

The Front Porch

Where The Tea Is Sweet and the Talks Are Long July/August 2025

Honoring Madison's Legacies of Friendship, Music And Memory

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The Front Porch

Where the tea is sweet and the talks are long

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The Front Porch



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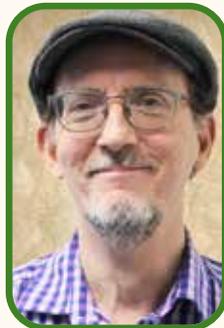
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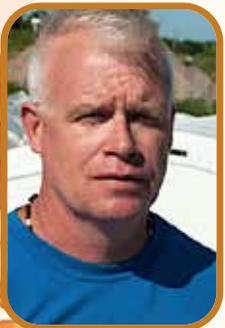
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SITTIN' ON THE PORCH WITH...

MIKE HARRIS

Story and Photography by Jason Futch

Mike Harris recently retired as the history teacher and athletic director for Lafayette High School (LHS).

"I came at a good time and during a good situation," Harris said of his hiring in 1987. "I haven't looked back since."

Despite the 30-plus years he contributed to LHS, his story begins in the City of Alachua, Florida, where he was born and raised. In 1981, Harris graduated from Santa Fe High School and started attending the University of Florida in 1985. During his time as a student, he took on various substitute teaching jobs with the Alachua County School District before pursuing a position at LHS.

"I figured out that if I learned or figured out how to teach, I would go back to Alachua County, but 38 years later, here we are," Harris said.

Of the three schools he applied to, LHS was the first to offer him a job.

Throughout Harris's career with LHS, he taught a variety of social studies classes ranging from geography to U.S. history.

"I enjoyed teaching geography and maps," he said, stressing it is essential for students and adults to learn how to read a map. "We've become so dependent on GPS that we don't know what to do when it goes out. Navigation systems are nice, convenient and easy. However, being able to open up a map might be one of those skills that might be good to know."

While teaching social studies, Harris also served as an assistant coach at LHS, overseeing football and basketball, and he held the position of athletic director until his retirement in May. His accolades and sporting achievements as a coach are evident in the collection of medals and plaques displayed at his home in Mayo, which he is proud of.

From the time Harris began working for LHS until his retirement, he recognized his time in Lafayette County had been an opportunity for him to connect with the locals and learn more about the area he has called home since working with the school.

"We've become so dependent on GPS - being able to open up a map might be one of those skills that might be good to know."

- Mike Harris

However, he also recognized there were significant changes in the way he ended up teaching students, compared to when he first started.

"Kids are still kids, but I think adults have changed," Harris said. "I think

technology has been a big factor along with other cultural changes."

As he retires from LHS, Harris hopes to be remembered during his tenure as someone who was fair, consistent and genuinely cared about his students. He also said that, over the years, Lafayette County has been good to him and his wife, Cheryl, crediting his work with LHS athletics.

"Not being from here, but being able to plug in and find a niche, and being accepted by the people of Lafayette County over the last 30-plus years," reflected Harris, "I hope we have reciprocated that appreciation. It's a good place."

Now enjoying retirement, Harris doesn't have any immediate plans set in stone, but he's looking forward to exploring new opportunities and dedicating more time to personal interests and projects he previously had to put on hold. He embraces this new chapter with an open mind and a sense of possibility. ■





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**RAY CHARLES
CHILDHOOD HOME**

This house is a reconstruction of the home where musician Ray Charles (1930-2004) lived with his mother, Aretha Williams, and adopted grandmother, Margaret "Mun" Robinson, shortly after his birth in 1930, until about the age of five. "RC," as Ray was known by his friends, received his first piano instruction from Willey Pittman, owner of the nearby Red Wing Cafe. Ray and his mother later moved into a small house behind the cafe. At age seven, Ray's sight failed and he was sent to the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind in St. Augustine. The modest wood frame vernacular house he grew up in was probably constructed in the 1920s. It had no electricity or indoor plumbing. Heat was prepared on a wood-burning stove. A hand-primed pump supplied water from a well next to the house. A fireplace in one of the four small rooms provided warmth, and open windows and doors allowed breezes to cool the house. Because of advanced deterioration, the abandoned house was scheduled for demolition. In 2006, the Town of Greenville purchased the structure to preserve the memory of Ray Charles, with a grant from the Florida Bureau of Historic Preservation. The town completed the reconstruction of the house in 2008.

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HONORING MADISON'S LEGACIES

of Friendship, Music and Memory



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Story by Heather Ainsley and the Madison County Tourist Development Council

In a town where the front porch isn't just a place to rest – but a place to remember, reflect and reconnect – few people have embodied the spirit of Madison County quite like Mrs. Elesta Clemons Pritchett, who was a prominent leadership figure for her community for much of her life before passing away in October of 2024 at the age of 94. Before her passing, the Madison County Tourism Development Council (TDC) was able to secure the profound honor of sitting down with Pritchett to capture her memories and share her incredible story, in the hopes of preserving her heart-warming legacy for generations to come. This interview was filmed, courtesy of a partnership between the Madison County TDC and Pinwheel Productions, and easily showcases Pritchett's grace, poise and her powerful presence. During the interview, she spoke of her love of growing up in Greenville during the 1930s and '40s, as well as her notable friendship with a young boy named Ray Charles Robinson, long before the world would come to know him as the musical icon, Ray Charles.

"I lived in Madison County all my life," stated a 93-year-old Pritchett, proudly. "Growing up in Madison County has been the thrill of my life – open spaces, the green grass growing, the trees blooming – this is the most peaceful place I have enjoyed living. Everybody knows everybody."

Pritchett led an extensive career in service to her community, serving as a teacher for 38 years in Greenville. In addition to that, she was on the city council for 23 years, serving for some of that time as Mayor of Greenville. She was on the Board of Directors for the Madison Chamber of Commerce, as well as the Madison County Economic Development Council. She also served as a chairperson on the Scholarship Committee for the North Florida College Foundation Board and was heavily involved in church activities. Her long list of community outreach and services to the public only serves to highlight her love of her hometown of Greenville.

For many years, Pritchett was also highly dedicated to preserving the memory of one of her childhood companions, Ray Charles, who would later become famous around the world for his incredible musical prowess. When the singer passed away in 2004, Pritchett intervened against claims made by Albany, Georgia, that the famous singer



This statue of Ray Charles in Greenville's city park came about as a result of Elesta Pritchard's efforts to preserve his memory.

was from Albany. As she argued, Ray Charles may have been born in Albany, but he only lived there for about a month, with much of his childhood spent in Madison County, Florida, growing up in the rural, small town of Greenville.

"I remember meeting Ray Charles, whom we called RC, when I was very young," recalled Pritchett. "I was about three or four years old, playing in his grandmother's yard."

She continued her recollection, adding that after some time, his family moved and she became a neighbor to RC and grew to know him well. Charles had lost his eyesight by the age of just seven years old, as a result of what is believed to have been Glaucoma. Even so, he kept up with the other neighborhood kids and was well-known for his playful pranks.

"We played with him and included him in anything we were doing," recalled Pritchett, "and he just fit right in! He was blind, and we had patience with him; we knew him and knew what it took to play with him, and we wanted to include him. And if you didn't include him, he would get included!"

Their friendship was one of innocence and familiarity, forged on front porches, in local homes and down the sandy streets of Greenville. Pritchett shared stories of the many adventures that she enjoyed with Ray Charles and the other neighborhood children. She described Charles as fearless, even with his lack of eyesight, and recalls how he would get up on her brother's

bike, assisted by the other kids, and ride without fear or concern for falling. Chuckling, she retold a story about how, after running an errand for her mother, she returned to her chair only to have Charles playfully pull her seat out from beneath her the very moment she tried to sit, landing her on the ground. Even without the ability to see, he was able to predict the exact time to move.

"It made me mad at the time," Pritchett was quoted saying in another interview about Charles' prank.

She mentioned that Charles had gotten in trouble that day for pulling the seat out from under her, but looking back, it didn't bother her as much.

"Later, I stopped to realize how thankful I should be that I had great eyesight, and he was just being a normal boy."

Charles would spend nearly every day at her house when he was home from St. Augustine, where he attended school. Pritchett said that music was everything to him, and he was deeply encouraged to pursue his musical interests by a local man by the name of Wylie Pittman, who was owner of the Red Wing Cafe. According to Pritchett, Pittman would sit with Charles and teach him how to play the piano. The kids referred to the cafe as a "juke joint," and it wasn't long before young Ray Charles had learned several songs that played on the jukebox at the cafe. He would listen to the songs, and learn to play them on the piano, and it was around this time that the people



Elesta Clemons Pritchett

in his life began to realize that he had a great gift. Commonly, members of the community would implore him to perform mini-concerts, celebrating his impressive talents.

“He was a genius in music,” remembered Pritchett, “and I feel very special because I knew Ray Charles. I knew him and grew up with him. I would like people to know that he is a product of Greenville. Without him, it wouldn’t be Greenville.”

Following the death of Ray Charles, Pritchett dedicated a great deal of attention and effort to preserving his memory and significance in Greenville. Two years later, her efforts were rewarded when, in February of 2006, a statue of Ray Charles was erected in the city park. Additionally, the house where Ray Charles grew up, the very same home where he rode bikes, pulled pranks, played games with the neighbor kids and learned to play the piano, was renovated and turned into a museum in honor of his small-town roots and larger-world accomplishments.

Pritchett hoped that by preserving such an icon’s humble beginnings, it would inspire those who come from small towns or difficult circumstances to go out into the world and become someone great.

“I want people to visit Ray Charles’ house because it is a historical site,” she stated. “I love it. I grew up with him. And I want other people to know about it, from far and near. [I want them to know] that he was poor but he made it, and he became, through all those circumstances, great. If a blind person from Greenville can make something of himself and overcome such an obstacle, they can also do that... It was a special privilege for me to know Ray Charles.”

“Madison County provided me from nobody to somebody,” said Pritchett. “I grew up here, my education was here, and I served here. This is the best place I can think of that you could live a peaceful, productive life. I wish that the next generation will take advantage of all the things that Madison County is about. I know that I’m not going to live forever,

and I hope that whenever I leave here, that I will leave it a legacy...to leave it so that someone else would like to take up where I leave off and go forward with it, I just love it [here] so much.”

Pritchett smiled, chuckling softly, and added, “I wish I could stay here forever but I can’t.”

In October of 2024, Elesta Pritchett passed away, and although she had spent so much time throughout her life in preserving the legacy of her childhood friend, she may not have realized the incredible legacy she was forging each and every day. From inspiring and educating young minds, to encouraging visitors and residents alike to explore and take pride in Madison County’s rich history, Pritchett will always be remembered and cherished by those who knew her.

