

# B TWIN COUNTY LIVING

- SOMETHING TO DO/3B
- CHURCH NEWS/4B-5B
- CLASSIFIEDS/6B-7B
- CROSSWORD/3B

RIGHT: MIKE TALLEY, NEPHEW OF N.H. TALLEY, POINTS TO THE CARBON ARC LAMP INSIDE ONE OF THE REX THEATER'S TWO PROJECTORS. THE SPACE BETWEEN THE TWO RODS WOULD CREATE THE LIGHT THAT MADE IT POSSIBLE TO PROJECT THE FILM'S IMAGE ONTO THE SCREEN FOR THEATER PATRONS, BUT IT COULD BE DANGEROUS IF NOT PROPERLY MONITORED. N.H. TRAINED SEVERAL OF HIS YOUNGER FAMILY MEMBERS IN THE DELICATE, COMPLICATED ART OF RUNNING A PROJECTION BOOTH.



LEFT: GREG TALLEY, MIKE'S YOUNGER BROTHER, PEERS THROUGH THE WINDOW FROM THE REX PROJECTIONIST'S BOOTH. THE TALLEY KIDS GOT IN FOR FREE, WHICH EXPOSED GREG TO ONE OF HIS GREAT LOVES AS A YOUNG MAN—THE FILMS OF ELVIS, WHICH HE ENJOYED SO MUCH HE NAMED A SON PRESLEY. RIGHT: THE FAMILY PATRIARCH, N.H. TALLEY, INSPECTING A REEL OF FILM. N.H. LEARNED HIS TRADE IN MT. AIRY, N.C., AND LATER MOVED TO GALAX.

## THE PROJECTIONISTS

The Talley family started in Mt. Airy, N.C. with N.H. "Nease" Talley, who came to Galax and founded a Twin Counties dynasty of people who lived, worked, played, married and raised families in the local movie theaters.

By SHANNON WATKINS  
Staff

If you lived through a certain part of the 20th century in the Twin Counties, there's a chance that your imagination was partially shaped by the labors of N.H. Talley or one of his relatives.

During that era — which is still within living memory — news came from a paper, a magazine or over the radio. Its images were limited to still photographs and what visions your mind could conjure while listening to an audio-only broadcast.

The pleasures of escape were likewise few in number. Video games were decades in the future. Books existed only on paper; though the pulpy excitement of comic books was gaining ground. There was no internet, and therefore no social media. (Aside, of course, from that eternal, unreliable entertainment source, the grapevine.)

In lieu of the almost endless diversions we find ourselves with today, the community concentrated all its attention onto only a few venues. In particular, the movie theater became a meeting place for those courting, a social hub and a palace of dreams where alluring stories of glamor, adventure and romance played out, over and over.

At the height of their popularity, almost every city or town had a luxurious abundance of theaters to choose from. In the Twin Counties, this was especially the case; the number of options was impressive.

Spanning various time periods from the 1920s to the 1960s, local theaters included the Rex in Galax on Grayson Street (opened 1940

and still standing today), the Penn in Independence (opened 1949), the Colonial in Galax on South Main Street (opened 1928), the Star Drive-In in Galax near Horton's Supermarket (opened 1951), the Midway Drive-in near the Blue Ridge Country Club, Hester's Drive-in in Fries, the Airport Drive-in on Route 89, the Fries Theater, the Hillsville Drive-in, the Hillsville Theater and the Galax Theatre.

Of these, the Galax Amusement Company owned the Rex, the Penn, the Colonial and the Star, and bought the Midway at auction in 1952. (The Midway, along with the Airport, had been owned by Frank Jones.) The story of who owned which theater — some changed hands via their parent companies at various points — is so convoluted it could be a separate story of its own.

The Galax Amusement Company was started in March 1940 by President Rex Sage, Vice President Dr. F. Scott Elliott and Secretary-Treasurer Orrin S. Rhudy; Cecil Curtis managed their theaters.

These theaters received the final reels sent from studios, celluloid fantasies conceived in the minds of Hollywood creatives and shipped vast distances to be born on silver screens before the eyes of the public. However, on the last leg of their journey, films were brought to audiences by another unseen force: the projectionists who literally ran the show.

In the Twin Counties, that often meant a member of the Talley family.

### At the Rex

Mike and Greg Talley are brothers; Diana Talley Roberts is their



ABOVE: MIKE TALLEY DEMONSTRATES REWINDING FILM REELS AFTER USE. THE PIECE OF FILM SHOWN IS A PREVIEW REEL FOR THE 1987 SYLVESTER STALLONE FILM, "OVER THE TOP" THAT THE TALLEYS DISCOVERED IN A JANUARY VISIT TO THE REX'S PROJECTION BOOTH.

RIGHT: FROM LEFT: MIKE TALLEY, N.H. TALLEY'S NEPHEW; DIANA TALLEY ROBINSON, N.H.'S GRANDDAUGHTER; AND GREG TALLEY, ALSO N.H.'S NEPHEW AND MIKE'S YOUNGER BROTHER, UPSTAIRS AT THE REX.

GAZETTE COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHANNON WATKINS; BLACK AND WHITE GAZETTE FILE PHOTOS COURTESY OF GREG TALLEY.



cousin. Mike lives in Clayton, N.C., and Greg and Diana live in the Twin Counties.

Mike and Greg are the nephews of Neasebert "N.H." Talley, the

family patriarch, born in 1906, in Mount Airy, N.C.; Diana is his granddaughter — her father, James, was the son of N.H. and his wife, Ada.

Affectionately known as "Nease" by his relatives and "N.H." by everybody else, he was the first

See PROJECTIONISTS, Page 2B

## Driving me nuts

Last year I wrote a column about my latest plan to change careers. Namely, I explored the option of becoming an official driver for the infamous Oscar Meyer Weinermobile.



TODD JENNINGS

How did it go, you ask? Shut up! THAT'S how it went!

Well, the Planters Nut Company just issued a statement that has once again raised my hopes of driving gargantuan promotional vehicles for money and food.

Like Oscar Meyer, Planters also has a fleet of oversized product-touting conveyances. These are all shaped like peanuts, of course. And they are hiring a crew to drive them across the United States and represent the Planters brand through media appearances, interviews and community visits.

This is my chance, people! My chance to BE somebody! I was, after all, once voted Most Likely To Become A Corporate Shill.

expect them to contain 10 times more peanut puns than should be allowed in polite society.

In order to be considered for one of the Nutmobile jobs, candidates must have a BA or BS degree, preferably in public relations, journalism, communications, advertising or marketing.

Weird. Nowhere did I see requirements like "must have valid driver's license" or "no peanut-related moving violations."

The biggest make-or-break question for this job SHOULD be: "How much experience do you have driving a huge, mechanical legume?" That alone would separate the wheat from the chaff.

Planters is looking for people who are outgoing, creative, enthusiastic and friendly, with a "big appetite for adventure."

You know, when you hire people with those qualities it never turns out well. In my experience, their next big "adventure" generally includes handcuffs and a trip to the

magistrate. Nutmobile drivers are officially known as "Peanutters." Oh, man! Would I love to put THAT under "occupation" on my 2020 tax returns.

The position is described as "self-managed with many responsibilities." Again, that is just asking for trouble.

"Hey! Let's see if I can fit this baby in the curbside pickup space at Chili's!"

I would love to see what else the job entails. I bet it involves eating a LOT of peanut butter.

Ever watch the end of a NASCAR race when they're interviewing the racers? Notice the drinks the racers are holding. If a beverage company is a sponsor, the driver will be bringing the bottle to their lips almost constantly. Their sponsorship contracts require them to keep the bottle visible and in use. I hear they even pay them extra for every time they take a sip on camera.

