

The Front Porch

Where The Tea Is Sweet and the Talks Are Long

May/June 2025

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The Front Porch

Where the tea is sweet and the talks are long

Established 2019

Vol. 6 Issue 5 • May/June 2025

The Front Porch is published every other month at 1695 South SR 53 Madison, Fla. 32340

Published by



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The Front Porch



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SITTIN' ON THE PORCH WITH...

ALLEN DEMPS

Story by Rick Patrick

Photograph Courtesy of Allen Demps

Madison County High School (MCHS) Head Varsity Basketball Coach Allen Demps has been synonymous with high school basketball in Madison County for close to 16 years. However, his accomplishments and contributions to the community go far beyond the hardwoods in the MCHS gymnasium.

A Madison County native, Demps grew up in the town of Greenville, in the western part of the county. A member of the MCHS Class of 2001, he went on to play basketball for the North Florida Community College (NFCC) Sentinels basketball team, when they had a competitive athletic program. While at NFCC, Demps earned academic recognition as well as athletic accolades, receiving the Academic Award from the Sentinels basketball team.

After his basketball playing career finished, Demps went to work as a correctional officer for the Florida Department of Corrections (FDOC). This year marks his 20th year serving the FDOC at Jefferson Correctional Institute, in Monticello, Florida. Demps has continued his education, earning his Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice from Florida Gulf Coast University in 2023.

Because Demps' love for the game of basketball continued into adulthood, he went into coaching. His coaching career began with the MCHS junior varsity team for three years before taking the helm of the varsity program in 2012. Since that time, the Cowboys have developed a winning reputation for the basketball program, joining the school's already legendary football program success. Under Demps' leadership, the Cowboys have made three Final-Four appearances and won one state championship, helping the school to hold both a basketball state title and football state title in the same

school year. During his tenure as the Cowboys' head coach, Demps has amassed a 212-100 record and was named the Big Bend Coach of the Year in 2018.

"I tell them, the so called friends who might be trying to lead them down a bad path won't have anything to do with them if they get in trouble."

- Allen Demps

Demps is quick to state that basketball honors and championships are secondary to the larger lessons he hopes to instill in his players. He does not hesitate to use his experience as a correctional officer to attempt to keep his players on the right path.

"I try to help them stay out of trouble," says Demps. "I tell them, the so called friends who might be trying to lead them down a bad path won't have anything to do with them if they get in trouble."

Over the years, Demps and his wife Renee have opened their home to many players to help young people to avoid negative influences. These efforts have paid dividends in that a vast majority of Demps' former players have moved on to lead very successful lives.

"I am proud of the fact that two of my former players are now coaching," added Demps. "One is coaching at the high school level and one is coaching college ball."

Demps does not hesitate to

attribute his success to an individual who took time and effort to serve as a role model and mentor to him at an early age.

"If it weren't for David Dukes, I would not be here today," said Demps. "[Dukes] practically raised me. He has been a major influence in my life."

Dukes is known as one of Madison's early civil rights leaders. As a teenager, Dukes helped lead resistance to the practice of "whites only" seating areas in many restaurants and drug store dining counters. Dukes also helped foster a mentoring program that served as a positive example for many youth in Madison County. The program started by Dukes has served as a blueprint for Merv Mattair and his widely successful Boyz to Kings mentoring and dropout prevention program.

Away from the basketball court, Demps is frequently seen out in the community. For many years he has served as part of the "chain crew" during MCHS Cowboy home football games. He is also quick to chip in when he hears of or sees a need in the community. In addition, he owns and operates a lawn care business called Demps Lawn Care.

Allen and Renee have one daughter, Alana, who is set to graduate as a registered nurse. ■



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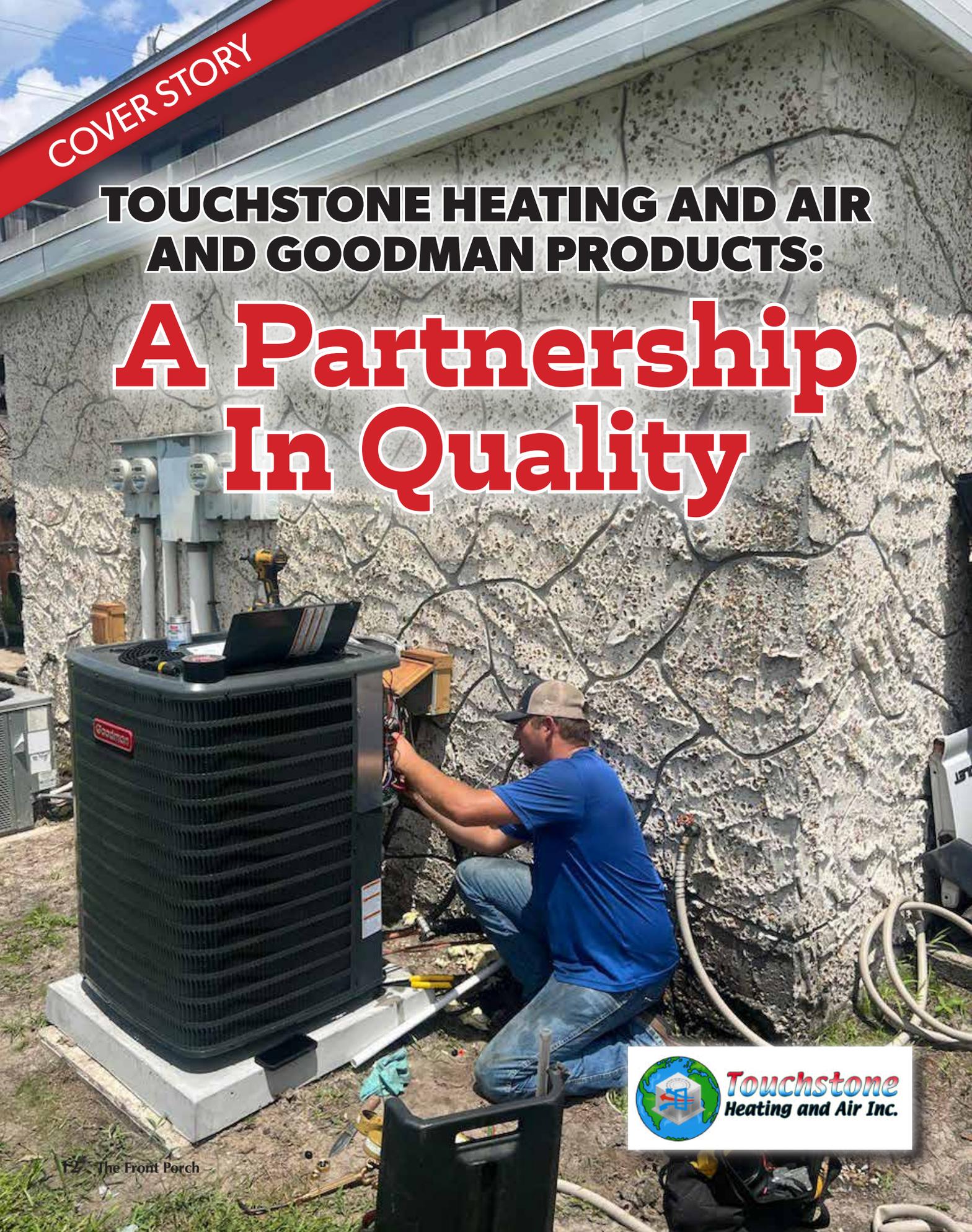
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COVER STORY

**TOUCHSTONE HEATING AND AIR
AND GOODMAN PRODUCTS:**

A Partnership In Quality



Touchstone
Heating and Air Inc.

Sponsored Content
Story by Mickey Starling
Photographs Courtesy of Touchstone

Touchstone Heating and Air owner Mark Touchstone is no stranger to hard work. The Lake Butler, Florida, native began working in the maintenance department for the school board while he was attending Union County High School. Then Touchstone worked for Enviro-Temp, a heating and air conditioning company in Gainesville. After working on a ranch in Wyoming for two years, Touchstone returned to Lake Butler and the air conditioning business, working for Robinson Heating and Air.

In the late 1990s, Touchstone was encouraged by several contractors to begin his own business, which he did, initially operating out of a storage building. Things got ugly when the financial markets crashed in 2008. Touchstone faced mounting debts and had to lay off most of his employees. Raising his daughter, Sydney, turned out to be the inspiration he needed to press on through the difficulties.

Today, Touchstone Heating and Air is a thriving business, with offices in Lake Butler, Lake City and Madison. The Madison branch came about after a resident called for service.

"I immediately knew this is a town I wanted to do business in," remarked Touchstone. "These are really nice people."

It wasn't long before Touchstone joined the Madison County



Chamber of Commerce, and he has enjoyed the many opportunities to help people, "We care about service," said Touchstone. "We offer 10-year warranties on parts and labor and a money-back guarantee."

His customers have been so pleased that Touchstone has only been asked for a refund once.

Touchstone only sells quality products such as Goodman, Amana, York and others, all with the same warranties. Besides air conditioning and heating, Touchstone also offers

generator installation and duct cleaning.

