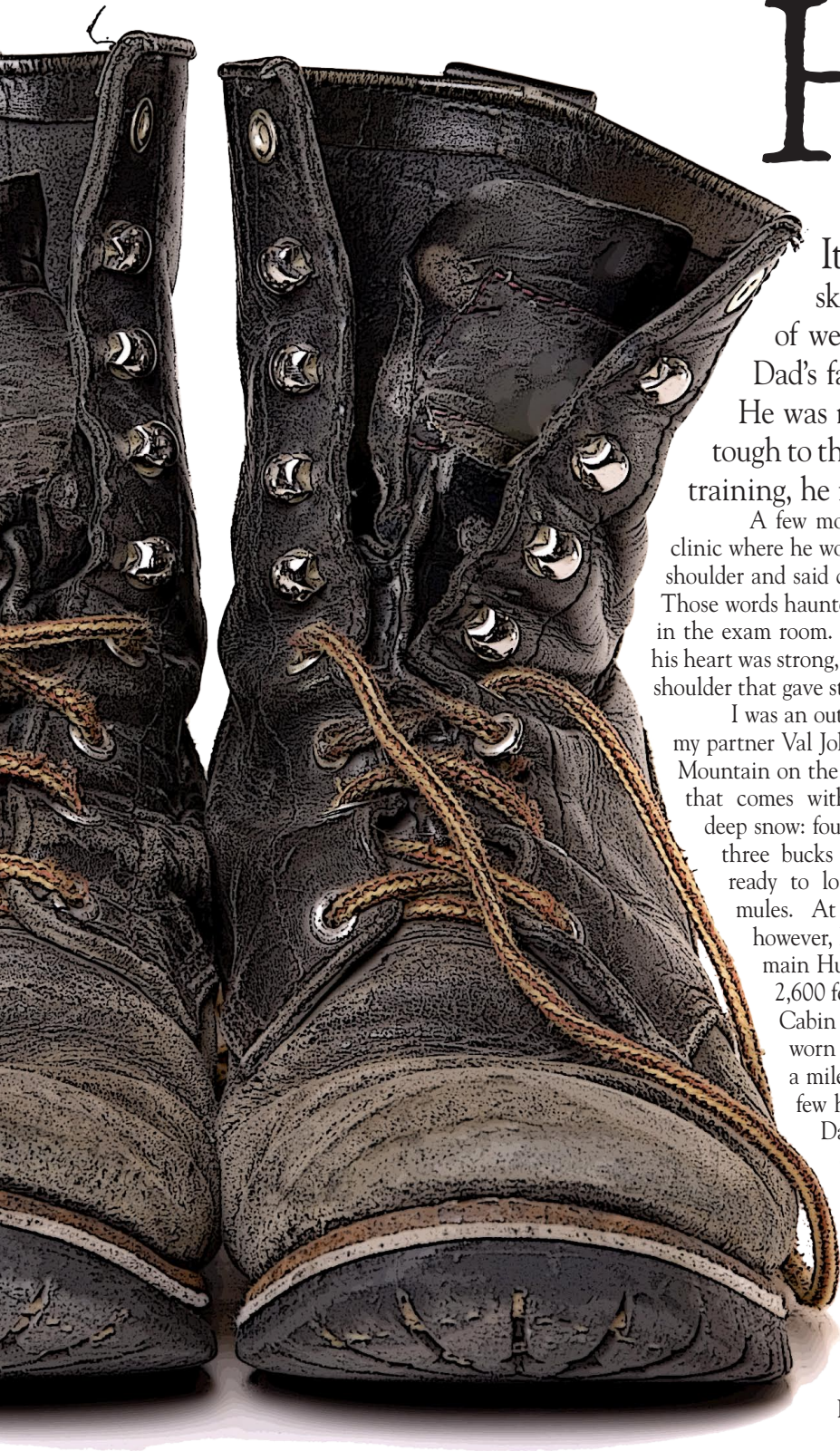


# An Old Hunter's Heart



It's early April and the dogwood and skunk cabbage are blooming in the foothills of western Oregon's Cascade Mountains, one of Dad's favorite times. He died a few days ago at 94. He was my hunting partner for more than 50 years, tough to the end. Tough was natural. In 1932, with little training, he ran a 4:24 mile at Willamette University.

A few months ago as I walked with him a short distance to the clinic where he would have an echocardiogram, he slipped his arm over my shoulder and said quietly, "Hold on strong son, the steps are coming hard." Those words haunted me as I watched the echocardiogram of his tired heart in the exam room. Then I remembered hearing them 37 years before when his heart was strong, and it was my steps that were coming hard, and it was his shoulder that gave strength, support, and comfort.

