

CONNECTED

Delicious Destination

Sweet success for
Mount Carmel Cafe



Mount
Carmel
Cafe

FIRST STEPS

MUSICAL HONOR



By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Protecting the Vulnerable

The internet powers many indispensable resources, including educational opportunities, tele-health, deployment of smart ag tools and the ability to stay in touch with loved ones. However, it is also the most common place for the recruiting and selling of sex-trafficking victims.

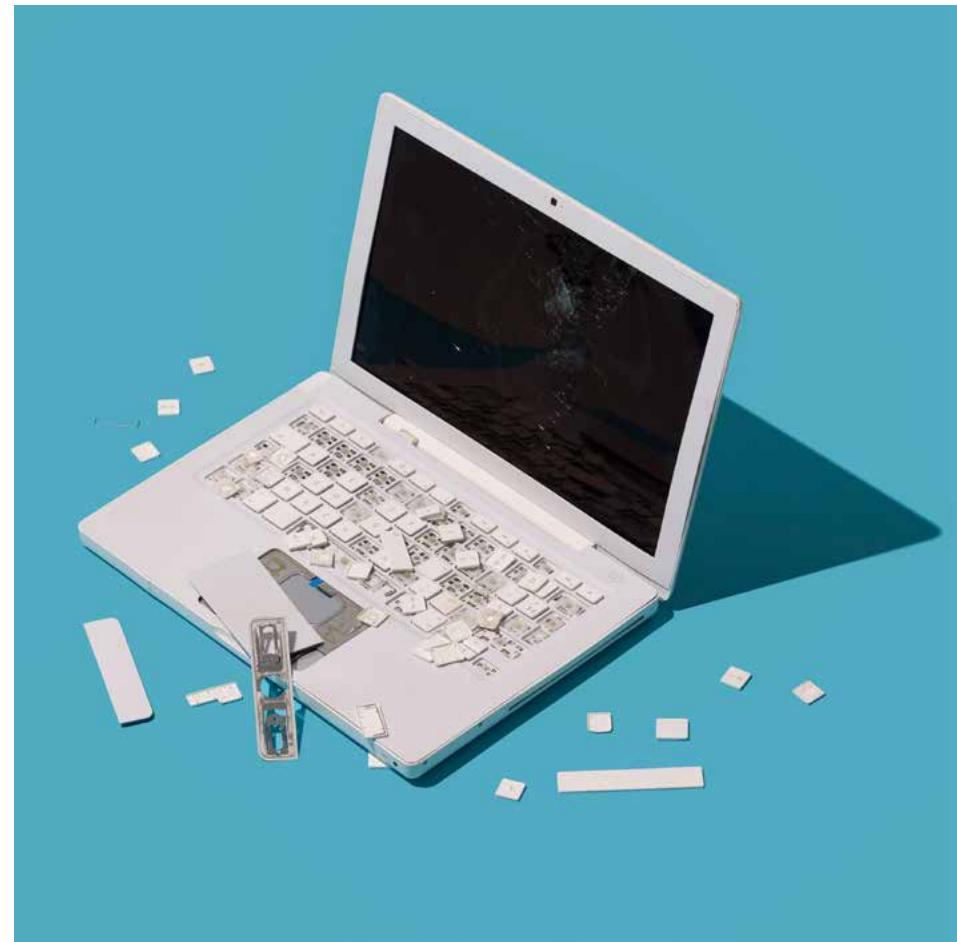
More than 150,000 new escort ads are posted online in America daily. Seventy-five percent of underaged victims report being sold online, and human trafficking is one of the fastest-growing criminal activities in our country.

January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month, and as we raise awareness to combat these crimes, NTCA members, and the association as a whole, are proud to collaborate with Guardian Group and Operation IFAST—ISPs Fight Against Sex Trafficking. It has been beyond gratifying to see the number of NTCA members step up to be the front line of defense with their “boots on the ground” staff.

Originating with CLtel in Clear Lake, Iowa, and in coordination with Guardian Group, a team of former intelligence professionals, Operation IFAST works to prevent and disrupt sex trafficking of women and children in the United States. Over 100 companies in 22 states and over 1,400 of their employees participate in the program, which helps educate and train their teams to report potential trafficking situations to local law enforcement or the National Human Trafficking Hotline.

NTCA members are committed to helping keep their communities safe and being part of the solution.

To learn more about Operation IFAST, visit guardiangroup.org/operation-ifast.



Adobe Stock image by stokete

Hard Reset

What to do with old, broken devices

Many people have outdated or unused electronic devices they aren't sure what to do with after the holidays. While recycling is good for the environment, many phones and tablets also contain rare materials that are much more useful in another device than sitting in a landfill.

