

MAY 2020

# SALISBURY

the magazine

## BEAR necessities

Ugandan golfers  
integral part  
of Livingstone  
team



### Heart of the batter

'Cookie factory' bakes  
for charitable causes

### Track record

Bob Willetts known for top-quality  
railcar restorations

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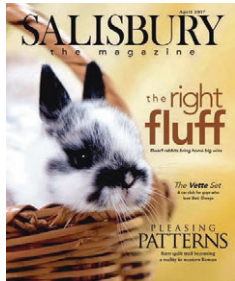
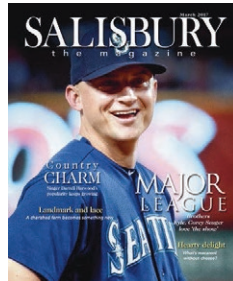
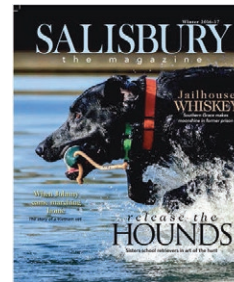
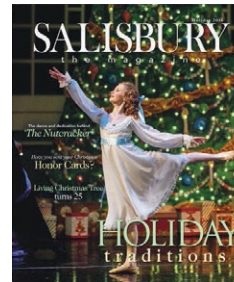
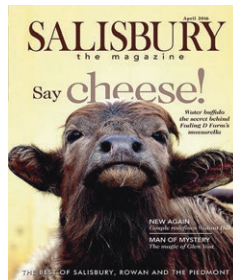
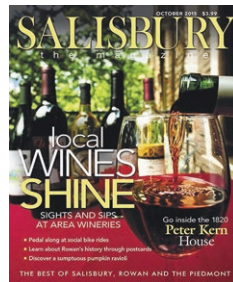
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*On the cover: Seven golfers from Uganda, who are part of the Livingstone College golf program, pose next to the bear statue on campus. Story on page 20.*

*On this page: Plenty of remnants of the Empire Hotel's rich history, such as the chain hardware to this window, are still evident in the rooms and hallways of the Salisbury landmark. Read more starting on page 50.*

*(Jon C. Lakey photos)*



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# When each of us is 'a health committee of one'

Salisbury and the rest of Rowan County dealt with another pandemic in 1918, and this “Spanish Lady,” as the influenza was dubbed, showed no mercy. The death toll in the United States alone was 675,000 people, including 13,644 in North Carolina. These numbers are frightening and hard to grasp.

The Washington Post reported that the flu fatalities in 1918 happened quickly — more than two-thirds of the deaths occurred within a 10-week period during the fall, the season which also hit Rowan County the hardest.

While I have never seen a number of influenza deaths given for Rowan County, the total had to be considerable. A cherished Rowan County historian, the late James S. Brawley, wrote “the Spanish flu began to strike down Rowan citizens by the hundreds.”

“Beginning in late September 1918 and continuing throughout October,” Brawley said, “over 2,000 cases were reported in the county and many more in the city of Salisbury. This threat offset the encouraging news (about World War I) from Europe.”

“... The crisis called forth all the ingenuity and know-how that the organization (Red Cross) could muster. Spanish flu did its work and passed over the county at November’s end, leaving thousands weak, some dead and others crippled for life.”

The city and county’s “ingenuity,” of which Brawley spoke, may sound familiar given this year’s experiences with the coronavirus. You can find a lot more details in an article I wrote for the Salisbury Post on Feb. 4, 2018, but let’s just say Rowan County had to shut down.

Government orders went out to close public schools, colleges, churches and the county fair. Political activities for the November general election were suspended. Textile mills closed, as did many local businesses. The Rowan Health Board further ordered that pool halls, movie houses, dance halls and “all other congregations of people” be closed and “all loafing or loitering in and around the railroad stations be prohibited.”

If people had to ride the Salisbury streetcars, they were told to leave the windows open. Parents were instructed to keep their children inside. Every citizen, the Health Board said, was being named “a health committee of one.”

Quarantines were ordered and self-imposed. City workers sprinkled streets in Salisbury with disinfectant and streets were being flushed daily. State revenue agents were told to turn in their confiscated liquor so the alcohol could be used for medical purposes. The health providers and the institutions of the day were overwhelmed.

Salisbury’s American Red Cross chapter, only two years old at the time, set up an additional hospital at the old courthouse (today’s Rowan Museum). It relied on volunteer nurses, placed nurses in homes, cooked and served meals to the sick and went door-to-door checking on residents.

The city established a soup kitchen in the basement of the courthouse. A motor pool carried meals to individual homes, along with nurses and medicine. This might sound familiar, but there were no vaccines available to combat this flu.

As I write this in mid March, what lies ahead with the coronavirus remains a great unknown. You will already see the effects of the coronavirus on our pages. We would like to give you more Scene pages, for example, but events we want to include have been canceled. We decided to leave out the calendar this month due to the uncertainty that events would continue as scheduled.

But we hope our stories offer some respite in uncertain times. And remember the Salisbury Post’s advice from 1918: “Don’t associate with the impolite or careless who spray your air with spit.”



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Wineka". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Mark Wineka,  
Editor, Salisbury the Magazine



| *through the lens* |

*by genevieve martin*

*Genevieve Martin calls this photograph of her flower garden 'May Merger,' because it represents the clematis merging with the roses.*



# *Kristy Woodson Harvey makes dreams come true*

One thing you can depend on with Kristy Woodson Harvey's books is a breezy read.

Her newest novel, "Feels Like Falling," is the ideal read if you are stuck at home, can make an escape to the beach or just need something to distract you from all the bad news. It will be released April 28.

Using two first-person narrators, as she often does, Harvey lets them tell the story of a very privileged woman and a woman who grew up motherless and poor.

Gray is a wildly successful 34-year-old with her own internet marketing site, using influencers and other tricks of the trade to draw attention to companies and products.

She started it at age 22, and has devoted her life to it. She did take time out to marry and have a son, but her personal life is not quite so successful.

She's so lucky, she can run her business from her beach house at Cape Carolina. Harvey titles her first chapter, "Gray: perfect island blonde," so you get the picture.

But the other narrator, Diana, whose introduction is titled "Royalty," is the woman who never got what she wanted, never had a successful business or a successful relationship or a much-wanted child.

Diana is, as her first love's mother calls her, a trailer trash orphan. But not at all. Diana has lived as an orphan, and she did live in a trailer and several foster homes, but she is far from trash. She is smart and caring, a woman who seems to find bad luck in every job, in every man.

She has dreams, but she figures she'll never realize them.

After breaking up with a slob of a 10-year boyfriend, Diana lives in her car, because she's jobless now, too.

Naturally, she and Gray meet, and naturally they realize they need each other and naturally, Diana is able to show off her skills. Naturally, Gray needs someone to keep her house going since she is so busy. Naturally, Diana is there.

Gray is rather high maintenance. She and her husband, Greg, are divorcing, with Greg

dictably, taken up with the brilliant and much younger assistant Gray hired for him, Brooke.

Diana still remembers her first love, Frank, who dumped her when his parents threatened to pull him out of the family business if he kept seeing the "orphan trailer trash." Diana was 18, Frank was 22.

From here, Harvey takes readers on a ride of love's up and downs, coincidences, very good luck and fairy tales coming true. Just what we need at this point in time — escapism and hope that life will always work out in the end.

If you are the suspicious type, like me, you will suspect all the men in the book have ulterior motives or evil plans, but, you're wrong.

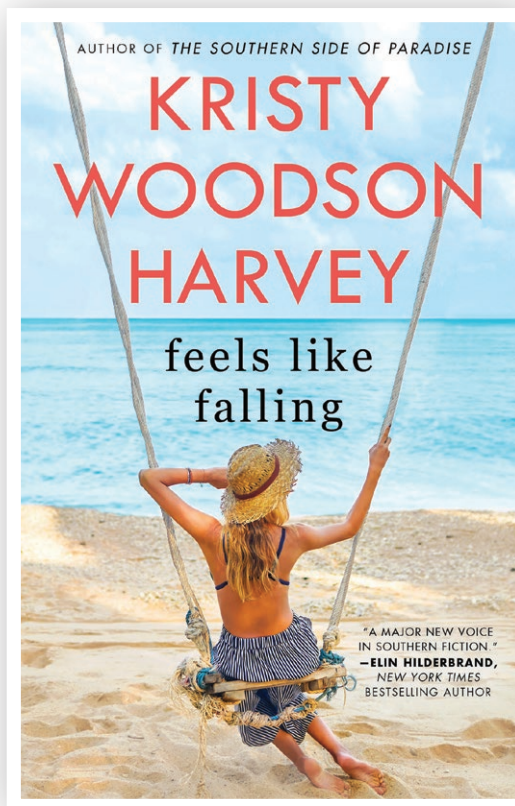
One of the things Harvey is good at is writing sympathetic characters over the age of 30. In her trilogy involving a mother and her three daughters, the mother was drawn as a fully-realized, hard-working woman capable of love after being widowed.

In this book, Diana is just 40, but also crafted as a full person who can handle struggle and disappointment and rise above it with determination and perseverance.

There will always be women like Gray who get everything they want, but they, too, will realize that sometimes they need more, they need humbling experiences that show them what really matters.

"Feels Like Falling" is another flower in Harvey's beach hat. She captures the reader's attention and rides the waves to make a beautiful landing that will leave you smiling and hopeful. It's nice to still have happy endings.

At this point, Harvey is scheduled to be at South Main Book Co., 110 S. Main St., on May 2, 6-8 p.m. Call the store at 704-630-9788 or go to [southmainbookcompany.com](http://southmainbookcompany.com) to confirm the event is being held. **S**



demanding half of Gray's company. They are sharing custody of their 9-year-old son, Wagner. His time with Gray includes tennis lessons at the club, where Gray meets Andrew, the hunky tennis pro. You can only imagine what happens next. It's pretty steamy, even though Gray is squeamish about a relationship with a much younger man — well, only 7 years younger, but still. Soon-to-be ex, Greg has, pre-

HURLEY  
PARK

*Danëlle Cutting pauses by the Hurley Park entrance and a bed full of spring tulips.*

# A natural fit

*Through her work at Hurley Park, Danëlle Cutting promotes the ‘web of life’*

*BY DEIRDRE PARKER SMITH / PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK WINEKA*

**D**anëlle Cutting, manager for Elizabeth Holmes Hurley Park, grew up on a local farm. Her family raised livestock and sold their field crops at local farmers markets.

