

BOON AND MARY CHESSON

NORTH CAROLINA TREE FARMERS

OF THE YEAR - 2006

To grasp Boon Chesson's approach to his 107-acre Tree Farm, one needs to envision that special ice cream dessert you can find in your grocery store around Christmas that features layers of ice cream, whipped cream and cake neatly rolled into one tasty package. While the combination of flavors makes this dessert such a treat, Chesson's blend of his experience, priorities and historical perspective has shaped the landscape on the Chesson Family Tree Farm over the past 30 years.

"A lot of people play golf, hunt and fish, I like to play in my woods," explained Chesson while touring his property. Of course, Chesson's definition of play - planting trees, cutting or burning undergrowth and maintaining a creek crossing - translates to chores for most of us.

The North Carolina Tree Farm Program officially recognized Chesson's recreational efforts when it named the Chesson Family Tree Farm as its 2006 North Carolina Tree Farm of the Year. The Tree Farm, which has been in the program since 1982 and is also a charter member of the North Carolina Division of Forest Resources' Forest Stewardship Program, showcases 75 acres of Longleaf Pines with another 25 acres in Loblolly Pines and the remainder is occupied by the two homes on the property. The property tucks into North Carolina's Uwharrie National Forest, bordering the forest on three sides in Montgomery County.

After growing up on the North Carolina coast in Washington County and earning a liberal arts degree in Political Science and Industrial Relations from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chesson chose to follow his parents as they migrated to Montgomery County by entering into a partnership to purchase the farm back in 1974.

"It had been a subsistence farm," stated Chesson. "It wasn't necessarily a commercial farm, which is kind of typical of this area. It had some standing timber - some older pines that had



Mary & Boon Chesson pose by one of the Tree Farm signs on their 107 acre Tree Farm in Montgomery County.

avoided being cut years ago. A lot of high-graded hardwood stands - then there was probably about 30-35 acres of open field."

Initially, a opportunity to own his own home, not the chance to grow trees, was the main attraction for Chesson, who was 22 years old at the time. Starting out, the Chesson's collectively did not really have a forestry background. Boon's father, Worth Chesson, grew up on a farm in eastern North Carolina, but after serving in the United States Marine Corps and going to college on the GI bill, the elder Chesson chose the professional world over farming. Boon's mother, Johnnie, still resides in the other home on the property. Worth Chesson passed away in February of 2006.

"One of the unfortunate things is that we did not have a plan for the farm, really, until we got involved in the Forest Stewardship Program," stated Chesson. "It was more or less a knee-jerk reaction to something early on. Over the years, we realized the importance of having a strategic plan."

That planning process began in 1979 when the Chesson Farm became charter members of the North Carolina Division of Forest Resources' Forest Stewardship Program as part of a cost-share planting of some 25 acres of Loblolly Pines. This experience in addition to several workshops began to stimulate a forestry interest in Boon. The farm enrolled in the American Tree Farm Program in 1982.

"Once we got to the point when we could recognize one pine tree from another," explained Chesson, "We started planting Longleaf on some other open ground and that's how we kind of drifted into the Longleaf management."

After graduating from the University of North Carolina, Chesson worked in the commercial construction field and eventually made the transition to home building. Chesson's interaction with wood as a building material began to influence how he looked at the trees that were growing on his land.

"We used to frame with Southern Yellow Pine and there were some problems with it," explained Chesson. "It wasn't real stable because a lot of it was plantation grown wood - that was the point where you started to see a lot of the Canadian wood showing up. I kind of felt like I ought to grow something of a little higher quality if I was going to provide it for the industry I was working in."

In his search for quality, Chesson ended up at the town library, researching past timber deeds and any historical events that may have affected the property he now considered his home.

"You are what you are because of what was there before you," stated Chesson. "It's all a progression from the past so knowing what occurred here as far as previous landowners and how they managed the land and what was done. If you don't know the history of it, you are going to be spinning your wheels trying to get started."

What Chesson discovered after spinning a wheel or two of his own is that his farm, though not typically location for Longleaf Pines, was in fact, a native home for Longleafs. His historical research revealed that the area relied on Longleaf Pines to be tapped for the once booming turpentine industry.

With a better understanding of the woods that he was standing in, Chesson planted his first acreage in Longleaf in 1988, again in 1992 and again in 2000. You can see the pattern. A graduate of the North Carolina Division of Resources' prescribed



David Brown, who owns Brown's Mowers & Equipment, presents Boon Chesson with a Stihl Chain Saw in recognition of being North Carolina's Tree Farmer of the Year.

burning program, Chesson maintains a rigorous burning schedule, running a fire through each stand every two years.

When its time to burn, any warm body is conscripted to be part of the ground crew. Over the years, that crew has included Chesson's wife, Mary, and their two adult children, Hamilton and daughter, Lesley.

Chesson considers his progression in his understanding of forestry from his first FDP funded Loblolly stand planting in 1979 to his latest Longleaf planting in 2000 as his greatest achievement.

