

TRIBUTARIES

JOURNAL OF THE
**Alabama
Folklife
Association**

15

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ON THE COVER

Rivercane in Homewood, Alabama, on the north bank of Shades Creek where Griffin Creek joins. Despite being near the Greensprings intersection, one of the busiest in Homewood, a few steps into the dense canebrake brings you into a different world. *Photo by Jim Brown*

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Alabama Folklife

ASSOCIATION

Alabama Folklife

Folklife includes cultural products and artistic expressions passed down through the generations via families, communities, and work life. It includes topics like food, music, dance, stories, remedies, hunting and fishing customs, religious rituals, and traditional arts like pottery, quilting, piñata making, and basketry. Folklife is comprised of living traditions that evolve as new groups arrive, environments change, and individual personalities leave their mark.

Alabama holds a rich array of folklife that includes both rural and urban traditions and contributions from diverse cultures and art forms. Alabama's geography, including the Gulf Coast, Black Belt, Tennessee Valley, Wiregrass, and Appalachia, yields folkways representing distinct environments and histories. Alabama folklife includes practices as wide ranging as shrimp net building, Watch Night, old time fiddle, huapango, gospel singing, the Vietnamese lion dance, storytelling, Poarch Creek shell carving, hanji, pine needle basketry, Rangoli, duck decoy carving, layer cakes, and much more.



TRIBUTARIES

Alabama's waterways intersect its folkways at every level. Early settlement and cultural diffusion conformed to drainage patterns. The Coastal Plain, the Black Belt, the Foothills, and the Tennessee Valley remain distinct traditional as well as economic regions today. The state's cultural landscape, like its physical one, features a network of "tributaries" rather than a single dominant mainstream. **JIM CARNES** | 1994 | *TRIBUTARIES NO. 1*



The Walk of Life

A History

ANNIE PERRY

Every September, we gather at Tuscumbia Landing in Alabama for The Walk of Life, an event to honor the Southeastern Indians who were forcibly removed from their ancestral homeland. It is a memorial and a celebration. As we walk, we remember those who walked the Trail of Tears and celebrate the return of the Southeastern Indians to their Home.

The idea for the Walk to honor the Ancestors came from Mohawk Medicine Man Walter Hill. Walking west is toward death; walking east represents life and rebirth. The two-mile Walk begins at Tuscumbia Landing, retraces the Removal route, and ends at Tuscumbia's Spring Park. There at the entrance to the Circle, the Tribes are welcomed back home. Sehoj Thrower, Environmental Protection Specialist for and Member of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, describes it:

I have witnessed some powerful things at the Walk from Tuscumbia Landing over the years. Thinking about elders from Oklahoma walking hand-in-hand with tribal people left in Alabama brings a tear to my eye. The Walk was originally formed by listening to elders who descended from those who walked the Trail of Tears. They wanted it to be a healing homecoming, which is the way it is walked, backwards, and on the original historical path as much as possible. I sincerely pray that the Walk will continue, and will be respectfully handled as a sacred endeavor, just as it always has been all these years.

The first Walk was held in conjunction with the Dedication of the Sacred Tears Monument at Spring Park in September of 2003. Walter Hill had passed away and the Walk was dedicated to him. The Landing at Sheffield had not been used in thirty years and was overgrown, so the City of Sheffield gave permission for Tuscumbia Parks and Recreation to clear a path for us. About twenty people walked. At times, we walked in single-file, ducking under limbs and around fallen trees. A volunteer followed in a pickup truck in case someone needed a lift.

Native Praise Choir sings
hymns in the Muscogee Language.
(Photos by Mary Carton)

As plans for the Oka Kapassa Festival became a reality, I asked permission to make the Walk an annual event. Robert Thrower, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer and member of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, stood up and said, “Not only can you walk, but I will walk with you.” He brought students to learn about the Trail of Tears and to volunteer.

Soon afterwards, Joyce Bear and Jay McGirt, Muscogee Creeks, walked from Tuscumbia Landing to the Park. As they walked, Joyce Bear sang the Removal song and Jay McGirt sang a Creek hymn that brought tears to many.

The Poarch Creeks welcomed all the returning Southeastern tribal members, and many answered the call. Since this land was once Chickasaw Homeland, Creeks invited the Chickasaw contingent to lead Walk participants in honoring the Ancestors. Chickasaw participants included legislators Scott Colbert, Katie Case, and Beth Alexander, along with language specialist Rose Jefferson. Barbara Bershears brought a busload of Colbert descendants and Stomp Dancers. Poarch Creek Elders came on their bus, and both Poarch Creek Chairmen Fred McGhee and Buford Roland have walked. The Mississippi Choctaw Drum Group Mystic Wind and their families honored the Ancestors. The Native Praise Choir from Tulsa, Oklahoma stationed themselves along the trail and sang hymns in their Native languages. Louis Johnson, vice-chairman of the Seminole Nation came dressed in regalia. The Cub Scouts provided a

halfway water stop and received a badge for visiting a historical site. The Tuscumbia and Sheffield Police provided an escort and took their role seriously to bring the group “home.”

Tuscumbia Landing was dedicated as a Certified National Park Service site on the Historic Trail of Tears in 2007. Those attending the dedication included local officials, guests, and representatives of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Poarch Creek Nations along with National Park Service officials. Robert Perry spoke for the Chickasaw, Chairman Buford Roland spoke for the Poarch Creeks, and Steve Burns Chavez



*We carried our feathers to a ridge overlooking the river,
where we hung them in trees to blow gently in the wind
and evoke memories of our people and the past.*

KATIE CASE



& Otis Half Moon, Nez Perce, for the Park Service. After the ceremony, participants, including the Alabama Chapter of the Trail of Tears, began the Walk. Chickasaw and Poarch Creek Elders led the group in a wagon to Tuscumbia Spring Park. As the walkers entered Spring Park, Chickasaw and Creek walkers sang “Amazing Grace” in their native languages. This became a tradition, and every Walk now ends with “Amazing Grace” sung by everyone. There was a strong spiritual presence. As Katie Case, of the Chickasaw Tribal Legislature, related, “We carried our feathers to a ridge overlooking the river, where we hung them in trees to blow gently in the wind and evoke memories of our people and the past.”

As Walk attendance began to grow, Aaron Mahr, Superintendent of the National Historic Trails System remarked, “One could not think of Tuscumbia Landing without the Return Walk.” Likewise, the National Park Service included the “Retracement Trail” in the charrette plans for Tuscumbia Landing.

To me, the most memorable incident was when Elder Flora Perry came with the Chickasaw Council of Elders and insisted that she was going to walk because that is what her ancestors did. Someone handed her an umbrella to use as a cane. Many times along the way, the group stopped and waited for her to catch up. Nearing the park, Ms. Perry was asked to lead the group. The umbrella that was supposed to be a cane was transformed into a Warrior’s staff as she led the group down the long hill into Spring Park. We had arrived. Even today, her legend lives on as the festival starts. Many look up the hill and remember when Flora Perry led the walkers in a victory march, the Walk of Life.

Jonathan Davis, of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians and the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, states, “I feel a duty to return as often as possible to pay homage and respect. A lot of us did not know we had the ability to walk the original trail of our ancestors. In remembering what happened

Mystic Wind, Mississippi
Band of Choctaws
lead walkers out of
Tuscumbia Landing.
(Photo by Mary Carton)



and walking their path along the Walk from Tuscumbia Landing, it is the only way we can move forward. The fact that there is any ancestral ground that we can walk on together with such significance is a miracle that we can't take for granted."

The year 2014 marked the bicentennial of the Treaty of Fort Jackson, when the Creeks ceded 23 million acres of their homeland, which became much of Alabama and Georgia. The Chickasaw had been asked to lead the walk in the past, but because of the year's significance, they asked the Creeks to lead. After dedicating the Walk to Reed Kirkland, a Colbert descendant, Eddie Tullis led the group into Spring Park, as the Mississippi Choctaw drum performed Honor songs. A hawk flew high above the group and followed them into Spring Park to inspire all of the participants.

In 2016, the Centennial of the National Park Service was connected to the Walk when Mary Risser, Superintendent of the Natchez Trace National Parkway, walked to represent the National Scenic Trails system.

Events leading up to Alabama's Bicentennial in 2019 focused on people, places, and the stories we tell, which included the Walk in 2017. That year, the Walk continued through the city of Tuscumbia. During Removal, a Cherokee man named Chicken died in Tuscumbia on the Trail of Tears. Roy Hamilton, representing the Cherokee Nation, laid the wreath and tied a turkey feather at the site.

During that Walk, a young mother was nearing her time to give birth, but she walked as some of the Ancestors did long ago. The winds blew in all directions to honor this child coming into the world. She returned the next year with her daughter, who was given the name "Walks in Wind." A young couple brought their newborn son, a Colbert descendant. A Choctaw Elder drove all night to bring a small drum that set the tempo for the Walk. It was his first Walk and no one knew he was coming. A young man came because an elder spoke to him in a dream. A Chickasaw man walked carrying his bow and arrow, a gift to his son to be presented after the Walk. Someone carried a feather, another a buckeye, a photo, and others held mementos from long ago. Some quietly spoke, some cried, but there was always that feeling of hope.

The Walk out of Tuscumbia Landing is done in silence, as we remember

the tragedy of Removal and the people who suffered. Few speak, and those who do find that they cannot take the quietness as trees seem to weep. A woodpecker taps a message, a cardinal appears as a welcoming to those along the trail. A butterfly sits on a hat. In the distance, a flute, someone is softly playing. Then a drumbeat, and later a voice singing a Creek hymn.

As the group arrives at Tuscumbia, the mood changes. The flute is rejoicing, the drumbeat is louder, and people begin to smile. The walk down the hill to Spring Park is done in jubilation. Spectators and vendors and Oka Kapassa participants stop and pay respect, and the walkers are welcomed into the festival. The ending song is Amazing Grace in the Muscogee language and then in English, with everyone singing.

As Jim Mallory, who walked multiple years with his wife, explains, “The event is essential in truly understanding the human experience of other people. Friendships and bonds that will last a lifetime have been cemented during The Walk.”

Many have come to take the Walk from Tuscumbia Landing and it has grown to 300 participants — Seminole, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, and Shawnee walking with the people of the area and forming lifetime friendships. As Beth Alexander, of the Chickasaw Tribal Legislature, stated, “The walk is a special time to remember those who went before us and to plan on what we ourselves will leave to the next generation.”

Tying a turkey feather in remembrance and offering tobacco and sage have become traditions and sacred connections to remembering the tragedy of Removal and the return of hope for the future.

As construction brings a changing landscape and scenery to the trail, what never changes is the welcome return of Southeastern Indians to a place they once called home. ○





Lest We Forget

The Social Function of Alabama's Ghost Stories

ALAN BROWN

Legends are oral tales, based on fact; however, through various retellings, the facts have become elaborated to the point that it is often difficult to determine where the facts end and the embellishment begins. Some of the most popular legends that are still very much a part of the oral traditions of Alabama and other Southern states are the ghost tales.

The image of storytellers as older relatives regaling listeners with ghost stories on cold, dark nights is still true in many families, but it is too restrictive. The fact is that one can hear ghost stories everywhere in Alabama, from the convenience store clerk who gives us directions to local haunted sites to the waitress who serves us our meals in small town restaurants. Many of the so-called urban legends are being kept alive by young people who defy their parents, the law, and, in some cases, common sense as they make the trek to haunted bridges and tunnels on the outskirts of town. College students frighten each other in dorms across the state as they share stories of former students who were murdered and still inhabit their former rooms.

The prevalence of ghostlore in Alabama cannot be credited solely to its entertainment value. In his book *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends & Their Meanings*, folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand says that we continue to pass down legends, “not only because of their inherent plot interest but because they seem to convey true, worthwhile, and relevant information.”¹ The truth of this statement is illustrated in several of Alabama's best-known ghost stories.

Cautionary tales perform a function for society as a whole and can be found in cultures throughout the world. Under the mask of entertainment, they warn children of the pitfalls they might encounter as they grow up. Brunvand refers to these stories as “ficts,” which are “told as the truth but [are] actually intended to scare children and other trespassers away from places where they are unwanted.”²

A classic example of one of these “ficts” can be found in Abbeville, Alabama: the legend of Huggin' Molly, which surfaced in the early 1900s. Huggin' Molly

One can hear ghost stories everywhere in Alabama, from the convenience store clerk who gives us directions to local haunted sites to the waitress who serves us our meals in small town restaurants.

was said to be a seven-foot-tall phantom who was “as big around as a bale of cotton.” Many parents and grandparents told children that she would hug them and scream in their ear if she caught them walking around after curfew.

Longtime Abbeville resident Jimmy Rane heard about Huggin’ Molly from friends and relatives: “If your mother or dad didn’t want you to be out after dark, they’d tell you Huggin’ Molly would get you. And we believed it, too.” So many people grew up with the fear of Huggin’ Molly instilled in them that the legend has become part of the community’s very identity. Visitors driving in to Abbeville are greeted by a welcome sign depicting a hag-like creature chasing a little boy. Even a local restaurant named “Huggin’ Molly’s” has capitalized on the town’s signature ghost story. Undoubtedly, tourism to the Wiregrass region has increased due to “Huggin’ Molly.” Clearly, the tale is no longer just a story told for the benefit of children.³

Ghost stories also cement bonds in the little communities that young people forge with each other. Many of these tales are urban legends, which

are narratives documenting strange, mysterious, and sometimes horrific events that the teller learned from the media or from a “friend of a friend.” As a rule, urban legends are set in modern times.

For years, urban legends have drawn young people, often teenagers, to isolated places that are reputed to be the scene of a horrible, mysterious, or supernatural event. The allure of “legend tripping,”

as this practice is called, lies in the element of danger. The attraction is enhanced if “No trespassing” signs are present or if parents have expressed their disapproval. Nocturnal visits to caves, abandoned buildings, rural roads, wooded areas, and cemeteries have become rites of passage through which youthful explorers prove their courage as they “test and define boundaries of the ‘real world ...”⁴ Rituals, such as blinking the car’s headlights to summon





the spirits, serve to establish group identity.

One of Alabama's most famous legend tripping sites is Hell's Gate Bridge in Oxford. The story goes that in the 1950s, a young couple accidentally drove their car off the bridge and drowned in Choccolocco Creek. This legend most likely started out as a cautionary tale, the subtext of which warns young people of the sexual hazards of driving out to "necking" spots, miles away from the supervision of their parents. Ironically, the elements of danger that were intended to dissuade young people from venturing out to this lonely spot have become part of its attraction. Until concrete blocks were placed in front of the bridge, many youthful legend trippers claimed that if you stopped your car on the bridge and turned off your headlights, either the young man or the young woman would climb into your car, leaving a wet spot on the seat. The bridge derived its nickname from the belief that if you stopped on the bridge and looked at the road behind you, you could see the gates of hell.⁵

Like so many stories that are interconnected with a man-made structure or a geographical feature, this urban legend might fade away if the crumbling bridge is ever razed or simply falls apart. In cases like these, the legends tend to die out when the storytellers pass away. However, folklorists like Stephanie Monohan believe that some legend tripping tales may enjoy a second life in digital space: "The internet has enabled more legend tripping to occur in embodied spaces by preserving legends that may have died out if solely reliant on in-person oral tradition."⁶ Drawing from her childhood in Staten

Hell's Gate Bridge
in Oxford, AL
(Photo by Trent
Penny, courtesy of
The Anniston Star)

OPPOSITE

Huggin' Molly on the
Welcome to Abbeville
sign (Photo by
Alan Brown)



The Pickens County Courthouse in 1951, 1976, and 2010. Through the years, visitors continue to look for the Face in the Window. (Photos courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History and the Library of Congress)

The Negro Burkhalter was being taken to the state prison of Montgomery after being convicted of burning the courthouse of Pickens County. A group of Carrollton citizens, so the story goes, took Burkhalter away from the posse and hanged him from a huge tree in a swamp during a terrific thunderstorm. Before he was killed, the mob asked the victim if he wanted to make a statement. "I am innocent," he said, "and you will always have my face to haunt you." Undeterred by the protestation of innocence, he was swung up, and as the rope tightened, there was a blinding flash of lightning. Next morning, back home in Carrollton,

Island, Monohan recalls legends about old buildings, like an abandoned monastery, that are still being shared on the internet long after the sites themselves were demolished. Of course, the size of the legend tripping community expands when the legends are transmitted in cyberspace.

