



THE GROUNDHOG

“Neighborly News from the Heart of Lookout Mountain”

Serving the Mentone, Valley Head, Hammondville, Cloudland & Menlo Communities since 1982

JSU officials: “Canyon Center will not shut down or close”

BY STEPHEN V. SMITH, EDITOR

Jacksonville State University has a clear message for those concerned about the future of the Canyon Center. Following news that the National Park Service lease for a portion of the building will be terminated at the end of the year, JSU President Dr. Don C. Killingsworth Jr. said the university “remains committed to the Little River Canyon Center’s ongoing operations and programming.”

While a portion of the facility is leased to the National Park Service, JSU is responsible for the building’s management, operations, and programming.

“Jax State’s role in managing and maintaining the Canyon Center will remain unchanged,” said Killingsworth, “and we do not anticipate any disruptions to our services, educational programs, or community engagement efforts. The Canyon Center will continue to serve as a hub for conservation, research, and outdoor recreation for visitors, students, and faculty alike.”

Since opening in 2009, the Canyon Center has supported the region’s



tourism industry, which has a significant economic impact on DeKalb County and surrounding areas. Tourists spent an estimated \$159 million in DeKalb County in 2023. The Little River Canyon National Preserve, which the center adjoins, drew an estimated 763,000 visitors last year.

The Canyon Center features a Grand Hall, HD movie theater, gift shop, natural history library, exhibits, classrooms, outdoor amphitheater, and scenic trails for both education

and adventure. It hosts concerts, workshops, hikes, lectures, and other activities year-round for students of all ages and the general public.

“Our commitment to education, conservation, and community programming remains strong,” said Pete Conroy, Canyon Center founder and director. “Since 2009, the Park Service has partnered with us, sharing responsibilities in education, visitor

(See “JSU,” Page 3)



Event Set for April 12

The year’s big food and art event is just around the corner. Get your tickets while they last for MERF’s annual Taste of the Mountain and Art Auction.

The event is set for Saturday, April 12, at Alpine Camp. Gates open at 5:30 p.m. and the event begins at 6 p.m.

This is more than just a great night out. Your ticket includes access to a delicious sampling of food from area restaurants, along with the opportunity to bid on one-of-a-kind local artwork and unforgettable experiences.

This year’s featured artists include Meg Justice, Doug Perkins, Mikel Yeakle, Lesa and David Cummings, and more — showcasing an exciting mix of styles and mediums. The auction includes pieces created by young artists from MERF’s Fine Arts Program at Valley Head School, under the guidance of instructor Caroline Moore.

Looking for a unique experience? This year’s auction lineup includes a Little Mole Run Golf Course experience for 4 persons and some weekend retreats perfect for making lasting memories.

See Page 16 for photos of artwork and more details.

Thanks to the incredible support of the community and local businesses, this fundraiser continues to thrive. Every dollar raised helps MERF further its mission of fostering lifelong learning in our schools and the wider community. From supporting the Valley Head School fine arts program to funding field trips, library resources, teacher appreciation, and more, MERF is focused on enriching education and providing growth opportunities to students. Other community programs include senior lunches, scholarships, and various outreach efforts.

“We are deeply grateful for the artists and food vendors who’ve donated their amazing creations,” says Kathryn Norris, president of MERF’s board of directors. “We also appreciate the local sponsors who support the event and the dedicated volunteers making it all possible.” Taste of the Mountain truly is a celebration of community. Get your tickets and come be part of a special evening! 🍷



A preview of some of the student artwork that will be at the auction. See more photos on Page 16.

Hand Brings Her Experience and Passion to MERF Leadership Role

BY STEPHEN V. SMITH

Katie Hand has always believed in the magic of Mentone. Now, as the new executive director of MERF, she’s bringing that sense of wonder full circle, giving back to the community that shaped her and nurturing new opportunities for others.

After years spent building a life and career in Virginia, Hand’s path back home was a blend of purpose and serendipity. She and her husband decided to return to Mentone to raise their son in the same nurturing environment that marked her upbringing. At the Groundhog Day Community Celebration in February, she picked up the lone remaining copy of The Groundhog newspaper from a table in the back of the gym. Flipping through its pages, she found the job posting for MERF’s executive director.

“It jumped out at me, and I couldn’t ignore it,” she says. That same night, she updated her resume and submitted it. MERF’s board of directors agreed she was a perfect fit.

Hand’s roots in Mentone run deep. She attended Moon Lake School in the 1990s and remembers the small-town charm vividly. Her parents were deeply involved in the community, helping with projects at the school and fostering a spirit of engagement that left a lasting impression. Hand’s



childhood memories, marked by imagination and a true sense of community, fuel her desire to give her son a similar upbringing.

Hand’s professional background is equally inspiring. She interned at the Smithsonian Institution, where her research contributed to a 2017 exhibit. She worked at the Manassas Museum, specializing in Civil War history and community outreach, and later transitioned into public education. At Fairfax County Schools, one of the top districts in the country, she honed her skills as a teacher and mentor.

Those years taught her the value of connection and the power of community support. “I really feel like Mentone, along with everything I’ve done, has been like a centripetal force,” she says. “All these experiences ...

they’ve all been orbiting around coming home.”

Hand’s return wasn’t just a relocation — it was a deliberate commitment to invest in her family and community. “I made a big decision to let go of a lot of things that I’d worked for to give my son all the things I had growing up,” she says. Her husband, originally from Chattanooga, has embraced the quiet pace of life in Mentone, finding joy in its smallness after years in larger cities.

As executive director, Hand has big dreams for MERF. She hopes to expand the art program at Valley Head School and foster growth in the MERF Moms group. “I’m excited to see what can grow from that,” she says, envisioning stronger community ties and more opportunities for parents and children to connect. She’s also learning about grants and scholarships, eager to ensure that MERF continues to enrich lives.

Reflecting on her journey, Hand says of life in Mentone, “It’s this magnet. It draws you back because there’s more work to do. There are more good things to be seen and had and felt. I think this community gives a lot of that energy away to people. And MERF does a wonderful job at giving experiences to kids so they can take energy and put it out into the world.” 🍷



The Groundhog

Published monthly by MERF

The Groundhog has been in publication since 1982. MERF is honored to continue this community tradition.

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The Groundhog is a community newspaper, and as such we encourage submissions from readers. Send story ideas anytime. The deadline for articles is the 15th of each month prior to publication month. Thank you for reading The Groundhog!

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Groundhog woodcut courtesy of
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EASTER EGG HUNT ALERT!

There are 12 hidden Easter eggs tucked away throughout this month’s issue of The Groundhog! Think you can find them all?

Email your list of egg locations — including the page number and where each egg is hidden — to GroundhogAds@yahoo.com. All correct entries will be entered into a drawing for a festive Easter basket filled with goodies!

Deadline to enter: Tuesday, April 15
Winner announced: Friday, April 18 on The Groundhog’s Facebook page

Happy hunting and good luck!

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Mentone Matters

Investing in our Community

BY MAYOR ROB HAMMOND

Last month, I wrote about the people who invest their time and energy into making Mentone a great place to call home. Visitors here quickly realize that beyond the beautiful natural resources of this region, it’s the people who truly make Mentone a special place to raise a family, own a business, and enjoy a slower pace of life. Quality of life is also impacted by infrastructure. This behind-the-scenes work can often go unnoticed, but planning and hard work are required to ensure our town continues to serve its citizens and meet the challenges that come our way. In the March issue of The Groundhog, you read about the \$300,000 Appalachian Regional Commission grant that we will match to make much-needed improvements to the historic Moon Lake School property. Our town also helped bring home an ARC grant to improve our water system.

Fort Payne Water Works owns and operates the public water system in Mentone. An ARC grant of \$295,000, which Fort Payne Water will match, will flow through the Town to the water system. It will be used to upgrade the aging 4-inch iron water line along Alabama Highway 117 with 2,300 feet of 10-inch, heavy-duty ductile iron pipe. This will connect with the water storage tanks in the curve on County Road 89 North.

The increased water capacity will greatly improve water pressure and the flow of water to homes and businesses in Mentone, benefiting our residents, visitors, and business owners.

“Improving the town’s water supply while restoring the historic Moon Lake school for businesses and community uses will only enhance Mentone’s offerings as a wonderful place to live and visit,” Gov. Kay Ivey said in making the grant announcements.

Kenneth Boswell of the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs agreed. “Both of these projects will greatly benefit the town of Mentone, improving the quality of life for residents and appeal for visitors,” he said. “ADECA is pleased to be a partner along with Gov. Ivey and the Appalachian Regional Commission in these projects that will enhance the community’s charm and boost tourism for the area.”



In other news, work should begin in a few weeks on the sidewalk upgrade. We will share a schedule as soon as that becomes available. The Town Council recently approved several paving projects, and the work has already been completed. Berry Street, Grove Street, and Wells Street have been paved.

