

The Four-Seven ranch in southwestern Montana was isolated enough that the occasional visitor was greeted with genial curiosity. The exception to this sagebrush diplomacy was poachers. Each fall, as deer and elk season approached, Grandpa Willis Jones directed us to put up a sign where Sage Creek Road made a 90-degree right turn up valley. My artistic stepdad Bill hand-painted the message across a four-by-eight-foot sheet of heavy plywood: "Attention hunters. Stop here at ranch house [arrow pointed left to our house] to ask about hunting on Four-Seven ranchlands. Violators will be forced to do business with Mr. Winchester."

The sign was lashed to posts at either end. Grandma Erna thought it was too subtle. "What if they don't know what that Winchester part means?"

Grandpa grunted. "They'll know," he added with a sideways grin. "If they don't know and they trespass I'll introduce them."

One day in September, days before opening day of big game season, Grandpa asked me to join him to drive our foothills lands on upper Sage Creek. The miserable excuse for roads trundled up the spiny ridges and hobbled through deep washes. Occasionally the four-wheel drive pickup would get stuck and my job was to grab a shovel from the truck bed and help dig us out. We checked the first two huge pastures and pulled up to the gate of the third. Grandpa pointed to fresh tire tracks and the barbed-wire gate sloppily closed.

"Someone's in here. Must be dudes 'cause they don't care about closing the gate proper." I stifled a shudder. Who knew what we might find up there.

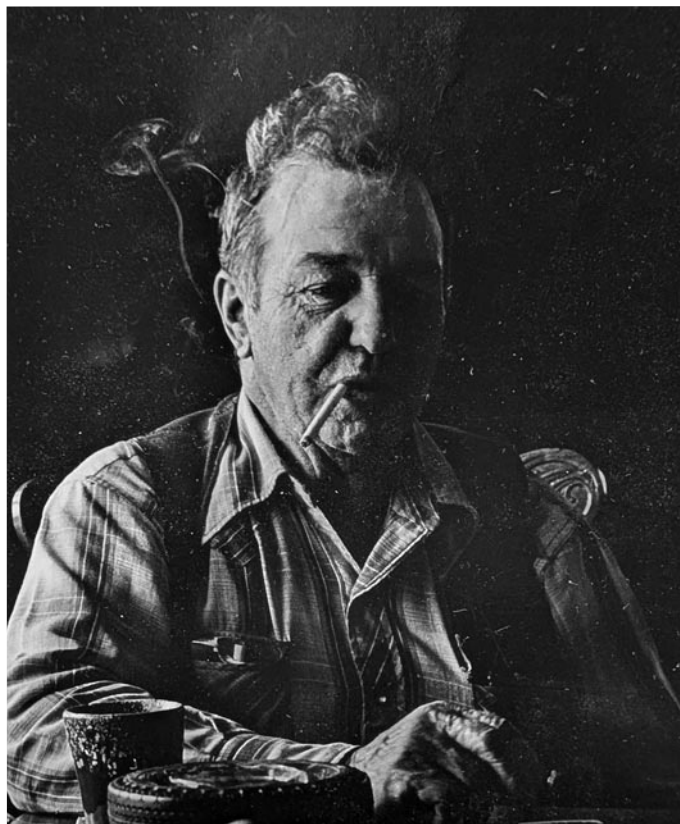
We turned out the four-wheel drive hubs and Grandpa asked me to drive so he could ride shotgun. It actually was a 30:30 saddle carbine he extracted from a rack behind the seat. He held the rifle upright between his knees. Because the road was steep and rutted, I shifted the Ford into granny gear and the pickup groaned into the steep ascent.

We topped out at the first saddle in the hilly topography. Grandpa fished binoculars

Educating the Poachers

Violators will be forced to do business with Mr. Winchester.

By Terrill L. Shorb



Grandpa Willis ran the Four-Seven Ranch and didn't care if innocent hunters knew what "that Winchester part" meant. This photo was taken in 1970. He taught those wanderers pretty quick. OPPOSITE: Winter feeding on the ranch.

from beneath the seat and through an open window glassed the terrain, tracing the wispy track of road up across the brow of a higher hill to where it disappeared from sight. "Up there," he pointed. Onward the truck growled.

"Okay, shut 'er off here," he instructed, as we bounced to within a dozen yards of where the road ducked down out of view.

We cautiously walked to the edge of the ridge. Below and just shy of the next wash was a four-wheel drive truck. Two men hunched over a deer carcass. Grandpa asked me to hold the rifle while he focused the field glasses. "Sonofabitch. Pardon my French." He said the men had shot a good-sized buck and were sawing off the antlers. I knew that

would not stand.

"Back the truck up here so it's facing home. You watch with the glasses and if they get the jump on me, you head home and call the Sheriff. Okay?"

Grandpa must've seen the fear in my eyes.

"Ah, don't worry. These dudes only want the horns. I'm gonna remind them they gotta take the whole deer."

"But..."

I scarcely saw the movement when he cocked the lever of the rifle and aimed it away from us. He started to walk away, stopped, said over his shoulder. "It's them guys you ought to worry about."