Here's how to dispose of your old devices properly:

Phones: Most phone manufacturers will let you trade in your old phone when you buy a new one. But if you still have old devices, retailers like Best Buy, Staples and Home Depot offer in-store drop-off for unused devices. EcoATM also has more than 6,000 kiosks across the country where you get cash for your old phone.

Computers: If you can't upgrade your computer to extend its lifespan, many manufacturers have take-back programs. Barring that, Best Buy has a trade-in calculator for PCs, while Apple offers its own recycling program for Macs. You can also donate your computer to an organization like Computers with Causes that will find students, foster homes or shelters where your computer can make a difference.

TVs: Often, finding a new home for your TV is the best option if it still works. Consider Goodwill, schools and libraries. If it's completely dead, Best Buy has a haul-away service that can send your old TV to one of its recycling partners.

Looking for a recycling center near you? Visit earth911.com to find the closest e-waste center.

GAME ON



Adobe Stock image by Mijan Živković

Growing numbers of seniors are playing video games to stay sharp

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

Today's gamers might not fit the picture many people have in their heads. As the generation that grew up with Sega and Nintendo has come of age, the Entertainment Software Association's 2025 annual study found that the average gamer is 36 years old. The same study found that 28% of gamers in the United States are over the age of 50.

"It's easier to play video games now than at any other time in history. You don't have to go to an arcade. You don't have to buy a console or PC, although many players still do," says Aubrey Quinn, senior vice president of communications and public affairs at the ESA. "Video games can be played anytime, anywhere, with devices almost everyone has on them all the time—smartphones and tablets."

Other than having fun, older gamers say they're drawn to the pastime because it helps them keep their minds sharp. And, as our world becomes increasingly digital, more people are turning to video games as a way to support their mental, social and emotional health.

IMPROVED COGNITIVE ABILITY

While everyone can benefit from enhanced attention, short-term memory

and hand-eye coordination, these can be especially important for seniors looking to keep their minds active. Puzzle games can help improve recall and mental agility, while action and adventure games can encourage problem-solving and support spatial reasoning, particularly those games that require navigating 3D spaces.

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Over the last decade, social interaction has become an essential part of gaming for many players. Connection with players online or on the couch can help older individuals improve their social relationships and build healthier emotional lives. A comprehensive literature review in the journal *Brain Sciences* in 2024 found that older people who played games showed a significant improvement in sleep quality and psychiatric symptoms.

BETTER BALANCE AND MOVEMENT

As motion controls have become standard for modern gaming consoles, games built around movement have also become more popular. These games provide a fun way for older players to stay active and can improve balance, all in a safe and low-stakes environment. ☎

PRESS START

Haven't touched a video game since the heyday of arcade cabinets? Don't worry. It has never been easier to get in the game.

One-stop shop—Much like a smartphone, every major console has its own digital storefront with access to thousands of games. Once you're set up, you can start playing without leaving the house to buy physical games.

Play your way—Accessibility for games is at an all-time high. "Aging often includes the need for extra support in games," says Aubrey Quinn, senior vice president of communications and public affairs for the Entertainment Software Association. "Accessibility features like large text, clear subtitles and chat speech-to-text are making it easier for older players to experience the benefits of play." Even if players have limited dexterity or mobility, there is a wide array of customized game pads and adaptive joysticks that can help anyone play without frustration.

What to play—Aubrey finds that baby boomers and Silent Generation gamers are often drawn to puzzle games like Candy Crush, Wordle and Tetris that are easily available on mobile platforms. A significant portion of those players also enjoy simulation games, action games and shooters. If you're jumping in for the first time, games like the Portal series and Journey offer engaging problem-solving and exploration at your own pace.

Building Beyond the Network

Expanding access and elevating the broadband experience

At the heart of our mission lies a simple but powerful belief: Everyone deserves access to reliable, high-quality broadband, no matter where they live. In rural America, where distance and terrain often create barriers to connectivity, our goal is to close those gaps and bring the digital world within reach of every home, business and farm.



CHRIS TOWNSON
Chief Executive Officer

Today, our network spans more than 7,500 miles of fiber, reaching roughly 100,000 addresses across the Upstate. And we're not slowing down. By the end of 2026, we plan to add another 1,000 miles of new fiber, representing an \$80 million investment in both West Carolina and Upcountry Fiber buildouts. This expansion is about more than infrastructure. It's about building opportunity, strengthening communities and ensuring rural families and businesses can thrive in a connected world.

Our construction strategy continues to focus on areas where broadband access can make the greatest difference. In the West Carolina footprint, we saw meaningful gains this past year in the communities of Honea Path, Belton and Williamston, areas where connectivity has become a catalyst for local growth. For Upcountry Fiber, progress surged across southern Oconee County, bringing service to Westminster, Oakway and Fairplay, as well as northwestern Pickens County, including Six Mile and Pickens.

