

**PROFILES OF CONSERVATION EASEMENT DONORS
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ALL PROFILES WRITTEN BY FRANK MCINTOSH

CHOP EVANS

Charles “Chop” Evans’ family has long been a presence in the agricultural community in this part of central Georgia where, since 2007, he has donated more than six conservation easements to Georgia Land Trust’s stewardship and has permanently protected nearly a thousand acres.

The conservation easements in Wilcox, Houston, Peach and Dodge counties in Georgia protect productive farm and timber lands, including one tract with 100 percent prime soils. The easements protect traditional viewsheds and natural areas providing habitat to a variety of animals, including bald eagles. The easements allow the continued productive use of the land while extinguishing much of the development rights on the properties and protecting sensitive natural areas.

Chop’s grandfather was a peach farmer with extensive holdings. Unfortunately, he fell victim to a “peach bubble,” as his speculation in the future of peaches peaked just as the market for peaches imploded. He unsuccessfully argued his own bankruptcy case before the state Supreme Court, arguing that to deprive a farmer of his land is to deprive him of the wherewithal to recover from his financial misfortune.

Friends purchased back some of the lands that had been lost, as well as his home place and reestablished him on the property, asking only to be repaid at cost.



Chop Evans

Regrettably, Grandfather Evans died as he was working to rebuild his farm enterprise. The family’s resilience and ongoing commitment to the central Georgia’s agricultural economy came through after this, as Chop’s father pursued commodities brokerage and kept cattle. Chop reports that his father’s goal with cattle was essentially to “grow them as big as he could” and notes that those who met these animals recall standing next to them “you were looking up at them”.

Chop’s father’s strategy and work got the family back on good footing. Much of the land owned by Evans’ grandfather was recovered by the family—including the family’s Peach County home place that having been recovered once, was sold out of the family again, and then regained once more.

Chop’s father also evidently did a good job of passing on the family’s undying love of land and agriculture to him. “I always knew what I wanted and when I want something, I pursue it. Pecans and peaches were what I was after. I have a great love of farming—I absolutely love it,” Chop says.

“I have been able to pursue it for 35 years, and do exactly what I want and make a living at it.”

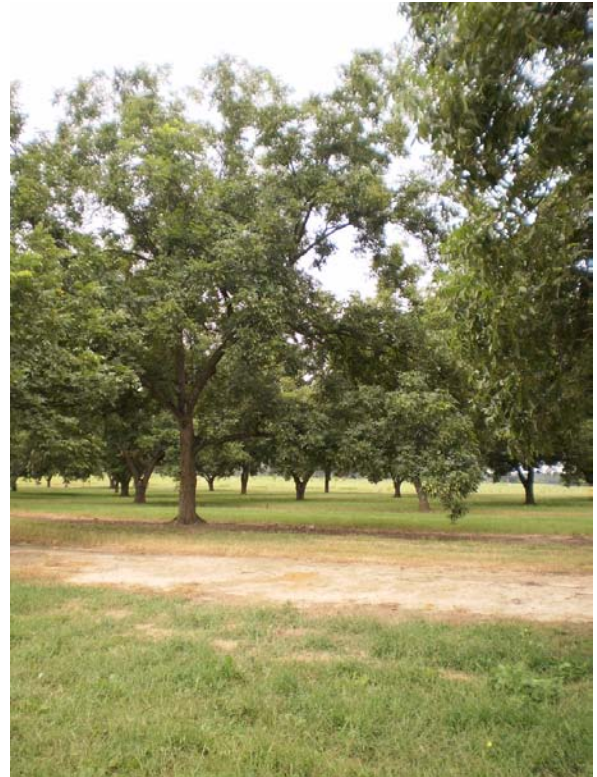
This love manifests itself in a seven-day work week, only occasionally interrupted by peaceful time spent at his Southern Lakes property (“my favorite easement—it’s just a beautiful place”) watching bald eagles take the occasional fish, hunting and enjoying a round of golf with his wife, Brenda, an avid golfer. Associates say they’re a bit shocked to find Chop *not* working some aspects of his land. “People tell me they’re surprised that I like to work so late every day.”

Evans admits that his knowledge of agriculture doesn’t extend too far beyond caring for his beloved peach and pecan orchards.

“If it isn’t a tree I’m not interested,” he says. “When it comes to other crops I wouldn’t know how to fill up a pot to plant them. About my only venture into row crops was raising pickles and every time the truck would pull away I’d wind up writing someone a check.”

He says of raising timber, “Woods are to be enjoyed but if you’re looking to make any money on it, that’s another matter.”

Chop defers to the next generation of Evanses to manage these operations. His two sons, Lee, 26, and Charlie, 30, love hunting, maintaining the timber and wildlife feed plots and “seem to have the urge to learn the business and come on behind me. I’m almost surprised but, of course, I’m happy.”



Mature pecan trees on Evans property

Travelling the corridor from Macon to Columbus south of Warner Robins, you see what can happen to farm land—with “starter castles” sprinkled over some of the most productive soils in the state. Contrasting those vistas of cul de sacs with the vistas Evans’ easements provide—well-managed pecan groves on gently rolling land feeding down to protected bottomlands—reminds you why protection of working lands is so important.

In addition to protecting much of his family’s land in conservation easements, Evans also serves on the board of directors for Georgia Land Trust, Alabama Land Trust and founding organization The Chattowah Open Land Trust.

Mention how agricultural land is lost to development and you may catch a rare tone of regret from Chop. “I had a hand in putting some houses along the paved ways, and I have to admit that I’ve never been happy with one. I’m enough of a businessman to know you have to make some money, but I always think, ‘dang, I wish we were still raising peaches or pecans there.’”

About the only other down note you might catch from Chop is that as development encroaches on agricultural land, the newcomers tend to “love what farmers produce but not what they have to do to produce it.”

But that will certainly never slow Chop down from doing what he loves best. To say that he is positive man is a serious understatement. If you ask Chop how he’s doing, you can count on his answer. “I’m always doing fine.”