

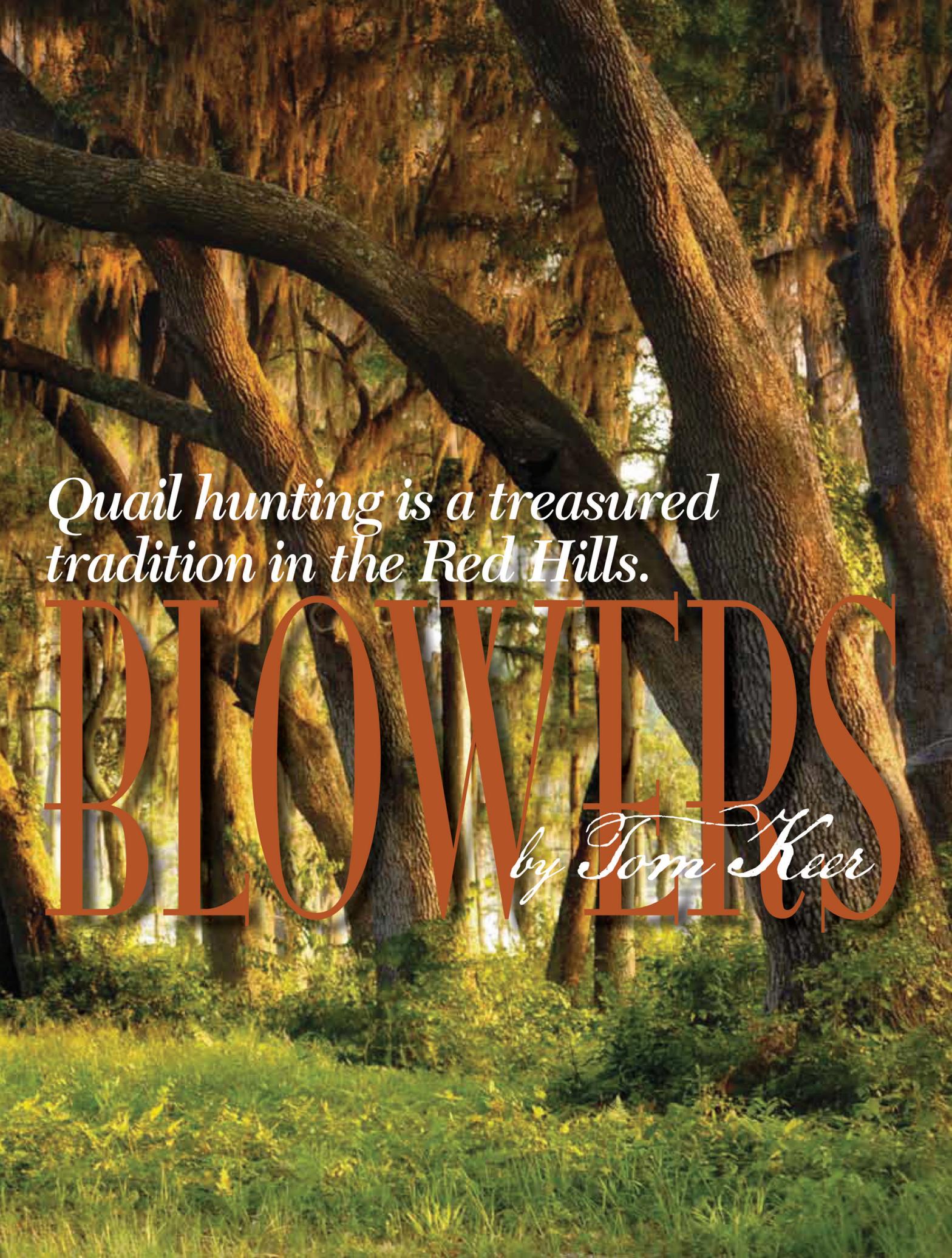
SPORTING CLASSICS

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LOLLIPOPS *and* HAT-



*Quail hunting is a treasured
tradition in the Red Hills.*

BLOWERS

by Tom Keer

Somewhere between the morning mist rising from the lake at False Dawn and the skeins of Spanish moss drooping from the cypress trees is a space of air where the quail fly hard. When a covey erupts from the broomstraw not far from a staunch pointer's nose, the birds waste no time in making their escape. If they can slip past the bicolor lespedeza that favors the moisture in the draws, then they'll sail past the slash and loblolly pines, finding safe haven near the bigger pines and live oaks. Not much will hassle them there, certainly not a pack of pointers and setters or a pair of bird hunters. When the commotion caused by the shooting entourage passes, they'll come out of hiding and resume feeding.

Bobwhite quail are a staple in the Red Hills region of South Georgia and North Florida. They always have been and my guess is they always will be.



February 16th was a vastly different day for me. I exchanged a Bay State winter sea duck hunt in my back yard for a mixed bag of quail, bass and bream at northern Florida's Honey Lake Plantation Resort and Spa. Instead of slip-sliding on the ice in my driveway as I hooked my truck to the boat trailer, I was enjoying a light breeze and 60-degree weather. The similarity is that I had awakened well before dawn, waiting on my friends to awaken at a more civilized hour. That time delay made my pacing around the Hunting Lodge living room akin to a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. It's a character trait that has been passed down to me, and it occurs only on days that begin with fishing or hunting.

I had time to kill and so I grabbed my camera and went for a walk. There was a winding boardwalk along 80-acre Honey Lake. The walkway zigged and zagged along the shore of what looked like a great bass lake. Steam rising from the surface reminded me of a cup of black coffee in my layout boat back home. I was in shirt-sleeves here, and just when I wished for that cup of coffee, I heard a loud boil erupt at the edge of some lily pads. It didn't