

# LAKE SIDE

SUMMER 2023

## Open Water

How the creation of Lake Murray helped spark what the Midlands would become

## *The Spirit is Back*

LAKE MURRAY YACHT  
PREPARES FOR  
RETURN TO SERVICE

THE GOOD LIFE IN LEXINGTON, NEWBERRY AND SALUDA

# on the cover

The Spirit of Lake Murray sits in dry dock as it undergoes extensive renovations. The yacht, the largest vessel on Lake Murray, is set to return to service this year under new ownership.

Photo by Kailee Kokes



# from the lake

Our maiden voyage.

Welcome to the Lake Murray edition of Lakeside, a quarterly publication from the team at The Lexington County Chronicle taking a look at what's happening when it comes to culture and tourism in the areas around the Midlands' popular reservoir.

Our publication launches with a look at an anticipated re-launch. The cover story for our spring/summer edition focuses on The Spirit of Lake Murray, a yacht that once took revelers around the lake and is set to return to service soon after an extensive renovation.

This being our inaugural issue, we asked J.R. Fennell, director of the Lexington County Museum, to take a deep dive into the history of the lake, explaining how it became such a big part of the Midlands' culture and economy.

We also have a piece detailing why the lake is a world-renowned spot for bass fishing, including perspective from local anglers — and a map of boat landings and marinas in case you're curious where you can launch your own vessel and see for yourself.

Turning to the areas surrounding the lake, we checked in with one of the area's biggest breweries in Cayce's Steel Hands, which recently took the leap of opening a second location across state lines, stepping into unfamiliar territory

for a Palmetto State brewing operation.

We stopped by the Newberry Opera House, one of the area's most cherished performance spaces, to ask about how the venue is bouncing back from COVID-19 difficulties, and we talked with the Riverbanks Zoo about its big plans for expansion.

We detailed the aspirations of growing semi-professional soccer club Soda City FC and talked to the Lexington County Blowfish baseball team about its rich community investment ahead of the club hosting its league's all-star festivities this summer.

We also have a calendar of prominent events coming up in the next few months.

As with any publication that's just starting out, we're keen to keep evolving in response to what our readers want. Please email me at [jordan@lexingtonchronicle.com](mailto:jordan@lexingtonchronicle.com) if you have thoughts or questions about Lakeside moving forward.

There's a lot of good living to be done around Lake Murray. We hope this magazine will help you take advantage of it.

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# Stay here, play here

Lexington County events for May-July

May

## NEWBERRY SHOP AND DINE

May 5, June 2 and 30. Held six times between March and October, the event encompasses a two-block area and includes live music and food trucks to enhance the shopping. Downtown Newberry. [cityofnewberry.com](http://cityofnewberry.com).

## "YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN" (PLAY)

May 5-21. Lexington's Village Square Theatre puts on a stage adaptation of the classic Mel Brooks comedy film. \$15-\$19. Village Square Theatre. 105 Caughman Rd., Lexington. [villagesquaretheatre.com](http://villagesquaretheatre.com).

## PICKIN' & PIGGIN'

May 6. Barbecue cook-off will feature more than 20 of the state's best barbecue cooks and includes all-you-can-eat tastings. \$15. Saluda Shoals Park. 5605 Bush River Rd., Columbia. [icirc.net](http://icirc.net).

## LEXINGTON COUNTY AG + ART

May 6. The Lexington County entry in the series of free, self-guided farm tours and markets across the state. [agandarttour.com](http://agandarttour.com).



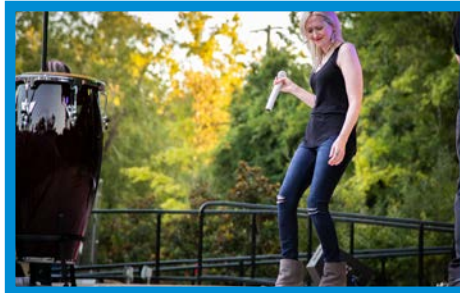
## SOUTH CAROLINA POULTRY FESTIVAL

May 11-13. More than 100,000 attendees turn out annually for the festival that includes live music, rides, arts and crafts, a road race, a parade and more. 101 Main St., Leesville. [scpoultryfestival.com](http://scpoultryfestival.com)

## RED, WHITE & BREWS

May 11. An evening of hand-selected wines,

craft beer, food from local restaurants, laser tag and live music from Rhythm 54. Irmo Town Park. 1249 Lexington Ave., Irmo. [facebook.com/irmochamber](https://facebook.com/irmochamber).



## LEXINGTON LIVE

The Town of Lexington's weekly free concert series continues on Thursdays through May 25. Icehouse Amphitheater. 107 W Main St., Lexington. [icehouseamphitheater.com](http://icehouseamphitheater.com).

## ABILENE (CONCERT)

May 12. Country band performs in Newberry. \$35. Newberry Opera House. 1201 McKibben St., Newberry. [newberryoperahouse.com](http://newberryoperahouse.com).

## "BLITHE SPIRIT" (PLAY)

May 12-21. The Newberry Community Players put on a production of the Noël Coward play concerning a socialite and novelist who invites an eccentric medium and clairvoyant to his house to conduct a séance, hoping to gather material for his next book. \$15. The Ritz. 1513 Main St., Newberry. [newberry-community-players.square.site](http://newberry-community-players.square.site).

## RIVERBANKS RUN

May 13. 5K run that benefits wildlife conservation winds its way through the zoo's scenic backroads and by popular exhibits. \$35-\$45. Riverbanks Zoo. 500 Wildlife Pkwy., Columbia.

## BEST OF HOLLYWOOD (CONCERT)

May 13. The SC Philharmonic continues its pops series in Irmo. \$30. Harbison Theatre at Midlands Tech. 7300 College St., Irmo. [harbisontheatre.org](http://harbisontheatre.org).

## LEXINGTON WINE WALK

May 13. The annual event featuring unlimited wine tastings and live music (this year from Going Commando) returns for another year. \$30-\$45. Icehouse Amphitheater. 107 W Main St., Lexington. [icehouseamphitheater.com](http://icehouseamphitheater.com).

## RHYTHM ON THE RIVER

The Greater Cayce West Columbia Chamber of Commerce's free concert series continues weekly throughout May. [facebook.com/rhythmtheriversc](https://facebook.com/rhythmtheriversc).

## PICKLEBALL TOURNAMENT

May 18. Features singles, doubles and mixed doubles competition. \$30. Seven Oaks Park. 200 Leisure Ln., Columbia. [icrc.net](http://icrc.net).

## A TASTE OF NEWBERRY

May 19. Newberry's annual event features samples of food, beer and wine alongside full meals from many local restaurants. Live music, too. Free. Downtown Newberry. [tasteofnewberry.com](http://tasteofnewberry.com).

## THE BEST OF EVERYTHING — A TRIBUTE TO TOM PETTY

May 19. Tom Petty tribute band plays Lexington. \$24. Icehouse Amphitheater. 107 W Main St., Lexington. [icehouseamphitheater.com](http://icehouseamphitheater.com).



## NEWBERRY COUNTY AG + ART

May 20-21. The Newberry County entry in the series of free, self-guided farm tours and markets across the state happens across two days at multiple locations. [agandarttour.com](http://agandarttour.com).





**GLENN MILLER ORCHESTRA**

May 21. Popular big band jazz outfit performs in Newberry. \$40-\$50. Newberry Opera House. 1201 McKibben St., Newberry. [newberryoperahouse.com](http://newberryoperahouse.com).

**LEXINGTON COUNTY BLOWFISH OPENING NIGHT**

May 26. The local wood bat collegiate team opens its home slate against the Boone Bigfoots. Lexington County Baseball Stadium. 474 Ballpark Rd., Lexington. [goblowfishbaseball.com](http://goblowfishbaseball.com).

**LANDSLIDE — A TRIBUTE TO FLEETWOOD MAC**

May 26. Fleetwood Mac tribute band plays Lexington. \$14. Icehouse Amphitheater. 107 W Main St., Lexington. [icehouseamphitheater.com](http://icehouseamphitheater.com).

**FIRE BREAK 50 MILE & 5 MILE FKT CHALLENGE**

May 27. 10-lap race around the Firebreak Trail challenges competitors with 50 miles, while FKT Challenge offers a five-mile alternative. [runsignup.com/race/sc/columbia/firebreakultrafktchallenge](http://runsignup.com/race/sc/columbia/firebreakultrafktchallenge).

*June*

**NASHVILLE NIGHTS**

June 2-Aug. 11. Weekly free concert series at Cayce's craft brewery features Nashville country up-and-comers. Steel Hands Brewing. 2350 Foreman St., Cayce. [steelhandsbrewing.com](http://steelhandsbrewing.com).

**SALUDA SPLASH RENOVATION CELEBRATION**

June 3. Saluda Shoals Park celebrates the reopening of its newly renovated splash pad with a day of water play. Food trucks will be on site. 5605 Bush River Rd., Columbia.

**DRIFT JAM**

June 3. This festival, one of two floating music celebrations on Lake Murray, returns after a year away. Spence Island. [driftjam.com](http://driftjam.com).

**LAKE MURRAY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**

June 11. Local community orchestra plays a program called "Concertos & Cupcakes." Harbison Theatre at Midlands Tech. 7300 College St., Irmo. [lmsso.org](http://lmsso.org).

**THE BOXMASTERS**

June 16. Rock band performs in Newberry. \$45-\$55. Newberry Opera House. 1201 McKibben St., Newberry. [newberryoperahouse.com](http://newberryoperahouse.com).

**NEWBERRY JUNETEENTH**

June 17. Newberry celebrates Juneteenth focusing on history and sharing stories, along with food, music and more. Downtown Newberry. [newberryjuneteenth.com](http://newberryjuneteenth.com).

**REGGAETRONIC LAKE MURRAY MUSIC FESTIVAL**

June 17. The second of Lake Murray's two floating music festivals returns for another year. Free (VIP upgrades available). Spence Island. [reggaetronicsc.com](http://reggaetronicsc.com).

