

Greener Grasses

How Pursell Farms went from the fertilizer business to a high-class golf, sporting, and relaxation destination.

by Jeff Book

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PURSELL FARMS

OPPOSITE PAGE: The scenic vista above Hole 5 on the golf course is a beautiful place to watch the sunset. **BELOW:** Parker Lodge, overlooking Hole 17, offers lodging for larger groups. Longhorns roam the sprawling property. Hunters try out their luck on the stands at The Orvis Shooting Ground.



DAVID PURSELL HAS ALWAYS taken a creative approach to commerce. The Auburn grad majored in commercial art, not business. In the early 1980s, he designed an emblem for his family's Sta-Green fertilizer brand, with a comical cow and the slogan "The Connoisseurs of Manures." Two decades later, he built the world's first research-and-demonstration golf course on the family farm, in a high-stakes (and ultimately successful) bid to grow sales. In 2006, the century-old business sold for a premium. Since then the Pursell Farms CEO has been leading a major corporate transition: from fertilizer to fun.

The family's sprawling property near Sylacauga, less than an hour southeast of Birmingham, has augmented its acclaimed FarmLinks course with enhanced dining and lodging experiences, a spa, and a full-bore Orvis sporting facility, complete with a retail store, sporting-clays course, shooting, and fly-fishing. On the way: a new wedding venue, 40-room boutique hotel, restaurant, bar, and pool. "Alabama doesn't have a great destination resort," David Pursell says. "That's what we want Pursell Farms to be."

When he wasn't expanding the fertilizer business, family patriarch Jimmy Pursell (David Pursell's father, now in his 80s) collected land the way some men collect stamps. Beginning in 1975, he assembled 3,200 acres in the far-south foothills of the Appalachians. The Piedmont tapestry of wooded hills, wetlands, meadows, lakes, and springs embodies the unofficial state motto: Alabama the Beautiful. The biggest spring supplies all the water needed to irrigate the golf course. It also supplies the large water hazard that gives Hole 17 its name: Big Gulp.

A HISTORIC COURSE

The property has a rich history. Historic routes cross it, from Indian trails to what was the Eureka Railroad, which carried timber as well as marble from Sylacauga's vast white vein. Andrew Jackson marched through with the likes of Davy Crockett and Sam Houston, en route to fight the Creek Indians at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend and the British at the Battle of New Orleans. Hernando de Soto arrived in

1540 while following the Coosa River in his quixotic quest for El Dorado. He likely made camp a chip shot from Hole 9, where mysterious mounds are said to be earthworks his men raised for protection. Remnants of moonshine stills can be found in the woods near Hole 6, known as Bootlegger.

The farm's most prominent artifact is Hamilton Place, a handsome Greek Revival house built in 1852. You'd never guess that when the Pursells acquired it, it was just a tin-roofed wreck, used to store hay, with cows sheltered in the basement. Jimmy and his wife, Chris, restored the house with great effort, and made it their home for thirty years. With its high ceilings, 12-foot-wide dogtrot center hall, and vintage décor, Hamilton Place is now a charming setting and popular backdrop for weddings.

The family business began in 1904 as the Sylacauga Fertilizer Company. "My great-grandfather would mix up anything organic—manure, guano, fishmeal—and sell it to local farmers," David says. The company was fortunate to be in Alabama, where the development of modern chemical fertilizers has deep roots. During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson ordered the construction of two nitrate plants in Muscle Shoals, to be powered by the hydroelectric dam later named after him.

Nitrates were needed to produce munitions; after the war they were repurposed to make nitrogen-rich fertilizer. Converted from swords to plowshares, the plants became the proving ground for the Tennessee Valley Authority's National Fertilizer Development

Center, the world's largest fertilizer research program. Originally meant to help Southerners farm depleted soil, the program ultimately helped increase food production in hungry nations everywhere. Thanks to the NFDC, by the 1970s—when the fabled Muscle Shoals recording studios were cranking out hit after hit—the area had more chemical engineers than anywhere else on earth.

The Pursells' fertilizer company happened to be the closest one to Muscle Shoals, which became a competitive advantage. Jimmy Pursell was able to test new products ahead of the pack. When the NFDC developed sulfur-coated urea, the company was quick to adopt it. The coating slowed the fertilizer's absorption, reducing both waste and environmental runoff. This early controlled-release fertilizer, and the Sylacauga plant built to make it, greatly increased the size and reach of the family business.

FERTILIZING BUSINESS GROWTH

The first instance of what became a key concept—hosting customer visits—happened not long after the plant opened in 1985. Representatives from retail giant Lowe's flew to Sylacauga on a company plane and received briefings on Pursell fertilizer along with a large helping of Southern hospitality. The resulting order absorbed 40% of the new plant's capacity.

