

# GENERATIONS OF MEMORIES

by Jim Heffelfinger

## Families and our Hunting Heritage

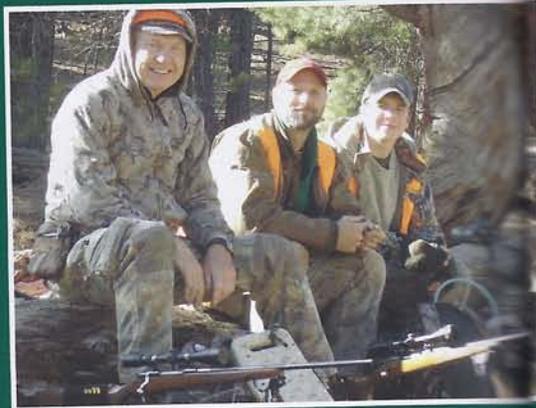
The importance of family to the future of our hunting heritage cannot be understated. Study after study has confirmed that having a personal mentor and a supportive social environment is the most important factor in becoming a hunter and staying a hunter. Since our earliest days in the caves, each generation of human hunters (that used to be all of us!) passed on the tradition of hunting to the upcoming future generations. That tradition was lost in more than 90% of the members of those future generations, so it is incumbent on the rest of us to make sure we do all we can to retain hunters who will continue to be leaders in the field of wildlife conservation.

I do everything the hard way, or at least not the way I am supposed to. My entry into the hunting fraternity was no exception. My dad grew up in the big city and didn't have any exposure to hunting, so it was never mentioned in our house. We moved to a small rural community when I was 14, and when I heard my friends spent their weekends walking

around in the woods with real shotguns shooting rabbits and squirrels, I just had to learn more. After a hunter education class, a shotgun purchase at my dad's hardware store, and a few trips to the local woods, the course of my life was irreversibly altered.

My interest in hunting spread to my older brother and my Dad. We hunted together for a few years, not really knowing what we were doing, before college and jobs caused us to disband and scatter. My discovery of the outdoors led me to pursue a degree in wildlife management. That college degree fed my hunger for wildlife that grew into a passion. Unfortunately, my preoccupation with college, and then raising a family, kept me too busy to feed my hungry family with wildlife. Now in a new state, I eased back into hunting and did it all alone. I played the role of a stealthy solitary ambush predator – a veritable “one-man wolf pack.”

At the time, I thought hunting alone was the way to go because I could call all the shots and go where and when I wanted (subject to approval by the real head of the



household). Then something magical happened; my parents retired from their hardware store in the Midwest and moved to a house two blocks away. Dad, then 66-years-old, said he was tired of hearing about all my hunting stories and wanted to experience them. It is unusual that a son introduces his dad to hunting. Human dimensions researchers will tell you it almost never happens, but his retirement opened the gate to so many amazing adventures.

### Team Heffelfinger

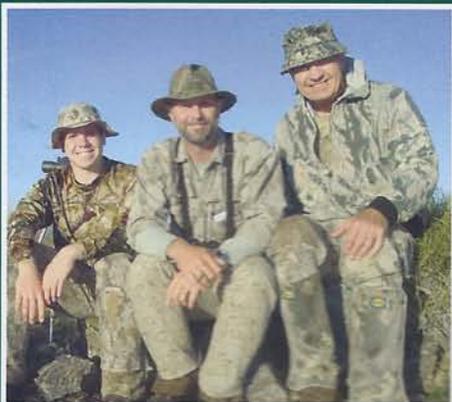
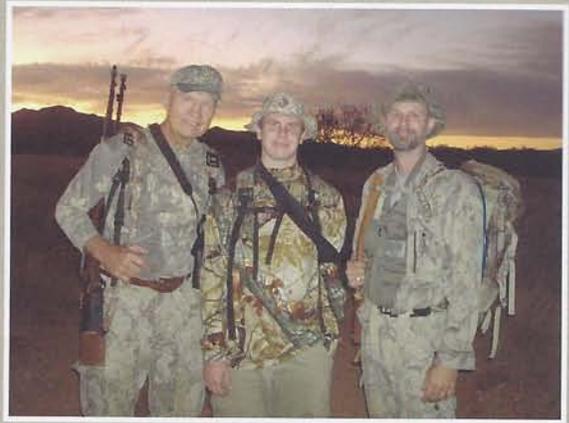
My dad and I started hunting javelina the first year he moved closer to me, and he scored in wide-open public lands hunting with a two-hour stalk down into a deep canyon. A deer hunt a few months later ended in similar success on a young mule deer buck. With some luck, we also had elk tags for that same year, and he ended his first year of real hunting with three big game animals under his belt and a freezer full of game meat! Suddenly a whole new world was opened to him, and we started hunting just about everything we could.

