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## In Florida, Big Developer Is Peddling Rural Chic

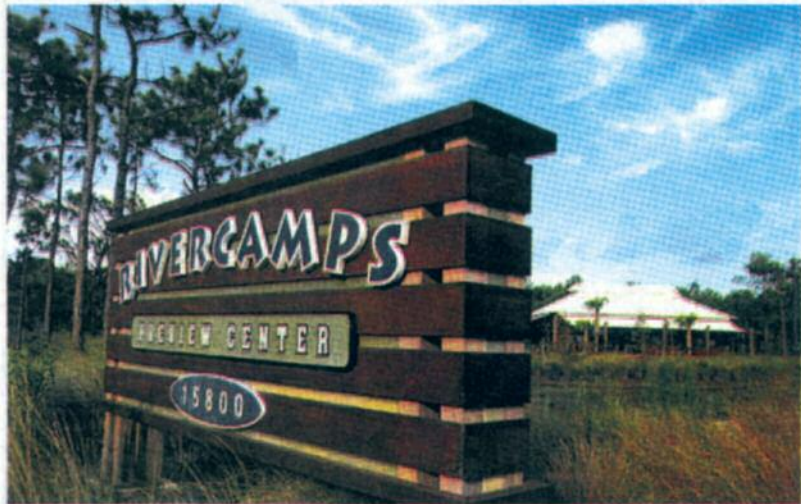
By **ABBY GOODNOUGH**

WEST BAY, Fla. — What is a striving Florida developer to do when most of its vast holdings are not beach chic but rural, remote and mosquitoey?

The St. Joe Company, which owns 800,000 mostly inland acres in the scrubby, unremarkable pine forests of the Panhandle, is invoking Thoreau.

The company, Florida's largest private landowner, is pushing "new ruralism," a concept it hopes will entice city and suburban dwellers who are weary of civilization and long to own a tractor, a pickup truck, or at least a kayak and a few large dogs.

At developments called RiverCamps, where "Cracker Modern" homes will sit on up to 4-acre lots near marshes, creeks and conservation areas, "camp masters" will tutor residents in bird watching and flats fishing and organize "owl prowls" and "star parties." At White-Fence Farms, on 5- to 20-acre lots near fields and ponds, "farmhands" will gas up an owner's tractor and help mow the meadow. A third cate-



Barbara P. Fernandez for The New York Times

RiverCamps, the first of three planned "new ruralism" developments by the St. Joe Company, offers two-acre lots for up to \$1 million.

gory, Florida Ranches, will have up to 150 acres and cater to hunters.

Recent sales of RiverCamps on Crooked Creek, the first project under way, average \$342,900 for the land alone. Projects farther inland will most likely cost far less per acre.

The idea is a corporate reinvention

of new urbanism, an antisprawl movement that advocates compact, old-fashioned towns where residents can commune in parks, shops and restaurants within walking distance of their homes. Instead of connecting

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# A Developer in Florida Aims for Rural Chic

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with neighbors, new ruralism promotes connecting with the land — though these cabins in the woods come with wireless Internet access and porches with screens that unfurl by remote control.

The target market is people 42 to 60 who, tired of coastal hurricane threats or the beach scene in general, want something more like Walden Pond or Walton's Mountain. Most are expected to use these ranches, camps and farms as second homes, though a surprising number of prospective buyers want full-time rusticity, St. Joe executives said.

Brainstorming sessions at St. Joe's headquarters in Jacksonville produced scraps of paper scrawled with phrases like "wind in the trees," "stars, no lights," and "slamming, squeaking screen doors." In June, the company published a white paper quoting Thoreau ("I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately") and defining new ruralism — a concept that developers elsewhere have also seized on — as rising with the sun, fishing with the tides and resting with the moon.

"People are trying to get back to a time they remember," said Peter S. Rummell, St. Joe's chairman and chief executive, who grew up in rural upstate New York and oversaw theme parks for the Walt Disney Company before moving to St. Joe in 1997. "A moderated ruralism seems pretty attractive."

It had better, if St. Joe is to succeed in the real estate business. The company's founder, Alfred I. duPont, bought huge tracts of land in the Panhandle in the 1930's, after which the company became a paper maker with banking and railroad interests.



