

My First Job



How did I get my first job? Nepotism, pure and simple. Ground squirrels dug tunnels that made a mess of the fields. Groundhogs, much larger cousins of the squirrels, were worse; digging holes big enough to trip and injure horses and cows, they could damage farm machinery as well. Both devoured crops, especially grain.

Granddad's farm had cattle, fields of grain and hay, and orchards; cherries were the main crop when I was a kid. What the rodents did to fields birds did to cherries, magpies and crows were the worst offenders. Dad had given me a .22 rifle and I did like hunting squirrels, so Granddad told me he'd pay me a dime for each squirrel, groundhog, magpie, or crow I killed.

Dad told me to hunt animals you needed to find a place they were likely to be and then wait patiently and quietly. His sage advice sounded logical, and I tried to follow it, but a preteen boy has limitations. Patience and quietness were beyond mine. I

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managed to bag a few squirrels but they weren't in as much danger as you might think.

Dad advised me to use a larger rifle for groundhogs. They were enough bigger that a .22 caliber bullet might only wound them, and while I enjoyed hunting I didn't want them to suffer. I would carry a .45 caliber lever action carbine, walk out the back door, and up the hill behind the house. Groundhogs decimated the upper section of a hay field part way up the hill, but they lived mainly in the rockslide near the summit. Here I would sit still, scanning the rocks for movement. When a groundhog appeared a shot would ring out, and sometimes I could collect my dime, but the danger to this animal population was no greater than that of the squirrels.

The most memorable assault on the groundhogs was on a bright summer day — I saw three groundhogs before I chambered a round. This had all the markings of a good day. As I approached the barbed wire fence at the top of the field a groundhog dove into his hole, and all their whistling stopped. I looked up to see a huge bald eagle silently gliding on outstretched wings about ten feet off the ground and no more than fifteen feet ahead of me. The magnificent raptor startled me, terrifying all the small animals on the hill. I crossed the fence and sat on the hillside with a view of the rockslide, but nothing moved. Finally, I carried the rifle down the hill thinking how little the rodents on the farm

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worried about me, and how that bird must have given them nightmares.

Birds are hard to hit with a rifle, but that didn't stop me from trying. Once I shot at a magpie in flight. I probably did that more than once, but I remember this time because I almost hit him. He didn't fall out of the sky but he did make a very hasty course correction. The bullet must have come very near to make him turn. To hunt birds, a shotgun is the tool to choose.

My cousin was on the farm for the summer, and Granddad bought a 20 gauge shotgun for us to use against the birds. Rod took that, leaving me my dad's beautiful Italian-made double barrel 12 gauge. We were older and I could drive our old World War 2 style Jeep, only on private property, but it was a big farm and we had plenty of room to roam.

With the Jeep, we could take a steep, narrow road over the top of the hill and hunt the birds on the other side where the orchards were. We didn't shoot into the trees, that would do more damage than the birds. On this trip we didn't care much about hunting at all, that was just our cover story. We wanted to drive the Jeep like the crazy fools we were. Going down the bumpy road, way faster than good sense dictated, we just hitting the high spots and flying over the rest. During this jaunt, my dad's beautiful Italian-made double barrel shotgun got a horrible gouge in the stock. My stomach turned when I saw the scar on that gun. We

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drove back home slower and more sensibly than we had come, and I had to tell my dad I had scratched the stock on his nearly new shotgun.

It seems to be a fundamental law that sons don't think their fathers know what's going on. At least that's how we saw it. Expecting punishment I explained how the gun had fallen against the gearshift lever as I was driving. The details of how I was driving might have been left out of the explanation, but looking back I'm pretty sure he filled in the gaps on his own. Dad responded with the last thing I expected to hear, "Well, those things happen."

Rod and I found some small spring leg traps and decided to trap rats in the barn. We asked Granddad, somewhat sheepishly, if we could get a dime for each rat. He looked thoughtful, "No, rats are worth a quarter." Rod and I were trappers now. We tried putting cherries on both sides of the pan (the trigger that trips the spring) thinking the rats would go across the pan. Who knew, rats are smarter than that? We found a hole they seemed to live in and put the trap in the opening of the tunnel so they couldn't go around the danger. Eureka, it worked! We were just like mountain men.

Walking down toward the barn one day, the chain holding the trap had been pulled deeper into the tunnel. Good, we got another one. Pulling on the chain I could feel the rat pull back,

and it felt like a big one. Slowly I pulled the chain; the rat fought it all the way. Then, I saw the head, bigger than I anticipated, and it was black with a white stripe. Recognizing the skunk I released the chain and let the animal pull back into the tunnel. Arriving at my house out of breath, “Dad, I got a skunk in a trap under the barn I saw his head. What do I do now?” Chuckling he explained, “A skunk has to raise its tail to spray, and it can’t raise its tail in a tunnel. So, you need to pull it out far enough that you can shoot it in the head with your .22 and then dispose of the carcass.”

Back at the barn, I was nervous, but it worked just like he said. I got rid of the dead skunk and set the trap to catch another rat.

The next day I went to the barn to check the trap. Again, the chain was taut. Again, the rat fought all the way, but this time I did not see a skunk’s head. I saw the tip of his tail!

Back at the house, “Dad, I caught another skunk, but he came out tail first. I let go and he went back in, but how do I get this one out?” Smiling again, “Well you’re going to have to shoot him with a big enough gun to go through him and kill him humanely from the back.” Then he added, “Or, you could shoot him with the shotgun.”

My face lit up, “Would that work?” I’m pretty sure he bit his lip to keep from laughing, “Yeah, that’d work.” Back I went with the

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double-barrel shotgun. I sat down on the ground and lined up the shot to make sure I killed the skunk. Taking no chances, I emptied the second barrel into the tunnel too.

About the time the second shot rang out I smelled the results of my foolishness, and I'm pretty sure I actually saw a cloud of the malodorous essence. About two hours later I approached the barn with a handkerchief over my mouth and wearing a swimmer nose clip. The dead animal was removed and discarded in the bushes some distance below the barn.

My illustrious trapping career ended that very day.