



THE CAMP

Many of us—the lucky ones—carry fond memories of the deer camps we grew up in . . . and the lessons learned there are more than just memories.

BY JOHN WOOTTERS

Some pretty unforgettable sounds have fallen on these old gunfire-deafened ears of mine, but a shriek that shattered the evening hush at our Sandy Creek hunting camp 45 years ago still rings in them even now! Never, before or since, have I heard anything like it. With no warning, it welled up out of the silent woods and froze me in my tracks.

It was a clear Friday afternoon in late November. In my secondhand 1946 Chevy sedan I'd driven Uncle Dick Fonville, our camp patriarch and deer-hunting guru, to the camp. My father and the other hunters were planning to arrive later that evening. I was 19 years old, home from college, and easing my-

self into the long Thanksgiving holiday.

We'd rolled up to camp just at dusk, the tires quiet in the sandy tracks. The Mayor, as we called him, stepped out of the car and disappeared from my view around the end of the camp house. I lifted the trunk lid and was gathering up an armload of duffels when I heard the shack's wooden floor creak under his footsteps.

A second later came that blood-curdling cry, half-screech, half-roar. In the next moment, the whole tar-paper end of the camp house leapt off its frame with a ripping crash and zigzagged away into the woods, running over small shrubs and caroming off tree trunks! Paralyzed with astonishment, I

did nothing but stand and watch it go.

Then, somewhere in the depths of the twilight, I heard the Mayor's laughter begin. He giggled. He chuckled. He roared hysterically. When I got around to the opening of the shanty (loaded gun in hand), I found him sitting on one of the Army cots, rocking with mirth. When he was able to speak, he told me what had happened.

As he'd stepped up into the cabin, he'd found a large, male, wild hog snoozing comfortably in the narrow space between the cots, his rear end toward the entrance. Mr. Fonville took one long stride and drop-kicked the boar in the—um, well, where a boar hog is most prominent from the aft perspec-

tive. The hog, thus rudely awakened, simply got up running in the direction he happened to be pointed, which was at the back wall of the shack. He took out the lower half of the tar-paper wall, which then draped itself around his shoulders and stuck with him as he earnestly launched what seemed to be a migration in the general direction of Venezuela. At the rate at which he was migrating when last seen, he probably reached the Panama Canal by sunup!

Fortunately, it didn't get cold enough that weekend for the gaping hole in the back wall to be a problem. The episode was just another step in the patch-only-what-you-can't-do-without evolution of the camp.

This camp, you see, wasn't exactly constructed; it just sort of "grewed." The generally mild December climate of Colorado County, Texas, didn't demand a winter-tight shelter that could be heated, so the camp under the majestic, moss-bearded live oak had a chance to evolve, little by little, over the years.

It was originally just a raised floor with canvas from an Army-surplus squad tent stretched over a wooden frame, barely big enough for four folding cots with a narrow aisle between them. The structure was three-sided and completely open at one end. The open end was somewhat protected by an extended roof and north wall. There were no windows. No improvements were ever made until absolutely necessary. Only when the canvas rotted away was it replaced with tar paper and a flat tin roof. When what the hog left of the tar paper gave way, it was replaced with corrugated iron.

This was outdoors living in truth and in spirit. Sleeping was the only thing ever done inside the shack; there was no room for any other activity . . . save hog punting. We lived, cooked, ate, and shared the camaraderie

of the campfire outside, regardless of the weather. I remember one pretty fall day when we were eating lunch around the picnic table in the camp yard, when the Mayor peered sharply out into the woods, reached for his little .250-3000 Savage M99, and, resting one elbow on each side of his tin plate of fried venison, dropped a nice buck in his tracks with one shot at some 150 yards.

There was a wood-burning stove under the extended roof, but most cooking was done on propane burners and most hand- and seat-warming around the open fire outside. Nothing as sissified as an enclosed outhouse graced the premises; we merely repaired to the nearby yaupon thicket for privacy. After pro-

longed occupancy, you had to watch your step at night . . . and not only for snakes!

Other hazards attended the toilet at the Fonville camp as well, some of them unusual. One afternoon during the local whitetail rut when most of the hunters were logging a little nap time, a very dignified member named Dr. Byron York picked up a roll of toilet paper and strolled casually into the thicket. Five minutes later, I heard his voice rising almost to a scream of excitement or panic. I scooped up my rifle and sprinted toward the din, followed by some of the others. We found a greatly agitated Dr. York, his pants down around his ankles, babbling about a rut-maddened buck that, he said, had swaggered belligerently up to him as he squatted in meditation. When the doctor shouted and gestured at him, the deer actually lowered his antlers as though to charge!

The final evidence of all this was the roll of toilet paper, York's only weapon, which had been hurled at the animal. It must have been a truly heroic heave, since the paper was festooned from



The camp building was for sleeping only; everything else was conducted outside. It was in this camp that Wootters received the basic hunting knowledge he uses to this day.

limb to twig through the forest for more than 20 yards!

