

# The Soil Doctor

By Ray Clifton, 2012

Milton Tuck describes himself as a “soil doctor,” at least to some first-grade children at the Alabama Nature Center who gathered to learn about the outdoors as a part of “The Walk in the Forest,” a joint Project Learning Tree and Society of American Foresters program.



Milton is a graying, powerfully-built man who has spent years sampling and classifying soil in Alabama. As I listen to him speak, I am astonished at his command of the science, acquired from a lifetime spent outdoors. But I’m even more amazed at his ability to break down the complexities of soil science to a six-year old child’s level of understanding. It is a rare skill. Those who work in natural resource disciplines spend a lot of time alone, and sometimes that doesn’t translate to social skills like public speaking or teaching.

As I listen, I can’t help thinking that if history had unfolded differently this man might be a king somewhere in Africa, with a couple of dozen brides and a whole passel of children and grandchildren. That might have been good for Milton, but it would have been very unfortunate for Alabama, because we desperately need more men like him.

Milton preaches the gospel of soil. His message is simple: everything of real value comes from the ground. Life is inseparable from soil.

He digs up a clod from the field where the children are gathered. He holds it up for inspection, grass still attached. “This is soil,” he booms. “S-O-I-L. Spell it for me.”

The children yell it back. They are as much in the palm of his hand as the soil sample.

He puts the clod down and picks up some loose material from the freshly-dug hole.

“This is dirt. “D-I-R-T. Spell it.”

“D-I-R-T” the kids yell back.

“Now, let me tell you the difference between the two,” he laughs. “Dirt is just soil that’s out of place. Like in my hand, or under my fingernails, or on your britches your momma told you not to get dirty out here today.”

The kids all giggle. I laugh too. Milton and I obviously had

the same professor at Auburn University. Professor Hood wouldn’t tolerate the “d” word in his agronomy classes.

Milton has the children spellbound for the next 30 minutes or so. It is fun to watch, but also a little disheartening.

Milton: “Where do turkeys come from?”

Child: “Walmart.”

Milton: “Yes, darling, but somebody had to get that turkey to Walmart. Turkeys come from farms. Farmers raise them so your momma can buy them and cook them for you to eat. Now, what do turkeys eat?”

Another child: “Ham.”

“HAM? No, child, turkeys don’t eat meat. They eat grass and seeds and insects. Those things are there for the turkey to eat because of the soil.”

This is frightening to me because we are not in Detroit, New York, L.A., or even Atlanta. We are in Elmore County, Alabama. Has Alabama culture become this removed from the land in only a couple of generations?

Milton continues, “You know what I’d be if we didn’t have good soil? I’d be standing here talking to you buck naked. These clothes I got on—they are made from cotton—and cotton is a plant that grows in the soil. And I’d be skinny and hungry, too—because everything I eat starts out from the soil in some way—plants and animals, children—all depending on the soil. Think about it. BUCK NAKED AND HUNGRY! I sure am glad we got all this good soil!”

The children all laugh. The “Soil Doctor” has made them think a little differently about their world.

He has made me think a little differently about it too. I’d bet he and I agree: there’s a whole lot of teaching to do, and quickly. The future of farming and forestry depend on it. ▲