

A Salute to Sylacauga, Oak Grove & Childersburg **COMMERCE** **2017**



Mosey on over to the Corral for the latest Western styles



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

Kelsey Thompson models an ensemble of Ariat apparel available at Oak Grove Corral.

Staff Report

OAK GROVE – Shoppers looking for gifts with a Western theme can find what they're looking for at the Oak Grove Corral.

Opened in March as an addition to Oak Grove Feed & Tack at 39925 Highway 280, the specialty boutique offers clothing and gifts for men, women and children. According to manager Amy Cockrell, "our best sellers are probably our boots, belts and wallets."

Among the boot brands available at the Corral are Ariat, Justin, Double H, Rocky, Nocana and Durango. The selection includes work and Western books.

Nocona men's and women's designer belts are proving popular this season, Cockrell said, as are various styles of leather wallets and money clips. Choices include long and bifold wallets in camouflage, Western and religious designs.

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Glenn Sisk, left, CEO of Coosa Valley Medical Center, accepts the first Pillar of the Community Award from Michael Landers, executive director of the chamber.

Sylacauga Chamber members recognized

Staff Report

During the past year, the Sylacauga Chamber of Commerce continued to work to live up to its mission of promoting economic development and quality of life in the Marble City, and it has honored three of its members for the impact they have made on the community.

Late in 2016, Coosa Valley Medical Center received the chamber's first Pillar of the Community Award.

Michael Landers, the chamber's executive director of the chamber, described CVMC as "an integral part of the community. Through its organization and operations, high-quality and award-winning healthcare and community service platform, it demonstrates the very principles of support and upstanding integrity."

Another first-time recognition, the chamber's Nonprofit Award was presented to The Arc of South Talladega County, which was founded in 1974 as an advocacy group for cognitively challenged individuals and their families.

"The Arc has been changing lives for the better through instructional services, career preparedness and a sincere devotion of service to others," said Laura Strickland, the chamber's marketing direc-

tor and membership coordinator. "The Arc is committed to enriching the lives of their clients, improving the lives of all our community by creating opportunity for personal growth and community success to all who are touched by their program."

Piggly Wiggly was the recipient of the Cornerstone Award, awarded to a business that has been in existence for five or more years and partners with the chamber.

The local Piggly Wiggly stores, one on U.S. 280 and the other on Alabama Highway 21, are owned and operated by SCVS Incorporated. SCVS is an acronym for the Cullota family – Sam Cullota, Charles Cullota, Vince Cullota and Sam Cullota Jr.

The two local stores are under the direct management and supervision of Vince Cullotta and Charles Cullota. The Cullota family has a long history in the grocery business – approaching 100 years – and Vince and Charles are continuing that tradition in Sylacauga with quality products, friendly faces and more than 75 local employees, Strickland said.

"It is the cooperative effort of all the members and the community that unifies us and enables extraordinary accomplishments for the entire area," Riley said.

Childersburg Chamber gets new name, new CEO in 2016; planning events for 2017

By DENISE SINCLAIR
Home staff writer

CHILDERSBURG – The Chamber of Commerce adopted a new name and logo along with hiring a new president/CEO in 2016.

In hiring Tom Roberts in June 2016, board Chairman Mort Moody said, "We feel like there are plenty of opportunities on the horizon with the right leadership. We are pleased that Tom accepted our offer to lead our chamber. His experience and enthusiasm match up well with what we are looking for in a CEO."

Roberts is excited about the opportunities ahead for the entire south Talladega County area, starting with a great chamber in Childersburg.

One of his goals has been to take current events to another level by working with the community on an event schedule.

Childersburg may be a small city, but, Roberts said, it's an historic city whose residents show a lot of positive pride in the many things that make it a great place. "It is literally surrounded by a large area that is full of potential for growth," he said.

Roberts is a native of Sylacauga and served on the City Council there from 2012 to 2016. He has decades of experience in broadcasting and other areas.

The Board of Directors adopted the new name -- Greater Coosa Valley Chamber of Commerce -- and logo in October 2016.

