



The Following Story

MY FIRST DEER HUNT

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YANKEE-NEVADAN
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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

First Deer Hunt

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Six months of life in the West did not dull my enthusiasm for it. On the contrary, I found myself looking for reasons and excuses to stay.

The long summer days were being replaced by the short, crisp, clear ones of autumn. The meadows had long since turned brown, and now, high in the Ruby Range, brilliant, golden leaves disclosed patches of quaking aspen that had gone unnoticed when clad in summer green. The sun's low-slanting rays enhanced the contrasting hues of tan, gray and purple, and produced alternating triangular shapes of light and dark on west-tending canyons and ridges. It was my favorite time of the year.

Unknown to (and un-appreciated by) the average city-dweller, autumn in the country virtually cries out to the hunter. It is a call of the wild, a call that draws out the most fundamental of man's instincts: to pit his prowess against that of the wily beast. After all, whether or not one admits to it, man has always been the consummate predator. And is it any less admirable to prey on wild animals than on those in captivity, such as cattle and sheep? I think not. At least the wild ones have the freedom to exercise their cunning and survival abilities.

Other than a few forays after squirrels I had done little hunting in the East (partly due to the war-time limitation on ammunition), so I was eager to try my hand at the sport in Nevada. I was introduced, first, to rabbit shooting. I say shooting rather than hunting because jackrabbits were so plentiful one hardly had to hunt for them. They existed in the old Bullion Road area, southwest of Elko, by the hundreds, perhaps thousands. It was impossible to drive that road without hitting two or three of them per mile.

As with all animals, except man, rabbit populations increase and decrease in cycles dependent on the availability of food and the prevalence of disease and predators. The rabbit population was at a peak in the late 1940s, the result of a decrease in the number of coyotes, their natural predators. It seemed only logical that we should assist the balance of nature. The rabbits would soon succumb to disease in any event. It was Mother Nature's way.

To make the shooting more sporting, we used twenty-two caliber rifles as opposed to shotguns. To make the killing less inhumane, we used hollow point bullets to hasten their death.

The best time for the shoot was at dawn or dusk, when the jacks moved about in search of tender grass or wild clover. We'd drive along an old road or trail through the sagebrush until one or more of them were sighted, then stop the car and commence firing, usually through an open window. When it got dark we'd "trap" them in the headlight beams, or with a spotlight, and dispatch the poor devils while thus disadvantaged. Sometimes we shot them from the moving vehicle, a practice that required considerable skill.

Dan was a pretty good shot with a pistol, even when in motion. But one time, when a fast-running jackrabbit ran right under the car, his bullet bounced off the rear tire. I wasn't too happy about that, and pleaded with him to put the pistol away in favor of a rifle. He just chuckled at my naiveté and - like the hero in an old movie firing at outlaws from a stagecoach - continued to shoot-em-up through the open window.

Shooting jackrabbits honed my skill with a rifle. And then came deer-hunting season. For about a decade, after 1945, deer hunting in northeastern Nevada was truly outstanding; probably because there had been so little such activity during the war. There was abundant food in the habitats, the deer were numerous and healthy. It was said that there were more deer per-square-mile in 1948 than at any time in recent history, possibly more than when the "white eyes" first invaded the country, certainly more than when early miners considered venison a staple in their diet.

It was October. Ted, John and Bob were preparing for a deer hunting trip and included me in their plans. I would drive my Ford to the base camp, and then we'd hunt out of a well-used (beaten up) war surplus Jeep borrowed from Mac the Plumber, a cigar-chomping friend of the Taelours. Dan, who would stay behind and operate the taxi business, loaned me an old Springfield 30-06 rifle.

On the appointed day, anxious for the hunt, we loaded the two rigs with groceries and necessities, and headed east on US-40. At Deeth we left the paved highway, drove through the mostly deserted town, passed through the gates of a shipping corral, bounced over a rickety plank bridge over the Mary's River, proceeded northeast over dusty Tabor Flat for twenty-five miles, forded Tabor Creek and went another seven or eight miles to our turnoff.

Much of the land where we would hunt was under private ownership, belonging to the Mary's River Ranch which (along with the Mala Vista and 71 Ranch) was being run by William B. Wright in partnership with Marble and McLaren, all well known names in the cattle industry.

(The Mary's River and Mala Vista ranches, both situated on the Mary's River, would, in 1954, come under the sole ownership of Bill Wright and eventually William B. Wright, Jr. Permission to hunt on the property or pass through it would finally be revoked, after a few so-called sportsmen cut fences, allowed cattle to stray, even shot at and wounded the animals and left them on the range to die. One could hardly blame the Wrights for closing off their property.)

