



The Escambia County Historical Society, Founded 1971

The Nov./Dec. 2021 Newsletter
 There will not be a regular meeting in December nor will there be a Christmas Party. The Next Regular Meeting will be January 25, 2022 at 3:00 pm in the Meeting Room in the Museum (mask required).



Emily Blejwas

Program for the January 28, 2022 Meeting

The guest speaker for the January meeting will be Emily Blejwas. She is the Executive Director of the Alabama Folklore Association (AFA). She is also the author of The Story of Alabama in Fourteen Foods, among other books. She has researched and written on Alabama history and culture for the Encyclopedia of Alabama, Alabama Heritage Magazine, the Alabama Review, and Mobile Bay Magazine.

Emily will present a program on how it used to be, how we used to do the things that were a part of everyday life

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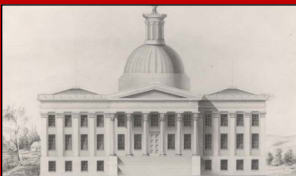


Farmers once brought corn to this 19th century gristmill near Roeton (Coffee County) to be ground into meal.



Major Moniac Presentation

Governor Kay Ivey presented the Alabama Distinguished Service Medal posthumously to Major David Moniac (1802 – 1836) in the Old House Chamber at The State Capitol November 15, 2021 in Montgomery, Ala. Major Moniac, a Creek Indian, was the first Native American and first minority to graduate from the United States Military Academy.



First Montgomery State Capitol, 1849, burned, replaced by present capitol.

Volume 48 No. 11/12
 Nov./Dec. 2021

Major Moniac Presentation of Distinguished Service Medal



**Major Moniac Presentation in the Old House Chamber at The State Capitol
November 15, 2021**



Text of Distinguished Service Medal

For gallantry in action while serving in the Creek Volunteer Mounted Regiment in the Battle of Wahoo Swamp during the Second Seminole War on November 21, 1836. Major Moniac's regiment was advancing rapidly through a dense forest when it was stopped by a muddy, boggy, 30-foot wide stream of unknown depth. Disregarding his own safety, Major Moniac advanced into the stream to determine if it was fordable and to reconnoiter the far bank. His selfless act triggered an ambush that killed him instantly-his body being struck by as many as 67 bullets-but his sacrifice saved the lives of countless Creeks and soldiers waiting to cross the stream. His action was in keeping with the finest tradition of military heroism and reflect distinct credit upon himself, the Creek regiment, and the United States Army.

News and Announcements



**Sammie with
Husband Gilbert**

ECHS Member Sammie McGlothren Passed Away in October

Educator and artist, Sammie was an active member of ECHS. She could be counted on to provide refreshments for the meetings and bring

interesting items to “Show and Tell” programs. She enjoyed both the meetings and the society’s field trips to visit museums and historical sites.

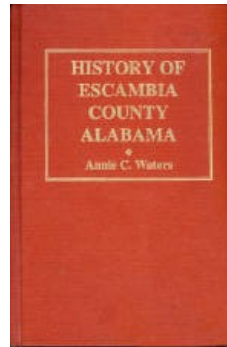
Sammie’s late husband Gilbert McGlothren and daughter Eva Tew McInnis (deceased), were also members of ECHS.



**Sammie, in back,
with Jacquie Stone.
Jacque and
Sammie had been
friends since
childhood and were
related through
marriage.**

Preparation of Annie Waters’ History of Escambia County, Alabama for a Reprint Near Completion

Don Sales says that the digitized copy of the book is about 85% complete. Work is being done on photos and copies of maps so as to improve the quality of these images in the digitized version.



The ECHS *Journal* Section

Fireballing

In 1992, Alabama Folkways published a column by Douglas Purcell on the holiday tradition of Fireballing.

There was such enthusiastic response to the article that Alabama Folkways published another article on fireballing in 1993, “Holiday Fireball Tradition Revisited” by Anne Kimzey.

Then in 2005, Janie Treadwell published “Great Balls of Fire! Fun with Fireballs in the South” in the Troy Messenger.

