*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**First buck still remembered four decades later**

The thermometer read in the single digits and 3 inches of snow had fallen the previous day. It was Nov. 19, 1978 — the second day of Wisconsin’s gun-deer hunting season.

It was my third season of hunting deer and I had yet to shoot a buck. In my first year, I had a nice buck lined up but the old military .30 carbine that I was using jammed. All my cousins had gotten bucks but I was beginning to think maybe hunting wasn’t for me.

I had been skunked opening morning and was a little reluctant to crawl from under the warm blankets to face the cold weather. But I summoned the courage to head into the woods just as dawn was breaking.

The previous day, my dad had gotten his usual opening-day buck from his deer stand. He was busy with chores, so I thought I’d sit in his stand for a while with hopes of seeing something.

I didn’t need to wait long; the deer were moving. At about 7:30 a.m., I spotted a spike-buck with curved antlers. My heart was pounding as I carefully lined up the crosshairs of the scope on the new 30-06 rifle Dad bought for me. I breathed out and squeezed the trigger.

The buck jumped and started running, but he collapsed after about 30 yards. It was a clean kill shot through the heart.

I field-dressed the deer the way Dad taught me. It wasn’t pretty but I did the job. I was just finishing when Dad walked down the hill.

“You got one,” he said in his matter-of-fact style.

“It’s not that big,” I replied, mentally comparing the single antlers to the 8-pointer he had shot the previous morning.

“No, it’s a nice one,” he said with a smile.

A load was lifted from my shoulders. I was no longer the buck-fever kid who couldn’t shoot. As I stood there with my father, a little less than a month removed from my 15th birthday, I felt like a man. It wasn’t the thrill of the kill but the sense that I belonged.

Four generations of Hardies have hunted this farm. Thirty years ago, I wrote a column about my grandfather and his deer stand that we simply called “Grandpa’s Stand.” He had an old cook stove in his stand. It was the perfect place to stop to warm ourselves, toast a sandwich and swap a few stories. Grandpa had an old knife he used to butter *lefse* — a special treat. He stabbed the knife into the side of one of the logs of his stand when he wasn’t using it.

A severe windstorm in 1998 dramatically altered the woods on our farm and also destroyed Grandpa’s Stand. A few years later, I was walking through that valley one hunting season when I sat down where his stand once was. As I was reminiscing I suddenly thought about that old knife.

I looked down and there it was — Grandpa’s knife. It was at least a dozen years since he had last used it. My throat tightened a bit as I picked up the knife and put it in my backpack — right next to the thermos that oncer was his. I closed my eyes and could almost feel him next to me — with a big smile and a twinkle in his eye.

I still have the knife and his thermos, which goes with me into the woods every year. In Grandpa’s honor, I also hunt over an open fire — a great way to keep warm and to cover my scent.

This year will mark my 44th season of deer hunting. I don’t remember the specifics of every season, but I’ll never forget shooting my first buck. I’ll also treasure the moment I was with my son, Ross, when he shot his first buck.

Good luck and safe hunting to everyone in the woods this year. I’m sure Grandpa also will be there — probably buttering a piece of *lefse*.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at*[*chardie1963@gmail.com*](mailto:chardie1963@gmail.com)*.*