

BOB WHITE, BOB WHITE:
THE SPORT OF QUAIL HUNTING IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY
SOUTH GEORGIA AND NORTH FLORIDA

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A two-year research project to identify the historically significant buildings, structures, and sites for the Florida Master Site File and to prepare thematic nominations for the National Register of Historic Places yielded a rich social and ecological history of the quail plantations, in addition to the architectural history.¹ This paper will focus on the quail hunting culture in South Georgia and north Florida as it developed at the turn of the century, the interconnectedness of the owners, their relationship with the tenant farmers who maintained a unique landscape for a three-months-of-the-year leisure activity, and the development and continuation of the Georgia-Florida Field Trial Club to improve the breed of hunting dogs.

Quail hunting is a seasonal recreation sport for a small cadre of enthusiasts with business and family connections tied together through the sport. This little-known sport requires vast acreages to support the game birds. Its practitioners developed a plan for habitat control which fostered an understanding of fire ecology that affects forests worldwide and protects thousands of acres of fields and woodlands from commercial development--ramifications far beyond the impact of one person with a dog and gun shooting birds for sport and lunch.

On the former cotton plantations of Leon County, Florida, along the south central Georgia border and often straddling it, the end of Reconstruction brought new owners and different ideas for the uses of the land. Just over the Georgia border in the 1880s, the Thomasville area developed a reputation for a healthful climate and a sportsman's winter paradise, attracting newly affluent northern sportsmen and sportswomen to south Georgia and north Florida. Finding plentiful game birds--particularly turkey, dove, and quail--they first leased then began purchasing small parcels of farm land and forests, consolidating them into thousands of acres of hunting plantations--larger than any of the antebellum cotton plantations.² The northern game hunters bought up the hundred-or-so-acre cotton plantations to amass 18,898 acres in 1910 and 81,004 acres by 1930 of Leon County's 426,752 acres.³ Members of the Hanna family and business associates of Cleveland, Ohio, and Standard Oil executives alone purchased over 70,000 acres in the Thomasville, Georgia-Tallahassee, Florida region.⁴ Because the area remained somewhat isolated after the Civil War, it retained many vestiges of antebellum plantation life, a life that the new plantation owners sought to emulate and the old ones wished to preserve. The region today contains more than a hundred working quail hunting plantations, proving more durable than the cotton kingdom they replaced.

These part-time residents became instrumental in the economy and ecology of northern Leon County, Florida. Their concern for the dwindling quail population, and its affect on their ability to hunt, prompted Udo Fleischmann, Lewis Steenrod Thompson, and others to fund and support Herbert L. Stoddard's seminal work in the Cooperative Quail Investigation and the Cooperative Quail Study Association. Quail require a habitat and food sources that are destroyed through the natural growth of fields and woods.

Stoddard found that the quail would propagate through habitat control; the optimal habitat would be maintained through controlled burning. This pioneering research led to the fire ecology studies conducted at the Tall Timbers Research Station, a quail plantation converted to the study of fire and its beneficial effects on flora and fauna. Controlled burning continues to be practiced; between mid-February and the end of March the plantation managers burn, at night, selected small plots separated by fire lanes during alternate years.⁵

To provide the optimal environment for quail, the new owners placed restrictions on what their tenants could grow. The tenant farmers, many of whom stayed on the same or nearby plantations their families had worked as slaves, no longer could grow large fields of cotton for cash but were confined to small, scattered patches as the landscape changed to accommodate the Bobwhite quail.⁶

Of a total county population in 1900 of 19,885, eighty percent (15,999) were African-Americans; by 1940 the general population increased to 31,646 and blacks to 16,106, a corresponding decrease to fifty percent of the overall population.⁷ The number of tenant farmers declined spectacularly (eighty percent) during the half century from 1,775 tenant farmers in 1900 to only 360 in 1950 with declines of fifty-five percent in the number of white tenant farmers and eighty-one percent in black tenant farmers.⁸ Black tenant farm families constituted more than ninety percent of all tenants during much of the first half of the twentieth century and between eighty-five and ninety percent of them lived and farmed on the hunting plantations.⁹ Harry Brubaker noted that “the plantations were in no sense commercial establishments and their upkeep did not depend upon self-produced profits. The tenants paid their rents in cotton; absentee landlords did not permit

them to engage in any practices that interfered with the propagation of quail in so far as these practices were known”¹⁰ The ideal environment for quail was the primitive small field, “patch-crop” type of cultivation. The larger hunting plantations were likely to have had dozens of tenant farm families with these small patch fields scattered throughout the acreage.¹¹ In return for altering their farming practices, the tenants often worked for the new owners as gardeners, housekeepers, dog handlers, wagon drivers, stablehands, and general laborers. Some men held dual positions; when not farming they worked in the main house, on road maintenance, or in carpentry. Often the women and children worked in the fields while the men labored in trade or service occupations on the plantation.¹² The women also served as cooks, laundresses, and maids, although some owners brought their own household help with them each season.

