

Outdoors

Mister Bob

He was born in 1875 in Houston County, Texas, the son of a circuit-riding Methodist preacher. He was named Robert Joseph Spence, but everybody except family called him “Mister Bob.” He married in the middle 1890s, and his first child, a girl named Mary, was born in 1900.

Sometime during the first World War, he was elected sheriff of Houston County, an office he held into the so-called Roaring Twenties. His only grandchild, a boy, was born to Mary in 1928.

Like many Americans, he lost most of what he owned during the Great Depression of the 1930s, managing to hold on only to his home in Crockett and his self-respect. After he left the sheriff’s office he served as constable for a time, and then sold insurance to help make ends meet.

During those hard years, his wife milked the cow and sold butter, eggs and produce from her garden, and sewed surprisingly fashionable dresses for neighbor ladies out of printed feed-sack fabric. It was, after all, the Depression, a fearful thing that people today can hardly imagine and which permanently scarred every adult who lived through it. Not much cash was circulating in Deep East Texas in the ’30s, but the Spences managed.

During that dreary time, his grandson, whose father was a Houston doctor, was sent to Crockett every June to escape the terrible summertime polio epidemics in the city, for which there was in those days no vaccine and no cure.

The boy and his grandfather relished those months together. Mister Bob taught the boy to shoot a rifle well enough that a few years later the lad won the New England schoolboy championship and led his prep school rifle team to consecutive regional team championships. The grandfather was also careful to teach the lessons of gun safety and maintenance.

A two-year-old sorrel gelding named Dan came to live in the pasture with the milk cow, and the boy learned the basics of horse-handling ... the hard way. For the first year his grandfather made him ride without a saddle, learning to maintain his seat by balance and gripping the horse between his knees. When the boy did get a saddle, it was like sitting in an easy chair, and he spent many long summer days ranging the dirt roads around Crockett with Dan. The pair became a familiar sight around the county.

The boy also learned to take responsibility for caring for an animal, currying and brushing, feeding and watering, and keeping Dan’s hooves trimmed and shod.



John Wootters photo

The author at age 16, aboard his faithful steed Dan and wearing Mister Bob’s silver-mounted spurs. The boy and his horse were a familiar summertime sight everywhere in Houston County during the late 1930s.

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horse, but he was big and strong and stubborn, and when he acted up about crossing a wooden bridge, Mister Bob mounted him and showed the boy how to dominate an 1,100-pound animal that was frightened by the hollow sound of his own hooves on the bridge planking. It was a brief but lively little rodeo, and the boy was soon fighting Dan across every bridge in the county until he came to ignore them and carried his young rider wherever he was asked to go.

Those lessons stood the boy in good stead in later years when he rode mountain horses in hair-raising places in the Rockies after elk, moose, mountain sheep and goats. For the rest of his life, he was completely at home in a saddle.

After the boy grew up and went away to school, Dan lived out his years peacefully on family land and died at the age of 32.

As sheriff, Mister Bob had developed friendships with the landowners around Crockett and enjoyed access for himself and his grandson to every private pond and stretch of creek and bayou in the county. The two of them fished together day after summer day. The sheriff loved casting artificial lures for largemouth bass (which he called “green trout”). He used a stubby steel casting rod from the brushy banks and taught himself to cast left-handed so he wouldn’t miss surface strikes by changing hands at the moment his lure landed. He used only two lures — a Pflueger “Tandem Spinner” and a big Heddon “Lucky 13”. In most of the places they fished, long casts were not possible, but he never missed his target with his short ones, and he caught good bass out of backwaters today’s anglers wouldn’t even slow down for.

Sometimes the boy and Mister Bob loaded his old Studebaker coupe and went camping on an oxbow lake off the Trinity River called Blue Lake. They pitched a

tent and slept on cots and cooked over open fires. They set and ran trot lines, baited redhorse minnows into a glass jug with bits of bread crumbs and used them to catch the big crappies for which Blue Lake was noted, using cane poles and bobbers. Some of these “white perch,” as Mister Bob called them, went over two pounds.

They cast lures around the stumps and button-willow bushes and caught bass that might make a modern bass fisherman with \$50,000 worth of boat, motor, tackle, and fish-finding electronics just sit down and cry.

Mister Bob was no trophy hunter. He hunted for protein or to protect his garden and henhouse, but he was a keen tracker, especially of strayed livestock and fugitive humans. On the margins of Blue Lake, his grandson learned from him how to tell the track of a fox or wolf from that of a domestic dog, and a deer track (rare in Houston County in those years) from a goat or small pig track, as well as sign of other local wildlife.

They watched herons and kingfishers patrolling the lake, and Mister Bob taught his grandson the names of all the trees growing in the river bottom. Years later, when the grandson was Scoutmaster of Houston Boy Scout Troop 29, he passed Mister Bob’s lore on to the young Scouts, including one who grew up to be Governor Mark White of Texas.

Evenings, to the accompaniment of a throbbing bullfrog chorus, Mister Bob might fry up a batch of fresh catfish from the trotline or

bullfrog legs harvested with the boy’s .22 rifle. After supper they admired the stars wheeling across the sky or watched the raccoons squabble over scraps tossed out into the kerosene lantern’s circle of soft light. Finally, they crawled into bedrolls under mosquito netting and drifted away to slumber to the deep baritone chanting of the barred owls. No prince in a golden palace ever slept sounder — or happier — than Mister Bob’s grandson in a shabby tent beside Blue Lake.

At Christmastime in 1939, Mister Bob took the boy on his first deer hunt, in the Davey Crockett National Forest east of Crockett. No bucks were seen, but it was a magical first step in a legendary lifelong deer-hunting career for the man the boy became.

Years later, Mister Bob’s grandson wrote a book about hunting in Texas and dedicated it to Mister Bob Spence, writing that the “old-time Texas Sheriff, a humble man of humor and wisdom, taught me how to ride a horse and shoot a rifle, and how to be a man.”

By the way, he was never “Mister Bob” to me; I always called him Granddad.

John Wootters, of Ingram, is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen’s Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column “Buck Sense” and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, “Hunting Trophy Deer.” He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen’s Hunting magazines.