

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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UCPS goes virtual this week after COVID spike

By Shawn Jarrard
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Just a week into the start of a new school year, the Union County School District has had to make the tough call to close the Primary School all this week after 22 staff members – 17 with COVID-19 – missed work on Friday, Aug. 20.

The staff outage represented about 20% of the Primary School workforce, ranging from teachers to school nutrition employees, paraprofessionals and custodians. Due to a lack of substitutes to fill in staff shortages, the Primary School will remain closed at least until next week.

"We will evaluate the situation on Aug. 27 for the following week," UCPS Principal Shane Womack said in an Aug. 20 letter to parents. "During this week of August 23-27, we will utilize online learning for first and second grades through Google Classroom (and printed learning packets for pre-K and kindergarten)."

Also at the Primary School, as of Friday, there



Union County Primary School teachers posed for this photo on Aug. 10, two days before the start of the 2021-22 school year. It was announced Aug. 20 that the school would close for a week due to staff outages primarily for COVID.

Photo by Mark Smith

were 24 positive cases and 85 students quarantined at home after exposures in the community, and Womack asked parents and guardians to continue monitoring children and to "notify us of any symptoms associated with COVID."

The first-week picture was better in the older grades,

with 11, 9 and 15 student positives respectively in the Elementary, Middle and High schools as of Friday, and only one employee infection at the Elementary and four in the High School at that time.

Woody Gap School had zero cases reported on campus last week. The younger grades

were similarly impacted in neighboring Towns County this month, with the Elementary School there experiencing a nearly identical situation among staff the first full week of school, resulting in campus closure and reopening after one week.

It is probable that transmission is occurring

in Union County Schools, but as COVID circulates in the community, it is unclear at present how much of the situation at the Primary School is due to on-campus spread, as classes just let in from summer break at the onset of a new viral wave.

Of course, the reality on the ground is that the nation

is currently contending with a surge of the most infectious strain of SARS-CoV-2 in the delta variant, translating to a swift spike in community transmission across the U.S.

On the home front, cases have risen precipitously in recent weeks, with COVID-19 hospitalizations at Union
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COVID-19 continues to spread in latest nationwide surge

By Shawn Jarrard
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The latest COVID-19 surge continued apace last week, with 183 confirmed cases reported in Union County between Aug. 1 and Aug. 20

compared with just 61 cases for the entire month of July, per the Georgia Department of Public Health.

As of Friday, the state was reporting one Union County resident dead with COVID-19 in August, though that number is likely to increase in the coming days given the current level of local hospitalizations.

Union General Hospital Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said at the end of last week that the region

may have reached a peak in hospitalizations for COVID after breaking inpatient records earlier in the month, though it was still too soon to know for sure.

"We continue to see a high number of COVID patients presenting to our clinics and the ER," Barnett said. "Our admissions have slowed slightly, so we are hopeful that we have at least plateaued."

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Allegheny Lodge welcomes veterans in monthly meeting



Local Masons, veterans and brothers Grover, Wade and Neville Smith with Allegheny Lodge Worshipful Master Murl Tackett, all showcasing their cavalry hats.

Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Allegheny Masonic Lodge #114 F&AM in

Blairsville welcomed special veteran guests on Monday, Aug. 16, in the fraternal organization's monthly meeting led by Lodge Worshipful

Master Murl Tackett, himself a veteran.

The meeting was preceded by a dinner of ham.
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Mayor, councilmen qualify unopposed for elective office



Robert "Buddy" Moore, Jim Conley and Tony Dyer at Blairsville City Hall Friday. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
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Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley and Councilmen Tony Dyer and Robert "Buddy" Moore are set to reprise their roles for four more years after

qualifying unopposed during last week's three-day period.

Effectively, the men have received a mandate based on their job performance as elected officials, and they are thankful for the support of their constituents.

Conley will be swearing in to his fifth consecutive term as Mayor after having previously served as a council member for more than seven years. He said he decided to run again because "we've got a lot

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US Rep. Andrew Clyde addresses quad-county meetup

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

HIAWASSEE – U.S. Rep. Andrew Clyde, the Republican freshman from Georgia's Ninth Congressional District, discussed current events before a group of about 60 people at the Towns County Civic Center on Wednesday, Aug. 18.