Roberts said the name change reflects the fact "that our community and the others all along the U.S. 280 corridor support, spend money, work in and learn at Central

Alabama Community College (CACC) in Childersburg. It's a large group of people, and we want to acknowledge that our trade market and the support for our businesses and industries are bigger than the 5,000 people that live in Childersburg."

As the Greater Coosa Valley Chamber moves through 2017, it's preparing for its Hall of Fame Banquet scheduled for 6 p.m. on March 2 at the Margie Sanford Hall on the campus of CACC in Childersburg.

During the banquet the newest member of the Childersburg Hall of Fame will be inducted. The three individuals vying for induction are Sandra Donohoo, Randall Senn and Malley Limbaugh.

Following is the chamber's 2017 coffee/breakfast schedule:

- March 14 – Coosa Valley Medical Center;
- April 11 – CACC;
- May 9 – City of Childersburg;
- June 13 – Renasant Bank;
- July 11 – That's Hot;
- Aug. 8 – Batter Up Restaurant;
- Sept. 12 – Geri's Gifts;
- Oct. 10 – Heritage South FCU;
- Nov. 14 – Alabama Power;
- Dec. 12 – Butler Harris Rainwater House.

The Chamber Board of Directors includes: Mort Moody, chairman; Diane Kay, vice president; Rita Patton, secretary; and members Bruce Hunt, Sandy Peoples, Milton Blakely, Marion Martin, Wesley Allen, Janice Groas, Jan Atkinson and Joe Allen.

For more information on the Greater Coosa Valley Chamber of Commerce, call 256-378-5482 or go to its Facebook page.



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Looking for a divine treat? Find it at Heaven's Gold Cakes

By KELLI TIPTON
Home Staff Writer

CHILDERSBURG

Whether you are planning an office party, a family gathering or a treat for a special occasion, Heaven's Gold Cakes and More can help you serve up scrumptious cakes, pies, brownies and other desserts that are sure to please everyone.

"One of our most popular cakes is Red Velvet. I make so much of it, I don't even eat it anymore," said owner, baker and cake artist Chunde McKinney. "We do a cream cheese pound cake, and the banana pudding cake is very popular."

Coconut, German chocolate, strawberry, lemon cream and vanilla buttercream cakes will also make a perfect ending to Christmas dinner.

Can't decide which fabulous flavor to serve?

"We also do a variety box featuring different flavors of cupcakes and cream cheese brownies," McKinney said. "We also do red velvet balls. It's red velvet cake on the inside, we roll it in the cream cheese icing, and roll it in the nuts. Those come in the variety box by request. The variety box is very popular, because people have guests coming over, and different people like different things."

The smallest variety box has 15 cupcakes, and the largest has 50.

Office parties and special events can be festive and hassle-free with a dessert bar. McKinney sets up a table,



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

Chunde McKinney is the owner and cake artist and Heaven's Gold Cakes And More.

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decorates it and puts out a variety of mini cupcakes, brownies, parfaits and chocolate-covered strawberries. Sheet cakes are also a popular choice for office celebrations.

McKinney opened her storefront cake shop in the fall of 2010, but she began baking cakes for family and friends out of her home in 2005.

"My mom taught me how to bake the cream cheese pound cake. It took me three months to master it," she said. At the time, she was a singer in a gospel band, and the band needed uniforms. "So I would make those cream cheese pound cakes and sell them to buy uniforms."

Next, she decided to try her hand at Red Velvet cake. She succeeded. Then someone asked her if she could decorate cakes. She believed she could, but had never tried. She took a class in Oxford at Hobby Lobby and learned a few tech-

niques.

"When we were learning to do roses with the frosting, I almost quit," she said with a laugh. "It was so hard for me to do them."

She read books on the subject and practiced more difficult techniques. Her persistence paid off. Today, she decorates everything from birthday cakes to wedding cakes with confidence and style.

"We all have God-given talents and abilities, and they will come out when you need them to," she said. "We just have to perfect them."

Heaven's Gold Cakes and More is at 917 1st St. SW, Childersburg. Business hours are from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, and from 9 a.m.-2 p.m. on Saturdays. For more information, customer reviews and photos, visit the Facebook page. To place an order, call 256-626-2590.



