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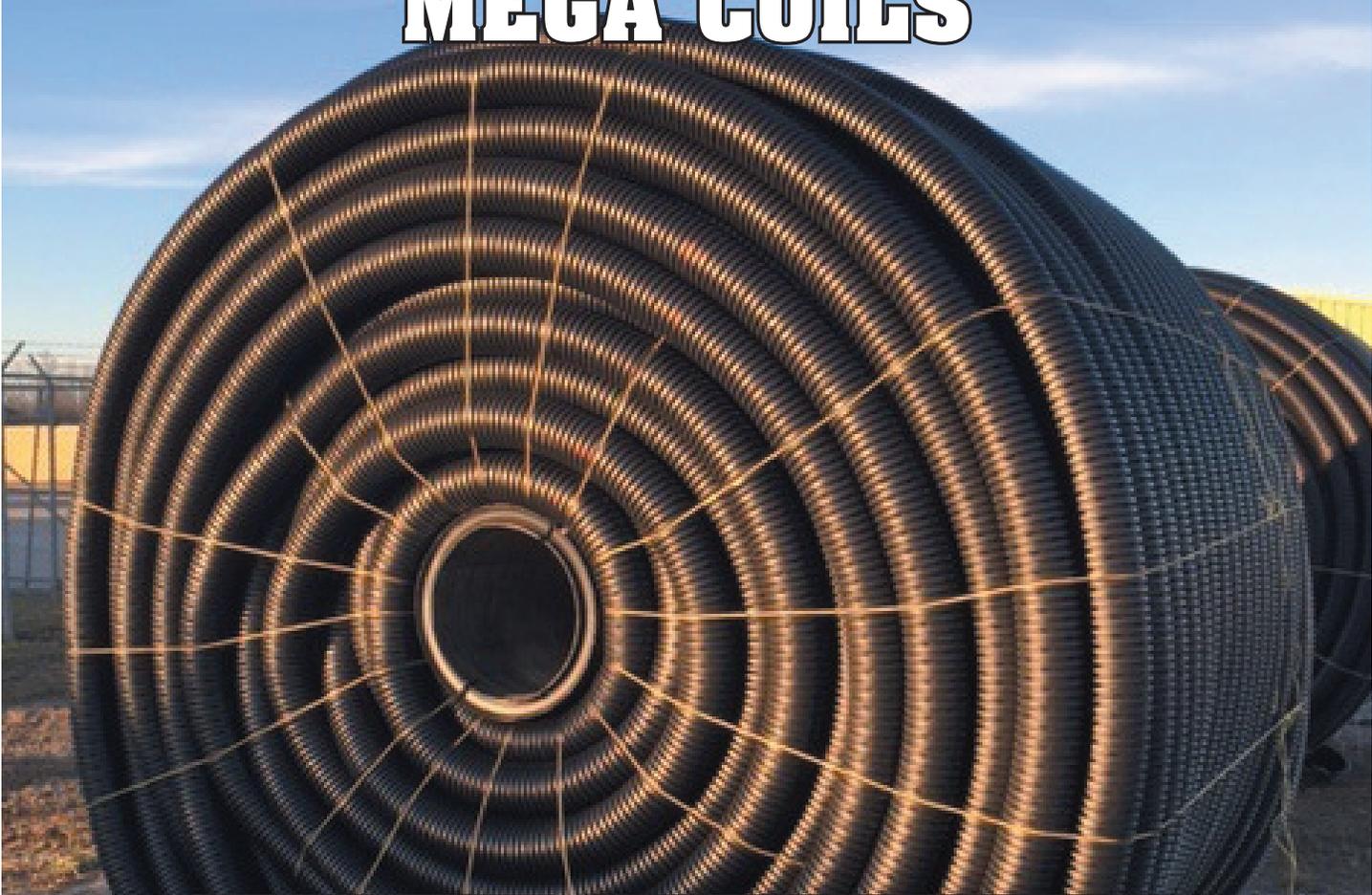


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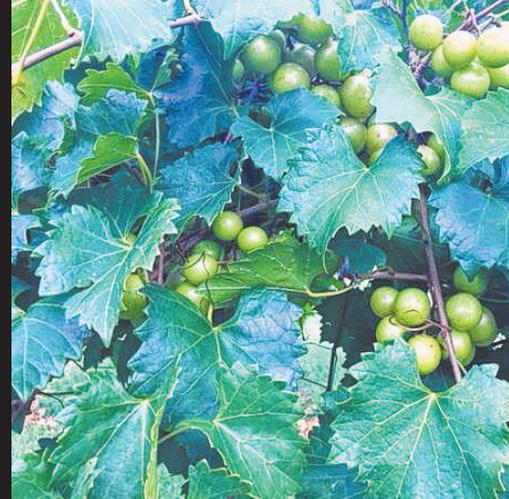
# HOMIE GROWN

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# Vines of Faith

Rows of vineyards at Crooked Run

PHOTOS BY CHASE JORDAN | SAMPSON INDEPENDENT



## Thompson family continues success with Crooked Run, Simply NC

By Chase Jordan

cjordan@clintonnc.com

John Thompson enjoyed picking juicy grapes off a vine as they piled up in a bucket in his hand.

For nearly a decade, John and his family watched countless amount of grapes grow. Through faith and teamwork, it's not going to stop anytime soon.

"God is, and has been, blessing our efforts in the vineyard both in our walk with him and financially," John said. "This won't make us rich by any means, but we do make decent money. And you can't put a dollar figure on my time spent with Gavin and Tanner as we learn together. Each season presents new challenges that we work through. God is good."

