

CALHOUN • COUNTY

BUSINESS

The Anniston Star
Saturday, July 29, 2017

Y'all Come

Tourism brings welcome changes in the local economy



WELCOME | BOB DAVIS

Oh, the places you'll go

"Oh, the Places You'll Go!" — a book written and illustrated by Dr. Seuss — could just as easily be a slogan for local eco-tourism entrepreneurs seeking to spread the word about Calhoun County's outdoor assets.

The places you'll go and the things you'll do if you wish to pedal, walk, run, paddle, watch a sporting event, play and so on. From

college athletics in Jacksonville to Coldwater Mountain's trails and from a Freedom Riders National Monument in Anniston to almost 400 acres of recreational opportunities at Oxford's Choccolocco Park there is plenty to attract visitors and their wallets to our area.

Once in town, they will need places to eat, to drink, to sleep and to be entertained.

According to the Alabama Tourism Department, that basic fact has Calhoun County cash registers ringing to the tune of \$80 million in tourism spending in 2016, an increase of 11 percent from 2015.

Among the eco-tourism benefits cited in a 2015 report by the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development were "generates local employment," "injects capital and new money into the local economy," and "enhances local community esteem and provides the opportunity for greater understanding and communication among people of diverse background."

Inside the pages of this edition of Business Calhoun County are stories detailing just how our region is cashing in on this growing market and fulfilling the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development forecast.

Oh, the prosperity our region will reap.



Bob Davis
Editor and Publisher

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Tourism money could be waiting for Calhoun County entrepreneurs to take advantage.

Lodging
Visitors who need a place to stay have a variety of options, and all present opportunity for local businesses.



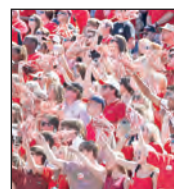
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COMING THIS WINTER



Preparing for retirement is a life-long exercise, and accommodating retirees can help build businesses and communities. In the next issue of Business Calhoun County we'll explore retirement planning from the perspective of individuals, entrepreneurs and community leaders. Look for it in The Anniston Star in December.

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Trent Penny/The Anniston Star

Fans watch cyclists compete in the 2017 Sunny King Criterium, one of the many cycling events held in Calhoun County.

DIGGING DEEPER

Tourism money could be waiting for Calhoun County entrepreneurs to take advantage

BY PATRICK MCCRELESS

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There might be untapped riches deep in the winding trails of Coldwater Mountain or along the 33 mile-long paved Chief Ladiga Trail for entrepreneurs willing to seize them.

For years Calhoun County officials have pushed to develop the area's eco-tourism industry, from extending mountain biking trails to opening RV parks. Communities have promoted events to attract cyclists, like the Sunny King Criterium in Anniston and the Cheaha Challenge in Jacksonville. The long-term goal is to attract tourists who will spend money on lodging, restaurants and shopping, in turn creating jobs and fostering the opening of new businesses.

Those efforts have apparently generated some results. According to a recent Alabama Tourism Department study, travelers spent \$80 million in the county last year — an 11 percent jump over 2015 in traveler spending on hotels, restaurants, shopping and transportation.

Still, Anniston's downtown, relatively close to many of the area's more popular trails, remains littered with empty storefronts. The county's vacation rental property market is practically nonexistent. Some industry experts say and other communities have shown that there could be greater spending if more businesses existed that catered to the tourism market and if it was better promoted.

What is needed

"Hotels are nice, but people would rather be in a

home," Richard Edwards, trail solutions manager for the International Mountain Biking Association, said of touring mountain bikers.

A quick search on popular online home vacation rental sites Airbnb and VRBO show sparse options in Anniston and the county.

Edwards said a vibrant nightlife is also important to visiting mountain bike enthusiasts and cyclists in general.

"That's going to have a huge impact," Edwards said of more nightlife options. "If you extended the riding into downtown Anniston, suddenly you'd see a huge wave of cyclists."

The city of Anniston has for years planned to link the Coldwater trails into downtown and extend the Chief

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Trent Penny / The Anniston Star

A good crowd was on hand during the Freedom Riders National Monument Celebration in May on Gurnee Avenue downtown Anniston.

TOURISM

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Ladiga to get more people to visit the shops there.

What is possible

Meanwhile, there are other communities across the country with eco-tourism similar to Calhoun, but with more business offerings.

Kalene Griffith has seen such business growth firsthand in Bentonville, Ark.

Griffith, president of Visit Bentonville, an organization that promotes tourism and supports business in the city, said Bentonville was once more like Anniston. Despite being headquarters for the national retailer Walmart, Bentonville's downtown boasted just two restaurants around a decade ago.

Then around 2007 the community obtained money to build 5 miles of trails, Griffith said. By 2011, the city paved a trail into the downtown area for cyclists. Events were held to promote the cycling amenities and a nearby art museum.

