



## *Clearing the Bar*

*by Gene Wensel*

I can't say as I remember my very first bow and arrow. It was probably a string-bent sapling, shooting dogwood branches cut from as high as I could reach. In the early 1950s, my parents moved to a suburban neighborhood of small, middle-class houses. My brother and I soon specialized in bowhunting neighborhood tweety birds in vacant lots. Today, that pastime is definitely on the list of "politically incorrect" things to do. By the time we turned eight years old, we had "real" longbows and cheap wooden arrows made for kids.

Dad gave us permission to drill a couple peepholes in the side of our garage. On the corner of that building stood a single rosebush butted up against a row of boysenberry shrubs. By scattering the remains of a slice or two of bread in the yard, we discovered we could attract all sorts of tweety birds. One of us would spot through the peephole while the other guy attempted to slip an arrow between the rosebush and the corner of the garage. The old neighbor lady living next door constantly reminded us that we were very bad boys.

We eventually worked out a point system for various species of birds. Robins were "illegal." For untold reasons, they were definitely off limits and we abided by that code with whatever logic prevailed. English sparrows were the equivalent of spikehorn whitetails. Starlings were forkhorns. Black birds were six pointers. Redwing blackbirds were eight pointers. Blue jays were ten pointers. I almost nailed a "Boone and Crockett" crow one day. If it weren't for an arrow deflection off a young maple tree, I would've had him.

All tweety bird deer seemed to be bucks. I don't know why we never had does around. Probably because "real men" didn't shoot female deer in those days. Many years went by before we realized the smaller English sparrows were a lot harder to hit than larger species.

One fine day, Dad brought home a shiny new aluminum arrow. He told us he "found" it,

although I suspect he simply couldn't afford two at the time. Since my brother and I were twins, he probably figured we would surely lose it or break it within a few days. This would have been about 1953. Dad killed a whitetail with his lemonwood longbow shooting a barbed Howard Hill broadhead that same fall.

I don't really know what year Doug Easton started producing aluminum arrows, but it couldn't have been too many years before '53. This metal beauty was a lady's target arrow, short enough to be used by kids. It was shiny silver, crowned in white, crested in green, with two green feathers, a white cock feather and a green nock. Barry and I talked it over and decided to paint it brown for better camo. I hate to think how many tweety birds that arrow accounted for. To this day, I can't believe the abuse those feathers and nock took. Had the glue not held, we would have been in serious need. We never lost that arrow. Oh, temporarily at times, but my brother and I made a pact. We would simply look for it until we found it, no matter how long it took. That single aluminum arrow changed two young lives forever.

I have to change the subject here for a bit to tell you about my brother's bed. During this same early '50s era, we slept in bunk beds for several years. I slept on top; Barry slept below. One day for some unknown reason, I happened to lie down on my brother's bed. Looking up at the bottom of my bed, I couldn't believe my eyes. There, in mute testimony of his nose-picking skills, were *hundreds* of dried boogers, neatly wiped onto the bottom of my bed in no special order. I'm sure a shrink would have a field day with his reasoning, but it had obviously become a nightly routine for years. Mom would have flown off the handle had she ever looked up while changing sheets.

We continued shooting newer bows and better arrows as we grew older. High school years brought on a second passion. Many will laugh at this one for sure; we took up pole vaulting. You have to remember, I weighted exactly 138 pounds when I graduated high school. I've since let myself go.....

Pole vaulting was serious fun. We considered it almost as much fun as flinging arrows. We subsequently built our own pit in a vacant lot on the corner. We started with a heavy bamboo pole reinforced with tape, presumably abandoned by the track team when aluminum poles came onto the scene. Along about 1960, we came into possession of our very own used aluminum pole. Then, about 1962, fiberglass poles came out. I jumped less than half a dozen times with a fiberglass pole. I just couldn't adapt to a pole that flexed. Bows were supposed to bend, not vaulting poles. I couldn't learn to trust them, so I quickly went back to aluminum.

