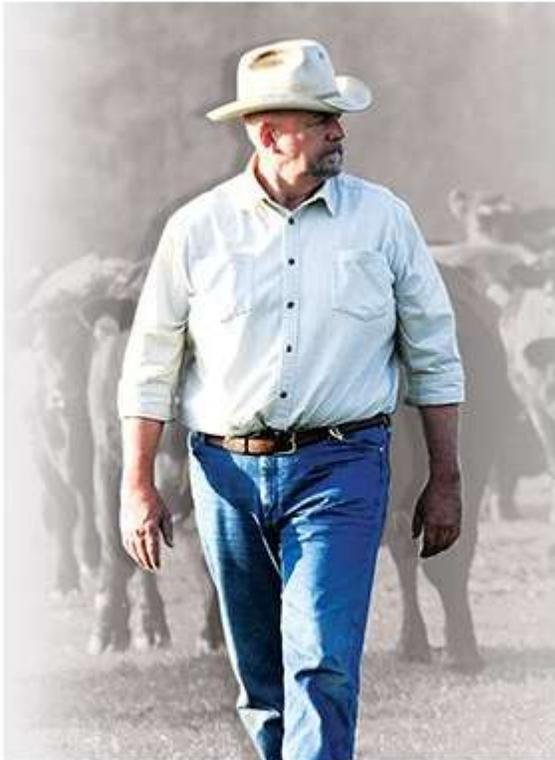


GeorgiaTrend

2014 Most Respected Business Leader

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Susan Percy



Full Circle: Will Harris of White Oak Pastures

www.herbpilcher.com

Will Harris calls his farmland in Bluffton, along Highway 27 in Southwest Georgia, “a magic place.” Not in a mystical sense, he’ll tell you quickly, but in more elemental terms of weather and soil. “It’s where meteorology meets geology,” he says. “It’s green 52 weeks a year – a microclimate that teems with life.”

Harris has turned that land, which has been in his family since 1866, into the largest USDA Certified Organic farm in Georgia, with a strong commitment to animal welfare. It’s a \$25-million operation that is one of the country’s most successful environmentally sustainable farms.

White Oak Pastures produces, processes and sells grass-fed beef, free-range chicken and eight other species – all raised humanely on the farm with no hormones, no antibiotics, no pesticides, no cages, no chemical feed. Harris, a University of Georgia ag school alum, won the UGA Award of Excellence in 2008 and the Governor’s Award for Environmental Stewardship in 2011.

For his achievements in combining sustainable agriculture with business success, Harris, president of White Oak Pastures, is Georgia Trend’s Most Respected Business Leader for 2014.

He wasn’t always an organic farmer, though; he ran White Oak Pastures as a high-volume, high-profit cattle business for many years, switching from conventional methods in the mid-’90s.

“OK,” he says with a grin, “the question I hate for people to ask – I’ll go ahead and cut right to it: ‘What caused you to switch?’

“I’m always embarrassed that I don’t have a ‘burning bush’ story. Moses didn’t come by with some stuff written on a tablet,” he says. “I just became increasingly disgusted with the excesses.



“I graduated from college in ‘76, and in my 20s there were a lot of things that were exciting to me – I loved those excesses. They were good; they made me money. In the ‘90s I was in my 40s, and I was less and less enamored with those excesses. I wanted to embrace a kinder, gentler agriculture. We went, financially, from being in what I thought was really good shape to losing money and going broke to catching traction before we got in real trouble, back to a business that is cash-flow positive and profitable.”

Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture Gary Black admires Harris as a farmer and a businessman. “Will has a deep passion for agriculture and a deep passion for the land and for his family, and it shows very plainly,” he says. “He set a vision for his farm to have generational impact.” He notes that Harris was an early and enthusiastic supporter of the re-introduced Georgia Grown Program.

On the business side, Black says, “Will is one of the brightest marketers that I know. He saw a market and saw an opportunity, and he really seized the moment just at the right time.”

The Land, The Animals

In the middle of a tour of the farm, Harris steers his mud-splattered truck off the road. “Want to see something cute?” he asks, and bumps his way across a field, stopping near a nanny goat standing with her two babies. “Just born last night,” he says as the goats scamper off.

Later, he pauses to point out a pair of bald eagles circling high above a pasture full of cows and chickens. “We’ve got 10 bald eagles on the property. People ask if I’m worried about the chickens. But I’m not. A bald eagle doesn’t hunt for sport – it kills to eat. I believe they seek out the weaker birds – they don’t take out the healthy birds.

“But now the sharp-toothed predators,” – coyotes, foxes – “they kill because they can. I want them gone.”

Harris has a natural solution for that, too: seven Great Pyrenees, large dogs traditionally bred to guard livestock, who stand sentry over the flocks to keep predators at bay.