“Some of my passion for the outdoors was instilled in me by my family and especially my grandparents,” Cutting says. “I think gardening is just as much a history book as cooking, and many people learned from their ancestors on how best to manage a garden.”

A 2003 West Rowan High graduate, Cutting attended N.C. State University, where she received bachelor’s degrees in agricul-

ture business management and animal science. She also minored in Spanish. At present she is pursuing an MBA from N.C. State with an emphasis in supply chain, technology and entrepreneurship commercialization.

Cutting previously worked as a Cooperative Extension agent specializing in horticulture and local food for Montgomery and Rowan counties. And prior to that, she worked for a produce company, L&M Companies in Raleigh.

Salisbury the Magazine recently caught up with this Rowan Original for a quick Q&A:

**Q. What is the purpose of Hurley Park? Talk a little about what's planted there and why.**

There really isn't a technical purpose other than I would say it is a place to encourage people to get back to nature, enjoy the outdoors, and connect with the environment. We have quite a bit of native and non-native plants. We have some varieties that you can no longer find in the nurseries, and what is a really cool thing we do is that we will propagate some of them for us to continue planting and we will also give away extras at some of our events. We have over 40 dedicated gardens, and some are very specific. For example, we have an ornamental fruit orchard, azalea gardens, a fragrance garden and a daffodil/daylily bed.

**Explain the importance of conservation and heirloom plants and having a passive space, like Hurley Park, as part of a small city.**

I could get on a soap box about this, but it really comes down to everything is a web of life. Everything from the smallest organism to the largest impacts our world. We have so much urbanization and so much of the "cookie cutter" landscape that it is becoming exceedingly difficult for our insects and animals. ... I try to tell people there is a beauty in allowing nature to take its course. Plant lots of things, let the caterpillars eat some of the plants (that's how we get monarchs!). You don't have to spray or weed everything, and you don't have to have a monoculture lawn. Allowing some of this to happen is OK, that's the circle of life and we have to have it or something gets taken away. We have to have some of the good with the bad so that everything is in perfect harmony. Too much one way disrupts everything. We need to protect our watersheds and natural areas so that we can continue to support this web of life.

**What attracted you to Hurley Park?**

It seemed like a natural fit. The posting came to me in an email and it just seemed like it was by fate. I was at a turning point in my career, and I felt like I needed some advancement and a new place to prove my worth. I hope that in the short time I have been at Hurley that people are seeing I am able to contribute.

**Do you have a favorite part of the park?**

There are lots of parts that I enjoy about Hurley, sometimes it depends on the day, time, and season. It seems like there is always something of interest. Many people do not realize how many sections we have in the park, a hidden gem is our woodland areas. There are some really neat plants and fungi that pop up during spring or after a rain that you will miss if you don't check in!

**What do you enjoy doing there the most?**

I would be lying if I didn't somehow include publicizing the park or greeting our regulars. Without providing awareness about the park I feel it gets left behind. Someone always needs to advocate for the park and that is one of our core duties so, naturally, I try to instill that into our park attendees. I also enjoy their conversation and how much they love the park. Some additional things I love the most is planning on the different plantings and trying to include pollinator plants as much as possible.

**What is your favorite plant?**

Another difficult question! I will say that for me it sometimes depends on the season, and I do enjoy plants that are interesting throughout all of the seasons and some that can serve multiple functions. For example, witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) usually has an early blooming flower

that is very unique and its leaves turn a beautiful gold in the fall. Another interesting tidbit is that witch hazel is used for medicinal purposes. Another favorite is nasturtiums. I like this summer annual because you can eat the entire plant, even the flowers. They are a bit spicy like radishes and make some of the most beautiful salads. They are also great in the landscape, but I usually plant most in my vegetable garden. I also love plants that are beautiful and great for pollinators. Some of my all-time favorites are Baptisia (false indigo), Amsonia (Blue Star Amsonia), Echinacea purpurea (purple coneflower), herbs such as parsley and mint (mountain mint) and, of course, *Asclepias tuberosa* (Butterfly weed).

**What is your pet peeve?**

I suppose this depends on the day. But probably the biggest one that I have is individuals not thinking about their actions and how they affect others. Currently, this action is people not throwing their trash in the right place. Hurley Park has over 13 trash cans and somehow we still get trash outside of them and into the creek, pond, and sometimes we even see where people threw their trash right beside the trash cans or in the road. We even have trash cans where people can pull up and throw away their trash, but even that doesn't seem to help. Just recently we had someone dump a large amount of household waste near our wooded area, when if they took it to the landfill it would have maybe cost them \$4. I guess it is laziness? OK, I will get off my soap box.

**What do you do when you're not in Hurley Park?**

When I have time outside of work and school I enjoy nature and spend my time in my own gardens whether it is flowers or growing my own fruits and vegetables. I like preserving the harvest, cooking something different, sharing what I have learned, sharing seeds and stories, traveling, camping and spending time with my friends, family, and pets. **S**

| outdoors |

*From left: John Pendzinski, Matt Staton and Mike Wright at Khumbu Ice Fall, part of Mount Everest base camp. The three Rowan County adventurers spent most of last November on their trek in Nepal.*

*(Photo courtesy of Justyna Delofski Photography)*



# Mountain lions

*Adventurous Rowan County friends trek to Everest base camp*

BY DENNIS DAVIDSON / PHOTOS SUBMITTED



*School kids along the trek to Mount Everest base camp were happy and beautiful.*

**F**or three Rowan County men, trekking the 18,500 miles to Mount Everest base camp last November was all they thought it would be — and more.

Mike Wright, John Pendzinski and Matt Staton made the three-week journey, including the 74 hours of travel it takes to get to Nepal and back, Nov. 5-26.

The three adventurers, never ones to back down from a challenge, decided to take on base camp in November 2017 and booked the trip the following February. The trio trained six days a week for 21 months — Wright and Pendzinski at the East Rowan YMCA, and Staton at Railway Crossfit in Salisbury.

For more “real world” training, all three men also took several hiking trips in Colorado’s Rocky Mountains.

Much of the time, the friends worked out wearing masks, designed to strengthen the diaphragm and get themselves conditioned to breathing under assertion. It also increased their lung capacities. In addition, they wore weighted backpacks to simulate hiking the trail in Nepal.

The trek went smoothly and the men made it there and back, just in time for Thanksgiving. They all agreed that the physical



*Staying hydrated is crucial. (Jon C. Lakey photo)*



*Mike Wright, left, and Matt Staton donated an Appalachian State banner to the world's highest Irish pub, in Namche Bazaar in eastern Nepal. Both Wright and Staton are ASU graduates.*

preparation paid off.

“We had all worked diligently on our conditioning,” said Wright. “John actually said that we may have overworked a little bit. The three of us made it without any respiratory issues and we saw some people who did have some problems.”

Added Staton: “We knew it was going to be cold and we knew it wasn’t going to be like hiking here. That was certainly expected, but we adapted to it super quickly. It was difficult at times and it was easy at times, but we were never miserable.”

According to an outdoors enthusiasts website, it takes two months to summit Mount Everest (29,029 feet), and only about 600 people attempt it each year. Of those, only around 300 are successful. While Everest base camp is a difference of 10,500 feet from summiting, it is still a huge undertaking. And while true adventurers have no fear, most are very respectful of the risks.

“There’s some truth to the dangers and there’s definitely some risks,” Wright said last October, before leaving for the journey. “Altitude sickness is the biggest challenge. That’s what we’re doing

with this training, beating ourselves up and getting our hearts used to it. You can’t acclimatize to the elevation until you’re at the elevation. You can just condition your body to see how it’s going to react to it, from an endurance and strength standpoint.”

Again, thanks to their dedicated training beforehand, the three friends’ bodies withstood the extreme challenge.

Wright, Pendzinki, Staton and Chad Michael, a friend from Boone, joined two friends from Florida, Christa Gibson and Mike Strauss, on the trip. Once there, five more people were added to their hiking group, two from Boston and three from Australia. One of them did not fare as well physically.

“The night we camped, and our tents were in close proximity, a man was overheard telling his wife that “if I don’t make it, I just want you to know that I love you,”” revealed Wright. “He wasn’t joking. He had been sick for a couple of days and trekked on and climbed up the mountain the night before we did base camp, so he was a trouper. The next morning, he was having a hard time breathing and you could just see it in his eyes. He and his wife were helicoptered out.”

...

Just getting to Nepal was an adventure in itself. The trip took 37 hours and there was an 11-hour time difference. The group flew out of Greensboro, connecting in Philadelphia for the long flight to Doha, Qatar. From Doha, another flight moved on to Kathmandu, Nepal. Then a five-hour bus ride ensued, followed by a 45-minute flight in a smaller plane to Lukla, where the climb began.

The last leg of the trip proved to be the most interesting. The Tenzing-Hillary Airport in Lukla is really more of a landing strip. It has the reputation as the “most dangerous airport” in the world. The runway is short and the small planes seem to just drop off into a beautiful, mountainous valley when taking off.

“We were so tired of traveling when we touched down at Lukla, but that air strip is so cool, we just took some time to video planes landing and taking off,” said Wright.



From there, the trekking company they had contracted arranged all of the group's stays along the trail. According to a travel website, the cost of an Everest base camp journey, including travel, ranges between \$2,000 and \$5,000 per person.

"They told us what to bring," said Wright. "It's up to us to bring it. It's all inclusive as far as the food and lodging. The trekking company has been doing this for 20-plus years. The owner has a presence in the region and his Sherpas (an ethnic group of people who live in the mountains of Nepal and central Asia and who serve as guides) work only for him. We'll carry our backpacks and the Sherpa carries our bigger bags or the yak (a long-haired, short-legged ox-like mammal) will. There are four people to one yak

*Mike Wright, left, John Pendzinski, center, and Matt Staton stand in Namche Bazaar in eastern Nepal. All three adventurers reside in Rowan County.*

and then two people to one Sherpa."

"I didn't know what to expect, being in that environment, with people we had never met before," remembers Wright. "Of the 11, seven of us made it up and down and bonded like we'd known each other forever. We had a celebration dinner the night that we got back to Kathmandu we talked about how well we all hit it off. We were halfway around the world and everyone got along just fine."

From Lukla to base camp, the total elevation

change was 26,000 feet, round trip. Their guide had the group going slow at first, easing into the elevation changes. There was a lot of up and down, hiking up as much as 2,000 feet, before retreating, so their bodies could adjust.

