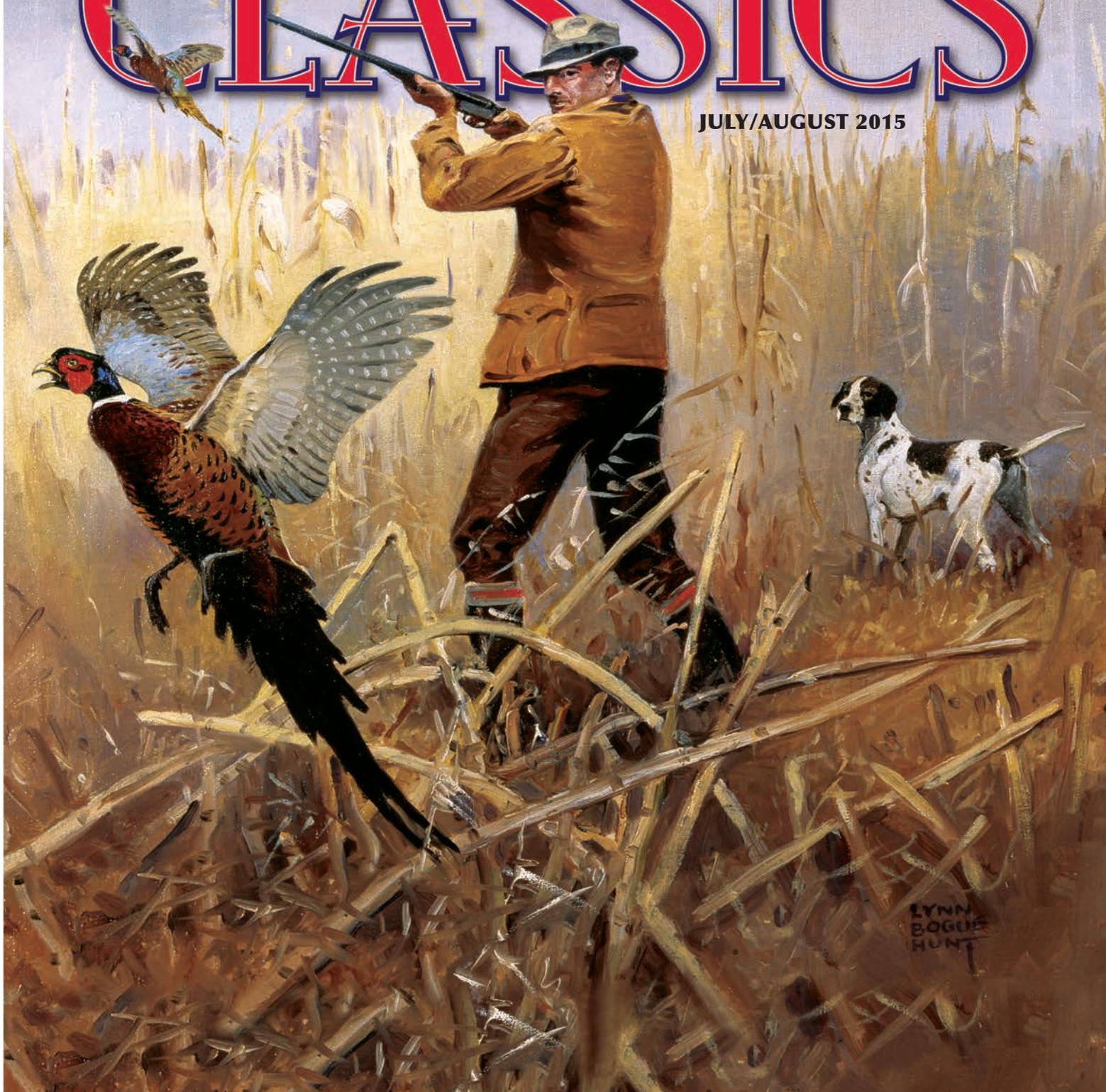