The event was sponsored by the GOP organizations of Towns, Union, Fannin and

Rabun counties, the four northernmost counties in the Ninth District.

Starting things off, Towns GOP Chair Betsy Young lamented the Aug. 15 fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban and the thousands of Americans now trapped in-country. It is a travesty, she said, after all the men and women of the United States Armed Forces gave to liberate that country.

Introducing Clyde
See Rep. Clyde, Page 3A



Congressman Andrew Clyde

Cattlemen's Association gives elected officials local farm tour

By Shawn Jarrard
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Earlier this month, the Blue Ridge Mountain Cattlemen's Association welcomed state and federal elected officials for a tour of local cattle farming operations to showcase the importance of the beef industry to the North Georgia Mountains.

In attendance were U.S. Rep. Andrew Clyde, State Agriculture Commissioner Gary Black, District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter, as well as spokespeople from U.S. Sen.

Raphael Warnock's office, including Northeast Region Outreach Representative Andrea Wiggins.

"We wanted to invite congressmen (and others) to come and take a tour of some local beef farms so they could see for themselves the economic and historical significance of the beef industry in our counties," Blue Ridge Mountain Cattlemen's Association President Mickey Cummings said.

Continuing, "You hear so many negative things about
See Farm Tour, Page 6A



A mixed group of local stakeholders and federal/state elected officials gathered for a picture at the Farmers Market Aug. 4 before embarking on a Cattle Farm Tour by the Blue Ridge Mountain Cattlemen's Association. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

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Virtual School...from Page 1A

General Health System going from just a handful at the beginning of the month to record numbers of inpatients, all coinciding with the start of a new school year.

Coming off an unprecedented level of summer school attendance to catch up kids who took advantage of a year and a half of online-only learning, the district has set a goal of returning all students back to classrooms where participation and progress can be better monitored.

So, the objective at the start of the semester was to resume traditional on-campus instruction as normally as possible, including compulsory attendance and no mask mandates for students or staff, with the understanding that plans would need adjusting as circumstances changed.

After all, the district had great success last school year, not having to close a single day for COVID while seeing viral spread on campus limited primarily to faculty and

staff, all of whom received the option of and continue to have access to vaccination against the virus.

Those same dynamics aren't as clear at the start of this school year, with more than three times the number of student infections districtwide than employees as of Friday. The good news is that none of the students have yet to present with serious illness.

A list of COVID-19 protocols outlining school guidance on quarantining, sanitization and more can be found at <http://www.ucschools.org/news>. As noted in the

protocols, the guidelines are being constantly updated to reflect new information as it becomes available.

The Board Office does not plan on offering an online-only option this school year, despite the weeklong Primary School closure, said Superintendent John Hill, as he and his staff believe in-person instruction best serves the needs of the children in ensuring "Success for ALL."

"The online piece is a challenge because we had very low success with students that were online last year, really a lack of participation," Hill said. "At least 70% of those kids were not very successful."

"That could be an option possibly, but at this time we're not ready to roll out an online option because of the low success rate those students had. You've got to have that balance of what's important to the children and why we're here, which is education."

"When we reflect on the lower success rate of our online education last year, we feel like face-to-face instruction is important. That's the reason I wouldn't automatically bail out on this."

The schools are currently increasing sanitizing measures but not mandating masks for employees or students, though masks remain "highly recommended as they are identified as a leading mitigation in the transmission of COVID-19 by leading health organizations," per school protocols.

As to why the schools will not be mandating masks on campus, Hill said that employees, parents and students are free to make that personal decision for themselves, but that requiring masks for everyone is neither desirable nor feasible given the extended period they would need to be worn.

School officials have enjoyed support and sustained criticism for their current course of action, with some more critical parents wanting additional mitigations in place to keep kids in classrooms as

much as possible this year, especially since sudden closures cause hardships for families.

Mackenzie Harkins has three children in the system, and when she was alerted by the Primary School that campus would be closed for a week due to COVID, she reached out to the newspaper to express her frustration with what she perceives as an unwillingness to enact mitigations.

