Tennessee State Government

Tennessee Historical Commission
Press Office
For Immediate Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 20, 2026

Media contact: Caty Dirksen

Caty.Dirksen@tn.gov

2025 TENNESSEE HISTORY BOOK AWARD RECIPIENT ANNOUNCED

NASHVILLE – The Tennessee Historical Society and the Tennessee Historical Commission are pleased to announce the Tennessee History Book Award for 2025 will be presented to co-authors Mary Ellen Pethel and Don Cusic for their book *Howdy! The Minnie Pearl Story*, published by the University of Tennessee Press.

Judged by a panel of historians from across Tennessee, two other books were finalists for the prize: *Tennessee Samplers: Female Education and Domestic Arts 1800-1900* by Jennifer C. Core and Janet S. Hasson (UT Press) and *Andrew Jackson: Old Hickory in Christian America* by Jonathan M. Atkins (Oxford University Press).

The judges described *Howdy! The Minnie Pearl Story* as the definitive biography of a Tennessee icon which captures the reader's attention with engaging prose and beautiful images. Pearl's success as a woman in a male-dominated world shows how she navigated the bounds of gender, culture and class in Tennessee.

One judge commented, "Much like its subject matter, Pethel and Cusic's prose is conversational, consistently engaging, and thoughtful." Pearl, whose real name was Sarah Cannon, came from the rural town of Centerville. As a comic performer and media favorite, she rose to the top of the country music business despite never having a hit song. The book pays particular attention to Pearl's impact on the social and political culture of the American country music industry.

"The Historical Society is so pleased to add this fascinating book to our distinguished list of Tennessee History Book Award winners," said Anna Durham Windrow, President of the Society. "This is the 27th year for the Book Award, and the third year of our partnership with the Tennessee Historical Commission," she added.

"We are delighted to partner with the Tennessee Historical Society with this annual award program that highlights works centering on Tennessee History," said Miranda Montgomery, Tennessee Historical Commission interim executive director.

The winning co-authors are both professors at Belmont University. Dr. Don Cusic is Belmont's Professor of Music Business and the Curb Professor of Music Industry History. Dr. Mary Ellen Pethel is an associate professor of history. Her biography of basketball coach Pat Summitt won the Tennessee History Book Award in 2022.

Tennessee State Government

Tennessee Historical Commission
Press Office
For Immediate Release

Additional information about the award and nomination forms can be found on the Tennessee Historical Society website. Nominations for the 2025 Tennessee History Book Award will be accepted in November 2025.

For more information about the Tennessee Historical Commission, please visit the website.

###