

This Mountain Farmer Favors Zoning

There's nothing softheaded about Gene Gibson. To Gibson, a varmint is a varmint. He'd just as soon carve another notch on his shotgun as have a groundhog eat up his crops or tunnel up his precious Jackson County farmland. "They come in here one summer gonna eat up everything," says Gibson. "We killed 18. Of course, I don't bother them until they bother me."

Gibson does not extend that same courtesy to yellow jackets. These he will bother without provocation. Spying the creatures swarming from an egg-shaped hole in the ground near his equipment shed, Gibson instantly hatches a plan to douse them with gasoline and kill them "dead as a nit."

Such are the ways of a fourth generation mountain farmer. He is lord of the land and holds a birthright to rule it. Yet Gibson is far from the stereotyped backwoods hillbilly. He is acutely aware of environmental problems like the greenhouse effect, acid rain, and ozone depletion. He can stand in his fields and quote from memory figures on the amount of soil being washed into the Mississippi River every day because of erosion. "If we don't go to taking care of Mother Earth, there won't be nowhere to live," says Gibson. "I wish people would realize that, but it seems like nobody is taking the initiative."

And if some of his neighbors heard Gene
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Gene Gibson on his farm in rural Jackson County.



Mike McLaughlin

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Gibson's views about land-use planning and zoning, they might think he had gotten hold of the wrong kind of branch water. "I think they're going to start zoning," says Gibson in a matter-of-fact voice. What does he think of this? "I think it'd be good."

Gibson's chief interest is in making sure that rural lands like his Jackson County farm get preserved for future generations to enjoy. If it takes zoning to accomplish that, says Gibson, so be it. He worries that he may be the last Gibson to farm the hills and hollows on the other side of the ridge from where his great-grandfather—a Civil War veteran—lies buried. "I hope my boy will keep the brush knocked down enough and keep the bears out of it," says Gibson. "I don't know."

But Gibson's son Bill is not a farmer. Like so many young people, the younger Gibson has left the fields for an office job. When he thinks about it, Gibson feels fairly certain that Bill will not want to keep up the farm *and* meet the demands of his job as the director of the Southwestern North Carolina Planning and Economic Development Commission. Gibson can foresee the day when there might not be a Gibson farm, and it troubles him. "I'm talking about preserving some farmland," said Gibson. "I don't think everything ought to be urbanized."

At 63, Gibson is an ardent conservationist, and he's extremely self-sufficient. He plants one and a half acres of a three-acre tract in corn each year, rotating the corn with rye to replenish the soil. The corn he mixes with a supplement and feeds to his cattle. He does much of the planting and harvesting with a Belgian work horse, Dan. The paint is still perfect on his 1970 David Brown tractor, a British model with 1,500 hours on it.

A homemade, gravity-flow water system delivers water to Gibson's small frame house at 36 pounds of pressure. Gibson and his son hand mixed and poured the concrete for the 750-gallon vault that funnels spring water through a third of a mile of plastic pipe down the hillside to the house. The Gibsons heat with a woodstove using firewood cut on the farm. Each year they tend a good-sized garden, and a neighbor now leases the burley tobacco allotment.

Even with these efficiencies, the farm has never produced enough income to raise a family. Gibson spent 38 years working for the highway department—and put three children through college—before he retired to full-time farming. "A little old mountain farm like this, you can't make a good living," says Gibson. "I guess you'd just have to call me a hobby farmer."

But Gibson, a devoutly religious man, has devoted himself to being a good steward of the land, and he firmly believes that owning land carries certain responsibilities. "When God created Adam and Eve he put them in the garden and told them to keep it looking good," says Gibson. "That's stewardship. Even though there wasn't no sin, they still had to work."

Too many times, Gibson says, people don't live up to the responsibilities that come with owning property. "Everybody wants a little slice of land," says Gibson. "They ain't making any more of it. That's one reason people ought to take a little better care of it."

Like it or not, says Gibson, sometimes the government has to get involved. "A fellow ought to be able to have a little flexibility," says Gibson. "I think he ought to be able to do a few things without asking the government if it would be all right. But some of these conservation practices ought to be put in place. If we leave it to everybody doing what they think, things will be in a mess, so we need some restrictions."

Gibson recalls from his own experience practices that have now been outlawed to protect the environment. "No time ago people just turned raw sewage right out into these streams," says Gibson. "That's a no-no now. My uncle had a hog operation, the hog house was right on the stream. He would take a hose and wash it right into the stream. We've got restrictions on it now . . . which is good."

Restrictions on how people use the land may be next. "I just don't believe in raping the land like they are doing in places," Gibson says. Still, Gibson says there will be those who will oppose any regulations as unwarranted government interference. "I guess there are some diehards who don't want to be told anything," he says.

—Mike McLaughlin