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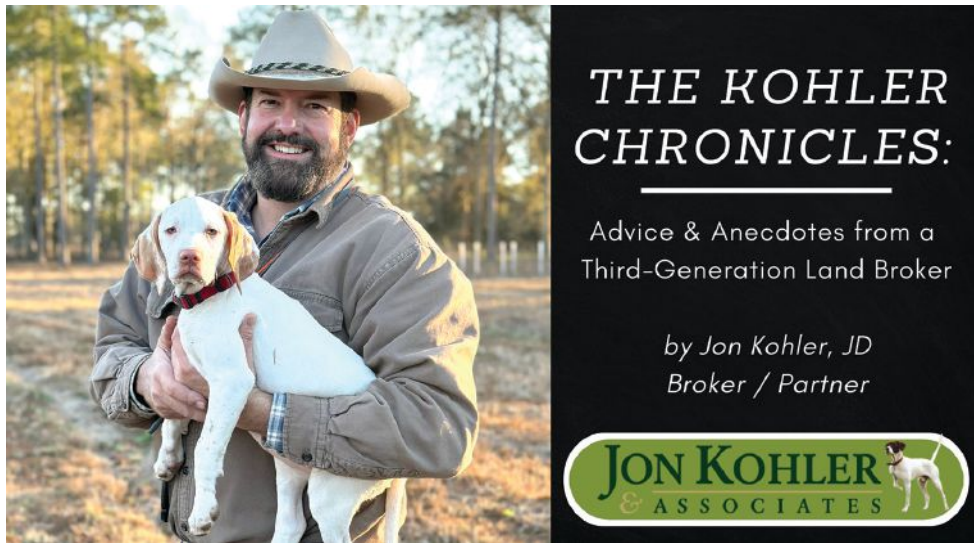
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Was Jesus a Logger?

by Cole Schwab

Jon Kohler & Associates Sales Associate & M.A. Rigoni Timber Buyer
North Florida is and always has been my home and workplace. To me, this region is our own little slice of heaven and the last remaining relic of “Old Florida.”

At Jon Kohler & Associates, we have sold land across 12 states. However, the number one most frequently asked question is, “What land do you have available in North Florida?”

There is something here, a combination of things, from its geology and

fertility to its people and industry, that sets this area apart.

When looking to buy land in North Florida, many people may start their search with two of the most prominent regions that I have the privilege of operating in every day: the Red Hills and the Suwannee Valley. The Red Hills consist of over 500,000 acres of privately-owned land and landowners with the same objective in mind: quail habitat with an emphasis on upland pine conservation. With this objective in mind, these landowners are all striving to manage their properties similarly.



COLE SCHWAB AND HIS DAD DISPLAY THE SPOILS OF A FUN-FILLED FAMILY HUNTING TRIP. Cole said, “I am also fortunate to get to work with and learn from my dad, Richard Schwab, every day. He has instilled in me a love for the land and how to put Christ first in my work.”

Although I, like many others, have a strong love for the Red Hills region, I believe land in the Suwannee Valley has some of the best returns on investment in the entire state. Though its outward appearance may never match the attractive aesthetics of the Red Hills, the Suwannee Valley has one key component that makes it superior: timber. The Suwannee Valley is the last sustainable timber market in the entire state.

The Suwannee Valley runs primarily east of the Aucilla River to the I-75 corridor and south along the Santa Fe River. Many folks associate the Suwannee Valley with rich, fertile farming soil, making it the breadbasket of the state.

Ample timber, agricultural products and minimum urban development help to protect the Florida aquifer in this region. The Suwannee Valley has the highest concentration of freshwater springs in the world. Specifically, rainwater is filtered through soil, roots and limerock down to the Florida aquifer. This filtration results in the crystal-clear, clean water we see emerging from the springs in the Suwannee Valley.

With the abundance of healthy timber stands in this region, the deep roots in the ground slow the time it takes for rainwater to reach the aquifer. The nutrients absorbed into these roots help grow the timber, enrich the soil and keep these stands healthy.

In turn, the Suwannee Valley comprises healthy timber stands, nourishing agriculture products and flourishing wildlife. All of these factors substantially improve land value.

Landowners in the Suwannee Valley can take pride in being the backbone of the timber market. However, few folks know the secret to timber values

here. It’s the envy of the South.

The timber market in this region of North Florida consists of a sustainable pulp market, a strong chip-n-saw market and, most prominently, a saw timber market that competes with the entire Southeast.

No other area can say they have all three timber market phases as strong as ever. Don’t get me wrong, some of the finest stands of saw timber you will ever lay eyes on exist in the Red Hills. The timber is beautiful and abundant.

In March and April of every year, we will see the two sawmills in the Red Hills region slammed full due to the plantation harvest season. The problem is the pulp and chip-n-saw market is facing record lows. The Suwannee Valley has the perfect balance of mills and all-weather working conditions. Timber producers are always thankful for tracts with good soil drainage.

During the rainy months, the East Coast mills struggle to buy wood due to soil conditions in their region. They pull from the Suwannee Valley region during this time and are willing to pay a premium for it. Supply and demand are everything in the timber business.

As a member of the timber industry, let me share with you some inside information about the logging industry. There are constantly new rumors, but take it from me: this is what’s really going on and why it matters.

