

MY Hometown

2025



AT THE LAKE WITH
Miss Alabama 2025
Emma Terry

SEE MORE INSIDE!



Adventure Awaits
At new hometown bookstore



Summer Memories
Travel, family, and unpredictable weather



Artist Tim Spanjer
Celebrating the 1980s with Talladega County

MY

Hometown

2025

A publication of

THE DAILY HOME

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ON THE COVER

Miss Alabama 2025 Emma Terry enjoys an afternoon amid the rigging at the Birmingham Sailing Club on the shores of Logan Martin Lake.



MY HOMETOWN
RECOGNIZED BY APA

My Hometown 2024, a publication of The Daily Home, received the third place award for Best Special Section the Alabama Press Association’s 2025 Media Awards. Update 2024 – My Hometown’s sister publication, also produced by The Daily Home – won the first place award in the same contest.



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A photograph of the Children's of Alabama building, a modern glass skyscraper. The Children's of Alabama logo, a red circle with white silhouettes of a family, is prominently displayed on the top of the building.

26TH ANNUAL

Hometown

BLOCK PARTY

weathers a storm to host almost 20,000 attendees

BY FAITH DORN
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

The Pell City Chamber of Commerce hosted its 26th annual Hometown Block Party on Saturday, June 7.

The community favorite family-friendly event featured live entertainment, food trucks and other vendors. Although the chamber is still tabulating the full attendance numbers, it is believed that as many as 18,000 people attended the event, despite some bad weather during the scheduled start time.

“We had some weather early on, but after that cleared, we had a really great turn out,” said the chamber’s executive director, Urainah Glidewell. “We had four stages of live music with over 20 performers. There was a wonderful variety of entertainment.”

In addition to entertainment, food vendors, local businesses, and local artisans, there were carnival rides provided by Southern Midways.

According to Glidewell, the Pell City Block Party creates an opportunity to bring the community together. “It’s a great family friendly time. Adults can enjoy it and bring the kids. We get to showcase our diverse community and bring everybody together for a fun event in downtown.”

Glidewell shared that the event had restructured its sponsorship levels to allow more people and businesses the opportunity to participate. “We want to have the support of our local community and businesses,” she said.

The big stage sponsors for the four live music stages were Buffalo Rock, Ford Meter Box, Honda Manufacturing, and Union State Bank. Winsouth Credit Union sponsored the kids’ area. VIP sponsors were Garrison Steel, UAB St. Vincent’s St. Clair and Sparklight. Joiner Plumbing Services was the porta-potty sponsor—fondly referred to as the “Block Party Pooper.”

Further support from the community came from local small businesses, the City of Pell City, the St. Clair County Commission, the Pell City Street Department, and Pell City Police Department.

“We’re very grateful for their support and help with the event,” Glidewell said, adding, “I would also like to give a special recognition to the Pell City High School Future Business Leaders



of America. They had a couple of sponsors and students that came to help, and they were there all day. They manned the tent for the Pell City Chamber of Commerce, drove golf carts, and helped vendors.”

One thing that made this year’s event standout was a storm that came through the area when the party was about to begin.

“We usually get out there at 8 a.m. to start setting up, and vendors arrive at 10 a.m. The storm came through right at 3 p.m.,” Glidewell explained. “People were holding down their tents. Blue i Eatery was the caterer for the VIP section, but a huge tree fell down on some power lines and trapped them in their neighborhood. They came up with a plan to load everything onto a boat. We got some volunteers and trucks, met the boat, got everything



PHOTOS BY TUCKER WEBB/THE DAILY HOME



set up, and it was absolutely delicious. The Venue on 20th graciously let us use their space for the VIP area. Our team being able to adapt to any situation was a highlight for me.”

She was there “from 7 a.m. until about 1 a.m. because I had to wait until the stages were broken down and make sure everything got cleaned up. It’s a lot of work, and we have a lot of wonderful volunteers. Our board of directors is great.”

The Hometown Block Party also partnered with the Logan Martin Charity Foundation to organize a beer garden at the event.

“They were absolutely wonderful to work with. They jumped through all the hoops to get the licensing. We had a tent set up for them, and some musicians set up to

play there. We’re hoping to grow that next year as one of the many options for food and drink,” said Glidewell.

She expressed gratitude for the volunteers who recruited the musicians, including Rotunda Forman who organized the “Homegrown” stage featuring local churches and schools and Bo Mitchell from the band Kudzu. “They really highlighted the variety of talented musicians we have here. We’re really very blessed to have those resources.”

The chamber director thanked “all of the volunteers and the Pell City Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors for their support and all of the hard work they did to make the Pell City Block Party

See **BLOCK PARTY** on page 3E



PELL CITY IS

Hotter than a

FIRECRACKER

RIGHT NOW, AND BILL ELLISON HAS THE MATCHES

Local developer enjoys making his hometown of 40 years ‘a better place to live’

BY FAITH DORN
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Bill Ellison can see potential. That ability has shaped his career, which began in the restaurant business in Lexington, Kentucky, with a small hamburger chain.

“I would have to find locations and negotiate,” he said. “I got into real estate development playing defense. My restaurant was not a national competitor. I would buy the property in a compatible use or deed restrict it on restaurant use.”

His experience in commercial development grew from there.

Ellison describes Lexington as comparable to Mountain Brook with “extremely expensive” land values in the early 1970s. “I saw what the developers were doing, and I wanted to do it. There was all of this growth in Lexington around my restaurants. The developers were wealthy and respected. I wanted to become one of them.”

As is typical of Ellison’s character, he found a way to do it.

“With my restaurants, I wasn’t wealthy enough to be in that game, but I still wanted to get into that profession. My partner and I started going to all these planning and zoning meetings. We were trying to watch and learn,” he said.

“We talked to all of the people whose projects failed about the reason that their projects got turned down. We would tell them that we thought we could still develop their project and turn their negatives into positives. I was a 24/7 workaholic. I ended up moving to Pell City in 1985, and I was semi-retired. My restaurants were my income, and for 15 years, all I did was hunt and fish.”

Still, Ellison looked at property in and around Pell City. He put a group of developers together and bought the land where Publix is today. “Every retailer I chased said that they didn’t think Pell City was big enough for a shopping center at that end of town and that they’d rather be on the interstate. They kept telling me that the interstate is where they wanted to be.”

At the time, there were 10

different property owners on the side of the interstate that Ellison wanted to develop. “I needed it all to be assembled for a shopping center, but I never could get all those people to agree. We didn’t have any shopping here. We had to go to Talladega or Anniston or Birmingham to shop. I knew there was a need.”

After four or five failed attempts, he tried in 1999.

“I made up my mind and said, ‘You all tell me what you will do.’ There was a consensus on price, and I thought it was way too expensive, but I said if I could get everybody to agree, I would do it. It was a big project, and I brought in other partners.”

He had the contracts in place, but at that time, the area had not been annexed into the city. Ellison spoke with then-Mayor Mack Abercrombie and asked for a development agreement, which was granted. The St. Clair Economic Development Council was formed at the same time as this large project was being developed.

“Ed Gardner Sr., was the first director, and he helped guide me with my plans and through discussions with the city and all the elected officials,” Ellison explained. His goal was to open a Walmart, but one had recently opened in Leeds, so that was delayed because the company wanted to see how that location would do. Our first phase was just the outparcels on I-20 and US-231. We started with Golden Rule, Krystal, the gas station, Arby’s, Wendy’s and Western Sizzlin’. My partners and I opened the Western Sizzlin’, then the Hampton Inn and Holiday Inn Express came.”

The Western Sizzlin’ was such a success that there would be as many as 200 people standing outside on Sundays trying to get a table. Thinking ahead, Ellison reached out to “a friend with a plane, and he went up and took some pictures that I was able to use to market to other restaurants. Within about a year and a half, I got the approval for Walmart.”



SUBMITTED PHOTOS
“I am like chasing things,” says local developer Bill Ellison. “I am a retail hunter.”

Since that time, Ellison has developed the Publix shopping center on the south side of town. He was the original developer of Pell City Center, and he brought Noon Management in to make sure that was completed. He bought another 50-60 acres where Home Depot, Cracker Barrel, Zaxby’s, and Planet Fitness are now, and he was involved with recruiting the movie theater and entertainment center to come to Pell City.

Ellison explains that as a commercial developer, he buys the land, designs what projects will look like, obtains all the city approvals, hires attorneys and engineers, and more. However, he simplifies his job description by saying that as a commercial developer, his job is to communicate.

“The good Lord has given me the ability to do what I do. I communicate and communicate passionately. In the restaurant business, I was never better than my last transaction. If people didn’t enjoy it, they wouldn’t come back.”

The community and retailers enjoy their relationships with Ellison. “I have a great relationship with all of the elected officials—multiple mayors and city councils—the EDC, as well as Metro Bank. Metro Bank has financed all of my projects.”

Although Ellison takes the financial risk when working on a commercial development, he says making these projects happen is a team effort. “I may be the motor behind it, and I stay with it, but it is a true team effort. It is ‘we’, not ‘me.’”

He is complimentary of Pell City

and St. Clair County officials for their dedication to continuing to improve the area. “Pell City is just so blessed. There is so much talent in our city officials and with our county officials. We’re all in this thing together.”

He also makes an effort to hire locally, including Walker Excavating, Luker and Co. Surveying, and Bain and Company CPA.

Brian Muenger, city manager of Pell City, remembers the first time he met Bill Ellison. After a town hall meeting led by then-Mayor Bill Hereford wherein the city was considering creating a city manager position, Ellison introduced himself to Muenger.

“He asked if I wanted to get dinner, so we went to The Ark and had dinner for about two hours. Bill is somebody incredibly passionate and intense, and he wants to know so much. I had no idea I would be working here eventually,” Muenger said, “I’ve worked with a lot of developers. I’ve worked with cities for close to 20 years now. Every project has a local or regional or national developer, and most are agnostic about where they work. It is rare to find a developer who cares so much about the area they are developing. For the better part of 30 years, he has been instrumental in developing Pell City.”

According to Muenger, Ellison’s projects account for at least four of the top 10 sales tax generators in Pell City.

Ellison continues to pursue commercial development projects because he enjoys making Pell City a better place to live.

“The tax revenue improves our community,” he said. “It helps make the city better, and I have a lot of pride in that. I am a competitive person. I am a hard worker. I want to continue to see this city do well. I am 79 years old, and I am working just as hard today as when I started.”

Don Smith, executive director of the St. Clair County Economic Development Council, calls Ellison the epitome of a community promoter.

“His love for Pell City and St. Clair County is shown by his dedication in trying to improve and develop the area he loves. Not only does he advocate for development, but he also invests his own time and



Elected and economic development officials break ground at the site of two new restaurants that will open next year in Pell City. “Our growth is going to continue,” Ellison says of the project.

On the call, he spoke with their in-house real estate developer, and she said that it would take five to six months to determine what their

A photograph of a Publix Food & Pharmacy store. The building features a large, arched window with the 'Publix' logo in green letters. Below the arch, the words 'FOOD & PHARMACY' are displayed in green. The store is surrounded by a parking lot filled with various cars, including a white SUV, a dark sedan, and a red car. Bare trees are visible in the background, suggesting a cooler season.

BOB CRISP/THE DAILY HOME

That cold call to Buc-ee's is just one of many that make up his commercial development career. "Everything I've done has been a cold call. Every single store that I've brought here, I have had to cold call and research and find the district manager and go on up the chain to the decision makers. People don't know me. They used to not know where Pell City.

The recently-developed shopping center with TJ Maxx, Ross, Old Navy, Ulta, Five Below, Rack Room Shoes and Hobby Lobby has further expanded the city's trade center. "We are pulling more people to shop here. It has kept our spending power in Pell City. Outback opened recently in Pell City, and in the spring or summer of 2026, Longhorn and Olive Garden

"I just remember when Pell City didn't have much of anything," Ellison said, "and I was part

See **FIRECRACKER** on page 3E

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Taking a second look at

Hartman
CASTLE

Old world romanticism meets modern amenities on Logan Martin Lake

WRITTEN BY
LOYD MCINTOSH

If you didn't see it with your own eyes, you probably wouldn't believe it.

After snaking your way through the narrow roads of Alpine Bay, you'll eventually encounter it, like some sort of mid-70s Sid and Marty Krofft meets Monty Python fever dream: a castle.

That's right. A castle.

Hartman Castle, to be precise – an endearingly bizarre amalgam of Bavarian, English, and even Asian architecture all rolled into one and tucked away among the modern homes in this otherwise normal waterfront neighborhood.

The castle was built by Donald Hartman, a native of Toledo, Ohio, who settled in Talladega County after serving as an Army communications specialist while stationed in Hawaii and Birmingham. Well-educated with multiple degrees, Hartman was a beloved Spanish teacher at Berry High School for many years and was respected as a leader in foreign language education. He began working on the castle in the mid-1970s as a gift to his wife, Royldene, who always wanted to live in a castle.

After Royldene died in the early 2000s, Hartman lost interest in the project, living semi-reclusively in a house next door as the castle fell into disrepair. After Hartman died in 2022, the house was put up for auction online, catching the eye of Blake Shultz, a Realtor and home builder from Hoover.

By the time Shultz saw the property, it had sat abandoned for almost two decades, and the vegetation was so overgrown it was almost impossible to see the house from the road. Additionally, most of the bidders hadn't seen the



property, and the auction company's listing promoted the castle for the property instead of the structure. Shultz, on the other hand, thought Hartman Castle was a diamond in the rough.

"It was interesting," he said. "The way they worded it, basically it was posed as a teardown. I don't think any other serious bidders got to see the inside, so everyone else that we were bidding against online, all the knowledge they had was it was a teardown."

"They just saw the value in the land, which has a pretty hard cap on what it could be worth as just raw land. So we got to take advantage of the auctioneer advertising it, in my opinion, incorrectly, which gave us a pretty big advantage."

Shultz bought Hartman Castle and eventually converted it into a unique Airbnb experience, transporting visitors back in time. But at the time Shultz took ownership of the castle, it appeared to be frozen in time.

"It looked like 20 years ago someone

just walked out without touching anything and locked the doors," he said. "The fridge had food in it, there were magazines next to the couches and the bed, some of which were made and some were like someone just got out of it a few minutes ago. It was a little eerie."

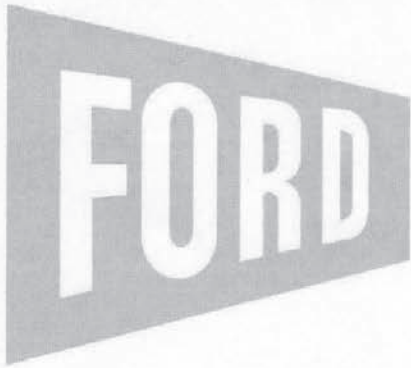
Today, Harman Castle has been restored to its former glory and updated with new features. The German-style castle finials (painted in eye-popping blue and gold), the handcrafted stone wall surrounding much of the property, and a mechanically operated drawbridge at the castle's front entrance add a healthy dose of medieval-inspired whimsy to the Logan Martin community.

