JESSE JEFFERSON, DEER HUNTER

Article by Pam Harris and Leslie Vess
Edited by Amy Douglas

INTRODUCTION

By Pam Harris

On a chilly afternoon in early October, Dr. Roy Armstrong, Leslie Vess and I took a trip to visit Mr. Jesse Jefferson, my grandfather. This good-humored, easy-going man told us the tricks of a very old outdoor pastime, deerhunting.

A large man standing approximately six feet tall with clear blue eyes and gray hair, my grandfather kept us captivated for nearly an hour with his vivid sense of humor and lively descriptions of his hunting experiences. He put forth every effort to make us feel welcome to his humble country farm.

The first thing we noticed when we entered my grandfather's yard was a wall full of mounted antlers.

Life: Oh, look at the antlers.

Mr. Jefferson: Yes, I've got a horn or two, ain't I?

Life: To start, let us ask you what is the first thing you do when you get ready to hunt deer? What kind of rifle do you use?

Mr. Jefferson: I shoot a thirty ought
six; there it is laying right on my seat. I got my field glasses, my cigars, my dinner bucket. I carry my dinner with me everytime I go.

Life: Is that right?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes; I go just like I'm going to work.

Life: You have a sight on your rifle?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. A Bushnell nine power. I used to shoot a 30-30; then I went to a 44 magnum. I didn't have a scope on it [when he was younger], but my eyes got fuzzy [when he became older]. You know, when you shoot, it looks like spider webs in the sight. So I need a scope. I'm 67, and when you get that old, your eyes change a little.

Life: They must not be too bad, seeing as you got four of them today.

Mr. Jefferson: No, I didn't kill none today!

Life: Oh, you didn't?

Mr. Jefferson: My buddy did. No, I didn't kill any. I shot a six point but missed, but I usually get my part of them in the year. I carry my limit.

Life: Is that right?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. We have a five-a-year limit.

Life: And you've already got yours?

Mr. Jefferson: No, no!
Life: Oh, not this time!

Mr. Jefferson: It ain't been but two days!

Life: I see.

Mr. Jefferson: We killed three yesterday and four today.

Life: What kind of dogs do you use in hunting deer?

Mr. Jefferson: Walker hounds.

Life: How many do you have?

Mr. Jefferson: I got four of 'em.

Life: Boy, they're pretty, aren't they?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. I had nine up until last year. But that bowel disease killed...
all but four. Yes, I like my dogs; I keep them in good shape.

Life: How old are they?

Mr. Jefferson: These two here is four, and them is two years old. Come 'ere Jack, come 'ere, boy! See them move their heads sideways?

Life: Now, you've got your rifle, and you've got your dogs. Now, what procedure would you go through to hunt deer?

Mr. Jefferson: Well, you turn these dogs a loose, and you're just lucky to get ahead of them. You know, you've got to follow your dogs.

Life: So you just stay behind the dogs?

Mr. Jefferson: Ahead of them!

Life: All right.

Mr. Jefferson: You wouldn't never kill one if you stayed behind them! You've got to stay ahead of your dogs.

Life: And they will run the deer towards you? Is that the way it works?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. That's the way it works.

Life: Does somebody have to stay back to let the dogs loose?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. We got guys turning loose dogs and guys on stand. We have CB radios too, you know, telling the guys which way the deer are going or which road or whatever.

Life: So you would be how far away from where the dogs are, in the truck?

Mr. Jefferson: Sometimes two miles from where I turn the dogs loose.

Life: So then you would contact them by CB?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes, [to] tell them which way to go, this way, that way. That saves a lot of gas and running around to pick up dogs.

Life: They'd let them go, and you'd be waiting for the deer to come?

Mr. Jefferson: That's right.

Life: From what distance could you hit a deer?

Mr. Jefferson: They've checked me on a speedometer, and I've killed one at a half mile.

Life: One half mile! That's a pretty good shot!

Mr. Jefferson: Pretty good shot, but it was just luck!

Life: Is that right?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. They used to call me "Eagle Eye." I used to have an old 30-30, and I knowed how to shoot things. I was shooting a shotgun, but you miss so many deer with buckshot. I don't like to cripple the deer. If we cripple one,
I'll look all day for him. You know, we just quit hunting.

Life: So if you wound one, you would first go out and try to find him?

Mr. Jefferson: Just look for that deer. I ain't interested in no deer but that one.

