

# In the Company of Dogs

“War nicht das Auge sonnenhaft,  
Die Sonne konnt’ es nie erblicken.”  
*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

**M**y father’s coat, abandoned among jars of tomatoes, a sack of drying walnuts and dust-covered mousetraps, hung lifelessly from a nail beneath the stairs to the basement. The tan, canvas field coat with a torn, tartan lining, frayed cuffs and missing button was as heavy as my heart as I held the coat to my face and smelled the curious mix of dust, gunpowder, dogs and birds. There was a hint of bacon grease from the café where stories were told and political complaints registered. White hairs from Cody, Dad’s last setter, seemed embedded in the corduroy collar, remnants of a hug for a job well done. A half dozen shotgun shells were nestled in the right front pocket. A box of Peters High Velocity, Rustless, Long Range, Hard Hitting, Smokeless Shotgun Shells sat on the shelf above the coat, lid open, exposing the blue paper hulls with roll crimps and high brass. The A. H. Fox 12 ga. that he called Loretta, which Mom had given me 23 years ago after the cancer had consumed him, shot plastic, star-crimped shells just fine, but not as good as paper, he always cautioned. Now Mom is gone, too. Her stuff is upstairs. Over the years, the remnants of his life had migrated to the basement. People and things move quickly through our lives with a wispy grace that barely stirs the air. But memories and traditions persist. Like him, I hunt. Were it not for him, hunting would not exist. He was my eyes. Hunting was my sun.

The late John Voelker, Judge and novelist, once said, “I fish ... not because I regard fishing as being so terribly important but because I suspect that so many of the other concerns of men are equally unimportant...” And so it is with hunting. Necessity turned recreation in the blink of a geologic eye. But the primal urge, however unimportant, persists whether it is genetically innate or learned. Rooted in culture, hunting is part of our behavioral repertoire. Sustained by positive associations and used as an excuse to go afield, to escape momen-



tarily the regimented drudgery of making a living in a workaholic society, hunting is a complex, passionate pursuit. The unenlightened, uninformed and uninspired might call it something else. If it were about killing, that is what we would call it.

Many will spend their lives and fortunes trying to recreate that brief period in their lives that haunts them pleasantly throughout the sum of their experiences, enduring warmly when all else seems cold and chaotic. They will repeatedly cross that shadowy line between remembrance and reality without realizing they can never go back. Each has their reasons. To some, hunting is what they grew up with. It was the usual. Seasons were defined by the species being pursued. To others, it is about the tools of hunting, romantic adherence to form and function when guns epitomized the blending of art into the mechanical age. Just as John Harrison honed a seagoing precision timepiece that allowed the determination of longitude, the gun-maker sought perfection in weaponry. Mauser, Luger, Beretta, Colt and Browning have all stood the test of time with their innovations for reliably controlling the explosive nature of gunpowder and channeling its energy. Finally, there are those who enjoy the social aspects of hunting.

Cultural rituals, be they the traditions of the prim and proper English hunt club or the Wyoming cowboy elk camp, provide opportunities for people who have similar interests to interact. Some of us, however, prefer to be in the company of dogs. Communal hunting by members of two different orders, a primate and a carnivore, never ceases to amaze me. The bond between man and dog stretches back between 10,000 to 14,000 years. Not quite as long as that between man and goats and then sheep, the relationship is much more refined. Perhaps it was because we were (are) both pack hunters with similar social structures. Domestication probably occurred in different places during roughly the same time. But taxonomists now

agree that the dog and the wolf are the same genus and species, differing only as subspecies. Konrad Lorenz, the late Austrian ethologist, would have been pleased. He understood the interspecies bond better than most but seemed troubled over the genetic history of the animal. He, with John Paul Scott, John L. Fuller and later Michael W. Fox, dedicated much of their lives to describing, behaviorally, the domestic wolf that some of us hunt with.

Upland hunting in the United States is as diverse as the breeds of dogs used to hunt birds. From Southern quail to New England woodcock; from Northern States ruffed grouse to Plains States pheasants; from Southwestern valley quail to Rocky Mountain partridge – the birds are as different as the habitats that support them. Even today with unprecedented habitat loss, the vastness of America’s landscape presents untold opportunities for hunters and their canine companions. Upland game bird hunting is available from coast to coast and border to border. This stands in stark contrast to the decimated game populations of a mere century ago when excessive harvest and lack of game laws led to extinction and loss of historic range. With the advent of Aldo Leopold’s scientific approach to wildlife management and wildlife biology becoming an integrated academic and professional discipline, federal and state governments brought wildlife back to the people. But at the same time, the public became less attached to the land that nourished them and that supported wildlife. More than half of Americans lived on farms at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fewer than two percent of Americans now feed the rest of the country and a portion of the world. Today, fewer than five percent of Americans hunt and those who do are aging rapidly. A full three generations separate most people from agriculture, rural lifestyles and hunting. But the wildlife still belong to the people. The individual states manage wildlife for the benefit of their residents. Both consumptive and non-consumptive uses of wildlife are considered, but the bulk of their resources are directed toward game populations. Hunters pay



for wildlife conservation and management. State hunting

licenses, federal excise taxes on sporting goods used for hunting and, in some cases, state tax dollars pay for the privilege of hunting well-managed game populations. Many states have developed innovative programs that target youth in an attempt to recruit a new generation of hunters to replace those who have reached the age where remembrances are less exhausting than actually going afield. Hunter education, stressing gun safety, is a requirement for young hunters in all 50 states. University-sponsored 4-H programs in shooting sports instruct youth in competitive shooting, from trap and skeet to Olympic-style marksmanship. Equally important, young people are exposed to the ethics of hunting and firearm use. Extension programs from Land Grant Universities even offer dog training for youth. These clubs are primarily for obedience training but the door is open for gun dog training and/or field trial competition.

