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the Backwoods Blaxican

BY DANTE ZÚÑIGA-WEST

Guess Who's Coming to Deer Camp?

The passing of another *Feliz Navidad* and the arrival of a new year have brought about a time of reflection in the backwoods. Overall, an off-season has set in, leaving the rod-and-rifle crowd time to celebrate successes and mull over mistakes.

Such is the case in the world of one Backwoods Blaxican. If the name puzzles you, think about it for a second. Pick up a *Field and Stream* magazine, turn on the Outdoors Channel or walk into Cabelas, you don't see a whole lot of brothers decked out in realtree camo jackets or helming watercraft on Oregon's lakes and rivers — but that's me, I'm that guy. And I'm willing to bet my experience in America's great outdoors is a bit different than that of the average Oregon woodsman. In the spirit of seasonal reflection, I can think of no better example to illustrate this experiential divide than last year's deer camp.

Deer camp is not just the camping of hunters, prepared to stalk antlered herbivores. It is an American outdoors tradition — particularly in the great white Pacific Northwest. It is incomparable to anything in the urban African-American experience; the only thing it can be likened to is the backyard BBQ, where family and close friends are brought together in a sometimes rowdy yet always looked-forward to gathering. From a Mexican-American perspective, I might compare this annual gathering to a *quinceañera*. Yes, the *quinceañera* is a gathering that celebrates a young Latina's 15th birthday; but as the Republican Party found out (the hard way) last year, there are a lot of us here now, and we have big families — so someone is always turning fifteen.

I am accustomed to hunting and camping alone, but in efforts to immerse myself in a pastime otherwise foreign to me, I sought the help of two men steeped in the tradition of deer camp. Names here have been changed to protect the innocent, so let's just call them Davey and Crockett. Davey, the son of an incarcerated Hells Angel, is of Norwegian decent, a proud fact he will often reinforce if given the opportunity. Crockett, the nephew of a Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon, is of Southern stock. They are both gracious hosts. They tell me not to worry about bringing anything other than my hunting gear and a sleeping bag; they've got the rest covered. So the day before deer season starts, I follow both of them out into the bush.

Deer camp is a festive occasion. The essentials of instant coffee, Red Bull energy drinks, beer and Costco packs of assorted muffins are placed alongside scoped rifles, gun-cleaning kits and camp axes. You need pickup trucks for this sort of thing, as well as tequila, which is used for the inaugural late evening scouting trip. Dinner (every night) is comprised of chilidogs, Budweiser and the time-honored ritual of campfire stories — it is here that diversity is celebrated.

I learn of the great Norwegian tribes, from which all mankind was birthed. A fierce and heavily armed race of people who originated in the North and came down across land bridges during the time when all of the continents were connected. Eager to swap words with my new friends, I talk a little bit about how contemporary science believes that the first humans came from Africa. My fellow campers and I do not come to a communal agreement on the origins of humankind, but as the stories continue on, including our mutual failures at things like love, childrearing and firearm maintenance, I come to understand that we aren't so different after all. We each hold a special place in our own hearts for being in the out of doors. We'd prefer a bad day in the woods to a good day in town on any occasion. In this we are united.

On the third day of deer camp, we split up to hunt a series of clearcuts. Davey goes south, I go north and Crockett goes east. I scare up what I think is a black bear, and spook a grouse out of hiding, but find no deer. As agreed upon the three of us meet back up at the junction of three logging roads. Davey and Crockett are there before me. I emerge from the brush to find the two of them standing beside a large gray pickup truck with a big Confederate flag sticker on the windshield. Inside the cab of the truck sits a blonde-haired, blue-eyed man and a pretty white girl wearing a camo baseball hat. Both are decked out in hunter orange. The man is talking to Davey as I approach the group, then he stops talking mid-sentence. He stares at me. His face looks as if he is encountering a natural disaster.

"You shoot anything?" I ask the man, in attempt to break the tension.

The man in the truck nods at Davey and Crockett, then puts the vehicle in gear and drives off. He shouts "Good luck" to someone as the truck pulls away. Dust from the truck tires settles. Davey, Crockett and I look at each other and start laughing.

The walk back to camp is silent, until Davey speaks.

"I don't think that guy had ever seen a black person in the woods before," he says, chuckling. "Or a Mexican."

"He left before we could tell him you're alright," says Crockett.

"Ya man, you are alright," Davey says.

Thanks, guys. ■

Dante Zúñiga-West of Eugene is a former arts editor at Eugene Weekly, a book author and freelance writer. His column can be found online at backwoodsblaxican.com

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