

Time with father time for reflection

A BEAUTIFUL SUNSET By STATE SEN. JOE BALLYEAT

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It was the beginning of rifle season. It was also my birthday, and my folks showered me with gifts. But the best gift would be spending the next three days hunting with dad in the Boulder Mountains near Butte.

I own a remote little piece of mountainside there, with a little "cabin" trailer hidden beneath towering pines. The "cabin" is extremely rustic (the outhouse is really just "out," with not much "house"). But the view is spectacular - especially the sunsets.

Now in his 80th year, dad isn't the same hard-driving hunter who fed a family of 14 with wild meat. These days, he enjoys the fellowship with his sons more than the kill. Since I had already bagged a six-point bull elk during bow season, this year I'd happily embrace dad's laid-back hunting style.

As was his custom, dad attended church Saturday evening. So we left Belgrade and headed west, driving directly into an awesome blaze-orange sunset. Dad marveled repeatedly at the view, noticing each slight change in hue as the sun slowly sank beneath the horizon - first soft orange, then golden, then rosy pink, then melting to deep crimson red. As we headed swiftly west, we chased the sun and prolonged its setting, with me and dad relishing every minute of beauty.

Changing of the guard

As dad struggled up the steps to the cabin, I was reminded that he was now experiencing the sunset of his own life. This powerful patriarch of a vast clan had once carried each of us on his broad shoulders; climbing over mountaintops as he taught each one the way of the wild. Now, more often than not, the sons were providing meat for dad's freezer.

When I was appointed vice-chairman of the Montana House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee as a freshman representative, some said it was because I was a "gifted" hunter - with the hunting photos in my wallet to prove it. Yet I was reminded on this birthday that "gifts" are free to the recipient, but cost the giver much hard work. Likewise, my hunting "gifts" came at the expense of my father's hunting success. It certainly hindered his swiftness, and stealth and hiking range to have a 6-year-old tagging along on each hunt. And dad had made that same sacrifice with all my many siblings; yet still somehow managed to keep meat on our table.

On opening day, I went out scouting for elk while dad waited at the cabin. After spotting 30 elk, I ran back to the cabin to fetch him. I drove him to within 180 yards of a shooting spot. We slowly hiked over the hill with dad leaning on my shoulder while I carried his old 12-pound Enfield .30-06. After positioning him for the shot and estimating the distance at 200 yards, I watched as his shot hit just low.

I had grossly under-estimated the distance, pacing it off afterwards at 350 yards. But in three days together, dad never once complained about my range-finding ability, nor did he grumble about his unfilled tag. To the contrary, as we sat watching the spectacular Big Sky sunsets each evening, he repeatedly reminded me that he really didn't need the meat anyway.

Dad even took time to relish the little things, like wearing his old homemade hunting vest. It wasn't light, silky, glow-in-the-dark like modern vests, it was a hodge-podge of fading blaze orange and canvass patches he'd cobbled together so many decades ago, during the height of his "busy" years. As he tied it up contentedly around himself, I recognized he looked just a little like the soft blaze orange sunset we'd enjoyed together on the trip over.

Sunset satisfaction

The beauty of sunsets is only partially visual. When a workingman relaxes before a setting sun, a portion of the enjoyment is the days-end satisfaction that comes from a job well done. Sunsets aren't for more work - they're best enjoyed in relaxed reflection on that which has already been accomplished. Likewise, the sunset of a life. I realized dad wasn't fretting about filling his elk tag; he was relishing our time together - playing rummy, cooking pancakes and sausage for breakfast and just relaxing and reminiscing over a job well done.

Earl Balyeat is now patriarch of some 50 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren and together with Jeannie, his wife of 60 years, they have imparted to that vast clan innumerable "gifts" - each gift unique and vital to each "gifted" recipient. The hunting trophies on dad's wall are crowded out by hundreds of photos of each new milestone in a clan-member's life.

Hunting isn't just about filling the freezer or tagging the "big one." It's about the passing of the torch from father to son. It's about the inter-family sharing of spectacular sunsets.

As dad drives slowly into his own sunset, I'm happy to embrace this time with him - including all the changing colors it brings to his life. And mostly, I want to just help him chase the sun - extending as long as we can this beautiful sunset.