

Where Are All the Boogeymen?

By Gene Wensel

"I have no doubt that Adam fished with a worm after his expulsion from paradise."
Theodore Gordon, 1947

A hundred years ago, over 30% of Americans resided on farms. Not only did farming provide the bread of life, but it produced honest, hard working Americans who *earned* almost everything they did and owned. According to census records, by 1970 over 95% of American families lived either urban or suburban. American family life has changed. Society has changed.

I recently read a book about men at war. Wars have a way of subtly changing things. World War II in particular disconnected many children from their fathers. What came to be known as "The Baby Boom" arrived shortly thereafter. With limited availability of men during WWII, the responsibility of turning growing boys into men was dumped onto their mothers. Adult males were once thought of as hunters/gatherers, while women were most often seen as "nest makers." But during any war, women, God love them, often inherit by default the task of trying to teach their sons to be men. War times were tough. During all my early years of schooling, I had only one male school teacher. I'm not saying men make better teachers, but, in my opinion, turning boys into men is a role best handled by the same sex.

A hundred years ago, boys grew to be men by working with and along side their fathers, uncles, grandfathers and cousins. There was what many could and would define as an apprenticeship in becoming a man. After the wars, boys saw their dads go off to work at non-farming jobs every morning, often returning home dog tired from long hours. What little free time American men enjoyed often brought addictions to their new jobs, television, alcohol and sex, causing millions of unhealthy divorces. The American divorce rate has since soared past 50%. Our society quickly changed, indoors as well as outdoors.

Even though Dad went off to war, I think back about my own childhood, which thankfully unfolded more smoothly than most. When I was a youngster, suburban boys aggressively rang doorbells searching for lawn mowing or snow shoveling jobs during what minimal free time we had. Today, a person has to run classified ads looking for youngsters who want to earn a few bucks doing physical chores. Then, if we do happen to find any, the kids expect \$50 an hour to do odd jobs! I can't remember the last time my door bell rang after a snow storm. Most young men are down at the mall or glued to some sort of screen. Yes, times have definitely changed.

How does all this relate to whitetail hunting? Deer hunting too has transformed over the decades to a point where it's just not the same as it used to be. I must say I miss it. When was the last time you saw a pipe smoking guy in a red and black checkered shirt hanging out at a deer camp reeking of Hoppe's #9? Fifty years ago, thousands of young hunters could not wait to get invited to their elder's deer cabins. Today, many camps are

not much more than places to play cards, smoke cigars (or worse), drink alcohol or “test drive” a new girlfriend.

We produced a vicious cycle. Progressive disinterest in the “Big Three” monthly hunting magazines of yesteryear was promptly addressed and all but dissolved, first by broadcast television and later by the computer age. Home computers brought fewer letters to the editors but more emails. Chat rooms and public forums quickly turned into electronic coffee shops or taverns, where someone with an opposing view might not just disagree, but could verbally butcher anyone with a different opinion. Subject matter didn’t seem to matter, be it sports, religion, politics, parenting or life in general.

Many, if not most, of the negative changes I witnessed in outdoor interest and philosophy were brought on by multiple television hunting shows and an accompanying cultural shifting of gears that allowed Nimrod to get to the top of any mountain a whole lot quicker. These short cuts turned out to be the festering root of a big aching tooth. Most of society ultimately decided it was perfectly okay to skip any degree of outdoor apprenticeship along the trail.