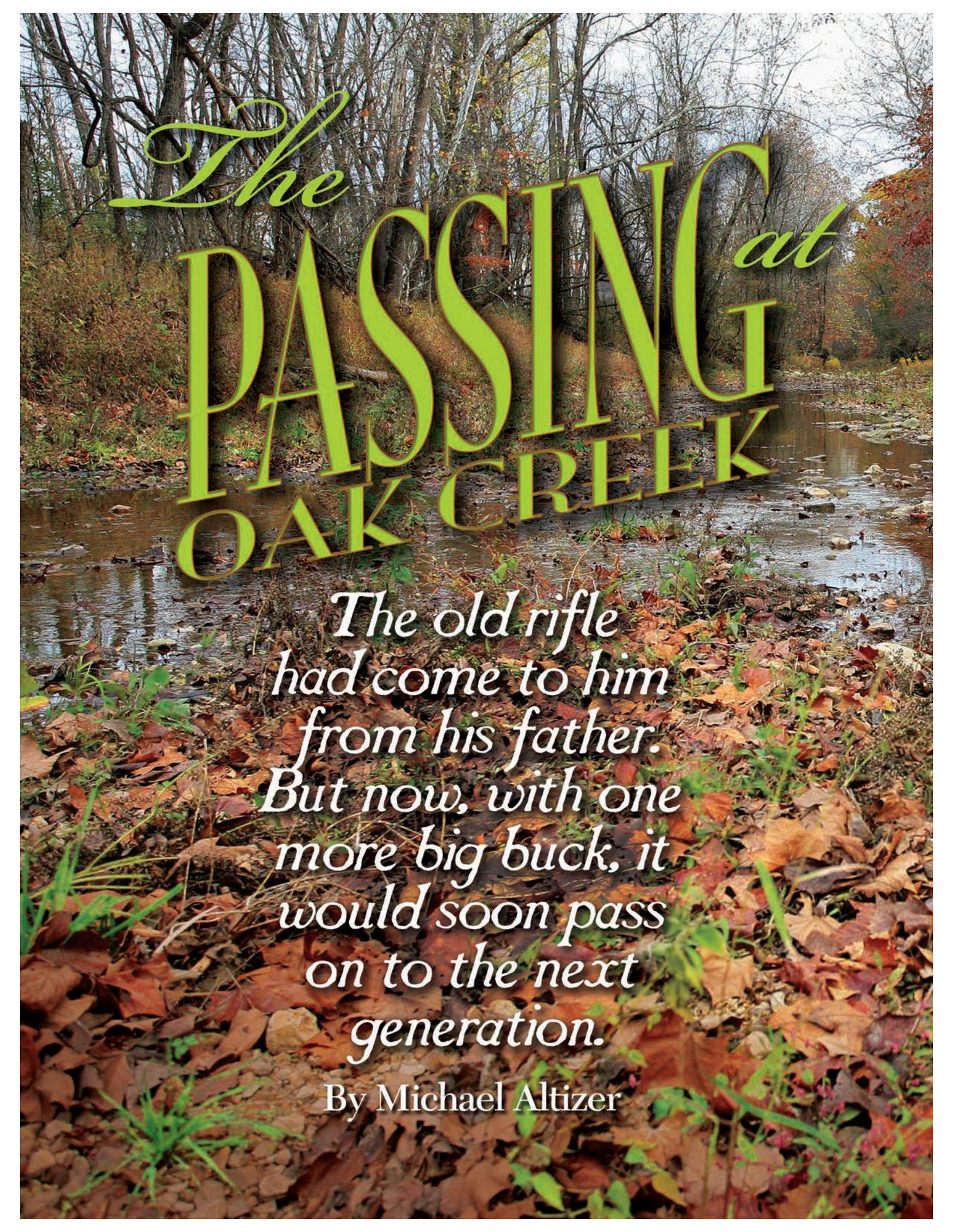


