

# The Front Porch

# Summer

2020

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

## Here's the Story

Valdosta family releases gospel album

## Summer Hot Spots

Perfect places for fun in the sun

## The Swamp Volcano

Stories rise like smoke

  
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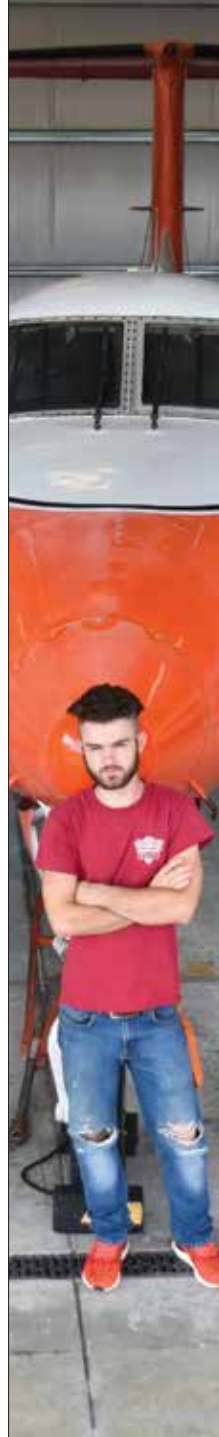
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# The Front Porch

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## Keep Sowing and Planting

Proverbs 20:4

*“Sluggards do not plow in season; so at harvest time they look but find nothing.”* (NIV)

*“Those too lazy to plow in the right season will have no food at the harvest.”* (NLT)

*“If you are too lazy to plow, don’t expect a harvest.”* (CEV)

During this time of the coronavirus pandemic we have seen many businesses close and/or have been partially closed. We are also seeing our neighbors and friends lose their jobs and/or have had their hours cut.

When businesses are shut down, their revenue stops. When restaurants have been partially shut down, their revenue is cut in half or more. Many of the businesses that are still fully in operation have still lost much of their weekly/monthly revenue.

Even in the midst of all of this chaos, I have watched as our local businesses have come up with some very imaginative new ideas, in the way of trying to keep revenue dollars coming in ... and I have been very impressed.

I’ve seen many businesses begin to offer curb-side service and delivery. I’ve seen some restaurants begin to offer take home ‘oven-ready’ meals as an extra source of income and still other businesses began selling/making specialty items they used to not offer. I have been very amazed, intrigued, and genuinely impressed.

Creativity in business is a crucial step. Creativity and innovation within a well-run company has always been recognized as a sure path to success. The need for creative problem solving has arisen more and more in the last few months, in order to help find solutions to this global hysteria.

It is this creativity and innovation that will keep businesses strong and make us all bigger and better because of it!

Within my own newspaper businesses, I’ve watched as our staff has pooled together and come up with some very imaginative ways in order to make extra revenue and come up with very interesting stories to cover. I have been legitimately impressed how everyone is rallying together as a team, in order to come up with great ideas and innovative ways to stay on top, during these tough economic times.



Just try to always remember, as horrid as it has been, with school being canceled, travel being restricted, social gatherings being canceled, no sports to watch, and beaches being closed, that it is our small hometown businesses that are in dire need. It is our friends and neighbors that need us the most right now to step up and help them survive.

All the businesses around us are striving each and every day to be creative but some are struggling to make payroll and bring in enough revenue to survive through these shutdowns. The coronavirus is killing the small businesses of America. As you go shopping from day to day, remember this is a desperate time and they need everyone’s support more than ever!

Quit driving out of town to shop. Go shop locally! Downtown and around town. There are tons of stores from which you can buy. You can buy birthday presents, cute shoes, and all your household cleaning supplies right in your own county and even your hometown. There are hunting and fishing supplies, jewelry, purses, boutique clothing, monogram clothing, tennis shoes, socks, underwear, toys, picture frames, dinner plate sets, antique furniture and clothing, artwork, theme-related items, knick-knacks, tools, auto parts, lawn and garden items, pool supplies, automobile items, toilet paper and paper towels. Anything you might need for yourself and/or for a loved one.

You don’t have to go out of town to a big box-store or order from Amazon. Support your hometown friends and help them feed their families!

So many of our hometown friends have already had to close up their businesses and/or are considering to do so. This is the time to pull together to help all our friends during this time of need.

When we’ve found a solution for the coronavirus and life goes back to “normal” ... will our hometown restaurants and businesses still be there? Only if we support them as much as they need us to! Think about that!

And to all my fellow small business owners out there ... these last few months, and the months that still lie before us, are our times to be plowing and sowing our seeds – so that we WILL have a harvest to feed upon. For it is written in THE Book!

So ... Stay strong! Keep plowing! Keep planting your seeds! For if you do ... God WILL provide come harvest time!

*Emerald Greene Parsons, Publisher*

A handwritten signature in green ink that reads "Emerald Greene Parsons". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a light-colored background.





## Get out of the truck

Growing up in rural North Florida involved a lot of backwoods explorations. My father and I would often ride through the woods when I was a child. An avid outdoorsman, he would teach me to identify trees and other plants based on the attributes of their leaves, bark, or needles. As we would ride along, he would point and I would name each and every one: "Sweet Gum tree! Pine tree! Blackberry bush! Dogwood tree!"



My father often jokes of my curiosity as a child—my need to know every detail. He tells the story of one particular backwoods adventure when I insisted we follow a gopher home. "Daddy!" I shouted. "What's that thing?" He told me the small critter was called a gopher. "A gopher? Well, where's he going?" My dad explained he was probably trying to go to his home in the ground. "Well, let's go see," I said.

We followed the animal to a clearing where several holes resided in the dirt. At this point, we got out of the truck and started to walk behind the little gopher. It eventually crawled into one of the holes, which I would eventually learn were called burrows. As I tried to see inside, my father began to explain how gophers dig tunnels in the ground, telling me all he knew about the small rodent I had just discovered. That day, I learned something new. All it required was stepping outside of the truck to walk along the gopher's path.

As an adult, I have learned that other adults like to make assumptions based on their own experiences. But what we oftentimes fail to realize is that our experiences are not the only experiences—the lives we live are not the

only lives lived. Many times in my life, I've heard remarks such as, "Well I have never seen it, so I don't believe that's a problem." To those with this mindset—regardless of the context—I would like to reply: I could have stayed in the truck and been satisfied with what my father told me, whether he was right or wrong. We could have ridden away, never to spend another second wondering about the little gopher or where he lived. I could have then gone on to tell others what my father told me, believing his words and, subsequently, mine, were tried and true. While my father did, in fact, never lie to me, the truth remains that he could have. While my father did, in fact, know accurate information about gophers, he could have been mistaken—and I would have never known it. All because of the decision to stay in the truck and keep on riding.

My point is this. Many cruise through life without ever experiencing anything other than what they see through the window of their pick-up truck. Some may say it's easier to stay in the truck and keep on riding. But looking through the window is never enough. What's worse, is teaching our children the way of the world based on what we see through that same window. Today, more than ever, is the day to get out of the truck. Your story is not the only story. Your truth is not the only truth. You will never be able to live someone else's life—but you can follow them home. You can listen to their story. You can take a walk inside their neighborhood. Visit their school. Meet their family. Learn their favorite food. Learn what makes them laugh. Learn what makes them cry. Then maybe, just maybe, your perspective will change. And the windows that kept us separated will be removed. And the beliefs, ideas, and mindsets that were passed down the line based on a mere window's view will evolve into something true.

It is with great pleasure that we present to you the first issue of our second volume of *The Front Porch*. With every issue, it is our goal to tell the stories of our area—to teach you, our loyal readers, about the amazing culture, history, travel destinations, businesses, and people who make up the North Florida-South Georgia region. I promise that we always get out of the truck. We explore. We meet new faces. We ask questions. And, with each passing issue, we grow as individuals. We only hope the same for you.

*Savannah Reams, Editor-In-Chief*

*Savannah Reams*



culture

# Helping Their Home

G-FAST patrols the skies, waters and forests of North Florida

*The Georgia-Florida Aviation Search Team (G-FAST) is made up of pilots, law enforcement officers, first responders and boat captains. It is that group of people, with their diverse skill sets, that makes the team a benefit to North Florida and South Georgia.*



“I had always been in the timber business. I would fly around, hunting timber.”

Richard Connell says this while sitting in his rented aircraft hangar at the Perry Airport, in Taylor County, Fla.

Cicadas chirp in the nearby trees and across the expanse of



the airport landing strip, heatwaves bubble in the air. Over the flat surface of the airport's stretch of asphalt, there is a drowsy sort of summer heat that both prickles the skin and lulls people into a midday nap.

For Connell and his crew, this hangar is a second home, as well as a place to store their airplanes and helicopters.

Connell is the CEO of G-FAST (which stands for Georgia-Florida Aviation Search Team), and the various aircraft in the hangar are tools in his nonprofit organization's endeavor to provide local and state law enforcement offices with reliable search-and-rescue.

Connell relays the story of G-FAST's creation while reclined back against a church pew that has been moved into the hangar and now serves as a wide booth for his crew to sit. It is placed up against the wall and Connell sits with his legs extended and arms folded over his chest - while the hangar is hot (aside from the occasional breeze that blows off the surface of the airport), he is clearly a man who is comfortable in his surroundings.

“I've been flying since I was about nine,” says Connell. He recalls that when he was a child, a family friend named Buddy Westbrook would take Connell out in the air. That adventure, flying and soaring above the ground, were experiences that Connell says would go on to shape his passion for aviation.

For many years, Connell used his passion for flying to hunt timber in rural regions. With his aircraft, he would pass over forested areas and look for timber that would make a good harvest.

In 2016, though, that passion for flying would take a new shape.

“I realized that all these rural counties don't have their own

aircraft,” said Connell. “They have to depend on other people if someone is missing or something.”

Many of the rural counties in North Florida and South Georgia are made up of sprawling swamps, forest land, lakes, rivers and stretches of salty Gulf of Mexico waters.

