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THE KOHLER CHRONICLES:

Advice & Anecdotes from a
Third-Generation Land Broker

by Jon Kohler, JD
Broker / Partner



Florida, Fences & Freedom

by Jon Kohler

With Additional Writing &
Research by: Scott Sumner

If you are a sportsman in Florida, consider yourself fortunate on many fronts. Since 1776, despite 250 years of ever-increasing laws and regulations, today's Florida is arguably the most free state in the Union.

Among my most-cherished freedoms is the ability to hunt and fish. One of my favorite species is the whitetail deer, a sentiment most sportsmen share with the first Floridians and Europeans, who arrived here five centuries ago. There is a sense of reverence a large

buck commands, and few places compare to modern Florida when it comes to season length and the right to raise and grow these great deer.

In my line of work, I get to meet a lot of interesting people who share a passion for our land and its history. I have had the chance to interview archaeologists such as Dr. James Dunbar, chair of the Aucilla Research Institute in Monticello, Florida, who found such amazing discoveries as proof of the first Florida people's interactions with saber-toothed tigers, short-faced bears, ancient bison, mastodons and even ancient armadillos pushing the size of my 1981 Jeep Scram-

bler.

I imagined all the different hunting opportunities and was curious about the different species hunted over time. It came as quite a shock that then, as now, the early hunters' foremost targeted species was the whitetail deer. Deer bones are found in almost every ancient campfire. Archaeologists, one after the other, confirmed whitetail deer are directly tied to Florida's people since the beginning of time.

Fast-forward 500 years to the beginning of Florida's first trade economy. The whitetail deer was the most economically-important game species for indigenous people, such as the Apalachee, considered to be one of the most advanced and powerful of the Florida tribes. From at least A.D. 1000, this group of Native Americans inhabited Northwest Florida between the Aucilla and Apalachicola rivers centered around Tallahassee.

Both hunters and farmers, their ability to grow crops such as corn, beans and squash, along with skills as hunters so great that one village, just a few blocks away from today's capital, had enough extra food to "host" Hernando Desoto's 620 conquistadors and 300 horses all winter. The deer population, in particular, was hunted for its food after the Spanish encountered the Apalachee. Deer hides became America's first currency, which is where the dollar bill's

nickname "a buck" later came from.

David Ward, also of the Aucilla Research Institute, states, "Deer were a good source of protein. The whitetail deer was important for the survival of the Native Americans that were here when the first Europeans got here."

Dunbar further notes, "The Apalachee were particularly known for their bows. Cabeza de Vaca (Spanish explorer) first came through with Narvaez in 1528. The Apalachee longbow caught the attention of that first expedition."

I can only imagine what these hardened conquistadors thought when they realized they didn't have the strength to pull back the Apalachee bows!

After their hopes for gold faded, a host of 53 Spanish Missions lined the region. Their main purpose was to tell the Apalachee about Jesus and trade for deer hides (the closest thing they found to gold), which they transported to St. Augustine for shipping to the Old World for a profit. I never really thought about exactly how, in the 1600s, one would get that many tanned deer hides to St. Augustine until David Ward first told me about the Tocobaga.

These natives were the first "maritime experts" and were based in the Tampa Bay region. One of their chiefdoms was essentially retained by the Spanish to move to the headwaters of the Wacissa River and transport deer hides

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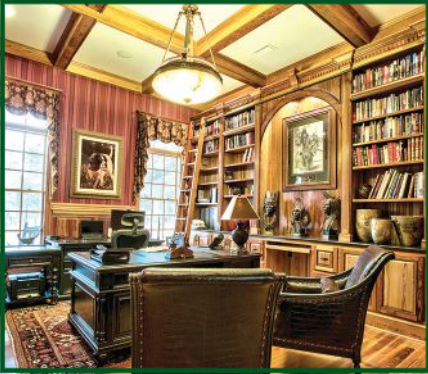
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He's an 'Influencer' for Jesus

(Continued from previous page)

and other goods to Saint Augustine via a fleet of dugout canoes. I can't imagine paddling a huge load of hides from the Aucilla down the Gulf of Mexico to about Cedar Key, then up the Suwannee River, up the Santa Fe, then portage the overland near Orange Lake, then into the St. Johns River. Now that's a shipping company!