Following are all three articles:

**Fireballing
By Doug Purcell
From <<https://books.google>>**

Over the past 15 to 20 years, a unique southern folk tradition has been revived in a few communities in Alabama and perhaps other rural areas of the South. This unique game is variously called “kerosene ball” or “Hail-E-Over” or is simply re-



**Cloth Ball Soaked in
Kerosene-A Fireball**

ferred to as throwing “fireballs.” Sometimes referred to as the “poor man’s fireworks,” this game was practiced in Alabama and Georgia on a regular basis 50 to 150 years ago. It involves tossing or throwing a flaming, kerosene-soaked cotton or wool ball between players in an open field or over the roofs of the tin-clad houses.

The Gibson family in Monroe County, Ala., and the Strickland family in Barbour County, Ala. have resurrected this unusual ritual, which is usually planned around Christmas or New Year’s holidays. Some heat-tolerant players also practiced this game around the Fourth of July. In an interview several years ago, Hank Williams Jr. recalled playing with fireballs at Christmas as a young boy.

Fireballs are tightly woven cotton or wool balls about the size of a softball, which are soaked in kero-

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sene for a few weeks before their use. Three variations of the fireball game have been reported to researchers. One involves the tossing of fireballs in an open field to players to random locations or at different ends of a large cleared field. Once the fireball is lit, it is tossed back and forth to participants who try to catch it with gloved or bare hands. More often than not, the fireball hits the ground with a swooshing “thump” and is then picked up and quickly thrown to another person. Sometimes two or more balls are in play at the same time.

Another interesting variation is called “Hail-E-Over,” which is similar to a game called “Annie-Annie-Over.” In this game, the players are on opposite sides of a tin-roofed house and the flaming sphere is thrown over the house where the other team attempts to catch it. The final version involves the enclosure of the fireball in wire netting, which is then twirled on a wire by a player at night.

The origins of the game are lost to history but a similar ritual, known as “swinging the fireballs,” is played in Stonehaven, Scotland, at midnight on New Year’s Eve. Participants use wire-netting globes that are packed with rags and other paraffin soaked combustibles. The globe are then attached to long wire “ropes” and swung around the heads of young fireballing enthusiasts.

Some say the game is enjoyed as a way of burning the old year out while others believe that fireballs will help ward off evil spirits and witches. Still others think that fireballing will help ensure prosperity.



Fireballing: “The tradition of soaking balls made of cloth in a flammable liquid for throwing is an Old World holiday practice still found in some Alabama communities.”

Text and Image from <https://www.facebook.com/PublicTelevision>.



A time-lapse photo of a fireballing scene in Barbour County, Ala.
From [Fireballing in The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture](https://books.google.com) <<https://books.google.com>>

Does cartoon character Snuffy Smith’s expression “Balls of Fire” or Jerry Lee Lewis’s song “Great Balls of Fire” have anything to do with fireballing? This interesting question remains unanswered.

Fireball Tradition Revisited

By [Anne Kimzey](#)

From <<https://arts.alabama.gov/traditional-culture/folkwaysarticles/HOLIDAYFIREBALL.aspx>>

A year ago [Alabama Folkways](#) featured a column by Doug Purcell describing the tradition of fireballing -- the practice of lighting kerosene-soaked balls of yarn or tightly-wound rags and tossing the fiery objects outdoors at night as a way of celebrating Christmas or the New Year.

The topic generated an outpouring of responses from readers who had participated in the tradition as children and recalled the excitement they felt watching the dazzling display of fireballs whooshing through the dark skies. One reader even drew a diagram of the field, placement of participants and

path of the fireballs, and an illustration of the fireball bucket and the two people in charge of the fireballs and matches.

The responses greatly increased our knowledge of the tradition, particularly of how widespread it used to be. When the column appeared in 1992, Purcell told of an active fireball tradition in Barbour County. He also knew the practice once occurred in the Alabama counties of Henry, Houston, Dale and Russell and in Hancock County, Georgia. Our respondents indicated that fireballs have also flown through the

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skies of Chambers, Tallapoosa, Elmore, Bullock, Pike, Crenshaw, Geneva, Covington, Monroe, Dallas, Marengo, Perry, Bibb and Blount counties.

While most respondents told of fireball memories dating back to the 1920s and '30s, Jeanette Gibson of Goodway in Monroe County, Alabama wrote that her family and friends began to gather on Christmas Eve a few years ago for "refreshments, fireworks, and fireballs," when she found it difficult to make the trip back to Blakely, Georgia, where her father's side of the family has thrown fireballs at Christmas for generations.

