

MEET CONSERVATION'S NEW PIONEERS

CHANGING LANDSCAPES and CHANGING DYNAMICS

ARTICLE BY MARY O. PARKER

Photo by Jeff Parker



Two years ago the Abernathy family purchased 95 acres in Llano County and, in 2011, twin brothers, Robert and Matt, harvested their first bucks there. Left to right: Robert, Mark, Carolyn, Matt, and front: Maisy.



The day I met the Abernathys, their four-year old black lab, Maisy, gave such an exuberant welcome that she bolted from the Polaris while it was still in motion. Considering her enthusiasm, I'd expected a joyful pouncing, but Maisy proved herself well-trained and welcomed me politely, instead. By the time the Ranger containing the other family members rolled to a stop, we'd already cemented our friendship.

As soon as I met TWA members Mark and Carolyn Abernathy and their twin sons, 12-year-olds Matt and Robert, I realized they all shared Maisy's enthusiasm. Especially when it came to the 95 acres of Texas Hill Country they'd purchased two years ago. In fact, I'd wandered to Llano County to gaze upon this object of their affection. I came also to learn more about Texas' new breed of landowner and conservation's new pioneers – those purchasing property solely for lifestyle reasons.

We began our visit under the shade of enchanting live oaks. Soon, I learned that Matt likes to carve, but he never knew that before acquiring the land. "Everywhere I walk, I'm always looking for the right sticks," he told me with his shy smile. And, with politely contained pride, Robert shared handfuls of treasures discovered while combing the property. "These are shells from a Henry Repeating Rifle," he said. "I didn't know what they were at first, but my granddad did. When he told me, I was *very* excited." The boys also showed me tomahawks they'd fashioned from local ingredients: oak, cedar, stones, and dove feathers.

"They like to shoot skeet," said Mark, "and just started hunting a couple of years ago." He shared another exciting event: In 2011, the boys harvested their very first bucks – an 8-pointer and a 10-pointer – here on the family's property.

The boys' stories called to mind a 2006 Cornell study I'd recently read, which found a direct correlation between the "youthful experience of outdoors" to those who become passionate about conservation as adults. Already, in the space

of 24 short months, these young men had established a strong sense of place, which would forever play a role in shaping their lives.

But, anyone who's ever been enamored knows relationships take work. Sometimes we even look to others with special expertise for help with making them work. Relationships with the land are no different, and so when the Abernathys began this particular relationship, they wanted to do it right. "We knew we wanted to be good land stewards, but we didn't know what that meant," said Carolyn.

TWA member and TPWD wildlife biologist for Llano County, Dale Schmidt, said, "Most people who come to me want to do something good, so we talk about their goals and create a plan." Schmidt helped the Abernathys create such a plan. (TPWD biologists and landowners sign a confidentiality agreement, so he could divulge nothing to me about that plan.)

Mark and Carolyn told me some of their goals include preservation of the property's natural springs, enhancing pasture quality and controlling invasive species. Carolyn stated, "We've learned that by doing those things, we'll preserve and enhance the water, food and habitat for all kinds of wildlife."

Typically, land ownership can be classified into six motivations: agricultural pro-

duction, profit-orientation, rural lifestyle, financial investment, mineral extraction, and wildlife enterprise. According to these motivations, we further organize landowner types into three clusters: agricultural-production landowners, multiple-objective landowners (own land mostly for investment purposes), and lifestyle-oriented landowners.

As of 2011, about 85 percent of Texas' land not covered by water – 142,988,754 acres – received special agricultural appraisal. Thanks largely to our number one position in both beef and cotton, "open space land" still covers a large chunk of our state; however, the number of agricultural-production landowners decreases each year. Overall, weakened agricultural economies continue to squeeze farmers and ranchers, while increasing real market values brought about by urban sprawl tempt them to sell all or part of their land. And, then, there's the issue of inheritance. Even if heirs don't need to divide the property in order to pay estate taxes, individual family members often want to cash out, and the land is divided in order to do so.

As the number of agriculture-production landowners decrease, multiple-objective landowners increase. Within the last 14 years (1998-2011) the amount of agricultural appraised acreage in Texas fell by 1,083,403 acres, while over 1.5 million



The Abernathys' stewardship goals include preservation of the land's natural springs, enrichment of its pastures, and controlling invasive species. "We've learned that by doing those things, we'll preserve and enhance the water, food, and habitat for all kinds of wildlife," Carolyn explained.

Photo by Jeff Parker



building permits for single-family homes (SFH's) were issued. In 2011 alone, nearly 70,000 SFH's received permits.

As demand for housing has risen, so, too, has the value of land. The average price for an acre of Texas soil went from \$809 in 1998 to \$2,350 in 2011, increasing nearly 300 percent over 14 years. Meanwhile, during that same period, the average sized parcel of rural land purchased decreased by 284 percent – from 1,242 to 436 acres.