Guests are greeted by a life-size suit of armor the moment they step inside the castle. Throughout the rest of the multi-level structure, the eyes are drawn to artwork, decorative touches, and knickknacks the Hartmans accumulated over the years on their many travels overseas. Around the castle, guests will find German beer steins, vases from Asia, and coats of arms



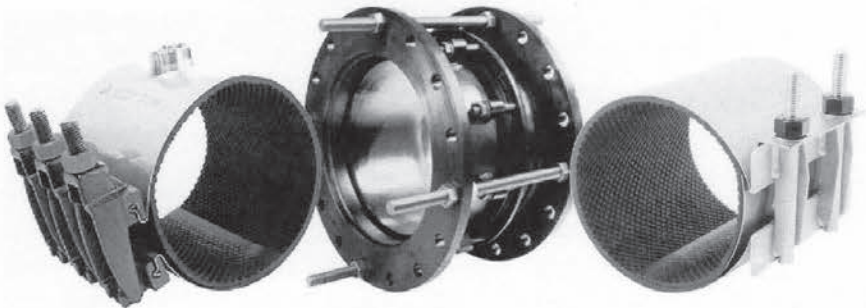
PHOTO BY BLAKE SHULTZ

Stays at Hartman Castle can be booked through Airbnb and Vrbo.



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PHOTOS BY BLAKE SHULTZ



from England – a testament to the Hartmans’ eclectic taste and keen interest in other cultures. “They traveled the world together and took influences from all over the globe, so there are a lot of conflicting styles,” Shultz says.

Among the enhancements Shultz made to Hartman Castle include adding pickleball courts and a miniature golf course and converting a space on the bottom floor into a game room. There guests can play a vintage pinball machine or video game or lift a pint around the card table during a game

See **CASTLE** on page **5F**

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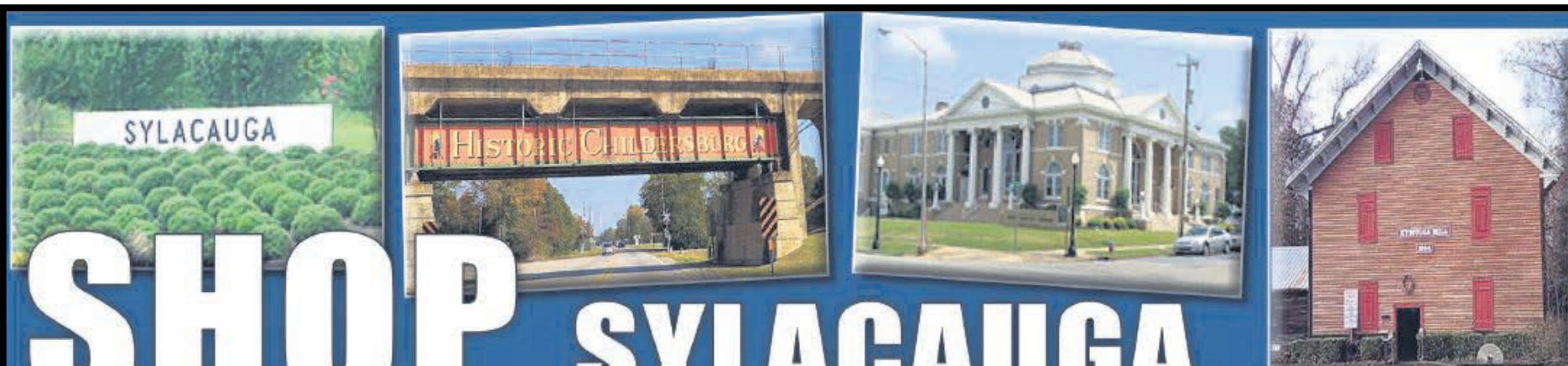
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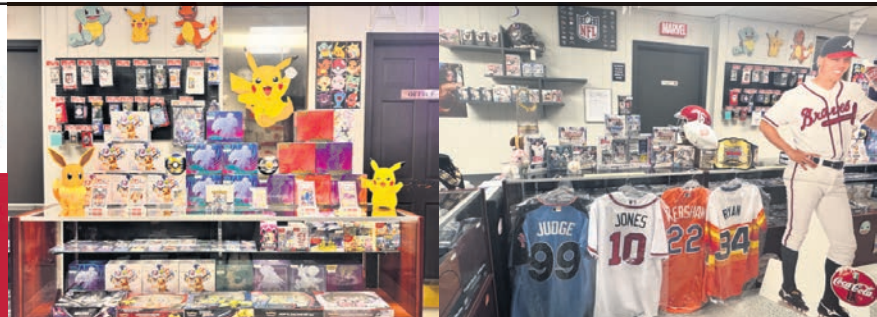
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AT THE

Kymulga Grits

FESTIVAL

BY SARAH
ELIZABETH
MOREMAN
DAILY HOME
CORRESPONDENT



After squeezing into the tiny car rental, I adjust the mirrors and the seat manually. Even with my somewhat petite state, I feel like a giant in this Mitsubishi Mirage. My usual ride, Darth Vader, a V8 SUV named for its engine, is grounded thanks to bad wheel bearings and spark plugs.

There is something about driving a rental that shifts perspective. As I steer this small car through Birmingham and onto Highway 280, I find myself paying more attention to what is beyond the windshield. The grass seems especially green, refreshed by the previous night’s wild, stormy weather. The trees seem to press in closer, hugging the road. I roll down the windows, letting in the startlingly fresh, cool air that feels perfect on my warm skin. I smile. This drive is exactly what I need after a long week of living with the weight of some heavy decisions.

Arriving at my destination, I ease the tiny car onto the muddy grass, still soft and slick from the storms, and slip it into a space without much room to spare. I emerge, straightening the hem of my floral dress. There is a graduation party later this afternoon, but for now, the high-heeled sandals can stay in the trunk. I leave on my black Hoka slides and start walking. An entrance sign comes into view, with Kymulga Grist Mill and Covered Bridge spelled out in crisp white paint, an American flag standing sentinel beside it.

The covered bridge is a sight I have been waiting to see for years, and here I am visiting this historic landmark (described by the City of Childersburg and managed by the Childersburg Historic Preservation Commission as “one of the only two 19th-century covered bridges in the state that has not been rebuilt or relocated”) to attend the annual Kymulga Grits Festival.

Excitement builds as I approach the covered bridge, where the soft lights hang in a crisscross fashion, casting an inviting and romantic ambiance. I stroll through the historic structure, breathing in the earthy scent of aged wood

and feeling grateful for the preservation efforts. As I walk through the shadows beneath the lights, I struggle to find a word that captures this feeling...something close to nostalgia, but not quite. Is it fernweh, the German word that describes a sense of belonging to a place I have never visited before? Fernweh fulfilled, I muse, while taking in the worn beams and small windows that line the path.

Peering out of one window, I see Talladega Creek rushing in full force, thanks to the earlier heavy rains. The bridge, believed to have been constructed during the Civil War, perhaps around 1861, was built to provide access across the creek. Wood and metal were used in its construction, employing the Howe truss design to span 105 feet over the water. As I move deeper into the bridge, I feel an increasing sense of nostalgia. I wonder if the spirits of those who lived and died during the Civil War linger here, though I know that thought is more a product of my imagination than my faith. Still, there is something quietly mysterious in the atmosphere, more solemn than frightening. I feel a deepening connection to this rare and historic site.

At the other end of the covered bridge, a soft light glows, framed by the rich greenery of the forest. Down the ramp from the bridge, I spot a wooden sign beneath a small metal awning, which shelters a glass panel displaying information about the trees found in the park. The list includes Cherrybark Oak, Florida Maple, Red Maple, Slippery Elm, Sweetgum, Black Walnut, Sugarberry, Box Elder, Water Oak, Yellow Poplar, American Beech, Loblolly Pine, Paw Paw, White Oak, Eastern Hophornbeam, Flowering Dogwood, White Basswood, Shagbark Hickory, Southern Catalpa, Silver Maple, River Birch, and Swamp Chestnut Oak. I realize I can only identify a few of these trees: among them, the Loblolly Pine and the Water Oak. The rest remain names on a list, waiting to become familiar.

Stepping away from the sign, I turn to observe the three carts hitched to a bright green John Deere tractor. A tractor train ride, I think with a smile. I ask the driver if I may join, and he helps me climb onto the last



PHOTO BY TUCKER WEBB/THE DAILY HOME

cart. The wooden seat is damp, yet welcoming in its coolness, a small relief against the humidity and heat that clings my skin and gives volume to my naturally dark honey-colored hair.

The trail ride is pleasantly slow as the tractor and its driver pull us through the forest, reportedly for all 8 miles. The tires slosh through muddy water along the well-grooved path. The canopy overhead and the dampness of the trees make the ride more enjoyable, with cool breezes offering a welcome contrast to the 70-degree weather. Sunlight filters through the leaves, casting dappled patterns along the way.

In the second cart, two young brothers register excitement over everything they see. The older one has his face painted with an ocean scene, complete with palm trees. The younger, wearing glasses, is more talkative; his enthusiasm is endearing as he points out each detail with delight. Their mother watches them with a smile that radiates with quiet pride. In the first cart, a man with his two young daughters turns to engage with the brothers, sharing bits of his knowledge about the nature passing by.

As I listen to their exuberant voices, I turn my attention to the lush shades of green around us, awed by the intensity of the landscape’s beauty. The cool breezes are so refreshing that I cannot help but feel a sense of reverence in the moment. Talladega Creek winds alongside the trail, its waters moving gently in parallel with our path. On the other side, meadows stretch out, dotted with picnic tables placed beneath sturdy, well-constructed pavilions. The peaceful setting invites quiet gatherings, offering shade and rest beneath the broad canopies.

Back on the bridge, I take in the view of the water below, wanting to experience its presence more closely. Then I walk back toward the festival grounds, where vendor booths are set up on near the

historic grist mill. Inside, I find a charming shop offering a variety of local goods: hand-carved wooden bowls, Kymulga T-shirts, a freezer stocked with Blue Bell ice cream, small-batch scented candles, and copies of the third edition of Recipes and Remembrances, a collection compiled by the Childersburg Historical Preservation Commission. Burlap-linen bags containing two pounds of stone-ground grits and white self-rising cornmeal are neatly arranged, each printed with the Kymulga Grist Mill and Covered Bridge logo, a proud reminder of the site’s history and enduring legacy.

After purchasing a Blue Bell Krunch ice cream bar, I explore the museum beyond the shop. I pause to observe a framed certificate from the State of Alabama, recognizing the Kymulga Mill and Covered Bridge as listed in the National Register of Historic Places by the United States Department of the Interior, dated October 29, 1976. I ponder the preservation efforts behind any nationally registered historic site, knowing that fundraising and membership are often essential parts of sustaining such places.

Wanting to contribute, I decide to purchase a shirt, a jar of local honey, and one bag each of stone-ground grits and white self-rising cornmeal. As I take in each part that makes up the grist mill, I reflect on how such engineering by creative minds long ago made it possible to stone grind grits and cornmeal. Creative minds of the past designed a system that could transform simple grains into sustenance. This kind of knowledge and the craftsmanship behind it should be shared so that future generations can grasp how far we have come when it comes to preparing food to fill our bellies.

Leaving the grist mill, I step over to the tracks simply to admire them. I have always had a thing for

See GRITS on page 10D



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From **GRITS** on page 9D

railroad tracks. The parallel lines running alongside the Kymulga Grist Mill and Covered Bridge over Talladega Creek resonate with me as perfect symmetry, an order in life that feels indelibly right.

Passing vendor booths offering cotton candy, balloon-tying, face-painting, crafts, and even guns, I make my way to the other side of the bridge to visit additional booths and check out the Kymulga Station. Live music fills the air while the crowds savor the locally famous shrimp and grits, along with burgers, hot dogs, and fries. The mingled scents of boiled peanuts, roasted corn, and cotton candy drift through the air, making my stomach rumble and my mouth water in anticipation. Beyond the station, I spot a food truck promoting Boba tea, with a long line waiting in front of it. A woman walks by, holding roasted corn on the cob as she eats.

I stop at a vendor booth where Terri LaPoint greets me warmly. It is her friendliness that draws

me in, and I ask about her U.S. Congress District 3 campaign and the issues she considers important — chief among them, keeping families together. I share my cousin’s story about the importance of family and midwifery. Before leaving, I purchase a copy of her book for my cousin, feeling more informed about how we can campaign for what we believe in to improve the lives of our community.

I almost walk past a booth selling canned jams and jellies until the words “Pickle Squad” printed on a bag catch my eye. I decide to buy two of these bags for my colleagues as an inside joke, given our shared love for anything pickled. Jake Smith of Red Beard Pickling Company and Bakery offers me a few samples. Naturally, I accept and try the watermelon jelly. Its flavor is succulent, and I can imagine my father enjoying it. He loves watermelon, and part of his love language is to buy a large one, slice it open, and cut bite-sized pieces with his large knife. He would always urge us to



PHOTO BY SARAH E. MOREMAN

try it, no matter how many times we said no. It was not until a few years ago that I humored him and began to enjoy watermelon, finally appreciating why he loves it so much.

The next sample is coffee. I look at the red-bearded man in front of me with a questioning expression.

Coffee jelly? I hesitate, then reach out and take the sample. The flavor bursts in my mouth, delighting my taste buds. I say “Okay” again, this time with approval. “I am getting this for my mother.” She loves coffee and drinks a whopping three cups every morning.

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Carrot Cake Jam, I wave it away. “I know that is for me,” I tell him. “My birthday falls on National Carrot Cake Day. I will get it without trying a sample. Now, what is this?” I ask, pointing at the jar of canned pickled lemons. He explains that people actually eat pickled lemons. Interesting, I

think to myself. “Okay, I will get that as well. Also these two rubber duckies, since it is a Jeep thing.” I wink at him, thinking fondly of my hunter green 1993 Country Jeep Cherokee that I had as a teenager. After swiping my credit card, I thank him and make my way

toward the tiny rental car parked at the top of the now-thinning makeshift lot, the muddy grass firming and drying under the afternoon sun. Once I place the bags of goods in the trunk beside my waiting heeled sandals for the graduation party across the state to where I will be heading next, I step

back to gaze down at the valley where the Kymulga Grits Festival is still unfolding. I feel grateful to have finally visited the covered bridge and experienced all that the festival had to offer. I will return to appreciate more of this historic place, and hopefully next time, I will be on a date.



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Summer MEMORIES

Sweet tea and sunshine

BY KRISTI SELLERS
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT



Summer in the South is more than just a season — it’s a full-on experience, best enjoyed with bare feet, a porch swing, and a glass of sweet tea so sugary it makes your dentist cringe. The moment summer rolls around, the Southern air thickens like gravy, the fireflies come out to dance, and the world seems to slow down just enough to notice the magic in it all.

