

The Front Porch

Where the tea is sweet and the talks are long

JULY/AUGUST 2023



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The Front Porch

Where the tea is sweet and the tables are long

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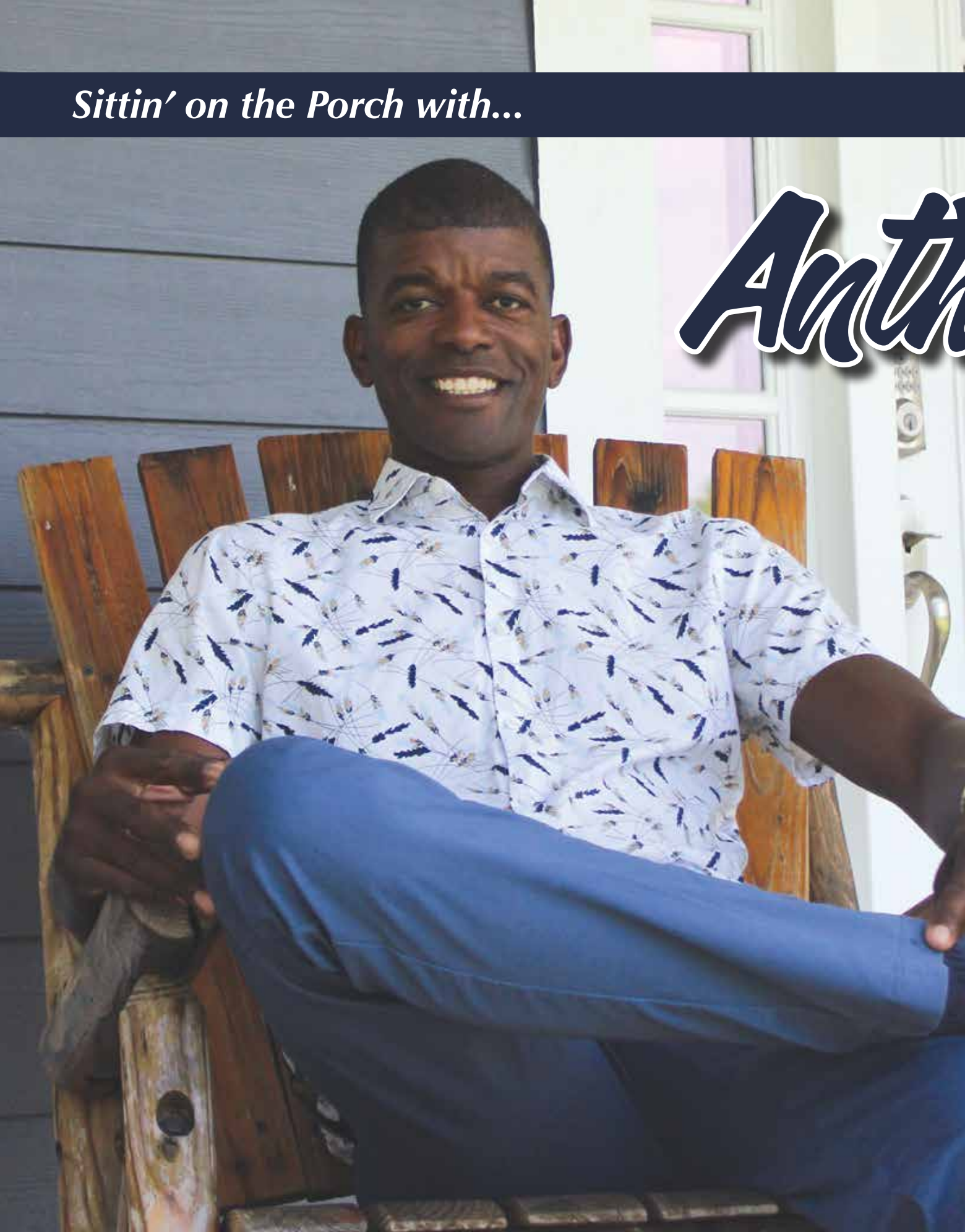
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The
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Porch**
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Sittin' on the Porch with...

Ant





Anthony Williams

Story and Photograph by Christian Peterson

Anthony Williams was born in Madison, Fla., to Genetheal Ash and Roosevelt Williams. He was raised in Jennings, Fla., alongside his seven siblings. He remembers fondly visiting Jekyll Island in Georgia during his family vacation and spending time on the beach as a child. Eventually, he graduated from Hamilton County High School in 1988. However, Williams knew the value of education, and he began attending North Florida Community College (NFCC) at age 19. He didn't attend without a goal though; Williams was born with a servant's heart and was interested in a career in law enforcement.

"It was an opportunity to serve my community," Williams said.

Even after his initial training at NFCC, Williams continued his education by receiving training as a Public Safety Adjunct Instructor. He then began a 31-year-long career in law enforcement with the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office. Williams recalls many incidents from his career, some good and some bad. The hardest days were when he had to deliver the news of a death of one his friends to their parents, or working

cases on the deaths of children. However, that didn't make every day bad. He also fondly remembers helping kids as a school resource officer,

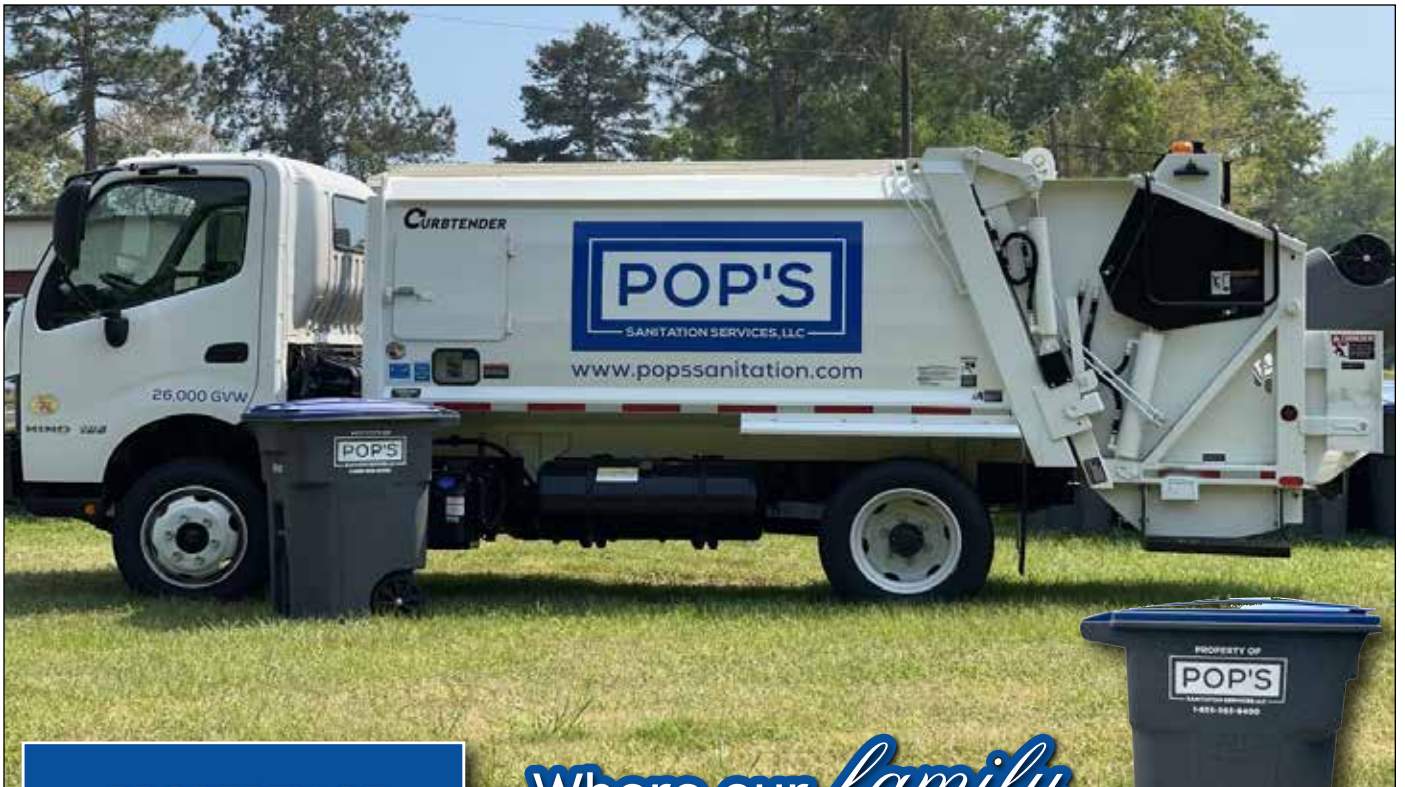
along with the multiple times he helped a family find a lost infant. He even helped with the birth of a child.

Williams continued talking about his favorite arrest; while it was a team effort, the events live in his memory as an all-time highlight. Jasper Police Chief Frank Ogman was first on the scene of a bank robbery in Hamilton County. As he arrived, an elderly lady was exiting the bank, so he held the door open for her. He then realized the lady was actually the male bank robber in disguise. The thief kicked Chief Ogman in the chest and fled from the scene. What proceeded was a foot chase, followed by the apprehension of the suspect by the K9 officers.

Now that he is retired, Williams' life has changed drastically. One day, as a supervisor he was receiving upward of 65 calls a day. Then after retirement, he found himself going from adrenaline to total relaxation, and he is enjoying it. He has found time to reinvent himself. Williams discussed how he wished to communicate to the public that law enforcement is a calling, and that law enforcement officers really do care. Almost every officer he knew just wanted to do what was right for the people and serve them.

Now that he is retired, Williams has been focused on his oversized law enforcement escort service, which helps move large loads and products throughout the state. He also spends time volunteering at a nursing home and continues to work with NFCC.

On top of all this, Williams is a family man. He has two daughters whom he loves dearly, and is ultimately enjoying his homestead life. ■



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Blue Coast Federal Credit Union



BCFCU opened their Madison branch in 2016.

NEW NAME, *Decades of Service*

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Story by Rick Patrick

Photographs Courtesy of Blue Coast Federal Credit Union

It began on July 3, 1956, as a way for the employees of the new Buckeye Cellulose plant in the small hamlet of Foley, Fla., in Taylor County, to enjoy banking services with the added benefits that come along with a credit union. The Buckeye Employees Federal Credit Union was born. W.D. Wilson, an accounting manager at the Buckeye Cellulose plant, operated the credit union from the nearby Foley Lumber Industries office. In those early days an unsecured loan up to \$200, with an additional \$100 for each co-signer, up to a maximum of \$400 could be made, at an interest rate of one percent. A couple of years later, Hoyt Ragans was



Current BCFCU CEO Bradley Blake named the first Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in 1959. By that time, the credit union had grown to 500 members, with

total assets amounting to \$188,000.

Over the next few years, the credit union grew and in 1960 moved operations to the old commissary building. The premises also provided for dry goods, a barber shop and a post office. It was not unusual to enjoy a game of pool while sipping on a refreshing soda drawn from the old-fashioned soda fountain. By December of 1960, membership had grown to 678 members and \$311,733 in assets. Ten years later, assets topped \$2 million at \$2,235,627, with 2,113 members. On May 18, 1975, a new Main Office held a grand opening at a new location on Highway 30. The credit union continued to enjoy steady growth in both membership and assets, and by the end of 1980 the credit union had amassed \$11,595,698 in assets and a membership



The Taylor County Special Olympics is just one of the organizations supported by BCFCU.

of 3,642 members.