Boy, it's a good thing I'M not a NASCAR driver — those would be some interminably long interviews. Forget sips between questions, you ever see a man take drinks between syllables? I'd be guzzling all the

way to the bank.

Therefore, any time you're representing Planters you best be downing that tan goop by the spoonful and praying the company reps from Smuckers are nearby.

The want ad also says: "If you're a little 'nutty,' all the better!" Ha... ha.

Hmmm. I got a better one! How about, "I guess I'll be working with some real 'goobers' then?" Hawhaw! Yeah, I always say if ya wanna blow the interview, one-up the HR director!

I am still rather shook up at the televised death of the beloved, monocle-wearing, marketing icon Mr. Peanut.

In a commercial that aired during the Super Bowl on Feb. 2, Mr. Peanut perished at the age of 104 following a... (sigh!) Nutmobile accident.

But, in a later spot, he was reborn as "Baby Nut."

I just thought of something. Does this mean Mr. Peanut didn't die after all, but rather was reincarnated?

Oh, come on. If I don't, who will? Even weirder, Baby Nut was

born with a top hat. So, I'm assuming that must be some sort of physical appendage. If so, that will certainly ensure the poor, little nut has a horrid life.

Except for always being ready for a cocktail dinner, having a congenital, top hat-shaped appendage is surely more trouble than it's worth.

Imagine him entering a courtroom to testify.

"Take off your hat!"

"I can't, Your Honor!"

"Listen, Peanut! You are THIS close to being found in contempt! Now take off your HAT!"

"I CAN'T!!!"

"Oh, yeah? We'll just see about that! Bailiff! Remove his hat!"

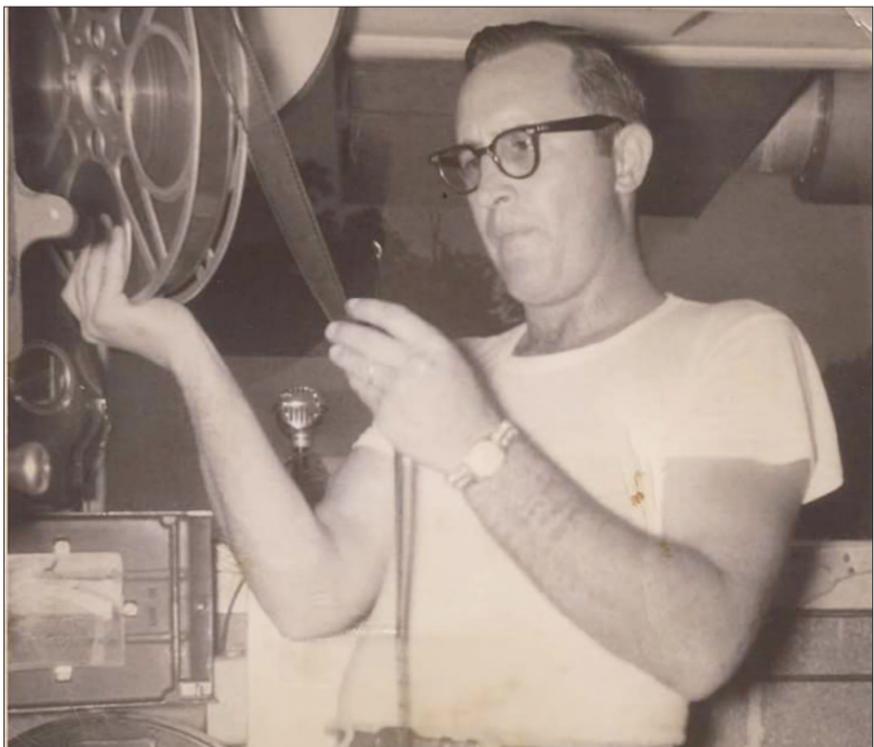
"Hold still, you!!!"

(rip!) "ARRRRRRGH! WHY, GOD, WHY-Y-Y-Y?"

Anyways, wish me luck! I'll let you know how my new endeavor turns out. Pretty sure I'm qualified.

That is, if the "BS" degree I'm known for and the BS degree they require are the same thing.

Todd's weekly column: Now in creamy and extra-crunchy.



# Projectionists

Continued from Page 1B

Talley to work in local movie theaters. They describe him more in terms of his ferocious work ethic than his personality, but Greg says, "He was a joker and a prankster. If he couldn't kid with you, he didn't want to talk to you." Mike says, "If he liked you, he liked you; if he didn't like you, you were out." Diana giggles, "He was a catbird!"

Mike, Greg and Diana are at the Rex Theater in downtown Galax, to take a look at the past. The brothers are in the projection booth up at the balcony; their cousin is perched, ladylike, on a seat just outside.

"N.H. started in Mount Airy in the early 1920s, sweeping up the Victory Theatre," says Greg. "They would let him watch movies for free," for performing this chore.

He eventually noted the popularity of the Broadway Theater, also in Mount Airy, and ended up learning how to run its projector. He did so for "about a year," says Greg, though he left to be a railroad lineman for a while.

He then came back to work the Broadway around 1927. He installed equipment necessary to run the first talkie in Mount Airy, "The Bellamy Trial," a 1929 drama directed by Monta Bell.

Soon after they showed it, the Broadway closed. Its equipment was sold to Claude Hackler in Galax, who was manager of the Colonial on North Main Street (the building's façade still bears a large Old English-style "C," high up). "This was about 1930," says Greg.

N.H. stayed for two years to teach another employee how to run the projector, "but the guy never fully caught on, so N.H. stayed in Galax," Greg says. "He ran the first talkie in Galax, 'Broadway Melody,'" a musical.

During that time, he met and married Ada, his wife, though nobody seems to know the specifics. She was born in 1910 in Mount Airy, N.C., and died in 1975. "I don't have a clue," how they met, says Mike.

"She always worked the concession stand at the Star Drive-In," Greg says. According to Mike, she was Cherokee, and referred to her husband only by his last name. "She'd call, 'Talley, get over here,'" says Mike.

He also says of N.H. himself, "I guess you could call him the godfather of the theater."

"Nease started at the Colonial but never went anywhere else after the Rex opened," says Greg, though he trained some of his family there, who picked up shifts sometimes. "Nease, he's the one that started it all, you know?"

## Upstairs

The projection booth was his second home and the locus of his working life. "This was Nease's kingdom," says Mike. "He was the man. This was it."

"And everything's just like it was," Greg says, eyeing the two projectors.

The booth is coated with

dust and so full of obsolete projection equipment — some broken, some intact — you have to clamber over and around it to get a good look anything, which is also difficult given the dim light.

It's also a no-nonsense workspace. There are exactly two places to sit down, and one of them is a toilet. "They couldn't leave!" Greg says with a laugh. "They had to stay up here and do it all!"

"They had a telephone over here where you could call down and say, 'Have somebody bring a hot dog or something up here,'" he points out.

"OK, I'm out here waiting on my popcorn and stuff," calls Diana with a smile.

"Call Cecil, he'll bring it," jokes Mike.

Diana laughs, "He's been dead a loooooong time!"

The other seat was next to the left projector and let its occupant see the screen.

It's difficult to explain the equipment or its workings without being there in person, and none too easy then, either, if you're not of a technical bent. A projectionist had to make sure the films were synced with the sound, playing at the correct rate, that reels were ready to be switched, the projector's light was bright enough, and spent reels were immediately wound back up for the next show.

The piece of equipment that handled the latter was a simple spool crank attached to a storage chest that held the reels when they first arrived and between shows.

