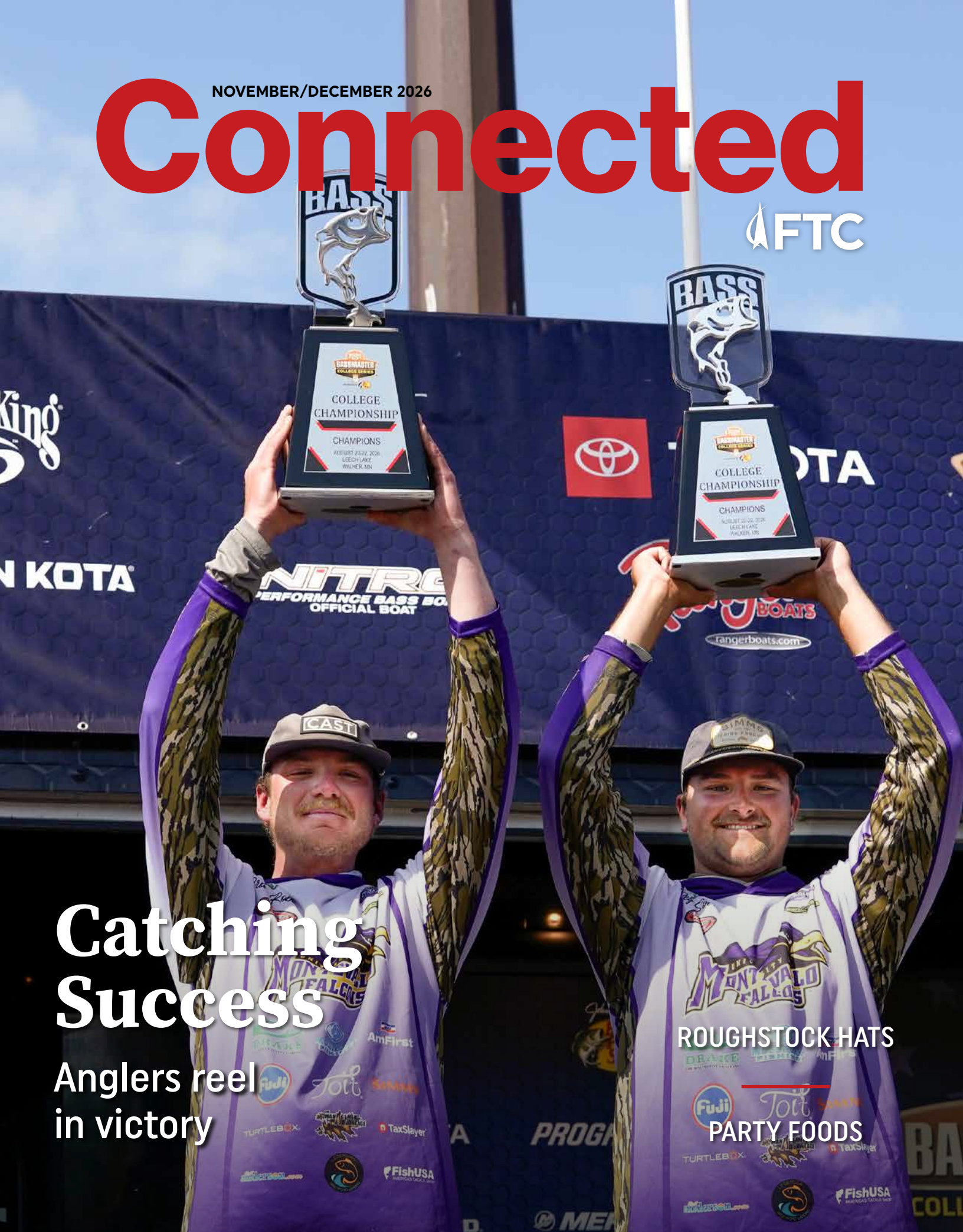
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2026

Connected

FTC



Catching Success

Anglers reel in victory

ROUGHSTOCK HATS

PARTY FOODS

NTCA THE RURAL BROADBAND ASSOCIATION

RURAL CONNECTIONS

By Mike Romano, CEO
NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association

Broadband Powers AI

Artificial intelligence is a hot topic these days with a constant stream of news articles talking about its benefits and potential pitfalls. While many of us think about AI in terms of chatbots like ChatGPT, it can also play a powerful role in helping businesses, like small, rural broadband providers, operate more efficiently behind the scenes.

