

OUTDOORS

by

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OUTDOORS

Boys in and around Kankakee, Illinois had an outdoors way of life prior to World War II. Preteen and teen-age boys spent more time out of the house than in. Home was where a boy ate, slept, and did certain disagreeable tasks, such as, bathe, chores, homework and sat quietly while parents talked to company.

A twelve year old boy ordinarily was considered to be old enough to buy .22 caliber ammunition and fire a .22 caliber rifle without supervision. It was not uncommon to find groups of boys with .22 rifles hunting near the city. Some boys received a single-shot .22 rifle for their twelfth birthday. It was often their prize possession until they fell in love with a car in their late teens. Though many preteens and teens wandered around the periphery of the city with .22s, I heard of no instance in which any person was shot by one of them. This is a tribute to the respect for guns and their deadliness which was inculcated in the boys from their early years.

My cousin, Joe, and I were born in the same year, but his birthday was a month and a week before mine. He received a beautiful new .22 caliber single shot rifle a month and a week before my birthday. It was a dandy which I admired. I longed to have one of my own. Unfortunately, when my birthday came to pass, I did not receive a .22 rifle. My father recognized one of the unwritten standards of the community and deep seated expectations of a twelve year old boy and gave to me permission to use his old .22 caliber Winchester Pump rifle, which had an octagonal barrel. Upon the demise of my father forty years later, I became the owner of that gun. Joe and I, with our .22s had many hours of companionship and fun which led to some adventures and an opportunity to observe human nature. We also became better acquainted with the flora and fauna in and around Kankakee.

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A boy with a .22 rifle can be a real benefit to society if he is accurate and knows what he is doing. Joe and I knew a family which operated a dairy herd a few miles outside of Kankakee. Our families used to buy milk and cream from the Grasso family. We usually went out to the farm in early evening when the cows were being milked. The milking was done by hand. I was fascinated to see how the teats on the udder were squeezed to produce a stream of milk into a pail. Even more fascinating was Mr. Grasso's unerring accuracy in directing a stream of milk into a cat's face for the amusement of a city boy. It wasn't all fun, because I would get my chance to turn the hand crank on the separator which separated the cream from the skimmed milk. The cream was very rich and when allowed to sour, it would spread like butter, rather than the so-called cultured sour cream found in today's stores. The butter had a definite cow flavor. I thought that the store bought butter had about as much flavor as lard. A real treat in the summertime was cool sweet buttermilk with pieces of real butter floating in the buttermilk.

The operation of a dairy herd required that the milk cows be driven to pasture after the morning milking and then be returned to the barn for the evening milking. One of the banes of a dairy farmer's existence was gophers. These cute little furry animals were about a foot long. These rodents honeycombed the earth with burrows for their homes. When they dug a home, their home usually had at least two entrances, sometimes more. These entrances were simply holes in the ground which dropped straight down for about eight inches. Holes in the ground may not seem to be much of a problem on a farm, but dairy cows wandering around a pasture with their customary grace and delicacy, may step in a hole and break a leg. The ordinary treatment for a cow with a broken leg at that time was to convert the cow into hamburger, which did not increase the production of milk from the herd.

The Grassos did not have a telephone. As a matter of fact, they did not have electricity, though it was on the way to the farm under the Rural Electrification Program. Joe and I agreed that the next time that one of us had an opportunity to go out to the Grasso farm with our parents, we would inquire as to whether he and I could come out and shoot gophers. One day Joe gave me the exciting news that he and his parents had been out to the Grasso farm. After being assured by Joe's mother that Joe and I were reliable, Mr. Grasso agreed to allow us to shoot gophers in their pasture. He said that he would have the cows out of the north pasture next Saturday

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morning. The enthusiasm of the happy news was shattered when we realized that we were committed to shooting gophers Saturday morning. In order to fire a .22 rifle, one needs ammunition. The cost of a box of .22 shorts was fifty cents, a considerable sum in those days when viewed in the light of the fact that a movie cost a dime and a large box of popcorn was a nickle. The only quick way of earning cash was to return pop bottles to a store to collect the deposit.