"The movies would come in a metal box, and this is where you would store them," says Greg. "First thing you'd do, you'd take them out and put them on here. They'd come in backwards, you'd have to wind it up, and you'd have to hold your hand over the film the whole time you were winding it to check for any breaks. And if there are any, you have to fix it before you can show it, of course. Once you have it wound up, you put it in these containers. A movie would be anywhere from, I don't know, four, five, even six reels at a time."

Mike examines the inside of one of the projectors. "This one right here's kaput," he says.

"These are probably the only two left standing anywhere," says Greg. "The rest of them probably got destroyed."

He moves over to the projectionist's seat. "Now that thing had slides in it and it would say 'Coming Soon,' and things like that," he says of a storage space next to the chair. "Nease would let me sit in that chair and slide those things in and out; it was like a thrill."

There's a box of what look like wrapped copper rods sitting between the projectors. "What these would do, these would create the light," says Greg. "You had a copper one and a black one, and they would arc, and you'd have a little flame up here," he points to the inside of a projector, "that showed you what the arc was actually doing so

you could get the perfect light, and when that worked, you had this right here," he points at the curved, silvery inside of one end of the projector, "was a reflector for the light. It would push the light all the way through here, and then that would be it to start out with."

He continues, "You had the film in here, you thread it all up, and then you'd be watching the movie. The movie would give you little signals of when you were supposed to change it over from one projector to the other one. And then it would go. It would last anywhere from 30-50 minutes." The usual signal was a dot in the corner of the film's frames that the projectionist knew to look for.

It's alarming to note that if you stared at the light too long it could blind you, and if you didn't watch what you were doing and let the voltage creep too high, you could wind up getting electrocuted — not quite the grande finale anyone was hoping for.

"These are just like a transistor radio," Mike says, pointing to something that looks a little like an electrical switch box on the wall. "This was an amplifier for your sound. It's supposed to be closed." He peers at it. "Those are old tubes. You won't find those anymore. They're a big version of what was in an old transistor radio or TV. And this was the control board for sound."

Memories start springing up for the Talleys. "When I got old enough to start walking around, I went with my dad everywhere he went," says Mike.

His father was Bill Talley, N.H.'s younger brother by about 20 years.

"So he taught me how to run the projectors at the Midway Drive-In," Mike continues.

"I'd forgotten about that!" interjected Diana.

"Yeah," Mike says. "So he'd put me up on a crate and he'd tell me how to do everything; he did that for years. I started doing it by myself when I was 12 or 13 years old. And he would take me to the Star Drive-In, and when he had confidence in me that I knew what I was doing, he'd go sit in the car and let me run the movies. Or he would go home, come pick me up later. And one day I said, 'Look, Pops, I'm doing all the work and you're getting paid, how about sharing that paycheck?' So finally he started paying me."

He continues, "I worked at the Star for a long time, and on occasion I would come out here and work. Nease would teach me the projectors upstairs; they were a little bit different. So he and I would trade off. Sometimes he'd work at the Star and I'd work here."

## Circle of Life

The Talleys worked the Galax Amusement Company's theaters and the theaters, in turn, helped produce more Talleys.

Greg says his mom, Jean — who married Bill, N.H.'s little brother — "was working at the Colonial at the time, it was maybe the late '40s or early '50s. And my



CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP LEFT: ADA TALLEY, N.H.'S WIFE, RUNNING A CONCESSION STAND. NEXT: JAMES TALLEY, N.H. AND ADA'S FATHER, FATHER OF DIANA TALLEY ROBERTS. NEXT: BILL TALLEY, N.H.'S YOUNGER BROTHER AND SON OF MIKE AND GREG. NEXT: A YOUNG MIKE TALLEY RUNNING A PROJECTOR. NEXT: JEAN TALLEY, BILL'S WIFE, IN FRONT OF THE REX.

dad had just got back from World War II, and he learned about the theater in Mount Airy."

He continues, "He moved up here and met my mom at the Colonial. They moved to Independence to the theater there, and they lived above it. Well, Cecil Curtis was the manager of the theaters, and he wanted Daddy to come out here and work at the Rex. He learned how to be a projectionist from his brother, Nease, which is your granddaddy," he addresses Diana, "so that's how he got started in the movie business."

Later on, James, Diana's father, proposed to his wife, Vera, at the Rex. The two were together for over 50 years.

Perhaps because of the romantic effect theaters could have on people, the Talley parents kept an eye on their offspring when the young ones came to enjoy the shows. As employees' children, they got in free.

"You'd bring your boy-friends, and your daddy would come over and come down and tap them on the shoulder," Diana laughs.

She recalls a specific young man who wasn't really a romantic prospect at all, who nonetheless got a firm message from her dad. "I'll never forget that! I mean, he just had his arm around me!"

But her dad "moved me upstairs with him. [That boy] wasn't really my boyfriend. He was just a guy that was here. But it was funny, I'll never forget that. I didn't realize that Daddy was even watching. He just had his arm around me. We were only 10 or 11. My daddy was very protective of me."

Meanwhile, Greg got hooked on Elvis Presley movies in the 1960s, even naming his son Presley.

"I swear I fell in love with Elvis because they would show Elvis double features every night," he says. "That's when I learned to ride a bike, I learned to drive a car, at the Star. Dad would go there and work in the day, and we'd be out there running around having a good old time. We'd sneak people in because we could get in free. We'd sneak them in the trunk and drive through [the gate] and then when we'd get in there, we'd put the back seat down and let them out."

Diana says that, while many were blood relatives, Talleys or not, the employees were a unit. "Everybody was family."

Towards that end, "We would like to thank all the projectionists who have worked at all the theatres through the years, ticket booth and concession stand workers," says Greg. "It took all of them to bring it together. Thanks to all the former managers, especially Cecil Curtis. The Talleys have been at the heart of the theatres since uncle Neasbert started sweeping up in Mount Airy."

Including wives and moms who worked concessions, he says, "At least eight Talley family members have been in the theater business." Among them were N.H. and his wife, Ada; their son, James; N.H.'s brother, Bill and his wife, Jean; their sons, Mike and Greg; and Bob Rudolph, N.H.'s son-in-law, who ran projectors in the Penn and managed the Penn and the Colonial.

## That's All, Folks

Eventually, of course, times changed; generational, economic and technological shifts changed the landscape, brought TVs to most homes. Movies became less of an imperative amidst a broad-

ening world of entertainment choices. The silver screen jungle became an empty lot, and many theaters eventually closed.

Cecil Curtis leased out a couple of the Galax Amusement Company theaters on his own. Then, according to the Talleys, Ronnie Milgrim bought the Rex and Star in 1972. They closed in the 1980s.

The Galax Downtown Association bought the Rex at auction around 1987, and the Rex Theater is now owned by the City of Galax. It mostly hosts live music, but occasionally shows a movie, though not using the original projectors.

As for N.H., "He retired in '72. And then that was it for him," says Greg. N.H. died in 1980.

"It looks so small now," sighs Diana. "It used to look so big to me when I was younger. It was just like going into a church when you were little, it was so huge."

But even small spaces can hold enormous power. Many years ago, according to Greg, one of Cecil Curtis's young grandchildren, Kemper Galyean, was determined to get into the projectionist's booth. The child — who was not being trained to run the machinery — was forbidden entrance, which only made him wild to find out what was going on inside.

Eventually, his persistence paid off: N.H. let him inside for a brief spell to watch. While the complex job of running a booth is ultimately mundane and mechanical, the young boy saw something fantastical happening.

N.H.'s indulgence had a profound effect on him, as he reported to Greg later. "He said 'I was so in awe of watching him run these things,'" says Greg. "I thought he was like a magician."



Mail ballots added to local totals



Biden declared winner; vote count continues in some states

By BRIAN FUNK Staff

Joe Biden's presidential win — though sure to be contested through lawsuits and recounts — is all but assured after winning the electoral vote

and the majority of the popular vote, even as the ballot count continues in a couple of states.

