

The Great Goodpasture River Hunt of 1987

2482 Words

In the last quarter of the 20th Century, the autumn moose hunt was an iconic Alaskan leitmotif. A moose skull nailed above his doorway was the aspiration of nearly every rural Alaskan, tangible proof of his rite of passage from Cheechako to Real Sourdough. It's called a hunt (not grocery shopping) because one must first find it, then kill it, and then carry it home. The state has laws against failing to salvage the meat. Indeed, heaven help the poor schmuck who carries out the antlers first, even with the most sincere intentions to return and get the meat. The state is merciless about that. Most of the hunters in the Tanana Valley know the old adage, "The fun stops when the hammer drops", for from the moment the moose goes down, it is pure hard work. A bull moose can dress out at over 700 lbs. of meat and the antlers alone can weigh up to 75 lbs. This year, Papa was taking his 15-year-old on this rite of passage.

In preparation for the hunt, Papa had purchased a new 90 horse Johnson outboard for his used 18-foot flat bottom johnboat. For a few extra bucks he replaced the lower unit with a used jet impeller. In the weeks leading up to the hunt, he and his oldest child piled gear all over Momma's cellar floor, weighing the merits of every item...discarding some today, adding some tomorrow, only to discard some more. One would have thought they were in Skagway, readying to trek up the Chilkoot Pass with the Klondike

Gold Rushers. Reading chronicles of Arctic and Antarctic expeditions (especially Scott and Shackleton); on the weekend before hunting season, they went up the lower Goodpasture and cached extra food and fuel for the return trip...just in case.

The first day had gone fairly well, only running aground seven or eight times (each time going over the side to push the boat off and stand waist deep in the frigid water pulling rocks out of the jet impeller intake-grill). Late on the afternoon of the second day they struck a gravel bar; ripping a hole in the seam between the transom and the deck and sinking the boat. With help from a passing hunter, they managed to pull the boat from the bottom of the river to the bank. For three days they hand drilled aluminum from slit beer cans to pop rivet a patch over the transom, hunting moose each morning and evening (unsuccessfully, I must admit). On the third day, as night came on, they sat around the campfire and watched as a river runner hove into sight. Seeing the disabled craft on the riverbank, the hunters stopped to render assistance. As our heroes related their travails, the hunters postulated that since the Goodpasture was glacier-fed and winter was coming on, there was less melt, so the water levels had dropped. They had made it to a creek well beyond the logjam portage and still had seen no moose. Warming up with fresh coffee at the campfire, they commiserated on the paucity of moose, attributing it to the insidious encroachment of progress and civilization happening everywhere in Alaska. With less than half an hour of daylight left, the visitors had launched their boat and headed down river, promising to pass a message to Momma that her hunters were coming out and she should meet them early at the Tanana Bridge.

That had been the day before yesterday. Yesterday they had started down river feeling pretty satisfied. True, the Harpies of Ill Fortune had thrown down the gauntlet,

but yesterday, our heroes had resolutely picked it up and routed them from the field. It had been the first really great day of the hunt. The sun shined on the pristine wilderness, beaver played in the sloughs; and on several occasions, rounding a bend in the river, they espied bald eagles surveying their kingdoms from lofty perches in spruce trees along the bank. Late in the afternoon, they stopped at the fuel cache and topped off their tank. Locating their prior camp, they laid a fire and settled in for the night.

Unbeknownst to our modern Argonauts; about the time they were bedding down, Momma received a garbled phone call from the bush. In those primordial days before the advent of cell phones, bush calls were relayed from short wave to short wave until they reached a cabin with a phone, the occupant of which made the call. As with all human communication, each short wave call involved receiving, interpreting and re-phrasing the message for the next bounce downriver. Inevitably, the story evolved in the telling. In this instance, what started as “sunk the boat but got it afloat again – everything OK – meet us at the bridge in two days”; eventually arrived as “Lost the motor – Floating the Tanana – Hope to arrive at the launch point in two days”. Floating, as in no power or control of the boat.