Pendzinski said that the oxygen in the air goes from 21 percent from the starting point to 14 percent at base camp, and then goes down to 10 or 9 percent at the summit.

"The Sherpas, the first couple of days, watched us like a hawk, so you had to stay with the group," said Pendzinski. "It was a snail's pace at first. Every morning, they checked your blood oxygen and heart rate and asked you questions. They did it again at night. It was a daily thing. Your blood oxygen goes up and down, depending on how much elevation. When you go up,



*A tent at Mt. Everest base camp.*

your blood oxygen goes down and at night, when your body is adjusting to it, it releases more red blood cells. So in the morning, when they test you, your blood oxygen should be back up.

“They take these precautions because losing people is bad for business,” he said, with a smile. “But, after babying us for a couple of days, they finally started to let us cut loose a little.”

There are little villages from the airport in Lukla until you get about two hours from base camp, according to the group. They all have, for the most part, some type of lodge, some type of restaurant or tea house.

“You’re talking about commercial transport,

personal transport, porters carrying up provisions, including gas tanks, because that’s their main source of energy,” explained Wright.

Added Pendzinski: “That trail is the interstate to those people.”

Along the way to base camp, the trekkers encountered numerous villages of interesting people and things. They even saw small children on their way to school.

One such town was Namche Bazaar, in Solukhumbu District of Province No. 1 of northeastern Nepal. There, they found some of

the comforts of home.

“In Namche Bazaar, we bought internet cards called ‘Everest Link,’” recalled Staton. “It was \$25 for 10 GB. You could text very easily if you were in one of the buildings with a router. As far as Facetime, sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn’t. The only night I didn’t talk to my wife and kids was at base camp. Every village had a router, so we were not cut off completely.”

Wright added that the internet cards were not for streaming or data, “but just to be able to stay in touch. I was prepared to not being able to stay in touch, but it actually worked better than we thought it would.”

Technology does have its limits, however.





Pendzinski had brought along a global satellite tracker so their families could watch them. “I found out quickly that didn’t work,” he laughed.

There were other unexpected luxuries as well.

“We ended up not even needing the snacks that we took because there were stores in every little village,” said Wright. “Pringles, Trix, Snickers ... they were all there. It was \$4.50 for a small stack of Pringles but you were like, ‘God these are good!’ You didn’t care how much there were. And a Snickers bar was the treat at the end of a day.”

There was nightly sleeping accommodations at small lodges along the path to base camp. Each stop also served food.

“The food was very good throughout the journey,” added Wright. “Eggs with the brightest yolks I’ve ever seen. Lots of rice and potatoes and the biggest and most orange carrots I’ve ever seen.”

There was also coffee each morning, even though a second cup cost an extra \$1.50. Staton confessed that he gladly paid for the coffee refill each morning. Tea, ginger and black, was also popular throughout the trek.

Meals were definitely heavy on the vegetables for a good reason:

“They recommended that we didn’t have meat above Namche Bazaar, because everything is carried up, with no refriger-

***Above left:** Mike Wright with Kancha Sherpa, who at 87 years old is the last surviving Sherpa of Sir Edmund Hillary’s expedition in 1953, the first to summit Mount Everest. **Above right:** The runway at Tenzing-Hillary Airport in Lukla, Nepal — known as the world’s most dangerous airport. **Below:** Mike Wright, left, and Matt Staton climbed Kala Patthar, a landmark with the most accessible closeup view of Mt. Everest, to see a stunning sunset. They climbed down at night.*





*From left, Matt Staton, John Pendzinski and Mike Wright, three friends who are mountain climbing enthusiasts. (Jon C. Lakey photo)*

ation,” said Staton. “You don’t want a stomach issue to be the reason you didn’t make it to base camp.”

That almost happened to Pendzinski. He did make it to the destination, but endured a stomach illness there.

“I got sick at base camp and it wasn’t pretty,” said Pendzinski. “Let’s just say that Mike and Matt got extra food for three days. I was afraid to eat. The Sherpas were getting a little worried about me.”

Pendzinski lost 15 pounds during the trip. “John was ‘Skeleton’ when he got back,” chuckled Wright, who lost 12 pounds himself. Somehow, Staton maintained his exact weight.

There were even a couple of bars in Namche, including the “highest” Irish pub in the world. Wright and Staton, both Appalachian State graduates, left an ASU flag there with the proprietor.

Staton thought the best part of the journey was staying in tents at base camp. “There was a night and a morning that we were by ourselves,” he said. “It was just an amazing feeling.”

Wright was touched by the people of the region.

“The culture was amazing,” said Wright. “Just beautiful people who treated us like royalty everywhere we went. They know that trekkers are

*“Who’s to say we have it better? How can anybody say we’re the standard? They may not have the luxuries or conveniences that we have, but they have a whole lot more peace, I believe. And not that those things cause discord, but they seem to be more satisfied as a people.”*

their life support. Tourism is huge for them. I did not see one disenfranchised person. Who’s to say we have it better? How can anybody say we’re the standard? They may not have the luxuries or conveniences that we have, but they have a whole lot more peace, I believe. And not that those things cause discord, but they seem to be more satisfied as a people.”

•••

With base camp checked off, the Rowan adventurers are ready for their next challenge.

They’ve continued their training regimens because Wright, Pendzinski and Staton leave next Jan. 5 for Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa. While Everest is in a range, Kilimanjaro, in northeast Tanzania, is the tallest free-standing

mountain in the world. It’s three degrees south of the equator, but it will still be cold at its elevation — 19,341 feet at the summit.

“We’ll see it for days and know where we’re going, unlike Everest, which was in the middle of a range and we went through other mountains to get there,” said Wright. “It’s the same type of training. It won’t be as challenging from a terrain standpoint, but it will be a much longer hike, if that makes sense, because it’s up and back.”

The travel to begin the Mount Kilimanjaro climb is 12 hours shorter than Nepal — “just” 25 hours. The journey will last 17 days. Ever the adventurers, Wright said they will probably take the offer to add an African safari, following the climb. **S**



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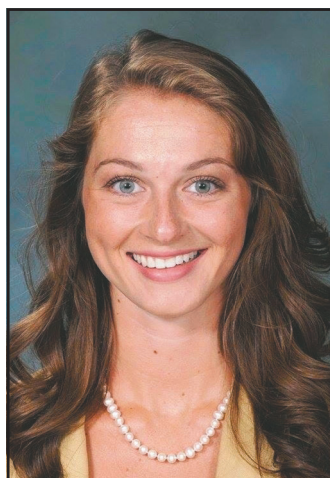
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*From left, Livingstone College golfers who are from Uganda include Edrine Okong, Ronald Otile, Emmanuel Jakisa, Daniel Baguma, Colline Ajidra, Titus Okwong and Joel Basalaine.*

# A link to links

*Livingstone College provides home for seven Ugandan golfers*

BY MARK WINEKA / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JON C. LAKEY



Almost daily, between their shifts at the Livingstone College cafeteria, the golfers from Uganda pile into Titus Okwong's 2002 Toyota Camry and head for the Country Club of Salisbury.

It might take two shuttles, if all seven of the guys are practicing at one time. Only Titus and, more recently, Colline Ajidra have driver licenses in this country, which for most of them is still an unfamiliar, challenging land.

"Seven golf bags can fit in here," Titus claims proudly, opening up the Toyota's trunk.

A senior who plans to graduate in December, Titus serves as point man for the group, and he definitely blazed the trail to Livingstone for the other Ugandan golfers to follow.

"I had a dream of coming to the United States to play golf," says Titus, who first arrived at Livingstone and the United States in the summer of 2016. "I had in mind we all had the same dream, and I had to create a path."

Now he is joined by Colline, Edrine Okong, Ronald Otile, Daniel Baguma, Joel Basalaine and



*Titus Okwong, left, lends a putting tip to Ronald Otile.*



*Titus Okwong watches the flight of his iron shot as Ronald Otile, Emmanuel Jakisa, Joel Basalaine and Colline Ajidra look on.*

Emmanuel Jakisa. Emmanuel, who arrived this past winter and is Titus' brother, was the most recent golfer to join the group.

They come from a country that Winston Churchill once labeled the "The Pearl of Africa" for its beauty. The River Nile originates in Uganda. Much of Lake Victoria lies within its boundaries.

While it's about the size of Oregon, Uganda has a lot more people — 34.5 million. You could say it's known today for tourism, gorillas, motorcycles and bicycles.

Looking around after he first landed in the States, Emmanuel told Livingstone golf coach Andre Springs, "Coach, everybody in America is rich, because I don't see any bicycles here."

Over a short time, the close-knit Ugandans have endeared themselves to their coach, the school and friends they've made in the community. Springs says the young men love and value the

game, hold dear their education and work hard.

"It's been amazing just to have them," Springs says. "It's been a great experience."

Gwin and Matt Barr, whose Salisbury family has somewhat adopted the guys, cherish their friendship.

"You can't find a group with more integrity," Gwin Barr says. "They're honest, hard workers."

"And joyful," Matt Barr says.

"And so grateful for every moment," Gwin adds. "They make me a better person just to be around them."

Somehow through perseverance and per-

sonality, Titus persuaded Springs to give him a chance. From Uganda, a then 21-year-old Titus called Springs out of the blue one day and said he wanted to be part of a championship college golf team and that specifically he wanted to be a Livingstone Blue Bear.

Though he already was older than the typical college freshman, Titus realized the usual path to becoming a professional golfer — his ultimate goal — was to make it as a college golfer first.

"I didn't know who I was talking to," Springs says, recalling his confusion about getting a call from East Africa. He told Titus to call him back

*"You can't find a group with more integrity:  
They're honest, hard workers.  
And joyful. So grateful for every moment."*



*Emmanuel Jakisa hits a practice shot on the range.*



in a month if he were really serious. “If the guy calls back,” Springs told himself, “we’ll go from there.”

Exactly a month later, Titus rang Springs again. “Don’t hang up the phone, don’t hang up the phone,” Titus pleaded. Again, he told Springs he wanted to play for the Blue Bears golf team.

Springs had the obvious questions: Could he play? Were his grades good enough? And again, who was this guy?

Titus provided him some background information and sent him a photograph. Meanwhile, Springs went to Livingstone President Jimmy Jenkins, who said if Titus had the academic qualifications he would offer him a scholarship.

“I said, ‘Yeah, why not give him a shot,’” Springs says.