**THE TAMS**

June 17. The longstanding Georgia vocal group performs in Saluda. Patchwork Farms. 110 Dairy Lane, Saluda. [facebook.com/patchworkfarmsc](http://facebook.com/patchworkfarmsc).

**RON DAISE PRESENTS GULLAH GEECHEE HERITAGE**

June 19. An evening of Gullah Geechee poetry, songs and heritage. \$28. Harbison Theatre at Midlands Tech. 7300 College St., Irmo. [harbisontheatre.org](http://harbisontheatre.org).

**SC JAZZ MASTERWORKS ENSEMBLE (CONCERT)**

June 24. Big band made up of local musicians teams with Grammy winner Kurt Elling for another concert in Irmo. \$55-\$65. Harbison Theatre at Midlands Tech. 7300 College St., Irmo. [harbisontheatre.org](http://harbisontheatre.org).

**INDEPENDENCE DAY CELEBRATION**

June 30. Lexington's July 4 celebration includes fireworks and a performance by the 246th Army Band. Free. Icehouse Amphitheater. 107 W Main St., Lexington. [icehouseamphitheater.com](http://icehouseamphitheater.com).

*July*



**4TH OF JULY CELEBRATION (LAKE MURRAY)**

July 1. The annual celebration on the lake features a patriotic boat parade and the state's largest fireworks show. Free. Lake Murray. [lakemurraycountry.com](http://lakemurraycountry.com).

**LEXINGTON COUNTY PEACH FESTIVAL**

July 4. Annual festival and July 4 celebration includes a car show, art and craft exhibition, live entertainment, the Peach Parade, and fireworks. Free. Gilbert Community Park. [lexingtoncountypeachfestival.com](http://lexingtoncountypeachfestival.com).

**"LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS" (MUSICAL)**

July 13-16. The Newberry Community Players put on a production of the classic musical that centers on a murderous, sentient plant. \$15. The Ritz. 1513 Main St., Newberry. [newberry-community-players.square.site](http://newberry-community-players.square.site).



**SOUTH CONGAREE CHAMPIONSHIP RODEO**

July 20-22. The annual rodeo competition returns for another year. South Congaree Rodeo. 395 Oak St., West Columbia. [southcongaerechampionshiprodeo.com](http://southcongaerechampionshiprodeo.com).

**SLIP, SIDE AND SPLASH**

July 22. "Nine crazy inflatable water slides" along with a splash pad and food trucks are on offer at this summer event. \$15. Melvin Park. 307 A Eptings Camp Rd., Chapin. [icrc.net](http://icrc.net).

*August*



**BREW AT THE ZOO**

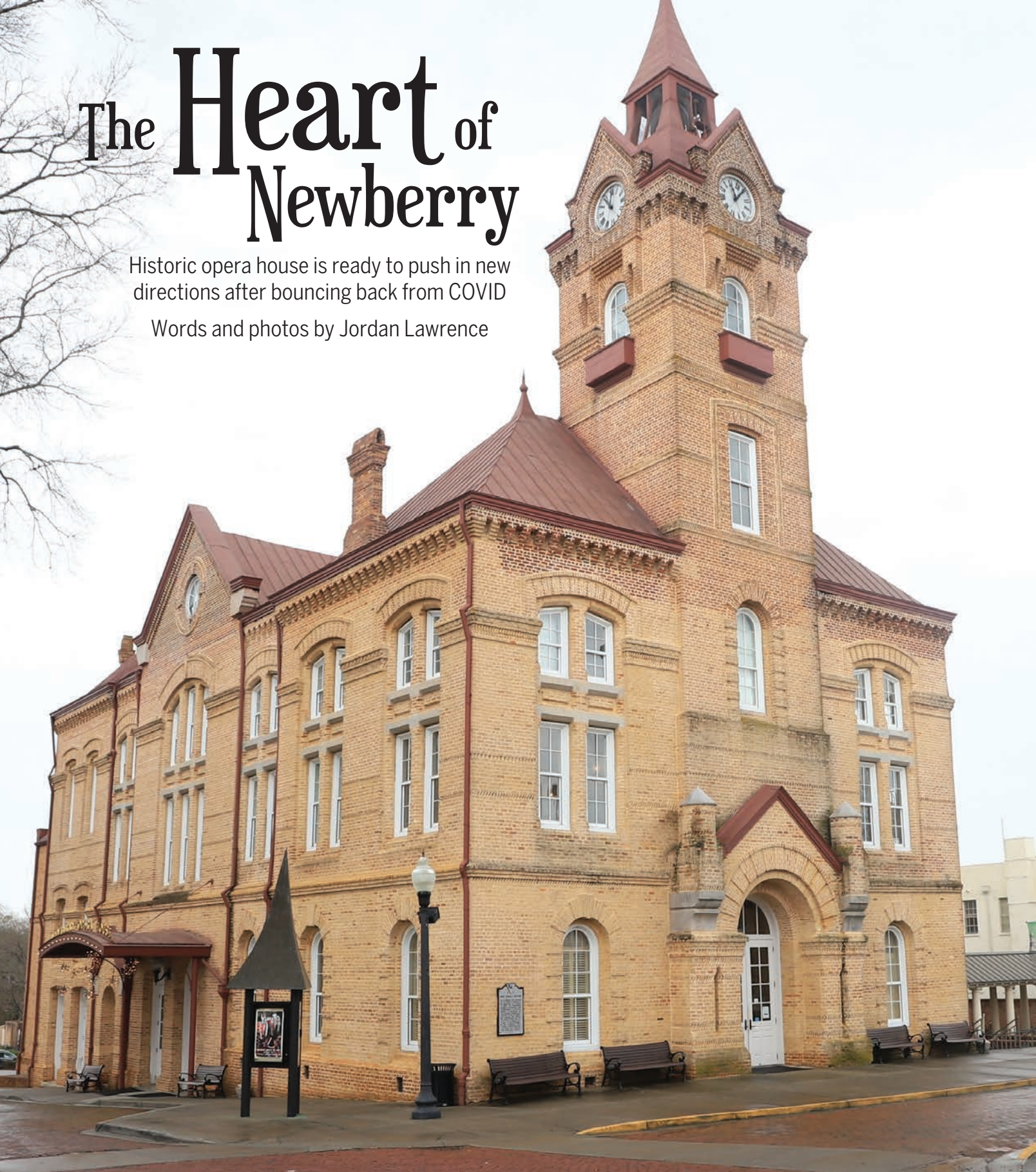
Aug. 4. The zoo's annual craft beer celebration returns for another year. More details forthcoming. Riverbanks Zoo. 500 Wildlife Pkwy., Columbia.



# The Heart of Newberry

Historic opera house is ready to push in new directions after bouncing back from COVID

Words and photos by Jordan Lawrence



It's no secret that COVID-19 hit the live music industry hard.

In October 2020, which turned out to be early in the course of the pandemic, a survey of venue owners conducted by the National Independent Venue Association found that nearly 90 percent of those

surveyed said they would have to close permanently within months if they didn't get a boost from federal relief funding.

The live music industry ultimately did get some federal help, and while the toll was felt with venue closings nationwide, a look around the local



entertainment landscape shows reasons to be hopeful as life settles into a new normal.

The White Mule, which tried to return an independent rock club to Columbia's college-adjacent Five Points neighborhood, didn't survive. But West Columbia's long-standing rock dive New Brookland Tavern, the position of which in the city's rapidly redeveloping River District has frequently felt precarious, is as busy as it's ever been.

And one particularly beautiful Midlands venue is thankfully still with us, though the journey wasn't easy.

The city-owned Newberry Opera House, which rightly describes itself as the heart of the municipality's downtown, wasn't immune to the impacts of the pandemic.

The 400-capacity building has been around a while. Constructed in 1881, it's been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1969. Operated in its current form by the Newberry Opera House Foundation, the cross-disciplinary performance space frequently gets bigger acts than you'd expect for a small room in a small town of about 10,000.

Paul Thorn, Ruben Studdard, Edwin McCain, Robert Earl Keen, and Sister Hazel have all played the room in recent years.

And entering March 2020, things were going pretty good.

"Our momentum was insane," Executive Director Anne Pinckney Smith told Lakeside. "We were having our best year ever."

The timing of COVID and the shuttering that it forced at venues across the country wasn't disastrous for the Opera House. The venue was three-fourths through its season and had raked in a majority of the revenue budgeted for that fiscal year.

But the impacts of the pandemic weren't short-lived, and the venue's shutdown stretched through the summer.

"It was the saddest meeting ever," Smith said of a staff meeting early during the pandemic as they eyed their options for reopening and when that would be able to happen.

"We're all about air and germs," she added, reflecting on the nature of a space that depends on artists who frequently sing loudly in front of packed houses to make ends meet. "We're the last industry that's ever going to come back. ... We all sat down and everybody was so scared."

But then the venue's technical director slapped his hand down on the table.

"Guys, we are not going to fail," Smith said, recounting his proclamation. "We have been doing this for 23 years, we are not going to fail." And at that point, we turned — as an organization, we turned the corner."

The Opera House had an advantage over many other venues in that the building is owned by the city, which wasn't about to shutter the main attraction drawing people downtown unless it had no other choice.

"Its renovation and reopening led to the revitalization of Newberry," Foster Senn, the city's mayor said.

The venue embarked on its current run in 1998, following a substantial renovation.

"Newberry in the 90s was struggling with the decline of the textile industry and the Opera House, as it was set out to do, became that rallying point," the mayor continued. "It opening and having all the shows brought lots of people to town, led to new restaurants, new businesses, and that just kind of grew gradually over time. And then, in addition, it brought a revitalization of the town, with new industry, which I would not have expected, but once the town had momentum, industry started paying a little bit more attention."

But while getting kicked out of the space wasn't a concern, the venue still needed an infusion of cash. Remaining shuttered through August 2020 and then having to weather days operating at a reduced capacity between 125 and 150, the Opera House couldn't generate all of the revenue it required.

In this regard, Smith said one of the venue's weaknesses at the moment the pandemic hit turned out to be a strength.

