

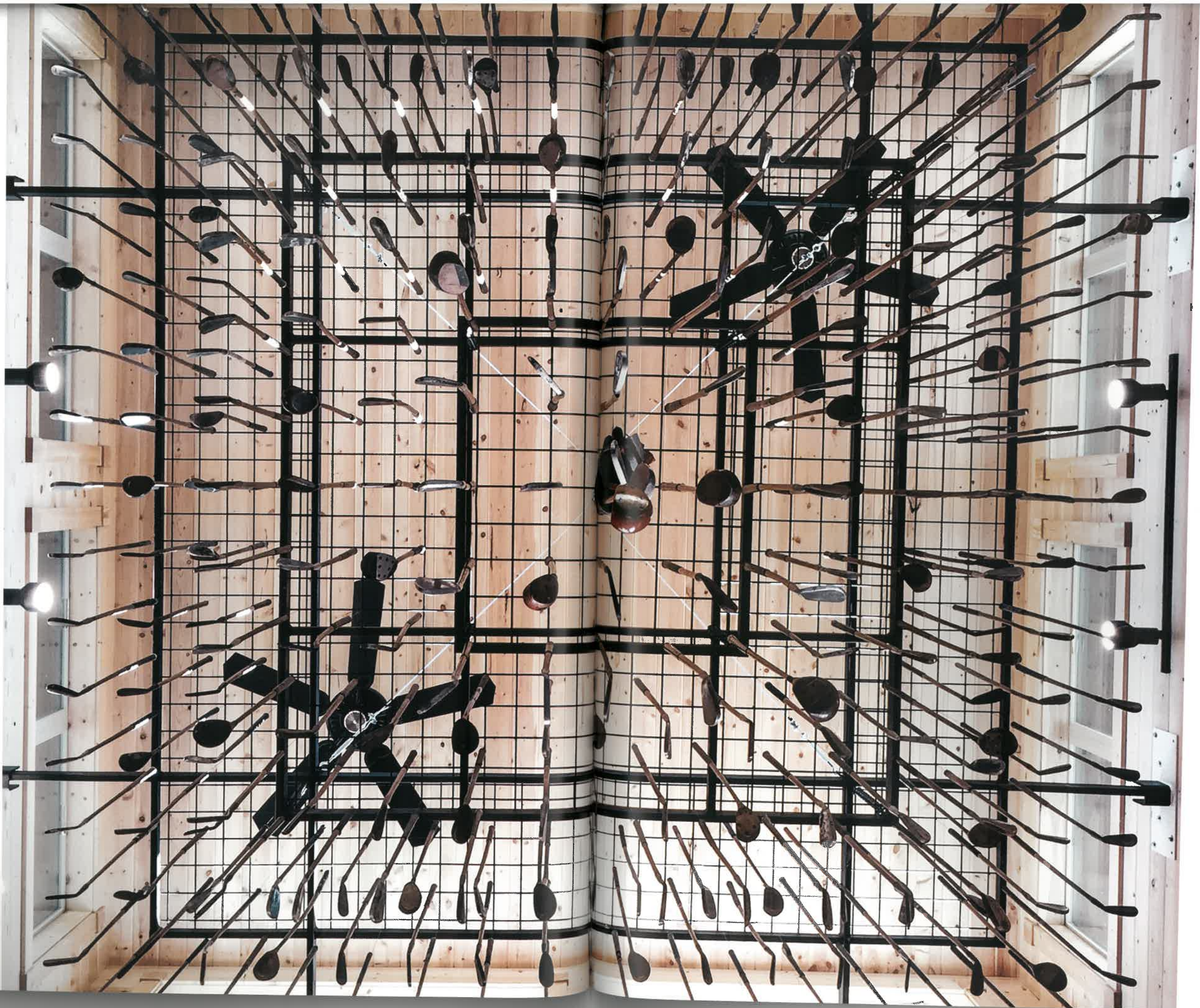
THE GOLFER'S JOURNAL

No.11



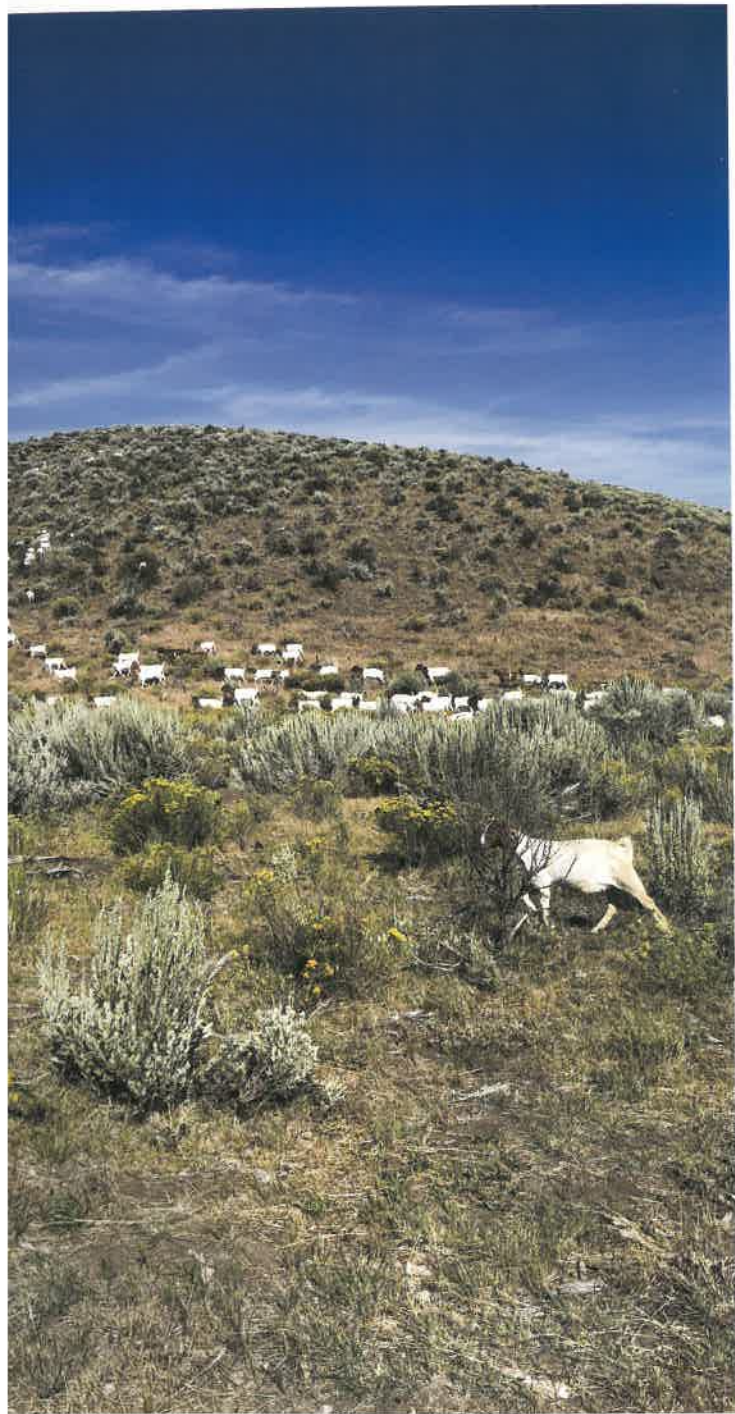
SPRING 2020

Redefining dinner conversatio
and what makes a great golf tri
at Silvie's Valley Ranch



DISPATCHES FROM THE NEW FRONTIER

Words by
D.J. PIEHOWSKI
Photos by
BRIAN OAR
(unless otherwise credited)



The Bandons and Cabots of the world may have Silvies outclassed in natural scenery and architect name recognition. But at each of those properties, with their high number of rounds and room nights, guests must be understandably held at something of an arm's length. When you're at Silvies, Scott, Sandy and Jeff Campbell pull you in and make you feel like part of the family. And, like most families, it starts at the dinner table.

The threat of stilted small talk lingered heavily as we approached our first dinner. You see, at Silvies there is nowhere to hide from it. Conversations with complete strangers are built into the design of the place. The bare-bones restaurant operation means that most meals—especially dinners—are served family style with the other guests. When we visited, on a stretch of weekday evenings during late summer, there were another 10 or so guests on property, so gathering the entire resort around one table felt more like an intimate dinner party than a middle-school assembly.