As we all explore the practical applications of AI, NTCA members are implementing various AI tools to analyze network performance data, identify potential issues before they affect customers, strengthen cybersecurity efforts and streamline routine administrative tasks. Finding these efficiencies allows employees to spend less time on repetitive work and more time on what matters most—building and sustaining reliable networks and supporting their communities. Especially if the implementation is done right and if providers "own their own AI future," they can be well positioned to identify and capitalize on new opportunities to grow and sustain their operations and serve customers and communities even better.

Rural broadband providers are unique. They are rooted in their communities, and personal relationships are the heart and soul of their service. AI should not replace that but, rather, it should be another tool to help local teams operate smarter and more efficiently so they can continue to provide high-quality, reliable service to their friends and neighbors.

And none of this innovation is possible without broadband. Every AI tool, whether used by a family, school, business or even a data center, relies on high-speed, reliable broadband. As the demand for these tools continues to grow, rural broadband providers will invest in building and sustaining the robust networks needed now and in the future.

Adobe Stock image by Lightfield Studios

System Reset

We've all heard the inevitable question when troubleshooting an internet outage: Have you tried turning the router off and on again? Rebooting electronics is such a common fix that it's become a running joke. But why does it actually work?

You might not think about it this way, but your router is a small computer, complete with its own memory, storage and operating system. Just as your computer can crash or freeze up, the same is true for your router.

WHAT DOES A REBOOT DO?

As with any computer, bugs can use memory or trigger safety measures that cause problems. A reboot won't solve the underlying issue, but it can be a quick fix.

Your router also manages multiple devices on the network. If some IP addresses are the same or are not up to date, your router can make mistakes. Rebooting the router resets those assignments.

Just like computers, a router can overheat, especially if it's in a tight space hidden from view. Turning it off for a few seconds can give the hardware a needed break.

Adobe Stock image by Ivan

Simple habits help your devices' batteries last longer

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

Whether it's a smartphone, laptop or a favorite pair of earbuds, most of us rely on rechargeable batteries every day. But like any electronic device, those batteries don't last forever.

Most modern devices use lithium-ion batteries, which gradually lose their ability to hold a full charge over time. While battery aging is unavoidable, a few simple habits can help slow the process and keep your devices working well for years. Maintaining good battery health can also delay the need for costly repairs or replacement of a device.

CHARGE SMARTER

Many people think leaving a phone plugged in all night will damage the battery. Fortunately, today's smartphones and laptops are much smarter than older electronics. Most stop charging once they reach 100% and manage the charging process automatically.

Even so, experts say batteries tend to last longer when they aren't constantly kept at either a full charge or completely drained. If possible, try to recharge your device before the battery falls below about 20% and unplug it once it has enough charge for the day. Many newer devices also offer optimized charging settings that learn your routine and reduce battery wear.

Heat is a battery's enemy. Avoid leaving phones or laptops in a hot car or in direct sunlight for extended periods, especially while charging.

CHECK YOUR CABLES

A charging cable may seem like a minor accessory, but taking care of it can save both frustration and money.

Instead of pulling a cable out by the cord, grasp the connector itself. Avoid tightly wrapping cables around chargers or bending them sharply, since repeated stress can damage the wires inside. If a cable becomes frayed or the connector is loose, replace it rather than continuing to use it.

It's also a good idea to use charging cables and power adapters from reputable manufacturers that meet your device's specifications.

NO WIRES? NO PROBLEM

Wireless charging pads have become increasingly common for smartphones and some earbuds. Instead of plugging in a cable, you simply place the device on the charging pad.

Wireless charging can reduce wear on a device's charging port, especially if you plug and unplug your phone several times each day. Some newer devices also support magnetic wireless chargers that help align the phone for more efficient charging.

While wireless charging is convenient, it may charge more slowly than a cable and can generate a bit more heat. For many users, though, it's an easy way to simplify charging while reducing wear on connectors.

With a few simple habits, you can help your devices stay powered longer and keep their batteries healthier for years to come.

Praising Those Who Make Success Possible

Another successful Annual Meeting is in the books, and I want to begin by saying thank you to each of our members who took the time to join us and participate in this important cooperative tradition.

