

## ■ Train

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appeared to be no serious damage to the shuttle components when the recently-repaired bridge across the swampy stretch of Tombigbee River bottomland collapsed in rural Marengo County, leaving two locomotives and two cars on their sides, and several rail cars hanging precariously on the splintered, broken remains of the trestle.

Six people were injured in the mishap, but none of the injuries were life threatening. Two of the victims were airlifted by two Lifeflight helicopters to DCH Regional Medical Center in Tuscaloosa. The others were taken by ground-based ambulances to area hospitals.

Because of privacy laws, none of the victims' names and hometowns were released to the news media.

The components were scheduled to be used on shuttle flights in the fall and winter and the accident won't have any impact on the scheduled June 8th launch of the shuttle Atlantis, a NASA spokesman said.

Each of the shuttle's twin boosters are 150 feet tall and manufactured in four segments. The rockets are used during the first two to three minutes following liftoff to push the spacecraft into Earth orbit. Once the spacecraft is rockets fall away into the ocean where crews pick them up and refurbish them for future missions.

The boosters were brought back to a rail siding at Georgia-Pacific Corporation's Naheola Mill where they will remain under 24-hour guard by local police officers and sheriff's deputies until they are sent back to ATK Launch Systems Group, of Promontory, Utah, for testing before resuming their trek to Florida.

Readers will recall that burning fuel leaking from between two similar sections of a solid rocket booster is believed to have caused the fiery explosion that killed seven astronauts aboard the space shuttle Challenger in 1986.

The derailed engines and cars landed on their sides on the ground in the wooded area next to the collapsed tracks, and no hazardous materials were released, a spokesman for the Ala. Emergency Management Agency said.

The fuel used in the rocket engines is aluminum perchlorate, which officials said has the consistency of a rubber eraser. It is not explosive but will burn profusely if ignited, according to published reports.

According to news reports, it was the second time in less than a week that a train carrying the booster segments across the country jumped the tracks. Five days earlier, two axles on one rail car came off the tracks just west of Salina, Kansas.

A spokesman for Genesee & Wyoming Inc. of Greenwich, Conn., the parent company of the M&B line, said that section of the line was closed for repairs on Sunday night and reopened early Wednesday morning. He told reporters that he was not sure what was repaired but that the trestle was inspected during the process.

The shipment was with the Union Pacific line when it left Utah but was transferred to the M&B at some point before the derailment.

Officials said that trains carrying hardware to the U.S. Spaceport at Cape Canaveral have used the same route for more than 30 years.

It was not known at presstime what caused the trestle to collapse, and there was no immediate estimate of how long repairs could take.

Officials with the National Transportation Safety Board and the Federal Railroad Administration were said to be on site later in the week but have released no statement to the local news media.

The call came in on a cell phone and was routed to Choctaw County from Marengo County.

Patsy Allen, Director of the E-911 Dispatch Center, said that the caller's signal was poor and that dispatchers finally understood that it was off Ala. 114 on what the caller said was ABC Road.

Pennington Chief of Police Kenneth Thomas was among the first units on the scene.

Local responders from Choctaw County included members of the Pennington Police Dept., and Volunteer Fire Dept., Choctaw Co. Emergency Management Agency, Choctaw Co. Sheriff's Dept., Alabama State Troopers, Choctaw Co. Rescue Squad, Choctaw EMS Ambulances, personnel from Georgia-Pacific's Naheola Mill and a number of other firemen and police officers from various departments throughout the county.