“[Hers] is a story that humanizes a legend and shines a light on the richness of our local history – a reminder that greatness often grows in the most unassuming places,” says the Madison County TDC. “Ms. Elesta’s words and presence are powerful. Her grace, wit and deep love for Madison County radiate in every frame of the video. It is both a tribute and a time capsule – a reflection of the community spirit we are proud to share with visitors and residents alike... Her passing was a tremendous loss for all who knew and loved her, but her voice, her story and her legacy will continue to inspire through this beautiful video and the lives she touched. We are honored to have captured her memories and to share them as part of Madison County’s cultural and historical fabric. Thank you, Ms. Elesta, for reminding us that even in the smallest corners of the world, history sings – and friendship leaves a legacy that lasts.”

Those who wish to hear Elesta’s story firsthand may view her interview online at visitmadisonfl.com. ■



The house where Ray Charles grew up has been renovated and turned into a museum in honor of his small-town roots and larger-world accomplishments.





RAY'S PIANO ECHOING PORCH SWINGS CREAKING CRICKETS AFTER DARK

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Anderson Spring on the Suwannee River



Lafayette Blue Springs

Story and Photographs by Heather Ainsley

Summer is officially underway, and sun-weary vacationers are flocking to Florida's waterways in an attempt to find cool, refreshing relief from the intense

seasonal heat. Florida is famous for its sprawling coastlines; the abundance of beaches and ocean water that surrounds and frames the state on all sides but one. While the ocean may seem like the obvious choice when it comes to

finding water to play in, Florida has far more to offer than simple salt and sand. Looking at map images of the rivers, lakes and swamplands of the state, Florida resembles a large sponge, little flecks of water indicated in blue, littered throughout the surface of the peninsula.

Florida has what is referred to as a "karst" terrain, meaning that the land that we inhabit is resting on a water-soluble layer of rock. This rock is mostly carbonate rock like limestone and dolostone, and it is very old and runs deep. However, this isn't merely a solid block of stone lying underneath our beautiful sandy state; the stone is water-soluble, which means it tends to break down and erode over time when exposed to water, leaving the different layers of stone full of cracks, caverns, tunnels and deep holes. These holes regularly fill up with rainwater, creating underground pockets and rivers of freshwater that make up what is called the Florida aquifer.

When viewing a map of Florida, the sponge-like patterns of blue are evidence of a thriving aquifer. In fact, Florida's aquifers are some of the world's most productive, providing fresh drinking water to more than 10 million Americans who call Florida home. Beyond providing such a precious commodity to humans, the aquifer provides water to countless ecosystems, enabling much of Florida to teem with beautiful, unique plant and animal life. This vibrant abundance makes Florida a prime destination for those who love the exquisite beauty and escape of being in thriving natural settings.

When it rains (and it rains a lot here in Florida), the aquifers fill up with rain water. When the holes, caves



Hart Springs

Paradise



Little River Springs



Madison Blue Springs

and crevices in the limestone are full to the brim, the excess water has to go somewhere, and this results in freshwater springs. A spring is a natural exit point for groundwater to emerge and flow freely. In many cases, Florida's groundwater emerges and flows across the Earth's surface as creeks, streams and rivers, which snake their way across the state.

Springs provide a one-of-a-kind summer experience for those who love to spend time splashing in cool water. And by cool, I actually mean cold – the water in the aquifer has spent lots of time underground in caves before being pushed up to the surface and hasn't had access to sunlight to warm it, so it emerges from the earth at a chilly 68-72 degrees (F) consistently throughout the year.

Florida's beaches are beautiful, but come late summer, the sand is hot, the water is hot and the sun is hot, making it an uncomfortable destination for those looking for a refreshing day out on the water. Springs can be a great alternative for those who wish to escape the summer heat, and they also provide stunning views, abundant wildlife and no short supply of cool, fresh water to play in.

Florida is home to well over 1,000 springs, and each spring is wonderfully unique. Springs are generally classified by the amount of water that flows from the aquifer. First magnitude springs see over 100 cubic feet of water per second (cfs), second magnitude springs see 10-100 cfs, and third magnitude springs see around 1-10 cfs. Any spring with less than 1 cfs is considered fourth magnitude.

Some springs offer shallow, sandy areas to wade in while others offer deep,

rocky cave openings that are great for diving, snorkeling or swimming. Some are more private and secluded and have an abundance of wildlife, making them the perfect setting to connect with nature and discover a sense of wonder and relaxation, while others offer close proximity to tourist amenities, making them prime destinations for those wishing to enjoy activities like hiking, camping, kayaking or birdwatching.

It is important to do some research before visiting one of Florida's stunning springs. While each spring has something to offer, no two are the same. Not every spring will be suitable for every visitor. While it would have been impossible to

visit all 1,000-plus springs that Florida has to offer, this journalist has always enjoyed visiting the clear, cool waters. Here's my list of favorite springs to go to in North Florida, complete with pros, cons and recommendations for any prospective visitor.

Many of the springs (even the popular ones) are nestled in rural areas of Florida, and this is an important factor to consider before hopping in the car and driving there. Many springs are fantastic places to spend the day, but they are not always located near other amenities like restaurants, stores and other recreational locations. This means that if you forget, like I did, to pack some snacks or a lunch





Non-venomous brown water snake.

for yourself, you'll be hard-pressed to find something to eat that doesn't come from a gas station or a Dollar General.

Also, it is important to have a backup in mind – it is frustrating to drive for over an hour to reach somewhere you're planning to have fun all day, only to discover it is closed when you get there. Some springs update their page on the Florida State Parks website, but in my experience not all of them do, so checking before you go is good, but not always effective. Some springs may be closed due to damage from storms, high currents or low water visibility.

To safeguard my adventures from spring closures, I like to participate in what I call "spring-hopping," where I pick several springs that are all located within a specific area, and I then go to each of them and spend some time throughout the day. This way, if one area has been closed due to unforeseen circumstances, there is still another chance to swim and have fun nearby. Many of Florida's springs are located farther away from larger cities, but relatively close to one another, so spring-hopping ensures that I have a backup or two to explore.

Many springs are protected as state parks, and part of protecting these amazing locations is limiting the number of people who can visit at one time. This may be annoying to some, but we have all seen photos of spring break chaos and the havoc that it wreaks on Florida beaches. For many residents, there's nothing more infuriating than seeing our beautiful ecosystems ruined by inconsiderate visitors, and limiting the capacity of swimmers serves to protect springs from being destroyed by being

consistently full during the summer season.

When visiting a spring, I prefer to visit during times when the spring will not be overly crowded, even with capacity limits (at-capacity is still too many people for my liking). To avoid being turned away at the gate due to visitor limits, I like to try and get there early, planning my travel time and factoring in any stops and traffic concerns so that I arrive before the park gets very busy, with enough time to enjoy the beautiful scenery before it becomes packed with vacationing bodies.

Jefferson County is home to **Wacissa Springs**, a popular watering hole that is much-beloved by locals. This group of 20 springs forms the headwaters of the Wacissa River, and offers a deeper swimming area near the aquifer entrance, which is accompanied by a rope swing and jumping platform. The spring head is surrounded by a county park, which has seen the recent development of a pavilion, a dock and repairs to the boat ramp over the last few years. This park is a favorite among adults and children, as it has a sandy shallow area that is suitable for small kids to play in. This site enjoys a healthy array of wildlife and is home to frogs, fish, newts, snails, crawfish, snakes, turtles, freshwater birds and the occasional juvenile alligator. As this site is highly active, wildlife steers clear of visitors.

Wakulla is home to **Wakulla Springs State Park**, which is one of the largest and deepest freshwater springs in the world. If you enjoy classic movies, you may have seen this spring on the "big screen," as it has been featured as a filming location in *Tarzan's Secret Treasure* (1941) and



Troy Springs

Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954). While it may not actually have tree-swinging wild men or terrifying swamp creatures, this spring is frequented by plenty of river life, particularly enjoying visits from manatee. A Spanish-style lodge built in the 1930s still functions as a hotel and event venue. The water runs exceptionally deep, around 185 feet, and swimmers are welcome to leap off of a jumping platform that sports two levels. Only those brave enough will “take the plunge” into the icy depths below! The lodge is sometimes closed for private events, but it is interesting to explore when open, and guests are welcome to order from the Lodge cafe area.

Madison County is home to **Madison Blue Springs**, a crystal-clear, first magnitude spring that offers stunning swimming and snorkeling opportunities as well as cave diving for certified divers. Nestled in a limestone basin that feeds into the Withlacoochee River, it is surrounded by beautiful woodlands that make it feel like a paradise set away from the busy world. A set of stairs leads the way directly into the swimming area, which is deep. This spring is around 25 feet deep, which may not be suitable for inexperienced swimmers. Additionally, as a first magnitude spring, the water bubbles up from the aquifer in large volumes, creating a current that leads out to the wider river. The fast-paced flow can be difficult for even strong swimmers to fight, and is located near rocks and boulders, which can be sharp and may shift when stood upon. There is a more shallow area on the opposite bank of this spring, but it rests on a bed of cypress knees and roots, which could

be cumbersome for very young children. A sandy, shallow area is available on the other side of the spring, but visitors should note that it leads out to the open river, which is warmer than the spring's waters but also darker from leaf tannins that limit visibility. Plenty of river wildlife can be seen here, and I have commonly found hog-choker fish (like mini-flounder that are fun to look for), crawfish, turtles and fish that vary in size from tiny to over two feet long. Other animals, like snakes and alligators, are possible but less common here, in my personal experience.

Suwannee County has multiple springs scattered along the Suwannee River. Among them is **Anderson Spring**, which was on my list for spring-hopping fun. Located in a more rural setting, it feels more private than the more tourist-driven springs. This means that while there were fewer people here, it was also less built up, so if concrete platforms and stairs that lead into the water are your preference, this may not be the spring for you. A short climb down a steep, rocky riverbank led out to an expansive swimming area. While you could see the ripples in the water from where the spring head was, this spring was not crystal blue like some others, due to being directly on the river. This means low visibility but also that the water is likely much warmer. This spring had a charming “local watering hole” feeling to it, and the view of the famous river was stunning.

Lafayette Blue Springs State Park was just down the road, about 18 miles. This park has two entrances, a north and a south entrance. It seems to have undergone extensive storm damage

during the last hurricane season, making it a little difficult to navigate. We paid our entrance fee at the north entrance and drove down a long, winding dirt road that was full of roots and sandy pits. It was a little treacherous in my little car. The road forked, and we initially took the right path, which led down to a green, swampy-looking lake that wasn't very enticing to swim in. I was disappointed, but we got back in the car and took the left fork in the road, which led out to a shallow creek that was actively flowing. This spring-fed creek was full of shells and neat stones, some of which were sharp. I recommend shoes. The shallow areas could be an interesting place for younger kids who are steady on their feet. This park allowed equestrian activities, with written proof of a negative Coggins test.