Every brand that Touchstone Heating and Air offers is a high-quality product. Goodman is especially known for being affordable and reliable, but their units have many great features. Some models incorporate variable-speed blowers and smart features that improve performance and efficiency. Goodman air conditioners are also designed for easy installation and maintenance, quiet operation and indoor air quality products such as advanced filtration, humidification, ventilation and purification systems. One of the common problems with air conditioners involves copper evaporator coil failures. Goodman features all-aluminum evaporator coils that are far more durable.

For more information about all the benefits offered with Goodman products, call Touchstone's main office at (386) 752-0720. ■



Mark and Amy Touchstone's family includes, left to right, Jordan, Zach, Amy, Mark, Cydney and Sam.

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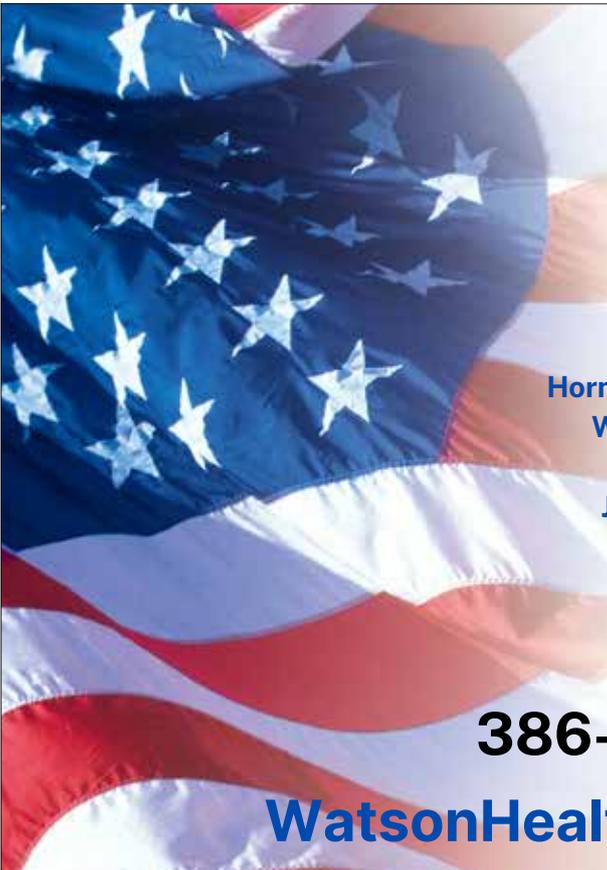
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FROM MADISON TO THE NATION'S CAPITAL

Story by Rick Patrick

Photographs Courtesy of Derek Barrs

It almost seems like a story written in Hollywood. A small town boy grows up to become one of the highest ranking officials in the transportation industry. But that is exactly what could happen if Madison native Derek Barrs is confirmed for his new job. The former Florida Highway Patrol Chief has been nominated by President Donald Trump's administration to become the new head of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA). The FMCSA falls under the umbrella of the U.S. Department of Transportation. The agency's approximately 1,100 employees are primarily concerned with reducing the number of crashes and injuries involving commercial vehicles.

Considering Barrs' history and background, it seems as if he is perfectly suited for this job. He still has to complete the confirmation process in the U.S. Senate, which could happen by the time you are reading this. The next step in that confirmation process is for Barrs to appear before the Senate's Science, Transportation and Commerce Committee, chaired by Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas). Should Barrs receive an affirmative vote from the committee, it will go before the full senate for a confirmation vote.

Barrs' professional career seems to have been leading up to this point. A 1991 graduate of Madison County High School (MCHS), where he played football for the MCHS Cowboys, Barrs began working part time with the Madison County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) as a dispatcher at the age of 17, in February of 1991. After graduating from high



school, he began working full time for the MCSO; first as a dispatcher, then as a patrol officer under the wing of long-time Madison County Sheriff Joe Peavey.

"We didn't have training officers back then. They just gave you a set of keys and sent you out," said Barrs with a chuckle. "It was a lot of learn as you go."

After 10 years with the MCSO, Barrs joined the Florida Department of Transportation's Office of Motor Carrier

Compliance, in 2001. In 2011, this office merged with the Florida Highway Patrol (FHP), and Barrs joined the ranks of FHP troopers. Barrs became the FHP District Commander in DeLand and Captain of the Tallahassee and Jacksonville FHP troops. Barrs rose to the rank of Major with the FHP and became the Southern Area Troop Commander for Commercial Vehicles. From 2017 to his retirement from the FHP in 2020, Barrs was the



Derek Barrs with his children, Bentley (left) and Brett (right)

Chief of Commercial Vehicle Enforcement for the State of Florida.

After retiring from the FHP, Barrs entered the private sector as an associate vice-president for HNTB. HNTB is a national company that specializes in transportation infrastructure and commercial vehicle technology. Barrs continues to hold his post with HNTB. Earlier this year, Barrs was tapped by Gov. Ron DeSantis to take a seat on the Flagler County School Board, where he continues to serve. Barrs stated that he will remain in these positions until the confirmation process in the U.S. Senate is complete.

Barrs stated that it was the connections and relationships he developed over the years within the transportation industry that led the American Trucking Association, the Truckload Carriers Association and the National Tank Truck Carriers to reach out to U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy suggesting Barrs for the position. When he was contacted to consider the job, Barrs stated that “after a lot of



Derek Barrs (center) with his parents, Penny (left) and Jr. (right).



Derek Barrs (right) and Ina Thompson serving Thanksgiving dinner to people in Madison County.

prayer,” he accepted the nomination. Should his nomination be confirmed, Barrs hopes to build “partnerships with the trucking industry.”

“The FMCSA is committed to commercial vehicle safety,” said Barrs. “This is true for not only commercial vehicles, but for non-commercial vehicles as well.”

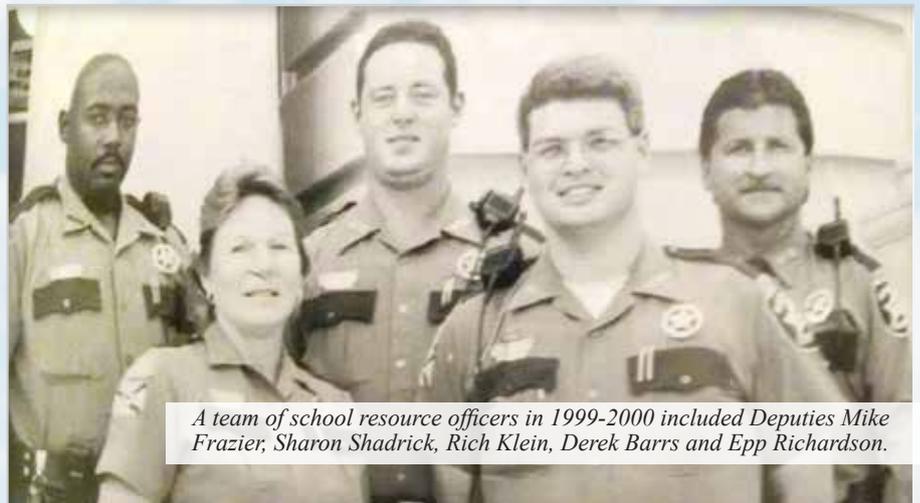
One challenge Barrs said the FMCSA could be facing in the near future is that of “autonomous vehicles,” which are driverless trucks that were once the subject of science fiction, but could very well become a fixture on the nation’s highways in the near future.

Barrs is quick to attribute his success to his Madison County roots.

“It has a lot to do with where I was raised,” said Barrs. “I have also been very fortunate to have a great team around me. I am very grateful.”

Barrs parents, Jr. and Penny, are both from Madison County. His mother, the late Penny Day Barrs, grew up in the western Madison County town of Greenville. Barrs has two children. His son Brett, is a lineman, and his daughter Bentley is currently in school in St. Augustine studying Communications and Media, along with Marketing. Bentley also teaches dance.

“I am looking forward to possibly serving in this capacity,” said Barrs. I want to make my hometown proud because Madison means so much to me.” ■



A team of school resource officers in 1999-2000 included Deputies Mike Frazier, Sharon Shadrick, Rich Klein, Derek Barrs and Epp Richardson.



