

Flatwater Tales expands in 2026

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of May 25, 2026)

Kay Brookshire brings readers of Historically Speaking insight into the amazing storytelling event that Oak Ridge enjoys each year! This time with added features of music and local storytellers!

Storytelling legend Elizabeth Ellis will spin her tales for the first time in Oak Ridge during the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival June 5 and 6. She joins acclaimed national storytellers Sheila Arnold, Josh Goforth and Bill Lepp, favorite returning tellers whose tales of history, hilarity, and Appalachian musical roots will entertain and delight adults and children.

Ellis, from Texas, tells stories taken from her childhood experiences growing up in the Johnson City, Tenn., area. She is described as having a voice as smooth as buttermilk and a knack for getting to the heart and the funny bone of a story.

"Elizabeth Ellis is so captivating that I can recall some of her stories almost word for word three years later," said Susan Byrne, one of the festival organizers, who heard Ellis at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tenn.

Ellis kicks off the festival at 10 a.m. Friday with a short solo presentation called "Taste of the Tales." That and most performances will be at a new location for Flatwater Tales, the Oak Ridge Convention Center, 1403 Oak Ridge Turnpike.

"These stories, they are the backbone of our lives. Everybody has stories. The only difference between you and the people you are going to hear onstage is that we've been working at that craft every day for a long time," Ellis said in Facebook comments on Flatwater Tales.

"Hearing Elizabeth Ellis is an unforgettable lifetime opportunity," Byrne said. "We are so excited to have her participation in this year's festival."

Stories and Music for America's 250th Birthday

Ellis will be back on stage with the three other storytellers at 7 p.m. Friday and at 3 p.m. Saturday at the Convention Center. At 7 p.m. Saturday, Ellis, Arnold and Goforth join ORCMA's Oak Ridge Chorus for a celebration of America's 250th birthday with song and story at the Oak Ridge High School Performing Arts Center, 1450 Oak Ridge Turnpike.

This special event, a first-of-its-kind at the storytelling festival, will feature a mosaic of music and stories highlighting the country's founding tenets, which are the title of the program: "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Spoken word, folk music and patriotic tunes will make for a special birthday celebration.

That festival finale will feature songs highlighting each founding tenet, for example "Simple Gifts" by Aaron Copeland and "This Land Is Your Land" representing "Life." For "Liberty," songs will include "Johnny Has Gone for a Soldier" and "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Representing "Happiness" will be "Hold Fast to Dreams" and "Bridge Over Troubled Waters," among others.

Sheila Arnold will present a story from 250 years ago, as a 1776 character offering a different perspective on America's founding.

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"You might meet someone who has a different vision of what America looked like at the beginning, but one that will help us have a better vision of what it is right now," Arnold said. She will tell the story as Ole Bess at 11:30 a.m. Saturday, June 6, at the Convention Center.

Local Tellers to Compete in Storytelling

Another new event at this year's Flatwater Tales is a storytelling competition featuring local amateur talent. Contestants will each have five minutes to tell their best story, with the winner going to the International Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tenn., this fall.

"The Homegrown Teller Contest is an opportunity to showcase the amazing talent we have here in Oak Ridge," Byrne said.

Bil Lepp, known for his hilarious stories, will emcee the contest, spicing things up with his commentary. The contest will take place at 1:30 p.m. Saturday, June 6, at the Convention Center. The audience has the job of choosing the winner.

"Get your tickets and be prepared to cheer for your favorite contestant," Byrne encouraged. "The entire city will win as these community volunteers take to the stage and uplift storytelling as an art form. Proceeds from this event and the entire festival will fund projects that improve our community."

Among local tellers competing in the storytelling are Karen George, local real estate broker at Walton George Realty; Sheila Michel, founder of TORCH, the local nonprofit organization fighting to end homelessness; Rose Weaver, who recently finished her term as Oak Ridge Poet Laureate; Elaine Graham, local comedian and estate sale broker; David Miller, an Anderson County School Board member; Mark Watson, retired Oak Ridge City Manager; and Tom Job, retired pastor from Christ Community Church and an active volunteer serving Bridge Refugee Services and other organizations.

Ray Smith, Oak Ridge Historian, author, and Historically Speaking columnist, also will join the local tellers in the Homegrown Teller Contest. Smith is supporting the Flatwater Tales in several ways.

