

Interview of Bobby Stephenson, Farmer and Farm Supply Store Owner

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Bobby Stephenson, an 85-year-old retired farmer and former farm supply store owner, grew up on the farm. His earliest memory is following his daddy around the farm as he worked, asking him if he could help milk the cows. There were no grocery stores; general stores carried everything. All of the family's sustenance was grown and made on the farm. His mom made the buttermilk and the butter. She grew and canned and preserved all the food they ate. He sees farming as a good life. He says: *You are your own boss, if you want to go fishing, then quit working and go fishing.*

Bobby picked up farming skills from his daddy. At age 7, he was finally allowed to milk the cow. He began milking the cow twice a day and continued this chore until the day he graduated from high school and got married in 1954. Only then did he quit milking and sold the cow.

He and his new wife, Thelma, moved into a house on a farm that they leased and started growing tobacco. He began to acquire farm equipment. He first bought a mule to pull the plow. He also bought a looping horse. When the tobacco was brought in from the field into the curing barn, he would tie it in bundles onto tobacco sticks on the looping horse, a process called looping. He took the tobacco to be auctioned at the warehouses in Fuquay and in Varina. Both auction houses eventually burned down, and later, an auction warehouse was rebuilt at Five Points.

During this time, there were allotments on tobacco. Allotments gave farmers a quota of total pounds of tobacco they could grow, this was a license to sell a certain poundage of tobacco. He felt he was being undercut; so he got out of tobacco farming in 1956 and went to work at a service station. Here, he made \$50 a week greasing, pumping gas, and changing oil.

Eventually he got back into farming in 1958 growing vegetables and tobacco. In 1959 he bought his own tractor, a CUB, which did the work of two mules plowing. He really got into farming in the 1960's when he rented a farm, starting with 20 acres of tobacco, soybeans, corn and wheat, which expanded into 80 acres of tobacco and 50 acres of soybeans. When harvest time came, he worked 20 people from July to September, teaching them to run the farm equipment and to loop tobacco. He started buying bigger tractors, and bought 5 of them. Then, he purchased a combine for \$17,000, which he ran into a pecan tree, straightened it out and traded in for a two-row harvester.

Farming had been slowly going out, and he left farming in 1980. He sold of his equipment when he finally left farming. After 1980, he went to work with his brother-in-law in his farm supply store, Powell & Powell Supply, one of the biggest farm supply stores in Wake County. Besides farm supplies and seed, they made their own fertilizer, bagged it, and ran trucks to go out and spread it. They had one truck in Sanford and two in Fuquay with tanks on the trucks for spraying. Soon, he was asked to run the store in the Sanford location.

Bobby says the basic things people have to learn about farming they learn from a mentor, they grow up with it. Going to college to learn farming makes you just a little smarter. He recalls one time that he told his two sons to clean out the pack house. They cleaned out the poison and dumped it in the pond. He

lost 25 calves, all but 15 cows, and a bull. He had to get a backhoe to bury the cows. This mistake cost him \$10,000.

Things that you must know to be a successful farmer are your market, your equipment, and financing (unless you inherit a farm). A majority of farmers today have to borrow money to farm. The last year he was in farming, he borrowed \$100,000. There are a few in this area who still tend tobacco and soy beans. There is not much corn to feed the livestock or hay in this area because there is no money in growing corn; the yield is low, 75 bushels per acre.

Bobby has, in turn, passed on his knowledge and skills to the next generation. Having always had hogs and cows on his farm, he helped his son, Ronnie, to start a successful hog farm. In addition, at age 80, he helped start The Garden of Eaten, a garden that grows food to donate to the homeless and others who are in need of food. He is currently the Garden Manager of the Garden of Eaten, and all who work in the Garden are mentored by him in the wisdoms of farming, along with an extra big helping of farm stories.