I re-parked the truck as instructed and leaned against its grill, binoculars tight against my eyes. Grandpa walked with the rifle held behind him. He was almost upon them when the men saw him and jumped back from the dead buck. One of them held the sawed-off antlers. The day was clear enough I could see the expressions which were smiling at first. Both men waved as if to leave, one clutching the severed antlers. Grandpa's back was to me and suddenly the rifle was clutched in his right hand, hip level, pointed vaguely in the men's direction. They backed up and one dropped the antlers. Grandpa now moved to lean against their pickup, likely because he knew that's where their firearms were. The rifle arched sideways, toward the downed buck, back toward the

men. I could tell Grandpa was saying something and the men simultaneously raised their hands up and outwards in a pleading gesture. I wondered if they were pleading for their lives.

Nearly an hour later Grandpa walked slowly back up the hill toward me. He kept looking back, as if to assure himself he wouldn't be shot in the back. All I could tell is the two men had dressed and loaded the buck in the back of their truck and now sat on its running board, watching Grandpa.

"Okay, let's go home." He set something in the middle of the road on a big, flat rock.

"What's that?"

"Keys to their rig." He raised a hand to

indicate he was catching his breath. “You drive, I’ll talk.”

I kept the truck in granny gear so it wouldn’t race forward and the Ford protested in a growly voice and we eased downhill toward the valley floor.” Grandpa smoked a Pall Mall, eased his Stetson back on his head.

“Well, those ole boys are from one of those auto states—maybe Michigan. They said they saved up all year so they could bag a big buck in Montana. They been cruising our roads a few days and staked out this area because they saw some bucks cross from the creek and head up this way.”

He exhaled blue smoke out the side window. “So they had the horns cut off. It was a nice four-point buck. When I walked up they said they came up the road in the dark and missed our sign about asking permission.” Grandpa chuckled. “I commented how we placed it so headlights lit it up before you make the turn. One of the guys says they musta been looking at the other side, the creek side, for deer.”

Grandpa finished his cigarette, crushed it in the truck ashtray, already overflowing with butts. He lit another. “So now they’re gonna leave with the horns and I say, ‘Ain’t you forgetting something?’ They look at me like I’m confused.”

“Nah, we got the antlers.”

Grandpa shakes his head, exhales a stream of smoke. “You got that whole buck here. We don’t believe in wasting anything on the ranch.”

“But we ain’t ever...”

The other guy cut in: “We only saw off horns. We never take the meat. We don’t know how.”

Grandpa laughed, a gentle chugging laugh. “I says, ‘Well this is your lucky day. I’m gonna show you how to field dress a deer and do it right.’ They started jawing on about how they got to go and so I swing ole Betsy up so they could get a good view of the business end.”

Grandpa said both their hands flew up like they were under arrest. “I told ’em, ‘I ain’t interested in turning you over to the Game Warden, though I probably should. You just follow my directions and I’ll get you through the process. Keys in the ignition?’”

“Yeah.”

“I’m gonna hang onto those until everything here’s done and I get back up the hill to

my rig.” Grandpa said he noticed their rifles were racked behind the seat so he got the key, locked both doors, told them they would find the keys at the top of the hill in the middle of the road. He laughed and coughed. “They started to complain and I let ole Betsy’s muzzle rise in their direction and they got quiet again.”

I held tightly onto the jouncing wheel as we got to the lower stretch of the two-track and approached the main road. “Did you make them gut the deer and everything?”

“Hell yes. They was complaining and making funny faces as I showed them how. Everything from cutting out the rut sacks on the hocks to turning the carcass face downhill to drain the blood. When they finally got the deer open and the guts spilled out, the one



guy, well I thought he was gonna faint.”

Another cigarette was enlisted to finish the story. “I showed them how to separate out the liver and heart and asked if they had a bag for them and they said all they got was a cooler with beer.”

“Ice in it?”

“Yup.”

“Wrap the organ meat in your pretty shirt,” I told the one guy.

“But this is a fifty-dollar shirt!”

“Well, it’ll honorably serve the organs that served the buck so well.” Grandpa said the guy seemed almost weepy when he lay the liver and heart on the expensive shirt. “Now you can put that in the cooler and load up the buck.”

We stopped at the gate and I shut off the engine so Grandpa could finish the telling.

“They said they didn’t have a way to get the meat back home so I told them they could donate it to charity. I said, ‘You stop at the Dell Mercantile and ask Herb for the name of the person who can handle that. I’ve got your license number and I’ll ask Herb to make sure you followed through. Otherwise, I’m giving your names to the Game Warden and I’ll press charges of you trespassing on the ranch.’”

Another cigarette. A gruff chuckle. “They was gonna protest again but ole Betsy kept raising her muzzle like a bird dog sniffing in their direction so they agreed right quick.”

Grandpa grinned. “I made sure they loaded the buck into the back of the truck

and shook the keys in my hand and reminded them they could pick them up at the top of the hill. I checked to make sure the doors was locked so they couldn’t sneak in and get a rifle.”

I prepared to get out and open the gate. “Wow, Grandpa, you’re like one of those guys out of the Old West. That was brave!”

He waved off the compliment. “Can’t stand to see a good animal wasted like that. Maybe those two honyonks’ll think twice before they do that again.” He paused, blew a streamer of blue smoke out the window and said with a sideways smirk, “Least out here in the Wild, Wild West.” ■

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