Located in Sampson County over 18 acres off Union School Road, the family-owned vineyard grows muscadine grapes for



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Crooked Run Vineyards produces  
Muscadine grapes throughout  
the year.

COURTESY PHOTO

non-alcoholic juice. The field was once used for sweet potatoes, tobacco and peanuts. After dealing with matters such as wind erosion, John was looking for a way to stabilize the field. He grew up on a farm and studied agronomy, the science of soil management and crop production. With a feel for the land, he didn't want to see it go to waste.

Grapes became the answer.

"I just felt like the Lord led me to grapes," John said about the field. "The first time I looked into it, there was nothing but wine grapes. People do well with wine grapes and I have nothing against that, but it just wasn't for me."

Later, another opportunity came and the first vines were planted in 2009 and soon, more were placed. For producers, growing the variety comes with several challenges that differ from others.

"The Lord has taught us a lot of things, patience being top," John said. "It takes a long time. They're a lot more fickle than wine grapes. The plants are not as hearty and it seems to be a lot of things that affect fresh black grapes."

The sign near the entrance of Crooked Run Vineyards includes John 15:5, a Bible verse which says "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

"It takes a lot of faith to keep going," John said. "It's a year-round job."

John and other family members, including his son Gavin, took a



John Thompson is looking forward to another growing season.

three-week break in mid-November and are preparing to start up again as more leaves fall from the vines — a contrast from the bright green field a few months ago. The work includes pruning and recovering from Hurricane Florence damage.

"We've got to get everything back in shape with posts replaced and wires put back together where they broke during the storm," Gavin said. "It's always spraying, pruning and you prune year-round."

Gavin emphasized how many people associate pruning with spring and summer months. But for grape growers such as himself, it's never too late to prune or do other work.

"We're out here about six days of the week most of the time doing something, whether it's spraying, mowing or pruning," Gavin said.

An advertisement for the Veterinary Medical Clinic. It features a large, fluffy dog (possibly a Komondor) standing in a field. The text is overlaid on the image. The clinic name is in large, bold, black letters with a white outline. Below it is the name of the veterinarian, William Oglesby, DVM. Further down, it lists the services: "We Treat Both Small Animals and Large Animals". At the bottom, it provides the address, hours, and phone number, along with the slogan "Healthy Animals are Happy Animals".

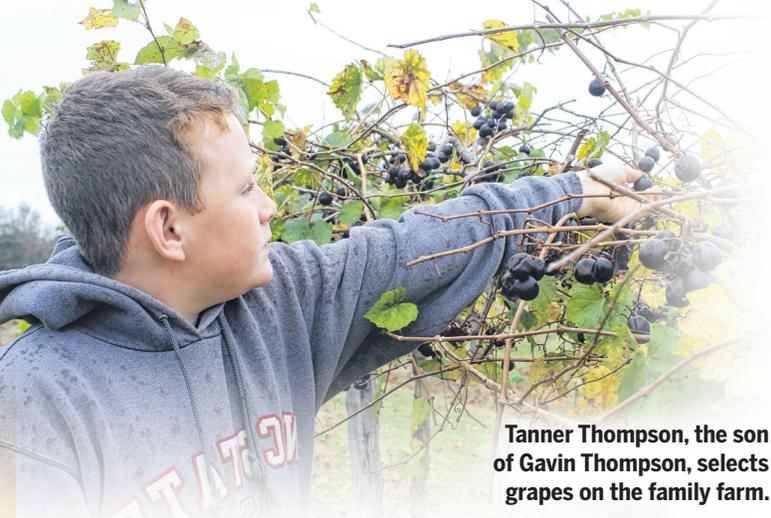
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**Gavin Thompson picks grapes from a vine at Crooked Run Vineyards.**



**Tanner Thompson, the son of Gavin Thompson, selects grapes on the family farm.**

**Continued from page 5**

Along with tasks such as defending the grape vines against cool weather, diseases and insects, Gavin said growth in itself becomes a test at times when it comes to drowning, despite being in a sandy area. The family receives assistance from North Carolina Cooperative Extension to assist with problems.

“There’s always something,” Gavin said. “Lightning struck and killed a whole row.”

After a vine is replaced, it could take about three years before it starts bearing grapes again.

“You have to train it all the time to get up on the wire to start producing,” John said. “It starts producing around the third year

*“There’s nothing like agriculture and having your family work together with a common goal. You spend a lot of time together, some of it good, some of it not, but there’s a lot of life lessons to learn. I just can’t say enough good things about people who work as a family, whether it be on the farm or on other businesses. It’s a good thing.”*

**— Deborah Thompson**

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and it's about the fifth or sixth year before it's in full production. It's a constant change-over throughout the vineyard."

Crooked Run Vineyards is assisted by part-time employees during busy times of the year and contracts with Cottle Farms to handpick grapes. But the majority of maintenance is completed by the Thompsons, who have full-time jobs outside of the farm. John manages the Rose Hill division of G&M Sales and Gavin is a conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Clinton.

All of the work pays off when the juice and grapes are enjoyed by others. During the year, Crooked Run Vineyards hosts "You Pick" events, which allows visitors to select their own grapes off the vines on Saturdays after the commercial harvest is complete.

"They have a great time," John said about the hundreds of people who have taken home grapes every year.

The vineyard birthed a popular business in Clinton.

