

## Idaho, 2004

# Two Bulls, Elvis, (A Big Bear,) Seven Wolves, Goodbye to Daddy, Harl Merlin White, 1918 - 2004 and a parking brake for a mule.

*By Harlan L. White, D.M.D.*

This was a tough year for me and my family. My family had six hunters before me, five brothers of my dad's. This year we lost my last uncle, my mom's brother Orval Oliver, and recently my dad. My dad had to go into the hospital on Christmas Eve, 2003, and the doctor told him that his failing heart might last from two days to two weeks or two months at the most. When asked if he wanted to go to an advanced care rest home facility, he said no and asked if I would take him home, back to his ranch and the land he loved for the remainder of his time. I said yes and hauled him home in my pickup when the hospital told us they had no ambulance drivers available for a week.

My mother and my two sisters and my good brother-in-law Dennis cared for my dad at home until his death on January 15, 2004. I was there with him until his last breath.

He was the finest man I have ever known. His side of the family was Osage Indian, Buffalo hunters from Oklahoma. His most distant known relative and mine was an Osage Chief named Star That Travels, (the closest description the tribe could give a shooting star) and in later life he became Chief Bacon Rind. He is prominent in the Osage Museum in Pahasah, Oklahoma. (My first night at my favorite meadow I was treated to a brilliant shooting star which I took as a tribute to my dad and Star That Travels. Here is to dad and to the long line of Osage Indians in my heritage.)

Again this year I headed out alone taking two mules, my old favorite saddle mule, Katie and a new mule named Gizmo, that I bought to replace June Bug who died last year of complications from choking on something on our last trip. Stopping in Boise, Idaho, I visited my son and his wife and my one-year-old grandson and then headed out to camp.

Coming in two days later were six Sutches; brothers Steve, Darl, Gary and Ed and Steve's son Mike with his twelve-year-old son Josh. They were bringing nine more mules, including Joe, George, C.C., Mr. Ed, Smoke, Chris, Clyde, Bo and Rufus.

The two days waiting for the rest of the

group were interesting. I went to our campsite and checked on some grain that we had

grown pups. They were lolling around in a meadow below the trail and the pups were



*Mike and Josh with Josh's big bull. Josh is twelve years old.*

stored. It seems that a bear had found the grain which was in a plastic storage box hanging between two trees up ten feet high. He had apparently sub-contracted with a squirrel to get the grain and a squirrel hole was in the lower corner of the box and the bear had then used the box as a Piñata, bating it to get he grain to fall out for him and the co-conspirator squirrel to eat.

I was to ride out with the two mules to the trailhead to help the other hunters pack up and bring in the rest of our gear. On my way out I saw a litter of wolves. There was one large wolf, (most likely a female) and six half

chasing mice, jumping up above the grass to try to see them. Perhaps thanks to the wolves I did not see any elk calves with the elk I saw this year and that worries me for the long-term health of the elk herd.

We were late getting into camp after an uneventful pack trip and with no daylight left to set up the tents, we slept in the Starlight Hotel on the ground floor using saddle pads for mattresses and enjoying a goodnight's sleep. Since my sleeping bag was still up at my spike camp, I slept in the canvas bag that one of our tents was packed in. We spent the next day setting up the tents and cutting wood and resting the mules.

The first day of the season brought us one elk, a nice spike that Mike and Josh got early in the day.

A word about Josh, he was twelve years old, just by a week and passed his hunter safety test with a perfect score. He has won some elk calling contests and has benefited from an Idaho policy which allows out of state juvenile hunters to purchase an elk tag



*Bear sign on the grain box.*

and license for under twenty dollars. Thanks, Idaho Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Mike wanted Josh to shoot at this spike elk but he was unable to do so due to head high brush along the trail preventing Josh from seeing the elk so Mike made the shot. The elk was hung up and the quarters left until the next day to bring back to camp.

Day two was an exciting one and the excitement centered on the packing in of the spike from the first day. Mike, his son Josh and I went down to pack in the meat taking the mule Clyde to do the packing and riding Katie and George and Bo.

Since we got to the area early we split up to hunt a bit and I sat down a couple of hundred yards from the hanging elk quarters. I did about an hour of watching and cow calling watching for elk.

