



Pop Cliff – The First Bear Hunt

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The dirt road leading up Pott's Mountain was so crooked that if you spit out the front window it would come right back in the rear window. At least that's what Pop said.

Even worse, if you stepped out the passenger side of the car on this road – it would be at least several hundred feet before your foot hit the ground.

Staring through the windshield of Pop's Chrysler, I wasn't thinking of doing either one.

I was eight years-old, and we were driving to the bear camp, a site about half-way up the mountain. This was my first bear hunt with Pop, a week-long camping trip, in the mountains and the cold of November.

My parents had special permission for me to be absent from school so I could make the trip, and they were going to join us at the end of the week – I would ride back home to Salisbury with them.

But for now, it was just me and Pop, starting what I was knew was going to be the best week of my life.

It was 1960, well before the "Political Correctness" movement came along, which was a good thing, because Pop Cliff would never be considered politically correct, not by a long shot. He would call a spade a spade in a heartbeat, and if you had a problem with that – too bad.

Generally there were three kinds of people, as he saw it; friends, family, and son-of-a-bitches. Where you fit in could change daily.

He was also a notorious story teller and practical joker. His stories were usually a stretch, and his practical jokes almost always got a "Damn it, Cliff!" or, "That was mean Pop!"

But they always cracked him up, and looking back, – they were always classic "Pop Cliff," – the seeds for a lot of great stories.

In later years I came to realize that Pop never really went for the hunting, he went for the camaraderie of camping with his buddies, to shoot guns, tell stories, and the abundant opportunities for practical jokes. The same reasons that I went hunting as an adult.

We arrived at the camp just as the road was petering-out, becoming more of a logging trail than a real road, and the campsite was only a clearing large enough for four tents, and a common area with a campfire in the middle.

Two pick-ups were squeezed in among the trees on the left side of the road, and the campsite was on the right, with the mountain falling away in a steep drop right behind the tents.

The other three hunters, Uncle Howard, Johnny C., and a fellow I didn't know, named Bob, had arrived the day before and had the campsite completely set-up. All we had to do was unload our gear and join them.

Bob had his own tent. Uncle Howard and Johnny C. were bunking together, and Pop and I were going to be in the third tent. The fourth was for mom and dad when they came up for the weekend. Our water supply for the week was a natural spring a short ways from camp, and our bathroom was whichever tree you found most comfortable – on the down-slope side of the camp of course.

We didn't have a lot to unload; a couple sleeping bags, a suitcase of clothes for me, a duffel bag for Pop, our guns, (mine was a Model 94 Winchester 30-30), a medium-size storage case of camping and hunting gear, a box of groceries we picked up on the way, and a smaller "special" box Pop had gone into a store by himself to get.

The guys had rigged a camp-stand for the rifles, which was really just a couple poles driven in the ground at the edge of the common area, with another pole lashed to them horizontally to lean the rifles against. This was just for day-time use. The guns went into the tents at night. We added ours to the collection of rifles already there, and tossed our personal gear in the tent.

I was the only kid in camp.

Pop introduced me to "Bob", but he was a stranger to me, and sort of a loner the rest of the week. I think Uncle Howard only invited him because most of the camping gear was his.

Johnny C. was going to do most of the cooking that week, so he took the box of groceries from Pop and added them to the chuckbox and coolers near the campfire in his camp kitchen area.

Uncle Howard was family of course, and a lot like Pop Cliff – upfront and independent. He would quickly let you know where you stood too. And also like Pop, he chewed. Between those two, it seemed like the official family sport was spitting tobacco juice. On my feet! It was going to be a long week for me.

Johnny C. was another thing altogether – what most people describe as a "character". Thin as a rail, but tough and wiry, good natured, and with a story, or something to say about everything. I'm pretty sure he was older than Pop or Uncle Howard, but I liked him and had a blast whenever he was around. He could shoot a rifle better than anyone I had ever seen, even Pop Cliff, and that was saying something.

I didn't know much else about him. Pop said he lived "up a holler" near Uncle Howard in Shawsville, and he never had a car, or much money, but every year he would have a brand new hunting rifle when he came to camp. Good expensive ones. This year he had a sharp looking 308 Marlin Lever-action, which he used to hit the center-seam of every tumbling empty propane tank I tossed in the air.

It was late afternoon, hunting was over for the day, (I think Bob was the only one that even went out that day anyway), so while the adults sorted things out and filled each other in on current events, I went exploring.

Besides the road/logging trail, there were a couple other well-worn trails leading away from camp. I knew one led up to the spring, I would find out that the other one led up to the top of the mountain tomorrow. For now, I was content to just explore the first hundred yards, or so, of each of them.

I was feeling like a "big kid", and it was still daylight – but, we were in bear country, and it was my first day – no need to take too many chances, right? Right. It had nothing to do with any of those sounds I heard, (or imagined), in the bushes on the trail up ahead.

