



Natural progression

Macon County's Bart Jones may have been raised in a town, but destiny and DNA have returned him to farming

Story and photo by Mark E. Johnson

Bart and Sarah Jones, here with their 17-month-old son, Ty, have built one of the Southeast's most respected swine breeding-stock operations. They also produce Red Angus and Simmental cattle and burley tobacco.

Take a look around his highly efficient, spit-and-polish farming operation, and you'd never figure Bart Jones for a city boy — but it's true.

Well ... kind of.

Although Bart was raised on a half-acre, neighborhood lot in residential Bowling Green, Ky., he spent most weekends as a kid either showing lambs and hogs in 4-H competition or helping out on his grandfather's Lafayette swine farm, roughly 50 miles away.

"Many times, my parents would meet my grandparents halfway in Scottsville [Ky.] on Fridays after school and drop me off for the weekend," says Bart, 34. "Then, they'd pick me up at the same place on Sunday night. It's what I chose to do. I've just always wanted to be on the farm or around farming."



Now, as owner of Red Hill Farms with Sarah, his wife of five years, Bart's natural love for agriculture has translated into a thriving, diversified enterprise. Since taking over his family's farm in 2001, Bart has built upon the Joneses' already-stellar reputation to create one of the Southeast's most respected Duroc, Landrace, and Yorkshire swine breeding-stock operations.

Also on the farm's 1,500 owned and rented acres are 200 head of Red Angus and Simmental cattle and 120 acres of burley tobacco, an aspect of the family's operation that was discontinued in the late '70s but resurrected by Bart 20 years later.



"It's the diversification that makes it work," says the Macon Trousdale Farmers Cooperative member. "If one enterprise is down, one or both of the others will likely be up. Each presents a different set of challenges, and we enjoy them all."

Enjoyment and education are recurring themes in Bart's explanation of how he became a farmer. When he was young, the Joneses "thrived" on showing livestock and traveled throughout the southeastern U.S. to compete. Bart says he's always had fun working with and being around livestock.

"My dad, Gordon Jones, is an ag professor at Western Kentucky University and judged a lot of shows across the country when I was a kid," says Bart while bouncing his and Sarah's 17-month-old son, Ty, on his knee. "Dad also traveled extensively as a swine consultant, and when school wasn't in, I tagged along."

It was after his first experience showing lambs and hogs at the Kentucky State Fair that the 9-year-old discovered he had a competitive streak.

"I won the hog show, but I placed dead last in the lamb competition," he recalls. "I remember coming home mad and telling Dad, 'If we can't do any better than that, I may as well quit.' But I just resolved to improve myself, and now, we want to breed the best hogs and cattle, and we're going to make that field of tobacco look good as you drive past."

Although high-quality farming was always part of Bart's DNA — Joneses have cultivated a crop on the Lafayette farm since 1892 — the family's focus on education allowed for a world of career possibilities for Bart.

"With a Ph.D. father and a mother with a master's degree from Vanderbilt, my family obviously believes in the value of education," says Bart, pointing out that Sarah is a certified public accountant who helps with the farm's finances. "Not going to college and farming directly out of high school wasn't an option for me, and that was a good thing. I went to one of the best agriculture schools in the country — Oklahoma State University — and earned a degree in animal science with a minor in ag economics. When I graduated in 1996, I was ready to put that education into practice. I drove straight from Oklahoma to Lafayette and went to work."

For five years, Bart farmed in partnership with his grandparents — J.C. and Durene Jones — until their deaths in 2001.

"I was blessed to have been given a jumpstart in agriculture," says Bart. "When I came home from college, my grandfather said, 'Here is the farm; do what you want with it. Just don't put a mortgage on it!' I honestly don't see how a young person could start farming from scratch these days, what with land, fuel, and equipment prices the way they are. You've got to have some help."

Bart also credits Macon County Extension agent Steve Walker and the staff of Macon Trousdale Farmers Co-op for helping him develop his operation, particularly the tobacco crops.

"I know I'm biased, but I think we have the best county agent around in Steve Walker," Bart says. "When I started out, I didn't know much about growing tobacco, and Steve's educational meetings and advice — especially on greenhouse topics — have been vital to our business."

Bart says he relies on the Co-op for a "laundry list" of supplies as well as sound advice.

"[Manager] Reid Brown and the folks at the Co-op have been invaluable to us," he says. "They are really knowledgeable about tobacco herbicides and insecticides, and Reid has done a great job of getting the fertilizer bought and then passing the prices on to us. He does a lot of things like that to help the farmers around here, and we appreciate it."

Bart adds that he hopes his son, Ty, will someday benefit from similar family and professional support and educational opportunities.

"Growing up around livestock and agriculture is a great way of life," he says. "If Ty wants to do that, I will try to provide him with those opportunities. And he'll have to be prepared for the good and the bad. There have always been rocky times in farming, and there will be again, but if you're determined, you'll succeed. It's not always easy, but I wouldn't trade my life for anyone's."

For more information about Red Hill Farms and the Joneses' upcoming Red Angus bull and heifer sales, call them at 615-666-3098 or visit online at www.redhillfarms.net.