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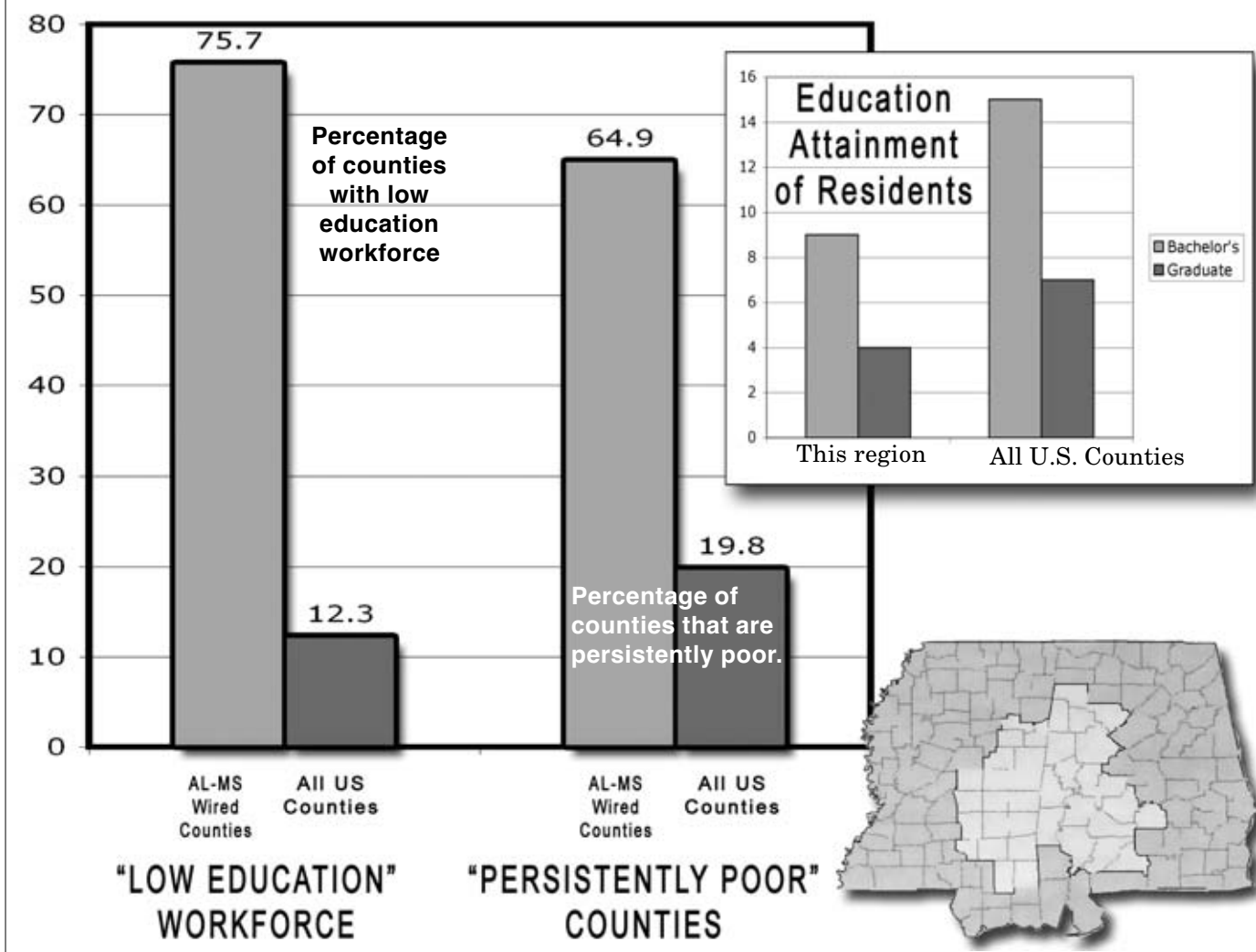
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## Correlation between low education to low economy



## ■ Bubble

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outlook statewide.

Economic predictions look good across the state. According to a report entitled 'Alabama's Long-Term Occupational Predictions' compiled in June of last year, Alabama is expected to see an increase to about 2.4 million jobs by the year 2014. The projected increase in employment encompasses several occupations, including a jump to about 524,000 jobs in professional occupations, 611,000 jobs in service and sales, 346,000 in office and administrative support occupations, 138,000 in construction and extraction jobs, more than 530,000 jobs in maintenance, repair, production, and transportation positions, and huge increases in both computer-related occupations and healthcare.

In fact, Alabama's projected annual average growth rate of 1.35% has the state projected to grow faster than the national average of 1.23%.

But the good news will not include one region of the state — Region 6, which encompasses Sumter, Marengo, Perry, Dallas, Wilcox, and Choctaw counties.

According to projections, by 2014 the estimated number of people employed in the Region will have dropped by 1,280 workers, down from 43,590 to 42,310.

While much of the state is adding jobs at a higher rate than in previous years, the region that includes Choctaw County is not. In fact, according to data by the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), the region is adding jobs at a much slower pace than the rest of the state and the nation. Among the higher-wage jobs in the area are industries related to paper production and forestry, but many economists believe that even those indus-

tries are at risk in a global economy. Such industries employ relatively few people, and the low-skilled, low-educated workforce in the area remains one of the main hurdles for attracting more industries that utilize a larger percentage of workers.

In an area where poverty typically runs much higher than the rest of the nation, the reasons for such problems are multiple. From lack of infrastructure to a predominantly rural make-up to the lack of a 4-lane highway through much of the area, there are plenty of places to put the blame.

But many experts are blaming a cycle of low education that must be broken in order to address the economic problems at all.

Only about 9% of adults in the area hold a 4-year college degree — and fewer students are going on to college each year. It is a cycle that perpetuates poverty and economic depression in the area.

A population with lower education leads to an unskilled workforce that causes industries to locate in other areas where more skilled workers are available. With no incoming industries, those jobs that are available in the area are typically low-wage jobs. Lower wages mean a higher percentage of the population still living in poverty.

And statistics show that children of poverty-stricken families are less likely to earn a high school diploma and much less likely to pursue the higher level of education that it takes to break the cycle.

Several entities have begun to address the economic problems in Choctaw and surrounding counties over the past few years, focusing, in large part, on the development of partnerships between counties to attract industries. However, few have addressed education and skills-training for workers as a primary focus.

Last month, the first in a series of spring Roundtable Discussions

for the federal WIRED grant project was held at the Gilbertown branch of Alabama Southern Community College. While the project is proposing to address economic problems in a 37-county region including portions of West Alabama and East Mississippi, it is focusing much research on the educational status of residents within the region and the impact of that status on the economy.