When I got back to camp, Johnny C. was heating up a pot of pinto beans Mom-mom Grace had sent up with Pop. She also sent some of her famous dry cornbread, which was wrapped in foil and sitting in a big cast iron frying pan, edged up to the fire to warm. The corn bread I loved, the pinto beans I wouldn't touch. So I had corned bread and potted meat with crackers for dinner.

But just being there was worth it.

After dinner was cleaned up, (by now it was fairly dark), everyone pulled folding lawn chairs around the fire and the "man-talk" started.

I don't remember most of it, but I do remember two things – the story telling got a lot more serious after the whiskey bottle had been passed around a few times, and Pop's warnings to me about what to be on the look-out for tomorrow when we went up on the mountain.

The one I went to bed thinking about was his story about the dangers of a wounded bear.

Pop said there was nothing more dangerous than a wounded bear. It was so dangerous that you should never even think of shooting one unless you were positive you could get a kill shot.

He told me about a fellow he heard of last year that had shot one of the biggest black bears ever seen in these parts, matter of fact, he was pretty sure it happened right here on this mountain we were on. (see where he was going?)

Anyway, this fellow was hunting with a 30.06, a pretty good rifle for bear, if you had a kill shot. If not, you were just going to make that bear mad.

He was hunting from a pretty good "hide" on the edge of the power-line cut, right at the tree line.

It was close to dusk when he spotted the bear coming up the cut, right towards him, ambling along scrounging for berry bushes.

The hunter waited until he was about a hundred yards away, then took what should have been a good heart-shot – right through the breast bone. Except it wasn't, it was a shoulder-shot, only this fellow didn't see that. It knocked the bear down, and the fellow thought he had a clean kill, but just as he was getting up out of his hide, the bear got up too.

They locked eyes with each other, but they were two different sets of eyes – the bear's were full of pain and rage – looking straight at the cause of both, and the hunter's were eyes of fear – thinking Oh shit! (Pop's word, not mine).

He should have stood his ground and taken another shot, or two, but he didn't.

As that bear started lumbering up the cut, three-legged, – the wounded leg just dragging with each forward lunge, (at this point Pop took great pains to describe the “thump...scrape, thump...scrape” of the bear's front paw as it slammed the ground, followed by the dragging scrape of the wounded front leg being pulled forward by the lunge), the hunter turned and high-tailed it into the woods, thinking he could make it back to the logging trail faster than the bear could catch-up to him through the woods.

He thought wrong. He was right at the tree-line when he heard the thump-scape of that bear gaining ground on him. He had no choice but to go for a tree and hope the bear's wounded leg would keep him from being able to climb up after him.

He made a serious miscalculation. Tree-line trees don't grow tall, they grow wide. Easy to climb, but not far to go when you do.

He was up as high as he could go, maybe ten feet off the ground, when the bear found his tree. Rearing up on his hind legs, and with a full stretch of his good front paw, his first swipe got the hunter's boot, just above the ankle. With only one paw, he couldn't grab the boot, but his swipes were powerful enough that each one took a chunk out of the tree, and the fellow's boot. That's how they knew how big the bear was, from those gashes in the tree..

When they found the hunter the next day, he was still up that tree, with his shoulders over a fork of branches, wedged tight, with one under each arm-pit, and both feet ripped off just above the ankles. There was a large matted area at the base of the tree, with all the leaves flattened and bloody, where the bear had lain, bleeding, and chewing on those foot-filled boots, while that hunter bled to death hanging from those branches. His rifle was still hung over his shoulder.

“Damn fool city hunters!” Pop muttered.

With that, it was bedtime. We were going to head out at first-light, and I needed my rest. Or so Pop said. The last things I remember as I fell asleep were the image of that fellow with his feet ripped off, and the thought that his 30.06 was a bigger gun than my 30-30.

Pop was right, first-light was early. I wasn't sure my eyes were even open as we headed out the tree-line trail, both of us packing our rifles, a couple sandwiches, and water bottles. It would be dusk before we returned to camp.

I was fully awake shortly, and soaking in everything around me as we walked that logging trail to the top of the mountain. I wasn't feeling like a third-grader, I was feeling like an equal. I had a high-powered rifle slung over my shoulder, just like Pop, and I was walking a mountain trail scanning for bear-sign, just like Pop.

From there we headed north, along the crest, for about an hour before we came to the power-line. Looking down from a mountain top, a power-line cut is an awesome sight. It looks like a barber took a giant pair of buzz clippers and just shaved a swath of that mountain right down to the scalp. A brown band of undergrowth wedged between tall stands of timber, with huge power poles marching the power lines up, over, and back down the mountain.

Not thinking, I just nodded when Pop said, "Come on, let's see if we can find you a good spot down there on that left side."

To be continued...

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