"The tone of their messaging makes it sound as if they had no choice but to close the school," Harkins said. "But they did have a choice and they do have an option to protect everyone on our school campuses and ensure no further outbreaks in other buildings: require masks."

"Protect our children and teachers and community by developing a comprehensive plan that acknowledges we are still in a pandemic and provide that information publicly so that we know the path forward."

"I believe we all agree in-person school is best and what our children need right now. Make that a priority by making thoughtful decisions that support us all."

In response to such criticisms, Hill said he understands parents' frustration, but he pointed to the countless hours since March 2020 that the schools have committed to planning COVID contingencies, with all efforts geared toward acting on a moment's notice amid shifting dynamics.

Further, Hill said the district had the support of the School Board for its current trajectory, including Board Member Julia Barnett, who is Chief Nursing Officer for Union General Hospital.

Assistant Superintendent David Murphy, who has been keeping a close eye on the data for over a year and a half, concurred.

"All of our protocols and things that we did last year, we still have them, and we still have the list and know what they are, we're just not (implementing everything) at one time," Murphy said.

Added Hill, "We're attempting to have as normal of a school year as possible, because that's what the vast majority of our staff and parents and children are wanting to do. So, we have every mitigation strategy that we had last year available."

Speaking specifically to mask requirements, which the district has attempted in the past, Hill said the schools will continue encouraging masks for staff, but that given the experience the system has with COVID, "we're not mandating masks" for anyone in the schools, including students.

"At this point in the game, parents need to make that decision for their children," Hill said. "We are here to teach children; we're not here to kick kids out of school over refusal to wear masks and mask compliance. I think that is mom and dad's place to make that decision."

"We're trying to find that happy place where it's somewhat safe during a global pandemic and kids are getting a high-quality education and actually having a good time at school."

"Seeing those little fellows smiling and playing and going out on the playground and going to sports practices and playing games – that's important stuff, too."

"We don't want anybody to be sick and want everybody to be healthy, but it's a challenge during a spike (in COVID-19 community transmission) to open school up."

Ultimately, Hill said he hopes the community and parents know that "we really care and do worry about their kids – it's just so hard to know what to do."

"The guidance changes sometimes more than once a week," he said, "and trying to balance safety, education, and an overall fun experience for children without totally taking advantage of an already worn-out staff is extremely challenging, but we are doing our best and will make changes as needed."

Allegheny Vets...from Page 1A

mashed potatoes, beans, corn, rolls, tea, lemonade and a large selection of desserts.

Founded in 1849, Allegheny Lodge #114 is home to many veterans, and part of the meeting was dedicated to them.

Special guests included Department of Veterans Service Office Manager Eddie Fontaine and brothers Grover, Neville and Wade Smith, all of whom are Vietnam veterans who joined a U.S. Army Cavalry Regiment. And they have the hats to prove it.

Grover joined in December 1966, taking his Advanced Infantry Training in Fort Gordon before becoming military police, and he readily shipped out to Vietnam and was assigned to the Eleventh Armored Cavalry Base Camp to run convoys and town patrols.

"I spent a year there involved in the Tet (Offensive) of 1968, the offensive that the Vietcong ... they hit us hard," Grover said. "And, luckily, I came home alive."

Neville went in in August of 1958 as an enlisted person, doing Basic and Advanced Infantry Training in Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

"Went to Fort Bragg

(North Carolina) for a couple of months, and then they shipped me to Germany," he said. "Became a buck sergeant over there in charge of the weapons platoon and ran that for several years, and then got hitched over there," he added, chuckling.

"I came back to Fort Hood (Texas) and got (Field Support Command), then decided I wanted to go to flight school. So, I went to Fort Wolters Flight School (Texas) and became a warrant officer."

"(Then I went to Vietnam and flew helicopters; two tours over there, shot down three times. Walked away from it every time, thank Goodness, you know. Got shrapnel in both knees, but that's life," he said, adding that he got out in 1970.

Wade Smith also joined a U.S. Army Cavalry Regiment and served in Vietnam. He retired from the U.S. Army after nearly 30 years as a Lieutenant Colonel, which is a story that will be featured in an upcoming edition of the North Georgia News.

