

*Continued from page 16*

then glanced up.

"You know, most people don't realize how hard this is."

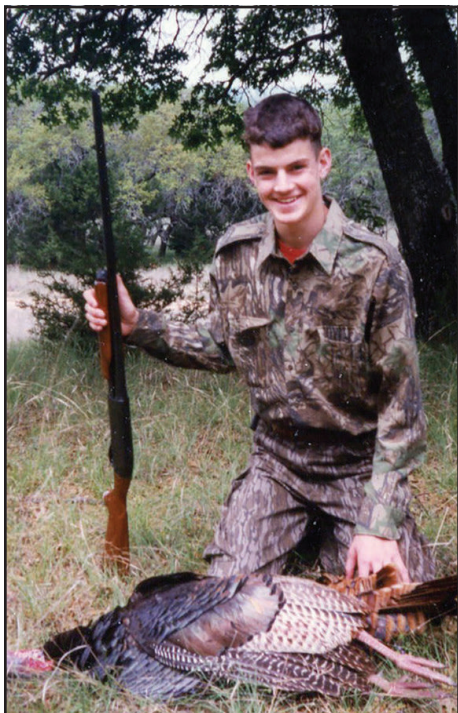
Lee seemed delighted, but mildly stunned, scarcely believing that he had finally become predator enough to use a bow to take a deer on its own terms.

As for myself, I couldn't quit grinning...

The very next spring, one fine April morning before daylight, my youngest son Reed - fourteen - followed as I led the way down into the pecan lined creek which flowed through the ranch. We had heard several gobblers as they flew to roost the evening before and hoped to entice one into Reed's shotgun range.

Settling into a thicket as the eastern sky turned pink, I used a slate call and wooden striker to chirp like a hen. Multiple gobbles instantly followed from the trees two hundred yards away.

I occasionally chirped or purred as the sun slowly pushed back the night, always prompting those gobblers in reply. Finally, we heard a great deal of flapping and muttering as they flew down from their roost. We could see the gobblers then, four



of them, headed our way. The largest had a beard so long it was bent from dragging the ground.

"It's on now," I whispered, and could feel Reed shudder beside me.

Another chirp from my call brought gobblers all around, and they headed straight toward us. But when fifty yards away, I was depressed to hear a real hen clucking. Sure enough, she walked out of the brush between us and the gobblers, and all four started strutting. They would still gobble to my call but slowly followed the hen off into the distance and out of sight.

"Now, that was cool." Reed whispered when they were gone.

"Yeah, what a perfect morning."

We began walking and calling, hoping to catch a lone gobbler, and managed to elicit an occasional distant gobble but none that would come to us. We walked for a couple of miles over the next few hours. Finally, near noon, not hearing so much as a hen in a long while, we headed back.

When within sight of camp, I said quietly, "Let's try one last time."

Reed ducked into some low cedar trees. I pulled out my trusty

call, gave one chirp, and a booming gobble sounded from less than a hundred yards away. Another chirp and he answered again, at half the distance. And then he was right in front of us, ten yards away, strutting and drumming. I gave a tiny nod and Reed slowly - and I do not misuse the word - eased his 20 gauge to his shoulder.

I jumped at his shot, and the gobbler rolled.

Reed ran forward, shotgun ready, but the turkey was down for good. As we examined the mature bird, we both noticed his bent eleven inch beard.

I said, "This is either that biggest gobbler we saw at daylight or his twin."

A grin threatened to split Reed's face...

Today, twenty years later, my four grandkids are taking the first steps down a similar

trail. They have all grown up visiting us here at the ranch, of course, complete with watching their dads shoot, hunt, field dress the animals, and process the meat. Family ties and traditions are interwoven throughout the proceedings, and many a ranch meal has featured wild game.

The grandkids are just now getting old enough to hunt too.

The oldest, nine year old Kaylie, started hunting with her dad, Reed. After sitting out multiple evenings and having several close encounters, she finally placed a precise hole in a nice buck. Arriving to pick them up, I shared in the moment she found the deer. Ritually smearing a little of the buck's blood across both of her cheeks, I welcomed her into a long line of hunters stretching back to her 500th grandfather. I'll never forget her smile. Or her dad's.

When the other three grandkids have a similar crystal memory of hunting with their fathers - like my childhood elk hunt with my dad - I'll consider my link in the chain to be complete, and the torch will have passed.

