



“Hurt Not the Earth . . . Nor the Trees”

By Elishia Johnson, Editor



Photos by Elishia Johnson

It's a little-known phrase from a verse in the Bible, found in Revelations 7:3: "... Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees..." It's also the philosophy of Danny and Mildred Baker, owners of JDB Farms in Tallapoosa County and winners of the 2002 Helene Mosley award for the Northeast Region.

According to Milly (as she's known by family and friends), this philosophy goes hand in hand with the TREASURE Forest Association stewardship creed which states, "We do not inherit our land from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children." Certified as a TREASURE Forest in 1999, Danny says he firmly believes in the creed. He feels that it applies to him personally because he DID attain the majority of his land through inheritance.

4 / Alabama's TREASURED Forests

Danny proudly traces his ancestry back to his great-great-great grandfather Archibald Baker, who fought in both the American Revolution and the War of 1812. Later, in the early 1880s, brothers Neil Henry Baker and Daniel Baker (Danny's great grandfather) settled in Hackneyville, Alabama. There they opened Bakers' Store, a general merchandise establishment where local farmers traded for supplies such as kegs of coffee, sugar, and meal, shot, powder, even lumber for coffins. Danny states that the store's ledgers go back to 1883 and apparently, it wasn't unusual for farmers to buy enough supplies to last an entire year, trading when their crops came in.

Although the store building no longer exists, the Bakers own the property where it stood in "downtown" Hackneyville. Along with a couple of wonderful

weathered barns, this parcel also includes the "Doctor's Shop" from the early 1900s where Dr. Carey Harlan practiced. One of Danny's goals is to restore this area to be a Pioneer Village of sorts.

Just down the road, Danny and Milly built their home on land his mother deeded to them in 1973, upon his return from the Navy. His parents acquired these 116 acres in the late 1940s and his father planted pines on its barren fields. Although he died soon thereafter, Danny

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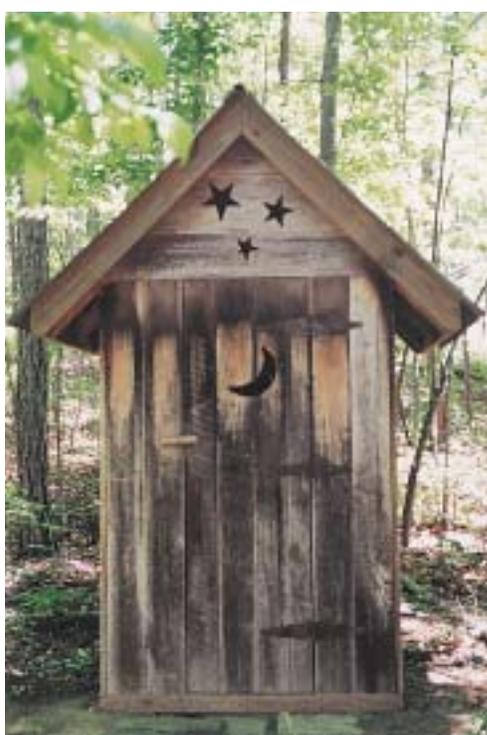


*Far left: Little Hillabee Creek meanders peacefully alongside the Baker property.
Left: Ponds were built primarily for wildlife but are now stocked with bream and bass. This large pond is spring fed from the hillside where Danny found remains of an old whisky still!*

Right: A tall pine looms over younger naturally regenerated pines that were prescribe-burned a few months earlier. This loblolly is one of the 12 trees per acre left for seed when the land was clear-cut in 1982.



Below: Milly and Danny Baker with son Jamison, a high school senior, accompanied by family pets, Duke and Levi.



Danny built the "privy" down by the gazebo and pond in preparation for a visit by several children from Belarus in 1999 .

believes his father must have had the foresight to know that producing timber would be good business. Danny states that it was obvious at a young age that he too had inherited a strong appreciation of and interest in trees. He recalls as a youngster he and his mother planting 2000 pine seedlings they received from the 4-H program. The plantation's "dividends" paid off more than once as he and Mildred used proceeds from one thinning



to begin building their house, and then several years later they were able to pay off their mortgage from a second "mature" timber sale. However, a few of those 50-year old pines are still standing. Today, approximately 50 percent of this property is in hardwoods.

A few miles away is the Simpson Farm inherited from his mother's family where Danny concentrates his energy on his favorite tree - the longleaf pine. Although this property is currently a nice mix of hardwood and pine, his goal is to eventually have it totally replanted in longleaf. Intrigued with both its history

and hopeful return to glory, he stated, "Longleaf seems to blossom out after burning. They were here in the south in abundance centuries before we were. Lightning caused fires and the Indians even used fire to clean the woods for hunting purposes . . . longleafs thrived at that time. People just don't burn like they used to."

