



THE GROUNDHOG

“Neighborly News from the Heart of Lookout Mountain”

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

A Mountain Christmas: Tree Lighting, Annual Art Crawl, and a Full Day of Holiday Magic



On Saturday, Dec. 13, at 5 p.m., Mentone will shine bright as the town gathers for the 7th Annual Mentone Community Tree Lighting at the corner of Highway 117 and 89. But the tree lighting is just the beginning — or rather, the sparkling finale — of a full day filled with art, music, food, and festive fun.

A Night of Music & Memories

This year’s musical performances promise to fill the air with heart and harmony, featuring the Mentone Ukes, the Mentone Springs Youth Choir, and the Mentone Community Chorus, a Northeast Alabama Community College choral group. The music will take place at the Linger Longer Pavilion to give families room to gather, sing, and celebrate.

To make the evening even more special, Santa will greet visitors inside the Mentone Inn for an open house, with hot

chocolate, cookies, and a cozy Christmas atmosphere.

Art Crawl

While the tree lighting is the day’s crown jewel, the hours leading up to it are just as magical. Beginning in the morning, Mentone will again host a town-wide Art Crawl from 10 a.m. till 4 p.m. Shops, studios, and gathering places open their doors to celebrate Mentone’s artistic heart. Visitors can explore studios, meet artists, make ornaments, enjoy refreshments, discover gifts, and soak up the atmosphere before heading to the tree lighting.

► **ART CRAWL MAPS** will be available at Little River Art Gallery at the Moon Lake Campus, and the Mentone Arts Center. Also, look for **ART CRAWL TOUR** signs at each location.

(See “Mountain Christmas,” Page 3)

The Hatter Cafe Celebrates 5 Successful Years in Mentone

BY REBECCA HENDERSON
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

When Roger and Pam Wald first drove up the mountain to Mentone, they didn’t plan to stay. The couple — he from Nashville, she from Michigan — were longtime Floridians, busy with their careers and family. But what began as a spontaneous detour during the “World’s Longest Yard Sale” turned into something extraordinary: a divine nudge toward a new life, a new business, and a community they would come to call home.

Last September, The Hatter Cafe celebrated its fifth anniversary, a milestone born of a joyful leap of faith.

In 2015, Pam had one birthday wish — to travel the yard sale.

“I wanted to start in Gadsden and head north,” she recalls. After making their way along the route, they ran into a woman at the Fort Payne hotel where they overnighted before a planned trip through Chattanooga. The woman urged the Walds to explore Mentone, a town they’d never heard of. They drove up to check it out, and within hours, both knew they belonged here.

“We spent the whole day talking to people in the community,” Roger recalls.

“We both had the strongest urge we’ve ever had — we needed to be here. It wasn’t the scenery necessarily,” Pam says. “It was a feeling...”

Roger chimes in: “It was God touching us on the shoulder.” The couple decided to plan their retirement here.

They returned within about a



The Hatter Cafe owners Roger and Pam Wald.

month and soon bought a house. Within two years, after a series of life events that felt like divine intervention, they had sold their Florida home and retired from their careers.

Creating a Place to Gather

Roger’s background reads like a training manual for their dream. With a degree in hotel and restaurant management from Florida State University, he worked with Bennigan’s and Chili’s for over two decades, learning the business of hospitality. Pam ran her own therapy clinic and managed staff across Florida. Together, they shared a love of service, community, and people. And they wanted to create a space in Mentone that would serve as a gathering spot where folks could spend time together and enjoy a bite to eat.

When COVID delayed their planned March 2020 opening by several months, they used the downtime

to decorate and finish renovations. “We were two weeks from getting ready to open up and then COVID hit,” Roger says. “But it gave us plenty of time to decorate and create.”

That dream became The Hatter Cafe, a wonderland of vintage teapots, repurposed furniture, and tables named for storybook characters. Guests dine at the “Alice” table, the “Mad Hatter,” or the “Cheshire Cat.” Every detail evokes the spirit of Alice in Wonderland — curious, charming, and slightly topsy-turvy.

“The quote that inspired it all was, ‘The secret, Alice, is to surround yourself with people who make your heart smile. Then and only then will you find Wonderland,’” Pam says. “For us, that place was Mentone.”

Walking into The Hatter, as locals call it, is like stepping into a storybook. Chairs hang on the walls.

(See “The Hatter Cafe,” Page 7)



A New Chapter in the Life of the Hitching Post

Mentone couple purchases vacant lot in hopes of building new memories

BY STEPHEN V. SMITH, EDITOR

Mary Gresham Barr came to Camp DeSoto every summer as a child. As the family car topped the mountain at Mentone, a familiar sight always greeted her, sparking excitement. “I knew I was close to camp when I looked right and saw the Hitching Post,” she recalls. Decades later, that same sense of arrival would shape her family’s story in a way she never expected.

Mary Gresham and her husband, Rick, recently purchased the lot where the Hitching Post once stood. The historic building was lost to fire in February 2023, just as renovations neared completion and new businesses were set to open inside.

(See “Hitching Post,” Page 3)



The Groundhog

Published monthly by MERF

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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
Reflecting on a Strong 2025

BY MAYOR ROB HAMMOND

As I put together this message just before Thanksgiving, I’m looking forward to the weeks of community events, dinners, and gatherings of family and friends that mark the holiday season. This is also a great time to take a look back at 2025. The year no doubt brought challenges and heartache for some people, but it also brought hope and encouragement. And as a whole, the year was marked with good news and progress for our community.

I realize talk of infrastructure development is boring to some. It’s a slow process, after all, with months (and sometimes years) of planning behind the scenes. For the general public, none of it seems real until the work finally starts to unfold. And even then, progress can be slow and the benefits can take time to become apparent.

This year saw great progress in our local infrastructure. We are nearing completion of a sidewalk expansion that will make our town more walkable and attractive to residents and visitors alike. A waterline upgrade is underway that will bring more water pressure and volume to our homes,



Alabama Speaker of the House Nathaniel Ledbetter (left) administers the oath of office to (left to right) Mentone Mayor Rob Hammond and Council Members Ray Padgett, John Paul Verdo, Hobson Kirby, Gerald Bailey, and David Allgood.

businesses, and camps, enhancing safety and improving overall quality of life. The Town paved several streets this year. The initial phase of a major Brow Park improvement has begun with the clearing of undergrowth off the side of the bluff that will prepare for an eventual trail system (a project for next year). Architect plans are complete and we will soon advertise

for bids for a major renovation to protect and enhance the historic main building at Moon Lake Campus.

These projects are good for our community. They bolster our economy in many ways. And they continue our strategic, methodical work of slowly improving life in Mentone for all.

Along those lines, we expect Mentone to be accepted into the 2026 Thrive Regional Partnership Resilient Communities program. Funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission, this program helps cities and towns in the 16-county Chattanooga region to, according to the program’s website, “develop local strategies to enhance their resilience to weather events like flooding and extreme heat. Through the program, community teams have access to professional guidance, facilitation, and technical assistance to assess vulnerabilities, identify local priorities, and develop nature-based strategies that leverage local expertise and natural assets to enhance community resilience.”

As you can see, 2026 is already off to a strong start. Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, and I hope to see you around Mentone at some of our celebrations! 🍷



Crews are removing underbrush from along the bluff below Brow Park. Next year, additional phases will bring a walking path, observation deck, and hiking trails off the bluff to this popular park. The work depends on grant awards.

From the Editor
All That Matters

BY STEPHEN V. SMITH, EDITOR

The next few weeks will bring us face-to-face with family members and friends to celebrate the holidays. We haven’t seen some of these folks in a while, and may not see them again for weeks or months.

Or ever. How should that reality shape the way we spend our time with these people? Taking to heart the frailty and unknowable nature of life can move us to be more intentional with how we shape our time together, build those relationships, and forge our own legacies.

Much of the work I do outside of The Groundhog involves corporate strategy. While it can get complex, strategy can be summed up simply as being intentional in how we plan for and carry out our days. As I’ve thought about this in relation to the holiday gatherings ahead, I arrived at some reflections:

Faces

When you’re with someone you love in the coming weeks, look at their face. Stare into their eyes when they talk. Look at the details, the shape of their facial features. Let your eyes trace the lines that run along their brow. Note how their mouths form a smile or a laugh, what their eyes express when they are sharing a story, how they communicate emotions during conversations as well as the quiet moments.

