

downhome

In Moultrie and Colquitt County

June 2011



CRMC's Jim Lowry

**'Fast and Dirty' at Needmore
Sparkman's Dairy**

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Local Places



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There's a lot going on ... just down the road here

Car racing is the top spectator sport in America, hands down. The roar of the engines, the smell of the fumes and the thrill seen in the eyes of those in the stands help form an ambiance that is as much Southern as it is national. Car racing was spawned in the South and as the stories go, moonshine runners were the seed.



And as has been proved here, it doesn't take a metro venue to draw a crowd. In fact Needmore (as the community is known) is about as small a place as you can put on a map and still call it a community. But as in the "Field of Dreams," someone must have said, "build it and they will come." And they do, every weekend.

And so in this issue of our Downhome magazine, staff writer Adelia Ladson gives her first-person account of a truly 'downhome' event.

As well, in this issue we take a look at another homegrown industry, Sparkman's Dairy, which we can say is truly some 'downhome' flavor. The Sparkmans have built their local industry around the Jersey breed and they feel their cows are just as 'happy' as those in California.

Other stories in this issue include a continued review of the railroad industry and how it helped shape our community. While we still have some rail activity in Colquitt County, many relics point to a time when the sound of locomotives was the very heartbeat of mass transportation here.

Meanwhile, this issue profiles Jim Lowry, who recently announced his retirement as administrator of Colquitt Regional Medical Center. Lowry has served the local medical community for some 40 years and has seen dramatic changes in medical care — both the types of services available as well as growth and innovations in the facilities from which they are administered.

So join us on the following pages as we tell you more about our friends and neighbors and what's going on down the road from us here in Moultrie and Colquitt County.

Yours truly,
Dwain Walden,
editor/publisher, The Moultrie Observer

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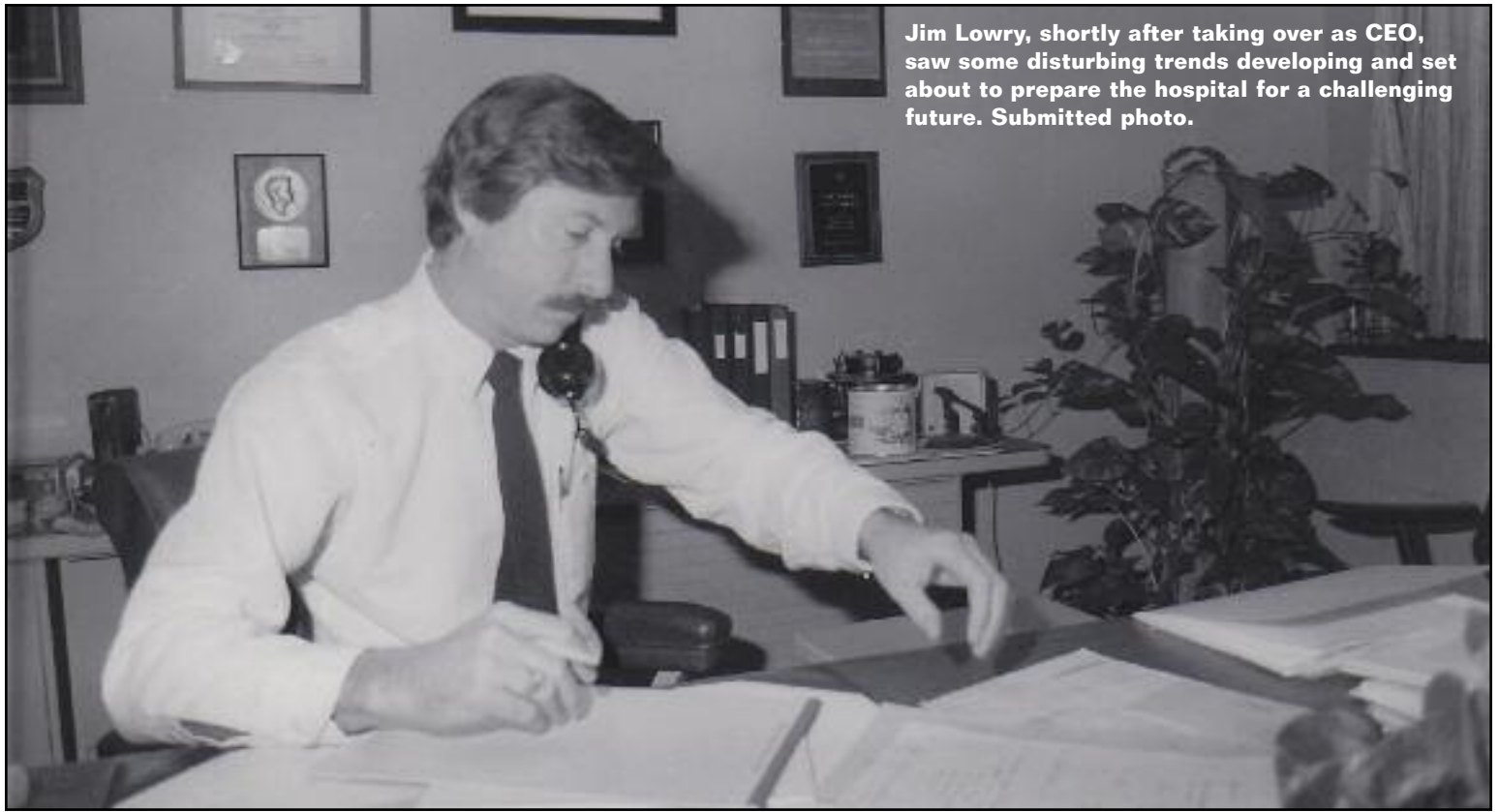
About the cover

Jim Lowry, CEO of
Colquitt Regional
Medical Center.
Submitted photo



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Jim Lowry, shortly after taking over as CEO, saw some disturbing trends developing and set about to prepare the hospital for a challenging future. Submitted photo.

Lowry finds 'his place'

BY GARY BOLEY

As a child growing up, Jim Lowry never knew a place he could call his “hometown” and that made an everlasting impression on him that eventually led him to find “his place” in Moultrie.

But it was a long and winding path that led him here, and now neither he nor the community he has served for more than 40 years can imagine what things might have been like otherwise.

The “epicenter” of his life, as he describes it, was two tiny Alabama towns — Notasulga and Loachapoka — located a short distance west of Auburn where his grandparents and great-grandparents had lived on a 500-acre farm since 1875. Lowry still has the deed to that farm.

“A lot of my memories — and my whole life — kind of

centers around that area. That’s where my mother, father, grandmother, grandfather and great-grandmother — all of them — lived and are buried,” he says.

But throughout most of his childhood, Lowry moved with his family from place to place and from one side of the United States to the other and back again. His father was an engineer who worked in the very secretive Manhattan Project to develop the atomic bomb. So, as that project developed, the Lowry family moved to different locations across the country.

