

Bob Vickery - 2005 Tree Farmer of the Year

North Carolina Tree Farmer of the Year in 2005, Bob Vickery, a landscaper by trade, just cannot get his hands around why his family farm was even nominated for the Tree Farm of the Year Award, never mind how his family farm was selected.

“We are small potatoes compared to some of the other tree farmers, their deal is bigger and a lot of ways better, but we have enjoyed ours,” stated Bob Vickery.

In fact, when consulting forester and tree farm inspector Jeff Pardue first approached Vickery, the Wilkes County native would only allow the farm to be considered if it was clearly stated that the true credit for the distinction be placed with his father, Sam Vickery, who died in 2001 of a blood disorder at the age of 81.

“I told Jeff I would only go along with it if I could defer the honor to my father,” stated Vickery. “I don’t like to take credit – it was his initial deal, his idea and his life.”

While Vickery struggles with the notion that his tree farm is one of the state state’s best, it may be a classic example of failing to see the forest through the trees.

Simply put, Bob Vickery doesn’t own his family farm, he is his family farm. It shaped his values and attitudes. Packed with memories, the farm is a living demonstration of what love for nature can occur over a long period of time.

“The evolution here is the most beautiful part,” stated Vickery when asked about his favorite thing about the farm.

The evolution of the Vickery family farm began back in 1948 when Sam and Louise sought to take their family, which included Bob, who was seven at the time, and his six-year old sister, Mary Martha, out of North Wilkesboro.

The property that Sam Vickery was about to purchase had undergone a typical progression of small farms during this time. On the front end of the farm, there is a modest 2 story brick home, most of which was built and designed by Sam Vickery. Much of the farm had once been a cornfield but over the years it had become the



host of a mixed pine and hardwood stands. The timber (l-r) Bob Vickery and forester Jeff Pardue pose for a photo after Vickery was selected as the 2006 Tree Farmer of the Year.

had been harvested and the farm was put on the market for a modest price.

Sam Vickery, a supervisor for the United States Post Office in North Wilkesboro, saw his family’s future in this 95-acre tract.

“I think what drew him to this farm was his interest in nature and a place to create. He wanted to have something for an evolution. In his mind, working on a lot in town was just not that fulfilling. The property presented itself as a bargain because it had been cut over and he probably felt like it was a good place to raise a family.”

The need to create, shape and beautify is a Vickery Family trait.

Louise Vickery was a potter. Examples of her work can be spotted on various shelves in Bob's house as well as on the custom imprinted tiles around the kitchen that captured the beauty of the various ferns and wildflowers found on the farm.

Sam Vickery may have been an employee of the U.S. Postal Service, but he worked tirelessly on the farm and was a notable local watercolor artist.

"He would get up and go to work about four in the morning and do his day's work and get back here around three o'clock and do another day's work," stated Bob Vickery. "I don't know how in the world he did it all."

While the younger Vickery marveled at this dad's work ethic, he did have the opportunity to witness this attribute on the other end of a crosscut saw.

"At that point, I think we used a crosscut saw before Dad actually purchased a power saw," stated Vickery.

This initial effort towards restoring the health of the farm, which was achieved with the technical advice of the folks at the North Carolina Soil and Water Conversation Resources and Division of Forest Resources, involved some reseeded and restoration projects.

Sam Vickery signed the farm up for the American Tree Farm System in 1954, becoming the 94th registered Tree Farm in North Carolina at the time.

"We just cleaned up trails initially," explained Vickery. "Then we took some pulpwood off the top ridge in a ¾ ton pick up. Then we went to a front-end loader with our tractor, and eventually we purchased a logging bed size truck. So, we've done a moderate amount of logging all along. Initially, we supplied a rail siding with pulpwood near North Wilkesboro."

Knollwood Farm was also a frequent host to Boy Scout and 4-H outings. Sam Vickery was one of the principle supporters of the Rendezvous Mountains program, a popular educational state forest in Wilkes County. In the winter, neighbors also shared in the harvest of firewood from the Vickery Farm.

As he looks back on his father's legacy, Bob has a tough time putting his father in a specific category.

"My dad was very much a naturalist," explained Bob. "There's a real debate on whether you are an environmentalist or an ecologist. Where do you split that hair? He was both of those things. He believed in utilizing what he had and sharing it with others."

Over time, Knollwood Farm became less of a source of hard work and more of a thing to enjoy for the elder Vickery, who walked those original logging trails that he had stabilized with his son up until his final days.

"The trails were his therapy," stated Vickery.

Bob's mother passed away just six months later.

Like his father, Bob Vickery's main job draws him away from the family farm. After graduating from East Carolina University in 1974, Bob returned to Wilkes County to contemplate his future. With a degree in Interior Design, Vickery understood that his trained profession would take him to a big city, such as Charlotte or Atlanta. Neither location seemed appropriate.

Instead, Bob took his design training back to the place he liked the best, the outdoors by enrolling in horticultural classes at Wilkes Community College in hopes of becoming a registered landscape contractor.

In 1975, Vickery created Knollwood Design, a landscape installation and maintenance company.

"The landscaping field was really in the infancy stage here at that point," explained Vickery. "There was really only one other true landscaper going, so we got in on the ground floor. It was a good time to get into it, but it was hard to get started."

