

# Grandpa's Walking Stick

Thick dense fog air felt exceptionally cool that morning, and the layer of heavy dew that I happened to be all but lying in only made matters worse. The sun had made its way into the morning sky nearly an hour before, but the canopy of moisture mostly hid that fact; except for the **occasional rays of red and yellow hues that filtered** through. As I surveyed my immediate location for any signs of venomous disturbances, my attention was quickly diverted by an old familiar sound that overpowered the raging river less than a hundred feet away. Another barrage of gobbles came from somewhere within the fallen cloud, and suddenly I didn't feel quite so cold.

I proceeded to run through a series of cuts and cackles, but was quickly overshadowed by a set of raspy yelps. Between the choruses of shocked gobbles, I could also make out lighter, sweeter tones. It became very obvious that I had an entire flock heading in my direction. As I pondered over my poor choice of a natural blind, I could make out bright shades of red bobbing through the fog. There I was, crouched behind the only bit of cover I could find, grasping my handmade wood bow with twelve sets of the best eyes the good Lord ever put upon this earth looking for me. Ordinarily, I would have felt my chances were slim to none, but not that morning. That morning I was carrying a very special bow.... a magic bow.

I had first learned of the wood's magical properties more than two decades prior to that damp, spring day. It was nearly Christmas, and I was staying with my grandparents during the school break. We had several bad snowstorms that year, and with a good twenty inches blanketing the ground, it made any outside duty a chore. I was all of nine years old, **but already I felt drawn to their self-reliant lifestyle**. Keeping the woodstove blazing and filling the bird feeders was my duty, and I accepted it with much pride.

After a few days, I noticed that Grandpa was late for breakfast every morning. He had gotten rid of his livestock at that point, and the path in the snow to the truck seemed clear. Nothing needed fixing that I was aware of, and I made sure there was plenty of wood stacked for the morning. Regardless, he would come in from the cold just about the time I was finishing my meal. The curiosity became too much, so on the fourth day, I asked, "Grandma, where does Pap go every morning" : "He takes a walk up to the other end of the farm"; she said. "Why"; I asked. "Cuz he thinks he needs to"; she smiled. I didn't know what she meant exactly, but I could tell it wasn't something she could explain, either. I decided to find out for myself.

I left the bedroom door open and slept in everything but my boots and coat. Just before daylight, I heard the creaks of the hallway floor and saw the dull glow coming from under the bathroom door. I pulled my boots on and bundled myself up for the cold as quietly as possible. I stood on a small bookcase to watch out the frosted window as Grandpa made his way across the yard and into the patch of woods behind the woodshed. The sun was just beginning to rise as I tiptoed down the hall and out the back door.

When I rounded the woodshed, I noticed an obvious foot trail heading through the forest. The snow on the trail had been beaten down quite a bit, but my steps were a far cry from Grandpa's 6-foot plus frame. I could only manage to make every other step of the size 12 depressions. I did my best to follow them through a mature stand of oaks, then down in a valley and along a creek amongst the mountain laurel, and finally up a rocky bluff to a small group of hemlock.

As I tried to catch my breath under the solitude of the hemlocks, I could **see the steam from Grandpa's coffee floating in the** air just ahead. I slowly made my way through the stand of trees until I saw him sitting motionless on a fallen log. He seemed to be watching something out in front of him, so I tried to sneak closer. A frozen stick buried just inches under the snow gave away my location, and the morbid fear of getting "caught with my hand in the cookie jar" rushed through me. His head turned slowly, his eyes met mine, and before the excuses could be muttered, he just grinned and motioned me toward him.

I made my way to the log and he pulled me up beside him for a better look. "You see `em"; he asked. In front of us, a hillside dropped down and gave way to a small pocket field. Against the white of the fresh snow, I could make out several movements of black and iridescence. "What are they"; I asked. "Turkeys"; Grandpa said. I had only seen a pair of turkeys prior to this and only for a few seconds as they flew over the family car. These large birds fascinated me, and though I have never been a good gauge of time, it seemed like we sat on that log for quite awhile.

Grandpa finished off the last drop from his coffee thermos, and slowly slid to a standing position. I hopped down off the log, knocking over a small bucket that had been sitting along its side. A few remaining corn kernels spilled onto the snow and Grandpa grinned and said, "Winters like this are

hard on everyone" : He tucked his thermos in his coat, picked up the bucket, grabbed his trusty walking stick, and off we went.

We hadn't gone far before I needed a rest. The stand of hemlock was more than half a mile from the back porch, and the deep snow made it feel more like ten and a half. Grandpa had a little canteen that he readily shared, and then he handed me his walking stick. "Here son, you take this"; he said. "I found this piece of hickory by an old burial ground" : "It seems to have some kind of magic": "How do you think I will so far"; he asked. I looked at him with much suspicion, but I was certain of two things; first, I was so tired I was willing to give anything a try, and second, I had always known Grandpa to speak the truth, even when Grandma thought he shouldn't! With stick in hand, we started back for the house.

