

PUTNAM COUNTY SOIL CONSERVATION DISTRICT
ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2005
TREASURES OF PUTNAM COUNTY
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By Cory Hodge, District Conservationist

Wanda Shanks has much in common with the historic stone barn on her farm, longevity and perseverance. One could also say they both have pioneer strength.



Wanda and her late husband, Walter, had a dream to improve their farm located in Buffalo Valley after Walter retired from the Putnam County School system. They wanted to improve their herd, restore two old barns and start a stream bank stabilization project. Before Walter could fully realize that dream he passed away in March of 1997. (*Historic Stone Barn – It is over 200 years old and due to Wanda's dedication continues to provide a valuable service*).

There was never a doubt in Wanda's mind, however, as to what would become of the farm and the dream. Not that it would have mattered, but her children agreed to let her try to take care of the four-hundred acre farm by herself for one year. They were worried about the safety of their mother, not her capabilities. She continued working as a bookkeeper at Cookeville High School, while farming for that year, before retiring from the school system after thirty-three years. But, retire from farming she did not! Her children were very pleased and proud of what she had accomplished on the farm during the trial year.

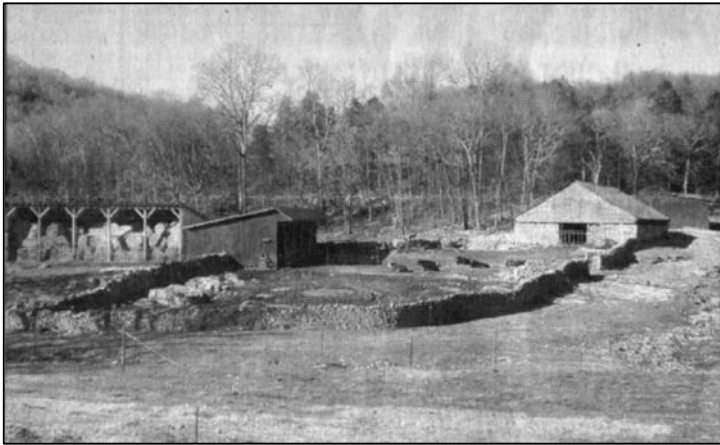
She kept the dream alive by continuing to improve the farm and complete the stream bank stabilization project. Wanda did not hire it done, and did not even buy the huge rocks or have them delivered to protect the stream bank. She collected them from the farm herself. At every opportunity she used a big tractor with its front end loader to place the harvested rocks along the stream bank.



Wanda also excluded livestock from the stream to lessen erosion and improve the quality of the water in Little Indian Creek. Due to her and Walter's vision, the stream bank erosion problem along the portion of the creek which borders the farm has almost completely been eliminated. (*Remnants of the old grist mill, located on Wanda's farm, are still part of the creek*).

Wanda acts as a sentinel over the stream that borders the property. Whenever there is a tree or other debris in the stream that could

compromise the steam bank, she takes immediate action. One time, a large sycamore tree fell away from the bank and across the stream. If left alone, this would have caused debris to build up and possibly reroute enough water flow to erode the stream bank. Wanda sprang into action and hired a backhoe operator to pull the tree out of the stream. Since she did not want the tree to go to waste, she called a friend who made wooden pallets. A rain was coming and he was short on help. He needed somebody to drive his big tractor to get the job done before the rain set in. Wanda climbed right up and drove the largest tractor she had ever been on to help her friend finish the job.



The dream continued as Wanda had the old rock barn refurbished. The original construction of the barn started in the late seventeen hundreds and was completed in the early eighteen hundreds. It was used by the fourteen families who lived on the four hundred acre section of land. Its rafters were made of long solid wood beams, and wooden pegs were used to hold everything

together. It had fourteen stalls for the mules on the farm, with seven stalls along each side. The families shared the barn and worked together to plow the hillsides and grow row crops such as corn. (*Scenic view of the barn yards on the Shanks farm complete with stone walls which we don't often find this well preserved today*).

These families built their homes on the poorest land and saved the best land for farming. Their understanding of the value of saving the best land for production could be a lesson for us today. The families also worked in a broom factory and a grist mill located on the farm. According to Mrs. Shanks, the barn was also used by the Confederate Army to store ammunition during the civil war. She did not restore all of the stalls back into the old rock barn so she would have more room to work cattle and load them into a trailer.

Wanda has downsized her herd a little since the passing of Walter, but she is still improving on the herd. She works the thirty-four cows, nine heifers and one bull, mainly by herself. She has a squeeze chute and head gate that can be operated by a single person which she uses to hold the cows while she doctors them. She even uses an old tobacco sprayer to clean rocks and debris from their hooves. Her twenty-two hundred pound bull will not fit into the squeeze chute, so she puts him in the alley of the old rock barn, climbs onto the rafters and pours the dewormer on his back. Wanda always finds a way to get the job done.

Like all good livestock farmers, Wanda pays close attention to her herd. One cold evening this past calving season, around eight o'clock, Wanda went to check on one of her pregnant cows. She found the cow lying down with a dead calf next to her. Wanda

was telling the momma cow what a bad mom she was not to clean up her calf so it could breathe, when she noticed the cow was still in labor. The second calf had breached, so Wanda pulled the calf out, realizing that the cow wasn't a bad momma after all. Wanda helped the calf down to the barn and made sure not to leave the dead calf out for the coyotes. She knows the value of patience when working cows alone.

Wanda is currently installing new cross fencing and a freeze proof water tank in a location on her farm that will greatly improve her cattle's grazing efficiency. This being done with assistance from the Putnam County Soil Conservation District and the Natural Resources Conservation Services through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Mrs. Shanks said, "This will help me a tremendous amount. The cows will not have to walk all the way down the hill to get water and I will not have to mess with a rubber hose in freezing temperatures." Over the years Mrs. Shanks has been a valued cooperater with the Putnam County Soil Conservation District. As a result of her dedication to conservation of our natural resources, she earned the Master Conservation Farmer Award in 2001.

Mrs. Shanks does not believe in asking for help on things she can do herself. Recently, she had some men coming over to build a well house and install the electricity, a pump, and pressure tank needed as part of her new water tank project. Instead of paying them for moving two giant utility poles, she hopped on her tractor at four o'clock in the morning and used its forks to carry the two poles to their intended location.



Mrs. Shanks is an amazing person with a drive that is an inspiration to all that meet her. Along with all of her other work she cuts, rakes and moves hay to the barn and sharpens the blades of her mower by herself. *(Mrs. Shanks cut, raked and moved all of her one hundred and eighty-seven round bales of hay to the barn this past summer. The barn located behind Wanda is over a hundred years old).*

This year she put up one hundred and eighty-seven round bales and castrated all of the bull calves by herself. When she is not farming, one might find her at the Buffalo Valley Presbyterian Church where she is the Secretary/Treasurer. She even plays basketball two days a week and volleyball one day a week. Not bad for a woman who has reached her seventy-third year. Wanda said she does not care if people know her age, because it will be on her tombstone someday and everyone will know anyway. Wanda believes that everyday is what you make of it. She demonstrates this belief in the pride she takes in her work and the initiative she has to get the job done.

So many lessons can be learned from this remarkable woman. Walter and Wanda's dream was not just a dream, but a way of life. Wanda is a true steward of the land, a loyal American and, like her historic stone barn, is a treasure of Putnam County.



This old barn on the Walter Shanks farm in Buffalo Valley was used to manufacturer gunpowder during the Civil War. In those days it was the Craven Maddux farm.



Walter Warren Shanks & his wife Wanda Brown Stout Shanks

