



The Carolina Country Fresh store off Hwy. 64 in Robersonville is the latest in a long line of Roberson family ventures. Family members there recently were (from left) Deann, Josh, Kenneth Sr. and his wife Bennette, Kip and Kenneth Jr. Hours are 8 a.m. to 7 p.m., and Sundays 1 to 6 p.m.

A good, old FARM FAMILY

For four generations, the Robersons of Martin County have grown with the times

Text and photos by Michael E.C. Gery

At a time when more and more of our farm products come from corporations, it's good to know that family farms are still with us. Corporate agriculture has its place and effectiveness in North Carolina and throughout the nation, but one thing corporate farms can't grow is character. If you know a good, old farm family, you know what I mean.

The Roberson family of Robersonville in Martin County is one of those good, old farm families. Soon after they began walking and talking, Josh and Kenneth "Kip" Roberson 3rd, now in their 20s, learned farming from their dad, Kenneth Jr., who learned it from his dad, Kenneth Sr., who learned it from his dad—all in the same place. At one point or another they each went out to the old "family tree" in the woods off one of their fields and carved their name in that tree. Kenneth Sr., who says he still sleeps in the room where he was born, for his 80th birthday this year bought some more farmland nearby. He buys it when the buying looks good, and over the years the family acquired acreage from Conetoe to Bethel to Gold Point. Along the way they gave a name to their family farming operation: "Scattered Acres."

Josh and Kip learned even more at North Carolina State University, and you can tell that they already apply contemporary business thinking and methods to their work. Their dad picked up some off-the-farm education, too, at Pembroke. "Schooling is OK," their granddad told me. "But it's not worth anything unless you get out here and use common sense." That sense comes from understanding the place you're farming and responding carefully to change. Even when he was a chicken farmer as a young man, Kenneth H. Roberson knew not to count his chickens before they were hatched. But once they did hatch he counted them closely. He knew his chickens so well that when he'd haul those broilers to a weighing station he had already calculated in his head to the pound what the scales would say even before he drove onto them,

and if they didn't say it he knew there was something wrong with the scales and would get weighed again. The senior Roberson also knew not to put all his eggs into one basket. This family has had a feed mill and owned a tobacco warehouse for more than 50 years. Today his sons, Kenneth Jr. and Henry, grow cotton, tobacco, soybeans, wheat, peanuts, strawberries, blueberries and produce. They operate greenhouses. His son, Tim, owns The Fillin' Station, a popular restaurant and catering business in Robersonville.

"If you do anything in moderation, you'll be all right," the elder Roberson says with a grin. "Even tobacco. Anything can kill you if you overdo it."

He adds that it helps to enjoy what you do and to have a wife and family working along with you. All that seems to be going on at the Roberson farm. Everyone gets involved in one way or another.

Kenneth Sr. learned to appreciate a good day's work early in his life after his duty as an infantryman in World War II. He was left for dead and remained unconscious for three days after his unit fell victim to an explosion. Doctors told him he wouldn't be able to walk, among other things. But he came back to the farm and never quit, even when Bennette Wilson went off to New York City to become a model. He went up there and carried her back to marry him.

How do the Robersons decide when to change directions at their farm? Kenneth Sr. says that in the early going, they just changed when they felt like it. "At that time we didn't have much," he told me. "So we didn't have much to lose." The farm began as a "four-horse farm," he explained, meaning that they worked about 80 acres, 20 per mule.

Kenneth Jr. says he never thought twice about being a farmer. "It's what I've always done." As a relatively small farm, there always was plenty that had to be done. "This job is here 24 hours. And it has its own kind of benefits."

The Robersons left the chicken business when the corporations began setting the rules and calling the shots. "After that, you were no longer independent," Ken says. Tobacco farming followed its own wavy course, subjecting farmers to strict contracts with the big tobacco companies, as the federal government set quotas on what you could grow while supporting the price you could get. Although the quota and price support system has been eliminated, the Robersons decided to continue growing tobacco on about 100 acres. But in 1999, Kenneth Sr. closed the Hardees Tobacco Warehouse that he had owned and run since 1946. When tobacco farmers had to contract with corporations instead of growing independently, there was no need for the auctions that had been such a large part of farm life.

Another major upheaval that affected not only the Robersons but all of Robersonville was the new four-lane divided state Highway 64 that bypassed the town when it opened a few years ago. The highway was planned to come right through some of the Roberson farmland. Ken and Vickie Roberson just shake their heads sadly when they remember those days. The woods where their kids would run and play—the same woods that grew the "family tree" all the boys carved their name in—would be gone. (They managed to save that tree, though.) The route was slated to go through some families' houses. A rare Republican at the time (he lost an election for state Commissioner of Agriculture to Jim Graham in 1976 by a landslide), Kenneth Sr. sat on the state Board of Transportation during the Holshouser and Martin administrations. He worked as best he could to move the highway's route so that no family would fare any worse or better than another. Even so, many of the businesses that once relied on the old Highway 64 traffic have closed. Bennette Roberson's children's clothing store is

still open downtown and so is The Fillin' Station restaurant. Another venture they steered into not long ago—a roadside produce stand and pick-your-own strawberries field along the old Highway 64—is seeing far less traffic these days. The action is out along the new Highway 64. The Handi Mart gas station and convenience store that used to be just east of town moved into a new building at the exit cloverleaf onto Highway 903. So did the Chinese restaurant, the Family Favorites restaurant and the ABC Store that had been in town. Now there's also a Food Lion, a McDonald's, a pizza place, a video store and a Dollar Store.

As they have for generations, the Roberson family looked at options to help adapt to the times. Josh began monitoring the activity around the ramps at the new exit. It's one of those easy-on, easy-off highway exits, and it has great visibility from the highway itself. By this past spring the Handi Mart was reporting between 4,000 and 5,000 customers over their 24-hour cycle. The location of the Robersonville-Hamilton exit is about halfway between Raleigh and the Outer Banks. Josh figured a produce store might work here. And so, Carolina Country Fresh was born.

The simple building made of rough-cut pine and poplar with a red tin roof resembles a barn inside, where fresh fruits and vegetables are set out in baskets and on tables. As usual, the whole Roberson family has become involved with the Carolina Country Fresh store. Vickie Roberson's jams have a place of honor along one wall. Aunt Beverly Roberson's pottery is on display in there, along with aunt Joy's framed photographs and grandmother Haislip's hand-painted glass. Deann Parker, a nursing student from Bethel who will marry Josh in October, is the latest addition. She keeps the place stocked and looking good and is pursuing marketing avenues such as the state's Goodness Grows program. Carolina Country Fresh will carry local produce, including berries, squash, cabbage, cucumbers, beans, tomatoes and sweet corn. They'd like everything to have a North Carolina link: honey, peanuts, sweet potatoes, flowers, wheat straw, pumpkins, mums, Christmas trees.

As Deann and Josh tidied up the little store recently, I asked Josh's father if he thinks his grandchildren will someday farm the Roberson scattered acres. He said, "They will if they ride with their daddies like these boys did and their daddies take them in that direction."



"This job is here 24 hours," says Ken Roberson (right), with his son Josh. "And it has its own kind of benefits."