

AG & NATURAL RESOURCES

“THANK A FARMER” SERIES: 79 Years Ago

Elbert County Extension is excited to introduce the “Thank a Farmer” series for our newsletter. Our goal is to highlight local farms, farm families, and some history of Elbert County. We believe that Agriculture in Elbert County plays a major role in our local economy, the development of our youth, and the strength of our heritage. We hope you enjoy!

79 years ago, Mary Jean Smith “helped” in the family’s garden. She was just 2 years old, living in Nebraska, in some very difficult times. “Those were the Dust Bowl days, you know.” Mary Jean recalls carrying water from a spring-fed creek to water the vegetables, and picking insects off the plants, since they had no chemicals available. Mary Jean remembers hunting with her father on horseback at the age of 5.” He would shoot jack rabbits and my job was to get down off the horse and get them. And they would kick!” Her mother would grind the tough meat into burger to feed the family of eleven. “We grew up on homemade bread and hamburger gravy.” They would also milk cows and sell the cream to supplement the family’s income. Her father loved red zinnias, so that was part of the garden too.



Although the family eventually moved away from farm life, Mary Jean always worked in agriculture. One of the hardest jobs she ever had was managing a group of 12 teenagers. Their job was to remove the tassels from corn plants so that they could control crosspollination. The teens would take two rows each and Mary Jean would follow them for miles, in zigzag fashion, making sure they were thorough. She recounts a problem she had with one young individual. He was the preacher’s kid. “I got hard boiled with him, preacher’s kid or no!” He was eventually transferred to another unit of the company.

Mary Jean found her way to Elbert County after moving south at the age of 59. She moved to Anderson, SC with her second husband after he got a job with FedEx air maintenance. She met John in Nebraska while working with a crop-dusting crew. He flew a crop duster and she drove the beacon truck which helped the pilots navigate. “They could go five miles at a time in a straight row”, she recounts. Mary Jean was good at the job due to her clear radio voice. She would transmit between the dispatch and the pilots. She and husband John found the Elbert County property after picking up a real estate brochure at a local gas station. John and Mary Jean cleared much of the property themselves. She would not use a power saw, so many of the pine trees she cut with an ax.



A visit to Mary Jean’s farm today reveals a neatly kept garden with vegetables, fruit trees, many ornamental shrubs, and of course her father’s favorite, red zinnias. Husband John has since passed, and all of Mary Jean’s children live a good distance. Her mother would always say “mind and body busy”, and Mary Jean truly lives by that philosophy. If you want to see the fruits of Mary Jean’s labor, visit the Elberton Farmers Market on Wednesday mornings during growing season. Mary Jean will be there, and has been faithfully for 8 years since its inception. In fact, she is one of the founding members.

The week of August 2nd - 8th is National Farmers Market Week. Elberton Farmers Market operates seasonally from April to December and is located on the downtown square. The hours of operation are typically from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. So, let’s celebrate National Farmers Market Week by thanking a farmer. Specifically, let’s thank Mary Jean Smith.