Throughout the decades that followed, the credit union continued to hit new benchmarks in growth in terms of both membership and total assets. As the credit union grew, membership was extended to include anyone who lived or worked in Taylor County. To reflect this change, the name was changed to Buckeye Community Federal Credit Union (BCFCU). In July of 2006, the credit union celebrated its 50th anniversary and had approximately \$55 million in assets and 10,200 members. In 2010, with close to \$65 million in assets, the credit union expanded to include not only Taylor County, but Dixie, Lafayette, Suwannee, Hamilton and Madison counties as well. In May of 2016, a branch office was opened on Base Street, in Madison, Fla. In 2021, the credit union received approval to expand even further to include a total of 13 Florida counties. In March of 2022, the credit union welcomed members of the Tallahassee Community Federal Credit Union. That same month, another branch location was opened in Tallahassee, Fla.

As a way of reflecting the growing area of service, the name of Buckeye





Former BCFCU CEO Charlton Knowles with former Executive Vice President Pam Rigoni-Parker on the occasion of Rigoni-Parker's retirement after 44 years of service.

Community Federal Credit Union was changed to Blue Coast Federal Credit Union, keeping the same initials. In an effort to honor the rich history and legacy of the Buckeye Community Federal Credit Union, the credit union has sought to trademark the Buckeye Community Federal Credit Union name in Florida for exclusive use in Taylor County. The Buckeye name will continue to be visible both in and outside the Perry office, as a division of Blue Coast Federal Credit Union. The Blue Coast FCU name will be used across the expanded communities, while allowing the Buckeye Community name to live on. Now, membership in BCFCU is open to anyone who lives, works, worships or attends school in Dixie, Franklin, Gadsden, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lafayette, Leon, Levy, Madison, Suwannee, Taylor or Wakulla counties. This includes businesses and legal entities located in these Florida counties.

BCFCU is set to offer services that can compete with the largest of banks,

with added benefits that come from dealing with a local credit union. Credit unions are made up of and owned by the members and, as such, any "profits" made are distributed back to the members in the form of dividends. The decisions of the credit union are also made by local volunteers who serve on the board of directors and various committees of the credit union. When you deal with BCFCU, you are working with your neighbors, people you know and will likely know you by name when you walk in the door. Beginning in July of 2023, BCFCU will be partnering with other credit unions across the nation to be able to offer teller services, such as making deposits and withdrawals, checking, etc. with 5,300 locations nationwide.

"Community minded, just like you," is not just a catchy slogan for BCFCU. It is at the core of how they operate.

"We exist to serve our communities," said BCFCU CEO Bradley Blake.

As part of the "Give back, Get more" program, BCFCU has given more than

\$20,000 back to the communities it serves. This program makes a donation to a variety of non-profit organizations for every loan BCFCU makes. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Special Olympics, Make-a Wish, St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital and Breast Cancer Awareness are just a handful of the charities that have benefitted from BCFCU charitable giving. Youth sports organizations are also among the groups receiving assistance from BCFCU. BCFCU is expected to donate more than \$25,000 this year to various organizations.

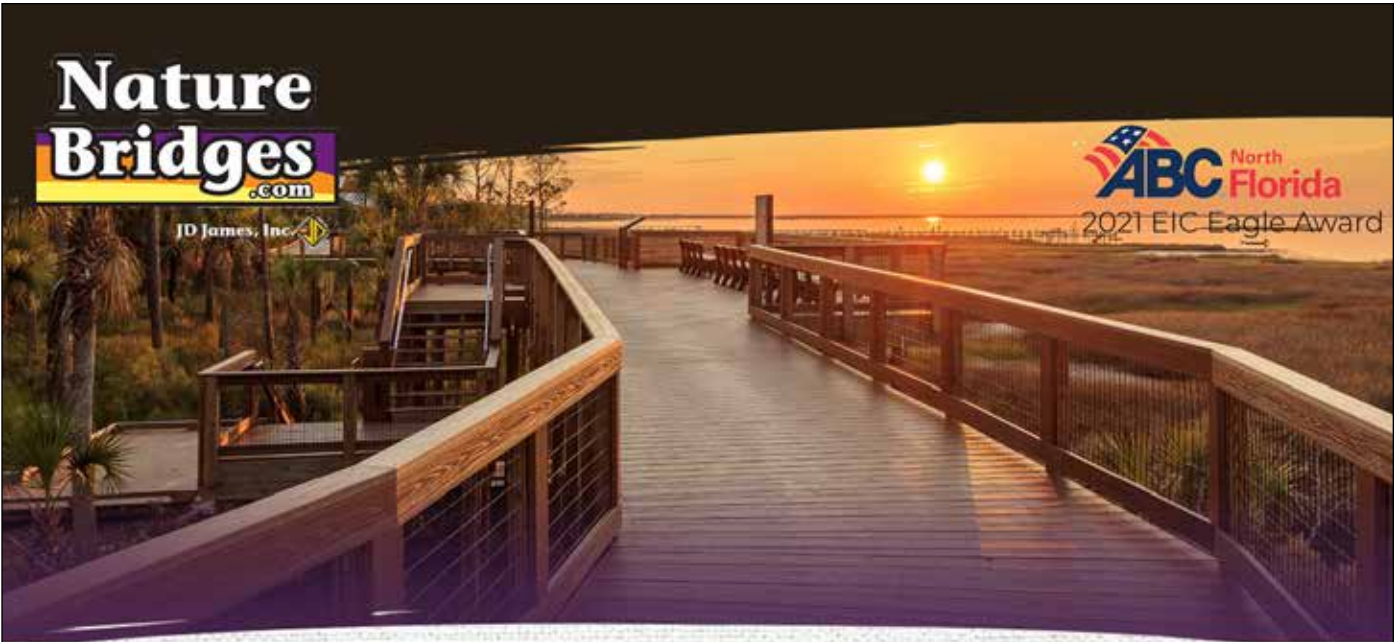
Building on its rich history of over six decades, BCFCU will continue to offer ever-expanding services to its members. On the horizon are vast improvements in technology that will allow BCFCU to provide even better and more personal customer service. This is something those early leaders of the comparatively small Buckeye Employees Federal Credit Union of 1956 would no doubt be proud. ■

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July 4 Celebrations

★ Branford

Join the Town of Branford for the Branford River Reunion's Fourth of July Celebration. Find a spot on the Suwannee River Greenway (directly behind Town Hall at 502 S.W. Suwannee Ave.) to watch one of the largest duck races in the area, show off your hot-rod in the car show, or just settle down in the shade for some good ole American jams. Of course, you won't want to miss the fireworks. Admission is free.

★ Jasper

Hamilton County's Independence Day Celebration will be held at the county's park (4525 SW 107th Ave., in Jasper). This free event includes live music, bounce houses, waterslides, plenty of vendors and, of course, an explosive fireworks display.

★ Live Oak

Live Oak's Freedom Festival features live music, bounce houses, plenty of vendors, and an assortment of activities – a little bit of something for everyone, adults and children alike. The evening of camaraderie will end with a bang (literally!) at 9 p.m. with a spectacular fireworks show. This free event is held at Millennium Park (corner of Pine Avenue Southwest and West Howard Street).

★ Madison

The Madison Lions Club hosts their annual God and Country July 4th celebration on the banks of Lake Francis, in Madison. The event kicks off at 5 p.m. and includes vendors, entertainment, a dazzling fireworks display and more. For more information, email mymadisonlionsclub@gmail.com.

★ Mayo

Get fired up for freedom with the Lafayette County Chamber of Commerce's Annual Fourth of July Celebration. From 6 to 9 p.m. in Mayo at the Edward Perry Sports Complex (840 NE CR 400), young and old are able to enjoy fun games, good food and vibrant firework om 6 p.m to 9 p.m. with this free event.

What's Happenin'

Now through September 2

"Memories" Exhibit at JAG

This show features works by many of the artists who are members of Jefferson Arts Gallery (575 W. Washington St., Monticello, Fla.).

The gallery is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling (850) 997-3311.

July 1, 2, 6, 8, 13, 15, 16, 20, 22

Monty Python's Spamlot

Peach State Summer Theater presents this new musical spin-off of the motion picture Monty Python and the Holy Grail, at Valdosta State University Fine Arts Building, 204 W. Brookwood Dr., Valdosta. For showtimes and ticket information, call (229) 259-7770.

July 5, 8, 14, 15, 19, 21

The Spongebob Musical

This Peach State Summer Theater performance offers fun for the whole family at Valdosta State University Fine Arts Building, 204 W. Brookwood Dr., Valdosta. For showtimes and ticket information, call (229) 259-7770.

July 7, 9, 12, 19, 22

Mahala - Musical

Peach State Summer Theater presents this gospel musical at Valdosta State University Fine Arts Building, 204 W. Brookwood Dr., Valdosta. For showtimes and ticket information, call (229) 259-7770.

July 7-9

Wet 'n Wild Weekend at Ragans

Beat the heat with tons of water fun at Ragans Family Campground. For reservations, call (850) 773-8269 or visit ragansfamilycampground.com.

July 8

Monticello Second Saturday

Enjoy karaoke, arts & crafts vendors, extended shopping hours and other fun in downtown historic Monticello from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. This month's theme is All Things Americana, in recognition of Independence Day.

July 14

Christmas in July

This free community event hosted by the Taylor County Historical Society starts at 5 p.m. at Rosehead Park in historic downtown Perry. It will feature arts and crafts, concessions, a bounce house, music, children's games and the screening of a beloved Christmas movie.

July 14-15

Ragans Goes Hawaiian

Enjoy tropical-themed games at Ragans Family Campground. For reservations, call (850) 773-8269 or visit ragansfamilycampground.com.

July 21-22

BBQ Cook Off Weekend at Ragans

Who has what it takes to earn the right to be called Ragan's Family Campground Pit Master? Entry fee is just \$5, and one lucky winner will receive a free night of camping. For reservations, call (850) 773-8269 or visit ragansfamilycampground.com.

July 28-29

Chocolate Lovers Weekend at Ragans

Simply put, it's chocolate, chocolate and more chocolate. Brings some old clothes. For reservations, call (850) 773-8269 or visit ragansfamilycampground.com.

July 29

Blackberry Festival

Riverbend News is proud to present this year's Blackberry Festival in Jasper City Park (205 Harley St.). Get your hands on some of Hamilton County's emergency vehicles, enjoy a K-9 demonstration, enter your kiddos in a photo contest and enjoy some sweet blackberry sweets. Admission is free.

August 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 12

The Drowsy Chaperone

This Main Stage musical production by Theatre Guild Valdosta takes place in the historic 'Dosta Playhouse, 122 N. Ashley St., in downtown Valdosta. This loving send-up of the Jazz Age musical features one show-stopping song and dance number after another with a cast of characters sure to deliver an evening of madcap delight. For showtimes and ticket information, visit www.theatreguildvaldosta.com or call (229) 24-STAGE (247-8243).

August 12

Monticello Second Saturday

Enjoy karaoke, arts and crafts vendors, extended shopping hours and other fun in downtown historic Monticello from 5 to 8 p.m.