The Kankakee Bottling Company bottled most of the soda pop sold in Kankakee County. Their soda pop was good. The cream soda was rich and the ginger ale was spicy. The root beer was creamy, and the grape and strawberry flavors were full flavors. Orange soda was a problem because the orange flavoring would settle out, and it was necessary to invert the bottle to achieve a uniform distribution of flavoring. If the orange soda were shaken too much, an orange geyser would erupt upon removal of the cap. To insure return of the bottle, the bottle company extracted a two cent deposit on a nickle bottle of soda pop. Springtime was not an ideal time to look for pop bottles. Joe and I set upon a hunt to look for pop bottles or anything else that could be converted to cash. Between the two of us, we were able to raise only sixty cents. Late Friday afternoon, we went to Baird-Swannell Hardware store at the corner of Court and Dearborn streets in downtown Kankakee. Though called a hardware store, it was a mixture of; nuts, bolts, paint, wallpaper, appliances large and small, and most importantly, sporting goods. The entrance to the store faced north and the sporting goods were in the southeast part of the first floor. We marched over the wooden floor to a counter along the east wall. The boxes of .22 shorts were kept in a wooden cabinet on the wall. When a salesman asked:

"What will you have boys?"

Joe, being senior, and having the money announced: "A box of .22 shorts please."

"Are you old enough to buy ammunition?"

"Yes, we are both twelve."

"Do your parents know that you are buying .22 ammunition?"

"Oh, yes! They know that we are going to shoot gophers at the Grasso farm just west of town tomorrow."

"In that case, you really need the shorts."

We paid for our valuable box of ammunition and were ready to go on our hunt the next morning.

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Saturday morning was bright and I was up early. I had breakfast about 6:30 a.m., and took my father's rifle and went out.

My mom said, "Where are you going?"

My answer was the standard, "Out."

I stopped by my cousin's house, who was waiting for me. We rode our bikes out of town with .22 rifles across our handle bars. Unfortunately, the Grasso farm, though on a county road, was not on an improved county road. We left the state road onto an improved county road, which was black top, and finally came to the Grasso road which was gravel. The Grasso road, which obviously was not used by a County Commissioner, had not been graveled for many years. Bikes were not an optimum means for transportation on that road. This meant that we walked our bikes for a mile and a half. Once we arrived at the Grasso farmhouse, we parked our bikes and went to the barn where we found Mr. Grasso pleased that we would shoot the gophers which had become real pests. To inspire us, he told us that he would pay a bounty of seven cents for each dead gopher that we would bring to him. To this day, I cannot understand how he arrived at the seven cents figure.

We knew our way to the north pasture and positioned ourselves on a slope on a hill on one side of the pasture so that we would be shooting down and toward another hill, but away from the farm buildings. This position presented somewhat of a problem in that the top wire of the fence around the pasture could be in our line of sight. We decided that this would be a hazard that we could overcome. We divided up the ammunition, loaded our guns, and sat and waited. It was a pleasant day with a gentle breeze off the pasture, reminding us that a herd of dairy cattle had frequented the area. The gophers started to move about the pasture. We decided that we would wait until each of us had a good shot. We would fire simultaneously so that even though the rifle fire would frighten the gopher, each would still get a gopher. The idea was good in principle, but difficult in execution, because the gophers didn't know of our arrangement. They would not cooperate to have two gophers hold steady simultaneously. Finally, we decided that we would take turns. This latter arrangement resulted in some hurried shots and wasted ammunition.

The morning's hunt netted six gophers, which we brought back to Mr. Grasso to collect forty-two cents. He allowed that we had done a good job in clearing out one area of the pasture and asked us if we would continue our

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hunt of gophers in the remainder of the pasture. We told him that we were out of ammunition. He said that he had some .22s in the house and would we come in for dinner before going out on our hunt. The noon meal on a farm is often times the main meal, especially on a dairy farm. We had chicken in a cream sauce, milk, and some homemade cheese. Cholesterol was not counted. All of this was enjoyed with fresh homemade bread and copious quantities of fresh homemade butter.

Our ammunition replenished, and our bodies refreshed, we went back to the pasture where we spent the remainder of the afternoon diminishing the gopher population. We were more successful, in that we killed nine more gophers which we brought in to the house toward the end of the afternoon. We received payment for our gopher extermination, and we were reimbursed for the ammunition that we had shot in the morning. It was a wonderful day. We had spent the day shooting, had a good dinner, and even got paid for it. The trip home was a breeze.

Kankakee County is on a limestone base. The entire county is pock-marked with limestone quarries. Even today, there are some Kankakee limestone buildings and some slabs which form the city sidewalks. These limestone sidewalks discouraged roller-skaters because they did not have the smooth continuous surface of the concrete sidewalk.

As was the custom in those days, once a limestone quarry had been quarried out, it was abandoned and the quarry filled with water. These limestone quarries were not only a nuisance in that they were unattractive, but also dangerous because people had a tendency to drown in these quarries. The quarries did provide a natural place for disposition of trash and garbage. The trash and garbage were not separated. Rather, the trash and garbage were mixed and dumped into a quarry. In time, the quarry would become filled and the land would again become useful. The principal use of the land was a city park. There were a number of parks around Kankakee which are built on former city trash and garbage dumps which filled quarries.