Grandpa was never the kind to say much, but when he did decide to speak up, it was generally worth hearing. On that walk through the snow, I guess he thought I needed to hear a few things. He preached about the conditions of our modern world, the responsibility we each had to wildlife and its habitats, the satisfaction of a self-reliant lifestyle, and a list of other things---some of which it has taken me most of my life to fully comprehend. Before I had a chance to ask a single question, we were rounding the old woodshed. "See, I told you it was magic"; he said. I handed the stick back over as if I were delivering Excalibur. "We better get on inside"; he said. "Wouldn't want Grandma to worry":

Over a decade slipped by before I saw the walking stick again. I was in my mid-twenties and "pursuing a career in music"; which accounted for little more than bouts of jetlag and lapses of good judgment. I was living a dream, but like most dreams, it came at a great price.

I was in San Francisco when I called home to check on things. My mother told me about the cancer-a rare form that takes its victims quickly. "How long does Grandpa have"; I asked. "Not long"; she said. I had six solid weeks of shows booked. My youth and overinflated sense of self worth got in the way of compassion and good sense. I decided to finish out my obligations-a choice that I will always regret.

There were only three days left of the tour when I got the call at the hotel. I canceled the last date and boarded the first plane I could get back east. I made it home in just enough time to view the weakened vessel that once belonged to the strongest man I ever knew, and then I helped put him in the ground. I saw my family grieve and I watched my father cry for the first time in my life. Despite the great loss in my own heart, I could find no tears. I simply wasn't ready to say goodbye.

I drove my father and brothers to meet the family at Grandma's after the service. There was plenty of food, but I don't recall having much of an appetite. Dad and I took a walk around the property, and he told stories about some of the racks tacked to the woodshed. As we talked, I peeked in the old greenhouse that Grandpa had built years before. I remembered the smell of freshly mixed soil and plants that covered virtually every inch of the rough lumbered shelves. Now, it lay as empty and bare as a part of my own soul. As I began to turn to go outside, I saw it. At first, I thought it might just be a remnant of the many tomato stalks he would carve. But, as I pulled it from the darkened corner, I recognized it immediately. Without a word to anyone, I wrapped the walking stick up in some plastic and put it in the car. I cleaned up the stick and put a few coats of varnish on it some weeks later. It always rested in whatever part of my house that I chose to write---whether it was music or stories. When I thought I couldn't keep going with an idea, I would hold that stick in my hand and remember that day in the deep snow. I always found the strength to keep on writing.

Some years later, I found a book called "The Bowyers Craft" in a small library near my home in Nashville. I had traded in my high dollar compound for a Robertson Longbow, and was intrigued with the idea of making my own bow. I managed to scrape out a few bows from a piece of hickory I chopped down, and one of them even held together. I was hooked.

One day as I was working on a song in my den, I looked over in the corner at Grandpa's stick, and the thought hit me like a hammer-USE THE WALKING STICK TO MAKE A BOW! I picked up the stick with much enthusiasm, but even with my limited knowledge, I quickly realized that the diameter and thickness of the stick would only make a light poundage bow at best. I dismissed the idea, and went on about my business.

A few months later, I was busy making plans to hunt some of my old stomping grounds back in West Virginia. I called an old friend and farmer to let him know when I would be coming, and more importantly, to get the lowdown of the summer buck sightings. As we talked, I found out about his recent divorce and the tough financial situation it had put him in. He had little choice, but for the first time since before the **Depression Era**, the property was being timbered. "What about the top of the back ridge"; I asked. "They haven't got to it yet"; he said.

That ridge had been an important one to me. On it sat a cherry tree where a young, fledgling bowhunter took his first deer-a small spile. As I thought about the profound affect of that day, I had an epiphany! "Bob, would it be OK if I cut down my cherry tree"; I asked. "I would gladly pay for

whatever they would give for it, but I have something I would like to do with the lumber': I proceeded to tell my old friend about my idea, and a few weeks later, he helped me haul out a few nice cherry splits.

I had read about folks using cherry staves backed with hickory to produce some nice shooting bows, so I thought I would give it try. Besides, it was about the only piece of wood that meant enough to me to earn a place with Grandpa's walking stick. Deer season was in full swing, but it allowed for the splits to get a few months of drying time before I helped them along in the hot box later that winter. I worked the split down to a good floor tiller, then flattened the walking stick and glued it to the cherry stave. After several hours of scraping away on the 100# bow (I had no idea a backing could make it so stiff), I tillered it out to a solid 55# at my 27 inch draw.