With the help of the president’s scholarship from Jenkins, the school agreed to pay 80 percent of Titus’ costs. It still left Titus an obligation of \$5,000 a year. Quite a few U.S. colleges or universities offered partial scholarships, but the amounts didn’t come close to making them as affordable for Titus.

“Overall, Livingstone gave me the best deal,” he says.

Springs remembers going to the airport in 2016 to pick up Titus. All he had was the pho-



*This photograph was taken in the Barr home. From left are Titus Okwong, Matt Barr, Colline Ajidra, Joel Basalaine, Edrine Okong and Charlie Barr.*

tograph Titus had sent him by phone, and he honestly wasn't sure Titus would show up.

But there he was. "It was the best thing that ever happened," Springs says.

It took a couple of years for Titus to get squared away on college life, clear academic standards by the NCAA and up his golf game, but the past two seasons he has been an integral member of the Blue Bear team.

At first, Springs says, Titus was shooting in the 80s and high 70s. Now he averages more in the low 70s.

"Titus was all over the place," Springs says, "but he really turned it on with good numbers the last year-and-a-half."

Edrine and Colline also have become team members, while the other Ugandans, as of this writing, continue work on clearing the necessary NCAA and CIAA academic standards and becoming eligible.



*What gives? Joel Basalaine, middle, along with Colline Ajidra, left, and Emmanuel Jakisa share a light moment during a practice round.*



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“Edrine is real solid and real quiet, with the mindset of a Tiger Woods-type,” Springs says. “He’s real aggressive with his swing and game.”

The star in waiting might be Ronald. “They (the other Ugandans) say he’s really going to be something special,” says Springs, who acknowledges that thanks to Titus’ trailblazing, “I can have a good problem pretty soon.”

“I’ve always wanted to have at least 10 players to pick and choose from. I have a pipeline here.”

In a March tournament at the Salisbury Country Club — the Richard Rendleman Invitational — Livingstone competed with Catawba College and six other teams.

Titus (tied for third) and Edrine (tied for sixth) played well individually, and Livingstone came in fourth in the team standings.

The Ugandan golfers, who have majors ranging from business to sports management, are generally older than the average student at Livingstone. Titus is 25; Daniel, Ronald and Colline are all 23; Emmanuel, 21; Joel and Edrine, both 19.

In Uganda, these Livingstone players played on national teams, and though from different regions of the country, they were familiar with each through various competitions.

“That’s the level of experience we had,” Titus says. “We grew up playing against and with each other. ... The level of talent we had was very high.”

The Barrs, who have come to know many of their personal stories, say the men are not from wealthy homes. The common denominator among them was their families’ economic hardships and that they felt compelled to get out and contribute, Gwin Barr says.

“The way they did it as youngsters was caddying,” she adds. “That’s what introduced them to the game.”

Titus has told the Barrs how as a boy he used to peek through barbed wire to watch play on a Ugandan course. It led him to fashioning his first golf club out of a tree branch. For his first ball, he wound rubber bands around a chestnut.

The Ugandan men readily acknowledge it



*Matt and Gwin Barr were hosts for a Christmas dinner that included six of the seven Ugandan golfers who attend Livingstone College. Matt took this photo from the head of the table. At front left is golfer Titus Okwong, and next to him is Tom Dixon of Charlotte, Gwin Barr’s brother-in-law. Gwin heads the right side of the table, and next to her is golfer Daniel Baguma.*



*Ronald Orile, right, pulls on his golf glove as Joel Basalaine looks for a ball in the Livingstone golf bag.*

was a big adjustment coming to Livingstone and this country for the first time.

“A cultural shock,” Titus says, “but it was my dream, and I was very flexible.”

Uganda has an average temperature around 78 degrees. Before he left Uganda, Titus was warned to expect much colder temperatures in the States.

“But it was the summertime — quite the opposite,” Titus says. He arrived in the dead of summer when daily temperatures were 90 to 95 degrees.

Many times with the weather here, Edrine says, there’s no happy medium as it is in Uganda.

“When it’s cold, it seems extra,” he says. “When it’s hot, it seems extra.”

Colline, a sophomore, says Americans have a different way of writing the English language to which he is adjusting. Among each other, the men often speak their native tongue, but their English is quite good.



*Ronald Otile tracks the flight of his ball.*



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*For transportation to and from the course, the Ugandan golfers depend on Okwong's 2002 Toyota Camry.*

Daniel mentions how getting used to rich American foods — such as macaroni and cheese — has been another challenge.

"I'm enjoying it more now," Daniel says. "You know who has the best macaroni and cheese? The Barr family."

The Barrs' son, Charlie, who is a serious high school golfer at Cannon School, first started coming home from the Country Club's course and talking about these "really nice guys from Africa."

"I really think you would like them," Charlie told his parents. "Can we have them over for dinner?"

"We went out and found them on the golf course," Gwin remembers. "It was a little awkward at first."

The Barrs, whose house is along hole No. 2, actually had noticed the men practicing prior to the invitation. Gwin says they just carried themselves differently and seemed gracious, smiling and upbeat. "It was just contagious," she

adds.

Four of the Ugandans came for that first dinner at the Barr house, taking their shoes off at the front door. "We fell in love with them the first night," says Gwin, who is president of the Crosby Scholars board.

These days, the guys call the Barrs "Mama Gwin" and "Daddy Matt." The family had the group over for Christmas dinner and the golfers contributed a traditional Ugandan dish of chicken and rice with all kinds of vegetables and what the Barrs report was "an amazing sauce."

Last Dec. 15, as a Christmas gift for the Ugandans, Matt Barr arranged a chance for six of the guys to play the famed No. 2 course at Pinehurst.

"It was totally unexpected that when we went to check in, the pro said it had been taken care of by the resort," an appreciative Matt Barr says.

Ronald shot a group-best 74 on the demanding course during a raw, windy round.

Not too long ago, Matt also arranged for his

friend Robin Sieger, the author of acclaimed books such as "Silent Mind Golf" and "Silent Mind Putting," to talk with the Ugandans and run them through several drills.

Gwin Barr thinks the Ugandan men at Livingstone represent "a treasure among us."

"Most of them don't go home for four years," she says. "They're all looking for jobs for the summer. I want the community to embrace these guys."

From their work in the school cafeteria, the Ugandan students send half their paychecks back home every month.

To keep receiving the president's scholarship, Titus says, he has to maintain a grade-point average within the 3.8 to 4.0 range. In past summers, he has tutored students in math and science who are trying to improve their own GPAs.

Has Titus given up his dream of playing golf professionally?

"Not yet," he says, climbing back into the Toyota and heading off for a practice. "That's No. 1." **S**



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*Willets uses a step ladder to reach the inside of the Pullman being restored.*

# TRACK STARS

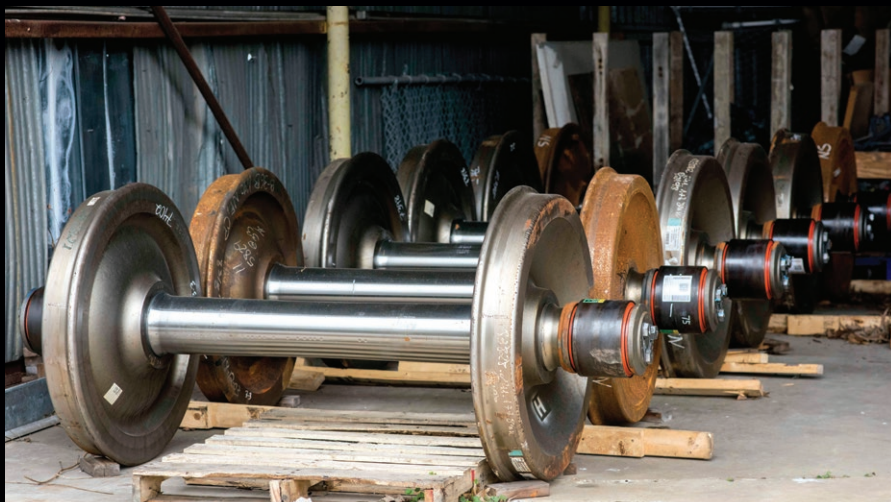
BOB WILLETT'S AND HIS TEAM MAKE  
RESTORING RAILCARS AN ART

by **MARK WINEKA**

photography by **JON C. LAKEY**



*Willetts Railcar Services  
restored The Sunbeam railcar.  
(Photo courtesy of Willetts  
Railcar Services)*





With his white, handlebar mustache, Bob Willetts could pass for an English land baron, an erudite professor or oil tycoon from a different era, but think of him more as a modern-day artist.

And his canvas is railcars.

Willetts figures he has restored close to 50 railcars over the years, and those restorations live in places such as Cincinnati, Chicago, New York City and Miami.

"They go far and wide," Willetts says. "It's like I have my own traveling exhibit."

To understand the specialization and quality of work done by his company, Willetts Railcar Services, realize that no less than movie director Francis Ford Coppola traveled here to look at "The Gritty Palace," one of his recent restorations.

These days, Willetts and his team are working on a 1926 Pullman railcar, which represents the most comprehensive reconstruction and restoration they've ever done. They are close to 20 months into a two-year restoration, which will rebuild the once abandoned car to modern standards so it can serve as a track research, or track geometry car.

The car will someday be inspecting tracks for a major rail company. Through magnetic testing, it will be ping-ponging the rails,

looking for metal erosion, flaws and cracks that help direct repair crews to potential trouble spots.

"It's going to be filled with computers," Willetts says of this car's future. "... When we rebuild it, it will be good for another 40 years."

Willetts identifies his customer simply as a "Class 1 Railroad," the description his client prefers.

"They like what we do," Willetts adds. "They threw me a bone."

Before the 85-foot-long Pullman car arrived on Willetts' site, it had been sitting in the woods somewhere in Maine for 15 years. The inside had been extensively damaged by fire and neglect, but the rail company still preferred the running gear underneath the old Pullman.

