

Hunt #13

Monday, November 24

Calvin and Bill's properties



Red and I are going to my favorite spot along the Elkhorn River, northwest of Elk City, Nebraska. Calvin Paasch lets us hunt coons on his property after deer season. He and his boys deer hunt their land and prefer that Red doesn't stir up the Whitetails they are hunting during the day. Calvin, still, encourages me to catch a lot of coons after deer hunting season.

I first hunted on Calvin's place four years ago with Mike McCrery, an elder at a church I was part of at the time. Mike knew Calvin from horseback riding on his land and got permission for us to coon hunt there. Mike and I hunted together a few times that first winter I was taking Red out at night. We caught raccoons both times we went out with Red.

Last season, I explained to Calvin that I had a bad knee but wanted to hunt on my actual birthday. I say actual birthday because I was born on the 29th of February. That day only "happens" once every four years. I had never coon hunted on my birthday before, so I was really excited about having the opportunity. He volunteered to have his big teenage son carry me out of the woods if I experienced a problem with my knee.

"Just give me a call on your cell phone," he told me. I knew then he was a nice guy.

Today, I called Calvin to let him know that Red and I were coming out. He acted a little strange, however, and said they got hit with some wind damage. I'd be welcome to hunt, though.

When we arrive, the night is clear, calm, in the lower-thirties, no moon. Ideal. We get to our normal parking spot near his gate

at 6:15 p.m. We step out of the truck, and I am shocked! The woods are basically gone. A few trees are still standing, but even some of the largest cottonwoods are down. Calvin was right! We go into the woods that are left anyway. Red strikes a raccoon and runs it around quite a while, but there is no way the coon is going up a tree. The fallen trees keep Red from getting close enough to force the coon up one of the few trees that are still standing. While following Red, I notice an eye shine in a big tree by the edge of a field, however. When Red gets done with the track he's on, we'll come back to this tree. He never does tree the one he started. I guess that coon was too smart for us.

We go back to the tree where I saw the coon, and Red strikes and trails across a weed field, across a winter wheat field, and into the piece of woods he treed four big boars in one tree two seasons before. That night, I called dad from the tree and told him the news. Never before had we treed four big boar raccoons in one tree! This was truly unusual. That many big boar coons together at all is rare. That night, I was using a new .22 magnum rifle because I thought I needed the additional power of a magnum rifle. These trees are much taller than the trees in Missouri, which makes for a longer shot. But, I traded it off after that night because it made the raccoon's heads too bloody. Bloody heads can be a real mess. As I said earlier, when skinning a raccoon, the head is the last part. Pulling straight down on the skin, if the head is really bloody, all the blood runs down onto the rest of the hide making the inside of the skin a bloody mess. The blood doesn't hurt anything; I just didn't like the mess.

We get to the woods, same deal, 75% of the trees are down. The woods are gone here, too! Calling Red off, we give up the chase. The one we are chasing must have been the one I eye shined earlier where Red picked up the scent. There have always been a few really smart coons in this area. We used to chase one

that always headed right to the Elkhorn River. Another one would head east across the highway off the property and into a huge field of corn stubble where Red couldn't line it out but wouldn't quit. I had to catch him in that field on at least three different nights. Tonight, after I catch Red we head straight back to the truck. No use hunting here anymore.

The damage to the trees saddens me because these woods contain a lot of good memories. How did Calvin's home not get wiped out by the strong winds that knocked all those trees down?

I pray, "Thank You Father, that their house is OK," as I drive from the area.

