

# The Front Porch

*Where The Tea Is Sweet and the Talks Are Long*

March / April 2024

## BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

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Suwannee Valley  
Electric Co-op  
CEO Michael  
McWaters

Tri-County Electric Co-op  
CEO Julius Hackett

## GIRL RACERS

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## TAX WATCHDOG DOMINIC CALABRO

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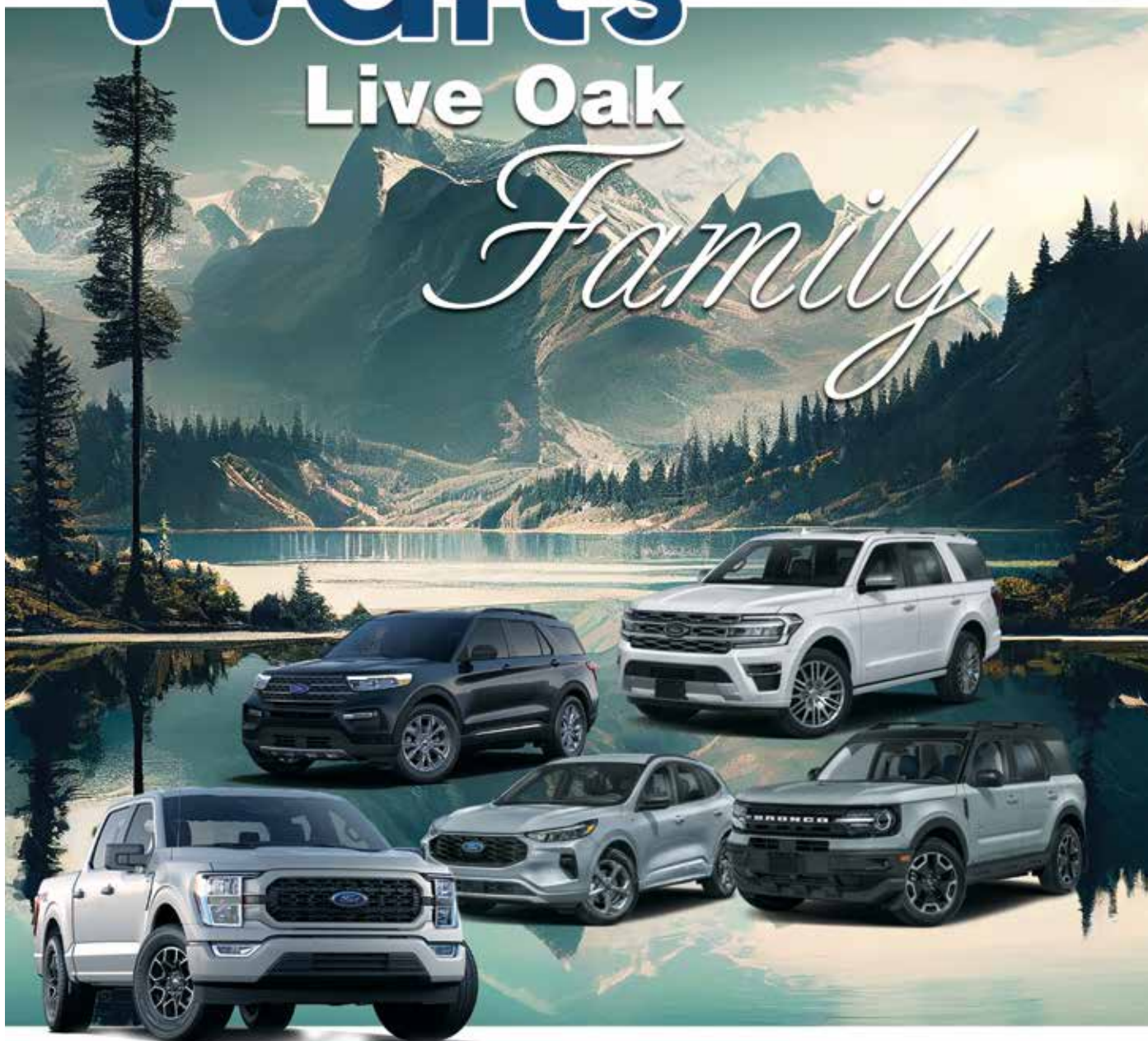


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# The Front Porch

*Where the tea is sweet and the talks are long*

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**Publisher**  
Emerald Greene

**General Manager**  
Chelsie Holbrook

**Editor**  
Laura Young

**Staff Writers**  
Heather Ainsley  
Danny Federico  
Robin Postell  
Mickey Starling

#### Sales Representatives

Justice Barrington  
Tiffany Ottey  
Ina Thompson

#### Advertisement Design

Mark Estefan  
Hannah Kolstad

**Advertising & Subscriptions**  
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# Meet Our Staff



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**Cheltsie Holbrook**  
General Manager



**Laura Young**  
Editor



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Staff Writer



**Danny Federico**  
Staff Writer



**Mickey Starling**  
Staff Writer



**Heather Ainsley**  
Staff Writer



**Mark Estefan**  
Graphic Designer



**Hannah Kolstad**  
Graphic Designer



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*Sittin' on the Porch with...*

# *Sim Alexander*

**Story by Mickey Starling**

*Photograph Courtesy of Renea Alexander*

Madison native Rev. Sim Alexander loves the atmosphere of his community, where everyone knows each other.

"I especially love that this is a place where people actually practice their Christianity," said Alexander, who has served in the ministry for many years.

He is presently in his seventeenth year as pastor of Evergreen Missionary Baptist Church, in Madison, and he also serves as president of the Madison County Christian Ministerial Association.

Alexander has seen some disturbing shifts in how Christians deal with the world around them.

"I see things that trouble me, such as the rampant illegal immigration taking place at our borders," said Alexander. "You can't get but four quarts of water in a gallon jug. Likewise, everyone can't live in America. We have a Trojan Horse situation taking place in our country, just without the horses. They're just walking in."

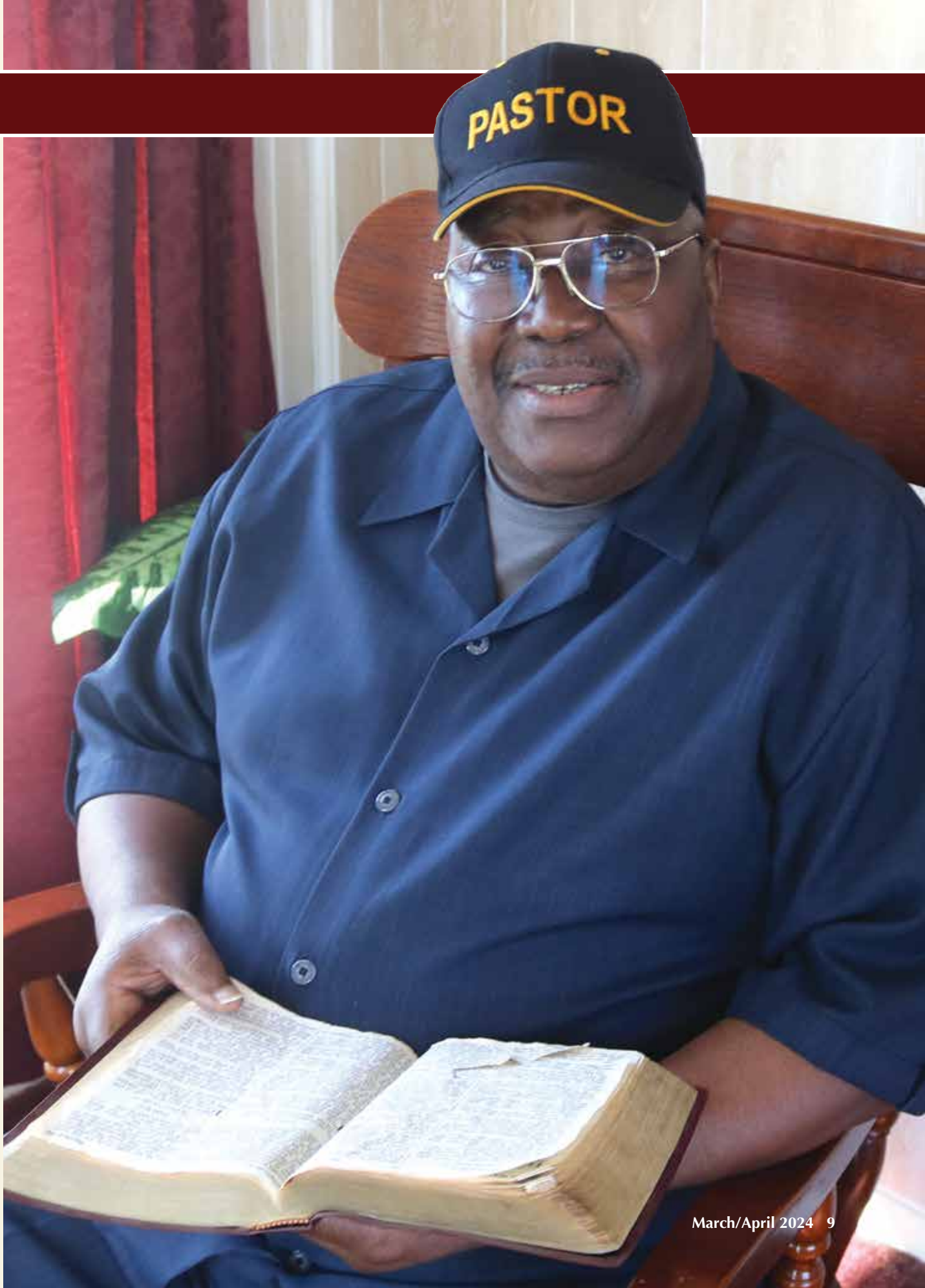
Despite his concerns, Alexander is careful not to let politics and the choices of others deter him from his determined pursuit of sharing the gospel with others and loving them without judgment.

"Too many people are letting politics divide them, causing hatred, even in the Church," reflected Alexander, as his voice rose to a passionate pitch. "Politicians aren't going to determine how I live, only God and His Word will do that."

He is quick to point out that he, like everyone else, has fallen short of the glory of God. "We tend to pick only certain sins to hate, like abortion or homosexuality, but there are more than a few sins that will send you to Hell," said Alexander. "Vengeance for sin belongs to God. The New Testament church is about saving people, not stoning them to death for their sins. We should be letting them know God has made a way to avoid His judgment."

As Alexander continued swaying gently in his rocking chair, his thoughts about the Church continued. "We really need to keep our thoughts and actions right before God and not do things we aren't called to do," said Alexander. "We do need to warn people, but in a spirit of love. If we allow hate in the Church, how will we ever show love to others? Come now, let us reason together. May God help us to do so." ♦







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COVER STORY

**BRIDGING**

*the*

**DIGITAL  
DIVIDE**



# Tri-County and Suwannee Valley Electric Cooperatives

## Sponsored Content

Story by Laura Young

Photographs Courtesy of  
TCEC and SVEC

It's 5 a.m. You're taking a class online, and you've figured out that the early morning hours give you the best shot to view a presentation on the course website. Streaming the material is not an option with the frustrating data speed you're getting, but will it download? Sadly, your computer estimates a download time of six hours. Only if the connection holds, you tell yourself. Past experience assures you it will never happen.

It's 12:30 p.m. During a lunch break you're trying to take care of a bill that the company thinks will be easier for you to pay online. Slowly their site loads onto the screen, and you log in to your account. It takes a while, but you eventually navigate to the payments portal. You've entered about half of the needed information when everything freezes. Clicking here and there accomplishes nothing. You start over, wondering if relocating into the next room will give you one more bar.

It's time for the weekly family Zoom. The gathering is a holdover from pandemic days, but everyone has wanted to keep doing it to stay in touch. You settle into a lawn chair in the middle of the yard where the signal seems stronger. Your frame shows up with all the others on the tablet screen, and you're following the conversation. From the others' point of view, however, your face is just an icon and anything you try to say comes across in warped, chopped-up fragments. You're clearly the country mouse in the group.

Your kid is home from college for the summer and beginning to look for work. Job hunts are all online these days, and time is of the essence. As soon as they wake up, they'll head off to use the free WiFi in a café 30 miles

away.

In short, the digital divide is real, and down your back road you have been living on the down side of it. Sure, you'd like to have speedy access at home like you do at your job in town, but over the years you've grown accustomed to the difference. You want it, but do you need it?

In the spring of 2020 – when suddenly millions of people experiencing the pandemic everywhere were trying to use the Internet from home to keep up with their studies, jobs and families – a known problem became more glaringly apparent than ever. Those living in rural areas simply didn't have connectivity like their urban counterparts. As the pandemic stretched on, they were disproportionately losing out in big ways: losing learning gains, losing business income and losing touch with loved ones.

Not since the electrification of households in the major cities of North America – nearly a century ago – has a gap of access had such consequence. By around 1930, when electric lines had reached about 70 percent of households in the U.S., the other 30 percent of homes that were left in the dark could be found primarily across rural America. Thankfully, with help from the Rural Electrification Act of 1937, from this darkness emerged a new kind of utility company: the electric cooperative. These non-profits, owned by the people whom they served, accomplished their purpose of bringing electricity to rural areas.

Because these co-ops have survived and thrived into the present, their longstanding commitment to serving rural communities has given them a unique opportunity to play a powerful role in tackling today's connectivity disparity: the digital divide. Many co-ops today are once again going where for-profit companies dared not go and

are lighting the way toward connectivity for all. This time, they are installing fiber optic networks to give rural homes and businesses access to the world at a competitive high speed.

In Florida, five electric co-ops have taken this project on. The first was Tri-County Electric Cooperative, based in Madison, Fla., and serving Madison, Jefferson, Taylor and Dixie counties. Then nearby Suwannee Valley Electric Cooperative – which serves Columbia, Hamilton, Lafayette and Suwannee counties – joined them in the effort to bridge the digital divide across our section of North Florida. How are they making this historic transformation happen?

## Tri-County Electric Cooperative

A group of citizens formed Tri-County Electric Cooperative (TCEC) in July of 1940. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had created the Rural Electrification Administration at the federal level in 1935, when the census showed that 90 percent of America's farms, ranches and homes were without electricity. In 1937, Florida's legislature passed the Rural Electrification Cooperative Law, making it possible for this new type of electric company to operate in the state.

During TCEC's first meeting, the officers were elected, an official seal was approved, by-laws were adopted and some business matters like check-signing and insurance coverage were handled. The next step was getting 100 citizens to "sign up" so that the Articles of Incorporation could be validated. With a bit of arm-twisting, the necessary members were recruited, and in September of 1940 construction of power lines began.

As customers throughout the Tri-County service territory became connected to the grid, the co-op needed





more employees and a bigger office space. By 1948, TCEC had 25 employees, 1,877 members, and an average monthly bill of \$6.13. Ten years ago, in 2014, the enterprise had grown to 12,398 members served by 64 employees, and the average bill had reached \$205.46. Today, with 67 full-time employees, TCEC provides 14,399 members (through more than 20,000 meters) with electricity at an average cost of \$187 per month.

