

ADAM HUNTER PRAIRIE

Haywood Rankin

May 9, 2012

THE SITE:

The reason for all the fuss about this corner of Redlair is the existence of the endangered species, Schweinitz's sunflower. What we now call the "Adam Hunter Prairie" hardly fits anyone's notion of a prairie. This bit of Redlair fit it even less a couple of years ago, when it was nothing more than a couple of trails coming together in a dense thicket growing up in the wake of Hurricane Hugo, or a couple of decades ago, when it was a dense Virginia pine forest. But with the help of volunteers the space has been cleared little by little, and is beginning to look open, if not much like a prairie. (The term is used because the piedmont, before the arrival of Europeans, once was covered with large open areas, burned off by the Native Americans, and it was in these extensive artificial prairies that the Schweinitz sunflower thrived.)

Lisa Gaffney, a Charlotte-based botanist, discovered the existence of the Schweinitz sunflower here in October 2002. She and Haywood Rankin were leading a walk during the last "Family Land Day" at Redlair, one of several walks being led on a beautiful autumn afternoon. They had planned to take a more botanically interesting route along the streams, but other groups were walking in the valleys, so they detoured to this area of hurricane devastation, not expecting to find anything of interest but rather just cutting across country. She could scarcely believe her eyes. She did not say a word about what she hoped was a remarkable discovery, merely asking permission to uproot "a plant." She wanted to be absolutely sure, back in the laboratory, that she had come upon this particular plant. (There are hundreds of varieties of sunflower, several of them looking very similar to the Schweinitz sunflower.) Indeed, she had stumbled on the most westerly location of a species of flower on the verge of extinction, only found in the Charlotte region and nowhere else on the globe.

When Lisa made this discovery, there was no broad cleared area around this patch of sunflowers, as there is now. Instead, a couple of trails intersected. Haywood Rankin had opened a tractor-and-horse trail along the course of the old cart track leading from the South Fork to the Hickory Grove Baptist Church, beginning in 1995. At first he had intermittently bushhogged this trail on visits back to the United States while he was on leave from diplomatic assignment in Africa, and he did more work on the trail when he retired to the farm in 1998. So what Lisa beheld in October 2002 was a bushhogged trail approximately 12 feet wide – a bit wider than most tractor-maintained trails on the farm because of the merger of two trails. Most of the sunflowers (then and now) were on the northern border of the trail, where the terrain falls sharply away and where the trail has almost always been a bit wet.

Whereas the forest at this trail juncture prior to Hurricane Hugo (September 29, 1989) had been a uniform and dense Virginia pine forest, in October 2002 the pines had mostly given way (devastated by the hurricane) to dense new growth, mainly of hardwood saplings of the softer variety (tulip poplar, sweet gum, and maple) but also with some oaks and beech. The area was (and remains) infested by Japanese honeysuckle. Kudzu severely infested the ridge to the east of this area in the wake of Hurricane Hugo but never quite reached this point. Haywood kept a knoll just to the southeast bushhogged; it was dotted with young Virginia pines (now cleared) and covered with broomsedge, but no Schweinitz sunflowers were found there. Recent efforts to sow Schweinitz seeds there have met with some small success. Very close to the main cluster, further down the northern slope, are to be found several examples of another rare and remarkable plant, the Bigleaf Magnolia. The chalkbark maple, which is obligate on somewhat mafic (calcium- and magnesium-rich) soils that also characterize most N. C. sites with Schweinitz sunflowers, is also to be found nearby.

When Lisa made her discovery, she counted scarcely more than 100 Schweinitz plants in two clusters, one five by thirty feet, the other much smaller. The following winter (March 2003) a volunteer group cleared a zone around each cluster, to about 30x30 feet. The number of Schweinitz plants jumped by an order of magnitude within two years, becoming much denser and expanding a bit downslope from the main cluster. Most of these plants were small, but the number of mature Schweinitzes, reaching as much as eight feet tall, has increased from a handful (five at most) to 40-50. Haywood has bushhogged the area once a year, in winter. Johnson grass and Japanese honeysuckle are a major headache, and hardwood saplings are fighting back insistently. In May 2006 another volunteer group worked half a Saturday to clear a larger orbit, for the first time using hand-applied glycosate on saplings and grasses, and other volunteer groups did further clearing in subsequent years. An area of two acres has been burned twice under supervision of the Forestry Service.

HISTORY:

There is no written history of the area and oral history is thin. We believe that the Rhynes owned the land to the south of the Adam Hunter Prairie (across the Old Lake Creek). The fine two-storey Miller Rhyne farmhouse stood three ridges to the south. The last Rhyne to live there was Bill Rhyne, who sold the Miller Rhyne Farm to Forney Rankin in 1958. (Rhynes at one time dominated the east bank of the South Fork all the way from McAdenville to Lincolnton.) We presume that these Rhynes arrived in the Hickory Grove area in the 1760's, the time of European/African settlement of eastern Gaston County.

The area immediately to the north of the Schweinitz site belonged to the family of George Stone until Forney Rankin bought it in 1997. Forney Rankin, who died in July 2002, took a keen interest in genealogy and the history of the property. He believed that all of the Stone Farm had originally belonged to his great grandfather John ("Butch") Rankin when the latter migrated to the Hickory Grove Road around 1810. (He migrated

from the original Rankin homeplace at “Rankintown” on Stanley Creek. Rankintown curiously passed to the youngest son, Col. Richard, and not to the eldest son, John. John Rankin presumably owned a large tract on Hickory Grove Road; for example, he donated the land for the Hickory Grove Baptist Church, even though he himself was Presbyterian, when he was an old man in the 1870’s.)

