

The Front Porch

Where The Tea Is Sweet and the Talks Are Long

Jan/Feb 2026

A LOVE OF THE LAND

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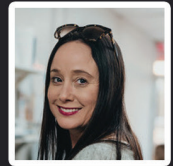
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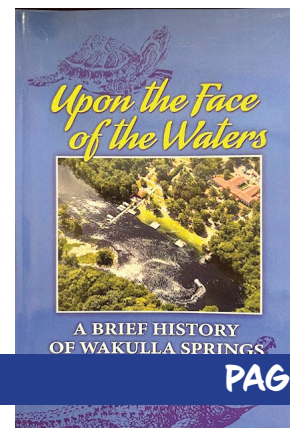
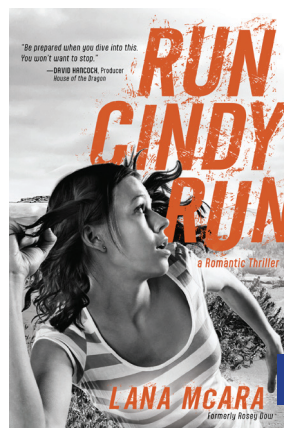
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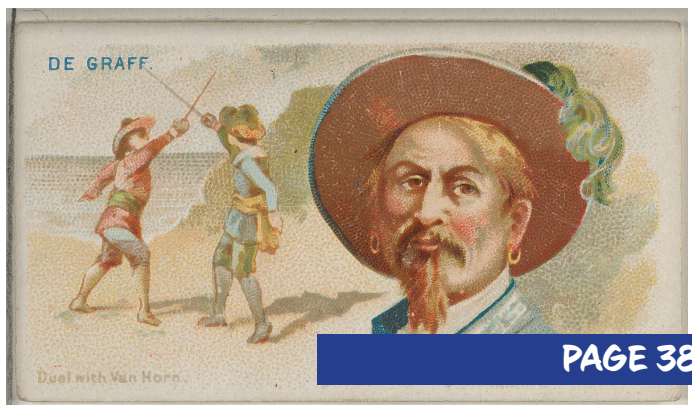
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The Front Porch

Where the tea is sweet and the talks are long

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The Front Porch *Meet Our Staff*



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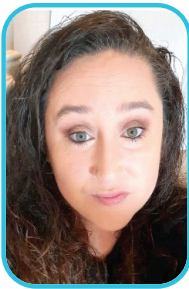
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SITTIN' ON THE PORCH WITH...

Alvin Federico

Story and Photography by Danny Federico

When Alvin Federico talks about growing up, his stories drift easily between the sandy backroads of Branford, Florida, and the bustling small neighborhood in Louisiana, where he spent his earliest years. Born to Charles and Lula May Federico on November 9, 1955, in Hammond, Louisiana, he attended Catholic school until seventh grade. However, at 11 years old, everything changed: his family relocated to Branford, his mother's hometown.

Branford in the 1960s was a different world.

"It was refreshing," Federico recalled. "The people were friendly, and for the first time, we had room to be outdoors."

In Louisiana, space was limited. In Branford, childhood stretched out across the white sugar-sand roads behind his grandmother's house. Days were filled with barefoot adventures, walks to Branford High School, and the kinds of chores that defined what Federico calls "good old country skills." He and his brothers kept their grandmother's home heated by chopping wood for her furnace. They tended her sizable garden and learned lessons far bigger than the backyard they worked in.

His grandmother, Annie Lee Hall, left a deep mark on his memory. But the person he credits most for shaping him was his older brother, Leonard.

"Everything Leonard tried to do, I tried to do better," Federico said. "He had a huge impact on my life."

That sense of drive followed him onto the football field at Branford High School, where he played from ninth grade through his senior year, covering nearly every position on both offense and defense. With only about 18 players on the team at the time, Federico rarely left the field.

"Half the time, the only break we got was halftime," he said.

Under legendary coach Cleve Sikes – whose name the school's field now bears – the Buccaneers made history in

1972 with their first undefeated season. Federico still speaks of that milestone with pride.

After graduating as his class's valedictorian, he earned a scholarship to attend Lake City Community College. However, the scholarship couldn't cover all the costs, so Federico took time off to work. Jobs were tight, and after getting laid off from one position, he found himself taking on work at WET Farms – the name of which utilizes the initials of the farm's owners, Walter, Ed and Ted Roberts – in O'Brien. While there, he helped farm tobacco and take care of hogs, goats, corn and peanuts, among other things. One of the more memorable tasks included helping build a house, literally, from the ground up with the farm's crew.

"We cut the trees, hauled them to the sawmill, then brought the lumber back and built the house," he says. "I was about 19."

When steady employment remained elusive, Federico enlisted in the United States Army in 1975 with the hope of becoming a helicopter pilot and using the GI Bill to pursue further education. He passed the flight tests, but a physical exam flagged an issue with one of his ribs.

"It was kind of a tough time right after Vietnam, so they were getting rid of a lot of helicopter pilots anyway," he recalled. "So they didn't need me. I ended up changing my military occupational specialty to Pershing nuclear missiles, and that's what I did for three years in the Army."

He completed his basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and his advanced training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. A year later, he was shipped out to Heilbronn, Germany. There, during the Cold War, he served as a missile crewman and azimuth reference unit operator, helping guide nuclear missiles as part of a continuous deterrence mission.

"We were positioned in a location where we actually went on combat alert status, and we would get locked into a

missile site for two months at a time," he recalled. "We would go in, set up our missiles with the live nuclear warheads on them, and just be ready for launch. We would have drills where they would call us out at two or three in the morning. We'd have to run from our barracks to the pad and count down. We didn't know whether it was the real thing until they told us it was a simulation. It was tense."

Federico finished his service in 1978 and eventually moved to New England, where he spent a decade working in textile mills and machine shops – experience he'd later draw on in unexpected ways.

In 1989, he took a position that shaped the rest of his career: managing a hog farm for the prison rehabilitative organization PRIDE Enterprises (soon to be PRI Enterprises). The farm supported a meat-processing plant that supplied food to Florida prisons. He supervised 28 inmate workers while tending to as many as 3,600 hogs. When the Department of Corrections phased out pork products in the early 1990s, the farm shut down.

Over the next 37 years, Federico moved steadily up the ranks. Today, he serves as a regional manager overseeing 10 manufacturing sites, including facilities that produce license plates, wood furniture, traffic paint, upholstery and forestry-based products.

Working closely with inmates for nearly four decades has shaped his views on rehabilitation and humanity. He approaches the topic carefully, weighing every word.

"Some people have done terrible things," he said. "Some will never change. But most of the ones I've worked with – they want to rehabilitate. They want a different life."

The most fulfilling part of his job, he says, is seeing inmates earn certifications – forklift licenses, welding certifications, trade credentials – while working for PRIDE (which they can take back out into the world) and later hearing from them after release.

"When they tell me they're working,

doing well, supporting their families ... that's the best part of the whole job," he said.

Federico's approach is simple: respect earns respect.

"I treat them like I would anyone else. Whatever I say I'll do, I do. I don't boss them around – I just tell them what needs doing."

He credits much of his confidence and adaptability in the role to his military service.

"Living with people from all backgrounds – international roommates, guys from big cities, small towns – you learn everyone's just human."

After years away – spending time in Maine, New Hampshire and Tallahassee – Federico eventually found his way back home to Branford. What he cherishes most is the reconnection with people he knew half a century ago.

"I've seen folks recently that I hadn't seen in 50 years," he said. "When I had knee replacement surgery, some of my old classmates asked if I needed help with rides or errands. That meant a lot."

He took a moment to reflect on businesses that are no longer around, such as Nell's Restaurant, the old G & H Grocery and Doc Ware's drugstore.

"You couldn't get away with anything back then – your mom knew hours

before you got home," he joked.

These days, Federico's free time is spent at home, relaxing, picking at a guitar between responsibilities, taking care of his property, and visiting with family, including his children and grandchildren scattered between Florida and New England.

Even now, retirement is a thought, but not a plan.

"I'll know when it's time," he said.

For now, Federico is content in the place where he grew into himself – driving down roads that shaped his roots, surrounded by the community that raised him, and working hard to help others find a second chance. ■



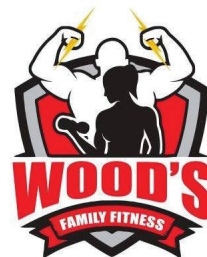
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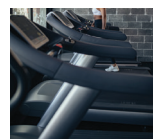


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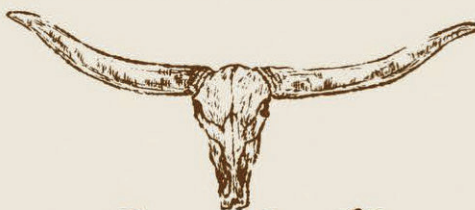


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COVER STORY

CELEBRATING

"a love of the land"



ADAMS
SPRINGS
RANCH



Story by Hailey Heseltine

Photos by Emerald Greene
and Adams Springs Ranch

In the southwest corner of Madison County, Florida, Adams Springs Ranch winds along the Aucilla River. Operated by Scott and Pam Adams, the nearly 5,000 acres stand as a testament to their decades of effort and love of the land.

Scott Adams' family line boasts generations of farmers before him. From his grandfather's mule and equipment trading business in Atkinson County, Georgia, in the early 20th century, to his parents' cattle and chicken farm in Citrus County, Florida, farming has always been in his blood – even when he didn't want it to be.

"My entire life, I was raised on a farm that had 55,000 laying hens," Adams recalls. "We picked those eggs by hand every single day. It was those chickens that did me in. Having to get off of the school bus every day and pick those eggs was rough, and so from about eight years old, I was ready to quit."

So he set off to make his own way in the world. Driven by the frustration of collecting one too many eggs, he quit high school and ran away from home just a few weeks before his sixteenth birthday. He dove into entrepreneurship, trying his hand with seed companies, cattle farms and logging. No matter what he did, however, he never completely left agriculture behind. Farming was "in his blood." In 1991, he started farming with 100 acres of his own, but it had been a long road to that point.



"I went and tried every job, and I think that I bettered myself because of it, because I just kept right on going. Being sixteen, you couldn't get a job, so it seemed you always got the dirty jobs," he says, "but I still thought that it was better than picking eggs. Then I got into waste management and construction. I was successful at that, thank God, but it took a lot of time and work. Now, in my later years, I'm right back to the agriculture I started from."

Though Scott never graduated high school, he was able to make a living and excel through the skills that he picked up while being raised in agriculture. He grew



up building skills in communication, finding solutions, planting, taking care of animals, fixing things up, teaching others and, most importantly, never losing hope and working hard. Those were the tools he needed to succeed, he says, and growing up farming gave them to him.

