

# A Woman's Place

By Susan L. Ebert

I was eight years old, and up way past my bedtime.

It was Indian summer of 1960, in the mid-zone where the undulating Bluegrass region rises like a bosom, becoming increasingly rugged, giving way to limestone ridges, which become the Appalachian foothills a few counties eastward; the land of my mother's family and my heart.

As the first-born grandchild of Dorsey Thomas Watkins – who had perhaps secretly wished for a first-born grandson – I went everywhere with my Papaw. Clapsed in front of him on his saddle astride his great albino Tennessee Walking Horse, Bill, as he brought in the cows for morning and evening milkings; cuddled up on the bench seat next to him in his big black Chevy truck; hunkered next to him as we coaxed bluegill from the stock pond with cane poles and crickets; cradled in his lap at the barbershop for his weekly trim.

Well, almost everywhere, that is. For until tonight, Mama had not allowed me to go coonhunting with Papaw. I reckon what changed her mind, is that my brother John, who was now six, was hankering to go,

*In this column you'll meet women who are passionate about hunting and fishing and saving the wild world for generations to follow.*



*The author, who was introduced to hunting by her grandfather, killed this big Rio Grande gobbler in Texas.*

and she could not say yes to him, and ignore my pleading eyes.

Giving her younger brothers, Gerald and Dorsey Lynn, stern instructions to keep an eye on us younguns, Ruby hugged us goodbye – at bedtime! – and out we spilled into the moonlight, like puppies into a bowl of milk.

Although John and I had explored, or so we thought, every creek bottom in Lower Nicholas County, the night-world that greeted us was foreign to our eyes. The velvet blackness was pierced through and through by thousands of pirouetting fireflies; an orange-yolk harvest moon cast eerie shadows on the familiar landscape of our daytime playground. Papaw's hounds, two redbones and a bluetick, who I had only seen languish forlornly in their doghouses during the day, were wagging their whole bodies in anticipation. Off we went from the farmhouse; the big khaki-clad men with guns and flashlights, my brother and I, to the sweet music of coonhounds in pursuit

of their quarry. I was hooked!

Down through the gullies and creek bottoms we clambered and



splashed, down amidst the giant spreading hickory and sycamore, down and down again with the hounds chasing the raccoons, and us in pursuit of all. The point was not so much to shoot the 'coons, as I recall, but to see how many the dogs could tree. After several successful treeings, the men would stop and build a small fire around which to rest, warm up and let everyone catch our breaths.

Scent, I think, is the strongest of all remembered senses. Still

today, I can conjure up the heady burgoon of that night's aromas: Papaw's starched khakis, smelling of Kentucky mountain air mixed with the Absorbine horse liniment he applied liberally for aches and pains; my own sweat, crisped by woodsmoke in the chill night air to permeate my clothes, long blonde hair and skin; the wet-dog smell of a bluetick hound as he lapped my face; the mysterious sharp scent emanating from the crystal contents of a Mason jar passed from man to

man around the campfire but not to my brother or myself.

Such was my introduction to the world of hunting.

As I grew into my teens and into adulthood, I found the world of hunting becoming increasingly distanced from me. My beloved Papaw died in 1979. I would watch from the kitchen window, with my Mamaw Grace, as unfamiliar men would stomp out into my familiar woods, guns a-shoulder and dogs at their heels, to bring deer, pheasant, duck and quail home. Women, I was told, should hunt rabbit, squirrel, 'possums; be "stew-pot" hunters, and leave the real hunting to us men.

My love for hunting ebbed and damned near died.

Still, my passion for the outdoors remained constant. As an avid horsewoman, I rode foxhunts and heavy-timbered cross-country courses in wild pockets of the Midwest, Northeast, Deep South and Texas. I fished and hiked my beloved wild places, exploring also wilderness areas of America's Southwest and Northwest.

During the eight years I served as marketing director for *Organic Gardening* magazine, I worked shoulder-to-shoulder with Bob Rodale, son of founder J.I. Rodale. Bob was an international skeet champion, and also just as adept at skinning a hog as he was at plucking an organic tomato. During my days at Rodale Press, my children and I flourished and found a path back to Texas, where son Scott was born and daughter Cristina conceived. (Both were baptized in my home church in Carlisle, Kentucky.)

Upon returning to Texas, I had the honor of being the only woman in sixty-five years to be publisher and editor of *Texas Parks & Wildlife* magazine, where I remained for seven years.

I returned to hunting with relish; as if greeting a long-lost lover, which indeed it was.



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Once again, I chose to stay up late or wake before dawn to see the things only us who care enough to see, can witness. Now, I could hunt again, and get comfortable with my own, new, left-handed gun.

Once again – in this case, not my Papaw and uncles but my newfound brothers – men invited me into their fraternity. The men with whom I hunt know that women and children are the keys to the future. Single mamas, such as I am, bring children and other women into the support of wildlife.

