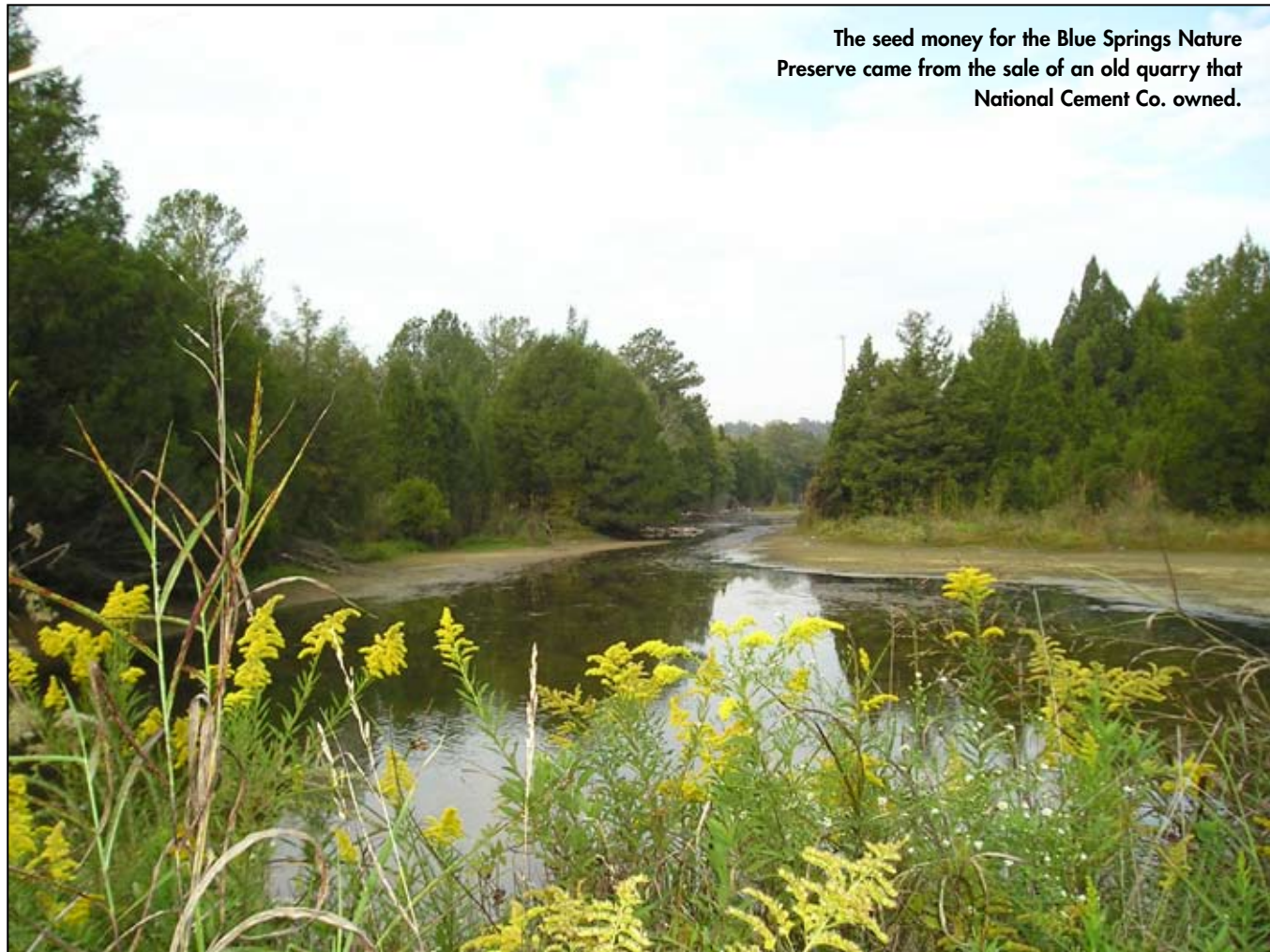


ST. CLAIR CULTIVATES AN ECO-PRESERVE



The seed money for the Blue Springs Nature Preserve came from the sale of an old quarry that National Cement Co. owned.

