

VIRIES[®]

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JON KOHILER

Man of the Land

National Merit Scholars

FSU's Golden Age in Recruitment
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The GATEKEEPER

*The most successful plantation broker in the South
aims for sales that place conservation above profit*

By T. Edward Nickens



We'd given up on the bird dogs. We came off the horses when the dogs first pointed, and marched in for the shot, but the quail broke and ran, followed by the pointers, who trailed the covey up a long North Florida slope of scattered pine. Three times the dogs pointed, and three times the covey bolted up the hill. That's when our hunt master, Shane Stuckey, hacked the dogs in and Jon Kohler (B.S. '91) and I unloaded our guns.

But as we turned toward the horses, Stuckey stood shaking his head. The dogs were on point again, near a lone live oak tree shading the crest of the hill.

"Get ready," Stuckey grinned. "The birds'll be pinned down at that big oak."

There was no more running. This time the quail covey burst from underfoot, a roaring cluster of wings and beaks that atomized in every direction. I missed once, connected on the second trigger pull, and glanced toward Kohler. Feathers drifted around him like a North Florida snowstorm. "Double?" I called over, and he answered with a grin.

And that's when I realized what had come together over the last few minutes. That old oak tree wasn't there by accident. Arthur and Jenny Cahoon, who

own this Valhalla Plantation, made a conscious decision to keep big oaks in the quail woods. Many quail plantation owners have little love for them. They harbor quail-eating raccoons and snakes and hawks. In fact, few elements at the 2,400-acre Valhalla are here by happenstance. Not the well-trained dogs, the gaited McCurdy horses, the wild character of the bobwhite quail, the primeval aspect of the pines, and certainly not that aged live oak shading the savannah.

The Cahoons deserve much credit for creating a place where impressive numbers of bobwhites share the land with old oaks and ribbons of brush crowding winding creeks. Over a three-hour hunt, we put up eight coveys of wild quail. I give a nod to the pointers, too, who trusted their noses and knew that the birds were likely to hold tight at the base of that live oak.

Kohler stood near the crest of the hill as an English cocker raced through the underbrush, searching for the felled birds. He's a big man, 6-foot-4, with a white cowboy hat that has become something of a trademark. In no small fashion, too, Kohler plays a significant role in the Red Hills' reputation as the nation's preeminent quail-hunting region. It's a place seeded with incongruity, after all: where fire gives life, where some of the country's savviest business minds seek to turn back time, and where one of the region's great champions of conservation is a real estate broker.

Opposite top: A road winds through iconic live oak trees at the 2,400-acre Valhalla Plantation. Photo by Mark L. Atwater

Opposite bottom left: A bird dog on the hunt for quail at Valhalla. Photo by Mark L. Atwater **Opposite bottom right:** Jon Kohler, wearing his signature white cowboy hat, on a quail hunt at Covey Pointe Plantation. Photo by Chris Mathan

Below left: An aerial view of the main house at Valhalla Plantation. Photo by Ray Stanyard **Below right:** Jon Kohler takes a shot while quail hunting at Covey Pointe. Photo by Chris Mathan





From Tallahassee, Florida, to the Ochlockonee River north of Thomasville, Georgia, 300,000 acres of rolling open pinewoods, golden wiregrass, ancient lakes and river swamp create a landscape lifted from the 19th century. This is the Red Hills, where more than 100 quail-hunting plantations, most with roots in the Gilded Age, maintain an ecosystem and a sporting culture that has passed from other parts of the South. It's a national park-sized expanse of land, much of it in semi-wild condition, scored by sandy roads and farm paths that lead to massive plantation homes. Some have been built in the last few decades, but most were constructed by wealthy Northern industrialists who flocked to the region to build quail plantations after the Civil War.

Over time, and by coincidence, a sprawling ecologically rich landscape today is among the most natural and native ecosystems remaining in the South. Owned by some of the wealthiest Americans, the Red Hills plantations are famed for perhaps the densest population of wild bobwhite

quail remaining on the planet. It's not uncommon for a hunting party to find 15 or 20 wild coveys in a day of hunting, a figure practically unheard of elsewhere.

The quail are here in high numbers because landowners spend small fortunes managing these pine forests. They employ biologists and foresters to burn the woods as frequently as every other year. They restore longleaf pine and wiregrass savannahs, and tailor timber harvest to the needs of quail.

More than a few are willing to go to such lengths because Jon Kohler convinced them that it's the right thing to do.

