

The Front Porch

Where The Tea Is Sweet and the Talks Are Long

September/October 2026

ROCKING, ROLLING AND BUILDING A DREAM

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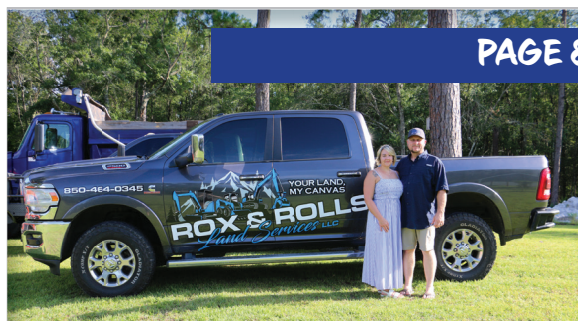
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The Front Porch

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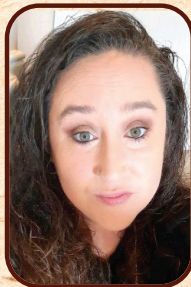
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COVER STORY

**ROCKING, ROLLING AND
BUILDING A DREAM:**

The Story of Rox & Rolls

Sponsored Content Story by Hailey Waldo

Photography by Dona Gilbert Day

Some businesses begin with a plan written out years in advance, a carefully calculated budget, a loan already approved and every detail mapped out before the first customer ever calls. Rox & Rolls was not one of those businesses.

Its beginnings were much more personal and much more uncertain: a husband who has spent most of his life around equipment, a wife who believed in him, a little money in savings, a personal truck, a skid steer and a little money in a newly opened business account. They did not have years of business education telling them exactly what to do next. They simply had a belief that they could make it work, a willingness to work for it and each other to lean on when the road became difficult. This drive is what made Rox & Rolls as successful as it is.

For James and Amber Hutchings, Rox & Rolls is not a story about becoming wealthy or building the biggest excavating company around. It is the story of two people who have spent 16 years together and decided to take a chance on something James had dreamed about for much longer. It is a story about choosing not to give up simply because the finances were not perfect, learning as they went, making sacrifices, fixing problems when they came up and trusting that the next step would become clear when they reached it.

"You just can't give up on yourself," Amber said. "Believe God has a plan that you may not see yet."

That belief has carried the Hutchings family through far more than the beginning of business. James and Amber have lifted one another up throughout their marriage, and that same partnership now exists in the middle of their workday. While James is out operating equipment, meeting customers and transforming properties, Amber is helping manage the business while continuing to work at the veterinary clinic she loves and homeschool their children. Their family, their faith, their community and their determination are all intertwined with what Rox & Rolls has become.

"We are just a small family enjoying what we do and keeping food on the table," Amber said, a simple description that perhaps says more about their priorities than any business slogan ever could.

James says he learned much of what he knows from his dad, Jim, to whom he credits his dedication and attention to detail. Growing up, James' family was

extremely close, and you could always find James in the shop with his dad, fixing tractors and hay equipment or working on projects. When it wasn't just the two of them, the entire family spent their time together, working on the farm, riding horses or going on trips. He says his family has shaped who he is, as a person and a business owner today.

Behind every driveway graded, every pond dug, every piece of land cleared and every drainage project completed is a story of work that began long before Rox & Rolls ever had a name. James has been involved in excavating for approximately 20 years, but his fascination with operating equipment goes back even further.

"It all started when I was young," he said. "I always had that mindset of wanting to do my own thing."

For James, running equipment was never simply something he happened to be good at. It became a passion, a career and eventually the foundation for a business he would one day build with his wife.

Now, two years after taking that leap, James and Amber can look back at what they started with and recognize just how far they have come. They did not begin with a large crew or a fleet of equipment. They began with themselves, a skid steer, a truck and a willingness to figure things out. They have built Rox & Rolls one customer at a time, one job at a time and, sometimes, one difficult decision at a time. Through it all, they have remained committed to the same thing that made them take the first step: creating an honest living doing work they genuinely enjoy, taking care of the people who trust them with their property and building something that belongs to their family.

For James, there is an especially meaningful feeling in doing that work here. He came to Madison County from New York when he was 9 years old and grew up in the community, one of four siblings and a child in a large family. He attended church, grew up surrounded by family and eventually graduated from Madison County High School (MCHS) in 2003. Amber, a Madison native, graduated from MCHS in 2008. Today, the house where James grew up is located just down the road from where he is now building the business he started with his wife. In its own quiet way, it is a full-circle moment: the boy who grew up here eventually became the man operating his own equipment, serving the people around him and creating a future for his own family in the same community.

Perhaps that is the heart of Rox &

Rolls. It is not simply the sound of a skid steer moving across a property or the sight of dirt being moved from one place to another. It is James and Amber proving to themselves that they could start with very little and still build something worthwhile.

"We've been blessed to have been able to earn enough to maintain our business needs," Amber said. "We've been blessed, really blessed."

After everything it took to get here, James has no desire to stop.

"We've been here for two years. I'm not stopping now," he said.

He does not dream of making Rox & Rolls enormous. He does not measure success by how many employees he can hire or how quickly he can expand. What he wants is remarkably simple: to keep working, keep his customers happy, pay the bills, enjoy his family and continue doing something he loves.

"I want to maintain, keep creating relationships with customers, pay our bills and enjoy ourselves," James said. "I'm not out here to get rich. I'm doing it because I enjoy it."

That philosophy is what makes the story of Rox & Rolls worth looking beyond the machinery and the dirt. The equipment may be what customers see first, but the business was built on something that cannot be purchased or rented: years of experience, personal sacrifice, faith, family, community support and the determination to keep showing up. For James and Amber, the goal was never to have everything handed to them. It was to create something themselves, and after two years of rocking, rolling, learning, working and believing in the dream, they are still doing exactly that.

James' relationship with excavating began long before the Rox & Rolls name was ever imagined. He said that from a young age, he knew he wanted to work for himself someday, and operating equipment was something he naturally gravitated toward. After graduating from MCHS, he began working with a local excavating company which became an important part of James' professional life. It was through that experience that James became more deeply involved in excavating and developed the skills that would eventually allow him to start a business of his own.

"The freedom you feel when you're out there is the main thing."

That freedom has remained a major part of why he loves the industry, even after approximately 20 years of doing the work.

James spent eight years working for a local excavating company, gaining



experience that he says helped prepare him for the future. During his career, he also worked in a factory building semi-trailers while operating equipment and pursuing side work. The dream of eventually being his own boss was always there, but James did not rush into it. Instead, he continued learning, gaining experience and developing a better understanding of the work. By the time Rox & Rolls began, he was not a newcomer to excavating. James had already spent years operating machinery, working on properties and learning from people who had experience in the industry.

For James, that background is important because Rox & Rolls may have only been operating for two years, but the experience behind it goes back decades.

"I've been doing Rox and Rolls for two years, but I've been doing excavating for at least 20 years," he explained.

The company is the newer part of the story; the knowledge and passion behind it have been developing for much longer. James carries the lessons he learned during those years with him. He gained extensive experience from his time excavating that gave him a solid foundation he could use when he eventually became his own boss.

The decision to start Rox & Rolls was not accompanied by a large financial cushion. James and Amber want people to understand that part of their story because it would be easy to look at a successful small business and assume that it began with substantial financial resources. It did not.

"James and I started our business on a whim," Amber explained. "Yes, we had a little in savings, but we started with our personal truck and \$500 in the business

account we opened and a skid steer."

That was the starting point. There was no large family investment, inheritance or outside source of money waiting to help them purchase whatever equipment they wanted. Amber said they did not get a business loan, and neither she nor James had prior business education that would have given them an easy roadmap for what to do next. They had to learn the business side while simultaneously doing the work that kept the business alive.

"We have had our struggles," Amber said.

Those struggles included figuring out the business side without having been formally trained in it, operating without a business loan and learning how to keep everything moving without someone else putting money into the company.

The most important part of the story of Rox & Rolls, Amber added, is that she does not want anyone looking at the company and thinking that starting it was easy or that they simply had the money available to buy what they needed. The opposite was true. They started small and figured it out as they went.

"We are making it," Amber said, giving credit to the customers in their community and surrounding areas, as well as their family and friends who have supported them since day one.

That support has sometimes been practical rather than financial. Family and friends have helped with equipment repairs and lent a hand when something needed to be fixed. In a business that relies heavily on machinery, being able to have people willing to help when equipment needs attention can be invaluable. The Hutchings family has had people around them who were willing to help them work through those challenges,

and Amber said that community support has been a major part of their ability to continue.

James and Amber also had to learn the business itself one step at a time. James said his approach has involved "lots of reading, lots of figuring things out, advice from others and an accountant." Rather than pretending they knew everything from the beginning, they learned what they needed to learn as the business developed. That process has included understanding the financial side of the company, figuring out how to manage jobs and schedules, learning how to maintain the equipment and understanding what it takes to keep a small business running.

The learning process continues, but two years of experience have given them something they did not have on the day they started: proof that their idea could work. James said that when he looks back, one of the biggest things he feels is pride that they are still going.

"I'm most proud of maintaining a steady schedule for two years straight," he said. "It's been hard, a lot of work. We've done a lot of work, and made a lot of sacrifices, so I'm proud we're still going."

For a business that started with a little money in the bank and a skid steer, maintaining a steady schedule for two years has become one of James' greatest accomplishments.

The business itself offers a broad range of land services. James explained that Rox & Rolls grades pads, hauls fill dirt, grades driveways, digs ponds, clears land, brush hogs, mulches, digs drainages and waterways and takes on demolition work. The company can handle many different types of jobs depending on what equipment is needed.

"You name it," James said. "If we can use a piece of equipment on it, we can do it."

The equipment is obviously an important part of the work, but James' experience is what allows the machinery to become a tool rather than simply a machine. Amber said that operating a skid steer seems almost effortless for him after all these years.

"James almost has an art of the skid steer," she said. "He can do it super fast, which honestly sometimes scares me."

She explained that the work seems completely natural to him.

"It's like second nature to him," Amber said. "He does it so naturally. He just flows."

James' comfort with equipment has been built over years of experience, and that experience is also why he believes people entering the industry need to understand that excavating is not necessarily easy work. Rox & Rolls primarily requires a CDL because of the amount of equipment that must be pulled, and James said the company looks for experience when bringing someone onto the team.

"We don't require a lot of training, but we do want experience mainly," he said.

There are college programs available for those interested in the field, but James explained that the work can be difficult and that getting into the industry can be challenging, especially with the market currently being saturated.

Despite those challenges, Rox & Rolls has continued to maintain a steady stream of work. James said there has not been a day during the two years of operation when he simply had no work to do. Amber said they have been fortunate even as the pace of the local market has changed. Both have noticed that this year has been slower than last year, with fewer people moving into the area and some people being more cautious about building homes or spending money.

"We've been blessed, really blessed," Amber said.

She explained that while they hear about the concerns other people are experiencing, Rox & Rolls has not had the problem of waking up and wondering whether there will be anything to do that day. The pace may be slower than the year before, but the work has remained steady enough for the company to continue.

The work itself also follows seasonal patterns. James said spring and summer typically bring an increase in activity. People are outside, working on properties and thinking about projects. When fall arrives and school begins, the pace can

slow. Winter brings the holidays, and people are generally focused on Christmas rather than planning their next pond or property project. The variety of Rox & Rolls' services means that different seasons can bring different kinds of jobs, and James has learned to work with those changes rather than expecting every month to look the same.

One type of project James said they have done a lot of this year is ponds, which he attributed to the dry conditions. But even with years of experience and countless projects completed, James said it is difficult to choose one favorite memory from the job. There have simply been too many. When someone spends years doing excavating and land work, individual projects can begin to blend together and what stands out more is the overall collection of people, properties and experiences that have come from the work. One recent experience that James particularly enjoyed was having their son work with them for a couple of months during the summer.

Family is at the center of James and Amber's life outside of work as well. The couple has two children, one who is 20 and one who is 10, and they homeschool their children. They are also preparing to welcome a grandchild. Amber works at the local veterinary clinic, a job she says she loves and does not want to leave even while helping with Rox & Rolls. Her own career journey took a different path before the business began. She attended college in Tennessee for dental assisting and spent a couple of years pursuing that field before the family returned to the area.

After Amber had her son, she wanted to stay home more, but as he reached school age, she also wanted something outside the home to focus on. That eventually led her to the veterinary clinic, where she found work she genuinely enjoys. Today, she balances that job with helping run Rox & Rolls and being involved in homeschooling their son Jackson. The business is therefore not something completely separate from their family; it is woven into the schedule and responsibilities of their everyday lives.

Outside of work, James and Amber prefer spending time together and with their family. They enjoy camping, and James likes fishing and going to concerts. Amber said what she enjoys most is simply being together. James joked that the two are together almost all the time, with the exception of when he is fishing. Their relationship is part of what has allowed Rox & Rolls to function as a family business because the same partnership that has carried them through 16 years together now carries into their

professional lives.

Care is one of the things Amber and James believes has kept the company moving. Amber said James is the kind of person who wants to help. If someone needs a small job done and he can fit it into his schedule, he may simply stop on the way home. If he is already on a customer's property and sees something that needs to be touched up, he is likely to take care of it rather than leave it for another day. To Amber, that willingness to help is not just a business strategy. It is part of who James is.

James agrees that his relationships with customers are one of the most important things about the business.

"What sets Rox and Rolls apart is the relationship with the clients," he said. "I build strong relationships."

He does not want to put himself above other people in the industry, and he acknowledges that there are many other contractors who care deeply about their customers. Instead, he focuses on making sure he is doing everything he can for the people who hire him.

"I don't know what everyone else does," James said, "but I always try to go above and beyond for my clients regardless of what the quote is."

That mindset has helped turn customers into repeat customers and, in some cases, friends. James said that once he establishes a relationship with someone, he wants to maintain it. The customer may call him again for another project, but James also makes an effort to check in and stay connected outside of the work itself.

