

# Cotton In The Hills

Farmer Finds Success In 'High Cotton' Of Mississippi Hills

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Coley Bailey Jr. of Coffeeville, Miss. learned many of his farming techniques from a grandfather who loved the people part of farming with as many as 40-50 people in the field chopping cotton.

However, he learned the most important part of farming from John Bradley, whom he credited with giving him the inspiration to begin a no-till system. Bailey first learned of no till at the Milan field day.

"John Bradley had actually come here," he explained. "Steve Cummings, Our extension agent in Yalobusha County, had set up some meetings for John Bradley to come and talk to our Farm Bureau group and to our local people

out ditches and clear land so it flows well. We basically have two different farms in Grenada County. We have 1,200 acres, then you go 18 miles into Yalobusha County and we have the other 1,200 acres."

Last year was a dry year and there was a noticeable difference between irrigated and non-irrigated land. The irrigated land produced 1,100 pounds to the acre and the non irrigated was in the 650-700 range.

"Most average years with the wheat cover crop I have not noticed a difference," he said. "I just watered and thought it would make a lot of difference. Now, using these later varieties and trying to manage without the water availability seems to be working for us. This year it should be a big difference because we didn't have any rain to finish the crop. We were O.K. until about



Growing all cotton since about 1997 is Coley Bailey Jr. (right) with his dad (left). Photo by John LaRose

about the benefits of no till."

At that time Bradley was superintendent of the Milan Research Station in Milan, Tenn. He has since transferred to a position as Monsanto's Director of Research at the AgriCenter in Memphis.

"That was about 1998 and that year we decided we would try it on some of our land," Bailey said. "Over the winter between 1998 and 1999 we decided to go 100 percent no till. We talked to John Bradley, he came and visited with us. We bought new planters, and he showed us how to fit those planters for a no till situation."

The process worked. A friendship began, and Bailey still talks to Bradley whenever he has questions.

In conventional tillage with the same size farm he had 13 employees, and used 11 tractors. Today he has four full-time employees and himself, one sprayer and two main tractors. He also has two six-row cotton pickers.

The earthworms have increased and are very prevalent since he switched to no-till.

"There are just lots of earthworms out there and they dig channels to hold moisture too," he said. A wheat cover crop soon became part of his operation, quite by accident, Bailey recalled.

"We had some land that was highly erodible in the hills of Mississippi and we wanted to redo the rows in that field," he explained. "My soil conservation agent wouldn't allow me to disturb the soil on that land after cotton picking in October, unless I planted a cover crop on it. So while we had time we put the lime out, put the fertilizer out, rowed it up, knocked the beds down, and planted wheat for a cover crop. Come March, we no tilled into that wheat and my father said that was the biggest mess he has ever made planting a crop. It was just on 50 acres.

"It turns out that cotton did better than any," Bailey said. "That was a drought year and when we were making about 700 pounds of cotton everywhere else, that cotton on highly erodible land made 900 pounds, so the next year we planted about 1,000 acres no-till."

Bailey's dad was very pleased. Now it is a number one priority to get the wheat planted.

"We have tried it a couple of different ways around the first or second week of September," he continued. "We tried flying it on with an airplane, then we defoliated and the leaves would fall off and rest on top of the wheat and when it rains the wheat came up through there. Now we use a high crop fertilizer buggy behind the pickers in front of the stalk cutters. We spread the wheat then and we feel we do a better job that way than we did with the airplane. There are no skips in the field, we get all the corners, we get the ends too. And it costs less."

The Baileys cropped 1,800 acres, with about 1,200 acres in cotton, when Coley came home from Mississippi State. The rest was in corn.

"There was a hog farm in Coffeeville and we would grow grain and the hog farmer would buy all our grain," Bailey recalled. "He would harvest it and then he would haul it to his bins. Then when he retired we lost that market of having somebody come in and harvest. So we went to all cotton and we have been all cotton since about 1997.

"At that time also, there was a gentlemen in Coffeeville who retired from farming and we had an opportunity to rent an additional 750 acres of land which put us up to the 2,500 acre range where we are today."

Of that total, only about 300 acres is irrigated with the rest dryland. In the hills, dryland is the rule and irrigation is the exception.

"In the Delta a lot of land is irrigated, but in the hills of Mississippi where we are there's very little irrigation," he reported. "More and more though, people are trying to put pivots in smaller fields."

The Bailey farm lays in the hills, with no part of it in the Delta.