Her predecessor as executive director, Molly Fortune, who had served in the position since 2015, left at the beginning of April 2020 for a position in Gov. Henry McMaster's office. But while Smith, who filled the role in an interim capacity before getting the permanent promotion in January 2023, was inexperienced when it came to leading a nonprofit performance venue, her experience as the Opera House's development director gave her keen insight into the organization's financial needs.

"Nobody knew how long COVID was going to last, but I knew that we were going to have to cover the ticket sales that we were going to lose, which was March, April, May, which was a pretty significant time," she said.

So the Opera House reached out to the community for donations, looking to build up an emergency fund of \$125,000 to weather its halted season. Donors ended up giving \$175,000.

The federal government kicking in with help buoyed the venue after that, with Paycheck Protection Program funds bolstering it during its second COVID-impacted year and a Shuttered Venues Protection Grant helping it through the third year.

The federal help along with being able to maintain its regular clip of selling out 25% of its shows after reopening kept the Opera House afloat.

Now largely on the other side of its pandemic hurdles, with regular capacity restored, Smith said the COVID difficulties were, in some ways, a blessing in disguise.

"We've always done well and we had a script of how to make it work. And all of the sudden, we had to take that script and we had to throw it," she said. "And we had time with nothing going on to think about it. To think, 'Does this work for us? Is this a profitable thing that we do? Is having only one genre of shows, is that where we want to go?'"

So far coming out of the pandemic, the venue has largely maintained the same balance as before when it comes to programming, sprinkling in dance and theater among its touring musical acts. And the mix of musical genres has remained similarly steady, with familiar varieties of country and rock making up the majority of the schedule.

But the Opera House has previously shown a willingness to experiment (famed hip-hop hype man Flavor Flav, boundary-pushing classical outfit Black Violin, hip-hop-spiked bluegrass outfit Gangstagrass all played the room in the few years leading up to the pandemic). And Smith said patrons can look forward to more such swings now that things are opening back up.

And she feels that the venue is in a better position to make big things happen coming out of COVID. More than ever, artists are willing to be flexible on their contracts to come play the Opera House, realizing both the value of making shows happen and the difficulties that independent venues face.

"Before, we were always at the mercy of the talent," Smith said. "But now, we will talk a little bit more, and they understand more. We're a small house with big plans. We've always been a little, small thing that really wants to be huge and impactful. And so we would call people, and they'd be like, '\$50,000. This is how much.' And now they realize, 'OK, yeah, we can go play Newberry Opera House. We'll just do it in a different way.' So they call us when they're routing this way. If they need to stop over, they'll say, 'Hey, let's call Newberry Opera House,' and then we'll negotiate a better deal for us. And they get paid to slow down their roll into the next location."

Thus, with the venue set to celebrate the 25th anniversary of its '90s reopening next season, optimism around the Opera House has been restored.

"It's really amazing the impact the Newberry Opera House has had in the last 25 years," Mayor Senn said. "I'm excited to see what's next."



# *The Spirit is B*

Lake Murray yacht prepared  
for return to service

Words and photos by Kailee Kokes





# Back

S



**T**he Spirit of Lake Murray has hosted many occasions over the years.

Ken Colton bought the 80-foot Skipperliner yacht in 2008, relocating the vessel from Florida to its namesake reservoir, where it was the largest boat and only yacht operating on the water.

Colton put the boat up for sale in 2021, having largely ceased renting it out in 2019 and unable to take care of a litany of maintenance issues due to a battle with cancer and his duties as pastor at Rehoboth United Methodist Church in Leesville, where he recently retired.

But in its heyday, the yacht was a fixture, hosting some 100 weddings and, on some occasions, a very different kind of commemoration.

"We've even had funerals," Colton told *The Lexington County Chronicle* while the boat was up for sale.

There will be no funeral as yet for the Spirit of Lake Murray. The boat is set to hopefully ride again this summer, as new owners have purchased the yacht and set about completing extensive renovations to get it ready to host tours, parties and other events.

The new ownership group, Lake Murray Partners, consisting of Norm Agnew, Rick Crout, Tyler Ryan and Steve Price, bought the boat in October 2022 and sailed it from Hollow Creek Marina to Agnew Lake Services to begin overhauling it.

Upon reaching its new home, the yacht was fully gutted from top to bottom and hull to rear. Ryan said a majority of the boat's structure had to be replaced due to rust. Though they were prepared for rust, there was more than they had originally anticipated. The owners say they've taken the necessary steps to making sure it won't return.

"There was a lot of rust and corrosion and stuff," Ryan said of the boat. "She's a 1994 and spent the first 15 years of her life down in salt water, down in Florida, and salt water, it just eats boats."

"Rust will continue to eat away. It's like a cancer," he added. "So either we could fix a spot and it would still continue or we just said, 'Heck with it. Start over.'"

Readying the boat, which ceased hosting large groups four years ago due to inspection requirements that necessitated removing it from the water, to return to service at all, let alone carry its passengers in comfort, is a large task. But they think reviving the amenity, which stands apart from other entertainment offerings on the lake, will pay dividends.

"This is a unique experience that you can only get on this boat on this lake," Ryan said. "And I think that's the exciting part."

The new owners say they each have their own specialty as they take on as they work to bring the Spirit back to life, with Agnew handling a majority of the design, Crout serving as one of the captains, Ryan being the entertainment/cruise director, and Price taking over the general manager position.

For instance, having a partner like Agnew, who owns his own dock construction facility on the lake in Ballentine, was a big help when it came to getting the boat



out of the water to complete repairs.

They are pushing to have the Spirit fully operational to take guests on their first ride June 1, flaunting a brand new look they say will be almost unrecognizable compared to the boat's previous appearance.

The partners want to leave the price for this transformation up to speculation.

"I think most people will look at this boat when we're done and think it's a million-dollar boat," Crout said.

Making the boat look like a million bucks is but one part of the task in front of the new owners. Multiple different certifications must be obtained before it can be fully operational.

Ryan told Lakeside that the most vital certification is the one granted by the Coast Guard, adding that they will inspect the Spirit and her crew with a fine tooth comb.

Crout, in his role master captain for the yacht, will have to demonstrate his skills in operating the ship, showing the inspector that he is able to do the necessary tasks, including parking. The crew's knowledge of boat operations, safety and emergency scenarios will also be tested.

Once renovations are complete, the revived Spirit is expected to have a capacity of 130 people, though the owners say they will most likely cap public charters at around 100-110 guests, as this increases the sense of intimacy.

Miriam Atria, CEO of the Capital City/Lake Murray Country Regional Tourism Board that promotes the region and operates a visitors center on the northern shore of the reservoir, said the boat was missed after it ceased operations.

"It's just another product that we have to

market and sell to the area," she explained. "It is one of the top requests for tours on the lake."

Artia added that her organization brings in a lot of potential investors who want to experience the area, and Spirit brings the opportunity to treat them to a meal on the water.

Creating a space where guests can enjoy a meal on the lake is just one of the possibilities the new owners foresee when their vision for the yacht is realized.

Upon walking up to the yacht, patrons will see it sporting a fresh paint job adorned with the company's festive new red-white-and-blue branding. As they enter the lower deck, guests will be greeted by a revised layout and a brand new color scheme.

When asked about the style they were trying to achieve, the partners said they want the yacht to be classy, contemporary and modern.





"You can see how dark this room was with all the dark wood around," Ryan said during a tour of the under-construction boat. "Not that it didn't look fine, but it's just dark. ... Lighter colors make it look bigger."

The revised layout highlights a brand-new bar with a steel interior and a countertop made from Brazilian Tigerwood.

"The bar's made out of some special wood that Norman had in a truck, sitting up in the woods for about 10 years. One day, he said, 'You know what? I think I got some wood.'" Crout said "So we went up there, followed our way through the trees and unlocked the back of a truck."

"It was special stuff," he added.

The fully stocked bar will feature beer, wine and liquor. Price shared that a friend of his who has been a bartender for more than 40 years

will be setting up the bar and getting the staff up to speed on how to make all the necessary drinks.

The partners added that there will not be a blender on board, as they do not intend on supplying their guests with slushies.

Tables will be placed throughout the room on the lower level, with what the owners see as a potential VIP seating area at the front, with a 180-degree view, taking the place of the yacht's former bar.

The boat is set to feature a state-certified kitchen, a luxury that the yacht was unable to provide previously. While the menu and food items are still up for debate, the owners said there will be some form of regular menu, but some items, such as steaks, will most likely be saved for special catered events.

"We're gonna offer basically food and a good

time," Crout said, adding that the owners are looking into the possibility of inviting guest chefs on board for special events.

The second level of the yacht is smaller and will feature an outdoor portion with a retractable awning. The partners said this level will be available to book separately, allowing for more intimate experiences.

The outside deck also has the space for a live band to be brought on to entertain the guests. Ryan shared that the yacht will be decked out with an AV system, allowing those below to hear the live music through speakers.

"Anybody can ride around on a boat. They were riding around on this boat for 10 years drinking slushies," Price said, before promising, "This whole experience is going to be second to none."





# SODA CITY FC CONTINUES TO GROW LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES IN SOCCER

Words by Isaiah Lucas | Photos by Jordan Lawrence

**S**oda City FC has been a successful member of the USPL since joining in 2018.

For general manager Andrew Richardson, the semi-professional team, which plays and practices at the Saluda Shoals Soccer Complex, is perfectly entwined with the community it grew from in Columbia.

“When you think of grassroots soccer and the impact soccer can have in a local environment, I think Soda City is the picturesque model of that,” Richardson said.

Richardson saw Soda City as a way to open doorways for local athletes, keeping their dreams on the pitch alive. The organization kicked off a new season earlier this month, and the women’s team it added last summer having recently held tryouts to rally another squad.

The increasing scope of the operation belies its humble beginnings.

“It was just three or four guys that just had a love of the game and had been involved after playing in different varieties, whether that was coaching, or administrating on the club side, or working on the high school side, or working in college, whatever it may be,” Richardson said. “We recognized that there was a bit of a void in Columbia, and really greater-Columbia, for players who had grown up in the area to be able to continue their careers or continue to play in a competitive environment that was going to be able to represent the city.