When the dinner bell rings (yes, it's an actual bell), guests file into the beautiful high-ceilinged dining room and musical-chairs themselves around a pair of long banquet tables. This is the only proper restaurant on site, and its hours are sharply fixed. In other words, if you miss the bell, you are what the frontiersmen of a bygone age would call "shit out of luck."

My travel companion, fellow No Laying Up compatriot Neil Schuster, and I found two seats near a cheerful-looking elderly couple on one end of a table and prepared to answer and reciprocate the standard, sleepy questions about jobs, siblings, weather and our current Netflix lineups. We were fresh off a pair of cross-country flights into Boise, Idaho, and a three-hour drive over gravel into the cell-service desert of eastern Oregon, during which we passed an actual building called the Bates Motel. Small talk with strangers did not sound appetizing to two weary travelers, but it wasn't long before we realized that Silvies demands a different mindset. It's most effective if you're willing to take a step back in time and strip away the distractions that made you take the trip in the first place.

Before the dinner-table conversations even reached the "So, where ya from?" stage, we were politely cut off by Jeff Campbell, Silvies' overqualified food-and-beverage director.

"Before we do anything here," he announced, "it's important that you all know a bit about the sourdough bread that's sitting in front of you." He or someone else from the resort gives this speech every single night, but it never seems to feel forced or rote.

While living in a house full of microbiologists in Palo Alto years ago, Jeff and the rest of the scientists became obsessed with the science of baking. "We started capturing wild yeast from different sources and trying out all these different breads with them," he told us. "In fact, I'm sure that there are many freezers at Stanford to this day that have archives of our sourdough cultures frozen away. That's just how scientists are. Once you have something that works, you need to make sure you don't lose it."

After Jeff's brother, Scott, and Scott's wife, Sandy, sold their veterinarian practice in 2007—the largest private practice in the country at the time—they purchased the expansive Silvies Valley Ranch, a working goat and cattle ranch that sits on a plot of land roughly the size of Chicago. While they were in the process of

This page: Photo by D.J. Pichowski



The Craddock and Hankins routings at Silvies connect, with Craddock's eighth (left) and Hankins' ninth fairways leading to the same green.

Jeff Campbell absolutely, positively does not need to be making sourdough seven days a week in a remote patch of land in eastern Oregon. He has a Ph.D. in immunology from Stanford University and spent years working in the Bay Area biotech scene. But as soon as he launched into an unforgettable history lesson on this particular loaf, my dinner companions and I were thankful he made the decision to stay. Campbell's passion is just one of the wonderful peculiarities of Silvies Valley Ranch, where the mundane things we take for granted back home become highlights of the experience.



The rolling topography makes for rollicking golf, including Hankins' downhill 18th (previous page), which offers guests the chance to win a flask of local rye by hitting the "longest drive of their life."



shaping part of the 140,000 acres into a luxury resort, the Campbells were trying to figure out who in a county of 7,000 residents would be capable of building a world-class food-and-beverage operation. After a brief stint at cooking school in Vermont, Jeff, the family baker, decided he was the person for the job.

He went on to explain that a good, spongy sourdough starter will stay alive and multiply in perpetuity as long as it's fed regularly with flour and water. The particular starter that Jeff uses at Silvie's has an intensely special meaning to the Campbell family. Jeff got it from Abel Diaz. Abel Diaz got it from Julio Urizar. Julio Urizar got it from Mildred Graves. Mildred Graves got it from her mother, and her mother got it from a Basque hermit out near Wagontire, Oregon, more than a hundred years ago. (In case you were curious how desolate Wagontire is, according to *The Oregonian*, its popula-

tion from 1986 to 1997 was two: William and Olgie Warner.)

"When we opened Silvie's Valley Ranch, [Diaz] said he'd give me some of his starter," Jeff explained. "But I had to remember where it came from. So that's what we do each night."

The bread is but one example of what makes Silvie's Valley Ranch different. Plenty of resorts use local myths and lore to spice up the guest experience. Very few do it without the patronizing stink of consultants or brand managers carefully "curating" an experience. At Silvie's, traditions seem to be in place because that's how the Campbells and the people of Harney County have always done things.

And I'm not a culinary expert, but let me tell you: It was the best goddamn bread I've ever had.

This is technically a golf story, and I promise we'll get there, but first we need to discuss the beavers. Because without the environmentally reckless actions of the Hudson's Bay Company in the 1820s, we're probably not playing golf in a far-flung Oregon plot some 200 years later.