My father first took me to the Fonville deer camp in 1940, when I was 11 years old, and I had the privilege of hunting there until the death of Mr. Richard Fonville in 1955 terminated the hunting lease that had been the camp's reason for being. It happened that I actually shot my first whitetail on another property in 1941, but it was in the Mayor's camp on Sandy Creek that I collected the remainder of my first couple of dozen bucks and learned all my basic deer-hunting lessons. It was also where I learned those vital lessons in sportsmanship, fair chase, courtesy toward companions, and respect for the

game, the land, and the law that I think boys learn best in a hunting camp.

Game was plentiful, the land was generous, and the law was prominent in Colorado County in those days.

Texas' whitetail population was just rebounding strongly from the near extinction of the 1920's. In fact, the swing of the pendulum toward overpopulation was already underway, but we didn't recognize that. In retrospect, the small bodies and antlers of our bucks, together with the numbers of deer seen every day, should have been a dead giveaway. Mature bucks regularly weighed 80 to 100 pounds field dressed, at most.

But the idea that there could actually be *too many* deer was still a bizarre concept to Texas hunters or landowners in the late Thirties and Forties. Neither does nor spikehorn bucks were legal game yet, nor would they become so in most of the state for another 20 years.

The land itself was perfectly flat, clothed mostly in open live-oak woods with little undergrowth. The lowest branches on the oaks were about shoulder-high to a man, which meant that he could actually see farther kneeling or sitting than he could while standing. Manufactured tree stands would have been useless, had they even existed in those days, and I do not recall ever hearing the idea of hunting from a tree even mentioned during the 15 years I hunted with the Fonville party.

Sandy Creek was more sandy than creek, but its subirrigation supported a large, dense yaupon thicket that was the major stronghold of the deer herds. It was there that I learned that whitetails have a barometric sense and can forecast weather changes. When most deer movement was *into* this thicket, bad weather was on the way; and when we saw the animals leaving the thicket during a

rainy spell or norther, we knew we could expect clearing before morning.

Most of us hunted at "stands," which were nothing more than areas noted for deer traffic after years of observation. We called the areas "crossings." The so-called stand would be merely a conveniently located tree trunk to lean against while one was seated on the ground or a comfortable stump or log. There was no structure of any kind, no blind, and, in those pre-World War II days, not even such a thing as camouflage clothing. We got deer within range in that fairly open forest without cover or camo simply by paying attention to the wind and sitting *still* . . . by which I mean *motionless*. It was considered an

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essential deer-hunting skill, and we took pride in it.

The local "law" took the form of Tom Waddell, one of Texas' most famous old-time game wardens. Tom was a tough and dedicated lawman, with a knack for seeming to rise out of the ground wherever a violation had just taken place. He was a friend of ours and always welcome in the Fonville camp. One evening Rupert Kerr, one of our regulars, had brought in a three-point buck; that is, with a spike antler on one side and a little fork on the other. It happened that Rupert's bullet had removed the forked side, the only proof of legality, and he'd spent an hour or two looking for it among the dead leaves. He finally found it and stuck it in his jacket pocket.

It further transpired that that was the evening Tom Waddell happened to drop in for a cup of coffee. When we

saw the headlights of his truck coming through the woods, somebody sneaked around and stole the forked antler out of Rupert's coat. Of course, Tom knew us all and he gave the two or three deer hanging on the buck limb only a quick sweep of his flashlight beam—until he came to the one that seemed to be an illegal spike.

Waddell's arrest-his-own-grandmother reputation was such that we always took pains to avoid even the appearance of evil. Rupert hastened to assure the warden that his buck was in fact a three-pointer and that he had the forked horn to prove it "right over here in my hunting coat." What followed was a general and increasingly frantic ransacking of camp, with Rupert trying to grin and look cool with sweat rolling down his face, and Waddell, expressionless, watching it all. Finally, just before Rupert was to be led away in hand-



Perseverance was learned in camp. Here Palmer Melton, who had an artificial leg, carried his buck back to camp.

cuffs, we gave him back his antler, and peace returned to Sandy Creek.

Tom Waddell did not find in his job description anywhere where it said he was supposed to interpret the language of the Texas game laws. He enforced the statutes as they were written, word for word, and left interpretation to the courts. He was the terror of the local poachers, but for all his forbidding reputation, his lifetime notes on waterfowl migrations in Colorado County proved, after his death, to be so comprehensive and meticulous that biologists found them uniquely valuable. He was not an eloquent man, but I learned to see the great love he had for wildlife, especially the wildfowl, under that rough exterior. He was the man who formed my earliest impressions of the game-warden fraternity, and it was a privilege to have known Tom Waddell.

It was both a privilege and a pleasure to have hunted with Richard Fonville. A pharmacist by trade, the Mayor actually had served a term as mayor of Houston, Texas, during the Thirties, but found that politics interfered too much with his hunting. He'd collected his first whitetail at about age 12 (around 1890) with bird shot in a 12-gauge shotgun, when his all-purpose dog had bayed the buck against a cut-bank in a creekbed. Young Dick had circled around and fired down on the deer from the bank above, at a range of a few feet.