While the creek was neat, it wasn't deeply impressive, and we got back into the car and drove to the south entrance, which proved to be much more enticing. After parking, we were met with the sight of beautiful blue waters. Two springs form deep pools on either side of a limestone bridge. The pools were cradled in rock but deep enough to jump into without injury, although I would not recommend diving headfirst, to avoid injury. A shallow area just beyond the pools had several families with small children in it.

Troy Springs is located close by, and boasted a 70-foot-deep aquifer entrance. This spring had a rather large picnic area, plus bathrooms for changing, and an area for rinsing diving and swim gear. A long, winding walkway eventually gave way to a stairway entrance into the water and what used to be a dock area for swimmers



Little River Springs



Little River Springs

that seemed to have been destroyed in the recent hurricanes. The water was full of turtles, some smaller species like musk turtles, and some giant river turtles that measured at least a foot and a half wide. These massive turtles didn't seem to mind us much and swam around keeping an eye on our activities. There were also several schools of some big fish (I believe were called "river suckers") that were fun

to swim around with.

Little River Springs, located in Suwannee County, offered a breathtaking view of startlingly blue waters, complete with limestone pools and shallow walkways. I would recommend water shoes while swimming in this spring, because of all the stones in the water. If rocks aren't for you, however, this spring also has a large, shallow sandy

area, making it ideal for young children and those who don't wish to swim but are happy to enjoy the water in smaller amounts. This spring is built up, with plenty of lounging areas for visitors to relax in, along well-established concrete walkways and stairs.

Hart Springs in Gilcrest County boasts one of the largest spring-fed swimming areas in the state. Like many

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of the other springs mentioned in this article, this spring is part of the Suwannee River Wilderness Trail, but it is also a part of the Gilchrist Blueway Trail, which consists of 55 miles of riverfront scenery. This spring enjoys the benefits of an accompanying park, with access to camping and a family-oriented recreation area that is accessible by boat or land. A swimming area has two separate spring heads, allowing visitors to spread out and enjoy plenty of space for recreation. There is also a dock, where swimmers can jump into the beautiful blue waters below. There are several trails for those who enjoy taking a summer stroll, and the park offers rentals of cabins for those wishing to stay a little longer than an afternoon. The bathrooms on site, which have showers and hot water access, can be easily reached from all camping areas.

Ichetucknee Springs State Park, located in Suwannee and Columbia counties, is home to eight major springs. This park is a favorite for many visitors as a popular tubing/lazy river destination. The springs have much to offer, including kayaking opportunities, snorkeling, diving in certain areas, canoeing and more. This park has a general store, located at the south entrance, where visitors can purchase swimming gear, paddling

supplies, souvenirs and more. The north entrance offers a food truck, making it a convenient location for those expecting to spend all day.

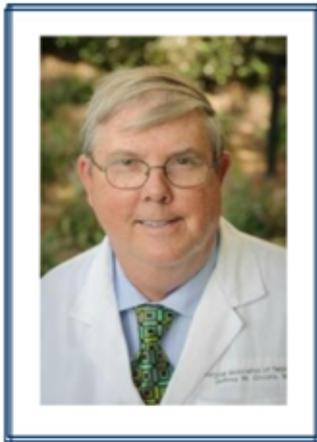
Wes Skiles Peacock Springs in Suwannee County is a favorite among cave divers. Nestled between Live Oak and Mayo, this spring has multiple spring heads and more than 30,000 feet of previously-surveyed cave passages, making it one of the longest underwater cave systems in the U.S. Visitors should note that only certified divers may enter the underwater caves. The park's hiking trails include educational stations that follow the underground cave paths. There are also picnic areas with grills and pavilions.

Hundreds of additional springs and parks are scattered across the face of Florida, and each one offers a rare vision of Florida's true beauty and diverse ecosystems. Please be mindful when visiting springs. These are precious ecosystems, not rough-and-tumble playground pools. Climbing on limestone cliffs, digging, pulling out freshwater plants and harassing wildlife can ruin the springs and cause irreversible degradation. Often, rising concerns about the survival of a freshwater spring will cause it to become closed to the public,

the swimming areas confined or shut down completely, and the parks and picnic areas themselves permanently closed off. To ensure that the Florida springs remain healthy and available for the public to enjoy, follow posted rules and maintain respectful etiquette. If you can't respect our natural resources, please don't visit them. ■



Wacissa River view from a kayak



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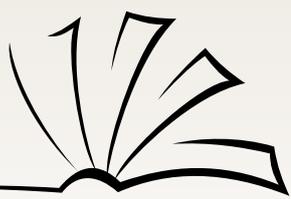
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Regional Reads

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. Here are just a few recent or upcoming releases. 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.

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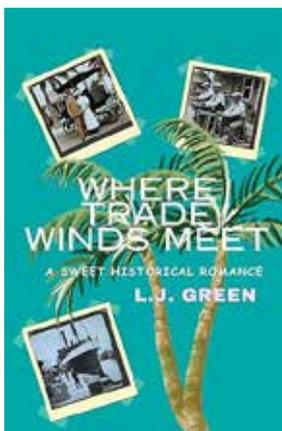
Where Trade Winds Meet

By L. J. Green (Southern Dragon Publishing, 2024)

Lillian Jade Green is a fiction writer based in Live Oak, Florida, who has taken inspiration from several old family diaries she found in a forgotten steamer trunk. The stories she creates blend her own love for the genres of mystery, romance and steampunk with intriguing details from the generations-old stories of two notorious black sheep of her family.

Her latest book, *Where Trade Winds Meet*, centers on the character Muriel Victorine Russell, a determined young woman managing the daily operations of her family's cigar factory in Key West in 1912, even as she aspires for independence and adventure. The bustling life of historic Key West provides a vibrant setting for Muriel's story, as it intertwines with that of William, a young man from a prominent British Bahamian family. The plot weaves in Conch culture, pirate activity and a love triangle tense with betrayal.

L. J. Green's books are available at many online booksellers, large and small.



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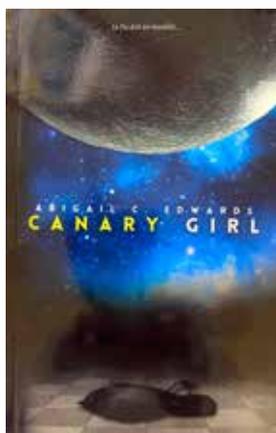
Canary Girl

By Abigail C. Edwards (2024)

Born and raised in North Florida, Abigail Edwards' work experience at Tupelo's Bakery & Café in Monticello figured into the setting for her first novel, *And We All Bled Oil*. Her next novel, *The Time Walker*, takes readers on a complex fantasy adventure involving a forbidden festival, a dangerous rescue, haunted graveyards, the black market and, of course, time travel. Her most recent release, *Canary Girl*, found its seed in "a jumbled stew of contributions from three homeschool teenagers," whose laughter and freethinking creativity one afternoon took root in her mind. This latest young-adult novel centers on Veronica, a brash 14-year-old prophet who gets trapped in a moment of time. It's a story about broken trust, backwater towns "that cling to your skin like an oil film" and the sting of both loneliness and aloneness.

After receiving a bachelor's degree in Hospitality & Tourism from Florida State University, Edwards moved to the United Kingdom and earned her Advanced Baking Diploma from the School of Artisan Food in Nottinghamshire. She currently resides in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Her books are for sale locally in Tupelo's, located at 220 W. Washington St., in Monticello, as well as at acedwardsbooks.com and major online booksellers.

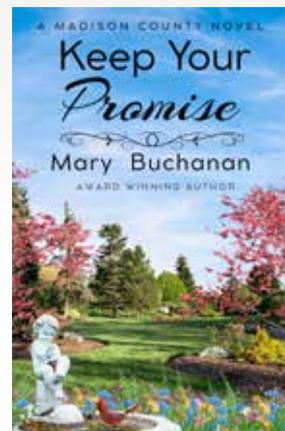


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Keep Your Promise

By Mary Buchanan (expected in 2025)

Mary Buchanan, a retired educator from Madison County, began writing professionally during a time of personal loss and isolation, when it gave her a creative outlet for keeping her mind engaged and her spirits high. She writes women's contemporary fiction with a touch of



humor and themes about the resilience of the human spirit. In the world of the *Madison County* series, love and second chances bloom alongside the wildflowers. Global Book Awards 2024 recognized two of her books, awarding a Silver Medal for *What a Christmas Kerfuffle* (Book 2) and a Bronze Medal for *Love Notes -The Story of Grace* (Book 3). Her fourth novel in the series, *Keep Your Promise*, is set to be published very soon.

In it, tragedy strikes the seemingly perfect world of acclaimed writers Anna and Liam Livingston, and Anna wonders if her marriage will survive it. But it does, with the support of Anna's sister and the couple's best friend. Twenty years later, when Liam falls ill with the early onset of a terminal illness, the couple's world is rocked again. With the expected backdrop of love and second chances, plus haunting echoes of past mistakes, *Keep Your Promise* weaves a cozy mystery full of emotional depth interspersed with the lovable antics of the family dog and the sister's dating misadventures. As the past and present collide, Anna and Liam find a way to navigate a path toward healing and redemption.

Mary Buchanan's books are available at Madison Books, located at 254 S.W. Range Ave., in Madison, and through several major online booksellers. ■

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WATCH OUT FOR



Story by Chris Latham

Folks living in rural Florida are no stranger to ticks. Primarily active in the spring and summer seasons, these itty-bitty parasites are the bane of any outdoor activity. Lying in wait, often concealed in bits of foliage or on blades of tall grass, they leap out to sink their mandibles into unsuspecting passersby, whose blood provides them with all

the nutrition they need to survive and multiply.

Although deer and other animals are typically their preferred hosts, ticks nevertheless present a serious threat to humans with their ability to transmit illnesses (the most common of which is Lyme disease, transmitted primarily by a species called the blacklegged tick). Now, with summer just around the

corner, residents of North Florida and the surrounding region are faced with another, particularly dangerous species of tick to be wary of – the lone star tick.

This species gets its name from the characteristic white marking on the bodies of adult female specimens. While male specimens lack this telltale marking, they can still be identified by a pattern of black splotches. Lone star ticks

SARAH TIPPETTE'S STORY



As an avid outdoors person, Monticello resident Sarah Tippette can proudly say, "If it's outdoors, I'm doing it!"

