

When Hunting Became Shooting

By Gene Wensel

Since I became an official senior citizen, I've been accused several times of teetering somewhere between senility and wisdom. Someone now has to push over seventy candles into my annual cake.

I remember when camo was only available in military issue or red and black checkered shirts; when deer camps all smelled like Hoppe's #9; when four wheel drive vehicles were all Jeeps; when the color blaze orange had not yet been invented. There were no ATVs, no cell phones, no GPS units, no snowmobiles. Snowshoes and treestands were all made out of wood. Luggage and bows did not have wheels. Boys built slingshots. Kids caught night crawlers and sold them with the help of a sign in the front yard. We had BB guns, shot tweety birds stone dead without eating them, did daily chores unpaid and rode bikes without helmets. We played "Cowboys and Injuns," constructed "forts," both underground and up in trees. We carried "milk money" to school every day. Boys fought without knives, and in our hearts we knew that all girls had "cooties."

When I was still a teenager, I visited the Orvis rod plant in Manchester, Vermont. From a rack in the front of their factory store, I lovingly fondled a featherweight split bamboo cane fly rod. It was only 5 feet long (much shorter than most fly rods) and was made for a 5 weight line.... perfect for many of Vermont's small trout streams. It wore an all cork handle and a reel seat of simple split rings. If I remember right, it weighed a mere 1 7/8 oz. It was a supreme example of artistic elegance and pure class. I wanted it very much, but the price tag on it said exactly \$100, way more than I had to my name. Today that same rod sells for well over \$2000.

Prices have changed. Times have changed. People have changed. Society has changed. We are now several generations removed from the farm but still need to grow things. Half a century ago, the term "politically correct" was nonexistent. "Boy scout" has taken on a whole new meaning, if you get my drift. Today's youngsters spend all their free time in front of television sets, computers or at malls instead of out in the woods. Kids feel naked without their very own cell phone within reach. People previously known as "whippersnappers" now play violent video games or watch television when not texting or talking on their cell phones. Teens quit doing chores for under \$50 an hour. They also carry charge cards. They don't walk anywhere they can ride. No more roving lawn mower or snow shoveling jobs are solicited. Boys wear earrings and necklaces. Girls get *boy's* names tattooed onto various body parts. Our "Commander in Chief" thought he was an emperor but looked and acted more like Steven Urkel than John Wayne or General George Patton. You get the picture.....

Our wind figuratively changed when hunting became an industry. In my opinion, it all started when television stole much of our free time. Interest in the "Big Three" hunting magazines soon waned. Television was King! So was Elvis. We had to endure live action bowling. Ed Sullivan offered us not only Elvis and the Beatles, but special talent acts like a guy spinning dinner plates on under-spined arrow shafts. We had Howdy Doody and a talking horse named Mr. Ed. I even watched Lassie right up until the

episode where the kid got his foot caught in a huge bear trap, then sent his loyal dog rushing back to the barn with instructions to bring back a C-clamp. A dog smart enough to fetch a *C-clamp*?? Gimme a break....

Television went through understandable growing pains. Then about twenty years ago, actual hunting shows were born, finding an uncomfortable niche right alongside *Star Wars*, horror films, *I Love Lucy* re-runs, fifty new sit-coms and soft porn. Never again did we have to watch Ozzie Nelson walk around his own home wearing a suit and tie when he had no apparent job. Mr. Ed went to the glue factory. Howdy Doody came down with mildew or dry rot, I'm not sure which, but the painted freckles eventually fell off his face.

Today we're offered full season, weekly TV episodes about people who catch turtles for a living, "exterminators" who don't kill much except insects, hunters who seemingly talk with marbles in their mouths to the point TV producers have to subtitle whatever they say as if they're speaking in a foreign language. "I **seen** three bucks" makes hunters sound uneducated. The hunt for Bigfoot continues. One of these days sasquatch hunters might consider leaving a bunch of trail cameras out for more than a few days at a time. On the TV menu are *weekly* shows about driving trucks on icy roads, logging, towing vehicles, raising little girls with double chins, the trials and tribulations of "Little People," the fine art of junk picking and hoarding at it's worst. Five year old girls are painted up for beauty contests. We're even treated to one about the perils of being a meter maid. Drama choices are endless! Had enough? Apparently not yet.

With hunting shows, celebrities seemingly came out of nowhere, all jockeying not for entertainment or educational value, but for pole positions of name recognition among their peers, potential sponsors and new followers. Our attention and interest were tested with lots of whispering, poorly hidden commercials, catch phrases, bad acting by people trying to be funny, and shameless, even embarrassing, high five whooping and hollering rants. It didn't take long for me to realize far too many celebrity hosts and guest hunters have a very hard time differentiating love from lust.