For James, that is what separates a job from a business built around people.

"Once you build that relationship you get to know the customers, they keep calling you back, and you form a bond," he said. "I've got several customers that are now my friends."

His efforts to reach out during the holidays are another example of how he views those relationships.

"I make an effort to reach out, especially during the holidays," he said. "That's what it's all about."

The Hutchings family also wants Rox & Rolls to remain a small operation. James owns the majority of the machinery used by the business and only occasionally rents equipment when necessary. The current team consists of James, Amber and Wesley. There is no large staff behind the company, and James does not have plans to turn Rox & Rolls into a massive operation simply for the sake of expansion.

"I don't want to," James said.

His goal is not to create a company

so large that he loses the personal relationships that made him enjoy the business in the first place.

Instead, "I want to maintain, keep creating relationships with customers, pay our bills and enjoy ourselves," James said. "I'm not out here to get rich. I'm doing it because I enjoy it."

That statement captures an important difference in the way James views success. For some business owners, success means expansion, more equipment, more employees and more jobs. For James, success means being able to continue doing something he loves while providing for his family and maintaining the relationships he has built with customers. He does not want Rox & Rolls to become so large that the original reason he started it gets lost.

After two years, he has no intention of stopping.

"We've been here for two years," James said. "I'm not stopping now."

The business has been difficult, but he believes the sacrifices have been worth it. He has seen the company survive its earliest years, maintain a steady schedule and develop a customer base that continues to call. That gives him confidence in the future without making him feel like he needs to transform Rox & Rolls into something it was never intended to be.

If James could return to the day he started the business with everything he knows now, his answer is surprisingly simple.

"I would say, why haven't I done this sooner?" James said.

James was 39 when he started Rox & Rolls, and he recognizes that many people might look at that age and decide it is too late to begin something new. For him, however, it was exactly the right time.

James pointed out that people generally think about how many working years they have left when they start a business later in life, but he believes the experience he had already gained was

an advantage rather than a disadvantage. After spending years in excavating, he had knowledge, experience and a clear understanding of what he enjoyed doing.

James' family background is part of that connection as well. He grew up with four siblings and was a middle child in a large family. Church was an important part of his upbringing, and faith continues to be important to James and Amber today. Amber sees that faith as one of the things that has helped them continue through difficult moments, especially when the future was not obvious.

"James and I have always lifted each other up," Amber said.

She believes that partnership is part of why the two have been able to overcome so much during their 16 years together.

"I know that's why God brought us together," she said.

For Amber, the business is another chapter in a partnership that began long before the first Rox & Rolls customer ever called.

That partnership has also helped them navigate the uncertainty that comes with owning a small business. There are days when equipment needs repairs, schedules need to change, customers need something quickly or unexpected challenges arise. There are financial decisions and business responsibilities that cannot be ignored. There is also the pressure of making sure there is enough work to keep the business moving. James and Amber have had to learn to deal with those challenges together.

Amber believes the story of Rox & Rolls can encourage other people who have a dream but are afraid to pursue it because they do not have the money they think they need. She knows that starting without financial security was difficult, but she also knows that waiting until everything was perfect might have meant never starting at all.

"I say all of that to say I think it's important for people to know you don't have to settle and give up your dreams due to finances," she said.

Her message is not that starting a business is easy. Her own experience proves the opposite. It means being willing to work through the hard parts.

"If you're willing to follow through, especially through the rough patches, you can achieve more than you thought in the first place," Amber said.

The key, in her view, is refusing to give up on yourself simply because the first steps are difficult.

Rox & Rolls now has two years behind it, a steady schedule and a growing collection of customer relationships that James values deeply. The

company serves Madison and surrounding counties, offering land services that range from grading and hauling to ponds, land clearing, brush hogging, mulching, drainage, waterways and demolition. James owns most of the machinery the company uses, and he remains personally involved in the work.

Yet despite everything that has been accomplished, James still sees Rox & Rolls as a small family business. That is not something he says apologetically. It is exactly what he wants. He wants to continue working with his customers. He wants to keep doing the kind of work that has been his passion for approximately 20 years. He wants to provide for his family without losing the enjoyment that brought him into the industry in the first place.

The business may be built around dirt, rock, machinery and land, but James measures much of its success through people. He wants customers to be happy with their finished projects. He wants them to feel that he cared about the result. He wants them to trust him enough to call again. And he wants to maintain those relationships even after the equipment has left the property.

The name itself, born from an old joke about James "rocking and rolling" on a skid steer, now represents something much larger. It represents the work that James has loved for most of his adult life, the family he shares that work with and the customers who have helped keep the business moving.

James and Amber know that the future will have its own challenges. They know the economy can change, that seasons can slow down and that running a business will never be completely predictable. But they have already learned that they do not need to know exactly what comes next in order to keep moving forward.

James took that step at 39, after years of working for others, after years of operating equipment and after years of wondering what it might be like to finally run something of his own. Amber stood beside him, helping build the business while maintaining her own career and their family life. Together, they took something that began with very little and turned it into a steady operation that has now reached its second year.

For a business that began with a dream, a truck, a skid steer and \$500, that may be the most fitting measure of success: they started with what they had, they worked for what they needed, they accepted help when they needed it, they kept faith when the future was uncertain, and after two years, they are still rocking and rolling. ■





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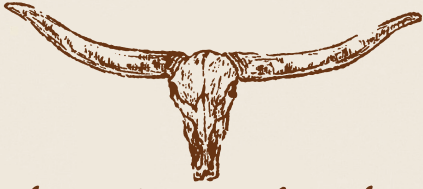


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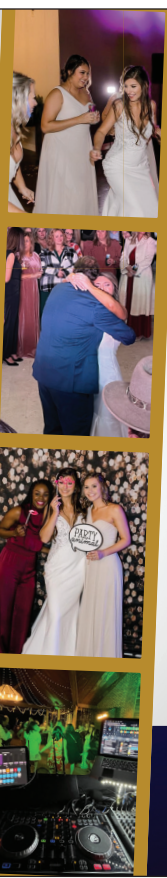
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TAKE IT FROM *Colbert*

Story and Photography by Robin Postell

Some people spend a lifetime chasing success. Colbert Sturgeon spent the first half of his life achieving it – then walked away. The South Georgia survivalist, featured for three seasons on National Geographic Channel's *Live Free or Die*, left a successful career as a financial planner, built a cabin on more than 50 wooded acres near Valdosta, and devoted the rest of his life to a simple idea: people are happier, healthier and freer when they become more self-reliant.

Long before television audiences discovered the South Georgia woodsman on *Live Free or Die*, the philosophy that would shape his life had already been handed down through generations. Colbert often tells the story of a great-great-grandfather who worked in a factory for a single day before returning home in tears. He believed the work had stolen part of his soul. He never worked another factory job. In fact, he refused even to learn to drive an automobile because he

believed the world was already moving too fast. Slow down, he insisted. Think. Live deliberately.

That story has become something of an inheritance.

"I went to college for almost a month," Colbert told me with a grin.

Every few days he found himself back in the counselor's office complaining that the education was expensive, slow and superficial.

"Your program costs too much, it's very slow, and it's very shallow."

Finally, he quit.

"I'm gonna quit college, and I'm gonna go get a library card. A library card is a lot cheaper, and they have more books than you guys got."

He spent years reading everything that interested him, building an education tailored not to a curriculum, but to curiosity.

Ironically, that unconventional education led him into one of the most conventional careers imaginable.

For 25 years he worked as a financial planner with American Express, advising clients on investments and retirement. He became successful because he understood something that had very little to do with money.

"Everybody is different," he said. "You have to say something different."

He hated scripts. New employees who shadowed him weren't allowed to memorize sales pitches. Instead, they were told to introduce themselves, stay quiet, observe, ask questions and solve problems.

"I never want to hear any complaints," he said. "I'd rather hear a solution."

That may be the defining characteristic of Colbert Sturgeon.

He doesn't see himself as a survivalist nearly as much as he sees himself as a problem solver.

Eventually he reached a conclusion that surprised nearly everyone around him.

Rather than spending his life helping people accumulate wealth, he decided to redefine what wealth actually meant.

He bought raw land along the Withlacoochee River, built his own cabin largely from reclaimed materials, eliminated most of his monthly expenses and began living the life he had envisioned for decades.

People often assume his lifestyle is about escaping society.

It isn't.

It's about becoming less dependent on it.

"The meaning of life," Colbert told me, "it's about food, water and shelter – and friends, and something fun to do. Everything else is stress."

His philosophy reaches into every corner of daily life.

Eat less.

Buy less.

Waste less.

Need less.

He believes Americans consume far more than they require and that many of the pressures they experience are self-inflicted through debt, convenience and endless consumption. He encourages people to prepare more of their own food, repair what they own, buy used whenever possible and conserve resources – not because it's fashionable, but because it creates freedom.

"If you ever see any product advertised," he told me, "do not buy it."

Advertising costs money, he argues, and consumers ultimately pay for it. Wait until someone else buys it new. Then buy it used.

"Inflation doesn't matter if you don't buy anything."

His lessons aren't really about saving money. They're about reclaiming independence. That independence extends into the woods, where Colbert has spent decades teaching wilderness survival and encouraging people to become more self-reliant. Survival, to him, isn't preparing for catastrophe. It's learning to trust your own abilities instead of assuming someone else will always rescue you.

One story illustrates that perfectly. Years ago, he and his wife became lost after dark on a mountain trail with no flashlight. Searchers eventually came looking for them, but Colbert wasn't panicked. He told his wife to hook her finger through one of his belt loops and follow him. Then he dropped to his hands and knees.

"I could feel the trail," he explained.

Unable to see, he navigated by sensing subtle differences beneath him – the packed earth, scattered leaves





and contours of the forest floor. When rescuers approached with lights, he quietly stepped off the trail and hid until they passed. Later he apologized to the ranger and explained he had simply been practicing survival skills.

Listening to Colbert, it becomes clear that he experiences nature differently than most people.

One story still leaves him emotional every time he tells it. Years ago, faced with hunger, he encountered a dying raccoon. He believes the animal communicated with him – not with words, but with understanding. The raccoon, he says, was already dying. Colbert needed food. The raccoon needed release. In his mind, they reached an agreement. He accepted the gift of its life with gratitude rather than triumph.

Whether someone interprets that as spirituality, intuition or symbolism matters less than what it reveals about him. Colbert doesn't see himself standing above nature. He sees himself participating in it.

That same outlook shapes his view of modern technology. When I asked about artificial intelligence, I expected enthusiasm from someone so relentlessly curious. Instead, he offered caution.

"I think it has benefit," he said, "but it's easy to distract people and depend on it when it's wrong."

His concern wasn't really about computers. It was about people surrendering their own judgment.

For Colbert, the greatest survival skill has never been building a fire or finding food. It's thinking independently. He wants people to ask questions instead of accepting easy answers. To challenge assumptions. To solve problems instead of complaining about them. To make up



their own minds.

As he put it simply, "Life is a do-it-yourself project."

Perhaps his most enduring reminder is equally straightforward: "You can't change the world, but you can change yourself."

That may be why Colbert Sturgeon continues to fascinate people.

Yes, he built a cabin in the woods.

Yes, he lived without many of the conveniences most Americans consider necessities.

Yes, he became a television personality almost by accident.

But those aren't really the story.

The story is a man who spent decades stripping away everything he believed people didn't truly need – not just possessions, but assumptions.

He isn't asking everyone to move into the forest. He's asking something far more radical.

Think for yourself.

Learn for yourself.

Become less dependent.

Need less.

Live more.



In a culture built on consumption, Colbert Sturgeon's quiet rebellion is conservation – of money, resources, health, energy and, perhaps most importantly, the human spirit. ■



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Reads

By Laura Young

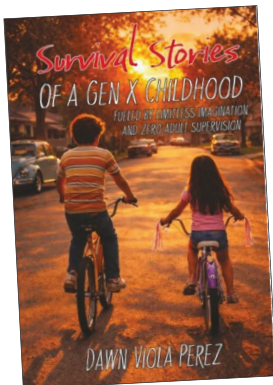
The interesting small towns that dot the landscape of Florida's Big Bend have produced a fascinating fusion of people, many of whom channel their experiences and interests into equally fascinating books. In this issue, we're taking notice of a photo essay, a memoir and a children's book in rhyme. If there's a local author whose work you'd like to see noted in a future issue of *The Front Porch* magazine, email emerald@greenepublishing.com.

Survival Stories of a Gen X Childhood

By Dawn Viola Perez
(2026)

Perry-based author Dawn Viola Perez grew up during the 1970s and '80s, enjoying a childhood full of activity, adventure and mischief. When she began to share some of her memories in online posts, she realized there was an eager audience for her stories. She decided to compile the tales into a book, not knowing whether anything would become of it or not. Though Perez previously published art books, *Survival Stories of a Gen X Childhood* is her first experience with narrative. With nostalgic and humorous tales from California in the early '70s to her high school years in Pennsylvania, she captures a time when kids disappeared after breakfast, came home at sunset and somehow lived to tell the tale. Readers who grew up Gen X will recognize every moment. For readers of a different age, it may serve as a survival guide.

The book is available in local bookstores around North Florida and through major online booksellers.



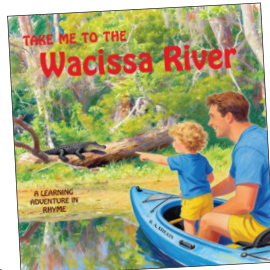
Take Me to the Wacissa River: A Learning Adventure in Rhyme

By Rebekah Sheats
(2026)

This children's book by Jefferson County historian and author Rebekah Sheats introduces children to the exciting animals and sights to be encountered along the Wacissa River, a local natural treasure formed by numerous springs. The book guides children to appreciate and identify the various waterfowl, reptiles and plants that flourish in and along the river. True-to-life and kid-friendly illustrations of egrets, herons, moorhen, limpkins, turtles, alligators and more spark the imagination of youngsters as they learn about the Wacissa and prepare for their own trip to this thrilling river. Coloring pages in the back add to the learning adventure.

