

AMERICA'S SENIOR RANKING SPORTSMAN



WITH ATTENTION RIGHTFULLY FOCUSED ON THE NEXT GENERATION OF HUNTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR COUNTRY'S WILDLIFE RESOURCES AND THE PRIVILEGES AND INHERENT RESPONSIBILITIES ASSOCIATED WITH CONSUMPTIVE CONSERVATION, IT IS EASY TO OVERLOOK THE VETERANS OF OUR SPORT. THIS HEARTWARMING ACCOUNT EXPOSES THE LIFE OF A GENTLEMAN CONSIDERED BY MANY TO BE AMERICA'S OLDEST, ACTIVE WHITETAIL DEER HUNTER. SO, PULL UP A CHAIR, MY FRIEND, AND PREPARE TO BE IMPRESSED!

MIKE ROBERTS

**NATURALIST AND OUTREACH EDUCATOR
THE WARD BURTON WILDLIFE FOUNDATION**

Photos Courtesy of Author

Clyde Andrew Roberts was born

in rural Bedford County Virginia, on October 29, 1913. From a historical perspective, Henry Ford was in his fifth year of mass-producing the tin lizzie and Woodrow Wilson was elected to succeed Theodore Roosevelt as president of the United States. Congress ratified the Constitution's 16th Amendment, thus making income tax a permanent component of the American dream. The nation's workforce earned, on average, 20 cents per hour, but sons and daughters of the wealthy attended college, socialized, and reveled in team sports. A year later, James Jordan harvested a buck in Wisconsin that would reign as the No. 1 Boone and Crockett whitetail for 79 years, and the last passenger pigeon on this planet died in the Cincinnati Zoo. What's more, America would soon send a generation of young men into battle on foreign soil, and a decade later face economic disaster. Although events of the early 20th century framed the destiny of America's citizens, hope for the future was securely wrapped in red, white, and blue fabric and continued to be based on individual liberties, the pursuit of happiness, and a higher level of personal work ethics. Clyde's major childhood responsibility was keeping enough firewood and kindling split to enable his mother to cook three meals a day and keep the big, two-story house warm during winter. In addition, the boy's daily routine included fetching buckets of water from the spring and transporting them several hundred yards to the framed dwelling. Life on the small farm required the unwavering support of two parents and their five children because there was a garden to work, livestock to tend, hay to save, and crops to plant and harvest. The family's only income came from an allotment of dark tobacco and the sale of a few calves and smoke-cured hams. Economically, times were tough!



Even with a long list of chores, as a youngster Clyde still found time for having some fun. Oft times he played with the muzzleloading rifle his grandfather, John Roberts, had used during the Civil War. Grandpa John was wounded in the Battle of Seven Pines near Richmond, but after recovering from the injury, he was sent to Gettysburg where he survived the war's bloodiest conflict. Clyde was warned never to put a percussion cap on the rifle because it was still loaded.

Exposure to hunting came early in Clyde's life; the 10-year-old used a short-barreled shotgun and cheap ammunition to put food on the table. There were no whitetail deer or wild turkeys in Bedford County back in the day, but cottontails were abundant. Chasing them with dogs

was the preferred method; however, the lad was equally skilled at catching rabbits in box traps and snares. Most of the bunnies ended up in the pot at home, though some were saved for his uncle who sold them at the town market. Sale price for cottontails shot with a gun was 15 cents; those trapped fetched 25 cents. And he had to leave one furry foot attached on each carcass because dishonest people sometimes attempted to slip in a domestic cat or two.

Jack Roberts, Clyde's father, was a devout Christian and strict disciplinarian; he did not permit family members to work, play ball, or hunt and fish on the Sabbath. Only once did the youngster break that rule. Upon returning home after nightfall and being questioned about the afternoon's activity, he admitted to

having gone fishing with a friend. The elder Roberts told his son because of being honest there would be no punishment, but if it happened again, consequences would be sure and swift. He never fished again on Sunday!

Clyde attended school in a cramped, one-room building located in the Orrix community—a mile walk from home. Classes were simply reading, writing, and arithmetic. Seventh grade was the extent of his formal education, because there was no high school in the county at the time. So, the following summer, the 12-year-old boy began his working career—peeling bark from pulpwood. That tough, nasty job earned him 10 cents an hour; workdays were 10 hours long.

The initial part of Clyde's employment was focused on either cutting timber or sawing lumber. Felling the huge hardwood trees was accomplished using a two-man, 5-foot, cross-cut saw. Often the tree diameter was so thick there was less than 6 inches of free blade travel. The massive, 8-foot logs were snaked out of the forest by a pair of stout oxen or mules. Pay amounted to one dollar per day.

Three years later, Clyde signed on with a boiler-fired sawmill where he became adept at sawing lumber and earning a whopping 35 cents per hour. Ironically, that particular job exempted him from World War II; the mill owner had a government contract to supply lumber for construction of the Radford Arsenal—one of the U. S. Army's primary ammunition storage facilities.

Working at a sawmill and farming left little time to hunt during daylight hours. So Clyde turned to night hunting. Because there were few raccoons in central Virginia during the 1930s, he and his friends focused on opossums.

Once the hounds had treed one of the pathetic looking marsupials, the hunters tied their hounds and either shook the possum out or cut the small tree, which allowed the critter to escape unharmed. Minutes later the dogs were released to chase and tree the animal a second time. Catch-and-release possum hunting!