Some of the most enduring legends perform multiple social functions, such as the face in the window of the Pickens County Courthouse. This legend exists in several variants, the most famous of which was told by Kathryn Tucker Windham in her book *13 Alabama Ghosts and Jeffrey*. After the courthouse burned to the ground on November 16, 1876, the local sheriff was under a great deal of pressure to find the culprit. Two years later, he pinned the crime on a Black man named Henry Wells who allegedly had a bad reputation in town. He arrested Wells and placed him in the garret of the new courthouse. That night, a storm was building, and an angry mob gathered around the courthouse. As lightning flashed across the sky, Wells yelled down at the crowd, "I am innocent. If you kill me, I am going to haunt you for the rest of your lives!" Ignoring his warning, the men dragged him out of the courthouse and lynched him from a tree. The next morning, members of the mob were shocked to see the face of Henry Wells staring down at them from one of the panes in the garret window.⁷

Although Windham's story is now the "accepted" version of the tale, other variants were also commonly told. One of these variants, collected by the WPA in 1938, uses a different name for the victim of the lynching:

*one of the mob passed the courthouse and saw Burkhalter's likeness on a pane of glass in one of the windows. An investigation from the inside showed the pane perfectly clear. However, in certain lights, many saw the likeness of the Negro from the outside. The glass remained in place, even during a severe hailstorm.*⁸

The fundamental purpose of legends is to explain the unexplainable. In fulfillment of this function, folk narratives act as “a convenient language for images... at the very boundaries of experience.”⁹ However, over time, the story of the face in the window has become a verbal and a physical memorial to a lynching. Carrollton resident Hugh Kirksey, who served as probate judge from 1962 to 1981, wrote the text of the historical marker that stands in front of the Pickens County Courthouse. In the 1960s, he was faced with the uncomfortable task of relating the state's most infamous lynching legend to a class of fifth graders from Birmingham who had taken a field trip to the courthouse. Kirksey relates:



The day for their visit arrived, and I was standing outside of the courthouse. Two Trailways buses pulled up. The children came out of the bus, and they were all Black. I remember thinking that I had never told the story to Black people before. I had always told it to people from the culture that I came out of. Well, I decided that I would just tell them the truth. So I got them in the auditorium right across the street, and I told them the story. I tried to think about what I could say to let them know that I saw this incident as a bad thing, and I wound up saying something like, “You might ask what the face in the courthouse window is saying. It says to me, ‘Don’t ever let this happen again!’”¹⁰

The Face in the Window (Photo by Alan Brown)

Kirksey's words to the Birmingham schoolchildren explain, at least in part, why the historical marker and a Legends & Lore marker have been erected at the courthouse and why a play depicting the story of Henry Wells is performed in Carrollton annually. The legend of the face in the window continues to be told, time and time again, because



Site of Bill Sketoe's lynching

OPPOSITE

Bill Sketoe's grave
(Photos by Dale Cox)

it confirms the community's belief that all human life is sacred. The memorials placed at the lynching site in Carrollton, in a sense, stand as society's "stamp of approval," not of the criminal act of lynching, but of the overriding message of the tale: if we turn a blind eye to vigilante justice, how long will it be before we ourselves become its victims?

A second lynching incident from Alabama's history also reflects the people's fear of the potential breakdown of society when mobs appoint themselves as the arbiters of right and wrong. The best-known version can be found once again in Windham's *13 Alabama Ghosts and Jeffrey*. On December 3, 1864, a Methodist minister named Bill Sketoe was crossing a bridge over the Choctawhatchee Bridge in Newton when he was waylaid by a group of vigilantes who called themselves Captain Brear's Home Guard. They had assigned themselves the task of rounding up — and punishing — deserters from the Confederate Army. A couple of the men engaged Sketoe in friendly conversation for a minute while another man crept up behind him and slipped a noose around his neck. Sketoe's assailants tied him up, threw him in the buggy, drove to the south side of a post oak tree, and stopped. After tossing the rope over a large limb and tying it down, the men asked Sketoe if he would like to pray.

Sketoe bowed his head and prayed for the souls of his executioners. One of the men slapped the rear of the horse hitched to the buggy. The horse bolted, and the limb jerked Sketoe out of the buggy. The problem was that Sketoe's feet touched the ground because the

Legend has it that any attempt to fill up the hole, either by the wind or human hands, was futile because the next day, the hole would reappear as a grim reminder of the crime.

men did not account for his large size. A crippled man named George Echols then used his crutch to dig a hole thirty inches wide and eight inches deep under Sketoe's feet so that his body could swing freely.

Legend has it that any attempt to fill up the hole, either by the wind or human hands, was futile because the next day, the hole would reappear as a grim reminder of the crime.¹¹ In 1979, the Highway 123/134 bridge at Newton was built over the hole. In 1990, the hole was filled with tons of rock in an effort to stabilize the bridge during floods. A historic marker was placed at the approximate site of Bill Sketoe's lynching. Like the commemoration of the Carrollton lynching, this marker also serves as a reminder of the dangers of mob justice.

Many folklorists have expressed concern over what happens to local legends after they have been wrested from the groups that created them and become an accepted part of community lore. Indeed, one wonders if society's symbolic endorsement of legends will eventually stunt their natural development. Will the young people who have been passing these stories down eventually abandon them once their elders begin telling them too?

Having spoken to many students about Alabama's ghostlore for over thirty years, I can recall the wistful looks on their faces as they relate the stories they grew up with, stories that remind them of home.

I have also observed that their imperfect memory of stories they read in books or on historic markers will probably ensure that their verbal transference of these stories will continue to add and delete elements from the plot. Thus, word of mouth still assumes the same pivotal role it has played for centuries: to serve as a conduit for important information, including those legends which resonate with cultural significance. ○





Southern Bite

Interview with Stacey Little

LINDA VICE

In 2008, Stacey Little had been writing restaurant reviews in the *Montgomery Advertiser* for a few years when the newspaper canceled the section. Several readers asked Little to find a way to keep sharing his insights on new restaurants and classic dishes, so he created Southern Bite, a food blog that now boasts 320,000+ Facebook followers.

In March 2021, Little generously sat down with AFA Board Member, Linda Vice, and Executive Director, Emily Blejwas, in his hometown of Prattville, Alabama, to talk about his great grandmother's influence on his life and cooking, the importance of coming to the table, and his expansive definition what it means to be Southern.

Though Stacey launched Southern Bite to do restaurant reviews, one Monday morning he was typing out a recipe to email to a friend (a common occurrence for him, coming from a long line of great cooks and recipe swappers), when it dawned on him to add a tab to the blog for recipes. And that's when things really took off.

LV | So tell us what happened!

SL | Well, people who were coming to the site for the restaurant reviews found the recipe and started asking for more. "Hey, what else do you have? What other things?" So I literally started going through the recipes that I had grown up with. The recipes that my mom had made forever. She had this huge three-ring binder just filled with things. I started systematically going through that binder and sharing those recipes. And at some point I started taking a picture every now and then. Eventually, I realized people were paying more attention to the recipes than they were to the restaurant reviews. I started focusing solely on those family recipes, and it just grew and grew and grew.

So, Southern Bite was a way to keep those family recipes alive?

Right. You know, in the South, we habitually don't cook with recipes. We cook

by standing in the kitchen and learning from our mothers and grandmothers. We learn to cook by feel and touch and taste. To write the Southern Bite cookbook, I spent a week in my grandmother's kitchen

and I would say, "OK, Nana, we're going to make this." And I would stop her and measure and we would go through things several times just to make sure that we captured those recipes that had never been written down. And in that process, I realized what an important role my great grandmother had played. My Big Mama. Her maiden name was Stacey, and that's why I ended up with the name Stacey. There were so many things that she prepared, that she cooked, that nobody knew how to make, that were literally lost when she passed away.

My son, Jack, will be 13 in September. And in writing the cookbook, I was able to capture recipes from people that he never met, that he never knew. In some way, I was gifting him a piece of his history. I was able to write those recipes down and introduce him to my Big Mama who he never met. Throughout that process, that was my main goal: to capture those recipes for him.

Then I realized there were thousands of people out there who were also interested in those recipes. And those people eventually made the book a bestseller, because those folks had the same desire to have those kind of family recipes, things that they had grown up with, too.

You mentioned that at first, you didn't want to do the cookbook at all. Why was that?

My fear was that people who follow the blog would feel a disconnect between a formal cookbook and what I do. I want people to visit

Southern Bite and feel like we're just friends sitting across the table chatting, and writing a stuffy technical cookbook was just not in the cards for me. I felt like that was a departure from who I was as a person and who I was to my readers, to the people who came to Southern Bite every day. I start sentences with "and" and I use "y'all" a lot and I just didn't want it to be this stuffy, sterile book. But the publisher gave me permission to be me without editing all of the personality out of it.



Photos by Kim Box

One of the things I really wanted to control was the photography. If you make a recipe and it even closely resembles what the image is, whether it's an image on the website or an image in the book, people are encouraged by that. So when you have photography that is super styled and you're using all these weird food styling tricks and all this kind of stuff, you get so far away from what it is as a recipe and it becomes unattainable. So I told them from the beginning: I will be involved in every bit of that process. Those are my terms. And we shot the entire book here in Prattville. You know, I cooked every single one of those recipes. I styled every one of them.

Talk more about why that's so important to you, to have recipes that are attainable.

As terrible as this sounds, I use what we call the Wal-Mart rule. If you can buy it at Wal-Mart, then I will use it in recipes that I create because I want my recipes to be attainable for folks. I want them to be things that anybody can get their hands on. There's some great content out there that will allow you to create decadent, wonderful recipes. They're going to cost you sixty dollars in groceries. And three of the things you're only going to use one time, and I love to do things like that for a special occasion, but for your run-of-the-mill things I like for it to be approachable.

Not everybody always has access to fresh vegetables. And so anytime I write recipes, I try to give people options. You know, it's best using this, but you can also use this, and I try to provide them with equal measurement. Whatever I can do to make it easier. It's always been really important for me to make people feel, regardless of what's in your pantry, be proud that you have something. If you're using cream of mushroom soup, if you're using Lipton onion soup mix or whatever, it's okay. There are plenty of places for you to go on the Internet or go in the world and people are going to tell you that you shouldn't be using that or that's unhealthy or it's too much sodium or too much this. But if that is where you are, that's okay. I want to give people permission to put food on the table regardless.

When I did the book tour, so many people were talking about what a challenge it is to get a home-cooked meal on the table. When I was growing up, we



*As somebody who has built a business based on food,
I am firmly planted in the idea that the food is important.
But the connections with your family and friends
over that food is infinitely more important.*

gathered as a family for dinner every single night. It didn't matter what was going on. That's what we did. But when I was out in the world, I saw that for lots of folks, that was a challenge. And I realized that's the place for me to be. I want to do something to help people get to the table. So Southern Bite has evolved over the years. It's a balance between capturing those time-honored Southern classic recipes like biscuits and chicken and dumplings and turnip greens, but also equipping families with quick and easy meals that help them get to the table.

EB | Why is it so important to get families to the table? What is it about sharing that meal together every day?

One of my best friends said one time, "As we each go out into the world every day, we're all changed in some way. We're affected by the things that happen to us and that happen around us, the people we meet. And bringing your family back to that table is the way to find out who your family became that day." And that's a great gift, being able to do that. To reconnect every evening. It helps to prevent things from happening that you don't know about. When you have your thumb on your 13-year-old son's life every single day, you're able to see if there are changes that are happening, if he needs to talk about something.

But when we grab our meals and go to separate places and we turn on the TV and we look at our phones, everybody's connecting with someone else and we're not focused on the folks who are most important. So sometimes families just need something easy, and sometimes easy includes a can of cream of chicken soup and sometimes easy includes a packet of ranch dressing mix. It's really a balance of giving people those classic Southern recipes, fried potatoes, macaroni and tomatoes and things like that, but also equipping families with things that are easy and straightforward, that include ingredients that they already have in the pantry that allow them to just put food on the table.

As somebody who has built a business based on food, I am firmly planted in the idea that the food is important. But the connections with your family and friends over that food are infinitely more important. Food is really just a conduit through which we're able to connect with our family and our friends. And if I can be a part of giving people that opportunity, that's the ultimate goal for me.



**LV | What role does passing down traditions play in Southern Bite?
You mentioned you started with all of your family recipes.**

My grandparents live just off the bypass in Camden across from the cemetery, and anybody who is familiar with Camden knows exactly where that is. And when my grandparents built that house, my grandmother, my grandfather, and my mother went in the woods and they dug up a little cedar tree and they brought the cedar tree to the front yard. And every year they decorated that tree for Christmas. And that became part of our family tradition. We always have Thanksgiving in Camden at my grandparents' house and we always spend the afternoon decorating that tree. And that was also a part of other people's family traditions because they made time during the holiday season to drive by the Robinsons' house and see the big Christmas tree with all the lights on it.

Southern Bite is kind of like that tree. It's built on the traditions of my family, the recipes that I grew up with, the recipes that were important to us, and in some weird way, sharing them with the world allows people to create their own traditions. And it gives me the opportunity to be a little bit a part of those other family traditions for other people.

My favorite thing every year is to sit on the back side of the website the day before Thanksgiving and watch the number of people printing recipes and knowing that there are hundreds of thousands of people who will have my recipes on their table on Thanksgiving. Just talking about it now gives me chills. It's just this really cool, humbling thing to know that people are able to create traditions and special occasions with their family through the same ones in mine.

Stacey Little
and his Big Mama
(Courtesy of
Stacey Little)

And Southern Bite reminds people of recipes they may have forgotten, or things they've been searching for forever. When I shared a recipe for butter roll, so many people emailed and said, "I haven't thought about this in years. I can't wait to make it. I remember my grandmother making it." Being able to remind people of things that they hadn't thought about in years or being the source for people to be able to recreate dishes that they've been trying to recreate for years is the coolest. Being a part of helping people recreate family memories is a big deal.



How would you sum up your philosophy of food?

Oh wow, that's a deep question. I think it really just goes back to that idea that the food is what connects us as human beings in lots of different ways. You know, in the South we celebrate everything with food. Births, deaths, you have people showing up with casseroles.

My sister has one she calls "Funeral Potatoes."

Exactly! Exactly. We celebrate everything with food. It's the constant throughout. When a new neighbor moves into the neighborhood, you show up with a pound cake. If you boil it down, it's really about the connections that food offers us. The food is important, but the connections are more important. And when you have the opportunity to use food to create that connection, that's really what it's about for me. Whether that's a physical connection, whether you're walking to your neighbor's house with a pound cake, or whether it's a digital connection where somebody who's been searching for years for macaroni and tomatoes that their great grandmother made when they were little can press the print button and is able to recreate that dish. If there's some way that I can give them a little bit of that beloved family member back, I think that's the ultimate thing for me.



Photos by Kim Box

I can see how important your Big Mama was to you. What memories do you have of her in the kitchen?

I remember sitting at that little tiny table in that little tiny kitchen. I mean, I remember it clear as day. I can picture what she was wearing. I remember everything about it. Ultimately, she is the inspiration for a lot of what I

do in the food world because they're just such strong memories in the kitchen with her. I don't remember the specifics about what we were cooking. That's probably because she was always cooking, so she was always in the kitchen. But I remember that so vividly. And she and I, we were tight. I mean, we were always together. We always just had a really, really strong bond.

Gosh, she was a spitfire, you know? All big mamas are held to that Big Mama standard. You know what I mean? Like, she was exactly what you expect she was. The classic great grandmother image, with her house dress and her apron, at the church every time the doors were open. She was the matriarch. Her husband died early on and she was in charge and she was perfectly content with being in charge and she kept folks in line. I saw her get a fly swatter after many a folk.