leave a dainty ring like a trout sipping a mayfly. It was a bulge of water made by a huge fish. The motion was deliberate, pre-meditated and perfectly orchestrated. I watched for a good 15 minutes but never saw another boil quite like it. That I did not was probably a good thing, or I would have missed breakfast and our morning hunt.

The morning light, a beautiful blend of pinks, blues and purples, illuminated the woods and waters, just as it has for more than a century.

The resort's story began in 1896 when Melville Hanna of



Cleveland, Ohio, purchased Pebble Hill Plantation in Thomasville, Georgia to escape



the harsh midwestern winters. The Hanna family, among others, transformed old cotton plantations into magnificent winter retreats. They established a rich sporting legacy of quail, turkey and deer hunting, and equestrian activities galore. Golf and tennis were also introduced in the region, and an active social season firmly established the Red Hills as a premier winter destination for sporting families.

Over time, Hanna's granddaughter, Elisabeth Pansy Ireland Poe, inherited Pebble Hill. An avid sportswoman, Miss Pansy created Honey Lake Plantation primarily for quail hunting and horseback riding. Before long the plantation was included in the prestigious Georgia-Florida Field Trial map. (Other marquee properties include Dixie, Pinckney Hill, Pinion Point and Avalon.)

Land that was home to Apalachee and Seminole Indians was soon hosting a veritable who's-who of sporting dignitaries, including President William McKinley, Cornelius Vanderbilt, B.F. Goodrich and Alexander Graham Bell (who knew Bell was a hunter?). Whitneys, Mellons and Archibalds were frequent visitors, and notable sporting artists such as Ogden Pleissner and A. Lassell Ripley painted oils and watercolors after their morning hunts. In fact, the hunter featured in Ripley's *Turkey Shooting* is none other than Pansy Poe who also commissioned the notable Clifton Sheppard to paint the museum-quality mural, *Honey Lake Seminoles*, which adorns nearly the entire upper wall in the Gathering Hall. Legend has it that following JFK's assassination, Jackie Kennedy was secreted in the little cottage on the secluded shore of Honey Lake.

