the good life that Jefferson County offers. This year's pageants take place on Saturday, June 6. At 10 a.m. contestants for Tiny Miss/Mr. Watermelon (ages 3-4 years), Little Miss/Mr. Watermelon (5-6 years), Watermelon Princess (7-8 years), Young Miss Watermelon (9-10 years) and Jr. Miss Watermelon (11-12 years) take to the stage. At 5 p.m. the curtain lifts for the pageants to select Teen Miss Watermelon (13-15 years) and Miss Watermelon Queen (16-21 years).

Fly Your American Flag Campaign

Throughout June and July, every place with a flag mount or a bit of lawn is encouraged by the Keystone Federated Republican Women to display American flags.

Patriotic Window Decor Contest

Throughout June and July, businesses are encouraged by the Monticello Woman's Club to dress the windows of their brick-and-mortar locations to celebrate America's 250th. For more information about entering a location in the contest, call 850-294-1307.

Patriotic Porch Decor Contest

Throughout June and July, the Jefferson County Historical Association encourages residents to gussy up their front porches with patriotic décor. Details on how to enter decorations to win a prize will be available soon.





Watermelon Festival Block Party – June 12

From 5-9 p.m. on Friday, June 12, downtown Monticello is transformed into one big party zone. A BBQ truck from Johnston's will scent the air and tantalize



the tastebuds, while the Kids Ride-On Parade meanders down Mulberry Street. From an outdoor platform, the newly crowned Watermelon Festival royalty are officially presented to the community, and winners of the Baby Photo Contest and Pet Photo Contest receive their prizes. There will be face painting, shaved ice treats plus watermelon-themed games sponsored by the Monticello Police Department.

Kiwanis 5K Watermelon Run & Walk – June 13

Bright and early the next morning, registered participants can check in beginning at 7:30 a.m. at 325 Walnut St., and the race begins at 8:30 a.m. Runners are "chip timed" by Gulf Winds Track Club. A link to the online registration portal is on the festival website. Questions concerning the race can be directed to watermelonrun@gmail.com.

Woman's Club Luncheon & Fashion Show – June 18

This event takes place in the Perkins Hall of the Monticello Opera House. The luncheon features the Woman's Club's 100-year-old recipe for chicken salad, prepared by members themselves, along with delicious sides, croissants and

a slice of homemade 10-layer yellow cake. Fashions from several downtown boutiques are modeled by hometown folks, and the popular raffle features items donated from local businesses. Tickets, available May 1, can be purchased by calling 850-510-8359.

Watermelon Festival Day One – June 19

On the peak weekend of the Watermelon Festival, downtown starts to come alive at 3 p.m. on Friday, June 19. Stroll along Dogwood, Cherry and Pearl streets to enjoy the Vendor Village (3-9 p.m.), Watermelon Oasis (3-9 p.m.), Beer Garden (3-9 p.m.) and Melon Jam street dance featuring the Michael Miller Band (6-9 p.m.). At the historic Monticello Opera House, see the Friday evening performance of this year's kids' show, *The Little Mermaid, Jr.* at 7 p.m.

Watermelon Festival Day Two – June 20

All day events on Saturday, June 20, last 9 a.m.-3 p.m. and include the Vendor Village, Antique Car Show, Kids Play Zone, Live Music and Watermelon Oasis. The Watermelon Parade happens at 10 a.m., and after the parade, you can swing by the Beer Garden and Food Court (11 a.m.-3 p.m.). Enjoy live music by the Luke Matthews Band (10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.) and 229 Country (12:30-2:30 p.m.). Saturday's showings of *The Little Mermaid, Jr.* take place at 11:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. at the Monticello Opera House.

Divas Tribute to the Troops – July 3

The Monticello Opera House has booked The Divas Trio for a dynamic concert that honors the sacrifice and celebrates the heroism of those in our military. The group delivers soulful harmonies and heartfelt renditions of beloved military anthems and patriotic favorites that are sure to leave the audience inspired and uplifted. The live show conveys a powerful message of gratitude and respect through songs like "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," "Don't



Sit Under the Apple Tree," "Lullaby of Broadway," "God Bless America," "Salute to the Armed Forces – Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, Marines," "Battle Hymn of the Republic," "Grand Old Flag," "God Bless the USA," "America the Beautiful," "My Country 'Tis of Thee," "Coming to America" and more. For tickets, visit monticellooperahouse.org or call 850-997-4242.

Monticello's 250th July 4th Celebration

Government officials, business owners, leaders of nonprofits and members of clubs from all around Jefferson County have planned a fabulous Fourth of July celebration in Monticello for America's 250th Independence Day. The grounds in and around Memorial Stadium on South Water Street will be filled with stage entertainment, food vendors/concessions and kids' games starting at 6:30 p.m. (gates open at 5 p.m.). Live music begins at 7 p.m. with soul music by the Billy Rigsby Band, followed at 8:15 p.m. by Baby Gray. A spectacular fireworks display starts booming around 9:15 p.m. Broad support has made possible the resumption of local fireworks after a hiatus of some years to reestablish a connection to the community's long history of July 4th observances.

Looking Back

Even before Jefferson was a county, people living around Monticello have celebrated America's birth in a big way. Local historian R. A. Sheats noted in her book, *The Baileys of Jefferson County*, that on July 4, 1826 (six months



before the creation of Jefferson County), William Bailey and other residents gathered with around 150 other people in Tallahassee to celebrate America's 50th anniversary.

That event included an invocation, a reading of the Declaration of Independence, a musical salute that was "very spiritedly struck up" and, of course, speeches. A southern barbecue followed, with a menu of "one ox, one sheep, two shoat, three dozen fowls, ten hams, and fish and vegetables in the greatest variety and abundance."

Toasts were made to the future of Florida by settlers who were already looking ahead to eventual statehood, and to Thomas Jefferson, "a living monument of greatness." Some time later, the toast-drinkers in Florida heard the news that Jefferson had passed away that very day.

In *Palmetto Pioneers: The Emigrants*, Cindy Roe Littlejohn recounts a Fourth of July celebration in 1832, where members of the Walker branch of her family came to Monticello on horseback and in wagons to gather with other settlers for



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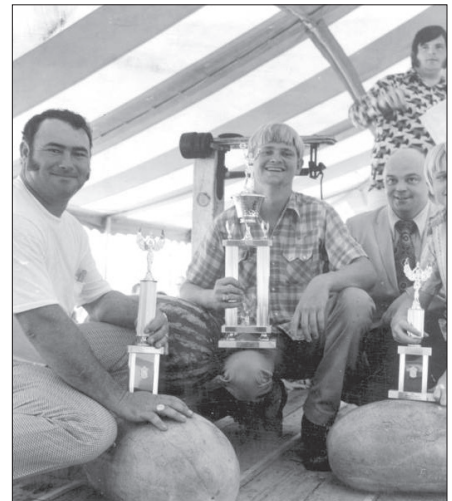
the occasion. Cannon and arms fired off at noon. After a procession from Martin Palmer's Tavern to the courthouse, there were speeches, prayers and toasts, such as "The tariff: may it be immediately adjusted to the satisfaction of all."

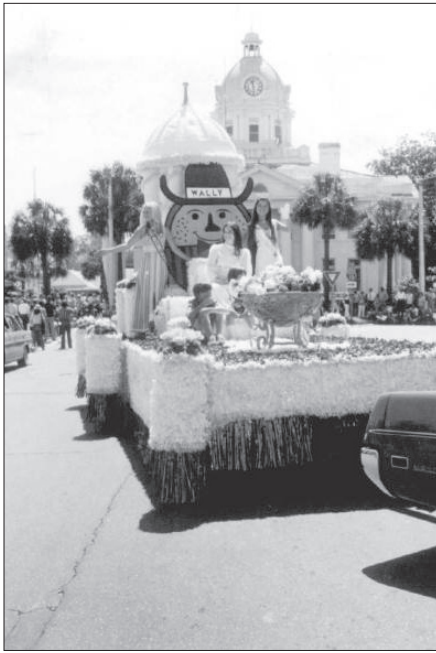
Littlejohn's historical narrative also notes that in July of 1840, the town held its annual Fourth of July celebration with an old-fashioned Virginia Barbecue. The festivities provided a much needed break from Indian trouble, a drought and worries about hurricanes.

In *The Birds of Jefferson County*, Sheats tells how Monticello's Fourth of July celebration in 1847 drew visitors from far and wide. The Fourth fell on a Sunday that year, so the accustomed celebrations were held the preceding Saturday. "It was a great and interesting day in the history of Monticello,"

one eyewitness noted. The volunteer companies of the Jefferson Hussars, the Independent Blues and the Independent Riflemen joined in the festivities, marching in a procession up Jefferson Street to a large grove of trees, where seats were provided for ladies and gentlemen. Patriotic readings, prayers and barbecue followed, and this year's toasts honored the memory of General George Washington, the heroes of the Revolution and the president of the United States, along with "Florida! The youngest daughter of our great Republic: The fairest flower that ever bloomed in the sunny South" – since Florida had just become a state in 1845.

It's clear that Fourth of July traditions have followed a thread through all the intervening years to today. Likewise, many events associated with the





Watermelon Festival have kept their importance into the present while evolving to reflect cultural changes. Photographs archived at Florida Memory and the *Monticello News* capture many moments from the festivals of the past: parade floats, contests, races, queens, street dances, shows, tournaments – and lots of smiles.

Both the Watermelon Festival and Monticello's 250th July 4th Celebration offer an extended, enticing mix of fun, spectacle, tradition, excitement and community spirit in a way that only an unapologetically rural slice of North Florida can. Jefferson County welcomes you to share in it! ■



BRYNWOOD

*Where hometown hearts meet
excellence in care*



Sponsored Content

Story by Crystal Goodwin

Photographs Courtesy of Brynwood Health and Rehabilitation

Tucked quietly into the rhythm of small-town life, the Brynwood Health and Rehabilitation Center stands as a place where care feels personal and neighbors become family. With a 97-resident capacity, the facility blends quaint charm with a lively community, offering frequent activities that keep laughter echoing through the halls.

"Nursing homes have a stereotype and a stigma to them," says Licensed Nursing Home Administrator Cindy Bruton. "This is a place where you go

to keep on living. We know it doesn't compare to their home, but we like to have fun and create a sense of family."

While many residents enter Brynwood for short-term skilled nursing care, with several long-term residents of over ten years, daily life is anything but boring.

