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# The Amazing Legacy of St. Joe Land

By: Julie Strauss Bettinger

*Buy land. They've  
stopped making it.*

- Mark Twain



Generations of hunters have benefited from the bounty offered by St. Joe Land. Turkey, deer and quail hunting are Northwest Florida favorites.

Many long-time residents in North Florida remember St. Joe as a paper company that owned a lot of timberland.

Its boundary markers and private property signs were so much a part of the landscape, locals gave the company little thought.

As recent as the early 1990s, small developers were known to tout the value of their own property because of its proximity to St. Joe land.

Pointing to a map, colored to designate large swaths of real estate, they'd tell prospective buyers, "That's owned by St. Joe, and it's been there forever." The implication was clear - you're practically guaranteed a buffer, since St. Joe's primary purpose was growing trees to feed the insatiable appetite of its paper mill.

People who were raised in Northwest Florida grew accustomed to the life cycle of timbering St. Joe property. The vast forests,

consisting of tall pines lined up in neatly planted rows, would suddenly be filled with smoke - as St. Joe burned the underbrush to provide nourishment and prevent runaway forest fires.

One year, there would be logging trucks and a few weeks later the forest would be a bit thinner from the one-third cut; the trees hauled away for pulping and papermaking. Another 10 years or so, after the increased sunshine and mother nature worked its magic, there would be another cut - this time providing a medium grade wood, about 50% for pulp and the rest reserved for trim work.

Nearing the 30-year mark, neighboring residents might see clear cutting - as the company harvested plywood grade lumber, which traditionally attracted the highest prices available in the life of a forest.

Within a year, pine seedlings would dot the landscape, as the cycle was started all over again.

## Protected Play Spaces

In the interim, of course, the St. Joe property was like a vast playground for outdoor enthusiasts. Generations of hunters ate off the land, enjoying turkey, deer and quail hunting in fall and winter.

In the heat of summer, teenagers piled in four-wheel drive trucks, breezed past the no trespassing signs, and braved the sandy silva culture roads to go swimming in the lakes and springs dotting St. Joe forests.

Recreational outings by extended families make up the legacy of St. Joe land.

## How the Property Came to Be

The story of how The St. Joe Company went on to become one of Florida's largest landowners is the stuff that legends are made of.

Soon after they arrived in 1926, Alfred I. duPont and his brother-in-law, Ed Ball, snapped up thousands of acres of Panhandle wilderness for as little as \$2 to \$3 an acre. A



If you have roots in Northwest Florida, chances are that you have roots in St. Joe land. The company owns more than 900,000 acres here (indicated by yellow tracts). With St. Joe's transformation into a real estate developer, property that was untouchable during a 50-year time span is being offered for sale.



new chemical process had made it feasible to use low-grade southern slash pines to make paper, and enormous quantities of timber were needed. The potential wasn't lost on duPont, an astute businessman and ardent philanthropist.

His plan for Florida can be summed up in a statement he made on arrival to the Sunshine State: "Our business undertakings should be sound, but our primary object should not be the making of money. Through helpful works, let us build up good in this state and make it a better place in which to live. In my last years I would much rather have the people of Florida say that I helped them and their state than to double the money I now have."

A descendent of the Delaware family that founded the DuPont Company, duPont dreamed of creating a papermaking company with revenues benefiting mankind. He continued to acquire vast landholdings, including hundreds of miles of coastal and

near-coast property.

Unfortunately, he was never to see the plan come to fruition. Still, 10 years after his death, trustees of the estate formed a new company to carry out his dream, and the St. Joe Paper Company was born. Today as publicly held corporation, profits from St. Joe continue to benefit children with disabilities through the Nemours Foundation, which was also created upon duPont's death in 1935, as provided in his will.

Over the years, St. Joe added other lines to its core business, including railroads, banks, a sugar company, a communications company and corrugated box factories. All the while, huge tracts of land continued to be added to the company's portfolio to grow trees and provide pulp for paper products.

