

A MAGAZINE FOR AGVOCATES, LAND LOVERS
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FALL 2024

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LAND & *Living*



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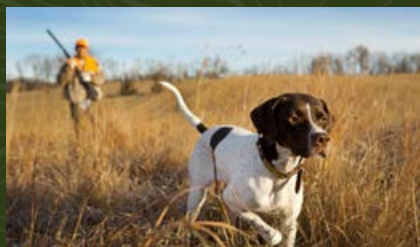
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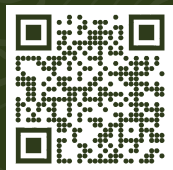
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Barndominium ESCAPE

STORY BY MIRANDA WALDEN

A lifelong dream turned into reality



From a young age, Ben Giddens had his sights on becoming a landowner.

Growing up in Leon County, FL, he had a modest and humble upbringing. He had a passion for the outdoors and loved to hunt and fish with his father, but it was always either on public land or private land that they had permission to use. As an observant kid, he thought how lucky were other families that had their own land to hunt. From that moment on, it became a lifelong dream of Ben's to own a recreational tract of land, as many acres as he could afford. "A place that I could constantly be working to improve and doing so with my kids and grandkids, sharing my passion for the outdoors with them," said Ben. "Teaching them to love and care for the land and the critters that live there in hopes they will pass it on to the generations to come."

Not only did he achieve this goal, Ben and his wife Trena recently constructed a barndominium on almost 300 acres of land to call their own.



The Journey to Landownership

Self-assured that the day would come when he would own land, Ben took time to educate himself. In 2012, Ben and a couple of friends leased a tract in south GA that they put much work, time, and money into. Just when they were starting to benefit from their improvements, they lost the lease, which is not uncommon and all the more reason Ben was saving to purchase his own tract. As time went on, they found another tract to lease, but Ben was more focused than ever to save up and educate himself on how to find and purchase the best recreational tract he could. He conducted research on property appraisers' websites to find out how much people were paying for land, how long they held onto it, and what their neighbors paid for their properties. He quickly realized that the more secluded the land was, the cheaper the cost per acre. Other factors that contribute to the value per acre of a tract is the timber value and whether it had irrigated or non-irrigated agricultural fields.

After studying the market and preparing financially, Ben and Trena found a tract in central GA that piqued their interest. Several factors came into play that swayed the Giddens' decision to purchase this property: It had great potential for a high quality of wildlife with its proximity to the Flint River, and it was easy to access without having to drive through rough terrain. This tract had been clear cut some years ago and the majority of the acreage not replanted in pines. This kept the cost per acre more reasonable while still providing good cover for wildlife. Ben saw the potential in this property becoming a great recreational tract and looked forward to being able to improve it.

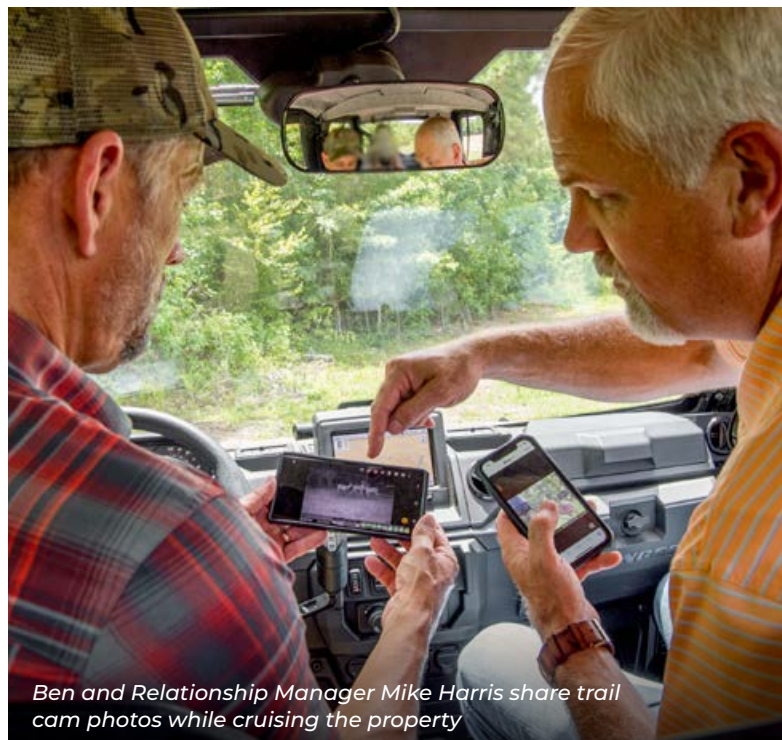
But one of the most important qualities of the tract to Ben? The neighbors.

Competition vs. Collaboration

There can be competition and harsh feelings between hunters and landowners who feel possessive of the wildlife that crosses between property lines. For example, rushing to harvest a buck just because you don't want the adjacent landowner to get it. But something many landowners hope for is collaboration with their neighbors. Ben encourages sharing trail cam pictures and wildlife discussions as opposed to withholding information. Luckily for Ben, he was introduced to his potential neighbors through a mutual friend before he and Trena even closed on the land. He was nervous to call but was pleasantly surprised to find that they were more than happy for him to purchase the property. They expressed their excitement to have a new neighbor who they felt would improve the land quality and cultivate a healthier habitat for wildlife. Prior to the Giddens, the property had been leased and not managed very well. Although it was farther away than they'd initially hoped for, their neighbors' enthusiasm, Ben's passion for wildlife, and the opportunities that the tract presented were enough for them to say "Yes!"

Financing with Farm Credit

From experience financing their primary residence, the Giddens knew that Farm Credit was the best financial lender available to help them tackle their latest investment. Because the Giddens' property is approximately a 3-hour drive from their residence in Quincy, Ben and Trena envisioned building accommodations on the property to house their growing family while visiting. Mike Harris, a Relationship Manager with Southwest Georgia Farm Credit, understood their goals and was able to provide resources and financing options. When the Giddens mentioned their interest in building a barndominium, Mike was able to adjust the terms of the loan and build in financing before they made it to the closing table.



Ben and Relationship Manager Mike Harris share trail cam photos while cruising the property

If there was ever a question or concern the Giddens had, Mike was right there. “Mike took my calls and was always available when I needed him. If I reached out, he was there,” said Ben.

“Business is not rocket science. Do what you say you’re going to do, be straight up with folks, call them back, and provide a good product. A lot of people struggle to do that, but not Mike, not Farm Credit. They treated me the same way I treat my customers, so I was very comfortable from the get-go.”

Building the Barndo

After clearing the property of any trash and debris, the Giddens started preparing the land where their barndominium would go. During construction, Ben and Trena were staying in a tiny 256-square-foot shed that had only a small table, TV, bunk beds, and a window unit. There was no water heater, and they were using a 5-gallon camping shower that they had to leave in the sun to warm up (Of course, “they” quickly turned to only Ben, as Trena decided the camp life was not for her).

