

The Front Porch

Where The Tea Is Sweet and the Talks Are Long
March/April 2025



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The Front Porch

Where the tea is sweet and the talks are long

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Meet Our Staff

The Front Porch



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Justice Barrington

Story and Photography by Heather Ainsley

Anyone who has spent any time in the small city of Monticello, Fla., has likely seen or worked with Justice Barrington. Raised for most of her life in Jefferson County, this 29 year old has held a number of jobs locally, with many recognizing her for the notable five years she worked as an Advertising Representative for the *Monticello News* and *Jefferson County Journal* through *ECB Publishing, Inc.* While she left Jefferson County for a time in 2022, she continued working in the newspaper and advertising industry, having established a job with a publishing company in Gadsden County, where she helped manage five different newspaper publications in Gadsden County and St. Augustine.

While she found this work rewarding, there truly is no place like home, and in 2024, Barrington shifted her career path and accepted a position as the new 4-H Program Assistant with Jefferson County UF/IFAS Extension. Through her new job, she helps to oversee programs offered to Jefferson County 4-H youths and assist the agents at the extension office whenever needed. She has been able to work hands-on with young people in her community, and currently oversees the Jefferson County 4-H Teen Council, a club where teenagers aged 13-18 can focus on life skills, parliamentary procedures and communication skills that will help them to be bright, functioning members of society when they reach adulthood. Recently, the Teen Council met with a local mechanic to get a rundown on basic vehicle maintenance, a topic that many young adults have to navigate by trial and error if they don't have someone available to show them at home.

Barrington says she finds her work deeply enriching, and loves to be able to engage with her community through these programs, all the while knowing that she is providing significant knowledge and empowerment to young people. Like many residents that put roots down in a rural community, she knows there is something truly special about living in a small town.

"When you live in a small community," she says, "everyone knows who you are, and that's both on a professional and a personal level. No matter where you go, whether it's going to the store, a restaurant or a shop, you're going to run into someone you know. Everyone is like family here."

Accepting a job working directly with 4-H kids is a big deal for Barrington, who was a member of 4-H herself growing up.

"It's exciting to sort of see the circle of life," she says,

adding that when she was growing up, 4-H Coordinator John Lilly and 4-H Program Assistant Gladys Neely were individuals that she looked up to immensely.

Now as an adult, she is working in Ms. Neely's old position, and Mr. Lilly has since retired. To be among the next generation of 4-H leaders is something that Barrington finds exciting and meaningful.

"It is amazing what a kid can do when coming from a small town, especially when you give them the opportunity," she mentions. "Small towns are characterized by traditions

and close community relationships. If you're from a big city, small towns seem to have a much slower pace, and that's certainly what Monticello has."

When it comes to working in a small town, Barrington finds great joy in being hands-on in the community and supporting the local schools by going to events and local games that are held in town. In her free time, she enjoys visiting some of the local coffee shops, where she says she is almost always certain to find someone she knows that she can catch up with.

When not working or engaging with the people in her community, Barrington enjoys researching its rich local history. Recently, she has found a liking for learning about historic homes that were once owned or are currently owned by African American families of the South. She hopes to someday create a catalog that explores the historical significances of these homes, as well as the histories and backgrounds of the people who lived there.

Barrington is also a photographer who enjoys capturing images of nature as she walks around town or visits beautiful places like parks and trails.

"There's just some things that catch your eye," she says. "Things that make you stop in your tracks and say, 'wow, that's really cool' or 'that's beautiful.' Stuff that makes you want to stop and look... I like to try and capture those moments."

When asked about other hobbies she enjoys in her spare time, she laughed good-naturedly and admitted that while she has been wanting to get into gardening, it isn't something that she loves... yet. While building her love for soil and plants, she harbors a steadfast passion for music. Her extensive collection of 100-150 vinyl records includes many of her favorites, like The Commodores, Gladys Knight & The Pips, The Isley Brothers and others.

From a small-town girl taking part in 4-H activities, to a community leader helping to facilitate them, Justice Barrington is a prime example that community effort builds community, and participation is the best way to give back to a place that will always be home. ■

"It is amazing what a kid can do when coming from a small town, especially when you give them the opportunity"

- Justice Barrington



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PIONEER FROM THE



Story by Laura Young

Photographs Courtesy of
Cheltsie Holbrook

When ground breaks on expanded medical space for a community, when a family starts to build their dream home, when a rancher needs a new pond to water cattle, when a washed-out driveway could use a load of fill... it all starts with the dirt. So much of the progress we humans create for ourselves in the world happens literally from the ground up. The construction industry functions through a huge network of contractors, engineers, suppliers and subcontractors whose working relationships are critical

to the completion of any job. Those who prepare the ground are among the first to set a project on a trajectory toward success, however simple or complex the undertaking may be.

In North Florida, Pioneer Excavating and Tractor Services has been a reliable resource for going on 25 years, and the family-owned business is making a promising transition into the next generation of operators. In 2001, when the late Paul Kinsley and Emerald Greene bought Pioneer from their friend Audy Payne, they had just one tractor and an excavator. Paul brought to the Madison-based business a love of tractor work and

experience with concrete. Once they acquired Pioneer Excavating and Tractor Services, Paul focused on growing the business, while Emerald handled the bookkeeping. As the business expanded, Paul added more equipment and services, eventually needing to hire employees to keep up with the growth.

"Paul was an honest and hardworking man," says Emerald. "He treated everyone fairly, never overcharging for his services. In times of hardship, especially during hurricanes and storms, he would always assist his neighbors, without hesitation. He had a good heart and loved to help others."

Although Paul and Emerald's marriage ended in divorce in 2008, she reflects on what a truly good father he

EXCAVATING GROUND UP



Paul Kinsley (center) stands with grandson Logan Riley, daughter Brooke Riley, daughter Cheltsie Holbrook and granddaughter Kennedy Holbrook.

was to their daughters, Cheltsie and Brooke.

Cheltsie remembers how she and her sister spent much of their youth, when not in school, either working with their father at Pioneer or working with their mother at her newspaper offices. Emerald recalls teaching both girls all the ins and outs of running a business, and by the age of 13, they were both fluent in bookkeeping skills.