This past year has been one of the most challenging years we have ever experienced across the state. The Red Hills took a huge blow when the Hood Industries sawmill closed in Metcalf, Georgia in the fall of 2023. Additionally, West Fraser closed their sawmills in Maxville, Florida and Perry, Florida

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This is God's calling

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recently. Further west, WestRock pulp mill in Panama City, Florida closed its doors in 2022.

Some blame these closures on labor, while others blame it on the outdated infrastructure of the mills. Probably one of the most shocking and significant mill closures occurred in November 2023, when GP Cellulose (previously Buckeye) closed its doors for good.

My hometown of Perry experienced a momentous loss with this mill closure. The majority of our town revolved around the cellulose plant.

Many businesses in Perry relied directly and indirectly on GP Cellulose and its employees. I have seen many close friends and family personally af-

ected by the closure. Many employees have already moved in search of work elsewhere. My late grandmother moved to Perry in the early 50s. Her father, my great-grandfather, was one of many tasked to help build the plant. Like so many others, they fell in love with North Florida. Her family decided to stay and settle in Perry. GP Cellulose had several employees whose families had worked there for generations.

Despite the economic struggles in North Florida, landowners can breathe a sigh of relief in the Suwannee Valley. This region hasn't felt the damage of mill closures to the extent of the other areas in the state. If you are a landowner in a county like Madison or Suwannee, you still have two thriving pulp mills with-

in a 40-mile radius. Not to mention a state-of-the-art sawmill less than five miles from the Suwannee River. The Suwannee River Valley has an ace in the hole.

I encourage clients to buy land in the Suwannee Valley for all of the reasons described above. Land is the number one hard asset. Timber can be a key part of this asset. Knowing a property sits in one of the most secure markets helps landowners feel confident in their investment. Why take my word for it? I am a third-generation land steward with expertise and experience in the timber industry. Growing up surrounded by family in the timber business, this is the only life I have ever known.

Our family has been in this industry since 1972. My family's business, M.A. Rigoni, was the first to introduce timber harvesting with a whole tree chipper. Since its introduction in 1980, it has revolutionized property management.

The chipper works alongside a standard logging operation by chipping and selling all unmerchantable wood as chips for biomass energy. Today, we sell our biomass wood product to three different fuel outlets. Our timber dealership stretches as far north as Albany, Georgia, as far east as Waycross, Georgia, as far south as Wildwood, Florida, and as far west as Tallahassee, Florida.

Our little family business was named 2015 Florida Forestry Association Logger of the Year and 2016 Forest Resource Association National Logger of the Year. Our business motto is:

"Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Philippians 4:8)

I truly believe this is the Lord's calling for my family. We are immersed in His creation every day. We have a firsthand opportunity to show landowners how to be stewards of the land.

It is also no surprise to me that those who spend a lot of time in God's creation, seeing it firsthand, are also folks of faith. We have a God-given resource, and we are to work His land for His glory. I will never forget a conversation my granddad had with me right before I graduated high school, a sales pitch, if you will, to join the family business.

He asked me, "Cole, what was Je-

sus' occupation on Earth?" Of course, I responded that Jesus was a carpenter.

However, my grandfather was adamant He was a logger. His logic was that "in those days, there was no Lowe's or Home Depots for carpenters to buy their wood. Jesus had to cut his own trees to use for his carpentry. Therefore, Jesus was a logger." I suppose I can't argue with that.

A question I can ask myself is, "For a business that has been around for over 50 years, what can I add?" As professionals in the timber industry, we take pride in being advocates for the landowner. It just makes sense to partner with a land brokerage that views land through a similar lens. In 2018, I joined as a sales associate with Jon Kohler & Associates. Our brokerage sold 17,427 acres in 2023. We sold an average of \$479,417 per day, 7 days a week, with an average per acre price of \$5,493 in 2023. These aren't inflated from a national brand brokerage. Our headquarters are right here along the Aucilla River, in the heart of North Florida.

Our brand specializes in serving landowners with timber investments all across the Southeast. I am fortunate to work alongside some of the finest professionals in the business and learn from them on a daily basis. The wisdom gained from mentors like Jon Kohler and Walter Hatchett is priceless. I am humbled and thankful for the time they have invested in me.

I am also fortunate to work with and learn from my dad, Richard Schwab, every day. He has instilled in me a love for the land and how to put Christ first in my work. Today, I am both a timber buyer for M.A. Rigoni and a sales associate for Jon Kohler & Associates. I love both of my jobs, and they build on one another. My passion is helping buyers find the property that fits their needs.

Our goal at Jon Kohler & Associates is to act as trusted land advisors, which parallels with M.A. Rigoni's motto of Philippians 4:8.

I use my timber knowledge to advise clients on the highest and best use of their land investment. Very few folks in the real estate industry in North Florida can give as knowledgeable and accurate timber advice as I can. Getting to work in the timber industry day in and day out helps me to apply my knowledge to the real estate market. My goals in all this are simple:

1.) To continue the property legacy through successful timber management and land stewardship for the next generation.

2.) To show clients why North Florida is so special. And to teach landowners how to use God-given resources for generational preservation and His glory.

This is why I love this industry so much and why it is so important to me.

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