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THE GROUNDHOG

"Neighborly News from the Heart of Lookout Mountain"

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

The Rev. Andrew Brislin Makes Mentone His Home

BY REBECCA HENDERSON
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

The Rev. Andrew Brislin, full-time rector at St. Joseph's on-the-Mountain Episcopal Church in Mentone, didn't begin his professional life in the pulpit. He began it with balance sheets, loan portfolios, and long conversations across a banker's desk. But it was there that his unexpected call to ordained ministry quietly took shape.

Known to friends and parishioners simply as Drew, he grew up in Selma, Alabama, a place whose history and complexity helped shape his understanding of community, suffering, and resilience. After graduating from The University of Alabama, he built a career in finance, working in banking, mortgage lending, software services, and even traveling the country with a mobile trade show before settling into nearly a decade at a Tuscaloosa bank. On paper, it was a stable and successful path. In practice, it became something else entirely.



Rev. Andrew Brislin is rector at St. Joseph's on-the-Mountain

The turning point came in 2011, in the aftermath of the devastating Tuscaloosa tornado that claimed lives and wreaked havoc in several areas of the state. After Brislin was away caring for his mother, who was battling pancreatic cancer, he returned to find a shaken community searching not just for financial help, but for someone to sit with them, to listen. Customers came to his desk not only to cash FEMA checks or manage damaged financial affairs, but to talk — to tell their stories, to process what they had survived.

"I realized, consciously or not, that I was providing pastoral services," Brislin said. At the time, he didn't see it as ministry. He saw it as listening, as being present, as helping people navigate moments when their lives had been turned upside-down.

That instinct only deepened as he helped clients manage estates after the deaths of loved ones. His work required empathy as much as expertise. Money, he came to understand, is often intertwined with grief and vulnerability. "Using pastoral skills," he reflected, "that's what I was doing. I just didn't know it at the time."

The question of ordained ministry emerged gradually, during a season already marked by loss. After his mother's death later that year, Brislin entered counseling with an Episcopal priest who asked a simple but life-altering question: Had he ever considered entering the seminary? His answer was an immediate no. But the question lingered on his heart.

(See "Rev. Andrew Brislin," Page 14)

My American Experience

Groundhog seeks submissions for essay project

STAFF REPORTS



The Groundhog is seeking essays from readers to mark the 250th anniversary of our nation's founding.

"History is more than a list of dates, people, and places," says Groundhog editor Stephen V. Smith. "It's a rich tapestry woven by millions of colorful threads, each a story of folks from all walks of life who experience the unfolding of history on a deep, personal level."

The goal of the "My American Experience" essay project is to collect the thoughts of those in our communities about what it means to be an American. "The American spirit captures an array of emotions and reflections for different people and can even change on a personal level across time," says Smith. "We hope to collect essays that will create a snapshot of this moment, to document this important milestone in the life of our nation."

Suggested topics for the essay include:

- An experience you had that shaped the person you are today
- A story of a family member or someone in your community that exemplifies the American spirit
- The best things about America
- America's greatest challenges
- What makes you proud about our country
- What disappoints you about America
- A message you'd like to share with those celebrating America's 300th anniversary in 2076

"While political issues certainly impact how history unfolds," says Smith, "readers are encouraged to avoid typical rants and instead reach for stories with deeper reflections that look beyond the current political climate. Likewise, we want to see more than superficial patriotism. We're looking for substance that will create a valuable, thought-provoking image of this moment and its place in the grand story of America."

Selected submissions will be published in upcoming issues of The Groundhog's print and online editions.

To participate, email your essay to groundhognews@yahoo.com, or mail it to:

The Groundhog
My American Experience
P.O. Box 107
Mentone, AL 35984

Submissions can range from a few paragraphs to 1,000 words. By submitting your essay, you grant permission to The Groundhog to publish it in print and/or online, in any format, without restriction or expectation of compensation. You further acknowledge that your submission may be lightly edited for context or space.



A Town Staple, Reimagined: Little River Hardware & Outdoor Supplies

BY REBECCA HENDERSON,
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

For decades, Little River Hardware in Mentone has been a place people rely on when something needs fixing, building, or replacing. Since Larry Johnson bought the store last August, he's been kicking things up a notch. Now operating under a new name, Little River Hardware & Outdoor Supplies, the store reflects both continuity and growth: the same familiar foundation with a new vision for how people live, work, and visit on the mountain.

Johnson purchased the store from close friend Cooper Lindsey after Lindsey mentioned he might be selling.

(See "Little River Hardware," Page 7)

Come join the fun at the

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- CAKE WALK
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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 Meg Justice/Bee Spring Studio

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Mentone Matters
Here's to a Year of Completions

BY MAYOR ROB HAMMOND

It was a wonderful Christmas season in Mentone, and I hope everyone reading this had moments of joy with those you love. I'm anticipating a strong year for our town, in part because it's going to be a year of completions.

The first among these will be the completion of our sidewalk expansion. We faced several delays on the second phase of this project, but the construction crews moved quickly once work began. We will schedule a ceremony to officially open this phase in the coming weeks, and we encourage you to join us in the celebration.

Once complete, Mentone will have sidewalks extending from Scenic Drive/County Road 89 at the top of the mountain to Moon Lake Library and Moon Lake Campus. This will benefit residents, visitors, and businesses alike. Walkable towns create health and recreation opportunities while increasing walk-in traffic for businesses along the path.

Another completion will be the renovations to the main building at Moon Lake Campus. After months of studies and plans by architects, the team at TARCOG (Top of Alabama Regional Council of Governments) is ready to advertise the project for bids. The Town of Mentone will receive and review those bids. The winning contractor must complete the project this year.

The renovation will have many benefits. It will make much-needed structural improvements to the main building on campus. It will make it safer for visitors and tenants. And it will protect this important historic structure and help preserve it for future generations.

The clearing you've seen taking place at Brow Park will lead to a new phase that will add a hiking trail below the top edge. This will provide our residents with additional recreational opportunities while attracting visitors to this new park feature. We also hope to receive grant money to add an observation deck and improved picnic areas. Hopefully, this work can be completed in 2026 as well.

While this year will be one of completions, may it also be one of new beginnings. We hope to see new businesses open and existing businesses thrive. We hope new community programs bring more access to the arts, from visual arts to music. And we hope existing programs will reach more people and build more relationships within our town.

Speaking of community, I hope to see you at the Groundhog Day Community Celebration on Saturday, February 7, at the Moon Lake Campus. It's going to be another fun event for kids of all ages — and adults, too! Come be part of the fun!

Local Mayors Encourage America 250! Celebrations

BY LINDA JONES

The National Society Daughters of the American Revolution (NSDAR) has asked members to honor our nation's history by commemorating the Semiquincentennial, the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 2026. The DAR is a non-profit, non-political organization dedicated to promoting community service, preserving history, educating children, and honoring and supporting those who serve our nation.

Hannah White Arnett Chapter, NSDAR, of Fort Payne has received 6 America 250! Proclamations from Mayors in DeKalb County to encourage celebrations in their communities this year. Those participating include Mayor Rob Hammond, Mentone; Mayor Karen Vest, Valley Head; Mayor Tony Hammonds, Hammondville; Mayor Brian Baine, Fort Payne; Mayor Paul Cagle, Fyffe; and Mayor Jeff Chandler, Collinsville.

The Groundhog is seeking essays from readers to mark the 250th anniversary of our nation's founding. See story on page 1 for details. Selected submissions will be published in upcoming issues of The Groundhog's print and online editions.



Mentone: HWA Vice Regent Linda Jones, Mayor Rob Hammond, Asst. Police Chief Michael Langston, HWA member Mary Shurett.



Valley Head: HWA Vice Regent Linda Jones, Mayor Karen Vest, Town Clerk Lora Wooten.



Hammondville: HWA member Debbie Lanier and Mayor Tony Hammonds.

From the Editor
It's Go Time

BY STEPHEN V. SMITH, EDITOR

My grandson loves to race. On foot. In a riding toy. Around the yard. Through the house. And often when you least expect it. No matter the environment, every race begins the same way: "On your mark … get set … go!"

That's how I felt when I woke up in 2026. The sense of anticipation grew as the final weeks of December accelerated to a crescendo of fireworks, aspirations, and promises made to ourselves. Like many, I "got on my mark" by focusing on plans for the new year. I "got set" by organizing, making notes, and adding key events to my calendar.

And then it was "go" time.

As I'm writing this, we've burned through more than half of the first month of 2026. One-twelfth of the new year is almost behind us. By the time you read this, about 10 percent of 2026 will be in the rearview mirror. Time and Tide wait for no man.

The moments when we're struck by the reality of our finite journey often lead us to start making lists, adding new goals, charting new courses. We plan the work and work the plan. We have so little time, living this vaporous life, that we must cram more into it and squeeze more out of it, right? That has always been my tendency, and it has both added abundance to my life and robbed me of opportunities.

A popular New Year's exercise is to choose a "word of the year" to act as a theme, a guiding light for the year unfolding. For 2026, my word is "legacy." There are some monumental things on the calendar this year, including the wedding of our daughter. This is also the final year before we have to start sharing our grandson with the school system. A friend, one of our children's elementary teachers, told me many years ago that once a child starts school, they are gone — you'll never have this much time with them again. Michele and I intend to build memories with our grandson, along with a solid foundation of loving life and his fellow man, that will impact him long after Mawmaw and Pawpaw are gone.

The word "legacy" will help keep me focused this year on building things that matter, things that will remain long after my eulogy is read. That doesn't mean cramming more projects into the workday. It means pursuing the projects that matter. This includes investing more in the relationships that matter most, being present when I'm with family and friends, and prioritizing experiences over material consumption.

If you're having similar thoughts, I recommend a couple of books. "Hero on a Mission: A Path to a Meaningful Life" by Donald Miller will help you identify the role you are playing in your own story and develop a plan to build the life you really want. In "Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals," author Oliver Burkeman forces us to face the brevity of our lives here on earth, a realization that frees us from the ridiculous thinking that we can ever complete all those projects in our notebooks, computers, and minds.