In 2014, Deborah Thompson started Simply NC to market and sell juice and other related products. After more research, she realized that other business owners across North Carolina needed a place to market their products. Deborah started with more than 20 vendors, and now has close to 100 vendors.

With about 40 North Carolina counties represented, the goal is to have representation from all 100 counties. Along with the bottles of grape juice, Simply NC offers a variety of items. Some of them include art, books, crafts, honey, soaps and gourmet

food products.

"The store has been a really big learning experience for me, but it's been good," she said. "I've gotten to know a lot of really good vendors behind the products that I carry."

As a proud native of North Carolina, Deborah encourages people to support entrepreneurs worldwide.

There's a lot of neat things in North Carolina and a lot of people don't realize how much good stuff there it is in North Carolina. It's a diverse state and I'm proud to be able to show a part of the diversity here. I hope that it continues to grow.

For Deborah, the grape growing process has been a good experience as well.

"We've learned a lot about grapes and they're not as easy to grow as some people think," Deborah said. "There's a lot of work put into it."

Like her husband and sons, Deborah enjoys referring to John 15:5, when it comes to overcoming obstacles of running the business.

"We tie back to that quite a bit and perform the work that Jesus refers to in the bible in trimming the branches," Deborah said.

That effort involves family members pushing together, which results in the continued success at Crooked Run. Their other sons, Brandon and Blake, were involved in the foundation too.

"I think it's a wonderful thing," Deborah said about the vineyard

**Continued from page 7**

with family roots.

“There’s nothing like agriculture and having your family work together with a common goal. You spend a lot of time together, some of it good, some of it not, but there’s a lot of life lessons to learn.



Grapes grow in a field owned by Crooked Run Vineyards.

“When the children are young, it keeps them out of trouble and keeps them working,” Deborah said. “It teaches them the value of hard work, the value of money. I just can’t say enough good things about people who work as a family, whether it be on the farm or on other businesses. It’s a good thing.”



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# A proud tradition

The beauty of the farm, even with the spray reel shooting wastewater on the field, is not lost on Herring. 'I love this place. It's home. It's where my family is. There's just nothing better,' he said.

PHOTOS BY CINDY IVEY  
SI CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

## Herring carries on family farming legacy spanning 80 years

By Sherry Matthews

Publisher

**A**LBERTSON — Chad Herring's life centers around farming. Well, actually, his life is centered in family, but that family's life — and livelihood — is steeped in agriculture.

In fact, the Herrings have been tending the land for over 80 years, starting with the 43-year-old's grandfather, Leland Herring, and trickling right on down the line to his father Prentice and uncle Curtis. The family agriculture business has grown through the years, from the farming of tobacco and other row crops to the raising of livestock.

"My grandfather, Leland 'Buck' Herring, started farming in the 1930s," Herring said during an interview earlier this year as he provided a tour of the family farm in the Glisson Township near Mount Olive. "He was able to raise a family of five children doing so."

The hog operation took root as a result of his Uncle Curtis's 4-H project back in 1965.

"The story goes something like this," Herring said, pride easily recognized in the smile spreading across his face as he detailed how his grandfather helped his uncle buy and raise nine feeder pigs to market weight as a 4-H project, sold them and found that doing so



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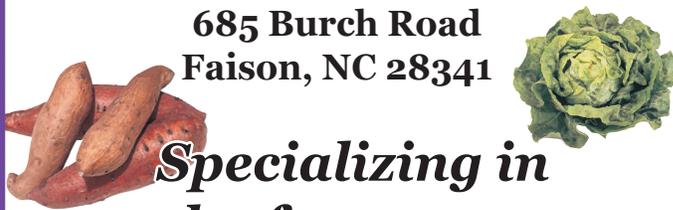
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## Continued from page 9

actually made him some money.

"That's pretty much how our hog operation started," Herring attested, as he pulled his pickup truck down a lane and headed toward the 10-house nursery operation that was born out of that 4-H project. "He saw there was a living to be made from it, and he just kept buying them, raising them and selling them.

That was in the late 1960s; he purchased a few sows and boars and the pig production began in earnest as a solid source of income for the family."

Today the Herrings are growers for Smithfield, the company, along with some of its growers, that have been embroiled in what he calls frivolous lawsuits that he fears will rip livings from first hog farmers and, in a trickle down effect, eventually dozens upon dozens of other businesses tied in some way to agriculture.

Down the lane, lined with beautiful rolls of hay sitting primly in vibrant green grass, stands a spray reel shooting out hog wastewater onto that field, just a few thousand feet or so from Herring's home and the homes of four or five others, some farmers, others in different occupations. Old and new homes are scattered down the road, many of them easily within nose-reach of any smells that might emanate from those hog houses.

With temperatures soaring into the 90s on the day of Herring's interview, and with a slight breeze blowing, the so-called scent often cited among the nuisances the farms present to neighbors isn't

**Chad Herring and his family: wife Melissa, son Ryley, age 7, and daughter Eva Grace, age 10.**



PHOTO COURTESY NC FARM FAMILIES

to be found, despite the constant rotation of the reel shooting out wastewater.

Herring surveys first the reel and then the houses, absently tugging at his cap as he talks animatedly about his family and the farm he loves. "This is our way of life right here. It's the way of life of many families up and down these roads. It's much the same over in Sampson, really most of eastern North Carolina."