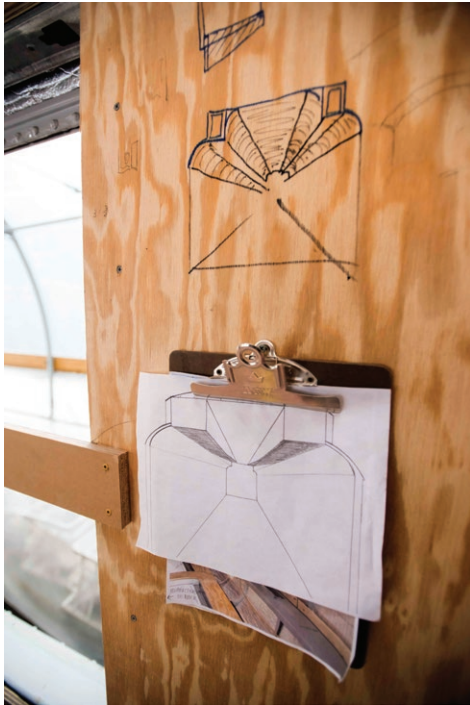
"If you like jigsaw puzzles, these are a hoot," Willetts says. "We have to know a little bit about everything."

Willetts employs close to 10 men and women. He thinks he





**Top:** Bob Willetts owns Willetts Railcar Services, a company that restores railcars. He operates out of East Spencer just north of the N.C. Transportation Museum. Some of his finished projects are in use at the museum. **Above:** A look at some of the restored cars parked on the track Willetts leases from the N.C. Transportation Museum.



has assembled a phenomenal ensemble and says “it’s very much a team effort.”

When he moved to Spencer six years ago, Willetts established an office at his home and rented space at the N.C. Transportation Museum, where he still leases track. Some of his more recent restoration projects are parked there, including The Gritty Palace, the Martin Clement and Southern’s 1081 passenger car, built in 1922.

“It’s amazing what it looks like now,” Willetts says, thinking back to the shape the 1081 was in when he started.

About two-and-a-half years ago, Willetts moved his restoration operation to an East Spencer spot tucked just off the main north-south rail line and not far from the Burdette Bridge. It’s at the back of property Willetts leases from Archie Jarrell.

For this site, Willetts added a switch and extra track to help maneuver the cars to be restored.

On the Pullman car project, Willetts Railcar Services has rebuilt the box. All the steel and infrastructure have been replaced. The exterior steel was bolted and screwed, but the bolts were made to look like the original rivets.

The crew has worked on adding air brakes, rebuilding wheels and improving the suspension. The project involves fitting in work areas, an electrical room, kitchen, restroom, theater-style seating, water tanks and heating and air-condi-

***Left:** Using his art education background, Willetts sometimes draws out what needs to be done. Here, he has illustrated for his crew how ductwork on the car might work along the ceiling. **Right:** A conference table inside the restored Gritty Palace railcar.*

tioning ducts.

At least a ton of reinforced steel has had to go into the back end, which looks onto the track. To afford the crew a better view, necessary for this car’s work, the collision posts had to be removed.

Willetts says the car’s interior will be finished in cherry wood — a job that usually falls to him.

This particular day’s project is to install a new coupling in the back. David Broadway also is inside the car, poring over electrical plans.

The Pullman car sits in “the greenhouse,” which Willetts built originally as a paint shop, but it’s also perfect for colder days. “When the sun comes out,” Willetts says, “it’s free heat. ... But it’s really just a giant paint booth.”

Otherwise, his crew likes to work on projects under an open-air, high-ceilinged bay whose track affords for railcars to be pulled right in.

Willetts comes by the description as an artist honestly. He has a master’s degree in art education from the University of South Carolina. Long ago, he drew renderings for architects.

And for eight years, he was a public school art teacher in North and South Carolina.

Even today, Willetts might explain the answer to a problem by drawing on an unfinished wall of the railcar.

At his home office, Willetts spends a lot of the morning on the computer or consulting with Sara Gettys, the vice president and chief financial officer. “She’s the one who tells me, ‘You can’t do that,’” he says.

In the afternoon, he usually visits the work site and gets up to speed with a crew that includes Nikki Watts, Manning Suttle, K.C. Waggoner, Walt Wyman, Stephen Smith, grandson Grady Tate and the husband-wife paint-and-body team of Shane and Kelly Harris.

“This is the land of odd jobs,” says Watts, lauded by Willetts as a talented steel cutter and welder. He adds that Suttle’s mechanical aptitude is phenomenal, and he thinks the Harris- es are the best in the business with their finish work.

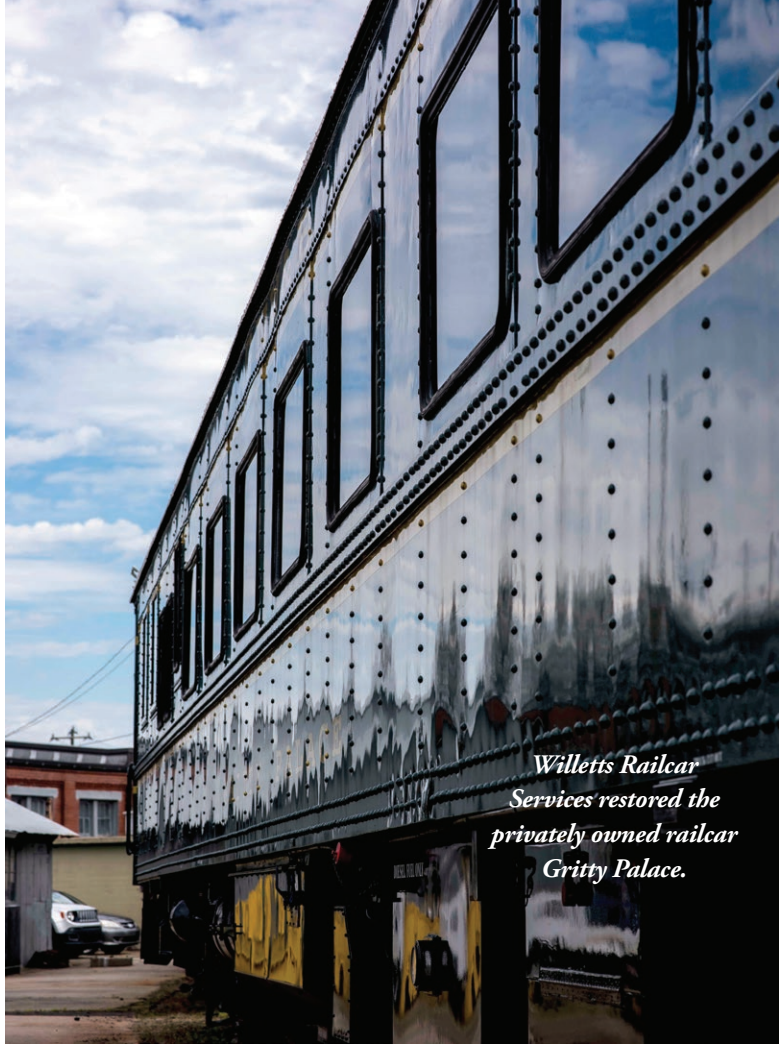
Willetts himself has the knowledge, experience and connections to be able to scavenge the country for components he might need in restorations. The work site is filled with all manner of things such as springs, bearings, wheels, bushings and brake cylinders.

Everything of value goes into big cargo containers for storage purposes.

*Story continues on page 38.*



**Top:** These 'trucks' will soon be part of the Pullman car's new undercarriage. **Above:** As Manning Suttle waits to the left, Grady Tate and Nikki Watts confer in a cargo container used for storage. **Left:** This red caboose was restored by Bob Willett's company.



*Willetts Railcar Services restored the privately owned railcar Gritty Palace.*



*Above: Manning Suttle, left, and Stephen Smith load some new springs into a cargo container for storage.*



*This is how the The Sunbeam railcar looked before restoration. (Photo courtesy of Willetts Railcar Services)*



*Dave Broadway and K.C. Waggoner assess some electrical needs during a restoration.*



*The Greenhouse serves as a paint and body shop, but it's also where Willetts' crew likes to work on restorations during the colder months.*



*New bolts show the blend of old and new.*



*The green Southern 1081 passenger car that is part of the rail experience at the N.C. Transportation Museum is one of the cars that Bob Willetts' company has restored.*



*Above: Willetts takes a look under the car being restored. Right: The monogrammed towels in The Gritty Palace's spacious bathroom.*



Willetts' business relies, of course, on a culture of rail buffs and private car owners.

For example, Coppola was looking for vintage cars to go with a small railroad he wants for his Napa Valley winery in California. Built originally for the president of the Rock Island Railroad, The Gritty Palace is owned by a two-man partnership now looking to sell the railcar.

They turned to Willetts' company for a complete makeover before putting it on the market.

Willetts and his crew restored the inside, spruced up the outside and worked on the running gear, which had serious problems. When Willetts went to retrieve the car from one of the owners in St. Paul, Minn., he had to load it with 11,000 pounds of sandbags to make the suspension track-worthy.

Back here, the Harrises did a superb paint job, and thanks to Willetts, "the inside is to die for." It features mahogany throughout with dec-

orative gold inlay.

The Gritty Palace owners call their business partnership Going Nowhere & Back.

"When I get paid, their check says 'GN-W&B,'" Willetts notes with a smile.

While Willetts Railcar Services builds and re-constructs customized railcars for private owners, it also lent its expertise to some of the restoration behind the famous Norfolk & Western Class-J 611 steam engine.

In fact, Willetts was a passenger in its 16-car nostalgic, homecoming trek from Spencer to Roanoke in May 2015.

To put it simply, Willetts has always been — and still is — fascinated with trains. As a youngster, he divided his time between winters in South Carolina and summers in Pennsylvania. He became a railroad enthusiast from the first time he can remember watching the trains of the Reading Railroad.

Willetts began working on railcar restorations as a hobby in 1973. By 1988, he left teaching and went into rebuilding railcars full-time.

His work and travels have taken him to jobs and shops in Lancaster, S.C., Charlotte and Midland. He doesn't think about retiring, and he always has been known as a troubleshooter, sought out by other restorationists for his advice.

A restoration Willetts might be most proud of is The Sunbeam, built in 1888 as a Pullman Palace car and used as a sleeper on the Southern Pacific Railroad. The restoration was a four-year project.

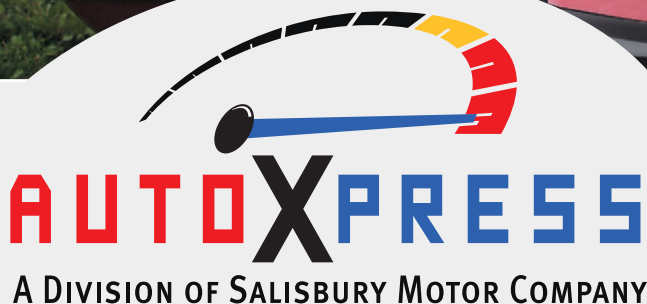
"It is my high-water mark," Willetts says.

