

Renee Morrison

This Alabamian storyteller brings family traditions, fables, and farm tales to life

BY JANIS HASHE

When she was 4, Renee Morrison sat on a stump on her family's dairy farm and told a story about being a coonhound to a group of mesmerized kids. That was the beginning of a life's commitment to the tradition of storytelling, which three years ago resulted in Morrison founding the Fort Payne branch of International Tellabration. Connecticut storyteller J.G. Pinkerton conceived the worldwide event in 1988, and it has since grown into festivals that take place in 40 states and nine countries. Morrison expects five to seven performers this year, some from Alabama and some from other places, to "tell" at the Little River Canyon Center in Fort Payne on November 20. The festivities open with a proclamation, which concludes, "Without further delay/In joy and anticipation.../Let the stories begin!" Admission is \$5. (256) 782-5697; tellabration.org.



You were influenced by a family tradition of storytelling. Which tales do you remember most vividly?

My grandmother's fairy stories. Through listening to them, I learned to observe nature—bumblebees, ladybugs, the natural beauty all around us. My grandmother was Irish, and when I visited Ireland with my own children, I felt the tradition had come full circle.

What inspires your stories?

I grew up an only child and my family lived on a dairy farm. The natural beauty of northeastern Alabama—and my own imagination—made everything into a story. I get

an idea, write it down first as a sketch, and then I build on it and embellish it. My kids say the stories are different each time—and they are, because the energy of the audience influences them.

Do you find there to be a difference between telling a tale and relating, say, a family oral history?

For either type, the magic still has to be there if you hope to capture your audience's attention. There needs to be a beginning, middle, and end, and the audience needs to see, feel, hear, taste, and smell right along with you, the storyteller.

What is so captivating about a tale told aloud?

A good storyteller believes in his or her story, and when the connection between storyteller and audience is made, all the chaos of a digital society falls away. The mind focuses, and the senses come alive.

Do you prefer telling stories to children or to adults?

I love a mixed audience. Children like to hear stories about when I was a little girl, and those stories also make the adults remember their own childhoods. I often use animals. Once I had a mixed audience including about 60

kids, all who were absorbed in their handheld video games. I gave a bark—I'm famous for my barks—and I instantly had their attention.

Is there a storyteller you most admire?

Alabamian Kathryn Tucker Windham, who is famous for her ghost stories. I was sounding out her written stories when other kids were reading *Dick and Jane*. I've been fortunate to tell with her. A few years ago, I sat down with her and she said, "I've been the ghost story writer, but I'm finished now. I'm pleased to pass on this pen." I was 4 years old all over again! **AJ**