PAUL HIGDON
Chief Executive Officer

Our Annual Meeting is much more than an event on the calendar. It is an opportunity for our members to take an active role in selecting the governance of their cooperative. That participation is one of the things that makes the cooperative business model so special. Our members have a voice, and we are grateful that so many continue to take an active interest in the future of FTC.

Everything we have accomplished over the years has been made possible because of the people we serve. Our members and customers are the reason we are here, and your continued trust and support allow us to invest in our network, expand our services, strengthen our communities and prepare for the future.

While our members are at the heart of our cooperative, our employees are the people who bring our mission to life each day. I am extremely thankful for the dedication of the men and women who make up the FTC team. Whether they are assisting a customer, installing service, maintaining our network, managing our finances, developing new technology or working behind the scenes, each employee plays an important role in our success.

Providing the level of service our members expect also requires strong leadership and teamwork throughout our organization. I am fortunate to work alongside a talented group of leaders who understand their departments, support their employees and, most importantly, understand that we are all working toward the same goal.

No department operates alone. From operations and engineering to finance, marketing, customer service, technology and every area in between, it takes communication and cooperation to make things happen. Each member of our leadership team brings different knowledge, experience and perspective to the table. Those differences make us stronger because we are able to work together, solve problems, make thoughtful decisions and keep FTC moving forward.

In the next few issues, you will hear directly from them in this column instead of from me. I wanted to take an opportunity to introduce you to some of the leaders who help guide our cooperative every day. I am proud of the team we have built, but none of what we do would be possible without our members, customers and employees. Thank you for believing in FTC, supporting your cooperative and allowing us the opportunity to serve you. Together, we will continue building on our success and creating an even stronger future for the communities we call home.

Connected
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2026 VOL. 30, NO. 6

Connected is a bimonthly magazine published by Farmers Telecommunications Cooperative, © 2026. It is distributed without charge to all customers of FTC.

FTC
Farmers Telecommunications
COOPERATIVE

FTC is the state's largest member-owned provider of telecommunications services. It serves Northeast Alabama with a robust broadband network using world-class optical fiber technology.

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UTILITY RESOURCES

On the Cover:

Photo courtesy of Solomon Glenn

Brody Robison, left, of Fyffe, and his fishing teammate, Peyton Sorrow, land a win at the college championship.
See story Page 12.

FTC RECEIVES SHOWCASE AWARD

NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association named FTC a 2026 Smart Rural Community Showcase Award winner. The prizes are presented annually to rural broadband providers that not only provide high-quality, reliable connectivity, but also lead the way on collaborative and innovative projects to advance their communities.

FTC was honored for launching the High-Tech Connect Center in Kilpatrick, providing digital literacy, computer skills and English as a second language training in an underserved community. The center helps residents build technology skills, expand their education and access online resources.

From left, NTCA CEO Mike Romano and Jason Shelton, of event sponsor Utility Capital Solutions, present the Smart Rural Community Showcase Award to FTC Executive Vice President of Marketing and Public Relations Brandi Lyles.

CONGRATS, PRIZE WINNERS

Some members took home big prizes from Farmers Telecommunications Cooperative's annual meeting in August.

Terry E. Culpepper, Eddie Overdear, Cory Shankles, Donna Taheri, Sybil R. Sharp, Hugh Punkin Rowell and Benny Neely each won $250 cash, as did F.G. Lumber Inc.

Amanda Gant won a smart TV. Andra Black Williams won a Ninja tea and coffee maker, and Sand Mountain Muffler won an Apple iPad.

Andy Fricks won a $500 Foodland gift card, and Stevie Phillips received a Skylight digital frame. Karen Bell took home a Turtlebox Ranger speaker, while Gail Benefield won an iRobot Roomba vacuum cleaner and mop. John S. Wagner took home a Wi-Fi-enabled Traeger Woodridge Pro pellet grill/smoker.

Billy Hosmer received a Total Connect FTC Security service package, and Frankie Wayne Keith won one year of free FTC Gig internet service.

The grand prize of $1,776 went to Toni Deaneki Carroll.

HOLIDAY OFFICE CLOSURES

Veterans Day—Wednesday, Nov. 11

Thanksgiving—Thursday, Nov. 26, and Friday, Nov. 27

Christmas Eve—Thursday, Dec. 24

Christmas Day—Friday, Dec. 25

New Year's Day—Friday, Jan. 1

For help on these holidays, call 866-638-2144.

