

► A developer wanted to destroy this beautiful house at Llangollen Farms. The main part of the house dates back 200 years.

Environmental Growth

18th-century farm is preserved through 13 years of land stewardship practices.

Story and photos by Janet Mayer

Thirteen years ago Llangollen Farms came dangerously close to becoming the site of just another housing development within driving distance of Washington, D.C. A developer had his eye on the property with intentions of taking a wrecking ball to the majestic old house overlooking the Loudoun Valley and building many houses on the 1,102-acre farm.

Fortunately, this did not occur. Instead, the farm near Middleburg, Va., has been kept in production agriculture. And the stewardship practices of its buyers earned the 2002 *Angus Journal* Land Stewardship Award — a feat that is icing on the cake for owner Roy Ash and farm manager John Wilkins.

“I bought the farm in 1989, when it was being sold in an estate sale,” Ash recalls. “The bidding had narrowed to a developer and myself, and I decided I didn’t want to see the historic farm fall into the hands of the developer.”



► Maintaining the environmental effort at Llangollen Farms are (from left) Roy and Lila Ash, John and Stephanie Wilkins, Todd Meade and Patrick Wolack.

The farm and house date back to the 1700s on land granted to the Powell family by Prince William of England. Records indicate that Thomas Jefferson was a frequent visitor to the farm. Having evolved through several famous owners, many of the barns and buildings, including the main house, had fallen into a state of disrepair. The land was also in poor condition after years of row cropping.

“We knew we had taken on a great task at

that point,” Ash says. “The developer had wanted to tear down the house, but my wife and I figured the main part of the house and the farm had been around for some 200 years, and if we could put things back in order, we would try to give it another 200 years.”

Ash added several other farms to his holdings, and today Llangollen Farms is comprised of the original farm, Winter Farm and Huntland Farms — giving the operation a total of 1,900 acres spread over a 15-square-mile (sq. mi.) area.



at *Llangollen Farms*

Learning the land

For Ash and his wife, Lila, restoring the old house at the original farm became an ongoing project for the next 6½ years. Making better use of the farmland became an ongoing project for Wilkins, who was hired as farm manager in 1992.

A graduate of West Virginia University College of Agriculture and Forestry, Wilkins also worked toward a master's degree in animal nutrition at Virginia Tech. He says it didn't take him long to know that the corn, soybeans and wheat grown on 650 acres would not be profitable.

"I didn't have any experience in row crops and small grains, but I wasn't opposed to learning," he says. "It was really discouraging after the first couple of years. The best we could produce in soybeans would be about 50 bushels to the acre, and that was in a good year. For a farm in Iowa, 50 bushels would be a bad yield, yet they pay the same for seed, fertilizer and chemicals as we do. I knew it wasn't going to be easy to make

the crops a profitable part of our business."

Since Wilkins had a background in cattle, and since he had conducted research in the field of forage management while at Virginia Tech, he decided the best path to follow would be to increase the size of the herd of commercial cattle. The cropland was converted into forage for a rotational grazing system.

Ash agreed, but with the stipulation that the final product would be black-hided feeder calves, because he knew black-hided cattle brought higher prices in the marketplace. Wilkins was in complete agreement since he firmly believed in the mothering ability of Angus females and also knew the breed would thrive on the area's native grasses.

Over the past decade, Wilkins

has managed the soil and water resources to develop a comprehensive forage program for the herd that now numbers 290 Angus cows, with 55 being registered, due to calve this fall.

Sustainable practices

To sustain the herd, former cropland has been systematically converted to both annual and permanent grasses using water

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Why nominate Llangollen?

Having worked with Loudoun Soil and Water for some 20 years, Pat McIlvaine sees an increasing interest by farm managers in protecting water quality with a big emphasis on the Chesapeake Bay area of Virginia.

"I have been working with Llangollen Farms since about 1992 and farm manager John Wilkins has done wonders through good management and conservation practices and through the continuing support of Mr. Ash," she says.