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MAY
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Watermelon Queen Pageants | 10 am & 5 pm

JUNE
6

Kick-Off Block Party | 5 pm - 9 pm

BBQ Dinner, Kids Ride-On Parade, Bed Race, Live Music, Watermelon Games

JUNE
7

Kiwanis 5K Watermelon Run & Walk | 8:15 am

JUNE
9

Slice & Savor | 5:30 pm

Watermelon Cooking Class with Celebrity Chef Jessica McMullen

JUNE
12

Women's Club Luncheon & Fashion Show | 12 pm

JUNE
13

Festival Day One | 3 - 9 pm

Vendor Village, Beer Garden, Melon Jam in the Watermelon Oasis featuring the Highway 59 Band (formerly The Street Dance)

Frozen the Musical at the Monticello Opera House | 7 pm

JUNE
14

Festival Day Two | 9 am - 3 pm

ALL DAY EVENTS

Vendor Village, Antique Car Show, Kids Play Zone, Watermelon Oasis, Beer Garden

Watermelon Parade | 10 am

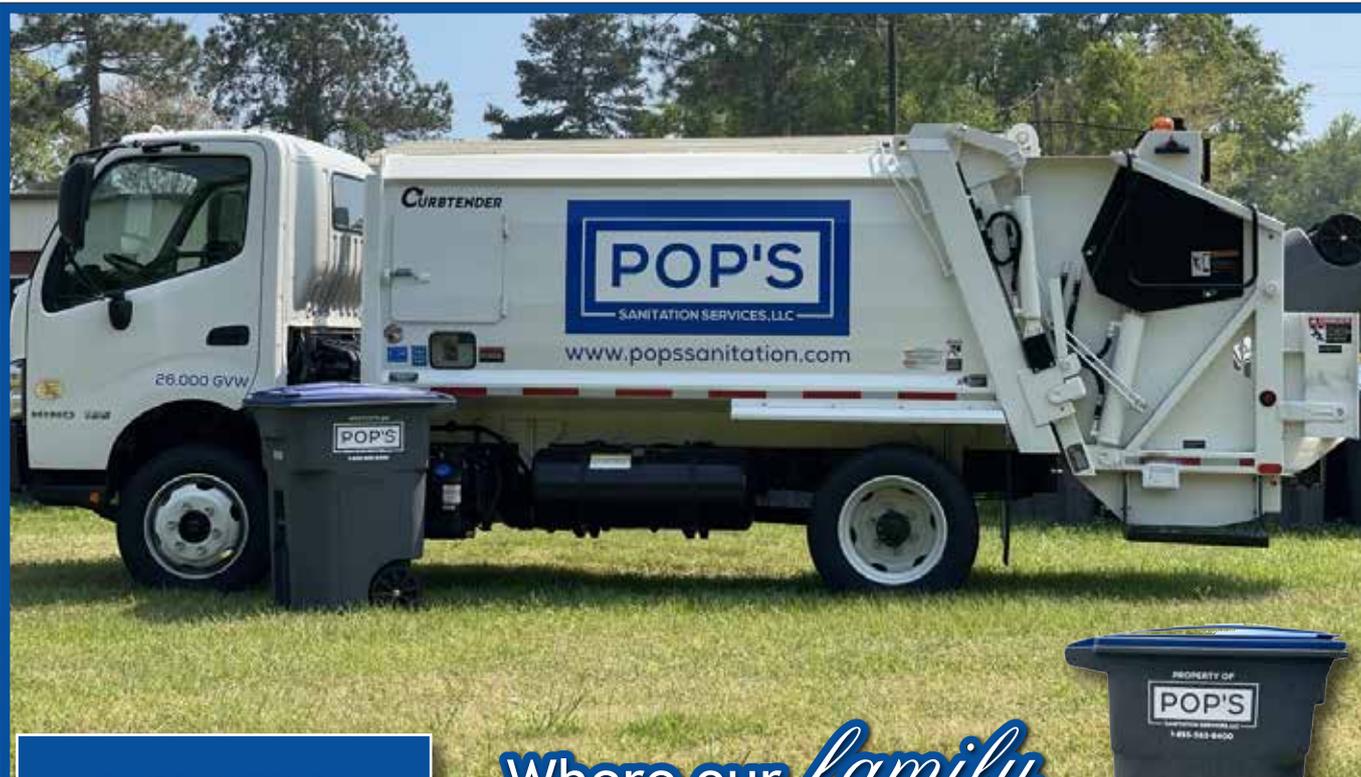
Frozen the Musical | 11:30 am

Frozen the Musical | 2 pm



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JUSTICE FOR COLE THOMAS

Story by Heather Ainsley

Photographs Courtesy of Chris Thomas

The following is the story of Cole Thomas, a young man from Suwannee County who suddenly went missing in November of 2016. This article includes details about the case as understood by Cole's father, Chris Thomas, through years of lengthy investigative work with a private investigator by the name of David Marshburn, who was hired by the family. This case is still open; anyone who has new information that could bring Cole home can contact Chris Thomas via his social media link provided at the end of this article.

Cole Thomas was an exemplary student his whole life. From his early days at grade school to his later years in high school and college, he maintained good grades, graduating from Suwannee High School in the top of his class as salutatorian in 2012. At the time of his

graduation, Cole had also completed his AA degree from North Florida College in Madison, Florida, and was on the Dean's List. Following his graduation, he pursued additional college education, attending the University of Florida.

In 2016, 22-year old Cole decided to take a short break from college classes to earn some money. He accepted a job offered to him by a man from Lafayette County named Steven Werley, with whom Cole would be working as an electrician, assisting with putting up solar farms in different areas across the country. It was this job that brought him from Suwannee County, Florida, to Pine Island, Minnesota.

Cole was traveling with two co-workers, Jeremy Carpenter (age 42) and Julian Valles, Jr. (34), neither of whom had a valid drivers license. As the only one with a license, Cole was the designated driver, although he was reportedly driving

Julian's vehicle at the time to transport himself and his two co-workers to and from the job site. Upon the completion of their final shift before the Thanksgiving holiday, Julian asked Cole to drive them to North Carolina.

Due to several false statements and changed narratives that were provided to media and law enforcement in the early days, weeks and months following this incident, details regarding the exact nature of what transpired on this drive are speculative. According to information gathered later by a private investigator, the following is what is believed to have transpired on the day that Cole went missing.

It is believed that the trip to North Carolina was to collect drugs. The three made their way from Minnesota, stopping for several hours in a town called Goldsboro in North Carolina. Julian had a friend there by the name of Rudy, and

they stopped at Rudy's house to meet with several other guys and pick up drugs. Julian was supposed to take these drugs to a client or clients in the nearby town of Benson as well as back at the job site.

It was determined, through later statements from Jeremy, that both Cole and Jeremy did not know the other men in the house; Julian knew them. They stayed at Rudy's house for five or six hours, leaving around 11 p.m. and making their way to Benson. Jeremy revealed that he was sitting in the passenger's seat, with Cole driving and with Julian in the backseat with the drugs beside him.

It was then that Jeremy said Cole began to panic, saying that he hadn't signed up for this, and if they got pulled over with drugs in the car, that they would all go to jail. In Jeremy's first couple of statements, Cole freaked out, got out of the car and ran off, never to be seen again. In later interviews, a much more sinister story began to unfold.

Unknown to Cole and Jeremy, Julian and Rudy had a plan. Unwilling to give away all of the drug supply that was owed to Julian's clients in Benson, Rudy decided to plan a staged robbery. The plan, as later described by someone who had been affiliated with Rudy, was for Cole, Julian and Jeremy to leave Rudy's home with the drugs as planned. From there, Rudy would have a secondary vehicle with three guys follow them, stop them and rob them of most of the drugs. Julian would have enough drugs to pay off some clients in Benson, but the remaining drugs would be reclaimed by Rudy's gang. Cole and Jeremy were to be unwitting witnesses to this crime, so that when Julian arrived at the job-site on Monday morning without the promised drugs, they could corroborate his story of having been robbed.

According to Jeremy's later statements, Cole began to panic in the car when he noticed a vehicle following them. He began to drive erratically, making unnecessary turns, stops and detours. Once or twice, he was able to lose the second car, but they never seemed to be lost for long. (Cole's father mentioned that, later, phone records showed that Julian was sending messages to the other car, enabling them to locate them again when Cole lost them.) All three men began bickering, and Jeremy mentioned that at some point in all the commotion, Cole reached into the backseat, grabbed a portion of the drugs

MISSING PERSON



Name: Christopher Cole Thomas

Date of Birth: 7-2-1994

Height: 6' 1"

Weight: 230 lbs.

Hair: Brown/Blonde

Eyes: Blue

**Last Seen Wearing a Red T-Shirt,
Black Pants, and a Black Carhartt Jacket**

and threw them out the window while driving. This escalated a heated argument between all three occupants in the vehicle. It was then that Cole pulled over, got out and walked away from the car.

Jeremy got out and followed him, attempting to calm him down. Together they walked to a nearby church, and Cole went to use the bathroom. When three unknown men in a car pulled up in front of the church, both Jeremy and Cole made a run for it, Jeremy running out the back of the church, and Cole running out the side along the highway. Surveillance footage later confirmed that the car pulled up beside Cole, and he was forced into it

at gunpoint.

Meanwhile, Julian was still sitting in his vehicle, and was later joined by Jeremy, who had walked to a nearby McDonald's drive through (confirmed with surveillance footage later) to get some water before heading back to the vehicle. It was then that the Benson Police Department made contact with Julian and Jeremy, who offered the story about their friend Cole having left the vehicle and run off. Cole was reported missing. Searches were later held in this area, as it was believed at the time that this was the last place he was seen before he disappeared. These searches have all

been unsuccessful.

Further information was later gathered by law enforcement, as well as private investigator David Marshburn.

While Cole and Jeremy were in the church, Julian was busy in his car, stowing a portion of the remaining drugs and money into the loose paneling of his car door. It is believed that he planned to use the fact that some of the drugs had been thrown out the window by Cole as a cover for the additional missing drugs. He reportedly called Rudy and told him their location. It was shortly after this that the three men made it to the church and kidnapped Cole.

