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Pilgrim's Pride

More Than Meets the Eye



Gus Smyrnios
Keeps It Real
on MTV

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The Front Porch

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Sittin' on the Porch with...

Keith Ragans

Story by Shelly Smith
Staff Writer

Keith Ragans, a lifelong Perry, Fla., resident, shares what it was like to grow up in Perry and how tradition, faith and hard work have been integral parts of his life. Ragans grew up with two sisters and his mom and dad, Hoyt and Betty Jo Ragans. His mom worked at the Buckeye Paper Mill, and his dad worked at the Buckeye Federal Credit Union. Ragans shares that seeing both his parents work hard during his childhood helped to instill a strong work ethic in him. Even though both his parents worked hard, they still made time for faith and family. Ragans says that during his childhood, every Wednesday and Sunday, you could find his family attending Lakeside Baptist Church. He was baptized and grew up in that church. Sunday family lunches

were spread out on the dining table, and everyone joined in for this special time. The Ragans family would eat together and then clean up from their meal together. Ragans recalls, "Mama would make a big meal and it was an important family time, growing up around the dining table." Family dinners were also shared every evening. Ragans says he spent a great deal of his childhood with his dad, hunting at Goose Pasture and fishing on the Santa Fe River.

Ragans met his wife, Marilyn, while he was studying at the University of Florida. They got married in 1988, and together, they purchased their store, Ragans Ace Hardware, in 1989. Their family grew in 1990, with the birth of their daughter, Tiffany and then again in 1993, when their son, Ryan, joined the family. Ragans and his wife, Marilyn, share that they raised their

children in their hardware store. By the time their daughter Tiffany was eight, she was able to work and run the cash register after school. That legacy of working hard and prioritizing your family with which Ragans grew up has carried on through the way that he and his wife ran their store and raised their family while growing their business.

Today, Ragans and his family still enjoy hunting and fishing as he did with his dad when he was growing up. Every year, their whole family, including three grandchildren, loads up and they spend time together in Cedar Key, Fla. Family time and family vacations are still a priority for this southern, small town family. Their daughter Tiffany chose to continue in the family business and she works in their hardware store alongside her parents. ■





Pilgrim's Pride

is more than meets the eye

Story by Lee Trawick
Staff Writer

Pilgrim's Pride is more than meets the eye; not only do they work with chicken, they also work within communities with their Hometown Strong and Better Futures programs and their Tomorrow Fund Scholarship. These programs are all headed by Jamie Chavis-Hands Borough, Pilgrim's Complex Human Resource Manager. Borough began her journey with Pilgrim's in 2017, in Sanford, N.C. A sociology graduate of Fayetteville College, Borough uses her knowledge every day when interacting with employees and working with the community to provide opportunities for tomorrow's youth. Working alongside her is Jeffrey Garner, the Complex Manager. Garner is from Pine Bluff, Ark., where he graduated from the University of Arkansas with a degree in agriculture. Although he's only been with Pilgrim's since 2013, Garner has spent his career in poultry. Teaming up through Pilgrim's, Borough and Garner have been able to contribute over \$750,000 to programs throughout the community.

Pilgrim's Pride, in Live Oak, is nothing without its employees. They take pride in their values and use them as their road map to a better tomorrow. Those values consist of determination, simplicity, availability, humility, sincerity, discipline and ownership. Although Pilgrim's may be located in Live Oak, their contributions to today's youth spread throughout Suwannee, Lafayette, Hamilton, Taylor and Madison Counties.

Their values may just be their road map to success, and people like Ana Alfonso Reyes and Luit Fuentes Piedra will lead them there. The duo are husband and wife; they arrived at Pilgrim's in 2006, after coming to the United States by way of Cuba. They have since been with Pilgrim's for 15 years. Over the years, they have moved from ground-level entry positions to machine operations to scale operations. But, their time with Pilgrim's goes much deeper than themselves. Their son, Lazaro Luit Feuntes, was a class of 2020 Suwannee High School graduate, with the hopes of going on to college. After winning the Tomorrow Fund Scholarship that Pilgrim's offers, his and his parents' dreams became a reality. The Tomorrow Fund Scholarship is a full scholarship awarded to a senior in the Suwannee County area that pays 100 percent of tuition and housing to the college of their choice.

It was a life-changing opportunity. Lazaro is now enrolled at the University of Florida, where he hopes to earn his degree in nuclear engineering.

Edgar Thomas is everything Pilgrim's is about; he has been an employee there since 1983. Thomas graduated from Madison County High School in 1983 and went to work at what was then named Goldkist, now Pilgrim's. Thomas started at ground-level before moving up in the company and is



now the Production Superintendent. Along his journey, he has made a better life for himself and his wife of 34 years, Veronica Thomas, along with their two children.

Thomas credits Pilgrim's for the opportunity for his daughter to further her education in college before joining the United States Army. "It's been a good ride; they believed in me and have been good to myself and my family. It has been a life-changer for us," Thomas said. He went on to offer words of advice to anyone looking for stability and a career with the opportunity for advancement. "I encourage anyone to come to Pilgrim's; you will get out of it what you put in it. will be provided every opportunity to advance within the company with benefits and security." Over the years, Thomas is proud to say he has seen many changes, such as all the technical leaps the company has made to provide a better and safe environment for its employees.

Glenn "Rambo" Clark is another team

member who is part of Pilgrim's heartbeat. He has been a valued asset to the company for 25 years. Clark graduated from Columbia High School in 1986, where he joined the United States Marines for four years before returning home and taking a job on the front lines of the former Goldkist. Clark admits he was only looking for a job, but he then realized he had a career in front of him with endless opportunities. Twenty-five years later, he showed interest in the information technology (IT) side of the company, and it wasn't long before he was offered the opportunity to get into that field. He has been in the IT field since 2003 and now carries the title of IT Specialist/LAN Administrator for the entire company. "Over 25 years, we have grown and progressed so much. From the training aspect, our employees are better trained for their positions, which allows them to work efficiently and safely," Clark said. "The biggest change is how much the company focuses on the family side of their employees. The company offers opportunities for college to all of its employees to help provide a better lifestyle away from Pilgrim's. They also offer a 401k plan for all of their employees from the first day of employment."

Chuck Floyd also holds the gold standard of an employee. Floyd is a homegrown Suwannee County boy who was raised in poultry. After graduating from Suwannee High School, Floyd joined the United States Army National Guard in 1993, where he served for six years. At the same time, he was looking for a career that offered the same core values with which he was raised by his parents, somewhere that valued a strong work ethic. In 1996, he found that career at Goldkist. He started as a truck driver, before moving to deal with the hatchery side of operations, then moved into the feed mill side of things when he caught the eye of upper management. He was then asked to join management. From there, he advanced to his current position of Live Operations Manager. He is responsible for everything outside of the plant, from dealing with the growers to the time the chickens arrive at the plant. During his career, he met his wife of 20 years, Haley Floyd and raised their two daughters. Floyd is grateful for the opportunities his career choice has given him. "At Pilgrim's, it's all about getting your foot in the door; the possibilities are



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limitless. The only limits we have are the ones we put on ourselves," Floyd said. "As parents, we always want better for our children, and here, I hope to provide that for my children. I am grateful for my parents, who have instilled a strong work ethic. Nothing is free and you have to work for anything of any value. My parents taught me that, and I hope to instill those same values in my daughters. It's also what Pilgrim's believes in; that's one of the many reasons I have stayed here. They value a strong ethic and everyone is rewarded with many different opportunities if they want it."

Abigail Carmenates is a native of New York and moved to Puerto Rico when she was three-years-old. She then moved to Miami when she was 17-years-old, before moving to Lee, Fla., with her husband of 34 years, Alexander Carmenates, in 1987. Then, in 1999, she moved to Live Oak. On Sept. 2, 1997, she began working at Pilgrim's. Carmenates started at ground-level as a de-boner, where she worked for two years

before moving into human resources (HR) in 1999, for all Spanish-speaking employees. She worked with the employees who did not speak English, from filling out an application to getting in the door and throughout their careers. She has been working in the HR department for 22 years now, totaling 24 years with the company. She prides herself on taking care of anything their employees need. "Whether someone wants a company t-shirt, to someone needing things more serious, Pilgrim's wants its employees to be kept safe and cared for in their personal lives and within their company," said Carmenates. "That is my job here, and I love it how they don't view their employees as employees, but as a family, even when they go home to their families." You never want your family to want for anything, and that is how Pilgrim's feels about their family. She and her husband have raised their three sons and one daughter throughout her career. She will be forever grateful for their family's life that she says she owes to Pilgrim's for

providing.

Tiffany Billie comes from Sumpter, S.C. She began her career with Pilgrim's when she was 18-years-old in 2010, before she transferred from South Carolina to Live Oak in 2020. She started in production before moving up into the HR department. Then, once a position became available in Live Oak, she jumped at the opportunity. "It's twice the size of the plant I came from, and there are so many opportunities here. I love how the job challenges me here and how the company is geared towards taking care of its employees. Pilgrim's tries to improve everyone's lives here," Billie said. "I like how they are open innovation here and always trying to find ways to offer more and more opportunities for their employees and the community." She went on to talk about what sets Pilgrim's apart from other companies, which is they do not hire a lot from outside. "They recognize the talent they have here in their employees and choose to invest in them." ■



Ana Alfonso Reyes and Liut Fuentes - "We came here from Cuba and are blessed to be able to be here for 15 years and put our son in a position through the 'Tomorrow Fund Scholarship' to attend the University of Florida and pursue his dreams as a nuclear engineer."



Glen Clark (Rambo) - "The biggest change is how much the company focuses on the family side of their employees. The company offers opportunities for college to all of its employees to help provide a better lifestyle away from Pilgrim's Pride. They also offer a 401K plan for all of its employees from the first day of employment."



