



became acquainted with Smith, who was part owner of a wildlife management company.

"I think it was all of those long nights drinking over here," Mary Elizabeth chuckled. "I think Bill was feeling guilty about how much it was costing."

Cottonwoods releases all of its quail before the hunting season. It's an expensive practice but one that gives hunters the feel of hunting wild birds. It also keeps hunting pressure down with a maximum of eight hunters in the lodge at anytime. The lodge doesn't mix parties. At \$500 per hunter per day with a two-hunter minimum, the booking party has the lodge to themselves, meals and drinks included.

Westervelt Lodge near Aliceville has also lowered its volume recently, from a maximum of 22 hunters to 14. It traveled a long road to its present state as a luxury lodge.

The living area once served as a living and sleeping area and the current dining area was once the kitchen. Westervelt's manager, Kevin McKinstry, said the old cots hunters once slept on are still gathering dust above the living area.

The lodge served as Gulf States Paper's hunting lodge in a day when hunters expected fewer amenities. Company employees, customers and adjoining landowners gathered in the 1950s and '60s for massive organized deer drives. And back then, it was more of a hunting camp.

When the lodge, which features deer, turkey and bird hunting, went commercial in 1974, the company built two wings of bedrooms. But with its tongue-and-groove pine paneling and Lazy Susans on the dining tables, Westervelt tried to maintain at least the feel of a hunting camp.

"We call it rustic elegance," McKinstry said. "With the overall feel and appeal of all that Southern pine and leather, I think it just drips of Southern hunting tradition."

The lodge thrives on repeat business and surveys its customers extensively. Customers like the feel of the lodge, so it has tried to maintain the ambience while modernizing. At one point, Westervelt employees were concerned that changing attitudes toward food might mean a shift away from its menu of traditional Southern home cooking. But customers said not to fix what wasn't broken. For years, two hunters shared a room as in traditional hunting camps. About five years ago, that changed, and all hunters have private bedrooms and baths.



The ample bar area at Cottonwoods continues the outdoors theme, with mounted game and natural materials, top left. A mounted turkey and deer top, decorate the wall of the dining area at the Westervelt hunting lodge. The entrance to the Westervelt lodge, above, features older architecture, hardwood floors and decorative game on the walls and tables.

"Private rooms and private bathrooms are the kind of things the clientele expects," McKinstry said. "They're not looking for a camp where you share a bedroom and wait on the bathroom."

Interestingly, McKinstry said the lodge is serving pretty much the same kind of customers it was 20 years ago.

"The clientele hasn't changed, but I think people's expectations have," McKinstry said. "Twenty years ago, people didn't want to come down there and check their e-mail. If Alabama's playing UCLA on cable television, people expect to see it."

But some things never change. The lodge's setting among tall pine trees gives it a look of seclusion. Hunters still value that.

"Some people do enjoy the fact that cell phone coverage is so poor down there," he said with a laugh.

Losing touch with the outside world, at least for a while, is all part of roughing it. 🌲