

Pride and Prevarication

A man is a man for all that, which calls for a certain pride that from time to time needs a wee boost. This is particularly true when he's failing in an endeavor of his choice, the more so if it's not for the lack of trying. Take hunting for example, an acquired skill despite claims that stalking wild meat is embedded in a man's genes. This claim is fostered by a belief that all men were once hunters, a manly pursuit that eventually got us out of the caves. It was how male ancestors fed their families, kept their children alive, and earned the admiration of women folk long before farming, and turning their dens into domestic havens. In the olden days, and it's a true fact, hunting prowess was the key factor in attracting the most desirable woman in the clan.

Today, far different standards abound than in the days of caves and bearskins. Spears are gone and arrows are elitist, both replaced by rifles. These rifles come in all shapes and sizes: multi-calibers, prices ranging from cheap to obscene, and firing mechanisms progressing from flintlock to semi-automatic. As to the hunting: courses are now required, competence tests are mandatory, firearms acquisition forms a must, photo ID licenses necessary (2 kinds), and above all, appropriate 'administrative' fees for each. Aah, today's young! They will never know what their grandparents meant when telling them how free life was at their age!

For example...in 1959 I was sixteen years old. A three year immigrant, I wanted to go hunting. I needed three items: rifle, ammunition, and a big game tag. Oh yes, I also needed to borrow my father's car (a \$25 addition to his insurance). And so...

...it was down to the Army & Navy on Whyte Avenue by bus (I couldn't cadge the family car). Once inside I walked straight to the rifle rack. Three dozen Lee Enfield .303 rifles sat in the open, their long wooden grips modified for sport use. The price was \$14.88, a figure I

will remember post dementia. I had been primed by a World War II veteran (the war was not long past), to check the weapon using two minor tests: open the bolt and peer down the muzzle to ensure the barrel is straight; take a live cartridge and poke the bullet into said muzzle. If the bullet fits, the rifling is worn out, discard rifle. If the bullet is so large a hammer is needed to ram it down the barrel (not recommended), purchase rifle.

So there I was, sixteen year old, standing inside the Army & Navy hefting rifles to one eye, looking for a straight barrel. Then, once found, removing a cartridge from a box of .303 rounds (dated 1917), and jamming the bullet down the muzzle. Nobody in the store found that odd. In fact, one of the clerks glanced over, saw I was managing, and went back to doing what he was doing. I cashed out with my \$15 (no tax in those days), said no, I couldn't afford a hunting tag just yet, hopped on a bus and took my Lee Enfield home

You see, crime was low in those days, and if anyone got shot it was invariably by accident, not design. Everyone understood that a high powered rifle had but one purpose: to shoot big game. Alas, my Lee Enfield shot nothing larger than rabbit and partridge; a shameful admission, that now leads me to unburden a conscience torn by ignoble days as a deer hunter.

Grade ten brought with it a friend called Ken, who also purchased this \$14.88 symbol of manhood. Our first expedition was the same year, and the hunting was extremely basic: drive East from Edmonton, find a large expanse of bush, tromp all day searching for deer, shoot a couple of rabbits or a partridge or two, keep the deer tag until Christmas, then hang it on the Xmas tree. This latter gesture became an annual rite lasting three years. Kind of silvery and forming a loop, the tag actually didn't look that bad on the tree.

Two years of abstinence followed this futility, during which time we both embarked on separate careers, and Marie Harrison and I got married (fifty five years this June). Ken also got married. Our wives got along quite well. So well, we were able to resume our quest for big game. That was 1963. There is no need to describe the hunt in detail, instead, refer to the previous paragraph.

For the year 1964, we decided to put a little more ‘oomph’ into the hunt. The current phrase is throwing good money after bad. It was off to Whitecourt with a borrowed house trailer, and this time also “our women folk”. It was a long weekend expedition that quite excited the ladies, for the next day they heard several shots. When we returned to the trailer, the chorus was, “What did you get?” Somewhat reluctantly, we opened the trunk and retrieved two brace of partridge. The four birds hadn’t looked too bad when we bagged them, but as we held them up by their skinny little legs, well...those “women folk” couldn’t stop laughing.

The next day the forest seemed to abound with everything except deer, and by tacit understanding we left the plentiful partridges alone. When we departed Whitecourt our wives, bless them, told us they had really enjoyed the weekend holiday—it had been lots of fun. Such comment merely added to the humiliation. Another big game tag was surreptitiously placed on the tree at Christmas.