"We created this urban experience and now there are 16 restaurants downtown and food trucks," Griffith said.

Griffith said an estimated 500,000 people use the city's trail system each year.

"Now downtown we have a lot of homes on Airbnb ... people have bought homes here and put them on VRBO for rent," Griffith said.

Griffith noted that many of the hotels and restaurants in the area have bike racks for cyclists.

"When people are done riding, it's acceptable for them to go into restaurants in their riding gear," she said. "Eight years ago, that probably wasn't as acceptable ... we have adopted biking as a whole because we want people to eat and stay."

With a national park, extensive hiking and biking trails and the Colorado River, the city of Fruita, Colo., boasts many outdoor tourism attractions and businesses that take advantage of them.

Mike Bennett, Fruita city manager, said the city's sales tax revenue jumps 25 percent every summer during tourism season. Bennett said the city has worked to foster tourism development, which has offset tax losses from the state's oil and gas industry.

Bennett said declines in the industry resulted in a 91 percent decline in oil and gas tax money for the city between 2014 and 2016. The situation is reminiscent of Calhoun, which has lost hundreds of jobs in recent years because of cutbacks in the defense industry, resulting in less spending and sales tax revenue.

"But we've made up a good part of that gap with retail trade, lodging and restaurants," Bennett said of the sales tax money. "We've taken a pretty proactive approach to recruiting business."

Bennett said the city's hotels do well, but he's also seen more people offering vacation home rentals.

"We've seen more and more of those over the years," Bennett said.

Anna King, co-owner of ERA King Real Estate in Anniston and overseer of King Property Management, said her company has tried to develop vacation rental homes in the county, but hasn't had much success.

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Bill Wilson/The Anniston Star

Andrew Harper works the front desk at the Hampton Inn in Jacksonville.

‘Good years to come’ Jacksonville’s Hampton Inn welcomes guests of many kinds

BY BILL WILSON

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Hampton Inn Jacksonville (Jacksonville Hotel LLC)

Four-story, 80-room hotel
with 4,000 square feet of
meeting space

Established: August 2009
Owner: Wesley Long
Employees: 25

JACKSONVILLE — When Wesley Long opened the Jacksonville Hampton Inn in 2009 it was during the heart of the economic downturn that had started in 2008. Long, who also owns a Hampton Inn at Lake Guntersville, wanted to open another hotel in a similar-sized city. He liked what he saw in Jacksonville.

Long, who lives in Guntersville, said he was impressed with the traffic Jacksonville State University generated on the weekends.

He said that at the time Jacksonville had no nice, full-service hotel like the 80-room Hampton Inn and wanted to change that. Long was also optimistic about the growth of the area with the development of McClellan and the completion of the new portion of U.S. 431. The popularity of the nearby Chief Ladiga Trail was also a factor in.

“The trail is less than a half-mile from here,” he said of the hotel, at the corner of Pelham Road and Greenleaf Street. “We pick up a lot of cyclists and stuff like that,” Long said.

Long said the popularity of the annual Cheaha Challenge cycling event also brings business.

The hotel has a competitive advantage over some in Oxford, he said, as it has 4,000 square feet of meeting and event space for up to 150 guests. Weddings, reunions and business-related events are booked on a routine basis at the hotel.

Long said that in the beginning customers searching the Hilton website for hotels in Anniston only got results within a 10-mile radius. Jacksonville’s Hampton Inn is 11.2 miles from Anniston. Long said he worked with Hilton for two years to work out a solution. Today the radius is 40 miles nationwide.

Long said he now gets business from events at Oxford’s Choccolocco Park and the Champion Sports arena in Alexandria.

“The Oxford sports complex is going to be huge for us, even being this far north,” he said. “It’s almost recession proof.”

The future for the hotel looks good according to Long.

“It’s really had good years and I see good years to come,” Long said.

‘Read the tea leaves’

Hotel developers dig deeper to understand Anniston’s attraction

BY EDDIE BURKHALTER

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Best Western Plus

Approximately \$10 million 75 guest room, four-story hotel with retail and meeting space planned for downtown Anniston

Established: Construction expected to begin in 2017

Developers: Tag Investments, JW Hartlein & Co.

Employees: Developers estimate 45-60.

Johnny Arnold thinks that Anniston’s new hotel, once built, will cater to business visitors and tourists alike.

Arnold’s Baton Rouge, La.-based Tag Investments and Mississippi-based JW Hartlein and Co., are developing Anniston’s new Best Western Plus hotel at 1200 Noble St.

Arnold said the decision to build in Anniston wasn’t difficult, but that it took more than looking at the city’s statistics.

Anniston is awaiting an announcement on where the federal government plans to locate a new federal courthouse downtown. Arnold expects the approximately \$41 million courthouse will draw visiting attorneys and paralegals in need of a place to stay. One site under consideration is a block south and west of the hotel site.

Best Western Plus guests nationwide pay an average room rate of \$107.