Vickery admits with a smile that the early days of his new business venture were a little slow at times, but some 20 years later, Knollwood Design employs two crews and a total of six people.

Vickery later built his own home and a supporting barn for he and his wife, Linda, in the late 1990's after a visit from Hurricane Hugo.

"Sometimes, there are silver linings to some disasters," stated Vickery as he explained that he was looking at building a place of his own on the property. "We had 90 mph winds. I had to take 55 trees off the driveway

just to get back out to the main road.”

Just as clearing the paths of a newly purchased farm had cemented a relationship between father and son, the aftermath of Hugo forged the union between Bob and Linda.

“She helped with the clean-up of Hugo,” stated Bob. “We were dating at that time - that was one of the things that helped bond us together. Dad, Linda and I cleaned up the road together.”

Bob and Linda built their new home on top of the slope that Hugo had cleared. Then added a barn a few years later constructed from some of the timber salvaged in the storm. Linda, the true horse buff in the family, cares for the horses and a mule, and regularly enjoys walking and riding the trails with friends who come to enjoy the beauty, and wildlife of the woodlands. It is not unusual to see deer, turkey, and various raptors in the woods and pastures, and ducks, egrets and kingfishers on the pond all on one day’s ride.

“The benefits of farming, particularly tree farming, come with dedication and hard work,” explained Vickery. “It requires a discipline of patience. You get setbacks of hurricanes but then you get the benefits of nature. It’s just a remarkable combination of power and beauty.”

The trails that traverse the farm are a maze through Bob Vickery’s memory banks of his childhood and his family. The entrance to the farm is a dazzling canopy of White Pines – once planted by Bob and his father in their initial stages of a Christmas Tree Plantation.

“We started that project the same time I was starting my business, but I soon learned that there are just so many hats a guy can wear,” stated Bob. “I decided that was one hat I could lose.”

The Christmas tree operation may have come and gone without much commercial success, but their aesthetic contribution cannot be denied as one drives down the tree-lined driveway.

In another portion of the farm, Bob winds by an old hollow tree that reaches some 45 feet into the air. The tree, which Bob tabs as a den tree, provides the ideal home for small woodland creatures such as a squirrel, raccoon or fox. It also marks one of the spots on the family farm where Sam Vickery’s ashes were

deposited.

“Dad and I have always kind of cherished this tree,” stated Vickery as he reaches out to the trunk of the tree. “This tree has a lot of kinship.”

It is this kinship with nature that makes this farm so



Bob Vickery with one special tree on his farm where his dad’s ashes were deposited.

special and so deserving of recognition. The Vickery Family Farm has never been about major production. The family’s management style has always been dictated by the goal of balancing needs with what the land can provide. In many ways, it was an investment and a guarantee for Sam and Louise’s future needs.

Except for the front portion of the farm where White Pines were planted, most of the regeneration on this tree farm has been natural. In select spots, Vickery has left some damaged trees as a future home for various forms of wildlife.

“Some of the trees that have been lightening struck,” explained Vickery, “We have just left them for the woodpeckers.”

In other areas, Vickery has sought to clear-cut or selectively cut areas to promote forest health.

“I don’t feel like you can use one formula on every tract,” stated Vickery as he looks at a four-acre area where he has selectively harvested timber. “We have gone to seminars forever, learning this method and that. It seems that in the public’s eye that clear cut has gotten such a bad rap. We do not avoid clear cuts on principle. I feel that when you have many stems that are a few years short of maturity that we are doing the right thing in taking out over mature trees that will open up the crowded understory that is still going to be productive. To cut the less than mature trees just to make pulp wood is not good forestry.”

In other spots, Vickery sees the value of restarting the forest cycle.

“There will be patches that we will clear cut,” stated Vickery. “We have identified one site that is pretty much hardwood that needs some work. It’s pretty non-productive. It’s about four to five acres. We will seed that back as a wildlife plot until it regenerates. It will probably come back as poplar because of what’s in there already.”

The proceeds from timber harvests show up as improvements to the pond, pastures and roads on the farm. The acre and half pond at the bottom of a ravine is an excellent example of this. The three-year old pond provides habitat for numerous animals while enhancing the aesthetic value of the farm.

Over the years, Vickery has come to respect the mission of the Division of Forest Resources.

“Most of our forestry consultation has been with the forest service as far as establishing the farm plans over the history of this place,” stated Vickery. “They have several outstanding foresters on staff.”

Portions of the farm are co-owned with his sister, Mary Martha Smoak and her family, who live in Winston-Salem. They visit and enjoy the trails and the natural aspects of the farm as often as their busy schedules permit. Bob manages and maintains the farm and aspires it will evolve as his father would have had it. Bob and Linda hope that one day their niece and nephew will utilize the farm, and its legacy, in many of the ways that they have.

He understands, however, that the modern market place and his own mortality will limit his ability to conserve the family farm. “That’s a matter of economics,” stated Vickery when asked about the short and long term future of the farm. “Hopefully, I plan to enjoy the benefits of the property. Eventually, I would like to see the things that Dad started, and that we continue, to be a part of the evolution of this tree farm.”

There lies the beauty of Knollwood Farm - a son striving to build upon the vision of his dad – captured in White pines that never made it as a Christmas tree stand, in trails that wind through the forest and in a hollow tree alongside an old logging trail.

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