Abigail Carmenates - "Whether someone wants a company tee-shirt to someone needing things more serious. Pilgrim's Pride wants its employees to be kept safe and cared for in their personal lives and within their company. That is my job here, and I love it, how they don't view their employees as employees but as a family even when they go home to their families."



Tiffany Billie - "They recognize the talent they have here in their employees and choose to invest in them."



Chuck Floyd - "At Pilgrim's Pride, it's all about getting your foot in the door; the possibilities are limitless. The only limits we have are the ones we put on ourselves."



Jeffrey Garner and Jamie Chavis-Handsborow have teamed up through Pilgrim's Pride to contribute over \$750,000 throughout Suwannee County and surrounding communities.



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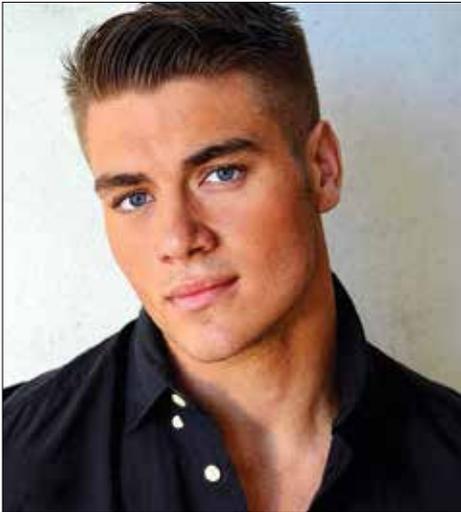
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[Gus Smyrnios/Courtesy]

GUS SMYRNIOS KEEPS IT REAL ON



Photography provided by Gus Smyrnios
Story by Mickey Starling
Staff Writer

Perry native Gus Smyrnios grew up as a somewhat typical teenager in the rural coastal community known as the Tree Capital of the South. While climbing trees may have crossed his mind a few times, Smyrnios had other things coming his way that would take him to a different sort of height. When he was 21 years old, Smyrnios was enjoying a trip to Daytona Beach, when he had a chance encounter with a photographer who liked his “look.” Smyrnios began doing a few photo shoots with him but not expecting much to come from them since he was new to the modeling business. To his surprise, between 15 and 20 of his first photos sold quickly. Smyrnios decided to further pursue modeling and began doing self-promotions on Facebook and other social media outlets. Since that time, his photos have appeared on approximately 156 book covers.

The modeling was going well for Smyrnios, who was doing a photo shoot in Canada about three months later, when he got a call from an MTV producer who had seen some of his photographs. “They were looking for a ‘redneck’ who wasn’t too backwards,” remembers Smyrnios. The show that MTV had in the works was called “Floribama Shores,” which was a sequel

to “Jersey Shore,” which ran from 2009 through 2012. Smyrnios finds it ironic that he was often teased in high school for having a “Jersey Shore” look about him.

Auditioning for the new show was an extensive process that began with 8,000 applicants. After about five rounds of interviews, the number of potential cast members was reduced to 500. Then, there was “on the town” filming, done in Panama City for the first season, where potential cast

members were filmed while interacting with others to see how well they performed with the cameras rolling. This process got fast tracked for Smyrnios, who was chosen to audition after producers rejected two of the final eight participants.

The premise for “Floribama Shores” is pretty simple. Quarantine four young ladies and four young men in a large house for two months, while providing plenty of liquor and free time. This formula will get the





group talking rather freely about everything, especially each other. Drama will naturally develop, and when it doesn't, show producers are skilled at pushing all the right "buttons" to crank up some friction. Smyrnios, who is now on his fourth season of the show, recalls the first two seasons were more authentic to reality, while the later seasons have been more scripted at times.

He has evolved in the show as the antagonist to the other cast members, primarily because he often doesn't take the "bait" from the producers as they work to stir up trouble that makes for good filming. "I like to remain true to myself while on set," said Smyrnios. "I bring real-life problems to the show, and I've received messages from fans who have been helped because of my honesty."

All of that honesty being broadcast on national television created some bumpy roads at home during the first season, but family and friends have come to terms with it over time. For Smyrnios, living under the camera lights 24 hours a day for two months is a constant adjustment to what might be

Gus Smyrnios (left) gets the upper hand on a fellow contestant on MTV's "The Challenge." He will return to the show once he heals from a recent motorcycle accident. [Gus Smyrnios/Courtesy]



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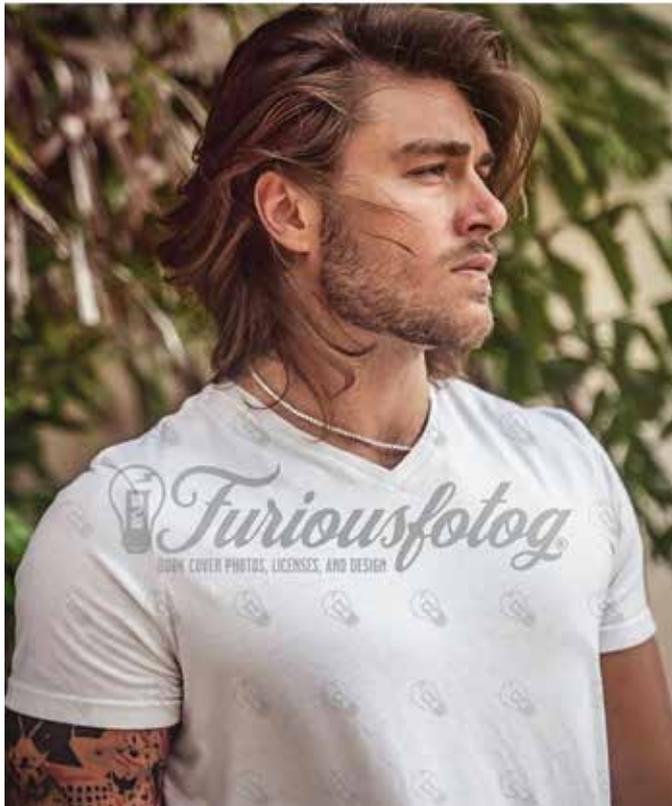
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coming next. On a few occasions, he has found himself in the middle of a fist fight, he has also been thrown up on during the show.

During an episode on Season Four the producers were at their wicked best when Smyrnios forgot to bring a hairdryer to the group's house. He asked the producers to get him one, but they suggested he borrow one from one of the girls, which he did. Little did he know that one of the producers told the young lady that Smyrnios had stolen her hairdryer, which caused her to become very angry. "She freaked out on me," said Smyrnios, who left the house for several hours after the incident, even though that was not allowed. "The story line they were creating was making me really angry because I get tired of being made the bad guy," said Smyrnios.

Those creative story lines sometimes have ripple effects all the way back home to Perry, where family members have received death threats and other unwanted attention from fans who have taken "Floribama Shore" a bit too seriously. "Social media tends to stir up a lot of stuff," said Smyrnios, who has learned to take whatever comes in stride. He is taking acting classes, with hopes of becoming a scripted actor. Though making that leap will be a challenge, Smyrnios welcomes the opportunity to keep moving forward with his career, and he has good advice for others with similar desires. "You need thick skin," said Smyrnios. "Chase your dreams and ignore the negative stuff and all the haters. Just go for it. I caught a lot of flack for going into modeling, until I became successful."

Speaking of challenges, you may have also seen Smyrnios on MTV's "The Challenge." He has taken a break from that show due to a recent motorcycle injury, but he plans on returning as soon as he has healed. For all of his success so far with reality television, Smyrnios breaks into a photogenic smile as he admits, "I'm too real for reality TV." Considering the longevity of "Floribama Shores," fans must be just fine with that. ■



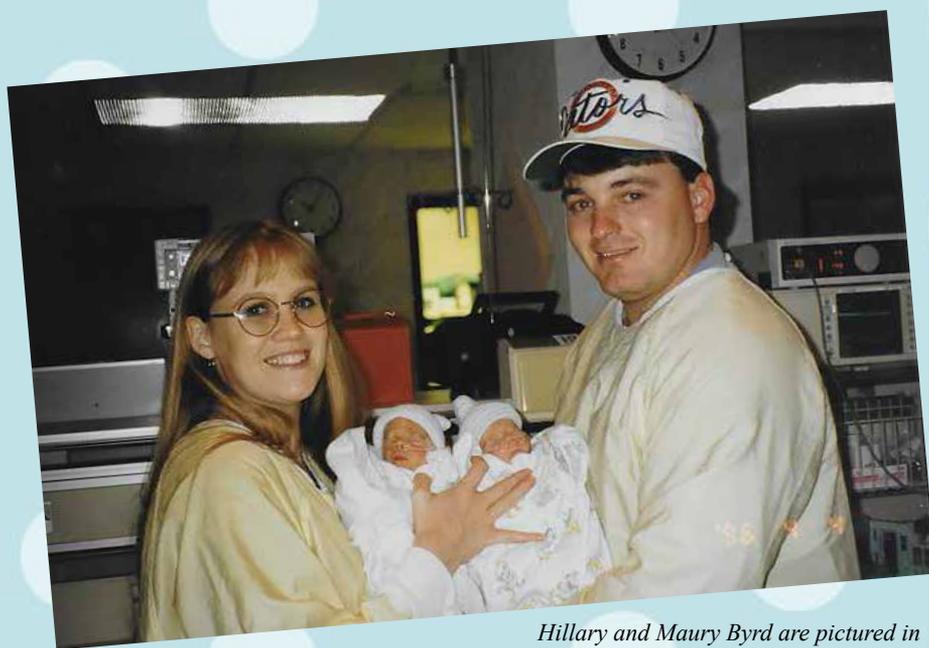
Gus Smyrnios is pictured on one of the many novel covers he has been featured on. So far, he has appeared on over 150 book covers. [Gus Smyrnios/Courtesy]



One of the newest photos from Gus Smyrnios' most recent photo shoot. [CJC Photography/Courtesy]

Against All Odds

The story of Mason and Myles Byrd



Hillary and Maury Byrd are pictured in 1996 holding their twins for the first time.