Tippette works as a veterinary nurse and enjoys a myriad of outdoor activities such as hunting and even raising her own beef and pork at home. Because she works with animals both on and off the clock, Tippette is plenty familiar with ticks and their associated dangers, but after beginning to experience symptoms of alpha-gal syndrome this past December, she has had to come to terms with the incurable tick-borne disease.

Between symptoms ranging from severe stomach pains, to a swelling tongue, to a burning throat, it took several months of consultations with different medical professionals before she could finally receive a clear diagnosis. Following a series of unsuccessful treatment attempts for a variety of suspected illnesses, it was ultimately Tippette herself who proposed the possibility of alpha-gal syndrome. After requesting a tick screening to go along with her blood tests, the source of her illness was finally confirmed – a bite from a lone star tick.

"The awareness just isn't there," she reflects. "If I didn't have the medical background I have, I don't know if they'd have caught it."

In one instance, after taking ibuprofen, Sarah began to experience a swelling in her tongue and a burning pain in her throat. She soon realized the capsule she had taken contained gelatin, which triggered her AGS.

"A lot of people think it's just red meat, but any mammal product can cause a reaction."

This nuance of AGS has caused Sarah no shortage of difficulties. As someone who works with animals, Sarah now finds herself especially wary of other potential triggers beyond just food, such as exposure to certain kinds of animal dander and even saliva.

Despite the adversity brought on by this sudden, life-changing illness, Tippette can say with confidence that she nonetheless will keep doing what she loves: "I plan to continue to farm and to teach my kids about agriculture and the outdoors."

THE LONE STAR TICK

are noteworthy for more than just their distinctive appearance, however, and have been observed to be particularly aggressive, actively hunting for hosts to feed on. A bite from a lone star tick can carry with it an array of rare and dangerous illnesses, such as ehrlichiosis, heartland virus disease, bourbon virus disease, tularemia and southern tick-associated rash illness (STARI).

Among these is alpha-gal syndrome (AGS), a condition known to cause severe allergic reactions in patients when exposed to red meat such as beef and pork (among others), and even related products such as dairy, broths and gelatin.

- Symptoms of AGS may include:
- Hives or itchy rash
- Heartburn and indigestion
- Diarrhea

- Difficulty breathing
- Low blood pressure
- Severe stomach pain
- Swelling of the lips, throat, tongue or eyelids

An increase in diseases associated with the lone star tick coincides with a surge in Florida's population of white-tailed deer, whose blood provides ample sustenance for an ever-increasing number

BETH MOORE'S STORY

Beth Moore, another Madison County resident, is all too familiar with ticks.

"I live in the woods, where we get ticks all the time – you don't think about it," she says.

One night, after a fine steak dinner, Moore was rushed to the emergency room at 2 a.m. with intense stomach pains. The cause was initially misidentified as an allergic reaction to her medication, and she was sent home. It wasn't long before she experienced another incident, which again resulted in an overnight trip to the ER.

It was ultimately a friend of hers who suggested the possibility of AGS, having seen a news report about a man from Arkansas with the condition. It seemed like a long shot, but this exchange soon led to her eventual diagnosis – alpha-gal syndrome from a lone star tick bite.

Moore stresses that everyone with AGS is different and experiences the condition differently. While she herself primarily struggles with gastrointestinal pain, others deal with rashes, diarrhea, swelling and anaphylaxis. Where Beth's primary trigger is beef, she knows people with AGS who can tolerate other common triggers such as pork and dairy. She herself sometimes consumes dairy and sees no difference; other times, the same food might cause a reaction.

Having lived with AGS for two and a half years now, Moore urges everyone to adopt a preventative approach to tick safety.

As she puts it, "Do everything you can to not get bit."

For her, this has entailed maintaining her and her husband's property with anti-tick measures in mind. By spraying down poisons and clearing her yard of fallen branches and other kinds of natural litter, Moore is better able to keep herself, her loved ones and her property free of ticks.





of ticks. It is important to keep in mind that these ticks are capable of spreading disease at any point in their life cycle, and even freshly-hatched larvae are able to bite.

Due to the variety of diseases transmitted by the lone star tick, it may seem difficult to keep track of them. Here are some common symptoms of illnesses attributed to lone star ticks:

- Fever
- Chills
- Headaches

- Body aches
 - Nausea and/or vomiting
- One may be tempted to think that because of their unassuming size, these ticks might not be all too significant of a threat; but it's their size that makes them so tricky to catch, especially before they've taken a bite. Even when a bite leads to illness, it often is not diagnosed as a tick-borne disease. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed in a 2017 report that an overwhelming

PAT TAYLOR'S STORY



Pat and Casey Taylor

On what seemed to be an average workday in 1999, Pat Taylor experienced a sudden onset of skin irritation across his torso.

"My chest was beet-red and itching!"

The symptoms appeared sporadically, seemingly without cause, for several years before disappearing. Nearly two decades later, a series of flare-ups had Taylor searching for a cause. When a friend of his suggested a potential meat allergy, Pat couldn't believe his ears.

"I was like, 'Are you crazy?' I hunt, I fish, I got a freezer full of beef and pork and deer meat."

Nevertheless, Pat pursued this lead, asking his sister (a pharmacist) if she could gather more information for him about the condition.

After several trips to an allergist and having been told they had never seen a case of AGS before, the cause of Taylor's troubles was finally confirmed.

"They told me, 'Congratulations, you're our first ever case of alpha-gal!'"

Taylor sees his experience living with AGS as proof that not everyone experiences the condition the same way. Even though his symptoms went dormant for years after they first appeared, other people experience symptoms persistently; where he personally can consume dairy with relative safety, others may experience life-threatening complications.

A long-time Madison County resident, Taylor has held a lifelong passion for the outdoors. While encounters with ticks are often a fact of life in rural Florida, receiving AGS from a lone star tick has greatly affected Taylor's ability to engage in some activities he loves. Whether he's attending cookouts, family outings or holiday celebrations, AGS has proven to be a major obstacle. Although Taylor can no longer safely enjoy red meat, his friends and family are nevertheless considerate of his condition, making sure to provide safe meal options at their cookouts and get-togethers. Even so, Pat continues to do what he loves, sharing the meat from his hunts with friends and family.

99 percent of tick-related ehrlichiosis cases appear to go undiagnosed.

Thankfully, lone star ticks are incapable of surviving in an indoor environment; but before you become a hermit, here are some ways to avoid these terrible pests while still getting your fill of the great outdoors. Be careful around tall grass, tree branches and other places where ticks are known to hide. After spending time outside and in contact with nature, be sure to scan your body high and low for ticks. If you find one attached

to you, be sure to remove it as soon as possible, preferably with tweezers or a similar, specialized tick-removal tool. Then thoroughly clean the bite with warm water and soap. It is important to keep in mind that removing a tick with one's bare hands can prove messy, and can end with the parasite's mandibles still lodged in the skin, in which case the threat of infection remains. If you experience any rashes or skin irritation after removing a tick, contact your doctor as soon as possible.

As far as preventative measures

are concerned, the CDC recommends treating one's clothing with substances containing as little as 0.5 percent permethrin, which is often used to treat head lice and scabies. It is also recommended that people exercise caution around thickly-wooded areas with dense foliage and leaf litter.

With all this in mind, please be aware of the threats posed by the lone star tick, and try your best to have a safe and healthy summer! ■

RENE ORTEGA'S STORY

Madison County resident Rene Ortega suffered a massive shock when a hamburger triggered a sudden and severe allergic reaction. Several hours after the initial consumption, Ortega was rushed to the emergency room, his throat having swelled shut. After several similar incidents, he requested to be tested for AGS, and it was finally confirmed.

Since his diagnosis, the process of navigating this condition has resulted in a complete change in lifestyle for Ortega, who must now exercise extreme caution about what he eats to avoid the risk of a serious anaphylactic reaction, keeping an EpiPen close at hand in case of an emergency.

Ortega laments the prevalence of cross-contamination in restaurant settings, with even seemingly safe food items posing a significant risk of triggering a reaction. This is because even meats typically considered safe for those with AGS to consume (such as chicken or fish) can come into contact with unsafe substances during the cooking process. For example, even a supposedly safe item like chicken may have been fried in a triggering substance like beef tallow. With regards to this, Ortega has made regular use of the mobile app Fig (short for "Food Is Good") to give him a heads up on certain restaurants' use of potential allergens, as well as those found in everyday grocery store products. Ortega maintains that doing so has allowed him to make informed decisions about what he puts in his body; he highly recommends the app to anyone living with AGS or other food allergies.

Even so, Ortega maintains a positive outlook on the situation, stating, "I look at it as a kind of blessing in disguise."

Since his diagnosis, he has stayed committed to a highly-regulated AGS-friendly diet free of mammal products. After making these changes, Ortega has observed a complete turnaround in his cardiovascular health, describing his most recent round of blood work as, "a poster child for good health."

Ortega has since begun working with cardiologists to conduct research on his condition. In his own words, "The lack of knowledge is unbelievable." By doing this, he hopes to help further the wider medical understanding of AGS, and in doing so allow new avenues for those living with the condition to live safe and healthy lives.





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— Benjamin Franklin



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GILBERT HERNDON:

A LIFE IN PICTURES

Story by Mickey Starling

Photographs Courtesy of Gilbert Herndon

Pinetta native Gilbert Herndon grew up loving the country life, surrounded by the beautiful bounty that nature provided on a daily basis. Wanting to create a lasting appreciation of what he witnessed, Herndon grabbed his Nikon camera and began capturing many breathtaking scenes from nature's canvas.

Shortly after graduating from Madison High School, Herndon worked at Dixie Packers for 11 years, but the voice of the great outdoors continued calling him, so he spent about three years studying still photography from *Time/Life* books, with the hope of becoming a nature photographer. As fortune would have it, Herndon had a friend who knew Wayne Pearson, from the TV show, *Ultimate Outdoors* and the Archery Shooters Association. He arranged a meeting for them, and Pearson was pleased with Herndon's self-taught skills behind the camera.

In August of 1992, Pearson hired Herndon as a photographer. However, since his TV show required expertise with a video camera, Herndon was faced

with a new challenge, which he happily embraced.

"Give me a camera, and I'll prove I can use it," Herndon told Pearson.

Very little time was afforded Herndon for learning the video camera because he left two days later for a two-week trip, where he would be responsible for filming an archery event and an antelope hunt. Herndon's efforts must have hit the mark, as he went on to work for Pearson steadily for 20 years.

After several years behind the camera, Herndon recalls returning home and taking a ride with his father. He noticed a pair of binoculars on the seat and picked them up. Herndon noted that they were badly out of focus and adjusted them.

"Try them now, Dad. That should be better," said Herndon.

His father replied to the contrary: "I can't see a thing. You messed everything up."