"On Christmas Eve our grandfather, George Edgar Bates, Sr., would have a place picked out in the back pasture usually where an old tree had fallen and needed to be burned. Our family (approximately 30) would gather around at dark and enjoy fireworks and throw fireballs," she wrote. "We would enjoy one another's company until past midnight and then hurry home before Santa got there."

The letters and phone calls revealed that fireball tossing was practiced in both white and black communities in Alabama. The origins are still a mystery. Those who were familiar with the tradition only among black communities speculated that the practice came from Africa.



Halo Effect with Fireball
From Wikipedia

Many white respondents emphasized their Scots-Irish ancestry and believed the game originated in Scotland. In fact, one caller alerted us to a radio advertisement for a car dealership in Mobile featuring a character with a Scottish accent talking about throwing the fireball to bring in the New Year. I called the dealership and the Scottish sales manager verified that he had spoken on the air about the ancient rite of throwing fireballs. He said, to his knowledge, it is not done in Scotland today, (The town of

Stonehaven, Scotland does carry on the tradition.), but he'd heard it was a custom that dated back to the "16th or 17th century." He had no idea that it was an Alabama tradition.

The radio provided another lead when a co-worker reported hearing a program on the Christmas memories of country music stars. She said Hank Williams, Jr. described throwing fireballs as a boy in Banks, Alabama.

Several readers wrote to explain that they made fireballs (also called "kerosene balls") as a homemade alternative to fireworks, which they were too poor to afford.

Instructions sent to us for making fireballs were all very similar, although only one person mentioned

putting a rock in the center of the ball so that it could be thrown farther. Gladys Kitchens Foster of Lafayette wrote: "My Grandma would take men's

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Annual News Year's Eve Parade in Stonehaven, Scotland with participants slinging fireballs made of rags compressed into a square block with wires attached to a long wire handle which allows the individual to sling the fireball.

<https://www.facebook.com/stonehaven.fireballs>

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Columbus knit socks which had holes in the toes and heels and unravel them, then rewind to make balls. She would sew them so they wouldn't unwind. At that time my uncle ran a small country store and he would put our balls in the kerosene tank a few weeks before Christmas for them to soak."

Mrs. Foster was one of several respondents who said she threw the balls "over the house top." Roy Ledbetter of Shorter wrote about a game called "Hail-E-Over," which he played in Tallapoosa County in the 1930s. First they made a softball-size ball from unraveled socks and soaked it in kerosene. "We would then light it and yell 'Hail-E-Over' and throw it over the house. The kids on the other side of the house were supposed to catch it before it hit the ground and throw it back over the house. The game was lost by the side that let it hit the ground first. (It had to be a tin roof because a shingle roof would burn.) This was our fire works on the 4th of July and Christmas."

Despite the dangers of playing with fire, the fireballers insisted they wore no gloves, although catching and throwing quickly or rubbing one's hands with dirt were mentioned as strategies for avoiding burns. Virginia Key of Troy wrote of growing up in Elmore County, "An Aunt of mine, probably about 12 years of age at the time, had a fireball stick to the back of her leg and she carried a bad scar from this accident." She went on to describe how the risks involved were part of the excitement of the game. "I watched terrified from our porch," she said. "My mother was so frightened of the 'game' that her terror was contagious, but it was an exciting sight to a 3 1/2 year old to see the ball of fire flying through the dark sky."

Mostly, respondents emphasized that fireball throwing was homemade fun in an era when you had



Stonehaven Participants in Annual Fire Throwing Parade with their Fireballs.

<https://www.facebook.com/stonehaven.fireballs>

to create your own entertainment. Many readers described other games that they played as children and other traditions associated with the holidays.

Great Balls of Fire! Fun with Fireballs in the South

By Janie Treadwell

<https://www.troymessenger.com/2010/01/05/great-balls-of-fire/>

A stranger to rural eastern Pike County might have been alarmed at the sight. But the sounds of merri-

ment from young and old would have quickly eased any alarm as balls of fire were tossed from one to another.

Barbara Currie is quick to say that "No, we're not teaching children to play with fire. We're teaching them about traditions."