In 1903, The Sunbeam was remodeled and made into a private charter car at the Pullman Shops. Later, it became a fishing shack on the banks of the Savannah River for 47 years, before it was discovered by staff members of Hildene, the summer home of Robert Todd Lincoln in



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Manchester Center, Vermont.

Lincoln was the eldest son of President Abraham Lincoln. Robert became president of the Pullman Co. and built it into the wealthiest corporation of its day. According to Willetts, cars such as The Sunbeam would carry Robert Lincoln from Pullman headquarters in Chicago to Hildene in Vermont, where the Willetts-restored car resides today.

“It helps illustrate part of the story of his wealth,” Willetts adds. “Our mandate was to restore the car to its 1903 remodeled appearance. ... It’s now a major attraction at Hildene.”

Again, the project just allowed for the artist to come out in Willetts, and he loves sharing that enthusiasm and what he knows with his current team, as would any erudite professor.

“It’s fun, and I’m trying to teach these guys what it’s all about,” Willetts says. “Even though I’m 67, I still feel immortal.” **S**



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# INDUSTRIAL-SIZED HEART

'SMITH COOKIE FACTORY' PRODUCES THOUSANDS OF OATMEAL DELIGHTS FOR GOOD CAUSES

by ELIZABETH COOK | photography by JON C. LAKEY





*John Smith is all smiles. The annual Smith Cookie Factory set up shop for a week at Shoaf's Wagon Wheel to produce over 11,500 cookies for a fundraiser. The proceeds went to Team Hank and the HEARTest Yard.*



**T**he aroma of John Smith's oatmeal cookies carries the sweet smell of friendship.

The scent wafts through the air at Shoaf's Wagon Wheel for two days in March as Smith, his family and friends bake, ice and assemble 11,500 cream-filled oatmeal cookies.

The cookies are raising money this year for a charity to help children born with heart conditions. In the past, John's cookies have also fueled scholarships in the memory of a close friend.

"I don't want to make a few cookies and give them away," John says. "I'd rather do something constructive."



But giving away was exactly what John had in mind some 25 years ago when he and his wife decided to bake cookies for friends at Christmas. They adapted an oatmeal cookie recipe from West Rowan High School.

Think of rich, smooth filling sandwiched between two thin oatmeal cookies.

The cookies were so well received that they became a family tradition. As the list of recipients grew year by year, sons Jeff and Tim joined in, and later Tim's sons did, too. It became a three-generation operation.

Twenty-three-year-old Chandler Smith, one of Tim's triplets, says he's been helping ever since he was big enough. The taste of the cookies spurs him on.

"I look forward to this day," Chandler says. "It's been building up a couple of weeks — until I get that first cookie in my mouth."

*Tim Smith picks up a tray of uncooked dough to move it to the next station, the ovens.*

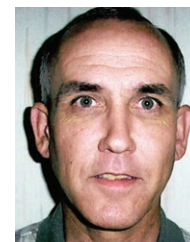
• • •

An ice storm one December forced the Smiths to postpone baking until February. The date worked out so well that they decided to stick with it. The cookies became after-Christmas presents, and each year the family made thousands.

Then came another storm of sorts. Mike McDuffie, who worked with John at Desco electrical wholesale, got sick with cancer. Mike was one of those people for whom "outgoing" falls short.

"He was a special man ... caring, loving, quirky," Kathy McDuffie Sanborn posted online

in January. It was the 12th anniversary of Mike's "going home," as she put it. He was 49.



**Mike McDuffie**

Before he died, Mike said he didn't want people to send flowers for him, according to Kathy. Instead, he dreamed of a scholarship to help young people who overcame adversity by showing the same "never give up" determination

that the late Jim Valvano, N.C. State basketball coach, used as he fought cancer in the 1990s — the same attitude Mike lived out.

Memorial donations received after Mike's death funded the scholarships at first — \$300 to a graduating senior at each of the county's six traditional public high schools.

Then John got an idea. What if his family

stepped up cookie production every other year and sold them to raise money for Mike's scholarships? Kathy liked the idea. So started the Smith family's first cookie fundraiser. Thanks to the fundraiser, the McDuffie fund gives \$500 scholarships now.

Mike would give that a loud "Amen!"

Dan Brown, one of this year's cookie volunteers, remembers working with Mike.

"McDuffie was full of life," Brown says. "He was one of the good guys."

Curt Smith, in his 10th year of helping with the cookie bake, says he and Mike were best buddies.

"He was a hoot, wasn't he?" Smith says.

• • •

John retired from Desco at the end of 2017, and recently he got another cookie idea, inspired by one of Mike's grandsons, Hank Chavis.

Hank was born almost six years ago with a heart condition, tetralogy of fallot with pulmonary atresia, that includes five heart defects. Through the miracles of modern medicine (and much prayer) he has grown and thrived.

To show their gratitude and help others, Hank's family raises funds for the HEARTest Yard, an initiative started by former Carolina Panthers player Greg Olsen and his wife Kara. Their son, T.J., was also born with a serious heart condition. The Olsens and Atrium Health Foundation set up The HEARTest Yard to help families of infants with heart conditions make the transition from hospital to home.

Over five years, Team Hank has been one of the leading fundraisers in the HEARTest Yard Showmars 5K, raising almost \$50,000, Kathy says. This year's race is tentatively set for June 17 in Charlotte.

Hank, the son of Brittany McDuffie Chavis and Jared Chavis, has undergone three surgeries. Kathy says Hank's oxygen saturation level used to stay between 60 and 70 percent, well below the normal range. Since the last operation, his

*From left, Linda Harrington, Jan Corriher Smith and Barbara Corriher fill the cookies with the sweet filling.*



oxygen level and circulation are much better.

When John reads on Facebook that Hank's fingernails are pink for the first time, it inspires him. He asks Kathy if she'd like the Smiths to hold a cookie fundraiser for Hank's HEARTest Yard 5K Team. She accepts the offer. It leaves her a little speechless.

"To have this family, three generations, be

willing to give up many hours, even taking time off from work, to support these fundraisers, is beyond words," she says. "Each is so gracious and willing to work so hard for these groups."

After expenses, this year's cookies will raise about \$10,000 for Team Hank, she says.

John loves to help people and loves to cook, and this project brings it all together, Kathy says.



## JOHN SMITH'S OATMEAL COOKIES

Makes 45 servings

### Filling:

- 5 tablespoons flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup milk
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup margarine
- 2 teaspoons vanilla

• Mix milk and flour together in blender, then cook until thick. (It will look and feel like mashed potatoes.) Let cool in refrigerator overnight. This is your paste.

• Cream margarine, sugar and salt in a small bowl; add vanilla. Beat until fluffy. Then add the paste mixture a little at a time and beat until smooth. I suggest doubling this recipe. It usually takes a little more than a batch of filling to ice one batch of cookies.

### Cookies:

Servings: 45

Preparation time: 2 hours

- 2 cups margarine
- 2 cups brown sugar
- 2 cups sugar
- 4 eggs
- 3 cups flour
- 2 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons baking soda
- 2 teaspoons vanilla
- 6 cups quick-cooking oatmeal

• Cream together margarine, brown sugar and white sugar until fluffy.

• Add 4 eggs, one at a time.

• Add the flour, salt, baking soda and vanilla to the creamed mixture.

• Stir in oatmeal.

• Make into balls about the size of an English walnut and flatten slightly.

• Bake at 350 degrees for 10-15 minutes.

• Let cookies cool before applying filling to one cookie and topping with another.



Jeff Smith uses a new addition to the cookie factory, a Kook-E-King cookie depositor.

“He is such a caring and giving person. He has set a wonderful example for his sons and now his grandsons.”

Amen to that, too.



So starts the biggest bake the “Smith Cookie Factory” — it’s right on their T-shirts — has ever undertaken.

The Smiths have cookie baking down to a science. John consults a spreadsheet that adjusts ingredients according to cookie count. They deal with mass quantities, such as 10-pound boxes of oatmeal and 7-pound bags of brown sugar.

“We were turning heads at Sam’s,” John says. “Who buys 38 boxes of oatmeal?”

The first step is to create a paste of milk and flour to thicken the cookie filling.

The next day, Monday of bake week, John, Kathy and a crew of volunteers assemble at Shoaf’s Wagon Wheel off U.S. 601 to make the filling. Huge, professional-grade mixers stand on the floor.

The apron-clad workers load the mixing bowls with thickener, slabs of margarine and bags of sugar, as well as salt and vanilla. (Real butter doesn’t work as well, John





*Cookies cool on tables running the width of the Wagon Wheel floor as, behind them, volunteers ice and wrap earlier batches.*

says.) The machines churn up the filling.

Wednesday is devoted to measuring out the mountains of dry ingredients for 50 super batches of cookies — sugar, flour, salt, baking soda and oatmeal — and packing them into boxes.

The final steps will take place over two days: 13 hours of assembly-line baking split between Friday and Saturday.

It's Friday. At one end of the big dance hall, John heads up dough production, combining margarine, eggs, vanilla and dry ingredients in the big mixers.

Son Jeff, director of real estate at Food Lion, leads the next phase, feeding the dough into a machine that John says has revolutionized the process. The refurbished Kook-E-King cookie depositor measures out the dough, four cookies at a time, and plops it directly onto parchment-lined cookie sheets.

Jeff used to dip out thousands of cookies by hand. He says the machine is a godsend.

“Even with four people dipping ... your thumb would just wear

*Karen Poteat adds the eggs to the mixer with the other ingredients.*





*Friends and volunteers apply the filling.*

out,” he says.

Jeff’s brother, Tim, who’s in industrial sales for Square D Schneider Electric, is in charge of baking. Sons Cameron and Colby help rotate big pans in and out of Hobart convection ovens — eight minutes of baking at 325 degrees.

It’s a hot job — “tiring but fun,” Colby says.

Cameron fans his face with oven mitts. “I like that we always do something for good,” he says.

The cookies spend a few minutes on cooling racks and then head for cooling tables stretched down the center of the room. Volunteers take over here, running spatulas beneath the cookies and letting them cool more before they go to the icing tables.

A cookie falls from a tray Kathy is carrying. “That one’s for me,” she calls out.



Just how much filling goes into each cookie de-



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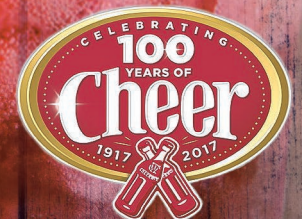


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depends on the volunteer.

