2025 ISSUE

Fall Guide

OF THE FOOTHILLS

A Companion to the 59th Annual Autumn Leaves Festival

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There's something magical about Autumn Leaves weekend in Mount Airy. The crisp air, the changing leaves, the familiar sound of fiddles and banjos, and most of all, the feeling of community that fills our streets. Whether you've been coming to the Autumn Leaves Festival for years or you're joining us for the very first time, we're so glad you're here.

This festival is about more than booths and music stages. It's a celebration of the artisans and craftsmen who share their God-given talents with us, the nonprofits who work tirelessly to prepare for this weekend to bring us some of our favorite foods, and the volunteers who come together to make it all possible. As you stroll the streets, you'll find inspiration everywhere you look, generations-old recipes, handcrafted treasures, and music that speaks to our roots. I encourage you to slow down, take it all in, and enjoy visiting with your friends and neighbors.

We are grateful for the support of all our sponsors who help keep this tradition thriving. A special thank you to our Title Sponsor, **Carport Central**, along with our Harvest Sponsors, the **North Carolina Education Lottery** and the **City of Mount Airy**. Thank you to The **Mount Airy Media News** and **Root & Rise Branding** for this beautiful guide!

From my heart to yours, thank you for being a part of one of the Southeast's largest and most beloved festivals. May your weekend here be filled with joy, laughter, and the magic that makes Mount Airy and Autumn Leaves so special.

I'll see you there,
Ashley



Ashly Lancaster
President & CEO

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Autumn Leaves Festival visitors looking for something to do after the shopping may enjoy a hike and panoramic views inside Pilot Mountain State Park. Photo by Doug Rice Photography

Escape the crowds

Discover Mount Airy's natural side during the festival weekend

By Ryan Kelly
ryan.kelly@mtairynews.com

The annual Autumn Leaves Festival draws shoppers and vendors from around the state and beyond into downtown Mount Airy for a weekend filled with arts, crafts, food, and live music.

That said, not everyone ascribes to the notion of 'shop 'til you drop' and may be looking for something more to do once the booths have been perused and bargains acquired.

For those who may need a break from browsing craft booths, Mount Airy's location in the Blue Ridge foothills offers outdoor escapes for just about any energy level.

Just like shopping at the Autumn Leaves Festival, Surry County's outdoor options include some things that stand right out, others that are reliable finds, and some that take you way off the beaten path.

Whether you're the reluctant spouse looking for adventure or simply seeking to enjoy the natural beauty that makes this area special, options abound. Outdoor activities range from gentle strolls to challenging climbs to epic bike rides.

Outdoor adventure begins just steps from the festival in downtown; sometimes you need to step away from the festival crowds and into the crisp October air.

The Crown Jewel: Pilot Mountain rises above

Rising over two thousand feet above sea level and visible for miles, the profile of Pilot Mountain stands right out as the area's most recognizable outdoor attraction. The Saura Indians called it "Jomeokee" - the Great Guide - and modern visitors still use its distinctive quartzite pinnacle for navigation across the Piedmont.

Pilot Mountain State Park, just 20 minutes from downtown Mount Airy, offers hiking options for every fitness level. The summit area provides panoramic views of the Piedmont and the Sauratown and Blue Ridge mountains, making it ideal for fall foliage viewing or birdwatching.



A paddler enjoys the Yadkin River.

Surry County has four navigable rivers with six access points across the county where kayaks and canoes can enter.

With over a million visitors annually, the park can get crowded, especially on weekends. Arriving early helps secure parking, and the park offers shuttle service from the visitor center to the summit area during peak times.

However, multiple trail options stay clear of the crowded summit access. These range from easy walks to challenging climbs, with several trails offering different access points to spread out from the masses.

The park spans two sections - the mountain area with the famous pinnacle and a river section along the Yadkin River - connected by the Corridor Trail. This gives visitors options beyond just the summit climb, including the easy Little Pinnacle Overlook for spectacular views without the challenging hike. On a clear day, visitors can view 3,000 square miles from this point. Located above a stone wall on the upper side of the summit parking area, the overlook is a great place to take pictures.

For those seeking a different nature experience, the Pilot Creek Meadow Walk offers a peaceful alternative where visitors can explore and observe birds, butterflies, dragonflies, and more as they walk through restored warm-season grass meadows. This mowed path leads to a small pond and is part of the Rosalynn Carter Butterfly Trail, established to benefit native pollinators and grassland birds. Located at 382 Boyd Nelson Road in Pinnacle, this area provides an accessible nature experience for those seeking wildlife viewing over summit climbing.

Close to home: reliable finds

There is no reason to head down U.S. Highway 52 to Pilot Mountain for a walkabout. A gentler outdoor experience is found right in town courtesy of Mount Airy's Granite City Greenway.

The horseshoe shaped greenway offers 6.6 miles of paved trails around Mount Airy that offer a variety of elevations and scenery including waterfowl as it follows the Ararat River and Lovills Creek.

The paved surface makes it accessible for all ages and fitness levels, perfect for an evening stroll after a day at the festival or an early morning walk before the crowds arrive. The greenway connects to downtown and provides easy access for festival visitors staying in the area via Riverside Park or the H.B. Rowe Environmental Park – among others.

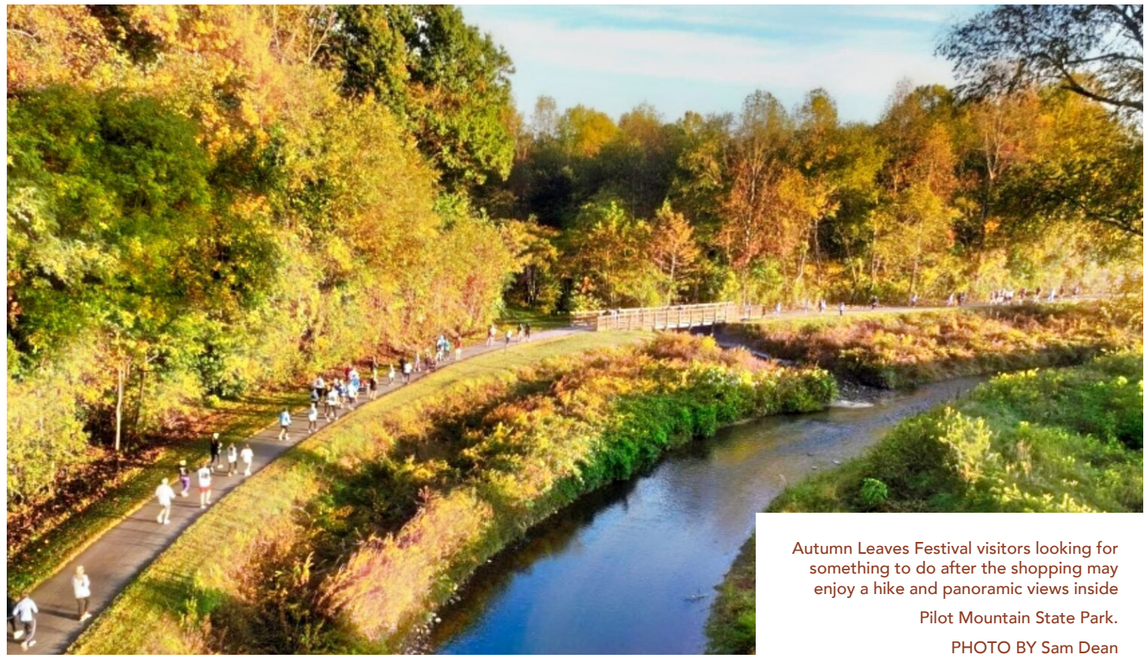
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As leaves fall around them, a pair of bicyclists enjoy a fall ride in Mount Airy.

Visit Mayberry photo





Autumn Leaves Festival visitors looking for something to do after the shopping may enjoy a hike and panoramic views inside Pilot Mountain State Park.