In the late 1980s, Jimmy Pursell acquired the rights to a superior new technology that coated fertilizer with polymers. Allowing for the thickness of the coating to vary both widely and precisely, the process—given the futuristic-sounding name POLYON—meant that fertilizer could be designed for optimal absorption for all kinds of plants and conditions. “With it, we could meet the exact nutritional needs of any plant in any geography in the world,” David says. It promised (to paraphrase the old DuPont slogan) better living through chemistry. And better, bigger profits for Pursell Industries.

In the 1990s, POLYON products powered a dramatic climb in annual sales, to around \$90 million. The company's consumer division, headed by Taylor Pursell (David's brother), sold fertilizer to Lowe's and other retailers; the technology division sold to other fertilizer companies, nurseries, and, especially, golf courses, around the country. POLYON fertilizer cost more, but was more effective and required fewer applications. But to gain market share, the company would have to educate buyers about the product's superiority.

“Instead of sending a huge team of salespeople all over the nation to convince buyers, we started

bringing them to Sylacauga for what I call relationship marketing,” David says. Invitees included salespeople for two much bigger companies selling POLYON fertilizer east and west of the Mississippi. But most often, they were golf course superintendents, who'd arrive a few times a year in groups of six (the number the farm guesthouse could accommodate). They'd play golf on an area course, enjoy sociable meals, and along the way learn the advantages of POLYON. It was proof of concept for what would become a much more ambitious program.

In 1997, the consumer group was spun off in a leveraged buyout to CitiCorp's private equity arm. David became president and CEO of the remaining group, renamed Pursell Technologies, Inc. It was then that he decided to pursue his next big idea, a radical marketing strategy. “My dad said, ‘What—you want to build a golf course on our family farm?’” he recalls. The country was in the middle of a golf boom, building 300-plus new courses a year, often to entice home-buyers. Pursell's vision was to create a research-and-demonstration golf course—an eighteen-hole fertilizer show-place, with more than 30 varieties of grass. The course would cost a huge amount to build and maintain, and the return on investment was far from certain. “It wasn't a matter of ‘if you build it, they will come,’” David admits. “It was, ‘if you build it, will they come?’”

He hired course architects Michael Hurdzan and Dana Fry—known for environmentally-sensitive designs such as Erin Hills in Wisconsin, which will host the 2017 U.S. Open. In the summer of 2001, the work of clearing and sculpting the land began. Then came the world-shaking attacks of 9/11. In the anxious aftermath, family members had what Pursell calls “a come-to-Jesus meeting.” They debated whether to cancel the project. “The consensus was, we ain't gonna let a bunch of terrorists change the way we do business,” David says.

Construction proceeded. “The course was designed to impress industry professionals, not potential home-buyers or members,” he says. “Because we had so much acreage, the designers didn't have to compromise,” he notes. “They could move the holes around to preserve certain areas and viewsheds.” Prime example: Hole 18, a huge fairway set amid 250 acres of grassy fields and wooded hills (three times as much area as many courses have for all 18 holes). The company also upgraded accommodations, building the spacious Parker Lodge and a clubhouse with a restaurant and pro shop.

David knew that his target buyers—golf course superintendents, the ultimate grass nerds—were slow

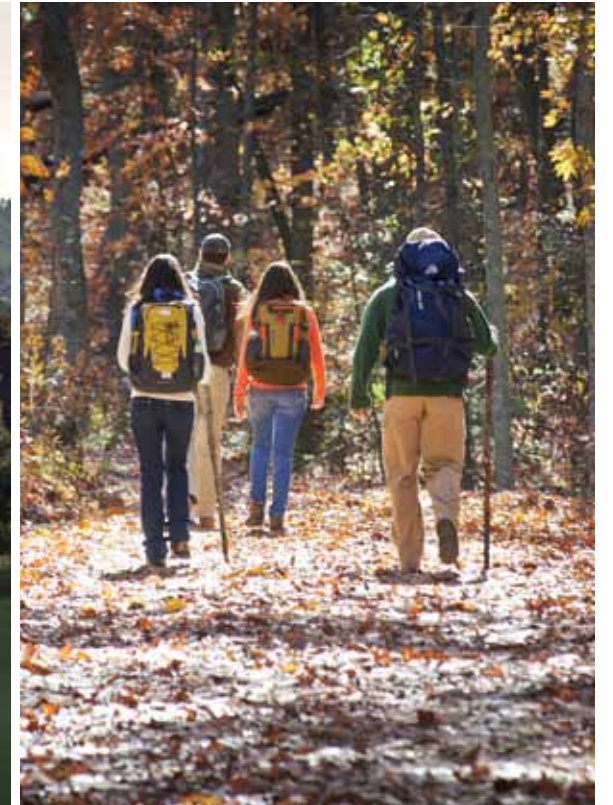


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OPPOSITE PAGE: Hunting dogs on the search during dove season on the property. THIS PAGE: The 18th hole looking towards the Clubhouse.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The 18th hole offers a dramatic view. Hikers on the path to "The Secret Spot," the highest point on the property—great for a vantage point of Lay Lake and the surrounding countryside. The theatre offers large meeting spaces for businesses to hold meetings and retreats. The property offers scenic views of Lake Christine. An interior of one of four bedroom cabins available on Founders Row.



to change to new products. "Our fertilizer was better, but most of them didn't know that," he explains. "We could have made sales calls for years and converted a few. Instead, we created an experience that demonstrated the benefits."