On the farm – he owns 1,250 acres and leases another 1,500 – animals graze freely in open fields. Cattle feed on grass, sheep eat the weeds and chickens peck at the grubs and insects; White Oak Pastures also raises goats, hogs, rabbits, turkeys, guineas, geese and ducks. The farm produces pastured eggs and grows 40 kinds of heritage vegetables for its Community Supported Agriculture program (CSA).

There are no sedentary, obese or feedlot-confined cattle here; no hormone-numbered chickens packed together in crowded houses. “Our poultry can fly,” he says, as an obliging chicken takes off to demonstrate.

The only time his animals’ feet touch concrete, Harris says, is when they go to the abattoirs. Animals are slaughtered and processed on the farm – no long rides in crowded trucks to get to distant out-of-state plants. White Oak Pastures is the only farm in the country with USDA-inspected meat and poultry plants on the premises.

Solar panels provide 40 percent of the energy for the meat and poultry abattoirs, both zero-waste facilities. Animal remains are reprocessed and used as fertilizer. Nothing is



wasted. Even the fry grease from the farm's Pavilion Restaurant (open to the public), where employees eat for \$1, is converted into biodiesel fuel.

"It's a simple business with a lot of parts," Harris says. He likes to quote Dr. George Washington Carver, the Tuskegee agricultural scientist: "In nature, there is no waste. ... I take a few pages out of his playbook."

Family And Stewardship

Two of Harris's three daughters and a son-in-law work with him at White Oak Pastures, the fifth generation of the family to work the land. He didn't consciously make the change to sustainable farming "to create a better business environment for my children to come back to," he says, "but I pretty quickly recognized that it could do that."

He has 90 employees – making him one of the area's largest employers. "They are quality jobs," he says with pride, "and I contribute to a health plan."

It was his great-grandfather, James Edward Harris, a Confederate Cavalry captain, who came to Bluffton after the Civil War. He had lost his family land in Quitman County but had an uncle who was a doctor in the area and helped him get established. He bought the farm that is now White Oak Pastures; some 100 of his former slaves came with him and helped him work the land.

Harris's father took over the farm at the end of World War II and made White Oak Pastures into an industrial farm. Harris went to college, came back home and "made it more industrial" before he changed things. "It took a century and a half to come full circle," he says.

He is passionate on the subject of environmental stewardship in its broadest sense, incorporating sustainability and especially animal welfare, which he defines as giving animals an ability to express instinctive behavior.

"We used to think as long as we didn't inflict pain and suffering, that was animal welfare," he says, "but that's not enough." There's a strong sense of responsibility.

"I steward the herds and flocks at White Oak Pastures, and I steward the land of White Oak Pastures and the people of White Oak Pastures," he says. "That's all I do, all I think about, all I [can] pass on."

Harris doesn't regret the years he spent in conventional cattle farming; conditions weren't right for his kind of sustainable agriculture. It produces healthier products – grass-fed beef is lower in total fat and higher in vitamin E and the B vitamins, Harris says – but not cheaper. "It's only in the last 10 years or so that there is a market for higher priced products," he says.

"I did what you were supposed to do in the 1970s – produced more pounds of beef and kept 'improving' things. If I had tried to change over in the '70s, I would have gone broke."

Agriculture after World War II, when his father began running the farm, had three guiding tenets, Harris says: centralize, industrialize, commoditize. "It was done to make food abundant, cheap and safe, but there were unintended consequences to animal welfare and environmental



sustainability – and it led to the impoverishment of rural America.

“That doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t have done what we did,” he says. The math has to work – the operation has to be economically viable. Nor is he out to convert those who have not changed over.

“I’m not an evangelist, I’m a farmer,” he says. But he believes that White Oak Pastures has a higher purpose.

“The old way was [to raise] the most pounds of beef at the lowest possible production cost – using drugs, antibiotics, hormones, artificial feedstock, confinement feeding. That was the mindset I brought, but [I realized] I can’t keep growing and farming like that.”

Alice Rolls, executive director of Georgia Organics, where Harris served as a board member for many years, talks of his unique role: “He’s really helped bridge the gap between the large commercial farms and the very small organic farms. In that sense, he is not only a wonderful, sustainable rancher, but he is helping build the infrastructure we need. It takes risk, and it takes investment. He’s an inspiration and a role model.”

Economics, History

Harris is a businessman, ever conscious of the bottom line. “This is not a hobby, it’s not a philanthropy, it’s a business – it feeds my family and 90 others. It’s got to work – got to make a profit, be cash-flow positive. I’m not getting rich doing it.” White Oak Pastures, he says, “makes money every year, we take good care of the property, we have no debt.”

Still, the transition to sustainable farming wasn’t easy. “I went from making money to losing money,” and he came to grips with the realization that “if something doesn’t change, I will go broke.” The turn-around was gradual but solid, a combination of factors. “We got some traction,” he says. Demand increased. Whole Foods and Publix Super Markets began carrying his meat products.