PHOTO BY Sam Dean

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One section of the greenway runs from Veterans Memorial Park south along Lovills Creek past Mount Airy High School. From there it is on toward the Rotary Pup Dog Park for those who may have Fido along for the weekend. Jenny Walsh and her dog Rocco were spotted recently at the dog park. She offered, "This is something we needed around here, not just for the dogs but the dog lovers."

Once past the dog park, the route continues to follow the creek and then the Andy Griffith Parkway as it traverses to the southeast. The trail then bends back up north at the Ararat River and then under the canopy on toward the H.B. Rowe Environmental Park and then Riverside Park.

Along the way, you'll find kayak and canoe launches, trout fishing access, and connections to downtown dining and shopping.

For something completely different, consider joining a ghost tour in either downtown Mount Airy or Pilot Mountain. These weekend walking tours combine local history with spine-tingling tales, giving you a chance to explore the area's past while getting some exercise. October timing makes these seasonally appropriate, and they're perfect for couples looking for different evening activities.

Off the beaten path: take a ride

For those discovering the area's outdoor offerings during their festival visit, Surry County boasts an extensive cycling network which will provide some with a brisk journey around the county. For other visitors, these adventures may be a compelling reason to return when spring weather makes longer adventures more appealing.

When warmer weather returns - or for the truly hardy October cyclists - Surry County offers exceptional riding opportunities both on roads and trails that entice riders to hit the road.

Bikeway loops offer more than just scenic rides

The Surry Scenic Bikeway is a homegrown effort that represents one of North Carolina's most comprehensive county-wide cycling systems, with over 500 miles of officially designated routes. What makes this special for visitors is that several routes begin right in downtown Mount Airy, so you don't need to drive elsewhere to access the network.

The system offers seven distinct routes ranging from shorter farmland loops with views of the Sauratown Mountain Range and the world's largest open-face granite quarry to challenging 58-mile rides to Pilot Mountain.

For history buffs, the 12.5-mile Rockford Connector takes riders through the historic village of Rockford, once Surry County's government seat, where you can explore the Rockford General Store and old Methodist church.

The longer Mount Airy-Pilot Mountain Loop offers unique attractions including the gravesite of Eng and Chang Bunker (the original Siamese twins) and the Southern Heritage Apple Orchard - the only one of its kind in the United States.

Routes integrate with local wineries and historic sites, allowing cyclists to combine outdoor adventure with cultural exploration.

The rolling terrain of the Blue Ridge foothills provides everything from gentle pastoral rides along rivers to challenging climbs for more adventurous cyclists.

Mountain biking: off-road options

For those seeking dirt over pavement, three local trail systems offer single-track adventures from beginner-friendly loops to technical challenges.

Westwood Park in Mount Airy features three trails including the Green Trail which offers a beginner-friendly introduction. Meanwhile the Red Trail challenges riders with steep climbs including the aptly named "Widowmaker Climb" and "Switchback Hill." The newest Orange Trail added stream crossings and technical features to the mix of trails in 2022.

Fisher River Park in Dobson, about 20 minutes from Mount Airy, provides technical single track known for its rock gardens, bridges, and "little drop-offs." The park offers a range of experiences from fast downhills to challenging climbs. The park's location along the Fisher River also provides opportunities for post-ride cooling off along the banks of one of the county's four rivers.

Pilot Mountain State Park has limited mountain biking options, primarily the Corridor Trail connecting the mountain and river sections of the park.



Cyclists navigate a bike trail at Fisher River Park in Dobson. Surry Parks and Rec photo

Planning an escape

October weather in the foothills typically offers ideal conditions for outdoor activities - crisp mornings, warm afternoons, and spectacular fall colors. Whether choosing a challenging hike up Pilot Mountain, a leisurely stroll along the greenway, or an evening ghost tour in Mayberry, the area provides natural beauty and outdoor recreation just minutes from the festival crowds.

After all, sometimes the best part of a craft festival weekend is the excuse it provides to explore somewhere new. Those explorations may lead to discoveries that yield more reasons to return when the seasons change and new adventures await.




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Festival Central?

Mount Airy and surrounding communities home to many fairs

By John Peters
jpeters@mtairynews.com



Mount Airy and Surry County are known for many things -- the hometown of Andy Griffith and inspiration for Mayberry; the massive Autumn Leaves Festival; and one of the nation's more influential regions on bluegrass and old time music -- not to mention its proximity to the Blue Ridge Parkway, Pilot Mountain State Park and plenty of outdoor opportunities.

Mount Airy might just as well be called the City of Festivals, and the greater Surry County region known as Festival Central.

That's because the Mount Airy and the surrounding towns have a calendar chocked full of major events, often drawing tens of thousands -- and occasionally more -- to the festivities.

Autumn Leaves Festival

Of course, the Big Kahuna of festivals is the annual Autumn Leaves Festival, held the second full weekend of October.

Every county and town has a fair or festival their local officials believe is big, and many are, but few can outpace Mount Airy's Autumn Leaves Festival, affectionately known as ALF. In a town of just 10,600, the population swells to a reported 200,000 or more during the three-day extravaganza.

The event began way back in 1966, more than half a century ago, as a means to celebrate the autumn harvest in what was

then primarily an agricultural community.

The booths and displays stayed close to that theme. Among the features in those early days was a booth where apple butter was made the old-timey way, with a gigantic vat of autumn butter being stirred for all to see; live displays on quilting and other rural farm crafts, and even a chance to milk a cow.

"Some fellow from Greensboro" came all the way to Mount Airy – three times – just to see a cow milked, the late Dr. Dale Simmons said in 2016, when he was being honored for helping to start the festival 50 years earlier. Simmons recalled how the cow had been dry on the determined man's first two visits to the festival, but the third time was a charm.

Milking a cow on Main Street, "that just tells you a little of what we were doing," in the early days of Autumn Leaves, he said, and how there was a widespread interest to see those kinds of things.

These days there are more than 200 booths set up — most occupied by top-notch handcrafters, artists, and a wide variety of novelty or specialty items on display. Generally there are about 25 different food vendors, featuring local favorites such as the ground steak sandwich or collared green sandwiches, to tropical fruit drinks and standard festival fare (hot dogs, sausage dogs, funnel cakes, cotton candy, BBQ plates and more). Most years between 35 and 40 bands play during the event — all local groups who have a personal connection to the old-time music so prevalent in the region's history.



There's something for everyone at the Autumn Leaves Festival, as this 4-year-old can attest while waiting for a balloon during the 2019 festival.



The gathering, routinely ranked as a Top 20 Event in the Southeast by the Southeast Tourism Society, is managed by the Greater Mount Airy Chamber of Commerce. Over the decades, the chamber and original organizers have entrusted the festival to a handful of individual festival directors who oversee the annual gathering.

One of those was Travis Frye. While he works as tourism coordinator for both the Dobson Tourism Authority and the Surry County Tourism Authority now, he served for several years as ALF coordinator while working with the chamber.

Several years ago he put his finger on one reason the Autumn Leaves Festival remains popular.

"We stay true to roots," he said during a 2019 interview. "The main thing we talk about is a sense of community. Although it's run by the chamber of commerce, we always want to include the community."

Even more evocative of those first festivals is the music available at the three-day gathering.

"All the music you hear is from locals," he said at the time. "We don't hire any outside big, elaborate bands … we try to stick to the roots of bluegrass and old time string music. We try to stick to those roots because we have so many great musicians."

Today, years after his remarks, that is still true, with old time, bluegrass, and gospel music bands from the region performing live throughout the three-day event. For more information on Autumn Leaves Festival, check out our full report of the 2025 ALF beginning on page 22 of this magazine.

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Floyd the Barber, portrayed by tribute artist Allan Newsome, addresses a packed Blackmon Amphitheatre during the Mayor's Proclamation and welcoming ceremonies of the 2021 Mayberry Days Festival.