It takes work to keep Mentone beautiful, and you’re invited to be part of those efforts. Our annual community cleanup is set for Saturday, April 5. Meet us in the Mentone Inn parking lot at 9 a.m. for equipment and assignments. In true community spirit, we’ll come back together after the work is done to enjoy fellowship and a potluck lunch at the Linger Longer Pavilion behind the Inn. Larry Joe Hall will bring us live music. Hope to see you there!

October may feel like a long time away, but the Mentone Fall Festival is just around the corner. This has become one the biggest events for our community. It brings people in who spend money with our local businesses while enjoying the beauty of all on Lookout Mountain. It also raises money for the Town to reinvest into the Moon Lake property where the festival is held.

This is shaping up to be a strong year for our town, in terms of infrastructure improvements, tourism, and quality of life in general. Thank you to everyone helping shape the future of this community. 🍷

From the Editor

Trails Build Generational Memories

BY STEPHEN V. SMITH, EDITOR

The Year of Alabama Trails is about more than just being outside and enjoying nature. It’s also a celebration of family that can stretch across several generations.

Early last month, on a day of sunny skies and pleasant temperatures, Michele and I buckled our grandson into his car seat and headed to DeSoto State Park. It was lunchtime, so a picnic was in order. As we fought the occasional breeze that tried to blow away the napkins, food wrappers, and even the blue-and-white-checked tablecloth Michele draped across the concrete picnic table, my mind was carried back some 30 years to similar scenes.

Some of our kids’ earliest memories of outdoor adventures were forged at DeSoto. We spent time there as a young family because DeSoto was part of my upbringing as well.

Now here we were, enjoying a picnic with the next generation, passing along a love for nature and for these lands that have been an Alabama treasure since its dedication as DeSoto State Park in 1939.

Our grandson has been to DeSoto many times, enjoying the playground in particular. One of his favorite outings is the Butler Boardwalk Trail and the adjacent Blue Trail. But on this day, I wanted to introduce him to the big rock formation behind the pavilion in the playground area. I climbed on it as a kid. Our daughter and son climbed on it as kids. And now our grandson — who, at three-and-a-half years of age, has agility, long legs, and an eagerness to tackle any challenge — was ready to scamper across the boulder.

Admittedly, that rock didn’t seem as big as it appeared years ago. And that’s a good thing, considering Pawpaw and Mawmaw had to crawl around on it with him.



After a bit more scampering, finding acorns, and playing in the leaves, we were ready for the next leg of our adventure. We took the Indian Falls Trail to the footbridge that spans the top of the falls. He’s a bit young yet to take the trail down to the river, so we spent a while throwing sticks into the water and watching them float over the waterfall’s edge.

Back to the car, we drove to the Country Store for a bathroom break and to load up on snacks. We spent a few minutes in the Benefield Interpretive Center, where he looked at the mounted animals and asked questions. A mosaic class was underway in the big room, but we did take a peek at the live corn snake.

As our day at DeSoto came to an end, I thought about the years ahead. When he’s older and can appreciate the living history lesson, I’ll tell our grandson how DeSoto was built 90 years ago as “State Park

No. 5” — Alabama’s largest park at the time — by the Civilian Conservation Corps. I’ll show him the quarry, the unfinished bridge, the lodge, and other stone structures. I’ll explain how one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s most enduring New Deal programs created jobs and trained young men in the trades while having a tremendous impact on access to public lands and the tourism industry, whose legacy endures.

But mostly, I’ll keep bringing him back to enjoy the park that introduced me to a love of trails. When the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources announced the 2025 “year of” theme, it said the designation would “require two years to complete because of the enormous outdoors opportunities in one of the most geographically and biologically diverse states in the nation.”

For us, the Year of Alabama Trails is an ongoing focus that will continue to bless our family for generations to come. 🍷



So Many Glorious Gifts in One Season

BY BEN SHURETT

Lord, thank you for the spring. Is there a more beautiful time or place than Lookout Mountain in the spring? I say nay nay.

Twenty-six hundred. That’s the number of daffodil bulbs we have planted in the 10 years since we made Mentone our forever home. My Mary’s birthday is April 12 and, with any luck at all, her birthday gift from me – as has become our custom – will be more daffodil bulbs to be planted in November.

Those bulbs begin peeking their heads above ground in February each year, sometimes even poking through snow to let us know spring and better weather are on their way.

That brings a smile. The flora of spring should bring a smile to you as well. Forsythia and redbud trees also foretell warmer weather, and isn’t that glorious?

College football is fabulous, but basketball is my real passion. Spring is the time of year when conference tournaments have concluded and March Madness is underway. No single weekend brings me more pleasure than the opening weekend of the NCAA



tournament, the time when underdogs prevail and so many “One Shining Moments” are born.

Basketball might be number one, but fishing isn’t far behind, and you can be sure April fishing is the best. The bream are beginning to bed and, best of all, big ole bass and rainbow trout will hit topwater lures. If you haven’t seen a fish explode on a topwater plug, amend your bucket list now. Fly fishing is my favorite. The excitement as you watch a dry fly slowly drift across where a trout is likely waiting is palpable.

An old fishing guide out West said it best: “Trout don’t live in ugly places.” Amen, brother. Fish bite best when the azaleas and dogwood trees are blooming. God was in an especially good mood when He created those, if you ask me.

Baseball season is beginning, golf courses are greener, the Masters golf tournament is next week, and that event is one of the greatest spectacles in sport. How about the Kentucky Derby? It’s less than a month away, and aren’t the ladies lovely in their bonnets?

Best of all? Spring means Easter and there’s a reason we capitalize on that. Thank you, God, for the saving grace of Jesus, and for all the gifts of your creation.

We are blessed. Look around today and see them all. 🍷

For more than 30 years, Ben Shurett was a newspaper publisher in Alabama and Iowa. He retired in 2014 and has lived in Mentone since.

JSU *(continued from page 1)*

services, law enforcement, and community outreach. We are proud of this collaboration, which has been recently recognized for its strong economic impact.”

The center is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Rooms within the center are available to rent for meetings, corporate retreats, and special events. The building itself is a model of sustainability, earning LEED Silver Certification for its innovative environmental design, which includes geothermal heating and cooling, recycled materials, and enhanced insulation.

“As we move forward, we will work closely with our partners and stakeholders to evaluate any potential impacts (of the lease termination) and ensure the continued success of this important facility,” Killingsworth said. “We appreciate the ongoing support of our community and look forward to many more years of serving the public at the Little River Canyon Center.”

The Little River Canyon Center is located at 4322 Little River Trail NE, Fort Payne, Alabama, on Highway 35 near Little River Falls. To learn more about activities at the center, visit www.jsu.edu/epic/canyoncenter. 🍷

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Scholarships for Valley Head Class of 2025

BY ANNA MAE HORN

Applications will open April 5 for the Valley Head Area Women’s Club Scholarships. This year, the two scholarships will be increased to \$700 each, due to rising educational expenses. Scholarships are available to all Valley Head School seniors who plan to further their education after graduation. Applications will be available in the Valley Head Counselor’s office.



The deadline to apply is April 24. If you prefer an online copy, email AnnaMaeHorn@gmail.com or call with any questions, 256-635-8775. The women’s club is honored to help local students further their education through these annual scholarships. Thank you to all who supported our bake sale and pecan fundraisers, which make these scholarships possible. *Anna Mae Horn is president of the Valley Head Area Women’s Club and can be reached at 256-635-8775.*

SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS FOR VALLEY HEAD SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Sponsored by Valley Head Area Women’s Club



With Spring Comes Hope

BY DEJOLY LABRIER

On my lingering in the garden today, I’m reminded that there is always an expectation of delight...a desire for abundance, vision for new growth, and aspirations for healing. Each time I lay a seed in the soil, I’m putting these ideas in motion. When my plants show up, no matter how small, there is a desire and a level of trust that they will thrive. Last year, I pruned an apple tree that had been floundering. It wasn’t producing blossoms or fruit. I wondered if it would survive such a brutal assault. Happily, the tree has not only survived, but is robust and producing more blossoms than ever before! In my life experience, when I’ve pruned away beliefs and people and things that are keeping me from blossoming and producing amazing gifts to the world, I’ve noticed that I not only don’t die from the pruning, but I become stronger and more confident in my being. I grow more into the authentic person I’m meant to be, like the cherished apple tree that I nourish with food and love. There definitely have been times in my life when my level of expectation and hope was at a low level. Those have been the times when I most needed to walk in my garden. That’s where I feel the magic of something greater than myself and see examples of hope, as new growth pushes through the soil and flowers blossom. I am continually encouraged by the lessons I learn from the plants. They teach me that no matter what the weather is, or the terrain of life might be, there is always hope for a brighter future...of green, luscious vegetation and new possibilities. May the magic of nature and the mysteries of spirit bring you hope. May this spring be an exquisite time of new growth and wonder in your life.

