

HISTORIC ROOTS

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STORIES FROM DEER CAMP

By JOHN M. MILLER

For ten days each November, in the Northeast Kingdom and in other parts of Vermont, life in the everyday world slows down. Some businesses and offices close. Others make do with fewer workers. But the woods and cabins that have been closed for a year are filled with the sounds of laughing and talking. There are smells of food cooking and wet clothes. There are people with guns and hunting gear. It is deer season. It is time for deer camp.

Deer hunting has always been important in Vermont. In the past men hunted to put meat on the table for their families to eat. Many still do. Many others, both men and women, now hunt for different reasons. Hunting gives them a chance to be close to nature for a while, away from their everyday lives. Families and friends spend time together. They tell stories of past deer hunts. Just as their grandparents and parents did for them, the older folks teach the younger ones the way of the deer and the woods. At deer camp things get done the way they have always been done. Deer camp is a way of living history. Life there connects past, present, and future.



John M. Miller



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Most camps have only spring water and no electricity. The weather is often cold and windy. There may be snow. Yet hunters treasure their days in the woods. For the men from the Northeast Kingdom who tell their stories here, deer camp is an important part of their life. Some of the reasons are the same. Some are very different.

Mel, a retired milk inspector and a part-time gun dealer, remembers hunting in the 1930s. He and his friends would drive as far as the cars could go. Then they would walk five miles through thick woods, carrying their guns. They didn't have a cabin to go to. Their 6-man tent, along with a stove, food,

and tools, was loaded into a heavy cart and pulled deep into the woods by horses. The men had no sleeping bags. In the cold nights they rolled themselves up in heavy horse blankets. The days started early. Jess, an old man, got up at 4 am to start the stove. Mel tells what it was like:

"I'd roll over to see Jess in long johns. He'd rout us out of those horse blankets, put on the coffee pot to boil, pound on the frying pan and holler and hoot. We'd get up, eat breakfast, get ready, and then have to wait until the sun came up a little bit, so we could see.

"We took sandwiches with us [when we hunted], never came back until dark. When somebody was lucky enough to get a deer, say 5 or so miles back, there'd be at least four of us to drag him back.

"One time we were in a good 6 miles. Up to our necks in deadfall. Real swampy. Five of us taking turns dragging. Some of the men carried old Colt handguns. It was getting on to late afternoon. We came upon this swamp. Rabbits all over the place. They pulled out those Colts and shot some. Boy, we dressed them all out and had a great big ol' regular rabbit stew down to camp. And then sometimes, you'd be so tired, having hunted so far from camp, you really didn't care whether you ate or not."

Some Northeast Kingdom hunters are farmers. Some work in the woods during the year. Living close to the land, they know about the changes that

come with the different seasons. They can see and smell and hear things that people who live in towns and cities cannot. This knowledge helps them in the woods. The 1930s, when Mel first went hunting, was the time of The Great Depression, when many people were out of work. Hunting for many then was more than a trip to the woods. They hunted for food. Mel tells about going hunting with Jess.

“I can remember when I first went. I used to go once in a while with Jess, who was real elderly. And by golly he’d pick out a deer and shoot it before I’d even seen it. And I was a young kid with sharper eyes than his. You don’t find that today. I think maybe the reason was that deer meant an awful lot to an individual, like whether you had meat on the table during the winter months. Many times, it felt like a life-or-death deal to a hunter with the pressure to bring home food for his family. Very seldom those guys missed. When someone did, he was disgusted. They’d talk about it for a week, how stupid they were, and call themselves everything in the book because they missed that one shot.”

You can still learn a lot from old hunters. One man told me not long ago that a smart mountain buck will run the whole length of a ridge because it can see both sides and because the draft, which carries warning smells, is usually up. He added:

“This is something you learn for yourself. You can’t learn it from any book. But it takes a

lifetime to learn it. And after you get it learnt you can’t give it to nobody, ‘cause they think you’re lying to them.”

Another old man told me how he would play his harmonica to deer. The deer would often seem amused. “Deer are funny animals,” he said.

Hunters are not the only people in the woods during deer season. There are laws about hunting, and game wardens spend long, cold nights and days trying to make sure that hunters obey them. Here’s what it was like to be a game warden in the days when they spent more time on foot than in trucks or cars.