Due to location and accessibility, neighbors informed the Giddens that they might have a difficult time finding a building crew. Luckily with Ben’s HVAC background and contracting business, he was able to round up a construction group fairly quickly. His contractors didn’t try to nickel and dime him, Ben stayed on top of things, and everything ran smoothly. Ben’s son-in-law, Logan Smith, is a top-notch carpenter and was a huge help getting the job done. The slab for their barndo was poured in August of 2023, and the Giddens had furniture in by late January

2024. They’d planned a 12-month construction which ended up only taking five.

The barndo is 2,100 square feet—1,500 sq ft is heated and cooled living space with the other 600 sq ft used for enclosed equipment storage. It also features 12ft overhang porches running the 70ft length of the barndo, both front and back. Some of the porch space is used for outdoor living areas, and the rest is for equipment implements. Inside, there are three bedrooms and two bathrooms—One bed and bath for Ben and Trena, and a bedroom for each of their daughters. Their daughters’ rooms both include a queen size bed and twin bunk beds for their kids. If additional sleeping space is needed, there is a large sectional sofa in the living room.

A common theme when constructing the barndo was having enough space but not too much. Ben’s goal was to keep the size down as much as possible while still having the space for their family and equipment. The bedrooms were designed to be just big enough without any wasted space. This allowed for the largest open-floor living, dining, and kitchen area they could have, which is where they spend most of their time. During construction, Logan (with Ben acting as his helper) installed the flooring, all the doors, window and door trim, as well as tongue and groove pine for the walls of the living/dining/kitchen space. Together, Ben and Trena along with Logan and their daughter Sarah, Logan’s wife, all pitched in staining the pine and painting the walls and doors. In fact, Trena’s design choices are what make their barndo such a home-y escape. They used Georgia long leaf pine for the walls in the living/dining/kitchen space, as well as the trim on the windows and doors throughout the barndo to give it a touch of that cozy cabin feel.







Off-Grid Living

Due to the lack of utility accessibility that came with the limitation of owning such a remote property, the Giddens invested in off-grid solutions. Because the barndominium was so far from the closest power line, it would have cost the Giddens upwards of \$65,000 to have local utility bring power to the site. After tax credits, solar power ended up being slightly more affordable than just the utility company's fee. The energy cost savings were a huge benefit, too—It usually takes many years to offset the upfront cost of solar equipment. In the Giddens' case, it was virtually an instant payback. Plus, they'd have no future power bills to pay.

Now, how does solar work exactly? The way Ben explained it is that the whole goal is to store enough power for the nighttime. The solar panels on their barndo are enough to virtually power three homes on a sunny day, but when it goes dark and the panels are useless, battery storage is the most important part. The Giddens have three lithium batteries that hold enough charge to power the barndo. In the wintertime when we are having those cold grey cloudy days, the batteries may not fully charge, so they do have to be more conservative with their usage. As a backup, Ben has the batteries wired with a generator plug and keeps a gas generator on hand so he can charge the batteries if needed. This past winter of 2023, the generator was never needed; however, there was a time or two when the state of charge on the batteries almost required a bit of help from the generator.

When it comes to water, that's another story. Water isn't always available where you would like to build. The Giddens' property is in an area where a good quality well location can be hard to find. The local well driller informed Ben about this challenge and recommended a company that does exploration geophysical surveys and provides a well site selection report. A magnetometer is used to find a fracture that holds ground water. The report is amazingly detailed and will give a specific location where a good fracture has been located so the well driller knows where to drill. There was only one quality fracture within a reasonable distance of the barndo location, so this survey and well selection report proved to be very important. Without this report, the well driller would have selected another spot to drill and never hit water. "You've got to check those things before you close on the land or select a build site because wells are a per-foot price. You could have an \$8,000 well or a \$14,000 well depending on how deep or how many times you have to drill before hitting water," said Ben.

Although the Giddens embraced off-grid living, that may not be everyone's preference or within their affordability. We always recommend determining what utilities are available from the county and what utilities you may need to make arrangements for. If you plan to build a home or dwelling, there could be restrictions on its location on the property based on where the well and sewage systems can be located. Find out who the state provider or local electric membership cooperative (EMC) is for the property. If power is not already available, talk to the company about the cost of running power to the property and the location of your future home.

The Giddens Now

Ben and Trena are continuing to improve the land for wildlife. They recently harvested some of their pines and are putting the revenue back into the property. With thinning the pines, they're allowing more sun to hit the floor, attracting a healthier and larger quail and turkey population. They're also planning a prescribed burn in January which will have many benefits like mitigating wildfire risk, preventing ticks, and reducing understory mass to allow for plants to flower. Ben has worked to improve the quality of his food plots and implemented year-round supplemental feeding utilizing gravity feeders for the deer. Trail camera surveys done in the spring/summer the first year of ownership showed 4-5 decent bucks. This spring/summer (year two) survey is showing a dramatic improvement with 12-15 decent bucks. He plants a variety blend of seed in his plots. The goal is to plant in the spring and again in the fall. These blends have plants that mature at different times of the year, so there's always something growing that the wildlife are utilizing. Ben is planning to double his food plot acreage over time and has recently added an additional 2 acres to an existing plot. He uses equipment for planting and the overall maintenance of the land—a tractor and skid steer with several implements. So many turkeys have shown up on the property that they're now treating them as pets.

Now, Ben and Trena have the retreat they'd always hoped for that feels like a second home their family can drive up and stay in as well. They're only 40 minutes away from cities like Macon and Columbus, so the ladies in the family can go shopping while the men are out hunting. "My advice? Have some place your wife is going to want to go as well," said Ben. In the mornings, the Giddens enjoy their coffee on the porch watching the cloud bank from the hill their barndo is perched on, lovingly named Victory Hill, with wild turkeys strolling through their yard.

Hunting is their main use of the property, which is set up primarily for archery hunting, so they have a small archery range for practice. When the family isn't hunting, Ben spends majority of the off-season continuing improvements. "I enjoy working on the land improvements as much as the hunting, maybe more," said Ben. "It's very satisfying to be on the land, working on various projects, and seeing the quality of the wildlife and property improving." The Giddens also enjoy looking for Native American artifacts with their family and riding their ATVs down the miles of dirt roads around the land.

Mike Harris still keeps in touch with the Giddens for updates on the family and what improvements they're working on. "There's no doubt with the improvements Ben and Trena have made, they have increased the value of their property," said Mike. "I knew really quickly working with Ben and Trena that they had a good plan. It wasn't just on a whim, so I wanted to go the extra mile to find a solution for what they wanted because it isn't conventional. They've both worked hard to get where they are, and they've made the sacrifices to have the funds available to do it. Responding to his calls was the easy stuff, but having somebody that's willing to be patient so you can structure their loan where it'll work for them was really the success here."