From linemen to mechanics, from engineers to office staff, those who work at TCEC continue the company's tradition of caring commitment to meeting the needs of its members, listening to concerns and using their expertise to make smart decisions and go the extra mile to solve pressing issues. While working to maintain environmental stewardship, affordable rates and their long-standing reputation as a trusted organization, the staff also extends their impact in the community through volunteerism, fundraising and sponsorships that support local sports teams, civic organizations, events and various youth education programs. The cooperative principle, Concern for Community, is at the heart of everything TCEC does.

In order to keep up-to-date with the day-to-day needs of its members, TCEC's board of directors necessarily engages in long-term strategic planning. This readies the company to act with fiscal responsibility to implement technological advances as they happen in the industry. The latest example of this is TCEC's recent expansion into partnering with the internet

provider Conexon Connect. While the local project has been making news just in the past couple of years, the effort has in fact been decades in the making.

The digital divide was first identified as a societal problem in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, electric cooperatives across the United States began using their resources to become part of the solution. CEO Julius Hackett says that when TCEC staff began hearing about other electric co-ops' success in meeting the internet-connection needs of their members, they put the issue on their board's radar. Hackett recalls that in 2018, TCEC began studying the feasibility of a project of this size. By 2020, the impact of the digital divide on TCEC members was glaring. With the opportunity for grant funding and the support of the TCEC board of directors, the time was right to move forward with fiber-to-the-home internet service.

"Our board was really sensitive to the amount of money needed to pull it off," says Hackett, noting that for a cooperative enterprise, the project had to reach all of TCEC's members, or none.

"That was big, needing 100 percent," says Hackett. "You want to serve all."

Even as Hackett and his staff continued to provide the board with updates about how co-ops across the country were finding ways to help bridge the digital divide, TCEC began to hear directly from its own members about it. What had once been a "want" had become a "need." This brought board conversations about it to a deeper level.

In the nearby state of Georgia, which

is the same viewing market as Tri-County's service territory, co-ops were getting the grant funds they needed to start internet service projects. When TCEC staff and board members visited two Georgia co-ops with a very similar territory, they saw first-hand that such a project could be launched and succeed. It was time for the board to consider their options. Should they partner with an independent internet service provider or do that part of such a project themselves?

When Conexon Connect presented a comprehensive fiber optic package — one that would provide TCEC members with quality internet service at an affordable rate while also lending their expertise in the project, conducting system maintenance and supporting smart grid technologies that would increase the reliability of electric service — the board made the leap. The vote was unanimous.

Hackett says the fiber-to-the-home project was "way outside anything previously approved by the board, but Conexon helped broaden their perspective on how it could be approached."

TCEC would own the infrastructure while Conexon would manage the operation of the network along with customer billing and technical support.

Agreements were forged, the project launched in April of 2022, and on Jan. 17, 2023, TCEC and Conexon announced they had connected their first co-op member to the new all-fiber high-speed network. During the remainder of 2023, they built 1,018 miles of fiber line and connected 2,506 more members to it. This





made broadband available to more than 6,000 households in Madison, Jefferson, Taylor and Dixie counties. Phase 1 is now completed, with Phase 2 on schedule for completion in 2024 and Phase 3 in progress. Projected costs have been right on target, and Hackett expects that by early 2025 broadband service will be available for all TCEC members.

As of now, the project focuses primarily on serving TCEC members; however, TCEC will continue to work towards acquiring grant funding to support extending the network to other underserved areas within Madison, Jefferson and Taylor counties.

As CEO, Hackett is at the forefront of the project. He has 35 years of experience working with electric cooperatives. Before becoming the CEO at TCEC in 2008, he spent 19 years at a fast-growing electric cooperative in Virginia, serving as the head of the engineering department for 12 years. He finds being CEO very rewarding but also challenging, because of the wide variety of complex issues that cross his desk.

"It is an honor for me to represent TCEC at the helm and stand for our employees, board of directors and our members," says Hackett.

Hackett appreciates how important it is for him to be out in the community, staying aware of local needs and getting feedback directly from members. It's this human connection, which comes along with the technological connections, that brings significance to his work. Leading the company through initiatives that

position them well for the future brings further meaning to his work. Some of these advancements have included Automated Metering Infrastructure, replacing paper maps of the grid with the Geographical Information System, implementing an Outage Management System to improve response times, offering members the option of pre-pay meters and making free energy audits available to members.

As amazing as all of these advancements have been, Hackett and his team say that the fiber-to-the-home project is the most meaningful they have ever worked on, eclipsing the impact that other technological advances over the years have made for their members. They can really see the powerful difference it is making in people's lives.

It's likely that bridging the digital divide will be in our time as historic an accomplishment as bringing electricity to homes was at the company's founding.

## **Suwannee Valley Electric Cooperative**

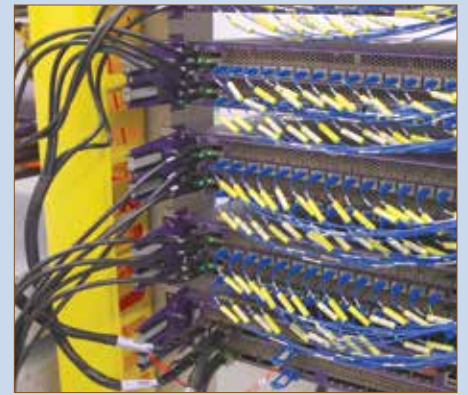
Suwannee Valley Electric Cooperative (SVEC) began operating in 1937, as soon as Florida law allowed this new type of utility to provide service. SVEC's founders went door to door to sign their neighbors up as members and then proceeded to build a system that would bring electricity to their homes. The co-op energized its first electric line in 1940, and today it maintains more than 4,100 miles of electric distribution lines. That's enough to reach from their headquarters in Live

Oak all the way to northern Alaska! Their service territory now extends across Suwannee, Hamilton, Lafayette and a portion of Columbia counties, an area of 2,100 square miles.

CEO Michael McWaters got his start in the field of utilities with an electric cooperative in Alabama, when a newspaper article led him to invite the new local co-op manager to his Rotary Club meeting, which led a while later to an unexpected job offer. He's been with co-ops now for nearly 30 years, the last 10 of them as CEO with Suwannee Valley, where he's involved in every aspect of the operation. Rural life is all McWaters has ever known, and having earned degrees in business administration and public administration, he brings to the job a blend of business savvy and a deep understanding of the people that co-ops serve.

He leads a staff of 85 operational and administrative employees who fulfill the co-op's responsibility to provide safe, affordable and reliable power to SVEC's owner-members. Their commitment to the quality of life in the community extends beyond their work environment, and in 2023 SVEC won the 2023 Large Business of the Year Award from the Suwannee Chamber of Commerce. The award recognized the SVEC team's impact on the local economy; on local education through teacher grants, student scholarships and sponsorship of clubs and organizations; and on local life through charitable contributions, volunteerism and civic participation.





usage on a post card and mailed it in to the company for billing. As one might expect, this system gave way to having SVEC employees stop by each meter, record the usage and carry the paperwork back to the office. It was only a matter of time before meter readers entered their findings into a hand-held computer. The first generation of automation kicked in when meters were developed that could transmit the usage data directly from the house to the headquarters, without a human in between. Nowadays, third generation AMI allows for two-way communication between the billing office and meters so that readings can be triggered remotely and the meter can respond on demand with the requested data.

Another fascinating tech advancement highlighted by McWaters is the "self-healing network." People are



Just as SVEC's staff keeps their skills up-to-date through ongoing training, so does the company regularly implement technology updates. McWaters says that during his career he has witnessed incredible advancements in service brought on by new technologies.

One of the most significant in his view is the Automated Metering Infrastructure, or AMI. Once upon a time, SVEC's consumer-members used a postcard system for reporting their usage. It was an honor system: members eyeballed their own meters, noted the



*TCEC Board of Trustees*





familiar with their own organic self-healing abilities, such as our immune system and the natural ability to clot blood and regenerate tissue at a wound site. The human body can accomplish amazing acts of repair all on its own, even though sometimes the intervention of a medic is helpful. For an electric grid, self-healing takes place during a power outage. McWaters explains that when there is a large outage, the SVEC network often can self-heal around 90 percent of it, isolating the source and making it easier for the line workers to focus their repair efforts. For example, if a fallen tree results in an initial loss of power to 500 consumers, the self-monitoring system can narrow that to just 50 by opening and closing switches systematically.

Now McWaters is guiding SVEC's process of pairing high-speed internet service with electric service through the technology of fiber optics, the transmission of data via light pulses. His work has always been about making a difference in his community, and this latest project is having a monumental effect in the service area.

"Rural is all I've ever lived," says McWaters. "I want to work hard so that rural kids have the same opportunities that metropolitan kids do. That's my passion. Their parents have chosen to live in a rural community, and they deserve the same opportunities. That's what brought us into fiber in the first place. It has refurbished our mission from 1937, from lighting up our community with electricity to lighting our community with fiber."

McWaters reflects that launching the broadband service came after many, many years of strategic planning. The SVEC Board of Trustees and staff looked at their options, debating whether to be the internet service provider themselves or facilitate another company to do it.

"We could never find someone willing to serve every home," he recounts. "We were not going to do this if we did



not serve every customer."

Each electric co-op that is helping to bridge the digital divide in rural America is approaching it in the way that best suits their market and business

plan. For SVEC, the decision was made to create a subsidiary company of their own to operate the broadband network and engage Conexon to manage the construction. In July of 2022, they





announced the launch of Rapid Fiber Internet, LLC, and they were on their way to giving SVEC members the high-speed connectivity they needed. Construction of their broadband network is well underway, with internet service available to 3,900 homes and businesses.

Overall, the project is expected to

take four years and cost up to \$93 million. The resulting benefits will parallel those that came with electrification in 1937, and by 2026 all of SVEC's customers will have the opportunity to connect to the kinds of online services that are fast becoming an integral part of modern life in the U.S.

Together, the historic fiber-to-

the-home projects of TCEC and SVEC have, in the span of just a year, already successfully provided a solution that would bridge the digital divide for nearly 10,000 members across their rural North Florida service areas, with steady progress underway toward reaching the remainder, 100 percent. ♦









**Attention Tri-County Members:**

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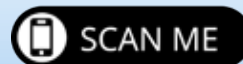
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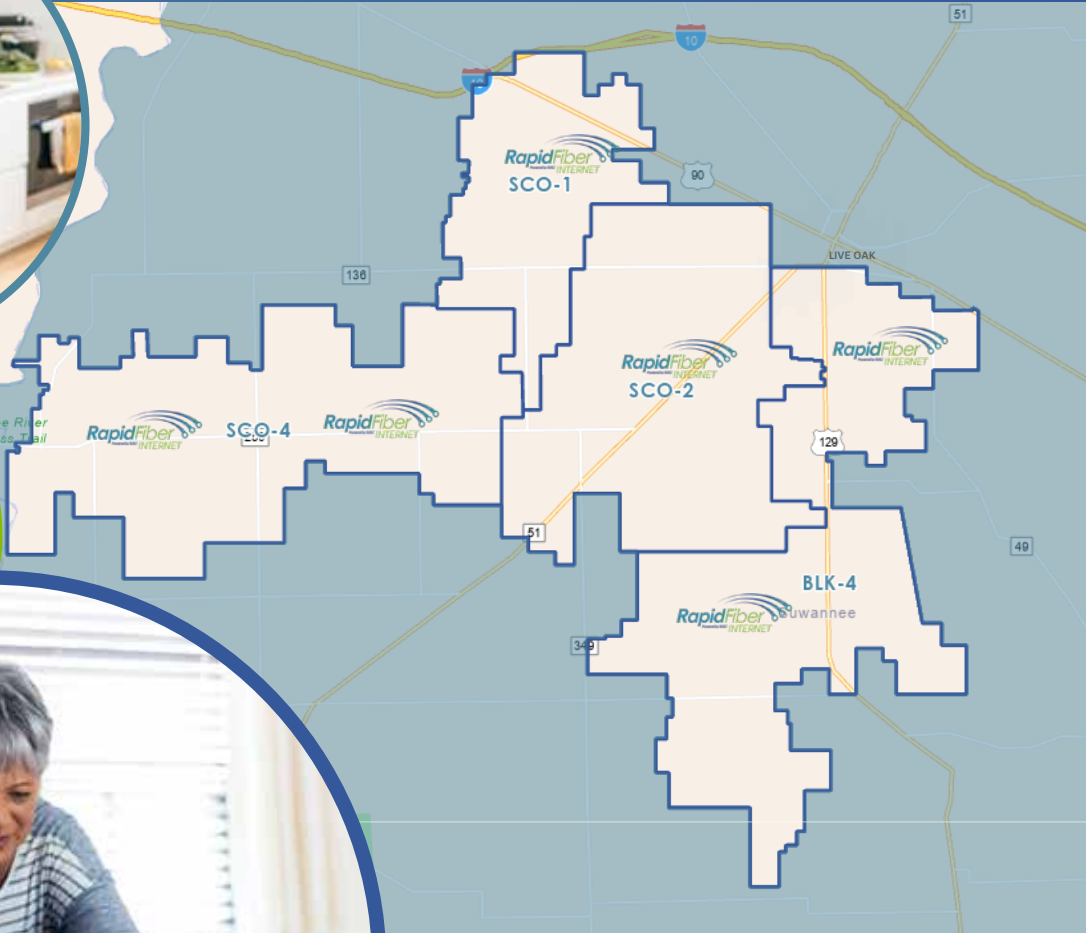


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# WHAT'S HAPPENING



## March 2

### Callie Jordan Mission Fund 5K Fun Run

"Be the light" by joining the Callie Jordan Mission Fund 5K Fun Run. Registration opens at 4:30 p.m., and the 5K race will begin at 5:30 p.m. A Kids Glow Race starts at 6:30 p.m., followed by an awards presentation at 6:45 p.m. Attendees are invited to stay after for food, music and a celebration from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. The event takes place at Heritage Park and Gardens, 1004 Helvenston St. S.E., Live Oak, Fla.



## March 8 - April 6

### Petals and Wings at JAG

This exhibit showcases the nature-inspired art of Anne Hemple. Jefferson Arts Gallery, 575 W. Washington St., Monticello, Fla., is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling (850) 997-3311.

## March 9

### Monticello Second Saturday

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



## March 16

### Big Bend Brew Fest

Sample unlimited tastings of 100+ different beers from brewers all across the Southeastern U.S. as well as food and music from 5 to 8 p.m. at Rosehead Park in Perry, Fla. Get your tickets for this Perry Rotary Club event at [www.bigbendbrewfest.com](http://www.bigbendbrewfest.com) before they sell out!

## March 18

### Monticello Market @ the Circle

The Courthouse Circle in downtown Monticello becomes an open-air market on the third Monday each month from 3 to 6 p.m. in the parking lot of The Social. Expect vendors like Ashwood Homestead, Blue Sky Berry Farm, Florida Georgia Citrus, Florida Line Nursery, Full Moon Farm & Apiary, Rocky Soil Family Farm, UF/IFAS and Under the Oaks. Interested vendors should contact the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce at [director@monticellojeffersonfl.com](mailto:director@monticellojeffersonfl.com) or (850) 997-5552.