A full scale attack on the big game population was clearly required to attain redemption, for hunting on a shoe string was obviously not working. The year 1965 heralded such a well-equipped assault: the house trailer was commandeered, along with a borrowed truck, borrowed horses, borrowed horse trailer, borrowed binoculars, and our own rifles and ammunition. (I

mentioned earlier that young people today have no idea of the freedom we enjoyed at that time in history; the flip side of that coin is they have no idea how broke their grandparents were).

As to the happy hunting grounds, we chose some of the finest in the province: the Rocky Mountain foothills, west of Calgary. As for big game, we had tags for elk, deer and moose, just to be certain. The hunt's duration was a full week. We...could...not...lose!

From Monday to Friday Ken and I hunted (Sunday hunting was prohibited). We were overawed by some of the finest countryside in the world. The scenery was magnificent: snow tipped mountains, wooded slopes, hidden lakes, glorious wild flowers of every hue, and the wildlife...wow! We saw coyotes, beavers, rabbits, muskrats, porcupine, more rabbits and even a lone wolf. There were trout in the streams, eagles soaring above, ravens perched in the pines, and of course, partridge. There was everything nature could offer—everything but big game. And as if to mock us, there were also cattle—hundreds upon hundreds of them freely roaming the countryside. Most were feeders: maturing calves, six to eight hundred pounds. After all, this was the foothills; the very essence of ranching country.

It was Friday night, and the week was ending. Ken and I sat on our sore and calloused backsides, commiserating beside the campfire. We were devastated. Five days and nothing! One day remained, Saturday, which was all or nothing! The shame of returning empty handed was mortifying. Yet what were our odds? Pitiful!

I think it was about then that the soft shuffle of hooves echoed from the trail behind the trailer. Along with it was the soft, lowing 'moo' of feeder calves. What would the morrow bring—another failed hunt, or...were there alternatives?

Don't leap to conclusions. We were desperate, but not criminally inclined. A hint: in 1965, a 600 pound heifer cost 21 cents a pound on the hoof, at the Calgary stockyards.

Advantages: a heifer loads into a horse trailer; Calgary was less than two hours away.

We were back at our small, makeshift camp by mid afternoon. By supper time the poor creature, now Christened Elsie (naturally), was deceased, skinned, and quartered. It took less than ten minutes to line the trunk of the car with plastic and set the four parts of Elsie inside. She seemed to be awfully small.

During this lethal performance, we accumulated an audience. A couple dozen "dogies" gathered round, each watching with bovine curiosity. They didn't seem upset by the wanton cannibalism, but Ken and I suddenly became quite distressed. We belatedly realized that here we were, in the middle of cattle country, slaughtering a six hundred pound heifer calf on rangeland regularly patrolled by armed cowboys. We quickly found Elsie's bill of sale, taped it nervously to the trailer door, and hoped that any passing cowboy would ask questions first....

They say that God protects drunks and the stupid. No need to mention where we fit, but He did look after us that day. We fled the site at first light, by which time a story was well prepared for our "women folk": it was a *female* elk (explains the lack of antlers); yes, Elsie was not large, probably last year's calf; oh, and Ken shot Elsie (he won the toss).

The first test was Marie's brother. Jim worked at one of the Edmonton packing plants (now all moved to the States), and was the obvious choice to help cut and wrap my half of Elsie. Fortunately, when skinning the poor beast, Ken and I innocently "butchered" the job. Not knowing better, we did not "peel" the hide. We cut it free with a knife, a messy job with the

blade cutting down to the meat, leaving little fat on the quarters...fat that would be expected on a domestic animal. Test number one passed successfully.

Test two was the “biggie”: an “elk” roast for Sunday dinner, prepared by Marie’s mum Lil, with the entire family present. Lil was of pioneer stock, born in 1915, and raised on a farm by Kitscoty. How many times had she eaten wild meat? I waited with trepidation. Lil took her first bite, chewing as if conducting a test taste. She nodded in a thoughtful kind of way and said, “It’s very good, G*****.” A small frown then appeared, and this is the absolute truth, she said, “You can certainly taste the ‘wild’ in the meat though, can’t you?”

A quarter century passed before ‘fessing up. As our “women folk” sometimes claim, men can be such liars!