

Big Chance. Fat Chance. Slim Chance: How Caprice Brought Us the Red Hills

By Jim Cox

*I*t's impossible to lead when you waltz with a two-hundred-year-old tree. A leather climbing belt tethers me to my senior dance partner some sixty feet above the ground. I feel like a seahorse attached to a strand of kelp as I sweep to and fro with this venerable longleaf. Our slow minuet doesn't match the tempo I hear and feel in the swift, steady wind, but there's no room for my dance chart in this setting. The ancient tree presides.

I hold an endangered species, a red-cockaded woodpecker that represents my reason for climbing this tree. I've removed the bird from the cavity where it hatched just eight days ago. It will require attention soon—some measurements, leg bands, and then back in the cavity—but I pause to bask both in the sheer beauty and mysterious improbability of the forest that surrounds us. This bird is secondary to the music, magnificence, and thoughts of providence that waltz through my head.

The magnificence of this old-growth longleaf forest, the Wade Tract, is quickly absorbed. Hundreds of grand old trees with tall, erect postures steeple-stretch toward the sky. Others with gnarled, wrought-iron branches, flat-headed tops, and tumescent boles lean at defiant angles toward the tug of the earth like huge bonsai bowing to greet guests arriving for a ceremonial tea. Beneath the trees lies an expansive prairie-carpet filled with golden grasses and green ferns and stretching in all directions.

The music of the longleaf forest is equally direct in its appeal. The performance begins when the wind moves unimpeded through the widely spaced trees and flows across millions of thin green instruments gathered in bunches at the ends of stout branches. The long, taut needles offer up silk-slim whispers on a slight breeze, the muffled, distant hissing of young owls. When stoked by strong gusts, those same long instruments ripple with a loud, slicing drone filled with resonance and overtones, a chorus of manatees inhaling-exhaling, inhaling-exhaling.

There is no other orchestra that makes such music, and in the case of this patch of old-growth longleaf pine, the Wade Tract, it's music crafted by one of the rarest forests in North America.

This facet of the forest, the question of rarity, is the most difficult to absorb. In the mid-1800s, the supply of longleaf pine seemed endless. Longleaf forests extended from Virginia to Florida to Texas and covered nearly 90 million acres. It was a forest that built a nation. The heartwood was especially coveted because wood-rotting fungi couldn't disfigure the light, cinnamon-yellow wood, and the tight, dense grain turned jaws of termites to jelly.

But longleaf forests today cover just 3 percent of their original range, and most are comparatively young forests that have been hacked and harvested at numerous points in their careers. An individual longleaf can live for over four hundred years, holding tightly to its patch of earth until struck by lightning or felled by a





storm. A longleaf forest that has grown back in an area cut over a century ago contains only teenagers and young adults when compared to an old-growth tract.

One authority estimates that only five thousand acres of well managed, old-growth tracts like the Wade Tract remain, and many of these ancient forests are found on private lands in the Red Hills region. Some of North America's most precious environmental jewels, or perhaps more appropriately, some of the continent's rarest natural artwork, lie between Tallahassee, Florida, and Thomasville, Georgia. Think of it as finding great paintings amid the roadside stands of the region; the bright colors of Van Gogh and Renoir servings as ornate backdrops to stacked jars of mayhaw jelly and pickled okra.

A simple question buzzes through my head like a pesky gnat: *Why were these ancient trees spared from the ax?*

Swaying near the branched arms of my two-hundred-year-old dance partner, I see and hear a complex answer to this question. An abandoned dirt road nearby is covered with brush and adolescent pines; the shoulders are steep and deeply etched, a scarp of rich red dirt cut by years of erosion. I hear a chorus of yelping hunting

dogs on a neighboring property. The dogs ramble nervously in featureless kennels that collectively stretch the length of two tennis courts and are cleaned twice a day. Their bays are just as much a part of the landscape as the music in the trees. And then there is the dark, charred bark that covers the base of every tree, long smudgy socks that help when I forget a pencil. A sliver of blackened bark can be used just like a pencil to record woodpecker data in my field book.

The sights and sounds are part of a very strange stew, a cultural history peppered by fire-arm technology and fire ecology, slavery and slow transportation, tenant farms and industrial titans, and, most importantly, lots and lots and lots of sheer luck.