The vigor of St. Clair County communities is reflected in the zeal local leaders are pouring into the Blue Springs Nature Preserve.

**BY JIM DUNN
PHOTO BY
CAROLINE BAIRD SUMMERS**

What started out as an attempt to secure a water supply source for St. Clair County has instead turned into a nature



**Spencer Weitman, President of
National Cement Co. in Ragland**

preserve that will benefit everyone from schoolchildren to birdwatchers to county revenue totals. The brains behind the 147-acre Blue Springs Nature Preserve didn't have the creation of a preserve in mind at first, but some serendipitous timing and corporate generosity have combined to reshape the county's ecological and economic future.

Spencer Weitman, president of National Cement Co. in the St. Clair County town of Ragland, explains how Blue Springs came to be.

"It's a little bit of a long story, but the St. Clair County Commission came to us, and initially wanted to purchase an old quarry we had on Highway 144 outside of Ragland for a water source in the future, to pull industrial water out of and build a

purification system, those types of things. When they did, we said we'd love to do that and help the county, because we've been in St. Clair County 100 years."

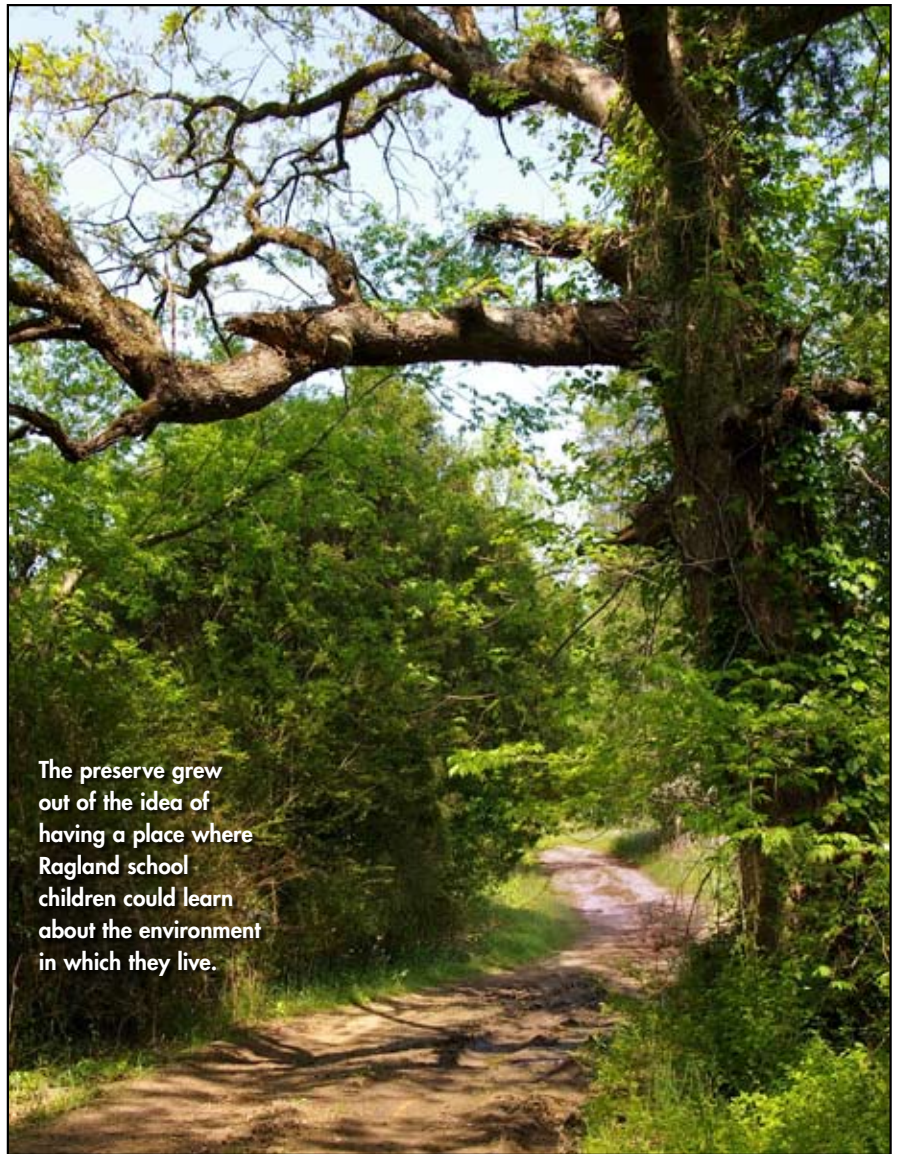
In 2003, National Cement Co. sold the old quarry to the St. Clair County Commission for its appraised value of \$250,000, then took that money and used it as seed funding for the creation of a 501(C)(3) nonprofit corporation.

