The Enduring Spell of Land Grant Careers  ARF  May 16  Jim Clark

Over a decade ago my friend and colleague David Green and I joined with other colleagues and their students across the NC State campus to plan and present an annual spring event called “The Spell of the Land.” We celebrated the charm, the bewitching allure, of our land from the mountains to the sea. I recall that each year Professor Will Hooker and his dedicated students used bamboo to make a natural logo for our celebration. In more recent years I have been fond of saying in unison with the great Kentucky author and environmental activist Wendell Berry that we cannot love each other if we do not love the land.

Today I humbly accept this award as a retired faculty member. In doing so I propose to talk to you about the spell of our land and our love and concern for each other after our work for pay is over. Here is the bedrock of my theme: We do not truly care for each other if our careers in the public, higher education land grant system end when we retire. My title is “The Enduring Spell of Land Grant Careers”

All of us who have had fulfilling NC State careers know that what we did for decades was more than a job. I find that what I do in retirement is an extension of what I did here since 1967. I arrived as a new faculty member in English from graduate school at Duke, after having completed my undergraduate degree in Chapel Hill.

NC State’s English Department was the only place I sought employment. I got the job with just one letter and an interview. An unimaginable stroke of good fortune by today’s accounts, but to me it was just what I expected. Let me explain.

I had entered the University at Chapel Hill in 1961 on a national 4-H scholarship.
Work and play in youth development NC State had engaged with me since the age of 9 showed me the way. This land grant campus was my developmental home away from home, the place where my rural Warren County roots in agriculture and citizenship had been shaped for a career in lifelong learning and serving. I have kept that land grant spirit alive as a volunteer since I retired in 2005-06.

Yet noting I do now is unrelated to what I did on this campus and across this state during my long and happy career. At age 62 I knew I could live another life and still be true to myself and my land grant values. I turned 69 last week.

But let me digress. When I arrived at State in 1967, I recall the personnel folks mentioned that 2008 would be my retirement date. That far looming year meant very little to me. In 1982, however, I did look ahead to retirement by establishing a wood working shop on our family farm at Inez, a small village surrounded by old Greek Revival houses that General Sherman chose not burn as the Civil War ended. His troops did camp on these plantations as he sent his hungry men north toward home in April and may 1865.

One of these surviving houses came into the possession of my paternal grandfather several decades later. It was a three storey 1830 house subjected to substantial gentrification in 1854. By the time the house and land became increasingly my responsibility, this Greek Revival white elephant needed lots of care. With this well outfitted shop I began this maintenance with my father, who had been born and raised on this farm. We also began to build and repair fine furniture. This outgrowth of high school farm shop training for him and for me bonded us as men and started my dreaming about one day living there myself to create original chairs, tables, and cabinets in retirement. There were also Angus cows and timber interests to manage.

Daddy died in the summer of 1992. By the following summer, all of my shop
equipment and much else had been stolen in the night. Twelve nights to be exact, nights when no one was living nearby and the county public safety officers were out of reach as well. Inez, you see, is so special because it is remote and beautiful. There you really could believe that you love each other because you love the land.

Rural thieves tested this hypothesis more than I cared to find out, but I did not want to injure someone or be killed to protect even special things.

So I slowly altered my dream of retirement, and by 2004, a period of especially dysfunctional administration in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences as well as atop this University itself, I knew I would be leaving early, living in Raleigh instead of Inez, several years before 2008. In fact, I had been amazed at the slipshod ways in which the University was operating at times since the early 1980s. Many of you will recall that a series of provosts, acting chancellors, and chancellors followed in the wake of the accomplished John Caldwell era here, the era in which I as a young scholar set out to do for others on campus and beyond what this land grant campus had done for me and my family since my childhood.

The volunteer services I currently provide to Habitat for Humanity of Wake County are a good compromise with what I had originally planned to build or restore during my retirement in my native county. I’ve actually lived in Wake County more than half of my life.

I fervently believe that the land grant system, like no other, provides faculty and staff, especially new faculty, a unique opportunity. Coming to NC State from this state, as I did, or far away like many of you, the employee gets to know the state through extension assignments and opportunities, to go to the places our students have grown up, to meet the parents and grandparents of our students where they live and work. This potential for statewide engagement produces an invaluable
perspective whether you are a soil scientist or a professor of American literature. Retired livestock specialist Jim Butler said in 2006: “I suppose I’m one of the luckiest people in the world. I don’t know many people in the University who have gotten to work in every county, and I was never 15 minutes away from someone I knew.”