And, in the context of tradition, the annual fireballing in Enon, Alabama is a unique fun-learning experience.

Fireballing or fireball throwing is the practice of lighting kerosene-soaked balls of yarn or tightly wound rags and tossing the fiery objects outdoors at night. The practice dates back to the 1920s and 1930s in America but the tradition probably originated "across the big water" as early as the 16th or 17th centuries.

The Willie Henderson family of the Enon/Josie community is keeping the fireball throwing tradition alive in the Pike County area and, to a one, they believe it's a tradition worth keeping.

"Fireball throwing was more of a tradition in my mother's family, the Ingrams, than in my dad's," Currie said. "But he remembers throwing fireballs as a young boy. So the tradition goes back a long way."

For the past 20-something years, somewhere around New Year's, the Henderson family—Currie and her brothers, Dennis, Durwood, Dwight and

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David — bush hog the pasture, open the gate and “throw” a big community party and keep an old tradition burning brightly.

“Fireball throwing is a lot of fun and it gives people something different to do and a unique way to celebrate New Year,” Currie said.

Currie’s “part” in the New Year’s tradition is, without a doubt, a most valuable one. She makes the fireballs and it’s a yearlong undertaking.

“The fireballs have to be made from 100 percent cotton,” she said. “I can remember Mother telling how her family would sit around the fireplace during the long winter nights and unravel their old socks and wind the strings into fireballs. Back then, the fireballs were thrown on the Fourth of July and Christmas, too, — a poor man’s fireworks.”

Currie said it’s difficult to find “all-cotton” socks these days, so she relies on crocheting yarn for her fireballs.

“I start with an old sock for the core of each fireball,” Currie said. “I just wad it up and then start tightly winding yarn around the sock. At some point, I stop winding and start stitching. If you don’t sew the balls together, they will fall apart when they start burning.”

Currie then soaks the fireballs in kerosene for several months to ready them for the annual fireballing throwing. Her stock usually numbers about 25.

People of all ages and from everywhere come to throw the flaming kerosene balls. Some wear gloves but the more adventurous or more experienced throw barehanded. Rubbing the hands with dirt provides some measure of protection for the bare hands.

“Kerosene burns real slow so, if you catch a ball and throw it quickly, it won’t burn you,” Currie said. “You’ve got to get rid of it in a hurry. If you hold it,

it will burn you.”

The Hendersons have been hosting fireball throwings for more than 20 years and thousands of people have participated.

“We’ve only had one injury,” Currie said. “A broken finger from catching a ball. We encourage everyone to have respect for fire and we don’t allow any cutting up. Parents come with their children and they show them how to throw the balls and how to be aware of what all is going on around them.”

This year, the crowd at the Hendersons’ fireballing numbered 250 or more — a big crowd that Jack Frost sent home early. “It was hard to tell how many we had because there was a lot of coming and going,” Currie said. “It was so cold, even the food froze on the tables.”

The Henderson brothers always provide the chili, hotdogs, chicken fingers, pizza and a huge bonfire and the “guests” bring their favorite side dishes. There’s as much munching and backside warming as there is fireballing.

This year’s event was the coldest that anyone can remember and the patriarch of the family, Willie Henderson, sat around the roaring fire with family and friends.

“Throwing the fireballs is a lot of fun for young folks but I just enjoy sitting by the fire with all my family around and my friends,” Henderson said.

Fireball throwing is more than tossing balls of fire in the air. It is, as Henderson said, about family and friends and about the tradition of homemade fun from an era when folks had to create their own entertainment.

The Hendersons are dedicated to the tradition and to the fun and fellowship it brings in celebrating the coming of a New Year. Their hope is that, for everyone, the year coming year will be as bright as a sky filled with flaming kerosene balls.

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	Regular	Mailed
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Escambia Historical Society Cookbook	\$10.00	\$15.00
Wildflowers of The Conecuh/Escambia River Basin CD	\$10.00	\$15.00
History of Brewton and E. Brewton (sc)	\$35.00	\$40.00
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ECHOES, The newsletter for the Escambia County Historical Society, a 501 (c) (3) corporation, is published monthly except November. Comments are welcome. You may email the Society at escambiahistoricalociety@gmail.com or call 251-809-1528.

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Many members give a membership as a gift!

**Business members get a large scale
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