Elmer and the Gray Fox

By
Ken Miller

When we bought the lot to build our house, it was totally devoid of trees as it had been part of a farm field until the lady who owned it got to where she needed to enter a nursing home. So the small farm was divided up into sizeable lots and sold so she could afford her extended care. Shortly after our house was finished and we moved in, I began looking for trees to line the driveway. I have always been partial to pin oaks and they grew wild in the woods at the back of Elmer’s farm which was just across the road from our house. Elmer said that I could dig up and transfer all the pin oaks that I wanted. So, with time my driveway and the front of the lot was lined with pin oaks. The oaks thrived in my soil and as soon as they had their root systems reestablished, they began to grow. After several years they were of a size that some of their limbs were sticking out into my driveway and in need of pruning.

One June day, I was in the process of lopping off lower limbs of the pin oaks when Elmer pulled into my driveway. “Come with me, we’re going to shoot a gray fox,” he said. “Where,” I asked. “Just over here in the back field,” was his reply. Now, to a farmer who raises chickens and ducks for sale, a fox of any color is a hated enemy, to be destroyed whenever encountered. It wasn’t so much that Elmer raised chickens and ducks, but Lizzie, his wife did. And if Lizzie said that a fox was making off with any of her chickens or ducks, war was declared.

“Do I need a gun?” I asked. “Nope, I’ve got my 22 rifle in the car,” said Elmer. So, I got in and we drove out the dirt road to his back field. “Where do you see the fox?” I asked. “Right up there on the hill where those sumacs are growing,” He said. “I want to get a good clean shot at this one so I can get it mounted and put it in the living room for Lizzie. That way whenever she mentions, ‘fox’, I can point to it and tell her I’ll take care of it just like I did this one,” he explained. We parked the car and began sneaking out through the field. Bent over, we got to the top of the rise and hid behind some scrub brush. “Let’s just hunker down here and wait,” he whispered. “It’ll be along soon.”

We sat there for close to a half hour before I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. As I slowly turned my head so as not to spook whatever was moving through the grass, I caught a glimpse of the fox. It was indeed a gray fox and, a magnificent creature. I nudged Elmer and pointed in the direction that I had seen it. Elmer whispered,
“I’ll wait until it gets into the opening so I have a clean shot.” Elmer eased the safety off the gun and rested the barrel over a small limb. The fox took a tentative step into the opening and Elmer fired. I knew it was a clean miss as I saw the puff of dust that was created when the bullet struck the ground several yards beyond the fox. The fox leapt into the air, came down and disappeared. “I got him!” said Elmer. “I don’t think so,” I told him. “Nope, I got him, let’s go down and get him,” he said.

When we got to the spot where the fox had been, there was no fox in sight. “I don’t see how I could have missed him,” Elmer said. “Let’s look around for blood.” At the side of this small open area there were several groundhog holes. I walked over to have a look at them. There, just inside one of the holes, I could see the fox’s tail. He had apparently responded to the shot by seeking to hide in one of the groundhog holes. “Over here, Elmer,” I said. “Yep, boy, I knew I got him,” he said when he saw the tail. “Elmer, I don’t think you hit it,” I said. “Now what are we going to do?” “Pull him out,” was his reply. “Pull him out? Elmer, he’s still alive,” I told him. “It doesn’t matter, you pull him out far enough so I can shoot him,” he said. “Elmer, I’m not so sure that I like this idea,” I told him. “Don’t worry, I’ll shoot him before his head comes out,” he said. “All right, but you shoot him before he has a chance to bite me,” I told him. “Yep, you just get him out part way and I will take care of him,” he said.

Well, like they say, “The best laid plans -----.” I grabbed the fox’s tail and started to pull. From within the hole came a growling that let me know that the fox wasn’t too happy about what I was doing. “Elmer, he’s pretty mad,” I said. “Don’t worry, soon as you get him out here, I’ll pop him,” was his reply. Well, for a while, it was a pretty even match, me against the fox. But, eventually, I began to make ground and the fox slowly started to come my way. I had the back legs out and said to Elmer, “OK, get ready, here he comes.” On my next tug, the fox started to turn around and its head popped out of the hole with jaws agape and that head aimed directly at me. “Whaugh!” Elmer exclaimed as he turned and started running away.

