

One matchless childhood moment

It was a scene that Daddy wanted indelibly stamped upon my young memory.

“Remember this,” he urged, with a tinge of sadness as his blue eyes scanned the vault of dying light above the winter woods. “You’ll never see anything like this again.”

The sunset was electric with endless strings of ducks and geese swirling by the thousands in a vast symphony of whistling wings as formation after formation spiraled downward to beat the darkness to the wetlands below.

These flocks had funneled down from the Arctic reaches of Canada and Alaska, into the middle of the hourglass-shaped Mississippi River Flyway, where they congregated chaotically before fanning out into the warmer regions to the south.

I was in my first decade, awestruck by the majesty of it all. Daddy was at the end of his fifth decade, old enough to be my grandfather and anxious to teach me the ways of a world that was changing too fast for him.

Born in 1902, he had grown up in the Mississippi Delta when hunting meant putting protein on the dinner table.

As boys, he and his brothers had started with homemade hollow-cane pistols, armed with powder from dissected firecrackers. Daddy soon advanced to a cast-iron pipe and dissected shotgun shells. He’d insert a firecracker fuse into a small hole in the loaded pipe, light it, and hope his target would stick around for the explosion.

When Granddaddy called a halt to the arms race, Daddy crammed all his ammo into his pistol for one last glorious shot—which rocketed the pipe into his forehead and knocked him unconscious.

Granddaddy angrily gathered up all the guns and threw them into a fired-up potbelly stove. Luckily, he wasn’t injured when the steel lids lifted off the stove in the ensuing explosion!

Daddy graduated to real guns just as all the big game was disappearing

from The Delta. Tales of bears, panthers and wolves now live mostly in folklore.

Into the wild

In March of 2008 I was fortunate to be able to sit down for a few hours with eighty-six-year-old Edgar M. “Son” Hood Jr., a retired Tunica County planter whose grandparents were pioneers in The Delta.

He told about their run-ins with predatory wildlife.

Bears often raided his grandparents’ corn, leaving many corn-ear piles inside their split-rail fence. “They finally figured out that every time the bears would get to the fence with a load of corn they’d drop it as they tried to go over the fence. The bears would just leave the ears there and go get a fresh ‘armload,’” he said.

“My grandmother was home alone one night when the chimney caught on fire. It was made of sticks and mud. She grabbed the baby in one arm and a bucket in the other hand and went out to get some water and found herself surrounded by wolves.”

He said that she knew that if the house burned down she’d be even more vulnerable, so she just got the water, stared down the wolves, went back inside, and put the fire out.

One time his father, Edgar Hood Sr., was coming home with a wagonload of fresh meat. “He was about to go under a tree that was leaning over the road when his horse started neighing and bucking up and wouldn’t go under the tree. He looked up in the tree and saw a panther, with his eyes glowing.”

Mr. Hood said his father simply threw the meat off the wagon, giving it to the panther, and raced home, safe and sound.

All that was before Daddy’s time, but the deer did disappear on his watch. Even the wild turkeys were on the way out, only to be saved by the conservation efforts of Daddy and his brothers.

Writer Wade S. Wineman Jr., in his *East of Slash* book on turkey hunting (OK Publishing Co., Greenville, MS), says, “Many locals believe that, because of the fear instilled in the poaching public by the Perrys, a good seed flock of turkeys was preserved while the rest of the state’s flocks were being wiped out.”

The family was famous (or infamous) for the posted signs they put up all over their woods. When Granddaddy died, one town wag said, “I hope Mr. Perry goes to hell! He’ll have it posted in a week and nobody’ll be able to get in!”

Before his death, Granddaddy acquired two bears and a trio of elk, as a reminder of what had been. When the bears attacked a farmhand who was assigned to feed them, the Memphis Zoo got two free bears.

The elk soon tired of their pasture and began leaping fences. My uncle Bobby Cox was assigned round-up duties but was slow saddling his horse one day. The elk were last reported twenty miles away, gone for good.

One day, years later, on a duck-hunting trip with Daddy, I spotted what I thought was a mule in the woods. We stopped the Jeep and finally made out a huge whitetail buck in the trees. The deer had returned—with a vengeance, we would learn later as their numbers swelled to “vermin” proportions.

The game warden begged us to kill one hundred one year. I came home from college and shot five in one day, including the equivalent of a golfing hole-in-one—a kill shot in the eye of a running deer more than one hundred yards away. Although I should have been happy about the miracle shot and the fact that I would feed five farm families for a month, I began to lose my zest for hunting. It just didn’t feel fair.

Now I hunt with a camera.

Nearly every day wild geese pass a few feet over my house in LaGrange, Georgia. Sometimes, when I’m outside, I see their shadows or hear the rustling of wings before they pass overhead. I always feel blessed.

I’ve only made one goose kill, a childhood achievement that was completely ruined when the goose’s partner circled back and bravely tried to assist its fatally wounded mate in getting off the water.

It was on another goose hunt that memorable day when Daddy prophesied, “You’ll never see anything like this again!”

In sixty seven years I’ve seen lots of things, including many of the wonders of the world, ranging from the Egyptian pyramids to Mount Everest on the day the first American reached the summit. But nothing matches what I saw in the sky as a boy: a living aurora borealis made up of waterfowl!

I’m glad we killed no geese that day.