Life: Because you don't want him to suffer?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. Not to suffer.

Life: What do you think is the deer that you've got that you're the most proud of?

Mr. Jefferson: Well, I got one in the house, the biggest I ever killed, weighed a hundred and ninety-four pounds field dressed. That's the guts took out.

Life: Is there any kind of strategy you use, or do you just get the dogs behind them and wait for them to come? Is that basically what it is?

Mr. Jefferson: Well, yes that's right. [But] you know about how a deer's been running. You've got to learn it. If you know about his crossing, stand over here, a mile down the road and you can beat the dogs back, why you get a shot.

Life: Do you try to figure out where they're going to be coming? Do they have paths?

Mr. Jefferson: No. They have different areas in the road they cross. They get to feeding [eating] the seed [in a field], and we hunt out of the field. We get so many of them, I don't know how. These does eat our beans up so bad.

Life: Oh, is that right?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. They eat a lot of crops up. A lot of people kill them in the summertime with fawns, little bitty fawns. They kill the old mother deer, and then the fawns starve to death. I don't do that; I don't kill in the summertime, no, sir.

Life: How about training the dogs? Is that a pretty involved process?

Mr. Jefferson: No. If you've got a dog like that one right there and take a couple of puppies with him, he'll train them.

Life: Is that right?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. You just turn the puppies a loose with him. They'll follow him; they train theirselves with the older dog.

Life: They're really pretty dogs. What kind of disposition do they have? Are they nice dogs?

Mr. Jefferson: Well, them there are kind of on the ill side.

Life: Oh, really?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes, they want to fuss.
That big-headed one wants to run my truck. He'll find me on the road and he'll run my truck like it's a deer. That big-headed one, I don't like on that account. I told some of the boys I was going to tie rope around his neck and carry him about a mile and let him run fast. Maybe he'll quit.

Life: That might straighten him out.

Life: How much does a dog like that cost?

Mr. Jefferson: They'll run from $150 to $300.

Life: Mr. Jefferson told us that hunting with a one-shot muzzle loader is a test of a hunter's skill.

Mr. Jefferson: I hunted the whole week last week with a muzzle loader, and I didn't get a shot, not one shot. And when you do shoot one then you've got to look for to see whether you killed him or not, because when you shoot him there's so much smoke.

Life: Is that kind of a bigger test to see what you can do?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. Now, bow and arrow hunting, I don't like that.

Life: You don't? Why?

Mr. Jefferson: Well, you shoot a deer with that, I call it, stick, and than nine out of ten times you have to track him up to where you shot him with the bow and arrow. And I had to find him in the woods, and I lose a lot of them.

Life: We asked if we could take some pictures of the dogs.

Mr. Jefferson: Come on here boys [dogs]. Sit still, boys! That one's got a little mange on him; I'll have to doctor him. He'll sit sometimes on that box just like a man.

Life: He's very photogenic.

Mr. Jefferson: They'll turn their heads. [Whistles.] Turn your heads, boys.

Life: Mr. Jefferson told us that he's a fur dealer in addition to being a deer hunter.

Mr. Jefferson: I got this freezer full of fur. That's a bobcat.

Life: You keep the furs frozen?

Mr. Jefferson: You have to until you sell them. These are 'coons, old 'coons.

Life: Do you skin them yourself?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes, yes I do. They bring 'em up here in the rough, and I skin them and fix 'em right.

Life: That's a bobcat?

Mr. Jefferson: That's a bobcat, yes, and this is a muskrat.

Life: Is keeping them frozen the best
way?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. The furs are already dried, but before you hang 'em out, worms will get in them. You got to keep them in the freezer. That one's ready to sell.

Life: Who buys them from you?

Mr. Jefferson: Different buyers. I've got them from Rocky Mount and [other places].

Life: What do they do, make coats out of them?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. And jackets. Now, here's a deer. It's an albino deer.

Life: Albino?

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. You see the white? He's even got white hooves, see. They are supposed to be that color [pointing to other deer hooves]. I was going to fix a gun rack out of these [white hooves].

Life: That would be something!

Mr. Jefferson: Yes. You see, he's near about an albino deer.

Life: Yes.

Mr. Jefferson: You see the spots on him?

Life: We asked Mr. Jefferson to pose near his collection of antlers for pictures. It's going to be an award win-
Mr. Jefferson: No. He sheds his horns every year and then grows them back.

