Written by Carol Pomeday
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Holtslander clan hunts together, emphasizing safety, respect for animal

For some hunters, deer camp is a male bonding experience, a rite of passage that turns boys into men.

For others, like the Holtslander clan in Port Washington, it is a family event with girls learning to shoot deer and other game alongside the boys.

Thanksgiving is spent at deer camp.

Ron and Pat Holtslander expect about 15 people to join them at their cabin on Parker Lake in Adams County and hunt on 126 acres of nearby woodland they bought 16 years ago that is prime habitat for deer and other wildlife.

Their son Ron II, his wife Lisa, grandson Ron III, 18, and granddaughter Amanda, 16, will be there. Daughter Linda Johnson, her husband Eric, grandson Clinton Templemann II and great-grandson Clinton III will join them from Princeton.

Granddaughter Denyelle Kosel, her husband John and great-granddaughter

Kiana, 4, will come. Grandson Gordon Gatzke wouldn't miss it for anything, and several cousins are also expected.

The hunters will perch in deer stands — some quite elaborate — from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. the nine days of the gun season, hoping a deer will come within range of their rifles.

The patriarch has the fanciest deer stand with a futon, table and chairs.

Pat, who has bagged deer, ducks and geese, hung up her gun several years ago and now takes care of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Amanda went hunting a couple times, but never fired a shot and has no desire to do so. She stays behind now to help her grandmother, who also prepares meals for the hungry hunters.

Pat doesn't do all the cooking. Each hunter makes his or her speciality and brings it to deer camp.

"We always have venison steak and venison stew," Ron Sr. said.

If they get a deer, they fry the tender back straps for steak and eggs the next morning.

"But it's not about getting a deer," Ron III said. "It's about being with family and having a good time."

"It's the only time of the year we get the whole family together for longer than 24 hours," his father added. "It's never been a big party or drinking thing."

Much of the night is spent rehashing old stories, especially embarrassing ones, Lisa said.

"If you do something stupid, you will hear about year after year," she said. "No one will let you forget."

The best stories are written down on a tablecloth during deer camp. Pat embroiders over the writing throughout the year so it's ready for the Thanksgiving table. A plastic sheet protects the cloth, but allows those at the table to relive the memories.

Following the gun season, the women and children return home, but the men stay for the black powder gun season.

“It’s kind of a male bonding thing, but it’s also work camp,” Ron II said.

While deer camp draws everyone to the cabin for the week, Pat and Ron Sr. and other family members are at the cabin almost every weekend from September to January for various hunting seasons. The men are proficient bow hunters, but the girls said they prefer
using rifles or pistols.

Perhaps because he grew up in an orphanage and did not have a father to teach him to hunt, Ron Sr. has been a mentor in the field for his children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. He loves nothing better than being surrounded by his family in the woods.

“A farmer I was working for taught me to hunt when I was 15. He gave me this old gun and I got my first deer. I remember it like it was yesterday,” said Ron Sr., who hasn’t missed a season since and is as proficient with a bow and arrow as he is with a rifle.

Even his marriage to Pat in 1952 two weeks before hunting season didn’t interfere. He left his bride at home while he went hunting with the guys.

After their three children were born, Pat decided to learn to hunt.

“I got tired of staying home alone so I decided to take the kids and go with them,” she said.

Ron Sr. took his son with him to the woods when the boy was only 5.

“He would sit me on a rock and I did not move,” Ron II said. “By doing that, I learned what the deer do, what they eat, how they act.”

He stayed on the rock all but the first time, his father said.

“I told him to stay put. I must have walked two miles into the woods. When I turned around, there he was,” Ron Sr. said.

“That taught me to always look behind me. He could have fallen behind and got lost. He never did that again.”

When Ron II was 12, his father taught him to use a gun.

“Mentoring should happen before you go hunting with a gun,” Ron Sr. said. “That’s how I did it with all my kids.”

His daughters Linda and Sandy learned the same way and they are avid hunters. This will be the first year Sandy will not join them. She moved to Colorado, where she’s hunting elk and moose as well as deer.

Lisa learned to hunt when she was dating her husband.

“Sandy said, ‘If you want to stick around him, you better learn to use a gun,’ so I learned,” Lisa said. “I never touched a gun until I married him. I was against hunting. I thought it was cruel to kill animals.”

Although she understands the deer herd must be culled to keep it healthy and prevent starvation, she still feels sad when she kills an animal.

"The first time, I was really excited when I got the deer in my sights and proud because I got it, but when I got home I was depressed and weepy for several days — How could I do that to such a beautiful animal?” Lisa said.

Pat said she cried whenever she shot a deer.

If there isn’t remorse, you’re not a good hunter,” Ron Sr. said.

Denyelle got her first deer when she was 12. She felt her father, who had died several years earlier and was an avid hunter, was with her.

“After I shot it, it started to snow and there was no breeze. I felt very peaceful,” she said. “I didn’t get a lot of time to hunt with my dad, but he was hunting with me that day.”

Lisa, Linda and Denyelle enrolled in a hunter safety course. They would correct the men when they did something unsafe.

That prompted the guys to take the course and eventually become hunter safety instructors. The three Rons and Gatzke teach classes at the Saukville Rifle and Gun Club.

“We got a lot from hunter safety, and we thought we should give back,” Gatzke said.

“We want to make everybody else’s hunting experience better and safer. They can learn from our experience and mistakes rather than their own,” Ron II said.

“Hunting can be the most wonderful thing in the world and, in a split second, it can be the most devastating.”

Pat Holtslander gathered her recipes into a cookbook that her children published for her 75th birthday. “Grandma Pat’s Palate Pleasing Fish and Wild Game Recipes” can be purchased by calling Holtslander at 284-4780 or on the Web site www.AuthorHouse.com.

Among those who will be at the Holtslander deer camp are (front row, from left) Ron Holtslander Sr., Gordon Gatzke, Pat Holtslander, Denyelle Kosel holding her prized 9-point buck head, (standing) Ron II, Ron III, Amanda and Lisa Holtslander.

Photo by Sam Arendt