

Elk with ELEANOR

OUTDOOR LIFE
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ART BY HAYDEN LAMBSON

I went to Tucson from Kansas City as a junior pre-law student largely because I had read Jack O'Connor's early writings on desert hunting. I had gotten my first limited but delicious taste of the West a few years earlier as a freshman in the New Mexico Military Institute of Roswell. After shooting my first deer out of Alamogordo and banging prairie dogs with a treasured .30-06 while a student, I couldn't wait to get back out to the clear air and mountains.

On hopefully introducing myself to Jack after my arrival at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where he then taught journalism, I realized my dreams. He graciously invited me to join him on a deer hunt in the Kaibab during the Thanksgiving holiday. That was during Kaibab's heyday as hunting ground for huge mule deer before the herd almost bred itself into oblivion. Jack and I had a great time together, and we hunted together on other occasions during my next three years at Tucson. No one ever had a happier college education.

The pleasures of my stay in Arizona were further augmented by a friendship that developed between George Parker Jr., another noted desert hunter, and myself. He was stationed with the border patrol at Ruby, Arizona, a small mining settlement near the border west of Nogales. On weekends I loaded the car with groceries and drove down to stay with George and his wife. We shot together and rode the border. George was then several time state champion with both pistol and rifle, and he urged me to get into competitive pistol shooting. Under his tutelage I finally made the rating of distinguished expert and occasionally bested the state champion. Jack and George between them gave me an education such as no other gun-loving youngster ever had.

I guess I was pioneering some out there in the rugged West. I determined to adapt my short-barrel, scoped, and thinned-down Springfield to the tradition of the armed and mounted man. While a student in Jack's journalism class, I sold

my first story. Its title: "The Scope-Sighted Rifle on Horseback." I don't know who was more delighted, Jack or myself.

Before classes started during my second year at the University of Arizona, Jack and I went on a desert sheep hunt together in Mexico. We hunted in August, of all times—a story in itself. We bagged a pair of rams on a rugged trip, but I caught some kind of bug that laid me low, and the sickness finally led to an appendectomy. I couldn't start law school that semester.

By Thanksgiving, Jack and Eleanor were excited about Arizona's first open season on the elk herd that had been transplanted into the state beginning in 1915. I had healed up enough to go along. No doubt, the prospect of the coming hunt and the O'Connor's kindness hastened my recuperation. Their home with the two little boys made a warm haven for me. After the last Wednesday class, we found ourselves rolling up to Winslow and then south to the ranch of Lee and Verde Haight. While driving with them that night out to the camp they'd set up at the end of wheel tracks, we saw the eyes and ghostly forms of many deer. Our tents were in the Sitgreaves National Forest on the broad, pine-covered plateau of the Mogollon Rim above the rugged breaks where the land finally pitches down many thousands of feet to the desert floor. It was beautiful country at 8,000 feet.

I differ with Jack's recollection of snow on our first night in camp. Old pictures that Jack took show my elk was downed on a dry day before the snow began. And what keen young hunter would fail to remember every detail about taking his first bull elk, a magnificent golden animal with great branching antlers.

But the elk I killed wasn't the first one I saw. I still have the first one etched into my mind too. He rose facing me from behind a log in a lovely glade, wheeled, and melted into the woods while I stood there frozen in awe. All I could do was promise Verde Haight I'd do better

on the next one and pray that there would be another for me to do better on.

Later we were riding along quietly through needle-carpeted pine forest when three chocolate-and-tawny bulls appeared across a draw. They were moving through scattered trees on the hillside from right to left. I bailed out of the saddle, drew my rifle from the scabbard, and moved up a few yards. The bulls were about 75 yards away.

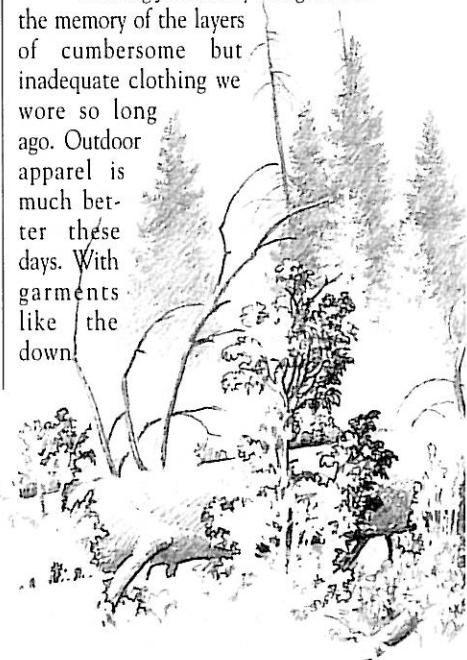
"The second one's best," Verde said.

