

Jack Kirkland/News-Sentinel staff

Sonny Morgan (right) says it isn't easy to stay in step with 81-year-old hunting partner Charles Matthews.

## Age won't keep preacher from hunting rabbit

*"Folks think rock n' roll is something, but they don't know what music is until they've hunted behind a pack of good beagles hitting a rabbit track."*

— Reverend Charles Matthews, 81-year-old rabbit hunter



**Morgan Simmons**

Outdoors

At first, the pack was scattered and undisciplined, but Charles Matthews didn't seem to mind. These were his dogs, the product of five generations of selective breeding, and he had faith they would settle down soon.

There were five beagles in the pack, and only one of them, a 13-year-old lemon and white male named Walt, was well-seasoned. Matthews said that's the problem with rabbit hunting into your 80s. You tend to outlive your best dogs.

"I depend on Walt for getting up on that track and sounding, keeping those young dogs in line," he said. "He's like me. He's got a lot of miles."

While Matthews worked the dogs, Sonny Morgan walked the opposite side of the fence row, beating the brush. Matthews and Morgan have been hunting together for 15 years. They met when Morgan began delivering papers to Matthews' home in Knoxville. Knowing that Matthews loved wild game, Morgan began bringing him geese, rabbits, and, in the summer, groundhogs. Before long, they were hunting together.

"He can walk my legs off," said Morgan. "He can read his dogs, and he can read rabbits. His eyesight is amazing. He's almost 82, and here I am wearing bifocals."

We hunted a 300-acre dairy farm along the Holston River, just below Cherokee dam. The day was cloudy and gray, with a cold, penetrating wind. The forecast called for snow.

An hour into the hunt, the pack began falling in line behind Walt, and we began seeing rabbits. Hunkered against the cold, the rabbits were slow to bolt. Matthews breeds some of his beagles to be small. These are his jump dogs, specialists in infiltrating thick brush, and flushing rabbits.

The pack's best jump dogs were Ruby and Bad-Eye. At the edge of a long strip of brush, they jumped the fourth rabbit of the morning. Up till then, the rabbits had stayed close to cover, often disappearing in groundhog holes. But this one made straight for an open field, zig-zagging by Matthews at full-tilt.

Matthews shot three times, and seemed genuinely surprised at the outcome. He missed.

"Long as I can see the rabbit, I feel good at shooting at him," he laughed. "I had to let him know somebody was out here."

Born in Mississippi, raised in Louisiana, Matthews grew up hunting in the swamps. A mason by trade, he moved to Tennessee to help build the city of Oak Ridge. He has been preaching for 32 years. His voice is deep and resonant, and when he talks to his dogs, it isn't difficult to imagine him projecting from the pulpit.

"I love rabbit dogs and preaching," said Matthews, "but

my favorite is preaching. If I'm not at the hospital visiting my people, or at church, I'm out rabbit hunting."

The day was spent hunting fence rows — narrow strips of honeysuckle and briar thickets that criss-crossed the fields. The dogs grunted in the underbrush, working their noses like radar scopes. Most of the rabbits were jumped on south-facing hillsides, where it was beginning to get warm.

"These fence rows are full of rabbits, if we can flush them," said Morgan. "When a rabbit packs snow on its feet, it gets hard for the dogs to smell. On a day like today, a dog might have to step on a rabbit to make it come out."

Noon arrived, but instead of lunch, Matthews had a cup of coffee. He led his beagles down an overgrown fence row that led to the Holston River. Morgan worked one side, Matthews the other. Matthews' steps were sure-footed and steady, and he never hesitated to follow his dogs through the thick stuff.

Another rabbit got up ahead of the pack, and we caught a glimpse of it running through the brush. The dogs tracked and backtracked, but to no avail.

"That rabbit must have hit a hole," said Matthews. "I could tell, because them dogs' ambition slowed down. They had good ambition, then they quit."

The second your mind wanders, the rabbit bolts — that's the Universal Law of rabbit hunting. We were working some brushpiles along the river. It was well into the afternoon, and our game bags were getting heavy. The rabbit jumped about 20 yards ahead, and we didn't see it until it disappeared into a field of uncut corn.