SPORTING CLASSICS

JULY/AUGUST 2015



LYNN
BOGUE
HUNT



The
PASSING *at*
OAK CREEK

*The old rifle
had come to him
from his father.
But now, with one
more big buck, it
would soon pass
on to the next
generation.*

By Michael Altizer





The rifle stands alone in an old sheepskin case in the far corner of a seldom-used closet that smells of oil and leather, wool and waxed cotton. The faded hues of its once deep-blued steel are now the colors of winter, and only its heritage and patina have richened with age. Its ancient walnut has been deeply etched by two lifetimes spent slipping through oak and laurel and bramble and briar and is still tinted with oil and sweat and tobacco stains from the hands of its original owner.

The old gun's best days may already have come and

Chuck Wechsler spotted this buck the evening before the hunt began, making sleep that night nearly impossible.

gone. But make no mistake, there is still life lurking beneath its worn exterior. And somewhere hovering between the Past and the Great Hereafter looms one more deer or bear, or perhaps even an elk or moose or caribou that might someday cross trails with the gun and become a memory itself.

Then the rifle will move on to yet another set of younger hands, to usher them forward into their own



rich and compelling Future, while connecting them with their own enthralling history and heritage.

I had just arrived at Donald Hill's 1,500-acre Oak Creek Ranch near Bland, Missouri, with my longtime hunting partner Chuck Wechsler, our mission to hunt this venerable setting and its legendary whitetails.

This was a homecoming of sorts for Chuck, but it was my first visit. "This is prime whitetail habitat," he had assured me. "You're going to love it there. It really feels like home—in fact,

the lodge itself used to be home for Donald and his wife, Angi, and their kids, before they built their new place."

An hour later we'd finished lunch and unpacked our gear and done a final check of our guns, then decided to do some late-day scouting before beginning our hunt. Some of the bucks we saw that evening made sleeping a veritable impossibility.

The next morning we left the lodge well before dawn. But unlike the previous evening with its cloudless vistas, the sky was heavily overcast and temps had dropped into the 30s—which meant the deer should be moving.



Donald Hill added this spacious, handsomely decorated trophy room to the original farmhouse.



Chuck headed out with guide James Smith, and I with Shane Boyer. Shane and I made our way north to the crest of a long wooded ridge, then worked two miles west to the eastern fringes of a broad meadow where we began glassing.

I was carrying my father's old long-barreled, short-magazine 336 Marlin lever-action chambered in .35 Remington—the rifle he'd first read about while a lonely young sailor in the middle of the Pacific and then bought in West Virginia the day he returned home to Mom and me. I desperately wanted to take one more deer with the old gun



Altizer wanted desperately to take one more big deer with his father's old rifle before passing it along to the family's next generation. Top: The author watched this beautiful 11-point buck for nearly a quarter-hour, but finally chose to pass on him—shooting him only with his camera.

before passing it along to a third generation.

Fifteen minutes after first light, three does meandered into the field from behind us, and 20 minutes later another came tearing past from the same direction. The rut was obviously kicking in, and we hoped there would soon be a buck close on her tail. Sure enough, within minutes a good eight-pointer showed up, his nose to the ground as he trailed her. But he didn't measure up to some of the big bucks we knew to haunt these woods, and we let him pass.

Then came my first real test.

Two hundred yards north, a big ten-pointer stepped into the field and began working down the far edge. He was larger than any whitetail I had ever taken, his antlers wide and well proportioned.

I looked at Shane hopefully. At first he was somewhat non-committal, but then shook his head and said he thought we could do better.

Never guide the guide. This has been one of my personal dictates for years, both to others and to myself. So I let the deer walk, shooting him only with my camera.

He was the best buck we saw all morning.

Two hours later a cold, dark, wind-driven rain blew in from the north and everything shut down.

We were well into our second afternoon before the storm blew itself out. As we moved north along the crest of a long sloping ridge, the late-day sky began to reveal a few hints of blue. An hour later the whole landscape lit up in the freshening early-evening

sunlight. We set up in the edge of the woods above a small pond overlooking a green field falling away to the west. Within minutes a big doe stepped into the open, and soon two more followed. One of them stopped for a moment and looked back, putting Shane and me on full alert, wondering what might be trailing her.