At one point I heard brush swishing and looked down below me on the hillside where a tall patch of wild Hickory brush obscured the view of the hillside. The brush was parting making it look like a submarine was going across the hillside. Then I saw a flash of blonde hair above the brush and was sure that a bull elk was about to come into view where the brush ended and the trail continued across an open grassy hillside. I got ready to shoot and waited for the big animal to appear. It did and took my breath away, making my heart pound enough that I was sure the animal would hear it.

The animal which appeared in all his glory was a full grown *Ursus Horribilus*, the American Grizzly Bear, not more than a hundred yards away with no cubs, it was likely a male since no cubs were present. He looked huge in the bright sunshine of the Idaho morning.

I have seen many Black bears and they give me a ho hum attitude, just one step above seeing a deer but below the excitement of seeing an elk. This guy was like seeing Elvis, he was the King and looked as big as a Volkswagen bug down there.

I spent a summer in Alaska surveying the McKinley Park boundaries and saw many grizzlies on a daily basis. This was definitely one of them up close and personal. He was huge, had a blonde hump on his back, was higher at the shoulder than at the rear and had a head as big as a basketball hoop. He gave no quarter and looked at me with disdain, swinging his shoulders in a swagger as he continued on his journey. I did not look at him with disdain knowing that he could cover the distance between us in

under five seconds, faster than an Olympic sprinter. I spent my time not looking for my camera but looking for my extra ammunition. This was very definitely no HO-HUM bear. I then went to find Mike and Josh and we went to the hanging elk.

Elvis had been there. He ate a complete backstrap, the choicest meat from the elk, chewed on the two hanging hindquarters and marked his territory with a large pile of scat. We loaded up the elk meat and headed to camp keeping a watchful eye for Elvis.

Once a person realizes that he is not really the top of the food chain he becomes a lot more watchful. After seeing Elvis, I no longer dismissed Katie's reluctance to approach a dark stump along the shady trail with my usual "It's okay girl, just a big stump not to worry." For the rest of the trip I said, "What is it girl? What do you see?" whenever she locked on to something nearby with her ears forward and staring with watchful eyes. I would pull my rifle from the scabbard and pay extra attention to each breaking limb or flying bird. Having the huge predator on the ridge certainly raised my interest in all that was around.



*Katie on the Slick Rock Trail. She scampered over this like a squirrel. Unshod animals only on this trail. Steel horseshoes slip instantly.*

The next day I had a close encounter with a big trophy bull elk and his herd of cows. I was leading Katie down the hillside off the trail in deep dark timber, a brushy hillside, when I heard elk moving ahead of us. I had been using Katie as an elk pacifier, using her breaking of limbs as a ruse making the elk think I was an elk and calling with a cow call every little ways. It worked and I was right in the middle of the herd.

I tied up Katie and proceeded on down the hill soon coming within forty yards of the bugling bull. It turned out he was bedded down behind a big windfall and I was able to locate him by another bugle. I tried to get to where I could see him better and bumped right into a bedded cow elk and

she instantly barked out a warning and the entire hillside erupted with running elk and the herd bull disappeared in one bound into the brush and was gone. Goodbye Mr. Elk, it was nice to see your horns and this time you won the contest. I will try again next year.



*Gizmo, my new mule. He knows he's pretty.*

Have you ever needed an emergency brake or parking brake on a mule? I found out I did with my new mule, Gizmo. My old saddle mule Katie and I had bonded long ago. Now she thinks of me as her lead herd member and if I drop her lead rope at any time, she is riveted to the ground, will eat grass and patiently wait until I pick it up. If I rattle some candy wrapper in my pocket, she runs to me to get an expected treat, her favorite being a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup.

Gizmo? He and I are just beginning to trust each other and I find him to be a fine saddle and pack mule with very few defects. I found one problem on this hunting trip. He is bonded to the other mules and if they are back at camp, he has a constant desire to return to them for safety and companionship. He has learned that if I am leading him he can quickly turn his head and jerk the lead rope out of my hand. Unless I can quickly grab it, he will turn and sprint back to camp.

This is not a problem if I am close to home or camp but the first episode occurred about a couple of miles from camp and I had to chase him all the way back. This could be a huge problem if he took off when I was five miles down in the deepest canyon and had my rifle and pack-sack on his saddle with my emergency fire starting materials. It could also be a major problem if we met the local grizzly bear and Gizmo headed back to camp without me carrying my rifle in the scabbard.