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Mayberry Days

While Autumn Leaves may be the largest event in Mount Airy, in terms of the number of people descending on the city, Mayberry Days could very well be the best-known.

Mayberry Days, a gathering of thousands — sometimes tens of thousands — fans of "The Andy Griffith Show," takes place every September -- usually the next to last full weekend of the month -- with concerts, talks about the show and its enduring effect on people, along with appearances and performances by remaining cast members.

Founded in 1990 by the Surry Arts Council and its executive director, Tanya Jones, to mark the 30th anniversary of "The Andy Griffith Show's" network premiere, Mayberry Days was originally Mayberry Day, a one-off festival meant solely to commemorate the anniversary. Jones has said on many occasions there was no thought given to a second Mayberry Day, until people started calling, wanting to know what would be featured in 1991's version.

That meant there was a year two, and year three, and soon enough Mount Airy was the home for all things Mayberry. Over the years, the festival has expanded, first to two days, then three, and eventually to its present incarnation, a full week of shows, concerts, and related activities.

The annual Mayberry Days parade is a fan favorite for those attending the September festival. Here, Daniel Roebuck, who starred with Andy Griffith on the series "Matlock," rides in the lead car.





"People love learning more about 'The Andy Griffith Show' and meeting people involved with the show, but more than that, they like participating in activities that make them feel like they've stepped into Mayberry, as if they're experiencing the culture of the show," Tanya Jones said of the festival's still-growing popularity.

Highlights are the official Mayor's Proclamation, which occurs Friday morning of the event, a golf tournament named The Emmett, after Griffith's long-time local friend and supporter of the arts council, Emmett Forrest, and a Saturday parade focusing on the show's cast members and related guests attending the event.

An example of what a Mayberry Day fan might find comes from the 2025 festival schedule, which saw comedy shows by John Floyd (The Mount of Mayberry); screenings of the film "Murder in Coweta County" starring Andy Griffith and Johnny Cash; talks and performances by both Bill Knotts, nephew of Don Knotts, and Karen Knotts, Don Knotts' daughter; talks about the show, filming locations, and other subjects by authors and show historians; an apple peeling contest; "The Andy Griffith Show" trivia contests; a pork chop eating contest; checkers competitions, talent show featuring many Andy Griffith Show tribute artists; talks and performances, along with autograph sessions, featuring many of the actors who appeared on the show; rock-throwing, pie-eating, and hay bale tossing competitions, along with concerts by such groups as The Dillards, The Bellamy Brothers, The Embers Featuring Craig Willard, The Holiday Band, and others.

There are also trivia contests, Mayberry-related games and displays, and the list of activities could go on and on. The event has grown so popular it has many times been named one of the Top 20 Events in the Southeast by the Southeast Tourism Society. It has spun off similar fairs — the former Mayberry in the Midwest, the present Memories of Mayberry in Alabama and similar gatherings, throughout the South, and even a Mayberry-themed cruise each autumn.

For more information on Mayberry Days, visit: surryarts.org/mayberrydays

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Karen Knotts, daughter of Don Knotts, waves to the crowd during the Mayberry Days parade in 2023. She is a regular guest and a fan favorite at the annual Mayberry Days festival.





Contestants chat and play a few tunes while waiting their turn on stage for the contest portion of the annual Mount Airy Blue Grass and Old-Time Music Convention.

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Blue Grass and Old-Time Fiddlers Convention

Much of the old-time and bluegrass music enjoyed the world over has its roots in Surry County, and that heritage is celebrated every year with the annual Mount Airy Blue Grass and Old-Time Fiddlers Convention.

It might not be the oldest of the old-time music festivals, nor the largest, but it comes pretty close on both.

Generally held the first full weekend in June, the festival officially consists of two full days of competition, jam sessions, dancing, singing, education, and family entertainment.

Truth is, the first of the fans and musicians start showing up days before the official event, pitching their tent or parking their camper at Veterans Memorial Park in Mount Airy, where the festival is held. By week's end, hundreds of campers and tents are flung across the grounds — and most of the local hotel rooms are filled — by musicians and big-time fans.

In addition to the official competition and performances, jam sessions break out all across the grounds, sometimes featuring groups of musicians who have never played together -- maybe never seen each other -- before pulling up a chair or sitting on a nearby bench to form an little impromptu concert or jam sesh.

Many of those attending are regulars, some traveling five or ten miles, other traveling hundreds of miles to attend what they often describe as a musical family reunion.

Even among first timers, the sense of camaraderie takes hold fast, making strangers into quick friends. "We'll be back," is the oft-repeated refrain from those taking in their first blue grass and old-time festival.

One of the attractions — in addition to the friendship and musical performances — are the free old-time and bluegrass workshops scheduled during the week.

The Surry Arts Council works to bring in many of the old masters of music, as well as rising stars, to give workshops in a variety of disciplines, including fiddle, banjo, vocals, guitar, jams, dance, and more.

Camping is available by the day or week for full hook-up, water/electric only, and primitive camping. Advance reservations must be made for the full week.

While these represent three of the large, long-time festivals that call Mount Airy home, there are plenty of others.

For more information on the festival, visit: surryarts.org/mafiddlersconvention





Members of Ballet Folklorico del Museo de Mount Airy entertained the Budbreak and Cinco de Mayo crowds in Mount Airy when the two festivals overlapped.

Wine and Craft Beer Budbreak Festival

That's right, the hometown of Andy Griffith, the real-life Mayberry, holds a craft beer and wine festival each spring, and it's a doozie.

Timed for early May each spring, the festival occurs just about the time the grape vine buds break pen -- thus the festival original name, Budbreak.

Wineries and vineyards have become a major part of the local and regional agricultural economy, with more than a dozen of each dotting surrounding countryside, producing award-winning wines which rival some of the best vintages in the nation.

That is celebrated each year with the annual budbreak festival, held in downtown Mount Airy. Many of those area wineries, as well as others from neighboring regions and local craft breweries set up shop in downtown, so those attending the festival can sample the local goods.

The festival also includes plenty of live music, a few wine-flavored concoctions for sale (wine slushies are insanely popular during the fest), and occasionally some dancers or other performers from nearby fairs or gatherings will put in an appearance, offering some live entertainment.

For more information on the budbreak festival, visit: budbreakfestival.com

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Rob Smith of Southern Charm Winery in Lincolnton provides wine samples to a group of people at a recent Wine and Craft Beer Budbreak Festival, with a long line of people trailing off in the distance, waiting for their turn during the annual budbreak festival.

BUDBREAK FESTIVAL
WINE & CRAFT BEER
MOUNT AIRY, NC





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Tommy Jarrell Festival

While the June old-time music and blue grass festival is a celebration of an entire genre of music, this gathering is commemorative one of the giants in that field, Surry County native and old-time music pioneer Tommy Jarrell.

The local musician passed away more than four decades ago — on Jan. 28, 1985. Yet, his musical legacy lives on — and the Surry Arts Council helps keep his memory alive with its annual Tommy Jarrell Festival, set for the weekend closest to March 1, the anniversary of his 1901 birth.

Jarrell was instrumental in developing the distinctive Round Peak style of banjo playing, a style musicians the world over have come to Surry County to learn.

Each year, the festival brings musicians and fans to Mount Airy for the day-long event. Many of the activities are scheduled at the Old-Time Music Heritage Hall at the Historic Earle Theatre, where an exhibit hall features displays on Jarrell along with other Surry County old-time music icons.

The day-long festival includes concerts — generally two hours of live concerts broadcast on WPAQ's landmark Merry-Go-Round, then a closing concert at the end of the day that features local award-winning bands and plenty of flat-footing for anyone who wants to take to the dance floor.

In between there are workshops galore — free banjo lessons, many times taught by Wayner Erbsen, who studied under Tommy Jarrell and other well-known masters of the genre; along with other workshops and a youth competition.

For more information on the Tommy Jarrell Festival, visit: surryarts.org/shows/tommyjarrell.html

The Roaring Gap Rattlers perform on the porch of the Edwards-Franklin House during a recent Surry County Sonker Festival.