Kidd and Spitfire Doll

Jonnie Kidd Whittington



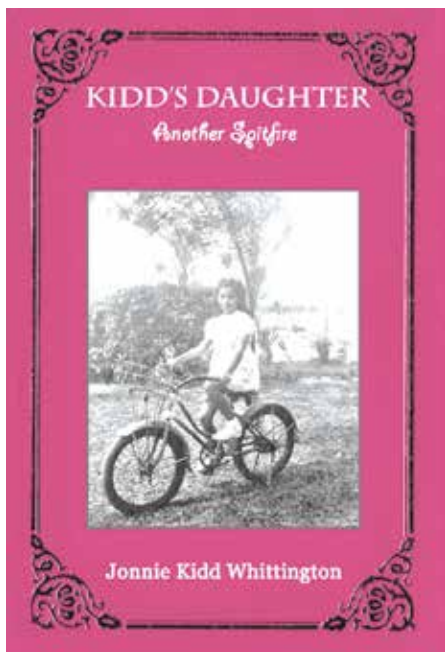
Kidd and Spitfire Doll / Photograph Courtesy of Jonnie Whittington

Jonnie Kidd Whittington: *Putting the pen to paper*

Story by Danny Federico

Jonnie Kidd Whittington, the youngest child of Yates and Dollie Kidd, was born at Six Mile Creek in Tampa, Fla.; however, she grew up all over the United States. As a young girl, she'd heard stories of her parents' lives in the roaring '20s and early '30s, some of which involved her father's exploits in the Ku Klux Klan. These stories awed Whittington, and she knew she had to put them down in print – especially the turning point in Yates's life when he shifted from Klan participation to a passion for preaching. This story, however, would only be told once she was around 60 years old – nearly 40 years after the idea first reached her brain.

As a young woman, Whittington moved to Tennessee to attend college.



Kidd's Daughter: Another Spitfire /
Photograph Courtesy of Jonnie Whittington



Jonnie Kidd Whittington, author of 21 books, is one of the founders of Writer's Ink in Mayo, a group for writers to share their ideas and receive feedback. / Photograph by Danny Federico

While there, she met her future husband, Malcolm Whittington, who was studying to be a minister. He was 21 when he started pastoring; she was 18. Eventually, the two moved to Lafayette County, Fla., where Malcolm ministered at Lighthouse Christian Center for years. Whittington also became a fixture at the church, as she would teach piano lessons there. While listening to her husband spread the word of God to the congregation, Whittington gained insight into human nature and compassion for those who have lost their way. This led her to travel to Orlando every Tuesday for six years to teach women in the Orange County Jail.

Eventually, the itch to write came back to her, and she published her first book in 2002, *Building Your House*, which is based on Christ's Sermon on the Mount. This, she said, was a topic she had taught at church

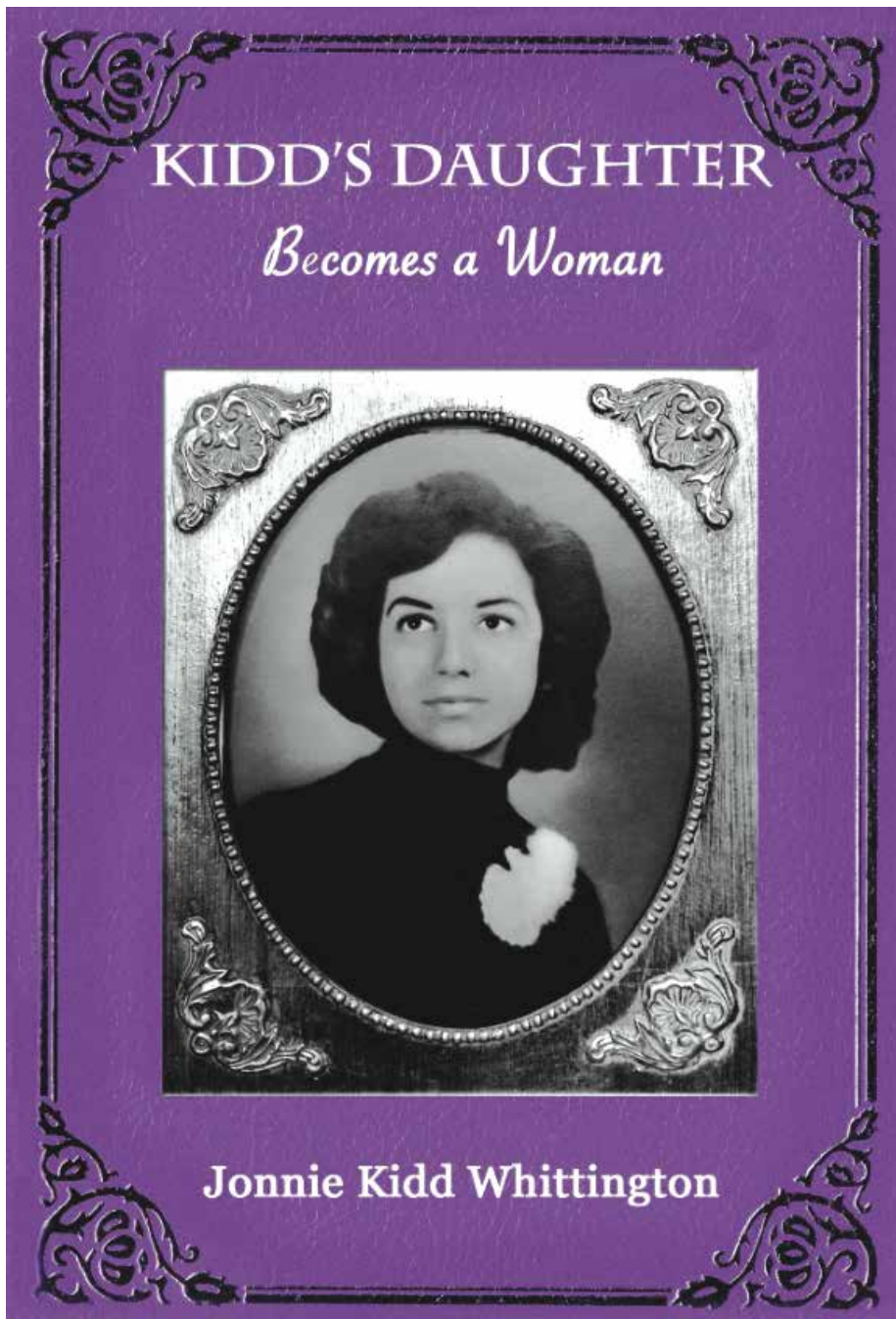
for 20 to 30 years before putting it in novel form. Then, in 2012, Whittington published *Kidd and Spitfire Doll*, the first of five books in the Kidd Family Series. Ever since, she has managed to publish one book every year.

"I didn't think I'd ever write a book," Whittington joked, expressing how the hardest part about the whole process was simply getting started.

Later, in 2013, she was contacted by friend and fellow author, Delores Leggett Walker, for assistance in writing her own novel.

"She called me one day and said, 'Jonnie, I've had a dream, and I think it's a book, and I feel like the Lord said to ask you to help me, because I don't know where to start,'" Whittington recalled.

So, the two met in the park to talk about it.



Kidd's Daughter Becomes a Woman / Photograph Courtesy of Jonnie Whittington

"I told her to just start writing, start at the beginning, and just write whatever comes to your mind. You can always change it later; it's nothing set in stone. But, you just have to start."

Whittington encouraged her friend to start by writing a chapter, and told her they would meet again the following week.

"I said, 'Write a chapter; whatever you think would be the first chapter. We'll meet once a week. You bring something you wrote, I'll bring something I wrote, and

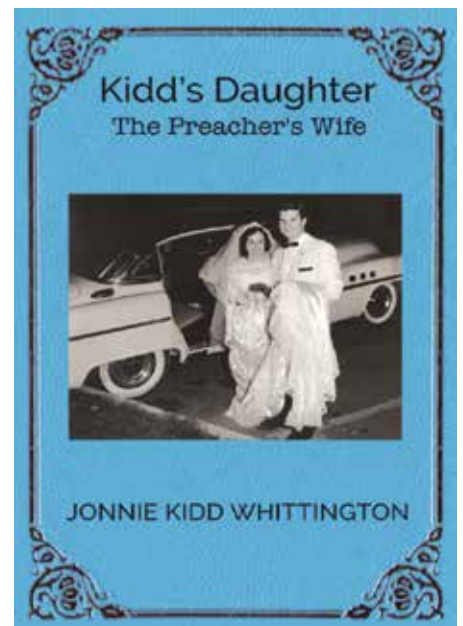
we'll critique each other,'" she recalled.

In this process, each would read their writings out loud to each other, then receive feedback.

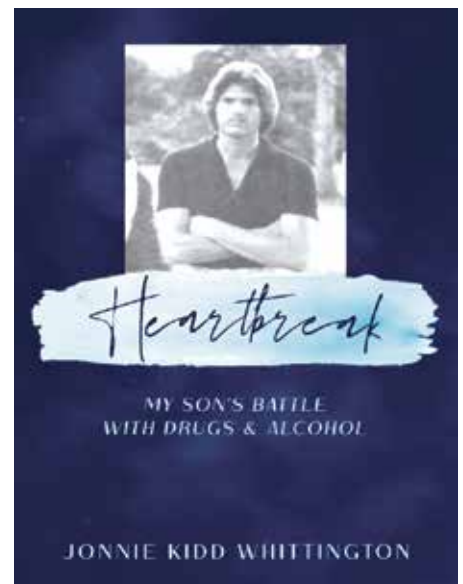
"So, we did that, and that was the start of Writer's Ink."

One thing Whittington admits might have been a reason it took her so many years to get started writing her novels was a lack of confidence.

"You think, 'I can't do this, I can't do this,' but you can," she said. "I used to lie



*Kidd's Daughter: The Preacher's Wife
Photograph Courtesy of Jonnie Whittington*



Heartbreak: My Son's Battle With Drugs & Alcohol / Photograph Courtesy of Jonnie Whittington

in bed at night, and it would play in my mind: 'I've got to write this, I've got to write this,' but I wouldn't because I didn't think I could."

She hopes that anyone wanting to begin their own novel will be able to find their muse through Writer's Ink or her book, *Late Bloomer: An encouraging word for wanna-be writers*. All of Whittington's novels are available for purchase on Amazon. ■

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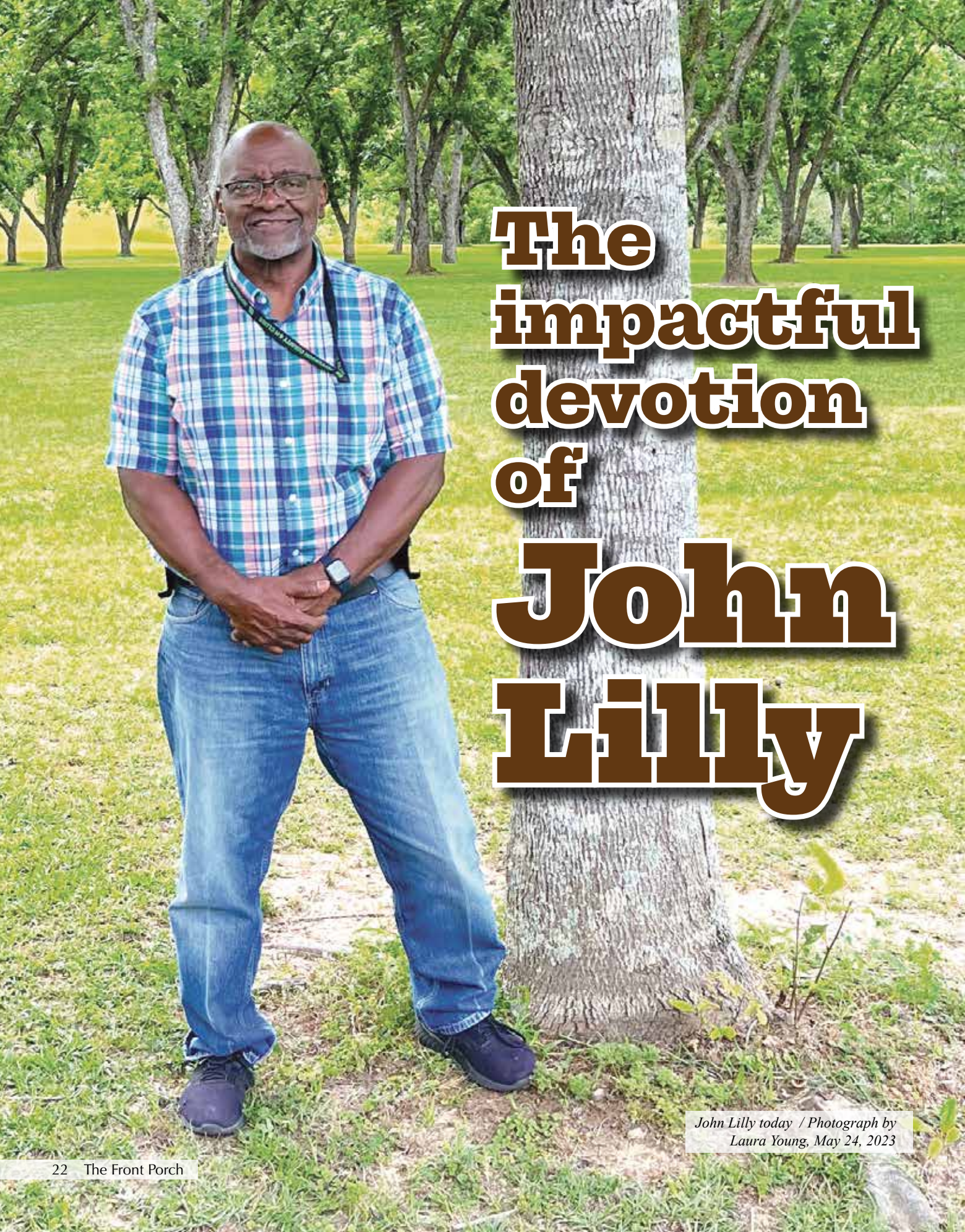
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**The
impactful
devotion
of
John
Lilly**

