Photo by Michael Kyser

Making Memories

By Elishia Ballentine, Editor

Photo by Kelvin J. Daniels

The Weldens wanted a place to take their four children – not only a getaway where they would be able to leave all the worries of the world behind and enjoy the outdoors, but also somewhere to spend quality, one-on-one time with the kids and continue to grow together as a family. "Although the lake is a beautiful place and lots of fun, I chose to look elsewhere," Chuck Welden said. "At the lake there is so much competition . . . with boats and jet skis, going out at night, kids in one room playing Nintendo, and adults in another room watching TV. There's just no interaction; it's almost as if you lose control."

It was a time when all of their friends were buying beach condos and lake houses. That seemed like a pretty good idea to her too, Lauren Welden admits, until one Sunday afternoon in 1992 when her husband brought her down to look at the Coosa County property for the first time. Finding the farm absolutely breathtaking, she agreed with him that they should purchase it. It was then that the couple committed to doing something different with their family. In fact, for the first 15 years after purchasing the farm, there was no television. Instead, they played games – together. As Lauren put it, they made memories.

Along the way, as the children were growing up, Chuck and Lauren also built a showplace. This year, they were recognized for their efforts with the Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award.

After the initial purchase, they took a big map of the area, and purchasing plots here and there when possible, pieced it together like a giant jigsaw puzzle. The previous owner of the original 330 acres had cut and thinned a lot of trees and replanted, but he did not hunt, nor had he actually "managed" for wildlife or timber value. The Weldens immediately started managing for both, and in the beginning, planted 100 acres of loblolly.

Realizing they needed something more for recreational value as well as provide a friendlier habitat for quail, turkey, and deer, they later planted 600 acres of long-

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Managing property such as this would be impossible without the assistance of qualified professionals, according to landowner Chuck Welden (front). He credits (l to r) Joel Glover of the Alabama Department of Conservation, Wildlife and Fisheries Division; Annette Spivey with the Natural Resources Conservation Service; Roger Vines of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System; Blake Kelly, with the Alabama Forestry Commission; Doug McConnell and Sarah Baldwin, private forestry consultants.

leaf. Striving for a balanced management plan, they began constructing diverse environments with wildlife and timber management complementing each other. They are now seeing much better quality deer; the average size of both bucks and does is improving every year, particularly the last five years.

Although Chuck had thought thinning pines was a bad decision, it has turned out to be rewarding, both for wildlife viewing and hunting. He said that working with Joel Glover of the Alabama Department of Conservation, Wildlife and Fisheries Division, taught him two things. "First, he reminded us of the one ingredient that is sometimes forgotten: sunlight. The second point was that **diversity** is the key . . . edges really matter! We wanted to focus on quail and turkey, so Joel advised us to plant chufa fields, Egyptian wheat, and partridge peas. Maintaining SMZs (stream management zones) has also shown huge dividends."

Regarding other forestry decisions, Chuck recognized the recommendations he received from Blake Kelly, Coosa County Forester with the Alabama Forestry Commission, as well as private foresters/consultants: Sarah Baldwin, Doug McConnell, and Ted DeVos.

Weldon went on to say that in his profession as an attorney he had learned, "Success does not come by accident – it only comes with having the right team. This works in business and real estate, and the same philosophy holds true on this farm. We've been blessed with a super management team. That's why it looks so good! Managing property such as this would be impossible without the help of some really qualified people."

One such person is Owen Smith, retired after 32 years with the Department of Agriculture. "To say that he can run a tractor and knows what to plant, when to plant, and where to plant it is an understatement." Another important member of the team is Donald Jennings, who takes care of the cabin and all the outbuildings. He has built and maintains tree houses, playhouses, bridges, and a fire pit.

Bill Dark of S.W. Dark Construction, who has been building ponds since 1947, was also acknowledged by Chuck. When getting ready to lay out the pond, they tried to take full advantage of the topography of the land. Along the edge, half of the pond is grass and the other half is either hardwoods or longleaf, alternated not only for scenic value, but also to be quality habitat for ducks, insects, and other wildlife as well.

Welden credited Roger Vines of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and Auburn University for assistance with creating the "frog pond." This turned out to be a rather complicated project that took a lot of research. It later served as the backdrop for an out-of-the-ordinary landowner tour that was held after dark one night!

Additionally, the family has hosted two other (daytime) TREASURE Forest landowner meetings. A number of different hunting trips and events for the Forestry Commission and Alabama Wildlife Federation have taken place on the property, where people came together to discuss issues concerning the state's wildlife and forests. Coosa County's FFA wildlife judging teams have often used the farm for educational purposes. The Weldens also host several missionary and church retreats here each year.

The farm's diversity readily lends itself to such events because there is so much to do, according to Chuck. Not only has his own family had a great time roaming and discovering all these things over the years,

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but they also loved sharing it with good friends. In addition to exploring the woods, ponds, and creek, there's the unique and incredible history of the place . . . adjacent to the cabin are ruins from a textile mill built in the 1840s by a Colonel Bradford, one of the earliest such factories in the state. The old "Central Plank Road" that cuts through the heart of the property was the first road in Alabama that was not dirt, running from Winterboro to Montgomery as a means of transporting cotton to market. There's also a gold mine from the 1840s; Washington Academy which served as an 1840s Masonic Lodge, and an old cemetery dating back to the 1850s. Plus, there's the old log cabin that Lauren bought as a surprise for Chuck's 40th birthday. She had it disassembled, brought to the property, then re-assembled on the banks of the creek!

Lauren says spending time with the children on this TREASURE Forest farm has created a unique situation with their family. "All the memories – the wholesomeness – seem to have really cultivated in the children an appreciation for the outdoors, and life in general."

"Stewardship is not for just the short time we'll be on earth, but a legacy we will leave our children and grandchildren. We realize we've been blessed with opportunities and the ability to even own a place such as this," remarked Chuck. "However, we also understand that it's important to remember to worship the Creator, not the creation."

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