Getting Help with Your Medication Costs

BY LYNN HIXON

There are several ways to manage your out-of-pocket Medicare Part D drug costs. The Medicare Prescription Payment Plan is a new payment option in the prescription drug law that works with your current drug coverage to help you with your out-of-pocket costs. Anyone with a Medicare drug plan or Medicare Advantage Plan with drug coverage can use this payment option. All plans offer this payment option, and participation is voluntary. If you select this payment option, each month you’ll continue to pay your plan premium (if you have one), and you’ll get a bill from your health or drug plan to pay for your prescription drugs (instead of paying the pharmacy). There’s no cost to participate

in the Medicare Prescription Payment Plan. Even though you won’t pay for your drugs at the pharmacy, you’re still responsible for the costs. This payment option might help you manage your monthly expenses, but it doesn’t save you money or lower your drug costs. If you need help obtaining prescription medications, remember the Senior Rx assistance program has helped thousands of Alabamians receive FREE or LOW-COST prescription drugs from pharmaceutical companies. If you have questions about Medicare changes or you need help with the costs of your medications, please call the DeKalb County Council on Aging at 256-845-8590 and ask for Lynn Hixon or DiAnne Callahan. They are ready to assist you.

American Legion Post 215 Upcoming Events

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monthly meeting
6-7 p.m. @ Post 215
- MAY —
May 3:
Memories of Mayberry Festival, Valley Head
May 13:
monthly meeting
6-7 p.m. @ Post 215
May 26:
Memorial Day Cookout
11 a.m. - 2 p.m.
@ Post 215
- JUNE —
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monthly meeting
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Year of Alabama Trails

Alabama Tourism Department is celebrating outdoor adventures across the state

BY STEPHEN V. SMITH, EDITOR

From the Appalachians and the Mountain Lakes region to the sunny beaches of the Gulf, Alabama is blessed with natural beauty and biodiversity. The Alabama Department of Tourism recently announced it is celebrating this abundance through The Year of Alabama Trails.

In fact, the state has so much to offer that one year is not enough. While past “Year of” campaigns, such as food and music, have lasted 12 months, The Year of Alabama Trails will continue through 2026.

“It’s going to last for two years because there is so much to do that we couldn’t cram everything into one year,” said Lee Sentell, Alabama Tourism Director, at the event kick-off earlier this year at Vulcan Park in Birmingham.

“Twenty years ago, tourism was a \$6 billion industry in Alabama,” Sentell said. “This year, it is a \$24 billion business.”

Chris Blankenship, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, said the trail systems of Alabama’s state parks will play a big role in the promotion. “When you look at

our 21 Alabama State Parks from one end of the state to the other, you’ve got the mountains in northeast Alabama to the Tennessee River

Valley to the southern Appalachians at Oak Mountain State Park, all the way down through the River Region through the Black Belt all the way to the Gulf Coast,” he said. “The breadth and diversity of the terrain is fantastic.

“If you want to hike in the mountains, you can do that here,” he added. “If you want to have a walk along the beach at Gulf State Park, the diversity is fantastic. I don’t think you can get that in any other state, especially one that’s only about 350 miles long.”

The Alabama Trails Foundation is partnering with the tourism department to “showcase the state’s natural beauty and promote healthy lifestyles through a variety of events, hikes,



community activities, and educational programs,” according to the foundation’s website. “This initiative aims to highlight the unique character of Alabama’s trails, encourage exploration, and foster a deeper appreciation for the state’s natural resources.”

While the campaign is highlighting “25 Must-Tread Trails for 2025” that span the state, there are plenty of outstanding trails to enjoy close to home. The Little River Canyon National

Preserve offers hikes ranging from easy walks to challenging treks. The Little River Canyon Center features trails for exercise and education. And DeSoto State Park boasts more than 35 miles of hiking trails, including 11 miles of mountain bike trails.

Keep reading The Groundhog throughout 2025 for The Year of Alabama Trails highlights, announcements, and opportunities to explore area trails. 🐻

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New Beginnings, Blessings, and a Busy Start

BY KATIE HAND

This is my first month to greet you as executive director of MERF, and I couldn't be more excited. My upbringing in Mentone blessed me in ways I carried with me through years of living away, and I am honored to have the opportunity to give back to the community that invested so much in me.

I'd like to thank the MERF board of directors for placing their trust in me. MERF does a tremendous work in Mentone and Valley Head, work that impacts people of all ages. Our support of students at Valley Head School, particularly with arts education, will shape the

adults they become. This is the heart of MERF's mission.

On behalf of the board and all who interact with MERF, I want to express our heartfelt appreciation to Alyce

Kenney for her service as executive director. She has a true servant's heart, and has been so helpful to me as I've moved into this role.

This is a busy time for MERF! We have moved our operations from the MERF House for the renovation to begin. I have a temporary office set up in

town, and we've had some trouble with forwarding our phone line, but we're making the best of an inconvenient situation knowing that the end result will be wonderful for our community. Our Senior Lunches continue to be

popular, with good food, fun games and — best of all — warm fellowship.

Last month, we hosted Valley Head Art Night, where families enjoyed pizza from Mentone Market, a photo booth, face painting, and more. The art on display included various styles and mediums, and some were chosen for the upcoming Taste of the Mountain and Art Auction. Their work is a reflection of the art teacher, Caroline Moore, and her dedication to her students.

Speaking of the auction, don't miss your chance to enjoy a delicious sampling of local culinary specialties, plus the opportunity to take home some gorgeous works from regional artists. Not only will you be surrounded by outstanding food and art, but you'll enjoy an evening of fellowship with neighbors and friends while supporting MERF's important mission. Tickets



Student art on display at last month's Valley Head Art Night

are selling fast, so get yours now. You can buy them in person at the Mentone Market, or online at merfhouse.org.

Katie Hand is executive director of MERF. For more information, visit MERFhouse.org, email merf.mentone@gmail.com, or call 256-634-2122.



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For Emmye and Seth Wilson, Life is Sweet on Mentone’s Blueberry Falls Farm

BY REBECCA HENDERSON

Nestled on rolling hills and defined by a clear stream tumbling over layers of rock, Blueberry Falls Farm is a six-acre haven on County Road 944, owned and lovingly restored by Seth and Emmye Wilson. The farm’s centerpiece is an acre densely populated with 435 blueberry bushes, some as old as 30 years. The plants’ roots are steeped in the history of a man affectionately dubbed “Captain Blueberry,” a pilot and blueberry grower who previously owned the land. Once wild and overgrown, the farm’s rows now stand well-tended, a testament to the Wilsons’ hard work, love of nature, and a bit of serendipity.

An Accidental Beginning

The story of Blueberry Falls Farm started with a Zillow link on a dreary, rainy day. Emmye, who’d been managing a tiny home dealership, clicked the link her mother sent her and was instantly enchanted.

“There was this waterfall and this weird, hay-built mud house... it just looked very European-meets-mushroom cottage,” she recalls. Without waiting for the real estate agent, she convinced Seth to take a spontaneous trip. Navigating rough roads that gave their car a beating, they arrived to find the gate open to a property that had been on its own for a while.

“The funny thing is, all these bushes were about 12 feet tall — completely overgrown,” Seth says. “When we drove by, we didn’t even know they were blueberry bushes. They looked like brush and weeds.”

But where others saw chaos, the Wilsons saw magic. “I was so excited, I almost threw up,” Emmye admits with a laugh. They decided to make this place their own.

Restoring the Blueberry Legacy

Transforming the property was no small feat. The couple hacked back the towering bushes to knee height, only to discover from an agriculture expert that it would take two years for the bushes to bear fruit again. However, Seth points out, cutting the bushes back was exactly what the plants needed to regain their health.

Meanwhile, the couple had the idea of creating a festival that would allow others to share in this special slice of nature. With a berry patch still on the rebound, panic might have

set in for anyone else. Instead, they leaned into the challenge. That first festival in 2023, even without fruit on the bushes, was a surprising success. Around 500 people wandered the farm, enjoying music and the casual, welcoming atmosphere that now defines the farm’s events.

As the bushes grew back, the Wilsons’ passion for the farm blossomed, too. Emmye’s background in marketing and Seth’s steadfast determination proved a powerful combination. Last year’s festival drew a staggering 2,500 attendees, spurred partly by a surprise guest: Bonnie, a fluffy Highland cow who charmed visitors. Musicians played all day, and every berry on the property was picked, Emmye says.

“There were people coming in crowds, walking in like 100-degree weather to the farm,” Emmye recalls. When the field rapidly filled with vehicles, she found herself frantically calling bus companies to shuttle visitors. “Bring everything you’ve got,” she begged one dispatcher.

The festival, though chaotic, was a hit. But it also prompted a pause. This year, the Wilsons are scaling back to focus on infrastructure — better parking, shaded areas, and a medical tent. They’re determined that the next festival, whenever it may be, will be even better.