A HOLE IN ONE

Once the facilities were ready, "The Experience at FarmLinks" went live. As before, it mixed R&D with R&R. Twice a week, the company would bring in groups of about twenty visitors, for a 48-hour program. "For the first day, we'd have them just play golf, eat good meals, and bring their blood pressure down," David says. "After that we'd show them the plant, which was neat as a pin, and introduce them to some really smart people in our R&D labs. Then we'd take them out to our living lab—the golf course—where they could see the products in action." This was not just a manicured test bed, but an actual public course repeatedly named one of the state's best by Golfweek.

Pursell added an exhibition hall where golf industry pros could get exposed to new products and practices. "In the end users liked it because they were learning about more than fertilizer," he explains. "They got

to see what was about to be introduced, what was coming down the pipe." Not by chance, each group included at least one person who was already a user and fan of Pursell's POLYON fertilizers. The visitors also served as focus groups, rating products and suggesting improvements.

For golf course superintendents, an invitation to FarmLinks was the equivalent of a golden ticket from Willy Wonka. Over the years, the Pursells brought in more than 10,000 of them from top courses, from as far away as Japan and Australia. "The word of mouth on it was great," says Tim Spanjer, marketing director of Pursell Farms. "After a while, everyone wanted to participate." The supers got to compare best practices with their fellow course coddlers. They left with a strong sense that the more costly POLYON fertilizer was a bargain compared to fertilizers that needed to be applied three times more often. Almost all converted to using it. And in a short time, Pursell Technologies went from No. 6 to No. 1 in sales of controlled-release fertilizer.

David's gamble had paid off—especially in 2006, when Canadian multinational Agrium bought the fertilizer operation for a near-nine-figure price. The sale proved to be very well timed. After the financial

meltdown of 2008, it became clear that the golf boom was over. In recent years, more courses have closed than opened. "The country overbuilt for the number of golfers, which is declining," David says. "Now we're in the hospitality business. We have to give people more reasons to come here and attract more different kinds of people."

Since 2008, the reasons have been mounting. The company added cabins and cottages. It hired executive chef Andrea Griffith, who previously earned kudos at two noted resorts, The Greenbrier in West Virginia and Primland in Virginia. Aiding her strong farm-to-fork focus are the property's two-acre farm plot and chicken, pigs, and cattle (no, not the longhorns along the entrance road—they're just for show). "We do in-cabin chef dinners, hands-on cooking classes, custom menus," she says. "We like to personalize the experience."

Orvis (founded in 1856) had been looking for a Southern outpost for some time; partnering with another old, family-owned company felt right to both parties. The rod-and-gun component at Pursell Farms is only the second Orvis owned-and-operated sporting facility anywhere. Members here have reciprocal privileges at the other



in upstate New York's historic Sandanona. They also have exclusive access to upland bird hunting (quail, duck, dove, and pheasant) at Pursell Farms. Both Orvis members and Pursell Farms guests can fish two seven-acre lakes where bass are plentiful. The sporting-clays course, hunting and fly-fishing instruction, and Orvis pro shop all are open to the public.

FarmLinks compares favorably to the state's Robert Trent Jones courses for playability (though the 72-par course offers ample challenge from the toughest tee markers). But David—joined by the next (fourth) generation of his family—intends to more than match the dining and lodging options on the RTJ Golf Trail. He'd like Pursell Farms to play in the same league as Tennessee's top-rated Blackberry Farm, and with a number of new editions, the farm is well on its way. A spa recently opened in the original farm guesthouse. In early March 2017, a new wedding venue next to Hamilton Place will be ready (he wants Pursell Farms to be "the Augusta National of wedding venues"). A 40-room boutique hotel with a fine-dining restaurant, gastropub, and swimming pool will open next summer.

"This is a reflection of our family—we want our guests to be thrilled to be here," David says. "I'm an Auburn fan, but I admire Nick Saban because he's always striving for perfection. We have to be at the top of our game all the time." If he has his way, Pursell Farms will draw discerning resort-lovers from near and far. "We're off the beaten path," says chef Griffith. "But once people come here and see it, they say it's a little piece of heaven." ■