

# Mathis Creek Farm . . .

## “It’s All About Family”



By Coleen Vansant, Public Information Manager, Alabama Forestry Commission

**M**ost all of us have ridden along a rural highway and suddenly drawn in our breath when we came upon a beautiful view before us. One of those scenes that is postcard perfect – one that makes you want to get out of the car and step a little closer. There is one of those snapshots along Highway 78 in east-central Walker County. That place is Mathis Creek Farm – the TREASURE Forest of Dr. Jeff and Kathy Barton and their son Scott.

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### **For the Family**

Named for Mathis Creek that runs through it and empties into the Black Warrior River, the history of the property is a long one for Jeff and his family. His great grandfather purchased the original 80 acres around the turn of the last century and cleared the land by hand for pasture. His grandfather worked the farm through the depression and according to Jeff, “was lucky enough to hang onto it.” Jeff’s father was a rural mail carrier and farmed on the side. Jeff and his brother

were raised on the land, both involved in helping on the farm. To them it is all about family – the recreational opportunities the property offers and the fellowship of sharing it with their family and friends.

For years the family had wanted to add more property to their farm. “My dad had tried to buy adjacent property since he was 25 years old,” Jeff stated. He added that he had been in his medical practice about six months when his father called him one day and said that

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an adjoining landowner was considering selling his property. Jeff said he immediately went to the bank, borrowed the money, and bought his first tract. Since 1994 he has purchased adjoining land on both sides of Highway 78, and now he himself owns about 335 acres. With the additional property owned by his father and brother, the farm is currently about 400 acres. Timber production and aesthetics are the Bartons' primary and secondary objectives on the property.

### Reclaiming the Property

Most of the newly purchased land was old mined strip pits that had been cut over. They were overgrown with pine, brush, and other native plants. In the early 80s, the property had been clearcut and seed trees left. In 2001 a pre-commercial thinning was done and the farm was started on a prescribed burning rotation. The property was just recently burned by the Alabama Forestry Commission, and according to Walker County Manager Dan Jackson, it is one of the hardest he has ever burned. Because of the property's location (Highway 78, one of the busiest highways in the state, runs through the middle of it), all smoke management precautions must be taken. Dan said it had to be done on a day with a south wind to keep the smoke off the highway, and even with trucks and flashing lights on the highway to warn motorists, the 911 office still got around 200 phone calls from concerned citizens.

Although they don't live on the land (Jeff is a practicing physician in Albertville), it is of most importance to them. "Our daily lives are pretty stressful," Jeff explained. "Our family comes here for fellowship and recreation. It's very important to us."

Currently there are 150 acres in pasture for cattle grazing and hay production. The rest is in timber. They have around 60 primarily mixed breed cattle on the farm, and their goal is to increase their herd to 100.

Although wildlife is abundant on the farm now, that wasn't the case when Jeff



Photo by Coleen Vansant

*Kathy and Jeff Barton with son Scott (middle), niece Elizabeth, grandson Kaleb (in red shirt), and Clifford the family dog.*

was growing up there. "From the '70s to '90s, deer were almost nonexistent on this property," he stated. Now they are almost part of the scenery at Mathis Creek Farm. Turkey are also thriving, and seeing a large flock bugging on the edge of the pastures is not unusual. The family said that once they saw 43 turkeys in one group! Dove is plentiful and there are some quail, although they are hoping to manage for more.