When someone goes missing in a North Florida county, finding them requires more than patrolling neighborhoods - it means bogging out into the messy swamps and hunting through miles of deep forest groves.

Connell noticed that despite that fact, many of the counties and their law enforcement agencies were poorly equipped to handle in-depth search-and-rescue operations.

Rural counties statistically have smaller budgets and Connell noticed that the law enforcement agencies in those budgets were unable to afford purchasing and upkeeping the expensive equipment needed for a successful search-and-rescue operation.

“That is what made me want to start this [G-FAST]...” explained Connell. “...to be able to help people in those rural counties.”

Since then, G-FAST has grown. What started off as a small operation is now much larger; Connell's crew consists of pilots, former law enforcement officers, boat captains, first responders and entrepreneurs - all who are dedicated to providing an extra level of safety and rescue for North Florida and South Georgia residents.

The hangar in Perry is packed with aircraft, and the G-FAST crew's base of operations in Jefferson County is filled with heavy-duty vehicles, boats and tools needed for a successful search-and-rescue.

“We've got fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, bulldozers and front end loaders,” says Connell. He lists off his organization's assortment of equipment in the same relaxed manner that any other person would read off their grocery list. “There are cranes, a bunch of generators, a mobile medical unit, portable refrigerated units, multiple boats, high water rescue vehicles and tents.”

Taking the leap from using airplanes to search for harvest-ready timber to running and operating a search-and-rescue organization was quite the task, but Connell said he was uniquely positioned to launch his operations.

“I already knew all the right people,” he explains. He was



*Del Loveless (on ground) and Richard Connell (on truck) cut down and clear away a tree for a local agency. G-FAST offered to remove the tree at no cost to the Jefferson County non-profit, saving them several hundred dollars.*

already connected to people in the various counties in the area and had formed friendships and working relationships with law enforcement leaders at the local and state levels.

Those partnerships - and G-FAST's designation as a nonprofit organization - allows Connell and his crew to purchase extremely discounted used equipment or receive donations from larger agencies that no longer need their equipment.

While G-FAST operates like a business, Connell is quick to remind people that his organization is 501c3 non-profit.

While the services G-FAST offers to local law enforcement agencies could be a costly expense for rural counties, Connell doesn't expect the rural counties to write him any checks for the search-and-rescue that his team does.

Instead, the G-FAST crew raises money through other ways, such as grant funding or working for the Jefferson County Solid Waste Department as the county's landfill management.

Annually, the Jefferson County Commission pays G-FAST \$1,500 for Connell and his crew to maintain the county's landfill site.

"We maintain it, grade its roads, keep it looking good," said Connell.

But that is only \$1,500, Connell adds. If the county paid employees or another contracting company to do that work, it would cost county taxpayers much more.

In addition to saving Jefferson County residents money though, Connell and his crew use that funding to launch their needed first response aid.

Pulling out his phone, Connell flips through albums of digital photos showing his crew out working while surrounded

by hurricanes, flooding and tornados. Some of the photos capture a glimpse of what it would be like while out on the roads during a major storm - in one particular photo, the roads glisten with a heavy flood of water while Connell, Jefferson County Sheriff Mac McNeill and G-FAST's Del Loveless and Kash Connell clear Jefferson County roadways during Hurricane Michael in 2018.

In part to G-FAST's efforts at keeping the primary roads in the county cleared during and after the Category 5 hurricane, Jefferson County residents were only without power for a little over 24-hours, compared to other counties in North Florida who went days - or weeks - without electricity.

Hurricane Michael also provided G-FAST crews with the chance to go door-to-door in other counties, helping people by delivering much-needed food, water, supplies and power to the hurricane victims who had been severely impacted by the devastating storm.

"When a major storm comes by, we have between 10-15 people who are a part of our team and everybody pitches in," adds Connell. He adds that "every hurricane" to have struck the region since 2016 (including Hurricane Katrina), G-FAST has been at the ready, offering aid and emergency response wherever possible.

G-FAST's abilities extend beyond storm aid, though. Connell's agency can conduct aerial searches for wanted criminals, G-FAST boats help the State of Florida by patrolling a small stretch of the Gulf of Mexico to prevent illegal activity from taking place on the water and the organization is a part of the MERC (Marine Emergency Response Team) with the United States Coast Guard.

But not everything that G-FAST does involves finding lost



The Georgia-Florida Aviation Search Team (G-FAST) is made up of pilots, law enforcement officers, first responders and boat captains. It is that group of people, with their diverse skill sets, that makes the team a benefit to North Florida and South Georgia. Pictured, from left to right, are: Richard Connell, Shelby Joyner, Kash Connell, Del Loveless and Susie Reams.

people, hunting down criminals and responding to destructive storms.

Del Loveless, one of Connell's right-hand men at G-FAST has been present several times in downtown Monticello to help smooth out traffic blocks.

The city has a small roundabout that wraps around the Jefferson County Courthouse, and as it is the main thoroughfare, the roundabout is often the scene of traffic congestion when big semi-trucks get stuck in the narrow roadway.

While it was local law enforcement who responded to assist traffic flow, it was Del Loveless with G-FAST who helped free the stuck truck.

While sitting in their airport hangar, Connell and his crew bat around various memories of moments when they provided less 'emergency' aid.

Susie Reams, Connell's daughter, shares how the G-FAST crew were called in to rescue a Florida Fishing and Wildlife Commission airboat that was stuck in local waters.

The non-profit organization makes appearances at several parades in the region and serves veterans of the United States Military in every way they can.

Connell mentions how his agency has delivered food to Jefferson County students and families with

the county's Sheriff Mac McNeill during COVID-19 school closures. On top of delivering meals, G-FAST remained busy during COVID-19 by cooking 50-100 meals a day for high-risk people who were shut into their homes.

These people, who hadn't been able to leave their homes due to their high-risk status, had no way of getting groceries, and so G-FAST stepped in to cook meals and deliver the plates to people.

Additionally, G-FAST has been serving the State of Florida by moving needed medical supplies around the region to keep hospitals and other emergency aid establishments stocked with everything needed to combat the virus.

"Do you ever sleep?" this writer asks, and Connell, leaning back against the hangar wall, shakes his head, rolls his eyes and grins.

While Connell may or may not get much sleep, he certainly does dream.

As Connell looks out over his hangar of airplanes, helicopters and the row of volunteers sitting beside him, he grins.

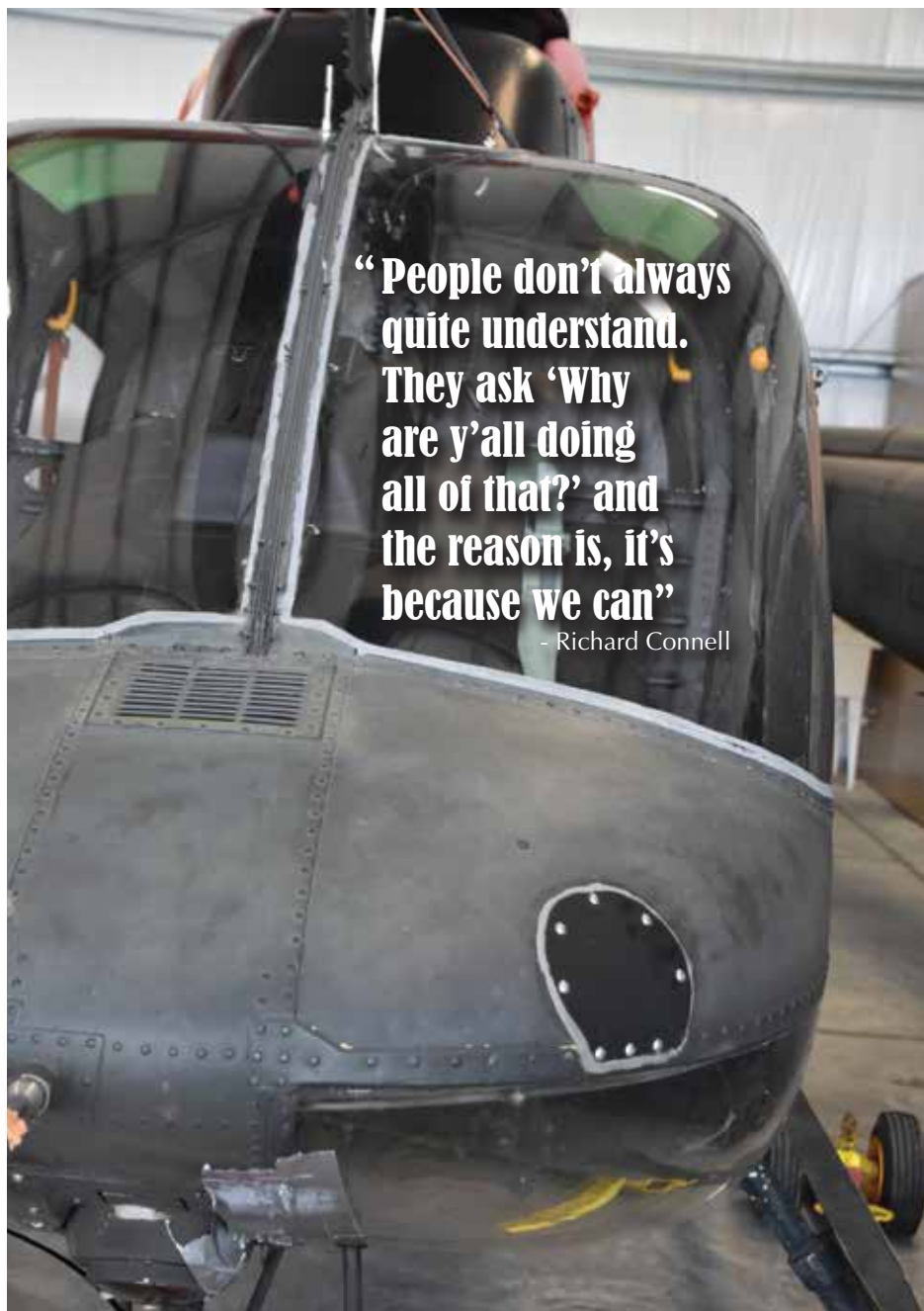
"We just want to grow this up, make G-FAST bigger," says Connell wistfully.