The story is best told by Colby Marshall, the Silvie's general manager who is so much more than that. Marshall has been here since the beginning and his background is something to behold. When he first started at Silvie's, his job title was vice president of guest and livestock operations. His past lives include forest firefighter and congressional chief of staff, focused on conservation. He's part cowboy, part scientist, part hotelier and part encyclo-

pedia. Today, he's in charge of everything that happens on Silvie's' part-breathtaking, part-bleak, seemingly endless swath of land.

"You guys can call it lifeless and desolate and empty if you want," Marshall told us with a boisterous, sarcastic laugh. "But we prefer the term 'frontier.'"

The land didn't always look like this, Marshall explained during a three-hour guided ATV tour of the ranch that left Neil and me dusty and enthralled.

Years ago, it wasn't harsh and dry in this valley. Beginning in the 1820s, the Hudson's Bay Company, under the direction of the British government, trapped and killed an estimated 200,000 beavers on the land that today makes up Silvie's Valley Ranch. Marshall, who rattles off the history and dates like he's reading from a textbook, explained that the British didn't want the French



There are 27 green complexes between the 36 holes at Silvies, meaning not every hole is reversible.



or their rebellious former colonies to derive any value from the land upon their exit. So, like they did in much of the American Northwest, they aimed to make the land a “fur desert.”

“Their plan was to strip all the wealth off the land,” Marshall told us. “But when they did, they fundamentally changed the hydrology of this system for hundreds of years. We’re still dealing with it today.”

This section of Oregon’s high desert receives only about 10 inches of moisture per year. And with much of that concentrated in quick snowmelt and early spring rains, the water tends to sheet off the land quickly instead of soaking in and creating the lush, green valleys needed for grazing.

“Think about what beavers do,” Marshall explained. “They build dams, which slow down that water and create ponds. That slow-moving water soaks up the sponge of this valley and creates more grass and trees and habitats. Everything depends on it.”

American homesteaders began arriving on the land in 1883. The Craddocks and the Hankinses—names you’ll see at the golf course—were the first to arrive. Today there are still relics of handmade houses that dot the landscape. But apart from the few families who stuck out the trying conditions, the land went through a number of different owners as it continued to atrophy and dry out. There was a San Diego eccentric who raised elk and sold their horns as aphrodisiacs. There were grazing associations and developers. Someone tied to the savings and loan crisis in the 1980s owned it for a minute. But each owner seemed to share the same short-sighted vision.

“Nobody put anything back into the land,” Marshall said. “Everyone took from it. They over-harvested it. They overgrazed it. And they didn’t take care of the irrigation system.”

That’s the iteration of the valley that Scott and Sandy Campbell grew up knowing. Long before they built their veterinary practice, they were children in nearby Burns, Oregon.

“When we were dating and when we were engaged, we would

see it all the time,” said Sandy. “We would drive through this valley and we’d see this ranch and think, ‘Wow, just imagine what we could do with that piece of land.’”

In 2007, they decided to find out. After selling their business and retiring, the Campbells were ready for a new project.

“Scott was home for two weeks and already he was in the kitchen rearranging all my drawers,” Sandy said. “I told him he probably needed to go somewhere he was in charge.”

The Campbells purchased the ranch as a place to relax in retirement, but when they took stock of what they had, they realized how much work there was to be done. In other words, the landscape we saw used to be even worse off.

“We spent quite a few years just figuring out how to get the agricultural side of things back in shape,” Sandy said.

Part of the answer turned out to be the implementation of beaver helper dams, a rock-based way to mimic the effect beavers have on an ecosystem. It’s a simple method that uses one of the most natural technologies on Earth, and it’s worked swimmingly.

“After two or three years of working on this, the ecosystems are healthy and the wildlife is returning,” Sandy said. “We can finally run our goats and cattle to graze the way we’re supposed to.”

It’s another example of the Campbells looking backward to build the future. It seems to pop up around every corner at Silvies Valley Ranch: The solutions are simple, but they’re far from easy. The next step was getting people to come see it.

Dan Hixson always knew that he wanted to build golf courses. The only issue was that he wasn’t actually a golf-course architect.

After years of bouncing around the American mini tours and the Australian Tour as a player, Hixson carved out a nice gig as a club professional at Columbia Edgewater Country Club in Port-

land, Oregon. When the urge could no longer be ignored, Hixson quit, much to the dismay of his peers. The next day, he started introducing himself as Dan Hixson, golf-course architect.