The Wacissa River was a favorite place for the author to visit as a child. She now enjoys sharing the experience with the next generation in her family, and she wrote the book as a way of passing on the river's delights to other local youngsters. The book's rhyming text makes it ideal as a read-aloud for children 2-6 years old, though older children (6-8 years old) could read the book on their own and still enjoy the exciting, informative illustrations.

It is available at the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce and Vintage Treasures (in Monticello). It can also be purchased online at Amazon.



Preserved: The North Florida Wildlife Center

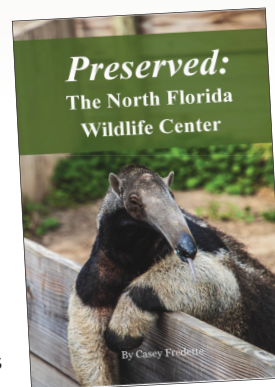
By Casey Fredette
(Casey Fredette Media, 2026)

Preserved: The North Florida Wildlife Center presents stunning photographs along with heartfelt stories that provide an intimate, behind-the-scenes look at the people, animals and mission of the North Florida Wildlife Center in Lamont. Though just five years old, this thriving and fast-growing conservation center welcomes more than 10,000 visitors a year.

Visitors learn about the incredible and rare animal species who reside at the Center, and they gain a new perspective on conservation issues that might otherwise seem far away and untouchable. In this first book about the Wildlife Center, Casey Fredette captures special moments of the visitor's experience with more than 100 color photographs. Readers can delve into details about the Center's founder, animal care staff and some of the Center's global conservation partners. Fredette also writes about selected animal residents and discusses how habitat design at the wildlife center contributes to its success. The final chapter explores the Wildlife Center's vision for the future.

Fredette plans additional volumes in the *Preserved* series, with each book offering not only a celebration of the bond between humans and animals but also a reminder that the future of countless species depends on awareness, compassion and collective responsibility.

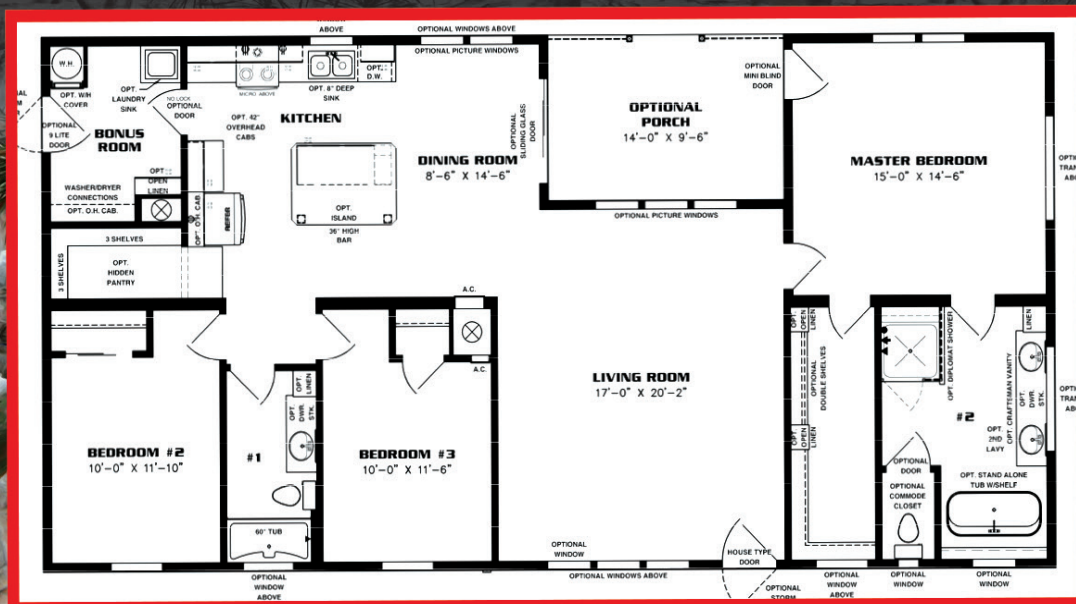
Preserved: The North Florida Wildlife Center is available for purchase in the gift shop at 1386 Cook Rd. in Lamont and online at www.northfloridawildlife.org and Amazon. Every purchase helps support animal care, conservation and wildlife education. ■





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How Bristol Hatch-Williams Is Keeping Noah's Legacy Alive

Story by Hailey Waldo

Photographs Courtesy of Courtney Hatch

At just 8 years old, Bristol Belle Hatch-Williams has already accomplished things many adults only

dream of. She is a pageant queen, an author, an entrepreneur and, most importantly, a little girl with a heart dedicated to helping others. Her mission began because of a little boy whose life

changed hers forever.

Noah Amador was the best friend of her older brother, Cooper. The two boys met in kindergarten, laughing together on the playground and sharing the kind of friendship that comes naturally to children. However, Amador's childhood looked very different from most. He was fighting for his life against a rare cancer called chordoma, which, unfortunately, took his life in April.

Chordoma is one of the rarest cancers in the world. According to Amador's mother, Kathy Amador, chordoma affects approximately one in one million adults and only about one in 20 million children. The cancer develops from remnants of the embryonic tissue that eventually forms the spine. Most chordomas grow along the spine or at the base of the skull. Because it is so uncommon, diagnosis is often difficult and research funding is limited.

Pediatric chordoma is even more challenging because childhood cases differ biologically from adult cases, meaning treatments cannot simply be copied from adult research. Every new study requires funding, scientists and families willing to fight for answers.

"The rarer it is, the harder it is," Kathy explained. "Childhood cancer already receives limited funding. Really rare cancers need research even more because there are so few children affected."

The Chordoma Foundation dedicates funding toward research, clinical trials and developing better treatments for both adults and children, including specialized pediatric research.

Today, Hatch-Williams honors Amador's memory by raising awareness and thousands of dollars for pediatric chordoma research so that other families may one day have hope.

"I started writing my book for childhood cancer awareness because my brother's best friend, Noah, passed away from cancer," Hatch-Williams said. "I keep raising money for the Chordoma Foundation."

That simple statement carries



Bristol Hatch-Williams at the Miss North Florida Pageant.

extraordinary meaning.

Wanting to do more than simply remember Amador, Hatch-Williams wrote and published her own bilingual coloring book, *B's Wish Pens, Little Pens, Big Wishes*, available in both English and Spanish on Amazon. The idea came during a car ride after one of the many events where she was selling her handmade Wish Pens.

The coloring book follows Hatch-Williams' journey of creating her Wish Pens and raising funds through selling them at pageants, local events and community gatherings. To Hatch-Williams, "the most important part wasn't the money. It was the kindness behind every pen," she wrote in her book. "Each pen reminded people that even kids can change the world."

Each colorful pen is carefully assembled by Hatch-Williams using unique beads shaped like crowns, puppies and countless other cheerful designs. She sells and gives them away at pageants and community events, donating proceeds to childhood cancer research. To date, Hatch-Williams has helped raise more than \$5,000 for the Chordoma Foundation through her Wish Pens. Hatch-Williams has even hosted her own book signing to raise awareness at a local boutique in Perry.

Hatch-Williams' favorite page in the coloring book is especially meaningful.

"It's a drawing of my brother, Cooper, and Noah swinging together," she said.

The QR code printed in the back of the book leads readers directly to the Chordoma Foundation, allowing anyone inspired by Amador's story to help continue the fight.

Amador was only 20 months old when his family realized something wasn't right.

"He was clearly uncomfortable," Kathy recalled. "He was sweating often and running random high fevers for no reason."

Repeated doctor visits eventually led to imaging that revealed a tumor. Even then, it took three agonizing weeks before doctors identified it as chordoma.

Unlike many chordomas that grow along the spine, Amador's tumor was located at the base of his skull and could not be surgically removed. He endured nine months of chemotherapy, spending several days in the hospital every two weeks. Eventually, the treatment worked remarkably well. The tumor shrank by approximately 95%.

For a brief time, life began to resemble normal childhood. Amador's chemotherapy port was removed, and



Every September, Bristol's school puts on their annual Noah's Legacy Day. The event includes children creating their own Mario carts and racing them around campus in honor of Amador's love for Mario.

doctors monitored the small amount of cancer that remained while he continued oral medication. Then came another devastating diagnosis. Only months later, Amador developed acute myeloid leukemia (AML), an aggressive blood cancer caused by treatment complications.

He underwent four intensive rounds of chemotherapy in preparation for a bone marrow transplant, spending nearly a month in the hospital during each cycle as doctors intentionally wiped out his immune system before allowing it to recover.

The transplant was successful. For a while, there was hope. Then the original chordoma returned.

Altogether, Amador battled cancer for four years before passing away in

April, just three months before what would have been his sixth birthday. Despite everything he endured, Kathy remembers something far stronger than his illness.

"He was really strong and a really happy kid," she said.

One of Amador's happiest seasons came when he was healthy enough to attend kindergarten, where he met Cooper.

"He absolutely loved school," Kathy said. "Even when he got sick and couldn't walk anymore, he wanted to go to school and just be a kid."

After Amador's passing, Hatch-Williams, Bristol's mother, Courtney Hatch and Kathy refused to let his story fade away. Through pageants, fundraisers and community events, they have



During one of Bristol's pageants, she took the time to honor Amador through a presentation and handing out her books.

helped introduce hundreds of people to Noah's legacy. One memorable pageant fundraiser raised nearly \$3,000, which Bristol proudly presented to Noah's family for the Chordoma Foundation.

"They've been such a blessing," Kathy said. "They've made sure Noah isn't forgotten."

Every September, Point of Grace Christian Academy hosts Noah's Legacy Day, a joyful celebration centered around childhood cancer awareness rather than sadness. The event features Mario Kart-themed races, honoring Amador's love for Mario, where students build cardboard race cars and compete in friendly races. Families enjoy vendors, children's activities, pulled pork dinners, community fellowship, free snow cones and the opportunity to make blood donations through a mobile blood drive. Together, the event typically raises \$5,000 to \$6,000 annually for pediatric chordoma research.

This year's Noah's Legacy Day will be held Saturday, Sept. 12, at

CrossPointe Baptist Church in Perry. Admission is free, and everyone is invited to attend, learn about childhood cancer, donate blood or simply spend the day supporting families facing impossible battles.

Although Hatch-Williams has competed in beauty pageants since she was just 6 months old, the trophies aren't what matter most to her. She's been crowned Miss North Florida, traveled to Disney, modeled in New York and competed across Florida.

"My favorite thing is the interviews and talking to people," she said with a smile.

Her confidence, compassion and service have also inspired one of Amador's most meaningful legacies. Each year during the Miss North Florida Pageant, the Noah Amador Scholarship awards \$250 to a contestant who demonstrates a passion for serving others. Participants submit videos showing how they make a positive difference in their communities, encouraging acts of kindness in Amador's memory.

Outside of pageants, Hatch-Williams attends Point of Grace Christian Academy, loves playing with squishy toys, enjoys spending time with her five siblings and hopes to become a dentist one day, just like her papa. She has already lost nine teeth and laughs that she's well on her way.

This September, she'll once again bring her coloring books and handmade Wish Pens to another pageant, continuing the work she believes is so important.

For Hatch-Williams, raising awareness isn't about recognition. It's about making sure her departed friend's story continues changing lives.

Childhood cancer research, especially for ultra-rare diseases like pediatric chordoma, depends heavily on community support. Opportunities to honor Noah's legacy include the following:

- Donate to the Chordoma Foundation to support pediatric chordoma research.
- Attend Noah's Legacy Day on Saturday, Sept. 12, at Crosspoint Baptist Church in Perry.
- Donate blood during the event's community blood drive.
- Purchase Bristol's coloring book or Wish Pens when available at community events.
- Share information about childhood cancer awareness during Childhood Cancer Awareness Month in September.

Families grieving the loss of a child or coping with childhood cancer can also find support through organizations such as the Chordoma Foundation, the American Childhood Cancer Organization, The Compassionate Friends and local hospice bereavement programs.

Sometimes the biggest difference doesn't begin with scientists in a laboratory. Sometimes it begins with an 8-year-old girl carrying a handful of colorful pens, a coloring book filled with hope and a promise that one little boy named Noah will never be forgotten. ■



Bristol, Kathy and Cooper had an emotional book reading at Crosspoint Church.