Roots and Branches

The Wilsons’ story isn’t just about blueberries. It’s about finding roots. The couple met at Emmanuel College in Georgia. Emmye played soccer, Seth played lacrosse. Their life together led them to Mentone, where they’ve built a career that blends hospitality and agriculture.

And every year they’re here, their love of the area grows. They got engaged at Brow Park and were married at Cragmere Manor. And now their two young daughters, Ellye and Talulah, toddle between blueberry bushes, while Maggie, the family dog, likes to sniff out the ripest berries — a skill so charming that Emmye has written a soon-to-be-published children’s book about her.

They’ve expanded the farm’s appeal with tiny home rentals, a game room adorned with funky paintings and art pieces, and a bathhouse overlooking the waterfall. Each new addition seems less about profit and more about sharing the farm’s magic. They envision adding two dome-shaped rentals painted blueberry blue — part practical, part whimsy.

It is evident that their ambitions are tempered by an appreciation for what they already have. “It’s not work if you’re doing something you love,” says Emmye. Their vision is clear: to refine, not expand. More landscaping, more

wildflowers, more time for the things that matter.

Living the Dream — With Mud on Their Boots

Life at Blueberry Falls Farm is charmingly imperfect. The bathhouse pipes have frozen on occasion, bridges need reinforcing, and festivals can go sideways when a cow draws more crowds than the blueberries themselves. But for the Wilsons, it’s perfect.

While they also own Mentone Mountain Getaways, a rental property management company, Emmye and Seth feel more and more drawn to the country, where their young family can be close to the land. When you visit, it’s obvious that Emmye, Seth, and their girls are exactly where they’re meant to be. For them, Blueberry Falls isn’t just a farm; it’s a life. 🍷



The Wilsons on their farm

This Summer on the Farm

Mark your calendars for the Wilsons’ **Summer 2025 Pop-up Markets and U-Pick Blueberry Events, July 12 and 26 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.** They’ll have live music, vendors, a waterslide, and kids crafts. Check out their website: blueberryfallsfarm.com

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Rhododendron Garden Club News

RGC Takes On Invasive Species

BY RHEA PIRCH

To mark the beginning of a new chapter in our club’s efforts to preserve and enhance the natural beauty of our surroundings, we recognized and supported National Invasive Species Awareness week, February 24-28.

With posts on Facebook and a call-out to community members to join us at Moon Lake Village, we set out to conquer the invasive plants that have spread like wildfire across the newly established RGC garden. Many thanks to the small but mighty crew who gathered to battle a whole lot of Chinese privet, honeysuckle vines, vinca, arum, wire vine, multiflora, and more.

As gardeners, we often prioritize aesthetics, fragrance, and growth potential when selecting plants for our gardens. However, it’s crucial to consider the environmental impact of our choices. One of the most pressing issues in horticulture today is the prevalence of invasive plant species and the vital importance of nurturing native plants instead.

Invasive plants are non-native species that have been introduced to an area, either intentionally or accidentally, and have established themselves at the expense of native flora. These plants often have aggressive growth habits, outcompeting native species for resources such as sunlight, water, and nutrients. The result can be a significant loss of biodiversity and disruption to local ecosystems.

Choosing native plants for your garden has numerous benefits, both for the environment and for the gardener. In this spirit, member Martha Wood presented a program on salvia during our last meeting, held on March 11 at



Pollinators like this butterfly need support from conscious, intentional garden planning.

the Moon Lake Library.

Salvia plants belong to the mint family, Lamiaceae, and are characterized by their aromatic leaves and tubular flowers. They thrive in diverse environments, making them suitable for a variety of gardens—from sunny borders to shaded woodland areas. Their blooming period can range from late spring to late fall, depending on the species and regional climate. This extended bloom time means that salvia can provide color and charm for most of the gardening season.

Salvia comes in a wide variety of species, each with a unique color palette and growth habit. Among the most popular types are:

Salvia nemorosa (Woodland Sage): Known for its striking purple-blue flowers, this species blooms from late spring to early summer and is a favorite for border plantings.

Salvia splendens (Scarlet Sage): True to its name, this species boasts bright red blooms that can add a fiery touch to any garden. It flowers profusely from summer to fall.

Salvia greggii (Autumn Sage): This species offers a variety of colors, including red, pink, orange, and purple, and is known for its long blooming season, often extending into the late fall.

Salvia farinacea (Mealycup Sage): With its tall spikes of deep blue or white flowers, this salvia is perfect for adding vertical interest to garden beds. It typically blooms from late spring to frost.

Salvia officinalis (Common Sage): While often grown for its culinary uses, the common sage also produces lovely purple-blue flowers that can enhance the visual appeal of herb gardens.

These diverse species, with their array of colors and blooming periods, make salvia a versatile and valuable addition to any garden. Another advantage of growing salvia is its ability to attract pollinators. These plants are particularly popular among bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds, which are drawn to their vibrant flowers and rich nectar. By planting salvia in



your garden, you can create a haven for these essential pollinators, promoting biodiversity and supporting the health of your local ecosystem. Its presence helps to ensure the pollination of other plants in your garden, leading to a more abundant and thriving environment.

Transitioning to native plants doesn’t mean sacrificing beauty or variety. Start by researching which native plants flourish in your region and consider visiting local nurseries that specialize in native plant species. They can help you select the right plants for your garden! 🌿

Rhea Pirch is president of the Rhododendron Garden Club.

Annual Wildflower Trail Walk

On April 8, we'll make the annual trek to the Shirley Miller Wildflower Trail/ The Pocket/Pigeon Mountain. Meet at the MERF House at 9 a.m. for the adventure. All are welcome, and the boardwalk trail is easily accessible for those who aren't mountain climbers!

Join us!

The RGC meets each month on the second Tuesday. We are currently meeting in the Moon Lake Library and gather at 10 a.m. Please join us for connection and conviviality. RGC is a member of the National Garden Club, Deep South, Garden Club of AL, District II, and NE AL Federation of Garden Clubs.

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With Little River Escape being such a success, we have decided to embark on a new journey by creating River Ridge Escape Tiny Home Dealership. At the dealership, tiny homes are available to tour and purchase. RRE is now delivering across the nation and also developing other communities to bring more folks to Lookout Mountain.

River Ridge Escapes now has nine tiny home communities near and atop Lookout Mountain in NW Georgia and NE Alabama. There are several Airbnb Tiny Homes in our various locations to come experience tiny home living, downsizing, the community, and explore the surrounding areas.

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Little Free Libraries: The Book Sharing Program That Grew

BY ANNE MCLEOD

After more than six years of enthusiastic use, the Little Free Library (“Take a book, leave a book”) at the Mentone Post Office had seen better days. It had served the community well, with post office customers and visitors perusing the selections on their way by. While library board members and employees kept an eye on it, ready to restock when books got low, that was only occasionally necessary. The project was largely self-sustaining, with people leaving books often enough to keep up the stock.

But now the wood was weathered beneath Lydia Randolph’s lovely floral painting, and the catch on the door finally gave out. The Friends of Moon Lake Library decided it was time for a rehab for the popular little box of books. The Little Free Library (LFL) was removed from its stand at the post office, prompting a sad note affixed to its post, “We miss you!”

It had been built and installed in August 2018 by longtime library volunteer Mickey Luck, who had, months earlier, set up our first LFL at DeSoto State Park inside the general store. Then last October, the Friends of Moon Lake Library donated an LFL to the town of Valley Head. The box was built by Craig Sheldon, and Mayor Karen Vest and the town council commissioned local artist Lisa Michelle Phillips to paint it.

When the Friends of Moon Lake Library discussed their LFL projects back in the fall, they decided to register each of the three they’d established with the nonprofit organization www.littlefreelibrary.org, so that each could be added to the map of more than 200,000 little libraries in 128 countries around the globe. They approved the order of three numbered plaques, making the Mentone and Valley Head libraries “official” Little Free Libraries.



LFL # 198584, Mentone Post Office

Don Highfield built a new box for the post office’s LFL and primed it and then handed it off to Lydia Randolph for repainting. The result was stunning — a colorful wrap-around painting of storybook animals and books that will delight browsers of all ages.

On March 13, the Little Free Library returned to its stand at the Mentone Post Office. And within two hours, a happy note appeared on the new plexi-glass door that said “Welcome home!”

We hope that all of our Little Free Libraries serve their communities and guests for years to come, inspiring a love for reading and an appreciation of the simple act of sharing with our neighbors. 📖



Little Free Library #198585, Valley Head Masonic Pavilion



LFL # 198583, DeSoto State Park General Store



APRIL 2025

AT MOON LAKE LIBRARY

Weekly Meet-Ups: MAH JONGG Tuesdays at 12 p.m. (beginners welcome); KNITTING and CROCHET Tuesdays at 2 p.m.; SCRABBLE Wednesdays at noon; TAX PREPARATION available on Saturdays through April 12. Call (256) 634-2127 for an appointment.