In the off-season, resident workers maintained the plantations. Gardeners kept the grounds mowed, shrubbery trimmed, and roads cleared of downed branches. Farm hands harrowed miles of firebreaks for the annual burning and scraped the red clay roads free of ruts until the next torrential rain left them a gooey quagmire. Tenants harvested their crops. The animal handlers cared for the mules and horses, and cleaned the stables and kennels. The hunting dogs needing training were sent elsewhere to hone their skills away from their home plantation trails.

Despite the absentee owners, the farm managers tightly controlled the lives of the tenants. On Horseshoe, unique among the plantations, farm manager William W. Goode forbade the growing of cotton and required the tenants to plant instead corn, velvet beans, beggarweed, sorghum, cowpeas, millet, oats, and vetch; quail fed on the post-harvest gleanings. Without cotton as a cash crop the tenants no longer paid rent but could live on

the plantation as long as they abided by the rules published in a booklet that Goode distributed among the tenants.¹³ The plantation took care of most of the tenants' needs: kept the houses, barns, and wells repaired; paid the doctor, midwife, and undertaker; hired tenants as laborers; and advanced money, mules and supplies.¹⁴ When the owners notified the managers of their impending arrival for the winter hunting season, all hands readied the main house and guest cottages, ensured a fully-stocked pantry, and checked the wagons and harnesses for the hunt.

A typical winter day finds the owners and guests rising in the gray light of dawn to eat a hurried breakfast of country ham and black coffee. The dog handlers choose their six-to-ten English pointers or setters for that day's hunt from among the barking dogs in the kennel. The eager dogs leap into cages mounted at the rear of the wooden mule-drawn shooting wagon; the retriever sits next to the driver. The hunting party loads two or three 20 and 28 gauge shotguns into the wagon, climbs in, settles on the upholstered automobile seats, and the driver urges the mules forward while additional hunters and at least three dog helpers accompany them on horseback. Following the well laid out hunting courses that wend their way around current and former tenant farms and alongside quail habitats, the party passes under huge live oak trees draped in Spanish moss and into the cool, Loblolly pine forest. The dog handler astride a Tennessee Walking Horse guides the hunting party to an area of cover he hopes will contain a covey of quail. The wagon stops and the handler releases two dogs; they work twenty to forty minutes before being replaced by another fresh pair. When the dogs sniff out a covey and point two hunters alight from the wagon or dismount, hand off the reins to a helper, load the double-barrel shotguns, and approach the concealed birds. In a roaring burst of

thrumping wings, the quail rush upward and scatter singly and in groups of twos, threes, or more from several directions flying toward safety. The novice hunter stands awestruck, confused about where to aim; he loses the shot. The calmer partner fires and downs a bird that broke to her left. As the dogs retrieve the day's first kill, the hunters remount and the party moves off to a new location.¹⁵

The day divides into three segments--morning and afternoon hunts and lunch. Each hunt follows courses laid out to last two to two-and-one-half hours each. The hunters stop for lunch at the time the quail go to cover to rest and digest their food after foraging in the morning. Kitchen staff set up the luncheon spread--complete with linens, silver, and china--at a prearranged site. After a leisurely lunch, the hunters follow another course for the afternoon hunt. By the end of the day they have covered over thirty miles of red clay roads.¹⁶ Over drinks after dinner nestled into chintz-covered overstuffed sofas in the brightly-lit living room or relaxing on leather armchairs in the walnut-panelled study lined with books and prints of racehorses their talk turns to the best choice of dogs for hunting.

The breeds of dogs which worked best for quail hunting early became a topic for discussion. To settle the debate, as they would with their thoroughbred race horses, in 1915 owners Lewis S. Thompson, Percy Bolton, Addison Hough, and Udo Fleischmann proposed and arranged a field trial for the winter hunters and their dogs which became an annual event near the end of the shooting season. The Georgia-Florida Field Trial Club was organized "to improve the breeds of bird dogs by holding field trials to test their qualities and so increase the interest in sport with dog and gun."¹⁷ The trials have been held at fifteen or more different plantations to provide varying terrain and hunting

conditions.¹⁸ The hunters experimented with spaniels and retrievers, but found the pointers, particularly the English pointers and setters, best adapted to the region. Other pointers used less often include the Irish setter, Gordon setter, German shorthaired pointer, Swedish pointer, and Brittany spaniel. Dog men concluded that the pointer has a better nose and greater speed, endurance, and strength when hunting with wagons and hunters on horseback.¹⁹