What the Ancient Trees Saw in Their Youth

A few of the oldest trees on the Wade Tract were slim saplings when Spanish anchors first dropped into Florida's waters. The Apalachee Nation called this area "old-fields," a phrase that suggests the land had been worked for many a good year. Populations of Native Americans never approached land-burdening levels, but they did clear land extensively well before European settlement. Early Spanish explorers described huge agricultural fields and extensive road networks among the villages, including a maize field stretching six miles. This may be an exaggeration or a faulty translation, but the population (which totaled about five thousand across the region) required mounds of maize and beans and squash, and towns and ceremonial centers moved frequently as soils of the ancient old-fields were exhausted.

The Red Hills's moist clay soils could sustain many crops in upland pine forests, but a simple need for potable water favored settlement near water bodies and away from the expanse of pinewoods. Apalachee villages included Ychutafun on the Apalachicola River, Uzela near the Aucilla, Bacica near the Wacissa, Ochete near the coast, and Iniahica nestled amid the lakes and streams of greater Tallahassee. The early inhabitants burned and hunted and probably enjoyed the music of the longleaf forests, but they turned soil and cleared land close to large sinkhole lakes and river traces.

A Bloody Road

The abandoned road I see may have been a footpath used by the Apalachee people, or the Seminoles who followed, but more recent technologies and great effort extracted this band of flat earth from the rolling hills. It was called Magnolia Road despite the fact that it runs here through an upland forest where longleaf pines, not magnolias, make up 85 percent of trees. For all its quietude and seeming comeliness, a scar on the landscape that has healed well, I know it to be a road built with misappropriate sweat and blood in a time when the concept of property was savagely applied to people with dark skin.

Like the theft of lands from Native Americans, slavery was a gruesome part of nation building. Thinking about this peculiar institution can cause the heart to twist and cringe, but slave-based agriculture played a strange role in preserving old-growth pine forests of the Red Hills region.

Cotton, tobacco, and other large-scale agriculture ventures were well established before the end of the Revolutionary War, but the new state of Georgia was a wild place that served largely to buffer South Carolina from Spain's colony in Florida. It took the Creek Wars of 1814 before enough land had been swiped to ease the way for settlement of Georgia's remote southwest corner, and even then a special land lottery was used to encourage settlement. In 1812, about two thousand people put their names in a hat in hopes of drawing 250–500 acres of Red Hills farm land.

Many newcomers first located on old-field lands near Tallahassee or the hammock lands surrounding the large lakes. Others secured lands north of Thomasville, but the soils found there were not suitable for cotton production, so much of this land developed as small farms while larger, less fragmented tracts enveloped the virgin pine forests surrounding the Wade Tract.

The modern history of the Wade Tract began when Thomas Wyche purchased 490 acres south of Thomasville and in the early 1840s settled with his extended family (including his parents, ten brothers and sisters, and six slaves). He purchased additional land quickly, but clearing for cotton production took great time given the primitive technology of the era. Although Wyche had amassed sixteen hundred acres at the time of his death around 1860, he'd managed to clear just a quarter of this acreage. Land clearing progressed with similar languor on other large tracts, and by 1860, nearly thirty years after settlements first arrive, Thomas County was covered by a mere 65,000 acres of improved farmland and a whopping 360,000 acres of unimproved forest land.

Given enough time and resources, settlers would have worked over the pine forests as surely as water created the Grand Canyon, but while soils of the Red Hills provided few obstacles to cotton production, getting the crop to market was another issue. Thomasville had no railroad until the 1860s, so early planters were forced to send the four-hundred-pound bales of "white gold" through Tallahassee to shipping ports along the St. Marks River. The abandoned stretch of Magnolia Road that I can see was built with slave labor to provide a more direct route to the shipping ports and avoid the usurious gatekeepers in Tallahassee. It linked up with Plank Road east of Tallahassee and headed south to the now-abandoned town of Magnolia along the St. Marks River.

Even this direct route was slow going when transportation was powered by mules. A prime six-mule team took a full week to carry a cotton shipment to port and return, and about a third of the cash paid for a crop ended up going to insurance, lodging, storage, and *primage*, an antiquated term that, according Webster, is "a small customary payment over and above the freight made to the master of the ship for his care and trouble."

With less money returning to the planters of southwest Georgia, fewer slaves could be purchased and less land could be cleared.

