

A morning in Belle's Break

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By JOHN L. SLOAN

A few weeks ago, I was asked to write another column of nostalgic fiction. The person commented on how much "Sharp as a Memory", jogged his memory. It has taken until this week to get the story "sitated" in my head and transmitted to my fingers. This is partially fiction, partially fact. You may decide which is which.

The water was ankle deep, just up enough to float the pin oak acorns. The nuts are what draws the squealer ducks into Belle's Break, a moss shrouded depression of cypress and tupelo. When the water came up in Mound Bayou, the break held enough water to float the mast and the ducks flocked in, mallards mixed in with the wood ducks. It was black water, covered with green duckweed and scum. Ducks loved it. We ran deer with three good dogs, too. The break was surrounded by a big swamp, not many deer but some. As always, I was hunting with the three men who raised me. They are all called uncle though none actually were. I am going to depart now to swamp/country vernacular, the language of my youth. It was the way we talked and thought. I know no other way to write A Morning in Belle's Break.

"At log was still a strong tree when the Indians wampussed around on the mound and buried they dead." Said Uncle Alphas as he dropped me off. "Theys four of us so shoot till you run out of shells and keep an ear for Buster and 'em. Theys liable to make a jump anywheys. Lester and his boy gonna take stand on Muddy Bya. Uncle Lloyd is gonna loose the dogs and I'm coming from Back Camp Slough. Jes stay put. You hear 'em dogs comin, take the fine shot out quick and get buckshot in. We'll pick you up after good sunup."

Then, he was gone.

It was dark, cloudy, lonely and the moss give me the fantods when the wind blew it agin my face as I settled on the damp log. Three times, I checked the britch on my shotgun to make sure it was loaded. Aye God! I'd give a purty to have that L.C. Smith 16 today. No telling what it would fetch was I to crave to sell it. They don't make 'em no more, that Hunter Arms Company what was in Fulton N.Y. Like as not, they aint there, either.

What was that?

Noises. Aye damn, the dark swamp is full of noises. Some I know, some, I reckon, I don't want to know. In 1956, they was still some haints in the swamp for a boy of 12. I don't care who you are, alone in the swamp in the dark and it comin a rain! It's dang sure gonna raise the hair on your arms some and liable to give you the golly wobbles. Seems Uncle Lloyd could have hunted here, too and maybe Uncle Lester or Uncle Alphus. Somebody coulda stayed. It'll get light in the bye and bye. Always has. Trouble is that area of Mound Bayou was on old Indian burial mound. That's where the name come from. They's some swear they have heard the old drums beatin back in there of a dark night. Enough to make a boy take the fantods! Now and agin you can see where them guys from LSU been digging. Leave em alone, I say.

They come a corkscrewin, them multi-colored, mostly chestnut lookin heads leadin the way and they was just speedballs agin the grey sky.

By the time I had four squealer drakes and a mallard hen layin on the log with me, the gun barrel had come hot and I was most through two boxes of them good, blue Peters Hi-Velocity shells. My shoulder was getting sore and I was glad for the break in the action.

It commenced to floatin in. Ridin on the air like the call of the Wendigo. Just a wisp now and agin. I had just read Call of the Wild, and that word stuck with me, still does...Wendigo, the French-Canadian haint what aint got a real name. Buster was cryin somewhere off in the distance and comin my way, aye God! Just now and agin I could hear him giving voice.

I slipped the two, blue number fours from the barrels and replaced them with red colored ought buckshot. Then, I eased up the slight bank and took me a seat on downed cypress. Musta was a hurricane come through here and knocked these cypress down.

Three dogs now. They've struck and are runnin. Still comin my way aye Grannies and I best ease over by that tupler tree and look sharp. Flock of greenheads sailed in and lit. Wrong shells and the wrong time. I can hear ole Squeally carryin the mail. He'll be leadin and lickin at his heels, that ole buck. At dog can flat run. Jubal, he is runnin middle and Buster is cryin in the

rear.

Wind pickin up and a little rain. I button my brown, canvas huntin coat with the lined game bag. I got it for Christmas and I am some proud of it. Uncle Lloyd and Aunt Jessie give it to me. My own folks didn't buy huntin or fishin stuff. Good thing, too. They's like as not, buy some red hat with ear flaps. I wore me an old Jones hat with brim turned up like it should be and a mallard drake tail feather in the band.