## March 30

### Easter Extravaganza at NFWC

The North Florida Wildlife Center in Lamont offers a special Easter themed event, with a huge egg hunt, lively animal encounters, keeper talks, crafts, food trucks, vendors and more. Special low admission for the event is just \$15 for kids and \$20 for adults. To purchase tickets in advance, visit [www.northfloridawildlife.org](http://www.northfloridawildlife.org).

## April 4 - 6

### Antique Tractor and Engine Show

The Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park (11016 Lillian Saunders Dr. in White Springs, Fla.) will host its 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Antique Tractor and Engine Show, reflecting 200 years of rural American history. Compete in tractor pulls and watch demonstrations of shingle milling, corn grinding, home canning and more. Admission is \$5 per vehicle with up to eight passengers.



## April 5 - 6

### Bluegrass Festival and Chili Cook-off

The 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Florida State Bluegrass Festival and Chili Cook-off attracts thousands of people each year to the Forest Capital State Park (203 Forest Park Drive in Perry, Fla.) for bluegrass music, music workshops, arts and crafts, food vendors, chili cook-off and free Moon Pies! Tickets are available at [www.floridastatebluegrass.com](http://www.floridastatebluegrass.com) or call 850-584-5366.



# WHAT'S HAPPENING

**April 6 - 27**

## Annual Student Show at JAG

This exhibit showcases the a wide variety of artwork from local students. Jefferson Arts Gallery, 575 W. Washington St., Monticello, Fla., is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling (850) 997-3311.



**April 13**

## Suwannee River Catfish Festival

Make your way down to Branford, Fla., for its annual Catfish Festival. From 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Suwannee River Greenway, attendees will enjoy free live entertainment while perusing an assortment of vendor booths offering locally-made goods. In addition, once lunchtime comes around, the festival will begin selling its famous catfish dinners.



## Monticello Second Saturday

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

**April 15**

## Monticello Market @ the Circle

The Courthouse Circle in downtown Monticello becomes an open-air market on the third Monday each month from 3 to 6 p.m. in the parking lot of The Social. Expect vendors like Ashwood Homestead, Blue Sky Berry Farm, Florida Georgia Citrus, Florida Line Nursery, Full Moon Farm & Apiary, Rocky Soil Family Farm, UF/IFAS and Under the Oaks. Interested vendors should contact the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce at [director@monticellojeffersonfl.com](mailto:director@monticellojeffersonfl.com) or (850) 997-5552.

**April 20**

## Community Day at the Farm

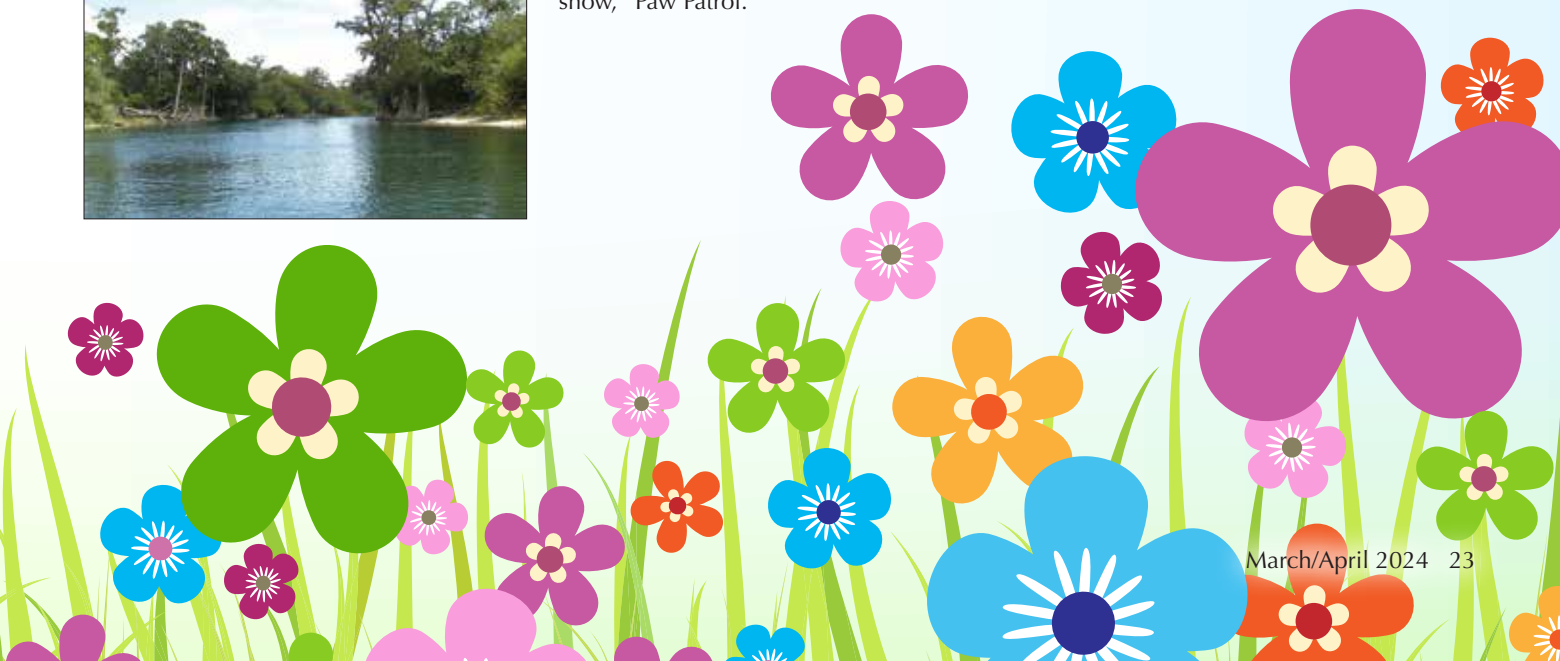
Come visit the best kept secret in Suwannee County. If you have ever driven by the UF/IFAS North Florida Regional Education Center's (NFREC) Suwannee Valley Farm (8202 CR 417 in Live Oak, Fla.) and wondered what they do, now is your chance! From 8:30 a.m. to noon, visitors will have the opportunity to enjoy trolley field tours, orchard tours, green house tours and equipment tours. There will also be a variety of educational booths for both adults and kiddos, along with appearances from the hit children's show, "Paw Patrol."



**April 27**

## Earth Day at NFWC

The North Florida Wildlife Center offers a special Earth Day event, with lively animal encounters, keeper talks, Earth Day-themed arts & crafts, food trucks, vendors and more. Special low admission for the event is just \$10 for kids and \$15 for adults. To purchase tickets in advance, visit [www.northfloridawildlife.org](http://www.northfloridawildlife.org).





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# BIG BEND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA



## Unit 2: Snipe Island

### Story and Photography by Heather Ainsley

Wildlife 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, an expanse of land measuring more than 60 miles of pristine coastline and 90,000 acres of raw wilderness managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. This incredible area of land is separated into five units, which span from the mouth of the Aucilla River that forms the eastern border of Jefferson County through Taylor and Dixie counties, all the way past the town of Horseshoe Beach.

Each unit of the Big Bend Wildlife Area

offers special combinations of recreational outdoor activities. In a prior edition of *The Front Porch* magazine, we explored the sparkling coastal views of the Hickory Mounds Unit. For this issue we explored the unit called Snipe Island.

Contrary to the name, Snipe Island is not an island at all, and a simple drive along some back highways of North Florida brought me to the unit in a little over an hour. Taking U.S. Highway 19 to a left turn at U.S. 27, it was a straight shot of quiet driving that took me east, as if I were heading to the town of Perry. Rather than stopping in Perry, a quick turn onto U.S. 98 led me in the other direction for a mere 20 miles. Highway 98 has two distinctly marked entrances to the Snipe Island Unit. As my vehicle only has two-wheel drive, I opted to take U.S. 14, as the map revealed

it is paved almost entirely to the entrance. Evidence of the heavy rains from the recent winter storms was prevalent along the shoulders of the roadway, and it seemed, the farther into the wilderness I drove, as if the swampland itself was coming to greet me.

Paved asphalt soon gave way to packed dirt roads, which were well-kept, much to my delight. Despite the plentiful rains, I had no trouble navigating along the drive and even passed several maintenance vehicles smoothing a particularly muddy section of roadway.

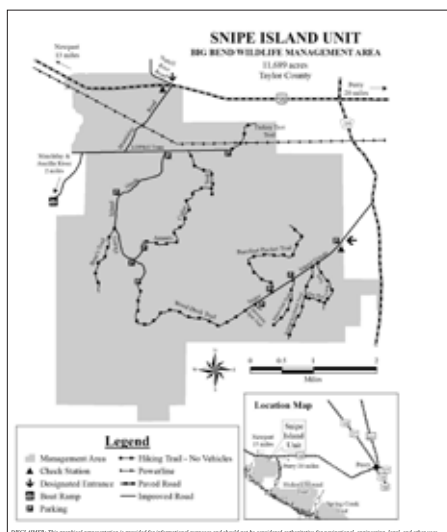
A small brown sign – easy to miss if you aren't paying attention – indicates the upcoming turn for the designated entrance. A larger sign stands farther along, framed by a gate that welcomes visitors to the unit. Just beyond the gate lies a place to park





the car and take a bathroom break before continuing from there on foot.

Signs at the parking hut indicate the best places to experience different recreational activities and list the various landscapes that visitors may happen upon while hiking the many trails. Because seasonal hunting is permitted within the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area, it is important that anyone wishing to hike the trails wear bright colors or reflective vests that can ensure their visibility to anyone hunting in the area. For a complete list of hunting regulations and seasons, see the Big Bend Wildlife Area website.



There are many different landscapes to see while visiting Snipe Island. As mentioned before, despite its name, this unit is not actually an island, but it is comprised of a significant expanse of wetlands. Within this one single unit, nature enthusiasts can enjoy views of freshwater marsh, wet flatwoods, forested wetlands, dome swamp, pine flatwoods and salt marsh.

Anyone wishing to hike along these saturated trails would benefit from wearing waterproof shoes, or shoes that they do not mind getting wet. While many of the hiking trails will be flooded after a particularly wet season, even in a dry season these paths through the woods could hold a considerable amount of mud and water. While some may consider such wet trails a down-side, there is plenty of beauty to witness and wildlife to see in the Florida wetlands.

Wildlife here may include bear, as indicated by another sign located in the initial parking area. It reminds visitors that they are in Bear Country and offers tips for staying safe in the event of a bear encounter. Individuals are instructed to back away from a bear slowly, while raising their arms and speaking in a loud, clear voice. Do not run if a bear approaches you; it is important to stand your ground and make noise and motions with your arms.

If the bear does not back down, use bear spray.

The habitats in Snipe Island are rich with wildlife. Depending on the season and the landscape, visitors can keep a lookout for Florida panthers, bobcats, wild hog, deer, turkey, raccoons, squirrels, rabbit, beavers, skunk, nutria, opossums,

“It seemed, the farther into the wilderness I drove, as if the swampland itself was coming to greet me.”

armadillos, coyote, otters, rats, crabs, snakes, bats, frogs and more. I was enthusiastic and eager to see as much wildlife as possible, but given the chilly conditions and the presence of many hunters in the area, I was not able to see many large animals. I did, however, enjoy the symphony of frogs and saw many small creatures, including several bird species plus a myriad of spiders, snails and other ground-dwelling things. The highlight of my animal encounters was an enormous blue heron that took flight as I walked along one of the hiking paths called “Screaming Hawk Trail.” While he was not a hawk, and he certainly did not scream, to witness such a magnificent animal in his natural environment was a special treat.





Despite the wildlife's shy nature, there was evidence all around of an abundance of animals moving to and fro. According to the many tracks and scat deposits along the trails, I could confidently suspect that I was sharing the trails with a great many different animals. While some may be disturbed by the idea of identifying animal scat, the tracks and waste left behind by wildlife can give us a rare window into their private lives. For example, while walking along one trail, I noticed a pile of animal waste that contained thousands of little shiny disk-shaped items, which I realized were fish scales. Given the water source that ran the length of the trail, I was able to deduce not only that an otter lived nearby, but also that fish lived in the water, with scales that indicated a decent size. While I peered into

the water's still surface, I could see no sign of fish, large or otherwise, but the waste left behind clearly indicated there were many things happening in this habitat that I was not privy to.

The presence of an owl pellet along my walking path told me that there was not only at least one owl nearby, but that it was surviving off of a diet of small, furry animals, indicating the presence of rats, mice, squirrels and nutria. Deer tracks are the easiest way to tell if a deer has been in the area, and muddy patches in wetlands are a great place to look for raccoon or otter prints. Paths made in tall grass can show hikers the trails animals use to move across open areas, and knowing the what animals eat can help identify which ones have left waste behind.



If the scat has hair or bone fragments in it, you can be sure that the animal who left it is a meat-eater in some capacity. Some animals like bear, fox and wild hogs will opportunistically eat a varied diet that can include berries, vegetation, insects and small animals. Other animals' scat shows they survive on vegetation alone. It is important to remember that, scientific discovery aside, animal waste is still fecal matter that can harbor disease; it should be handled only using gloves and instruments that can be thoroughly washed after.

