

# Fighting Pigweed

## Farming Duo Uses Early Maturing Varieties To Produce Cotton Crop

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**STEELE, MO.** Cotton is the main crop at the Jessie and Earl Carter farm in Steele, Mo., but it wasn't always that way.

"When I first started we had wheat, soybeans and cotton, Jesse, the elder of the father-son duo, said. "We didn't have a lot of cotton but then it finally grew into quite a few acres of cotton. I had been farming just grain for several years, and then I bought my uncle out and I raised grain that first year. But then the second year after that I started raising cotton and it's just grown into a pretty good size cotton operation."

Cotton, soybeans and wheat were the staples for several years, then about three years ago they went for a few acres of rice. They threw a little corn in for rotation to help the cotton out, but gave the rice up because it was too much work.

"So right now that's where we are and we just may start raising a little more wheat," he continued. "We quit raising wheat about six years ago, then put it back in the mix again last year. Before that, we found that wheat interfered with the cotton operation too much. Wrong time of the year for the harvest. But with the price of wheat, we're starting to bring it back in the program."

The 68-year-old Jessie has been on the farm most of his life and saw a lot of changes. He and his wife, Phyllis, have two grown boys and five grandchildren, including one girl and one set of twins. One grandchild helps on the farm, two others are in college, and the granddaughter is in high school. The youngest grandson does nothing but play baseball.

Jessie is a fourth generation farmer, having acquired the land his father and grandfather farmed. He and son, Earl, operate the farm, then each has his own property as well.

"My grandfather came here from West Tennessee back in the early 1900s," Jessie explained. "I started here on this farm with my uncle, Shirley Lovens, a well known farmer, back in 1970. In 1980 he decided to retire and I bought him out and when Earl came out of college he joined me and now he has his own farm and I've got my own. Then we farm together but we have two separate entities."

Farming has changed quite a bit over the years. Just a few years ago Roundup took care of everything, although the Carters always put some chemical out behind the planter. Then about two years ago the resistant pigweed appeared.

"Then we had to put a lot more chemical out with some residuals to take care of it," he recalled. "There's not anything that controls it real well; but it takes a lot of management, you've got to stay ahead of it, you can't get behind. If you do you're in trouble. We found out we had to go back to some of the older ways of farming, a little plowing now. For years we didn't have to worry about that, we just broadcast sprayed with a big spray rig. Now we have to do a little plowing and a lot of spraying and a lot of chopping. We've got crews working all the time in the field trying to take care of all the escapes."

The Carters have a little over 8,000 acres, caring for about 4,000 acres each. That's down a little from two years ago.

"I've started cutting back a little bit," Jessie said. "We did farm around 9,500 at one time, but I'm getting older and I'm cutting back a little more every time. I hope one day maybe I'll retire."

They have eight full-time helpers, and pick up another eight at harvest time. However, now Earl purchased one of the new cotton pickers so maybe they won't need as much help.

"I still have conventional pickers and I'm going to see if they are going to stand by and help him out when that one fails," Jessie said.

Earl is 47 years old, and has been on the farm all his life. He started farming on his own in 1986. He and wife, Christy, have two children, one in Three Rivers College in Poplar Bluff, and another son is a sophomore in high school.

"I just like farming, I like hunting and my operation like my dad was saying," Earl explained. "I probably have about 4,000 acres this year. I have 2,100 acres of cotton, about 260-270 acres in corn, the rest of it is soybeans."

He's impressed with the cotton genetics of today.

"The genetics on cotton has really come a long way," he said. "The boll weevil eradication program, which is in the maintenance stage now, has really helped out with our top crop on our cotton. The new cotton varieties, which are Roundup, of course, is really good on weeds. That made it a lot easier to cover a lot of ground quicker and that's why about three or four years ago we had probably 6,500 acres of cotton. We could spray over 1,000 acres a day with our sprayer rig and it was just real convenient. But now we're using more residuals, more chopping crews like my dad was saying and now we're going back to putting a lot of pre-plant herbicides out, a lot more herbicides behind the planter, and using a lot of hooded sprayers now."

"But the cotton varieties are really good," Earl continued. "We've had a lot of drought years, we've had some years really wet and the cotton varieties have surprisingly turned out pretty good. The big problem now is the pigweed of course; but the yields have been pretty strong. There are just some real good varieties out there. I think the cotton companies are doing a good job of genetics."

The shortage of labor is the main reason he's gone with the new picker.

"There's just not many young people interested in farming any more," he lamented. "I'm probably one of the youngest; oh, there's a few guys probably in their 30s but there's not many guys wanting to stay on the farm. They're just not interested in it. So labor is getting harder and harder every year and that's one thing that scares me about having to go back to old school like we're going to have to do. But that's why I went to the new cotton picker, because it would be easier for one man to do it all, compared to having to deal with a big crew during harvest. I'm hoping it will make it more convenient, we'll find out this year. But everybody I've talked to really likes the new pickers."

Maturity is one of his biggest concerns when selecting varieties. This region almost has to have an early maturity. They plant seed from D&PL, Stoneville, and Americot.

"I forget what year Americot got started, but we've always stayed with early maturity from them," he said. "We've tried some of the later maturities, I really like the Stoneville 5458; but this year planting was so late and it's a full season maturity. We had to get it planted early so it was kind of hard to plant. The D&PL 0912 and then Americot is probably what we've probably got most of this year. They're both outstanding varieties. We spread them out, and one thing I found out about the Americot is it's really good on dryland, it took stress really well, it's just a real good cotton plant."