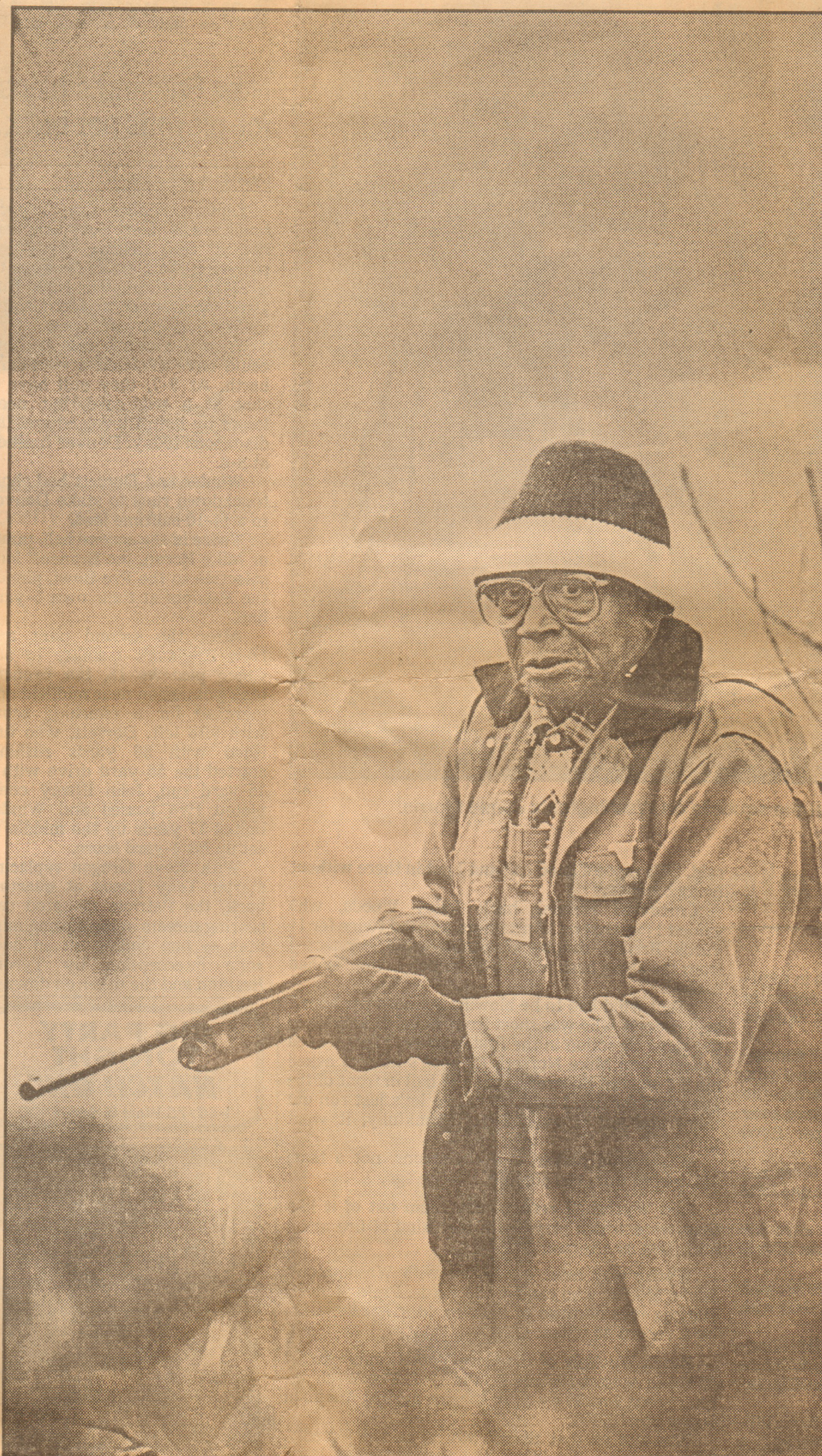
The next 20 minutes were the best of the day. The rabbit covered a sizeable fraction of the farm with the pack howling in pursuit. The three of us spread out 50 yards from the cornfield. We listened, and for the first time that day, Matthews sat down.

"You hear that?" he said. "That's Walt. I can tell because he's got a big mouth. I love the chase, love listening to that dog music."

Somewhere at the far side of the field, the rabbit turned. The beagles were on their way back. Their voices swelled to a cacophony of yips and howls. Matthews stood up and raised his gun, anticipating the rabbits arrival.