Cole was taken back to Rudy's house in Goldsboro, where he was brought back inside. The next morning, Cole was held in the house, as the others went back to the area that the drugs had been tossed, attempting to recover the missing drugs. Because some of the drugs were stowed away, not all of the drugs were recovered, and Rudy blamed Cole.

According to several different accounts, the following is believed to have taken place at the house. Angry about the missing drugs, Rudy demanded to know where the drugs had gone, shoving Cole and reportedly performing a strip search on him, believing him to be in the possession of the missing drugs. Cole responded by shoving him back and the two began to fight. The six or seven men in the room then jumped on Cole, beating him until he was on the floor. It was then that an eyewitness stated that Rudy stood over Cole and shot him in the chest.

It took years to accumulate enough information to piece the events of Cole's disappearance together. In the year that followed, four men were arrested in connection to his disappearance: Julian Valles, Jr., Ridell James, Jr., Rudolfo DeLeon, Jr., and Jeremy Carpenter were each charged with felony concealment of a death. Julian, Ridell and Jeremy were also charged with obstruction of justice.

Through extensive investigative work, the private investigator was able to gain new statements from several different witnesses, including some of the accused. Although he was able to convince them to offer their official statements to the police, evidence emerged suggesting that one of the key witnesses had been receiving death threats while incarcerated, and later withdrew his statement. Eventually, charges on all four of the arrested men were dropped. The reason for this was given by Johnston



County District Attorney Susan Doyle in a statement offered to a local news outlet in North Carolina, WRAL.

Doyle stated, "The investigation into the death of Cole Thomas is ongoing. The [North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation] continues to follow up on all new information. After a thorough review of the case as it stands today, I made the decision to dismiss the current charges in order to avoid compromising any potential future homicide prosecutions."

Cole's father, Chris, explained that, due to the constantly changing stories, even if the truth was among the many different accounts of what happened, the inconsistency made it very unlikely that any confessions would ever hold up in court. The case needed more concrete evidence to accompany any confessions in order to hold up.

"At this point," says the grieving father, after nine long years of waiting for news about Cole's case, "we pretty much know everything that happened. They just haven't found my son's body."

The most recent tip, he says, was a lead submitted to the private investigator about the possible location of Cole's body, when it was suggested that he may have been dumped in or around Durham Lake in Goldsboro. While the private investigator brought two of his own cadaver dogs to the area in the hopes of

locating some sign of Cole's remains, the vastness of the lake and the vague nature of the tip made it impossible to know where to start. Cole's whereabouts are still unknown.

"Ultimately, we want justice," says Chris. "That may not happen until Cole is found. I would love to bring him home, or even to have a place were I could visit him. Until that day, I want to keep his name out there. Somebody knows something."

"Everyone gets lost for a minute," he acknowledges. "We all make bad decisions, at some point or another. It just so happened, he made a decision that would later cost him his life. He was such a good kid. Just the weekend before he went missing, he asked for a ride to Jasper to work with Steven, and I admit, I was a little frustrated with him – I wanted him to stay in school... I used to see shows all the time that talked about kids that went missing, and you think 'I can't imagine...' This has changed my life, forever. There's so much that won't ever be the same. He went missing on Thanksgiving weekend. Thanksgiving, holidays, birthdays, the thought of grandkids, the future... none of that will ever be the same."

Cole was a vibrant young man. He was playful and funny, always cracking jokes. His father describes him as having a tremendous heart and enjoying normal kid stuff. At 6'1" and 230 lbs, he loved to work out, and was proud of being in shape.

Following Cole's disappearance, Chris made countless 500-mile trips to North Carolina, in the hopes of aiding law enforcement in the search for Cole, and assisting in any way with the investigation. Although the couple are estranged following a divorce, Chris mentions that Cole's mother, Kathy, has since created a special scholarship in Cole's memory, called the Cole Thomas Memorial Scholarship. This scholarship is intended to award financial aid to a student who embodies qualities and academic values that Cole himself exhibited. For more information about the scholarship, contact Kathy at k.herrington9403@outlook.com.

Any information that could be relevant to bringing Cole home can be sent to Chris Thomas via his Facebook page: www.facebook.com/chris.thomas.790693. It will be shared with law enforcement and the family's private investigator in the hopes of finally bringing closure to this case, and justice for Cole Thomas. ■

Jason Shoaf

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Find an agritourism location near you!

Story by Laura Young

Photographs Courtesy of Florida Agritourism Association

Both agriculture and tourism lie at the heart of Florida's economy, and enterprises that combine them have found a sweet spot that can give visitors from nearby or afar an especially satisfying experience. Legislation passed in 2013 helped break down some operational barriers for those seeking to invite the general public onto their lands for educational and entertainment purposes, giving a further boost to landowners needing to diversify to stay profitable.

A UF/IFAS Extension publication explains the importance of agritourism, especially for farmers, this way: "With less than two percent of Americans living on a farm, the public is becoming more and more removed from farming practices and agricultural production... Agritourism provides an excellent opportunity to open meaningful connections between agriculture and the public." Florida statute now defines agritourism as "any agricultural related activity consistent with a bona fide farm or ranch or in a working forest which allows members of the general public to view or enjoy activities related to farming, ranching, historical, cultural or harvest-your-own attractions for recreational, entertainment or educational purposes."

This description applies to more types of destinations than one might at first imagine. The Florida Agritourism Association (FATA)

– a non-profit organization that supports this growing market in Florida – has bona fide members in a wide range of categories, including:

- working farms, ranches, orchards and nurseries
- u-pick fruit, vegetable and flower operations
- vineyards, wineries and distilleries
- crop mazes
- event venues on agricultural lands
- farmers markets
- trail riding stables, hunting grounds and petting farms
- conservation areas for wildlife, birding and exotic animals

Lena Juarez, executive director of FATA, says, "With over 23 million residents and over 140 million visitors to Florida a year, our farmers and ranchers have ample opportunities to offer agritourism activities. Whether it's a u-pick, wedding in a barn or educational session for kids, Florida's agritourism operators are opening their gates and giving visitors a place to play while adding value to every acre on their farm."

At the FATA website, visitfloridafarms.org, information is available to support operators' marketing efforts and to guide visitors. A mobile app also is available for visitors to use to find a farm and activity nearby. Below is a sampling of destinations near to *The Front Porch* magazine readers in the rural North Florida area that we primarily serve. It's an impressive variety of opportunities!



ROCKY SOIL
FAMILY FARM

Rocky Soil Family Farm

3137 Waukeelah Hwy.
(Monticello)
www.rockysoilfamilyfarm.com

The small family farm uses intensive methods to grow produce for local markets and restaurants. It also has a farm bakery operated by a global master chef, and they recently began milling 100 percent heirloom corn into grits, cornmeal and polenta. They offer intimate dining experiences and scheduled farm visits.

The Homestead Barn

409 Whitehouse Rd
(Monticello)
Thehomesteadbarn.com

The Homestead Barn is a 6,400 square-foot event venue set on 93 acres of mossy oaks, southern pines and farmland that the owners offer as a space to "celebrate life's greatest moments, both private and corporate, while serving the community through Christian ministry and fellowship." The facility

includes a bridal suite, restrooms, prep kitchen, farm-style tables and fire-pit with outdoor lighting.



Aunt Louise's Farm

8101 Waukeelah Hwy.
(Monticello)
www.auntlouisesfarm.com

This farm is home to many friendly animals including alpaca, chickens of all sorts, donkeys, ducks, emus, geese, goats, highland cows, horses, peacocks, pigs, quail, rabbits, a tortoise, turkeys and zebu. They open to visitors on set farm days in both spring and fall. Field trip groups are welcome, and they have a traveling petting zoo, too. Three options for private events include a Birthday Party package, a Pavilion package and an Under the Country Lights Package.

Green Meadows Farm

177 East Bluebird Rd.
(Monticello)
www.localharvest.org/green-meadows-farm-M23232

This family-owned u-pick farm has organic blueberries on Fridays and Saturdays during the season from 7:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. The farm is a NWF Certified Wildlife Habitat, and visitors often see turtles, fox, coyote,

deer, bluebirds, purple martins, swallowtail kites, woodpeckers, doves and quail, among others. Picnic tables are available, and they often have homemade blueberry treats for sale, such as blueberry fritters, blueberry lemonade tea and blueberry ice cream.

Monticello Market
205 W. Washington St.
(Monticello)
www.facebook.com/MonticelloMarketFL

The Jefferson County Tourist Development organizes this weekly market on Wednesdays 4-6 p.m. for local growers, bakers, makers and ranchers from Jefferson County and its other rural neighbors.



Blue Sky Farm
Berries & Blooms

Blue Sky Farm
1180 Ashville Hwy.
(Monticello)
Bskyfarm.com

Founded in 2012, this u-pick farm offers blueberries and blooms for the whole family to enjoy. Visitors can pick from three hundred bushes with seven varieties of blueberries in season as well as many varieties of flowers, including sunflowers, amaranthus, zinnias and more depending on the season. A mobile flower bar can bring the blooms and on-tap beverages to your event as well.