As if everything he and his crew do doesn't keep them busy from sunup to sundown almost every day, Connell says he is looking into ways to incorporate water bombing into the services that G-FAST will offer.

While the crew already has a 600-gallon bucket for dumping water on fires, he is looking to equip one of his aircraft and designate it for wildfire water relief.

"I always just look to see what we really need - and what we really need in this area is to have water bombing capabilities," says Connell.

Connell also has lofty goals of overseeing the building of a paved airstrip in



**“People don't always quite understand. They ask ‘Why are y'all doing all of that?’ and the reason is, it's because we can”**

- Richard Connell

Jefferson County.

"People don't always quite understand. They ask 'Why are y'all doing all of that?' and the reason is, it's because we can," said Connell. "It's a headache, keeping all this stuff serviced. It's a pain, but..." Connell looks out over his hanger filled with aircraft, ATVs, tools and volunteers. "Our main thing is just to help our home in any way we can." ■

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# The Roberson Bunch: *Making music is a family affair*

Story by Rick Patrick, Staff Writer

Photos by Rick Patrick and Shane Mathews Photography

Album artwork courtesy of Desmond Roberson & The Roberson Bunch

First, the real-life vonTrapp Family Singers inspired the hit stage and screen musical, “The Sound of Music. Then, The Partridge Family entertained TV viewers on ABC every Friday evening at 8:30, 7:30 central. But none of these musical families had quite the same “soul” that the Valdosta, Ga.-based “Roberson Bunch” has.

Headed by father, Desmond Roberson, and mom, Tammy Roberson, the rest of the “bunch” includes Malia, age 11; Mary, age 13; Tamauria, age 16 (going on 17) and “DJ” (Desmond, Jr.), age 16. The family has been singing together for approximately

three years and has recently released their first album, “Here’s the Story,” which debuted at #63 on the iTunes Top 200 chart.

This latest project features tight, jazz-influenced backing vocals and an uplifting, positive message. According to Desmond, he takes influences from many different musical styles. He describes the group’s music as “black quartet music,” but one can hear many different influences on this latest project. One can hear hints of earlier gospel groups such as Andre Crouch and the Disciples and the Mighty Clouds of Joy along with contemporary jazz, pop and even some hip-hop sounds. One cut from the album, “Still Working on Me,” is a cover of a popular southern gospel song, but the Robersons put their own jazzy twist to it. “We wanted to be of some sort of encouragement during such a difficult time for our country, so we wanted to release music that could motivate and inspire our listeners,” said Desmond. “We are very happy with this



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Photo by Shane Mathews Photography

The younger Roberson “Bunch,” pictured from left to right, are: Malia, Mary, DJ and Tomauria.



The cover art for Desmond Roberson & The Roberson Bunch’s debut album. Pictured in the top row, from left to right are: Mary Roberson, Tammy Roberson and Contributor Brandon Sharper. Pictured in the middle, from left to right, are: Malia Roberson and Producer Eric Brown, II. On the bottom row, from left to right, are: Tamauria Roberson, Desmond Roberson and Desmond “DJ” Roberson, Jr. (Photo courtesy of the Roberson family).

accomplishment, but plan to do even more in the near future.” The project was produced by a young Valdosta native and talented keyboardist, Eric Brown, II, and features musical contributions from Brandon Sharper and Antoine Spade Bradley.

Desmond grew up in Madison, Fla. and began singing as a youngster at Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church. While attending Madison County High School, he met his future wife, Tammy, who also came from a musical family. Tammy often performed with her family’s group, The Daughters of Faith. Desmond’s musical abilities caught the attention of Carl Joseph, who invited him to sing with his group, The Spiritual Tru-Tones.

After spending several years touring with Joseph and his group, Roberson helped form the Madison County Boys Choir. The Madison County Boys Choir gained a great deal of notoriety singing and performing in churches and community events throughout the area.

Desmond and Tammy married and quickly began growing a family. While working on a solo project, Desmond had his kids perform with him. This was the beginning of “Desmond Roberson & The Roberson Bunch.” Currently four of the Roberson’s eight children perform with the group, however everyone has a job to do, be it helping with wardrobe or serving as the group’s road manager or product sales. Since forming as a group, the family has had an extensive travel schedule. They have performed throughout the southeast, making their way as far as Memphis and Nashville, Tenn. Although the pandemic put a damper on the family’s travel schedule, they have remained active, recording their album and performing “virtual” concerts from their Valdosta home.

During “normal” times, the family often loads the big, green “pickle” van and hits the road to another performance. Often, mom, Tammy, simply loads some bread and sandwich supplies and they eat on the road. “It’s not just kinda fun, it IS fun,” says Malia, the youngest of the Roberson singers. “Sometimes I’ll see something funny from somebody in the audience and I try not to laugh, because dad says we have to be serious.” Malia says she would like to continue with music, possibly making a career out of it. Watching the family perform, it is easy to see that young Malia is the “showman” of the group. There is some debate between Malia and older sister, Mary, over who can claim the title of the biggest “diva” in the group, with each one claiming the other should have that distinction.

In addition to frequent concerts and church performances, Desmond hosts a yearly “Lupus Awareness Concert” in honor of his mother, Tammy Monlyn, who suffered for many years with lupus. The annual concert helps to raise funds for a scholarship at North Florida College.

Performing seems to come as second nature for the group, who hold regular rehearsals in their garage. Often the impromptu performances lure neighbors and passersby to stop and listen for a while. One neighbor enjoyed the music so much that she brought chicken and cake to the family.

Future plans for the family include producing a music video and writing and gathering new material for the group’s follow-up album. The family clearly enjoys making music together and today’s world seems desperate for positive family role models. The Robersons seem poised to help meet that need, with smiles on their faces and songs in their hearts. ■

*The Roberson parents, Tammy and Desmond.*



Photo by Shane Mathews Photography



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*I am*  
**DAVID  
DUKES**

On Tuesday, Aug. 6, 1963, a 17-year-old found himself in the cold grip of handcuffs for simply walking through the front door of a local drug store. This event would become a pivotal moment in the history of Madison County and the greater North Florida area, setting in motion a young man's struggle for freedom and equality—a journey that would anger his oppressors and alienate his family, but bring about monumental change.

Story by John Willoughby, Staff Writer

Photos courtesy of David Dukes

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Although he was erroneously considered a trouble-maker by members of the Black and white community, his arrest as a teenager was worn as a badge of honor. The young man would pursue justice for Black residents in his community, at times risking life and limb. Nothing short of a pioneer for civil rights, he was—and is—unabashedly frank, resolute in the face of adversity, and fearlessly outspoken. His name is David Duke.

Dukes grew up in the 50s and early 60s, when people of color were subjected to undue ridicule and harassment. These were extremely dangerous times for Black people—entering the wrong establishment or drinking from the wrong water fountain could lead to jail time or even bodily harm. He was one of nine children and raised by his mother alone. Dukes and his siblings worked in tobacco and cotton fields during the summer-time and fall. It was their way of supporting the household bills and purchasing school clothes.

As he grew older, Dukes became more aware of the happenings around him. While Jim Crow laws seemingly triumphed across

the nation, Dukes' family, friends and fellow African Americans were directed to the back door, the colored-only water fountain, and the theater balcony for any service that was unquestionably designated for white residents.

"I said, 'I can't wait until I get old enough to do something about that here in Madison,'" said Dukes. "Colored signs were all over the place. It was degrading ..." The young activist had resolved at the age of 17 that the back door wasn't for him anymore; especially at Roberts Drug Store, where he was first arrested for trespassing after walking in the front door as a Black man, simply seeking equal treatment.

As time progressed, Dukes gained a following among the younger residents of Madison County, as young as 12 years old, but no older than 19 years old. Very few adults participated in the demonstrations and protests. As a matter of fact, Dukes was subjected to others trying to impose their opinions on him in efforts to get him to stop, "because I was going to stir up trouble," Dukes added.

Demonstrations and pickets began in

full force, namely at restaurants and the Madison County School Board, both of which perpetuated segregation. Even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, Madison County was slow to integrate. Dukes went as far as taking the matter of the newly-unlawful segregation to the United States District Court in Jacksonville, where a federal suit was filed against all public entities in Madison County who showed any form of segregation.

"The federal government said, 'you can't discriminate;' [yet] they were still discriminating against us," said Dukes. "The judge told them if y'all refuse to serve Black people here, or the sheriff didn't protect us, then he would send U.S. Marshalls in and also arrest the sheriff and other police officials for not protecting us."

Although circumstances between the Black and white community across Madison County began evolving, the past still lingered in the present and Dukes continued pressing on. Integrating schools was a slow-moving process in Madison County and those in power ensured a way around the law. "When the school board did it on their own, they had some foolishness called 'freedom of choice,' knowing full and well there was not a Black family in Madison who was brave enough to send their kids to the white school," Dukes noted.

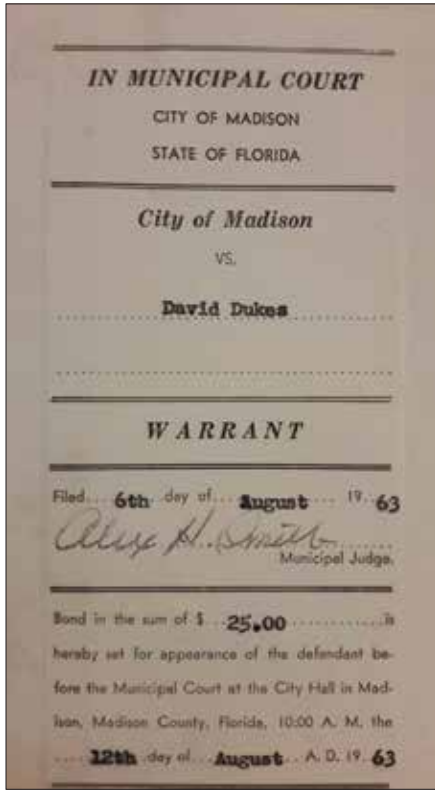
At the Chuck Wagon in Madison, where David had previously been one of nine arrested for trespassing, white employees resigned from their positions after the owner directed them to begin serving everyone. The Chuck Wagon was the only business in the area Dukes dropped suit against due to the owner's decision to integrate.