He said the U.S. Army had all three brothers serving in Vietnam simultaneously, which was against military policy.

Following dinner,

Freemasons and guests retired to the meeting room where Fontaine fielded questions from the many veterans in attendance regarding VA Benefits.

Prior to answering questions, Fontaine offered a brief history of his military service, saying he was a U.S. National Guard and U.S. Army veteran.

"Started out my career in 1982 at the age of 17," he said. "Had to get a waiver from my parents in order to go in. Things worked out. I stayed for a long time, until 2012. Overall, it was a grand experience. I would never trade it for anything else in the world."

"I'm here to speak with you tonight about what your (benefits) are and make you more familiar and more available to me."

Fontaine did say that the VA was doing a lot via email nowadays, and that he was sympathetic to those who didn't like it. But with COVID and all the new technologies now, he said it can't be avoided.

He can be located at the Blairsville VA Clinic. Veterans with questions can reach him by phone at 706-745-6341 or via email at eddie.fontaine@vs.state.ga.us.

Four More Years...from Page 1A

of things going on that I wanted to be a part of."

"The completion of, for instance, this downtown parking lot," Conley said. "I don't know exactly how long we've been working toward this, but it's been at least seven or eight years that I know of."

"There's things going on at the airport that we're continuing to work on, and other projects throughout the city that we've got to get done, our (LED lighting project around the square), some sidewalk projects, and the crosswalks, which is in the works now."

Councilman Dyer was first elected in August 2010 to complete an unexpired term ending December 2013, followed by election to two full terms, and he concurred with the mayor's sentiments last week.

"My goal would be to continue serving the constituents and do anything we can to make life better for them and make the city more friendly to them," Dyer said. "Not only the constituents, but the tourists and the citizens of the county."

"That was my goal when I came on the City Council 11 years ago, was to serve the constituents. There's lots involved – the mayor went over that, we do have a lot going on."

"And we have

accomplished a lot, right here in the City Hall block and the downtown area, (including the expanded council chambers and new Blairsville Police Department Headquarters).

"We've come a long way, and now (the downtown parking lot is being paved with bathrooms to be installed), and I just want to continue serving the constituents."

By December, Councilman Moore will have completed three full terms as a member of the Blairsville City Council for 12 years of service to the city. He, the mayor and Councilman Dyer have worked many years together now, and he contended there's something to be said for that.

"We're all here to serve the people of Blairsville, use their resources wisely, and do the things they want us to do," Moore said. "I've enjoyed working with all these guys."

We've gone to some meetings in other cities and communities, and it doesn't always go so smooth as it does here.

"We might not always agree on something, but I guarantee you that each person here on this council and the mayor has got their heart in the right place, and I enjoy working with people like that."

Blairsville City Hall is working to confirm with the state that no General Municipal Election will be required in November, as a single candidate qualified for each open seat.

There will still be a countywide Special Election held on Nov. 2 asking residents whether they support the implementation of a 1-cent Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax to fund the construction of roads, bridges and safety improvements benefiting the county and city.

COVID Spike...from Page 1A

“Our current COVID census is 35, down from a high of 42 at Union General. Chatuge currently has six COVID inpatients.”

Barnett noted that “the vast majority of severely ill patients requiring hospitalization are not vaccinated,” with an average range of just 5%-10% for breakthrough infections in fully vaccinated people.

Especially if the most vulnerable continue to seek vaccination and people take common sense measures like staying home when sick, Barnett believes things could once again begin trending in the region’s favor, and she encourages residents in need of medical care to feel confident in going to the hospital.

“Our staff and medical staff continue to push through this difficult time,” she said. “They are working long hours and harder than ever to do their best to provide great care to our community. We appreciate the community’s patience and gestures of care and kindness to our staff.”

The Union County

School District had to close the Primary School this week after staff shortages due to COVID-19, discussed at length in a separate article in this week’s newspaper.

In vaccination news, the Food and Drug Administration granted full approval to the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine on Monday. Previously, the vaccine was only being administered under an emergency use authorization. Moderna and J&J vaccines still await full approval.

