

Grandpa's Magic Rifle

By Thomas J. Firth



I can't help but feel sorry for the kids of today. I'm not sure where our society failed them or exactly where we took a wrong turn in allowing values to change. But, I fear we have left this generation to stumble aimlessly about in a world that is pitifully boring and woefully lacking in adventure.

Sure technology and prosperity have provided today's youth with video arcades on every corner, theme parks in every county, computer games that require a doctorate degree to navigate and cable television with more channels than fleas on a stray hound, but to my mind, they have no entertainment of any value or substance.

Now when I was growing up and coping with life's lessons, nothing offered more adventure, held a grip on a young man's fascination more tightly, or was revered more highly than, The DUMP.

Perhaps the single most contributing factor to the dump's intrigue was that it was forbidden. "And stay away from that dump!" Granny would say. "It's filthy, there's nothing there but junk and it's crawling with vermin!"

With selling points and redeeming qualities such as these, how could one not be attracted to such a place? Besides, maybe I could catch one of those "crawling vermin's" Granny mentioned so often. While I never managed to spot, much less catch one of the elusive critters, the dump was nevertheless a veritable smorgasbord of hidden treasures.

Prince Albert tobacco tins were a staple and a highly prized commodity to youngsters in my day. Just as no self-respecting frontiersman would not dare to be caught without his powder horn for his flintlock, nor would any Red Ryder toting eleven-year-old be without his tobacco tin half full of BB's. They were also handy for storing such valuables as

marbles, army men, fishing lures and hooks, not to mention bait, insects and amphibians (to keep that pesky Shirley Paynebud at bay during recess).

The dump was also a potpourri of other valuable treasures as well. One absolutely could not play army without at least one genuine article of U.S. military clothing (the more holes the better). A complete uniform almost always guaranteed you would be first picked when choosing up sides. For some mysterious reason I never understood why these valuable uniforms often turned up at the dump. Probably accidentally discarded by some housewife unaware of their worth.

Oh yes, and there was one other pastime the dump offered that could be found nowhere else on earth....RAT KILLIN'! There was always at least one small trash fire going at the dump on any given day. In the evening (right about dusk) it offered just enough light to view the rats as they made their way in and around the trash. While probably not exactly politically correct today and no doubt listed as endangered species by some green group, back then we felt we were accomplishing two things: (1) By picking off rats with a .22, we were saving the world from another possible black plague epidemic and ...(2) Sharpening our marksmanship skills for future employment as big game hunters, a win/win situation.

It was on the occasion of my twelfth birthday when I received my first .22 rifle. It was actually my eleventh birthday but since my Grandpa wasn't much on math, I could see no point in spoiling his philanthropic mood.

Twelve seemed to be the magic age at which one could receive a .22. Kids were routinely awarded BB guns upon taking their first baby step but a .22 required a certain maturity and twelve seemed to satisfy that requirement.

At any rate, it was a beauty! An 1898 Remington pump with a hexagon barrel and a peep sight. It had belonged to my uncle, who was off in the Air Force protecting democracy and depleting the British of their supply of ale, who had written home consenting to the arrangement.

My grandpa was a Swede. At 6'4" he was an imposing figure and didn't mince words. Actually he did! Speaking in a thick Swedish accent he managed more often than not to butcher the English language.

"Kid," grandpa said (apparently not much on names either). "Dis ainno hair riffle. It's a twenty-two dats got alotta majik lef in it fer a kid yer size." As I looked to granny for translation, he continued. "Hue tik karra diz ting ar I skins hue earsbock an pekkle 'em, yah!" he vowed sternly as I momentarily wondered if that might be less painful than my Grandma's nightly behind-my-ear scourings.

"Gee thanks Grandpa! I'll clean it every day and take real good care of it," I said trying to contain my elation. "Do I get any bullets Gramps?" I sheepishly asked.

"Ya hue bettcha shuer," he said. "Hue doan tink I feerget a ting like dat do ya?" he was quick to add as he reached into his pocket with his ham-sized paws and retrieved five shiny .22 bullets. As I stared at the five rounds he'd placed in my hand, I suddenly realized my Grandfather's lack of comedic depth as he pointed one of his carrot-sized fingers at me and declared, "Deez tings doan grow onda trees kid!"

While I was somewhat relieved and comforted with the fact that in the event of a raging forest inferno I wouldn't be caught in a deadly crossfire by ammo-discharging conifers, I was, nevertheless, a bit disheartened as my Grandpa continued. "Hue brink subtink bok fer sewer an I give hue five more boolits, yah."

This I was to learn, was my grandfather's way, and not being one who needed to look at a mule's shoe twice, I quickly learned that if I brought home a rabbit he would never ask me how many bullets I had left. He simply grunted, said, "Goot yob kid," and handed me five more rounds.

Soon I became a good enough marksman that I could bag a rabbit, squirrel or sage hen with my first shot, go get five more rounds from Grandpa and before long I'd have a tobacco tin full of .22 bullets. Enough for a trip to the dump.

It was mid August and summer vacation was speeding to an end. Knowing full well that school would start in another few days, I decided to kill two birds with one stone. Since Strawberry Creek was below town at the far end of the valley, I knew this would likely be my last chance to capture that monster German Brown that had eluded me all summer and I grabbed my fishing rod and three tobacco tins of lures, hooks and worms. And, since the dump was conveniently located but a short distance out of the way on my return trip home, I gathered my rifle and two half full tins of .22 shells as I kissed Granny ado and headed out of the kitchen door, advising her of my return before dark. "AND STAY AWAY FROM THAT DUMP!" I heard Granny holler as the picket gate slammed shut behind me.