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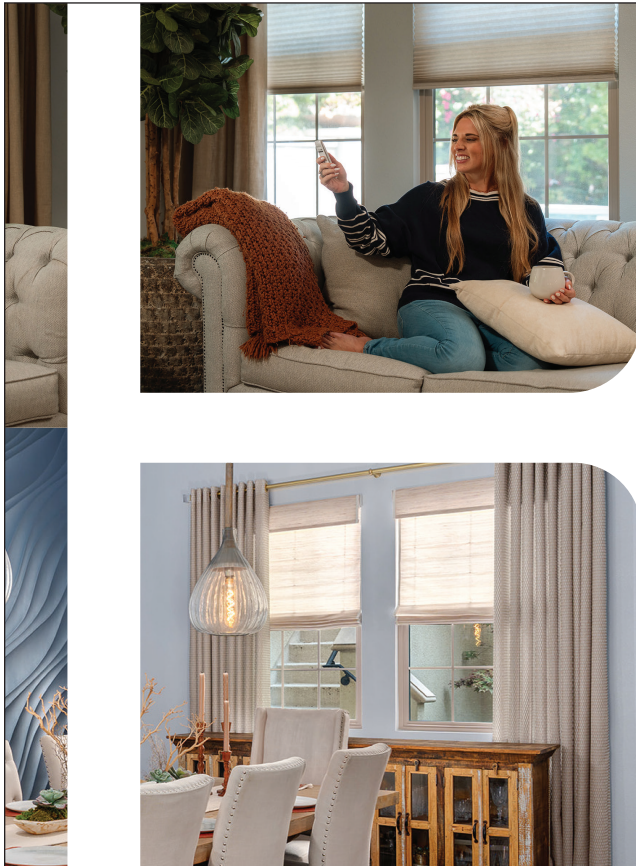
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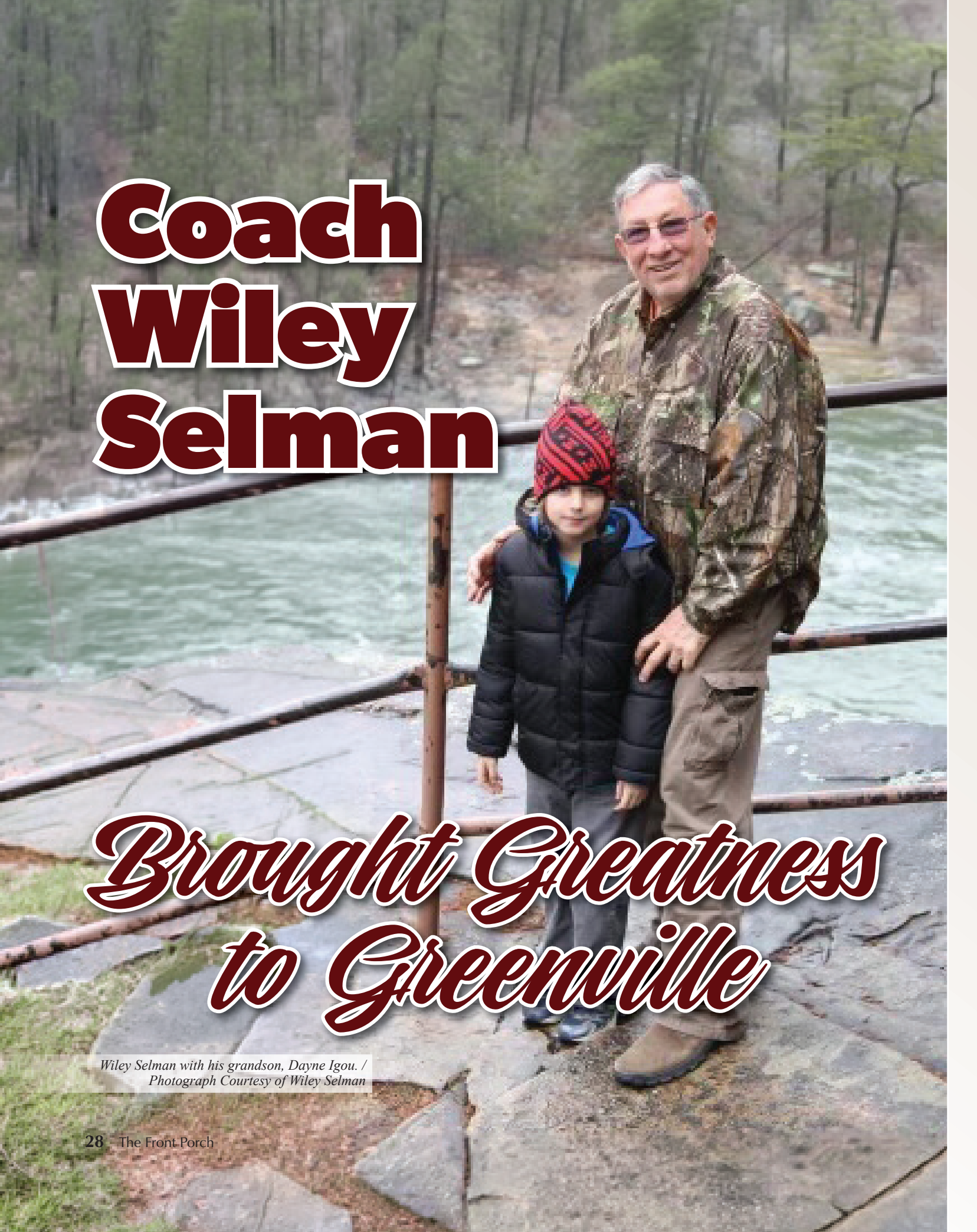
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A photograph of an older man, Coach Wiley Selman, and a young boy, Dayne Igou, standing on a stone walkway next to a river. The man is wearing a camouflage jacket and glasses, and the boy is wearing a black puffer jacket and a red and black patterned beanie. They are both smiling at the camera. The background shows a river with rapids and a forest of tall, thin trees.

Coach Wiley Selman

*Brought Greatness
to Greenville*

*Wiley Selman with his grandson, Dayne Igou. /
Photograph Courtesy of Wiley Selman*

Story by Rick Patrick

When Wiley Selman was asked to fill in for a teacher at Greenville High School (GHS), in the spring of 1963, it was only going to be a temporary assignment. After finishing that school year, however, he was asked to stay and take on the coaching job for the school's basketball team. Selman recalls that the team had only chalked up one win in each of the two previous seasons.

After Coach Selman took the helm of the Pirates' basketball ship in 1964, the team never had another losing season. By 1968, the GHS Pirates were playing in the State Basketball Tournament for the first time. Under his leadership, the Pirates were consistent district and conference champs. In addition to a state playoff appearance in 1968, the Pirates made another appearance in the state playoffs in 1975. Then, in 1980, in the school's final year before closing, the Pirates were State Runners-up.

"[Coach Selman] was an excellent coach, and Greenville basketball dominated larger schools for all the years he coached," said Steve McHargue, who played for Coach Selman from 1973 to 1975.

The Pirates were Basketball State Runners-up in 1976 and 1977.

Coach Selman not only brought athletic success on the basketball court, he also coached the Pirates' football team to a nine-win season in 1966. The only defeat the Pirates suffered that year was to eventual State Champion Jefferson County. That year, the Jefferson County High School Tigers had an unknown linebacker named Jack Youngblood, who would go on to fame playing for the University of Florida Gators and a Hall of Fame professional football career with the Los Angeles Rams.

In 1976, Coach Selman led the Pirates to the school's sole State Championship. That year, the Pirates won the Class A State Championship in track and field.

Coach Selman's influence went far beyond the basketball hardwoods of the GHS gym.

"He was a great example to every player he ever coached," added McHargue. "He coached during integration and he brought us together as a team. I am guessing his career win percentage is among the best ever in the state. But much more than that, he molded young men and was loved and respected by all his players."

Coach Selman also served as a positive example for numerous young people through his connection with the

Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA). Coach Selman helped to initiate the FCA chapter while he was a student athlete at the University of Florida. This experience had such an impact on Coach Selman that he later began an FCA group in Greenville.

"I had the honor of inviting [Coach Selman] to be on our FCA Board when I was on staff with FCA in North Florida," added McHargue.

McHargue's brother, Mike, also had the honor of playing basketball for Coach Selman at GHS.

"I was immediately struck by his devotion to his craft of coaching and to the Christ he served," said Mike McHargue. "The man was steadfast in

all areas of his life from the eyes of this teenager."

Coach Selman was born and raised in Madison, the son of Buford and Lucile Selman. His father worked as a bookkeeper for the Van H. Priest Company before his parents opened Lucile's Dress Shop, in Madison. Young Wiley spent much time working in the store for his parents. After graduating from Madison High School in 1957, Coach Selman went to the University of Florida, where he lettered in Track and Field for the Gators while earning a degree in Physical Education.

In addition to coaching, Selman was the principal of GHS until the school was consolidated with Madison High



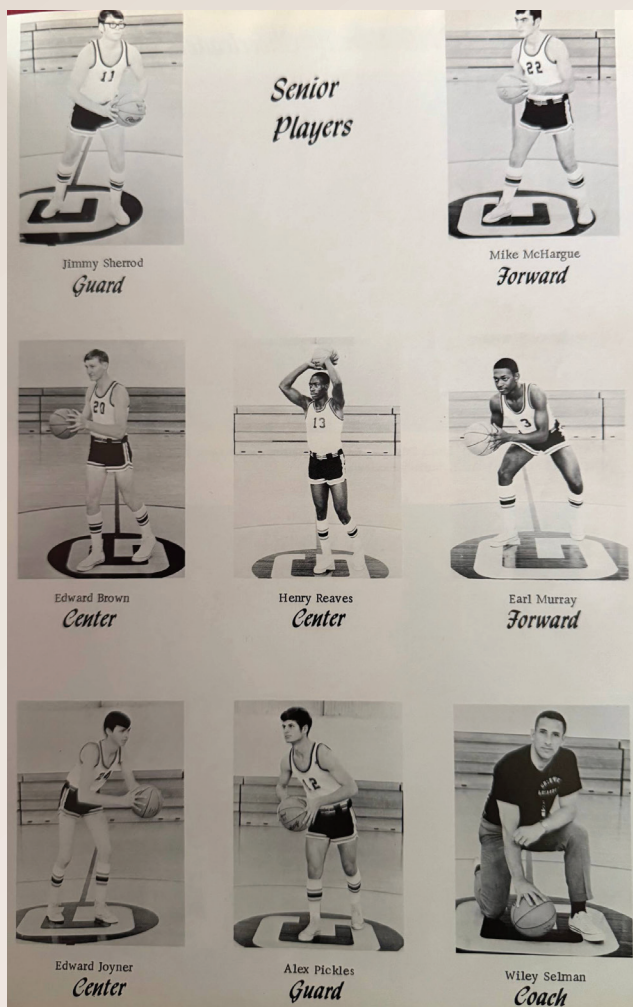
Twin siblings Mary Ellen Selman Greene and Wiley Selman took their high school senior portrait together.

School in the fall of 1980 to form Madison County High School (MCHS). He served as an administrator at MCHS until 1984, when he left the

education field to become an agent with State Farm insurance. He worked with State Farm for another 20 years until his retirement in



Posing in the 1970s are the Selman siblings, left to right, Roberta, Wiley, Mary Ellen, Bill and Susan.



In 1970, Greenville High School Basketball Coach Wiley Selman led the Pirates to an appearance in the State Basketball Tournament. / Greenville High School Yearbook

2004.

Today, Selman enjoys his retirement days in Sea Grove Beach, between Panama City and Destin on Florida's Gulf Coast. There, he enjoys playing his ukulele with a group call the Sea Grove Strummers. The group performs around the area, entertaining folks in many nursing homes and retirement centers.

He also enjoys frequent visits from former players.

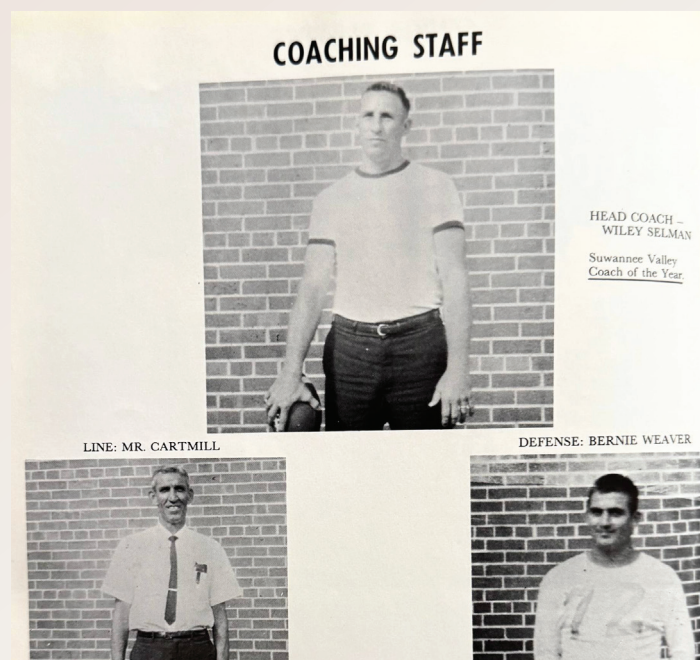
"I have former players

who come through often and we sometimes go to dinner and enjoy sharing memories," recalls Coach Selman.

Like ripples on a pond, the impact Coach Selman had on the lives of hundreds of young people continues to expand. Many of those young people have gone on to become ministers, business leaders and mentors in their own lives, serving to carry on the growing legacy of Coach Selman. ■



Selman plays the ukulele with his granddaughter, Rhey Igou, at a festival.



Coach Wiley Selman led the 1967 Greenville High School Pirates to a 9-1 record on the gridiron in. Their only defeat that year was to the eventual State Champion team from Jefferson County. / Greenville High School Yearbook

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Dr. James Sledge: A Jefferson County Landmark

Story by Rebekah Sheats

Photographs Courtesy of the Sledge Family

When Dr. James "Jim" Sledge was born in Monticello in October 1924, Jefferson County was less than 100 years old. By the time he died in 2025, Jim's life would span more than half of the county's history.

Many changes came to the area during Jim Sledge's lifetime, and many things that current residents regard as landmarks or mainstays of the community were brand new at the start of his life. To put things in perspective, the present courthouse that defines the landscape of downtown Monticello was only 14 years old at Sledge's birth. One of Jim's earliest memories was of sitting in his front yard, waiting to hear the courthouse bell chime so his mother could set the family clock.

Jim was a fourth-generation Floridian. His father, Lamar Sledge, was a farmer who cultivated land north of Monticello. In the early 1930s, Lamar was elected sheriff of Jefferson County, and the Sledge family moved into the jailhouse on Dogwood Street (currently the Old Jail Museum). Sheriff Sledge was killed in the line of duty in 1934. Young Jim was only 9 years old at his father's death.

With the loss of her husband, Jim's mother Rena Sledge was left to care for her three young children alone.

Jim, the youngest child and the only boy, found a job at 10 years old as a page in the Florida Legislature. He earned four dollars a day carrying messages and fetching things for the lawmakers. The money slowly added up, and at the end of the legislative session, Rena used Jim's wages to purchase a car for the family.

While working in the capitol, Jim served many men who would later become famous as legislators or future governors.