April 1 at 3 p.m. - Municipal Library Board meeting; 4 p.m. Friends of Moon Lake Library Board meeting.

April 3 from 4-5 p.m. - Poetry group is forming for anyone interested in reading and discussing poetry from any time period. Meets monthly on the first Thursday of the month.

April 4 at 6 p.m. - Family Game Night! Bring a snack to share, and we'll enjoy board games and cards at the library.

April 11 at 6 p.m. - Movie Night: "Conclave" (2024-PG)

April 12 at 10:30 a.m. - The Moon Lake Library Book Club meets for a discussion of books about home or coming home.

Friday Night at the Movies
April 11 6 PM
Moon Lake Library
CONCLAVE
(2024, PG)



April 12 at 1 p.m. - Mentone Ukes offer free ukulele lessons for all experience levels.

April 21 at 6 p.m. - Family Game Night! Bring a snack to share, and we'll enjoy board games and cards at the library.

April 26 at 1 p.m. - Mentone Ukes offer free ukulele lessons for all experience levels.

Moon Lake Library
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A Gallery Was Born

BY JULI JORDAN

It's hard to believe a year has passed since we first stepped into the space that once housed the Moon Lake School office, later becoming Meg Justice's studio, and envisioned it as the future home of Little River Art Gallery. On April 2, while discussing the possibilities, a few overzealous board members eagerly began removing ceiling tiles and wall trim — sealing our commitment to the project. Thankfully, it was a day after April Fools!



Little River Arts Council (LRAC) began as the Mentone Area Arts Council (MAAC) in 2006, but until last year, we never had a place to call our own.

Even though we didn't open the gallery until the summer, April 2 feels like the day our little gallery was born. As we celebrate our first anniversary, we want to extend a heartfelt THANK YOU to everyone who has supported this little dream of ours. Here's to many more years of art and community!



LRAC board members Stephen Smith and Mikel Yeakle working on the Little River Art Gallery one year ago.

Featured Artist: Brande Arno

Brande's art is both free-spirited and sophisticated. Her subjects, primarily animals, each carry a distinct personality — brought to life not only through

her brushstrokes but also by the names she gives them. From bunnies and chickadees to bears and deer, her work has a way of elevating both the décor and the mood of any space.

The first time I saw Brande's work, I was captivated. A few years ago, at Follow Your Art, I took home a straw-chewing bovine named Maxine. Maxine doesn't mince words or mess around — she means business! But even now, I still find myself thinking about the playful little bunny that first caught my eye.

Gallery hours are Thursday to Saturday, 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. or by appointment.

A Heartfelt Thank You to Our Little River Art Gallery Volunteers!

We are incredibly grateful to our volunteers who help keep our gallery doors open: Helen Allen, Brande Arno, Bev Bates, David Cummings, Chris Davenport, Sharon Morris, Tiffany Parnell, Sandra Perry, Mary Ann Robbins, Denise Soares, and Barbara Umland. These wonderful individuals bring energy, enthusiasm, and a love for the arts to our community!

Want to be part of the fun? Join us at the gallery and contribute to the arts while meeting visitors and fellow art lovers. Sign up today at www.littleriverartscouncil.org/volunteer/!

Make Your Mark on Mentone

Now on display: Lisa Michelle Phillips, featuring artwork of the Mentone Inn and the Make Your Mark Chalkboard!

Upcoming Artists:

- NACC Spectrum Art Club (April 15 – May 31)
- Valley Head School (June – July)
- Lisa Sulkosky (October – November)
- Brande Arno (December – January)

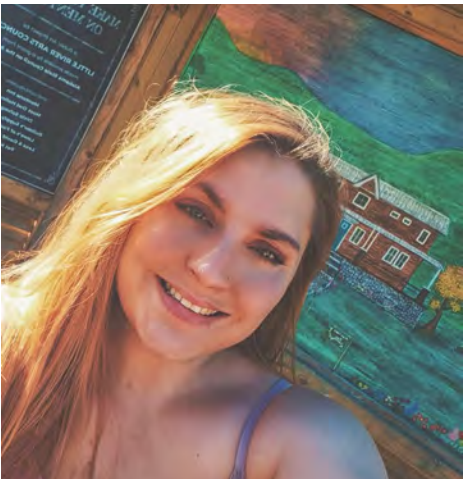


Art by featured artist, Brande Arno

Want to Make Your Mark on Mentone? There's still one opening for August 2025! This is a fantastic opportunity to showcase your work, promote yourself as an artist, or even highlight your organization. Visit our website and click the "Make Your Mark on Mentone" link to learn more and submit your application!

May on the Mountain First Friday – May 2

Mark your calendars for the first-ever First Fridays, a monthly celebration of art, music, and community in Mentone! Beginning May 2 from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m., the shops at Moon Lake Village will come alive with pop-up artists showcasing their work; live music by Judy Nicole Kirby; refreshments; and interactive art activities for all ages.



Make Your Mark on Mentone artist, Lisa Michelle Phillips



Make the evening even more special by dining at Moon Lake Kitchen! The Mentone Arts Center is also joining the festivities, featuring the Porch Pickers performing live from 3 to 5 p.m.

Third Weekend in May: Big Art Pop-Up!

The festivities kick off on Friday, May 16, from 6 to 9 p.m., with live music by Will Dooley on the grounds of the Mentone Inn. Bring your camp chairs and blankets to settle in for an evening of downhome tunes from a beloved local artist.

Amy's Catering will be onsite, offering delicious dining options during the concert. The celebration continues Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., with the Big Art Pop-Up art market at the same location. Browse and shop unique creations from talented local and regional artists — it's a perfect way to support the arts while enjoying a beautiful day in Mentone! 🍷

Juli Jordan is president of the Little River Arts Council.



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Mentone Arts Center Busy Month for MACC: Songwriters Series, Art Class and the Return of The French Family Band

BY RANDY GRIDER

The promise of warmer weather means things are heating up at the Chuck Sennett Center for the Arts.

Night of Music

The next Music on the Mountain songwriters series will be Tuesday, April 1, at 6:30 p.m. at the arts center. Hosted by Mentone resident Craig Hendricks, award-winning songwriter and full-time touring performer, the event is free to the public.

Come out for a night of learning and listening to family-friendly stories and songs. If you would like more information on attending or participating, please email crosscountrymusicproductions@gmail.com or call 256-884-1101.

Color Theory Class

We will host Color Theory Weekend with visiting artist/instructor Margaret Scanlan April 5-6 at Moon Lake Village. The two-day class is limited to 10 students. Tuition is \$195 (plus supply fee directly to the instructor, as she will furnish all materials). At press time, the class had filled up, but we have a waiting list in case of any last-minute cancellations. See contact info below.

The Class: Spend a fun-filled weekend learning about color theory and playing with high-quality acrylic paint and paper. Sharpen your sense of personal color choices while learning about color-theory terms: hue, intensity, and value. Plan to have a good time in this well-paced, no-failure class. No painting experience necessary. Open to all levels.

About the Instructor: Margaret Scanlan is a full-time studio artist in Knoxville, Tennessee, working in acrylic and watercolor, large- and small-scale work. She is a signature member of the American Watercolor Society, the

National Watercolor Society, and the Watercolor USA Honor Society. She is represented locally at Bennett and in Ireland at Kenny Galleries.

For many years she has taught painting, drawing, and color theory workshops at Arrowmont (TN), the John C. Campbell Folk School (NC), Penland School (NC), Le Petit Bois Gleu (France), Chateau du Pin (France), and Killarney, Ireland. Her work is in numerous private, corporate, and public collections in the U.S. and Europe, including the Knoxville Museum of Art, the Huntsville Museum of Art, the Springfield Art Museum (MO), Sloan-Kettering Hospital (NY), and L'Abbaye de la Roe (France). She also plays keyboards in a Celtic band, Red-Haired Mary.

The French Family Band

There were still a limited number of tickets available at press time for The French Family Band's two shows in Mentone on Saturday, May 31 (7-9 p.m.), and Sunday, June 1 (3-5 p.m.). The payment link is available on our Facebook page or we can email it to you.

Originally from Australia and now based in Nashville, The French Family Band (core trio features husband-wife duo Stuie and Camille French and their son Sonny) takes inspiration from the country and Western swing icons of decades past, creating and performing American roots music that's most assuredly vibrant and fully alive. The group appeared on the legendary Grand Ole Opry four times in 2023, which is all the proof of life any fan should need. They have had ringing endorsements from folks like Marty Stuart and Connie Smith, among other greats.

Stuie and Camille and their three children moved to Nashville in 2019 after building a strong reputation back home. Over the course of nearly 20 years as the duo Camille and Stuie,



they became one of Australia's best-loved musical acts. They won three Australian Golden Guitar Awards, which are equal to the CMAs, and won another one in 2023 as The French Family Band.