And that way of life, he believes, is being threatened by the lawsuits that have been heard, one after another, in a Raleigh federal courtroom. So far, three verdicts have come down totaling millions upon millions of dollars. While state law whittles down the punitive damages that can be awarded, the lawsuits and their aftermath are doing irreparable damage to farmers, Herring believes.

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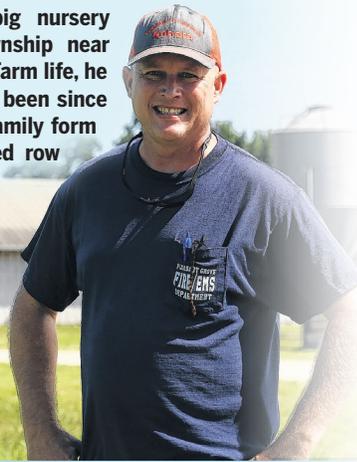
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Chad Herring, director of N.C. Farm Families, at his family's pig nursery facility in the Glisson Township near Albertson in Duplin County. Farm life, he said, is in his blood and has been since a teenager working on the family farm which, at that time, included row crops as well as livestock.



Chad Herring carefully watches a spray reel shoot hog wastewater onto a field that sits just down wind of his home. Being good stewards of the land, he said, was of prime importance to his family and all farmers.



**Continued from page 11**

It's one of the main reasons he agreed to accept his new role as executive director of N.C. Farm Families, a non-profit group formed in 2015, shortly after the RiverKeepers began speaking out against farms in Jones County. It is an organization that has gained momentum as lawsuits began to flourish.

Herring took the lead, he said, because of his strong belief in farming and his stronger desire to "make sure farming life today stays sustainable. I want to be able to pass to my children what my father did for me and his father did for him. Right now I feel like all that is being threatened and it scares me."

So he promotes farming at every turn, trying to help people see what can so easily be taken for granted. He isn't looking to make people mad or discount their feelings, but merely to educate them to the truth, something he says that is often lost in the 24/7 news cycle.

"Farmers are just out here trying to make a living. We aren't out to hurt anyone; in fact, we are here to help. People tend to forget where they get the meals they sit down to eat with their families. It didn't just come from the grocery store; it comes from right here, on the land, and through the sweat from many a person's brow."

He wants people who don't live in rural communities to understand who farmers are and what they stand for, and he especially wants them to see the faces of the men, women and children who earn their living from the land, often living next door and down wind of the hog houses they operate and the fields they spray.

"We are very responsible; we care about our neighbors and we care

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about our communities. We aren't here to hurt anyone; we're just here to make a living and help put food on everyone's table, not just our own," Herring said.

As the head of NC Farm Families, his goal is to tout farming and to tell the stories of the hundreds of men and women who farm the land every day; the children who work with their parents on the farm and the lives they try to live.

For Herring, farming is all he's ever known and the thing that runs deep in his blood - roots that were planted many years ago and have spread out and continued to grow.

*"It just don't get any better than this. Working the land, living on the farm, it's a way of life I love and I'm really blessed to be a part of this."*

— Chad Herring

**From 4-H project to family partnership**

From that first 4-H project until today, the Herring pork operation has grown exponentially.

"All our pig production was done on the ground until 1969, when we constructed our first farrowing barn," Herring explained. "The very next year, in 1970, we had an extremely cold winter and an abundance of snow. Despite having constructed some small huts on the ground for our sows and pigs to get in, we still lost 75 percent of our livestock

Chad Herring proudly displays one of the many signs showing support for North Carolina's farm families.



He is in his backyard, the backdrop of his nurseries and the spray reel shooting wastewater on a nearby field easily seen behind him.

Herring is a family man who believes in living off the land and giving back to it. Farm life, he said, is in his blood and he is raising his children to love it - and work it - much the way he did growing up.



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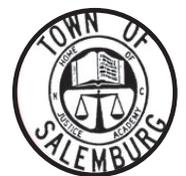
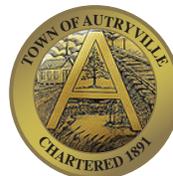


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## Continued from page 13

because of the freezing temperatures.”

Undeterred, Herring's grandfather told the family their next step was moving the pigs indoors. “He said it was either that or ‘we are getting out of the pig business.’”

One year later, the Herrings constructed their first finishing barn. It served, he said, a dual purpose, housing sows and their litter just before weaning. “Then the sows were moved back into group breeding,” he pointed out.”

The year before Herring was born, in 1974, his uncle Curtis saw the opportunity to increase efficiency by moving from a group breeding to an individual breeding format. “What that meant was the need to construct a boar barn,” Herring said.

It was a move that didn't come without some difficulty. “My grandfather was in the hospital at the time, so my uncle went and asked my grandmother for permission to build the boar barn and the money to build it. He knew my grandfather wouldn't approve of such.”

He was right, Herring attested. “When he returned from the hospital, he wasn't convinced of the idea; however, it wasn't very long before he saw the true benefits of the barn and being able to monitor and identify which sows had bred.”

The Herrings passion for raising pigs continued to grow and, in 1977, a gestation barn was built adjacent to the boar barn.

Three years later, Herring's father returned home to the family farm

and for the next couple decades the hog operation grew from a few sows/boars to a 500-sow farrow-to-finish operation.

In 1987, a partnership between the Herring brothers and their parents was established, and Herring Pork Producers was formed. “It was a really big deal for us,” Herring, who was 13 at the time, said, pointing out that he had grown up working on the farm with both the livestock and row crops.