“I certainly didn’t go into the deputy force for the money. I got \$4 a day [and very seldom spent] under 18 hours a day.

“We would leave between 8 and 10 at night. And if we had a lot going on I might get back



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by 4 in the morning, sometimes 2, then I'd get up at 6 and start chores. Did this for 28 years. "This is the time when wardens were out on their snowshoes. This was before snow machines came along or anything like this. [The wardens] got out there. They knew what was going on. They had a sense of the entire district. Maybe not inch by inch, but certainly acre by acre.

"It was a lot of miles, I tell ya. It could vary from 2 to 9 miles in a day. We tried to keep it down because, you understand, you work all day out here, but you're gonna come home and have supper, then you gotta work all night that night. You previously have worked all night the night before too. You may have had an hour's sleep, you may not have had an hour's sleep when deer season starts. If something came up you took care of it. That was the idea of it. You had nobody to turn it over to, you stayed with it and got it done."

For some, deer camp is a family event, a chance for fathers and sons to be together. A woodworker named Jim was just a boy when he first went to deer camp with his father. He remembers the work and the fun as he was introduced to the company of adult men.

"Well, the first time that I came to deer camp for deer season, I was 12 years old. Mr. Man, if that wasn't something. Boy. Ten men in here, ten great big men, rough, gruff voices.



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He'd back the pickup truck up there and they'd take out the cases of beer. Whole pickup truck load, and they'd stack it in there, right to the ceiling.

"I'd just come up for maybe a weekend or somethin' like that. Man, I was in the dishpan, I lugged the wood, split, kept the place swept up. I did everything. I'd get all done and after supper, I'd get out of the way and



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they'd do dishes and have a few after-dinner drinks, gettin' ready for the poker game. I'd go up on that bunk right there, and lay there with

my arms folded, and I'd fall asleep watchin'.

"I was the only one back then that had a father that would bring their kid into camp. How well that ever set with anybody I don't know. But he wanted me there."

Many men, women, and children still go to deer camp every year. Some hunt for food. Some care less than others whether they get a deer or not. For them it is camp itself that attracts them. One hunter says:

"All the camps that are in this Northeast Kingdom...take all these camps and all the men that are in them, what share of them are actually hunting hunters? The biggest share of

them are non-hunting hunters like us that enjoy getting out of that normal rat-race routine that we're wired into. They come here and they love it.

Because it's a change. It's a vacation.

"You don't have to answer the phone; we don't have no phones here. We lug our water. We got gas lights, that's about the most modern thing we got. We don't even have a radio in the



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camp. Nothin'. We don't want to know what the outside world is doing, really. We come here, and it's quiet, most of the time."

"The priorities¹ have changed," says another long-time hunter, "I still get a thrill out of shootin' a deer. But the priority of that thrill isn't there, I mean up so high as it used to be. I ain't here to impress them. I'm here because I'm havin' a good time. So jinglin' the grate and keepin' the fire goin', or cookin' somethin', or sweepin' the floor has got a higher priority right now than me goin' out and killin' a deer."

For whatever reasons, come November, many people head for the places where deer are. Two or three generations together they hunt, they party, they live simpler lives, close to each other and to nature. Year after year the same people come to the same place. Year after year life in camp unfolds in the same way. Memories of other deer camps remind hunters

¹ Priority (pry-or-ity) means the order of importance. Something with high priority is more important than something with low priority.

of their own past. Stories of their fathers and grandfathers take them back further into history. Deer camp also links them with the future. Children and grandchildren join in the life of the camp. They learn to hunt. They become part of new stories that they will tell to their own children and grandchildren.

Roofing Around

The stories and photographs in this article come from John Miller's book, *Deer Camp: Last Light in the Northeast Kingdom*. There are many more stories and pictures in the book. Your library may have a copy. If not, your librarian may be able to find one for you.

If you are a hunter, think about the stories and traditions that are part of your deer camp. What is important to you about deer camp? How far back do the stories go? How far back can you remember? If you have a favorite story, write and tell us.

If you do not hunt yourself, you might want to talk to someone who does and ask him or her the same questions.