Voices

Listen to the tone of their voice, its

resonance, its timbre, its pitch. Pay attention to how they phrase their words. What makes their voice stand out from others in the room? Find things you can take with you. A friend told me years after he’d lost his sister in a car crash that he could barely remember what her voice sounded like. That crushed me. She was my friend, too. I still remember the words she said and how she said them the night before the accident, as I was one of the last among our high school friends to see her alive. But most characteristics of her voice have, sadly, faded from my memory as well.

Mannerisms

My mother-in-law often stands with a hand on her hip. Her daughters do it, too. And their daughters. When we get together for holidays, extended elbows are everywhere. Getting to the table or coming back for dessert is like navigating traffic cones in a highway construction zone. But those “Worley elbows” as I call them are precious to me. Look for other mannerisms. How do they turn their heads when they laugh? Do they have a way of walking across the room or giving a hug or expressing themselves when they enter the room? These little things help form the bigger picture of what makes them who they are. Make note of them. Remember.

When we gather, the food is important. The gifts are nice. But these are just the background for what really matters. It’s the stories and laughter and overall fun. The hugs and pats and smiles. The small details that form the

people you love. The little moments that you don’t realize mean anything until they are all you have left someday.

These are the things that matter. Cherish them. Collect them. Remember them.

I’m reminded of a precious song from my new favorite artist, a folk duo from southern Louisiana known as Ordinary Elephant. This husband and wife team tours the country, was honored as the International Folk Music Artist of the Year in 2017, and has been nominated for the same award again this year. Yet for all their success, Crystal and Pete Damore are among the most grounded, kindest, and sweetest souls I have known. (See them perform at youtube.com/@the-lookoutsessions). Their melodies and harmonies are the perfect packaging for their reflective lyrics, especially one titled, “Hope To Be That Happy.”

The song is about Crystal’s grandmother who, despite the changes that aging brought to her, chose happiness over despair:

*“I hope to be that happy
I hope to be that happy
When the E on the eye chart gets blurry
And I turn in my keys
When there is more behind
Than in front of me”*

The ending of the song is what gets me, and it perfectly captures my sentiment as I reflect on the weeks of celebration and gatherings ahead:

*“I hope I will know
All that matters
Is right in front of me”* 🍷



Mountain Christmas (continued from page 1)

Meet and watch the creative process of local artists, including **Jeremy Clark of Clarkworks; Carla Johnson with Debra Foster; Meg Tannehill Justice; Lydia Randolph; and Magnolia Rose.** A stop at **Bee on the Brow** will offer breathtaking views, holiday decor, and artwork by **Lisa Sulkosky.**

Holiday specials, open houses, demos, and unique finds await at:

- **Groovy Goat** – kick off your crawl with a fun, eclectic shop.
- **The shops at Log Cabin Village** – Mentone’s iconic shopping village, a must-see!
- **Hummingbird at Loom** – handmade shawls, ponchos, and handcrafted wood furniture.
- **Mentone Arts Center** – warm open

house with featured artists and holiday cheer.

- **Mentone Market** – bustling with Christmas feels, local goods, and select art pieces.
- **Rocky Top Pottery** – handcrafted pottery with that Mentone mountain charm.
- **Artisans** – a welcoming shop across from Mentone Market.
- **Little River Hardware** – make your own hydro-dip ornament.
- **Moon Lake Trading Co.** – festively featuring an artist at work, plus Seabolt’s Taco Truck.
- **Coming Up Violets** – ornament-making activity for all ages with Amanda Grace.
- **Faith & Mustard Seed** – gifts ranging from meaningful to whimsical.

- **OtherWorld Gifts** – you might catch Bill 3D-printing treasures.
- **The Mentone Shop** – newly opened and featuring “all things Mentone.”
- **Little River Art Gallery** – Layne Stone will be weaving baskets onsite. Plus warm cider.
- **The Gallery by Andiamo** – always inspiring, always beautifully curated.
- **Need Something Framed? Cloud-land Framing** – Mentone’s only frame shop, conveniently located on Moon Lake Campus.
- **The Rabbit Hole** – an adventure in deliciousness and great gifts awaits!

Delicious Ways To Fuel Your Crawl

Grab something to sustain you as you meander through town. The

following eateries will be open during the crawl hours:

- **Moon Lake Kitchen:** coffee & beignets from 10 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 – 4 p.m., with regular lunch service from 11 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.
- **The Hatter Cafe:** 8 a.m. – 2 p.m., 5 – 8 p.m.
- **The Wildflower Cafe:** 11 a.m. – 3 p.m., 4 – 8 p.m.
- **Elevation Bistro:** 4 – 8 p.m.
- **Seabolt’s Street Tacos** (weather dependent): 11 a.m. – 3 p.m.

December 13 captures everything Mentone does best — creativity, community, hospitality, and holiday cheer. See you there! 🍷

Hitching Post (continued from page 1)

The Barrs’ connection to Mentone as a couple began in 1988 when Mary Gresham introduced Rick to the mountaintop community early in their relationship. Mentone quickly became their shared retreat. When they married two years later, they spent their honeymoon in Mentone. At the time, the Hitching Post was one of the few businesses in town.

Rick remembers it vividly: the creak of the floors, the smell of old wood, and the irresistible pull of antiques waiting to be touched, explored, and carried home. “The building was certainly a landmark, and I knew it would tell lots of great stories if it could talk,” he says.

Like so many in the community, the Barrs were devastated when the historic structure burned. “It has hurt to look at the empty lot these past two years,” Mary Gresham says. The loss left not just a bare space, but a gap in the visual and emotional landscape of Mentone.

In the months that followed, they, like others, hoped someone might rebuild something that honored the original. “Little did we know that someone would be us,” Rick says.

After lots of discussion and prayers, the couple purchased the vacant lot with a desire to carry the Hitching Post’s spirit into its next chapter.

That chapter is still unwritten, as the Barrs are taking time to research, reflect, and listen before making decisions about the site’s future. What they know for certain is that they do not want to erase what came before. Mary Gresham feels this strongly. For her, the Hitching Post is interwoven with a lifetime of memories: driving through town with her mother, arriving at camp, welcoming friends and kids and dogs to the family’s Mentone home, and helping visitors navigate by the simple instructions “turn right at the blinking light and drive past the Hitching Post.”

The Barrs are gathering memories to help honor the Hitching Post. “We want to celebrate the memories the community has of the Hitching Post as we dream about the future,” says Mary Gresham.

To that end, the Barrs are inviting anyone with photographs, written recollections, or special connections to the Hitching Post to share them. They



especially welcome hand-written notes. They hope to collect and display these items inside the new building once it comes to life.

These memories can be mailed to:
Hitching Post
P.O. Box 124
Mentone, Alabama 35984

As the community looks ahead, the Barrs hope Mentone will see this

project not simply as a rebuilding effort, but as a continuation of a story. The next iteration of the Hitching Post will take shape in time. For now, they are beginning the process the same way the old building welcomed generations of visitors — with an open door, an open heart, and a shared sense that something meaningful is just around the corner. 🍷

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BLUEBIRDS NEST – Tucked away in Laurel Creek Lakes, this charming cabin sits on a wooded corner lot with a peaceful lake in the backyard. Ideal as a full-time home, week-end getaway, or rental property. Enjoy the screened front porch, open living/kitchen/dining with custom touches, and a cozy gas log fireplace with stone surround. Main level master features vaulted ceiling and sitting area. Upstairs loft bedroom with half bath. Relax on the back deck overlooking the lake. A must-see gem! \$360,000 MLS#21895665

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A Season of Light and New Beginnings

BY DEJOLY LABRIER

As the year draws to a close and the air turns crisp with the promise of winter, our hearts naturally turn toward reflection. The holidays remind us of what matters most — connection, kindness, and the quiet miracle of being here, together, for another season.

This is the time to pause and notice the light — whether it’s a candle flickering in a window, laughter around a shared table of delicious food, or the gentle peace that settles in when we let gratitude fill us. Even in uncertain times, love remains the thread that binds us, guiding us toward healing and hope.