According to the New York Times, approving the shots will accomplish several goals, including paving the way for vaccine mandates “by public and private organizations who were awaiting final regulatory action,” such as the U.S. military, and hopefully compelling greater acceptance by vaccine hesitant people.

Full approval is also expected to address the apparent waning of vaccine immunity amid the delta variant’s rising tide by enabling booster and off-label uses of shots; President Joe Biden has already

announced plans for vaccinees to receive booster doses, some as early as next month.

On Aug. 19, all District 2 Public Health Departments began making available booster doses for moderate to severely immunocompromised people who meet the requirements to receive a third shot of either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, excluding J&J recipients for the time being.

“This is an additional dose for individuals that have specific health conditions that limit their ability to make antibodies to fight off COVID-19 with only two doses of the vaccine – this is not a booster dose for the general population,” said District 2 Public Information Officer Natasha Young.

Anyone who has yet to receive a COVID vaccination may do so for free and without an appointment at any county Health Department. Presently, Union County remains even with the state average of fully vaccinated residents at 42%.

Also last week, Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Chief Judge Raymond George ordered a reinstatement of the previous

mask mandate inside the courthouses of the circuit, effective Monday, Aug. 23.

“Due to the rapid increase

in the number of COVID cases and the variants thereof, it has become necessary to implement the requirement of masks/face

coverings, social distancing and temperature checks again,” according to the order signed Friday, Aug. 20.

Rep. Clyde...from Page 1A

was Ninth District GOP Chair Rebecca Yardley, who offered a brief biography of the congressman.

Clyde graduated cum laude from Bethel University in 1989 and received his MBA from the University of Georgia in 1999. He started a business in his garage in 1991 that has grown into the successful Clyde Armory, with two locations in Georgia today.

The congressman served 28 years in the U.S. Navy, in Iraq and Kuwait, and retired with the rank of Commander.

In 2013, he was hit with a civil asset forfeiture from the federal government of \$940,000 but fought it and, ultimately, won the asset forfeiture back.

As a result of that experience, the congressman co-authored the Clyde-Hirsch-Sowers RESPECT Act to protect small business owners from having that same experience.

The acronym RESPECT stands for “Restraining Excessive Seizure of Property through the Exploitation of Civil Asset Forfeiture Tools.”

In 2019, President Trump signed into law the Taxpayer First Act, which incorporated the Clyde-Hirsch-Sowers RESPECT Act, a triumph for the congressman and American small businesses.

With that intro, Congressman Clyde then took the floor, first recognizing his wife, Jennifer, for her support in everything he does before moving on to discuss his first months in office.

“What I’ve seen these last eight months can best be described in Washington as a nation in crisis,” Clyde said. “We have a national security crisis. We have a border crisis.

“We have an economic crisis, an energy crisis, a crime crisis, and a crisis of the unborn, with the federal government now wanting to use our tax dollars to fund abortion outright, and that is simply unacceptable.

“These last three days have truly highlighted our national security crisis. On

Sunday, Kabul, Afghanistan, fell to the Taliban without so much as a fight. It took only 10 days for the Taliban to take over once they saw us leaving like a dog with its tail between its legs.

“In less than a month it will be the 20th anniversary of 9/11, and because of President Biden’s incompetence and lack of leadership, the Taliban today actually control more of Afghanistan than they did before Sept. 11, 2001.

“This is the most staggering failure of leadership and the worst betrayal of our service members’ sacrifices in a generation,” Clyde continued, adding that he fears this may end up being Biden’s Tehran if the Taliban detains Americans and holds them hostage.

Clyde also focused his message on the situation at the southern border, saying it was “the worst I’ve ever seen, and the administration refuses to even call it a crisis.”

“If we think that because we’re here in Georgia and not a border state that we really don’t have to worry about it, that would be a mistake,” Clyde said. “We should be very concerned about safety, because every community is at risk.

“In total, over 1.3 million illegal aliens have crossed our border this year alone. We are on track to reach over two million illegal aliens crossing over the southern border by the end of the calendar year. This is a crisis, ladies and gentlemen – a true crisis.”