"I work with a lot of operations in the county, but this has to be one of the best. I feel their hard work and dedication makes them a role model farm for the *Angus Journal* Land Stewardship [Award]."

Conservation practices:

► installation of more than six miles of fencing to protect streams

- installation of 24 livestock water troughs
- participation in Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practice Program
- cool-season and warm-season forage management
- rotational grazing system
- cropland conversion to pasture and hay
- no-till planting methods
- nutrient management plan
- 50 acres of riparian buffers created by fencing streams
- 320 acres of hardwood forest and 11 ponds providing wildlife habitat

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► A newly installed creek crossing prevents erosion.

► **Right:** Pat McIlvaine, an agronomist with Loudoun Soil and Water Conservation, and John Wilkins check the operation of a water trough and review its report.



► Miles of centuries-old stone fence surround part of the farm. Special stoneworkers keep the fence in good repair, and no concrete is used.

management and the conversion of natural resources along the way.

Much of this was achieved by working with Pat McIlvaine, an agronomist for the Loudoun County Soil and Water Conservation District and through participation in the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Program.

Working through the program's cost share SL-6 practice, water quality was protected at the farm by installing three miles of fencing along stream banks and 15 water troughs. An additional three miles of fence and nine additional troughs were voluntarily installed by the operation.

The stream fencing has created an estimated 50 acres of riparian buffer, ranging in widths from 10 feet (ft.) to more than 100 ft. Not only do these areas enhance aquatic life, but they also function

as wildlife corridors for rabbits, turkey, quail, deer and many birds of prey, including a recently sighted bald eagle. Wilkins says plans are underway to convert another five acres of former cropland into a forest buffer that includes restoring a wetland area through the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).

Another 320 acres of woodlands, comprised mainly of deciduous hardwoods, provides habitat for wildlife and protects the steep slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains and stream corridors that feed 11 farm ponds. The land is under a conservation easement that permanently protects the forest as well as the farmland.

Wilkins's good management practices also apply to the 1,200 acres planted in cool-season grasses, such as fescue and orchard grass, with another 12 acres devoted to switchgrass, a warm-season species. About 70 acres of millet provide a summer annual grass, which is grazed, and acreage for no-till planting of annual ryegrass for winter grazing.

"In a good year, I believe that by allowing the livestock access to clean water and high-quality forage, a 10-month grazing system can be achieved," he says. "I also believe a year-round grazing system is a real possibility. By using this type of system, costs of labor and fuel

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► In a riparian area, drainage tiles have been put in to drain a formerly wet field into a cistern, which supplies water for the cattle.

Education At Llangollen Farms

When John Wilkins came to Llangollen Farms as a farm manager in 1992, the staff numbered between eight and 10 men. Since that time, the staff has been pared down to Wilkins; his right-hand man and assistant, Todd Meade; and Wilkins's wife, Stephanie, who is office manager and, as he proclaims, does any other job that needs to be done.

Each year an intern from an agricultural college is hired for the summer months, giving that student the opportunity for a hands-on and practical real-world experience on a farm. It also provides an extra hand during the busiest time of the year. This year's intern was Patrick Wolack who attends Virginia Tech.

"We get along with a small staff mainly because we have gotten more efficient," Wilkins explains. "However, I couldn't do it without Todd and Stephanie, or without our summer interns. The students not only provide extra hands, they also let me see and explore parts of the operation that I otherwise might have overlooked. They often do this by questioning why we do things a certain way, and it honestly causes me to stop for a minute and question why we are doing it that way. We get interaction going among the student, Todd and me, and many times we have ended up getting some ideas and maybe changed the way I previously looked at managing a particular operation.

"Since most of the interns are about to graduate, it is actually a two-way street. We can give them experience and a challenge, and they can give us some of the newest information they are getting in school. We both benefit."

► Below: College intern Patrick Wolack (left) and Todd Meade, Wilkins's assistant, move cattle into a paddock.



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required by traditional crop production can be saved while maximizing manure management by grazing distribution.”

