



THE Alleghany News

October 6, 2021

133RD YEAR, 9TH ISSUE

WWW.ALLEGHANYNEWS.COM

NEWSSTAND PRICE 50¢

Billings sentenced to five-plus years in prison

FROM STAFF REPORTS

Donald Alfred Billings, 53, was convicted of attempted murder-related charges in the Sept. 27 Alleghany Superior Court, finally bringing to a close a criminal saga dating back to August 2018.

Billings, who had been ruled incapable to proceed with trial, had been ruled capable for this court appearance. The charge of felony conspiracy had been pled down to “solicitation to commit first degree murder,” and he received a 66-92 month active sentence.

Time spent in jail in Florida



DONALD ALFRED BILLINGS

was applied to the sentence as a credit.

He was ordered to continue

with his psychiatric treatment and to submit to assessments and treatments for mental health and substance abuse. All court costs owed were reduced to a civil judgment. He was ordered to pay a \$3,653.62 court-appointed attorney fee.

The charges of three counts of felony attempted first-degree murder and two counts felony conspiracy were dismissed. The charges of felony possession of a firearm by a felon and fleeing or eluding arrest with a motor vehicle were consolidated with the other charges.

On Aug. 3, 2020, Billings’ co-defendant, Alton Otto Smoot,

29, originally from Thurmond, was sentenced to 56-80 months in prison in a plea deal for his part in an Aug. 11, 2018, chase that had eluded deputies.

The case was noteworthy in that Billings and Smoot returned heavy fire at the deputies that was described by Sheriff Bryan Maines as an “offensive tactical assault.”

The two were captured a week later in Treasure Island, Fla. Smoot was taken into custody without incident, but Billings was holed up in an apartment and was not captured until a SWAT team fired in stun grenades.

A fire ensued – whether started by the grenades or other causes was not determined – and Billings suffered significant burns.

Court records said at that time Billings was incapable to proceed with trial, a designation typically given a defendant for reasons of mental health or defect who is not able to understand the charges against him and/or participate in his defense.

Other people appearing in this court session can be found in the court report on page 4A.

Bottomley and DEQ clash over land clearing

By BOB BAMBERG
ALLEGHANY NEWS STAFF

Bottomley Evergreens and Farms and Bottomley Properties and the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) are discussing terms for remediating alleged sedimentation of a stream and other environmental issues regarding property along

See BOTTOMLEY, Page 4A

County Commissioners A rehash of old business

By BOB BAMBERG
ALLEGHANY NEWS STAFF

Two issues that have come up before were front and center at the Sept. 20 County Board of Commissioners’ meeting: Solid Waste fees charged to part-time residents, in this case for recreational vehicles (RVs), and the posting of a 45 mph speed limit on N.C. 93 and U.S. 221, roads that formerly had a speed limit of 55 mph.

Al Clifton raised the solid waste fee on behalf of Saddle Ridge Campground, a large RV park located just off the Blue Ridge

See REHASH, Page 6A

FUN AT THE FAIR



FAIR SATURDAY—People turned out in droves for the Alleghany Fair, enjoying a day of rides, food and games. Izabella Price and Logan Brown (above) are pictured trying their hand at a fishing game. At left, a group screams their way around one of the many rides.

PHOTOS BY ZACHARY WEAVER

Dollar General hearing Thursday

FROM STAFF REPORTS

The Alleghany County Planning Board will hold a public hearing on Thursday, Oct. 7, at 6 p.m. to consider a conditional use permit for the construction and operation of a Dollar General store in the Ennice community. The announcement was in last week’s issue, but failed to include the date. The Alleghany News regrets the error and any inconvenience it may have created for readers.

See HEARING, Page 5A

Run for Gracie returns Oct. 9

FROM STAFF REPORTS

The 13th Annual Run for Gracie will be held on Oct. 9 at Piney Creek School, marking the event’s return following its COVID-19 cancellation last year.

The one-mile fun run will begin at 9 a.m., and the 5k will begin at 10 a.m. Registration on the day of the race will be open until 30 minutes before each event. Participants can also call 336-359-8327 to pre-register. The cost is \$20 for both races and comes with T-shirts for the first 100 runners. Trophies will be awarded for the top three finishers in each age category.