A few Decembers ago, I gathered a small group of friends to sing Christmas carols for the residents of a local apartment community. It was the kind of chilly night where we could see our breath as we sang, but that didn’t stop us from pouring our hearts into every note of “Silent Night,” “We Three Kings,” and “O Holy Night.”

The residents received our songs with applause, smiles, and a few joyful tears. When we had finished

visiting all the homes, our little group returned to my place for cookies and hot chocolate. We couldn’t help but marvel at how full our hearts felt after

giving something so simple. I knew that, for many of the residents, it was the first time they had ever experienced this small act of kindness — and it reminded us that the holidays are truly about sharing light where it’s most needed. As we said our goodbyes that night, we hugged and promised to do it again, each of us carrying home the quiet joy of having given what we could — and having

received even more in return. Now, the new year stands before us like a blank page, waiting for the stories we will write. We can choose to move forward with open hearts — to listen more deeply, to forgive, and to believe once again in what’s possible. So as we cross the threshold into 2026, may we carry gratitude for all that has shaped us and courage for all that lies ahead. And may love — steady, generous, and enduring — be the compass that guides us into a bright new chapter. May this holiday season sparkle in some special way for all! 🍷



A Hometown Christmas at Possum Emporium

Join the family-friendly celebration at this new shop in town. On Dec. 6, from 10 a.m. – 4 p.m., there’ll be an appearance by Santa beginning at 11 a.m. (bring the kids for photos); singing by the newly formed Mentone Springs Youth Choir at 2 p.m.; a gift basket drawing for adults and stocking drawing for kids — just donate to the food drive to be entered; crafting, s’mores, and a food drive with donations to support local families. 1774 County Road 642 in Mentone.



Take These Steps to Help Manage Stress

BY LYNN HIXON

Too much stress can affect your physical and mental health. Below are some steps you can take each day to help you feel calmer and in control.

- Move your body: Physical activity like walking, stretching, or other light exercise releases feel-good endorphins and helps reduce stress hormones.
- Get enough rest: Aim for seven or more hours of sleep nightly, and try to go to bed and wake up at a consistent time to support healthier stress levels.
- Take breaks from the news and

- screen time: It can help to step back from constant updates. Negative information can intensify feelings of stress.
- Connect with others: Share your feelings with friends, family, or trusted community members. Talking through your feelings can ease emotional burden.
 - Practice gratitude: Write down a couple of things you’re thankful for each day. It’s a simple habit that can boost mood and build resilience.

Please call Lynn Hixon to make an appointment for Medicare Enrollment at the DeKalb County Council on Aging at 256-845-8590. 🍷

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The Giving Time of Year: Places to Donate

BY JAY ROBBINS

This time of year is sometimes called the "giving season," a period when people are inclined to help others with gifts, money, and time. There is something in the holidays that makes us more appreciative of the things we have and opens our eyes to the needs of other people. If you are fortunate enough this year to find yourself in a position to help, here are some places where you can drop off toys, food, and clothes.

Toys for Tots is looking for toys that are brand new and still in the box, not gift-wrapped. People also sometimes donate brand new bicycles, blankets, throws, stuffed animals, and baby clothes. All donations are given to families within DeKalb County. Donations are down a little this year, but the need is greater. If you'd like to help, be sure to do so before December 16, when donations are picked up. Toys for Tots has drop-off boxes in the following locations.

MENTONE:

- Moon Lake Library
- Mentone Market
- Mentone Town Hall
- St. Joseph's Episcopal Church

VALLEY HEAD:

- Zack of All Trades
- North DeKalb Primary Care
- Side Street Deli
- Valley Head Baptist Church

HAMMONDVILLE

- Lea's Chapel Baptist Church

You can donate food, toys, and winter clothes at Hammondville Town



Hall, though food is needed the most. Individuals or families who need help can drop by and pick up a bag of groceries between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Outside those hours, call Janell Frazier at 256-635-8764, and she'll meet you there.

St. Joseph's Episcopal Church in Mentone has a food pantry each Wednesday from 9 to 10:30 a.m. throughout the year for individuals, couples, and families.

"We have seen a steady increase in the number of people needing help," says Paul Howell, who oversees the program. "Especially at this time of year, and with the government shut-down in November." You can help by putting nonperishable goods in the church's drop boxes at the Moon Lake Library and the Mentone Post Office, or by taking them directly to the church.

Let us hope that one way or another, every individual in DeKalb County and beyond has what they need for the holidays, and perhaps a little more. 🍷

Mentone Community Church Hosts "Jammies for Jesus"

BY HAYLEY CROFT

Mentone Community Church invites all children in Mentone and the surrounding area to a morning of Christmas joy at "Jammies for Jesus" on Sunday, Dec. 14, beginning at 9:30 a.m. in the student center. Kids are welcome to come dressed in their favorite cozy pajamas and enjoy Christmas-themed games, snacks, and fellowship.

The morning will also include

a screening of "The Star," a family-friendly animated film that tells the story of the first Christmas from the perspective of the animals who witnessed it.

This event is free and open to all children. We hope you and your family will join us as we celebrate the birth of Jesus together with fun, friendship, and the spirit of Christmas.

For more information, please contact Hayley Croft at hayley.croft3@gmail.com. 🍷



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MERF Helps Send FFA to National Convention

BY KATIE HAND

MERF continues to support Valley Head students by making hands-on, real-world learning possible. This fall, MERF helped send Valley Head FFA officers to the National FFA Convention and Expo in Indianapolis — one of the largest student leadership gatherings in the nation. For many students, it was their first time traveling outside the South, and the experience expanded their understanding of what is possible for their future.

Under the guidance of Cameron Mitchell, Valley Head’s Agricultural Department teacher and FFA advisor, students participated in leadership sessions inside Lucas Oil Stadium and met college and agricultural professionals from across the country and abroad (all the way from Scotland!). They explored the national expo floor, where they learned about career pathways and saw how agriculture and technology are shaping the future.

The trip also included memorable educational experiences along the way. Students toured the Louisville Slugger Museum, where they learned how professional baseball bats are made and saw bats once used by legends like Babe Ruth. In Indianapolis, they visited the historic Indianapolis Motor



Speedway, rode around the track, and explored the museum filled with Indy 500 racing history.

Mitchell shared that the students returned home with new confidence and a stronger sense of direction, saying the experience “helped them see themselves as leaders.”

MERF believes experiential learning is invaluable. When students leave the classroom — and sometimes the state — they gain independence, curiosity, and a broader view of the world. MERF is grateful for the community support that makes these meaningful opportunities possible.

As we approach the end of 2025, please consider how giving young minds opportunities like this cultivate a culture of thinking, collaboration, and a growth mindset for students who will one day take the lead! If you would like to support MERF and its mission to expand experiential learning, please visit our website: merfhouse.org, or you can mail your check to: P.O. Box 107, Mentone, Alabama 35984. Thank you for helping us carry on with good work! 🍷

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



Left to right: FFA advisor and Valley Head School teacher Cameron Mitchell, FFA officer Kansas Lee, and FFA officer Kowen Worthey



UPCOMING MERF
Senior Lunch Dates

2025
December 3, 17

2026
February 4, 25
March 4, 25
April 1, 29
May 6

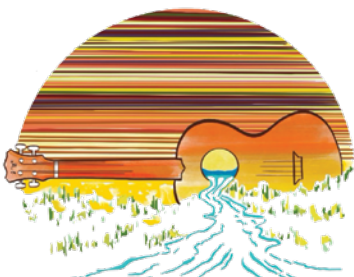
The Island of Misfit Ukes

BY HANK ALLEN

When I was a kid, there were shows and movies you could only see once a year and you’d better be sure to be near a TV when they came on. The movie I really looked forward to seeing was “The Wizard of Oz,” especially after we got a color TV that really let you see the difference between Kansas and Oz.

It was the golden age of animated Christmas specials. “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” “How the Grinch Stole Christmas!” “The Little Drummer Boy,” and “Mister Magoo’s Christmas Carol” all premiered during the 1960s. Those were all great, and I especially liked the Grinch and Charlie Brown, but my favorite was the stop-motion animated “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” My favorite things about the special were the scenes involving the Island of Misfit Toys.