LIFELINE ASSISTANCE

Help is available to cover the cost of internet service for eligible households. FTC is proud to take part in a government assistance program administered by the Federal Communications Commission.

Lifeline Assistance Program

What is it?
Lifeline is a government assistance program dedicated to making phone and internet services more affordable for income-qualified households. This benefit provides eligible consumers a $5.25 monthly discount for local voice-only telephone service and a $9.25 monthly discount for stand-alone broadband internet access service or broadband internet access service as part of a bundled package.

Who is eligible?
Customers who have an annual household income at or below 135% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines for a household of its size or those who participate in any of the following programs:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as Food Stamps
- Medicaid
- Supplemental Security Income
- Federal public housing assistance
- Veterans Pension and Survivors Benefit

Learn more at lifelinesupport.org/get-started or farmerstel.com/lifeline.

Note: FTC is not responsible for determining who qualifies or who receives assistance. Consumers must meet specific criteria in order to obtain assistance with their local telephone and/or broadband service, and qualification depends on government-established guidelines.

Museums and Th

Remembering the war that changed the world

Story by LAURA McGILL

When measured on a grand scale, World War II is almost too immense to comprehend. An estimated 16.4 million people served in the U.S. Armed Forces during the war, with more than 405,000 losing their lives. The United States spent about $341 billion on the war effort, or $4.7 trillion when adjusted for inflation. Globally, the loss of life is estimated to be as high as 85 million people, with adjusted costs surpassing $15 trillion.

On a human level, the war is responsible for countless stories of lives cut short and those forever changed. Many of those accounts are preserved at The National WWII Museum in New Orleans.

OVERWHELMING AND INTIMATE

Located on a sprawling campus, The National WWII Museum features seven distinct areas. The experience captures both the grand scale of battle through immersive displays and the small, poignant reminders of the men and women who fought for freedom on the battlefield and the homefront.

While tours can begin in any of the buildings, the Louisiana Memorial Pavilion provides an important orientation and history lesson on the significant events that set the stage for World War II. Exhibits explain the political debates, the attack on Pearl Harbor, rationing of consumer goods, America's internment camps, segregated military units and the dramatic economic response.

Building 3, Campaigns of Courage, is divided into two parallel exhibits—the Road to Tokyo and the Road to Berlin. Each brings to life the hard-fought victories and the devastating losses on the long journey to end the war. Battles in the Pacific are recounted in a gallery that places visitors in grueling conditions from Guadalcanal and the Philippines to the haunting scenes from

Request permission to come aboard

With their sailing days long behind them, a few of America's World War II ships continue to serve their country. Today, the mission is to honor those who served and educate about a time that is slipping away from living memory. Here are a few treasured museum ships that welcome visitors to come aboard.

USS Alabama
Mobile, Alabama
After earning nine battle stars, the Mighty A battleship and its crew of 2,500 led the American fleet into Tokyo Bay on Sept. 5, 1945. The ship is joined at Battleship Memorial Park by the USS Drum, the oldest American submarine on public display.

USS Kidd
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Learn the story of how the Kidd became the only U.S. Navy ship allowed to fly the Jolly Roger flag of piracy. Check before planning a visit, as the Kidd has been in dry dock for repairs and was awaiting a higher water level to return home.

USS Lexington
Corpus Christi, Texas
Commissioned in 1943, the ship was the Navy's oldest working carrier when decommissioned in 1991. In 1980, it became the first aircraft carrier in U.S. history to have women stationed aboard as crew members.

USS North Carolina
Wilmington, North Carolina
The battleship served in every major Pacific naval offensive during World War II, earning 15 battle stars. It is the state's official memorial to the more than 11,000 North Carolinians who died during the war.

USS Yorktown
Mount Pleasant, South Carolina
The Navy's 10th aircraft carrier, the Fighting Lady, was commissioned on April 15, 1943. Patriots Point Naval & Maritime Museum is also home to the USS Laffey, the most decorated World War II-era destroyer still in existence.

emorials

the aftermath of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. European battles are revisited with landscapes ranging from fortified beaches and bomb-torn villages to frozen forests and unimaginable death camps.

