

It's Called **“The Pasture”**

The SID & VIVIAN BEECH TRUST

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There’s a bear in them there woods,” I remember my uncle jokingly say when I was a youngster and just beginning to learn about the great outdoors, initially in the form of hunting deer and turkey. Uncle Sid told me this primarily to keep me awake and alert while sitting on a deer stand, although it didn’t stop the wiggling. And he was right, black bear have been regular residents on the 1,320 acres in the Sid and Vivian Beech Trust located in Washington County.

Today, there is at least one bear that has taken up residence on a more permanent basis. “The Bear,” as he is called, has a sweet tooth, enjoying the honeybuns left for him on occasion as a means to catch him on a game camera. Not only was he captured on camera after demolishing an automatic feeder, he also left claw marks around the area which happens to be my



aunt’s favorite turkey hunting spot. Now Aunt Vivian is one of the bravest women I know. Once, she single-handedly caught a night hunter who had shot a deer in her front yard . . . she waited until he returned to pick up the dead animal, then she parked her car behind him and waited for the local game warden to arrive! When it comes to this bear, however, she has relinquished her hunting area to reduce the likelihood of meeting him on the way to the turkey blind some dark morning. And yes, at 95 she still hunts!

Always known as “The Pasture,” the property contains natural longleaf pine stands of various ages, stocking densities, and species composition. It was here that my first exposure to forestry came in the 1960s when approximately 200 acres of longleaf pine was harvested and replanted in slash pine, the most rec-

ommended pine species at the time. Site preparation consisted of taking a small dozer with an open tree planter and snaking a path between the large longleaf stumps. No chemical, and certainly no fire, was used back then.

In hindsight, the poor site preparation paid off by leaving numerous longleaf pines in the grass stage that now make up some of the best trees in the stands, after two thinnings have taken out the poorer quality trees. What I remember most about this experience was Uncle Sid teaching me about aging trees and tree rings, as well as how to make coffee over an open fire using a five-gallon bucket. Back then, buckets were made of steel instead of plastic. Uncle Sid told me that woods-brewed coffee “would put hair on my chest.” I can say that was one of the few times my uncle was wrong.

The Pasture has a rich history. In the early 1900s, the Howard family tried to squeeze out a living on the land. In the 1920s, a boundary dispute arose over having to cross several other landowners in order to go to town. The Howards cleared a field, dug a well, and built a house on what is called the Howard Field. Near the old home site is the Howard Family Cemetery. Only the well and cemetery remain today. The old home site is now used as a gathering place for recreation and for equipment storage.

Other historical features include the earthen remains of an old logging railroad with three switches that crossed the property in several locations. A well on the south end of the property supplied water for the steam engines. The first turpentine still in Washington County was located on the land south of the Howard Field. In the 1930-40s, a sawmill operated by “Baby Boy” Weaver was located on the ridge west of the Howard Field. There is also an old oxen yard and dip vat found on the property.

Ownership of the Pasture changed in the 1970s when Uncle Sid’s pole business partner, Bud Dickey, passed away. Jointly owned by the two families until then, the property was divided at that time into two separate ownerships.

Sid and Vivian Beech always had a reverence for nature and especially longleaf pine, thus stewardship was second nature. Being great citizens as well as stewards of the land, their commitment to forestry and natural resources education was forefront when they donated 160 acres of forestland to Mobile College in the 1970s (now the University of Mobile) and another parcel in 2005 to the Washington County School System for a school forest.

Unfortunately, Sid passed away in 2005. Since then, Vivian has been involved in all the decision making, as well as the supervision of all activities on the property. She is very active, present on a daily basis during every silvicultural activity that takes place, whether it is logging, road work, prescribed burning, or planting food plots. If work is performed on her land, she is there. After all, she’s the Boss! Her overall management objectives are to continue developing the longleaf pine ecosystem with

natural regeneration (where possible) of longleaf pine, and to produce quality wood products while enhancing wildlife habitat for game and non-game species as well as recreational opportunities. Timely thinnings and routine prescribed burning are the primary management practices utilized.

A plan was developed and followed where all the upland pine stands would be thinned over a five-year period from 2006 thru 2010. Each stand was marked to ensure the best trees were retained for merchandizing poles and other products, including Number 1 sawlogs for the export market, as well as the normal sawlogs, peeler logs, chip-n-saw, and pulp. Approximately 640 acres total – 440 acres of natural longleaf pine stands and 200 acres of planted slash pine/natural longleaf pine stands – were thinned to 60-90 square feet of basal area. A final harvest was completed in 2010 on approximately 115 acres comprised of lower stocking and poorer than desired species composition.

