*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Hunting story resonates with readers**

The annual Wisconsin gun-deer-hunting season is in the books. Although I never took a shot this season, I will forever remember it for the kind and heartwarming reaction I received from many readers.

The reaction was to a recent column I wrote about the last hunting season of 2019 that I spent with my father, Bob Hardie, who died this past summer. It seems like the bond between father and son practiced through hunting struck a chord with readers.

Here are some of the reactions.

Chris Dolan of New Prague, Minn., wrote about his father, James Reemts, who also died this year at the age of 85.

“I just wanted you to know that the story you wrote regarding your father meant the world to me,” he said. “My father passed away on Oct. 14 of this year. Deer hunting was an annual tradition with he and I as well. When I was younger we hunted in Ottertail County, Minn., where my dad grew up — land he had hunted since his youth — and when older, when Dad could no longer manage the tough hunts in the swamps up north, on our farm east of New Prague.

“I did not go deer hunting this year. The season was simply too close to my father’s death and it would have been a bit much to manage, emotionally. Next year, however, will find me back up north, to the land where he introduced me to the heritage, to the place we made many a wonderful memory together.

“Thank you again for the article you took the time to write. It is just what was needed, on this end, at this point in life.”

Bruce Dietlzer said he read my column in the Inter-County Leader in Frederic, Wis.

“Articles like yours help assuage non-hunter viewpoints,” he said. “Your recollection as a 15-year-old (of) ‘it wasn’t the thrill of the kill, but the sense I belonged’ harks back to a saying I made a poster of. ‘To hunt is not to kill, but to kill is to have hunted.’ One of my co-workers hung one in his cubicle.

“The picture of the three of you from 2010 is great. Your profiling of your dad, to the end, is both heart-wrenching and heartwarming.”

Jackie Pitel of La Crescent, Minn., wrote, “You have a special talent for using the things of nature to help each of us readers connect with our past. The story of Ross helping Grandpa to his hunting scene was so warm and tender. You with your dad and your conversation about the kind of tree … so preciously stated, so tender for us who have been in similar situations with aging folks. I know you miss him, but in this pandemic, I have come to know for sure our dads are in a better place.

“Blessings to you and encouragement to keep sharing your heart.”

Dave Ryder of Trempealeau, Wis., said my column brought back deer-hunt memories of his own father.

“From when I was too young to hunt, listening to Dad, Grandpa and Uncle Bob tell of past hunts,” he said, “including trips to Cable and ammunition shortages during World War II.

“I finally turned 12. Opening morning, Dad and I headed for the Black River bottoms for my first experience of actually participating with a gun. We stop at a log in the middle of dark nowhere, and he tells me to ‘sit here, and stay here until I get back.’ That was possibly the longest two hours of my life and I saw no deer.

“Dad kept a journal of what he and Mom shot each year, and added me and eventually my brother-in-law. He was especially proud of the year my mom wanted a chest freezer, and he told her that if she shot a big buck he’d have to buy one. She shot a dandy 8-pointer that year. In the 1980s and 1990s, when the deer herd really populated around our area, my brother-in-law and I were harvesting multiple deer between gun and bow. Dad says, ‘You guys make it look too easy.’ And he put the journal away.

“I could go on and on with great memories, but what brought the tears was the memory of Nov. 22, 2013. The Friday before the opener and my son’s birthday, I was at our business cleaning up that morning before going to have coffee with Dad and the fire siren went off. Shortly after a friend ran in and said ‘You better go to your parents; I think that siren was for them!’ Well it was. Dad had major heart failure, but lasted into Saturday before he expired.

“He made it off my son’s birthday and on to opening day. I didn’t hunt a lot that season, but when I was out for the first time, I asked him that if he and Grandpa and Uncle Bob were done visiting, maybe could they try and push a buck past me. I’m guessing they had a lot to talk about.

“Thanks again for the article and memories.”

Glenn Wolfe of La Crosse wrote, “I’m not a farmer or a hunter or much of an outdoorsman, for that matter, but I enjoy your columns regardless of the subject. Your perspective on life and the value system you sew into every essay resonates with me. I find it a comfort to read your words.”

My deepest thanks to all of you and others who wrote or called. I’m humbled that so many of you connected with that column and with others I have written.

We’re all traveling through this journey of life together.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at chardie1963@gmail.com.*

***Photo cutlines:***

*121020-agrv-life-hardie-1: James Reemts shows the last deer he shot, late on the last day of the season. (Chris Dolan photo)*

*121020-agrv-life-hardie-2: James Reemts poses with a buck he shot in 1994, in the great swamps of the Inman Wildlife Management Area in Ottertail County, Minnesota, a portion of which was once a farm that he lived on as a child. (Chris Dolan photo)*