“My dad worked on the three bombs — the atomic bomb, the hydrogen bomb and the neutron bomb,” Lowry says. “I never did know a lot about what he did. He was a civilian and at one time worked in a place called the ‘Birdcage.’ He would be gone for a total of

three or four months a year traveling out to different silos in Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma or wherever the intercontinental ballistic missiles were.”

The “Birdcage” that Lowry remembers as a child was an underground concrete bunker surrounded by wires and fences and guarded by Marines in bunkers who never knew what they were guarding but were nevertheless sworn to secrecy for 50 years. The secret, as is now known, was the storage of atomic weapons and components.

“I can remember Mama and I went to the gate (at the Birdcage) early to meet dad,” Lowry says. “A Jeep with a machine gun pulled up and sat there until a Navy bus came up and Dad got off.”

Lowry was starting to school when his family made their first long move across the country to Los Alamos near Albu-

querque, a place young Lowry found strange and intimidating. He’d never seen Indians and Hispanics before and the surroundings were like nothing he had ever witnessed.

“That was totally alien to me,” he recalls. “There was no grass. There was tumbleweed that would roll by and we lived in an adobe house. Everything was so different out there.”

For Lowry, Notasulga and Loachapoka seemed so far away.

“I can remember when I started school I was so excited to see a little black kid in my class,” Lowry recalls. “I was afraid of Hispanics. They looked so different, but I was familiar with black children. So, I ran over there and I sat right next to him and we became very good friends.”

From Albuquerque the family moved back across the country to Fort Campbell, Ky., and

then to Hopkinsville, Ky., and eventually to Clarksville, Tenn., where Lowry graduated from high school.

But throughout his childhood, Lowry would return for brief visits to his grandmother's house in Notasulga.

"Every year I'd go back there, and my grandmother, Willie Lou, would say, 'Jimmy, you're going to graduate from high school and you're going to come live with me and you're going to go to Auburn.' Every year when I would go there, that's what I would hear."

And she was right. When he graduated from high school in 1959, he had no problem deciding what to do next.

"I decided that living with my grandmother was a dream-come-true. It was the happiest moment of my life ... going back to live in Notasulga," Lowry says.

Life was good. Lowry says he still thinks of those times and

that place and every time he hears a train's whistle it takes him back to thoughts of the track that ran past his grandmother's house.

"It was a time when you'd sit on the front porch and talk to folks," he recalls. "With all the data we have today, you sit on the front porch and you're thinking, 'I'd better check my email ... I better check my Twitter or whatever. I'm missing something.' Well, you weren't missing anything back in the '60s. That's just the way it was. While you were there talking to someone, you weren't missing nothing."

Making a career decision was a little more difficult than deciding where to go to school. Throughout high school, he thought he might become an engineer like his dad. He wore a slide rule on his belt and belonged to all the science and engineering clubs.

But one day at a church

youth meeting a local pharmacist said something that got Lowry's attention. He said that a pharmacist could pick anywhere in the country to live.

"That meant I could pick anywhere I wanted to live and I wouldn't have to move," Lowry said. "Seeing all my relatives in Notasulga and Loachapoka and the stability they had made me realize that's what I wanted too."

But Lowry says his career got off to something less than a spectacular start when he accepted his first job as a pharmacist at a Rexall store in downtown Montgomery where he quickly realized that retail pharmacy was not for him.

"I was getting up at 5 a.m. to open the store at 6 a.m. so we could serve a 99-cent breakfast at 7 a.m.," he says. "We had a little-bitty pharmacy in the back and a big store up front that sold candy, birds and all sorts of things and I had to

help prepare the breakfast, run the register and everything else. I finally realized that I had been going to school all those years and there I was cleaning out bird cages."

Lowry soon left his retail pharmacy position to accept a hospital pharmacy internship at University Hospital in Birmingham, but at the end of the six-week internship and a short time working at an outpatient cancer center he was still without a clear direction of where to go.

"At that time, I still didn't know where I wanted to be, but I knew where I didn't want to be and I didn't want to be in Birmingham," Lowry said.

So, he packed all his belongings in his MGB and traveled south toward the Gulf coast, making stops for interviews in Mobile, Biloxi, New Orleans, Corpus Christi and Brownsville and then drove through part of Mexico on his way to visit his



Jim Lowry, far right, meets with the Colquitt County Hospital Authority shortly after taking over as president and CEO. Submitted photo.

parents, who had moved back to Albuquerque. During the visit with his parents, he decided to take the hospital pharmacy job in Mobile. Over the next two years, Lowry finally affirmed his earlier decision that pharmacy really wasn't what he wanted.

"I decided that what I really wanted was a career change," Lowry says. "So I went back to the University of South Alabama and got a degree in accounting while working the night shift as a pharmacist."

After graduating, one of Lowry's contacts at the Mobile hospital, who had since taken a job as an administrator of a hospital in Arkansas, hired him as an assistant administrator of a 50-bed satellite hospital with only a half dozen physicians on staff.

During the first days on the job, while Lowry was still trying to orient himself to his new environment, he came face to face with his new challenge.

"I was sitting at my desk shortly after going to work there and one of the board members, who was kind of like vice chairman, walked in and said, 'Jim, we need to go downtown and borrow some money.' So, we got in the car and went downtown and we borrowed — I can't remember how much now — but it seemed like a lot of money ... maybe \$10,000. On the way, I asked him, what's this for? He said, 'We don't have enough money to meet payroll.'"

Lowry jumped right into the hospital accounts, taking them apart and analyzing the financial problems.

"I got all my accounting people, my accounts receivable people and we began to look at all the accounts and take them apart. A lot of people just didn't pay ... didn't want to pay," Lowry recalls. "I said, 'Guys, we're going to work until we collect this amount of money and get ourselves back on a break-even situation.' And that

was the beginning of my management career."

Lowry was able to take the hospital from the red into the black, but after about two years he realized that running a hospital that small was not his long-term future.

"Running a 50-bed hospital was very, very difficult," he recalls. "It more or less runs you."

Using the American Hospital Association's listing of hospitals, Lowry identified areas where he thought he would enjoy living and began to send resumes in search of his next career opportunity. One of those was Moultrie, Ga.

Why Moultrie?

"For some reason, I had in my mind that Moultrie was between Birmingham and Atlanta," he recalls. "When I flew into Albany for the interview, I thought I was somewhere between Birmingham and Atlanta."

Although he inadvertently missed his intended mark by a hundred miles or more, Lowry had finally found the home he had been seeking all of his life.

"I remember the courthouse on that first visit ... the Spanish moss hanging from the trees and the courthouse square," Lowry recalls. "I felt very comfortable that I was back in the South."

Before leaving town on that initial visit, he had a written offer in hand.