“We kicked off that first year and had pretty good success. And then as we grew, we actually grew into the footprint of Columbia. So our partnerships became stronger, we were able to attract more players and build relationships with clubs and schools and colleges,” he added. “You fast forward two or three years later, where we were the only USPL team in Columbia, there’s now four. We were kind of the only semi-professional organization that was able to compete on a national level, from South Carolina, there’s now two from Columbia who have played in the national semifinal.”

## COMMUNITY ASSISTED GROWTH

Richardson and the ownership group is very grateful for the role the community in Columbia played in providing support, whether that be financially or through other means.



Richardson was adamant that this doesn't happen without that support.

"When you think of soccer on the largest level in the United States, it's the same problems at the youth level that it is on the pro level, and that is soccer is a very expensive sport," Richardson explained. "To operate an MLS team, it's probably a half a billion dollar expense. For us, obviously, being on the UPSL side, we're like fourth-tier on the pyramid, it's still incredibly expensive to operate. That first year when everything's sorted out the way we wanted it and had our roadmap, we realized it was gonna cost us probably \$50-60,000, just to operate, not to turn a profit of any sort, but just to operate."

"Being able to find people who had a vision that aligned with ours and understand what we were trying to do, it was tricky. That's why we're so appreciative of people like Gateway Supply Company, who has been with us from the very beginning, and groups like Prisma Health. There's so many people who have really kind of gone above and beyond, not to put anything in our pockets, because, you know, I think I can speak on behalf of our ownership group, we're not only we're not taking any money home, we're paying significant amounts of money out of our pocket to be able to continue the organization."

While being able to obtain investments from the community was important, Richardson knows he has to put together a product that's worthy of new investments, while also proving the club was indeed worth it to those currently invested.

"The financial side is a huge part of it and then the other side is really being able to market yourself as something that's unique and worth people's time to come out and see," Richardson continued. "Columbia is a growing city with a lot of opportunities. There's probably five or six youth clubs, there's obviously dozens of high schools, there's colleges, there's all kinds of different things for people to do. So within that scope, to still try to get people to come out to see our team play, it's a challenge."

"That's why we've worked so hard from a marketing side, whether that be through social media, or in building relationships with different entities. We're just finding different and creative ways to get our name out and our story out so that people can connect with us and then they'll want to support us. That I think has been one of our greatest challenges, but probably also one of our greatest triumphs as far as being able to do that successfully, and build up a fanbase that supports us really well."

### IT COMES WITH THE TERRITORY

Soda City's success in its first five years was somewhat expected by the ownership group in the early stages. However, how fast the success has been achieved has been a welcome surprise.

"We knew there were players who could play, they just needed an opportunity to be seen," Richardson said. "What we didn't know is how

that talent was going to match up with talent across the rest of the Southeast, and across the rest of the country. And as we got into the league, and we started to play, teams from Savannah, and teams from Charleston, and teams from Charlotte, and teams from central Georgia, and even in Tennessee, we realized we were putting a really competitive team out every time we're playing."

"I don't know if we anticipated being able to get to that national level as quickly as we did," he added. "But I think once we saw ourselves against the people we were going to be competing against, we thought we'd be able to put together a team that could at least make the attempt to be a championship level organization."

While seeing the growth and success has been nice, it came with the creation of more local competition on the pitch, resulting in ever-changing numbers in the stands.

"We've also encountered a big challenge due to our success," Richardson admitted. "When we got started we were the only show in town from a UPSL level. For players beyond that high school, club level or age, your choices were to play with us in the UPSL or to potentially go to the USL2 team, the Phantoms here in Columbia. You fast forward four, five years, there's five UPSL teams plus the USL2 teams, and there's three or four additional teams inside 50-60 miles. I think because of that, you naturally are going to lose people to some other organizations. You're gonna lose some fan support because they'll align themselves with this other team. But I think we're still not even close to where we can be from a fan standpoint."



### FUTURE EXPANSION

Those in charge at Soda City FC want as many talented people as possible to be able to continue to play the game at a very competitive level. Expanding the organization to different areas like a youth futsal team and a women's team have been the result of that wish.

"We recognized we need to continue to take this model of providing soccer opportunities and expand that," Richardson said. "That took us into having Columbia's only United States Youth Futsal sanctioned organization for our younger players to be able to play indoors and learn a different style and a different avenue of the game."

"Last year was the first year we were able to compete in the WPSL on the women's side, even though that had been something that we had on our horizon from the time we started. So to be able to put that team out last year, and then head into our second

season this summer is something we're really proud about. But it's always going to be about looking for the next thing for us to be able to provide back to soccer within greater Columbia."

The women's program held open tryouts last weekend. The hope is that the team is just as successful as the Soda City men's team.

There's been an emphasis on quality over quantity when it comes to putting a team together, according to Richardson, in order to maximize everything that's being invested into it.

For more info on Soda City FC, visit [sodacitysoccer.com](http://sodacitysoccer.com) and [sfcwomen.systeme.io/e0e58dec](http://sfcwomen.systeme.io/e0e58dec).



# Something for EVERYONE

**Local anglers talk about the fishing diversity  
that makes Lake Murray great**

Words and photos by Kailee Kokes



The “Jewel of South Carolina” brings in crowds for a variety of reasons, but it’s a renowned locale for one activity in particular.

Bass fishing is the top sport on Lake Murray, bringing in hundreds, if not thousands, of anglers each year.

In October 2022, the reservoir hosted the Black Bass Fishing World Championship, becoming the first U.S. site to host the prestigious international competition. So far in 2023, the lake has hosted a stop on the MLF Bass Pro Tour and an entry in the Bassmaster Elite Series.

According to Miriam Atria – president and CEO of the Capital City/Lake Murray Regional Tourism Board, which attracts and helps host many of these events – the Black Bass championship alone brought in hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenue to local hotels, along with other injections into the local economy.

“It filters out across the community as well because they’re buying the gas for their vehicles or boat or they’re buying souvenirs, sending the wife to the zoo,” she said. “It goes on and on. It’s just what we call a tourism multiplier.”

Atria told Lakeside that some of these tournaments take a long time to plan. The Black Bass championship took roughly five years, she said, with COVID-19 hindering the process.

The CEO added that there are other factors at play. They have to be careful not to overfish Lake Murray, and there are only so many dates during the year when the weather and lake conditions are right for fishing competitions. And then the lake has to compete with other major lakes across the country to secure tournaments.

Lakeside caught up with a local professional and two other anglers who routinely fish on the lake to talk about what makes its waters so special.

Prosperity’s Anthony Gagliardi said he has been an angler since he could walk and participated in his first tournament when he was about 11.

“I just fell in love with the combination of vision, which I loved, and then my love for just competition, I was always really super competitive,” he said “So turn it turn meditation, just kind of the best of both of those worlds. I just fell in love with that.”

Gagliardi won the MLF Bass Pro Tour event that took place on the lake in April.

He noted the importance of bass fishing to the lake, emphasizing that events like the one in which he recently competed garner national attention, including coverage through television and other media.

“You’re talking about hours and hours of exposure on national TV, hours and hours of websites streaming live on the web,” he said. “So you’re just putting this area out there for people to see.”

All the anglers Lakeside spoke with praised the fishing diversity that Lake Murray provides.

“I’ve always said I feel like Lake Murray is really a gem in South Carolina,” Gaffney’s Justin Harvey said. “It’s centrally located and just the way that it takes the wind down there is phenomenal.”

Michael Murphy, a retired professional angler who fished on the Fishing League Worldwide tour with Gagliardi, has a degree in fisheries and aquatic sciences. He explained that the sheer size of Lake Murray gives it the ability to house multiple ecosystems.

According to Murphy, Lake Murray’s middle elevation above sea level is part of what sets it apart. Lake Hartwell, for instance, is at a higher elevation, creating more of a deeper mountainous, clearwater fishery, while Lake Marion has a lower elevation and a more shallow backwater fishery. Lake Murray sits between the two.

“A lot of people that come here for tournaments, they really love coming here because there’s something for everybody,” Murphy said. “What I mean by that is somebody may have grown up fishing rivers so they’re more comfortable in rivers and the back of creek arms. Well, there’s a bunch of that on Lake Murray. But let’s say somebody is from California or even Hartwell, that is used to fishing in deeper, clear water. There’s something like that for them too.”

He said this is why he feels it takes more to win on Lake Murray, explaining that it’s a lake where they can all find spots to lean into their strengths.

Gagliardi emphasized that the health of the lake is important to maintaining this diversity, and Murphy elaborated on what that means.

A healthy lake is dependent on the food chain’s input and output, Murphy said, explaining that the output would be predator fish like the lake’s bass and catfish. The bottom of the chain





consists of bugs and microscopic animals and plants. The microorganisms are kickstarted in Lake Murray by native grass, making its ecosystems highly sustainable.

"Higher sustainability means healthier fish, which are typically bigger," he said. "They live longer, so they're able to get bigger. ... They weigh more. We can get more meat on their bones because they are eating better."

Beyond the tournaments, the lake's attractiveness to anglers generates other impacts to the local economy.

Gagliardi and Harvey both talked about the expenses that come with bass fishing.

"That's why sponsorship becomes such a critical component, because you can't always just rely on your ability to catch fish and win money, you have a consistent income," Gagliardi said.

He added that as an angler you have to be prepared for ups and downs in your income, stating that budgeting is important since you are unable to predict the money you'll make the following year.

Harvey spoke about the money that anglers put back into the economy.

"I would say the average boat price is probably \$70,000, so you have people, you know, constantly buying \$70,000 boats, which they have to pay state sales tax," he said, adding that boat sales also generate revenue from luxury taxes and other expenses.

The angler, who travels from Gaffney to fish on Lake

Murray, mentioned that he spends roughly \$120 each weekend on gas alone before adding in the cash paid for bait, tackle, food and other items.

Financial responsibility isn't the only thing that anglers and future anglers need to be prepared for. Gagliardi told the Chronicle that it takes perseverance to be an angler, adding that you are going to fail a lot and have to constantly learn and adjust.