Weitman says that the original plans for a simple site soon blossomed into something grand.

"It started off that it was going to be a one-room, open-air schoolroom that the kids from Ragland could come over and be on-site and play with frogs and look at the wetlands, etc. So we formed a steering committee of local people and National Cement people and some of the ecologists that had been working with us, and it started getting bigger and bigger. We finally decided that to do this, we needed a master plan, so we actually hired a company called 4Site, out of Huntsville, that does these things."

Weitman says the aggressive vision created by the master planners received solid backing from county officials. "The county saw what we were doing there, and so they got behind it. We've got the mayor and the county commission involved, and they're starting to see what we're trying to accomplish. It's just starting to take on a life of its own."

The plans for Blue Springs include a long list of assets. An entrance on Highway 144 will provide an access point into the preserve, with a parking lot and transportation by tram into the preserve. Alabama Wildflower Gardens will be located near an old farm pond and will include an outdoor arboretum showcasing native plants like the endangered Alabama Leatherflower. A visitor center at the gardens will include exhibit space, a greenhouse and an outdoor gathering space for self-guided tours. A Cultural Preservation Building will let visitors experience St. Clair County history via artifacts and exhibits like a Civil War-era cotton gin. Spencer's Bluff, which is an elevated knoll overlooking the lake near the tram route, will provide space for picnics and will include a covered pavilion. Visitor's facilities will include an education center, administrative offices and classrooms. A network of trails will



The preserve grew out of the idea of having a place where Ragland school children could learn about the environment in which they live.

provide access to overlooks, greenways, wetlands and prairies.

Although the focus of the preserve will be first ecological and educational, that doesn't mean it won't positively affect the area's economy. Ecology- and education-seekers spend money, and that green-centric revenue spends just as easily as manufacturing money. Weitman says that an economic impact study hasn't been done on the preserve, but he does expect the impact to be positive.

"There are several of these around the Southeast, and a couple in Alabama, and there's more interest there than I thought there would ever be. They told me that bird watching is really high up on the list as far as tourism goes. It's little things like that that come into play that we never anticipated. Again, we were

doing it for the kids and the school, and more for a local place for them to go and learn and be exposed to things."

Weitman's confidence is well founded. A recent U.S. Fish and Wildlife survey reported that Alabamians spent \$2.3 billion on ecotourism in 2004.

"Blue Springs Nature Preserve is an important project because there is currently nothing like it in St. Clair County," explains Lyman Lovejoy, president of Lovejoy Realty and finance chairman for the Blue Springs Nature Preserve Steering Committee. "It will give our children a chance to get out of the classroom and learn from hands-on, outdoor experiences, which may even inspire their future career choices."

The steering committee plans to begin fundraising efforts in 2008. •