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Farm preservation tour a lesson in community conservation

By Giles Morris • Staff writer

North Carolina's farmland is rapidly disappearing. The state has lost more than a million acres of it since 2007, and only 17 percent of the land in cultivation in 1950 is still farmed. In the mountains, the pressure to develop flat land near water sources accentuates the problem.

"That's the first place a developer will build," said John Beckman, pointing at his melon field in bottomland. "I could have subdivided this into one-acre lots and sold them all as waterfront property."

Beckman and a handful of other property owners along Tilley Creek in Cullowhee are working in conjunction with the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee to save their land from development and keep it farmed by using conservation easements and elbow grease. Last Saturday, they opened up their properties to the public to showcase the effort.

Four separate landowners in the Tilley Creek watershed have put more than 200 acres of land into conservation easements and kept close to 20 of those acres bearing food.

"People look to county and state government to conserve land, but there's another way it can happen," said Paul Carlson, executive director of LTLT. "There's starting to be a cumulative conservation story in Tilley Creek."

Tough row to hoe

Beckman doesn't have any illusions about why farming has all but disappeared in Western North Carolina.

"Nobody wants to farm. It's hard work. There's not hardly any money in it. I still haven't found anything that makes money," Beckman said.

A builder and a developer who was raised in upstate New York and has lived in Maine, Colorado, West Virginia and Wyoming, Beckman moved to Jackson County from Raleigh in the mid-1990s to run an organic farm on Betty's Creek. After selling that property to developers, he intended to take a break from farming, but fate intervened.

The historic Pressley farmstead, a picturesque piece of land that was farmed by Bob Pressley between 1900 and 1960, was in danger of becoming a shooting range. In 2006, Beckman bought the 200-acre property, which is only three miles from the Western Carolina University campus, in a tax foreclosure auction with the intention of preserving it.

"Rather than being smart and taking a break, I got involved in another project right away," Beckman said.

But Beckman couldn't afford to pay taxes on the entire property, so he put 135 acres into a conservation easement with LTLT. He has divided the rest into 5 to 10-acre lots centered on a common area that can be farmed. So far he has only sold one of them, to Cindy Anthony, a Pressley descendant who has hopes of restoring the old farmhouse to its original splendor. But Beckman's broad aim is to create a new model for land conservation and development.

On his own piece of the land, he's spent the past three years creating an organic farm that produces a wide array of vegetables to sell at farmers markets. The effort to clear his garden plot, which had reverted to a mixed poplar forest, was

tremendous.

"The saying is we're blessed with rock and it's true," Beckman said. "You can't stick a shovel in the ground without hitting rock."

Beckman hauled out 20 truckloads of rock and used it to build his "Frank Lloyd Lite" house beside the burbling waters of Tilley Creek. But for Beckman, the job of figuring out how to minimize the workload of running a 5-acre farm is part of the challenge. To that end, he was thrilled to welcome interested conservationists for a tour.

"It doesn't do any good to get other farmers out here," Beckman said. "That's the choir. Half of my job is education. Showing people this is possible. Showing people you don't have to kill yourself."

Russ Regnery came to the tour having never been to Tilley Creek. Beckman's farm and the precedent it offers blew the Macon County native away.

"It's just a fantastic example to set for people," said Regnery. "You can have a way of life that pays for itself and preserves an agricultural tradition that almost doesn't exist anymore."

Beckman estimates that he spends 20 hours per week in his fields during the growing season, but he maintains that people should bite off whatever they feel they can chew.

"What I want to emphasize to people is that farms don't have to be 100 acres," Beckman said. "Everybody should have a 10 by 10 plot in their backyard."

As for the broader picture of farmland conservation, Beckman believes there isn't a single approach that will do the job. County and state government will have to spend money to preserve what they can, and private landowners will need to work with land conservation groups like LTLT to create a patchwork quilt of farmland in places like Tilley Creek.

"It's going to take the contributions of a lot of people working a lot of different angles," Beckman said.

Setting the example

Joan Byrd has lived on Tilley Creek for almost 40 years. She started her life there on a one-acre lot on the ridge above where she lives now. Twenty-six years ago she married her husband, George Rector. Both of them are ceramics instructors at WCU. They purchased land and began farming a pasture alongside Bryson Branch, a picturesque mountain stream off Bo Cove Road.

In order to preserve their peaceful life on the mountain, they continued buying land that was likely to be developed. Five years ago, they put 40 acres into a conservation easement with LTLT.

"We just didn't want it to be developed," Byrd said.

While Byrd still focuses her energy on her pottery studio in summer, Rector has embraced the backbreaking work of maintaining a stunning garden of raised beds, grapevines and kiwi pergolas. To look at the perfectly manicured beds is to understand that a garden can be artistic as well as functional, but that doesn't mean it doesn't require hard work.

"There's a lot of stoop labor involved," said Rector. "The Italians have a saying that the ground is very low. I remember that a lot at the end of the day."

While Beckman fights the rocks on his land, Rector has settled into a 30-year war with voles, burrowing rodents that have a taste for vegetables. His potatoes sit in the ground in makeshift containers with hard bottoms and wire mesh sides, and as the season goes forward, he mounds the plants with soil.

The struggle is worth the effort for Rector, who sees producing food as a step towards self-sufficiency that may become critical in the future.

"Cheap food is a luxury right now, but it's cheap because oil is cheap," said Rector. "That may not always be the case."

For Kate Parkerson, outreach coordinator for LTLT, Beckman and Rector are the unsung heroes of the farmland conservation movement because they have succeeded in showing how the land can be saved and used by the people who live on it.

"Some people think that if you put your land in conservation you can't use it," Parkerson said. "You can't use it for development, but you can use it in a way that's productive and energizing and free and still protects the resource."

The landowners of Tilley Creek -- Vera and Don Guise own another historic farmstead higher up Tilley Creek with a 48-acre conservation easement, and Kathy Ivey, their neighbor, has 46 acres in conservation -- are preserving a watershed that could easily have been cut up into tiny pieces for second home lots.

"If the people who owned these properties didn't see the risk and take the steps to get the conservation easements, that might have happened," Parkerson said.

Through their efforts, they want to show that the value of land is in the way that you use it, not how much you can get for selling it.

About LTLT

LTLT helps to conserve the landscape of the upper Little Tennessee and Hiwassee river valleys by protecting private lands from inappropriate development. LTLT does this by working with private landowners to place conservation easements on their property, by accepting gifts of land, and by purchasing at-risk properties. As of September 2009, LTLT had protected 3,564 acres through conservation easements, and another 1,278 acres through acquisition. LTLT also played an important role in the State of North Carolina's acquisition of the Needmore Tract, a 4,500-acre tract on the banks of the Little Tennessee River. www.ltl.org.

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