

Sallie's Ashes

By Kristin Koppen

Photos by Brennan Robideaux

Sallie Smith, Diane Thomas and Savan Wilson teamed together to address an environmental threat to the Tensaw Delta and Mobile Bay – Alabama Power's coal ash pond at Plant Barry. The three grandmothers started the Coal Ash Action Group (CAAG). They star in the new documentary, Sallie's Ashes, which premiered at the Telluride Film Festival in August 2025 and debuted in Alabama at the Fairhope Film Festival in November 2025. What follows is an amazing story of friendship, a passion for the environment and an awareness action plan.

Sarah Crosby Smith, known as Sallie, graduated from Randolph Macon Woman's College and received her master's degree from the University of Delaware. Sallie was a lifelong learner and a gifted teacher. She received several awards and also served as the President of the Nursery Kindergarten Association of Delaware.

She and her family retired to Fairhope, Alabama in 2004 where she started a number of nonprofits including Read Aloud Baldwin and Unlocking Potential. She also launched the Coal Ash Action Group in 2022. She was a mother of two



and a grandmother of five grandchildren who all played in Mobile Bay as Sallie did as a child. Posthumously, she has twin great-grandchildren. Sallie passed away at the age of 80 in October 2023.

And the story begins... Sallie was not only a community leader but a gatherer of friends invested in the community – friends who shared common interests and causes. Enter fellow retirees, Diane Thomas and Savan Wilson...

Diane Thomas was born and raised in Arkansas and moved to Alabama in 1973 to complete the requirements for her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at the UAB School of Medicine. In 1975, she married James L. Thomas, M.D., a psychiatrist, and they practiced together for more than twenty years. Together, they have three sons and six grandchildren.

Diane has been actively involved in her community through numerous volunteer roles, including serving as a member of



the City of Fairhope Strategic Planning Commission, Chair of the City of Fairhope Personnel Board, a Read Aloud Baldwin volunteer reader at Crossroads Head Start for seven years, and as a member of the Coal Ash Action Group.

In 1989, the Thomas family moved to Montrose, where they lived on the bay for more than thirty years. There, her family crabbed, swam, sailed, canoed and kayaked. Her love for the bay—and her commitment to protecting it—run deep.

Savan Wilson found her forever home in Fairhope, Alabama in 2004. She graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi and received her MS and PhD from the University of Mississippi. She was a librarian, national and international educational consultant, Director of Education as MS Public Broadcasting, a university professor, and worked in Italy for ten years. She led a number of organizations as president and chair. Honors include: the SECA Award for Outstanding Contributions, the Carroon Golden Apple Award, USM Excellence in Academic Service Award and the USM Excellence in Librarianship Award.

As she says, "She has failed retirement three times and is now a lifelong volunteer." Her main passions include helping to preserve online Fairhope history as a member of the FSTC Archives committee and being a member of the Coal Ash Action Group. She grew up going to her family's "River Camp" on the Pascagoula River and loves being on the water.

When Sallie was diagnosed with lung cancer which had, unfortunately, metastasized to her liver, she decided to make her remaining time count by focusing on a problem separate from her illness. And she immediately thought of the worst threat to her beloved bay-- the toxic coal ash pit sitting on the side of the Mobile River. Sallie always said that Coal Ash called her name and when that happened, she had to try and solve the problem. She reached out to Diane and Savan. Together, these three amazing women founded the Coal Ash Action Group, a.k.a. Grannies Against Coal Ash, in 2022. These three "Mimis" (yes, they all go by that name versus grandma) collectively have 17 grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

The mission of this group is to raise awareness and present information about Alabama Power's Plant Barry coal ash pond which poses significant environmental and economic threats to Mobile County and Baldwin County.

A larger core team and group of volunteers have since joined them. CAAG has hosted information booths at numerous events throughout Baldwin County, including Coastal Clean-Up, Master Gardeners, Earth Day celebrations, and Community Spirit Day in Montrose and Daphne, among others. Members have also presented to a variety of organizations, including church groups, retirement communities, and civic organizations such as Rotary and Lions clubs.

The story of these three grandmothers and their passion for Mobile Bay shows that it is never too late to take up a cause and make a difference in the community. If you have questions, please reach out to movetheash@gmail.com. If you would like to take action and/or participate in the Coal Ash Action Group, please visit the website: movetheash.com



Four Facts about Plant Barry's coal ash pond:

1. There are 21 million tons of toxic cancer coal ash sludge stored in a pond covering 452 football fields which sits on the side of the Mobile River 20 miles from the head of Mobile Bay.
2. The only thing holding the coal ash from flowing into the river is a single dirt dike made of dirt, clay and coal ash.
3. The pond is unlined and is polluting the ground water under the pond with heavy metals including arsenic, cobalt, cadmium plus others, and according to a new study by the University of Alabama and Texas A&M we now know there is pollution outside of the pond in the river sediment and surface water.
4. The bottom line: If there were a catastrophic failure of the dirt dike due to a Category 3, 4, or 5 hurricane in the area or a major upriver flooding event, the 21 million tons of toxic coal ash sludge would pour into the Delta, down the rivers, and into Mobile Bay. These bodies of water would remain polluted for decades.



The Documentary

Cori Yonge, Fairhope, Alabama discovered the work that these three grandmothers had initiated and decided to produce an APR/NPR feature on the coal ash action group's efforts. An award-winning Los Angeles producer, Daniel Junge, heard the NPR story and contacted Brennan Robideaux, a talented young film maker from Lafayette, Louisiana. Sallie's Ashes, a 40-minute documentary, was born after discussion with the three grandmothers. Many hours of filming and production occurred over a year and a half. Brennan served as producer/director along with Allison Bohl Hart and Junge who were producers. Sallie was able to participate in the documentary until her passing in 2023. The producer/director, Brennan, said "Sallie's Ashes was made as a labor of love, both for the people of Alabama and for a cause that matters deeply to us."

The documentary, Sallie's Ashes, is being shown all over Baldwin County and the state of Alabama including Mobile, Birmingham, Auburn/ Opelika, Decatur, Huntsville and Muscle Shoals. This 40-minute documentary may be scheduled for a group viewing by visiting: movetheash.com. Additionally, the documentary was selected as one of the top four juried awards at the 2026 Environmental Film Festival in the nation's capital (DCEFF), earning the prestigious Eric Moe Award for Best Short on Sustainability. "This recognition shows that a story that began in Alabama communities can carry national significance," said the film makers. "It affirms the power of grassroots voices and the importance of protecting our land and water for future generations." The award ceremony was held on March 28, 2026 in Washington, DC with both Diane and Savan in attendance.

Collaboration has been key to the formation of the CAAG project and filming of the documentary. The local environmental group, Mobile Baykeeper and their team, especially Cade Kistler, has been supportive of the Coal Ash Action Group in not only fact checking but also in providing valuable information, photos and data. The original team of three coal ash activists has expanded to include several additional members and a much larger group of coal ash volunteers who now assist at events and share information.

What does CAAG hope to accomplish with this action campaign? They want a legally binding agreement from Alabama Power to recycle as much of the toxic ash as possible, excavate any remaining ash to an upland lined and capped landfill, and leave NO ash on the side of the river. In Sallie's words, "Alabama Power, do the right thing."