



The American

BY SHANE P. MAHONEY

It may appear to us now that North Americans, as products of the frontier, were destined to be hunters. How in this Eden of wilderness and bountiful game could we have become anything else?

Not really until the 19th Century did the hunter emerge as an identity in American life, made famous because a rising, literate middle class was now removed from the frontier hardships.

In the growing cities of America, those bastions of civilization and cradles of anti-hunting sentiment, did greatest support for hunting emerge. Formerly, in frontier times, hunting was merely a necessity, hardly something to support. Yet in the rising middle class culture, men in the thousands joined the ranks of hunters for no other reason than to belong to that fraternity. It may come as a shock to learn that it was 200 years after Jamestown, and a lot of deer down, before hunting was really *thought* about in America.

Hunting can be viewed as both a cultural phenomenon and a biological one. For the vast majority of us, hunting is not critical to our survival.

As modern hunters, what greater contradiction exists than we kill that which we love? Thus, while it might be reasonable to expect that Americans would become a nation of hunters, history reveals that it was not a given in the minds of the colonials, but gradually emerged in post-independence America. True, most frontier people relied at least in part on hunting to sustain themselves. But they certainly did not view it as a service to anyone but themselves with no other purpose than survival. Indeed, most dreamed of a time when they would not have to hunt, and when the cultivated land would provide all they required. The self-reliant farmer was assumed to be the next step in social evolution.

The anti-hunting movement is not new. Thus, hunting was then, as it is now, controversial, contradictory and entwined in the social debate over who we are as human beings, what as citizens should be our role and identity, and how should we interact with the natural world. For many it placed the American citizen too close to the Native American, an iconic symbol of contradiction and ambivalence in the American mind.

We have to remember that our forefathers were European, and they brought to the New World the ideas of the Enlightenment. In their minds, America would become the land of individual farmers who would eventually, and inevitably, lay down their guns and rise above their animal nature. Just as the Great Plains were to be brought under the plow and managed to foster the great herds of domestic cattle, and the wild men and beasts removed, so was hunting thought to become a thing of the past.

However, this did not happen. Somewhere along the way man's oldest tradition became something to be admired and sustained by many, and unopposed by a sizeable majority of American society. Oddly enough, as hunting's necessity declined, its popularity appeared to increase. As with all social change, many forces contributed to this transformation.

Crucial among them was the role some frontier hunters played in the Revolution, bringing hunting and heroism in parallel. But more important, with the great surge to independence, American society turned its focus from things European to things American. Everything from frontier life to native culture came under the cultural microscope, and figuring prominently were American hunters. As the writings of James Fennimore Cooper attested, hunters were now mythic heroes – men to be admired and emulated.

It was in this crucible of social and political change that Daniel Boone and David Crockett were to emerge as near-prophets to the American mind. No longer backward country bumpkins, or primitive frontier warriors, these individuals were translated to symbols of America's greatness. The western hero was buckskin-clad and capable of living from the land. By association with hunting then, all men could join with these heroes.

Hunter In Transition

The rugged individualism and frontier abilities of its people were indelibly tied to America's greatness. The hunter in our midst signaled that at least some had not lost these capacities, and were in fact the nation's best hope of holding on to "Americanness" forever.

This was how frontier necessity and survival became the great attractant to thousands of American men who no longer had any real need to hunt. It became a best means for urban professionals and great landholders to prove they had not gone soft, but yet retained the stuff of adventurers and nation builders. Through hunting, they would show not only their resilient capacity to undertake a life on the land, but also through study of the land and their quarry would they come to a greater understanding of their own identity. By the first decades of the 19th Century, hunting was thus creeping toward a social institution, and not only developed men of physical ability but of intellectual capacity as well.

It was essential in a very self-conscious American society that hunters be more than efficient killers of game. They had to elevate themselves beyond this or they would represent a stagnant America, one that had not progressed beyond the backwoods existence. An effective means of doing so was for hunters to couple their practical interest in the ways of wildlife with more elite activities, such as the pursuit of science. This was not a difficult transition for natural history had become by this time the new creed of enlightened men, both in Europe and in America. Men of such knowledge became greatly admired, whether a Thomas Jefferson in the New World, or a Charles Darwin in the Old.

Furthermore, the study of natural history, like hunting itself, fit the still prevailing idea that man was to have and execute dominion over the earth. Both activities were seen as assisting in this ordained responsibility, and in 19th Century America, subduing the continent was still a prevalent and intense ideal.

Thus, hunters had gone from being viewed as brutish men in decline to romantic figures who contributed to a sense of American identity, and to an understanding of the continent itself. By the time of the Civil War, hunting was a signal of progress, having by this time borrowed the sport hunter ideals of European counterparts, many of them aristocrats, and making hunting attractive to men of power and wealth. Through these recruits, hunting was to navigate the corridors of political influence, finalizing its legitimacy within the cultural fabric of the nation. In this final transition, American society saw the hunter not only as the noble frontiersman, but also as the scientist, the respectable citizen of commerce and industry, and ultimately, as the protector of nature and spokesman for conservation.

Through the leadership of outstanding men such as Theodore Roosevelt, hunting entered the 20th Century respected as a conservation tool and a true representation of progressive citizenry.

Hunters are not engaged in a simple thing, and solutions to our problems will be no less complex. History suggests success, however; and an understanding of our past can illuminate the way.

Both Teddy Roosevelt and Aldo Leopold, two of hunting's greatest statesmen, understood this. That is why they made hunters and hunting the center of social responsibility. Opposition is nothing new, my friends. The important thing for hunters is to stay focused and always in transition.

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**Hunt
Forever**