The uncounted mail-in and absentee ballots are not expected to be sufficient to swing the election in favor of President Donald Trump.

In the Twin Counties, election officials have now added a handful of mail-in votes to the totals, though that small number of ballots will result in little to no change in the overall results.

Trump swept in-person voting in all precincts in Galax, Carroll County

and Grayson County; and received the majority of the absentee and mail-in votes in Carroll and Grayson — with one notable and surprising exception.

See ELECTION, Page 2A

Teens die in Carroll car crash

Two Carroll County High School students killed in single-vehicle accident; two others injured

By ETHAN CAMPBELL Staff

The community is mourning the loss of two local teens who were killed in a single-vehicle accident this past weekend in Carroll County.

Both were students at Carroll County High School. Two other teens in the vehicle were injured. According to a report from the Virginia State Police, the crash occurred on Nov. 8 at 1:15 a.m. in the 3100 block of Sylvatus Highway (Route 100).

Virginia State Police Trooper F.R. Farthing, who is investigating the accident, reported that, "a 1980 Chevrolet Silverado was traveling south on Route 100 when it struck a deer. The vehicle then ran off the left side of the road, struck a fence, overturned

See FATALITY, Page 2A



Firefighters responded to a major propane leak at Oldtown Market on Nov. 9. GVFD photo

Area evacuated for propane leak in Galax

Police investigate possibility that gas lines were tampered with

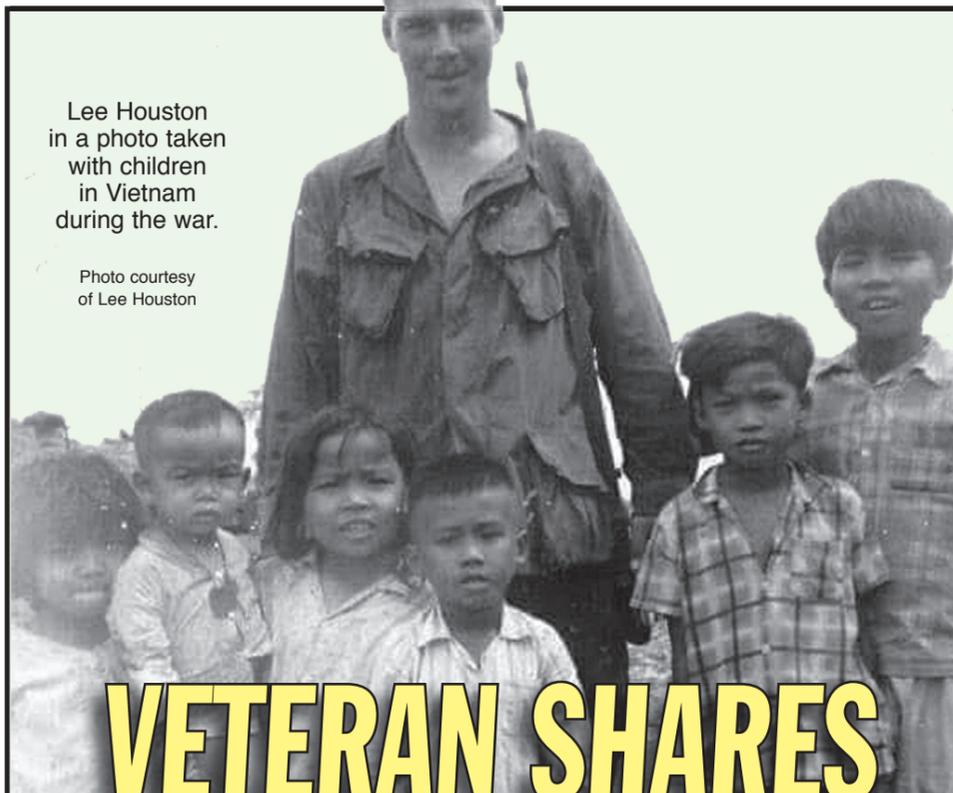
By SHANNON WATKINS Staff

Possible tampering with gas lines caused a propane tank leak at the former Oldtown Market on Monday night around 6 p.m., resulting in an evacuation of the surrounding two blocks.

Capt. Mike Ayers of the Galax Volunteer Fire Department said the leak was one of three incidents requiring the GVFD's response on Monday evening. No injuries were reported in any of the incidents.

According to Ayers, the first occurred at 5:59 p.m. on Cliffview Road, when a family's stove caught fire from food that was cooking.

See PROPANE, Page 2A



Lee Houston in a photo taken with children in Vietnam during the war.

Photo courtesy of Lee Houston

VETERAN SHARES LESSONS LEARNED

In his new book, Vietnam veteran Lee Houston of Galax offers help to those suffering from PTSD

By SHANNON WATKINS Staff

"You can kill or be killed. Being a machine gunner, I killed a lot of people. Some of them very close and some of them a long way off," says Vietnam veteran Lee Houston of Galax.

Visiting The Gazette's office, his delivery is dry and to the point.

He continues, "A machine gun's nine rounds a second. It takes a whole crew to carry the ammunition and operate it. It's a devastating weapon and that's what I carried."

He isn't bragging or apologizing; he's stating facts. And explaining how he came to develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after the war.

"Thirty percent of combat veterans have PTSD," he says. "I know a lot of them never had treatment."

Houston, fortunately, did. He ended up writing a memoir, "An Enlisted Man's Point of View: Lessons Learned," that he self-published through an Amazon service. In it, he recounts memories of battle and its aftermath, and how he came to realize he had PTSD, which is defined by the American Psychiatric Association as "a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event



Houston has been receiving treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) for the past 16 years. His book grew out of his treatment: a way to put the past behind him and impart lessons learned on the battlefield and beyond.

Gazette photo by Shannon Watkins

such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, or rape or who have been threatened with death, sexual violence or serious injury."

He hopes the book will help veterans and civilians alike.

Most of Houston's face is covered by a cloth mask due to COVID-19 precautions, but his gentlemanly drawl is easily heard, his words thoughtfully measured and delivered.

See VETERAN, Page 3A

Carroll poll workers test positive for COVID-19

Voters urged to use precautions; election workers were at Laurel Fork and CCHS voting locations

By ETHAN CAMPBELL Staff

Two poll workers, who served at two precincts in the Nov. 3 election, have tested positive for COVID-19, according to Carroll County Electoral Board Chairwoman Brenda Lindsey.

A fax received from the Director of Elections and General Registrar on Tuesday states that the two precincts affected are Laurel Fork and Carroll County High School. "After contacting county

See COVID-19, Page 2A



FLIPPEN NEWMAN

Police capture fugitive

By ETHAN CAMPBELL Staff

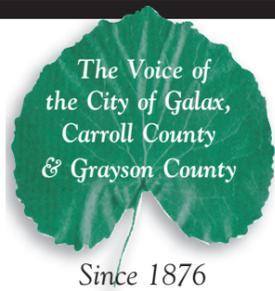
Two from Austinville were arrested last week after leading police on a vehicle pursuit through parts of Carroll County.

K-9 units tracked one man through a residential area after he fled on foot from the vehicle.

Carroll Sheriff Kevin Kemp reported that on Nov. 5, a deputy with the sheriff's office was on patrol near the intersection of Coulson Church Road and Airport Road when a black Lincoln car was observed.

According to the report, police checked the temporary registration and found that it

See FUGITIVE, Page 2A



FOLLOW & CONTACT

- GALAXGAZETTE.COM
NEWS@GALAXGAZETTE.COM
FACEBOOK.COM/GALAXGAZETTE
TWITTER.COM/GALAXNEWS
(276) 236-5178

INSIDE TODAY

Table with 2 columns: Category and Page Number (e.g., CALENDAR...10A, OBITUARIES...7A)



# Houston

Continued from Page 1A

It's a voice you'd trust to give good advice. When he tells a joke a little later, he has the same wise way of dropping the punchline.