Well, my life didn’t exactly flash before my eyes, but it only took a microsecond to realize that I had a real problem on my hands, or in them. I did the only thing I could think of; I immediately started turning and twirling. That did the trick. There I was twirling around and the centrifugal force was keeping that fox aimed out and away from me. After about six turns I still didn’t know what I was going to do to end this situation so I simply let go. Well, Mr. Fox went flying through the air and hit the ground rolling. When he got up, he started walking off like a drunken sailor. The twirling had made him dizzy! Elmer came running up gasping and said, “I thought you were a goner that time! Now I’ll get him.” Elmer raised the rifle to take aim. I put my hand on the barrel of the gun and pushed it down. “Elmer, let him go, he’s earned the right to go on living,” I said. “No, he’ll get Lizzie’s chickens,” he said. But, by then the fox was out of sight.

Over the remainder of that summer, Elmer reminded me several times that “It still spites me that we let that fox get away!” One day that fall I walked down to my mailbox to get the mail and I looked out across Elmer’s field. There along the hedgerow was the fox along with his misses and three half-grown youngsters. The mother and the kids quickly disappeared into the underbrush, but he stood and looked at me. He was beautiful! I did an imaginary tip of my hat to him and said, “Nice family.” I swear that he winked at me before turning and following his family into the underbrush.
A Health Physicist Laments
or
Elmer and Me
By
Ken Miller

It almost seems like it was just yesterday that I started working at the Hershey Medical Center. In reality, it was 1971. Not long after moving to Hershey, my wife and I made the decision that this would be our home. We began looking around for a building lot on which to build our new house. Late one afternoon my wife called to say that she had found us the perfect building lot and asked if I could meet her there right after work. As we drove up to what would become our future home site in the pristine farm country of Conewago Township, I knew immediately that this was the lot that we wanted. There were several dozen Canada geese foraging among the corn stubbles on the lot and just across the road there was a beautiful Pennsylvania Dutch farm.

At long last, the day arrived when we had the house completed and we could move in. As we were unloading our furniture Elmer, who owned the farm across the way, pulled into the driveway on his beat up old Ford tractor that was held together with spit and a generous helping of baling wire. He didn't get off the tractor so I walked over and asked him how he was doing. "You're really going to do it?" he said. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Ya got her finished and yer moving in," he replied. "Yep," I replied. "Is that a freezer I see on your truck?" he asked. "Yes," I replied. "When you get ready to fill it with good beef, let me know," he said. "I'll do that," I replied. "Do you like sweet corn?" he asked. "Yeah, we sure do," I said. "I'll drop some off for you" he said as he started his tractor which coughed and sputtered and belched a huge puff of smoke.

The next evening when I got home from work there were approximately 300 ears of corn sitting on my doorstep. My wife and I were up till the wee small hours of the morning blanching, cutting corn off the cob and bagging it for the freezer.
The next spring Elmer again pulled into the driveway on his beat up old tractor. "You planning on having a garden?" he asked. "Well, I would sure like to," I answered. "But, I don't have any tools for working a garden as yet," I replied. "I'll be by to plow you up a garden," he said as he began backing out of the driveway. The next afternoon, my wife called to tell me that Elmer had been by to plow me a garden. "That's great," I said with enthusiasm. "You're not going to believe it when you see it," she said. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Just wait until you get home and see for yourself," she said as she was hanging up the phone. That evening, when I got home, I walked out back and could not believe what I saw. Elmer had plowed up a whole acre! As I stood there with my mouth agape, Elmer walked around the house and asked, "What do you think?" "Elmer, what in the world am I going to do with a garden that big?" I asked. "I don't have any tools except a rake and a hoe." "Don't worry, I'll help you" was his reply. Elmer's idea of helping was to disk up the garden for me and to use his corn planter to plant me 64 rows of sweet corn. That took up half of my new garden. Someone suggested that I try zucchini. So, I planted 20 mounds of zucchini. Since I had so much space to fill, I also planted 20 mounds of cantaloupe, three dozen tomato plants, six rows of green beans, four different kinds of cucumbers, etc. etc. etc. For the rest of the summer, I was a slave to that garden. Every evening I was out in the garden in a futile attempt to beat back the weeds with my trusty hoe. Then came the end of summer. Every evening I was out in the garden hauling out produce. Forget about a garden basket, I bought the largest wheelbarrow I could find and I still couldn't haul it all out. After canning hundreds of quarts of tomatoes, pickles, pickle relish and red beets and, filling the freezer with corn, peas and green beans, my wife said that if I planted another garden that big, she would see me in divorce court. It got so that even friends would step into doorways or turn and walk the other way if they saw me coming. I just couldn't give away enough stuff from the garden.