Down here, the sun doesn’t just shine. It sizzles. You learn to respect the heat, plan your errands early, and never, ever leave the house without your sunglasses and a bottle of water (or a giant styrofoam cup of sweet tea from mama’s refrigerator). The humidity has a mind of its own, curling your hair and sticking your shirt to your back before you’ve even made it to the mailbox.

But despite the heat—or maybe because of it—summer in the South has a rhythm all its own. It’s barefoot walks across the dewy grass. It’s church fans waving during revival services. It’s the smell of fresh-cut watermelon, the sting of a sunburn, and the cool



relief of a dip in the creek, pond, lake, or kiddie pool.

You can’t talk about Southern summers without mentioning food. Tomato sandwiches on white bread with ground pepper, fresh corn dripping with butter, and anything grilled, smoked, or fried. If it doesn’t involve a picnic table and paper plates, is it really summer? And let’s not forget peach cobbler, best served warm with a scoop of vanilla ice cream that melts faster than you can eat it.

Evenings are the reward for surviving the scorching day. As the sun sinks and the cicadas start their chorus, families gather outside. Neighbors swap stories, kids chase lightning bugs, and someone inevitably pulls out a guitar or a Bluetooth speaker with their favorite playlist. Maybe there’s a backyard bonfire or just a quiet swing on the porch, the sound of crickets rising like a hymn.



Festivals pop up like wildflowers across small towns—peach festivals, watermelon festivals, bluegrass jamborees, and Fourth of July parades complete with kids on bicycles wrapped in red, white, and blue streamers. It’s a celebration of all things simple and good.

Summer in the South isn’t fancy. It’s sweaty, sticky, loud, and slow. But it’s also full of flavor, laughter, music, and moments that linger like honeysuckle on a warm breeze. If you ever spend a summer down here, you’ll never forget it. Because no one does summer quite like the South.

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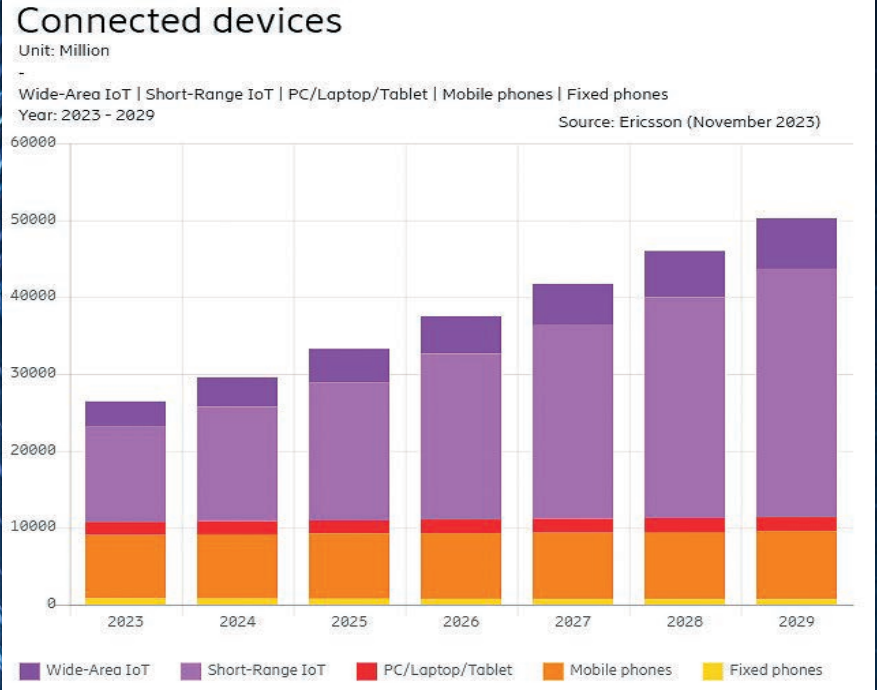
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Summer MEMORIES

The gift of lightning bugs

BY SARAH
ELIZABETH
MOREMAN
DAILY HOME
CORRESPONDENT



“Look!” we would shout whenever we see lights that seemed to wink at us in intervals, sometimes up, sometimes down, among shrubs and trees, hovering over the lawns. The evening shrouded us with thick humidity, thick warmth that provided a nice contrast to the chilled homemade ice cream and watermelon that we savored after a cookout of burgers and hotdogs. It was summer, a true Southern summer. And the season was not complete without lightning bugs. Fireflies may sound better, but I grew up hearing and saying “lightning bugs.”

Nowadays, whenever I doom-scroll, I get upset seeing mentions of how fireflies are going extinct due to pesticides, habitat loss, and other reckless human activities that drive away more of what gives us simple delights of enjoying nature. However, I am guilty of having forgotten about the lightning bugs when I moved into the city. It was reminded when a friend told me about how her childhood friend would soon be visiting her and hoped to see the fireflies. It was a dream of hers, and I was amazed when I realized that this woman is well into her fifties and has never seen a lightning bug. She talked about wanting to see the fireflies so much that my friend nicknamed her Firefly.

Firefly’s yearning to see the lightning bugs took me back to some of my earliest memories of seeing them. We were living in the barracks within Maxwell Air Force Base, and we neighborhood kids gathered in the middle courtyard of our backyards, chasing each other and the lightning bugs. They were everywhere, so close that we could easily catch handfuls, albeit gently, since we intuited that these

bugs were precious. When I caught some in my hand and watched how their little bodies beamed beneath their wings, I felt as if God was pleased with us, having sent so many for us to catch and release once we saw them light up.

When my family moved back to Auburn, my siblings and I played the flashlight tag game with the neighborhood kids, typically on Friday nights. Sometimes I played barefoot, because I was young and unafraid of running through the neighbors’ backyards, even with pinecones and branches crunching under my tender soles. The excitement of running away from the shaky flashlight in the darkness was all I was thinking about. Through the branches of pines and oaks, I could see the stark whiteness of the moon and stars. The streetlight was not enough to take away the fun darkness.

It was on one of these flashlight tag nights that I decided to crawl underneath a grouping of shrubs and trees to follow the lightning bugs. Inside this naturally canopied cocoon of a flowerbed, I had my own quiet moment with the lightning bugs, their winking lights illuminating the space. Their glow lulled me to sleep, and I did not realize I had drifted off until much later, when the one with the flashlight shone its beam into my eyes, waking me up and scattering the lightning bugs.

That memory has carried me through these years whenever I think about lightning bugs, about how I felt protected and deeply loved, so much so that I easily fell asleep. I still remember how the lightning bugs seemed to surround me protectively, and I knew God was smiling on me as I succumbed to dreams so sweet I still remember them to this day. Lightning bugs epitomize warm, sultry Southern nights filled with the deep drawl of memories and treasures that preserve the slowness of time, praising the gift of rest.





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From **FIRECRACKER** on page 5D

of when we got something—the Walmart shopping center. We have never forgotten how we worked together. We were in a drought and thirsty. Because of the way we worked together, we can have anything we want, and there is still lots more we can do. My success is not my success. It is our success.”

Ellison’s dedication to improving the community doesn’t end at professional responsibilities. As a member of the Pell City Rotary Club, he supports all of the civic organization’s service projects.

“When I look at our Pell City Rotary Club, it is made up of people who are difference-makers in our community. If you really want to do something, they can make it happen. We give back, and we do so many things,” he said. One of the things Ellison helped the club do was host a 5K fundraiser. “They put me on the board over community service, said we needed to do a 5K, and asked me to chair the committee and bring that race to reality in 2023.”

Similar to preparing for his cold call to Bucee’s, Ellison Googled “How To Put Together A 5K Race.”

“They said it would take nine months to put the fundraising together. We had five months. Our beneficiary was the St. Clair County’s Boys Ranch. I knew if I was on the fundraising side, I was going to need to tell the story. My wife Dana and I went down to see the ranch. That place had been vandalized and was in horrible condition.”

Ellison told the story of the ranch, and the first 5K raised \$65,000 for it.

While health concerns may have created complications for him in recent years, Bill Ellison does not give up.

“I have CLL Leukemia. It is a chronic disease. They have medication now. They can’t cure me, but they can keep me in the middle of the road. During Covid, I got really, really sick. I almost died. I went

from 185 pounds to 135 pounds. It was touch-and-go for a while, but God was not done with me yet. I’ve got another chance, and I’ve still got work to do.

“I don’t know what the future holds, but Pell City is hotter than a firecracker right now. There are a lot of projects that are about to be announced. There is a lot of momentum. I typically operate under the radar, and with these projects, it is always ‘we’, not ‘me’. I have been blessed to be a part of this growth.”

Ellison is appreciative of the opportunities he has received and the relationships he has developed.

“It is the people around me that are so important. When I worked with Kevin Jennings and Jamey Flegal from Noon Management, they told me, ‘You just don’t realize how blessed you are.’ Everybody wants to be involved with Kevin and Jamey. For them to come to this city and talk about the level of talent and professionalism here, that is really why we have been able to have all of the successes we have had. It is a team effort, and there have been so many people who have worked on these projects.”

One important relationship that will mark 20 years in December is his marriage to Dana, who describes being married to Bill as “an honor. I came from a humble background, and he has given me a great life. I do residential real estate, and he is my biggest supporter. I’ve had to come through some tough obstacles in my life. Bill backs me in everything. I never doubt who my biggest supporter is. I had breast cancer, and he has leukemia, and we are in it to win it. I couldn’t ask for a better husband. I’m just so proud of him and his accomplishments.

“I was 38 when I met him. I felt like I had searched 38 years to find him. We know we have something good here,” said Dana.

Pell City knows that it has something good here with Bill Ellison, too.

From **BLOCK PARTY** on page 3D

another successful event.” This year was her seventh block party and the city’s 26th since the event’s inception.

“Each year, we are glad to see it grow and glad to see the community support it,” Glidewell said. “We want to make it better every year.”

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Gone but not FORGOTTEN

An unplanned detour leads to reflections about community and history

BY SARAH ELIZABETH MOREMAN
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT



Today is one of those days when an aimless road trip simply unfolds.

After attending a morning baby shower in Talladega County, my friend Felecia and I decide to take a carpe diem drive on a road we have never explored before, rather than heading back home via the main highway or interstate. Our spirits are high after seeing our friend glowing in her late pregnancy. Pregnancy is a miracle for her and her husband, who have been trying for quite some time.

The road turns gently to the right, revealing an old cemetery where weatherworn headstones lie beneath a blanket of tall, overgrown grasses and the shadows of longleaf pines, oaks, maples, and cypresses. Some headstones and monuments stand starkly white or grayish-white, rising above the blanket of natural debris.

“Hey, Fe, let’s check this out.” Although it may seem oxymoronic, given that we

have just left a celebration of an expecting birth, I know Felecia will appreciate this cemetery as much as I do. Both of us have a deep appreciation for history. Pulling the vehicle over to park just off the side of the road, we step out and make our way to the nondescript entrance.

Coming closer, we can see more headstones, monuments, and even a rusted, lichen-choked wrought iron fence topped with fleur-de-lis hidden under branches, shrubs, and trees, partially obscured. A strong presence of history emanates from the abandoned site, with the overgrown grass and crunch of leaves adding an air of mystery. Many of the headstones are not upright, but rather leaning, as if sinking into the ground. The sawgrass, with its bright green coloring, seems out of place among the old monuments stained with bird droppings, weather elements, and such various biological growths as mold, mildew, algae, lichen, and moss. Some of the leaves are still crispy enough from the previous autumn to crunch under our feet as we read the names of each headstone and monument that we can reach without getting our



PHOTO BY BUDDY ROBERTS/THE DAILY HOME

limbs scratched by the wildness of nature, branches, and briars.

Some headstones are unreadable, worn away with time. The ones that we can make out show dates well over 150 ago, spanning the late 1800s to the 1930s, an era marked by the Reconstruction

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PHOTOS BY BUDDY ROBERTS/THE DAILY HOME

following the Civil War and the Second Industrial Revolution, which reshaped the Deep South’s economy and infrastructure.

Cemeteries, including this one, fascinate me because of how the headstones are architecturally designed to mark each individual’s life—not only with the birth and death dates separated by a dash, but with epitaphs and engravings that symbolize a person’s focus, faith, or love.

Spotting a headstone with something on top, I bend down to brush some leaves off of it.

“Come and see this,” I call to Felecia. She steps over to see where I am pointing at a figure of a lamb atop a headstone marking a beloved daughter’s grave. This architectural detail stands in stark contrast to many others adorned with Freemasonry, Knights Templar, or Shriner symbolism. Before this carpe diem drive, I was vaguely aware of Freemasonry symbols, thanks to Dan Brown’s wildly popular *The Lost Symbol*, which sparked an alertness in me to the deeper, often secretive layers of power, like the Illuminati.

A compass, a carpenter’s square, and a capital G, representing either God or geometry, frame the Freemasonry belief system, bridging the earthly and spiritual realms and responsibilities. Another Freemasonic symbol is a five-pointed star, with a tip pointing downward, representing the Star of Bethlehem and the Order of the Eastern Star, a sister organization to Freemasonry. While conspiracy theories swirl around these symbols, I am certain

that many individuals who formed fraternal ties found a profound sense of belonging and purpose through them. Seeing so many Masonic gravestones here is striking.

Beyond the engraved symbols, it is the epitaphs that pull at my heart the most. I find myself reflecting on how each person is remembered and loved in their inscription. “Gone but not forgotten” seems to be the standard, but I hope my loved ones would choose something more inspiring for me when I pass away.

I glance over at my friend. “Have you given any thought to the inscriptions on these headstones? Can you sense the community here?”

See **HEADSTONES** on page 2F



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From **HEADSTONES**
on page 7E

“I surely can,” she responds, her gaze sweeping across the cemetery before meeting mine.

I nod, then look up to see the sun peeking from behind a monument, its rays piercing through the clear sky. Sunlight emphasizes the poignant reality of the “gone but not forgotten” phrase within this cemetery, marked by our visit driven by curiosity and a sentimental respect for history.



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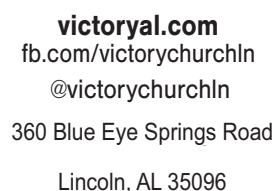
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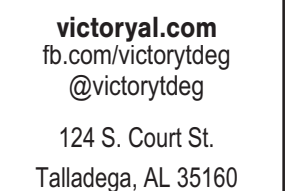
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AT WEEPING WILLOW BOOKS

IN PELL CITY

BY
MICHELLE LOVE
DAILY HOME
CORRESPONDENT



Every small town needs a bookstore.

That’s just a fact of Southern culture.

For a long time, Pell City went without a locally owned bookstore. With the opening of Weeping Willow Books, that has changed.

The store opened in June with the buzz around town that it would provide a comfortable place for people to convene to enjoy a good book and good conversation. The doors haven’t been open even a month yet, but the excitement surrounding the store has spread like wildfire.