But one of the things that is most striking when I when I look back is her importance of focusing on family. That intense focus on taking care of your own. I think that's probably the most important thing that I remember from her. You know, family members aren't always going to be perfect. They're not always going to do things the way that you think that they should do them. But they're still your family.

And I look to the folks who follow Southern Bite as family members. I really do feel like we're just one big giant family and each day we just stretch the table out a little bit longer and somebody pours some more sweet tea and we just pass it down.

There's a lady named Miss Peggy and unfortunately, she passed away. I may tear up as I tell this story, but I think this is an important story to tell. I got an email one day and the subject line said, "You saved my life." And the email was the story of a 70-year-old lady in Iowa Park, Texas, who had spent her entire life raising her kids and being a devoted wife and mother. Her husband had passed away of a heart attack and she fell into a deep depression. Her kids all lived away and she had nothing left.

One of her sons had given her a laptop as an opportunity to find something for her to do. And to give her some kind of interaction. Somehow, she found Southern Bite and there was a recipe that reminded her of something that she had grown up with. So it got her up and it got her in the kitchen. And each day that we would post something new, she said she would get up, she would get dressed, she would go to the grocery store, she would buy those ingredients. She would make whatever it was, and she would share it with a family member or a friend or a neighbor. And she said that finding Southern Bite saved her life because she knew that if she hadn't found that motivation, there's no telling what depression would have done to her.

I never met her. I don't know what her voice sounds like, but I know her. She became an important part of our family. Every holiday something showed up at our door from Miss Peggy. Jack had his tonsils taken out and when we got



home from the hospital, Miss Peggy had arranged for a local florist to go and buy this enormous basket of ice cream and jello and popsicles and have that basket delivered to us. So there's a dedication in the book to Miss Peggy, because Miss Peggy is part of the reason why I still do what I do, because I know there are other Miss Peggy's out there. There are other people out there who sometimes are just looking for a connection and you never know when you can be that connection.

So connection is really at the heart of Southern Bite.

Yes, and kindness is a general rule of thumb for everything across Southern Bite. Social media is really a double-edged sword because it is a wonderful opportunity to reach people that you could never reach and to connect

with people. But it also allows people to say whatever they want to say without any fear of retribution. People hiding behind their keyboards. Very early on, as our social following grew, I knew that Southern Bite was going to be a place of kindness. And it took a little while for me to start getting rid of folks who couldn't be kind. But eventually I gave myself permission to preserve the family. If you can't mind your manners, then we're going to see you out, because regardless of your opinion, regardless of your political views, regardless of anything, you can always find kindness. So that's just something that I consistently enforce.



EB | It sounds like inclusivity is also important to you.

Right. You have to look out for people who start a sentence with, "A real Southerner would..." My standard response to that is, "A real Southerner would mind their manners." But I often reverse that and pose that question back to my readers. What makes this method or this ingredient Southern or not Southern? Just because your grandparents didn't put sugar in cornbread doesn't make my grandparents' recipe that might have a tablespoon of sugar in it any less Southern. It's important that we make people stop and take a step back and realize that there's a world that exists outside of themselves.

People are really passionate about food



Photos by Kim Box

Coming from a family of resourceful people means you can turn out a delicious meal out of virtually nothing. Whether it's Crisco and flour or peas in the freezer from last season, you're taught to be creative and inventive and to make do with what you have. A rural life forces you to be that way.

and I love that passion, but sometimes we just have to step back and realize that as we're talking about traditions, your family tradition doesn't necessarily define the entire geographic area. So I often say, you know, folks, the inclusion of one ingredient or the elimination of it doesn't make something Southern. What does? Is it because it was made physically in the South? Is it because the person who made it lives in the South? Is it because the ingredients were sourced in the South? What is it that makes a dish Southern?

LV | And would you define that for us please?

Well, see, that's the thing. There's not an answer for me because I think that any of those things can make something Southern. Any combination of those things. And the reality is that Southern food as we know it today is an amalgamation of lots of different cultures. We have African influence. We have French influence. We have so many different cultures and foods that have created what we know as Southern food.

What are some of your family's most cherished Southern food traditions?

My grandfather had two huge gardens and he grew everything. Okra, peas, corn, tomatoes, potatoes, cantaloupe, watermelon. And there was an heirloom English pea that he grew that was unlike any English pea I've ever had in my life. You pick them and they look like the traditional green English pea, but when you cook them, they turn brown and kind of shrivel. Almost like what a speckled butterbean does when you cook it. They turn that brownish gray. The texture is super creamy and they don't taste anything like English peas. It's one of those things that is a simple part of our family's history.

Does anybody preserve that pea?

My grandmother saved a bunch of them and there is actually a farmer in Camden who grows some every year and makes sure we have them for our family gatherings. On Thanksgiving, for instance, we have to have those peas. So being able to continue that tradition has always been super important.

How has that part of the South, the rural part, influenced you?

I often say that as Southerners, we were "farm to table" before it was cool. Sunday dinner at my grandparents' house consisted of whatever we picked

from the garden that day. I would go with my grandfather and we would dig potatoes or whatever it was, and that is what made up the meal. Sometimes there was ham or chicken, but not always. There were plenty of meals that were nothing but vegetables.

Growing up like that forces you to be resourceful, whether it is growing your own vegetables because you're not close to an urban market or learning how to field dress a deer or whatever it is. Those things teach you to be resourceful. And coming from a family of resourceful people means you can turn out a delicious meal out of virtually nothing. Whether it's Crisco and flour or peas in the freezer from last season, you're taught to be creative and inventive and to make do with what you have. A rural life forces you to be that way.

And in general, when you can be resourceful, you're just a better human being, right? You know how to make the best of whatever it is, whether it's food-related or your general attitude. When you have the ability to see the good things and to make something good and not focus on just the negative, on some level it carries over.

One of my guiding principles is gratitude. We can find something to be grateful for in every aspect of life. Just being able to put food on the table, regardless of what it is, is a reason to be grateful, because there are countless numbers of people, especially right now dealing with the pandemic, who are struggling to put food on the table. I truly believe that when you can come from a place of gratitude, you're a happier person.

EB | What was your family table like, growing up?

It was just me, Mom, and Dad, but very infrequently was it just me, Mom, and Dad, because there were always people at our table. Whether family members or neighbors or my stepbrothers were there for the weekend, there were always extra place settings. Maybe it was somebody from Dad's work or neighbors who would often come and have dinner with us. One of my dad's friends lived with us for a little while because he was just in a rough patch, so there were always extra people.

People were always welcome and there was always more, which is interesting because I grew up poor. But until I was an adult looking back, I didn't realize that we did without anything. Once, my mom told me what a tiny grocery budget she had every week. I thought, gosh, we spend more than that on a single meal sometimes. I look back and I wonder how on earth they made that work and then to feed extra mouths too. But it was just part of what we did.

It kind of makes perfect sense that everyone was welcome at your parents' table, and now everybody's welcome at Southern Bite.

It's really interesting. But I think that's frequently how things work. You don't really pay attention, but they become a part of your being. They become a part of who you are and your persona and your frame of mind and your attitude in general.

LV | What's your most favorite recipe in the world?

Oh, I think I have to say biscuits. I could write a thousand recipes with infinite detail about biscuits. And until you've stood in the kitchen with somebody who knows how to make biscuits and you've been shown exactly what the texture should feel like and how to work the dough, you can't really make good biscuits. And once people can master biscuits, there's so many other things that they can do. Biscuits evolves into pie crusts, evolves into cinnamon rolls or butter rolls, evolves into dumplings. All of those are based on a basic technique. And once you master that, it opens you up to a lot of other things.

EB | How did your Big Mama fix biscuits?

She didn't bake biscuits in the oven. She cooked them on the stovetop in a cast iron skillet. I'm not sure if it was out of necessity that she made them this way, but essentially the process was the same up until the baking process. She would form those biscuits. You know, I didn't grow up with grandparents who used biscuit cutters. They formed biscuits in their hands. They worked in a big bowl of flour. There was no measurement. I stood there and watched for years as my grandmother would put a handful of Crisco in the middle of a big bowl of flour and she would work it in and add buttermilk until it looked right or till it felt right. And once that was done, they would form the biscuits in their hands.



Photo by Kim Box

Most people at that point would pop them in the oven, but for whatever reason, my great grandmother would put them in the skillet and cook them on top of the gas stovetop super low, with a plate on top of the skillet. Then about halfway through, she would scoop a spatula under there and flip the entire thing over. And what you ended up getting were these super great tender biscuits that had crunchy edges. They were very unique. And they're a part of so many of our family's memories because they were different. They're not the kind of biscuits that you get everywhere.

I actually have one of her cast iron skillets that I still use. It's not something that's this revered family heirloom, because I know that she wouldn't want it sitting on a shelf somewhere. She would want me using that skillet. So I still use it to this day. And every time, I think of my Big Mama in the kitchen. ○



Cherokee Rivercane Basketry

Modern and Historical Encounters

JIM BROWN

Introduction to Cherokee Rivercane Basketry

Sometime in the summer of 1982, I drove the family's old VW camper up to the Smokemont campground, in the National Park a few miles up the Oconaluftee River from the town of Cherokee, North Carolina. I was headed to meet Carol Welch to learn the art of Cherokee-style traditional rivercane basketry, about to fulfill a long-held wish: to gain firsthand an in-depth knowledge about Native American culture, particularly the Cherokee. My interest dated to family visits in the mid-1950s, when I was just ten or twelve years old, to Cherokee tourist attractions: Oconaluftee Indian Village and the drama *Unto These Hills*.

I connected with Carol through the roommate of one of my students at Samford University, who was Cherokee and from the Qualla Boundary land trust, the capital of which is Cherokee, North Carolina. When I called to ask Carol if she'd teach me to make a Cherokee-style cane basket and volunteered to pay tuition, she said she'd never done that before, but how would \$25 per day sound? It sounded great to me.

Carol lived in Big Cove, NC, the valley made by Raven Fork that runs down into the Oconaluftee from the northeast. She was about 42 years old; I was 37. I'd show up at her house around 8:00 in the morning and we'd work at baskets until noon — mostly inside, with soap operas playing on the TV. Then I'd wander off somewhere for lunch, return at 1:00 and work until 4:00 or so, then go back and eat and sleep in the camper. We did that for three days, and I still have that first rivercane basket I made under Carol's tutelage. It sits in a place of pride atop the piano in the living room — singleweave, most of the horizontal splits dyed very dark brown (with butternut root) making a spiral pattern on the tan, undyed background, with a thin white oak rim bound by even thinner hickory bark lashing to finish off the top. I say "I made" the basket, though Carol supplied all the finished and dyed cane



I still have that first rivercane basket I made under Carol's tutelage. It sits in a place of pride atop the piano in the living room — singleweave, most of the horizontal splits dyed very dark brown (with butternut root) making a spiral pattern on the tan, undyed background...

splits, and the rim and lashings, not to mention the instructions. Only later, upon learning those steps, did I truly appreciate what she'd done for me.

Davis, Carol's husband, was an excellent fisherman, night watchman, bear hunter, and gatherer of things Carol needed from the woods — cane and white oak for splits, hickory bark for lashings, bloodroot and butternut roots for dyes. He had deep Cherokee roots, and Carol was of mostly Cherokee heritage herself.

Carol used rivercane to make baskets when she could get it, but given the shortage of rivercane in the mountains, she worked mainly in white oak — doing traditional cane basketry patterns in thin white oak strips. The oak splits didn't have the shiny surface of cane, but they took dye faster. A couple years later, a severe frost killed most of the remaining cane and even the blackberries, freezing the roots, and nobody in the area had any cane for a while.

I was determined to take Carol a load of Alabama rivercane, and found some to harvest alongside I-59 somewhere northeast of Springville. I tried to find canes whose bottom five or six feet had no twigs coming from the joints, which interfere with the splitting. I whacked them down with a machete, cut off the tops, and bound them with vines in bundles of 25. Ten bundles later, grimy, sweaty, and mosquito-bitten, I discovered the philosophical truth that 250 of anything is a lot. Post-enlightenment, I tied the bundles to the luggage rack on top of the car and drove them the six or so hours up to Cherokee. As a reward, Carol gave me a small, beautiful rivercane doubleweave basket, that PhD of Southeastern Native American baskets, which also sits atop the piano today. It's a classic three-color: tan (undyed cane), brownish-black (butternut root dye), and orangey-red (bloodroot dye).

With the doubleweave, you start with a typical square or rectangular bottom, but the basket is woven in distinct quadrants. Next, the corners are turned up so all the weavers are at 45 degrees instead of vertical or

horizontal (*see illustration on page 36*). You weave up to the height you want your basket to be, shiny side of the cane inside, then turn sharply over and weave down the outside and tuck things in under the bottom according to the pattern already there — so it's really an inner and an outer basket all in one.

When water is poured into such a well-made basket, the splits swell until the basket is watertight; then you can actually drop in hot stones from the cooking fire and cook soup in it. Carol had learned basic singleweave cane basketmaking from her mother, then learned the more difficult doubleweave technique from legendary high school teacher Lottie Queen Stamper, who taught crafts at the Cherokee school in Qualla for years. Stamper began teaching basketry at the Qualla high school in 1937, after learning the doubleweave technique from “Old Lady Mrs. Toineeta” on Swimmer Branch.

In fact, earlier in life, Carol had made it her mission to be the next generation's Lottie Stamper, but to her disappointment the school discontinued the position when Lottie retired. When I met Carol in 1982, she sold baskets at the Crafts Cooperative and shop in Qualla and in a shop in an old log church next to the local Baptist church, where she was a member.

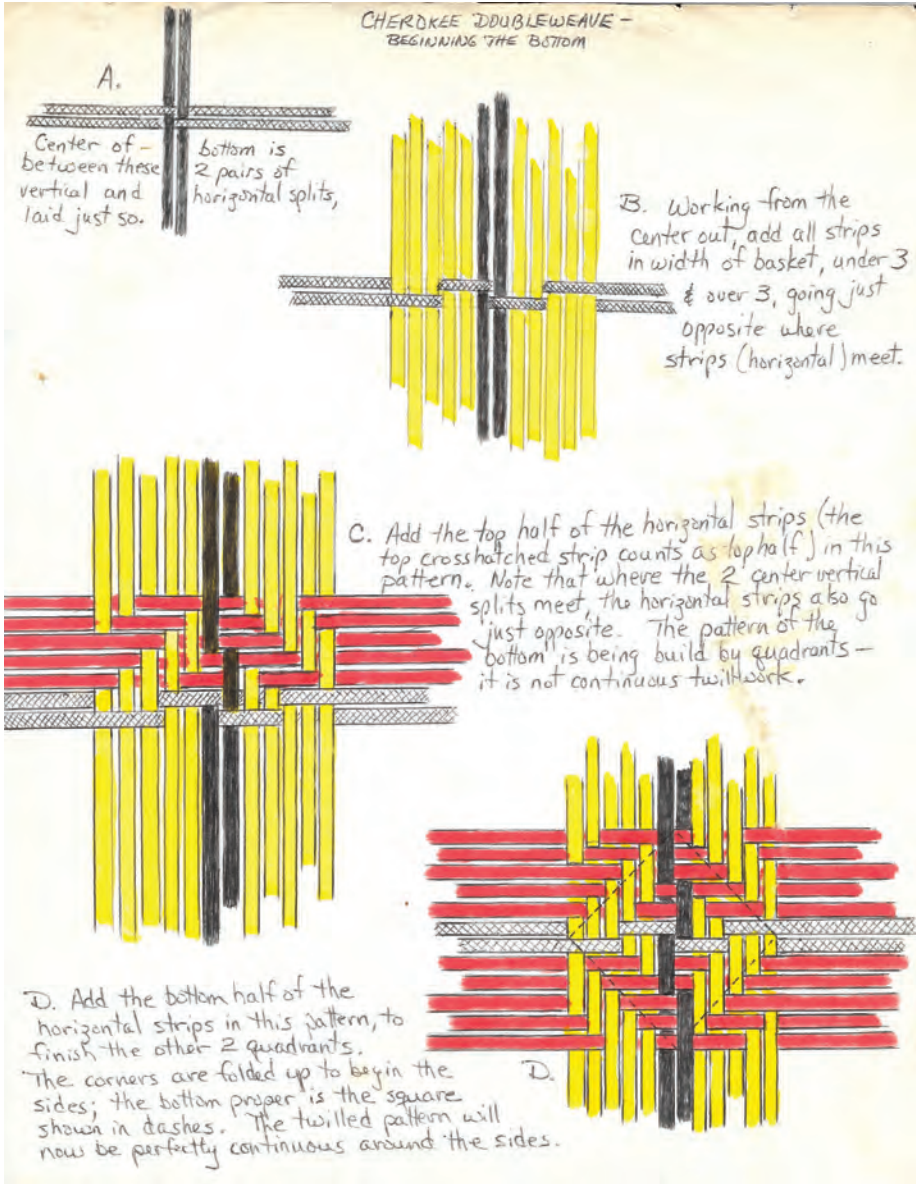
The oldest Cherokee basket | Browsing the collections of the British Museum

In 1985 and again in 1996, my family lived as the family-in-residence at Samford University's Daniel House in London. I must have gone to the British Museum a dozen times that first semester: free admission and perhaps the best museum in the world. Not to mention that on exhibit was allegedly the oldest dateable Cherokee basket. The basket was part of the original collection of Hans Sloane that became the nucleus of the museum in 1753. In 1996, I set out to research the basket and produce a scholarly article on it.