I spent the last remaining days of winter "breaking it in"; and gaining confidence in my own accuracy with the bow. As spring descended, I had reserved myself to the idea that I would hunt with Grandpa's stick alone during the upcoming turkey season. Grandpa had never had the opportunity to take to the spring woods for the birds that he and I had cherished, so I thought I might give him that chance.

I arrived at the large management area on the afternoon prior to opening day. I quickly set up a camp with little more than a tarp and bedroll, and then took to the woods for some much-needed scouting and the hopes of "putting one to bed" : As I made my way down the labyrinth of grassy logging roads, two things were obvious-both the coyote and turkey population seemed to be flourishing. The sign was abundant, but with the amount of coyotes in the area, I questioned how well the birds would respond. Despite my pessimism, I made my way down into the river bottom and made a huge circle back toward camp.

Camp was only a few hundred yards from a series of fields bordering a set of hardwood ridges that made for good roosting sites. As it drew closer to evening, I made my way back toward the top. Just as I peaked over the ridge, I caught that old, familiar sound. I stopped and hit the owl hoot as the sun started to fall into the horizon. Two distinct sets of gobbles came from near the edge of one of the fields. I made my way over slowly and hooted once more with the same results. As the final light of day faded, I could hear the batting of wings as they flew up into the trees. I knew exactly where I would be the next morning.

The birds had flown up to roost very close to the edge of a large pocket field, so I snuck into position well before daylight and under the cover of darkness. I set up my small, makeshift blind and placed a decoy just a few yards away at the edge of the field. An owl returned from his evening's hunt, giving one more call to the night, and my feathered friends answered him less than 75 yards from my position. My spirits soared. That is, until I could make out an alien-like beam of light in the distance. It drew closer, and soon I could hear the gasping breaths of two men who could stand to spend a little more time in the woods, and a little less time at the donut shop. My dreams of taking a bird that morning quickly fluttered away with the series of alarm putts and flapping wings. I gathered up my gear, and headed down the ridge. The sun was attempting to show itself by this time, but as I dropped down into the river bottom, a dense fog and a cool burst of air engulfed me. Still miffed about the intrusion earlier, I did my best to shake it off and enjoy the morning. "It WAS a walking stick," I told myself. Any feelings of "public land resentment" were soon replaced, however, when I could hear what I came for bellowing from below me. I made my way through the fog like a ship, relying on the occasional gobble to direct my steps like a trusty lighthouse. The birds appeared like apparitions, with the colors of black and red burning through the fog. At first, I wasn't sure if it was turkeys or a gang of lost pirates rolling down the Duck River. But, as the fog began to lift, my childhood fantasies were overshadowed by instinct. I reminded myself that I was a hunter, and the stick I carried was no toy. My quarry was making its way to me quickly, and it was time to get serious. The small bush I was using allowed me to view the show, but still remain hidden-so long as I didn't move. Drawing the bow and

shooting would be another matter all together. Behind me was a hill nearly too steep to walk on, and in front was a few large trees, and a multitude of ferns and flora leading to the river less than sixty yards away. They would have to pass by close.

I watched as the flock began to spread out in all directions. One monstrous gobbler walked near the river's edge, strutting and gobbling as if to remind the others who owned this river bottom. A group of hens stayed mostly in the middle, challenging my lifeless-looking decoy, while the other gobblers seemed to want to watch from a distance. Two mature gobblers circled out from the bunch, heading

behind a group of trees. With most of the flock now past me and intent on my decoy, I knew these two strays would be my only opportunity. As soon as I could hear wing tips sloshing through the inches of water only a few steps away, I drew the bow. The alarm putts began, but it was too late. One of the gobblers had already taken his final step, and the arrow was gone.

The eruption of wings echoed through the bottom, but in seconds, only the sound of my heart and the river remained. The gobbler took just a few steps before surrendering himself as a sacrifice. I made my way to him, in disbelief that the sequence of events actually occurred. As I dropped to my knees, I was overcome with emotion. Nearly a decade had passed since the day I watched Grandpa be lowered down, but it was not until that moment in the river bottom, there with the wallowing stick in hand, did I finally find the tears. The shame of missing his final days was finally released, seeming to flow into the standing water---remnants of an earlier spring rain.

The monkey that had been on my shoulder was soon replaced with a monarch of the spring woods. With the fog now gone and the sun beaming down, I made my way out of the river bottom. As I neared the top, I took a moment to reflect at what I had done and take in the beauty that surrounded me. The scattered dogwood blooms seemed to burst from the wall of green, while the scent of honeysuckle permeated the air. Below, the river waters sparkled from the rays of sunlight, and the pasture on the opposite side was the piercing green that you only see from the richest of soils. "Grandpa would have loved this place"; I thought to myself.

Staring out over that river bottom, I made Grandpa a solemn vow---that I would never live a life of selfishness again, and so long as

I have a breath, I will never stop believing in magic.