The congressman said he introduced the COVID-19 Border Protection Act (HR-2076) after the Secretary of Homeland Security admitted to him, on the record, that the government was releasing untested illegal immigrants into the homeland.

According to Clyde, the act requires the Department of Homeland Security “to devise and implement a strategy to ensure no illegal alien with COVID-19 in DHS custody

may be released into the community during a public health emergency.”

“The cost of that bill is completely paid for,” Clyde said. “It borrows no additional money because it simply redirects unspent funds back to the United States that (Biden) had set aside through the State Department to help refugees overseas.

“Thousands upon thousands of illegals are being sent all across our nation by the current administration, many of them not even tested for COVID-19. They have no idea whether they have it or don’t have it. That’s why I say every state is a border state.”

Next, Clyde touched on the ballooning national debt that stands at more than \$28.6 trillion and counting, driven ever upward by a precipitous rise in debt from multiple rounds of COVID-19 relief funding.

And now, Washington is poised to spend more than \$4.5 trillion in the coming weeks to enact a massive infrastructure bill and budget reconciliation process that will broaden the footprint of the federal government, according to Clyde.

“The result of all this spending will be to further fuel inflation,” Clyde said. “Prices are already up 5.4% compared to this time last year, which means you and I have less money in our pocket than we did six months ago.

“And while both inflation and Washington spending habits continue to go unchecked, we will soon be faced with a debt ceiling crisis because the government is running out of money to borrow.

“I personally do not believe that lawmakers should vote to raise the debt ceiling without an iron-clad agreement that we will get our fiscal house in order, reduce spending to below what we receive in revenue, and begin reducing our nation’s debt load.”

To contact Congressman Clyde, call the District Office at 470-768-6520 or his Washington, D.C. office at 202-225-9893.

Jim Wood returns to Old Courthouse on Blairsville Square for Aug. 27 concert

Jim Wood, popular local singer and musician will perform in concert in The Old Courthouse on the Square on Friday, August 27 at 7 p.m.

Jim lives in Hiwassee, GA and is 51 years old. He was born in Ft. Worth, TX and has lived in Texas, South Carolina, Georgia, Montana, and Tennessee. He lived in Suches, GA for 22 years, where he graduated from Woody Gap School, and considers Suches his first hometown. He moved to Nashville in 1996 and lived there for almost 3 years prior to returning to his roots in Hiwassee.

Jim has been performing since the age of 9. He started playing harmonica in church, and square dances at the old Winfield Scott skating rink. Jim began playing guitar at the age of 12 and singing at 19. He credits the Lord, through his mom, Ann Chapman and dad, the late Wayne E. Wood, for his musical ability, wit and showmanship. In his youth, he was widely known for playing years of square dances in the old Woody Gap Gymnasium and at Lake Winfield Scott in Suches, and his raucous version of “Johnny B. Goode” at the Georgia Mountain Fair.

In addition to performing, Jim is a prolific song writer with over 50 copyrighted songs. In 1996, while living in Nashville, he recorded



Jim Wood

“Black Mountain Lament”. The collection has six original songs including the title track - named for Black Mountain in Jim’s boyhood backyard. In 2007, Jim recorded his latest CD, “The Smoky Mountain Man.” The CD has 16 songs, eight of which are original songs. The title track is a reflection on the changes the mountains and its’ original residents have seen over the years, and is somewhat of a commentary on what occurred as change followed.

Jim is extremely honored to be the Chairman of the Country Music Show at the Georgia Mountain Fair, and to have been “picked” to fill that role by the legendary Howard Cunningham – a po-

sition that “Fiddlin’ Howard” held since the band’s inception over 55 years ago. Jim has been a member of the Georgia Mountain Fair Staff Band for 20 years, including its induction into the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame in 2004, and Chairman since 2008. He has been a regular performer at the Georgia Mountain Fair for over 30 years, and has a deep, personal connection to preserving its musical heritage. He is most grateful for the opportunity to hone his guitar playing ability under the guidance of his musical hero, James “The Chief” Childers, and is most fortunate and humbled to help carry the torch for these great musicians.