Samantha Herrington, the store’s owner, said the excitement has been brewing since the idea for the store was developed.

“In 2023 we established the entity, and once we established the entity, I don’t know how, but everybody started finding out about it,” she said. “And everybody that I had to talk to about getting things running was so excited. I was blown away.

Before we even had any marketing or anything, it was still a hush-hush situation, but everybody was stoked.”

Herrington’s love of reading and books hasn’t a lifelong passion, however. She said that while her mother read to her and her brother as they were growing up, they didn’t develop a passion for reading until much later in life.

“When we had kids, all of a sudden it just blew up for us,” she said. “When I had my daughter, I was a stay-at-home mom, and I had so much time and it just sparked a love of reading that just kept growing and growing and growing.”

Living in Pell City, Herrington said she noticed there were a lot of people who enjoyed reading as much as she did, but not having a local bookstore in town was inconvenient.

“I was talking to my mom one day – it was probably about three or four years ago – and I was telling her how much Pell City needs a bookstore,” she said. “The closest ones to us are in Oxford or Trussville, and for people who work during the week, that’s not close. I just felt like it’s something we really needed in Pell City especially. There are so many high school kids who



PHOTOS BY TUCKER WEBB/THE DAILY HOME

Weeping Willow Books is at 1714 Cogswell Avenue in Pell City.



walk past the store after school every day.”

While the store space isn’t huge, Herrington has made sure to make use of every inch. Book-filled shelves line the room, the covers facing out so patrons can immediately see the cover art. Herrington said when they were thinking of how to design the store, they wanted to go with “an enchanted forest feel,” so customers can feel as if they are stepping into another world. There are even trees built near the children’s section. She estimates they have roughly 26

different genres of books, ranging from paranormal to hobbies to a classics section with such titles as Jane Eyre and Robin Hood. An Alabama authors shelf keeps growing because of people telling her about authors she isn’t familiar with.

“I’m a local,” Herrington said. “I like to be pretty personable and find out what people like. Although my inventory is not vast, I also love ordering new books for people because I find out about books I’ve never heard of before.”

See **BOOKS** on page 16





PHOTOS BY BLAKE SHULTZ
Hartman Castle is noted for its sturdy and ornate decor.



Medieval romanticism meets modern convenience at the castle.



One of the castle's unique amenities is a miniature golf course overlooking Logan Martin Lake.

From **CASTLE** on page 7D

of Queen Nazarene (an Old English card game dating to the 1670s).

Less than two years since opening Hartman Castle to the public, Shultz says the interest and response has been amazing. People from more than 20 states have stayed at the castle, and their reviews have been overwhelmingly favorable.

“Everyone’s loved it,” Schultz said. “We’ve gotten all five-star reviews, and, amazingly, we’ve gotten into the superhost status on Airbnb. Everything’s been super positive.”

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Celebrating the 1980s
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Artist TIM SPANJER

BY BUDDY ROBERTS
SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

Had Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol grown up in the 1980s, their art might have looked a lot like Tim Spanjer’s.

Both pop artists’ use of color and subjects already ingrained in the public consciousness during their heyday of the 1960s find parallels in the work of the



accomplished Talladega County artist, who cites both as influences on his style.

“There is a very graphic feel to their art,” he says. “The focus is on design, shapes, and colors. Not much in the way of blending.”

Although he

admittedly was influenced by the two artists, Tim’s style is distinctly his own, and it’s a perfect style for his paintings of origami, paper airplanes, bottles of hot sauce, cigars, matchboxes, shoeboxes, board games, VHS tapes, and other throwbacks to the 1980s.

“I remember growing up in the ’80s,” he says. “It was a great decade, a cool bygone era. It was a time when products and movies came into their own. The Baby Boomers had given way to Generation X, and everything got bold, graphic, and colorized. There were a lot of cool brands, candies, and cereals. Grunge music was coming on to the scene in the late ’80s, Atari brought the in-home arcade to gaming, and VHS brought movies in



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ART OF SPANJER

Tim Spanjer at work in his art studio in southern Talladega County.

homes. At the time, we didn’t notice it, but the decade was a real cultural explosion.”

Tim’s coming of age in the 1980s was sandwiched between childhood in the 1970s (during which he remembers collecting baseball cards and vacationing with his family at Coney Island and Disneyworld) and college in the 1990s. Memories of growing up in New York state, north of Manhattan, are still vivid.

“They come back to me sometimes through my kids’ appetite for the cultural things they’re excited about,” he said. “When my son got into baseball cards, it took me right back to the coolness

of going to the local pharmacy and buying a wax pack of cards. In quiet times alone here in the studio, my mind often wanders back to when I was a kid.”

Tim shares his art studio with his wife

Vaughan, whose art has also been recognized throughout the Southeast and beyond. Their home and studio are situated amid the tranquility and nature of Pursell Farms, where Tim serves as director of



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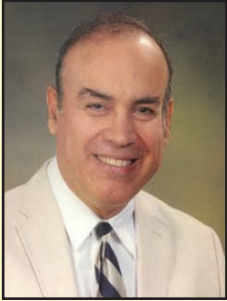
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sales and marketing. Besides painting there, he builds his canvases in the studio.

“I always build my own,” he says. “Nothing is prefabricated. The way I work is to draw the image on the computer, determine the size of canvas I want to use, transfer the image to the board, and then paint it. The art, for me, is done on the computer. The most boring part, to me, is actually the painting. All of the creativity and art is complete before I even start painting.”

Tim paints with high-gloss enamel (“when it’s on, it’s on”) and isn’t concerned about perfection when applying the colors. “I don’t mind drips or a heavy application of paint. Imperfections are part of the art. They make it unique and one of a kind. And I’m not into photorealism at all. My paintings give you a sense of what you’re looking at with out overcooking it.”

Although it could be said that his own understanding of light, color, composition, and dimensional space is what makes his art appealing, Tim prefers to give credit to a higher power.

“Art,” he says, “is one of the most compelling reasons to know there is a Creator. Everything comes from him. All I am doing is moving paint around in what I hope will be an

appealing way and calling it my own. Hopefully I’m doing that in a way that you haven’t seen before, but it’s not for me to dictate who someone should consume my art. Ultimately, I do it for me. I like seeing



a work of art be completed and done, and if people like it when it is, their perception of it is their own.”



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Summer MEMORIES

Travel, family, and unpredictable weather

BY MADELINE KLINE
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

There are many things to love and hate about a Southern summer. Depending on your mood, each thing may not clearly fall into one category. The thunderstorms, hot sunshine, and having the kids home all day may be some of the best and worst parts of the season.

Personally, it is my favorite time of year. I love tanning by the pool with my sister, I'm partial to the heat, and thunderstorms really fill me with wonder and joy. Sure, the humidity might be suffocating, sweat dampens my back, and my makeup runs the moment I step outside. Despite all this, I wait for that familiar Southern summer the rest of the year. Something about life seems to get better with long days punctuated by an 8

p.m. sunset.

So many experiences of a Southern summer are shared by so many. The Gulf Coast is widely loved, for good reason. Everyone seems to know something about your next destination. We share where to get the best seafood (I'm torn between Bayou La Batre or Apalachicola), the best views, or family-friendly attractions that litter the Southern coast line.

Growing up and visiting family, I would spend close to a collective month away from home, travelling the south through Mississippi to Florida, seeing all the South has to offer. I specifically remember my grandparents taking

me to the Wharf, a little resort with a wave pool, live music, and shops. Spending a week or more there was a tradition for a long while. While we were there, we could go off to Orange Beach or trek back to Mobile, where my grandparents lived at the time. We spent two weeks there every summer, too. Their pool was small, and the concrete around it was scalding. But those memories are the seed of my love for this season.

The South seems to come alive during the summer. Everywhere you look is green and lush, teeming with life. Tree lines literally glow with fireflies and sing with cicadas. I realize when the weather is warm and the days are long that my own backyard is a thing of beauty.

I start getting up earlier and finding myself much more willing to go

appreciate the lovely setting the South shares. Natural features cover our landscape: Oak Mountain, Cheaha, Desoto, Tannehill – just to name some of my favorites here in Alabama.

The weather itself is a natural wonder of our region. Near daily thunderstorms cool the evening and amaze my inner child. I watch heat lightning stretch across the sky, blurred

See SUMMER on page 16





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IN THE STUDIO WITH

Vaughan

SPANJER

BY BUDDY ROBERTS
SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

Vaughan Spanjer squeezes a tube of oil paint, expelling a small blob onto her palette, an aluminium rectangle already heavily encrusted with shades of blue, red, green, and white and a single pop of yellow.

After swishing her brush through a container of odorless mineral spirits, she dabs it into the globule – black at first glance before closer examination reveals a subtle green in its dark depths.

“This color Is called Turkey Umber,” she says. “I’d never heard of it before, but it seemed fitting to use it in this painting.”

Now her brush is conveying the paint to a 30x30 canvas that will be displayed in a client’s lake home when Vaughan completes the commissioned painting of an Eastern wild turkey. Hence the Turkey Umber.

Three or four inches to its right on her studio wall is a slightly larger canvas bearing a detailed depiction of a great blue heron. “It’s going to Cape Cod,” Vaughan says as she goes to the mineral spirits again before judiciously adding a nuance of paint – Burnt Umber this time, from the opposite side of the palette from the turkey variety – to the background.

“I work on multiple things at once,” she explains. “It helps me step back a bit from each piece, so I don’t overwork anything, like too many



strokes, muddying it up, or painting over things I thought were mistakes. As a realistic painter, I tend to overthink details. That doesn’t really benefit me in the long run. And I tend to love the ones that are not perfect on details. It’s a painting, not a photograph. Leaving one for another, even if it’s just for a few minutes, lets me come back to it with a different perspective, which is good.”

As Vaughan paints, Chris Stapleton’s voice croons on low volume from an orange-handled white Turtlebox. Finished art in ornate frames are on display throughout her half of the studio she shares with her husband Tim – paintings and drawings in oils, acrylics, and watercolors of flora, horses, hunting dogs, a fox. And more birds.

“I’m very inspired by birds,” she says, adding a new layer of white to the heron’s feathers. “Birds that live by the water tend to have a distinct characteristic that’s just all their own.”

The Spanjers’ studio is steps away from their home at Pursell Farms in south Talladega County. Vaughan’s family owns the farm property, and she grew up there (before the golf course, the inn, and the wedding venue) surrounded by the nature and wildlife that still influences her art.

She gestures toward the window at the back of the studio.

“My aunt and uncle live in that house up there, and there’s this large pond between here and there. Herons are always flying in and out and perching. Living over here, you’re constantly seeing water birds, and I just love them. They are graceful and peaceful – and not just the water birds, birds like pheasants and quail. And I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a pheasant up close, but it’s the most beautiful bird. They way God created its feathers is just gorgeous.”

Vaughan left the natural serenity of the farm for Auburn University, where she studied fashion design and production management – and met Tim. They married two months after her graduation and moved to upstate New York, commuting five hours round-trip into the city for work.

“I got to work for Adam Lippes,” she recalls, “who is a boutique designer, and got some great experience there, but when my husband and I wanted to start a family, I had one of those moments where I had to ask myself, ‘Is this really the life I want?’ It was great, it was fun, it was inspiring, it seemed glamorous, but the fashion industry is extremely cutthroat, and you’ve got to be cut out for it. I wanted a slower-paced life.”

Eventually, Tim was asked to take the role of director of marketing at Pursell Farms, and, now parents, they returned to Alabama and the rural serenity Vaughan loved as a child.

“I don’t think I can



PHOTOS BY BUDDY ROBERTS/THE DAILY HOME
Wildlife is a frequent subject of Vaughan Spanjer’s art. Here, she works on a commission at her studio at Pursell Farms.



live in a city again,” she says, having moved back to the turkey canvas. “I mean, I would if I had to, obviously, but I need the outdoors. I need the space. And I need to be close to creation. That’s really what my art is – a celebration of the Lord’s beautiful creation. It’s my interpretation of it, obviously, but I just want it to make people happy. I want them to feel something when they see one of my paintings. They don’t even have to buy it – if it brings them joy in that moment, that’s great.”



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BY LACI BRASWELL
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Tucked away in Cropwell, just minutes from the shores of Logan Martin Lake, Coosa Cafe & Creamery offers more than just a morning pick-me-up.

It’s become a new hub for lake community residents and commuters alike.

The cafe serves a thoughtfully curated menu of specialty coffees, fresh-baked pastries, artisan sandwiches -- and, of course, ice cream.

The establishment opened in March and is owned by Tami and Matt Kronen, the husband-and-wife team behind popular eatery Piece of the Pie on nearby Coosa Island.

As someone who is a self-proclaimed coffee snob and connoisseur of breakfast sweets, I couldn’t wait to try it myself. Upon entering the cafe, I immediately smelled the perfect blend of roasting coffee beans and baked goods.

The glass case was filled with an umpteen amount of cookies, muffins, pastries and donuts. I had no idea what to order, but a perfectly decorated patriotic glazed donut with red, white, and blue star sprinkles ultimately caught my attention and appetite.

The drink choices seem endless. Not only can the cafe make a variety of coffee styles such as lattes, frappes, and cold brews, it has numerous flavors in stock, perfect to build your own or select one of their specialty drinks.



In addition to coffee, the cafe also takes pride in crafting dirty sodas, which are made typically with an energy drink as their base, with endless different flavor and cream combinations.

Don’t let the lengthy drink menu distract you from trying Coosa’s Cafe & Creamery’s food selections. They serve a variety of deli sandwiches that can be ordered cold or toasted, such as a Cuban, Club, Italian, and more.

After browsing the cafe for a few moments, I was warmly greeted by Tami Kronen.

“We wanted to provide something different for our community,” she said. “There isn’t a coffee shop on this side of the lake.”

The owner said the area has been home for her family for many years. “Matt’s from the area and his family used to run this marina. Over the past decade or so Matt has tried to do a lot to update the space. He runs the laundromat next door and a towboat company on the lake too.”

Tami said it was their goal to provide the lake community, along with those out on the water, a place to grab a bite to eat and cool

off. “This is our fifth year having Piece of the Pie,” she said. “We were always thinking about how we could expand and provide more for the lake community. When this space became available, I knew I wanted to serve coffee and food selections that we don’t have at Piece of the Pie. With both businesses, we have a place you can start and end your day.”

Not only does the cafe order air-roasted coffee beans, they also make most of their food selections from scratch. “Our donuts are very popular,” Tami told me, pointing to the glass case. “We make them fresh each morning, and we often sell out.”

Ice cream is served at the cafe in a dish, sugar cone or homemade waffle cone.

Ice cream flights have become another popular menu, and Tami plans to add a latte flight soon.

Ultimately, I decided to order multiple menu items to graze on throughout the day: an iced honey bee latte, a cotton candy dirty soda, a cold cut Italian sandwich on sourdough bread, with a side of pasta salad, and two varieties of donuts – an original glazed and biscotti.



