

Moving Green

Green houses, buildings and communities are the next direction in development.

BY CHRIS MCFADYEN

PHOTOS BY DENNIS HOLT

CAN BALDWIN COUNTY FARMS STILL BE SAVED?

Tommy Swearingen's savvy plans for his family farm and a conservation community may be the vision that can rescue our priceless neck of the woods.

A sparkling green island in Baldwin County's suburban sprawl is two square miles called Beebe Farm. Hemmed in on all sides—the expanding suburbs of Bay Minette to the north and the newly platted, 1,000-acre Lingleaf Golf Community of Spanish Fort to the south—it is one of the few big working farms that has not bowed to the Gulf Coast's towering real estate prices.

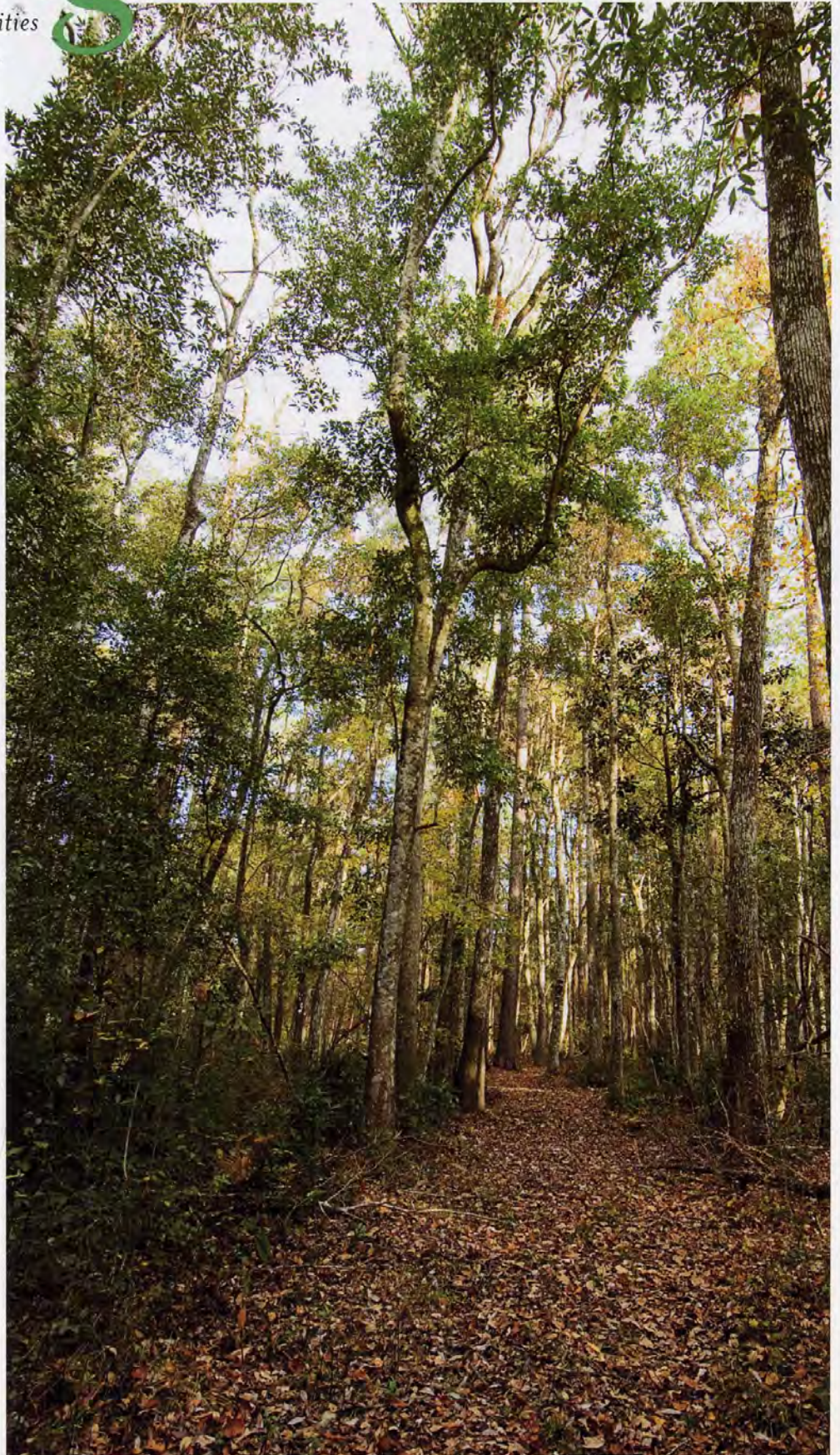
Owner, **Tommy Swearingen**, set aside 300 of the total 1,146-acres of Beebe Farm to be farmland forever.