I hope I'm sharing with you next year in this space that 2026 was the most fulfilling, abundant, enriching year of my life. Likewise, I hope you will share similar comments on that article via social media, through email, and even letters delivered the old-fashioned way (use an America 250 stamp, please; I'm collecting them). There are few certainties in life, but one thing I know for sure: we won't get there without knowing where "there" is. Once you have that vision, get on your mark, get set, and go!

Employment Program Offered for Seniors

The Top of Alabama Regional Council of Governments (TARCOG) Senior Community Service Employment Program is seeking applicants 55 and older for part-time work and paid job training opportunities. The program has 48 openings across DeKalb, Jackson, Limestone, Madison, and Marshall counties, offering participants $12 per hour and up to 29 hours of work per week. Designed to help seniors build skills and transition into permanent employment, the program places participants with public agencies and nonprofit organizations and prioritizes veterans and income-eligible individuals. Job placements are with public agencies or nonprofit organizations. For more information or to check if you qualify, call TARCOG at (256) 830-0818.

Regenerative Grazing: Animals Can Improve Soil Fertility and Restore Ecosystems

BY BILL MARTIN,
RETIRED SCIENCE TEACHER

This is the seventh in a series of articles on regenerative agriculture, featuring local residents involved in the movement.

Windy Hill farm manager Brent Halderman describes regenerative grazing as: mobbing, mowing, and moving. The team at The Farm at Windy Hill in Mentone pasture-raises and finishes South Poll cattle and Katahdin hair sheep. Additionally, they pasture raise hens for egg production and grow garden produce and fruits.

The idea behind regenerative grazing is to imitate the wild herds of grazing species that crowded together for predator protection. When Ted Turner reintroduced bison to his large farm, they brought the prairie back to life in desert-like lands. Bison and grasslands have an age-old mutual relationship. Allen Savory has done something similar in the African savanna using cattle as a substitute for wild herds. Land becoming desert is now lush with tropical grasses and elephants, lions, and other wild species. Dried water courses run once again on the Turner Ranch and the Savory project in Zimbabwe.



Savory regenerative farm on the left. Neighboring continuously grazed farm on the right

Though counterintuitive, higher animal density improves ecosystems through herd impact. Today, movable electric fencing — polywire on reels and step-in posts — keeps herds bunched and allows precise paddock sizing. Managers adjust group density and movement frequency as forage changes seasonally. In summer, excess forage can be stockpiled for winter, making the system highly adaptive.



Polywire and reel. Rolling it up before the move.

Mowing or Grazing

There are different strategies to utilize forage, depending on the farmer's goal. Typically, cattle graze a third, trample a third, and leave a third for regrowth. Keeping animals from grazing all the way to the ground minimizes parasites and sickness, and maximizes forage recovery. Some might see the trampled forage as a waste, but it is key for soil fertility. It becomes earthworm and soil microbe food.

Mobbing the herd concentrates the manure and urine load, also improving fertility. However, grazing management depends on the goal. The day I visited, some of the steers were being finished, soon to go to the processor. They were given a large paddock and allowed to eat the nutrition-rich growing tips before their daily move. This left a good deal of forage stockpiled to graze in winter. Some producers use a total graze with longer rest periods, thinking that management scheme promotes more plant diversity. It is as much an art as science to manage the herds, the forage, and balance animal and pasture performance.



Brent moving cattle to a new paddock.

Moving animals daily (or more often) gets them off their own manure and on to fresh forage. It will be two to three months before they come back to the same area. Once animals become accustomed to moving, they are eager to access fresh forage in the next paddock and don't require prodding or driving them to move. The challenge comes in fencing new paddocks every day and making sure water is provided in each paddock. A free-choice mineral feeder moves with the animals from paddock to paddock.



Brent shows the free choice mineral feeder pulled by his ATV

The beauty of the free-choice mineral feeder is that animals can select the minerals they need. Additionally, the cattle and sheep help re-mineralize the soil's missing nutrients in their manure and urine over time.

Selecting the right breed is critical for animal performance on pasture, especially when finishing on pasture. Smaller framed animals tend to do better. South Poll cattle were developed by Teddy Gentry on Lookout Mountain. He crossed four breeds and selected for the cattle that were heat tolerant, long lived, docile, good mothers, and grass adapted.

South Poll cattle are now common across the country on regenerative farms. Katahdin hair sheep don't produce wool. They shed hair. As a result, their meat isn't loaded with lanolin, and therefore tastes better. Sheep graze differently from cattle and require guardian dogs to protect them from predators. Sheep like to browse woody and broadleaf plants, but also eat grass.

Sheep and cattle don't share parasites, so they can be grazed one after another, or together as a "flerd" (flock and herd) depending on the goals for pasture management and meat production. Add in chickens, and you've got a multi-species grazing rotation.



The mobile egg wagon, chickens, and guardian dog

Windy Hill allows campers to raise their chicks during summer, something the kids enjoy plus it helps out on the farm. Each year, they select different laying breeds in order to keep track of the age of the birds. This wooded

(See "Regenerative Grazing" Page 4)

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LITTLE RIVER VENUE is ready for your viewing! This previous restaurant with kitchen equipment, seating, and grills. Located on DeSoto Parkway. $350,000 MLS# 21870315



NESTLED IN THE HEART OF MENTONE, this charming 3BR/2BA home sits on a beautifully landscaped 1.5-acre lot with seasonal views of the brow. Inside, you'll find rich Brazilian cherry wood floors, a cozy stone fireplace, and a wood stove for crisp mountain mornings. The kitchen features a unique old well, adding rustic character to the space. Whether you're sipping coffee on the porch or gathering by the fire, this home invites warmth, comfort, and connection. Come experience mountain living at its most magical. $399,900 MLS# 21901861



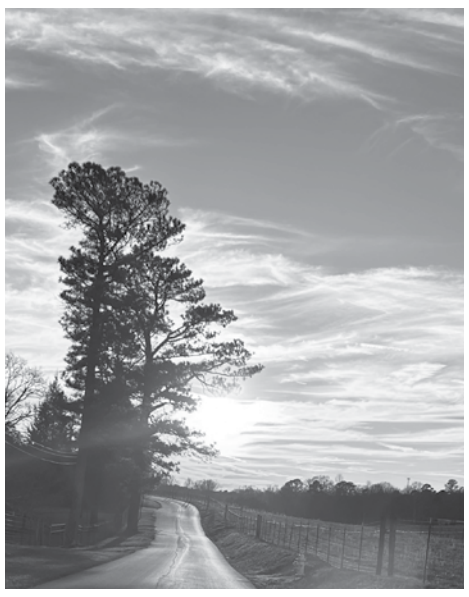
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Love is Everywhere

BY DEJOLY LABRIER



I love my February tiara! Its hearts are sparkly and playful, and absolutely oozes love. It makes



me smile every time I put it on. I also love sunrises and sunsets on the mountain — especially those breathtaking silver and gold ones that appear after a rain shower. I love watching kittens and puppies play, then curl up and sleep. I love a good book that makes me think, and sometimes even cry.

These small, tender moments remind me that love doesn't always arrive with fireworks. Often, it whispers, gliding seamlessly into our attention. For many years, we've been captivated by stories of love — from the 1970 film "Love Story" with Ali MacGraw and Ryan O'Neal, to the timeless tale of "Romeo and Juliet" by William Shakespeare. My mother was a huge fan of the Harlequin romance novels when I was a kid.

These stories remind us that love has always been central to the human experience. It shapes us, challenges us, and can teach us what it means to be alive. The human spirit blossoms and flourishes in the high vibrations of giving and receiving love. That may be one reason so many dating apps have appeared in the past decade. Places to meet new and interesting people are sometimes limited to the internet, and beneath the technology and profiles, we are still seeking the same things: appreciation, recognition, affirmation, connection, and love.

But love is not only romantic. It lives in friendships, in quiet kindness, in shared laughter, in moments of understanding, and in the simple act of being seen. So, if you are searching for love, don't give up. It often appears when we least expect it. Enjoy those flowers, candy, and other goodies you receive this month, whether someone gives them to you or you treat yourself. They are simple expressions of heartfelt love. You deserve it!

And sometimes love looks like my sparkly February tiara, reminding us to keep our hearts open. You never know when moments of loving and being loved will appear.

What Medicare Pays for Skilled Nursing Facility Care

BY LYNN HIXON

Skilled Nursing Facility is often shortened to SNF. SNF care is post-hospital care. SNFs can be their own facilities, or they can be part of nursing homes or hospitals.

Medicare Part A may cover your SNF stay if:

- You were admitted as an inpatient to a hospital for at least three days in a row.
- You enter a Medicare-certified SNF within 30 days of leaving the hospital.
- You receive care for the same condition that you were treated for during your hospital stay.
- You need skilled nursing care seven days per week. Or, you need skilled therapy services at least five days per week.

If you meet the requirements, Part A should cover your SNF care to improve your condition, maintain your ability to function, or to prevent your health from getting worse. Note that the day you become inpatient counts toward your three-day inpatient stay to qualify for Medicare-covered SNF care. However, the day you are discharged from the hospital does not count toward your qualifying days. Also, remember that time spent receiving emergency room care or under observation status does not count toward the three-day hospital inpatient requirement for SNF coverage.

Each benefit period, Original Medicare Part A covers the full cost of your first 20 days in a SNF. For days 21 through 100, Part A covers part of the cost, and you pay a daily coinsurance. A benefit period begins the day you are admitted to a hospital or SNF as an inpatient and ends the day you have been out for 60 days in a row. If you need more than 100 days of SNF care in a benefit period, you will need to pay out of pocket. Remember that you can again become eligible for Medicare coverage of your SNF care once you've been out of the hospital or SNF for 60 days in a row. You will then be eligible for a new benefit period, including 100 new days of SNF care, after a three-day qualifying inpatient stay. If you have the Medicare Advantage plan, your costs might be different. Contact your plan to learn more.