Herndon gently reminded him that he got paid to keep things in focus. Shortly after their ride, the elder Herndon bought a new pair of glasses.

In 2006, Herndon added fishing

tournaments to his filming resume, capturing the action for *Forrest L. Wood's FLW Fishing Tournaments*, which was a popular program aired at the time. Herndon also filmed for Bass Masters and Major League Fishing for five years, until health issues forced his retirement in 2022, after enjoying 30 years of success in the narrow and demanding field of nature photography. Herndon was one of only about 40 videographers who filmed fishing tournaments.

There is good reason for the small number of folks in this field, as it requires long hours, extensive travel, patience and exposure to the elements.

"I once had to travel 100 miles one way by boat to film a bass fishing tournament," recalled Herndon. "Also, the camera has to be up all the time so you don't miss something. It gets tiring."

Holding a heavy camera is just the beginning of the physical challenges Herndon faced in his career. Many of the hunts he filmed involved hiking mountains and walking long distances. Then, there were the hours spent in freezing temperatures, sometimes accompanied with rain.



*Gilbert films in
Jackson Hole, Wyoming*

"Your fingers have to be uncovered to use the camera, so my hands got very cold," said Herndon.

One of the perks that came with Herndon's job was the opportunity to film a number of celebrities. In the late 90s, he filmed Dale Earnhardt Sr. on his only two successful bow hunts for Ultimate Outdoors. One of Herndon's favorite memories from this time period was filming Tim Conway and Harvey Korman in *Tim and Harvey in the Great Outdoors*, which is available on YouTube.

"Harvey was very funny," recalls Herndon, who got to spend some time with Korman when the camera wasn't rolling.

Herndon met several other celebrities while filming a show supporting wounded veterans, including Marshall Teague, known for his legendary fight scene with Patrick Swayze in *Roadhouse*. While enjoying such an interesting and exciting job, which carried Herndon to every state but Hawaii, it came with a price. Herndon often spent months away from home, rarely sleeping in the same bed. Holding a camera for eight hours straight in temperatures that could range from -40 to 100 degrees was no easy feat.

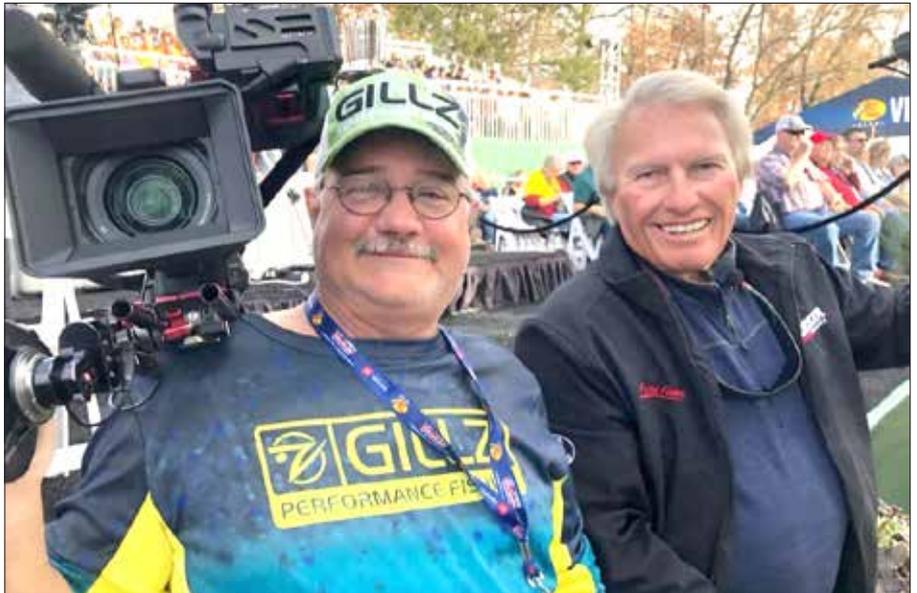
Through it all, "It was still fun," recalls Herndon.

Today, he still enjoys the great outdoors by gardening and riding his motorcycle. Herndon is also skilled in crafting and playing native American flutes, some of which can be viewed on YouTube (search for "Gilbert Herndon - The Experimental Journey").

His quiet and restful days are a stark contrast to the months of travel and long hours of work he was accustomed to, and Herndon is grateful for a career that few have imagined or enjoyed. When he got his shot, he took it, and it was well framed and perfectly focused. ■



Gilbert Herndon speaks with Harvey Korman while filming "Tim & Harvey in the Great Outdoors."



Gilbert Herndon takes a break while filming TV host Roland Martin.



Gilbert takes in the scenery on a beach in Costa Rica.

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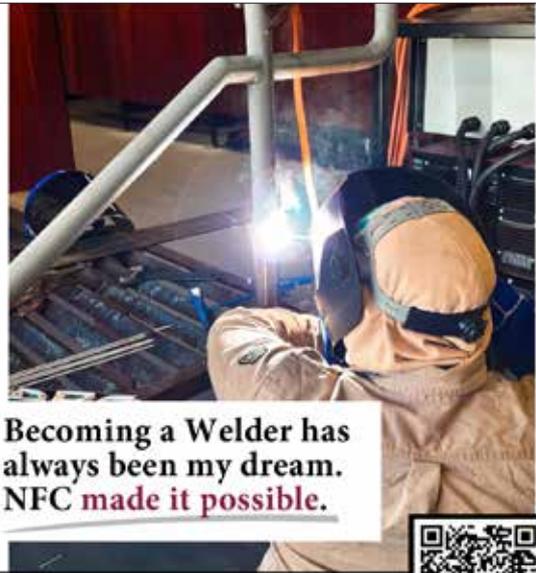
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FROM BULLDOG



Even today's Bulldog fans recognize and love to see Mike Pittman. / Photograph Courtesy of Beth Pittman

TO LEGEND

How Mike Pittman rewrote Suwannee's story

Story by Christian Peterson

Mike Pittman is a name associated with greatness – a name that has stood the test of time. It's a name that lives in the Hall of Fame at Suwannee High School (SHS), and other halls of fame for that matter. Every time someone begins discussing the history of Suwannee sports, without fail, Pittman's name will be brought up. Some could even say he reigns supreme as the biggest name to graduate from SHS and return as a coach. But what made Pittman into the legend he is today? How did he earn his spots in various halls of fame? What makes him different from the coaches before and after him?

Pittman grew up in Suwannee County, moving to the area when he was in the second grade. He stayed local for his entire childhood, eventually graduating from SHS. However, his exposure to football began long before high school. Pittman spoke about being a kid in elementary school, sitting outside the football field and watching the team practice after school. Finally, in eighth grade, he started playing football, a trend that continued throughout middle school and into high school.

After graduating high school, Pittman attended Valdosta State University to pursue a career as a wildlife biologist. Many people are unaware that he has always had a passion for wildlife,

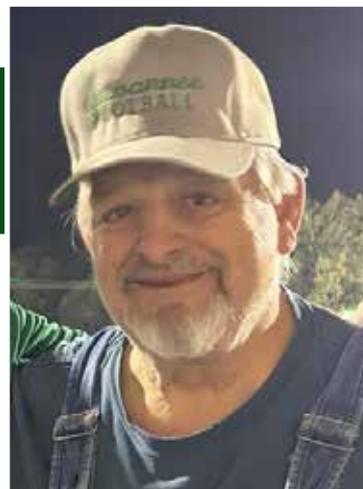
particularly the local fauna of Florida. However, while he was still at college, Pittman made the switch to football coaching. This included some brief stints coaching in smaller areas, with Buddy Chiles at the boys' club and for a short time at a middle school. Right out of college, Pittman went to coach at Lowndes High School in Valdosta.

Throughout Pittman's life, he was surrounded and influenced by many inspirational coaches and teachers who taught him the art of coaching.

"Joe Wilson did more for me than anyone else," Pittman said.

He spoke of how Wilson had taught him how to handle kids and the politics of football. He also cited Chiles as the best defensive coach he had worked with, and he recalled watching Gene Cox as a child from behind the fence. Other notable mentions included Nick Hiter, Dean Brody, Jim Hues and Luther Welch. When looking back on his career, one thing stood out as the main lesson he learned: "Never quit. No matter how things get, persevere."

To give an example, Pittman told of an experience he had as a young man. One day while out hunting from a deer blind, alone, he fell from an eight-foot height, landing on some roots. This resulted in his heel slipping out of his ankle, with intense pain that knocked him to the ground. After repeated attempts



to see if he could walk back to his truck, Pittman found himself in a sticky situation. He couldn't walk, he was alone, and he had no means of contacting anyone.

This was when his football training kicked in; his survival instincts, along with his mind reminding him to persevere, all went to work in tandem. Pittman crawled 250 yards, eventually making it to his truck. Once he had clambered inside his truck, he painfully drove himself to the hospital to get fixed up. Even now, looking back, he credits his success in that situation to the perseverance and hard work in physical fitness that he had learned through football training.

Reflecting on his childhood overall, Pittman said, "Suwannee County in the 60s was one of the greatest places to grow up in the world. I loved it."

He recalled summer afternoons when he sold Coca-Cola bottles to the bottling plant and then spent the money on fishing supplies. He reminisced about time spent playing various sports with kids, including baseball, basketball and football. He spoke of two teachers who left the biggest impression on him: Mrs. Bullock, who is the reason he has a love for wildlife, and Mrs. Normady, whom Pittman described as "just a kind and good person."



The Bulldogs won their fourth consecutive state championship under Head Coach Mike Pittman./Photograph Courtesy of UF Archives.

Taking a deeper look at his coaching career and its influences on him, Pittman again recognized Wilson, the coach for Lowndes County, for what he taught about the passing game and particular skills a head coach needs, such as how to handle adults and administrations, how to navigate the politics of football and the importance of the atmosphere around a team. Pittman commented that he didn't realize how helpful Wilson had been to him as a leader and teacher until later in life. He looked back with gratitude for the experience he had, the education he received and the skills he learned to work with the athletes.

Then in 1985, he finally received the position he had dreamed of: coach for the Suwannee County Bulldogs.

"Suwannee County was the only job I ever wanted," Pittman admitted. They had rough seasons in the past, but Pittman said, "I knew you could win in Suwannee County."

Pittman arrived ready to transform the Bulldog football program. He aimed to be a tough but fair coach, and the first thing he did was take 80 boys to football camp, giving them a taste of how tough he would be as a football coach. He returned with 19 kids on his team. Pittman was actually the first coach in Florida to take his team out of town for summer camp. While that team didn't make it to the state championship, Pittman described them as the foundational team, which started the program he would eventually take to the state championship.

