

COVER STORY

Dating back to the mid-1800s, the Livingston-Fraleigh farm is one of North Florida's true icons.



Bridging The Gap

By Jacob Bemby

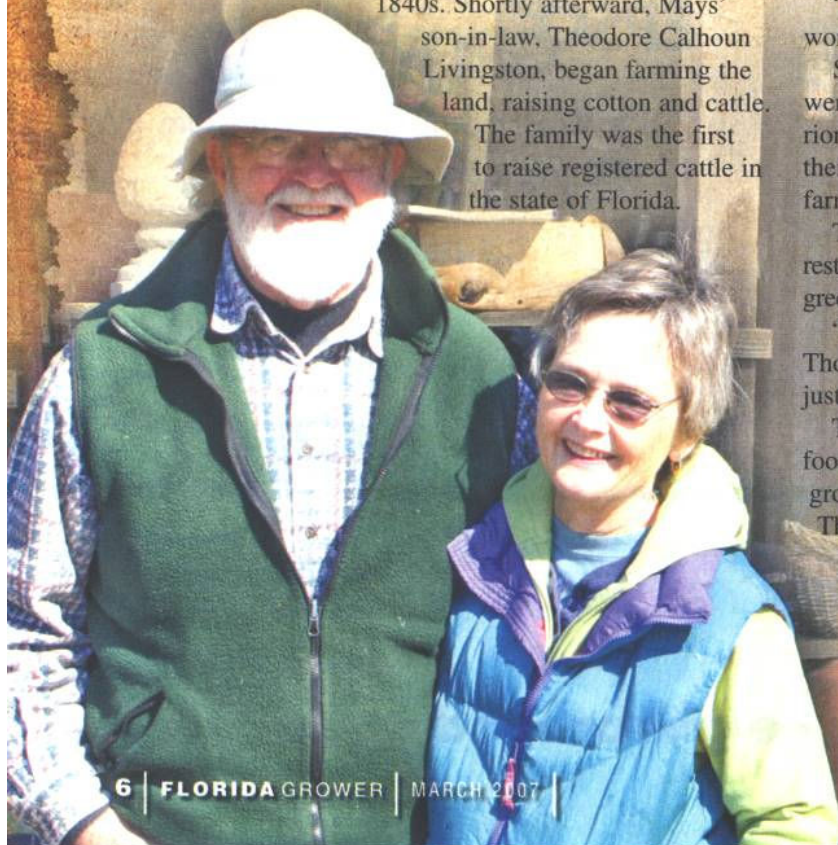
When Betty O-Toole's family began farming in Florida, James K. Polk was president, the U.S. Naval Academy had just opened its doors, and the country was still marveling over Samuel Morse's brand new telegraph machine.

Cotton was king in North Florida back then, with farmers mixing in tobacco and the occasional vegetable crop to keep revenue flowing.

"Back then, farmers grew what they could sell quickly," O'Toole says. "My family was one of the best farmers in the state. They knew what the people needed."

Blazing The Trail

Dannette Hill Mays, one of O'Toole's ancestors, was the first person to settle on the Madison County land in the 1840s. Shortly afterward, Mays' son-in-law, Theodore Calhoun Livingston, began farming the land, raising cotton and cattle. The family was the first to raise registered cattle in the state of Florida.



"Bringing in cattle was one of the smartest things my family did," O'Toole says. "No one else in Florida was doing it then, so they had the market cornered."

Business was good, O'Toole recalls, throughout the remainder of the century. When the calendar was nearing 1900, though, growing cotton became a tough task.

"The boll weevil came along and put an end to cotton being grown on the Fraleigh farm," she says. "In 1905, they grew shade tobacco, and lived on that for a long time."

"But, shade tobacco stopped being profitable in the 1970s and the family stopped growing it."

O'Toole says they did keep growing acres of flue-cured tobacco until the early 1990s.

Coming Full Circle

As a child, O'Toole was not allowed to work on the family farm.

"Daddy would never have let his little girl do farm work," she says. "He did not approve of it."

So, two years after graduating from high school, O'Toole went to Florida State University where she majored in interior design. In 1990, she and her husband, Jim, took over their portion of the 150-year-old Livingston-Fraleigh family farm and began growing herbs.

The O'Tooles began producing culinary herbs for high-end restaurants but eventually shifted their operation to the current greenhouse production.

"We had about 12 restaurants in Tallahassee and Thomasville that we were supplying," Betty says "But, it just about killed us."