“I really enjoyed them both. Farming has always been in my blood; it's something I'm very proud of, that's for sure. Our family's small, independent family farm had evolved into 500-sow farrow to finish operation. It took hard work, a lot of prayer and a lot of commitment. We have been very blessed.”

The Herrings continued their farming operation, with livestock becoming the primary source of income. Then, in 1994, his grandparents moved out of the partnership, leaving the operation in the hands of Prentice and Curtis Herring. It was around that same time that Herring left the farm to pursue his college education.

Two years later, in 1996, farming challenges prompted the Herrings to move from an independent operation to a contract pig production, first with Lundy in Clinton and eventually to those who purchased Lundy, first Premium Standard Farms and finally Smithfield Foods.

Along the way, the Herrings modified their facilities to accommodate a nursery/finisher setup and eventually, in 2006, tore down the existing buildings and built brand new nursery barns, making the entire farm a nursery facility that would house about 15,000 nursery pigs.



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**Continued from page 14**

That same year, Herring returned to the farm to work full-time, a move he has not once regretted.

“Our farm has continued to provide a good quality of living for several families, including my own. My father, my uncle, myself and even our employees’ families have all enjoyed the fruits of our labor working on the family farm. That’s how it is on most farms.”

Now married to wife Melissa, and with two children of his own, Eva Grace, age 10, and Ryley, age 7, Herring’s hope is that his children will glean the same experiences of farm living that he did.

“They love it as much as I did as a kid, and I do now, as an adult.”

Standing in his backyard, his family’s nursery operation the backdrop, Herring surveys the land, keenly aware of his surroundings. He points to the row of houses on both sides of the road, noting that family surrounds him and neighbors abound.

He wrinkles his nose and shakes his head. “If this were a problem; if the smells were unbearable. If there was something dangerous in the water, do you think I’d raise my kids here. Do you think they would,” he says pointing across the road to a nearby neighbor’s home..

“I can answer that quickly. No. Really, no one would. Most farmers live near their operations. And besides all that, farmers are responsible; they care about the land. They don’t want to harm anyone; all they want to do is make a living, tend the land, be good stewards, care for their families and look after their neighbors.”

He tips his hat back on his head, rubs his temples and grins.

“It just don’t get any better than this,” he said. “Working the land, living on the farm, it’s a way of life I love and I’m really blessed to be a part of this.

“I have to give special thanks to my grandparents for starting the farm, and my father and uncle for continuing to grow and develop it into what it is today. If not for their hard work and dedication, life would certainly be very different today.”

PHOTO COURTESY NC FARM FAMILIES

Herring



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# Farming through the generations

Salemburg Gin & Cotton Co. was started in 1956 by Otto, Bobby and Fredrick Strickland and Cranford Fann.

COURTESY PHOTO



*Stricklands cultivate the land — and family values — on the farm*

By Kristy D. Carter  
kcarter@clintonnc.com

For generations, the Strickland family has been farming, and while it began many years ago as a business investment, it is now a way of life for the younger Stricklands.

Salemburg Gin & Cotton Company was established in 1956 by Otto

Strickland and his sons, Bobby and Fredrick and Otto's son-in-law Cranford Fann. At the time, the men saw the gin as an investment opportunity, but little did they know, the farm would cultivate generations of Sampson County farmers.

Several years later, Fann left the farm when he was elected as the county's sheriff, and continued to lead a successful career as Sampson County Sheriff for many years. Around the same time that



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**While the Stricklands no longer grow cotton, the name Salemburg Gin & Cotton Co. is widely known to Sampson residents.**

he left the farm, the Strickland brothers bought their fathers shares of the farm, and then transitioned the farm from only growing cotton, to growing tobacco and other row crops such as corn, wheat and soybeans.

The brothers had a vision — they wanted to grow the farm each year, little by little, to better provide for their families. Bobby had four children and Fredrick had three, all of which helped on the farm and learned the necessary skills that were imperative for the farm to continue growing. Farming was the family business, and something that everyone held ownership in.

In the late 1970s, Bobby's oldest son, Sherrill, had just graduated

### **Continued from page 19**

from North Carolina State University with a degree in industrial engineering. Having grown up working on the farm alongside his father, Sherrill had farming in his blood, and decided not to pursue a career in engineering. Instead, he decided to come home to Salemburg to farm with his dad and uncle.

In 1994, Bobby retired from the farm and became the mayor of Salemburg — a position he proudly held for 32 years. Fredrick's youngest son, Clay, also graduated from North Carolina State University with a degree in business management, and decided he, too, would move back home to Salemburg and work on the family farm. In the early 1990's, the Strickland family suffered a great loss, when Fredrick died of cancer. Holding to the precious memories and legacy Fredrick left behind, the Stricklands continued to run the family farm.

Today, the family farm is still known as Salemburg Gin & Cotton Co., even though cotton has been long gone and the farm now focuses on other crops. Currently, there is approximately 2,500 acres being actively tended by the Strickland and crops include conventional and organic tobacco, conventional and organic soybeans, corn, organic wheat, organic sweet potatoes and organic squash.

In recent years, the Strickland family saw an opportunity to diversify their operation with organic crops and produce. The Strickland's are proud to offer a certified organic product to the agriculture community.

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Sherrill, Clay and Sherrill's two sons, Clint and Brandon, who also graduated from North Carolina State University with degrees related to agriculture. Both Clint and Brandon have young children, who they say are being raised on the family farm, and will one day hopefully continue the legacy started by their great-grandfather many years ago.