Jim plays a variety of original and standard songs and employs a unique blend of original humor and the lost art of storytelling. His musical styles include Bluegrass, Rockabilly, Blues, Gospel, and Country. He invites you out to an hour of acoustic music that allows him to return to the roots of his music in Union County, and to one of his favorite events of the year!

There is no admission charge to the concerts presented by The Union County Historical Society. The musicians donate their time and talents. Voluntary donations to the maintenance fund are always welcomed and appreciated.

'Maters & Music' draws crowd at Reece Farm

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Born in 1917 and raised on a small Choestoe farm near present day Vogel State Park, the nationally acclaimed poet/novelist Byron Herbert Reece is a legend in these parts.

Serving to memorialize Reece and his legacy, a dedicated group of volunteers formed the Byron Herbert Reece Society in 2003, later opening the Reece Heritage Farm in 2012.

"Part of the purpose of the Society, and the venue itself, is to introduce people to Reece the writer, who gained a good bit of fame in his time," said Dr. John Kay, Ph.D., retired department chair at Young Harris College and former Reece Society chairman.

In service to this outreach initiative, Kay and others from the society welcomed more than a hundred guests to the Seventh Annual "Maters & Music Festival" on Saturday, Aug. 14.

The festival is a recurring event for the society,

which has committed much time and energy over the years to promoting the life and works of the North Georgia native son.

Reece's writings chronicled the hard but simple ways of mountain living in the early 20th century. He loved the land and always conveyed "I am a farmer first and a writer second." It was in recognition of his two identities – farmer and writer – that the "Maters & Music Festival" was born.

"I was the first program chairman, and (several years ago) we were thinking of different programs to have, and we thought, 'Well hey, tomatoes in August relates to the Farm. Let's have tomato sandwiches,'" said Society Board Member Ken Akins.

Board Member and Treasurer Debra March said the event is a great outreach program to welcome residents and community visitors alike to see the Heritage Center and get to know more about Reece's legacy.

"Previously we did tomato sandwiches, and we got

really good at making a lot of tomato sandwiches," March said. "But with COVID this year, we're just giving whole tomatoes away."

"We're giving away tomatoes and the music is free, and we just invite the community to come down and visit the farm," added March, noting that the festival has been a great way of forwarding the society's mission of generating interest in and recognition of Reece's life and works.

"He was an extraordinary human being," Akins said of Reece.

Before the music started, event emcee Akins recited a short Reece poem called "The Reach of Song," which he said captured Reece's legacy well:

*From chips and shards,
in idle times
I made these stories,
shaped these rhymes
May they engage some
friendly tongue
When I am past the
reach of song.*

Local singer/songwriter

Wyatt Espalin, straight off a performance at Anderson Music Hall for the Georgia Mountain Fair, reached the crowd at the Reece Farm with his own songs, entertaining people for about an hour that Saturday with some folksy tunes.

The afternoon performance featured "Sam and the Boys." Sam, his son Sammy and grandson Samuel Ensley took the floor to play some downhome Bluegrass music.

Society Board Chair Jerri Gill said it was always a pleasure to welcome the Ensley Family to play at the Reece Society events.

"Not only are they popular local singers," Gill said, "they have been so helpful to the Reece Society by setting up the musical equipment this year



The Byron Herbert Reece Society handed out fresh tomatoes at the 2021 "Maters and Music Festival" on Aug. 14.

Photo by Mark Smith

and in the past, for themselves and for other performers."

All told, well over a hundred people flowed through the

pavilion throughout the course of the event, many of whom took home some beautiful August tomatoes.



Local musicians "Sam and the Boys" performing downhome Bluegrass music at the Seventh Annual "Maters and Music Festival."

Photo by Mark Smith

Farm Tour...from Page 1A



In addition to promoting the local beef industry, Blue Ridge Mountain Cattlemen's Association President Mickey Cummings highlighted the importance of the Canning Plant in the local agriculture scene earlier this month.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

farmers – we just wanted them to know that there's a group of beef cattle producers up here that grow a good crop, and it's important to the area.

"Just in Union County, it's worth over \$1 million a year, so if you combine that with all of the counties, you can see the importance of it."