Pittman's tenure as a coach at SHS is legendary. He led the Bulldogs to be football state champions in 1987, 1988, 1989 and 1990. On top of that, he took eight district championships and made it to the regional finals two additional times. Pittman served as head coach for the Bulldogs from 1985 until 1996, a total of 11 years, and was the first Bulldog coach to last more than four years. He finished with a stupendous record of 92-37. Pittman continued coaching elsewhere, even taking Hamilton County High School to three different state playoff appearances.

In total, Pittman coached for 36 years. His coaching philosophy was the same as the one he approached life with: "I believe you gotta do and act right." He reflected on how coaching has evolved over the years and how he no longer sees anyone coaching for change. He commented that it isn't the kids who have changed, but the parents and administration who have.

"They don't coach tough anymore." Then Pittman shared his thoughts



Mike Pittman smiles with family friends after being inducted into the Florida High School Athletics Association Hall of Fame. Pictured, from left to right, are: Blake Howard, Laura Lee Howard, Mike Pittman and Brent Howard. Photograph Courtesy of Laura Lee Howard.

on how he had built state championship teams.

Although his coaching style evolved, he always had a way with kids and found it easy to communicate football to them. Plays evolve, but kids remain the same. Being able to communicate with them and teach them is the most effective way to be a coach. Pittman was focused on building relationships with his athletes, being a mentor for them, supporting them even when they were playing other sports in the off-season. He knew that if they were playing sports, they weren't involved in other concerning activities. In fact, Pittman only remembers ever kicking one kid from his team due to that child selling drugs. Otherwise, Pittman worked with the parents and the athletes to make sure everything could work.

Pittman commented on mistakes he has seen other coaches make, including the idea of building character. He explained that it's possible to build character, but sports don't build it; instead, they bring out the character that's already there. He voiced his opinion that a coach should focus on being kind, fair and good to their athletes, mentoring them and building strong relationships. His favorite memory from his tenure at Suwannee, he shared, was winning the state championship on the home field in Live Oak.

"I knew what it meant to the town to win that championship," Pittman said.

"I have never seen the community like when we were winning state championships," he added, recalling how he loved the Bulldog growl and made his

athletes wear ties to school, to look good while being champions.

Other highlights were less related to football and more about what was around it. At the top of his list was seeing his athletes later in life, seeing their families and the adults that they had become.

Now Pittman has some advice to offer athletes and aspiring coaches.

For athletes, his top message is "persevere and do what's right." Athletes, he says, should remember there is more to life than football. Finally, "tough times never last, but tough people do."

For coaches, he first advises finding a mentor, someone to guide and build them up as a coach. Then learn how to teach kids; just because one knows football doesn't mean they know how to communicate it.

His final piece of advice, for everyone, is to pray. Pittman says he always found himself praying, and it helped him relieve stress and bring everything back into focus.

Pittman currently enjoys a quiet life, keeping things less stressful. He does look back, wishing he had remembered to keep his mouth shut more often and had been more organized as a coach. However, he remains grateful for the experiences and career that he has had. Now, Pittman focuses on his other loves: hunting, fishing, gardening and enjoying his passion for wildlife. He also enjoys spending time with his wife, Cindy, and his daughter, Beth. Finally, Pittman hopes to be remembered as a good and fair person more than for any of his other accomplishments. ■



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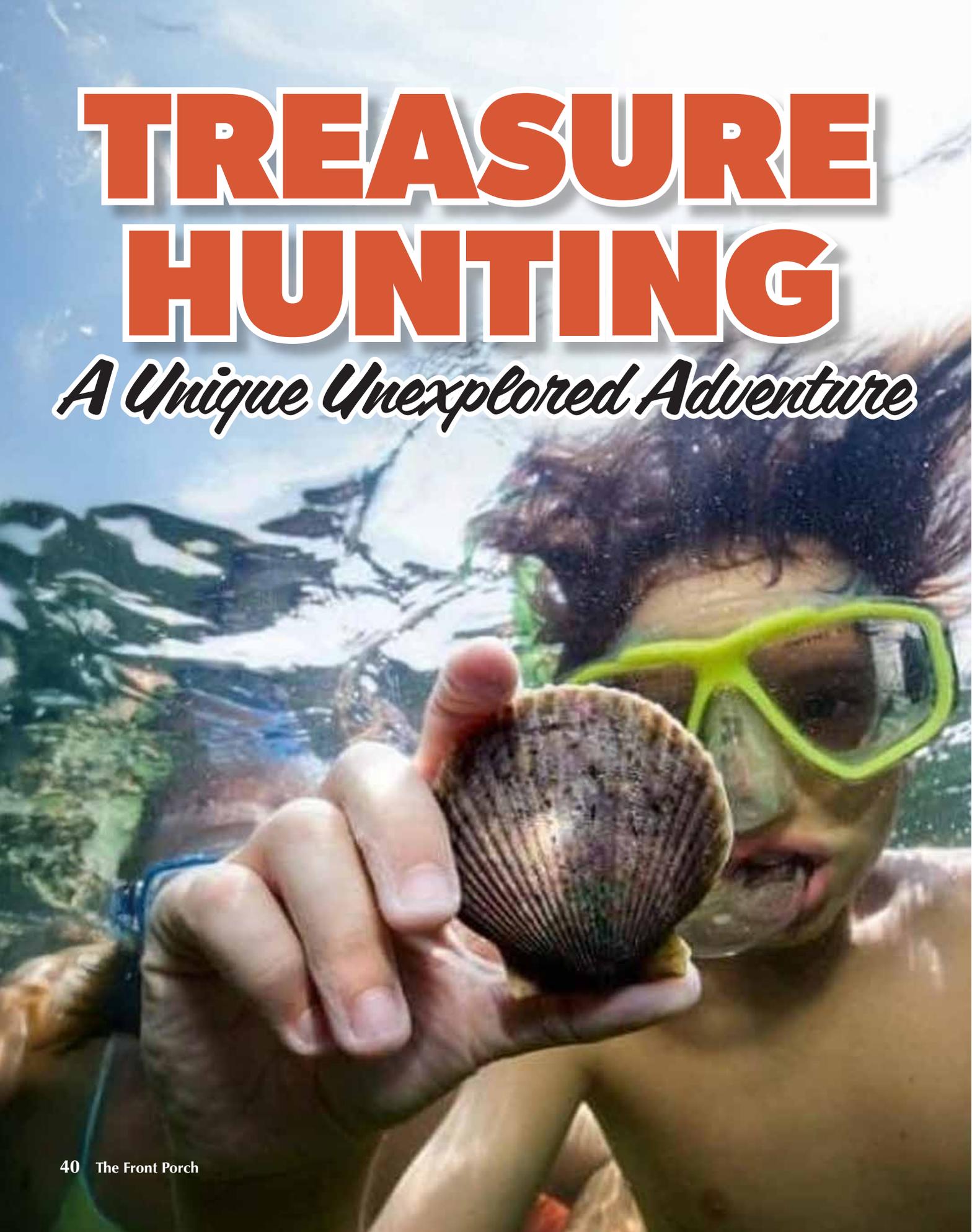
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TREASURE HUNTING

A Unique Unexplored Adventure



Story and Photography by Dawn Perez

Picture the scene: You are heading out to the open waters of the Gulf of Mexico by either the Keaton Beach Canal, the Steinhatchee River or the Econfina River in Taylor County. You're enjoying a fresh salt breeze coming from the Gulf while watching the seagulls fly and the fish jump in the water. Either you are traveling in your own boat or your charter captain is taking you. If you have chosen to travel by charter captain, he will be experienced and knows the waters well since he has done this many times before. You throw down your anchor and get ready to start searching the waters, waiting in anticipation while you search for living treasures below. You have found proof that they are down there, and now it's time for everyone – children and adults – to put on their gear for an exciting adventure: snorkel, mask, fins and a mesh bag.

You will swim, searching along the grassy waters where the scallops are hidden, sometimes for hours before taking a break. You jump back on the boat for a bit, letting your skin dry in the hot sun. The day progresses, sun growing hotter, so you jump back in the cool Gulf waters to search again for scallops. While exploring the sea grasses, you come across many different crustaceans. You see sea trout and seahorses as well as star fish and turtles. Maybe even a dolphin. Soon you are done, having filled your mesh bag and your bucket to the allowable limit and you are ready to go back and feast on your spoils. But wait, tomorrow is another day, and you will be back to enjoy this treasure hunt once again.

In order to enjoy your spoils, you must clean them before cooking. You can pry open the shell and then remove the meat with a scallop or oyster knife. There are many facilities and marinas that provide cleaning services if you decide you would rather not do it yourself. Scallops can be broiled, fried or stir fried. There are several restaurants in Taylor County that will cook them for you.

Taylor County is the best known place for bay scalloping in this entire region and has the longest undeveloped coastline in the entire state of Florida. Every year, thousands of visitors travel from all over to Taylor County (Steinhatchee, Keaton Beach and Econfina) to capture their share of the riches waiting for them in the shallow pristine waters of this beautiful coastline. All you need to bring is a mesh bag, water shoes, snorkel and mask (and of course your license). In addition to that, you must not forget sunscreen, water for hydration and a cooler with ice for



your scallops. That is all you need for your recipe of fun for the whole family. Scallop Season this year started on June 15 and runs until Labor Day. For accommodations, the Taylor County area has many options; resorts, condos, cabins, motels, hotels, campgrounds and rental homes. After settling in, some visitors take their own boat and head out

with the family or hire a charter captain with years of experience who provides everything needed for the day.

For more information about guides, restaurants, accommodations or marinas or a free visitor guide with information about enjoying scalloping and other activities in Taylor County, you can visit www.TaylorFlorida.com. ■

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PRISCILLA THE MASTODON roams Florida's Big Bend again!