### Getting Assistance with Goals

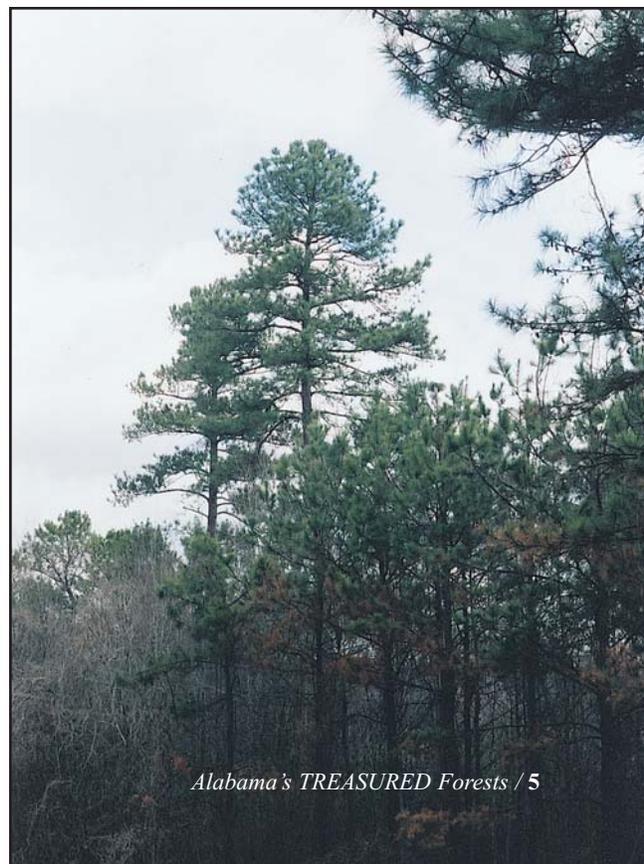
With land management comes the need for help from time to time. Years ago, Jeff's dad began a close relationship with the Walker County Soil and Water Conservation District office and received assistance from them in managing the property. "AFC Forester Dan Jackson has been a tremendous help," Jeff explained further. "We were novices as far as forest management. We'd be lost without all of the assistance." By learning that there was help available for landowners, the Bartons

have been able to get assistance with their pine planting, pond, and pastures. Another big help is Jeff's brother-in-law Harold who serves as the full-time farm manager.

Aside from just the natural beauty, one of the most unique features of the farm can be seen from Highway 78. What appears to be an old covered bridge sets the stage from the highway and as you enter the property. The family built on to an old bridge on the original Highway 78 and made a covered bridge out of it. Now it is the centerpiece as you look down the valley towards the cove where the farm is located. Jeff said his dad remembers stopping on the school bus at this bridge when he was a boy because the road was flooded.

Many landowners would call it education, but the Barton family seems to see it more as "sharing" their land with others. The couple has hosted many educational and landowner programs over the years. The local Alabama TREASURE Forest Chapter/Walker County Forestry Planning Committee has held several events there. They are the host of the county FFA forestry judging competition, have had outdoor women groups there,

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*Opposite page: Valley view with covered bridge. Right: These seed trees have regenerated the current forest.*

*Photos by Coleen Vansant*



Beautiful Mathis Creek is visible from U.S. Highway 78 in Walker County.

and are proud to have the boy scouts use their farm. This tradition goes back many years since Jeff and his brother were young scouts, both of whom earned the prestigious Eagle Scout rank. And then there are what Jeff calls “various

and sundry kids” that enjoy the farm such as his son Scott, grandson Kaleb, and a variety of nieces and nephews.

Jeff said he heard about the TREASURE Forest program from his dad. He was trying to develop sound land man-

agement practices on his farm and TREASURE Forest seemed to fit with that. He is a member of the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association and the local planning committee.

As with all TREASURE Forest owners, the work is not nearly complete. In addition to the Bartons’ plans to increase their cattle herd, they are also in the beginning of a kudzu eradication program. The prescribed burning program will be an ongoing project. Planting more pines is in the future picture, as well as working on their wildlife management program. At some time they also want to build a 10-acre pond for the family to enjoy. When retirement comes in a few years, they have plans to return to the property to live.

Jeff takes a lot of pride in his property . . . not only in the long family heritage that it holds for him, but also in seeing the growth and development that have taken place over the years. However, the greatest thing for him is being around family. For the Bartons, “It’s all about family.” 🏡

*Pines on the right were burned after a pre-commercial thin. Contrast: The stand below was not thinned before being burned.*

Photos by Coleen Vansant