*John Lilly today / Photograph by
Laura Young, May 24, 2023*

Story by Laura Young

Making an impact with youth and valuing agricultural work have deep, personal roots for John Lilly. These threads are woven through his life from an early age, and over time they have created the full and flowing fabric of his impressive career with the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Science (UF/IFAS) Extension service.

Born and raised in Jasper, Fla., Lilly grew up in a large family with his mother, stepfather and eight siblings. From the third grade on through his sophomore year in college, he remembers working summers in tobacco and vegetable fields across Hamilton County. He appreciates that, although his family was economically very poor, he learned if you wanted to have something you could work your way to get it.

"It was hard work," Lilly recalls, "but it taught me great work ethics. Nothing was given to us. We had to work for it."

Lilly traces his interest in working with youth to his years playing football for the Hamilton County High School Fighting Trojans, when he experienced first-hand the influence that coaches and teachers could have on a young person's life. He learned to listen, to have self-control and to excel to the level of earning a scholarship to attend Tuskegee University, a private, historically black land-grant university in Alabama. There he played fullback for the Golden Tigers and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Agricultural Education in 1985. Later, he earned a master's in Agricultural Education from Florida A&M University.

He began his career right back in Hamilton County by teaching Vocational Agriculture and advising the Future Farmers of America club at the high school. After one year, however, he was offered a position as a 4-H agent with the UF/IFAS Extension in Alachua County. He credits Isaac Chandler, Hamilton County's 4-H agent at the time, with encouraging him to take his

career in this direction. Two years later, in 1988, he became the 4-H agent in Jefferson County. Monticello has never been the same!

"I've been here ever since," reflects Lilly. "That was the best career move I made. I have no regrets whatsoever about coming here and working with this community. I absolutely love it."

He rose to the position of Jefferson County Extension Director in 2010 during a span of more than 35 years of impactful devotion to the youth of Jefferson County.

Over these years, Lilly has worked closely with the Jefferson County School District to have 4-H clubs that meet right on the campuses, where access for students in third grade through sixth grade has been easy for their families to manage. Lilly says that in the statewide

In addition to school-based 4-H clubs, the county has community-based clubs with volunteer leaders. The names of some of the currently active clubs show the range of interests that 4-H can nurture: Hickory Hill; Life, Liberty and Livestock; Working Soldiers; Mighty Oaks; and Explorers.

Other signature programs that Lilly holds close in his heart are the Camping Program, Teen Leadership Program and Environmental Education programs.

"I love doing camping because it allows us to work with kids mainly in an outdoor setting. We're able to do hands-on activities in an open environment," explains Lilly. "To me, that enlightens the kid, and that inspires the kid to participate, especially when you have a leader who also is excited to be outside and loves working outdoors. I love it."



Curious youth look on to see how a drone control works. / Photograph Courtesy of John Lilly

scheme of things, this was an unusual approach, but one that his predecessor, Albert Fuller, had started and Lilly continued. Using this approach led to very high 4-H enrollment, which had a ripple effect into high enrollment in specialty workshops and summer camps.

"We were able to recruit and get a lot of kids involved," says Lilly. "So, that was a big advantage compared to other counties."

He has seen time and again how well a camping experience teaches youth important social skills and responsibility to the group.

To provide leadership opportunities for youth ages 13 to 18, 4-H offers Teen Councils at the county, district and state level. Jefferson County's council participates in leadership workshops and plans major county events, including 4-H awards banquets, National 4-H Week activities and

John Lilly teaches a group of students about the invasive evergreen Ardisia. / Photograph Courtesy of John Lilly



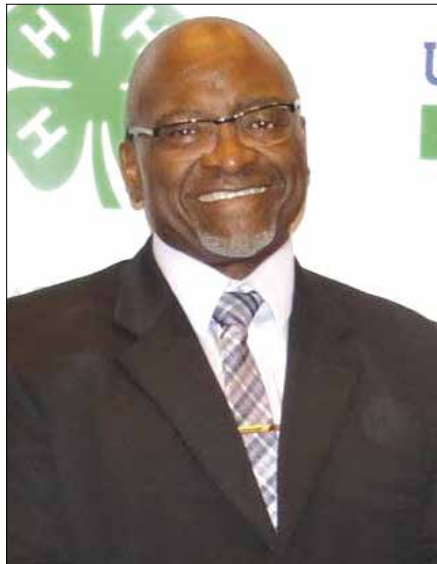
community service projects such as roadside cleanups and holiday visits to nursing homes. Lilly has especially powerful memories of taking four members of his Teen Council to help clear debris in Bay County after Hurricane Michael devastated the Florida Panhandle.

"We left Jefferson County at 5:30 on that Saturday morning," Lilly recalls. "On the way there, we hit Blountstown in Calhoun County, and that's when we started seeing the devastation of that hurricane. It was just total silence in that van. Of course, when we hit Bay County it was like a bomb had hit."

With wheelbarrows, rakes and other equipment, they cleaned up scattered debris as well as the interior of rain-soaked homes whose roofs had been blown off.

"Those kids worked the entire day, and here's what I admire about that group of kids. It started raining. Not one gripe, not one complaint. They worked through the rain. They didn't stop... To me, that was service above self."

Environmental Education is another significant part of the programming Lilly oversees, including Project Learning Tree and Project Wild. The Florida Forestry Association's award-winning Project Learning Tree program uses the forest as a "window on the world" to develop an understanding of environmental complexity through critical and creative



UF/IFAS Extension Director John Lilly

thinking, leading participants to have the skills and confidence to act responsibly on environmental issues. For Project Wild, the UF/IFAS partners with the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies to foster responsible actions toward wildlife and related natural resources.

Lilly is thankful that during his tenure the extension office moved from a location in downtown Monticello surrounded by asphalt to the expansive property it now occupies just west of town, where his vision for impactful outdoor activities for youth has had the chance to blossom.

"It was a phenomenal move," says

Lilly. "You can see we have a diverse property out here: open pasture, the [pecan] groves, a wetland area, a forest area, an arena. In the past, we used to have to transport kids to different sites... Now everything is here."

"For example," he continues, "if we are doing a program on forestry, we can go directly into the forest. To me, the best teaching method is having nature right there in front of you with those kids."

Lilly credits the leadership of former Jefferson County Commissioner Betsy Barfield and North Florida College for being instrumental in helping UF acquire the property and arrange for its maintenance by the county, with support from inmate labor. Having the extension facility on such a property means that when Lilly became director in 2010, his leadership duties included not only being a program manager and a staff manager but also a land manager.

Larry Halsey, the Jefferson County Extension Director who was Lilly's boss for many years, said in nominating him for an award in 2009: "John Lilly is the kind of agent who each year sends hundreds of youth who outgrow age criteria for 4-H enrollment into the future, knowing that they have been really loved. They've belonged to, they have been contributors to, something that is better for their participation. They have learned new skills, but more important, they learned about themselves and their worth in a safe environment."

The walls of Lilly's office are covered with awards that recognize his achievements. In fact, his commendations are so numerous – thirty and counting – that he finally had to quit putting more up, for lack of wall space.

As Lilly looks toward retiring in March 2024, he acknowledges, though with soft-spoken humility, that he developed and nurtured one of the consistently best extension programs in the state, known for the diversity of its participants and strong relationships with those in the community whose support has been key.

"The community has given extension as a whole a lot of their precious time, a lot of their monetary donations. Whatever we need, this community has been here

for extension. I would like to thank the Jefferson County Community.”

As much as he loves his work, Lilly says it’s time to retire, and he is looking forward to not working 60 to 65 hours a week. Soon, he’ll have more time to build his dream home in a community he’s grown to love, try out his new tractor, tend the garden, pursue hobbies and enjoy his family – two adult boys, John Lilly, Jr., and Johnathon Harvey, as well as two teenaged grandchildren, Mekei Harvey and Janya Harvey.

He’ll also continue, no doubt, to be involved in the community as an active Rotarian; a leader of Jefferson Outreach for Youth, whose annual JOY Toy Drive helps needy families celebrate Christmas; and a member of the board of the Jefferson County Education Foundation, a significant supporter of public school teachers and their inspired projects.

Anyone who knows John Lilly sees his hand in so much that is good about the local community, and they give thanks for the genuine care he shows for every youth who crosses his path. It all seems to come quite naturally.

“I love making an impact with youth,” he says. “I don’t want a pat on the back. I don’t like being in the limelight. What I do like to hear is when my former students come back and they tell me the impact that I made on them. That’s what gives me goosebumps. That’s what’s kept me going all these years.” ■



The 4-H clubs in Jefferson County are among the most diverse in the state with regards to gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, due to the efforts of John Lilly to promote the programs to all students. / Photograph Courtesy of John Lilly



Students learn about peanut harvesting during a field trip with John Lilly to a local peanut field. / Photograph Courtesy of John Lilly

AWARDS

National

National Association of Extension 4-H Agents, 4-H Distinguished Service Award, 2015
 National Association of Extension 4-H Agents, Southern Regional Winner, Excellence in 4-H Volunteerism, 2013
 National Association of Extension 4-H Agents, 4-H Meritorious Service Award, 2005
 The National Association of Extension 4-H Agents, Special Award, Natural Resources, Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents, 2003

State

Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents, Social Media Packet Award, 2022
 Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents, Excellence in 4-H Volunteerism Award, 2022
 Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents, 4-H Distinguished Service Award, 2015
 Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents, Excellence in Camping, 2006
 Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents, Excellence in Teen Programming, 2006

Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents, 4-H Meritorious Service, 2005
 The Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents Special Award, Natural Resources, Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents, 2005
 Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents, Literature Award, 2005
 Conference Participant Certificate, Office of Attorney General, 2005
 Recognition of Achievement, Extension Leadership Forum, 2005
 Certificate of Appreciation, 4-H Master Volunteer Leaders Conference, 2005
 The Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents Special Award, Natural Resources, Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents, 2003
 Literature Award, Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents, 2003
 Search for Program Excellence Award, Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents, 2003
 Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents Search For Teen Excellence in Teen Programming, 2001

Florida Association of Extension 4-H Agents Search For Excellence Award, 2001

Local

Certificate of Appreciation, Ladies Auxiliary, VFW, “Unsung Hero” 2015
 Certificate of Appreciation, Madison County 4-H Tropicana Speech Contest, 2006
 Appreciation Plaque, Jefferson County 4-H County Council, 2005
 Certificate of Excellence, Boys and Girls Club, 2005
 Certificate of Appreciation, North Florida Fair Association, 2004-2005
 Recognition Plaque, Jefferson County School District, 2004
 Certificate of Appreciation, Jefferson County High School Science Club, 2004
 Certificate of Appreciation, Jefferson County High School Science Club, 2002
 Recognition Plaque, Science Club, Jefferson County High School for providing hands-on training for Marine Ecology judging, 2002
 Recognition Plaque, Howard Middle School Community Based Industry, 2001

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A Finlayson family gathering for an Aucilla Christian Academy dinner in 2011 included, left to right: (standing) Jay, Mac, John, Richard, Ricky and Timothy; (seated) Anna, Mary Beth, Margie and Meagan.

