

Clark County

Walt & Dardean Wheaton

While Elpha Nelson was out picking huckleberries on Mount Adams, digging clams at the beach and camping above Moulton Falls, she was keeping an eye out for a place for the family. She found what she was looking for above Lake Merwin in Clark County and purchased 75 acres in Buncombe Hollow in 1954 for 3,000 dollars borrowed by assuming a second mortgage on her home.

The property included a full-blown homestead with a farmhouse, a barn, chicken coop, root cellar, pigpen, schoolhouse and a fruit orchard. The property had been recently logged and lacked any large trees. By 2001 the brush patch had been converted into a fully stocked tree farm and received local, state and regional tree farm of the year awards.

The farm's conversion began when Elpha became involved with Clark (Skamania) County Farm Forestry and started planting trees. Elpha's son Walt Wheaton says, "County agents descended on Mom as soon as she bought the property. She was a willing student and became interested quite rapidly. Fred Pratt was one of the first that helped Mom get into forestry. Before I returned from the service, Mom had already planted a lot of the trees and done a basil spray on some alder and different things. She was into it."

Returning from overseas active duty in 1955, Walt, his wife Dardean and their three children became involved with Elpha's mission, spending weekends digging, planting and fixing up the homestead. Some of the buildings were beyond restoration. Walt, "They were so old. We dismantled everything. It was pretty much like posts sticking in the ground. We all got on one side of the barn and pushed it over."

The Wheatons have planted over 30,000 trees on 70 of the 77 acres they now own. At first, they restricted a variety of tree species in an arboretum area, but have since allowed for more diversity. There are over 50 acres in Douglas fir in 5 age classes. Walt, "Our daughter Nancy attended a meeting on red alder and convinced the rest of us to plant two recently acquired acres in red alder. Although we call it Nancy's alder, we all helped plant it. After fighting alder by hand, chopping, aerial, and backpack spraying for years, the dramatic improvement of the alder



market has made us much more tolerant to letting it grow. Now alder is an accepted option for timber growers.”

Recent changes in regulations have been frustrating for Walt. While firmly supporting clean air and water, and habitat protection for fish and wildlife, he feels the rules are overkill. Walt, “I would think if you put some good minds to it you could simplify it to an extent that a majority of the tree farmers would say, yeah, this makes sense. If it cost me a few bucks, no big deal.”

Walt’s Explorer Scouts and Dardean’s Girl Scouts earned their share of badges and honors at Buncombe Hollow. Elk, deer, otters, coyotes, beavers, raccoons, porcupines, and even a potbelly pig have been seen. Regarding beavers, Walt replies, “We accept them. We feel the same way about the porcupines that we do about the beaver. We don’t have a lot of them. We’re glad that we have them and we aren’t out there shooting them. We see a porcupine every other year or so. They work over our Scotch pine pretty good. They climb pretty high and really strip them.” Dardean adds, “The pine trees were left over from Christmas planting so we didn’t care, as long as the porcupines left our fir alone.”

Their affection for porcupines started when Walt and his mother Elpha found a dead porcupine at the base of a tree in the orchard. Then looking up, they spotted a baby porcupine. Walt, “They’re the cutest things. We put him in a bread box and took him to our home in Vancouver.” Walt and Dardean fed and nurtured the baby porcupine for little over a week, then placed it in a fish aquarium and took it to the children’s school to share with their classmates. They eventually found a home for the “little fellow” at the Portland Zoo.

The Wheaton’s dream is for the tree farm to remain in the family for their children’s children to enjoy nature in the way they have on the bench overlooking the beaver pond on their woodland retreat.

“When our kids were little we used to take them out to the beaver pond at dusk, walk out on a partially submerged log, sit real quiet, turn on the spot light and watch the beavers,” says Dardean.

BUNCOMBE Hollow Tree Farm
Elpha Nelson, April 24, 1906
Walt Wheaton, born May 5, 1927
Dardean Rogers Wheaton, born September 19,
1930
Member Clark County Farm Forestry Association
CCFFA Tree Farmer of the Year, 1998
Washington Tree Farmer of the Year, 2000
Western Regional Tree Farmer of the Year, 2001

