

## Uncle Pep

*By William Williams*

*NE Region Information and Education Supervisor*

To avoid accusations of misquoting a popular phrase, I spoke the introductory sentence out loud and then quoted myself. It speaks to one of the many benefits of mentoring young hunters. *Game News* frequently publishes articles that recount memorable hunts that often culminate in the harvesting of a trophy animal. Some writers fondly recall time spent afield with family and friends. Many mention at least one person who made a profound influence in how the author views the importance of mentoring during their formative years. Their most cherished moments almost always involve a shared hunting experience.

It's a shame (and misleading) when many outspoken critics of hunting focus on the brief moment that precedes the taking of a game animal. They feel that hunters live only for the pull of the trigger or release of the bow string, and conclude that killing game is the essence of hunting.

The allure and appreciation of hunting involves much more than these critics realize. I have a difficult time remembering some hunts when an animal was harvested, while others when no game was taken produce vivid memories. The difference is usually companionship.

Most people who identify themselves as hunters can point to one person who was influential in introducing them to the activity and nurturing their lifelong appreciation of the outdoors. For me that person was Uncle Pep. You see, my father was not an outdoorsman. The only person in my entire family who liked to hunt and fish was married to my mother's oldest sister.

Onofrio "Pep" Orlando was one of seven brothers of Italian descent and all were avid hunters. Sunday dinners at his house usually consisted of spaghetti and meatballs with plenty of grated pecorino cheese and fresh Italian bread. Sometimes the spaghetti sauce included the meat of deer, rabbit or squirrel. Thinly sliced cured meats were drizzled in olive oil and topped with raw garlic. Tales of hunting adventures were told around the table, and I was soon begging to be taught the ways of the outdoorsman.

Uncle Pep was getting on in years, but relished the idea of passing on the sacred tradition. Advanced age and a bad back caused by an old coal mining accident had slowed him down, but not enough to keep him out of his beloved deer woods.

My earliest hunting related experience was sitting with a small group of other young men in an Elks Lodge in Pittston, when I was 11 in the early 1970s. A gentleman lectured to his young students about parts of a firearm, hunting safety and ethics. He scribbled main points on a flip chart. Posters depicting game animals were posted on the walls. There was a slide show presentation. I recall the room was dimly lit and smelled of stale cigarette smoke.

The local game protector spoke to the class about hunting laws and told a few stories about encounters he had with poachers. He was an imposing figure but displayed a friendly demeanor. To me it seemed a game protector had the best job in the world. Little did I know at the time how this early encounter would shape my future. Throughout the presentation my anxious thoughts kept turning to the impending test I would need to pass to get my Hunter Safety Card. I passed the test and got the card. Uncle Pep was proud.

It was just after 4 a.m. when Uncle Pep picked me up in the 1968 Ford F100. Two 35-caliber Remington Gamemaster pump action rifles were cased behind the seat, along with a brown paper bag containing two porketta sandwiches and a few cans of Fresca. As the truck made its way to the mountains of Sullivan County, the radio played "Who's in the Strawberry Patch with Sally?" It's funny, the things you remember. A few hours later, the beams of two flashlights illuminated a deer trail as Uncle Pep led me into the woods. It was my first opening day of buck season. We posted in the pre-dawn darkness and soon heard the sounds of deer running and kicking up leaves behind us. As the sun rose over the mountain, the surrounding woods slowly came into view. A lone doe meandered about 50 yards to our left and we watched her dissolve into the hemlocks. The crack of rifle fire echoed across the valley, then more followed from much closer. I don't think I blinked once the entire morning.

The day drew on without seeing a deer with antlers and Uncle Pep decided we should head back to the truck. I was leading the way to the vehicle when I turned around to see him kneeling on the ground with his rifle on his shoulder. A spike buck with head alert was making its way through a patch of mountain

laurel that I had just walked past. When the deer gave him an opening, the shot was fired but the deer never broke stride. It was a clean miss.

It wasn't until four years later before I harvested my first buck, while hunting alone on a "day off" from high school. After loading it into my car, I made the 2-hour drive to a little coal yard near home. At his desk in a little shack near a coal stove was Uncle Pep. My inexperience at field-dressing big game was clearly displayed on my hunting clothes, and his face broke into a smile before stepping outside to admire my prize. The tenderloins were immediately removed and grilled over the coals. They were brushed with olive oil and topped with raw garlic, which was always on hand. It was the best tasting venison I ever ate. Perhaps it was because of the company.

Years went by, as they do. I went on to college and received a degree in Environmental Science and later joined the Navy. I was stationed in Bremerton, Washington, when I got news that Uncle Pep had passed away. The American Red Cross was kind enough to fund my trip home to attend the funeral, even though he was not a blood relative. My uncle had not hunted in several years, as the ravages of old age had taken their toll. His rifle and Woolrich hunting coat were passed on to me.

My interest in wildlife and hunting eventually prompted me to pursue a career as a Wildlife Conservation Officer, and in 1999 I became a member of the 25th class of cadets. I was honored to be selected by my classmates to be class speaker at the graduation ceremony. Toward the end of my speech, I thanked the class instructors, field training officers and many others who made that graduation possible. I thanked the family members and friends that were there in person. There was a brief pause. My voice cracked slightly as I thanked those who were there in spirit. You see, my classmates all had their version of Uncle Pep.

After seven years as a WCO in Sullivan County I spent three years as a Land Management Group Supervisor. Most recently, I was promoted to Northeast Region Information and Education Supervisor.

The flip charts and posters used when I took my hunter education class have now been largely replaced by DVDs and PowerPoint presentations. Facilities are well lit and comfortable. Training is more interactive. What hasn't changed, though, is that someone takes a genuine interest in the future of a young person and brings them to a class.

They say a person is a product of all of their decisions. I believe these decisions are more likely to be good ones if guided by positive lessons and valuable experiences provided by a caring teacher. Some call this mentoring. There are many more youth hunting opportunities in Pennsylvania now than there was when I first took to the woods.

The Game Commission's Mentored Youth Hunting Program now offers youngsters many ways to gain hunting experience and learn about our rich hunting heritage at about any age. Special youth hunting days are set aside to allow junior hunters early exposure to hunting deer, turkey, small game and waterfowl. HTE classes now have a broad course curriculum that provides an exceptional learning experience and it's delivered by a corps of talented and dedicated volunteer instructors.

I try to participate in local HTE classes whenever possible, and often relate my early experiences to the students. One thing Uncle Pep emphasized was firearm safety. I was taught to always count the five cartridges in my hand, and then visually inspect the open chamber of my rifle after unloading it, to make sure it was empty. It would stand to reason that if my firearm held only five cartridges, then just counting the number in my hand would have sufficed. "You can never be too safe," Uncle Pep would say. It's funny, the things you remember. □