The time we have spent together is unique and very special. It surprised me how amazing and fun it was to hunt not only with another person, but with your dad. Quality time spent with someone is measured in the hours you share away from all the distractions and noises.

Within a few years, my oldest son Levi became 10-years-old, completed a hunter safety course, and was chomping at the bit to get into big game hunting. His first successful hunt was an ancient granddaddy of a Corsican ram from the Hill Country. The ram may have been older than Levi! That hunt began a long stream of deer, elk and javelina hunts with three generations of Heffelfingers (Team Heffelfinger) working together to outwit and out-sit the animals we pursued in the forests, brushlands and grasslands.

The team has since been joined by two more members, my other sons Wyatt (14) and Cody (16). Wyatt lost interest in javelina after his first hunt, when I called in a whole herd and they surrounded us with jaws popping menacingly. He does have a passion for turkey and deer hunting and added one of each to his bedroom wall last year. Cody is content spending his time fishing, but is frighteningly deadly with a

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.22 on rabbits. The last member of the team turned 8-years-old this year and will soon start filling his bedroom wall and my garage freezer.

#### Plugging the Generation Gap

The baby boomer generation born after World War II was followed by Generation X, and now what seems to be the XBOX generation. Baby boomers returned from the war with new marksmanship and outdoor skills and a strong feeling of self-reliance. The desire to get outdoors was natural for this generation that mostly grew up on a farm or in a rural setting. The generations that followed saw social changes that took them farther and farther from nature and direct contact with the land. More of the American population lived in the city or suburbs, and this meant fewer people grew up in rural areas where it was abundantly clear how meat was manufactured and packaged. Even though I was raised in the city, I spent some weekends at my uncle's meat processing plant watching steers go from feedlot to freezer. Show me a kid who raised a 4H steer and sold it to the highest bidding slaughterhouse, and I'll show you a well-adjusted kid who understands the world.

Unfortunately, we have witnessed more and more separation between the generations as a direct result of spending less time spent together. Generations of the past were more cohesive because the whole family sat around the only radio in the house and listened together. When I was a kid, we all sat around the only TV in the house and argued about which of the available three channels we wanted to watch together. Today, if kids are home at all, they are undoubtedly on a cell phone, XBOX, computer or watching their own TV in their room. Family communication has now degenerated to receiving text messages from mom to take the garbage out. **The country needs something the family can do together and hunting is that thing.**

In 1971, anthropologist Lyall Watson even said that

the incredible development of the complex human brain was the result of the increasing need to communicate and coordinate abstract plans associated with hunting animals. Communication can be a powerful thing in the development of a human brain – especially a teenage one. There is no better way to open up communication with your children than to be participants – rather than spectators – in the physical and mental challenges that hunting provides. Having three generations of Heffelfingers hunting together has done remarkable things for our family, and I don't think we are unique in that regard. I could write thousands of words about the benefits of hunting to wildlife conservation in North America (I know because I've done it), but closer to home are the real benefits it provides me and my family.

Bonding between family members and across generations is something that is hard to purposely orchestrate, but

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hunting provides the opportunity because you are separated from the distractions of everyday life while you work together to achieve a common goal. Passing on your knowledge of the outdoors to the next generation of hunter-conservationists gives you a great sense of a heritage being passed on in to the future. This started thousands of generations before Team Heffelfinger was assembled and, with our help and vigilance, will continue for thousands more generations.