After graduating from Aucilla Christian Academy in 2011, Cheltsie got an associate's degree from North Florida College and then completed a business degree with St. Leo University in 2015. She married Marcus Holbrook, and as their own family grew with daughters Kennedy and Haven, Marcus served as

an investigator with the Madison County Sheriff's Office and Cheltsie became the general manager for *Greene Publishing, Inc.* while also doing bookkeeping for Pioneer on the side.

"Every Thursday was paperwork day," Cheltsie recalls. "Daddy would come sit at my kitchen table and we'd go over what needed to be done for the week."

Cheltsie continued in this role until November of 2023, when suddenly everything changed.

Paul underwent heart surgery to fix a torn aorta. Unfortunately, unexpected complications arose during the procedure, and Paul did not survive.

Overnight, Cheltsie found herself the heir to Pioneer, which had grown from its humble beginnings in Madison

County to a regional business with a team of employees who operated five dump trucks, four skid steers, five excavators and two loaders. After the loss of her father, she wanted nothing more than for the business he had built to endure.

"A main fear of mine was that with Daddy dying the company would die," she says. "But with God's grace, an outstanding team of employees, and a community that has supported us, Pioneer is still thriving, just as strong as it was with Daddy at the helm."

Cheltsie is quick to heap lots of praise on many in the local construction industry who also care about Pioneer and want her to succeed. Because she had been doing Pioneer's paperwork for ten years, she had developed solid



Cheltsie and her one-week-old baby, Haven, went trick-or-treating on Halloween in 2023, riding in a golf cart with her dad, Paul Kinsley—just two weeks before Paul unexpectedly passed away.



work relationships with many contractors, and a number of these people have become her mentors during the ownership transition. Their loyalty means everything to her.

“It’s because of them that I still have dad’s business,” she says. “Paul’s legacy lives on because they’ve stayed with me. Especially the team members of Pioneer. I couldn’t do this without them.”

She especially acknowledges advice and help from Mitchell Morgan, of M&R Construction; Randy Norris, “The Dirt Man” of Live Oak; Chris Newsome, a supervisor at America’s Home Place in Valdosta; Tommy Hardee, a family friend; and David Adams, Mikel Wisenbaker, and Audy Payne, Paul’s good friends. Cheltsie also deeply appreciates how her staff at *Greene Publishing* and *Riverbend News* have stepped in during a time when she couldn’t give the same level of focus to producing the *Madison County Carrier*, *Madison Enterprise-Recorder* and *Riverbend News*.

Further, her husband Marcus has given incredible support, even leaving his career in law enforcement to work at Pioneer. He’s joined a team that Cheltsie was determined to keep employed. These include Jonathan Kelley in maintenance; grade men Marcus Holbrook, John Belinski and Bryan Gonterman; dump truck drivers Randy McCamman, Michael Butler, Dutch Tennhard and Sandy Menendez; and Missy Bass, who keeps everyone organized as the secretary and scheduler, a new position Cheltsie created last year.

With Cheltsie at the helm of this strong crew, Pioneer Excavating and Tractor Services is forging ahead. Services offered include hauling all sorts of building materials (dirt, rock, lime rock base, asphalt milling, granite, top soil, septic sand, masonry sand – anything you need!). In addition to dump truck deliveries, Pioneer can clear land, create pads for houses and mobile homes, make driveways of any kind, dig ponds and do demolition. Their service area spans Madison, Jefferson, Taylor, Lafayette, Hamilton and Suwannee counties in Florida as well as part of southern Georgia.

“We have a lot of loyal contractors that entrust us with their customers’ needs,” Cheltsie points out, naming businesses like America’s Home Place, ChrisMill Homes of Florida, Trademark Homes of Monticello, M&R Construction and CE Construction as references. “We have all of the equipment and knowledge needed to make anything happen. We can do it all!”

It’s a huge relief to her to see the family business her dad built flourishing and growing.

“More than anything,” she shares, “I want to see Pioneer existing into the future.”

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ARCENEAU ON TINIAN:

*An historic airfield emerges
to face a new threat*

Story by Laura Young

Photographs Courtesy of Byron Arceneaux

It was 80 years ago, on Aug. 6, 1945, that a B-29 bomber named *Enola Gay* took off from a U.S. airbase on the Pacific island of Tinian. It carried the first uranium bomb, "Little Boy," which devastated its primary target, the city of Hiroshima, in Japan. Three days later, another B-29 named *Bockscar* lifted off from Tinian and ultimately dropped its payload, a plutonium bomb nicknamed "Fat Man," on its secondary target, the city of Nagasaki. The day after the second attack, faced with hundreds of thousands of casualties from these two nuclear bombs alone, Japan surrendered, and World War II officially ended for the United States.

Over the decades since 1945, the airfield at Tinian was largely deserted, and jungle gradually encroached to cover its barracks, runways, parking aprons and bomb-loading pits. On occasion, U.S. Marines have used the airfield for limited exercises, but for the most part the site lay cloaked in thick vegetation.

Today, however, the North Field at Tinian has once again risen to strategic importance for the U.S., and there's significant activity underway by Air Force construction units on the island. Among those currently mobilized to Tinian is Lt. Col. Byron Arceneaux, a civil engineer from Monticello, Fla., whose Air Force Reserves unit, the 622 Civil Engineer Flight based at Dobbins Air Reserve Base, sent 11 members to the Pacific Theater in October of 2024. Their six-month assignment involves augmenting the Pacific Air Force Command engineering staff who are completing the design/plan phase for reclaiming and updating the old air fields in this region.

"The Tinian North Field project is challenging and interesting as an engineer," says Arceneaux. "It's notable because this is the first time the Air Force has tried to reclaim a historic WW II airfield and bring it up to a condition suitable for current use. Thankfully, I am able to utilize my particular experience and skill set as a large-scale land development civil site design engineer, and apply it to the project."

Arceneaux and his unit have been working to locate the historic pavement at the airfield. To do this, they've consulted records from the U.S. Navy Seabee Museum in Port Hueneme, Calif., obtained by the commander of the 513th Expeditionary Redhorse Squadron, the Air Force construction unit handling the physical reconstruction phase. This will actually be the second reconstruction of

this airfield on Tinian, because the Navy originally built their airfield on top of a much smaller one captured from the Japanese after the U.S. took the island in August 1944.