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

A variety of tasty and decadent treats is always available at the Childersburg bakery.



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The Golden Arches as small-town community restaurants

By DENISE SINCLAIR
Home staff writer

SYLACAUGA -- Merry and David Neisler operate their nine McDonald's restaurants like "mom-and-pop" businesses in small towns.

The couple would have it no other way.

They describe themselves as hands-on owner-operators who learned the business from, as they say, "the hamburger cook to the manager."

Merry, a former registered nurse and stay-at-home mom, wanted a job where she and her husband could work together after their four children started school. Her husband worked in sales and marketing.

"He was the breadwinner," she said. "We started looking and learned about (the) McDonald's owner-operator program after studying other restaurant opportunities."

"We chose McDonald's. We learned to operate a store from the ground up. They have so many programs in place that help make you successful."

The Neislers, who previously lived in Florida, started out as owners in 2003 in Jacksonville and Piedmont.

They visited Jacksonville and looked at Jacksonville State University, which is the largest employer in that area. They decided to start there.

In 2006, they purchased the Roanoke and Ashland stores and also built a McDonald's off of Interstate 20 in Heflin. They later bought the Childersburg, Sylacauga, Alexander City and Dadeville stores.

"They are all in small towns and we love that," Merry said. "Small towns have such great appeal."

McDonald's has more than 2,400 owner/operators in the United States, and selling franchises is an important part of the company's business strategy.

The company is selective in granting franchises, and prospective franchisees need to demonstrate a solid commitment to McDonald's, possess substantial business or restaurant experience, and sufficient liquid assets. Only around 1 percent of

applicants are accepted as McDonald's franchisees.

Merry said she wants her restaurants to be a part of the communities they serve. They partner with many organizations and recently decided to help Rockford with its pancake breakfast.

She and her husband formed a company with the nine restaurants called DECK Foods Inc.

"We took a letter from each of our four children to make the name. Our son is David Allen, so we used the 'D', then there is Elizabeth, our late daughter, Caroline, and Katie," she said.

Allen is 29 and a graduate of Georgia Tech. Elizabeth is 25, a graduate of Samford and a physical or personal trainer. Caroline, who died more than two years ago, played volleyball at Samford. Katie, 20, is a student at Samford who plays on the university's volleyball team.

Merry said all her children were involved in activities prior to college.

"We told them if they got a scholarship to college, we would buy them a car before they went to school. All of them worked hard for those scholarships," she said.

Merry grew up on a farm in Georgia, one of six children. Her father and mom lived through the Depression. Her parents taught their children to work and persevere.

"I drove a tractor, baled hay and basically was my father's field hand," she said. "The work ethic was very important. You work hard, stay busy."

Merry considers her family's restaurants mom-and-pop businesses.

"We work for ourselves and we are small business owners," she said. "We have some great people working for us. We are in the people business."

As a company, The Neislers want customers to feel like they are going to grandma's when they come to their McDonald's.

"We are small-town community stores," Merry said. "We want to get to know people. We love where our stores are. I think building relationships in the communities are important."



Denise Sinclair/The Daily Home

Merry Neisler at the McDonald's in Sylacauga. She and her husband David own nine stores, all in small towns in Alabama.



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Mama Ree's Restaurant

It's the place to go for an old-fashioned home-cooked meal

By DENISE SINCLAIR
Home staff writer

SYLACAUGA -- If you're looking for an old-fashioned home-cooked meal, then look no farther than Mama Ree's Restaurant.

From homemade meatloaf to peach pie or a good breakfast, the restaurant offers a down-home menu to delight the taste buds.

Mary Marie Cardwell owns the restaurant, which is now in its 38th year. The restaurant is at 37801 U.S. Highway 280.

Cardwell said she had done many jobs, including working for Avondale Mills, operating a daycare, driving a school bus and substitute teaching when she made the decision to open a restaurant.

The Cardwells lived in Stevenson before moving back to the Sylacauga area. She and her husband are originally from Coosa County.

