**Back to Basics:** First SFA president's house serves as geography professor's sustainable homestead

**Story by Christine Broussard / Photography by Hardy Meredith**

**SIXTEEN ACRES OF** land covered in pine and hardwood trees, a natural spring and a trickling creek back up to a two-story, light blue home in varying stages of renovation.

Dr. Jeffery Roth ’89 and ’96 stands outside the home and land he purchased in 2007, as he details its history and connection to one of his favorite educators—SFA’s first president, Dr. Alton Birdwell.

“When I was living in Denver looking for a house in Nacogdoches, I found this one online and thought, ‘boy that house looks familiar,’” Roth said. “It’s because it was the Birdwell house. I had done some research on Birdwell when I was working for SFA history Professor Dr. Jere Jackson, and I really liked him.”

Roth received both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from SFA, and during that time, he formed a historical appreciation for SFA’s first president. So, when he was hired as an SFA associate professor of geography eight years ago and chanced upon the first SFA president’s home for sale, he was giddy.

“Birdwell was a hero of higher education,” Roth said, holding tightly to the leash of his large, well-behaved Black Russian Terrier. “SFA wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Birdwell.”

Named president of Stephen F. Austin State Teacher’s College at its inception, Birdwell served in that role through 1942. Delayed by repercussions of the first World War and “Texas politics,” Roth wrote in a 1998 paper when he was a research specialist for the Center for East Texas Studies, Birdwell’s family didn’t move to Nacogdoches until the early 1920s.

“Birdwell wanted to bring education to the common man, so he did things like ride a mule around East Texas giving speeches,” Roth said. “He could have ridden in a buggy, but he picked a mule because it was the symbol of prosperity for the common people—the more mules you had, the more successful you were. He wanted to prove a point.”

In addition to the home’s history, Roth’s excitement about and vision for the property is to build a self-sustainable homestead. His first phase of renovation involved restoration to the home’s interior mixed with clearing portions of the land to raise endangered livestock and plant a garden.

“For about 15 years, I’ve been looking at endangered livestock as a research topic,” he said. “Endangered breeds are important because we have 10,000 years of agricultural development at stake. We are raising so few breeds of cattle and chickens, one disease could go through flocks and wipe out millions of chickens. The same thing is happening with heirloom vegetables.”

“... taking what I learn here into the classroom ... If you want to connect it to Birdwell, that’s definitely what I’m most proud of.”

**DR. JEFFERY ROTH**