"The vegetation made the task of even finding where the old pavement was a challenge," continues Arceneaux. "Some of the old airfield centerlines were still identifiable, but virtually all of the parking aprons for the aircraft off of the runways were grown over."

Finding what was constructed back in 1945 is important, Arceneaux explains, because regulations and environmental concerns limit the project to the historic

no Tinian Monarchs nesting in the trees prior to clearing them," says Arceneaux. "Nevertheless, in spite of these obstacles, and using the historic information available and modern technology, we were able to determine the extents and locations of the historic improvements."

Once the footprint of the site is established, Arceneaux's team can produce civil design plans that indicate what elevations and grades will make the runways and taxiways suitable for modern aircraft.

"We anticipate being able to begin paving operations this summer," Arceneaux says. "The pressing deadline



footprint of the airfield. Documents from 1945 such as the "As Built Drawing of the Airfield" have been invaluable. The engineers were able to scan the drawing and then use computers to overlay it with current aerial imagery as well as a topographic map created with lasers that can survey through vegetation (a LIDAR system).

"Using these pieces of information, the team was able to direct surveyors on the ground to find and locate certain points," Arceneaux says.

He acknowledges that it would have been much easier to burn off the vegetation or conduct mass clearing to locate the old features, but this was not allowed. Their approach must follow modern environmental regulations and respect the presence of an adjacent bird sanctuary, which includes a population of the endangered Tinian Monarch, a small bird found only in the forests on this island.

"A biologist has to verify there are





U.S. Air Force Reservists CMSgt Bobby Vongphakdy, Lt Col Byron Arceneaux, Maj Sid Dudley and Maj Ryan Winsor are among those working to restore the North Field on Tinian.



for our mission here is to have all the facilities we believe we need to successfully counter military action in the theater completed by 2027. Based on current intelligence, we want to be prepared for potential Chinese actions by 2027."

When Arceneaux's reserve unit is not deployed, they report for monthly training weekends at Dobbins ARB in Georgia. Annually, they have a two-week training session, and last year that took them to an active base in Germany to support military engineers with projects in Europe. With this longer deployment in the Pacific Theater, Arceneaux's unit is enjoying the extended time they have together.

"The camaraderie is excellent here," he notes. "Typically we only see each other sporadically, whereas now we are all working together, so we all get to know each other on a much deeper level."

Arceneaux's reinstatement in 2011 as an officer with the reserves grew from a military career that began in 1994. Inspired by his father, Col. Ronald J. Arceneaux (Ret.), he entered the U.S. Army through the ROTC program at Georgia Institute of Technology, where he earned a bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering. During active duty 1994-2000, he was stationed at Fort Hood (Texas), Fort Rucker (Alabama) and Fort Benning (Georgia). In 1995 he was deployed to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to build camps for Cuban refugees. In 1998 he deployed to Managua, Nicaragua, to repair infrastructure destroyed there by Hurricane Mitch.

At the rank of Captain in 2000, he separated from the U.S. Army and began building his own civil engineering business. Arceneaux's company specializes in site development consulting for large real estate land developers in the northeast sector of metro Atlanta.

He is married to Michele Arceneaux, and they have three grown boys who all graduated from Aucilla Christian Academy in Jefferson County. Zack, a graduate of Florida State University, teaches high school and coaches varsity girls soccer in Dawsonville, Ga. Nick, a graduate of the University of Florida and the University of South Florida's Physical Therapy School, practices as a physical therapist in Gainesville, Ga. The youngest, Matthew, is studying Computer Science at Florida Polytechnic Institute in Lakeland, Fla.

When Arceneaux's mission on Tinian is complete, he'll return to Trelawn Farm in Monticello, where his family moved in 2013 so that Michele and their then-young sons could be close to her family. At that time, he was being deployed with the Air Force Reserve to Afghanistan for seven months to manage construction projects for the Afghan Government, Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police.

"We ended up loving Monticello," says Arceneaux, "so we stayed."

Beyond just residing in Monticello, Michele and Byron have become very involved in the community. Byron serves voluntarily on the Jefferson County Planning Commission and is a member of American Legion Post 49. Michele organizes the annual Monticello Christmas parade and festivities. She has been president of the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, is a past president of Kiwanis Club and currently serves on the Jefferson County Tourism Development Council.

When Byron is off-duty from business and military commitments, he enjoys raising Gulf Coast Native Sheep as well as dairy cows, chickens and occasionally pigs on the farm. In addition to agricultural activity, Byron and Michele have opened the grounds of Trelawn to regular archaeological digs conducted by local high school students under the direction of scholars from the Aucilla Research Institute. They are unearthing significant evidence of plantation life dating back to the early 1830s.

As on Tinian, there's a history to be discovered, and connections worth making, as the layers of vegetation and earth lift away. ■





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Sorrowborn by April Davis and Kevin A Davis (coming in March 2025 from Inkd Publishing)

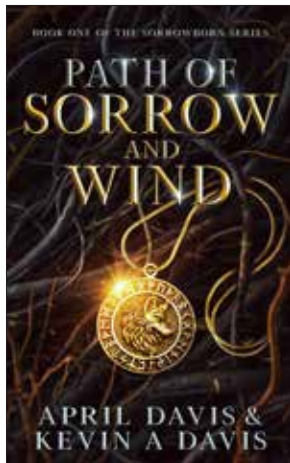
April Davis and Kevin A Davis of Madison, Fla., are launching a new young adult romantic adventure fantasy trilogy later this month, *Sorrowborn*. The series focuses on the youth born into the times called Sorrow. "Loved ones have vanished, faded from Earth like mist. Elsewhere, the cryptids have appeared..."

In Book One, *Path of Sorrow and Wind*, the dark forces are countered by the onset of magical powers in those

born to survivors. One of these, Caitlyn, dares to use her powers to try to save a shunned boy named Dean who has been infected by werewolves. Her decision puts her and her closest friends at risk, but with determination, she follows her conscience and her heart. These choices change everything.

The Florida Authors and Publishers Association has recognized Kevin A Davis as a President's Book Award Gold Medal Winner in 2024 for his adult fiction book, *Atlanta's Guide to Cryptids*. His books are available from Inkd Publishing as well as various mainstream online booksellers.