We're also working to connect new areas, including portions of Abbeville and McCormick counties, where 15 miles of fiber construction—supported by a \$1.2 million investment—is underway. Looking ahead, we'll launch a major new project in 2026, an extension of 150 miles of fiber in northern Greenville County, backed by a \$7.5 million investment. And one of our largest efforts yet will center on northwestern Anderson County and central Pickens County, where we're planning approximately 500 miles of new fiber construction, a cornerstone of our expansion into early 2026.

But our mission goes beyond laying fiber. We're not just a broadband pipeline. We deliver a complete broadband experience, tailored to fit your life. Whether you're running a family farm, working from home or streaming your favorite shows, we provide solutions that enhance how you connect. From outdoor WiFi extenders that keep you connected across your property to advanced security tools that protect your devices and personal data, our services are designed to bring peace of mind and convenience to every household.

We're also building onto our suite of security services, offering customers added layers of digital protection and parental controls, because we believe a great broadband connection should be fast, secure and dependable. Every part of our offerings is built around value, helping families, students and businesses make the most of their connection without compromise.

As we continue to grow, one thing remains constant: our commitment to bridging the digital divide. Every new mile of fiber represents more than progress—it represents access, opportunity and inclusion. Together, we're connecting communities, empowering families and ensuring rural America is not left behind in the digital age.

For us, connectivity isn't just about speed. It's about bringing the world home, one connection at a time. ☎

WC west carolina

CONNECTED

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2026

VOL. 14, NO. 1

West Carolina Connected is a bimonthly newsletter published by West Carolina Telephone, © 2026. It is distributed without charge to all members/owners of the cooperative.

WC west carolina

is a member-owned cooperative dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people of Abbeville, Anderson and McCormick counties.

West Carolina Telephone
233 Highway 28 Bypass
Abbeville, SC 29620
864-446-2111
westcarolina.com

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Westley "Wes" McAllister, President
North McCormick, Area 8

John Michael Thomas, Vice President
Iva, Area 2

Jane U. Stone, Secretary
Donalds, Area 3

Aimee Gray
Starr, Area 1

Lee W. Logan
Due West, Area 4

Eric McCall
Antreville/Lowndesville, Area 5

James Robert Hester
Calhoun Falls, Area 6

Darren Campbell Lewis
Abbeville, Area 7

Talmadge R. Bussey
South McCormick, Area 9

Produced for West Carolina by:

Pioneer

On the Cover:



Chef Raymond George moved to Mount Carmel to open his restaurant, which is known for its popular comfort food entrees. See story Page 12.

Photo by Matt Ledger

GIVE BIG Holiday Food Drive

West Carolina and its Upcountry Fiber partnership with Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative held the annual Give Big holiday food drive in November, delivering food and support to nine local organizations assisting families in need. Employees reinforced the effort by bringing in donations and contributing more than \$800 toward additional food purchases.

Throughout the monthlong drive, customers were invited to drop off three or more nonperishable, unexpired food items at any West Carolina or Upcountry Fiber office. In appreciation, participants received a free internet

speed boost for 12 months. Every donation helped stock shelves at food banks across the region and helped ensure families had meals for the holiday season.

"Every year, the Give Big food drive reminds us what's possible when a community comes together," says West Carolina CEO Chris Townsend.

This year's campaign once again highlights the power of local giving and West Carolina's commitment to supporting families close to home.



Photos courtesy of West Carolina

West Carolina members brought in dozens of nonperishable food items during the annual Give Big drive. The membership has supported the initiative since its inception. West Carolina employees gather and sort the donated food.

TAKE THE WORRY OUT OF PAYING YOUR BILL

Resolve to save some time in 2026 by signing up for SmartHub.

SmartHub lets you manage your West Carolina account and pay your bill from anywhere. Download the SmartHub app from your app store. Have your account number and most recent billing statement handy to register or call our team for assistance.

To learn more and register for SmartHub, go to wctel.smarthub.coop.



Discovering Hidden Gems

Travel vlogger highlights off-the-beaten-path destinations

Story by KATIE TEEMS NORRIS

Gems exist in small towns all around you, but you might not know it. Take some time to explore interesting locales within a short drive or take a longer trip to make memories. YouTubers are traversing the country and taking audiences along for the ride—join them in uncovering the magic in places others may overlook.

BUILD THE DREAM

“There are so many things around me within driving distance that I had no idea about. And I believe that’s also the same for everybody else,” says Tony Hossri of the YouTube channel Build the Dream. Based in Georgia, Tony films his outdoor explorations and city tours for his vlog, or video blog.

With a little research, you can also find beautiful hikes and fun small towns. Tony searches the name of a building or other historic

sites on Google when he’s looking for places to experience. He also uses the AllTrails app to find great hiking destinations.