While still living in Citrus County, he met Ngoc "Pam" Fitchett through a mutual friend. Pam was born in Vietnam, and she and her mother returned to the United States with her military father as the Vietnam War ended. Though not part of a farming family like Adams, she also spent her childhood in rural Citrus County.

"I thought she was pretty, so I asked her friend to introduce her. We started dating and we never stopped," he says.

It was also while they were dating that Pam became involved in the agriculture business, as she agreed to help him with his work. The couple got married December 31, 1996. Since they were "flat broke," according to Scott, they had a small wedding with only six people. They went to the courthouse, got their marriage license and enlisted the help of a notary friend. Some friends agreed to host the wedding, and they cooked dinner for the couple and served as witnesses.

"It was the perfect marriage, perfect friendship, everything," he recalls. "Because neither of us came from parents with a lot of money, we struggled. We worked really hard, basically seven days a week since we've been married, but we just hunkered down, had faith and worked a little harder. We were both



young, trying to pay for our electric bills and food, and then we had our two kids, Chelsea and Colby ... From the hard work we put in, we reinvested back, always, into our agriculture operation and kept it going."

Agriculture was challenging and unforgiving. The couple worked multiple jobs and for at least 80 hours a week, in addition to caring for their children. They remained resilient and determined, however, and their efforts have paid off after decades of sacrifice.

"Typically, our agriculture was always our secondary income, because there's not really enough there to make a living unless you get to a certain size,"



explains Scott. "So our whole marriage, my whole life, we built and built and had to have a second or first job to support us. We got in the timber business and the cattle business, and we bought more and more property until recently we finally got to a level where we could sustain ourselves."

The Adams' business also has grown enough to support about ten other

families of employees and subcontractors.

Originally, the couple planned to stay near Citrus County, but as development began to encroach on the agricultural community, they decided to expand elsewhere. They began to look toward North Florida, where land was relatively affordable.

Scott had a few childhood friends he kept in touch with from Citrus who

lived in Madison County. He began to take their joking requests for him to move more seriously as the Adams searched for new land. In 2015, they discovered that the area south of Greenville offered enough continuous land for their needs, and so they decided to purchase a few thousand acres beside the Aucilla River. As they escaped the urban encroachment in Citrus, finding arrowheads and warding off wild boar became part of their daily routine.

"There's absolutely nobody where we're out by Greenville," says Adams. "It still takes 25 minutes to get to Madison or Monticello. There's very few people who live out there, but that's just the same as the place we were born and raised. It's identical, and the people are identical. It worked out. The relationships we had with people in business and personally were able to stay intact. It was just like home."

A decade later, they continue to own a construction business and about 1,000 acres of cattle land under the name Adams Moon Lake in Central Florida. However, the couple has moved most of their operations to the larger property in Madison County. They recently sold most of the Adams Moon Lake land for local reinvestment.

On both properties, they breed and raise Brahman and F-1 to create quality beef cattle and sell for beef through private treaties and markets, running about 500 heifers and cows per year. Additionally, about 3,000 acres of land are dedicated to their timber business. Longleaf pines and other types of trees



based on terrain are harvested, then replanted or made into new pasture space to expand the couple's cattle operations as needed. They typically sell the timber to foresters, loggers or brokers.

Unfortunately, Adams says, the timber operations have been limited, since many nearby plants and mills have shut down in recent years.

"Farming's gotta be in your blood," he says. "You gotta love it. It's not for the money, because it's a very sacrificial thing. The rewards are sometimes very thin. It's gotta be for the love of the land, the animals and the agriculture. Even when it's not that profitable – and we just managed to get in a better spot over these past few years – you keep going, because it's for the love of the land."

The ranch adopted a new purpose around 2018 with the purchase of additional property by the Aucilla River. The expanded area contained several springs under state conservation, which feed the river and play a vital role in the area's ecosystem.

"Ours just happen to be very high-quality springs," Adams remarks, "which brings in and supports magnificent nature with the wildlife, the fish. They're amazing. It's a really neat thing to be able to have on your property. Now we're really pushing conservation and keeping everything so that it can't be developed around the springs and the Aucilla River."

"In the first place," he continues, "they're a natural wonder. They support all the ecosystems and animals through this whole wildlife corridor that ends up at the Big Bend estuary. There's a lot more

technical things than I know how to say, but I can say that what the springs bring to the Big Bend through the Aucilla River is just remarkable ... When you start looking at them, and think about how they're constantly pumping approximately ten million gallons a day, around the clock nonstop, seven days a week, 365 days, it's incredible. When you live on top of them like we do, you can almost feel them running underground."

Since that part of the property is protected by conservation, the family only uses it recreationally, such as for swimming, fishing and hunting. The land cannot be developed, so it can only be used for exploration and appreciation.

"These springs are especially important with the drought that's been going on the last few months," he comments. "It's been so dry, and so there are animals coming from miles and miles away just to get a drink, because so many creeks and ponds are all dried up. If they didn't have the springs, if they had been developed, then I don't know where they would go. Without the springs, the Aucilla would probably be almost dry, but they're keeping it flowing with all that water – that ten million gallons a day. It's amazing."

Scott Adams' words aren't just a sentiment; the springs do play an irreplaceable role in the environment. They feed the rivers, which then feed the Floridan Aquifer, a major drinking water source. In their absence, the environment would lose an essential pillar of support.

The Adams' farming operations and other businesses have gone under

many names over the years, often based on location or the type of farming they were focused on. The springs were the inspiration for the ranch's latest name, Adams Springs Ranch, which they hope is here to stay. The couple is now well settled, having recently finished their personal house to replace the 70-year-old home originally on the property. They also have completed guest houses for friends or people hunting on their property, in addition to barns and other necessary construction to support a farm. It's taken an entire decade to finish it all, Adams says, but it was well worth the effort. With the work on their personal home out of the way, the family is also freed to work on a dream project that could have a positive impact on the community.

"Now, we're working on building an educational lodge facility on the Aucilla River," Adams says. "We're hoping to be able to help the FFA, 4-H, Boy Scouts and other groups that teach children about nature, conservation and agriculture. The main thing for us is that we want to keep the teaching of agriculture going."

Through the Aucilla lodge project, the family hopes to enable local children to immerse themselves in the unique opportunities that growing up in North Florida provide.

"Down south and in Central Florida, there aren't the large properties or nature areas as there is here. It's all concrete and homes. Those children do not have the ability to really see what it's like, not when they're raised on a concrete slab," comments Adams. "There's a God-given gift that these children in Madison,



The staff at Adams Springs Ranch.



Pam and Scott Adams, owners of Adams Springs Ranch.



Scott Adams grew up on a farm in Central Florida, where his love of agriculture was born. He's pictured here as a young boy hugging his childhood horse.



Jefferson, Hamilton, Suwannee, Lafayette and Taylor have by being able to hunt and fish and explore in the woods. It is a jewel that these counties have that few others have. It's gonna become a commodity that people need to learn, to feed themselves ... so I would say that it's actually a blessing that there's not a big population around here, because these kids can connect with nature."

The family already has selected a location for the lodge in a conserved piece of property beside the river. The land is protected through Florida Forever, so the lodge's future home had to be cut out of the conservation easement. They have held permits for the project for a while, but Adams admits that "things move slow around here," and it may be some time before they are able to begin the actual construction process.

In the meantime, they're continuing to focus on what matters most – conservation, promoting agriculture and upholding environmental standard – as they maintain their quality of life and quality of business. It's an easy thing to do when they live in a place they love, doing the work they're passionate about, alongside people they care about.

"Madison's a great community," Scott muses. "For a small community – and it's not the financially richest community, by no means – it's probably one of the richest, most family-oriented, highest quality of life counties you could ever want to live in in the state."

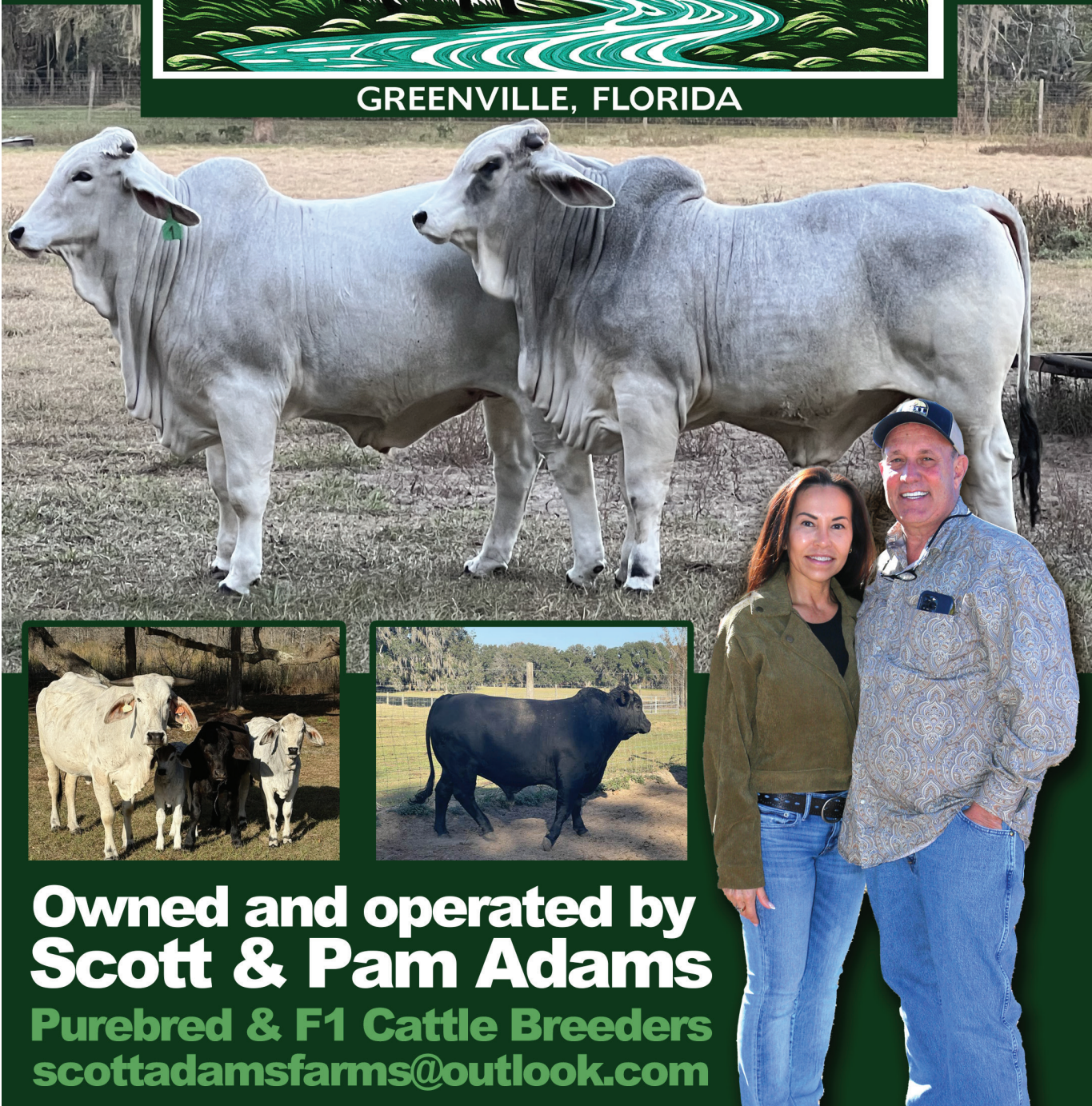
Going forward, the Adams hope to give back to the community they're proud to live in with the Aucilla lodge project, and by helping preserve North Florida's natural and agricultural heritage through their hard-earned Adams Springs Ranch.