Story by Lee Trawick
Staff Writer

Hillary and Maury Byrd, high school sweethearts from Lafayette County, were married in 1995. When she was 20-years-old and he was 22-years-old, Hillary informed Maury they were expecting. While Hillary thought she had the surprise of Maury's life, the real surprise came a few weeks later at their first sonogram. "Maury and I went for our first sonogram, expecting to find out if it was a boy or girl," Hillary recalled. "We were looking at the screen intently, unsure what we were looking at when the technician made a comment that warranted a reaction. When she

didn't get the response she was expecting, she turned and looked at us and said, 'You know you're having twins, right?' Maury sank into a chair. We were both speechless for a few seconds before we managed to shake our heads 'no'. We were floating; very excited, but still in shock a little. But that explained why I looked nine months pregnant when I was only 18 weeks."

It was only one week later they found out they were having identical twins. Hillary was also told her's was considered a high-risk pregnancy, as there was only a thin membrane separating the two while they shared placenta and were in the same gestational sac. Things made a turn

for the worst at 23 weeks, when Hillary had not felt right all day. After Hillary's mother advised her to call her doctor, she and Maury were advised to visit North Florida Medical Center to get checked out. It was there the couple's worst fears had become a reality; Hillary was in labor and doctors did not expect the babies to make it through the night. "Everything was a whirlwind from that point forward; they gave me particular steroids to help their lungs develop," Hillary said. She was then transported to Shands UF in Gainesville via ambulance.

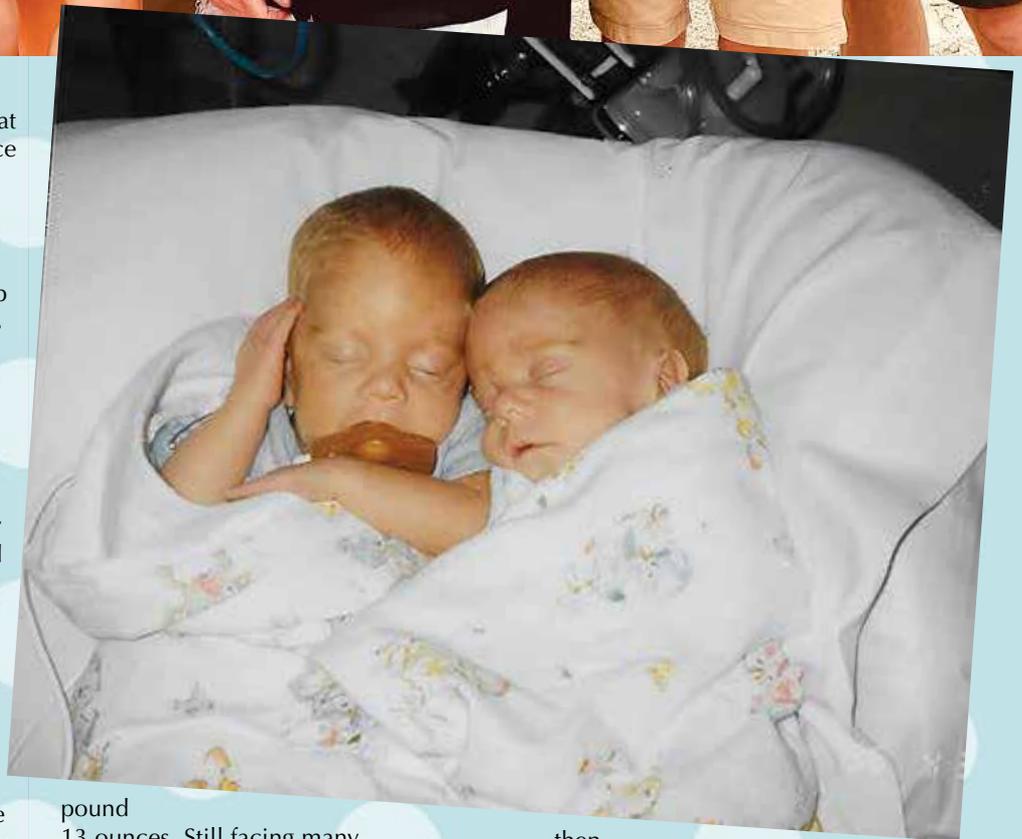
Hillary was able to receive two doses of steroids before the boys were born, during which time they developed Twin to Twin Transfusion Syndrome (TTTS), a rare condition that only occurs in identical twins, where the blood flows unevenly between the babies that share a placenta. At that point, the doctor had to perform an amnioreduction, where the doctor must extract amniotic fluid from gestational sac using a needle by ultrasound. The first procedure resulted in removing one liter of fluid. Then, the day before the babies were born, Hillary underwent two more amnioreduction procedures.

To fully understand the magnitude and severity of their circumstances, the nurses asked every night, when Maury and Hillary were alone, "If the babies are born tonight, what kind of life-saving measures do you want us to perform on them?" Their answer never wavered. "Everything you can," Hillary said. "Several days before the babies were born, the pediatric head neurologist informed us that if the babies survived, there was a 75 percent chance



they would develop cerebral palsy. Of that 75 percent, there was a 50 percent chance that it would be severe, as they would be confined to a wheelchair their whole lives." Then, at 27 weeks, Maury and Hillary were informed there was nothing else the doctors could do for them to stop labor from happening and delivering was imminent. "The day the boys were born, we had three different pastors stop by to pray with us," Hillary said. "That was not a coincidence; I wholeheartedly believe that was God being there with us. The power of prayer is so strong. It is so real. Our entire community, our church family and even people from other counties and throughout the state continued to pray for us from the day I was admitted."

On Feb. 19, 1996, the moment had arrived. Then, as soon as their baby boys were born, they were taken away to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). It was days before Hillary and Maury could hold their sons. While they still had more questions than answers and the odds were still stacked against them, their sons survived; they were alive. Maury and Hillary were the proud parents of Mason, two pounds one ounce, and Myles, one



pound 13 ounces. Still facing many obstacles and still remaining in incubators, Mason and Myles fought for their lives. "It seemed they would take two steps forward,

then one step backward during that time," Hillary recalled. "We took turns going from one incubator to the



Miracle twins Myles and Mason Byrd

other. It was a relief when they were able to put them side by side." They remained in the hospital for three months before they could take their babies home. While in the hospital, Mason faced one more obstacle, as he had to have laser eye surgery. Premature babies are susceptible to retinal vessel development issues and, as a result, they are at a high risk of retinal detachment, which can cause blindness.

The day Maury and Hillary got to hold their babies for the first time was a chaos of emotions. "We were excited and terrified all at the same time," Hillary said. "They still had so many wires hooked up to them; a heart monitor, respiratory monitors and oxygen. There were all kinds of beeps and alarms and they were still so little. Once we held them in our arms, the fear was still there, but there was so much more relief and exhaustion and tears. But, what stands out the most was the love that overwhelmed us for our babies. We got to hold Mason first, then Myles second and to think we got to experience those feelings twice, because it didn't matter that we just went through those emotions holding Mason, they were such miracles that we were so overwhelmed all over again holding Myles."

Then in May, Mason came home two weeks before Myles could. Both babies

went home with heart monitors to detect if their heart rates dropped or stopped. With the boys being born so premature, they were at high risk of developmental and physical delays. However, with the power of prayer, both Myles and Mason never showed any signs of issues. "They were extremely busy little men, there was never a dull moment," said Hillary. Experiencing the birth of her sons helped direct her course of education from pharmacy to nursing, leading her to become the Nurse Practitioner she is today. "I saw daily what a difference they made. The nursing care we received was phenomenal; the nurses were literally with us day and night. For example, I worked alongside the nurse practitioner who was the boys' nurse in the NICU while I was in nursing school. Then, when I was doing my internship, I got to learn from some of the same nurses that had taken care of my boys and me five years before."

"The day I was supposed to start my hours in the NICU was Sept. 11, 2001," said Hillary. "We were sent home after only a few hours because of the attack on the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon. Once I got home, all I wanted to do was hold my babies. I remember sitting in the recliner holding my babies when one of them leaned in and told me I smelled so

good, then they both snuggled in tight. I knew immediately what that meant; I smelled like the NICU. I knew what they were referring to; it brought back so many memories and emotions."

Myles and Mason got the opportunity to be big brothers to Micah, who was born in 1998 and Max, who was born in 2003. Upon graduating from Lafayette High School, Myles joined the United States Navy, where he served four years before returning to Lafayette County and choosing a career in law enforcement. Mason owns his own burial vault business. He is married to Sydney Byrd and, together, they have a daughter, Aspen. Myles is engaged to Kinady Crews and is hoping to get married in 2022, where they will start a family of their own shortly after.

With the power of prayer and by the grace of God, Mason and Myles have lived life to the fullest and have no plans of slowing down. "When the boys used to lay down at night, they would lay in their beds, supposedly going to sleep, and it wouldn't be long after laying them down we could hear them talking and giggling," Hillary said. "Can you imagine having your best friend spend the night with you every night? That's exactly how they were and still are today." ■



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**UF's first female
Rhodes Scholar**

Aímee Clesí



Story by Lee Trawick

Staff Writer

Aimee Clesi, from O'Brien, graduated from Branford High School as the Co-Valedictorian in 2018. She then graduated from Florida Gateway College, before landing at the University of Florida (UF) in Gainesville. Although she has not yet graduated from UF, Clesi has put herself in the stratosphere of former U.S. Presidents, Secretaries of State, Noble Prize winners, Grammy winners, U.S. Senators and Hall of Fame basketball players. This is because Clesi is the first female in UF's history to ever win the prestigious honor of a Rhodes Scholarship.