Other buildings include the Solomon Victory Theater with the 4D movie experience "Beyond All Boundaries," narrated by Tom Hanks. The Liberation Pavilion explores the postwar years and the war's continuing impact. At the US Freedom Pavilion: The Boeing Center, visitors can get up close with WWII tanks, trucks and planes. Building 7, the John E. Kushner Restoration Pavilion, may be the last on the list, but it is worth including to see the museum's ongoing restoration work. The space is dominated by the patrol torpedo boat PT-305.

With so many stories to tell, it is difficult to tour the entire museum complex in just one day. Two-day passes are available, and memberships include unlimited regular admission. Learn more at nationalww2museum.org.

The National WWII Museum in New Orleans gives many opportunities for visitors to learn about the war and its impact on the world.

A display at the Arsenal of Democracy exhibit details the role of the media in sharing information about the war.

Photos courtesy of The National WWII Museum

During USS Lexington tours, visitors can explore 11 decks along five routes. Volunteers are on hand to answer questions.

Adobe Stock image by Ryan Conine

Looking for someone to repair your hat or shape a new one? The Roughstock Hat Co. crew, from left, Zac Hairston, Levi Hamilton and owner Todd Cawood, can help.

Brimming With Possibilities

Roughstock Hat Co. attracts cowboys from near and far

Story by MELANIE JONES

Shoppers arriving at Roughstock Hat Co. are greeted by a bucking bull in the window, three men in cowboy hats and barstools made from saddles. It's immediately clear that this is cowboy country.

Todd Cawood opened the Fort Payne Western hat store in April. The idea was born of frustration. "I couldn't find anybody to fix my hat," he says. "So, I said, 'You know what? I'm going to be that guy.'"

Roughstock doesn't just repair and sell hats. Todd and staff members Zac Hairston and Levi Hamilton customize them at the hat bar. Hat forms—solid molds hat makers use to shape their creations—line the walls and fill a shelf in the middle of the store to help customers choose their favorite styles.

Hat bars may be a new concept in Fort Payne, but they've existed for years. "They're all over Texas," Todd says. "We really hadn't had that option here in North

Alabama. That's why I couldn't find anyone to work on my hat. It's a service that's been needed in the area for a long time because there's quite a few guys who wear hats on a regular basis. There are actually working cowboys in the area and a lot of rodeo cowboys as well."

And a cowboy just isn't a cowboy without the right hat.

THE PERFECT HAT FOR EVERY HEAD

The process of buying a custom hat is simple.

Customers saddle up—quite literally—at the hat bar, where they can choose from a menu of shapes. If their desired shape isn't on the list, the team at Roughstock will be glad to create it from a provided photo.

Once the shape has been selected, the customer watches as a staff member steams the hat, making it pliable enough to shape. As it dries, it holds its form.

But it's not just the shape of the crown or the bend in the brim that makes a hat personal. Customers can choose from an array of hatbands and accessories like feathers and pins. Staff members can also brand hats, whether with initials, ranch brands or a touch of whimsy like hearts.

The hat doesn't just have to match the cowboy—it has to suit the weather.

"They say hats don't have a season," Todd says. "Felt sales are better in the cold months, but in Alabama, you could wear straw all year."

Straw or felt, shoppers can choose a style custom made for Roughstock. The store has its own brand of straw and felt hats staff members are eager to show off. There's even a display of Western-brand trucker hats to choose from and some Roughstock-branded T-shirts for sale.

CITY SLICKERS WELCOME

While the store focuses on Western wear, the staff can create most any kind of hat. "Yeah, we've got a cowboy theme, but we're not just a cowboy hat shop," Todd says.

For example, if someone wants a fedora, the staff finds the right blank and goes to work. "We cut the brim down and shape it into the fedora," Todd says.

Todd says some customers come in with a friend or even a large group. A few months after the shop opened, a wedding party came in for fittings. The groom and his groomsmen took their turns at the hat bar and got matching hats for the ceremony. And that's not the store's only wedding venture.

Roughstock has a mobile hat bar it can take to weddings and receptions to create custom hats for attendees. The staff also sets up shop at festivals, concerts and rodeos.

ROUGHSTOCK HAT CO.
436 Gault Ave. N., Fort Payne
256-578-1978
roughstockhatcompany.com
Find the store on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok @roughstock-hat-company.