Lifelong learning and service--extension of what we are mastering and teaching--engages citizens who have the same needs and ideas. We learn from each other, no one having all of the answers or facts. This is the essence of the land grant system. We lose sight of it or abandon it at our peril as a state and as a nation. I do not speak lightly.

If the thieves who robbed me down to the bare concrete floor of locked buildings had taken advantage of the land grant experience of 4-H or later received training as young farmers, homemakers, or small business owners, they and I might have different stories to tell today.

Criminals thrive when their other routes to economic development are closed or taken away. Stealing what belongs to someone else becomes their illegal entrepreneurship. Their moonshine operation of today is stealing salvageable metal, especially copper. In the old days, at least, the land grant system could teach the bootleggers to grow their own corn.

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Now for another change in retirement plans. I cared so much about this dynamic yet fragile land grant approach to public, continuing education and well being that I agreed in the fall of 2005 to work in Holladay Hall for the coming months as a special assistant to Vice Chancellor John Gilligan. He was also acting in another
position that was being filled at his administrative level. When Dr. James Zuiches arrived and began to make his way across campus and the state as the new Vice Chancellor for Extension, Engagement, and Economic Development, I vacated my contract position at the end of June 2006.

Dr. Zuiches has now retired himself, and I believe I am right in stating that no one has been identified to devote full time to the important land grant position he vacated. Ironically the justification for this vacuum has been financial exigency. I consider this development in this hard times economy to be the equivalent of the removal of North Carolina State University’s mountaintop. Wendell Berry tells us that in the coal fields of Appalachia, short sighted coal companies have removed the tops of over 500 mountains to improve their corporate bottom lines. We do not love the land or the people if we destroy them.

Our land grant environment is damaged and diminished by this administrative decision at NC State University. During the Great Depression when this place was just a college, President Frank Porter Graham of the Consolidated University was determined not to surrender to the dominant business interests of North Carolina that had adopted the false policy of trying to pinch their way out of North Carolina’s critical situation. President Graham said, for our times and his: “ We cannot pinch our way out. We have to invest, build, and create our way out.”

So we must get to work as individuals, largely on our own. Nothing that I do in my retirement years is a new responsibility, just another opportunity, rather, to share what my career at this land grant campus taught me how to do.

This morning I led a life writing workshop in Garner at the Senior Center. In that group are a dozen adults who write at home and read what they have written in these weekly sessions. When this workshop ends after six weeks, I’ll ask the
writers to select the best of their work for me to publish in a booklet that is distributed free to each participant, with extra copies for the Garner Senior Center’s library.

If this Senior Center were a residential facility with assisted living and advanced care options, the booklets accumulating there could be consulted by the professionals in the Health Center. At Springmoor and Magnolia Glen where I have also conducted innumerable life writing workshops, doctors and nurses have access to similar writings by men and women who are now wearing diapers again and may be near death. Reading their true stories enables caregivers to know the people their patients once were. You can see the value of this information to all concerned, especially if the patients are mute or otherwise unable to communicate clearly.

All of the life writing workshops I have done in this region, including one this past fall at East Carolina University, are direct outgrowths of classes I developed and taught in the Encore Program at McKimmon Center before I retired. I am proud to say that I have also continued to develop and teach other classes for Encore and to lead study tours to places I have studied with adults enrolled in these classes.

Just this month some of us Encorians went to eastern Pennsylvania for 4 days to check up on Ben Franklin and John and William Bartram, dead these many years. Like the life writers of our day, however, they had left us accounts of their works and days.

I mentioned earlier that as a farm youth in Warren County, I engaged myself in the 4-H movement. I have not quit that commitment. Not only was it the reason I chose to have my career at NC State; 4-H has provided a framework for my interest in youth development and an outlet for my own research and writing. In 1984 I
published a short history of 4-H in North Carolina. When this movement reached one hundred years in this state, in 2009, I was completing a much longer history called *Clover all Over: North Carolina’s First 4-H Century.* I wrote both of these books as a volunteer. Throughout the decades I have also headed organized efforts to collect and conserve 4-H records and artifacts. This work is now focused on the creation of the North Carolina 4-H History and Learning Center at Millstone 4-H Camp in Richmond County. I chair this statewide effort to raise funds, build, and sustain this land grant monument to rural and urban youth development without regard to gender, race, or sexual preference.

One of the hallmarks of the Millstone project and the recent centennial history of 4-H is racial balance. With more time in retirement and more records to work with, I have been able to tell the story of youth development before and since integration in great detail. It is an instructive story for our times as the life experiences separating rich and poor North Carolinians are pinched by homelessness and hunger that crosses racial and socio-economic lines night and day as in the Great Depression.