First, I found out a good deal more about Hans Sloane (1660-1753). As a young man, he had been to Jamaica as physician to the Governor, with lots of time to collect and muse upon natural history. A physician to the rich and famous, he became so himself. Samford's Daniel House is in South Kensington, in the greater political unit known as “The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.” In or

Although American rivercane and Asian bamboo are closely related, you can usually tell them apart from a distance: the bamboo has a layered look throughout the branches and yellowish stalks; the American rivercane has a bushier, unlayered look.
(Photos by Jim Brown)





ABOVE Starting the doubleweave basket

OPPOSITE A three-quarter finished doubleweave cane basket
(Photos by Jim Brown)

around 1700, Kensington was still an outlying rural royal hunting estate, and Chelsea was a little riverside town some seven miles up the Thames from the City of London proper, with no idea it would someday have a professional football team. And there in Chelsea right on the waterfront in the early 1700s (and still today) was the Chelsea Physic Garden, which Hans Sloane bought and turned into possibly the greatest herbal medicine garden of the age, back when almost all medicines came from plants.

He planted the garden geographically, with all the medicinal plants from Europe in one place, the Mideast in one place, the West Indies in one place, and so on. Apothecaries from London would float up on the incoming tide and snip the leaves or dig the roots they needed. Then they would while away time until the tide turned, relaxing in the next-door coffeehouse featuring the newest recreational drug, caffeine, and then float back down to London on the ebb in a heightened sense of awareness.

The known history of the oldest dateable Cherokee basket begins in 1722-25 with Mark Catesby, a naturalist working north of the Spanish settlements in America in “Charles City” (only later called Charleston), South Carolina. Catesby was sponsored by several wealthy patrons, including Hans Sloane, and was charged with collecting “natural history artifacts” from North America — particularly seeds and seedlings, so much was the rage for new botanicals in England. Catesby apparently made a foray upcountry towards what is now Augusta, when the Cherokee towns came down much closer to the coast. He was said to have entrusted a basket he acquired on this trip to Governor Nicholson (the first royal governor of South Carolina, 1721-25) to take back to Catesby’s chief patron, Hans Sloane, when Nicholson returned to Great Britain in 1725.

Further research led me to the old reading room of the British Museum, with its huge sky-blue dome and radiating pattern of bookcases and desks, communing with the ghost of Karl Marx who did most of his research for *Das Kapital* there. I pored over the elephant folio version of Catesby’s two-volume work on the plants of North America, with its huge hand-tinted prints all bound together — so heavy I had to take it back to my desk one volume at a time. Herein, I discovered that what scientists then called *Solanum rubrum* was our common pokeberry, used for dying cane baskets, among other things.

Then there was the basket itself, which I was itching to see. It was no longer on display, as holdings are rotated, but Jonathan King, curator of the





The British Museum's Cherokee doubleweave cane basket with doubleweave lid, sent from America to Hans Sloane ca. 1725
(Photo by Jim Brown)

then “Museum of Man” branch, invited me to ride the museum’s internal shuttle as it made the rounds of all the British Museum holdings and storage rooms scattered around the city, and spend an hour or so with the basket. Flash photography was prohibited, but there were big sunny windows, and I photographed every side of the well-lit basket: really two doubleweaves that together made a portmanteau (twenty sides and bottoms in all, counting insides and outsides). It was the same classic tricolor as the basket Carol gave me in 1985, some 260 years newer.

Later, at the Royal Society building with its tall back windows overlooking the Mall, I introduced myself as a professional historian working on Catesby and the oldest Cherokee basket (conveniently omitting the fact that my academic credentials were for continental European history and included neither British nor American expertise). They had me recline in a deep leather armchair while they accessed and brought me Mark Catesby’s 36-page letter describing the Cherokee he had encountered— the actual handwritten letter, not a copy. I think if I’d have asked for a gin-and-tonic I’d have gotten it.

Back in the manuscript room of the British Library, I found a letter from Catesby to Sloane from March of 1723 saying he was setting out for “the Cherikees a nation of Indians 300 miles from this place & who have lately declared war with another nation which diverts them from injuring us and gives me the opportunity of going with more safety.” Catesby’s concern with safety was warranted; his predecessor had been killed by the Tuscarora. Then, eureka, I found this letter from Catesby to Sloane:

I photographed every side of the well-lit basket: really two doubleweaves that together made a portmanteau (twenty sides and bottoms in all, counting insides and outsides). It was the same classic tri-color as the basket Carol gave me in 1985, some 260 years newer.

Charles Town Nov. 27, 1724 Honorable Sr. I hope ere this you have received from the Blandford Man of War (who sailed from hence in August last) a box of plants and other things with a Lr of advise. I now send by Capt. Easton in Ye Neptune a box of dried plants with an Indian apron made of the bark of wild mulberry this kind of cloath with a kind of basket they make of split cane is [here "are" is written over with "is"] the only mecanick arts worth notice. These basket with a kind of tobacco pipe they make with marble I'll send the first opportunity. The plants now sent were the production of the last half-summer in the Settlements, having before sent you collections of the same months I fear these will afford but few that are new to you. I am Sr Yr most dutyfull Humble Servt M Catesby.

Weaving New Worlds

The article was taking shape nicely, and I was already weighing possible publication sites, when Jonathan King asked if I knew Sarah Hill, a scholar from Atlanta who had already been there to work on the basket. When I got in touch with Hill, it turned out she had not only already published on the basket, but was also finishing up a comprehensive book on the history of the Cherokee and their basketry that she'd worked on for twenty years.

Hill's most interesting book, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry*, was published the next year, in 1997. It details the matrilineal nature of Cherokee society, in which women did almost all the agriculture and home crafts, while men focused on hunting and war. But beginning in the earliest historical records of the 1500s, a pattern of encroachment by European society on Cherokee lands is evident, causing a slow but sure disintegration of Cherokee society. Cherokee women maintained their culture in part through basketmaking — weaving new worlds.

In America, rivercane baskets were made by various Indigenous people everywhere rivercane grew, from its northern limit around the Ohio River to the Gulf Coast. This includes most of present-day Alabama. In Alabama, Cherokees resided and their descendants remain largely in the northeastern corner of the state. If any readers should know of Alabama Cherokee rivercane baskets, or even stories about them or their makers, I would love to hear from you. ○



Mardi

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32

Mardi Gras Canceled? When Pigs Fly!

The Genesis of the Mobile Porch Parade

EMILY BLEJWAS

“Usually my street is pretty festive during Mardi Gras,” said Suzanne Sarver, who lives close to downtown Mobile, Alabama, and its parade routes. But on a Wednesday evening in January 2021, she noticed her neighbors were “barely able to take down their Christmas decorations. It seemed like everybody was in a slump this year.” Others in Mobile felt the same, describing being “down in the dumps” and “bummed” when looking toward a Mardi Gras season with all parades and most events canceled due to the pandemic. “I’ve really been fine. It hasn’t been that bad,” JoAnna Wilson Simmons said, after nearly a year living under Covid. “But when Mardi Gras hit, it was like ...” She sighed. “It’s so big for everybody on the Gulf Coast. It hit worse than Thanksgiving and Christmas for me.”

In Mobile, the American birthplace of Mardi Gras, the season consists of four weeks of parades, balls, parties, and events. So the pandemic didn’t threaten to “take away one day,” Sarah Hoeb pointed out, but “an entire season of events and celebrations and decorations and food ... To take away tradition from people is very hard.” Indeed, when I interviewed eleven Mobilians who participated in the Mobile Porch Parade in February 2021, most cited tradition and pride when explaining Mardi Gras in Mobile, centering the holiday as fundamental to Mobile’s identity. “It’s part of who we are,” Debbie Ollis said. Simmons agreed: “It gets in your blood.”

Mardi Gras weaves tightly through Mobilians’ memories of growing up in the city. Gwen Jones recalls standing near Spanish Plaza as a girl, watching the bands with her parents, then meeting friends there as a teenager. She would look for certain bands, catch peanut butter taffy, and always be sure to see the “dragon parade” (three dragons: Verna, Dean, and Vernadean, have rolled in the Mystics of Time parade since 1948). When Jones went to college in New Orleans, her mother mailed her moonpies, a staple of

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GWEN JONES

Mobile Mardi Gras, during the season. Ricky Bradford remembers meeting up with his whole family, including aunts, uncles, and cousins, to watch the parades on Mardi Gras day from the steps of the First Baptist Church on Government and Broad Streets. They packed lunches so they could stay all day, through the very last night parade (the Order of Myths).

Childhood traditions like these continue as Mobilians grow up and pass them on. Many families have participated in Mardi Gras for generations, with children parading in the same societies as their parents, decorations handed down to newlyweds, and families standing in the same spot to watch the parades every year. Simmons's favorite part of Mardi Gras is "seeing all the kids playing together and dancing in the streets. It reminds me of when I got to do that." Hoeb related that after her son, Lucas, was born on January 1, "One of my first memories of taking him out was going to a Mardi Gras parade and I had him in the stroller and he was totally covered up, sound asleep the entire time, while we just watched the parade. So he, from a young age, was indoctrinated into moonpies and beads and he loves Mardi Gras."

In a usual year, the interviewees spend the Mardi Gras season attending balls, parades, parties, gatherings with friends and family, and other events, like the queen's luncheon or coronation ceremony. Tim Clarke noted that when his son was a member of the court in 2020, it meant two weeks of nonstop entertaining and events. Some stay in hotels downtown, to enjoy the parades and go out with friends and family before and afterwards. Sarver described her house as a home base for parade-goers, a place to congregate or to rest and recharge. "It's a constant party," she said.

Gatherings with family and friends, both large and small, are the most important part of Mardi Gras for all interviewees. "We go huge," Jones said. As the oldest of eight children, she hosts a family gathering that draws one hundred people or more, with many coming from out of town. Ollis's family always gets together on Joe Cain Day for a family brunch. Other gatherings are spur of the moment. "Somebody will host a fun yard party, just, 'Hey come out, we've got a second line band and cocktails and oysters,' or a crawfish boil here and there," Jamie Flotte said. Several interviewees mentioned seeing people at Mardi Gras whom they don't see at any other time of year, or groups of kids who always attend parades together even though they go to different schools.

Some interviewees ride in parades themselves, both in Mobile and in New Orleans. Decorating is also part of the season; Mobilians often redecorate their Christmas tree for Mardi Gras, festoon their porches and yards in purple, green, and gold, and fly Mardi Gras flags. Others enjoy decorating the tables for friends' balls or other events. "And leading up to Mardi Gras, making sure you have all your attire set for the season," Flotte added. "Inviting your friends to the different balls and getting the pre and post-parties for that organized."

When asked to describe the spirit of Mardi Gras, interviewees used the words *joyful*, *happy*, *celebration*, *fun*, *creativity*, *unique*, *frivolity*, *community*, and *togetherness*. "I like anything that's joyous," Jones said, "and on Mardi Gras even the worst person seems to feel good. You know even the ones that never seem to smile? It's the pure joy of it." Simmons added, "The rules get loosened. We go to every single parade, every single night, even when they were babies in the wagon. And we stand in the same spot year after year with our friends and we make new friends. And they eat moonpies and come home and eat Ramen at 9:30 at night that we've caught and then they go to school the next day. It's the only time where I'm the mom that lets them have no rules."

Simmons added, as many did, that Mardi Gras is also about community and togetherness: "It's really the one time of year when there are no strangers." And there are "lessons learned even just standing at the parade. Patience. If you don't catch something, there's always something coming up next. No need for tears. It's a fun time. If you catch too much stuff and the person next to you didn't catch enough, go ahead and share with them."



Superheroes
(Photo by
Emily Blejwas)

So when Sarver saw her dismal street that Wednesday evening, she thought about the Yardi Gras movement happening in New Orleans, with Mardi Gras décor springing up on porches and in front yards, and she did what she could do. She thought of a name, bought a domain, and built the Mobile Porch Parade website. "I just saw that people wanted it and I have a little bit of skill and experience building websites," Sarver recalls. "I saw people had the ideas



Family pets inspire cutouts (Photo by Emily Blejwas)

and I'm just the one who pulled the trigger to make it happen." She casually sent the website to some friends, asking them to check it out, and "before I knew it, it just blew up."

Mardi Gras decorations sprang up on porches and in yards throughout Mobile, especially in historic neighborhoods close to downtown. Some streets got a friendly decorating contest going. Others formed neighborhood "krewes" with float signs numbered after houses and krewes named after streets. "People needed something concrete," Sarver said. "A lot of people had the ideas ... but things like this, they need a name sometimes to spread. And that's what it did and it was so fun to see. And my goal was to do it and have it take on a life of its own where people were doing different things with it all under the same umbrella and that's what happened."

Two days after Sarver created the website, Oakleigh resident Lisa Valentine called veteran float builder Craig Stephens and asked to rent something from his float barn for her yard (she chose a depiction of Jerry Garcia). When her neighbors saw it, they followed suit, and for the next three weeks, Stephens was slammed. He rented over 200 pieces to 70 houses: the entire contents of his float barn.

Stephens remembers laughing about the Yardi Gras phenomenon in New Orleans at first, but then thinking that if he could just rent to one house in a Mobile neighborhood that typically decorates for Mardi Gras, it would take off, and that's what happened. After Valentine called, "It was off to the races," he said. "It just spread by word of mouth."

Though some Mobilians rented pieces from Stephens, others commissioned pieces from local artists, and many made their own decorations. They often chose themes that represented themselves or that kids would enjoy. Stacy Wellborn, who rented Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* characters from Stephens, loves the book and also felt it fit her and her husband, Johnny. They added Christmas garland to create a "wild" atmosphere. Simmons commissioned large painted plywood cutouts of frogs from local artist Sune Phillips because her sons, Wilson and Lewis, love frogs. Hoeb made cutouts to resemble her own dog and cat, because she and her son, Lucas, both love animals.

When Jones's great nephew, Zorian, spotted Popeye on her neighbor's porch, he said, "Popeye is strong, but he's not a superhero. I want superheroes." So Jones called on her brother and sister-in-law, both talented artists, to make cutouts of Spiderman, Venom, and The Incredible Hulk. Jones wanted them to be colorful, and her brother added a bit of Mardi Gras regalia to each: beads, a parasol, and throws. Jones loved seeing all of the different themes that popped up around the neighborhood, representing what was personally significant, like her musical neighbors and their music theme. "I think it's so much fun to see what's inside everybody's heads," she said.

