



TIMBERLAKE TAVERN

Historic Campbell County venue gains renewed purpose

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFFREY WESTBROOK

Community and history. Perhaps these two words best sum up the essence of Timberlake Tavern, a gathering place for community and an events venue. The sprawling, three-story structure that exudes graceful southern charm, is approaching its centenary under new ownership.

And of course the other important words associated with the Tavern are lakeside life. The Tavern was one of the first buildings erected on the new lake which was established in 1926, and to this day the structure remains largely the same as it was when it first opened in 1929.

In October 2020, Etta Legner and Tom and DD Gillett bravely purchased the Tavern in the midst of covid-related restrictions. They all live on the lake, and they wanted to take an active role in the preservation of the historic building while putting it to good use as an events and community center.

Their bold step paid off. "The building [and grounds] needed some maintenance and TLC," explained DD. "Covid gave us the

time to do that work."

The work included a new roof, gutters, and siding (on the back of the house); rearranging the upstairs rooms and furniture; renovating the bathrooms; painting; landscaping; and restoring the garden.

Meanwhile, they started hosting some events. By November of that year, they held their first event - outside on the tavern's wraparound porch. The first wedding under the new ownership took place in March 2021. "Business has been steady ever since," DD reported.

Timberlake Tavern's staff is happy to host all kinds of events: small porch party, birthday party, celebration of life, anniversary party, wedding, wedding reception, rehearsal dinner, baby or bridal shower, company picnic, family reunion, and even business seminars. The facility can comfortably accommodate 80-90 guests inside. Outside in good weather an additional 50 can be added.



Shown above, this painting of the Timberlake Tavern, created by a friend of owner Etta Legner, hangs in a place of honor in the main hall.

*Pictured at right, in renovating the Tavern after they purchased it, co-owners Etta Legner and Tom and DD Gillett found under layers of paint and wallpaper what must have been the original 1929 wallpaper in a bedroom of the Timberlake Tavern. The historic finding has been framed and hangs in an upstairs hallway. **On opposite page,** the wide facade of Timberlake Tavern is festively decorated for its ribbon cutting ceremony in July. The long wraparound porch beckons visitors to come and sit a spell.*

“We’ve seen birthdays, showers, and other parties with 40-60 people and a catered sit-down dinner,” DD observed. The trend is moving toward larger and more elaborate gatherings than in past decades, she noted. There was even a bouncy house on the front lawn at one recent event.

The tavern also hosts various events for the lake community. “We wanted to give back to the community, so we have events for the community here,” Etta commented. Friday Night Cheers used to be held at people’s homes, but during covid it moved to the tavern, where it continues to meet. Other community events have included Timberlake Board meetings, garden club, cards club, and more. “We have a lot of community activities. This was always the clubhouse, and they enjoy it.”

Holidays often involve community gatherings, including Memorial and Labor Days as bookends to the summer season, Christmas, and Friendsgiving.

Last year’s Christmas season exemplified the kind of positive interaction and community spirit between tavern and lake-shore community. Etta and DD shared how one resident who has been very supportive of the tavern built a 22-ft. Christmas tree for the tavern’s front lawn. Around 15-20 members of the community pitched in to help construct it and set it up. The tree went up Thanksgiving weekend but remained dark until the first weekend in December, when the Tavern hosted a big community Christmas celebration.

The festivities included Frosty, Santa, carriage rides, kids’ activities, “snowball” battles (using cotton snowballs; kids and adults alike loved it, the owners reported). This year there will be a children’s Santa shop in which kids can buy gifts for family, friends, and teachers. Everything will cost only a dollar. “We intend to have carriage rides again. Christmas was a big deal last year; it will be again this year,” Ms. Gillett stated.

Last year the weather was ideal for a Southern outside Christmas carnival - crisp and cool, but beautiful and sunny. While the proprietors cannot control what the weather will be like this year, they are already planning this year’s event. The Lexington Carriage Company (from Lexington, VA) will be back with carriage rides again, for instance, and hot cocoa and cookies will be available on the porch.

The Christmas spectacular at Timberlake Tavern is open to the public, Gillett pointed out. It takes place the first Sunday in December, starting at 1 p.m. There will not be much advertising for it, other than announcing it on Facebook and spreading the news by word of mouth. “It was a lot of fun last year, and we look forward to it being a lot of fun again this year,” she added.