The new courthouse will supply the Best Western with weekday customers, Arnold said, but it will be the “weekend warriors” who really fill out the hotel register.

Arnold listed numerous Anniston attractions he thinks will feed the hotel with customers, from the world-class Coldwater Mountain biking trails to the the Chief Ladiga Trail and the Anniston’s museum complex. Talladega Superspeedway races and Jacksonville State University graduations draw thousands to the area, he said.

The “cherry on top,” Arnold said, was a development he wasn’t aware of when he and his partner began looking at Anniston.

The Freedom Riders National Monument, designated by President Barack Obama days before he left office, includes the former Greyhound bus station on Gurnee Avenue, also about two blocks south and a block west of the hotel site, where civil rights activists in 1961 were attacked by a white mob while testing the nation’s recently desegregated transportation system.

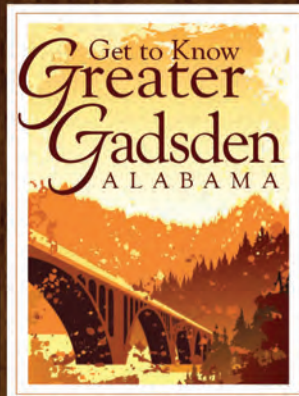
Anniston’s tourism attractions can’t be found in the city’s census records and traffic pattern studies, and if developers only look at statistics they could miss out, Arnold said.

“If I’m waiting to see the numbers I’m already too late. You’ve got to be able to read the tea leaves,” Arnold said.



Trent Penny/The Anniston Star

Best Western Plus is to be located at 1200 Noble St., where this building was demolished recently.



greatergadsden.com

Noccalula Falls

First Fridays - Downtown Gadsden



Biking the Black Creek Trail System

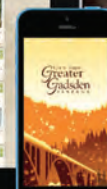


Fishing the Coosa River/ Neely Henry Lake



GO MOBILE

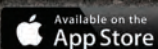
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'The next adventure'

Anniston bed-and-breakfast is a long-haul plan for Brightwells

BY SAMANTHA HILL

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Parker House Bed & Breakfast

Bed-and-breakfast in a historic east-side Anniston home

Established: 2012
Owners: Scott and Megan Brightwell
Employees: Six

Scott and Megan Brightwell started their family-run bed-and-breakfast after wanting to leave Dunwoody, Ga., just north of Atlanta, for a smaller-town atmosphere.

They had never run a bed-and-breakfast before, but when their friends were selling the Parker House, everything felt right.

"We were looking for the next adventure in our lives," Scott said. "Turns out, this is it."

The couple run the business in a three-story Richardsonian Romanesque Victorian house in the historic Tyler Hill neighborhood. Built in 1889 by Duncan T. Parker for his family, it has five rooms on the first and second floors, plus a basement with stone and brick walls and a dirt floor.

Guests pay \$135 to \$165 per night, depending on the rooms they choose. The Brightwells provide breakfast, which is a choice of buttermilk pancakes, omelets or crepes with seasonal fruit. Their kids, Coleman, Eleanor and Abigail, greet guests and set the table.

Megan said it's not uncommon for bed-and-breakfast owners to see success, then burn out and quit. After five years of running the Parker House, Megan said that's not their plan.

"We don't want to be a short-term business," Megan said. "We want to be in it for the long haul."

Though the Brightwells hosted had a few weddings at the Parker House, they say most of their guests come for the Chief Ladiga Trail. They have had Swiss golfers stay for a few nights to play the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail course at Silver Lakes. They also had an Italian designer bring his family as he worked on a project with Honda.

Scott said he has seen the business grow steadily each year since 2012. He isn't sure if it's all due to a rise in tourism in the county, but tourism is the primary growth engine for the area, he said. One thing the family would like to see in the future is cycling trails expanded into downtown, making it safer for cyclists to ride into town.

"I think that'll be really good for downtown," Scott said.



Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

The Brightwell family (Scott and Megan with children Coleman, Eleanor and Abigail Brightwell) inside the Parker House Bed and Breakfast in Anniston.

'On the map'

Couple aim to help change views of Anniston by hosting cyclists

BY KIRSTEN FISCUS

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The York Place on Coldwater Mountain

Three-bedroom short-term rental home that accommodates 10, with camping space and bike trail access

Established: 2014
Owners: Preston and Natalie York
Employees: None

A little bit of vision and handiwork is all it took for Preston York and his wife, Natalie York, to contribute what they said is a small part of Calhoun County's tourism market.

The Yorks own and operate a home, listed on the popular vacation rental website Airbnb.com, in the Constantine neighborhood on the slopes of Coldwater Mountain.

The couple bought the home, which was once abandoned and gutted for scrap metal, and made it not only livable but a "cozy getaway near the mountain," Natalie York said.