Left: Family photo includes Ben and Trena Giddens (center); their two daughters, Kayla (right) and Sarah (left); Sarah's husband, Logan; and their four grandchildren on sofa



"If you treat a piece of property right, you can dramatically change the land for the better."

—Ben Giddens



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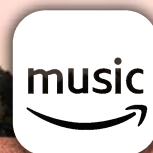
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A POTTER'S PARADISE

STORY BY ANNA KINCHEN

Southern makers, Bobby and Daphine Martin, create their own paradise in rural Webster County as they redefine post-retirement living exploring artistic mediums on acreage that inspires.



Sowega Yonder

South of Columbus, Georgia, and 35 miles East of the Alabama state line lies Weston, Georgia, with a population of 2,390. The beautiful topography fades from flat farmland and timber tracts to rolling hills and valleys. And in the heart of one of those South Georgia hollers lies 104 acres of well-tended pasture and unspoiled hardwoods that also happen to be prime habitats for wildlife and potters alike. To find such a place, one must detour from the likely traveled highway to wind along the backroads and the outer fringes of Webster County near Ichawaynochaway Creek. It is scenic countryside and a welcome deviation from the flat, red land stretching out South.

A quirky and hand-painted sign, 'Benttree Pottery' marks the entrance to the property, followed by an intriguing but quaint 'Feed and Seed' shed. The shed more closely resembles a studio prop on a Western movie set than a functioning storage building. Custom and hand-built, no doubt. Another bend along the one-lane sandy drive reveals another boutique shanty, 'Garden Shed.' Like the former, the only purpose it seems to serve is to be charming. The driveway deepens into the property, crossing a creek flanked by handmade wooden rails. A visitor could redefine the meaning of the word remote here. Finally, the raw woodland tundra opens just enough to present an imagined paradise: a cluster of unique dwellings and creative workspaces housing the artistic vision of two southern makers.

Lucy, the family dog, approaches with a wagging tail, followed by her owners, Bobby and Daphine Martin. Their smiles are welcoming, and their wardrobe reflected the sinfully hot July day we settled on to conduct this interview. Daphine charms the eyes in a worn bandana scarf, casual jeans, and Tecovas boots. She exudes creativity. She is effortlessly cool. And Bobby? His warm smile and firm

handshake reveal his hidden talents. His hands, seasoned from years of honest work, could indeed create a fine piece of pottery or an exquisite piece of furniture.

There is no pomp to how the next three hours unfold, but it is nearly perfect. Daphine took to the rocking chair on a side porch of their pottery barn (workshop) while Bobby leans against the railing. Relationship Manager Brian Roberts plants himself comfortably on a tree stump turned footstool. If we were to survive the humidity, we knew we best keep still in the shade. The hum of the cicadas provides a relaxing background symphony while a nearby oscillated fan keeps the gnats at bay. Occasionally, a quack of a duck by the pond or a cluck of a chicken in the coop jostles the calm to reach us at the barn. And time, well, any awareness of it just slips away at the expense of good ole' storytelling.

Backwoods Maestros

The Martins, native to Georgia, are as renowned for their artistry and craftsmanship as they are for their pottery.

Daphine, resourceful and free-spirited, grew up in a family with eight other siblings in rural Georgia. She went to work as soon as possible—at a sewing factory, Sears Roebuck, waitressing. Eventually, she landed in Albany selling floor coverings for Joe Watkins Lumber and Home Center via a tiny, white Volkswagen. When Mr. Watkins grew tired, he closed his business, but not before loaning Daphine a few computers and a couple of desks. To her surprise, customers were still interested in working with her, and vendors were more than willing to provide her with supply. Daphine had a family to provide for and a passion for helping people. A leap of faith and an entrepreneurial mindset led her to establish her own successful home supply business, Custom Interiors.





The Martin's main cottage porch overlooking the Ichawaynochaway Creek.



The Martin's property is comprised of 104 acres.

Daphine, still resourceful and determined, scaled Custom Interiors over 34 years by listening to her customers and taking it upon herself to provide solutions. She took immense pride in servicing her customers and developing meaningful relationships.

Daphine says of her business growth, "It was like trying to catch a tiger by its tail!" Whatever the need, Daphine would evolve. Drapery, upholstery, thrifting, decorating, design, and fine art painting were not only self-taught skills she developed over the years but more of a testament to her love language. She had a salesman's attitude built around a servant's heart—characteristics that still define her today. If there was a belief that she could do it, well then, she did it for the benefit of others.

Bobby, who is as quiet and soft-spoken as he is humble, didn't see why there needed to be "any fuss about him in the article." So Daphine led with an "I'll toot his horn for him!" as she shared Bobby's story.

Born in Palmyra, Georgia, Bobby was an aspiring carpenter who got his start in brick masonry. His attention to detail and his eye for precision eventually led him to the home construction and framing business. Like Daphine, Bobby is also resourceful and widely appreciated for his craft. Although he would never claim such a thing, Bobby Martin is clearly a savant in the art of building and woodworking. Daphine enthusiastically chimes in again, "There is nothing he can't build with his hands!" Bobby, too, is self-taught, developing his skills over the decades, willing to tackle any project that a customer brought his way, especially Daphine.

Daphine enters the chat again, this time through Bobby's own words. "That's how I first met her—through projects she was involved in through her business. I did some odds-and-ends work for her on the property after I got hurt on a construction job. I screened in that and added on to this. And when I had free time, she wanted me to build furniture for the store—dining tables, end tables, chests, and consoles—anything she wanted. Eventually, my partner and I used one of her barns to do work out of. She would pitch me an idea, and I would say, 'Where ya' want it?' She would point, and then I would get busy. Not a lot has changed in respect to that," he chuckles.

A lifetime and relationships later, their working connection grew into something more. Bobby leased a hunting property 15 miles down the road from Daphine's home and work barn. He would stop by the barn to check on a project, and Daphine would put him to work on something else. "Something stayed torn up! She would mess up the tractor, couldn't get the mule to start, or would have the lawn mower stuck in the mud down by the pond. And nothing has changed about that either!" he chuckles again in contrast to his attempt to appear frustrated. Daphine flirtatiously grins in his



The pottery shed and workshop

“Time passes differently for us out here, and we don’t keep up with anniversaries. Every day is the Bobby and Daphine Martin show!”

—Bobby Martin

direction before nonchalantly labeling those events as “good times.”

They tied the knot “sometime around 2012, 2013, or 2014” at the Preston courthouse during a break from working in the pottery barn on an otherwise uneventful afternoon. Neither could confirm the date before sharing that they wrote it down in the bible they keep down at the house. “Time passes differently for us out here, and we don’t keep up with anniversaries. Every day is the Bobby and Daphine Martin show!”