"I had zero experience," he said with a laugh. "I started asking around and tried to figure out how to get into the business and very quickly figured out that nobody was going to hire me. So I just started my own business."

Hixson's design career started simply. He worked on small projects for clubs with a bit of disposable income and no real architecture contacts—putting in a bunker here or lengthening a hole there. Eventually his contacts in pro shops across the region (both his father and brother are also PGA professionals in the Pacific Northwest) led to jobs designing practice facilities and short-game areas.

"At most of these country clubs, there's always a similar conversation," he said. "'Hey, we want to do some work. Does anybody know an architect?' And no one really does. But they all knew I was getting into it, so that's kind of how it started."

After sprinkling plenty of practice areas and short courses around the Northwest, Hixson was approached by a friend who spoke the words that architects dream of: "He said, 'I know these people who own land in Bandon who want to build a golf course,'" Hixson said. "I looked at him and just said, 'Yeah, right.'"

As he dug into the project, he quickly found out that the land was not part of the hallowed resort on the Oregon coast, but a few miles down the road. He reached out to the project organizers and they sent him an application packet with questions about his design firm and certifications.

"I just stared at it for two or three days," he said. "I couldn't even say yes to one question that was in there."

Dejected, he decided to call the organizers and just start talking.

"We chatted for a while and I told them I was bummed and that I didn't qualify under any of the standards they were using, but that I was incredibly passionate about being considered....I finally just said, 'What are you guys doing right now? I can get in my car and be there in about an hour and a half.' So I did. And within a few hours, they had basically hired me."

To show how serious he was, Hixson had offered to design the course for free. (The owners refused that idea, but were impressed by his dedication.) The project turned into Hixson's first 18-hole golf course, Bandon Crossings, the affordable public track on Highway 101 that is familiar to almost every Bandon Dunes visitor.

After the success of Bandon Crossings, Hixson was commissioned to design Wine Valley Golf Club, a sprawling course in Walla Walla, Washington, that has hovered on the edges of many Top 100 lists. And it was at the opening ceremony for Wine Valley that he received a call introducing him to Scott Campbell, who wanted to talk about a piece of land called Silvies Valley Ranch.

Hixson was an atypical golf-course architect, which worked out well, because Scott Campbell was an atypical golf-course owner. Campbell played the game a bit, but had no preconceived notions that typical course owners bring to the table.

Campbell wasn't completely sold on the idea of putting in a golf course. At least not at first. Part of the reason he and Sandy had purchased Silvies Valley Ranch was to find a way to bring

Silvies Valley Ranch spans some 140,000 acres, roughly the size of Chicago.



tourism and economic opportunity to the quiet part of the world that they both loved so much. Golf seemed to have as good a track record of doing that as anything else.

"I think the golf course might have been the product of a lot of scotch drinking and hand waving," Sandy said with a laugh.

Campbell and the prospective architect visited the land a number of times in 2009 and Hixson did his best to convince Campbell that he didn't have a spectacular golf course waiting for him on his property. He had two.

The idea of building a reversible golf course had been stuck in Hixson's mind for years. He'd pitched it to other owners, but could never convince them that it was anything more than a gimmick or a needless risk.

"Luckily, I'd been rehearsing my pitch for quite a few years," Hixson said. "I told Scott about how St. Andrews used to be reversible. I told him what I thought it would mean to the resort and how we could basically get two courses on nearly the ground of one. It'd be an eco-friendly way to do things in that sense. And he just loved it right after that."

Today, guests play the Craddock Course on even-numbered days and the Hankins Course on odd-numbered days. The routing is mostly reversible clockwise/counterclockwise, but there are 27 total greens, giving each course its own distinct moments.

The project kicked off in the throes of the financial crisis, which meant the crew was small and progress was slow. Rather than take a typical design fee, Hixson signed on as an employee of the resort for the nine years it took to complete the course. As a result, he was involved in much more than just the golf operation. He helped build roads, he landscaped the property and he

even worked on the beaver helper dams.

