

SMALL HARVEST. BIG MEMORIES.

A father, a son, a borrowed blind in the twelve-degree Panhandle cold. And a seven-point buck that will never make the record books, except the one that counts.

BY DINK MURPHEY

MY SON BOBBY WAS FOURTEEN, and he and I had been after his first buck for a few years. The road there had been a good one. His first doe. A javelina. A few other Hill Country critters along the way. But now it was time. Time for the old rite of passage that fathers and sons have walked in the whitetail woods for as long as there have been fathers and sons and whitetails.

Just after Christmas an invitation came out of nowhere from my friend James, and it changed everything. Bobby was ready. I knew it. All the years of practice on the range and in the field, all the hard work, the preparation and the management were about to pay off. He had paid his dues.

The years leading up to it were full of good memories. We made a lot of runs to our Hill Country lease on the line between Bandera and Uvalde counties. It may be later in life before my boys appreciate a day of driving T-posts in 104-degree heat. But I believe they both learned the worth of time and elbow grease. Loading protein. Mixing mineral licks. Hauling corn. Keeping the feeders running.

Throw in six hours of highway between our house and the lease, and the wanting builds with every mile.

For two seasons I had listened to Bobby talk about his hunting friends. Buddies from school who had shot not only their first buck but a couple more. Now and then he would show me the pictures they posted to Instagram or sent him by text.

They were nice deer. Very nice. Most were cull bucks on the places where they were taken. Management deer. Big eight-pointers and bigger nine-pointers with solid mass. Deer any grown man would be proud to show his hunting compadres. And those weren't even the trophies that walked those properties.

THE LEASE

House Rules in the Hill Country

Where	Bandera–Uvalde county line, near Utopia
Since	Family-run, settled in 1885
Shooters	4½ years or older; never under 3½
Points	Eight or better
Spread	Antlers outside the ears
Culls	Does and bucks alike

Our lease is something to see. It is the most beautiful Texas Hill Country I have ever laid eyes on. The family that owns and runs the ranch settled the land in 1885, and they have been good stewards of what God gave them.

I have called other places God's country in my life. But this may be the land the good Lord smiles on most. It is that magnificent.

It sits within a few rifle shots of the town of Utopia, and the hills hold good, solid eight- and ten-point Hill Country deer. Hogs and the occasional exotic come as a bonus.

The rules of the lease are reasonable and built for sound management, with the usual cull requirements on does and bucks alike. Shooter bucks four and a half years or older, and no younger than three and a half. Eight points or better. Antlers outside the ears.

Bobby kept reminding me how many seasons we had gone without a trophy. I always shot back that it wasn't for lack of opportunity.



In the second rut I gave him the green light on a very nice four-and-a-half-year-old eight-pointer. Just before he squeezed, Bobby came up off the scope for a deep breath. He apologized and went back to the glass quickly. Not quickly enough. It was his first bout with buck fever. It would not be his last. The doe that buck was chasing ran off, and the buck went with her.

I have to own a second chance that went south. I like this lease, and I would rather not be asked to leave over a rookie mistake. So when a different eight-pointer stepped out, I hesitated to call him clear. By the time I decided he was all right, he had made himself invisible. Maybe he was chasing a doe. Maybe he caught a whiff of my coffee breath. Whatever the reason, he was gone. Over the hill, maybe. Or worse, over the old cedar and barbed-wire fence between our lease and the neighboring ranch. That fence divided hunters who were unequal in how they managed deer and equal in how bad they wanted a buck that season.

I did not know it then, but that same kind of inequality in deer management would open the door for Bobby's first buck. As much as I would have liked it to happen on our Hill Country lease, we were elated when James called. He asked us to join him, his son and another family at his ranch near Shamrock, Texas. It took me about four seconds to say yes.



No one has ever accused me of packing light or packing smart, least of all for hunting and fishing trips. This trip was no exception.

On earlier hunts with my boys I had made a point of carrying a Sako Forester chambered in .243. I wanted them to take their first buck with the same rifle I used on mine in Bosque County years ago. A rifle carried by their father and their grandfather and their great-grandfather.

But something made me reach for a different rifle this time. A no-frills Remington Model 700 in .30-06, blued steel and a walnut stock. The first rifle I could ever call my own. A gift from my father on my sixteenth birthday.

