

Things One Does Not

By Tom Word

From earliest remembered days, we longed to bird hunt. Bird meant quail, grouse or duck—with barn pigeons for practice. The hardware store served as center of our universe. Here bird hunters came for ammunition and to talk. Here posters and calendars from Remington, Winchester, Peters, DuPont, placarded the walls and fueled our imaginations. How we longed to go hunting.

Eventually, we were old enough. Fathers, uncles, older brothers finally took us. Before that they taught us to shoot, straight and safe. During our waits to be old enough, we read *Field and Stream*, unbought, from the racks in the drugstore. Our imaginations soared.

We went first as unarmed watchers. Then as shotgun toting hunters without shells. Finally we became wingshots, at first inept, some of us eventually expert, most (like me) mediocre.

We knew the adults who were the good shots, the skillful hunters, the men with good dogs. We envied them. We hung on their stories at the hardware, in the barbershop and café, where nickel coffee, ten-cent burgers, and 25-cent breakfasts accompanied their talk.

We absorbed the rituals. We learned that men went forth in twos or alone, accompanied by pointer or setter (usually one man to one dog). They came back with plentiful bags, which they shared with kin and neighbors. Just where they went was not discussed.

We learned early that if we were invited to go, we never said where we'd been. And we never went back to a host's hunting places, except as his guest and in his presence. "Hunting back" was a sin unpardonable, like cheating at cards. Even telling someone where we'd hunted as a guest was verboten.

In our little town lived a legend. A four-legged legend. A pointer belonging to our town's most revered citizen, Doctor Nixon. The pointer's name was Agrippa. He'd been in his youth a great field-trial champion. Retired at age four, he came home to hunt for Doc Nixon. He lay at the good doctor's feet in the office, silent witness to every patient's visit. He was not a dog to be petted, only spoken to. He acknowledged your greeting with a stare that made you know he knew your every thought. He walked to and from the office with Doc morning and evening, walked the route twice again when Doc went home for lunch. On Wednesday afternoons and on Saturdays in season, he rode on the car seat with Doc to their hunts. Doc hunted alone, the only hint of his places an occasional sighting of the Packard barreling along a dusty county road.

After dark the Packard might be heard bringing Doc and Grip back to town where they stopped at the house of Doc's cook, Mary Blevins, in Dark Town. Her grandchildren ran out to the car with a bucket for the birds and a rabbit or two. Next morning Mary would bring Doc the birds picked (never skinned). Doc would keep four quail or a grouse for his and his wife's Sunday dinner, give the rest to his nurse and to

aged or ailing patients, delivered to them by the nurse. Rabbits stayed at Mary Blevins' to be stewed for her table.

Grip was the town's first citizen, admired, as was Doc, by all. Doc was generous with Grip's stud services, free to locals. Every week the Railway Express office held a bitch or two for Grip's attentions. Barbershop speculation said Grip brought Doc half his income.

No day in our town's history ranks in memory like the day of Grip's disappearance. Doc turned him out the back door as usual at 9 p.m. to relieve himself, and he didn't come back. At dawn the sheriff found the truck's tracks on the muddy shoulder of the alley behind Doc's house and Grip's tracks leading to it. Doc knew at once how the thief had done it. The truck held a bitch in heat that had been let out on a check cord to explore Doc's fallow vegetable garden, where Grip habitually went to relieve himself.

Doc's suspect list was short. At its top was a field-trial handler from one state away who'd handled Grip's chief rival in field trials. That rival was a bitch named Sweet Alice. Doc had refused to breed Grip to her (he didn't like her gait). That refusal had cemented the handler's hatred of Doc. The handler's name was Norm Bates. Doc figured Norm had abducted Grip to breed to a daughter of Sweet Alice, retired now like Grip from the field-trial wars.

Doc waited seventy days from Grip's abduction and then paid an unannounced visit to Norm early on a Sunday morning when he knew Norm would be nursing a hangover. Sure enough, he found a Sweet Alice daughter nursing a litter of ten pups bearing the telltale markings of Agrippa—a liver ring at the base of their tails. Doc went to the door of Norm's cabin and asked, "Where's Grip?" Norm didn't answer, but Doc could read from his face that Grip was not there. That told him Grip was with Norm's one solvent owner, Harry Eels, a mortician who owned Sweet Alice.

Doc gunned the Packard down the highway the twenty miles to Harry's funeral home. He found Grip in the two-run kennel out back. In the adjoining run was Sweet Alice. Without a word to Harry, Doc put Grip and Sweet Alice in the Packard (Grip up front and Alice in the trunk) and headed for home. Two men in black suits posted at the front door of the funeral home told Harry Eels what had happened.

Next morning, Doc Nixon wired an ad to the *American Field*:

"Norm Bates has a new litter of ten pups from a daughter of Sweet Alice sired by my Agrippa. You can buy one for \$150 with a check payable to the American Red Cross mailed to me. I'll send you the stud-dog owner's certificate, and Harry Eels will send you the certificate for the bitch."

After the ad ran in the *Field*, Doc Nixon sent Harry Eels a post card. It read:

"Send your hearse driver for Sweet Alice once all the pups are sold.

Sam Nixon, M.D."