Gulf County now has 15,200 residents; Liberty County has 7,300.

But the land was strictly for timber farming until the 1990's, when St. Joe sought to reinvigorate by switching to land development.

Though the company has been developing property ever since, about 99 percent of its holdings — as much as all the developed land between Miami and Fort Pierce — remain wild. It first focused on its 30 miles of Gulf of Mexico coastline, creating resort towns like WaterColor and SummerCamp with multimillion-dollar vacation homes. Making inland holdings attractive is far more complicated, requiring not just market research but a tricky makeover for land that has long been inhospitable.

"A big thick pine forest with a lot of undergrowth is a pretty forbidding place," Mr. Rummell said. "It scares a lot of people."

At RiverCamps on Crooked Creek, which is near Panama City Beach and offers two-acre lots for up to \$1 million, the overhaul involved thinning the forest and burning the thick underbrush so that softer, greener grasses would emerge. With the land reworked, a landscape architect identified 34 "environmental jewels" — Spider Lily Marsh and the like — and mapped them out for prospective buyers. Brochures promise homes in the "Cracker Modern" style: lots of wood, metal roofs, broad roof overhangs to block the sun and screened porches.

With construction yet to begin, 145 buyers, mostly from Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee and Texas, have closed on plots at RiverCamps on Crooked Creek, the first of three such developments.

"We honestly asked ourselves, 'Will people live in this environment?'" said Kevin Fox, the St. Joe executive overseeing RiverCamps. "We've got critters, we've got heat, we've got humidity."

More problematic is the isolation of St. Joe's land, most of which lies in the barely traveled region between Tallahassee and Panama City Beach. Gulf County, where St. Joe owns 230,000 acres, has but 15,200 residents, and Liberty County, where it owns 112,000 acres, has 7,300. A lot of St. Joe land surrounds the swampy Apalachicola National Forest and Tate's Hell State Forest, where a farmer named Tate supposedly got lost for days and emerged snakebiten and delirious. The company is lobbying to move and expand the small Panama City airport, while moving sections of a coastal highway inland, widening other roads and donating land for a new hospital.

Though St. Joe has worked to win over the counties its land is in, some residents and environmental advocates worry about the scope of its ambition and have fought some of its



Photographs by Barbara P. Fernandez for The New York Times

Builder's stakes, top, are going up in rural Florida as a developer tries to lure city dwellers looking for a change of pace. Homes, like the model at RiverCamps, above left, would have amenities like wireless Internet access, in a forest environment complete with wildlife, above right.

projects. Charles Pattison, executive director of 1000 Friends of Florida, a nonprofit environmental group, said St. Joe's latest plan "could be positive" but that the company must take pains not to force wildlife off the land and to add enough infrastructure.

"This is an area of the state that typically has one of the lowest population densities," Mr. Pattison said. "Issues like protection of habitat, hurricane evacuation routes and service provisions have got to be addressed."

At the first WhiteFence Farms site, southeast of Tallahassee, St. Joe is preparing 373 acres of former watermelon and peanut fields for "people who have always wanted to live on a farm but don't see themselves as farmers," Mr. Fox said. They must also be willing to pay \$20,000 to \$45,000 an acre for the land alone. The company is digging ponds and smoothing pastures for buyers it imagines dabbling in horse riding, beekeeping, wildflower growing and field plowing.

Deborah Dudley, a lawyer who is trading her home in nearby Rosemary Beach for one here at RiverCamps on Crooked Creek, said beach towns had grown too crowded with commercial distractions.

"You lose the whole basic feel of the land," Ms. Dudley said. "I don't want to use the word 'backwater,' that sounds too negative, but RiverCamps has this whole underpinning of past Florida — a rural history."

Ms. Dudley said she wanted to emulate Florida's early rural settlers,

known as crackers, who, wrote a British traveler in 1857, "lived among the pines, raised a few hogs and cows, grew a little patch of corn, and just barely survived." Yet Ms. Dudley said she also expected the comforts that cracker settlers sorely lacked.

"Absolutely I want that privacy and those woods," she said. "Yet at the same time, I want to be able to invite a neighbor over for a glass of wine and I want a nice kitchen with a Sub-Zero refrigerator."