See what you can find and start making memories. While visiting Cincinnati, Tony saw around 50 people riding scooters. He joined up with the group on his bicycle. “They got to this random tunnel area where they had this giant scooter trick fest,” he says.

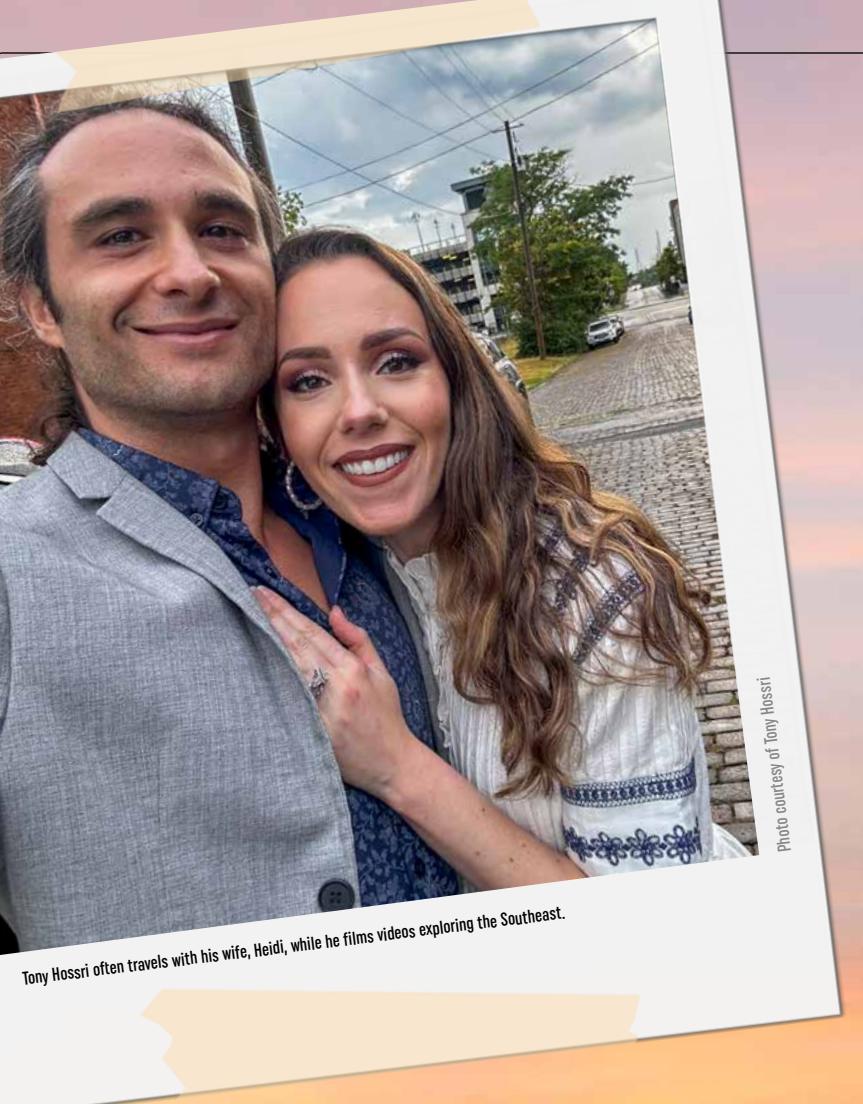
While researching online is a good place to start, Tony says, “Let your phone be a tool to give you a better life, not a way to waste your life by endlessly scrolling.” If using distracting apps gets in the way of having new adventures, consider deleting them like Tony did.

“Look up a neighboring town, neighboring city, neighboring hike,” Tony recommends. “Do everything you can to get out of the matrix to live a more fulfilling, memorable life.”

Visit buildthedreamnow.com and follow Build the Dream on YouTube to start getting ideas for your next adventure. ☺

The South Carolina Lowcountry is a great destination for travelers looking for adventures on the water and culinary experiences.

Adobe Stock photo by makassana photo



Travel Safely

Did you know posting your vacation on social media can pose a risk to you and your home? Consider waiting to post about your travels until after you've returned.



Nearby Adventures



Alabama: Monte Sano means “mountain of health” in Spanish. Since the late 1800s, visitors have been coming to Monte Sano State Park in Huntsville for hiking, biking, climbing and bouldering. Go to alapark.com.



Kentucky: In Corbin, Cumberland Falls, measuring about 68 feet tall and 125 feet wide, earns the title of the Niagara of the South. Go to explorekywildlands.com.



Tennessee: Located three hours east of Nashville, Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area includes 125,000 acres of the Cumberland Plateau. Go to nps.gov.



South Carolina: Visit the Lowcountry, the four, southern-most counties in the state, for water-based outdoor adventures. For ideas and destinations, go to southcarolinalowcountry.com.