The Finlaysons

Blessed in family and history

Story by Lazaro Aleman

Photographs Courtesy of John Finlayson

Marjorie and John Finlayson sit in the screened back porch of their comfortable home in the Asheville area on a spring morning, sunlight dappling their expansive backyard, where thrive all kinds of flowering plants and shrubs and birds chirp merrily.

Married for 60 years, the Finlaysons

are a gracious, genteel southern couple, comfortable in each other's company, and generous with their hospitality.

A self-described "Georgia gal" born in Chickamauga and raised in Daisy, both small towns in the Peach State, Marjorie majored in music theory and taught at Aucilla Christian Academy for 18 years. "Loving every minute of it," she will tell you. Hers also is an affinity for math.

John, meanwhile, has been a farmer, pilot, entrepreneur and community leader, along with being a wildflower enthusiast, photographer and sometimes verse writer. His ancestral roots in Jefferson County run deep, going back to the early 1800s, making his one of the county's founding families.

At 95 and 88 respectively, John and Marjorie are still relatively fit and active

and their minds agile, if John admits that his falters a bit at times.

"I know a lot more than I can remember," he says. "It's all there. And sometimes it comes, and sometimes it don't."

The two regularly attend the First Methodist Church in Monticello, teach Sunday school and sing in the choir, as well as still doing their own grocery shopping.

A raconteur with a generally sunny disposition and a gentle sense of humor, John's is a wealth of stories accumulated over a lifetime and refined with telling. His also is a fondness for wordplay. About his age and life expectancy, for example, he will tell you that he possesses good genes.

"Mama died young," he says. "She was 89. Daddy lived to be 100. So, I got better genes than Levi Strauss."

He is the storyteller, Marjorie the collaborator, her part in the interview to provide context, substantiate his stories, fill in a missing gap here and there, and occasionally add her own insights and observations.

How the two met, John attributes to his boyhood friend, the late Clifford C. "Tippy" Shuman, whose wife's aunt lived in Davisboro, Ga., and with whom Marjorie was staying while earning her music degree.

"Tippy and Virginia's aunt decided I needed to meet Marjorie, and Marjorie needed to meet me," John says. "So Tippy got me to go up to Davisboro on a deer hunt. And interestingly enough, Tippy got a buck, and I got my deer. Marjorie's my dear; you can spell it either way. I guess we're the only people in the world that had a 240-lb. red-headed Cupid named Tippy Shuman."

The Shehee side of his family, John says, came to Jefferson County in the 1820s. The Finlayson side, meanwhile, came in 1838 via his namesake great grandfather John Finlayson, who married Augustine "Florida" Shehee. The couple eventually made their home at Glendower, a nearby estate that remains in the extended family and that still operates as a viable farm.

"I'm the fifth generation on this land," John says.

"And there's now a sixth generation on

the land," adds Marjorie, referring to their sons Mac and Richard and their families, who live within shouting distance, making for a closely-knit community.

"I call it our own little commune," Marjorie says.

"Anyway, we've been here a while and have a family cemetery at Glendower," John sums it up, adding with a smile, "I'm not planning to leave this place. I'm going to stay right here."

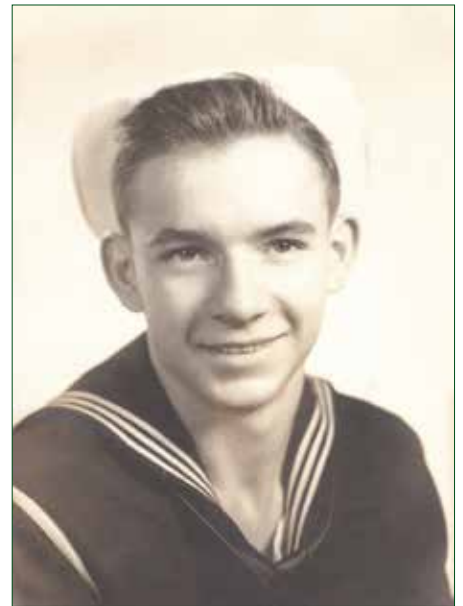
Deeply steeped in Jefferson County history (he keeps a trove of historical documents and artifacts, including slave bills of sale and a hand-carved wooden fork used by a distant relative who was a Union soldier held at the notorious Andersonville prison in Georgia during the U.S. Civil War), he is sensitive to today's cultural and political currents. Hence, he is circumspect when speaking about certain aspects of his great grandfather, a cotton grower who owned slaves, served as president of the Florida Senate, was nearly elected Florida governor in 1860, and subsequently served as state comptroller during what John calls the "Southern War for Independence."

"It was a slave economy back then," he acknowledges. "It was a different society; one that we can't now comprehend, it's so foreign to us. But yes, my great grandfather had a cotton plantation, and he was very successful."

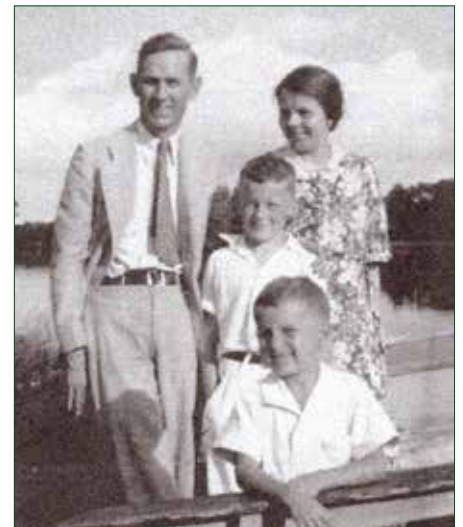
He prefers, however, not to dwell on this part of the family history, concerned that in today's social climate some might assign responsibility to him and his heirs for their ancestors' doings. In his view, efforts to revise history are misguided at best.

"Rather than change it, we need to learn from history," he says. "I think that the most incorrect thing going on in the country now is political correctness and trying to change what happened. It happened in a different culture. You can't judge what happened then by the culture we live in now, because this is a different time. When they come along later and see what a mess we've made, they can't judge us either, because they're not living in it. You have to be living in it to judge it."

Although born in Monticello, John spent his formative years from third through 12th grade in Escambia County, where his father, Edwin "Ed" Finlayson, was county



John Finlayson joined the Naval Air Corps on July 21, 1945, just before the end of World War II.



Edwin and Marguerite Finlayson with their sons, Edwin and John, in 1932.

agent. His father, in fact, is credited with discovering and naming Bahia grass, which eventually came to form the basis of the family business.

The way it happened, John says, is that his father noticed a certain grass growing wild in Pensacola and grew curious about it. When he sent a sample off for identification, it turned out to be a new grass in the Bahia genus, one that had double the number of chromosomes. Commonly found in South America, John says his father surmised that a seed had come to Pensacola in the ballast of a sailing ship and taken hold. Bahia grass's major



Marjorie and John Finlayson, Aug. 4, 1962.

features, he says, lie in its hardiness and rapid proliferation.

"It does more with less fertilization," John says. "Cattlemen loved it, and the lawn people hated it, but that's what put us in the seed business."

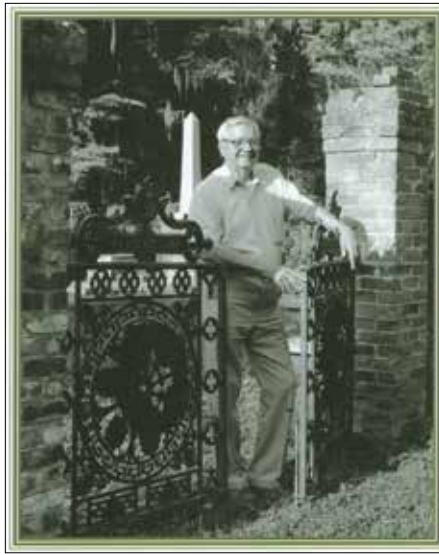
His father, he says, started the Bahia seed business at the present farm while still living in Pensacola, making the long-distance drives here when necessary. In the interim, his father's neighbor, Fred Boyd, oversaw the crop, Boyd having married a Finlayson, which is how the two longtime county families came to be connected.

John, meanwhile, joined the Navy right after his high school graduation in Pensacola, wanting to participate in World War II.

"I've probably told this about a hundred times," he says. "I joined up on July 21, 1945, to whip up on the Japanese. It took the Japanese three weeks to find out I'd joined, and they quit the war."

Following his military service, John attended the University of Florida, from which he graduated in 1950 with a degree in agriculture, plant breeding his specialty. The new knowledge he immediately put to use in the family's seed business, which by then had expanded to the production of seeds for corn, oat, rye, peanut and other crops. Their products, John says, were primarily sold to farmers and seed stores in Florida, Georgia and Alabama, although some of their Bahia grass seeds traveled as far as Australia.

"I was then very idealistic," he



John stands in 2005 at the Finlayson Family Cemetery in Ashville, Fla.

says. "I thought the problem with world hunger was that enough food wasn't been produced, and we were going to produce more food. But as I got older, I realized that we were producing plenty of food, the problem was that many people weren't able to earn the resources to buy the food. The lack wasn't in food; the lack was in the ability to get the food."

He and his father, he says, incorporated the family business in the 1960s to avoid the inheritance tax. The seed business was doing well enough too, he says, until the minimum wage rose to \$1 about 1970 and made the production of seeds no longer economical. That was when they switched to cattle growing.

At one time, John says, the farm consisted of 2,500 acres, which they considered selling to pay the business's debts, accrued because they had continued to farm after it was no longer profitable due to the minimum wage increase. He credits Marjorie with coming up with the solution of selling only a portion of the property and keeping the remainder.

"We sold 1,500 acres and cleared up our debt, keeping about 1,000 acres," John says. "I told daddy that we would have had a lot more fun if we'd taken the money that we borrowed and gone to the dog track and betted it, instead of spending a whole year losing it on the farm. But daddy was an entrepreneur. He always wanted to expand. I didn't catch that bug from him."

John's is a trove of memories of life

in Jefferson County, going back nearly a century. He remembers when Tallahassee's population was 10,000 people, when stamps cost three cents each, when a car could be purchased for about \$1,000, and a day's wage was \$3.50. In his boyhood, he recalls, the town marshal in Monticello patrolled on horseback, and the long-gone Dixie Hotel on East Washington was the popular place to go.

He was alive when Sheriff Lamar Sledge and deputy Herman Arndt were fatally shot in Madison County while trying to make an arrest in 1934. He was also around when two prominent local politicians shot it out in the courthouse circle one election eve in the 1930s, grievously wounding one another.

He remembers the prohibition era, when bootlegging was fairly common in the county, and he remembers the presidential campaign when Roosevelt beat Hoover.

