

OCTOGENARIANS

Months ago, the fireplace shed its last glow in the deserted clubhouse; a final thin thread of smoke was spun out and vanished in the silent air. For a time, hunting days are over. Well may I be content then with the snug corner of my own hearthstone around which are gathered the good wife and my boys. They assail me with demands for stories, and I go over, for their and my own enjoyment, old experiences in swamps and rivers.

The great logs in the fireplace might tell if their flaming tongues were given speech of hunts made long ago. However, the red tongues only roar and hiss as they lick the crackling sinews of oak and hickory and tell nothing that ordinary ears have not heard.

Mallards, as far back as the 1950s, with flaps down and landing gears extended, drift into my decoys and fall to my gun at Big Lake in Arkansas, teal at Lake Catherine in Louisiana, redheads at Lake Koshkonong in Wisconsin, bluebills at Reelfoot, canvasbacks at Chesapeake Bay

Way into the night I prattle, unaware that I am alone before the flameless embers, deserted even by the shadows that earlier played their grotesque pranks behind me. I fan the coals to kindle a flame and then to my recliner for more reveries.

If you will allow me, since my wife and boys are sound asleep, I will continue with two great hunting days spent afield during the 2004-05 season. Forgive my weakness, for this is no fancy sketch; would to heaven that it were.

I got a call from my friend, former U.S. Senator Kaneaster Hodges, Jr., inviting me to hunt with octogenarian Leonard Sitzer at his 700 acres of flooded green timber near Weiner, Arkansas. Kaneaster was no spring chicken himself, for he was 66 summers old. At 61, I would be the teenager of the group.

I had some second thoughts ó but I must admit they were fleeting ó because these two old birds were Democrats, dyed-in-the-wool, through-and-through. My father once told me, “Never trust a Democrat or a Yankee even if he is a Republican.” I told Kaneaster that I would hunt with them, but only if they agreed to go to confession and ask for forgiveness.

My father offered more advice, “If you ain’t rich and there ain’t no chance to be rich then marry someone that is rich.”

Years later, I felt compelled to come up with advice for my sons, Bryan and Chad. “If you can’t own a great duck hole then marry someone that does.”

And that is what Leonard did. He married Katherine in 1948, the daughter of W.L. Craft, who, it just so happened, owned this 700 acres, having bought it in the 1940s. Levees were built, and now, instead of being fabulous for a few days when it flooded, it was, and is, fantastic for the entire duck season.

The night-before anticipation was like when I was a youngster: didn't sleep a wink. At the small clubhouse, pleasantries were exchanged, and gumboots replaced loafers and thinsulate/goretex replaced the latest fashion.

It was a short run with the Go-Devil as dawn approached. Receding but lingering ice from a recent cold spell prevented us from hunting in Leonard's favorite hole. So they debated back and forth where they should hunt as if it made a difference. Here it made no difference, for you were assured a limit of greenheads. For centuries, mallards have visited this playground where, for the most part, they have the place to themselves.

Throughout its many green-timbered acres, I met many, submerged brush piles, enough at all events in a morning's hunt to test fully my dexterity in managing my balance and bring out all the attributes of my refined and moral education, for retrieving is done the old fashion way: without a retriever.

On several occasions, I was baptized and rebaptized. On more than one occasion, I had to ask for forgiveness for words that my mother had not taught me.

Apart from this drawback, we were rewarded with remarkable shooting of every description, whether from a pair or a group of mallards descending peacefully to the seductive musical notes of Leonard's calling.

Kaneaster remarked, "Leonard has a unique style of calling, unlike anything I've ever heard. I've hunted with state champions, world champions, and champion of champions and none compare to him."

When asked about his calling, he replied, "When I was a young boy, sneaking up on a large group of contented mallards, I listened intently, and then I did my best to mimic them. So the call you hear and the ducks hear is that imitation. The same call, with a few refinements, I've been doing for the last 60 years."