Florida Georgia Citrus
5314 Boston Hwy.
(Monticello)
www.floridageorgiacitrus.com

This family-owned business specializes in satsumas grown on the farm. They also grow other varieties of citrus, pack/ship fresh fruit and make satsuma products like juice, jellies, syrup and salad dressings. They are open to the public, with their busiest season for selling fruit in November, December and January. They also participate in the FL-GA Farm Tour in the Fall, offering hayrides around the groves and filling their packing shed with lots of vendors.



North Florida Wildlife Center
1386 Cook Rd. (Lamont)
northfloridawildlife.org

At top attraction in North Florida since opening in 2019, the Wildlife Center provides a safe home for an amazing array of rare and endangered animals as well as some very interesting ambassador animals. Visitors can take a self-guided tour or book one of six special animal encounters. Proceeds from admission also support habitat and species protection efforts around the world. The center regularly offers special events and special discounts.

During May and June, visitors on Mother's Day weekend, Memorial Day weekend and Father's Day weekend can save five percent when ordering tickets online.



Harris Homestead
Earl and Roe Harris
3231 Northwest Concord Church Rd. (Greenville)
HarrisHomesteadFL.com

This farm provides fresh goat milk for their Serenity Acres line of soap and other skin-care products. Appointments for a visit can be made through their website. The one-hour walking tour includes meeting various types of goats, seeing where goat-milk products are made, doing some hands-on fun activities and, depending on the season, taking a peek at the gardens, orchard, berry patches and chicken pasture.

Garrett Brothers Farms
27687 U.S. 129 (Branford)
www.branfordfarmstand.com

The Garrett family has been farming for four generations, and it currently produces vegetables, strawberries and flowers on 800 acres in Branford. Their Farm Stand offers a variety of attractions for all ages, including a giant strawberry mural, antique tractor collection, authentic windmill and tortilla machine. The restaurant offers authentic tacos, burritos and bowls

as well as homemade churn-style ice cream and milkshakes. Depending on the season, visitors can u-pick strawberries, u-pick flowers or enjoy a fall festival with pumpkin patch and crop maze. On event days, there are hayrides for touring the fields, pastures and natural landscape.



International Falconry Academy
15209 165th Rd. (Live Oak)
www.birdsofprey.net

This academy offers experiences that feature falcons, hawks and owls that fly to your outstretched glove. Classes and workshops also are offered for those seriously exploring the world of falconry. Individuals, small groups and field trips are welcome. Options include a Hawk Walk, Half-Day Falconry Experience, Morning Owl Prowls, Falconry Apprentice Workshops, Multi-Day International Falconry Academy, School/Camp/Library Programs, Nature Photography Sessions and Full Flight Demonstrations, for fairs, festivals, openings and events.

To learn about more agritourism destinations farther afield, see visitfloridafarms.org.



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DIRTY PECAN GRAVEL RIDE

A humble cycling event turned household name

Story by Heather Ainsley

For the past ten years, the quiet dirt roads of rural North Florida have been a destination sensation for cyclists across the country, and heading a significant portion of the hype is the Dirty Pecan Gravel Ride. This annual event was created in 2015 by Betsy Barfield, who served for 12 years as a commissioner on the Jefferson County Board of County Commissioners.

Dirty Pecan started on a bit of a whim; as a lifelong cyclist herself, Barfield enjoyed biking trails in Tallahassee regularly. One day, she was approached by a friend of hers named John Webb, who brought up the idea of her starting a gravel ride in Jefferson County and the neighboring areas. Gravel riding is a type of bicycling where the cyclists ride on a trail or surface that is unpaved, making it a mix between road cycling and mountain biking.

As this style of biking generally involves unpaved roads and more rural paths, it often brings cyclists out into nature. For that reason, North Florida makes for a tempting location to host a gravel ride, with hundreds of miles of unpaved roads that offer amazing views. From the comfort of canopy roads, to the enchantment of billowing grass fields, to the stillness of swampland, the beauty of rural Florida and Georgia is unmatched, and John Webb knew it would be a real treat for those who like to gravel ride.

Barfield worked together with Webb, and it wasn't long before the routes were established and the date of the very first event was set. But just like any event, it needed a name.

"We called it Dirty Pecan," says Barfield, "because this area is referred to as the pecan capital of the world, and you get dirty while riding off-road. Since then, it has really become a household name."



Georgia is a power-house for pecan production; with an average harvest weighing in at around 100 million pounds of pecans! While Florida's pecan production is significant, the Sunshine State can't compete with those numbers, but that doesn't make it any less relevant when it comes to pecan history.

A portion of Highway 90 between Tallahassee and Monticello is named Mahan Drive after Fred Mahan, who owned Monticello Nursery Company in the 1920s, which was the second largest plant nursery in the Southeastern United States at the time. His nursery specialized in the wholesale of pecan trees and ornamentals, and Mahan was credited with developing the Mahan Pecan, also referred to as the "paper-shell pecan," a development that changed the pecan industry forever. He is also well-known for his dedication to the beautification of Jefferson County, having donated countless plants from his nursery to the county's Unemployment Relief Commission in 1930, making it possible for the county to hire able-bodied workers during a time of record unemployment. These plants were used to beautify Monticello and Jefferson County. In fact, many of the crepe myrtle trees that iconically line Mahan Drive are the very same trees Fred Mahan donated nearly 100 years ago.

The Dirty Pecan Gravel Ride launches each year from the Jefferson County UF/IFAS Extension Office, which is located on Mahan Drive, making the event's name a perfect nod to not only the importance of the pecan industry in North Florida and South Georgia, but also to one of Monticello's prominent historical leaders, both in his role in the pecan industry and as a philanthropist of

this region.

"From the very beginning, we have tried to keep it super simple," says Barfield of the Dirty Pecan Gravel Ride. "To keep the cost down, keep the aggravation down, to keep the rules down, and just keep everything simple. I think we pretty much have stayed true to that guiding principle. John created all the routes, he created what it was going to feel like, and I did the rest."

"The first several years, the event was free," recalls Barfield. "If someone wanted to leave a donation, they could, but we didn't charge to register and do the ride. What I did from the get-go was to go for sponsor money. I've been a fund raiser for all of my professional career."

Barfield had worked at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital Foundation for 13 years, followed by a couple of years working for the Tallahassee Museum (known formerly as the Jr. Museum), as well as serving as a political fund raiser for several years. Using this experience, Barfield was able to secure sponsors each year to help get the Dirty Pecan Gravel Ride its necessary funding in the early days.

The first year showed humble, yet spirited attendance, with 20 riders participating in the ride. The following year showed modest growth, with 25 riders participating. By the fourth year, the participation had tripled in numbers from its inception, with around 60 riders registering to enjoy the ride.

From there, the growth has been quite natural, says Barfield, who remembers adding things here and there to the event, as requests were made over the years and additional sponsorships made more add-ons possible. It wasn't long before Dirty Pecan began promoting

event merchandise like shirts and socks, and participants began suggesting that the event include a sign-up cost. Determined to keep the cost of the event low, Barfield began to charge \$15 for cyclists to register, eventually moving as high as \$25 over the course of several years. This growth has only continued to bloom over the years, with 2025's ride seeing an incredible 478 registered cyclists.

"In the beginning, we didn't have a charity picked out," mentions Barfield, although she says she knew she wanted to find a way to enable all of the event's growth to benefit the community in some way. "While I was a commissioner, I always wanted to use my energy and resources for a good cause under the county's umbrella, whether that was something like the Senior Center, Humane Society, or 4-H. When we started out, our charity was going to be the Eagle Scouts, but at the last minute and for a variety of reasons, they decided that they didn't want to participate in the event. So, I called up John Lilly at Jefferson 4-H and told him, we're a few days out from this event, and would he like to help us out and benefit from it, and he was on board immediately."

The rest, as the saying goes, is history, and ten years since its inception, Dirty Pecan has brought in a total of \$200,000 for 4-H. While raising money to benefit 4-H was always a yearly goal for Barfield, she didn't really realize the full scope of how much money had been raised over time. It wasn't until she was nominated to be entered into the 4-H Hall of Fame in 2023 that she realized the full weight of impact that her event had been making, after seeing a video that had been made in her honor. In the video, it mentioned her having donated



\$150,000 toward 4-H, and the news shocked her, because, as she put it, she hadn't really kept track of the amount of money overall that had been donated, and never thought twice about it once the check was handed over. Her goal was to create a fun, hassle-free cycling event, and to have 4-H benefit from it.

When Barfield left her position as a county commissioner, she opened up Dirty Pecan, LLC., so she could better organize and keep track of how funds were distributed and deposited. As an official LLC, Barfield filed taxes on the money that Dirty Pecan was able to raise, even though she gave the money away to a non-profit. Even though she was determined to "do things by the book," she was still surprised at the end of the year when she was hit hard with taxes. After realizing the financial strain of paying taxes on money that the company did not keep, she knew she had to find another way to manage Dirty Pecan.