Susan Comeaux built on a longtime inside joke with a college friend (they gift each other pig collectibles) for her theme: *Mardi Gras Parades Cancelled? When Pigs Fly!*, which she painted on a board that hung from her second story balcony. In addition to the extensive pig décor, she and her husband, Phil, created a large pig out of a pink princess tent left out by a neighbor on trash day, with plastic plates for a nose and leftover Mardi Gras streamers for hair. Comeaux even received a mysterious pig statue on her porch as a gift during the season. Bradford and his husband, Bruce, repurposed a headdress they had used for a Mardi Gras party the year before, and outfitted Halloween skeletons in Mardi Gras regalia for their yard.

When Ted and Jamie Flotte visited the float barn, Stephens remarked that he had been waiting on the perfect yard for a huge beach lady, and theirs was it. They also chose a frog, an inside joke between them, and looked around for more beach-related decor. They visited locally owned shops, including Toomey's, Al's 5 and 10, and Blankenship's Hardware, to make a whole beach scene come to life in the front yard. They created an ocean wave from chicken wire and PVC pipes, at first using zip ties, then deciding pipe cleaners would be easier. They described it as a trial and error process that required multiple trips to the store.

Some interviewees usually decorate their homes for Mardi Gras, so they just embellished it for the Porch Parade. Streets like Lafayette are already known for extravagant decorations for Halloween and Christmas, so the



FIGURE 03 Throw me something!
(Photo by Emily Blejwas)

Porch Parade was a natural extension. But others do not typically decorate or consider themselves artistic. Simmons is one of those, but stated “I just got wrapped up in it.” Wellborn said that her husband, not a crafty type, “totally bought into it and every time I come home there are more lights. He has loved it.”

Four hundred homes registered to be included on the official Mobile Porch Parade route before the January 24 deadline, but many more were decorated. Because most registered homes were clustered in neighborhoods close to downtown, Sarver created six parade routes (and corresponding maps) based on the historic neighborhoods recognized by the city: Old Dauphin Way, Oakleigh, Lower Dauphin Street and DeTonti Square, Church Street East, Midtown, and Leinkauf. The maps provided Mobilians with a “porch parade” to replace the usual tradition of watching downtown parades.

Decorators on the Porch Parade route saw a huge increase in foot traffic, and even some parties and bands walking through, lending it a festive air. They loved seeing the “parade-goers” come by, whether on foot, driving, pulling wagons, or riding bikes or scooters. Parade-goers often slowed down, pointed, laughed, and stopped to take pictures or pose with the cutouts. Many waved, honked, or

called out, “Looks great! Happy Mardi Gras!” or “I love it!” Bradford put up a *Throw me something* sign and found beads in his yard from people doing just that. Parade-goers often posted photos on social media, and Mobilians began tagging friends when they recognized their houses, creating an online porch parade community as well.

Porch Parade decorators enjoyed chatting with the steady flow of people through their neighborhoods, and especially loved seeing the joy it brought to children, who often ran up and squealed with delight upon seeing some of their favorite characters: Mary Poppins, Peter Pan, Captain Hook, Tinkerbell, Spiderman, Venom, The Incredible Hulk, and characters from Dr. Seuss books and *Where the Wild Things Are*. “Jerry Garcia has become a topic of discussion at our house,” Simmons said, laughing. “The reactions were wonderful,” said Jones, who recalled a little kid who stuck his head out of the car window and shrieked in delight at the superheroes in her yard. “I thought, ohhh, that’s the cutest thing on earth.”

As Sarver had hoped, the Mobile Porch Parade website was only the beginning. Many stepped up to help and brought new ideas to the table. Wellborn created and managed Facebook and Instagram handles for Mobile Porch Parade, which soon had over 2,000 followers each. Courtney Harris, a local graphic designer, happily worked for free to help Sarver create the maps. Soiree Signatures, an invitation and calligraphy shop in Midtown Mobile, donated the cost of printing over 1,000 maps and served as the pick-up site. Margaret Richards, a Mobile native, created a playlist.

The Porch Parade had spread like wildfire, largely through word of mouth and social media, in a city that desperately needed some

FIGURE 04 Porch Parade at night
(Photo by Tim Clarke)



To know that you're bringing joy in the time of a pandemic when so many things have been uncelebrated, so many things we've missed out on. Just giving to the community in this way and bringing joy in this way and just having people wave and say, 'We love what you did! Thank you!' It's so cool.

SUSAN COMEAUX

joy and light after a tough year. Wellborn recalled being bummed out after Christmas, with “nothing to look forward to until this Porch Parade thing popped up and I was like, Yay! Yay! Hallelujah! Something to get excited about that I can do and I can express and be creative. It was like a gift.” Comeaux called it “that light that we’ve needed” and Clarke explained, “It filled a void. It gave people some hope and some joy, and just a small way to celebrate, rather than not having anything to do at all.” Some parade-goers even thanked Clarke for keeping them in the Mardi Gras spirit.

Jones, an elementary school teacher, described the Porch Parade as “a huge deal for me because my students get so excited every year at Mardi Gras and that’s a huge factor in how I feel about it too, because I love their faces and how much they enjoy it. And every year I do a king cake and all of this, and I was thinking, none of this will have any meaning for them this year.” But when she told them about the Porch Parade and some students drove by her yard with their parents, “they just think it’s so cool.” Jones’s 82-year-old mother, who lives with her, also enjoyed seeing the kids come by. Jones describes her mother as a “goer,” accustomed to many social outings, which were severely limited during the pandemic. “So this perked her up too,” Jones said.

Indeed, all of the interviewees commented on the joy, fun, and sense of celebration that the Porch Parade brought after nearly a year of living with the pandemic. “People were just excited for an excuse to do something fun,” Sarver said. “In a year like this, it’s the little things that really matter and so even something as silly as decorating your house ended up bringing a lot of joy to people.” Ollis agreed: “People want to celebrate and they’re going to find a reason to do it and I love that about human nature, that we’re going to rise above things. It’s just fun, and you’re never too old to have fun.” Jones added, “People needed something in their life that was normal. Something in their life that was about joy. And maybe just a good party.”

“It’s a way that, after such a hard year, for everyone’s spirits to be lifted and maybe there’s the light at the end of the tunnel,” Flotte said. “And we have just so enjoyed the smiles that have been brought to people’s faces.” Comeaux added, “It’s so wonderful to be living in a community that comes together like this. Sure, we get a lot of joy out of this, but we did this for others, and so

did other people. And to know that you're bringing joy in the time of a pandemic when so many things have been uncelebrated, so many things we've missed out on. Just giving to the community in this way and bringing joy in this way and just having people wave and say, "We love what you did! Thank you!" It's so cool. And not that it takes much, but it brings out the kids in us."

Wellborn explained, "Visit Mobile uses the tagline, *Born to Celebrate*. It's a perfect tagline for our area... I love our Mardi Gras because it's approachable, it's about family, it's about the kids. It's about celebrating life. And the Porch Parade has allowed people to have that celebration of life piece of it. And it's given people something to do, to have a sense of community."

In fact, many interviewees emphasized the togetherness, community spirit, and camaraderie fostered by the Mobile Porch Parade. As Simmons explained, "There is not a stranger on the parade route. You start dancing with whosoever's standing next to you after you've been hanging off the barricades for that long. The kids are throwing the footballs back and forth to each other that they've just caught. Somebody's offering you a piece of chicken off the grill while you're walking down the street, or a beer. It's that sense of community and I think that's what the Porch Parade has been able to keep going." Jones agreed. "The essence of Mardi Gras is joy. It's about the pure joy of not

Where the Wild Things Are (Photo by Emily Blejwas)



meeting a stranger. Everyone is friendly. People walk by and they talk to you as they walk by and you give kids beads and stuff. And to me, it fosters community. It's a time to celebrate life."

"I feel like it's made everyone come together," Ollis said, of the Porch Parade. "I've never seen our city this united over Mardi Gras and it's not even taking place!" Stephens called the Porch Parade "The essence of community. It was like everyone was pulling together to just do something. Do what we can do." Jones pointed out that everyone needs "some form of cohesion. So this was a neighborhood thing, creating better neighbors. So to me, it's a great opportunity to create some unity and community." Sarver agreed. "That's the part that really gets me fired up and excited," she said. "Seeing people be creative and together. Creativity can really spur a sense of community and being a good neighbor."

Indeed, interviewees place a high value on the Porch Parade's ability to foster creativity and provide a creative outlet during a difficult time. "Knowing this community, it does not surprise me that this was born," Comeaux said. "Mobile is filled with people with such creative ideas. So much art." Sarver went a step further, pointing out the inherent creativity in every Mobilian:

That really was the most exciting part to me. People who always say they're not creative proving themselves wrong. I think everybody's creative. You just have to find that one thing that sparks it out of you and I think the Porch Parade sparked it for a lot of people ... People who aren't usually creative or don't think they're creative came up with the most creative decorations and made them themselves. I mean, some people made their own float pieces. Like papier-mâchés! That's what's really cool to me. I love people taking that time to have fun and be creative. A lot of people just don't have the opportunity to do that a whole lot. And when you give them the excuse and give them the opportunity, it's amazing what people come up with ...

And I think it helped people realize that creating beautiful things around you can really change your perspective and your mood. You don't have to go into an art gallery to experience art. This is a perfect example of being able to create something as a community that everybody can enjoy. That's so fulfilling to me. That right there is worth it. Worth all the hard work.

Stephens agreed completely. "I don't think there is anyone who's not creative. I don't think there's anything that human beings really do that's not creative. Certainly we're all born as artists. And somehow it's like an un-education. It's something that you unlearn, most people do, in early life. Because children are just purely creative. They have no inhibitions." As a full time float builder, Stephens found the Porch Parade "refreshing. It's a different medium with a house and it was just really a lot of fun ... You can do things on a house you can't do on a float. It's less constrictive. With floats it's this yearlong process of coming

We would drop sculpture off and every time I would drive by the house it would look better. People just kept going. It was almost like this stream of creativity. It just spread all over town. It was beautiful.

CRAIG STEPHENS

up with designs that everyone agrees on and developing off those designs. Doing the houses just felt a lot more free.”

The idea of inherent creativity underscores another Porch Parade quality important to many interviewees: its inclusive and egalitarian nature, which Sarver intended from the beginning. “My goal with this was to create something that everybody could do. Mardi Gras societies and organizations are, by nature, exclusive. I wanted to create something that everybody in the community could get behind and feel like they were a part of... The goal was to create a creative outlet for people in the community that was truly inclusive. Because Mardi Gras is enjoyed by everybody, not just societies and organizations.”

Wellborn agreed. “What I really like about it is that anybody can participate. You don’t have to belong to an organization, you don’t have to be in some secret society, you don’t have to have a bunch of money. Anybody can participate. And that’s what the Porch Parade did that was so cool.” Jones added, “Everybody’s pulling on different resources. So I think it’s cool that no matter what, everybody was equal in what they shared. ‘Cause all of the things are cool whether they’re the huge ones from the float or the other sizes.”

Ollis added that because of the “no rules” and “anything goes” spirit of Mardi Gras, it was natural for the Porch Parade to be inclusive. “There’s no wrong way to do it,” she said. “You really can’t mess it up. In Mardi Gras, honestly, the gaudier the better.” Stephens agreed. “Mardi



Kid-friendly cutouts made by a local artist (Photo by Emily Blejwas)

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STACY WELLBORN

Gras means something different to everyone. What Mardi Gras means depends on who you ask. The really neat thing about it is you can do it how you want to do it... If you couldn't afford to rent sculpture from us, it didn't matter, you don't need money to be creative. Also, we would drop sculpture off and every time I would drive by the house it would look better. People just kept going. It was almost like this stream of creativity. It just spread all over town. It was beautiful."

When I asked Stephens what it feels like to see one of his floats in a Mardi Gras parade, he corrected me immediately. "It's not really one of my floats. By the time that thing hits the street so many people have been involved with it." Likewise, he views the Porch Parade as "group art. When you give a sculpture, three to five people may have worked on it. We'd drop it off at someone's house and they would just continue to do whatever. So it was like this stream of creativity. Just links in a chain. It would go as far as you wanted. For me, the most gratifying part was how creative customers got and how excited they got."

Others echoed Stephens's excitement over working communally as neighbors, families, and friends. Several involved their children in the creative process. Hoeb's son Lucas made two paintings to set on the porch, adding to the Mardi Gras décor. Jamie and Ted Flotte, newly married on January 9, began decorating immediately after returning home from their honeymoon. "It's been very fun to work on it together and use the house that's going to be our forever home that we're not even in yet to start making memories there," Jamie said. They enjoyed going through the learning process together, trying different materials and structures and running back to the store all those times.

The Porch Parade also fostered an appreciation for the art and creativity inherent in Mardi Gras. Comeaux explained:

You know when you're at a Mardi Gras parade, and the floats are coming by, we tend to not really see them. You might say, Oh yeah, look at that, but then you're either trying to catch something or trying to avoid being hit, so you really miss out on the art that's floating down the street. And in this way, people have stopped. They're looking at all the float pieces, or they're looking at the creativity and the work that people have put into making their own float. So there's been a real art appreciation, being able to stand in front of float pieces.

Sarver also noted the appreciation of historic neighborhoods fostered by the Porch Parade. “What was really cool was walking around the neighborhoods on the weekends and seeing how many people were out and about,” she said. “Mobile is a really beautiful city with a lot of really beautiful homes and neighborhoods and knowing that people were maybe discovering those neighborhoods for the first time, or even rediscovering them from not being out and about as often or in years, was really neat.”



The Beach Lady
(Photo by
Emily Blejwas)

The Porch Parade had another critical effect in Mobile: it offered a boost to artists and small businesses at an extremely difficult time. The Porch Parade website encouraged Mobilians to buy decorations and supplies from local artists and businesses, especially those who depend on the Mardi Gras season for revenue. In fact, several Porch Parade decorators participated explicitly to support these businesses. Simmons is the daughter of a seamstress whose business depends in part on outfitting the girls of the court, and Simmons also wanted to support a local artist friend. Ollis’s son owns a small business, so she participated with him in mind.

Perhaps the most dramatic impact was felt by Stephens, whose

team of ten workers normally builds floats for seven Mardi Gras parades each year. In January 2021, Stephens was three days away from having to send all of his employees home. Without parades, there was no work to be done painting and preparing the floats. Instead, thanks to the Porch Parade, Stephens rented every single sculpture in his float barn, all pieces that would have stood idle. The Porch Parade created a brand new revenue stream for Stephens, and paychecks for his employees, in a dismal year. Stephens and his crew stayed busy for four weeks around Mardi Gras, delivering sculptures, then collecting them, repairing any damage, and building

a few custom pieces. Working 14-hour days seven days a week, they outfitted 70 houses with over 200 pieces of sculpture.

In 2022, Mardi Gras will roll with the floats that went unused in 2021, leaving Stephens with another work gap to fill. He estimates a four or five-month work shortage in 2022, which the Porch Parade will help to fill. Stephens has already taken orders for next year, with many decorators reserving the same pieces and others ordering custom jobs. Stephens plans to expand the number of pieces he has available to Porch Parade decorators by building sculpture intended for yards and porches in a range of sizes, catering to all budgets and spaces. He'll start with the things he ran out



When Pigs Fly!
(Photo by
Emily Blejwas)

of first: music and flowers and children's themes, like characters from *Star Wars*, *Super Mario Bros.*, and *Sesame Street*. Time will tell, but it seems likely the Porch Parade has created a permanent new line of business for Stephens, and potentially other artists and small businesses, moving forward.

Even with all of the good that came from the website Sarver created on that dreary January night, she wanted to do one last thing. When she realized the Porch Parade had captured such a huge, happy, and motivated audience, she saw it as "the perfect opportunity to

raise some money for local nonprofits. I just felt like that would complete the mission of the whole reason why I started the Porch Parade. To support a more inclusive community and supportive community, and that just felt like the one little missing piece.”