I admired the octogenarian when he brought down a pair of greenheads with one shot, hoping I could do the same in another twenty years. I admired him again when a lady mallard – probably a widow – floated down in front of him. Contented, she was a busy little bird – wading and paddling. Only when he enticed a group of ten to join her did she flee with the remaining lucky ones.

With a limit in hand, Leonard rejoiced, "The red gods have blessed me for many years on these hallowed hunting grounds, and I hope the Maker blesses me with one more season."

Former President Jimmy Carter, one of many luminaries who have hunted ducks here, included a story entitled "Arkansas Rain, Ice, and Ducks" about Leonard's green-timber hunting in his book *An Outdoor Journal*.

On one of those rare days when ducks were scarce, he stated: "Finally a flight of circling ducks set their wings, just above the treetops, and sailed down toward us, darting from

side to side as they avoided the outstretched tree limbs. We watched intently, our backs to the wind. No one moved as we crouched against the trees. I fired first. A greenhead hit the water. Three other guns opened up as the ducks flared upward, their wings beating rapidly. I turned and fired the other barrel. One of my rare doubles. We counted six drakes down, with no cripples.ö

Carter lamented, öOne other was a female, but no one would admit having shot her.ö

Back at the clubhouse, Leonard's eyes sparkled as he related the many red-letter days that he has spent here, doing what he loves the most: waterfowling.

Here where Dave Maass, Ken Carlson, and Jack Cowan painted green timber hunting scenes, I bade a dignified adieu and hastened homeward a happy man knowing that this octogenarian had given me a red-letter day.

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For 50 years or so, it has been the want of your scribe when the hunting season steps around to let business and my cares wag awhile on their own hook and skip away to Beaver Dam and enjoy the exhilarating and tonic sport of duck hunting. Here where Nash Buckingham hunted, where Horace supplied his humor, and Queen Victoria served cathead biscuits.

Here where öGuidoö Wheatley, George Handwerker, Minter Parker, and Dr. Mitchell showed Nash the art of wing shooting. These old sports were all elegant shots, as they were taught the use of the gun when boys. Fifty was the self-imposed limit; all brought down with eight gauges.

Therefore, when I got a call from a friend asking if I could arrange a hunt somewhere that Nash made famous, several places came to mind. Wapanoca Lake, where he hunted many a day, was now a wildlife refuge. Mud Lake and Lakeside in Arkansas were two others. Nevertheless, I knew that other than Wapanoca Nash's favorite hunting site was Beaver Dam, the most noted hunting grounds in this part of the country, if not in the whole world.

Hither comes yearly numerous waterfowl. Yes, they come indeed, until at times the whole lake seems populated with their presence, and the air itself is hallowed with the sweet music of their pleasure.

In the olden and golden days, steamboats from Memphis, forty miles distant, dropped off sports at a landing on the Mississippi River. Prearranged wagons ferried them a few miles eastward to the clubhouse of the Beaver Dam Ducking Club. Years later when the last spike was driven, locomotives traveled over the sinuous and quivering rails to drop the sports off at the club's doorsteps. When the Fords first came in, the sports drove from downtown Memphis to Beaver Dam on dirt roads. If they made it in 2 1/2 hours, it was considered öwonderful.ö

Until four years ago, the old club was still in existence, headed by William "Chubby" Andrews. Then commercial hunting took over.

I first met Chubby, a.k.a. "Dr. Chub," at Tunica Cutoff when he and Mike Cianciola, a well-known waterfowl artist, motored up around seven o'clock one morning. We were not desirous of companionship since we already were camouflaged and decoyed. Nevertheless, we took pity on the old sports and invited them to join our hunting party. It soon became obvious that this old timer was no ordinary shot. While I did the calling, he did the shooting, saying grace over the fallen victims more often than my companions and I combined, whether it was 30 yards or 50 yards.

My curiosity got the best of me so I asked, "How did you learn to shoot so well?"