"You have to be open minded and learn new techniques and learn how to be proficient at that," he said. "As far as being professional, you've got a whole other side, the business side, completely separate from the fishing side."

Murphy said anybody can be an angler so long as they have a willingness to learn and make mistakes. He added that from those mistakes you learn life lessons.

Gagliardi echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that Lake Murray, by virtue of not having a true off season, generates an immersive fishing culture and produces a wealth of proficient anglers.

Murphy said the first word that comes to his mind to describe this culture is "brotherhood," though the lake is home to some great female anglers, too.

"No separation of age, creed, race – if you're male or female, the fish don't know," he said. "So it's one of the things that anybody can do, and it all comes down to what's in between your ears. And that's it, it's all about mental strength."





# L A K E M U R R A Y

boat ramps and marinas

## NEWBERRY

- 1** Kempson Boat Ramp  
2822 SC-395

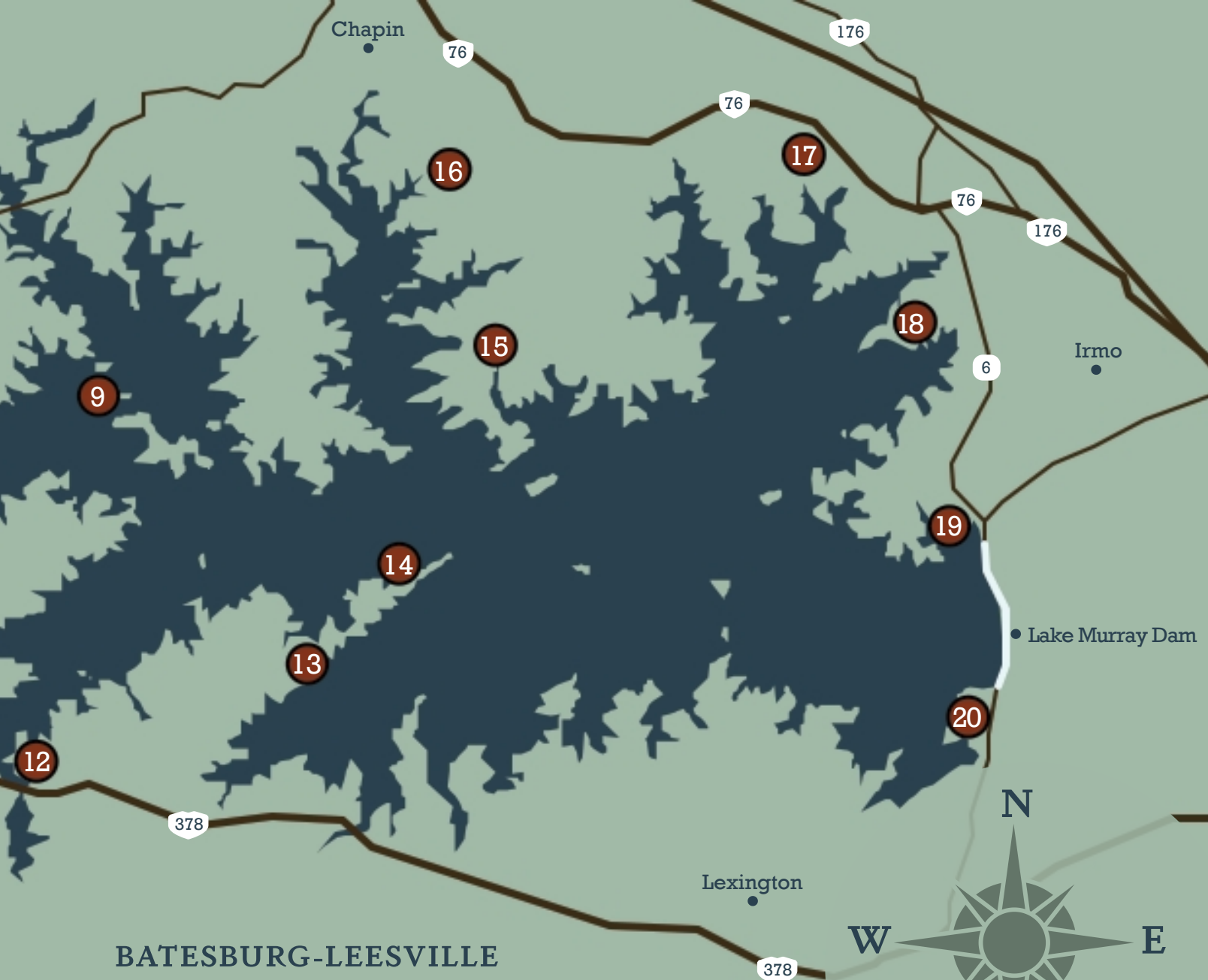
## PROSPERITY

- 2** Black's Bridge  
3660 Prosperity Hwy
- 8** Buffalo Creek Marina  
849 Marina Way
- 9** Billy Dreher Island Ramp  
224 Sassafras Lane
- 10** Crayne's Landing  
26 Crayne's Loop

## LEESVILLE

- 4** Big Mans Marina  
125 Big Mans Road
- 5** River Bend Boat Ramp  
734 Riverbend Point
- 6** Lake Murray Shores Boat Ramp  
1 Robbins Street
- 7** Acapulco USA  
960 Rock North Creek Road
- 11** Hollow Creek Marina  
3340 Hwy 378
- 12** Southshore Marina  
3072 Hwy 378





### BATESBURG-LEESVILLE

- 3** Lake Murray Estates Boat Ramp  
394 Ruby Riser Road

### CHAPIN

- 15** Hilton Recreation Area  
Cove Launch Court
- 16** Eptings Landing  
433 Eptings Camp Road

### IRMO

- 17** Shealy's Landing  
320 Shadowood Drive

### LEXINGTON

- 20** Jake's Landing  
220 Jakes Landing Road

### COLUMBIA

- 18** Rocky Point Boat Ramp  
411 Rocky Point Drive
- 19** Lake Murray Dam Ramp  
6 SC-6

### GILBERT

- 14** Larry Koon Landing  
1523 Shull Avenue
- 13** Public Boat Ramp  
1523 Shull Avenue



# SOMETHING PROV

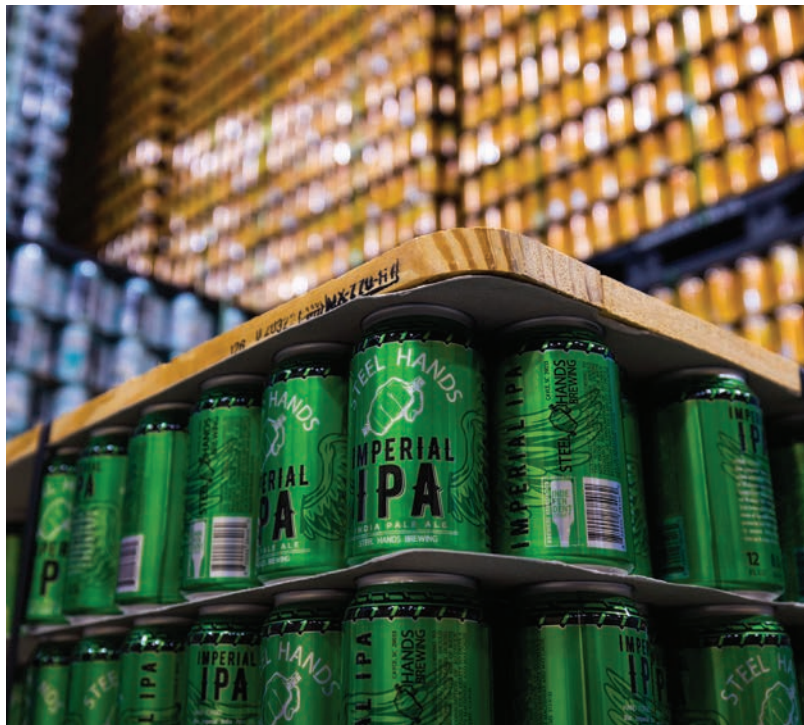
CAYCE'S ST  
BREWERY EXP  
MAKES IMPA

WORDS BY AN  
PHOTOS BY THOM





NG'S.  
**Brewing**  
STEEL HANDS  
HANDS INTO NC,  
FACT AT HOME  
APRIL BLAKE  
MAS HAMMOND







One might think it's just another place to grab a beer, but since opening in late 2018, Steel Hands Brewing has had a ripple effect in Cayce — the city in which it resides — the county of Lexington, and even throughout the Southeast's craft beer scene.

When Steel Hands opened, it was the biggest production brewery in South Carolina, though it has since moved down the list. The 30-barrel brewhouse proved to be highly popular, and the owners decided to replicate the brewery and taproom as a 20-barrel brewhouse in Greensboro, N.C., in May 2022. In the short time it has been around, Steel Hands has truly established itself as a community gathering place for residents and out of towners alike who have one thing in common: the thirst for a quality craft beer in a welcoming and bustling environment.

Nestled in between the 12th Street extension, CMC Steel, and a rail yard, Steel Hands embraces its industrial location wholly. The branding, decor and vibe include steel rebar as much as possible. The massive indoor seating area spills out into a large yard with covered and open air-seating, a walk-up beer service window, and a large outdoor stage fashioned out of shipping containers that plays host to live music many nights during the week.

In the short time Steel Hands has been producing, they've risen up to claim the spot of the fourth largest brewery by production of the state's 130 craft breweries, according to South Carolina Brewers Guild data. With such a high volume, they employ 85 workers among both locations in the Carolinas.

#### IT BEGINS AT HOME

The story of Steel Hands begins with the City of Cayce's vision to bring in a brewery when the craft beer scene was at a fever pitch throughout the country in the early to mid-2010s. Breweries were opening left and right, and Mayor Elise Partin and her team wanted their city to be a part of it. It worked in the city's favor that Scott and Ashley Lambert and Darryl Frick were looking to open a brewery on a similar timeline.

