



## The DORRILLS:

# Sharing a Heritage

By *Elishia Ballentine*, Editor

**H**ow many people can say that their first date was a hike in the woods??? According to Carol Dorrill, her first date with John was exactly that. He brought her out to the Pike County family farm and proceeded to give her a walking tour of the 80 acres. She wondered if it were some sort of test, but proudly says she passed with flying colors. John was amazed that she kept up so well. After all, contrary to popular belief, “LA” (Lower Alabama) is NOT all flat land . . . there are quite a few hills and valleys. Little did he know that Carol, originally from Calhoun County, had grown up hiking all over Little River Canyon, Duggar Mountain, and the Talladega National Forest! And now, 40 years later, they’re still walking that same 80 acres together, plus a few more.

These original 80 acres and an old farmhouse had belonged to John’s parents, and much of the property has been in the family for over 100 years. In fact, in 1990, the Alabama Department of

Agriculture & Industries recognized the Dorrill Home Place as both an “Alabama Century Farm” and an “Alabama Heritage Farm.” To achieve the Century Farm designation, it must be in the same family for 100 years or more, demonstrating a durability and love of the land. Similarly, a Heritage Farm award is given when certain of the farm structures have remained on a family farm for at least 100 years, reflecting identity and important historical and agricultural qualities.

Although the farm has grown considerably, it was that same 80 acres that achieved TREASURE Forest status in 1988 (certificate #567). Over the years, John and Carol have added several hundred acres. Much of it was formerly cropland for peanuts and cotton, but with assistance through CRP programs, long leaf and loblolly pines were planted. Today there are approximately 1000 acres in timberland of various ages.

Just as the face of the farm itself changed, so have the family’s goals for the farm . . . it is no longer principally an

economic resource for harvesting timber. A different type “investment in the future,” now the primary objective of the Dorrill family’s TREASURE forest is environmental education, with their secondary objective being aesthetics. The emphasis on education was a natural evolution of sorts for the couple. As John and Carol became more educated about managing and improving their land, they understood that other landowners wanted to learn these same principles and skills. They realized that their property provided the perfect environment to fill this demand.

Taking full advantage of its beautiful natural state, the Dorrills transformed 30 acres of mixed pine and mature hardwood into an educational forest. There was already a creek, and they built a couple ponds. They added walking trails, a shooting range, and a bridge over a wetland area. Since building their large “demonstration barn” with full meeting facilities, they estimate that several hun-

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dred people have benefited from the environmental education programs each year.

Educational activities at the farm include landowner tours for Alabama TREASURE Forest Association (ATFA) chapters, and Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC) tours demonstrating management practices such as prescribed burning and planting of longleaf pines. The county AFC staff has also given tree identification workshops, as well as "orienting" courses on finding your way in the woods and what to do if you get lost. In conjunction with the Alabama Department of Conservation & Natural Resources (ADCNR) and the local ATFA chapter, the Dorrills have hosted several successful "Outdoor Ladies" events.

They have also extended a welcome to the young people in the community such as field days and summer camps for 4-H groups and "Outdoor Kids." Day camp



Photo by Elishia Ballentine

*The Dorrills enjoy an autumn walk through the woods.*



*A mix of pines and hardwoods provide the setting for this environmental education TREASURE Forest.*

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activities typically include fishing, archery, firearm safety, and conservation. In what may become an annual event, the ADCNR held a youth fishing rodeo here this past summer (co-sponsored by the local Wal-Mart Community Outreach Program). Over 70 children (aged 12 and under) hauled in approximately 700 pounds of fish! Both John and Carol commented on how much fun it was to watch some of the kids experience the excitement of catching a fish for the first time.

The farm has hosted new employee training for the Natural Resource and Conservation Service for two years, and new opportunities to share the facility continue to arise. Now that word has reached the community about the availability of this beautiful setting, there are more and more requests for weddings, receptions, and class reunions. Even these "non-educational" events allow an opportunity to "teach" the public. Carol

feels that many people have a misconception about non-industrial, private forest landowners. "It's a choice, a priority. Instead of taking expensive vacations or making other investments, we chose to buy land and make improvements."