With the first thinning operations, fuel breaks of 20-25 feet width were established around the property’s upland boundary lines and improved with culverts, rock, and grasses to make them suitable for vehicular traffic. A survey through the swamp re-established property lines and corners.

In memory of Uncle Sid and his love for the look of dense longleaf pine stands with heavy pine litter, one

seven-acre longleaf pine stand was left un-thinned to show the original dense stocking level. Even though he understood it would benefit future natural regeneration and enhance wildlife habitat, Sid never wanted to thin the longleaf pine stands.

During the logging operation, all roads were day-lighted with water diversions added and improved as needed. Permanent firelines are maintained, with water diversions cleaned and reopened at least every two to three years in conjunction with prescribed burning.

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Due to heavy fuel accumulation across all stands on the property, prescribed burning was introduced in early 2004. The initial winter burns were of low intensity to protect the older longleaf pine and the "duff donuts" around their bases. The second round of burning moved into late winter/early spring for a more intense burn and to promote browse, while further reducing the duff donuts with minimum damage to the older longleaf. The last burns were early to mid-growing season burns for better woody control and wildlife browse response.

Continued prescribed burning is conducted on approximately 300-500 acres every year, with burns moving into the growing season as fuel loading is reduced. The latest burn was approximately 50 acres in June 2015, with another planned for September 2015. Future burning will be a combination of early and late growing season burns, with occasional winter burns to keep a variety of species and age distribution of natural vegetation that will be beneficial for wildlife management.

Natural regeneration is the preferred method within the longleaf stands, applying a modified Stoddard-Neal approach. With Stoddard-Neal, trees are selected for harvest creating smaller openings for natural regeneration, versus the three-stage regeneration process using a shelterwood where eventually all the mature overstory is removed once adequate regeneration has been attained. If managed properly, there will always be a mixture of young regeneration through multiple-age classes contain-

ing more mature longleaf pine that will provide great turkey roosting across the property.

Limited artificial reforestation has been utilized with 115 acres planted. Approximately 100 acres was planted in containerized longleaf pine under the WHIP/EQIP programs.

Chemical site preparation was used, followed by a site-prep prescribed burn. Another 15 acres was planted with slash pine in low areas not best suited for longleaf.



This slash pine site was

bedded and separated from the upland with a permanent fireline so the young longleaf pine could be burned without impacting the slash pine regeneration.

Armstrong Creek Swamp makes up approximately 500 acres of the property. The swamp is a mixed stand (bay/gum/slash pine) running from the northeast corner to the southeast corner, dividing the property's upland tracts. In 2015 a road crossing was built at the most narrow ridge points on the north side of the property. Previously, all traffic had to go through three other landowners' properties. This road will provide direct access for the planned second round of thinnings to start next year.



Cogongrass is found on the property and has been chemically treated since 2006. The initial spraying was done under the Alabama Forestry Commission's cogongrass cost-share program. New spots are identified and sprayed routinely.

While food plots are planted annually, primary wildlife management is achieved by maintaining an open understory through light thinning and prescribed burning. Hardwood mast trees including oak, dogwood, and hickory are maintained on uplands where fire intensity can be regulated to prevent mortality to the thinner-barked hardwoods. Burning is performed in a manner to provide a checkerboard appearance. Gallberry thickets provide nesting and cover for deer, turkey, and other small game.

In addition to black bear, Mississippi kites, osprey, and even an occasional bald eagle are seen using the swamp as a wildlife corridor. There is also a growing gopher tortoise population that has benefitted from the thinnings and prescribed burning. Despite the 100-year-old longleaf pine stands, no red-cockaded woodpecker habitat has been found on the property, mostly due to the absence of heart rot within the longleaf.

Wild hogs have been a nuisance over the years, but successful hunting and trapping programs have helped reduce their numbers. For several years, the Chatom Unit of the Alabama National Guard enjoyed barbecued wild hog for their annual Christmas dinner.

Hunting has always been the primary recreational use, with deer and turkey as the favored game animals. Many youngsters, including me, and adults alike killed their first buck and/or gobbler on the property over the years. Small game is occasionally hunted also. On several campouts, the Chatom Boy Scout Troup has hunted, prepared, cooked, and eaten squirrel stew for their evening meal.

Approaching soon, the "Pasture" will once again be offering hospitality . . . Vivian Beech is excited to share the woods and welcome everyone to the upcoming forestry field day sponsored by the Alabama Natural Resources Council (ANRC). As one of the winners of the 2014 Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award, the Sid & Vivian Beech Trust property will host the 2015 Southern Region Landowner Tour on October 15, 2015. In Aunt Vivian's words, "This is what Sid and I always wanted to do, share our blessings with others." ♣