More recently, entrepreneur Bob Williamson expanded on the plantation's rich outdoor legacy and created a not-to-be-missed sporting venue. Williamson's remarkable life story (which he chronicles in his fascinating book, *Miracle on Luckie Street*) brought him in search of a plantation that would preserve an exquisite piece of land. Over a three-year period Williamson visited nearly three-dozen plantations, none of which resonated with him. But the first time that he toured Honey Lake Plantation, he knew he was home.

Bob Williamson's original goal was to preserve and enhance the plantation's grounds and waters. Entrepreneurs are seldom at rest, and little by little he began to expand upon the property's rich sporting traditions.

Williamson brought in his son Jon to oversee the operation and to manage the wide array of sporting opportunities that now include hunting for quail, turkey, waterfowl and deer, horseback riding, fishing for trophy bass and bream, and kayaking. By adding a full resort and spa with conference center, the Williamsons now have a world-class venue that spares no detail when it comes to business, pleasure, or a combination of the two. In recent times, Honey Lake Plantation has served as a backdrop for weddings, celebrity sporting competitions and special culinary events.

A stately gate marks the entrance to the Gathering Hall, the plantation's epicenter. To the left is the Equestrian



English cockers are used by the Honey Lake Plantation guides to flush the birds and often to make the retrieves. Opposite: The author, guide Ed Hart and Brian Raley move from the custom-designed Bird Buggy into position on an honored point.

Center, a newly built lodge overlooking a stable that's home to a number of Tennessee walkers. Close by are two ponds, each chock-full of largemouth bass and big bream.

On that February morning I noticed the little lakeside chapel across the road bathed in golden sunlight. Bob Williamson transported the chapel's iron bell and exquisite stained glass windows piece-by-piece to the plantation.

As I stood in the circular driveway by the Gathering Hall, a hunting vehicle rolled up, the likes of which I'd never seen on a quail plantation. It had a long front hood followed by a bench seat that staged up to a platform with four leather executive chairs. Underneath it all was a Suburban chassis and a Chevy 350 engine. There were two dog boxes in the bow and six more in the stern. Driven by hunt-master Rick Almarode, the vehicle contained a half-dozen English pointers and setters and a pair of English cockers.

Responding to my inquiring look, Rick said, "It's called a Bird Buggy. We had it custom made. Check this out."

Much of the buggy was self-explanatory style and comfort, with the captain's chairs up high, coolers full of water and soft drinks, and bench seats, but there was a flip top on each side of the hood.

"Custom gun racks, velvet lined, protected by the steel lid,"



he noted. “They’ll keep your shotguns safe from the bumps and clean from the dust.”

“What does one of these rigs cost?” I asked.

“You don’t want to know.”

There are other vehicles for carrying shooters through the quail courses at Honey Lake Plantation. Bird Buggy #2 is a custom-developed trailer pulled behind a Jeep and there are several Polaris six-wheelers, much like the de facto buggies on most plantations. A traditional option is to hunt on horseback and there is no finer Red Hills mount than a Tennessee walker. The horses are cool and calm, easy gated and demure in the line of fire. Ride in a vehicle or follow the dogs on horseback, take your pick.

During our stay we enjoyed the company of some truly interesting sportsmen. One was Steve Bartkowski, the former Atlanta Falcon quarterback. I remember the 1974-75 pro draft like it was yesterday. I was in middle school playing linebacker and slot back when Bartkowski was drafted number one over Walter Payton. Seeing Bart walk down the front steps of the Gathering Hall wearing an orange vest and carrying a 20-gauge Beretta was about as much of a stunner for me then as it was when he beat out Sweetness back in the draft.

Another special guest was Bob Svetich, the former Pittsburgh Pirate baseballer. My uncle lived in Pittsburgh, and I remembered Bob and his twin brother Ron from the old Three Rivers Stadium days. Svetich now owns a company in Colorado called The Outdoor Group. His brother is a coach for the Colorado Rockies.