The end result of all these figures? Today, Texas has more landowners owning smaller parcels of land than ever before, a trend which shows no sign of slowing considering population projections. According the State Comptroller's Office, from 2000 to 2006, Texas' population increased by 12.7 percent, nearly twice that of the national rate of 6.4 percent. The Texas Water Development Board predicts that, by the year 2060, we'll have 46,323,725 residents. That's almost double what we have now.

That's where landowners such as the Abernathys, who sit squarely in the lifestyle-oriented landowner cluster, come to the rescue. Folks like them may just hold the key to the future of habitat conservation and the restoration of watershed health. Schmidt said that as larger parcels of rural property continue to be split into smaller ones, he's seeing more landowners like the Abernathys, and he stresses the value of such folks creating stewardship plans "whether it's a couple acres or a couple hundred acres."

According to data included in the 2005 masters' thesis of TWA Director Jenny Sanders, more than one-third (39 percent) of Central Texas landowners own land exclusively for lifestyle reasons. Sanders found this group had the greatest propensity to respond positively to the widest range of conservation programs but often didn't know about available resources.

Not knowing of resources rang true for Carolyn and Mark, but they credited Capital Farm Credit with nudging them toward their conservation journey. "They gave us a TWA membership, along with our loan for the property, and so we started receiving the [Texas Wildlife] magazine. Through reading it, we began to realize there was this world out there, this whole realm of things to be done," said Carolyn.

"And, then I went to TWA's Women of the Land conference, and that taught me a lot," she said. "It was actually almost overwhelming. I learned so much. I even learned about identifying plants and left understanding why that's essential." She looked at her sons. "We've had a lot of fun this spring with all the growth. Last year, with the drought, we had nothing to ID."



Photo by Jeff Parker

Matt (l) and Robert (r) Abernathy display treasures – both found and created – from the family land. The boys fashioned their tomahawk blades by patiently chipping away at the stones. Matt crafted the handle from oak, while Robert used cedar and capped his creation with dove feathers.



Photo by Jeff Parker

The Abernathy twins include Henry Repeating Rifle shells – which each bear an "H" and two grooves from the gun's double firing pin – among the treasures they've unearthed while exploring the property with their granddad.

Carolyn admitted to feeling a bit deluged at first. "But, when you're actually implementing what you've learned about, it's fun, because you see the effects," she said. When I asked about her favorite effect so far, she gave an embarrassed laugh and answered, "Well, so far, the most satisfying has been the mesquite kills."

Mark explained: "The reason for that is that we've been prepping the land for quail, and we're hoping that, at some point, after doing some habitat management, we'll have more. We've seen some already, here or there."

"Yeah, and last year with the drought," Carolyn continued, "nothing was growing, so we didn't have to worry about controlling the mesquite, but this year..." She shook her head. "We're trying to preserve the land for the grasses. Just even having no cattle, no horses, eating the grass all the time, that's already had a large effect on helping to retain moisture. And, the grass by the springs was all eaten down, but we learned how it helps filter the water, so we want it there."

In spring 2012, the *Journal of Arid Environments* discussed how changing landowner dynamics might affect watersheds and ecosystems. One hypothetical example: lifestyle-oriented owners might view cover differently than agricultural-production landowners, which could result in brushy proliferation in areas historically dominated by grasslands. On the other hand, studies have indicated that lands owned by those in the lifestyle-oriented cluster could act as more effective riparian buffers and help restore hydrologic functions in dryland ecosystems (which make up the majority of the state). However, in the case of "ranchette" parcels (those very small parcels), fragmentation will result in a disruption in ecological services and wildlife habitat.

For the 95 acres purchased by the Abernathys, the future looks bright. As Maisy's gaze followed his every move, Mark pointed out bluebird houses they'd installed and said the first bat house would go up soon. "There are so many things you can do to create habitat for animals," he explained. And while he uses his tractor at times to do so, he insisted, "We like to keep things wild, as much as possible."

"A big part of the fun we have out here all year long is observing animal tracks and signs, watching the different deer that come to the feeders, seeing a variety of birds of prey, finding turkey feathers, identifying the plants and wildflowers, and spotlighting at night. It wouldn't be the same experience without continuing to see all those things. That's what inspires and motivates us to take part in wildlife management and what will continue to define any plans we make for the land in the future," Carolyn said.

Then, with a grin, she added, "My joke is that we're Longhorns becoming Aggies!"



Photo by Jeff Parker

Mark and Carolyn Abernathy said the joy the family derives from the interacting with land inspires and motivates their involvement in wildlife management and will continue to define their future plans.