“I hate having a woman in deer camp,” a well-known outdoor writer recently complained to me. “Guys start falling all over themselves, and it changes everything.”

“Give me their phone numbers and let me ask why they do this,” I replied. “My guy friends tend to still scratch their nuts around the campfire, tell bad jokes and snore in the bunkhouse, just the same as always.”

He had nothing left to say.

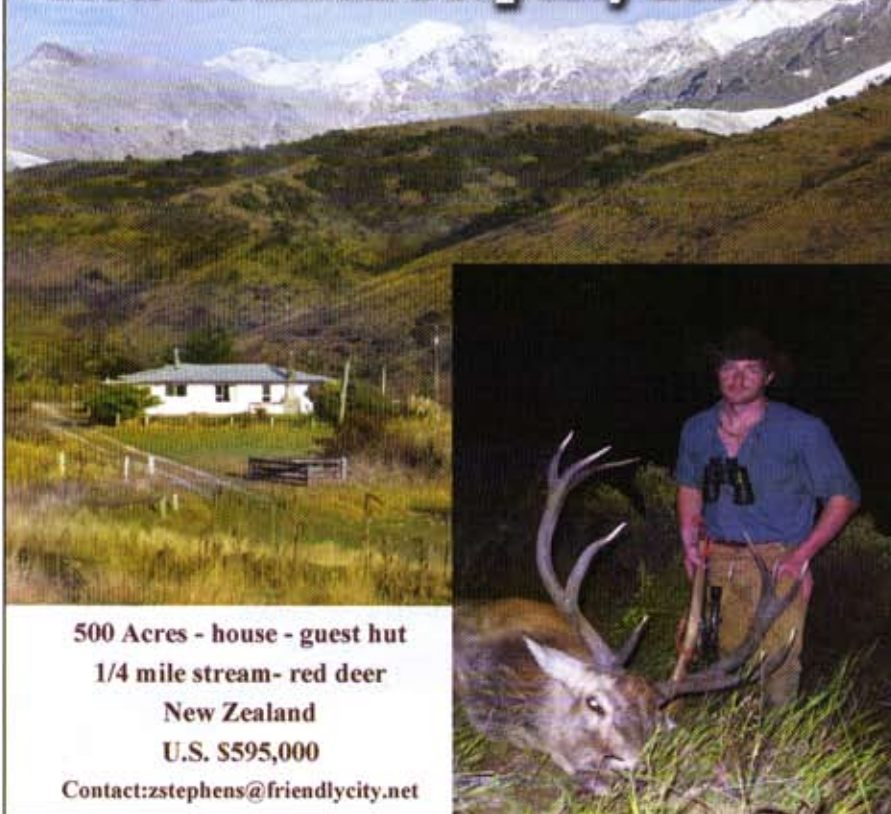
I have plenty left to say: A woman’s place is in the outdoors.

Our place is on rivers, burbling with life and birth. Our place is in the woods and meadows, where trees and grasses restore our spirits, so we can thus restore our men and children.

Our place is in a duck blind as a giant sluice of sunrise shoots over the eastern horizon, and the whole world seems reborn with hope and prayer.

Our place is honoring what our pioneer ancestor women did: making homes, defending children against warring Comanche, and hunting food on the prairies while men took cattle to market and fought wars. Our place is finding the joy of a fine dog who brings his quarry to his mistress, and the confidence that comes with being competent with guns, rods and knives. Our place is in the prayers of our children, for as my son Scott prayed one Easter, “Dear Lord, thank you for this turkey on

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our table, and helping my mama be a good shot."

**I**n this column, you'll be introduced to women who love the outdoors. The first few you'll meet, as do I, all owe our participation to men.

Soon, you will hear other women's voices, as well, about women who bring other women into our circle.

We need every one of us – man, woman and child – to join hands, if we are to save some semblance of the wild world we love for generations to follow.

The course, I think, is to put the shortest distance between ourselves and our food: We consumers vote with our wallets.

I prefer to buy local organic produce and hunt migratory birds. I like knowing that my Duck Stamp helps protect habitat all along the flyways, and helps me provide antibiotic-free, hormone-free table fare. Plus, the soul-stirring joy of rushing wingbeats, cupped wings and splayed feet in the morning marsh is revived when ducks are plated to family and friends. I prefer to buy my produce from local gardens; not from overseas. When I purchase meat for my family, I seek out steroid-free, hormone-free, antibiotic-free meat.

Still, no mere trip to the store – or even to the farmer's market – can equate to the emotional connection we feel when we hunt and become one with the natural world, an experience that glues us to our ancestors and enriches our ability to teach our children about the richly interconnected web of life.

Our wild world is becoming increasingly fragmented, rare and precious.

Take every man, woman and child you love into the wild: Show them what my papaw, Dorsey Thomas Watkins taught me, as a child:

A woman's place is in the outdoors. ♣