



For Release: September 4, 2014

Knoxville sisters chosen to receive Farmland Owner Award from Practical Farmers of Iowa

KNOXVILLE, Iowa — Charlotte Shivers, Martha Shivers Skillman and Marietta Shivers Carr have been chosen as the recipients of the 2014 Farmland Owner Award, granted annually by Practical Farmers of Iowa to non-operator landowners who have shown a commitment to managing their land for long-term sustainability of farm businesses, environmental quality, soil productivity, rural communities and the next generation.

"They impressed me with their effort to educate themselves about more sustainable farming practices," says Ann Cromwell, who farms near Williamsburg and serves on Practical Farmers' board of directors, which selected the award recipients. "I was also impressed by their diligence in ensuring the land would be well cared for, such as searching for a farmer with the skills and interest, including language in the sales contract to clearly communicate this attitude and the family time needed to ensure their heirs were supportive."

Charlotte, Martha and Marietta inherited 520 acres of land in the Knoxville area in 1990. From the start of their new role as landowners, the sisters sought to find a tenant who would farm the land sustainably. The search took them 12 years, but when they found the right person – James Petersen, the son of their first cousin – they set up fair rental terms for Jim to farm 160 acres of the land.

A few years later, the sisters sold that parcel to Jim at below-market rates in exchange for a contract that would enshrine their values of good stewardship and long-term conservation. In 2012, the sisters started renting their remaining 320 acres to Jim, and have since worked to understand and guide the farming practices used on the land.

"Receiving this award has been a lovely surprise," says Charlotte, who lives with her husband, Bob Baker, on the farm in the house where she was born. "It's nice to know that someone notices we've been working hard all these years to manage the land."

She adds that the award is especially meaningful because now all three sisters have returned to Iowa. Oldest sister, Marietta, recently moved from Seattle to a memory care facility in Indianola. Middle sister, Martha, was the first to return and lives across the road from Charlotte in the former tenant house. All three had left the state after high school, Marietta to become a secretary, then medical administrator; Martha an occupational therapist and landscape gardener; and Charlotte a realtor and Unitarian Universalist minister.

"Charlotte and I have been the ones most directly active with the farm," says Martha, "but Marietta has been an integral piece. She put the final seal on selling the 160 acres to the Petersens, declaring that finding someone who would take care of the land, and putting some deed restrictions on it, was more important than getting top dollar."

A deeply rooted land ethic

Charlotte and Martha both credit their parents with instilling in them a belief in caring for the land – a "land ethic" they say was passed through the generations to their father, John Shivers, and on to them.

"This ran deep in us. Our parents didn't just repeat it from time to time, but it was obvious in the way we saw farming done," Charlotte says. "My father was a leader in contour farming, terraces, rotating crops, new crops – and

I can remember his joy coming to the side door and calling, 'Vera, get the girls, come see, the flax is in bloom!' It was more than a mission to take care of the land; there was joy in it – joy in this relationship with the land."

Martha recalls how her father would speak often, and with conviction, about his connection to the land: "We might be moving sheep, and he would get off his horse and stand looking over the land and say, 'The land isn't ours. It's ours to use, and to pass on better than we got it.' I took that first part consciously to heart, that you respect and take care of the land – like it's your best friend."

When the sisters inherited the land, they faced the same choice many landowners today grapple with: sell all or part of the land and walk away with the cash; or keep it and work to maintain the legacy of their ancestors. For the trio, there was no question. While each sister was living out of state at the time, they felt a strong connection to the farm. They formed the "Shivvers Fair Acres" partnership and took turns serving as managing partner. Martha served first and Charlotte is the current managing partner.

Fairness in name and deed

Charlotte says that in addition to teaching respect for the land, her parents believed in fairness. This value is captured, not just in the name of the sisters' partnership, but in their approach to managing their land. "We were raised with that value too. It's as if there are two meanings of the word 'fair' in 'Fair Acres': 'fair' as in beautiful land, and 'fair' as in considerate treatment of each other."

Today, Jim and Julie Petersen and their children farm corn and soybeans, including both conventional and certified organic row crops in a five-year rotation; organic oats; hay; and pasture. The family also has a cow-calf operation and lambing ewes that are rotationally grazed.

But this success almost didn't come to pass. During the farm crisis of the 1980s, Jim's father, Folmer – the husband of the sisters' first cousin, Norma – confided to Charlotte during a family reunion that they were in financial trouble and might lose the farm. Charlotte suggested he seek a loan from her mother, Vera Shivvers. The sisters helped, and because Folmer was looking to transition the farm to Jim, Vera loaned Jim the money needed to save the farm.

"We learned to trust Jim and Julie that way," Martha says. "Then I discovered Jim was trying different sustainable farming methods that we hadn't been able to get our farm operators to do, and his sons were interested in organic farming." The sisters started renting to him in 2004. They created a lease whereby landlord and tenant shared the risks yet had a cash-rent arrangement.

When the sisters decided to sell that land to the Petersens with good stewardship provisions embedded in the sale contract, Martha recalls that the force of the second half of her father's quote – about passing on the land – suddenly hit her.

"How did money alone get to be so important?" she says. "Top dollar should not be the guide. You need to know you can trust the next person to be a good caretaker."

Be patient, persist and communicate

Martha advises farmland owners to be patient, and to persevere in finding someone who shares their particular farm goals. "Don't be satisfied with the first operator to express interest. It took us over 12 years to find a farm operator who shared our goals of sustainability – who wanted to produce abundance, but also to save good land and water."

Both sisters emphasize the importance of good communication – between landowner and farm operator, but also between family members. When they first formed the Shivvers Fair Acres partnership, Martha insisted the trio go into counseling together to ensure that their differences did not get in the way of caring for the farm. “It was clarifying communication,” Charlotte says, “and it helped straighten things out each year.”

Martha adds that Jim’s openness to discussing ideas about the direction of the farm was a key factor in building trust with him. She believes that just as it’s vital for landowners to have an open back-and-forth with their farm operators, they also must have a reciprocal relationship with the land. “My land nourishes me as a landowner with food, beauty and money, and by the same token, I want to nourish the farm by seeking ideas for the best way to care for it.”

Suggestions for future recipients of the Farmland Owner Award can be sent to Teresa Opheim at teresa@practicalfarmers.org or (515) 232-5661. Anyone who owns land but does not labor on it is eligible.

###

Founded in 1985, Practical Farmers of Iowa is an open, supportive and diverse organization of farmers and friends of farmers that seeks to strengthen farms and communities through farmer-led investigation and information-sharing. Farmers in our network produce corn, soybeans, beef cattle, hay, fruits and vegetables, and more. For additional information, call (515) 232-5661 or visit www.practicalfarmers.org.

Contact:

Tamsyn Jones | Practical Farmers of Iowa | (515) 232-5661 | tamsyn@practicalfarmers.org
Teresa Opheim | Practical Farmers of Iowa | (515) 232-5661 | teresa@practicalfarmers.org