Clayvolution

In 2018, Daphine handed her keys to Custom Interiors to her daughter, Shelly, who continues to operate the business successfully today. “Shelly is a salesperson and takes wonderful care of her customers. The store is amazing, and she continues to build a following! Both of my daughters have an eye for design and exceptional taste. I am just so very proud of them.”

Daphine entered retirement, unsure of what to make out of such an abundance of free time. Bobby grumbled, “She painted a little, but she was mostly mullygrubbing around here after her younguns booted her from the



The chicken coop

store. She is her best when she has a project to work on.”

Daphine's daughter, Morgan, also needed a project. Morgan and Daphine always appreciated the ceramics and artwork that Daphine sold through the store. With a few classes under her belt, Morgan exposed Daphine and Bobby to the process of handmade pottery during an extended stay in their guest house.

“We did it because we wanted to, not because we thought it would become a job. Morgan told us what we needed to get started, and we bought a few pieces from potter Huey Wheeler in Dawson,” says Daphine. Mr. Wheeler appreciated the interest in pottery that the Martins and Morgan had taken. He knew his equipment was going to a good place. And, of course, Bobby was more than capable of making additions to the barn to make space for the used kiln and equipment Morgan and Daphine had purchased.



While kneading clay, Daphne and her daughter created new memories molded around their time in the workshop together. Through trial and error, a show here and a show there, Benttree Pottery formed and began to grow an audience of admirers. However, it wasn't long before Morgan was in pursuit of her next project, leaving Daphne to continue her craft on her own, or as Daphne initially thought.

**“We did it because we wanted to,
not because we thought
it would become a job.”**

—Daphne Martin

“Bobby didn't care for it initially, but I made him try it one day in 2019—around when we bought the pottery bus we affectionally call Sammy. He sat at the potter's wheel, went to work like crazy, and made something amazing right out of the gate! He made it look easy and ticked me off,” exclaimed an excited Daphne. From experience, she felt that pottery was a medium “good for the brain,” a means to stay sharp and provide a creative outlet—almost therapeutic. She also notes that it is a hobby that is easy on the body and is still possible for someone like Bobby, who struggles with arthritis.

From the moment Bobby sat down onward, Benttree Pottery, as we know it today, was truly born. The two, side by side, transitioned Benttree Pottery into a full-time passion project—another leap of faith and testimony to their shared talent and Daphne's entrepreneurial mindset.

Clay and Glaze

Collectively, the Martin's pottery pieces draw on early traditions born out of necessity and utilitarian purposes—durable mixing bowls, tableware, bakeware, spoon rests, crocks, jugs, jars, and even lamps. However, they are also known to create pieces that evoke the natural world and southern landscapes around them—bobwhite quail, pinecones, a camellia bloom, bird dogs, and deer antlers, to name a few. If one cannot appreciate the form and craftsmanship of each piece, then they are surely awed by the nostalgia. The personality of each design, coupled with an appreciation of the creators themselves, draws a loyal following and customer base throughout the South.

Considering that Bobby is a lifelong student of form, precision, and function, it is no wonder that he took to the wheel like a natural, throwing, slabbing, and free-forming like an experienced potter. Today, Bobby puts his energy behind larger pieces and exciting commissions. “I once dictated what he made, which were pieces I could not do. But Bobby has taken it over, and I trust his instincts. Bobby Martin creates what he wants. He can throw and fire enough in one day to keep me busy for two weeks!”

Daphne focuses on smaller pieces, hand-molding decorative accents like flora and fauna. And she doesn't attach handles to a piece that do not fit right in her own hands. “I like a weight to my functional serving pieces





and a set of handles that make it easy to hold.” Daphine also applies her imaginative painting skills to most of their creations, evoking rich glazes and earthen textures that resemble the culture and environment they covet around them.

Daphine also takes on the role of quality control. Although disheartening, losing around ten to fifteen percent of the pottery in a kiln from air bubbles, cracking, or fractures is easy. The South Georgia humidity can affect drying time, causing pieces to stick to shelves, too. And glazing can be tricky. She retreats to the woods for a walk on difficult days to regain her focus and inspiration. Yet, she still refuses to allow a less-than-perfect piece to find its way into the hands of a buyer. Once glazed, pottery loses its ability to be recycled and remolded. So, Daphine does what feels natural and decorates the very place from which she draws inspiration.

Lucy, the dog, drinks from a gorgeous, perfectly imperfect glazed bowl more suited for fruit in a fine dining room than the workshop floor. A quick tour by ATV around the property unveils fallen branches and stumps adorned with Daphine’s “rejected” pottery. There is no rhyme or reason for their location or placement. Daphine shares, “I retreat to the woods to listen to the birds, talk to the Lord, rest my bones, and, I guess . . . look at my broken pieces.”

Passion for Pottery

For Bobby and Daphine, each piece of pottery is unique and special. “We do this because we enjoy it. It is not a job but an extension of who we are and what we appreciate. We like to create things that can be passed down to generations years after we’re gone. Although letting some of our work go can be hard, we realize we can’t keep it all.”

Reflecting on former career paths and success, it is easy to see the connections to their new hobby. The Martins continue to focus on the customer, basing their supply on demand and leveraging their artistic inclinations and skills to create art their clients will appreciate. The Martins tirelessly test the limits of their craft, noting one of their larger pieces was made from a stump they found on their property. One of their more popular pieces was a vase molded to the form of an antler base; another found treasure from the acreage surrounding the workshop. They also welcome commissions. For a past project, they incorporated cotton bolls for a regional gin. For another project, they attached a covey of quail taking flight to a unique branch for a local plantation.

The cost of their artwork varies based on the amount of clay, glaze, skill, and time required to create each piece. Tableware and mugs start at around \$45 each, with larger jugs and lamps fetching as much as \$400. “We invest in quality clay and glazes. And we invest our time.” Some of their pottery can take hours, even days, to create, followed by a drying process that can take up to another week or longer. Then, the pieces go into the kiln to bake (bisque fire), which hardens the clay in preparation for glazing. The glazing process can take 3 to 4 days before firing the pieces in the kiln once more. It is a labor of love.

For anyone looking to purchase Benttree’s unique pottery, Daphine encourages you to follow and communicate through their social media pages. They also stock Daphine’s former business, Custom Interiors, in Albany, Georgia. Benttree Pottery would also like to invite you to attend their 5th Annual Pottery Show at their property in Weston this Fall.

Annual Pottery Show

November 9, 2024

10 am to 5 pm

Address provided on their social pages.

New and limited designs available. Early attendance is encouraged.

Facebook – Bent Tree Pottery and Woodworking

Instagram – Benttree_potteryandwoodworking

Garden of Eden

Whether they are close to celebrating a ten- or twelve-year anniversary is up for debate. However, one could easily mistake Bobby and Daphine’s connection to one another and the land as one built over a lifetime. In their world, if she speaks it, he finishes the sentence. If she dreams it, he builds it. If he creates it, she paints it. A little bridge here, a swing for her there, trails along the creek, a shed in the woods where she can read her bible and paint . . . a custom-built oasis, a potter’s paradise. Even

a functioning treehouse complete with a kitchen for grandchildren and guests.