Hermey, an elf who doesn’t fit in because he wants to be a dentist, and Rudolph, who is excluded from the reindeer games because of his bright red, glowing nose, decide to travel



together and end up at the Island of Misfit Toys. The island is a sanctuary for all the unwanted and "misfit" toys in the world until Santa can get them a home. The group includes toys like a bird that swims instead of flies and a train that has square wheels on his caboose. Even as a kid, the island didn’t seem like a sad place, but somewhere that anyone with uncommon interests and skills could live together without being ostracized and learn from each other. Not unlike a community ukulele group.

Getting together to play ukuleles and sing with sometimes over a dozen at the Moon Lake Library (where we are the house band) in Mentone, Alabama, feels like our own little island of the misfit toys.

I can’t think of any other reason that



this group of people would have gotten together, other than the Ukes. We all have different backgrounds, diverse ages and musical skill levels. Even though we all like music, we can’t always agree on what songs to play or how to play the ones we agree on. But once we work through all the differences, we come up with something better than any single one of us could have done. In this world of online “communities” of people who never meet in person, we are all singing, playing, and becoming friends in the same room. I’m always saying that I

finally met my people with the Mentone Ukes. Sometimes even misfits like me find a place to fit in.

The Mentone Ukes will hold practice sessions at the Moon Lake Library on December 20, January 3, 17, and 31 at 1 p.m. A free introduction to the ukulele is offered, and loaner ukuleles are available. Newcomers and beginners of all ages are welcome to attend! For more information, you can find us on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and on our website, www.mentoneukes.com.

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The Hatter Cafe *(continued from page 1)*

Tables are sawed in half and reborn as art. Teacups dangle above your head. Each corner tells a story, crafted from the Walds’ love of restoration and imagination. Pam wanted the decor to evoke memories of times past. “We repurpose everything,” Roger adds. “Pam dreams it; I figure out how to build it.”

But behind the whimsy lies a deeper mission: connection. They envisioned The Hatter as a place where people could get together again after the isolation of COVID — “a space where people make memories,” Pam says. The Cafe quickly became just that. A large men’s breakfast group meets in the Cafe each week, and locals and travelers alike return again and again, some driving hours just for breakfast. “Word of mouth is our best marketing,” Roger says. When you walk in during open hours, you will almost certainly see customers taking videos and photos of the walls and chandeliers and other decor to share with friends. And you are very likely to see groups of friends and family around the tables, celebrating their special occasions, as well as individuals who came alone and made friends in the Cafe.

Building a Wonderland
The building itself has a history of



Above: One of The Hatter’s many savory creations: Meatloaf Pie. Right: A tea fit for royalty.

its own. The 1950s home once housed a restaurant called Windwood Farms, known for whiskey ribeye and shrimp and grits. It also was the site of a sandwich shop back in the day. The Walds saw the potential right away. “As soon as we walked in, we said, ‘This is it,’” Roger says. They expanded the kitchen, added porches and two charming lodging rooms — both with private entrances, porches, and hot tubs — and built The Rabbit Hole, a combination gift shop and bakery next door. Their days are long but joyful. Roger cooks most days the Cafe is open, often serving 120 – 200 guests daily during peak season for breakfast and lunch alone. They operate five days a week,



Thursday through Monday, offering breakfast and lunch, with dinner served on Friday and Saturday evenings. As the mountain slows down in the colder months, so does The Hatter. Beginning in January, the Cafe shifts to its winter hours, open Friday through Sunday for breakfast and lunch only, giving the team time to rest and recharge before the busy season returns.

Faith, Food, and the Future
To the Walds, The Hatter Cafe is more than a business. It’s a calling. “We don’t question God anymore,” Pam says. “When He closes one door, another opens.” Roger gestures toward the space

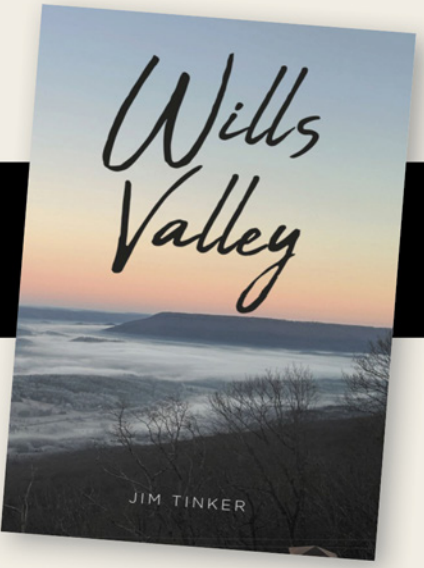
they’ve created and adds, “This is our testimony. We created it for people to come and relax.” Roger calls the restaurant their “retirement project,” and though everyone knows how much work it must be, the Walds don’t see it that way. For them, it’s magical. Roger spends many hours in chef’s clothes. “I tell people I’m not a chef,” he laughs. “I’m just a good home cook.” But the scratch-made menu says otherwise — Southern comfort classics with a creative twist, inspired by family recipes and customer favorites like “Down the Rabbit Hole,” a layered brunch dish of collard greens, grit cakes, and an egg, invented by a loyal regular. Future plans could include take-away casseroles and items to ease the burden of cooking for folks who are visiting and living in the area. And look for information in this issue of The Groundhog about The Hatter’s Great Gatsby New Year’s Eve party. Even after five years, the wonder hasn’t faded. “We want people to walk in and say, ‘Wow,’” Roger says. “Because when they do, they’re already part of the story.” For the Walds and their dream, that story continues — colorful, heartfelt, and full of grace. 🐇

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Rhododendron Garden Club Garden Club “Tours” the Gardens of the World

BY MELLANIE TUTTLE

Mary MacMichael opened our last meeting with a meditation about the gardens mentioned in the Bible: Eden, Gethsemane, Golgotha, and the final, heavenly garden. This led perfectly into the slide show presented by Lesa Cummings. Lesa and her husband’s travels were showcased by the lovely photos of gardens visited, as well as ones from their former home in Anniston. She lamented the fact that many of the plantings just a few miles south are not welcome on the rocky soil of Mentone. What thrives in one locale struggles in this clime.

From Alabama to Europe to Asia, gardens compel us to slow down and appreciate. First looks saturate the senses — the colors, shapes, and organization of the space. Wafts of fragrances wash over us while we meander. That temptation to touch or smell is irresistible. Buzzing bees, chirping birds, and gurgling water demand attention. Breathtaking beauty comes first, then details emerge, and the brain demands its due. What is that flower? Who determined the combination of plantings? Can this work at home? How many gardeners maintain this place?

Gardens are universal, embedded in the DNA of humans. Gardens reflect the culture of a people. According to an article from the University of Minnesota, “Out in nature, we feel how

we are connected to entities beyond ourselves and understand our interdependencies with other living beings. Nature also prompts us to reflect on the ever-changing nature of existence and what might lie beyond it. Nature provides a space in which we can connect spiritually both with ourselves and outside ourselves.”

What a pleasant way to spend an hour. One member, while thanking Lesa, commented that she’d saved so much money in travel because the gardens of Wales, England, Europe, Japan, and Iceland were all visited via the slide show! All the gardens were amazing, but Iceland moved to the top of my bucket list!

Let’s get a trip organized for September. What Iceland lacks in trees (although 85 species have been reintroduced), it makes up for with arctic thyme, lupine, berries, sorrel, caraway, kelp, and moss. Lesa noted how reluctant they were to walk through any of the delicate beauty, but she had photos of the sheep trudging through. Add the Aurora Borealis, and Iceland becomes even more magical.

The conservation committee report detailed new discoveries of fish, nicoletid insects, and bathymodiolin mussels in Alabama. The Gurley Darter (*Etheostoma gurleyense*) and the Birmingham Darter (*Etheostoma birminghamense*) were discovered by Yale researchers in the Mobile River drainage system. A new species of silverfish, (an insect, not a fish), the *Spinanycta*

alabamensis, was found in Bobcat Cave at the Redstone Arsenal. Finally, the Ocean Census Project announced the discovery of a tiny mussel, *Vadumodiolus teredinocola*, located in the sunken remains of an ancient forest off the coast of Alabama. The new species was found living within the remains of abandoned burrows created by shipworms. The name of the new species, *teredinicola*, is derived from the Latin *teredo*, meaning “shipworm,” and *incola*, meaning “dweller.” Aren’t those Latin names fascinating? It represents the first shallow-water member of its group, as most live in deep sea environments.