"I think this has been good for the neighborhood and it's literally in nature," she said. "This is about changing the perception of the area. I want it to be better and I want to be part of making it better."

The couple spent about \$65,000 on the home, about half of that on remodeling, Preston York said.

"It's been a learning experience," Natalie York said. "A fun adventure and good part-time job."

Preston York said he was drawn to the property because of its proximity to the mountain, which currently has 35 miles of biking trails. York owns his own trail-building company and built the paths on Coldwater, he said.

"Coldwater has put Anniston on the map," he said. "We've had negatives put us on the map but this is a positive on the national level."

The home has been tailored to mountain-biking enthusiasts, with space for campers, and York also built a trail that begins at the foot of the home's front deck.

"The advantage to flipping a home is that we were able to customize it and turn it into his vision," Natalie York said.

Keeping to a budget and paying for the process with cash kept the project debt-free, the Yorks said. Money earned from rentals, about \$1,000 a month, helps pay for upgrades to the home, Preston York said.

Much like the process the couple went through, the county's tourism depends on revitalization and opportunity, they said.

"We have a lot of untapped potential with cycling and mountain biking," York said. "If you build it, they will come."



Koirsten Ficus/The Anniston Star

Preston and Natalie York, both mountain biking enthusiasts, bought and remodeled a home as a vacation rental for those who share their cycling passions.

'A great place'

Oxford restaurateur says business is performing well thanks to arts center

BY ALEXANDER COOPER

Special to The Star

Hubbard's Off Main

Restaurant in downtown Oxford seating 90 in regular dining area, 60 in adjacent party space

Established: 2013

Owner: Charlotte Hubbard

Employees: Six permanent, with more for occasional events

Through the doors of a building marked "Hubbard Piano" in large white letters outside, Charlotte Hubbard can usually be found hosting lunch or dinner at Hubbard's Off Main in downtown Oxford.

Hubbard, a member of the Oxford City Council, established the restaurant four years ago in the building next

door.

"I wanted to do this soup-and-sandwich start-up restaurant," she said about starting the business, "but it grew very quickly into more than that. Mainly because of the Performing Arts Center next door."

Hubbard is the sole owner of the restaurant that is open for lunch and dinner Wednesdays through Saturdays, and from 11 a.m. 2 p.m. Sundays.

"It's been something that people have been really receptive to," she said about the response to her restaurant.

The Performing Arts Center, she says, is still one of the major reasons for her restaurant's success. The center opened in 2013 after a \$10.4 million renovation of and addition to the former City Hall building, undertaken by the city. It regularly hosts touring concerts and musicals.

"During the main showtimes," Hubbard said, "which start up in August and continue three or four months with shows pretty consistently, it makes up about a quarter of our business."

She says she often sees diners both before and after shows, as the restaurant is in walking distance of the venue. She'd welcome more competition.

"We need more independent restaurant owners in this area to meet the needs of the people that come," she said.

Hubbard thinks the Performing Arts Center is one of Oxford's most valuable assets in drawing tourists.

As a member of the City Council she has also been an advocate for an Oxford-Anniston partnership to market attractions in the two towns better.

"I think Oxford and Anniston work well together," she said, "because there are so many things that we could promote. We have to get it out there that this is a great place to eat and play and stay."



Charlotte Hubbard, owner of Hubbard's Off Main in Oxford.

Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star



There's so much to see!

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'It's JSU's place'

Success of sports-themed restaurant & bar in Jacksonville spills over to Oxford

BY REBEKAH HAWKINS

Special to The Star

Struts

Casual restaurant & bar with seating for 105 in Jacksonville, 150-200 in Oxford.

Established: 1999 in Jacksonville, 2004 in Oxford
Owner: Walter Fritts and Ryan Fritts
Employees: About 30 at each location

Ryan Fritts had no restaurant experience when he came home to Alabama to help his father, Walter Fritts, with their family's restaurant, Struts.

"My background is in management information systems, and I had a job with a financial corporation," he said. "But my dad said that he trusted me. So I came home."

Walter Fritts opened the Cockpit, a convenience store that closed earlier this year, in

1992. Fritts decided that Jacksonville needed a place to get a good sandwich and a beer, and from that came Struts, which opened in an area of the building the Cockpit had used for storage.

The restaurant has everything from cheese sticks and loaded fries to burgers, salads and sandwiches. Struts is also known for its wings with more than 15 sauces to choose from. Regular menu items range anywhere from \$7 to \$17.

Ryan Fritts says it was hard work from the ground up, and it was nothing fancy. He took the reins in 2003, and in 2004 Struts opened its second location in Oxford. The interior decor at each place pays homage to locals' devotion to college sports.

"At our Jacksonville location everything is JSU, there's no Alabama or Auburn. We want people to know that it's JSU's place," He said. "At Oxford we have JSU, Alabama and Auburn."

Fritts says business is always better when the teams are winning.