Sarver chose the Food Pantry at Central Presbyterian Church because it was located in the same neighborhood as many of the Porch Parade homes, and she had seen the food pick-up lines during the pandemic. “I wanted it to be an organization that’s making a very direct impact on our own neighbors and our own community,” she said, “and I wanted to choose an organization that really stepped up during the pandemic and helped our neighbors who were struggling.” In her first social media post encouraging Porch Parade enthusiasts to donate, Sarver reminded Mobilians that while the pandemic made Mardi Gras different this year, it had impacted neighbors’ lives in an even bigger way: “I think that really helped remind people that the pandemic isn’t just affecting the way we celebrate Mardi Gras, it’s affecting people’s livelihoods and what they can provide for their families.”

Sarver also included Restore Mobile, a nonprofit that restores historic homes in the districts represented in the parade maps. So while parade-goers could pick up the printed, colorful maps at no cost, they were encouraged to donate to the two nonprofits when they did. In the end, Mobile Porch Parade raised \$2,494 for the Food Pantry at Central and \$996 for Restore Mobile. Further, after Mardi Gras, organizers collaborated with Piedmont Publishing to produce a book that features photos and essays from Porch Parade decorators, with a portion of the proceeds intended for the Food Pantry at Central and Restore Mobile.

As quickly as the Mobile Porch Parade began, of course, Mardi Gras ended. Mobile is a heavily Catholic city after all, and many Mobilians take Ash Wednesday seriously. King cake is finished the night before or tossed out; Mardi Gras decorations come down first thing in the morning, before Mobilians head to church to receive the ashes. On Ash Wednesday in 2021, driving down Dauphin Street, I gave a final glance at a Porch Parade house only to find it completely bare. The sun shone off its white surface instead of shimmering on red and gold costumes as it had the afternoon before. Jones noted that in New Orleans, “everything dies at midnight. Even in the French Quarter. I always think of it as the joy leading up to the season of reverence. I think it’s cool that you go from full out enjoyment to a quieter enjoyment.”

Ollis, Principal of St. Mary’s Catholic School, described the transition from Mardi Gras to Lent as “stark,” noting that on the morning of Ash Wednesday, “The very first thing we do is go to Mass. There is no recovery.” She knows people often associate Lent with giving something up, but noted that “there’s a lot more to it. Almsgiving and prayer. It’s a reflective time in your life. So it is the complete opposite of Carnival.” Comeaux added that the transition

is “often welcome. In a regular Mardi Gras season, there’ve been so many parades and parties and balls that by the time Lent comes, we feel like we really need it. We’re grateful for it, for the time to slow down and refocus.”

Of course, Mardi Gras will circle back again, and all of the interviewees plan not only to continue the Porch Parade tradition in 2022, but to make it bigger and better. Some have already rented pieces from float builders or commissioned new pieces or custom house designs from local artists. Some are pondering how to embellish their theme, or which new theme to choose. Bradford plans to add more skeletons to his yard, turning it into a Mardi Gras mob/street scene. Hoeb is considering adding silver wigs (worn by Mardi Gras pages) to her animal cutouts, and friends have asked her to make cutouts modeled after their own dogs. “I’ve talked to so many people and you can just see the wheels turning,” Stephens said. “They have all these ideas. That’s just as good as things get to me.”

Healing
(Photo by Craig
Stephens)



I've talked to so many people and you can just see the wheels turning. They have all these ideas. That's just as good as things get to me.

CRAIG STEPHENS

“I’m hoping this is the start of a tradition going forward,” Clarke said. “Even though in 2022, we’ll hopefully be back celebrating Mardi Gras like we traditionally celebrate, I’m hoping the Porch Parade tradition continues. I think it just adds to the overall festivities and ambiance of Mardi Gras.” Others are positive the Porch Parade is here to stay, and has added a new element to Mardi Gras in Mobile. This doesn’t surprise Ted Flotte in the least. “Mardi Gras is always evolving,” he reminded me.

As for Sarver, she hopes to recruit more volunteers and to work more closely with small businesses next year. She also notes that the Mobile Porch Parade is an “evergreen name that isn’t tied to one season,” so she’s thinking about the possibility of Halloween or Christmas Porch Parades, perhaps paired with a local nonprofit that could use the funding at that time of year, like a themed event or “seasonal drive.”

Of all the good that spilled from Sarver’s act, when I asked what made her the proudest about the whole experience, she said:

What I'm most proud of is just seeing the feedback from people about how much they enjoyed it. This past year has been rough in so many ways and tough for a lot of people and those simple pleasures of seeing house decorations. It's so miniscule, when you think about it. It's a simple concept... Seeing people talk about how much fun they had going out with their families. People telling us about how much they enjoyed getting out... Just having people get excited about something that they could do with their friends and family. That was really the best part for me.

As I closed my conversation with Stephens, I wondered aloud if “healing” is too strong a word for what the Porch Parade brought to Mobile, and he emphatically disagreed:

Healing is a major aspect of this. All the things we've talked about. Contrast that with where our minds were at that point. Month after month after month of just bad news. And even the most optimistic of us, things just getting darker and darker. It was like a release. Yeah, absolutely it felt like healing. That's exactly what it felt like... At the end, I finally did my house, and that's what I did with my house was about. Was that healing. ○



Urban Co-operatives

Exploring Sustainable Living in Alabama

THOMAS M. KERSEN AND CANDIS PIZZETTA

Research on co-operative communal arrangements is sparse, especially research on communal arrangements in the Deep South. As a follow-up to the article published in *Tributaries* in 2009, this study will document and contribute to the history of progressive communal endeavors in Alabama. Between the 1960s and 1980s, communal living arrangements grew steadily throughout the United States. This article will focus on the specific arrangement known as “co-operatives.”

The Foundation for Intentional Communities (FIC) defines co-operative communities or co-ops as “communities that are generally expense sharing (rather than income-sharing) and often found in cities and towns.”¹² Co-ops can be differentiated from co-housing, which “integrates autonomous private dwellings with shared utilities and recreational facilities such as kitchens, dining halls, workshops and children’s play facilities.”¹³ We will highlight three urban co-operatives that arose in Birmingham, Alabama in the 1970s, Morningside, Kudzu Kastle, and Crescent House, as well as one umbrella cooperative organization headquartered in the Montgomery area called Abieka.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, communal living arrangements grew in popularity in the United States. Many intentional communities were urban and oftentimes religious or spiritual in outlook.¹⁴ They were often founded in hopes of establishing a sense of community members felt was missing from modern life. For many communards, including those in the south and in Alabama, sustainability and equitable living were the key ideals being practiced.¹⁵ Moreover, co-operatives such as Crescent House, Morningside, and Kudzu Kastle in Alabama, offered “free spaces” that empowered people and communities. Evans and Boyte define “free spaces” as “the environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of co-operation and civic virtue.”¹⁶ According to Francesca Polletta, free spaces are

We come to develop an alternative lifestyle dedicated to harmony with the environment and with each other.

ABIEKA MEMBER

“small scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are freely participated (unlike in work and other arenas of social life) and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization.”¹⁷ Joshua Lockyer does not use the term “free space” when discussing intentional communities, but notes that intentional communities empower people, especially on issues dealing with sustainability.¹⁸ Thus, co-operatives as “free spaces” were and are at the forefront of sustainability and other concerns that seemed counter-cultural to many during the period covered by this study.

Some formulations of co-operatives originated far earlier than the scope of this study. In the United States, co-operatives began to flourish on and around college campuses in the New Deal era, a period that culturally aligns with the period of this study and with the genesis of the co-operatives highlighted here.¹⁹ Student co-operatives, such as the fourteen found in Madison, Wisconsin, began to grow in popularity and to comprise a significant portion of co-operative living in urban spaces.²⁰ Perhaps one reason students found co-operatives attractive was that they offered a practical solution for cost-sharing. While many co-ops started out of economic necessity, they often ended up as places to practice all sorts of ideologically based goals. One of the most important of these goals for co-operative members was a concern for the environment and sustainable, healthy food production and distribution.

Co-operatives, despite their counter-cultural ethos, do not appear solely in urban areas known for bohemian enclaves but in every U.S. state in both urban and rural settings. For example, Birmingham, Alabama, might be an unexpected locale for the emergence of a number of co-operatives in the 1970s. Three co-operative communities that chose to remain part of the greater Birmingham community rather than strike out on their own in a more rural setting were Kudzu Kastle, Morningside, and Crescent House.²¹ Kudzu Kastle was located to the south of the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) and north of Vulcan Park. Operating during roughly the same time, and near Kudzu, was Morningside. Both Kudzu and Morningside were minutes away from UAB. Crescent House was founded after the other two co-operatives folded. Finally, Abieka, Incorporated, was an umbrella organization headquartered in Montgomery, comprised of members in mainstream communities, co-ops, and other forms of living. Several members of co-ops in Birmingham were members of Abieka or linked to the organization in other ways.



One of the few systematic studies of co-operatives was completed by sociologists Angela Aidala and Benjamin Zablocki, who surveyed 772 individuals from sixty urban communal groups between 1974 and 1976.²² The communal groups were divided by type (Eastern Religious, Christian Religious, Political, Hippie/Countercultural, Alternative Family, Co-operative Household, and Personal Growth) and included 51 individual surveys from residents of urban co-operatives.²³ Compared to the overall sample, members of co-operatives, like those in Alabama, tended to be younger, with a higher percentage of males and single people, and with fewer children than other communal groups. These survey results also suggest that co-operatives, including those in Alabama, appeared to attract more members from higher economic brackets, members with college degrees, and members with family members who held college degrees. Fewer members of co-ops had blue collar jobs and compared to the overall sample of urban communal groups, co-operatives also had a higher percentage of Protestants than of people from other religious backgrounds or without religious affiliation. In summary, when compared to other communal arrangements, members of co-operatives tended to have higher socioeconomic status.

Urban co-operatives also tended to be housed in a single structure at one location. Many urban co-op members lived in houses from

Kudzu Kastle in
Birmingham,
early 1970s.
*(Photo courtesy
of Karl Schaffer)*

A benefit organized by member Karl Schaffer brought in the famous poet Allen Ginsburg to UAB to raise funds for a predominantly Black commune in southern Alabama known as The People's Farm. While in Birmingham, Ginsburg stayed at Kudzu.

the Victorian/Edwardian period, which were usually large with porches and common areas. Co-ops with ample space allowed for privacy which was important to the success of the communes.²⁴ The average number of bedrooms for most urban co-op houses was eight. Kudzu Kastle (1972-to mid-1970s), in Birmingham, Alabama, was a five-bedroom Victorian house that members rented for \$175 a month.

A survey of 30 urban communes in the northeastern United States in the early 1970s found that the "great majority of the communes in the city were situated in large old houses in the downtown area, in the general vicinity of a university." Co-operative members living in a big house near a university also described the co-ops in Birmingham. Kudzu Kastle was located near several progressive enterprises such as Gene Crutcher's bookstore, Southside Food Co-operative, Southside Free clinic and Switchboard, Red Mountain School, and the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB).²⁵

Several members of Kudzu were working or going to school at UAB. One member was completing her residency there. Two Kudzu members and one Morningside member were computer programmers in the same department at the university. Crescent House had a handful of members who also worked at UAB.²⁶ Kudzu and UAB were linked in other ways as well. A benefit organized by member Karl Schaffer brought in the famous poet Allen Ginsburg to UAB to raise funds for a predominantly Black commune in southern Alabama known as The People's Farm. While in Birmingham, Ginsburg stayed at Kudzu.²⁷

Another Birmingham co-operative located even closer to the university was Morningside (1973-1976), whose members settled in the old Coe Home. Built in 1908, the house had 5,311 square feet, six bedrooms, and four bathrooms. John Valentine Coe, president of Birmingham Lumber and Coal Company, was the owner of the house until his family sold it to Morningside in 1970.²⁸ To live at Morningside, members paid \$125 a month towards the mortgage, utilities, and food.²⁹ At its height, the Morningside co-op housed fifteen people, a figure not far from the average for co-ops across the country.³⁰

A few co-ops listed in the FIC were led by single individuals while a third of the co-ops had a core leadership group of some sort. All three co-ops in Birmingham were led by a core group. Like most other co-ops, the Alabama

co-ops relied on some form of consensus to get things done. Moreover, like many co-ops across the country, Kudzu members divided rent, utilities, and other expenses. Finally, co-op members often required sharing in the labor around the co-operative and owned the property collectively.

Food production and shared meals were also important facets of co-op life. Many of those in the co-operative movement began by working in food co-ops in cities across the nation. In many instances, food co-ops would later transform into living co-ops. Such was the case for a number of communally minded individuals who got their start at Bread Tree in Birmingham.³¹

Besides food redistribution, eating together was an important part of group life. Most co-op members reported eating all of their meals together or eating together two to five times a week. The kitchen in the house occupied an important space.³² This proved true for the cooperatives in Birmingham. Members of Crescent House came together primarily for the evening meal Monday through Thursday. Crescent House member Keitha Hudson wrote, “We had a meal co-op also with a few other folks that lived outside the house. There were eight of us ... Each person cooked every two weeks.”³³ As is often the case in communal enterprises, cooking and cleaning dishes eventually fell on one person, which led to some conflict.

A small percentage of co-ops restrict what members can eat. However, many co-ops across the United States reported being vegan or primarily vegan. Hudson reported that Crescent House members were vegetarian.³⁴ Karl Schaffer wrote about dietary restrictions at Kudzu Kastle, “The house had some communal rules: no meat, no drugs, communal meals, communal food purchases, etc.”³⁵ Over the years, the rules, especially about eating no meat, were hard to enforce because members kept violating them.

Members also worried that Kudzu’s political activities would catch the attention of authorities, such as a couple of meetings they held with the Alabama Black Liberation Front (ABLF) who were affiliated with the Black Panthers. ABLF also worked with and offered support to the People’s Farm community in Bogue Chitto, Alabama. Schaffer insisted that drugs not be used at Kudzu as a “preventative measure” against scrutiny from authorities who sought

Morningside in Birmingham, early 1970s (Photo courtesy of Barry Robinson)





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Abieka Advertisement (left) and event flier (opposite)
(Individual fliers in a set of documents collected by
the Fairhope Single Tax Corporation)

to shut down ABLF, Kudzu, and other counter-culture endeavors and groups.³⁶

The last Birmingham co-operative is Crescent House (1977-1988). Many of its members were formerly members of Morningside. Five people comprised the group that lived in a large Tudor house built in 1910. The house had four large bedrooms and three full bathrooms. Life at Crescent House focused mainly on sustainable living. According to member Keitha Hudson, environmentalism informed all of their prac-

tices. She wrote, “We recycled everything and composted and gardened. We built a greenhouse on the back of the house to raise food during the winter and heat the [adjoining] kitchen.”³⁷ Crescent House member Stephen Guesman, also a one-time member of Morningside, Kudzu Kastle, and later Common Ground intentional community in Blount County, spent his whole life engaged in cooperative living and working in permaculture and solar energy.

Crescent House members were very active in folk and square dancing. According to Guesman, dance and music provided a nexus for a number of people in the countercultural scene in Birmingham to get together.³⁸ Later, members of Common Ground and Wild Hydrangea intentional communities continued to practice traditional dance and music in the Birmingham area.³⁹ Two former members of Wild Hydrangea, Joyce and Jim Cauthen, are well-known in the world of “old-time music and dance” through performing as the band Flying Jenny and in Joyce’s many publications on the topic.⁴⁰

Zablocki observed that beginning in the mid-1970s, communards became more practical and less ideological than their earlier counterparts.⁴¹ Under-scoring Zablocki’s point is Abieka, Inc., a loosely configured cooperative organization headquartered in the Montgomery area. The Montgomery contingent also operated Nature’s Grocery, which offered all sorts of natural foods at low prices.⁴² Besides people in the Montgomery/Auburn area, Abieka had member groups in Troy, Clayton, Birmingham, and even Atlanta. Some of the members of Abieka in Birmingham had also been members of Morningside.