## In the Army

Houston served in the 199th Light Infantry Brigade during Operation Fairfax in the Vietnam War. The 199th turned out to be a unit with a 22% casualty rate, which is almost unimaginably high. It also had the distinction of being the first with an African-American commanding officer, Houston says.

As for what that was like, "In the army, everybody's green," he noted. "The first meeting we had - now remember this was back in segregation days - the first thing they said was, 'You're all green.' And I found out that everybody bleeds red. So no, I never thought anything about it. I lived, ate and slept next to people of different cultures and different backgrounds and so forth."

The mental and emotional injuries came from his posting: he was a machine gunner engaged in countering guerilla warfare. As it's a placement with a high mortality rate, his recruiter tried to convince him to take something less risky, but Houston says he wanted to go out into a dangerous combat area.

"I'm the kind of person, anything I do, I do the best I can," he says. "I felt like that if I was going to be in combat, I wanted to be the best at killing as I could be. I look back on that, it was a little crazy. Because I'm about as pacifist an individual as I could possibly be nowadays."

Not all of his memories are bad: he shows the only picture of that time, of himself and a gaggle of local kids in Vietnam. It's the one on the cover of his book.

"When I was in the army, you'd have never known it," he says. "I got back and went right back to college."

About the photo, he explains: "So that was the kids that hung around us. One of them got killed, sometime in there."

"We took care of them," he says of the children. "We got issued what we called a 'goodie box,' and the goodie box would be candy, cigarettes, chewing tobacco, letter paper and envelopes - things we normally would have bought at the PX. And so every two weeks I got three bars of soap, and I gave it to mothers, because that was a luxury over there, so they could wash their children in something other than nasty rice-paddy water or river water."

Houston pauses and adds, "So the children were rather one of the fond memories."

As for those he served with, "I'm in contact with some of my old friends, which came about because of the book. For years I didn't want to talk to anybody. If you'd known me even 10 years ago I would have never mentioned it. It was only after I'd got treatment that I was able to talk about it."

Vietnam was different, because the armed forces found themselves in a non-battlefield situation: the clearly-demarcated lines and occupied territories that marked much of the previous World Wars' expression were absent in Southeast Asia. The enemy didn't necessarily wear uniforms, and therefore could be anybody. Being in a country whose customs and people were new to them sometimes made it hard to tell friends from foe, though there were some clues, Houston notes.

There was a national curfew in effect, which helped somewhat in identifying the enemy, Houston says. "What we knew was that they traveled mostly at night. And it was tidal country, the tide came in and out twice a day."

He continued, "We would set up at night and nobody was supposed to move. We set up at night near a creek they were known to frequent. So if anybody was out at night, they were enemy. And 99.9% of the time, they were. Because everybody else went back to their village at night."

But the conundrum of how to tell who was the enemy gave rise to a soldier's joke: "A private got over to Vietnam, and realized he didn't know how to spot the enemy," Houston says, eyes twinkling. "He asked his sergeant, 'How do you know Viet Cong from civilians?' And his sergeant said, 'Well, it's easy, when you're out and you're not sure, just holler 'To hell with Ho Chi Minh!' and you can tell by how he acts,' and the private says, 'Well thank you, sir.'"

He continues, "A while later the sergeant was at the hospital and sees the private, who was all bandaged up, laying in the bed. He said, 'What happened to you?' The private said, 'Well, I did what you said. I saw this guy on the other side of the road, and I couldn't tell if he was Viet Cong or a civilian. So I hollered, 'To hell with Ho Chi Minh!' and he hollered 'To hell with LBJ!' [Lyndon Baines Johnson, the American president at that time.] We were shaking hands in the middle of the road, and a deuce and a half (a 2.5-ton army truck) ran over us."

## PTSD

His PTSD started making its presence felt when he was in Germany in 1968, during the "Prague Spring," when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia to put a stop to liberal reforms in Czechoslovakia's Communist Party.

"My best friends outranked me," he recalls. "And I ran around with them. That was because they were the only ones with combat experience." He found them easier to relate to because of it, he says.

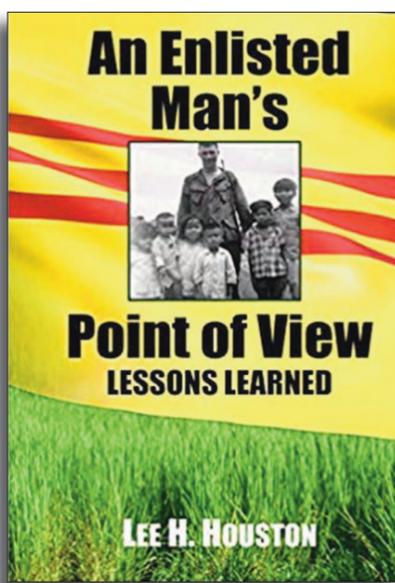
"Most of the guys over there were draftees and had none. They had a completely different understanding of the army. To them the army was just, 'a place I have to go for two years. Let's get drunk, have a good time, and go home.' But I was very serious and realized that the Russians were right over there, the East Germans were right over there, and they didn't like us and wanted to take over."

Eventually, Houston was discharged. His PTSD really began to wreck his life when he was living post-service and trying to hold down jobs, but nightmares robbed him of sleep. "I withdrew, I didn't come out. I'd sit in my office staring at the wall. And two hours would pass by like that," he says.

"I lost several jobs. I'd have a good job, and then I'd start having these spurts of nightmares. And when I had those, it would compound itself. I would get to the point where I wasn't sleeping more than two or three hours a night. You do that for three or four weeks, and you go nuts. This is different than crazy. You become nonfunctional. You end up getting fired or losing your job. You end up doing something like that. That happened to me three times."

Having a good partner was real boon to him at the time, he says. "Thank God I've got a very understanding wife. She just helped me through the nightmares and understood it. My kids, I never tried to expose them to it."

His nightmares took two forms: one a



Paperback copies of "An Enlisted Man's Point of View: Lessons Learned" by Lee Houston can be purchased on Amazon by searching "Lee Houston author" on the site at amazon.com.

simple replay of events that happened in combat; the second, "I would have my machine gun and I would be in my fatigues, and I'd be in some historic setting," Houston describes. "I'd be with Cleopatra before Caesar arrived, to help defend her. I'd be at Antietam at the stone bridge. I'd be at these different places. I love history and I read history a lot. I'd be at some historical thing and I'd have my M-60 there."

Though the connection isn't as obvious, he attributes the latter dreams to the harsh reception Vietnam veterans got when they returned home.

"We were treated just like dirt. We were called 'baby killers.' We were the opposite of baby killers," he says, in that same calm, factual way. "Our medics spent more time fixing up civilians than they ever did us. Remember, they've got diseases over there you never heard of. I came back with several of them."

Houston continues, "The way we were treated, there was no time to get over the war. There wasn't somebody to say, 'Oh, I'm glad you're home,' other than your parents. I know several veterans whose families wouldn't have anything to do with them when they got back. I know someone who ended up for being in jail because a wise guy picked a fight with him in a bar one night. He got called a baby killer and that kind of thing. So he ended up in prison."

Such reactions were partly due to news of atrocities like the My Lai massacre, in which U.S. soldiers slaughtered a civilian village; the killings were considered a war crime.

"We were glad the guy was convicted, the lieutenant [Lt. William Calley]," says Houston. "I feel like he should have gotten worse. Because what he did was absolutely, completely and totally against [our training]. We were trained to fight guerilla warfare. We were trained that the civilians were just as much the victims of that war as we were. And we were to treat them like they were victims of a war and bend over backwards to help them and show solidarity with them."