He hunted all his life, and his yarns of the early days from east Texas' mysterious Big Thicket swamp (now a na-

tional nature preserve) to the jungles of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula livened up our campfires. His was an energetic, innovative mind, and he teamed it with owl-like powers of observation in the woods to evolve theories about whitetail senses, habits, reactions, and biology that were 25 years ahead of their time. I have only recently seen in print ideas about deer biology that Uncle Dick Fonville proposed to me, at least as hypothesis, before the end of World War II. For example, the Mayor never believed that deer were color-blind, and now we know he was right. Only a lifetime of personal observation of the deer has taught me as much about them as did the Mayor before I was old enough to vote.

He'd used many different rifles and calibers over the years, and he fostered much of the early interest in firearms that turned into a career for me. By the time I knew him, however, he'd settled on the scoped Savage Model 99 in .250 for his own hunting, and I never heard that rifle crack more than once per deer. Mr. Fonville loved venison above all other foods, preparing it for break-

fast, lunch, and supper and wrapping it in a cold biscuit for an on-stand snack, as well. He never let the camp venison supply run low, and there was no sense in anybody else killing "camp meat" after we heard the deadly little .250 echo through the thicket.

It was the Mayor's camp, but he was no tyrant. The atmosphere at Sandy Creek was always gentle, friendly, and warm, especially toward the boys, of which I was only one of several who did much of our growing up there. We were not only tolerated but welcomed. We learned much about the world of men and how to behave in that world, about compassion and cooperation, in the rickety old camp under the live oak.

One of the regulars was the Mayor's nephew, Palmer "Peg" Melton, an athlete of considerable southwestern fame who'd lost his leg in an accident. Despite walking with a heavy limp, Palmer preferred still-hunting to sitting on a stand. He carried a beautiful, iron-sighted lever-action Winchester Model 64 in .30-30 WCF, and was our surest hunter (next to Uncle Dick himself) and best shot. He was pure poison on running deer, and although he never seemed to drop a buck with a single shot, he never let one escape wounded, either. He was powerful enough to pick up one of those small whitetail bucks by one antler, throw it over his shoulder, and limp to camp on his artificial leg!

Palmer is the one who got me straightened out on the whitetail rut, accurately explaining the nuances of rubs and scrapes, at a time when most hunters didn't know the difference! He taught me even more about the niceties of shooting moving game with a rifle. One of my most vivid memories of him is his pleasure and pride in me the first time I actually beat *him* in an informal target shoot at camp. He was the *second* proudest and most pleased person around!

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Well-behaved kids were welcome at the camp, shown below in 1947 before the hog ran through the back wall.



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I visited the old campsite twice, years after the Mayor's death. The first time it was still there but in ruins. The second time it was gone—and so were the woods, the crossings, the thicket, the deer, and even the creek itself; the whole area had been bulldozed, leveled, leveed, and converted into a vast rice field stretching from horizon to horizon. Only Tom Waddell's beloved ducks are there today, and I will not go back again.

Most of the lessons learned at the Sandy Creek place were administered, of course, by the deer themselves. From them I acquired the skills and self-discipline to be a hunter... some of which probably saved my life in Korea a few years later. I learned to use my own senses—to lower the barriers all of us in the city unconsciously erect to filter out distracting sights and sounds. Also, I learned how to become one with the wild world, how to defeat the animals' senses, how to be an unseen observer.

I learned to trust myself, to move confidently in strange territory, at night, or in bad weather, to handle guns and knives, axes and matches skillfully and safely and—just as important—responsibly. I learned to be objective about myself, to know what I *couldn't* do, as well as what I could. And I unconsciously absorbed the "law of the woods," those immutable statutes of nature according to which carelessness or stupidity will get you hurt or dead, and from which there is no court of appeal. This is the real world, that hard, relentless, cold, dangerous world in which all wildlife lives day and night... and from which what we call "civilization" is mostly a process of escaping. Perhaps only hunters, of all modern Americans, understand this perspective so well.

This, then, is my acknowledgement of the debt I incurred at the Sandy Creek camp, the lifetime lessons learned and the values absorbed from all the players—Dad, the Mayor, Peg Melton, Tom Waddell, Denton and Rupert Kerr, the deer themselves, even the boar hog that ran through the wall of the camp house. None of those men still live today, but their heritage was passed on to me and the other kids who came to the Fonville hunting camp.

Many readers—the lucky ones—grew up in some kind of deer camp, somewhere, too. However different from Sandy Creek it may have been—in location, climate, topography, construction, ambience, or hunting mores—it is an important common element in all our lives, and we all share that same heritage, the honorable heritage of the hunter.



Around camp, venison was always plentiful, if sometimes a trifle chewy... almost every meal of the day. Here Wootters' number-one teacher, his father, works at masticating his lunch before returning to his "crossing" for the late afternoon.