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Director Brian Raley had driven down from South Carolina with their vehicle loaded to the gills with fishing and hunting gear. Brian had brought his sweet little Brittany to complete some of the dog’s early training, and I was eager to see him work.

Rounding out the group were Richard Jordan, president of the Christian Sportsman’s Alliance; singer/songwriter Wayne Galloway; and Robbie Payne from Horizon Software in Atlanta. Robbie has an impeccable knowledge of sporting literature and can quote passages like a pastor references Bible verses. Michael Williamson, Bob’s second son, a software entrepreneur and an outstanding sportsman, played host to Bart’s group. It was about as interesting a team of men all pulled together for a walk in the woods as I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting.

Bob Williamson stopped by to greet us before our hunt. Bob is a turkey-hunting fanatic, and with the upcoming season and a number of hunters already booked in, he was getting a jump-start on scouting.

“I heard a number of really good gobblers this morning,” he said. “I’m a little nervous about the mild winter combined with the early spring, and hope the season doesn’t kick off too soon.” (As it turned out, Bob didn’t need to worry because a number of 20-plus-pound birds were harvested in March.)

Running our hunt were guides and dog trainers Ed and Sheila Hart. The Harts manage the plantation kennels, and field trial enthusiasts will instantly recognize their names from the winners’ circles. Ed and Sheila are sticklers for developing top-notch dogs. If part of your reason for quail hunting is watching the bird dogs, then you’ll be in for quite a show.

Chuck, Brian and I loaded up in the Bird Buggy, with Ed and Sheila out ahead on horseback. Whenever the dogs pointed, Ed would raise his orange hat. Some things don’t need to be said twice, and not once did he need to repeat the movement.

A morning covey rise is one of the best ways to start the day, and we had our first point in a mix of loblollies and milo. A covey of some 15 birds rocketed out of the grass, followed by a few shots and a few birds.

“There was a genuine hat-blower right around here the other day,” Ed said.

“A hat-blower?”

“Yes sir,” he said. “A hat-blower is when we get two or three normal coveys that sort of merge together. Instead of a

dozen or so birds we'll see forty or fifty. The breeze coming from all of their wings can blow the hat off your head! I hope we see one of them this morning."

"Me too."

We followed up some of the singles and doubles, walking at a leisurely pace around a stand of pines and over to a planting of Egyptian wheat, wiregrass, lovegrass, broomsedge and Johnson grass. Oats, clover and soybeans rounded out the mix.

A setter pointed and a single bird went up and flew straight-away. There were a few shots and the bird continued flying away.

"A lollipop," Ed said. "They're the easiest shot in the book. A straight, going-away single. No explosion like you'd find in a covey rise . . . no confusion caused by birds flying across shooting lanes . . . and no trees to cloud your vision. Just a single bird flying away with no cover. It's so easy that most hunters consider it a gimme and miss. Just last week there was a shooter who doubled a few times with a .410 and then whiffed on two lollipops. That's how it goes sometimes.

"But y'all shouldn't worry. There'll be more birds . . . many more in fact. You can trust me on that."

Ed was right, and our morning hunt was filled with fast-flying birds in a variety of picturesque coverts.

After lunch, we stood on the veranda in the back of the Gathering Hall mulling over our afternoon plans. One option was to follow up our spectacular morning with quail, quail and more quail. Option two was to grab a case of shells and



Cigars and after-dinner drinks are best enjoyed in a rocking chair overlooking Lake HayHayLaLa. Below: Brian Raley pivots on a hard-left flyer. Opposite: An avid horseman, Bob Williamson parlayed a \$35 million capital investment into a superb setting for a variety of sporting activities.

break some clays at the expertly manicured skeet, trap and 5-Stand courses. Option three was an afternoon duck hunt. Because of the warm winter along the Atlantic Flyway, ducks numbers were a little low for the Williamsons' liking, but that's more indicative of the high standards they've set for the plantation. There were lots of teal and woodies in the shallow-water ponds rimmed with soybeans and corn, but the usual influx of ringnecks, baldpate, bluebills and redheads had yet to arrive.