Sherrill and his wife, Rhonda, raised Clinton and Brandon on the farm. Just like their dad, grandfather and great-grandfather, the brothers have a passion for agriculture, family and Salemburg. Working together at Salemburg Gin & Cotton Co. is a way they can tie the three things together.

According to Clint, he knew from a young age that he wanted to end



Sherrill Strickland, wife Rhonda, and their sons Clint and Brandon and their families.

up back on the farm. In 2011 he and his wife, Allie, made the decision for him to live out his dream of working on the family farm Clint and Allie have since started their family and say they are grateful for the opportunity to carry on the tradition of family farming.

Brandon had several years of a successful career in agriculture banking and lending following graduation from college, but he too, always felt a pull to the family farm and in 2016 Brandon and his wife, Megan, made the decision for him to join the family farm as well. Now, Clint and Brandon each have two children of their own and look forward to raising them on the farm just as they were.

Farming has been very good to us," Clay shared. "But lately it seems to be getting tougher to be profitable in the current climate of

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## Continued from page 21

increased regulatory requirements, extreme weather, higher input costs and lower crop prices. Farming is not as fun as it used to be, that's for sure."

However, for the Strickland family, farming isn't just about earning a paycheck — it brings more to the family like traditions and farm family values. Through farming, both Clint and Brandon said they have learned many values in life.

"The most obvious is hard work," Clint said. "But there are too many to count. There's something about being a part of a farm that puts life into a different perspective than most."

Even Clint's wife Allie says she has learned a little along the way.

"I'll never forget Clint's mom saying to me when he first came home to farm, 'you better be ready to do a lot of 'hurrying up and waiting!' Welcome to the farmer's wife club,' Allie said. "If you don't know what that means, you are not a farmer's wife. Patience is very important in life. Patience is something we all need to learn and continue to work on. I'm thankful that the Lord has provided me with patience in being a farmer's wife. I am also thankful that the Lord has provided me with Clint, who has always been a patient man and demonstrates that daily. We try very hard to instill patience in our girls. It's important for them to learn that things do not always happen in our timing but more importantly, in the Lord's."

***"As much as they love their farming legacy, they put their families first. While crops are important and pay the bills, you can best bet these men aren't going to miss a tee-ball game or dance recital."***

**— Allie Strickland**

"Another is respect — respect for those around you, respect for the world we live in and that provides for us" Clint chimed in. "And to be grateful, the Lord has blessed our family. We can only pray that our girls see how He has provided for generations of our family and that they Praise Him in good times and bad. Especially being farmer's daughters, each year is unpredictable. We never know what challenges we may face on the farm."

Both Sherrill and Clay share having faith in God and that the next generations will be successful in continuing the Salemburg Gin & Cotton Company tradition and farm family values for many years to come. Both work to instill that faith in Clint and Brandon daily.

"Work hard for anything you want in life," Brandon said. "Anything worth doing, is worth doing right. Be a man of your word and integrity."

Brandon's wife Megan works alongside her husband to instill similar values in their children.

"We try demonstrate all of the values a person needs to be successful, not only on the farm but in life," Megan said. "These include good work ethic, respect, responsibility, honesty, being a good listener, conflict



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resolution and so many more. One thing that Brandon is teaching them, whether he realizes it or not, is to pursue your passion. He was encouraged to branch out and try something different for a while, which he did, but his love for the farm was ever present and the boys now get to see him doing what he loves, and I hope they understand how important that is."

The Stricklands value the importance of being close and a farm family. Over the last six decades, the family has endured many years

of the unknown, but the passion for agriculture runs deep — just as the love for the N.C. State Wolfpack.

"As much as they love their farming legacy, they put their families first," Allie said. "While crops are important and pay the bills, you can best bet these men aren't going to miss a tee-ball game or dance recital. The farm has truly evolved over the years and continues to do so with each passing year. The younger generation looks forward to growing diversity in the farm, continuing to find advancements in

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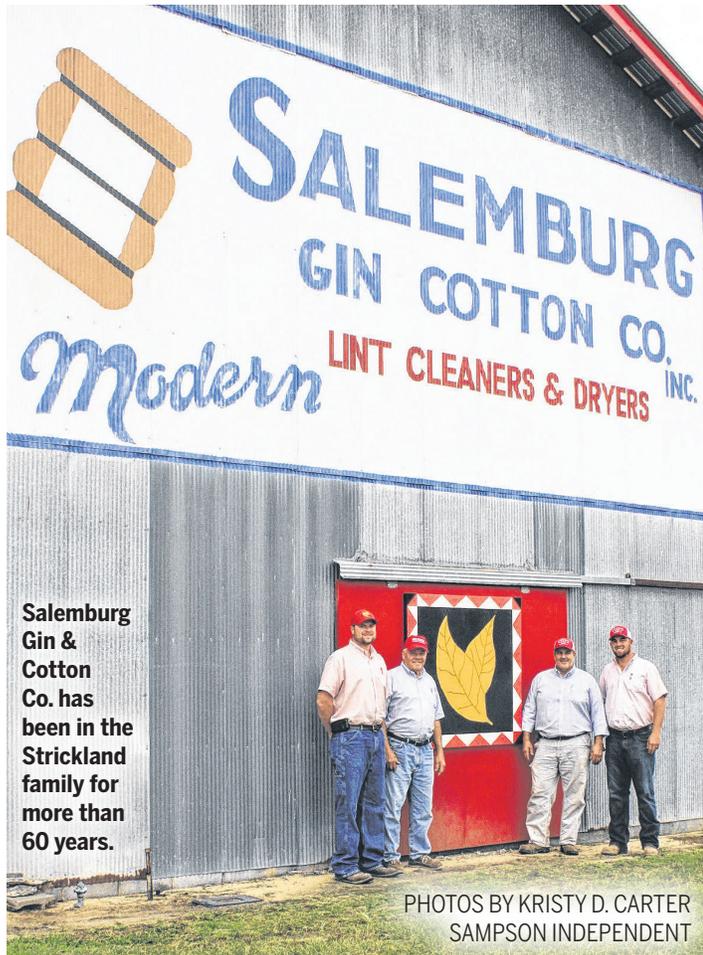


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technology to make the farm more efficient, yet still faces many of the same challenges their family did back in earlier years.”