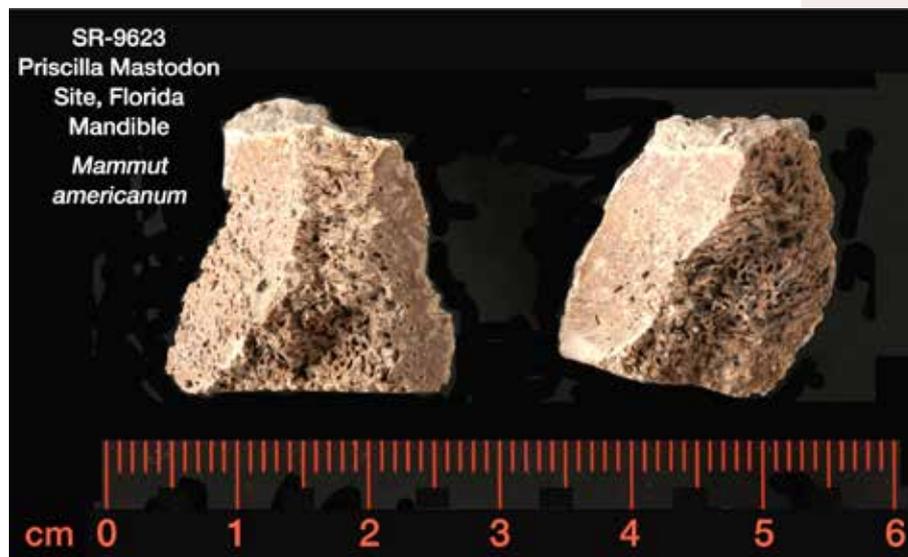
Story by Dr. C. Andrew Hemmings
Aucilla Research Institute

Perhaps you have slowly passed a 10-foot-tall replica of a mastodon skeleton zooming along Highway 27 or any number of other roads in North Florida. Maybe you have been able to meet this mastodon in Monticello, Perry, Tallahassee or other towns and schools he likes to visit when they have historic or cultural events. I am of course talking about Priscilla, the mastodon from the Aucilla Research Institute, and our partners at G-FAST who mounted him on a trailer and help get him everywhere he needs to go. If you would like to know how this all came to be, please read on.

In the mid-1960s, an amateur Paleontologist/Archaeologist named Don Serbousek found the nearly complete skeleton of our mastodon in one of the Aucilla River's dark holes. Serbousek was from Ormond Beach and owned Don's TV and Dive Shop, which should immediately tell you how he could afford enough dive gear and compressed air to excavate a mastodon with just a couple of helpers. 1968 was the big excavation year, and as incredibly well-preserved, unstained bones came out of the deep even National Geographic was on hand to help document the process and wrote a short note about the work. As a kid, Serbousek had a favorite pet pig named Priscilla, and so the old fellow was named in honor of that childhood pet.

Here are some performance specs

44 The Front Porch



on Priscilla, in case you were thinking about pulling a mastodon tag as we know happened a number of times across North Florida near the end of the last Ice Age when people were hunting them. He is about 11 feet tall and weighed nearly 12,000 pounds.

The condition of a mastodon's teeth can help us determine the animal's age. Mastodons get only three permanent molars on each side (both top and bottom of course, for a total of 12 adult teeth). Over the lifespan of a mastodon, the first

molar erupts as the baby teeth are pushed out. That first molar wears its three cusps down and the second molar erupts. Slowly it too wears down its four bigger cusps. Finally, the five-cusped and bigger still third molar erupts and eventually can wear down to the gum line in the mastodon's mouth.

Priscilla has the first and second molars all exposed and noticeably worn, but the third molars are still covered by bone in the jaw and skull. This suggests an age between about 30 and 35 years,



depending on exactly how much grit he ate, which would hasten the wear on his teeth. Unfortunately, our good friend has a lot of small, boney growth along his spine, suggesting at least a moderate amount of discomfort from arthritis. All in all, he was a fine adult mastodon in good but not great health, and it is not clear why he perished so young. Mastodons could live 55 to 60 years in ideal conditions.

Serbousek soon realized he had one of the most complete mastodon skeletons known, and after carefully drying the bones he made enormous fiberglass molds of each one. For a number of years, he sold complete sets made from those molds that were mounted in various museums for display. Around the year 2000, Serbousek and my professor, Dr. David Webb, started to negotiate a permanent home for Priscilla at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville.

By 2003 Priscilla was part of an exhibit called TUSKS that showcased Pleistocene/Ice Age animals and artifacts that had been found in Florida. When the exhibit opened, all of the graduate students in paleontology (and their token archaeologist) took turns explaining the various objects to all comers on the weekends, and I for one am pleased to say I married one of those museum visitors. Results for others may vary. TUSKS was shown at the Florida Museum of Natural History for several months before the entire exhibit went on tour for a couple of years.

Priscilla has now been on display at his permanent home for close to 20 years, but the museum displays are presently closed for renovations until, hopefully, sometime in 2026. For a number of reasons, several museums around the country have closed a great many exhibits all at the same time. The Museum of Florida History in the basement of the Gray Building in Tallahassee is also closed indefinitely for renovations. Unfortunately this means Herman, the mastodon recovered opposite the dive tower at Wakulla Springs in 1930, is not taking visitors for now either. If you want a fun history project, you can see still



photographs of the mastodon excavation on the Florida Memory site (www.floridamemory.com), and if you watch closely to match the trees you can see some scenes in *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) were filmed right where Herman the mastodon was found.

This brings us back to the copy of Priscilla we have mounted for travel. For the time being, if you would like to get up close and personal with a mastodon we invite you come to an event where the Aucilla Research Institute and G-FAST will set up our mastodon and other displays of Pleistocene material from the Big Bend area. Over the last few years, we have attended dozens of events across North Florida and South Georgia. In 2023 we spoke to more than 13,000 school children. It turns out you could count on your fingers the number of kids who had been able to see the real Priscilla or Herman, a striking contrast with the huge number who can see the copy made from the molds. It was pretty humbling to realize that if we don't bring our Aucilla mastodon on the road, it's just another abstract story from the internet or TV. There is a lot to be said for putting the phone down and engaging the physical reality of the world around you. In this case, it is an 11-foot-tall mastodon that weighed six tons whose relatives were still on the Florida landscape when the first people arrived.

Between Serbousek's discovery in the 1960s and Priscilla moving to Gainesville in the early 2000s, divers from the Aucilla River Prehistory Project, headed by Drs. David Webb and Jim Dunbar, visited the site several times in the 1990s to study the geologic history of the sediments and collect artifacts that we thought might help date exactly when Priscilla was alive.

During a survey of this part of the Aucilla in 1994, I found a Clovis point less than five feet from Serbousek's gridded units. I was convinced for 29 years that the point and Priscilla must be close in age. Thankfully, I don't think I ever published anything where I said that though, because... In 2023 we were able to directly radiocarbon date a piece of bone from Priscilla's jaw, with the kind permission and assistance of the Florida Museum of Natural History. Since hundreds of bone points and a handful of stone artifacts had been found near and on top of the layer with the mastodon bones, we kind of expected a date in the range of 13,000 to 14,000 years old, just after the first people we know of got to Florida, and the Aucilla specifically, at Page/Ladson and other sites nearby.

Much to our surprise, the bone dated to 21,880 calendar years before present. This means Priscilla lived right at the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM), not 13,000 years ago when people using Clovis points lived in the same area. Also, the date and associated information from oxygen, carbon and nitrogen isotopes suggested the water table was practically as high as today at precisely the moment it should have been at its lowest.

Did Priscilla die or get washed in from a flood? Was there something else going on that we do not yet understand?

The jury is still out on this part of the mystery, which means we still have work to do, including training our replacements to carry the work on in the future.

Today the land next to Priscilla's site is about ten feet above sea level. However, 21,880 years ago that spot would have been more than 400 feet above sea level. Salt water today is about five miles away, but then it would have been more than 125 miles to the south.



X years ago. X was stuck at 11,000 years for decades before we realized that 11,000 radiocarbon years actually meant 13,000 calendar years. Atmospheric carbon changes year to year in the air, so a radiocarbon year almost never comes out exactly the same as a calendar year, and we have to make calibration curves that wiggle all over to get our best estimate. Once the line in the sand became the new and improved 13,000-year-old date, it stayed there for another ten years or so. Now, in Florida we can confidently say people were here by 14,550 years ago, and maybe earlier. For North America, depending on who you ask, and how much we want to argue, sites dating between 15,000 and 22,000 years old have pretty solid evidence that suggest people might have been in America when Priscilla was alive, but we can't quite prove they were here then just yet.

One might wonder how Priscilla spends his days now? Most of his off days are spent in the cool shade of an airplane hangar in Perry.

Travel days are always the most exciting. Having followed the trailer hundreds of miles now, I can tell you it never gets boring. EVERYONE slows down to take a look. I mean really, how often in your life do you see a mastodon doing 55 on the highway? Once outside of Thomasville, a highway patrol trooper wanted a better view and nearly pitted me to get to the back of the trailer. He suddenly realized I was following to keep people away and swerved off and gave a friendly wave. I hope any officers reading this are as friendly if I happen to be, aaah, "hurrying" to meet Priscilla at an event. I'll be the one with all the seven-foot spears and boxes of artifacts in the car.

We know a good deal of information about Priscilla, but it turns out as science has gotten much smaller in the last ten years or so we can now ask and answer all kinds of questions that were unanswerable even 20 years ago. Future inquires will look at his ancient DNA, parts of grasses and plants stuck between his teeth, an examination of the strontium from groundwater he drank throughout his life. This is a really fun one because it turns out mastodons often



roamed from North Florida as far north as Atlanta looking for water in the dry winter months. Further analyses of the stable isotopes of carbon, nitrogen and oxygen can tell us about what he ate and what the environment around him was like at the Last Glacial Maximum (22,000 years ago). Dr. Tom Stafford prepared and analyzed the bone samples we dated in 2023. He said Priscilla is one of the best preserved mastodons in North America. In the future, we would like to get a little bit more enamel from a tooth and try to date a specimen with very little carbon using a new method he is developing. If it works, this would mean bones with very little surviving organic carbon might be datable in the future. This is a fascinating example of something we cannot do right now, but, if we figure it out, then we can in the future.

We hope to see you at future events with Priscilla and would love to tell you all kinds of interesting stories about the animals and early people of Florida. But that is just the start. There are lifetimes of research to do at the Aucilla Research Institute, and we can't do it all. And think of how many people there are to teach about the Pleistocene and more recent past of North Florida. If you are interested in getting involved, or have kids that would like to explore more of the sciences – from geology to chemistry to geography to zoology to physics and beyond – we delve into nearly all of them at some level.

If you are organizing an event (historic, cultural or a really big BBQ) and would like us to participate, just let us know and we'd be happy to come. If you would like to get involved or just learn more, please give us a call at (850) 933-6286 or send us an email through our website, www.aucillaresearchinstitute.org. I mean come on, someone has got to figure out all the chemistry Dr. Stafford is trying to learn from Priscilla's teeth. As they say where I work: "You can learn a lot from a mastodon." ■

Florida as we know it today was very high and dry, and surficial fresh water would have been much harder to find than now, with much of it available out near those far-off ancient coastlines that today have hundreds of feet of ocean water over them.

Peninsular Florida was slightly more than double its present size when Priscilla was alive and had huge areas of grassland and very few marshy areas away from the ancient coasts. Plant and animal communities had lots of species that are now extinct or no longer live in Florida (which is called extirpation). Some of the Ice Age animals of Florida are telling us grass was abundant simply because they were able to live here. Mammoth, horse, bison/buffalo, *Palaeolama* and a few other animals were primarily grazers who got most of their calories eating grass that has been gone for at least 10,000, maybe 12,000 years. Priscilla, a browser more like deer, primarily made a living on branches, leaves and plants found closer to reliable water.

