

Harmony In The Heart Of Deer Country

by Charles J. Alsheimer

Photos by author

All right you guys, roll out! Let's go! Move!" These words penetrated my subconscious. I hadn't heard shouts that loud since my first days of basic training in the Air Force.

Rolling over on the pile of old mattresses that made up my bed, I tried to crawl deeper into my sleeping bag. Oh, what I'd give for just a few more minutes of sleep! On any

other day perhaps I'd have dozed off, but not this day. It was opening day of the 1982 Pennsylvania buck season and I'd come to the heart of Pennsy to hunt and experience a real deer camp for the first time.

Lifting my head from the pillow, I squinted past the lone light bulb in the center of the rustic attic called the sleeping quarters. Even in the thirty-degree temperature, the other

bunks were starting to come alive.

Next to me Dick Snively said, "good morning." Before I could muster a reply, Doc Berry's voice from downstairs bellowed once more, "breakfast will be ready in ten minutes. Let's go! Move!"

I slid out of bed and tried to jump into my cold blue jeans in one motion. I should have known better. When I straightened up, I



Camp Harmony's founders, Dr. Tom Berry (left) and Let Haverstick (right).

Around the breakfast table sat doctors, corporate executives, factory workers, a minister, and a photographer. And nobody talked about politics, the economy, or their families. On this day it was a different kind of business—white-tailed deer business. Weather, hunting techniques, and the stands they'd be hunting dominated the chitchat around the table.

banged my head on the attic's low ceiling.

Ten minutes had passed since Doc sounded reveille and things were starting to happen. From the far side of the room Ted Ochs, a Methodist minister from Schuylkill Haven, Pennsylvania, asked Kevin McCarty what time it was. Kevin's reply was 4:30 A.M. Wow! I thought, daylight doesn't come until 7:00—talk about early birds.

The cabin's wooden stairs creaked underfoot as I headed down. There, bent over a bed of coals, stood Let (short for Lester) Haverstick stoking the fire that had gone out sometime during the night. "Morning, Let," I said as I walked slowly past and into the kitchen. Peeking around the corner, Doc Berry's eyes caught mine as he was hunched over the stove making bacon and eggs. Before I could say anything he said, "Good morning, brother. Ready for breakfast? Hand me a fork, will ya. We'll be ready to eat in just a couple minutes."

Standing at the edge of the room with my arms crossed, I enjoyed the scene as I waited my turn in the "john." Talk was everywhere. Guys jawed while pulling on wool socks, all caught up in the excitement of opening day of deer season. Truly this was a happening.

I turned, grabbed the cold front door knob, and stepped onto the porch. Peering into the dawn's darkness, I knew this was going to be a unique day for many reasons. First and foremost was the weather. The entire area had been socked

with a dandy ice storm during the night. Everything glistened. Cars, trees . . . everything! "At least the freezing rain has stopped," I thought to myself.

Inside the guys started to gather around the big wooden table. The aroma of bacon and eggs and hot coffee was overwhelming. Everyone took his place at the table and Let Haverstick returned thanks before the feast began. Voices crisscrossed the table. "Pass the bacon, pass the coffee. Dan, where you huntin' this morning?

Doc, you going up Short Mountain? Dick, how 'bout you? I'm going to stand right here behind camp. John, how 'bout passin' the salt."

Having never experienced such a sight before, I was content to just sit back, eat, and take it all in. Camp Harmony was in its glory. Around the table sat doctors, corporate executives, factory workers, a minister, and a photographer. And nobody talked about politics, the economy, or their families. On this day it was a different kind of business—white-tailed deer busi-



Dan Berry refurbishes his favorite deer blind on "Short Mountain" the day before the 1982 Pennsylvania deer season.

Camp Harmony

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Nearly as fast as breakfast began, it ended. Doc asked, "Who's cleaning up?" There are no volunteers in Camp Harmony; everyone has a responsibility. Before Dan Berry could check the work roster, John Haverstick and Kevin McCarty acknowledged the task was theirs. Tomorrow it was my turn!

