



Jim Dobson
2009 recipient of the Holman Award

By Tom Bennett

The center of good farming science and soil and water conservation in our watershed is Blairsville's Mountain Branch Experiment Station, recently renamed the Georgia Mountain and Education Center, of the University of Georgia College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences. And the person synonymous with its model soil conservation practices and breakthroughs in feeding the world was the superintendent, himself a research scientist and UGA associate professor, Jim Dobson.

He retired in 1991 after 38 years at what he lovingly calls "the station." For what he accomplished there and contributions in retirement Dobson, now 84, is the inaugural recipient of the Holman Water Quality Stewardship Award of the Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition.

The profuse activities of the Dobson era included research and demonstrations of forage and grain crops, fruits and vegetables, ornamentals and beef cattle. In addition, the USDA hardiness zones 6 and 7 extend along the finger of the Appalachians dipping into the Georgia mountains at Blairsville. So Dobson and his fellow faculty and graduate students put to the test the winter hardiness of many crops.

"Whenever we were testing grasses and legumes or something else, for example, we knew that if it would survive the cold here, it could grow anywhere in the Southeast as well as many other areas," Dobson recalled.

You can find on the Internet today a typical research project from the Dobson years. It is "Quantification of Disease Resistance that Reduces the Rate of Tobacco Etch Virus Epidemics in Bell Pepper." It was completed in 1989 by three UGA faculty members and a graduate student. They write in their fourth paragraph: "We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of James Dobson, superintendent of the Georgia Mountain Branch Experiment Station."

The station set an example when it was designated early on as a soil and water conservation farm. "We carried out all the best management practices on the station," he recalled proudly. He

was the longtime chair of the Blue Ridge Mountain Soil and Water Conservation District and a founding and continuing board member of the Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition.

DOBSON NEVER married, instead living a life of service to agriculture and public service. “I couldn’t find anyone who would have me,” he said, and we doubt that. The late Dr. Fred Davison (former UGA president) at Jim’s retirement compared him to Dick Russell. Senator Russell was a bachelor like Jim, and he devoted his life to public service.

The Dobson rule for interaction among people is “Brevity, brevity, brevity!” So it rules out listing here his numerous church, civic, educational, historical and veterans affiliations that he has taken on as a volunteer. It’s fair to say no one is more dogged or insistent in selling tickets to non-profit fundraisers. Holding a batch of tickets and with a gleam of determination in his eye, he makes Union County charity drives successful.

“When you retire again, then I will start having more money,” a frequent target told Dobson.

DOBSON WAS one of eight children of a cotton farmer in Central, S.C. In January 1945 in Luxembourg during the Battle of the Bulge, PFC Dobson of the 320th Infantry of the 35th Division of the 3rd U.S. Army was wounded when a shell fragment struck his leg. “One of those German eight-eights got me,” he recalled.

He recovered in hospitals in England and Atlanta. He went on to receive a bachelor of science degree from Clemson University and a Master’s of science from the University of Georgia.

“In 1953, I came to the station in Blairsville thinking I would stay a couple of years and then shoot for a doctorate,” he recalled. “But I liked it so much here that I just stayed.”