



ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK FOUNDATION

ELK COUNTRY and the HUNT

BUGLE

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- *A peculiar virtue in wildlife ethics is that the hunter ordinarily has no gallery to applaud or disapprove of his conduct. Whatever his acts, they are dictated by his own conscience, rather than that of onlookers. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this fact.* —Aldo Leopold

This Ain't the Ponderosa

An innocent stroll through the woods ends with allegations, insinuations and the sheriff.

Last November I went on a hunt that made me wonder whether elk hunting is right for me. Quite unexpectedly I visited a modern Ponderosa, the ranch from the old western television show *Bonanza*. And let me tell you, the gracious, welcoming ranch-owner Ben Cartwright has changed. I won't name the state, because there is no point in speaking ill of a place that I have come to love. Let's just say that it's in the Rockies.

Most *Bonanza* episodes involved someone passing through the Ponderosa. Sometimes it was a band of Indians, pursued by some overzealous cavalrymen. Sometimes it was a Hungarian prince, carrying the crown of his country, and hiding from the evil king's henchmen. Often the visitors spent the night in the spare room upstairs, although a few spent the night in the barn. But all visitors were treated courteously, and were well fed before they went on their way.

We rolled out of bed the first day of the season early. It felt like we had slept for about half an hour. I'm the oldest in our hunting party by at least a year, but none of the company seemed inclined to honor their elders and I was forced to make my own coffee. We were camped among scattered patches of snow, and the temperature was a brisk 12.

After a hot breakfast that

would have fed a family of 10 living at normal temperatures and altitudes, we were ready. One of my partners pointed to a place about an inch off the side of the map. "We're right here," he said.

"Right here?" I asked. "I can't see us."

He explained that I would be able to see us on the map after we walked for a mile or two on a compass heading of 275 degrees. I wasn't particularly worried. I'm comfortable with a map and compass; and besides, there were plenty of landmarks around to navigate by, or at least there would be landmarks when the fog lifted. Off we went, my partner and I separated by 500 yards. I had my compass and my map, and I was ready to bag a big one.

I walked for a while and periodically checked the map to see when I would appear, but I never did. The country was beautiful and steep, and the air was fresh and clear. It was cold enough that I'd be chilled if I stood still, but was comfortable for exercise. And did I ever exercise. Those hills were steeper than any I had hunted. The only problem was my map. I still couldn't find myself on it.

After the fog lifted I could see a medium-sized town in the distance, perhaps 20 miles away. Even if I never appeared on the map, I knew that I wouldn't get lost. I'm not too proud to call for

a lift with my cell phone—if I had a signal. As the morning turned to midday, the terrain got steeper and I left the scattered patches of snow behind me. By 11, I was pretty tired, and I was beginning to suspect that I was not going to hit the road where we were supposed to meet for lunch. My partner should be off to my left a bit, but I hadn't seen him in a long time. I paused to squint in the sun, and stripped off one layer of clothing. I took another step downhill, and my feet went out from under me, the victim of loose shale. I slid 15 feet, holding my rifle up high to keep it from harm, and came to rest against the stump of what had been a large pine tree. My Remington 700 was fine, but I had ripped open my woolen army pants—and my knee. It didn't look like I would need stitches, but in short order my knee would be pretty stiff. I looked up where I had come from, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to go back that way. Too steep. I checked my cell phone—no signal.

I slowly worked my way downhill, trying to stay on a compass heading of 275 degrees, hoping against hope that I would see the road or one of my partners. And then I came to a fence. A big fence. It was perpendicular to my path and stretched as far as I could see to my left and right. Every third section had a bright yellow sign that stated "No Trespassing

for any purpose." The fence was in good repair, fully six strands of barbed wire. Obviously the owner was protective and serious about it. It seemed an odd choice for what was mostly sheep country. This fence looked like it would hold back a buffalo.

