

OPENING DAY AT DEER CAMP

by
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The porch swing creaked in rhythm as the heat of the late August evening gradually faded away. The conversation came easy and was mixed with laughter as my wife, Linda, and I visited with my parents. We talked about the events of the week and updated them on the latest adventures in the lives of their now grown grandkids.

“Bow season opens in a couple of weeks. I think I’ll take a day or two off work and go to deer camp,” I said. I saw Dad’s eyes light up. “I think I might just go with you. I feel the best I’ve felt in ages,” was his reply. His health had been declining for a while, and lately had worsened. I saw the look Mom gave Linda. They both knew he couldn’t hunt. He knew it, too. I knew he just wanted to go to deer camp one more time.

Most people probably wouldn’t consider my dad a great outdoorsman. He didn’t have the latest gear and never went on a guided hunt. His trophy room consisted of the antlers of one small six point buck. He attached them to the old wooden gun rack in our den and showed them off to visitors for years. But to me, he was Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett rolled into one. He taught me to love and respect the outdoors. We went on camping trips and explored the woods, but hunting and fishing became my passion.

I spent hours catching bait--grasshoppers, worms, crickets, and minnows--for our weekend fishing trips. We fished in farm ponds, trout streams, and sometimes went out in the old wooden boat with its 9hp Sears motor. The motor ran most of the time, but we always took a tin can to bail water and a wooden paddle just in case.

After enough safety and shooting lessons with the single barrel .410 shotgun, my hunting career began. Dad started me out on squirrels, and we always ate what we killed. As I got a little older, he let me rabbit hunt with him and his pack of beagles. In my early teens, someone gave him a bird dog they no longer wanted, and quail hunting captured my imagination.

A few years after college I got a job in this area, and Linda and I moved back home. The deer population was growing rapidly at that time, and I soon discovered the obsession I still have—bow hunting for deer. I got Dad interested in archery, and this led to our association with the deer camp he loved so much.

Our deer camp didn't look much different than any other. We joined a small group of friends to purchase an acre of land in Abbeville County, S. C. The little plot was surrounded by good public hunting land and had utilities for a mobile home. Some hard work and ingenuity turned it into a full hook-up campground for our little group of campers. They were circled up like a Wild West wagon train, and there was a picnic table and fire pit in the middle. Dad's camper was about thirty years old, and mine only a little newer. We spent about as much time doing repairs as we did hunting, but Dad loved everything about the place.

Dad was in the middle of everything at camp. The others all liked him and let him think he was in charge. He figured that since he was the oldest, it was his duty to run things. He oversaw the skinning pole, fire building, meal planning, and advised everyone on where and how to hunt; but telling hunting stories was his specialty. He could turn the mere glimpse of a deer into a near miss encounter with the next world record buck. He was king, and that little deer camp was his domain.

We never made the opening day trip we planned on the porch that hot August day. As a matter of fact, Dad died on opening day, September 15, 2001, four days after the Twin Towers fell, and one week before his 69th birthday.

I haven't missed an opening day since then and have been blessed to kill a few first day deer. I always say a thank you prayer and dedicate that deer to Dad. I'd like to have another opening day to hunt with him. I'd also like to spend one or more with my own son and my grandkids. My son and I haven't gotten to hunt together for a few years. He lives several states away now, and has a full and busy life with a new wife and a business to run. My grandkids live nearby and say they want to hunt with Papa when they "get big." I'm just not sure Papa will be around long enough to hunt with them.

I don't know if there will be deer hunting in heaven, but I'd like to think there will. In fact, there are a lot of things I don't know. But I do know this: If we all put our faith in God and ask Jesus into our hearts, we'll find out some day. Thanks, Dad. You taught me that, too. I'll see you on opening day. And, oh, by the way, the rest of the family will be joining us in camp just a little later on.