

Honing Your Skills...

# The Past As The Present

## Traditional Hunting Archery

By **Greg Tinsley**  
Editor in Chief

Photos courtesy of author

When I was first asked to discuss why I've exclusively taken up ancient tackle for all of my hunting archery adventures, *what a cake assignment*, I thought; *easy money*. Why does one at midlife abandon the absolute joys of bowhunting with legal, state-of-the-art archery systems and de-evolve into bows first designed in the dark recesses before the rise of human civilization? Climbing Mount Everest with supplemental oxygen under the watchful eyes of professional mountaineers seems a superbly difficult, death-defying, and socially acceptable procedure. Yet people continue to accomplish, fail, and often die on solo, bareback climbs in the Death Zone. Why give up on super-efficient, fun-to-shoot, bow-and-arrow systems for the archaic bent stick?

Greg Tinsley, right, with son Brooks and the younger bowman's first archery elk. Although the author returned home without an elk of his own, this 2007 New Mexico adventure will always remain as his most memorable hunting experience with traditional archery equipment.





I'll knock out a discourse about my return to bowhunting with traditional gear in an hour. Wrong. Apparently, my archery soul, and my ability to decisively express complex emotion are respectively elusive and broken. And so, I suddenly teeter more deeply into this cavern of sport, religion, tradition, and modern culture with the poor, average writer's trepidation and dread...

Regarding the super-technical, high-risk, athletically elite stuff—say, hang gliding from the rims of volcanoes, BASE jumping and the like—I suppose it's the adrenaline dump, the physical and mental addiction to thrill seeking along with measures of egomania and a few shots of death wish that drives these wanton X-Game hard-cores. With my nose metaphorically pressed to a 17-inch slab of Plexiglas, from the outside looking in at some of the freakish things these folks do, altogether defying death seems to be one heck of a fire-breathing cocktail.

The iconic archer, Fred Bear, spoke famously to the emergence of this niche culture of the new thrill-seeking youth in an interview sometime before his own, otherwise quiet, death. He said, and I paraphrase: If these kids want excitement then they should try hunting brown bears with bows and arrows. At hearing Bear say that in person, Tom Siatos—the Rolex timepiece spokesperson, the WWII island-fighting survivor, the men's magazine publisher and the dangerous game adventurer—might well have slammed his palm down mightily on a table and roared: "Now that's archery, boy!"

I knew both Bear and Siatos. Bear lived vicariously for the most part through his classic film shorts, his book, *Fred Bear's Field Notes*, one stunningly unforgettable face-to-face exchange and through a short hunt with a few of his best friends at his beloved Michigan hunting camp, Grousehaven, the year after his passing. As the editor of a couple of popular hunting magazines, I worked with Siatos for several years up through his retirement, well beyond the

last of the "country club days," as he put it. Both of these influential men were way, way larger than life.

I suppose my return to the true stick and string was led by a curious fascination with the hunting and the shooting exploits of these old-school dudes. Fred Bear's way at the top of my list, but there's a good collection of other men, including the likes

of film genre—will never be equaled. Back then, our archery club, the one with an abbreviated NFAA course behind Robert Petty's house, primarily gathered once a month to discuss club business for nine minutes and then watch Bear Archery films, twice or three times back-to-back. They were shown using a reel-to-reel movie projector, for goodness sakes! People were very upset when the

films became hard to get and, in fact, I believe that the dissipation of these cinemas was one reason why that club folded. From wild sheep to Kodiak bruins, Bear, of course, did all of his work with the ultra-erotic, recurve-limbed bow.

I suppose it may be difficult to be truly sentimental regarding traditional archery tackle without these underpinnings. Feelings or emotions governed by the romantic and the nostalgic—sentiment—is a powerful thing that requires seasoning and perhaps some connection to a bygone era before sentimentality can even be recognized.

It was after I left the job in the big city a decade ago that I found myself able to shoot daily without the fear of nicking the next-door neighbor. I finally became pretty good with a compound bow and all its accompanying bells and whistles. I'd been decent to start with, so legitimate 50- and 60-yard pinwheel groups with hunting tackle

loomed for me as the next archery frontier.

And then along about 2001 I enjoyed a chance meeting with John Fazio in a New Mexico elk camp, a loquacious old friend who'd become a very serious traditional bowyer. Fazio is known in small circles as a master craftsman of recurve bows. The design that I fell for in elk camp was a fairly innocuous period piece fashioned after the bows Bear used throughout the 1950s. Fazio calls that model Trident [a few other custom and semi-custom bowyers are making similar models], and I quickly learned that the Trident was by tangible degrees functionally superior to anything Bear, the great bowmaster and inventor, had ever conceived.

Fazio told me early on in my re-discovery of traditional tackle that to hunt

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of Jim Dougherty, Bob Swinehart, Howard Hill, Ben Pearson, Larry Bamford, Steve Gorr, Judd Cooney, Bill Negley, Bob Lee, and H.R. "Dutch" Wambold, the author of a masterpiece of hunting literature titled, *Bowhunting for Deer*. Who, as a youth in the late 1970s, would not be predisposed to the old ways when holding their first issue of M.R. James and company's *Bowhunter* magazine, or by watching the edited-for-television version of John Boorman's treatment of James Dickey's *Deliverance*, both strategically timed boosters to the absolute joy I was then discovering by way of hunting with traditional bows?

Bear's numbing record with dangerous game—and his relentless promotion of bowhunting in America through the short-

with these ancient effects was “to walk with the ghosts of the greatest hunters who ever lived.” I liked the sound of that.

I’ve never been crazy about tinkering with sightpins, stretched cables, and mechanical arrow rests. With the stickbow, I mainly shoot. I’ve come to appreciate and lean towards minimalism. Stickbows end the need for the mechanical release aid, the digital range finder, the can of graphite spray and the accompanying backup redundancies. Although the nuisance of their overall length certainly negates some of the performance gap, pure bows weigh near nothing, which is tremendously convenient on the first or the ninth day in the mountains. Make no mistake, with practice these minimally modernized arcs of hewn woods, glasses, and epoxies are as spectacularly lethal at short range as the crashing blows from the .338 Ultra Mag. But, in the case of traditional hunting archery, the black ink in the “results” column is almost always applied by users who must perpetually practice with their tools. That suits me, because I love the “practice” of archery.

My brother-in-law Dick Billingsley died last November, but well after morphing from a staunch rifleman to a traditional archer. Billingsley believed that Aldo Leopold and his essays on conservation in 1949’s *A Sand County Almanac*, probably saved hunting in America along about the ‘50s and ‘60’s. Leopold, author of the *Land Ethic*, certainly smoothbored his way through braces of waterfowl, grouse, and twittering timber cocks. But, he favored the old longbow for big game. From Part III: *A Taste for Country, Wildlife in American Culture*, Leopold writes:

“I have the impression that the American sportsman is puzzled; he doesn’t understand what is happening to him. Bigger and better gadgets are good for industry, so why not for the outdoor recreation? It has not dawned on him that outdoor recreations are essentially primitive, atavistic; that their value is a contrast-value; that excessive mechanization destroys contrasts by moving the factory to the woods or to the marsh.”

Billingsley’s critique delivers a solid bull’s-eye, I believe; *Almanac* on the whole is enormously the most eloquent and important “outdoor” book of the last century, perhaps for all of time.

Finally, for me at least, the stickbow is a mysterious symbol cleaved from the eons that best represents where I am personally, or where I think I want to be, as a hunting archer. And with every measure, I’m finding that I’m now overrunning the most supreme of all of the big-game challenges when I chase parallel to the title of Howard Hill’s classic, *Hunting the Hard Way*. ■