Researchers noted the silverfish finding in Bobcat Cave “serves as a reminder that there is still undiscovered biodiversity even in relatively well-explored areas, like these caves that are used often for recreation and tourism.” Professor Dan Distel noted, “By exploring the incredible diversity of life in the sea and the rich information hidden in its genomes, we learn the best ways to safeguard our planet’s delicate ecosystems.” The Mobile River Drainage system within the southeastern North American freshwater biodiversity hotspot is home to the planet’s most species-rich freshwater ecosystems outside of the tropics. We can travel the world, witnessing stunning man-made and natural gardens, but as Dorothy reminds us, “There’s no place like home.”

Next month, Kathryn Norris will



host the December luncheon, with the swearing in of new officers: Mary MacMichael, president; Mary Shurett, vice-president; Rhea Pirch, treasurer; and Laura Hambaugh and Beth Garfrerick, co-secretaries. The meeting is scheduled for December 9 at 11 a.m. Guests and former members are welcome. We’d love to see you, and there is always too much food! 🍷

Mellanie Tuttle is a member 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.



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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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Looking Ahead to 2026 at Moon Lake Library

BY ANNE MCLEOD

Closing out the old year and beginning again is always exciting. And while we can't know all that 2026 will bring, here's a sneak preview of some programs and initiatives coming up at Moon Lake Library.

We're happy to announce that we will once again offer free tax preparation from February through mid-April. Dottye Pierce has helped folks with their taxes on Saturday mornings for the past three years, and we're lucky to have her back. Also, in February, look for local author Jim Tinker, speaking about his book, Wills Valley.

We plan to sponsor some photography programs in the spring, as Steve Brandon offers a session based on his photos from around the world. In addition, local photographers David and Lesa Cummings will share tips for nature photography using smartphones, once the flowers are blooming again.

Lynn Vanderhoff is in the process of revamping our children's programs. We are continuing our outreach to the Valley Head community, with book giveaways at local events. Recently,

we learned that the summer reading theme for 2026 will be "Unearth a Story," focusing on dinosaurs, archaeology, and paleontology, so dinosaur fans of all ages will enjoy this one.

In August, we are hosting Alabama's premier weather personality, James Spann. As you know, he travels throughout the state frequently, and we're delighted to have him come back to Mentone.

Thanks to the Friends of Moon Lake Library, we have a movie license that's allowed us to show new movies and many classics over the past couple of years. One of the year's highlights will be Zombieland, which Hank and Susan Van Apeldoorn worked on as part of the film crew. We hope to have them back, sharing some behind-the-scenes secrets about that hilarious film when we show it in October.

Having a vibrant and inviting library is easy when you have an engaged community as we do in Mentone. Thanks for your support of Moon Lake Library. If you don't have a library card, please come see us and get signed up. 🐾

Anne McCleod is the librarian at Moon Lake Library.

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Holiday Art Crawl, Artist Spotlight on Barbara Umland, and a Time for Gratitude

BY JULI JORDAN

TOWN-WIDE ART CRAWL
Dec. 13 from 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

The Annual Art Crawl is a day of Mentone holiday cheer that includes a tour of local artists’ studios, special open houses at area businesses, and ornament making for kids of all ages.

For detailed information about the Art Crawl and the Mentone Tree Lighting, see page 1.



Little River Art Gallery Featured Artist: Barbara Umland

Barbara Umland has been an integral part of Mentone’s creative community.

Barbara has called Mentone home for 17 years. She served as a member of the LRAC Board of Directors and remains a dedicated volunteer at St. Joseph’s food pantry. She is well-known as the area’s fairy house design-and-build aficionado, creating enchanting dwellings from natural

materials gathered in her wooded yard. A lifelong lover of art, Barbara credits her older brother — who held a master’s degree in art — as a mentor. Though she pursued a career in nursing, earning her degree from Samford University in Birmingham, art remained a constant passion. Her career included organizing and managing the Lactation Center at Cobb Hospital in Atlanta and later consulting in Birmingham until her retirement at age 70.

Barbara’s artistic journey has taken her far beyond Alabama. A workshop in Giverny, France, where she painted daily in Monet’s garden, deeply influenced her impressionistic style. While today she paints exclusively in acrylics, she considers herself a mixed-media artist at heart. Her paintings are held in private collections across Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and Wisconsin. In addition to her artistic pursuits, Barbara teaches fairy house workshops, volunteers, and continues to find joy in learning new skills, most recently taking piano lessons for over a year in celebration of her 80th birthday.

Leaf Your Mark on Mentone: Moon Lake Arts Collective

The Moon Lake Arts Collective is getting closer to our fundraising goal, most recently receiving a \$6,000 grant from the Tillotson-Menlo Charitable Foundation, Inc. This proposed public-access clay and art studio will be a creative hub, offering workshops, artist guild memberships, and community classes.

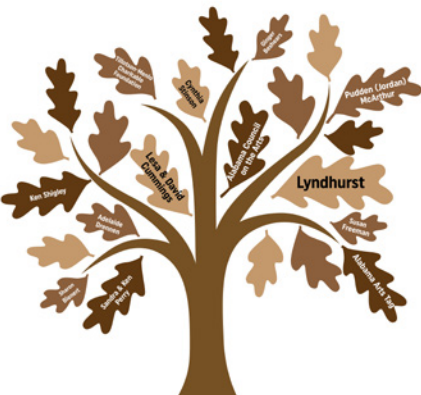
Every donor will be recognized on the studio’s Donor Wall, and gifts of \$2,500+ will be honored with a metal



We would like to thank all our volunteers for their generous support of our efforts to provide a place for local artists to be seen. We could not stay open without them! Pictured: Back Row: Layne Stone, Chris Davenport, Sandra Perry, Barbara Umland. Front Row: Brande Arno, Sharon Morris, Kathy Dyleski, Helen Allen, Cyndi Yeakle Not Pictured: David Cummings, Tiffany Parnell, Rhea Pirch, Mary Ann Robbins

oak leaf on the outdoor Donor Tree, symbolizing the deep roots of Moon Lake School and the new growth of creativity taking hold here. To help make this vision a reality — or to “add your leaf” — visit www.littleriverartscouncil.org.

MOON LAKE ARTS COLLECTIVE



Art of Appreciation

The Little River Arts Council celebrated our fantastic board members and our wonderful gallery volunteers with a brunch hosted by Cynthia Stinson at the beautiful Mentone Inn. There was delicious food, lots of laughter, and thank-you gifts for everyone. Chris Davenport received the award for Most Dedicated Volunteer, having filled over 30 (3-hour) shifts at the gallery in the past year. Brande Arno received the Sales Excellence award, having transacted the most sales, and Sharon Morris was our Top Sales Performer, with the highest amount sold. Not to be forgotten, our president bestowed nicknames on all her board members. 🍁

Juli Jordan is president of the Little River Arts Council.

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Mentone Arts Center

Arts Center Gears Up for Art Crawl, Acrylic Painting Class, and a Special Concert

BY RANDY GRIDER

It's the time of the year for celebrations and giving. We kick it off by joining the Little River Arts Council and other businesses for the annual Art Crawl on Saturday, Dec. 13. We will have featured art and artists, refreshments, and extended hours. Please check out our Facebook page for more details.

We have two events after the first of the year that you can consider for yourself or as a gift to that special someone. First up is a two-day painting class by returning artist/instructor Lucy Thomas. The Feb. 21-22 acrylic painting class is titled, "The Art of Loose Landscape" and will focus on trees, clouds, and fields.

"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. "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, 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. Tuition for the class is \$195, and the class is limited to 10 students. Thomas 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 her husband, Garner, their 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



Landscape by Lucy Thomas

to attend Berklee College of Music. Tsukamoto is known for his innovative fingerstyle technique and his ability to fuse instrumental compositions with storytelling. Look for updates/details on registration for the class and ticket purchases in the month of December on our Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/mentoneartscenter.org>.

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.