By the late 1940s, local raccoon populations had rebounded somewhat. Throughout the designated season, weather permitting, Clyde and a neighbor spent at least three nights each week roaming the creek bottoms with their hounds. Being in the prime of life, he survived that rigorous lifestyle on a few hours' sleep.

This man's story would be incomplete without mention of his religious beliefs. At age 16, while attending revival services at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Clyde dedicated his life to serving Jesus Christ. In accordance with the scriptures, the teenager was baptized in Buttermilk Creek on a cold, frosty, November morning and still talks about the freezing water that took away his breath. These days he continues to read the Bible daily, returns thanks before each meal, routinely prays, and still drives to church on Sunday morning. Even while on hunting trips to Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho, Clyde remained in camp on the Sabbath.

After retiring from public work in 1978, the aging farmer continued raising beef cattle. Even so, Clyde was concerned about idle time. That's when Nadine, his wife of 65 years, stepped up to the plate; she presented her husband with a new rifle with which to hunt deer—a game species he had never pursued. In addition, his son and a friend gifted him a dozen leg-hold traps. Purchasing a lifetime Virginia hunting and trapping license, for \$5, Clyde



After retiring at the age of 65, Clyde received a new rifle and began hunting deer for the first time.

sprinted out of the gate. For the following 12 years, the retiree occupied himself by successfully outwitting red and gray foxes, raccoons, bobcats, beaver, river otters, mink, and muskrats.

Then, while checking traps one cold morning, Clyde fell three times. Realizing something was amiss, his wife drove him to the doctor's office where X-rays revealed a benign tumor growing near the inner ear. Weeks later, doctors at the University of Virginia Medical Center removed the tumor. Although successful, the operation resulted in total hearing loss of the left ear. Yet, by deer season, he was ready to climb into his tree stand.

Since retirement, Clyde has hunted whitetail deer every year except one. Sometime in the mid-1990s, while watching neighbors unload his Angus bull from a cattle trailer, the deranged animal attacked the bystander. Even after the men beat the massive bull off his hapless victim, he returned for a second round. With their respected friend lying unconscious, the neighbors feared the worst! Following a painful ride to the hospital in an emergency vehicle, x-rays indicated a dislocated shoulder and several broken ribs. Clyde had survived another close call, but those slow-healing injuries prevented him from shooting a rifle or climbing a tree stand that fall.

In 2013 Clyde Roberts celebrated 100 years of life by climbing, unassisted, 20 feet up into his favorite tree stand—a permanent structure that overlooked an old field he plowed with a team of horses as a boy. Imagine the memories! On the third evening of muzzleloader season, just as the setting sun kissed the western horizon, a 20-inch six-pointer stepped out of the woods and began thrashing

his antlers into the low-hanging limbs of a red cedar. Whispering, "That's the one I've been waiting for," Clyde touched off the shot. Moments later, when approaching the downed whitetail, the emotional hunter murmured aloud, "Thank you Lord for one more buck!" Before season's end, he had harvested four additional deer, two while hunting alone.

One of Clyde's all-time favorite deer hunts occurred during Virginia's 2016 muzzleloading season—at age 103. His granddaughter, Christin Elliott, carried him to vote on Tuesday morning and then, as a seasoned deer hunter herself, accompanied her "Papa" to his stand in the afternoon. About an hour into the hunt, a handsome buck followed two does out into the field 75 yards from where they sat. A single shot from the .50 caliber, CVA Accura anchored the biggest buck of Clyde's life.

Last August, Clyde's son constructed a roomy, new stand for his father—one with the conveniences of steps, handrails, and a comfortable bench seat, but still 20 feet above ground level. Then, just days before the 2018 muzzleloader season opener, a senior editor for a major outdoor magazine phoned to request an interview and perhaps some time spent in a tree stand with America's oldest deer hunter. Who could turn down such a request?

To summarize the three tiring days of interviews, photography, and afternoon hunts, the centenarian passed up the first 12 bucks that walked within shooting range—all too young. Finally, on the third evening, a fat, 3-year-old, eight-pointer eased out to feed. In a matter of moments, Clyde had the scope's crosshairs centered squarely on the deer's shoulder. After the smoke cleared, the buck lay

lifeless. That magazine editor left Virginia humbled and impressed with his new friend.

During the first week of general rifle season, Clyde dropped a long-tined, mature, eight-pointer on a friend's farm in Halifax County. That was the 13th deer Clyde had harvested since turning 100. What an accomplishment!

These days, at 105, Clyde Roberts' hands are not as steady as they once were and his legs not nearly as strong. Regardless, this senior retains the spirit and tenacity of a person half his age. Although his coon-hunting days are over, Clyde greatly anticipates next year's deer season. Having watched two homes burn to the ground, and after losing a beloved wife and cherished grandson, this honorable man continues trusting a higher power. Whenever someone asks him about the most influential change experienced during his lifetime, he replies, "Getting electricity," but when questioned about the secret to longevity, the immediate response is, "Hard work and living for the Lord!" ■

EXPOSURE TO HUNTING CAME EARLY IN CLYDE'S LIFE; THE 10-YEAR-OLD USED A SHORT-BARRELED SHOTGUN AND CHEAP AMMUNITION TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE. THERE WERE NO WHITETAIL DEER OR WILD TURKEYS IN BEDFORD COUNTY BACK IN 1923, BUT COTTONTAILS WERE ABUNDANT.



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