For Barfield, it just made sense to turn the LLC into an official not-for-profit company. In August of 2024, she filed the necessary paperwork and turned Dirty Pecan into a 501(c)3 organization. Barfield says that she has always been conscious about transparency with the public regarding Dirty Pecan, wanting to consistently maintain a level of unquestionable honesty about her intentions. It just made sense, she said, to turn it into an official non-profit, with a guiding principle to donate to 4-H, Future Farmers of America (FFA) and other regional non-profits that help children.

Her goals of using Dirty Pecan events to support 4-H have been widely celebrated and supported by the cyclists who attend her event, many of whom have had their lives impacted by 4-H in some way or another.

"I would say that 80 percent of our riders have been touched by 4-H," says Barfield, "whether it is their children, themselves or someone they know who

has been involved directly. People just give so generously, through Dirty Pecan, to 4-H."

As the event grew, Barfield was able to bring in some bigger companies to benefit and sponsor Dirty Pecan, using connections that she had built through her years working as a fund raiser. Approximately 90 percent of the money raised each year by Barfield through Dirty Pecan (averaging \$15-25K annually) is designated to go towards Jefferson County 4-H kids for overnight camp, with some money being allocated for other programs, like FFA.

Barfield reveals that she was shocked when she asked one day how much money was in the account for 4-H from Dirty Pecan, and she was told there was nearly \$50,000 that wasn't being used. Slightly crestfallen, she inquired as to why the money she was working so diligently to raise wasn't being utilized to benefit the children of 4-H, as it had been specifically raised with the intention of it being used.

"That's when they reminded me that most of the money was used for overnight camps," revealed Barfield. "Our Jefferson County children go to Camp Cherry Lake in Madison, Florida."

Approximately 12 acres of land bordering Cherry Lake was designated in 1937 via a lease for camping functions, and was later acquired for local 4-H purposes. In its prime, Camp Cherry Lake offered all sorts of fun camping activities, including water skiing, knee-boarding, swimming, sailing, fishing, picnicking, camping and more. For nearly 100 years, it has been a peak destination for 4-H overnight campers.

Fast forward to today, and one fact poses a big problem: Camp Cherry Lake is closed. It was shut down during the Pandemic in 2020 and never opened back up. Currently, the cabins and facilities are in deplorable condition and have been deemed unsuitable for campers. What's

worse, with Camp Cherry Lake out of commission, there is no overnight camp that is available to send Jefferson County 4-H kids to, and thus, no place to spend the money designated by Dirty Pecan to be used for overnight camp. When she learned of this issue, Barfield knew something had to be done.

As one of only three 4-H overnight camps in the entire state of Florida, Camp Cherry Lake is significant, and its closure affects not just Jefferson County 4-H kids, but 4-H kids in Madison and several other neighboring counties. The facility needs extensive work, and upon looking into what it would take to get the place up and running again, Barfield quickly realized that it didn't seem like the restoration of the camp was high up on anyone's priority list.

"I was hoppin' mad," admits Barfield, who asked around for how this was going to be remedied, but to no avail, as there seemed to be no plans to restore or reopen the camp. "There is money sitting in that account for those kids to go to camp, and they're not going to camp. I continue to raise money, and all our rural children are not going to overnight camp, and that's a shame."

After having donated around \$25,000 to 4-H that year, Dirty Pecan had some remaining money that was supposed to be designated for event efforts that would take place the following year.

During her induction into the 4-H Hall of Fame, Barfield was offered the opportunity to speak, and it was then that she presented a \$10,000 check to 4-H, and restricted it to use in the restoration of Camp Cherry Lake. While she knew that the restoration would take far more than a mere \$10,000, hers was a motion to get the ball rolling on repair efforts and to bring Camp Cherry Lake back into the attention of those who could help bring it back.

"I am an alum of 4-H," says Barfield, thinking back. "I spent two summers at Camp Cherry Lake's overnight camp, and it was incredible to see things come full circle and to be able to come back and give to Camp Cherry Lake."

The problem was a complex one, but Barfield was determined to pursue the issue. Relentless, she used her network of contacts to spread the word, constantly urging UF/IFAS administrative personnel to keep pursuing the issue. Through exhaustive efforts, she was able to encourage the progression of getting the camp on the radar for legislative funding. From there, it was a matter of getting support from the Senate. With support from local governmental officials, they were able to file a request with the Senate for \$450,000. During 4-H Days at the Capitol in Tallahassee, more than 1,200 children from all over the state of Florida donned their green 4-H shirts and gathered at the Capitol to request support of the funding.

"Following that," says Barfield, glowing with pride, "the Senate kicked it up to \$900,000. We were doing back flips! Never in a million years did I think... but it passed – it was put in the budget, and the governor signed it. It was unbelievable."

It was a start. The minimum estimated cost of repairs to Camp Cherry Lake was at least \$3.2 million. With all the progress made to gain some funding, the UF/IFAS/4-H board of trustees voted at last to list the project as a priority, and committed to pursuing additional money.

Barfield soon received the news that the University of Florida was planning to ask the Legislature for \$10 million, with a primary focus on Camp Cherry Lake. After Camp Cherry Lake has been fully repaired, the remaining money would be allocated to the remaining two camps in Florida, as they are also old and in need of restoration. Ten million dollars is no small ask, and the University of Florida broke this large request into two smaller requests, with the first being an inquiry for \$5.6 million.

The efforts to gain funding is still ongoing, but as it stands, this project has been awarded \$2.8 million, with the possibility of being approved for a funding boost to bump it to \$5.6 million.

"As of right now, we are all hands on deck," says Barfield. "We are sending letters, lobbying those legislators, especially on the House side, to get it up to the \$5.6 million. Once we get it in the budget, (it has to be on both budgets, the Senate side and the House side), then it goes to the governor for approval." She mentioned that while they are hopeful that the needed money will be placed in the budget, the governor can still veto the budget, although she has high hopes this does not happen.

While the remainder of the funding has yet to be entirely secured, the project



is already underway. The first step is to replace the old cabins. Barfield mentions that they should be breaking ground very soon, and from there, they will continue with a master plan that will allow the complete restoration and re-opening of Camp Cherry Lake, after half a decade of being shut down. Upon completion, the camp will be open as an overnight camp for any 4-H kids in Florida, but will also be available for private camping for organizations to use, as well as individual events like weddings. It will also be used for agricultural training, and other areas of youth work force development. The ultimate goal is to reopen the facility and ensure that all citizens have an opportunity to benefit from it.

This incredible comeback was made possible by the collected efforts of numerous local governmental entities, administrative staff who work with 4-H, the UF/IFAS office in Jefferson County and countless 4-H participants and advocates across Florida who are working hard to acquire the funding to make it possible. For Betsy Barfield, it all started with Dirty Pecan, an annual gravel bike ride designed to showcase the rural beauty of North Florida and South Georgia. This simple dream of creating a pleasant, easy-to-navigate cycling event has blossomed beautifully over the last 10 years into a powerful message about perseverance and advocating for causes you believe in.

"When I see those kids," she says, "and they are up there at the Capitol, talking to these legislators, I feel so proud. I watch their posture, their handshakes, how articulate they are. Even though they are so nervous, they never falter. 4-H

teaches them to be leaders, and when I see that, I have to turn away to keep from crying."

"I've always been lucky; good things have always happened to me, although maybe a lot of that is mindset," she continues. "I'd like to say, to all people who find themselves in positions of power, whether you've been elected, or are wealthy, or are a person of influence, you are in a truly unique position to forward something good in the world. For me, that was helping the children of 4-H."

When people ask Barfield how they can get involved in Dirty Pecan, she replies that she has all the help she needs with the event. She encourages them instead to give support in other ways.

"Be involved in 4-H," she says. "Support cycling and bike paths in your communities. Support looking out for people. I want people to think about how they can make their circle better, and give other people, not a hand-out, but a hand-up. Find ways to inspire our youth, and help them find their spark. This is why I do what I do. There is no doubt in my mind that I'm in the right place."

With things finally in the works for 4-H's Camp Cherry Lake, Barfield looks forward to the future of Dirty Pecan, and says she is looking for a way to continue this event even long after she retires, so that it may always benefit 4-H. Anyone interested in assisting in securing the future of Dirty Pecan can contact her at betsy@dirtypecan.com. She says she would love to welcome someone who is dedicated to honoring the simplicity and goals of Dirty Pecan, a humble cycling event turned household name. ■

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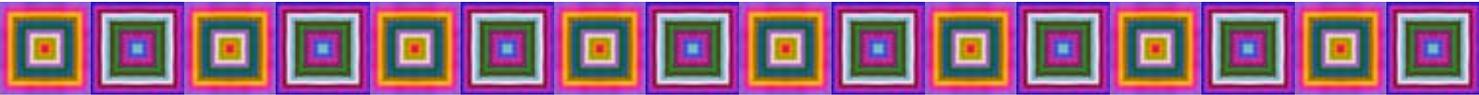
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A STITCH INTO THE PAST: Queenie Udell

Story by Jason Futch

Photograph from *Florida Memory*

Queenie Udell's history in White Springs, Florida, has contributed not only to the Black community but also to the quilting community. Her contributions to quilting were even honored through a local proclamation in February of 2015, which allowed her famous yo-yo quilts to be displayed on the side of Adams Country Store (now Suwannee Hardware and Feed, which have since been removed). She was also inducted into the Stephen Foster Folk Cultural Center State Park Hall of Fame for her contributions.