Screams for railroad transportation were not quieted until the Atlantic and Gulf Railroad linked Thomasville to Savannah in April 1861. Boom times were surely ahead with only a nuisance of tall pines to stand between landowners and the fertile red soils, but yet another wave from Lady Luck's wand interceded in the

very month that the railroad arrived in Thomasville. At 4:00 a.m. on April 12, 1861, a single mortar was fired at Union soldiers stationed at Fort Sumter, South Carolina.

The Civil War cast long, dark clouds over the bright future the railroad seemed to bring to Thomasville. Cotton sales became unsteady, and the war siphoned off the yeomen and pouts who'd grown food for the South on their smaller farms. As food supplies diminished, the Confederate government encouraged plantations to grow corn, beans, and other foods needed to sustain the South. A truce held between advancing cotton fields and the longleaf forests of the Red Hills.

Southern Dogs They're Not

On the eve of his march from Atlanta to the sea, Tecumseh Sherman told Lincoln "I can make the march and I can make Georgia howl. I propose to kill even the puppies, because puppies grow up to be Southern dogs."

The kenneled dogs I hear in the distance are not typical Southern dogs. They spring energetically as though immune to the heat, and they're a recognizable breed, not purebred mutts. It's unlikely Sherman had a chance to threaten pure breeds such as these. Their sharp yelps didn't become commonplace until the close of the century.

Soon after Sherman's march, cotton plantations began crashing like severed chandeliers. Attempts to plant, cultivate, and harvest vast cotton crops using market forces, not slavery, failed miserably, and the large plantations split like loblollies in the mud. There were 611 farms in Thomas County in 1870, but this number increased exponentially to 1,600 by 1880, and then to 3,200 by the turn of the century. Many were the forty-acres-and-a-mule variety operated by black tenant farmers.

Fortunately for the pinewoods, the railroad that arrived in Thomasville in 1861 hit a roadblock that took decades to overpower. Original plans to build spurs westward to Bainbridge and south to Monticello, to extend the Atlantic-and-Gulf Railroad from the Atlantic to the Gulf, but these plans lagged in the dust of the post-war economy. For several decades, Thomasville remained the last stop on the line. As any Southern pup knows, being last in line can lead to deprivation, but when you're a hotel that sits at the end of a railroad line, you often have a captive audience.

Thomasville became a favored winter resort in the late 1800s because of warm winters, Southern charm, and the fact that the railroad went no farther. The city grew elegant hotels that included the Waverly House, Gulf House, and the 160-room Piney Woods Hotel, which some called the finest hotel in the South. The agriculture-based economy of the South was in deep freeze, but new industries of rail transportation, oil, shipping, and steel production plowed ahead with manifest destiny in Northern states, and these industries created a wealthy new society that sought refuge from the dreary winter weather of Cleveland, New York, and Philadelphia.

The arrival of high society and gilded dreams, coupled with technological advances on the firearms front, carried Red Hills forests through a period where other Southern forests fell at a rapacious rate. Winchester Rifle Company introduced its first repeating shotgun with choke boring in 1887. The new breech-loading system was grafted onto the old "fowling piece" and now made it difficult to miss the broadside of the barn, much less a quickly flying bird. Through careful fine-tuning, Winchester unveiled the first mass-market, pump-action shotgun in 1897; three to five shells could be fired in quick order, sending a spray of lead shot through the air.

Around 1890, J. Wyman Jones, a wealthy New Jersey businessman, purchased a wooded park near Thomasville and filled it with game birds that he hunted using the new weaponry. Before advances in gun technology, game bird hunting consisted of waiting long hours for quarry to fall into snares or fly into nets. The improved shotgun allowed active pursuit of game species amid the mild winters, and hunting parties traveled through tall pines and abandoned fields on horseback while a well-trained pack of English pointers scouted through brush for bobwhite quail.

What if golf had been the outdoor craze of late 1800s rather than crisp, cool air, the music of the pines, and the occasional report of newly designed shotguns?

Jones was soon followed by the Van Duzer family of New York, who purchased Greenwood Plantation; the Hanna family of Cleveland, who purchased Melrose and Pebble Hill Plantations; and then the family of Jephtha Wade, another Cleveland native, who purchased Millpond Plantation from surviving members of the Wyche family.

