



THE GROUNDHOG

“Neighborly News from the Heart of Lookout Mountain”

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

Bid, Savor, and Celebrate March 19 at MERF’s Taste of the Mountain & Art Auction

BY REBECCA HENDERSON
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

The Mentone Educational Resources Foundation (MERF) invites the community to its annual Taste of the Mountain and Art Auction, a beloved fundraiser celebrating local art, food, and education. This year’s event will take place on Thursday, March 19, at Alpine Camp, with gates opening at 5 p.m. Guests will enjoy an evening filled with creativity, cuisine, and community spirit — all in support of a meaningful cause. Browse and bid during both a silent and live auction featuring stunning works from talented regional artists, as well as special pieces created by Valley Head School elementary students through MERF’s fine arts

program. In addition to artwork, bidders can compete for sought-after experience packages, including cozy cabin retreats, private chef dinners, and other thoughtfully curated offerings. Food lovers will also be in for a treat. A variety of local restaurants and businesses will serve signature dishes throughout the evening. Come hungry and get to know those whose culinary works make our community a food lover’s destination. Tickets are \$50 and can be purchased online or at Mentone Market (cash or check accepted). Purchase tickets here: <https://www.merfhouse.com/shop/tickets/3> Those who would like to further support the event may also contribute through sponsorship donations. Become a sponsor or donate here:



<https://www.merfhouse.com/product/art-auction-sponsorship-donation/12> All proceeds from the evening directly support local art education initiatives and other

community-focused programs led by MERF. Mark your calendar and make plans to attend! It’s an evening you won’t want to miss. 🍷

Mentone Arts Center Thrives on Steady Leadership and Clear Vision

BY REBECCA HENDERSON,
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

In October 2020, as much of the country was still shutting down, the Mentone Arts Center at the Chuck Sennett Center for the Arts opened its doors. “We opened October 22, 2020,” Executive Director Randy Grider said. Five years later, people gathered inside to celebrate the fifth anniversary of what has become a hub of creativity for the town. The anniversary is less about marking a date and more about reflecting on what has been built — a working gallery, a performance space, and ongoing art classes led by both local and visiting artist/instructors and gives the community consistent access to the arts.

Longevity Means Planning for Reality When asked what he considers the center’s most significant milestone, Grider replied, “I think making it to five years and paying off this building, which we did last year.” Operating any organization in a small tourist town requires careful planning. From the beginning, the arts center approached its budget with that reality in mind. The board and staff built operating reserves and intentionally scheduled programming during slower months to bring local residents through the doors. Concerts in January and February were not accidental. They were designed to keep activity steady and provide income when walk-in traffic slowed. Grider noted the difficulty many area businesses face is that the highest operational costs (heating bills) coincide with the season of lowest



visitor traffic, January and February. “We did plan ahead to get through those months and learned a lot of lessons. It has changed a little up here. January and February are not just total deserts anymore. People do come more than they used to.” External factors also play a role. When Highway 117 closed due to flooding, the impact was immediate. “That morning before they closed it, I did \$400 in sales before 11 a.m.,” Grider said. “Then it took weeks to make another \$400 because the road was shut down. We had to overcome our main artery through town being shut off.” For a nonprofit whose mission centers on supporting artists, fluctuations like that matter. “But we were very lucky when we first opened,” he said. Grider had hoped to bring in \$5,000 (just to pay the utilities) from that first October through the end of

2020. They brought in \$31,000 from the sale of art. The center takes a 30% commission on artwork sold — lower than many commercial galleries — so that the majority of each sale goes back to the artist. “We only take 30% here because our mission is to help the artists,” he said. “We have to have other layers of funding — private donations and grants and things like that.” That structure means the center’s financial health is closely tied to its ability to diversify revenue and maintain community support. In addition to gallery representation, the center has hosted workshops and classes that give artists opportunities to teach and expand their reach. For emerging artists, those classes can be an entry point into the creative

(See “Mentone Arts Center,” Page 11)

Join the Annual Mentone Cleanup March 28

The annual Mentone Community Cleanup is set for Saturday, March 28. If you wish to participate, gather at the Mentone Inn parking lot at 9 a.m. to meet Lyle Nicely and receive a high-visibility vest, pinchers, and trash bags. In addition to music and fellowship, participants can enjoy the traditional potluck lunch at Linger Longer Pavilion behind the inn at noon. Anyone wishing to bring food can drop off at the pavilion any time after 9 a.m. Please package your food in a disposable container. For additional information, please call Lyle Nicely at 256-996-0169 or Cynthia Stinson at 256-634-4836. 🗑️





The Groundhog

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

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

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Groundhog woodcut courtesy of Meg Justice/Bee Spring Studio

FOLLOW US ON

Mentone Matters
The Best of Mentone on Display

BY MAYOR ROB HAMMOND

A major event for our area is taking place next month, one that shines a spotlight on what makes Mentone such a special place.

The annual Taste of the Mountain and Art Auction is set for March 19. This is more than just a fundraising event; it's a celebration of our community and its culture.

As the name suggests, attendees will enjoy a sampling from the fantastic restaurants and chefs in this area. Mentone is also known for being a community where the arts thrive, and you will understand why when you see the many paintings, photographs, and other pieces of art available through silent and live auctions.

For more than a century, Lookout Mountain has been home to summer camps. This year's event will once again be hosted at Alpine Camp for Boys, giving visitors a chance to enjoy the beautiful facilities and natural beauty of one of our camps.

One more thing will be on display March 19, something beyond the food, art, and camp experience. The driving force behind this event is our spirit of community. People donate food and art, which are core to the event. Tickets always sell fast, as area residents ensure they get a spot for this special evening.



And attendees eagerly participate in the auctions, hoping to take home a unique piece of Mentone.

The event is hosted by MERF, and proceeds from the evening help fund the many great activities this organization sponsors throughout the year. This includes an art teacher at Valley Head School, lunches for our senior citizens, scholarships, and much more.

Just as the Taste of the Mountain and Art Auction provides a sampling of Mentone's food, art, camp life, and community spirit, it's also an example of the good work done by our dedicated local organizations. MERF is just one of many groups that make Mentone such a great place to live. We saw this last month at the Groundhog Day Community Celebration.

The Groundhog Day event is a true community effort. The Town of

Mentone provided the use of the gym on Moon Lake Campus. The Little River Arts Council coordinated the cake walk and helped MERF's art instructor with art projects for the kids. The Rhododendron Garden Club managed the Crock-Pot Cookoff. Our local Scout troop provided drinks and snacks. The Moon Lake Library offered free books. And the event is hosted by The Groundhog, the newspaper published by MERF.

Thank you to everyone who stopped by the Groundhog Day event last month, and thank you to all who will gather on March 19 for the Taste of the Mountain and Art Auction. These are big events that showcase everything unique about our town. And when they are over, the good work of these groups and residents continues throughout the year, building the community we are blessed to call our home. 🐾

From the Editor
Spend Time, Capture Stories

BY STEPHEN V. SMITH, EDITOR

I've spoken with people who barely knew their grandparents, and some who never knew them at all. While I didn't understand how rare it was then, I was among five living generations until my great-great-grandmother passed away when I was a young teen. Likewise, I failed to celebrate this rarity with my children when their great-great-grandmother was alive for several years after they were born.

First, there is the pain of regret. What a blessing it would have been to these two ladies, no doubt, to have received more visits from their descendants. When I think about how much I treasure my time with our four-year-old grandson, I can't imagine how precious it would be to get to know his children and grandchildren and to be part of their lives.

Second, there is the pain of loss. How much richer would my life be today had I absorbed stories from my great-great-grandmother? The Civil War had been over for only 20 years when she was born; how was her upbringing impacted by the great conflict that threatened to tear our young country apart? What was it like to start a family in the early 1900s? Did World War I claim anyone she knew? What was it like to raise babies in such uncertain times?

As we celebrate America's 250th anniversary, I wonder what the 150th celebration was like, marked a few months after her 40th birthday.

Was daily living hard, farming rented land on Lookout Mountain and raising several children? What did they eat? What did they do for entertainment? How did they live?

Time took her eyesight, her hearing,

and, eventually, her memories. At age 97, it claimed her life. But time also took her stories. Not because she wasn't willing to share them, but because I didn't take the time to ask. Sure, I was only a kid when she died, so I didn't fully appreciate the rare gift I had been given. And that's my point. We should be more intentional about capturing the stories of family members while they are still here to share them. In so doing, we will enrich our lives with tales that belong to us just as much as they belong to them. To get these stories, we must spend time with these precious people. And that, in turn, will be a tremendous blessing to them. Our family stories are the threads that bind generations. What can we do to capture and preserve those stories? Email your thoughts and ideas to groundhognews@yahoo.com. 🐾

Scenes from Groundhog Day Community Celebration





Agritourism: Our Trip to White Oak Pastures

**BY BILL MARTIN,
RETIRED SCIENCE TEACHER**

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

Last fall, Nancy and I packed up and headed south on Highway 27 for about five hours to White Oak Pastures in the small town of Bluffton, Georgia. We first learned of Will Harris and his farm a few years ago through his appearance in the video “100,000 Beating Hearts” on the YouTube series Soil Carbon Cowboys. White Oak Pastures is a large (3200+ acre), diverse, and vertically integrated regenerative farm. They additionally contract graze sheep on another 2,000 acres under solar panels. The animals live on the farm from birth to processing, and are directly sold to customers, restaurants, and stores nationwide.