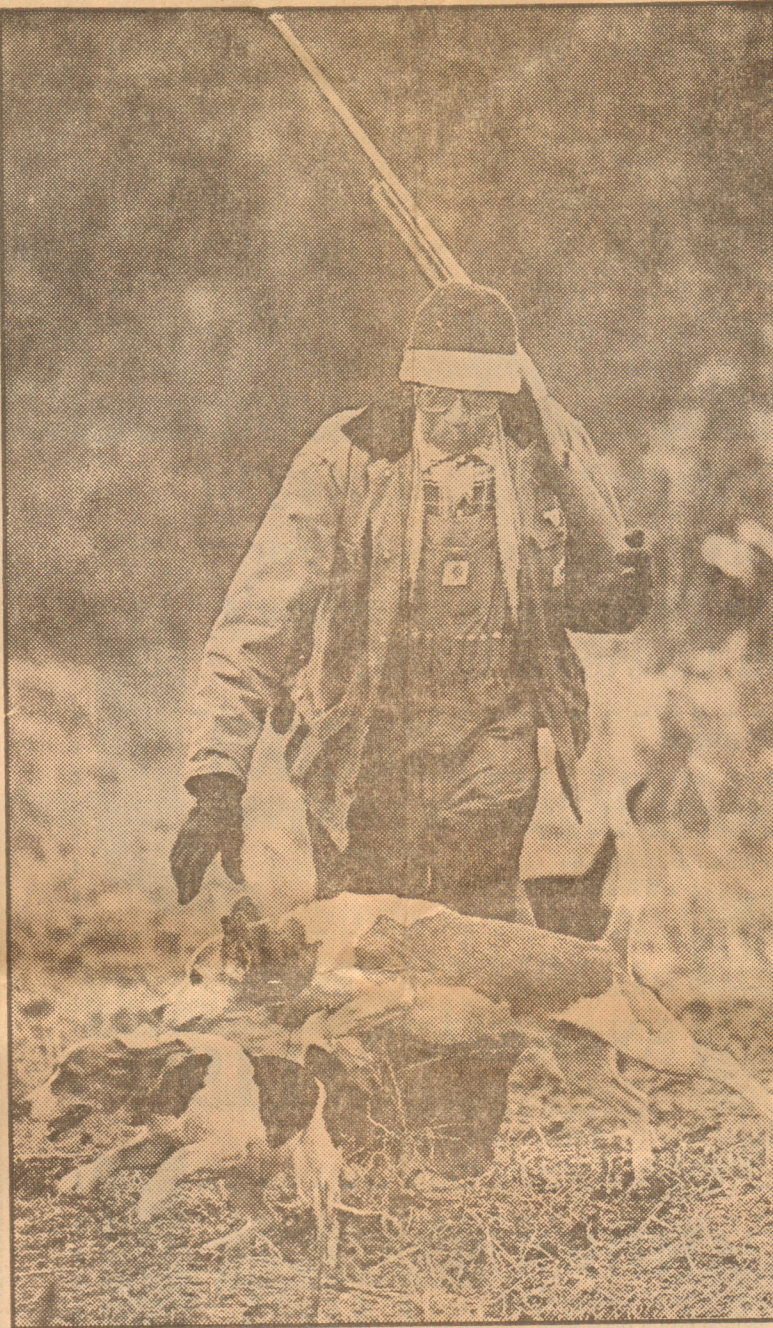
That was the last rabbit bagged that day; it was getting late. On our way back, the sun broke through the clouds, bathing the fields in low-angled, punished light. Carrying his shotgun on his shoulder, Matthews called his dogs. By the time we reached the truck, they had fallen in line.

"I'm in good shape today, I am," said Matthews. "Sometimes, times my legs feel worn out, but not today. The only thing that's to stop me now is sundown."



Jack Kirkland/News-Sentinel staff

Charles Matthews has an eye for those places likely to be best for rabbit hunting.



Jack Kirkland/News-Sentinel staff

His beagles, bred to hunt rabbits, usually allow Charles Matthews to get the jump on his prey.

## Cooking rabbit a breeze if you can stand smell

By MORGAN SIMMONS  
News-Sentinel outdoors editor

It's been 15 years since Ivory Matthews ate rabbit. Married to Charles for 45 years, she long ago got sick of the way rabbits smell.

"Charles and my baby brother use to hunt all the time," she said. "They'd bring them home, and I guess I just got tired of cleaning them."

Despite her personal palate, Mrs. Matthews is still an accomplished game cook. Matthews says his wife even makes groundhog taste good.

Mrs. Matthews likes to make gravy with rabbit. First, she cuts the rabbit in sections, removing the legs, and cutting the back in half. She dusts the meat with flour, sprinkles with salt and pepper, and fries it in shortening.

"The deeper the fat you put it in, the better the chance of cooking it without the rabbit getting hard," she said.

When the rabbit is barely done, she pours off the grease and pours in enough water to almost cover the meat. Sometimes she adds onions or vegetables. She cooks the rabbit slowly, adding more water if needed. As the rabbit steams, it becomes tender, and the water cooks down to make a rich, brown gravy.

"Charles brings home a lot of rabbits," said Mrs. Matthews. "We give some away to church-members, and to our friends as Christmas presents."