Daphne reflects on this property she purchased years ago through Southwest Georgia Farm Credit and the original cookhouse she turned into a sprawling cottage home with the help of Bobby. "It was everything I ever wanted—what I had been searching for. It offers rolling terrain, fresh water, natural hardwoods, and space to create. To me, this is the Garden of Eden."

**"I retreat to the woods to listen
to the birds, talk to the Lord,
rest my bones, and, I guess . . .
look at my broken pieces."**

—Daphne Martin

This Eden inspired the name Benttree Pottery. The property offers many tree species, some of which have bends and angles, perpendicular branches. History states that trees like these were used as directional landmarks and markers for Native Americans. The name felt appropriate for Daphne—a nod to Bobby, her children, and grandchildren—and the place that means so much to them.

Retirement for the Martins looks quite idyllic and wonderful on their acreage, which is big enough to explore their many pursuits. Between slinging clay, firing up the kiln, building furniture, manicuring the woods, growing vegetables in their garden, or cultivating a better

habitat for the wildlife, they busily fill every day with purpose. "Four or five creeks run through here with cold, fresh water. We like the privacy of the woods, but we want to keep it looking good. And if it rains, you are gonna have to fix the driveway," says Bobby. "And that is why I want a small excavator," Daphne interjects. The only time Bobby admits to sitting still is in church on Sundays.

Bobby preaches, "The North Georgia foothills have nothing on Weston! This community, this land, the ability to live this lifestyle, is like heaven. Here, you do what the bible says and love your neighbor as thyself. People care here. They shake your hand and greet you with a smile. If you ever want to move and live out your dreams, come on to Weston." And lastly, he adds, without hesitation, that his favorite thing about Southwest Georgia is "her" as he nods softly in Daphne's direction.

Looking Living Ahead

There are no big plans for Benttree Pottery because the artists themselves intend on treating each day as a blessing, taking their time, and living to inspire their work, not the other way around. They have mastered, as well as romanticized, the ideas of simple living.

"In ten years I intend to be right here at Benttree—HOME—still cutting grass, still cutting wood, still gardening, fussing about my chickens in the flower beds, Bobby fussing about gnats, still sitting on the porch watching the deer on the dam, the swallows dip down for a drink, the herons grab a gosh dang good fish, the ducks take their daily flights circling the pond and coming so close to the porch you can hear their wings, still drinking our coffee in the morning, a good fire going when it's cold, still sitting side by side in the swing on the front porch . . . just a swinging." — Daphne Martin.



THE CASTELLOWS

GEORGIA THROUGH AND THROUGH



On top of a silky steel guitar, a soft voice gets right down to business as the song “No. 7 Road” opens:

“Everybody’s got their little slice of heaven, mine’s in the Georgia pines. Seven miles east of a wild cat creek, if you blink it’ll pass you by. Granddaddy walked barefoot up and down this road, now I am, too...”

Tradition. Heritage. Dirt roads, Georgia clay, cotton fields, cattle barns, sweet tea, soft evening breezes, when Southwest Georgia’s new musical singing set of sisters, The Castellows (pronounced CA-stellows) let their sweet harmonies wrap around the sumptuous melody of “No. 7 Road,” they’re not just singing from their heart, they’re singing from the land, too.

Home-schooled on a cattle and timber farm in tiny Georgetown (population 2,235), a small farming community on the Alabama-Georgia line, right next to Walter F. George Lake, the three Balkom sisters—Powell and Ellie (part of triplets), age 21, and younger sister Lily, 19, have brought their gentle, down-home songs of life on the farm. You can easily imagine the three of them on the back porch harmonizing as the sun goes down.

Along with third sibling Henry, the other triplet, the Balkom family grew up in Quitman County, on a cattle and timber farm, all the children homeschooled in that tiny Georgia community.

While it must have been a chaotic farmhouse, triplets, two girls and a boy, then a younger sister just 17 months later, the one word that doesn’t come to mind is harmony. Yet the way their voices blend together on songs like “Miss America” or “No. 7 Road,” it’s as if they’ve been harmonizing all their lives. It’s a classic country sound, the plunk of a banjo, a gently strummed guitar, voices as soft and sweet as a late afternoon Georgia breeze.

STORY BY JOHN NOGOWSKI

The state, the feel of Georgia is in their music and especially in their homespun lyrics.

"I'm learning that to live, (Granddaddy) was walking this dirt where he was walking to school. Oh, No. 7 road, won't you take me home where my roots run deep strong. Like that old oak tree, oh you're running in my blood, built in my bones. Who I am, where I stand on No. 7 road."

Even the group's name, The Castellows, honors their Georgia family heritage.

"I believe it was their great grandmother's maiden name," explained HB Riordan, the group's day-to-day manager. "I guess she had all girls so the family name was going to die with her. Until this."

The Castellows released an EP with the single "Miss America" in late June and currently have a single "Sober Sundays" out with Wyatt Flores that's also doing well. And they are starting to make an impact in the country music world. They've been featured on CMT (Country Music Television) and were the subjects of a photo session and interview in the national publication "Cowboys and Indians Magazine."

Posing in an assortment of snappy western gear for the magazine's photo spread, they were interviewed by writer Allie Greenfield and spoke openly of their Georgia upbringing and how it influenced everything they do—and are.

"We were homeschooled all the way through and we absolutely loved it," Powell said. "I feel like growing up, on land and out in the open, it's so great. You're in that environment because your whole world is this piece of property; you're just learning, and we got to work on the farm. We were able to learn responsibilities."

Powell, who graduated from the University of Georgia with a degree in agriculture, intends on making farm living her career. Aside from music, that is.

"And then, [agriculture is] what I wanted a career in, so I kind of found my love for that from growing up on the farm," she said. "And it's a smaller farm. We do cattle and timber, and then both our parents have other full-time jobs. So, anything we do on the farm is just our family. And all, basically, our whole extended family on my dad's side lives on that land, on that farm, too. So, we were super blessed to grow up that way. I feel like a lot of people don't get to grow up like that with all their family."

And, Lily, the youngest, adds this. "And we grew up in the house where our Daddy was raised in."

From generation to generation. The family farm, pecan pie, singing on the back porch after the day's work is done, it's the kind of image that appeals to all country music fans, imagining life on a South Georgia farm.

Though their career has made them relocate to Nashville for the time being, their lyrics to "No. 7 Road" show that Georgia is never far from their mind.





"There's seven of us sitting on a table at supper time. Now, I'm seven states away but my mind stays right there when I close my eyes. Still trying to fix that barbed wire fence or sitting on a back porch swing, No. 7 was the place where I was raised, now I'm picking this old six-string."