"One of the best things about Brynwood is that we can take social isolation and turn that into friendships," Bruton explains. "It's about a lot more than following all the regulations, which we strive to do, but it's about the person and their quality of life."

Staff work intentionally to create meaningful experiences that bring joy and

connection to residents. From hosting a resident prom complete with decorations, music and royalty, to seasonal traditions such as pumpkin painting in the fall, the calendar is filled with moments designed to spark creativity and celebration.

Residents also enjoy outings that keep them connected to the community, including trips to local football games to show their hometown pride, and evening drives to see the Christmas lights in Thomasville.

The facility also honors culture and history through thoughtful celebrations like Black History Month. Community volunteers frequently visit, **bringing conversation, activities and**



companionship, or provide services like free family portraits.

Whether it's a festive event, a community outing, or a simple afternoon spent visiting with friends, the staff's focus on engagement ensures that residents are not only cared for, but are surrounded by opportunities to smile.

At the center of this compassionate and caring environment are the facility's staff, who strive to make their work environment a fun place.

"That's just who we are. That's just our personalities," says Nursing Director Brittany Holmes. "You have to be a very compassionate person to work in this field. You have to want to help people, and want to see them happy."

While every day might not be sunshine and rainbows, the staff support one another through the toughest parts of the job.

"It can be overwhelming when you have the desire to make everyone else great," Holmes says.

Her emphasis on staff development paid off in March 2026 when the facility successfully completed their annual Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA) Survey and received a deficiency-free report.

Earning an AHCA deficiency-free survey means Brynwood passed their state inspection with zero violations, which reflects full compliance with all state and federal regulations regarding care, safety and quality.

That exceptional service is no accident.

Under the direction of Bruton and Holmes, Brynwood has relied on staff retention, one-on-one trainings and the daily auditing of care processes to elevate their staff to the highest standards. Though this work can be difficult, often

grueling and detail-oriented, they have worked diligently to ensure that every member of their staff is operating at the highest levels of efficiency and dedication.

"Any one person can make or break it," Bruton says of the exam.

With a low annual turnover rate for all employee positions, the facility prioritizes employee relations to ensure quality care is provided to residents. In fact, some staff have been with the facility for more than 30 years.

The exam itself looks at everything from admissions protocols and administrative records to ensuring staff wear their badges, wash their hands after using hand sanitizer three times in a row and knock before entering a room.

Drilling these required habits until they are second nature are all a part of consistently excellent care.

The annual survey, which lasts three to four days on average, is typically conducted by a group of up to a half dozen surveyors. They can arrive at any time and spend approximately eight hours per day at the facility to determine quality of care.

"This was a team effort," Bruton says proudly. "Everybody was doing their part."

In addition to the annual AHCA survey, Brynwood received a five-star rating from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS).

According to Bruton, on average, fewer than 3% of facilities across the nation receive a deficiency-free review from AHCA. Only 1-2% receive both a deficiency-free review from AHCA and a five-star rating from CMS simultaneously.

"This does not mean things do not inadvertently happen, such as falls," Bruton clarifies. "It means, when it does,

it is a matter of what do we do when something happens. How do we handle it? There is a protocol."

"Documentation really matters," according to Holmes. "Our nurses have to document everything they do, and they do a lot."

Brynwood is a full-service facility, offering not only skilled nursing and rehabilitation and long-term care, but a range of medical treatments through contracts with providers. These include cardiology, pulmonology, mobile dermatology, psychiatric services, vision, audiology and podiatry. Having so many on-site services is rare, requiring continued education of the staff to assist with administering a wide range of healthcare.

Working at the facility has many benefits, including tuition reimbursement and support for additional training and licensure.

Lilac Healthcare, the management consulting company for Brynwood, emphasizes the importance of community, with a stated vision "to create a better everyday life for our residents, families and associates."

As the facility continues to grow, leadership remains focused on strengthening its connection to the community it serves. Bruton emphasizes this vision.

"I want us to be a viable part of the community. I want the public to think of us, to know of us and to trust us," she shares.

That commitment is reflected in both the quality of care and the welcome atmosphere families and residents experience each day. Brynwood has found a balance that defines its identity – big enough to be a community, yet small enough to feel like a family. ■



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Tate Gray

From small-town roots to the rodeo arena



Story by Hailey Waldo

Photographs Courtesy of Amber Gray

At just 17 years old, Tate Gray, of Live Oak, is already carving out a name for himself in one of the most physically demanding and mentally intense sports in America: bull riding. With a list of accomplishments that seasoned competitors would envy and a mindset grounded in discipline, faith and determination, Gray's story is one of rapid growth, resilience and an unwavering pursuit of bull-riding excellence.

Bull riding, often called "the most dangerous eight seconds in sports," is

a rodeo event that requires riders to stay mounted on a bucking bull for a full eight seconds using only one hand gripping a rope. Judges score both the rider's control and technique, as well as the bull's power and movement, making it a true test of balance, strength and mental focus. Unlike many sports, there are no teammates to rely on in the arena, just the rider, the animal and the clock.

What makes Gray's journey even more remarkable is how it all began, not in a rodeo arena, but in a simple, everyday conversation with his friend.

"It started with me and my friend one day. We were just talking about

it," Gray said. "So I brought it up to my mom, and she really took off with it and got me to where I am today."

From that moment forward, what began as a passing idea quickly turned into a full-fledged commitment to the sport. Though Gray didn't completely grow up around agriculture and wasn't raised in the rodeo spotlight, he is sure meant for it. His father worked as a ranching cowboy, giving him a glimpse into an agricultural lifestyle, but the competitive side of rodeo was something he had to pursue on his own. After losing his father at just 4 years old, Gray described how perseverance became a

defining part of his life early on.

"In the past three years, I've been more open to agriculture," he explained. "It hasn't been since my childhood or anything, but I kind of grew up around it."

His mother, Amber Gray, recognized his interest early on and made sure that if he was going to step into such a demanding sport, he would do it the right way.

"He just came up to me about it," Amber said, "and I said, 'well, if we're going to do it, we're going to do it the right way.'"

That meant training, learning from experienced riders and developing not only the physical strength required for bull riding but also the mental toughness that defines the sport.

"At first, it was scary starting out," Gray admitted. "But once I learned the mindset of it all, it calmed down."

That mindset has become one of his greatest strengths. Bull riding is often described as eight seconds of controlled chaos, but for Gray, it's as much about preparation as it is about performance.

"You have to learn a lot and from the right people," he said. "It takes a lot of time, effort and practice. I practice every day."

Much of that practice happens at home, where Gray trains on an electric drop barrel, a mechanical device designed to simulate the unpredictable bucking of a bull.

"It bucks up and down, and I use it every day. That's where a lot of the work happens when I'm not at a rodeo."

In addition to the barrel, Gray incorporates other drills into his routine, including working with his horse to simulate the aggressive movements of a bull.

"I get on my horse every once in a while and take it over some jumps and a round pen to simulate the bull kicking up on the front end and rearing on the back end," Gray explained. "It helps a lot to simulate it."

Despite the demanding schedule, Gray said balancing rodeo with daily life isn't as difficult as it might seem.

"I don't find it too hard to balance everything," he shared. "I always find time in my day to practice on my barrel, and I'll always go to any bull riding practice I can go to. That helps me throughout the week to prepare myself."

His commitment has paid off in a big way. Over the past several years, Gray has built an impressive resume, including winning the Little Britches State Finals three years in a row and claiming multiple state titles during



his junior high rodeo career. He also competed in shoot dogging, a steer wrestling event adapted for younger athletes, where he placed fourth in the world.

"I've won three state saddles at the end of this year," he said. "When you're in a rodeo association, you compete all year long, and at the end of the year, your points carry over. The most points wins champion or reserve champion saddles."

Gray has consistently come out on

top, earning not only saddles but also buckles and recognition as one of the sport's rising young talents.

"When I won the World Championship, I got chaps and a buckle," he added.

Now competing at a higher level, Gray recently made waves at the North Florida Rodeo in Lee, where he placed second with a score of 78 points on Friday night. It's just one of many highlights in a career that continues to gain momentum.



Tate Gray stands with his mother Amber Gray after being awarded a champion belt buckle at the 2025 Las Vegas Junior World Finals

His travels have taken him far beyond Florida, including recent trips to Texas and Las Vegas – two major hubs in the rodeo world.

“We just went out to Texas a couple weeks ago,” Gray said. “We did the Las Vegas qualifier, which I had won a world championship in 2024, and I plan on going back this year. I made qualifications.”

While in Texas, he also competed in a Junior Patriot event, further sharpening his skills against top competition.

“My favorite place to travel is Las Vegas,” he said. “The rodeo ran smoothly. Everything was real nice. We had good stock.”

Las Vegas holds special significance in the rodeo community as the home of the National Finals Rodeo (NFR), where the best professional cowboys in the world compete. For younger riders like Gray, the Junior NFR offers a glimpse into that elite level.

“When you go to Vegas, it hosts the national world rodeo finals,” he explained. “That’s when you’re a professional cowboy, and it’s a 10-day deal. Out there, they have a Junior NFR, which I qualified for. It’s kind of following the professionals, just at a junior level.”

Gray’s ambitions don’t stop there. As he approaches his 18th birthday, he has already begun stepping into the professional world.

“We went and got our feet wet in

our first PRCA rodeo two weeks ago,” he said. “It was really fun.”

The Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) is the premier governing body of rodeo in the United States, and competing at that level is a major milestone for any rider.

“That’s what qualifies for the world finals at the end of the year,” Gray said, “but I can’t fully do that until I’m 18.”

Even so, his early exposure to the professional circuit is setting the stage for what could be a promising future. In addition to his rodeo success, Gray is also attracting attention from colleges. Recently, he received offers from Missouri State and Frank Phillips College, in Texas.

“I’ve been looking into that, but I’m not sure yet,” he said. “Frank Phillips is a full ride in diesel mechanic or welding – something technical or in the trades.”

While his future plans are still taking shape, one thing is certain: rodeo will remain a central part of his life.

“I plan on continuing it when I’m older,” Gray said.

Of course, the road hasn’t been without its challenges. Bull riding is widely regarded as one of the most dangerous sports in the world, and Gray has experienced his share of injuries.

“I’ve been knocked out one time,” Gray reported. “I blew my thumb open and had to get 12 stitches. I fractured my elbow – not too bad – but I was hung up on a bull from the rope, and it stepped

on my leg. That was one of the scariest ones.”