Behind the wheel of a white Ford F-150, Kohler can eyeball a piece of pinewoods at 60 mph and tell you if it carries 60 square feet of timber per acre or 40. He can tell which landowners are taking care of their grass. Who is squeezing their woods for a bit more profit. On our first drive through the Red Hills, with smoke from a prescribed burn

As an FSU student, Jon Kohler played second trombone for the Marching Chiefs in 1987 and 1988. "I jokingly tell people I played for Bobby Bowden in both the Fiesta Bowl and the Sugar Bowl," says Kohler, who praised the Marching Chiefs as one of the most respected bands in the nation. "The talent was amazing. Being a business major, not a music major, I found it very cool that musicians in the College of Music wrote or arranged many songs we played." Kohler is pictured with fellow Marching Chiefs and hunting buddies Mark Shellahamer (B.S. '94) and Glenn Shellahamer (B.S. '90), the sons of former Marching Chiefs director Bentley Shellahamer (B.M.E. '66, M.M.E. '70).



drifting in the woods by the highway, Kohler kept up such a chatter about the lands lying to each side of the highway that I double-checked my seatbelt.

"That's Ted Turner's place, Avalon, about 30,000 contiguous acres."

"This is about where DeSoto came through the capital of the Apalachee nation."

"That's Oak Hill, owned by a former speaker of the Florida House and former president of Florida State University."

Many of these plantations are properties Kohler has sold, parcels in a \$342 million portfolio of quail plantations, sporting ranches and conservation lands closed by Kohler & Associates and his Plantation Marketing Group since 2008. "Kohler has a true heart for conservation," says Kevin McGorty, director of the Tall Timbers Land Conservancy, which holds conservation easements on more than 114,000 acres in the Red Hills. Perhaps the most successful plantation broker in the South, Kohler sells property from Florida to Montana, but his home and heart and family and future are in the rolling Red Hills, a region he protects with messianic zeal.

Kohler grew up east of Tallahassee, on a 40-acre parcel once a part of the famed Verdura Plantation. The son of a neurologist, the grandson of a real estate broker, both his mother and father loved life outside the city. When Kohler was 4 years old, the family bought 160 acres of wild land along Florida's Gulf Coast, east of Keaton Beach.

There was marsh and live oaks, longleaf pine and the freshwater Blue Creek spilling into the Gulf. Kohler learned to hunt and fish there, learned to burn the woods and till food plots and plant longleaf pines until his hands bled. And he learned that the hardest work involved in the stewardship of land is done by the heart.

His parents clashed about the costs of keeping Blue Creek wild. "I remember them fighting about the property," Kohler says, nodding slightly. "The money and labor involved in taking care of it – I saw how much my dad loved and cherished it, but there was a cost." Neighbors suggested they clear-cut the old pines, maybe subdivide a lot or two to take the sting out of property taxes. But that ran counter to his parents' dream. "As I got older," Kohler continues, "I realized: This land produces nothing. Its only utility was its place in the natural order, and our enjoyment of it. That was instrumental for me, remembering my parents' struggles and evolving a land ethic that brought together reverence for the land and a realistic understanding that nothing is free."

It's unlikely that a 9-year-old Jon Kohler could have articulated a balance sheet weighing the intrinsic and extrinsic valuations of open country. But soon he could. In his third year at Florida State University, while he was double-majoring in entrepreneurship and small-business management, Professor John Lewis told the story of two plantation brokers who recently sold the storied Valhalla and Chemonie Red Hills plantations. For Kohler, it was a moment of epiphany.

Opposite top: A view of longleaf pine trees at Long Pine Plantation. Photo by Mark L. Atwater

Opposite bottom: Jon Kohler watches over a controlled burn on a Kohler & Associates property. He has been certified to conduct controlled burns by the Florida Forest Service since he was a student at FSU.



Celebrating

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“I remember hearing that phrase – plantation broker – and it was a jolt. I said: That’s a *job*? From that day to this, it’s all I ever wanted to do.”

After college and law school, Kohler moved to a ranch outside Red Lodge, Montana, where his family had relocated. While practicing law and selling real estate, Kohler and his former wife started a company making tile tables painted with trout and mountains and other Western icons. Within three years they had 250 dealers around the country, but his heart was still in the Red Hills. He left Montana in 2000 for a four-year stint as an exclusive broker for Jacksonville-based Rock Creek Capital, managing billions of dollars of land sales across the Southeast. In 2004 he struck out on his own, a Florida cracker with membership in the Florida and Montana bars, real estate licenses in Florida, Georgia, Montana and Wyoming, and a firm idea of what it would take to keep his beloved Red Hills from falling into a subdivided ruin.

“The last 10 years was a scary time,” Bill Palmer says. “There was a lot of turnover in plantation ownership.” He sits in a rocking chair on a porch at the Tall Timbers Research Station, the privately funded, internationally renowned science institute that fosters land stewardship in the Red Hills. “It could have been a game-changer depending on what kind of new ownership came in. Jon played a key role in keeping this area together.”

Palmer is CEO of Tall Timbers, which employs a 30-person staff of scientists and land managers. The new generation of plantation owners, he says, is more interested in biodiversity, longleaf pine restoration and the Red Hills ecology than many earlier owners, but the foundational interest remains quail and quail hunting. “I don’t know what would happen here without that bird,” he says, shaking his head. “This region is sustainable only as long as private landowners stay engaged and interested for the right reasons.”