His efforts expanded throughout North Florida, but not without a price tag. While in Monticello one day, walking the sidewalks, a car had straddled the concrete walkway trying to run him over. Dukes was able to spare himself by jumping out of the way, but the occupants who made an attempt on his life were relentless as they returned to the roadway waiting on him to cross the street.

"I was running so fast, I couldn't stop, and my body slammed up against a police car," said Dukes. "He rolled his window and he wanted to know what the hell was wrong with me slamming my body into his car like that. I was so out of breath I couldn't speak right away so I was pointing and I said, 'you see those three white men in the car? They're trying to kill me.'" And despite his oath to serve and protect, the officer rolled his window up and ignored his plea, forcing Dukes to run toward the Blue Heron Cafe from the centerpiece courthouse square for safety.



In other instances, a Monticello police officer threatened to “blow Dukes’ brains out” after Dukes requested an investigation



into a cross burning near the house he was living in at the time. While staying in Havana, northwest of Tallahassee, Dukes received a threatening phone call.

“A local man called me and told me he was on the way over there with a group of people and they were going to take care of me once and for all,” Dukes recalled. “I was not going to cause anymore trouble in Havana because I was going to be dead.”

Despite notifying the Havana Police Department, Gadsden County Sheriff’s Office, and county officials; his only aid of rescue were five men from the church he was bunking in.

Dukes was forced out of Madison County in 1965 after having his fill of the many threats to his life—the stress was nearly killing him. He moved to the Miami area, where life was much different than the small town with which he was familiar. While his only plan was to gain an education, his new home of Richmond Heights would be the home he would someday build with his wife and children.

While in South Florida, Dukes enrolled at Miami-Dade College Kendall where he received his Associate in Arts degree. While gaining an education, he continued his efforts to ensure equal rights for all through voter’s registration and education. Sit-ins weren’t necessary; mutual dining between

Black people and white people was common in his new territory.

One day, Dukes’ friend from Guyana called, catching him as he was heading out the door. “He asked if I would pick up his cousin from the airport,” recalled Dukes. “I told him ‘no way,’ because I had to be at work in 15 minutes, but he begged me to pick her up.”

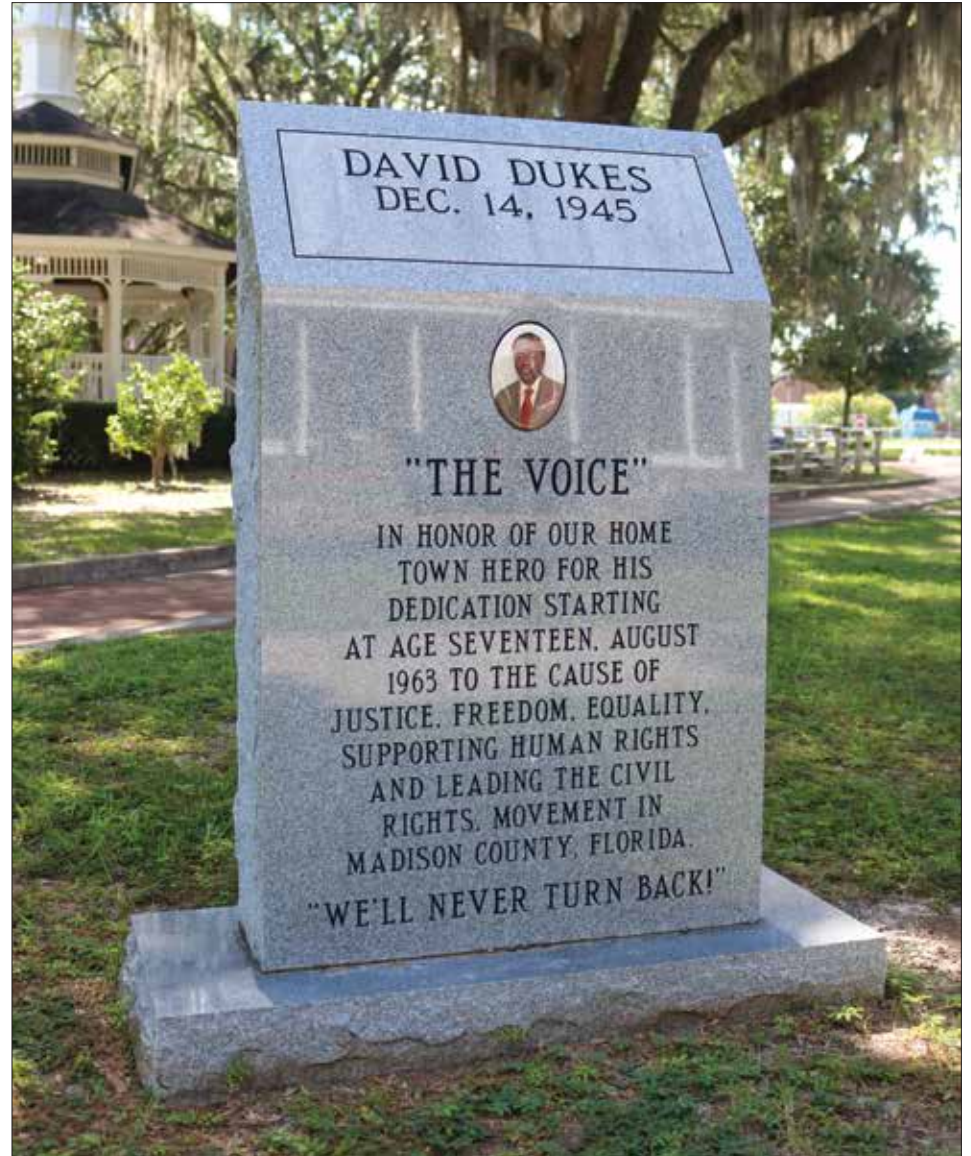
Dukes caved to his friend’s wishes and there at the Miami International Airport, he laid eyes on his beloved Bennellia, a Caribbean belle from the Island of Trinidad and Tobago. After a series of events led to their union, Bennellia and David married on July 20, 1974. Over the years of their marriage, and while Dukes completed his degree with Florida International University in 1975, the newly-formed Dukes family began welcoming children into the world, in whom they’ve taken great pride: Joash, Robert, Brenda, Hazel, Gordan and Tamara.

While Dukes had built his home in

South Florida, an event in August of 1992 would change the course of his life. Like many in the South Florida area, Hurricane Andrew would greatly damage the Dukes’ haven, leaving it without a roof and windows.

The storm rolled in and Dukes and members of his family sat patiently in the living room as the bands of thunderstorms began lashing the home. “The wind was getting very strong. I knew that the plywood covering the utility door would be blown off soon,” Dukes would later write in his memoir titled, “A Journey Back Home.” The family soon moved into the hallway. “All of a sudden, the entire bathroom window exploded. Each of us jumped from the frightening sounds ... We heard glass breaking and all sorts of debris hitting the house. The inside walls were vibrating; it was like a scene out of a horror movie.”

As the roof began peeling and water began drizzling into the home, David



prayed that if his family was spared in the storm, he would return to his hometown of Madison and begin working with the youth and the community. God would take him up on his word just one year later.

On May 17, 1993, merely months after completely reversing the damage done to his Miami home, Dukes returned to Madison with a mission. The idea of the Johnson-Brinson Project, Inc. had been conceived in a small motel room three years prior. Dukes, who served as the executive director, soon took to the streets of Madison, talking with individuals and organizations to help bring his dream to a full reality.

no drugs or alcohol, profanity, sexual misconduct, or provocation, just to name of few. There were no exceptions.

"I did not tolerate anyone violating the rules," Dukes recalled. "If you have no intentions of going by the rules, then stay away from here. Don't give me the opportunity to send you home."

Finally, the doors to the Johnson-Brinson Project were open. Word spread across Madison County and while the center was open to students to enjoy exciting activities, the ones who came to play and disrupt the true purpose of the project were sent home.

For eight years, the Johnson-Brinson

and even student mentors, whose lives were undoubtedly changed. One even called the center his home from freshman year in high school to his senior year in high school. Allen Demps now serves as a role model while coaching the Madison County High School varsity basketball team. In recent years, the Johnson-Brinson Project alumnus led the Cowboys to the basketball state championship.

Demps states that he met Dukes at a time when he needed guidance and intervention the most; he was not a stranger to getting into trouble. "Mr. Dukes took me in as his son and molded me into the



Response was low and residents were apprehensive of the idea, Dukes wrote. Just over \$5,000 was made in 1993, but most of it wasn't made in Madison. Instead, a majority of those start-up funds were from Dukes' personal payroll checks through his employment with the University of Miami School of Medicine's MRI Center, which he quit before returning to his homeland.

1994 was the official first year of the Johnson-Brinson Project, Inc. Prior to the first official day of operation in September, David was sent a donation by a woman named Sharon Young, who was living in Tallahassee at the time, who had previously offered to assist the non-profit organization in buying a residence on Parramore Street, in Madison. The price of the home was reduced by \$3,000, thanks to the Atlanta-based owner's generosity and, within months, registration forms were printed and center rules were established to include



Project served as an after-school program with an approach toward the promotion of education and the reduction of family and youth violence, substance abuse, low self-esteem, teenage pregnancy, and other issues that plagued Madison County. Students were welcomed daily, after-school. It was rare that the center was closed on time at 6:30 p.m. and on the weekends. Each day, Dukes and his team had a focus – anywhere from oratory skills to just simply enjoying a game of basketball, the Johnson-Brinson Project was about it. It was also important to Dukes that his students knew who they were despite what others said or thought.