When Covid hit, The French Family Band pivoted from playing traditional gigs to doing Facebook Live concerts from home. This turned out to be a winning strategy that exposed their music to the world. They built a Facebook following of more than 180,000 followers and created a global fan base that loves their music.

Randy Grider is executive director of the nonprofit Mentone Arts and Cultural Center. He can be reached via email at mentoneartscenter@gmail.com or by phone at 256-674-3366.



The French Family Band



A work by artist/instructor Margaret Scanlan



Groundhog Volunteer Hero: Susan Noel

Originally from Meridian, Mississippi, Susan Noel moved to Lookout Mountain at age 9 and has called it home ever since. A retired educator, she spent over 30 years teaching elementary science and reading at Menlo School, a job she adored. And her passion for serving others remains as strong as ever.

Susan has spent many hours in service to her community, including serving as a Friends of Moon Lake Library Board member. She also has given her time reorganizing books on the shelves and alphabetizing the popular donated used titles. These days you'll also find her working behind the front desk, assisting patrons and ensuring the library remains a welcoming space for all.

Her pride in the library shows in her smile when she speaks about it: "It's such a community center that welcomes everyone and has something for everybody," Susan says.

In addition to her library work, Susan volunteers weekly at the St. Joseph's Food Pantry, continuing her mission to support her community in any way she can. Susan's contributions make her a true hero.

Thank you, Susan! Is there a volunteer you'd like to recognize? Email your nomination to groundhognews@yahoo.com.

St. Joseph's on-the-Mountain

Holy Week Schedule of Services

PALM SUNDAY 4/13
11 a.m. Palm Sunday Liturgy
Procession and Holy Communion

MAUNDY THURSDAY 4/17
6:30 p.m. Liturgy of the Upper Room
& Washing of Feet

GOOD FRIDAY 4/18
12pm Celebration of The Passion of Christ
6:00 pm Stations of the Cross devotion

RESURRECTION SUNDAY 4/20
11 a.m. Festal Eucharist & Holy Baptism

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11:00 AM - REPTILE & AMPHIBIAN CREATURE FEATURE
1:00 PM - VENOMOUS SNAKES OF ALABAMA

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Valley Head Happenings: Memories of Mayberry Set for May 3

BY MAYOR KAREN VEST

Our 8th Annual Memories of Mayberry Festival is set for Saturday, May 3, around Valley Head’s town square. The fun starts at 9 a.m. and runs until 5 p.m. Mayberry’s favorite characters, Floyd the Barber (Alan Newsome); Deputy Barney Fife (Anthony Wood); and Ernest T. Bass will be strolling the streets of Mayberry again this year. Have your photo taken with them and in front of Barney’s sheriff’s car. We will also have our jail in front of Town Hall, so be thinking of someone you would like to “lock up.”

This year’s festival t-shirts feature the new slogan, “What the World Needs is More Mayberry” and come in lavender and graphite (gray). Shirts are only \$15 for small through XL and \$20 for 2X through 4X. All previous years’ shirts will be on sale for only \$5.

Whitney Tinker will open the event by singing the National Anthem. The main stage, on the field in front of town hall, will feature the country-rock band Stranded, who’ll play multiple sets throughout the festival. In front of the pavilion on Commerce Avenue, catch the square dance club and cloggers.

Numerous food trucks, including Froggy Freeze, DB Enterprises, Mi



Casita, and A & R Concessions, will sell tasty meals and treats. Also, numerous baked goods and candy vendors will be on hand. Valley Head’s own Tiger’s Inn and the new Side Street Deli will be open for lunch that day.

Some 30 craft and retail vendors will sell homemade items such as

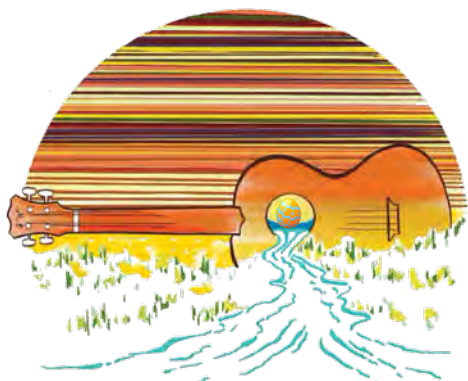
wood crafts, jewelry, hand-crocheted animals, potholders, farmhouse décor, Scentsy, artisan soaps and resins, barn quilts, porch signs, and much more.

This year’s festival will once again feature a classic car Cruise-In along Commerce Avenue and Winston Street. Be sure to walk around the corner to see all the beautiful cars. If you plan to enter the Pie Baking Contest, please have your pies at Town Hall by 9 a.m. that morning. And don’t forget to enter Aunt Bee’s Homemade Dill Pickle Contest. You may bring your pickles any day prior to the festival or by 9 a.m. on that Saturday. There are no fees to enter the pie and pickle contests.

There will be plenty of activities for the kids, including pony rides, children’s train ride, blow-up slide, and a bouncy house. Bring your entire family for a day that’s sure to be filled with fun. For more information, check out the festival Facebook page, “Memories of Mayberry Festival.” This year’s proceeds will go into the Town of Valley Head Events and Festivals Fund.

Valley Head holds its Town Council meeting the first Monday of each month at 6 p.m. The public is always welcome to attend. I am so excited to share our news with you, and I am proud to call Valley Head home. I hope you will come visit us soon. 🍷

Springtime with The Mentone Ukes



BY DEBRA FEY

The Mentone Ukes is the designated house band of the Moon Lake Library. With our spring performances right around the corner, this is the perfect time to learn the ukulele or dust off your uke skills and join in the fun!

Our ongoing FREE sessions will be held on Saturday, April 12 and 26, at 1 p.m. at the library. A beginners lesson is held at the same time as our regular session, and loaner ukes are available.

We would love for you to join us. Be sure to look for our performances at various places around town this spring! For more information, find us on Facebook/MentoneUkes or on the web: www.mentoneukes.com. 🍷

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April Community Events

*All times are central unless otherwise noted.
Calendar entries are subject to change.*

April 3 Brunch & Learn – Join the DeKalb County Master Gardeners Association for a Brunch & Learn like no other! Enjoy a fascinating falconry presentation and demonstration by Matt Whitfield, president of the Alabama Hawking Association. Brunch at 8:30 a.m. and presentation 9–10:30 a.m. DeKalb VFW Fairgrounds Hall, Fort Payne.

April 4 Hike with a Naturalist: Bridge Trail to Little Falls – Please join us on a guided 3-mile hike at the Little River National Preserve. We'll pass Little River's wonderful waterfall on our way to Little Falls, just downstream. Please wear footwear suitable for hiking. Bring water, sun protection, and possibly a snack. Free event. Registration appreciated. This is a moderate to arduous level hike with varying and uneven terrain. Children and dogs may find it challenging.

April 4-5 The Skeeters Live – Back Forty Ballroom – The Skeeters - 10 Ton Records - National Single Release Party. Doors open at 5 p.m. Show time 7 p.m. Tickets on sale at eventbrite.com.

April 5 Pancake Breakfast – Sylvania Fire Department is having our annual pancake breakfast fundraiser April 5 from 7-10 a.m. Plates will be \$7; dine-in or takeout. All proceeds benefit the fire department.

April 5, 12, 19 & 26 Sewing Course – Want to learn how to sew? Enroll now for a comprehensive course starting April 5 at Dogtown Fire Hall! Choose from two class times: 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. or 5-8 p.m. Learn from experienced instructors and complete three projects using one of our 12 classroom machines. No machine? No problem! Digital Sewing Reference Cards will be provided each week.

April 5 Landscaping with Native Plants – Landscaping with native plants is sometimes called “naturescaping.” Learn how to enhance your landscaping skills while promoting biodiversity. Will include presentation and afterward an optional meandering walk-about to see native plants around the Nature Center. 10 a.m.-1 p.m. DeSoto State Park. Benefield Nature Center next to the Country Store on Co. Rd. 89 Free and open to everyone, no pre-registration required. For details, email Brittney.Hughes@dcnr.alabama.gov.