The Dorrills are thrilled that their children share the same philosophy and love of the land. When their sons were still small, they brought them to the farm every weekend. Living in Montgomery, the car was packed and ready to go every Friday after school let out. As they grew up, they helped their parents kill kudzu, build fences, and plant trees. Today their boys are just as involved and interested in the property. In the earlier years, they enjoyed bringing friends and church groups out to the farm; now they bring their own families to enjoy the heritage of this homestead. Carol said, "We won't be here to see all these longleaf pines and hardwoods reach maturity . . . but the grandchildren will."

Although most of the acreage has already been gifted to the children in a trust, it was with the agreement that John and Carol be allowed to continue managing it. Retired from a 44-year career with the Alabama Farmers Federation (ALFA), John says he takes great pleasure in working in the woods. His timber management practices include prescribed burning every other year and thinning hardwoods for aesthetic purposes. He also maintains green fields, noting that wildlife has

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increased since they started making timber improvements back several years ago. Deer and turkey are now plentiful, and quail seem to be coming back naturally.

Charter members of the largest TREASURE Forest chapter in the state – Pike County – the Dorrills are active in several other organizations. Carol served seven years and John is currently serving on the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association board of directors. Both were instrumental in helping to establish the ATFA Endowment Fund. The numerous certificates and plaques on the walls speak for the recognition they have received for their involvement and work through the years. Among these achievements, Carol was honored with the State Forester's Leadership Award in 1999 for helping establish TREASURE Forest programs in counties across the state. In 2001, the Dorrills received the Pike

County Chamber of Commerce Agricultural (Farm/City) Committee's Forestry Award. In 2002, the couple was given the Pike County Farm/City Service to Agriculture Award. In 2003, John was honored with ALFA's Special Service to Agriculture Award. Most recently, John and Carol received the 2005 Pike County Farm/City Conservation Award. In

February of 2006 at Auburn University, John will be formally inducted into the Alabama Agriculture Hall of Honor, recognizing his outstanding contribution to the state in the area of agribusiness. Showing

no sign of slowing down, the couple's list of accomplishments will no doubt continue to grow.

The Dorrills mutually voiced pleasant surprise at the extent of the use of their educational TREASURE Forest, saying it has greatly exceeded their expectations. Both John and Carol understand that they have been blessed with an opportunity to purchase property, as well as the ability to manage and groom it. Although it would

be easy to take it for granted, keeping it all to themselves, they feel a duty to share with others. In Carol's words, "It's almost a spiritual obligation. The land is a gift from God: we realize that we really don't own it, we're simply stewards, given the tremendous responsibility of taking care of it."

John commented on how gratifying it was to see people truly enjoying the land. This positive act of sharing or "giving back" to the community is what drives the Dorrills. Even though a TREASURE Forest means a lot of hard work, they agree that providing others with the chance to drink in the serenity of the beautiful resources of forest, land, and sky has its own rewards. 🌲



*The family roots on the Dorrill's Heritage Farm run as deep as those of this old oak.*

Photo by Elishia Ballentine

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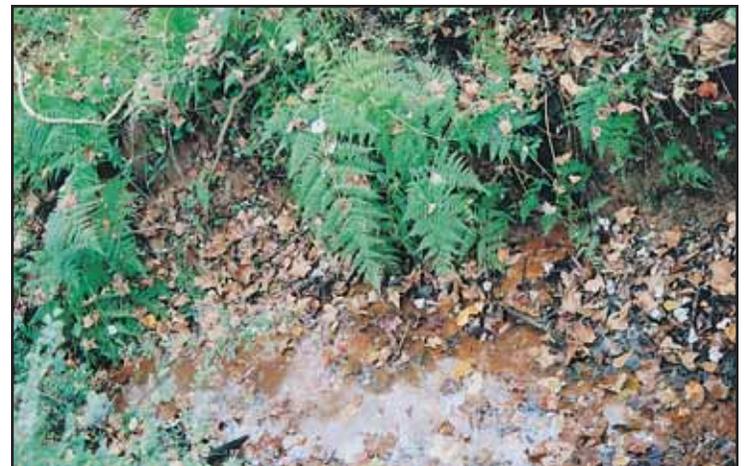


Photo by Elishia Ballentine

*Left: John and Carol Dorrill get ready to greet another tour group at the demonstration barn. Top: A variety of ferns grow along the creek in the educational forest.*