



WHY WE

farm

By Nell Perry Bovender

“I’m taking care of what was given to me, and I want to pass it on in the best shape possible.”

Tim Bovender

Fifteen years ago, I gave up city life to move to rural Rutherford County. The man I married had made the same decision 20 years earlier. We weren’t simply looking for a slower pace and a sense of place, although those are huge benefits. We were choosing a life rarely chosen these days.

Tim is a farmer.

The rarity of his decision is reflected in the steady decline in the number of farms in North Carolina over the last 20 years—from 72,786 farms on 10.3 million acres in 1982 to 53,930 farms on 9.1 million acres in 2002. That’s 26 percent fewer farms in just 20 years.

It’s hard work, and it doesn’t pay well. The price of a pound of meat on the hoof, to be honest, bears little resemblance to the sticker price at the grocery store. But farming is a labor of love.

For Tim’s labor over these last 35 years, we were named “State Conservation Farm Family of the Year” for 2006 by the N.C. Division of Soil and Water Conservation. The award title is an acknowledgement that farming is more than an occupation: It’s a lifestyle affecting an entire family.

The award recognizes Tim’s work to protect the water sources that run

through this property. He installed 45,000 feet of fencing—more than eight miles—to keep our 100-plus beef cattle out of the streams. The streams serve as the headwaters of Cathey’s Creek, part of the Second Broad River watershed. To provide water for the cows, he had two wells dug and installed 12 watering tanks and almost two miles of pipe. Government programs paid for enough of the effort to make it affordable.

He has also corrected damage done by farming practices generations ago. Water runoff from cotton fields had eroded a huge gully down the hill almost to one creek, and “high-grading” timber—the practice of cutting the best trees within a grove—had left forests of low-grade timber. Tim gradually filled the gully, which is now seeded back into permanent vegetation. And he follows a forestry plan that he and the U.S. Forest Service came up with to clear-cut and replant sections of timber in both pine and hardwood.

The award also recognizes our decision six years ago to place 300 acres under a conservation easement, which means that this acreage will remain

Top Photo: Tim's great-grandfather built our house in 1889. **Middle Photo:** To preserve pasture vegetation we rotate where the cattle graze. **Bottom Photo:** Tim installed more than 8 miles of fencing to keep cattle out of the streams. Photos by Nell Bovender



open space for agricultural purposes forever. Foothills Land Conservancy holds the easement, pledging to monitor in perpetuity what goes on here. Contrary to what most people think about conservation easements, we still own the land and are free to sell it.

Development is encroaching on farmland all over this state; the loss of 1.2 million acres over the last 20 years shows that. Farmers are hard pressed to afford the increase in taxes and resist the pressure to sell. Our decision, we hope, will make it easier for our children to own this place.

The spirit of farming

The “why” of the award, however, is much easier to answer than the “why” we farm.

Simply put, it's what Tim always wanted to do. Granted, his parents encouraged college so that he could consider other professions, but upon graduation, Tim was ready to farm his mother's home place. He inherited more than the land to farm, however; he inherited the spirit of farming. There is a connection to the land that the farmers or descendants of farmers who read this essay will understand.

Land to those who care for it isn't an investment; it's a responsibility. Farmers don't own land; they care for land.

Tim called me once while we were dating to tell me he had been offered \$1 million for this place. It would make a gorgeous golf course with homes dotting the hillsides. That may be when I knew how truly special he was. He had said no.

Land tells a story that too few people take the time to uncover these days. We are a mobile society, rarely living in the same place for very long. Housing developments sit where cotton or tobacco once grew, covering the sites of long-forgotten one-room schoolhouses, country stores and Native American hunting grounds.

Tim is the seventh generation to farm here, so we know the history. John and William Flack were among the Scotch-Irish settlers from Pennsylvania who accepted the Lords Proprietors' offer to settle what is now North Carolina. They received a land grant from King George III in 1769 for 200 acres on Cathey's Creek. John's great-grandson, Millard, Tim's great-grandfather, built our house in 1889. Our daughter,





This shows Tim and me with our children, Will, a senior at the University of South Carolina, and Ali, a 5th grader. Photo by Jake Garmon

Alice, is the fifth generation of Alice in this branch of the Flack family.

This corner of the world was once known as Cuba, a name given to the local post office that sat in W.W. Horn General Merchandise from 1850 to 1904 just a stone's throw, as they say, from our house. Horn also operated a mill across the road from the store. The only remnants of Horn's mill or the store are a few rocks and the name of the road our driveway turns off of—Horn Mill Road, two miles northwest of Gilkey in northwestern Rutherford County.

Our cow pasture in the corner of the driveway and Horn Mill Road was a militia muster back when settlers were called together to protect themselves. At the turn of the last

century, it was the recreation center of Cuba—a baseball field that saw many a Saturday night game.

The best explanation we have uncovered for the name is that the country Cuba was the closest tropical paradise folks in the United States could visit—sort of like we visit the Bahamas. The name was an acknowledgement that this place was indeed paradise.

Farming is a rare career choice these days. One, land is too expensive to get into farming from scratch and, two, it doesn't pay well. Rare is the farmer who only works his land; most are dual-career farmers who hold down a day job with benefits or whose wives have jobs with benefits while they work part-time off the farm, full-time on.

Tim, for example, owns and operates a bulldozer, mows county dam sites, constructs barns and houses. I operate a local nonprofit providing urgently needed repairs to the homes of low-income homeowners.

Large family farm tracts are rare. Farms break up as parents pass on portions to each child and each of those children passes on portions to their children and so on and so on. Tim's mother was an only child, and her mother and father had worked hard to buy back family parcels as they were sold, thus keeping the original family tract intact.

The list of drawbacks to farming is quite a bit longer than the list of advantages: lack of discretionary income, lack of health insurance, lack of stamina. But the main advantage is big enough to outweigh all the disadvantages: We have been blessed with a piece of paradise here on Earth, open space for which to care, and we take that responsibility seriously.

To sit on our front porch and admire the view alone is medicine to the stressed. Our heart rates slow down, we breathe deeply, we smile. Well, that's what folks who visit tell us. Taking time to sit on the front porch is a different issue.

Tim's response to the state conservation award is simple: "I'm doing what I'm supposed to do. I'm taking care of what was given to me, and I want to pass it on in the best shape possible." To us, the most important part of the award is the knowledge that North Carolina still values conservation enough to select a farm family to honor. 🇺🇸

Nell Perry Bovender is a regular contributor to Carolina Country. The farm is served by Rutherford Electric Membership Corporation, a Touchstone Energy cooperative.