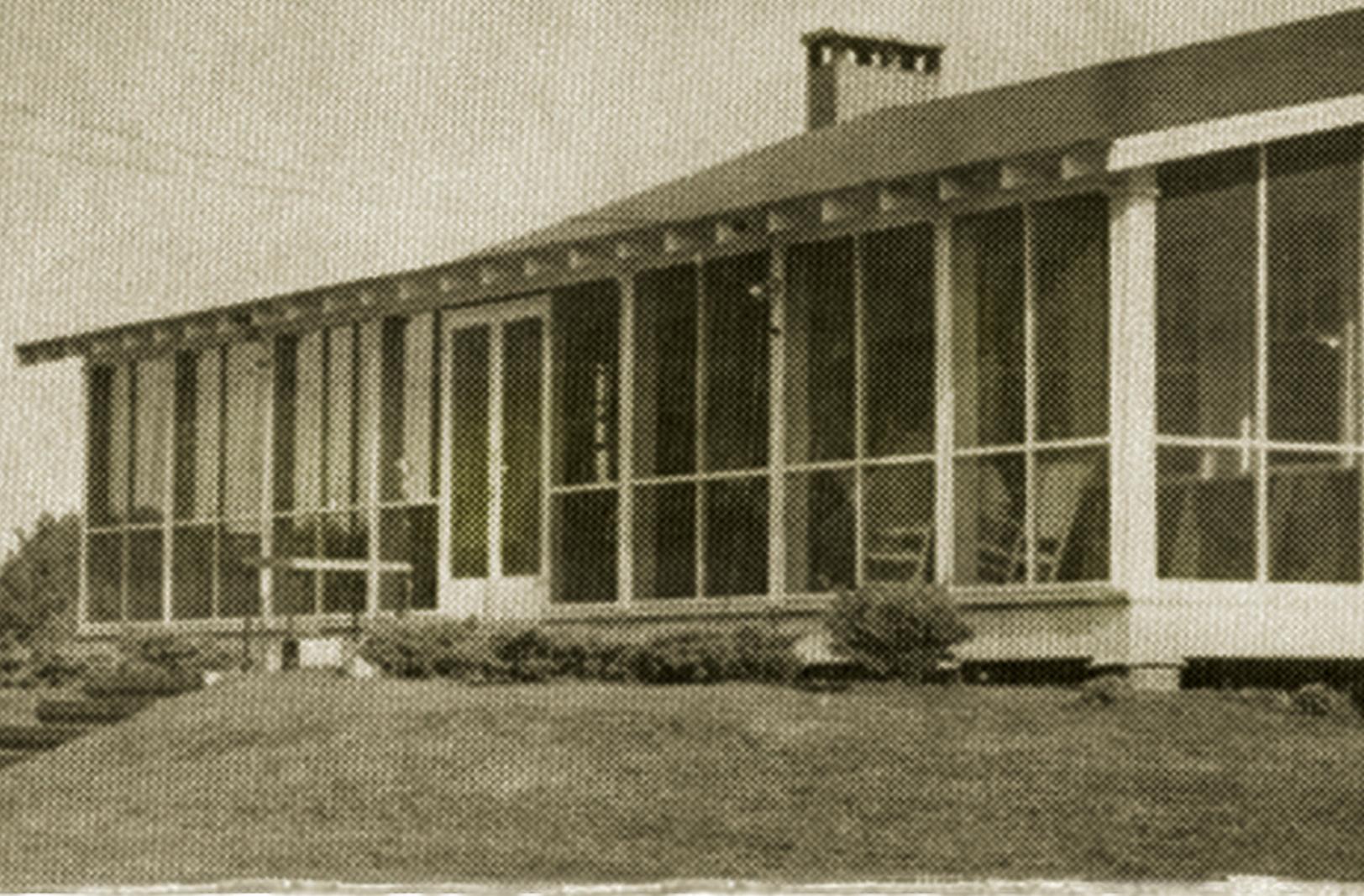


Westervelt Lodge

A Legacy of Tradition

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In Pickens County, Alabama, November 30th, 1951 dawned a brisk post-Thanksgiving morning along the steep, sandy banks of the Tombigbee River. Around 6:30 that morning, the sun was breaking on the horizon as a modest group of seventy-eight deer hunters and “drivers” eagerly gathered around the old mule barn on Ingram Spur road to organize a deer drive on a newly-acquired, massive property, known locally as the “Ingram-Day Tract.” Hunters loaded into several stake-bed farm trucks, which eased along the

dim, woods roads, stopping every two hundred yards to drop off men with shotguns cradled in their arms and buckshot stuffed in their pockets. Six deer hounds were standing ready for release at different spots, with the morning chill showing itself in their every exhale. Soon, the still air was filled with the cries of the hounds hot on the trail; the whoops and calls of wood-savvy “drivers” and those waiting for the glimpse of a fine buck silently slipping ahead of the organized drive echoed through the forest. It was a morning

Westervelt Lodge 1957



to remember, with three mature bucks taken during the drive. The first deer killed was a fine buck which fell to V.M. Cooper of Aliceville. J.T. Burroughs took the second buck of the morning, and Frank Prewitt brought down the largest buck of the day, a 225 pound 8 point. This first hunt would be the beginning of many lifelong memories created on one of Alabama's most well-known sporting properties, Westervelt Lodge.