Which explains why Kohler considers himself a “gatekeeper” – his wording – to the region. As a broker, he vets potential buyers, weeding out not only those who would develop the land, but those who might not subscribe to the full – and expensive – program of prescribed fire and forest management required to maintain the Red Hills ecology. “This is a unique landscape that pivots on aesthetics and recreation and less on capitalistic endeavors,” Kohler says. “My job is to make sure that everything is in place so that proper

stewardship of the land results in an increase in net worth or capital. If the numbers fall apart, it’s a lose-lose for everybody.”

According to many Red Hills observers, this is where Kohler & Associates and its marketing arm, Plantation Marketing Group, shine. Kohler’s wife, Erica, oversees plantation valuations and managing contacts for the firm. Lauren Fielding-Vann delves into historic document research, oral histories and a property’s pedigree of quail and timber management to tease out narratives of Deep South history and sporting heritage. Two brokers, Walter Hatchett and C.J. Brown, manage transactions across the Red Hills and South Carolina. Most large properties get a royal treatment presented in wirebound and hardback books. Kohler’s group “does amazing storytelling to bring to life the history and culture of these properties,” says McGorty.



Above: Jon Kohler and his wife, Erica, with a team of horses at Greenwood Plantation. Photo by C.J. Brown





By any measure, Kohler has forged a remarkably successful career selling Red Hills dirt. In his free time, he is loath to leave it. His 600-acre Red Hills farm, Lick Skillet, is a laboratory for the management protocols he preaches. Free-range, antibiotic-free cattle and hogs. Managed timber. Pine straw production. A duck pond. “I walk the talk,” he said. “I’ve made all the mistakes and learned from them.” Kohler rarely accepts the frequent invitations to shoot ducks in Argentina or target sailfish in Costa Rica. “Moving fences, checking on the river, that’s my fun.” Lick Skillet is his Blue Creek, his legacy to his two young sons, Greyson, 4, and Ashton, 2. A couple of weeks earlier he and Greyson were walking the edge of a Lick Skillet field and a covey of quail got up, the first bobwhites his son had ever seen.

Underscoring these intrinsic values is a constant Kohler mantra: How much might a historic river ford add to a property’s value? What’s the worth of long-term quail management? Why does it make sense to pay for the privilege of owning a property that will cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in annual maintenance?

A perfect example is the recent sale of the 5,000-acre Greenwood Plantation, just outside Thomasville. The plantation was the longtime home of John “Jock” Hay Whitney, former U.S. ambassador to Britain and publisher of the *New York Herald Tribune*, and his wife, Betsey Cushing Roosevelt Whitney. Whitney was a financier of “Gone With the Wind,” and the main Greenwood manor, considered among the finest examples of Greek Revival architecture in America, was the ultra-private retreat to which Jacqueline Kennedy disappeared in the weeks after JFK’s assassination. The plantation contains the 1,000-acre Big Woods, the largest contiguous, privately owned tract of virgin longleaf pine in the world, plus a campus of nearly 50 historic properties that include offices, greenhouses, a lodge and a massive winter stable.

It took five years to find the right buyers. The conservation philanthropist Emily “Patty” Vanderbilt Wade paid \$22 million for a 4,000-acre swath that includes the Big Woods, while a Thomasville-based investment group bought the campus with the main house and the trove of historic properties.

“A highest-yield proposition wouldn’t have conserved the ecological and cultural values of Greenwood,” McGorty explains. “Jon’s company took a documentarian approach to storytelling to explain why these properties matter. That kind of expertise is absolutely critical to the conservation of these landscapes.”

“After the flush,” Kohler says, “Greyson said: *Dad, that scared me!* But he was smiling when he said it. And I told him: Son, you never get over that.”

On my last night in the Red Hills, Kohler grills steaks from his grass-fed Angus cattle, and we sit on the porch railing of the Lick Skillet camphouse and crack open Apalachicola oysters. The week before, Kohler says, a guy called him and started the conversation with an apology: His farm was only 100 acres, and he realized Kohler typically dealt with much larger properties.

“But I could tell how much he loved that land,” Kohler says. He detailed all the work he’d done, clearing brush and pruning trees, working past dark, worrying his wife. His concern was that all of his time and effort really wasn’t making the property worth more. He worried that, from an economic perspective, he was wasting time and money.

“So much of my job is listening,” Kohler continues, watching the skylight fade behind the pines. “And feeling that man’s passion for his land, it just lights a fire under me, to make sure that if he ever does sell that property, that people appreciate what he’s done. That he gets paid for loving the land so much.”

Kohler tells the story with an oyster in one hand, cracker in the other, each forgotten as he weighs his own words. “That man said something that I hear from a lot of people,” he says. “Something I absolutely understand to my core. Working on the land, he said, healed his soul.” **V**

Opposite top: The mansion at Greenwood Plantation as it looks today. Photo by Mark L. Atwater **Inset:** The Greenwood mansion pictured on a historical postcard. **Opposite bottom:** Jon Kohler on horseback at Morton Bray Plantation. **This page:** Erica and Jon Kohler with their sons, Greyson and Ashton.

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