PHOTOS BY TUCKER WEBB/THE DAILY HOME



Each item was definitely worth my 30-minute drive. I recommend anyone

passing through the area or on their way to the lake to stop by. Remember – it’s important to treat yourself! The cafe has a drive-thru for those on the go. I can’t wait to go back and try a latte flight and

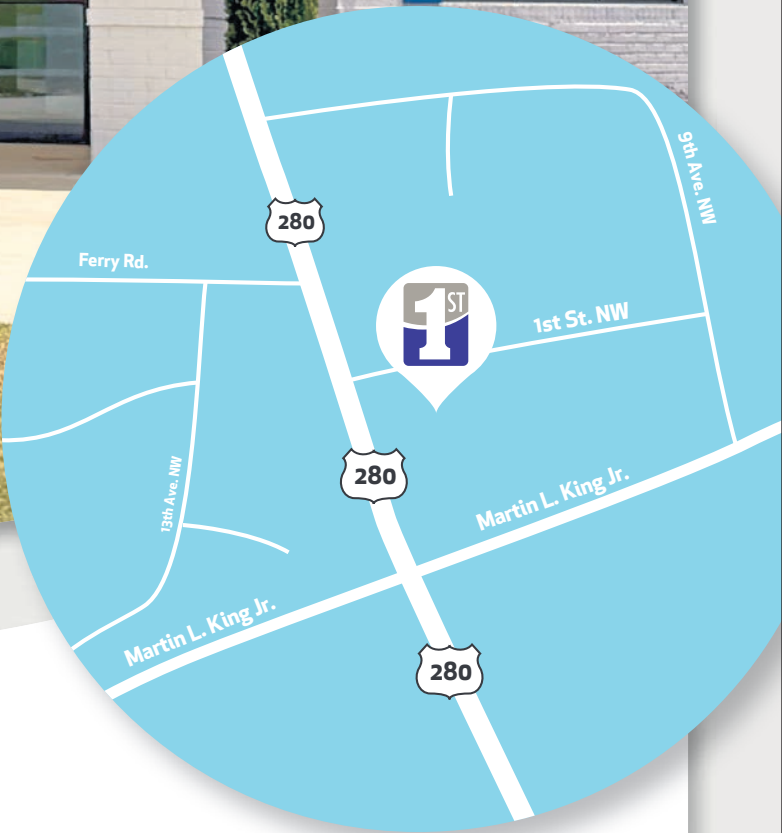
somehow save room for some ice cream!

Coosa Cafe & Creamery is at 10140 U.S. Highway 231 in Cropwell. Hours are 6 a.m.-4 p.m. Mondays-Wednesdays; 6 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays; and 7 a.m.-5

See CAFE on page 36



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From **BOOKS** on page **4F**

The name of the store stems from a lifelong love of the weeping willow trees, something she and her father shared. When she was trying to come up with a logo for the store, she couldn't shake the idea of a weeping willow standing over her daughter, who sparked her love of reading in the first place. She had

a friend draw up the logo, and the rest is history. While the store is still in its early days, Herrington said she has big plans for how it can be involved in the community. "We have a back room that's closed off right now, but that will become a café and then once we do that we want to host book clubs and author signings

and different summer reading programs where kids can come get prizes and stuff like that," she said. "We have a lot we want to do in the future." To people who, like Herrington and her brother, are learning to appreciate reading, she recommends going off movie taste to gauge what genre suits you best. She said she hopes the store serves as a

place where people can appreciate good books and learn how important books really are. "There's a quote by George R.R. Martin, and I'm probably going to butcher it, but it goes something like, 'I've lived a thousand lives and loved a thousand loves all because I read,'" she said. "It really is living a thousand different

lives without having to go out and spend your money. You get to travel to all these places and go to and explore places that don't even exist! All these wonderful realms right there in front of you."

Weeping Willow Books is at 1714 Cogswell Avenue. Hours are 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays. For more information visit the stores' Facebook page.

From **SUMMER** on page **8F**

by thick fluffy clouds. I can even appreciate the flash rainstorms. I try to be grateful for them, forcing me to stay in and take care of all the little things around the house.

Summer is a practice in gratitude. The warm sun has already lifted my spirits, so when I see storm clouds rolling in and smell the rain in the air, I can be happy that the grass will be greener when it's over.

Whether your summer is filled to the brim with vacations, excursions, and family or just a means to lazily sunbathe and relax for a season, I firmly believe that the South and its summers are the best

around. I wish all of my neighbors a happy summer, even if you really can't stand the heat and the bugs. We can all agree to hate the mosquitoes and love the sunsets.

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Summer MEMORIES

Being barefoot is part of who we are

BY KRISTI SELLERS
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

In the South, going barefoot isn't just something you do on a hot day. It's a time-honored tradition passed down through generations like cornbread recipes and tall tales. There's something about the Southern soil under your feet and the sun on your shoulders that just makes you want to ditch the shoes and feel the world as it was meant to be felt—warm, wild, and wonderfully barefoot.

Ask anyone who grew up in the South, and chances are their summers were spent shoeless. From the first warm day of



spring until the first cold snap in fall, feet were free to roam. It wasn't unusual to see kids walking barefoot to the corner store, playing in the creek, or hopping from patch to patch on a gravel road like they were avoiding lava. Shoes were for church, school, and maybe Grandma's house — everywhere else was fair game.

Being barefoot was more than just



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comfort. It was freedom. It was the sound of screen doors slamming behind you, the feel of cool dirt, and the unmistakable sting of stepping on a sweetgum ball where you forgot to look. It meant you were outside, living life, getting dirty, and learning how tough a pair of feet could get. Calluses were earned, and a blackened heel was a badge of honor.

Mamas might fuss and holler, telling you to "put on some shoes before you catch something," but they

See **SELLERS** on page 36

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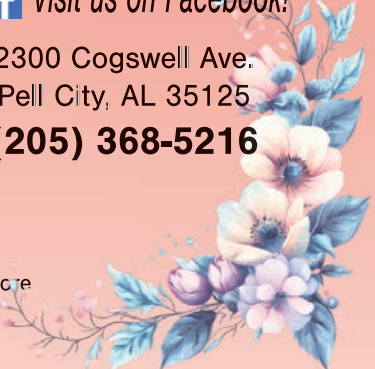
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EVEN FROM AFAR

BY SARAH
ELIZABETH
MOREMAN
DAILY HOME
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Is that a Great Blue Heron?" I type after studying the photo of a long-limbed, golden-eyed bird staring toward the horizon. The sender is the owner of the two dogs I am taking care of while he and his family are at the beach, specifically Dauphin Island.

"Probably," he replies immediately, and I text back, asking him to send more photos of any other birds they might capture.

Soon my phone is flooded with awe-inspiring photos taken by his daughter. Some are more of the Great Blue Heron, now unmistakable with its distinctive features. Others include the brown pelican with its prominent throat pouch, the Green Heron with a verdant green cap and plumage trimming its brown body, and whistling ducks with startling orange-red beaks that shine in the light. What catches my attention the most is the direct, piercing stare of an osprey.

While I admire the photographs, one of the dogs nudges at my phone, toppling it to the ground, with a bang that startles the older dog from her deep, snore-filled slumber. She lets out a litany of barks as I lean over the sofa to retrieve the phone, its screen still displaying the gorgeous yet piercing stare of the osprey.

I look out through the French doors and see that the rain has stopped. I stand up and beckon the two dogs to follow me outside. We all need a good stretch after being holed up on the sofa all morning while the storm raged with lightning and thunder. Now, the air feels cool, even in the summer. The dogs chase each other around the yard as I breathe in the fresh smells of washed oaks, sweetgums, grass, and gardenias.

The wet grass tickles my bare feet as I walk across the yard to the mailbox. The sounds of birds cawing and chirping keep me in a mindset of wonder, especially at how they fly with such effortless grace.

After retrieving the mail, I head back to the house to drop it off before joining the dogs in their fun.



PHOTOS BY TIM BADGWELL



I toss a tennis ball to the puppy, who eagerly catches it. She is still learning the game of fetch and does not yet understand that I need the ball back in order to throw it again. I laugh as she either drops the ball or keeps her jaws locked around the neon green toy, unwilling to let it go.

I pull out my phone to snap a few pictures of the determined puppy before walking away to encourage both dogs to keep chasing each other. I settle into an Adirondack

chair and switch my phone to video mode to record them burning off energy in the freshly rained-on backyard. Then I send the photos and video to their humans.

Replies come quickly with exclamations of delight over the dogs' play, followed by more pictures of seabirds. I smile, knowing they sent them because they remember how much I appreciate the beauty of herons.

From **SELLERS** on page 26

secretly understood. After all, they'd done the same thing when they were kids. There's a deep nostalgia tied to going barefoot, the kind that takes you back to lightning

bugs in mason jars, watermelon slices on the porch, and long days that stretched on forever.

Even today, in an age of arch support and air-conditioned everything, the

barefoot tradition lives on. It's not uncommon to see kids running through sprinklers or folks fishing off a dock without a pair of shoes in sight.

Going barefoot in the South isn't

about being careless. It's about staying connected. It's about remembering where you come from and staying grounded — literally. It reminds us that the best things in life are often the simplest: soft grass,

warm pavement, cold creek water, and the joy of walking through it all with nothing but your own two feet.

So the next time you find yourself in the South on a sunny day, don't be afraid to join

in the tradition. Kick off those shoes, feel the ground beneath you, and take a little walk through time. After all, in the South, bare feet aren't just part of summer. They're part of who we are.

From **CAFE** on page 10F

p.m Saturdays. For more information, visit its Facebook page or call 205-

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BY FAITH DORN
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

For a small transportation center, the Sylacauga Municipal Airport is a busy place.

According to operations manager Wade Pruitt, having an airport in southern Talladega County is very important because an airport brings in investors, potential businesses, and manufacturing work to the area.

“People looking to do that fly. They don’t drive,” he says. “They like to have an airport nearby. One reason why one of the men who uses the airport frequently built his business here is the airport. A lot of people don’t realize the impact an airport has on the community. We are really proud we have all of this traffic at the airport. There was a study done a few years ago that said the yearly impact this airport had on the community was \$15 million dollars, or something like that.”

Pruitt explains that airways are highways in the sky, and there is an intersection about a half mile from the southwest corner of the Sylacauga Airport.

“They can stop here and purchase fuel and take a rest. People stop here on their way to Florida. People stop here who have never been to Talladega County. A group from Florida was flying north, went around town, came back and stayed the weekend and went to Mt. Cheaha and Childersburg, too. People will talk about how awesome this area is and will come back and buy a house. That has happened.”

Merkel Field at Sylacauga Airport is named for the Merkel family who donated the land to the airport. “The Merckels used to own a lot of this property in the 1940s and 1960s, and one of the family members donated the land to the airport,” Pruitt said.

The City of Sylacauga “is the sponsor of the airport with the FAA and ALDOT,” he added. “The Sylacauga Airport Authority actually operates and maintains the airport on behalf of the city.”

When asked what kinds of airplanes fly in and out of the airport, Pruitt laughs and says, “Every one of them. All kinds of airplanes from small, general aviation to large corporate jets that can hold 25 people use this airport. There is no telling what you’ll see out here.”

Listing every kind of airplane that uses Sylacauga Airport would take a while, but a short list of organizations that use the airport includes the U.S. military, flight schools (including the flight school at Auburn University), companies that use seaplanes and charter jets, Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, Lifesaver 4, and the Oxford Police Department.

The airport has a Fixed Base Operator building in which Pruitt’s office is located. “The public can come through to watch the airplanes land and take off. There are benches outside in the shade, so they can sit and watch and bring their children,” he said.

To encourage enthusiasm for aviation, the airport’s shop, Aero Missions, has begun hosting a free community event called Aviation Day. This year’s event was on June 28 and featured airplanes, gliders, helicopters, and remote controlled planes, as well as the pilots of those aircraft. The LifeSaver crew held a demonstration during the event. Food truck vendors and activities for children were also on site.

In the future, Pruitt wants Sylacauga Airport to host an air show. “We’re going to try to have one. It just takes a lot of planning. You have to go through the FAA and all that to get licenses and to get the nod from them. You have to plan it for a while.”

Until the air show comes to fruition, Pruitt invites the community to visit the airport and watch the aircraft take off and land. “We encourage everybody to get involved in aviation. We invite everyone to come out and appreciate it,” he said.

Follow Sylacauga Airport on Instagram at @merkelfield.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS



A CONVERSATION WITH

Miss

SYLACAUGA

BY BUDDY ROBERTS
SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

Amelia Tucker doesn't believe in giving up.

She'd never have been crowned Miss Sylacauga if she had.

"I competed 32 times in Miss Alabama preliminaries before I won Miss Sylacauga," she recalls. "I was first runner-up like 10 times before I competed in Miss Sylacauga. I am every excited to have this title. Miss Sylacauga was like my Miss Alabama."

Amelia competed for the state title late last month, "and it was a dream to just go to Miss Alabama. It was very busy and intense week, and it honestly is probably one of the hardest things I've ever done, but it was one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. Getting to see all of all of our hard work come to fruition that week was really sweet."

Walking through the Marble City's downtown district on an early July afternoon, the Gadsden native (who works as social media and content coordinator for Big Oak Ranch in Springville) shared



more about her Miss Alabama experience and explained why she loves the local city she has represented during the past year.

DH: What was your performance in the Miss Alabama talent competition?

DH: Tell us about your community service initiative.

Miss Sylacauga: "It's called ACTS of Purpose. ACTS stands for Awareness, Compassion, Talents, and Service, and it's about volunteerism and helping individuals find purpose in the space around them. I was bullied when I was in middle school, and a big outlet for me was



PHOTO BY BUDDY ROBERTS/THE DAILY HOME
"I have really fallen in love with this area," the Gadsden native says of the Marble City.

age students because they're the ones that really need to learn how to get out into their communities. To that end, I created the ACTS of Purpose personality survey, and I gave it out in

really about winning a crown and being a titleholder. It's about the growth you gain from the experience. There are so many times that I felt like I had failed, and I've learned not to tell

Sylacauga is over, because I have really fallen in love with this area. Everyone is so big about community service. And I love the kids' pickleball club. I got to play with them last October, during the week of Halloween, and they were all dressed up in costumes. Playing pickleball in a crown is not easy at all, but it was a lot of fun. I got to come down for the marble festival this spring, and there's Blue Bell and so many other cool things here that people should know about.

"One thing I lot of people don't know is that Miss Sylacauga is the oldest Miss Alabama preliminary title in the state. I'm the 88th Miss Sylacauga, which is a pretty awesome thing. There's a lot of legacy that come with the Miss Sylacauga title, and the support behind the organization has been incredible."

DH: When will the next Miss Sylacauga be crowned?

Miss Sylacauga: "October 4. I get to enjoy my experience here a little bit longer."