Snipe Island has a lot to offer the experienced hiker. While it may not have the altitude that some challenging trails offer, the wet, muddy trails nonetheless make for a unique and rewarding trek for those willing to get their shoes a little dirty. Trails like Barefoot Pocket Trail and White Oak Trail lead straight into the woods and require the hiker to turn around and come back the way they came after their scenic stroll. Others, like the Doe Run Loop Trail, follow a circular path, connecting with additional trails like Screaming Hawk Trail. By taking loop trails, hikers can enjoy a walk through the wetlands that will eventually lead them either to a straight-shot trail through the woods for additional exploring or all the way back to where they started, which is perfect for those who may get lost while following their own way

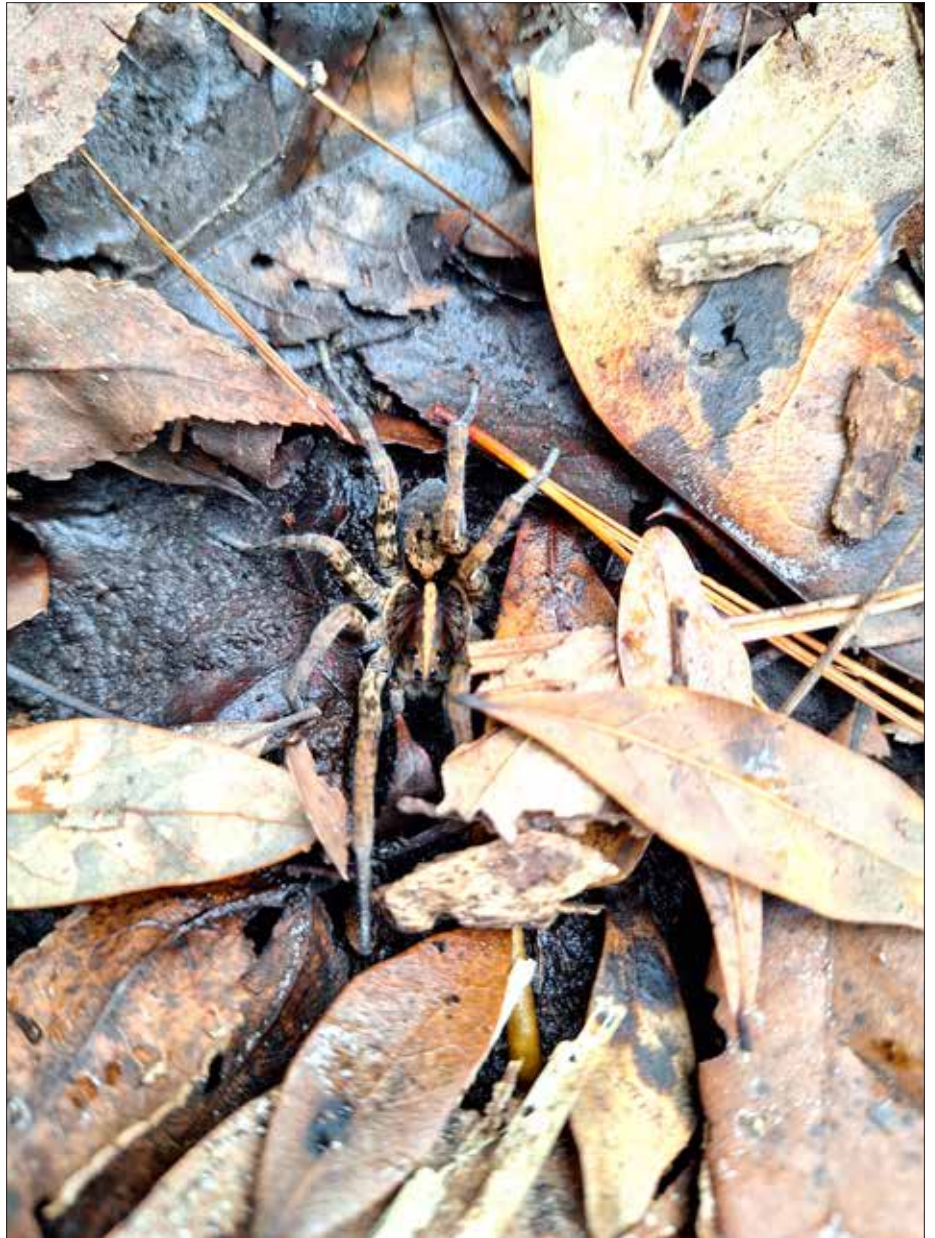




through the forest.

Should an experienced hiker choose to, it is possible to enjoy a very long hike from one of the designated unit entrances to the other. The two entrances are connected by Wood Duck Trail, which travels from the cluster of trails by the east entrance to the vast loop trail near the north entrance. For those hesitant about taking so long a hike, fret not; there is opportunity for parking throughout Snipe Island, so you can always drive part of the way and enjoy a shorter stroll if you choose.

This unit of the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area does not permit camping at this site, although many other recreational activities can be enjoyed. Snipe Island is open for public access year round, and horses are welcome along the trails as well. There are check stations for hunters to use, and it is required that any hunters abide by all relevant hunting regulations, standards and requirements,

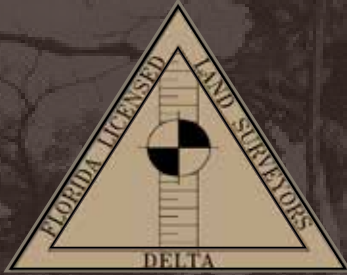


including but not limited to bag limits for in-season game. While hunting dogs are allowed, there are rules and guidelines to follow. Any dog that is not a hunting dog is required to be on leash at all times.

While a boat ramp is not officially connected to the Snipe Island Unit, the unit map shows one approximately two miles to the west, on the Aucilla River. Anyone who finds the map too vague for their liking need not worry; the boat ramp can be easily found by searching online for "Aucilla boat ramp at Mandalay." From the boat launch, individuals can enjoy kayaking, fishing, boating and sight-seeing on the beautiful river.

Snipe Island is an excellent destination for nature enthusiasts, admirers of wildlife and those who harbor an adventuresome spirit! With enough trails to enjoy all day long, and nearby attractions like the Aucilla River and Hickory Mounds Unit, Snipe Island is a great place to spend the day removed from the noise and daily grind of city life. With more than 11,600 acres of wild Florida landscape, it's easy to spend all day enjoying the serenity of the great outdoors. The other units connected to this vast area of untouched wilderness are Jena, Spring Creek, Hickory Mounds and Tide Swamp, which are all officially on the list for prime nature adventure destinations! ♦





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# Barbara Thomas-Reddick

## CARRIES ON A FAMILY TRADITION

Story by Mickey Starling

Photograph by Laura Young

When you're the daughter of a Korean War veteran and Matilda "Tilly" Thomas, you quickly learn the value of a structured life. Barbara Thomas-Reddick was one of 13 children who kept a tight schedule in the family's Greenville home.

"We knew every day what was expected of us," says Reddick.

School days were followed by chores and homework, while weekends were spent preparing for church and the upcoming week at school.

"On Sunday, we had a family devotion before church," recalls Reddick. "Church attendance was expected, and there were consequences for not going. My mother's faith was very motivational for me."

She was always a good athlete in her school days, excelling in several sports.

"I was quick on my feet," says Reddick, who regularly sought to please her mother.

She was beside her often, helping with whatever was needed. That devotion was needed even more when Reddick's father passed away while she was in the ninth grade, leaving his wife to raise the children alone. As the next few years passed, this "mama's girl" continued making good grades and doing well in sports.

As a senior, Reddick met one of the greatest obstacles of her life. The squeaky-clean church girl found herself pregnant. Hating to disappoint her mother, Reddick delayed telling her. She eventually approached her coach, Nancy Benjamin, with her dilemma. Benjamin offered to speak to her mother for her.

When the day arrived to break the news, Reddick was apprehensive about her mother's reaction. Matilda Thomas was known for being straightforward with her responses and never one to sugarcoat her words. However, she never responded in anger or disappointment to the news.

"She really surprised me," says Reddick. "She started fixing my favorite foods and asking if I needed anything. She just took care of me."

At the time, what seemed out of character for Reddick's mother, proved to be the norm of her character. Over the following years, she often took in grandchildren and great grandchildren, caring for them if problems or addictions arose in their homes. She was devoted to seeing that her entire family was well educated and prepared

for life, including all 76 of her grandchildren and great grandchildren. Again, if Miss Matilda was helping to raise kids, so was Reddick.

"I wanted to be a part of my mother's legacy," said Reddick, who saw firsthand the concern she had for families struggling with a crisis, and it shaped the course of her life.

Concern for others was one of the greatest benefits of growing up in Greenville, according to Reddick.

"Everybody had eyes on you," she remembers. "They helped keep us out of trouble. It was a great place to grow up."

After high school, Reddick held true to her vision of continuing the love and service she had witnessed in her mother. Most folks are satisfied with one or two college degrees, but if Reddick were to show off her degrees and certifications, she would need a wheelbarrow.

After completing her A.A. degree at North Florida Junior College, she went on to earn a doctorate in Divinity and a master's degree in Leadership from Southwestern Christian University, in Bethany, Okla. Numerous other degrees and certifications were earned from Covenant College and Beulah Heights University. She also completed an internship at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital and a 1,600 hour residency at John Hopkins Hospital/Clinical, in Baltimore, Md.

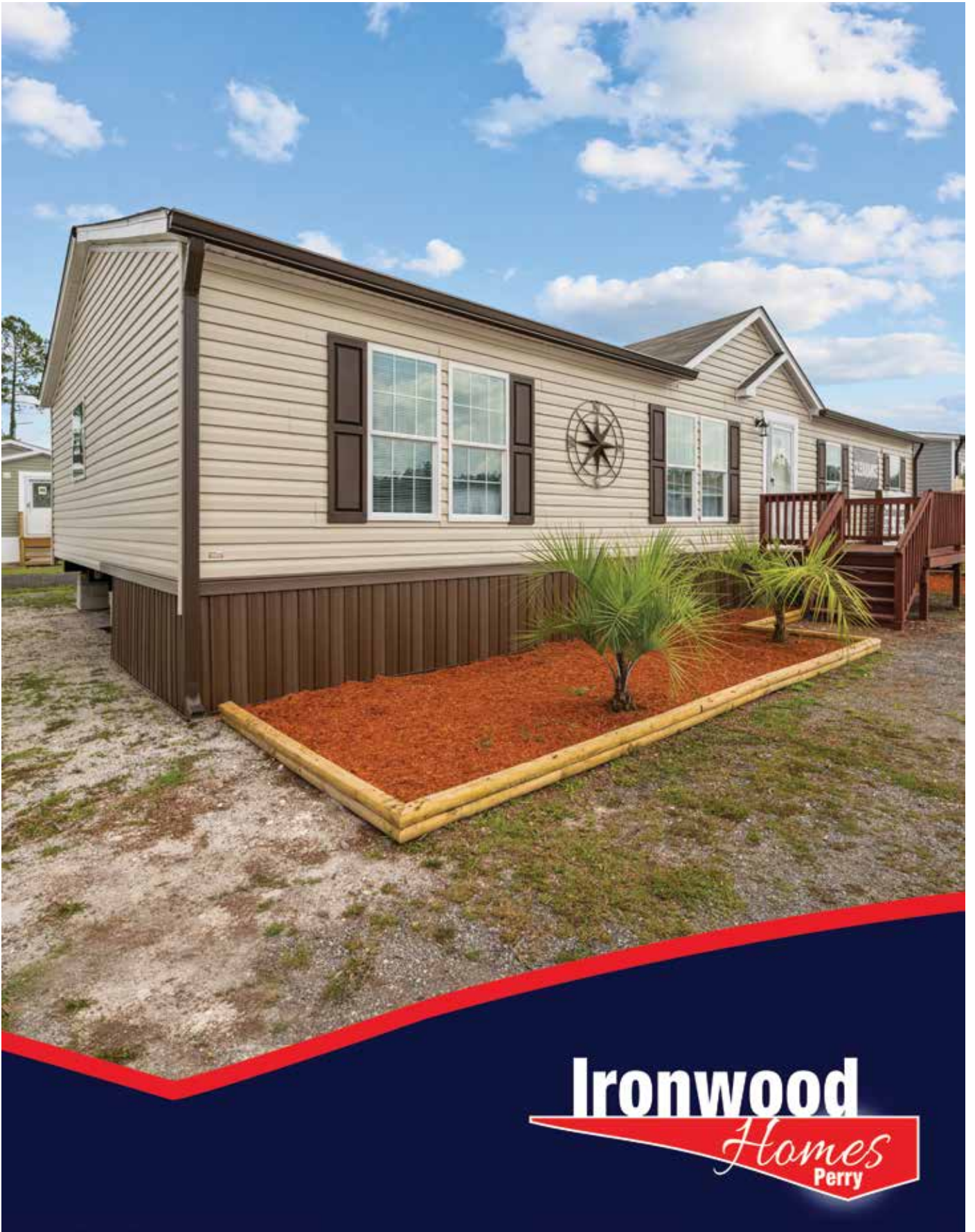
Putting all that education to good use, Reddick has invested the last 20 years serving as a chaplain and substance abuse counselor with Franklin Academy, which has locations in Monticello, Tallahassee and Quincy. She is also CEO of Holistic Plan of Care, a counseling organization that serves a host of mental health issues such as substance abuse, marriage counseling, anger management and more.

When the weekend arrives, Reddick doesn't slow down. She pastors Brim Fountain A.M.E. Church, in Crawfordville, Fla., and Springhill A.M.E. Church, in Tallahassee.

In her spare time, she has written numerous books, including *The Presence of a Chaplain & My Personal Tapestry of Life*. When the fingers aren't typing, her voice is ringing with gospel hits like "If God Don't Do It," which has over 127,000 hits on Spotify. Reddick has a new gospel release coming soon, entitled "Hold On."

It's a busy and fulfilling life for Reddick, who is pleased to carry on where her late mother left off.

"My mother always said she wanted the works she did to speak for her, and it's the same for me," says Reddick. "I want to pray for people, loving and helping them any way I can." ♦





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# GIRL RACERS

Motorsports enjoy broad popularity in America, and many forms of it are open to very young competitors. Though not old enough to legally take to the roadways, kids who drive skillfully and love the thrill of speed can show their stuff on racetracks in dragsters and on motorbikes. Plus, circuits for drag racing, motocross and flat track events offer youth – boys and girls equally – opportunities to push their mental and physical limits, excel and build friendships as part of a unique community. The following stories show how four North Florida girls found their way into racing and discovered how wonderfully it fueled their own energies.

## TINY DRAGSTERS

### Chloe and Addilyn

Story by Robin Postell

*Photographs Courtesy of the Tanners*

Chloe and Addilyn Tanner might not be more than a decade old, but they already know how to break the speed limit.

"We took Chloe to her first Gator Nationals race, and she fell in love with Terry McMillan's dragster and Britney Forrest – a pro dragster. Ever since then she's wanted to race like they did," her mother Brittany says. "Their daddy Josh used to drag when he was a teenager and so did their papa."

The Baby Gators are held annually in Gainesville a week before the Gator Nationals and provides generational racing families a way to get their tots in the mix. Chloe didn't start racing until 2022.

"We talked about it and were able to find a dragster," Brittany states. "We rebuilt it for her to start with, and upgraded to the new one she has now."

Addilyn has her own dragster, too. Chloe's current car is a fire red 2005 half scale which she runs in the 890 class. She has competed in about 20 or more races. On July 8, 2023, at South Georgia Motorsports Park (SGMP) in Cecil, Georgia, Chloe won first in a bracket race.

"She was so excited," Brittany says. "She's raced a bunch of races, and it's taken a lot of them to get where she is now. The



first race she was in she placed third, and it's been hard to get back there."

Chloe, 10, is a determined little competitor. Addilyn, 9, loves it, too, but is still a bit drag shy after a mishap that sent her into the wall. She got a little bruised up but nothing serious. For the moment Addilyn is not ready to go back.

Yet.

"They are literally tied to the seat belt, completely tied in," Josh interjects. "They can hardly move at all. It's very safe."

The safety gear keeps parents' nerves at a minimum.

"The first time she did it I was kind of nervous, but after that I wanted to do it myself," her father adds. "She has so much safety gear on, she's not going anywhere."

Chloe is eager to add her commentary, so she's given the floor.

"It like pushes you back to the seat because of how fast you're going," Chloe says in a rush. "The fastest I've gotten up to is 76 mph and 1/8 of mile."

Josh adds, "Only thing she stresses about is red lighting."