Even when the Gamecocks aren't winning, the Jacksonville location maintains a good relationship with the university, he said, with faculty, students and locals among the regulars in Jacksonville. JSU's hosting of local sporting events like the county high school basketball tournament and jamboree football games also boots business, he said.

The Frittses are currently expanding the Jacksonville location after the Cockpit's closure, and hope to open it before the upcoming fall semester at JSU.

According to Fritts, the Oxford location hasn't seen much business from interstate traffic, but it has loyal locals who help keep the business functioning well. He says both locations perform well.

He says that although JSU brings in people from out of town, Calhoun County tourism has room for improvement.

"I'd like to see it grow more in industry and not just retail," He says. "We need jobs desperately so we can do more and attract more people."



Ryan Fritts, owner of Struts in Jacksonville.

Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

'A huge help'

Gridiron's owner says new park, desire for growth are serving up success

BY THOMAS HOWARD

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The Gridiron Oxford

Family-friendly sports-themed restaurant with seating for 225

Established: 2016
Owner: Jeremy Reeves
Employees: 35

The Gridiron opened its doors in Oxford in October 2016, the fifth location for Jeremy Reeves' growing chain.

The restaurant focuses on providing a family-friendly, sports-themed environment, something Reeves said pairs well with nearby Choccolocco Park.

"The park has been a huge help," Reeves said. "We've actually been doing a lot of the catering down there."

Reeves said the Gridiron's Oxford location has catered the Ohio Valley Conference women's softball tournament and is scheduled to cater the Dixie Youth World Series in August.

Reeves said Choccolocco Park, which opened in 2016, was one of the reasons he chose to open in Oxford.

"A lot of it was the park, the growth of Oxford," Reeves said. "This community wants to grow."

The Gridiron's building in the Oxford Exchange has been home to several other restaurants that failed to take root. Reeves said the laid-back atmosphere at his restaurant is why he is succeeding.

"All of the other restaurants were under the same corporation," Reeves said. "They changed the concept, but kept the same management team."

Reeves said the Gridiron is a different concept and a new management team. He said they now serve between 15,000 and 20,000 people per month, with entertainment ranging from trivia on Tuesdays to live music on weekends.

Reeves said all five of his Gridiron locations focus on serving fresh food that has never been frozen. The most popular items on the menu, he said, are the Chicken Bliss Potato, a baked potato topped with chicken and the chain's signature white barbecue sauce, and the beef brisket.

The four other Gridiron restaurants are in Gadsden, Decatur, Boaz and Centre. Reeves said the locations employ a total of about 250 people in all.

Reeves said Oxford has shown it is determined to draw more tourists, and he supports that idea.

"It's a stepping stone for growth," Reeves said. "That's what success is built on."



Jeremy Reeves, owner of the Gridiron restaurant in the Oxford Exchange.

Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

'Always something new'

Anniston's Peerless trades on historic charm, keeps menu fresh

BY BEN POCKSTALLER

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The Peerless Saloon & Grille

Downtown restaurant and bar in historic building with seating for 255

Established: 1899, reopened in 1991
Owner: Kristy Farmer, Wilbur Nolen
Employees: 25

Robert E. "Daddy" Garner first opened the doors of the Peerless Saloon on Anniston's 10th Street in 1899.

The saloon closed down in the 1920s, and various businesses came and went over the years at that location. In 1991, the Peerless reopened under the ownership of Kristy Farmer and Wilbur Nolen. It became the Peerless Saloon & Grille in 2008 when the establishment began serving food. The Peerless has made a name for itself as a hotspot for locals and out-of-towners alike.

Chef Candice Jackson said one hallmark of the Peerless is its family-friendly atmosphere.

"When you go somewhere, you're always thinking, 'Can I bring my kids?'" Jackson said. Jackson's children and Farmer's grandchildren are frequent guests at the Peerless.

The place bursts with history. Guests walk through the saloon's original doors on their way to the restrooms. The bar and adjacent bookcase are from the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, and doors and light fixtures from the 19th century Calhoun County courthouse now have a home at the Peerless.

Each of the Peerless' four history-filled rooms can be rented for private parties.

In addition to its history, Jackson said the Peerless' food also draws out-of-town visitors.

"Food's a big part of it," Jackson said. "Everyone loves good Southern food."

The grille offers signature dishes such as the Peerless Shrimp & Grits and the Fried Green Tomato Shrimp Stacker. Most meals range cost between \$8 and \$16.

Front-of-house manager Hunter Cain said the ever-changing menu keeps locals and travelers walking in.

"We don't burn people out, because there's always something new to try," he said.

Farmer estimated that around 4,000 out-of-towners visit the Peerless each year. The staff usually see their largest influx of tourists during events such as races at Talladega Superspeedway, the Cheaha Challenge, the Woodstock 5K, and local music festivals.

Cain said he often sees many of the same out-of-state visitors on the weekends of Talladega's races.