Wade was grandson of the founder of Western Union Telegraph and served as owner, president, or board member for a host of large corporations. Old pictures show a slim face and upward sloping eyes tucked beneath an extending brow. He rolled in money, as they say, but he was not a tightwad. He was called Cleveland's greatest philanthropist and made vast donations to Cleveland's art gallery, an orphanage, local schools, a university, and several other public ventures. He was equally generous in Thomasville and certainly has been immortalized in the arena of old-growth longleaf forests: any pinewoods biologist worth their salt knows of the Wade Tract.

Wade likely appreciated the music and beauty of longleaf forests. His interest in nature can be seen in the donations he made to the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. He was also interested in landscaping and created separate gardens on Millpond Plantation for roses, dogwoods, and tropical ferns and shrubs. His dwelling place on Millpond was a spectacular Spanish revival building with scores of rooms gathered around a large central courtyard. Wade consolidated land held by nearby tenant farms and eventually amassed nearly ten thousand acres before dying at Millpond Plantation in 1926.

The Wizard of Sherwood

Yankee money protected longleaf forests of the Red Hills, but Yankee money was being used for this same purpose throughout the South. The hundreds of winter retreats organized from disparate old plantations and tenant farms totaled 3.6 million acres throughout the Southeastern U.S. in the early 1900s, roughly the same acreage of longleaf forests that remains today.

The fortunes of forests in the Red Hills improved when Lady Luck brought a special eye to survey the half-million-or-so acres of plantation lands in the region. It was the eye of a special wildlife biologist who was as passionate about quail hunting as he was about recording rare bird sightings and enjoying the sights and sounds of an old-growth longleaf forest. He was a rare shaman of natural history and wild landscapes, if you will, and his sagacity led to the charred bark I see on these ancient trees.



Populations of bobwhite quail pitched into decline in the early 1900s. Quail need open pinewoods and agricultural lands where sun pours down to the ground, but the land once harrowed for cotton was growing thick with brush and young pines. A forest conservation program initiated in the 1920s sent federal agents across the region asking property owners to stop burning their forests. Soon afterward, the open prairie-carpet lying beneath the tall pines began to clog with hardwood brush and thickets. Hunters needed machetes as much as shotguns to pursue their quarry.

Plantation owners, who were keen financiers and corporate bosses when they weren't hunting quail, were not the types to sit back and idly watch quail declines bring a close to an era. Led by Col. Lewis Thompson, Harry Whitney, and Henry Beadel, several Red Hills owners banded together to provide about \$46,000 in seed money to the U.S. Department of Agriculture to support a research project focusing on quail declines. A young biologist from Wisconsin named Herbert L. Stoddard headed up the Cooperative Quail Investigation beginning in 1924.

Stoddard had an eye that could fathom a forest as easily as it could follow quail at the end of shotgun. Aldo Leopold, author of *A Sand County Almanac* and the father of wildlife management, once sent Stoddard a letter that summed up his peculiar genius:

I am sending you by express a yew bow, which I have been making for you this winter. I have enjoyed it because it was a way to express my affection and regard for one of the few who understands what yew bows—and quail and mallards and wind and sunsets—are all about.

It was certainly Stoddard's understanding of wind and sunsets—the processes of the forest, not just the quail within—that was his greatest gift. He watched the booming lightning of summer storms rift asunder the aged longleaf of the Red Hills. The storms killed a few tall trees each year, and the gaps in the canopy poured sunlight onto the ground. Hundreds of seedling longleaf took hold in some of these sunny patches and began their slow ascent to the sky.

Stoddard heard the wind in the pines, as well as more distant sounds from the time of Native Americans and early plantation owners. It was the crackling of the fire that these people used to herd game and freshen their grasses. Fires pass through the pinewoods like a finger moving through the flame of a candle. It stays close to the ground, killing brush and oak thickets without touching the thin green needles on limbs high above the ground.

From these insights, Stoddard developed a method of selective timber harvest that removed a few trees periodically, not whole forests, much like lightning. He showed that fire was not only an integral part of Southern pine forests but also the cheapest and most effective way for landowners to control their brush and promote healthy quail populations. His recommendations for land stewardship could guarantee an annual yield of quail and timber, as well as a stable, healthy forest that contained all the elements and processes from the red-cockaded woodpeckers that need hundred-year-old pines to the ground-loving meadowlarks and gopher tortoises.