"The best part of it all is getting to see the wildlife, the locals, and enjoying working with these people every day," says Scott. "It's about the animals, the river, the fishing, and making sure it all stays around for the next generations to enjoy. If we can carry on that legacy, well, then we've done our job." ■

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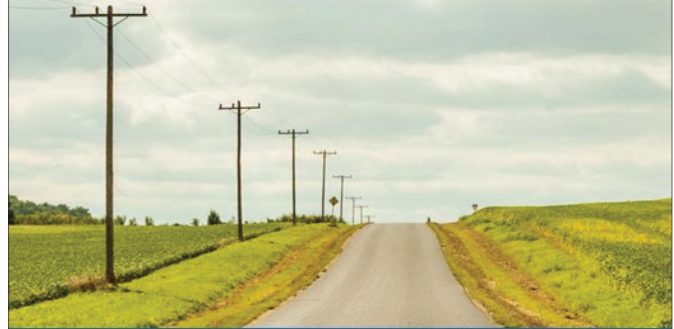
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MEET OUR AREA'S 2025 Farm Families of the Year

MADISON COUNTY

The Page Family

Story by Rick Patrick

For Travis Page, farming is as much a part of his life as the air he breathes on the farm that has been in his family for over a century. The family farm is located three miles southwest of Madison, on the banks of Hutto Pond. Hutto Pond lies at the edge of the Red Hills region of Florida, which runs from Madison County westward to Jefferson and Leon counties. This area is known for its rolling hills and rich, clay soil.

This is where Page's family began farming in 1912, when Page's great-great grandfather, PK Lanier, acquired a 470-acre tract of land. Page's grandfather, PK Pittman, then owned and operated the family farm until his passing. This paved the way for the family to maintain ownership of the farm to this day. Of the many farms owned by the late PK Lanier, the current Page farm on Hutto Pond is the last remaining farm in the family. Now, over a century later, Page runs the farm, raising beef cattle as well as growing corn, peanuts, peas, hay and timber.

"This farm is where I raised my first crop, ran my first cattle herd, caught my first big bass, killed my first duck, harvested my first dove, bagged many big bucks, proposed to my wife, raised my first fat steer for the North Florida Livestock Show and raised my daughter Kloie

Page," said Page. "The Hutto Pond that sits on our family farm has probably made the biggest impact on my life growing up, and shaped me into the man that I am today. This 114-year-old family farm has taught me that hard work and dedication will give you many life lessons. It may not make you a rich person in wealth but gives the richness that no amount of money can buy. I think I would take that deal every day. I've always said that if the world goes crazy and things get out of hand, we may not have any money, but will have plenty to eat.

"My life in Agriculture started at an early age. I always enjoyed going to the farm, checking cows, driving tractors and picking peas and shelling them on newspaper on the living room floor 'til my fingers couldn't shell any more. I was 14 years old when my grandmother, Marguerite Pittman, retained ownership of the farm. I knew exactly what I wanted to do in life. It was a decision that some struggle to find in life, but for me it was my passion and what I looked forward to every day. I felt like I needed to do whatever it took to help out my family members and help keep the farm going. Throughout high school, I worked for grandma whenever I could, mending fences, feeding cows and doing whatever it took for the farm to keep going. My



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passion kept growing, and finally I asked grandma if I could buy her cows from her. I remember telling the owner of Townsend Livestock Market, Abb Townsend, what I wanted to do. He met me at the farm and appraised the cows to a fair market value and told me what they were worth. With hardly any money, Madison Community Bank loaned me the money and I bought the cows from my Grandma. I didn't want to go to college, but my mom was a teacher and told me I had to go. So I went to North Florida College, then transferred to the University of Florida and earned a degree in Agriculture Operations Management. The day I graduated in December of 2005, I was back to the same ol' predicament, no money to buy a house, so

back to Madison Community Bank again to borrow more money. I bought my first house and put it on the farm. Some crops grown are timber, peanuts, corn, soybeans, grain sorghum, iron clay peas, seed rye and hay. Without the awesome local bank, I'm not sure where I'd be today."

"After my great great grandfather P.K Lanier farmed the land, my great grandfather, L.C Pittman, ran a dairy farm and raised beef cattle here on the land. After he retired from farming, my granddaddy, P.K. Pittman, took the farm over. After World War II, he and Sim Wilson, his right hand man, put up all new fences around the farm and sectioned off fields to rotationally graze cattle, hogs, and grow whatever crop would pay the bills. This started another

generation of agricultural passion. He raised beef cattle, timber, hogs, cotton, soybeans, corn, produce such as squash and the well known cash crop, flue-cured tobacco, which was a staple crop in Madison County for many farmers in our area for many, many years. He irrigated his tobacco seed beds and tobacco crops out of the several ponds here on the farm – the Hutto Pond being one of them that helped provide the water to make a healthy tobacco crop."

Page is an active member of Madison County Farm Bureau, Chairman and Board Member of the local Farm Service Agency, with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and is a member of First Baptist Church of Madison.

Page and his wife

Amanda Morris Page have passed their love of farming to their daughter Kloie, who has had success with her own cow herd, since she started it at the age of 12, in 2021. In fact, Kloie enjoys bragging to her father any time her calves bring a higher price than his at the stockyard.

The Page family was named the Farm Family of the Year during the 80th Annual Farm Bureau Banquet, held on September 16.

Page acknowledges the help and assistance given to him by not only his family, but also the many other farmers and ranchers who helped fuel his dream of maintaining the family farm, from previous generations to generations to come. ■

HAMILTON COUNTY

The Tyre Family

Story by Jason Futch

During the Florida Farm Bureau's Annual Dinner in Hamilton County on September 4, the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Hamilton County Extension Office honored the Dalton Tyre family as recipients of the 2025 Hamilton County Farm Family of the Year award. Greg Hicks, the Extension Director for Hamilton County, shared

the family's story, emphasizing their contributions to the county.

"Dalton Tyre grew up on his family farm in Hamilton County that primarily raised hay and cattle," Hicks said. "While growing up, Dalton's plans did not include being a farmer, but after a few short years of college, he realized he missed farming."

When Dalton returned home, he continued the



Photography by Haylee Jacobs/HJPhotography

family's hay operation before going out on his own and starting his own family farm. His family farm consists of approximately 1,000 acres, primarily growing peanuts, as well as other crops such as peas, and producing hay. Dalton hopes to start producing corn and expand the farm while continuing to implement sustainable farming practices.

During his speech, Hicks quoted Dalton as saying, "Honestly, I don't think you choose to be a farmer. I think farming is something that

chooses you."

Hicks also acknowledged Dalton's wife, Amie, who is pursuing a career in training and riding barrel horses. He said she hopes to make horses her full-time job in the future.

"They are both supportive of each other's lifestyles, which can be very time-consuming," Hicks said. "But at the end of the day, they are thankful to do what they love."

Dalton was recently honored in May as a recipient of the Florida Farm Bureau County Alliance for Responsible Environmental

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Stewardship award at the University of Florida, North Florida Research and Education Center in Live Oak. The award recognizes Florida's farmers and ranchers who voluntarily demonstrate exemplary efforts to protect the state's natural resources, which include best management practices. He was also honored by the Hamilton County Board of County Commissioners on September 2 for his work in the farming industry in the county.

"The Dalton Tyre family is a highly respected and

hardworking family whose roots run deep in Hamilton County. We are honored to present them as the 2025 Hamilton County Outstanding Farm Family of the Year," Hicks said.

Dalton said the award, which came five years after starting his own farm, was an honor to receive.

"It feels good to be recognized and to know people are seeing what you are doing. I appreciate it," he said.

Dalton said families and individuals wanting to go into

farming should make sure it's the path they wish to take.

"It's easy from the outside looking in when you think all there is to do is ride a tractor and plant stuff," he said. "But there are a lot of long days."

He also said unpredictable weather events, such as droughts, rain and hurricanes, tend to affect the business as well.

Dalton also suggested having a sound financial plan in place because the farming industry isn't a get-rich-quick profession.

"You turn a lot of money, but you're not going to profit a lot of money," he said.

Dalton advised having a sound business plan to propose to a bank in order to convince them the business plan is good.

He is proud to provide sustainable farming to Hamilton County and stresses the importance of purchasing fruits, vegetables and meats from the USA, as customers know they are getting the best products due to the regulations required to sell agricultural products. ■

LAFAYETTE COUNTY

The Lyons Family



Story by Emily Beach

Chris and Kelly Lyons, along with their four daughters and Chris's brother, Dale, have built a farming operation rooted in faith, family and farming. Their dedication to the land and livestock has earned them the honor of being named Lafayette County's Farm Bureau Family of the Year – a recognition of both their hard work and their impact on the community.

A family effort

Every member of the Lyons family has a role in the farm's success. Dale takes immense pride in checking the cattle and working closely with

poultry managers to ensure that equipment is running properly and parts are available when needed.

Emily and Kelby-Grace have grown into capable operators who can now run any piece of equipment on the farm, all while managing the daily responsibilities of maintaining and caring for the livestock. Their dedication and sweat of the brow keep the farm up and running on a daily basis.

Lydia lends her energy and skill to feeding the replacement heifers, helping pen cattle with her four-wheeler, and working the chute gate during handling. And while Krista's role

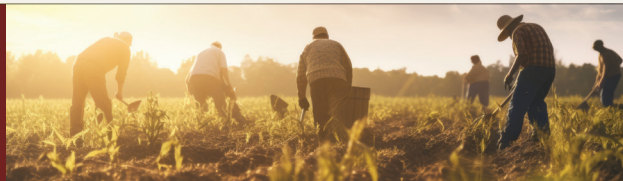
may look different, Chris and Kelly proudly say she has provided them with the most important addition to the farm yet – their first granddaughter.