"Mr. Buck taught me everything I know about shooting. He told me, 'The only way to learn to shoot well is to hunt a lot and burn ammunition. As a boy, we had loading outfits and our parents gave us all the hulls, caps, wads shot, and powder we wanted.'"

Eager to find Mr. Buck for some shooting lessons, I asked, "Where is this Mr. Buck?"

"Why lad, he's six feet under!"

"Who was Mr. Buck?"

"His name was Nash Buckingham, a Memphian. He was a famous outdoor writer, conservationist, and hunter. Did you not know him?"

"I met him once as a child at York Arms Sporting Goods store. But that is about all I know about him." I stared at the old timer wondering who he was, who was this man that had learned to shoot from Mr. Buck?

Before saying our "goodbyes," we decided to hunt again the next day. Thus began a friendship that has lasted through the years.

However, to revert to my story, I will endeavor to give a brief account of our hunt at Beaver Dam. Before I start let me introduce as a parenthetical clause the fact that if you hunt with Chubby make up your mind first that he is a better shot than you are or you will learn the fact very soon.

A few phone calls had us scheduled for a morning's hunt with Mike Boyd, a commercial hunting guide, whose family has lived on the lake since the 1940s. Tagging along was my hunting buddy, Alfred Burton.

As the fresh breeze of morning stirred the ripples to laughter on the bosom of the limpid lake, we took our seats in the wooden blind, while the moon hovered above the cypress tops, casting moonlight on our decoys. It seemed to hover forever over the horizon, not wanting to miss this magical moment.

Moreover, the sunlight shimmered over the surface of the lake as though it were the first surface it had struck in its distant flight from the unbroken horizon. Gradually, the sun, reflecting crimson clouds and a purple sky, climbed over the cypress trees as at sea it does over the waves of water.

An artist could not have painted a more beautiful scene.

Soon Mike had the birds fluttering down into the decoys. In no time, Chubby, weakened from metastatic prostate cancer and heart problems, invigorated, hopped from his shooting stool and unloaded, way before the younger generation had emptied their fowling pieces. Moving with the grace and skill of an NFL running back, he shot like the legends of old: Bogardus, Carver, Paine, and Parsons.

If Marje, his wife, had seen him move this fast, she would wonder what the complaining was all about when she asked him to do chores around the house.

Just like at Leonard's place, the unlucky floated gracefully on the rippled water, some upright, some topsy-turvy. Mike's lab Hoss then preformed his business with just as much grace and skill.

With each duck he shot, a toothy smile emerged. Although advanced in age, he let everyone know he was still young-at-heart and could shoot with the best of them.

And so the day went on this fabled hunting ground with the old master showing his pupils the art of wing shooting. We had a long way to go to catch up with this old-timer, and I'm not sure there is enough time left in my internal clock.

As we headed back, I asked, "Where'd you get your nickname?"

"My nanny gave it to me because I was chubby."

Then he reminisced and said, "You know it was here at Beaver Dam that I took my first hunt with my Dad and shot my first duck. I hunted on these hallowed grounds during the halcyon days for 20 years with Mr. Buck. In his failing years, he told me, 'You're the son I always wanted. When I'm gone, write a book about Beaver Dam and put the Lord all through it.'"

"Do you know, while I hunted ducks today, that many thoughts came back to me? Or that across the years I heard again the plaintive calls of millions of mallards? I revisioned myriads of specks winking past above high cypresses, and saw gaudily colored, sun-burnished shapes slipping through the muck of loblolly swamps. Do I have any regrets for having ever hunted them? Not on your life!"

The only way to finish this hunt was to lunch at the Blue and White in Tunica, where old timers in days past sat around tables stuffing gut-wadding and drinking belly-washers,

while they told stories of the olden and golden days spent afield, some true and some not so true.