The Rhodes Scholarship is considered the most prestigious international scholarship for American college graduates. While the

scholarship was established in 1903, it has only been open to women since 1976. Not only is Clesi the first woman from UF to receive this honor, but she is also UF's first Rhodes Scholar since 2000.

In order to be considered as a Rhodes Scholar, Clesi had to begin the application process in July of 2021. At this time, students first have to get the endorsement of their home college. Clesi not only got the endorsement from UF, but she also received endorsement from two lawyers and Bobby Lynch, who was her boss and mentor while she worked at Ichetucknee Springs State Park. Lynch is someone Clesi holds very dear to her heart and appreciates for giving her and her sister the opportunity to work while the world was in shut-down mode over the Covid pandemic. At that stage, there were over 2,300 students in the application process. Of the 2,300 students who applied, only 247 colleges were represented, 90 percent of which were Ivy League universities.



In the second phase of the process, the Rhodes Scholar trust is broken into 16 U.S. districts, where the top two from each district were sent before a selection committee. Because of the pandemic, the selection committee met via Zoom with all 32 finalists on Thursday, Nov. 18, and Friday, Nov. 19.

"It was a bit intimidating, considering almost, if not all, were coming from private institutions and there I was, in a Zoom meeting with all of these worthy applicants," Clesi said. "I didn't think I had a chance." Clesi went on to talk about her experience in the meeting that could instantly change her life forever. "They had us in these Zoom chat rooms, where we were in a group of three. At any given moment they could switch us out of one room and into

another room."

On Saturday, Nov. 20, after two hours of being on a Zoom call, all the applicants were in one room where everyone could see each other. After the long wait, Mark Crosswright, Chairman of the Rhodes Scholarship Committee, entered the Zoom room and wasted no time. After a brief congratulations to all the finalists, he named Clesi the winner of the 2022 Rhodes Scholarship.

Clesi will graduate from UF in May with a double Bachelor's Degree in Philosophy and History. Upon graduation, she hopes to continue her education at Oxford University, in the pursuit of a law degree. However, Clesi is modest in speaking of her goal. "There is no guarantee I will get into Oxford University," Clesi said, even though the university has a particular office in their administration for Rhodes Scholars. Clesi plans to use this opportunity to further her education and ultimately focus on fighting wrongful convictions when she returns home.





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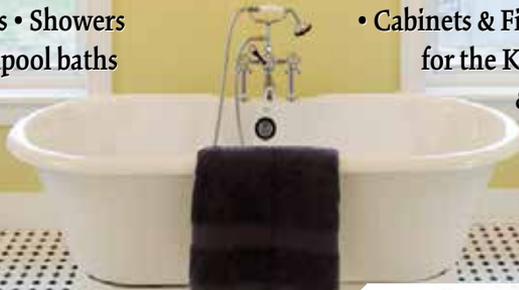
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HERBERT PERRY

MYTH OR LEGEND?

Story by Lee Trawick
Staff Writer

Herbert Perry was born in Live Oak on Sept. 15, 1969, and was raised in Mayo on his family's dairy farm. People may have thought Herbert was born into the shadow of his father, Edward Perry; after all, the legacy Edward left at Lafayette High School (LHS) was so significant, no-one could live up to it, having pitched a no-hitter for his first game on LHS's varsity team. After high school, Edward went to a major league tryout with the Los Angeles Dodgers, where he was offered \$5,000 to sign on the spot. However, he could not stand the idea of leaving home. Then, after the sudden death of his father, baseball became an afterthought all-together.

However, despite his father's success, Herbert never felt the pressure of Edward's shadow. He was raised to be the best version of himself and no-one else. He heard about his father's stories, both far-fetched and true, from everyone except for Edward. "Daddy never really liked talking about himself. If you asked him something, he would only acknowledge what was said, but would rarely tell the story from his views about himself. That's just how Daddy was," Herbert said. "He never needed the praise of others. So, when Dana, Chan and myself came along, we were free to be our own person."

It didn't take long for Herbert to build his own legacy. Unfortunately, his legacy grew so broad, so fast, that the line between fiction and non-fiction blurred. The stories are about a 14-year-old Herbert who hit a home-run with a broken arm; who hit a 500-foot home-run in high school; who struck out 210 of the 260 batters he faced in his senior year; who knocked a brick out of the centerfield wall at the Suwannee High School baseball field and who kicked a 67-yard field goal in football practice. The legend of Herbert Perry is half-mythical,

while the other half is mind-blowing. Herbert laughs at the stories he has heard over the years, but is quick to correct what is true and what has become a myth.

Herbert's resumé includes a bidding war between the Toronto Blue Jays major league baseball team and the University of Florida (UF). The Blue Jays offered Herbert a free agent contract following his senior season in high school. Eventually, he accepted a football scholarship offered to him by UF upon graduating from LHS in 1987. Herbert was a two-sport athlete while at UF, playing football for the Gators as both quarterback and punter, as well as playing first and third base for the baseball team.

Herbert was a vital part of the first UF Gators baseball team to reach the College World Series twice. He also piled on individual awards, including the two-time All Southeastern Conference (SEC) team as a third baseman, Most Valuable Player Award in the SEC Tournament, in 1991 and the Most Valuable Player Award in the Gainesville Regional Tournament, in 1991. Herbert was also the Gators' Most Valuable Player in both 1989 and 1991.

He later left football to focus on baseball, where he went on to become the second pick for the Cleveland Indians in the 1994 Major League Baseball Draft. Herbert then climbed through the ranks of the minor leagues before making his major league debut on May 3, 1994. Throughout his major league career, Herbert played for four different teams: the Cleveland Indians (1994-1998), the Tampa Bay Devil Rays (1999-2000), the Chicago White Sox (2000-2001) and the Texas Rangers (2002-2004). He also played in one American League Championship Series, then in the World Series with the Cleveland Indians against the Atlanta Braves in 1995. These facts are not disputed. However, many other "facts" are hard to validate.

The fact behind the broken arm home

run. The legend of Herbert Perry may have started when he was 14-years-old. His senior league baseball team was going into



extra innings and Herbert's team had run out of pitches. Herbert walked to the plate with his bat in his left hand and stood in the right-handed batter's box. He wore a cast on his right hand, protecting a broken wrist. Billy Shows threw a fastball. Herbert saw it, swung with one hand and lobbed it over the left fence. No one was surprised Herbert's team won the game.

The myth of the missing brick in centerfield. For years a brick had been missing in the centerfield wall of the Suwannee High School baseball field. The myth behind it is Herbert hit a line drive so hard that he knocked a brick out of the wall. As a tribute to such a feat, the brick wasn't replaced until years later. Herbert laughs at the story as he straightens out the truth. "Roger Wagoner started that story when I hit

a line drive off the wall in centerfield that bounced all way back to the infield. I hit that ball hard, but I didn't knock a brick out of the wall," Herbert said. "I was 14-years-old and we were playing All-Stars there. We were playing Hamilton County All-Stars and Wagoner was playing centerfield."

The fact behind the "Perry grunt." This myth grew when Herbert was a sophomore at the University of Florida, playing baseball for the Gators. In a home game against the Florida State Seminoles, he stepped to the plate and sent a line drive over the right-center field wall for his first collegiate home-run. By then, Herbert had already solidified his place as a crowd favorite. Many claim Herbert grunted so loudly it was heard throughout the stadium, leading many to believe that was the beginning of what grew to be the "Perry grunt." The truth to the "Perry grunt," though, is that it started when he was 10-years-old in little league. Although, Herbert does chuckle when he talks about the story. "It's something that started when I was 'bout 10-years-old, but most of the time, if I grunted, I hit a home-run," Herbert said. "The grunt really started because Daddy never thought I was giving it my all, so I started grunting to show him I was giving it everything I had. It's embarrassing, really."

The myth of the 500-foot home-run.



This story takes place when Herbert was a senior in high school at baseball practice. While at batting practice, he hit a ball 420-feet over the centerfield fence. However, the story goes that he hit the ball so hard it hit the roof of the house across the road, meaning the ball would have traveled 500-feet. This myth still roams around the LHS baseball field today. Herbert is quick to straighten out the facts. "No, I did not

hit the roof of the house," Herbert said. "The ball bounced and hit the house. But no, I did not hit the ball on the roof of the house."

The fact behind the 67-yard field goal. Being a three-time consecutive national winner in the punt, pass and kick nationwide competition, no one was surprised that Herbert's punting skills, along with his quarterback play, earned him a football scholarship to UF. But, what may be surprising is the story of his 67-yard field goal kick. Many find this story hard to believe, but this story is not a myth. Herbert lined up during practice from 67-yards out, with Billy Shows as his holder, and kicked the ball through the uprights. Herbert is proud of that feat and witnesses assure it did, in fact, happen.

The fact behind the "end it and let's go home" home-run. Herbert was a junior when the LHS baseball team was playing in Bell, Fla. He had already hit two home-runs earlier in the game but, in the sixth inning, the Hornets only needed one more run to finish their opponents under the 10-run mercy rule. That day, his father, Edward, told him: "Herbert, son, we are out of pitching. Go up there, bat right-handed and hit it out of here and let's go home." The walk-off home-run that followed gave Herbert his third home-run of the game. While

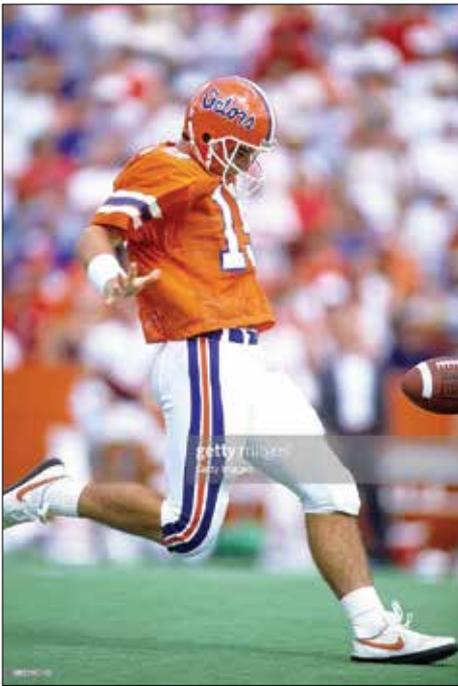


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the stories often get intertwined with one another, the broken arm home-run is not the same home-run as the “end it and let’s

go home” one.