"People must have some integrity and what I call a powerful foundation," Dukes remarked. "You know who you are and where you stand and no one can shake you ... [When I was in Madison], I was a Black MF; I was a Black SOB; I mean, [I was being called that] daily. I couldn't go to the post office; couldn't go to Winn-Dixie. If I'm walking down the street, people would call me dirty names. I didn't pay them any attention. I answer to one name, and that's David Dukes."

Over the years, the Johnson-Brinson Project was visited by hundreds of students,



man that I am today," said Demps. "As a teenager, Mr. Dukes provided life lessons on what it meant not only to be a man, but a Black man! He taught me the importance of learning, educating myself and instilling morals and values in my life so that I had something to work toward. I find myself, as a coach, being that father figure to many young men. I would not have that opportunity if it was not for my father, David Dukes."

Because he was determined to make a difference during his time in Madison County, Dukes traveled back and forth between North and South Florida, because his wife and children remained in their Richmond Heights home. Despite gaining grants from the Department of Juvenile Justice, funds were insufficient for the Johnson-Brinson Project and, in 2001, after seven years of service to the Madison community, they closed.

"When I left, it died and I didn't want that at all," said Dukes. "I wanted somebody

# Nine Arrested On Trespass Charge <sup>B-2-64</sup>

Nine young colored people were arrested by city police here Sunday afternoon, charged with trespass after warning. They presented themselves at the Chuck Wagon to be served and the waitresses refused service asked them to leave, and called police.

In the group were Carolyn Hachett, James Lott, Willie Lee Jinks and Dorothy Louise Jinks of Greenville, David Dukes and Jesse McCall of Madison, and three juveniles.

The three juveniles were turned over to the juvenile court and their matter will come up Monday afternoon, August 10th.

The older defendants were assessed bonds of \$100 each and their cases will come up Monday, Aug. 10th, in municipal court.

# Probe Asked In Madison Car Shooting <sup>64</sup>

MADISON, Aug. 25 (AP) — A civil rights worker in Madison whose car was damaged today by shotgun blasts said he has asked the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Justice to enter the investigation.

Mike Geison, 22, a white man from Miami, said his car was damaged by repeated shotgun blasts shortly after midnight. The car was parked and vacant.

Madison police, the county sheriff's office and the governor's office began an investigation of the incident.

Geison said he received a threatening telephone call after the incident and called for help in the investigation from the FBI and the Department of Justice. Geison also wrote a letter of complaint to Gov. Farris Bryant about alleged harassment previous to the shooting.

A spokesman said Bryant received complaints from six other civil rights workers in connection with the shooting.

# Madison Negroes March <sup>(1964)</sup>

MADISON — About 75 local Negro residents and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) workers marched 20 blocks from the Mt. Zion Baptist Church to present 11 demands to the Madison County School Board Wednesday morning.

There were some catcalls from onlookers as the group picketed the school board building, but no serious incidents were reported.

School board members said



to take over and keep it going because it was a powerful organization, helping the people in Madison County." Dukes returned to Miami where his loving family remained, anxiously awaiting his return.

Madison-native Marvin "Merv" Mattair later "grabbed the baton," as Dukes stated, and began Boyz to Kings, an organization strikingly similar to the Johnson-Brinson Project, but with more support and parental involvement.

"I spoke for the first time at North Florida College when I was in college there. He was in the audience and he heard me speak," said Mattair. "[Dukes] came to me afterwards ... The rest is history. When I grew up mentally and gained a better understanding of my purpose on this earth, it's amazing how our paths kind of crossed. Mr. Dukes - he put his mouth in his shoes. He walked this thing out."

In 2015, Mattair was asked to be the grand marshal presiding over Madison's 20th of May Jubilee, an annual event

commemorating the Proclamation of Emancipation Day, which officially designated the end of slavery in Florida on May 20, 1865. But to Mattair, "It'd be disrespectful for me to be in that position before my elders," he said.

On the Saturday of multi-day festivities, Dukes and his wife were escorted in a limousine, down the parade route. On that same weekend, Dukes was honored with a monument in the Madison Four Freedoms Park, dreamed up by Kenneth Davis and his wife, the late Renee Dianne Davis.

"The city had never done anything as a thank you or to recognize the efforts of [Dukes] putting his life on the line," said Renee. "We asked each church, civic organization, lay people and individuals for a donation of \$100, and most of the churches and the people gave us a donation."

The monument remains on the northwest end of Four Freedoms Park, at the corner of Range Avenue and Marion Street.

Today, Dukes continues to live in the Richmond Heights area of Miami-Dade County, retired from Be Strong International, a mentoring organization through which Dukes has inspired countless more youth.

Dr. Martin Luther King once said that the time is always right to do what is right. In fighting for unalienable rights for his brothers and sisters, David Dukes proved that there's no wrong time to take a stand. And as civil rights in America remain a relevant issue today, hold fast to the words and legacy of those who have given up so much - not only those who have given their lives, but their freedoms--from which we can learn to continue to ensure liberty and justice for all. ■



*This account of Dukes' life is dedicated to the memory of Renee Dianne Davis, who entered into Eternity after her March interview with Greene Publishing, Inc. A retired Madison County school teacher and proud graduate of Florida A&M University, Davis' efforts in ensuring Dukes' recognition in Madison County are forever preserved in the minds of her husband, Kenneth Davis; her beloved children, grandchildren, friends and David Dukes himself.*



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# Summer **HOT** **SPOTS**

*Foreword by Savannah Reams, Editor-in-Chief*

William Shakespeare once wrote, “Summer’s lease hath all too short a date.” His words ring true again and again, as people young and old celebrate the warm kiss of the sun; the salty, sea air; and the chance for respite and renewal that comes for a brief period each year.

With this in mind, our team at The Front Porch has compiled a list of places to visit during the warmest time of year—we like to call them summer hot spots! Whether you’re longing to dip your toes in the sea, cast a line, or camp in the great outdoors, there are all sorts of opportunities for summer fun in the North Florida-South Georgia region we call home. Check them out!

## Keaton Beach Vacation Rentals is home for the summer

*Story and photos by Savannah Reams, Editor-in-Chief*

Stephanie Weldon is a Florida girl who grew up in historic Indiantown. It is noted that tribes fleeing southwards from the US Army after the First Seminole War found the area a pleasant place to call home due to the higher elevation and plentiful opportunities for hunting and fishing—a safe haven for the uprooted.

Weldon would eventually follow her husband, George, to Okeechobee, Fla., where they would work nearby and raise two girls, Julia and Kassie. Over the years, the family found respite in Keaton Beach, Fla., where they would stay during the summer, spending their days on the gulf, soaking in the sun and scalloping. Often they would return, longing for the family atmosphere and



pleasant experiences that surrounded the quaint coastal community. “My girls still talk about crabbing in the canals,” states Weldon, fondly. For this family, Keaton Beach became a home away from home.

Like the Florida communities with which the Weldons were familiar, Keaton Beach possessed its own rich history. Home to one of Florida’s most natural and undeveloped coastlines, Keaton Beach is named for Abb and Sam Keaton, two brothers who were some of the first settlers in the area and who are thought to be its original owners. Previously cotton farmers, their primary source of income gradually shifted as mullet fishing became one of the thriving industries in Taylor County. In the early 1900s, mullet were caught off the Florida coast and residents of South Georgia and North Florida would come to Keaton Beach to buy the fish, which were salted down for use during the winter.

Commercialization of the beach came when Captain W. Alston “Cap’n” Brown, who owned the turpentine works at Blue Springs Creek, became involved with the area in the early 1920s. The Keaton Brothers were said to have worked with Brown, and he named the beach in honor of them. Early on, the community consisted of two houses, a pavilion, a sawmill, a church, a commissary and several workers’ houses. It has been said the pavilion was used primarily as a fish camp by day and as a dance hall and restaurant by night, with residents citing the spot as a fun place to square dance after dusk.

Keaton and the surrounding beaches were devastated on March 13, 1993, when the “No Name Storm” or “The Storm of the Century” battered the beach without warning. Several residents and visitors of nearby Dekle Beach lost their lives. Although the devastation changed the face of Keaton Beach, it didn’t change the heart of the residents, and the survivors rebuilt their homes from the ground up. Today, thanks to their perseverance, the heart of Keaton beats strong.

The Weldons’ love for the quaint, coastal community led them to purchase a beach house in 2015. Just two years later, Stephanie retired and decided to begin a new journey: managing and renting vacation properties in the area she and her family love. Today, four beautiful vacation homes make up Keaton Beach Vacation Rentals: Margaritaville, Fish Gills, The Boathouse and School of Reds. What visitors often find, is that staying at one of the Weldons’ homes is a lot like visiting family.

“When people come to rent, we always make sure to put a name with a face,” says Weldon. “We will have get togethers, hang out by the fire pit and, eventually, leave as family.” Much like Weldon’s stomping grounds of Indiantown, Keaton Beach has become a safe haven for many—a place to rest, heal and develop meaningful relationships with one another and the tight-knit community who lives there.



*Stephanie Weldon loves managing and renting vacation properties in her home away from home, Keaton Beach.*



## Mike's Marine Supply: *Solutions with a smile*

*Story by Mickey Starling, Staff Writer*

Since 1970, Mike's Marine Supply has been the place to go if you are looking to get out on the water and enjoy a beautiful day. Mike's Marine Supply is a full-line Yamaha dealer, offering pontoon boats, aluminum and fiberglass bay boats and offshore boats. Some of their featured items include G-3 boats, Sea Hunt, Skeeter and Tidewater, all powered with Yamaha outboard motors. Pre-owned boats are also available. They also have a wide variety of accessories, including power poles, trolling motors and Garmin electronics.

This family-run business is dedicated to customer service and is known for having great prices for great products. "I love the positivity and excitement of seeing people when they first get their boat," says co-owner Laurie Ann Falk. Natives of Panacea, the Falk family understands that many boaters travel long distances to vacation in their little slice of Heaven. When a need arises, Mike's

Marine Supply is ready to provide solutions with a smile. "We will do whatever it takes to help," says Falk. "Customer satisfaction is the key to our business."