For us, we also talked of the past, when life with dazzling promises was just opening to us, and of all our fears and hopes for the present and the future. We wondered whether it would be but a few years before our noble waterfowl ceased to exist; the places that knew them would know them no more. We contrasted the present-day scenes with the glories of departed years and exclaimed, "But now, they are not. Alas! for the days that are gone!"

Though I may in future years visit every famous hunting ground on the continent, though all such trips may be eminently successful, I can never hope to experience more genuine pleasure in so short a period of time than I did in two days with these octogenarians. I shall ever cherish it and the feeling of awe with which I beheld.

I have seen and hunted with many good sports, but these two have brought down more ducks than any one I have yet seen. They are true sportsmen, in the true acceptance of the word.

An old timer once wrote, "The true sportsman pursues his game for pleasure, giving to his friends more than he retains, shoots invariably on the wing, and never takes a mean advantage of bird or man. It is his pride to kill what he does kill elegantly, scientifically, and mercifully; quantity is not his ambition; he never slays more than he can use; he never inflicts an unnecessary pang or fires an unfair shot; he is generous to his associates, not seeking to obtain the most shots but giving away the advantage in that particular and recovering it if possible by superiority of aim; for, although to be a true sportsman one must naturally be an enthusiast, he should never forget what he owes to his friends, and above all what he owes to himself."

I can only add, "Honor to whom honor is due. And thanks to you two octogenarians for giving me a museum of memories, for memories are the anchor of the soul."

As the end of my reveries draws near, I send my best wishes to all my brother sportsmen, wheresoever dispersed. May you live and flourish through the next, and through many, many years to come, and may you derive health, strength, and happiness unalloyed from a rational indulgence in duck hunting before old age or rheumatism envelopes you in their clutch.

And here, now that the nights grow shorter and warmer, I say goodbye, having spun my yarn, with a vigorous frame, a fresh fund of knowledge relative to mother nature, an appetite for innocent and healthful recreation unclouded, and, in a word, in splendid condition for launching forth on a new sporting year.

I hope these few words will leave you in splendid condition for launching forth on a new sporting year, for its promise of brighter days, of secluded lakes and solitary green timber, and the chatter of northern strangers.

For me, so long as I have the memory of these glorious days to look back on, I can never altogether be unhappy. Nothing can take from me the joys that lakes, rivers, forests, and far-stretching flooded fields have yielded to me in years gone by, and if I cannot look forward to like days in the future, I can at least live over again in memory the pleasures of the past.

Before we parted that day at Beaver Dam, Chubby placed his hand on my shoulder, his moistened eyes met mine, he whispered serenely, "An unseen finger [Mr. Buck] pulled the trigger today! This will be my last roundup at Beaver Dam. The next hunt we have, I shall meet you at water's edge with the Maker at my side. Your Dad along with the old timers will have their gumboots on ready to throw out the decoys if a limit is waiting!"

I half-whispered back, "I'll be ready when that day comes. I'll have my gumboots on. Tell the old timers that I want to meet them all and hear their stories. I want to know if it is true there were so many ducks in the bygone days that when they rose they blackened out the sun and the thunder emitted from their beating wings was heard miles away.

"Oh, what a day, glorious day this has been."

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On June 29, 2005, Dr. William "Chubby" Andrews went to the promise land, there to be with his Maker, his Dad, Mr. Buck, and the rest of the old timers.

Perhaps, he will be remembered as the man who brought the late Nash Buckingham's words to life in his book, "Nash Buckingham, Beaver Dam and Other Hunting Tales."

To me, however, Chubby will be remembered as a role model, for he loved Marje, his wife for 61 years, his family for 84 years, loved people, and loved life. However, "most of all he loved and dedicated his life to the Lord."

He appreciated "every sunset, every sunrise, and every bird that flew." To everyone, he was a "Giant of a Man: a Christian gentleman without peer."

I know he has passed through the pearly gates and is dancing in gold dust. (Published in DOUBLE GUN JOURNAL)