He finishes, "Like I said, our medics spent the most time with them. We gave the kids

candy, we gave the mothers soap, we did all these things. We got zero credit for that."

## Treatment

He sought treatment for PTSD, which at first wasn't easily had.

"I went to civilian doctors, and they would tell me I had depression, and they would treat me for depression," he says. "I finally got to a doctor 16 years ago who had done some of his residency in a VA (Veteran's Administration) hospital."

Houston continues, "He said, 'You don't have depression; you have PTSD.' He made one phone call, and suddenly I found myself in a Veterans' Administration hospital, and they knew how to treat it. They put me on six medications, and I finally was able to sleep."

He wrote the book first as an exercise with a social worker, who had him recount events during his service in Vietnam and later in Germany in the late 1960s.

"She had me write them in a very structured way, and then we'd go back and analyze the event," Houston explains of the therapeutic exercise. "Well, that took it out of the 'now,' because PTSD is about reliving it, and your mind doesn't know the difference between real and reliving. You want to say it ends. But it doesn't. And so that took it out of the present and put it in the past."

Gaining distance helped him come to grips with trauma that had stayed with him for years, he says, though sometimes the biggest opposition came from within himself.

"One of the biggest problems I had when I went in, I was macho, I thought I could whip the world. And it was difficult for me to open up and say, 'I've got these problems.' You've got to be honest about it: 'These are the things that are happening to me,' and you've got to tell them."

As for where veterans can seek help, he offers advice: "Go to the VA. It's easy to get in. The first few weeks, I was with a psychiatrist every day. And then it got to be once a week, once a month, I still go once a month. That's 16 years, I still go once a month."

"The first guy I went to said, 'Look, it's taken you 40 years to get this out of shape, because you've had no help, you've been backsliding. We're not going to get you over this in a month. It's going to take years.' Well, it's been 16 years now. And I'm much better than I was."

Some of his readers benefited from the book, despite having no combat experience. "I had one lady who read the book who said, 'I have PTSD and I didn't know it until I read your book.' She had never been in the military. She said 'I had a husband who beat me for seven years. I relive it most every night.'"

Houston thought the book would just be for VA hospitals. "The VA has talked about buying some and just giving them to people who have PTSD to help them to grapple with it, and say 'Here's a guy who's no different from you, and here's what happened to him.'"

He smiles, "Writing a biography's no different from going around naked. Everybody gets to see the bumps and the scars. And all that kind of stuff. It's a hard thing to do, to stand up and tell people 'Well, here's what happened to me, but I'm not really crazy. I've just got a different set of experiences than you do.'"

However, Houston perhaps sums it up best when he says, "I still see the world as a place where you can get killed. That you have to be ready. And yet, that has made me a very peaceful individual, and I want to live as righteously and as good as I can."

# Rebuild VA grants available to help small businesses, non-profits

Eligibility expanded to allow requests up to 100,000

RICHMOND — Rebuild VA, a grant program to help small businesses and nonprofit organizations affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, will expand eligibility criteria and increase the amount of grant money businesses receive.

Rebuild VA launched in August with \$70 million from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Gov. Ralph Northam, in a recent news release, confirmed that he will direct an additional \$30 million to support the expansion of the program. Businesses with less than \$10 million in gross revenue or fewer than 250 employees will be eligible under the new criteria, and the maximum grant award will increase from \$10,000 to \$100,000.

"These changes to the program will ensure that we can provide additional financial assistance to even more Virginians so they can weather this public health crisis and emerge stronger," said Northam.

Rebuild VA will now be open to all types of Virginia small businesses that meet size and other eligibility requirements, from restaurants and summer camps, to farmers and retail shops. Businesses that previously received a Rebuild VA grant will receive a second award correlated with the updated guidelines.

Rebuild VA is administered by the Department of Small Business and Supplier Diversity (SBSD) in partnership with the Department of

Housing and Community Development and the Virginia Tourism Corporation, and the Virginia Economic Development Partnership.

Eligible businesses and nonprofits must demonstrate that their normal operations were limited by Governor Northam's Executive Orders Fifty-Three or Fifty-Five, or that they were directly impacted by the closure of such businesses. In September, the program expanded eligibility to supply chain partners of businesses whose normal operations were impacted by the pandemic.

Rebuild VA funding may be utilized for the following eligible expenses:

- Payroll support, including paid sick, medical, or family leave, and costs related to the continuation of group health care benefits during those periods of leave;
- Employee salaries;
- Mortgage payments, rent, and utilities;
- Principal and interest payments for any business loans from national or state-chartered banking, savings and loan institutions, or credit unions, that were incurred before or during the emergency;
- Personal protective equipment, cleaning and disinfecting materials, or other working capital needed to address COVID-19 response.

For additional information about Rebuild VA and how to submit an application, visit [governor.virginia.gov/RebuildVA](http://governor.virginia.gov/RebuildVA).

# Pickett represents students on Galax School Board

Cole Pickett, 18, a Galax High School senior, is this year's student representative on the Galax School Board. He attends meetings and acts as liaison between the board and student body. "I'm planning to go to Virginia Tech," said Pickett of his future plans, which include a degree in Human Nutrition, Food and Exercise, and a Doctorate in Physical Therapy. As for his current status, Pickett said, "I think it is a great opportunity to put myself in a professional setting with our school system's leaders. I plan to do my very best to represent students at every level. I also am looking forward to bridging the gap between administration and students."



Gazette photo by Shannon Watkins

**The Gazette**  
 108 WEST STUART DRIVE • GALAX, VA 24333  
 Phone: 276-236-5178 • Fax: 276-236-0756  
 HOURS: Mon. - Fri. 8:30 AM - 5:00 PM; Closed Sat. & Sun.  
 WWW.GALAXGAZETTE.COM

**FIRST AMENDMENT**  
 Freedom of Religion, Speech and the Press; Rights of Assembly and Petition

Copyright 2020. All rights reserved. Contents may not be disseminated without permission.

Established 1876.  
 Published Wednesday & Friday by Landmark Community Newspapers, LLC, at 108 W. Stuart Drive, Galax, VA 24333.

Periodicals postage paid at Galax, VA 24333 • USPS 212-920  
 POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Gazette, 108 W. Stuart Dr., Galax, VA 24333.

**VPA** Virginia Press Association

Publisher/Adv. Manager.....Randy Kegley  
 Editor.....Brian Funk  
 Subscriptions.....Tanja Gober  
 Bookkeeper.....Valerie Swiger

**CIRCULATION RATES**  
 Single Copy.....50¢

**Subscribe Online At**  
 WWW.GALAXGAZETTE.COM  
 It's Safe and Secure!

**EZ PAY IS OUR BEST RATE**  
 EZ Pay charges your credit or debit card in installments at the frequency requested.

**ALL-ACCESS = PRINT, MOBILE & ONLINE**

LOCAL TERRITORY (ALL-ACCESS)	OUTSIDE LOCAL (IN STATE) (All-Access Unless Noted)
One Year.....\$59.99	One Year.....\$104.99
Six Months.....\$35.99	Six Months.....\$74.99
Three Months.....\$21.99	EZ Pay One Year.....\$99.99
EZ Pay One Year.....\$54.99	EZ Pay Six Months.....\$57.99
EZ Pay Six Months.....\$33.99	
EZ Pay Three Months.....\$19.99	
EZ Pay Monthly.....\$8.99	

**OUT OF STATE (All-Access Unless Noted)**

DIGITAL ONLY (From Anywhere)	One Year.....\$134.99
One Year.....\$59.99	Six Months.....\$74.99
Six Months.....\$35.99	EZ Pay One Year.....\$129.99
Three Months.....\$21.99	EZ Pay Six Months.....\$79.99

Call (276) 236-5178, ext. 222 for more non-local rates. Monthly rates also available.