In spite of changing hunter demographics, habitat loss, increased urbanization and decreased access to prime hunting lands, America’s hunting opportunities abound, especially in the west where public lands make up half the land mass. Even in states with little public land, state wildlife agencies have made available millions of acres through private-land access programs. Hunters in South Dakota will harvest two million rooster pheasants this year. North Dakota and Kansas will each add another million birds to the dinner table while pumping tens of millions of dollars into the local economies. Most of those hunters will be in the company of dogs.

Pointers, setters, flushers and retrievers, wolf-dogs in the hunt, primal in pursuit, primal in their relationship with the two-legged tool users, all have the purpose of moving in and out of the coverts that protect their quarry. To most upland hunters, it’s not about keeping score. Rather, fair chase supplants the competitive urge to win and pride is reserved for well-trained dogs. The beauty of a bird’s plumage is revered. I can still see my father’s admiring eyes and smile for a smart retrieve and a bird delivered



to hand. The months of training seemed forgotten. The pride was for the dog. Like most dog owners, he assumed that the animal possessed cognitive abilities

more human than canine. His hunting stories always assigned human characteristics to the dog's behavior. Dogs gave him pleasure.

In a world obsessed with electronic gadgets and instant communication, the simple pleasures of hunting behind a dog on a frosty morning seem archaic. Can the sounds of dry leaves crunching underfoot and the song of the Meadow Lark greeting the new day be programmed as a ringtone on your cell phone? Probably! Can the orange glow of the sun rising above the weathered boards of an abandoned farmstead be captured as the background display of your smart phone? Surely! Can a battery-operated device recreate the satisfaction of seeing your dog lock up on a covey of quail hiding beneath a rusted harrow and simulate the heart-stopping explosion of wings at the flush? It's coming. Why get up at 4:30AM, drive 70 miles to walk around in the cold with wet feet and numb fingers behind a dog who has fresh cow manure stuck to his neck and collar when you can enjoy the entire experience (sans the smell of bovine feces) on your giant flat screen with a computer-generated quail hunt while in the warm comfort of your living room? Pass the bean dip, please.

Some of us prefer to be in the company of dogs. Knuckle-dragging, evolutionary throwbacks, we are compelled to retrace the steps of our fathers when the leaves turn and the geese head south. It's not that we don't embrace technology or feel compassion for wild things. Rather, our fascinations and compassions seem misplaced in time. Perhaps Mr. Berretta hunted behind a distant relative of my Bracco Italiano. Perhaps Mr. Fox hunted grouse in the fall of 1915 using the same model shotgun as my father's. And maybe the brown-and-black, striped tail feathers protruding from my hunting coat inspired the same awe in my grandfather for nature's handiwork as it does for me. Genetic predisposition or culture, it really doesn't matter. There is satisfaction.

In an often-misquoted radio broadcast in 1936, Hermann Goering said, "Guns will make us powerful; butter will make us

fat." Herr Goering did not foresee the digital age in which guns are replaced by e-commerce and butter by inactivity. A new generation of technologically powerful,

corpulent, young people might never appreciate the gunsmith's art, experience the hunt with all their senses, or connect with their ancestors as they followed the wolf-dog in search of food. Who needs those thumb-texting, tattooed young people who can't spell and think that polar bears are cuddly, you might ask. The answer is, "we do." Without the millions of dollars in federal taxes on hunting and fishing equipment, plus revenues from license sales, wildlife management, as we know it, will cease to exist. Who will pay for wildlife conservation? Who will perpetuate the hunting traits of the German shorthaired pointer? Will all hunting dogs go the way of the Poodle or Dachshund? Perhaps someday, Mini-Labs and Toy Spinone will hunt for stuffed animals in cramped apartments in Boston and Milan. Yes, people will still be in the company of dogs, but that primitive bond between two species of hunters might be different.

In a shrinking world with a global society, those who share a passion for perpetuating that ancient hunting ritual between man and dog must unite. The time-tested training methods and breeding criteria of the Europeans combined with the diverse hunting opportunities of North America might rekindle interest in hunting dogs and hunting. And maybe, just maybe, they will reignite that glowing primal ember that burns within us.

Like most dinosaurs, I fear extinction almost as much as I fear change. I'm nearly my father's age now and, like him, I can distinguish between the important and the equally unimportant things in life. Maybe that is why each fall, I put on his coat, load his side-by-side with vintage paper shells, and I hunt birds behind my domestic wolf.

Briefly, I am his eyes. He gave me the sun.

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*This article originally appeared in the Bracco Italiano Club of America newsletter.*