We would hunt with Bill Wright's permission, which was easily obtained, I assumed, since each of the Taelour boys had worked on his ranch at one time or another in the recent past.

It seemed a long way from the county road to our destination, over a twisting track through sagebrush and four or five "bob wire" gates. It was said, in the West, that if there were three people in the front of a vehicle you could tell which one was the real cowboy; he sat in the middle. He'd rather ride a horse than drive, and he wasn't about to get out to open and shut the gates. But there were only two of us in my Ford, and since I was driving that chore automatically fell to Ted. He finally pulled the last gate taut and

flipped the loop over its cedar post, breathed a sigh of relief and climbed back into the car.

From there it was another quarter-mile through shoulder high sagebrush into the mouth of the canyon, where a line camp nestled in a grove of quaking aspens bordering a small stream of crystal clear water. Currant Creek. I drove down off the canyon road and parked among the trees beside the cabin.

In the diffused light of the overcast, late afternoon sky, the camp reminded me of those portrayed in the Westerns. I wished for my camera but I had left it in Elko.

(Now, lacking such a record, I must reach back over the forty-some intervening years to recall the details.)

The cabin was of frame construction, perhaps 12' by 18' in size, resting on hewn timbers directly on the ground. The rough board siding was unpainted and weather beaten. The corrugated metal roof was rusty from age and exposure. A similarly constructed lean-to provided additional space to the rear. A pair of windows, their small panes intact (I noted with amazement), looked toward the southeast and southwest. A trio of large flat rocks stepped up to the sill of the main doorway, where a once-fancy paneled door, no doubt a castoff from the home ranch, stood latched against the weather but unlocked as was the custom.

I didn't think about it at the time, but that line camp was a symbol of a way of life in Nevada that had endured since the 1860s when cattle were rounded-up, driven and otherwise controlled almost entirely by cowboys on horseback. Cowboys were still the backbone of the industry in the forties, especially in the hill country, but the motor vehicle had already begun to change things dramatically.

I followed Ted inside, and was immediately struck with a sense of *déjà-vu*. I had seen this place before, through the eyes of Zane Grey. Except for the metal cots along the walls and modern labels on the shelved canned goods, I could have been standing in the nineteenth century. How many dusty boots had pounded that creaky board floor? How many saddle-weary butts had settled onto that hard bench over in the corner? How many cold-to-the-marrow cowpokes had backed up to that cast iron range, palms out to soak up its radiant heat? How many tall tales had echoed off those bare walls? Or arguments over who rode the best cow-pony in the remuda? I couldn't know the numbers but I could feel the "spirit of cowboys past."

Ted crumpled an old newspaper and stuffed it into the firebox of the range, added a handful of dry kindling from an old bucket on the floor, and lit a fire.

"It's the custom," he explained for my benefit, "when you use a line cabin you leave it like you found it or better. A buckaroo gets caught in a blizzard up there roundin' up cows and heads for this place to hole up....looks like a mansion to him. Worst thing's to find it cold and empty...no kindling...no food. We'll leave more than we use when we go, for Old Bill's boys."

I joined Bobby and John, who had arrived in the Jeep, and helped them pack our goods inside. (I had learned that in the West the word "pack" was synonymous with "carry" or "haul.") By the time we'd finished and closed the door Ted had a roaring fire a-going, and we

warmed our hides in front of it, turning like so many roasts on spits and tossing down shots of terrible tasting whiskey to thaw our innards.

Ted brewed sheepherder coffee, a handful of grounds in a pot of cold water brought to a boil. John dumped the contents of a big bean-can into another pot, to heat, and dropped a batch of fat hamburgers onto a sizzling skillet. Bob and I fetched water from the creek and readied a wobbly wooden table for the meal. The taste of whiskey and the smell of food whetted my appetite, and when we sat down to eat I ate like a hog, a manner quite uncharacteristic of me.

After dinner, wound up by whiskey, the Taelours went through a lengthy repertoire of stories, most of them new to me, that ran the gamut of possibly true, obviously fabricated, totally outrageous, and finally, when they were having trouble pronouncing their consonants, way off color.

Ted dominated the session. He was far-and-away the best teller of jokes I'd ever met. In time, though, having grown tired and sore from laughing so hard, I unfurled my bedroll on one of the cots and turned in for the night. The others stayed upright, loudly bickering over a card game till long after I'd fallen into a deep sleep.

