Natural-Born Proud

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The Pit River flowed out of a reservoir somewhere up above Adin and meandered its way south and west down through Big Valley and across the Cascades before dumping into Shasta Lake over by Redding. About twelve miles east of Fall River Mills, it made a sharp turn to the west and flowed deep and wide toward the little mill town. There were a few trout and a lot of suckers in it, but we were mainly interested in California Pike—slender, three- to four-pound fish that fought like demons. We set up light camp at the river bend. Once we got situated, we got after the pike with lures and spinners.

Since we arrived at our spot a little before noon, I knew we’d have time to set up camp, fish or fool around, and shoot before the day was over. Once we had fished a little and had a bite to eat, it was time to get the guns out. All of us had already shot our guns, some more than others, but this would be our last target practice before the hunt. My Old Man was never one to take target shooting lightly. It had to be done the right way all the time. And it always had to be done before season. He’d say, “Why would ya wanta take target practice at the thing you tryin to kill? That don’t make no sense to me.”

Willis and Smitty piled up two four- or five-foot mounds of the soft earth of the river bottom. They were high enough for us not to shoot over and thick enough to stop a rifle bullet. We positioned five-inch bullseyes on the sides of the mounds by poking little sticks through the corners of the paper. Then we paced off a hundred yards. The Old Man said we didn’t need to sight in at a range greater than a hundred yards because if we didn’t hit a deer
within that range, our chances of hitting him at all weren’t worth a plugged nickel.

All of us shot, two at a time, from the same distance, but we had individual targets. And we all shot from the same positions—propped on the truck’s hood, standing, sitting, kneeling on one knee and lying prone on the ground. We fired three shots from each position, trying to get them into as tight a pattern as we could.

The first few rounds were startling because the explosions from our rifles were so loud. Their concussion filled the air around us and crashed off across the prairie, receding like sharp thunder claps. By the time everyone had fired several shots, I could distinguish the sound each gun made—the smaller guns cracked, the larger ones boomed. The smell of gun powder hung over us as we fired, and after the first few shots, my ears rang the whole time.

The Old Man and Smitty went first to give the rest of us something to aim for. The Old Man never did much cooking or other work around camp, but, by God, he could shoot a rifle. He liked shooting from one knee best, but in every position he put all three shots within the bullseye. Competing with the Old Man, Smitty called up his military experience and also put all his shots inside the bullseye, and then bragged about how practicing to shoot gooks would help him get his buck. He said he didn’t care which position he shot from; he could hit from all of them. When Bub’s and my turns came, the Old Man reminded us of what he had taught us before.

“Shoot with both eyes open, an don’t squint. Look straight down the barrel through your sights at your target. Take in a deep breath, let out half of it an hold the rest, then squeeze the trigger. Don’t pull it, ’cause if you do, you’ll miss every time. If you squeeze the trigger right, you won’t know when the gun’s gonna go off, but you’ll hit your target. An don’t worry about recoil. Don’t flinch. All these big guns kick, but if you wrap your forearm through the sling an hold the grips tight, you can stand the kick. Besides, by the time you feel the kick, your bullet’s already gone.”

Bub did better than I did, putting two out of three shots in the target in all of the positions. I put all three in while propped on the
truck, and sitting, but I put in only two kneeling and lying down, and only one standing.

“You’re pulling your trigger instead of squeezing it like Dad told us to do,” Bub told me. Damn him. He needled me every chance he got.

“Shut up and mind your own bananas,” I told him.

Unca Billy put about half of his shots in the target, and Willis did the same. Seeming to forget his buck fever during the bear episode, Unca Billy claimed he’d shoot better at a live target. He said, “I may not hit these paper targets too good, but I bound ya I’ll git my buck if I git a chance. Don’t worry ’bout me.” Willis looked embarrassed and allowed as how he was “kinda nervous” that day, referring back to his crying jag on the White Horse road.

Shooting the guns was fun. Everyone seemed to let go of some of the tension of the previous couple of days. Smitty joked and played with Bub and me, and though I still hadn’t forgotten my earlier feelings, I enjoyed myself.

Poor Deke, however, was in trouble. He couldn’t come near the bullseye. He never had been a great shot, but only some of his shots even hit the paper his targets were on. The rest kicked up dirt when they hit the mounds. At first, the Old Man and Smitty tried to coach him, but as he got more and more frustrated, we started thinking something actually might be wrong with his gun, not just his shooting. When neither the Old Man nor Smitty could hit with Deke’s gun, the question was settled.

“I told you it wasn’t me,” Deke declared, feeling vindicated. “Sumpn’s wrong with this lousy gun.”

A military .30-06 bought out at Fort Ord, Deke’s gun still had a heavy wooden stock running from the shoulder plate to the end of the barrel when he got it home during the spring before the hunt, so it looked like a tree limb with a shank of pipe buried in it. During the summer, a guy in Monterey put a sports stock on it, then Deke bought himself a Weaver scope from Sears in Salinas. My old man tried to get him to have a gunsmith mount the sight, which was fairly delicate work, but Deke refused, apparently thinking that being a master carpenter qualified him in gunsmithing too.
“Naw, Doc. All thas gon do is cos me twenty-five dollars for him to do what I can do myself.” So after drilling and tapping the barrel, he mounted the scope himself. The result was that he couldn’t hit shit with it.

Deke had been a self-reliant guy all his life. Mom called it “independent” and liked him for it. In fact, I think that quality may have been a large part of why he and my dad were such good friends. The Old Man’s pride and Deke’s independence weren’t altogether different from each other. Deke didn’t think there was much he couldn’t do, and his wife Susie claimed he was so stubborn that he’d argue with a sign board. He didn’t believe in buying things on credit, and he always carried his carpenter’s tool box in the trunk of his car. More than once I had heard him tell about how he had started his life in Texas as the fourth one down in a farm family of thirteen children. They had lived comfortably enough through the Depression because they were able to feed and take care of themselves off their land.

When he was fourteen and nearly as big as he ever got to be, he ran away from home, hoboed his way to Houston and did odd jobs to support himself. It was there that he took up the carpenter’s trade and got so good at it that he could frame in doors and windows without using a square. He could simply look at a line of studs and tell if it was straight. Unlike most people, who run away from things, Deke had run to something, his craft. And craft became a large part of who he was.

After he married Susie and got saved, he moved her to California to make war money and get away from her huge, excessively needy family. They never had any children themselves. He was always in demand as a carpenter, and buildings he had raised were spread out all over the Monterey Peninsula.

But his skills and independence did him no good at Pit River. Unless he got help from someone else, his chances of killing a deer were slim and none, as Unca Billy told him. There was a good gunsmith in Fall River Mills, so after fussing and fuming and using pliers and a screwdriver to mess around with the gun some more himself, Deke finally broke down and decided to take the gun to him to be bore-sighted.