I had never used it much. I did not care for the old fixed-power Weaver scope that rode on it. Months before, though, I had bought my first Burris and mounted it on that sentimental old gun. It gave the rifle new life and left its character alone. I liked the

look. I liked what I saw through the new glass even more. And I took comfort knowing it had been sighted in recently and had not traveled since.

THE RIFLE

What Rode to the Panhandle

Rifle	Remington Model 700, blued & walnut
Caliber	.30-06 Springfield
Glass	Burris, replacing a fixed-power Weaver
History	A father's gift on a sixteenth birthday
The shot	About 100 yards, 12°F
The buck	Wheeler County seven-point

James was not only willing to put us in one of his blinds for a buck. His rules were liberal, to say the least.

If a Boone and Crockett buck walked out in front of that blind, we were to take him.

— THE INVITATION

His ranch is big. It straddles two counties, and it is big even by Texas standards. He has put a lot of time and money into quality deer management, and it has paid off, for him and for the neighbors too. Neighbors who had put little of their own into it.

James told us a neighboring farmer had been putting day hunters along the fence line they share, and those hunters were shooting at most anything that walked by. Then he finished his generous offer. If a Boone and Crockett buck walked out in front of that blind, we were to take him.

Now those were rules a man could get used to.



We bundled up against the twelve-degree Panhandle cold and walked out to the blind. It was not long before a nice little eight-pointer came into the open with two others behind him. Bobby and I agreed quickly on the biggest of the three, the one hanging farthest back. He stood about a hundred yards out,

but he would not give us the angle we wanted for a clean shot. Then he got jumpy and trotted off slow.

I told Bobby to take one of the two smaller bucks still standing there. He politely declined. He said he would wait for the big one to come back.

Was this my son? Showing that kind of patience?

I liked what I was hearing. And his patience paid. Before long the buck circled back, and Bobby was ready.

I leaned in and whispered. "I won't say another word. Take your time, and shoot when it feels right."

A few minutes passed.

Then the shot.

The buck did not drop where he stood. He ran off with the others. But every telltale sign of a hit was there. I said we ought to sit tight fifteen minutes or so before we went looking. Bobby could hardly sit still. After about ten I gave in, and we left the blind and walked to where the shot had found him.

Bobby picked up the blood trail first. I moved ahead and found it farther on. We had never rehearsed this. Never studied it. But we fell into a rhythm and took turns leapfrogging each other, finding it and losing it and finding it again.

"Here it is," I would say.

"Here it is again, Dad," he would answer, seconds later.

He let out one shout. Then he broke down and wept.

— THE TRAIL

It went on for what felt like forever and was probably five minutes. Then, with Bobby's head still down, I looked up and saw the deer lying ahead. I turned and watched my son. His head was still down. Still hunting the next drop of blood.

He looked up and saw me smiling. He must have known what that smile meant. He turned and peered

into the distance and saw his buck. He looked back at me. He let out one shout. Then he broke down and wept.

He wiped his eyes, and before he looked at the buck again, he wrapped his arms around me. A hug unlike any I have ever gotten from either of my boys. We walked up to the deer, and I stood back while Bobby looked him over. Another bear hug. High-fives. Words between us I honestly cannot remember well enough to put to paper.

He had done it. A beautiful, respectable seven-point.

I took his picture with my phone. He posed the way he had probably posed a hundred times in his mind. Only this time it was real.



On the drive home we planned a stop at Syracuse Meats. I was selfishly weighing more Buck Stick

Jerky against the jalapeño cheese links. Bobby had other things on his mind. He wanted a shoulder mount. I had been leaning toward a homemade European mount. Then Bobby reminded me of my first buck. A Bosque County basket buck that hangs on the wall of his room today. Shoulder mount and all.

It made me think. There is so much talk these days about the harvest, about the animal and the antlers, and too often it comes at the cost of the hunt itself. The real thing. The memory. That Wheeler County seven-point riding home in our truck was not the most impressive set of antlers ever taken. But I would not trade him or that day for anything in this world. Neither would Bobby.

All our time and hard work had paid off. In our family's record book he is a trophy. A memory for a lifetime, for a father and a son. ■

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PULL THE DOOR SHUT. LET'S RIDE.