Will is the fourth generation of his family to operate this farm. He began as a conventional farmer, but after he loaded a group of feeder calves in a three-layered semitrailer to send to the Midwest, he started to think about what kind of life those calves would have after he had been so careful to ensure they had a good start to life. He began to alter his farm at that point. The farm has three goals: first, to provide a humane and healthy life for his animals; second, to use animals to improve his soils and the ecosystem; and third, to have a positive effect on his community. White Oak Pastures is the largest employer in the county and has brought the small town of Bluffton back from the ashes that so many other small Southern towns experience.

Agritourism wasn’t a goal, but so many people from around the country and world wanted to visit that they began building cabins around the farm, buying homes in Bluffton as they became available, and building an RV campground

for visitors. They offer a variety of tours, horseback rides, and workshops. They allow you to visit any part of the farm and its many operations on your own, with the request that you shut any gate you open.



We live in the woods near Menlo, so for a change, we opted to stay in one of the townhouses, a short stroll from the farm store and restaurant that is in the heart of Bluffton. In the store, you can buy a variety of grass-raised and finished beef, pastured pork, rabbit, lamb, and mutton cuts, as well as vegetables, fruits, honey, leather goods, tallow, and lard products from hand creams to soap, all produced on the farm. There is also a restaurant that provides three meals daily, serving food from the farm. The farm has two meat processing plants (abattoirs). Any waste in the process is composted and returned to the soil after decomposition.

The farm is subdivided into over a hundred paddocks, and most of the animals are moved daily. Herd size is large, with a couple of thousand head of cattle and hundreds of pigs being managed from paddock to paddock. When new land is acquired, they begin rolling out hay and densely stocking cattle to concentrate organic matter and spread manure and urine to start improving fertility and healing the soil.



Rolled out hay and the resulting manure load

Rabbits were grazed behind the house where we were staying. The hutches have wire bottoms to prevent digging but allow grazing. They were moved daily. The electric netting around the hutches protects from predators (mainly neighborhood dogs). Rabbit is one of the more popular products, and the store was out during our stay.



Notice the grazed areas as the hutches are moved from day to day.

A few miles south of the farm, sheep are contract grazed under 2,000 acres of solar panels. They are also moved daily with the help of herding dogs. They not only provide meat to sell, but they also earn a fee from the solar company for weed and grass maintenance. It was interesting to see a regenerative operation of this scale. The multiple species are used synergistically to enhance soil

fertility, water retention, and pasture/ecosystem restoration. Most of the surrounding area is row-cropped, primarily with peanuts, and the soils are open to erosion.

During rain events, the runoff from White Oak Pastures isn’t muddy, but it is from the neighboring row-cropped farms. There are two other interesting tourist stops in the area. The first, the Kolomoki Mounds, are only five miles or so away from Bluffton. They are a reminder that this land has been farmed for well over 1,000 years. It is the oldest Woodland Indian site in the Southeast and contains Georgia’s oldest temple mound, standing 57 feet tall. The other site, closer to Columbus, Georgia, is Providence Canyon State Park, also known as Georgia’s “Little Grand Canyon.” It is easily accessible on arrival or departure from White Oak Pastures. It formed as a result of poor farming practices in the 1800s, allowing erosion so massive that gullies 150 feet deep were formed, so deep that it seems to be a canyon.

We can farm in a sustainable regenerative manner, enhancing soil fertility and ecological health, or in a way that degrades and even destroys soils. White Oak Pastures makes a small profit, supports multiple families, and enhances the local community. It serves as an example of how we can grow high-quality food as we improve the environment. 🍎

RESOURCES:

- Visit their website: whiteoakpastures.com
- See all their different enterprises on their YouTube channel, “whiteoakpastures”.
- Their nonprofit, The Center for Agricultural Resilience, offers workshops and resources and can be found at thecfar.org.



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Many Local Resources for High School Graduates

BY ANNA MAE HORN

Class of 2026, here is some great news! Help is available from people who have been where you are; some have even walked the very same hallowed halls their senior year. We know this is a busy, and often overwhelming, time as you prepare for the next exciting stage of life. Volunteers are available to help with resumes and applications. For financial assistance, local scholarships are available. There are many people who want to help you succeed.

One general resource is available to either help directly or connect students and parents with other resources. Community volunteers can help with educational or employment resumes and applications. Homework help, job search assistance, and other miscellaneous services are also free for students. You may email VHSresume@gmail.com or text/call Anna Mae Horn at 256-635-8775.

Moon Lake Library now has an outreach team specifically to help local students. Several of the team members are available to meet up for help with forms or even homework. Make arrangements ahead of time. A community room is available if quiet space is needed. You can contact the library by phone at 256-634-2127, online at MoonLakeLibrary.org, or through social media.

Several local organizations offer scholarships to help you further your education. The criteria are varied. Some scholarships are for Valley Head High School students; others are for area residents who may or may not



attend public school. Some accept applicants who are pursuing a technical or professional certificate instead of a university or college degree. Academic information is always considered, but there is no requirement to be at the very top of the class. Let's talk about some of these organizations briefly.

The Valley Head High School Class of 1969 alumni will give their third annual \$1,000 scholarship, which was established in honor of classmates who have passed. The recipient will be a graduate of their beloved alma mater who walks the same hallways they once walked and plans to attend a university, community college, or technical school. The committee will look at financial need and academic endeavors thus far. Email VHSresume@gmail.com for more details.

MERF, Mentone Educational Resource Foundation, will award two Carter Holland Memorial Scholarships valued at \$1,000 each. Established by Carter's family and in honor of his

great character, these scholarships are awarded based on demonstrated leadership, kindness, good character, and future plans to give back to the local community. Applicants must live in the school district, be enrolled full time at a college or technical school, and work toward a degree or certificate. More information can be found at MERF-house.org.

The Valley Head Area Women's Club annually awards two \$700 scholarships toward any accredited educational institution: technical, professional, or academic. Criteria include financial need, dedication to success, and academic effort. Contact these ladies through their Facebook group or at 256-635-8775 for more information.

St. Joseph's on-the-Mountain Episcopal Church will award up to 10 Vann-McCary scholarships of between \$500 and \$1,000 to students planning to attend college, university, or an accredited trade/technical school. The applicant can be anyone from the

Mentone/Valley Head area, including graduating seniors or former recipients for up to a total of four years of higher education. Students will have a chance to talk about their dreams and how they would like to make them happen. The committee will consider the level of financial need, academic achievements to date, and clarity of educational and career goals as part of this application. You may call the church at 256-634-4476 or send an email request to admin@stjom.church. For more information, you can learn about the church at <https://www.facebook.com/stjom/>. They will make sure you get an application!

There are several other scholarships available that are not school specific. The American Legion, Valley Head Masonic Lodge, Sand Mountain Electric Cooperative, Farmers Telecommunications Cooperative, and area businesses have offered scholarships in the past. Funding for college is available, so be sure to apply as often as possible. Your high school counselor will have applications and information for local scholarships.

We live in a caring community with many wonderful adults who are proud when local students thrive. It is also a varied community with people from all walks of life, a multitude of experiences, and diverse knowledge to share. Please reach out. If you never ask, you can never be told "Yes!" Let others help you reach your goals. We wish you much success with your future endeavors, whatever they may be. Walk confidently on your next path. Congratulations, Class of 2026! 🍀

Lucky Me! Key Lime Pie and Carrot Cake

BY DEJOLY LABRIER

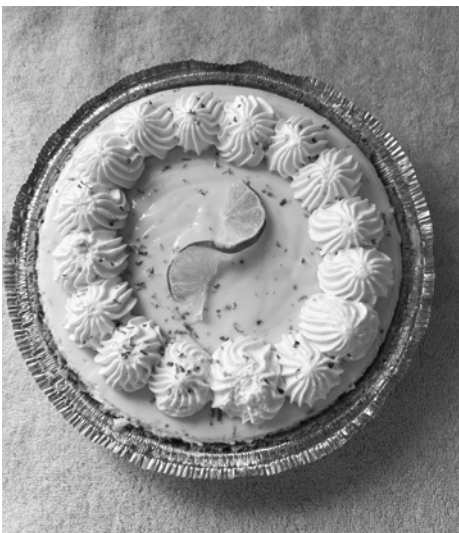
As the technician presses the hydraulic button to recline me back in the chair, I think about how lucky I am to be getting my tooth fixed. Not my standard vibe for dental work, by any means. It's actually usually one of my least favorite things to do, and I was



noticeably surprised by my thought. This change in gratitude comes after many years of shifting my perspective on how life unfolds. Then a few years ago, I read the transformative book "Conscious Luck: Eight Secrets to Intentionally Change Your Fortune," by Gay Hendricks and Carol Cline. I highly recommend it.