I awoke before sunup to the sounds of rattling stove lids and a roaring fire. Ted was already up-an-at-em, and in a few minutes we all rolled out, anxious to get a head start on the deer. Motivated by the near freezing temperature I dressed very quickly, then pitched in to help with breakfast. It was a hearty meal, of greasy bacon, spuds and eggs, toast and coffee. Enough fuel, we hoped, to keep us going all day.

I bundled-up with all my available clothes and jackets, and still shivered when I stepped outside. There was ice at the edge of the flowing creek that morning, and small pools were frozen tight enough to hold my weight.

The old Jeep was cold too. When Ted hit the starter the engine groaned in protest, hesitated, but finally fired-off in a dutiful clamor and the rest of us climbed aboard. Bob and I sat on the cold metal wheel wells in the back, along with the necessities, John sat in the front. Each of us, except Ted, had a rifle loaded and ready for action.

Moving slowly up the canyon, the dim headlights revealed a rough road ahead, one consisting of little more than two wheel tracks through the grass and sagebrush. We bounced over rocks and willow roots, slid through muddy springs, forded the trickling stream from one side to the other and back, and scraped under low-hanging limbs that threatened to decapitate both Bob and me.

A couple of miles above camp we broke out of the canyon onto an open, rolling upland. It was now fairly light and Ted turned off the headlights. Bob spotted a small bunch of deer on the skyline. Does, we guessed, judging by their silhouettes, and we continued on toward the rim-rock country.

"That's where the big ones hang out," Bob whispered to me, as though the deer might hear his voice above the grinding noise of the Jeep.

We came to a fence line and Ted turned to follow it. It was a perfectly straight fence, probably one boundary of a mile-section, so we had an up and down ride over the hills. The ground cover was all bunch grass and white sage up there, too short to slow us down much, but the sidehills were so steep I had to cling to the side of the Jeep to keep from falling out. Straight up or straight down was okay with me, but I sure didn't like the sidling. I never knew that a motor vehicle could lean so far without tipping over.

Coincidentally with the rising sun we reached the top of the Snake Mountains (as they are known) and dropped down the other side into a shallow draw filled with almost naked quakies. Two does, startled by our presence, trotted out of the opposite side of the patch, hesitated, looked us over, and then moved away. We piled out of the Jeep, almost before Ted got it stopped, and shouldered our rifles.

"There y'go George," Bob indicated a small buck just exiting the trees, "Nail him!"

For a moment I seriously considered his advice, then discarded it. "Too small," I said, "I want a big one."

Bob raised his rifle and squeezed off a round that found its mark in the left shoulder of the animal. It was a good shot, and the little buck fell virtually on the spot. While Ted and John hiked around the ridge, in case there were more deer in hiding, Bob and I hurried to the downed buck. It was my first good look at a mule deer - so named because of its large size and long ears.

Thinking ahead to the time when I might get to field dress a deer of my own, I watched carefully as Bob and John slit his throat and commenced the bloody chore; which took them less than twenty minutes to complete. By rights (legally) it was Bob's deer. But he conned John into tying his tag to the young three-pointer. We then lifted it up, secured it to the hood of the Jeep and went on with the hunt.

Bob, who had taken the wheel, drove up the edge of a draw above the quakies, forded a couple of small creeks, and eventually came to a talus slope where we left the rig and proceeded on foot. Spread out in a line abreast, Bob and I on the right, Ted and John on the left, we crouched low and gained the top of a northwest-facing rim. I took a position beside a block of desert varnished basalt, and peered into the canyon below.

What a sight! The canyon extended from its head, off to our left, a quarter-mile to the northeast where it cut through seven-or eight-hundred feet of solid rock. Directly in front of me the cliff dropped fifty-feet straight down then inclined toward the bottom, the closest point of which was some 200-yards away. The wall across the way was sheer, possibly steeper and higher than the one on which we lay.

The boys had insisted that we would see deer in this canyon and I was not to be disappointed. While scanning from one end of it to the other I caught sight of a movement way down in the cut. At least I thought I saw something, and beckoned to Bob for confirmation. He crawled over to my vantage point and together we watched and waited. There it was again. Yes, it was a deer. A doe. Then I spotted a buck. And another. They were still pretty far away but appeared to be moving slowly toward us. We would wait.

The herd came through the narrow defile in single file, and then disbursed to browse on the rich bitterbrush in the bottom. I began to count them: two, four, five, ten, fifteen, twenty, fifty, sixty, eighty, a hundred. I quit counting.