Millard Wear, who was CEO of Vereen Memorial when Lowry arrived as assistant CEO in 1971, told Lowry of the community's plan to build a new hospital. Lowry's job would be to manage Vereen Memorial on a day-to-day basis so Wear could devote his time to the challenges of construction and transition to the new building.

Within the next few years, the new hospital was completed and Lowry had established himself as an able administrator. He impressed the Colquitt County Hospital Authority with



Jim Lowry, after graduating from Auburn University, became a pharmacist only to realize that pharmacy was not really what he wanted to do with his life. Submitted photo.



Jim Lowry holds his two children, Nicole and Paul, in this 1975 photograph taken a few years after moving to Moultrie. Submitted photo.

his strategic planning abilities, clinical knowledge, financial expertise and self-motivation and in 1982, when Wear retired, he was promoted to president and CEO.

As in past positions, Lowry immediately faced significant challenges, including an aging medical staff and the community's projected slow annual growth rate.

"When I became CEO in 1982 it almost took me back to the days of borrowing the \$10,000 to make payroll," Lowry says. "We had just had our lowest financial year and our lowest volume year. When I put every doctor's name on a sheet of paper and put their age beside the name along with the number of patients they admitted and tracked it back year to year, I saw significant problems developing. I saw that automatically in the next few years we could easily lose 35 percent of our medical staff to retirements. It was apparent we needed to get into the physician recruitment business. So we started recruiting physicians, particularly those specialties the hospital never had before."

At the time Lowry took over as CEO, he initiated a 10-year master plan which to this day is studied and adjusted annually. With the adoption of that plan, things began to happen and over the next three decades Lowry led the hospital's growth from a small community facility to become a regional medical center.

Over the years, Lowry has become one of the most respected authorities in Georgia healthcare and has served on numerous state healthcare boards. Under his watch CRMC has been recognized as Rural Hospital of the Year and was also presented the Community Leadership Award. Lowry has also been an active participant in many local civic organizations.

Last year, when Lowry announced his retirement after 40



Nine-year-old Jimmy Lowry gets an up-close look at a deer in a petting zoo while his mother, left, smiles approvingly. Submitted photo.

years of service to CRMC and the community, the Georgia Hospital Association named him their Lifetime Heroic Achievement winner and the Georgia Council of Auxiliaries, made up of hospital volunteers from across the state, named him CEO of the Year.

Lowry says he can't remember making a conscious decision to stay in Moultrie.

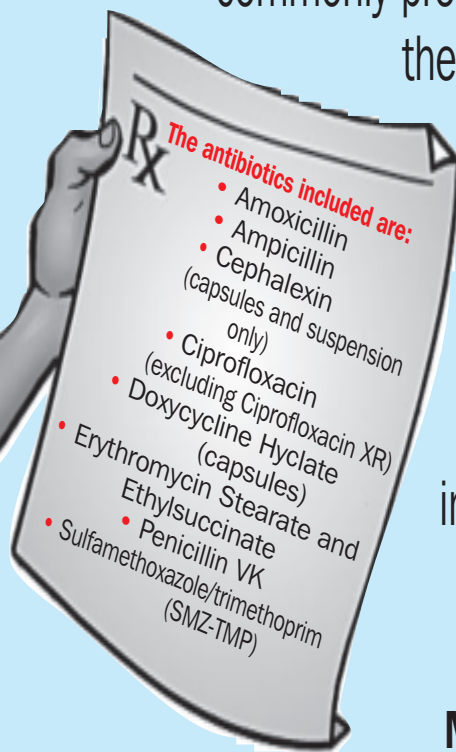
"As time goes by, you connect to the community. Then, all of a sudden, you realize you've been here longer than any place you have ever lived in your life, which was one of my goals," he says. "I never had a hometown, but I wanted to make sure that my children had a hometown. This is my home. This is where I want to be. This is my place. I'm not going to lose my connection to Moultrie. I want to be a Packer. I want to be a part of the fabric and the growth of this community."



After 40 years of service to Colquitt Regional Medical Center, Jim Lowry will retire this year. Submitted photo.

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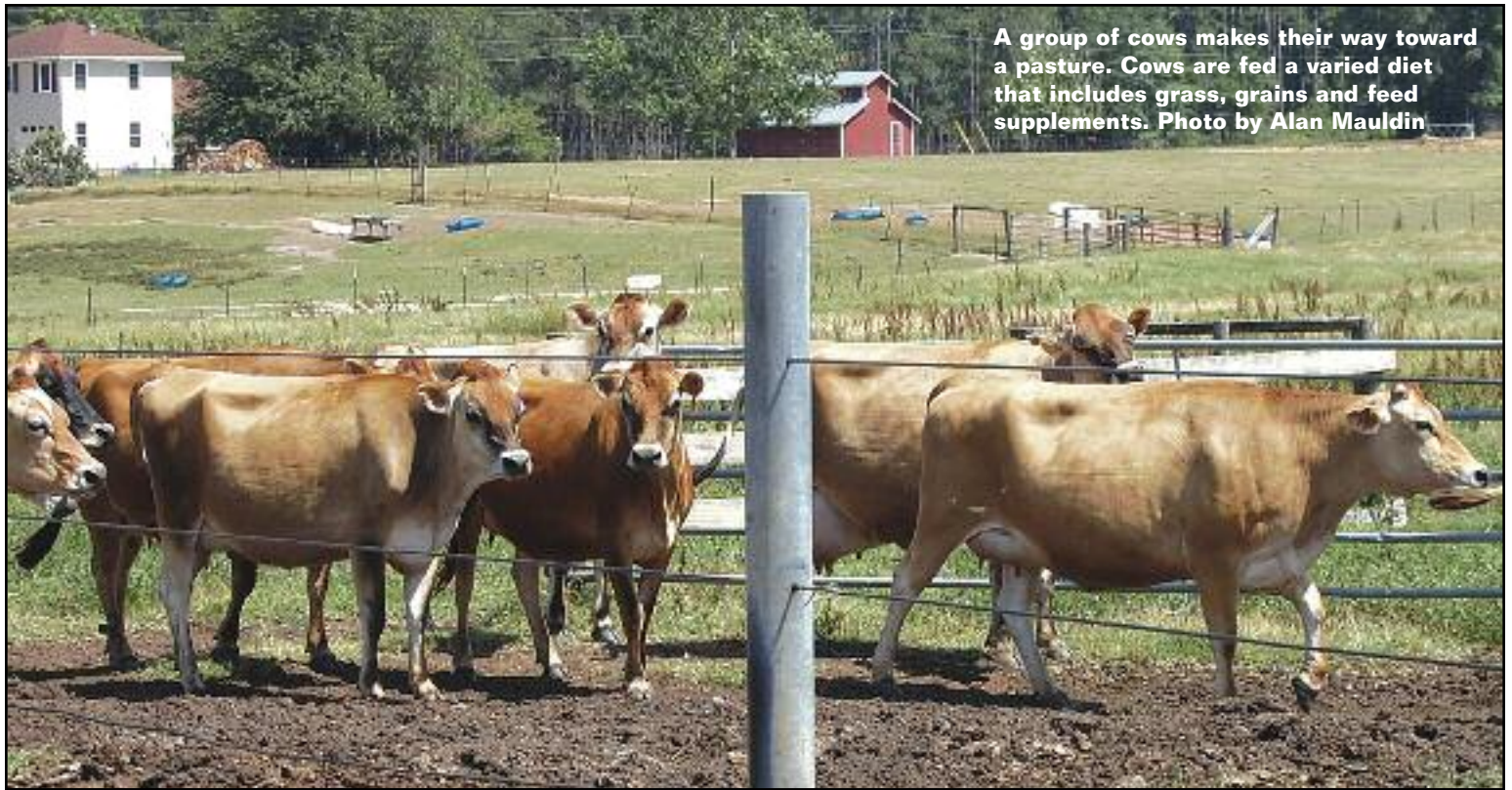