As I fired, the bull humped up, and the line of animals passed behind a screen of smaller trees for a distance of 25 feet. Coming out, the former No. 2 was last in line, but he was still moving along with the others. After 50 yards, though, the bull suddenly fell.

There lay my prize. The 180-grain Bronze Point had performed perfectly. It went through just behind the shoulder where it belonged. Accustomed as I was to the dainty Coues' deer of southern Arizona and Sonora, to me that bull and his spreading rack looked immense. Having hunted elk since then in Wyoming and British Columbia, and having measured many record heads as a Boone and Crockett committee judge, I can say the head still looks good.

Verde and I were looking for a mule deer six miles from camp when the blizzard hit. A frigid blast from the north drove a nearly solid mass of flakes at us horizontally. We had to face the storm all the way back to camp. Without well-oriented horses, we would never have made it. We couldn't see anything ahead of us. You really appreciate a good pair of chaps at such a time, and my heavy woolen cavalry coat from my military school days served reasonably well too.

Reading Jack's story brought back the memory of the layers of cumbersome but inadequate clothing we wore so long ago. Outdoor apparel is much better these days. With garments like the down



Hayden Lambson

jacket and lightweight Neoprene parka suit in which I weathered so many Yukon, Alaskan, and British Columbian storms, the modern outdoorsman is well equipped, but no one has improved on chaps for rough going.

Jack remembered the bitter cold of those nights with only a homemade blanket bedroll to keep the O'Connors warm. I was relying on a sleeping bag made from my Kentucky grandmother's prized feather bed.

After a couple of nights of sleeping in the warm bag on an air mattress and leaving the bag closed in the frigid tent all day while hunting, I found myself lying in an icy puddle one night. By miserable morning, I figured out that body moisture condensed against the cold rubber mattress at night and freezes inside the sleeping bag during the day. It thaws when you get in again. I learned to take my sleeping bag off the air mattress during the day, turn it over, and dry it out.

After the blizzard and frigid blast blew themselves out that night, a bright blue sky looked down on the sparkling snow. The forest was fantastically beautiful. The tracks of great elk were everywhere, and wrist-thick cedar limbs had been hooked down for browse. I followed the tracks of a flock of wild turkeys for miles on horseback but never saw the wily birds. Somebody else got one, though, and Eleanor did herself proud on it over a smoky pine fire that night.

We had only till noon the next day to hunt, and I still wanted a crack at a mule deer. Verde and I hunted hard but finally gave up and headed back to camp over the snow on our patient mounts. I suddenly spotted a white, grey-

ringed bull's-eye about 125 yards away near a huge pine trunk and then made out the neck and horns of a deer above it. The bull's eye was a good buck's rump.

I slipped off the horse, pulled my rifle, and sat in the snow. The cross hairs of the old 4X Noske scope quartered the target, and they looked just right when the rifle went off. That scope was the cat's meow then. You should see the narrow field of view now!

The buck plummeted down into a cedar tangle. We rode over, tied our horses about 50 feet apart in the brush, and looked for the deer. Since we found no blood, Verde went around a knoll to the left and I went to the right. There was a maze of deer tracks in the snow, and we couldn't distinguish my buck's. We finally gave up and met back at the scene of the shot. Just then the deer lurched up out of the brush at our feet and between our horses. That deer started around the knoll to the left on three legs. Verde jumped to one side, and in the scope's narrow field I caught a flash of neck hair and fired. The buck folded in his tracks.

We found that the first bullet had hit almost dead center. It had broken the deer's hip and then it had ranged forward. The bullet had finally mushroomed perfectly against the

chest skin, and yet the buck had the vitality to jump up and run.

Going home, my Auburn roadster was heavily loaded. The elk quarters and head were in the rumble seat, the hooves sticking up high above the horns. The mule deer was lashed onto the trunk rack. Cars were more functional then. By the time I got to Prescott, I could stay awake no longer.

We had been trying to avoid freezing to death by sitting near sooty pine fires, and washing had been out of the question. I must have been quite a sight when I entered the old hotel in Prescott and asked for a room.

The clerk, however, accustomed as he was to grubby miners and long unwashed cowpokes, merely looked me up and down, elevated his nose, and asked, "Would you mind paying in advance?" He didn't know I owned a load of valuable meat.

Such were the benefits of higher education in the far West if you attended a school where Jack O'Connor taught. When my own son came along, the third in the family line to bear the same name, my abiding gratitude dictated that the C. used as a middle initial had to stand for Connor.