"My daughter and I passed by here one day and saw this building was empty," she said. "My daughter said why don't we open a restaurant, and we did. That was on Thanksgiving. We opened Jan. 5, 1979."

Cardwell said she always loved to cook and have people over. The restaurant, she thought, was a good choice.

Where did the name Mama Ree's come from?

"I had a good friend, Mary Ellen

Goins. Her grandchildren called her Mama Ellen," she said. "I wanted my first grandchild to call me Mama Ree's. Just kind of happened and now everyone calls me Mama Ree's."

The restaurant owner said her employees still peel the potatoes instead of using instant ones. She uses frozen vegetables instead of those from cans.

"When you eat here, you're getting a home-cooked meal, from the chicken and dressing to the butterbeans and fried cornbread," she said.

Cardwell gave her mom credit for teaching her how to cook and the Lord for giving her the knowledge and stamina to do it all these years.

"I would follow my mom around learning everything I could from her," she said. "I've been blessed by the Lord and I love what I do."

Mama Ree's is open Sunday through Friday offering a breakfast and lunch buffet from 5:30 a.m. to 2 p.m., and breakfast buffet on Saturday from 5:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.

For many years, the restaurant stayed open for dinner, but Cardwell said it became too much to do dinner. She said most of her family has worked at the business. "I have one granddaughter working for me now part-time. She is going to school. My other granddaughter that did work here had twin girls," she said.

The restaurant has 12-14 employees. "Some have been with me for 32 years.

I have several waitresses who have been working for me for 25 years."

Cardwell said she loves the people most. "I love to see them enjoy my food. I'm amazed to see people come back even from generation to generation. It gives me the feeling of contentment."

She said the restaurant business is the hardest work she's ever done, but the most rewarding in her life.

"The Lord has really blessed us," she said. Cardwell and her husband, Terry, will be married 57 years in June.

"If not for my husband keeping everything running, I couldn't do this," she said. "Also my loyal customers who keep coming back. I have a great repeat business."

Cardwell said the restaurant has done some remodeling, including new carpet, a new metal roof and vinyl siding.

"I said I was going to retire at 75, but I guess now I'll have to work past that," she said. She is 74. "I'm going to work as long as my health allows it and as long as I have the Lord's blessing.

Although she doesn't cook anymore, Cardwell said she makes a trip through the kitchen occasionally to make sure everything is OK.

The Cardwells attend Mountain View Baptist Church and have three daughters, five grandchildren and has six great-grandchildren with the recent birth of her granddaughter's twin girls.



Denise Sinclair/The Daily Home

Mary Cardwell, who is known as Mama Ree's, is pictured at her restaurant on U.S. Highway 280 with her husband, Terry.

