

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

JOHN & SARA & AL BICKLEY

Marshallville is among the prettiest small cities in Georgia. A conservation easement donated by John and Sara Bickley and John's brother Al on agricultural land east of the city will protect in perpetuity some of the charm of this little jewel nestled amongst productive, well-managed lands.

The Bickleys' father came to Marshallville in 1930 to be the overseer of a large plantation and got into the business of buying crops to carry to sell outside the immediate area, linking producers and consumers. He eventually built a grain elevator that provided storage for the overage created as higher yielding seeds came on line, "so local farmers didn't just have to feed it all up."

The family's agribusiness expanded into providing agricultural chemicals, fertilizer, certified seed and providing a market for soybeans, grains, pecans, cotton and peanuts. Now, John reports "we're the middle guy. We sell to some of the biggest users in the world."



John Bickley and Buddy

As family farms began transitioning out of farming around 25 years ago, the Bickleys moved into real estate, working with farmers, most of whom they knew well, to help them in the transition. Seeing farms converted to alternative uses over the years was a prime motivation to the Bickleys' doing their conservation easement in Macon County, Ga. The land in the easement belonged to a neighbor for 75 years but unfortunately, as John says, the neighbor "ran out of generations" when it came time to retire from farming. "He was glad to sell it to us to keep farming it."

John, Sally and Al discussed the easement for over a year before deciding to proceed. Georgia Land Trust board member and conservation easement donor Chop Evans helped them decide, as did their accountant, who had himself done a conservation easement.

Bickley notes, "There seems to be a growing awareness of the usefulness of conservation easements. Two years ago, it seemed like a vast majority of people in land didn't know about them, but more and more do now."

Marshallville lies within a particularly fertile belt just south of the Fall Line, combining rich soils with a location far enough north that its freezes come late but still gets enough "cold hours" to allow successful peaches cultivation. It is also very good land for growing pecans.

Like most landowners in this part of Georgia, Bickley enjoys hunting and managing land for game “although we don’t actually shoot at too many of the animals on our property. I really just enjoy seeing them come along. We maintain a lot of hedgerows and fencerows, a good environment for quail. Mourning dove like to nest in pecans, so we have lots of birds on the property. Pecans are also very good for deer and small animals.”

In addition to game, the area also supports many non-game species including a healthy population of hawks and is a stopover point for Sandhill Cranes.

About 250 acres of the 400 acres in the conservation easement are being converted from peaches and row crops into pecans. “It takes a good seven years before you see fruit on a pecan. It sort of asks why a 60-year-old plants trees. Nobody knows how long they’ll live, but it makes for a beautiful place just to look at. And when the fruit comes in, it’s great to enjoy, too.” Bickley noted pecan trees have other less obvious benefits—ranking among the top carbon sequestering species.

The conservation easement donation helped make the transition to pecans possible, with the tax savings being reinvested in pumps and irrigation and to carry land costs until the trees begin producing. Bickley notes the environmental economies of pecan cultivation versus row cropping. These include the smaller wells (6 inches vs. 15 inches) used for a pecan grove’s drip irrigation system versus large pivots for row crops. Far less water covers much more land.

An afternoon with Bickley is a primer in the subtleties of pecan growing. He explained how it was necessary to give the trees a gentle early season shake, to reduce the fruit load that can damage trees. “People look at you like you’re a little crazy, shaking fruit off before it’s ripe.” He noted the variety of pecans in the groves and how each had its particular use; the choicest, of course, show up in fancy tins around Christmas.

In addition to riding or walking the land with Buddy, his English Cocker, Bickley says, “The thing I like best about owning land is that although I’m not a full-time farmer, when I get home I want to get out and do something productive for the land. It is a relief valve; I enjoy the work.”