It is still bothering me about the woods, and somehow, we are skunked on a good weather night. Not ready to give up, we head south to Bill's campground along the Elkhorn River since it's not very far from Calvin's property. We have already caught several coons here this season, so I'm not sure we will find another one. It has a huge field of picked corn; therefore, there is plenty of food for raccoons for miles around. Guess we'll try out that migration theory. We park at his locked gate with a big KEEP OUT sign near it. Not long into our hunt, Red strikes a track in the woods along the river. He trails across a field of soybean stubble, through a fence row, and out into a field of corn stubble. This bothers me because Red generally is not a very good field dog. For some reason, he has a hard time taking a track anywhere in a field where there is scent of a raccoon. This time, however, Red moves the track along. He trails into another fence row, and we follow the track down the fence east. Following him, I spot an eye shine in a big cottonwood in the fence row. I won't shoot this one now. We will come by this spot again. It is on the way back to the truck. We'll get him then. On into the woods, I follow Red. We go right by the place he trailed

up the fallen tree he couldn't make it down without jumping earlier this season.

"I hope you don't do that again!" I think.

In fact, I'm starting to wonder if Red is going to tree this coon at all when just about that time he does. If I had been in a competition hunt, I would have happily yelled, "Tree my dog!" Right now, however, I'm just glad we aren't skunked!

"Way to go Red. You did it," I tell him.

This is as far as we are going in this direction tonight, however. It is late and time to head back.

On the way back, we check out the big cottonwood with the coon I eye shined earlier. It is still there.

"All right!" I think.

Red gives it a few barks, but he isn't showing much interest. Apparently, the raccoon hasn't been on the ground. He is high up making it hard for Red to smell him. When I turn on my gun light, Red gets excited.

Most of the time, a big cottonwood, especially in a fence row, doesn't have a place for me to get a good gun rest in order to make a steady, confident, accurate shot. The fence row is usually too brushy to stand as far back as needed to see the top of a huge tree.

This place is no different. I have no choice but to back out into the stubble field and take a shot from there. With as careful an aim as I can muster, I squeeze the trigger. Plunk! The bullet strikes the coon right between his shining eyes!

"Wow! What a shot!" I think.

The coon hits the ground with a loud thud.

"That's a pretty good-sized coon."

There's no better way to describe the sound of a dead raccoon striking the ground after falling from a tree than thud or plop. Imagine dropping a twenty pound sack of flour from a distance

two to four times the height of the roof of your house. I think dropping the sack of flour to the ground would sound the same as when I shoot a raccoon out of a tree and it hits the ground.

When this coon falls, Red puts his finishing touches on it. As I inspect the big raccoon, to my surprise it is a big bob-tailed boar. It practically has no tail at all.

My mind starts racing with the possibilities. "Maybe, its tail got bit off in a fight with another boar; or, caught it in a steel trap; or, frozen off in the winter when it was young; or, another predator munched it off. Who knows?"

I've seen this before. This is the kind of big, old, smart, gnarly, trophy raccoon a coon hunter dreams about catching. They usually get away. Not this time. I carry it out of the fence row to the field of corn stubble.

Placing the coon in my vest whole to carry out, I look up at the tree again and see another eye shine! Again, I don't have a rest on which to hold the gun steady. I make another good off hand shot. It is always harder to make a good shot with a rifle on a still target without a rest. Both of these coons I will carry to the truck. Now, with three big raccoons in my vest, I'm testing the reinforcements a seamstress did to the shoulders. I got those reinforcements to help carry just such heavy loads.

Almost immediately, Red starts barking excitedly on another track. I do a mental check to make sure neither of the two raccoons squalled. Thankfully, they were both dead before they hit the ground.

"Good deal," I think. "This isn't one of those chases!" The last time we had a coon chase like that one was at Raven's Nest on the last hunt, and we never caught the coon that went straight to a dozer pile. From the direction Red is taking, I'm thinking he might be back-tracking. Back-tracking is when a dog runs a track the wrong direction.

“Maybe, he is back-tracking the first coon we caught,” I think. He heads back through the fence row, through the soybean stubble, and into the woods by the river.

“I am not going to follow you running a back-track. You’re going to have to tree that thing before I go after you. Good luck with that since you’re trailing a back-track!” I say out loud. Red trails on paying no attention to my negativity.

