

**LANDOWNER
PROFILE:
THE OKLAHOMA
FOREST LEGACY OF
THE HERRON FAMILY**

**COULD YOUR
LAND PRODUCE
MITIGATION
CREDITS?**

**APPS FOR
LANDOWNERS**

A man and a young boy are standing in a forest. The man, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and jeans, has his hands on the boy's shoulders. The boy is wearing a red polo shirt and green safety glasses. They are positioned next to a large stack of cut logs. In the background, there are tall pine trees and a yellow logging machine with the number '335C' on its side.

Family FOREST *Legacy*

THROUGH FOUR GENERATIONS
OF FOREST MANAGEMENT
AND THE CREATION OF TWO
ICONIC MUSEUMS, THE
HERRON FAMILY OF IDABEL,
OKLAHOMA HAS LEFT A
LASTING MARK.

BY PETE WILLIAMS



The Herron family from left: Pete Herron, Katie Herron, 4-year-old Asher Herron, longtime office manager Lavetta Ward, Don Herron, 2-year-old Baylor Herron, Mary Herron, Grace Palmer, and Danny Palmer.

A logging truck idles at a stoplight at the corner of Washington Street and Lincoln Road. Steam rises from the asphalt on this 98-degree day in late July and the truck, loaded with pine saw timber, is one of many that travel through the intersection roughly every few minutes.

Three miles southwest stands the Museum of the Red River, the largest cultural institution in a 150-mile radius, in the midst of a \$5 million expansion to 45,000 square feet that will better display its 30,000 artifacts from six continents.

That the museum and the timber industry flourish here in Idabel, a town of just 7,000 nestled in the southeast corner of Oklahoma that's at least a three-hour drive from Dallas, Oklahoma City, Tulsa, or Little Rock, is partly a testament to nearby Beavers Bend State Park, which draws thousands of annual visitors to Broken Bow Lake and the Oachita National Forest, inspiring a brisk market for cabins and craft breweries.

But it's also due in no small part to the Herron family, which over the last 75 years has managed timberland, spearheaded the creation of two museums – Red River and the Forest

Heritage Center – and served as tireless advocates for forestry in a part of the country many people mistakenly assume is all open plains.

Oklahoma has diverse geography with the eastern third receiving far more rain than the rest of the Sooner State. The so-called pine belt accounts for the 17.4 percent of the state covered in forestland, mostly in the Southeast. Of that, 7.5 million acres is privately owned, accounting for a \$3 billion forest industry.

Here in Idabel, the office of Herron Industries sits back from a busy commercial stretch of road at the end of a long driveway flanked by towering pines planted in 1980. Quintus Herron charted the growth in diameter of the trees until his death at 91 in 2014.

"He came to the office until the very end doling out work," says his thirty-year-old grandson, Pete Herron, gazing up at the pines as he corrals three generations of Herrons for a family photo. "Every time I encounter a logger who is middle-age or older, they have a Quintus story to tell. We're a family business



"I feel a very large responsibility to maintain our success and continue to grow our company and family and maintain the camaraderie our family has."

– Pete Herron

that's worked with other family businesses for generations. It's a neat story."

Indeed, Idabel is just 15 miles west of the Arkansas line and McCurtain County's soil and rainfall are ideal for growing trees. But few people in Oklahoma had that in mind when Leonard Herron and two of his five children, sons Quintus and Joe, founded the company that became Herron Family Tree Farm in 1944.

It all began with Indian land. Leonard Herron, the first of a long line of Herrons to attend Oklahoma State University, married a half-Choctaw Indian girl from McCurtain County he met at OSU. She brought land to the marriage and Leonard leased it to farmers while operating a feed store in Idabel.

Business thrived until Leonard sent two trainloads of tomatoes to Kansas City just as the Depression struck. With no buyers, the Herrons took a big financial hit and Leonard packed up his wife and five children and moved to Stillwater, where he became an insurance agent.

After Quintus and Joseph graduated OSU in the 1940s, Leonard convinced them to move to Idabel and grow trees on the land. Leonard and his wife were the landowners while Leonard, Quintus and Joe were the tenant farmers. Both entities jointly owned the timber, an arrangement that continues today with the Herron Family Tree Farm as the landowner and Herron Industries the tenant farmer.

Much of the land was acquired in the 1940s and the Herrons became the first large-scale tree farmers in the area.

"Pines were considered a nuisance because they were growing in pasture or crop fields," says Don Herron, 68, Leonard's grandson and Pete's father. "Leonard could see that they would grow into something."