Last month, The Groundhog newspaper and MERF sponsored a delightful Groundhog Day celebration with games, soup competition, library book giveaways, a Groundhog mascot, and a cake walk. As I put the event on my calendar, I silently thought, "There's a carrot cake with cream cheese icing waiting for me on the cake walk!" It's my favorite cake. Key lime pie is one of my favorite pies after pumpkin. As I sat down with my friends Paul, Charlette, Gay, and Sharon, I noticed that Sharon had won the only carrot cake on the cake walk. I told her it was my favorite and began spying the other items on the cake walk table. We have some really talented bakers here! The centerpiece was Charlette's chocolate cake with a Groundhog formed on top. Oh my!

I handed over my dollar to walk, and when my number was called, I went straight to the table to get the key lime pie I had my eyes on. When I got back to the table, Sharon graciously offered to share her carrot cake with me!



(Thank you, Sharon!) Two wins! I see conscious luck in this way. Set your intention (to get a favorite goodie at the cake walk). See yourself with the intention fulfilled (key lime pie and carrot cake in my hands). Be grateful (hand on my heart with a huge smile of gratitude).

The spring equinox rolls around this month, which puts me in planning mode for my various gardens. With



conscious luck, I will intend my gardens to flourish. I will see the flowers bloom, producing food for the bees and beauty for me to appreciate. And I will feel grateful for the predictable cycles of life in my gardens. Try your luck with consciously bringing excitement and anticipation into your life! It works! I'll feel the delight all over again as I slice into my beautiful key lime pie! 🍀



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Smithsonian “Spark! Places of Innovation” Exhibition Comes to Fort Payne

A Smithsonian traveling exhibition highlighting innovation in rural America opened in February at the Fort Payne Coal & Iron Building and will remain on display through March 25.

“Spark! Places of Innovation” explores how small towns across the country have turned local challenges into creative solutions, revitalizing neighborhoods, strengthening business districts, and building new cultural opportunities.

Landmarks of DeKalb County, in collaboration with the City of Fort Payne and Fort Payne Main Street, was selected by the Alabama Humanities Alliance to host the exhibition as part of the Museum on Main Street program, a partnership between the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), state humanities

councils, and local organizations.

The exhibit features stories, images, and interactive displays from more than 30 communities nationwide, showcasing social, artistic, technological, and cultural innovation.

“Spark!” allows us to reflect on DeKalb County’s history, present, and future, and we are excited to explore what the future may hold for our community,” said Jessica Harper-Brown, executive director of Landmarks of DeKalb County. “We want to convene conversations about innovation in our own community and have developed local exhibitions and public programs to complement the Smithsonian exhibition.”

The exhibition is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., with evenings and weekends available by appointment. 📍



Riverview Camp owners Larry and Susan Hooks with Dan Green, formerly of the Alabama Forestry Commission

Riverview Camp Home to Champion Hawthorn Tree

BY REBECCA HENDERSON, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Tucked into the natural beauty of Riverview Camp for Girls stands a tree that is quietly extraordinary. The Littlehip Hawthorn (*Crataegus spathulata*) has been officially recognized as the Alabama Champion Tree for its species, an honor reserved for the largest known example of a tree in the state. The designation is based on height, trunk circumference, and crown spread.

The outstanding specimen was discovered by Dan Green, formerly with the Alabama Forestry Commission and now a volunteer with the North Look-out Mountain Fire Protection District.

While conducting work on a fire protection plan at the camp, Green noticed the impressive Hawthorn and realized it met the criteria for champion status. Following his nomination, the designation was formally confirmed through the Alabama Forestry Commission’s Champion Tree Program and recognized by State Forester Rick Oates.

The Champion Tree Program documents and celebrates Alabama’s most remarkable trees, helping preserve the state’s natural heritage. This Littlehip Hawthorn is more than a record holder — it’s a living landmark. Rooted in history and cared for with intention, it stands as a reminder that when nature is protected and valued, it leaves a lasting legacy. 🌳



EASTER EGG HUNT

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Busy Days and Bright Plans Ahead for MERF

BY KATIE HAND

The past month has been a full and meaningful one for MERF as we’ve continued preparing for the 2026 Taste of the Mountain and Art Auction and moved forward with several projects that support our school and community.

Our Groundhog volunteers continue to amaze me with their dedication and flexibility — this newspaper truly wouldn’t be possible without them. Senior Lunch has remained a special time of connection, made possible by a caring volunteer team and the generosity of local businesses and organizations who share wonderful meals with us. We are also thankful to Moon Lake Baptist Church for graciously providing space when we need it.

The newly refreshed MERF House feels bright and welcoming. We’re excited to begin hosting rentals for gatherings and events while continuing to welcome longtime community groups that make the space feel like home. Behind the scenes, we’ve been busy coordinating grants, supporting projects, and staying connected with the donors and volunteers who help make this work possible.

Students at Valley Head School have had several exciting opportunities lately. MERF helped Valley Head fourth-graders take a field trip to the



Huntsville Symphony Orchestra, where they attended a performance of “The Comedians” and enjoyed lunch on the way home. Two students from Mrs. Lewis’s class even had their artwork featured in the concert program. We’re also happy to support the Valley Head Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) Club at their leadership conference in Mobile. Once there, they will grow their skills and confidence beyond the classroom.

Mrs. Lewis has been preparing her students for the upcoming art auction by guiding them through designing barn quilt patterns on aluminum board, carefully working through each step with patience and care. As they create, students are not only expressing creativity but also strengthening math skills and learning how to plan and carry out a design from beginning to end.

We were also proud to award Emma Harrison the Sue Henry Memorial Scholarship to support her continued studies at the University of Alabama. A graduate of Valley Head, Emma is finishing her kinesiology degree and plans to pursue a Master of Science in Athletic Training. She remains on the Dean’s List and serves as a student manager for the Alabama Crimson Tide men’s basketball team. Supporting hardworking students like Emma is one of the greatest joys in what we do.

Another project close to my heart is



Last year’s Taste of the Mountain and Art Auction held at Camp Alpine.

the Pollinator Paradise outdoor learning space at VHS. Thanks to a grant from the Alabama RC&D Council, this space will give students a place to explore nature and learn beyond the classroom. The design is led by Victor Wood of Victor Wood Landscape and Garden Design, and we hope it will be ready for students and teachers to enjoy by the end of the school year. More to come!

We are also grateful to the Tiltonson-Menlo Charitable Fund for granting funds to help furnish the patio at the restored MERF House. We look forward to the porch becoming a peaceful place to sit, rock, and enjoy time together. Another recent grant awarded from the Alabama State Council on the Arts will provide much-needed art supplies for the upcoming auction and beyond, helping make creative learning more accessible for students.

MERF keeps moving forward with gratitude, learning more each day. The work we do — supporting students, welcoming neighbors, and creating spaces to learn and grow — is only possible because of our dedicated community. 🐾

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

UPCOMING MERF
Senior Lunch Dates

March 4 at MERF House 11:30 a.m.
March 25 at MERF House 11:30 a.m.
April 1 at MERF House 11:30 a.m.
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May 6 at MERF House 11:30 a.m.

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The Dead Is Not Dead ... And I'm Grateful

BY ROMEY ATCHLEY

For our first practice of 2026, the Mentone Ukes started the year with a fun day of learning some downhome traditional folk music. The theme of our selection was old-timey songs originally hand-picked by Grateful Dead guitarists Jerry Garcia and Bob Weir. While best known for playing original tunes on electric guitar with the Grateful Dead, these music legends also had a great repertoire of historical American songs, which they recorded in abundance.

Having this great base of traditional music allowed them to get together with a variety of other musicians and play music better suited for sitting on the front porch or around a campfire with friends. Even at “Dead” shows, there were times when they set down their electric guitars and played an acoustic set for their audiences. Their original songs, featuring characters like cowboys, coal miners, pioneers, outlaws, and sailors, fit right in alongside the old classic tunes they were bringing to new generations.

Though Garcia made his mark as one of the greatest electric guitarists of all time, when he was a young musician, he avidly explored the roots of American music and even played the banjo in a bluegrass band. These early explorations would remain with him throughout his life, and when he wasn’t touring with the Dead, he kept that love of simple, timeless songs alive by forming other bands and playing with a multitude of talented musicians over the years.

The basic structure and easy lyrics of these songs provided a framework where people of all musical genres could meet. Musicians who had never played together could connect around a simple tune with three chords and a repeating chorus that everyone could sing along with, but to which complex riffs could also be added.

For someone who wants to take the deep dive into American roots, Garcia and friends offer many great albums to choose from. In 1973, Garcia, along with other prominent performers of the time, created a band called Old and in the Way. Though the project only lasted a year, the album they released in 1975 held the spot for the number



one best-selling bluegrass album of all time until it was dethroned by the soundtrack to “Oh Brother Where Art Thou?” in 2002. In 1975, Garcia put together another group, the Jerry Garcia Band. This side project became an outlet for playing more acoustic rock and folk music than the electric acid rock the Grateful Dead were becoming famous for. The Jerry Garcia Band continued to tour until Garcia’s death in 1995, and many great recordings of the live shows exist, including one that was released as an album called “Almost Acoustic.” Also, later in life, Garcia developed a special relationship with mandolin player David Grisman, and they produced numerous albums together featuring beautiful covers of traditional country, gospel, and bluegrass songs. They even released a simple yet profound collection of traditional songs for children called “Not For Kids Only.”