Our pole vaulting became a passion. We got pretty good at it too. Pedestrians started watching. My young ego liked that. People would ask how high we were jumping. To this day, I have no idea, as it didn't really matter to us and we didn't have a tape measure anyway. The important thing was that we were having lots of fun and clearing the high bar fairly regularly. One day, our high school track coach happened to drive by. He approached us about joining the track

team. When we found out track practice included jumping jacks, running, and push-ups, we passed. We simply enjoyed jumping too much to turn it into regimented physical exercise.

One other factor made residential pole vaulting lots of fun. There happened to be a stop light on the corner of Maple Avenue , about fifty yards from our pit. During the summer of 1961, my brother and I single-handedly caused seven rear-end collisions at that intersection! People were paying more attention to our jumping than to the red traffic light. I liked that. Luckily, no one ever got hurt. I'm surprised the cops didn't shut us down.

Bowhunting for deer, or any species for that matter, has changed over the years, both in participant numbers, game populations and equipment. I remember when the median age of bowhunters was under thirty years old. Now it is apparently in the forties. Old time bowhunters are starting to die off. In the not too distant future, I expect large numbers of experienced bowhunters will be dropping like flies as old age and high-mileage "equipment failure" sets in.

Role models and mentors have become endangered species. Today, most role models are the guys seen on outdoor television shows. Many of them seem to be hunting for all the wrong reasons. Thousands of young bowhunters have no idea who guys like Howard Hill, Fred Bear, Ishi, the Thompson brothers, Will Compton, or Glenn St. Charles were. Pope and Young were just two guys who "started the record book." Sad, but true.

During college, in September of 1968, Barry and I were in a bar/restaurant on the top floor of Stouffer's Hotel in Indianapolis , Indiana . The place was one of those all glass affairs where patrons could look out over the city. At dusk one evening, Barry said to me, "Hey, look at that guy over there." The silhouette of a lanky man stood at the window, absorbing the sunset. "Look at those ears," Barry said. "Look at the shape of his head. I believe that's Fred Bear." Sure enough, we approached to find none other than Fred and his family eating dinner at Stouffer's. They were on their way back from Florida to Grayling, Michigan , where they had checked out a piece of property in Gainesville . Fred invited two young bowhunters to join his table. He bought drinks while we talked for over an hour, an experience I'll never forget.

I was engaged to be married in December of 1968. A month or so after our meeting with the Bears, it came time to send out wedding invitations. I figured I'd send Fred Bear one, more as a joke to my brother than anything else. A couple weeks later, I got a package in the mail with a hand-written letter from Fred's wife, Henrietta. In the box was a beautiful polar bear, hand-carved out of solid walrus ivory, presumably brought back from one of Fred's polar bear hunts. The letter stated Mr. Bear would not be able to make my wedding, as he was already scheduled for a musk ox bowhunt that December, but he would like for my bride and I to accept the gift. I spent my wedding night at Stouffer's Hotel in Fred's honor. Well.... sort of.

Ten years later, I was hunting elk with Charlie Kroll, who was married to Fred's daughter. Charlie quickly got side-tracked, spending his September days fly-fishing for brook trout in the headwaters of the Big Hole River near camp. I lucked onto a big cinnamon bear one morning and made a great shot. I also had a close encounter with a huge bull elk that same day and sunk a broadhead deep into a tree. It's probably still there.

We were basking in the glory of another fine September day in Montana . During "tribal council" that evening around the campfire, we were laughing over the fact that the nearby town of Wisdom , Montana , in the heart of the Big Hole Valley , had a "Big Hole Women's Club." Ha! Barry said to Charlie, "Hey, being married to Fred Bear's daughter, you probably get to go over to his house fairly regularly, don't you?"

"Yes. Why?" Charlie asked.

"Do me a favor. Next time you go over there, steal something for me. Something personal." Of course, he was mostly joking. A month went by when my brother got a package. In it were Fred's toothbrush, a pair of jumbo dirty socks, and a bloody kill arrow sporting a honed Bear Razorhead. Fred Bear was a good business man with heart and a sense of humor. So was his son-in-law.