Together, this strong family unit keeps the operation running smoothly, with each member's contributions adding to the whole.

A diversified operation

The Lyons Family Farm is a sole-source income operation, supported entirely by the land and livestock they manage together. Their operation is highly diversified, balancing cattle and poultry with careful land stewardship.

On the cattle side, the



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family maintains a herd of 500 Brangus-Angus crossbred cows and 18 Angus bulls. Over the years, they have worked to develop a strong black-hided herd to meet buyer demand. This strategic approach allows them to market semi-loads of steers and heifers through internet sales, creating opportunities for repeat customers who appreciate the quality and consistency of their calves.

The family makes efficient use of their land through rotational cropping and grazing practices. Their fields are planted in grass seed, hay, rye and millet, which not only provide feed but also allow the soil time to rest and rejuvenate. Each year, they harvest enough grass seed and hay to produce around 1,500 rolls of hay for their cattle, ensuring a reliable feed source while protecting the land for future generations.

Poultry with deep roots

Cattle may be a big part of their operation, but poultry is just as important – and has deep family roots. In the early 1960s, Chris and Dale's parents, the late Lex and Sarah Helen Lyons, began raising poultry with just 7,000 birds, eventually growing to 40,000 by the late 1980s. Carrying on that legacy, Chris and Kelly built their first eight broiler houses in 2006.

In 2017, the family expanded from eight houses to 25, a major investment that now produces more than 630,000 chickens for Pilgrim's Pride every six to eight weeks. This growth was done with a strong commitment to the community, keeping the operation local whenever possible. From buying LP gas to sourcing parts, services and repairs, the Lyons family is intentional about

investing back into their own community.

The poultry houses also contribute to the sustainability of the farm. Each year, the operation uses more than 800 semi-loads of feed, supporting local corn growers. In return, the litter from the broiler houses is spread across the family's fields as a natural fertilizer, significantly reducing commercial fertilizer costs and improving soil health.

Community and care

For the Lyons family, farming is about more than just production – it's about care, quality and community. Whether raising cattle or chickens, their goal is to minimize stress on the animals, ensuring healthier and better-quality livestock.

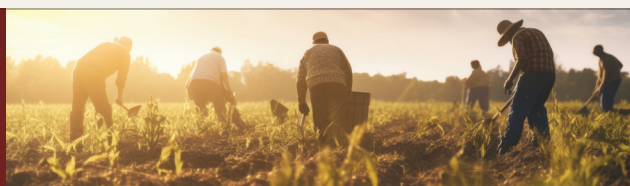
They also see farming as a full-circle system that not only supports their family but also strengthens Lafayette County's

agricultural community. By supporting local growers, buying local services, and managing their farm with stewardship in mind, they are keeping agriculture thriving for both today and tomorrow. Their operation allows them to contribute to two of the three main staples of agriculture in their community: cattle and poultry.

A legacy of faith and family

Being named Lafayette County's Farm Bureau Family of the Year is more than a title – it is a reflection of the values, resilience and vision that Chris, Kelly, Dale and their daughters bring to their farm every day. The Lyons family embodies what it means to live off the fruits of their labor, proving that with faith, family and hard work, success in farming is not just possible – it's sustainable for generations to come. ■

TAYLOR COUNTY



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The Cruce Family



Story by Heather Ainsley

In March of 2025, Cruce Family Farms was named Taylor County Farm Family of the Year in acknowledgment of their diligent efforts operating their family-owned citrus grove. This is the second award the family has received, having been awarded the same honor in 2017. Despite the family's success in citrus, their farming roots lie in a

slightly different field.

For nearly half a century, the Cruce Family dedicated their land and farming efforts to timber, but after 42 years of running the business, they, like many in the timber field, began to notice significant strains in the industry. These strains were only heightened with the closing of the local lumber mill, and it wasn't long before the Cruce family

began to look for ways to diversify their land away from timber and toward more sustainable crops.

In 2017, Matt Cruce, along with his father, John, and supporting family, made the decision to plant citrus trees in a humble 10-acre plot on the family farm. Over time, the grove has grown, the family adding a couple of acres of new trees each year, along with a packing house for packaging the fruit for consumers.

The decision to plant citrus came from the family's standing familiarity in growing trees, as well as a desire to start this new endeavor on a small scale that could be easily managed by the family. Unlike row crops, many of which need to be grown on a massive scale to be considered profitable, citrus trees can offer a significant yield in a smaller growing area. Without thousands of acres to dedicate to row crops, starting a citrus farm on a 10-acre plot of nutrient-rich soil just made sense.

"I don't know what I was thinking," jokes Matt, reflecting on the farm's early beginnings. "Each day we wake up and realize we know nothing about farming citrus! Every day is a new learning experience."

The sentiment is equally shared by John, who echoed that much of the citrus farm's success has come by no short amount of trial and error, the family learning valuable techniques on the job and in the fields. This style of "learning by doing" has certainly paid off, however, with the Cruce Family Farm growing from

its humble 10-acre origin to 100 acres in just 8 years.

While it may seem like a lot, in the farming industry, 100 acres is considered quite small, with some commercial farms tending groves that easily span thousands of acres. Even so, the Cruce Family Farm keeps John and Matt plenty busy, with an annual production of 15,000 to 20,000 field boxes over the last three years.

The farm sees two general seasons: the growing season and the packing season. Specializing in mandarin and navel varieties of citrus, the farm harvests the sweet, ripe fruit starting in November and continuing through the month of December. While it may make for a busy two months at the packing house, there is still much to be done during the remaining 10 months of the year. Unlike row crops, which are planted and harvested in a single growing season, a citrus grove needs tending all year round, for years. In fact, a single citrus tree does not even begin to produce a viable crop until it is four or five years old, which means a citrus farm requires significant care and tending before a single crop can be harvested from it.

"It takes a lot of trial and error," mentions John. "It's not like rolling the dice and coming up seven each time; there's an art to it. Harvest and packing aside, each tree is a 12-month commitment, and when we aren't in the packing house, we've got to be out there in the field, checking the trees and making sure everything is healthy and growing right."

Like many farmers in North Florida, the Cruce family sustained devastating losses during the past few years, particularly during the hurricane seasons of 2023 and 2024, when several major hurricanes ripped through the Big Bend area. These storms were responsible for destroying numerous trees and causing the farm to lose around half of their usual yearly crop. While the family is still seeing evidence of impact, the citrus trees seem to be recovering, getting stronger and healthier with each year. By keeping a close eye on signs of stress, disease and decay, Matt and John can help their trees recover and prevent small issues of concern from becoming wide-scale problems for the whole grove.

The fruit grown on the Cruce Family Farm is picked by the harvesting team on the same day it is ordered, ensuring that each order of citrus arrives to the consumer at the peak of flavor and freshness. The farm does not process any citrus on-site, focusing only on growing, harvesting and packing their fruit at the height of ripeness for wholesale, so the fruit you pick up at the market is the very same fruit picked off the tree. While the farm primarily sells their fruit commercially, local consumers may also buy directly from the farm by submitting orders on their website, CruceFamilyFarms.com.

From farm to market, John, Matt and the rest of their team strive to grow, pack and ship the best citrus possible, serving their sweet, juicy citrus straight from their family to yours. ■



SUWANNEE COUNTY

The Garrett Family

Story by Jason Futch

During the Suwannee County Farm Bureau's annual dinner on September 18, Joseph Garrett and his wife, Katie, were honored as the 2025 Suwannee County Farm Family of the Year. Their efforts in providing fresh vegetables and strawberries to Suwannee County began with Garrett Brothers Farms in Branford in 1992.

"We're just appreciative of it. I would say it was a surprise," Joseph said about receiving the recognition.

Garrett Brothers Farms has been in continuous operation since 1992, when brothers Jeff and Jake Garrett, Joseph's father and uncle, relocated to Branford from Homestead, Florida, to start a commercial vegetable

operation. Farming for four generations, Garrett Brothers Farms has a rich heritage in Florida agriculture and also has a long history of u-pick operations, including four generations of successful u-picks: two strawberry operations in Homestead and a peach u-pick in Georgia in the 1950s.

Joseph and his brother, Daniel, ultimately took over the farm's operations and expanded their acreage in Branford to include the location of an old farmhouse. The home was initially built in 1943 for the family that had farmed tobacco on the land for many years before the Garretts purchased it. The house was built as a two-bedroom, one-bathroom home with two fireplaces. According



to Joseph, no one could see the house from the road because it was so overgrown and needed major repairs.

The plan was initially to use the property to grow more commercial vegetables, but other ideas began to take shape. In 2022, partnering with the Leos family, the Garretts transformed the old farmhouse from a broken-down shell into the Branford Farm Stand, a location where they could showcase their homemade jams, jellies and sauces, while also selling fresh vegetables and strawberries.

Continuing the family tradition of u-pick fruits, Joseph started a u-pick strawberry operation next to the Branford Farm Stand, which is available from January to March. They also offer a u-pick flower option from May through June.

When traveling to the Branford Farm Stand on U.S. Highway 129, it isn't hard to miss—a 1949 Eli Bridge Ferris wheel towers over the property, making it visible from at least a half mile. It is one of the attractions that Branford Farm Stand offers, primarily during the Fall Festival on the last weekend of September and weekends

throughout October. They also have a playground, a milkshake silo and a pumpkin patch.

The Branford Farm Stand additionally offers fresh tacos, with the tortillas made in-house. They are also dabbling in Florida wine tourism, offering strawberry wine for customers. Their signature strawberry milkshakes are a known go-to for those visiting Branford.

Joseph said the Branford Farm Stand sees constant traffic, with people from Jacksonville to Maine visiting yearly since the business opened its doors to the public. It is the support they have had since 2022 that makes Joseph and his family appreciative of the Suwannee County Farm Family of the Year Award bestowed upon them.

"We wouldn't be here unless the community supported us," he said.

The Branford Farm Stand is located at 27687 U.S. 129, in Branford. It is open from Monday through Saturday, between 11 a.m. and 8 p.m., and on Sundays, from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. To learn more about the Branford Farm Stand, visit www.branfordfarmstand.com.

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The Clarke Family

Story by Kathy Egan and Laura Young

Photograph by Emerald Greene

The farming community of Jefferson County anticipates the Farm Bureau Annual Meeting each year, as it is an important gathering of friends, fellow farmers and ranchers. A major highlight is always the announcement of who will be named Farm Family of the Year. On September 23, 2025, the award went to the Clarke family.

Dana Clarke runs Graziers Cottage Farm, on the Ashville Highway just outside the City of Monticello. Her mother and father, Brenda and Bob Clarke, also share the responsibilities at Graziers, and they agree with Dana's sentiment about the award: "This is a blessing."