"We were really intentional about recruiting a brewery because people travel to craft breweries, it's a culinary draw, and we like that because people in the region will look around and see what else is here in the city," said Partin. "You often see breweries in unusual or industrial areas, and the Steel Hands team couldn't have done a better job with the branding — on every can it says made in Cayce, South Carolina, so that certainly helps to raise our profile."

Starting with the immediate area of the City of Cayce, the impacts of the brewery's presence happened quickly.

"A lot of businesses have popped up around us in Cayce," said Ashley Lambert, who also serves as the marketing director for the brewery. "We bring something different to the table as a destination here for the city, and serve as an anchor for the city. Hopefully they can use us as a case study for future development!"

In addition to just existing as a destination, Steel Hands also creates opportunities for people to gather.

"Whether it's through music or food, or barbecues and the like, they are constantly doing different things to draw people in," Partin said. "They really focus on creating an amazing product and have an excellence mindset."

#### COUNTY-WIDE IMPACTS

Craft beer tourism is still a major draw for some travelers, especially when the breweries are located conveniently off of major interstates. In this way, Steel Hands is contributing to



bringing people to the area who may not have stopped otherwise.

"There is so much else here, but if people don't know that we have the river walk or art galleries, Steel Hands is that initial draw for a lot of people," Partin said.

Beyond tourism, Steel Hands also contributes to the community by purchasing products created by nearby producers, such as Irmo's Loveland Coffee, who supplied the brewery with the cold brew coffee featured in the wildly popular coffee lager and its seasonal variations.

The brewery also partners with local nonprofits in a big way.

"Steel Hands Brewing is a leader in the greater Midlands region as a community engagement and economic development champion," said Campbell Mims, executive director of the South Carolina Brewers Guild. "An advocate for the local movement and its surrounding community, Steel Hands mastered initiatives like its Steel Paws Wheat Ale fundraiser, in which a portion of every sale supports canines."

The program, which rotates its focus quarterly on special needs dogs, public safety K9 programs, public service dogs, and shelter dogs, has raised thousands of dollars and plenty of awareness in less than a year. The second iteration of Steel Paws will be served up in April 2023.

### INTERSTATE EXPANSION

In 2021, Steel Hands decided to expand its reach beyond the Midlands, and open a second brewery in Greensboro. Both locations house production and canning lines, but the Greensboro location has more of an experimental brewpub feel, Lambert said. What that means is they have the space to release more new and different styles of beers, like sours, that release every two weeks in the North Carolina taproom. Two weeks later, those beers

make their way across the border and are offered to customers in the Cayce taproom.

"We leaned into the experimental aspect in the expansion, and we're excited to have the space to offer more options like sours," Lambert offered.

Opening a second location farther from home, and in another state with its own alcohol regulations, isn't without its challenges though.

"We don't live there, so we had to bring in a team we trusted, and added on some full-time roles to help us root into the community and bridge the gap," said Lambert. "The struggle is an ongoing effort to get your brand out there."

Things seem to be going swimmingly for Steel Hands Brewing, as they were recently named 2022 brewery of the year by the North Carolina Brewers Guild. They also have strong support from Mayor Partin, who reached out to the mayor of Greensboro to voice her opinion on the benefits Steel Hands has brought to her community.

"I had no doubt they'd do the same things up there that bring people together, such as creating an enjoyable outdoor space, bringing in music, and great craft beer," Lambert added

She said the brewery has many ideas for growing its Cayce location, including snagging the land to the side of the brewery for a dog park or some other out-of-the-box type idea. This would be in addition to the recently built steel shed that was needed for product storage due to the increasing need for space as the brewery grew rapidly. This 5,000-square-foot space also serves as flexible venue space as needed.

"We are expanding within the means we have, one beer at a time," Lambert said.

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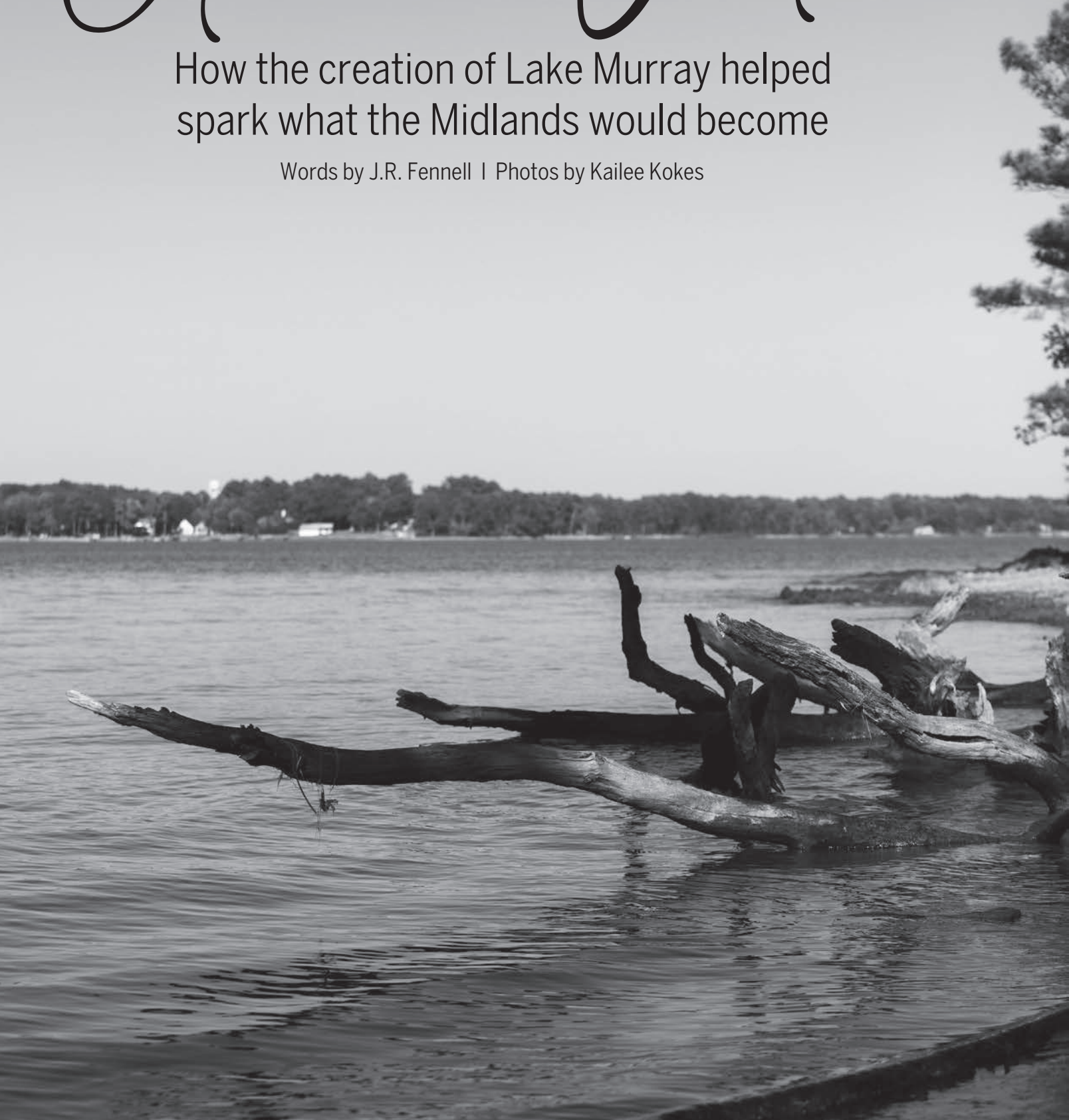
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f t i y v

# Open Water

How the creation of Lake Murray helped  
spark what the Midlands would become

Words by J.R. Fennell | Photos by Kailee Kokes





The streams and rivers of Lexington County have been an important part of the economy since the very beginning.

Many sawmills and grist mills relied on the flowing water to provide power. When Columbia and the surrounding area began to electrify, people began to look to those same streams and rivers to provide the power. The first attempt to harness the Saluda River for hydroelectricity began in 1912 when developers looked at the Dreher Shoals site as a suitable location for a dam. However, this was abandoned when a dam and reservoir were constructed at Parr Shoals on the Broad River.

As the 20th century progressed, continued growth led to the need for more power. To meet the growing needs of the community, a dam on Bear Creek was proposed but never really got off the ground. A New York engineering firm named Murray and Flood saw the potential of the Dreher Shoals site however and bought the rights to build a dam there in 1926. Murray and Flood, led by William S. Murray, worked with the Lexington Water Power Company to start construction on the dam in 1927. To honor his work, the state legislature voted to name the proposed lake created by the dam after William Murray on April 6, 1927. A license to construct the dam was issued by the federal government on July 8, 1927. Murray and Flood along with the Lexington Water Power Company decided to build an earthen dam due to the availability of materials and the strength of the material.

The first activity that needed completion was the purchase of land for the lake. A total of around 100,000 acres needed to be purchased. This was hindered by some families having no legal documents to prove their ownership of the land. There were also some who refused to sell and sued the Lexington Water Power Company. Besides families, three churches, six schools and 193 graveyards had to be moved. For graveyards, descendants of those buried could choose to have the graves exhumed and the remains moved or they could choose to leave the graves where they were. State officials were worried that those displaced by the lake would leave the state as Georgia began advertising that they would offer free transportation to those who wanted to leave. Many nearby residents were also convinced that mosquitos would make the land near the lake uninhabitable.

After acquiring the land, the LWPC needed to clear the land. Wood was needed to build concrete forms, train trestles, train tracks, etc. By mid-1928, 2,000 men were employed in logging and milling the wood. Thirty-seven saw mills were built to help with this. Many workers came from out of town and needed housing while working on clearing the land and building the dam. To meet this need, nine barracks, a community center and a church were constructed.

After clearing the land and milling the wood, the next objective was

constructing a railroad link with the nearby Columbia, Newberry and Laurens railroad (nicknamed the crooked, noisy and late by locals). The intake towers were then constructed, rising 223 feet. The arch conduit was constructed at this time as well. This conduit, which was used to divert the river during construction, was so large, six cars could travel side by side through it. It also featured concrete walls that varied between five and nine feet thick. Construction of the intake towers took 636,000 bags of cement and over 5,700 tons of steel.