Every few years, archaeologists draw a new line in the sand and authoritatively declare people arrived no earlier than

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● CARL SADLER'S ●

BASEBALL

★ JOURNEY ★

From the Forest Capital to Cleveland

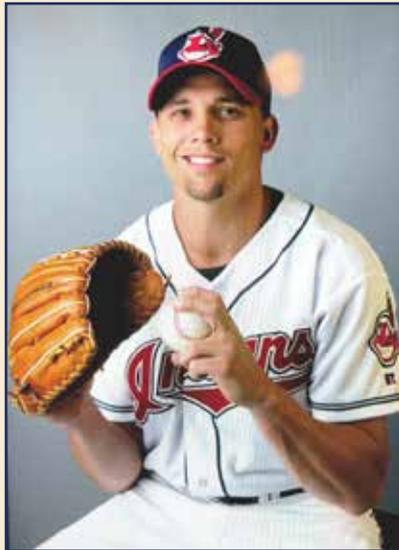
Story by Rick Patrick

Photographs Courtesy of Carl Sadler

When Taylor County native Carl Sadler graduated from Taylor County High School in 1996, he probably had little idea the path the next years would take him down. Not long after high school, Sadler was drafted by the Montreal Expos in the 34th round of the 1996 Major League Baseball draft.

After signing, Sadler spent time with minor league “farm” teams controlled by the Expos, including the Vermont Expos. Then because of an injury, Sadler missed the 1998 season and was released. The Cleveland Indians picked him up, but after just six games with minor league teams in that organization, Sadler underwent Tommy John surgery and missed the rest of 1999 and some of 2000.

Tommy John surgery is common among athletes, especially baseball pitchers, to repair a torn ulnar collateral (UCL)



ligament inside the elbow. This ligament helps secure the elbow joint, and athletes who frequently use throwing motions, such as baseball pitchers, may suffer from UCL tears that require surgical repair. The procedure involves harvesting a tendon from the patient's body, or possibly from a donor, and attaching it to serve as a new UCL. Recovery from the surgery can be lengthy, sometimes taking up to year to

return to a pre-surgery level of play.

Sadler was eventually able to come back from the surgery and play Minor League Baseball. With the Kinston Indians, a North Carolina team, he had an impressive 6-0 record, with a 1.88 earned run average (ERA) and 78 strikeouts in 27 game appearances. He later spent time with the Akron Aeros (located in Ohio) and the Buffalo Bisons (New York), with ERAs of 2.33 and 1.93 respectively over 33 games played for the two teams. These successes led to him being called up to the majors.

Sadler remembers his first appearance in the “big show.” In late July of 2002, the Cleveland Indians were in a three-game series with the Oakland As. Sadler flew to Oakland, arriving at the stadium just before the game was scheduled to begin.

“It was the sixth or seventh inning, I don’t remember exactly which, when I got the call in the bullpen,”







recalled Sadler. "The bases were loaded, with one out. I looked and the very first batter I faced in my major league debut was David Justice. I remember thinking to myself, 'I used to follow him when I was a kid, now I am pitching against him.' I forced him to foul out to the third baseman. The next batter was leading the league in hitting, and he grounded to me and I threw him out at first to get out of that situation. I had a big case of butterflies, but that only lasts for a second. Then you tell yourself that you are as good as they are and you have a job to do."

The next series for the Indians that season was in Seattle. Sadler was called into the game in the same high-pressure situation, one out and the bases loaded. From that tension-filled start, Sadler enjoyed two years with the Indians.

"I am very grateful to the Indians organization," added Sadler. "They were very good to me and provided a way for me to take care of my family."

During his tenure with the Indians, Sadler played in 24 games that first year, with an ERA of 4.43 and 23 strikeouts to his credit. Sadler earned a roster spot the next year and played in 18 games for the Indians with an ERA of 1.86. Despite the low ERA, left-handed batters had a .333 batting average against him, and he was sent back to the minor leagues. Sadler spent the remainder of the season in Buffalo.

The following season saw Sadler spending time in both Buffalo and Akron. In 2005, his final year of professional baseball, Sadler played for the Long Island Ducks, the Somerset Patriots and the Yuma Scorpions before retiring at the end of the season.

Looking back on his days on the baseball diamond, Sadler speaks with a great deal of happiness.

"I enjoyed every day of it," he says. "I wish every kid or ball player could enjoy that feeling I had when I made my debut in the big show. I know it's rare that anyone gets to play professionally, but that feeling can be felt by kids at just about any level."

Sadler freely shares his thoughts on the state of youth baseball. With so many young players playing for extended times, Sadler fears that many of them may be pushed too hard and far in playing ball.

"Kids need a break," said Sadler. "I think it's not really the kids wanting to play so much, but parents trying to live their own dreams through their kids. Kids are put under so much pressure today. A lot of times, kids aren't having much fun; and baseball should always be fun."

When Sadler's son was growing up, he enjoyed playing baseball and showed some talent.

"One day, my son said he didn't want to play baseball any longer and that he wanted to become a welder," recalled Sadler. "So, I helped put him through welding school. Now he's a traveling welder and doing very well."

Today, Sadler lives in Perry, where he and his brother Eric own and operate Eric's Tree Service. ■





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Stay tuned for more announcements coming soon!

WHAT'S HAPPENING



Fourth of July Celebrations

Branford

Join the Town of Branford for the Branford River Reunion's Fourth of July Celebration. Find a spot on the Suwannee River to watch one of the largest duck races in the area or just settle down in the shade for some good ole American jams. Of course, you won't want to miss the fireworks.

Admission is free. The festival will take place on the Suwannee River Greenway (directly behind Town Hall at 502 S.W. Suwannee Ave.).

Madison

The Madison Lions Club hosts their annual God and Country July 4th celebration on the banks of Lake Francis (323 SE Lake Shore Dr.) The festivities begin at 4 p.m., with vendors, live entertainment and a dunking booth, all finishing with a dazzling fireworks display at 9 p.m. For more information, contact Tim Dunn at (850) 464-4890 or email madisonlionsclub@gmail.com.

Live Oak

Live Oak's Freedom Festival features live music, bounce houses, plenty of vendors and an assortment of activities – a little bit of something for everyone, adults and children alike. The evening will end with a bang (literally!) at 9:15 p.m. with a spectacular fireworks show. This free event is held in historic downtown Live Oak. This year, the festival committee will be honoring Suwannee County Purple Heart recipients. If you know of someone who received the Purple Heart, contact Mayor Frank Davis at (386) 362-2276 or fdavis@cityofliveoak.org.

Jasper

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

Steinhatchee

Fireworks will be bursting bright in the night at the Steinhatchee Community Center, located at 1013 Riverside Dr.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

Now through August 31

“The Joys of Summer” Exhibit at JAG

This exhibit is JAG’s annual member show, featuring the creative work of local artists in a variety of mediums. Jefferson Arts Gallery, 575 W. Washington St., Monticello, Fla., is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling (850) 997-3311.

July 5

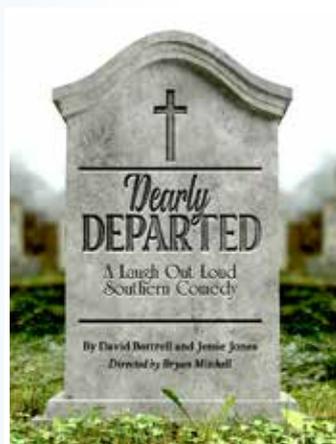
Independence Day Celebration in Perry

On Saturday, Perry is holding its Independence Day Celebration beginning at 4 p.m. in Rosehead Park (300 S. Washington St.) with food trucks, craft vendors and family fun. Live music by Whiskey Heart starts at 5 p.m., and there'll be fireworks at 8:30 p.m.

July 11-13

“Under the Big Top” at Ragans

Enjoy circus-themed activities all weekend at Ragans Family Campground. Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.



July 17-20

Dearly Departed at MOH

This comedy written by David Bottrell and Jessie Jones, and directed locally by Bryan Mitchell, is set in the Baptist backwoods of the Bible Belt,

where the beleaguered Turpin family proves that living and dying in the South are seldom tidy and always hilarious. Despite their earnest efforts to pull themselves together for their father’s funeral, the Turpins’ other problems keep overshadowing the solemn occasion. For showtimes and ticket information, call the Monticello Opera House at (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

July 18-20

“Bubble Blast” at Ragans

Enjoy bubbly fun all weekend at Ragans Family Campground. Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.

July 25-27

Little Women at MOH

Louisa May Alcott’s classic coming-of-age novel comes to life on the historic Monticello Opera House stage, under the local direction of Michelle Miller Dollar. The story follows the lives of the four March sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, as they strive to be brave, intelligent and imaginative young women growing up in the middle of the Civil War. An emotional, epic and moving family saga, it chronicles their struggles to make their own way in a society that offers little use for women beyond the household. For showtimes and ticket information, call the Monticello Opera House at (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

July 25-27

“Winter in July” at Ragans

Enjoy cooling activities all weekend at Ragans Family Campground. Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.

August 1-3

“Best of Summer” at Ragans

Teachers and school staff receive free day passes at Ragans Family Campground. Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.

August 22

Artfest 2025 Application Deadline

The Live Oak Artist Guild’s Artfest 2025 deadline for applications is approaching fast! This 27th annual Fine Art Exhibition will take place from Saturday, Sept. 6, through Friday, Sept. 19, in the Suwannee River Regional Library in Live Oak. A special reception and awards presentation will take place on the opening day from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. For more information on how to submit artwork, contact Katherine Allen at (386) 243-9485 or email liveoakartguild@outlook.com.



August 28

Britishmania at MOH

For one night only, the Britishmania Beatles Tribute Band will take you on a memorable trip back to the 1960’s to experience the wonderful sound and stage persona of The Beatles! Re-live what it was like to see them in their epic periods in their career beginning with The Ed Sullivan Show era followed by the Shea Stadium era then moving to the Sgt. Pepper/Magical Mystery Tour era and finally the Abbey Road/Let it Be era.

For tickets, call the Monticello Opera House at (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.



August 29-September 1

“Labor Day” at Ragans

Celebrate the holiday all weekend at Ragans Family Campground. Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.



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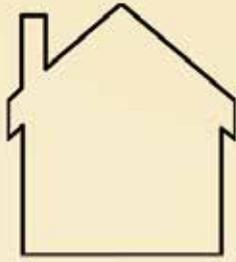
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