

**Morning Was Coming, I Was Ready**  
**Article from May - Jun 2005 Buckeye Trapper**  
**by Col. Richard L. Stanley Sr.**

I felt a soft touch on my shoulder. It was Dad gently shaking me from sleep to the cold darkness of early morning. "Come on Richie, it's time to check our trap line before the critters get away," Dad was softly whispering in my ear so as not to awake my little brothers soundly sleeping under the big feather-tic beside me.

It was pre-1925 and I was still in knickers. Dad had long promised me he'd take me with him on the trap line after I turned nine and could keep up with him along the creek bed.

Dad stood there by my old four-poster bed already dressed and holding aloft his battered old "Big-Bowl" coal oil lantern. He never went anywhere without it at night due to his poor sight. The "Big-Bowl" was fussen and poppen as usual due to the cheap grade of coal oil, or kerosene Dad used. The lantern cast his huge shadow back on my bedroom wall. That's enough to scare a kid right out of his bed I thought to myself. As he spoke his breath hung in the air like a frozen cloud telling me it was going to be a cold one. But I was ready!

This wasn't like Mom waking me up for school when I'd try to lay back and hide under the covers. When you're nine years old there is a difference between your Mom calling you for school, and your Dad calling you for a new adventure on his trap line. Yes, I was ready! School was one thing, but your Dad inviting you on the trap line was something else. Together we would ride to the hounds; my Dad and me! So I quickly slid out of bed onto the cold floor, grabbed my clothes, which I had especially piled on the floor the night before, and tippitoeed downstairs to the inviting kitchen where ol' Dad had the wood blazing in the cook stove. This cozily warmed up Mom's kitchen and Dad had a pan of mush and sausages frying thereon. Mom really knew how to cook, but she was sleeping in this cold morning. It was about 4 a.m. Dad was an early riser.

While I was pulling on my two pairs of knickers and double socks and sweaters; not forgetting my well-worn leather high-tops with my trusty Remington pocketknife tucked in the side pocket; Dad had set the table for us men. Even hot biscuits. There was a new feeling of togetherness here between my Dad and me, even though he was pulling a huge stocking cap so far down over my head I could scarcely see and wrapping a long muffler about my neck so I could barely breathe.

I had three brothers and three sisters, which really left little time for a one on one relationship with our parents. But I was the oldest and the only child to show an interest in hunting and fishing with Dad. My Mom was Dad's field companion before us kids arrived and was pretty good with the shotgun. As the years passed by I found I was truly blessed to have the same interests as my Dad for the hours spent together in the field were the most wonderful days of my childhood.

Dad was not much for talking as he spent much of his time by his lonesome out in the woods or working his farm sunup to sundown, so we usually ate in silence. But I knew what he was thinking. I would study his face, unknown to him of course, and I could see little smiles and a twinkle in his eyes and I knew he was thinking of our coming day's adventure out there in the wilds together. He thought a lot, so did I.

Dad had already harnessed ol' Mare to our buckboard in the barn. Ol' Mare always loved to go for a trot, anytime, anyplace, as she loved to run the trails usually with my dog, Snapper, gleefully barking at her heels. Snapper was not allowed to accompany us on the trap line.

After cleaning off the table, Dad turned the wick down on the kitchen wall lantern and turned up the Big Bowl. He wedged another piece of wood in the stove for Mom and led the way out to the barn. "It's really finally happening. I'm going along on the line. Seems like I've waited for years for this moment." My mind

was racing with excitement. It was cold, dark, and very quiet outside. A cowbell clanged as ol' Bessie stirred in her sleep in the barn. A limb snapped as the sap froze in the big oak tree by the barn. The moon had disappeared and only a handful of twinkling stars attempted to light up the cold, dark sky. It was all kind of foreboding and ominous to me, as I never got out at this time of morning before. Oh well, I was ready!

Dad's traps were mostly set around part of a long curving lake of which I never saw the other end. It laid several miles from our farm through a deep woods and much rough country. Dad and a stranger had an understanding on trapping this lake together in peace. The other man was a full-blooded Shawnee who they say lived in a small log cabin set far back in the woods at the other end of the lake. I had never seen this Indian but my schoolmates had many stories to tell about him; some true, some not so true, my Dad said. But I knew darn well that I'd never want to bump into him in the woods without Dad and Snapper with me. I wasn't afraid, just cautious, you know. Anyway, Dad said he didn't speak much English and they talked mostly in sign and for me to never bother him, as if.