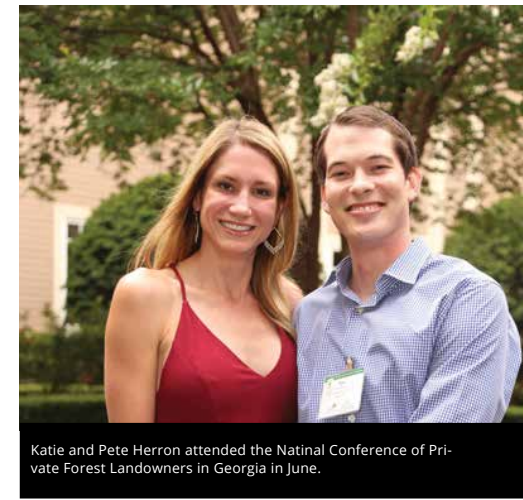
The family owned its own saw mills and a retail lumberyard throughout the 1940s and into the '60s, enduring several fires common to such operations at the time. After one devastating blaze the family put a tract of land on the market to pay bills but received no bids at \$1 per acre.

The business survived in part because of a tax discovery Leonard made with the help of an accountant who worked out of his Stillwater office building in the 1940s. The accountant advised Leonard that timber counts as real property rather than

personal property and, as such, taxes are paid not as ordinary income but as long-term capital gains.

That accounting firm still works with the Herrons today, typical of their business relationships. They have used many of the same logging crews and the six full-time employees have many years of experience. Office manager Lavetta Ward has worked for the company for thirty years; her colleague retired two years ago after sixty years. Lead forest technician Ricky England has more than forty years with the company. Danny Palmer, a forester, co-manager of the company, and second cousin of Pete Herron, has been with the company since graduating OSU.

"I have no doubt we wouldn't have survived to the fourth generation without long-term employees," Pete Herron says. "They have eased the burden of management over the years and assisted in every area of the operation. It's going to be a big change moving into the future one day with new employees."



Katie and Pete Herron attended the Natinal Conference of Private Forest Landowners in Georgia in June.



The legacy of Quintus Herron lives on in the Forest Heritage Center (left) and the Museum of the Red River (right).

About half of the Herron family acreage owned today, which includes land in Arkansas and Texas, was acquired during the 1940s and '50s. Joe Herron, who died in 1989, spent much of his career performing the tedious work of title searches. Abstracts remain in the hallway file cabinets of the Herron Industries offices, located next door to a Sonic restaurant, the popular drive-in chain founded in Oklahoma City in 1953. At the entrance to the Herron office is artwork of a blue heron. Though spelled differently, heron and Herron are pronounced the same and the bird serves as something of a family corporate shield.

For years Quintus Herron managed pine plantations in 50-year rotations with as many as five thinnings before shifting to a more traditional 30-year model. These days the Herrons clear-cut 800 acres annually, undergo a second thinning on an additional 800 and a first thinning on 800 more. They replant clear-cut land immediately.

"Most people take a year off and (site) prep but our objective is to get it in the ground as fast as possible," Don Herron says. "As far as the 800 acres, we'd rather be consistent than play markets. There's a lot of value to having an even flow; it makes management a lot easier. Even if there's an unusually good price, we're not going to sell next year's package."

Of course, like the rest of the country, the phrase "unusually good price" is not heard among Oklahoma forest landowners in reference to timber markets.

"There's not as much wood here as in Arkansas but mills can reach into there if they want and use that to their advantage," Pete Herron says. "Everyone is still waiting for a good price so there's plenty of wood around here, too."

There's plenty of forest presence around Idabel as well. Weyerhaeuser arrived in 1969, buying timber from the Herrons every year since. Weyerhaeuser's nearest mill is 10 miles from Idabel.

"Weyerhaeuser seems like the big corporate giant around

here and we're the small local timber company," Pete Herron says.

That means being conscious of local residents and public relations and not objecting when locals hunt on their property, much of which is not leased to hunt clubs.

"We can't officially make it open for hunting because of liability but it's not gated and we're not running people off," Pete Herron says. "People appreciate that we don't have a gate on our many miles of road systems. That might cost us more on roadwork in the long run but people appreciate it, keep an eye out for forest fires, don't dump trash and generally help us be good stewards of the land."

Herron grew up in the woods learning stewardship. But he headed to Oklahoma State not sure he wanted to work in the family forest operation, though he hedged by majoring in business and getting a minor in forestry.