While a quarry was being used as a trash and garbage dump, the rat population would grow by leaps and bounds. The Norway Rat, or brown rat, inhabited the dump. Since food, in the form of fresh garbage, was delivered to the dump daily, these rats would grow to a large size. Some rats would weigh as much as two pounds, and were the size of a large cat. They could be as mean as a constipated cougar. When the rat population became

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crowded in the dump, some of the rats would leave the confines of the dump and establish residence in the surrounding neighborhood. Persons who lived near the former quarry, and now dump, complained of the rat population. Trapping and poisoning was done to no great avail. The steady supply of food and no real enemies allowed the rats to increase and multiply.

Generally rats were nocturnal. In the security of the dump, they moved about in search of new succulent tidbits in the daylight hours, especially on the weekends when there was no activity on the part of city employees operating the dump. It was a popular sport for boys to go down to the trash and garbage dump when the dump was closed on a Saturday afternoon and shoot rats with a .22 rifle. Shooting of rats was a social occasion and several boys would go together for a rat hunt.

One of Joe's neighbors was Billy Lee. Billy Lee was not a native of Kankakee. His family had recently moved to Kankakee from Memphis, Tennessee. Billy Lee's parents did not allow Billy Lee to have a .22 or even fire one. He did beg to shoot, whenever he was out of sight of his mother and someone had a rifle.

Joe and I had arranged to meet at the dump on a summer Saturday afternoon to shoot rats. Billy Lee had invited himself to accompany Joe when he saw Joe leaving his home with his rifle. The three of us found a comfortable hiding place behind some bushes close to the water across from the fresh trash. All that we had to do was sit and wait for a rat to come out and scamper from one opening in a pile of trash to another. At the point when the rat was between holes, one would fire. If one were lucky enough to see the rat coming out of the hole as he hesitated to check the lay of the trash, one would have a shot at the rat while he was standing still.

The hunt had a certain amount of success. If a rat were hit solidly, the rat would jump straight up and flip over on its back. That was a sure kill. Billy Lee was taking one-third of the shots, but not making one-third of the kills. We were intent on watching for rats and did not notice that someone had come up behind us. When we finally turned around, we discovered that a member of the Kankakee police force was standing behind us. He proceeded to ask the obvious question:

"What are you doing boys?"

Billy Lee, being the oldest, answered: "Notin' "

Joe, being a little more direct said, "Shooting rats."

The police officer then asked who owned the guns. Joe said the gun was

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his. Billy Lee quickly handed my father's gun to me and I said this was my father's gun.

The obvious question came:

"Does your father know you have his gun?"

I said, "Yes."

The police officer then asked Joe and me to come with him to the police car. Obviously, Billy Lee no longer enjoyed the scenery and made very quick withdrawal. We went to the police car, and the police officer took down our names and addresses. He then inquired as to how long we had been shooting. We told him it had been a couple of hours. He made inquiry as to how many rats we got, and we gave him our best estimate. He then told us that as long as we kept shooting at rats and did not shoot at anything outside of the dump, he would do nothing.

Joe and I went back to our stand secure in having the imprimatur of the Kankakee Police Department. Also we were unencumbered by Billy Lee's pleadings of; "Let me have a shot."

Billy Lee, though he did not have a rifle, was always ready for a hunt. Some of the other fellows had had encounters with Billy Lee of various types. For some reason or another, Billy Lee always managed to take the front position in any good situation and disappeared when there was trouble.

One August afternoon, a group of us were talking about hunting. Somebody mentioned how the jacksnipe was very difficult to shoot but highly sought after. Jacksnipe is a hunter's name for Wilson's snipe or common snipe. The snipe is about ten inches long and has a long bill. It is in the same family as the American Woodcock. It lives in marshes, bogs, and along the river banks. It generally feeds on worms and grubs.

We all agreed that it is possible to catch snipe after dark. Snipe will generally run toward a light when frightened. The standard procedure for catching snipe was to place a lantern on the ground and have somebody hold a sack near the light. The frightened snipe rush past the light and into the sack. A second sack is required to hold the captured snipes. The only equipment required is a source of light, a kerosene lantern, and two gunny sacks. A catcher, the most important member of the team, holds one gunny sack and transfers caught snipe into the other gunny sack. The remaining members of the team are beaters who go out into the marsh or bog to drive the snipe toward the light and to the catcher.