For a full 20 minutes we

watched them feed, occasionally jerking their collective gazes up to look back into the woods.

Then I caught movement.

At first I wasn't certain what I had seen. But the glint of an antler caught my eye, then another, and a buck stepped from the thicket. Tall, heavy, and wide, his antlers gleamed like great branches of polished maple in the warm autumn sunlight.

My heart began racing as I glanced over at Shane. He was grinning broadly, but after a minute or so of glassing he leaned over and whispered, "Yeah, he's nice—but it's still fairly early in the hunt and I think we can do better."

Before our hunt began, Donald Hill had told me. "You know, you might very well have an opportunity to take the biggest whitetail of your life here." So now as the import of his words began to sink in, I thought of my brother Alan, the best hunter I have ever known, and the advice he had once given me: "Patience and being willing to take big chances is what kills the biggest deer. When you finally look at a buck and don't even question whether or not he's big enough, *He is!*"

And so I waited.

Unbelievably, I waited.

For a quarter-hour we watched that buck, though I dared not sight on him through my scope. Then remembering my camera, I shot a couple of quick photos as he worked the does. But he must have picked up the sound of the shutter, because he suddenly threw his head up and snorted loudly and the field cleared in seconds.

Forty minutes later, yet another storm blew in, and it rained hard until nearly daylight the next morning.

Our last day dawns cold and damp and dripping, with Shane and I discreetly tucked into a stand overlooking a long beanfield bordered by thick woods on both sides, stretching away to the north for well over 400 yards.

I have no idea as to the lay of the land off to the west, but to the east the field drops steeply into a deep, thickly wooded ravine, which by now I have come to know quite well.

The wind is whipping in from the north at nearly 20 miles-an-hour, and 30 minutes after first light we spot a doe nervously skirting the far edge of the field.

Another hour passes and the sky begins to clear. But if anything, the wind grows even stronger, consolidating its force and direction.

Then suddenly Shane whispers, "Buck."

Deep in the woods off to our right, I catch the muted flash of an antler, then the flick of an ear. He is quartering away as we try to get a read on his size and configuration. Then he moves through a



small opening 300 yards out, and we can see that he's a big deer.

A *very* big deer.

For one brief moment he turns, then reverses direction and continues moving away, at last vanishing over the crest into the hollow below.

We rise and circle away from him, moving into the head of the hollow where he had disappeared earlier. After crossing a small creek, we climb halfway up the far slope and begin easing down the hollow toward him with the stiff wind directly in our faces. We sift the dense woods ahead with our noses and eyes and binoculars, and 20 minutes later we spot him in a thicket 80 yards below us, bedded in a small depression on the far side of the creek.

All we can see are the tips of his gleaming, ivory-colored antlers as he turns his head to peer back up the trail, judiciously watching his backtrack. Marking his position as best we can, we silently retrace our steps 300 yards back up the hollow away from him, then drop down to the creek, cross to his side, and begin our stalk.

For the next 45 minutes we ease, we ooze, we inch, step by meticulous step along the edge of the widening stream toward the bedded buck, melting into the dense creek-bottom woods until we're just above him.

Everything is working in our favor. The wind is still boring up the hollow into our faces, and the low morning sun is directly behind us, so if the deer turns his gaze in our direction he'll be looking straight into its harsh glare. Everything is moving and swaying in the relentless wind, which is effectively shrouding our scent and masking our movements and any insignificant sounds we might make. But we must continue to be precise.

Shane eases his head around the trunk of a tree, then turns to me and silently nods. He kneels, and I slowly raise my rifle and find some indistinguishable part of the deer in my scope. He is less than 40 yards away, still bedded in the thick stuff next to the creek at the base of two small hickories.

But I have no shot.