Without many options, I hung a left, and headed south along a stock trail, more than 60

degrees off my course, figuring to go around the fence. A half hour later there was still no sign of a break in the fence, and I was pretty far off course. My knee was getting stiff, so I headed north, back to the point where I had first hit the fence. I followed the trail for half an hour or so beyond that point. Still no break in the fence. It was clear that this was a huge

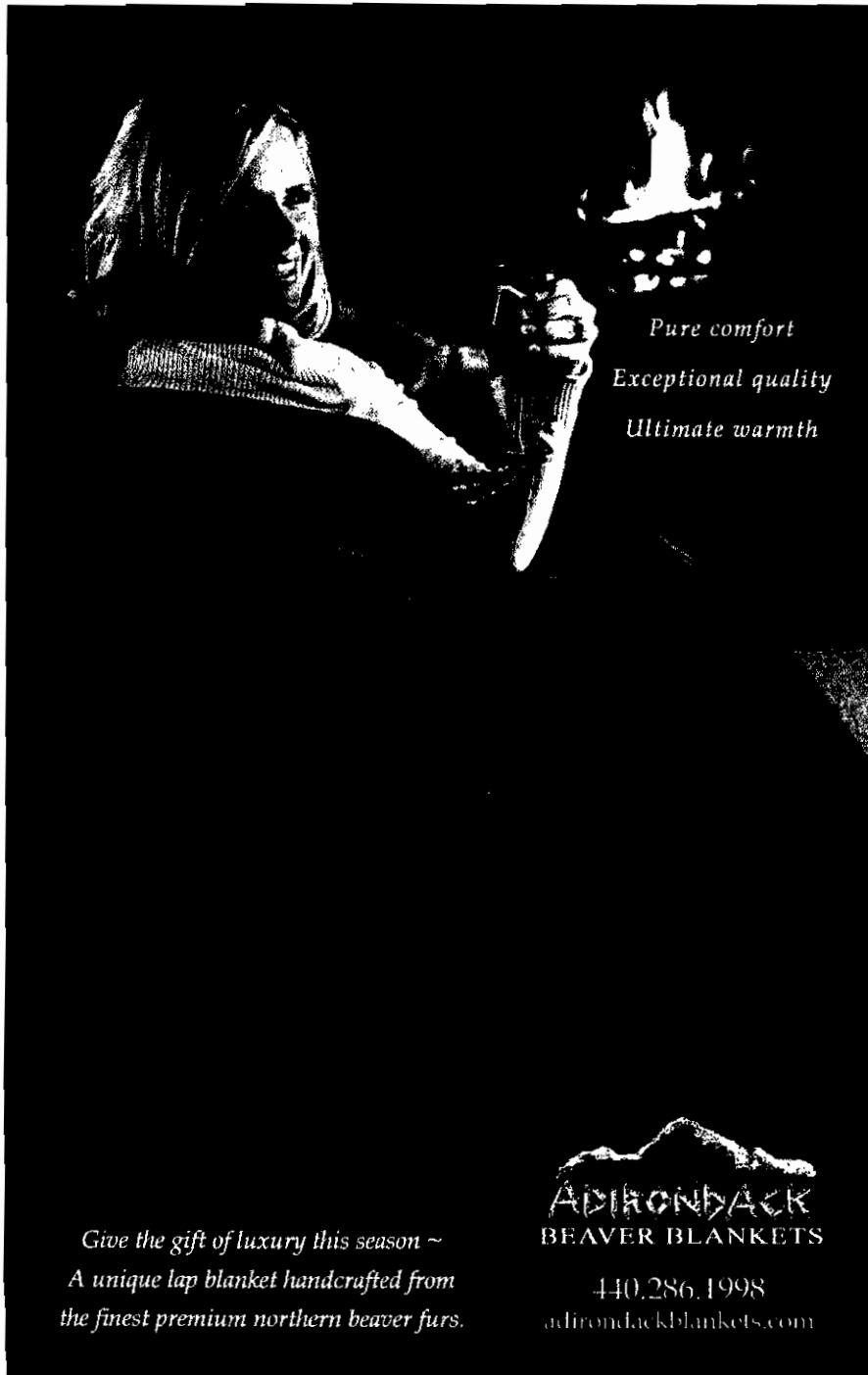
ranch and I might spend hours trying to go around it.