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Rick by Delores Leggett Walker (2024)

Delores Leggett Walker, a native of Mayo, Fla., is renowned for her touching storytelling, which captures the essence of rural life. Her journey as an author began with the release of her first novel, *Legend of Promise*, in 2013. Since then, she has written a total of 10 novels, among which three belong to her *Promises* trilogy, while six are part of her *Destiny Diaries* series.

She published the sixth installment in the *Destiny Diaries* series, *Rick*, in 2024. In this tale, Walker introduces readers to Rick

Durand, a man grappling with the tragic deaths of his father and grandfather in a plane crash. As Rick struggles with his grief, the weight of responsibility falls heavily upon him, as he is forced to manage the family business, Durand Construction.

One year later, Rick is still reeling from the tragedy when he receives an unexpected inheritance from a stranger. This revelation draws him to a small, picturesque community nestled between the Suwannee River and the serene Gulf of Mexico. However, the small town also harbors a set of secrets that threaten to upend everything Rick thought he knew about his past and identity.

Rick and Walker's other novels are available for purchase on Amazon.

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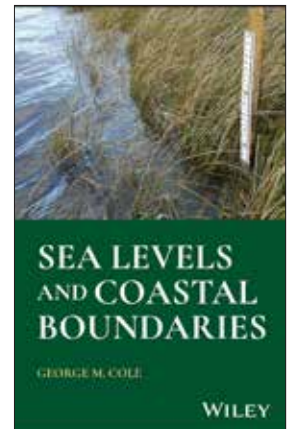
Sea Levels and Coastal Boundaries by George M. Cole (Wiley and Sons, 2024)

George M. Cole is a professional engineer, surveyor and geographer who serves on the board of directors for the Aucilla Research Institute in Monticello, Fla. His background includes service as a commissioned officer of the U.S. Coast & Geodetic Survey (now NOAA), the State Cadastral Surveyor for Florida, a private consultant directing private surveying and mapping operations in both the United States and Latin America, a visiting professor at the University of Puerto Rico, and an adjunct professor at Florida State University.

Cole's latest book is a comprehensive, authoritative reference to guide attorneys, engineers, surveyors, coastal planners, land developers and decision makers concerned with water boundaries and the water rights. It includes descriptions of how to determine boundaries where shorelines have been altered due to sea level change in the short and long term. Examples and exhibits from case law take the reader into complex legal issues such as navigability, riparian rights and interstate compact agreements. In the book, Cole also offers clarifying information on the topics of justice, safeguarding the environment and related issues.

The book is available from the publisher and various other major booksellers. ■

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STEINHATCHEE

is calling your name

Story by Dawn Perez

Photography by Heather Ainsley

Tucked away in the quiet, untouched wilderness of Taylor County, Steinhatchee Falls is one of Florida's best-kept secrets. If you're the kind of traveler who loves stumbling upon places that feel like they belong in a storybook – where time slows down and nature takes center stage – then you're in for a treat.

A waterfall in Florida? You bet! When most people think of Florida, they picture sandy beaches, palm trees and theme parks. However, just beyond the sleepy fishing village of Steinhatchee lies one of the Sunshine State's few natural waterfalls. While it can't rival Niagara in size, Steinhatchee Falls is the widest waterfall in Florida – a beautiful, cascading stretch of the Steinhatchee River that tumbles over limestone ledges,

creating a gentle but mesmerizing scene. The water, stained the color of sweet tea from the tannins of ancient cypress trees, flows peacefully through lush forest, making this spot feel like an escape from civilization. You can almost hear the whispers of Old Florida in the rustling leaves and chirping birds overhead. Steinhatchee Falls isn't just for looking – it's for exploring. Those who love the outdoors will find this a gem of a





STEINHATCHEE FALLS

playground.

Paddle Away – Bring a kayak or canoe and glide along the Steinhatchee River, where you might a manatee, otters and other wildlife as well as the occasional gator sunbathing on the banks.

Cast a Line – Steinhatchee is known for its world-class fishing, and the falls area is a great spot to reel in freshwater species. Downriver, where the fresh and saltwater mix, you'll find some of the best inshore fishing in the state.

Hike Back in Time – A short nature trail follows the river, perfect for a peaceful walk under a canopy of towering pines and oaks. Fun fact: This area was

once part of an old pioneer route, where early settlers and Native Americans crossed the river, proof that this place has been enchanting travelers for centuries.

Picture-Perfect Moments – Whether it's the golden light reflecting off the river at sunset or a quiet moment sitting on a rocky bank, Steinhatchee Falls is a dream for photographers and nature lovers alike.

What makes Steinhatchee Falls truly special is its unspoiled, back-to-nature feel. There are no big crowds, no theme park lines – just you, the sound of flowing water and the peaceful embrace of nature.

When you're done exploring, head

into the town of Steinhatchee for some Old Florida Charm. You'll find some of the best seafood shacks serving up fresh Gulf shrimp, smoked mullet dip and hushpuppies so good they'll make you want to stay forever.

So, if you're looking for a place where Florida's wild beauty meets Southern hospitality, where adventure meets relaxation, where every corner whispers a bit of history – Steinhatchee Falls is calling your name.

Pack a picnic, bring your camera and come see why this little slice of paradise deserves a spot on your Florida travel bucket list! ■



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UP IN FLAMES



Madison Sporting Goods is aflame as the fire leaps out in an attempt to reach another building. Firemen from several departments steadily pour water on the raging inferno.

A Community United

Story by Heather Ainsley
Photographs by Tommy Greene
Madison County Carrier

April is a time of merriment for those who live, work and spend leisure time in beautiful Madison County, as it harbors the celebration of Down Home Days, a festival that spans multiple days, and brings together visitors and residents in the spirit of hometown fun. For nearly 45 years, countless individuals have built wonderful memories of live music, parades, dog shows, worship nights, street dances, vendor shows and no short supply of small-town hospitality, earning the city of Madison, Florida, a reputation for being an ideal place to have a great time.

But for those who were present in the city in 1997, April also harbors another memory, one of smoke and ash, of tears and terror. On the evening of Friday, April 18, 1997, a time of dancing and spirited celebration of Down Home Days was cut

short as a sudden block fire threatened to turn the city to embers.

The morning and afternoon before that fateful night had been quite ordinary – as ordinary as the beginning of the Down Home Days could be, that is. Hundreds of people had gathered in the streets, dancing and celebrating along with a performance by a local dance group with Becky's Dance Steps Studio, which was followed by a street dance that many enthusiastically participated in.