Please call Lynn Hixon, state health insurance assistance program (SHIP) coordinator at the DeKalb County Council on Aging, at 256-845-8590 if you have any questions.

Regenerative Grazing *(continued from page 3)*

chicken pasture (silvopasture) was once a privet (Ligustrum species) thicket. They brought in a forestry mulcher and ground the privet into wood chips. In the winter, they used one of the most powerful regenerative tools — bale grazing. Not in a bale ring, but rolled out across the pasture. Cows line up along the unrolled hay eating most of it, but also trampling some into the soil — all as they deposit urine and manure in the area.

Here again, many might object and say that practice is a waste of hay, but in reality it accomplishes many things, from planting the seed from the hay to fertilizing the soil. It also demonstrates the advantage of multi species farms like Windy Hill.

In a recent study of several Southeastern (including a couple on Lookout Mountain), conventionally (continuously) grazed farms were compared with farms using the regenerative principles of mobbing, mowing, and moving. A team of scientists made many measurements. The findings are remarkable. The regenerative farms absorbed four times more carbon dioxide. They recorded 442 birds of 9 species compared to the conventional farms with 152 birds of 6 species. Regenerative farms had 33% more insect diversity and 25% more soil microbes. Regenerative farms could absorb 3.5 inches of rain/hour, but the conventional farms could only absorb 1.5 inches/hour. That's 2.3 times more absorption, a 54,000-gallon difference. After seeing the data, 80% of the conventional farms began to use regenerative practices. We are what we eat. The same is true for the animals. Having a diverse pasture with grasses, legumes, and broadleaf plants allows animals to choose what they need. As a result, their meat and eggs are more nutrient dense and healthier for us.

While confined feeding operations can be destructive, regenerative grazing can restore ecosystems while improving soil fertility. As Brent says, "It's not the cow, it's the how."

RESOURCES

- Seeing is believing. You can visit many regenerative operations on YouTube.
- "Soil Carbon Cowboys" is a series of short documentaries taking you around the country to visit several regenerative operations.
- Allan Williams Boston Ted talk "First, Heal the Soil" covers the SE comparative study
- Allan Savory's Ted talk "How To Green the World's Deserts and Reverse Climate Change," or
- "Running Out of Time," his documentary on holistic (or regenerative) management describes his restoration of tropical savannas.
- Greg Judy Regenerative Rancher channel posts videos every day sharing his knowledge.
- Farm Like A Lunatic with Joel Salatin is also an excellent channel. He is an innovative farmer who shares his production practices.

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A Familiar Face at City Hall: New Menlo Mayor Kris Willis

BY JAY S. ROBBINS

Kris Willis never had a grand plan to become the mayor of Menlo, Georgia, a town of 500 people (give or take) a mile from the Alabama state line. But he's happy to be there. He had recently moved back to Menlo when he was approached about the position last April by the Menlo City Council, when the previous mayor decided to step down. He thought about it, agreed to do it, and was appointed interim mayor. It went well, he thought, and he ran for the office (unopposed) last November.

"I came into a pretty stable situation," he says. "I've got a good council. The mayor is the one who gets a lot of the credit sometimes, but the council makes the decisions. The mayor doesn't have a ton of power in our structure. They were making a lot of progress when I was appointed, so I came in with the idea that I don't want to mess things up. We all have a similar attitude. It's not about us, it's about the city, and that makes for a situation where you can get a lot done."

Willis was born and raised in Menlo, attending Menlo Elementary, then Trion High School. While at Trion he played basketball. He also started cutting grass and doing other odd jobs for the recreation department. Over time, he worked his way up, and for the next 28 years he worked for the recreation departments in Trion and then in Summerville, where he became the assistant director for Summerville Parks and Recreation.

Sports Provided Common Ground

"We worked with the schools but were funded by the city. I did a lot of league sports — baseball, football, basketball. I did most of the scheduling and recruiting of coaches, referees, officials, just keeping it all organized. I dealt with the public a lot. I coached a little. There's people now that are grown that I've watched come all the way from 5 years old and they've got their own kids playing now. It's interesting when you look back at how many generations came through there."

If there is a through-line in the life of Kris Willis, you might point to sports, which he's obviously always enjoyed. Some years ago, he began writing for an online sports media outlet, mostly about baseball.

"It started out as a side project distraction, but it's worked out really well. I used to write but I'm in more of an editorial role now. It kind of grew and grew, and I eventually got a chance to do it full time from home, so a couple of years ago I was able to move back to Menlo. It took something special for me to leave my job in Summerville."

He mostly covers Major League Baseball. "All our properties are online. We don't have print. There was a point where I was in the press box for the Atlanta Braves. I did that for a couple years. That was fun. It was like living out a dream. I didn't go every night. I'd pick and choose my spots when there was something that I needed to cover. But we covered every game, from a blogger's standpoint more than a traditional beat writer."

As chance would have it, when he moved back to Menlo, he lived next door to then-mayor Allen Keen. "I was interested in what was going on in the city. Allen and I would talk. I started coming to city council meetings, and when he decided to step down, that's when they approached me and asked if I was interested in taking over."



Menlo Mayor Kris Willis

Familiar Faces

Willis is happy to be living back in Menlo. "I do love this place. It's always been home. It didn't matter where I lived, I always wanted to come back here eventually." His wife Christy teaches at Menlo Elementary School, and son Riley is a senior at Chattooga High School.

Looking back at his early years in Menlo, the mayor is quick to point out that his strongest memories are of the folks he knew and still sees today. "The thing that jumps out to me is the people," he observes. "Always the people. I still see a lot of familiar faces from the elementary school. There is a huge sense of community in that school. Those people I was in class with all the way from kindergarten to the eighth grade, they're still some of my best friends."

Even so, Menlo, as every city does, has changed over the years. "The glove mill's not as big as it was," he says, referring to the SHOWA facility. "My mom and my grandmother worked there. My dad worked there for a time." Willis remembers when the Menlo Family Restaurant used a walk-up window. "I remember being a kid and going up and getting a milkshake out front.

"In the end, we're a lot like every other small town out there. We don't have as much money as we'd like. We're trying to do the best we can with what we have." Taking care of existing infrastructure is top of mind for the mayor. "The biggest project I would say we have in front of us is a well that's offline that we're trying to get back online. We may have to seek grant funding for that. We've got enough water, but the well gives us options. It gives us protection if one of our sources goes down."

These days, Willis appreciates being able to walk from his home to most places in town — the post office, the bank, city hall, Lucky's supermarket. "A lot of times, I don't even get the car out, depending on the weather." And walking is another way to stay in touch with people. "People see me. They know me, they know my family. I try the best I can to be available if anybody has questions or concerns. And everybody's been good so far. I'm very appreciative of this opportunity."

If you'd like to talk with the new mayor about what's going on around town (or about baseball or anything else), you might catch him at Menlo City Hall. If he's not there, leave a message with Nicki Hoard, the city clerk, or Beverly Price, the assistant clerk. But your best chance might be to catch him out walking.

Later this month, Willis will head to Athens, Georgia, for three days of training offered by the Georgia Municipal Association. He is looking forward to it. "If I'm going to do this, I want to do it the best I possibly can."

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MERF House Restoration Complete

BY KATIE HAND

The MERF House restoration is officially complete, which is a big milestone for MERF and for the Mentone community. After months of steady work, the building now meets current safety and structural codes and is ready to once again serve the public as a community and educational space. This 111-year-old home got a much-needed facelift!

We truly appreciate all the local donations that helped make this project possible. Your financial support carried it all the way to the finish line, and we're excited to finally say it's complete. MERF is also grateful to the Alabama Historical Commission, whose funding helped open the door for this work to move forward.

We extend special thanks to Craig Sheldon, MERF board member and retired professor emeritus at Auburn University, who helped spearhead this effort from the very beginning. The project would not have been possible without his initiative. We are also thankful to Sally and Larry Johnson, owners of Camp Skyline, for generously allowing MERF to use their property as a temporary space during the renovation.

Nearly three years in the making, this restoration project has spanned everything from early planning and outreach to the final walk-through. We are sincerely grateful to everyone who played a role in bringing it to completion.

The work on the house was completed by Circle H Construction, owned and operated by Brent Hobbs. Brent and his crew helped make the project work for MERF both visually and financially. What most folks will notice right away is what meets the eye — everything feels fresh and new. Just as important, though, is the work you don't see. A large part of the time and budget went into what's under the floors and above the ceilings, the kind of work that doesn't stand out but matters most for safety and long-term use. Brent's flexibility and generosity helped move the project forward when things got challenging.

Architectural oversight was provided by Joel Leonard of Leonard Designs, who was responsible for the overall concept and design, project management, compliance and coordination among everyone involved, and who worked closely with the construction crew throughout the project to help keep everything on track. MERF President Kathryn Norris was also a key player in the process. She collaborated with Leonard Designs and helped finalize major decisions along the way.

Final details are wrapping up now, and MERF is in the process of moving operations back into the house. The Groundhog newspaper will once again be distributed from the MERF House, and Senior Lunch will return starting February 25. Plans are also in place for an open house in the near future. The MERF House will be available again for community use, including gatherings, meetings, family events and other local activities. We're looking forward to seeing the house and grounds back in use and filled with people again.

Katie Hand is executive director of MERF. For more information, visit MERFhouse.org, email merf.mentone@gmail.com, or call 256-979-4962.

THANKS TO:

Alabama Historic Commission

Camp Skyline
Larry and Sally Johnson

LeonardDesign PC
Joel Leonard
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Circle H Construction
Brent and Shannon Hobbs
205-966-2276

Laney Electric
Benji Laney
256-717-5145

J & B Service LLC - Plumbing
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Little River Hardware *(continued from page 1)*

Asked what ultimately led him to take the leap of ownership, Johnson pointed to a simple motivation.

"The goal was to make sure it stayed a local hardware store and has what people want, right here in Mentone. We wanted to make sure we had everything the local community needs; what all the camps need; and what the builders need, because there are a lot of builders in Mentone," Johnson said. (He and his wife, Sally, own Camp Skyline just down the road.) "I knew whatever we needed at Camp Skyline, probably the rest of town could use as well."

