



# AFC COOPERATIVE FARMING NEWS

SERVING SOUTHERN GROWERS SINCE 1939

## From One Family to Another

by Julie A. Best  
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The Sessions Farm in Grand Bay, Alabama, is truly a family farm. As with many family farms, it all began with a vision. It started in 1948 when J. P. Sessions and his brother Harvey returned from a tour of duty from an island in the Pacific—Hawaii. Yes, these brothers were in the same Marine unit and were serving in Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attack occurred. According to Joyce Nicholas, one of J. P. Sessions' six children, "Daddy was determined to have something of his own one day that he could pass on to his children."



A portion of the Sessions Family, L-R: Jeremy Sessions, Blake Nicholas, Judy Poiroux, Philip Poiroux, Ms. Irene Sessions, Martha Sessions and Art Sessions.

With a mule and a one-row plow, a strong back, and youth in his favor, Mr. Sessions began farming.

Joyce says, "They tell me it was great in the old days. By the time I came along in the 50s, Daddy was producing watermelons and selling them at the French Quarter in New Orleans."



The combines "families" – Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) employees and members of the Sessions family.

As time went by, Sessions diversified his farm and it grew. Joyce says, "With that came more land, which meant more income, but also more debt, which meant that each one of the six children had to do more hard work."

At one point, Sessions had over 1,000 head of hogs. There were farrowing houses and finishing houses, but the hog operation didn't last long. For survival in the 60s and 70s, the farm depended on row crops, mostly potatoes, soybeans, wheat and corn. "But, Daddy always planted plenty of watermelons, cantaloupes, and snap beans. The potato production in the 60s to late 80s and a contract with Frito-Lay gave the farm a boost," says Joyce. When that came to an end, the farm was faced with serious decisions about even more diversity.

Mr. Sessions died in April, 1974, at the age of 49, leaving a young widow with two children still at home; the older four children were married by this time. Son Art was a junior at the University of South Alabama where he was majoring in Education. The hard decision was made for him to drop out of college and return to the family farm to run the operation on a day-to-day basis. Joyce says, "That was in 1974, and Art, along with my sister Judy and her husband Philip, took over the role of decision makers on the farm. Our mother, Irene, has always been a constant on the farm, paying bills, running errands, baby sitting grandchildren, cooking lunches, and helping out with potatoes, pecans, and peaches. My older brother Mickey, who was a schoolteacher, has always worked on the farm in the evenings and on Saturdays. They worked many long hard hours to help keep the farm afloat. Of course, Lois, David, and I worked too, but we were younger and maybe didn't realize the financial hardships that the older siblings were facing."



**Jeremy Sessions, with his back to the camera, talks to NRCS employees about growing vegetables using the plasticulture system.**



**(L-R) David Sessions; Gary Kobylski, State Conservationist, NRCS; Darrell Driskell, Chair, Mobile County Soil and Water Conservation District; and Bill Keys, Mobile County NRCS District Conservationist survey the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. Many of the pecan trees were totally destroyed.**

As time passed, the partnership between Judy and Art dissolved. Joyce says, "Philip and Judy have a wonderful small-scale family farm, and all of their children work to help plant, cultivate, and harvest their crops. They have a cow/calf operation and Judy is the manager of the Agrilience-AFC, Grand Bay Feed and Seed."

When younger brother David graduated from high school, he and Art became partners to manager the Sessions Farm operation. They learned that flexibility is a key component of surviving on the farm. The family had always depended on the pecan groves as a source of income, but serious setbacks occurred with

the event of Hurricane Camille and then again 10 years later when Fredrick struck. The damage to the pecan groves necessitated more decisions and more diversity.

Down through the years, the farm has produced eggplant, strawberries, tomatoes, and peppers. Joyce says, "In the early 80s, Art began planting peach trees, something our Daddy had tried several years earlier without success because the varieties did not survive due to the number of chill hours required to produce the peaches." Taking the information provided by Auburn University along with the availability of peach tree varieties that require fewer chill hours, the farm was soon into the peach business. Today, peach production is one of the specialty crops at Sessions Farm.

Currently, the Sessions Farm grows vegetables using the plasticulture system. Joyce says, "They have been using this system for over 15 years now. David and Art have

interplanted crops to provide more diversity. They use the space in the pecan groves and between the peach trees to grow vegetables with the plasticulture system. They are making optimum use of a small space. The farm produces tomatoes, peppers, cantaloupes, watermelons, and squash using the plasticulture system.”

