

# Perquimans People

## Tunnell taught curriculum of life in vocational ag

Chances are if you went to Perquimans High School between 1952 and 1976 and you lived on a farm in the country or even on what might have been considered a half of a farm, you would have signed up for Joe Lee Tunnell's vocational agriculture class.

And chances are if you did you learned a whole lot more than how to slop a hog.

That's because in Tunnell's hey-day, the state didn't set the curriculum. The teacher took care of it, and Joe Lee took it upon himself to teach a whole lot more than he had to.

Ask one of his former students and he'll tell you the same thing. Joe Lee Tunnell taught the subject of life.

Tunnell spent 25 years teaching at Perquimans High School. He would take a student as a freshman and keep him under his wing the entire four years he was at the school.

A boy's education under Tunnell began with a course he called "growing up." In that course he taught the child everything his father was supposed to have taught him but usually didn't.

Along with "growing up" came the kinds of things a young man would need to know to get along in a rural community.

He taught wood working, home construction, farming skills, and leadership.

His freshman class would

learn a motto that Tunnell would strive to have them stick by. It went, "Learning to do, doing to learn, earning to live and living to serve."

Vocational ag lasted two full classroom periods and Tunnell would get things underway each day with some sort of philosophical discussion.

He said his students would often greet him with, "What sermon are we going to have this morning?"

And Tunnell would always come through with some thought provoking words.

"You can't control the length of your life but you can adjust the width and the depth," was one such phrase used to set off discussion.

To hear Tunnell talk you know instantly that he must have been either a preacher or a teacher. A person doesn't string words together like he does and not get paid for it.

As he speaks he blinks his eyes like a hoot owl and when he wants to make a point or gets a little excited he throws his arms out with abandon and the very motion seems to kick his voice up an octave.

His nose is humped from the time a piece of wood flew out of a saw and knocked him on the seat of his pants in the shop one day.

Tunnell was born and raised in Hyde County, a county that even a country boy would have called back woods.

He was raised during the depression, which might explain how he has grown a yard full of beautiful camellias from nothing but cuttings, has made a table from an old piano, and hesitates to put sunflower seeds in his bird feeder because they run 32 cents a pound.

Tunnell's father was a merchant, and sold everything a rural family would need to survive. There was also a family farm and Joe helped out with both enterprises.

"Being born and reared on a farm and having taken vocational education in high school, plus liking animals and the outdoors, I decided to become a vocational agriculture teacher," Tunnell said.

As it still is today, N.C. State University was then the place to go for such pursuits.

"I packed my little foot locker, steamer trunk they called it, and boy I'm telling you, that was country going to the city," Tunnell recalled. "I didn't even see my first streetlight 'til I was 16 years old," he said.

They tell one tale on Joe, which isn't exactly truthful, about how country he was when he first arrived at State.

They say he went to the drug store and ordered a Coca-Cola and the counter clerk fixed him his first fountain drink. Joe tilted the cup back and

took a big swallow, then spewed it out all over the floor in shock.

"Man this Coke is full of glass," Joe was supposed to have said.

"You fool," the clerk responded, "that's ice."

"Don't you know there ain't no ice in July," Tunnell shot back just as quickly.

And while the incident never really took place, Joe did on one occasion write home and tell his mother he was going to a football game the next night, though he didn't know how in the world they were going to see to play.

But despite the ribbing, which he can dish out as well as he can take, Tunnell's country upbringing was probably his biggest asset when he returned to Weeksville (in Pasquotank County) and later to Perquimans County to teach.

He was able to provide, better than any outsider could have, the kind of guidance a young man growing up in the country would need.

The thing that separated Joe Tunnell from a lot of teachers was the amount of time he got to spend with his students.

"If he came to me as a freshman I taught that boy four years," Tunnell said. "It gave me a chance to know that boy, know what he was interested in, what he was made of, and what he wanted to do...period."

Each student was required to have an agricultural project at home and Joe would get to know the boy's family, would take the child to camp, to Future Farmers of America activities, and on field trips.

By the time the boy got through with his courses he was a young man, and Joe Tunnell was like a second father to him.

Because his course was an elective, the only students who took it were those who were truly interested. And they had to be willing to work or they didn't last.

"Sense of responsibility, that's one thing our boys learned," Tunnell said. "In voc-ag you could do so many things you couldn't do in a regular classroom."

"I've had boys build a complete bedroom suite and pay for it after they got out of high school," he said.

Another thing they learned was leadership, and it carried over into their adult lives.

"That training paid off," Tunnell said. "You take the Ruritans, the Lions Club and the Jaycees. The majority of them are former FAA members."

Teaching vocational agriculture was a 12 month a year job. Throw in after hours in the shop and the extracurricular activities and you've got a demanding, time consuming schedule.

Add to that the something extra that Joe Tunnell always gave it and you have to ask "Why?" There can be only one answer.

"I just loved to work with boys and watch them grow up," Tunnell said. "I guess that was the main thing."

And in watching them grow, Tunnell learned something

about about young men.

"He's got to be interested to start with," Tunnell said, "got

to have that desire and want'n to do, and if he does he can make it."

It definitely helps, though, to have some adult guidance from a man like Joe Tunnell.



**Woodworking**

Joe Tunnell twists in a screw on a Spruce gun house. Now retired, Tunnell spends alot of his cabinet he is working on in the shop behind his time in the shop making furniture.



**Prize camellias**

Joe Tunnell shows off one of his prize Camellias. He raised a whole yard full of the beautiful plants from cuttings.

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