Hurriedly, I filled my day-pack with camera, shells, and sandwiches. I threw in a rain parka for good measure because I'd be out all day on top of Short Mountain. Dan Berry asked me if I was ready. I was going to ride with him to the base of the mountain I'd be hunting. Scraping the ice off the windshield wasn't easy, but we finally headed down the lane to the dirt road that would take us to our hunt-

ing site. What a day! It certainly wasn't the kind deer hunters dream about. Even in the pre-dawn darkness, we could see the going would be difficult. Not only was everything laden with ice, but fog had moved in.

After he pulled his pickup off the road near the Spruce Run Camp, Dan and I started our climb through fog and mist. The day before I made a concealed ground stand at the head of a ravine on top of Short Mountain not far from Dan's blind. Now all we had to do was find it in the foggy darkness. About halfway through our climb, we stopped for a breather. The climb had been tough. The ice-covered rocks and leaves nearly made the going impossible in places. It was now 6:30 and I seriously doubted we'd make it to our stands by 7:00 and first light. Luckily we found a familiar stand of

laurel which kept us on the right track. I left Dan at his stand a little after 7:00 and made my way to the head of the ravine. It was starting to get daylight but the fog was so thick a deer would have to be right on top of me to get a shot. With my back against the big oak, I settled in for a long vigil. From my ground blind, I could cover a hundred yards in nearly every direction through the climax timber. Obviously the weather was affecting the other hunters because it was nearly 7:45 before I heard the first shots from afar.

Things were going from bad to worse. The rising temperature caused the ice on the trees to start melting. What was so beautiful at dawn turned into a November rain forest. Coupled with shifting fog, this wasn't my idea of the hunt of a lifetime. Fortunately, I was dressed for the occasion.

From my perch, I started to make out the ridge of Shade Mountain off in the distance. Even in the lousy weather it seemed great to be alive. Nine o'clock came and went and still I'd not sighted my first deer despite increased shooting all around. Hopefully this would change.

My mind started to drift and I wondered how the other guys were faring. I especially wondered how Doc Berry was managing with his bad knee. It was through Doc's urging that I finally decided to try the deer camp experience.

For several years Doc and his doctor son, Dan, had been coming to our farm in western New York to try their hand at farm country whitetails. Each year the Berry's invited me to their camp in Pennsylvania, but until 1982 I always declined Doc's invitation. It should be pointed out that saying no to Doc is no easy matter. Being a very forceful individual with a stern look, he has a way of eventually making you listen to him.



Part of the kitchen detail—John Haverstick (left) and Kevin McCarty (right).

Actually, if it wasn't for Doc and Let Haverstick, there would be no Camp Harmony in the wilds of Pennsylvania's Mifflin County today. Together they make quite a team, despite their vastly different personalities. Doc is very enthusiastic and good at giving orders, perhaps a carryover from his experience as a fighter pilot in the South Pacific during World War II. Let, on the other hand, is a quiet man, a mechanical genius who heads his own corporation in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. As different as their personalities are, however, they have one thing in common. They're genuine individuals who'll do anything for you.

You might say that Camp Harmony began as a vision for Doc and Let. Down through the years, they pretty much hunted everything in their home state and even went west for elk and mule deer on occasion.

But, not surprisingly, their first love remained hunting the white-tail. During the mid-1950's, they pursued a lifelong dream of having their own deer camp in prime deer country. In 1957 the dream became a reality with the construction of their own cabin in the heart of Tuscarora State Game Lands in Mifflin County.

At the time, both lived in the Lancaster area, where Doc had his practice and Let his hydraulics company. But, though some distance from Lancaster, the Mifflin County area was special to Doc. He spent his summers there, while growing up, with his Uncle Ray Zimmerman, a game warden in the Mifflin County area, and fell in love with the central Pennsylvania mountains. Actually, Doc and Let do not own the land their cabin is on but, through a unique leasing arrangement, built the cabin on state land and lease the site it sits on every fifteen years.