They're quite proud of their instrumental prowess; Powell plays banjo and some guitar, Ellie plays guitar and has recently schooled Lily on bass and while they've done some terrific cover versions like their take on Emmylou Harris's "Red Dirt Girl," they're not sitting around waiting for some Nashville songsmith to crank out a tune for them. They're writing their own material. And it's not like they aren't sure where to draw their inspiration.

As Ellie told "Cowboy and Indians" writer Allie Greenfield: "I think a lot of different things inspire our songwriting and we are also very new songwriters, so it's interesting to see what's inspired us a year ago is not what's inspiring us now. And I think a lot of it is stuff we know. Like we write a lot about our home, we write a lot about our family. We write a lot about each other. And we're also patriots. We love this country. So, we write a lot about this country and we write love songs, too..."

Whereupon Lily, the baby of the group, chirps; "We haven't really dated a whole bunch, so that's not the first

and only thing that we write. I feel like there are a lot of people who write awesome love songs, but we just write other stuff."

And when it comes to country music, that generally means one thing.

"Story songs," Ellie explained. "a big part about country music is storytelling. Perfecting the art of writing a narrative song is something that we try to do."

They are starting to hit it big. The group has eight videos up on YouTube along with a charming interview of the three of them on CMT, talking about their crazy rise to success. (youtube.com/watch?v=kLihYpMESWU)

They're about to go on tour. They have upcoming dates in New York, Ohio, Canada and The Grand Old Opry at Nashville's historic Lyman Auditorium.

For a trio of Georgia schoolgirls, who grew up listening to the Dixie Chicks, Marty Robbins and the Judds, earning the opportunity to tread the same floorboards as Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn and Dolly Parton, this year, well, that's a pretty darn big deal.

Something worth singing about.

Check out their website: thecastellowsmusic.com





LEVELING *the* GUN RANGE

STORY BY ANNA KINCHEN

Women clay and wing shooting groups promote gun safety, outdoor recreation, and networking as a introduction to a Southern lifestyle.

Although the shotgun knows no gender, it might appear a little out of place in the petite hands of a woman. But what woman isn't admired just as much for her grace as her grit? Maybe your eyes strike a bargain with what your brain, and possibly your experience, already knows. Behind her imagined primness actually lies a pert, competitive personality that is inarguably tough as, let's say, bullets. Out of place? Maybe. Hair-raising and oddly suitable? Yes.

There is a gentility and decorum to wing and clay shooting that many find entrancing. Those who hold true to the rules of form and precision are highly respected, including women. One can even say there is a pageantry to the sport when you factor in the proper attire and gleaming barrels. The great Queen Elizabeth herself was a champion sportswoman who retreated to the country to partake in the traditions of field sports and hunting. She was known for joining the Guns at Sandringham and Balmoral and participating in deerstalking.

*"She's but a simple country girl
who loves the land and sacrifices
herself to duty."*

*—Field and Stream, The Gun Dogs
of Queen Elizabeth*

But Queen Elizabeth was not the first female champion revered for her deadeye, sharpshooter skills. It was a brazen gunslinger by the name of Annie Oakley who charted a new course in the 1800s. According to the National Women's History Museum, Annie traveled with her husband across the country and abroad during her lifetime, showing off her skills with a shotgun and outshooting most that challenged her. She became a star in a male-dominated sport. She is remembered as the legendary frontwoman for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and an advocate for women.

Annie's Legacy

As if taking a page from Annie's biography, female clay and wing shooting groups are an emerging trend formed by 21st-century headstrong adventure-seekers on a journey to grow their knowledge of and confidence in shooting techniques. Another common denominator and member



Left to right: Susan Bennett, Bri Whigham, Lisa Lowe, and Raina Cauley

claim to fame? Sass. Annie Oakley-style groups are being formed across the U.S. of enterprising women who, like Annie herself, share a passion for sport and the outdoors.

Some members acknowledge they have a history already rooted in shooting culture and hunting recreation. Even those that don't, unsurprisingly find appreciation in the activity and enjoyment in the camaraderie. These "social clubs" create a sense of community and provide a unique opportunity for women to flourish in a supportive environment.

A New Club

Red Hills Annies of Thomasville, Georgia welcomes you to give it a try. Originally called GRITS (Girls Really Into Shooting), the female wing and clay shooting club was a passion project led by founder Deborah McKown in 2017. "It's incredible to think back to what she started and witness the club where it is today. It's a strong memorial to a strong woman."

In 2022, GRITS rebranded and re-launched under the leadership of Bri Whigham, Heidi Davis, and Raina Cauley as The Red Hills Annies. The Red Hills Annie's mission is to provide resources on gun safety, education, techniques and guidance, and last but not least, networking opportunities right here in South Georgia and North Florida.

"For me, it's also about providing an introduction to a lifestyle," says Bri Whigham, Real Estate Broker, Photographer, and one of the facilitators of the Red Hill Annies Chapter. Thomasville is the heart of the plantation belt where hunting recreation and stunning southern landscapes are celebrated. "Our community is built around that culture. Our Red Hills region was named for the vibrant, red clay that makes up our topography which is also rich with biodiversity and scenic beauty. This is where I was first introduced to shooting sports by my father as a way for us to spend time together. Now, it is something that I also do just for me as an outlet. I love exposing other women to it. And I love being outdoors. "



The Red Hills Annies, like their fellow Chapters, are helping level the gun range in an effort to advance women in the sport. They operate under a “everyone is welcome” policy. There are no membership dues or attendance requirements. There are also no skill requirements or age limitations, either.

Joint Effort

Bri also shares, “We are working towards developing meaningful collaborations and charity outreach. But for now, we want to maintain our momentum by setting our crosshairs on growing our members and quickly plugging them into the activity itself. Our diverse group of members range between the ages of 30 to 60 years old on a spectrum of uncertainty in how to carry a shotgun to expert markswoman. There are locals, a few commuters, and a few frequent visitors at each event.”

Although the focus is to grow, the group still aims to enhance awareness of their club through the support of good community causes like Ducks Unlimited, Clays for Strays, and Lives Without Limits. Red Hills Annie member Lisa Lowe also serves on the board of Lives Without Limits which is a charitable organization with a mission to support individuals with disabilities and provide them with outdoor recreation opportunities. Larger Annie groups across the U.S. have donated big numbers to national charities and organizations like The Trust for Public Land and SHARE Military Initiative. Lisa shares, “As a smaller group, we want to be able to contribute and make an impact in our own way, at a regional level.”

Lisa also referenced her exposure to wing shooting in the late 90s when she would join her husband during dove shoots on their hunting property in Boston, Georgia. Her experience and eventual proficiency in the sport led her to shoot alongside Randy Ryan. Following several busy years raising a family, Lisa notes that the Red Hill Annies offered her a chance to reconnect with a part of her past that she loved so much. “I enjoy gathering with a group of like-minded women in a space that doesn’t feel competitive. We are all out there just to have fun.”