Mike's Marine Supply has an experienced team that can provide routine maintenance and repairs of all types. Whether you need a tune-up, new steer cables, throttle or seat repairs or anything else, their staff is ready to provide fast and affordable services.

Laurie learned the business under Mike Falk, Sr. while attending Florida State University, where she graduated in 1999. She has been with the business since 2000. Lori and her husband, Mike Falk, Jr., now run the business which was started by Falk, Sr. after having worked in the marine business for several years in Alligator Point.

If you are in the market for a boat, start your search at Mike's Marine Supply, where friendly service and a fair price are only a phone call away. They can be reached at (850) 984-5637 and their hours are: Monday-Tuesday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Wednesday, 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.; Thursday-Saturday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Drop by and see them at 1296 Coastal Hwy., in Panacea, Fla.

# Steinhatchee Falls: *Hidden gem of the Nature Coast*

Story and photo by Savannah Reams, Editor-in-Chief

While many visitors of the great State of Florida frequent its coastline, less know of the treasure troves which hide along their route. While Florida is proud to boast of its commercialized beauties such as Panama City, Daytona and Miami beaches, there are coastlines that are equally as impressive—one such is Florida's Nature Coast, which extends along the Big Bend, from Wakulla to Pasco County. Within this area, visitors can access what many like to refer to as “real Florida”, taking in scenes such as swamps, marshlands, natural springs, and rivers—all features of Florida's coastline that outsiders with expectations of powdery sand and blue waves may not expect.

Rising in the Mallory Swamp, just south of Mayo in Lafayette County, flowing 34.5 miles along the border of Dixie and Taylor Counties to the Gulf of Mexico, is the legendary Steinhatchee River. At the mouth of the river sits the town of Steinhatchee—a

coastal fishing community, brimming with locally-owned seafood eateries, brightly-colored homes, and marinas. Just up the road from the quaint town, along County Road 361, sits Steinhatchee Falls—a peaceful spot where locals and visitors can enjoy a picnic, take a dip in the cool water, slide a canoe or kayak down the boat ramp for some paddling fun, or simply savor a quiet moment listening to the river as it rushes over the falls.

While the falls aren't as majestic as Niagara, they certainly possess charm. Just three feet high, they consist of a flat rock shelf that stretches completely across the Steinhatchee—an area where vehicles used to cross during their travels. Historically, this limerock outcropping served as a crossing point for Native Americans and settlers of the 1800s and before. Traces of the road are still present today.

Visit Natural North Florida recommends that caution should be exercised when swimming, as the water is turbulent and dark with a rocky bottom. Children should be supervised at all times. It is recommended to bring along insect repellent, as mosquitoes are prominent during the hot months of summer. Always remember that natural settings such as Steinhatchee Falls present the possibility for wildlife such as snakes and alligators. While sightings are rare, it is important to practice vigilance.





## Ragans Family Campground: S'mores, sun, and swimming

If there's one spot in North Florida that offers amusement, relaxation and excitement simultaneously, it's the 80 plus acres paralleling Interstate 10, south of Madison, known as Ragans Family Campground.

For the extended Ragans family who call the Ragans Family Campground their home, camp is more than just the tents you slumber in and the bonfires you huddle around while melting chocolate and marshmallow s'mores in the fire. Camp is the wholesome family fun and tradition that constantly remains the same in the fast-paced world of today.

Owned by Madison locals, Jimmie and Latrelle Ragans, and managed by North Dakota natives Diana and Patrick Beete, Ragans Family Campground has been in operation for nearly 21 years strong. And while there's a differently-themed party every single weekend, there's surely more than meets the eye to the locals who just visit for the fun in the sun.

With 16 primitive campsites, more than 40 cabins and numerous RV hook-ups, campers visit from all over the country – not just to wake up and smell the North Florida air, but to participate in the many other features available for their enjoyment.

Just south of the main camp office, there's no limit to the amount of fun that can be had during the summer months. Even North Florida locals travel to the South Madison park to bounce into Wibit Lake. For years, the 60-foot Tornado Water Slide

ride has been a favorite among the thrill seekers who are able to slide right into the relaxing lazy river, which is  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a mile long. Uniquely, Ragans Family Campground also offers a splash pad, as well as a zero-entry swimming pool, sloped to transition from land to water for handicap-accessibility.

For those who are wanting a cooling day of games in the water, Ragans Family Campground offers numerous games such as the Downpour Derby and Water Wars. Of course, water park hours are subject to change without notice.

Toward the back end of the park, campers can cast a fishing pole for catch-and-release fishing in Camper's Lake. ATV riders are also designated their own piece of heaven with multiple trails in the tall pines of North Florida.

Plan a trip to check out the fun for yourself by visiting [www.ragansfamilycampground.com](http://www.ragansfamilycampground.com). ■



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# What's happenin'?

**Notice:** Due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, events are subject to cancellations. Please make sure you contact the event sponsor closer to the time of the event in order to gain further information.

## August

**7: First Friday Sip and Stroll** is a monthly event held in downtown Thomasville, Ga. that you won't want to miss!

Beginning at 6 p.m. and lasting until 8 p.m., enjoy sipping your favorite adult beverage in an event cup and wristband from participating merchants while you shop and stroll the

streets to see the shops and restaurants of Downtown Thomasville. Make your way to the Ritz Amphitheater to see the headliner band, Futurebirds, perform from 8

p.m. until 10 p.m.! Bring your lawn chair, blankets and the whole family for a fun evening in Thomasville! Contact the City of Thomasville for more information at (229) 227-4136.

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**22: Tiger Con** will be held on Saturday, Aug. 22, at the Rainwater Conference Center, in Valdosta, Ga. This anime, gaming, cosplay, and comic convention will celebrate its third year, providing fun for the whole family. Enjoy costume and video contests, a Vocaloid concert, and a trade show with 50 dealers and artists. All ages are welcome at this event. For more information, visit [tiger-convention.com](http://tiger-convention.com).

## September

**4: First Friday Sip and Stroll** is a monthly event held in downtown Thomasville, Ga. that you won't want to miss! Beginning at 6 p.m. and lasting until 8 p.m., enjoy sipping your favorite adult beverage in an event cup and wristband from participating merchants while you shop and stroll the streets to see the shops and restaurants of Downtown Thomasville. Make your way to the Ritz Amphitheater to see the headliner band, Natalie Brady & the Nite Owls, perform from 8 p.m. until 10 p.m.! Bring your lawn chair, blankets and the whole family for a fun evening in Thomasville! Contact the City of Thomasville for more

information at (229) 227-4136.

**25-26: The Smokin' in the Pines BBQ Festival**, held annually in Perry, Fla., is one of the largest and most popular barbecue festivals in the southeastern United States! The event includes multiple barbecue and sauce competitions with cash prizes, southern rock live music, arts and crafts vendors, food vendors, a people's choice barbecue tasting and much more. Call (850) 584-5366 for more information.

**30: Suwannee River Jam**, the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park's annually anticipated event, will return on Wednesday, Sept. 30, and last until Saturday, Oct. 3. Suwannee River Jam will feature big-time Country music artists, including Toby Keith, Billy Ray Cyrus, Randy Houser, Craig Morgan, David Allen Coe and more. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit [musicliveshere.com](http://musicliveshere.com).

## October

**2: First Friday Sip and Stroll** is a monthly event held in downtown Thomasville, Ga. that you won't want to miss!

Beginning at 6 p.m. and lasting until 8 p.m., enjoy sipping your favorite adult beverage in an event cup and wristband from participating merchants while you shop and stroll the streets to see the shops and restaurants of Downtown Thomasville. Make your way to the Ritz Amphitheater to see the headliner band, AJ Ghent Band, perform from 8 p.m. until 10 p.m.! Bring your lawn chair, blankets and the whole family for a fun evening in Thomasville! Contact the City of Thomasville for more information at (229) 227-4136.

**17: Hickory Grove Founder's Day** is set to take place on Saturday, Oct. 17! This annually anticipated Madison County event is all about days gone by. Throwback activities include cane grinding and syrup-making, just like it was done over 100 years ago; sausage-making in the ole smokehouse; butter churning; re-caning old chairs; quilting demonstrations; and picking up homemade jelly in the Hickory Grove Country Store. Look for the Antique Car Show, Hog Calling Contest and Dill Pickle Spitting Contest, a crowd favorite. The Hickory Grove

Singing Stage will be filled with songs you know, just before the old-time circuit riding preacher shows up to give an inspiring message to the crowd! The festivities will take place at Hickory Grove United Methodist Church, located at 1218 NE Hickory Grove Rd., in Pinetta. Look for the signs so you will not get lost. For more information, call Dan Buchanan at (850) 464-8710.

**24: The Florida Forest Festival**, held annually on the fourth Saturday in October, is a celebration of the forestry industry in Taylor County. With the World's Largest Free Fish Fry, a festive parade through downtown, lumberjack shows and competitions, arts and crafts, an antique car show, children's games and story telling, this event promises to have something for everyone in the family! The event also features heavy equipment shows and exhibits as well as loader competitions, cross cut saw competitions and chainsaw competitions. This year's event will feature performances from Buddy Jewell and Andy Pursell! Visit [floridaforestfestival.org](http://floridaforestfestival.org) for more information. ■

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local legends

# The Mystery of the Swamp Volcano

*The swamps of Jefferson County are speckled with underground caves, cavernous aquifers and sinkholes ... and maybe a long-lost volcano that once burned in the Wacissa Swamp.*

Photo by Susie Reams

The small towns of Jefferson County are filled with mysteries ... one such secret lies boiling in the swamps of the Wacissa.

The mystery of a volcano that is rumored to have burned in the wetlands of Wacissa, Fla. has been around for centuries. Once, many years ago, it was a well-known mystery, but as the years went on, it has become a secret tale only known by a few locals.

The volcano gained its name from a local native tribe. For generations, the region's Timucuan Natives passed down stories about the "Wakulla Volcano." In the Timucua language, "Wakulla" meant "mysterious." In the early 1820s to the mid-1950s, this legend of the volcano was quite popular. According to local lore, the rumored volcano was said to be about 20 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico.