"The first thing they do when they come into town, they come to the Peerless," Cain said.

Cain also said that tourism is not only beneficial to the Peerless, but to Calhoun County's economy.

"When they come here, they're always asking us, 'What is there to do?'" Cain said.



Trent Penny/The Anniston Star

Hunter Cain and Candice Jackson at the Peerless in downtown Anniston.

‘It’s so refreshing’

Coldwater Mountain’s trails bringing bikers to Anniston

BY CAMERON KISZLA

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Coldwater Mountain Biking Trails

33-mile bicycle trail system in 4,183-acre conservation area

Established: 2012

Owner: Land held by Alabama’s Forever Wild Land Trust, trails built by International Mountain Biking Association’s Trail Solutions

Annual visitors: Expected 50,000 - 150,000 users per year, according to JSU economic impact analysis

Dozens of riders come to the Anniston area each day to ride Coldwater Mountain, which contains approximately 33 miles of professionally designed mountain-biking trails and has aspirations to double in size.

Coldwater Mountain’s trails were designed and built by the International Mountain Biking Association. Tom Sauret is IMBA’s regional director for the Southeast, and he said that Coldwater Mountain in particular is growing in popularity.

“It is rapidly becoming a national destination and even an international destination for riders looking for a bike-optimized trail,” Sauret said.

Tom Nelson, president of the Northeast Alabama Bicycling Association, said that even in a rainy stretch through June, newly installed trail counters showed 30 to 35 riders per weekday and more than 100 riders per weekend day, and they’re not all locals.

“Go to the trailhead on a Saturday and there are several Alabama tags with number 11 for Calhoun County, but more will be from out of county or out of state,” Nelson said. “Georgia, Tennessee ... last time I rode, a group from Indianapolis came down to ride for the weekend. If you look at where we’re situated, there’s probably 100 million people within a day’s drive of Coldwater Mountain.”

All of these out of town riders are bringing in tourists dollars as well. Restaurants like the Peerless and Mellow Mushroom are biker favorites, as is the Hotel Finial, which offers a bike-washing station and five rooms with interior bike storage.

“We definitely cater to the bicyclists who come here,” said Ginger Marsh, sales and events manager for the hotel. “And we try to promote downtown as well, telling them about different restaurants and places to go. I always try to push Anniston.”

Patrick Wigley owns Wig’s Wheels, a bike shop on Noble Street, and he has found that when his business succeeds, so do the other downtown shops.

“If riders have access to the downtown area we have here, they’re going to spend money and they’re going to spend the night.”

Wigley also thinks Anniston can capitalize on the outdoor tourism and build a reputation as a bicycling town.

“What rears its head more often is positive news always has to do with cycling, whether it be Coldwater, Cheaha Challenge or the Ladiga Trail, and it’s so refreshing.”



Trent Penny/The Anniston Star

Cyclists churn their way up a Coldwater Mountain bike trail.

‘They seek them out’

Officials expect new national monument to draw legions of park fans

BY CHELSEA JARVIS

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Freedom Riders National Monument

National monument dedicated to the Freedom Riders, with Anniston's former Greyhound bus station and site where bus was burned in 1961

Established: 2017
Owner: National Park Service
Annual visitors: 150,000-200,000 per year, superintendent estimates

There are three things people always ask when they arrive at a National Park Service-managed national monument, according to Reginald Tiller.

“Where’s the restroom?” said Tiller, the superintendent of Anniston’s Freedom Riders National Monument. “How long will it take to tour the site? And then, where can we go eat?”

The Freedom Riders National Monument, declared a national monument in January, includes Anniston’s former Greyhound bus station on Gurnee Avenue and the site where a bus carrying Freedom Riders was burned by locals in 1961.

Tiller said Anniston’s proximity to Interstate 20 will attract visitors who are on vacation but perhaps headed somewhere else.

“If there are signs out there, that is going to bring a lot of people who are on vacation, driving from one state to another ...” Tiller said. Travelers who collect the park service’s “passport stamps” will come to Anniston to get their books inked at the Freedom Riders site, he said.

Tiller said an average visit to Anniston for these travelers will likely last one to three hours. He said guests will visit the monument and get a meal in town before moving on to their next destination.

“I would think that 150,000 to 200,000 per year initially would be an excellent number for this site,” Tiller said.

The Civil Rights Memorial Center in Montgomery, run by a non-profit, sees about 35,000 to 40,000 visitors annually, according to center officials.

The memorial is dedicated to 41 people who died in the struggle for equality during the civil rights movement. Center officials said many of their visitors spend one or two days in the area touring other historical sites. Most visitors ask if there other civil rights or Civil War monuments nearby, an official said.

Pete Conroy, co-chairman of Freedom Riders Park Committee, said based on his experience in Mentone with Little River Canyon National Preserve, he suspects the Freedom Riders Monument will have a dramatic growth curve.