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A woman shows off a cherry sonker, while holding a blueberry sonker in her other hand, while visiting the Surry County Sonker Festival.

Surry County Sonker Festival

No list of celebration events in Mount Airy can exist without mention of the annual Sonker Festival held each October by the Surry County Historical Society at the Edwards-Franklin House, a structure built in 1799 which is located at 4132 Haystack Road west of Mount Airy.

The Sonker Festival celebrates a type of deep-dish fruit dessert that originated in the area. As is the case with so many local fairs and gatherings, the event generally features live and old-time bluegrass music, pottery and other craft displays— but the main attraction always is the coveted dessert for which it's named.

While a sonker may take on different forms and flavors, the ones featured at the annual festival usually includes sweet potato, peach, strawberry, cherry and blueberry.

An hour or two at the festival is often a relaxing way to get away from the high-tech, often busy world. Attendees always are urged to bring lawn chairs to the festival and sit in the yard of the Edwards-Franklin House to munch away while listening to music, with space for flatfoot dancing also provided.

Some of the displays and demonstrations part of the festival most years include quilters, basketry, a pottery display, an exhibit featuring 18th- and 19th-century artifacts and more.

Tours of the more than two-hundred-year-old house are often part of the day.

For more information on the festival, visit: sonkertrail.org/sonker-festival

Dobson Spring Folly

The annual Spring Folly in central Surry County a two-day festival of fun, family adventure and entertainment, carnival rides, delicious food trucks and vendors, and unique crafts from talented artisans.

The event is held each April and features plenty of live music at Dobson Square Park, usually kicks off about mid-day on Friday, running until that night, then runs all day on Saturday. Admission to the park where music is played is generally free, though those attending are encouraged to take lawn chairs.

The Folly may be best known to kids in the area as a great excuse to get out and enjoy some carnival rides. Generally a low-cost wristband will yield unlimited rides all day on Saturday.

A plethora of options will be found including a bounce house, inflatable slide, and some of those rides that make the Folly the Folly like the Paratrooper or Round Up. There are safety and height requirements for some of the rides, info will be posted in a conspicuous place.

If one goes to enough street festivals and events in Surry County, then you might see some commonality in what food vendors show up.

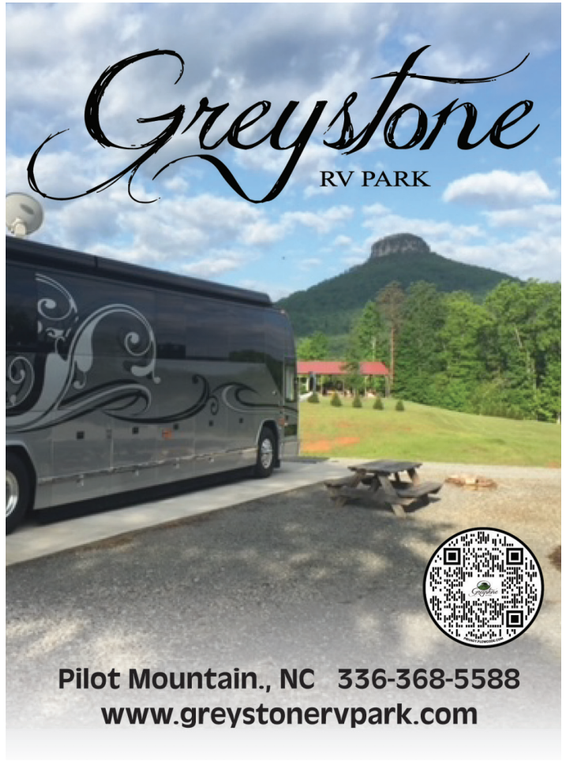
Some area favorites will set up shop to feed hungry Folliers including BJs Fry Shack, Liz's Tacos, and Mermaids on the Go. Dobson's Grounded Coffee will be slinging the java while T's Treats fires up a funnel cake or two and Hometown Donuts & Pretzels satisfies the inner voice who needs a fresh glazed donut.

Hungry yet?

For those who may not be on the hunt for a carnival ride, or carnival eats, there are craft vendors set up at the Folly for some light browsing — generally just in time to score a one of a kind gift to give to a loved for Easter or Mother's Day.

Find more information on the Dobson Spring Folly at: facebook.com/share/18orSoZUMT/

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Pilot Mountain Mayfest

Stretching back nearly 50 years, Pilot Mountain's annual Mayfest brings thousands to the tiny town in the shadow of the Mountain for which the town is named.

"Mayfest is one of Pilot Mountain's greatest traditions. Our town is thankful for all of the hard work that goes on behind the scenes with the Pilot Mountain Civic Club leading the way to make this happen for the 42nd year," Pilot Mountain Mayor Evan Cockerham said before the 2025 version of the annual gathering. "To me, Mayfest is the time when the community opens for the spring and summer months to welcome visitors who love the welcoming atmosphere that is unique to our small town."

Mayfest is a three-day extravaganza of food, crafters, other vendors, artists, rides and kids games, and a great time for family and friends to visit with one another while visiting the town. Generally held the second full weekend of May, the festival stretches from Friday to Sunday, with the sponsoring by the Pilot Mountain Civic Club members keep the event running smoothly.

The 2025 version included 120 craft vendors and 50 food vendors, along with plenty of live music. The 2026 version is expected to offer the same level of variety and fun, with many of the vendors returning year after year. A variety of food vendors will be offering culinary treats during Mayfest which run the range from gourmet tacos to grand pastries at the Food Village, sponsored by R&J Tree Service. Some Mayfest favorites are returning again including Fire Chief's Grill, Happy Belly, Benny's Ice Cream, The Nutty Couple, and many more. Carter said the "array of food and beverage selections will leave you amazed and going back for seconds."

For more information about Mayfest, visit: pilotmountainnc.org/387/Mayfest

Pilot Mountain is lined with vendors and visitors during a Mayfest event.



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Handmade ceramic mugs by local potter, Cris Tadesse owner Crisanthemum Studios in Pilot Mountain NC. See their ad on page 28 to learn more about their Glaze-Your-Own pottery and studio offerings.

From the beginning to now, Autumn Leaves Festival is a jewel in Mount Airy

By John Peters
jpeters@mtairynews.com

During the second weekend of each October downtown Mount Airy is transformed into a teeming community, with crafters, food vendors, musicians, and families descending on the town.

The event? The Autumn Leaves Festival, which organizers say draws tens of thousands to Mount Airy for a full weekend. Part crafter show, part food festival, the gathering is almost like a family reunion, with visitors scheduling their vacations to coincide with the event so they can come back to Mount Airy to visit their friends and check out the year's offerings.

The first Autumn Leaves Festival was held Oct. 13-15, 1966, a time when local industry and manufacturing was thriving and tourism was a fledgling upstart part of the area economy. The festival was designed as a tourist-oriented event, one where local residents could show off their talents and celebrate life in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

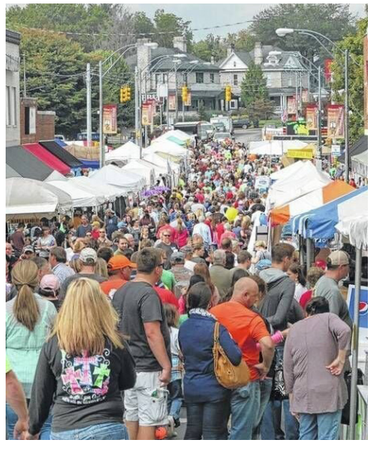
The first mention of the festival in the Mount Airy News was in the Aug. 18, 1966 edition, an announcement of the first promotion by Dr. J. Simmons, chamber president and Jim Grimes, executive director at the time. The event was one that was already drawing excitement from those at the kick-off meeting, as they hoped it was an "affair that would eventually be of national importance."