"I've never been anybody important," he would later say, "but I've sure met a lot of important people!"

Schooling and World War II

Jim attended school at the old high school building on West Washington Street (now known as the A-Building). He was the shortest boy in his class but did well as quarterback on the Monticello football team.

In 1940 he spent a year

in the Philippines where his uncle, Colonel Theodore Sledge, was serving in the Army. Jim attended school in Manila until he was sent back the States in mid-1941 as war clouds thickened on the horizon. He finished his schooling in Texas. He served as president of his senior class, was a member of the National Honor Society, played quarterback of his high school football team and lettered in both football and basketball.

The United States entered World War II while Jim was still in high school. His uncle Theodore Sledge was taken captive by the Japanese and remained a POW throughout the duration of the war. When Jim graduated in 1943, he immediately enlisted in the Army Air Corps. His uncle had hoped he would enter West Point, but Jim was half an inch too short to be accepted into that military institution.

"My legs were too short for marching, so I thought I'd better try the Air Force," he later joked.

After basic training in Miami, he was sent to Massachusetts State University as a member of a college training detachment. A fellow cadet described him this way: "Jimmie is 5 ft. 4 ½ inches of coordinated 'Mickey Rooney' in a soldier's uniform." After completing his college studies, Jim was trained as a bombardier navigator in a B-17 and graduated as a second lieutenant. He would remain in the Air Corps until the completion of the war.

Finding a Wife

In his later years, Jim was quick to recall that "he who finds a wife finds a good thing" (Proverbs 18:22). He was eighteen years old when he found his wife, though it would take a little time before she realized it. It all started in September 1943 while Sledge was in Massachusetts during his training with the Army Air Corps. One day he caught sight of a short blonde girl who intrigued him. He didn't know her name, but he often saw her at a restaurant called the Greeks.

"I'd like a date with that girl," Jim told his companions, but he didn't speak to her.

Coming from the South, Jim had been taught that it was improper to speak to a girl without an introduction. Jim often saw the girl at the Greeks, but each time he saw her, a young naval cadet was with her. Were they engaged? Jim didn't know, but he frequented the restaurant on the chance of seeing the girl there.

The fall of 1943 soon passed, and before Jim knew it, 1944 was dawning. He still held hopes of meeting the blonde girl, but his chances were quickly slipping away. His classes were coming to an end, and his detachment was scheduled to ship out on January 31.

Two weeks before his departure, Jim and some other cadets were on leave one



Boyhood friends Jim Sledge and Boots Thomas, 1941

evening and walked past a bowling alley which also had a dance floor. Looking through the windows as he passed, Jim saw the blonde girl inside dancing.

"There's that girl!" he told his companions.

"Well, go in and meet her!" his friends urged. "Go in and ask her for a dance."

"No, no, I couldn't do that," Jim said.

"Go on!" the cadets pressed.

As Jim continued to hesitate, the boys forcibly pushed him into the bowling alley.

Knowing this might be his only chance, Jim at last decided to speak to the girl. He put a nickel into the jukebox and selected Bing Crosby's rendition of "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning." (He chose the song because it was slow and he was a poor dancer.) Then he plucked up his courage and asked the girl for a dance.

The girl's name was Rosalind, and she was from a small town called Sunderland. For Jim, it was love at first sight. To his dismay, their dance was cut short when Rosalind's ride showed up a moment later. Jim was left standing alone on the dance floor as Rosalind dashed out of the bowling alley with a quick "I gotta go." Bing Crosby's song was only half over.

Now that he had met her, Jim was

determined to get to know Rosalind before he shipped out. He didn't know her last name, but the girl had mentioned that she worked for Pratt & Whitney Aircraft Company. Jim decided to write a letter to the company in an attempt to find her. It was a long shot, but it was all he could do. Sitting on his bunk that evening, he wrote a brief letter and then addressed an envelope with all the information he knew about Rosalind:

Miss Rosalind ??
Blonde, 5' 0" – 95 lbs
Hometown: Sunderland
c/o Pratt and Whitney
Hartford, Connecticut

As expected, Pratt and Whitney marked the letter "Undeliverable" and returned it through the mail, where Jim received it a few days later. Despondent, he carried the letter around with him in the forlorn hope that he might meet Rosalind by chance somewhere.

Miraculously, he did connect with her three days before he shipped out. They spent a few short hours together and promised to write each other.

Both would keep that promise, and hundreds of letters were exchanged throughout the duration of WWII. Finally, after Jim was discharged from the Air Corps at the war's end, the two were married in

February 1946. They would enjoy 72 years of delightful married life before Rosalind's death in 2018.

A Dentist in Monticello

After the war, Jim wasn't sure what to do next. He had planned to study engineering, but he found he didn't have much interest in it anymore. His stepfather, who was a medical doctor, recommended dentistry.

"You know, you ought to consider dentistry," Jim recalled him saying. "Not medicine, now. With medicine, you have to get up in the middle of the night and go see somebody. In dentistry, you can wait till the next morning. It would be a good occupation."

Jim followed this advice and entered dental school, graduating in 1951. An exceptional student, he received membership in Omicron Kappa Upsilon, a National Honor Society for outstanding clinical skills and academic excellence in dentistry. He and Rosalind moved back to Monticello in 1953, where Dr. Sledge would serve as a dentist for the next forty years.

Jim had little money when he returned to his hometown, so he visited the Farmers & Merchants bank to obtain a loan to cover the cost of opening a dental office.

He recalled: "I went to see Judge Scott Clarke and told him, 'Judge, I'd like to borrow some money to buy some dental equipment.' He asked me: 'Well, what've you got for collateral?' 'I don't have anything except an education,' I said. He replied: 'Well, does your momma own the house she's living in?' 'Yes, sir.' 'Well, we'll just write that down then as your collateral.' He knew I'd pay that bill! And I did. He was a good businessman."

Many Monticello folks remember the decades Jim served as a dentist here. After setting up his small office, he set to work immediately.

"I kept regular eight to five hours office hours," he explained, "but the first day I was here, I worked till seven o'clock at night."

Locals knew Jim and trusted him with their teeth, so his office was constantly filled. He stayed busy throughout the week and also opened on Saturdays.

"I closed Thursday afternoon and stayed open on Saturdays," he recalled. "If you were a farmer, Saturday was your day to go to town. And if you could catch the dentist, he could fix your toothache on that day. Most people didn't have money to spend on fillings, so if the tooth hurt, they just had it removed. In the early days, most of my dentistry was pulling teeth."

Jim sometimes received farm produce in exchange for payment. Some of his patients paid cash, and others never paid at all. He offered dental work to anyone who needed it, whether they could pay him or not. Each year he provided dental packs to every third grader in the county, and once a month he offered a full day on which he provided free dental work for indigent children. Jim's compassion for the suffering and his concern for those in need provided dental assistance to people who otherwise couldn't afford to have their teeth cared for.

Jim discovered that his stepfather's advice was true, and he was usually home with his family in the evenings. Yet he did have a few night calls. Dr. John Brinson was one of the main doctors in Monticello at the time, and when he needed a set of dentures made, he couldn't find the time to visit Jim at his dental office during business hours.

"Dr. Brinson kept so busy that I had

to go to his office at night to make his dentures," Jim recalled. "After I closed up one evening, I gathered all my stuff together and climbed the stairs to his office to make the dentures."

The Jefferson County Historical Association

Besides his dental work, Jim kept busy with other local interests. In 1962, the Jefferson County Historical Association was created. It began small, with only fifty-five paid memberships. Sledge, at 38 years old, was elected as the association's first chairman. He didn't feel qualified for the position, but he agreed to accept as long as others were willing to assist.

He remembered: "They asked me if I'd be the chairman of the association, and I said, 'I'll be the chairman as long as Irma Linn is the secretary.' Irma was always so efficient. If she were your secretary, you wouldn't mind taking on any job they gave you. You knew it would be a success because she was in it."

One of Sledge's first acts as chairman was the purchase of the Wirick-Simmons House, one of the oldest structures standing in Jefferson County. The home, originally constructed in the early 1830s, was in a decrepit state when the historical association began raising funds for its purchase.

"It cost us \$25,000," Jim remembered.

The restoration of the house would require much more, but over the years it has been beautifully restored and now stands as an authentic representation of what homes in the town of Monticello looked like two hundred years ago.

Schools and Social Functions

In 1971, Jim was chairman of the



Dr. Jim Sledge



Jim served as a second lieutenant during WWII.



Jim as high school quarterback, 1942

committee that purchased the old school building in Aucilla and founded the Aucilla Christian Academy, an inter-denominational, private educational facility. The school was created with the advice and counsel of Rev. Raymond Blair. Attorney Buck Bird covered the legal aspects of the creation of the school.

"I don't think he charged anything for all that work on Aucilla," Jim noted. "He's such a generous man."

Jim was a longtime member of the local American Legion and Kiwanis clubs. He was also a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

Gary Wright explained, "This is an organization which focuses on the history of the Civil War and our local ancestors who served in the War. Dr. Sledge served as our chaplain, and at every meeting he opened and closed it with prayer."

Growing up, Jim had spent several years living with his grandmother, Hattie Sledge, who had lived through the Civil War. From her Jim learned firsthand what life had been like on the home front during the war and how hard the times had been for the mothers, wives and children left behind.

Gary Wright recalled, "When Dr. Sledge said his prayer in our meetings, he always mentioned the sacrifices our ancestors made – very compassionate comments about the women and the children." For others this might have been a matter of historical interest or study; for Jim, it was a personal memory of family members' stories which had touched him deeply as a child.

Boots Thomas Memorial

Of all his many endeavors, Jim is perhaps best known for the loyalty and recognition he paid to the memory of his boyhood friend Ernest "Boots" Thomas. The Thomas family moved to Monticello in 1934 when Jim was ten years old and rented a house not far from the Sledge home. Jim and Boots were the same age and quickly became the best of friends.

With the arrival of World War II, Boots Thomas enlisted in the Marines. He became a drill instructor and was promoted to the rank of platoon sergeant. In February 1945 he participated in the Battle of Iwo Jima, in which he and his platoon raised the first flag atop Mt. Suribachi. Boots was killed in action on March 3, 1945, a week short of his twenty-first birthday.

Jim was training as a bombardier in Texas when his mother called him to let him know that Boots Thomas had died.

"I just couldn't believe it," he wrote a friend a few days later. "It came over the radio last night, so it must be official."

Jim found it difficult to grasp that he would never see his best friend again.

"He was so smart and the type of

men we need on this side – figuring out things, and not over there being shot at," he wrote. "I don't see why some person like me couldn't have been in his place. There's nothing I wouldn't do for him. He was just the best guy that ever lived."

After the end of WWII, Sgt. Thomas' body was returned home and interred in Roseland Cemetery. Jim often visited the grave but spoke little about his lost friend.

"For years I couldn't even say the name Boots Thomas without breaking down and crying," he recalled. "I just couldn't talk about it."

More than two decades later, in February 1978, the Monticello News ran a front-page article about Boots Thomas in an attempt to raise awareness of this local unsung hero. Jim Sledge, Pat Smith (director of the chamber of commerce), and others realized it was time to commemorate Monticello's fallen son and joined together to keep the memory alive. Jim began telling the Boots Thomas story to schoolchildren across the county. Later that year, a fundraising committee was formed to raise money for the creation of a memorial to commemorate Sergeant Thomas.

Sledge chaired the committee and sent out letters asking for donations to erect a monument. The response was overwhelming.

Jim noted, "Letters came from people all over the state and all over the country. People would send us five dollars or maybe ten. A man from St. Pete gave \$500."

Little by little the funds grew until enough money had been raised to cover the cost of the marble slab memorial that stands in Monticello along West Washington Street today. The land was donated by two Marines.

When the monument was completed in February 1981, hundreds of folks – locals, congressmen from Washington, Iwo Jima veterans, distinguished military officials, and Thomas' brother and sister – gathered for the unveiling of the Platoon Sgt. Ernest I. "Boots" Thomas Memorial. Memorial bricks would later be added to recognize other local veterans. In 2024 a plaque was erected at the memorial to commemorate Dr. Jim Sledge's seven decades of dedication to preserving the memory of his boyhood friend.

Sunday School and Missions

Not all Jim's actions found their way into the spotlight. For more than forty years he taught Sunday school to the fifth and sixth graders at the First Baptist Church in Monticello. Generations of youngsters learned the books of the Bible and the elementary principles of Christianity through his dedicated, energetic and entertaining lessons. Fun-loving and full of jokes, Jim easily captured the hearts of

young people as he instilled in them the importance of love and compassion for others just as he had learned these values as a child. Jim's stories kept his young listeners enthralled and helped him introduce children to deeper truths.

"It's fun to listen to stories," he explained, "but the most important thing is understanding who God is. Even a child needs to learn this. Sometimes it's difficult because we can't see God, but even the littlest children need to learn and understand what faith is."

On several occasions Jim combined his dental profession and his love for others by joining in medical mission trips to Central America and the islands of the Caribbean. Residents of the islands often had no access to dental care, and Sledge would find himself busy from the time he landed until he left. When he arrived in Barbados in 1989, the local missionary had alerted people to the arrival of a dentist. Jim rose early the next morning and walked to the little cinderblock building where the clinic was being held. The sun had barely risen, but there was already a long line of people waiting to have their teeth pulled.

"We left the windows open," Jim reminisced, "and every once in a while a chicken would fly up and perch on the sill to see what we were doing inside."

He offered his services free of charge, but some of the patients expressed their gratitude in gifts. One woman kept her hands cupped together as he extracted her tooth. After he finished, the woman opened her hands and offered Jim a fresh chicken egg which she had carefully guarded during the procedure.



For decades Jim Sledge planted flowers and managed the upkeep of the Boots Thomas Memorial.

Local Honors

In 1982, Jim was nominated as the parade marshal for the Jefferson County's annual Watermelon Festival in recognition of his many years of dedicated, selfless service to his community. He would continue to receive accolades throughout his life.