The Tavern offers more than event facilities. The rooms upstairs have been repurposed as AirBnB rental suites. They include a two-bedroom apartment with full kitchen, bathroom, and living room,





“Marilyn” is a 1947 Ford Super Deluxe that is part of the Timberlake Tavern family. The burgundy colored vehicle is in pristine condition. People can hire Marilyn - complete with chauffeur Tom Gillett (the owner) - to give them a ride in style to a special event.

as well as a one-bedroom apartment, an efficiency apartment, and a two-room “Bridal suite.” The latter is included as part of a package for weddings, with one or two nights’ stay (bride and bridesmaids can stay the first night, and the newlyweds the second).

The one-bedroom apartment is rented out full-time year-round, so there is always someone in residence at the Tavern. The other accommodations can hold a total of up to 14 guests. Sometimes for weddings out-of-town guests and family stay there, the owners related.

At other times, the guests are summer vacationers looking for a lake holiday. The Tavern can offer swimming, fishing, kayaking, and canoeing; the property includes a dock in the lake. There are also water toys available for guests’ use, and Etta offers pontoon boat rides.

Although the Tavern began as and again today serves as an events facility, it has not always been thus. The history of the tavern is one of its many charms, and the owners are happy to

recount this history and the tales of the inn’s past.

Timberlake Tavern opened in 1929, just three years after the establishment of the lake. At that time, there were few homes along the lake shore. The Tavern property included a nine-hole golf course, and the tavern served as the clubhouse for both the golf course and the community.

Eight rooms upstairs provided opportunity for people to come and stay at the lake in the summertime to enjoy the swimming and fishing. The only major structural differences between then and now are the exterior stairs leading to the balcony (providing an entrance for guests staying upstairs) and the configuration of the upstairs rooms. One of the many interesting tidbits that DD and Etta shared was that the third floor back then was the maid’s quarters. Today it houses the efficiency apartment.

While the historical records from the tavern’s early days are somewhat limited, one significant source of information is an article which appeared in the Southern Virginian magazine.

The property remained like that until the early 1950s (although



Two of the Timberlake Tavern's owners, Etta Legner and DD Gillett, sit on the porch of their event venue and Air BnB historic property with a glimpse of the lake behind them. The place has sat on the hillside overlooking the lake for nearly a century, serving as a community gathering place, among other uses.

the exact date it ceased to function as a clubhouse and inn is not known). It was rented out to various groups, including the nascent Timberlake United Methodist Church congregation, which had its beginning right there in the Timberlake Tavern in 1953 before moving to its permanent home a few miles away down Timberlake Road. The church still maintains a connection to the lake community, though, DD noted: the church still holds baptisms in the lake.

BMW rented it for a time as housing for out-of town workers who had come to Lynchburg temporarily to work on construction of the first commercially owned nuclear ship, Etta said.

A contractor named Thompson purchased the tavern and moved his family there in 1955. He turned the upstairs into apartments for housing his workers. He built several spec houses around the lake; his daughter still lives in one of them, Etta and DD stated.

The family lived on the property until approximately 1972, when the Glasco family bought it and occupied it until 2006.

They lived on one side of the downstairs, with their bedrooms upstairs. The other side of the ground floor was turned into an apartment. Although the contractor divided up the home and put up partitions, he did so in such a way that the hardwood floors were undamaged, the current owners pointed out admiringly. The floors today are still the original ones. People who live along the lake today remember playing on the tavern's spacious lawns as children during the Glasco family's residency.

In 2006, the home and its furnishings went on the auction block - literally, Etta narrated. As the bidding continued without slowing, eventually three families who lived at the lake realized they were bidding against each other and instead decided to pool their resources, purchasing it as a joint venture. They restored it to its original usage as a venue, removing the ground floor partitions and renovating it. Eventually one family, the Viars, bought out the shares of the other two families. They owned and operated it until selling it until they sold it to the current owners.

Another important source of history not only for the Tavern



but for the whole lakeside is Doug Washington, the community historian. He wrote a book in 1995 titled Timberlake: Gem of the Piedmont. He wrote not only about the lake's founders and the early days, but also about the Native American presence. One particularly interesting account placed Thomas Jefferson walking through the property from Poplar Forest to visit his friend who lived nearby at Closeburn.

A piece of history that also figures into the current facility is Marilyn. Marilyn is a piece of that same time. More specifically, Marilyn is a 1947 Ford Super Deluxe. She can be rented out for special occasions, whether or not one is holding an event at the tavern. Tom provides chauffeuring.