Now for you Cheechakos out there, the Tanana is a major river system draining a large portion of the land between the Alaska Range and the Brooks Range. It is silted, deep and in places, very fast. Gale force winds are common, but in a storm, gusts can exceed force 10 on the Beaufort scale (over 55 knots). Much as she loved Papa, she knew he wasn't experienced enough to float his johnboat down the Tanana like some 20th Century Huckleberry Finn floating his raft down the Mississippi...but he was wild enough to try it. Complicating matters, the evening weather report warned of a severe

storm system due to arrive over the middle Tanana Valley after midnight. Momma was now extremely concerned.

Anxious and unable to sleep, she drove down to the launch-point shortly after dawn. As she paced along the riverbank (and several gusts nearly knocked her down) she could not see how her family could safely navigate the river. Staring glumly at the rapid current, it seemed to her the gusts were strengthening, as were her misgivings. Finally, in desperation, she returned home and called a family friend with a boat to request a rescue mission.

About the time she was pacing at the launch point, our stouthearted woodsmen awoke to a discordant fluttering all through the tent. A wind gust had torn part of the entryway, flapping it like a rug being dusted on a clothesline. For Poppa, it was just something one had to expect braving the wilds of the Alaskan Frontier. Convinced the winds would die down as they got farther down river, they cheerfully broke camp, and shoved off into the current. The wind, however, did not die down, veering to head on. Despite the headwinds and the repairs on the transom, they had managed to get the boat “on step” . With his son in the bow watching for sleepers, they were moving at a good rate of speed as they entered a sharp bend. Thinking of the yarns he would spin about his adventures when he got back home; Papa used the pilot console to steady himself against the centrifugal force. .

“HANG ON!!!” His strained voice resonated above the roar of the outboard as he crashed full length on the deck, the pilot console landing atop him. With no one steering, the 90 horse Johnson (utterly oblivious to the commotion up forward) roared right along driving the boat out of the water, over a beached log, and depositing it on the

gravel bar almost parallel to the channel: a full eight feet from the water. As it pitched to a stop, the steering console shifted slightly, activating the kill switch and shutting down the motor. Assured no one was hurt, Papa rapidly assessed the situation and concluded they were well and truly up the proverbial creek. But at least they had a paddle (although, in reality, it was an oar). Even so, they had one hell of a problem, for no rising tide was coming to float them off. Furthermore, large outboards do not have throttle-steering handles.

Evaluating and discarding several options, Papa grabbed his Sven saw and led them up the riverbank and into the woods. Selecting a suitable spruce tree, they sawed it down and dragged it to the boat. With the camp-hatchet, they knocked all the limbs off, fashioning a crude lever pole. With considerable straining and shoving, they managed to get a few inches of pole under the stern. Heaving up the opposite end of the lever with all their strength, they elevated the stern and watched, gratified, as the boat slid down the lever-pole to land on the gravel a couple of inches closer to the water. It worked again at the bow. So the afternoon passed. Grunt-toil-heave-sweat...now the stern...then the bow...back to the stern. Grunt-toil-heave-sweat, grunt-toil-heave-sweat, Yo! Heave! Ho! Yo! Heave! Ho! Break up the mantra with an occasional expletive (of which Momma would not approve) as you contemplate the distance still remaining to the water. Grunt-toil-heave-sweat . Yo! Heave! Ho! Periodically remind yourself of all the fun you are having on this (EXPLETIVE DELETED) moose hunt. Grunt – toil – heave –sweat. Yo! Heave! Ho! At some point in this nightmarish void, Papa realized his hands were getting wet twisting the lever pole under the stern. Gradually, the weight of the boat became less

as the stern began to float and a few minutes later, the current suddenly wrenched it from the bar, necessitating a mad scramble to grab the bow line as the boat started downriver.

With his vessel securely tied to the log, Papa stared at the engine, hoping for inspiration on how to maneuver the outboard. Poets contend that necessity is the mother of invention. Most of us mere mortals, however, eventually learn that like any conscientious mother, she can be worn to a frazzle and require a rest. Papa and son continued to stare for a significant length of time.