Television hunting shows made hunting look easy, programming youngsters to expect success without ever really earning it and getting quickly frustrated when "it" didn't happen soon enough. Commercialized gadgets were invented and promoted to eliminate much of the process. Hunters became "athletes." Hunting became a "team sport." People right out of puberty decided to go "Pro," with deadly intentions but foggy direction, skipping any degree of apprenticeship or woodsmanship skills along the way. I continue to see six year old kids posing their best "bad ass" faces for hero photos. Few smiles. Kids young enough to wear pajamas with the feet attached are regularly seen posing behind trophy bucks. Youngsters who still get a lollipop whenever they sleep dry are shooting big game. Deer are now "whacked," "popped," or "smoked" from long ranges. Arrows became "meat missiles," while bullets became "pills." Just this morning I saw a photo of a bowhunter posing with his dead critter. On the horizontal rib cage of his prize sat an open can of beer. The words "*awesome*" and "*That's what I'm talkin' about!*" have risen to far more than standard verbiage.

With the "help" of television celebrities, who often seem to think of themselves as somehow very special, hunting slowly but surely lost it's romance. Our "music" increased in tempo but lost it's rhythm. Many hunters don't even get into the woods anymore. There is no story attached to 90% of the deer killed on television these days.

“*Just put me in a good spot*” is all they expect. Traditional deer camps were sold... or only used for poker, booze, smoking, or to test drive new girlfriends.

Hunting became shooting. “Bows” that look more like James Bond tools came to be known as “weapons.” Instead of trying to get as close as possible to big game, the challenge evolved to how far away one could “whack” a deer with either bows or guns...it didn’t really matter. Just last night I watched a celebrity bowhunter “whack” his “biggest buck ever” (home grown to boot) from 56 yards. I think that buck deserved better...at least the decency of a closer encounter with his predator.

Primitive black powder firearms grew into nothing more than single shot rifles without the brass, using pellets rather than powder, big scopes, thumbhole stocks and attached bipods. I even saw a muzzleloader dude carrying *two* of them in case he needed a second shot! I made a mental note to myself: “*There could be a market out there for double barreled muzzleloaders....maybe even repeaters.*”

Pre and extended primitive “weapons” big game seasons, those fought hard **for** and established **by** none other than our bowhunting pioneers, were quickly infiltrated by hundreds of thousands of opportunists simply looking for an easier way to fill their *entitled* “extra” tags. Able bodied citizens sold or traded in their compound bows for scoped crossbows 8” wide.

“Hunting” shows often display sniper talent. Now, before someone takes a bead on me, I want to admit I’ve always admired and respected long range shooting skills of snipers. I’ve bought and read stuff by and about guys like Carlos Hathcock, Chris Kyle, Simo Hayha, etc. But, when hunting is confused with long range shooting, one can’t help but realize sniper talent often emerges as little more than superb target shooting at live targets. Again, no disrespect to long range sniper skills, but in my opinion, anything over 400 yards is a whole lot more about shooting than hunting. The only real hunting part is spotting the animal from afar and stalking or crawling into position to set up for the shot. I might also mention here that I am an NRA “Lifer,” and by no means an anti-gun person whatsoever.

Back in the “Golden Age” of deer hunting, many if not most deer were killed with open sighted .30-30s. I once commented to my dad that a seemingly higher *percentage* of big bucks were taken in “the good old days,” even though total deer numbers were not nearly as high in that era. Dad pointed out the biggest reason was possibly because most hunters used open sights. Few carried, nor could afford, binoculars or scopes. Since shooting doe deer was not cool in those days, spikes and forkhorns with small antlers were not easily identified as bucks from long range, and so were not shot at. Huh....

In long range shooting, with either gun or bow, the absolutely necessary and noble relationship between predator and prey is remarkably reduced or even eliminated. From greater distances, a game animal’s ability to even be aware of a hunter by way of their normal senses is reduced to all but worthless levels. Because of that fact, there is no longer any real connection with the animal, and therefore not much of a hunt. Elevated “shooting houses” set up on the edges of food plots are correctly named.

Many, if not most, modern hunters are opportunists. Fred Bear himself put that philosophy into motion with his “two season hunter” concept, which in truth was little more than a shrewd marketing plan, at least at the time. Most opportunists are essentially the definition of the word. They choose expediency over basic principles. ***A big problem surfaces when opportunists sacrifice principles.*** Opportunists not only despise failure,

but most cannot handle it. They dislike eating tag soup, preferring to kill their game “the easiest legal way.” Going home with no blood on their hands apparently leaves a bad taste in their mouths.