Smith's Historic Tour of Oak Ridge

Smith will once again offer his free Historic Tour of Oak Ridge for both visitors here for the festival and residents from 9-11 a.m. on Saturday, June 6, beginning at the International Friendship Bell in Bissell Park. Participants are asked to register for the tour at the ticket site, <https://www.flatwatertales.com>, as space is limited.

The tour will include a visit to John Hendrix's grave and stops at The Alexander Guest House lobby, the Secret City Commemorative Walk, the Radiation and Radioactivity Museum, and the Scarboro Community Center. The self-driving guided tour will also feature Jackson Square and the east portion of the Oak Ridge Historic District.

The Storytellers

Along with Ellis, the other tellers bringing storytelling magic to the festival are:

- Sheila Arnold. A master storyteller for more than 20 years, she returns to Oak Ridge with a historic character presentation, bringing Ole Bess back to life from 1776 to talk about freedom. Arnold previously presented the moving story of the Scarboro 85, about the 85 students from Oak

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Ridge's Scarboro neighborhood who were the first to desegregate a public school system in the southeast in 1955. She told the Scarboro 85 story here in 2022 and 2024, thanks to a Tennessee Arts Commission grant.

- Josh Goforth. A master of nearly 20 musical instruments, Goforth returns to the Tales to entertain with foot-stomping music accompanying stories from his Appalachian roots. Recognized as a master fiddler, Goforth has toured with a variety of ensembles, including David Holt and the Steep Canyon Rangers. He has appeared at the Grand Ole Opry, the Lincoln Center, and Carnegie Hall.
- Bil Lepp. An award-winning storyteller, author, recording artist, and History Channel host, Lepp spins hilarious, family-friendly tall tales and stories. He is an occasional host of NPR's internationally syndicated "Mountain Stage." Though a five-time champion of the West Virginia Liar's Contest, he tells stories that often contain morsels of truth, presenting universal themes in clever and witty ways. Lepp has performed at each of the Flatwater Tales.

Tickets for the festival, featuring no-repeat performances, may be purchased at the Flatwater Tales web site, <https://flatwatertales.com>. Tickets include a \$60 weekend pass for entrance to all seven shows, plus the American Museum of Science and Energy, Oak Ridge History Museum, and the Oak Ridge Art Center. Individual tickets to "Taste of the Tales" are \$5 each, and the individual tickets to the remaining five shows are \$15 each for adults and \$5 for children. Proceeds from the storytelling festival are returned to the community through the three Rotary Club's service projects in Oak Ridge.

The Schedule

Friday, June 5

- 10-10:35 a.m. – Elizabeth Ellis, "Taste of the Tales."
- 3-3:35 p.m. – Bil Lepp, "Taste of the Tales."
- 7 p.m. – Josh Goforth with "Home in Carolina" story and foot-stomping music, joined by Bil Lepp and Elizabeth Ellis.

Saturday, June 6

- 9-11 a.m. – Oak Ridge History Tour with Ray Smith.
- 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. – Sheila Arnold brings Ole Bess, a 1776 character, to life to talk about freedom.
- 1:30-2:30 p.m. – Homegrown Tellers Contest, local tellers contest hosted by Bil Lepp.
- 3 p.m. – Bil Lepp with hilarious stories from West Virginia, joined by Elizabeth Ellis, Josh Goforth and Sheila Arnold.
- 7 p.m. – "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness," celebrating America's 250th birthday with stories by Sheila Arnold, Elizabeth Ellis, and Josh Goforth and music by the Oak Ridge Chorus.

The Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival is made possible by the support from Consolidated Nuclear Security – Y-12 National Security Complex, Pinnacle Financial Partners, and Explore Oak Ridge. The festival is led by community volunteers, including volunteers from the Breakfast, Noon, and Sunset Rotary Clubs in Oak Ridge.

Thank you, Kay Brookshire, for the details of the Flatwater Storytelling Festival for 2026. It looks to be another outstanding and enjoyable event. If any of you have never been to a storytelling festival, we have one of the absolute best right here in Oak Ridge! Once you have experienced such excellent storytelling you will look forward to opportunities in the future to again enjoy the experience!

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Josh Goforth



Bill Lepp

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