The O'Tooles decided to just grow plants, instead of food for consumption in restaurants. Today, the O'Tooles grow about 350 varieties of herbs on five acres of the farm. The rest of the farm is filled with planted pines.

The O'Tooles grow 15 kinds of mint, 10 varieties of rosemary, 10 of thyme, and three kinds of lavender. In addition, they grow tarragon, marjoram, lime balm, catnip, garlic chives, oregano, and many more types of herbs. They also grow between 350 and 450 pounds of shitake mushrooms each year. The

Herb Central

shitake mushrooms produce a revenue stream during the cold winter months.

Betty learned about the shitake mushroom during a 1991 workshop in Tallahassee, sponsored by Florida A&M University. The workshop showed farmers how to diversify, so they wouldn't go bankrupt.

Betty was one of five participants. Betty said that shitake mushrooms are very tasty, even tastier than portabella mushrooms.

"They're packed with minerals and are supposed to help lower your cholesterol and blood pressure," she says. "They're also high in antioxidants."

Despite growing the shitake, the O'Tooles have two greenhouses bursting to the seams with herbs.

"An herb is a multi-use plant," Jim says. "It's either good for you, tastes good, smells good, or works in a medicinal manner."

Continuing The Pioneering Spirit

Showing the ingenuity of her earlier forebears, Betty has recycled three buildings, which had been set for

The heart and soul of the O'Toole Herb Farm in Madison County is the garden, which sits at the center of the property and is fondly referred to as the Patch. The acre of land was the original seedbed for the family's shade tobacco operation. It is banked by two ponds, and has good elevation with great drainage.

"When Jim and I first started to think of starting an herb farm in 1989, this spot was so obvious to us," says Betty O'Toole, whose family has farmed there since the 1840s. "It had been chosen all of those years ago by my ancestors for the seedbed (out of 1000 acres) for the most important spot of the farm.

"It had been laying fallow for 17 years, waiting for us and had to be the perfect spot for our baby — O'Toole's Herb Farm!"



demolition, on her farm. One of the buildings serves as the couple's home.

Two of the buildings house the farm's store and gift shop. Visitors come by and many of them end up sitting on the porch with Jim and Betty, having made friends for life with whom they have just met.

O'Toole's Herb Farm is certified with the Florida Organic Growers, and the couple employ two full-time employees and two part-time employees.

Each year, they put on an herbal festival, known as the "Just Because" festival. The festival is held the first

Saturday in February each year.

Hundreds of visitors go the farm and enjoy the workshops and the vendors' booths. Vendors range from dairy farms, which produce chemical-free milk, acupuncture and acupressure therapists, to other herb growers.

For Love Of Farming

Betty's three brothers also own portions of the property, with the shift being made from field crops to ornamental plant production.

"The farm is here to stay and it will stay in our family," she says. "My nephews are now in the process of expansion and are leasing land from the rest of us with the hope and promise of being about to take over the entire farm within about 20 years."

Jim and Betty will quickly tell you that the farm is not a place to make hordes of cash and get rich, but they enjoy the simpler way of life that it provides. After living in Tallahassee, from the time of her graduation from FSU until 1990, O'Toole says she was happy to get back home.

"It's been a real quality-of-life improvement for us," she says. "That is the benefit that we reap from the family farm."

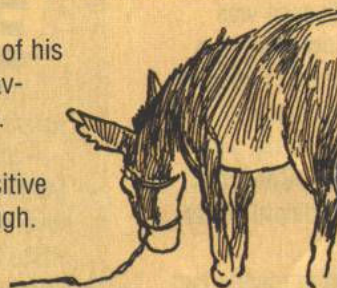
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Her Own Words

Madison County herb grower Betty O'Toole says her family's rich 150+ year farming history is full of interesting anecdotes. Some involve farming during the Civil War, selling product during the Depression, and some involve technology. This one involves mules:

"My father loved this farm with all of his heart. One of his favorite things were the mules, as evidenced by his having 25 mules and only one tractor for a period of time. He was a shade tobacco grower, and the large leaves had to be perfect with no blemishes. The careful, sensitive mules were the only creatures allowed to pull the plough.

"We now have on our herb farm, parked near one of our greenhouses, a road grater designed for six mules. Daddy converted it to a tractor-pulled grater in the 1940s and it still works today. He was very creative and inventive, and many of his ideas were recreated in commercial farming equipment throughout the years."



Jacob Bembry is a freelance writer in Madison County. For questions or comments about this article, please e-mail edit@meistermedia.com.