Udell was born on September 29, 1919, in Jefferson County, Florida. Around the late 1940s, Udell moved to the Black Bay area of White Springs, where she met her husband, Melvin. She brought with her the talent of sewing quilts, which started when she was in her youth. Her mother and grandmother both taught her how to sew yo-yo patterns on quilts, which became a trademark for her work. The material ranged from flour sacks to old clothing.

Udell would stitch her yo-yo patterns with embroidery thread, then flatten and sew together by hand. She would credit people in the community with contributing to her quilts. "People give me scraps, and I just sews'um," Udell would say in an interview with the State Park.

Although she used no quilting frame, Udell also made patchwork quilts. Some examples included a string quilt she stitched in 1977, which used long, narrow strips as the patchwork motif. She



quilted the entire project on her lap, using any extra material she had for a backing.

Over the years, Udell lost track of how many quilts she made. Locals across Hamilton County and elsewhere would purchase her quilts and keep them at home or send them to relatives as gifts.

"I just quilts'um as I go," Udell said in a 1977 interview with Stephen Foster State Park.

To quilt so many pieces also takes patience. Florida Memory Project once noted her husband, Melvin, as remarking, "Queenie Udell has patience just like Job." In some instances, she would work late into the evening gathering small circles of brightly patterned fabrics. Once she would have a collection of yo-yos, she would begin tacking them into small blocks, which were later put together to form the quilt size she desired.

One of her quilts, a piece she stitched together in the early 1970s, is

still on display at the Stephen Foster State Park. She also went on to teach quilting classes there, which added to the emphasis on quilting's rich history in Hamilton County.

Udell continued to quilt until health issues hindered her ability to continue her craft. In February of 2015, White Springs was declared part of the Florida Quilt Trail, to which a painting of Udell's yo-yo pattern quilt was put on display at the Adams Country Store, along with a pattern, known as the double wedding ring quilt, by resident Nancy Morgan. Unfortunately, a couple of weeks before the quilt was set to be dedicated, on February 11, 2015, Udell passed away at a rest home.

However, before she passed away, Udell was able to learn about the tribute to her work after Merri McKenzie, wife of then-Vice Mayor Walter McKenzie, presented the quilt to her and shared about how it would be displayed on the side of the country store. According to an interview with *The Jasper News*, Walter shared that he believed she was pleased by the news.

After the dedication, the Adams Country Store became Suwannee Hardware and Feed, which continued to display Udell's yo-yo pattern quilt on the side of the building. The quilt has since been replaced by a mural that honors the legacy of "Old Florida." However, plans are underway to refurbish the quilts and have them on display elsewhere in the town.

Udell's memory will continue to live on through her work, which has inspired countless Black residents. ■

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MORE THAN A GAME

Madison's coaches shape lives
on and off the field





Story by Tiffany Fessler

Photographs Courtesy

Madison, Florida, is more than just a small town – it’s a place where resilience, community and the power of mentorship shape lives. In December, the Madison County High School (MCHS) football team secured their seventh state championship, but their greatest victories extend far beyond the field.

The coaches of Madison don’t just build football players – they build men. They become role models, mentors and guiding lights for young athletes, many of whom face unimaginable hardships. They don’t just coach – they change lives.

The Coaches Who Break Cycles

Head Coach Price Harris knows firsthand what football can do for a young man. Raised in Madison, he left for nearly three decades before returning home to care for his aging parents and lead the team. For him, coaching isn’t about trophies; it’s about teaching boys how to become men of integrity, sacrifice and responsibility.

“You don’t get into coaching just to win football games,” Harris said. “Of course, we’re competitive and want to win, but what drives us is seeing young men become men. We live in one of the poorest communities in Florida. Seventy-three percent of our young men grow up without a father. We want to break that



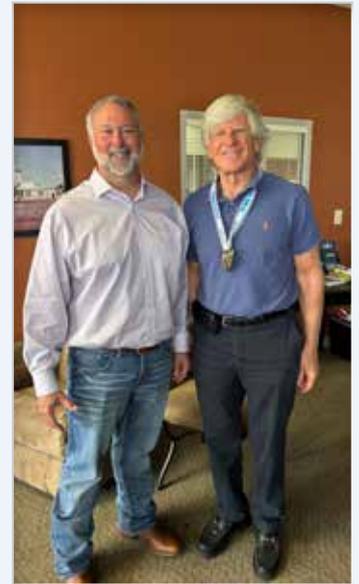
cycle. A lot of times, we, as coaches, become that father figure.”

Coach Morris Bell, who also coaches the MCHS Girls Softball Team, understands that reality all too well. Growing up without a father, Bell was raised by a single mother with four brothers who, night after night, had to figure out where to sleep. But he found guidance through the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and made a commitment to be the role model he

never had.

“Football gave me direction, but coaching gave me purpose,” Bell said. “These kids need to see what a father looks like. They need to see what it means to be present, to take care of your family, to stand up and lead. That’s why we do what we do.”

Bell recounts an especially heartbreaking experience from the team’s 2002 season, a moment he says changed his life forever.



“We were preparing for our homecoming game, but at 1 a.m., we got the heartbreaking news that one of our student-athletes had been found dead,” Bell recalled. “It shook me to my core. Here we were, trying to inspire these kids through football, and suddenly, we were faced with an unimaginable loss. In that moment, I knew my purpose – I wasn’t just coaching a team. I was stepping into the role of a father figure for these boys. From that day on, I was determined to be a consistent presence in their lives.”

For Coach Bubba Carroll, the impact of coaching spans generations. A former Madison player himself, he has been part of nearly every state championship victory. But his role goes far beyond the playbook – he’s there when his players need him most.

“When these kids face tragedy, we are the ones they call,” Carroll said. “We’ve picked up groceries for families with nothing. We’ve taken kids on college visits who have never left Madison. I had a kid call me in the middle of the night when his mom was being arrested. Another called me when he ran out of diapers for his baby. This is real life for them. And if we don’t step up, who will?”

Carroll grew up watching his father, a Madison coaching legend, open his home to players who had nowhere else to go. Now, he carries on that legacy – showing kids that life is bigger than what they’ve known.

“We took two players on a college visit, and we stopped by my cabin in Georgia,” Carroll said. “They were FaceTiming their families, blown away

because they had never seen mountains before. Some of these kids have never had a Christmas tree. One of my players had never seen one, so I got him a tree. These kids don’t just need coaches. They need more people looking out for them, and that’s exactly what we want to do.”

A Brotherhood That Extends Beyond the Game

These coaches are more than just mentors – they are husbands, fathers and family men who have broken the cycle themselves. Their own children see them

living out the lessons they teach, proving that fatherhood is more than just being present – it’s about showing up every day, leading by example and guiding young men toward a better future.

“We aren’t just coaching football,” Harris said. “We’re teaching these kids that they can be more than their circumstances. They can be great husbands, great fathers, great men.”

Madison’s championship legacy isn’t just measured in wins – it’s measured in the lives forever changed by the men who lead this team. ■



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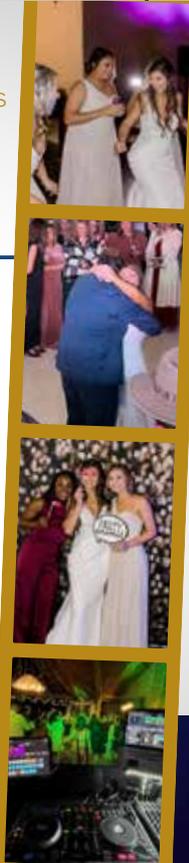
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WHAT'S HAPPENING



May 1

Suwannee CARES 2025

Since 2001, the Suwannee River Partnership, along with other agricultural organizations, has hosted this celebration at the UF/IFAS NFREC-Suwannee County (8202 C.R. 417, Live Oak). Community members gather 6-8 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 2

Fantasia in the Garden Tea Party

Fellowship Baptist Church (1997 N.E. Colin Kelly Hwy., Madison) hosts a Tea Party in honor of a Women's Pregnancy Center. Seating is limited, please RSVP with Tricia Barnes (813) 763-4080.



May 3-31

"Tranquility for an Uncertain Time" Exhibit at JAG

This exhibit showcases the oil paintings of North Florida coastal and rural landscapes by Steven Andrews. 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.

May 3

May the 4th Be with You Dice Run

Register at American Legion Post 57 (2602 S.W. Main Blvd., Lake City) 9-10 a.m. The 124-mile route takes around 2.5 hours, plus stops, and ends at The Edge of Town in Lee, with onsite restaurant, beer, wine, pool tables, outside entertainment and a live band. See route details at maps.app.goo.gl/96jWPcMkFauM6Vyb7.