Expanding What's on the Shelves

Since taking over, Johnson has focused on restocking core hardware items — "the nuts and bolts" — while also adding entire new categories. That thinking led to expanded hunting, fishing, and outdoor supplies, including ammunition for hunters; Turtlebox outdoor speakers; hammocks; Flexible Flyer snow discs; fishing rods, camping tents and chairs; Fenix headlamps and flashlights; OneLogFire products; and all manner of other items.

An example of a cool new offering is the complete fishing kits. "We would have people come up on the weekends and say, 'Oh, I didn't know our cabin was on the river. Do you have a fishing pole?'" Johnson said. The store carries complete fishing needs for catfish and bass, open-face reels, and brands that are familiar favorites. "If you're taking your kid fishing, it's Zebco 33. That's part of everybody's memories," Johnson said. "We wanted to have something for them."

More for Builders

Another key addition has been lumber and other building basics, aimed at helping local contractors and homeowners get the job done.





"There are houses going up everywhere," Johnson said. "If you're a sheet or two short of OSB or a two-by-six short, we're going to have what you need."

He recalled a conversation with a builder who had to drive off the mountain for just three boards. "He said, 'I would have paid you whatever you asked just to keep me from driving all the way down there. By the time I went down and came back, it was already getting dark. That put me off a day, just because of three two-by-fours.'"

"We can't turn back time," Johnson added. "But we can save you time."

Shopping Destination

Visually, the store has changed, especially up front. Locals and weekend visitors now encounter birdseed, outdoor gear, jackets, Red Ryder BB guns, Mentone T-shirts, and Little River Hardware & Outdoor Supplies apparel right when they walk in.



There are also a few unexpected favorites, such as Sally's homemade ice cream, which she creates and stocks in the store seasonally. "The biggest seller by far is Sally's ice cream," Johnson said, laughing. *[Editor's note: I took home a half-pint of pumpkin pie ice cream in the freezer case when I paid the store a visit, and it was sheer heaven.]*

The warmth of the place harkens to stores of yesteryear, where folks who walk in feel at home. A TV above the battery section shows weather and ball games, with free coffee nearby. "That's our recharge station," Johnson said. "You can recharge yourself, and you can get the batteries." A digital photo frame behind the counter flashes customer photos of outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing and area wildlife, which anyone can submit using the store's email address on the business cards.

Johnson is full of ideas for tailoring the store to its customers. For instance, on the counter is a new Wish Book, where customers can request items they'd like the store to carry. And kids can build their birthday and holiday wish lists in the book as well.

Day-to-day operations are handled by longtime employees Bootsie McGee and Phil Gamble. Johnson, who is busy year-round with the camp, steps in on delivery days, covering breaks, and spending time talking with customers, especially on busy weekends. "When I bought the store, the first thing I did was look at Bootsie and Phil and say, 'Will you please stay?'" he said. And they did.

Behind the scenes, Johnson has focused on making the store easier for staff to run. New inventory and ordering systems allow employees to scan items directly from the floor. A new stock room in back makes replenishing the shelves efficient when sales are brisk.

Vision for the Future

Johnson wants to keep an ear to what folks want in a hardware and outdoor store while making the place fun to visit. It's easy to have fun when you encounter his enthusiasm. Future plans include a remodel of the rear of the building to house an outdoor product demo space, where shoppers can test out the tents and camp chairs and other products. He also plans to offer fly fishing clinics and other interactive experiences.

Fun fact: Johnson recently discovered that his great-grandfather, whom he never had the opportunity to meet, owned a large hardware store in Florida back in the day. Some skills must be hard-wired in the DNA.

Little River Hardware & Outdoor Supplies is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Saturday 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. Johnson anticipates opening earlier in the warmer months.



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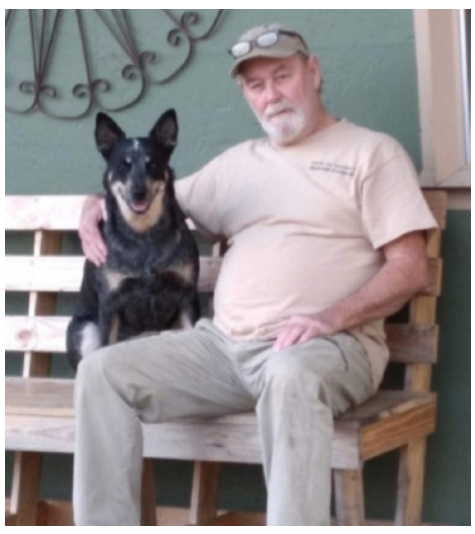
RGC Welcomes the New Year



BY RHEA PIRCH

We were delighted to start the new year with a special guest at our monthly meeting. Members enjoyed the opportunity to gather and welcome guest speaker David Driver, widely recognized as "The Real Turtleman," and his pest-detecting dog, Miss Trouble.

David entertained us with stories of his many critter-catching adventures over the past 45 years as a pest control professional for Mentone, Lookout Mountain, and Northwest Georgia. He has rid many homes and businesses of snakes, raccoons, insects, and other pesky nuisances. (Ask around, and you'll probably find at least one person he has helped!) In this presentation, he focused on the advantages of installing owl boxes, as they attract owls to residential areas and gardens, where these birds serve as natural predators of rodents and other pests. By encouraging owls to nest nearby, homeowners can reduce the need for chemical pest control methods, leading to a safer and more environmentally friendly approach to managing unwanted critters. Additionally, supporting local owl populations helps maintain ecological balance and biodiversity. David will have owl boxes available for purchase in March at his office in Mentone, next to Mentone Realty.



The "Real Turtleman" David Driver and Miss Trouble

After David's presentation, we discussed garden club business and upcoming events. We are looking forward to a busy, productive year ahead! We'll start by coordinating the Crock-Pot Cook-off during this year's Groundhog Day Community Celebration on Saturday, Feb. 7. It's an opportunity to show off your best recipe, be it chili, stew, or soup. The judges (yet to be determined) will taste each entry and declare a winner in each of the three categories. There will also be a People's Choice award, so if you're more into tasting than cooking, you can purchase three cups of any of the entries for $10 (or one for $5) and pick your own favorite! We'll also be selling desserts and lovely table arrangements made by our members. You can sign up for the cook-off at https://forms.gle/zzqTauEyWzcxb5qX6.

The seed swap returns this year



on Saturday, Feb. 28, at Moon Lake Library from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Bring in your seeds, swap them with others, peruse the library's selection of gardening books, and share ideas with other gardeners. Any seed and seed saver is welcome, but invasives that take over the natural habitat are discouraged. Portion seeds in bags or envelopes with the common name listed. A photo of what the seed will look like is helpful, but not necessary.

Work and planning continue on Moon Lake Garden, between the amphitheater and the gymnasium at the Moon Lake Campus. We look forward to spring, when we can start planting and beautifying the garden for all to appreciate! We would like to make this garden a community effort, so if you have any non-invasive plants you'd like to add, we'd love to include them! Send us a message on Facebook or drop us an email at rhododendrongardenclub@gmail.com if you have any questions or would like to contribute.

We're excited to announce a partnership with Valley Head School to help their students build a school garden. At our February meeting, landscape designer Victor Wood will present his ideas for a garden that will provide hands-on experience for the students and foster an appreciation for nature and sustainability. This collaborative project will furnish a vibrant learning space for the children and allow us to share our knowledge with the next generation of gardeners.

Did you know we have a Facebook page? Follow us at www.facebook.rhododendrongardenclub.com to receive gardening tips, get updates on our activities and "like" us!

Rhea Pirch is the Treasurer of the Rhododendron Garden Club.

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.









Author Jim Tinker to Speak on Historical Novel "Wills Valley"

BY ANNE MCLEOD

On Sunday, Feb. 8 at 2 p.m., Jim Tinker, author of "Wills Valley," will speak at Moon Lake Library about his historical novel, published last year by Christian Faith Publishing.

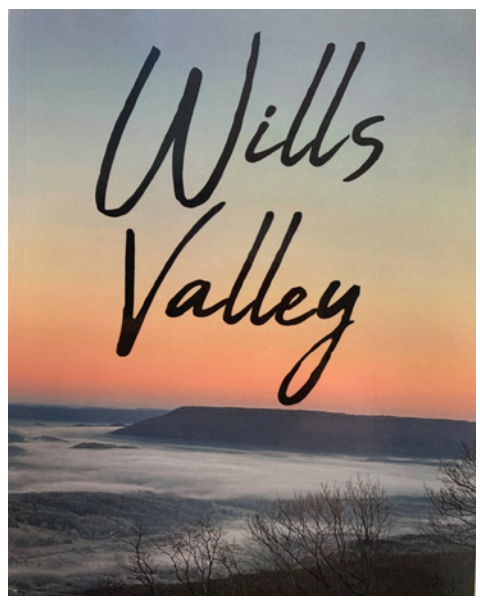
"Wills Valley," set in DeKalb County, Alabama, is based on historical facts and real people who lived in the area. The novel tells the story of two men — one older, one young — living and working in north Alabama not long after the removal of the Cherokee. Today, both men lie somewhere in unmarked graves in Wills Valley, between Lookout Mountain, Georgia, and Sand Mountain, Alabama. Though written as fiction, the book is grounded in well-documented history and meticulous research, offering readers an immersive look at everyday life, family struggles, and cultural change in the region.

The story itself grew out of Tinker's deep interest in history and genealogy. He has researched his family history for more than 45 years, tracing generations from New England through the Civil War and Reconstruction and into Alabama. "Wills Valley" begins with his grandfather, Calvin Tinker, who was raised in Deerhead Cove and went to work as a young boy at charcoal furnaces in Rising Fawn, Georgia, before later moving to Birmingham to work in the steel mills. Tinker notes that while the book is fiction, many of its historical details, even those that may surprise longtime local historians, are drawn directly from documented sources.