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GREG YARBROUGH,
R. Ph.



A group of cows makes their way toward a pasture. Cows are fed a varied diet that includes grass, grains and feed supplements. Photo by Alan Mauldin

'Our cows are happy too'

Jersey cattle are secret to Sparkman's success

BY ALAN MAULDIN
alan.mauldin@gafnews.com

Any pet owner can attest to the responsibility that goes with the territory, whether it's 3 a.m. trips outside with a new puppy or merely feeding a goldfish regularly.

At Sparkman's Dairy, the Jersey cows can reach more than 1,000 pounds and there are 1,000 animals in its care, each requiring proper nutrition, veterinary care and even protection from predators such as coyotes and dogs.

The pet analogy breaks down, however, when considering that in addition to regular feeding and medical care, the producing cows must be milked up to three times daily, and their udders don't take holidays and weekends off.

"Dairy isn't for anybody who doesn't like to work," said John Bernard, a professor of animal and dairy science at the University of Georgia's Tifton campus. "It's two or three times a day (milking), 365 days a year except leap year, when it's 366 days a year."

Sparkman's has seen a lot of change since 1967 when Ross Sparkman Jr. purchased the Tom Murph Dairy operation consisting of 70 acres and 35 to 40 cows. Today the Sparkman family owns 400 acres on Rossman Dairy Road, with an additional 700 rented acres. Milking cows total about 500, with the dairy now operated by Ricky Sparkman with sons Matt, Ryan and Dustin.

In 2007 Ricky Sparkman started his own dairy line,

Sparkman's Cream Valley, which produces milk, butter, cream and a drinkable yogurt on the farm. Ice cream production has been temporarily suspended due to the high demand for cream and cheese, but Sparkman said he plans to crank ice cream production back up in the future.

Last year the dairy, which employs 24 including the plant and had \$3 million in sales, produced seven million pounds — 813,953 gallons — of milk. That includes whole milk, skim, 1 percent, 2 percent and chocolate.

Much of the success can be attributed to the breed of cow — the Jersey — that the dairy uses exclusively, Sparkman said. Holsteins are used almost exclusively by dairy farms, but the Jersey averages 9.3 percent solids in milk, compared to the 8.25 per-

cent average for other breeds.

"The Jersey in particular has a higher fat and solids content in their milk," Sparkman said. "The solids are what you taste."

"Most dairy farmers prefer Holsteins because they produce more milk," he said. "Jersey cows have better acclimated to hot weather. Jersey cows are more efficient. They convert feed to milk more efficiently than any other breed."

The higher fat content also makes a difference in the taste of the dairy's Plugra-style butter, which contains 93 percent butterfat compared to the industry standard of 89 percent.

The dairy's butter churn can hold 100 gallons and in 15 minutes produce 430 pounds of butter.

"We can't keep enough butter

and cream,” Sparkman said. “These are the things we were excited about when we got in the business of milk.”

Since Sparkman’s got into producing its own milk brand, it is now possible for homesick Colquitt County college students to get a little taste of home. The milk is available at Georgia Tech, Emory University and Valdosta State University. The milk also is sold at Emory Healthcare and St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital.

Locally, products are available at the three Oxley’s in Moultrie and one in Pavo, Bill Simpson’s stores, Robinson’s One Stop, Corner Cakery, Pine Ridge in Norman Park and several restaurants. The Sparkmans also operate a retail store at the dairy on Rossman Dairy Road.

Rounding out the product line is drinkable yogurt.

The yogurt produced at Sparkman’s is unique, Sparkman said, in that there is no added water, coloring or flavoring, only milk and fruit.

“We had the opportunity to produce smoothies,” he said. “My son was determined to do this without adding anything unnatural to it. We’ve had a lot of interest in our yogurt. We’re trying to capture as much of that marketplace as we can.”

Ice cream also is in the future for the dairy, but Sparkman is not sure if production will resume in 2011 although customer reaction was favorable.

“The process is very sensitive,” he said. “You have to be very careful with the temperature because if you aren’t ice crystals develop and it ruins it. We’ve got a lot of work to do on that still.”

Even though the dairy has seen tremendous growth, the family is looking to expand the operation, which ships to 13 states including as far away as Connecticut, Maryland, New York and Wisconsin.



This calf is one of dozens that are bottle-fed several times a day and will be the milk producers of tomorrow for the dairy. Photo by Alan Mauldin



Olga Chavez packs boxes of butter. Sparkman’s has temporarily halted the production of ice cream due to the high demand and prices for butter and cream. Photo by Alan Mauldin

“Because of the technology in our mail delivery system and designed containers that will hold temperatures to allow us to move across country we’re looking at Internet sales,” Sparkman said of making individual sales as far as the West Coast. “At one time it was costly to move product across the country. All that is coming in line now that they have the containers.”

“We have the opportunity to go west. We’re really excited about that.”

While strong prices for milk is food for the business, one cause for concern is the high price of grains. The cows’ diet includes corn, grass, sorghum and distillers grains, a byproduct of ethanol production.

Despite the television commercials touting California’s cows’ state of mind, Sparkman said that Georgia bovines can be just as contented.

“We like to think our cows are just as happy as those in California,” he said. “It’s hard to believe we see those ads in Georgia all the time.”

What makes Sparkman happy is hearing from customers who enjoy his products. That particularly is the case with bakers and chefs who find the cream superior to those made from milk from different cow breeds.

“That’s the good stuff,” he said. “That’s what keeps me going and makes the bumps and bruises worth it.”

Making dairy tougher in the Southeast is heat, said UGA professor Bernard. As temperatures get to 68 and above cows begin burning energy in cooling themselves, something that dairy states such as Minnesota and Wisconsin do not have to deal with as often as the South.