Tourism was always a main focus of the festival, which was described in that first article as "'tourist oriented' but home–based," with an intention of encouraging "Mount Airians and all those 'along the Blue Ridge' to practice the friendliness for which the area is famous."

"It will give pride for those who love the hill country to show visitors the sunrises and sunsets that cannot be duplicated anywhere else."

The mayor of Mount Airy at the time, Ed Clark, held a ribbon-cutting ceremony, along with chamber representatives, early on Friday morning to celebrate the first festival, but the ceremony was not held downtown — it was at the National Guard Armory, which was once a big part of the festival. In the late 1960s, Mayberry Mall was also added as a festival spot.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 26



Main Street in Mount Airy, along with a few side streets, are usually a teeming mass of shoppers and booth workers throughout the three-day Autumn Leaves Festival each year.



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22



Master Blacksmith Joe Allen shows off his skills in the courtyard of the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History during the 2024 Autumn Leaves Festival.

The armory served as a place to celebrate local industry, and by August of 1966, 17 of 32 booth space were already sold for one of the most elaborate trade fairs ever seen in this area, which included displays by ProcterSilex, Renfro, Techform, North Carolina Granite, Pine State, Quality Mills, Adams-Mills, Perry's Manufacturing, Workman's Federal, and more.

The focus in and around the downtown area was on locally-produced crafts, art, and handmade goods, along with local entertainment, and it was quite large—spread throughout the downtown area, the armory, and other locations.

The chamber of commerce organized bus tours to the mountains to see the autumn leaves, which were in full splendor on the second weekend in October, according to the Oct. 13, 1966 edition of the newspaper.

Music was a huge focus of the first festival, with four bandstands set up throughout the downtown area, which was closed from Oak to Pine Streets. The first music included Donna Fargo and the Osborne Brothers, as well as entertainment by local choral, band, and theatrical groups. Square dances and dances for teenagers were held each night. WPAQ founder Ralph Epperson manned a bandstand on the north end of the street.

Local arts and crafts were exhibited at Reeves Community Center, which was then known as the YMCA, along with exhibits prepared by gardening clubs and farmers, as well as nightly concerts.

The local Moravian church served suppers "in the manner that has made them famous, with waitresses in traditional costumes." A booth sold ham biscuits for ten cents each.

Models wearing clothes from downtown establishments paraded through the streets and restaurants. An exhibit of automobiles was set up in the street. Local and state politicians made appearances, as well as Miss Mount Airy, who served as a hostess for the festival.

The State Campers and Hikers Association held a meeting during the first Autumn Leaves Festival and camped nearby for the entire event.

A still was set up, demonstrating the process of making moonshine and white liquor, still rumored to be an actual still, producing alcohol on N. Main Street.

The Surry County Quilters Guild set up on the street, as well as folks demonstrating milk and butter churning, cow milking, sauerkraut making, a corn shucking contest (won by the '67 Chief of Police E.V. Marion), cider-making, molasses-making, blacksmithing by Big John Martin from Bannertown, who brought his anvil and made horseshoes in front of F. Rees Clothing then put the horseshoes on the horses the next day, right on the street, according to an article published in October, 1988.

By 1969, the festival was expanding, with the addition of the now-defunct wagon train, the first which traveled under the direction of the police chief, according to an article in the September 19, 1969 edition of the newspaper. The wagon train began in Beulah, traveled to Lambsburg, Virginia, and along the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, through Cana, Virginia, before turning toward Mount Airy. Those in the wagon train stopped at arranged campsites, with music, campfires, and food planned for every night. The festivities ended with a wagon train parade down Main Street on the Thursday before the festival began, a tradition that would continue for decades.

The first wagon train participants camped on Hamburg Street, at the Mount Airy Livestock Yard. The State Campers and Hikers Association also returned for many years, camping for the entirety of the festival.

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Gurney Royall, pictured here in 2019, stirs a 50-gallon vat of apple butter—a tradition he upheld for 30 years at the Autumn Leaves Festival. The apple butter booth has been a staple since the festival's founding in 1966, with Gurney continuing the work of those who came before him. Though Gurney has passed, his wife Pam and their children carry on the legacy, now representing the third generation at the festival.

By the 1980s, more wagon trains had been added, along with horse-pulling competitions.

Wagon Trains were a huge part of the festival for many years, with the largest run by the Pipers Gap Saddle Club. They were a nod to the days of the past when the region was a pass-through for travelers on the Great Wagon Road, many who chose to settle in the Mount Airy area, then known as The Hollows.

In later years, traffic became a problem as well as negative attention to the few who chose to become intoxicated stopped the wagon trains, with the last one rolling through town in 2002.

Since those early days Autumn Leaves Festival, or ALF as it has become affectionately known in the area, has grown far beyond anything the original organizers dreamed. Some years, according to the Greater Mount Airy Chamber of Commerce, more than 200,000 visitors make their way to downtown Mount Airy for the event.

There are still a few of the old-time booths, showing how apple butter was made back in the day, or demonstrating the machinery and engines that might have been common on farms half a century ago.

But many of the booths now belong to vendors of all sorts of handmade crafts. And the food selections vary widely, from the old-favorite Collard Green Sandwiches to an array of dishes, drinks, and desserts. In recent years, play areas for kids have expanded, and always there is plenty of live music, featuring local bands.

This year's festival is October 10-12. The gathering will run from 9 a.m. until 9 p.m. on both Friday and Saturday, then run from noon to 6 p.m. on Sunday.

For more information, visit:
autumnleavesfestival.com/about

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WPAQ Bandstand Schedule

Located by Truist Bank at the end of North Main Street, the WPAQ Bandstand highlights traditional bluegrass music native to our region, and is a treasured part of the Autumn Leaves Festival.

See the Festival Map on Pages 30-31 for navigation.

FRIDAY OCTOBER 10TH

11:30 AM	Openning Ceremonies	
11:50	Sugarloaf Mountain Band	(Bluegrass)
12:35	Crossriver	(Bluegrass/
1:20	Over The Hill Bluegrass Band	Gospel)
2:05	Jack Holt & High Country Grass	(Bluegrass)
2:50	Shelton Brothers	(Bluegrass)
3:35	Robert Tilley & The Hard Times Band	(Bluegrass/
4:20	Snow Creek Old Time Band	Gospel)
5:05	2 Young 2 Old	(Bluegrass)
5:50	Hubert Lawson & The Bluegrass Country Boys	(Oldtime)
6:35	Surry Line	(Bluegrass)
7:20	Indian Grove Ramblers	(Bluegrass)
8:05	Trish Fore & The Wildcats	(Oldtime)

SATURDAY OCTOBER 11TH

11:15 AM	The Merry Go Rounders	(Oldtime)
10:00	Bill & Maggie Anderson	(Americana)
10:40	Mountain Road Bluegrass	(Bluegrass)
11:20	The Merry Go Rounders	(Oldtime)
12:00	Southeast Express	(Bluegrass)
12:45	Fishers Peak Timber Rattlers	(Oldtime)
1:30	By Grace	(Bluegrass/Gospel)
2:15	The Nunn Brothers	(Bluegrass)
3:00	Young at Heart	(Bluegrass)
3:45	Mark Templeton Band	(Bluegrass)
4:30	Harrison Ridge	(Bluegrass)
5:15	Slate Mountain Ramblers	(Oldtime)
6:00	The Country Boys	(Bluegrass)
6:45	Steve Marshall & Highroad	(Bluegrass)
7:30	Echoes of Round Peak	(Oldtime)
8:15	Travis Frye & Blue Mountains	(Bluegrass)

SUNDAY OCTOBER 12TH

1:00 PM	Pen-N-Carol	(Americana)
2:00	Ben & Eric Marshall	(Bluegrass)
3:00	MSouthern Gentlemen	(Bluegrass)
4:00	Davis Bradley	(Americana)

Local Stage Schedule

Located halfway on West Independence Blvd, the Local Stage marks the end of the new section of the festival's footprint. Explore this recently added area and enjoy diverse music from local artists!