I remembered a bit of advice that Max Harsha had given in his book called, *The*

*Muleskinner's Bible.* He suggested making a hook to put on the end of the lead rope to snag on trailside brush, limbs and rocks to prevent the return of your saddle animal to camp without you. I had no metal hooks so I cut a branched alder limb with a nice forked limb and made myself a snag hook to stop the bad behavior of Gizmo.

I took him out for a photo opportunity a few hundred yards from camp. Dropping his lead rope to the ground with the new hook, I began to take his picture. He then turned to head back to camp and within twenty yards had snagged the hook on a trailside shrub. It instantly jerked him to a stop and I collected him. That simple emergency brake on the lead rope made my life a lot simpler on the trip and I used it on Gizmo for the remainder of the trip. So, thanks or the help, Max Harsha, your advice was excellent.

At one point on my ride I was at the Salmon River at an altitude of less than two thousand feet and camp was at eight thousand feet, more than a six-hour walk on foot back to camp. It was nice to have my mule escalator service locked down unable to go to camp without me.



*Gizmo's parking brake in use. It stopped him from going home without me.*

Now about Josh and his big bull. We saved the most excitement for the last day of our week long hunt. Some would say that it was beginner's luck. I say it was beginner's excellent preparation and training. It took his grandmother, Barbara, 39 years to kill a bull elk, an excellent six point in 1999. Josh was just barley twelve years old by a week when this season started but he had been on elk hunts and mule rides with us since he was old enough to walk. He had been shooting a lot with a .223 bolt-action rifle and was good with it. His step up to a .30-06 in the same brand of rifle was no big problem and he had won some cow calling contests. He had once ridden thirty miles mule back with us into the

head of the Selway River in Idaho without complaint spending ten hours in the saddle at age six. Josh was ready, all eighty pounds of him. He and his dad Mike left camp on foot on their last opportunity Friday morning with Mike saying that they were going out to get a bull. Two hours later they were walking the wide pack trail through the lodge poles and found themselves in the middle of an elk herd with a cow staring right at them. They became statues for several minutes until she resumed feeding and then moments later a huge six-point bull walked into view.

Instinctively Josh raised his rifle and shot twice at sixty yards range and his first elk hunt was history. He had done what many adults spend a lifetime trying to do. He killed a mature herd bull and have the trophy of a lifetime. He was not surprised that he was able to do well, he had trained and worked hard to do this and we had driven twelve hours and ridden another six hours by mule to get him into an area where big bulls are common away from the other hunters. It all worked out so well making his dad and the rest of the family and me very proud.

The next day we headed back to civilization in a snowstorm and made our way back to Oregon. Two weeks from then we were to go again for elk in Eastern Oregon at my old favorite spot at Desolation Creek. That will be another story.

So here is to Josh and the big whopper of a bull. Here's to Elvis and to all the Sutches. It was a very good year. Here is to my daddy and old Bacon Rind, the Star That Travels.

If life gets tedious and starts to get you down, go for a mule ride. Things always look better at three miles an hour and from

the saddle of a stout and willing mule.

Another note concerning this hunt: Our



*"Roll Over Rock". Notice mossy lichens now on bottom and clean rock on top.*

group names areas where we hunt after an interesting event that occurred there. For instance the area where Katie bucked me off at the elk carcass up by Annie Springs in 2001 we now refer to that as Rodeo Ridge. Now we have another place that we call Double Click Trail and it has a story about it. Seems that one of our hunters met a big trophy bull elk coming right up the pack trail and jumped off his mule to shoot. It was posing in the trail forty yards away, broadside and the hunter worked his bolt to put a live round in the chamber and pulled the trigger. Click. No shell in the chamber and the bull ran off unharmed. Second time this hunter has clicked at a big bull,

*Editors note: We want to thank Harlan for his articles on hunting in the wilderness. He shares with all of us an insight into another way of life that many of us will only be able to dream of. Thanks, Harlan.*



*Heading home.*

once with a broken firing pin. Hence, Double Click Trail.

There is another change in our area, a rock as big as a small horse that had been in place for thousands of years has rolled over. It had been beside our trail and now has been rolled over exposing a new white surface with no moss on it. We now call that area Rollover Rock. Our pack trail has had to detour around it and it was caused by a large yellow pine tree uprooting and taking weight off the rock allowing it to roll.

This was my first time ever to return home from a trip and not immediately phone my dad and tell him all about the trip so I will think about telling him all the story and hope that he hears it up there with the Cloud People.



*Salmon River Wilderness, Idaho 2004*