Life can be very fragile. Tragedy came into my own family before I got out of school. Dad was killed in a firearms accident at 44 years of age. We lived in rural Vermont . I was away at college. He was on his way out the door with his Colt 45 to shoot at some tin cans when he simply dropped the gun. It discharged when it hit the ground, the bullet taking him in the left armpit and exiting between his shoulder blades. A split second changed the history of our family.

As tragic as this incident was, what shocked me almost as much as the accident was the fact that many of my relatives expected my brother and I to give up hunting. Give up *hunting*? Why? It never made any sense to me. Still doesn't. One wouldn't quit driving cars if their parent got killed in a traffic accident.

Unless your birth certificate has an expiration date on it, our remaining seasons are definitely numbered too. In reality, as sad as it is to admit, some people reading these words may have already experienced their last season. The longer I live, the more I realize the importance of spending each deer season as if it were my last.

We can't go through life relying on statistics. Many projections are way off. The national success rate for bowhunters is supposed to be somewhere right around ten percent. That means nine out of ten archers don't tag a whitetail annually. Right.... Another way to look at those figures would be to say an average person goes ten seasons for every deer he bags. In fifty years of bowhunting, many people will only tag five whitetails? I don't think so. With sex ratios at, let's say, one buck for every five adult deer, that allows only one buck every half century! You and I

both know those numbers aren't even close. Forget statistics. I recently read somewhere that 92% of Americans consider themselves "better than average" drivers! For most people, skill behind a wheel is not exactly a gift. Neither is math.

Some numbers hurt even more. It is a depressing fact that only ten percent of American bowhunters join their own state bowhunting organization. *Nine out of ten* let the few who really care carry all the weight. What does this mean? It means if you are not putting something back into your passion, you are most probably nothing but an opportunist. Give more than the price of a hunting license. Join several organizations representing your passion and get involved. Many people think of membership dues as annual "bills". Don't think of them as bills; think of them as responsibilities.

Everyone is not cut out to be a bowhunter. Every football fan has a right to enjoy a good game. But not all fans will make the team. Bowhunting is *supposed* to be hard. It is meant to be difficult. It is presumed to be challenging. The "we can make your grandmother a bowhunter" marketing ploy is often simply not in our best outdoor interests. Bowhunting is a physically demanding, even *primitive* pastime. It is characteristic to be that way.

Is hunting a sport? I don't think so. It was called "sport hunting" over a hundred years ago to differentiate it from market hunting. Nor is hunting a game. Keeping score has nothing to do with it. Football, baseball, and basketball are sports. Pitching horseshoes, playing cards, or bowling are games. Golf and tennis fall somewhere in between. If hunting is neither sport nor game, what is it? It is 100% *instinct*, not unlike breathing, eating, sleeping, or reproducing.

We must ask ourselves why we hunt. All bowhunters need to serve an apprenticeship. Mind set should be to "get closer." While we're setting goals, we must also set self-imposed limitations. Just like there is a big difference between love and lust, there is an important contrast between shooting and hunting. Hunt for the right reasons. Keep ethics and responsibility on the menu. Make a special effort to tell non-hunters about the ones we let go. Sometimes the opportunities we pass are more important than the ones we seize.

There are a lot of people out there who will try to tell you that hunting is not a right, that it is a privilege. I'm going to tell you it is a God-given right as well as a privilege. It is the pursuit of happiness. It is a freedom I am willing to fight for. We can justify and cherish the outdoor opportunity with a simple bow and arrow in hand. Participate for all the right reasons and discover the passion.

Raising the bar increases challenge, but clearing it every single time only cheapens the experience. I guess what I'm trying to say is that it *doesn't really matter* how high the bar is set, as long as it is "high enough". It doesn't really matter what kind of pole you use. It doesn't matter what kind of clothes you wear. It doesn't matter if people are watching. What *really* matters is that we sincerely enjoy jumping and that we set the bar just high enough so that we

clear it every once in a while.