Jim Tinker grew up in Brighton, Alabama, near Birmingham, and spent much of his professional career with the Boy Scouts of America, where he worked in program development, fundraising, and training. He later continued with the organization as a consultant after his retirement in 1999. Over the years, he has also owned and operated a charter fishing boat, served on the staff of his local church, and worked in real estate. He holds a degree from Samford University and has received numerous awards for his service in his community, profession, and church.

Tinker has previously published "My Last Will & Testament," a book reflecting on his faith journey. He and his wife, Judy, divide their time between their cabin in North Georgia and their condo on the Gulf.

The author talk with Jim Tinker is free and open to the public. Copies of "Wills Valley" will be available for purchase, and the author will be on hand for a book signing. Additional library parking is available in the



grassy area beside the library or in the Moon Lake Campus parking lot off East River Road.

Anne McCleod is the librarian at Moon Lake Library.

Dr. Lisa Bratton Returns to Speak at Moon Lake Library

BY ANNE MCLEOD

On Sunday, Feb. 22, at 2 p.m., Dr. Lisa Bratton of the Tuskegee Institute will speak on "The Role of Tuskegee Institute in African American Voting Rights." One of the library's most popular programs last year was Bratton's presentation on "The Tuskegee Airmen – In Their Own Words," and we are delighted that she is returning to Mentone.

She will have copies of her new book, "Youth Voting Rights: Civil Rights, The 26th Amendment and the Fight for American Democracy on College Campuses," for sale and signing.

Bratton is an associate professor of history at Tuskegee University. She received her B.B.A. from Howard University, her M.B.A. from Atlanta University, and her M.A. and Ph.D. in African American Studies from Temple University. Her primary research interest is Historic Brattonsville, the South Carolina plantation on which her ancestors, Green and Malinda Bratton, were enslaved. Although enslaved for much of their lives, they went on to become the first Freedmen to purchase land in York County. She is the recipient of numerous grants and fellowships, most recently the Clemson University Teacher Scholars Fellowship and the HistoryMakers Fellowship in Pedagogy Teaching and Pedagogy. Bratton is an avid traveler who has visited all 50 states and such interesting



Dr. Lisa Bratton of the Tuskegee Institute returns to speak at Moon Lake Library.

places as Pyongyang, North Korea, Cuba, and Swaziland.

Last March was the first time Bratton had been to Mentone, and she and her cousin who joined her for the trip reported that they both had a wonderful time on the mountain. She told me, "The audience was so engaged, and I would love to see them again." We look forward to another interesting presentation from this dynamic speaker.

The program is free and open to the public. Additional parking for the library is available in the grassy area beside the building, as well as in the Moon Lake Campus parking lot around the block on East River Road.



Left to right: Lynn Hixon, Mary Shurett, Deborah Bates, Moon Lake librarian Anne McLeod, and Lila Roberts of the Mentone Ukes.

DAR Presents "The Interactive Constitution" to Moon Lake Library

Members of the Hannah White Arnett Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution presented a children's book, "The Interactive Constitution," to librarian Anne McLeod at the Moon Lake Library in December. The book presentation was on behalf of the Mentone Ukes, who had played at an event for the DAR and wanted to give back to the library where they practice every other Saturday.

The book, written by David and Stephanie Miles, was designated a Notable Social Studies Book by the National Council for Social Studies and the Children's Book Council. Young readers will find a brief history of the American Revolution, as well as interactive features explaining the three branches of government; the roles of each branch; how legislators, the president, and Supreme Court justices are chosen; and how the Constitution can be amended. "The Interactive Constitution" is available for checkout at the Moon Lake Library.

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Legacy of Art, Community, and Looking Ahead

BY JULI JORDAN

Sometimes a single conversation opens a door to an entire chapter of shared history. Recently, while receiving a generous donation from the Tillotson Menlo Charitable Foundation, I had the pleasure of visiting with Carol Mitchell, administrative coordinator for the foundation. What began as a funding conversation quickly turned into a walk down memory lane — one that reminded me just how deeply rooted the Little River Arts Council is in community-centered art.

Carol shared stories of the mosaic bench created in 2009 for Best Glove Factory, designed and assembled by Menlo School children (her grandson among them) under the guidance of LRAC board members Heather Nicely and Linda Munoz. Supported by an Alabama Arts TAG grant, these two women spearheaded a multi-community mosaic bench project that engaged students in Menlo, Valley Head, and Fort Payne, blending creativity, collaboration, and civic pride.

Over the years, these benches have become quiet storytellers. You can still find them at places like the Mentone Post Office, the MERF House, Valley Head Town Hall, and the Menlo Fire Station and park. A few have gone missing, including one that once lived at Mentone Town Hall, but their impact remains. They stand as lasting reminders of what happens when children are invited to create something meaningful for their community. Community projects like these have been part of LRAC's mission from the very beginning. The belief that art belongs everywhere — and to everyone — continues to guide our work today.





That same spirit is now finding a permanent home through Moon Lake Arts Collective. Recent support for this project reflects both longstanding relationships and new generosity within our community.

Moon Lake Arts Collective: A Community Investment

The generosity that has carried Moon Lake Arts Collective this far has been deeply personal. With nearly 70% of funds raised coming from just 12 individuals and families, this project stands as a testament to what happens when people choose to invest in creativity, education, and place. Fundraising continues as we work toward opening doors that will serve artists, students, and the wider community for years to come.

At its heart, Moon Lake Arts Collective reflects LRAC's belief that art is for everyone. Communities thrive when creativity is shared.

We are deeply grateful to Dr. and Mrs. Charles Sennett for their generous gift in memory of their son, Chuck Sennett, in support of Moon Lake Arts Collective.





Additional donors thus far include Lesa and David Cummings, Pudden McArthur, Sandra and Ken Perry, Cynthia Stinson, Adelaide Drennen, Ginger Beshears, Susan Freeman, Ken Shigley, Sharon Bienert, Cyndi and Mikel Yeakle, Diana Ogletree, and Juli Jordan.

Grants, Programs & What's Ahead in 2026

We are also proud to share that LRAC has received grant funding from the Alabama State Council on the Arts to support the Summer Music Series. This support ensures that these concerts remain free and accessible to all, offering vibrant community gatherings on the grounds of the Mentone Inn from May through August.

2026 Dates to Note:

- Music Series featuring Will Dooley – May 15
- Big Art Pop-Up – May 16
- Music Series featuring Black Sedan Band – June 6 (returning for their fifth year!)
- Creative Spirit Market – November 14–15 at DeSoto State Park
- Moon Lake Arts Collective Grand Opening – Date to be announced
- Make Your Mark on Mentone – Chalk murals changing throughout the year



Be sure to check out the latest "Make Your Mark on Mentone" chalk art mural by Fort Payne artist, Brande Arno.



Call for Artists: Make Your Mark on Mentone

Located on the grounds of the Mentone Inn, the 6-foot x 8-foot chalkboard has showcased the work of 11 artists since 2024. Many of the 2025 participants had never worked in chalk or at this scale before. The project offers artists an opportunity to stretch their creative practice, gain public visibility, and engage directly with the community. Each participating artist receives a stipend. The project is also open to schools, art clubs, and organizations looking for a fun and meaningful team-building experience. Learn more at littleriverartscouncil.org under the Make Your Mark on Mentone tab.

Juli Jordan is president of the Little River Arts Council.

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Mentone Arts Center

Guitarist Hiroya Tsukamoto returns to the Arts Center

BY RANDY GRIDER

We have two events scheduled for the month of February and much more in the works as we head toward spring. Our two-day acrylics painting class by returning artist/instructor Lucy Thomas is scheduled for Feb. 21-22. The class is titled "The Art of Loose Landscape" and will focus on trees, clouds, and fields. The class sold out quickly, so we've asked her to return the first weekend in May for another class similar in theme. To register for the May class, please see contact information at the bottom of the article. Tuition for the class is $195 and the class is limited to 10 students.

"My favorite kind of landscape to paint is the type of scenery you see while driving down a state highway or country road," Thomas said of her landscape classes. "There are fields with yellows and purples and greens. Clouds are heavy in the sky, and not too far in the distance is a tree line made of many types of foliage. All the action takes place on a serene horizon line. That's what I will show you how to do in this class. I'll show you how I paint trees and shrubs, show you how to give depth and distance to land, and we will paint skies and clouds together in multiple ways. My favorite way to paint is using the negative space technique. So, there will be a heavy dose of that as well." Thomas added that this is not a realistic painting class, and drawing skills are not necessary.

The artist started painting at 47 after a discouraging medical diagnosis. Before long, art became her full-time job. Since then, her work has been in galleries across the Southeast. She teaches at the Huntsville Museum of Art, Revelry Fine Arts in Nashville, and online through her website.

She lives in the Nashville area with husband Garner, dogs and cats, and a tortoise named Steve.

On Friday, Feb. 27, we will welcome back guitarist/composer Hiroya Tsukamoto to the arts center. Tsukamoto is a Japanese composer, guitarist, and singer-songwriter who blends folk, jazz, and world music into his performances. Born in Kyoto, he moved to the U.S. in 2000 on a scholarship to attend Berklee College of Music. Tsukamoto is known for his innovative fingerstyle technique and his ability to fuse instrumental compositions with storytelling.

Russell Gulley is producing the show as part of his Community Folksongs Arts in Education program. Popular Huntsville guitarist Mike Slaten will open the show, which runs from 6-9 p.m. Tickets are $25 and are available at the arts center and online through Eventbrite. Hiroya will be performing at the Fort Payne Middle School the afternoon of the show.

Randy Grider is the 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.



Guitarist/composer Hiroya Tsukamoto





Landscapes by Lucy Thomas

A Look at the U.S. Space Force Flag

BY BARRY MORTON

The United States Space Force flag features a black field with platinum fringe and central imagery drawn from the Space Force seal, symbolizing vigilance, innovation, and space defense. It was officially unveiled on May 15, 2020.