Brittany and Josh support their daughters' aspirations, pointing out they're good, regular little girls. Chloe is a fifth grader and Addilyn a year behind. They love being outside riding bikes and dirt bikes. Addilyn loves doing hair and makeup, and Chloe loves drawing and making charm bracelets. Prior to racing, Chloe did six years of dance and soccer. Besides racing her dragster, Chloe also





plays softball for Legacy Fast Pitch in Lake City, the recreation department in Hamilton, and travel ball, which has lately conflicted with racing.

"We're shooting to get back to racing within a couple of weeks," Brittany says, adding that the racing community is another great perk. "We really didn't know anything about the racing community until the Highhouses, Ricky Cook, and Tim Goolsby helped us along the way. They all have kids in it too."

Chloe has race friends all over, including Gainesville, Keystone Heights and Jacksonville.

The first race year they did about two a month.

"We hit whatever we could," Brittany says. "She's really great with sports conduct. That helps her blend in and communicate with others and have more compassion towards other people. Having her family, plus a race family, is so healthy for her."

Her very "hands-on" family keeps things in perspective. Their grandparents attend as often as possible, too.

"Her friends from school go to races and spend the weekends with us at racetrack," Brittany adds. "They love going into the pits to help her get her car ready."

With limitless possibilities sprawling out before them, they have plenty of time to try everything – and plenty of time to spare.



## SUGAR, SPICE, and Emma loves dirt bikes

Story by Robin Postell

Photograph Courtesy of Megan Greene

Emma Greene, 11, might seem like a regular fifth grader at Madison Creative Arts Academy. Bubbly, chatty, cute, she's got the pure light of childhood beaming out of her.

Don't be fooled. Emma Greene's got game – currently racing on dirt-bottomed Flat Track ovals of varying lengths. The shorter the track, the riskier it gets. On the straightaways, racers reach 35 to 40 mph, bringing those white-knuckle turns at the corners quicker than anticipated. The racers often lean over so far, they're nearly parallel to the track. Dusty and trembling,

competition gets serious while trying to navigate the chaotic corners. Strength and agility are as important as helmets.

Emma's mom, Megan, who is a registered nurse at Emma's school, admits she and husband Tanner don't always go watch her race.

"The races are kind of their thing," Megan says, referring to her father Audy Payne and Emma.

The pair are diehard road dogs chasing speed, glory and victory.

"That's their time, which I love because knowing she's with my daddy puts me at ease. Being a nurse makes it even worse



for me to watch because I've seen, know, what can happen if something goes wrong. Plus, she's got all these racing friends she's made from different places who only get to see each other at the events. She'd rather





me not be there so she can hang out with them."

Racing circuits and the hosting tracks are fertile dirt for growing unique communities. All kindred spirits, Emma refers to that growing gang of hers as a second family.

A childhood Go-Kart ride that didn't go well scared Megan straight out of any racing aspirations of her own, but Emma's arrival finally gave Papa a worthy playmate to show the magic of dirt bikes and dirt ovals.

Finally, he could impart his wisdom from racing Motocross, Flat Track and dragsters in his own youth. Having immigrated from England, his family had settled in Orlando. Twenty-five years ago, he moved to Madison. When Emma entered his world, he had a protégé.

The race genes skipped a generation, but the wait was worth it for Audy. When she was four, he plopped her down on an electric bike to see what happened. Over the following year, he watched how she handled it. By the time she turned five, he was satisfied she had the chops for a legit set of wheels, presenting a new, gas-fueled motorcycle.

Emma hasn't stopped riding motorcycles since.

Papa taught her the ropes, teaching



her how to work on her own bikes. Having a cool Papa has its perks. She had a hero, and he had a mini-me. Three years ago, he decided to build a flat track oval on his property, nice and short to be even more challenging than Ocala's slightly longer oval at the Marion County Speedway.

With lots of hands-on experience and the best teacher in Papa, Emma excelled enough she was ready to race. With two seasons behind her now, Emma has that look in her eye that says she's in it to win it.

"I've got seven plaques," she says.

"Papa is making some wood for me to put them on."

Megan loves the bond Emma has with her Papa but isn't convinced – yet – that Emma will stick with it because she also plays softball, passionately.

But right this minute, in the throes of racing season, Emma says, "I don't know if I'm going to play softball next season," with the dismissive fickleness of kids who can change their minds and ride life's clock with impunity.

"Let's put it this way," Megan says. "...I just don't know if she'll still be out there in her 50s."

While Megan sees Emma's enthusiasm, she reminds her to not take it so seriously that she forgets to have fun.

"As soon as it's not fun anymore," Megan shrugs, "then it's over. I just want her to enjoy it while she's doing it and learn to have integrity whether she wins or loses.

One weekend in January, Papa and Emma loaded up and headed to the Marion County Speedway for a race.

Audy texted: "She got fastest time in two of her classes during practice. She won her first race and got second in the second race. Now they are doing practice before they have the main event in her classes. I'm watching, she's racing."

Emma's first-place plaque would join the growing collection back home.

Audy texted again to say she ended up with a first and a third in the main events for her class.

"I didn't expect to win," she says graciously. "I was racing against other people who were so fast. I think the reason I won was because my Papa told me I could do it."

Papa knows best.



# JADA, ZEN

## and the art of flat track motorcycle racing

Story by Robin Postell

Photograph Courtesy of the Parkers

At only 13, Jada Parker of Monticello, Fla., has already figured out she loves competition. Homeschooled, Jada is an out-of-box thinker with multiple generations of her family all involved in racing. Parents James and Melissa, who own Pro Roofing in Tallahassee, fully support her flat track racing goals.

"Motocross was everything to me, but I had two surgeries – one on my knee and another one on my shoulder that got me thinking," Jada reflects. "While recovering I rethought the motocross thing because it's a lot – and hard on your body. Very few make it to the top in motocross because it's more well-known than flat track. Becoming a motocross pro is hard, but flat track not quite as much. There are just so many people in motocross who want to become a pro so it's a lot harder."

Jada had decisions to make. Missing two entire summers is hard time for a kid.

"My dad and brother J.J. got into the flat track around that time, and I said let me try it and see what it's like," Jada recalls. "I thought it looked stupid and boring because all they do is go in a circle, but once I got out there it felt so good and was so fun. Ever since, it's been my new dream. I hope I can get fast at it and become a pro."

The difference between the two racing styles of motocross and flat track is subtle but significant.

"Flat track focuses mainly on your corner speed, and so does motocross, but it's more on the technique side because you gotta have the skills for that," Jada elaborates. "If you have the technique, then you can be fast in the turns too. In motocross you have all the jumps and the turns, and it comes down also to how fast you are."

Still afire with last weekend's racing

thrill, Jada rides shotgun with daddy James while he checks on roofing jobs.

"I got beat by my rival this past weekend," she concedes, with a tinge of edginess. "I came in second behind him."

A boy, at that, she half-whispers, but switches subjects fast.

"I started riding a bike when I was four," she says excitedly.

"A bicycle?" the interviewer asks.

"No," she answers, "A motorcycle. I learned how to ride a motorcycle before I ever learned how to ride a bike."

Already well-seasoned in the highs and lows of life, competition and physical injuries, she admits she still gets wound up when she races. The mixed emotions from adrenaline can range wildly from happy to sad.

"I get very nervous before the races but that's just a big part of it," she says. "This sport requires getting your mind right. I have to really concentrate at the start under those lights not to stall like I did in my very first race. You've got to hit your clutch and go. In a race like this, getting to the first corner first means you're fast and



practically the winner. The racing means so much to me, and I can be very hard on myself for not being as fast as I would like. I need to tell myself that the kids have been racing at this track for five years, and I've only been at it for nine months. I want to be perfect at it but it's impossible. That's hard to accept."

To increase strength and focus, Jada works out in her bedroom doing a variety of routines online. She has added yoga for the benefits of flexibility and increased concentration. Racers on those dirt ovals must be fit enough to handle those infamous corners. That's where the challenge and reward collide.

Jada likes to head over to her friend Emma Greene's place in Madison where they can practice and hang out at the flat





track built by her Papa, Audy Payne. They get a chance to spend time together besides just the tracks during races.

Upcoming races keep her steadily focused on how she'll perform, but being 13 sometimes is plenty. Surrounded by plaques and trophies in her bedroom, the overflow provides décor for the family's fireplace mantel.

Jada has completed seven races this season as a flat track newcomer. Over the last summer she traveled to South Carolina, Tennessee, Ohio, Louisiana and Alabama for racing.

"I raced in all of them but Ohio, which was a Vintage National," Jada says. "We traveled 13 hours – no sleep, nonstop, for my dad to race."

James has let Jada have the floor up till now.

"It was my first time on a half-mile track that looked like the straightaways go on for days," James says, shaking his head as he reveals he blew the transmission on one bike before mounting another. "Having never run a track like that on gravel, it was a crazy learning experience."

Jada loved watching her dad race.

"Even if you don't ride you can learn something about how people work the bike and how they go into the turn versus how you go into a turn," Jada says of watching daddy. "I learned how he goes into the corner under power is different than how I do it. I did learn for now how to beat him."

"For now," James pipes in. ♦



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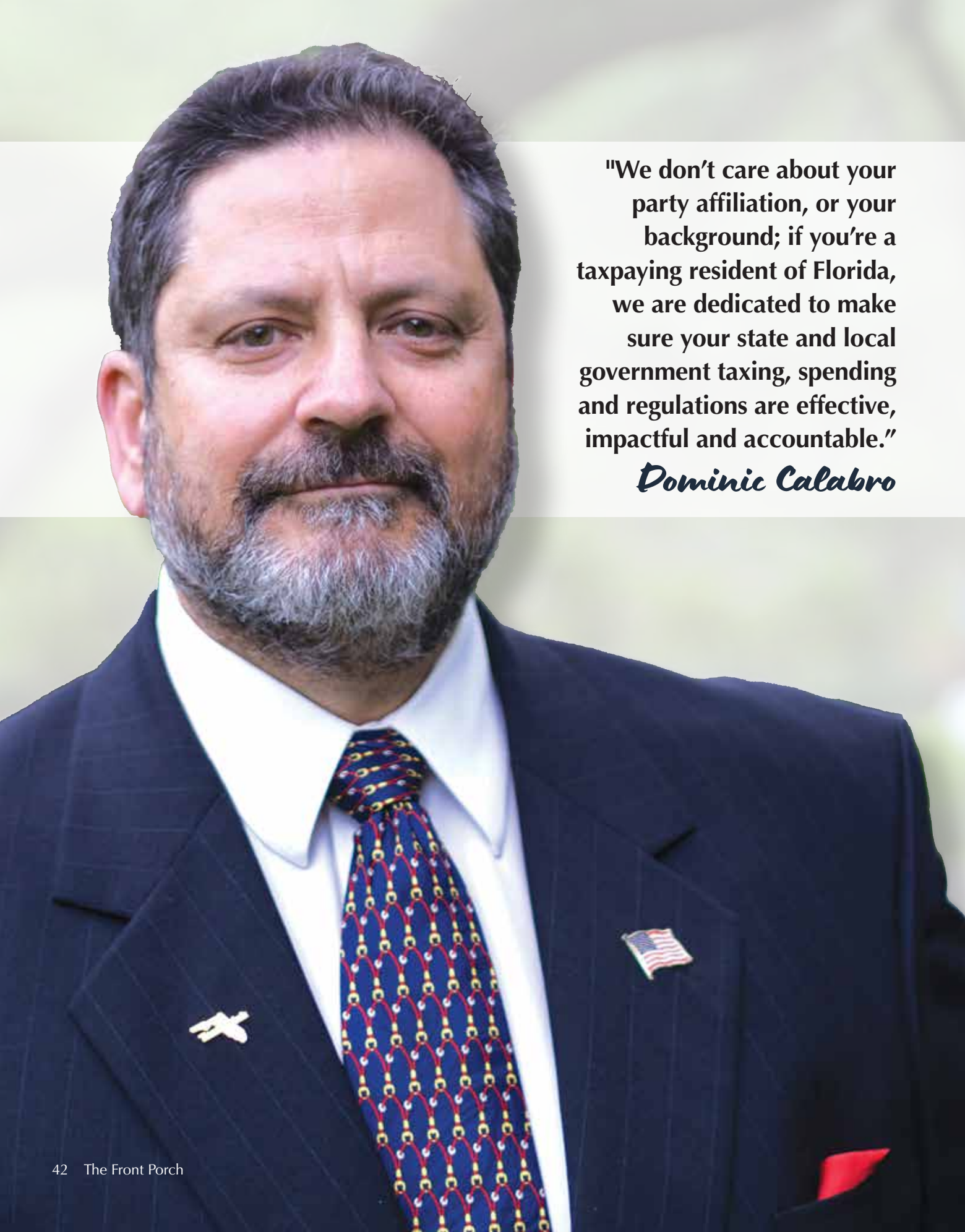
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***Dominic Calabro***



# FLORIDA'S TAX WATCHDOG

# Dominic Calabro

Story by Robin Postell

Photographs Courtesy of Dominic Calabro

Dominic Calabro, the CEO of Florida TaxWatch (FTW), has been at the forefront of promoting fiscal responsibility and transparency in the state of Florida for more than four decades. As a seasoned leader and advocate for efficient and transparent governance, Calabro has dedicated his career to analyzing and scrutinizing government spending, advocating for tax reform and ensuring that taxpayers' hard-earned money is utilized wisely.

Born and raised in New York, Calabro's path to becoming a prominent figure in Florida's fiscal landscape began with earning a bachelor's degree in political science from the State University of New York, followed by a master's in public administration from Florida State University. This strong foundation aided his understanding of how government structures and policies worked, preparing him for future challenges.

The young trailblazer was hired by the Florida State Senate Ways and Means Committee as a young staffer before being hired in March 1980 by what was then the Citizens Council for Budget Research, Inc. Founded the year before by esteemed business and civic leaders, it was brimming over with vitality as a newcomer on the watchdog scene. Calabro saw its potential.

"I waited several months so I could finish out the Senate cycle," Calabro reflects on those early days. "In June 1980 I became a research analyst, and by September I was promoted to senior research analyst. Three years later, at only 25, I was the acting executive director and changed the name to Florida TaxWatch. I was fortunate to work with wonderful leaders that demonstrated the same drive I did."



The original founders were big biz luminaries like Winn Dixie CEO K.E. Davis, his nephew Wayne Davis, Publix founder Mark Hollis (who became president of Publix, and two highly respected senators – Democratic Senate President Phillip Lewis, and Republican leader Senator Ken Plante.

"This was in the day when the Democrats and Republicans could be friends," Calabro points out. "They actually roomed together. The point I'm making, and I didn't want to overstate it, it speaks to the long-standing nonpartisan mission of Florida TaxWatch. Nonpartisanship is in our DNA. It has served not only us, but all the taxpayers of Florida. We don't care about your party affiliation, or your background; if you're a taxpaying resident of Florida, we are dedicated to make sure your state and

local government taxing, spending and regulations are effective, impactful and accountable."

Today's political field might find it difficult to fathom how a bipartisan group could play so well together, but Calabro relies on that fundamental experience to guide his actions.