### New Directions

St. Joe continued operating mostly in the railroad and paper businesses until the mid- 1990s, when shareholders turned their

attention toward unlocking the value of the company's assets - including miles of Gulf, river, canal and lake frontage - through real estate development. In 1997, Peter S. Rummell, a former Disney executive, was recruited to carry out the plan for what became The St. Joe Company.

With this monumental shift in direction, property owners in Northwest Florida were stirred from their slumber. When the community development powerhouse Arvida was brought into the company, they really perked up.

Suddenly it became clear that property that had been untouchable before might be offered for sale.

Acquisitions of various other real estate companies followed St. Joe's Arvida purchase. Under Rummell's direction, the company also developed a strong commercial arm and acquired numerous commercial real estate firms under the name Advantis Commercial Real Estate Services Company.

The St. Joe Company of today has five individual business units under one umbrella, and numerous other divisions to carry out its plan of place making in Northwest Florida.

Today, driving through communities from Tallahassee to Ft. Walton Beach, you'll see The St. Joe Company "blue bird" on signs for everything from prime commercial real estate for sale (under the name Advantis), to residential communities (Arvida).

### Woods and Water

Though most of The St. Joe Company's visibility has come from its community and commercial developments near the coast, what lies in the hinterland may be the most intriguing part of its story.

So what exactly are the plans for all of those pine forests, those marshy areas next to the bays, the pond-dotted pasturelands and hill country?

That's the primary purpose of one of the company's business units - St. Joe Land - i.e., determining the highest and best use of a large portion of approximately 900,000 acres concentrated in Northwest Florida, and passing it along for sale to the next generation.

The amount of property is baffling to some. Clustered together, the company's landholdings would be larger than the state of Delaware.

### Stewards of the Land

Demonstrating its commitment to preserving the character of Northwest Florida, The St. Joe Land Company hired many north Florida natives and charged them with making the

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Armed with its own mapping division, on-staff architects, land planners and general contractors, St. Joe Land Company is carving out tracts for farms, hunting preserves and riverfront lots from Northwest Florida's waterfront parcels and wildlife-rich sanctuaries.



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most of St. Joe's landholdings.

Armed with its own mapping division, on-staff architects, land planners and general contractors, the company is carving out tracts for farms, hunting preserves and riverfront lots from these waterfront parcels and wildlife-rich sanctuaries.

As tracts become available for sale, they are marketed on the company's website ([www.stjoeland.com](http://www.stjoeland.com)). Brokers from a sister company, Advantis, handle sales, and St. Joe Land has established its own financing division to manage the intricacies of large acreage purchases.

St. Joe Land Company continues to work closely with St. Joe Timberland and its Conservation Lands division, which is led by some of the state's most committed land preservation professionals.

### **Conservation Still Key**

Through efforts of its business units working together, The St. Joe Company is able to respond to requests from conservation interests - including the state - to purchase and preserve gems for public enjoyment.

Since the company moved from paper milling to real estate, news of land acquisitions for conservation and preservation have increased - nonprofits and the state of Florida have been pleasantly surprised by the receptiveness of their offers.

Through The St. Joe Company, state parks in Northwest Florida have expanded, preserving many of the same playgrounds that Floridians have enjoyed for the past 50 years when it was under private ownership.

Open spaces are also incorporated into many of St. Joe Land Company's featured properties - segregated tracts sold for hunting plantations, private retreats and timberland. And the truly spectacular properties - those bordered by water - are being reserved for a new kind of real estate creation called RiverCamps ([www.rivercamps.com](http://www.rivercamps.com)).

Yes, it's true. The St. Joe Company is now in the real estate business and while some decry the demise of untouched forests, others are celebrating access and preservation. They're happy to have the opportunity to reserve their own place in history - by owning a piece of St. Joe land. ■

*Writer Julie Strauss Bettinger is a native of Northwest Florida and among those who have enjoyed the recreation offered by St. Joe land. To find out more about St. Joe Land call 1-866-JOE-LAND or visit [www.stjoeland.com/fc](http://www.stjoeland.com/fc).*