It was a lengthy project, but the result is stunning. Though they are mostly composed of the same land, the Craddock and the Hankins should be thought of as two distinct golf courses. Any stigma that reversible courses carry with them quickly evaporates within the first few holes of your second round at Silvies. Having seen the property the day prior, you're already armed with knowledge of different fairways and alternate angles into greens. It's a cyclical feeling that makes the second round infinitely more fun than the first. And the third more fun than the second. And so on, until it's time to return to civilization.

The golf matches the resort: It's rustic and minimalist, shaggy around the edges, but refined and handcrafted in all the best ways. The fairways are massively wide, but the relentless wind and the firmness of the greens are a humbling trade-off. One of my favorite features was the set of five consecutive fairways that quietly connect and roll into each other like a capital "W" with an extra limb.

"It's fun when people walk off the course after their second round," Hixson said. "Because you can just see that the light has gone on for them. They'll always say the same thing: 'I'd heard about reversible golf, but I just couldn't really picture it. Now it makes sense.'"

Silvies also features two short courses, both done by Hixson. McVeigh's Gauntlet, named after a bootlegger who homesteaded on the property in the late 1800s, is a brutally difficult but endlessly fun challenge course of mostly par 3s and a few short 4s. It's a fantastic bet-settling course, though it's probably best known for the "Beer Tree," where a stocked cooler sits in the shade of a massive pine at the top of one of the course's steepest climbs.



Sometimes the best thing to do at Silvies is simply enjoy the company of others, under the ranch cabin's one-of-a-kind chandelier.



But the Chief Egan Course is why most people initially heard of Silvies. On the short pitch-and-putt, players have the opportunity to hire one of the resort's two goat caddies. This is exactly what it sounds like. Two caddies (Mike and Bruce) split the rounds on the Chief Egan Course, using specially made saddlebags to carry drinks, balls and a few clubs hole to hole. The goats are trained to stay off the greens at all times. Apart from Bruce trying to eat some of Neil's unkempt hair when he wasn't looking, they mostly graze and keep to themselves.

Goat caddie is the most competitive job on the ranch, and it's not even close. Sandy and her team have more than 3,000 goats on property and only Mike and Bruce have made it into the big leagues of full-time caddie-dom. The others? Well, those family-style dinners feature goat on the menu each night.

After dinner, guests make their way outside to the communal fire pit, where Jeff puts out coffee, cocktails and s'mores ingredients. It's quiet between conversation, but it's a comfortable quiet as you listen to the bonfire crackle like a vinyl record that's run out of tracks to play.

"I think I would have been a pretty good frontiersman," Neil said with a stern confidence on our first night, sipping his drink. Somehow, Silvies is able to bottle up this feeling and serve it to each guest. (After sunset, much of it is delivered through the signature "Horseshoe Nail" rye-based cocktail.) The following day, after our ATV tour of the ranch's cattle and goat operations, Neil emphatically amended this statement and blamed his hubris on the whiskey and the quiet, infectious comfort of the resort.

Just like at dinner, the conversation comes easy around the fire pit. We found it came easy everywhere at the resort. There's plenty to keep you entertained, but the lack of any extra bells and whistles just crystallizes how often we feel distracted in our real lives for no reason. Something as simple as talking—really talking—and connecting with other guests tends to feel more like an exotic experience than a chore. And when the conversation runs out, you can take your time appreciating the roughly 12 billion visible stars overhead.

Silvies forces you to rethink what you're really looking for in a golf trip. After enjoying the time spent getting to know complete strangers around a dinner table and a fire pit, I learned it wasn't privacy I was after. It wasn't luxury or opulence, either—not after spending three hours throwing hatchets into stumps and getting rattled around on a dirty ATV.

It seems that, for many, the answer is a true experience. And the elements that make up Silvies—the scenery, the history, the food, the traditions—do plenty to make you feel alarmingly content. Golf is the reason you made the trek, of course. And it's spectacular. But like all the best golf excursions, you'd be doing yourself a disservice here if that was the sole focus of the trip.

"I can get tunnel vision on the golf stuff," Hixson said, "but it just seems like people walk away feeling like the golf is only just part of it, which is great. It's the whole experience that really captures people. And that's a testament to Scott and Sandy and the people working there."

In our world of constant distraction, it is genuinely disarming to be relaxed on that level. It makes you feel extra chatty, generous and nostalgic. We heard that the week before we visited, someone bought a bottle of Macallan 25 to pass around the bar with the other guests they had just met. After my stay, that didn't sound so crazy. ■