

COVEY RISE®



WILD QUAIL THE STODDARD WAY

Cane Mill Plantation and the path of progress.

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If you had the chance to save something, to keep a piece of history alive, and to invest deliberately with your heart, would you do it? If you could convert the fruits of your entrepreneurial labors, the hard-earned dollars made riding the wave of commerce, into a lifestyle steeped in nostalgia and anchored to a patch of dirt far removed from the path of progress, would you do it? For most of us, the answer would be no, and unremarkably so, since such a scenario exists so far beyond the possible that it simply defies the imagination, even for the most fervent of upland enthusiasts among us. Sure, we can picture ourselves coursing the piney woods and broomstraw in pursuit of quail, following happy dogs, and enjoying the fellowship of like-minded folks both afield and fireside, sipping fine spirits and the fine spirit of ownership and stewardship such an investment would no doubt foster. But would you invest in it, both time and treasure, especially if you were acutely aware that there was more road behind you than ahead? These are foundational human questions when you approach them in the context of climate change, political unrest, and similar existential threats, and there's a part of us that always wants to say yes, obviously yes, to all of those questions. Most of us feel compelled to leave this earth better than we found it—but a quail plantation in the Red Hills of Southwest Georgia?

First, we have to come to terms with the reality that this isn't just any old quail plantation in a part of the world known for such things. The place we're talking about, Cane Mill Plantation, and the nice folks who've hitched their wagon to it, have garnered a great deal of press lately, mostly for the handsome purchase price, but also for the unique history of the nearly 4,000 acres of prime wild bobwhite habitat. The Thompson Family stewarded Cane Mill across two centuries, and for most of that time the quail population flourished. Granted, the Red Hills region is renowned for its ability to foster wild bobwhites, but the Thompsons had a helping hand very early in the process.

Herbert Stoddard, whose influence on quail management and habitat conservation cannot be overstated, designed and implemented the Cane Mill quail experience as a part of his early work with what is now Tall Timbers Research Station. Every detail was considered—including habitat maintenance, small brood fields, and prescribed burning—across the lifetime of the property, a commitment that has stood the test of time. Eight half-day hunting courses and their scheduled rotation for rest days, initially configured by Stoddard a century ago and illustrated appropriately by a dusty map on the barn wall, are still utilized quite successfully today. Jon Kohler, who brokered the sale of Cane Mill for the Thompsons, emphasized the importance of Stoddard's work, saying, "Even today, with all the technology and scientific study of the modern era, we are essentially just confirming the things he originally recommended in his seminal book, *The Bobwhite Quail: Its Habits, Preservation, and Increase*, which was pub-



PINEY WOODS SUNRISE

A misty fog blankets pasture and paddock as dogs and quail awaken to begin the timeless dance anew.



lished in 1931.” That history is a compelling part of the Cane Mill story, certainly, and the Thompsons are to be applauded for their perseverance in implementing Stoddard’s original vision through the years, a labor of love that could not have been described as inexpensive. As the family grew and interests diversified, though, the expenses related to maintaining this crown jewel of the upland lifestyle weighed heavily, forcing the difficult decision to sell. The ultimate challenge, however, emerged as one of stewardship, finding a buyer who could appreciate the story, incorporate the history, and yet offer a new and complementary vision that would bring Cane Mill solidly into this century with an eye to the next.

Bob and Odette Kenna, about whom much has been written, seem to be the perfect pair to undertake both the transition of Cane Mill into the present and its projection into the future. In short, they possess the three characteristics most needed for such a project. They have the passion, the patience, and the pocketbook. While the last of these might initially seem the most significant, bringing a quail plantation back to life is at the very least a three-legged stool. This is especially true of one with such a storied past, as if Stoddard is still walking the grounds.

Bob Kenna hunted birds and worked bird dogs from an early age among the rolling farms of Long Island and, later, guided for a friendly landowner in Maryland, so the upland world has been a passion for most of his adult life. He and

Odette share a love for dogs, especially working dogs, and together they have cultivated a real interest in the upland-hunting lifestyle. That passion has also engendered no small amount of patience. Bob’s early career success stemmed from the belief that typically there has got to be a better way to do things. The same proves true in the upland world. Dissatisfied with the performance of farm-raised birds while still living in South Florida, the Kennas built two flight pens to recreate the action of wild birds. Now they’ve found the epicenter of wild quail habitat and choose to live among the bobwhites year-round, patiently steering a large ship through the paces and changes necessary to make Cane Mill sustainable.

That the Kennas would take this project on is remarkable. That they would answer the questions from the opening paragraph above so positively is extraordinary. It would have been easy—in fact, it is perhaps more commonplace than not—for a hunting plantation to occupy a line on their balance sheet reserved for special interests, only to be liquidated when the asset appreciated or the passion depreciated. The Kennas,

A VARIETY OF HABITAT

Mule-drawn wagon filled with eager dogs meanders through a small section of Cane Mill, but the road leads to larger tracts, ultimately revealing a diversity of habitat and wildlife that has harbored wild quail for centuries.