The Stricklands say they believe that family farms are a huge part of Sampson County and provides the framework for its economic structure. Most of the areas in Sampson County were built due to agriculture.

“We are thankful to be a small part of that here in Salemburg,” Sherrill added.



Salemburg Gin & Cotton Co. has been in the Strickland family for more than 60 years.

PHOTOS BY KRISTY D. CARTER  
SAMPSON INDEPENDENT



From left: Clay Strickland, Sherrill Strickland, Clint Strickland and Brandon Strickland — all owners and operators of Salemburg Gin & Cotton Co.

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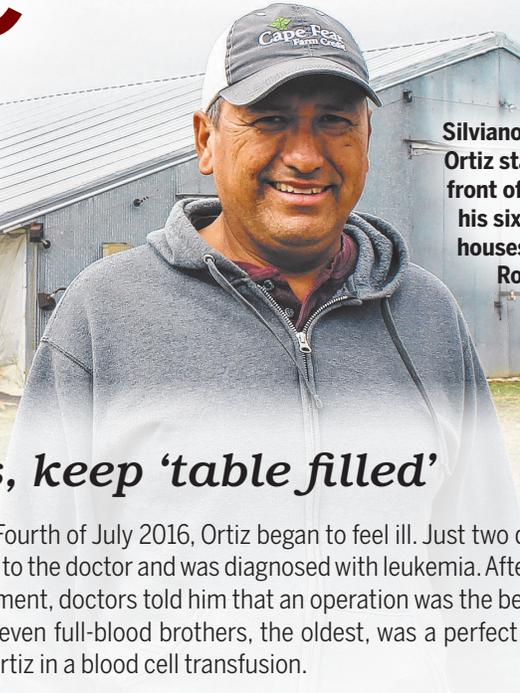
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# Living the American dream



Silviano "Jack" Ortiz stands in front of one of his six turkey houses in the Roseboro area.

## Ortiz works hard to achieve goals, keep 'table filled'

By Chris Berendt  
cberendt@clintonnc.com

Over a 17-acre expanse in the Roseboro area, Silviano "Jack" Ortiz tends to six sizable turkey houses all by himself. He probably should be taking it easy, but he doesn't know any different. He has to work.

While he's on this earth, he will be working. However, two years ago, the Prestage contract grower had a health scare.

On the Fourth of July 2016, Ortiz began to feel ill. Just two days later, he went to the doctor and was diagnosed with leukemia. After months of treatment, doctors told him that an operation was the best option. Of his seven full-blood brothers, the oldest, was a perfect match to assist Ortiz in a blood cell transfusion.

Ortiz had the operation in February 2017 and stayed at the Cancer Treatment Centers of America in Houston, Texas, for 100 days after that. Ortiz was not used to staying still. He returned to Houston twice more in 2017 and again at the beginning of 2018. He was set for another visit to close out 2018, getting monthly check-ups in

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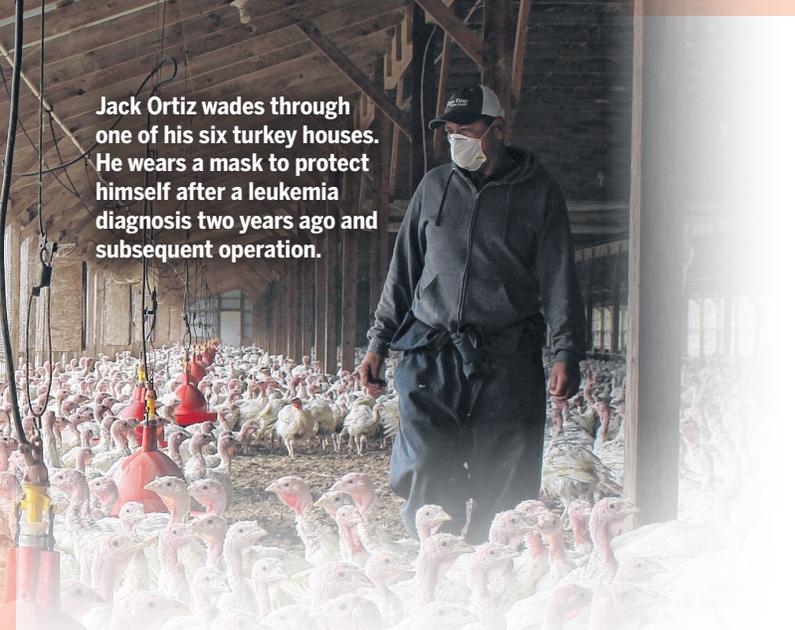
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Jack Ortiz wades through one of his six turkey houses. He wears a mask to protect himself after a leukemia diagnosis two years ago and subsequent operation.