There must have been at least a hundred-and-fifty deer down there (evidently migrating southward for the winter), feeding unconcernedly up-wind from us and oblivious to our presence. They drew closer and I identified several bucks bearing great racks, but my gaze always returned to a big fellow in the van, an outstanding buck, I decided, and one that must inevitably come within range. I signaled to Bob and pointed toward the big guy. Unexpectedly, he nodded his head and lifted his rifle to shoot. I panicked.

"Let me have a shot at him," I asserted hoarsely, "You've shot lots of deer."

"Aw...I think I'll take 'im," he spoke, pressing his cheek firmly against the rifle butt.

"C'm on, Bob," I pleaded. "Give me a chance. If I miss...you take him."

"Okay," he conceded, and lowered his piece. Anyway, the buck had disappeared behind a stand of tall buckbrush.

I had been lying on my belly on the rocks, so now I rose up on my left elbow, shouldered my "ought-six" and swung its muzzle toward the point where the buck should emerge. I flipped the safe to off and held steady, trying to remember all the things I must do if I were to make a successful kill.

I had shot Dan's rifle before - in practice I had blown away a coffee-tin at two-hundred yards - but it belonged in a museum. The stock was weathered and nicked and worn, the barrel was nearly devoid of bluing. Worst, though, was the front sight. The bead that normally sat atop the vertical blade was missing, knocked off nobody knew when, leaving it an eighth-of-an-inch short. I must allow for that when taking aim.

Suddenly the antlered head came into view. But I didn't want to shoot him in the head. A few more steps and his shoulder would be in the clear. I adjusted the rifle appropriately and wished to God my heart would quit pounding so hard. He moved slowly forward and paused, revealing a dark, flowing cape. What a beautiful animal, I mused, forgetting for an instant why I was there.

Then up went his head, antlers laid back horizontal, and nostrils high in the air. He had sensed danger but knew not where it lay. He was sampling the wind.

Over my shoulder Bob whispered excitedly, "Shoot! Shoot!"

I took a deep breath, held it, aligned the sights to my target compensating for the missing bead, and squeezed the trigger. The buck stood very still.

"BOOM! Thunk! A-boom!"

The report seemed extraordinarily loud. Even the echo from across the canyon was loud. But it was that second sound that was music to my ears: I had scored a hit. Wincing from the recoil of the rifle I stood up and watched as the buck, mortally wounded, staggered and lay down in the brush, all but hidden from view.

"You stay and watch," Bob offered, "I'll work my way down."

The rest of the herd had scattered and was out of range. The hunt came to a standstill. Ted shouted from up-canyon, "You got one?"

"Yeah!" I returned, satisfaction in my voice.

He climbed down and joined Bob near the wounded deer, where they stood guard in case he decided to get up and run off. John went for the Jeep. It was a wonder I didn't break my neck then, in my haste to get off the rim.

The proud buck lay on a carpet of dry grass among the bushes, head held high, big black eyes staring in wonder. We approached him cautiously, afraid that he might jump and run. But he was too badly hurt for that.

When I got close to him, though, he got up on three legs, the left front one hanging limp, lunged and fell forward striking his great antlers on the ground. Remembering that the little buck, the one Bob shot earlier, had thrashed around and broken a tine on the rocks, I sprang forward and latched onto his antlers with both hands, to prevent his breaking them. It was an unnecessary and unwise thing to do, for there was little danger of his damaging one of those sturdy appendages and a real likelihood of my being gored. In a flash I was hoisted ignominiously clear of the ground.

The Taelours laughed at my predicament until Ted, seeing that I was not going to turn loose, came to my rescue. Bob then helped Ted control the animal, directing the tips of his antlers into the soft earth while I took out my knife and administered the coup-de-grace. With a great tremble, the beast drew a last breath and slumped to the ground. It was over.

I had mixed emotions then, emotions which, I believe, most hunters experience in the circumstance. One cannot help but admire the living animal. It is proud, beautiful, wary, cunning, strong, swift, keen, and instinctively intelligent. But so is the hunt to be appreciated. It is a test of man's own cunning, intelligence and strength, a test of his ability to search, stalk and position himself to advantage, a test of his inherent ability and skill.

Having participated in the hunt, I can say unequivocally that neither emotion can be adequately evaluated by one who has never hunted. Unlike a majority of humanoids (in recent times) I was extremely fortunate. I took advantage of an opportunity and gained a true perspective of man's important relationship with the other species of the animal kingdom.

