

Yesterday & Today

NEWSLETTER OF THE LOWNDES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



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The Valdosta Daily Times, December 25, 1909

Editor's Note

This is our family's fourth holiday season in Valdosta and the end of my first year editing this newsletter. Both milestones remind me how this time of year lends itself to reflection and reminiscence—and how history is wound up in it all.

Every time we pull an ornament box down from the attic, or write a Christmas card to a friend in a far-flung place, or prepare our usual dishes for dinner on New Year's Eve, we make meaning from memory. Like the Museum's archives, our holiday traditions keep us connected to the stories that form who we are and enable us to pass them on to our children (page 3). They anchor us in the present through the lens of a past remembered deeply, fondly, viscerally.

2025 was a year filled with many achievements for the Society and Museum. President Michael Black shares the results of the organization's renewed commitment to growth and renewal, the acquisition and maintenance of assets, and planned outreach to the community (page 2). Ongoing partnerships with groups like Scouting America are enabling area youth to deepen their learning of local history while making significant contributions to the Museum (pages 5 and 6). And as Executive Director Renate Milner points out, people from all over the world count on the Museum for practical, academic, and social reasons, just as they rely on its supporters to preserve its very existence (page 4).

Thank you to everyone who worked hard all year to keep the Museum the thriving, welcoming place that it is. Wishing you and your family a very Merry Christmas and all the best for a happy and healthy 2026!

Amy Faeskorn

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President's Annual Report

by Michael Black

As we close a productive year at the Lowndes County Historical Society, I'm pleased to share the tremendous progress we have made together. Thanks to the dedication of our members, volunteers, trustees, staff, and interns, we advanced many important initiatives that strengthen our mission and enhance the experience we offer to our community.

This year we successfully launched our new website which now includes online membership payments. We increased our social media presence and communicated more frequently with members by delivering newsletters directly to their inboxes. These improvements have helped us stay connected and share the stories, events, and preservation efforts that matter to our members.

Our programs and community partnerships remained a point of pride. We contributed to the Lowndes County Bicentennial celebrations and supported the Georgia Trust Fall Ramble this October. Both gave us the chance to shine a light on local history and welcome visitors who might not have known us otherwise. Throughout the year we also hosted student groups of all ages from elementary school to college for tours, research, and hands-on learning.

Much of our momentum this year came from key improvements to our facilities. Highlights included repairing the bell and repainting the bell tower, replacing the awning at the rear entrance, upgrading our door-access cameras, and giving the outdoor exhibits behind the Carnegie Library a much-needed refresh. Inside the Carnegie and the Bird Annex, several exhibit updates are well underway. We also completed necessary repairs to the Bird Annex following a 2024 car accident. These efforts ensure that our buildings remain both safe and inspiring spaces for visitors.

Several initiatives are actively underway for 2026 including revising our marketing and publicity materials, increasing content on our website, revising the emergency response plan, and improving indoor and outdoor exhibits. And of course, we remain focused on growing our membership.

I remain grateful for the continued support of our members. Your enthusiasm for history and preservation fuels everything we do. Together, we have built an organization that honors the past while preparing for the future, and I look forward to another rewarding year ahead.

The society depends on the generosity of its patrons around the world
to carry out our mission.

Thank you to all contributors.

received September 1 - December 3, 2025

Memorials

Ken Ferrell

Kent and Vicki Edwards

Wendell Godbee

Mr. and Mrs. Jimmy Simpson

Wayne Hall

Jim Hathaway

Bobby Green

Lester Mulligan

Lester Williams

Mr. and Mrs. Jimmy Simpson

Sherri Gregory

Ronnie and Bebo Blanton

Dr. Lucy Greene

Ron and Carol Irwin

Donations

Michael and Floye Luke

Pines, Plays, and People

Lowndes County holiday festivities through the years

Regardless of one's religious beliefs, family background, or personal preferences, this time of year brings with it a hefty dose of nostalgia (along with fruitcake, spiked egg nog, and potato latkes). The cancellation of this year's Greater Valdosta's Community Christmas Parade due to inclement weather hasn't dampened the spirits of those who remember with fondness two local rituals that anchored the Christian and Jewish communities of Lowndes County: tree-cutting at Hambrick's Christmas Tree Farm and the annual Hanukkah production at Temple Israel Hebrew Congregation of Valdosta.

Although closed since 2018, Hambrick's continues to hold a special place in the hearts of Valdostans who grew up making the trip there each December. "To this day we still get a lot of heartfelt postings on Facebook with people sharing their stories," says Helen Hambrick, who made the difficult decision to end operations after her husband Johnnie's death from brain cancer.