See RUN, Page 5A

Local author profile

Almond talks about his book, ‘The Tannery’

By BOB BAMBERG
ALLEGHANY NEWS STAFF

Piney Creek newly minted author Michael Almond has received numerous accolades for his first book, “The Tannery,” historical fiction set in Wilkes County. Few are more praiseworthy than UNC – Charlotte English Professor Dr. Mark I. West who compared it to Harper’s Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird.”

Calling Almond’s story, a riveting novel and legal thriller that is “unflinching and disturbing” in its depiction of the state’s bigoted past, West says it stands up to the comparison with “Mockingbird.”

I have also lent my praise to the novel.

Set at the beginning of the 20th century, the plot revolves around Virgil Wade, a young mixed-race male accused of murdering the daughter of tannery owner Jakob Schumann. As in “Mockingbird,” a mob seeks to lynch Wade, but his fate rests with his defense, led by his lawyer Ben Waterman, and a trial

that seeks to offer facts to counter the community’s rush to judgment. The book has enough twists and turns to keep readers engaged until the last pages.

A native of Pilot Mountain, Almond received his undergraduate and law degrees from UNC – Chapel Hill. Wanting to practice international law and remain in the state, Almond said he sensed Charlotte was on the verge of explosive growth and established his own international business-law firm there.

He and his wife Helen Ruth purchased a farm in Piney Creek in 1987 and retired there in 2005. For several years, Helen Ruth served as the executive director of the Alleghany Memorial Hospital Foundation.

Almond is slated to speak and sign books at an author’s event hosted by the Wilkes Heritage Museum in the restored 1902 Wilkes County Courthouse on Thursday, Oct. 14, beginning at 5:30 p.m. and hold a similar event at the Alleghany County Library at 11 a.m. on Saturday, Oct. 16. Preorders of the

book are available from Amazon.com, Barnes&Noble.com and In dieBound.org on the web or through links on Almond’s author website, www.michaelalmondbooks.com. The book will be available in bookstores on Oct. 19.

Why did you choose to place a racially charged crime at the book’s center?

I came of age during the Civil Rights movement. My goal was to write a murder mystery and compelling legal thriller, and I wanted to have the theme of racial justice at the turn of the century running through the book.

One decision I had to make was how far I should go in developing Virgil Wade’s character. I decided all we need to know is that he was a mixed-race black male who struck a white woman. In the context of the times, his fate was sealed. Virgil represents a sort of “Everyman” in terms of treatment of Blacks back then.

How did it come to be set in

See ALMOND, Page 2A



MICHAEL ALMOND



MUSIC OFF MAIN
was held in Crouse Park on Oct. 2, closing out the 2021 season. Dropkick Mullet served up a selection of 80s rock hits, playing the entire four-hour concert.
PHOTO BY ZACHARY WEAVER

Sparta Sweets n' Treats serves up rolled ice cream

By ZACHARY WEAVER
ALLEGHANY NEWS STAFF

Those seeking a new frozen sweet treat can try the rolled ice cream at Sparta Sweets n' Treats.

Sparta Sweets n' Treats, which is co-owned by Cheryl Parker and Jerry Porcaro, is located on the upper level of Trojan Village Shopping Center, adjacent to Line 'M' Up Barbershop, which Porcaro also owns and operates. They maintain opening hours of Friday, 3 p.m.-9 p.m.; Saturday, 8 a.m.-9 p.m.; and Sunday, noon-8:30 p.m.

Sparta Sweets n' Treats serves up rolled ice cream. This unusual sweet treat, which originated in southeast Asia, is created by smoothing out ice cream into an extremely thin sheet on a minus-25-degrees Fahrenheit surface. They offer build-your-own flavors, specials and weekly featured items and snow cones.

The shop also offers cookies, brownies, cheesecake and chocolate-covered strawberries. As supplies last, they also sell Hole Lotta Donuts on weekends. They also have a to-go window, located on



SWEET TREATS—Cheryl Parker and Jerry Porcaro pose in front of the shop's menu board.
PHOTO BY ZACHARY WEAVER

the ramp beside the shop, that Parker wants to promote use of.

Parker, who works in home health care, said she wanted to bring something different to the community with her ice cream. She said she made up

her own base, got the chilling table and learned how to roll the ice cream hands-on. The shop was originally set to open in July, but the pandemic delayed its opening to early September. Parker hopes to add donuts made in-shop to

the menu in the future. Sparta Sweets n' Treats will host a Chamber of Commerce ribbon cutting on Friday, Oct. 8 at 4 p.m. and a grand opening party with live music 6 p.m.-9 p.m. the following day.