More recently, at the Lee PCA rodeo, Gray had the wind knocked out of him after a ride.

“On Friday, I got off the bull, and it knocked the wind completely out of me,” he said.

Despite these moments, Gray remains undeterred, driven by both passion and perspective.

“What people don’t know about rodeo is that a lot of it looks bad, but it’s not really bad at all.”

A large part of that perspective comes from his strong faith, which he carries with him into every ride.

“Before I get on, I pray over my bull for God to keep me and everyone in the arena safe,” Gray said. “I have Him help me ride this bull and do the best I can.”

That quiet moment of prayer reflects the mindset that fuels his performance.

Gray also credits much of his growth to the mentors and training he has received along the way. He has attended multiple bull riding schools, learning from experienced professionals who have helped shape his technique and approach.

“I’ve gone to four schools,” he said. “Gary Leffew, he’s a real good teacher, especially about mindset and fundamentals. He’s great in my mind, and I really like him.”

Beyond the arena, Gray’s life is equally grounded in hard work and responsibility.

“Outside of bull riding, I work for my step-dad,” Gray said. “He’s a stock contractor, and he comes to all the rodeos, which I help him out a lot with.”

That work includes everything from preparing livestock to maintaining the property.

“Working around the house, farm work, feeding the cattle, fixing the fences – stuff like that,” he said.

Those daily responsibilities not only support his family but also keep him closely connected to the agricultural roots that have become such a significant part of his life.

As Gray continues to grow both as a rider and as an individual, his story stands as a testament to what can happen when passion meets opportunity, and when a simple conversation turns into a life-changing journey.

From practicing on a drop barrel in Live Oak to competing on national stages, Tate Gray is proving that dedication, faith and hard work can carry you far, even in just eight seconds at a time. ■

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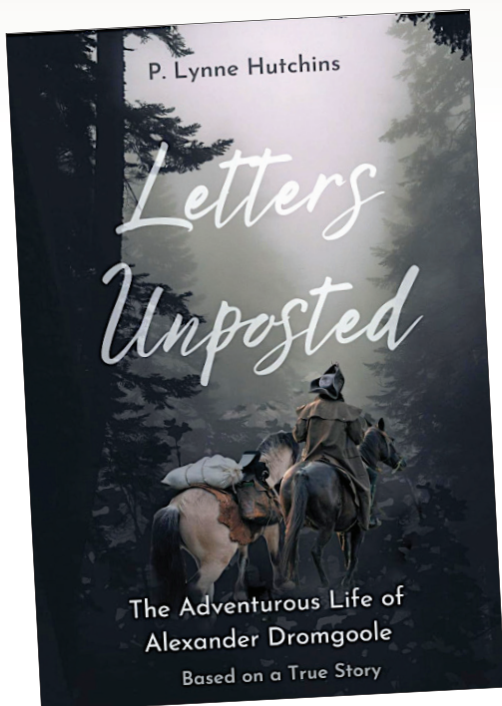

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Letters Unposted

(Newman Springs Publishing, December 2023) and

A Question of Friendship

(September 2024)

By P. Lynne Hutchins

Historical fiction writer P. Lynne Hutchins, a retired teacher from Live Oak, enjoys telling the kinds of stories that usually haven't been featured in history books. She's in the midst of crafting a trilogy for young adult readers that begins during the American Revolutionary War in western Appalachia and continues through the Trail of Tears in the 1830s.

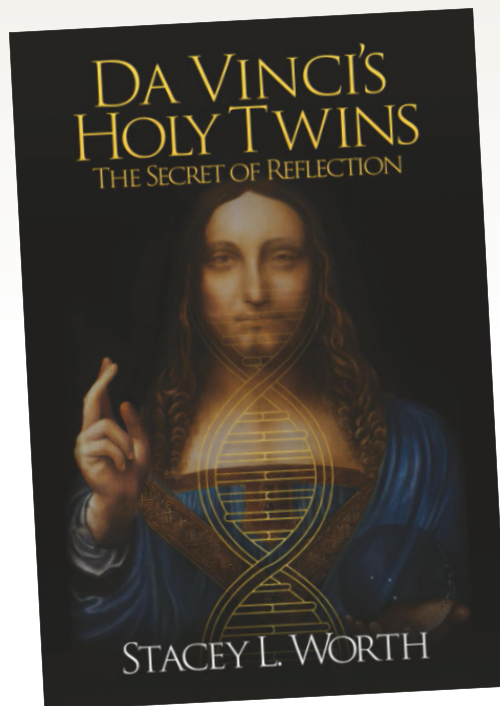
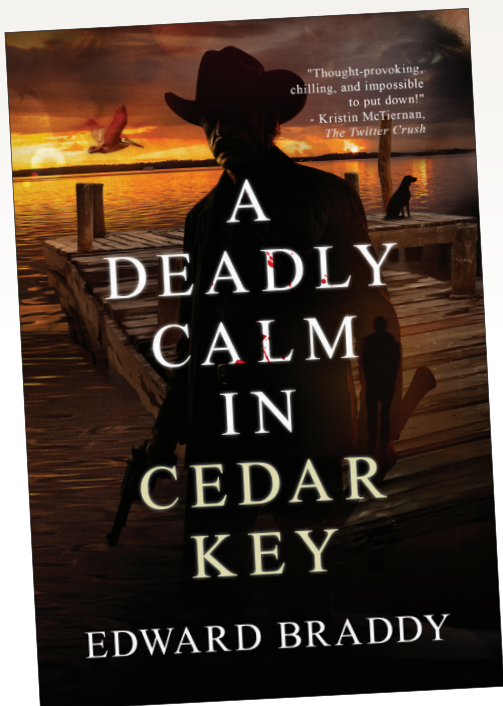
The first book, *Letters Unposted*, is based on the true story of Alexander Dromgoole, an aged and frail Revolutionary War veteran and Indian trader who is reliving his adventure-filled

life through letters he wrote, but never sent, to his brother over a 50-year span. Due to failing eyesight, he has a young orphan boy named Thomas read them back to him one last time before he dies. In this way, the reader is transported into Dromgoole's upbringing, war experiences, first love, life as a gentleman and travels trading with the Cherokee.

The second book, *A Question of Friendship*, continues with Thomas, now a teenager, as he forms unexpected friendships, learns to see new perspectives and finds the courage to help others in dire circumstances. There's murder, a kidnapping, romance, difficult journeys and harrowing escapes across a backdrop of new settlements and the Trail of Tears.

Both books are available through the author's official website, plynnehutchins.com, as well as major online booksellers. The third book is in the works!

The interesting small towns that dot the landscape of Florida's Big Bend have produced a fascinating fusion of people, many of whom channel their experiences and interests into equally fascinating books. In this issue, we're taking notice of a crime thriller, an exploration of human nature through art, and two works of historical fiction. If there's a local author whose work you'd like to see noted in a future issue of *The Front Porch* magazine, email emerald@greenepublishing.com.



A Deadly Calm in Cedar Key

By Edward Braddy
(February 2026)

Edward Braddy lives in Old Town, and his first book, *A Deadly Calm in Cedar Key*, just won the 2026 Spring Seasonal PenCraft Book Award in the Fiction – Mystery – Sleuth genre.

The story centers on the murder of a kindly volunteer in Cedar Key, a crime that pulls the town's disgraced former police chief into the investigation. While his involvement might restore his reputation, it also could stir up interest in the circumstances of his involuntary separation from law enforcement. A dangerous hurricane tracks toward the scene as a swirl of federal agents, local politics and meth traffickers complicate the pursuit of justice. It all sets up a classic dilemma between upholding the law or stepping into the realm of vengeance that is often at the heart of the best crime thrillers.

The paperback version is available now through major online booksellers. A hardback edition and audio book are forthcoming. Braddy is currently writing a second book in what he hopes will become a five- or six-book series.

Da Vinci's Holy Twins: The Secret of Reflection

By Stacey L. Worth
(American Publishing, February 2026)

For Live Oak author Stacey Lee Worth, a 12-year search to reach her silent grandson became an exploration of Leonardo da Vinci's secret code – how every brushstroke encodes the rhythm of the seed, the twin currents of masculine and feminine light, and the balance that sustains creation. Her research focused on the question, “What if Leonardo da Vinci's masterpieces were not portraits of saints, but blueprints of human consciousness itself?”

Her conclusions have been published in the book, *Da Vinci's Twins: The Secret of Reflection*. In it, Worth uncovers a hidden pattern that runs through Leonardo's art, modern biology and the human soul. Through examining paintings from *Salvator Mundi* to *The Last Supper* and the rediscovered *Holy Infants Embracing*, Worth reveals a unified vision: that consciousness itself is the reflection between opposites. Blending art history, science and personal revelation, this is the story of a grandmother, a master and the mystery of light returning.

Worth has envisioned this book as the first in a trilogy. She currently is working on the second book, *The Human Seed*, and plans for a third book, *The Honeycomb*, to follow.

The first book is available through major online booksellers.

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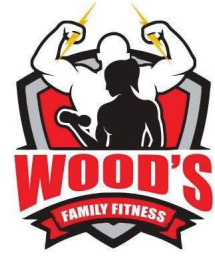
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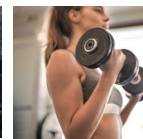
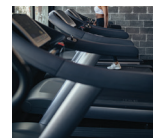
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From coma to comeback:

MALCOLM WINGFIELD'S RELENTLESS FIGHT TO LIVE AGAIN

Story by Hailey Waldo

Photographs Courtesy of Malcolm Wingfield

For Malcolm Wingfield, resilience is something he learned over time, shaped by where he came from, the challenges he pursued and the recovery he continues to work through today. After a sudden injury that left him in a coma and partially paralyzed, his path shifted into a long, uncertain recovery that tested both his physical and mental strength.

Wingfield was born on November 19, 1994, in Philadelphia and raised in Madison, Florida.

"I was born in Philadelphia ... I trickled down from Chicago to North Carolina; then I finally ended up in Madison," Wingfield said, describing the path that eventually led him to graduate from Madison County High School (MCHS). He spent nearly two decades living in Madison before deciding to enter the military. His introduction to the military came unexpectedly.

"When I was at MCHS my senior year in 2013, the recruiters came and I wasn't thinking about it at all ... I didn't even know there was a difference in the branches," he said and recalled how one moment stood out. "I saw them in their uniforms, and this Marine walked by, and they all looked at him a certain way ... There's a reason they did that."