When this property was purchased, it had been ravaged by the





The gamepole was full from the mornings hunt, as a tradition the meat would be distributed among every hunter.

struggles of those trying to survive The Great Depression. In addition, the last gasp of sharecropping and tenant farming in West Alabama had left its mark on the land. Virtually every stick of merchantable timber had been removed and Mother Nature had quickly begun to take back the fields which had fallen fallow as soon as the plows disappeared. Gulf States Paper Corporation (now known as The Westervelt Company) was the new owner of this sprawling, ten-thousand acre property that hugged the Tombigbee River bank for over nine miles. During the evaluation process for this new acquisition, company foresters were unable to calculate a “timber site index” to determine the soil’s potential for growing quality timber, because no trees large enough to measure were in existence anywhere on the property. Consequently, the “cotton site” index had to be used and the new owners hoped that good cotton land would, in time, become good timberland. This new tract was promptly named the “Westervelt Game Reserve,” to honor the founder of the company, Herbert Westervelt.

Over the next five years, the organized drive hunts increased to five per year. A mix of company employees, customers, guests, pulpwooders and local landowners were invited to each drive by written invitation. Each hunt was organized by a traditional huntmaster tasked with explaining the rules to the hunters, who then drew for stands and loaded up into large trucks. At the end of each hunt, an actual, local sitting judge would hold a “kangaroo court” and oversee penalties given to those in violation of the rules - normally some good natured swats with a long paddle in front of the chuckling crowd. Once, the judge ordered a paddling for a corporate accountant who showed up late for that mornings hunt and was still dressed in his business suit. The judge announced over his microphone that failure to wear proper hunting attire would not be tolerated and the paddle would be a good reminder not to forget

that in the future. As time went on, these organized hunts continued to grow in popularity, and larger crowds were invited. Additionally, the number of deer hounds required for these hunts grew to 75-90. Above the high-water mark, a small lodge was constructed, which would accommodate 125 people for the hearty barbeque lunch served after each hunt. This building remains the centerpiece of the lodge today.

Due to increased interest in hunting and wildlife management, the company hired Ray Redmond as Chief of Gulf State Paper’s Wildlife Management Program in 1956. Ray is credited as the first graduate wildlife biologist hired by a southern forest industry company. He worked diligently, trapping deer in the thick river bottoms to restock them in the upland areas across west Alabama where they had been depleted. Wild turkeys were also dwindling in the area around Westervelt Lodge; Ray reestablished the population in this location, where they have since flourished. During the 1960’s, Gulf State’s wildlife program rapidly expanded. A hunting permit system was implemented on the other 300,000 acres of Alabama timberlands owned by the company. The revenue generated from that program funded the Wildlife Department which grew significantly during this time period. Hunts at Westervelt Lodge continued to increase in popularity and attendance, and, in 1966, an archery hunt was offered for the first time. A total of 32 hunters qualified for the hunt, which required hitting an 18” diameter target in 2 out of 3 shots at 30 yards. During that bow hunt, 232 deer were sighted, 27 shots were taken, and one deer was killed. The challenge of hunting deer with a true primitive weapon was evident, and bow hunting became an established activity at the lodge.

After 17 years of working tirelessly to develop quality wildlife habitats and a healthy forest, Ray Redmond retired in 1973. Sadly, he passed away shortly after his retirement, but his good reputation



The “post hunt kangaroo court” would address any rules that had been broken.

and legendary legacy still live on in all the people he mentored and influenced many years ago. He is recognized as the founding father of the Westervelt Wildlife Management Program, which is known and respected across the country today.

In 1973, a decision was made to open the lodge to paying guests and become the first commercial hunting lodge to open for business in Alabama. The facility was expanded, adding ten bedrooms to accommodate these guests. Additionally, skeet and trap fields and a rifle range were installed, providing a variety of activities. J. Wayne Fears was the new leader of Gulf State’s Wildlife Program, and he was tasked with launching the new “Westervelt Lodge.” With the now thriving populations of white-tailed deer and wild turkeys, the timing was perfect. Top outdoor writers from around the country were frequent visitors and published many articles promoting the fine hunting found here in magazines like Pertersen’s Hunting, Field & Stream, Outdoor Life, and Sports Afield. In 1975, W. Fred Bear, the father of modern archery hunting, offered a bow hunting school at Westervelt to teach new hunters archery hunting techniques with hands on experience, including actual hunts. The same concept around wild turkey hunting was added in 1977, with Ben Rogers Lee leading our wild turkey hunting school. The turkey hunting school



Mature bucks on Westervelt have always been “wall hangers”.

is still very popular and continues over forty years later, with the help of noted author Col. Tom Kelly until 2014 and currently led by World Champion turkey caller Eddie Salter.

Over the next twenty years, customer interest in harvesting quality bucks and improvements to their hunting experience increased. During the early 1990s, big changes were made to the Deer Management Program, improving customer service and hunter management. Under the direction of then Wildlife Department Manager, John Roboski, the number of deer hunters per season was cut in half to reduce hunting pressure. A slot limit was also implemented to allow the majority of the bucks on the property to reach a mature age class before harvest. Customers would also now enjoy a private bedroom while staying at the lodge, and comfortable SUV’s were used to take hunters out to their stands instead of a rough ride in the back of a truck. The customers responded by eagerly filling up the limited available space.

Today, with another twenty years under our belt, Westervelt Lodge will soon celebrate 68 years of hosting hunters seeking a quality outdoor experience. Although major changes have been made along the way, the understanding of what makes Westervelt Lodge a special place to the six decades of visitors has remained constant. 🌲

Westervelt Lodge 2019