Life: Is that right?
Mr. Jefferson: Yes. And they have velvet on them at first. [This happens] at rutting time; they shed all those hard horns off and they come back velvet.

Life: Mr. Jefferson's wife and Pam's grandmother joined us.

Mrs. Jefferson: I raised a deer.

Life: Is that right?

Mrs. Jefferson: Raised him on a bottle.

Life: What did you do, find him in the woods?

Mrs. Jefferson: No, when they were gathering the wheat, they scared the mama off, and she left the baby. The
man saw the little baby deer lying there and picked him up and didn't know what to do with him. So he put him in the edge of the woods, but the mama didn't come back. So he carried him to a neighbor. And the neighbor didn't know what to do, so she called me. I had bottles; I raised puppies on bottles and squirrels and everything else. So I keep bottles on hand. So I went out there to tell her what to do, but she said it was too much trouble and for me to take him. All of the stores sent discarded milk to me when they found out I had a baby deer. That baby was raised just like a little baby would be raised in a hospital anywhere. I had to train that rascal. The very first thing I started him on was a beer cup because that was the only thing big enough to get his nose into. He wanted more, so Carolyn came out here that night and said, "Mama, put him on a bottle." But I said, "He won't take the bottle." She said, "I'll make him take that bottle." Boy, she sat down and she kept running her finger in his mouth aside that nipple and he took it. We had no problems with it. We fixed a pen out here, and, I bet you, people came from far and near to see the baby deer. He would follow us everywhere we went. Then the game warden came up here and told me I had to let him loose. I said, "Suppose I turn him loose and he comes back?" He said, "Run him off." The dogs ran him off, and he had just got little horns.

Life: That's something. I bet you hated to see him go.

Mrs. Jefferson: Oh, I hated to lose
him. I said, "Don't bring me nothing else like that unless you find a baby bear because I know they aren't going to do that!"

Mr. Jefferson: Yea, I caught a bear one time.

Jesse and friends display deer brought down that day

Life: A bear.

Mr. Jefferson: Yes, in World War II.

Life: Did you get him when he was a baby?

Mr. Jefferson: Caught him when he was a calf going with his mama.

Life: How long did you keep the bear?

Mr. Jefferson: We kept him about six
months. He wasn't but about two feet by two feet. He looked like a box. We raised him on milk and raisins. We put a dog collar on him and kept him there, but someone stole him or something. One night he disappeared. Someone just swiped him.

Life: But you could handle him all right?

Mr. Jefferson: Oh, Yes.

Life: What did you feed him?

Mr. Jefferson: Fed him raisins mostly, grape raisins and milk. He weighed about 60 pounds. I tried to ship him home, but they said you couldn't ship anything like that.

Life: Well, I tell you we have really enjoyed talking to you. I think this is really going to be a good story. I think you have given us a lot of information, I'm sure it was accurate.

Mr. Jefferson: I've done a lot of hunting, trapping, and skinning fur.

Life: You must really have a lot of respect for the deer.

Mr. Jefferson: Yes, sir, I sure do. I don't believe in killing a doe. But now we've got doe season, and if they're eating up the beans in the fields bad, that's where we hunt at to keep from killing them in the summertime because of leaving little fawns to starve to death. Yes, sir, that's what we do. We hunt the fields around us, and that's
the reason we've got so many with the big horns. If you kill the doe, you ain't gonna have no bucks.

Life: That's true!

Mr. Jefferson: I never did believe in killing does. We've always been lucky in killing bucks. We've killed our part of them.

Life: I guess, we'd better head on back into town. I sure have enjoyed it.

CONCLUSION

By

Leslie Vess

During the time we spent talking with Mr. Jefferson, we learned a lot about hunting and the ethics of hunters who care about wildlife. For example, Mr. Jefferson mentioned several times, his aversion to allowing a wounded animal to wander off and suffer. This is one reason why he does not bow hunt since the animals wander off and suffer before dying. He also does not hunt does due to the fact that the fawns left behind usually die from starvation or are killed by predators. It's nice to know that there are people who do not believe in inflicting needless pain and suffering just for sport. The time we spent with Mr. Jefferson was very rewarding and an experience we will always remember. When leaving Mr. Jefferson's home, we thanked him for his time and he invited us back for collards.
Jesse Jefferson's prize buck