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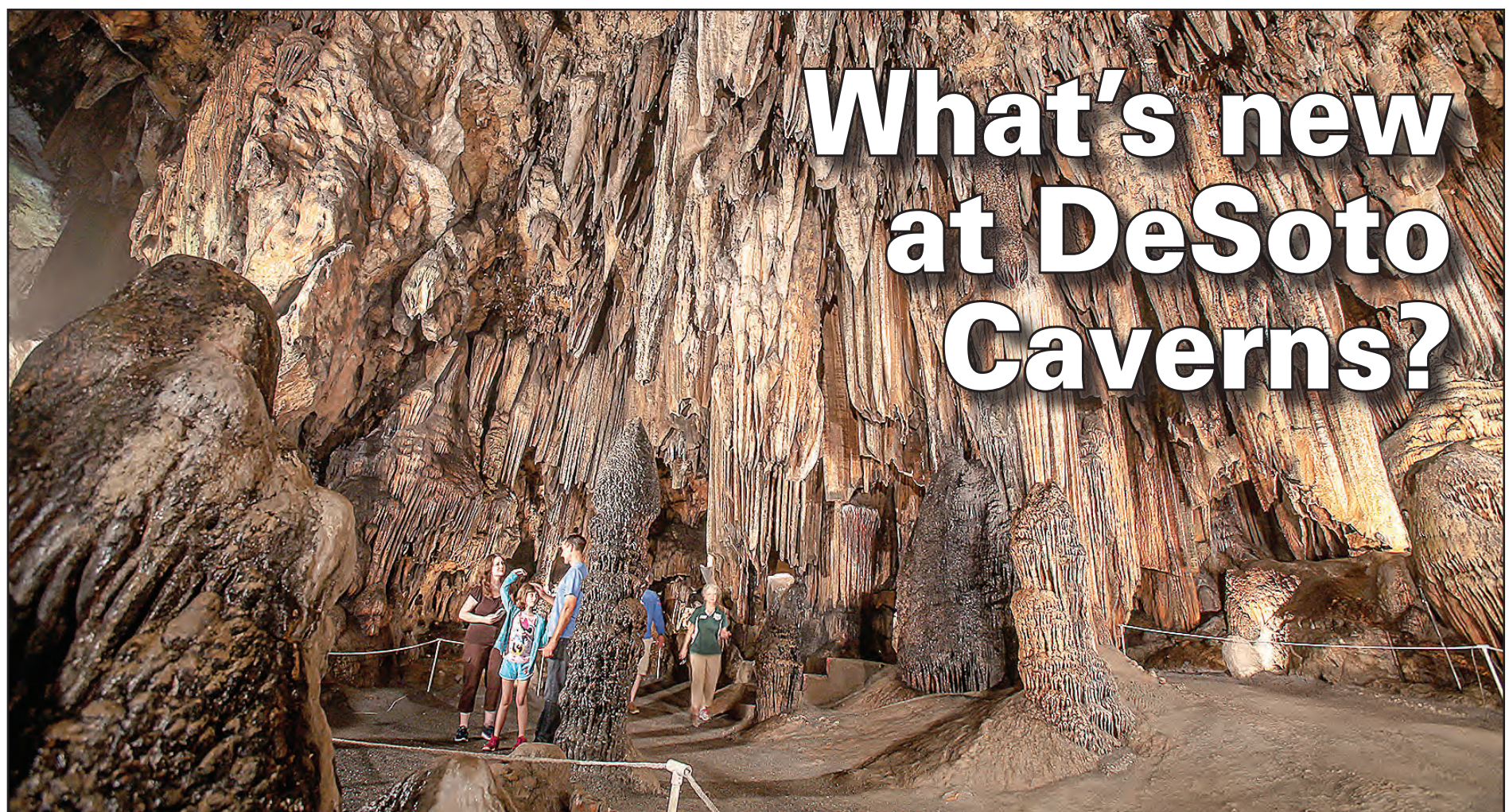
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Submitted photo

DeSoto Caverns Family Fun Park has been enjoyed by families for multiple generations..

Family fun park continues to entertain visitors

By **BUDDY ROBERTS**
Special Projects Editor

CHILDERSBURG – One of Talladega County’s most popular attractions begins 2017 with new leadership.

Joy Sorensen has been named president of DeSoto Caverns Family Fun Park, the fifth generation of her family to be involved with its operation. She is joined by a management team that includes Jared Sorensen, chief visionary officer; Ryan Burke, general manager; and Andrew Jernigan, vice president of operations.

“I love this place,” Joy Sorensen said on a recent afternoon, seated at a table inside the park as crews were at work nearby renovating the welcome center and gift shop. “I’ve been proud of it ever since I was little and my friends would come and visit. I always loved showing them my basement, so to speak.”

What she refers to as her basement is the natu-

rally-formed underground chamber with a 12-story ceiling that serves as the main attraction at the park. The property has been owned by Sorensen’s family for more than 100 years, and the cave has served over the centuries as a Native American burial ground, Confederate munitions production and Prohibition-era speakeasy.


Sorensen’s family connection with the cave dates back to her great-great-grandmother, Ida Mathis, who bought the property with some partners in 1912 with the intent of mining it for onyx.

“We have gem quality onyx inside the cave, which is the highest grade possible,” Sorensen said. “But in the early 20th century, the market had become flooded with Mexican onyx, which was less expensive, and the cost of mining was far too high for them to be able to see their onyx at a competitive price. Ida Mathis appreciated the history of the cave, and her wish was for it to stay in the family for years to come.

