

# 50 years and 9,000 trees later, Minnesota man sells tree farm

Tracy Frank | Grand Forks Herald | Nov 5th 2015



DETROIT LAKES, Minn.--David Fihn is saying goodbye to a tree farm that has been his hobby and place of refuge for the past 50 years.

“It’s difficult to let it go,” he said. The 82-year-old, who worked as a Detroit Lakes dentist from 1960 to 2002, recently sold the 110-acre east Otter Tail County property.

He bought it, he said, just because he wanted it. “I just wanted to own the land and I wanted to grow trees and a place to go to get away from the stresses of everyday life,” he said. “I’ve escaped out here a lot.”

Fihn planted about 9,000 trees, mostly by hand, over the past 50 years. “I’ve always been a tree planter,” he said. “Ever since high school.”

He did it, he said, as a way of “looking at what the future would be.” His wife and two children would sometimes help him plant trees, and his family used to picnic and hike on the property. “I’ve spent a lot of time out here,” he said. Fihn often planted seedlings he would get from the conservation department over two to three weeks in the spring. They were about 12 to 14 inches tall with trunks about the size of a pencil. “Planting seedlings is always a bit of a gamble,” he said. “If you run into a real dry spring, they don’t do well. If you have good rains, at least up through June, then you’ll do better.” Of the trees he planted, Fihn said about 7,000 are still growing.

He planted mostly evergreen trees, like pine and spruce, but he also planted some chokecherry trees and lilacs. “In the spring it’s just tremendous out here,” he said. “It’s fragrant and it’s pretty.”

Fihn occasionally sold trees for lumber and kept some of the land in CRP. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Conservation Reserve Program pays farmers a yearly rental payment in exchange for taking environmentally sensitive land out of agricultural production. Fihn said he did those things mostly to help pay his taxes on the land. When he bought the property, he said he did not intend to sell trees to turn a profit.

He's also occasionally rented part of the land to a farmer to grow hay, barley and corn. And for several years he allowed bee hives to be kept on the property in exchange for honey.

The property is a certified tree farm with the American Tree Farm System--a network of 82,000 family forest owners who sustainably manage 24 million acres of forestland. "The American Tree Farm System, which celebrates its 75th anniversary next year, has continued to prove that family forest owners can help ensure our forests provide the essentials Americans depend on--clean water, a home for wildlife, wood for products and energy," said Elizabeth Bender, director of communications and policy for the American Forest Foundation, which runs the American Tree Farm System program. There are 1,583 certified tree farms in Minnesota totaling 229,040 acres. There are 115 in South Dakota, totaling 27,090 acres. The American Forest Foundation does not have a tree farm program in North Dakota, said Melissa Moeller of the foundation.

Fihn has allowed people to hunt on the property and said he always appreciated when hunters asked him first. He's seen a lot of changes over the years--mostly in the increased numbers of houses on lakes in the area. "I still marvel when I drive out here," he said. "It's a grand place. It's been a wonderful escape for me."

The land will continue to serve as an escape. Mitch Olson of Fargo bought it and plans to use it as part of a campground for veterans and their families.



*David Fihn has planted 9,000 trees on his east Otter Tail County hobby tree farm over the past 50 years.*

Trevor Peterson