I know there is a big pile of rocks along the river, so I’m not surprised when he loses the trail at the pile. Walking to the edge of the woods, I scold him. I want him to leave it, come out of the woods, and quit messing around. He hasn’t barked for about five minutes. Red hasn’t come out of the woods, either.

All of a sudden, he breaks the silence with tree barks!

“You bozo,” I yell, but he sounds pretty sure.

On the other side of the rock pile, near the river, Red has a coon treed!

“Well, I’ll be darn. You have one.” I tell him.

“Way to go Red,” I apologize. He concentrates on tree barking.

Surprisingly, this is not one of those times that he was back-tracking. It’s almost like he enjoys a good hot sniff (fresh scent) on the ground more than a cool sniff (not fresh scent) up a tree.

The river is about thirty yards away. The tree is far enough from the Elkhorn River there is no chance the raccoon will fall or roll into it. I want to make a good shot, so the coon doesn’t run to the river if he falls out alive. The heaviness of my vest is requiring some effort to even stand up, so I remove it. I back up from the tree with the coon and find another tree from which to get a good rest for my gun. I have a solid sight (the + or crosshairs in my scope are not moving) on the raccoon’s head through my scope with my gun resting on the tree’s trunk. I squeeze the trigger. Plunk. Plop. We have our fourth raccoon,

and it too is a big old boar. Amazing! Unlike the last one, this one has the normal six black rings on its tail.

Since my vest is full, I take out one of the two sixteen penny nails I always carry with me. My dad taught me to do this squirrel hunting. Cut a small stick; sharpen one end; cut a slot through the squirrel's back foot; and place the stick through the hole. It gives something to hold onto between your fingers. You can carry multiple squirrels this way if you don't have a vest with a game carrying pouch built in it. The same is true of raccoons.

I've improved on the wooden stick carrying method with raccoons, however. A steel three and a half inch nail cuts down all the above steps, as I don't have to cut a stick. A nail is already sharp, and it's a lot stronger. I just jam the nail through the center of a coon's big back paw. A nail like this will also hold more weight than a stick. One big raccoon, or two small ones, are all I can carry any distance with one hand.

After all this, Red and I are back at the truck at 11:00 o'clock.

We celebrate with McNuggets and McDonaldland cookies on the way home. When we get to the house, I place the night's take on the garage floor for Beth and my boys to see, as I did for mom and dad when I hunted nearly every night back in the winter of '78 before college started.

Most of those nights in Missouri, I hunted by horseback, so I wouldn't get tired walking and carrying the raccoons. The dead raccoons were tied to the saddle horn for the horse to carry. I like to ride horses, so we always had a good trail ride. There are several national forests in east central Missouri near where I grew up, so there were no fences, no houses, and no roads for miles. You'd think a horse would be scared, or would have a hard time making it through the woods at night, but this isn't the case at all. It helps, however, to have a horse that neck reins (walks in the opposite direction of the rein when it touches that

side of its neck). This type of horse can be guided around the trees quickly, especially if you have to chase after the dogs at a fast pace. Riding a horse, we can cover a lot more territory coon hunting than I do now by foot!

The Ozarks in Missouri are an ideal area for hunting wild running forest coons by horseback with hounds. The most we ever got in one night was five. During the whole winter season of '78, we caught 59 raccoons. Their hides were worth a lot of money then. From the sale of those coon hides, I paid for my first semester of college. If I was able to catch 59, with a faster method (on horseback) and with a champion hound, you can understand how amazing the number Red and I are catching this season is. Heck, I could have paid for several years of college if we caught this many back then!

I was able to hunt that winter because I decided not to start college until January. Dad insisted that he take Bawley and me on a month long hunting trip to Montana in October for my High School graduation present. Of course, I was all for that!