In 2018, the county commissioners passed a special resolution in Jim's honor for his 94th birthday. A community birthday celebration was held at the chamber of commerce, and Governor Rick Scott sent a letter thanking Sledge for his lifetime of achievements in his home state of Florida. The governor's letter read in part: "As governor and a U.S. Navy veteran, I am

pleased to recognize you for your dedication and commitment throughout seven decades to honor the courageous sacrifice during World War II of United States Marine Platoon Sergeant Ernest I. 'Boots' Thomas. Thank you for working to make sure the Monticello community, Florida and our nation will never forget the sacrifices made by Sergeant Thomas and other fallen soldiers."

Jim Sledge received countless honors throughout his long life. Aspects of his life and career have also been preserved in several local books, including (among others) *Remembering Yesterday: Growing Up in Small-Town America*; *Till Then and Forever: The Wartime Letters of Jim and Roz*, the personal side of WWII; and a children's book, *Just Jim: a Little Boy, a Time of Trouble*, and a Faithful God.

Living for Eternity

Jim celebrated his 100th birthday in 2024.

By this time he had outlived all his childhood friends and would joke, "I have to go down to the cemetery to see anybody I know!"

As his health began to deteriorate at 100 years old, Jim would sometimes broach the topic of death and his funeral. He had attended innumerable funerals in his long life.

"People give good eulogies," he'd say, "but maybe they shouldn't have waited until the funeral to do it."

One piece of advice he often gave was this: "If you have something nice to say about someone, don't wait until their eulogy to say it – tell them now!"

This was something he exemplified throughout his own life. He always had a kind word and a heartfelt piece of encouragement for everyone he met.

Jim was a man who managed to find something good about everyone. Even for those difficult-to-get-along-with people, he rarely had a harsh word to say; he always found a way to cast things in a better light and appreciate people for the good qualities they possessed.

Gary Wright recalled, "He was loved by everybody. And why was he loved by everybody? I think fundamentally because he was a true Christian. He represented Christianity in every way."

Jim exemplified the words of 1 John 3:8, "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth." He didn't just talk about caring for people; he actually cared and did something about it.

On April 27, 2025, Jim Sledge passed into eternity. He has left a pair of shoes that will be difficult to fill, but he also has left a lifetime of Christian example and precious memories that will be cherished forever. ■



Love captured on camera: Jim and Rosalind Sledge as newlyweds, 1946



Jim and Rosalind enjoyed 72 years of happily ever after.



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Since he started playing paintball at age 11, Barker has earned a reputation as a versatile athlete and traveled up the ranks to D-1.

WARREN BARKER

On the Path to Professional Paintball

Story by Hailey Heseltine

*Photographs Courtesy
of the Barker Family*

Many parents imagine that their children will take up some kind of sport as they grow up. Families often anticipate going out on Saturday afternoons to watch games of softball, soccer, football or tennis. If the child is skilled, they might even find themselves traveling for varsity games and bringing home a college scholarship. With sports being a profound part of so many people's lives, having at least one child become an athlete is very common.

Paintball, however, is a sport that's probably pretty far down on the list of expected paths. Yet, that's reality for the Barker family. At the age of 16, Warren Barker, the youngest son of Kenny and Joanne Barker, is already a D-1 semi-professional paintballer.

When Monticello resident Warren

Barker first started playing paintball at age 11, it was only a hobby.

"My dad played paintball when he was younger," Barker explains, "and I went out one day with him and my brother, as my brother was getting into it. As they started going out more and more, I started showing up, 'cause I didn't have anything to do. I started playing with 50 cal [.50 caliber], and then eventually I started playing with the big boys and with my dad and brother."

Though he had tried his hand in other sports, he quickly discovered that paintball was something special.

"It was just a lot of fun to me," he says. "I was having fun playing and learning. It was something I could hold on to. Overall, it's like the safest way to get adrenaline. It was like going on a rollercoaster every time I played."

It was that same year that he decided he wanted to start competing,

and so he began playing tournaments in Orlando. Entering the world of competition made him realize that he had a lot to learn, not only about the game, but also about what it means to be a team and how to play against unfamiliar opponents.

"Everyone around you has a paintball gun and a paintball marker, and you can't underestimate anyone's ability, or even overestimate anyone," he says. "It's a game of skill, but it's also a game of luck. You could be the best player in the world and lose to the worst player in the world. You also have to be good at communication. You have to practice it all and to take the sport seriously to get better."

Barker's father, Kenny, recalls, "It wasn't immediate, but when he said he wanted to start playing tournaments, we assembled the team, and he just had that thing about him. I always felt like he had

the potential to play at a higher level than where he was at, and then every time he was bumped to a higher level, he showed again that he had the potential to play at a higher level. I'd say probably about two years ago, he was displaying some potential that if he stuck with it a little bit longer, then he could eventually become pro. I'm not going to say that it's inevitable, but he possesses everything he needs: the knowledge, skills and abilities to play at the highest level for one of the best teams out there."

He continues, "When Warren started, he was in D-6, which is the bottom of the barrel. Every year, Warren has gone up to the next division. Every time they play a tournament, they're assigned points as a team and as players. As they accumulate those points, typically the better they do, and the more that lends itself towards experience and skill level. It will automatically bump you to the next division up. Since he started playing at 11, he's gone up a division every year, and naturally, the jump from D-2 to semi-pro is a pretty substantial jump. The jump from semi-pro to pro is even greater. He may not go pro next year, but he is definitely on the radar for turning pro, and the team that he practices with, Tampa Bay Damage, is a top tier pro team, which kind of puts him in that status too."

As Barker rose up the ranks each year of competition, he also traveled across the United States and beyond for tournaments, gaining a reputation as a skilled and versatile player. A highlight of his career so far was the 2025 United Paintball Federation World Championship in Dreux, France, which he was selected to compete in as part of the Team USA U-16 division. His team ultimately brought home the gold medal for their division, as well as U-19 scoring gold and the men's team attaining second place.

"I got to win with all my friends," recalls Barker, "kids from my team, other teams. They were great people, and I think we went undefeated, so it was awesome."

Another big win was when he played with a team called Livewire in the Maximum Velocity Paintball Series, bringing home for trophy for D-3. Even though winning is a great feeling, he also acknowledges that there are other ways in which paintball has enriched his life.

"Probably the biggest benefit is that I've learned how to talk to people, like going up to pros and stuff. That was a big thing for me, just talking to people, learning how to speak socially, how to interact. Being able to communicate



Though it first started out as a hobby, Warren Barker now regularly competes in tournaments between his classes at Florida High and family obligations. He hopes to become a member of pro team Tampa Bay Damage.

with your teammates is big," Barker says. "I like hanging out with my friends, my teammates, like during all those dinners that we've had. That, and being able to travel and see all different places. I've been to France, Cincinnati, Chicago ... It's been really cool."

Today, Barker's home team is the under 21 league Legacy Factory, located in Lakeland, Florida, where he travels about 32 weeks out of the year to practice. Since Barker is a junior at Florida High in Tallahassee, he faces a balancing act in juggling his duties as

student and athlete. Traveling to Lakeland so frequently, he has very little free time, especially on weekends when students would typically be catching up on homework and other projects. Because of this, he's had to learn valuable time management skills. It's his usual practice to get as much done ahead of time as possible when he has an assignment. With so much of his time dedicated to paintball, procrastination is not an option.

"It's not completely un-doable, since it's usually weekends and long



Warren (left) is pictured with father Kenny Barker (right) after the big win in France last year. This September, he will be returning to compete in the United Paintball Federation World Championship for the Team USA U-19 division.



Warren Barker (center) is grateful to have the support of his parents, Kenny (left) and Joanne (right).

weekend tournaments,” explains dad Kenny Barker. “Even when there’s travel, you might miss a Thursday or Friday or something, but as long as we schedule it and keep up with the school, it seems to be so far working. It is certainly a balance. It’s not easy, but luckily for him and for us, he’s a great student. That takes the difficult part out of the equation. If his grades were tanking, he wouldn’t be progressing through paintball like he is, but he’s very disciplined.”

As much dedication as it takes for Warren to be a D-1 paintballer, it also requires sacrifices of time and effort on the part of his parents. Thankfully, it’s a sacrifice they’re willing to make to help him become the best player he can.

“The level where we’re at, and if he wants to play at the highest level, it’s a commitment that we’ve had to make, too. It hasn’t been easy, not by any means, but to see him progress as a young man and athlete, and to potential reach his dreams — well, it’s kind of what we’re here for,” says Kenny.

Mom Joanne adds, “I think that it’s great that he’s outdoors, and like with any team sport, he’s got good friends and is learning good skills, like communicating and strategizing and cheering one another on, and having good outcomes in the process.”

Along the way, the family has had the opportunity to tie in memorable

family vacations during their travels. Las Vegas, Zion National Park, Bryce Canyon, Switzerland, Germany and of course France are some of the places they’ve been able to go and make lifelong friends along the way.

The burden will get easier to bear as Warren grows up, graduates high school and keeps finding his own way in paintball. He now has his driver’s license, which means that he will soon be bringing himself to practice in Lakeland, and Dad will have a little more time to himself for fishing.

If Barker ends up becoming a member of pro team Tampa Bay Damage as he hopes, he would consider moving to Tampa and going to college there. Since professional paintballers often “don’t make a crazy amount of money,” he has plans to help him along the way. Currently, he’s enrolled in a dual-enrollment program for HVAC at Lively Technical College in Tallahassee. He will likely have his HVAC certification before he graduates from Florida High. As Barker jokes, “Florida is only going to get hotter,” so he expects it to be a stable career option. He is also working on creating a paintball brand called War Dog, which is currently in its startup phase.

“A lot of players are known for their brands,” he explains. “If I ever did get super popular, that would be another

way for me to have an income.”

What’s on the horizon for Barker? Despite a basketball injury slowing him down earlier this summer, he made the tryout for this year’s U-19 division at the United Paintball Federation World Championship, which means he’ll be heading to France this September to compete. While he’s in Europe, he will be participating in the National X-Ball League of Europe Tournament as a guest player on one of the European teams. Though he does not know which one he will be competing on yet, he has received an offer from Five Star, a professional Spanish team.

As Barker enters increasingly professional tournaments, teams and spaces, he hopes to get as many wins as possible while also getting his name out and building a great reputation. He is grateful for the support of his coach, Matt Carothers, his parents and his team for every day bringing him closer to his goals — and closer to going pro.

Reflecting on how Warren started, Kenny says, “Paintball is a very, very safe sport compared to some other sports out there. It is safe, it is fun, and I would encourage parents to take their kids to a paintball field and give it a try. You never know where your children’s interests are going to be, and they could be really good at it. If nothing else, it can be a lot of fun to play.” ■



In 2025, Barker traveled to France to compete in the United Paintball Federation World Championship for the Team USA U-16 division. His team ended up bringing home gold.



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In 2016, Major Beatrice Livingston won the Correctional Officer of the Year award from the MCSO, showing her dedication to serving her community.

MAJOR BEATRICE LIVINGSTON

Breaking Barriers Through Service

Story by Hailey Waldo

Photographs Courtesy of the Madison County Sheriff's Office

To Major Beatrice Livingston, success was never about titles or climbing the ranks. To her, showing up everyday, working hard and doing the job to the best of her ability was enough for her. That mindset has guided her through a remarkable career in corrections and law enforcement, one that ultimately led her to become the first female major and jail administrator in the history of the Madison County Sheriff's Office (MCSO). Livingston officially was introduced as the chief jail administrator on February 14, 2026.

Raised in the small town of Monticello, Livingston learned the values of hard work, perseverance and dedication at an early age. Those values would later shape both her personal life and professional career. In 1998, she moved to Madison, where she and her husband, Odell Livingston Jr., built a life centered on family. Married for 30 years, the couple has raised five children

and now enjoys the blessing of six grandchildren.

While Livingston's childhood dream was to become a nurse, life had a different path in store for her. Like many people beginning their careers, she was motivated by a simple message: to provide for her family. That desire led her into corrections, a profession she never expected would become a lifelong calling. She began her career in corrections in 2003, while attending the North Florida Community College Public Safety Academy.

"Once I became a correctional officer, I had amazing role models placed in my path to help guide me through," Livingston said. "Some of those mentors are still in my life today."

Those role models helped shape her approach to leadership and service. Rather than focusing on promotion or recognition, Livingston concentrated on learning as much as possible about every aspect of the profession. Her education came primarily through hands-on experience and specialized

training. On May 24, 2024, Livingston graduated from the Florida Sheriff's Association's Commander's Academy Class 15, completing the two-week course along with 36 other Sheriff's Office personnel. The Commander's Academy is an exceptionally informative and educational experience focused on the future public safety leaders of the next generation. Livingston gained knowledge on leadership, ethics, discipline and additional subject matter. Over the years, she developed a deep understanding of correctional operations by working in a variety of assignments and embracing opportunities to learn.

As a correctional officer at Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, she attended advance career development trainings and performed many duties such as classification officer, sex offender registration, felony DNA collections and many others, all of which led her to being promoted to Corporal in 2007 and Sergeant in 2011. One area that particularly impacted her career was classification.

"I enjoyed working in classification the most. It allowed me to learn different areas of the profession," Livingston stated.

That willingness to learn proved valuable as she advanced through the ranks. Yet, the road was not always easy.

As a woman working in a traditionally male-dominated profession, Livingston faced challenges that required confidence.

"The challenges were being authentic and being myself as a woman in a male-dominated profession while earning the respect I knew I deserved," she explained.

Rather than changing who she was to fit expectations, Livingston remained true to herself. Through consistent performance, professionalism and dedication, she earned the respect of both her peers and supervisors. In 2012, Livingston stepped away from corrections for a year to pursue the dream she has carried since childhood, becoming a nurse.