Dana is a native Floridian, hailing from Apopka, but unlike many of our area farmers, she does not come from a long line of food producers. Rather, she grew up in a suburban lifestyle; then, as a teenager, she did an apprenticeship on a small, grazing dairy. It was then that her love of cows and farms began to bloom.

As a young adult, Dana began positions at various other farms in several states, all the while harboring a longing to live in North Florida. Then, in 2013, good news came, which Dana expresses simply as, "God worked all that out for us."

The desire of Dana's heart came to fruition when Bob, her father, had a change in his job. They relocated to this area in 2013. Five years later, all three Clarks began a small cow-calf operation in Jefferson County. Dana continues to love the land and is passionate about regenerative farming techniques, especially managed grazing on perennial and annual forages.

Dana says she is able to see the increasing diversity and health of land and cattle. Grazing cattle via different methods, depending on circumstances and weather, allows soil recovery, which in turn improves the health of her herd.

From mid-spring through mid-fall, the Clarks implement high-density grazing, which involves moving the herd through several different small paddocks each day, then allowing those areas to fully recover before being grazed again.

During late fall into early spring, when the grass is more dormant, they graze the herds as much as possible on stockpiled forage (also called "standing hay"). When providing hay from round bales, the Clarks just unroll them across open pasture, rather than using hay rings, an approach that is more beneficial for building the soil. Because standing hay is not as nutritious as fresh grass, protein supplements keep the herd in good shape through the colder season.

The cows themselves are South Poll, "the mama cow of the south." This breed, Dana explains, is a four-way cross that promotes heat tolerance and pest resistance. The yearlings are sold to other farms in the region to be grass finished. Overall, the Clarks' goal is to increase the size of the operation while maintaining and improving the agricultural practices.

In addition to the commercial operation, Graziers Cottage Farm also raises a few Jersey cows that supply milk for the family's personal use. They drink the fresh milk and also use it make their own butter, buttermilk, yogurt and kefir.

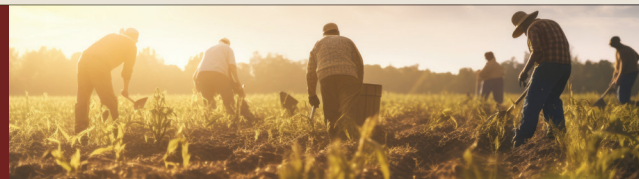
In 2023, their farm hosted a Pasture Walk & Talk through



UF/IFAS Extension - Jefferson, and every day, Dana says she discovers more ways to learn from others in the region and beyond. She wishes to extend her thanks for the recognition as Farm Family of the Year. First, there's the Farm Bureau. Then, there are many others in Jefferson County who have helped her in so many ways. She thanks Joel Love and Ben Hoffner of UF/IFAS for their support and interest; Larry and Kelly McMullen, who sold them the land they needed;

Chris Tuten, who was a huge help with tractor and cow work; Ronnie Walker, for his help with the dairy girls; and Dr. J.W. Cone, who supports the farm as their veterinarian. The Clarke family is honored to be named 2025 Farm Family, and they are looking forward to the Southern Cover Crop Conference in Gainesville this coming February.

Dana emphasizes, "I look forward to attending and continuing to learn." ■



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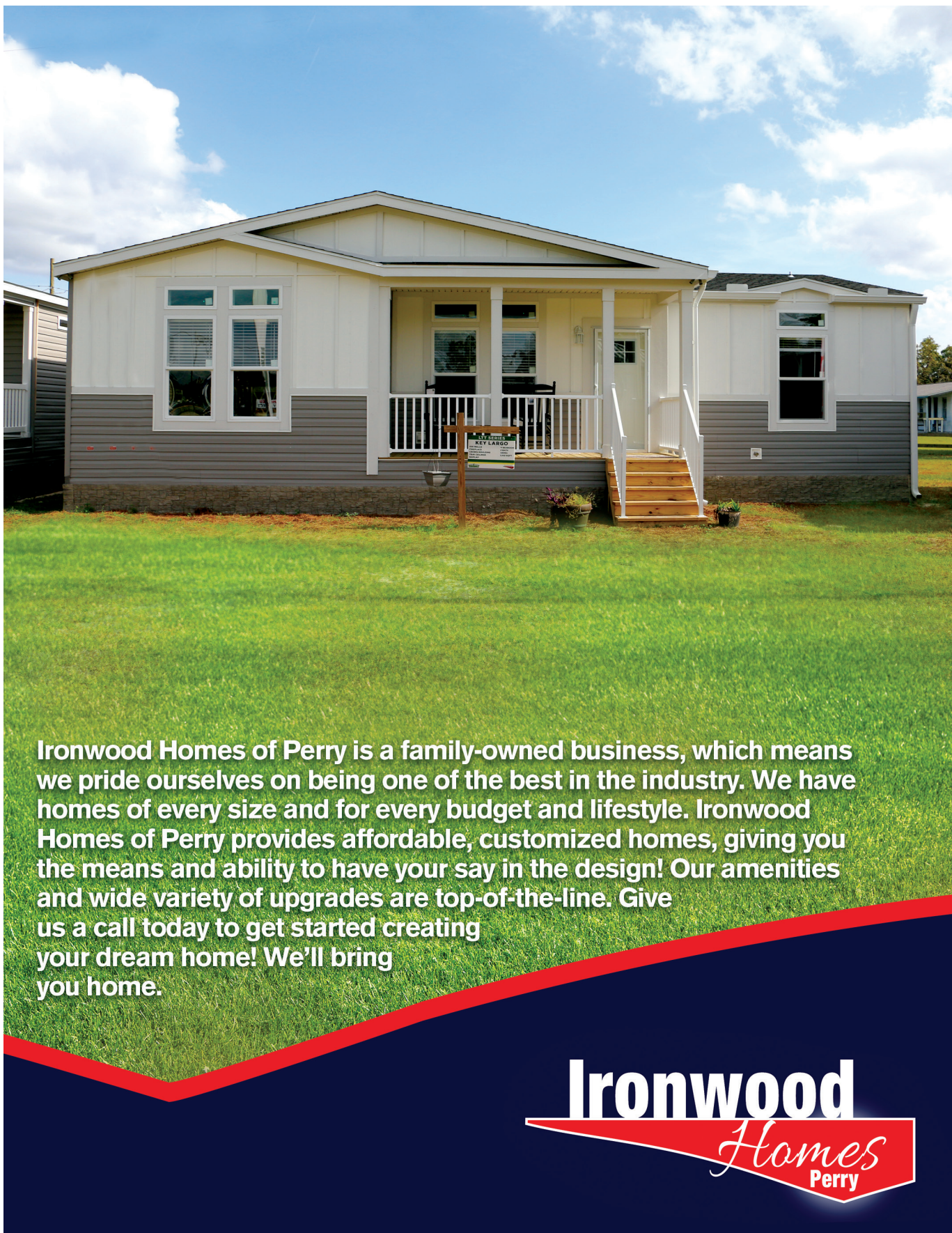
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Lights, Camera, Action:



Emma Akerman
finds her field of dreams

Story by Mickey Starling

Photography Courtesy of Danielle Piazza and Emma Akerman

Emma Akerman has had a vivid imagination and a love for storytelling since the second grade. Music and photography equally fill her mind with a world of possibilities. This expressive young lady has always been ready to capture the moments that life brought her way, and boy, does she have a story to tell.

After graduating from high school in Alabama, Akerman made her way to Madison, Florida, where her father, Mark Akerman, is the principal at James Madison Preparatory High School (JMPHS). She completed her Associate of Arts degree at North Florida College before transferring to the University of Florida (UF) in 2021, where she majored in Media Productions.

The path to this career choice wasn't exactly a straight one for Akerman, who initially desired to go into acting. Her attraction to the fine arts field was met with a great deal of skepticism from her parents, who knew the odds of finding good employment were slim. "Fine Arts are great, but that's a competitive industry" was the thought roaming her father's mind. However, he was partially responsible for her obsession, since he bought her a camera when she was young, and she rarely put it down. After all, there is always a story to tell, and a picture is said to be worth a thousand words. When Akerman filmed and edited the 2020 graduation film for JMPHS, her father took notice.

"Wow, you really know what you're doing," he remembers commenting.

Akerman is a lady of many hats, demonstrating both athletic and acting skills in middle school.

"She was a great point guard," remembers her father. "She was such a scrappy player, so I encouraged her to stick with it."

It was the theatre, however, that captured her attention, and her talents won her the title of Best Actress at the District Walter Trumbauer Theatre Festival as a senior in high school.

The bridge that connected Akerman's aspirations with her her parents' hopes was built during a semester she spent at the University of Alabama Birmingham, where she enrolled in a film studies class while continuing to study acting at the university.

"That class curved my interests toward creating for screen versus stage," said Akerman. "It's what led me to choose Media Production when I transferred to the University of Florida (UF)."



With a clearer focus, Akerman made her way to UF on a mission to make her dreams a reality. She quickly turned this large ocean of a university into a small pond that she readily navigated by joining numerous clubs and networking through the many new friends she was making. Akerman also took advantage of opportunities presented to her while doing an internship with Songbird Music Works, in Nashville, Tennessee, where she made great connections in the industry.

Returning to UF, she worked with Swamp Records while making more connections in Nashville. Eventually, a position for a digital content coordinator opened with Ryman Hospitalities, the owner of the Grand Ole Opry, in Nashville. After four extensive interviews, Akerman landed the job.

"I'm a digital content coordinator, which means I'm everyone's production

assistant," said Akerman, who is again wearing many hats.

She provides content for the Opry's YouTube channel and other social media platforms; helps various artists get their edited content online; edits sound and hype reels; and shoots promo reels for Ryman Hospitalities Properties. Her busy schedule keeps her working onsite at the Opry three nights a week, where she is also an onsite coordinator.

Fortunately for Akerman, she isn't easily starstruck, so meeting celebrities doesn't distract her, though she confesses to having a few favorites. She filmed the member induction night for Lainey Wilson, whom she found to be "really kind." Equally kind and memorable was Bill Anderson, the longest-running Opry member.

"This is such a kind, warm place," stated Akerman. "Having a job where I get to combine my love for storytelling



"You Sleep Last Night" was released in October. "Clover," is a short film about two childhood friends who reunite and rekindle a deep bond until a late-night argument brings a painful revelation to light. It was shot in August and is now being edited. Numerous other projects, including narratives, a dance choreography and some freelance material are set to be completed soon, with narratives being their preferred focus.

Hower is also employed with Rustler Hat Company, which specializes in selling customized hats, shirts and accessories. Like Emma, her passion is in the creative process of acting and film production. Hower is amazed at how well things have developed since their brief encounters in college.