The Sessions Farm is truly a family operation. Several grandchildren are now associated with the family operation, along with in-law children. Joyce Nicholas is no longer associated with the farm on a daily basis, but she still has a heart for the land. Joyce is a soil conservationist with the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In that capacity, she saw a connection with her family and a group of NRCS employees.

NRCS has an organization known as the National Organization of Professional Black Natural Resources Conservation Service Employees (NOPBNRCSE). This group of NRCS employees is committed to conservation and leadership. Their mission is to mentor and motivate their members for leadership roles and to initiate an effective and strong outreach approach to under served communities. This group of motivated NRCS employees chose to visit the Sessions Farm as a part of their Annual Meeting this year. The theme of their meeting was, “Small Scale Farm-Approaching the Next Level.” What better way to learn about the next level than from a farm where the family has had “hands-on experience” with moving from one level to the next in the farming operation.

The NRCS employees were greeted by two young farmers, Jeremy Sessions and Blake Nicholas, first cousins who work on the Sessions Farm. They showed them a variety of vegetables grown using the plasticulture system, and more traditional crops like peas, corn, collards, cabbage, and turnip greens grown the “old fashioned way.” The peaches—ready for harvest as early as May—provide the Sessions Farm with a niche market, which seems to help them achieve that next level of success. Jeremy and Blake are able to market many of their products at local farmers’ markets and have benefited from the Buy Fresh, Buy Local campaign in Alabama.

Sessions Farm also grows Satsuma. James Miles, Horticultural Extension Agent with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System has been instrumental in giving assistance with the Satsuma endeavor.

Joyce says, “All in all, I can tie the NOPBNRCSE and our family farm together in that we, the Sessions Family, are like their group. We may have limited resources, but we use them wisely. We work hard and we do not think that any task is too small for us or our children to endure, provided that the outcome rewards you with a sense of accomplishment or self-worth. Sessions Farm may seem large to some, but compared to the big farms in the Midwest, we are but a drop in the bucket. Those brothers of mine can produce more food on an acre of land than most people can imagine. They are good farmers, who work hard and have given the next generation the opportunity to farm for a living. The NOPBNRCSE group is also giving to the next generation through mentoring and building relationships with landowners and a diverse group of new friends.”

Art Sessions says, “We were glad to share what we have learned about the plasticulture

system. Hard-earned knowledge gained from first-hand experience is something that we are glad to pass along to those who want to learn more about the procedure.”

Judy Sessions Poiroux says, “It was Philip’s and my privilege to host the NOPBNRCSE group at our home. We enjoyed sharing our farm experiences and some of our homemade seafood gumbo. Living on the Gulf Coast can be a two-edged sword. We have some drawbacks—hurricanes are a regular part of our life—but we also have the best seafood of any state or region. The Sessions clan partakes of the blessing from the ocean on a regular basis and we invite everyone to visit our area of Alabama.”

Johnny Trayvick, an NRCS employee and past president of NOPBNRCSE states, “Joyce, you have a real nice family. They treated us just like family and like they have known us all their life.”

Mrs. Sessions says, “Joyce, your NRCS friends are nice.”

And, Joyce says, “I have to agree, NRCS folks are good people—just like family.”

As for J. P. Sessions’ dream of having something to pass on to his children, Joyce says, “I think our Daddy would be proud of the accomplishments each one of his children and grandchildren has made. We are a diverse group. We all work hard and most everyone helps out on the farm when they can.”

From one generation to the next, and from one family to another, all of these folks agree. Even with its challenges, farming is a great life!

**NOTE:** After writing this article, the coast of Alabama was hit by Hurricane Katrina. The Sessions Farm experienced a great deal of damage. The pecan crop for this year is lost, along with many pecan trees that were totally destroyed. There is damage to the cotton crop, pasture and hay land, as well as barns and other farm buildings. Judy Poiroux said, “Many in the area have been affected as well, and we don’t want to forget our neighbors to the east and west who suffered great losses in the seafood industry.”

Typical of the attitude of the people of the land, Joyce Nicholas says, “The can do attitude prevails. The boys are going to make the best of this situation. It’s not just our family, but many families have lost so much. We’re thankful that there was no damage to our homes, and that we are all OK.”

The Sessions family says, “The financial loss will diminish with time, but the bonds that are forged with disasters such as Hurricane Katrina will last forever. Our families will plant again, build again, and laugh again, together.”

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