But back to the job at hand; the hard work part of the hunt, the field dressing. With my coat removed and shirt sleeves rolled up, with lots of advice and a little help, I took my knife in hand and cut the musk-glands from the buck's legs (to avoid having their contents come in contact with and contaminating the meat). We then turned the deer onto its back and I made a slit in the belly hide, from pelvis to rib cage, to expose the entrails. I was happy to note that my bullet had found its way to the flesh of the shoulder and not to the guts. Or I'd have had a messy job of it.

Following the "explicit" instructions of my partners, I removed the penis and urine-sac (again, so as not to taint the meat). Next, with a great deal of effort, we removed the innards, separated the liver from the mess and set aside the rest for the coyotes and

vultures. I then severed the diaphragm and reached - with bare hands and arms - into the warm steaming cavity to remove the heart, lungs and esophagus. The heart we saved; the breathing apparatus was added to the pile of entrails.

Done! My arms were bloody up to the elbows, but I had a fine, well-dressed deer to show for my (our) efforts.

The end of the gray day was fast approaching and we were an hour from camp, so we quickly loaded my buck into the back of the Jeep (leaving hardly enough room for Bob and me), headed across the high country to the road near the head of Currant Creek and went on down to our camp. It was virtually dark when arrived, and I was more than a little weary from the activities of the day.

But there was still work to be done. While John got a fire going in the stove in the cabin, Ted, Bob and I set about taking care of the two deer. In turn, each one was hoisted into a suitable tree, by means of a rope tied around the base of the antlers, there to be out of reach of possibly hungry coyotes, and to air and cool during the night. We then rustled up some firewood, for the night's fuel and to replenish the standing supply, and returned to the cabin.

It was pleasurable beyond description, being in that warm sanctuary. Jim Beam made the rounds and we soon forgot how bushed we really were. The story of the day's events began to unfold, each of us adding to the narrative with more and more embellishment as the level of liquor lowered in the bottle. And in spite of earlier cries for food, any thought of eating was now secondary.

I finally stoked-up the fire, brewed a pot of black coffee, opened a can of pork-and-beans and put it on to heat. I had to get something solid in my stomach.

Long after it was timely (in my estimation) the Taelours quit drinking. Ted, who had turned up his nose at my beans, sliced off some fresh liver and set it to sizzling in the big iron skillet. Having downed most of the beans, I now tried some of the meat. The flavor was okay but the texture was very strange indeed, not unlike rubber. I was sure that I'd never again eat the stuff, unless, perhaps, I was stranded and starving to death on a remote mountaintop.

It must have been after 9:00pm (early by the clock, late by the sun that had set at 4:30pm) when we hit the sack. I would not awaken until it was light again in the canyon, well after sunrise.

I noted a definite absence of conviviality that morning, even some grumbling about the cold, since no one had gotten up in the night to tend the fire. We picked at our ham-and-eggs and sat for a long time drinking black coffee. None of us felt good (I swore it was the liver that upset my stomach) but we somehow got the deer loaded into the Jeep and the camp gear in my Ford, tidied-up the area and headed down the road.

The trip home was uneventful. We were in Elko by late afternoon and went directly to John's place, south of the tracks near Fourth and Douglas Streets, where we hung our deer in his back yard preparatory to skinning them out.

But even before they were unloaded, Ted insisted that I should have a picture taken of me with my first deer. I said I couldn't afford it, whereupon he called a studio and a professional

photographer came over and did the deed, at Ted's expense. It was your typical "big game hunter" picture, with John and I kneeling, rifles in hand, before our "trophies."

Ultimately, with its head and hide removed and the carcass ready for butchering, my deer weighed 154 pounds. The magnificent antlers, with six points on the right and five on the left sides thus qualifying as a five-pointer, measured thirty inches at the outer extremes.

(I look back on that buck with particular pride, for, as it turned out, after many years of deer hunting and several kills it was the largest one of all.)

As a matter of interest, a typical, mature, western mule deer buck is one with a set of antlers containing four tines on each side, in addition to the "eye guards," and is designated a "four-pointer." Older bucks often grow additional tines.

I think Ted exhibited as much enthusiasm for my kill as I did, perhaps more, and urged me to have the head-and-cape mounted by a professional taxidermist, to hang on my wall. But I had no wall of my own and was short of money so it was out of the question.

Instead, I mounted the antlers on a wooden "shield" and hung it in the garage, to be privately admired from time to time, and placed my photograph (one of two that were made) in an album.

Perhaps one day I could show them off to my children, and tell the story of my first real hunting adventure in Nevada.