According to Danny, not only is longleaf less susceptible to insects, but it also matures as a better quality wood. Additionally, it draws the highest dollar returns when harvested for power poles and pilings. Besides, there are those potential "bonus" benefits he's looking forward to . . . longleaf pine straw is the prettiest and most durable, and there's not a big supply of it. He hopes to one day rake and sell the straw himself or lease the land to someone who would market it.

Another parcel Danny inherited is the Osborne property he calls the "Cabin Farm." In 1982 when harvesting this 120 acres by clear-cut method, he left 12 seed trees per acre to allow for natural regeneration. Now, roughly 75 percent of the parcel is covered in loblolly pine. In these idyllic woods beside Little Hillabee Creek, Danny built himself a rustic cabin. No telephone, no power, and no neighbors . . . it's the perfect "escape" for Danny to relax and read.

(Continued on page 6)

As much as he enjoys the privacy, he also enjoys sharing this “hidden treasure” with different church, civic, and school groups. Once or twice each year the Boy Scouts camp out here to look for arrowheads and work on merit badges. After they leave, Danny says he enjoys following their trails through the woods and to the creek bank, imagining that the beaten paths they leave behind are similar to the ones left by the Creek Indians who once lived here, hunting and fishing this exact spot.

The Bakers always enjoy having people visit their property. Tours give Danny the opportunity to show off his accomplishments and share his theories on conserving resources. He eagerly discusses the merits of reforestation, windrows, culverts, turnout ditches, fire lanes, and prescribed burns with other landowners – hoping they will get ideas for their own property as well as learn from his mistakes so that they won’t make the same ones. He says just think how great the state would look if all the landowners competed and tried to “out-do” each other with their stewardship efforts!

Danny pointed out that these tours that allow landowners to learn from others’ successes and failures are one of the benefits of belonging to the TREASURE Forest Association and the Longleaf Alliance. This is in addition to the valuable information obtained from the educational programs these groups provide. Danny says he has done 99.9 percent of the actual work on his property, but he noted the assistance he has received over the years from the Alabama Forestry Commission, as well as other state and county agencies. (He recalled that it was after receiving his first issue of *Alabama’s TREASURED Forests* magazine several years ago that he was “set on fire” to become a TREASURE Forest landowner!)

By now it’s obvious that timber is their primary objective. However, wildlife is viewed by Danny and Milly as being equally important. To this end he has planted about 500 saw tooth oaks and he maintains 10-12 acres in food plots, usually with a deer mix of wheat, oats, rye, and clover. Deer and turkeys are abundant, and the Bakers are pleased to share their property with the Hillabee Hunting Club. They’ve participated in a deer management program for over 18 years. One of Danny’s hobbies is building birdhouses (and benches) from old barn wood. In addition to wood duck boxes, he has also put up houses for woodpeckers, owls, and other birds. The blue bird boxes he constructs have openings protected with copper. According to Danny, this not only keeps the squirrels out, but also looks pretty after weathering.

Milly believes it is vital to give all the creatures a place to live. She hates to see anything happen to trees or animals . . . she wants to help - and preserve - all “wild treasures” – especially the ones within her reach. “So many animals are forced out of their homes by new houses, shopping centers, and the like in the name of ‘progress.’ They need extra care.”

Education being another of their TREASURE Forest objectives, each year the Bakers welcome 250-300 fifth graders to their property as part of the “Classroom in the Forest” program. A couple years ago, they invited the FFA Forestry Judging team.

One of the most memorable highlights of sharing their blessings with others occurred in 1999 when the Bakers hosted seven special visitors from Belarus and their host families from the First United Methodist Church of Alexander City. These children were victims of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster.



Photos by Elishia Johnson

*Top: Danny and AFC County Manager Guy Slayden “talk trees” around the fire ring at the Cabin Farm.
Bottom left: Raised on a farm on Sand Mountain, Milly is an animal lover who says she is “more country” than Danny.
Bottom right: Planted near a food plot, netting protects the 500 young saw tooth oaks from birds and squirrels.*

Neighbors and family helped entertain them with a hamburger cookout and picnic at the gazebo and a hayride. The children spent the day running in the woods, riding four wheelers, and paddling on the pond with several local children. Although they didn’t speak the same language, Milly said it was wonderful to watch them playing together. Both she and Danny said their hearts were truly touched – this experience made them realize how fortunate they and their own children were.

Danny and Milly have high expectations that their sons Jonathon and Jamison will develop a similar love and deep appreciation of the land. The boys have always enjoyed wildlife and hunting, and the parents noted with pride that both sons have attained Eagle Scout status, an accomplishment that earned Jonathon one rank higher when he joined the Air Force last year.

The Bakers are very appreciative of their inheritance, but more importantly, they hope to leave the earth and the trees a better place for their heirs, as well as pass along their commitment to stewardship. 🌲