That curiosity turned into interest.

"I was watching YouTube ... looking at all the branches, and the Marines stood out. It wasn't the same," he said. "Their demeanor, what they stood for, it wasn't the same," he added, explaining what drew his attention more deeply.

He began to notice differences not just in appearance, but in the mindset and expectations, which made the Marines feel like something more than just an option. What drew him in was the challenge.

"They were the hardest, most physically demanding ... I truly wanted to challenge myself."

When he went to enlist, however, he was told he wasn't ready.

"They said I was overweight ... I had to lose at least 150 pounds, and the recruiter said I wouldn't be able to do it."

Instead of walking away, Wingfield committed to the process.

"I was tired. I was extremely tired, and I never took any days off," he said. "All I cared about was proving them wrong."



His routine became repetitive and demanding, centered entirely around reaching that goal. Days blended together with little rest, and his focus remained fixed on meeting the requirement.

"Even the last day before I went to the recruiter, I didn't go to sleep at all. I was still running to get that weight off," he added.

While he now recognizes the risks in how far he pushed himself, at the time it represented determination and a refusal to accept limits placed on him. By March 10, 2014, he had made weight and entered boot camp. Over time, what started as a challenge became something more to him.

"I fell in love with it," he shared. "It wasn't an interest until it turned into a dream I didn't know I had. I felt at home there. I wanted to do 20 years or at least until they kicked me out."

He served for six years in the Marines before his life changed unexpectedly.

After returning to North Carolina, following a military operation, he recalled, "I just blacked out ... and then they never really told me what happened. I was the last one there on the base," he added, describing how sudden the moment felt.

The moment itself remains unclear to him, something he describes as sudden and without warning, making it even more difficult to process afterward.

The last thing he could recall, he was loading up weapons into a training vehicle. When he woke up, he was disoriented.

"I woke up and thought everyone was in my room ... and I didn't even realize I wasn't talking because I had lost the ability to talk."

As he became more aware, the reality set in.

"I realized it was a hospital room ... I was trying to move, and I didn't even realize I was paralyzed. Once the morphine wore off, I realized I wasn't dreaming, and I was in unimaginable pain."

Before those early stages of recovery began, the extent of Wingfield's injuries revealed just how serious his condition was. He suffered a traumatic brain injury along with fractures to his C1 and C2 vertebrae, injuries that affect the upper spine and are critical to basic movement and stability. He also experienced a brainstem injury that led to right-sided paralysis, known as hemiplegia, along with nerve damage and hearing loss. Internal injuries added to the severity, including damage to his organs that resulted in the removal of his spleen, as



well as a left kidney hematoma and lung contusions. During his time in recovery, he also endured a heart attack, had difficulty swallowing, required a feeding tube and developed other complications that affected his ability to function independently.

The early stages of recovery were especially difficult.

"The first two months were definitely the worst. I couldn't tell anyone the pain I was feeling ... or that I needed to use the bathroom or was choking," he said. "I almost choked to death a few times ... had a call button but I couldn't press it. By luck, someone always walked in."

Without the ability to communicate, even routine moments became unpredictable and, at times, dangerous.

"I went from being strong and independent, to now needing help constantly," he added.

Wingfield relied heavily on the presence of others, which made even basic needs feel uncertain. With limited movement and no way to communicate, even time itself felt different.

"Since my neck was broken, I couldn't even look around or at the TV. The only time I got to see something other than the ceiling was when I was turned to the side ... I could wave my hand – that was the most entertainment I got."

The moment he spoke again came suddenly.

"One day, I was choking and just blurted out 'help' ... and everyone freaked out because I was talking, but in the moment, I just needed help."

That moment stood out because it happened out of necessity, forcing the return of something he had lost without realizing it. Even after regaining his voice, the mental toll remained.

"I told them, 'I don't want to be here no more' ... I couldn't live in this much pain for the rest of my life."

Yet, through it all, Wingfield remained resilient. Progress came gradually. As he began to understand the extent of his paralysis, he kept moving one of his hands and wondering "what's wrong with this one?"

Wingfield was diagnosed with hemiplegia, a type of paralysis that affects only one side of the body. Despite setbacks, he stayed focused on improving.

"I told my physical therapist, 'I'm gonna do this no matter that,'" Wingfield said.

Small steps followed.

"I was able to stand on a walker for the first time ... Everyone was surprised I was even able to move."

Those moments built toward something bigger.

"Four months later, I was able to walk again and I went to surprise my family. I didn't tell them right away until I walked to visit them," he said.

Everyday experiences began to take on new meaning.

"I hadn't drunk water with my mouth for over a year," he shared. "I started crying. Just the feeling of water – I didn't even know I took it for granted."

Even going outside became significant. Wingfield recalled one snowy



day in the hospital when he was allowed to go outside.

"I went outside with just a tank-top. The doctor thought it was brain damage, but I wanted to feel the cold."

In moments like this, Wingfield realized how much he had taken for granted.

"Before I'd always try to be warm when it's cold, or cool when it's warm, but I wanted to just feel the cold air. Imagine being on your back for over a year just staring at the ceiling, I can barely describe the feeling when I was finally able to go outside."

During his recovery, Wingfield also connected with others.

"I went around to other people's rooms in my wheelchair and checked on them, and we all became friends," he said.

One moment stood out in particular where Wingfield met a paralyzed 10-year-old boy.

When the boy asked Wingfield, "How did you learn how to walk again?"

Wingfield replied, "I don't know how to tell you, but I can show you."

Before Wingfield was transferred, he watched the boy walk again, as he was leaving the hospital.

After more than a year in the hospital, Wingfield was transferred to a rehabilitation program in Tampa.

"That program focused on Veterans learning to live again outside of the hospital," he said, where he continued rebuilding independence.

"I was in a coma for around a month ... The recovery was long, I am still hurting to this day," said Wingfield, adding that even after major milestones,

the effects of his injury never fully went away. "I didn't recover till around the two and a half year mark ... I missed a lot in that time, alone."

Adjusting back to life came with its own challenges.

"When I was able to walk ... I went to go swipe my card, and they told me to insert my card chip, and I said 'what chip?' Things like that, and then DoorDash came, Uber, all these new things. I had no idea what was going on," he admitted.

Even outside the hospital, the world felt unfamiliar.

"People graduated. People had kids. I had no idea what was going on."

Wingfield continued to struggle, trying to catch up to a life that had continued without him. He explained that accepting that lost time was one of the harder parts of recovery, learning to move forward without being able to go back.

"If I let it hold me back I never would've gone back to school, never would've loved my mom the same way or never would've had my final moment with her before she passed away," he said, adding that his experience ultimately changed how he valued his relationships and made every moment more meaningful.

Today, Wingfield lives in Gainesville, Florida, and is continuing forward.

"Now I go to school," he said. "I'm graduating from Santa Fe Community College next semester."

He works in nutrition and is pursuing motivational speaking, while also sharing his experiences through his book, *Me Against Me: Not All Storms*

Come to Disrupt your Life, which has reached an international audience, permanently earning its place in the London Book Fair Book Gallery. The event is one of the most anticipated book fairs on the calendar, bringing together thousands of professionals from across the globe.

Wingfield's book is available for purchase on Amazon, where he dives deeper into his loss, self-transformation and personal resilience, all framed around the saying, "Not all storms come to disrupt your life ... Some come to clear your path." His book continues to gain momentum and recognition within the global literary community.

He is also preparing for an interview spotlight, "Inside the Author's World," with Logan Crawford.

"I saw life in a whole different way. I'm more appreciative of all the things I lost," he said, reflecting how his perspective has shifted since his recovery.

Recovery is still ongoing.

"I'm hurting still ... Sometimes I can't even sleep ... There's days I sit there and can't believe I went through that ... Sometimes ... I just want to give up."

Even so, Wingfield's focus remains on moving forward.

"I remind myself of what I have in front of me ... How can I move forward if I'm looking behind?"

That mindset continues to guide him, especially on days when progress feels slower or more difficult to recognize.

"I cope with it by staying busy,"

Wingfield said, describing how he manages the long-term effects of his injuries. "I have the worst days when everyone is used to seeing me up, but I continue feeling down."

He explained that while those moments can be difficult, he's found ways to keep moving forward.

"I really like running. Believe it or not, it helps clear my mind ... I listen to music and play the piano, too," he said, adding that staying active gives him structure and balance.

He also spends much of his time with his family.

"I really like working with my brother ... I like finding new ways to interact or do something new," he said.

Wingfield's story reflects the impact of persistence through long-term recovery. His experience shows that progress can come slowly, but it is possible.

"I can still say I got through it," said Wingfield, setting an example, he hopes, that others will follow and keep going even when the path forward feels uncertain. ■

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THE RHYTHM OF THE RUN



Addi with Birdie



Inside the world of young barrel racer Addi Belle Godwin

Story by Danny Federico

*Photography by Addi Belle Godwin and
Ginny Godwin*

When the gate swings open, everything else disappears.

The noise of the crowd fades into the distance, becoming indistinct in the background. It dulls, taken over by something steadier – the rhythm of hooves striking packed dirt, the shift of weight in the saddle, the instinct that takes over when there's no time left to think.

Standing in the ring are three barrels, spaced out across the arena floor. The pattern is simple; the execution is not.

For 14-year-old Jasper resident Addi Belle Godwin, it all starts in the seconds just before a run, when the world stills and everything is possible.

"Excitement," she said, reflecting on what emotion comes over her before the gate opens. "I try to motivate myself and my horse not to be worried."

Then it begins.

In a matter of seconds, the run is over – a blur of motion, tight turns and acceleration where every movement matters and every fraction of a second carries weight. But those few seconds in the arena are only the visible part of something much larger. What people don't see is everything that comes before it: the repetition, the mistakes, the adjustments and the steady work that builds over time.

For Godwin, that journey didn't begin in an arena, but rather with a love of horses that began when she was just a child.

"They were my favorite animal when I was younger," she said.

Her introduction to riding came early. At 4 years old, her mother put her on a horse for the first time, carefully guided by lead line as she learned how to properly sit, balance and move with the animal beneath her. At that age, it was less about competition and more about familiarity – learning what it felt like to be

on a horse and understanding the basics of control and trust.

But it didn't take long for that early experience to grow into something more.

By the time she was 6, she had begun stepping into the rodeo world, participating through organizations like the Southeast Little Britches Rodeo Association and the East Coast Rodeo Association. There, she was introduced not just to riding, but to the culture that surrounds it – the long days, the early mornings and the energy of competition.

