

MOONLIGHT

OVER *Chattooga Belle Farm*

"The mountains are calling and I must go."

— JOHN MUIR

Story by *Christine Drais*

Photos by *Susan Stamey*

Nightfall comes to Chattooga Belle Farm outside of Long Creek, in Oconee County. The farm is located in what is considered to be the darkest parts of the county, providing the perfect setting for winter stargazing.

Whether you live in Oconee County full-time, vacation here or are just passing through, it is impossible to overlook the beautiful backdrop of the Blue Ridge Mountains. One of the most breathtaking views of these mountains can be found at Chattooga Belle Farm in Long Creek, which also happens to be home to historic apple orchards, Friday night bluegrass music and whitewater rafting.

At Chattooga Belle Farm you know quickly that the drive was well worth it as you instantly drink in the incredible panoramic view, the fresh air, green pastures of adjoining hillside farms and a church steeple in the distance.

However, one of the best views of all is above you in the night sky.

During the 1950s Long Creek was the

largest apple producing area east of the Mississippi River. Once owned by the famous comedian Groucho Marx, the 138-acre working farm and rolling landscape of the Chattooga Belle Farm is home to orchards full of peaches and apples, grapes and Muscadine vines and a variety of berries.

The event barn has an inviting design with steep rooflines that reach toward the sky and an old-fashioned side porch with rocking chairs and antique farm equipment — a great place to take a break from picking or pose for a family photo.

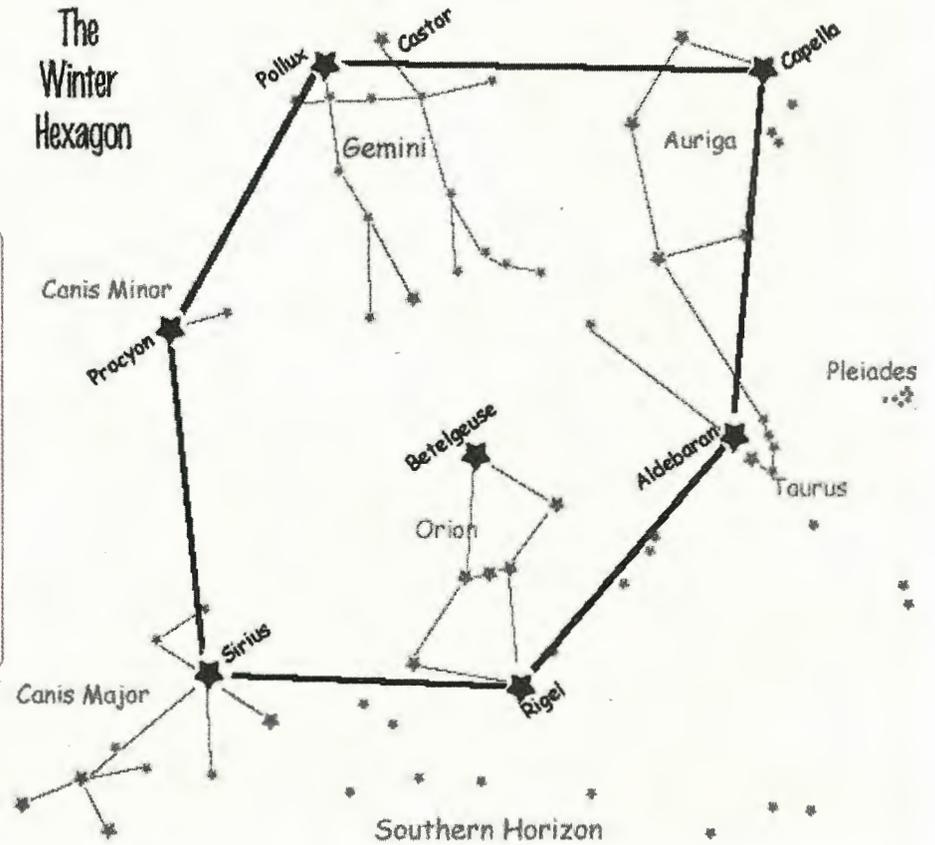
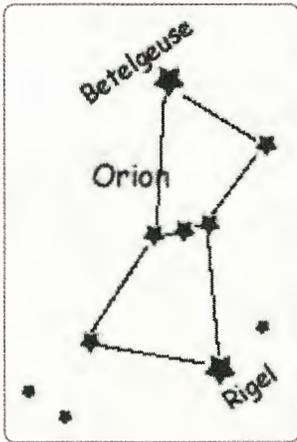
The rear of the barn faces the Blue Ridge Mountains with a covered open-air patio where echoes of voices past and winds from each direction seem to envelope you. The magic of the place culminates at the center of the Lomax Observation Circle located at



the rear of the event barn. The site is considered to be the darkest place in Oconee County and is used by the Clemson Area Amateur Astronomers Club each month for stargazing. Experienced and novice astronomers of all ages gather with their telescopes to gaze at the night sky in search of stars, planets and constellations. Winter skies can be exceptionally thrilling as constellations can be easier to identify.

According to science-teachers.com, Orion, well known to most people, is the key for locating many other constellations in the winter sky. The first way to locate these constellations is to follow lines made by pairs of stars in Orion, or find the three stars in a row, which is the belt of Orion.

The second way is to locate the great



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Horace Gravely (right) and Kappy Carter in Lomax Circle at Chattooga Belle Farm. Gravely is a member of the Clemson Area Amateur Astronomers and can assist you in locating fascinating constellations of the universe. The group meets monthly at the Chattooga Belle Farm and has a website with meeting information if you care to join them.

winter hexagon of bright stars around Orion. As you see in the diagram, these bright stars connect the main constellations of the winter skies.

If you scan the sky from the southern horizon to the region overhead, you should be able to see the following constellations on a clear winter night: Orion the Hunter, Canis Major the Great Dog, Canis Minor the Little Dog, Taurus the Bull, Auriga the Charioteer, Gemini the Twins and the Pleiades star cluster.

To find Sirius and Canis Major, follow a line from the belt stars of Orion to the left and slightly down, you will come across a very bright star called Sirius, which is also known as the Dog Star. Sirius is the brightest star in the night sky so it is hard to miss. Once you've located Sirius you can locate the other stars in the constellation Canis Major the Great Dog.

Astronomy is one of the oldest sciences because almost every ancient cul-



ture, understanding the need to predict the change of seasons, became expert at tracking and predicting the motions of the sun, moon and planets. Many of the prehistoric monuments — such as the Egyptian Pyramids, Stonehenge and a myriad of Native American, Mayan and Aztec temples that still stand today — are aligned in some astronomical direction or other designed for way-finding or prediction of the seasons. Today, farmers still refer to the phases of the moon and the seasons for crops and livestock predictors.

So, as you stand in the center of the Lomax Observation Circle compass, listen to the secret echo of voices past — a natural amplification of sounds, voices, and singing — the music of the mountains. Then look up and the world around you will expand beyond your imagination. ❖

Directions: Driving from Westminster, S.C.: Take Highway 76 west towards Clayton, Ga. Follow 76 to Long Creek, SC-12.6 miles. Turn left on Damascus Church Road. Go .7 mile. Chattooga Belle Farm is on the right. (864) 647-9768.

Lomax Circle at Chattooga Belle Farm provides the perfect spot from which to enjoy winter stargazing.

Photo by Christine Drais



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