Fellow member Raina Cauley, a certified Level One Instructor and former Clay Target Coach with Brookwood Schools in Thomasville, shares that she has always loved hunting and clay shooting with her family. Her passion for the activity and desire to share it with others led her to pursue certification. “I am the ‘all things safety and procedure’ resource when it comes to our group. Safety is paramount. Clay shooting can be a pleasurable life-long sport if you approach it with a safety-first mindset and develop good habits from the start.” Raina also added, “This club is really a gift to us women. An opportunity to step outside of the box, expand our confidence, and familiarize ourselves with a lifestyle.”

What to Expect

Onboarding is simple. Reach out to one of the facilitators, Bri Whigham, via email at BriWhigham@gmail.com and let her know of your interest. She will quickly add you to the group’s marketing list and notify you of upcoming events and shoot dates.

Practice makes perfect and increases competency. The Red Hills Annies hold consistent meetings scheduled on the second Tuesday evening of each month except for July and August. "The southern heat and humidity are a bit much that time of year." Each meeting kicks off with a safety talk and a round of introductions. You can expect to shoot for the first hour before transitioning into a social hour to mingle and make new friends.

Locations of monthly meetings vary. The Ranges of Oakfield, a pistol, rifle, shotgun, and archery range in Thomas County, is considered "home base". However, the group enjoys rotating to local plantations as well as members' homes or properties.

There are no dues, but members pay out of pocket per event for things like range fees and clay targets. And don't forget a pair of safety goggles and ear protection which are required to participate. It is also recommended that you bring your own shotgun and shells. However, should you find yourself lacking in this department, experienced members of the group are excited to share theirs. We wouldn't be talking about ladies of the South if we didn't mention hospitality!

"I enjoy gathering with a group of like-minded women in a space that doesn't feel competitive. We are all out there just to have fun."

— Bri Whigham

Safety & Etiquette

Range etiquette is not just about looking the part. It is about being considerate and keeping those around you safe.

Several gun safety sites recommend treating every firearm as if it is always loaded, as a universal rule. Even if you've double-checked the chamber, it's best to continue handling it with the same regard you would a loaded weapon. Regardless of whether your weapon is loaded, you should always keep the muzzle pointed downrange. If you need to place the gun down on your bench, it should be unloaded and facing the targets. Once you are ready to start shooting, only direct the muzzle at items you intend to hit.

Those same sites also recommend being aware of your surroundings. You should pay attention to your actions and the actions of other shooters on the range. If someone calls for a cease-fire, you need to be able to hear it. Also, know your target and what's beyond it. Even if your range has a reliable backstop in place, it's good practice to gain a clear understanding of your surroundings, especially when shooting at outdoor targets.





“Any woman who does not thoroughly enjoy tramping across the country on a clear frosty morning with a good gun and a pair of dogs does not know how to enjoy life.”

—Annie Oakley

Essentials

Member, Raina Cauley, also suggests taking the hunter safety course through the Department of Natural Resources site. "The short course removes some of the mystery around shooting and will help you familiarize yourself with safety techniques that are critically important."

Annie, don't rush to get your gun. Explore several options first. "Our bodies are very different than men — our necks are longer; therefore the stock of a shotgun typically needs a higher rise. The height and length of the stock matter. And the more comfortable you are, the more likely you will consistently hit your target."

Ready to pull the trigger on owning your own shotgun? Raina also recommends asking for a women's cut or asking for a "Monte Carlo style stock" that is made for comfort and balance. Also, Garden and Gun Magazine has done some research for you. Take a look at their article. **Shotguns for Women Shooters – Garden & Gun** (gardenandgun.com)



TALK LIKE *an* ANNIE

Know before you go. If you want to talk to like an Annie, we have provided a breakdown of some of the lingo you'll hear at the range. If you want to walk like an Annie, well, that is up to you to bring the smoke.

#1 Bird/Clay Pigeon/Skeet: Also known as the clay pigeon, the "bird" is the target in skeet shooting, a small, circular clay disc that is flung into the air to be shot at. Its nickname comes from its bird-like flight path when it's launched.

#2 Break: The term "break" refers to the successful act of hitting and fragmenting a clay target mid-air with a shotgun blast. A clean break indicates precise aim and timing and is the goal of every shot in skeet shooting.

#3 Pull: The term "pull" is used by the shooter to signal the trapper to release the clay pigeon. It's an essential command that initiates the target's flight and the ensuing shot.

#4 Clay: The "clay" or clay pigeon is the standard skeet shooting target made from a mixture of limestone and pitch. Skeet shooters aim to accurately shatter these eco-friendly discs to score points.

#5 Double: In skeet shooting, a "double" refers to two clay targets thrown simultaneously from the high and low houses, challenging the shooter to hit both targets in quick succession.

#6 Gauge: The gauge of a shotgun indicates the diameter of its barrel; common gauges in skeet shooting include 12, 20, 28, and .410, with smaller numbers indicating larger barrels. The choice of gauge can affect the difficulty and strategy of the sport.

#7 Over-under: An over-under is a type of break-action shotgun with two barrels stacked vertically. It is favored by many shooters for its balance and the ability to have two chokes for different shot spreads.

#8 Shell: The 'shell' is the ammunition used in skeet shooting, consisting of a plastic casing that holds the shot, gunpowder, and primer. It's ejected from the shotgun after firing.

#8 Reload: To reload in skeet shooting involves refilling a shotgun's chamber with ammunition after firing. This skill is crucial for shooting successive rounds swiftly and maintaining a smooth rhythm during a sequence of shots.

#9 Safety: "Safety" in skeet shooting refers to the mechanism on a shotgun that prevents accidental firing. All shooters need to engage the safety when not actively shooting to ensure the well-being of participants and bystanders.

#10 Sweep: "Sweep" refers to the movement pattern of the shooter's gun as they track and shoot at the flying targets. It involves smoothly swinging the shotgun in a controlled arc, following the path of the target, and timing the shot so that the shotgun's blast intercepts the moving clay.

ASSOCIATION NEWS

▼ Welcome to the Team



Jack Davis
Relationship
Manager Trainee



Lauren Martin
Residential &
Lifestyle Lender



Megan Spindle
Client Relations
Specialist



Kishan Gumbs
2024
Summer Intern



Weston Powell
2024
Summer Intern

▼ Farm Credit Summer Interns Share Their Experience

Southwest Georgia Farm Credit continues to provide internship opportunities each year in which the successful candidate(s) has the opportunity to work with our experienced staff in each department. This summer, we welcomed Kishan Gumbs and Weston Powell as our 2024 Summer Interns in the Bainbridge branch.

Kishan is currently attending Florida A&M University, where he is pursuing a degree in Accounting. Weston is currently attending Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in Tifton, where he is pursuing a degree in Agribusiness and Ag Technology Management.