Over the years, Garcia and Weir introduced me to so many great tunes. But along with the songs, they introduced me to the idea of how fun getting together and playing music with people could be, leading me down a path that would eventually take me

to the Mentone Ukes. Our group is always looking for new music to play, and we are encouraged to bring in our own favorite songs to learn as a group. What better genre to explore than music that was meant to be shared and played together? These songs have survived all this time, not only because they provide an easy format to play around but also because they contain profound, relatable truths about the human condition.

When these songs were born, there was no radio or TV, and no recordings. To enjoy music, one would either have to learn an instrument by playing with others or catch a group like the Mentone Ukes playing live around the community. Music allowed people the moment to take a break from the struggles of life and to share those struggles with others, to shout them to the heavens in song or to dance them off. In these settings, songs were shared and learned and spread by word of mouth until no one even knew where the original song had come from.

These songs had a life of their own. People traveled with them and passed them to others, lending to many versions of a song with differing lyrics.



The ones that have survived until today only have the word “Traditional” listed as the song writer.

As we play them, I find it fascinating to be part of the chain that breathes new life into an old song. There are plenty of songs out there rich with the emotion and experience of the people who tried to tame this wild land before there were machines. For me they are a direct connection with the past, pieces of our own history that live on like a time capsule that we dig up again and again. Who hasn’t been “Going Down the Road Feeling Bad” at some point, or lost a love like in “Dark Hollow” and wanted to catch a train out of town, or wanted to build a cabin on a mountain and leave it all behind like in “I’m Troubled”? Who hasn’t known someone who was “Drifting Too Far from the Shore”?

Thanks to people like Bob Weir and Jerry Garcia and all the other musicians that continue to learn and play the songs of our roots, the music lives on. Here on the mountain, the Mentone Ukes keep that tradition alive. Without the Ukes, I would never have experienced what playing music with others was like and why it brings people such joy. 🍷

Author’s note: In the midst of writing this article, I was saddened to learn that Bob Weir passed away on January 10. That night, a friend stopped by and when we got to reminiscing about Bobby and his impact on our lives, he picked up the guitar and started to play “Dark Hollow,” one of the Bob Weir songs I had just introduced to the Mentone Ukes. It meant a lot to me that I was able to pick up my ukulele and play along.

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Rhododendron Garden Club Garden Club Is Woven into Our Community

BY MELLANIE TUTTLE

The Rhododendron Garden Club (RGC) was formed over 50 years ago by a group of dedicated women whose goal was to preserve and promote the beauty of Mentone. Both Mentone and the RGC have experienced the challenges of growth and changes in population and focus, but they’ve always maintained the love of community in a small town. We treasure our connections. The MERF House (Mentone Educational Resources Foundation) had been the RGC’s meeting place for years. RGC maintained the plantings around the building and contributed to the senior lunch program. When that building was being remodeled, the Moon Lake Library graciously provided a home. The Seed Swap in February is a joint endeavor (be saving seeds during this year for next February). So many exciting happenings at the library, truly the heart of Mentone. A booth during the Follow Your Art festivities gives the club the opportunity to sell plants we’ve grown, offer helpful hints to the public, and share our culinary expertise. Yum! The Groundhog Day Celebration Crock-Pot Cook-Off, another community event, was so much fun last month. Another yum! Thanks to MERF and The Groundhog for the inspiration and inviting RGC to participate. At the February meeting, MERF Executive Director Katie Hand and Victor Wood shared the Valley Head Pollinator Paradise Project, which

includes an outdoor learning/gardening space between buildings. “The Pollinator Paradise will support science and environmental lessons tied to Alabama’s ecosystems, while offering a peaceful, inclusive setting where all students, including those with disabilities, can connect with nature. It will promote hands-on learning, collaboration, and creativity through student-led projects in gardening, art, and storytelling. In a time of climate uncertainty, this small but powerful space will help students become thoughtful, resilient global citizens with a deep appreciation for the natural world.” (from Katie’s handout) When Moon Lake School was operational, the club sponsored an after-school Junior Garden Club. The Valley Head project will be another community effort and a new goal for the club to offer its support. The Moon Lake Garden is a labor of love. Started in the 90s by founding club members, it was a butterfly garden. Years of invasive species growth had fostered lots of poison ivy, arum, privet, vines, and mature trees that blocked sunlight. Progress has been made, and the city has been amazing in their financial and verbal support. George Bernard Shaw said, “Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.” We must be making progress, because we have certainly changed our minds about the direction of the garden! Hopefully, those who have passed on are watching our progress and are pleased with what we are doing.

It was sad when MAPA closed its doors and the Rhododendron Festival and Colorfest were no more, but thanks to MERF for picking up the publishing of The Groundhog. In a serendipitous moment, I picked up a copy of Volume 5, Number 1, which was published in April 1987. An article by Linda Brown included a paragraph about the RGC meeting at Homer and Bernice Crow’s home, Raven Haven, mentioning plans for the coming year and Bernice demonstrating basic rules of flower arranging. In the first paragraph of the article, Linda stated, “April has been designated as clean-up month in DeKalb County. Wouldn’t it be nice to have it said that Mentone was the cleanest town in DeKalb County? Dare we go for the cleanest in the state of Alabama? We could do it. Let’s all do our part and clean our yards and roadsides. Pick up litter wherever you see it.” Almost 40 years later, that commitment continues. Linda Brown kept the community updated on all things Mentone until shortly before her death and was a hard act to follow. Also on the front page of that issue, “In Memoriam” was dedicated to my grandmother: “Edith Blalock Lyday, born Nov. 9, 1898. Born and reared in Mentone, she spent most of her life here. She touched many lives through her years as a teacher [at Moon Lake] and through the beautiful hand-made quilts she crafted. Mrs. Lyday was a very special person, and the world is a better place for her stay here. Like ripples in a pool, her influence, love,



and concern will be felt for generations.” Generations of community. It’s in our DNA. Waves of ripples ongoing, continuing. At next month’s meeting, Martha Wood will present a program on Horticulture - Collections and Displays. Come join us on April 14 at 10 a.m. We should be back at the MERF House; otherwise the meeting will be in the library. Mellanie Tuttle is the Secretary 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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“A Book Club for Curmudgeons” at Moon Lake Library

BY ANNE MCLEOD

Book clubs have become increasingly popular in recent years. Schools use them to encourage students to engage with literature. My neighborhood in Athens, Georgia, had its own Sunday afternoon book club, complete with wine and snacks. The new local independent bookstore in Fort Payne is even named Book Club and hosts a number of different gatherings for customers interested in connecting with others over books.

A lifelong book lover, I once looked forward to being part of a group created around discussions about books. But as a busy person with a lengthy TBR (To Be Read) list and too little time, I didn’t adapt well to reading books selected by others. It didn’t leave enough time to read what I wanted to read. At the same time, I wanted recommendations from other enthusiastic readers but without feeling pressure each month to read what someone else had selected.

Hence, the Moon Lake Library Book Club, which I think of as “A Book Club for Curmudgeons.” It evolved over time from a gathering devoted to reading the same book to a group that got together to share what they’d

been reading lately. Now it’s a group that meets to discuss books with a common theme, author, genre, or other underlying similarity. This latest version has worked well for us over the last couple of years.

We’ve devoted a month to works by Wendell Berry and Janisse Ray. We’ve read a graphic novel of our own choosing and books that were collections of short pieces, like stories, essays, or meditations. We’ve chosen books around the theme of horror, leading to discussions about what we each find terrifying. We’ve read and recommended books about travel, art and artists, food, and home. I encourage readers to interpret the themes loosely if they like.

What we’ve found is that it makes it easy to join at any given month, plus it keeps costs down, as we don’t have to read the same books. And in the occasional instance when we do decide to read the same book, it makes it special. One of the advantages of being a public library is that the Alabama Public Library Service makes book club kits available to us. When we decided to read Bill Bryson’s story about hiking the Appalachian Trail, APLS came through for us with ten copies of A Walk in the Woods.

Between eight and twelve of us get together on the second Saturday of each month at 10:30 a.m. and give a five-minute-or-so overview of one or sometimes more books. I write up the list of recommendations and post it on Substack, along with the next month’s theme. It’s been great fun and has led us to try many books we would not otherwise have even heard of. We enjoy hearing about a range of titles. Some may be children’s or young adult. Others are literary award winners or nonfiction. Sometimes it’s a bestseller. We never know what we’re going to hear about, and that keeps it fresh for all of us.

If you’d like to try the Moon Lake Library Book Club, please join us the second Saturday of the month. The club decided that in celebration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States, we would read books with American themes this year. In March, we’ll read books about recent American history, fiction or nonfiction, set in the past 50 or so years. Please see the accompanying graphic that gives the themes for 2026, and I hope we’ll see you at the library and hear what you’ve been reading.

