



Traditional Bow - Meeting Marvin

Story and Photos by
Brad Isham



Few indeed seem fitted for archery or care for it. But that rare soul who finds in its appeal something that satisfies his desire for fair play, historic sentiment, and the call of the open world, will be happy . . . As an implement of the chase, to us it seems to hold a place unique for fairness . . . Yet these are not the reasons why we shoot the bow; we do it because we love it, and this is no reason; it is an emotion difficult to explain.

Saxton Pope, 1923

Few people are aware that traditional archery still exists. Modern archery has evolved into perfectly engineered, CAD-produced compound and cross bows, with high-tech sighting systems that rival rifles. I'm not making judgments against modern archery equipment, or the insensate impression they create, that the kill is paramount, the hunt secondary. I've only come to my own conclusion that traditional archery is right for me.

As I became interested in traditional archery and hunting, I found a small community of like-minded people who believe that to take a game animal you should be within an intimate distance. Going afield with a simple, handmade longbow and a quiver of arrows fletched with turkey or goose feathers is one of the greatest, simple pleasures available in the hunting world. A few years and many mistakes into my traditional archery conversion, I moved to Rappahannock County, Virginia, where I met a man lost in time, Marvin Breeden. Since meeting Breeden, I've gained a half-century of traditional archery experience through his patient instruction.

Breeden began bowhunting in 1957 as a young man in Great Falls, Virginia. He was introduced to archery and falconry by Al Nye, a noted bowhunter, falconer, and outdoor writer. Nye's articles can still be found today. Nye taught



Breeden the old method of catching birds of prey with ground nets and barn pigeons tied to long poles for bait. But the falconry was simply too time consuming for Breeden, and he found a passion for the bow and arrow.

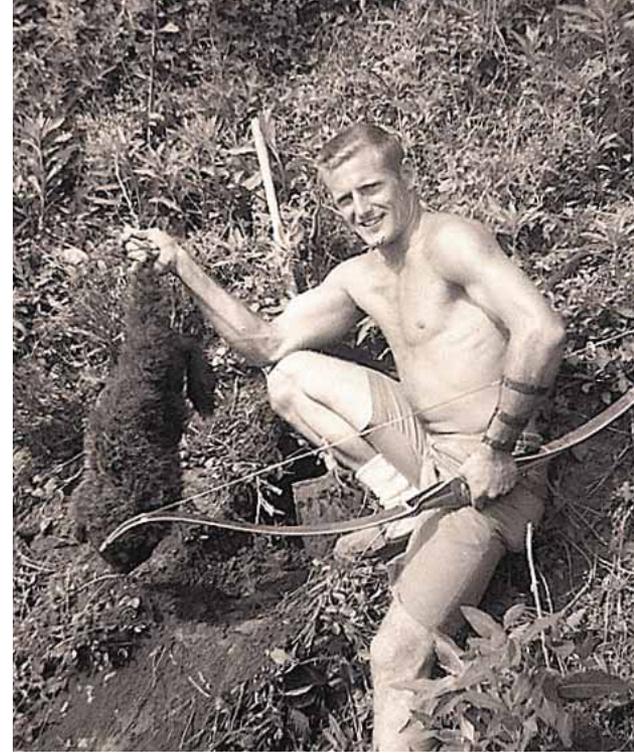
Breeden's longbows start from seven-foot logs, typically Osage orange but sometimes Hickory or Mulberry. The logs are split lengthwise into billets using a steel wedge and a sledge hammer, debarked, and stacked horizontally in a drying rack for months and sometimes years

before they are ready to be shaped. He uses a pattern to trace the bow's outline onto the billet and rough cuts toward the outline with a hatchet. As he nears the outline he trades the hatchet for a draw knife, then the draw knife for a wood rasp, and finally the rasp for a wood scraper, taking as little wood as possible with each stroke.

He examines the growth rings in the billet to find the widest one with which to work. The *back* of the bow (the side away from you when shooting) must be worked down to follow a common

growth ring from tip to tip so that when the limbs are bent under stress they will not split or separate. The *belly* of the bow (the side facing you when shooting) will sometimes pass through several growth rings as it tapers from the handle to each tip. At this point the bow is strung, the limbs are tillered (corrected to bend appropriately), sanded, finished, and then of course, it is named.

He makes his own bowstrings using a method called the Flemish twist. The twist blends two to three bundles of



Dacron string, twisting each bundle individually while wrapping the bundles together in similar fashion to making rope. The loops at the ends of the strings are blended into the body in a smooth, twisted taper. It's the twist in the string that keeps it together under the stress of shooting.

The arrows Breeden makes start with a plain shaft of 11/32 inch Port Orford cedar. To begin, the shafts are hand straightened, cut to length, tapered on each end, and then dipped into clear gloss polyurethane and dried, hanging vertically on a rack made of clothespins nailed to a board. They are crown-dipped in paint to add color, eight inches on the nock end, where the feathers will be added, and dried again.

The shaft is crested on a machine Breeden made himself in the 1950s from the motor of an old ship's compass, some roller bearings, and a board. To crest an arrow is to create your own signature by adding colored stripes uniquely yours. The crest is followed by attaching hand-cut turkey or goose feathers and a field point for practice arrows or a broad-

head for hunting. He still uses the Zwickey Eskimo broadheads like he did in the 50s; an effective broadhead that, like Breeden, hasn't needed to change.

His years of experience leave him secure in his belief that traditional archery is highly effective when tempered by practice and self-discipline. In 2002, when Breeden was 70 years old, he found bear tracks in the snow while hunting the hardwoods of Rappahannock County. On a bluff overlooking the Rappahannock River, the bear tracks became combined with deer tracks. He climbed a tree and hauled up his bow and arrows. In the cold and the snow he waited, thankful for the day, the snow, and the opportunity to hunt. The bear followed back his own tracks right past Breeden's stand and at 22 paces he loosed an arrow that found its intention. The bear made only 35 yards before expiring and weighed-in at just over 400 pounds.

Breeden has had many hunting partners over the years, myself included, but the strangest was a ruffed grouse. It walked out of the woods one spring into Breeden's garden while he was tilling the

soil. The grouse followed Breeden up and down the rows, scratching in the soil, and never seemed to mind Breeden or the tiller. The bird began meeting him in the yard every time he came out of the house and soon followed him everywhere. By fall, grouse would follow Breeden to the woods and join him in his tree stand to hunt. The bird would perch on a nocked arrow, walk the limbs of the bow, or even sit on Breeden's head, preferring his knit cap to any other headwear.

"He used to pull my hat off so it would fall to the ground and then he could fly down and have it all to himself," Breeden laughs as he relives his time with the grouse. "Then he just left and never came back. I always worried about him, I hoped he didn't get eaten by a fox or killed by a hunter or anything, but you know one day, months later, I saw him again. I was out in the woods shooting my bow, and I decided to sit down and take a rest. I heard something walking through the leaves toward me and I sat up, thinking it was a deer. And there he was – the grouse! I lay down on my back, pulled some trail mix out

of my pocket and put it on my chest, and the old boy hopped right up and started eating just like he used to. We shared the time and the trail mix, and when he was done he walked off and that time was the last. I never saw him again.” A hunter, yes: insensitive, no.

Breeden continues to hunt, and he shoots his self-made bows daily until taken over by the need to warm his weary knees by the woodstove. Other than tired knees, he is in excellent health and hopefully will be blessed with years of adventures to come.