Comin close and full out. I'ma take and tell you sumpin, Mr. Man, if three dogs at full cry comin your way and pushin a deer don't give you the buck augers, aye Grannies you're dead!

That ole deer is going to try and make a lose on the dogs in the break and I am between them and the break. Time to get down on one knee and try to make my silhouette smaller. Gotta look close, no telling how far ahead of the dogs he is.

CRASH! Flash of brown knockin the bejeesus out of the palmetto and comin right at me. Gun comes up and the first barrel, the full choke, goes off. Flash of brown turning left at less than 20-yards, small antlers bright against the dark day. Second barrel goes off and it is quiet. Not a sound. How can it get so quiet so quick? Onliest sound is my heart hammerin agin my chest ribs.

A small, half-wet boy in too big hip boots with an empty shotgun stands with head down against a massive tupelo gum tree. Three dogs, a walker, a black and tan and July-Trigg cross, swirl around his legs, waiting for instructions or at least a pat on the head. The picture stands clear in mind. I can smell the dogs, the rain and the swamp. I can feel the swamp around me. Nuthin feels like a true swamp.

From the east end of the break, Uncle Alphus, hip boots turned down and rolled beneath his knees, strides into view, a question in his eyes. From the south, at just about the same time Uncle Lloyd pushes through the palmetto, pipe clenched in his teeth, glasses fogged, hair still jet black, same question in his eyes.

I try to think of a good story but all I can say is, "I shot him twice close and he never staggered a bit. I reckon I just missed."

Uncle Lloyd, he called Buster to him and put a bailin string leash on him. I pointed out the last place I saw the deer and he led Buster that way, talking low to him like you do a good dog or a good woman. I could hear Buster's flukes snufflin the way they do when he is workin something and all to once he bellered something fierce. Like to shook the moss on the trees.

Uncle Lloyd, he taken him a wrap on the leash and give Uncle Alphas a nod. Uninvited, I joined 'em and we started off. The sun was commencen to break through a few spots and all to once, Uncle Lloyd he stopped and pointed.

Mr. Man, I mean to say, I never seen so much blood on the ground and on the palmetto spotlit by shafts of sun. The uncles, they commenced to catchin and holdin dogs and I caught me old Squeally and him wet and stinkin like a wet dog does. I'll take and tell you, it got busy real quick.

And then, we didn't go 30-yards and hit a finger of the break. Uncle Lloyd, he shifted the pipe in this teeth and pointed with his sharp nose as he was bad to do.

"Boy," Said Uncle Lloyd, "Go see can you drag that deer out of that water where we can get aholt a him a'thout getting all muddy.

That was when I saw the small antlers barely stickin out of the scum covered water at the edge of the break. He was in a shaller finger of the break where it seeped back into the trees. The water was covered with scum and duckweed like it is in a swamp break and the sun spackled it.

That was when I learned deer, no matter where they are shot, don't always drop in they own tracks. I also learned you never say you missed until you are sure you did. From both barrels, that buck had six buckshot in the vitals and a broke front leg. Still, he run a good 100-yards. But there he lay, aye Grannies!

We gutted the buck and drug him back to my big log. Well, I had like to forgot my ducks I had lined up back on that log, ready for presentation.

The Uncles, they made some over them ducks, too. And Uncle Lester, he come with the iron horse, aslingin mud every which a way. We got all loaded up and started out, me sittin on the spare tire in the back. I'll take and tell you something, it took some not to keep reaching out the jeep back window, I mean if there had been a window, and pettin that buck tied across the dog box. And it tooken me some doins not to puff up and play the role when, back at camp, the Uncles bragged on me for gettin meat for the whole camp. Duck gumbo for supper and deer meat all around, aye Grannies! Truth told I reckon I did puff up a tad and that was and is okay. I deserved it. Killin a deer, any deer in 1956, was doin somethin. Reckon how it was to a button of 12.

Now sure, you bet, I've killed a ton of bigger bucks since then and forgot the biggest part of them, too. But you can bet a pretty, I won't never forget that cold, rainy day in Belle's Break as long as I draw a breath. Nor that L.C. Smith, either and I've owned a right many shotguns since then. But I won't forget that one.

No sir. Not never. Like that old, stag handled knife Uncle Lloyd give me when I killed my first deer, some things, you don't forget.

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