"We've got great founders; we are truly on the shoulders of giants," Calabro credits. "Civic and business leaders – people who cared about Florida becoming a great state to live, work, raise a family and grow a business. We've always been public-spirited. Live, love and enjoy. I think the founders thought the state was at a stage of adolescence – not the megatrend state that it has become today. It had a lot of growing to do. We had just gone through years or decades of our legislature being malapportioned."



Calabro adds that up until the 1950s and 1960s, North Florida had more senate and house members than most of South Florida. Many things had to happen to force the state's governance reform before FloridaTaxWatch could have a real impact. In 1968 Florida's state constitution was amended to modernize its government.

Remaining firmly grounded in fundamental governing policies laid out in the constitution, Calabro and FTW provide empirical evidence, not just opinions and polls.

"We operate according to what the best polices for the taxpayers of Florida are," Calabro says. "It's really allowed us to look at the founding principles of the state and the nation, along with empirical evidence, and be the independent eyes and ears of the taxpayers."

Calabro understood from his experience that an independent watchdog

was needed, to serve as a check on wasteful government spending and advocate for policies that would benefit taxpayers.

"There are about 24 states that have similar organizations," Calabro states. "Florida TaxWatch is one of the most impactful, effective and influential statewide taxpayer resources in the country and has been for decades. It came on the scene and was able to be watchdog, bird dog and guide dog. What's unique about Florida TaxWatch is it's able to look at the long-term, sound fiscal interest of taxpayers."

Calabro underscores the fact that it isn't only a public interest group; IRS code includes it as one of the only research groups of its kind. The watchdog's job requires dedication and endless hours, but FTW has managed to emerge and dominate in a typically underserved

sector.

"I think what's happening now is we made the point that Florida is truly open for business since the pandemic," Calabro emphasizes. "Very large corporations are coming to Florida, and it is growing so fast that it's hard to keep up with the roads, bridges and water systems to protect the paradise we call Florida. While we like growth, you have got to make sure you can handle that growth, so it won't destroy the quality of hospitals, water and long-term care facilities for elderly."

A visionary, Calabro's relentless efforts aided in successfully shaping the discourse surrounding taxation and spending in the state. A vocal advocate for tax reform, Calabro uses the vehicle of FTW to push for policies that provide relief to taxpayers and promote economic growth.

A notable achievement was the



passage of the Tax and Budget Reform Commission in 2008. Calabro's leadership and expertise were instrumental in crafting the proposals that were eventually approved by voters. Additionally, Calabro has been actively involved in the evaluation and analysis of state budgets, providing recommendations to policymakers on areas where spending can be reduced or reallocated.

As a result, Calabro credits FloridaTaxWatch for eliminating numerous taxes.

"Florida Tax Watch has reconstituted the tax law institute for quality health and aging," Calabro adds. "We just released a report on the great shortage of positions of medical personnel, so we've engaged the different leaders in healthcare and health policy to advise us on best practices to get ahead of these challenges."

Florida TaxWatch conducted research in telehealth that got vital legislation passed.

"Florida would have been up the creek without it during the pandemic," Calabro says. "We also helped champion healthcare with advanced nurse practitioners during the pandemic."

Calabro has served on various government committees and task forces, offering his insights to shape policies that prioritize the long-term financial health of the state. As a member of the Florida Press Association, Calabro carries FTW with him wherever goes and knows strategic networking and FTW visibility keep it fresh in the minds of Floridians.

"Over the years, whether FTW was dealing with water policies, transportation, healthcare policies, social services caring for youth and families, we spent the money on policies and activities that had the best likelihood of having great outcomes," Calabro says. "FTW is also very concerned about property insurance, property taxes, improvements to the healthcare system, citizen retention and workforce housing."

As Florida continues facing economic challenges, Calabro remains focused on addressing issues that impact the state's residents. His work is far from over.

His legacy is one of unwavering commitment to Florida taxpayers. By fostering a culture of accountability to bring people together in pursuit of common goals, he is positioned as a

broadly respected figure who has nimbly straddled party lines to get things done through ethical, credible guardianship of Florida's growing number of citizens.

"Our population is adding the equivalent of one to two cities a year," Calabro states. "It's amazing. A net gain of 1,200 new residents a day, Florida is the third most popular state, and the second fastest growing as far as population. It is very hard to keep up with."

Florida TaxWatch is supported by voluntary, tax-deductible donations and private grants and does not accept any government funding. *FloridaTaxWatch.org* is the digital headquarters, which provides a wealth of free research and sources for those interested in staying informed and educated about the statewide impact of economic, tax and spend policies and practices that impact citizens and business.

"Our excellent reputation is due to our incredible research team, tax experts, economists and budget analysts," Calabro declares proudly. "We have a team of very dedicated and selfless professionals and citizens (volunteers) who see FTW as a critical and valuable institute." ♦



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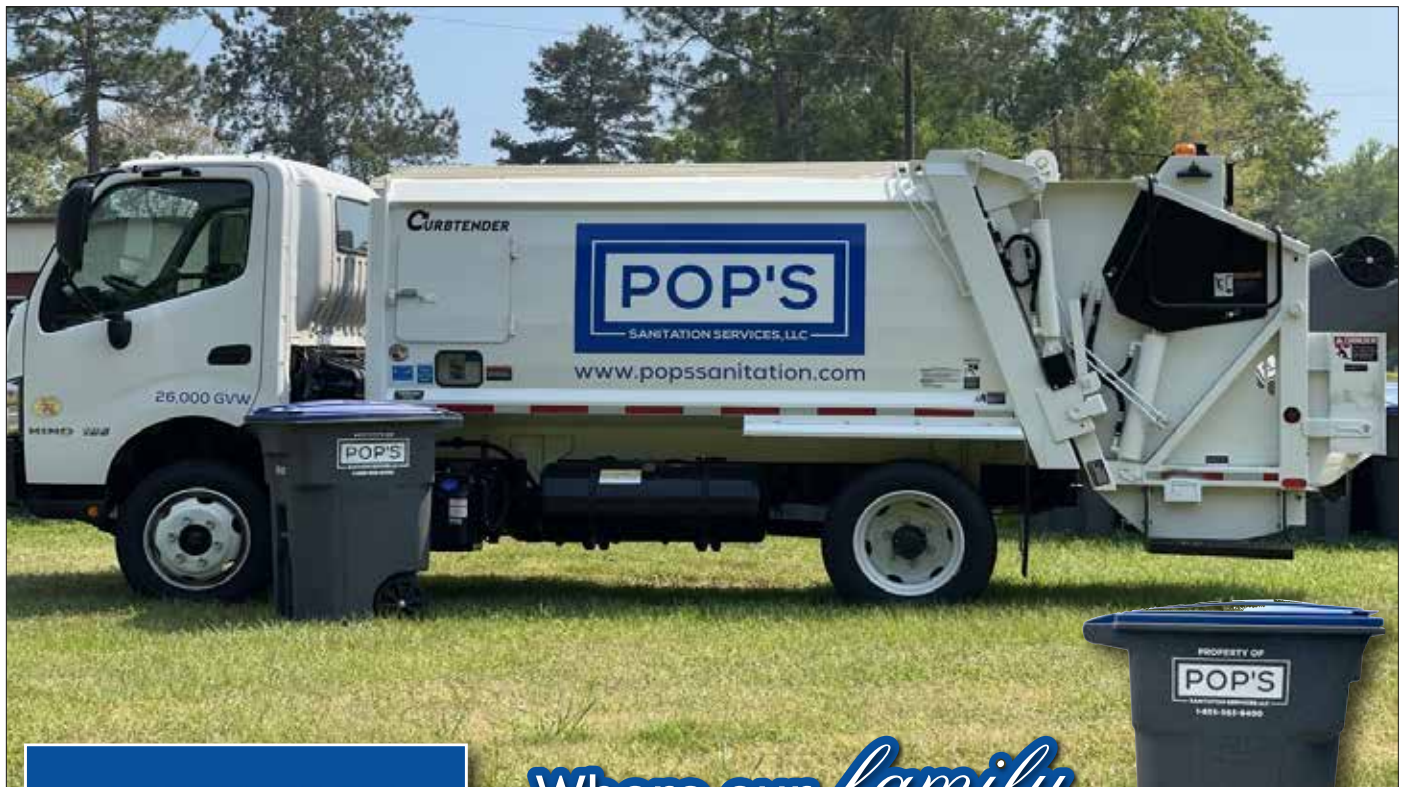
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# Full of God's Favor

The year was  
1991. Glen  
Green had  
just graduated  
from Suwanee  
High School  
and thought  
he had a plan.



# Florida Melody Boy Glen Green has been Delivered

Story by Robin Postell

*Photographs Courtesy of Glen Green*

Enrolling in Lake City Community College, Green loved – and played – baseball. He considered himself pretty good, and he could get a degree while he was at it. The thrill expected from being on his own, doing what he thought he was supposed to do, didn't last. The teenager wanted something else, but what, he couldn't say.

"The day I quit baseball I was driving home, and something told me (which I know now was the Holy Spirit talking to me) 'go into this bookstore,'" Glen explains, adding, "I listened to that call."

He pulled over and entered the Christian bookstore. Gladys Cason was there, a music leader at Mount Olive Baptist Church in Wellborn where Glen had been attending services for several months.

"She asked if I had ever thought about singing in a group," he continues. "She told me a group needed a baritone – and I'm a baritone. She got my number and that was it!"

Suddenly Glen went from a college drop-out to a full-blown member of the Florida Melody Boys. God had placed him in all the right positions, he knew. The rest of the 1990s was a whirlwind of new and exciting experiences. Being young enough to love living on the road, he spent almost the entire next decade performing nationwide with the group, gaining popularity with every new booking.

Inspired by the iconic gospel group the Dixie Melody Boys from North Carolina, the Florida Melody Boys were inspired, green and full of young electric energy. Being good Christians kept them out of the dark alleys of mainstream artistic success, but they were – still – all young men looking for adventure and good times during this Golden Era on the road.

Comprised of four to five members, the group fluctuated between a full band, keyboardist, and just singers. Those were good times, Glen says.

He means it.

Glen, like all good North Florida boys, had attended church as long as he could remember. Still teething in the

pews of Rosemary Baptist Church in Live Oak, he had prayed and sung his heart out amongst the scant congregation. Those southern hymnals became as much a part of his formative years as any schoolbook. The gospel music genre is an unsung hero in the country's rich musical history, providing the earliest experiences for individuals destined to be famous rock stars, fey blues singers, sad country crooners and gospel-singing honey baritones like Glen Green.

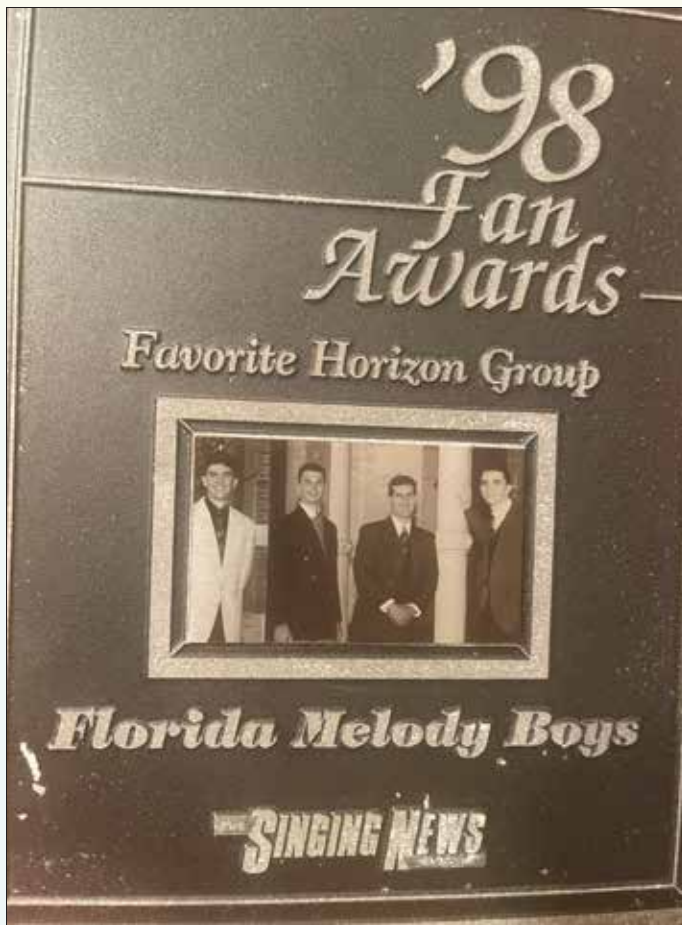
"My mama played piano, and my daddy was a deacon," he says with a shrug. "That was it. If 15 people showed up on a Sunday night, that was a crowd."

Humble beginnings are underrated for their ability to create adventurous spirits with fire burning bright and hard inside them. They know how to appreciate blessings, to stay gracious in the face of opportunity, and leave everything and everyone a little better than when they found them. Glen and his wife of 23 years, Traci, practice what they preach.

"If you keep answering the calls," Glen says, "He will always provide what you need."







Traci agrees emphatically. They are referring to the call of the Holy Spirit, of course, which they have plenty of experience listening to – and always, always answering yes.

This mantra is infectious. They emanate a working faith – the stuff that comes from weathering storms, not just gliding up the easy streets. They make it look easy, as if their faith has paved their lives with milk and honey. But they don't try to cover up the lows, admitting they've been tested.

Back during the 1990s, the Florida Melody Boys stayed booked, traveling near and far, producing eight albums along the way. Widespread recognition led to the top brass of *Singing News* taking note. Considered the gold standard for the gospel-Christian musical genre, *Singing News* hosts an annual awards ceremony. Glen and the Boys headed to Louisville, Ky., to attend the National Quartet Convention, where they were presented with the Horizon Group of the Year award – a category for up-and-coming talent to keep an eye on.

"I had a lot of fun. I was young and single, and there was only one married guy in the group," Glen reflects. "Traveling the country with your best friends and seeing different places was amazing. It was something I will always cherish."

Glen was due for another call.

"I was still with the Boys and went to a convention in Wimauma, Fla.," he says with a smile. "They have a sing down there every year. I was running the sound for a talent contest and there was a young lady there whose mama made her enter the talent contest, which she didn't want to do. When I saw her, I guess I just knew...I talked to her, and she told her mom that same night she was going to marry me. The rest is history."

Traci giggles. That was her he was talking about, after all.

Traci Hines from Arcadia, Fla., was no musical slouch.

According to Glen, she has a much more impressive musical pedigree than he, receiving a scholarship to Livingston University in Alabama. Her entire family are musically inclined, playing multiple instruments and active in their church also.

"The long-distance romance was hard, but we made it work," Traci reflects. "We talked on the phone and tried to see each other once a month or more if possible."

They were committed. Traci decided to transfer to the University of Florida to finish her degree in Speech Therapy – closing the distance considerably. Not quite enough, though.

In 2001, Glen finally got a yes from Traci and they were married – the same year he decided to leave the Florida Melody Boys. The time had come to begin a new era, and a family.