Setting Families Up for Success

Abbeville County First Steps helps children and parents prepare for school

Story by BRANDI DIXON

Raising a child is both a joyful and challenging experience, especially for new parents. What's the best way to choose a pediatrician? What kind of crib is the safest? Which car seat should I get? How can I ensure my child receives proper nutrition? The list goes on and on.

There is, however, help. Abbeville County First Steps is a nonprofit devoted to giving parents confidence that they have the support to give their child the best start possible. Success means engaging families, caregivers and community partners to serve little ones up to age 5.

Recognizing that the area's needs are unique, the organization tailors its offerings to meet families where they are, Abbeville County First Steps Executive Director Rebecca Lyman says. Community partners also play a vital role. Organizations like West Carolina make a significant impact through their ongoing support.

"I believe creating strong ties and relationships within the community will only further Abbeville County First Steps' success in reaching as many parents and children as possible," Rebecca says. "Pinpointing the needs of our community is my main goal."

PARENTS AS TEACHERS

Recently, South Carolina First Steps added to its roster of programs, beginning a personalized approach to early childhood

development called Parents as Teachers, or PAT. This voluntary effort helps families raise children to be healthy, safe and ready for school, PAT Supervisor Jacquelyn Wideman says.

Parents who might benefit from the program are recruited through community events, by referrals from the school district and word of mouth from current participating families.



From left: Abbeville County First Steps Executive Director Rebecca Lyman, Parents as Teachers Supervisor Jacquelyn Wideman and parent educators Latasha Wardlaw and Mikayla Covington take part in a community outreach event.

Once enrolled in the program, PAT works with families to conduct assessments to identify any developmental delays and make referrals for assistance, if necessary. PAT also helps parents work with their children on age-appropriate activities designed to strengthen fine and gross motor skills, cognitive abilities, social-emotional development and problem-solving skills.

Essential to the effort are the one-hour home visits when a parent educator leads a structured, evidence-based curriculum. Each visit focuses on three key areas: parent-child interaction, development-centered parenting and family well-being.

“They receive home visiting services weekly for eight weeks from a certified parent educator,” Jacquelyn says. “Once the eight weeks are complete, then home visiting services are done twice a month until the children age out at 5 years old or enter kindergarten.”

Discussion topics during home visits include age-specific child development and parenting strategies, practical tips for

managing behavior and ways to encourage learning at home. “Home visits aim to increase parental knowledge, improve parenting practices and promote school readiness,” Jacquelyn says.

PAT also helps families access food boxes through the Abbeville Area Medical Center and, when appropriate, connects

participating families with Abbeville’s Angel Tree program to assist during the holiday season. ☎

ABBEVILLE COUNTY FIRST STEPS

394 Highway 20 Bypass, Abbeville

864-378-8575

acfirrststeps.com or first5sc.org

READY TO ENROLL?

Families interested in programs through Abbeville County First Steps, including Parents as Teachers, should visit First Five SC, also known as First5SC, at first5sc.org.

The South Carolina Early Childhood Advisory Council started First Five SC in collaboration with various state agencies in 2019. It serves as a one-stop portal for information on public programs and resources that support the growth and development of young children.

Families can also go to acfirrststeps.org or visit the Abbeville County First Steps Facebook page.

There is information about the Department of Social Services for governmental assistance, housing assistance programs and BabyNet, the state’s early intervention system for children under age 3 with developmental delays.



Latasha hands out snacks and program information during an event.

Photos by John Clayton

FORGED IN FIRE

Metalworking opens opportunities for rural farriers

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

There have always been parts of metalworking that feel a little bit supernatural to Jim Poor. While most of the craft is the product of diligent training and hard work, some elements of working with heat and metal are stubbornly unpredictable and come down to a touch of each smith's own personal sorcery.

"In my world of making tools, lastability is the most important thing," he says. "There's a lot of heat treating that goes into tooling, and that's magical stuff because you can't see it. You do it, but you can't really know the results until you send it out to the customer. So, it becomes kind of like black magic."

Jim has been trying to unravel the mysteries of metalworking since he was 12 years old. When he was growing up in Abilene, Texas, his father shod horses on the racetrack circuit, and Jim helped him after school. Once he graduated from high school, Jim found himself shoeing horses after work to make extra cash. It was at one of those jobs that he heard about the Texas Professional Farriers Association.

"One of my customers used to read the local news to me while I was shoeing his horses. And one day he read that this group was going to be at the Abilene County Fair shoeing horses for \$40," Jim says. "I was only getting \$25, so I thought I should see what these guys were doing."

Meeting other local farriers and blacksmiths opened up new opportunities to turn his side gig into a full-time job, hone his craft and even compete across the globe.

"I love competing the most. It's a small community, but it allowed me to travel all over the world and have so many

experiences," Jim says. "I don't think anything else I could've done with my limited education would allow that."

