

Emma's first hunt

MENTORING MY SWEETHEART

Story by Dale Valade for the Blue Mountain Eagle

When we started dating back in 2014, my wife-to-be had only once fired a gun. During that endeavor, an ex thought it would be hilarious to turn her loose, for her first time ever, with a 12 gauge. Whatever amusement he may have gotten was very one-sided, and needless to say, she did not share in his mirth. This same basic story has been repeated to me several dozen times over the years with a little variation in the details, of course. Occasionally it was a .300 Weatherby Magnum that the first-timer was handed and in turn received a cookie-cutter-like scar on their forehead to remember the humiliation and pain of being the butt-end of a bad joke. Sometimes it was a .357 magnum handgun that went sailing out of the novice's ignorantly light grip at ignition, the front sight burying itself between their eyes which did the trick. Whatever the reason, this is no way to expose newcomers to firearms. Many such stories were appended with "... and that's the first and last time I ever touched a gun." And it's hard to blame them when such has been their only exposure to shooting a gun.

Happily for Emma, she started dating a gun guy in 2014 with all kinds of firearms for her to go try. Many of our dates were spent shooting ground squirrels, plinking and target practicing. I started her off with a .22 rifle, then gradually went to blackpowder guns with light loads. We worked up to a 20 gauge and a .22-250 from there. Reactionary targets and tin cans were her favorites and kept her interest piqued. We practiced from all of the various field positions, and her improvement and progress were plain to see. Her first time shooting a handgun (a blackpowder .44 sixgun), she nailed four out of the six targets. I guess you could say she is a natural.

As time went on, she accompanied her father and me on dove and grouse hunting soirées, and she did very well. In 2015, she told me she wanted to try deer hunting. But she was unable to shoot well enough with anything bigger than my .22-250 to do so. Even though I hardly consider the .22 caliber to be a perfect deer rifle, I have always felt that a small bullet in the right spot is better than a large bullet in the wrong spot, so we secured our tags and went hunting.

That year in Idaho was the most dismal deer season I have ever experienced to date. We hiked and hiked. And we saw lots of deer but no bucks. We jumped up some 40 head of moose. How badly I wished I had a moose tag. It was hot and dry, and we covered a lot of country. Near the last few days of the season, we split up, and she stalked within 50 yards of a four-point buck but made a rookie mistake, and before she could get the safety moved to "fire," he bolted. That one missed opportunity and days of long hard hikes amounted to her first season. She would be so exhausted at the end of those days of hunting that she would often fall asleep on the drive back to Idaho Falls where we lived at the time. Disappointed as she was, she didn't give up even though she never got to even fire a shot that year.



Emma Valade



Dale Valade

In 2016, we moved back to Oregon, and in the fall of 2017, we both headed for the hills with an antlerless deer tag in hand. I had since acquired her a Remington Model 600 in .243 Winchester. With its short barrel and lightweight design, it was the perfect gun for a little lady like her. Shooting twice as much bullet as the .22-250 with her new rifle, I felt she was much better armed. On opening day, we headed for the hills. It was a beautiful fall morning with a light fog rising off the river. About a half hour into the hunt, we spotted deer. After practicing all summer with her new deer rifle, she took her first doe at about 75 yards. She fired offhand with a "hasty sling," and the 100 grain Hornady bullet met its mark. Her excitement was contagious. I'm not sure who was more proud. After pictures, I field dressed and loaded her first deer into our truck. As she told the story to others that day, I must confess I was just as excited as she was. I filled my own tag that evening, and we had our meat for the winter.

Seeing someone go from eager newcomer to experienced shooter and first time deer hunter was one of the greatest things I as her mentor could've experienced in this lifetime. This is the goal all shooting mentors should strive for: to get their pupils to master the art and constantly grow in discipline and skill. I've mentored others for their first kill, and it's always a great occasion. Get them trigger time with guns that fit well and that they enjoy shooting, and they too will enjoy the various shooting sports. This fall, we both drew our antlerless deer tags again. I cannot wait to take my sweetheart, and my newest hunting partner, out yet again. It's pretty much the perfect date together!

Dale Valade is a local country gent with a deep love for handloading, hunting and shooting.

His Camo's in the Closet

A poem by A. Kathy Moss for the Blue Mountain Eagle

His camo is in the closet and his bow is on the wall,
His arrows untouched, for he will not hunt this fall.
Or any year after, he feels he is alone
An army of a thousand men and he was sent home.
Only stubs now visible where his legs used to be,
To live beyond the blast, to serve his country.
Now through the darkness, his limits all come to mind,
The excuses of his life were all that he could find.
An anger deep within, he was fading away,
To be done with the pain not face another day.

Yet his dad came in his vision a distant memory
A chance to relive his childhood, of things that used to be.
They loved to hunt together, he smiled at the thought
Of the stories and the animals his dad almost got.
And of tag stew that they ate, a brothly mixture in their caper
More vegetables than anything. Was that really soggy paper?
He could hear his father's laughter as it quietly ebbed away,
He remembered hunting in the morning, naps during the day.

They would laugh at his stories and his lavishing puns,
And admired the collection of his many guns.
How his dad harassed him, with that bow over there,
A Stick-Flinger he had called him with a twinkle in his stare,
But that bull that he got with it, before his dad would die,
Made a boy into a man, with pride in his father's eye.

Through the shadow of death he faced his fears
He heard his father's words ringing in his ears,
As he had seen battle and the force of a hand
His father's battle cry, "Not on our land!"
But when the Twin Towers fell, so did he
Risking life and limb for the land of the free.
With tears down his face he quietly asked, "why?"
From the voice of his father, came a reply.

"You are who you are, helpless or not,
Rise above your weakness and deal with what you got,
For your life is not a dream, or something that is given,
Your life is today, and for you to start livin'."

Then he woke from his dream, as quick as a wink,
After four years he had to move beyond the brink.
With a program for the wounded, a beacon in the night,
A warrior who has faced a battle and struggled through the fight,
He gathers up his courage, and presses strength within
For the first time in a long time, he is ready to try again
He has built an inner-strength within himself somehow
His history and future blend together to the man he is now.
He grabbed his prosthetics, and silently slipped them on,
His friends were coming, and his nightmare is now gone.

The night rests from the darkness now fading to light,
The moisture teases the senses of the frost's first bite.
Anticipation of autumn and the gathering of friends,
And this is where his dream of hunting begins.

For his camo is in his duffle and his bow's off the wall,
His arrows are sharp, he's going hunting this fall.
He can hear a bull bugle a high-pitched scream,
He is going to live, and be more than his dream.