April 5 Wildflower Watercolors for Beginners: Spring Blooms – Hosted by DeSoto State Park & Little River Arts Council. Discover the beauty of native wildflowers through the art of watercolor in this beginner-friendly class. Designed for those who think they can't draw a stick figure, this course focuses on easy-to-learn techniques to capture the delicate charm of local flora. You'll create vibrant, nature-inspired artworks while exploring the unique features of native wildflowers. No prior art experience is required. By the end of the class, you'll have a collection of small watercolor paintings and newfound confidence in your artistic abilities. 2-5:00 p.m. DeSoto State Park. Nature Center next to DeSoto's Country Store on Co. Rd. 89: \$55.00 fee includes all supplies. Ages 12 to adult. Class space is limited to 10; pre-registration is required for attendance in this class. Pre-registration: <https://reserve.alapark.com/register/DSP-SSS-Spring-Watercolors>

April 5-6 Color Theory Weekend – Two-day class with visiting artist/instructor Margaret Scanlan. Class is limited to 10 students. Tuition is \$195 (plus supply fee directly to the instructor as she will furnish all the materials). Email mentoneartscenter@gmail.com or call 256-674-3366 to register. 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

April 10 Daybreak Flatwater Paddle Trip – The DeSoto State Park staff offers this relaxing guided morning paddle trip on scenic Little River. This trip is approximately 4 miles round-trip on flat water under your own power and spans a 3- to 3.5-hour period. Includes kayak, paddle, and personal flotation device. Participants must be able to paddle upstream and back (no current). Weight limits: 300 pounds for singles, 450 for tandems. Ages 8 to adult. What to bring: Appropriate clothing for weather, bug spray, snacks, and drinking water. 7-10 a.m. DeSoto Falls Picnic Area-Miller's Bend Paddle Shack (about 7 miles from main park area of DeSoto State Park). Fee: \$30 for single kayak rental (tandem kayaks are available on a limited basis for \$50. Email to check availability.) Pre registration: <https://reserve.alapark.com/register/DSP-Daybreak-Paddle>

April 11 Pop-Up Shop and Book Signing – Pop-up shop and book signing with Mary Ella Gabler, Peacock Alley Linens at the Gallery by Andiamo Lodge. Meet the founder of Peacock Alley, Mary Ella Gabler, and have the opportunity to purchase some Luxurious Linens. Free and open to the public. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

April 11 Wild Cave Exploration – Go beyond where the average tourist explores! This adventure is for those of you ready to explore on your knees, on your belly, in the mud, and through tight tunnels. Explore in one of Northeast Alabama's most unique all-weather caves. All gear included. 3-6:30 p.m. True Adventure Sports Training Facility, 13102 Alabama Hwy 176, Fort Payne.

April 11 Kids Bops Sunny Day Sweepin' the Clouds Away – On my way to where the air, and the music, is sweet! Join us in the NACC Music Auditorium for all your childhood favorites! Featuring the NACC Chorus, Jazz Band, Encore, and Mustang String Band. 6:30 p.m.

April 11 Boys in the Band – Bring your dancing boots and your best pair of hometown socks and join us for a Back Forty Ballroom BASH! Tickets are on sale now. Back Forty Ballroom, Fort Payne. Doors open 6:30 p.m. Tickets: \$35 per person @ bitb.band/ backforty. Table seating is first-come, first-served.

April 12 Trail Trekker Hike: Neverland Loop – This hike series is designed for those who prefer some company out on the trails with experienced park staff or volunteers. Start marking them off toward your patch today! About the hike: Will be hiking on the Never-neverland/Vizneyland Trails, as well as the Dark Side Trail for a longer hike, which will be approximately 7 miles round-trip, moderate. Trail weaves through hardwood forest with sandstone outcroppings, streams, wetlands, and an old homeplace along the trail. 9:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; DeSoto State Park. Meet at DeSoto's Country Store on County Road 89. Will caravan to trailhead. Fee: Free and open to everyone, no preregistration required. Weather dependent; please call the lodge at 256-845-5380 beforehand to check on status of hike.

April 12 Spring Market Fiesta – Sonrise Retreat will host its Spring Vendor Fair on April 12 from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Look for local vendors, food trucks, live music, bouncy houses, the Easter bunny and more! There will be a \$3 onsite parking fee. We look forward to seeing you there!

April 12 Eggstravaganza Egg Hunt – Join us for our annual Eggstravaganza Egg Hunt at the Geraldine Town Park, starting at 2 p.m. Over 5,000 eggs hidden; age groups will be 0-3, 4-6, and 7-10. There will be a gift bag filled with goodies for every child, plus pictures with the Easter bunny! Bring the kiddos out for some Easter fun. We are excited to see our community come together!

April 12 Earth Fest 2025 at Little River Canyon Center – Celebrate Earth Day with the JSU Field School! Join us for a FREE day of outdoor fun at the JSU Little River Canyon Center! Enjoy live music, yoga, guided hikes, live animal presentations, hands-on crafts, and more. Connect with local organizations working to protect Alabama's natural resources! Bring a lawn chair and spend the day celebrating nature! Meet passionate environmental groups and learn more about Alabama's amazing wildlife!

April 12 MERF Taste of the Mountain & Art Auction – Get ready for an unforgettable evening at Taste of the Mountain & Art Auction, MERF's annual fundraiser. Come to Camp Alpine for a night of delicious local flavors and exciting silent & live art auctions, featuring pieces from talented area artists and Valley Head students. Tickets available at the Mentone Market for cash and check sales and on <https://www.merfhouse.com/> for credit card sales. Tickets are \$50 per seat or \$400 for a table for eight. Online sales will add a 3% processing fee. Don't miss your chance to support art education and community programs while enjoying a fantastic night out!

April 12 Conversations at the Andiamo Table with Mary Ella Gabler – Indulge in an exclusive evening of connection, inspiration, and exquisite dining. This intimate event features a gourmet meal prepared by our renowned chef, perfectly paired with meaningful conversations led by Mary Ella Gabler, founder of Peacock Alley and author of Uncommon Threads. 6-9 p.m.

April 13 Beducation with Mary Ella Gabler of Peacock Alley – Come join Mary Ella Gabler, founder of Peacock Alley and author of Uncommon Threads, and Colleen Duffley from Andiamo Lodge to learn the Art of Making the Perfect Bed. Transform your bedroom into a sanctuary of comfort and elegance! 12-2 p.m. at Andiamo.

April 14 Beginner Quilting – Learn all the basics of quilting and make a quilt of your own. Beginners' quilting class will be at The Locale in Fyffe. Mondays starting April 14 from 6-8 p.m. \$200 for an 8-week class.

April 16 Lunch & Learn with The SAM Foundation – Join us for an opportunity to learn more about The SAM Foundation and its mission to prevent suicide. You will also be trained in an evidence-based suicide prevention program called QPR (Question, Persuade,

Refer), which will equip you with the skills and knowledge to intervene in a suicidal crisis. Lunch will be provided by Rita's Cocina. Training sponsored by: Fort Payne Improvement Authority. Held at the Coal & Iron Building.

April 18-19 Spring Festival – Cool Tools & More in Sylvania. There will be vendors set up for the day. 9 a.m.-2 p.m.

April 19 Hike with a Naturalist: Canyon Mouth Park Trail – Get ready for an unforgettable outdoor adventure! Join us for a guided 2-mile hike through the stunning Canyon Mouth Park in the Little River National Preserve. As you hike along the breathtaking CMP Trail, you'll be surrounded by scenic views and diverse wildlife. Please wear footwear suitable for hiking. Bring water, sun protection, and possibly a snack. Free event. Registration appreciated. This is an easy to moderate hike. Children and dogs are welcome. Meet at the Little River Canyon Center at 10 a.m. From there, we'll caravan to the trailhead together. Alternatively, you can meet us directly at Canyon Mouth Park at 10:30 a.m.

April 19 Third Saturday – Third Saturday Sunset Cruise-In will be an afternoon of family fun activities in the Main Street District of Fort Payne. This public event will include food, live music, motorcycles, antique car show, and much more. 5-9 p.m.

April 25-26 Myrtle Jane's Pop-Up Market – We are so excited to announce our 2nd year of the Myrtle Jane's Vintage Pop-Up Market, Friday April 25 & Saturday, April 26. This is a rain or shine event. Location is at our Myrtle Jane's Fort Payne store.

April 25-27 & May 2-4 James and the Giant Peach! – The musical James and the Giant Peach is about an orphan boy who discovers a giant peach that takes him on a magical adventure. Tickets \$8. Appropriate for all audiences. Northeast Alabama Community College Theatre. Tickets by phone: 256-638-4418 ext. 2218 or online.

April 26 Lost Falls Trail Run – Welcome to the 2025 Lost Falls Trail Run! All runners who sign up for the Lost Falls 10K, Half Marathon, and 50K will receive a t-shirt and finisher medal as well as a hot meal post-race! Packets may be picked up the morning of the race (near the Country Store/Information Center: 7104 Desoto Pkwy NE in Fort Payne) from 6:30-7:45 a.m., but we encourage you to get there as early as possible! The race is capped at 300 runners. Desoto State Park. For more information, please see the registration page. Registration: <https://ultrasignup.com/register.aspx?did=107154>

April 26 DeKalb Master Gardeners Plant Sale – The DeKalb County Master Gardener Plant Sale will be Saturday, April 26, from 8-11 a.m. (or until all plants are gone) at the DeKalb County VFW Fairgrounds.

April 26 Spring Fling Showdown – We are thrilled to host a special, one-day pickleball tournament for men's doubles and women's doubles! REGISTER: <https://pickleballtournaments.com/.../spring-pling-showdown>. Medals will be awarded for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd places in each division. Drinks and snacks available for purchase.