"Leaving the Florida Melody Boys and getting married that same year was an exciting time," Glen says. "My wife and I started singing in a Lake City gospel group, Delivered."

Another golden era dawned for Glen, and now Traci.

"It was one of those moments when you just know," Traci says of her love for Glen. "I grew up singing in my home church in Arcadia. My mom played piano, and my whole family could sing, but I never envisioned myself traveling as a singer. I have always known I've had a call on my life with Christian music, but being able to travel and do that for a while with Glen was a lot of fun. I would never take that for granted."

Traci and Glen set up house in Live Oak. Traci had begun teaching school after leaving Gainesville with her degree in hand. There were some kids at Columbia High School who were singing in this group, Delivered.

"They got to talking about singing one day and knew I had been in the Florida Melody Boys," Glen says. "They thought I could help advise them, give them some pointers, and we did that for several weeks. Then they sat us down one night and asked if we would like to join them."

Another one of those calls the Greens live to say yes to, they enjoyed the chance to sing and perform on the road together. They were also trying to start a family at the time, but it didn't keep them from loading up and singing wherever they were called. During this same period, they lost their first son after only 17 days. There were miscarriages. Devastating hardships befell them and their faith, they admit, was tested. They felt all too human and raw.

"After we lost our son and went through that, it would've been easy to turn your back on God," Traci reflects. "But we didn't. He brought us through it, and we were determined to remain faithful. He has been faithful to us. We see it in our jobs, in school, our family – you just gotta keep believing. It's what we've built our marriage on, our family, our lives."

Another call came when Traci gave birth to a perfect healthy boy.

"After me and her sang with Delivered for about 10 years we had our son, Braxtyn," Glen says. "We sang a little after his birth, but it was time for something else."

Their boy might as well have been an angel. They even took him back out of the road with them when he was just four weeks old.

"But it just got too much," Traci says. "The other Delivered members left. It was just Glen and me and it got hard to find good fill-ins. We decided to stop performing."

The traveling gospel journey had finally come to a stop. They dropped their roots and switched from roaming performers to a solid Suwanee County family, raising and educating the next generation. Like always, they answered yes to the call to go back home and stay.

Today Traci is an Assistant Principal at Suwanee Middle School after teaching for 21 years. Glen has been teaching at his alma mater, Suwanee High, since 2007 – 14 years of math, and



the last seven as the Driver's Education instructor.

"We know that God's full favor will always be with us as long as we answer yes," Traci reiterates. "We have seen our strength and goodness in God so many times in our lives – with our child – with everything – it's just amazing. We wake up every day and thank him for everything and we go out – expecting – every day. We've taught our son to do the same."

Braxtyn, 18, graduated in 2023 from Suwanee High School and is already exhibiting the full favor of God. At only eight, Braxtyn heard Glen lamenting that their worship team at Melody Church had lost their drummer. "Dad," he told Glen, "I can do it."

And he did. A drumming instructor had told Glen he couldn't teach Braxtyn anything and to let him go ahead and start playing. The natural talent Braxtyn had was clear. Soon he was teaching himself how to play other instruments, including lead and acoustic guitar. Only a couple of months ago Glen walked in Melody Church and heard someone singing and playing keyboard.

"It was Braxtyn!" Glen exclaims. "I had no idea he could sing or play keyboard. We got everything we needed in this one kid. An artist, an athlete, Braxtyn can do anything. He literally wins everything he can win. He's a special kid, full of God's favor, that's all it is."

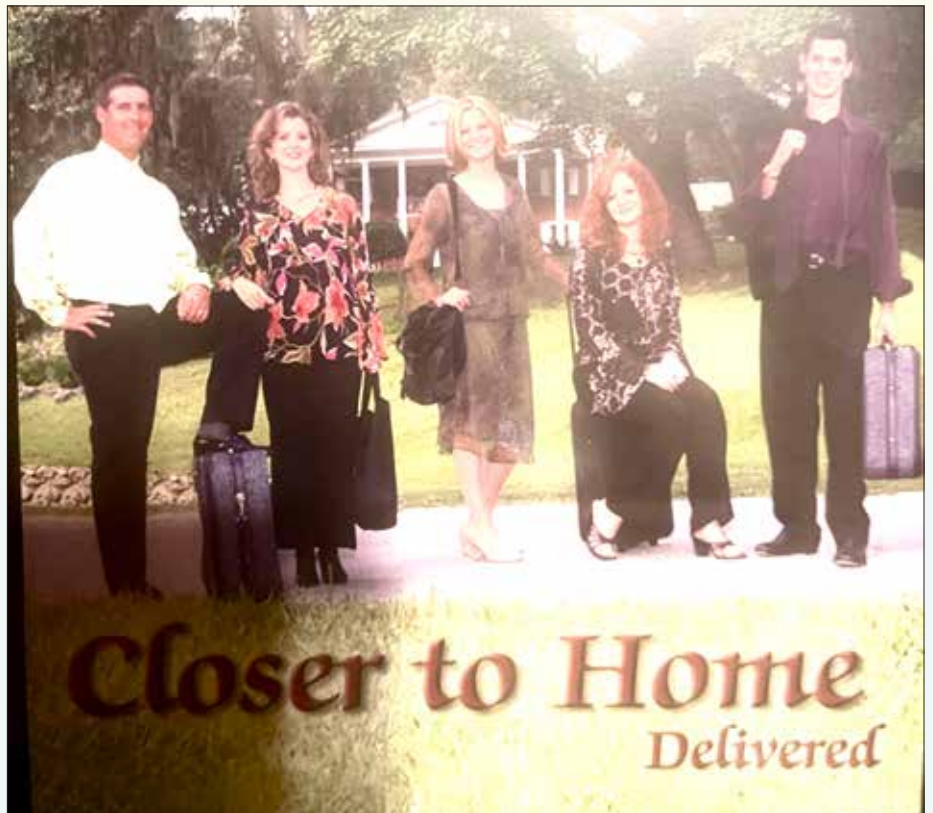
The Greens are now dedicated wholly to church, family, school and now Braxtyn's move to Wesleyan College in North Carolina, where he has a football scholarship. The new freshman will be pursuing degrees in Exercise Science and Sports Psychology, while serving as the football team's kicker – a position he chose because Glen told him it was a high-pressure position.

"Before he left for college, we wanted him to find a church up there that was kind of like ours at Melody Church," Glen says. "I'm just a singer and run the AV department, streaming our services live every week – and my wife's the worship leader. It has been such a blessing being able to do that with both my wife and son. He'd been our drummer and guitarist and was so active."

Like magic, they found a church that fit just right. Braxtyn auditioned, and is now playing drums, lead and acoustic guitar just like back home at his new home. Mama and daddy beam. Sometimes everything just falls into place, you see.

The calls are still a-ringing. Always answer.

And say yes. Always, always say yes. ♦





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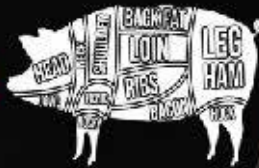
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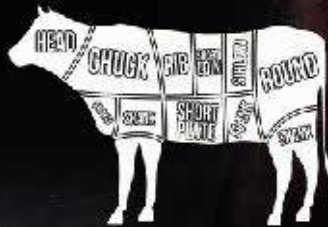
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# HISTORY THROUGH

**By Dr. James Dunbar**  
*Aucilla Research Institute*

Looking at a modern map of Jefferson, Madison and Taylor counties in the Big Bend of Florida, the major river features shown include the Aucilla River, its primary tributary the Wacissa River, and the Econfina River. These rivers, the land they traverse and the people who have relied on them have a history that can be understood through many sources, and maps that date back through hundreds of years provide an especially fascinating view. How did early

observers of this area map these rivers, and what do these maps tell us?

## **Aucilla and Wacissa Rivers**

A French map by Claude Bermou published in 1681 depicts an unnamed river between the St. Marks and Suwannee rivers that may represent the Aucilla River. Similarly, another French map by Guillaume De L'Isle published in 1703 shows an unnamed river between them.

The Aucilla/Wacissa was named Rio de Basisa in 1707 on a Spanish map and was shown as located between the Rio de

Sn. Marcos (St. Marks River) and the Rio de Biches (the River of Bugs, probably the Econfina or Fenholloway rivers). Curiously, a French map dated 1717 named it the Vasisa, which was repeated in English on maps of 1733 and 1748. The name Vasisa appears to be derived from the 1681 name Basisa, and either name appears to be a variant of today's Wacissa. The Spanish may have referred to the Aucilla as the Basisa because a group of indigenous Tocobago Indians established a settlement on the Wacissa at the behest of the Spanish. The name Aucilla had yet to appear, likely





Anonymous Spanish cartographer map of 1707 providing the Description of the port of Apalache and naming the Rio de Basisa (Wacissa) located between the Rio de St. Marcos (St. Marks River) and the Rio de Biche (the River of Baga, probably the Econfin or Fenholloway rivers).

because the Wacissa River was the most navigable of the two.

As most readers know, the Aucilla has many land-locked channels between Goose Pasture Road and Nutall Rise, making navigation impossible. Thus, the Basisa was the first name used for the Aucilla basin. Its eastern tributary, the Wacissa, was recognized due to its navigability and the importance the Tocobago village brought to it.

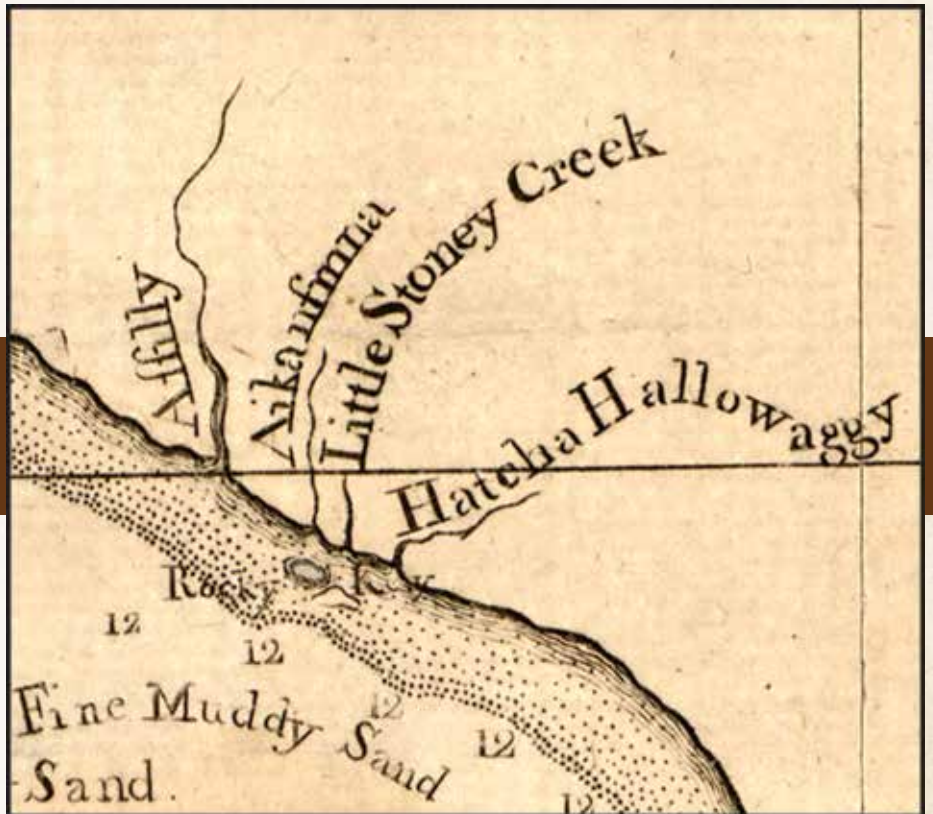
A 1707 Spanish map depicts two Tocopaca (also Tocobago) villages: the first was in the Panacea area of Wakulla County, and the second was on the Rio de Basisa (Wacissa River) of Jefferson County. Spanish documents indicate the village on

# H MAPS

the Wacissa had a smaller population than other Native American settlements in the Big Bend area of Florida. The 1717 French map depicts the Tocobago settlement on the Wacissa River, naming it les Tocopata errans (the wandering Tocobago). The French word *errans* (wander) may relate to the village's maritime population and their employment to move products to and from the mission chain. The Tocobago were known for their navigation skills and for carrying cargo along the Apalachee Bay shoreline via watercraft to landings on the Suwannee and Santa Fe Rivers. They



Section of the 1703 Guillaume De L'Isle Map of Mexico and Florida of the English Lands and the Antilles Islands, showing an unnamed river between the R. d'Apalache (St. Marks) and the R. S. Pierre (Steinhatchee) Rivers that likely represented the Aucilla.

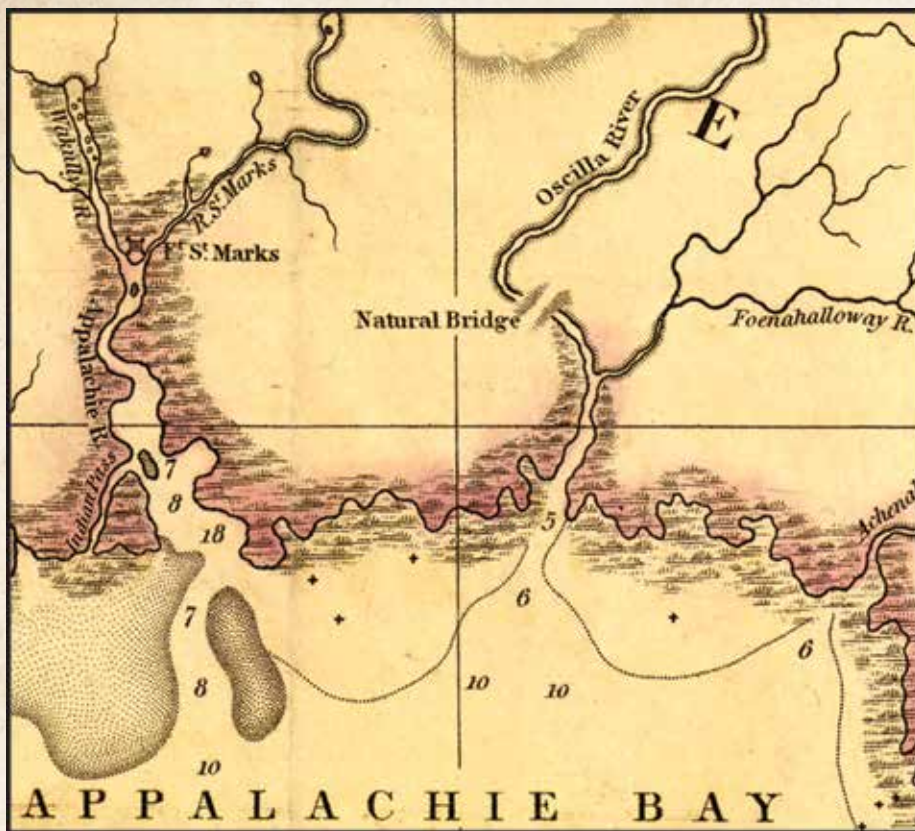


Section of the Bernard map of 1774 showing the rivers inland from Rocky Key (Rock Island) in their correct relation to one another. From east to west the Hatcha Hollowaggy (Fenholloway), Little Stoney Creek a drainage without a name today although it is likely one to the tidal creek with a freshwater source, Aikanfmna (Econfina), and the Assilly (Aucilla).

brought food crops and other cargo from the Spanish missions to supply the fortified

town at St. Augustine on the Atlantic coast. Interestingly, a Dutch map of 1630 in Latin





Section of the John Lee Williams map of 1827 that incorrectly shows the *Foenahalloway* (Fenholloway) as a tributary of the *Oscilla* River.



places the "Tacobago" near the mouth of the R. del Spiritu Santo (River of the Holy Spirt), today's Suwannee River – more about the Tacobago in another article.