The fact behind 210 strikeouts in one season. In sports, everything is measured by statistics. The story goes that Herbert struck out 210 of the 260 batters he faced his senior year. This story is backed by how he pitched every other game until the Hornets were making a run into the playoffs; then he pitched every game. Teams complained that he threw so much that FHSAA changed the pitching rule, now known as the pitch count rule, due to Herbert and another player.

In today’s game, 100 strikeouts in a season is a milestone. But, the milestone that Herbert achieved by striking out 210 of the 260 batters he faced in his senior year is a milestone others will no longer be able to beat.

Being a myth or legend isn’t for Herbert to decide, but he is proud of his accomplishments. “I matured physically faster than others is all. God blessed me with talent and I’m grateful for that. He gave me a great father and coach and I’m even more grateful for that,” Herbert said. Herbert smiles at the memories of heated arguments he and his dad would get into on the field and in the dugouts. “We were

both extremely fiery competitors and we hated to lose at anything, so we would get into it now and then, but it never once changed our relationship. He was my daddy and I knew where he was coming from. I was what I was in baseball because of my daddy. Every year, in spring training, I always led the big leagues in home-runs. That was all because I had been facing the greatest pitcher I ever saw for a month before going to spring training.”

“I’ve faced a lot of greats, and I’m not taking anything away from any of them, but my daddy was the best I ever faced. He was Greg Maddox with a 12-6 curveball. Had he stayed with baseball, he would have been a first-ballot Hall-of-Famer,” Herbert said. “Ben McDonald, on an illegal mound got the best of me my freshman year at Florida; that was the only time in my life I faced a pitcher I thought was as good as my dad.”

Herbert is proud of his career, but he is more proud that it was his daddy who coached him and taught him about baseball and life. While others may have stories of Herbert, he clings to the stories he has with his daddy the most. ■



Herbert is pictured with his family. Pictured in the back row, from left to right, are: Drew, Herbert and Sheila. Pictured in the second row, from left to right, are: Kelbey and Gabrielle. Pictured in the front row, from left to right, are: Becca, Ethan, Harper (behind held) and Olivia.



Three of the child extras portray their best zombie faces. [Seth Adams/Courtesy]

Local filmmaker is **INFECTED** with a **CREATIVE MIND**

Story by Christian Peterson
Staff Writer

Seth Adams is a Hamilton County native. He has grown up with a love and adoration for the natural setting in which he was raised. At eight-years-old, Adams got a hold of his mother's camera. Soon, he was filming short videos with elaborate stories and designs behind them. Making small movies from a very young age, Adams continued filming as he grew. Eventually, Adams wished to pursue further and planned on going to Full Sail University. His goal was to earn a \$25,000 scholarship so he would be able to pay for school. He met with his friend, Tyler DaSilva, and began working on a short film called "Wannabes." The three-minute short film focused on three criminals from the 1940's who were trying to be bank robbers. It earned him a \$22,000 scholarship, and he continued to pursue his love for filmmaking. After leaving Full Sail, Adams began to work on the television show, "Wayne Pearson's Ultimate Outdoors." Still, Adams was honing his

craft and eventually left the show to do wedding videos and other similar projects for community members and friends.

Adams' most recent endeavor is a short film called "Sanctuary." The film follows a small group of survivors in an apocalyptic world, which has collapsed due to a massively infectious form of dementia. The disease is incredibly fast-acting and leads people of all ages to become increasingly violent towards others, losing control and eventually becoming zombie-like. The most prominent aspect of the movie is the scenery. There are many obvious scenic moments that natives of Suwannee and Hamilton Counties would notice. The old Suwannee River Peanut Company is a major set piece of the movie. The actual building is located in Jennings, Fla., on State Road 6. The Suwannee River is also a prominent scene, along with main street Jasper, where the climax of the movie was filmed. Throughout the entire film, the love of the land and environment is present. The main reason the movie will make local viewers

feel at home is the fact that it was entirely filmed in Hamilton County.

One could argue that, while the story of the film itself is dystopian, the movie is a love letter from Adams to the land in which he grew up. "I love where I'm from and this movie shows the beauty of the land," Adams said.

The love for his hometown is felt throughout the movie. Adams is not ashamed of his origins, but instead is proud of them and is more than happy to include it in his work. Adams states the freedom of access to land and big points of interest were huge blessings to him. Adams is a unique film maker, as he does not consider himself a "film buff." Instead, his goal is to tell the stories he wants, as well as hone the creativity in his mind by working on his craft. He pours his all into his work. For "Sanctuary," not only did he direct it, but he also wrote it, edited it and scored it. While the onset audio was done by his fiancé, Adams took the weight of the 45-minute film all on his own shoulders, stating he



Two zombie extras pose for a selfie during filming. [Seth Adams/Courtesy]



A child extra waits for direction during filming. [Seth Adams/Courtesy]



The zombie makeup process begins on the extras. [Seth Adams/Courtesy]



[Seth Adams/Courtesy]



[Seth Adams/Courtesy]

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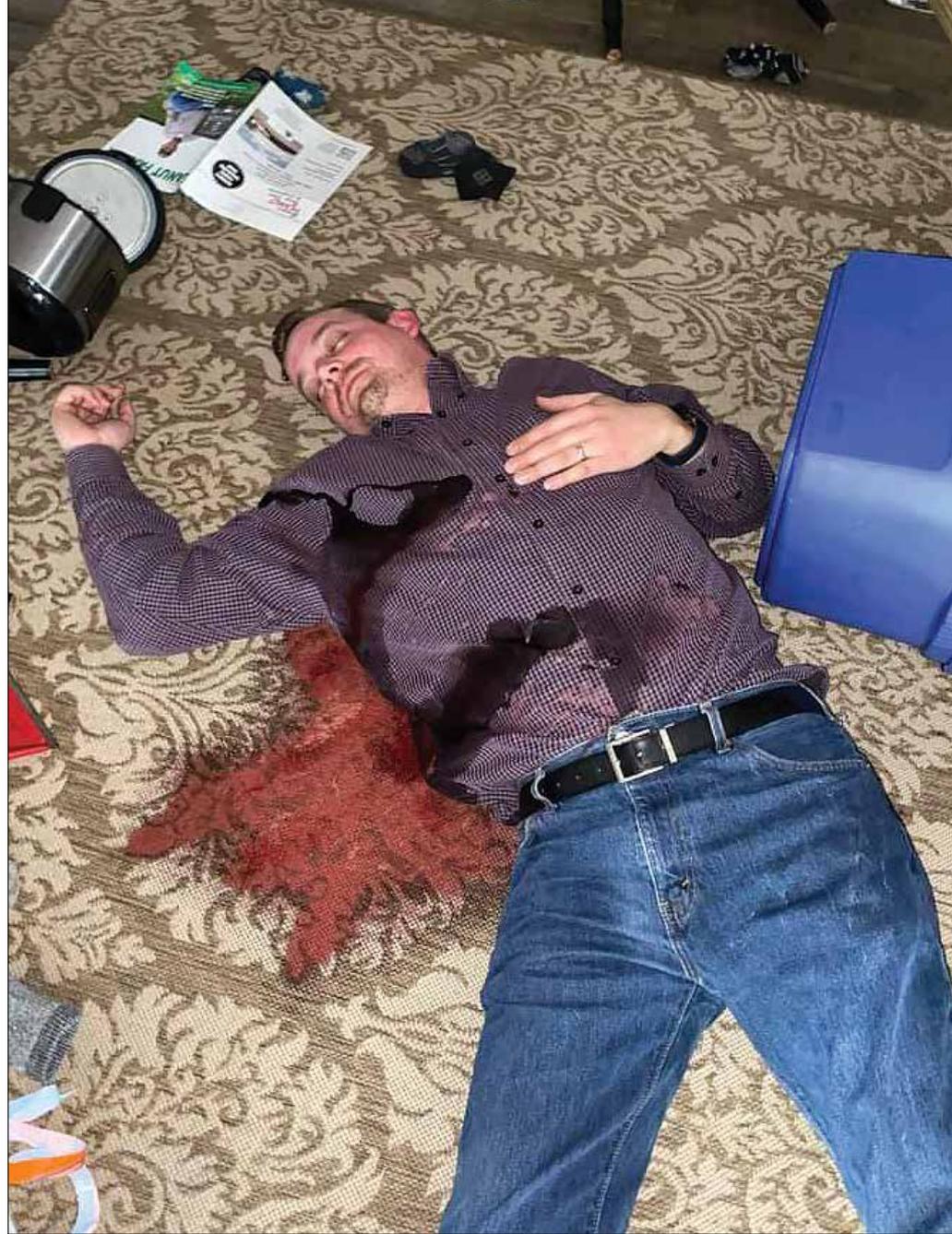
had put over 500 hours into the movie. The entire filming process took three months to complete and included a lot of work, especially with moving locations.

Adams said a specific scene in the movie was one of the hardest to film, but also the most rewarding. At one point in the film, the main characters are forced to run from a group of zombies. The scene itself is very quick but, nevertheless impressive, as a large group of actors ran full-speed down the middle of a popular state road. Adams said there was a lot going on behind the camera, as they had to go through the state government to get permission to do the filming on the road. Not only that, but there were multiple police cars there to make sure everyone was safe and, in total, around 40 people were there trying to film.