See the Festival Map on Pages 30-31 for navigation.

FRIDAY OCTOBER 10TH

12:00 PM	TBD	
1:00	TBD	
2:00	TBD	
3:00	TBD	
4:00	Mallie Belle	(Classic Country)
5:00	Gatlin Hiatt	(Country/Rock)
6:30-9:00	Thunder Rose	(Rock & Roll)

SATURDAY OCTOBER 11TH (CONTINUED)

10:00 AM	VOCE	(Broadway)
11:00	First Presbyterian Church Choir	(Gospel)
12:00	Mitchell Fonville	
1:00	Gsusfreaks	(Christian Folk)
2:00	Libby Hill	(Country/Southern Gospel)
3:00	Lady SAJG	(Old School R&B)
4:00	Mallie Belle	(Classic Country)
5:00	Ryan Rice	(Classic Country)
6:30-9:00	Thunder Rose	(Rock & Roll)

SUNDAY OCTOBER 12TH

12:00 PM	The Mitchell Fonville Project	(Gospel)
1:00	Beth Tilley	(Christian)
2:00	Shiloh Baptist Church Choir	(Gospel)
3:00	Blueridge Mountain Heirs	(Bluegrass Gospel)
3:45	Ballet Folklorico del Museo de Mt. Airy...	(Cultural)

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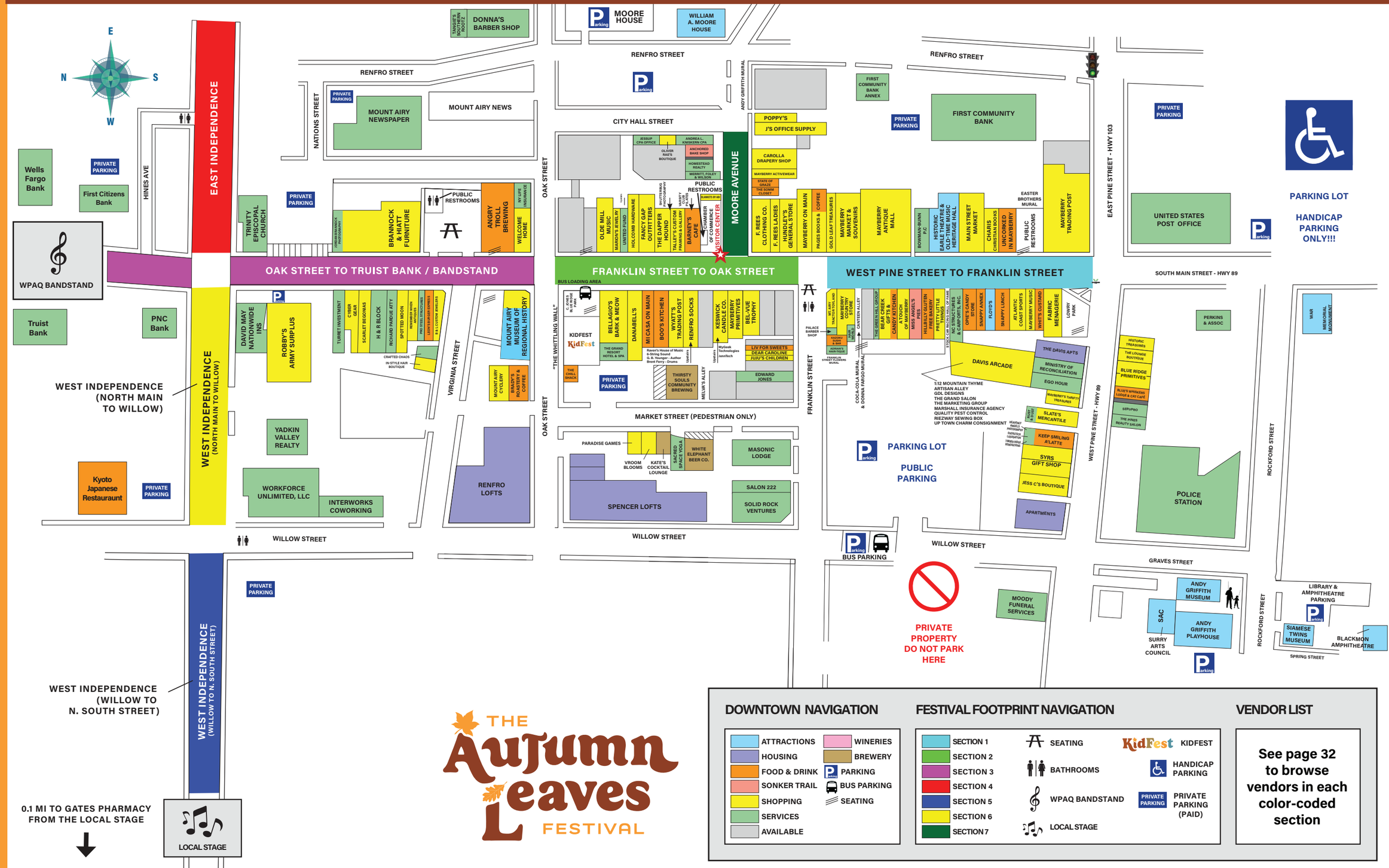


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2025 AUTUMN LEAVES FESTIVAL MAP



THE Autumn Leaves FESTIVAL

DOWNTOWN NAVIGATION

- ATTRACTIONS
- HOUSING
- FOOD & DRINK
- SONKER TRAIL
- SHOPPING
- SERVICES
- AVAILABLE
- WINERIES
- BREWERY
- PARKING
- BUS PARKING
- SEATING

FESTIVAL FOOTPRINT NAVIGATION

- SECTION 1
- SECTION 2
- SECTION 3
- SECTION 4
- SECTION 5
- SECTION 6
- SECTION 7
- SEATING
- BATHROOMS
- WPAQ BANDSTAND
- LOCAL STAGE
- KIDFEST
- HANDICAP PARKING
- PRIVATE PARKING (PAID)

VENDOR LIST

See page 32 to browse vendors in each color-coded section

2025 ALF Vendor List

WEST PINE STREET TO FRANKLIN STREET

Adoughables
Appalachian DiviniTea
Aunt Meredith Light Switch Covers
Barbara's Specialties
Caricatures by Brian
Country Tumblers
Dry Hook
Edgest Leather
Fizzy Bonez
Fizzy Friendz Bath Bombs
Foil Decor
Honest Elderberry
Olde River Primitives, LLC
Rockness Momster
Start Studio Art
Surry Shrine Club
Timeless Timber Designs
Veronica's Doggie Delights

FRANKLIN STREET TO OAK STREET

Amish Heirloom Baskets and More
Bear Creek Carvings
Cattle Dog Crafts
Chamber Merchandise Tent
Discerning Designs by Jessie
Don's Barbeque & Catering
Ellie's Slime Emporium
Face Painting Maria
Fairy Tales
G&S Gourmet Dips
Joey's Name Art
Karen Casey Fused Glass Designs
Keswick Candle Company
Lamplighter Candles
McMasters Unlimited, LLC
McNeills Pottery
Memory Glass Art by Laura
Mountain-Artisans
Nectar of the Vine
Pickers Tent
Rising Smoke Sauceworks
Rudolph and Me
Seasons To Sew
Smok'n Hot Brass
Stella Creek Soap
Stonegate Candles
The Sassy Crafter
Vroom Blooms
Waterfall Studio
We Care Concessions

OAK STREET TO TRUIST BANK / BANDSTAND

Build a Barnyard Friend
Campus Scenes
Carolina Bee Farm LLC
Carport Central
Crosby's Cuttings/RTC Pottery
Earths Moon Crystals
Gonzales Produce
Henry Farms Broken China Jewelry
Henry Frye Mantels
House of God Church
House of Morgan Pewter
LazerEdge
LoriLea Creations
Mermaid Dreams
Michaels Wood Creations
Millennium Charter School
NC Bee Exchange
NC Lottery
Never Enough Snowmen
Peachey's Bakery
Red Bank Ruritans
Southern Charm Grill
Steele Concessions
Stressed Out Soaper
The Chill Mobile
T-Mobile
True Honey Teas
Virginia Hardwood Utensils
Wax Hands
Wild Bills Soda Co.