The actual location of the Wakulla Volcano is suspected to have been in southwestern Jefferson County, 10 miles inland of the Gulf of Mexico. The lore of the Seminole Indian Tribe mentions the mysterious volcano in the Wacissa Swamp. Their stories mention the "smoke rising in the swamp" and it is this account that has convinced modern historians of the Jefferson County location of the fabled swamp.

Settlers from the 1830s pinned the blame of the strange smoke on what they believed to be Native campfires or from a possible den of pirates on the coast. The smoke was so visible that there are reports of people in Tallahassee who saw black smoke that looked like coal burning coming from the southeast. The smoke would go on for days at a time, in the same area. During the night, a bright light also came from the same area.

Maurice Thompson, the author of the play "Tallahassee Girl", also witnessed the mysterious smoke and mentioned it in his play. Thompson describes the smoke as "a slim, mysterious dark column of smoke spouting straight up to the sky"

The discovery of suspicious smoke and light brought more attention to this volcano and its mysterious location. Once the word was out about the hidden volcano within the swamps of North Florida, several expeditions were conducted by residents of Monticello, Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Newport, St. Marks, even a reporter from Ohio for the New York Times.

The search for the volcano continued when the United States government offered a reward of \$500,000 to anyone who could locate the origin of the smoke and lights. A lesser reward was also offered by the Governors of Florida, Georgia, Alabama and New York.

The expeditions were primarily on horseback, although others were by wagon, and each expedition ventured far into the mosquito, moccasin and alligator-infested swamps between Wacissa and Aucilla.

Reports from those who took part in the expedition say that the horses' coats would change color due to the number of bites from mosquitos. The grand expedition would last a minimum of three days before the volcano-searchers had to return to civilization, but no one ever did find the Wakulla Volcano.

Due to the wild and unforgiving nature of the swamps, it was fortunate that no one was killed or severely injured during the expeditions.

Archeologists also tested the Wacissa Swamp and multiple areas near the swamp during the 1850s on the expeditions. But even these tests brought up concerns - did the people during the time have the technology and equipment needed to actually find this volcano?



Photo by Ashley Hunter

Swamp and murky lakes are common in Jefferson County. But one swamp, located in Wacissa, Fla., may be home to more than just alligators, birds and bullfrogs - it may be the location of an old volcano.



## local legends

There is no crater or heat from the swamps found related to the Wakulla Volcano legend. There were large igneous rocks, a specific type of magma rock, surrounding the possibility of where the legendary volcano may hide.

Years prior in 1840, near Wakulla, an oil company was drilling a test well and found volcanic material, but it was 7,000 feet down. So, it couldn't have been the Wakulla Volcano? Could it?

Maybe the Wakulla Volcano hunters were in a hurry to receive a reward, instead of thoroughly searching for a mystery that would change the way people think about Jefferson County.

The volcano was addressed again as workers built the U.S. Route 98 through the Wacissa. During construction of the road, the workers had to fill a deep hole that required at least 38 trucks with 600 tons of rock.

So, if no one ever found the volcano, why aren't plumes of smoke still rising from the Wacissa Swamp? Some believe that an earthquake in Charleston, S.C. might be the answer to that question. In 1886, Charleston was the site of an earthquake that was so powerful that it shook Tallahassee. Locally, the seismic activity resulted in the draining of Lake Jackson. Within days, the Leon County lake emptied of water. If the earthquake affected Tallahassee, could it also be the reason for the disappearance of the mysterious smoke? What if the earthquake shifted the volcano into a lower layer under the ground, dimming its fire?

This earthquake could have also been to blame for the emergence of sinkholes in the southern portion of Jefferson County. The land there is now speckled with sinkholes just below the ground, as well as underwater caves and underground rivers.



*A Little Blue Heron wades in the waters of one of Jefferson County's swamps.*

The Aucilla River itself – a prominent body of water in Jefferson County – flows underground for a portion of its travel to the Gulf of Mexico. The effects of the earthquake might have made it more difficult to find out if the volcano existed, or it was just a myth.

There have been many changes to the swamps in the Wacissa and Aucilla over the years; the sprawling swampy region has since shrunk in size. Where it was once infested with swamp creatures, the area is now home to more people. Towns have sprouted in the area, bringing houses and roads to the former swamp. Where explorers once hunted through desolate swamp, people are now allowed to hike or ride bikes on trails that go through the swamps. These changes made by humans could also have affected the Wakulla Volcano – roads may have been laid over the volcano's

original location or rock and rubble might have filled the volcano's opening. These changes may have forever sealed the volcano's status as a hidden mystery of Jefferson County.

From the moment the Wakulla Volcano theories began, and still to this day, the mysterious volcano has not yet been discovered.

There is one famous saying: "Not all mysterious can stay mysterious forever."

The volcano may no longer burn in the swamp, sending smoke skyward, but the advancement of technology and the growth of Jefferson County means that renewed interest in finding the volcano is growing ... the Wakulla Volcano and its location in Wacissa's miles of swamp may not stay a mystery forever. ■

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- **Labor Day Weekend and Fireworks Spectacular (September 4 - 7)**
- **Night of Worship (September 18)**
- **Halloween Fall Festival Weekend (October 16-17, 23-24 and 30-31)**

While you're reserving your campsite, be sure to check out these exciting and upcoming themed weekends that you can plan your trip around! More themed weekends are offered and can be viewed at [www.ragansfamilycampground.com](http://www.ragansfamilycampground.com).



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*In the business of cypress for six generations*

# Down the Fenholloway

*By Jane Hutto*

The canoe was as fragile  
As a crescent moon, this  
Playing to our advantage  
When simplicity counted.  
Our goal to weather the storm,  
Avoiding abundant ornamentation  
Or expensive renovations.  
We drifted through banks of

Scarlet trees and green, the  
Ultimate in nature's array,  
Noticing how clouds, heavy  
With thunder's blast, blocked  
Communications, wishing  
Preparation had availed itself  
Instead of this unplanned retreat—  
Our dayshift left incomplete, as if

Some griffin had crooked his finger  
And we complied. "Up in smoke,"  
Some may say of our plans, left  
Behind like troops quartered in their  
Cantonment, yet we persevered  
For the prize set before us, assured  
That a fourth generation had  
Satisfied the equation.

## Afterword

Jane Hutto, current resident of Milton, Fla., hails from the small town of Greenville, located in Madison County, Fla. At 83 years of age, she is still painting pictures with words. Her poetry is often inspired by family, days gone by, and her comings and goings in North Florida.

The Fenholloway River is a small, black water river located near Perry, Fla. The river's watershed contains wooded wetlands in the upland and coastal marshes in the lowland. Sandy soils dominate the landscape. The San Pedro Bay wetland area in northeast Taylor County is the headwaters for the 36-mile-long river. The stream discharges into the Gulf of Mexico. A rich history surrounds the river, with countless memories of swimming, fishing, and recreating on its banks. However, when the river was designated for industrial use in 1947, a slow, but steady destruction began. Procter & Gamble would build a pulp mill in 1954 and, slowly but surely, the Fenholloway was compromised, becoming notorious as the most polluted river in Florida. This damage would take many years to reverse. After millions of dollars in restoration projects, the river's future is bright.



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*A “cat-face” carved into a cypress tree, remnant of the time when turpentine was collected in the early 20th century.*



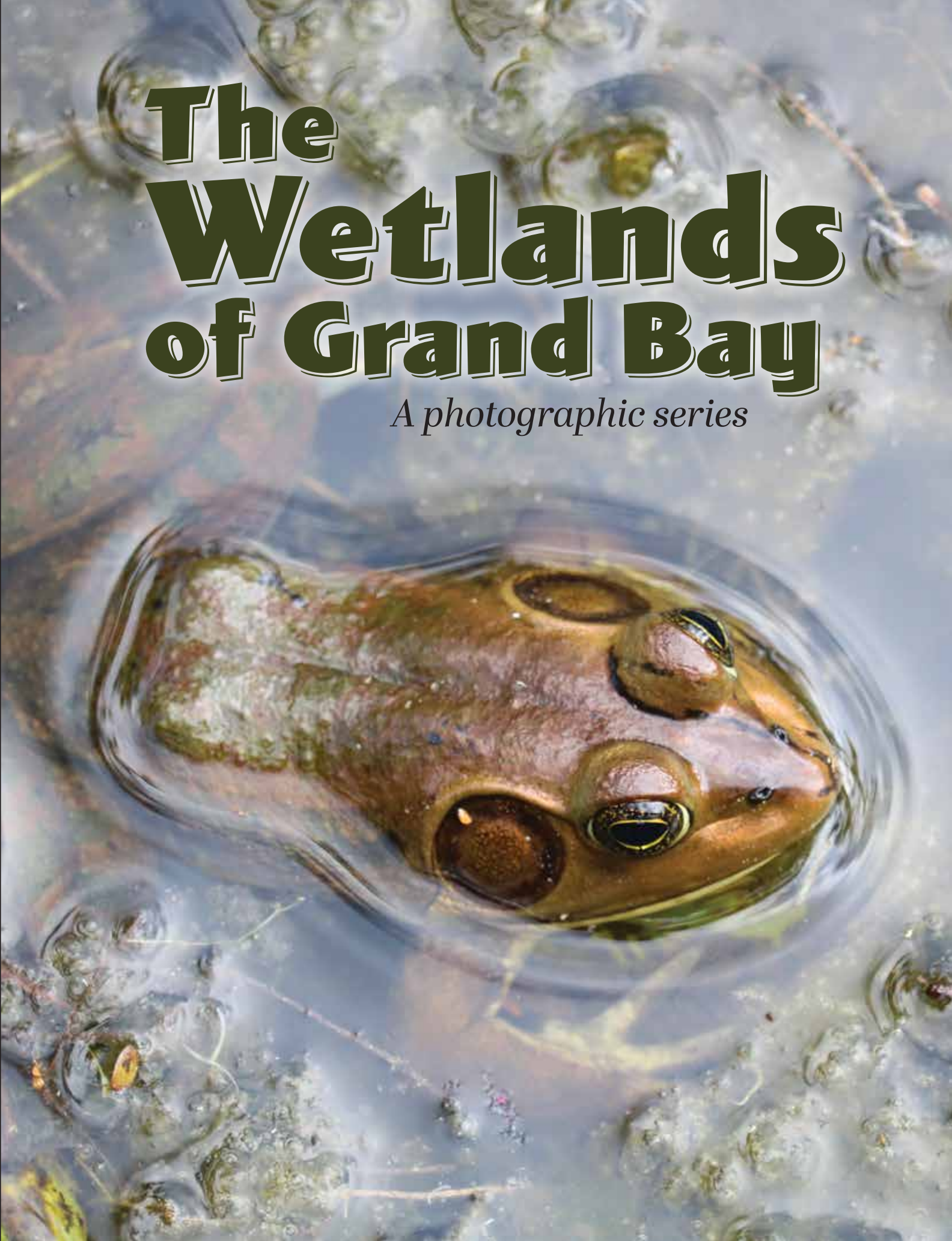
*Story and photos by Rick Patrick, Staff Writer*

Part of the larger 13,000 acre Grand Bay, the Grand Bay Wildlife Management Area (WMA) consists of approximately 8,500 acres of native wetlands—all situated in natural South Georgia.