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Billy Lee immediately asserted his knowledge of snipe and his vast experience in catching snipe. Joe, Don Hall, Butch Deveau and I agreed that we would go out to hunt snipe. Billy Lee had the lantern and said that he would catch the snipe. We did not know whether he was capable because the catcher must be able to whistle to enhance the attraction of the snipe to the light. We all tried our respective whistling ability. It was agreed that Billy Lee was the best whistler.

After dinner, we gathered at Joe's house. Billy Lee brought his lantern filled with kerosene, and we wandered off toward the river where we would catch snipe. On our way to the river, Don Hall poured most of the kerosene out of Billy Lee's lantern. We walked along the river bank over a creek in a roundabout route past a swampy area. Billy Lee was not quite certain of which way we had come. Finally, we found an ideal spot for snipe: an open area not too far from the river. We waited until it was very dark and the snipe had settled down for the night. We positioned Billy Lee kneeling, on the ground with the lantern in front of him. In his outstretched arms, he held the bag behind the lantern. He was ready to have the snipe run into his bag. While he was holding the bag, he had to whistle to attract the snipe. The four beaters then went out quietly so that we would not disturb the snipe in the immediate area to drive them away. The beaters were to go some distance from the light and then start to make noise to frighten the snipe and drive them in toward the light and into the bag held by the catcher, Billy Lee. Once we were out of sight and ear of Billy Lee, we ran for home. We left Billy Lee holding the bag.

The next morning, we were anxious to learn what happened to Billy Lee. Billy Lee was as mad as the proverbial wet hen. It appears that while he was waiting for the snipe to come, the lantern burned out. He started shouting, and we did not return his call. Since he was unfamiliar with the area, he had headed back in the general direction in which he thought we had come from and lost a shoe in the swamp. He proceeded to fall into the creek and did not get home until after his appointed hour. We were most sympathetic. We explained that we thought he had left because we did not see his light. He was outvoted four to one.

The Kankakee River, in addition to having banks which provide a home for snipe, also had little inlets which provided a resting spot for Mallard ducks on their way south. Kankakee was not on the major fly away, but some stray ducks would come wandering into the Kankakee River. Mal-

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lards, which are surface feeding ducks, as opposed to the diving ducks, find some of the inlets to their liking. We were always scrupulous in observing the seasons for shooting of game, but the thought of a license was unheard of. Joe and I knew of a swampy area where Mallards would often land which was ideally suited for shooting. Rifle bullets could skip along the surface of the river, like a stone which is thrown along the surface. Our conclusion was that there was an angle at which you could shoot a bullet which would not skip. We were not sure of the angle, but we knew that if we are shooting down toward the water, it was safe. Since Joe and I were going to go duck hunting, we took our fishing poles in addition to our rifles.

Billy Lee wanted to come along with us to go duck hunting. Billy Lee had managed to talk one of the fellows into loaning his rifle to him. When we suggested that Billy Lee bring his fishing pole with him, Billy Lee made some sarcastic remarks that the crazy people in Kankakee did not know that fishing poles were for fishing, and not for duck hunting.

The three of us walked along the river and came to a high spot overlooking our swamp area. We were in luck. There were a number of Mallards feeding in the area, dipping down, tails up, feeding on the bottom of the swamp. We agreed that all three of us would fire at the same time. We all were going to agree on which duck each of us would shoot, then upon the count of 3, we would all fire. The ducks were not moving around too much, so that it was to be a fairly easy shot. Billy Lee selected a large drake that was closest to the river. Joe and I selected smaller drakes. We had the count of; "1, 2, 3, fire." The rifle cracks were simultaneous, and each of us hit our target. The remainder of the ducks took off. It was a beautiful sight to watch the ducks flapping their wings, running on the water and rising into the air. They did not look back for their fallen comrades.

The three dead ducks floated on the water. It being late October, the water was cold, as was the air. Billy Lee then said, "We need a boat to get the ducks."

Our response was: "You go get a boat, we will cast for our ducks."

Joe and I stood on the shore, casting for ducks.

Billy Lee said; "My duck is floating away. Let me use your pole."

Our response was; "As soon as we pull in our ducks."

Joe and I must have cast for more than one hour. Once in a while, when one of us may lay our line over our duck, the duck would turn or hit a reed so that the hook would disengage. It was necessary to start the casting

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again. Eventually, Joe and I brought our ducks in to shore. Billy Lee's duck in the meantime had floated farther away from shore. Joe then loaned his fishing pole to Billy Lee. The sun was setting. We left for home with our ducks while Billy Lee remained on the shore in the orange gold setting sunlight casting for his prize.