“Cows, dairy cows in particular, originated from a temperate environment,” Bernard said. “In the 90s, they can actually be in a place where they’re panting. If they’re doing that they don’t



Calves are treated specially at Sparkman's — to keep them happy. Photo by Alan Mauldin

want to eat. If they don’t eat, they don’t produce milk.”

Southern farmers have adapted to some extent with the use of misting systems and shaded barns with fans. Without those aids cows could produce 10 pounds less milk each per day, Bernard said.

“It costs more to produce milk in this part of the country,” he said. “(But) There are some advantages here, particularly when you think about the long growing season. You don’t have that in Wisconsin with the snow cover much of the year.”

Local dairy farmers mostly grow their own forage but have supplements that others do not have such as cotton seeds and even citrus pulp that Florida growers ship to cattle producers.

Bernard said that the Sparkmans have done a good job with their herd of Jersey cows and the business overall.

“They do a great job in ensuring they put a quality product on the shelf,” he said.



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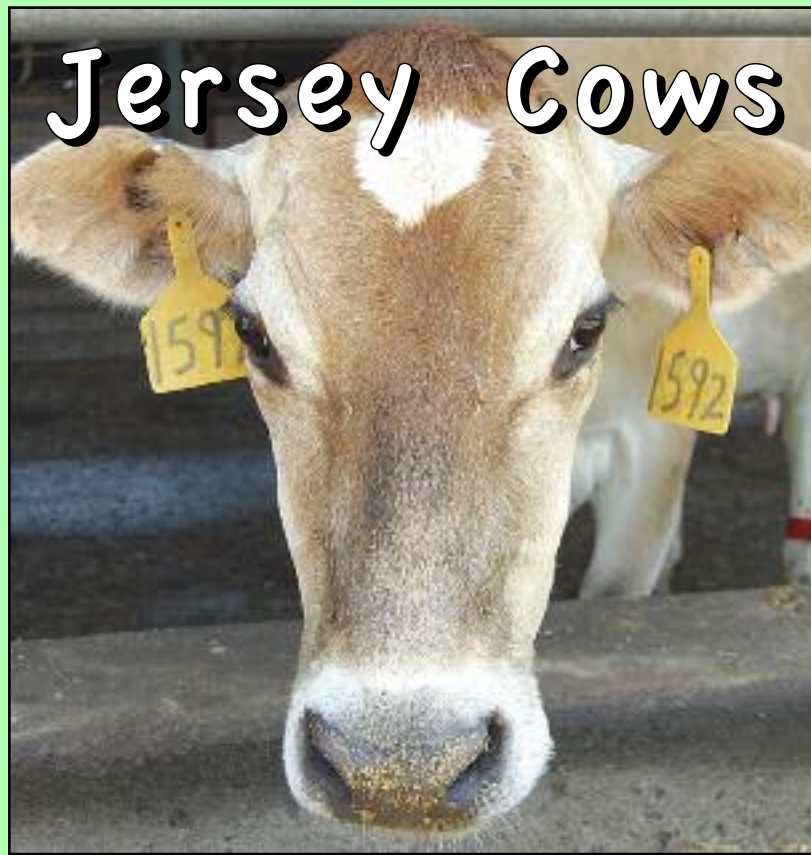
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According to Woodside Farm Creamery, here are some facts about the breed of cows that Sparkman's Dairy uses.

- Jersey cows originated on the Island of Jersey, a small British island in the English Channel off the coast of France

- Jersey cows account for 3.8 percent of U.S. milk production, with Holsteins accounting for 95.2 percent of the 167 billion pounds produced annually

- Jerseys' average weight is 900 to 1,200 pounds. They are the most heat-tolerant of cow breeds and produce more pounds of milk per pound of body weight than any other breed.



- One Jersey named Marlu Milady's produced 22,235 gallons during her lifetime

- Cows are milked an average of three to four years

- Jersey cows can range in color from a shade of fawn, but also may be gray, reddish, spotted white or even nearly all black. Whatever the color, the underside of the cow is normally lighter

- A Jersey cow named Mainstream Berretta Joy of Lynden, Wash., is the world milk champion, producing 44,930 pounds of milk in 365 days, and produced more than 40,000 pounds in two consecutive years.



A Sparkman's employee cleans the storage tank after milk production is finished for the day. The pipes are part of the system in which fats and solids initially are removed from the milk and then reinserted to make different types of milk and chocolate milk. Excess fats and solids are used in the production of cream and butter. Photo by Alan Mauldin

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DIRT TRACK RACING



Photo by Adelia Ladson

The smell of the fumes, the roar of the engines and the taste of the dust

BY ADELIA LADSON
adelia.ladson@gafnews.com

If you've never been to a car race — any kind of car race — then you should go at least once. Now, honestly, I'm not necessarily a NASCAR fan because I don't follow it and I'm not going to watch it on television. I have, however, been to two NASCAR races in my life (one being the 50th running of the Daytona 500) and have completely loved every minute of them. It's just the entire experience of being there watching about 83 tons of metal flying around a track in speeds in

excess of 190 miles per hour. It's primal — our need for speed.

But let me tell you something folks, if you go just a little ways out of Norman Park and turn on John Vickers Road, there's a "little old place" called Needmore Speedway — you might have heard of it. It's a place where the motto is: Fast and Dirty. Now, if you haven't seen dirt track racing, then you haven't felt the thrill and terror of "out-of-control" personified into living, breathing, racing color; you haven't seen the flash of neon through a cloud of dust; and you certainly haven't

tasted the combination of dirt and adrenaline that's in-your-face entertainment. "Fast and dirty," indeed.

Chris Hunnicutt, owner of Needmore Speedway, said the track actually started out as a practice track for his son who was into dirt track racing. Then, they looked around and noticed that the closest tracks were in Albany and Waycross.

"And we just took the next step," he said.

He said they were hoping for good turnouts to the races and got pretty close to what they expected because dirt track racing is well-followed.

"It's a nice family atmosphere and it's something entertaining to do aside from going to the movies," he added.

This year's season opened in March and will continue into October with races running on Saturdays. To find out when the races are scheduled, you can go to the track's website at www.needmorespeedway.com or call the office at 229-769-5611. That's what I did to find the race I wanted to check out.

When the gates opened at 1 p.m. for the World of Outlaws Late Model Series, a steady stream of cars with race-goers filed through. The stream would continue through most of the afternoon — people from Alabama, Florida and as far away as Ohio tend to show up for the races. Jenny Edwards, Hunnicutt's sister-in-law, works the gate making sure everyone gets through and where they're supposed to be for the race. Her bubbly, easy-going personality keeps the fans happy as they go through

the long line at the entrance.

