

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

WALTER SHEFFIELD

Walter Sheffield's uncle had a simple land ownership philosophy: "I only want to own what touches mine." Not all of the family was quite that avid in their pursuit of land ownership, but from Walter's grandfather's first 70 acres purchased in 1888, they've been active landowners in Miller County, Ga. Walter's father's purchased a farm adjacent to Grandfather's holdings in 1914, and Walter and his three siblings acquired land adjoining their father's.

Earlier, much of the land was part of the Seminole nation. Andrew Jackson led an expedition to the area to affect a transfer of ownership to the new American nation. Jackson's troops notched trees along their route through the dense woods to guide them out. Many places in the area carry "three notch" in their names after Jackson's navigation markers.

It would have been tough going with the dense cover of cedar and pines. The cedar were logged first, with the pine later harvested for ties for the rail line that forms part of the boundary of the 69-acre easement conveyed to the Georgia Land Trust. Grandfather Sheffield bought much of his land during this time, paying around two and a half dollars per acre.



Walter Sheffield

The onset of World War II brought an interesting benefit to the family. The many stumps on the land, some "too large to even reach across," turned out to have a tar useful in munitions manufacture. In 1943, the federal government removed all the stumps at no cost. (Sheffield served as a submariner in WWII. Originally headed for West Point, he was too young to use his appointment and wound up commissioned from the Naval Academy.)

Walter's father's farm was around 450 acres with about 150 acres in cultivation. In addition to Sheffield's family, three tenant families farmed around 25 acres each. They could draw \$21 a month from their lots' anticipated production.

After his father's death, Walter purchased a sister and brother's section of the farmstead and even acquired the land that eventually became the conservation easement from his uncle. The easement protects rich soils; about two thirds of the easement's area is rated as prime soils, with another roughly 10 acres rated as significant. The balance of the land comprises bottomlands that protect and feed Aycock's Creek, part of the Spring Creek sub-basin, a tributary of the Flint River, identified as a Georgia High Priority Waterway.

This newsletter focuses on the joys of landownership but less happy tales have some value. A portion of the easement land was planted in "a bad batch of seedlings" that developed fusiform rust about 15

years after planting. The ravages of this silvicultural pest are extreme: much affected acreage had only 15 to 16 trees not beset with the rust. These areas are now being cleared for replanting.

It is important to note that conservation easements forest management provisions allow donors to undertake thinning and clearing to protect the health of their forests, including within Special Natural Areas.

Like many who grew up in the area, Sheffield fondly relates experiences with hunting, bird dogs and some of the animals hunted.

Walter's first shotgun was a reward for picking his first bale of cotton and he notes that "with lots of fence lines there were always quail. I don't hunt any more, but I always had five bird dogs down on the property. The last one—a wonderful German short-haired pointer—died recently. He was the second best dog I ever owned."



Oak-lined road along edge of Sheffield property

The first best? "Another pointer. We had split rail fencing on the property, and he would leap on top of those fences and hold a point. He was amazing."

The property's crown jewels for Walter remain his live oaks. Sadly, the trees have seen Grandfather Sheffield's home burn—"six rooms with a separated cooking wing"—and saw the land that held the old house leave the family, about the only part of the family's extended holdings to do so. If the trees live another couple of hundred years, they may never see that again.

Walter's three children share his affection for the home place, and he reports that son John III's first question when visiting from Denver is, "When are we going to the farm?" We hope the oaks will always have some Sheffields to shelter and echo Walter when he says of the oaks, "I hope they are there forever."