HEAT TESTING

Despite his years of experience, Jim remembers having plenty of nerves the first time he smithed competitively. It was 1985, three years since he started shoeing professionally, when he decided to take part in an event in his hometown.

"I thought it was pretty interesting, but it was scary at the same time," he says. "There were people there who knew a whole lot more about this craft than I did. I was still pretty young, but I just loved it."

A few months later, Jim joined some of his TPFA colleagues at a competition in Oklahoma, followed shortly by a trip to the nationals in Jackson, Mississippi. Farrier competition is divided into novice, intermediate and open divisions, with competitors earning points based on how well they finish and how many others are in their division. Farriers face off in classes where they have a set time to complete a task. Judges rate their performance.

For all his lack of experience, Jim climbed the ranks in short order. After just three competitions, he was already shoeing in the open class. Those competitions quickly became highlights of his year, regularly testing himself against hundreds of other farriers as part of major competitions in Texas, California, Florida and Calgary. At one of those events in California, Jim met Kathleen, the woman who would become his wife.

"She can do just about anything, but she does more of the artistic work than I do," Jim says. "We met each other out there



Competitors race the clock to get their work ready for judging.

and just became inseparable from that day forward. We dated but could only meet at competitions for several years. Of course, that was another reason to go.”

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Over the course of his competitive career, Jim earned a position on the American Farriers Team nine times, while Kathleen helped establish the first women’s international team, Women Horseshoers of America. After years of traveling the world to compete and teach, they established Flatland Forge in Tuscola, Texas, where they now focus on making farrier tools like tongs, punches and 27 different styles of hammers.

“Most people are pretty surprised we produce that many different hammers. But I’ve found out that some people are just collectors,” Jim says. “They may not even use them. They just like the look of them and the craft of them.”

In many ways, Jim envies aspiring farriers and blacksmiths today. With the rise of the internet, it is much easier to discover new techniques and learn from the best artisans in the world. Even before the internet, that accessibility was what drew him back to the craft as a young man. But the best advice he can give to anyone forging their path now is the same as it was then.

HAMMER DOWN

For anyone looking to build a career as a farrier or blacksmith, Jim Poor’s advice is simple: “Find people who are close by to you, and don’t be a jerk. You’ll get a lot of help.”

The easiest way to do that is connecting with a local group. Jim joined the Texas Professional Farriers Association as a young man, while his wife, Kathleen, connected with the Western States Farriers Association early on. If you’re looking for organizations in your state, start here:

ALABAMA

Alabama Professional Farriers Association
President Sam Howard
Email: sam.howard18@icloud.com

KENTUCKY

Derby City Horseshoeing Association
President Zeke Evans
Email: horseshoes92@gmail.com

INDIANA

Indiana Farriers Association
President Dustin Shuck
Email: dustinshuck@yahoo.com
Website: indianafarriers.org

SOUTH CAROLINA

South Carolina Farriers Association
President Dusty Newby
Email: dustynewby@gmail.com

TENNESSEE

Rutherford County Blacksmith Association
President Matt Clarady
Email: rcbabblacksmiths@gmail.com
Website: rcbabblacksmiths.org

“What I’ve always loved most is that blacksmithing is something that you don’t need money to learn. All it takes is effort,” Jim says. “You have to be a self-starter. You’ll work 10 times more hours than somebody with a day job. But all you need to succeed in this craft is a willingness to learn and work.”

SMALL TOWN, BIG FLAVORS

Mount Carmel Cafe provides fresh-to-order food

Story by JAMIE BIESIADA

Raymond George may have trained with famed chefs Emeril Lagasse and Bobby Flay, but celebrity kitchen stars were far from his inspiration to pick up his first knife. That honor goes to his grandmother, the late Audrey Johanson, who taught a young Raymond to cook in her Jersey Shore kitchen.

He was one of Audrey's 18 grandchildren, but he felt like the only one when he was cooking with her. "She always inspired me with cooking and showed me how to do certain things," Raymond says. "She showed me how to use a knife properly and how not to waste food. And when I was ready to go to culinary school, me and her would go take tours and look at the schools."

With his grandmother's help, Raymond selected Johnson & Wales University, which set him up for a lifelong career in the culinary arts. He trained with Bobby and Emeril—experiences he calls both intense and fun—and worked at New York's famed Tavern on the Green before

moving south, holding a number of culinary jobs along the way.

Five years ago, a new opportunity came up: the chance to start the Mount Carmel Cafe in Mount Carmel.

Raymond leaned on his years of experience to craft a menu with broad appeal. From barbecue chicken sandwiches to seafood to burgers, he makes everything fresh to order. It's different from the fancier dishes he was trained to make, like veal saltimbocca and rack of lamb, but Raymond is happy to keep things simple. "We don't skimp on things, and we try to make everything perfect for our customers," he says.