Yet, as she reflects today, she believes God had different plans for her life. After leaving the profession, she eventually began a new chapter with the MCSO, where her leadership abilities and years of experience continued to shine. Livingston officially started her career at the MCSO in 2013 as a detention deputy. Livingston received Correctional Officer of the Year in 2016, a prestigious recognition to honor corrections professionals who demonstrate exceptional courage, leadership and service.

"It was an honor receiving Correctional Officer of the Year. Just doing my job and whatever else needed to be done is what led to the award," Livingston explained.

Afterwards, in 2021, Livingston was promoted to Lieutenant, where she was responsible for classification, PREA, visitation, educational groups for inmates and food service. She continued to attend advanced training courses to enhance her proficiency in the detention profession, such as internal affairs, jail inspection, disciplinary, Florida Model Jail Standards and more, showing her deep commitment to her profession. Now, Livingston is a certified jail inspector for the State of Florida and a member of the Florida Sheriff's Association.

She believes some of the greatest contributions come from people who are willing to step forward when something needs attention.

"Often you hear people say, 'It's not my job,' but my thought process is if you see it needs to be done to help the facility run smoother, then it's your job," Livingston said.

That attitude has become one of the defining characteristics of her leadership style. Today, as jail administrator, Livingston oversees the daily operation of the facility, ensuring that both staff and inmates are cared for and that the jail operates safely and efficiently.

"Whatever the day brings, I just roll with it," Livingston added.

The position requires flexibility, decision-making and most importantly, the ability to calmly respond to challenges as they arise. It is a responsibility she carries with pride. One of the most significant milestones of her career came when she became the first woman in MCSO's history to achieve the rank of major and serve as jail administrator.

Despite her accomplishments, Livingston considers her greatest achievements to be found outside the workplace.

"My greatest accomplishments are raising amazing kids who value themselves as well as having good work ethics," Livingston said.

Family remains at the center of her life, providing her motivation throughout her career journey. When she is not working, Livingston enjoys spending time at home, cooking, baking and relaxing with family. Those moments offer a welcome balance to the demands of managing a correctional facility.

Looking back, Livingston says her career was never driven by desire for rank or recognition.



Undersheriff Chris Andrews and Major Beatrice Livingston

"Becoming the first female to hold the rank of major and jail administrator for the MCSO is an honor. It's an achievement I'm deeply proud of, not only for myself, but for the women who may follow behind me," Livingston said.

Her success also shows how opportunities for women in corrections and law enforcement have evolved since she first entered the profession.

"A lot has changed for women since I entered this profession," Livingston noted.

To women considering careers in law enforcement or corrections, Livingston shared her take.

"Just be yourself and work hard at adding value to the profession. Always strive to do your best, and success will follow."

She continued to say, "My mindset was never focused on climbing the ranks. It was always about learning everything I could to do the job the best way possible and taking pride in the work I performed every day."

Her message to the next generation shows her dedication to her hard work and faith.

"Just continue to work hard, even when it's hard. Your work will always speak for you, even when you think it's going unnoticed," Livingston said.

Through decades of commitment to her profession, her family and her community, she has proven that true leadership is not measured in titles alone, but the impact made along the way. ■



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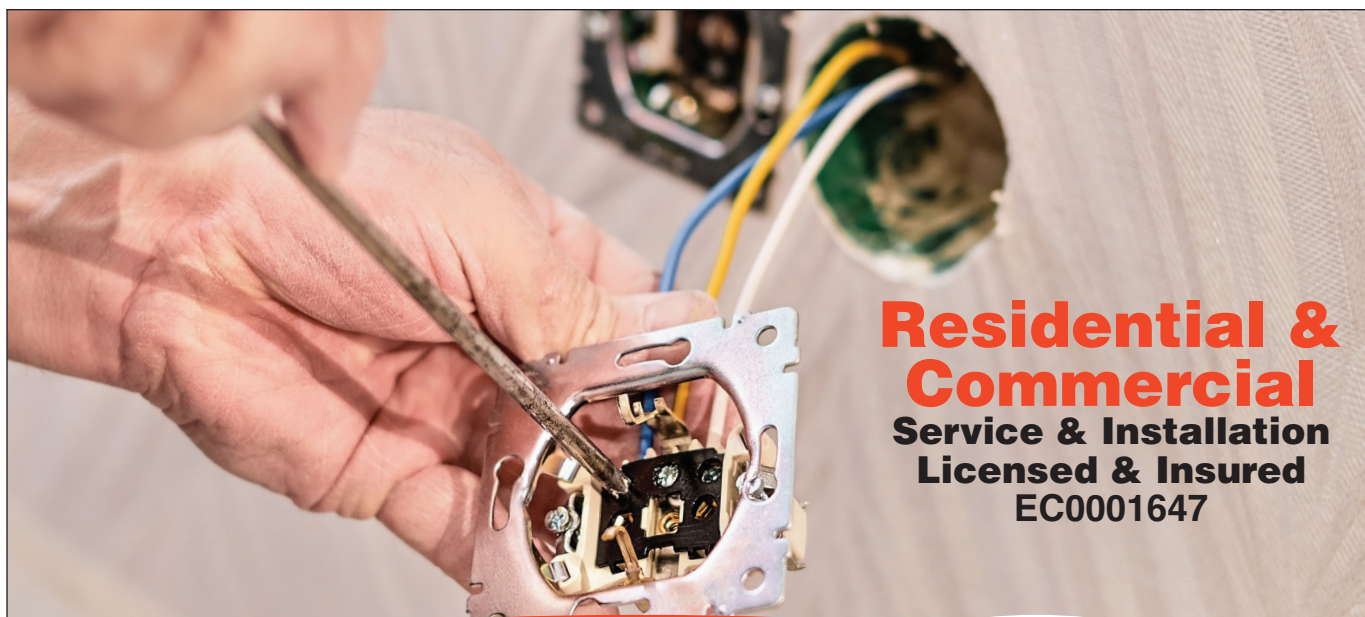
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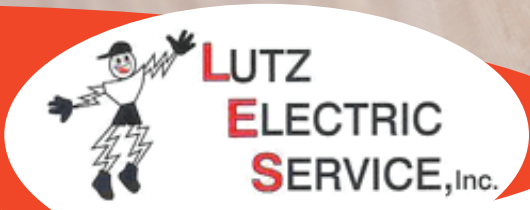
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How Seth Adams Brings Hamilton County to the Big Screen

Story by Danny Federico

Photographs Courtesy of Seth Adams

For as long as he can remember, Hamilton County native Seth Adams wanted to make movies.

Like many childhood dreams, it could have faded with age. Instead, it followed him into adulthood, through college, back to his family's fifth-generation farm in Jennings and eventually onto movie screens with *The Legend of Yella George*, an independent horror film inspired by one of the county's local legends.

Today, after completing its festival run and entering the distribution stage, Adams finds himself looking back on a journey that transformed an idea in his head into a feature film.

"I'm glad it's over," Adams said, adding that it was surreal to watch an idea that began in his imagination become a feature film despite limited money, resources and experience.

Inspired by a local legend, *The Legend of Yella George* follows a detective investigating the disappearance of his wife in rural Hamilton County. As he searches for answers, folklore and reality begin to blur, drawing him into the mystery surrounding Yella George. The abandoned home tied to the tale sits in the woods on the Adams family property and has long been the subject of stories passed down through generations. Part of the tale claims a pair of glowing yellow eyes can be seen on the night of a full moon.

The film recently earned the Best Florida Fright award at the Indie Horror Junkie Film Festival, which took place in March. However, Adams said the recognition, while meaningful, wasn't the accomplishment that affected him the most.

Instead, he points to the Central Florida Film Festival held in January in Mount Dora, Florida, where he watched *The Legend of Yella George* inside a movie theater.

"That was the biggest deal to me," he said. "Since I was 8 years old, it's been a dream of mine to see a movie of mine play on the big screen. That day, it happened."

The road to that moment wasn't easy.

Creating the film meant overcoming countless obstacles that independent

filmmakers often face, from limited budgets to finding locations and recreating realistic scenes. Because much of the film centers on law enforcement, authenticity was important.

Fortunately, relationships Adams had established within the community helped make that possible. The Hamilton County Sheriff's Office allowed Adams and his crew to use patrol vehicles, uniforms and portions of its facilities while filming, giving the production a level of realism that otherwise would have been impossible to achieve.

"You get the realism from that," Adams said. "It's true production value."

Still, technical challenges weren't always the hardest part. There were moments when Adams questioned whether he should continue at all.

He remembers comparing himself to major Hollywood directors and wondering whether the project was worth finishing. However, a conversation with a friend helped change his perspective.

After Adams admitted he wanted to quit, his friend asked a simple question: Would this movie be better than the last one he made? When Adams answered yes, the response was equally simple.

"Okay, then what's the problem?" Adams recalled. "It's better than that."

Support from the cast and crew became another source of motivation.

Adams recalled filming outside the



Brown Lantern in Live Oak on a cold Sunday night. Cast and crew members, many of whom weren't being paid for their participation, stood outside in freezing temperatures, wrapping themselves in blankets between takes.

He expected people to walk away. Instead, one crew member approached him afterward and asked when the next filming day would be.

"I expected everybody to quit on me," Adams said. "Not only did they not





quit, they were asking me, ‘When are we doing this again?’”

Another cast member drove several hours while pregnant and dealing with severe nausea just to make a filming session, never complaining despite the difficult conditions.

Those moments, he said, reminded him that other people believed in the project just as much as he did.

Although Adams has established himself as a filmmaker, he still credits his upbringing on the family farm for shaping the person behind the camera. Rather than influencing the stories themselves, farming instilled a work ethic that carried over into the craft.

“My parents never let me stop if I

started something,” he said. “If you’re going to start it, you’ve got to finish it.”

That determination also explains why he continues to tell stories rooted close to home. Growing up in Hamilton County gave him an appreciation for the area’s quiet character and overlooked history.

People outside North Central Florida may not know where Hamilton County is, he said, but they don’t realize the stories hidden there.

“There’s more to the woods than what you see from the roads,” Adams said.

Now, with *The Legend of Yella George* having completed its festival run, Adams has reached another milestone: the film is officially available to stream on

Fawesome.

He’s also written another screenplay — a personal project documenting peanut farming and his family’s agricultural legacy.

Adams encourages anyone pursuing a creative passion not to compare themselves to others or become discouraged by the crowded world of online content. Instead, he says, keep creating.

As for his own motivation to continue making movies, Adams admits he still can’t fully explain it.

“I don’t know where this came from,” he said. “It’s just in my blood.”

To learn more about *The Legend of Yella George*, visit yellageorge.com. ■





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IRON SHARPENS IRON:



Sam and Will Wainwright during their graduation photoshoot in 2024. / Photograph by Lily Townsend/Lou's Photography

The Lifelong Rivalry That Forged SAM AND WILL WAINWRIGHT INTO CHAMPIONS

Story by Danny Federico

For most of their lives, twin brothers Sam and Will Wainwright have had someone standing beside them who refused to let the other get too comfortable.

Whether they were playing sports, competing around the house or, eventually, stepping into the Suwannee High School weight room, neither particularly enjoyed losing.

"We've always been competitive," Sam said. "Whether it was sports, games or just everyday things, we pushed each other to be better."

Will remembers it much the same way.

"We've been competitive for as long as I can remember," he said. "Whether we were playing sports or just messing around at home, neither of us wanted to lose."

That competitive streak eventually helped the Live Oak natives become state champion weightlifters and record holders. However, neither brother originally entered the weight room with dreams of championships. At first, they were simply football players who wanted to get stronger.

"I wanted to become stronger, more explosive and help my performance on the field," Sam said. "Before long, I realized I enjoyed Olympic weightlifting even more than football."

Will followed a similar path. He played football and competed in track and field while at Suwannee High School, but it was Coach Dan Marsee who introduced him to competitive weightlifting.

"He always believed I could be successful if I stayed committed," Will said. "Coach Marsee had a huge impact on my development as an athlete."

As each brother learned the sport, they both quickly discovered that success required more than raw strength. Technique, patience and consistency became just as important.

"You can be strong, but if your technique isn't there, you won't reach your full potential," Will said.

Before long, the brothers began winning competitions and setting their

sights higher.

For Sam, that shift came as he began winning competitions and chasing state records. For Will, competing at larger meets showed him how far the sport could take him. Either way, each had a training partner who was unwilling to let him coast by.

Although they competed in different weight classes, the separation did little to temper their rivalry.

"If one of us had a great day in the gym, the other wanted to match it or beat it," Sam said. "We constantly challenged each other."

Will said training alongside his brother kept him accountable.

"Seeing how hard he worked made me want to match that effort every day," he said.

Their competitiveness extended beyond themselves, though. Sam said growing up in an athletic family made

hard work feel normal. The two also pushed themselves to surpass records set by their older brother.

Still, the rivalry between the twins remained friendly. They celebrated each other's victories while each wanted to put up the better numbers in training.

That competitiveness also meant brotherly encouragement did not always sound particularly encouraging.

"He motivated me with insults," Sam said, explaining how Will helped him recover from a disappointing meet.

Will described essentially the same strategy.

"He'd usually joke with me or give me a hard time, but it always helped me move on and get focused on the next competition," he said.

The formula worked. During their time at Suwannee High School, both brothers collected multiple state championships.



During a 2022 weightlifting meet at Suwannee High School, Sam (center) broke the school's record in the 169-pound class with a 300-pound clean and jerk. Will (right) was close behind in second place with a 270-pound lift. Their performance led them to a state championship appearance. / Photograph by Leslie Slaughter

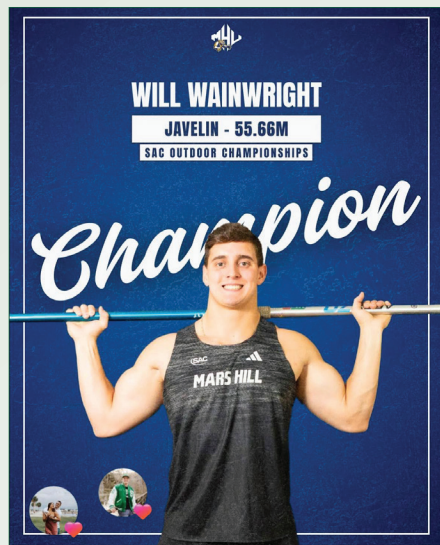
Sam's senior season culminated in state championships in both the traditional and Olympic disciplines at 199 pounds. He posted a 660-pound Olympic total, including a 380-pound clean and jerk, setting state records along the way.