"We get out here. We cut the fool. We have fun. ... It's not all work and here you get all the sun you want. You don't even have to go to the tanning bed," she said laughing.

She also said that on an average race day, which this was not, they get about 3,000 fans — this race was expected to bring in many more. She said that there were lots of fans who attend the races on a regular basis and she and the others who work the gate have made friends with them. She said some of them bring them water and Gatorade. Emphasizing this point, as I was chatting with her, one of the fans handed her a tin-foil wrapped container out of their window — it contained a brisket.

"We have the greatest fans that come out here. ... The most fun I have out here is all the stories I hear," she said smiling.

Fans show up as late as 8 p.m., so Edwards works the gate the entire time. She doesn't get to see the races.

"Except ... my nephew's. And I sneak down there," she said sassily, as if telling a secret.

She said that everyone who works at the track is from the community and when I went in, I struck up a conversation with Greg Keigans who lives about 300 yards from the track.

"I think it's the best thing that ever happened," he said.

He said he works at the track every weekend and as I was talking to him, he went over to the fuel pump to help one of the racers — local driver Cole Summerlin. Watching Keigans pump fuel into the white super street model the 18-year-old Summerlin races, I got a chance to speak with Eddie, Summerlin's father.

"When he's in this car, I know where he's at. He's not running the streets," he said emphatically.

Eddie said that Cole has run about 20 races and this was his second year racing. He said he used to race so it kind of stayed in the family.

"It gets in your blood," he said.

"Speed," added Cole.

I walked around the area where the drivers had their "camps" set-up and was met with a candy store of bright colors from primary to neon.

These machines were sleek and beautiful ... and very well taken care of judging by the flurry of activity surrounding them. You couldn't help but want to run your hand down the side of one of those gorgeous pieces of metal. Of course, I didn't because I didn't want to look goofy or have the drivers look at me suspiciously but it was definitely tempting.

Hunnicutt had pointed me toward where some of the local drivers were set up, and the first one I came to was Kelly Walker's camp. There, I found April Carlton of Doerun whose boyfriend is one of Walker's crew. She was hanging out on the back steps of the huge trailer that was Walker headquarters. She told me that the "speed" (there's that word again) was what made the experience exciting for her. She said when Needmore Speedway was built, it gave her the option to see the race every weekend instead of having to plan to go to the Albany Motor Speedway.

"It's something to do on the weekend. ... It's totally different when you're just coming to watch it and when you're helping work on it," she said.

She told me that the drivers and their crew pretty much worked on the cars all through the week to be ready for the weekend's race and that Walker races three different cars.

"That's what we've been doing all week," she added.

Since Walker was not around, and Carlton said he would be around later, I moved on down the line and found three people sitting under a shelter who seemed to be enjoying the atmosphere, too. I couldn't believe my luck when I found out that it was Shane Lee, the announcer for Needmore Speedway and Albany Motor Speedway, and his parents, Donna and Terry Lee. He was a wealth of knowledge about the sport itself and gave me great insight into dirt track racing and its culture.

"There's just something about dirt track racing. I just love it. ... I'm at the racetracks every weekend," he said.

He said it gives people something to do on a Saturday night and there were many young drivers racing. He also basically repeated what Cole Summerlin's dad said, "Parents know where their kids are on Friday



Needmore is a 3/8 mile, 90-foot-wide dirt oval track. Photo by Adelia Ladson

and Saturday nights instead of them being out on the street.” He pointed out a family to me and said that it was a family atmosphere.

“It is definitely a family-oriented sport. ... It’s just fun. It’s a great atmosphere. Chris has done a good thing out here,” he said.

He also said that people from all over come out to watch the races and this was good for tourism in the community.

When I asked him about what was going on that afternoon, he told me that the super late model series that would be racing that day were the equivalent of NASCAR racing in dirt track and that many NASCAR racers ran in dirt track racing. He said he believed that NASCAR racer Tony Stewart helped to “put dirt track racing back on the map.”

He also explained to me how the cars actually “drift” around the turns and that it would be something to see that afternoon.

“You have to turn right to go left. As long as I’ve been watching racing, it never ceases to amaze me they way they can go into a straightaway and then ease off and be able to hold it straight,” he said.

On examining some of the cars before I talked to Lee, I had noticed that they looked to me like they weren’t very heavy. Or, to be more accurate, they looked not so sturdy on the outside. When I hesitantly voiced this observation to him (I didn’t want to offend by suggesting that these cars weren’t sturdy), he nodded his head and said that they looked basically like a dune buggy with sheet metal on it.

Lee also explained there were six different classes of cars that run out at Needmore — mini stock, enduro, pure stock, super street, limited sportsman and late models. That night they only ran four of the classes and the World of



Greg Keigans, left, an employee of the track, puts fuel into Funston driver Cole Summerlin's car, right. Summerlin also raced in the super stock series and placed eighth that evening. Photo by Adelia Ladson



Si Davis, left, and Zane Johnson make some adjustments on No. 5 before the evening's race. Drivers usually work on their cars all through the week to get ready for the weekend's race. Photo by Adelia Ladson

Zane Johnson of Moultrie, in the No. 5, does some practice runs around the track before his super stock event. He placed second that night. Photo by Adelia Ladson



Outlaws late models would be running 40 laps. They usually have about 100 plus drivers every Saturday night, he said.

“It’s all about hobby not making money. It’s all about loving the sport,” he said.

The drivers rarely get the money back that they put in to it, he added. He said it never stopped: Come Monday, the drivers and crews will be working on their cars again to get ready for the next Saturday night.

“It’s like a disease. Once you’re hooked on it, you can’t stop,” he said.

After I left Lee and his parents, I saw Zane Johnson, also 18, another driver from Moultrie who would be racing that day. He was doing some repairs on his super street, with the help of Si Davis. Even though he was busy getting ready for the race, he took the time to answer some of my questions. My biggest one being, “Why do you do it?”

“I love it. My daddy raced for years. I’ve been in it for so long. It’s fun,” he said simply and to the point.

He told me that he had run eight or nine feature events and he had a brother, Jay, who also raced.

“It’s loud and dirty and just fun. I really don’t know how to describe it,” he said shaking his head.

“It’s an adrenaline rush,” Davis interjected.

“It ought to be a good show tonight,” Johnson added.

He also told me that he worked on his car all through the week and when I asked him how fast it would go, he shrugged his shoulders and said it didn’t have a speedometer. When I mentioned how light it looked, he told me that it weighed about 3,000 pounds.

Before I left him, I asked him if he had any last words and he said, “Thanks to all my sponsors. If it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t be out here.”

Those pretty paint jobs on the cars weren’t just for decoration. Just like in NASCAR, these cars are plastered with business logos ... and, I noticed, some girls’ names inside of hearts. Kind of reminded me of knights wearing their lady’s ribbon when jousting.