I was an outfitter/guide in 1970, operating out of Salmon, Idaho, with my partner Val Johnson. Dad was part of a late-November hunt near Grass Mountain on the Payette National Forest. We'd had one of those rare days that comes with the first deep snow: four bulls and three bucks down and ready to load on the mules. At sundown,

*Remembrance of Robert H. Mealey  
August 13, 1912, to April 5, 2007*

*By Stephen P. Mealey – April 22, 2007*

however, I was unsure whether our horses had been returned to the main Hungry Creek camp or were left for us tied 2-1/2 miles and 2,600 feet below at McCalla Creek. Dad stayed with the fire near Cabin Mountain, and I hiked down the trail—only to return worn out and without horses three hours later. There was shelter a mile or so away, and we started out. My legs cramped after a few hundred yards and even short steps were difficult. I heard Dad say quietly as he lifted my arm over his shoulder: "Hold on strong son, the steps are coming hard." We made the mile that way and then set up a rough camp. The next morning he would say: "Your granddad would've loved this."

Hunting was in our blood. We were bonded by it in our souls, and we didn't and couldn't talk about it. The feelings from all the times together, good and bad, went deeper than love.

My grandfather's home on the South Santiam River was a hunter's home. As a boy I remember massive

elk horns taken by him on an 1890s hunt adorning the entrance. Buck heads and horns covered nearly every doorway. Rifles, mostly Model 99 Savages and Model 1886 Winchesters, stood everywhere in corners but especially around the fireplace. Hunting was celebrated in pictures and in my grandfather's poetry, but mostly in stories. These were the most exciting and intimidating of all because they usually began with: "Your Uncle David was nine when he killed his

usually added: "Sleep cold and you're sure to be up to hunt early."

Dad and other hunters like him were efficient and effective products of their time: long on skill, knowledge, effort, desire, and success, and short on equipment and amenities. They didn't talk much about their success because they didn't have to. The horns in the barn told a silent but eloquent story. In the end, Dad was a "make do" guy.

**In 1993 grandfather, son, and grandson travelled to the Wapiabi River in Alberta for a moose hunt with Clayton Grosso. As noted on the hunting sticks carved by Dad – 3 generations, 3 kills, one shot each.**

**...I FOUND DAD IN SOCK FEET GUTTING A FINE, FAT FIVE-POINT BUCK. HIS LEATHER BOOTS HUNG ON A LIMB. "I WAS WITHIN 100 FEET," HE SAID. "COULDN'T HAVE GOT ON HIM WITH MY SHOES ON."**

first deer," or "Your dad was ten when he killed his first deer and twelve when he killed his first buck." I was filled with a mixture of pride in their success and fear that I might not measure up. I remember promising myself I'd try hard to become their equal.

Dad was 17 at the start of the Great Depression. The family was in the saw-mill, timber, and stump-ranching business, which was a difficult way to make a living. Mountain people like us ate venison and sold what beef they could. Since most everyone did the same, there was too much beef for good prices and too few deer for good hunting. Dad was called "little wolf" by his father, uncle, and brothers because of his hunting skill and success. He hunted nearly every weekend except in the spring and started earlier, stayed longer, and traveled farther than most. He seldom came home without "heart and liver." He was a crack snap shot. He had to be since deer were few and while usually close, they were almost always in the brush and moving. One running shot was the usual opportunity. Dad's rifle was a Savage Model 99, .25-35 with tang peep, perfect for the job. There was no target practice since the normal shooting situation on the hunt was impossible to simulate. Training was "on-the-job." Food, clothes, and other equipment were spare: rice, beans, boiled venison, wool pants and shirt, slicker, leather boots (usually wet), Ka-Bar knife, pitch, candle, matches, and compass. Camp was minimal: lean-to, open fire, frying pan, and coffee pot. "Make camp too fancy and comfortable and you might forget why you came," Dad would say. He

That was the humbling lesson of the Depression: make best use of what's at hand. The result was an unflinching focus on expert hunting skills and a minimum concern with "gear" and other frills.

Dad gave me my first rifle, a Winchester Model 63 .22 Long Rifle, along with his hand-written Creed of a Sportsman when I was 12. The message was clear: rifles, hunting, wild things, and ethics are inseparable. Last year he also gave me my last rifle, a Browning Model



1886 45-70 U.S. Forest Service, National Forest Centennial Edition, with clear direction that it goes to my son, and then to his son along with the Creed. Hunting and ethics are to remain inseparable in our family.