The wealthy and powerful businessmen often invited influential and famous friends to join their families for a week of shooting. Among the frequent guests were the Duke and Duchess of Windsor at Foshalee and Horseshoe plantations, and President Dwight Eisenhower who stayed at George M. Humphrey's Milestone Plantation and hunted on John Hay Whitney's Greenwood Plantation.²⁰ While many of the plantations technically occupied Leon County, Florida land, Georgia from the earliest days remained the focal point for shopping, hospital care, and transportation. The owners paid Florida taxes but donated vast sums to the John D. Archbold Memorial Hospital in Thomasville, Georgia, founded in 1925 by Archbold's son, a quail plantation owner, in memory of his father. Major contributors included individuals, foundations, trusts, and funds associated with the northern owners. In Thomasville, they also supported the Thomas County Historical Society, Glen Arven Country Club, Thomasville Garden Club, YMCA, and Big Oak Park.²¹ In Leon County, several of the plantation families supported the Tallahassee Junior Museum, a natural science and history museum with exhibits depicting the ecology, wildlife, and early built environment of the Big Bend region. Mrs. Alfred B. Maclay donated her Killearn Gardens plantation to the state of Florida in 1953

as Maclay Gardens State Park. But, significantly, none of the owners opened any of their vast acreage to local quail hunters.

With only one or two exceptions--Udo and Charles Fleischmann and Henry and Genevieve Beadel, in particular--the northern owners did not socialize with Leon Countians. Only Charlie Knott and Breckinridge Gamble, members of two prominent Tallahassee families, appeared to socialize and hunt with the newcomers.²² The local populace who hunted quail went elsewhere to farmland in central and southeastern Leon or adjoining counties. Not until the 1980s did commercial shooting plantations appear in Georgia in addition to clubs that leased land for hunting on the northwestern border of neighboring Jefferson County, Florida.

Some of the thrill of quail hunting was expressed by former president Jimmy Carter: "I remember that first quail...I was ten years old, hunting alone with my bird dog and my bolt-action .410, and I was so excited when that bird fell I ran all the way home to show it to my daddy. After suitable admiration, he asked, 'Where's your gun?' It took three days to find where I had thrown it down in my excitement!"²³

¹ Leon County Hunting Plantations; An Historical & Architectural Survey project conducted for the Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board by Kevin McGorty, project director, and Susan Hamburger, survey researcher, 1984-1985 included physical site surveys, photographing buildings, drawing floorplans, and sketching the proximity and relationship of buildings and landscaping within the complex; interviews with owners, managers, and tenants; and research in primary documents and secondary sources to document the history of the quail plantations.

² Susan Hamburger, "On the Land for Life: Black Tenant Farmers on Tall Timbers Plantation" (*Florida Historical Quarterly* 66 (1987): 152-159; Hank Margeson and Joseph Kitchens, *Quail Plantations of South Georgia and North Florida* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), pp. 4-5.

³ William R. Brueckheimer, "Leon County Hunting Plantations; An Historical & Architectural Survey. Final Report: Geographical--Historical Overview" (Tallahassee: Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board, 1988), p. 206; 1993 *Florida Statistical Abstract* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), p. 259.

⁴ Brueckheimer, p. 102.

⁵ Herbert L. Stoddard, "The Use of Fire on Southeastern Game Lands--1935," in *The Cooperative Quail Study Association, May 1, 1931-May 1, 1943* Miscellaneous Publication No. 1 (Tallahassee, Florida: Tall Timbers Research Station, 1961) p. 51; Herbert L. Stoddard, *The Bobwhite Quail; Its Habits, Preservation, and Increase* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 413.

⁶ Hamburger, pp. 152-159.

⁷ Brueckheimer, pp. 57 and 193; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Vital Statistics of the United States 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), p. 58.

⁸ Brueckheimer, p. 182.

⁹ Brueckheimer, p. 185.

¹⁰ Harry F. Brubaker, "Land Classification, Ownership and Use in Leon County, Florida" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1957), pp. 109-10.

¹¹ Bruckheimer, p. 186.

¹² William W. Goode, "Horseshoe Plantation Log," 6 December 1930.

¹³ William W. Goode, "Farm Program for 1931" (Tallahassee: Horseshoe Plantation, 1930), pp. 1-4 and 6.

¹⁴ Goode, "Farm Program for 1931," p. 6.

¹⁵ Brueckheimer, pp. 167-69; Margeson and Kitchens, p. 4.

¹⁶ Brueckheimer, pp. 172 and 174-75.

¹⁷ George M. Humphreys and Shepard Krech, eds., *The Georgia-Florida Field Trial Club 1916-1948* (New York: Scribners, 1948), p. 7.

¹⁸ Georgia-Florida Field Trial Club, *The Georgia-Florida Field Trial Club 1916-1966* (n.p., n.p., 1966?), pp. 28 and 29.

¹⁹ Brueckheimer, p. 157.

²⁰ Clifton Paisley, *From Cotton to Quail; An Agricultural Chronicle of Leon County, Florida, 1860-1967* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1968), photo caption between pp. 52-53; E. J. Kahn, Jr., *Jock: The Life and Times of John Hay Whitney* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1981), p. 211.

²¹ Brueckheimer, p. 253.

²² John Winthrop Diary, Special Collections Dept., Strozier Library, Florida State University.

²³ Charles Elliott, *Prince of Game Birds; The Bobwhite Quail* (Atlanta: Georgia Dept. of Natural Resources, 1974), p. vii.