A Facebook page managed by a marketing employee has helped the cafe connect with the community.

INVESTING LOCALLY

Raymond was connected to investor Wes McAllister through mutual friends. Wes is a board member of the Freshwater Coast Community Foundation, which

works to better the local area through its support of entrepreneurship, education and the arts. He wanted to create a cafe at a nostalgic location in town, the old post office. It also filled a need for more restaurants in the area.

Rural development is a family mission for Wes, whose father, John, was a founder of West Carolina Tel in 1952 to connect the community with the rest of the world. Wes is the West Carolina board president today.

He hopes the cafe continues to draw people to the area. "The main thing was the people, getting people to understand and attract people to rural communities," Wes says. "The atmosphere that we try to provide at the cafe is different and it's special."

MOUNT CARMEL CAFE

3883 Highway 81, Mount Carmel

864-391-2233

Follow Mount Carmel Cafe on Facebook.



Mount Carmel Cafe frequently shares photos of its food on social media, including an irresistible burger stacked tall with all the toppings.



The classic pepperoni pizza never disappoints.



Thick hand-battered chicken strips are served with seasoned fries.

Photos by Matt Ledger

From Local Roots to Legendary Stages

James Austin Charping honored for a lifetime in music

Story by PATRICK SMITH

As a longtime member of the house band at the legendary Beach Wagon in Myrtle Beach, James Austin Charping had a front-row seat to country music history. He's shared the stage with rising stars and future legends throughout his decadeslong career.

As he continues his musical journey back home in Iva, James was recently honored with the Hometown Heroes Recognition Award from the South Carolina Entertainment and Music Hall of Fame.

"James is more than a musician. He's a bridge between generations of Carolina sound," says David Godbold, the hall of fame's founder and CEO. "His commitment to authenticity, his remarkable career and his lifelong connection to Iva make him the perfect recipient of the award."

GETTING STARTED

The son of musicians, James now calls a small part of his family's original 45-acre farm home, complete with a recording studio so he and his friends can jam.

"My dad had a band. He was a square dance caller," James says in a 2023 podcast recorded with his son-in-law, "Backstage with Chris Lee." "My mother had a three-piece band with her and her brothers. They had a radio show back in the mid-1930s and '40s."

James picked up the guitar when he was 13 and never looked back. He formed several bands over the years, often taking small jobs to help pay the bills, but he always identified as a musician.

At 32, he joined Silver, the house band at the Beach Wagon—a roller-skating rink turned music venue that



James Austin Charping, left, jams with Leon Everette during the award ceremony.

Photo courtesy of the South Carolina Entertainment and Music Hall of Fame

could accommodate 500-plus fans. His time in the business includes countless performances, studio work in Nashville and sharing stages alongside icons like Waylon Jennings, Garth Brooks, Alabama, Randy Travis, Vince Gill, Marty Stuart, Keith Urban and many more.

But for James, his career highlight is what he describes as opening for "The Big Three"—Conway Twitty, Merle Haggard and George Jones.

A frequent request during his years on stage at the Beach Wagon inspired what was perhaps the biggest hit he wrote, "Play Anything."

"We'd finish a song and ask people walking by the stage what they wanted to hear next. They'd say, 'I don't know, just

play anything by George Jones,'" James says. "The song wrote itself in about five minutes."

A MUSICAL HOMECOMING

James returned to Iva a little more than a decade ago with the love of his life, Juanita Richards. Since returning, the couple started a new rendition of the house band, The Band Silver, which plays across the region to much acclaim.

After a lifetime of music, James' career is now enshrined in the South Carolina Entertainment and Music Hall of Fame. "Being honored that night was incredible," he says. "I've had a really good life in the music business, and just being remembered at all is amazing." ☎

The Ultimate Comfort Food

Beans or no beans, chili always hits the spot

Is there any food in America that creates more of a stir than chili? It's certainly a bowlful of contention.

If your heart lies in Texas, beans take a hike. Southerners, though, love their beans. In the Midwest, it's all about comfort with ground beef, tomatoes and beans, or a simple, creamy chicken chili full of flavor. But every bowl of chili, no matter where you live, has one thing in common—each is a serving of comfort that wraps around you like a well-worn blanket.



Food Editor
Anne P. Braly
is a native of
Chattanooga,
Tennessee.

Photography by **Mark Gilliland**
Food Styling by **Rhonda Gilliland**

WHITE CHICKEN CHILI

Prep time: 20-25 minutes
Cook time: 1 hour
 4 boneless chicken breasts
 1 teaspoon dried basil
 1 teaspoon salt
 1 teaspoon onion powder
 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
 1 teaspoon dried thyme
 1 teaspoon dried parsley
 1 tablespoon butter
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 1 large onion, chopped
 3 stalks celery, chopped
 3/4 cup chopped red bell pepper
 2 cans whole green chilies, chopped
 3-4 cans cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
 2 teaspoons cumin
 1 cup sour cream
 1/2 cup heavy cream
 1/2 cup chopped fresh cilantro
 1 cup grated Monterey Jack cheese
 Additional chicken broth, if needed

In large pot, add chicken breasts and completely cover with water, 4-6 cups. Simmer chicken breasts with basil, salt, onion powder, garlic powder, thyme and parsley until completely cooked.