We jiggled and bounced along in the buggy with ol' Mare blowing her frosty breath in great clouds which hung in the air as we passed by. The ruts in the mud road had frozen during the night and I feared the wheels would break when passing through, catching in one rut, then another. This is why some call it a "buckboard". Dad built most of it out of old weathered flat barn boards. Dad's "Big Bowl" lantern hanging on the front-top of the buggy, swinging crazily, was casting great mysterious shadows of the trees along the narrow trail winding through the forest. Some trees had limbs that actually looked as if they were reaching out for us as we raced by. Ol' Mare didn't wear blinders and I had seen her, more than once, look sideways with fearful eyes as if she knew more than I what lurked behind the shadowy trees. Mostly I remember the great ghostly, galloping shadow out front of us, cast by the ol' Mare herself as she trotted along forever trying to keep up with her own shadow.

An owl hooted at us as we rolled by, only to be answered by another owl further along the trail asking "Who? Who?" with no answer whatsoever, this was appearing to be rather ominous, it was certainly frightening to a child of my years at the time. I fully expected to see a menacing dragon fly overhead. I carefully watched Dad for sign. I was ready! My right hand rested comfortably on my Remington tucked in the pocket of my high tops.

Suddenly something flitted into the trail ahead, stopped, and then flashed its gleaming yellow, eyes at our lantern's light, then disappeared into the underbrush beside the trail.

I looked up at Dad. He casually explained it was a mere grey fox out hunting its dinner. "Perhaps we will meet again," Dad said wistfully. My inquiring mind was activated. "Wow!" I thought, "The darkness must be full of fur animals we could catch." Somewhere far ahead a whip-poor-wil sang its lonesome night song.

We soon came to the lake where Dad kept an old flat-bottomed rowboat that he had made years before for fishing. We soon were rowing our way along the water edge. Some places there were very steep banks and at other areas there were creeks entering and swampy places with some strange animals making splashing noises in the near dark areas. My imagination was running wild, as it was still dark and patches of fog hung in the air like old tree moss. I felt like I was in a place we shouldn't be in. Somewhere far off a lonely dog barked. An oar squeaked.

Our Big Bowl lantern only lit up a circle about ten foot out but Dad knew where he was going. He was a woodsman. He'd stop here and there, poking around with his long staff that he always had in the boat. He used it for about everything, from poling us along in shallow water to killing a water snake. Sometimes he'd get real excited pulling up his trap from deep water with a big muskrat caught therein he called "Muskrat." Much bigger than the ones I chase around the barn. "The big difference," Dad said, "is I get cash money for these rats."

We picked up a bunch of these wet 'rats, forcing me further and further back in the boat as I'd not yet accepted them as boat-buddies. I still was learning. At one spot he caught an old lazy possum and casually tossed it in the boat, in my end, it didn't appreciate the toss and was about to show me its displeasure, grinding its teeth and making funny noises. I was about to exit my end of the boat, post-haste, into three feet of murky water, when dear ol' Dad threw an old burlap bag over this weird denizen and it immediately "played possum". With some foreboding I regained my composure and re-took my seat nearer the stern keeping one eye on the denizen and the other eye on the pile of so-called expired big 'rats, expecting any minute for one of these wet things to come alive and run up my leg. I was ready! I think.

All of a sudden, from out of the fog and darkness, there was an old man in a burchbark canoe silently gliding past our path. His speed was such that he did not even leave a wake. He sat ramrod straight, kneeling on the floor of his canoe, his single paddle poised inches above the water preparing for another stroke. He appeared to be as old as the mountains. His face was like tanned leather, deeply lined from years in the sun and wilderness. His long raven black hair was hiding part of his features except his piercing eyes; one red and one jet black, both appearing to be glowing like embers in a smoldering camp fire, seemingly filled with immortal hatred, but for what. I thought, he seems to have the best of both worlds.

He slowly turned his head to us, affixing those haunting eyes on both of us at the same time. My eyes quickly caught his necklace and head cover. Around his neck he wore several strands of beads that even in the semi-darkness sparkled like diamonds and red rubies reflecting more colors than the rainbow from our lanterns light. Square atop his triangular shaped head with high cheekbones sat the grinning face of a coonskin cap, teeth and all, charcoal eyes also staring at me. This old Shawnee brave appeared to be toothless and his cheeks sunk in on both sides where his teeth should have been.