My energy level was falling. I stopped for food and water and to evaluate my options. By 2 p.m. I found myself at the bottom of a steep ravine. North, south and east—all were too steep to climb. And west, the fence. Darkness didn't seem far off. I wasn't afraid of spending the night outside—I had all the right equipment. But I wasn't looking forward to it either.

Beyond the fence I could see a jeep trail which paralleled a small stream. My old Boy Scout handbook had said that when lost, one should always travel downhill and follow a stream. Little streams lead to big streams, and big streams lead to roads, and once on a road don't get off it for any reason. That's probably good advice for a Scout, and it would work for me today. The stream was small, and the jeep trail wasn't much, but both pointed more or less toward the town that I had seen earlier. I unloaded my rifle, slipped the bolt into my daypack, capped my scope and rolled under the fence.

Thirty minutes later I limped up to a large farm house, eyeing a sign that said, "Beware of Dog." I laid my backpack and rifle by the mailbox and surveyed the place. The house was a newer log cabin. It had to be at least five bedrooms, with large bay windows facing out over well-maintained fields. I could see several hundred sheep and four outbuildings, not made of logs but modern metal pole barns. A trailer next to one barn held two snowmobiles, and another held two quads. A tractor with a bucket peeked out of one shop. Two identical late-model, double-cab pickups displayed the company logo on their doors.

I immediately thought of the Ponderosa. This place was so neat that it could have been a movie set. Not a thing was out of place. I pictured myself seated at the kitchen table, chuckling over my bad luck, with a cup of coffee,



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laced with something strong. I pictured Ben across the table from me.

I didn't step up onto the porch but called from the gate.

"Hello."

In a second I was face to face with an attractive gray-haired woman in her late 60s.

"How did you get here?"

She wasn't smiling. Bad sign. That was a rather odd question, and a bit silly, since I obviously hadn't driven in and there was no horse or bicycle in sight. I restrained my flip impulse to tell her that I had flown in using the miniature helicopter in my back pocket. I gave her the answer that she already knew.

"I walked."

"You're in big trouble. My son is going to be really mad."

I explained that I was hunting for elk, and that I had messed up my knee. I gestured to my knee as a call for sympathy. My bloody knee peeked out through the rip.

"All I want is directions, ma'am. Or maybe to use your phone? I can't get a cell phone signal."

"That's not going to happen." An odd response, at best. "Stay here," she said, and disappeared into the house.

She came back in a few minutes and I showed her my map. She quickly determined that I had begun that morning about a mile and a half north of where I had been told we were, and that my compass course should have been about 245 degrees, rather than the 275 degrees. That explained it. I thought about walking to the highway. I would probably be able to catch a ride, in spite of my rifle. The roads were filled with trucks full of hunters in camouflage, and they wouldn't find my rifle particularly intimidating. But I'd rather call one of my buddies.

"No, you can't use the phone. We'll wait for one of the men." Apparently I had interpreted the