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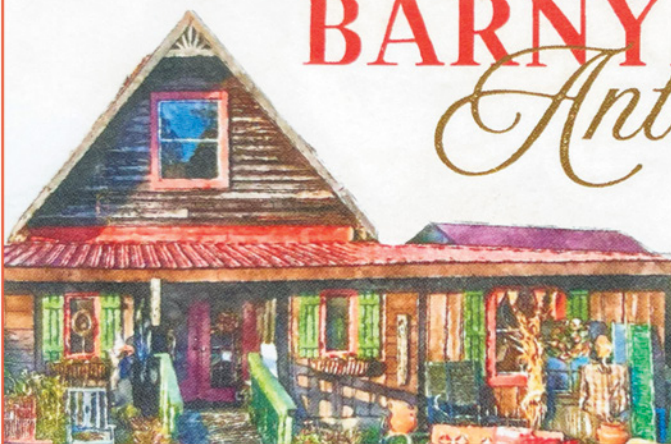
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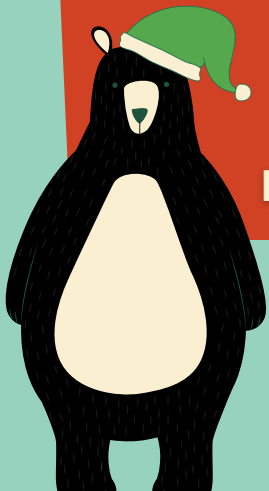
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Valley Head Happenings

Town Officials Sworn In; Christmas Festivities Around the Corner

BY MAYOR KAREN VEST

Our Oath of Office Ceremony took place November 3 at The Side Street Deli. Judge Ronnie Osborn officiated and swore in myself as mayor, our town council members Easton Bailey, John Chambers, Nathan Owen, Lyndall Elkins, and Scott Pepper. Judge Osborn also swore in Police Chief Brad Gregg, Fire Chief Dustin Burt, and our Town Clerk Lora Wooten. We handed out several well-deserved awards that same evening. Chief Gregg, Assistant Police Chief Jimmy Phillips, and retired officer Lamar Bray were presented certificates thanking them for their past years of service.

Fire Chief Burt and Assistant Chief Michael Chambers were awarded special certificates for their leadership and volunteer services, as was the entire Valley Head Fire Department. Adele Phillips was recognized with a special plaque, recognizing her dedication and service to the town for over 17 years on our Town Council. Charles Vest was named Volunteer of the Year for 2024 and 2025 and received a special certificate.

Christmas in Valley Head will take place on Sunday, December 7, 2025. We will have caroling around the square, live musical entertainment, multiple vendors selling arts and

crafts, plus our annual Christmas Parade. The festivities will begin at 3 p.m. and last until 7 p.m. The parade will begin at approximately 5 p.m. and will travel from Valley Head School through town and around the town square. We are thrilled to have a commitment from the Ider High School Marching Band to join this year's parade. Jess Goggans and her musical troubadours will perform in front of town hall from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. We hope to have the Mentone Springs Children's Choir perform that evening as well.

Naturally, no Christmas festival is complete without Santa and Mrs. Claus! We are hoping the Grinch and The Gingerbread Man will make appearances this year as well. Photos with Santa will be free! We have so many beautiful new Christmas decorations, and we can't wait to light them up. Plan to join this free family event. Let's kick off the holiday season together!

The Valley Head Volunteer Fire Department continues to grow. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer, please call town hall at 256-635-6814, and we will give you Chief Burt's contact information.

Valley Head holds their town council meetings on the first Monday of each month at 6 p.m. The public is always welcome to attend. 🍷



Valley Head Town Council (left to right): Nathan Owen, John Chambers, Easton Bailey, Mayor Karen Vest, Scott Pepper, Lyndall Elkins, and Judge Ronnie Osborn



Volunteer Fire Department (left to right): JD Trammel, Chief Dustin Burt, Mayor Karen Vest, Lucas Elkins, Michael Chambers, and Mike Stone. Back row: M. Potts, Austin Gifford, Adam Thornton





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December & January Community Events

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

December 2 Christmas Wreath Workshop – Join us for a wreath-making workshop to get into the holiday spirit at Enthusiast Wine Bar. Bring your family or friends and come enjoy a fun night with us this season! We will most likely add a few more dates to the calendar! To sign up, visit our website: www.towncreekfieldandfarm.com. Go to the Events tab and fill out the form! We look forward to seeing you!

December 4 Christmas Open House: The Shop at Little River Canyon – Celebrate the magic of the season with us at our Christmas Open House! Join us for an enchanting evening of holiday shopping and cheer. Enjoy extended shopping hours, exclusive specials, complimentary gift wrapping, and the sounds and tastes of the season with festive music and holiday treats. It's the perfect way to kick off your holiday celebrations – shop local, find unique gifts, and share in the joy of the season at The Shop at Little River Canyon. 4 to 7 p.m.

December 4 Rainsville Christmas Parade – Begins at 5:30 p.m.

December 5 Hike with a Naturalist – Powell Trail – Join us for Hike with a Naturalist! We will be hiking Powell Trail. This is a 2-mile trail in the Little River Canyon National Preserve. This hike is a strenuous journey with varying and steep terrain into the canyon. Cell phones may have little to no reception. 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. Free and open to everyone! Registration appreciated. WEATHER: As with all outdoor events, if it's raining/stormy or very poor trail conditions, we may have to cancel. If the weather is questionable, please check with the Canyon Center at 256-845-3548. 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

December 5 Main Street Movie Night “Elf” – Come enjoy the classic movie “Elf” with Fort Payne Main Street. Tickets are free, but seating is limited to 150. Stop by the Main Street office (509 Gault Ave. N, next to Blue Jug) during normal hours to pick up your tickets. First come, first served. DeKalb Theatre 7 p.m.

December 6 Christmas @ the Cabin in Henagar – Join us on the first Saturday in December for Christmas at the Cabin! The night will begin with our annual lighted Christmas parade at 4 p.m. and will finish with entertainment, pictures with Santa, train rides, and delicious food from Crossover Cowboy Church at the Henagar Park as the parade ends. Be sure to visit Henagar Park throughout the month of December to see all the beautiful Christmas trees, sponsored and decorated by members of our community.

December 6 Hometown Christmas at the Possum Emporium – We're spreading holiday cheer at the Possum Emporium and you're invited to be part of the magic! Santa arrives at 11 a.m. for photos with the kids, Mentone Springs Youth Choir performs at 2 p.m., S'mores & refreshments served throughout the day, Gift Basket Drawing – bring food drive donation to enter! There will be crafting tables for kids to get creative and a food drive to support local families in need. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

December 6 Ider Christmas Parade – Begins at 1 p.m.

December 6 Crossville Christmas Parade and Christmas in the Park – Begins at 5:30 p.m.

December 6 “It's A Wonderful Life” – A 1946 American Christmas fantasy drama film directed and produced by Frank Capra and will be played at the Fort Payne Opera House. The movie is now considered one of the greatest films of all time and among the best Christmas films. Doors open at 5 p.m., Movie starts at 6 p.m. No Admission. Free popcorn & drink per attendee.

December 7 Valley Head Christmas Parade – Begins at 5 p.m.

December 9 Christmas Wreath Workshop – Join us for a wreath-making workshop to get into the holiday spirit at Meal & Market. Bring your family or friends and come enjoy a fun night with us this season! We will most likely add a few more dates to the calendar! To sign up, visit our website: www.towncreekfieldandfarm.com. Go to the Events tab and fill out the form! We look forward to seeing you!

December 12 Christmas in the Park – Join us for the 40th annual award-winning Christmas in the Park in Fort Payne! Visit with Santa, visit with our civic organizations for hot chocolate, coffee, sodas, peanuts, and popcorn! Christmas in the Park ends at 6 p.m., just in time for the parade! Free to the public!

December 12 Fort Payne Christmas Parade – Begins at 6 p.m.

December 12–13 Alice Circle Vendor Event – All the vendors are set, and we can't wait for these events! Mark your calendars and come out and support local makers! We'll feature each vendor, photos of their products, and more soon! Friday 10 a.m. parade begins and Saturday 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

December 13 Crafting with Nature – Join the Bucks Pocket State Park naturalist at the Sauty Pavilion to get crafty with natural materials! 10 a.m.