"It was just amazing that it was all kept together," Adams said.

Eventually, though, filming did end. However, that wasn't where the work ended for Adams, as he then went home to cut three months worth of footage down to 45 minutes. Finally, the time came to premier the film for the public to see. Adams got into conversation with Todd Siff, professor at Florida Gateway College (FGC), and was able to use FGC for the premier. Approximately 110 people attended the premier and the reviews were all more than satisfactory. Adams wasn't done with this film just yet, though; he also submitted it to the Florida Film Festival. There, it has the ability to be seen by many people in the film industry and can get even more public reception.

"It was lots of hard work, but I would love to do it again," Adams said of the experience. Adams is currently working on three different scripts for new ideas he has and has no plans to stop pursuing film making. To watch "Sanctuary," visit [Vimeo.com](https://www.vimeo.com) and rent it for \$3. ■



Matthew Ezell plays a dead body. [Seth Adams/Courtesy]



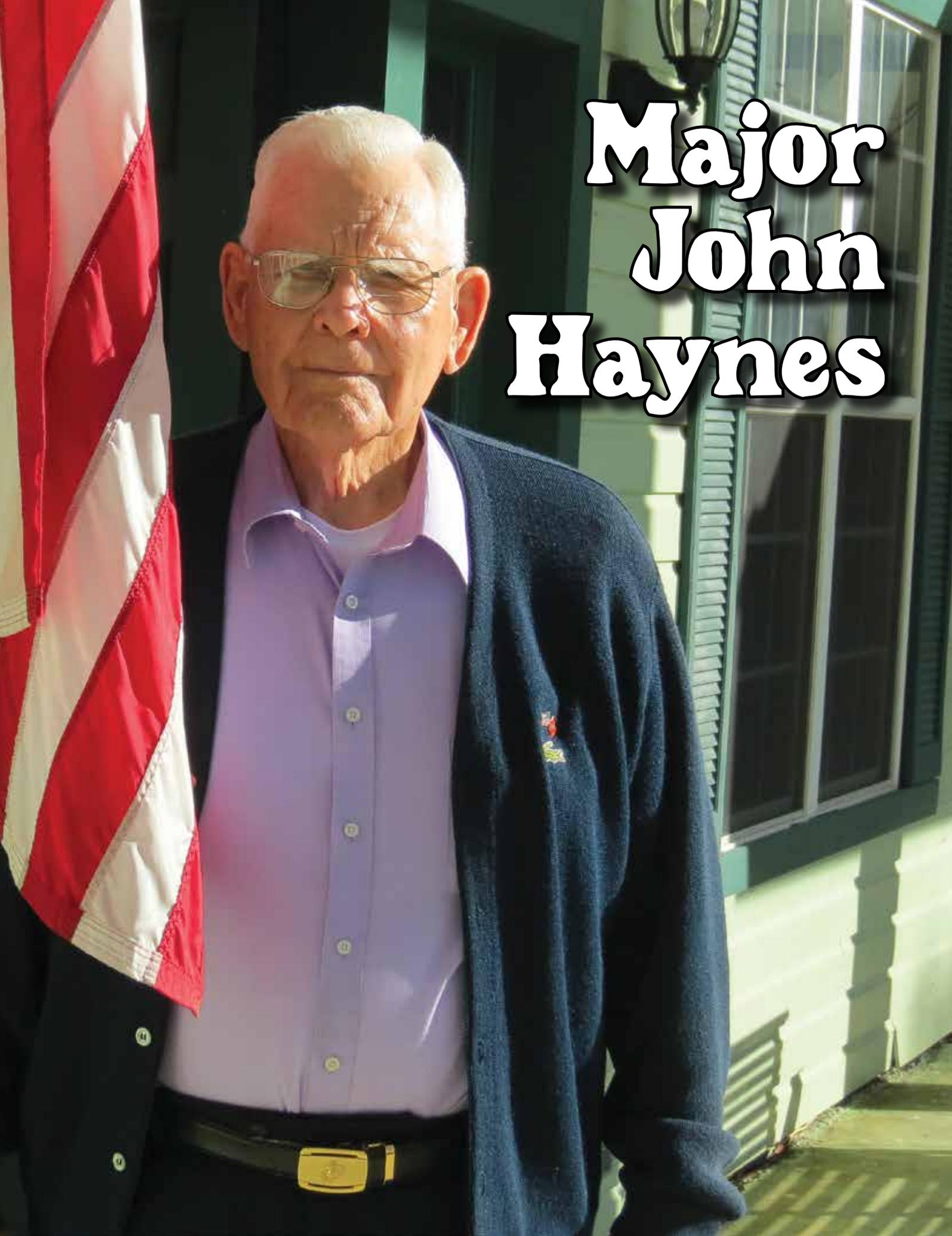
[Seth Adams/Courtesy]



Child extras share their excitement before makeup. [Seth Adams/Courtesy]



Matthew Strickland with fake blood for the scene ahead. [Seth Adams/Courtesy]

A photograph of an elderly man, Major John Haynes, standing outdoors. He is wearing glasses, a light purple button-down shirt, a dark blue cardigan, and a black belt with a gold buckle. To his left is a large American flag. The background shows a house with a window and a light fixture. The text 'Major John Haynes' is overlaid in the top right corner in a large, white, bold font with a black outline.

Major John Haynes

A portrait of courage and determination

Story by Mickey Starling

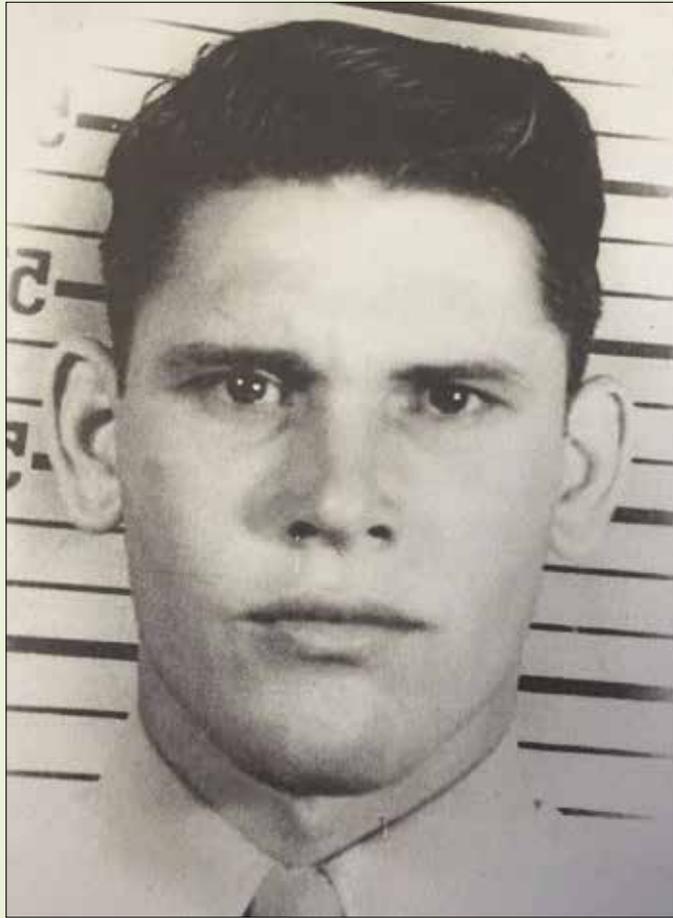
Staff Writer

Madison County native John Haynes was born in 1930, in the farmhouse of his grandfather, Jim Williamson. His story is reminiscent of the biblical story of Esther, who was told, "You were born for such a time as this." Early on, Haynes took on the responsibilities of an adult, which was common for kids who grew up on a farm. By age five, he was often up by four a.m., taking care of various duties. Haynes recalls that his grandfather promised to teach him how to use a compass. One morning, Haynes awoke early, anticipating the instructions and the possibility of receiving his own compass. Instead, he found himself behind a plow that was harnessed to a well-rested horse. "That horse's rear end is your compass. Follow it." So began another day on the farm, where more work than could be accomplished was always to be expected.

By the age of 11, Haynes was growing into a tall young man with a calm demeanor that often gave others the impression that he was much older. The family had relocated to the Venice/Nokomis area of Florida., where Haynes remembers hearing of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. "I knew right then that I wanted to serve in the military." His exuberant patriotism caused him to attempt joining the United States Marine Corps at the age of 13. The recruiters foiled his attempt, but nothing dampened his desire to serve sooner rather than later. After giving careful thought as to how he previously got caught trying to enlist, Haynes gave it a more educated attempt two years later. At the age of 15, he successfully entered the Marine Corps, having never stepped foot in a high school. Today, the almost 92-year-old retired Major chuckles at those memories. "I'm 91, but the Marines think I'm 95," said Haynes.

Having to conceal his age turned out to be a great motivator for Haynes, who tried to be the best at whatever task he was

given. He rightfully assumed that success would lessen the chance of being discovered as a child in uniform. His determination to succeed did not escape the watchful eyes of his superiors, who awarded him the title of "Most Ready for Combat" as boot camp concluded. It's a good thing he was



ready, because Haynes was immediately shipped overseas with 5,000 other troops, just in time to avoid a new law which was going into effect which would require all troops from all military services to spend at least six months in stateside training before being deployed overseas.

By 1949, Haynes had honorably served the Marines for four years and had achieved the rank of Buck Sergeant. The time had flown for the aspiring young man, and he was hungry for more time in service. He reenlisted for the first of many times, eventually serving in the Marines for 30 years before retirement. "Many of my

fellow Marines often complained about the quality of the food and the harshness of the training," said Haynes. "I found nothing to be overwhelming. I just absorbed whatever was around me and kept going. I remember my first meal was stuffed green peppers. I thought I had died and gone to Heaven."