Hambrick's Christmas Tree Farm in the 1960s

The farm, which was opened by his parents in 1954, was a fixture in local holiday culture and was inextricably linked with Johnnie's reputation for kindness and generosity. Chris May, who worked for Johnnie for almost 30 years, recalls how much joy the farm brought him. "He was godly. He enjoyed knowing that people who had come as children with their parents were now bringing their children to the farm. He loved that it was intergenerational," May says. Helen enjoyed the warm, personalized atmosphere. "Families would come with their kids and set up a picnic lunch after cutting down their tree," she says. "We always tried our best to provide quality service—handing out hand saws, shaking out dead needles before tying it to the car roof—whatever helped people make great memories."

Since its founding in 1907 Temple Israel has been gathering to celebrate Hanukkah, the "festival of lights" commemorating the Maccabees' retaking of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and the miracle of a small amount of oil lasting for eight nights. December of 1977 saw members Louis and Susan Schmier juggling the dual obligations of their then 8-year-old son, Michael. "Every year our Sunday school classes did some kind of Hanukkah project," Louis, current president of the synagogue, explains. "When Michael was in second grade, they made a giant menorah and put on a play. He got the lead role as the *shamash* ['helper' in Hebrew or the candle in the center of the menorah used to light all the other candles]."



Michael Schmier (seated left, striped shirt and yarmulke) with his Temple Israel Sunday School class in 1977

Michael was also cast that month as Amahl in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, the children's opera put on at the original Sallas Malone Elementary School on Patterson Street. Undaunted, he prepared for both roles as his parents fretted over the potential for cross-script contamination. "In rehearsals he would sometimes mix up his Maccabees and Wise Men, and we said to ourselves, 'This is going to be a disaster,'" laughs Louis. "We went to the performances, said a *bracha* ['blessing' in Hebrew], and crossed our fingers. He nailed both parts!"

LCHS appreciates our business and organizational members.

If you have artifacts related to your company's history in Lowndes County that you'd like to share or donate, please contact us at lchs.research@gmail.com.

Mark Your Calendar!

Upcoming Membership Meetings

March 19, 2026

May 21, 2026

September 15, 2026

Executive Director's Corner

Why the Lowndes County Museum Matters—And Why Supporting It Is Non-Negotiable

The Lowndes County Historical Society & Museum is more than a place to look at old photographs or artifacts; we serve a deeper purpose. We are the archives for both the City of Valdosta and Lowndes County, and that makes our work essential. Nearly every department in local government—planning, engineering, legal, tax assessors, historic preservation—relies on the records we preserve. When they need a map from 1920, a property photo from the 1950s, or documentation on a building long gone, they come to us. If we weren't here doing this work, much of the county's memory would simply be lost.

Since COVID, like many organizations, we faced challenges. Visitor numbers dropped, budgets tightened but we kept going. We repaired, reorganized, digitized, researched, and reopened our doors stronger than before. The results show: our visitor numbers are slowly but steadily increasing. We are now averaging over 80 visitors a month, not including online research requests, and those numbers continue to rise. People are returning—families, school groups, Moody AFB newcomers, researchers, and longtime residents rediscovering the county history, their history.

Museums matter nationally, but in a community like ours, the impact is personal. When people visit the museum, they don't come to see a generic collection. They come to see their people, their neighborhoods, their schools, their stories. They come to understand how Valdosta grew, who shaped it, and why it looks the way it does today. That connection creates pride, identity, and a sense of belonging.

There is also a practical side. Visitors eat at local restaurants, walk through downtown, attend events, and bring others back with them. When businesses and industries look at Valdosta, they don't just look at numbers—they look at culture, stability, and community investment. A county with a strong museum and an organized archive sends a clear message: we care about where we came from, and we care about where we are going.

The Lowndes County Museum has carried out this work for generations, and we continue to do it every day. Supporting it means supporting the official memory of this county and ensuring that the next generation can still find the records, stories, and photographs that shaped this place.

We have come through adversity and are building momentum again. The community's support is what allows us to keep doing this vital work.



An elephantine task accomplished

Randa Gladwin puts her Scouting skills to use as Gypsy gets a much needed makeover



Randa Gladwin replanting near Gypsy

As any visitor to the Museum in recent years knows, the outdoor Gypsy the Elephant exhibit has needed some love. When Valdosta High School senior Randa Gladwin took a closer look, she realized it would make an ideal Eagle Scout Service Project.

"I was familiar with the story of Gypsy from my middle school history class," recalls Gladwin. "Our Scout troop has been at the Museum pretty regularly for flag raising, and every time I saw the statue I knew I could do something to restore it."

After sharing her idea with the Museum and gaining permission to proceed, Gladwin started planning in January. First, she conducted in-depth research into Gypsy's story, using both the Museum's indoor exhibit and online resources. Next,

she completed Scouting America's comprehensive documentation requirement for Eagle Scout projects, which entails mapping out the timeline, uploading "before" photos, naming individuals who can provide assistance, and creating a budget.