"My senior-year FHSAA (Florida High School Athletic Association) State Championship stands out the most because I broke the state record in front of a packed crowd," Sam said. "That's a moment I'll never forget."

He later earned medals at Junior Nationals and the U23 National Championships, accomplishments he said



Sam Wainwright (center) competed in The Praelium 10th Anniversary competition, which took place Aug. 1 and Aug. 2. His performance resulted in a 310 kilogram lift, earning himself a gold medal. / Photograph by Debbie Ann



Will Wainwright claimed the title of champion in the javelin event of the South Atlantic Conference Outdoor Championships with a throw of 55.66 meters. / Photograph Courtesy of Mars Hill University

proved he could compete with some of the country's best lifters.

Will capped his high school weightlifting career with an Olympic state championship at 219 pounds in 2024, posting a 600-pound total. He also excelled outside the weight room, competing in football and becoming one of the Bulldogs' top throwers in track and field. As a senior, he finished second at state in the javelin, third in the shot put and sixth in the discus.

"Winning my final state championship stands out the most because it was the perfect way to finish my high school career after years of hard work," Will said.

Despite the medals and records, both brothers point to something less tangible when explaining their success: consistency.

"We showed up every day, trusted the process and stayed committed even when progress wasn't immediate," Sam said.

Will echoed his brother, saying weightlifting ultimately taught him that discipline and consistency matter more than talent.

Now, two years after graduating from Suwannee High School, the brothers are once again sharing a campus as they begin to carve out separate paths. Both attend Mars Hill University in North Carolina.

Sam is majoring in business administration and continues to compete in Olympic weightlifting at the national level. He hopes to continue improving his national results while pursuing business opportunities and entrepreneurship after college.

Will is studying allied health sciences with a concentration in physical therapy.



Will and Sam Wainwright pose with the medals they received from the 2022 Class 2A State Championship. / Photograph by Leslie Slaughter

He competes in both weightlifting and track and field at Mars Hill University, although his primary focus has shifted toward track and improving his performance in the javelin. However, his long-term goals include becoming a physical therapist and eventually opening his own gym.

Their futures may be beginning to diverge, but both still look back on their years in Suwannee County in much the same way.

The championships matter. So do the records. However, so do the ordinary days in the weight room that led to them. Looking back on their experiences, each offered nearly identical advice to their younger selves.

"Don't rush to the next goal because, someday, you'll look back and realize those everyday practices became your favorite memories," Sam said.

"Enjoy the process, because those everyday moments end up being the ones you'll remember most," Will said.

Although their accomplishments have taken them beyond Live Oak, neither has forgotten where the journey began.

"Don't let where you're from limit what you believe is possible," Sam advised young athletes. "If you're willing to work consistently, stay disciplined, and believe in yourself, you can accomplish more than you ever imagined."

Will offered much the same message.

"Never think a small town limits what you can accomplish," he said. "If you're willing to put in the work every day, you can compete with anyone."

For two brothers who grew up pushing, challenging and refusing to let the other get ahead, that is, perhaps, the lesson they proved to each other first. ■



Will and Sam Wainwright hold up their 2023-24 FHSAA Class 1A Championship weightlifting scoresheets. / Photograph by Leslie Slaughter



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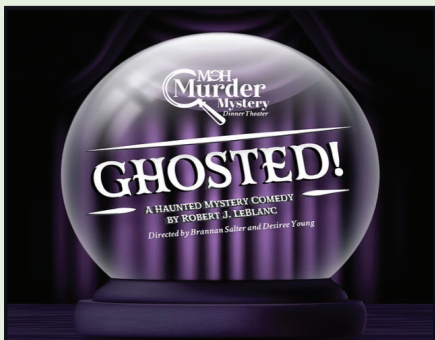
WHAT'S HAPPENING

SEPTEMBER

NOW - SEPTEMBER 30

2026 Best of Riverbend Nominations Open

Nominees must live, work or do business in Hamilton, Lafayette or Suwannee counties. Categories include Small Business of the Year, Large Business of the Year, Best Business in Customer Service, Best Individual in Customer Service, Non-Profit of the Year, New Business of the Year, Young Professional of the Year, Outstanding Volunteer of the Year and Hometown Hero of the Year. Nominate through Sept. 30 at riverbendnews.org/riverbend-events/2026-best-of-riverbend-community-choice.



SEPTEMBER 4-20

Ghosted! – Murder Mystery Dinner Theater at MOH

Celebrity medium Isaac Ghouliston holds a séance at Houlstone Manor, his ancestral home that is rumored to be haunted by a bevy of ghosts. This interactive performance is a “let your hair down” good time, performed in the Perkins Banquet Hall of the Monticello Opera House. For ticket information, call 850-997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

SEPTEMBER 5-30

Swamp Buddha Sumi-e Old Friends New Brush Strokes at JAG

This exhibit features sumi-e artwork by a regional collective of ink-wash painters. Jefferson Arts Gallery (575 W. Washington St., Monticello) is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling 850-997-3311.

SEPTEMBER 12

Madison Local Market

From 9 a.m. until 3 p.m., enjoy a wide variety of local goods at Four Freedoms Park, in downtown Madison.

SEPTEMBER 19

First Responders and Friends Special Needs Field Day

Suwannee County Fire Rescue, the Florida Department of Health and the Suwannee High School Allied Health Program host a First Responders and Friends Special Needs Field Day, beginning at 10 a.m. at the First Federal SportsPlex (1201 Silas Dr. S.W., Live Oak).

SEPTEMBER 25-26

Smokin' in the Pines BBQ Festival

This is the largest and longest running BBQ competition in Florida and has all the ingredients for an awesome weekend of fun for the whole family! Live music Friday and Saturday, over 100 craft and food trucks, BBQ Tasting, Kid's Que Competition (must pre-register) Kid's Fun Zone, Volkswagen Bug Show and more! FREE to attend the event. BBQ Tasting People's Choice tickets are on sale on Eventbrite. For more information visit www.smokininthepinesbbq.com or call 850-584-5366.



SEPTEMBER 26

Wild Things Bash: 6th Year Celebration

The North Florida Wildlife Center (1386 Cook Rd., Lamont) is six years old! Celebrate 9 a.m.-4 p.m. with free goat feeding, free face painting, animal encounters, local food and drink and more. Online tickets are half price; regular price at the door. For more information call 850-347-0921, email info@northfloridawildlife.org or visit www.northfloridawildlife.org.

SEPTEMBER 26

Redeemed! Youth Rally

Suwannee Station Baptist Church (3289

101st Lane, Live Oak) invites youth across North Central Florida to participate in its third annual Redeemed! Youth Rally. For more information or to learn how to get involved, contact Sheila Pittman at 386-397-4883.

OCTOBER

OCTOBER 2

Patsy & Loretta Together Again at MOH

This tribute concert features the country music of vocal sensations Patsy Cline and Loretta Lynn on the historic upstairs stage at the Monticello Opera House. For ticket information, call 850-997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

OCTOBER 2-3

Third Annual Falling into Cash Bulls, Broncs and Barrels Rodeo

Over two exciting nights at the Hamilton County Arena (165 Robin Ave. S.W., Jasper), see bulls, broncos, barrel racing and plenty of family-friendly entertainment. Gates open at 6 p.m., and the show begins at 8 p.m. Admission is \$10 for ages 10 and up, \$5 for ages 6-9 and free for ages 5 and under.

OCTOBER 3

Live Oak Elks Lodge Golf Tournament

Elks Lodge No. 1165 hosts its annual Golf Tournament at Suwannee Country Club (7932 U.S. 90, Live Oak). Tee times are 8 a.m. for the first flight and 1 p.m. for the second flight. Entry is \$75 per person or \$225 per three-man team. Each extra player costs \$25. Entry includes 18 holes of golf, lunch and beverages, and a dinner/dance celebration afterward. To sign up, call Daniel Bennett at 386-362-9180 or the Elks Lodge at 386-362-1165.

OCTOBER 6

Spell for Evangeline Homeschool Spelling Bee

Registration is open for the second annual Spell for Evangeline Homeschool Spelling Bee, which begins at 4 p.m. All funds raised will support Evangeline, a young Suwannee County girl battling childhood cancer. To register, visit spellforevangeline.my.canva.site.

OCTOBER 6-13

Scarecrow Pageant Entry Drop-off

Hearthstone Botanical Gardens (3300

WHAT'S HAPPENING

134th Pl., Wellborn) hosts a Scarecrow Pageant featuring entries from businesses and individuals across North Central Florida. Enter between Oct. 6 and Oct. 13. Categories include Children and Youth Groups; Adults and Families; Businesses and Organizations; and Field Scarecrows. Entries will remain on display until after the Scarecrow Pageant Festival on Saturday, Oct. 17. For more details, visit www.hearthstonebotanicalgardens.org.

OCTOBER 8-11

Suwannee Roots Revival

The Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park and Campground (9379 C.R. 132, Live Oak) invites you to this family-friendly festival. Enjoy four days of Americana, folk and bluegrass music, along with camping, yoga, music workshops and more. To purchase tickets, visit suwanneerootsrevival.com.



OCTOBER 10

Pioneer Day

Head over to Veterans Memorial Park (123 S.W. C.R. 300, Mayo) for the Lafayette County Chamber of Commerce's 46th annual Pioneer Day. Enjoy a variety of vendors 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Don't forget to find a spot for the parade, which begins at 10 a.m. For more information about visiting or being a vendor, see lafayetteflchamber.com/pioneer-day.

OCTOBER 10

Pioneer Day Art Show

During Pioneer Day, the Mayo Woman Club hosts an art show inside the Lafayette State Bank (340 W. Main St., Mayo). The display lasts 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Artists can enter two pieces per category. Artwork must be original, created within the last three years and ready to display (framed with wire hangers). Cash prizes and ribbons will be awarded, including Best of Show.

OCTOBER 10-11

FL-GA Fall Farm Tour 2025

Visit farms, ranches and orchards across the region during this amazing educational

and family event. For more information, follow FL-Ga Farm Tour on Facebook.

OCTOBER 16-17

Liberty in Stitches

The Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park (10405 Foster Barnes Dr., White Springs) hosts its Liberty in Stitches: Honoring America's History Through Quilting show 9 a.m.-4 p.m. daily. View a variety of quilts, visit craft vendors and enjoy history exhibits, demonstrations and displays. For more information, visit StephenFosterCSO.org.



Suwannee River Roundup Pro Rodeo

Suwannee Parks and Recreation hosts its sixth annual Suwannee River Roundup Pro Rodeo at the Bob Holmes Arena (1302 11th St., Live Oak). Gates open at 6 p.m. each night, and the action begins at 7:30 p.m. See bull riding, bronco riding, steer wrestling, breakaway roping, calf roping and team roping. Adult tickets are \$10, kids tickets for ages 6-12 are \$5, and free for children under 5.

OCTOBER 16-25

The Crucible at MOH

The Monticello Opera House presents Arthur Miller's classic play that dramatizes the 1692 Salem witch trials and the mass paranoia that destroys a community. For ticket information, call 850-997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

OCTOBER 17

Suwannee Thunder Charity Ride

Berrett Lodge No. 43 and Lions Paw Chapter Widow's Sons Masonic Riders Association invite motorcycle enthusiasts to participate in the Suwannee Thunder Charity Ride for Toys for Tots Suwannee County. Registration begins at 9 a.m. at Sisters Cafe (26804 FL 247, Branford), with kickstands going up at 11 a.m. Cost of registration is \$15 per rider plus a new

unwrapped toy. Each additional rider costs \$10. Lunch is included, along with a 50/50 raffle and live music. The ride ends at Wellborn Lodge No. 13 (12249 C.R. 137, Wellborn).

Scarecrow Pageant Festival

View a variety of creative scarecrows and vote for your favorites while enjoying hayrides, vendors, raffles, crafts and plenty of fun activities for all ages 10 a.m.-3 p.m. at Hearthstone Botanical Gardens' (3300 134th Pl., Wellborn) Scarecrow Pageant Festival.

OCTOBER 21-24

Florida Forest Festival

On Wednesday, Oct. 21, the festival opens with a kick-off the carnival. Oct. 22 is the night of fireworks, and Friday, Oct. 23, enjoy downtown events like the Kid's Parade and the Bed Race. The main event is Saturday, Oct. 24, with live entertainment, carnival, lumberjack shows, over 100 craft vendors, food trucks, equipment show, classic car show and more! For more information, visit www.floridaforestfestival.org.

OCTOBER 22-25

Suwannee Hulaween 2026

Delight in electronic music, art and camping at the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park and Campground (3076 95th Dr., Live Oak). The festival boasts a blend of mesmerizing lights, art exhibits and live performances. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit suwanneehulaween.com.

OCTOBER 31

Trick-or-Treat Trail for Dogs and Kids

Doggie Dude Ranch (16516 C.R. 136, Live Oak) invites families and four-legged friends for an evening of costumes, candy and Halloween fun, 5:30-7:30 p.m. There will also be a Terror Train and Haunted House when the sun goes down.

Bats, Beasts & Boos at NFWC

The North Florida Wildlife Center (1386 Cook Rd., Lamont) celebrates Halloween with frightfully fun activities, including trick-or-treating, free face painting, free goat feeding, animal encounters, local food and drink and more! Online tickets are half price; regular price at the door. For more information call 850-347-0921, email info@northfloridawildlife.org or visit www.northfloridawildlife.org.

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