It was during the street dance festivities that Madison's Chief of Police at the time, Rick Davis, happened to notice a few youths gathered in an alleyway behind a couple of shops. When Davis realized that the juveniles, who ranged from age 10 to 18 years old, were smoking, he promptly ordered them to leave, running them out of the alleyway. According to accounts gathered afterwards, the kids tossed their cigarettes

down to discard them as they fled.

Moments later, another officer with the Madison Police Department (MPD), Kelvin Franklin, noticed what appeared to be smoke and flame coming from inside a shop connected to the alley, Lucile's Dress Shop. After checking the alley and confirming a fire, Franklin called the alert, summoning assistance to help put out the flames. In just three short minutes, Madison Fire & Rescue arrived at the scene with the first of many trucks, but the flames had already begun to spread, and fast.

What happened next was a blur, as rescue personnel struggled to contain the ever-growing blaze. The heart-stopping moments were captured by *Madison County Carrier's* reporter, Ginger Jarvis, who was at the scene. The following is an excerpt from her report of the event.

"A raging inferno capped what had been a convivial evening. On Friday

afternoon, dance students in ribbons and tulle entertained a crowd on the corner of Range and Pinckney to kick off Down Home Days. Afterward, a DJ cranked up the sound for a street dance, punctuated by laughter and squeals of delight. The Band Boosters were hawking pop and sandwiches, families were visiting, kids were acting goofy, everyone was into the spirit of community.

Then, just as the last CDs hit the stack, someone spotted a curl of smoke at a window. The laughter stopped. Sirens, flashing lights, more smoke... fear gripped the crowd...

By 11 p.m., the electricity had been cut off from downtown. As in some ghastly disco, flickering lights from emergency vehicles beat a shadowy rhythm for the grim dance against destruction. From the rooftops, fiery figures of brilliant orange and yellow leapt and swayed in their own demonic ballet, illuminating the horror in the faces of the people below.

Borne by the evening's stiff breeze, those flames and their acolyte sparks stretched out and clawed at the window frames of the building across the alley. Tiny flickers licked away the paint and began to burn in earnest, teasing onlookers with the threat of an entire town in ashes."

What began as a flicker of flame in an alleyway had swiftly evolved into a monstrous blaze, and as fire rescue teams worked frantically to contain the fire, local business owners tried desperately to save what they could.

The first shop affected by the flames was Lucile's Dress Shop, owned by Buford and Lucile Selman. The boutique had been a staple in the community for an incredible 60 years. According to her husband, Lucile had always hated desk



Merchandise can be seen inside the businesses as they become fully involved in flames.

work but had a real knack for selling dresses, something she found great satisfaction in doing. Headstrong and determined in her youth, Lucile had made arrangements to lease some unused space from a local barber, and on February 6, 1937, Lucile opened her dress shop with \$300 worth of inventory. Historically, the location was extremely favorable for the Selmans, as it was nestled conveniently between the popular dime store and the A&P.

According to a statement from Buford, during the store's prime they were able to regularly make half of their weekly business on Saturdays alone. The shop quickly became a beloved community staple, as nearly every young lady that grew up in Madison worked there at some point or another, and many residents grew to depend on it for gifts and necessities alike. The store remained under the sole ownership of Lucile and Buford for the entirety of its existence, making it the

oldest continuously-owned business in Madison. That is, until the day it burned to the ground in April of 1997.

The fateful fire started in the alleyway directly behind Lucile's, and the dress shop was the first to become engulfed in flames. While the store owners were not present, their daughter, Mary Ellen, and her husband, Tommy Greene, had urgently rushed to the scene, but by the time they were able to unlock the store to gain entry, the fire had become too involved, and the family could only look on through tears of heartbreak as the longstanding storefront was consumed by fire.

Connected to Lucile's rested Roebuck's Barber and Beauty Shop and Princess's Place, owned by Jimmy and Princess Roebuck respectively. These establishments were also quickly engulfed in the wall of fire. Jimmy made desperate efforts to enter his shop to salvage anything he could, but was



This picture shows downtown Madison stores Madison Sporting Goods, Lucile's Dress Shop and Roebuck's Barber and Beauty Shop on April 17, 1997, just a day before the fire destroyed this block.



Firefighters work to extinguish the raging fire that destroyed four downtown businesses Friday night, April 18, 1997. Here, the firemen fight a valiant but futile battle as, from left, Madison Sporting Goods, Lucile's Dress Shop, Roebuck's Barber & Beauty Shop and Princess's Place go up in flames.



Albert and Bali Thigpen watch the fire as it threatens to engulf her flower shop, located in the old Western Auto building.



MPD Chief Rick Davis (left) and Patrolman Ben Ebberson (right) stand over Madison Sporting Goods owner Alan Sowell, kneeling, as he watches his store go up in flames.



As the sun rose April 19, 1997, charred remains of downtown businesses were seen.

quickly restrained by rescue personnel. Neither he nor his wife were permitted to enter the building. Unable to do anything for their shops, the couple was forced to look on helplessly as their buildings succumbed to the flames. Jimmy Roebuck had bought the structure in 1983, and he and Princess had worked hard to fix up the place over the years for their own purposes. As a barber for over 34 years, Jimmy had expanded his barber shop from a smaller location he had rented from Tommy Greene before buying the building in town for what he said had been a good price. Princess's Place had been a boutique specializing in baby and children's clothing, but along with the merchandise lost in the fire were a number of personal keepsakes that Princess had kept there, like her own son's bassinet from when he was a baby, some 36 years before.

While the fire devoured the first few shops, another business called Madison Sporting Goods, had a few precious minutes to spare before the flames began to creep their way through. According to newspaper accounts of that night, Alan Sowell, the owner of Madison Sporting Goods, assisted by members of the community, began pulling inventory – primarily guns, ammo and other goods that were easily carried – out of the burning building and away from the fire's path. Likewise, Rob Covell, owner of the Madison Tae Kwon Do School, rushed up the stairs to collect anything he could carry and pass it along to anyone willing to carry the items across the street to safety.