Bernard Romans' map of 1774 first named the Aucilla River the Assilly River. Other English maps published in 1775, 1776, 1777, 1781, 1794 and 1806 called it the Ashley River, as did a Spanish map of 1799. French maps of 1777 and 1780 continued to name the river Vasisa or Vaziza. By 1808, a British navigation chart called it Assilla Creek, as did a Spanish map of 1810. Some of the first maps

published by the fledgling United States named the river the Ausilly in 1822, 1823, 1825, 1826 (War Department, Office of the Chief of Engineers 1826), 1827 and 1829. However, in 1827, John Lee Williams altered the spelling, naming it the Oscilla River, preferring the "O" over the "A" previous maps had once used. The original 1829 plate map, updated in 1848 after the Second Seminole War, also named it the Ocilla River. By 1834, the "O" was in everyday use. The Oscilla spelling was recognized by the U.S. Coast Survey on their hydrographic charts of 1855. In the American Civil War, a Confederate map drafted by Major George Washington Scott used the modern spelling, Aucilla River.

### Econfina River

According to Clarence Simpson, "The name Econfina is a Creek [Seminole/Creek] designation for natural bridge from the Creek *Ekana* = earth, and *Feno* = bridge or footlog, and it is translated as Natural Bridge on the Bruff-McClellan map of 1846." The Bruff-McClellan map labels it the "Econfinee or Natural Bridge" River.

A 1733 English map named the Econfina the Vilches River, as do English and French maps of 1748 and 1749. The river is located between the Aucilla and Fenholloway rivers. In 1760, Thomas Je rerys named the river Vilche but incorrectly reversed the names Vasisa (Wacissa) and Vilches (Econfina) on his map in 1768.

The 1774 map by Bernard Romans shows the location of Rocky Key (today's Rock Island) and the river mouths of the Aucilla, Econfina, Little Stoney Creek and Fenholloway in correct relation to one another (west to east). He named the Econfina the Aikanfmna. Subsequently, two French maps called it the Vilches in 1778 and Vilchez in 1780. A map published in the United States in 1806 by John Cary does not name the river but shows it east of the Aucilla. An 1808 English map shows the middle of three drainages as Little Stoney Creek. An 1810 Spanish navigation chart also shows three rivers/creeks east of the Aucilla River and inshore from the Isla de Piedra (Island of Stone, today's Rock Island). An English map of 1808 and a Spanish map of 1810 are similar to Bernard Romans' 1774 map but do not name the waterways.

In 1818, Captain Hugh Young, who was among General Andrew Jackson's troops in the First Seminole War, described the natural bridge across the Econfina as a "stratum of limestone rock twenty-five feet wide, entirely across the channel and [except for high water, affords] . . . a dry and secure bridge." He referred to the Econfina as Natural Bridge Creek.

In 1827, several maps incorrectly showed river locations for about twenty years. John Lee Williams ignored what prior English, French and Spanish cartographers had already determined. The Williams map of 1827 initiated the problem by depicting the Fenholloway River as a tributary of the Aucilla. That mistake was repeated on other maps until the Zachary Taylor military map 1839 corrected it. Captain John MacKay and Lieutenant J. E. Blake of the U.S. Army Topographical Engineers developed the Zac Taylor map. They used a variant of the Public Land Survey System (PLSS), first developed in America by the British Army in the 18th Century and adopted



by the U.S. with the support of Thomas Jefferson. The 1839 Zac Taylor map once again correctly placed the Econfinee (Econfina), Aucilla (Ocilla), and Fenahallowa (Fenholloway) rivers in their correct positions as unified rivers flowing into Apalachee Bay as separate systems. Interestingly, the 1839 map (see the National Archives record group 77 version RG77\_CWMF\_US\_112\_01) shows details such as the locations of hammocks, swamp land and pine barrens from the Apalachicola to Suwannee rivers. By 1846, another military map by the topographical engineers no longer showed those details, perhaps because the Second Seminole War had ended and the Seminoles' influence over the land had shifted well to the south.

In 1848, the original plat map of Township 5 South and Range 7 East showed the Econfeenee River discharging into the Gulf of Mexico in sections 15 and 16. Variations for the spelling of this river continued until the printing of the 1914 Florida Growers Atlas of Florida, Taylor County, Sheet 46; it used today's modern spelling, Econfina. ♦

*James S. Dunbar, Ph.D., is chair of the board at the Aucilla Research Institute. He is a field supervisor and senior archaeologist with the Division of Historical Resources Bureau of Archaeological Research as well as an archaeological consultant for Florida State University, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Service and the Florida Dept. of Law Enforcement.*



Section to the MacKay/Blake map of 1839, also known as the Zachary Taylor military map that correcting the John Lee Williams mapping mistake.

## Big Bend Farm Bureau

(386) 310-2121

### Lance Braswell

Agency Manager

#### Jefferson County

(850) 997-2213

#### Josh Leibbrand

Agent

#### Madison County

(850) 973-4071

#### Abby Godwin

Agent

#### Lafayette County

(386) 294-1399

#### Devin Hingson

Agent

#### Taylor County

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# A Life Among the

## JULIE CONLEY

**Story by Laura Young**

Whether she's holding a shovel to break ground on a new hospice office, addressing a crowd gathered for lighting of the downtown Christmas tree, writing a grant for a community bike trail or donning a neon vest for a clean-up day – one way or another Julie Conley has her neighbors' wellbeing at heart. As a civic leader for decades, Conley's neighborliness and goodwill have extended well beyond her own street, with a helpful and cooperative spirit that has touched many a resident of Monticello and Jefferson County.

Born into a local multi-generational family, Conley has lived all but about eight years of her life in Monticello. At the end of elementary school, Conley's immediate family moved to Jasper, and during junior high she began attending Georgia Christian School in nearby Valdosta. After graduating, she headed off to Florida State University and not long after circled back to Monticello when she married her first husband. Together they have two grown children, Hannah and Gabriel, five

grandchildren and one on the way.

Fond memories linger from being surrounded by extended family and inspired by the elders she encountered growing up.

"My mind keeps going back to my childhood and the strong women in my world to whom service was always important," says Conley. "My great grandmother, grandmother and mother were strong women and servants in their own right. My grandmother was a business owner here in Monticello before 'women-owned' businesses were commonplace. She employed blacks and whites and, as far as my young eyes could see, treated them equally well. My mom, who is still alive, was the City Clerk in Jasper for at least 25 years, and my eight years as City Clerk here were during her tenure. These women instilled in me the importance of putting others' needs before my own, and I guess that's what drew me to a career of public service. It was an opportunity to make others' lives better. I hope I have done that."

Indeed, Conley is now primarily known for her time as a highly effective

public servant. She says that she was always interested in politics, and the road to becoming the first woman Mayor of Monticello began with her first job in the law office of Brian Hayes, who was the City's attorney at the time. She was Hayes' office manager for 18 years until he encouraged her to run for Monticello City Clerk/Treasurer. As a teenager, Conley had dreamed of working on someone's political campaign, and as it turned out the first opportunity was her own. She won the election and served as City Clerk from 1996 to 2004, when she was elected to her first term as a City Council member. She served on the Council 2004-2008 and again 2014-2024, taking several turns as Mayor of Monticello. Along the way, she also worked as the business manager for Jefferson Communities Water Systems, a not-for-profit that supplies water to an area of the county including Lamont and Lloyd.

Having just retired from public life in January of 2024, Conley looks back on her work history with a warranted sense of accomplishment. Early on, she recognized the difference between politicians who



# e Doers

wanted to *be* something versus those who wanted to *do* something. She determined to be among the doers.

During her tenure as City Clerk, she made a concerted effort to improve interactions between city and county elected officials, and she oversaw extensive renovations to City Hall, which occupies the old Glenn Miller place, built around 1910. Notable projects the City Council undertook while she was a member included the remodeling of downtown's Cherry Street area and upgrading the wastewater system to reuse reclaimed effluent at a local nursery operation. Of most significance to Conley was writing the grant that secured funds to convert a section of old railroad tracks through Monticello into a landscaped recreation area, the Ike Anderson Bike Trail.

Conley's professional life tracked along with that of her longtime friend, Emily Anderson, who also served on the City Council and as the City Clerk during an overlapping time period.

"Julie has always been a visionary," says Anderson, "but it's not just that she's a





visionary. She was open-minded enough to explore options, and she understood how to work through an organization to make a change. Julie understood politics and how to move a project forward. She saw that the look of a place is a big part of economic development, and she would advocate for the aesthetic of the community. She never lost sight of working for the community as a whole. That's what I've appreciated about her."

While fulfilling her duties on the Monticello City Council, Conley also served on the board of Jefferson County's Economic Development Council (EDC) and then became its executive director. She recalls that the EDC worked to keep the county's name out there for consideration by site selection entities, but it was a tumultuous time, she says. Opportunities for local economic development often conflicted with

anti-growth and anti-change sentiments in the community. As a result, some huge prospects turned sour, like the Project Gamechanger facility for travel teams, which ultimately was nixed in a referendum. Still, she gave it her all, as with everything she has undertaken.

Former EDC Chairman Ron Cichon has reflected, "Working with Julie on the Economic Development Council for ten years, I saw her commitment to public service first hand. She dedicated her considerable talents to promoting our community at every opportunity."

Conley's leadership also has extended to serving on boards for numerous other organizations over the years, including the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce, Tallahassee-Leon County Economic Development Council, Jefferson County Democratic Executive Committee, Jefferson County Legislative Committee,

Apalachee Regional Planning Council, Capital City Bank and the North Florida Economic Development Partnership. In recognition of Conley' advocacy for the community, she was twice the recipient of the "Elected Official of the Year" award from the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce. In 2012, she was named one of the "25 Women You Need to Know" by the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

Merry Ann Frisby has known Conley since they worked together in the Hayes law office in the 1980s.

"Julie is a compassionate friend," says Frisby, "and a compassionate advocate for our county. She has worked tirelessly as a citizen and as an elected official to better our hometown. She's a cool person, very beautiful person. I'm glad to call her my friend."

Friendship along with faith and an adventurous soul have rounded out





Conley's professional successes with a rich personal life. She is very active in the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, has served several times on its vestry, helps with the food pantry and sings in the choir.

She married Tom Conley in 2000, and on their own time the couple have traveled across the globe. For their honeymoon, Tom surprised Julie with a trip to Peru, where they hiked the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. Their treks in South America also have included visits to Argentina and Chile. In the U.S. they've traveled from West Coast to East Coast and from Florida up to Michigan, one of her most favorite places. On a trip to Nepal in Asia, they hiked to the base camp of Mt. Everest – "the hardest thing I've done in life." The Conleys have been to Europe and all the way down to New Zealand, which Julie says is the most

gorgeous place she's ever seen.

Once while traveling in Costa Rica, they began thinking about buying a place in Panama, where Tom grew up, the son of a negotiator of the Panama Canal Treaty. Four years ago they followed through and now spend part of every year in a second home there.

Naturally, Conley's retirement will include more travel, and her bucket list includes spending time in places like New England and Spain.

"Retirement feels great!" she enthuses.

As organized and detail-oriented as her career has shown her to be, Conley also has a strongly intuitive side. This shows up in the kitchen, where she likes to cook without adhering to recipes, and in the garden of her 124-year-old cottage, where flower beds soften the lines of the picket fence and potted plants lead the

way up the front walk to a wrap-around porch. Folks might begin seeing Conley riding around town on a bicycle that a friend recently handed over to her. She might learn to really play her violin.

"The thing that I like is that I don't have to have a plan," says Conley of what lies ahead. "I can actually buy a one-way ticket somewhere, because I don't have to come back."

But we all know she will be back. Conley's commitment to her community remains strong. Even though she's realized "how quickly you become irrelevant" once you leave public office, her eye for the quality of life in her hometown is still keen. She's already organizing a neighborhood clean-up day, and she's still inclined to reach for the phone when she sees something that needs to be done. Even in retirement, it's clear that Conley will always be one of the doers. ♦



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**On Sunday, Nov. 19, 2023, Paul Kinsley left this world and went to join his Heavenly Father after complications from heart surgery.**  
**He is missed every single day by so many.**



My name is Cheltsie Kinsley Holbrook, Paul's oldest daughter. For those who do not know me, I have a beautiful family: Marcus, my husband of 9 years; Kennedy, our five-year old daughter; and Haven, our 3 month old daughter. I graduated from Aucilla Christian Academy in 2011, North Florida College with my Associate in Arts degree in 2013 and Saint Leo University in 2015 with a major in Business and a minor in Human Resources. For as long as I can remember, my parents have taught me the value of hard work!

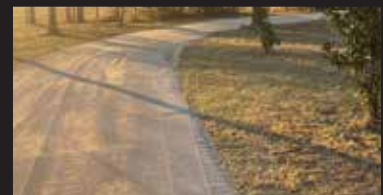
My mother, Emerald Greene, is the CEO of *Greene Publishing, Inc.*, which publishes two newspapers every week in Madison County. Every summer and every day after school, my sister and I would go to the newspaper to work! We were taught the value of a dollar and what a good work ethic was. Throughout the years, she expanded the newspaper business by buying the *Monticello News* and *Jefferson County Journal* in Jefferson County. Then in 2020, my mother and I together founded a new newspaper that covers Suwannee, Hamilton and Lafayette County - the *Riverbend News*. My mother and I successfully provide local news to five counties by publishing five newspapers a week and a bi-monthly magazine, *The Front Porch*.

I have also been doing the bookkeeping for Pioneer since March of 2015. Daddy "suckered" me into the job in 2015 because I was getting married and it was a way for me to have an extra income. So when any of you receive a Pioneer invoice, pay over the phone, etc., it is me doing all the work!

When I first started with Daddy nine years ago, the bookkeeping was a mess! He went so long without a bookkeeper that it took me MONTHS to get everything straightened out and finally back on the right track - but we did it! In nine years, Daddy and I have built the business up from three total employees to now 11 employees! Along with the 11 employees, we have five dump trucks, two skid steers and two excavators! All of the glory goes to God for His blessings on this business throughout the years.

Even though owning this business was never part of my plan, God had different ones. I look forward to serving our customers with the best work and customer service, just like Daddy did! Thank you for your business and support throughout the years and I look forward to providing the same type of service in the future.

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