We work forward another three yards, and I can see he's positioned with his rear end aimed roughly straight at us. But he's still mostly covered by trees and brush, and all I can see clearly is the back of his head slowly tilting up-and-down and swaying side-to-side, and for one brief moment I wonder if he is actually dozing.

By now we're pretty much level with him. But I realize that even *if* I can manage to get closer, at this angle the only sure shot I'll have will be into his hindquarters.

And I'm simply not going to take that shot.

My only option is to work back across the creek to the right and try to get a more open angle into his chest. I have great confidence in Dad's old rifle, for he and I have made close, fast kills with it before on both bear and buck, and I know that if the big deer suddenly spooks and blasts out of his bed, I just might have an opportunity for one quick shot into his vitals.

I slip into the creek, cross it carefully without making a ripple, then begin easing out into the woods on the far side.

I can see a little more of him now . . . he's barely 30 yards away and still peering up the far side of the hollow, completely oblivious to my presence. But he remains severely obscured by the brush between us, and I am nearly out of cover.

So, remembering the advice my brother had once given me about taking big chances, I make one final check of the ground before me, dial my scope down to its very lowest setting, slowly raise my rifle, quietly draw its hammer to full cock and take a half step around the tree to my right—myself and the great buck now fully exposed.

His head jerks around and he nails me. And as he gathers his powerful legs beneath him, he flinches hard as 200 grains of finely crafted copper and lead tear into the back of his ribs and angle forward through his chest to the point of his opposite shoulder. Still, his momentum and adrenaline carry him to his feet, and as he bolts upward I send one final round deep into his heart and he lurches forward, then pivots over backward and crashes to the ground as I rack the lever one last time.

I watch him for a minute or more through my scope, the hammer still fully cocked and my finger on the trigger.

But he never moves.

Finally I hear Shane's voice from somewhere behind me and feel his hand on my shoulder, and I carefully ease the hammer back down into safety and raise the old gun to the heavens. Then before moving a single step, I dig my phone from my shoulder pouch, power it up, and with hands still shaking, punch in my brother's cell number.

Shane and I were late getting back to the lodge that afternoon, and when we arrived, we found that Chuck and James had taken a fine, big 10-pointer.

But what I will remember most isn't the actual size of those two grand bucks. Nor is it the long and tedious stalk that Shane and I made, as all-consuming as it was.

Instead, it's the old rifle with which I took that deer, the man who had carried it for so many decades before me, and the winsome little boy to whom it would soon be passed. 🐾



EQUIPMENT NOTES

For more years than I can recall I have relied on binoculars, scopes, and rangefinders from Leupold Optics. On this hunt they again functioned flawlessly, particularly in some of the cold, windy, and rainy conditions in which they were asked to perform.

My old Marlin, chambered in .35 Remington, was loaded with Hornady's LEVERevolution ammo. On my initial shot, the 200-grain FTX bullet entered the back of the big buck's ribs, angled forward completely through the chest, and pulverized the bones of the opposite shoulder. The shot was absolutely devastating, and the bullet performed perfectly. —Michael Altizer

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Leica's Geovid HD-B is a superb binocular, ideal for spotting and checking out Oak Creek's beautiful trophy whitetails. This amazing



The author at age four with his father, Claude Altizer, and the first deer ever to fall to the rifle. Top: Mike Altizer and the big Missouri whitetail he took at 23 yards with his Dad's old rifle, following a difficult hour-long stalk he'll never forget.

binocular features Advanced Ballistic Compensation, which is easily operated by pushing just two buttons. The ABC system enables you to determine point of aim for various reticles and bullet drop compensators for up to 2,000 yards. Its bright LED display adjusts automatically to any lighting condition. The 10x42 I used produced sharp, high-contrast images, even in low-light situations. I also liked the Geovid's rubber-armored magnesium body, which is both rugged and light in weight.
— Chuck Wechsler

IF YOU WANT TO GO

To check out Donald Hill's most excellent hunting and accommodations, visit www.oakcreekwhitetailranch.com. Or call them at (573) 943-6644.