“People adore national parks and they seek them out,” Conroy said. “It has a super broad appeal at a time in history when it’s important.”

Conroy said the committee is interested in selling shirts, books and educational materials for the monument. He said he believes the Freedom Riders monument will mirror or exceed the success he has seen at Little River Canyon.



Trent Penny/The Anniston Star

Reggie Tiller with NPS during the Freedom Riders National Monument Celebration in May on Gurnee Avenue in downtown Anniston.

'So jealous'

Oxford's gem of a park draws visitors' admiration, envy

BY ZACH TYLER

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Choccolocco Park

370-acre sports complex featuring three baseball and eight softball fields, four soccer fields, collegiate-grade track-and-field venue, 36-acre lake with 1.4 miles of encircling paved track, and two playgrounds.

Established: 2016
Annual visitors: Unknown, but estimated to be more than 200,000 between January and April 2017.

Baseballs snapped between leather mitts on a recent weekday at one of Choccolocco Park's two signature fields, built to college-conference standards, and Lori Fuller waited for her teenaged son, a left-handed pitcher, near the concession stand.

She'd driven to the park from her hotel, where they'd stayed the night for about \$80. It was less than a mile, past the restaurants and shopping centers that've taken up positions around Interstate 20's Exit 188 like basemen around home plate — and where Fuller and her son ate dinner the night before for about \$50.

Fuller had one thought when she got to the park, a visit she would make like so many other parents in the name of her son's baseball dreams.

"I'm so jealous that Auburn hasn't done this," she said.

By "this," Fuller meant what Oxford officials have done with what used to be a sod farm. The complex sits off of the city's busiest interstate exit, and some event or another draws visitors there on many warm weeks out of the year. Fuller was in town for a professional baseball scouting event.

There are the collegiate contests. This year the Ohio Valley Conference's softball and baseball tournaments brought 16 teams to the site. Officials need do little to encourage those athletes, coaches, and the fans and family members trailing them to stay in one of the nearby hotels, or eat at a local restaurant.

"It's a great location," said Don Hudson, director of Oxford's Parks & Recreation Department, which oversees the complex's operation.

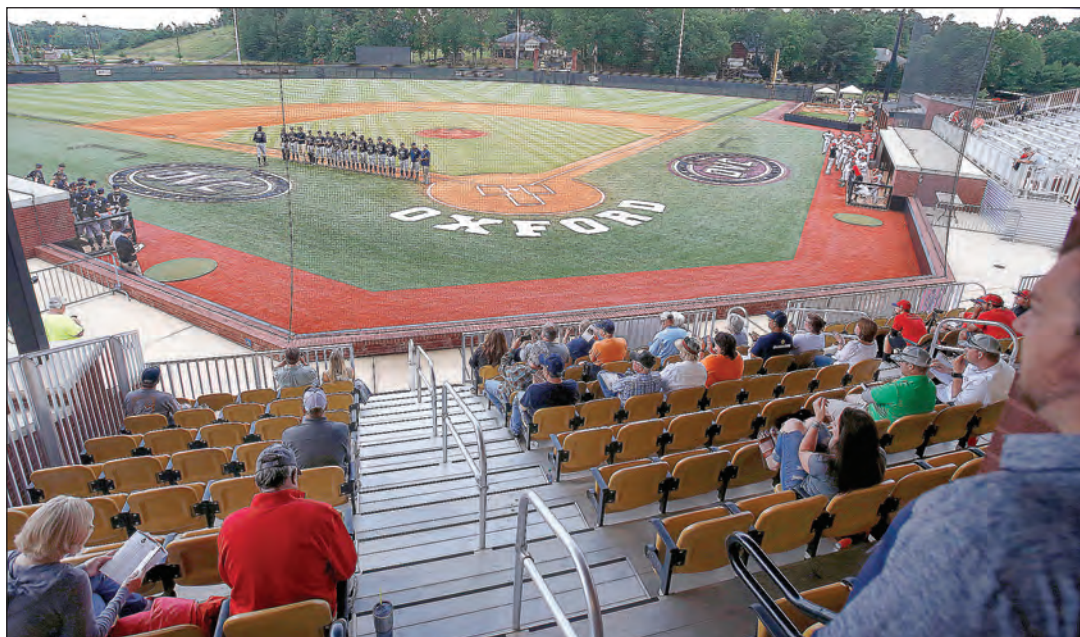
"The other stuff kind of takes care of itself," said Jack Deal, interim manager of the facility.

Hudson and Deal say that perhaps 60 or 70 percent of visitors go to the park because of the events hosted there. The city doesn't have a clear count of how many visits the park's had since its opening, though.

"We've been trying to track that," Hudson said. "When we go talk to folks, to businesses for sponsorships, that's what they want to know."

Digital trackers have been installed recently, Hudson said, but haven't provided a full count yet — all he and other officials know is that turnout has "exceeded what we expected."