## Continued from page 27

While getting treatment for his leukemia, Ortiz had some time on his hands and picked up the Bible. He said sometimes at church, one can tend to have the words from the pastor hit them and bounce off. He delved into the text, and he's content. He sees the illness as a blessing in disguise, considering himself lucky for having faced a life-altering situation, dealing with it head on with the hope of ultimately overcoming it.

It also hasn't slowed him down.

He went out and bought the best protective mask he could find, one with ventilation on either side. He also regularly dons more layers of clothing than he needs.

"I couldn't stay away," said Ortiz. "I had to go in there and do something."

between at the Southeastern Medical Oncology Center in Clinton.

Doctors now tell him there is an 80 percent chance the leukemia doesn't come back, but caution him to guard against the 20 percent. That means taking it easy, not exposing yourself to the elements — cutting grass, outside debris — anything that might adversely affect the body.

Working in turkey houses, where litter dust is kicked up frequently, is not ideal. But that is living for Ortiz. He has to work.

"All my life I've been working two jobs, then you stop working and it's like your life fell apart," said Ortiz.

He just recently quit his other job as a torch operator at DuBose Steel in Roseboro. Having two jobs is nothing to Ortiz. It's practically a walk in the park now that he is simply raising 40,000 turkeys, albeit still not at 100 percent.

"I have six kids and I always wanted to make sure I had a full table for my kids," said Ortiz, whose children now range in age from 10 to 26. "You can't complain. Some people never work and they die. You have to work; you have to contribute. My dad and mom taught me how to work. That's the best thing you can learn from your parents."

Ortiz laughs and shakes his head when he talks about some households today where children just get expensive things from their



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parents. When Ortiz was growing up, he not only worked, he worked to help out the family. There was not extra money for a new \$200 pair of shoes or a gaming console. It was money for the household, he said.

Growing up as a young boy in Mexico, Ortiz had a dream to raise his family in America, to own a home and 50 acres of land. Leukemia was a roadblock in that pursuit of happiness, but not a death sentence. Ortiz is grateful for it.

"I've learned throughout my years that life is full of challenges and opportunities," Ortiz stated. "Growing up in Mexico I often heard of the opportunities available in America — opportunities that I longed to be a part of."

At 16 years old, with a middle school education, Ortiz came to America and started working on a ranch. He worked in Florida during the mid-1980s, picking tomatoes and working in the processing and packaging plant. He would make trips to North Carolina too, harvesting peppers and blueberries, and cropping tobacco.

While not completely satisfied with working in the fields, Ortiz enjoyed a life in agriculture and went where the work was.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act enacted in 1986, known as Reagan Amnesty, reformed United States immigration law, requiring employers to attest to their employees' immigration status and making it illegal to hire or recruit illegal immigrants knowingly.

Ortiz needed a green card to stay in the United States, and he got one.

"Since 1986, I've never had a day off, because I've always looked to work," said Ortiz, who wonders how people could talk about not finding a job when he's worked two nearly his whole life. "They're not going to come to you," he said of employers with jobs. "You have to go to them."

***"I have six kids and I always wanted to make sure I had a full table for my kids. You can't complain. Some people never work and they die. You have to work; you have to contribute. My dad and mom taught me how to work. That's the best thing you can learn from your parents."***

**— Silvano "Jack" Ortiz**



**Jack Ortiz is responsible for raising 40,000 turkeys as a contract grower for Prestage Farms.**



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## Continued from page 29

In the early 1990s, Ortiz worked at Nash Johnson in Duplin County for five years. With five people under him, he was working 70-80 hours a week for \$7.50 an hour. He went on to work for similar wages as a Prestage employee. With three children at the time, he did what he had to do to keep the table filled.

After a stint in Missouri, Ortiz returned to North Carolina in 2000 and began working for Charles Williams on the property he now calls his own. Earning a meager wage to start, Ortiz got a raise after the first week when Williams saw how hard Ortiz worked.

That hard work bred success.

After working diligently for Williams over the years, in 2012, Williams and Ortiz became business partners and entered an agreement by which Ortiz leased the 17 acres off Marion Amos Road from Williams. In 2017, in the midst of his own sickness and five years into their 10-year lease-to-purchase agreement, Ortiz met with Williams and, with the assistance of Cape Fear Farm Credit and guidance from his mentor Williams, a deal was struck to purchase the farm outright.

Ortiz Farms was his and a dream had been fulfilled.

"I've owned this since last year," said Ortiz. "I wanted 50 acres of land with a house right in the middle of it."

Owning 17 acres of land with turkey houses on it and residing on another stretch of property just down the road, Ortiz is living the American dream — working hard to one day own something, carving out a place for himself and his family.

"America is the best country to work and to live," he said, echoing the words he uttered to the person administering his U.S. Citizenship test over a decade ago. "I want to contribute and provide a better future and opportunities for my family. I am thankful to be a part of agriculture and to be able to provide for my wife and six children."

Along with his six children, he now has two grandchildren, another generation that will know what hard work is. Even through obstacles, hardships and illness, grandpa Ortiz will show them.

"I can't complain," said Ortiz, pulling his layers back in place after a quick break, ready to go back to work. "I know one day we gotta go. Something happened to me, but I'm not afraid. I'm thankful."



**The 17-acre expanse off Marion Amos Road is the prize for a lifetime of working by Jack Ortiz, who grew up in Mexico and worked in the fields before owning his own operation.**



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