To subscribe, call (276) 236-5178, ext. 222 or complete this coupon and mail to:  
**The Gazette, 108 W. Stuart Dr., Galax, VA 24333**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 City/State/Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone: HOME: \_\_\_\_\_ CELL: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Card#: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Exp. Date: \_\_\_\_\_ CUV# \_\_\_\_\_

**PAYMENT MUST ACCOMPANY COUPON. THERE IS A \$30 FEE FOR RETURNED CHECKS.**

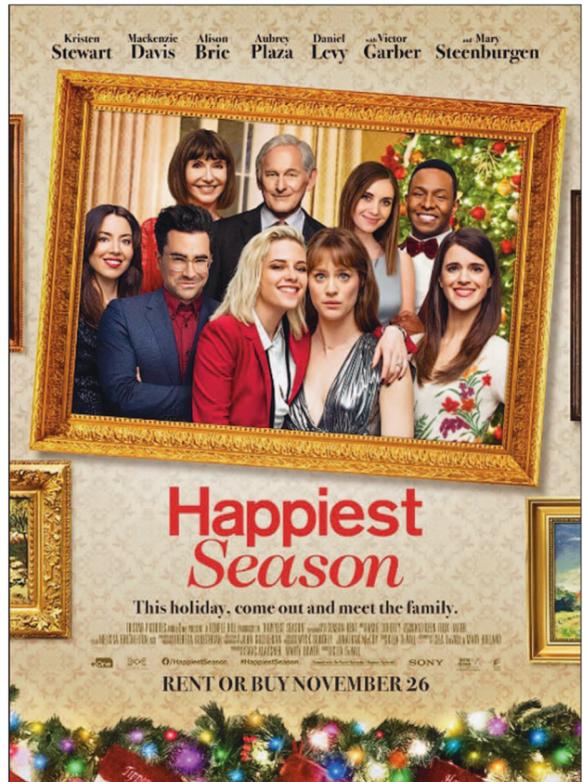
**VISA** **MasterCard** **DISCOVER**

Your subscription includes 24/7 digital access to all content available online. Temporary suspension of your print newspaper delivery due to vacation and other reasons does not extend your subscription expiration date. Your account will be subject to a surcharge for premium issues such as the Thanksgiving week issue and special guest sections. Notification of the premium issue and surcharge amount will be noted in the newspaper on the day of publication and one issue prior. Your total bill will remain unaffected but there will be a slight adjustment in your expiration date, unless you have elected the Monthly EZ Pay option. The premium surcharge will be added to the regular Monthly EZ Pay charge in the applicable months that include a premium issue. Your subscription expiration stop is not automatic. To stop, call customer service 276-236-5178, ext. 222.

# LIVING

B

INSIDE: CHURCH NEWS: 5B • CLASSIFIEDS: 6B-7B • HEALTH: 4B



“Happiest Season” made its debut on Hulu this month, offering a holiday movie with an LGBT love story as its main plotline. Galax native Mary Holland co-wrote the screenplay with Clea DuVall, and stars in the film as the main character’s affable sister, Jane Caldwell.

Photo at left courtesy of Lacey Terrell/Hulu; photo above courtesy of Hulu

## Happy Holland-Days!

Mary Holland, a comedian and actress born in Galax, spoke to *The Gazette* about her career five years ago. Now she’s brought the gift of a hit holiday comedy to Hulu, the warm and witty ‘Happiest Season.’

By SHANNON WATKINS  
Staff

“I’m excited to find out what’s coming,” says Galax-born actress Mary Holland, in a phone interview with *The Gazette*.

Coming from someone who’s already worked with the legendary Sir Patrick Stewart, voiced a “Star Wars” character, taken the stage as part of the famed improv group Upright Citizens’ Brigade and now has a hit movie on Hulu, that’s a pretty impressive statement.

You’d think Holland, whose resume is ever-expanding, would be happy resting on her laurels for a moment, but she’s still looking forward with the same joy, enthusiasm and drive that have marked her career from the start.

Holland’s latest work is the Hulu romantic comedy/holiday film “Happiest Season,” which won plenty of critical acclaim and tons of fan love the moment it came out. It’s no stretch to say that Holland steals scene after scene with effortless comedic flair.

No stranger to creating new works, she also wrote the screenplay with its director, Clea DuVall.

Mary plays Jane Caldwell, the “eccentric” sister in a family of five who come home for a Christmas that’s been carefully engineered by their mother, Tipper, (played by Mary Steenburgen) to help create an image of perfection that will help their father Ted’s (played by Victor Garber) political career.

Everything goes smoothly, at least on the surface — until it falls hilariously apart. The comedy is also a lesbian romance worthy of the Hallmark Channel, because one sister, Harper, (played by Mackenzie Davis) brought home her fiancée, Abby (played by Kristen Stewart). Trying to hide one secret only results in skeletons coming out of several closets, and the whole thing makes for a satisfying movie experience.

Holland’s Jane is an odd woman who stayed close to home and is writing an epic fantasy novel — that she can’t stop telling literally everyone about, at bewildering length. Anyone who’s ever been buttonholed at a party by someone who gushes about their favorite topic well beyond polite conventions will recognize Jane right away. The special touch that Holland adds is making her so vulnerable and delightfully lovable.

Holland left the Twin Counties a while ago to attend a performing arts high school before ending up in Hollywood. We talked with her last in 2015, when she was ramping up to play Shelly, a personal assistant, in the comedy “Blunt Talk,” which starred the legendary Sir Patrick Stewart as a conservative talk show host.



Sisters Sloane (played by Alison Brie, left) and Jane (played by Mary Holland, right).

Photo courtesy of Hulu

“Blunt Talk” was canceled after two seasons; but Holland, talented and energetic, has never stopped being funny.

### Happiest Season

“The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive and it’s felt so amazing to see it received so warmly by everybody,” Holland says of “Happiest Season.”

“I’ve gotten messages from friends and family and it means so much, but I’ve heard from people I don’t know who tell me how much it’s impacted them and how much they loved it,” she added.

Holland and co-writer/director DuVall first met while working on “Veep,” the HBO comedy series. “We had a real connection with each other,” she recalls. “We hit it off. Clea’s written a bunch of things on her own. She wrote and starred in ‘Intervention,’ (a comedy-drama about four couples) so she’s an experienced screenwriter.”

DuVall had the idea for “Happiest Season,” says Holland, because while the out lesbian director, actress and screenwriter loved holiday movies, “She hadn’t seen herself repre-

sented in that genre, and wanted to make a movie centered around a lesbian couple. She had this in her head for a long time and wanted it to be a comedy.”

She decided Holland was a good creative partner and asked her to join forces in making it a reality. “I was over the moon,” Holland rhapsodizes. “The story, I thought, was so beautiful, and yes, there should absolutely be an LGBT rom-com for the holidays.”

As for Jane, “She’s a character that’s very dear to me,” says Holland. “When we were fleshing out Harper’s family, we knew we wanted her to have sisters... those relationships Harper has are so interesting and specific.”

The interplay of competition and alliances among the sisters gave real depth to the story. “We wanted one of them to be a real rival of Harper’s,” and this ended up being Harper’s perfectionist sister, Sloane, played by Alison Brie. For the other sister, she says, “we thought it would be fun if she was very different, didn’t live up to their expectations and had such a well of deep love.” (That became Jane, Holland’s role.)