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Trent Penny/The Anniston Star

At top: Fans watch at Choccolocco Park in June as the JSU Gamecocks take the field against Southeast Missouri State. Above: The grounds crew removes the tarp from Choccolocco Park's main baseball field.

'The red and white'

Jacksonville State's teams fill stands, hotels and restaurants

BY KEITH HUFFMAN

Star Staff Writer

Jacksonville State University athletics

NCAA Division I sports program with 17 teams playing in the Ohio Valley Conference

Established: 1903 (first football games)

Owners/operators: JSU board of trustees; President John M. Beehler, Athletic Director Greg Seitz

Annual visitors: More than 200,000

While athletes can rely on devoted sports fans for loyal turnouts and exuberant, team-colored enthusiasm during triumphant seasons, surrounding businesses stand to benefit from fans' purses and wallets.

Consider the city of Jacksonville.

In December 2015, when the Jacksonville State University Gamecocks hosted three playoff football games, the city collected approximately \$45,000 more than the prior year for that month, said Jarrod Simmons,

39, Jacksonville's city administrator.

"We collected about \$700,000 in sales tax that month, which was the best month we had," Simmons said.

More than 200,000 people attended JSU athletic events in 2016, said Greg Seitz, 47, JSU athletic director. Those events included competitions among a variety of the university's sports, ranging from football to softball, baseball to tennis.

"Out of those events, we played a total of 99 opponents over the last year," Seitz said. "And so in addition to our athletic events, we also host the Northeast Regional Basketball Tournament and the Calhoun County basketball tournament. And in both of those events, we had 72 teams that visited Jacksonville and more than 35,000 fans."

During football season, approximately 20 percent of fans come from areas more than two hours away, Seitz added.

"So we're hoping that a lot of those fans will stay the night in Calhoun County," Seitz said. "In addition, the fans that are coming into town are eating in our restaurants, shopping at our local businesses."

Besides staying in Calhoun County and eating at Jacksonville's restaurants, Seitz said, fans buy gas at local stations and shop at Walmart and other retailers. Meanwhile, many fans buy tickets, and they purchase food at concession stands, T-shirts and caps at souvenir booths. That revenue helps to support the employment of 56 people in JSU's athletic department, including coaches and support staff.

And while fans enjoy the sports, they're also supporting their respective institutions of higher learning.

"Every college and university wants to build a loyal and involved alumni base," Seitz said. "And college athletics certainly helps in that way."



Trent Penny/The Anniston Star

At top: A crowd of 23,413 gathered to watch JSU's home opener against Tennessee State in 2015. Above: Players salute the JSU band after the inaugural game at Burgess-Snow Field in 2010.

CLOCKING OUT — TIM LOCKETTE

To understand home's charms, think like a visitor

By the time you read this, I'll be in Mexico.

Or on my way, on a cruise ship from Mobile.

They say these cruises are cheap, if you can avoid buying booze, or using the Internet, or partaking in a dozen other services the cruise line offers. The actual stateroom is a loss-leader. Or so I hear.

Somewhere, potentially, some far-away person is making similar plans right now to come to Calhoun County on vacation.

To Silver Lakes, for golf. To Coldwater Mountain, to bike. To Jacksonville State's football stadium, for an away game. Or

to Anniston, to see a civil rights historic site that one day will be a full-fledged national monument.

I recognize that a person could have a pretty awesome vacation doing only things that can be done in Calhoun County. I'm not going to do those things on my vacation, because I did some of them last weekend, or will do them next month.

Instead I'm about to get on a boat, then on a bus, to a place called Tulum, where I'm told there's a Mayan ruin right next to the beach.

That's the sum total of what I know about Tulum. But I can guess that people in Quintana Roo had to be convinced, at some point, that those old ruins in the jungle were something that people around the world would want to see. Somebody had to get behind the idea that we should spend money and time on these attractions that had been there for a long time already without attracting anybody yet.

You get what I'm saying: What's commonplace to us can be amazing to someone from elsewhere.

Still, even as I get on the boat, even I can't fully answer the question of why people go where they go. What combination of ignorance and knowledge makes a person travel to a place they've never been?

When an ignorant American thinks of Mexico — when I think of Mexico — he thinks of ruins and beaches. Oh, and a nasty drug war. Tulum gives me two of those things in one place. I'm willing to assume that the other thing will be far removed from me. And I'll be disappointed if I don't come back wiser, with some of my ignorant-American stereotypes shattered.

What are Calhoun County's ruins, and what are our beaches?

What's our war?

What's our unexpected, and what do we have to teach?

How do we get people on the boat?



**Tim
Lockette**



EAT

STAY



PLAY

Visit Calhoun County

Learn more at VisitCalhounCounty.com.

For more information, stop by the Chamber & Visitors Center at
1330 Quintard Avenue in Anniston or call (256)237-3536.

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