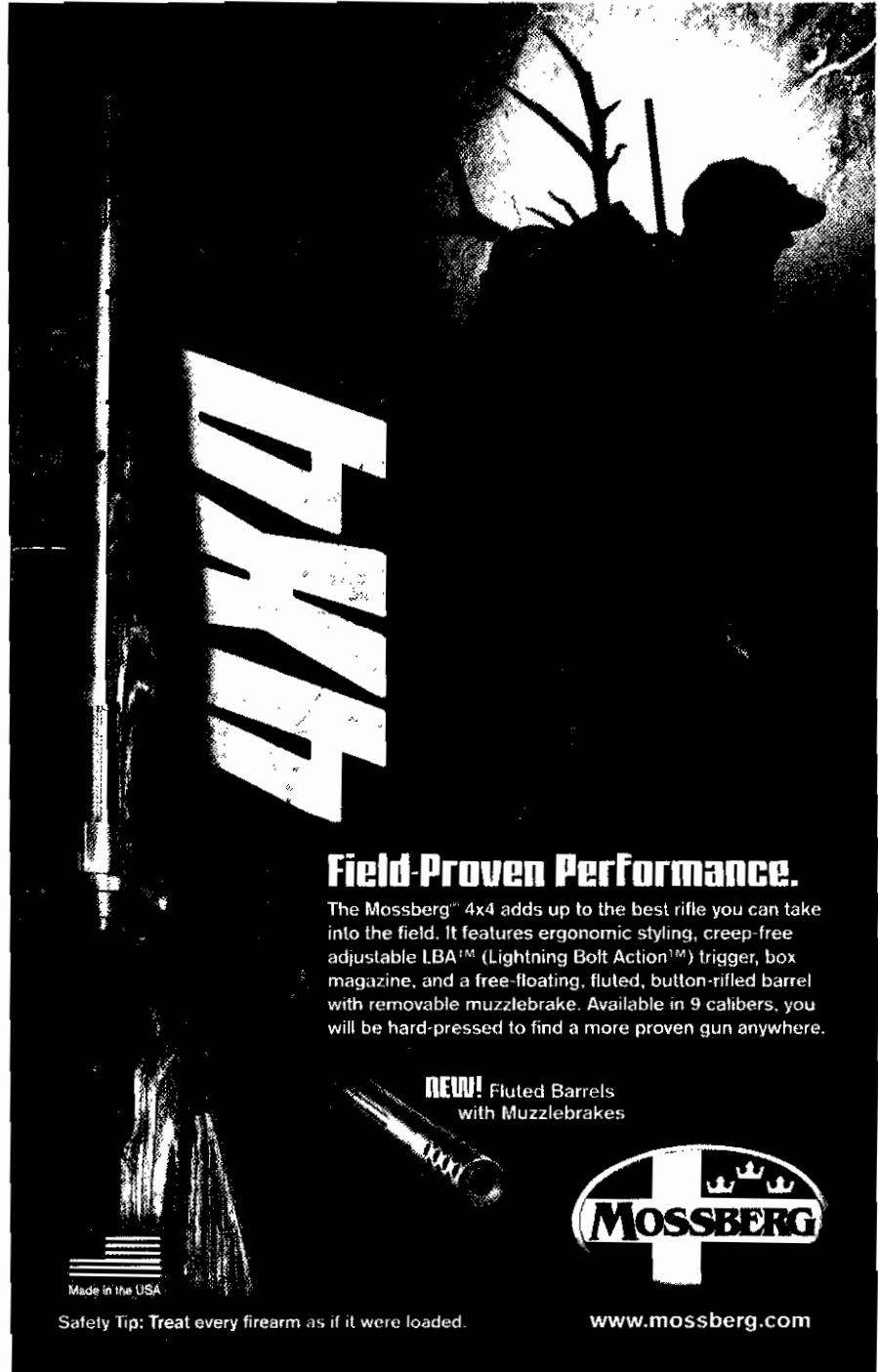
fence and signs correctly. I was not welcome. It was clear that I wouldn't be offered coffee, and that Mr. Smith, the owner of the property, was no Ben Cartwright.

"My son will want to talk to you about this." I couldn't imagine what he wanted to talk about.

"Do you think that he would rather that I spent the night in the woods?"

"Yes, probably." She made it clear that he greeted all visitors this way. "But usually his bark is worse than his bite. Just let him speak his piece, then tell what happened. Who knows, it might turn out okay."

That was perplexing as well. The "might" bothered me a bit. What could he do, throw me in irons? And what did "turn out



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okay" mean? After a while one of the men drove to the house, and she made arrangements for him to drive me back to camp. On the way he explained that Mr. Smith charges for an elk hunt, and he's pretty protective of the ranch. I needlessly pointed to my knee, but he just shrugged. "He won't care."