Stoddard published his recommendations and went back to Washington in 1931, but it soon became clear to Colonel Thompson and others that Stoddard's management techniques were not being widely applied in the Red Hills. In a bold move that only a well-heeled landowner could make, Thompson brought Stoddard back to the Red Hills and deeded one thousand acres of land to him on condition that Stoddard live there. Stoddard called the property Sherwood Plantation; he opened a forestry and wildlife consulting business in Thomasville; and for the next four decades, his hand carefully guided management of some of the most important ecological properties in North America, including the Wade Tract.

Stoddard could have made tons of money given the vast timber resources he controlled, but his eye was fixed squarely on maintaining the pieces of this complex puzzle using techniques that mimicked natural processes. When the new owner of the Wade Tract, Mr. Jephtha Wade III, asked Stoddard to harvest some of the timber in the patch of old-growth where I now stand, Stoddard reportedly said, "Let's get to that next year." Mr. Wade asked the same question again a year later, and the year after that, and both times the answer was "wait till next year." The following year, Mr. Wade reportedly asked, "We're never going to cut that patch, are we?"



The Future of the Legacy

Stephen J. Gould once described evolution as music produced by a special tape player. There are hundreds of billions of chance events the tape player has passed through to produce the sounds you hear at this moment, but if you try to rewind the tape and play it again, the music changes. The tape can never be played the same way twice.

You may rewind the serendipitous tape that stores the history of ancient forests of the Red Hills, but it's unlikely you would hear the same music I hear today. The Nature Conservancy describes the Red Hills as "One of the Last Great Places" on earth, but at each step there were other much-less-than-great possibilities. Native Americans clustered around sinkhole lakes that lay to the south; the plantations developed just in time to have their lifeblood drained by war; the railroad stopped at Thomasville; wealthy industrialists pursued quail using fancy new armament; a young biologist with phenomenal acumen lit a fire that still burns.

Jack of Diamonds, I cry

Lady Luck has certainly smiled upon us with this gift of ancient forests. It could be she has an appreciation for all things living as well as an ear for great natural music. Perhaps she takes a literal interpretation of the story of Noah and includes forest ecosystems in the mix of things we are to preserve. Perhaps she simply loves old trees.

It seems just as likely, though, that her destructive wand called "bad luck," was simply distracted at key moments in history, its eye diverted by the chaotic spinning of this earthen body. If the Wade Tract is a jewel spawned by luck, the providence seems all the more impressive and precious because caprice is an extremely dangerous bedfellow, even when it's the only warm body in the joint.

A slim chance is what we cling to in the Red Hills. Even as Tall Timbers Research Station and The Nature Conservancy attempt to conserve the ancient forests of the region, Tallahassee and Thomasville seem ever more intent on achieving a final kiss through their expanding neighborhoods and roads. There are also many new landowners sprinkled throughout the region, heirs of heirs of heirs in some cases. It's a natural progression, but it further fragments the landscape and leads to a greater diversity of management approaches and styles. Guided by outside consultants, some landowners approach quail and timber management with an eye toward short-term benefits that can rob the land of its natural diversity. As Stoddard noted, an attempt to increase a single component such as timber or quail often harms other components. New management techniques that focus narrowly on quail or timber also can be costly, very costly, and this can put a whole new perspective on the value of a two-hundred-year-old tree.

I arrive at another tree with more woodpeckers to band. Today's fieldwork has taken longer than it should, but I often stop and reflect in my line of work. Trouble is that, as I ascend my ladders and feel the tug of the wind in the tree, my mind wanders away from history and music and dance toward some darker questions: is it possible to conserve these exquisite ancient forests on these private lands, the last vestiges of a decimated landscape, or am I merely watching the final extinction of that landscape? Is it music through the pines that I hear, or the sound of a slowly advancing glacier, a devastating glacier powered by cash-floe? Will Lady Luck's wand continue to wave, or the scythe called bad luck?

Biography

Jim Cox climbs trees for Tall Timbers Research Station. When he's not listening to the music in the pines, he crunches numbers and cranks out dry technical papers on the bird life of the Red Hills. One of his long-term goals is to see an endowed position created at Tall Timbers for the purpose of studying animals on the Wade Tract. Information on this endeavor and a virtual tour of the Wade Tract can be found at www.talltimbers.org.

Note

This essay is included in the inaugural publication of the Red Hills Writers Project, *Between Two Rivers: Stories from the Red Hills to the Gulf*, Edited by Susan Cerulean, Janisse Ray, and Laura Newton. The anthology can be purchased online at www.redhillswritersproject.org.

Jim Cox at the Wade Tract