Memorable exploits from his military tenure abound for Haynes, who received 21 awards during his career, including the Silver Star and the Purple Heart. Furthermore, he entered the military with little education and exited with a master's degree. One fond memory for Haynes includes the year and a half he spent serving at Marine Barracks Washington (known as Eighth and I). This is the oldest active post in the Marine Corps, established by President Thomas Jefferson in 1801. The Barracks supports both ceremonial and security missions in the nation's capital. For Haynes, the highlight of this tour was participating in the inauguration of President Harry Truman. He also had the privilege of being featured on a Marine Corps recruiting poster.

Never one to search out the easier and safe assignment, Haynes spent most of his career specializing in explosives and nuclear weapons. He was the Officer in Charge of nuclear weapons for 15 years and he served as the chairman of the Armed Forces Explosive Ordnance Disposal Board for E.O.D. Training. During

the course of his highly decorated career, Haynes was credited with inventing life-saving devices that were employed in taking apart explosive devices. He once handled a nuclear weapons incident that saved hundreds of lives due to his creative expertise and quick thinking.

There were also a number of harrowing experiences for Haynes. As a combat engineer, Haynes was known as the guy who could blow a hole to exact specifications. This talent was called upon while serving in Korea. Marine forces were positioned facing a road identified as a peace corridor, meaning they were not allowed to

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fire at the nearby Chinese forces who were not restricted from firing from their location. "If you were to lift your finger to check the wind direction, it was possible that it might get shot off," said Haynes.

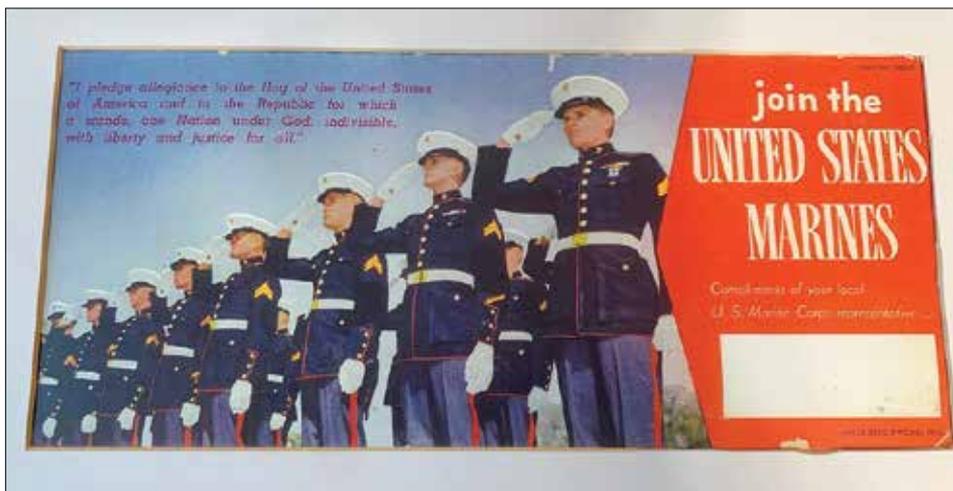
To counter this situation, Haynes was assigned the task of blowing two holes, perfectly sized for tanks that could then fire upon the Chinese troops without infringing upon the peace corridor. In order to accomplish this without being detected, Haynes could only work while being under enemy fire. This way, his needed explosions would never be noticed. After two weeks of tedious and dangerous trench digging towards the desired positions, Haynes waited for his strategic locations to come under fire so that he could detonate his explosives. Both holes were perfectly sized and the tanks were dropped into position without alarming the Chinese.

Once, the Chinese Communist soldiers realized what had taken place, they sent out several hundred troops to attack the location. What the enemy soldiers were not aware of was that one of the tanks was a fire thrower, which Haynes recalls, "lit them up." Another "hot" moment occurred when Haynes was serving in the Manchurian province of China, around 1945. Fresh out of boot camp, he found himself looking for hidden bombs to diffuse along a railway that had to be protected in order to rescue a large number of mostly unarmed Japanese soldiers who would soon be at the mercy of Chinese troops who likely had revenge on their minds, following four years of enduring the Rape of Nanking, where Japanese soldiers raped and killed thousands of Chinese soldiers and civilians during the Sino-Japanese War.

While diffusing a booby-trap explosive, Haynes heard a loud "boom" behind him. He then saw a general running incredibly fast in his direction, shouting, "Hey Haynes, you missed one!" "No sir, I didn't," Haynes responded. "Look up the hill." Chinese Communist troops were rapidly descending upon the railway. The general made an equally fast return back towards the train, which was fortunately well staffed with Marines who were ready to answer their assault. It only took a few minutes for the Chinese troops to make a hasty retreat.

At a Chinese Marine Reunion some years later, Robert Shovar, who served with Haynes during the Manchurian incident, was asked if he knew Haynes was only 15 years old at the time. "NO!" said Shovar. "John was our go to guy. We depended on him for everything."

Though Haynes retired in 1975, his service to veterans has continued tirelessly. He remains active in 11 veterans organizations, and he has helped thousands of veterans obtain financial assistance and other Veterans



Administration benefits. Haynes is the past chairman of the Florida Veterans Foundation, and he was inducted into the Florida Veteran's Hall of Fame in 2013. Haynes has been instrumental in helping several other area veterans to be recognized in the Hall of Fame.

If that wasn't enough, he has also devoted some time to encouraging local students to do their best. "No matter your struggle, never give up," Haynes repeats to them often. "You can achieve whatever you are motivated to accomplish."

Recently, Haynes was honored with a Dream Flight, given by a group of volunteers through an initiative called "Operation September." The group held a two-month-long campaign in 3,000 cities, aimed at giving 1,000 World War II veterans a ride in a

Boeing Stearman biplane, like the ones flown during the 1930s and 1940s. The adrenaline this plane brought in his early days of training returned as soon as his flight left the ground. "It was a wonderful experience," stated Haynes.

Experience is something this quiet and honorable man has plenty of. His patriotism and determination to make a difference in the service to his country has saved hundreds of lives and improved the lives of thousands because of his dedication to protect their freedoms and make the world a better place. We can only hope that more men like Haynes will rise to face whatever future challenges may come our way. Without them, our freedoms may become nothing more than a fond and fading memory. ■





THE WILES
FAMILY
MAKES
GOOD
SYRUP
AND EVEN
BETTER
MEMORIES

SWEET TRADITIONS

Story and photos by Rick Patrick
Staff Writer

Every year when that first nip of cool weather fills the fall air, many people begin to think of the changing colors of the leaves or that first cup of pumpkin spice latte. For the Wiles family of Taylor County, it also means it's time to prepare for making cane syrup. It is a family tradition that dates back over half a century, when the patriarch of the Wiles family, Malcolm "Mac" Wiles, began grinding sugar cane and cooking the juice to make the sweet, amber hued delicacy that has graced pancakes and homemade biscuits on many a southern table. "I don't remember exactly when daddy started making syrup, but it was when I was a little boy," said Robert Wiles. "Now, I'm over 70 years old."

Mac Wiles, known as "PawPaw" to the many grandchildren in the Wiles family, had been a professional baseball player with the St. Louis Cardinals and dairy farmer with his father before serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II. He moved to Taylor County from Arkansas after being



introduced to the area while serving at the air base that was once housed near the old Perry/Foley Airport. The elder Wiles began farming after making his home near Shady Grove, in northern Taylor County.

"Back when my daddy was making syrup, he'd grind it using a mule to run the grinder. Now we use a tractor to run the grinder. We also use gas to cook it instead of wood." Other than those two modernizations, brothers Robert and Dawson Wiles grow the cane and make the syrup in the same fashion they learned from "PawPaw" Wiles years ago.

The process of the annual syrup making actually begins in late August to early September when the sugar cane stalks are put into the ground. After a little over a year of being exposed to the warm sun and frequent rain showers, the stalks grow to a height of eight feet or taller by the time it's ready to harvest. When the weather turns cooler, the cane is cut for grinding. Everything must be done in one day, so the process usually begins in the early morning;





although that time has gotten a bit later in the day as the Wiles brothers have gotten older. "Old men take longer," jokes Robert's wife, Linda.

Once the cane is cut, it is fed through a grinder to extract the juice from the cane. The juice is collected in a large barrel after going through a strainer to catch larger pieces of cane or other debris that may be mixed in with the juice. After the cane juice is collected it is transferred into a 60-gallon kiln and a fire is lit to begin the cooking process. "I know just how hot to cook it,"

says Robert with a smile. "I don't use a thermometer. It's easier with gas because we can adjust the flame. Now, daddy would use wood. He'd know just how big of a piece of wood to put on the flame to keep it cooking at just the right temperature." During the cooking process, constant attention must be kept to ensure the juice doesn't get too hot, but cooks at a constant rate and temperature. As the juice cooks, water evaporates and impurities are cooked out. This causes the juice to undergo several color changes, slowly progressing from a

pale green color to a reddish amber when the juice finally becomes syrup. During this process, solids from the juice gather around the rim of the kiln. These are wiped away with a damp rag. This step is a constant job while the syrup cooks. As more and more water and solids are cooked out of the juice, it will begin to bubble with large eruptions that almost appear to "hop." This is what was called "frogging." When this begins to occur at a steady rate, the syrup cooking enters a critical stage. At this point, a great deal of skill is needed to ensure the syrup

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doesn't burn and get scorched. If the syrup burns or scorches, the entire batch is lost. Fanning the syrup is sometimes needed in order to cool the temperature. Soon, a thick, sugar-rich taffy-like substance will form around the edge of the kiln. This candy, called "pole-cat," is scooped onto pieces of cane "paddles" and allowed to cool. This "pole-cat" has delighted generations of Wiles youngster of all ages. "I remember daddy loved that 'pole-cat' as much as any young 'un," said Robert. "He did have a sweet tooth."