Those early experiences shaped her, giving her a foundation not just in riding but in understanding what it meant to compete. Still, it wasn't until later that she found the discipline that truly felt like her own.

"Rodeos have really made me fall in love with riding," she said.

From that love, a fascination with barrel racing was born, ultimately becoming her focus.

"I like barrel racing because it gives



me a place to make runs with my horse," Godwin said.

She noted the structure of the race – the pattern, speed and precision – drew her in. More than that, though, it's what those runs represent: progress taking shape in real time.

"When you make a good run, you know that what you've been practicing on with your horse is starting to work," she said. "Like, you are starting to get somewhere."

That feeling of improvement, of movement forward, is what encourages her to keep getting back on the saddle.

"It makes me happy whenever I can get somewhere," Godwin said.

To someone watching from the stands, barrel racing might look simple. A rider enters the arena, circles three barrels and races toward the exit. It happens quickly, almost effortlessly, but Godwin knows how much effort lies beneath that simplicity.

"Not everybody realizes how much work you have to put into certain horses," she said.

Every horse is different. Each one, she said, has its own personality, its own tendencies and its own way of responding. What works for one horse may not work for another, and learning

how to adapt to that is part of the process.

"Every horse has a different way of running barrels," she said. "And people don't always realize how hard it is to learn what helps the horse the most."

That learning doesn't happen all at once. It happens gradually through repetition and observation.

Godwin typically practices two to three times a week to build consistency not just in her own riding, but in her communication with her horse. Recently, she began working with a trainer in Hahira, Ga., to refine her technique.

"He's been showing me how to run the barrels a lot smoother," she said.

In barrel racing, smoothness isn't just about appearance; it's about efficiency. A smoother run, Godwin explained, often means tighter turns, better positioning and, ultimately, a faster time.

Seemingly small adjustments in how a horse approaches a barrel, exits a turn and how quickly it accelerates are what separate a decent run from a great one.

For years, one horse stood at the center of Godwin's journey: Ranger, the horse she won the National Barrel Horse Association's 2024 Youth and Teen World Championship with.

Ranger wasn't always easy. Godwin explained he had a reputation for being

skittish, the kind of horse that could be unpredictable and cautious around others.

However, over time, something changed. With patience and consistency, Godwin built a connection with him, one based on trust and understanding.

"He was a really good horse," she said.

Together, they claimed the world championship title, a moment that still stands out to her.

"It's the biggest accomplishment I've had so far," she said.

That run, like so many others, lasted only seconds, but what it represented stayed with her.

Since then, her journey hasn't slowed down.

Godwin returned to the championship in 2025 and has continued competing in events ranging from rodeos to local fundraiser barrel races. At the same time, her path has shifted slightly.

"I recently sold Ranger," she said.

Moving on from a horse that played such a significant role isn't easy, but in barrel racing, change is part of growth. Riders move forward, partnerships evolve and new opportunities begin to take shape.

Now, her focus is on a different

horse: Birdie.

"He's curious," she said, "and he knows how to do the barrels pretty well."

She stated their partnership is still developing through repetition, patience and time spent getting used to each other.

"We've been working on making sure that we're smoother and cleaner," Godwin said.

Because even with a new horse, the fundamentals remain the same – trust is everything.

"To build trust, you just practice with them," she said. "You get to understand how they operate."

That understanding grows over time with consistency and familiarity.

"The more you ride your horse at home, the better they understand that you're their person," she said.

That connection shines through in subtle ways – how a horse responds to cues, in how tightly it turns, in how confidently it moves through the pattern. Even small details matter. Positioning in the alleyway, for example, can help set up a better approach to the first barrel, allowing for a tighter "pocket" and a more efficient turn.

It's the kind of detail that might go unnoticed to a casual observer, but for a rider, it can make all the difference because, once the run begins, there's no time to think through each step.

"You're trying to remember what to do," she said, "because, when you're in a run, it goes by so fast."

As the horse surges forward, the outside world fades.

"The outside is mostly blocked out," she said. "You're so focused on making sure that you get everything right."

Godwin said it's a balance between instinct and awareness, reacting in real time while staying locked in on the pattern.

"It's a lot of thinking," she said.

When everything comes together, there's a moment near the end of the run that stands out above the rest.

"The most exciting part is leaving the third barrel," she said. "Making sure you get your horse out and you feel good about yourself, you completed something."

That sense of completion – of executing something exactly as intended – is what makes it all worth it.

But not every run goes that way. There are mistakes and missteps. There are runs that don't feel right from the start.

Sometimes a horse goes too wide around a barrel, adding seconds. Sometimes a cue comes too late or too early. Sometimes things just don't line up the way they should.



For Godwin, those moments are part of the process.

"I use what I did wrong so I can work on it," she said.

Godwin explained that her mom often records her runs, giving her the opportunity to go back and watch, analyze and understand what happened – what went well and what needs improvement.

"You can see if you didn't turn them the right way or cue them the right way," she said.

From there, it becomes a cycle: identify, adjust, practice and try again. That mindset has shaped how she approaches competition now.

Where she once focused more on what happened after the run – the reactions, the people around her – she now keeps her attention on what matters most.

"I focus more on my runs now," she said.

That shift has brought a new level of confidence. It's also changed how she sets her goals. Godwin stated she's begun working on increasing her speed, tightening her turns and improving consistency with each run.

At the same time, she said she's learned something just as important as any technical skill.

"As long as I have faith in myself and my horse ... I can do it," she said.

Still, the sport comes with its challenges.

"The toughest part is how competitive it is," she said.

As riders gain experience, the level of competition rises. Horses become faster, runs become tighter and the margin for error gets smaller. But for Godwin, that challenge is part of what keeps her



motivated.

Outside of the arena, her life is filled with other responsibilities and interests. She's involved in Future Farmers of America, participates in theater and balances school alongside her riding schedule.

Each of those commitments requires focus and discipline. But even with everything else going on, her connection to horses remains central.

"Most of my time is taken up with horses," Godwin said, "and I like that."

Looking ahead, her focus remains on improvement, not just in terms of results, but in preparation and consistency. She wants to make sure her horse is ready for every run, physically and mentally.

Her goals aren't defined solely by wins or titles; they're about becoming a better rider, building a stronger partnership with her horse and continuing to grow with each experience. At the same time, she's thinking about her future beyond barrel racing. She has an interest in occupational therapy and enjoys helping others, a path that will require the same patience and dedication she brings to the arena.

But no matter where that path leads, barrel racing has already left its mark. It has taught her discipline, focus and resilience. It has shown her how to work through setbacks and how to build trust, not just with a horse, but with herself.

Back at the gate, everything resets.

The anticipation builds. The focus sharpens. The world narrows once again.

For Godwin, every run is another opportunity to improve, to learn and to take one more step forward.

And when the gate opens, she doesn't hesitate.

She runs. ■

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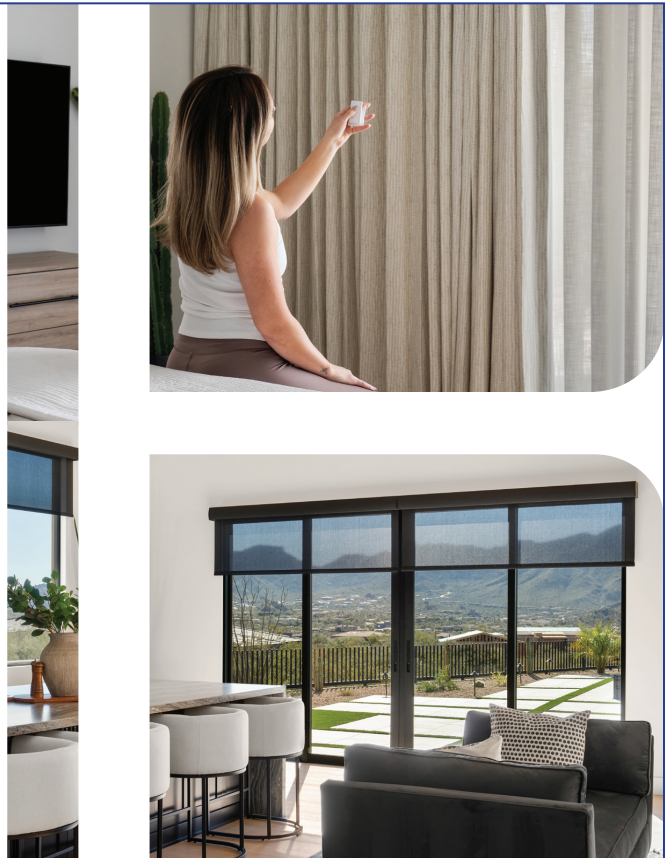
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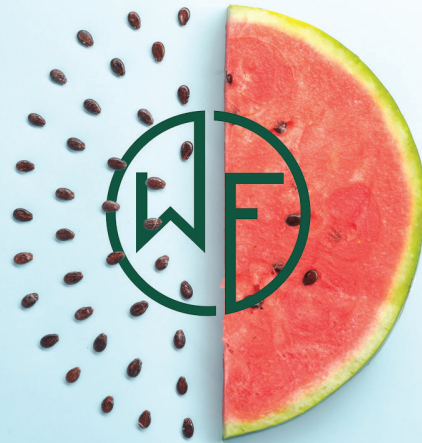
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IN THE SPOTLIGHT

BRANNAN SALTER

Story by Hailey Heseltine

Photographs Courtesy of Brannan Salter

If you see a show at the Monticello Opera House (MOH), chances are that Brannan Salter is a part of it. With experience across 42 productions, this theater aficionado has served variously as a behind-the-scenes member, performer and, most recently, a newly-appointed member of MOH's board of directors.

Salter doesn't remember how exactly he ended up on stage for the first time, but he remembers how it felt to be there.

"It was *Hot Dogs and Cool Cats*, in the summer of '09. I think that the director of the show was drawing in from the homeschooled network in the area. Somehow, my parents found out about it, and I got landed. That's all I know about how I ended up there. It's all back far enough in my mind that it's more of a fact than a memory, but I do know that I was eager and willing," he recalls.