December 13 Serious Skills Series: Stained Glass Mosaic Project – Learn the beautiful and ancient art of mosaics! DeSoto State Park staff will teach design, techniques, and the skills of glass cutting, gluing, and grouting with special emphasis on safety. We will be working on mosaic stepping stones that, when finished, will be on display in DeSoto's pollinator garden. Join in the fun and create art to be enjoyed by others! If you don't wish to work with the glass, still feel free to stop by and check out our progress! 1 to 4 p.m., DeSoto State Park Nature Center. Free & open to everyone. Ages 8 to adult. No pre-registration required. For any details email Brittney. Hughes@dcnr.alabama.gov.

December 13 Tree Ring Printing: Telling Nature's Story – Hosted by DeSoto State Park. Discover the fascinating story of trees and our environment through time! Tree rings hold the secrets of a tree's age and the history of its surroundings. In this hands-on event, you'll print tree rings, uncover the tree's age, and transform these natural records into unique pieces of art you can take home.

Ages 8 to adult. 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. \$15, supplies included. Pre-registration required.

December 13 Wreaths Across America – Hannah White Arnett Chapter, NSDAR, and DeKalb County VFW Post 3128 will again sponsor Wreaths Across America Day locally at Patriots Memorial Park, 410 Godfrey Ave. NE, Fort Payne, beginning at 11 a.m. Ceremonial wreaths will be placed at the flags in the park, representing those who served in the Army, Marines, Air Force, Space Force, Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, Fire Department and Police Department, as well as those who are POW/MIA. We would like to invite you and your family to attend the ceremony at Patriots Memorial Park to help us remember the fallen, honor those who serve, and teach the next generation the value of freedom. Afterward, participants will proceed to Glenwood Cemetery. American Legion Auxiliaries Fort Payne Unit 89 and Mentone Unit 215 will instruct volunteers how to place wreaths on veterans' markers, say their name aloud, and thank them for their service to our country.

December 13 Canyon Christmas – Come celebrate the season with us at the Little River Canyon Center. Snap a picture with Santa and take home a free 4x6 print! Enjoy crafts, treats, Storybook Trail, and more. All free and open to the public. 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Call the Little River Canyon Center at 256-845-3548 for more information.

December 13 Fyffe Christmas Parade – Begins at 12 p.m.

December 13 Collinsville Christmas Parade – Begins at 5 p.m.

December 13 Christmas Tree Lightening in Mentone – Annual Christmas tree lighting beside the Mentone Inn. Caroling, hot chocolate, pictures with Santa, and more. 5 p.m.

December 13 “National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation” – Fort Payne Opera House. Doors open at 5 p.m., movie starts at 6 p.m. Free admission with popcorn and drink.

December 13 Geraldine Christmas Parade and Christmas in the Park – Begins at 6 p.m.

December 13 Boys in the Band 7th Annual Tribute Show – Boys in the Band returns home for their 7th annual tribute show. A portion of the proceeds benefit the Alabama June Jam Foundation.

December 16 First Choice Personnel: Ribbon Cutting to Celebrate 35 Years – Join Us in celebrating this milestone. 2207 A Gault Ave. N, Fort Payne. 10 a.m.

December 19 Trail Trekker Hike: Neverland Loop – A 7-mile moderate hike through hardwood forest, wetlands, sandstone outcroppings, and an old homeplace. Weather-dependent; please call the lodge at 256-845-5380 beforehand to check on status of hike. Contact Brittney.Hughes@dcnr.alabama.gov for any details. www.alapark.com/desoto-state-park/hiking; Meet at DeSoto's Country Store. 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Free, weather dependent.

December 19 Dark Skies & Starry Nights – Evening of stargazing with the Bucks Pocket State Park naturalist at Point Rock Overlook. Learn about light pollution and bird migration. 7 p.m. \$5 per person. Register Here: <https://reserve.alapark.com/.../dark-skies-starry-nightsbbsp>

December 19 Fort Payne Main Street Movie Night – “Polar Express” Tickets free but limited to 150. DeKalb Theatre. 7 p.m.

December 20 Hike with a Naturalist – Path to Learning – On this guided hike, we'll discuss the plants, animals, and natural history of the area. Come along with us for a relaxing half-mile hike on the Path To Learning at the Canyon Center. Please wear footwear suitable for hiking. Bring water, sun protection, and possibly a snack. As with all outdoor events, if it's raining/stormy or very poor trail conditions, we may have to cancel. If the weather is questionable, please check with the Canyon Center. Meet at the center. 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. Free and open to everyone! Registration appreciated.

December 20 Winter Adventure Hike – DeSoto Falls Basin – Set out on an adventure hike with DeSoto State Park staff to the bottom of one of Alabama's tallest waterfalls, DeSoto Falls! Learn about Little River, an outstanding water source with its clear water and plant and animal life. Discover the history of the area. This hike is approximately 1.5 miles total but considered moderate to strenuous due to the mountainous terrain and elevation. Will be hiking on rocky terrain down to the West Fork of Little River and walking upstream to the view of DeSoto Falls. 12 to 2 p.m. Meet at DeSoto Falls Trailhead on County Road 613. Free & open to everyone; no-preregistration required. Weather- dependent, please call the lodge at 256-845-5380 beforehand to check on status of hike.

December 20 Sylvania Christmas Parade – Begins at 1 p.m.

December 21 Creekside Birding Walk – Birdwatching along South Sauty Creek at Bucks Pocket. Bring binoculars. Call 256-673-6137 for info.

January 1 New Year's Day Waterfall Hike 2026 – Join DeSoto State Park staff & volunteers for a fun day of hiking through the park to see waterfalls and water features. Approx. 3 miles, moderate terrain. 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

January 1 New Year's Day 2026 Adventure Hike to DeSoto Falls Basin – Join DeSoto State Park's first day adventure hike to one of Alabama's tallest waterfalls. 1.5 miles, moderate to strenuous. 3 to 5 p.m.

January 1 First Day Hike 2026: South Sauty Trail – Celebrate the first day of the year with the Bucks Pocket State Park naturalist for a moderate-to-difficult 3-mile out-and-back hike along the South Sauty Trail. There is parking available near the trailhead on both sides of the road, as well as down the road toward the ORV Trail West (in front of the yellow gate). Email: anna.crow@dcnr.alabama.gov for more details.

January 10 Campfire Talk: All About Eagles – Join the Bucks Pocket Park Naturalist for an evening of storytelling by the fire as we discuss the history of the bald eagle in the United States and how you can play a role in the U.S. national bird's conservation success story! Bring a camp chair, as seating may be limited! 5 p.m. Community Fire Pit (by Sauty Pavilion)

January 17 Bartram's Winter Woods: Winter Tree ID – Hike Explore the forest through the eyes of William Bartram, the famed naturalist who documented the Southeast's rich biodiversity more than 250 years ago. On this leisurely winter hike, we'll practice identifying trees without their leaves by looking closely at bark, buds, and overall shape – the same kinds of details Bartram would have noted in his journals. Along the way, we'll reflect on how our forests have changed since Bartram's time and consider what we can do to help protect them for the next 250 years. This is a 2.5-mile out-and-back hike over moderate terrain. Attendees are encouraged to bring water, bug spray, sturdy footwear, and a small notebook or journal if you'd like to write or sketch during the hike. We will have some journals and pencils available for use. South Sauty Trailhead Bucks Pocket State Park. 1 p.m.

DECEMBER & JANUARY AT MOON LAKE LIBRARY

MAH JONGG Tuesdays and Fridays at noon - beginners welcome.

KNITTING and CROCHET Tuesdays at 2 p.m.

SCRABBLE Wednesdays at noon.

Dec. 2 at 3 p.m. - Municipal library board meeting; 4 PM Friends of Moon Lake Library board meeting.

Dec. 4 at 3 p.m. - Poetry Club with Dekie Hicks

Dec. 6 at 1 p.m. - Mentone Ukes offer free ukulele lessons for all experience levels.

Dec. 7 at 2 p.m. - Holiday Social, featuring the Mentone Ukes, Lee Bailey, and the Mentone Children's Chorus. Come enjoy great music and refreshments!

Dec. 7 - Valley Head Christmas Parade - Book giveaway for kids sponsored by Moon Lake Library.

Dec. 12 at 6 p.m. - Friday Night @ the Movies - National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation (1989 - PG-13)

Dec. 13 at 10:30 a.m. - The Moon Lake Library Book Club - This month we're reading and sharing books published in 2025.