May 7

Hurricane Preparedness Day

Learn about hurricane preparedness with the Suwannee County Sheriff's Office Division of Emergency Management's free informational event in the Walmart parking lot (6868 U.S. 129, Live Oak), 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Monticello Market

Growers, bakers and makers gather every Wednesday 4-6 p.m. in the parking lot of Kelly & Kelly Properties (205 W. Washington St.), offering sustainably grown fruits, vegetables, floral bouquets, pasture raised meats, sourdough breads, honey and specialty products. Interested vendors should apply on the MonticelloMarketFL Facebook page.

May 9

Golf Tournament Benefiting Vivid Visions

Chip away at domestic violence with the annual Charity Golf Tournament. This year it will benefit Vivid Visions, Inc. and take place at the Suwannee Country Club (7932 U.S. 90, Live Oak) with a 9 a.m. shotgun start. Registration is \$75 for singles and \$225 for teams. Call Bob Budwick at (386) 362-1147 to register.



May 9-11

Mothers Day Weekend at Ragans

Come celebrate Mom at Ragans Family Campground. Moms get a free day pass! Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.



May 10

Wildflower Festival

Experience the vibrant celebration of spring wildflowers that North Florida is famous for. 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.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

May 10-11

Spring Harvest Farm Tour

More than 30 farms, groves, orchards, u-pick and ranches all across South Georgia and North Florida welcome you. To download the complete guide, visit the FL-Ga Farm Tour Facebook page.



May 10-11

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 can 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 12

BINGO! At Grumpy's Diner

Five games of three cards each are split 50-50 with the Madison County Chamber of Commerce, and in a bonus game the winner takes all. Cards are \$2 each or three for \$5 (nonrefundable), 6-8 p.m. at 244 SW Range Ave., in Madison.

May 14

Monticello Market

Growers, bakers and makers gather every Wednesday 4-6 p.m. in the parking lot of Kelly & Kelly Properties (205 W.

Washington St.), offering sustainably grown fruits, vegetables, floral bouquets, pasture raised meats, sourdough breads, honey and specialty products. Interested vendors should apply on the [MonticelloMarketFL](https://www.facebook.com/MonticelloMarketFL) Facebook page.

May 15-17

Resonate Suwannee

Enjoy three days of camping, music, art and community inside Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park (9379 CR 132, Live Oak). This festival features the sounds of funk, blues, bluegrass, electronic and jam bands. The lineup includes STS9, Deca, 5am trio, Desert Dwellers, Papadosio, Ott, Lotus, CimaFunk and more. For more information or tickets, visit www.resonatesuwannee.com.

May 17-18

Watermelon Festival Pickle Ball Tournament

The 74th annual Watermelon Festival includes Pickle Ball Tournaments from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the Jefferson County Recreation Park (1380 Mamie Scott Dr., Monticello). For further details, follow the event's Facebook page and visit www.monticellowatermelonfestival.com.



May 21

Monticello Market

Growers, bakers and makers gather every Wednesday 4-6 p.m. in the parking lot of Kelly & Kelly Properties (205 W. Washington St.), offering sustainably grown fruits, vegetables, floral bouquets, pasture raised meats, sourdough breads, honey and specialty products. Interested vendors should apply on the [MonticelloMarketFL](https://www.facebook.com/MonticelloMarketFL) Facebook page.



May 24 - 26

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.

May 23-26

Memorial Day Weekend at Ragans

During Memorial Day weekend at Ragans Family Campground, enjoy fireworks on Saturday. Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.

May 26

Memorial Day Picnic at Post 49

The Otto M. Walker American Legion Post 49 (1065 S. Water St., Monticello) hosts a picnic open to the public. Lt. Col. Byron Arceneaux will speak at 11:30 a.m. about his recent mission in Guam and Tinian. A raffle drawing and fried chicken lunch follow.



WHAT'S HAPPENING

May 28

Monticello Market

Growers, bakers and makers gather every Wednesday 4-6 p.m. in the parking lot of Kelly & Kelly Properties (205 W. Washington St.), offering sustainably grown fruits, vegetables, floral bouquets, pasture raised meats, sourdough breads, honey and specialty products. Interested vendors should apply on the MonticelloMarketFL Facebook page.

May 29

BINGO! at The Edge of Town

Enjoy a fun-filled night at 8289 E. US Hwy. 90, in Lee, 6-8 p.m. Five games of three cards each are split 50-50 with the Madison County Chamber of Commerce, and in a bonus game the winner takes all. Cards are \$2 each or three for \$5 (nonrefundable).

June 4

Monticello Market

Growers, bakers and makers gather every Wednesday 4-6 p.m. in the parking lot of Kelly & Kelly Properties (205 W. Washington St.), offering sustainably grown fruits, vegetables, floral bouquets, pasture raised meats, sourdough breads, honey and specialty products. Interested vendors should apply on the MonticelloMarketFL Facebook page.

June 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14

"Second Samuel"

Theatre Guild Valdosta presents the heartwarming comedy "Second Samuel," set in the sleepy South Georgia town of Second Samuel in the late 1940s. All is peaceful and serene until the death of sweet Miss Gertrude turns the town upside down, leaving everyone wondering if anything will ever be the same. Performances take place at the historic 'Dosta Playhouse (122 N. Ashley St.) For showtimes and tickets, visit www.theatreguildvaldosta.com, or call the box office at (229) 24-STAGE (247-8243).

June 6

Watermelon Festival Block Party

The Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce kicks off the 74th annual Watermelon Festival with an exciting line-up that includes a Kick-Off Dinner, Bed Race, Kids Ride-On Parade, live music and watermelon-themed games. For dinner tickets and further details about the activities, visit www.monticellowatermelonfestival.com.



June 6-8

Pirate's Weekend at Ragans

Enjoy a cardboard boat race and other pirate-themed fun at Ragans Family Campground. Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.



June 7

Wellborn Blueberry Festival

Browse through more than 100 vendor booths at the 31st Annual Wellborn Blueberry Festival in Andrews Square (1340 8th Ave.). This free one-day event features a locally grown blueberry pancake breakfast (\$5, 7:30-10:30 a.m.), live local entertainment, arts and crafts, children's games, plants for sale, a petting zoo, a parade and other attractions. For more information, visit www.wellborn.cc/blueberry-festival.

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 7:15 a.m. at 325 Walnut St. in Monticello, and the race begins at 8:30 a.m. For more information and online pre-registration, visit www.monticellowatermelonfestival.com.

June 9

BINGO! at Grumpy's Diner

Five games of three cards each are split 50-50 with the Madison County Chamber of Commerce, and in a bonus game the winner takes all. Cards are \$2 each or three for \$5 (nonrefundable), 6-8 p.m. at 244 SW Range Ave., in Madison.

June 10, 11, 13, 14

"Frozen Jr." at MOH

MadCo and the Monticello Opera House present "Frozen 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.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

June 11

Monticello Market

Growers, bakers and makers gather every Wednesday 4-6 p.m. in the parking lot of Kelly & Kelly Properties (205 W. Washington St.), offering sustainably grown fruits, vegetables, floral bouquets, pasture raised meats, sourdough breads, honey and specialty products. Interested vendors should apply on the MonticelloMarketFL Facebook page.

June 12

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 13-14

Watermelon Festival

The Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce presents the culminating weekend of its 74th 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, with the addition of Watermelon Parade at 10 a.m. and Antique Car Show at 11 a.m. For further details, follow the event's Facebook page and visit www.monticellowatermelonfestival.com.



June 13-15

Fathers Day Weekend & BBQ Cook-off at Ragans

Come celebrate Dad and enjoy the cook-off Saturday night. Call Ragans Family Campground at (850) 973-8269 for more information.

June 14

Madison Local Market

Walk through the beautiful Four Freedoms Park while it's packed full of local vendors!

June 14-August 30

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.

June 18

Monticello Market

Growers, bakers and makers gather every Wednesday 4-6 p.m. in the parking lot of Kelly & Kelly Properties (205 W. Washington St.), offering sustainably grown fruits, vegetables, floral bouquets, pasture raised meats, sourdough breads, honey and specialty products. Interested vendors should apply on the MonticelloMarketFL Facebook page.



June 21

Blackberry Festival

Riverbend News hosts its Third Annual Blackberry Festival from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Jasper City Park (205 Hatley St.). Enjoy browsing through an array of craft and food vendors while listening to live music by Faster Than Flash. For \$25, enter your kiddos into the Little Miss and Miss Blackberry Photogenic Contest. For more information or to enter, contact Danny Federico at reporter3.riverbendnews@gmail.com. To become a vendor, contact Rachal Deming at (386) 364-4141 or email bookkeeper.riverbendnews@gmail.com.

June 25

Monticello Market

Growers, bakers and makers gather every Wednesday 4-6 p.m. in the parking lot of Kelly & Kelly Properties (205 W. Washington St.), offering sustainably grown fruits, vegetables, floral bouquets, pasture raised meats, sourdough breads, honey and specialty products. Interested vendors should apply on the MonticelloMarketFL Facebook page.

June 26

BINGO! at The Edge of Town

Enjoy a fun-filled night at 8289 E. U.S. Hwy. 90, in Lee, 6-8 p.m. Five games of three cards each are split 50-50 with the Madison County Chamber of Commerce, and in a bonus game the winner takes all. Cards are \$2 each or three for \$5 (nonrefundable).



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