Situated fifteen miles west of Mifflintown, Pennsylvania, the

camp is nestled in the heart of Licking Creek Valley—miles from the nearest electrical hookup. Just driving to the camp makes one's heart-beat increase, for the entire fifteen-mile trip from Mifflintown to Licking Creek reminds you that this is whitetail country, the kind of country dreams are made of. The paved roads and any sign of open country

end as you near the first sign announcing the more than 6,500-acre Tuscarora State Game Lands. From that point on tradition begins. Located along the several miles of dirt road leading to Camp Harmony are camps with names like Spruce Run, Spectacle Gap, Black Log, and Seven Eleven. Each camp takes their deer hunting seriously and

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down through the years more than one dad taught his son the essence of the deer hunting experience. On the ridges of Short, Blue, and Black Log Mountains a part of America's deer hunting history has been written since Tuscarora was formed on April 23, 1935.

Since its inception in 1957, Camp Harmony has flourished under the guidance of Doc Berry and Let Haverstick. Though they

don't rule with an iron hand, they do rule with order. Everyone who is invited has rules he must adhere to and responsibilities he must tend to. Doc carefully plans each hunting season and then gives each hunter his orders.

For starters, Doc, who is an accomplished cook, plans the menu for the first week of hunting season and makes out the work roster showing what each hunter's respon-

sibilities are from wood cutting to the sandwich detail for the next day's hunt. Though the camp has had as many as twelve hunters, Doc and Let have settled on a more realistic total of eight men for opening week of deer season. With only one rustic bathroom, I can vouch for the fact that eight is enough.

Perhaps many backwoods hunters would laugh at the mention of a bathroom in a remote deer camp, but let me tell you there is nothing better than a hot shower after a hard day of hunting! Mind you, this is no easy task when the electricity needed to heat the water is several miles away. This is where Let's talents shine. Several years ago, he decided to add a few conveniences to the camp, including a diesel generator for electricity and running hot water. Though the generator has been known to break down, it usually does the job nicely.

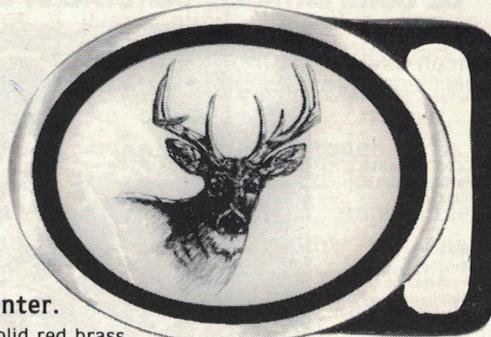
The night before opening day, I sat in front of the fire talking to Doc Berry about the camp and its history. I asked him how it came to be known as Camp Harmony. He said, "Originally Let and I and another guy built the camp and called it Camp Harmony because we all agreed there would never be any

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disharmony here. And you know, in all the twenty-five years there's never been anything close to a disagreement. Of course, we don't allow alcoholic beverages, radios, or TV's in camp and if a guy wants to use a telephone, it's fifteen miles down the road. Let and I always wanted a place to come and hunt where everyone could have a good time. Over the years, this has proven to be the case. The good Lord has been very good to us, there's a lot of memories in this camp."

I glanced at my watch and for the moment sort of doubted Doc's "good time" statement. It was 1:30 P.M. and the day had been less than eventful for an opening day, at least the opening days I'm accustomed to in New York. More than two hours ago the ice finished falling from the trees, allowing the mountain to quiet down. I hadn't heard any shooting since 11:00. For that matter, I had only seen two deer—a doe and a fawn—since dawn. But from the sign I saw the day before, I was sure plenty of deer inhabited the area. Now that the ice and water were off the trees, I was confident things would begin to happen.