It was two miles to the dump and another mile beyond to Strawberry Creek. As I reached the heavily wooded corner where the dirt road branched off to the dump, I noticed something curious. There, in the middle of the dirt road lay a dead bobcat, apparently the victim of a speeding dump visitor. It was my first up-close encounter with a bobcat and it required a certain amount of time to inspect the deceased. Upon completion of my informal autopsy, I continued on to the creek.

It was getting on in the afternoon and I had managed but three small brook

trout. That monster Brown had managed to escape my hook one more summer. Still, three fish were better than none and I gathered my gear and lit out for the dump in eager anticipation of the day's grand finale.

I reached the turn-off and headed up toward my destination and noticed the dead bobcat was still laying undisturbed in the middle of the road. You know, it's truly amazing how an expired animal can swell to almost twice his size just from laying around in the hot sun all day. Truly amazing I tell you.

Anyway my timing was perfect as I arrived at the dump at almost the magic hour. I positioned myself in the lidless trunk of a gutted out '39 Chevy and laid my rifle across the rear fender facing one of the trash fires. I didn't have long to wait for the rats to appear.

POP, POP, POP. One by one, rodent after rodent fell victim to my incredible marksmanship as I imagined myself a buffalo hunter in the 1800's. Before long I had managed to rack up quite a score as I scratched another mark on the rusted fender with an empty shell casing. POP, POP, POP, CLICK! It was at this point as I flipped open the lid containing my ammo that my second worst fear was suddenly realized. As I peered into the bottom of the can, unable to see the rounds at the bottom, my sharp intuition alerted me...It's dark outside you idiot!

Knowing full well that a collection of bears, bigfoots, monsters and mole people awaited me behind every tree on my journey home, not to mention Granny's butt beating I was sure to receive, I quickly gathered rod, rifle and gear and lit out on the road for home.

As I reached the fork, I could observe the silhouette of the dead bobcat still in the road thanks to a full moon. Although I was in a hurry, I couldn't resist the temptation that overcame me as I approached the lifeless carcass. It was at this juncture when one of those strokes of genius I'm prone to overcome me as I briskly strode along. Without breaking stride, I stepped squarely in the middle of the bloated bobcat's body.

When the weight of my step came down on the bobcat, three events happened simultaneously: (1) The deceased emitted a loud, stereophonic, from the grave groan from all orifices that I was totally unprepared for. (2) My rifle went north, my fishing gear went south, I shot five feet into the air and ...(3) I immediately soiled my britches and began my famous and patented panic scream, AAGHH, AAGHH, AAAAGGHHHHH!

It is my firm belief there should be an Olympic event for boys twelve and under. It would be called "The After Dark, I'm About to Die, Dash For Home." That evening I would go on to shatter the existing record for this event (previously set my me two years earlier)



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as I proceeded to establish a new land speed record in worn out P.F. Flyers.

With reckless abandon and no concern for cross traffic, I exploded in the direction of home. As a trail of sparks jettisoned from my sneakers, I turned to observe whether or not the zombie bobcat was gaining on me. It was at this point I realized my FIRST and worst fear in the world as I came to a sudden and abrupt halt. With my feet still racing like a paddlewheel out of control I looked forward to find myself face to belly staring up a non other than "The Peeper."

His real name was Lawrence Byer. He was in his early forties and lived alone just up the canyon from our house. Lawrence had never worked a day in his life and while this was the one redeeming quality I admired about him, he was the origin of my nightmares. He was our equivalent of Hannibal Lector, Freddie Kruger and Janet Reno all rolled into one.

Legend had it (the one told by all the kids at school) that Lawrence was a mass murderer. Specifically, little boys! He would kidnap them, hide them in one

of the hundreds of abandoned mine shafts in the area and because he had no means to earn money for food, he would eat his captives. Although we never actually knew of anyone who'd been abducted by him, we were certain of the authenticity of the claim because ...well, just because. Granny maintained this was nonsense and that Lawrence was harmless but we knew better. Lawrence was seldom seen during the day, but often at night. What more proof could you want? Oh yes, and Lawrence would skulk around at night and sneak up to your bedroom window and peep in when you were asleep. No one ever actually caught him, but that's because we were asleep! Hence, the name, The Peeper.

At any rate, there I was about to be dragged back to some abandoned mine shaft and eventually eaten by The Peeper. My only hope was for the zombie bobcat to kill me first.

As I leaped over the picket gate that led to my house, I finally stopped and looked back to survey the situation. Wow, that was a close one, but I'd managed to escape with my life. Now all I had to contend with was Granny!

I knew I couldn't tell Grandma what had happened that evening or I'd have gotten a second spanking for going to the dump and what was I going to do about my fishing rod and my rifle I'd hastily discarded back at the zombie bobcat?

I got up early the next morning knowing I had to return to the dump road to find my possessions. I also knew that because the sun was up, The Peeper would be at home in his coffin and the zombie bobcat would be dead again.

I gingerly sneaked out of the kitchen door being careful not to awaken Granny but mostly because I was still tender and smarting from the previous evening's homecoming.

As I approached the gate I noticed something peculiar. The closer I got, I simply couldn't believe my eyes. There, leaning up against the garage inside the gate, was my fishing rod and rifle! But how did it get there? I wondered? Then suddenly it came to me. My amazing Grandpa was right. It was just as he said. The rifle was magic! It had found its way back home and it had brought my fishing rod too!

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