DH: Will you be competing again in another preliminary?

Miss Sylacauga: "I will not be. I'm actually getting married. I got engaged yesterday. So this is a one-and-done for me, but it's been amazing. I've cherished every moment of it, but I'm excited to move onto the next chapter of life."



Miss Sylacauga with members of Sylacauga's youth pickleball club during an event last Halloween.

Miss Sylacauga: "I sang 'That's Life.' It's a Frank Sinatra song, and it's awesome. I love it. It chose it because the song kind of talks about struggling and falling down but picking yourself back up. I felt like it was relevant to my life story."

volunteering. I got to go on a missions trip to the Yakama Reservation in Washington state, and helping other people showed me that I had purpose in my own life. I want others to experience that same discovery.

"I target high school and college-

classrooms before Miss Alabama. It allows students to circle personality traits that resemble themselves and shows what kind of volunteer they are. There's the driver, the clarifier, the influencer, and the supporter. Two of them are extroverted, and two of them are introverted, and the types help them to focus on ways they can give back to the community in the way that suits their personalities best."

DH: What has your involvement with the Miss Alabama organization taught you?

Miss Sylacauga: "Probably because I've competed for so long, that it's not

myself that they're failures. They're roadblocks, and you have to learn to keep pushing past them. Stereotypically, a lot of people hear the words 'Miss Alabama' and think it's just about looks and walking around in a dress, but it's really about growth and making connections with your community."

DH: Did you have connections to Sylacauga before winning the title?

Miss Sylacauga: "Actually, my church has a few members that are from Sylacauga, but I didn't know a ton about it until I competed. I'm going to be sad when my year as Miss



PHOTO BY BUDDY ROBERTS/THE DAILY HOME
Amelia Tucker is the 88th Miss Sylacauga.

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THE EMOTIONAL

Explosion of FIREWORKS

BY
MICHELLE LOVE
DAILY HOME
CORRESPONDENT



Growing up, my family always loved the holidays. It was a big deal every Halloween, every Christmas, and even every 4th of July.

Our Independence Day traditions weren't anything outside of your usual Southern favorites: ribs on the grill, cold drinks and, of course, fireworks. Every year my dad and I would go to the top of Brookwood Hill in Vestavia Hills and watch the fireworks shoot into the sky for Fire on the Mountain.

We would walk up there with other families, complain that we didn't bring folding chairs, and remind ourselves to pack them next year (we never did), and then we would look up into the sky and watch the magnificent show unfold before us. It made us feel patriotic and closer than the other 364 days out of the year. My dad passed away when I was 19, and I still think about all the fireworks we never got to see together.

That's the thing about family traditions: they tend to lose their spark when the family members you did them with disappear. My dad has been gone for a while now, and in that time I've grown and matured, and I'm now excited to



PHOTOS BY TUCKER WEBB/THE DAILY HOME
Scenes from the annual Independence Day fireworks show in Pell City.

start my own family someday. I've had many 4th of Julys since my dad passed away, and honestly I can't tell you where or with whom I watched the fireworks all those years since. What I can tell you is I do remember every time I see fireworks, I think of my dad and family traditions and that feeling of patriotism that I felt every year.

There's a lot happening in the world that scares me and countless others, but for a brief shining moment, July fireworks shows make everything seem better.

I don't know what the future holds, but I like to think it holds more fireworks, family, and fuzzy feelings.





Summer MEMORIES

Life is best lived in bare feet

BY SUSAN COOK
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

There's no better time to go barefoot than summertime in the south. Kids especially know this to be true.

One summer afternoon when I was 8, I ran barefoot through the soft green crunch of my front yard grass, then suddenly sank my right foot into a bright red ant bed. The ants reacted to my misstep much faster than I did. I had clearly ruined their day, so they quite naturally proceeded to ruin mine. Within minutes, my foot swelled to twice its size, burning with the white-hot piercing sting of those unforgiving fire ants. As I stared



at the blimp that used to be my foot, I tearfully vowed never to go barefoot again. Thankfully, that was a promise I didn't keep.

How else would I learn that raindrops falling on your feet feel like chilled pearls that dissolve, run, and cool your soles? That stepping on stones or a brick path heated by the sun offers the same warmth as a hug? And after a long day, whether it's a pair of heels, flip-flops, or work boots, nothing feels so good as sliding, pulling, then kicking off those cages. Carpet, hardwood, and tile come alive under the 7,000 or so nerve endings in our feet. Research shows that barefoot contact with the earth can produce

See COOK on page 3H



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Jake “David” Jensen

MAKING WAVES IN MMA

BY LOYD MCINTOSH
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

That Like a true fighter, Jake “David” Jensen is an enigma. The mixed martial artist and boxer lives his life like Clint Eastwood, the no-name stranger riding into town to take care of business, only to ride off into the sunset once the job is complete. Where did he come from? Nobody knows. Does he have a family? Not sure. Does he have kids, a college degree, a job, or a significant other? He ain’t saying.

Jensen exists in the shadows, only coming into the daylight when necessary and keeping his private life incredibly private, a near impossibility for an athlete making waves in a sport that is custom-made for over-the-top self-promotion. Jensen has almost no social media presence, no website to promote his appearances, and information about his career as a professional fighter is spotty at best. That’s just the way he likes it.

“I’m a little bit of a ghost on social media,” says Jensen during a Zoom call from his home in Oxford. “I have an Instagram account, and I think it has one post.”

Jensen did reveal that he has been active in athletics since he was 10 years old, playing baseball, studying boxing and martial arts, and was a decathlete on the Mary College track team in North Dakota. He even had a stint playing hockey while living in the upper Midwest, where he was encouraged to use skills as a pugilist.

“I was the enforcer,” he explains.

“They would give me a number and I’d go out there and flatten the guy and the crowds would love it. That’s pretty much what I did in the sport.”

Despite his relative anonymity, Jensen has been making a name for himself in MMA circles, with the occasional boxing and kickboxing bout thrown in here and there,



Jensen was the main event of the MMA Clash at the Coosa earlier this month at The Venue at Coosa Landing in Gadsden. Competing at 170 pounds, Jensen put his 9–0 MMA record on the line against journeyman fighter Daniel Pearce for the BCFC Welterweight Championship. Jensen says he and Pearce have different approaches to MMA, which made their bout one of the most interesting on the fight card.

“My style in mixed martial arts has always been standup. That’s what the crowds like to see,” he explains. “They don’t like to see guys rolling around on the ground. They like seeing people get knocked out and put down on the canvas, and my style transitions very well between boxing and MMA.”

Prior to the Clash at the Coosa, Jensen described Pearce as “a ground guy. He does a lot of jujitsu, so it’s going to be an interesting matchup. We have conflicting styles, so it’s just going to come down to who’s the better man at fighting that night.” This publication was prepared before results from the fight were available.

When not training or competing in MMA events, Jensen operates his own construction company, which he launched shortly after moving to Oxford in 2023. Now 32, Jensen believes he realistically has another five or six years of professional fighting left in him. A man of deep Christian faith and an interest in social issues, Jensen wants to use fighting as a way to make a difference, especially to young men who, he says, are hearing the wrong messages in today’s culture.

“Fighting is just one route I want to go into. I have ambitions to get into politics, so I want to use fighting as a platform to project myself into politics. I think that we have a crisis with our young men. I think that there are not many good role models, and I think that what we see on the screen is not good for a lot of our young men. So I want to change that.”



mostly as a journeyman brought in by the promoter of an up-and-coming fighter. Typically, the journeyman is the underdog and meant to be a stepping stone to pad the opponent’s record. Jensen, however, doesn’t play by those rules.

“A lot of times, promoters have their guys that they want to protect and promote, and they try to find them easy fights,” says Jensen. “I’ve always kind of stayed under the radar so promoters didn’t really know what I was about. They have me come in as basically the lamb for the slaughter to fight guys that they thought were the up-and-coming stars. I’d fight them, beat them, and then sort of just fade off into the darkness.”

Undefeated in all disciplines with a record of 19-0, Jensen is squarely focused on the octagon of MMA. Now representing Blue Collar Fight Promotions based in Attalla,

Summer MEMORIES

Sweltering days of freedom and imagination

BY EJ VERNON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

My 11-year-old toes tried to escape the July heat rising from the pavement.

Moments earlier I sat with my siblings in the air-conditioned living room, watching TV, as was our habit when school was out for the summer. TV passed for screen time before the days of smartphones and social media. The word “text” was still used as a noun, not a verb. If I wanted to talk to my best friend, Mikah, I punched buttons on a corded phone to dial her number from memory and politely asked one of her parents for permission to converse. The cord attached to the receiver was no more than 10 or 12 feet long, so standing out of earshot in a house of six people meant private conversation was impossible.

I forget what we were watching when we were interrupted by the stern sound of Mom’s voice. Probably some cheesy sitcom like Saved by the Bell or Full House. “Go outside,” Mom said. “Now.”

She had grown tired of the incessant noise and tired of repeatedly telling four kids to do chores.

We protested. Too late. Out we went to the front yard. Sandals still in hand, I stood barefooted when Mom locked the door behind us. Sending kids outside, unsupervised, in the summer heat, was not a sin in 1995.



Now what? At 10 a.m., temperatures were quickly approaching triple digits.

I stared at the vast acreage, gazing toward the end of the gravel road, beyond the wire fencing and the cattle guard that was supposed to deter the cows from migrating to the front yard. Some cows are smarter than they look.

The view in front of me was one I cherished on stormy nights, ardently hoping to catch a glimpse of lightning striking the ground as it fell from a pitch-black sky. Each flash lit the earth one second at a time the same way blinking lights bring life to lavishly decorated trees in front windows every December. Flash. Flash. Outlines of the gravel road and wire fence appeared only to disappear again.

Now, the sight of dull, brown grass left me longing for the excitement and freedom I felt during rainstorms, two emotions I naively believed defined adulthood.

Suddenly, the rhythmic clanking of the garage door pierced the silence that seemed to overpower the stifling humidity. My brother moved like a train with no brakes down the sidewalk and disappeared into the garage. In seconds

he emerged, clutching the handlebars of his 10-speed bike. I reckoned he was en route to the pond at the bottom of the hill behind our house.

My sisters hesitated. Perplexed glances indicated their confusion matched my own. Why would Mom open the garage? Did she feel sorry for turning us out in the heat? I trailed behind my sisters as we raced to the garage, forgetting about my exposed feet and the hot ground. Surely Aloe Vera gel would heal those burns.

Once inside the garage, the three of us rummaged through a wooden box containing pairs of rollerblades, a couple of basketballs, softballs, and mitts. I pulled out my rollerblades and stepped into them, snapping the plastic buckles over my feet and ankles.

I followed my sisters onto the large patio that provided a makeshift driveway between the house and the gravel. Most of the time my parents parked their cars on the patio, but that day the square piece of cement was our skating rink. Imagination turned concrete to ice and roller blades to ice skates as we attempted spins and jumps. We pretended to compete against one another with the showmanship of Scott Hamilton, the grace of Nancy Kerrigan and the spunk of Michelle Kwan. No helmets. No knee pads. We skated for hours,



only pausing long enough to turn over the cassette tapes that blasted music through the speakers of a battery-powered boom box. Living outside city limits, we never worried about whether Celine Dion’s high notes or the twang of Garth Brooks’ guitar

disrupted neighbors. Wheels spinning under my feet, rollerblading sometimes seemed easier than walking.

Thirty years have passed since that summer day in 1995.

Thirty years later, adulthood demands hours of screen time

in front of a computer monitor. Thirty years later, imagination evaporated, I can’t remember the last time I put on rollerblades. Thirty years later, I long for freedom, the same freedom I experienced while standing barefooted on hot pavement.

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From COOK on page 76

nearly instant changes leading to improved sleep, reduced pain, decreased muscle tension, and lowered stress. Ready to kick those kicks to the curb yet?

The one place I think we all agree to leave our shoes behind is the beach. It’s the one silently agreed-upon place where we can park our shoes on the boardwalk and trust they will still be waiting for us when we get back. It’s irresistible—that moment when you step off the rough

wooden planks and feel your soles sink into that silky sand. Burying my feet in a mound of sand, curling my toes as I go, I’m always surprised by how cold the sand gets the deeper I dig.

The only beach where I ever kept my shoes on was on a black sand beach in Hawaii. Even then, I couldn’t help but slip off one shoe, balancing like an awkward flamingo, just so I could experience the chilly Pacific firsthand, grazing my toes into the pulverized lava earth. One of the most memorable days of my

life was spent in my bare feet, exploring the natural wonders of a beach in the heart of California’s Big Sur, where the sand turns purple in the sun. I gazed at the vast rolling waves and thought, now, this is a perfect day, and it was at that exact moment a yellow jacket rose from the sand and stung my unsuspecting foot.

For me, going barefoot still takes courage, but bring on the stings. Life is for living, and how much better is it when you get to experience it in your bare feet.

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~ A. A. MILNE

BY SUSAN COOK
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

We ask a lot of bridges.

Every day, we walk, bike, and drive across them, trusting them with our lives without a second thought.

While I don’t know who constructed the first bridge in history, I’m fairly certain a nearby log and good balance were involved. But the first real evidence of bridge-building technology can be traced back to Babylonian society in 4000 BC. A single brick arch a little over 700 feet wide spanned the river that flowed through the center of the ancient city.

These remarkable marvels of human ingenuity not only span rivers and gorges but also vast expanses of time, connecting civilizations and helping to shape the course of history. Bridges in all parts of the world have witnessed the footfalls of armies, the migration of peoples, and the plodding progress of trade.

But it’s not enough that we

ask bridges to carry our physical weight safely across a treacherous expanse. We ask them to carry our emotional weight too. We’ve made bridges our time-worn idiom of choice for every aspect of the human experience.

We bridge the gap between strangers with warm smiles, extending olive branches to build bridges of friendship. Or, for better or worse, we burn bridges behind us, leaving a fiery wake but no way to reach us. Sometimes we realize that a situation is out of our control, that it’s a bridge too far; or, maybe we’re just not prepared to face that problem yet, so we wait and cross that bridge when we come to it. Occasionally, we learn to take the high road, forgiving one another of past wrongs, realizing that it’s all water under the bridge.

We ask a lot of bridges. These physical symbols of our inventiveness, strength, and perseverance serve as more than a mere means to safely cross. Maybe they hold the answers to all of life’s problems.

But, hey, if you believe that, then I have a bridge to sell you.



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Fields of DREAMS

BY BUDDY ROBERTS
SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

Baseball has been described as symbolic to American culture, part of a trifecta that also includes hot dogs and apple pie. It’s called America’s pastime and the perfect sport. Its terminology has become part of the national vernacular. It’s played in venues that range from massive Major League stadiums to recreation league diamonds in small towns from Long Island to Pasadena.

It is on those small fields that many believe the best baseball is played – baseball that isn’t played for millions of dollars in compensation or lucrative endorsement deals, but simply for the fun of the game and being with friends.