STATELY OAKS AND HAPPY HORSES

Days are filled with tradition at Cane Mill, from the vintage dog boxes to the sunset strolls with faithful companions.

however, appear to be in for a penny and in for a pound, and when considered through the lens of conserving both habitat and the upland lifestyle, that commitment to this project, and for taking Cane Mill into the next chapter of its history, is evident from the moment you pass through the gates.

I arrived in the early hours of a crisp fall day, dappled sunlight dancing through the misty fog that eventually gave way to green horse pastures and live oaks dripping with Spanish moss. It's the idyllic setting that springs to mind when one remembers great hunting trips, with roosters crowing the arrival of the new day and excited dogs, newly freed from their fitful slumber, making their way into the fields and hedgerows for their morning training. There are also the sounds of tractors and hammers, saws and voices, and I'm reminded that this is a working farm with plenty of work facing them in the day ahead.

Along the main drive there are new houses going up, the sort that will eventually house the staff, and they are renovating or rebuilding infrastructure that may have been built around the same time that Stoddard drafted the original layout. There are barns and sheds in various states of repair, new

dog kennels at a distance, and all manner of equipment, old and new. There are seed drills next to mule-drawn wagons, and skid-steer tractors next to that. Standing in the middle of this, I'm reminded of the cumbersome work of the uplands, the machinations that often precede us afield, the actions we may never be fully aware of. The planting and cutting of fields and lanes, the mending of fences, and the clearing of debris, all of which are done behind the scenes, remind me that Cane Mill is very much a going concern. Ecologists estimate that, left to its own devices and allowed to return to its natural state, the island of Manhattan would revert to swampy jungle in less than 100 years. I give Cane Mill a quarter of that time, so the to-do list is almost as endless as the expense report.

The spirit is not all doom and gloom, though. It harbors a lot of hope, especially for those of us who live the upland life. There is the quiet history of sandy dirt roads, marking the footfall of humans and animals alike, recording lazy days and hectic days with the same precision. There are horses and mules sharing the same paddock, perhaps eager for the harness

legacy, the past and the future meeting in the present. As Odette Kenna said of their efforts to refurbish and maintain the headstones in the small cemetery where the old plantation church stood, "We're here now, but many were here before us, and many will pass this way after us." On a lighter note, plans also include the refurbishment of a much older structure, or what will be called the Fowler Cabin, in honor of Jim Fowler, the persistent and resilient co-host of Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom, whom Marlon Perkins put to the test in each and every episode—from a safe distance, of course—and who was known to frequent Cane Mill when not wrestling alligators for an enthusiastic television audience. Cheers, Jim.

Where possible, there is a nod to history, and efficiency is not always the order of the day. The Kennas, though, seem content to engage equally in what must be done, what should be done, and, ideally, what can be done. But walk the sandy lanes and you get a sense of the place. The happy dogs, the hopeful staff, and the hunters that will return to these woods for a chance to walk with Stoddard and experience the thun-

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and saddle, perhaps not, looking curiously over the fence at the activity. There are trainers playing with puppies and working dogs, preparing for the hunts of both today and tomorrow, in much the same way that Stoddard envisioned it more than a century ago. More than anything else, there is the juxtaposition of the old and the new. An old, weathered hitching post stands watch over a freshly painted construction dumpster filled to the brim with the siding and roofing of yesteryear, replaced with green Galvalume and freshly painted board and batten in a traditional brown. The melding of the old and new lend a timelessness to the surroundings, much the same way that photographs from the heyday of upland hunting are not readily discernible from those of last season. It's not that upland hunters are opposed to the new. It's more that we're comfortable honoring the old, the proven, the traditional.

Even the new carries some essence of the old, though. With both conservation and historical context in mind, new structures planned for Cane Mill will be consistent with the plantation aesthetic and, more importantly, incorporate lumber milled from plantation trees. While this may seem like a small gesture, and in the end the least efficient method, it is characteristic of the Kennas' commitment to history and

derous flush of wild quail. For now, we see the man behind the curtain, the tractors and the trucks, and the investment in the future of Cane Mill, but these provide a backdrop to the quiet concert of songbirds and hammer drills, a composition known as peaceful progress, and it's music to the Kennas' ears.

It was, after all, progress of a different, more traditional sort that was the impetus for their move to Cane Mill. Their farm in Southern Florida was decidedly in the path of encroaching human progress and, as is usually the case, the knocks on the door got more frequent and the money stacked higher. Their love of dogs and enthusiasm for the upland lifestyle led them to Southwest Georgia, and their first visit to Cane Mill sealed their fate as well as the future of the place they loved immediately, in some small way because it was in the path of absolutely nobody's progress. As the saying goes, Cane Mill is not in the middle of nowhere, but you can get there from here. In Cane Mill, the Kennas discovered a spot where the conservation of habitat and the upland lifestyle may actually be the highest and best use of the dirt. In the Kennas, the Thompson Family discovered their ideal owner, the right stewards for the Cane Mill Plantation legacy, and the larger upland world is the ultimate beneficiary. 🐾