Dawson Wiles carefully fills bottles with freshly made syrup.

When the syrup has cooked down to its desired level, a lemon is cut in half and squeezed into the syrup. This helps reduce the crystallization of sugar after it is poured into bottles. Then, the syrup is scooped up and poured through a sheet of cheesecloth into another container to filter out any remaining residue. The finished syrup is poured into bottles and is ready to add its rich, sweet flavor to any biscuits, waffles, pancakes or anything else.

"This is a dying art," laments Robert. "Young people today just aren't that interested in things like this." On this particular Saturday, one young man, 16-year-old Bradley Buckhalter, a friend of the Wiles family, showed a great deal of interest in changing that perception. Young Buckhalter and Robert's son, Andrew, personify the hope that this art will continue on.

The Wiles syrup-making tradition is not only about making syrup. On that day, friends and family will show up with food or to help and the event, at times, has become a huge social gathering. It has become a time for folks to enjoy fellowship, fun and the love of family far sweeter than any bottle of syrup.



Robert Wiles feeds sugar cane into a cane grinder.



Dawson Wiles (left) and Bradley Buckhalter (right) enjoy a taste of "pole-cat" candy.

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The Nu Omega Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

Celebrating 40 years of service to the community

Story by Rick Patrick
Staff Writer

It started in October of 1981 when a group of women associated with the Valdosta, Ga., chapter of the national sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha decided to expand to Madison. A petition was extended to the South Atlantic Region office of the sorority and it was approved to establish the Nu Omega Omega chapter in Madison. Those charter members were Shirley Barfield, Martha Barge, Marie Bell, Catherine Brooks, Johnnie Burgess, Deloris Jones, Jacquelyn Jackson, Helen Myers, Sandra Monlyn, Jayne Scott, Edna Turner, Lorita Turner, Chrystina Vaught, Evelyn Whitby, Vinette Williams and Joyce Wilson.

Now, 40 years later, some of those



charter members are still active in the organization. One of the core principles of the organization is community service. That is one aspect the local members of the sorority have taken to heart. Recently, as a way of celebrating this 40th anniversary milestone, some of those charter members of the local chapter replicated their first fundraiser by holding a “virtual rock-a-thon” in order to raise money for local dialysis services and the American Cancer Society. This fundraiser was undertaken in order to help improve the health of Madison County, which has been one of the goals of the organization for years.

The local chapter has also sought to strengthen family relationships by sponsoring an annual father/daughter dance in conjunction with Valentine’s

Day. The sorority also sponsored the "Miss Fashionetta" and "Mr. Esquire" pageants. The purpose of these were to help young people develop vital skills such as public speaking, presentation and other communication skills. According to sorority member Regina Nash, participation in these events has even led to other young women becoming involved as adult members of the sorority. More recently, the sorority has been sponsoring a training program for students planning to attend college. This training has included such vital topics as choosing a college or university, applying for financial aid, entrance exam preparation and more.

Nash said that the local chapter re-evaluates local programs every four years or so. New ways of serving the community are always being considered. Some future community service projects include a mentoring program for young women in the fifth grade through 12th grade. It is hoped that this mentoring program will help develop and promote not only greater



academic skills, but proper social skills as well.

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. is the

oldest Greek-letter organization established by African-American, college-educated women. There are nearly 300,000 members





AKA member Deloris Jones receives a small token of appreciation from Madison City Manager Jerome Wyche.

serving in approximately 1,018 graduate and undergraduate chapters in the United States, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Bahamas, Bermuda, Canada, Dubai, Germany, Japan, Liberia and South Korea.

The national organization of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. dates back over a century to nine college students at Howard University, in Washington D.C., who began the sorority in 1908. Since that time, the sorority has grown into a

“globally-impactful organization bound by the bonds of sisterhood and empowered by a commitment to servant-leadership that is both domestic and international in its scope.” As the national sorority has grown, they have managed to maintain their focus on two essential areas: “the lifelong personal and professional development of each of its members; and galvanizing its membership into an organization of respected power and influence, consistently

at the forefront of effective advocacy and social change that results in equality and equity for all citizens of the world.”

Madison County has been clearly better off over the past 40 years for the work of the members of the Nu Omega Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Here’s to another 40 years, and more, of service from the dedicated sisters of Alpha Kappa Alpha. ■



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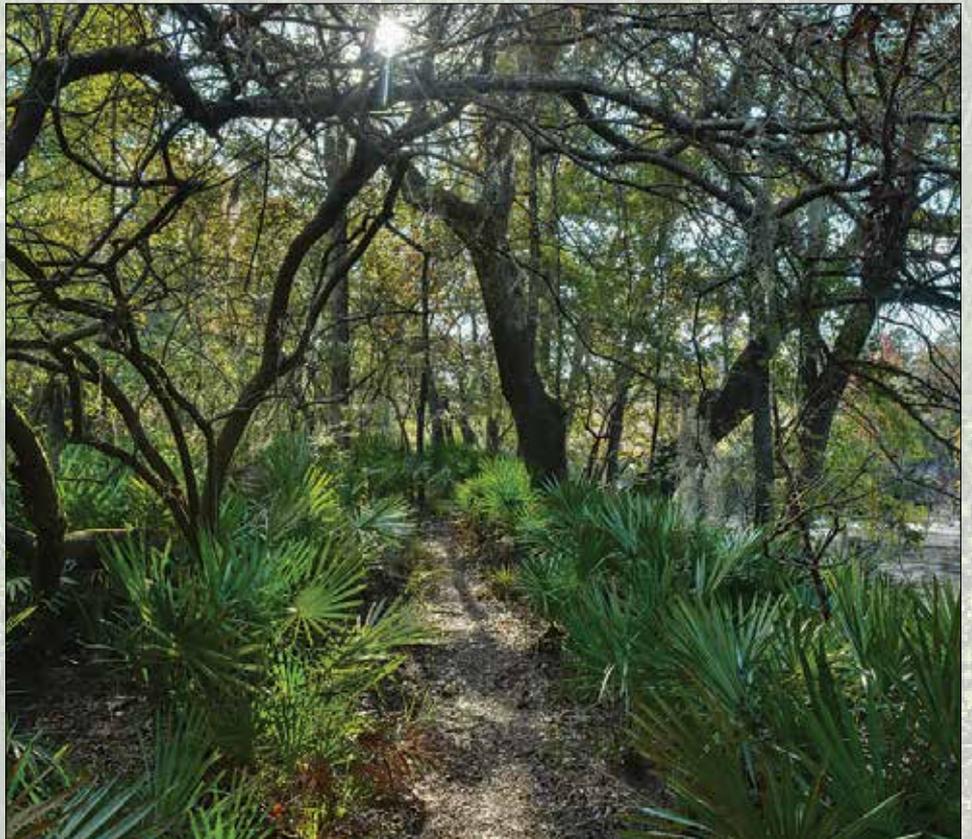
FLORIDA'S FIRST TOURIST ATTRACTION

Story by Lee Trawick

Staff Writer

White Sulfur Springs was established in 1831 and has been a popular destination for centuries, dating back to when the Apalachee and Timucua Native American tribes regularly met at the springs. Evidence supports this theory, as so many Native American artifacts have been found over the years throughout the area. In today's world, White Springs is often overlooked as the tourist destination it once was; the nature trails, the Bridge to Nowhere, the springhouse that drew millions of people and the Suwannee River class three whitewater rapids are all what makes White Springs a place of healing.

In 1835, Bryant and Elizabeth Sheffield bought property on the Suwannee River in Hamilton County; Bryant built a springhouse and hotel around the springs, despite the smell of rotten eggs. By drinking the water, Bryant believed he was healed from his kidney ailments. Word spread quickly across the country and people began coming from all over the United States to bathe in the healing waters of White Sulfur Springs, a few of these being popular names throughout history, such as



President Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Ford.

White Springs is a town that offers some things no other places in Florida could offer, such as class three whitewater rapids. Big Shoals State Park in White Springs has the largest whitewater rapids in Florida. Of course, the rapids depend on the season and the rise and fall of the Suwannee River; nevertheless, if you're looking for a unique getaway, there is no better place than the Florida whitewater rapids at Big Shoals State Park. However, whitewater rapids aren't all the park offers, as the historic Suwannee River runs through it. So much of North Florida's wildlife depends on the Suwannee River and all are on full display while taking a trip through the park's 28 miles of nature trails.

One of these nature trails leads from Big Shoals to the Bell Springs. This is a 4.6-mile stretch that offers scenic geological features, including a waterfall at Robinson Branch and eroded lime rock formations. Other trails available at Big Shoals include the serene Woodpecker Trail, which runs 3.4 miles and is lined with beautiful flowers; the Long Branch Trail for hiking and biking; the Big Shoals Trail for hiking only; the Palmetto Trail for hiking and biking and the Mossy Ravine Trail for hiking and biking.

Perhaps what White Springs is best known for today, however, is the Stephen



Foster Culture Center State Park. The 800-acre State Park offers an opportunity to step back to a time when America cultivated great artists and great musicians. Stephen Foster composed "Old Folks at Home," which was adopted in 1935 as the Florida State song. The Stephen Foster Culture Center is home to the Florida Folk Festival, which started in 1953 and happens every May on Memorial Day weekend. It brings thousands from across America and is the oldest state folk festival in the United States. The Stephen Foster Culture Center State Park

is also home of the annual Festival of Lights, which runs from Dec. 10 through Dec. 24.

Next time you are looking for a unique destination vacation, don't forget to visit White Springs, a destination rich in vibrant nature, engaging history and diverse culture. From whitewater rapids, to a state park honoring one of the nation's (ironically, Stephen Foster never visited Florida) most influential composers, there's always something to take you away from the worries of the world. After all, White Springs is known as a place of healing. ■



White Springs, Fla. Interior Bath House.

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