Abieka members across Alabama engaged in a wide range of activities, including building a permaculture house and farm in “Frogtown.” Troy members planned a booth for the Bicentennial celebration. At Council-Flat Rock, members repaired a road damaged by a hurricane. Of Abieka, one

member wrote, “We come to develop an alternative lifestyle dedicated to harmony with the environment and with each other.”⁴³ Abieka can be compared to rural communal experiments in Missouri where communards combined progressive ideals with music to create “free spaces” for practicing and spreading the word about sustainable living.⁴⁴ Rather than retreating from mainstream community, people in co-operatives and other communal arrangements sought to live simpler, more ecologically friendly lives and to share their insights with their mainstream neighbors.

Discussion

Cooperatives create safe places to think about, plan, and practice ideas that mainstream society may consider radical. Much of the movement in alternative food, health, and other aspects of life began in intentional communities that are often hubs for these types of activities.⁴⁵ Norman Davis argues that “Co-ops can be levers to cause broader changes in the community. They can be the empowering force in people’s lives.”⁴⁶ The Birmingham, Alabama co-operatives showcase Davis’s point. Karl Schaffer noted that Kudzu Kastle “did become something of a nexus of political and community activity.”⁴⁷ Much of the activity in Kudzu Kastle was environmentally oriented, including food co-operatives and sustainable living practices. Keitha Hudson at Crescent House wrote that the central issue for Crescent members was sustainable living and sharing those insights with the greater community.⁴⁸ The same was true at Morningside, according to member Peter Robinson.⁴⁹

Members of communal movements, such as co-operatives, may be the “levers” that offer opportunities for the wider community to embrace practices that emphasize local production and combat sprawl by building up and not out.⁵⁰ These formerly fringe ideas and others have now become mainstream. Food cooperatives mainstreamed into farm-to-table or fresh markets, and there is an increased concern about sustainability and smart growth development, inspired in good part by cooperative and cohousing ideas. All of those seeds planted by enterprising and forward-thinking co-op members have taken root and hopefully will combat current modes of production that are environmentally unsustainable and socially inequitable. In some cases, we may even relearn and enjoy things forgotten or underappreciated, such as contra dancing and folk music.⁵¹ ○

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Flavor, Legacy, and Service

Passing Down Traditions in Montgomery Restaurants

KARREN PELL AND CAROLE KING

Family recipes, traditional dishes, and special services are all aspects of foodways that make local food culture unique. While we were researching our latest book, *Classic Restaurants of Montgomery*, we discovered two classic food traditions and one impressive service that have been passed down through the generations and are still in use today.

Martha Hawkins, owner and proprietor of the popular restaurant, Martha's Place, still makes a recipe attributed to her mother: Sallie Hawkins's Corn Bread. In her book, *Finding Martha's Place: My Journey Through Sin, Salvation, and Lots of Soul Food*, Hawkins recalls that "there was always people in our home" during her childhood.⁵² Some were neighbors she recognized, but not all. Hawkins did not know how her mother made the food stretch to feed so many, but she did, and "somehow people always ate and ate and ate."⁵³

Her mother's open heart and hearth inspired Hawkins to open a restaurant. In her book, Martha wrote about the time her family moved into a new neighborhood. She and her brother went out walking and got lost, but then found their way back. When they sat down with their family to dinner, Martha described the emotions inspired by her mother's cooking:

The pork chop casserole was piled high on a serving bowl in the middle. A plate of fresh corn bread was sliced and steaming on a platter to one side ... I took the first bite and it felt like all the comfort of being where I was supposed to be ... All of a sudden, in that very same moment, I knew what I wanted to do with my life ... I would make a place that felt just like this supper table ... When people was out getting lost ... or doing whatever people do to feel tight inside ... I would tell 'em to come into my restaurant, and they would feel like they had come home at last.⁵⁴

Thus, Hawkins not only passes down her mother's recipe to her customers, but that nourishing feeling that comes from comfort food.

Another famous family recipe is the secret sauce at Chris' Hot Dogs, the



Martha Hawkins
and her staff at
"Martha's Place"
(Photo by
Carole King)

oldest family-owned and operated restaurant in Montgomery. Christopher Anastasios "Chris" Katechis opened the restaurant downtown on May 1, 1917. Chris' Hot Dogs is currently owned by his son, Theo, and Theo's son, Costas "Gus." Along with its long history, record of famous people who loved the hot dogs, and ambiance of the small grill at 138 Dexter Avenue, Chris' Hot Dogs is famous for its secret sauce.

The chili sauce recipe is kept a secret between "two or three living persons," according to Theo Katechis, who states that his father created it by "trial and error."⁵⁵ Approximately ten gallons of sauce are made every day and served with hot dogs, hamburgers, and cheeseburgers. And as the menu notes, "Yes, we have plenty of napkins." The sauce can be purchased by the pint, quart, or gallon and has found its way to Austria, Germany, and Alaska.

Mike Deep, founder of the popular restaurant, The Sahara, passed along his restaurant chops to his son-in-law, Michael Castanza. The Sahara opened at 511 East Edgemont Avenue on December 10, 1952 and closed in 2005. Though our book, *Classic Restaurants of Montgomery*, notes that one of the most popular dishes was West Indies Salad, Castanza recalls that *the* most popular dish was Chicken Supreme. He notes that the cr me sauce was a difficult recipe and alas, the dish is currently not being served anywhere at this writing. However, Chicken Supreme played a role in creating a process known as "corporate drop-off catering" in Montgomery.

In the early 1950s, take-out and delivery orders were not as popular or common as they are today. Castanza recalls that delivery of full meals to workplaces began with pharmaceutical representatives searching for a way to spend time with doctors who were

Along with her mother's recipes, Hawkins passes down her mother's "way of setting things straight and helping folks get set right ... she never made a person feel lumped in together with others — we was all individuals to her."

often too busy seeing patients to meet with them. Someone came up with the idea of providing lunch for doctors and staff, so the representatives could pass along information to doctors without disrupting their work.

The Sahara helped realize this idea by creating a hot meal that traveled easily: Chicken Supreme with hot rolls and a vegetable. The restaurant charged a small delivery fee, thus developing an additional and profitable market. The delivery process was passed down through the decades. At Chappy's Deli, where Castanza is now Director of Operations, corporate drop-off catering fills a constant demand for sandwich and dessert trays for businesses implementing a "working lunch" for employee trainings and meetings.

Hawkins, Katechis, and Castanza are all passing on another tradition as well: caring about their coworkers and customers, and finding ways for their restaurants to contribute to their communities. In 2016, the Montgomery Chamber of Commerce awarded Hawkins the Point of Light Award for her outstanding contributions to the community. Her organization, Martha Hawkins's Ministries, helps single parents and low-income children, and Hawkins also provides employment for ex-offenders. Along with her mother's recipes, Hawkins passes down her mother's "way of setting things straight and helping folks get set right ... she never made a person



Front door of Chris' Hot Dogs (Photo by Karren Pell)

Owner Theo Katechis stands beside the FDR shrine at Chris' Hot Dogs (Photo courtesy of the Montgomery Advertiser)



The sign above the Sahara Restaurant was a Montgomery landmark (Photo courtesy of the Montgomery Advertiser)

feel lumped in together with others — we was all individuals to her.”⁵⁶

Mike Deep, Castanza’s mentor at the Sahara, impressed upon him “the importance of learning people’s names and all the things they prefer.” He taught Castanza that “you’ve got to connect with people.”⁵⁷ As a result, Castanza is active in his community and a generous supporter of Montgomery Catholic High School. In 2021, Chappy’s Deli received the “Alabama Retailer of the Year” award for its contributions to the community, including providing food to frontline workers during the pandemic. Likewise, Theo and Gus Katechis often give hot dogs to those struggling with hunger and homelessness, who know they will be treated with respect *and* eat a great hot dog. Theo is also a leading member of the Greek Orthodox Church community.

So, from Chris’ Famous Hot Dogs’ secret sauce, to Sallie Hawkins’s Corn Bread, to Castanza’s lunch deliveries, Montgomery restaurants carry on traditions that provide flavor, legacy, and service, and help define the food landscape of the city. ○

BOOK REVIEWS

Hurricane Creek

Personal Accounts and Collected Lore

BY NANCY CALLAHAN | NEW YORK: CRESCENT RIDGE PUBLISHING, 2019

REVIEW BY JOEY BRACKNER

In 2008, I was surprised to see my friend Nancy Callahan walk into the funeral home for the wake of my cousin Joseph E. “Bub” Hayward. As it turns out, she grew up with Bub, whom she called Bubba, and was surprised that I was a first cousin to the “red-headed Haywards” of Holt. She confided that she had recently interviewed Bub for her latest work, a book about Hurricane Creek. We then shared our mutual sentimental attachments to the Creek which had been a part of my childhood shared with my cousins.

Hurricane Creek: Personal Accounts and Collected Lore is a loving tribute to Hurricane Creek and its cultural and biological significance, as well as its role as a frontline in Alabama’s growing environmental movement. Those who already know and love this body of water will be thrilled with new information, little known facts, and familiar images. Other readers will be drawn to the Creek by the stimulating account of Nancy’s research and inspired to preserve it from urban sprawl.

The book is a fitting last chapter to the career of Nancy Callahan (1946 - 2020). The author bio on the dust jacket describes her as a “journalist, cultural historian, and mental health counselor in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.” Nancy was this and so much more. The daughter of local lawyer and traditional fiddler Artemas “Temo” Callahan, she became a musician in her own right, as well as a champion debater, a published journalist at age thirteen, and a lifelong environmentalist. For most of us, Nancy exploded onto the scene with her well-received book, *The Freedom Quilting Bee: Folk Art and the Civil Rights Movement* (University of Alabama Press, 1987, 2005). This work introduced me and many others to the group of artists now known as the Gee’s Bend Quil-

ters. Like her first book, *Hurricane Creek* strikes gold; it gives stage to local voices and those who know the subject best.

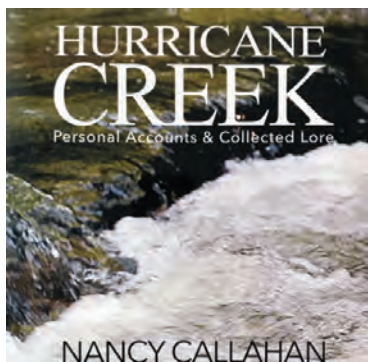
In this substantial hard-back work of 349 pages with 78 photos and maps, Nancy Callahan reveals the wonder of Hurricane Creek with her own research and taps into the knowledge of others on the subject. The text follows her interactions with the Creek's neighbors, biologists, environmentalists, educators, and businesspeople, as well as her own reflections based on those interactions. The images, both historical photos and those made recently by Angie Sogol and John Wathen, give important reference points.

Nancy writes out in phonetic fashion the correct, local pronunciation of Hurricane as HAIR-uh-kin, a shibboleth for those of us who grew up enjoying the Creek. She repeats this phonetic spelling to keep the local dialect in the reader's head as he or she becomes familiar with important locations, such as the Big Rock, Devils Backbone, Lambs Bluff, Billy Goat Bluff, Mossy Bluff, the Government Seat, and the L&N Trestle.

In the first third of the book, Nancy lovingly recounts excursions to Hurricane Creek with friends and specialists in biology and history over the course of several decades. This ground-truthing reveals new insights about a creek that she has known all her life. She soaks it all in with the reader tagging along to inspect

geology, flora, fauna, and the evidence of a succession of industry in the form of cisterns, railroad trestles, erosion, and pollution. Her fast-rushing shoals of subjective and emotional allusions to art and literature are tempered by the empirical slower water of published observations from geologists and botanists such as Roland Harper and Charles Lyell, as well as state geologists Eugene Allen Smith and Walter B. Jones. Thick description of the landscape reveals her love of botany. She describes the incredible diversity and beauty of the Creek's flora, including roosterheads, huckleberries, soapwort gentians, the star anise, cowcumber trees (a native magnolia), and the beautiful Alabama azalea: *Rhododendron alabamense* Rehder.

Her excursions include a chapter on the search for Pennington Mill — one of the first industries on the Creek. This chapter leads to one on Owenwood, the plantation home of the Prude family, who eventually ran their own mill on the Creek downstream from the remote part of Hurricane where the outnumbered Cadet Corps of the University of Alabama hid from Union troops in 1865. Another chapter details the impact of the Mercedes factory in Vance near the headwaters of Hurricane Creek. Government regulations helped minimize the runoff into the Creek and the company has been a fairly good steward of the wilderness areas around the plant. Settlement ponds ensure that an industrial spill will be contained before it reaches the watershed.



The remaining portion of the book, consisting of 34 smaller chapters, includes profiles of people who live on the Creek and interviews with those who have stories about it. The shorter stand-alone stories are annotated with the life dates of the interviewees, along with the date and location of the interview. These edited interviews speak of early settlers, past activities, and businesses, then come back to the environmental health of Hurricane Creek. Her sample was skewed towards the elderly but is otherwise representative of east Tuscaloosa County and includes five interviews with African Americans. Her subjects range from the children of sharecroppers to Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard Professor E. O. Wilson. Wilson's first fieldwork as a university student was at Hurricane Creek where he discovered a previously unidentified ant species. Other well-known interviewees include University of Alabama's Dr. Doug Jones (the son of Walter), well-known storyteller and author Aileen Kilgore Henderson, and former Alabama poet laureate Helen Blackshear.

For most of her respondents, the Creek represents notable events in their lives and that of their community: courtship, baptisms, a drowning, segregation at swimming holes, froggiging, walking the scary-high railroad trestle, and camping with best friends. The persistent rumor of panthers in the area is something I remember. Fittingly, the panther is the mascot of nearby Brookwood High School. "Running off snakes" so one could swim is also something I remember, as did so many interviewed in this book.

The recounting of the tornado outbreak of 2011 marks a change of tone in the book. The carnage wrought by the storms shocked the whole state. The Creek was clogged with downed trees and debris from nearby homes. Several Creek residents were killed, and cleanup/recovery eventually brought attention back to the overall health of the Creek. This event occurred when Nancy was nearing the end of her interviews but probably before she began shaping the book. At his point, her mounting sense of urgency for the survival of the Creek intensifies.

From the beginning, Nancy's interviewees express concern over the effect of industrial activity, primarily that of the coal companies, whose industry gave with one hand and took with the other. There are many accounts of how strip-mine runoffs, colored orange-brown, nearly destroyed the creek. Nancy records people describing major fish kills in the 1920s, 30s, 50s, and 70s. Hurricane Creek's constituents now include many determined local citizens who wish to rehabilitate and preserve Hurricane Creek. The hero who emerges on the lips of many is John Wathen. A north Alabamian, Wathen was inspired by Robert Kennedy, Jr.'s national

Hurricane Creek strikes gold; it gives stage to local voices and those who know the subject best.

Waterkeeper Alliance movement. As Creekkeeper, he and his allies have achieved many successes, including a public park at the 216 Bridge. The challenge is substantial. The Creek is still at risk and its people are still fighting to save and celebrate this beloved place.

It is 1968 once again. My uncle, Charles Brackner, drives his son Gary and me to the bridge on Hurricane Creek — the new one near Brookwood that replaced a covered bridge burned down by college students in 1961. He cautions us to watch for snakes and to drink water from our canteens. He will pick us up at dusk at the downstream bridge on HWY 216. We set off walking and wading with smiles on our faces, entering the sensory overload that is Hurricane Creek. Thank you, Nancy, for bringing me back to the creek, and for your efforts to preserve the wonder of this place for all who follow you.

Witch of the Mountain

The Real Story of Granny Dollar

BY MARCUS C. THOMAS | MARCUS THOMAS, 2021

REVIEW BY HENRY WILLETT

In the summer of 1977, I lived for six weeks in a rustic log cabin built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s, in DeSoto State Park in northeast Alabama. About a mile from my cabin stood a fireplace, chimney, and the log ruins of another cabin. Until her death in 1931, that cabin had been occupied by the legendary local midwife, root doctor, and fortune teller, Granny Dollar. As folklorist-in-residence, I was charged with documenting the folk traditions of the area surrounding DeSoto State Park in Dekalb County. It was my first exposure to the rich body of oral narratives surrounding the somewhat mysterious life of an old woman known as Nancy Callahan “Granny” Dollar.