"The other varieties are all good too, but mostly we try to stay with the early maturing varieties," Earl said. "One reason is, for a year the micronaire was something we had to deal with especially in the hot and dry weather. The mike on a lot of these varieties would tend to come out high so we were trying to get something where the mike wouldn't be so high. One thing is we're getting more and more irrigation, we probably doubled it the last five years, and so we're starting to rotate a little more with corn

and cotton. I think that's going to help a lot also. We throw the growth regulator to our varieties because we like to keep it all in the boll not in the stalk."

The soil types pretty well help them determine the varieties to use. But the irrigation helps also, especially with residuals.

"That's one reason we're going to a lot of pivots, so we can get our residuals to work," Earl explained. "Even on our wheat beans this year, we put wheat where we had pivots so we could put a residual behind our bean planter and we



The Carter's are impressed with the cotton genetics of today. They agree the genetics on cotton has really come a long way.  
Photo by John LaRose, Jr.

wouldn't have to wait on the rain. We're seeing where LibertyLink soybeans is probably going to come into view pretty soon because if I plant wheat where I do not have water I probably would go with LibertyLink soybeans so I have another option out there."

A fierce windstorm prevented them from getting 100 percent on this year's wheat in the middles of the cotton ground.

"A lot of our cotton we had to replant because of that," Jessie said.

"That's one thing that saved us this year," Earl added. "Last fall, which was an extremely dry year, we finished the harvest early and we put wheat out in the middles for wind erosion. The sand was just eating our cotton up and that saved a lot of cotton for us. This year we probably would have lost a lot. There was a lot of guys down south that had a really rough year because of sand and there was just no way to stop it. It just blew all the month of June. I've talked to guys and they said they would definitely have wheat in the middles or they will not have cotton because it's just too expensive a crop. That sand also caused the erosion of the chemical. I think we lost a lot of our chemical because of sand, and the wind was blowing it away. So it seems everybody is looking for some kind of cover crop."

"We have one guy that just got through putting lime out and one of those big winds whipped up so bad; he figures his neighbors got all of his lime," Jessie added.

Earl said they're trying to do some variable rate applications following a soil test, and using the Beris machine to tell them where they need more fertilizer.

"With the price of the fertilizer now it just seems to make sense to put it where you need it," Earl said. "I think you're going to see a lot more of that technology. We have RTK, and we use it a lot putting up our beds and planting and that's really come in handy. GPS is one of the biggest things going on in farming, I think. They say you overlap 10 percent when you're plowing or disking or doing your field work. You figure that on 9,000 acres and that's 900 acres you're duplicating. With the cost of diesel and everything else, it wouldn't take long over a year to make it pay for itself. If we had GPS when we started back in the 80s, we would know a big savings by now. GPS has come a long way. But it takes skill to use it, and it's not so easy to find somebody and put him on a tractor. He has to know how to operate those extras."

Still, Earl finds the biggest problem in farming today is the resistant pigweed.

"It used to be so easy to keep a crop clean and now there's the extra expense," Earl said. "A lot of these landlords are older and they've seen it clean for the past five years and now all of a sudden they're seeing trees out here. It costs \$30 an acre to get people to chop pigweed. And like dad said, the choppers have been going ever since the cotton came up; and we're doing soybeans and I keep hearing about the seed bank and everything else that is in ditches and turnrows. That's something else we're going to have to fight."

Jessie added, "We've been fighting that all summer. We started two mowers, one a ditch bank mower and one is two-row mower and I think the mowers are going to break us just repairing them. We're always tearing up things trying to keep the pigweed down by mowing. That's not going to do it, we're going to have to go to spraying."

Earl continued the thought: "In the springtime, if you get a big rain and the ditches overflow and back up into your fields like happened this year, you took pigweed seed and pulled them out of ditches and spread them across these fields. That's one reason why I think you see a lot of pigweed in all these farms by rivers. The floods just took them out of the ditches and dumped them in the field."

One reason it's so difficult to eradicate pigweed is there isn't 100 percent compliance. One farmer may take care of his own, but what about the neighbor?

"You know this county has had a bad Johnson grass patch, but we're spraying Johnson grass on this, and we don't have Johnson grass on this anymore," Jessie added.

"What scares me about the pigweed control is, while gramoxone is a great product, you have to be careful," Earl noted. "Anything that will kill a pigweed needs to be used with care. It's a strong chemical."

Earl said that since food and clothing is so essential for life, the crops the American farmer raises will always find a place in the market.

"I think if we can get through this pigweed issue, which we will, I think there is a future in farming and I think we're going to have to get the younger generation interested in it," he said. "We've battled cockleburrs, Johnson grass and morning glory, and now we have pigweed which is a monster but we will overcome it. I'd love to have my boys farming my dad's ground and my ground some day. Because that's what we're out here for, so they can carry it on."

Jessie feels the pigweed problem is going to cut the large cotton acres down.

"The dependable Roundup, that's the reason we were able to raise so much cotton because we could manage it so easy," he said. "Since the pigweed has come on we've cut back 2,000 acres and we're probably going to have to cut back more."

"We're going to have to use a lot more rotation into it," Earl commented. "It's costing more and more every year to get a crop in and out."

Earl and his wife, Christy, teach a sunday school class at First Baptist Church. He's also on the local school board. He was studying agronomy at Arkansas State University when he met Chrissy. He rented ground and started farming, then came back to the farm. Chrissy is owner and director of Apple Tree Preschool in Steeles, Mo. The school attracts 35 to 45 three to five-year-old students a year. Δ