Here is a breakdown of the flag's design and symbolism:

Design Elements

- Black field with platinum fringe: Represents the vastness of space and the elite nature of the force. Central imagery from the Space Force seal:
- Delta Wing: symbolizes historic ties to the Air Force space community and represents change, innovation, and all types of space vehicles supporting national defense
- Globe: depicts Earth as the home base of the Space Force and its support to joint warfighters
- Elliptical Orbit: signifies defense against threats from space and cooperation with allies
- Polaris (North Star): represents guidance, vigilance, and a constant presence in space
- Star Clusters: two clusters represent space assets; three larger stars symbolize the Space Force's core missions — Organize, Train, and Equip

(See "Space Force Flag," Page 12)

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Valley Head Happenings

Website Launch, Improved Fire Rating, and Holiday Highlights

BY MAYOR KAREN VEST

I am so pleased to share that the Town of Valley Head will soon publish its new website and our brand-new Facebook page. Look for both in the coming weeks. We are thrilled to properly share our news and advertise our local businesses with updated media so necessary in this fast-paced world we all live in.

Fire Chief Dustin Burt announced during our January council meeting that the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), which sets global standards for quality, efficiency, and safety, recently conducted its Public Protection Classification (PPC) of our fire department. Our community ISO rating has been lowered to the PPC of 04/4X. The ISO's PPC plays an important role in the underwriting process of insurance companies. This new rating could mean savings on your homeowner's and commercial insurance rates. PPC also provides fire departments with a valuable tool when planning, budgeting, and justifying fire protection improvements. We are very proud of our Valley Head Volunteer Fire Department for working hard to achieve this new and improved rating.

The volunteer fire department continues to grow. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer fireman, please call Town Hall at 256-635-6814, and we will give you Chief Burt's contact information.







Scenes from Valley Head Christmas Festival and Christmas Parade

Valley Head held its annual Christmas Festival on December 7, with caroling around the square, Jess Goggans and her musical troubadours strolling around town, multiple vendors selling beautiful arts and crafts, and everyone enjoying the largest Christmas Parade we have ever had. It was such a treat to have the Ider High School Marching Band join this year's parade. Also, the Mentone Springs Children's Choir gave a wonderful performance that evening.

The Town of Valley Head now has the 2026 applications for Farmers Market Vouchers for senior citizens. Please come by Town Hall and fill out an application. You must be 60 years old or older and meet the required income restrictions.

Valley Head holds their Town Council meeting on the first Monday of each month beginning at 6 p.m. The public is always welcome to attend. Our next meeting is Monday, Feb. 2, 2026.

Space Force Flag *(continued from page 11)*

- Inscription: "UNITED STATES SPACE FORCE" and the Roman numerals "MMXIX" (2019), marking the year the Space Force was established

Historical Context

- Established: Dec. 20, 2019, as the sixth branch of the U.S. Armed Forces
- Flag Unveiled: May 15, 2020, during a White House ceremony with President Donald Trump, General John W. Raymond, and Chief Master Sergeant Roger Towberman.

Streamers

Like other military flags, the Space Force flag may carry campaign streamers for verified combat or service credit. These streamers are embroidered with the name and years of the campaign, such as:

- Afghanistan Campaign: Liberation of Afghanistan (2001), Consolidation phases, Transition phases
- –Global War on Terrorism Service
- –Kosovo Campaign
- –Southwest Asia operations.

Written by Barry Morton, past commander of the Mentone American Legion Post 215 with the help of MS Co-Pilot AI. The Legionnaire Park is situated behind the Post at 195 Cove Road. You can contact Barry by texting him at 334-202-8936.





*Long-time board member **Chuck Lawley** retired in December from the North Lookout Mountain Fire Protection District. Fire Chief Joseph Lee (right) presented him a plaque for his tremendous contributions to the department and to the community it serves. Thank you, Chuck, for sharing your invaluable knowledge and experience.*

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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.

Come Experience Tiny Living on Lookout Mountain!

Tours of River Ridge Escape's Tiny Homes — Mon-Fri 10-5 ET or by appointment.
8021 Highway 48, Menlo, GA 30731 RiverRidgeEscapes.com (706) 936-0007

February Community Events

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

February 2-3 Loomis Bros. Circus – Join us for an all new family-friendly Country and Western-themed adventure as the award-winning Loomis Bros. Circus rolls into town. With a captivating blend of classic charm and modern thrills, Loomis Bros. Circus promises a mesmerizing experience for audiences of all ages. From their menagerie of exotic performing animals to fearless daredevils, every act is crafted to create a sense of wonder and excitement. Northeast Alabama Agri-Business Center in Rainsville. https://lbctix.com/lbc/rainsvle26/

February 3-March 31 Moon Lake Bee Culture (Beekeeping) – This eight- week class led by instructor Cameron Mitchell will cover safety; beekeeping tools; the history of beekeeping; origins, bee anatomy, and lifecycle, and starting your own bee yard. Tuesdays from 5 to 7 p.m. at Moon Lake Campus. Class is $25 and can be paid either by cash or check on the first date of class. For more information, contact Laura Otinger at 256-228-6001, ext. 2322.

February 5-March 12 Moon Lake Land-Based Art and Southern Heritage Art Class – This six-week, land-based art course explores Southern and Appalachian culture through place-based making and hands-on projects. Meeting Thursdays from 3 to 4:30 p.m. at Moon Lake Campus, students will complete three (two-week) projects: painting a 12" x 12" barn quilt inspired by regional traditions, creating a nature-based mandala or medicine wheel using locally gathered materials, and constructing small stone sculptures that emphasize balance and form. The course encourages creative connections to place, heritage, and identity while developing foundational skills in design, painting, and sculpture. No prior art experience required. The course fee is $25 and can be paid with cash or check on the date of the first class. For more information, contact Laura Otinger @ 256-228-6001 Ext. 2322

February 5-7, 9, 12-14 Children's Advocacy Center Dinner and Play – Children's Advocacy Center presents their annual dinner and play, written and directed by Eddie McPherson. The play will be at the First United Methodist Church Life Center in Fort Payne. Ticket prices vary and are by reservation only. For more information or tickets, 256-997-9700.

February 6 Pace of Play Indoor Golf: Ribbon Cutting – Something new and exciting is coming to Fort Payne: Pace of Play Indoor Golf! This new entertainment spot offers a fun place to gather, featuring indoor golf simulators that let you play courses from around the world, along with additional activities like dart boards. Join us for a ribbon cutting to celebrate their opening, then stick around for a tour of the facility and a chance to try your hand at one of the golf simulators. We hope to see you there! 100 8th Street SW, Fort Payne. 10:30 a.m.

February 7 Harold Beck Memorial Antique Tractor Show – All brands of tractors and Hit and Miss engines are welcome! We will have plenty of door prizes and stuff to give away! Bring the family and all of your friends to this 2nd annual show! Northeast Alabama Agri-Business Center. Doors open at 8 a.m. Breakfast and lunch will be available at the concession stand. All admission proceeds will be donated to DeKalb County Volunteer Fire Departments. For more info, call 256-440-0502 or 256-601-3178.

February 7 Serious Skills Series: Nature's Elements in Metal Art Workshop – The Serious Skills Series is a variety of classes and workshops that provide opportunities to discover a hidden talent or learn a new skill for personal enrichment. Classes are open to local residents, overnight guests, and park visitors. Unleash your creativity as you design and create your own unique metal art piece inspired by the beauty of nature. Join artist Kevin Watson from Tintations for a fun workshop that utilizes reclaimed tin and barn wood. Make your own piece of art to hang at home or give to someone special. This class is for ages 14 to adult. What to Bring: Enthusiasm (all materials and tools needed to complete this project will be provided). Wear comfortable, casual clothing and bring drinks/snacks if you wish. This workshop emphasizes the use of hand tools, so students should have moderate hand strength. 1 to 3 p.m. at DeSoto State Park. Location disclosed at time of registration. $40 includes all supplies. Class space is limited. Pre-registration is required. RSVP here: https://forms.office.com/g/TrpDjAEefD

February 7 Megan Danielle at The Pickin Post – Join us for a great night of music. Tickets are $25 each and can be picked up at Black's Tire in Rainsville or Patterson's Pawn & Music in Fort Payne. Music starts at 6 p.m.

February 7 Groundhog Day Community Celebration – The Groundhog and MERF invite the community to the Groundhog Day Community Celebration on Saturday, February 7, from 10 AM to 2 PM at the Moon Lake Gym in Mentone. This free, family-friendly event will feature kids' games, art activities, a Cake Walk, a Crock-Pot Cook-Off, and more community fun throughout the day. Bring the whole family and enjoy a festive celebration of Groundhog Day with local organizations, food, and activities for all ages.

February 14 Overview of Lookout Mountain & Little River – Looking for something to do on Saturdays? Join us for a nature talk at Little River Falls viewing platform. At 10:30 a.m., you can join Ranger Regina to walk from the visitors center to the falls or join us at the falls viewing platform at 11 a.m. for the program.

February 14 Darren Knight & Friends – Excited to announce our Valentine's Day show with Darren Knight and Friends at the Back Forty Ballroom in Fort Payne from 8 to 11 p.m. For more information, call 256-845-3380.

February 20-22 Twining with Fabric Workshop – Hosted by DeSoto State Park & Little River Arts Council, the Serious Skills series is a variety of classes and workshops that provide opportunities to discover a hidden talent or learn a new skill for personal enrichment. Join expert weaver Patty Baird for a two-session workshop exploring the art of twining — a traditional weaving technique used to create beautiful rugs and chair upholstery. Patty will bring her own loom and demonstrate the process, sharing the rich history of twining, how to construct a simple loom, and tips on selecting the right fabrics and techniques for your project. Over the course of the workshop, participants will create a 12" x 18" woven piece using the twining method. All materials, including a personal loom, are provided — and yours to keep at the end of the workshop. Friday evening intro (2 hours); Saturday 4-hour class; and the next day a 4-hour class to finish up the project. Friday: 6 to 8 p.m.; Saturday: 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.; and Sunday 1 to 5 p.m. DeSoto State Park: $150 per person includes most supplies. Participants will need to bring at least three twin-size flat sheets of three colors to make strips for their project. (COTTON ONLY). Pre-registration required by February 1. RSVP here: www.littleriverartscouncil.org/twining.html

February 21 Crafting with Nature – Join the Park Naturalist at the Buck's Pocket State Park Sauty Pavilion to get crafty with natural materials! 10 a.m.