Anne McCleod is the librarian at Moon Lake Library.



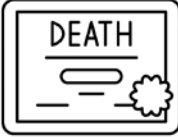
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April - American music/musicians
May - Travel in America, American places
June - American art/folk art
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September - The US Constitution/Bill of Rights
October - Banned Books
November - National Parks/natural wonders
December - Reader’s choice

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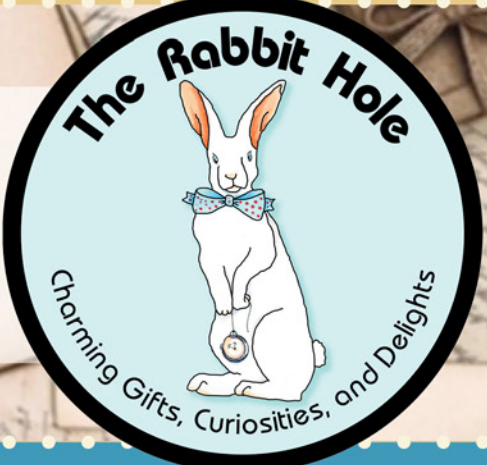
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Moments That Matter, Spaces That Last

BY JULI JORDAN

March brings fresh colors of the season from our newest Make Your Mark on Mentone mural. This spring’s featured artist is Jacqui Cooper Morgan of Oxford, Alabama, an ER nurse and artist known for expressive florals, whimsical animals, and vibrant abstracts. Her mural, inspired by Lookout Mountain wildlife, will be on display March through May at the corner of AL Hwy 117 and CR 89 on the grounds of the Mentone Inn.

Make Your Mark has now featured 11 artists, most working in chalk for the very first time. The project invites artists to create on a literal stage, knowing the work is temporary. It’s about courage, experimentation, and stepping beyond comfort zones. It’s about embracing the beauty of something that won’t last forever. And every now and then, it might even boop your bop. Make Your Mark on



Mentone was made possible by a grant from the Alabama State Council on the Arts and generous support from local businesses and individuals.

Save the Dates for a Year of Art & Music

It’s shaping up to be a full year for the arts in Mentone. Be sure to mark your calendars!

•**Summer Music Series**
6-9 p.m. on the grounds of Mentone Inn. Bring a lawn chair. Bring a friend (even four-legged) and enjoy music under the stars in the heart of Mentone.

- Friday, May 15 – Will Dooley & Co.
- Saturday, June 6 – Black Sedan Band (Food: St. Joseph’s)
- Saturday, July 11 – Dennis Parker & Friends: James Taylor Tribute (Food: St. Joseph’s)
- Saturday, August 15 – NACC Mustang String Band & NACC Theatre Department (Food: Boy Scouts)

•**Big Art Pop-Up**
Saturday, May 16, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. – Mentone Inn. A one-day gathering of artists and makers.

•**Creative Spirit Market**
November 14 & 15 – DeSoto State Park. Regional artists, handcrafted goods, and holiday spirit.

Moon Lake Arts Collective: Building Something That Lasts

While murals are temporary, some creative dreams are meant to take root. Moon Lake Arts Collective will be Mentone’s first public-access



pottery and arts studio — a welcoming hub where artists, students, and visitors gather to learn, create, and connect.

Planned for a new building on the historic Moon Lake Campus, the collective will include:

- A flexible arts studio for classes and workshops
- The Little River Art Gallery, featuring 2-D and 3-D work
- A clay studio operating in a guild model with affordable memberships
- “Make Your Own” pottery classes where visitors create a Mentone memory with family and friends

Why does it matter?

- Because hands-on art builds confidence in children.
- Because shared creative space strengthens connection across generations.
- Because working artists deserve access to tools and exhibition space.
- Because visitors who create something meaningful here invest in our local economy.

The collective aims to have a significant community impact by providing a welcoming space for all ages, supporting local artists, and strengthening tourism. Through scholarships and volunteer exchange programs, the Moon Lake Arts Collective will ensure that art is truly for everyone. This project is funded by the Alabama State Council on the Arts, Lyndhurst Foundation, Tillotson-Menlo

Charitable Foundation, Alabama Arts Tag, and generous individual donors, including Soc & Barbara Sennett, Lesa & David Cummings, Pudden McArthur, Sandra & Ken Perry, Ken Shigley, Diana Ogletree, Cynthia Stinson, Adelaide Drennen, and Ginger Beshears. Fundraising continues as we work toward opening doors that will serve this community for generations.

To learn more or to support the project, visit: www.littleriverartscouncil.org/moonlakeartscollective

Little River Art Gallery Featured Artist



deJoly in front of “Remembering My Sundances”

Little River Art Gallery’s featured artist is deJoly LaBrier, a familiar voice to many as a regular contributor to “The Groundhog.”

deJoly works in acrylics, using color and movement to express emotion beyond

words. As she shares, “Never underestimate the power of your presence. Being present while being creative results in amazing power emanating from your work.”

By profession, she is a life and writing coach, and she is also an artist, author, animal lover, and good friend. Around town, she is known for wearing a tiara — a quiet reminder to honor herself and, in turn, honor others.

Stop by the gallery and experience her work in person. 🐾

Juli Jordan is president of the Little River Arts Council.

When a War Changed a Family’s Trajectory



BY DAVID CUMMINGS

My father was from Winston County in Northwest Alabama. He was one of eight siblings in a typical rural farming community. By finishing high school, he became a rarity in his family. But there were limited opportunities for getting out of the farm life he was living. He was 26 when he was drafted into World War II.

Somehow, none of his brothers went to war. Dad had been helping in a general store in Haleyville, and knew about stocking items. In their wisdom, the Army Air Corps sent him to be a supply sergeant with the Hundredth Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force in Eastern England. When he left for training it was his first time outside Winston County.

The Bloody Hundredth was the group featured in the TV series Twelve O’clock High. They were the most awarded and honored B-17 group of

the war. Almost daily they did bombing runs to destroy Hitler’s war machine in Europe.

Dad was responsible for obtaining and making available the supply items for the base. It was not a glamorous war job, but he felt good about doing his part.

Their base at Thorpe Abbots in Norfolk was the Easternmost English base with a long runway. Often planes from other bomb groups would return from a run needing to land as quickly as possible because of damage that occurred on the mission. Dad quickly realized that some of the other groups had better Norden bombsights or wheels or other parts. He would lose sleep helping his buddies quietly change out the parts for the benefit of the Hundredth before the planes went back to their group’s base. He had some great stories that we heard about a dozen times each. I grew up hearing details about base life in England. It was a far-away world I’d never see.

After the war he went back to Winston County but jobs were scarce, and having seen what he’d seen, a farm life was not going to do it for him. On a whim he went to Auburn University on the GI Bill, which paid for college for returning WWII veterans. He was the first and only Cummings from

Haleyville that ever went to college.

He did a four-year degree in 12 consecutive quarters, not taking a summer off but going straight through. For a major, all he knew to do was major in Vocational Agriculture. He met and married my mother who was ten years younger and happy to catch a veteran. After graduation he got a job at Dallas County High School near Selma, Alabama. Within three years he was principal of the school. They still talk about his time at the school. In 1955 when I was a year old he did a career change and moved us to Birmingham and became a land agent with Alabama Power Company. He did that corporate job until retirement in 1980. His brothers became a barber, a truck driver, and a farmer. Going to reunions in Winston County was like going into another world. It was still The Country.

Some of my earliest and most lasting memories are the many times Dad would soliloquize on the need for my brother and me to do better than he did. He was acutely aware of how his circumstances had changed by going to college. He was determined to see his sons do even more in life. He made sure that we knew he expected us to go to professional school. He and Mother worked hard to send us all the way through as much schooling as they

could talk us into. We got it.

My brother practiced medicine in Birmingham for over forty years, and I was a dentist in Anniston for 42 years. We know the effects of ambition and education. And it was because of Houston Cummings and World War II.

In 2021 I arranged a visit to Dad’s base at Thorpe Abbots in Eastern England. Volunteers gave a tour, showed my dad’s picture in the archives, and took me to the very barracks that he and friends almost burned down one night in that hilarious oft-told story. I thought I’d never see it. The locals acted totally appreciative about “The Yanks’ Time” in their community.

This is the American Experience I know and treasure. And we must all remember that we have to Go and Get It. It works. 🐾

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. To participate, email your essay to groundhognews@yahoo.com.

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Mentone Arts Center Tickets Sales Begin March 1 for The French Family Band

BY RANDY GRIDER

With the promise of spring just around the corner, the Mentone Arts Center is filling in our calendar for classes and musical events.