As we gazed over the waters of Lake Hayhaylala, we suddenly saw a boil even bigger than the one I'd seen at first light. That did it! Quickly we gathered up our fishing gear and made plans to try several different ponds.

The water had warmed up to an absolutely perfect temperature, and while there were good bass and big

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bream breaking the surface, there were even more a foot or two below.

Honey Lake is best fished from the plantation's Carolina Skiff, a shallow-draft boat that's maneuverable yet stable. Lakes Obo, Hooking Bull and Hayhaylala can be fished from shore or by kayak. Angling aficionados instantly recognize the clusters of lily pads and flooded timber as meccas for bass and bream.

I fished with Bob Svetich and made a critical mistake. Bob made a cast while I was rigging up and instantly hooked up. I offered to release his plate-sized bream. He hooked up on his next cast, and then the next, and before you know it a bunch of time went by with me releasing *his* fish.

"You're on your own now, pal," I said and walked away. In short order I was having similar success on bream and bass.

Later that afternoon we met up with Chuck and Brian at Lake Obo. Chuck claimed that he'd hooked an astonishing 37 big bluegills on 37 casts, all from the same spot on a grassy bank, and Brian backed up his friend's boast. Meanwhile, Bart put the ball in the end zone with 13 pounds of bass spread out across two fish.

A bright blue sky and outstanding fishing, what's better than that? Ending the day with a culinary masterpiece and a good night's sleep in amazingly comfortable guest suites, that's what.

William Mann is the plantation's executive chef, and if you're not careful, his three decades of culinary experience will put a bulge in your waistline. He calls his style Plantation Elegant, which means a new twist to favorite Southern classics.

Breakfast ranges from eggs any-style to omelets or French toast. At lunch, a pulled pork BBQ sandwich, southern fried chicken or a gourmet elk burger are a few options. And for dinner, try a bone-in filet mignon, andouille-stuffed chicken, lamb chops with a pomegranate reduction and smashed turnips, or an herb-roasted pork loin with roasted apples.

Chef Mann is a firm believer in the

"direct-from-the-farm-to-table" concept, so guests will enjoy some of the freshest foods available. Quail, venison and fish are harvested as are five types of lettuce, two varieties of greens, vegetables like squash, carrots, turnips, potatoes and broccoli. A plethora of spices are homegrown as well, and eggs are gathered daily from the Honey Lake chicken coop. And we haven't even talked about the delicacies coming from the smokehouse or his dessert menu.

After dinner, it's off to socialize some more before bedtime. We stayed at the 3,600-square-foot Honey Lake Lodge, which has five luxury guest rooms, each with king-sized beds and private baths.

Bob Williamson designed every building himself, and he spared no details in the process. Heartwood pine floors and gorgeous cypress walls were milled from fallen trees on the plantation. The full kitchen, breakfast counter, wet bar, leather couches and fireplace add enough space and atmosphere for sports to end a perfect day in comfort.

There are other lodging options as well, including the 24-bedroom Equestrian Lodge in addition to Five Pines and Two Oaks Cottages, which offer two suites, each with private baths and a shared living room. And if you're looking to tie into the Honey Lake Plantation tradition, then stay at the Pansy Poe Cottage where Jackie Kennedy once stayed.

If you have an opportunity to walk along the quaint streets in Thomasville or around the energetic Florida State University in Tallahassee, you're likely to find yourself thinking about things unrelated to quaint stores or cheering fans at an FSU home game. It might be the boil of a bucketmouth bass, a hat-blower of seemingly endless numbers of quail or the lollipop that you missed. When that happens, you can smile for you've just become part of the Red Hills legacy. 🍷

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Contact Honey Lake Plantation Resort and Spa, 1290 Honey Lake Road, Greenville, Florida, 32331; (850) 948-9911; www.honeylakeplantation.com.