Soil resources are an important part of the Llangollen program, and Wilkins follows both long- and short-range fertilization plans developed by Robert Shoemaker, nutrient management specialist with the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). With a forage base of some 900 acres of fescue, nitrogen applications are needed to provide stockpiled grass for winter grazing. In accordance with the results of soil samples, the

operation hires a local professional service to apply fertilizer and lime as needed. The service is also used when the need for restricted pesticides is indicated by signs of noxious weeds and insect damage.

“I think with a useful rotational system like ours, we are making progress,” Wilkins says. “We are making a lot better use of the grass than we previously were, and the cattle are more manageable, healthier and cleaner.”

Educational opportunities

Others are also learning about the successful conservation and grassland management practices at Llangollen Farms. Loudoun

County Extension agent Gary Hornbaker

has featured the operation in Virginia Tech’s Small Scale Beef Farm Management Short Course, using the management program at the farm as an example.

The Virginia Department of Soil and Water Conservation has recognized the operation for its successful water management program. The Huntland tract received the 1998 Potomac River Basin Clean Water Farm Award, and the original Llangollen tract won the same award in 2001.

“I have always had a problem watching a cow dirty up a creek,” Wilkins says. “The water that leaves this farm winds up in the Potomac River above the intake pipes for the Fairfax County Water Authority, so it is going to wind up in somebody’s drinking water in Washington. To me, that is just not right.”

“For others wanting to go into a program like ours, I would advise them to have a good solid plan that evolves as you go along. Ours is a team effort, and I sure couldn’t have done it without the support of Mr. Ash,” he says. “Although we are only about halfway to where I would like us to be, we are making progress. I like to think we optimize the potential: what the cows will give, what the soil will produce, what Mother Nature will let us have and [what we can do] to harness the water.”

Ash attributes the success of the farm projects to Wilkins’s ability to plan ahead.

“Although the most I did was okay John’s projects, the whole key is to bet on the right people, and I would attribute the success of our programs to the fact that he and I think outside the box,” he says. “This is the only way to go, because you have to reach beyond the edge of where most people think. In that sense, we are both exploring what the new frontiers might be in trying to figure out how to succeed in light and in the context of the change all about us, rather than settle for what we used to do. Who knows what’s going to happen or what is going to be the way to deal with what we are doing five years from now? You must have an inquiring state of mind and — no matter what our age or our objective — keep on learning all through life.”

AJ

Angus Journal Land Stewardship Award winners

2001: Lazy Lane Farms, Upperville, Va.

2000: Green Creek Ranch, Steamboat Springs, Colo.

1999: Tenroc Ranch, Salado, Texas

1998: Tom Bros. Ranch, Campbellton, Texas

1997: Poplar Hollow Farms, Brevard, N.C.*

1996: Whitestone Farm, Aldie, Va.

1995: William Elkins, Fallowfield, Pa.; Bascum Smith, Russell Springs, Ky.; Eddie Parker, Waurika, Okla.; and Allen & Patsy Grimes, Scranton, N.D.

1994: J.O. Creighton, Paris, Texas; Pletcher Bros. Farms, Crooksville, Ohio; Jim & Polly Shipley, Stockton, Mo.; and Martin Viersen, North Platte, Neb.

1993: William Ausley, Nokesville, Va.; Cecil Davis Sr.,

Marshfield, Mo.; Gregory Gould, Ulm, Mont.; and Ken Johnson, Tompkinsville, Ky.

1992: Tom Elliott, Grass Range, Mont.; Bruce & Scott Foster, Niles, Mich.*; W.B. Herrington, Mount Calm, Texas; and Ralph & Henis Veenema, Deposit, N.Y.

1991: Richard Christy, Scott City, Kan.; Al Pedigo, Fountain Run, Ky.; Lawrason Sayre, Churchville, Md.*; and Donna Sitz & family, Harrison, Mont.*

1990: George & June Crenshaw, Manhattan, Kan.; Earl McKarns, Kensington, Ohio; Russ & Mandy Schulz, Sheridan, Wyo.; and Carl Turner, Covington, Tenn.

*These nominees were recognized in the NCBA Environmental Stewardship Award Program.