"We really just farm up and down creek bottoms, just on both sides of the creeks," Bailey stated. However, he doesn't pull water out of the creeks.

"We have wells. I run two wells and then we can irrigate another 20 acres out of a pond," he said.

The land where the wells are is his own land. He owns about 500 acres and leases 2,000. The irrigated land, plus another 100 acres, is all precision leveled on a grade that falls two tenths of a foot every 100 feet. One well is 125 feet deep, the other 135 feet.

He would irrigate more but that is all he can level. Of his total acreage, there are about 140 different fields. The landlords of the rented land are not willing to spend the money for leveling.

"Also, the fields are small, it is just not justifiable to install irrigation," he said. "Our biggest field is 200 acres and then we have several fields less than 10 acres. We were able to clean

Aug. 1 and we didn't have any benefit of rain. So we don't have much top crop. The irrigated is going to produce a top crop, the rest is not. I hope we are going to be in the 850 on the non irrigated and 1,100 on the irrigated."

Those wishes more than came true last fall as yields for this past year's crop were 1,400 pounds on the irrigated land and 900 pounds on the dryland.

The past year Bailey watered only three times, twice in June and one more time the first week of August. On June 19 the crop got 11 inches of rain to help through the summer.

Bailey is very meticulous about the variety he plants. He tried the new Delta Pine 515 for the first time this year. It is a mid variety, a little quicker than 555.

"It is looking good," he said. "We planted it on our irrigated land. Our Delta Pine rep recommended that we plant that on strong land where we could water it, and it just really looks like it has a lot of horsepower. I am looking forward to seeing how that is going to turn out."

Bailey has a very good relationship with Woody Woodson, the Delta Pine rep.

"We just trust him, and if we have any issues he will take care of them," he said. "We have met with some of his superiors and we feel they have the best to offer us and the best fit. The varieties they have, the customer service, the new lines they have coming in the pipeline with drought tolerance which they plan to offer in 2009 and 2010, and the flex varieties – the lines are getting better and better. We feel if we are going to hit a home run we are going to hit it with the 555. The later season varieties historically have done better on our farm and we are trying some flex."

In 2007, Bailey used four Delta Pine varieties – 555, 515, 432 for the refuge, and 164 is the flex cotton. All are Roundup Ready varieties, and the wheat cover crop really suppressed all the other weeds.

Last year he battled some resistant marestail in his fields, so this year in February when it was dry enough he sprayed 2,4-D. He followed that with a burndown with Ignite by Bayer.

"We burned down everything with Ignite and that brought the wheat down," he reported. "It actually didn't kill the wheat completely, it turned the wheat a brown color and the wheat didn't really die and fall over. So that gave me a better wind break for planting the cotton in the wheat. Since I used Roundup Ready cotton, I sprayed Roundup when the cotton was just bursting through the ground. We planted about April 20 and within five or six days we were spraying Roundup over the top."

He sprayed over the top with Roundup twice, once at the cotyledon stage, just when it comes up out of the ground, and again at about the four-leaf stage.

Bailey plants the crop on beds, the same beds formed in 1998 when he rowed up the field.

"The last time the hipers were in those fields was in March and April of 1998," he said.

Now that so much is going well for him, Bailey has some more plans for the future.

"We hope to begin using an auto drive guidance system," he said. "We have a manual guidance system but we don't have auto drive. We have light bars that we follow to make sure we are on the right row when we are planting wheat, but it doesn't drive the tractor for us, so we are contemplating that. Hopefully we will be able to buy a guidance system for our two planter tractors this year. Then we will row up 600-700 acres a year and spread it over about three or four years so we can have everything on a full precision plan."

Once that's complete he can begin thinking of rebedding everything. He hoped to begin the plan following harvest last fall.

"If we get through harvesting early, we can get this system, begin tearing the rows down, row it up and plant the cover crop on it," he said. "Then that will be done for the 2008 year."

Bailey said he considered growing some grain this year with the higher grain prices, but feared he couldn't get a fair price for his cotton equipment.

"Then also, we are just set up to grow cotton," he reasoned. "We are in a coop gin within 20 miles of here and that's where all our cotton goes. So we knew we had the infrastructure to get the crop out."

"Now we want to see how they are going to get all this grain moved. There are some people here making some good soybean yields – early soybeans and some good corn yields – but there are already lines waiting at elevators and if farmers don't have on-farm storage they are having trouble. We will try to have everything lined out before switching to grain where we can have on-farm storage and some own trucks so we can go back and forth to our bob storage." △