February 21 Animals of Alabama – Come join us for a nature talk at Little River Falls viewing platform. At 10:30 a.m., you can join Ranger Regina to walk from the visitors center to the falls or join us at the falls viewing platform at 11 a.m. for the program.

February 21 Grill on the Hill: North Hill Church – The community is invited to North Hill Church's first public event, Grill on the Hill, at The Barn at Blue Pond. This casual gathering will feature free food and an opportunity to learn more about the church's mission to plant, grow, and make disciples. The church is committed to advancing God's Kingdom by sharing the timeless message of the Good News through a fresh initiative in the city. 9796 Blue Pond Blvd. W, Sylvania at 5 p.m.

February 28 Creekside Birding Walk – Buck's Pocket is home to a diverse range of bird species throughout the year, making it a prime spot for birdwatching, or "birding." Along the banks of South Sauty Creek, you can observe waterfowl, wading birds, and birds of prey in their natural habitat. Be sure to bring your binoculars! We'll meet at the gate to the Old Primitive Road before walking down the trail. Call for more info 256-673-6137.

February 28 Serious Skills Series: Mojo Bag Workshop – Classes are open to local residents, overnight guests, and park visitors. Start the new year by creating your own mojo bag with Southeastern finger weaver Keena Graham. In this hands-on workshop, all materials are provided to craft one medium-sized mojo bag, along with charms for adornment and a selection of herbs and flowers to make sachets for your mojo. 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. DeSoto State Park's Benefield Interpretive Center next to the Country Store on County Road 89. $65 includes all supplies. Class space is limited to 10; pre-registration is required. Pre-registration: https://forms.office.com/g/s6CppAv1Li or https://www.littleriverartscouncil.org/mojobags

February 28 Trail of Tears – Join us for a history talk at Little River Falls viewing platform. At 10:30 a.m., you can join Ranger Regina to walk from the visitors center to the falls or join us at the falls viewing platform at 11 a.m. for the program.

February 28 The Malpass Brothers at The Pickin Post – Enjoy an evening with The Malpass Brothers at the Pickin Post. Tickets are $35 and can be purchased at Black's Tire in Rainsville or Patterson's Music in Fort Payne. 256-657-3817 or 256-845-4115 for more information.

THE FOOD PANTRY
at St. Joseph's on-the-Mountain Episcopal Church



Open every Wednesday to Mentone/ Valley Head/ Hammondville residents from 9-10:30 a.m.

We do close four Wednesdays a year. (Holy Week, World's Longest Yard Sale Week, Thanksgiving Week and Christmas Week.) We also welcome pantry volunteers and donations. For questions, call 256-634-4476.

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Feb. 3 at 3 p.m. Municipal Library Board meeting; 4 p.m. Friends of Moon Lake Library Board meeting.

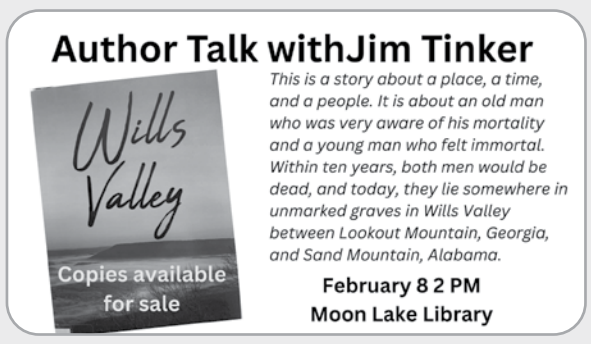
Feb. 5 at 3 p.m. Poetry Club with Dekie Hicks

Feb. 6 at 6 p.m. Friday Night @ the Movies: "Hamilton"

Feb. 7 at 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. Children's Book Giveaway at the Moon Lake Gym during Groundhog Day festivities.

Feb. 7 from 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. The Great Groundhog Giveaway - We are archiving hard copy back issues of The Groundhog and offering the leftover papers to the community. These will be available in the library.

Feb. 8 at 2 p.m. Featured Speaker Jim Tinker, author of Wills Creek. Copies available for sale and signing.



Feb. 12 at 6 p.m. Photographers David and Lisa Cummings will share travel photos in a presentation "Route 66 - His and Hers."

Feb. 14 at 10:30 a.m. The Moon Lake Library Book Club

Feb. 14 at 1 p.m. Mentone Ukes offer free ukulele lessons for all experience levels.

Feb. 22 at 2 p.m. Featured speaker Lisa Bratton of Tuskegee Institute, author of "Youth Voting Rights: Civil Rights, the 26th Amendment and the Fight for American Democracy on College Campuses" will speak on "The Role of Tuskegee Institute in African American Voting Rights."

Feb. 28 at 1 p.m. Mentone Ukes offer free ukulele lessons for all experience levels.

Feb. 28 at 10 a.m. Community Seed Swap and Girl Scout cookie sale



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Readers Love The Groundhog

Survey reveals strong engagement with the community newspaper and its advertisers

BY STEPHEN V. SMITH, EDITOR

In an age when newspapers are going all-digital and print publications are becoming increasingly rare, readers of The Groundhog continue to enjoy their monthly community newspaper and the news and features it delivers.

Across the past several weeks, The Groundhog has conducted a survey to better understand reader engagement with the newspaper. Following are some of those results:

Favorite features
- Upcoming events
- News
- Human interest stories
- Updates from organizations such as the Little River Arts Council and Moon Lake Library
- Mentone Matters by Mayor Rob Hammond
- From the Editor.

Where to you pickup your copy?
- 90% at distribution points within the community
- 10% via subscription.

Residency
- 70% described themselves as full-time or part-time residents of Mentone.

Support for Advertisers
- 76% of readers have visited a business after seeing its ad in the newspaper
- 63% of readers have made a purchase from a business after seeing its ad

When asked to complete the sentence, "The best thing about The Groundhog is," readers consistently described the newspaper as a vital thread connecting the people, places, and stories of Mentone. There was a strong appreciation for the focus on local news, community happenings, events, history, and the people who give the mountain its character. Many readers valued how the newspaper helps them **"keep up with everyone & everything going on in Mentone,"** while others pointed to its deeper role in preserving local memory, from **"local lore"** and **"old photos"** to stories of artists, farms, and outdoor life.

One reader summed it up by saying The Groundhog presented **"the different colors of fabrics all sewn together that make up the greater Mentone area — community, arts, music and nature."**


DECEMBER 2025/
JANUARY 2026
FREE
THE GROUNDHOG
"Neighborly News from the Heart of Lookout Mountain"
A Mountain Christmas: Tree Lighting, Annual Art Crawl, and a Full Day of Holiday Magic

The Groundhog is published by the non-profit MERF, which does tremendous work in Mentone and Valley Head through arts education, support for senior citizens, and scholarships. local residents and visitors alike.

Rev. Andrew Brislin *(continued from page 1)*

At nearly 40 years old, the idea of returning to school — and entering such an intense field of study — felt daunting. The classroom was a couple of decades in the past. Yet despite how big a life shift he would face, a divine path continued to reveal itself. "Here I am throwing up obstacles, and God's starting to knock them down." His wife, Allison, met the possibility with calm resolve: "If you're ready to move the mountain, I'm ready."

It helped that Brislin knew several in the clergy who had begun as attorneys, insurance brokers, and other professions. It was doable. And the life experience he'd gained thus far would only add to his skills in ministry. In fact, his employer was in full support of his exploration of the priesthood. "They continued to invest in me as an employee, even though I was discerning this other call."

What followed was a long period of discernment, consisting of years of prayer, study, preaching, and serving at the church he already attended — all while he continued working full time in banking. The Seminary of the Southwest eventually led the couple to Austin, Texas, where Brislin graduated in 2020, carrying with him not only theological training but also a deeply formed sense of what pastoral presence looks like in real life. In sitting with people in need, Brislin, a soft-spoken man, learned the value of silence in addition to spoken prayer. "Sometimes you have to make space for silence. God speaks to us in Holy silence. That's His language."

His first call took him to the Church of the Ascension in Montgomery as associate rector, where he served through the upheaval of the pandemic years. There, he honed the rhythm of parish leadership: preaching; visiting the sick, ministering to those in mourning, and other types of pastoral care; church administration; and youth ministry, including working closely with the Scouting program (Brislin is an Eagle Scout himself).

Part of the training he received is what Brislin calls "learning to enter well into a community and leave well," meaning to serve each community according to its distinct needs, and if you leave, leave your congregation and the community having served with grace.

When Brislin first received the invitation to talk with St. Joseph's, he knew little about Mentone other than a visit decades earlier as a teenager attending a Scouting event at Camp Comer. But as conversations unfolded and visits followed, something clicked. What stood out immediately was the church's commitment to hands-on service, especially its food ministry. "Feeding people is boots on the ground — the hands and feet of Jesus in the community," he said. Just as compelling was the wider community itself: a place rich with artists, musicians, storytellers, and people who arrived by winding paths, each carrying their own history.

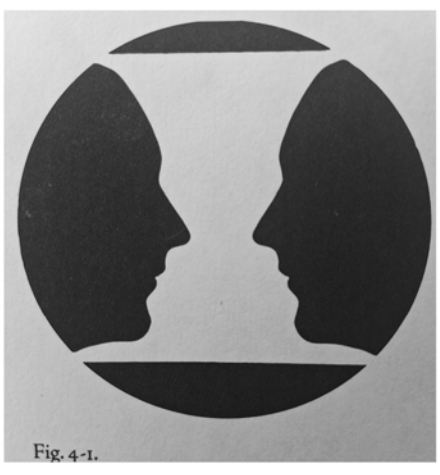
Mentone, he discovered, is quietly alive with creativity and connection. "You'd never know it driving down I-59," he said, "how much is going on up here."