When Etta, Tom, and DD purchased the tavern in 2020, they were unable to hold a ribbon cutting because of covid restrictions. They finally were able to do so this summer. Those attending the event were able to see the charm, rich history, and ongoing benefit to the community which Timberlake Tavern provides. •

Shown above, the tastefully decorated areas at Timberlake Tavern offer comfortable accommodations with perks such as fresh-cut flowers, snacks, and a coffee bar in each guest room. They invite visitors to relax and enjoy their time at the lake.

TIMBERLAKE TAVERN

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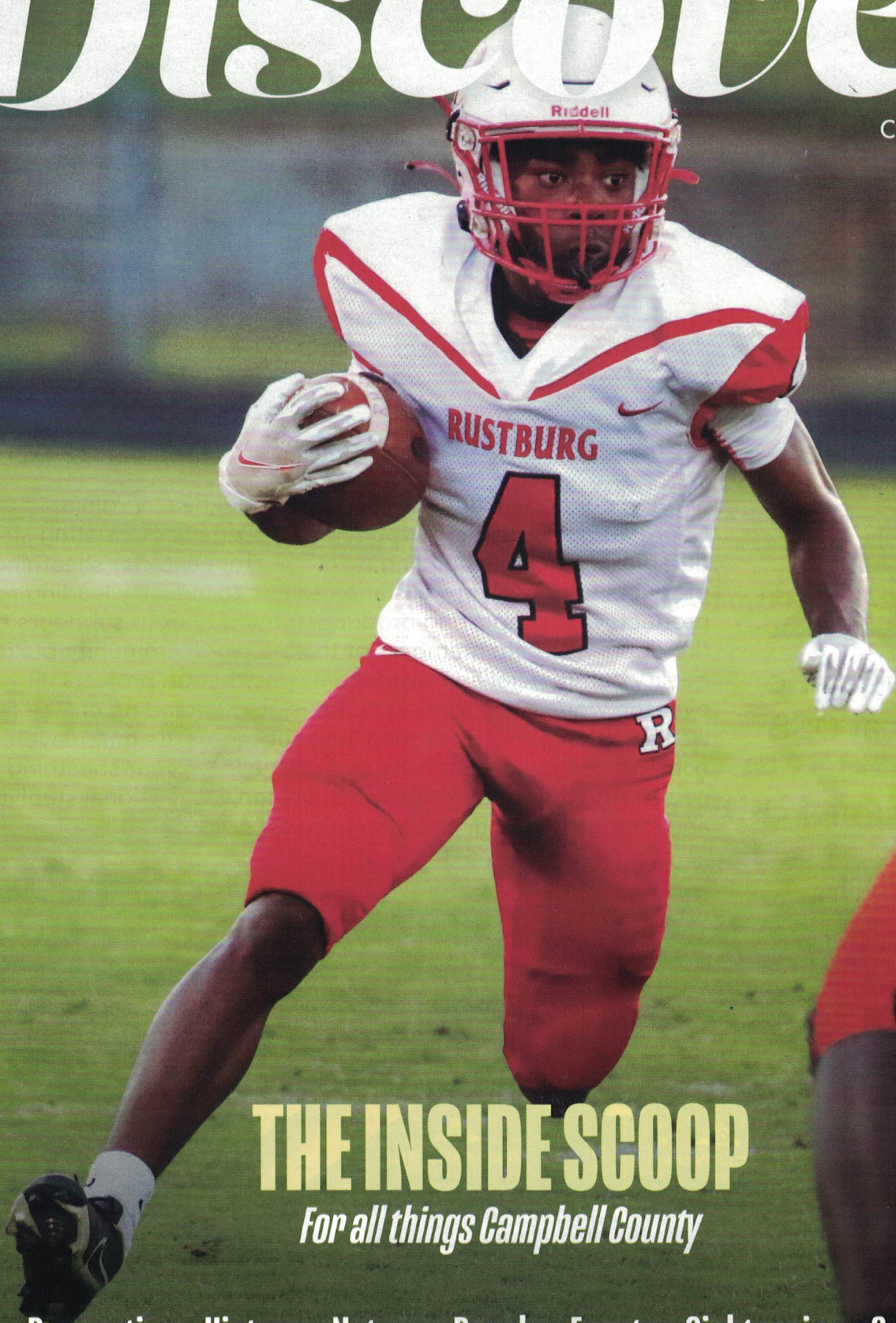
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