Construction on the dam then began. To build the dam, workers built 30 miles of railway. Trains would bring dirt to the dam site and unload their cars. Water pumps on boats would then spray the dirt on the dam to wash the finer material to the bottom of the dam. Rip rap was placed on the side of the dam facing the lake. The dam ranged from 1,150 feet wide at the bottom to 25 feet wide at the top. 11,000,000 cubic yards of earth were used to build the dam. The intake gates were closed on Aug. 31, 1929. Because the dam was not completely finished, engineers wanted to keep the water level at 290 feet. However, September and October 1929 saw two tropical storms inundate the area with water. To keep the water from reaching too high, the spillway gates were opened to release some water. When the dam was completed in 1930, it was the largest earthen dam in the world. Power began flowing at 7 a.m. on Dec. 1, 1930.

During World War II, B-25 bombers stationed at the Columbia Army Air Base used the islands in Lake Murray, particularly Bomb Island (then called Lunch Island), as targets for practice bombing raids. For practicing night bombing runs, Bomb Island was illuminated with lights. One night during the summer of 1944, the lights on Bomb Island were not working. The pilot of a B-25 on a training mission saw another ring of lights in the distance and the crew released the bombs on that ring of lights. It turns out the circular lights he saw were not Bomb Island but the Saluda traffic circle. Terrified residents thought they were under attack by the Japanese. Unfortunately, several planes crashed during these practice runs. One of these planes was raised from the depths in 2005 and is now on display in Birmingham, Alabama.

Lake Murray greatly transformed the geography and economy of the area once completed. Boating and fishing became popular and as Lexington County became a suburb of Columbia, many chose to live on the lake. To learn more about the Lake, visit the Lexington County Museum and Lake Murray Country and Visitors Center.

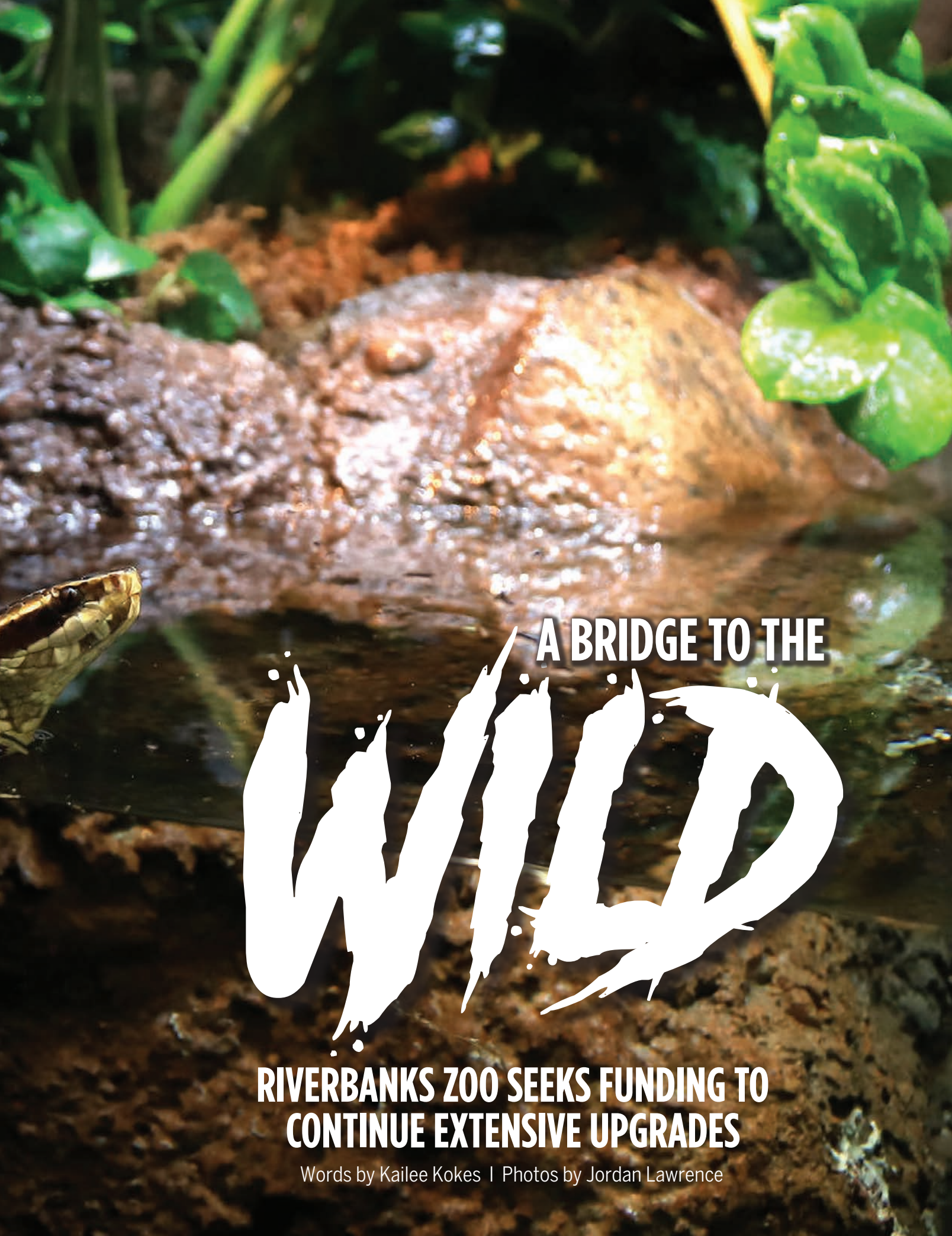
*J.R. Fennell has served as director of the Lexington County Museum since 2007. He holds a master's degree in public history and a certificate of museum management from the University of South Carolina.*











**A BRIDGE TO THE**

# **WILD**

**RIVERBANKS ZOO SEEKS FUNDING TO  
CONTINUE EXTENSIVE UPGRADES**

Words by Kailee Kokes | Photos by Jordan Lawrence





A popular attraction that straddles the Saluda River seeks funds to continue an extensive overhaul.

The Riverbanks Zoo and Garden has completed another portion of its Bridge to the Wild master plan to reshape its campus with the renovation of the Darnall W. and Susan F. Boyd Aquarium and Reptile Conservation Center, which welcomed back guests in March.

The conservation center continues the first phase of Bridge to the Wild and follows the White Rhino habitat that was completed in 2020. According to Lochlan Wooten, Riverbanks' chief operations officer, the zoo and the Darnall W. and Susan F. Boyd Foundation began discussing plans for the \$10 million dollar renovation project in 2018, which was originally intended to be much smaller-scale.

The center is far from the end of the \$32 million agenda planned for the first phase of Bridge to the Wild, with the remaining elements set to be completed next year.

"[The renovations] are important because continuing to promote the amazing conservation work that goes on not just at Riverbanks Zoo, but other zoological institutions," Wooten said, "we can connect people to ways that they can make small changes in their daily lives that will help us save the planet."

The zoo has announced some of its plans for the following phases and is in the process of figuring out funding for phase two.

Wooten told the Chronicle that the zoo's current course of funding is to try to obtain a general obligation bond from Lexington and Richland counties. As of February, the zoo hadn't applied for any grants or started fundraising for this phase.

This second phase of the plan is set to cost about \$90 million, Wooten said, adding that if they are unable to receive the obligation bond, they will break up the next phase, separating it into smaller pieces with a smaller reach.

Richland County Council rejected an \$80 million bond to fund upgrades at the zoo last year.

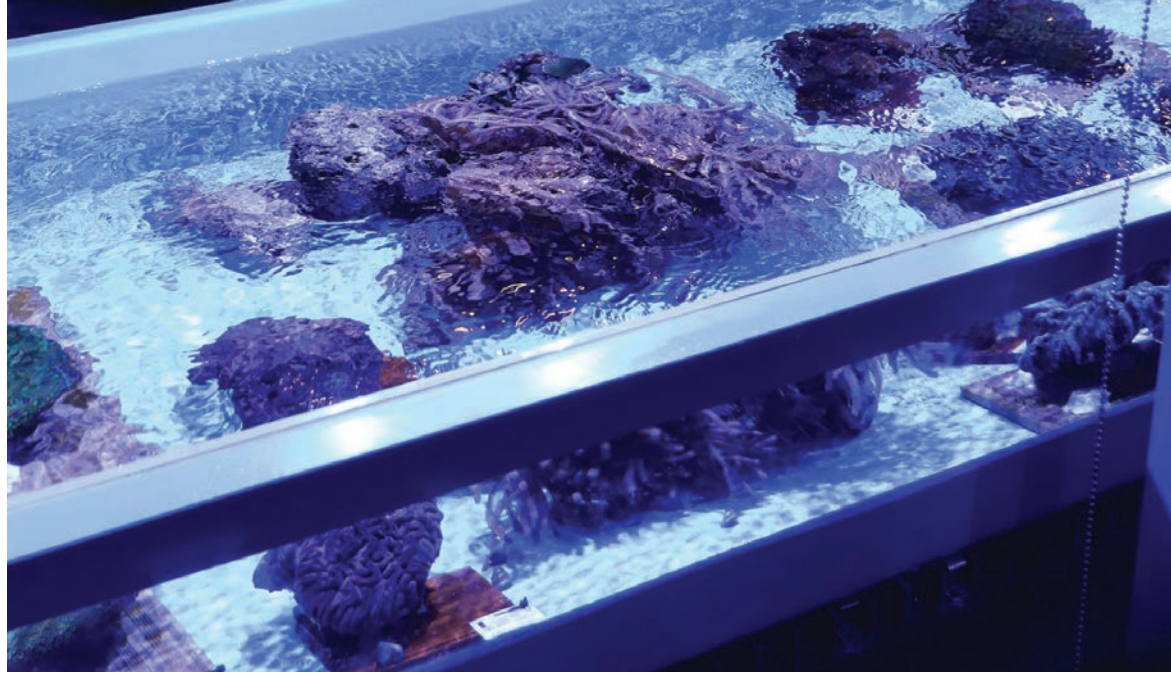
Wooten emphasized that new things will be happening at the zoo no matter what.

