

MOURNING

By George Vukelich

HENRY Reese is one of those Wisconsin folks who lives in the city but he's the first to tell you that what he really lives for is The Deer Season.

"I dream about hunting all year long," he says. "Deer hunting! I'd rather hunt deer than anything else I can think of and probably anything else you can think of, too."

There was a time, Henry says, when, to him, "hunting" meant shooting anything that walked or ran or flew across the Wisconsin countryside. He was even crazy about bear hunting once, but when he talks about hunting today, he means going after deer and only deer.

"I went through some kind of a transition with a bear once," he admits. "There are transitions that you go through in life and in your hunting, too. Well, I went through one that just changed my hunting all around."

Henry admits that as a young man he was full of blood lust and never thought twice about the animals he killed. He remembers the time he and his brother, Gene, "walked down" a buck in the snow until its long tongue was bulging and hanging out of its mouth like a piece of liver.

"A man can walk down a deer," Henry says. "No question. That's what we did. Gene took one side of the track and I took the other, like the Indians do, and we didn't run at all, just kept up a good, steady pace so the deer could never stop to rest."

They caught up to the buck in a clearing where it was standing like a winded distance runner, plumb out of gas after a tough, pressure-packed race. The buck's chest was heaving as it tried to catch its breath and they shot it dead, a .30 caliber slug in its heart.

Henry says the only emotion he felt was elation when the buck fell. He would have taken a knife to the buck's neck if he had to, he says. He and Gene had "earned" that buck because they had walked through the same rugged country the buck had, the same 4-inch snow and the thick underbrush that seemed to coil in those deadly loops and snares that slashed and caught at you like barbed wire.

They had taken the buck playing by his rules. They hadn't ambushed him across 100 yards of open valley. They hadn't run him down with dogs or a snowmobile. They hadn't used skis or snowshoes.

They had, by god, walked that deer into a state of

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exhaustion and their lungs and their legs had suffered the same piercing pain that his did. They had earned that buck and "earning" their buck meant "suffering" for their buck.

"I let Gene shoot it," Henry says. "Either one of us could have but at that point who fired the shot was academic because in a way we both had killed it."

"I figure it wasn't the bullet that broke that deer's heart," Henry says, "it was us."

The deer wasn't all that big and impressive, he concedes. It wasn't a trophy buck or anywhere near it.

"I mean," Henry smiles, "we're just talking your average, run-of-the-mill swamp buck that would hardly impress the good old boys over at the Legion Bar."

But Henry certainly regarded that buck as a prized specimen, a true "trophy" in its own unique way and it had nothing to do with the number of points on the buck's head.

Hunters talk about "trophy bucks" and that didn't mean, in their estimation, that the antlers had to be a Boone & Crockett record or have 16 points or 12 or even 10. Henry thought that a trophy was exactly what Aldo Leopold had said it was.

"The trophy," Aldo Leopold wrote in his book, *A Sand County Almanac*,

"whether it be a bird's egg, a mess of trout, a basket of mushrooms, the photograph of a bear, the pressed specimen of a wildflower, or a note tucked into a cairn on a mountain peak, is a certificate. It attests that its owner has been somewhere and done something — that he has exercised skill, persistence and discrimination in the age-old feat of overcoming, outwitting or reducing-to-possession. These connotations which attach to the trophy usually far exceed its physical value."

That particular buck, like all the others over the years, had come out of the Star Lake/Plum Lake country around Sayner, where Henry has always hunted deer and which he loves better than any place in Wisconsin or, for that matter, the world.

IT WAS up there in that tangled North Woods country that Henry encountered his legendary black bear and went through his "transition."

"It was back a while," he says. "I'm not sure exactly what year it was, but it was the last deer season you could shoot a bear on a deer license."

Behind his glasses, Henry's blue eyes glitter with that excitement that hunters get whether they're in duck blinds or on deer stands or just hunkered down on a bar stool at the Legion Bar, reminiscing about being in duck blinds and on deer stands.

"I always wanted to kill a bear ever since I can remember," Henry confides. "I think it had something to do with the way bears smell. You know, you can smell a bear in the woods for miles, it seems. That distinctive smell of a bear pile makes the hair stand right up on the back of your neck and puts the fear of God in you."

Henry says it seemed as though the bear wanted you to smell him and to know that he was out there somewhere — to



let that work on your mind a little.

"I'm not talking about hunting bear with an infantry company," Henry says disdainfully, "and walkie-talkies and dogs and enough firepower to invade Grenada. I'm talking about being out in the woods alone or on a deer stand alone or up-to-here in a cedar swamp, alone and smelling that bear out there. Being alone makes it a whole different ball game.

"Just you and that bear."

Henry says he was smelling bears on his deer hunts for about 10 or 15 years before he ever saw one. He and Gene smelled out not only bear piles, but the branches and tree trunks that bears had broken apart.

Bears have a "musty" smell, Henry says, and once you smell it, you never forget it.

"If you grew up on a farm," he says, "you'd swear it was kind of like an old boar in the hog pen."