Talladega County is home to many such venues, the Town of Munford’s youth

league facilities serving as the setting for the accompanying photographs. The looks on the youngsters’ faces, the intensity in their eyes, they eye black stains on their faces, and the dirt stains on their uniforms attest to how much they’re enjoying themselves.

“We play hard and catch the ball,” a five-year-old second baseman was heard to say at the end of game.

“We hit the ball and throw fast,” the youngster’s counterpart on third added. “I know how to throw the ball to first base.”

“We have a lot of players who can hit good,” the team’s catcher chimed in.

While most who take the field in youth leagues will later occupy Major League

stadiums as fans rather than players, that’s okay. It’s been said that sometimes you don’t know the value of a moment until it become a memory, and baseball continues to provide memories that last a lifetime. For many who are now adults, a part of them will always be squinting in to the sun, sliding into first, and celebrating with their fiends on the baseball fields of their youth.

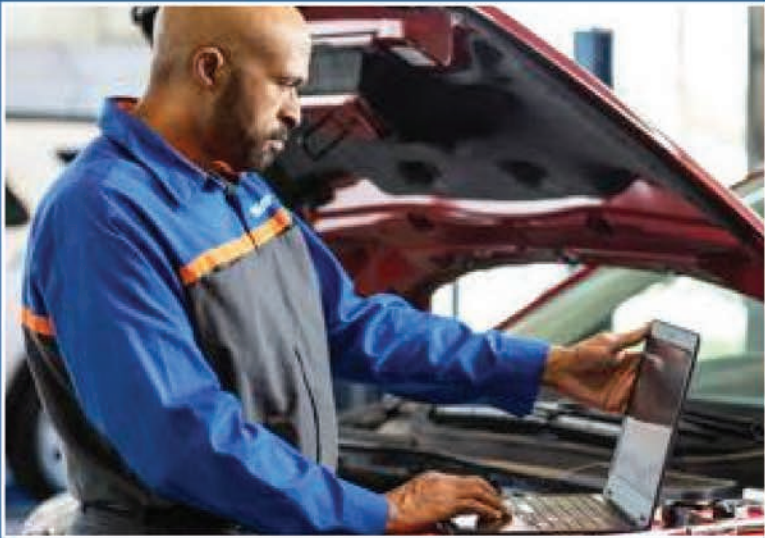


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Leeds native begins her year of service as Miss Alabama 2025

Emma Terry will represent her home state at Miss America competition on September 7

BY BUDDY ROBERTS
SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

“What was going through your mind while you were waiting for the final name to be called?” I asked Emma Terry by phone nine days after she was crowned Miss Alabama 2025

“It was the most surreal moment of my life,” she said with a smile in her voice, “although I’d been in the position of standing there as the top two twice before. In the Miss Alabama competition, they call the name of the first runner-up first, so when they didn’t say my name, it didn’t register with me for a moment. I was just experiencing this intense sense of peace and calmness knowing that I had done everything I could up



to that point to be the best version of myself.” The 22-year-old UAB graduate was crowned June 28 by Abbie Stockard, Miss Alabama 2024, to whom she was first runner-up in last summer’s competition. “I love Abbie so much. She’s an incredible friend to me and has done incredible things with her service initiative,” Emma said, even as she’s still adjusting to the idea that the crown and title have been passed to her. “I was at the post office the other day – didn’t have the crown on or even a full face of make-up – and someone asked me, ‘Aren’t you that girl from Leeds who

won Miss Alabama?’ And I had to think for a second before I remembered, ‘Oh, my goodness, I am!’ I don’t know that it ever really will sink in.” I doubt she will allow it to. I’ve known Emma for eight years, and her success in the Miss Alabama organization was fait accompli. I could see big things in store for her the first time we spoke, when she had been named Miss Cahaba Valley’s Teen. Seven titles later, she’s more seasoned, assured, and confident, but essentially the same Emma: optimistic, real, compassionate, resilient, and still just that girl from Leeds. “Through the Miss Alabama organization, I have grown up and become a more empowered and confident version of myself,” she says,



SUBMITTED PHOTO
Emma Terry is congratulated by her mother Amy after being crowned Miss Alabama 2025.



PHOTO BY BUDDY ROBERTS/THE DAILY HOME
Emma makes a visit to the Birmingham Sailing Club on Logan Martin Lake.

“but I think Emma still is and always has stayed the same. I have always known that I wanted to make a difference and have an impact in the lives of others. Throughout the coming year, you’re going to continually hear me say how grateful I am to have this opportunity to do it.” Her primary vehicle for making a difference through

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the Miss Alabama organization is her community service initiative, Stomping Out ALS One Step at a Time. She developed it in honor of her grandfather, Stewart Simpson, who died in 2024 after battling amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) for more than two decades.

Stomping Out ALS One Step at a Time became a 501c3 nonprofit last year, and its mission is to promote awareness about ALS (which Emma says is considered “a rare disease” that affects 30,000 Americans) and support fundraising efforts toward finding a cure.

“As an advocate, the challenge for me is to generate momentum for finding a cure,” she said. “The number of Americans with ALS is not in the hundreds of thousands. It’s not in the millions. It’s 30,000. That’s why a personal connection is so important in helping people understand why we need to find a cure. When I talk to people, I provide that connection.

“Even if I have just

met you and started sharing my story about how I changed my grandfather’s diapers, how we dealt with bed sores, how I’ve taken exams from hospital rooms, how I’ve spent the night in an ER waiting room to deal with a feeding tube crisis and sepsis, that creates a personal connection. The main two associations that most people have with ALS are Lou Gehrig and the ice bucket challenge, but they don’t know how to make that connection between ALS and those two things. So I’m the person that can make that connection. And then also share my personal story and make them even more passionate and understand truly why this is such an important cause to support. And it’s really been a beautiful thing over the past seven years to see my community and the Miss Alabama family, support the cause and understand why it’s so important to me personally and how it’s affecting 30,000 other Americans and families and communities across the country.”

The average life

span after an ALS diagnosis is two to five years, but Stewart Simpson lived with the disease for 22. “That is remarkable,” Emma said. “He was a very resilient person, obviously,

and he fought every day not to give into the disease. I helped care for him since I was a little girl, and I appreciate the gift of having so much time with him, even though it was so sad to see

transitions of the disease happen to him so slowly.”

As a young caregiver, she was inspired by her grandfather’s resilience.

“He taught me

how to continue to find the light in the darkest moments. When you’re in the middle of a pandemic, you’re sitting in an ER parking lot because

See **AMERICA** on page **8H**

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From AMERICA on page 7H

your grandfather’s blood pressure has dramatically dropped and the paramedics are saying, ‘You gotta get him somewhere now,’ and it’s midnight and they’re wheeling him out to the helicopter pad to airlift him to Princeton because that’s the only bed available in Birmingham, and he’s septic for the first time, and he had a kidney stone that became infected – just this perfect storm of pure chaos in life – you just have to sit there and be resilient. So life has taught me a lot about the importance of optimism and positivity because that is the only thing that I believe is going to carry you through those really hard moments.

“I’m so passionate about

this cause because of those experiences that I’ve had, because of those things that I’ve gone through with my family. I mean, my mom has changed her dad’s diapers. I’ve changed my grandfather’s diapers. My uncle has changed his dad’s diapers, and my grandmother has changed her husband’s diapers because of this disease. No one should have to do that. It gives me such motivation, and I realize that my family was not the only one going through this and fighting and struggling through the disease. There are other people that are fighting the same fight. I want to contribute to something that’s bigger than myself. And so that’s why I do the work that I do.”



PHOTO BY BUDDY ROBERTS/THE DAILY HOME

native and Miss Alabama 2025 Emma Terry.

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The Pell City Chamber of Commerce board members for the upcoming year. Pictured: (L-R) back row- Philip Brewer, Jacob Compton, Urainah Glidewell, William Bullard, Caran Wilbanks, Stephanie Garner, Nicole Anderson Front row- President-Elect Thomas Ray Mauldin, President-Shirley Kujan, Treasurer Donald Gover, Vice President Rotunda Forman Not pictured: Jean Speer, Chelsea Isbell

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Talladega and St. Clair's HOMETOWN LAKE

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BY FAITH DORN
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Local waters hosted the Flying Scot Women's North American Championship, an event of the Flying Scot Sailing Association, in late spring. Seventeen teams of two and three sailors totaling 40 women registered for the event at the Birmingham Sailing Club. Participants representing different sailing clubs attended from seven states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Texas.

The Flying Scot is a 19-foot centerboard sloop and is one of the oldest and largest sailboat classes in the world. The Flying Scot was designed by Sandy Douglass in 1956. Douglass had previously designed the Thistle, another popular class of sailboat.

Amy Sides has been a member of the Birmingham Sailing Club for about 25 years, joining when she moved to Birmingham. Her sailing career started when she was a child, beginning by taking sailing lessons while visiting her aunt and uncle in Connecticut. Now, Sides serves as director of the Birmingham Sailing Club's junior sailing program. She was also a participant in the Flying Scot Women's NAC this year.

"I was the skipper, which means I drove the boat. The teams are made of one skipper and one or two crew. The crew do a lot of things like adjusting and raising the sails," Sides explained. "Another skipper, Dianne Hart, and I were a team during this regatta. She had to become more familiar with the other side of sailing as crew."

Another Birmingham Sailing Club member allowed the women to borrow his Flying Scot and helped them practice. Both Hart and Sides usually sail a Thistle, so they needed to practice sailing the Flying Scot several times before the NAC to get used to the differences between both sailboats, including the lightness of the Thistle and the extra inertia of the Flying Scot.

"Sailing is basically the same from boat to boat, but to race them, there are



particulars that you want to focus on," said Sides, who enjoyed the camaraderie of the event. "It was exciting to be there with a bunch of women sailors. I hadn't really participated in an all-women event since college. It was a lot of fun. I enjoyed the challenge of improving my sailing in a different type of boat which I have sailed before but not very often."

"When you race sailboats, you never know the conditions you will have: wind, weather, waves and currents, so you have to practice in all different conditions," she added. "I was really excited to have the chance to be part of this national event and to not have to travel far. It was fun to have ladies from all over the country come to our club. Someone traveled 600 miles to compete."

The winning team of the Flying Scot Women's North American Championship, Greta Mittman and Heidi Gough, represented Corinthian Sailing Club in Dallas, Texas. The team of Birmingham Sailing Club's Sally Morriss and Sherrie Galaway of Dallas placed second in the regatta.

Stan Graham, a member of Birmingham Sailing Club and one of the organizers of the regatta, said that "Salty" Sally Morriss sailed her father Jim's original Flying Scot.

"She's been sailing since she was 12 years old. Her father, Dr. Johnson, was a pediatrician in Vestavia. He was one of our early members and was very instrumental in starting our Flying Scot fleet in the mid-to-late-1970s," said Graham, who served as the PRO, or Principal Race Officer, for the event.

"The regatta is a timed event. You set a course with a starting line, give the sailors a five-minute warning, then they cross the

line, and the regatta begins," Graham said.

He was out on the water early to study the wind. "Obviously, you can't see the wind, but it is constantly oscillating and shifting. The quicker you can get to the mark, you can take advantage of those shifts. You have to be good at all points of sail," he explained. "You make judgements on where the wind might be better. You study all these factors, and it takes a lot of skill."

According to Graham, although the event was scheduled to take place over two days, the conditions on Sunday were not very promising, so the organizers made an effort to do three races on Saturday. "At some regattas you may not get but one race, and those are kind of disappointing," he said.

Dianne Hart teamed with Amy Sides in the regatta. Both women usually skipper, so Hart decided that she would crew during this event.

"Our fleet and our club were the dual hosts for the NAC," said Hart, "We had a cookout on Friday night and got to meet all the other competitors. On Saturday night, there was a catered meal at the Birmingham Sailing Club with a slideshow of various photos people had taken. It was a really nice evening. On Sunday morning, we had mimosas and really nice breakfast casseroles."

Serving as crew on her team made Hart appreciate the role again.

"It was good for me. I enjoyed being able to do the crew features as best and as fast as I could. It has been a long time since I have crewed, especially in a race. Normally, my husband crews for me in our Thistle, so it gave me some more appreciation for him," she said, laughing. "It was a



PHOTOS BY JEFFREY SIDES AND RANDY LENTZ

really fun time. Usually, we just sail women and men; it doesn't matter, but it was nice to have an all-women event and have nice little feminine touches throughout the weekend. There were some really good sailors, and we were really happy as a club to host."

Erin Sides, Amy Sides' daughter and one of the women who chose to be on a three-person team, described the entire event as "really cool. That was the most women sailors I have seen at this club."

The younger Sides said that she usually sails a 420, a 4.2-meter-long sailboat that she equates to a "baby Flying Scot."

With encouragement from her mother, Erin decided to skipper in the regatta. She said this event was only her third or fourth time sailing

a Flying Scot. Her three-person team was filled out by another member of the Birmingham Sailing Club and the mother of one of her sailing coaches.

"I think I was the youngest skipper, if not the youngest sailor. I turn 20 in September," Erin said. "I enjoy sailing and spending time with the club. Sometimes it can be intimidating because people have more experience than you—sometimes more years of experience than you've been alive. I just go out there with the mindset of whatever happens I am going to learn."

To learn more about the Flying Scot Sailing Association, visit fssa.com.

To learn more about the Birmingham Sailing Club, visit birminghamsailingclub.org.

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Finding renewal and purpose
in Talladega County’s

Abandoned
STRUCTURES

BY SUSAN COOK
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT



In the absence of humanity, nature again takes hold. Its wildness reclaims the land, gradually erasing all traces of human intervention. Vines creep up the crumbling walls, their tendrils snaking through broken windows, weaving a tapestry of life against a backdrop of decay. Nature carpets what remains with soft moss and lichen, adding a touch of vibrant green to the muted tones of forgotten homes.

Birds return to claim their dominion. The wind, unhindered by walls or panes, whistles through the empty spaces, carrying seeds that find fertile ground in neglected gardens. Over time, the abandoned houses become enveloped by a lush wilderness. Trees, slender and resilient, emerge from cracks in the pavement, their branches reaching toward the sun. They cast dappled shadows on the overgrown lawns, where wildflowers now bloom, painting the once plain green patch with bursts of color.

Squirrels scurry along the sagging fences, amassing a network of secret pathways. Rabbits burrow into the earth, creating cozy homes within the forgotten foundations.

As the seasons pass, nature reclaims its throne with patient and persistent grace. The abandoned houses become interwoven with the surrounding ecosystem, an integral part of its ever-changing tapestry. These dwellings stand as silent spectators to the resilience of nature, a testament to its ability to mend and restore.