Almond

(Continued from Page 1A)

Wilkes County?

Writers are told to "write what you know," and growing up in neighboring Surry County, I spent a lot of time in Wilkes County. I started my research and was impressed by the C.C. Smoot and Sons Tannery that was the largest steam tannery in the Southeast. It operated in Wilkes County until it was devastated by the 1940 flood.

How long did the novel take from research to completion?

Research and outlining is something lawyers do well. I spent 14 years researching the book, much of it dealing with the founding and growth of the town of North Wilkesboro and the impact and vast reach of the Smoot and Sons Tannery. Many of the hides that were processed at the tannery came from South America.

Last April, I told Helen Ruth that I had completed the final outline. She put her hands on her hips and said, "Me and all of your friends are sick and tired of hearing about your research and your outline. Go upstairs and start writing your book, or be quiet about it." So that's just what I did!

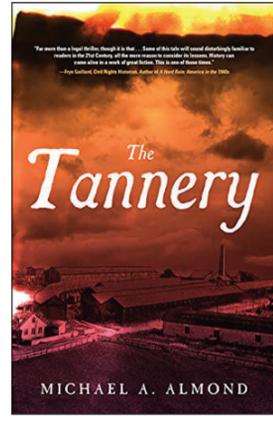
I sat down to the terrifying image of a blank computer screen without knowing how I would weave the historical information into an engaging tale. But when I wrote the first line, I was off and running. I wrote it in one draft over a period of

five months .
Was it your intent to follow the themes in "To Kill a Mockingbird?"

No. I first read "Mockingbird" almost 60 years ago, and, quite frankly, the comparison never occurred to me. West is actually the fourth advanced reader to make that point, but I have avoided using all of those because I didn't want folks to think I was riding on the back of "Mockingbird."

Your research began near President Obama's election at a time when racial tensions in this country were at a low point. How did you come to write a book that so reflects the almost 180-degree shift in racial tensions that permeate America today?

I am a fan of history, particularly Southern history. The research opened up doors, and I came to realize that 1900 was a pivotal time in North Carolina's racial history, a history that has been largely swept under the rug. Take the Wilmington Massacre of 1898, for example, when



so many Blacks were murdered and the local government replaced with White Supremacists. The quest for racial justice became a central theme of the book, but at the time I began researching the novel, I had no idea it would become so relevant to current times.

How much of the book is fact and how much is fiction?

When I read historical fiction, I want to know where the history ends and the fiction begins. In that sense The Tannery is sort of like a time machine that transports the reader to a different time

and place. At the end of the book, there are historical notes where I tell the readers who and what are real and what is fiction.

How is the book being promoted?

Following the Wilkes and Sparta events, there are about 25 planned events through Dec. 4, from as far north as Baltimore, to as far south as Jacksonville (Fla.) and as far west as Lexington (Ky.). Others may be planned later.

Do you have another book in you?

Yes, if I can ever get this one in my rear view mirror. I do have an idea for another novel, tentatively titled "The Factory," set in Winston-Salem during the rise of the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. There's another murder involved, and our friend Ben Waterman will be called to defend a young woman.

Port-A-Pit Chicken

1/2 chicken
baked beans
BBQ slaw
roll
\$10.00
per plate
Money raised goes to fund scholarships for students

Drive-thru pick up: Sparta School
THURSDAY, OCT 21, 12-6 PM

For tickets, see Jay @ Keller Williams Realty, Matt @ Becca's Cafe, Heather Klein @ her law office or Bob @ the Alleghany News



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Offering more than a century of service to our community
The Alleghany News (USPS 013-760), published weekly at 20 S. Main St., Sparta 28675 by Alleghany Holdings, LLC. Periodicals postage paid in Sparta, N.C. 28675. Postmaster send address changes to: The Alleghany News P.O. Box 8, Sparta, N.C. 28675. Annual subscription rates: Alleghany County, Grayson County and Galax, Va., \$25.00; and all other U.S., \$35. This includes 6.75 percent sales tax for all N.C. subscriptions. Seniors get a \$2 discount. Phone: 336-372-8999; Fax: 336-372-5707; www.alleghanynews.com.

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