I went back to Kelly Walker’s camp and was able to catch up with him for a few moments. He told me that he had run about 60 or 70 features since he’s been running and this was almost his second year of racing.

Walker said he and his father-in-law, Tony Lasseter, started going to watch the races in Albany. He said he had always wanted to race, and after about a year he took the plunge.

“We just decided one night that we’d give it a whirl. That’s how I got started,” he said.

For just “giving it a whirl,” Walker seems to be doing quite well. He was a champion his

first year of racing at the Albany Motor Speedway, Lee told me in our conversation earlier.

Walker also mentioned, just like Lee did, that the Outlaws race tonight was the NASCAR of dirt track racing and he would be running with them. By the way, talk about light, his super late model weighs 2,200 pounds. Even a Mini Cooper’s curb weight is 2,535. I understand why these cars have to be light. What I just don’t understand is what keeps them from taking flight when they’re burning around the track. To me, and I do plead race car ignorance, it looked like a strong wind could pick them up when they were out there.

Walker told me that he and Lasseter decided to go with the model he’s racing because he had never raced before.

“We’ve run four features since we’ve been racing,” he added.

When I asked him what it was like out on the track and

how did it feel to be out there, he replied in no uncertain terms, “You feel out of control all the time. It’s really fun. I enjoy it.”

He also added that it was like being on a slick dirt road making a sharp turn and trying to hold on to it.

“To make the turns, you’re on the edge of being out of control,” he said.

He has two young boys and he said that they loved coming out to the track.

“It’s a family-oriented thing out here. We’re fortunate around here because there are a lot of dirt tracks around here,” he said.

As it was getting closer to the drivers’ meeting, I thanked Walker for taking time to talk with me and headed toward the office and stands. I was starting to really feel the heat and was

kicking myself for not being better prepared when I was saved by Donna and Terry Lee who gave this poor girl a bottle of water and a ride. The couple was tooling around on their golf cart because Donna was a photographer who took pictures regularly at the races. She actually was going to be out in the middle of the track for the races.

They let me tag along with them up to where they had a reserved spot next to the fence around the track. This was where Terry would be enjoying the race. This is where I would get a taste of things to come that evening.

After the driver’s meeting the drivers were allowed to go out on the track for practice runs. As I watched, I was reminded of fishtailing around a turn or on a straight piece like

they used to do on dirt roads back in the day when you wanted to see just what your parent’s car could do. (Ahh ... that brings back memories. Although, I didn’t exactly fishtail around a turn on purpose — it kind of snuck up on me.) Except this was to the utter extreme and I don’t ever remember one of the wheels losing contact with the road when I was along for the ride. I totally got what Walker said about always feeling on the edge of being out of control because that is exactly how it looked. As I tried to get some photographs, I found myself cringing and gripping my camera tightly every time I watched the cars take the turns. Then, when I was secure in the fact that the cars really were not going flip over, I just sat back for the rest of the time and “enjoyed the ride.” Al-

though, in the practice rounds, one of the drivers did hit the wall and the car had to be towed off. Terry told me that it was a good possibility that the car would be out for the race that night.

As for tasting the dust, when you are close to the fence like I was, you very likely will get sprayed with dirt as the cars race by. That’s just all part of it. I mean where else do you get to wear part of the track home?

To me, the most amazing part was watching the drivers I had just chatted with earlier in the day making their runs. These regular, very accessible guys — many from around here — were out on the track doing fantastic things. I have to admit I got a little catch in my throat just watching the beauty of the whole thing.



Dirt track racing brings many loyal followers out on weekends to Needmore. The fans start showing up as soon as the gates open, which can be about four hours before the drivers even hit the track. Going out to the track is an all-day event and many families choose to spend their Saturdays there. Photo by Adelia Ladson



Local driver Kelly Walker ran with the Outlaws on Mother's Day and finished out this late model series race in 16th place, which earned him a part of the purse. Walker has only been racing less than two years. Photo by Adelia Ladson

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COLQUITT COUNTY'S RAILS

Do they have a future?

BY ADELIA LADSON

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Learning some of the history of the railroad showed me where we've come from (see last issue) but what I really wanted to know was where the rails were going. I wanted to know what I would find when I "followed the tracks."

And since I started with the Jack and Faye Bridwell at the museum to see where we've been, I knew that I needed to start with Darrell Moore, president of the Moultrie-Colquitt County Chamber of Commerce and the Moultrie-Colquitt County Development Authority, to see where we were now and where we were going.

"We've never really been a real strong rail community since I've been here," said Moore who moved back here in 1997.

At that time, there were three or four industries in Moultrie that used the rail system, he said, and he believes it has declined nationwide.

"It's extremely important that we keep the rail here," he said.

He added that he has had calls from companies looking for rail-serviced sites that would be prospective new businesses to open in Colquitt County.

"If you don't have it, they're not gonna look," he said.

He followed that up with the



Tracks crossing Central Avenue were taken up in October of last year. Darrell Moore, president of the Moultrie-Colquitt County Chamber of Commerce and the Development Authority, said it was OmniTrax's decision to take them up but it was also a potential liability for them because it was difficult to get them put back down through DOT, once they were gone. Photo by Kevin Hall

fact that there are sites he can show prospective new businesses that can be serviced by the rail system. He also said that it might give businesses here a possible option — especially if gas prices continue to go up and they need to look for alternate transportation.

He said, currently, what we have servicing Colquitt County is a short line.

"I think they do a good job serving the people who are here. ... They're a lot more flexible and a lot more accommodating. ... We'd do everything we could do to keep them

here," he said.

Moore said the Broe Group, which is headquartered in Denver, Colo., managed the rail system that is in our community. It is run through their affiliate OmniTrax, one of North America's largest private railroad and transportation services companies, according to its website.

Also according to the OmniTrax website, Georgia & Florida Railway, Inc. (GFR) is a network of approximately 297 miles of track radiating from its Albany, Ga., headquarters, and extending into northwestern

Florida near the Gulf of Mexico. GFR's commodity mix is quite diverse, with carload revenue split between wood pulp, beer, agricultural commodities, limestone/aggregate and a multitude of other commodities. Customers include Miller Brewing, Procter & Gamble (P&G) and Buckeye Technologies.

Two companies in Moultrie are using the rail system on a limited basis: Beadles Lumber Company and Universal Forest Products.

Victor Beadles told me that one of the reasons his father located the company in Moultrie back in 1948 was because of the railroad.

"They shipped most of the lumber by rail. They loaded by hand back then," he said.

Now, the lumber is loaded by forklift on the flat railroad cars, he added.

He also told me that the railroad eventually lost much of the lumber transportation because trucks could get it to the customers quicker than by rail. However, he said, back in the '50s, when the paper mills started, his company started using rail to ship wood chips to them.

