

Desire, Devotion, a



By Elishia Ballentine, Editor

He calls it the “Poor Man’s Farm.” With mostly his own two hands, sheer determination, and limited resources, landowner Bobby Jennings has built one small tract into a true TREASURE along the banks of Hillabee Creek in Tallapoosa County. Initially equipped only with a mule named Queen, a plow, and a desire to improve the property, Bobby has planted, sprayed, and burned his way to a forest landowner’s dream. His motivation? Seeing other TREASURE Forests and Helene Mosley properties.

Humble Beginnings

Back in the late 1960s, Bobby was a “vo-ag” (vocational-agricultural) teacher in Hackneyville. One evening he received a phone call that a bus driver at the school had suffered a heart attack and needed a temporary substitute. Bobby agreed to help out and ended up driving the school bus for over three months. When the man eventually recovered and came back to work, he wanted to know how he could repay him for his kindness, but Bobby wouldn’t accept any payment.

and Determination



Still wanting to show his appreciation, a week or so later the man made Bobby an offer he couldn't refuse . . . he wanted to sell him 82 acres of forestland for \$75 an acre. Thinking it sounded like a fair deal, but admitting he wasn't an expert on the value of timberland, Bobby sought the advice of his father. Together, they walked the property and determined that it would indeed be a good investment. Once Bobby Jennings became a landowner, the real work began.

Planting the Seeds of Good Stewardship

Harvesting and replanting in a constant cycle over the next several years, he steadily continued to purchase more acreage across four or five separate tracts. Over 750,000 loblolly pine seedlings were planted on approximately 700 acres. When the first trees reached about 16 years, Bobby contacted consulting forester Bruce Eason. For almost 30 years now, the two men have been working together. His first forest management recommendation to hands-on landowner Jennings was to burn!

With the help of the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC), Bobby recalls starting his prescribed burning program in the late 1980s. He then attended seminars and training, learning everything he could about prescribed fire. He was soon doing the burns himself and has been ever since on an approximately 300-acre rotation, using a four wheeler and an "8N" tractor. For the past several years, he's successfully controlled hardwoods by conducting growing season burns with the help of forester friend and Certified Prescribed Burn Instructor Kent Hamby.

Timber production for income was the primary objective of this TREASURE Forest, with the landowner himself doing 90 percent of the planting and other tasks. The majority of the property is in loblolly pines: 500 acres planted and 200 acres in natural stands. At the time of this interview, there were currently 280 acres in longleaf pine, with plans to plant 115 more acres making a total of nearly 400 acres. There's another 150 acres in hardwood.

Wildlife was Bobby's secondary forest management objective, with an emphasis on quail. Toward that end he's accomplished a



good bit of burning and thinning, and planting of lespedeza to increase both cover and food sources for the birds. According to Jennings, that's also why he's made a practice of investing in longleaf . . . "it can be burned on a regular basis, and it's more friendly to quail."

There are now approximately 40 wildlife openings, all about one-acre in size. Each is maintained annually with cool and warm season mixes. With an abundance of deer

and turkey, all of the acreage is currently under hunting lease with five different hunting clubs. Helping him develop a quality wildlife program, Bobby comment that he had received a tremendous amount of assistance from the Alabama Wildlife Federation, particularly biologist Claude Jenkins. He also noted that Joel Glover, biologist with the Fish & Wildlife Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, has delivered great advice on managing for wildlife benefits.

Expressing appreciation to the local Tallapoosa County AFC staff as "another great addition to his TREASURE Forest program and team of experts" over the years, Bobby commended forester David Kelly and forestry specialist James Yarbrough. He said they've helped construct fire lanes, establish green fields, and create stream crossings and turn-outs on the farm's 18 miles of roads and steep hills, of course always following Alabama's Best Management Practices (BMPs) for Forestry!

From early on, Bobby set two goals for himself: to one day become certified as a Tree Farm, and be recognized with the coveted Helene Mosley award. And wow, did he ever achieve "Tree Farm" status! Not only was Bobby named 2008 Alabama Tree Farmer of the Year, but in 2009 he also qualified as one of three finalists from the Southeast Region for (national) Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year! Then in 2011, Bobby and Marilyn Jennings were the recipients of the Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award for the central region.

Readily giving credit to those people and agencies already mentioned, Bobby understands that he could never have attained these successes without their professional assistance and often "free advice." As he once commented to David Kelly, he views this forestland as a reflection of himself, with its transformation being very similar to the one he has experienced in his own life.

Passing the Torch

Bobby acknowledges that because he's learned so much from so many, educating other landowners is an important mission for him . . . to share this knowledge, hopefully motivating and inspiring just as he was inspired so many years ago. He wants to demonstrate what one person can do, if they're dedicated . . .

The Jennings family has hosted several groups and landowner tours; one of the largest was in 2007 which was attended by approximately 220 people. Among other things, Bobby shows landowners a comparison between vegetative management control achieved chemically with Arsenal and prescribed burning, versus not burning at all, but letting nature take its course and

allowing everything to grow. One of his favorite highlights . . . on 95 acres in one spot and another 200 acres on a separate tract, he exhibits how much more productive natural stands can be in just a few years with pre-commercial thinning.

Bobby Jennings says he is by no means wealthy, but owning a total of nearly 1,800 acres is a personal achievement of which he is very proud. He admits it is nice to have the timber value of the property, but he realizes he couldn't have done it without the help of others. He also appreciates the support of his family and especially

his wife, Marilyn, who has given him the freedom over the last 40 years to work on the property as often as needed to make improvements . . . the freedom to devote so much time and energy to his passion . . . the development of a productive forest. ♣



The Jennings Family: (seated) Bobby and Marilyn with great-grandson Hudson; (standing) son, Mike; granddaughter-in-law, Lindsey (grandson, Taylor, is a green beret in North Carolina); daughter, Camille, and her husband, Joe.