

Journal

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From First Principles to the Last Hunt

by Micah A. Clark

As I look back, I can see now that muzzleloading had been interwoven through my life, somewhat unwittingly, until I actually entered the black powder arena and the NMLRA a few years ago. My earliest memory of blowing smoke came when I was a youngster in the early 70s, mimicking Fess Parker as Daniel Boone. Back then we didn't have 100 television channels. If the antenna's tin foil was crimped right we might have four. Still I believe that having the choice between *The Daniel Boone Show*, *Gunsmoke*, or reruns of *The Lone Ranger* made for a far better America than what fills minds now.

Though it could get a child expelled from school today, my yard was Boonesboro and I played as if it were real, in broad sight of my neighbors who to me were not friendly Indians like Mingo. My BB gun was often my Kentucky Rifle, and like the frontiersmen, I rarely went anywhere outside without it. Once, I ordered a brochure from a company that made a BB gun that really looked like a Kentucky Rifle and I pestered my dad to buy it. As I recall, it was around \$100, a small fortune then and now for a BB gun. The dream of my Daisy as Crockett's "Betsy" or Boone's "Tick-licker" would have to live on in my imagination.

Sometime in the mid-70's my father read an article in a hunting magazine that captivated both of us at the time, though for different reasons. It was written by a man who had set aside his .22 rimfire squirrel rifle for a Pennsylvania longrifle – just like Fess Parker's! From that point on, dreaming of squirrel hunting with a black powder rifle never really left me.

Dad, however, was intrigued by the attitude of the author, who called him-



self a sportsman rather than a hunter. To this author, taking a squirrel with a .32 caliber Kentucky longrifle was like taking a deer or buffalo. Not be-

ing black powder hunters back then, we merely thought this author's step back was something like removing the scopes from our Ruger 10/22's and



using iron sights. A notion that makes me laugh now!

In that article, the author's respect for his prey was off the charts. His love of hunting through all the peripherals of the outdoors connected with my dad like no other article he had read. He found this same mindset in recent years when I took him to various primitive shows and reenactments. Though a lifelong hunter, Dad loathed today's hunting television shows and the filmed "high-five" of the kill. He often told me, "If you have to kill an animal to enjoy hunting, you shouldn't even be in the woods."

For Dad, the woods were like sacred ground. It was there where he was closest to God, much to the chagrin of our pastor who once complained of our missing Sunday School during squirrel and deer seasons. My father sternly informed him that I was learning just as much about the presence of the Lord under a tree as I was in the pew. He reminded him that we were regularly in church all other times of the year.

Speaking of church, the Bible instructs us to "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it." This proverb applies to hunting too. Some of the vir-



The author's son, Ben and father, Don

tues of hunting that muzzleloading has in droves are self-control, patience, and respect for nature. His first rule of squirrel hunting was drilled into me after all of his safety instructions. His rule was to always let the first squirrel you see pass out of respect for the animal. He said, "Almost anyone can walk into a woods and kill a squirrel, but a real sportsman can enjoy hunting without ever touching the trigger." He insisted, "You're not a real hunter until you can not shoot an animal."

Dad made a big deal out of what we saw as much as what we harvested. In fact, in forty years of hunting together, I never saw my father take more than one squirrel per hunt. His view was that it is far better to go hunting five times, than to kill five squirrels in one hunt. Again, it was about being there (a lesson I later learned was also the key to fatherhood).

Last fall, Dad and I traveled from Indiana to Missouri for the 36th year in a row for our annual hunting trip. In 2011, I had hunted deer almost exclusively with my Lyman Great Plains .50 caliber flintlock. That rifle is easy and forgiving compared to my sometimes-frustrating .32 cal. longrifle. A deer's vital area seems enormous compared to trying to hit a running golf ball sized target bounding along the treetops. Moreover, these Missouri grey squirrels seemed like they were highly caffeinated compared to our fox squirrels back home.

With dad getting up in years, after 35 straight years of deer hunting, we chose to travel early to our property for an easier and warmer October squirrel hunt. By this point, I was confident enough to hunt squirrels like Daniel Boone. It was a passing of the old and a



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beginning of the new – far more than I knew at the time. It was my first squirrel hunt using black powder and I am not sure which one of us was more excited about it.

The colors of the Ozarks were incredible that year and the fall weather was wonderful. Over and over Dad said, “Why didn’t we do this before? It is so beautiful here right now.” On the third evening, my Goex propelled .310 ball struck home about 30 minutes after I

heard the boom of “twin tubes” Dad’s .20 gauge side-by-side, which had been an anniversary present from Mom forty-five years earlier.

The day before I had sent a shot right over the head of a startled grey, whom I believe ran clear to the next county. As the sun dropped below the mountains and darkness crept in, I met Dad seated at the tree where we had split up. We compared the beauty of our prizes for a while and then walked back to deer camp. Under the light of our propane lanterns, at our cabin we built in 1990, we cleaned our squirrels on our kitchen table reminiscing about all we saw, the challenges of black powder, and many memories from our past years.

Dad went home to heaven not long ago, still longing for one more hunt. I think now that he knew his time was running out. On Fathers Day, after he had opened his gifts, he shocked everyone when said that he had a gift to give. He then handed my 10 year-old son his keys to our cabin.

This year will be my first Ozark hunt without Dad, but the first with my son. Recently, I took Ben to our local woods with my .32 Crockett over my shoulder. I found myself unexpectedly repeating Dad’s adages to him. I’d catch

myself, only to see me in my mind’s eye at 10 again, hearing Dad’s same words coming from my mouth.

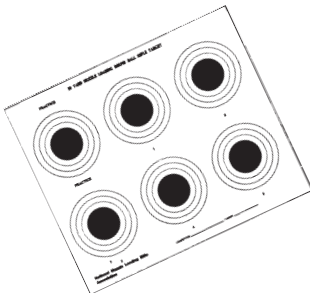
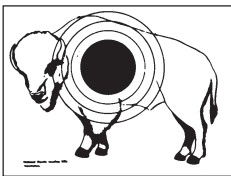
If hunting and blackpowder are worth anything, it is not in the game that we take or the shots that we make, it is in those values, traditions, and memories that we hold dear and pass on against the cultural tide. I think that after forty years of instruction and hunting together that is what Dad most wanted me to know.



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