The Stones acquired their farm from the Cloningers, who presumably acquired it from the Rankins, if Forney Rankin’s theory is correct. Rankins continued to live on an adjacent farm (between what became the Stone Farm and the Hickory Grove Road) until 1910, when all the sons moved elsewhere. They evidently had concluded that the land had become too poor to sustain an adequate farming livelihood. Among the sons, only Forney’s uncle Haywood continued to farm, buying a dairy farm on flatter, richer land south of Gastonia.

Forney Rankin was born in 1912 at the tag end of the Hickory Grove Road in McAdenville, where his father became a builder of mills and large homes. However, the family continued to think of the area around the Hickory Grove Baptist Church as their real home, as most of them continued to be buried there when they died. Forney (also known as “Red”) sought to return to his family’s old center and began acquiring land in the area in the 1940’s. He never succeeded, however, in reacquiring his grandfather William’s homeplace, which is now part of a housing development.

The long wedge between the Rhynes and Rankins, where the Schweinitz sunflower was discovered, was owned by the African-American Hunter family until sometime in the 1940’s. Adam Hunter lived in a one- or two-roomed frame cottage on a knoll several hundred yards east of the sunflower site, just south of the old cart track leading from the river to the church. He was undoubtedly the owner of the rest of the ridge west toward the river, through which the cart track proceeded till it reached the Upper Bottom, belonging to the Rhynes. (A little up river the track reached the Duncan bottomland, now long since grown over, and the Duncan homeplace, abandoned probably in the 1930’s. The Duncans had separate access from Spencer Mountain village until the dam and canal were completed in 1905 and from the Hickory Grove Road across the Spargo Farm.) Adam Hunter’s cottage burned down in the 1940’s.

Adam’s brother Jim (“Happy Jim”) Hunter lived on a farm just south of the Hickory Grove Baptist Church that was acquired by the preacher Henry Wright (whose daughter married into the Duncans). At some point Happy Jim Hunter’s house was used as a schoolhouse for black children. By the time Forney Rankin acquired all these properties in the late 1940’s to mid-1950’s, these black families had departed. He said he bought the Adam Hunter Place, being auctioned by the County for nonpayment of taxes, for \$15 per acre. No one at the time imagined that this part of Gaston County would ever become part of the Charlotte metropolitan sprawl, and most people, except Red Rankin, just wanted to get off the land.

Presumably, the Adam Hunter Farm originally belonged either to the Rhynes or the Rankins. The Hunters would not likely have been freemen prior to the War Between the

States. Perhaps they were slaves of the Rhynes, since the Rhyne Farm was the largest and most prosperous in the immediate area. Some of the engineering works on the Miller Rhyne Farm – in particular, the dike built around the large Lower Bottom, the most productive field in the area – are suggestive of slave labor; though it is also true that the Rhynes were hard workers and capable of building the dike themselves.

By whatever route (whether as freed slaves being rewarded for good service or simply acquiring an available back corner of not-very-desirable land in a post-war period of economic depression), the Hunters did obtain this freehold after the war. It was a relatively large piece of land, 40-50 acres, but it was mostly very steep.

What is immediately noticeable when comparing the two flanks of the Old Lake Creek, both of which are steep, is that the south flank (owned by the Rhynes until 1958) remains a magnificent hardwood forest that was never put to plow, while the north, i.e. south-facing, flank (the Adam Hunter Farm) was cleared and plowed in its entirety. Hand-dug terraces remain in evidence up and down the steep clay slope, broken by deep erosion gullies, which in some places were stopped up with rock, laboriously carried out of the heavily eroded fields. The principal (probably exclusive) money crop was cotton, notorious for its depletion of soils and lack of protective cover against erosion. One can conclude that when Adam Hunter took his family off the farm after his cottage burned down, the soil had been completely exhausted and could no longer grow enough cotton to exchange for necessities nor even enough wheat and vegetables to keep body and soul together. The dense Virginia pine stand that took over is characteristic of suddenly abandoned cotton fields on plowed red clay.

The mystery hanging over this miserable terrain is why the Schweinitz sunflower chose this corner to grow and how it survived. Its present clusters are close to the border of the Stone Farm and along the old cartway. One can imagine that the land along the cartway would have been more likely to have been kept open by burning of the woods than more isolated areas. The sliver of terrain north of the principal cluster was put to plow at some point, as evidenced by an old terrace on the north slope, but it is likely that farming on that side of the cart track was abandoned early on and left to go to seed. Pines on the south side (until Hurricane Hugo) were denser but shorter and much younger, supporting this theory. One can surmise that the south side was kept in agriculture until the Hunters decamped, and sun was therefore always available from the south side.

But all that ceased 60-70 years ago or so, and a period of dense darkness ensued for over 40 years. Then Hurricane Hugo struck in 1989. It is said that sunflower seeds can lie dormant for decades, and there seems to be no other good explanation for the emergence of these sunflowers. Hurricane Hugo had a pattern of settling down hard on a few places, where its tornadoes left no tree standing. The worst-hit such place on Redlair was the Adam Hunter Ridge, where for a quarter of a mile few mature trees were left standing. In one area, a little bit to the east, it opened the door to a lightning invasion of kudzu. In another, apparently, it opened the door to survival and expansion of the Schweinitz sunflower.