Over the years Elmer got me into enough adventures on his farm that I could fill a book by writing about them. However, I will save some of those for other stories. The reason that I started writing this article was to discuss Elmer and our fishing ventures. As I looked out over his farm this morning I found myself saying to myself, "Boy, I sure miss fishing with that old guy." Shortly after I moved into my house, Elmer discovered that I liked to go fishing. From that day on he was forever asking me "when are we gonna go fishing?" Most of the time he would call and say "Merle, or Lemuel, or Samuel, or Lizzie's brother, or whoever, called and said they are really biting at the Middletown Reservoir or at Falmouth (or wherever). Let's go there." Elmer was the type who, when the urge to go fishing struck, he wanted to go right then and there. It didn't matter to Elmer that I was only half through mowing the grass or that I was in the middle of taking the shutters down to paint them. When the urge struck, he was ready to go. For years it looked like I only ever half finished most of the projects I started around my home. Elmer loved fishing. But, Elmer wasn't the greatest fisherman! He was forever getting snagged and saying, "Ken, can you help me out here?" I would no sooner get him un-snagged than he would throw right into the same spot and we would repeat the process all over again. Elmer wasn't the type who could ever get the hang of fishing with artificial lures. For Elmer, a night crawler and a big bobber were the only things to use. However, Elmer wasn't terribly adept at catching night crawlers. That meant that every time it rained, I would be out in the evening searching my yard with a flashlight for a supply of night crawlers for Elmer. For, "sure as shootin", every time it rained Elmer knew the fish
would be biting the next day and, I could expect his call. On lakes I got blisters rowing Elmer around. He always thought the fish were biting on the other side of the lake where he could see "that other boat." "That's where they must be biting if those guys are over there," he would say. As soon as we got across the lake, he would notice a boat on the side we had just left. "That's where they must be biting if those guys are over there," he would again say. On lakes, I spent all my time rowing and had no time for fishing. Often in the spring I slipped and fell into icy streams trying to get Elmer's line untangled. When the fish were biting, it was a great day. When they weren't, it was my fault for not taking him over to where they were biting. My fishing outings with Elmer were sort of like taking a little kid fishing for the first time. He never quite got the hang of it but he sure enjoyed hauling in an occasional fish. I don't recall ever coming back from fishing with Elmer without saying to my wife "that's it, I've had it. I'll never go fishing with Elmer again." A week would pass and Elmer would call and say "Billy says they are really biting up on Stony Creek, when can we go?" And, off we would go again.

Elmer died several years ago at the ripe old age of 89. Now, every time it rains I get the urge to go out in my back yard and look for night crawlers. In spite of all the frustration I experienced trying to fish with Elmer, he was one of my best friends and I would love to have him call me up just once more and say "hey, Marvin says they are really biting on the Swatty."
A Raccoon in the Chimney
by
Ken Miller

Every once in a while we need to get away from health physics and do something different just to relax, unwind and recharge the old enthusiasm batteries. One Friday in May, I decided to do just that. I took the afternoon off so my fishing buddy, Lou, and I could go up to the cabin and fish the evening hatch. I had the car all packed and was eagerly awaiting Lou’s arrival so we could be off as it was a 90-mile drive to the cabin. If traffic wasn’t too heavy, we would have just enough time to get to the cabin, unpack and head out to the stream in time to pick our spots before the trout started their evening meal.