Older local residents recounted stories of Granny’s childhood on Sand Mountain, her Cherokee heritage, her family’s hiding in a saltpeter cave to avoid forced removal to a reservation, her 26 siblings, her fiancé’s death in the Civil War’s Battle of Atlanta, her sometimes-vicious dog Buster, her notable six-foot stature, and her ever-present corn cob pipe. One elderly informant recalled spending Christmas with Granny as a four-year-old child in 1896. Others remembered her as a palm reader, especially popular with weekend and summer visitors to the cabins and summer homes of nearby Mentone. Still others retold tales of Granny having buried treasure in the vicinity of her modest log cabin.

Over the last century or so, the Granny Dollar story, a complicated combination of fact, fiction, exaggeration, and conjecture, has changed

little. In *Witch of the Mountain: The Real Story of Granny Dollar*, Marcus C. Thomas, a native of northeast Alabama and 25-year veteran FBI special agent, utilizes his investigative skills and extensive genealogical research to “peel back that mystery [of Granny Dollar’s life] and tell the story of the real woman who became Granny Dollar.” In doing so, Thomas discovers that many elements of the Granny Dollar story are, in fact, fabrications, introduced by Granny herself and later propagated by various journalists, local historians, and others with an interest in Granny Dollar’s life and a romanticized notion of southern Appalachian culture.

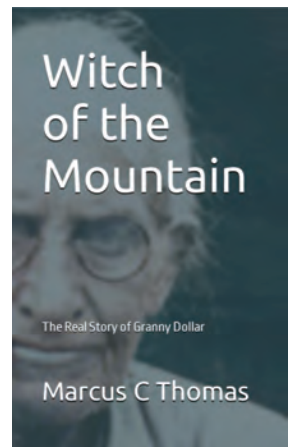
An article written by local schoolteacher Sadie Shrader and published in 1928 in the *Progressive Farmer and Farm Woman* was the first to bring widespread attention to Granny Dollar. The article, “An Indian Daughter of the Confederacy, Listen to What Grandma Dollar Says at the Age of 101 Years,” established most of those elements of the Granny Dollar story, which have persisted for the last century.

Marcus C. Thomas has skillfully dissected the Granny Dollar story, exposing multiple inaccuracies and laying out the realities of the Granny Dollar biography. “Callahan” was not her birth name. She was 80 years old, not 101, at the time of her interview with Shrader. She was born in Georgia, not Alabama. She had little, if any, Cherokee heritage.

In his thorough investigations of Granny Dollar’s genealogy, Thomas uncovers many details of the lives of Granny Dollar’s relations. Several were involved in repeated lawlessness in north Georgia, including moonshining, family abandonment, and even fratricide. Her father died at the hands of Georgia deputies. Thomas suggests that particular elements of Granny Dollar’s fabricated past resulted from her desire to obscure this unsavory family history. Her claims of being a Cherokee centenarian may have also enhanced the marketing of her herbal doctoring and palm-reading enterprises.

In the early 20th century, it was still relatively easy for people to “re-invent” themselves when they felt it necessary or desirable. (In researching my own family roots, I discovered ancestors who “re-invented” themselves during their

In the early 20th century, it was still relatively easy for people to “re-invent” themselves when they felt it necessary or desirable. Granny Dollar, no doubt, found that a bit of reinvention served her well as she pursued the business of life in northeast Alabama.



passage across the Atlantic from Ireland.) Granny Dollar, no doubt, found that a bit of reinvention served her well as she pursued the business of life in northeast Alabama.

A number of the patrons, writers, and journalists of the 1920s who documented and celebrated Granny Dollar did so at a time of Appalachian romanticism. From the creation of Appalachian settlement schools, like the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, to Henry Ford's eugenics-driven celebration of Anglo-Saxon Appalachian culture, there existed romantic notions of a distinctive cultural purity in the relatively undisturbed Appalachian Mountains. The Granny Dollar story was no doubt nourished by the popularity of that notion of southern Appalachia. Indeed, tourists who flocked to Mentone and DeSoto State Park found in Granny Dollar the "authentic" Appalachian experience they were seeking.

There is one inconsequential error in *Witch of the Mountain* that bears mentioning. In citing a newspaper article I authored in 1978, Thomas writes that in my childhood, Granny Dollar wanted to take me home with her. That account should have been attributed to an 85-year-old man I interviewed in 1977. Granny Dollar died several decades before my birth.

Witch of the Mountain: The Real Story of Granny Dollar is a thoroughly researched and carefully crafted "peeling back" of the mystery of a local legend. Thomas's book can serve as a template in establishing a starting point for anyone exploring the creation and evolution of local legends.

Alabama Quilts

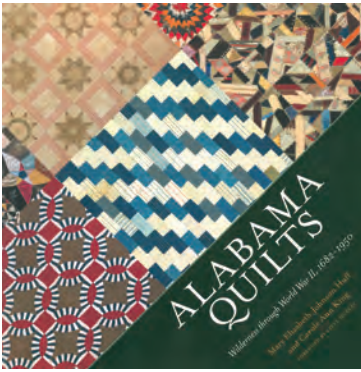
Wilderness through World War II, 1682–1950

BY MARY ELIZABETH JOHNSON HUFF AND CAROLE ANNE KING |
JACKSON, MS: UNIVERSITY PRESS OF MISSISSIPPI, 2020

REVIEW BY ANDREW GLASGOW

Alabama Quilts is a work of intellectual, historical, and visual heft. The book tells the story of Alabama's history through women's lives and works in quilting and other needle-based activities. It begins pre-statehood and moves the reader forward to the 20th century. Representing 200 years of quilting culture, *Alabama Quilts* required exhaustive research, which shows throughout the volume.

Of the many state quilt books I have encountered in the past twenty years, I am delighted to report that *Alabama Quilts* is the most fully formed book on the history of Alabama through quilts and quiltmakers. By dividing the subject into chapters based on historical eras and events, authors Huff and King have created a history book that is both personal, with many



The book makes it clear that Alabama women were on the frontlines of cultural change, and it is especially gratifying to read these stories with women as narrators.

photographs of quilts and quilters, and contextual, with quilts placed in a broader Alabama story. Wars, deaths, and natural occurrences all play a creative role in these quilts.

The book's division into time periods also enhances its readability. *Alabama Quilts* explores Alabama's very public history in a straightforward manner that remains politically neutral. Quilts remain the focus, but are discussed in the context of American, and particularly Southern, history.

Though long discounted as less important, women's stories are centered in *Alabama Quilts*. The book makes it clear that Alabama women were on the frontlines of cultural change, and it is especially gratifying to read these stories with women as narrators. Further, women frequently used quilts and needlework to illustrate and comment on societal issues. *Alabama Quilts* provides a vibrant look into history from women's perspectives, which is both interesting and important.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Alabama women were charting their own paths as they quilted and discussed the issues of the day, from family to the impending Civil War to wars of international significance. Several generations were involved in these discussions, while all working together on quilts.

In addition to women, *Alabama Quilts* shows entire families involved in quiltmaking. While perhaps not taking up the scissors or needles, photographs reveal whole families intimately involved in the display and sharing of quilts in public spaces. The stories within these pages bring the history of Alabama families and communities to life. Alabama quilts — fundraising quilts, crib quilts, and quilts with mementos of military service, firefighters' ribbons, and medical artifacts — all have a place in the Alabama quilting story.

Though quiltmaking is not unique to Alabama, from the Civil War era Gunboat Quilts to the modern, African-centric quilts from Gee's Bend, quilts are among the best and most beloved of the Deep South's artistic expressions. ○

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Contributor Biographies

Emily Blejwas is the Executive Director of the Alabama Folklife Association. She is the author of *The Story of Alabama in Fourteen Foods* (University of Alabama Press) and two middle grade novels: *Like Nothing Amazing Ever Happened* and *Once You Know This* (Random House). Blejwas has also written for al.com, the Encyclopedia of Alabama, Alabama Heritage Magazine, the Alabama Review, and Mobile Bay Magazine. She holds an MS in Rural Sociology from Auburn University and a BA in Religion from Kenyon College. She lives in Mobile with her husband and four children.

Joey Brackner is the Director of the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, the folklife division of the Alabama State Council on the Arts. He is the author of *Alabama Folk Pottery* (University of Alabama Press, 2006). Since 2013, he has been the host of the Alabama Public Television series, *Journey Proud*. His research interests include Alabama folk pottery, traditional graveyard decoration, and southern horticultural traditions. Brackner is a native of Fairfield, Alabama. He received a BA in Anthropology from the University of Alabama at Birmingham in 1977 and an MA in Anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1981. He was Humanities Scholar in Residence at the Birmingham Museum of Art prior to being hired as state folklorist in 1985.

Alan Brown holds a DA in Rhetoric from Illinois State University, an MA in Educational Administration from the University of Illinois, an MA in American Literature from Southern Illinois University, and a BA in English from Millikin University. He began teaching at the University of West Alabama in 1986, and has since developed an abiding interest in Southern Folklore, in particular Southern ghostlore and African American music and culture. Brown's extensive research has culminated in 29 books, including several collections of Southern ghost stories: *The Face in the Window and Other Alabama Ghostlore* (1996), *Shadows and Cypress* (2000), *Haunted Places in the American South* (2002), *Ghost Hunters of the South* (2006), *Ghosts along the Mississippi River* (2011), *The Big Book of Texas Ghost Stories* (2010),

Ghosts along Florida's Gulf Coast (2015), and many others. Brown has also hosted ghost tours in Charleston, South Carolina; Livingston, Alabama; Meridian, Mississippi; and New Orleans, Louisiana.

Jim Brown holds a Doctorate in modern European history from Vanderbilt University (1971). He completed a post-graduate semester in Intercultural and Folk Studies at Western Kentucky University (1977). Brown taught European and World History, and occasionally Folklore, at Samford University (1971-2016). He is the recipient of Samford's two major teaching awards: the Buchanan, as voted on mainly by students and the Macon, as voted on mainly by faculty. Brown has taken students on travel/study trips to 22 countries on five continents. He is the editor of *Up Before Daylight: Life Histories from the Alabama Writers' Project, 1938-1939* (University of Alabama Press, 1982), which won the *Choice* "outstanding academic book" category award (1983). He is the author of *Fairy Tales, Patriotism and the Nation-State: The Rise of the Modern West and the Response of the World* (with parallel Google Earth folder for each chapter) (Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 2014), written on a folk consciousness-to-nationalism theme.

Andrew Glasgow is a native of Heflin, Alabama and an Art History graduate of the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He was first employed by the Birmingham Museum of Art, where his major focus on the decorative arts history of Alabama resulted in the "Made in Alabama" exhibition in the early 1990s. In 1988, Glasgow moved to Asheville, North Carolina to work for the Southern Highland Craft Guild. He was Assistant Director of Blue Spiral 1 in the mid-1990s, and after another stint at the Guild, became the first director of the Furniture Society with an international membership of furniture makers. In 2007, Glasgow became the Executive Director of the American Craft Council, the nation's most important organization for American craftspeople. He is now medically retired and writes and supports the Asheville Art Museum.

Thomas Kersen is an associate professor of sociology at Jackson State University and holds a PhD from Mississippi State University. He is the author of *Where Misfits Fit: Counterculture and Influence in the Ozarks* (University Press of Mississippi, 2021). He has authored a number of articles on communal living, including "Communal Living in the Heart of Dixie" in *Tributaries, No. 11* (2009). Kersen was also a member of a commune in the Ozarks in the 1970s. Prior to Jackson State University, he was an assistant

professor at the University of North Alabama. Kersen is a proud graduate of the 2006 Alabama Community Scholars Institute.

Carole King has been the historic properties curator for Landmarks Foundation, managing the collection at Old Alabama Town in Montgomery, Alabama, for almost forty years. She holds an MA in Folk Studies/Historic Preservation from Western Kentucky University and a BS from Auburn University in Interior Furnishings. She was a founding member and has been a longtime supporter of the Alabama Folklife Association. King is the co-author of several History Press local historical publications with Karren Pell and the co-author of the recently published *Alabama Quilts: Wilderness Through World War II* with Mary Elizabeth Johnson Huff. King is also active in local community preservation efforts.

Karren Pell is a singer-songwriter and the author of six books. Her latest work, *Classic Restaurants of Montgomery*, was co-written with Carole King and published by the History Press in 2020. Pell is the creator and leader of the Old Alabama Town Revue, now in its fifteenth year. In 2021, Pell was honored to have two essays published in Foster Dickson's online journal, *Nobody's Home*, and two singles recorded—one in Australia and one in Norway. Pell lives in Montgomery in a bungalow that always needs work, with her husband Tim Henderson and more cats and dogs than she will admit. For more insight, check out her website at karrenirenepell@wordpress.com.

Annie Perry is the Founder and Coordinator of the Walk of Life. She is a graduate of David Lipscomb College and lives in Tusculumbia, Alabama. She met her husband, Chickasaw Elder Robert Perry, at the Oka Kapassa Festival and Walk of Life. Annie Perry is the Founder and President of the Heinie Manush Day; Chairman of the Alabama Chapter, Board Member, and Board Secretary of the Natchez Trace Parkway Association; Board Member and Secretary of Compelling Stories of the Southeast; and an Alabama Community Scholar. She represented the Alabama Bicentennial Committee for Community Celebrations with Robert Perry and is the Founder of Sam Dale Day for the Mississippi Bicentennial Celebration (2018). She is the recipient of the Renaissance Award in Education from NO'ALA – Northern Alabama Magazine (2014) and the Outstanding Service Award-American Indian from the Alabama Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (2017).

Candis Pizzetta is an associate professor in the Department of English, Foreign Languages, and Speech Communication at Jackson State University and holds a PhD in English from Baylor University. Her recent publications include “Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity in the Knowledge Economy” in *Redefining Liberal Arts Education in the Twenty-First Century* (University Press of Mississippi, 2021); “Morality and Money: The Economic Value of Virtue” in *POMPA* (2018); and “The Recognition of Implicit Bias as a Precursor to Normalizing Blackness: The JSU ADVANCE Implicit Bias Think Tank” in *Southern Journal of Policy and Justice* (2018). She is the general editor of *The Researcher: An Interdisciplinary Journal* and an editorial advisor for the Gale Group Publishers’ *Contemporary Literary Criticism* series.

Linda Vice has had several careers, as a teacher and school administrator, Program Director of Community Relations/RSVP for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, Executive Director of Senior Services for the Jefferson County Commission, Executive Director of Southwest Alabama Tourism, consultant for the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development, and finally, owner of her own antique mall, *Fuel My Habit*, which grew from her lifelong hobby of collecting. Vice is a member of Leadership Alabama, a Rotary GSE Team Member, and a certified interpretive guide under the National Park Service. She writes a weekly column for the *The Thomasville Times* called “The Front Porch Philosopher” and has contributed to *Tributaries*. Folklife has been a major influence on her life, contributing to her cultural and heritage tourism studies and writing as well as to her regionally recognized storytelling. Vice’s life motto is, “Life is an adventure to be lived, not a problem to be solved.”

Henry Willett, through his career with the Alabama State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and as Director of the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, has worked with artists and communities across the state of Alabama. With degrees in English, anthropology, and folk studies from the University of Virginia and Western Kentucky University, he has directed and produced concerts, exhibits, recordings, publications, special events, and numerous public programs documenting and celebrating Alabama’s traditional culture. Willett founded the Alabama Folklife Association in 1980. He makes his home in DeKalb County in northeast Alabama.

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The Alabama Folklife Association

The AFA was founded in 1980 to document, preserve, present, and promote the multicultural folkways of Alabama through research, education, and programming.

To share folklife broadly statewide, the AFA supports a variety of work including community and school programming; hands-on workshops; the Alabama Community Scholars Institute; exhibits; interviews and oral histories; the Archive of Alabama Folk Culture; performances, festivals, and events; and publication of *Tributaries*.

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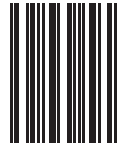
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