

NEVER A DEER

By Rebecca Woodbury Tucker, Perkinsville/Weathersfield

My father grew up in a hunting family, went out religiously every hunting season for nearly 50 years, but he never brought home a deer.

Born in 1909, Philip Howe Woodbury was the eldest of four boys who hunted, fished and trapped all over Windsor County, Vermont. Dad says today that his father, Harry, was an avid hunter and a good shot, who took his boys with him one at a time on his frequent hunting excursions.

Even after my father went through college, had a wife and young family, the outdoorsman in Dad never waned. He brought home creels full of fish, or his jacket pouch full of many species of ducks, partridges and woodcock. I still remember those little breasts of tough, dark meat, with a piece of shot here and there, that my mother cooked up and served.

Mama never ate them, though. To her, anything not bought at the store or grown in the garden was not fit to eat, especially if it was just recently lying dead, feathers and all, still warm on the kitchen table. She did the best she could for a Connecticut girl brought up in town, however. She got out Fanny Farmer's cookbook and followed directions.

Our menu was usually supplemented with tuna or hamburger. There were four children very soon in our family, eventually six, and a day's catch didn't always make a full meal. A whole venison would have.

Like a lot of the native Vermonters, my Dad looked forward to whitetail deer hunting all year long. Every opening day of the November season, four a.m. would see a light in our kitchen and my father at the table downing the last of his hot coffee with his characteristic quiet "Slu-u-u-rrppp-p."

Always an early riser, I would tiptoe in and quietly close the door so as not to awaken Mama. He might turn, finger to lips in a silencing gesture, and whisper:

"Morning, Reba!"

Rising, he'd take two waxed paper-wrapped sandwiches from the icebox, a carefully folded packet of raisins, a piece of cheese, and a plaid Thermos bottle and place them into a khaki canvas sack.

"G'morning, Daddy, going hunting?"

A nod.

"Where are you going?" We kept our voices low, like conspirators planning a secret.

"Ummm, same place." He seldom said where.

Wherever he hunted, it was far enough away so he was gone all day, and when Dad returned after dark, Mama would hurry to open the door, and we children would rush for a hug as he entered the kitchen, smelling of the outdoors like laundry fresh from the clothesline. His rifle was always cradled against his black-and-red checkered wool sleeve, the barrel pointing to the floor, its chamber cracked open, the shiny reddish-brown of the stock peeking below his other elbow.

"Catch anything?" we'd clamor, some of us peering beyond him at the car in the driveway.

I tried to imagine a deer draped over the front fender of the old Plymouth suburban. As was the custom in the early fifties, a victorious hunter might drive all over the neighborhood, showing off his kill, blood from the deer's nostrils blown back in a long bloody line along the car's side doors.

But I was never to see this firsthand until I was grown and married to a more trigger-ready hunter, for the paint on my father's station wagon was never streaked with wind-driven blood.

My Uncle Don shot many deer. Once his wide handsome grin enlivened the Rutland Herald sports page with a ten-point buck he'd shot over in Barnard or South Reading.

Don and Uncle Harry (we call him "Bug") came around to hunt with their big brother, my Dad, some fall mornings. Then the dimly-lit kitchen would be a little noisier because Harry and Bug were always laughing and talking.

We'd hear stories later, when they returned after dark and Mama might invite them to stay for supper. My uncles would tell of wild game sightings, "getting a

bead," firing, and hitting a deer. Then of finding and following a trail of tracks or blood in the snow, and then discovering the big buck resting beneath a blown-down tree. Bug's daughters Lynn and Marcia ate deer meat, and cousin Kelda and Aunt Bette, too, I am sure. But we did not.

As I got older, I tried to figure it out and got brave enough to ask my Dad one early November morning, "You go out every year and hunt all day; you're surely a good shot. So, how come you never catch a deer?"

We still said "catch," as if it was a butterfly in a net, though by now I knew that a hunter's skill was of the utmost importance. That, with a little luck and lots of persistence, is what makes it in the hunting world.

Dad was backing his lunch, and as he carefully placed the Thermos into the sack, he could have seen me worrying: "Have I asked a bad question?"

I watched a smile flicker over his lips as if he was debating what to tell me. I was nearly 13 now, old enough for the truth, whatever it was.

He set the little waxed paper packages carefully on top of the drink bottle. Looking up at me, he shrugged his shoulder a little and smiled as he spoke.

He gathered the old canvas bag, slung it over his shoulder and stepped outside. The old Plymouth, parked at the top of the drive facing the road last night, turned up its lights like eyes opening after a night's sleep. The car rolled silently down the drive and turned left onto the highway. I saw the vehicle slow, the little red tail lights blink, then the car jerk forward and begin to gain speed as Dad pulled out the clutch for a keyless start.

His words still seemed to linger somewhere near the door. I pulled my head in from the darkened window, stepped back into the lamplight, sat down in his still-warm chair and thought about those words:

"Reba, what do you think your mother would do with a DEAD DEER?"

(Editor's Note: A shortened version of "Never a Deer" appeared in Nostalgia Magazine in 1995.)