EAST INDEPENDENCE

Appalachian Aura
B.E.L. Boutique
Cadence's Cupcakes
Carolina Crafts
Chapter & Verse Studios
Cook's Clay Works
Cotton Creations
D-Daddy's Crafts
Foothills Gem Mining
Gypsy Blu/Hip Klips
Hair by MaddieG
Heavenly Hill Honey
Heavy Ocean Designs
Kona Ice of Mount Airy
Little and Big Crochet
Magical Marionettes & Hand Puppets
Mis Match Boutique
Modern Forestry
Niemiec's Emporium
OldMorrisFarm, LLC
Pure Wellness Body & Health (C.H.I.L.D.)
Pyles Jujitsu
Rub and Grub
Sandtastic Creations
Scentsy
Simply Sue's Bowtique, LLC
Southern Ivory
Spiffy Duds
Sweet Mornings Farm
Sweet Stitches by Rachel
Tabby's Wooden Toys
The Picket Fence
The Pink Boutique
Triple A Treats, LLC
Whiskey Run Customs

WEST INDEPENDENCE (NORTH MAIN TO WILLOW)

Apple Butter Tent
Bark-er's LLC
Blue Ridge Primitives and More
Boy Scout Troop 553
Britt's Leather
Cape Woolamai Mercantile Co.
Christina's Signs
Decision Designs
Dixieland Kettle Corn Company
Fox's Woodworks
Homegrown Bubbles
Jay's Heating Air & Plumbing
Magnanimous Beard Products
Mayberry Tractor
Musket Ridge Flowers
Public Safety
Sandy Level Community Council
Simple Patio Furniture
State Farm Insurance
The Hickory Nut
The Taco'bout
True Form Designs
Veteran Leather
We Care Concessions (Trailer)
Wild Thyme Jewelry

WEST INDEPENDENCE (WILLOW TO S. SOUTH STREET)

3 Southern Jewelz
Bumble Bee Boutique
Buttercups Ice Cream & Beverage
Carolina Tye Dyes
Carolina West Wireless
Constanza Wears
Countryside Creations LLC
Curlinator Designs
D & M Creative Designs
Daralyn's Designs
Divine Pies Bakery
Eat'n Time
Fork'et Me Not
Granny Clampett's Hidden Treasures
Jamz Freeziez LLC
Leaf Filter
Marvin's Garage Doors
Mountain Mama Pottery
Pink Lola
Pirate Crafted Treasures
Rainbow of Yadkinville
Rainy Day Notions
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The Painted Panda Face
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The Sugarloaf Mountain Band will lead off the entertainment portion of this weekend's Autumn Leaves Festival, the first of 32 bands slated to take to the main stage during the event. John Peters I Mount Airy News

WPAQ Bandstand synonymous with the ALF festival

By Tom Joyce
tjoyce@mtairynews.com

Try to imagine the Autumn Leaves Festival without its traditional music element provided from the WPAQ Bandstand throughout the event – which might be difficult since the two have become so intertwined.

The truth is, you can't.

"It wouldn't be the Autumn Leaves Festival, in my opinion, if we didn't have music native to this region," observed Kelly Epperson, the owner of the Mount Airy radio station that has been part of the annual fall showcase from its beginning.

"We have always operated a bandstand at the Autumn Leaves Festival," Epperson said of the event first held in 1966.



With its longtime stated purpose being to celebrate the end of the growing season for crops including tobacco and to highlight the culture of this region, old-time and bluegrass string music is a big part of that.

This will be the case in 2025, when Epperson says more that 30 different groups are slated to perform during the festival's three-day run from Oct. 10-12. In addition to the old time and bluegrass string music, a few bluegrass-gospel bands will be featured.

Coupled with pleasing the crowds in front of the stage, much of the music also will be broadcast by the station for the benefit of those not there in person.

The WPAQ Bandstand once again will be located in the banking district occupied by Truist and other institutions at the upper end of North Main Street.

"We'll be the first thing you see when you're headed downtown," Epperson said for the benefit of those who might be unfamiliar with that location.

In addition to acting as a gateway for the various craft vendors and other attractions to be bunched along North Main and other city streets, the bandstand serves as a kind of Festival Central.

Along with non-stop live music, the opening ceremony for the event always takes place at the bandstand.

Mount Airy Mayor Jon Cawley reads an Autumn Leaves Festival proclamation from the WPAQ Bandstand in 2024.

While folks will be scattered along streets throughout the downtown area, the WPAQ Bandstand serves as a central rallying point where a core group of festival attendees will be found at any time.

Long association

Kelly Epperson barely remembers the first festivals in the late 1960s.

"In the early years I was only a youngster," he said of the period when his late father Ralph ran the radio station.

"He had on his red Autumn Leaves Festival jacket."

Kelly Epperson says the WPAQ Bandstand had humble beginnings.

"We had a small stage at first – there was no cover over it," he recalled.

"Some years, we were over at Mayberry Mall, but most of the time we've been downtown."

And the WPAQ Bandstand hasn't always been the only game in town during the Autumn Leaves Festival.

"We had two bandstands some years – WSYD operated the other," Epperson said of a former rival radio station locally later acquired by WPAQ which offered sounds of the non-traditional variety.



"A labor of love"

Contrary to popular belief perhaps, WPAQ doesn't just throw up a stage, a few microphones and then says, "y'all come."

Booking all the acts requires months of preparation and a major commitment by radio station personnel.

"It takes just about our entire staff," Epperson advised. "It's a labor of love."

The WPAQ owner specifically mentioned the station's music director, Tim Frye, who is familiar with all the groups secured for bandstand performances.

"Tim Frye has done this for a ton of years," Epperson said of the long-time DJ and local musician.

As for the upcoming talent lineup, local favorites including The Slate Mountain Ramblers and The Nunn Brothers will be featured.

"We'll have some new groups coming along," Epperson added. "We try to give everybody an opportunity."

Great for the station

One also gets the impression that WPAQ is happy for another opportunity to perpetuate the region's music at the Autumn Leaves Festival as it has since the station first hit the airwaves in 1948.

"I'm just honored and thankful that the Mount Airy Chamber of Commerce lets us be a part of this," Epperson said of the organization that spearheads the festival.

"We've always had a great working relationship with the chamber," he said. "We've worked with them over the years, and I see this continuing."



Flatfooters are a frequent sight greeting bandstand performances. Tom Joyce I The Mount Airy News



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Foil Decor - elegant, yet inexpensive kitchenware

By Tom Joyce
tjoyce@mtairynews.com

It's said that necessity is the mother of invention, and Sabina Miller is a perfect example of this.

"While planning my wedding, I wanted the convenience of foil pans but the look of a casserole dish," Miller explained.

"I wanted something more decorative than plain foil pans and more convenient than glass casserole dishes."

Miller searched online for something that could make foil pans look more elegant. "But I couldn't find it – so, I invented it," she added.

The result is her operation called Foil Decor, which the Virginia Beach resident will bring to the Autumn Leaves Festival for the first time this year.

"I've heard it's a big event," Miller said.

Foil Decor features an innovative array of products that impact women and families by enhancing the experience of serving food for social events.

From tailgating to holiday dinners, Foil Decor is viewed as a tasteful and elegant way to use and transport foil pans that resemble casserole dishes.

This is accomplished due to a base giving a foil pan support, with a ring that locks on and secures in the foil pan.

Meanwhile, a snap-on lid helps maintain temperature, making it easy to transport.

The lid also can be inverted to use as a bowl for crackers, buns or chips when serving one's favorite dip.

