

The Day JFK Was Shot

by
Jim Sayles

Everyone my age remembers exactly where they were and what they were doing when JFK was shot. It was a tragic day in American history, equal, in those days, with our more current response to the 9/11 tragedy.

I was in deer camp on the Sayles Ranch.

Each year, beginning in 1962, my hunting buddies and I set up a deer hunting camp in the Huff pasture with a large, heavy, canvas tarp stretched over a rope, staked down at the back with the front flap tied off to several oak trees in traditional western style. The tarp afforded protection in the event of rain and shade when it was sunny.

Our food supplies were limited to a sack of potatoes, a sack of onions, pinto beans, some flour, and salt, garlic salt, and pepper, and after the first deer was hung we looked forward to an African style gorge-feast of french fried potatoes, ranch style beans, and chicken-fried backstrap all washed down with cold Coors beer.

It was in this camp on Thursday night, November 21, 1963, that the usual “Wild Bunch” was there, Ned Butler, Jim Tutt, Hoot Gibson, Buck McMullan, and, that year, my roommate, the little wild man, Ed Muse.

The only camouflage clothes available were WWII pattern military surplus, but none of us wore camouflage. We wore jeans, plaid or khaki shirts, and western felt hats, preferably Stetsons, with Buck’s hat always taking the prize for the most beat up and sweat-stained along with it’s traditional adornment of a scraggly black buzzard feather.

We all wore big belt knives, and they were frequently stuck in a big, dead elm around our “bulls-eye”, a tattered ace of spades held in place by a tack.

We also wore revolvers, western revolvers with fast draw holsters. A stranger, coming upon us by accident could easily have mistaken us for a band of outlaws from the old west.

It was a time of testosterone-filled exuberance in the most beautiful time of the year, and, as always, we drank a little too much beer the night before the first day of hunting.

Everyone but Ned was up before daylight, and, as we prepared to depart to the far ends of the ranch, Hoot, a three hundred twenty pound, six foot four giant of a man, chided Ned.

“Ned, you better get up. You’re gonna miss it. We’re all gonna kill a buck, and you’ll be the only one to miss out. You’ll never live this one down.”

Ned grumbled and pulled the bedroll up over his head.

There weren’t many actual deer stands on the Sayles Ranch in those days, but we all had our favorite ambush spots, lookouts, or stalking grounds. And, yet, when we gathered up later that morning to come back to camp no one had taken a shot.

Ed’s story was the most laughable. We had placed him in one of the few tree stands, a pallet attached to an oak tree with cedar posts for legs, and, when he fell asleep, he was awakened by his fall to the leaf cluttered ground eight feet below. His father’s rifle, a .300 H & H, was lying beside him, and two bucks, an eight and a ten point, were staring at him fifty yards away. Ed raised the rifle slowly to take a shot, but as he attempted to take aim he realized he was looking through an empty tube. The fall had broken the glass out of his scope.

Back at camp, after we poured out of the old blue army jeep and Buck's red, flat-bed truck, Hoot laughed and said, "Look at Ned. He's still asleep."

Suddenly the look on his face changed from humor to chagrin as he said, "Oh, no. No. NO. Don't tell me."

Hanging on the deer pole with Ned's tag tied to the antler was a nice 8 point buck.

The sun had awakened Ned, and, after casually getting up and getting dressed, he walked up the hill behind camp where he encountered the buck. After dragging it back down to camp and hanging it on the pole, he got back into his warm bedroll and was sound asleep when we arrived.

My dad and John Matthews were co-owners of a thoroughbred gelding, Red Viking, that set a track record at Del Mar in California, and my dad invited their horse trainers to come to Texas for a three day deer hunt. He showed them what pasture to hunt and told me where they would be, but, other than that, I had no responsibility for them and did not expect to see them.

The night before, as the trainers had cocktails at my father's house, my father told them, "You need to go to Jim's camp and meet him. His mother sent them out a large ham, a pot of beans, and a chocolate cake. So you might as well have lunch with them rather than go into town."

But my dad failed to tell me that we should expect company.

After skinning Ned's buck we began to cut it up for our gorge-feast, and the butchering got out of hand as we began to stab our knives into the buck's flesh, tearing off huge chunks of meat, as we attempted to gross one another out by seeing who could eat the most raw venison.

Picture it. Hoot with a ham sandwich in one hand and a large piece of chocolate cake in the other hand, taking alternate bites as he egged us on. Ned at 245, Jim Tutt at 225 on down to the runt, Ed, the wild man, Muse, disdaining the civilized food as we tore off raw flesh, growling and snarling like a pack of savage wolves with blood running down our chins and dripping from our fingers while the two horse trainers from California, in their crisp, new L.L. Bean hunting outfits, walked up, unannounced, to our campsite.....to have lunch with us.

When they realized what they were looking at they stopped one hundred feet away with widened eyes and mouths agape.

Even before they spoke they began backpeddling the way they had come, as if they hoped that we had not seen them. Then the bravest of the two called out, seeing that we had spotted them, and he said, "Hal told us to come by and say, 'hello', but we need to get on back to town. Just wanted to say, 'hi,' and thank you for letting us come out for a hunt. Good to meet you."

Once they got to where they thought we couldn't see them, they turned and ran up the hill to their rent car.

We heard the news, later that afternoon, that JFK had been assassinated in Dallas, and on Monday I heard from my dad that his horse trainers, who had planned a three day hunt, flew back to California Friday afternoon, the first day of the hunt, on "urgent business."

I smiled but didn't say anything. I guess they didn't want to have anything more to do with a state where Presidents get shot down in the streets of Dallas, and the good ol'

boys, carrying revolvers and Bowie knives, strip meat off freshly killed deer carcasses and eat it raw for lunch.



The Wild Bunch – Jim Tutt, Jim Sayles, Hoot Gibson, Buck McMullan, Ned Butler