In a sense, abandoned houses find a new purpose. They become havens for biodiversity, ecosystems unto themselves. Each cracked crevice teems with life, fostering a delicate balance between decay and regeneration. Amidst the solitude, there is a quiet harmony between the remnants of human existence and the forces of nature. Even in our absence, nature’s relentless spirit persists, reclaiming what was once ours and transforming it into a strange and wild beauty.

And so, the cycle continues. These abandoned houses, though a little sad in their forgotten state, become a testament to the eternal rhythm of life, a reminder that even in the face of impermanence, nature finds a way to flourish.



PHOTOS BY BUDDY ROBERTS AND BOB CRISP



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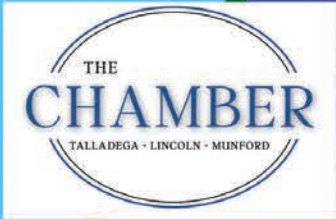
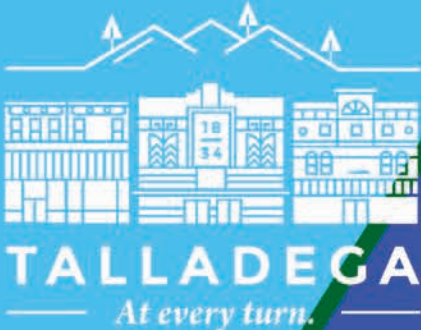
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Ever tried a dill pickle CUPCAKE?

Hometown bakery offers custom cakes and a variety of traditional and unique cupcake flavors

BY VALLEAN JACKSON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Klarissa’s Cakery is a locally owned business producing delectable treats that are sure to add joy to any celebration. The St. Clair County bakery is popular for its custom cakes, unique flavors, wide selection of cupcakes, and friendly customer service.

“I discovered my love for baking at a young age, when I was about 9,” says owner Klarissa Hendrix. “My grandmother has baked my entire life, and that was a way for us to connect. But the more I did it at home as I got older, the more I realized that this is my calling. I tried to venture into another career, but my heart was not in it. I prayed for guidance on what to do, followed my heart, and started with a 1970s South Camper when I was about 17 or 18, turned it into a food truck, and things took off almost seamlessly.”

In 2022, Hendrix opened her first storefront in Odenville, as her food truck camper couldn’t meet the demand for the orders she was receiving. “Odenville was amazing and welcoming

for my first location, but after a while I needed to expand again.” Now she is back in her hometown of Springville with a bigger location.

“If I can make a difference and just give somebody a smile to help their day be a little better or sweeter, it reiterates what I am supposed to be doing and am fulfilling my purpose,” she says. “Springville has been amazing, as well as Odenville, in supporting my business, and it has just been really humbling. I appreciate all of the communities near and far for their level of support received and the chance to meet everyone who comes in.”

When asked what makes Klarissa’s Cakery unique, Hendrix names its custom cakes, custom fondant work, detailing, cupcake flavors, and the variety. She added that she strives to have a new flavor in the showcase every day.

“I always want to make sure that my products don’t just look good, but they taste good,” she says. “I love creating stuff, and when I’m in the kitchen and just in my zone, that’s when I’m able to make all the unique flavors come to life. We have done



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

some really out-there flavors, like a dill pickle cupcake. It was interesting but did well. Nevertheless, after all these years, what keeps me creating and going is the passion of loving what I do. Even on the hard days, it’s worth it because I know I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing.”

Klarissa’s Cakery is at 37 Marietta Rd. in Springville. Hours are 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays and 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturdays. For updates about flavors of the week, visit its Facebook page, visit klarissascakery.com, or email to klarissascakery@gmail.com.



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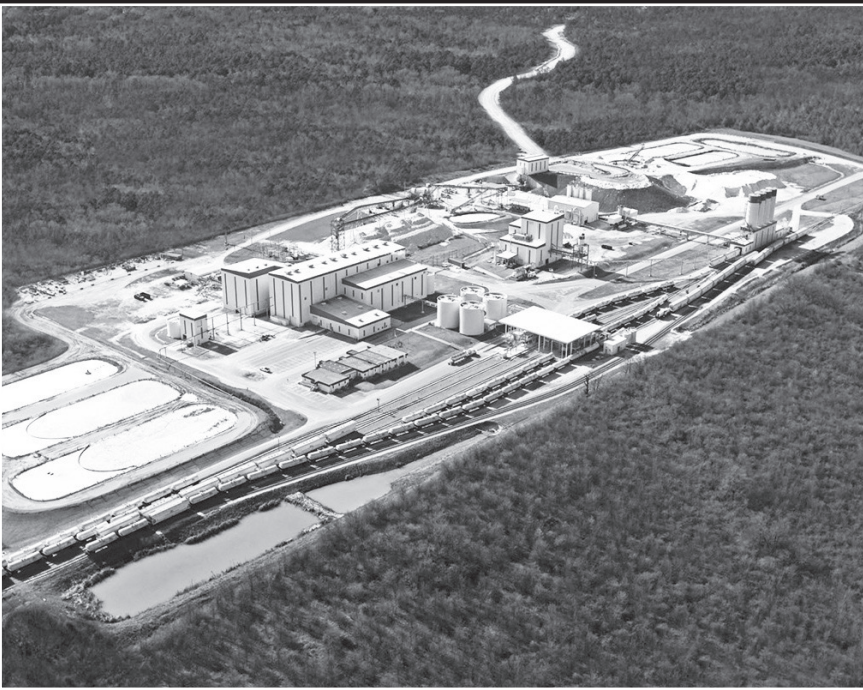


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Reflections on MY HOMETOWN

BY BUDDY ROBERTS
SPECIAL PROJECTS EDITOR

It was a midsummer morning straight out of an Andy Hardy movie in my hometown of Summerville, Georgia.

Zell Miller was coming to town to dedicate the newly renovated Dowdy Park (named in honor of J.R. Dowdy, who had served as mayor when I was an infant) at the intersection of U.S. Highway 27 and University Street, complete with a just-finished gazebo from which the then-governor and later-U.S. senator would speak.

Walking on and off the quarter-mile asphalt track past the historic Couey House (constructed c. 1840 by A.M. Couey and sons and relocated to



the park 150 years later when a new highway steamrolled over its original site), the playground where I had gamboled as a child, the picnic pavilion, and Town Branch, I could see the governor and his entourage situating themselves behind the red, white, and blue bunting, streamers, and balloons that decorated the rotunda.

The high school band was interpreting some classic standard as festively as it could, and I was evidently as full of nostalgia, wistfulness, and sentimentality as Joey Chestnut was full of hot dogs earlier this month at Coney Island. I

know I was full of it because I thought the corniest thing I could possibly have thought to myself as I approached the bandstand and the growing crowd that had come to see the governor.

“This is my town.” That’s it. That’s what I thought to myself.

In my defense, I was still in my early 20s, completely caught up in a moment, and too naive to realize that it wouldn’t last. Within two years, I was no longer a resident of my hometown. I now have a complicated relationship with it.

Whether we still live there or not, complicated relationships with the communities in which we grew up aren’t uncommon. Some of us couldn’t wait to get out, only to be happily



drawn back later in life. Others never thought we’d leave, then unexpectedly heard the call of the vagabond.

My vagabond shoes have brought me, after a couple of stops along the way, to Talladega County, and it has been from here while working on this annual supplement to The Daily Home that my thoughts return every summer to my hometown. And I sometimes wonder if I’m being too hard on my younger self.

“This is my town.” Was it really naive and corny of me to have thought

that? Shouldn’t everyone think such things about their hometowns? As we age, after all, hometown becomes more of a state of mind than a place, and especially in such turbulent and uncertain days as these, it’s not unnatural to feel nostalgic for the places and times that made us feel safe and secure. Our hometowns represent that.

They also represent the best in each of us. Yes, maybe that is kind of corny, but being reminded of who we were, who we are, and how we got

from there to here is part of life, one that grows in significance the older we get.

So regardless of how complicated your relationship with your hometown may be and whether your hometown is Talladega, Sylacauga, Pell City, Munford, Oak Grove, or somewhere other than Talladega and St. Clair counties, we at The Daily Home hope you have enjoyed reading these stories that our team has worked hard to prepare and our advertisers have made it possible for us to share with you.

Summer MEMORIES

Barefoot summers are all about freedom

BY MADELINE KLINE
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

When I think of all my barefoot

memories, my mind is filled with metaphors about freedom. Not only that, but what it means to take the risk needed to be free. Being barefoot feels like something primal and natural, and that rugged kind of living can end up with you getting poked by something you didn’t expect.

Recently, I visited Noccalula Falls. I ended up being barefoot for a lot of

my hike. My friend is a photographer, and we wanted to get some outdoorsy, “ethereal” shots. I can not explain the joy I felt on some of the coolest, lushest greenery I had seen in a while. Obviously not every step was pleasant. I specifically don’t like how sweetgum pods feel under bare feet. But it was so worth it to feel the earth and feel a little wild in the moment too.

Most of our barefoot memories likely come from childhood. When playing outside, it was a little more expected for kids. There was so much to learn from the world in those moments. I stepped on bees, rough gravel, even glass once or twice. My aunt’s dogs scratched my feet when I was chasing her around, poor thing.

That’s the price of freedom isn’t it? Learning through a little pain? It seems



like a crucial part of knowing one’s world, feeling all of its sharp corners and rough edges. Then comes the rules, and fear of breaking them. You will step somewhere you’re not supposed to, bleed a little, and either put on some shoes or avoid that path altogether.

I’m barefoot a lot

less as an adult, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing, and it was a choice I made all by myself. I’m not in my parents’ mown yards anymore, and I’ve stepped on about everything I wanted to step on. But sometimes I miss walking down neighborhood roads without shoes, just because it felt like

my first choice I could make with real consequences.

Exploring freedom through just merely being shoeless might be a stretch. It’s not like having to wear shoes is some sort of oppression, but there was something innocent in spending most of my summers without them.

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Mike and Jeanette Wadsworth inspect some of this year’s harvest.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Wadsworth Farms takes pride in producing tasty and nutritious fruit. “One cup of blueberries is only 83 calories, contains 14 percent of daily fiber, is low in fat and sodium, and is a good source of vitamins,” says owner Mike Wadsworth. The farm is at 330 Wadsworth Road in Cropwell.

It’s Blueberry SEASON

AT WADSWORTH FARMS

BY VALLEAN JACKSON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

Just as many of us were counting down to the first day of summer, Cropwell residents were eagerly waiting for the opening day of blueberry season at Wadsworth Farms. The fourth-generation, 114-year-old farm has been designated as a Century and Heritage Farm by the State of Alabama, and it’s a place that locals strongly recommend as worthy of a visit. It’s frequently described as a peaceful, fun experience, with the added benefit of a bounty of locally grown fruit.

“When we first started, we would say that we would open on Father’s Day, and now the climate has changed enough that it is warmer earlier,” owner Mike Wadsworth said. “So this year, blueberry season started the week before Father’s Day. This year we didn’t have any big freezes, so we have a big crop. Most years, we have a late frost that knocks some of the berries off, and that’s okay. There’s nothing we can do about that, but it’s been about two years of the last 30 years that we lost a complete crop from freezes. Hopefully that doesn’t happen again any time soon, but other than that, I would say we do pretty good.”

Wadsworth Farms was established in 1911 by Wadsworth’s grandparents Lee and Ella Wadsworth, who started it as a peach orchard. Mike now runs the farm with his wife Jeanette, and in 1987 they planted the very first blueberries, knowing that the farm needed to produce more than just cattle and timber. The initial plan was to produce strawberries, but found they proved too expensive to plant and maintain. Finding success with blueberries, Mike believe that he is keeping the tradition of what his grandparents started while adding his own vision to the farm’s legacy.

“What keeps me motivated to keep going,” he said, “is meeting the various people that come to visit. I’ve had archeologists, geologists, scientists, doctors, you name it come to the farm. I think it’s also a stewardship thing for me because I don’t like seeing vacant land. I always try to make things better, and I think that’s something everybody should try to do.”

The farm offers seven varieties of rabbiteye blueberries, and Wadsworth says that he strives to offer the sweetest berries possible. For this year, the farm could have opened sooner based on the color of the berries, but they weren’t sweet enough. He refuses to sell berries that aren’t ripe and sweet, and he’d rather lose some berries than not offer his best harvest.

Wadsworth Farm is a you-pick-it farm where customers can come grab a bag and bucket, pick as much or as little as they please, purchase, and enjoy at their leisure at a picnic table on the farm or back at their homes. Eating the fruit is a pleasant experience, and Mike believes picking it can be too.

“When you’re out there picking blueberries, you’re just out there with your own thoughts. You can think about anything or nothing at all, and you’re among nature. People can also see first-hand where their blueberries are coming from, and I think that’s important too.”

Wadsworth Farms is open seven days a week from sunup to sundown and until the blueberry season is over. It is closed during heavy rains or if there is lightning in the vicinity. For step-by-step blueberry recipes, visit the farm’s Facebook page or visit www.wadsworthblueberries.com.



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The Ritz

THEATRE

A TALLADEGA GEM

BY VALLEAN JACKSON
DAILY HOME CORRESPONDENT

In a world of screens and endless streaming, live theater remains of America’s most cherished cultural pastimes. For Talladega residents, the magic of live theater isn’t a distant idea—it’s a local experience housed in the vibrant Historic Ritz Theatre, an

Art Deco gem that brings stories to life right in their own backyard. “The Ritz Theatre enriches cultural life, brings people together, and supports local growth,” says executive director Lauren Deal. “It offers a shared space for entertainment, education, and artistic expression, helping residents connect through storytelling and live performance.

Theatres often boost the local economy by attracting visitors, creating jobs, and supporting nearby businesses. They also provide youth and adults with opportunities to learn, perform, and grow creatively. Whether restoring a historic building or introducing new programming, a theatre becomes a valuable hub for community pride, engagement, and revitalization.” The theater was built in 1936, and it was restored and reopened for operation in 1988. The beautifully restored 520-seat theater serves as a vibrant hub for the arts in the region. Community engagement is a core part of The Ritz’ mission, with events such as the Low Country Shrimp Boil

& Drawdown, summer picnics, and the Mardi Gras Gala that brings residents together for food, fellowship, and entertainment. Children and families benefit from theatre arts programs and recitals, including collaborations with groups like Missoula Children’s Theatre and local dance companies. The venue also offers film screenings and maintains a professional-grade stage equipped with modern sound and lighting systems. With accessible seating, concessions, and a location in the heart of downtown Talladega, the Historic Ritz Theatre is a beloved landmark offering something for everyone, from unforgettable performances to cherished community traditions.

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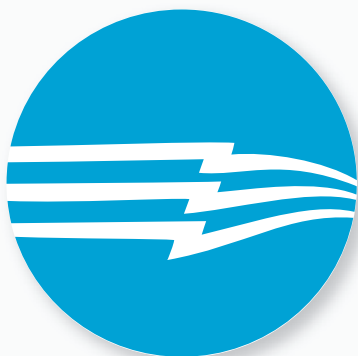
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