There are a lot of things that compete with your teenager for time and attention. Hunting is an activity that takes you away from most of those distractions (the best hunting spot is not the one with the most deer, but the one with the worst cell coverage). Being able to sit for hours and talk to your teenager and, more importantly, listen to your teenager is time you will never regret. During the hunt, we are focused on harvesting and animal, but years later we realize how inconsequential the actual harvest was to the experience. Some say that time spent afield with your dad or kids is not subtracted from your total lifespan.

There is no substitute for having your son listen to your father talk about the locker room pranks he and his teammates pulled in high school in the 1950s. Too often young people see their grandparents as old people and don't spend enough time with them to find out that 50 years ago they would have had a lot in common. Hunting as a family with several generations in the field together creates an incredible sense of continuity, not only of our hunting heritage, but in family heritage. It is also a tribute and an obligation to the conservationists who worked so hard to develop the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation that has given us so much. So many people tell me their best memories are those of spending time in the field hunting with their dad. This makes me appreciate what I have now and how many memories are being forged that will be remembered fondly.

#### Meat and Memories

Oral histories shared around a campfire have been important to humans since the beginning of time. The huge assortment of electronic gadgets and social media sites that are supposed to enhance communication seemed to have only stifled it. Quiet time spent together is what creates the memories for the next generation and enriches the lives of the previous



generation. Most of my best hunting memories to date are of enjoying small things with family and of conversations that would never come up if it weren't for long rides to and from hunting locations and full days in the field together. There have been many days of hunting with none or very few game animals sighted. At the time I was so hopeful for an animal to show up, but in retrospect I see those deerless days as gifts of time together.

As important as memories are, the meat can be mighty important when you have four boys to feed on only a

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biologist's salary. We have trophy standards we try to adhere to; our rule is "if it fits in a tortilla its big enough!" Team Heffelfinger has not spent all our time sitting on hills talking. Besides Levi's Corsican ram, he has harvested three javelina, three mule deer, one whitetail, and a very special elk on his 16th birthday. My dad, the 78-year-old patriarch of the team, has five javelina, one pronghorn, two elk, and two mule deer and all in the last 11 years. I have used freezer paper to protect deer of both species, two elk, a pronghorn, and a handful of javelina. Wyatt's mule deer buck (named Houdini for his skill in disappearing into thin air) and spring gobbler this year gave him a great start in supplying meat for the family. Not to be outdone by the others, Cody shows why his middle name is Hunter by keeping the freezer stocked with world-class Antelope jackrabbit meat (don't laugh until you've tried it!). Garrett Buck is only eight but when we unleash him on the world the significance of his middle name will be immediately obvious. The freezer is nearly empty except for some early season doves so Team Heffelfinger is chasing deer, elk, jackrabbits and some feathered game this fall and winter.

In 1949, Aldo Leopold, the father of modern wildlife management wrote "Babes do not tremble when they are

shown a golf ball, but I should not like to own the boy whose hair does not lift his hat when he sees his first deer." My father had such a boy because that accurately describes my reaction the first time I had a deer walk under my tree stand. I am proud to say the reaction appears to be in all our genes.

We are all too busy, but fathers must realize that the time we have with our children is shorter than you think. Their weddings are closer than you realize, and there will always be time to work...later. If you don't have children at home now, find a youth who needs your mentoring and help connect the generations into an unbroken chain of support for wildlife conservation for all who will follow us. 🐾🐾



Editors note: Jim Heffelfinger completed a Masters Degree at Texas A&M-Kingsville working on the issue of coyote predation on trophy bucks in South Texas. He then worked on the Rio Paisano Ranch (Brooks/Kleberg Co.) as Manager of Wildlife Operations. He is now an adjunct professor at University of Arizona, Professional Member of Boone & Crockett, Chair of the western states Mule Deer Working Group, and a big game biologist for the Arizona Game & Fish Department. Jim's book *Deer of the Southwest* was published by Texas A&M University Press – autographed copies are available from [www.deernut.com](http://www.deernut.com). If you are interested in Jackrabbit recipes, just e-mail Jim through his website or find "Jackrabbit Jim" on Facebook.