"While designing Foil Decor, I did not want a plain-looking serving system," recalled Miller, who secured three patents along the way.

"I want people to look at the system and think this has the look of an elegant table setting, but not expensive to purchase."

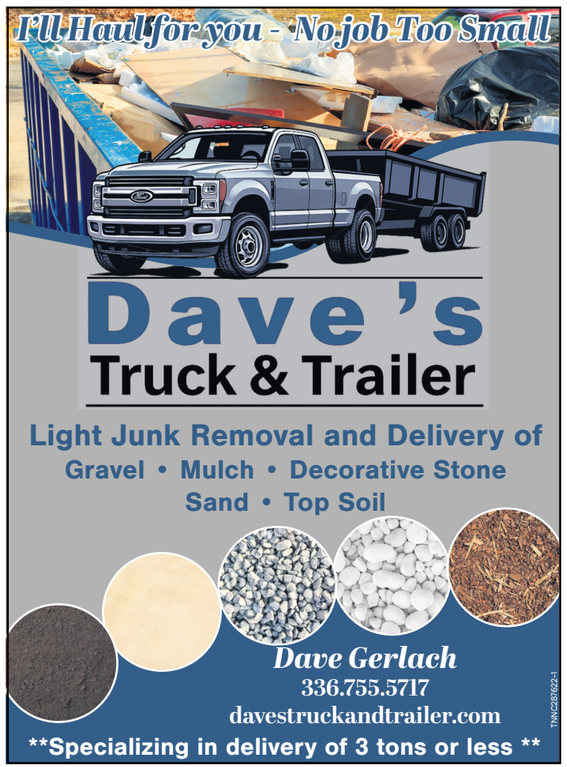
Foil Decor fits any occasion in any season, according to its inventor, who says her experience shows what can happen when someone follows a dream.

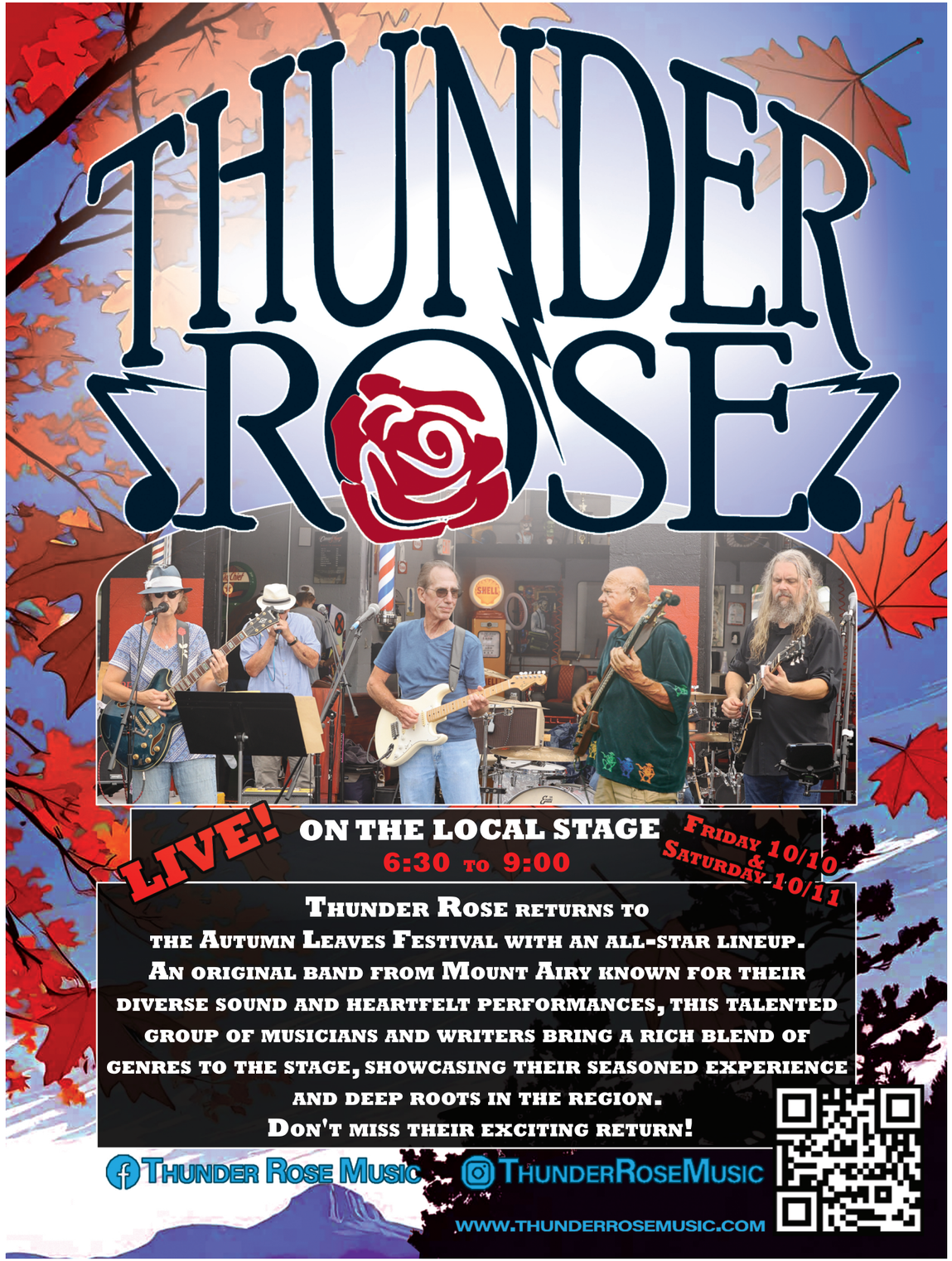
"Turning an idea into reality had its challenges, but with perseverance, success will come –I encourage fellow entrepreneurs to never give up," Miller advised.



Sabina Miller holds one of her Foil Décor creations.







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Festival to offer slime of the times

By Tom Joyce
tjoyce@mtairynews.com

Among the hundreds of vendors at the Autumn Leaves Festival over the years, there is no record of slime ever being part of the proceedings.

That will change this year when Ellie's Slime Emporium joins the event for the first time, offering a variety of unique products.

"Just what is slime?" one might rightfully wonder.

As the name implies, slime is a gooey substance with qualities of both a solid and a liquid. It comes in various textures, colors and consistencies.

Although slime is classified as a toy, it has a therapeutic purpose that provides a calming experience.

Playing with slime can be a stress-relieving, sensory activity that helps people unwind and relax. Some find the repetitive motions of manipulating slime to be meditative and soothing, which can help to reduce anxiety and tension.

And it's also just a fun and creative outlet.



"It's very popular, especially among girls," said Amber Nelson of Concord, whose teen-age daughters Josie and Kailey, ages 14 and 16, operate the enterprise.

Ellie's Slime Emporium was started in 2022 by the sisters, who love to make slime.

When deciding what the name of their shop should be, the conversation led to a discussion about how they could use some of the sale proceeds to help worthy causes.

Josie and Kailey selected two charities they are passionate about, including elephant rescue (which are reflected in the Ellie's name and mascot) and preventing human trafficking.

They partner with those charities to spread awareness along with contributing part of the proceeds from sales of their products.

Ellie's Slime Emporium sells handmade slime, including themed slime kits, mini-slimes and aromatherapy slime.

A "design your own slime bar" also will be offered at the Autumn Leaves Festival, according to the girls' mom.

The design-your-own component allows shoppers to select their slime base from five different slimes in six colors and then customize that with glitter, clay add-ins, bingsu beads and "little things they can do," she explained.

Along with the popular design-your-own slime, a selection of fall-themed and other popular pre-themed slimes will be available at the festival.

Yet the mission of Ellie's Slime Emporium is always in the thoughts of Josie and Kailey.

"For these young entrepreneurs, it's not just about slime anymore," according to a description of their operation offering squishy fun for a great cause.

"It's about making a difference in the world."



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