Without a verbal greeting, change of expression or display of emotion at seeing us in the darkness, this old brave raised one hand from the paddle, palm to us, and silently passed on into a fog bank as though he had never truly existed here beside us in the water. The entire episode took place in the span of fifteen seconds. His epitaph was only a faint swirl in the waters from his paddle. Many years would pass and long after his departure with the Great Spirit would I learn the truth. This kindly old soul of the woods, who all of us kids feared, who seemingly could put the fear of hellfire into anyone he gazed at, was actually legally blind and rarely knew if he was looking at anyone unless he heard their presence. His poor eyes merely were reflecting our own fires and personal fears.

When we departed the shore in our boat Dad cautioned me not to talk only whisper if necessary, as our voices scare the night critters and we were now in their world.

Occasionally Dad would step off the boat to walk a short way into the woods to check a trap. For this he carried a pail with vegetables, strips of rabbit fur, chicken parts and other assorted smelly things to attract the fur animals. Also in the pail was a small hatchet, given him when he was a young man by an Indian hunter he befriended. He also carried a spool of fine baling wire. He was always experimenting with snare type traps where he had to bend a small sapling tree down to attach it to some kind of trigger on the snare to jerk the critter off his feet when caught. He was never very successful with these kinds of traps. Some rabbits occasionally for supper.

We paused once, way out in the dark lake while crossing. While the boat softly bobbed about, my good ol' Dad took from under his great coat two sandwiches Mom had prepared for us the night before. Big slabs of cheese with home made bread and butter, compliments of Bessie. "Dad thinks of everything." I thought as I munched away at the goodies. This sure added to the magic of being out here in the wilderness alone with my trapper Dad. A nod of his head and a big grin made our snack complete.

Morning was coming. A slight breeze ruffled the lake surface. Shadows were reluctantly retreating into the forest along the shoreline. The sun was rising over the distant forest and was painting the soft, feather like clouds with tips of red and gold. Several colorful ducks resting along the shore, on our approach, frantically paddled away to safer water. Far out in the lake a gaggle of geese rose in unison to continue their long trek south to warmer waters. A beautiful morning.

Once when Dad stepped off the boat into the woods I heard him fussing about and a chain rattling. When he returned he carried a big raccoon by the tail, larger than ol' Snapper he was. Dad's proud smile told it all. As he rowed along he told me about the coonskin headgear the old Shawnee wore.

Dad said the old Shawnee was known as Hawkeye throughout the mountains, probably due to his vision problem. He said that chieftains or tribal leaders often wore the coonskin headgear with the entire raccoon head on top. The raccoons bared teeth gave them a appearance of ferociousness and cunning, the pointed ears gave the Indian extra hearing powers, and the extra eyes gave the Indian the vision strength to see near and far in his hunts and battle. The remaining pelt draped over his shoulders commanded a sign of security, good health and prosperity.

"All Indians", Dad continued on, "consider all animals as their friends and indeed pray for them to the Great Spirit before killing any animal and immediately thereafter. Another prayer is said thanking the Great Spirit and the animal for the meat to eat and the pelts to make into clothing and other necessities. Nothing is ever wasted." Dad had known many Indians.

Our work was completed for the morning and the sun was friendly to our faces as we turned the boat about to return to our buggy and the warm lap blankets.

Mom had another hot breakfast waiting for us. Dad told Mom of our great adventure together on the lake saying it was one of his best days ever and that perhaps I had brought him luck on the trap line. My cup runneth over, there was that big smile and twinkle in his eye again as he winked at Mom.

The die had been cast and I knew I was a dyed-in-the-wool trapper from then on. My big reward was being alone with Papa on my first trapline adventure, long ago. ### Col. Richard L. Stanley, Sr., 243 Manatee Road, Winter Haven, Fl. 33884

Editor's Note: Richard has asked us to inform our readers that he has been diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma and will be undergoing treatment. He regrets that his current condition did not allow him to write the next installment of his "Remember When" series. Richard hopes to be far enough along with his recovery to continue writing soon.

Richard would appreciate our prayers and hearing from our readers who have a moment to write a short note or to make a phone call at 863-324-2711.