In eastern Montana, on the Kinchloe Ranch, north of the town of Roundup, we hunted everything that was in season: antelope, mule deer, ducks, rabbits, sage grouse, coyotes with the landowner's greyhounds, and, of course raccoons. In fact we taught the owners of the ranch how to hunt coons by horseback. Up to that point, they had always wanted a good coon hound. They saw we had a hound with us, and of course, they wanted to know if he was any good. For some reason, they called a coon hound a "barking dog," which was kind of funny to dad and me. Maybe, it was because their greyhounds didn't bark. A greyhound runs down a coyote by sight, catches it, and kills it without barking at all. After hunting a few nights with the rancher, his sons, a hired hand, and his daughter who was my age, dad finally asked Wendel Kinchloe, the ranch owner, if any

of the dozens of horses we were seeing while antelope hunting on their ranch were broke to ride.

“Sure!” Wendel responded.

“Well, have some of the gentle horses saddled up tomorrow night, and we’ll ride them on our coon hunt.” Dad told him.

The next day, dad and I hunted hard after antelope beginning at daylight. We crawled in cactus, stalked them, shot at them, ran after them, drove after them, and finally got a couple. On the way to the camper that evening, we hoped the Kinchloes weren’t serious about going coon hunting because we were completely worn out.

We drove down out of the hills onto their lot in the flat river bottom where our camper was parked only for the truck’s headlights to reveal what looked like half a dozen saddled horses! Unbelievable. The Kinchloes were ready and eager to go coon hunting! The whole family was there to go on their first horseback coon hunt. Dad and I grabbed a quick bite of something to eat, and we were off into the night hunting raccoons with our hosts. After those hunts along the Musselshell River by horseback, they thought Bawley was the best dog they had ever seen! I think Wendel would have paid just about anything for Bawley. Bawley, however, wasn’t for sale.

A few days later, dad and I left their ranch and traveled to western Montana near Butte to hunt Elk and Mule Deer in the mountains. We also fished for Rainbow Trout in a clear creek next to the road. The fresh Rainbow Trout fried in our camper were really good! We stayed out there for a week. Once we had “rested up” (just hunting and fishing during the day), we got to thinking we had such a good time with the Kinchloes, we should go back east to visit them one last time before returning to Missouri. By that time, we had a nice 5 X 5 Elk and a huge Beaver! Dad and I were really happy about this and wanted someone to

celebrate with, plus, we hadn't killed a Mule Deer. We both had a tag for Mule Deer and it just happened that Wendel had Mule Deer on his ranch. We could continue hunting for Mule Deer and maybe do more coon hunting by horseback with them, as well. As it turned out, we got the biggest Mule Deer we could find on Wendel's ranch and caught more coons.

The Montana hunting trip was a graduation present my dad and mom could understand the importance of and it meant something to me for the rest of my life. Mom always understood I was born a hunter, and Dad and I were able to experience this trip together. But the trip had to come to an end. We have memories from the Montana trip both of us still enjoy today. Dad would return a few times to the Kinchloe ranch with my brother where his friendship with them would continue. I was never able to return.

From Montana, we returned to Missouri on Halloween night with a freezer full of meat, capes, pelts, and antlers for mounting. I then got to enjoy the coon hunting season in Missouri without a daytime job or school. I hunted every night it was possible until the season ended in January and college began.

Ironically, Bawley died shortly after I started college that January. An autopsy revealed he died of cancer. I mention this because at times he acted kind of sick during our Montana trip. We just thought he was tired. He was nine years old at the time. In spite of our loss, I still think about those unforgettable nights together in the woods during that season and I miss him!

But, once college got underway, and I was working on weekends, I had to sell my Black and Tan, Jim. My coon hunting days were over, at least at that time. Jim just couldn't stop being a hunting dog, that's what he enjoyed doing the most, it wouldn't be fair to him not to hunt him, so I reluctantly sold him to a coon hunter to hunt the next season.