The reverence for these first bow hunters reminds me of my friend Bob Williamson. Bob is an uber-successful businessman, passionate deer hunter and a Christian mentor, or maybe better



"REMINDS ME OF WHAT KING SOLOMON WOULD HAVE BUILT if he were a Florida Cracker." That's how Jon described the beautiful custom office space of Bob Williamson at the historic Honey Lake Plantation in Madison County.

described in today's world as an "influencer" for Jesus. After he sold one of his companies for a fortune, he founded the famed Honey Lake Plantation in Madison County. He lined his office with the finest woods of heart pine, pecky cypress and cedar meticulously laid by the best craftsmen. It reminded me of what King Solomon would have built if he were a Florida cracker.

There, front and center, where one would expect to see the Ark of the Covenant, was this huge flint spear point about 10 times larger than anything in my own arrowhead collection. To Bob, this one-of-a-kind point represented his own accomplishments, and he wondered what tales it could tell about the "warrior" and hunter who certainly once owned it. This continued until one day, while showing it off, an expert casually mentioned that it was a great example of an Apalachee farmer's hoe. It was likely used to plant sweet potatoes or squash by a child or woman, but certainly not by a "warrior," and never used to hunt anything. Like a bolt of lightning, this treasured heirloom went from prominence to disgust, and no one ever saw the hoe again. It was like someone took back his "Small Businessman of the Year Award."

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CHRISTIAN BUSINESS MENTOR BOB WILLIAMSON IS A PASSIONATE DEER HUNTER, and probably more proud of the trophy whitetails taken on his famous Honey Lake Plantation than his wall full of small business awards and accolades.

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'What I stand for is what I stand on'

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Exploring the whitetail deer's noteworthy place in Florida's cultural past helps us understand and appreciate how they came to be so ingrained into our psyche.

With today's wealth and knowledge, some landowners are taking it up a notch by bettering their own deer herd in ways previously unimaginable. Florida is one of the states that offer the freedom for a landowner to put up a high fence. With what we have learned about deer over the last 500 years, this is making a big difference.

When I drive down the road and see a high fence, it's the same as when I see a property with a conservation



"THE APALACHEE WERE PARTICULARLY KNOWN FOR THEIR BOWS," said Dr. James Dunbar, who further notes, "Cabeza de Vaca (Spanish explorers) first came through with Narvaez in 1528. The Apalachee longbow caught the attention of that first expedition." (Photo courtesy of the Aucilla Research Institute)

easement. I immediately know the landowner is heavily invested in improving wildlife habitat above any other uses. I like that. Those are my folks. They also almost always use prescribed fire, but that's another subject. The subtleties can be missed by many, even those on my own staff.

Just last week, we were filming a 200-acre high-fenced property for our latest short film. There was about one adult deer per acre on that property. In perspective, as a general rule, average woodlands have about one deer per 16-20 acres. Despite filming and droning during the peak of fawning season, we saw no deer, to everyone's surprise, but the landowner and me. Yet, later that 90-degree afternoon, only a few miles away and while on a cattle ranch on the Santa Fe River, we saw deer herd after deer herd, including numerous fawns running everywhere. Why the difference? The high-fenced landowner invested in deer habitat.

During fawning season, it's imperative that good cover protect the vulnerable fawns from predators. Like getting wild quail and turkeys to the age they can fly, so too getting fawns to the age they can outrun predators is job #1. While enjoyable for all of us to watch at the Santa Fe ranch, the fawns committed the



"THE HIGH-FENCED LANDOWNER INVESTS IN DEER HABITAT," says Jon Kohler, who proves his point with this prime example of a world-class whitetail, Hercules, raised on his farm, Lick Skillet.

ultimate sin, being seen running across the landscape, flagging their white tails for every predator to see but nowhere to actually hide. What the high fence landowner also knew is in addition to all the cover he grew, his high fence kept out most fawn-eating predators.

When I am looking at land issues, a "quick check" I use to determine how things should really be is to go back to how God made it before mankind messed with it. When it comes to the correct buck-to-doe ratio, I don't have to use my quick check to know that one decent buck per 5-10 does (which a lot of our lands have) isn't right.

With work, these guys with a high fence are able to get things back in sync

with the perfect 1 to 1 ratio. There is something exciting to see when someone improves their land to accomplish these goals.

So, the next time you drive down the road and see a landowner exercising his freedoms by investing in habitat, building a high fence, see a well-managed hunting property or lease, or see a big orange "smoke ahead" sign, please be reminded that over the last 1,000 years, many things have changed, but one thing stays the same - our passion for the whitetail deer!

Thank you, Lord, for these lands. In the words of Wendell Berry, "What I stand for is what I stand on." That seems pretty appropriate to me.



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