"It's crazy to think how you can meet someone once or twice in college and then, two years down the line, become best friends and start an entire film production company with them," said Hower. "I knew right when I first worked with Emma that we were cut from the same cloth and shared the same passions and goals that others would be too scared to pursue. We're able to push each other past our fears and work towards the same goal together – it's magic."

The duo has especially enjoyed working with new actors, 70 of whom auditioned for a recent project. Short films give new actors valuable practice and often create name recognition through success at film festivals. These events broaden networking capabilities and may generate some income for the actors.

Short films also hone production and performance skills by practicing telling a story within 10 minutes. Famous producers, such as Steven Spielberg, began their stellar careers through short film production.

For Akerman and Hower, the future is bright, whatever they decide to do with it.

"I will stay at the Opry until something better comes along, but it will be hard to leave here," said Akerman. "I've learned a lot, and I feel very fortunate."

Her parents share that sentiment as well.

"I really thought she was chasing down a rabbit hole at first, but she has made wise decisions," said Mark. "I'm really proud of her."

Akerman's continuing story is evidence that passion, mixed with preparation and perseverance, will always pay off, turning those "rabbit holes" into fields of dreams that come true. ■

and music is awesome."

Though working at the Opry can be demanding, Akerman's creative mind doesn't rest when the workday ends. As fate would have it, an opportunity to expand and explore her talents recently developed when Bryanna Hower, a college friend from UF moved to Nashville, settling into Akerman's apartment complex.

The pair had collaborated on a project in Gainesville, Florida, and posted it in 2023. The project had more than 65,000 views. Hower studied acting at UF and shares the creative interests of Akerman. This newly formed dynamic duo discussed a number of possible projects while also assisting each other with previous works.

It was a short leap for them to launch their own production company, Honeywell Films, on June 1, 2025. So far, a project called "Where Did



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Regional Reads

By Laura Young

The interesting small towns that dot the landscape of Florida's Big Bend have produced a fascinating fusion of people, many of whom channel their experiences and interests into equally fascinating books. In this issue, we're taking notice of a romantic techno-thriller and the history of a beloved North Florida landmark. If there's a local author whose work you'd like to see noted in a future issue of *The Front Porch* magazine, email emerald@greenepublishing.com.

Upon the Face of the Waters

By Dr. Tracy J. Revels
(Sentry Press, 2016)

Madison-born author Tracy J. Revels has written more than 30 books. She is the Laura and Winston Hoy Professor of Humanities at Wofford College, where she has been a member of the history department faculty since 1991.

In *Upon the Face of the Waters: A Brief History of Wakulla Springs*, Dr. Revels traces the flow of history at one of Florida's most beautiful natural attractions. The great spring in Wakulla County has drawn millions of guests over hundreds of years. Native Americans hunted and conducted rituals on its banks. A French naturalist risked death to analyze its waters. One of Florida's richest men built a private lodge beside the spring, while generations of tourists enjoyed picnics, political rallies and romantic evenings along its shore. Both Tarzan and the Creature from the Black Lagoon frolicked in Wakulla's waters. In 1986 the springs officially joined Florida's state park system as the Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State Park, and it remains a natural jewel of North Florida, an example of Florida's 'vintage' style of tourism.

This short, 90-page book tells Wakulla's story, from prehistory to the present, noting how the site has been used. The book explores scientific projects at the springs, including record-setting dives, as well as art and literature inspired by wildlife and nineteenth century legends. It also illuminates many of the challenges that Wakulla faced, and the controversies which continually threaten its existence. *Upon the Face of the Waters* is illustrated with historical drawing, maps and photographs.

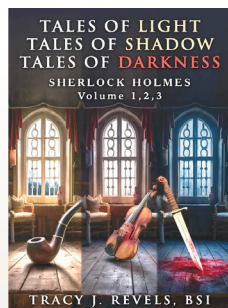
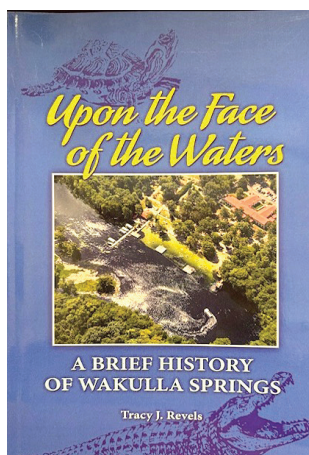
Wakulla Springs hold a very special place in Revels' heart because she and Dr. John Moeller, a fellow Wofford professor, married there in 2013.

The paperback version of *Upon the Face of the Waters* is sold in the gift shop at the Lodge at Wakulla Springs. Through Amazon, it is available as an e-book or audiobook read by the author. Sales of the book support the work of the Friends of Wakulla Springs, a nonprofit group which hosts educational events and does fundraising work for the park.

Dr. Revels' research focuses on Florida history, and some of her non-fiction works include

- *Grander in Her Daughters: Florida's Women during the Civil War*
- *Florida's Civil War: Terrible Sacrifices*
- *Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida Tourism*

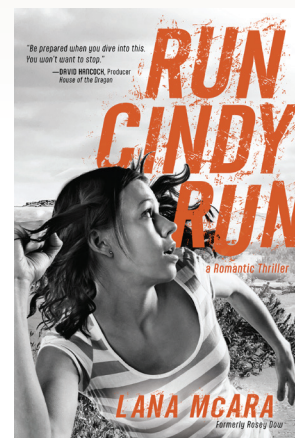
Revels also writes fiction. She is a member of the Baker Street Irregulars, and her most recent work is *Sherlock Holmes: Tales of Light, Shadow, and Darkness*, a collection of 41 Sherlock Holmes stories (MX Press, 2024).



Run, Cindy, Run!

By Lana McAra
(Vendela Publishing, 2025)

Lana McAra is an award-winning, international best-selling author and ghostwriter of 50 titles with a million books sold. She has been teaching how to write fiction for 20 years and offers a writing class called Writers Ink at the public library in Live Oak, Fla.



In *Run, Cindy, Run!* the main character is hunted for secrets she doesn't have. This gripping romantic techno-thriller is packed with CIA betrayals, cyber warfare and heart-pounding suspense that won't let you go from cover to cover (Tom Clancy meets Sandra Brown).

After her parents are jailed for treason, Cindy Lestrade disappears into the Arizona desert with a new identity. When U.S. missile systems go down, world powers hunt the one person who can unlock the code – Cindy. She, however, doesn't have the key. Cindy's only hope is Grant Collier, the CIA agent who told her he loved her, then betrayed her. Now he's back to save her... or is he really there to finish his mission?

Framed. Betrayed. Hunted. She trusted him once. Can she survive him twice? It's one woman, one mission and zero room for mistakes.

The novel is available from major online retailers. ■



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Story by Dr. C. Andrew Demmings

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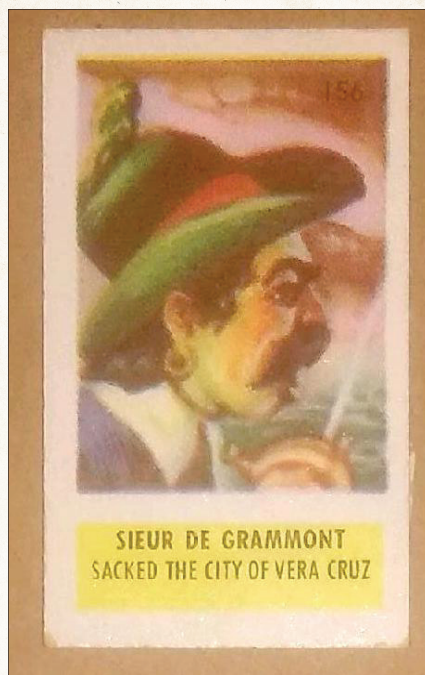
Just the presence of anyone not authorized to be in the Gulf of Mexico by Spain was a capital offense from 1493 until 1750. Though this rule was widely ignored, it was still a very dangerous game to play with the Spaniards. Understandably the French, Dutch and English, among others, felt left out of the New World spoils and pretty much tried to do whatever they felt like whenever they could. Piracy had of course been a problem from day one. A nineteen-year-old Christopher Columbus was the sole survivor of a French pirate attack off Portugal in 1476. Most of the wealth taken from the Aztec Empire by Hernan Cortes in 1519 never made it to Spain and is still being spent in France.

Our story covers a short period late in the 17th Century when Dutch, English and French colonies were already established in America, Canada and across the Caribbean islands and when "ownership" of these lands was being taken from the native peoples and heavily contested among the European nations. This is just a brief tale without the global econ-political web of intrigue I am working on for an academic paper which means here we can focus on the good pirating parts.

Early in the spring of 1682, a motley crew of ten pirate, or more properly privateer, ships filled with French, Dutch and probably other nationalities, were illegally congregated at Anclote Key in preparation for the raid of all raids on St. Augustine in order to remove the Spanish from Florida for good on behalf of the French.

Only two of the captains are clearly identified, and both are far more famous for incredibly successful careers on other raids and expeditions. The Dutch born Laurens de Graaf and Frenchman, possibly minor nobility, Sieur Michel de Grammont were both notorious for decades and each avoided the hangman's noose to walk off the pages of history leaving unsolved mysteries that linger today. Each was worthy of a scholarly book that verifies all of this with as many original sources as possible, and then a blockbuster movie! We'll come back to their endings later.

From the Spanish perspective, these men are all clearly pirates. Their mere presence in the Gulf was a capital crime even before they attacked the fort or did anything else bad. To the French, they are privateers: private sailors engaged in warlike activities without actually being in the employ of the King Louis the XIVth, maybe. To this day Laurens de

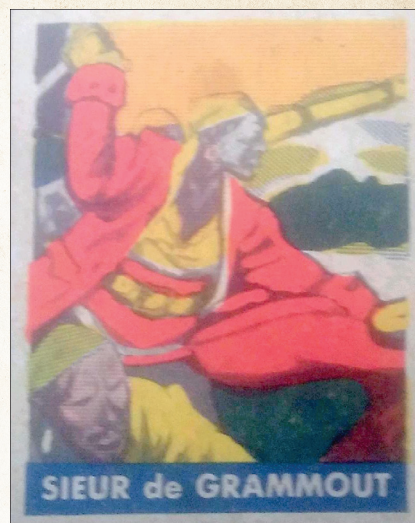


Graaf and Sieur Michel de Grammont are vilified in the historical accounts from the Spanish, and often American, historians. Yet they are heroes to the French who put them on trading cards from cigarette companies in 1888 and gum cards into the 1840s. Depending on which original and secondary sources you examine, one king's privateers are another king's pirates.