Civil and human rights claim my retirement time and imagination in another way as well. I serve as co-chair of the North Carolina Freedom Monument Project, a public art park earmarked for the land behind the Department of Archives and History in downtown Raleigh. This installation is an outgrowth of the work of the Paul Green Foundation.

As many of you know, Paul Green of Harnett County and Chapel Hill was a human rights activist and playwright as well as a poet and fiction writer. His career ended with his death in 1981, but his legacy lives on through a foundation that bears his name, a foundation I have the honor of serving as president. The North Carolina Freedom Monument will celebrate our common interest in freedom by focusing on
the experiences of North Carolina’s African Americans during slavery and since emancipation. Many of you have seen Paul Green’s famous outdoor drama The Lost Colony at Manteo. Others of you have attended plays at the Paul Green Theater in Chapel Hill. This public arts monument to our shared freedom will be a Paul Green memorial park in the center of Raleigh for the entire state.

Dr. Friday, for whom the award I am receiving today is named, has said often that he came to think of Paul Green as the conscience of North Carolina. That is a very high compliment from another of our very special citizens, one who, since Paul Green’s death and his own subsequent retirement from a public position, has become our vocal and visible conscience himself.

As a professor emeritus of English it is perhaps not surprising that I would be devoted to Paul Green, Thomas Wolfe, the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame, and Encore classes that read and discuss the works of authors across the land. What may surprise some of you is that because NC State is a land grant campus, it founded the first Humanities Extension Program in the country, and I was honored to co-direct and then direct it between 1987-2003. In this position I was tapped to serve in leadership positions in many of the cultural and literary organizations in North Carolina. I would not have had these opportunities to serve and to bring special cultural recognitions to NC State University if my home campus had not been committed to the land grant philosophy of public higher education.

For me, the joy of continuing a land grant career into retirement includes the opportunities I have mentioned and a closely related one, my current leadership of the Friends of the Gregg Museum of Art and Design at State. When the new Gregg is firmly established in the historic chancellor’s residence on Hillsborough Street, all of us will have a fuller sense of the superb life of the arts at NC State. I invite you to learn more about the collections at the Gregg, now still located in
Talley Student Center. Join me and hundreds of others in becoming a Friend of the Gregg.

Now I go back to the beginning of my land grant experience, the land in Warren County where I grew up and where I and my two brothers own and manage an incorporated farm. We still raise pine trees and Angus cows. The pasture meanders through the managed forests. One of my jobs is to proofread our pasture. This task is not unlike proofreading a manuscript or grading a student essay. I pull out or otherwise eradicate the weeds that should not be taking up the space of good forage for the herd, just as for many years I helped students improve their written communication. I recommend this proofreading of the pasture to you, whether you have a farm pasture, a lawn, or just a cluttered house or garage. We need to downsize to live more fully in retirement. But keep in mind a caution or two.

Downsizing, culling the home place hideaways, can lead to throwing out items that might fit well in the collection of the Gregg Museum or the 4-H History and Learning Center at Millstone. You might have in an old folder a family story from slavery times that belongs in the North Carolina Department of Archives and History. Or perhaps more likely, you will run across family letters and photographs you will need when, in these later stages of life, you are writing your life stories for your new spouse, your grandchildren, and your eventual caregivers.

In other words, be sure that what you are proofreading out of your domain is really no longer of use to you, to our land grant University, and to our state.

Tomorrow at the University in Chapel Hill I will present the North Caroliniana Society’s book award to the writer of the best work of North Carolina nonfiction published during the past year. The winner is Dr. David Silkenat. His UNC Press
book is entitled *Moments of Despair*. It recounts the tragedy of suicide, divorce, and debt or bankruptcy in Civil War Era North Carolina. For example, despairing white North Carolinians were more likely to commit suicide after the war than before, while blacks almost never killed themselves after emancipation although before the war suicide was an acceptable route out of bondage.

I mention this book and its subject to refocus our thoughts on my expanded theme in these remarks. “We do not care for each other if we abandon the land grant system of public higher education at NC State or in our retirements. We must keep up the good service. For all of you know that President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act in 1862. Under this legislation our state was granted 270,000 acres of public land to found and fund a land grant campus. There were rough spots along the way as the Civil War Era wore on, but NC State College emerged and has evolved through ups and downs since 1887. We must keep the legacy of those years in our vision now as again we have our private and public moments of despair. In volunteering your time and career-based knowledge and experience you can find, as I am finding, that we do care deeply about each other and our environment, including the land and all that it has granted us. I urge you to share your wealth of time and talents. For the spell of our land grant careers is upon us this afternoon here in this room as we recall all that this campus has done for us and many others.

Thank you.