

THOMASVILLE, GEORGIA, THE QUAIL HUNTING CAPITAL

It was quail hunting that helped attract wealthy northerners to Thomasville, Georgia, and it was shooting that led to the formation of the Thomasville Gun Club in the 1880's. This was the heyday of the glass ball and clay pigeon shooting contest. Northerners and locals took part in shooting matches. The county's abundant supply of quails, doves and ducks drew Yankee visitors to Thomasville's hotels and boarding houses. Shooting plantations became the rage, and the Bobwhite quail was the sought after game bird. In 1897 *Harper's Magazine* declared Thomasville "the best winter resort on three continents."

The Thomasville-Tallahassee region contains over a hundred working plantations and is known as the "quail hunting capital of the world." With 72 plantations in Thomasville today, it is a town that no other can rival. The sporting plantations conjure images that we commonly associate with the South: spiral staircases, columned porticos, Sporting paintings by old and new masters and gun rooms filled with sporting firearms. Family and guests gathered around fireplaces and set the mood of the shooting season and rekindle traditions and romance of bygone days. This patchwork of plantations that blanket the north Florida south Georgia area have become more durable than the cotton kingdoms that they replaced.

To this day the hunting traditions and rules are carried out and enforced by the plantation owners. Four shooters are usually the limit on a typical hunt, and shoot only in pairs. A huntsman, who always

leads the party, will usually have three or more assistants to manage the dogs, hold the horses and assist the riders in getting back into their saddles. The pointers suddenly stop when they come upon the scent of a covey of quail. At this moment the huntsman will take off his red hat and the shooters dismount. The hunters pull their guns from the scabbards attached to the harness on the horse, load their guns and walk forward with the barrels pointed upward. Then an assistant uses a whip to beat the grass to flush the quail. After a bird is shot, the huntsman will relay to the driver of the wagon to release the Labrador or spaniels to retrieve the bird. The hunting cycle ends when the shooters unload their guns, and break the barrels open, and return the guns to the scabbards.

Thomasville historian William Warren Rogers summed up the resort of Thomasville during the Gilded Age. *...the 1880s and 1890s was a golden [age] and marked the height of Thomasville's fame; special trains brought many wealthy and distinguished guests; the streets and boulevards swarmed with fancy carriages drawn by glistening horses (frequently the purebred animals were shipped in especially for the season); elegantly attired men and women attended balls, staged dinners and parties, promenaded, took rides, sunned themselves, played cards, hunted fox and shot quail. During the winter season the native Southern accents were joined by those of midwesterners and easterners and on occasion, by the aristocratic and sometimes pseudoaristocratic speech patterns of Europeans who commanded only a smattering of English. There was little wonder that a native Georgian would reflect later, 'In that war impoverished country during*

the later `1880s, strange almost exotic seemed the great winter resort Thomasville, with its tourist hotels, its lavish show of ease and opulence and its idling crowds at play.”

In essence the new owners of property in Thomasville were the product of the Gilded Age. Their fortunes were based upon petroleum, mining, shipping, banking, and steel. Northerners from Cleveland, Ohio, led in Thomasville's development as a sporting destination.

The Duke and Duchess of Windsor were the guest for many winters at Mrs. George F. Baker's Horseshoe Plantation. The Duke was made an honorary member of the Georgia-Florida Field Trial Club and was an excellent marksman. One day one of the young helpers on a shoot instructed the Duke to carry an empty shell box during a hunt. Not long afterwards the boy realized that he had been commanding the former King of England and the boy apologized profusely. The Duke took it in good spirit and insisted on continuing to carry his own box back to the hunting wagon.

President Dwight Eisenhower was a frequent guest at George M. Humphrey's Milestone Plantation. In 1954 *Time* magazine covered President Eisenhower's trip to Thomasville. *"Five minutes after he arrived..Ike was togged out in a natty corduroy cap, green windbreaker, whipcord jodhpurs, and sturdy natural leather boots. Under his right arm, the President carried two shotguns which he had carefully selected from his private collection: a standard 20-gauge double barreled shotgun and his favorite, a small .410*

over and under." The President acclimated himself to the relaxed Thomasville culture pretty quickly despite tensions with Russia and China that were particularly heated at this time.