"Roosevelt's campaign song was 'Happy days are here again,'" he says, singing a small refrain from the tune. "Mind, this was the depression we're singing about."

Of the Great Depression, he says that bad as it got, his family was largely spared, as his father fortunately had a job as county agent.

"I asked him once how, since he had gone broke farming, how was he going to advise other farmers?" John says. "He said he'd made all the mistakes you could make, but he knew how to correct most of them, so he figured he could give them good advice."

Although he himself participated in various community-minded endeavors throughout his life, John says he never aspired to public office, lacking the proper temperament.

"I don't have the disposition to do it," he says. "I would have gotten into fistfights, but I've served in a good many other ways."

Among his many civic activities, he was president of the Jefferson County Farm Bureau, chairman of the Monticello Opera House Board of Directors, president of the Kiwanis Club, president of the Cattlemen's Association, chairman of the Bicentennial Committee for Florida's 150th celebration of statehood and one-time chairman of the

local Democratic Party.

He also served on Governor Lawton Chiles' Property Rights Commission and on the Board of Directors of the Suwannee River Water Management District, as well as being co-chair of Aucilla Christian Academy in its early days.

One of his abiding passions, John says, was flying, which he did until age 91. Although learning to fly was his aim when he joined the naval air corps, he didn't learn to fly until his 50s. What happened, he says, is that by the time he was sent to naval preflight school, the war had ended and there was an excess of aviators.

"So, they began eliminating them," John says. "They changed the physical requirements, and I was underweight, so they dropped me from the program."

It was his late brother Ed, a Marine aviator who had flown in WWII, Korea and Vietnam, and who later became a flight instructor at UF upon retirement, who taught him how to fly.

"He asked me if I still wanted to learn," John says. "I said, 'yeah, if you think you're smart enough to teach me.' Of course, the issue wasn't whether he was smart enough. The problem was that I had trouble landing. I was great at taking off and flying, but when I got close to the ground, I thought, well, if I do the same thing every time, I should be able to land just right. But I've landed over 1,500 times since, and no two landings are alike. You have a moving vehicle in a moving medium, and you have to constantly adjust for that movement. Once I figured out that it wasn't going to be the same, I did all right."

He rates himself a competent enough pilot, having flown on occasions into major airports such as New Orleans and Tennessee, although he never much cared for all the red tape involved in dealing with the large airports. The only reason he quit flying at age 91, John says, is because he no longer had the physical stamina.

"You learn as you get older that your energy level will decrease and decrease," he says. "I'd be flying and I'd be just fine. Then I would land, shut off the engine, and I'd be as weak as water. I'd used up every bit of energy that I'd had. My adrenaline just quit, and so I told the Lord, 'I'm going to quit before it quits up yonder.' And so I



During Bethlehem in Monticello in 1999, Marjorie played the role of a marketplace lady, while John depicted a beggar.

did."

Ever adventuresome, however, he water-skied into his 80s, and went body surfing as recent as age 94.

"Last year, I decided I would go body surfing," John says. "It was really interesting. My family didn't try to stop me, but they lined up the grandchildren all along the shore, so that when I got in trouble, they could get me out. I could catch a wave all right and ride it good. But when I got into shallow water, I couldn't get up. Two of the grandchildren had to run and help me up."

Another favorite pastime that he and Marjorie enjoyed together was traveling, the two having visited every state in the union, some more extensively than others. North Dakota, for example, was one of their brief visits.

"We had some frequent flyer tickets," John says. "So, we flew to Minneapolis and drove over to Fargo, N.D. We went across the Red River, and I said, 'Well, we're in North Dakota; we can go back.' Marjorie said, 'No, not yet.' We had to get on the interstate to where they had a big sign that said, 'Welcome to North Dakota,' and take a picture of us there. Then we could go back."

"What I tell everybody is that we've been to all 51 states," he quips. "The 51st is the state of confusion that we lived in for many years."

Another of his hobbies is identifying and photographing flowers, an interest that he attributes to his mother.

"Mama loved flowers, and she got me interested in them," he says. "Then when I was in college, I learned about their scientific names. I could talk to a person in Uganda, and if I had the scientific name, they would have the same name, so I learned all the flowers' scientific names. Wildflowers, nine out of 10 times, I can identify them. I like to know what something is. Not just that it's there, I want to know what it is."

Adds Marjorie: "He also loves to take pictures of wildflowers. Wherever we went, he had to stop to take photos. We finally had to make a rule that when we traveled on vacations he couldn't stop to take pictures."

"I'd stopped at road ditches to take pictures of wildflowers," John adds, smiling.

Asked about his philosophy, he points to a tablet with inscribed lettering that hangs on the porch wall.

"Not lucky, just blessed," he says, reading the lettering. "We've said that so many times that a friend gave us that little block with the saying. You hear people talking about being lucky, but there's not much luck involved. We're just blessed."

As for his general attitude, he quotes lines from the poem "Tis The Set Of The

Sail" by Ella Wheeler Wilcox.

"Poetry is another of my hobbies," he says, adding that he still writes verses to Marjorie on Christmases and her birthdays. "This poem goes something like this, 'The ship sailed east, and the ship sailed west, on the self-same winds that blow. It's not the gale, but the set of the sail, that determines which way you go...'"

"I've noticed there are just two kinds of people," John continues, "happy people and unhappy people. And circumstances have very little to do with it. Happy people can go through a devil of a bad time, and they'll still be happy. Unhappy people will be in the lap of luxury and be unhappy. That's the best advice that I gave to my boys, was 'marry a happy woman.' Me, I like to have fun. And it's fun to relate to people."

The other thing that's important to the two of them, he says, is family, of which they abound.

"Our ancestor family got us here," John says. "Then there is the immediate family of our children and grandchildren. That's a different family. And we have two



Flying was an abiding passion for John, one he enjoyed until he was 91.

other families that we enjoy, our Methodist Church family our Aucilla Christian Academy family. And that about takes care of the important things in our lives. We're just blessed. And those words, family and blessed, are two big words in our lives."

He pauses and reflects.

"You know, there's a saying, once a man; twice a child," he says. "I'm on the second go round and enjoying it. I'm still enjoying my first one too." ■

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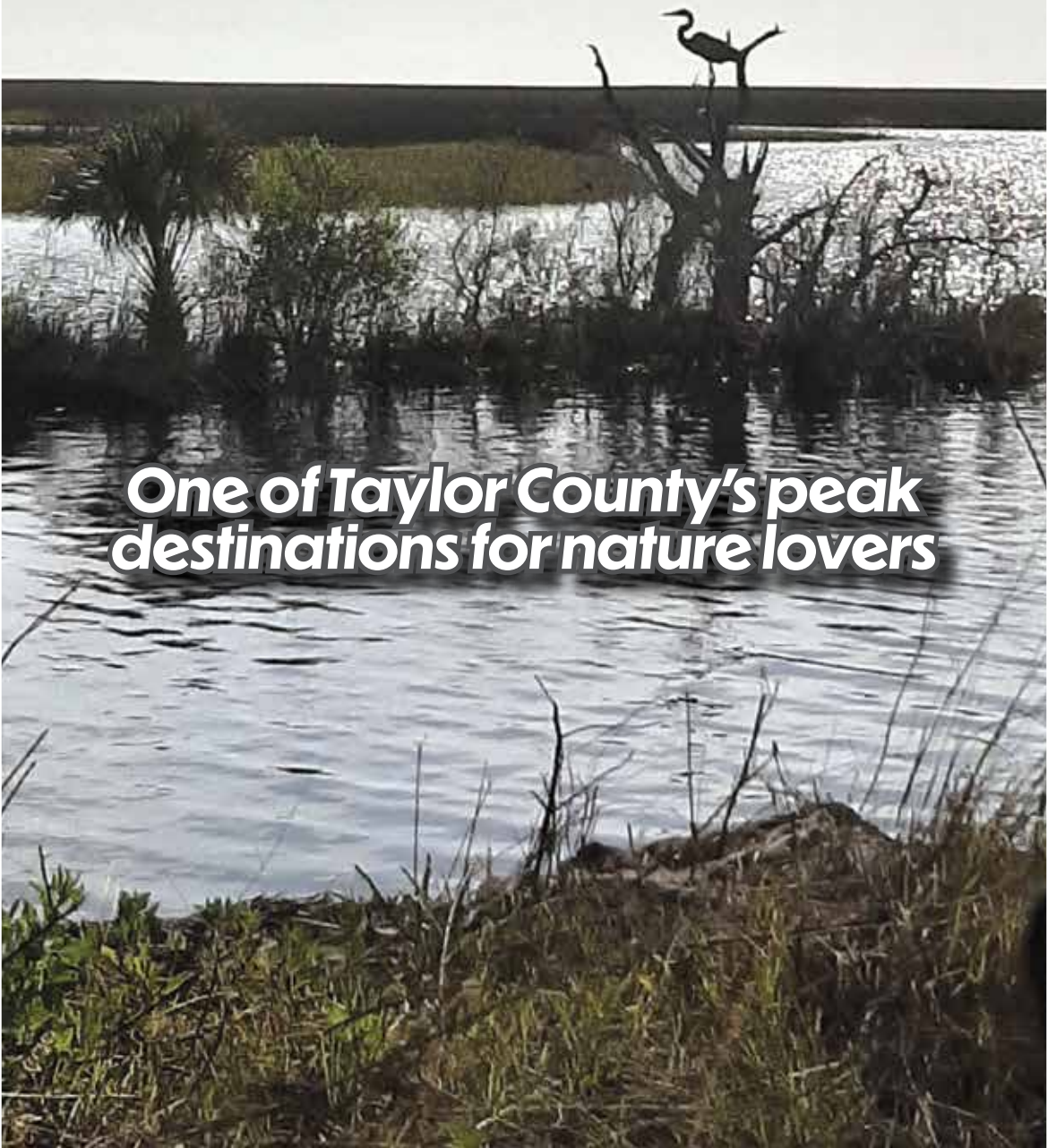
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Big Bend Wildlife Management Area:

Hickory Mound



One of Taylor County's peak destinations for nature lovers



Entrance to Hickory Mound

Story and Photography by Heather Ainsley

Nature enthusiasts appreciate Taylor County for its extensive access to undeveloped Florida coastline and natural woodland. In fact, it is home to a significant section of the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area, which is comprised of over 60 miles of Florida coastline and 90,000 acres of wilderness that is managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. This enormous expanse of land is separated into five units which span from the mouth of the Aucilla River all the way past the town of Horseshoe Beach, from Taylor to Dixie County. Each unit offers special combinations of recreational outdoor activities. The first unit is called Hickory Mound.

Approaching such a rural and undeveloped span of land can be a little bit tricky, and the narrow, unpaved roadways that make up the majority of the drive can be a little intimidating for those with smaller, two-wheel-drive vehicles. Even so, adventure awaited, so the journey for this writer began by following U.S. 19 S. until it met Hwy. 27 S. A left-hand turn onto 27 continued the drive for another six-and-a-half miles before reaching County Road 257. After a right turn onto 257, it was time for a relatively mild start to my lengthy journey into the wilderness.

This road was paved, but narrow, and as one follows the eight-mile stretch of

sun-bleached asphalt, it is easy to feel as if you are driving away from civilization itself. After a little over eight miles, 257 takes on the name Aucilla River Road, although this change is hardly noteworthy, as the road itself changes neither direction nor appearance. Aucilla River Road continues the drive for less than 10 miles, but with each mile, the sky itself begins to open outward, and the Florida brush on either side of the tired, cracked road seem to rise up, wild and unkempt, cutting bravely through wilderness that is altogether stoic, indifferent and wonderfully untamed.