The ways and means modern hunters went about their passion took another turn for the worse when commercial interests gave birth to untold numbers of instant experts, all dwelling mostly on ego trips while quickly skipping over the amateur skill levels. The goal seemed to be to utilize the quickest, easiest ways they could legally fill as many tags as they were allotted and “entitled” to. *Simple yet mysteriously defined differences between love and lust eventually became unclear.* What was once pure spring water quickly turned to mud, certainly not suitable for drinking. More often than not, outdoor passion swiftly evolved from hunting to *shooting*, with little or no regard to any values actually earned. “*Just put me in a good spot*” type thinking by-passed, and even avoided, all levels of basic woodsmanship skills or time and effort.. The “music” of hunting increased in tempo but lost it’s rhythm. There is not as much silence and solitude offered or noticed, while whispering became overbearing. Hunters barely out of puberty quickly turned “pro,” with deadly serious attitudes but foggy direction. Many, if not most, mainstream hunters are now being driven by the warped perception that success *needs* advantages, gadgets, short cuts, and dozens of dead critters wearing huge antlers or skulls. It’s now mostly about numbers and inches. Far too many outdoorsmen still don’t get it. People who spend far too much of their free time watching outdoor television shows are no longer experiencing the real romance of hunting. I personally don’t mind genuine enthusiasm or excitement as long as its not obviously staged.

When I was a youngster, I liked the idea of being a boogeyman. I really did. I still do. Not the kind with warts who hides under the bed or jumps out of a closet to scare little kids, but the type who simply lurks in the shadows to strike at opportune times.

I place the primary blame of our outdoor cultural swing on the invention and acceptance of broadcast television. It was bad enough a half century ago when TV first stole our free time, but things have become much worse in the past decade or so, when “hunting shows” established their own niche right along side soft porn and horror flicks. Hunting shows deteriorated even more when many of them promptly mutated into “reality shows,” building genuine life and death competition among *team* participants of the blood sports. Is hunting a team sport? I don’t think so. Am I right, wrong, or just missing something here?

Along came dozens of sponsored “celebrity hunters,” figuratively crawling out of the woodwork, jockeying not for entertainment or educational value, but for pole positions of recognition among their peers, sponsors, and “fans.” Who would have ever predicted that celebrity hunters would someday travel in gaudy tour buses or fancy pick up trucks decked out with multiple flashy sponsor logos and “clever,” if not disgusting, marketing slogans? Egotistical clowns in camo seemed to come out of nowhere, all racing to establish some sort of “professional hunter” identity while tossing things like ethics, common sense, modesty and humility right out of deer camp windows. A questionable degree of pride in achievement was rapidly and regularly demonstrated by shameless antics displaying various forms of enthusiasm, both verbal and physical. Any respect for wildlife was shadowed by insane degrees of zealotry and ranting. Don’t get me wrong; hunting is supposed to be fun and pursuit is a 100% natural instinct, but its almost out of control these days.

Rude folks have gone out of their way to eliminate much of the process. In a sense, society tried to make Italian food using no tomatoes. Televised rednecks quickly out numbered the gentlemen. Terminology and grammar were fumbled, many speaking as if they had marbles in their mouths or whispering whatever they had to say. Handsome whitetail bucks were crushed, smoked, whacked, or popped. Arrows became “meat missiles,” while bullets became “pills.” One only has to look at the brand names of commercial broadheads these days. Many imply destruction, hatred or evil. One would tend to think we are at war with deer.

Today, there just isn’t much of a story involved in the taking of 90% of the deer shot on television. Sure, a few hunting celebrities attempt to disguise their tales as some sort of romance, but nearly all fail miserably. Many televised hunters don’t even actually get into the woods anymore.

I really don’t have anything against gun hunting if it is done right, using firearms as honorable tools to actually hunt our quarry. I used to do it myself when I was young and I have good, respectable friends who still do. But when bows and arrows are quickly cast aside to justify filling a tag or finishing the making of a TV show, firearm use leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Far too often guns can turn hunting into *shooting*. I want to feel intimate with distance. I hunger to see how close I can get to my quarry. Personally, I don’t want to see how far away I can be when I shoot a deer; I want to see how close I can get. I guess what I’m trying to say is that one can make a campfire by rubbing two sticks together, use of a flint and steel, a wooden match, a butane lighter, or even a flame thrower. I happen to be a wooden match guy.