I was anxiously pacing in my driveway when I spotted Lou’s car turning off the highway and onto my road. “Great! We’re going to make it,” I thought. Just then, Carole, my wife called out to me and told me that Elmer was on the phone. Elmer was my 86-year old Pennsylvania Dutch farmer neighbor. He had scoliosis and didn’t weigh more than 125 pounds soaking wet. Elmer was my neighbor and, he was my friend. Unfortunately, he had an uncanny knack for calling me at all the wrong times to ask me to help him solve one of his many problems. “What does he want?” I asked. “He said he needs your help in getting a raccoon out of his chimney,” she said. “What?” I asked. “Here, you talk to him,” she said. I answered the phone and Elmer asked his usual question, “Ken, are you busy?” “Elmer, Lou and I are just about to leave for the cabin to catch the evening hatch,” I told him. “Come on over,” was his reply. “Why, what is going on?” I asked. “A raccoon fell down the chimney and I need your help in getting it out,” said Elmer. “Elmer, how do you know there is a raccoon in your chimney?” “I can hear it hissing and scuffing around,” he said. “Come on over and help me get it out; it won’t take long.”

Elmer’s farmhouse was built in the late 1800s. The kitchen contains one of those open fireplaces where kettles of food were once hung from iron racks for cooking. Years ago Lizzie, Elmer’s wife, decided that that it was an eyesore, a source of dirt and something
that she would never again use for cooking their meals. So, at her insistence, Elmer had a carpenter come in and panel the inside of the fireplace. He kept an old chest of drawers in the opening and, over the years, it had become his treasure chest for everything he had in his pockets when he came in from working on his tractor or puttering around in his barn. To say that it was bulging at the seams would be an understatement. It was filled with nuts, bolts, bent nails, bladeless pocketknives, twists of twine and other things, some that were beyond recognition.

When Lou and I walked up on the porch, Elmer met us at the door. Lizzie was pacing in her dining room, wringing her hands. “Come here and listen,” Elmer told us. Before we could do that, we had to move Elmer’s treasure chest out of the way. We did so carefully lest it fall apart and we would have to spend the evening rebuilding it for him. Once we got the chest out of the way, we still could not hear anything. “Wait,” Elmer said. “Let me tap on the panel at the top and you’ll see what I mean.” He gave the panel a sharp rap with his knuckles and, sure enough, we could hear hissing and a scurrying sound above the panel. “Uh oh, now what are we going to do?” I asked as thoughts of being attacked by a raccoon, and possibly one that was rabid, suddenly filled my mind. “No problem,” said Elmer, “here, take my 22 rifle and shoot up through the panel a few times.” “When we know it’s dead, we’ll take the panel off and get it out.” “Elmer, I don’t know if that is such a good idea,” I told him. “Here, let me loosen just an edge of the panel and see if I can see what is in there with the flashlight,” I suggested. Using a screwdriver from Elmer’s chest of drawers, I gently pried the front edge of the panel down just enough so I could shine the flashlight into the opening.

When I shined the flashlight into the opening four large eyes lased out at me; and, their owners made an ungodly hissing sound. I was so startled that I reflexively jerked back and, in so doing, caught my shirt cuff on a nail protruding from the paneling. The next thing I knew, I was lying on my back on the kitchen floor, barely able to see for the cloud of dust surrounding me. On my legs lay the paneling from the top of the fireplace along with half a dozen bricks and an ever-growing mound of soot, sand and other unidentifiable debris that had accumulated in the chimney over the years. On my chest were two half-grown barn owls that seemed to think that I was a special treat their momma had dropped down the chimney for them. When I turned my head, I had a sinking feeling as I caught a glimpse of the cloud of soot that was drifting toward Lizzie who was sitting in her rocking chair in the dining room.

I learned several lessons that afternoon:

- Barn owls will build nests in abandoned chimneys.
- Baby barn owls can fall down the chimney if they are not careful.
- Half-grown barn owls can break your skin.
- It takes five hours to clean soot out of Lizzie’s dining room and kitchen.
- When Elmer calls and asks if I am busy, say, “YES!”
- “It won’t take long” has a different meaning when you are 86.

We never did make it up to the cabin that weekend.