That's the part with the prime agricultural soil, the part that undulates along both sides of Baldwin County 40—the part realtors covet most.

"Quite a few real estate people have wanted to buy the farm. Some think they can even buy the conservation plan," says Swearingen. "It's not something they understand. They think they can wait out the feds. But they can't. This is permanent, irrevocable."

Swearingen traded the federal government his development rights on those 300 acres in exchange for tax deductions. The deal is part of a seven-year-old USDA initiative, the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRLPP) to preserve agricultural land, threatened by development. Swearingen was one of the first to qualify in Alabama, after the state program began in 2003. (al.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/frpp.html)

Now, those 300 prime farm acres are the centerpiece for another land use vision: a conservation community. Twenty-five homes will be built inside a 1,146-acre preserved landscape. "It's





ABOVE Tommy Swearingen with his 1953 Chevrolet farm truck "These days, everybody wants to go to the urban fringe, buy a 20-acre piece of the land, have a horse farm, maybe a tractor," says Swearingen. "New Holland even sells a tractor named after these people, the Boomer." But, by the time you do all that, you've spent more money than it would cost to be here." DauerWalden's land acreage includes forest, pasture and wetlands.

like living inside a private park, permanently protected," says Swearingen.

The community is called DauerWalden (dauerwalden.com), and it is as high-minded as its name sounds. (German for "enduring," plus that Thoreau place). Swearingen has a doctorate in forestry and was a professor of natural resource policy at Maine's Unity College, which styles itself "America's Environmental College."

"I would like to preserve everything that's not residential, or about 1,000 acres," says Swearingen, who acquired ownership of the family farm from relatives over the last 20 years. The FRLPP is exclusive to prime crop and pasture land, so other types of conservation easements will have to preserve the balance: 150 acres of pasture, 850 acres of longleaf pine forest, and 150 acres of hardwood bottomland.

"There are increasing numbers of conservation communities across the country," says Swearingen, "but, the density of housing to preserved land in DauerWalden is dramatically lower. To the best of my knowledge, the lowest in the eastern United States."

First on the market were 17 three-acre lots in a designated subdivision. More recently surveyed are five 20-acre tracts and three five-acre tracts. Smaller subdivision lots call for conventional-style houses. On a 20-acre tract, you can build an environmentally innovative "earthship." All construction calls for EarthCraft or EnergyStar certification.

All home sites are priced at around \$200,000 each, quite a bargain, considering what comes with it, says Swearingen. "It may seem expensive, if you think of it as a three-acre lot. But you're not just buying a lot. You're buying a landscape—everything, from the barn to the tractors. And, you don't have to learn how to manage large tracts of land. Plus, you don't have to worry about someone coming along and putting in a wrecking yard next door to your fence."



ABOVE The **Jayne Swearingen** farmhouse, circa 1914. Tommy Swearingen is making the old house more green friendly. Beebe Farm's more than 400 animals include Tennessee Walking and Racking horses, donkeys, ponies, Holstein and other cattle, black belly Barbados sheep, African pygmy goats, Nubian goats, Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs, rabbits, cats, dogs, peacocks, guineas, emus, turkeys, ducks, geese, parrots, doves and laying chickens. If they choose, residents of DauerWalden can buy a cooperative share of the farm, or just sit back and enjoy the view. **RIGHT** One of the farm's heritage breed Scotch Highland cattle. School groups often visit the farm (dauerwalden.com).



BELOW Amanda Johnson feeds and pets Ella, half pygmy and half La Mancha goat. Ella likes to ride with Amanda as she makes her rounds feeding the animals. **BOTTOM** The bird barn is a two-thirds replica of a traditional southern horse barn.



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