So she bought the rest of the partners out and went on.”


Known as the Kymulga Cave, guided tours began there in 1965. Sorensen’s father, Allen W. Mathis III, began operating the park in 1975, developing it from a small attraction to a tourist destination that routinely plays host to thousands of visitors from throughout the country. “He transformed DeSoto Caverns from a basic touring experience to being one of the most advanced cavern tours available, with a state-of-the-art laser light and water show and a beautiful park full of attractions for families to enjoy together.”

Sorensen and the park’s staff have been in “all-hands-on-deck mode” in recent months, upgrading facilities and working on new attractions. “I love it when things are like this with everybody working together, and I have a very gifted team to work with,” she said. “I’m very excited about the park’s future, and we have a lot in the works right now that we



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Submitted photos

Each October, the park hosts the Tomb of the Risen Dead event, recognized as one the country’s top Halloween-themed attractions. Entertainers at the festival have included fire artists and New Orleans-based duo The Crescent Circus.

think our guests will be excited about too.”

One such project is Unlock the Legend, an escape game experience scheduled to begin this spring inside the cave.

“Escape games are so much fun, and they bring people together,” Sorensen said. “We went to an escape game conference in Chicago, and that helped us get it going. What’s so great is that when it opens, it will be the one and only underground escape adventure.”

The family-friendly experience offers parents opportunity to enjoy the activity with their children, regardless of age. “My father was really passionate about families being able to enjoy experiences together,” Sorensen said. “That’s why the maze, the putt-putt course and the cave are all designed for families to participate in together. It makes us feel good to know that people who came to the cave when they were kids are now bringing their kids to see it. We are very excited about the park’s future.”

For more information, visit www.desotocavernspark.com.

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By **BUDDY ROBERTS**
Special Projects Editor

CHILDERSBURG -- When Paul Caldwell started Confederate Stills of Alabama, he saw the venture as more than the manufacture of distillery equipment. It also gave him an opportunity to pay tribute to his heritage.

"One of the things that got me intrigued about distillery was my great-granddaddy's discharge papers from a prisoner of war camp in Illinois," he said. "His name was Henry Jackson Davis. He was my grandmother's daddy. I've been to his grave down around Alexander City. He died in 1923 or 24."

Davis walked home from the Union internment camp, where he'd been imprisoned as a member of the Confederate Army's Alabama 34th Infantry.

"His function in the regiment was to make the liquor," Caldwell said. "They used white liquor, and when someone got wounded, they'd give him two or three shots of it before amputating his leg or arm. When they finished, they'd pour some of the liquor on the bandage, and that was it. He either made it, or he didn't."

Davis' legacy lives on in the hand-crafted stills and cypress fermentation tanks produced by his great-grandson's operation in Childersburg. The company's emblem is the same as that Southern soldiers wore on their belt buckles, which, according to Caldwell, is now a registered trademark of Confederate Stills of Alabama.

"I wanted to do something to honor my great-granddaddy," he said. "And our big tanks have 13 stars on them, for the stars on the Confederate flag."

Caldwell's stills and fermentation tanks have been featured on *Absolutely Alabama*, an episode of *Shipping Wars* and are used by cast members of the *Moonshiners* television program. The stills range in size from 100 to 250 gallons, encased in oak, cherry, walnut or Mahogany. Fermentation tanks can be as small as 75 gallons and as large as 1,000 gallons.

Caldwell built his first still while he was a work control manager at Joseph M. Farley Nuclear Generating Station, eventually taking early retirement to operate Confederate Stills full-time.

"Things started taking off while I was still there," he said. "I posted a photo of my first still on the Internet, and within a week, I got a call from a guy in Colorado wanting to buy it. It got much, much bigger than I ever thought it would be, and I realized that I couldn't continue to do both. So I went home and had one of those long, heartfelt prayers, asking 'Do I do this, or not?' When I went back in, I resigned and took on this challenge."

It's one that has paid off for him, and, he believes, for his customers. "What comes out of a small craft distillery is so much better than mass-produced whiskey."