Lacking anything like a Publix for 1,000 miles, a few of these ships decided to attempt to knock out Spain's smaller Florida settlement while gathering provisions in St. Marks by capturing San Marcos de Apalachee. This first wooden fort was built in 1679 in response to an earlier pirate attack. Manned by about 50 soldiers and several hundred Apalachee natives, it still remained vulnerable as you will see.

On March 19 at 2 o'clock in the morning, they attacked fort San Marcos de Apalachee (St Marks) at the confluence of the Wakulla and St. Marks rivers, and after a somewhat half hearted defense by the Spaniards, the fort and a ship were captured with close to 20 people. All was taken with no serious injury to anyone or property, particularly the food stores in the warehouse. Those who had fled brought the news to Mission San Luis in present-day Tallahassee by about noon. The pirates loaded up everything of value, destroyed the cannons and burned the wooden fort before retreating with the captured ship to the point at the mouth of the river.

A Captain Herrera, five soldiers, two ranchers and about 100 Native



Americans retook the now empty fort and set about rebuilding the defenses. Six hostages were sent back up river to negotiate the release of everyone else for the then standard rate of 10 hogs per group of captives. They were hustled north to San Luis and learned Governor Cabrera in St. Augustine was under strict orders not to negotiate with pirates. After getting no response for several days, the pirates sailed three ships up to the fort and trained their cannons on it. Herrera had his men tear down the walls they had just rebuilt and abandon the fort after burning all the other buildings. The soldiers retreated to the treeline, and a waiting game began.

The pirates occupied St. Marks, coming and going as they pleased. They did ship maintenance and hung around until, incensed at the killing of two men with them, they burned the Apalachee village nearby. For the most part, the Spanish only knew most of the pirates were lurking around Casana Point and in the Bay of the Wacissa River. This probably means out past the lighthouse and over to the Aucilla, but that is pretty hard to verify. If they wanted navigable access to fresh water, it meant they went into the Aucilla. Also, that would help kill shipworms, which were a massive concern for wooden hulled ships.

This presented an interesting problem regarding what to do with a boatload of "privateers" sitting at the mouth of the Aucilla well into summer. Now don't get me wrong, I love Williams Landing as much as anybody, but after 90 days I'm going to need a trip to JR's on 98 or I'll be pirate mad, too. Likely they careened their vessels (this is where you get your ship in very shallow water, lying on its side to scrape barnacles and repair shipworm damage among other



maintenance) but that might occupy a few weeks at best.

With frustration building on both sides, the pirates sent everyone but some friars and the ship pilots back with a letter saying give us 10 hogs or we are coming ashore and cutting off everyone's head. Anticipating such an attack, artillery and nearly 250 re-enforcements from San Luis were formed into three lines of defense along the elevated road from the fort and into the woods towards Tallahassee. They dug a trench above the fort where they could see if anyone came up either the Wakulla or St Marks. Next was a line inside the woods a couple miles away, and finally about 14 miles inland was a fortified line with cannons meant as a last line of defense for San Luis.

The pirates came *en masse* with

several ships and smaller vessels in a show of force preparing for a landing. On June 8 they started coming ashore and working small vessels up both rivers. The soldiers and their allies, seeming themselves about to be cut off, fired their guns and arrows prematurely and ran for it. Getting to the second line, they panicked the men under Herrera there and when he objected someone shoved him in the river. The third line heard them all coming and yelling that 100 Frenchmen were after them, so they all abandoned their posts and ran 21 miles into Tallahassee. It was four days later that the Spanish returned to find that two final soldiers had been captured and the pirates had left.

The pirate group broke up at this point, and many headed south, but some forced the captives to guide them along

the coast to the Suwannee River. From near Old Town landing, 35 of them went east on the southern trail to the hacienda de la chua (believed to mean "ranch of the sinkhole") of Tomas Menendez Marquez at the Alachua Sinkhole (on the southeast side of Gainesville off SE 15th St., which is a park today). They of course raided some smaller ranches along the way.

Once again they attacked at 2 o'clock in the morning (who knew that was a thing) and captured the owner Marquez, his son-in-law Juan de Hita and four servants. They burned many of the buildings, sent a ransom demand for 150 cattle plus a purse of money and then headed for the Suwannee.

The retreating pirates were ambushed by a group of 21 Timucuanas led by three Christian caciques, or chiefs, who freed the captive Spanish with the loss of one Native American's life. The caciques were later presented with swords by the grateful Spaniards.

So we have a raving horde of privateers/pirates coming up from south Florida, attacking and trouncing the Big Bend area, then, heading to Gainesville to do the same. I'm sure there is a Miami Hurricane joke in here somewhere, but I for one refuse to make it!

After the failures to gather provisions in North Florida, the planned attack on St. Augustine was tabled. Some of the French privateers, however, were not yet done with Florida, as Gainesville/Alachua was attacked again in 1684. Though reliable information is very scarce, this raid was much smaller and did not cause the Spanish as much concern as the 1682 raid. In addition, unconfirmed writings suggest Grammont wanted to attack St. Augustine in 1684.

The next known accounts of de Graaf and Grammont involve Grammont and company heading straight to Havana, Cuba, and blockading the harbor later in June with eight vessels. Many of these must have come directly from the failed Florida expedition. In July, de Graaf and his men captured the Princesa with 120,000 silver pesos, northwest of Havana, Cuba, which was the nearest Spanish port after leaving Apalachee Bay.

Later in the summer of 1682, the two primary protagonists went their separate ways for several months. After some movie-quality secret pirate meetings on Roatán, de Graaf, Grammont and several other very famous pirates, in five ships and eight smaller vessels with more than 1,300 pirates converged on Veracruz, Mexico. On May 17, 1683, they sacked and held



the city for weeks.

This is just one highlight for these two in rather impressive, decades-long careers as privateering pirates. For comparison, the average pirate career lasted barely two years. The average for all positions in the NFL is roughly 3.4 years, and while some players get roughed up on social media, at least they don't get hung upon a forced "retirement" like a lot of the pirates did.

Both Grammont and de Graaf were operating, on again, off again, with the consent of various colonial governors and probably directly for King Louis the XIVth at one point. It is important to note they were rarely ever actually pirates but clearly were agents of France some of the time as privateers and later with military commissions, even if they were often held at arm's length for plausible deniability.

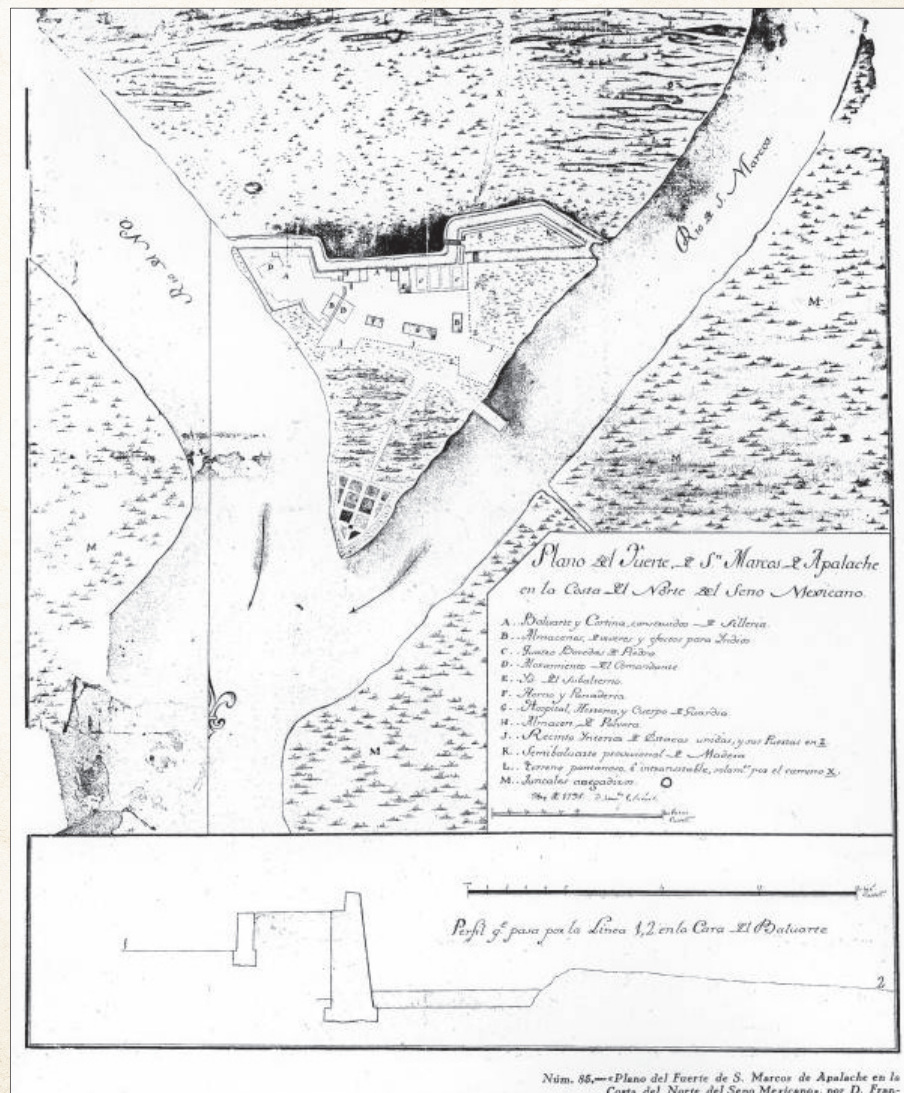
The career of Michel de Grammont is thought to end in 1686. Arriving in St. Augustine on April 30 with several vessels and plenty of men, he was finally prepared to destroy the town but everything went wrong. The first smaller vessel through Matanzas Inlet ran aground, the pirates who survived were eventually captured, and Grammont sailed away to South Carolina when the raid seemed futile. From the Carolina coast, Grammont headed east for West Africa. His last known act was capturing a Dutch ship off the Azore Islands, and then he vanished with all hands aboard in a storm. Or not, as there is at least one account of him alive in or around France in 1687 that I have yet to be able to confirm.

Laurens de Graaf was very well known throughout the Atlantic world by that time and was recruited by the English and French governments. Eventually he had a minor French position and was still active in 1699 when the Le Moyne brothers, Bienville and Iberville, sailed into the Gulf with de Graaf as their guide. They hit the shore near Destin, and he directed them to Pensacola Bay and points west where the French eventually found Mobile, Biloxi and New Orleans. With his guide duties complete, he returned to Santa Domingo/modern Haiti and vanished from history in 1704 with at least six plausible stories, not one of which is verifiable as far as I can tell.

As despicable pirates of the Spanish Main, who dabbled in Florida Man quality disturbances along the Gulf Coast, I hope this all-too-brief glimpse into their world brought up some things you didn't know about old Florida.