Most opportunists don’t belong to much of anything, because many are simply *users* who don’t really care. There is a big difference in having an *interest* in something and being *passionate* enough about anything to *really care*.

Hunters need to encourage and embrace the challenge instead of the “kill at all costs” attitude. Risking an unfilled tag will require re-education of the general public to the sweetness of *maybe* accomplishing things a harder way, which is often also a simpler way. It becomes a values thing.

Slipping the crossbow mentality and justification into archery seasons under the disguise of it being a “more efficient weapon” (there’s that *weapon* word again) is little more than an opportunist’s excuse and a money driven marketing ploy. I had a hard time not laughing when an able-bodied neighbor of my brother lobbed off two of his fingers the very first time he took a shot at a nice buck with his brand new crossbow.

True disabilities aside, there is simply no reason to allow crossbows outside of gun seasons. When states dump the *truly* physically impaired requisite, we end up with 90% being mere opportunists. Once again, our biggest problem comes along when these opportunists sacrifice principles. Our deep outdoor passion should never be thought of as any sort of “entitlement,” which unfortunately is the way the majority of users interpret things today. In reality, opportunists might have efficiency, but they display very little class.

Using bows and arrows at ultra close range *puts the hunt in hunting*. Was a big buck shot from a vehicle hunted or simply shot? Was he an accomplishment to be proud of or closer to nothing but a victim? In truth, many “sport hunters” have little or no desire (or time) to honestly engage an animal up close and personal, instead following the simplistic philosophy that getting a job done the quickest, easiest way is the best way. This last sentence in itself is a sad reminder that the hunting process has been watered down to pathetic levels. We need to get back into the woods! Shortening the learning curve that comes as a part of any apprenticeship is not the answer. Hunting needs to once again become a “values” issue, accepting challenges but not pushing past them. Extending one’s personal range limits quickly takes our passion from the level of a challenge to that of a stunt, often justified solely by the fact they saw someone on TV pull it off once.

Respect for wildlife continues to diminish. Deer are not targets. We are not at war with wildlife. Product names need not imply death, destruction, fury, evil, or hatred.

Who could have predicted egotistical hunting celebrities would someday show up in *tour buses* and pickup trucks that look more like they belong in a parade? Who would have guessed that hunting celebrities would make statements like, “I wouldn’t think of going hunting without wearing Brand X camo.” Who “woulda thunk” broadheads would sell for \$40 *each* and the hunting industry might evolve to where breast implants would become a deductible business expense?

Hunting, our beloved passion, needs to be redefined and fixed...reborn if you will. Self imposed rules of conduct can and should be shared, shown, and encouraged by wise, strong-willed people with good values. As things play out now, right or wrong is too often cast aside during the process of interpretation.

It has always fascinated me how flyfishermen can smoothly pull off crusading their passion and beliefs with mass acceptance. They have their very own organizations, seasons, stretches of water, their own magazines, TV shows, mail order catalogs, outfitters, etc. without seemingly offending other fishermen using bait, spinning rods or high tech gear. They express and even flaunt class right before the eyes of “gill crushers” with minimal opposition. How can they do that? One of the reasons is that fishing can be a non-consumptive catch and release pastime, while death is a part of hunting that cannot be avoided nor denied quite as easily.

I can't help but ask myself why high-tech hunters, once they “master” their hunting tools, don't naturally and instinctively realize such and revert to increasing personal challenge levels one way or another rather than pushing onward.

Hunting will regain its identity only by embracing the journey.... selling the process rather than the product. There is nothing wrong with intensity, but we must express **love of** the hunt rather than **lust for** the hunt! Admitting and agreeing that there is in fact a problem that clear thinking could help is a step in the right direction, even if addressed one hunter at a time.

Those in my circles have been talking about the dilemmas within modern hunting practices and the truth that there is a need to do something about them, but the answers have been unclear. Translating these tasks to actions will be our biggest new challenge. We need to educate the masses to realize that at least right now, more of them are guilty than innocent.

In truth, what you are reading here would never be seen published in any mainstream outdoor media because it would piss off multiple advertisers enough for them to jump ship. When principles face profits, the outcome is seldom positive. Most outdoor media needs to first recognize the fact that currently they are part of the problem more than the solution.

True love of the outdoors and passion for the chase is not for everyone, but in my opinion, it's time to put the hunt back in hunting.