“Papa,” it was tentatively spoken, “can we duct tape the steering console back into place?” Not wanting to hurt the youngster’s feelings, (he had, after all, not whined even one time about all the problems), Papa stifled his reflex response regarding the idiocy of the suggestion (Papa was, after all, an ex-Army Sergeant). Yet, talk about out of the mouths of babes...Mother Necessity finally roused herself and like the final move of a Rubik’s cube, a way forward fell into place. Duct tape the base of the console to the deck...Half way from the base to the top, run parachute cord around it...use parachute cord to tie guy-lines from each corner of the pilot console to the corresponding corner of the boat...two to the bow, two to the stern. Some time later, as they surveyed the finished product, they had to admit it certainly wasn’t pretty...but it was stable enough to turn the outboard from side to side. Twisting the ignition key, Papa gave heartfelt thanks to the Almighty when the engine caught and settled into its throaty roar. Slowly backing away from the bar, they once more headed for the rendezvous; fighting the headwind, and occasionally going over the side to pull the boat off a bar and once again pull rocks from the impeller intake-grill with his trusty Leatherman...It was however, noticeably less often than coming up-river. As the sun moved into the final quarter of its arc, the cold,

wet hunters finally spotted the confluence of the Goodpasture and the Tanana. Only eight miles of the Tanana remained between them and the rendezvous, so they pulled out on a gravel bar to boil some water over a hasty campfire...a warm-up break before the final push down the Tanana River. Papa had given his son a cup of chocolate and was mixing himself some powdered coffee when the rescue boat arrived.

With his offspring safely on the rescue boat, he cranked up his engine. By the gods, he was determined, to bring his vessel back to port under her own power! He was not, however, willing to risk the kid. There was absolutely no way he was going home to tell Momma he had lost their child on the river. He'd sooner throw himself upon his sword (in this case his authentic Green River Hunting Knife mail-ordered from Smoky Mountain Knife Works) than face her with such news. Like Roman Governor Varus after the Battle of Teutoberg, he knew in the end it would be quicker and more merciful. The Fates, however, relented somewhat; and 45 minutes later, Papa beached his beat-up craft on the gravel beneath the Tanana River Bridge.

While towing the boat back home, the three Moirai had a final sardonic laugh. From the roadside, a bull moose with at least a 50-inch rack darted across the road, directly in front of Papa's truck...a near collision.

Impatiently waiting at home, Momma paced the floor, praying for their safe return. Finally they drove up and she ran out to meet them. Although immensely relieved that both of them were safe, she was in no mood for Poppa's cheerful greeting:

“Hi Baby, we sunk the boat but we got it back home. How long ya think before the insurance pays off so I can go get a new one and get back out?”

“NEVER!!!” It was the roar of an enraged momma grizzly, springing to the defense of her cub, “ YOU COULD HAVE KILLED MY SON!!!”

With that, she took her cub into the house, punctuating her exit by slamming the front door...in absolutely no mood whatever to be trifled with.

Having been married only 19 years, Papa was still somewhat of a neophyte in the Eleusinian Mysteries of Feminine Logic. He was however, astute enough to realize this was probably not the best time for a rational discussion regarding his escapades up-river. He wasn't terribly worried, though, for this marriage was a love match. Time would work its soothing magic on her, and when she had calmed down; he was confident he would dazzle her with the brilliance of his logic and she'd relent and let him get another boat – and he was right. She finally came around – five years later.

There was one lesson he had taken to heart from the Great Goodpasture River Hunt of 1987. The course of one's life is similar to the course of the river as it sweeps to its fated extinction in the sea. The quantity of material things one possesses in reality is of little consequence, for they can be beached on the gravel bars of adversity at any moment. Just as the river, in the course of its meanderings, affects everything it touches; the true monuments to a person's existence are the interactions and memories engendered in the day-to-day flow of life to the Spiritual Oceania from whence it came.