"Finally realizing what grew here naturally and managing for it - the Longleaf," stated Chesson. "Typically, you associate it with sand hills or coastal plain, but for it to be in this area and to be managing for it, and be fairly successful in it; I think that's an achievement."

Further proof of Chesson's maturing forestry knowledge came in 1992 when the drain at the

base of a dam began to falter. The dam, which was constructed in the 1950's, contained an 18-acre man-made lake. Chesson was forced to drain the lake and plan for a four-foot wide creek that now weaves through this acreage. He planted Longleaf on the upslope and Yellow Poplar, Green Ash, Bald Cypress in the lowlands along the creek.

Walking the Chesson farm with its architect, you soon discover that Boon Chesson not only studies history to be a better tree farmer, he respects it as well.

On the back half of the farm, two majestic oak trees hold court in the middle of the largest planted Longleaf stand on the farm – some 17 acres. I wondered why a man, who obviously knows his forestry, would allow two shade-causing trees to remain standing when the rest of the acreage had been cleared to establish this now seven-year old stand.

“I left those out of respect,” stated Chesson. “The trees mark the place that was once a home site. We figured that folks once lived there and we should have some appreciation for that.”

And, Chesson's admiration for the past does not stop with mankind. In one particular patch of his farm, Chesson points to some Longleaf that have been sitting on a slope well before he ever set his eyes on this property. How does he know? Old timber deeds of course.

“The diameter limit cut on this stand was six inches, which is pretty daggum small for 1946,” stated Chesson in somewhat disbelief. “I figure these trees – that's how they avoided being cut – their parents were the ones that got whacked and these were just the little seedlings that were here. When the under story was gone, they took off.”

As they grew, these trees provided the natural seed for the Longleaf currently in the under story and may have provided the ideal model for Chesson.

“The long range goal is to get my Longleaf stands in a state of maturity where I can start doing small patch clearcuts and get natural regeneration,” stated Chesson. “Basically, the goal is to develop an uneven-aged managed forest where there is continuous cover but in small areas you have natural



These two oak trees mark a spot where a home once stood on the property.



regeneration. It can be burned, managed, harvested and naturally regenerated so that the people who get it after me, my children or whoever, they don't really have an out of pocket expenses - it pays for itself."

Chesson reveals his major concern for his property, and forestry in North Carolina in general, when he details the need for his farm to pay for itself. He sees property taxes as the number one threat to landowners.

"If they rise to a point that is just not financially feasible to continue growing timber, folks will be forced to sell it," explained Chesson. "That is driven by development moving into an area. As housing and commercial space increases - that raises property values and is a threat to anybody who owns any land."

While Chesson's property is enrolled in the state's present-use tax program through his involvement with the Tree Farm Program and he is confident that he has the financial assets to maintain his forests when development touches his neck of

the woods in Montgomery County, he still has his concerns for the future. He hopes that the work he has started back in 1979 will provide inspiration for his children.

"Certainly, they see my enjoyment out of doing it, the work that I have put into it, and the changes that have occurred over time will hopefully be something that will impress them when they have control over it," stated Chesson.

Chesson spent his entire professional career working with wood while his hobby was growing it. Today, at age 56, Chesson, who claims to have no master skill of any kind, is taking the final step towards his total immersion in his trees by enrolling this past fall in the forestry school at Montgomery Community College.

It seems that after spending all this time with foresters on his farm and at various workshops, the 2006 Tree Farmer of the Year is a little jealous of these folks.

"After hanging around these guys," stated Chesson referring to two North Carolina Division

of Forest Resources foresters who were out on a visit to the property at the time of the interview, "They know things that I don't know how to do so I needed to go back to school."

When he graduates, Chesson is not sure what he will do with his new degree, but he surely will have a wealth of experience to draw upon.

"I have a lot of different backgrounds," admits Chesson. "I could probably bring some different perspectives on some things for different folks"

In addition to a unique approach, Chesson brings a blue-collar work ethic to his management on his farm.

"I do the most if not all the work here myself," stated Chesson. "I have certainly hired people to do some of the big plantings - the ones that were just more than I could tackle. I just enjoy putting in the effort myself. I get out there and burn and brush saw. I have done a lot of the plantings. It truly is a working woods."

Through all of his hands-on interaction and research on his farm, Chesson believes that his

land has reached out and touched him in a very tangible manner.

"Being associated with a piece of property - growing timber - will expand your horizon to look out into the future because it is not a short term proposition," explained Chesson. "You have to think about what use will be made out what you are growing? Will there be a market for it? What will it look like in the future? What value will it have, if any? It's kind of given me a longer eye I guess than I would have had if I had been in a different situation."

Boon Chesson's Tree Farm is a place where the past connects to the future, again and again, swirling around itself similar to that special dessert. The priorities for the property are so well defined and balanced; you have little trouble seeing Chesson's master plan in the uneven heights of the pines and hardwoods, the two huge oaks anchoring an old home site or the recently constructed stream ford. It is impressive. ■