Dad was with me at age 14, the first year I could legally hunt deer in Oregon, when I missed a doe, the first deer I ever sighted on. "You'll connect next time," he said. I was with him in Wyoming when at 87 he killed his last elk. However, we rarely hunted together. Usually, especially in the early days, he gave me a map of the hunt with compass bearings describing a rect-

angle or triangle, allowing me to hunt into the wind and to return to beginning. Later, I planned the hunts myself. At first I didn't see much but compass and map and traveled at least a little scared. In short time what mattered most was finding a buck. Anyway, on one of those early hunts I cut his tracks as I followed the planned route; he was never far away.

Our first long hunt was in early October 1957. We packed the camp on two horses to Washington Ponds in what is now the Mt. Washington Wilderness. A good canvas tarp made an open-sided shelter. We had two capoc sleeping bags

zipped together with wool blankets inside. We never shed our black wool longjohns. The bed was laid on saddle pads and those on mountain hemlock boughs. At the start, breakfast was boiled rice and raisins ("spotted dog"), bacon, eggs, and coffee. Lunch was sandwiches of peanut butter and mom's apple butter. Dinner was unpredictable combinations of Campbell's soup and Dinty Moore stew with frying-pan bread and coffee, followed by canned peaches. We cooked over an open fire. I figured the menu was incentive to get venison quick and improve the fare. Evidence was a sack of potatoes and onions reserved for heart, liver, and backstraps.

We hunted the open hemlock where deer were eating mushrooms. Dad said to hunt slow, quiet, and always against the wind. I did, daylight-to-dark for three days, but only jumped deer out of range. With a recent dry spell, the forest floor was brittle; going quiet was hard. The fourth morning I heard a shot from the .25-35 and five minutes later two more quick ones, signaling a kill. A quarter-mile later, I found Dad in sock feet gutting a fine, fat five-point buck. His leather boots hung on a limb.

"I was within 100 feet," he said. "Couldn't have got on him with my shoes on."

Predictably, the menu improved. I didn't get a shot that hunt, but I did learn to "do what it takes," which meant on that trip, hunt a lot with shoes around my neck.

**HE TOOK A SOLID REST AND MADE A GOOD SHOT. WITH THE ELK GOING DOWN, HE LOOKED BACK AND SAID, "NOT SURE WHO GOT THE WORST OF IT." THE RIFLE LACKED A MUZZLE BRAKE THEN AND KICKED LIKE A MULE... DAD LOOKED BACK ACROSS THE CANYON...AND SAID MOSTLY TO HIMSELF, "IF I HAVE TO USE A RIFLE LIKE THAT .300 TO GET MEAT ON THE GROUND, IT'S TIME FOR THE OLD MAN TO HANG IT UP."**



That wasn't the last time I was to see Dad in sock feet dressing a close-shot buck or bull elk.

Fall of 1974, Dad and I, along with hunting partner Monte Barker, had an elk camp on Lewis Creek south of Hyalite Peak in the Gallatin Range in Montana. Dad had hauled his saddle horse from Oregon for the trip and had stopped in Butte for lunch. Two days later in camp, he was down sick with food poisoning. By the third day, Monte and I had two elk to pack, and Dad seemed no better. On the way back to camp with a load of meat, we heard a single shot, and five minutes later two more.

Monte said, "I don't believe it!"  
"You'd better," I replied.

Camp was empty when we got there. We unloaded the meat and headed out in the direction of the shots. We found Dad about a mile up the canyon, nearly finished quartering a spike bull.

His face was pale but he had a big smile when he said, "Chances to hunt elk are a lot scarcer than

chances to be sick, so I figured I better hunt. Truth is I couldn't stand being the only one in camp without meat."

He saw me look at his boots, not completely laced to the top. "The spike was digging for pine nuts in the squirrel middens under the whitebark pine. I had to be extra quiet to get up on him; boots got in the way." The empty .348 Winchester case was near a downed log 60 yards away where Dad was kneeling when he shot.

In 1962, we were hunting the steep ridges under Rebel Rock on the McKenzie River's South Fork. It was a typical October day in the Cascades: temperature around 38 degrees, steady, light rain, and everywhere blowing and drifting fog limited visibility at times to gun-barrel distance. By coincidence we had come together late morning under a high bluff. We sat there out of the wind for 15 minutes or so, not saying much but both of us shivering with the chill.

Finally, Dad said to no one in particular, "Being a man is knowing how to be cold."