April 26 Hike With a Naturalist, Powell Trail – Celebrate Trails Day is the perfect opportunity to get outside and enjoy your favorite trail. This is a 2-mile trail in the Little River Canyon National Preserve. This hike is a strenuous 2-mile journey with varying and steep terrain into the canyon. Please wear footwear suitable for hiking, dress in layers, bring water, hiking poles, sun protection and a snack! Meet at the Little River Canyon Center, and we will caravan to the trailhead. 10:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Free and open to everyone! Registration accepted.

April 26-27 Gun and Knife Show The show is held at the DeKalb County VFW Fairgrounds and is promoted by A.G. Gun Shows. All federal, state and local firearm laws and ordinances must be followed. 250 tables of guns (new & used, antique & modern), knives, ammo, military surplus, tactical gear and more! Come check us out! Saturday 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sunday 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

April 27 Fly Fishing 101 Workshop Join Dr. Tim Lindblom at the Little River Canyon Center for Fly Fishing 101! Learn the basics to get started on your own fly fishing adventures! We discuss gear selection, knots, fly selection, and casting instructions. Participants will get hands-on experience and the opportunity to make that first catch! Ages 14 and over are welcome. Register today! Spots are extremely limited! 2-5 p.m. \$50 per participant; JSU students and teachers receive 20% off with promo code! (Must show school ID.) No refunds after April 19 What to Bring: Please bring water, sun protection, and a snack. All equipment will be provided, but you are welcome to bring your own. Register today https://secure.touchnet.net/C20901_ustores/web/product_detail.jsp?PRODUCTID=337

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Do you know these boys at Milford Howard’s cabin site?

BY STEPHEN V, SMITH, EDITOR

We love a good mystery, especially one tied to local history. We are hoping readers of *The Groundhog* can help solve this one.

A postcard came our way recently featuring a photograph of eight boys at what is believed to be the site of Milford Howard’s cabin where he lived near the Master School following his sale of the Alpine Lodge property.

A local historian determined that the postcard was produced sometime between 1918 and 1930.

The names of the boys are written on the back in pencil. Five of the names are legible and appear to be:

- Odell Yancy
- Clifton Brock
- Homer Brock
- Ishmael Payton
- Arnold Hicks

These names match those of five boys listed as Master School students on page 154 of *The Vagabond Dreamer*, the Milford Howard biography written

by Elizabeth Howard, further strengthens their connection with the Master School.

The boy in the top left of the photograph is identified as a Bailey on the back, but his first name is difficult to decipher. According to the Milford Howard biography, a Mr. and Mrs. Miles Bailey and their seven children operated a sawmill on property adjacent to the Master School. Miles Bailey is said to have provided the pine shingles for the construction of the Master School. The list of students in *The Vagabond Dreamer* includes an Augustus Bailey, but that does not appear to be the name on this postcard.

Besides young Bailey, there are two other boys unidentified on this postcard.

Do you know the three unidentified boys? Do you have additional information that might shed historical light on the photograph? Please email information to groundhognews@yahoo.com, or write us at:

The Groundhog
P.O. Box 107
Mentone, AL 35984



MENTONE'S ANNUAL COMMUNITY CLEANUP

Roll up your sleeves and join us for a day of community spirit and beautification at Mentone’s Annual Cleanup Day on Saturday, April 5.

DATE: SATURDAY, APRIL 5
TIME & MEETING PLACE: 9 A.M. AT THE MENTONE INN PARKING LOT
(You’ll receive equipment and be assigned a cleanup area upon arrival.)

AFTER THE CLEANUP: POTLUCK LUNCH & LIVE MUSIC!
Once the hard work is done, head over to the Linger Longer Pavilion behind the Mentone Inn for a potluck lunch at noon. If you’re bringing a dish, drop it off early in a disposable container or one marked with your name.

Enjoy live music by Larry Joe Hall while connecting with fellow community members!

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT: Lyle Nicely at 256-996-0169 or Cynthia Stinson at 256-254-9872

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The Mountain Kitchen Take It Easy for Dinner

BY REBECCA HENDERSON,
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

When spring fever hits and you want to be outside, why rattle those pots and pans for hours in the kitchen? This recipe has tons of flavor, uses one pot, AND gives you an excuse to consume some serious amounts of Parmesan. Add a salad (or not), and voila!

Amazingly Quick Tortellini Stew

(Serves 6)

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, minced (for convenience, use chopped garlic in the jar)
- ½ cup finely chopped fresh zucchini
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 can (14.5-ounce) diced tomatoes, undrained
- 5.5 cups vegetable broth (adjust according to how thick you like your stew)
- 1 tablespoon dried Italian seasoning
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- ½ teaspoon dried red pepper flakes
- 9-ounce package refrigerated cheese tortellini (dried tortellini works fine, too)
- 4 cups fresh spinach leaves
- Shaved or grated Parmesan cheese

1. Heat the oil over medium heat in a large saucepan.
2. Add garlic and zucchini, and saute 1 minute (do not brown it).
3. Add tomato paste, tomatoes, broth, and seasonings, and bring to a boil.
4. Gently add pasta, and return to a low boil. Cook 6 minutes or just until pasta is tender.
5. Remove from heat, and immediately add spinach. Stir until spinach wilts.
6. Top with cheese, and serve.

Breakfast at the Inn Is a Sweet Experience

The Mentone Inn’s Cynthia Stinson has greeted many a sunrise surrounded by hungry guests. They quickly find that her breakfasts are made with love, as though each day were a special occasion. One dish in particular is like a warm hug with a hint of cinnamon and a blanket of sweet, buttery topping. It’s next-level on the comfort scale, and

you assemble it the night before and bake it just before serving. When she sent me a photo of this beloved recipe, she apologized for the stains on the paper. I knew then that it was a good one. “It’s the most requested dish I make... I’ve been using it for 40 years,” Cynthia says. It’s also included in the inn’s cookbook, which she published back in 2009. She has only two copies left, but she is working on volume 2.

Baked French Toast Casserole

(Serves 12-14)

- Casserole:**
- 1 loaf French bread
 - 8 large eggs
 - 2 cups half-and-half
 - 1 cup milk
 - 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
 - 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
 - 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
 - ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
 - Dash of salt
- Praline topping:**
- 1 cup butter
 - 1 cup packed light brown sugar
 - 2 tablespoons light corn syrup
 - 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
 - ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg
 - 1 cup chopped pecans

Maple Syrup

1. Slice French bread into 20 (1-inch) slices, and arrange in a buttered 9 x 13 dish, overlapping slices.
2. In a large bowl, combine the eggs, half-and-half, milk, sugar, vanilla, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt. Beat with a whisk until blended but not too bubbly.
3. Pour mixture over the bread slices, covering evenly. Cover with foil, and refrigerate overnight.
4. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. To make the topping, melt butter and brown sugar in a small saucepan over low heat. Stir in corn syrup, cinnamon, and nutmeg; spread evenly over bread, and sprinkle with nuts.
5. Bake for 25 to 30 minutes or until puffed and lightly golden.

Serve with maple syrup.

Share and Share Alike... Sometimes

Mentone resident and extraordinary cook Mary Shurett shares a funny family story, along with a cherished dish you’ll adopt in your own family. “As children, we enjoyed covered dish meals at my grandparents’ home with all of my mother’s siblings,



Zesty Tortellini Stew satisfies a serious pasta craving while packing plenty of fresh green veggies.



Delightfully easy Carrot Souffle requires just a whirl of the ingredients in a food processor, then a short baking time.

their spouses and children. Everyone brought delicious food, including my Aunt Evelyn, who was famous for her banana pudding! It was the BEST! Several years ago, I showed my cousin Peggy (Evelyn’s only child) a copy of her mother’s banana pudding recipe. Peggy looked carefully at the recipe, placed her finger on one ingredient and said, ‘Mother NEVER put that in her banana pudding! She always omitted an ingredient or included something so that no one else baked one as delicious as hers!’ Oh, how I wish my mother were alive to learn this interesting tidbit! Fast-forward to Christmas brunches, Thanksgiving and Easter lunches celebrated at my parents’ home. Richard Stout, the late husband of my niece, Karen, always brought his Carrot

Soufflé and it was requested every year by all. The recipe, unlike Evelyn’s, was generously shared with me and now Karen happily shares it with you. Enjoy!”

Stout Family Carrot Soufflé

(Serves 12)

- 3 cans sliced carrots, drained
 - 1 stick butter, softened
 - 4 eggs
 - ½ cup all-purpose flour
 - 1 tablespoon baking powder
 - 2 cups sugar
 - ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon (more if you love cinnamon)
1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
 2. Position knife blade in food processor bowl; add carrots, butter, and remaining ingredients, and process until smooth, stopping only to scrape the sides.
 3. Spoon mixture into a lightly greased 2-quart souffle or baking dish.
 4. Bake for 1 hour or until set and lightly browned. Serve immediately. 🍴



The Mentone Inn’s Cynthia Stinson created this cookbook in 2009 and is working on a second volume.

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