We kick off the month as tickets go on sale March 1 for the return of one of our most popular musical acts . The French Family Band returns for two shows June 20 and 21. Originally from Australia and now based in Nashville, the band takes inspiration from the country and western swing icons of decades past, creating and performing American roots music that’s most assuredly vibrant and fully alive. The group appeared on the legendary Grand Ole Opry four times in 2023. Their core lineup is an actual nuclear family that just happens to be incredibly talented. Guitarists/vocalists Stuie French (Dad), Camille French (Mum), and Sonny French (Son) are a clan of uncommon gifts and skills that rival the stars of country’s Golden Age. Their combined sound is smooth, sweet, and ferocious. Echoes of Chet Atkins, Anne Murray, and Merle Haggard can be detected, but their style and spirit are all in the family. Their sophisticated twin guitar harmonies and blended vocals set them apart from practically everyone. “Stuie and Sonny French have invaded Nashville with the best country guitar playing the town has heard in years.” - Marty Stuart

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



they became one of Australia’s best-loved musical acts. They won three Australian Golden Guitar Awards, which are equal to the CMAs, and won another one in 2023 as The French Family Band. When Covid hit, they pivoted from playing traditional gigs to doing Facebook Live concerts from home. This turned out to be a winning strategy that exposed their music to the world. They built a Facebook following of nearly 180,000 people and created a new, global fan base that loves their music. Their outstanding songwriting, fearless playing, and tight family harmonies seem to have an unlimited appeal.

Tickets are \$30 per person. The Saturday night show will be from 7-9 p.m., and the Sunday matinee will be from 2-4 p.m. All times are Central. A link will be provided on the Mentone Arts Center Facebook page, or you can contact us at the number at the bottom of this article to reserve your seats.

We also have scheduled visiting artist/instructor Lisa Opelinski for a weekend class in April and artist/instructor Bradley Wilson will have weekend classes in both June and July. Look for more information on these classes in next month’s Groundhog as well as on our Facebook page. 🍷

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.



French Family Band

SAVE THE DATE

MIKEL YEAKLE
35 YEARS AT PARADISE GARDEN
a photography exhibit
March 7 - May 25, 2026

OPENING & ARTIST TALK
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2:30pm ET

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Mentone Arts Center *(continued from page 1)*

community. For established artists, they offer another source of income and engagement. For a town this size, it’s remarkable that attendance of an acrylic painting workshop demands an encore class from the instructor.

Classes have ranged from painting to fired glassmaking, which is also known as lampwork and other creative disciplines. Residents and visitors sign up to try something new or build on existing skills. In a rural area, access to structured arts education can be limited; the center is one of the local entities that have filled that gap.

Listening-Room Atmosphere for Music

Live music has also become a consistent part of the programming. A listening-room setting brings audiences into close contact with performers, creating an experience that feels personal rather than distant. Mentone continues to benefit from Grider’s ability to bring in top talent; Grammy-winning artists like Gary Baker; The French Family Band; Lee Farrar Bailey; guitarist Hiroya Tuskamoto, and so many more. These performances regularly sell out. The center also has provided free songwriter rounds hosted by award-winning singer-songwriter Craig Hendricks. These rounds have brought in up-and-coming local and regional songwriters as well as established artists like Kathy Louvin and Randy Brooks.

Grider’s philosophy is simple: provide more than a shopping destination. Rather, create an experience. That focus shapes decisions about programming, pricing, and partnerships. The center works alongside other organizations on the mountain, recognizing that a healthy arts environment depends on collaboration.

Experience Behind the Scenes

Grider did not come to the role through traditional arts administration. His background is in journalism and publishing.

Born in Scottsboro and raised on Sand Mountain, Grider graduated from The University of Alabama. He began at “The Birmingham News” as a sports writer and then editor of small-town newspapers, often hired to stabilize struggling publications. He then spent 13 years in national magazine publishing, managing large budgets and major advertisers such as Shell and Daimler. Those years required strategic planning and staff management — skills that translate directly into nonprofit leadership. The magazine industry was changing and Grider felt he was losing touch with his passion — writing. He

and his then-wife decided to start a magazine called “Lookout Alabama,” which was available in 11 states. Eventually the magazine ended and Grider took a position as publisher of two newspapers in Texas. Living in rural Atlanta at the time, he traveled back and forth in the role for a year, after which he decided to seek a job in this area to be closer to his teenage children year-round.

When members of the arts center board approached him about leading the effort to establish a permanent arts space in Mentone, the project appealed to both his professional experience and his connection to the area.

“They asked me if I would be interested in being the executive director and seeing if we could make it happen,” he said. It was a perfect fit.

Fundraising began for the arts center. The original building plan was eventually scaled and shifted to the current in-town location. Renovations relied heavily on donors and volunteers. Despite the uncertainty of 2020, the group committed to an opening date.

They solicited artists, and with the help of dedicated volunteers, the gallery began to take shape. “We just said ‘that’s the date we’re going to open, no matter what happens,’” Grider said. “And we did.”

Looking Forward

After five years, his goals are practical.

“I always want to see the sales increase for the artists and for our funding,” Grider said. “I would like to see fewer ups and downs through the months.” His goals include expanding class offerings, potentially adding more children’s programming, and continuing to strengthen relationships with other arts organizations in the area. But his longer-term hope is straightforward.

“What I would like to see is, 20 years from now, is that we’re still here and a regular stop for people.”

The Mentone Arts Center’s first five years have been defined less by dramatic expansion and more by steady development, thanks in no small way to Grider’s thoughtful stewardship. The center is now a hub for artists and those who seek enrichment from their work. And today more than 60 artists and makers are represented in the gallery.

Grider’s favorite part of the job? “I get to be around beautiful art all day, and I get to be around artists who are excited about their work.” Seeing people come in happy and leave even happier feels like a mission accomplished. 🍷

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Valley Head Happenings

New Website and Facebook Page Up and Running

BY MAYOR KAREN VEST

We have now published the Town of Valley Head’s new website, valleyheadofficial.com. Be sure to visit our beautiful new site and give us any feedback you may have or suggestions for any additional content. The new Facebook page is also live, and we will keep everyone updated with events, news, and other important information in a timely manner.

Valley Head Masonic Lodge 394, together with the Grand Lodge of the State of Alabama, recently awarded a \$1,000 scholarship to Nathaniel Charles Maier. He is a 2025 graduate of Valley Head High School. Nathaniel is currently attending the Nashville Auto and Diesel College, where he will graduate in September. He hopes to pursue a career as a mechanic working on heavy machinery and equipment. Nathaniel is the son of Amy and Bryan Buchanan of Valley Head. The town

is very proud of this young man and wishes him the very best in his future.

We were proud to host Brittany Gilbert and her wonderful young leaders in the Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) Club during the February meeting. Braylie Callahan read the proclamation, which I later signed, proclaiming the week of February 8-14 as FBLA Week in the Town of Valley Head. The town is proud to support this wonderful organization and our future leaders.

In other business, Craig Hulan was awarded a four-year contract to maintain the lawn and landscape at both the park and around town. He had held the contract over the past several years and continues to do an outstanding job of keeping our town beautiful. The town has also hired part-time maintenance employee Raymond Beasley, who is already doing a wonderful job. His many duties include keeping the bathrooms at the town park clean and tidy and maintaining all the trash cans

around the park as well. He will also be responsible for maintaining the trash cans and sidewalks around town square, assisting during our numerous town events, and other maintenance duties on a weekly basis.

The council approved the application for two new firefighters during our February 2 meeting. Both candidates will be on a 90-day probation period. The Valley Head Volunteer Fire Department is always looking for new volunteers. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer fireman, please call Town Hall at 256-635-6814, and we will give you Chief Dustin Burt’s contact information.

SAVE THE DATE: The council has decided that our Valley Head Spring Festival will be Saturday, May 16. If you would like to be a food or craft vendor for our event, please stop by Town Hall for an application. We will be providing additional details in the very near future.

Valley Head holds their Town



Left to right: Mike Howell; Charley Vest, Master of the Lodge; Nathaniel C. Maier; LA Smith; and John Jones.

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, March 2. 🐻



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March Community Events

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

March 6-7 Orbix Blow Your Own Ornament – Design and literally “blow” your own ornament with the help of one of our glass artists. Please note this is not an all-day class. We reserve time slots during this time according to the number of people in your group. Ages 5 and up. Please call 256-523-3188 or email us at info@orbixhotglass.com to schedule. \$42 per ornament. Shipping \$15 for up to 4 ornaments, or pick them up on the following Tuesday or later.

March 7 Sand Mountain Soiree – NACC’s Sand Mountain Soiree is set with guest speaker Caroline Gidiere! Caroline is an interior designer based in Birmingham and author of “A Life in Good Taste.” Tickets are \$40. Please contact Chasley Brown at brownchasley@nacc.edu or call 256-638-4418 EXT 2248 to reserve your seat. We hope to see you there! Begins at 11 a.m. at NACC’s Tom Beville Lyceum.