Researching pirates can be far

more difficult than you might imagine. The vast majority of information online is one website repeating what another says with no one ever using an original source from the time period that can be verified. Here I have relied heavily on original Spanish eyewitness documents translated by John Hann, and 1977 and 1990 articles by Amy Turner Bushnell. Second- and third-hand accounts make for good stories but leave more than a little to be desired when you are after historical accuracy. Grammont is variously called Michel, Nicholas or Francois, and Laurens de Graaf/Graff, nicknamed Lorencillo by the Spanish, has been spelled at least 12 different ways that I have been researching. That said, if you are interested in some good sources, you really can't go far wrong with anything written by Benerson Little or David Marley. Especially good are *The Buccaneer's Realm* and *Pirates of the Americas*, respectively. ■



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What's Happening

January 10, 17, 24, 31



The Monticello Market takes place 10 a.m.-1 p.m. at Kelly & Kelly Properties (205 W. Washington St.). Interested vendors should apply on the MonticelloMarketFL Facebook page. For more information, email MonticelloMarketFL@gmail.com.

January 10



Woman's Club of Jasper Chili/Soup Cook-off

The Woman's Club of Jasper (403 6th Ave. N.W.) hosts its annual Chili/Soup Cook-off from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Individuals interested in entering their favorite chili or soup can call Mary B. Cail at 386-303-2280, Julie Gant at 386-303-2388 or Delores Howell at 386-397-0554. The number of participant entries is limited to 12.

January 10-31



Annual Fiber Arts Show at JAG

The exhibition opens at Jefferson Arts Gallery (575 W. Washington St.) with a special reception on January 10, from 12 noon to 4 p.m. View creations by various fiber artists using techniques as string/thread work, weaving, needlework, lace and knot work, felting or sculpting. Items on exhibit may include embroidered pillows, fabric collages, baskets, papier-mâché, woven shawls, hooked rugs, tapestries, beaded clothing, quilts, montages, silk paintings and more. The show continues through January 31 during regular hours, Wednesdays and Saturdays, 10 a.m.-2 p.m., or by appointment by calling 850-997-3311.

January 19



Suwannee MLK Day

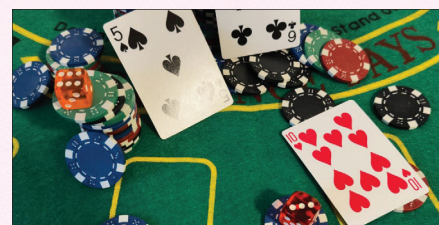
The Suwannee County Martin Luther King Jr. Committee will be presenting MLK Day 2026.

The event will feature a parade, for which lineup will begin at 9 a.m. at RIVEROAK Technical College (415 Pinewood Dr. S.W., Live Oak). Following the parade, a church service will take place at Ebenezer A.M.E. Church (411 Parshley St., Live Oak), featuring Rev. Jeffrey Graham and Rev. Anthony L. Newton. For more information or to participate in the parade, call 386-249-5641.

January 19

Jefferson MLK Day

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center in Monticello has planned a Peace Walk/Parade beginning at 11 a.m. and Family Fun Day with program, games, music, vendors and food, from 1 to 5 p.m. For more information, call 850-933-2012 or email johnsonalthera1@gmail.com.



January 24

Texas Hold'em in Madison

The Madison County Chamber of Commerce's Texas Hold'em Poker Tournament Fundraiser takes place at 701 BC Venue and Brewery on 701 S.W. Range Ave. The fun starts at 4 p.m. with different levels of entry fees available. The "Play and Eat" costs \$50 per person for \$5,000 in chips and \$20 for \$2,000 in additional chips. "Observe and Eat" costs \$10. Seats can be purchased at www.madisonfl.org or by calling 850-973-2788.

What's Happening

January 30, 31



Woman's Journey to God's Love and Empowerment

Presented by Charlotte's Hope Ministries, this event features Tammy Whitehurst speaking about a life centered on a loving relationship with God, acting with grace and mercy towards others and growing in a Christlike character. The event takes place from 6 to 8 p.m. at The Bridge (1135 E. U.S. 90). Tickets cost \$45 and are available by calling 850-973-7968 or visiting www.char-hope.org.

January 31



Big Bend Brew Fest

Those age 21 and older can sample craft beers from more than 15 local breweries, 5-8 p.m. at Rosehead Park (618 S. Washington St., Perry). Tickets

cost \$35 for regular entry and \$45 for VIP passes. All proceeds will benefit the Shop with a Cop Program the The Rotary Club of Perry. For more information, call 850-584-5366 or visit BigBendBrewfest.com.

February 6



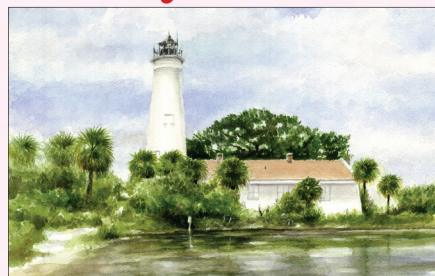
Sounds of Simon and Garfunkel at MOH

Award winning musicians Jeff Jablonski and Jeff Radi take the audience on a musical journey performing Simon and Garfunkel's celebrated hits, including Paul Simon's solo career. This unforgettable stage performance is sure to transport you to a simpler place in time, where heartfelt lyrics harmonize with the emotional music of this beloved duo. For more information and tickets, call the Monticello Opera House at 850-997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

February 7, 14, 21, 28

The Monticello Market is 10 a.m.-1 p.m. at Kelly & Kelly Properties (205 W. Washington St.). Interested vendors should apply on the MonticelloMarketFL Facebook page. For more information, email MonticelloMarketFL@gmail.com.

February 7-28



Art by Nathaniel Pye and John Isaacs at JAG

The exhibition opens at Jefferson Arts Gallery (575 W. Washington St.) with a special reception on February 7, from 12 noon to 4 p.m. Nathaniel Pye's watercolors are inspired by the bounty and natural beauty of rural North Florida. John Isaacs paints wildlife of the Southeastern U.S. with a special interest in birds, but also other animals and even some landscapes and seascapes. The show continues through February 28 during regular hours, Wednesdays and Saturdays, 10 a.m.-2 p.m., or by appointment by calling 850-997-3311.

February 13-15



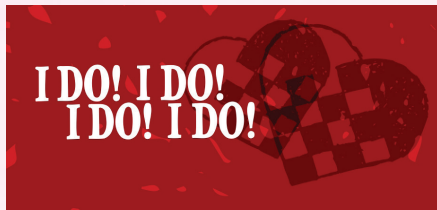
Steinhatchee Fiddler Crab Festival

Enjoy fiddler crab races, live music, a magic show, a fishing tournament, car show, boat tours, parade, "swamp

What's Happening

water" cook-off, fireworks and more. For more information, contact the Steinhatchee River Chamber at 352-356-8185 or visit steinhatcheechamber.com/fiddler-crab-festival/.

February 13-22



***I Do! I Do!* at MOH**

The story of a marriage is at the center this musical by Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones, which received seven Tony Award nominations for its original Broadway production.

Follow Michael and Agnes from their wedding day through 50 years of raising a family, negotiating midlife crises and rediscovering how much they really need each other. The perils of life are set to a tuneful, charming score. For showtimes and tickets, call the Monticello Opera House at 850-997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

February 13



Perry Chocolate Crawl

Chocolate lovers are invited to shop in Perry, Florida, and sample chocolate along the way

in participating stores throughout downtown during business hours. For a full listing of participating business, contact the Taylor County Chamber of Commerce at 850-584-5366.

February 14

"Love Birds" Day and Art Festival at NFWC



The North Florida Wildlife Center (1386 Cook Rd., Lamont) offers a special weekend of Valentine-themed fun and an art festival, with animal presentations, goat feedings, keeper talks, face painting, arts/crafts, vendors, wine/beer and local food/drink. For ticket information, call 850-347-0921 or visit NorthFloridaWildlife.org.

February 20-22

FSYR 68th Anniversary Open House & Horse Show

Saddle up for three days of family-friendly excitement at the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranch (1813 Cecil Webb Pl., Live Oak)

during the 68th Anniversary Open House & Horse Show. Watch riders compete in events like pole bending, Texas barrel weave, arena race and cloverleaf, with divisions for small fry, junior, powderpuff/senior and more. Horse clubs and individual riders may participate, with registration set at \$35 per event. Side jackpot entries are available for \$50 per class. Vehicle admission is \$10, and campsite reservations are open. Visit www.YouthRanches.org or call Jessica Hartley at 386-842-5555 for more information.

February 28 and March 1



Sixth Annual Strawberry Fest

There's fun for the whole family from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Suwannee County Fairgrounds (1302 11th St. S.W, Live Oak). Taste an array of strawberry delicacies and enjoy activities for all ages, including free bounce houses, arts and crafts, a Berry Cute Baby Contest, pony rides and much more. Admission is \$7, but kids ages 2 and under get in for free. Receive \$1 off admission by printing a coupon from www.LiveOakFestival.com, or bring a canned good to the festival gates to benefit the local food pantry.

Cody Church

AN INDEPENDENT COMMUNITY CHURCH



COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

Community Food Pantry and Closet

Follow us on Facebook for Open Days and hours

Common Ground Youth Resource Center

School Supplies, Wi-fi Access, Study Space, Snacks/Food, Personal Hygiene Items and more

Text 850-694-3095 if you need assistance outside of open hours



Your Cody Church family wishes you a Happy
New Year and blessed 2026!

3812 TRAM ROAD, MONTICELLO

WEEKLY SERVICES

Sundays

11AM: Morning Worship Service

Children's Church and Nursery Provided

6PM: Evening Worship Service

Common Ground Youth Group Meets at 6PM

Wednesdays

7PM: Bible Study and Prayer Meeting

Common Ground Youth Group Meets at 6PM

Andrew Poole and Kellie Shirah are the dynamic co-owners of Poole Realty.

Poole Realty was established in 1990 under the leadership of founder, Ronnie Poole.

As a leader in local real estate for over 35 years, Ronnie successfully brought together the finest real estate professionals in and around Live Oak and Branford, Florida. Building on Ronnie's foundation, Poole Realty works tirelessly to build strong and meaningful customer relationships and to leave a positive lasting impact on North Central Florida.

Serving Live Oak, Branford, and Beyond

The team at Poole Realty is dedicated to making the Suwannee Valley a wonderful place to live, work, and raise our families. Navigating our website, you'll see why we enjoy this beautiful, unspoiled section of the Great North Florida.

Our tailored approach sets Poole Realty apart; we work hard to match each customer with the property that best fits their needs. Whether you're looking in Live Oak, Branford, or anywhere in North Central Florida, we are committed to providing an exceptional real estate experience.



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