The duck hunting season ran into pheasant hunting season. Kankakee County was a haven for the ring-necked pheasant. Typically, there was plenty of cover for the birds, and the corn fields provided an adequate supply of food. Pheasant season opened at noon on November 11. In those days, November 11 was called Armistice Day. Veterans organizations had a parade in downtown Kankakee, and at 11:00 o'clock, church bells would toll commemorating Armistice Day. More important to schoolboys was that it was a state and national holiday, so that there was no school.

Joe and I had observed that there were a number of pheasants along a railroad right of way south of Kankakee. This section of railroad ran between various corn fields. Typically, the railroad company burned out the weeds in the summer, but by late fall, the weeds have grown sufficiently to provide adequate cover for various types of wildlife. More importantly, there was a culvert on either side of the road bed which collected water from the road and corn fields. Little pools of water remained to give the wildlife a source of water.

Joe and I decided that we would go hunt pheasant in the afternoon. We expected the hunting to be good on the theory that the pheasants would be coming back to roost after feeding in the corn fields. As was typical, on a day off from school, I made my appearance for lunch at high noon, gobbled what mother presented, and set off outdoors with my father's .22. I met Joe, and we went out along the railroad to search for birds along the railroad right of way.

In some circles, Joe and I would have been considered to be "meat hunters" as opposed to sportsmen. The sportsman usually hunts with a dog. The dog may be a dog which points the game, indicating where the game is so that the hunter then will flush the bird. In the case of a hunter using the dog which does not point but rather flushes the birds, the hunter must be on his toes watching for a bird when it is flushed. In instances where a hunter does not use a dog, typically, the hunter flushes the bird himself or the bird flushes as the hunter approaches. In any event, the sportsmen wait for the pheasant to make its ascendance with a whirring noise, so that the bird is on

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the wing. The hunter then attempts to take the bird, that is, fires his weapon, usually a shotgun in an attempt to kill the bird in flight. The sportsman believes that it is sporting to give the bird a chance to fly away. Joe and I did not hunt in this manner.

Joe and I were not using shotguns, which have a relatively short range of 100 yards or so. Our weapons used ammunition which in the words on the carton were, "dangerous within one mile." We knew that we could not shoot into the air, especially during the excitement of a bird flushing. We might kill someone. Our only choice was to shoot the birds while they were on the ground. This meant that we had to see the birds in a relatively open area, that is, not behind grass or brush, and, of course, hens were not eligible for shooting.

Joe and I walked along one side of the right of way. We flushed a few hens, but we were fortunate enough to encounter a number of cock pheasants. We shot two cock pheasants a piece, the legal limit, by late afternoon. It had been hard going through the weeds and grass along the right of way, so that we decided we would walk back home on a township road, which led back into town.

Joe and I trudged along the gravel township road, each carrying two pheasants and a rifle. A twelve cylinder LaSalle automobile came down the road, passed us and then stopped about fifty yards ahead of us. We continued walking. The driver of the automobile came out. He was dressed in a fine hunting outfit, and we could see that there were two other men in the car with hunting caps.

The driver approached us and said, "Would you like to sell your pheasants? I will give you five dollars."

My immediate answer was, "I don't know." The offer was quite tempting because we typically sold pheasants for fifty cents a piece. Joe and I looked at each other quizzically.

The hunting Beau Brummel pulled out a billfold, withdrew two ten dollar bills and said; "Here is ten dollars a piece for each of you. I will take the birds."

At that time, ten dollars was more money than I had ever had, bearing in mind that a week's salary for a secretary was fifteen dollars, for a five and a half day week.

Joe and I did not hesitate. We exchanged the pheasants for the money. He took the pheasants, put them in the back seat of the car and roared off.

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We did notice that the car did carry a sticker indicating that the car had its home in Chicago. I often wondered what the three hunters in their fancy hunting clothes said about bringing home four pheasants, each pheasant shot with a single rifle bullet.

Joe and I realized that we had a problem. Each of us was coming home with no pheasant, but with ten dollars in hand. We were afraid that we would lose the money because our parents would want us to do something foolish like put it in the bank. We thought of hiding the money, but then decided that honesty was the best policy. Fortunately for us, virtue was not only its own reward, but we were allowed to keep the money and use it on movies, popcorn, milk shakes, and of course, .22 shorts.

The responsibility of carrying and firing a weapon which gives a boy the power to put to death most creatures is an awesome responsibility. It is with the handling of responsibility that a boy learns his individual responsibility, not only to himself, but to his fellow beings. The boys I knew then are now men who have a good sense of responsibility. They may have developed this responsibility outdoors.*

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