She expands on Jane: “Once we decided we wanted the middle sister to be different, I said I want to play that part. So from very early on in the writing process we knew we were going to write that character for me. There’s a lot of qualities of Jane that we took from me: I have night terrors and I’m a big fan of fantasy fiction and I have those peacekeeping sensibilities. So she really blossomed.”

Jane was a great fit because she was written for Holland, of course. “As an actor, the other way is usually how you get work,” Holland says. “There’s a fully formed character that you’re stepping into. This was made for me; I think for that reason she did become so similar to me. Jane is a source of comedy for most of the movie, and the way her family doesn’t really take her seriously.”

In a more conventional comedy, it would have been standard to have her dreams of being an author mocked and dismissed, relegating her ambitions to the butt of a joke. “Happiest Season,” however, takes a much more positive approach, proving that you



Brie, Davis and Holland film an ice skating scene in which sisters Harper and Sloane settle into a hilarious display of their sibling rivalry

Photos courtesy of Lacey Terrell/Hulu

## Holland

Continued from front

don't have to be "normal" to be successful. "We thought it would be so much more interesting if Jane was really talented," says Holland of Jane's triumphant moment. "She's creative and she's talented and that payoff at the end was so satisfying to play."

People have told Holland lots of good things about her performance as Jane, the best being that they see themselves in her. "That has been so great to hear," she says. You can hear the smile in her voice over the phone through most of the interview; at this point it goes almost incandescent with happiness. "People really relate to her. I do, too. It means so much that other people do, as well."

As for working with Kristen Stewart, DuVall and actress Aubrey Plaza (who plays Riley, one of Harper's exes), "I've got crushes on all of them," says Holland.

"Aubrey I've known for a while," having met on the 2016 comedy film "Mike and Dave Need Wedding Dates," Holland says. "She was great in that. We also are both into the improv comedy scene, so we've crossed paths a number of times. I'm just constantly surprised and delighted by her in what she plays and how she plays. She's constantly surprising me. Her performances are all so unique. She's so lovely, she's a joy to be around, she's so funny."

As for Stewart — arguably the biggest established star going into "Happiest Season" due to the "Twilight" series and other high-profile roles — Holland says, "Kristen was incredibly kind, and so present as an actor. She's so thoughtful and intentional about what she's doing. She's so cognizant of how she can tell the story with the most integrity and how she can make the story more organized. Kristen is as cool as you think she is."

She continues, "Same with Makenzie. She's such an extraordinary actor. All of them are so magnetic."

Of course, DuVall, behind the scenes, made a strong, stable place for everyone's work to thrive from: "In putting this cast together, Clea created this positive, happy feeling on set," says Holland.

And anyone who's seen the movie would be remiss in not mentioning Dan Levy as John, who takes the "gay male best friend" trope — he's specifically Abby/Stewart's best friend — and elevates it with a nuanced touch and acerbic delivery; he steals scenes on par with Holland herself.

"He's just such a star. He's incredible," says Holland. "He's so funny and at the same time is so lovely and warm and is such a brilliant actor. It was such a joy to see him bring John to life. You couldn't ask for a kinder, more generous fun person to be around on camera and in real life."

Even though the interview was conducted solely with Holland, it's easy to imagine her costars say the same things about her.

### News, Podcasts and the Future

After discussing "Happiest Season," the conversation turns comfortably around a variety of topics.

In terms of both couples and big projects, "Happiest Season" hasn't been the only thing on Holland's plate recently: on Halloween, she got married to actor Matt Newell in their carport, with attendees joining in via Zoom.

"Getting married during COVID, and having to adapt what our ceremony was going to be — while it wasn't what we originally planned, there was something really special about being really creative about it and about

finding a way to let people participate but still be safe," says Holland. "It made it even more special than it already felt like it was going to be."

Given showbusiness, it's no surprise that they've worked together. "Matt and I have been creative partners in the past and he's such an incredible source to creativity and support for me," she says warmly. "I hope in our married life we'll get to be able to work with each other."

Interestingly enough, Holland's 2015 appearance in The Gazette was mentioned on Episode 662 of the popular comedy podcast "Comedy Bang-Bang," hosted by Scott Aukerman. He was in Mount Airy, N.C., of all places, when he spotted Holland on the front page of the newspaper.

"He went to a bachelor party," at comedian and actor Zach Galifianakis's ranch in North Carolina, Holland says with a laugh, clearly tickled to hear someone caught the story, "and I think Zach is the one who came across the mention of me."

She doesn't say she's besties with Galifianakis, but "I've crossed paths with him a couple times. I only had a conversation with him recently, but now I do feel like I know him. Before, I'd seen him around places."

(Oddly enough, Galifianakis has often been spotted around her hometown of Galax, because he owned property near Sparta, N.C., and would visit Galax to dine.)

A question from Gazette editor and podcast enthusiast Brian Funk gets the biggest, most surprised laugh from Holland, regarding comedian and podcaster extraordinaire Paul F. Tompkins.

Tompkins and Holland have worked on various funny podcasts together; Tompkins is known for his distinctive gentleman-about-town look, complete with impeccably-kept facial hair.

So when faced with the question: "Is Paul F. Tompkins's mustache as fluffy as it sounds in my headphones?" Holland positively whoops with glee. "It's the fluffiest mustache I've ever seen," she fires back, giggling, "and it's perfectly manicured, as you can imagine. It's very perfectly groomed."

Holland is undeniably gifted at comedy, but is she interested in going in other directions? "My dream would be to play in all genres," she says. "I've mostly done comedy and I would love to continue to do it, but I would love to be in a period drama."

Speaking of crossing the genre barrier, she's now appeared in the "Star Wars" universe, voicing a droid named AD-3 on the kids' game show "Star Wars: Jedi Temple Challenge" (viewable on YouTube).

Her character is the sidekick of Ahmed Best, the actor who played Jar-Jar Binks in the "Star Wars" prequel trilogy and now fills the role of Master Kelleran Beq, the game show's host. Critical reception has praised their chemistry.

"It was a huge honor," says Holland fervently. "I love droids so much and getting to be the voice of one was a huge honor."

Given her success at getting work — over and over again, from cell phone commercials to Comedy Central series to hit movies — and her obvious pleasure in it, is there a formula Holland uses? Does she have a solid set of goals, or does she just remain open to possibilities and see what happens?

"Just speaking for myself, I think that is



"Happiest Season" is just one of Holland's credits to date. Others include "Blunt Talk" (above), and "Star Wars: Jedi Temple Challenge" (right), which arguably makes her a Disney princess, as well.

Photo above courtesy of Justin Mintz/ Starz; photo at left courtesy of StarWars.com



the way you sort of have to approach it," she says thoughtfully, "because as an actor, you're not in control. You're not in charge of what job you're going to get. You have to just go with the flow."

She elaborates a bit: "I think with the mindset of those projects that I come up with, that I get to work on, I fully invest in them without knowing where they're going to go. I take an attitude of 'Let's see where everything leads.' I'm very open."

What's up next? "I think it goes back to that same philosophy about being in the moment," she says. "I'm excited for the next steps; I'm excited to see what's coming. I've done some writing projects with friends over the past year and I'm excited to find out what's coming."

Since Holland worked with Sir Patrick on "Blunt Talk," she hasn't done any other projects with him, but says, "We did a 'Blunt Talk' reunion Zoom earlier this

summer. I sure hope we get to work together again. He's a total delight."

Holland closes out by bringing it back to the present. She might not rest on her laurels where "Happiest Season" is concerned, but she'll mention them for just a moment.

"I hope this movie reaches people and they enjoy it over the holiday," she says, "and I'm excited for everyone to see it."

"Happiest Season" is currently streaming on Hulu. Her latest series, "Robbie" from Comedy Central, is available on YouTube. A list of Holland's other appearances can be found at IMDb.com.