Pete met his future wife Katie at school, where they worked in restaurants, taking more than the traditional four years to complete degrees. At one point they moved to Hawaii for a year before returning and graduating in 2012. Later Pete managed to convince his Oklahoma City-raised wife to move to tiny Idabel, where they could continue the family forest legacy.

Though Pete had worked through high school at Herron Industries, neither his father nor grandfather pressured him to return after graduating. Pete weighed the prospect of a desk job in Oklahoma City versus working in an outdoorsy family business in his hometown.

"What drew me back was the idea of being part of something meaningful with a real purpose instead of having a typical corporate life," said Herron. "I knew I wasn't going to blow anyone away with my forestry skills but I'm a good people person and realized in school I had developed skills that could help our business."

Quintus and Don Herron didn't just give Pete the job, listed on his Herron Industries business card as "Partner & Go-To

Guy." They opened it up to all family members and made Pete interview.

Since joining the company in 2012, Pete has immersed himself in all aspects of the family business – or businesses. A typical week could include checking in on logging crews, paying bills, and reviewing contracts, title opinions, and potential land purchases. He spends an average of a half-day a week on the Forest Heritage Center Museum, where he's chairman of the board. He's on the board of the Herron Foundation, which endows the Museum of the Red River. He's vice president of the Oklahoma Forestry Association, a father of two kids 4 and 2, and even chairs his church building committee as they try to get a new fellowship hall built.

At first glance, Oklahoma might seem an unusual spot for the Forest Heritage Center Museum. Then again, the woody setting in Beavers Bend State Park in the nearby town of Broken Bow seems perfect for the attraction, which traces the area's forest industry from the 1870s, when railroads arrived and the lumber business began to boom.

The museum – open 365 days of year with no admission fee – came about as an educational initiative in 1980 when Quintus Herron and others grew concerned about the negative perception the timber industry had on the West Coast.

The centerpiece of the attraction is 14 dioramas painted by artist Harry Rossoll, the late Forest Service artist who created

Smokey Bear, the symbol of forest fire safety. Rossoll's dioramas trace forest history and are accompanied by taped narration.

The museum includes chainsaw carvings, antique forestry and woodworking tools, and a 100-year old log cabin from the Kiamichi Mountains. The Forest Heritage Center hosts two wood art shows – Broken Bow bills itself as the "Wood Art Capital of Oklahoma" – that draw 15,000 visitors to the area.

Quintus Herron chaired the museum's advisory board for 25 years and helped inspire the creation of "Tree Bear," a mascot whose mission is to inform consumers of the more than 10,000 uses of trees in their everyday lives.

As proud as the Herrons are of the Forest Heritage Center, the Museum of the Red River might be a more impressive family legacy. Quintus and his wife Mary, who had traveled extensively and assembled a vast art collection, felt that people in McCurtain County would benefit from a place to explore other cultures and learn about their own history.

In 1974, they founded the Museum of the Red River, now nationally recognized as having one of the finest collections of pre-Columbian Indian art and artifacts. Funded by endowments from the Herron Foundation – Don is President and Pete is on the board – it's a staggering accumulation of art that museum director Henry Moy shows a visitor one afternoon even as the finishing touches are applied to the latest expansion.

The previous addition included the Mary H. Herron Com-



Pete Herron, Danny Palmer, and Don Herron stand along a recently-cleared road on family property in Idabel, Oklahoma.



Herron property includes an airstrip, forestland along railroad tracks, and a road named for the family.



munity Conference Center, a space for educational and cultural activities unveiled in 2009, two years after Mary Herron's death.

Like the museums, Herron Industries is building for the future. Pete Herron spends a lot of time thinking about how to maintain the continuity and success as part of a younger, fourth generation that's larger and perhaps less connected to the land as previous generations – a typical concern of family forest businesses.

"I feel a very large responsibility to maintain our success and continue to grow our company and family and maintain

Broken Bow Lake, part of Beavers Bend State Park, draws thousands of annual visitors to southeast Oklahoma.



the camaraderie our family has," Pete Herron said. "How can I keep our ever-expanding partners connected to the heart and soul of what this business is and not let it slip away to becoming just a tree-growing business? You want to keep it in the mind's eye and heart and the family connected to it. It's a tremendous responsibility to manage the level of assets we have and I am doing everything I can to prepare myself to be as knowledgeable and experienced as I can every day." ■

Pete Williams is editor of Forest Landowner magazine.



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