

# VISALIA TIMES DELTA

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## Visalia family strives to continue Quaker legacy in Tulare County

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By: Donna Orozco

It was only supposed to be a two-year stay in Visalia.

Instead, Bill and Beth Lovett spent a lifetime building Quaker Oaks Farm, a place where they used their Quaker values to bring people together to build peace and justice, a “place where good things happen.”

Early this year, the farm became certified organic. By next year, the plan is to sell its vegetables to the public.

The farm is part of the continuing mission the Lovetts-- who died seven weeks apart from each other in 2018 -- first dreamed of more than 50 years ago.

Today, Bill and Beth's family are continuing their Quaker legacy with Quaker Oaks Farm.

Formally known as the Religious Society of Friends, the Quakers were founded in 17th Century England in an attempt to reform the state-established Church of England.

The Quakers experienced widespread political and religious repression in England. Large numbers of Quakers eventually fled to England's North American Colonies, where they found more religious freedoms in New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania.

After the American Revolution, Quakers became abolitionists, prohibitionists, pacifists and advocates for civil rights in the newly formed United States.

Coming out west

Back in 1966, Bill was hired with other Quakers to create Self Help Enterprises to build homes for farmworkers in Tulare County. (Self Help Enterprises continues its mission today. Bill worked there for 23 years.)

But the Lovetts had to get to Tulare County from New Jersey, first.

When you look at pictures of the young family of seven coming out to California from New Jersey, it looks like something out of “The Grapes of Wrath”— but it was 1966. They traveled in a loaded-down 1937 Ford truck and a station wagon, camping out at spots across the country.



Steve and Mary Lee pose among valley oak saplings and the remaining pine trees left from when Christmas trees were sold at Quaker Oaks Farm. The farm is now a non-profit and recently organic certified in line with the goals of founders Jim and Beth Lovett in pursuit of sustainable agriculture.

Daughter Melissa Lovett-Adair recalls many funny things that happened along the way, including leaving her 1-year-old brother at a gas station, each parent thinking he was in the other vehicle.

After establishing their careers and family, the Lovetts bought 25 acres east of Visalia adjacent to Kaweah Oaks Preserve in 1978. It was mostly grassland with tules growing in a wetland and riparian woodland.

Inspired by the majestic 200-year-old Valley Oak in the center of the land, daughter Amy suggested they name their property "Quaker Oaks Farm," a name that has stuck ever since. (Unfortunately, the tree fell over last year, but its massive arms can still be seen on the property.)



Building the Lovett's home in 1983. In the background is the giant oak tree that Quaker Oaks Farm is named for.

Bill built a passive solar home there, very innovative design at the time, cutting old black walnut trees on the property to build cabinets and furniture. He planted Christmas trees as an income source, which became a favorite place for locals to cut their Christmas trees each year until an infest of beetles ended the grove in 2008.

They experimented with growing organic vegetables that they sold at the farmers market and to local restaurants. They also planted a variety of fruit trees and kiwi vines.

Beth loved her flower garden and spun wool and made clothes from the sheep they kept.



Lovett family members in 2011 with the Ford truck that moved them to California. Bill and Beth are second and third from the left.

The Quakers often met under the old oak tree but had no regular meeting place.

In 1991, the Lovetts donated two acres of land to build the Friends Meeting House on the property, a place where not only the Quakers but other groups can meet. The Unitarians used to meet there, a group which Bill laughingly called "hyperactive Quakers."

### Becoming a nonprofit

In 2007, the Lovetts created a nonprofit organization and in 2015 transferred the farm to the Quakers to continue their legacy.



Steve and Mary Lee at Quaker Oaks Farm on Thursday, July 25, 2019. The farm is now a non-profit and recently organic certified in line with the goals of founders Jim and Beth Lovett in pursuit of sustainable agriculture.

The following year, volunteer Steven Lee, a molecular biologist with the USDA, moved his family to the farm and began habitat restoration of the wetlands and sustainable agriculture practices.

"The rest of the board are not farmers," said Melissa Lovett-Adair, president of the board. "In his three years here, Steven has helped us understand sustainable practices and how to get grants. He has made our farming and habitat restoration projects possible."

The Lovetts died just seven weeks apart in 2018, knowing the non-denominational, nonprofit organization would continue their work.

### Restoration

Farms must be free of prohibited pesticides for three years before they can be certified organic, which Quaker Oaks attained in January.



Steve and Mary Lee at Quaker Oaks Farm on Thursday, July 25, 2019. The farm is now a non-profit and recently organic certified in line with the goals of founders Jim and Beth Lovett in pursuit of sustainable agriculture. The fallen oak in the background was once the largest tree on the property.

Steven Lee works evenings and weekends, with help from his wife Mary and sons and occasional volunteers, to restore the land, create diversified farming and build a resilient landscape.

He is eradicating non-native species and has planted native blueberries instead, which encourages wildlife. He plants cover crops to improve water retention.

A Health Soils Initiative grant and the USDA and Natural Resource Conservation Service program helped offset the costs of planting hedgerows, mulching and composting, which helps reduce CO2 in the atmosphere.

Planting widely-spaced trees will be good for grazing when they bring back sheep.

Volunteers planted 800 milkweed, which attracts butterflies. The farm will be able to sell the seed and also tops of the plants for cordage used in basket making.

After prescribed burns, the wild tobacco is returning, which Native Americans can use in their traditional ceremonies.

The restoration project will attract helpful insects that pollinate and eat pests, provide critical habitat connectivity for local and migratory wildlife, and offer opportunities for people to learn about conservation strategies.

#### Community projects

From the beginning, the Lovetts wanted the farm to serve others.

Soon after they bought the farm, they were visited by a member of the Wukchumni Yokuts tribe. The land had been part of their ancestral gathering grounds. The Lovetts invited them to meet on the land for gatherings and ceremonies, and it has been used that way ever since.

“My mom remembered traveling here as a child. There was an old village here,” said Darlene Franco, a member of the board. “We didn’t have a place to have our ceremonies, and the Lovetts welcomed us.”

The tribe helps put on the farm’s annual Youth Service Learning Camp, where children camp out for a week, learn about the land and how to restore the earth, and do a service project.

Another community project is the Mixtec Community Garden, a place where families who have immigrated from Oaxaca, Mexico, are growing organic produce.

Classes are also held on such topics as water conservation and the Native American culture, including making acorn meal.

Plans include creating a nature trail with educational kiosks and hosting a composting class.

Another project the board hopes to create is one of Beth’s dreams, to have a peace garden.

“My parents saw this as a place where people could come together to learn,” Melissa said.



Steve Lee talks about milkweed planted at Quaker Oaks Farm on Thursday, July 25, 2019. The farm is now a non-profit and recently organic certified in line with the goals of founders Jim and Beth Lovett in pursuit of sustainable agriculture.

The Quaker Oaks Farm board is working to continue that dream.

#### Information

To learn more about Quaker Oaks Farm, to volunteer or take a tour, go to [www.quakeroaksfarm.org](http://www.quakeroaksfarm.org).  
Volunteers are always welcome.