I didn't respond, and a few minutes later we separated to continue the hunt. I worked my way down the ridge into a strong wind and into some protected breaks with good cover. A nice buck was feeding

**LEFT:** Dad with his last elk taken on a hunt with son Steve and grandson Robert in the Shoshone National Forest in 1999. **BELOW:** Ten years earlier, the men were joined by the author's brother Bill on a High Oregon Cascades buck hunt. All four were successful.



## THE CREED OF A SPORTSMAN

TO MY SON STEPHEN  
CHRISTMAS 1954

MAY I GROW TO KNOW INTIMATELY THE SECRETS OF THE FOREST AND FIELD.

MAY I LEARN TO BE A TRUE SPORTSMAN, KEEN OF EYE, SOUND OF HEART AND SOUL.

MAY I STRIVE TO UNDERSTAND AND PROFIT FROM THE CRITICISM OF MY FELLOWS AND MY OWN INTROSPECTION.

MAY I ASPIRE TO A TRUE KNOWLEDGE OF THE RIGHTS OF THE WILD ONES AND MY FELLOW MAN.

MAY I EVER BE HUMBLE AS I TREAD THE PATHWAYS OF THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE.

MAY I SET MY MIND AND WILL, INTOLERANT OF DEVIANT WAYS, AND TRULY ON THE COURSE OF RIGHT, AND IN THE PLAIN SIGHT OF MY GOD.

FROM YOUR FATHER:  
ROBERT H. MEALEY

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The two Roberts take a snooze during a 1995 hunt in Oregon's High Cascades.

in a small opening 50 yards or so below. He dropped in his tracks with one shot from the .30-30 at the base of the neck. I made a pack of him and reached the truck late afternoon where Dad was waiting. It was snowing lightly.

"Best thing I've seen all day," he said. "Looks like you whipped the cold."

Preserving our hunts was important to Dad. He sometimes recorded important events on a "hunting stick." He would smooth one side for notes. Then he would notch the edge, one for each day of the hunt. He made two such sticks for a moose hunt that he, my son (his grandfather's namesake), and I made with Alberta outfitter Clayton Grosso. At trip's end, he noted on the sticks, "Wapiabi R., 1993 Can.: 3 generations, 3 kills, one shot each." He also noted for day one of the hunt, "bull-Steve"; for day three, "bull-Grandad"; and for the eighth and last day, "bull-Robert." My son and I each have a stick. Mine rests below a framed copy of the Creed in my gun cabinet.

Dad's last hunt was in 1999 in elk country he loved in the upper reaches of Robber's Roost Creek on the Shoshone National Forest near Cody, Wyoming. Grandson Robert, good friend Bob Model, and I were along. On the fifth day we spotted a small bunch of elk low on the side of a ridge about 350 yards away. Dad carried his Remington 721 .30-06 with 200-grain factory loads. "That's pretty far for me and this outfit," he said. I offered my new .300 Remington Ultra Mag, saying it was zeroed for 300 yards and to hold just a few inches above "dead on."

He took a solid rest and made a good shot. With the elk going down, he looked back and said, "Not sure who got the worst of it." The rifle lacked a muzzle brake then and kicked like a mule. We packed meat the next day. After it was loaded on the horses, Dad looked back across the canyon to where he had shot from the day before and said mostly to himself, "If I have to use a rifle

like that .300 to get meat on the ground, it's time for the old man to hang it up."

He did. He believed he could no longer successfully use the skills and equipment that had served him all his life, and he wasn't about to change. His respect and love for the elk and deer he had hunted so successfully all his life now outweighed his need to pull the trigger on any rifle again. I didn't seriously ask him to join another hunt.

My brother Bill and I hired an outfitter to pack our camp into and out of Linton Meadows in Oregon's Three Sisters Wilderness for the 2003 early September High Cascades buck season. We had a good hunt with two nice bucks and a fat bear on the meatpole. More important, we had a good camp—more elaborate than Dad would have had, especially in the early years. The camp had three chairs around the fire, one for Bill, one for me, and an empty one, the chair of honor, for Dad. We covered it when it snowed and when it rained, and only occasionally used it as a place to temporarily set the biscuits and backstraps. We didn't talk about it much, but we both knew that empty chair symbolized the legacy that brought us together in that special place. That legacy represented all the best things an outdoorsman can be.

Right now, I plan to keep an extra empty chair in my hunting camps. It will honor the old hunter's heart and spirit that stood for great hunting and outdoor skills, high ethics, self reliance, humility, resourcefulness, toughness, patience, perseverance, and perhaps most of all respect for the lives of wild things and restraint in ending those lives and understanding the connection between the two.

However, in the future I can see a day when that chair might be used by a grandson or granddaughter who wants to learn and understand. That would bring joy to that old hunter's heart and to mine too. ■