

Albert and Wynette Shaw

2010 Tree Farmers of the Year

The Shaw Family Farm is a Glimpse of American History

By Chris Brown, NCFA Director of Communications

Now, I am not suggesting that he would do it, but you could not fault 2010 North Carolina Tree Farmer of the Year, Albert Shaw, if he borrowed a verse from country singing legend Hank Williams Jr.'s song, Family Tradition, when posed the question about why he is so passionate about his family farm.

Since Shaw once took guitar lessons from southern rocker Charlie Daniels' first cousin, Albert might even be able to strum a few chords as well!

And what a story it is.

The original farm dates back to a land grant of 1,000 acres from the King of England to a Matthew Colvill. Early in 1776, folks in southeastern North Carolina were forced to show their allegiance – to the king or a new republic.

Colvill pledged his support for the king by joining the loyalist at the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge on February 27, 1776 in which a group of 1,000 patriots defeated some 800 loyalist. Colvill managed to survive the battle and retreat back to his family farm.

Five years, in 1781 on the night before the Battle of Elizabethtown, local patriots decided that they would not let Colvill fight against them a second time. Colvill died at the hands of local patriots while in his own home – the home that Albert Shaw grew up in.

To the victors go the spoils, and shortly after the war, the 1,000-acre farm was put up for auction by the sheriff of Bladen County. Albert's ancestors were not the original winners of that auction; however, the MacMillan family took ownership of the property in 1800.

When Daniel Shaw married into the MacMillian family by taking Mary MacMillan as his bride, the



Albert and Wynette Shaw were named 2010 N.C. Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year.

587-acre family farm came with her as part of her inheritance.

"We are seventh generation here on the farm," stated Albert, who has traced his family's lineage that is tied closely to the historical events in this southeastern coastal corner of North Carolina.

For Shaw, noteworthy events and traditions of the farm have been passed down through the generations through family stories just like historical roadside signs that commemorate the Battle of Moore's Creek and Elizabethtown.

One of the first that Shaw learned was the legend of the corn crib that was erected out of cypress logs in 1849 and still stands on the family farm today.

"The day my grandfather, Albert, was born," explained Albert, "they were notching up the log barn. So family tradition says Granddaddy was born the day they notched up that barn so we have always been able to keep track of that date."

A more personal date for Shaw was Easter Sunday in 1955 when a fire claimed the original family homestead. An only child and just eight years old, Albert recalls helping his mother collect and salvage family china and silver from a burning house all the while watching his father try to rescue the family's first-ever refrigerator!

"He struggled to save that refrigerator, and in the end, he got it stuck in the door frame and he had to give up on it," recalled Albert, who was born in 1946.

Shaw's father, Roy, was a farmer who utilized both his fields and forests to provide for his family.

"My father had quite a bit of mature timber," stated Albert. "He would go in and select trees and bring in a buyer, and they would just go through and pick trees, especially for poles. He didn't believe in a clear-cut."

You don't have to spend a lot of time with Albert to realize that he kept a keen eye on his dad's approach to the family farm. In 1964, just when Albert was poised to follow his college plans of becoming a forester, his father passed away, leaving him 100 acres of the family farm.



Albert Shaw, left, and Tree Farm Inspector Greg Conner review Albert's Tree Farm map.

"I went to N.C. State majoring in forestry, but the chemistry wiped me out," stated Shaw with a chuckle. "I had to drop back and get into the school of agriculture. I could make it in Farmer

Brown Chemistry. I couldn't quite master that other one. I got my degree from N.C. State in Soil Science."

In 1968, Shaw's share of the family farm increased to 200 acres when his mother, Susan, deeded him her 100 acres when she remarried. So, in a matter of four years, Shaw went from being a link in the family chain to the leader and author of the future of this family farm.

The weight of this responsibility was not lost on the newly graduated Shaw, who was now working for the North Carolina Department of Transportation while tending his farm and forests on the side.

Shaw recalls going to a business seminar where the speaker urged his audience that successful people identify where their passion is and then put a plan in place both in the short term and the long term.

"At that seminar, I realized my passion was the family farm," stated Shaw. "Basically, I inherited 200 acres of the original family farm. My goal was to put it all back together."

It was also at this time when Shaw put his first loblolly pine trees in the ground while tending his fields of tobacco. At any given moment in the life of the Shaw Family Farm, the majority of the farm stood in trees rather than cleared land since the longleaf pine trees were a key source of naval stores and lumber.

"The family focused a lot on the timberland continuously," stated Shaw. "In addition to turpentine, there were two different sawmills that operated on the farm around the turn of the century."

After working with the Department of Transportation for several years, Shaw returned to the fields full time before he accepted a position with the U.S. Post Office as a rural postal carrier in 1976.

"If you ever farmed, it's just in your blood," stated Shaw. "You just can't shake it. There is nothing in the world like getting out there in the spring and

tilling a field. Stick your bare feet down in that fresh plowed dirt, and that's just where it's at."

And while Shaw toiled with tobacco for 25-plus years leading up to the tobacco buyout, he has spent plenty of time planting and nurturing his forests. Today, the Shaw Family Farm is back to its original size of 587 acres.

Over the years, Albert's work in the tobacco field provided essential funds to pursue his dream of reassembling the family farm. But those broad tobacco leaves also netted him his wife, Wynette, who he married in 1980.



Albert Shaw does most of the work on his Tree Farm.

"Wynette's father owned a tobacco warehouse," explained Shaw. "I ended up selling tobacco with him. We met through the warehouse, and we married in what were second marriages for both of us. She had one child, and I had three so we are totally a blended family of four kids and 11 grandchildren."

At this point in his life, retired from the U.S. Postal Service after 31 years of service, Shaw has the time to pause on what he has accomplished over the years as the steward of the family farm and all the traditions that it represents.

"I am really interested in promoting the history of the farm," stated Shaw as he points out that his farm is home to several living artifacts of an era when North Carolina led the world in the production of naval stores.

Another artifact with ties to another century are the narrow gauge railroad tracks that once weaved their way throughout the swamp areas and traced back to where a large permanent sawmill once stood.

"Most of the swamps in the 1920s were logged by tram railroads," explained Shaw. "Our family was involved in the buying and selling of timber in the area. I still have a huge saw dust pile from one of the mills on the farm."

Shaw refers to his checkerboard management approach on his farm as being busy, but many foresters would call it being smart. He is spreading out the risk and spreading out the income – or some might say, spreading out the taxes – by managing tracts in different ages.

"I tried to break the farm up into 20-30 acre wood lots," stated Shaw. "When I was originally doing it, that worked fine. Now, with the logging and the way everything is these days, 30-acre wood lots just won't work. You need at least 50 acres to get loggers out to your farm."

"Albert is unique in that he has been buying and selling timber off and on for other people as well as himself for 30 years. He's got a pretty good handle on the timber markets, so he does it himself," stated consulting forester Greg Conner, who has helped Shaw with writing his management plans for the Tree Farm Program and the Forest Stewardship Program.

When asked what he believes is the greatest achievement of his family farm, he thinks back to that seminar he took just after his college graduation. "I fulfilled that goal of putting the family farm back together," stated Shaw. "It took me over 30 years to do it."

And over the years, what did he learn the most from his farm?

"If you'll focus and if you'll keep on plugging," explained Shaw, "you'll have some setbacks. But I have always been told that if you are passionate about something, that's what you need to focus on. It's been very good to me."