Phase two is set to include an immersive, walk-through orangutan habitat and a brand new multipurpose facility and restaurant with a large deck along the banks of the Saluda River, part of an effort to better connect the gardens on the Lexington County side of the river with the zoo on the other side.

This phase also calls for the zoo and its animals to adorn both sides of the Saluda River.

Also included in the planned second phase is the South Carolina Nature Preserve, a trail that would feature some native species, including golden eagles, red wolves and black bears.





“You start kind of at the bottom down near the river, and maybe you grab a bite to eat ... and then you walk out the back deck and you see orangutans and then you will follow the pathway up the hill and you’re exploring the South Carolina Nature Preserve, and then you’ll end up at the top of the hill,” Wooten said, describing the trails.

The second phase would also include the installation of a sky gondola, which would allow for easy, scenic transportation from the river up toward the botanical gardens, as well as expansions of the tiger and lion habitats.

Addressing the Lexington Chamber’s Business Over Breakfast meeting in January, Thomas Stringfellow said the intention before COVID-19 was to roll out these plans two years ago, but the zoo still hopes to have some of the phase two upgrades in place before it hits a big milestone.

“In two years, it’ll be our 50th anniversary, and we were hoping all this would be ready to go by then,” he said. “We’re about two years behind, but if we can push through we may have a few pieces of this open and ready to go.”

Wooten mentioned that no land has to be purchased for the next phase, since the necessary property is already owned by the zoo.

Following the completion of the second phase, she said the zoo expects to reach 1.6 million annual guests and have a \$175 million economic impact – currently, the zoo says its economic impact is nearly \$149 million.

Outside of animal-related renovations and additions, the zoo is also

making changes to its infrastructure, targeting such projects as parking expansion, ticket booth renovations, bathroom renovations and ensuring that there are plenty of food and beverage options.

“Even if it’s just a restroom renovation, being sure that we are inclusive of those with different physical abilities and different mental abilities, it’s all a matter of inclusion because truly the most important thing to Riverbanks outside of conservation is creating a sense of belonging,” Wooten said.

New features of the zoo’s recently reopened aquarium and reptile building include conservation labs that are open for guest viewing. Wooten shared that Riverbanks has been part of the Florida Reef Tract since 2019 and helps safeguard coral along Florida’s coast. Through its terrestrial efforts, the labs help support the populations of gecko species.

During the construction of the center, all its animals were temporarily rehomed. Wooten said more than 100 individual animals of 22 different species were housed at 19 different zoos while the work was done.

With this renovation, the zoo welcomed 20 new species including moon jellyfish, giant pacific octopus, Mojave and rock rattlesnakes and Gambel’s quail, among others.

The center itself houses more than 12,000 animals, representing more than 300 different species, 17 of which are endangered.

*Jordan Lawrence contributed reporting to this article.*





Photo by Jordan Lawrence

# Home Team

*Lexington County Blowfish are about community, not just baseball*

Words by Thomas Grant Jr.

Call it a match made in summer baseball heaven.

At least that's how Lexington County Blowfish co-owner Bill Shanahan sees his team's relationship the past eight years to the community it calls home.

Since 2014, the Coastal Plain League franchise has turned the former Wildcat Hollow football stadium for Lexington High School into a family-friendly, entertaining baseball experience with a capacity of 2,573 fans.

This has twice earned the summer collegiate wood bat team its leagues highest honor of Organization of the Year both, in 2015 and last season. The team also plays in a uniquely configured ballpark renovated for \$3 million with an expanded concourse, lower bowl "Wrigley Field Style" box seating, a vintage grandstand with a roof canopy, an air-conditioned stadium club overlooking the field from the first base side that can be used for special events, administrative offices and concessions.

Most important, the dimensions used in the design of the field were taken from some of the country's most iconic Major League Stadiums, including Fenway Park (302 feet — Right Field Foul Pole or Pesky Pole) Wrigley Field (394 feet — straight away centerfield), Yankee Stadium (318 feet — left field foul pole) and Dodger Stadium (55 feet — home plate to backstop).

"They have cemented themselves as a staple in Lexington County and the surrounding areas," Coastal Plain Commissioner Justin Sellers said.

Also, for the second time in Lexington — and the third in the team's existence — the Blowfish will host the league's All Star Show festivities, set to take place July 18-19 and feature a Fan Fest, an All Star Skills Challenge, Scout Day activities and the 23rd annual All Star Game.

From providing an environment for college and future Major League Baseball players to hone their craft to providing a fun time for all ages through various promotions and games with team mascot Blowie, the Blowfish find themselves in more sound waters compared to their waning days in aging Capitol City Stadium in Columbia.

Shanahan — who purchased the team in 2005 with his wife, Vicki — reflected on those early days.

"Our first season was 2006 at Columbia Capitol City Stadium," he said. "And you know, it was to fill the void Minor League Baseball had left [in Columbia] and I saw a great, great opportunity in the community to be able to have summer collegiate baseball. You could have South Carolina Gamecocks in it, you could have Clemson players, you know, because when you think of like the minor leagues, when you go, you don't even know any of the players in most cases."

"But here, summer collegiate baseball in the Coastal Plain League, not only do we get players from South Carolina, Clemson, College of Charleston, the Citadel, Coastal Carolina, you know, you name it. But a lot of these players also grew up in the area. So a lot of these high school kids



that went on to college are coming back and get to play in their hometown, which is fabulous.”

As the team continued, all arrows pointed to Lexington County, Shanahan said, because of the growth of families on the county’s side of the Congaree river.

The team’s inaugural season in Lexington was arguably its most successful from an on-field standpoint. During that summer, fans witnessed a no-hitter thrown by Heath Holder, a playoff series victory and the Blowfish coming within one win of reaching the Pettit Cup final, which determines the champion of the league.

The 2015 season also provided a glance of those staple activities seen at Lexington County games. Mascot chases, special fireworks shows, honoring military families after the second inning and special game days such as “Dog Day Tuesday” and “Thirsty Thursday” are among some of the activities one can experience attending a Blowfish game.

“It worked out that this site had been sitting for a long time, as we all know, for five years after 40 years of high school football,” Shanahan said. “So there were a lot of great memories that were here, so we thought, well, let’s just create new memories. And that’s how Lexington County baseball stadium got started.

“Our goal from the very beginning was to provide great family fun and entertainment at a very cost-affordable price and most importantly, have local ownership — we care about our community. We are here. We live here. We are not an out-of-town owner. We care about Lexington, Lexington County and all the towns and cities that are in the area. Of course, we live on Lake Murray. So, we love Lake Murray.”

In recent years, the Blowfish have further solidified their relationship with Lexington County by making themselves omnipresent throughout the area.

This had included sponsoring such events as the Lexington County Chili Cook Off and the Shamrock Parade held in downtown Lexington.

Co-sponsored by Old Mill Brewpub and the Blowfish, the Cook Off held at the Icehouse Amphitheater has helped raise funds for charitable organizations through the judging of 15-20 gallon chili meals prepared by various entries.

This year’s St. Patrick’s Day parade featured “The American Soldier” as the grand marshal, represented by service members from nearby U.S. Army Fort Jackson in Columbia.

The Blowfish will also resume their tradition of inviting recruits to the

stadium for a night of baseball. This year’s Fort Jackson Night is scheduled for June 24.

“Vicki and I made a commitment that we were going to go to every town council meeting and meet the mayors and the council of each town and city in Lexington County when we were moving over here and getting the stadium built,” Shanahan said. “Because we wanted to know them. We wanted them to know we’re local. We care.”

Over the past few seasons, this has included a special promotion involving the team jerseys. As a tribute to the cities, towns and public

service organizations in Lexington County, the Blowfish have had their names placed on the back of the jerseys, holding an online auction at the end of the season with the proceeds raised going toward various charities.

Other special jerseys used over the years include the team’s alter ego, the Lexington County Pancakes (with a spatula on the jersey, usually worn during matchups with the Macon Bacon). Last season, the Blowfish introduced Glowfish jerseys with neon blue and red letters and numbers on the back in illuminating colors along with a Palmetto State-shaped silhouette logo on the cap.

The Blowfish’s most notable jersey-related promotion took place this past year during Memorial Day weekend. The Blowfish wore special jerseys with the back displaying the names of 13 service members who were killed during a terrorist attack at a Kabul, Afghanistan airport in August 2021.

And this season, the team is partnering with the Hootie & the Blowfish Foundation to become the “Hooties” on June 16 and raise money for the Lexington medical Center Foundation.



Photo by Thomas Grant Jr.

For all the community service and fan-friendly promotion, the organization’s central mission remains player development. A crucial part of accomplishing that goal are the host families.

Along with providing a room in a safe environment, the families that host players provide access to laundry and meals at their discretion.

Since moving to Lexington, a total of 54 players who’ve suited up for the Blowfish have been selected in the MLB draft. Shanahan’s favorite class is the 2021 team, which despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic during the summer of 2020, had eight players selected, including four from South Carolina (Brett Kerry, Brady Allen, Andrew Peter and Wes Clarke).

“We now have 10 former Blowfish alumni that have made it to the major leagues,” Shanahan said. “That’s pretty amazing and if you think of the players that are in the minors right now that are playing, some of them are



going to have a chance to make it.  
 "You're watching future professional baseball players, right here at Lexington County Baseball Stadium, that are going to go on and compete at the highest level."

This season, the Blowfish are even more focused on ending their postseason drought. They will have a new head coach in K.C. Brown. The cousin of former University of South Carolina pitcher Jay Brown, K.C. started as a volunteer assistant for the Blowfish before becoming a full-time assistant this past year.

He also served in an interim capacity on occasion in place of Jonathan Johnson. Brown is the team's fifth head coach since 2018 and hopes to plant his roots at the position.

Looking towards the future, the Blowfish will look to continue to fulfill their role as Lexington County's "home team."

"Enthusiasm, as I always say, breeds more enthusiasm and crowds attract crowds," Shanahan said. "And if we can get people excited about all the great things in Lexington County, more people will want to be here."



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