



*Jim Kitzmann and the 14-point buck he shot two years ago on his land. This year, for the first time in many years, Kitzmann will forego North Dakota's November deer season.*

# Hunting for Deer Camp Memories

By Ron Wilson

***Like the big deer hunting camps themselves, the idea of hauling a bunch of hunters in the back of a truck is mostly a thing of the past.***



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Jim Kitzmann is an inquisitive man. He earnestly searches for glimpses into the lives of those who lived on the land long before him, finding some answers in books and the hundreds of artifacts he's assembled over time.

The Mandan man likely knows more about the stone tools and arrowheads that make up part of his collection than he does about a handful of simple, old black and white photos taken at a deer camp along the Missouri River north of Stanton. "Now I wish I would have asked Dad more questions about that camp," Kitzmann said. "Big deer hunting camps like this are really a thing of the past. You just don't see them too often anymore."

It was 1948 and the price of gasoline was 26 cents per gallon, the minimum wage worker was making 40 cents per hour, and Edward Kitzmann of Hannover was attending his first hunting camp. "It was his first year hunting deer ... he would have been 37," Kitzmann said of his father. "He knew some people up in that area."

Nearly 60 years ago, deer numbers in North Dakota were a shadow of what they are today. The season was just three days long, and it wasn't a certainty there'd even be a season most years. From 1942 to 1953, for

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instance, hunters were allowed in the field about every other year.

In 1948, about 34,000 deer licenses were sold statewide, and about 58 percent of those were filled. (For comparison, more than 100,000 deer were taken by hunters in North Dakota in 2006.)

Even so, Edward Kitzmann and his hunting party had good success that year. On the back of one of the photographs it's written in pencil that 34 deer were shot by hunters. "They'd drive the deer out of the river bottom ... everyone got along good and did their part on the drives" Kitzmann remembers his Dad saying. "These people had gone through the Depression, had gone through some hard times ... Deer camp for these guys was a break. Dad had to save money for years to even buy a (rifle) to hunt."

We can tell by the photos that hunters were shuttled to and from hunting spots in the back of a truck, deer hung proudly from camp meat poles, and the one woman pictured, Kitzmann said, was the camp cook. We can only assume, however, what camp life was like during the short season: were jokes played on the rookie hunters, did card games last late into the night, were old deer hunting tales about the big ones that got away resurrected around an outdoor fire pit?

"I never got the chance to hunt there, and we didn't talk much about it, so I'll never know," Kitzman said.

North Dakota's deer hunting tradition is long and strong. Families reunite and friends

who maybe haven't seen each other since the last deer season rally around campfires to scratch deer hunts in the dirt with sticks, rib each other, and reminisce. To some, opening day has a holiday feel to it. Sort of like Thanksgiving, but without the turkey-induced nap between football games.

Talking about old deer camps and reliving some of his own past hunts is likely as close to deer hunting Kitzmann, 64, will get this season. For the first time in years, Kitzmann will miss North Dakota's November deer season, blaming his absence on arthritis. "I could still go on a stand and sit, but if I got something, then I don't know what I'd do," he said. "Missing the season is going to be hard."

For the last 12 years, Kitzmann has hunted alone on his farm north of New Salem. He didn't hunt in a group that offered some extra muscle to drag a deer out of a draw or help load it into the back of a pickup. "When I'd hunt by myself, I'd just sit on a stand and wait and watch," he said. "I learned so much about deer by just sitting and watching. I also got a lot easier shots."

When Kitzmann got started hunting in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it took a lot of time, effort and a fair amount of luck to get a deer. "If you had a buck tag you'd better shoot the first one you saw because you'd likely never get another chance," he said.

Deer, unlike today, were few and far between in North Dakota when Kitzmann was younger. "When I was a kid, if you saw a

***The deer hunting along the Missouri River nearly 60 years ago was good for this group of hunters. We're guessing, so was the camp food, campfire tales, camaraderie ...***



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deer on the prairie, you got on the phone and told all the neighbors about it," he said.

Kitzmann has shot a number of deer alone on his farm, but one in particular he likes to hang his hat on. (He could actually hang 14 hats for every point the white-tailed buck sports.)

In 2005, Kitzmann was scouting just days before the Friday noon opener when he spotted the buck, which stood only 40 yards from him. "I came home and told my wife I'd seen enough . . . I was going to hold out for him," he said.

He saw the buck several times during the season, but it never offered that high percentage shot Kitzmann hoped for.

"Finally, the last Thursday of the season I got him when he stepped out of the trees chasing a doe," he said. "I guess you could say that I went out with a bang. I had a lot of good years, a lot of fun deer hunting."

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**RON WILSON** is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



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*The season's harvest was proudly displayed in this camp somewhere near Stanton.*



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*Hunters who stayed in camp for the short deer season had a roof over their heads. It's guessed that some didn't spend the night, but drove out for the daily hunts.*