One must keep in mind that Thomasville was a haven for reclusive celebrities. Thomasville was the private sanctuary to which Jackie Kennedy secretly removed to immediately after John F. Kennedy was shot in 1963. Mrs. Kennedy's "hideout" remained anonymous until a photographer snapped a picture of her leaving All Saints Episcopal Church a week after she had been in town.

It was the Golden Age of Shotgunning. As breech loading hammerless shotguns became more common, quail could be shot more effectively. In England and the United States the shotgun was refined to perfection. There were subtle improvements in boring, choking, engraving and checkering. True to tradition, shotguns with side by side barrels are still the preferred guns on the Thomasville plantations. The smaller bores of the 20 and 28 gauge are thought to be more of a sporting gun than the heavier 12 and 16 gauge guns. Modern automatic and pump-action guns are considered unsporting. Gun talk is circled around Purdeys, Parkers, L.C. Smith, Winchesters and Holland and Holland shotguns.

The game wardens of Georgia have imposed strict restrictions on the quantity of quail that one person can shoot. The area is also notorious for the well-patrolled plantations. There have been encounters with visiting celebrities who claimed to be unaware of hunting restrictions.

One of the famous land owning families of Thomasville was the Whitneys who owned Greenwood plantation and Foshalee Plantation. Jock Whitney once said that "Greenwood would be the last place I would ever get rid of." Jock was the Ambassador to the Court of St. James and he hosted several famous guests. One of his guests was Carl Spaatz, the Chief of Staff of the US Air Force. They went duck hunting, and the legal limit was four ducks per person. A Federal warden by chance saw them and noticed that Spaatz was over the limit. In essence the good-natured, law abiding chief had been picked up on a federal charge. Jock Whitney being the good host arranged to have the fines paid and later capped the evening off by hospitably losing at poker to General Spaatz.

One year General Dwight D. Eisenhower was turkey hunting at Coca Cola's CEO, Robert Woodruff's plantation near Thomasville. Eisenhower downed four birds in 90 seconds. The limit was two in 24 hours. Woodruff had a game warden make a mock arrest of Eisenhower and then released him on the grounds that such marksmanship was impossible

One of the most picturesque traditions of quail shooting outings in the Thomasville area is the sturdy Georgia shooting wagon. It is indigenous to the area and is an unique vehicle which had its origins in Thomasville around the 1880's or 1890's. The vehicle combined the sturdiness of an old Springfield wagon with the grace of a phaeton. There are usually a dozen of these wagons seen at the Field Trials along with over a 100 modern-day jeeps. They were made very

durable in order to cross stumps, roots, logs and brush. The first models were made by the Studebaker Company of Indiana. There were places for a driver in the front seat and two riders in the next seat. On the back was an iron cage capable of holding about 10 dogs complete with their water tank. There was also a well padded compartment for the storage and protection of the guns. It was common to drive up to 12 miles to the shoot each way, sometimes covering 30 miles in one outing. A pair of two fast mules expedited the long drive.

The biggest annual event in Thomasville is the Georgia-Florida Field Trials which takes place each February. In 1916 a group of wealthy northern sportsmen founded the Georgia-Florida Field Trial Club. The event is exclusive to plantation owners from the Tallahassee, Thomasville and Albany region and their designated guests. The event rotates to different local plantations. The Thompson's Sunny Hill Plantation and the Whitney's Foshalee are the most popular venues. The field trials begin early in the morning and take four hours. There are 16 entries for dogs, and the heats are 30 minutes each. At noon there is a large picnic, followed by short business meetings, and the election of next year's officers. In the afternoon the winners of the field trials are announced.

Field trials promote the development of high class bird dogs. To measure up to field trial standards a bird dog must possess speed, range and style. The ideal bird dog is a polished product: a high class, thoroughly broken performer that creates constant admiration by the excellence of his work. The field trials combine outdoors,

camaraderie amongst sportsmen, and a great quail hunting tradition.

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