"I call John the icing patrol," says Tim's wife, Jan Corriher Smith. She likes to spread it on thick. "People like icing," she says, but she tries to use some restraint. The crew ran out of icing one year, she says.

Her mother, Barbara Corriher, applies icing nearby, as she has for several years. She started right after Jan's father died. The family buried him on a Friday, and the next day Jan and her mom were spreading icing.

"It's an outlet for both of us," Jan says.

"I iced a few and it got into my system," Barbara says.

According to Tim, the icing holds the delicate cookie layers together. "You have to let the icing get into them or they'll actually fall apart," he says, "if we did them right."

At other tables, volunteers wrap the finished cookies in foil, four to a package. They're presold, \$5 per pack.

All told, 57 volunteers help with the cookie bake. They include Steve Wilson, a coworker of Jeff's who drove



*Curt Smith carries a tray of finished cookies.*




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**Left:** Hank, the son of Brittany McDuffie Chavis and Jared Chavis, has undergone three heart surgeries. **Right:** Jason Barber is all smiles as he picks up 20 packs of cookies. Half of the cookies will go to Boone to Appalachian State where his daughter Paige is in school.

from Kernersville to help on a day off.

There are some first-timers on duty. “They told us to make it like you would eat it,” says Lisa Culligan.

And many returning helpers.

“Nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine to go,” quips Harold Watson, as he sets down an iced cookie.

Wagon Wheel owner Jim Shoaf lends a hand, as well as his building. “I’m flexible,” Shoaf says as he ices a cookie. John calls Shoaf a godsend, too; the Wagon Wheel provides roomy shelter for this cookie flash mob.

After the last cookie is wrapped on Saturday, the Smiths load John’s kitchen equipment into a 16-foot trailer, where it will stay until the next big bake. For now, 11,500 cookies have set a Smith family record.

“This is the most we will ever do,” John says. “We’ve reached our limit.”

Would he like to go into cookie production fulltime?

“No, no, no,” he says. “This is fun. Anything other than that, it’s a job.” **S**

*Elizabeth G. Cook is former editor of the Salisbury Post.*





*The Smith family poses with Kathy McDuffie Sanborn, holding grandson Hank, and Jared and Brittny Chavis, holding daughter Campbell.*



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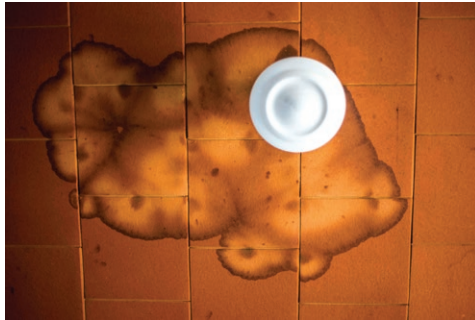


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# DISTINCTIVE ADDRESS



GHOSTS OF COLORFUL RESIDENTS, PATRONS STILL  
ROAM HALLS OF VENERABLE EMPIRE HOTEL

by LIZ MOOMEY photography by JON C. LAKEY

**Editor's note:** *As reflected in many of the images, photographer Jon C. Lakey was given wide access to the Empire Hotel, and Salisbury the Magazine extends its appreciation to developer Britt Weaver for that opportunity.*



*Developer Britt Weaver shines his light into one of the old hotel's many nooks and crannies.*

In its glory days, the Empire Hotel was the destination.

Hotel guests — some of them famous — mixed with permanent residents whose stories live on, though the Empire closed in October 1963, almost 57 years ago.





*Lord Salisbury, left, called the Empire home. Elsewhere, around every corner, one can still see traces of the hotel's former majesty.*

Britt Weaver, the developer of Empire Hotel Holdings, aims to redevelop the property on the 200 block of South Main Street in Salisbury into an apartment complex.

The long dormant hotel once bustled with people, such as a rough-looking newcomer who supposedly took out his glass eye to keep an eye on his money because there was no safe. He was noted in the Salisbury Evening Post's 1959 story titled, "The Empire is 100 years old: Stories of hotel weave a pattern of joyful past."

Pete Murphy, a North Carolina Speaker of the House, was a resident. Robert E. Lee and Charlie Chaplin stayed at the hotel.

But the tenants who were longtime boarders made the Empire Hotel special.

"History lives inside of a building as well as outside," Ed Clement said. "The insides of a building are really as important as the outside. That's where the stories are."

The memory of George Poole, who was known as Lord Salisbury, lives on.

His obituary from the April 27, 1951, Salisbury Evening Post describes Lord Salisbury as "the man who devoted his life to making others

smile." In 1949, he said he wanted to lie in state two days and go to his grave dressed in the sartorial splendor to which he was accustomed, backing his claim to be "The Loudest Dressed Critter in Christendom."

Gary Thornburg brought back Lord Salisbury in the mid 2000s. He paraded around town in a costume cobbled together from Catawba College and Piedmont Players costume shops and a top hat from Murphy that his great-grand-





EMPIRE HOTEL IN 1912  
W.A. Fox at the Cigar Counter  
(Can't identify the desk clerk.)

daughter had in her possession. Thornburg would give Downtown Dollars to kids as part of promotions.

“He was just an outrageous kind of guy and dressed oddly,” Thornburg said.

As a child, Clement remembers Lord Salisbury. He and his friends would ride their bicycles all around town and stop outside the Empire Hotel.

“He was quite an interesting person,” Clement said. “He would talk to the kids and we would say something about the money that was in the pot.”

Thornburg was given what looked like a demitasse from an older man who told him that Lord Salisbury would show a dollar coin in the pot to the kids. The coin was glued in there so no kid could get it.

Thornburg’s favorite story of Lord Salisbury though was at a baseball game between the Statesville Owls and the Salisbury Pirates in the mid 1940s.

“Everyone just stopped — players, coaches, fans — and stood in awe,” Thornburg said. “He



was a spectacle. He was just quite a character.”

Tar Heel History, by Robert L. Williams, described the scene when Lord Salisbury arrived to the game in the eighth inning:

“Meanwhile, on the field, the game had come to a complete standstill. No one moved as all the

*Story continues on page 58.*



*The porcelain remnants of a hotel room's bathroom.*



*Windows afford ample light.*



*A forgotten skylight.*



*An on-off switch.*



*A hallway view into a room.*



*Part of the ballroom.*



*Former hotel space which could be apartments in the future.*

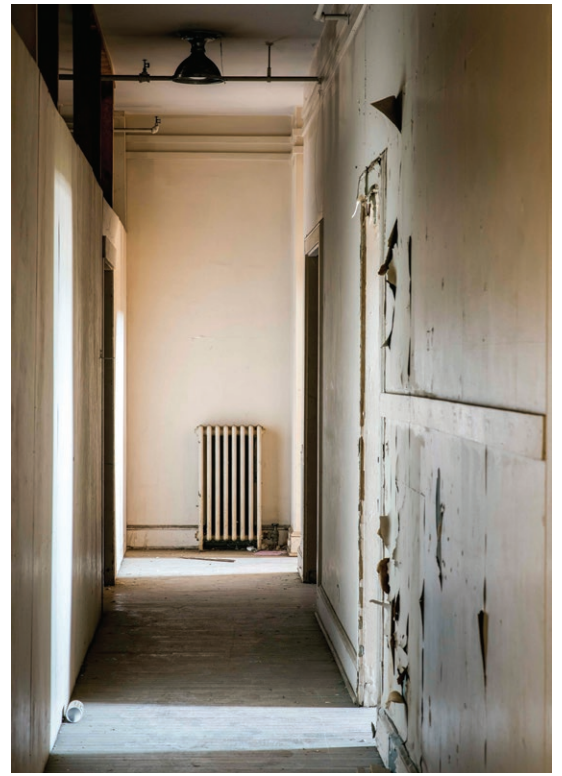


*Left: The inside of a wall revealed. Above: Stairs to the next floor.  
Right: Many of the steam radiators remain.*





*Looking out onto South Main Street.*



*A view down a typical hallway.*



*A conversation piece left behind.*

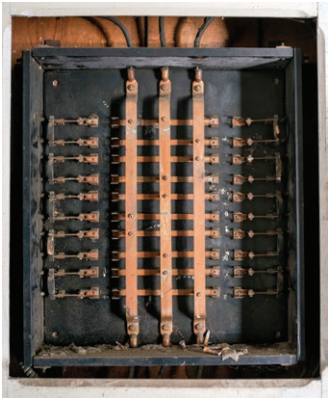


*Left: Through the years, areas of the hotel saw different alterations.*



*Right: Everywhere is the peeling paint and wallpaper of a different era.*



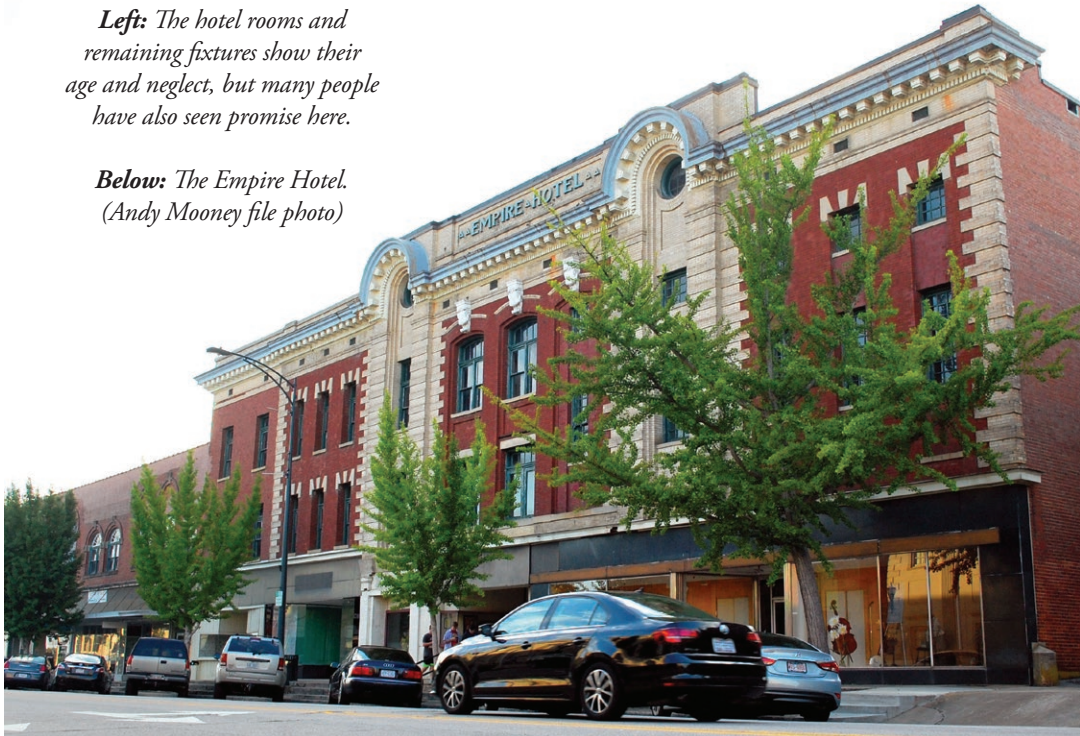


*The old furnace still stands ready for action.*



*Left: The hotel rooms and remaining fixtures show their age and neglect, but many people have also seen promise here.*

*Below: The Empire Hotel.  
(Andy Mooney file photo)*





players stared at the spectacle. Lord Salisbury was dressed in every imaginable color. For this particular occasion he wore a green coat, yellow trousers, an orange shirt, polka-dotted necktie, a straw hat and a monocle in his right eye. A foot-long stogie extended from his mouth and on both wrists and ankles were huge time pieces.”