On the way back to camp I learned that the ranch was about 60,000 acres, in sheep, hay and timber. The driver saw his boss clearly and didn't seem to think much of him. He shook his head several times as he discussed his boss' attitude toward his employees, hunters and the world in general. He didn't seem to want to talk much.

An hour later, as I sat with my knee on a stump under a bag of ice, the sheriff drove up. She was around 30 with shoulder-length red hair and freckles. Mr. Smith had called in a report of someone hunting and trespassing on his property, demanding that I be arrested. Our campsite location had apparently been reported by the man who drove me to camp.

I explained what had happened, mentioning that I could see the jeep trail from the fence, and how I had capped my scope, unloaded my rifle and placed the bolt in my pack. The officer agreed that spending the night on the mountain to avoid crossing a fence to ask for directions didn't make much sense. I learned that Mr. Smith is well-known in the area for his treatment of trespassers, or of even those who he thought might be thinking about trespassing.

Just a few weeks before, one of Mr. Smith's employees had gotten into a shouting match with a man scouting before the season opened. The man was just admiring a band of elk that were on the ranch, using a spotting scope from a safe perch on BLM land. The sheriff also told me that the jeep trail I had been on was a county road, and I had every right

to be on it. Mr. Smith disputed this fact, although the road was clearly marked on county maps produced long before he was born.

The sheriff accepted a cup of black coffee and we swapped lies—I mean hunting stories—for more than an hour before she left camp. She said that no legal action would be taken against me, and she was pretty sure I wouldn't hear from Mr. Smith again.

"Don't say I told you so, but he's recognized as a bit of an idiot. The only real money that comes into this county at this time of year is from hunters like you. And this is how he welcomes you. By the way, it's not his ranch. It belongs to his mother."

The next morning I got up with the guys, but with a stiff knee I would hunt from a stand. Just as we were about to leave camp, Mr. Smith and two friends showed up to demand the cost of a hunt from me. I limped over to meet him. It was clear that either his mother hadn't told him my story or he didn't care. He felt that \$ 5,000 was a fair price for my trespass, but he'd take \$3,000. He advised that I could either pay him now or pay him after a court case. He claimed to have sued a number of hunters and never lost.

Following his mother's advice, I just let him talk, and I didn't try to explain until he had spoken his piece. I repeated my story, but he didn't seem to care whether I had been hunting or not, and didn't care whether I had twisted my knee. He seemed to be inviting an offer of some lower amount from me. Since I hadn't been hunting, had unloaded my rifle and had walked down the center of a county road to ask for directions, I didn't feel like paying. I told him that I would be happy to tell my story to a judge. I willingly apologized for being on his property, and said that if I had to do it all over again I would have done the same thing.

After about 10 minutes of waving his finger in my face, Mr.

Smith settled down and agreed that I had probably done the right thing. He said he had decided the night before to give me the benefit of the doubt. Finally, he agreed to drop the matter, although he disputed that the road was a county road. Shortly, Mr. Smith and company were gone.

Two days later, my knee was much better, and I was on my way home, with my share of an elk. I was also carrying about an unsettled feeling about the experience. I would have understood suspicion at my arrival at their doorstep, but not outright hostility. I could have understood a questioning visit to my campsite, but not a hostile visit, a demand for cash and an attempt to have me arrested. Mr. Smith's comment that he had been prepared to give me the benefit of the doubt made no sense, since he had called the police and demanded that I be arrested before he heard my explanation.

I still love elk hunting, although I learned some things on this trip. I won't leave camp without a good map that covers the entire area to be hunted. I gained a renewed respect for our law enforcement officers. In spite of the way we flinch when we see them in our rear view mirrors, most police officers have an abundance of common sense. I confirmed what I suspected—that most of us could do far worse than to be half as wise as our mothers. And lastly, I haven't changed my belief that most of America is filled with good, wise people. But here and there are some people who never learned what Ben Cartwright taught us every week—that a stranger is just a friend you haven't met yet.

At the request of the author, we did not publish his name. Though we typically don't publish anonymous articles, this story's Ben Cartwright has been known to resolve conflict with lawsuits, or worse.