"I remember a bunch of us running into Madison Sporting Goods with our arms outstretched," recalls Emerald

Greene, daughter of Tommy and Mary Ellen, nearly 30 years later. "We all formed a line, and Alan would hand us armfuls of items, whatever we could carry, and we would take it out to the sidewalk, then turn around and go back for more. Soon, the smoke got so thick, you couldn't see anything. Some of the remaining ammo started going off, so he was made to leave the store, and none of us were allowed to go back in, it was too dangerous."

Sowell reportedly had to be physically restrained from reentering his shop. In a news article published in April of 1997 by the *Madison Enterprise Recorder*, reporter Ginger Jarvis wrote about the surreal moments that followed the extinguishing of the blaze, capturing the words of a relieved firefighter to a friend who worked for the police department. She wrote:

"Relieved enough to put some humor to his voice, [the firefighter] asked, 'So what did you do all night, direct a little traffic?' The policeman retorted, 'I kept Alan out of that store, and that's the hardest work anybody did here.'"

During the heat of the blaze, it was quickly realized that the fire was too aggressive and intense to be able to save the shops that were already enveloped in flames, so efforts shifted in earnest to trying to prevent the fire from spreading to the rest of the city. A reportedly windy evening made this extremely difficult, and as citizens looked on in horror, other business owners began trying to salvage irreplaceable items from their buildings, desperately hoping to minimize their looming losses, should the fire rescue teams' efforts be unsuccessful. Personnel with the local newspaper office quickly

began removing the newspaper archives, which would be impossible to replace. County employees assisted in carrying important documents and records out of other buildings and away from the path of the fire.

Efforts to prevent the fire from raging through the city were aided by 25 different fire rescue teams, as emergency responses continued to come flooding in from neighboring communities. Madison Fire & Rescue, with their team of 20 personnel and three pumpers, was aided by tanker trucks, pumpers, fire engines, aerial teams and countless fire rescue persons from Live Oak, Falmouth, Jasper, Perry, Taylor County, Shady Grove, Tallahassee, Jefferson County, Lowndes County, Hamilton, Jennings, Valdosta, Hamburg-Lovett, Lee, New Home, Cherry Lake, Clyattville, Twins Lakes, Bemiss Barretts, Westside, Sirmans, Greenville, Pinetta and South Brooks County. These firefighting teams were also assisted by the American Red Cross and Dixie County EMS, who was assisted by Gilchrist County, who covered Dixie County so they could respond in Madison.

Jarvis wrote, "... Madison did not go to this dance alone. A fire truck from Pinetta pulled behind the Courthouse Annex, firefighters climbed onto the roof, and a jet of water beat back the flames trying to gain entrance there. Units from [other counties and areas] flowed into town and took up stations along the streets, poised to pick up the reel if sparks ignited anywhere else. Their personnel directed traffic, patrolled the crowds and spelled weary Madison firefighters and EMTs at the pumps."

The battle raged on for nearly three hours, and by 1 a.m. the nightmare was

finally over, as the flames and embers were extinguished at last. Due to the collective efforts of countless individuals who risked their very lives to save the city of Madison, the fire that had threatened to consume the entire town was contained to the 200-block area of South Range Street. Several additional shops suffered significant heat, smoke and water damage that evening, including Base Street Florist, Madison Tae Kwan Do and Cowart & Zant law offices. The Courthouse Annex, however, was spared and suffered no damage from the fire. The four shops directly connected to the alleyway – Lucile's, Roebuck's, Princess's Place and Madison Sporting Goods – were completely destroyed in the blaze. Miraculously, no deaths or significant injuries were reported, although several individuals were administered oxygen as needed at the scene.

Incredibly, 380,000 gallons of water were used to extinguish the fire, which was responsible for causing an estimated \$650,000 in damages in just three hours. Today, that is the equivalent of around \$1,280,000.

In a letter to the editor, published in the *Madison Enterprise Recorder* on April 30, 1997, the Madison County EMS Director Juan Botino, stated, *"On Friday, April 18, I saw cooperation, concern and compassion on a mass scale, like I have never witnessed in 25 years of working EMS. Five of those years were spent working the streets of Dade County, and during numerous incidents, I never saw a fraction of the teamwork and caring that took place that Friday night. I would like to thank everyone that turned out to help. There are so many of you that it is impossible to mention you all by name... To all the other departments and communities from outside Madison County, we are forever in your debt... If we could implement the spirit of cooperation, compassion, caring and concern that were exhibited that Friday evening, in our every day dealings with each other, the world would be a better place to live."*

The cause of the fire was believed to be arson, although in the weeks, months and years that followed, no arrests were ever made. Madison County Sheriff at the time, Joe Peavy, stated that although the department had been looking into the case, there was simply not enough physical evidence to be able to make an arrest and press charges against anyone. It was believed that one of the discarded cigarettes from earlier that Friday evening had been the cause of the resulting inferno, and the juveniles that had been present in the alleyway that evening

were brought in for questioning. Within a month of the fire, law enforcement officers felt that they had a key witness that would be able to provide them with the information required to lead to an arrest, but the juvenile later refused to participate in a lie-detector test and their statement was never put on record. As such, 28 years later, the case remains unsolved.

Steadily, the city of Madison recovered from this devastating event, and even some of the business owners who lost it all were able to reopen their shops and resume business. Jimmy Roebuck moved his barber shop to a new location down on Range Street to a house that was owned by his father-in law, Otis Peavy. His wife, Princess, reopened her children's clothing boutique in the same building. Sowell reopened his sporting goods shop temporarily across from the police station while reconstruction of the original location was underway. He purchased the plots where the other three burned shops had once stood, and around a year later, he opened his new store, which spanned the entire area of the 200-block that had burned. He stayed in that location until 2013, when he sold the business. Over the years, the property that once housed the rebuilt Madison Sporting Goods store has been divided and exchanged hands several times. Today, the spot is occupied by an Edward Jones Financial office and We Pack & Mail. Lucile and her husband Buford retired. Fundraisers and continuous community outreach showered the victims of the fire with love, support and assistance for months following the dreadful blaze. Appreciation picnics were organized to thank the EMS and fire teams that worked so diligently to save the city of Madison.

Despite the years that have passed, the fire has lingered in more ways than one, particularly in the hearts of the people it once threatened.

"It's amazing how people come to your aid when you are in need," reflects Alan Sowell, in an interview 28 years after the harrowing events of that night. "The people of Madison were really good to me and my family – I have tried ever since to remember to pay it forward and take care of others and treat everyone as well as people treated me and my family after the fire."