Susan Sides, president of Historic Salisbury Foundation, said she sees Lord Salisbury as a beloved town character.

“He would wear three or four watches up his arm, four or five ties, pants, clothes that didn’t match,” Sides said. “He changed clothes three times a day. He always looked different.”

Frequently when talking about the residents of the Empire Hotel, people raise Lord Salisbury’s name as one of the most interesting characters in Salisbury history.

“He’s just a fun character with a lot of personality,” Sides said. “To keep from depression, he decided to make his life happy. He created his own way of doing that. It was by making others happy. In doing so, he made himself happy.”

Lord Salisbury’s obituary reflected that: “Nothing, he declared, would make him happier than to know that those who came to mourn would smile at him as they had done in life.”

Sides shared a bookmark featuring Lord Salisbury that stated, “The Loudest Dressed Man in the World. I was christened George Grace Poole. I live at the Empire Hotel — Apartment 224, Salisbury, North Carolina.

“... Lord Salisbury has 26 unmatched suits and changes three times a day.”

Randy Hemann served as the Downtown Salisbury Inc. director when the city bought

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the hotel from the Ragsdale family on July 19, 2007.

The late Paul Bernhardt was a downtown merchant and mayor of Salisbury. He often shared stories about Charles B. Tripp. Bernhardt was a circus memorabilia collector, and Tripp was a sideshow performer known as the “Armless Wonder.”

Bernhardt shared a postcard with Hemann from Tripp.

“One time he gave me a postcard that he (Tripp) had written with his feet and it was just as beautiful of script as you could see,” Hemann said. “It was a 8-pica script. He (Tripp) was the most interesting to me of all.”

Sides also enjoys the story of the Empire Hotel resident who appeared not to have a lot of money, but after his death the citizenry discovered he was very wealthy indeed.

The 1951 story reported: “A search of his

room disclosed a treasure trove, the like of which had never been found here before. Bills were hidden in countless hiding places, and the total was many thousands.”

Hemann knew what a key building the Empire Hotel was to downtown Salisbury. He spent a lot of time working with Mary Elizabeth Ragsdale to purchase the building for Downtown Salisbury and the city. It was important to preserve the building because of its unique history.

Hemann recalls seeing the Empire Hotel’s ballroom.

“The first time I went up that ladder and saw the expanse of the ballroom ceiling with the little round windows and everything,” he said. “I really knew that at that point it really was quite a jewel.”

Clement said the ballroom was a community room.



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*Top: Wide-open areas wait for renovation. Above: The developer hopes to transform floors of old hotel rooms into apartments.*

"It seemed like all the major events for a certain period in downtown Salisbury took place in the ballroom," Clement said.

His parents went to dances in the Empire Hotel ballroom.

Weaver said "Are you going to keep the ballroom?" is a frequent question he gets.

In 1910, Clement said, the Pennsylvania governor traveled to Salisbury with generals and others who had served in the Civil War — some who had been incarcerated in the Confederate Prison here. They came to dedicate the Pennsylvania Monument in the Salisbury National Cemetery.

Salisburians did everything they could to welcome the Pennsylvania delegation at the hotel.

"Salisbury really turned out," Clement said. "They were very determined to show these visitors Salisbury hospitality."

The Empire Hotel opened on May 17, 1859, as the Boyden House. It was named after prominent townsman L. L. Boyden. Boyden House was advertised thusly: "This superb house has just been open for the accommodation of the

public. The building is new and elegant, and the rooms are well finished and furnished in superior style. The parlors are sumptuously filled. It was designed as a first class hotel in its construction."

In 1907, architect Frank P. Milburn, who also designed the Salisbury Depot, enlarged the hotel. It was then known as Central Hotel.

Later it was renamed as the Empire Hotel. Through it various owners and decades of neglect, the Empire Hotel sticks around.

Historic Salisbury Foundation Archivist Terri Jones said in the most recent tours of the Empire Hotel, there were still bars of soap at the sinks, "like it was frozen in time."

Clement credits former owner Mary Elizabeth Ragsdale as the hotel's guardian angel for many years.

"She believed in preservation," he said. "She probably saved the building."

Clement said she was upset when the domes were removed to stop the roof from leaking.

Hemann said the city was thrilled when it bought the Empire Hotel. There was a lot of

interest. The city went with Empire Properties in Raleigh to redevelop the site.

The construction plans included 60,000 square feet of hotel use with 75 to 85 rooms, restoration of the 4,200-square-foot grand ballroom, and 25,000 square feet of ground-floor retail.

"Within a week of when we were to close with Empire Properties is when the world fell apart financially," Hemann recalled.

The city — and country — were hit by the 2008 financial crisis.

Weaver said there have been plans for the Empire Hotel many times and they've never seen fruition for many reasons.

"As a community, we want to give all of our encouragement possible to Britt Weaver and hope that this project can move forward and bring that Empire back," Sides said. "It won't look exactly the same, but that was the biggest venture in downtown Salisbury in its time."

Clement said he is hopeful it will be resurrected, someday providing more memories for Salisbury. **S**

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Jeffrey and Rita Lefler



Above: North Rowan High Key Club members Kaleb Burleyson and Chase Shoaf. Below: East Rowan High Key Club members Lauren Whisnant, Madison Brown and Mayra Fabian



Kiwanis Club members on one of the rotating griddles included Janet Haynes, Ann Eidson, Todd Hildebrand and Don Coggins.

## Kiwanis Pancake Festival

Over a Friday night and Saturday morning, the Salisbury Kiwanis Club held its annual Kiwanis Pancake Festival at the J.F. Hurley Family YMCA. The annual event dates back to 1957 and represents the club's major fundraiser for its numerous children charity projects. The Salisbury club also sponsors Key Clubs at Salisbury, East Rowan, North Rowan and Carson high schools.

— Photos by Mark Wineka



Reba Deal Drennan, Paula Deal Hill, Melissa Deal Waller and Jim Deal



North Rowan High Key Club volunteers included Evan Mahaley, Natalie Zanudo and Gretchen Rodriguez.



Above: Colette Miller and Sue Tuluri.  
Below: Sandra Goodman with her dad, Bill Anderson.



Good-sized crowds attended the pancake festival on both Friday night and Saturday morning.



The Poteat family includes, from left, Lee, Wood, Carlos, Hazel, Leslie and Rodney.



Key Club members from Carson High included John Sokolowski, Lindsey Conrad, Brandon Barrera and Kimberly Barrera.



Above left: Ricka Alexander, Katharine Alexander and Pamela Myers. Above: Thomas Vick, Ervin Gaither and Leon Gaither had a chance to reminisce about their football days at Salisbury High School. Left: Gary, Darlene and David Lefler



Bill and Sharon Livengood



Phyllis Clark and Linda McNeely



Rose Corriher, Jim Everett, Ronnie Bailey and Nancy Rominger worked the room all day delivering meals and checking in patrons of the spaghetti dinner.

## Humane Society of Rowan County Spaghetti Dinner

The Humane Society of Rowan County held a spaghetti dinner fundraiser in the Rhyne Building at Stallings Memorial Baptist Church. The long-established Humane Society offers information and help on pet adoptions, spay and neuter clinics, dog obedience classes and more. It is a non-profit volunteer animal welfare organization, not affiliated with Rowan County Animal Control.

— Photos by Mark Wineka



Humane Society President Jane Hartness and husband Mike with Lynn Hartness and Pam Nance.

Mike Hartness, Frank Daniel and Stephanie Doblowsky spent most of their day working in the kitchen, preparing the spaghetti dinners.



Dan and Sue Gajewski with grandson C.J. Higgs



Kendra Fulbright and Lorie Corriher



Pauline Corriher and her well-known husband, 'Wild Bill' Corriher, have been married 63 years.





Above: Paul Maples, right, and Donna Smith prepare more barbecue chicken orders in the kitchen at First Presbyterian Church. Right: J.T. Kluttz, Don Pruitt, Frank Saunders and Anne Ramsay Saunders



## Meals on Wheels Rowan's Barbecue Chicken

Meals on Wheels Rowan sold Port-A-Pit barbecued chicken at its 12th annual BBQ fundraiser in March. Eat-in dinners and drive-through orders were offered at First Presbyterian Church in Salisbury. Three additional drive-through locations were set up at Shiloh United Methodist Church in Granite Quarry, Mount Zion United Church of Christ in China Grove and St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Mount Ulla. This year was the third time for "Eat One, Feed One" tickets.

— Photos by Mark Wineka



Volunteers Paige Overcash and Amy Francis bag up some new orders.



Kevin Pruitt and Anne Little

Above: Part of the volunteer team handling the drive-through business along South Jackson Street were Paige Overcash, Annie Bates and Frank Monk. Right: Pat and Boyd Morgan



Some of the key Meals on Wheels volunteers and staff members include Liz Shifflete, Rose Meeks Jones, Sandy Combs and Missy Brown.

| *salisbury's the place* |



**‘CHASTEEN CASCADE’**

**By James Taylor**

*Oil on canvas*

*Artwork for Salisbury's the Place may be submitted to [mark.wineka@salisburythemagazine.com](mailto:mark.wineka@salisburythemagazine.com)*

*Vertical orientation is preferred.*

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