"This internship has taught me that there are a lot more opportunities in this business than I was aware of," said Kishan.

"The program truly shows you each facet of the business and what it takes not only to finance, but to be involved in agriculture today," said Weston.

▼ Bainbridge Customer Appreciation Event

Since taking a break from in-person events due to the pandemic, we were more than excited to plan our first Customer Appreciation Event in four years. In April, we hosted a luncheon at our Bainbridge branch and enjoyed the company of around 200 guests as we delighted in fellowship, community, and a delicious seafood buffet. Special thanks to Gay's Food, Inc. for catering, In Tents Events for the tents, tables, and chairs set up, and our amazing employees and customers for showing up and helping us throw such a wonderful event!



▼ Billings Completes The Graduate School of Banking

Congratulations were in order for Southwest Georgia Farm Credit Relationship Manager, Billy Billings, who completed his final session at The Graduate School of Banking at Louisiana State University. The Graduate School of Banking is one of the nation's leading schools for bankers. It offers an opportunity to learn from experienced faculty, who challenge students to learn in a competitive, enriching environment.

Since 1950, the school has been a major provider of advanced financial education in the U.S. Almost 17,000 bankers have successfully completed the program. Billy was elected, and served, as Class President during all three sessions.



Billy Billings
Relationship
Manager

▼ Americus Customer Appreciation Event

In addition to our Bainbridge Customer Appreciation Event, we also threw an event for our Americus branch shortly thereafter. We experienced a full house as customers and employees alike came together and enjoyed each other's company. Once again, we chowed down on an amazing seafood buffet catered by Gay's Food, Inc. inside the beautiful venue of Wolf Creek Plantation!



▼ Thomasville Ribbon Cutting & Open House

To celebrate the opening of our new office in Thomasville, we hosted a ribbon cutting and open house in May. We held an after-hours get-together with a spread of hors d'oeuvres catered by JB Crumbs and an outside bar setup by On the Rocks Bartending in which our customers and associates had such an awesome time chatting and catching up! We can't wait to host more events in the near future.



▼ Annual Meeting Notice

Southwest Georgia Farm Credit will host its Annual Stockholders' meeting Tuesday, February 18th, 2025. The meeting will include the Association's annual report from management and directors, election of one Association director and election of the 2025 Nominating Committee. Location details are forthcoming.



ASSOCIATION NEWS

▼ Scholarships Awarded to Regional Students

In a continuing commitment to serve rural America, Southwest Georgia Farm Credit will present five area high school seniors with scholarships to pursue their college educations. Our scholarship program helps ensure a bright future for our rural communities and the agricultural industry for many generations to come.

Scholarships are awarded to deserving high school seniors who live in the Association's 21-county territory (Baker, Calhoun, Chattahoochee, Clay, Decatur, Dougherty, Early, Grady, Lee, Marion, Miller, Mitchell, Quitman, Randolph, Schley, Seminole, Stewart, Sumter, Terrell, Thomas, and Webster County).

Public, private, and home-schooled students are all eligible.

Selections for all winners will be based on the applicant's record of extracurricular activities, scholastic achievement and demonstration of exceptional character.



DEADLINE

The deadline for submitting all applications is January 15, 2025.

More information and applications are available online at swgafarmcredit.com/scholarships

APPLY

Please submit applications by mail to:
Southwest Georgia Farm Credit
Attention: Scholarship Committee
305 Colquitt Highway
Bainbridge, Georgia 39817

Or by email to: Marketing@SWGAFarmCredit.com
Subject Line: Scholarship Application – Your Name
(Documents CANNOT be sent via Google Docs, Drive, etc.)

▼ Supporting Locally Grown Products

Southwest Georgia Farm Credit began the Fresh from the Farm Mini-Grant program 13 years ago with the goal of recognizing our regional producers and their contributions to our healthier lifestyles. Over the last 13 years, the Association has delivered \$65,000 in grants to local produce markets and roadside stands. The Fresh from the Farm Grant is just another way for Southwest Georgia Farm Credit to partner with, promote, and support local farmers.

The Fresh from the Farm initiative gives reusable shopping bags along with ten \$500 grants each year to farmers who own qualifying produce stands. The program provides cash for grant recipients to enhance their marketing and promotions, like buying ads or developing a website and social media presence.



DEADLINE

The deadline for submitting all applications is January 15, 2025.

Fresh from the Farm applications are available online at swgafarmcredit.com/fresh

APPLY

Please submit applications by mail to:
Southwest Georgia Farm Credit
Attention: Fresh from the Farm
305 Colquitt Highway
Bainbridge, Georgia 39817

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Land, Forest, Wildlife Management Scholarship Awarded to SRTC Student

STORY BY MIRANDA WALDEN

Leah Thrailkill has been named the recipient of the Southwest Georgia Farm Credit scholarship at Southern Regional Technical College. This \$1,000 scholarship, specifically for the Land, Forest, Wildlife Management Technology Program, is designed to help students cover the cost of tuition and fees. Thrailkill, originally from the metro Atlanta area, has always had a passion for the outdoors and is thrilled to continue advancing her education within the program.

Thrailkill says, "This program has been the most enjoyable thing I've done—from learning how to operate a tractor, to cutting down a tree, to discussing policies dealing with wildlife, to learning how to balance a fishpond so it has a thriving community. There's so much more that I've learned, and there is still more to come." Leah is excited to accomplish her dream of becoming a first-generation graduate and making her family proud.

Leah's instructors praise her determination and adeptness. "Leah started our program last year as a new student to the field of conservation, having no established prior training or education in natural resource management. She has excelled in her first two semesters, demonstrating herself a dependable worker who embraces new challenges and skills. She learns quickly through trial and error, not willing to let a skill or concept elude her more than once," says Dr. Jeremy Green, Program Chair.

He continues, "In the classroom itself, Leah is quiet and leads by example among her peers; she is held in very high

regard as someone who will get the job done correctly and with integrity. Already in her time with us, she has found GIS mapping as a major interest and is pursuing this opportunity as she approaches her internship and graduation in the coming year. We could not be more excited to honor her hard work and sacrifice as a young person who is new to the field but determined to be successful and create a niche for herself in the workforce."

SRTC Land, Forest, Wildlife Management Faculty, Elizabeth Harrell, gives more background on the program. "When beginning the Land, Forest, Wildlife Management program, students embark on a journey to gain new knowledge and skills, form industry-specific connections and relationships, and embrace the opportunity to grow as a student and an entry-level professional in the conservation field. Graduates are trained in prescribed fire, silviculture, GPS/GIS, wildlife management, and many more skills applicable to the conservation field. Our graduates have recently become employed by local hunting plantations, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the Georgia Forestry Commission, non-profit organizations, and research facilities such as Tall Timbers Research Stations and The Jones Center."

For more information about this scholarship, contact Christina Reneau at CReneau@southernregional.edu.



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