

# Buster Sykes Farm, Turner Road in Mebane, NC

## The farm

Alamance County's Cooperative Extension Service is fortunate to have access to 170 acres of mostly wooded land on Turner Road in Mebane. Around 15 acres are cleared, some of which is being used as a demonstration orchard, providing the opportunity to plant many varieties of fruits and observe and assess their hardiness in our area.

The land was left by Coleman Clark "Buster" Sykes who was born and raised on the land and had fond memories of coming home from school, changing into his slicker and boots and exploring the trails, creek, and wildlife. Having no direct descendants and fearing the land would be developed, Mr. Sykes wanted to insure the land would remain a farm following his death. He reached out to Alamance County's Extension Office after learning about its youth programs. Rett Davis, director at the time, sent Paul Walker, the livestock agent and Roger Cobb, the crops agent to walk the farm with Mr. Sykes. Following many legalities including a psychological exam to make sure Mr. Sykes was of sound mind, in 2006 Buster signed an agreement with N.C. State University to put his farm in a land trust with the North Carolina Agricultural Foundation to protect it from development and to establish learning centers and demonstrations for youth and adults.



Buster Sykes as a young boy

## Who was Buster Sykes?

By all accounts, Buster Sykes was an interesting man, described by those who knew him as a good and generous man, if a bit eccentric. He is said to have led the youth group at Hawfields Presbyterian Church when he was a young man and remained active in the church community. He was known to be distrustful of banks and dealt only in cash he kept hidden in his home. He worked in the machine shop at Western Electric, and on Fridays was often seen in the parking lot cashing paychecks for a fee. He had a pickup truck and kept his stuff in the bed; it seemed he never took anything off and just kept piling more on.



Buster was a good steward of the land and believed nothing should go to waste. He used any tree that fell on his property for firewood or to make tools. He made perfect hexagon shaped tomato stakes and produce crates from felled cedar trees. He loved to dynamite boulders and then crush the rock. His favorite time to dynamite was late in the evening. There would be a loud noise, houses would shake and the neighbors would say, "Well there goes Buster again." He had a rock crusher on Ferrell Road off of Turner Road. People would bring rocks to Buster and he would crush them for gravel.



Buster owned a saw which was powered by a Model T auto engine similar to the one pictured at the right. He would travel to homes in the community with his saw to cut wood into short pieces for use in wood stoves. When Buster went places to saw wood, he would jack up one wheel on the Model T to make the axle turn freely. Then he would put a belt connected to the saw on a pulley beside the wheel to make the saw run. He was said to be a good mechanic who worked on equipment in the community.



Buster sold some of his produce - corn, strawberries, and sweet potatoes - but gave most away to members of the community. He would let people pick in his strawberry fields but if you got out of your assigned row he would ask you to leave. The area where the orchard is now was his sweet potato field which he grubbed by dragging cedar logs behind his Massey Ferguson tractor. He loved his tractors, and after he lost his driver's license, he drove his beloved tractor up and down Turner Road. Buster passed on his love and knowledge of the land to Bob Devoacek, and Bob still has many of Buster's tools and his International Harvester tractor pictured here with Buster in the driver's seat.

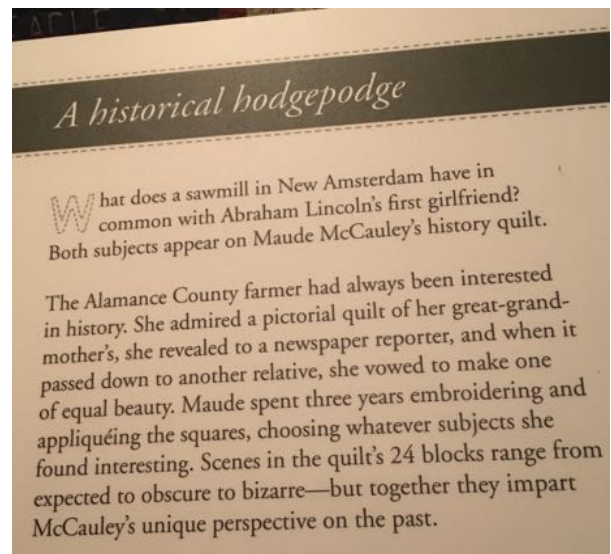


There were two farm houses on the farm. The daffodils that still bloom in the spring grew near the original home place, and they were so beautiful that on Sunday afternoons it was a community gathering place for picnics and fellowship. Buster never married and was said by some to have had several women in his life, but never wanted a wife.

## History of the farm's land

Prior to 1750, colonial governors had granted most land along the Haw River and the Trading Paths to a few men. It is said that the creek on the farm was used to power a saw mill during the American Revolution. During and after the war, ownership of the tract was contested. Between 1796 and 1803, three tracts along the streams of Haw Creek were sold to James Clendenin. Buster Sykes is a direct descendant of Clendenin through his mother, Annie Maud Johnston Sykes McCauley, and although a house fire destroyed the land record of the farm, it is likely this is how the land came to him. Buster Sykes's sister relinquished her claim to their mother's land in a quitclaim deed to Buster in 1970. Information about the history and ownership of the land was researched by historian Carole Troxler. Further details of Dr. Troxler's research are on file at the Extension Office.

While visiting the [QuiltSpeak exhibit](#) at the NC Museum of History, Barbara Taylor was surprised to find a quilt made by Buster's mother, Maude McCauley. The museum was kind enough to share photos of the quilt which is part of their permanent collection and is now back in storage. It was donated by Buster's nephew, Rex Farrell, son of Buster's sister, Crystal.



One of the blocks in the quilt depicted an old southern home, 1884 birthplace of the maker. Barbara reached out to Dr. Carole Troxler who did some research on whether the home depicted was on the Buster Sykes Farm. Using census data, Dr. Troxler determined that Buster's mother had two tracts, one in Thompson Township that became the Buster Sykes Farm and also an unlocated one in Melville Township.



The 1910 and 1920 censuses show Buster and his sister living with their mother and her mother, but in the Melville Township home, not Thompson. The entry for "occupation" for mother's mother, who is head of household, is listed as farmer, but the census taker added that the farm in question was in Thompson Township. So evidently Buster's mother's mother owned a farm in Thompson Township, presumably the Buster Sykes farm. None of this tells us definitively where Buster Sykes' mother was born, presumably one of these two places.



## Acknowledgements

The above information was compiled from interviews with Rett Davis and Paul Walker, retired Cooperative Extension staff; Bob Devoacek, husband of Buster's great niece; Bill Covington, retired dairy farmer; and Henderson Scott, a member of the Hawfields church and community. Dr. Carole Troxler contributed historical research on the history of the land.

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