According to data from U.S. Census Bureau, in a huge 64.9% of counties within the WIRED grant region, at least 25% of the adult residents have neither a high school diploma nor a GED. These numbers compare to 58% of counties in the remainder of the state, and only 19.8% of all counties in the United States. When it comes to higher education, the region fares even worse. Only 4% of residents in the counties within the WIRED grant region have attained a graduate degree in their field.

Although the WIRED project is just getting underway — with much research and fact-finding already being done — the study, as well as a host of others, has already proven that the region's economic woes have a direct correlation to education.

While the rest of the state celebrates its economic advances and its Site Selection magazine award, this area is not yet celebrating. Although the solution is complicated and multifaceted, the celebration for Choctaw County may only come with a trained and better educated workforce that will attract industry, raise income levels, and break the cycle of low education and declining economy.

(ED. NOTE: Part II of this series will focus on the economic base — which types of jobs are doing well in the area, which are not, and how that job availability compares with the state and nation.. Watch for it in next week's **Sun**.)

## ■ Drugs

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said.

"I got right on his bumper on one of the back roads, he stopped and both he and the passenger hit the woods," Skinner said.

They lost sight of the driver, but Gates chased after the passenger while Skinner secured the truck.

Meantime, Butler Policeman Randy Pinkerton and Emergency Management Agency Director Bill Gibson had heard the radio traffic when the deputies went "10-100" — police radio code for "hot pursuit" — on the suspects, and rushed to offer their assistance.

The passenger, who was identified as Jarmarl Portis, 21, of 1774 CR 45, Lisman, was quickly taken into custody by Gates at the scene.

While Gates went after Portis, Skinner secured the suspect's truck. A search of the vehicle turned up a cell phone and a bag of material believed to be marijuana which was divided into five smaller bags.

Information from the cell phone

revealed the identity of the driver, Victor Smith, 22, of P.O. Box 45, Lisman.

With the passenger in custody, and knowledge of who the driver was, the deputies brought Portis to the County Jail.

On Monday, Skinner went back to the Lisman area and started asking questions about Smith.

"I guess word got to him that we knew who he was and about 4 p.m. on Monday he came and turned himself in," Skinner told the Sun.

Both men were charged with possession of marijuana, first degree, and resisting arrest.

The incident just goes to show that no call is ever typical, commonplace or routine, Skinner said.

"We never know what we're going to find when we go on a call," he said. "Ordinarily, we would have gone and found the guy with the loud music and told him to turn it down. As it was, we were able to make two drug arrests."

Skinner said they really appreciate the help from Gibson and Pinkerton.

## Marijuana Eradication Program finds few "pot" plants in Choctaw

A multi-agency effort last week during the state's annual "sweep" of 67 counties turned up a few marijuana plants in the Scott Mountain area but in no significant sizes or quantities, Sheriff James Lovette said.

The operation was conducted by two military helicopters flying at low altitudes over the county during the two-day sweep.

Lovette said that another sweep will be conducted later this year.

"It's really a little early to find anything yet," he told the **Sun**. "It's been too cool and too dry, and most of what we found were seed beds."

Lovette said that his department is making an all-out effort to target the illegal drug traffic in Choctaw County.

Persons who have knowledge of, or suspect that illegal drug activity is occurring in their neighborhood, may call the Drug Task Force hotline 24 hours a day at 251-246-7400. Callers do **NOT** have to give their name.

## ■ Murder

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Gilbertown, was arrested July 27, 2005, one day after Dobbins' son found the body of his badly beaten, stabbed father behind a shed at the elder Dobbins' home on CR 511 in the Melvin-Crandall community near the Alabama-Mississippi state line.

Clarke Co. (Miss.) Sheriff Todd Kemp told the **Sun** at the time that the body was found shortly after 7 a.m. by the son who became concerned when he could not contact his father and stopped by to check on him. Kemp believed, and testi-

mony during the trial confirmed, that robbery was the motive.

Doris Vann, Singleton's fiancée, then 25, of 261 Paragon Road, and Joseph McHenry, then 33, of the Melvin-Isney Cutoff Road near Gilbertown, were also arrested and similarly charged.

Vann died last year in the Clarke County Jail — apparently of natural causes — before she could stand trial.

In exchange for turning State's witness against Singleton, McHenry will serve five years in prison on a lesser charge of accessory after the fact of capital murder due to a plea bargain between him and Clarke County officials.

McHenry admitted during testi-

mony on Wednesday that he was intoxicated when Singleton and Vann-Freeman came to pick him up on July 26th.

After stopping to get more alcohol, the three went to Dobbins' home ... twice. The second time, McHenry said, Singleton and Vann went to get some money from Dobbins. Sheriff Kemp told the **Sun** in an earlier interview that when Dobbins refused, Singleton beat and stabbed him to death.

"I remember seeing blood all over Shawn's right hand and he had a bloody screwdriver," McHenry said during court proceedings last week. "Doris (Vann) gave me some money and we went and bought drugs."