

# RECLAIMED TREASURE: A JOINT VENTURE

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**T**he Banks Lodge property in Walker County has a long and varied history. The conversion from row crops to coal mines to a thriving TREASURE Forest has been a joint venture between landowners and agency personnel. The result has been a true success story as well as benefit to many in Walker County.

Brothers Frank, Henry, and Neal Banks grew up working the fields on the family farm in the Pleasant Grove community. Cotton, corn, hay, and various vegetables were tended using horses in the fertile bottoms along Lost Creek. "It was a good place to grow up," said Frank Banks. Not only did the hard work in the fields cultivate a rich work ethic, but firm family values were rooted there as well. Reaching the

age when young men leave home to carve out their own lives, the brothers each left the farm in search of vocations. Henry found a career with Alabama Power Company, Neal was

employed with the Chevron P&M Coal Company, while Frank worked with the Alabama Department of Public Health. Although their careers took them physically away from the farm, their hearts never really left. As Ulysses and Jewel Banks grew older, farming the fields was no longer an option and the decision was made to sell the property to a mining company. Soon the property was strip mined.

After being away for many years, the Banks brothers decided to exercise a buy back option, purchase the property from the company, and begin the reclama-



*Brothers Neal, Frank, and Henry Banks receiving their TREASURE Forest sign from then-Walker County Forester, Dan Jackson.*



*Frank Banks with an 11-point buck taken on the property, which the brothers planted mostly in pine timber following the reclamation. They also planted red clover and chufa, so plenty of deer and wild turkey roam the land.*

tion process. With no background in land reclamation or natural resource management, they realized they would need assistance. The stage was set for a true joint venture.

Obviously the first step toward restoration would be to begin the reclamation of the mined areas. The brothers were fortunate that the project would be handled by one of the best reclamation scientist in the country, Jim Kitson, a field supervisor for the Walker County Soil and Water Conservation Reclamation Department. Having overseen the reclamation of thousands of acres and taking pride in a successful project, Jim directed the task on this property which was completed in phases.

For more specific natural resource management information, the family turned to the state for assistance. Frank Banks said his first meeting with ADCNR Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division Wildlife Biologist Kevin Pugh lasted for four hours with him taking notes the entire time. He said he thought this was a tremendous amount of information until he received his voluminous timber management plan from then Walker County AFC Forester, Dan Jackson. Armed with the recommendations from these two professionals, the Banks property was now on the path to TREASURE Forest.

Although the brothers selected timber and wildlife as the primary and secondary objectives for their property, they soon realized – as many landowners do – their objectives were expanding to include recreation and education as well. To meet these objectives, they contacted Alabama Extension System County Coordinator Danny Cain to assist with a fishpond and other aspects of the property. Later, NRCS District Conservationist Amber Johnson was contacted to provide guidance on the prop-

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*Jim Junkin, staff forester with the Alabama Forestry Commission, discusses prescribed burning at one of the various stops along the 2009 Walker County Land Management Tour on the Banks TREASURE Forest.*



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erty. The brothers continued to implement the recommendations of the resource professionals and soon the property was taking shape, meeting the objectives of the owners. Today the property is producing quality timber as well as outstanding recreational activities. To say the project was a success would be a gross understatement. As Jim Kitson commented during a recent landowner tour of the property, "When someone can harvest timber from a reclaimed property, it was a job well done."

Anyone would be hard-pressed to recognize that this property was strip mined less than two decades ago. Alabama Forestry Commission Forest Ranger/Technician Bartley Wyers was recently quoted as saying, "It is amazing to come here and see the difference good land management makes."

The Banks property continues to be well managed. Along with Forest Rangers Jesse McDonald and Jason Berry, Wyers and staff forester Jim Junkin recently conducted a prescribed burn on the property. As part of the landowner tour, Junkin explained how prescribed fire is one of the most economical yet beneficial practices that can take place on a pine stand. Not only does the burn return nutrients to the soil for the trees, it also scarifies seeds that germinate and provide vast amounts of forage for wildlife. Wyers explained to the group that the goal of the Alabama Forestry Commission is to protect and sustain our forest resources by using professionally applied stewardship principles and education. He went on to say that the Banks brothers are the epitome of TREASURE Forest landowners in that they not only manage the property well, but also pass on the land ethic to future generations, thereby ensuring that Alabama's forests will continue to provide abundant timber, wildlife, clean air and water, and a healthy economy for years to come.

Frank Banks said that although the reclamation of the property from strip mine all the way to TREASURE Forest had been a lot of work, it had been a labor of love, and the family was happy to be able to share it with others. This family has indeed been gracious in sharing the property by hosting many different outdoor events. The Walker County Forestry Planning Committee members have worked with the Banks family, using the property to educate and motivate others in the community. During the recent tour held on the property, Mr. Banks stated that



*"This land means something to the Banks family and they're doing everything they can to take care of it," according to Jim Kitson, field supervisor with the Walker County Soil and Water Conservation Reclamation Department who directed the project. Working a land management plan such as TREASURE Forest will leave something behind to be enjoyed not only by their children and grandchildren, but future generations as well.*

the family had been truly blessed and they had to give the LORD the credit for what had occurred there.

Being privileged to take part in the recent tour, I came away thinking that more than a piece of property in Walker County had been reclaimed. I saw a family rightfully filled with pride over their accomplishment, yet giving the credit to the ultimate resource manager, the LORD above. I also saw agency personnel with a sense of true accomplishment in that their recommendations had been put into practice and had produced the desired outcome. I witnessed children running and playing in a forest without another care in the world. I saw multiple agencies and organizations come together on a rainy day to provide something worthwhile to area landowners. All of these things are TREASURES worth reclaiming.

There is a true TREASURE in Walker County and other counties throughout this state. If you would like to visit a TREASURE Forest, or better yet, create one of your own, go to [www.aces.edu/forestry/anrc/](http://www.aces.edu/forestry/anrc/) and locate one of the member agencies of a forestry planning committee in your county. Tell them you want to get to work creating a TREASURE Forest. You'll be glad you did. ☺