In-line “primitive weapons” wearing huge scopes, bi-pods and thumbhole stocks do not belong in “primitive weapons” seasons as far as I’m concerned. What’s the point? They too have evolved to be nothing but single shot rifles missing only the brass part of the cartridge. The hunting industry now has the audacity to call scoped in-line muzzleloaders and crossbows “primitive” weapons. It’s more than a little bit insolent.

My brother and I used to hunt several farms bordered by property owned or leased by whitetail nuts. Almost every year during late season, they would blast bucks on film for TV.... bucks that needed just one more year to reach full maturity....bucks that both Barry and I let walk earlier in the season. They would do it in cold weather by planting soybean fields, then leaving them unharvested. Other people “harvested” standing corn with Brush Hog equipment rather than standard farm machinery. When hungry deer

crossed fences to feed in the beans or corn, they got shot from up to 250 yards away with “primitive” weapons during what is nothing but an extended gun season. Yes, if you sense frustration on my part, you would be right. I even had a TV host once tell me that he “hunts 99% of the time with a bow and arrow and *prefers* bowhunting.” He went on to say the *only* reason he used guns was because one of his sponsors was giving him free firearms. Right. I was tempted to ask him if he thought it would be okay if his wife did **not** sleep around 99% of the time.

One of these days, a fired or retired hunting show cameraman is going to write a book about some of the things that go on behind the scenes of what we actually see on television. Half the time, a bored, waiting “hunter” has ear phones plugged into their ears! I-pods and cell phones offer music, video games, opportunities to chat with friends, conduct business, “sexting,” and whatnot. And if you think hanky-panky between cameramen and female bowhunters has never happened, I have a bridge to sell you. Pop-up blinds got their name in more than one way!

Many hunting show celebrities don’t even get into the woods much anymore except to look for shed antlers or put out trail cameras. They prefer spending their time in elevated shooting houses with sliding glass windows and propane heaters set on the edges of food plots. I really don’t have a problem with food plots or simple blinds. Other than the fact food plots are essentially planted to attract and kill deer, they are also an important supplemental food source for wildlife trying to make it through harsh winters when competition for available food is intense.

And then we come to the canned hunts. If there were some way to count, I’m sure we would discover the fact hundreds of wealthy people have paid well over \$10,000 to shoot the “buck of a lifetime” inside a high fenced enclosure. Did they earn these trophies? No, they only earned the money to buy them. The “hunt” may have cost them a small fortune, but in reality they never paid the full price.

Can an automobile mechanic also be a good driver? Of course he can. Is everyone who swings a hammer a good carpenter? Not quite. The ironic part of all this is that some of these canned hunt “trophies” are actually killed by people with adequate hunting skills, if only they took the time and effort to apply them. Lack of time and a fat wallet ultimately confirm their decisions. I’m told one can even kill huge bighorn rams inside high fences if you are willing and able to pay the price. “Wildlife” farming has even changed the way deer are photographed. How long has it been since you last saw a magazine front cover photo of a big buck whitetail that wasn’t taken inside a park or high-fenced enclosure? Genetic tampering, incest among deer, drugs and electro-magnetic application to velvet antlers has produced racks on immature bucks that are approaching the 600” mark! Many racks displayed at hunting expositions are pen raised.

Wisdom, maybe brought on with old age, has convinced me that *humans can justify almost anything* if they try hard enough.

I treasure any and all opportunities to study deer sign, find funnels, decipher wind patterns, and set camera traps to see what is on the menu. I delight picking out fantasy trees to hide in while my imagination conjures ultra-close range encounters where I can strike with no warning. I feel I am an honorable predator and specifically selected mature deer are worthy prey. I love being a boogeyman, or at least think like one when I’m outdoors. I find great pleasure trying to figure out what’s going on while walking in the woods at my own pace with a simple bow and arrow. While some might see it as a desire

to be sneakier or to be some sort of purist, I see it as an honest way to close my deals with truer dignity. I sleep better like that.