March 7 Serious Skills Series: Quilt the Forest – Join fabric artist and nature enthusiast Michelle Reynolds for a creative quilting workshop inspired by the beauty of the forest. In this hands-on class, you'll design and hand-sew small blocks onto a canvas square using colorful felts, embroidery threads, and other materials. Reflect on your favorite nature scenes as you create a unique vignette, cutting out symbols, layering colors, and stitching them together to tell your story. All fabric and supplies will be provided, no previous experience required. 1-4 p.m. DeSoto State Park. Benefield Interpretive Center next to Country Store on County Road 89: \$55 includes all supplies. Class space is limited to 12; pre-registration required. Pre-registration: https://www.littleriverartscouncil.org/quilttheforest1.html

March 7 BINGO at Nevin's Place – Come have some fun with BINGO! Admission is \$20 per adult, \$10 for ages 12 and under. Price includes: 1 hot dog, bag of chips, a drink, and door prize entries. Doors open at 11 a.m., and BINGO starts at 12 p.m. Bring extra cash for other activities! Cash only. 5790 AL HWY 227 S, Crossville

March 7 Rhonda Vincent and the Rage at The Pickin Post – Tickets available at Black's Tire in Rainsville or Patterson Music in Fort Payne. Cost will be \$40 to \$45. Music starts at 6 p.m. Call for more information, call 256-657-3817 or 256-845-4115.

March 7 Damon Johnson at the Back Forty Ballroom – Spend an intimate night with Damon Johnson, who will take you through his music and musical experiences. 7:30 -10 p.m. Get tickets at https://www.eventbrite.com/e/an-evening-with-damon-johnson-tickets-1981083630468.

March 7 to 14 Finders Keepers Consignment Sale – You will find gently used, good-quality name-brand children's and adult clothing and shoes, home furnishings, electronics, books, toys, furniture, and more, all at great prices. Sign up NOW to become a consignor! Will be held at the VFW Fairgrounds. Special pre-sale hours for consignors. 256-632-2420 or 256-638-5998. Sale hours: Saturday, March 7, from 9 a.m.- 5 p.m.; Monday, March 9 -Thursday, March 12 from 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. Half-price sale hours: Friday, March 13, from 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. and Saturday, March 14, from 9 a.m. - 2 p.m. Closed Sunday, March 8.

March 8 Nature in Miniature: Clay Mushroom 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. Classes are open to local residents, overnight guests, and park visitors. Unleash your creativity and explore the fascinating world of native mushrooms – through art! In this fun and beginner-friendly class, you'll learn to sculpt realistic and whimsical mushrooms using polymer clay, starting with simple forms and building up details like caps, gills, stems, and textures. Class will be 2-5 p.m. DeSoto State Park. Meeting place to be disclosed at registration. Fee: \$65.00 includes all supplies. Ages 12 to adult. Class space is limited to 10; pre-registration required. Pre-registration link: https://forms.office.com/g/U7U2yF3k7s or https://www.littleriverartscouncil.org/claymushrooms.html

March 13 to 14 Myrtle Jane's Spring Open House – Celebrate the new season with us at our Spring Open House! Lots of vintage, florals, and home décor. Friday, March 13, 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. and Saturday, March 14, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. 1030 Grand Ave SW, Fort Payne

March 13 to 14 Blow Your Own Ornament – See details above (March 6-7).

March 15 May's Gulf Songwriter Series XIII – Join us for the May's Gulf Songwriter Series Sunday, March 15, from 2 - 4 p.m. at Little River Canyon Center featuring Pierce Pettis | Aubrey Itson. Tickets \$15 in advance, \$20 the day of the show. Coolers welcome.

March 15 The Bellamy Brothers – The Bellamy Brothers and special guest Charlie Allen live at The Pickin Post at 7 p.m. Tickets on sale now at https://www.simplेतix.com/e/an-evening-with-the-bellamy-brothers-let-y-tickets-245974 and by phone at 615-663-6560. Get ready for a foot-stompin' good time!

March 19 MERF Taste of the Mountain and Art Auction – An

annual fundraiser hosted by Mentone Educational Resources Foundation (MERF) at Alpine Camp. Tickets are \$50 and are available now. Tickets can be purchased online or at the Mentone Market by cash or check. A silent and live auction will be held of beautiful artwork from area artists, along with art from Valley Head School elementary students as part of MERF's fine arts program. Exclusive experience packages always a favorite among bidders. Think cabin getaways, private chef dinners, and other curated offerings. Sample incredible food from local restaurants. Gates will open at 5 p.m. for guests. Proceeds benefit local art education and other community-centered programs provided by MERF. We look forward to seeing you there!

March 20 to 21 Blow Your Own Ornament – See details above (March 6-7).

March 21 Mustang Run 5K – Run or walk the beautiful Northeast Alabama Community College campus on Saturday, March 21 and help raise money for scholarships at the First Southern State Bank Mustang 5K! The Mustang Run / Walk will begin promptly at 8 a.m. from the Soccer Field on the Northeast Campus at 138 Alabama Highway 35 Rainsville. Chip timing will be provided. All proceeds will benefit scholarships at NACC. Pre-registration until day of race is \$30. Registration day of race is \$40. Students pay only \$20. To be guaranteed a long sleeve race t-shirt, please register by March 1. Register: https://runsignup.com/.../FirstSouthernStateBankMustang5K

March 21 Hike with a Naturalist - Powell Trail – Join us for Hike with a Naturalist! 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; and 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.

March 21 Native America Stone Structures of Northeast Alabama – Not all rock walls and stone piles are leftovers from old farms. Find out how archaeologists can tell the difference between Native American stone structures and historic agricultural work. Discover the fascinating history behind Native American stone structures found across Northeast Alabama and the Southeast. Join retired JSU archaeologist Dr. Harry Holstein as he explores the history, meaning, and cultural significance of rock mounds, stone walls, effigy structures, and other intriguing sites. This will be an inside program with an optional short walk afterward to a prehistoric Native American rock shelter behind the Nature Center. Free & open to everyone, RSVP appreciated. 9 a.m. DeSoto State Park

March 21 to 22 Peacefest at Tigers for Tomorrow – Peace, Love & Big Cats PeaceFest is a celebration of art, music, and wildlife. Tigers for Tomorrow is proud to host PeaceFest, a weekend dedicated to live music, visual arts, local vendors, and wildlife conservation. This event is a true celebration of community, creativity, and connection, bringing together artists, musicians, and nature lovers for an unforgettable experience. There will be live music on Saturday from 9 a.m. - 3 p.m. On Sunday, music from 11 a.m. - 5 p.m. Local artists and vendors will also be set up throughout the preserve, offering unique handcrafted items, artwork, and creative goods. This arts and crafts festival is an opportunity to support local creators while exploring the preserve and learning more about the incredible animals that call Tigers for Tomorrow home. For this special weekend, we are offering reduced admission of only \$10.

March 24 Animal Tales Story Time – Join the JSU Field School for a short story time at the Little River Canyon Center before we hike the half-mile loop of the Path to Learning on our Backyard Birding Hike. 10:15 a.m. Free and open to the public.

March 26 Spring Break Scavenger Hunt Hike – Celebrate spring break and join us for a Scavenger Hunt Hike. We will hike the half-mile trail, the Path to Learning, as we search to solve written clues. The guided hike will start at 10:30 a.m., or explore on your own with a self-guided adventure from 11 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. Children and leashed pets are welcome! Please note that though this trail is listed as easy, it includes uneven terrain. Meet at the Little River Canyon Center. Please arrive by 10:30 a.m. For questions, call the center at 256-845-3548 or email FieldSchool@jsu.edu.

March 27 Spring Break Nature Journal Hike – Celebrate spring break and join us as we create Nature Journals and capture the sights and sounds of the forest. We will hike the half-mile trail, the Path to Learning, as we stop along the way to work on different nature journal techniques. The guided hike will start at 10:30 a.m., or explore on your own with a self-guided adventure from 11 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. Children and leashed pets are welcome! Please note that though this trail is listed as easy, it includes uneven terrain. Meet at the Little River Canyon Center. Please arrive by 10:30 a.m. For questions, call the center at 256-845-3548 or email FieldSchool@jsu.edu.

March 27 to 28 Blow Your Own Ornament – See details above (March 6-7).



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March 1 at 2 p.m. Featured speaker Karen Cook speaking on cremation services and the Neptune Society.

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

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

March 6 at 6 p.m. Friday Night @ the Movies: “Wicked for Good.”

March 8 at 2 p.m. Featured Speaker Jack West and the Alabama Rivers Alliance Southern Exposure Film Series.



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

March 21 at 10:30 a.m. Little Library Learners with Ms. Lynn, “March into Spring.”

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

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Symbolism and Significance of the Seabees’ Banner

BY BARRY MORTON

This is the fifth in a series of articles describing the 12 military flags at Legionnaire Park.

The United States Navy Seabees, formally known as the Naval Construction Battalions, are renowned for their unique role in building and fighting as part of the U.S. Navy. Their flag is a strong symbol of their identity, history, and values.

Design Elements

The Seabees’ flag features a blue field that represents loyalty and the naval tradition. At the center is the iconic Seabee insignia: a determined

bee wearing a sailor’s cap and wielding a wrench, hammer, and a machine gun. The bee is depicted in flight, signifying readiness and action. This imagery captures the Seabees’ mission to both construct and defend.

Symbolism

Every element on the flag has meaning. The bee symbolizes industriousness, teamwork, and adaptability, qualities essential to the Seabees. The tools and weapons reflect their motto: “We Build, We Fight.” The blue background connects the unit to the larger Navy, while the gold accents highlight excellence and achievement.