“Meat came very late to the good food movement,” Harris says. “The whole movement started in the ‘70s and ‘60s. Organic vegetables seemed to catch some traction very early on, part of the whole hippie, get-back-to-nature thing. It wasn’t until the ‘90s that people started talking about meat.”

He credits Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and the ground-breaking article, “Power Steer,” published in the *New York Times Magazine* more than a decade ago, for raising awareness.

“I think when we industrialized, commoditized and centralized meat production, we made meat so abundant and cheap that for the first time affluent people could just eat filets. It became a common cut of steak. On down the food chain, people with less disposable income ate ground beef.

“Then people started giving consideration to how an animal was raised. That had been forgotten. It’s a consideration people had to pay more for,” he says. “It costs more to raise an animal in an



environment in which it can express instinctive behavior than to raise one in an environment where you're just not inflicting pain and discomfort.

"Then environmental sustainability became something that people considered – not to have [commercial operations] that dumped a lot of animal waste effluent in streams that would percolate down to groundwater. It became something people would pay more for."

No GreenWashing

Harris is asked if there is any middle ground between large-scale conventional cattle raising and the high animal welfare standards he uses.

The expression on his face answers the question: You either do it or you don't.

"You're talking about environmental greenwashing," he says with scorn. "[People who say] I use way less pesticide this year than I did last year." Or claim chickens are free-range because there's a small open area just outside the chicken house. "Or 'cage-free broilers.' There's 23,000 of those poor bastards in that house, but there's no cages in there.

"Greenwashing," he repeats. "They're already changing some miniscule, meaningless little component of production and saying, 'Hey, us, too!'"

As for meaningful, in-between steps? "I don't really know how you do that. I know how to do it both ways.

"One thing really unusual about us is we are one of the few places where somebody came from mainstream industrial and went this way. Most of the people who do what we do for a living came here from somewhere else – software, or executive salesmen who inherited a farm or something. I know who the players are. There aren't many of the people who used to be one of the good old boys and came over here." He laughs. "I sound like a reformed prostitute."

Then a tougher question: Is food likely to become even more politicized by class, so the well-to-do can eat healthily and the poor cannot?

"From the perspective that wealthier people have more money than poor people and this food costs more than other food, that potential is there," Harris says. "That is not the way I see it shaking out. Our customers – I rarely refer to them as rich people, I refer to them as sophisticated people. A lot of rich people want the biggest grain-fed, rib-eye steak they can buy. That's not my customer.

"Decisions to eat our kind of food versus commodity foods have more to do with sophistication – not income."

He uses simple arithmetic to make his point: Say, for example, you're an average American who spends 10 percent of your income on food. If Harris's food costs 30 percent more than conventionally raised food, you could eat it for 13 percent of your income. "That's not cost-prohibitive. Something you spent 10 percent on goes up 30 percent – that doesn't overwhelm you.



“After a point,” he says, “that’s not true. If you’re one of the people spending 80 percent of what you make on food, you can’t do it.”

The Long View

There’s no secret to Harris’s success, but he does have an explanation: “We were really good commodity cow producers – my father and me. Just our very nature is we’re very linear, western, alpha male. A little is good, more is better. That’s in the DNA – nature and nurture. When we – or I, my daddy was dead – started down this road for this kinder, gentler, sustainable, humane deal, in some ways I brought this same mindset to it. I made the decision to uncompromisingly raise high animal welfare [standards, to do] high environmental stewardship farming, but I brought the linear, western, alpha male mores.”

His kind of farming gives him some freedom larger operations don’t have. “Most big ag companies – I’m not talking about farms, I’m talking about agricultural processors; most of them are big, multi-national stock companies, beholden to the shareholders to maximize their per share earnings or stock values.

“The advantage – or disadvantage – that I have over those guys is I can take the long view. I can not use any chemical fertilizers, and in some number of years we’ll be better off.”

Harris doesn’t see a lot of expansion, although he is excited about Internet sales: “There’s no one between us and the customer.” He would like to branch out into some specialty items – jams, jellies, even pet food.

“We raise all the animals we process here except for cattle and a few sheep. We have to buy a few of those from other farmers, friends and neighbors who raise them with the same protocol.

“My goal would be for some angel investor – we don’t have enough money – to buy 10,000 or 15,000 acres of land that we could improve like we did this.”

Despite all the accolades, Harris is uncomfortable with the word pioneer.

“We haven’t invented anything. Everything we do here, there’s a lot of other people doing it,” he says. “One thing that makes us different – we do way more of it and are doing it on a larger scale than probably anyone else in the country. Early innovator, maybe – pioneer is somebody who started something nobody else is doing. We’re not doing a damn thing that other people aren’t doing. Our claim to fame is we scale it up.”

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