Dec. 20 at 10:30 a.m. - Children's Matinee - Polar Express (2004 - G)

Dec. 20 at 1 p.m. - Mentone Ukes offer free ukulele lessons for all experience levels.

Dec. 23-25 - CLOSED FOR Christmas

Dec. 31-Jan. 1 - CLOSED for New Year's

December 31 - January 1 **CLOSED FOR NEW YEAR'S**

Jan. 3 at 1 p.m. - Mentone Ukes offer free ukulele lessons for all experience levels.

Jan. 6 at 3 p.m. - Municipal Library Board meeting; 4 p.m. Friends of Moon Lake Library Board meeting.

Jan. 8 at 3 p.m. - Poetry Club with Dekie Hicks

Jan. 10 at 10:30 a.m. - The Moon Lake Library Book Club. This month, we're reading and sharing books about artists and the arts.

Jan. 11 at 2 p.m. - Featured Speaker Anne McLeod: “Do We Look Like Outlaws? The History and Secrets of the 1934 Textile Strike in Alabama and Georgia”

Jan. 17 at 1 p.m. - Mentone Ukes offer free ukulele lessons for all experience levels.

Jan. 23 at 6 p.m. - Friday Night @ the Movies: “Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale” (2025 - PG)

Jan. 25 at 2 p.m. - Featured speaker Jack West of the Alabama Rivers Alliance - The Southern Exposure Film Festival.

Jan. 31 at 1 p.m. - Mentone Ukes offer free ukulele lessons for all experience levels.

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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.

Barry Morton is past commander of the Mentone American Legion. This article was written with the help of artificial intelligence. If you'd like to get hold of Barry, you may text him at 334-202-8936.

The Marine Corps flag is prominently displayed during military ceremonies, parades, and official functions. It is often seen alongside the American flag, especially in Color Guard formations, where it is dipped in honor during the playing of "The Star-Spangled Banner." One of the most iconic



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The Mountain Kitchen Sweet Treats Give Way to Simpler Foods

BY REBECCA HENDERSON,
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

This confection is sure to be a hit on your holiday dessert table — sweet and tart, with plenty of walnut crunch. Add a few squares to your gift plates and folks will think you splurged at a bakeshop. The fudge freezes well, too.

WHITE CHOCOLATE- CRANBERRY-WALNUT FUDGE

Makes 1 (9 x 13) pan

- 4 cups sugar
- 9 oz. evaporated milk (about ¾ large can)
- 1 stick butter
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 7 oz. marshmallow cream
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 12 oz. package white chocolate chips
- 1 cup sweetened dried cranberries, roughly chopped
- 1 cup chopped, toasted walnuts

1. In a large heavy pot, bring sugar, milk, butter, and salt to a boil. Continue boiling, stirring often, until mixture reaches softball stage (235 degrees on a candy thermometer).
2. Remove from heat, and stir in remaining ingredients, beating with a wooden spoon until chocolate is melted and mixture is completely combined.
3. Pour into a buttered 9- x 13-inch pan. Cool completely before cutting into squares.

Winter Warmup, Please!

January is usually a time to tone down the indulgent foods and focus

on cozy, simpler dishes. And if they're easy, that's even better when you've had a busy holiday and have spent hours planning meals and tidying the kitchen. Soups are big in our house all year long. They're kind of a reset food — one course, a few ingredients, and usually pretty economical.

NEW YEAR ROASTED PEPPER SOUP

(Serves 4 to 6)

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 cup chopped green onions, white and green parts
- 5 cups vegetable stock
- 2 cups jarred roasted red peppers, drained
- 2 (14.5 oz.) cans low-sodium whole stewed tomatoes
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 2 teaspoons dried basil
- 2 tablespoons whipping cream
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Herbed croutons

1. Sauté onions in olive oil in a large heavy saucepan over medium heat, cooking until soft.
2. Stir in stock, peppers, tomatoes, sugar, and basil. Bring mixture to a boil.
3. Reduce heat, cover, and simmer for 20 minutes.
4. Use an immersion blender to purée soup, or remove the peppers and tomatoes and purée them in a stand blender, and return to the saucepan.
5. Stir in whipping cream until well combined to mellow the flavor.
6. Add salt and pepper to taste, and serve with croutons on top. 🍴



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Dear Community,

In 2026, Boom Town Makers Market celebrates 10 years of showcasing local and regional artists in North Alabama.

There are too many people to thank in one message. Still, we must begin by acknowledging Mr. Ed Westmoreland and the Westmoreland family for allowing us to call the iconic Sawyer Building home and providing the perfect anchor for downtown revitalization.

We are grateful to Main Street Alabama for recognizing the potential of the visual arts in Fort Payne and providing the data, framework, and support that fueled our initiatives. Thank you to the Fort Payne Main Street Board of Directors for championing this vision.

We also thank Lynn Brewer for bringing Main Street Alabama to our Community; Connie Fuller and Randy Grider for their work on the successful application; and Mayor Larry Chesser and the Fort Payne City Council for their foresight in funding the initiative.

Most importantly, thank you to the artists who have trusted us with their work and to the team members and volunteers who have supported us throughout the years.

Please watch our social media pages and BoomTownMakersMarket.org to learn about the celebratory events throughout 2026.

Here's to a decade of creativity—and many more to come.

Darlene Rotch & Team
Boom Town Makers Market

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First Day Hike: A New Year’s Tradition of Adventure

DeSoto State Park invites hikers of all ages to celebrate both the New Year and the Year of Alabama Trails with its annual First Day Hike, a guided journey through some of the park’s most scenic and beloved natural features. Led by park staff and volunteers, this moderate three-mile trek highlights a series of waterfalls including Lost Falls, Laurel Falls, Indian Falls, along with peaceful water features such as Laurel Creek and the West Fork of Little River.

The route follows sections of the orange and blue trails, winding through hardwood forest, sandstone outcroppings, wetlands, and rocky terrain. It’s an ideal way to embrace Alabama’s statewide celebration of outdoor



recreation and connect with the natural beauty of Lookout Mountain.

The hike is free, open to all ages, and requires no preregistration.

Well-behaved, leashed dogs are welcome. Participants should meet at DeSoto’s Country Store on County Road 89 for the 10:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m. hike.

Winter weather can be unpredictable, so hikers are encouraged to call the Lodge at 256-845-5380 beforehand to confirm the status of the event. For details, contact Brittney.Hughes@dcnr.alabama.gov.

Attendees should dress for seasonal temperatures and wear sturdy, closed-toe shoes, as the trail may be wet and uneven. Bringing water, sports drinks, snacks or lunch, and optional hiking poles is recommended.

DeSoto’s First Day Hike offers a refreshing start to 2026—an opportunity to embrace the outdoors and take in the natural beauty of Alabama’s mountains and waterfalls.

New Year’s Day Adventure Hike to DeSoto Falls Basin

For hikers seeking a more challenging afternoon outing, DeSoto State Park also hosts a strenuous 1.5-mile Adventure Hike to the base of DeSoto Falls, one of Alabama’s tallest and most iconic waterfalls. The route descends rocky mountain terrain to the West Fork of Little River, then follows the river upstream to a stunning view of the falls.

TIME: 3–5 p.m.

MEET: DeSoto Falls Trailhead, County Road 613

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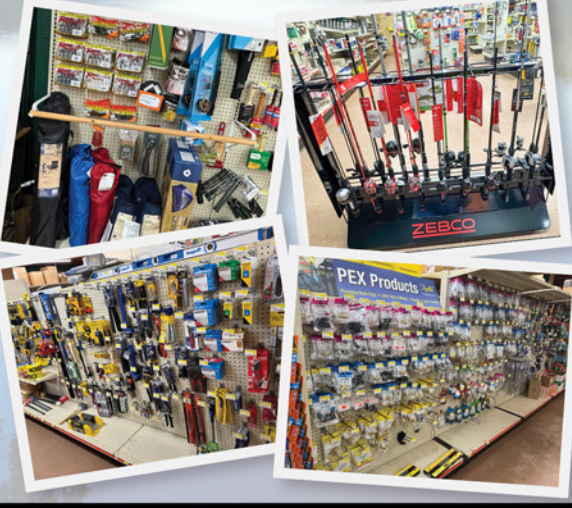
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