The Robert Patten Wetland Education Center offers educational programs on wetland ecology, plant identification, local wildlife and more. There is a half-mile long boardwalk that winds its way through a variety of natural wetlands habitats. Along the trail, one can see an abundance of flora and fauna, from tall cypress trees to birds and alligators. There is also a 54-foot tower that gives spectators a grand aerial view of the area.

To get there, follow Hwy 125 (Bemiss Road) north out of Valdosta toward Moody Air Force Base. Turn right onto Knight’s Academy Road. After travelling 5.9 miles, the entrance to Grand Bay WMA is on the left.

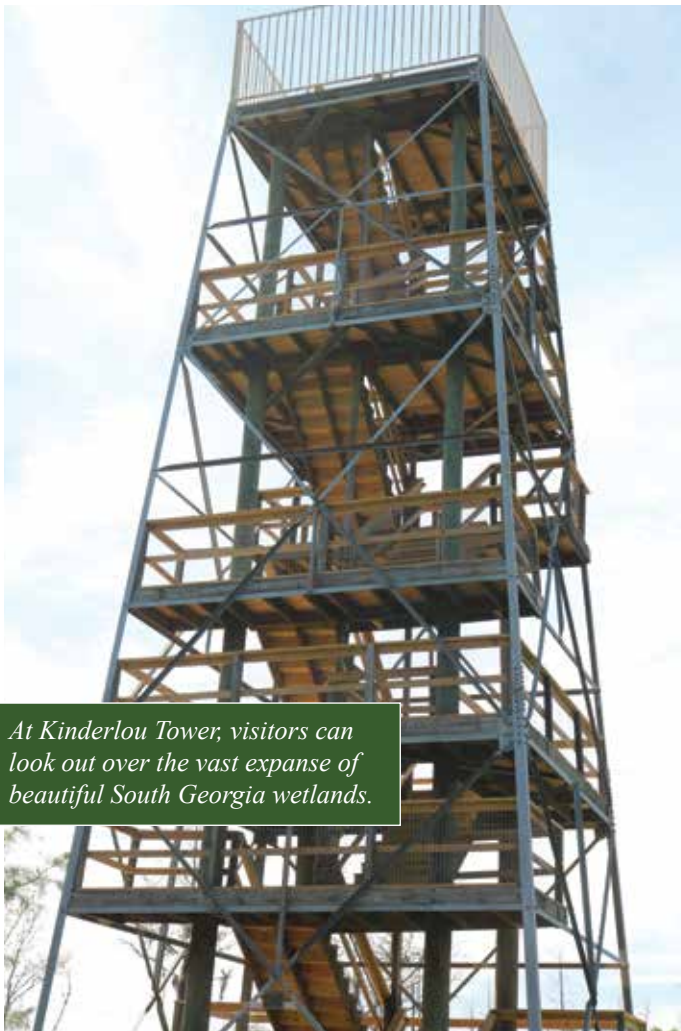
The following shots were taken along the boardwalk in the Grand Bay WMA. They show just a glimpse of the variety of plants and wildlife that can be found in this natural South Georgia gem.

A close-up photograph of a frog in a pond. The frog is brown with large, prominent eyes and is partially submerged in the water. The water is clear, and there are some ripples around the frog. The background shows some green vegetation and a small insect on the water's surface.

# The Wetlands of Grand Bay

*A photographic series*

nature



*At Kinderlou Tower, visitors can look out over the vast expanse of beautiful South Georgia wetlands.*







nature



*A Blooming Project:*  
**HEARTHSTONE  
GARDENS**





*Breathtaking hydrangeas are some of many flowering plants at Hearthstone Gardens.*

Along the winding, scenic roads of Wellborn, Fla., down a dusty, gravel drive called 134th Place, rests the picturesque Hearthstone Gardens. The project was brought to life by Judee Mundy, who has worked tirelessly to plant a botanical garden that can be accessed by the public for free—a lifelong dream she turned into a reality. Here, visitors can find peace, tranquility, and learn about their natural environment.

With each passing day, Mundy's gardens are expanding and, currently, she and volunteers are in the process of constructing an alcove which can only be accessed by a wooden bridge. The intention is to create curiosity among visitors. The alcove, which will not be visible by the naked eye, can be entered by crossing the beautiful, handmade bridge, over a stream lined with flowering shrubs which will reach great heights. The setting will only add to the allure already established at Hearthstone Gardens, where visitors wander freely around the grounds, accessing twists and turns throughout its wooded areas near Mirror Lake.

An interesting aspect of the gardens is that there are no straight lines—everything is on a curve. “I think curves help a person feel peaceful, relaxed—you just stroll, rather than a straight line where you want to go from point A to point B,” said Mundy. “A curve is gentle. Also, when you are on a curve you cannot see around the corner, so it's a motivator to see what is coming next.”

The butterfly mound, covered in all sorts of native wildflowers of different shades is a lovely attraction at Hearthstone Gardens. Breathtaking beds of lavender-colored wildflowers called Stokes' Aster serve as a showstopper upon first glance. This plant offers beauty with both its vibrant blooms and attractive, evergreen foliage. Other sights visitors enjoy include a bountiful rose garden and interesting exhibits such as the “white patch” filled with flowering and non-flowering plants that are the shade of white. Guests can enjoy the greenhouse, tropical gardens, bird sanctuary, as well as the children's garden, which features fun and familiar-sounding plants such as elephant ear, scorpion tail and asparagus fern. A Japanese garden is still in the works, and its beginning stages can already be accessed by the public.

Through the grit and determination of a woman on a mission, Hearthstone Gardens is a reality, brimming with even more possibilities. Mundy isn't finished with her project and, as mentioned before, stay tuned for the new alcove, currently under construction. Hearthstone Gardens is located at 3300 134th Place, in Wellborn, Fla, located off US 90 West. Admission to the gardens is free. Space for events such as weddings or showers is available. For more information, visit [hearthstonegardens.org](http://hearthstonegardens.org), email [hearthstonegardens@gmail.com](mailto:hearthstonegardens@gmail.com) or call (386) 438-3102. ■



Sittin on the porch with...

# Jamie Lee



*Jamie Lee moved to Jasper, Fla. in the second grade and has called the peaceful community home ever since. She especially loves how people come together to help others in need. That help is often accompanied with the famous fried chicken from Foodway.*

Story by Mickey Starling, Staff Writer

Photo by Savannah Reams, Editor-in-Chief

West Palm Beach native Jamie Lee was born in the fast lane. Her father, Jim Crowe, is a racing legend in the area, having won numerous trophies in the late model division. Her cousins and brother have continued the family legacy, building and racing cars in the same area where Jim Crowe left his mark for 20 years.

Lee's parents divorced when she was in the second grade and her mother moved the children to the small town of Jasper, in Hamilton County, Fla. The fast lane quickly became a fading memory as Lee grew up in the quaint and peaceful community of 4,100 residents. As Lee relaxes in a porch swing that overlooks the woodlands, she reflects upon how her life was impacted by her mother's decision to call Jasper home. "I would have been a totally different person," said Lee. "Here, I had great teachers, especially my third grade teacher. She read the Bible to us every morning, led us in prayer and finished with the Pledge of Allegiance. She was instrumental in teaching me what really matters in life."

Lee is also grateful for her step-father, Ed Simmons, who passed away in 2001. "He taught me a lot about love by the way he treated my mother," said Lee. "He also kept things interesting with all the animals he kept around the house. We won ribbons at local fairs for our guinea pigs and rabbits." Lee also recalls entering a "giant chicken" in a 4-H contest. "I don't remember how that

turned out, but eventually, he made some great fried chicken," said Lee.

The small town-atmosphere suits Lee just fine. Though her relatives are mostly in South Florida, Lee is quick to brag about her large extended family in Hamilton County. "I love this town. The community comes together to support each other," said Lee. "When trouble hits, you know the fried chicken is coming."

Lee and her husband, Brooks, frequently assist others when they encounter troubles of various sorts. They have currently opened their home to three young ladies who needed a family to help them through difficult times. "When people need a place to stay, our home is where they often come," said Lee. We have a lot of kids who call us 'Mom' and 'Dad.'" Stray dogs are also no strangers to the Lees' kindness, as they have provided a home for many of them over the years.

When Lee isn't busy with family or her business of selling "It Works" products, she can be found cooling off at one of the area springs. Lee is also an avid worshipper who often ministers through interpretive dance. "I love helping others encounter the presence of God," said Lee.

Looking forward, Lee hopes to see Jasper bloom again economically. "My heart is to see the vacant buildings in Jasper rejuvenated and full of prospering businesses, said Lee. "We could be a 'Hallmark' town." If many of the residents in Jasper have the same heart for others that Lee and her family have, the "Hallmark" towns could probably learn a thing or two from these folks. ■



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