Now, his stills produce liquor at distilleries from New York to California. He sees them as meeting a need in the market that opened up in the wake of the craft brewery boom that began a few years ago. Between 2012 and 2014, as many as 425 new distillery licenses were issued across the country.

"By that time," Caldwell said, "I'd already decided

Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

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A family or an individual along with SAFE will work together to identify strengths, to set goals, and to map a course for the future. Often this will include finding help within the community. SAFE will coordinate with other agencies to help get the services you need.

SAFE offers programs for all ages and for all needs

- Adult Education
- At Risk Youth
- After-school and Summer Enrichment
- Case Management
- Family Literacy
- Fatherhood
- Get Healthy Talladega County
- Job Readiness
- Living Well Alabama
- Marriage Enrichment
- Medication Assistance
- Parenting Support
- Transportation
- Volunteer

SAFE Family Services Center
78 Betsy Ross Lane • Sylacauga, Alabama 35150
256-245-4343
www.safefamilyservicescenter.com



First United Methodist Church

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SUNDAY OPPORTUNITIES

- 9 am - Casual 'n Christ Worship
- 9 am - Children's Worship
- 10 am - Grounded Worship
- 10 am - Sunday School All Ages
- 11 am - Traditional Worship
- 4 pm - Youth Activities & Worship
- 6 pm - Bread For The Journey Worship

WEDNESDAY OPPORTUNITIES

- 5:30 pm - Children & Youth Activities
- 6 pm - Bible Studies

I was going to build a still. If you know anything about nuclear power and people who work in that field, you know that they're real A1 personalities, kind of like fighter pilots. We decide we're going to do something, and we do it."

He had been an electronics technician in the U.S. Navy before starting his 27 years at Farley, so "I was well-versed in calculus, thermodynamics, heat transfer and fluid flow. At its basics, nuclear power is all about taking fluids and turning them into steam to turn generators. Distilling is not a lot different."

Caldwell points out that no distilling actually takes place at his Childersburg operation – just manufacturing. "All we have here is equipment. No ingredients. We have none of the natural products needed to make liquor."

Asked to identify his favorite liquor, Caldwell's answer might be seen as surprising.

"It used to be Dickel, but it's rare any more for me to drink any of it," he said. "I can buy a six-pack of beer, and it will last me a month."

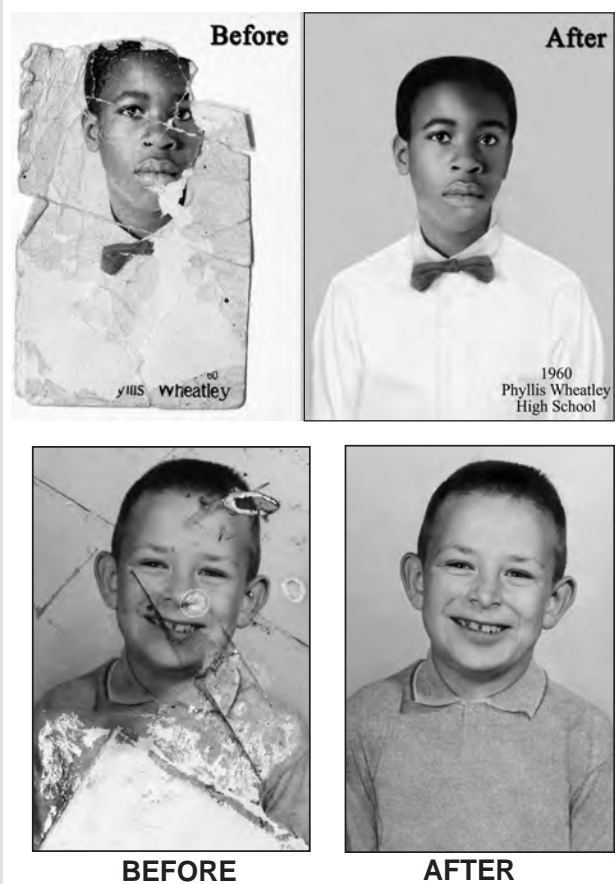


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Matthew – 17:20

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