One late Saturday afternoon, on a deer drive, they smelled that musty scent and it was so strong they decided to come back the next day and get serious. Deer hunting had fallen off

They were within maybe 500 yards of where the bear had been shot the previous day when they heard a sound they had never heard before

anyway and everybody was frustrated. They hunted with the same dozen guys every year but everybody hunted independently so Gene and Henry talked the gang into organizing a drive.

"Gene and I were driving together," Henry says, "and, all of a sudden, Gene says, 'There's a raccoon.' Well, it was a pretty big raccoon.

"I think Gene didn't want to see a bear, but that's what we were seeing: A bear!"

The bear galloped toward where Bob Vogel had a stand on the right and Al Trumpy had one on the left. So, no matter which way the bear went, there was a sharpshooter waiting. It turned right and Vogel nailed it through the heart with one shot — a black bear that Henry estimated weighed 300 pounds.

They gutted out the bear and left the warm intestines in a steaming pile and Henry says it's true that "the muscle structure in the bear's chest does make it look like a naked man, but that didn't bother me too much."

That wasn't the "transition." The transition came the next day.

HENRY and Gene were back in the woods, looking for their trophy deer. They were sneak hunting, Henry remembers. That's where you walk, not quite together, maybe 50, 100 yards apart, just kind of angling through the woods, past some object or point, always in sight of each other.

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"It was an ungodly sound," Henry says.

Their first thought, Henry says, was that it was "the Polish guys from South Milwaukee" doing a deer drive in the vicinity. There were 10 of them and they stayed up at Shorty's Hillside Tavern on County Trunk N. They had a leader called "Baldy" who carried a whistle. They also had a second-hand old police paddy wagon and they'd go from one hunting spot to another in that paddy wagon. They'd finish a deer drive, Baldy would blow a whistle and they'd all come back to the paddy wagon.

"You'd see them chuggin' all around the area," Henry says. "They'd be sitting there like soldiers in an old Army truck, guys on both sides."

On a deer drive, Henry points out, it's not uncommon for the drivers to make "crazy noises" just to get the deer alarmed and moving toward the hunters waiting on the stands.

"Some drivers," Henry smiles, "go 'toot-toot' or 'tweet-tweet' or 'bang-bang!'"

"You hear goofy things and you find yourself saying goofy things. People run out of things to say. You hear them yelling: 'Ook! Aach! Bear! Bear! Deer! Deer! Move, Move! Run, Run! Flush! Flush!' I thought I even heard some of the Polish guys yelling out 'kielbasa!' a couple of times."

Henry confesses that when they first heard the "ungodly" sound, his first thought was that it was one of Baldy's boys who had too much to drink at Shorty's the night before.

"All of a sudden," Henry recalls, "that voice struck a higher note and it stopped us right in our tracks. My brother had one foot raised off the ground and I saw him just freeze there. He told me later that I was in a similar position, one foot raised and stopped dead, so that voice had the same effect on both of us."

Recovering, Henry and Gene ran toward that high-pitched voice that seemed to Henry to be almost a human in pain, and yet not human. They dashed through the heavy trees, into a clearing.

"It was the same place where Vogel had killed the bear," Henry says, "and kneeling over the guts was a sow bear, wailing. The ungodly, high-pitched voice was coming from her!"

"She was raising up on her hind legs and then coming down on all four and doing all this wailing. She rose up, oh, three or four times. She was right over the spot where the bear had been killed and dressed out and I just knew that she

was his mate.

"His guts were still there and you just knew she was feeling emotion. She was feeling empathy. She was mourning him!"

Even as Henry speaks, I can see that widow bear in my mind's eye and then, as though superimposed upon her, I can see the desolated, devastated faces of all the widow women I have ever known. Old women, young women, child women. They were the women of our family covered in black, all the women of the world covered in black, all the widows of dead men, wearing their black veils and clothes, crying inconsolably, wailing, screaming.

WHEN did it start? When did the human animal first know loss and grieve? When did we first experience the pain of loss so great that it carries the human voice into another dimension, a dimension that seems not of this Earth? It is beyond crying and wailing.

The ancients called it keening — the sound of loss beyond words, beyond description, beyond telling. But, a she-bear?

"Our nephew, Danny," Henry continues, "had heard all the commotion and he came roaring out and he's quite a hunter. He had the old instinct. He wasn't soft like Gene and I were. He didn't associate it that way.

"Danny raised up his .30-30 to shoot the bear and Gene just turned the gun away. He shoved the barrel so Danny couldn't shoot and it took 10 years before Danny got over that.

"While we calmed Danny down, the bear sort of faded away."

Henry understood why Danny was so upset but all of a sudden getting a bear as a trophy wasn't important to Henry or to Gene.

"Understand, we didn't feel that the bear was 'human,'" Henry says, "but we did feel a lot closer association to it than we did the day before."

Henry has never hunted bear since that day. He still hunts deer, though, and he'll be up in the Star Lake/Plum Lake country again this year, looking for that big buck, as he has since he was a boy. His hunts will take him past the spot where the bear was killed and where his mate found what was left of him.

Of course, Henry admits, should he ever hear that "ungodly wailing" again and this time it turns out to be a doe, he probably would have to rethink the whole situation — again. **W**

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