Sowell mentions that in his desperate attempts to preserve what he could from the flames that night, he injured his knee pretty severely. After two different failed surgeries over the years, he finally had to have a full knee replacement. His injury wasn't much of a thought that night, however, as he only remembers "running

around trying not to lose everything [he] had."

"It was a shock to us," recalls Princess Roebuck, in a recent interview with *The Front Porch Magazine*. "I just couldn't believe it. It was Down Home Days, so we had just finished the street dance, which is kind of like a big party, and I was already in bed. I got a phone call, and they said, 'Downtown Madison is burning down.' We couldn't speak, we didn't hardly believe it. I'll never forget not knowing what we'd do... there was a feeling of everything you own being tied up in the business. I turned to God to know what to do from there."

Princess and Jimmy were able to re-open both businesses a few blocks away, in her father's old house, which she said was just sitting unused. The couple continued running the Barber Shop and boutique for several years before Jimmy retired for his health, and Princess retired with him so she could help care for her husband. They passed the business on to their daughter, who ran it for a couple of years before closing it down.

Although much inventory, years of hard work and generations of sentimental memory were lost in the fire, the events of April 18, 1997 will forever serve as a reminder of the steadfast resilience of small towns, and what can be accomplished and preserved by our willingness to aid not just the individuals within our own communities, but the communities around us. It was the fellowship and bravery of the surrounding cities, counties and towns that responded to a neighbor's plea for help and delivered them from the maw of disaster that enabled the citizens of Madison to preserve as much of their historic and beautiful city as possible. On that fateful evening, 28 years ago, communities across North Florida came together as one, defending and protecting a city that was not their own, for no other reason than that they were asked. Countless heroes, both within Madison County and without, answered the pleas of their fellow man, and greatly changed the outcome of a fateful Friday night.

Although many expected Down Home Days to be subdued that year, the next morning dawned bright as countless citizens, many of whom had only caught a few measly hours of fitful sleep, showed up and celebrated with vigor. The parade was rerouted, the vendors moved, and the citizens and visitors united in celebration and gratitude. The memory of the horrors of the night before served only to fuel a powerful reminder of the connections that exist among small communities and the resilience of the people who live there. ■



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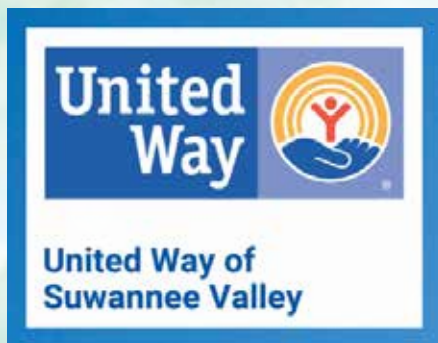
WHAT'S HAPPENING



March 5

Monticello Market Every Wednesday

The Courthouse Circle in downtown Monticello becomes an open-air market every Wednesday from 4 to 6 p.m. in the parking lot of The Social. It features a community of growers, bakers and makers who produce sustainably grown fruits, vegetables, floral bouquets, pasture raised meats, sourdough breads, honey and specialty products. Interested vendors should contact tsterling@jeffersoncountyfl.gov.



March 7

Golf for a Cause!

This tournament, sponsored by United Way of Suwannee Valley, takes place at Quail Heights Country Club (161 SW Quail Heights Ter., Lake City, Fla.). Registration begins at 7:30 a.m., with a shotgun start at 8:30 a.m. Four man teams are \$260 or \$65 per golfer. Prizes will be given for first place, second place, longest drive, closest to the pin, putting contest and more. All proceeds benefit the United Way of Suwannee Valley's Community Investment Fund. For more information, call (386) 752-5604 (Ext. 115).

March 8

Madison Local Market

Take your pick of fresh, locally grown produce and goods offered by a variety of artisans from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. at Four Freedoms Park, in Downtown Madison.

I Heart Art Craft Show

Browse an assortment of craft vendors, craft cabins and demonstrations at the Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park (11016 Lillian Saunders Dr., White Springs) from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Monticello Second Saturday

Enjoy karaoke, arts & crafts vendors, extended shopping hours and other fun in downtown historic Monticello from 5 to 8 p.m.

77th Annual Suwannee County Chamber of Commerce Gala

Cocktail hour begins at 5:30 p.m. and dinner will be served at 6:30 p.m. Tickets for this semi-formal event, held at Camp Weed (11057 Camp Weed Pl., Live Oak) are \$75 per person. For more information, call the Chamber office at (386) 362-3071.



March 8 - April 3

"Flora, Fauna and Friends" Exhibit at JAG

This exhibit showcases polymer clay mosaic paintings created at Debortina Studio. Jefferson Arts Gallery, 575 W.

Washington St., Monticello, Fla., is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling (850) 997-3311.

March 10

BINGO! at Grumpy's Diner

Five games of three cards each are split 50-50 with the Madison County Chamber of Commerce, and in a bonus game the winner takes all. Cards are \$2 each or three for \$5 (nonrefundable).



March 13-16

Suwannee Banjo Camp

Learn to play the five string banjo in nature with some of the best teachers around. Additional full-time programs include old-time fiddle, bluegrass guitar and mandolin. Nine class sessions in four different levels of instruction will take place at Camp Weed (11057 Camp Weed Pl., Live Oak). For more information or to register, visit suwanneebanjocamp.com.



March 14

Wine & Art Tour

Sip wine and browse street art while supporting local businesses with this fun night in downtown Live Oak, beginning at 5 p.m.

WHAT'S HAPPENING



March 14-15

St. Patrick's Celebration at Ragans

Ragans Family Campground holds their St. Patrick's Day festivities, with fun activities for the whole family. Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.

March 14-16

Grease at MOH

The rock-and-roll musical *Grease* gets its name from the 1950s working-class youth known as greasers. The storyline follows ten teenagers as they wrestle with peer pressure, politics, personal core values and love. The show had a 3,388-performance run on Broadway, was made into a feature film and is being staged locally at the historic Monticello Opera House. For more information and tickets, call (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

March 18

Business After Hours in Madison

This Madison County Chamber of Commerce event will be hosted by *Greene Publishing, Inc.* at 1695 S. State Road 53 from 5 until 6 p.m. Be sure to wear green to be entered into a drawing.