The move to Mentone represents more than a new position; it marks a personal homecoming of sorts. The Brislins are embracing the slower pace, the foggy mornings, and the closeness of the natural world. They are rediscovering some old loves. "Allison and I used to hike a good bit, and that's something we're excited about," he said. They're also interested in fly fishing, working outdoors, caring for their Brittany spaniels, and simply finding joy in a community where retirement somehow makes people busier than ever.

Professionally, Brislin sees Mentone as fertile ground for collaboration. He is eager to build relationships across denominations, to explore ecumenical worship and shared service, and to ask, together, what the churches in the area can do to meet the needs of their neighbors.

For Brislin, the journey from banking to the priesthood has never been about abandoning one world for another. It has been about recognizing that the skills formed in one — listening, empathy, presence — were always pointing toward the other. Mentone, with its layered history and close-knit community, feels like the right place to continue that work.

"This whole process has never been what we expected," he said. "It's been way better." And now Brislin begins the next chapter of a calling that started long before he ever stepped up to a pulpit — one conversation at a time.

CREATIVITY WORKSHOP
Fridays in February
from 2 to 4pm.
Based on the book: DRAWING ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE BRAIN by Betty Edwards.
With the Artist and Teacher:
RUTH FERRAZ
Call or text for registration and address. (912)436-6569.
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Fig. 4-1.

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Saturday Night Special $18.99
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The Mountain Kitchen
Post-Holiday Reset to Lighter Meals

BY REBECCA HENDERSON, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

After saying I wouldn't do it, I did anyway. I ate sweets for four solid weeks during the holidays. My own sweets, sweets that came our way as gifts (not complaining!), and until mid-January, I was still rolling on a sugar high. So I sat down with my recipe boxes and cookbooks and began to plan some meals that, while not necessarily dietetic, shifted my focus over to the savory side and used ingredients from areas of the store other than the baking aisle.

GREEK CHICKEN SALAD

Makes 6 servings

5 ounces plain Greek yogurt
½ cup light sour cream
6 green onions, thinly sliced
3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
2 tablespoons chopped mint
1 tablespoon chopped parsley
½ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon sugar
1 pound cooked chicken, shredded (rotisserie is fine but I prefer boiled chicken breasts — they don't have the rotisserie flavor)

1. Combine first 9 ingredients in a bowl, stirring until blended.
2. Add chicken, and stir to coat.

This gratin is a combo of several recipes I've made over the years. Don't be afraid to cook fennel. It has a licorice-like flavor that goes well in a gratin. The leaves are tightly packed together, which makes it necessary to rinse them to remove any grit.

FENNEL-ARTICHOKE GRATIN

Makes about 6 servings

1 can artichoke hearts (or use frozen), rinsed, drained, and roughly chopped
4 fresh fennel bulbs, trimmed of tough green leaves and quartered (you can use the more tender green leaves for other recipes)
½ cup shredded Gruyère or mozzarella cheese
½ cup cheddar cheese
½ cup Italian-seasoned panko bread crumbs



Fennel-Artichoke Gratin

1. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Grease a shallow baking dish with butter.
2. Place the quartered fennel bulbs in a bowl of cold water, and gently swish around with your fingers to remove any grit.
3. Boil the fennel bulbs in lightly salted water for 3 minutes or until tender; drain.
4. Place artichokes and fennel in buttered dish. Sprinkle with salt and pepper to taste.
5. Top with cheese, then panko.
6. Bake at 400 degrees until cheese is bubbly.

Ok, I said I wasn't eating anything sweet, but these are pretty and they have fiber! You can use semi-sweet or dark chocolate to create a satisfyingly sweet bite that's so easy to make. Dried apricots provide antioxidants as well. Is chocolate good for you? Well, I'm not getting into that, but these treats are a vast improvement over cakes and cookies in my book. Not an apricot fan? Use any dried fruit you like. If you're cooking for one or two, these are perfect.

CHOCOLATE-DIPPED DRIED APRICOTS

Makes as many as you care to dip. You can jazz these up by sprinkling chopped nuts or shredded coconut on the chocolate before it dries.

Dried apricot halves
Semisweet chocolate baking bar (such as Baker's)

1. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper
2. Break chocolate into pieces, and melt over simmering water in a double boiler.
3. Dip apricot halves into chocolate, covering half of each piece.
4. Place on parchment paper to dry.
5. Store in an airtight container.







A Day at the River

BY STEPHEN V. SMITH, EDITOR

One of the best hikes in DeSoto State Park offers a close encounter with a 20-foot waterfall and easy access to the West Fork of Little River.

Park at the Talmadge Butler Boardwalk (if this lot is full, park at the playground or Country Store), watch for traffic, and walk across the road. Follow the signs to Indian Falls, where a foot bridge gives you a stunning view of the falls from its very top.

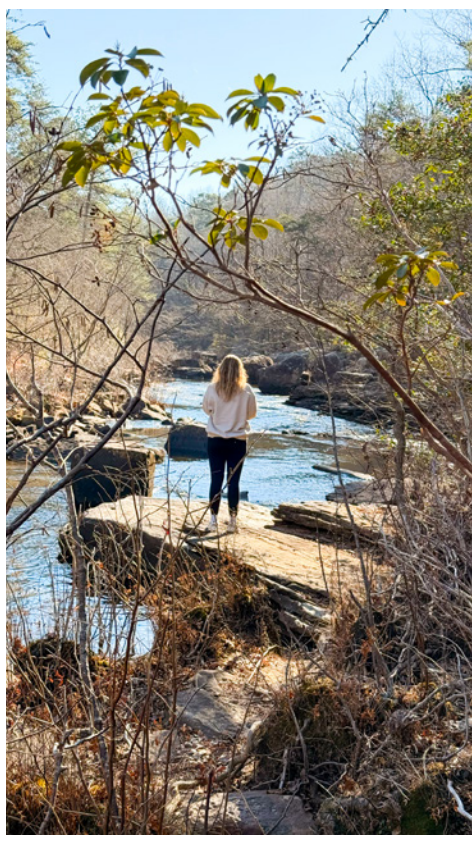
Hike down to the base of the falls, enjoy the view, and do some exploring among the rock formations. Practice caution, as the rocks may be wet.

Continue past the falls along a path that leads you to the West Fork. This is part of the Yellow Trail.

Depending on water levels, you'll find the river flowing at a nice pace, offering beautiful photo opportunities. But don't just experience the views through your phone or camera; take time to be fully present and marvel at the power of the river and the natural beauty surrounding you.

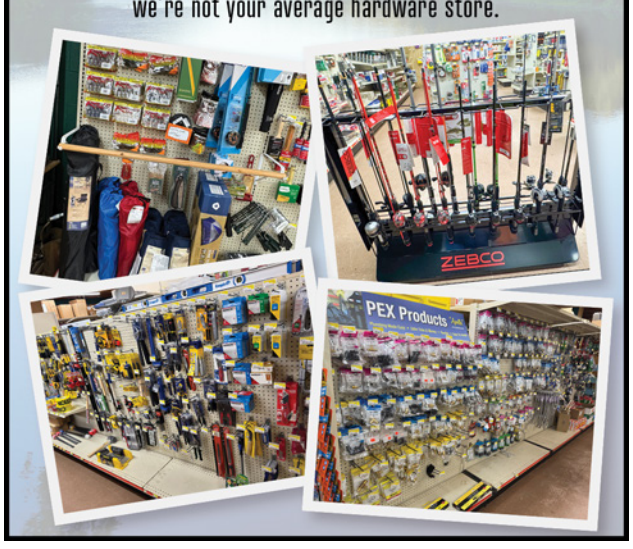
Hike downstream, and you'll find wide areas with plenty of space to sit and enjoy a picnic lunch. Bring friends or family with you, and plan plenty of time to enjoy the experience with nature. There is a moderate climb back out, but it's well worth it.

As always, practice safe hiking. Learn more at nps.gov/articles/hiking-safety.htm.





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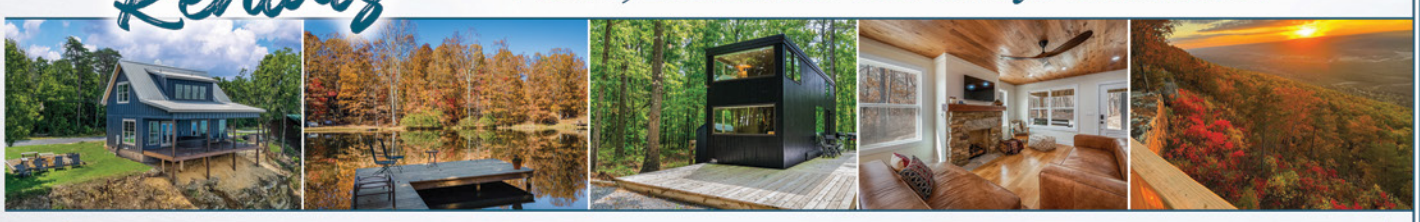
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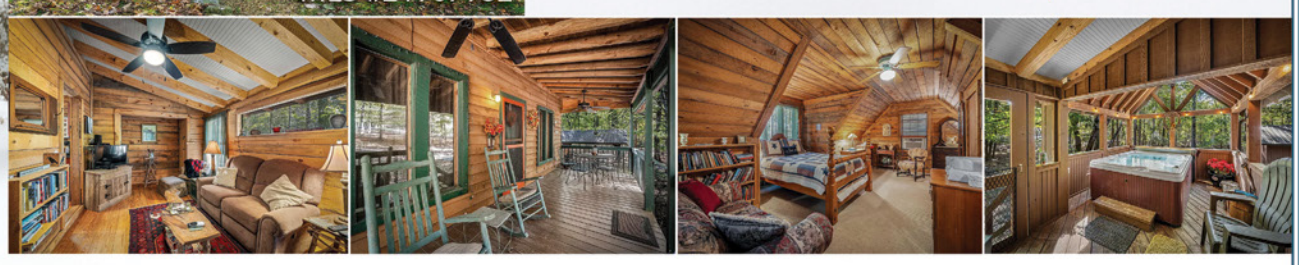
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