Salter says that growing up homeschooled in Jefferson County re-contextualized his life. Though he was born in Tallahassee, he moved to the Aucilla community in 2003 and found himself growing up in one of the most active homeschooling communities in North Florida. Around middle and high school ages, he was involved in co-ops and other groups, and discovered he was particularly fond of speech and debate, creative writing and math, among other subjects. The liveliness of the homeschooling community, however, wasn't enough to bring him out of his shell. An only child and not quite a social butterfly, Salter already knew as a young teen that he was on the autism spectrum. According to a bio of him, his mother may have encouraged him to join the cast of *Hot Dogs and Cool Cats* to help with socializing.

"I was definitely a little late to the game on some of the social cues and things like that," he says. "Those took me a bit longer. Then there's other things with my memory, like that I can look at a script and have it down in a few days. There's also areas where I'm able to tunnel, focus my attention on certain things, you know, and that happens to segue in with certain kinds of work I do pretty well."

With the help of mentors like Jack Williams and Melanie Mays, he quickly discovered that acting was one of those things he could do pretty well. Stage fright wasn't much of a problem for him, and he navigated multiple roles in his very first show. Most people in the cast had at least one costume change for an alternate role, and he was no exception, playing one of the dogs for about the



first two thirds of the play, then doing a quick change and returning to the stage to portray a humane society employee.

Being onstage wasn't daunting for him. He describes himself as often entering a meditative-like state, completely absorbed into the show and his role, "a mood that hits when

everything's calm, and it's like you're locked into it."

Though participating in productions hasn't always been constant throughout his life, it was something he always found himself coming back to, year after year.

"I'd say that there is a mental and emotional catharsis, and even kind of a

dopamine kick, that comes from learning to be somebody you're not," Salter says. "It's like you have a filter that you put over yourself to do that kind of thing. You get the script, and there's some guys and girls I know in the world who thrive off of and love improv, and when something's happening, they just have to wing it. There's other people that love the structure of the same thing happening the same way every time. For me, I don't really have a single word for it."

Though Salter can't explain exactly what it is that drew him to acting, his track record speaks for itself – more than 40 productions, 17 years of experience, thousands of hours of practices and countless contributions on and off the stage. When he's not acting, he's often occupied with tech roles. He's also earned a reputation as someone who can be relied on for last-minute assistance. His ability to memorize lines within days is both a blessing and a curse, because he often finds himself called to replace cast members who have to drop out of the show.

Another one of his specialities is projection. The tone of his voice naturally carries across the theater well. This means that, even though some other actors might need a microphone to assist with amplifying their voices, Salter doesn't. Unfortunately, though, everyone can't be



all strengths.

"I cannot dance to save my life," he laughs, "which is interesting, for as many musicals I've been in. God's honest truth is that because I'm tall, I'm usually in the back. Every now and then, there'll be a line right at the front, and I go, 'Oh no, now I have to do this right.' That's the truth."

Regardless of the demands of his particular role (including dancing), he says that theater requires you to

With acting, you have to put yourself into a lot of different mindsets and be a lot of different people. The more you do it, the more you learn about yourself, and the more you learn about other people, too.

constantly be on your toes. Anything could go wrong, from cast members forgetting their lines to unfortunate mishaps with sound effects. He told the story of a particular production instance in which the sound for a doorbell ringing was accidentally swapped with the sound of a toilet flushing. Needless to say, there were a lot of giggles that night. Being a stage actor includes needing to adapt to whatever circumstances may come up because, as the saying goes, the show must go on. For Salter, it's been going on for quite a while.

"I think it's a chicken and egg dynamic," he muses. "Half of the reason that I've kept it up is just that this stuff goes back further than any detailed memories I have. It's sort of like how a brick-and-mortar churchgoer who's been going all their lives probably couldn't wrap their head around ever walking away from that. The other half of it is that I've made lifelong friendships, like family besides blood, with people in the theater. Turning my back on that or giving it up is like asking a fish to give up water."

His most recent production at MOH was *Tuesdays with Morrie*, in which he played one of the lead roles, Mitch Albom. The show, which is based on a memoir of the same name, follows a journalist as he reunites with his former professor during the last days of his life.



Salter describes Mitch's character, as "an aspiring jazz pianist that suffers a personal tragedy early in his life, which pivots him out of his dream and into something more sensible for the bank account ... a workaholic that thrives off of over-sensory stimuli, and he's emotionally unavailable, keeping his trauma buried in the past."

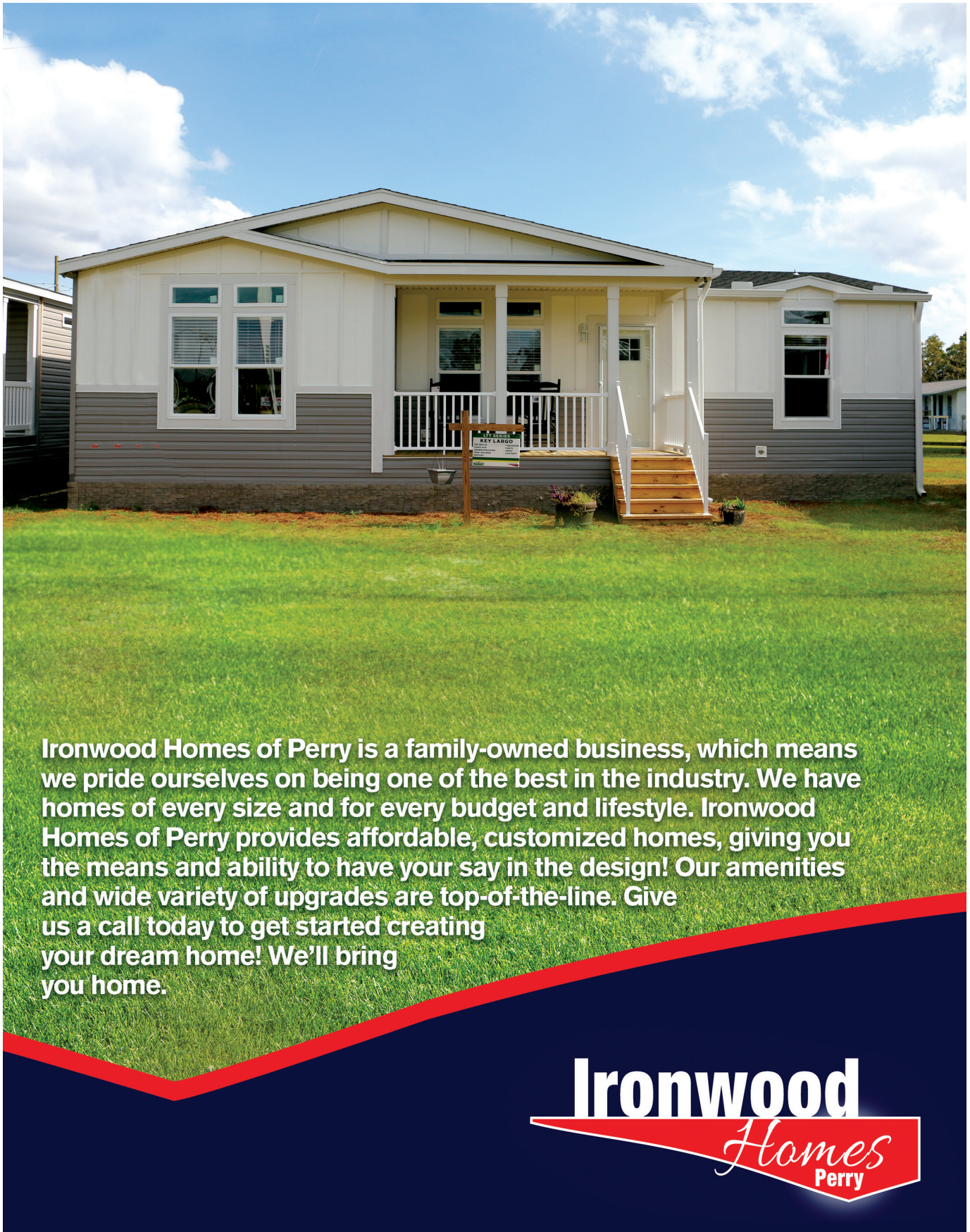
Salter admits that he was initially daunted after reading the script, because the role was quite different from the ones he usually plays, and dramas are one of the types of shows he's the least experienced in. As he practiced, however, he discovered that he had more in common with Mitch than he thought.

"In some ways, it was the easiest thing I've ever done, because I realized that I had a lot in common with him, personality-wise," Salter says. "In other ways, it was the hardest thing I've ever done, because I was having to face head-on with the mirror, and the actual flaws and issues that I'm aware I have. With acting, you have to put yourself into a lot of different mindsets and be a lot of different people. The more you do it, the more you learn about yourself, and the

more you learn about other people, too. It's interesting, because you can step back from a situation and get a third-person perspective on your own life."

Next, Salter will be playing the Rabbi in *Fiddler on the Roof*, which shows at MOH May 15-30.

Lately, big changes have been occurring in Salter's "sport." He was appointed to the Board of Directors at MOH last year, and now he's doing everything he can to promote the advancement of the group: building connections, promoting productions and raising awareness of the Monticello Opera House both as a venue and community hub. He's also soon to start one of his biggest projects yet – codirecting a production for the first time. Interactive murder mystery dinner shows are a popular regular program at the opera house, and now he's going to be working from the director's chair. Though the show isn't scheduled until September, he'll start focusing on the production by July. As Salter sets the stage, he'll continue to be guided by the people he loves, the hobby he loves, and the community that he calls home. ■



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GURLEY GREYHOUNDS:

Florida's last greyhound breeder



The box in this freezer may be labeled "Inedible Beef," but the dogs who consume more than 100 lbs. a day would say otherwise.

Story by Mickey Starling

Photographs Courtesy of Rob Gurley

Madison County used to be home to a bustling greyhound business, with about 50 dog farms operating throughout the early 1990s. When greyhound racing was at its peak, 68 tracks were in operation nationwide and in Mexico.

Times have changed. The greyhound industry has been dwindling for decades, primarily due to state and federal legislation that has sought to end greyhound racing. Currently, there is only one state, West Virginia, that has a race track.

For Madison's Rob Gurley, greyhounds and everything about them are in his blood. Gurley is a third-generation breeder, trainer and rehabilitation specialist. He also connects

pet lovers with greyhounds who are ready to retire.

"They make excellent pets," said Gurley.

Though greyhounds are known for their impressive speed, they are typically "lazy, low-maintenance dogs," according to Gurley, who has the distinction of being the last greyhound breeder in Florida.

