

OUTDOORS

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OPENING DAY

Michigan pheasant hunting — then and now

By Len Jenkins
For GateHouse Media

It seemed like such a long night — Oct. 19, 1959. Why? Well back then, the next day, Oct. 20, was almost as sacred as Nov. 15 is today.

It was opening day of pheasant hunting in southern Michigan. What made this even more significant to me was that my father had sent a note to school and got me excused to go pheasant hunting, provided of course that I kept my grades up. Well, I did and I got the day off school, several boys did as well, because it was opening day of pheasant season.

There were so many birds. Those rowdy, raucous, noisy birds that exploded into the sky and flaunted their magnificent plumage and color only to provoke a boy to shoot too soon yet maintain his resolve to do better next time: it was exciting.

Well, on this particular opening day, my dad and I had driven out to my grandparents farm — a place I knew well and loved since I spent every summer of my childhood and adolescence there, helping as I could with the cows, the gardens and the orchard and always knowing that there were plenty of pheasants around.

One of my jobs was to set out and fill small cans with water so that the birds could get water to drink instead of picking and damaging the tomatoes for the moisture and sustenance they needed. I kept those pans filled. There were so many pheasants.

Well, that morning, we arrived early, as opening hour on opening day was 10 a.m. — not just at day-break. Busiq and Dziadzie, my loving Polish grandparents welcomed "their Lenusz" and invited him into the house for his favorite treat — freshly baked apple pie and hot coffee. As much as I loved Busiq's pie, I couldn't wait to get out into the field, but had to wait patiently until the magic hour arrived.

It finally did, and Dad and I had my farm dog



Dave Guertin of Hillsdale, Robert Bulk of Dearborn and David Hall of Strongsville, Ohio, had a productive day hunting pheasants at the Len Jenkins Hunt Club in Reading. The labs enjoyed the many birds they flushed and retrieved for their owners. COURTESY PHOTO

friend Brownie, a collie/chow/shepard mix, headed out. Shortly thereafter, a barrage of gunfire punctuated the morning peace. Then I understood why dad wouldn't let me go out early, since a shot prior to 10 a.m. would have meant we were technically "poaching" since opening time was 10 a.m.

Dad taught me to obey the game regulations. A shot prior to 10 a.m. would have attracted attention, and we would have been in violation, and that would have been obvious.

There seems to be so many hunters out on that day. There seemed to be cars and trucks parked along all the country roads. There was so much action. Pheasant hunting was a big deal in the 50s and 60s, unlike now.

Shortly after starting our hunt we had action. I know I shot that Ithica 16 gauge, but know in my heart I shot too soon and missed. It was kind of awkward for me. That gun was almost as long as I was tall, but I felt great carrying it.

Dad, however, shot and knocked down a monstrously beautiful rooster that fell hard to the ground but disappeared. Pheasants seemed so smart and cagey,

always able to find ways to survive.

Well, Brownie finally found this bird and actually killed him as the bird was wedged under a fallen log in his effort to hide and survive. At that point I realized that I could only enjoy hunting with a dog who could locate and "dispatch" fallen game, even though it might not be retrieved to hand. I knew then that dogs salvage wounded game and make the hunt more productive and enjoyable.

Dad shot another rooster, which we found quickly. I shot at a couple of birds, but I know I missed clearly and resolved at that point to become a better shot, especially if I can grow into that Ithica 16.

We didn't have hunter's safety classes then. You learned how to hunt and practice safety afield from your father and grandfather. It was the ultimate in individualized instruction and instilled a love of the sport and appreciation of the game. I think Dad taught me well, just as I hope I taught my own son well, who has become very skilled in waterfowl, upland game and deer hunting. The joy of hunting was passed on from one generation to

another. That was how it was done.

Well, those great days and years (the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s) are over and the pheasant population has plummeted. There reason is probably mostly by loss of habitat.

So .. what do you do if you want to hunt pheasants? You can hunt wild birds in Michigan during the legal season, except that populations generally are low. But pockets of significant numbers do exist, mainly in Michigan's thumb area.

You can arrange a trip to Iowa, the Dakota's or Nebraska but will have to bear the expense of travel, non-resident license fees, etc. You can go to Pelee Island in Canada for a hunt but you will also bear expenses. You can also enjoy wonderful pheasant hunting on one of Michigan's licensed shooting preserves, which also offers a very long season (Aug. 15 to April 30).

This could provide a lot of sport. You'll love it! It's the next best thing I can think of to the "good old days" of the 50s, 60s and 70s. If you really want to enrich your trip, take your sons and daughters with you. Chances are you'll have a wonderful bonding experience that both you and your family will find exciting, exhilarating and memorable.

It's worth it. The youth will remember the day just as I have remembered that special day with my Dad in 1957.

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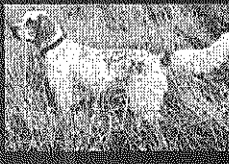
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