WARM WELCOME

Todd opened the store less than a year ago, and it's already popular. The local newspaper named it one of its Best of DeKalb winners after only a few months.

In fact, the store was attracting attention even before it opened. In January, Todd announced his plans to launch the business, opening the doors for the first time in April. "We had people from January to April just asking, 'Can I bring my hat in to have it fixed?'" Todd says. "The community really got behind us."

Todd's FTC's fiber internet connection allows him to promote the store on TikTok, Instagram and Facebook. That's brought in visitors from beyond Fort Payne and even from outside North Alabama. "We've had people drive down from Memphis and a couple of people from Mobile," Todd says. "We got people to travel, and it helps that we're kind of in a tourist spot here."

While folks are getting their hats worked up, they can also get their boots cleaned. The boot-cleaning station is right by the door.

"We try to bring a little Texas to Alabama," Todd says.

Photo by Todd Cawood

It's not all about cowboys at Roughstock Hat Co. The shop's artisans can make custom hats in a wide variety of styles to match customers' tastes.

Photo by Melanie Jones

Levi Hamilton steams a hat to prep it for shaping.

Have a Holly Jolly Kitchen

Smart gifts can make holiday cooking easier

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

The holiday season means warm family gatherings, pulling out favorite recipes and sharing memorable meals. But it can also bring crowded kitchens, packed schedules and stress over that perfect entree overcooking.

Fortunately, smart kitchen devices can take the pressure out of home cooking. Whether you need to monitor food remotely, automate routine tasks or just get rid of some of the guesswork, there are tools to help experienced chefs and culinary newbies alike. That makes these connected kitchen gadgets the perfect gifts that continue paying off long after the holidays are over.

SMART COFFEE MAKER

Holiday mornings often begin before sunrise, and a smart coffee maker can have a fresh pot waiting before anyone reaches the kitchen. Many models allow users to schedule brewing from a smartphone, create recurring routines and integrate with voice assistants for hands-free operation.

Consider brewing capacity, programmable schedules and compatibility with whole-pot or single-serve brewing preferences when comparing options.

KITCHEN DISPLAY

A smart display serves as a digital recipe book, cooking timer, entertainment hub and communication center all-in-one device. It can display step-by-step recipes, manage multiple timers, stream music or video and answer cooking questions without requiring users to touch a phone with messy hands.

When selecting a model, compare screen size, voice assistant compatibility and integration with other smart-home devices. Displays that support video calling can also help families connect with relatives during the holidays.

SMART MULTICOOKER

A connected multicooker combines the functions of a pressure cooker, slow cooker, rice cooker and saute pan into one appliance while adding smartphone controls and guided recipes. During the holidays, it can free up valuable space by preparing mashed potatoes, soups, stuffing or desserts while the stovetop and oven are occupied.

Look for models that include a variety of cooking programs, delayed-start options and recipe integration through a companion app. Capacity is another important consideration, with larger households typically benefiting from 6- or 8-quart versions.

WIRELESS MEAT THERMOMETER

A wireless smart meat thermometer allows cooks to monitor the internal temperature of turkey, ham, beef or other meats from a smartphone without opening the oven or smoker. Many models estimate cooking times, alert users when food reaches the desired temperature and provide guided cooking recommendations to help avoid overcooking.

When shopping, consider how many probes are included. Larger families or frequent entertainers may appreciate systems that can monitor multiple dishes at the same time, while single-probe models are often sufficient for everyday use.

SMART AIR FRYER

Connected air fryers allow users to start cooking, adjust temperatures and receive notifications through a mobile app. They're ideal for preparing appetizers, vegetables or rolls and reheating leftovers quickly during busy holiday gatherings.

The basket size should match the number of people typically served. Dual-basket models provide additional flexibility by allowing two foods to cook at different temperatures simultaneously.

COUNTERTOP OVEN

A smart countertop oven can bake, roast, air fry, broil and toast while offering app connectivity, automatic cooking programs and recipe guidance. These appliances are especially useful during the holidays, when the primary oven is filled with a turkey or roast and additional cooking space is needed for side dishes and desserts.

Interior capacity is one of the biggest differences between models. Shoppers should also compare available cooking modes and determine whether remote monitoring or automatic cooking adjustments are important features.