March 20-23

Suwannee Spring Reunion

Gather at the Spirit of Suwannee Music Park (9379 CR 132, Live Oak) for a weekend of family fun featuring bluegrass, folk and blues music. To purchase tickets, visit visitsuwannee.com/live-oak/suwannee-spring-reunion.

March 21 - April 6

Murder's in the Heir - Murder Mystery Dinner Theater at MOH

When tyrannical billionaire Simon Starkweather announces the contents of his will, surprise after surprise make a maze of the plot, and his murder naturally follows. Almost every character in this hilarious mystery could be guilty, but only the audience has the power to decide who actually is! For showtimes and ticket information, call the Monticello Opera House at (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.



March 21-29

Suwannee County Fair

Celebrate the best of the county with food, rides, animals, games, entertainment, music, agriculture, art and more at the Suwannee County Fairgrounds (1302 11th St. SW, Live Oak). For more information, visit suwanneecountyfair.com

March 27

BINGO! at The Edge of Town Bull Pen

Enjoy a fun-filled night at 8289 E. US Hwy. 90, in Lee, from 6 until 8 p.m. Five games of three cards each are split 50-50 with the Madison County Chamber of Commerce, and in a bonus game the winner takes all. Cards are \$2 each or three for \$5 (nonrefundable).

April 5

Friends of Music Presents: Silviu Ciulei and Dr. Tania Moldovan

Join Covenant First Presbyterian Church (421 White Ave. SE, Live Oak) at 7:30 p.m. for a free concert featuring two incredible musicians who will bring you the passion and beauty of classical guitar, flamenco and tango.

April 5-30

Annual Student Show at JAG

This exhibit showcases a wide variety of artwork from local students. Jefferson Arts Gallery, 575 W. Washington St., Monticello, Fla., is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling (850) 997-3311.



April 11-16

Suwannee River Wilderness Trail

Celebrate Florida's famous river with Paddle Florida's signature event. This 65-mile paddle on the historic Suwannee River, spanning six days, stops at dozens of natural springs. For more information on shuttles, gear, a packing list and the itinerary, visit www.paddleflorida.org/suwannee-river-wilderness-trail.

April 12

Family Fun Day at Camp Weed

Get ready for a day full of fun, food and family memories with a chili cook-off, an Easter egg hunt, live music, an archaeological dig, campfire stories and classic camp games. Don't miss out on hot dogs, chips and a delicious bake sale. Admission is free for kids 12 and under, and \$10 for all other individuals. The fun begins at 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Camp Weed (11057 Camp Weed Pl., Live Oak).

WHAT'S HAPPENING



Suwannee River Catfish Festival

Individuals from all over are invited to join the Branford, Fla., community on the Suwannee River Greenway (200 Trail St.) for the town's annual family-friendly festival, which offers an array of games, arts and crafts vendors, food vendors and live music. Dinners of crispy, fried catfish, baked beans, coleslaw and hush puppies will be available for \$10. Admission is free. Proceeds from the festival support the Fisher House of Gainesville and local high school scholarships.

Spring Bloom Craft Fair

Ragans Family Campground hosts their Spring Bloom Craft Fair. Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.

Christian Jubilee

Allison Acres (4076 N.E. County Rd. 150, Pinetta) will feature the musical talents of Grace Graber. Gates open at 12 p.m. and the show starts at 1 p.m. For more information, call (850) 929-2045.

Music in the Park

This day of gospel music in Veterans Memorial Park (123 SW CR 300, Mayo) begins at 1 p.m. and includes a free Boston butt meal and prize giveaways throughout the day.

Hamilton County Easter Egg Hunt 2025

Youth of all ages are invited to participate in a free Easter egg hunt from 1 to 4 p.m. in Jasper City Park (103 1st Ave. NE, Jasper, Fla.). There will be plenty of vendors on site, along with plenty of eggs, bounce houses, a dunk booth and raffles to raise funds for the Chief Tony Rickerson Memorial Fund for local scholarships.

Monticello Second Saturday

Enjoy karaoke, arts & crafts vendors, extended shopping hours and other fun in downtown historic Monticello from 5 to 8 p.m.

April 14

BINGO! at Grumpy's Diner

Five games of three cards each are split 50-50 with the Madison County Chamber of Commerce, and in a bonus game the winner takes all. Cards are \$2 each or three for \$5 (nonrefundable), 6-8 p.m. at 244 SW Range Ave., in Madison.



April 17-19, 25-27

Madagascar – A Musical Adventure

Theatre Guild Valdosta's Gingerbread Players present a stage version of the fun DreamWorks animated motion picture. Performances take place in the historic 'Dosta Playhouse (122 N. Ashley St.). For showtimes and tickets, visit www.theatreguildvaldosta.com, or call (229) 247-8243.

April 18-20

Easter Weekend at Ragans

Ragans Family Campground offers special Easter fun all weekend, with a special Sunrise Service on Sunday. Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.

April 19, 20

Easter Extravaganza at the Wildlife Center

The North Florida Wildlife Center in Lamont offers a special Easter weekend event, with a huge egg hunt, lively animal

presentations, keeper talks, crafts, food trucks, vendors and more. Special low admission for the event is just \$12 for kids and \$17 for adults at the door; \$10/\$15 when purchased in advance online at www.northfloridawildlife.org.

April 24

BINGO! at The Edge of Town Bull Pen

Enjoy a fun-filled night at 8289 E. US Hwy. 90, in Lee, 6-8 p.m. Five games of three cards each are split 50-50 with the Madison County Chamber of Commerce, and in a bonus game the winner takes all. Cards are \$2 each or three for \$5 (nonrefundable).



April 26

Down Home Days

Madison's annual celebration culminates with a parade, vendors, a frog hop, performances and much more fun for the entire family. Events take place throughout the day, from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. For more information on events throughout the week, visit the Down Home Days website at www.madisondownhomedays.com.



National Barrel Horse Association Jasper Exhibition

This exhibition takes place at the Hamilton County Riding Club (1567 Hatley St. W, Jasper) beginning at 10 a.m. Categories will include Buckaroos, Open, Open 5D, Teen 5D, Youth 5D, Senior 5D and 3D Poles. For more information, visit the association's Facebook page at www.facebook.com/NBHAFI08.

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Health & Human Services Committee

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