Another high school graduation present I received was from my Aunt Zoe and Uncle Charlie Caywood. Charlie is an artist best known for custom made black powder rifles, shotguns, and pistols. In fact, Charlie founded Caywood Gun makers, and gunsmithing has remained a craft in their family. His son, Danny made an authentic reproduction of Davy Crockett's rifle for President George W. Bush. Until recently, my aunt owned and operated the historic War Eagle Mill located on the War Eagle River near Rogers, Arkansas. In 1973, my Grandpa Medlin restored the gristmill, which was destroyed during the Civil War by the Confederate Army. It's believed to be the only undershot water wheel currently in operation in the United States, and my family had a huge part in bringing it back into operation. A water wheel was used to convert the energy in flowing water into other forms of power, in this case to mill wheat into flour and corn into meal. An undershot water wheel has the flowing river water running under the wheel, which causes the wheel to rotate, and generates the power to rotate the milling stones that grind the wheat or corn. My aunt and uncle made the mill operation into a successful business. Their graduation gift was a scrimshaw of "me" as Jeremiah Johnson, on a piece of ivory. In the movie, Jeremiah Johnson originally carried steel traps. My uncle, however, replaced the steel traps with a coon and ax and added a hound. It's really cool, and I've always liked it a lot. It hangs in my truck still today.

I mention this because of the importance *Jeremiah Johnson* holds for me. *Jeremiah Johnson* was my favorite movie of all time for many years. Jeremiah, played by Robert Redford, was a man repelled by city life after the Civil War, who sought solitude in a wilderness whose purity he never questioned. He goes off to learn to be a mountain man. With the help of an old trapper, he learns well but gets in trouble with the Crow Indians for

violating their religious rules helping some stranded settlers one harsh winter. The Crow kill his wife and son while he is away. This tragedy makes him a loner for life. The Crow repeatedly try to kill him for who he is and what he has done. Through all those hardships, Jeremiah learned to be at peace and eventually gained the respect of the Crow, who were once hostile to him, by killing every young brave that attempted to take his life. Thirty-seven years ago, this movie resonated with me because Jeremiah, like myself is a hunter and prefers the solitude of the wilderness.

Now that I've had some time to endure a few hard experiences, I, too, am learning more clearly who I am. I still think about Jeremiah Johnson. I've even gotten into trouble for helping people.

Through these experiences, I've learned that it is OK to be who I am in this world, and not to let what other people think bother me too much. Most people won't encourage you to be who you are. They want you to be who they think you should be. Sometimes I think it would be easier just to be what others think, then I remember that nobody ever said it would be easy to be who you are. God never promised a comfortable life, but He does promise true fulfillment through a relationship with Him. God won't help us be someone else. He does, however, help us with the courage and the power to be who we are, who He made us to be, through a daily relationship with Him. Jeremiah Johnson stayed true to who he was even through the hardships.

Regardless of the hard days, each time I go into the night, I give thanks to God for the opportunity to hunt. Tonight, what started out a discouraging night turned out to be awesome.

"Thank You, Father," I think to myself.

I am glad that just a few years ago Red reminded me how much I enjoy hunting raccoons with a good dog. This has also

reminded me how different my relationship with Jesus is now compared to the one I had with Him while in high school. The hunting experience is even more enjoyable now, though Red is not at the level of a champion hound like the one I had then. Red's a member of the family, and the job he does hunting is fulfilling to us both. He doesn't need to be championship quality for us to enjoy the experience. When I hunt with Red at night, words like gratitude, appreciation, contentment, and fulfillment describe me. This is why I hunt now. The stress and pressure of a normal business day are nowhere to be found in the woods at night. My focus is completely on what Red is doing and what we are experiencing together. The words of Jesus are becoming reality for me when He says in John, chapter 16, verse 33, "...in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble (stress, pressure)."

The next day, I leave a message for Calvin that if he ever wants to borrow a brush chipper, one is available to him anytime.

"What he really needs," I think, "is a logging company!"

84 raccoons this season.