A left turn provides a sharp respite back into civilization, as U.S. 98 E. moves the journey along a quick three miles of bustling highway traffic. Unlike interstate roads, however, this small section of the drive is framed by dense Florida greenery, and still allows for a rural feeling. An unsuspecting turn off on the right signals the presence of Cow Creek Grade, an unpaved stretch of road that will lead directly into the heart of Hickory Mound.

Thus begins the true adventure into this stunning expanse of Florida woodlands. The gravel path, however worrisome upon first regard, is well-maintained and generously wide, easily stamping out my fears regarding potholes, mud pits and becoming stranded in the middle of nowhere with no cell service. On either side of this spacious drive rests a wide variety of sights to behold, including creeks, swamplands and dense

woods. The farther you travel along this scenic landscape, the easier it is to feel like you might have taken a wrong turn somewhere, but the path is delightfully void of confusing places one can easily get turned around. The main drive in is a simple, straight shot for several miles, leaving driver and passenger to enjoy a steady pace as they soak in the sights all around.

The benefit of the area being so out of the way is the abundance of wildlife. For any nature enthusiast, a surprise sighting of elusive and shy wildlife can be a crowning moment in any outdoor excursion. Animals were everywhere, and for me, it all started with a gopher tortoise sighting, right by the roadside.

Gopher tortoises are listed as a state-designated Threatened Species under the Endangered Species Act. They are one of only five native tortoise species in all of North America, and are the only species of tortoise found east of the Mississippi River. While sightings are uncommon in northern parts of Florida, they can be found in all 67 of Florida's counties. These animals can live around 40 to 60 years in the wild, and this incredibly long life is centered around its burrow. Much like the name suggests, gopher tortoises are diggers, and they spend about 80 percent of their time underground. A single burrow is usually about 15 feet long and six feet deep, although some burrows have been recorded reaching up to 40 feet long and 10 feet deep. The gopher tortoise is described as a keystone species, because their burrows provide shelter for at least 360 other animal species, including burrowing owls, Florida mice, indigo snakes, rabbits, gopher frogs and many invertebrates. To see a threatened species like the gopher tortoise right at the beginning of the journey into the Hickory Mound was a special and delightful treat.

As we approached the official sign of The Big Bend Wildlife Management Area, we witnessed a massive white-tailed deer in the tall grass beside the road. Although efforts were made to slowly creep the vehicle closer, the enormous doe did not hesitate to bound away, showing us definitively how they got their iconic name. This sighting was a rare opportunity



Sunset over the water

to see these shy animals in the middle of the day, as they are typically more active at dawn and dusk. The quiet wilderness and private acreage enable these animals to live a life that is void of urban activity and development, giving them a truly natural setting.

A red-tailed hawk swooped across the roadway, largely indifferent to the presence of a vehicle as it soared above the gravel path. This was not the only red-tailed hawk seen along the trip.

With that, it became clear very quickly why Hickory Mound is such a popular destination for birdwatchers. Small quail-like birds wandered casually across the gravel road, cooing to one another. Although they were close in size and color, one sported a beautiful black crown with a pale stripe above the eye. Research later suggested that these two birds were native Northern Bobwhites, the black crowned one being male, and the brown one being female. Other birds found in the Hickory Mound Unit included sandpipers, a speckled ibis, heron, crane, and a pair of red-winged blackbirds. The blackbirds feature sleek, black feathers on their entire body, but sport a flash of vibrant scarlet and yellow on their shoulders. Males use these displays of color to express their confidence and lure in a mate. The females of this species are actually brown, meaning that the two we glimpsed during

this trip were male.

The variety of birds to be seen at Hickory Mound doesn't compare to the variety that can be heard there; bird calls rang out endlessly across the beautiful wetlands, and it was enjoyable to try and make out the songs and calls we recognized. One of the more impressive features of this unit is the presence of a three-story birding tower that overlooks seemingly endless acres of open sky and salt marshes. From each level, individuals can gaze out across the landscape, keep an unfettered lookout for birds and wildlife, and can feel their worries melt away as they watch the sun go down, the coastal breeze whispering through the marsh grasses.

If you are still enough, you can even hear the chattering squeaks of little marsh rats as they scuttle through tunnels created in the layers of grass and cattails. If you are really lucky, you may even catch a glimpse of the tiny rodents as they wander about their lives, squeaking away to one another as they make their way across the wetlands. The tower offers a true escape, even if just for a moment, from the hustle and bustle of the daily grind.

The wide gravel path that cuts through the dense Florida woodlands soon began to narrow, and the ecology surrounding it began to change dramatically. Gone were the dense

patches of forest as they fell away to expanses of cattails, sawgrass and water, the blue sky extending as far as the eye can see. Distant clouds floated lazily, offering a breathtaking view that cannot be found in the city or suburban communities of Florida. Soon, the land on either side of the roadway fell away completely, leaving a narrow (but sturdy) strip of road that takes visitors directly across the incoming or outgoing tide. In water on either side, crabs, snakes and fish can easily be seen in abundance. Hickory Mound is a prime destination for hunters, fishermen and crabbers during the appropriate seasons for hunting, trapping and catching wildlife.

Also in abundance, unfortunately, is the unsightly evidence of these hunters, trappers and fishermen. The only drawback to such an incredible and wild destination was the presence of litter and discarded fishing equipment, especially noting the existence of countless trash receptacles, most of which stood empty.

Good travel etiquette includes cleaning up after yourself when you have finished enjoying a location, especially a location that is so crucial to wildlife and others seeking natural settings. Those wishing to perform a good deed during their visit may wish to bring along trash bags for collecting refuse to place in the provided bins.

The majority of Hickory Mound is driving trails. There are no walking or hiking trails marked at this unit, although there are several places where visitors can pull the car over for sightseeing, picnicking, fishing, crabbing or birding. There is also a restroom station provided along the roadway. This unit does not allow camping overnight, with the exception of primitive overnight camping at designated sites at Rock Island. Rock Island is accessible by paddlers who use the Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail between Sept. 11 through June 30. All campers must be in possession of a camping permit from the commission, which is valid for one night only.

Additionally, all hunters, fishermen and crabbers must abide by all rules, restrictions and regulations set by Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation

Commission (FWC). Check stations are provided for any animals harvested. All hunters are responsible for knowing the rules and regulations prior to visiting the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area. A full list of regulations can be found on the FWC website by searching Big Bend - Hickory Mound Unit.

When you've taken in all the sights, sounds and birdwatching you can handle, it is a good time to hop back in the car and continue the journey. Following the vehicle trail will take visitors away from the Florida coastline and back into swamp and forest environments. A lefthand turn onto Swartz Tram will lead along quiet and secluded woods, where you can see bobcats, deer and even elusive fox squirrels. Traveling slowly allows ample time for sightseeing, but an efficient (but careful) speed on the gravel road will swiftly lead visitors to a left turn onto JC Franklin Grade, which will lead to Franklin Ponds.

Franklin Ponds includes a large body of water suitable for fishing, and has several picnic tables where families can stop near the breathtaking water and enjoy a meal. Kiosks provide information about the species of fish that are able to be captured in the pond, including bluegill, redear sunfish, speckled perch, largemouth bass and catfish. In addition, the kiosk lists tips and advice on the most effective way to catch each fish.

The pond is vast and deep, but not swimming-approved. Indeed, as we gazed out across the mirror-still water, we happened upon a small alligator, another exciting wildlife spotting. Given the sheer size of the pond, it is easy to consider the possibility of massive alligators being present in the water, and it is easy to understand why it's not recommended that people swim there.

From Franklin Ponds, if the access road is open, it is a short and beautiful drive back to the entrance of Hickory Mound. If the access road is gated, as it was during our trip, there is a path leading around the ponds that allows vehicles to retrace the path back to Swartz Tram, which also leads back out to the main entrance.



Bridge roadway leading across the marsh tides

During your stay, please remember to be respectful and follow all area rules that are posted on all kiosks: Dispose of litter properly, don't remove wildlife or plants, or release wildlife or plants from other places, and enjoy all wildlife at a distance and do not feed or disturb them. While this unit of the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area did not have camping or hiking trails available, there was plenty to see, hear and enjoy. The full list of wildlife we observed on our five-hour adventure included the following: a gopher tortoise, a massive white-tailed deer (doe), a red-tailed hawk, a fox squirrel, another red-tailed hawk, two northern bobwhites, a blue crab who was hoarding a chicken bone from another who was keen on investigating it, sandpipers, two red-shouldered blackbirds, a family of marsh rats, two Gulf salt-marsh water snakes, speckled ibis, an alligator, a bobcat, a young buck and a black blob that crossed the road way ahead of us that might have been a raccoon.

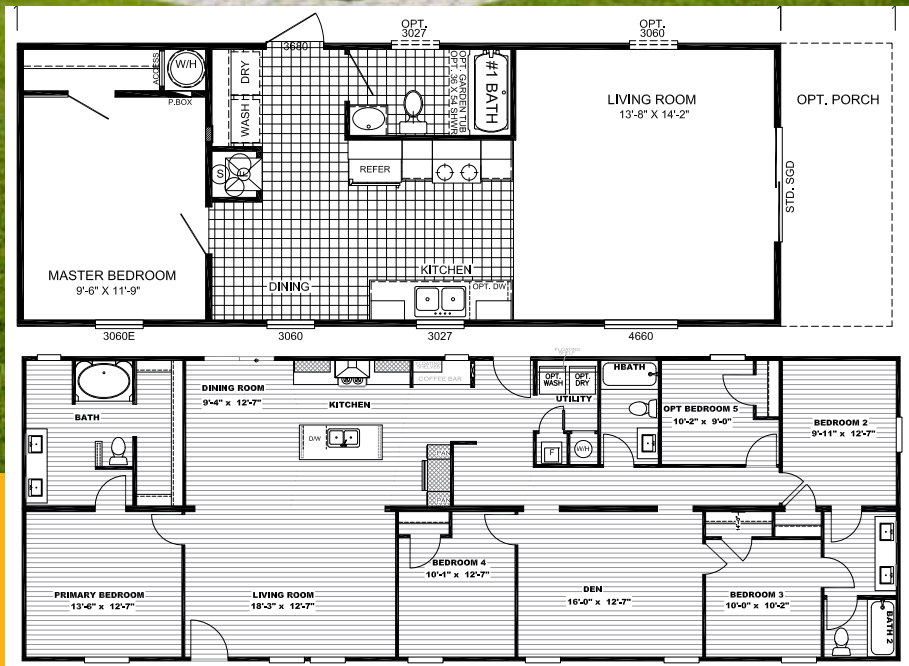
All in all, if you like nature and being outdoors, there is much to be enjoyed at Hickory Mound, one of five units of the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area. The other units connected to this area are Jena, Snipe Island, Spring Creek and Tide Swamp, and they are officially on the list for prime nature adventure destinations! ■



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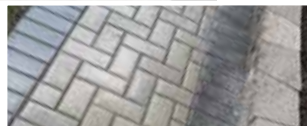
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Cameron Bruton is busy these days as he continues to grow his business, Bruton Apparel, and encourage others in their faith.

Cameron Bruton: Winning at the game of life

Story by Mickey Starling

Photographs Courtesy of Cameron Bruton

Cameron Bruton is a Jacksonville, Fla., native who spent a portion of his elementary and junior high years in Madison County, nurtured by his loving grandparents, Eula Robinson and the late J.C. "Pookie" Robinson. During those early years, Bruton attended Pinetta Elementary School and enjoyed being coached in basketball by the late Randall Buchanan.

"That was one of my favorite memories of living in Pinetta," said Bruton.

He did not let the foundational training go to waste. Bruton returned home

to Jacksonville to complete his secondary schooling at Ed White High School, where he graduated in 2009. Bruton's passion and talent for basketball continued as he spent two years playing in a semi-professional league in Jacksonville and Orlando, Fla.