Greyhounds became a part of the Gurley legacy when Rob's grandfather moved from his native Alabama to San Diego and fell in love with greyhounds. In 1961, he purchased his first race kennel at the Caliente Race Track, in Tijuana, Mexico, which was less than a thirty-minute drive from his home. Race kennel owners provide housing, training and care for greyhounds, keeping them



Gene Gurley (center) is pictured with his children, Rob (left) and Melissa during a birthday celebration. The cake decoration is fitting for a family that has spent decades in the greyhound business.

in optimal physical condition for future races.

Gurley's dad, Gene, joined the family business as a teenager, moving to St. Petersburg, Florida, at 18, hoping to make better money. Not only was the money better, he was blessed to meet his wife while there. Her stepfather was a dog trainer at Derby Lane, in St. Petersburg.

Though Rob was born in Florida, his family moved several times, as the dog racing business was typically seasonal. Gurley lived in California before settling for a longer period in Colorado, where he graduated from high school.

The Colorado move took place as a result of their Tijuana race kennel achieving top ranking for their excellent services. Consequently, they were offered a booking in Colorado, which they accepted.

The move to Lee for the Gurleys came in 1991. Gene worked with Beckner farms for several years before purchasing the Terrill Farm in 1995, which brought Rob to Lee after briefly attending college and working at several dog tracks around the country.

"I've been here ever since," said Gurley. "We just keep adjusting to the business as it changes."

For a time, Gurley Greyhounds changed their focus from breeding to rehabilitation.

"Now, we are back to raising puppies and a little bit of everything else," said Gurley.

When training dogs, Gurley uses the practice track located on the late Bob Mendheim's former greyhound farm, in Lee.



Gurley's greyhounds make a rapid run around the track while thoroughly enjoying their training.



The dogs are always ready to greet visitors on Rob Gurley's greyhound farm.

Part of Gurley's many roles in the greyhound industry is facilitating adoptions for retiring dogs.

"There's over a 90% adoption rate for greyhounds," said Gurley, who is also a board member of the National Greyhound Association since 2018.

Gurley helps fellow board members with questions and complaints, which are usually centered around the constant fight against negative legislation from the state and federal level. He serves members in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Kentucky.

"Currently, there is an amendment

attached to a federal agriculture bill that could potentially ban the training of dogs for almost anything other than pets," offered Gurley.

Winter typically adds more to Gurley's plate, as he transports dogs to Lee from the midwest to save them from dealing with the frozen ground and to train them to be ready to run.

Greyhounds are one of the oldest purebreds in the United States, with pedigrees tracing back to well over a hundred years. Gurley is doing his part to keep them well populated, presently housing 10 pregnant dogs. Even getting



Rob Gurley (left) and his father Gene share a life-long love of greyhounds.



Rob enjoys some free time with his favorite pet, Molly.

greyhounds bred is more difficult than you might imagine.

Today's trends support surgical implantation of semen, rather than natural breeding. This has resulted in overuse of the best stud dogs, whose semen is divided into multiple vials before being frozen. What that translates to is uncertainty about the quality of semen used to inseminate dogs.

"In natural breeding, the fastest swimmers get the job done," said Gurley. "Now, those at the back of the line are producing pups, so it's going to have an effect."

Also, semen specimens are often collected too frequently from the same studs, further reducing their quality.

Gurley has been forced to extreme measures to ensure the quality of his future pups.

"I purchase semen from stud dogs

in Australia, and I also buy stored semen from deceased dogs as a way to get the best quality," said Gurley.

Life on a greyhound farm is no walk in the park. The days begin early and the work is always plentiful. Each day begins at 6 a.m., with approximately 100 kennel dogs needing to be let out. While the dogs are enjoying a good stretch, their beds are cleaned or replaced, and food is prepared – a lot of food.

Between the kennel dogs and the 120 farm dogs, Gurley goes through 180 lbs. of beef and 126 lbs. of kibble each day. The dogs prefer their meat raw, with added fat, for maximum nutrition. Gurley stores two tons of beef in a freezer which gets restocked twice a month.

The dogs are let out four times a day, roughly three hours apart. Added to the busyness of the regular routine, there are

always puppies needing vaccinations, medications and worming. All the dogs are wormed every two weeks.

Every day is a labor of love for Gurley and his father, who is now 78 and still working full steam ahead. Along with father and son, Gurley Greyhounds has three full-time employees who keep things running smoothly: James Peoples, who has worked the farm for 24 years; Nick Peoples, who has worked alongside his dad for eight years; and Loyce Manuel, a familiar face who worked with the Gurleys when they owned a race kennel in Jacksonville.

Gurley has no problem with the 12-hour days that are common.

"I love working with the dogs," remarked Gurley. "They are always happy to see me. I enjoy doing it. Who wouldn't want to work with dogs and puppies?" ■





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GIRLS GONE KAYAKING



Story by Dawn Perez

Whenever anyone asks me what my favorite thing to do on the Gulf is, I always say fishing.

But if I'm being completely honest, my favorite way to fish is from a kayak.

Kayak fishing on the Gulf is an experience unlike any other, and along the shores of Taylor County, Florida, it's an adventure you just can't replicate anywhere else. Out here in the Big Bend, we're blessed with the longest stretch of pristine, undeveloped coastline in the state, and it feels like it sometimes.

No crowds. No chaos. Just you, your kayak, and whatever decides to bite.

What I love most about kayaking is the freedom. I'm in full control. No engine, no noise, no schedule – just me paddling wherever I feel like going (which, let's be honest, is usually wherever the fish are supposed to be).

The Big Bend is filled with winding creeks and hidden trails, all part of the Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail, and every trip feels like discovering a secret. The scenery alone is worth the paddle: beautiful coastal views, wildlife everywhere and more birds than you can count, including some you'll swear are judging your casting skills. The shallow grass flats are packed with speckled trout, redfish, flounder, and black bass. It's the perfect natural nursery for these species, and a playground for anyone with a rod in hand.

I was introduced to kayaking about six years ago. Now? I'm hooked. (Pun absolutely intended.) There's just something about being able to glide into those shallow, tucked-away spots that boats can't reach. It's peaceful ... until it's not ... like when you hook into something that reminds you real quick who's actually in charge out there.

Another bonus? I pack light. Since I catch and release, I don't need much, just my gear, a little cooler for drinks, and a good attitude. (And maybe a snack ... because priorities.)

If you don't have your own kayak, no worries, there are great outfitters in Steinhatchee that can set you up. Some of my favorite launch spots include Dallus Creek, Steinhatchee, Hagans Cove, Keaton Beach, Hickory Mound, Yates and Spring Creek. Each one offers its own kind of magic.

And let me tell you, when you're out there, the sounds are everything: the breeze, the gentle lap of the water against your yak and the occasional seagull that sounds like it has opinions. Lots of opinions.

As for my setup, I use an Ascend kayak, sturdy, easy to maneuver and not too heavy (which matters more than you think when you're dragging it around). I recommend at least a 12-foot kayak for Gulf waters. Safety-wise, always wear a personal flotation device and carry a whistle. I keep mine attached to my life jacket because if I ever need it, I'm not digging around like I've lost my keys at the bottom of my purse.

Now, when it comes to fishing let's just say I can hold my own. I had a great teacher out of Keaton Beach and Spring Warrior, like Captain David Hall with Reel Hard Charters, who taught me well. In these shallow waters, I usually go with live bait, shrimp or pinfish under a Cajun Thunder float, but thanks to Captain Hall, every now and then, my go-to Bass Assassin Sea Shad in Electric Chicken reminds me I actually know what I'm doing.

If you're looking for an adventure that's equal parts peaceful, exciting and just a little unpredictable, kayak fishing in Taylor County might just be your new favorite thing, too.

Who knows? You might even find yourself out there thinking, "I came for the fish, but I stayed for the freedom." ■





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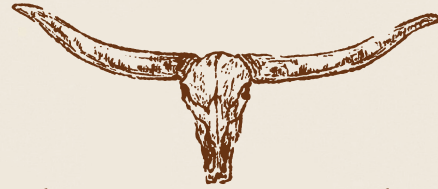
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WHAT'S HAPPENING

MAY



May 2

Wildflower Festival and Plant Sale

Experience the vibrant celebration of spring wildflowers that North Florida is famous for at the Wildflower Festival. At Heritage Park and Gardens (1004 Helvenston St. S.E., Live Oak) from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., attendees can browse an array of unique crafts and goodies offered by local vendors, savor delicious treats from food trucks, enjoy crafts and send their kids on thrilling adventures with kiddie rides. Admission is free.



May 2-30

The Wonders of Watercolor Exhibit at JAG

See paintings by Bill Holkham at Jefferson Arts Gallery (575 W. Washington St., Monticello) on Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling 850-997-3311.



May 7

25th Annual Suwannee CARES

Since 2001, the Suwannee River Partnership, in cooperation with multiple agricultural organizations and agencies, has hosted the Suwannee CARES celebration at the UF/IFAS NFREC-Suwannee County (8202 C.R. 417, Live Oak). Community members gather from 5:30 to 8 p.m. during this free event to recognize farmers and ranchers from the 13 counties inside the Suwannee River Basin who demonstrate outstanding environmental stewardship.



May 7-17

20th of May Jubilee Celebration

The Madison County Recreation Association (243 S.W. Arnold St., Madison) sponsors a series of events to commemorate the historic 20th of May Jubilee. On Thursday, May 7, a special religious service begins at 7 p.m. On Friday, May 15, the 20th of May Seafood and Fashion Show takes place from 5 to 7 p.m. On Saturday, May 16, the annual 20th of May Parade and Field Activities takes place featuring fun, games and entertainment for the entire family. The parade kicks off at 10:15 a.m. on Martin Luther King Drive, and the fun continues at the Madison County Recreation Association until 4 p.m. On Sunday, May 17, more fun is in store with the 20th of May Field Games at the Madison County Recreation Association. For more information, call Albert Barfield at 850-274-3131.



May 9-10

U-Pick Flower Fest

The Branford Farm Stand (27687 U.S. 129) kicks off the u-pick flower season during Mother's Day weekend. Attendees will be able to pick flowers and enjoy live music, vendors and more. Admission is \$10 per person and \$10 per flower holder for picking. Individuals are encouraged to bring their own clippers and a vase. For more information, visit www.branfordfarmstand.com/u-pick-flowers.

