

# TRADITION

Memories and stories from deer camps gone by explain why we are the hunters we are.

■ Text and photos by *Kristopher M. Klemick*

**T**here's something to be said about tradition. Whether it's the desire to celebrate and honor the past or simply hold onto the memories and nostalgia of our youth, the behaviors and symbolic actions we take each year leave an indelible mark on our lives, inherited from years past and generations before. But in the world of deer hunting, tradition cuts deeper and is undoubtedly rooted in our DNA. Our hunting culture is built upon decades of dyed-in-the-wool rituals that have molded us into the hunters we've become and will continue affecting generations that follow.

## THE UNIQUE TAILS OF TRADITION

In my home state of Pennsylvania, the first day of rifle deer season has always been an undeclared state holiday. Schools are closed, local businesses are shuttered and nary a boss dare deny a time-off request for opening day. As a child, I always looked forward to the after-Thanksgiving dinner festivities at my grandparent's house, as it marked the official kick-off to something that rivaled in excitement to Christmas morning — the magical first day of buck season, held the Monday after Thanksgiving. While mom, gram and my aunts plotted their Black Friday shopping strategy, my dad, uncles, grandfather and their close friends would go over our game plans.

Pop was the plant manager at the Pepsi bottling plant in town, so a truckload (no joke) of drinks were already in the bed of someone's truck, with just enough room for a keg or two. Everyone would meet early at Gram and Pop's Friday morning

to cover last-minute details before setting out to accomplish their supply responsibilities: picking up meats, cheeses, potatoes, onions, cakes, pies and a mountain of snack food. Oh, and lest we forget the paper goods (Read: toilet paper. Lots of toilet paper.)

My grandfather loved buck season. It was his second favorite holiday, and when I was old enough to join my father in the stand at age 12, I realized why he loved it so. More than six decades before, he and a couple of his closest friends decided they'd contribute money to a jar when they met each week at the local VFW until they saved enough to buy our little slice of heaven in Tioga County, Pennsylvania. The almost-250-acre property originally included an old farmhouse with busted windows and doors, where almost two-dozen men would call home during the two-week season.

Chronically contagious laughter — the kind that makes your sides hurt — tore through the rickety farmhouse — along with stiff northwest winds — as stories of past seasons were shared. The tale of a guy falling out one of the house's second-story broken windows late one night is still told today. Everyone heard a thud outside, and then moments later, in walked the guy covered in snow, and everyone roared with laughter when they realized just what had happened. Soon afterward, the guys built the new camp, which stands today.

A roaring fire in the wood stove consistently threw 80-degree heat up from the basement as outside temperatures struggled in the single digits, yet windows were still always open, just like the back door, as friends would stop by with





■ The author's oldest son was deeply immersed in every experience during his first year at deer camp and couldn't wait to help drag his uncle's buck out of the woods.



bologna and cheese platters to laugh and carry on. Upstairs, the camp cook would have a massive spread of food laid out. Football played on one of the few channels we could get atop the mountain, and you were lucky if you could find a seat anywhere. Four couches, just as many recliners and a dining table that seats 30 were always taken. In the basement, it was much the same. The bar was always stocked, beer flowed freely through the taps on the wall and the huge poker table was constantly alive. I remember earning quarters for every drink run I was sent on. To this day, buck season is an experience like none other.

### CARRYING THE LEGACY

Sons and grandsons of the original founding fathers now lead our fourth generation to the woods, and though our numbers have declined, our excitement for each new year and its traditions remains stronger than ever. More than 30 years and counting, our food plots continue to be planted in Whitetail Institute's flagship Imperial Whitetail Clover. Blood lines on the cheeks continue to celebrate and honor a new hunter's first deer, many of which were taken from those plots. And tenderloins from the day's hunt are triumphantly cooked and enjoyed the evening of the harvest.

As has been done since the first members walked through the door, everyone signs the book. Its volumes offer a rich history from a cherished but distant past. Hunters also still sign up for

■ The truck at the author's camp has been involved in more memorable, wildly unbelievable and hilarious hunting stories than it has miles on the odometer. Here, the author's brother, Joel, left, uncle Mark, right, and leader and senior member John, center, reminisce about the time a cab full of hunters, replete with a harvested doe and two other hunters, almost bounced out of the bed as the truck flew down the mile-long logging road in the dark with no headlights, brakes or power steering.

the buck pool, place their money in the jar and hope for the best while crossing their fingers they don't have the misfortune of missing a buck.

"I'll never forget it," said John, our senior member, recalling his experience as a young child. "I got back to camp one night and told everyone that I missed a buck earlier in the day. Big mistake. Didn't they go and cut the tail right off my brand-new flannel shirt. Mom wasn't happy with Dad when we got home. For years, that shirt tail was tied to the banister in the old farmhouse. And mine wasn't the only one."

Although we don't terrorize youngsters with that practice today, you can bet they know the story and share the same laughs as those who experienced it firsthand and continue to tell it. It's those long-established rituals and experiences we associate with hunting season that makes it such a special part of our lives, and why it will continue to play an important role instilling and carrying the memories and legacy for generations.

As we look forward to each new season's campfires and camaraderie, we must also endeavor to create new traditions. In fact, Pennsylvania challenged its hunters to do that in 2019, when the state's opening day was changed for the first time since 1963 from the Monday

after Thanksgiving to the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Although the relatively rushed transition from a dining room turkey table to the deer stand affects many aspects of the season, opportunities to create new memories, new experiences and new traditions still abound.

### HONORING THE PAST

The walls of any camp, club or hunting family are never the same. Each has its unique story to tell, but we share the same common thread that weaves how hunting connects us and its traditions carry us. Some find comfort and honor the past by hunting from the same tree stand or stump their father or grandfather hunted from. I could always look through the woods from my stand and see my grandfather sitting in his. We'd give a careful wave anytime we'd catch each other while glassing the woods. Though he loved buck season, my grandfather held Christmas at the top of his list, because it brought the family together. And although he passed in 2008 at daybreak Christmas morning, I visit Gram and Pop's grave each year on the way to camp Friday morning to check in, just like we always did. Tradition would not have it any other way.