The real work began in earnest in June, when Gladwin began sending emails to her troop and preparing the landscape for its upgrade. "We started taking out all the plants and cleaning up the statue," she says. "We also took out the old fence and painted features onto Gypsy to make her stand out a bit more. On other days, we planted new plants and replaced the fence."

The boldest part of Gladwin's proposed design was the erecting of a brand new sign, mounted on a wooden post to Gypsy's left, along with three boards mounted on the fence behind her with additional information about the exhibit. "I had a lot of fun working on those parts," she says, noting that several of her fellow Scouts helped her complete them. Over the summer she continued to

(continued on next page)



Pamela Miller, Henry Miller, Amelia Miller, Jon Weber, Randa Gladwin, Randy Gladwin

(continued from previous page)

document her progress with Scouting America in great detail and after presenting her project in person to a Scouting board earlier this month officially became an Eagle Scout—a rank attained by only four percent of Scouts nationwide.

Gladwin was the first Scout in her troop to do an Eagle project at the Museum, and she's hoping it will be the first of many. "Everything went smoothly, and we all had a lot of fun," she says. Her advice to those who may follow in her elephant tracks? Persistence. "It's intense, but if you stay on top of it, it's so rewarding. Some days you won't want to work, but you have to see it through!"



Chris May, Avery Blanton, Mike Winters, Richard Terry,
Ricky Edwards, Michael Black



VSU students enrolled in the Race, Class,
and Gender class at their November visit



Paul Watson, Steve Findlay, Michael Black

The September Membership Meeting featured a full "Back to School" program. Speakers included Mrs. Sandra Wilcher, Superintendent of the Lowndes County Schools, and Dr. Craig Lockhart, Superintendent of the Valdosta City Schools.

LCHS President Dr. Michael Black presented certificates of appreciation to volunteers from Scouting America Troop 491 and Col. Edmund N. Atkinson SCV Camp 680.

This fall saw many visitors to the Museum. VSU Instructor Robert Taylor brought his Race, Class, and Gender class for extra credit. All 22 fifth grade students from Valwood School went outside to ring the newly repaired bell!

Jeremy Petrella and Lilla Kate Hart represented the board at the meeting of the Lowndes County Department Heads on November 17th.



Lowndes County department heads at the November
meeting and visit to the bicentennial exhibit

His word is law

In his sixth decade of service, longtime trustee John R. Bennett continues to make the preservation of local history a top priority



Bennett at the 2024 LCHS Holiday Social

Although he wasn't born in Valdosta —his family relocated to Lowndes County from Kansas City, the city of his birth, when he was in the 1st grade —John Bennett learned from an early age the importance of civic engagement.

"My mother, Lee, was an art history teacher and a painter, so I started volunteering in the arts community when I was young," he recalls. "I started delivering *The Valdosta Daily Times* on my bicycle when I was 11. I was always out and about and seeing what was going on in my neighborhood."

After graduating from Valdosta High School in 1959, Bennett attended what was then Valdosta State College, where he majored in history and graduated in 1963. He credits his professor (and former LCHS president) Dr. Bill Gabard with igniting his passion for understanding and documenting the past.

"We studied southern and western expansion a lot, but when we started writing papers about local history, I was hooked," he says. Gabard invited Bennett to attend meetings of the fledging Lowndes County Historical Society, held at the time at the yellow house on Patterson Street near the university campus. After graduating from the University of Georgia law school in 1966, Bennett joined the Army, where he served as a JAG attorney, returning to Valdosta in 1971. By then, Bennett had taken an active leadership role and was asked to become a trustee. "They needed some legal help," he laughs. "So I was able to advise them on incorporation and other aspects of formalizing the organization."

Bennett's father, Harold, also became involved early on and eventually became a trustee as well. "I was lucky that my parents weren't from here but soon became 'native,'" Bennett says. "My dad was on the city council and was instrumental in getting the ordinance passed to protect the Carnegie Library from destruction. It was always the expectation and part of our family values that we kids would serve the community."

Over the years, Bennett has seen many positive changes in the growth of the Museum. "I love seeing how the organization has matured. I can remember when we were lucky to be open a day or two on weekends. We're making great strides with the new generation coming up. [Current President] Michael Black is doing wonderful things for us."

Now fully retired from his trust, estate, and elder law practice, Bennett enjoys gardening and spending time with his grandchildren and in the company of his Springer Doodle, Maddie. After over 50 years of service, he'll complete his appointment as treasurer and his term as trustee this month. Fellow trustees and members extend their deepest gratitude to him and wish him the best.

Renew your membership online today!

lowndescountymuseum.com/membership



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