

SHOOTING THE BREEZE

THE BLISSFULLY IGNORANT

"IT ISN'T THAT CUTTING EDGE TECHNOLOGY MEANS NOTHING; IT'S THAT IT DOESN'T MEAN EVERYTHING."

—Dale Valade

By Dale Valade

For the Blue Mountain Eagle

Some years ago, I was elk hunting in Umatilla National Forest up above Spray, and near the end of my stalk, I came upon an old skid road and decided to walk it out to the main road where I could wait to be picked up by someone in our party.

Nobody had cell phones back then, not sure they would've worked up there even if we did. Not long after I had started down this road, I saw another hunter exiting a thicket with the same idea. No matter, I wasn't seeing anything to shoot at anyways. As I neared the fella, I waved to make sure he'd seen me, and he smiled and waved back in acknowledgment.

I could see he stood about 5-feet, 7-inches tall in his Army surplus "Mickey Mouse" boots, was wearing wool pants and a red flannel jacket and a felt hat with a shorter brim. It probably was a fedora at some point, but it sure wasn't anymore. He was girded about with a wide leather belt that had only a few old cartridges in loops and a Ka-Bar knife dangling off of it.

Like everything else the old boy carried with him, his rifle had seen more than a few miles. I could tell it was a Winchester Model 94 but couldn't tell which caliber. We passed the short time with small talk in sort of a half-whisper, betraying the fact that we both somehow still held out hope that we might walk up on an elk. He was quite a friendly chap. We will call him Harry. As we neared the main road, we came across a downed log and had a seat. It was there that the real conversation took place.

I was about to inquire about Harry's rifle when he beat me to the punch and asked about mine. That day I was carrying a Remington 700 in 8mm Remington Magnum loaded with Sierra 220-grain Gameking handloads. As he looked it over, I spewed ballistics and numbers like some guy reading the disclaimer at the end of an infomercial on TV. But despite my best efforts, it was no sale. Harry handed back my rifle,



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Dale Valade shot this buck on the last day of the season in 2018.

largely unimpressed, saying, "When I was in the service, anything that big came on wheels!"

After an awkward silence, he asked if I would like to see his rifle.

Once I quickly wiped the drool from my chin, I grasped the rifle from Harry's extended hands to give it a look see. He warned me that it was loaded, and after I had completed a short inspection, he asked me what I thought. Although old guns have always interested me, I couldn't believe that anybody would willingly take a .32 Winchester Special to go elk hunting. What if he had to take a longer shot? Did he even know his muzzle velocity? It didn't even have a scope, just buckhorn sights.

Tragically, before I could inform him of the many flaws in his choice of weapon,

one of Harry's folks wandered up on us in an old Dodge Ram pickup. Harry collected his prized punkin-chunker from my youthfully ignorant hands and waved as he climbed into the cab, wishing me luck.

All these years later, I've come to realize just how smart and how lucky old

Harry and others like him really are.

He had probably happily hunted all of his life with that old Winchester. Maybe it was even a well-used hand-me-down when he got it. Possibly it was his one and only rifle, unlike most of us with a library of guns to choose from. He bought his ammo at Wal-Mart, only when it was on sale, and darned his socks when they wore thin. Unlike me, he didn't stew over laser rangefinders, high-dollar optics with custom dials and mounts or spend countless

hours stewing over ballistics charts, testing every new "wonder bullet" that came along in his meticulously prepared handloads. He didn't burn up boxes of ammo in several agonizing hours shooting a veritable howitzer off of a bench rest to prepare himself for that proverbial "last day at sundown 'sniper' shot." He spent no time reading Kuiu, Danner or Havalon product reviews and took no part in Black Friday sales nor social media feuds.

Harry was in the woods not just to kill something but to enjoy some freedom from the hustle and bustle of the world — yes, even from the hunting world. Harry refused to exchange the simple pleasures of hunting for any sort of edge (real or implied) afforded him by all the modern gear and gadgets. I see now that he really was on to something there.

By that time in my life, I had already read several grocery sacks — paper not plastic — full of the various hunting and shooting magazines. My young mind was filled with charts, numbers, muzzle velocities, sectional densities and ballistic coefficients. Not old Harry. He wasn't burdened with such information, or if he was, he didn't let it bother him too badly. Nope, what he knew was there were elk in those hills and his old '94 would fill his freezer if he got lucky and did his part. It must truly be blissful to just "go hunting."

It isn't that cutting edge technology means nothing; it's that it doesn't mean everything. I think we hunters and shooters of today get so caught up in the minutiae that we sometimes miss the big things. We literally can't see the forest for the trees, it would seem. We sometimes get to thinking that the more money we invest will not only make us more successful in the field but more happy in the heart. Harry understood that it's the little things about hunting, and life in general, that are of the most worth.

I never saw old Harry again, but I think about him every so often. He'd be 100 years old at least if he's still around, lugging that old .32 Winchester Special looking for elk in his Mickey Mouse boots and enjoying every blissful minute of it.

Dale Valade, a local country gent with a love for the outdoors, handloading, hunting and shooting, writes a regular column for the Blue Mountain Eagle.



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Columnist Dale Valade sights in his rebuilt .30-06 rifle in the spring of 2016.