May 9-10

Spring Harvest Tour

Dozens of farms, groves, orchards, u-pick fields and ranches all across South Georgia and North Florida welcome you for a behind-the-scenes look. To download the complete guide, visit the FL-Ga Farm Tour Facebook page. Questions can be emailed to millstonefarmtour@gmail.com.

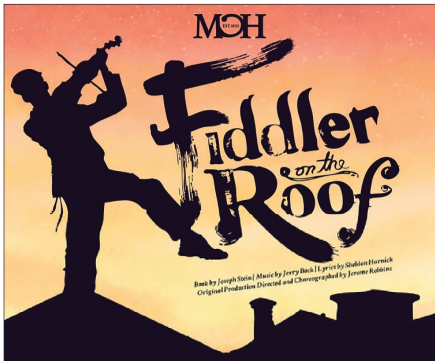


May 14

Wildlife After Dark

The North Florida Wildlife Center (1386 Cook Rd., Lamont) offers this 21+ event with local beer/wine, food trucks, live music, animal encounters and "nighttime activities" from 5 to 9 p.m. For tickets visit www.northfloridawildlife.org

WHAT'S HAPPENING



May 15

Senior Parade

This event celebrates and honors the accomplishments of seniors; it takes place at Four Freedoms Park (downtown Madison) from 10:25 to 11 a.m.

May 15-30

Fiddler on the Roof at MOH

This Tony Award winner tells the tale of Tevye the Dairyman and his family's struggles in a changing Russia, with humor, warmth and iconic songs such as "Sunrise, Sunset," "If I Were a Rich Man" and "Matchmaker, Matchmaker" among many others. Don't miss it! For showtimes and ticket information, call the Monticello Opera House at 850-997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

May 16-17

Watermelon Festival Pickleball Tourney

The 75th Annual Watermelon Festival Pickleball Tournaments take place from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the Jefferson County Recreation Park (1380 Mamie Scott Dr., Monticello). For further details, visit www.monticellowatermelonfestival.com.

May 20

Emancipation Day

The Community Friends of Jefferson County host a celebration of the 20th of May, 1-5 p.m. at the Old Howard Academy (835 Mamie Scott Rd., Monticello).

May 22

Memorial Day Service

The Madison County Board of County Commissioners honors fallen



heroes with a special Memorial Day service, beginning at 11 a.m. at Four Freedoms Park (downtown Madison). For more information, call 850-973-3179.

May 22-24

Florida Folk Festival

Celebrate the diverse culture, food, music and arts that make Florida unique at the Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park (11016 Lillian Saunders Dr., White Springs) along the banks of the historic Suwannee River. Named a "Top 20 Event" in the Southeast, this festival has activities for everyone: a full schedule of performances; jam sessions and workshops; local eats, educational exhibits and vendors; dance lessons and storytelling. For more information or tickets, visit www.floridastateparks.org/FloridaFolkFestival.



JUNE

June 6

Wellborn Blueberry Festival

The 32nd Annual Wellborn Blueberry Festival takes place from 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on the first Saturday in June at Andrews Square (1340 8th Ave., Wellborn) featuring a blueberry pancake breakfast, live entertainment, arts and crafts, a car show and over 100 vendors. Enjoy breakfast from 7:30 to 10:30 a.m. at multiple locations for \$6. Admission to the festival is free.



June 6

Blackberry Festival

The Fourth Annual Riverbend News Blackberry Festival takes place from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Hamilton County Recreational Park (4525 S.W. 107th Ave., Jasper). The free event features food and craft vendors, a kid zone, live music, a petting zoo, games, a pie eating contest, sack races, a cornhole tournament and more. For more information, contact Amber Moore at 850-464-8136 or email manager@riverbendnews.org.

June 6-August 29

Annual Member Show at JAG

This exhibit features the creative work of the gallery's member artists, who work in a variety of mediums. Jefferson Arts Gallery (575 W. Washington St., Monticello) is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling 850-997-3311.



Memorial Day

★ May 25, 2026 ★

May 25

Memorial Day Picnic at Post 49

The Otto M. Walker American Legion Post #49 (1065 S. Water St., Monticello) hosts a free picnic open to the public. The program begins at 11:30 a.m., with David Wilson, USAF (Ret) as guest speaker and a Remembrance of Fallen Comrades & Flag Ceremony. A raffle drawing and fried chicken with fixings follow. For more information, call 330-354-5533.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

June 12

Watermelon Festival Block Party

The Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce kicks into high gear with the 75th Annual Watermelon Festival with an exciting line-up that includes a BBQ, Kids Ride-On Parade, live music and watermelon-themed games. For further details, visit www.monticellowatermelonfestival.com.

June 13

Kiwanis 5K Watermelon Run & Walk

This event is part of the Watermelon Festival sponsored by the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce. The registration desk opens at 7:30 a.m. at 325 Walnut St. in Monticello, and the race begins at 8:30 a.m. For online pre-registration, visit www.monticellowatermelonfestival.com. Questions may be directed to Watermelonrun@gmail.com.

June 16-20

The Little Mermaid Jr. at MOH

MadCo and the Monticello Opera House present "The Little Mermaid Jr." based on the Walt Disney animated film and the Broadway musical. For showtimes and ticket information, call the Monticello Opera House at 850-997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

June 18

Watermelon Festival Fashion Show

The Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce continues the traditions of the annual Watermelon Festival with the Woman's Club Luncheon & Fashion show in the Monticello Opera House Perkins Hall at noon. For tickets, call Pam Kelly at 850-510-8359. For information about other festival events, visit www.monticellowatermelonfestival.com.

June 19-20

Watermelon Festival

The Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce presents the culminating weekend of its 75th annual Watermelon Festival. Friday's festivities begin with the Vendor Village at 3 p.m., and evening fun lasts until 9 p.m. with live music, beer garden, kids show and more. These repeat again on Saturday, plus the Antique Car Show starts at 8:30 a.m. and Watermelon Parade rolls out at 10 a.m. For further details, visit www.monticellowatermelonfestival.com.

JULY

July 3

Divas Tribute to the Troops at MOH

The dynamic Divas Trio will perform a special concert at the Monticello Opera House to honor our military through favorite patriotic songs. For pricing information and tickets, visit monticellooperahouse.org or call 850-997-4242.



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WHAT'S HAPPENING

4TH OF JULY

CELEBRATING AMERICA AT 250 YEARS

BRANFORD

Branford's Fourth of July Festival features a full day of activities beginning at noon, including children's events, a cornhole tournament, duck race, car show, parade and fireworks at 9:30 p.m. The Rotary Club of Branford's annual Duck Race takes place at 2 p.m., with tickets available for \$5 each and proceeds supporting local scholarships and community programs. Attendees can enjoy contests, live attractions and family-friendly fun throughout the day before the evening parade and fireworks finale.

JASPER

Hamilton County's Independence Day Celebration is held at Hamilton County Recreational Park (4525 S.W. 107th Ave., Jasper), featuring live music by the Str8up Band, food and craft vendors, a kids zone with waterslides and games, and a cornhole tournament. The event will culminate in one of the region's best small-town fireworks shows as the community celebrates America's 250th birthday. Attendees are encouraged to bring chairs and enjoy a full evening of family-friendly fun.

MONTICELLO

Jefferson County's 250th July 4th Celebration takes place at Memorial Stadium (Tiger Lane, Monticello). Gates open at 6 p.m. for fun activities, live music and food vendors, followed by a spectacular fireworks show at dark. For more information, call 850-997-5552 or email info@monticellojeffersonfl.com.

LIVE OAK

The America 250 Historic Living Timeline Parade takes place at Veterans Park (201 Howard St. W., Live Oak) as part of Freedom Fest from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m., with the parade beginning at 7 p.m. This free, family-friendly event invites the community to participate in a living parade showcasing key moments in American history, along with live music, contests, food vendors and a fireworks show. For more information or to register, visit www.FreedomFestParade.com.

MADISON

Come celebrate the nation's 250th birthday as the Madison Lions Club sponsors the annual God and Country Celebration on the banks of Lake Frances, in Madison. Time to shop vendors and enjoy entertainment is capped off by the big fireworks display at dusk. For more information, contact Tim Dunn at 850-464-4890 or mymadisonlionsclub@gmail.com.



**NORTH FLORIDA
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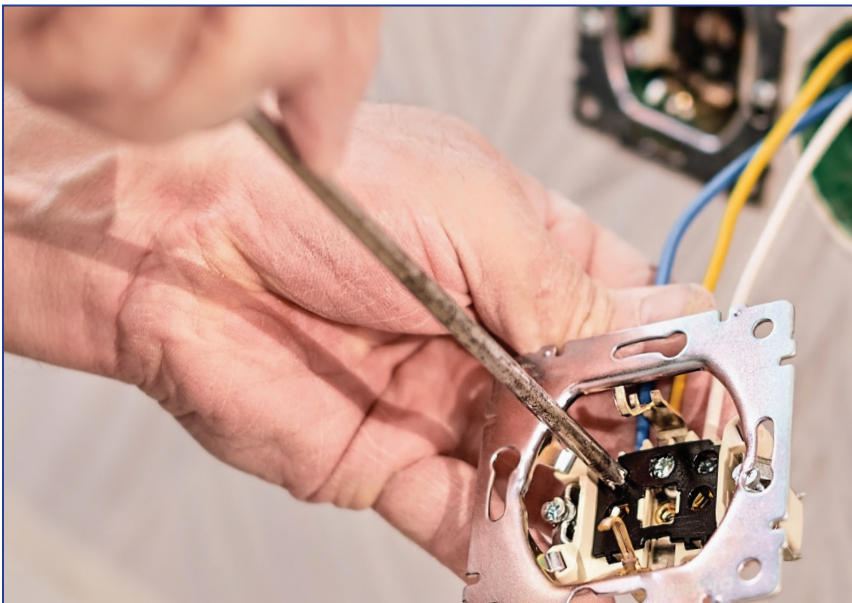
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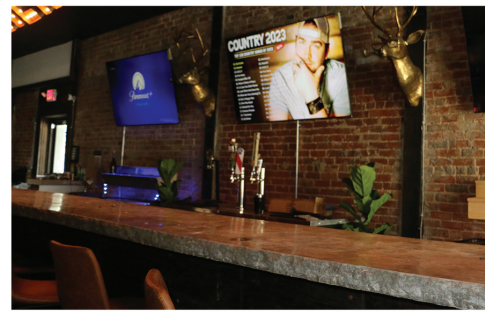
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