Historical Significance

The Seabees were established

during World War II and have played a critical role in constructing bases, airstrips, and infrastructure in combat zones ever since. Their flag has become a source of pride, flown at Seabee bases and events, and serves as a rallying symbol for both current and former members.

Legacy

Today, the Seabees’ flag continues to represent the courage, skill, and dedication of those who serve in the Naval Construction Forces. It honors their legacy and inspires new generations to uphold the proud traditions of the Seabees. 🐝

This article was written using the assistance of MS Copilot.



The United States Navy Seabees’ flag on the Legionnaire Park fence behind the American Legion Post 215 in Mentone.

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Red Flags To Spot Health Fraud Scams

BY LYNN HIXON

Health fraud scams refer to products that claim to prevent, treat, or cure diseases but are not proven safe and effective for those uses. These scams may be promoted in magazine ads, TV commercials and infomercials, or promoted by talk radio hosts and social media influencers.

Look for these red flags to spot health fraud scams, especially for older adults:

1. A TV commercial, social media influencer, talk radio host, website or advertisement promises immediate, effortless, or guaranteed results.

2. Claims of an “innovation,” “miracle cure,” “exclusive product,” “new discovery,” or “magical cure” are highly suspect. These words are used to appeal to your emotions and should not be trusted.

3. A product is promoted as a “natural” cure or “dietary supplement” that sounds too good to be true. Be aware of anti-aging scams and arthritis scams. There has been no treatment proven to slow or reverse aging or cure arthritis.

4. There are no science-based testimonials; instead, testimonials are from celebrities or actors pretending to be highly satisfied customers. Ask your doctor before buying nutrition supplements or health treatments.

5. The seller promises a money-back guarantee, no questions asked. Marketers of fraudulent products will make sweeping promises, but not return your money.

If you have any questions about scams, please call the DeKalb County Council on Aging at 256-845-8590 and Lynn Hixon, the DeKalb County SHIP will assist you. 🐝



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The Mountain Kitchen And the Winner Is... Groundhog Celebration Winning Recipes

BY REBECCA HENDERSON,
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

We’ve begun a culinary tradition in Mentone each February: The Groundhog Day Celebration Crock-Pot Cook-Off. Thanks to the Rhododendron Garden Club, the contest is well organized and quite exciting! This year’s judging panel, Valley Head Mayor Karen Vest, Fire Chief Joseph Lee, and I, faced a long line of piping-hot creations. We came hungry and slurped our way through something like 15 recipes, assigning them scores in categories such as flavor, aroma, and the like. It was one of the best freelance jobs I’ve ever had! All were delicious, and it was tough to choose winners. But there were only so many trophies.

- The winners:**
- First place, soups: Michele Smith’s velvety chicken noodle
 - First place, chilies: Mary Shurett’s zesty white chicken chili
 - First place, stews: Anne McLeod’s hearty boeuf bourguignon stew
 - People’s choice: Shannon and Lulu Goshorn’s divine sweet potato and pear soup

BOEUF BOURGUIGNON STEW

- 6 strips bacon
- 2 pounds beef, cubed
- 1 medium onion chopped
- 1 cup water
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ teaspoon thyme

- 2 bay leaves
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ pound mushrooms
- 1 cup or more dry red wine (Burgundy, cabernet sauvignon, etc.)
- 4-6 potatoes in 1-inch cubes
- ¾ cup green peas

- Crockpot Instructions:**
1. Fry bacon and brown beef in bacon drippings.
 2. Add onion, and cook until soft. Add garlic and cook for a minute more.
 3. Add remaining ingredients, reserving peas and using 1 cup of wine. Cook on low for 8-10 hours.
 4. Add peas about 30 minutes before serving. Adjust seasoning to taste with additional wine, salt, or thyme if desired.

- Instant Pot Instructions:**
1. Follow above recipe for Crockpot, but instead pressure cook the stew for 25 minutes.
 2. Turn off multi-cooker, and quick-release pressure, allowing steam to escape away from you.
 3. Stir in peas, and let sit until they are thoroughly heated. Adjust consistency with extra wine or substitute beef broth. Check seasoning and add additional salt or a sprinkle of thyme.

WHITE CHICKEN CHILI

- 5 cups chopped cooked chicken
- 3 (15-ounce) cans Great Northern beans, drained
- 1 (32-ounce) box chicken broth



Crock-pot Cook-off Winners: from left, Michele Smith, Anne McLeod, Shannon & Lulu Goshorn, and Mary Shurett

- ½ (16-ounce) jar Ragu Chunky Garden Combination sauce
- 1 (8-ounce) package Monterey Jack cheese, shredded
- 2 teaspoons ground cumin
- Garnishes: sour cream, shredded cheddar cheese, corn chips, jalapeños

1. In a 6-quart electric slow cooker, combine the chicken, beans, broth, garden sauce, shredded Monterey Jack cheese, and cumin.
2. Cover, and cook on high for 3 hours, stirring occasionally.
3. Reduce heat to low, and simmer 2 more hours, stirring occasionally.
4. Serve hot with desired garnishes.

CHICKEN NOODLE SOUP

This can also be made in a pot on stove top.

- 2-3 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- 8 cups chicken broth
- 1 can cream of chicken soup
- ½ (16-ounce) package wide egg noodles
- ¼ cup flour
- 2½ cups milk
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon black pepper

1. Add the chicken and broth to Crock-Pot, and cook on high until the chicken is fully cooked, about 3-4 hours. Remove the chicken, and shred it.
2. Stir the cream of chicken soup, noodles, and shredded chicken into the broth. Continue cooking until the noodles are tender, about 30 minutes.
3. In a separate bowl, whisk the flour with about 1 cup of the milk until

smooth. Stir the mixture into the soup, and cook until it begins to thicken. Add the remaining milk, and continue cooking for 10-15 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Stir and serve.

SWEET POTATO & PEAR SOUP

The people’s choice winner was cooked in a traditional pot.

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 3-4 large carrots, peeled and chopped
- 6-8 celery stalks, chopped
- 1.5 teaspoons ground turmeric
- 2 cloves garlic (minced)
- 1.5 tablespoons thyme leaves
- 7-8 cups chicken stock (or vegetable)
- 3 large sweet potatoes, peeled, chopped
- 3 pears, any variety, peeled, chopped
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3 tablespoons honey
- Juice of 1 lemon

1. Add olive oil to a heavy bottom soup pot over medium heat. Add onions, carrots, and celery, and cook until onions are soft, but other vegetables needn’t be soft.
2. Add turmeric, garlic, and thyme leaves. Cook an additional 30 seconds.
3. Add broth, sweet potatoes, pears, salt, and honey. Bring to a boil, then reduce to medium-low heat. Simmer for 30-40 minutes, or until vegetables have softened.
4. Remove from heat. Purée until smooth.
5. Stir in lemon juice. Enjoy! 🍴

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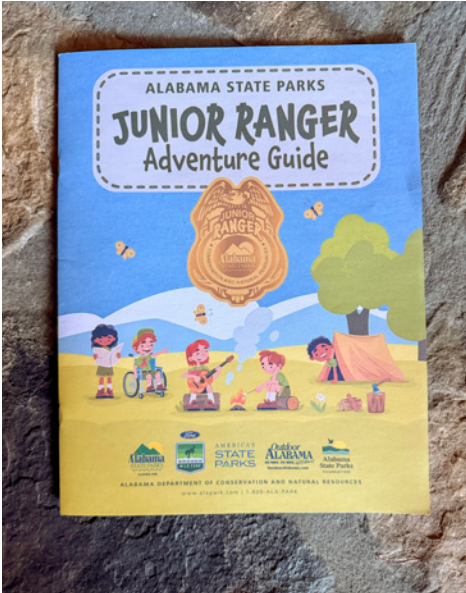
Junior Ranger Program Connects Kids with the Great Outdoors

STAFF REPORTS

Young explorers are invited to learn, play, and earn a badge through the Alabama State Parks’ Junior Ranger Program. Designed to be fun, educational, and hands-on, the program encourages kids to explore nature, learn about wildlife and conservation, and develop a deeper connection to the outdoors.

Locally, participants can pick up

the new Junior Ranger book at the Country Store & Information Center, the Benefield Nature Center, or the DeSoto State Park Lodge lobby. The book includes a variety of activities that guide Junior Rangers through the park’s natural and cultural features. Once the activities are complete, Junior Rangers can present their finished books to the Country Store staff or the Lodge front desk staff to receive their official Junior Ranger badge. The certificate inside the book will be signed, and participants get to keep their book as a keepsake of their experience.



▶▶▶ For those who would like help completing the activities or prefer a guided experience, in-person Junior Ranger programs are offered on select Thursdays and Saturdays. These sessions provide additional support and interactive learning opportunities. Upcoming program dates include:

- March 7
- March 12
- April 16
- April 25
- May 16
- May 21

The cost to participate in these sessions is \$2. The program is geared toward children ages 5–12, but all Junior Rangers are welcome to join.

Registration and full details can be found at:
<https://reserve.alapark.com/register/DSP-Junior-Ranger>

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