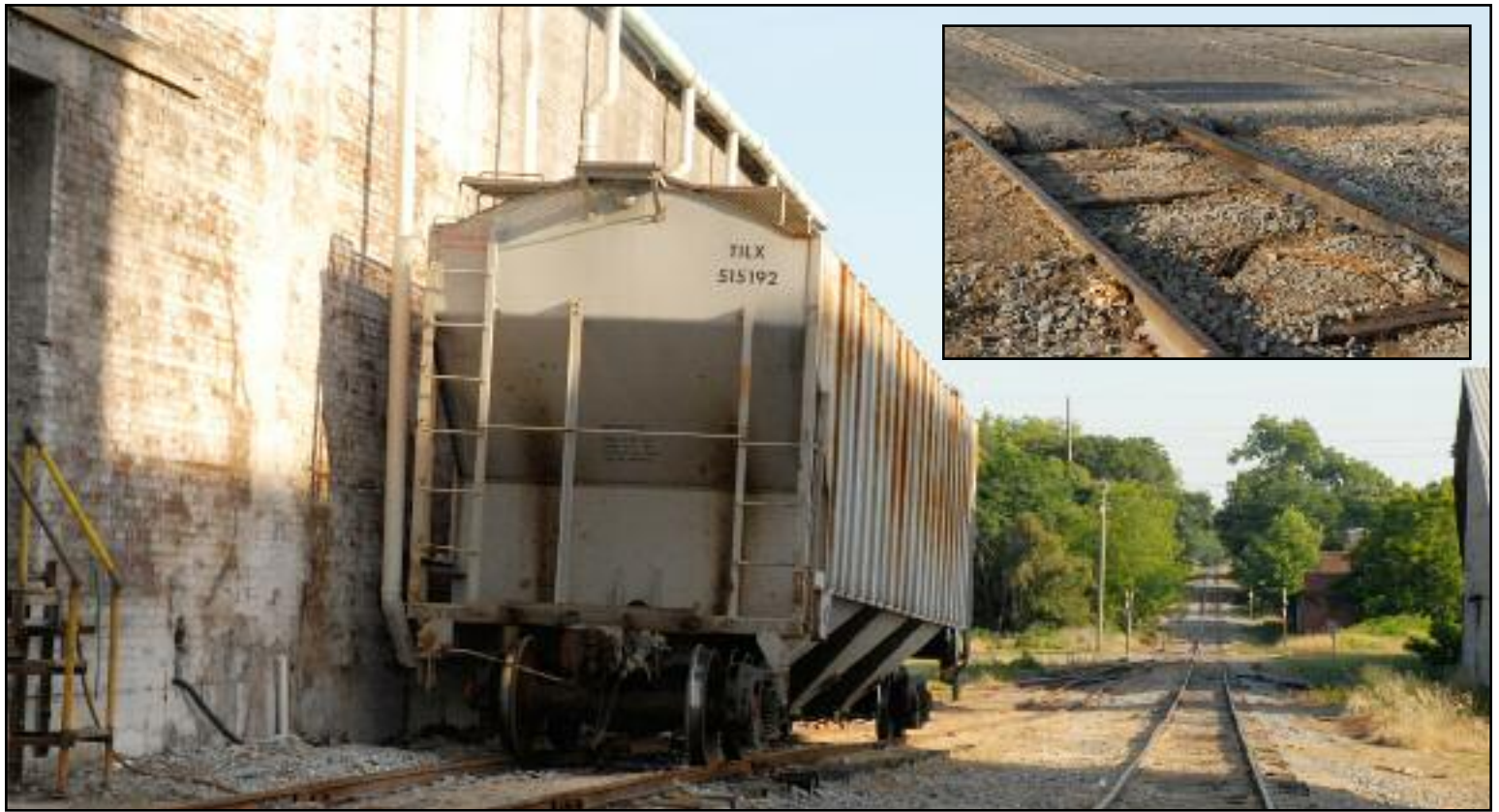
"When they lost a lot of the lumber shipments, they picked up the wood chips. That went on many years," he said.

Then, last year, his customer didn't want the chips by rail anymore and he started shipping them by truck.

"So now the only thing we are doing by rail is lumber," he said.

Beadles said that is less than 10 percent of what he ships out and that goes up North because the railroad can beat the price on the long haul over the short haul.

"You don't want to load a railcar for Tifton," he said laughing.



Going down Fourth Avenue Northeast there's that large railroad crossing and when you look to the right, you see this forlorn looking railroad car. It looks like it's been forgotten. In the inset above, the tracks just off the road at that crossing have broken cross-ties. Photo by Adelia Ladson

He also added that he uses the rail system on an “as needed” basis.

“We would have preferred to continue to ship those chips by rail,” he said.

He said that the rest of the products they sell — bark, sawdust and shavings — all goes by truck.

Beadles said he calls Omni-Trax when they have a shipment, and a rail car is sent out of Albany to pick it up. He said the percentage of customers who want the rail service has shrunk in the South in the lumber industry.

“But say if lumber is coming from Canada, you’re going to put it on railcars,” he said.

When I spoke with Lee Brooks over at Universal Forest Products, he told me that they used the rail system for incoming shipments mostly instead of outbound shipments.

“When you load a railcar, it takes a long time. We do use train system and intermodal



These are tracks that run behind Trinity Baptist Church. They literally just stop a few feet from the road they cross. Photo by Adelia Ladson

system, where they load it on vans and take it to a terminal. It's simply easier," he said.

He said the outbound freight was 15-20 percent via the intermodal system and Land Star was the company they used.

"It takes a little longer — four to five days longer," he added.

He said almost everything from Canada and the upper Midwest comes in by rail to them and it was usually spruce. He said 90 percent of his spruce was delivered this way, — but that's only about 10 to 15 percent of their total consumption. He added that they used mostly yellow pine, which is available locally.

On speaking with both Beadles and Brooks, it seemed to me that around here, the rail system is only used when there's no rush on getting the

product in or out and it's coming from or going to a long way away. However, as Moore said earlier, he has had prospective businesses who have called him looking for rail service and we do have that to offer to them still.

Colquitt County's involvement with the railroad seems to have come full circle. My trip down the tracks started with lumber and the tracks have led me back to lumber. Or ... maybe no so much "back to" as just slowly and surely chugging along over the past years, carrying the same thing.

No one can really say for sure what the future holds for any industry, but for right now the trains are still running and the rail system that helped build our community still has some support from the community in return.



Beadles Lumber Company is one of two companies in town, that I found, that still use the rail system on a limited basis. Above is a rail car loaded with MSR lumber ready to go up to Chicago, and below is the same car being loaded by James Moore, on the forklift, and Bennie Griffin. Owner Victor Beadles said that he calls OmniTrax, which owns the Georgia & Florida Railway, and they send a car out to him when he has a shipment ready to go. Photo by Adelia Ladson



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