Cummings invited a wide array of stakeholders to the Aug. 3 tour, including High School Future Farmers of America senior officers President Alyssa Sweat, Vice President Emma McConnell, and Secretary Miriam King. Middle School FFA Adviser Katie Rittenhouse was also present.

The Farmers Market was the first stop on the tour, serving as a central meeting place that allowed Cummings, who manages the Market, to show off the SPLOST-funded facilities and discuss the tremendous agricultural and economic value of the Market and Canning Plant.

Representing the Georgia Cattlemen's Association were Executive Vice President Dale Sandlin, Executive Committee Vice President Joe Garner of Blairsville, and Region 2 Vice President Wesley Hopgood of Blairsville, all of whom were excited to welcome the elected officials and advocate on behalf of the beef industry.

Just prior to the start of the tour, everyone present introduced themselves and briefly addressed those gathered, starting with Rep. Clyde.

Clyde said he was working on forwarding truth-in-labeling legislation in the House of Representatives called the Real MEAT Act, which would require plant-based products masquerading as meat to be clearly labeled.

Ag Commissioner Black agreed with Congressman Clyde, saying there were "a lot of things in the public arena that are very confusing."

"We're 15 years into a debate with the federal Food and Drug Administration that you cannot milk an almond," Black joked, before going on to say he was thankful for the opportunity to visit with local farmers again and commending the Union County Schools Agriscience Center.

Wiggins from Sen. Warnock's office said she and the interns who made the trip with her to Blairsville were excited to be back in the area after recent visits and were both thankful for a welcome reception and looking forward to learning more about the industry here.

Cummings and guests then boarded a school bus to begin their tour of three different local cattle facilities, including Bill Hutson's Oakhill Farms purebred operation in Blairsville; the Burrell Cattle Company specializing in backgrounding, also in Blairsville; and Steve Whitmire's Brasstown Beef in North Carolina that sells locally raised and processed beef.

All in attendance considered the tour to be an eye-opening and valuable experience, which was important to Cummings, who is concerned about rampant misinformation regarding beef production these days.

He and the Cattlemen's Association hope to raise awareness that "high-quality beef is something good to use in our diet every day, and it doesn't harm us if we'll eat it right."

"What I wanted to show to these congressmen was that we have common, everyday people that produce beef in these counties," Cummings said. "They do it safe for the environment, and it's safe nutritionally as well."

"We're just trying to get the point across that there are good people growing a high-quality product, and we're trying to dispel a lot of

misconceptions about beef."

Also present were Union County Extension Director Timothy Jennings, Union/Towns Ag Agent Jacob Williams, Chestatee-Chattahoochee RC&D Council Executive Director Frank Riley, and others, with Riley sponsoring a local beef lunch on behalf of the RC&D that day.

The Blue Ridge Mountain Cattlemen's Association is comprised of Union, Towns and Fannin counties in Georgia, and Clay and Cherokee counties in North Carolina.

"All total between those five counties, there's about 24,000 livestock, and if we were to take that and turn it into meals, that's a little over 20 million meals from those animals right there," Williams said. "So, that's a pretty big deal when we're talking about economic importance."

"Farm gate value is almost \$21 million from the five counties as well, so the farmers here raising cattle is a big boost to our economy, bringing in lots of money."

Added Williams, "One other thing I think is really important about the cattle industry that is specific to us here in the mountains is the use of pastures and hayfields as a conservation of the land."

"We have a lot of highly erodible land that we wouldn't be able to use for production in other ways, but we can grow grass on it, so we can raise cattle on it."

"That takes some land that would otherwise not be profitable, and we can use that to make some money off of as well, which is good for our economy."

Rhonda Mathews of the CTAE, Agriculture and Young Farmers programs of Fannin County High also attended the tour.

For more information on Georgia's cattle industry, visit <https://www.georgiacattlemen.org>.

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Union County Farmers Market

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2nd Place - \$250 Cash
3rd Place - \$100 Cash

Additional Door Prizes Day of the Event

Ducks can be adopted at the Blairsville Police Department
96 Blue Ridge Street • Blairsville, GA, or from any Blairsville Police Officer

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