In 2017, Bruton enlisted into the United States Air Force. During his five-year tenure, three of which were spent in Germany, Bruton found his way back to the hardwood. His talents earned him a spot on the All-Europe Team, which was comprised of U.S. servicemen serving throughout Europe.

This unique team came together on

short notice, with members chosen just two weeks before the league's tournament began. To remedy the short notice, the team had two-a-day practices for the first week. Unfortunately for Bruton, he suffered an injury prior to the tournament and ended up helping coach the team, which went on to win a first-place gold medal.

"This was the best team I've ever played for," said Bruton, who honorably discharged at the rank of Senior Airman in 2022.

One of the many attributes that Bruton gained from his military service was to use his time wisely.

"If it works in the Air Force, I figured it would be useful in my business," said Bruton.

Work has been essential for Bruton's success, as he regularly puts in 80 hours a week for his new business, Bruton Apparel, which features a clothing line designed by Bruton. Recently, he added shoes to his online clothing site.

"It's going really well," said Bruton, who spends long hours planning and designing clothing as well as locating vendors to keep the business running smoothly.

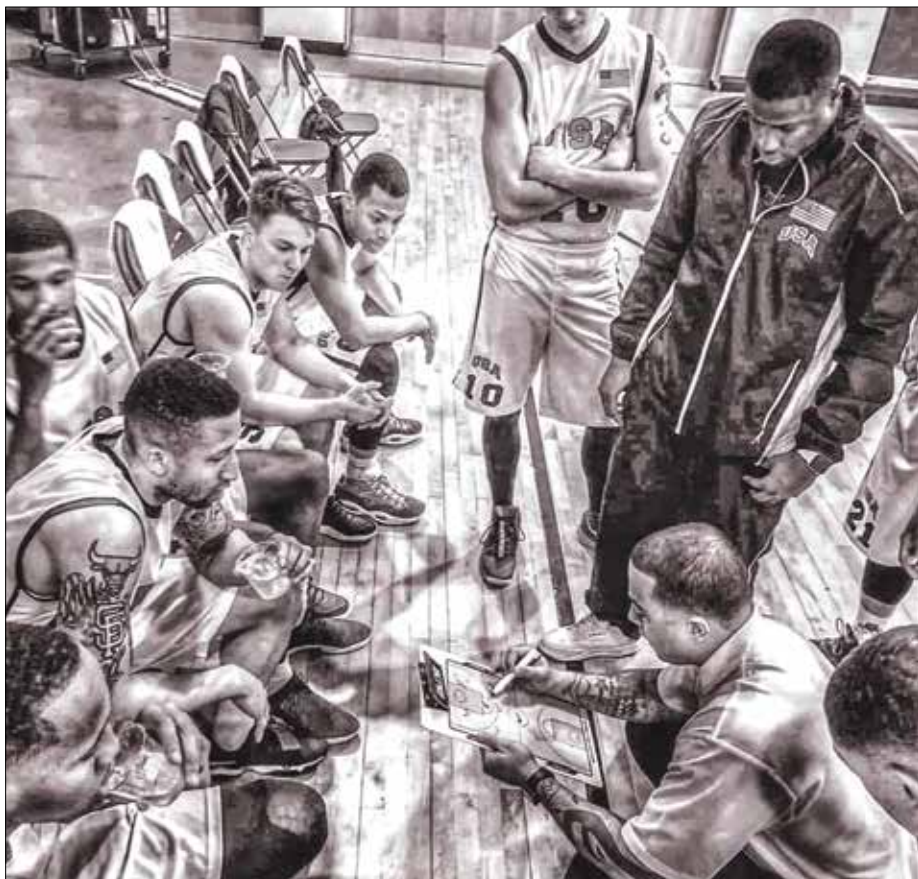
"I am building generational wealth for my family," said Bruton. "My purpose in life is to break generational curses in my family and others."

Bruton has been a Christian since childhood, but that didn't prevent him from going through difficult circumstances, some of which sent him spiraling into depression. Rather than sinking further into an emotional abyss, he tapped back into his relationship with Christ. Today, Bruton knows he is called to spread the good news about what God can do in any situation. Regularly, he posts uplifting messages and prayers on TikTok and other social media platforms.

"I'm not perfect, but I try to live the life and share it with others," said Bruton. "I love helping people, and sometimes a simple prayer will change someone's life."



Cameron checks out a newly-arrived shipment of shirts for Bruton Apparel.



This computer-rendered photo captured Bruton (standing next to the head coach) as the All-Europe team prepares to return to the court.

The fruitful life that Bruton now enjoys and shares with others is a direct result of those early years in Pinetta, spent with those beloved grandparents.

"They gave me a lot of much needed love," recalls Bruton. "They instilled in me a lot of godly principles and pointed me in the right direction."

Though there were some detours along the way, Bruton's spiritual compass held true. From the basketball court, to business ventures and pointing others to Christ, it's all coming up gold for him now.



The All-Europe team displays their gold medals after winning a tournament.



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Preserving the dying art

Stanley Ash

and his passion for cane syrup



Stanley and Janette Ash take a moment to show off their rows of growing sugarcane. / Photograph by Lee Trawick

Story by Lee Trawick

Although he lives just across the river in Lafayette County, Stanley Ash is a Branford native through and through. He graduated from Branford High School in 1967 and later married his wife, Janette Pearson, in 1971. Together, they have built a life to be proud of. He retired from the Buckeye paper mill in Taylor County, and she stayed at home to raise their three daughters – Susan, Sandy and Sonya – who each went on to receive their college degrees and begin their own successful lives. Many would tip their hats and say, “Well done!” However, their journey was not yet complete.

Nearly 25 years ago, Ash found himself helping his friend, Albert Knight, make cane syrup. It wasn’t long before he had taken a real liking to the art.

“I realized, after a few years, I could make my own,” he recalled.

Thus, he embarked on a journey to acquire knowledge from several local cane syrup makers: the late Charles Koon,

the late Leo Jackson and the gentleman many in Lafayette County considered the best syrup maker around, the late Dub Williams. Ash admits he’s made his fair share of mistakes over the years; however, making cane syrup is an art only mastered by years of practice – much like finding water with a wishbone-shaped branch. Both are dying arts in today’s world.

“Stanley was born 100 years too late,” said Janette. “This is just something he loves to do; he loves things and doing things the old way.”

For many years, there was a common bond between local cane farmers and syrup makers. If one needed something, another was quick to offer a helping hand with no questions asked. However, after the passing of Carl Driver, another fellow syrup maker, Ash seems to be carrying a torch with a dying flame.

The art of growing and making cane syrup, like anything else, has a rough outline of steps. To make it right, though, Ash believes you have to develop a

different kind of understanding.

“There is no set way to make it – it’s one of those things you just have to get a feel for,” he explains. Although he and Janette began the art as a hobby, just something to do to keep the mystique of the good ole days alive, 25 years later, it has become a full-on operation. Today, their product is known simply as “Cane Syrup.” There’s no fancy brand name for it, and it doesn’t need one.

The Ashes have a kettle that can hold nearly 80 gallons of fresh cane juice that’s been squeezed from the sugarcane stalks and filtered into a 55-gallon drum. It’s then pumped into the kettle, where the juice is boiled until Ash feels the consistency is “just right.” For every 80 gallons of juice, roughly 18 gallons of syrup is made. He measures its consistency using an old trick Koon once taught him. He dips out a bit of syrup after approximately four hours of cooking and lays it on a piece of angled tin to see if the syrup runs down it like a liquid or only dribbles down an inch or



The cane syrup making process begins with cutting the Saccharum, or leaves, off the cane stalk. / Photograph Courtesy of Ken Lee

two. If the syrup runs down the tin, it is not quite done. However, if it sticks, it's "just right." As such, there's no recipe card tucked away in an old coffee can or on a shelf collecting dust. It is entirely made by



Stanley and his granddaughter, Malah, are up before daylight to begin the process of making cane syrup. / Photograph Courtesy of Ken Lee

years of practice and mistakes.

The process begins in October, when the Ashes plant their sugarcane. In a year, it's ready to be harvested. They begin by cutting the Saccharum, or leaves, off the cane stalk. This is followed by a process called tuning, which is where the top of the cane is cut off at an angle to make it easier to feed through the mill. Ash then runs the cane stalk through a saw he designed from an old tree saw in order to cut down the stalks. From there, it is loaded onto a trailer.

"I can tell you, if anyone has ever fed the cane stalks through the mill before, it doesn't take long to realize the importance of loading the cane stalks the right way onto the trailer," Janette said.

Once the stalks are loaded onto a trailer, it is hauled to the "Stanley Cane Mill" on Ash's farm, where the art of making cane syrup begins. The stalks are put into the mill operated by the PTO shaft of a tractor, which is backed to the mill. The juice is then squeezed out into a pipe that runs into a barrel with a screen placed over the top to prevent any impurities from getting into the juice. A second round of

filtering takes place as the juice is pumped into the 80-gallon kettle. Then, the real art begins.

Although the juice has been filtered twice, the Ashes must continue to monitor it, as any impurities that remain filter their way to the surface. To skim these impurities off the top, the Ashes use homemade skimmers, which were made by Pat Koon. Atop the kettle sits a ring with thin cloths tucked against it. As the juice begins to flow over the ring, it's caught by the cloths and filters the juice yet again as it cycles back into the kettle to continue boiling. When the consistency is right, Ash begins to scoop out the syrup into a big container with another cloth over it for one more round of filtration, ensuring it's the cleanest syrup possible.

Finally, the syrup is bottled up, labeled and ready for the local customers who make sure their names are placed on the list of buyers in advance. Some of the Ashes' cane syrup is made with a bit of corn syrup, and some are even made with zero additives. While no batch is ever the same, each is treated with the same dedicated care and attention.



When the consistency is right, Stanley Ash begins to scoop the syrup out into a big container with a cloth over it for an extra round of filtration, ensuring it's the cleanest syrup possible. / Photographs Courtesy of Ken Lee

The bottling process often becomes a family affair. In fact, every year, the Ashes host a family reunion, where everyone joins in on labeling bottles. Each case contains 12 bottles, and they produce more than 125 cases in the months of October and November. For these busy productions, children, grandchildren, cousins, nieces and nephews all join in to help put the finishing touches on the bottles.



After the syrup is made, it's bottled and hand-labeled. / Photograph Courtesy of Ken Lee

Stanley and Janette have never advertised their syrup; for them, it's not about becoming a world conglomerate, but rather about making a product they can be proud of and that locals enjoy. One hundred percent of their sales are by word-of-mouth, and word travels fast and far around the area. The Ashes do not ship their product, as he and Janette enjoy talking with their customers like they're family. At the same time, their syrup has reached Alaska and other parts of the country, and has even been seen on restaurant tables.

Their mill is always open for anyone to drop by to see how his syrup is made. Visitors are liable to get a stick of "polecat" candy, which comes from the boiling-over portion of the juice as it is being made into syrup.

Somewhere along their journey, the idea was proposed to bring the Lafayette Elementary School first-grade students out to Stanley's mill to see how cane syrup is made and join in on the process a bit. These days, a class trip to the mill has become a staple in their curriculum. Each year, students pour into the mill for a glimpse of the process, and they learn the value of hard work, along with the lessons of reaping the fruits of one's labor.

Today, the Ashes' cane syrup is simply a way to hold onto the purity of hard work and one last art that will soon be obsolete.

"When I am too old to do this, I have no one to pass it down to. My kids and sons-in-law are all smart enough to do it, but they have their own lives and are not interested in it," Stanley said. "So, when I'm done, I guess that will be it." ■

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