

Timberlands auction provides glimpse into Southern tradition

By JAN LEFEVRE

The shadows of morning shortened as the clock leaned toward the eleventh hour. David walked to the open door and looked toward the street. It appeared that everyone had arrived, but policy dictated that he remain patient for the deadline. Three solidly-built men crowded onto a deacon's bench along the wall separating David's office from the lobby and others had taken up positions in a circular fashion around the room. Two conversed quietly in the corner, next to the narrow loft stairway. All were dressed in a various assortment of work attire from khaki pants and plaid shirts to bib overalls.

The small turn-of-the-century building rested next to the old railroad bed, the track itself long gone. Because of the odd angle of the street to the railroad, the structure itself was a peculiar shape. Maria, David's wife, explained that it formerly served as an old grocery store. The beadboard lining the ceiling and supporting the chair rail appeared original, but the bright blue paint was fresh. Filtered light sifted into the space through miniblinds on the old windows. The refined grey leather wingback chairs and large oriental rug on the polished wood floor seemed to contrast with the old logging tools, pieces of tree trunks gouged with machete chops and blazes and deer antlers protruding from the walls. I wondered if the room represented the separate touches of man and woman.

Glancing periodically at the clock, I couldn't help but sense the anticipation that permeated the room. Firmly grasped in the callused hands of each buyer was an envelope or two representing the result of several days of exhausting work, work that included carrying a heavy machete, dodging poisonous snakes and trekking through patches of dense undergrowth.

David, prepared as a surveyor with engineered preciseness, had taken four or five days, with three extra men, to cover the Thomas estate himself, measuring, identifying, recording and marking each tree to be sold. Four colors of paint indicated various boundaries and selected cutting areas.

Preceding the arrival of the buyers, David had briefed Dick with his professional litany: "I'm doing what you hired me to do; tell you what it's worth, sell it and supervise the harvest." He explained that the buyers would arrive only shortly before the sale, size up the competition and present their bids. "They may



David Jennette, president of Timberlands Unlimited, Inc. (left), looks on as Dick Lefevre, interim vice president for business affairs, congratulates timber buyers Myron Hoffer of H. S. Hoffer and Sons Lumber Company and Eric Welker of Union Camp Corporation.

sit outside in their pickups until five minutes before the sale," David said, "and I've seen 'em go into the restroom at the last minute to change their bid." David smiled as he fondly reminisced about his father's method of holding bids. "I've seen my Daddy carry three bids on him, one in his sock, another in his hip pocket and a third in his shirt pocket. Depending on the competition that he saw walk in the door, he'd pull out a low, medium or high bid from its hiding place."

Outlining the process, David explained that bids would be collected separately for each parcel and read aloud. He advised Dick on the minimum bid to accept. "Access, timber and ground conditions will sell it," he said. "There's not a lot of lumber for sale right now. I think we'll have a good day." His voice sounded confident and a slight smile emerged from the corners of his mouth. Dick smiled in return as he recalled how he had informed his colleagues that the timber sale should exceed a quarter of a million dollars in unrestricted income. Intrigued with David's optimism, he was delighted with the prospect of anticipated revenues greatly exceeding the original estimate.

Silence descended as the hands of the clock moved onto the bewitching hour. All eye contact and body movement ceased except for my glance at Dick. As vice president for business affairs, he represented the college in the transaction and his face was expressionless. Yet as my husband, I sensed that his

exhilaration was rapidly exceeding the lack of emotion on his face. With his formal suit and tie, he appeared almost statue-like, standing behind David on the periphery of the circle.

Precisely at eleven o'clock, David invited the buyers to put forth any questions about the property itself. It was critical that everyone understand the exact parameters for each bid. A solemn buyer asked about right-of-ways. David explained that loggers could not traverse the yard surrounding the homestead to reach timberlands.

"OK, we'll do it in the order advertized," he finally declared. "We'll start with lot one." David briskly walked around the room and gathered envelopes from seven outstretched hands. The only sounds were his muffled footsteps as he circled the carpet and occasional traffic clamor on the street beyond the open door. He carefully tore open the first envelope, extracted its contents and read the bid aloud. "Three hundred sixty one thousand, six hundred and fifty dollars," he declared. I didn't dare look up. It was much more than I had expected. David's assistant silently wrote down the name of the buyer and the amount as it was read. David repeated it. He went on to the next bid and completed the process six more times. Trying my best to remain composed, I could feel a growing knot of excitement in the pit of my stomach as each offer was read. I swallowed hard as I realized that the highest final bid for the first parcel had exceeded four hundred thousand dollars. Keeping my head down, I hastily jotted figures in my notebook, trying my best to look experienced.

Bids were collected and read for the second parcel. The highest bid again exceeded David's earlier estimate. He motioned with his hands for Dick and me to accompany him into his office behind the glass windows. His assistant followed silently. As I sat on the stiff bench next to Dick, I sensed experienced eyes observing us through the glass. After merely a brief perusement of figures and David's steadfast assurance that the highest bidder on each parcel was reputable, Dick confirmed his acceptance of the highest bids.

Returning with an air of solemnity and decorum, David walked to the outer room and carefully announced the decision. All but the highest bidders for the two parcels quietly ambled out through the open door. The procedure was now one of protocol and the excitement of anticipation had retreated. In what seemed like an instant, the college had consented to a sale valued at \$533,863.00.

As Dick executed the transaction with the two seasoned buyers, a peculiar feeling edged

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Brenda Tinkham, president of the Murfreesboro Rotary Club, presents Chowan College President Stan Lott with a \$15,000 endowment for the Murfreesboro Rotary Club Scholarship Fund. A scholarship will be awarded each year to a deserving Hertford County student attending Chowan College. Looking on is Dr. Bruce Whitaker, past president of Chowan College and Johnnye Lott.