CONNECTED WALL OVEN

Smart wall ovens connect to home Wi-Fi networks, allowing users to preheat the oven remotely, watch cooking progress and receive alerts when dishes are finished. Some premium models

also feature internal cameras or food-recognition technology that can provide additional guidance throughout the cooking process.

Because these appliances are built into cabinetry, buyers should carefully verify dimensions, installation requirements and compatibility with existing kitchen layouts before making a purchase.

SMART MICROWAVE

Connected microwaves can automatically adjust cooking times, download cooking instructions through companion apps and send notifications when food is ready. They simplify reheating leftovers, preparing vegetables and handling quick side dishes while the rest of the holiday meal comes together.

Capacity, sensor cooking functions and compatibility with existing smart-home ecosystems are among the most important features to compare when choosing a model.

CONNECTED STAND MIXER

While stand mixers have long been a staple for holiday baking, newer connected versions can guide users through recipes, recommend mixing speeds and synchronize with companion apps. They're particularly helpful when preparing cookies, cakes, breads and festive desserts.

Consider bowl capacity, motor power and the availability of optional attachments that expand the appliance's versatility beyond baking.

Holiday meals keep the kitchen busy with dozens of dishes, careful timing and plenty of coordination. Smart cooking tools can't take care of everything on their own. But for families who enjoy cooking together or playing host, they can simplify many of the tasks that make holiday cooking stressful, so you can focus on what makes this time of year special.

Adobe Stock image by Vadym

Fishing for SUCCESS

Fyffe man has winning nature

Story by MELANIE JONES

Brody Robison was just 5 years old when his grandpa introduced him to fishing, taking him out to the cattle ponds on his farm in Fyffe.

"He'd take me fishing any chance he got," Brody says. "As I grew older, those ponds on his property were always my playground. My parents would drop me off out there as a young teen, and I'd just run around and fish from daylight to dark."

The grown-up Brody is still fishing, and his years casting lines into farm ponds have paid off. He and his teammate Peyton Sorrow won the 2026 Strike King Bassmaster College National Championship in August. They overcame three grueling days on Leech Lake in Walker, Minnesota, contending with churning water and high winds.

CASTING INTO THE FUTURE

Brody never intended to fish in college. In fact, he never considered attending college. His plan to attend trade school changed when he was offered a place on the University of Montevallo fishing team. He never looked back. Now, he holds a bachelor's degree in business and is two credits away from earning his Master of Business Administration degree. "It's definitely been a blessing. It's something I never would have done," he says.

That doesn't mean he's ready to hang up his rod and reel and settle into an office job, however. He's already testing the waters of semiprofessional fishing.

As of September, there were three events left in the semipro tour, and those were qualifying events for the elite tour, Brody says. "I'll definitely continue fishing competitively for a long time," he says.

The national college championship title provides the experience he needs to go pro, just as his experience as a guide prepared him for the title.

READY TO WIN

Brody works as a fishing guide on Lake

Friends and fans congratulate Brody Robison on his college championship win.

Brody and teammate Peyton Sorrow celebrate winning the 2026 Strike King Bassmaster College National Championship with their families. From left are Daniel Robison, Tammy Robison, Brody, Peyton, Elisse Sorrow and Greg Sorrow.

Champlain in New York several months a year, and his teammate Peyton is also a guide in New York. Both spent some time fishing up north around Minnesota in the two months leading up to the tournament.

"We've spent a lot of time up north in the wind and the big waves," Brody says. "That definitely helped our mindsets going into it, but the national championships always get your nerves riled up."

They didn't let those nerves shake them.

"We went out with a lot of optimism and had a great first day. Better than we expected," Brody says. "We just let that momentum carry through the tournament. We had to persevere through the winds and the waves."

The last day wasn't as successful. "We really didn't think we had done our jobs," Brody says. "But the good Lord was looking out for us, and we were able to catch just enough to get us across the finish line and win it," topping the 100-team field with a catch totaling 61 pounds, 3 ounces.

He says that moment was surreal. "It's a tournament that I've wanted to win my whole college career. That was also my last college event, so to be able to pull off that tournament and that win right there at the end was just a super cool experience for us," Brody says.

CAPTAIN BRODY

Even when Brody's not competing, he's on the water. He obtained his captain's license two years ago and guides on Lake Guntersville in the spring and early summer. When it gets too hot in Alabama, he heads to New York and works Lake Champlain. Once he finishes there, he heads back south. "I have a couple of tournaments in the fall, and then I start guiding on Weiss Lake for striped bass in the wintertime," he says.