Remove chicken from broth. Reserve the seasoned broth for the chili. Once chicken is cooled, chop and set aside.

In a large pot, add butter and olive oil, and sauté onion, celery and bell pepper until vegetables are tender. Add chopped chilies and two cans cannellini beans. When mixture is warm, mash beans with a potato masher.

Add 2-3 cups of the reserved broth, chicken, cumin and 1-2 more cans cannellini beans. Let simmer 30 minutes to 1 hour. If mixture becomes too thick, add more broth. Add sour cream, heavy cream and fresh cilantro. Stir well. Taste and adjust seasonings. Just before serving, stir in grated cheese and ladle into serving bowls.



TEXAS-STYLE CHILI

Prep time: 45 minutes
Cook time: 3-4 hours
1/4 cup ground ancho chile pepper
1 tablespoon ground chipotle chile pepper
2 tablespoons ground cumin
2 teaspoons dried oregano
1 teaspoon ground coriander
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/4 cup cornmeal
1 4-pound beef chuck roast, trimmed of excess fat and cut into 1 1/2-inch cubes
8 slices bacon, cut into 1/4-inch pieces
2 teaspoons salt
2 small yellow onions, large dice
5 garlic cloves, chopped
3 jalapeno chiles, cored, seeded and finely diced
4 cups low-sodium beef broth
2 cups water, plus more for the chili paste and deglazing the pan
1 1/4 cups dark beer
1 cup canned crushed tomatoes
1 tablespoon molasses

2 teaspoons unsweetened cocoa powder
1 cup grated Monterey Jack cheese
Additional chicken broth, if needed

Mix the chile powders, cumin, oregano, coriander, cinnamon and cornmeal in a small bowl and stir in 1/2 cup water to form a thick paste. Set aside.

Season the beef with the salt and set aside.

In a Dutch oven, fry bacon over medium heat until the fat renders and the bacon crisps, about 10 minutes. Remove the bacon to a paper towel-lined plate. Pour all but a few teaspoons of fat from the pot into a small bowl. Set aside.

Increase heat to medium high. Sear the meat in three batches in single layers until well browned on one side, adding more of the reserved bacon fat as necessary. Place the seared meat on a plate. Add about 1/4 cup of water to the pot and scrape the bottom with a wooden spoon to release all the flavorful brown bits. Pour the dark liquid over the seared meat.

Reduce heat to medium and add 3 tablespoons of the reserved bacon fat to the pot. Add the onions and cook, stirring frequently, until softened.

Add garlic and jalapenos, and cook 2 minutes more. Add the reserved chile paste and sauté until fragrant.

Add the broth and stir with a whisk until spice mixture is completely dissolved. Again, scrape the bottom of the pot to release any spices. Stir in the water, beer, crushed tomatoes, molasses and cocoa powder. Add reserved bacon and seared beef back to the pot and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and cover, leaving the lid just barely ajar. Simmer, stirring occasionally, until the meat is tender and the juices are thickened, 2 1/2 to 3 hours. Taste and adjust seasonings. Ladle the chili into bowls and serve with desired toppings.



TWO-MEAT CHILI

Prep time: 20 minutes
Cooking time: 1-1 1/2 hours
1 pound ground beef
1 pound ground pork
1 onion, diced
1 green pepper, diced
1-2 tablespoons flour
2 28-ounce cans chopped tomatoes
1/2 cup chili powder (more or less, to taste)
Salt, to taste
Cumin, to taste
1-2 8-ounce cans tomato sauce

Brown meats together in large chili pot with onion and green pepper. Drain grease and stir in flour. Add remaining ingredients, starting with 1 can tomato sauce. If it seems too thick, thin it out with more tomato sauce.

Simmer for at least 1 hour. Serve with sour cream, corn chips and shredded cheese. ☺



Opportunities for Students

All applications due February 14, 2026

Scholarship

- Applicants must live in the West Carolina service area and their legal guardian/parent must be a West Carolina customer
- This scholarship is NOT based on GPA
- Applicants must be a senior in high school during the 2025-2026 school year

Apply online at
westcarolina.com/scholarship

Youth Tour

Tour date: June 1-5, 2026

- Legal guardian must be a member of West Carolina
- Rising high school senior (graduating in 2027)
- Student must be under 18 at the time of the tour

Download application at
westcarolina.com/youthtour