He also shares a bit of electronics education with the customers he guides.

"The cool thing about fishing is there's never a wrong way to do things. There's a lot of different right ways," Brody says. "Everybody can have their own style. Some people have tens of thousands of dollars in electronics on their boat, but some people have the bare minimum."

There have been many technological changes to fishing over the past five years. "It's definitely changed the sport," Brody says. "A lot more time, effort and skill go into it with many variables. The learning curve is more straight than it ever has been, and luck just doesn't play as much a role anymore."

LEARNING ON THE WATER

It isn't just about competition. For Brody, it's about knowledge.

"My main thing is, I love biology," he says. "I love understanding what's going on with nature. Whether it's fish, deer, turkeys, waterfowl. Whatever it is, I like to understand how their brains work. I love to understand the science of their cycle throughout the year, their seasonal patterns.

"I guess that's what gets me up at the crack of dawn and on the water every morning. It's cool to watch everything unfold and understand God's creation through nature."

Peyton, left, and Brody overcome the rough waters of Minnesota's Leech Lake, reeling in more than 60 pounds of fish.

Photos courtesy of Solomon Glenn

Snacks Worth Sharing

Crowd-pleasing recipes for festive gatherings

The holiday season is full of opportunities to gather with family, friends and neighbors, but hosting doesn't have to mean spending hours in the kitchen. Just a few simple, shareable dishes can help guests mingle while keeping the cook out of the kitchen, so everyone can be part of the celebration.

Whether you're hosting an open house, pitching in for a potluck or serving appetizers before a holiday meal, these easy recipes are big on flavor and short on prep time, making them perfect for busy holiday schedules.

Photography by ***Mark Gilliland***

Food styling by ***Rhonda Gilliland***

HOT SPINACH ARTICHOKE DIP

- 1 10-ounce package frozen chopped spinach, thawed and squeezed dry
- 1 14-ounce can artichoke hearts, drained and chopped
- 8 ounces cream cheese, softened
- ½ cup sour cream
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Crackers, sliced baguette or tortilla chips

Preheat the oven to 350 F. In a large bowl, combine the ingredients until well mixed. Season with salt and pepper to taste, then transfer the mixture to a lightly greased baking dish. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes, until the dip is hot and bubbly with lightly browned edges. Serve warm with crackers, toasted baguette slices or tortilla chips.

BAKED BRIE IN PUFF PASTRY

- 1 8-ounce wheel brie
- 1 sheet puff pastry, thawed
- ¼ cup cranberry sauce or your favorite fruit or jam
- ¼ cup fresh or dried cranberries or fruit of your choice
- ¼ cup chopped walnuts or pecans
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 egg, beaten for egg wash
- Fresh rosemary or fruit, for garnish
- Assorted sliced fruit and crackers for serving

Preheat oven to 400 F and line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Unfold the puff pastry on a lightly floured surface. Place brie in the center. Spread cranberry sauce, jam or fruit over the top of the brie. Top with cranberries or fruit and nuts. Drizzle with honey. Fold pastry over the brie, sealing the edges. Place seam-side down on the baking sheet. Brush with the beaten egg.

Bake for 20 to 25 minutes until the pastry is golden brown and the cheese is soft and melty. Garnish with rosemary and serve warm with sliced fruit and crackers.

Tip: Let rest for 5 minutes before serving, so the cheese sets slightly.

BRUSCHETTA

- Fresh, ripe tomatoes, any color
- Sourdough bread, fresh or day-old
- 2 garlic cloves, skin removed
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Fresh basil (optional)

Thoroughly wash the tomatoes, then chop roughly into small pieces and place in a bowl. Save any juice. Add a generous amount of extra virgin olive oil, salt, pepper, one clove of crushed garlic and fresh basil, breaking up the leaves if desired. Mix and leave to rest for 10 to 20 minutes at room temperature or in the fridge.

Slice up to two pieces of bread per person. Heat a skillet on high and cook bread on both sides for a few minutes, until golden. You can also heat the bread in a toaster or oven. Once ready, immediately rub a clove of garlic over the top of the bread.

Using a tablespoon, drizzle any remaining tomato juice over each slice of bread, then add the tomato mixture and a few pieces of fresh basil.

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