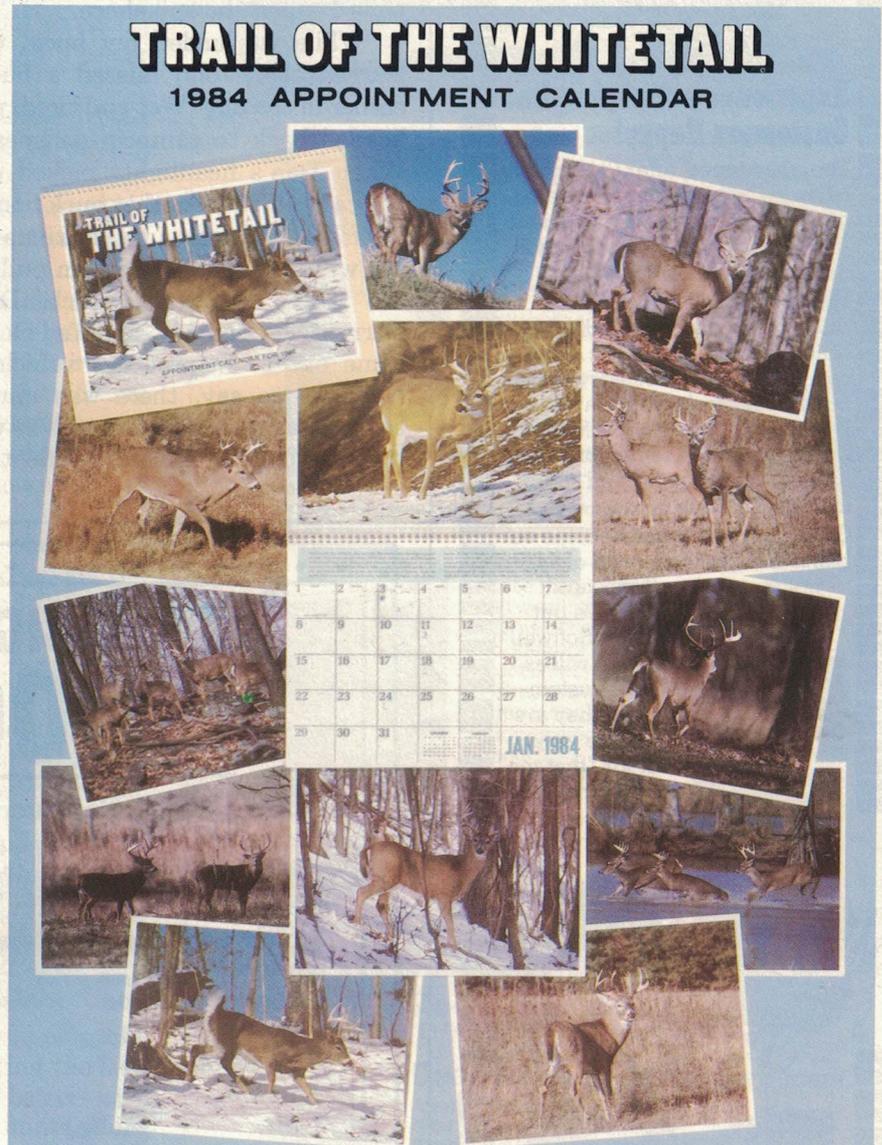
Even though dressed for the soupy weather, I was quite damp and uncomfortable from sitting on stand since daybreak. Both pairs of gloves I packed were now very wet and I could feel the air getting colder. I was having doubts as to whether I could sit three more hours until quitting time.

As often seems to happen, I could sense something behind me. Slowly I peered around the big white oak and was amazed to see a spike buck walking, not thirty yards behind me. I was amazed because I looked in that direction a short time ago and saw nothing. I was sure he wouldn't be able to see me behind the tangle of limbs propped up around my stand. Slowly I raised my 30-06, put the cross hairs on the buck's shoulder, and squeezed the

trigger. At the rifle's blast, the buck took three bounds and piled up in a clump of mountain laurel.

After field dressing the buck, I wondered what I should do. It was only 2:30 and I wasn't supposed to

meet Dan at the truck until 5:00. After dragging the buck back to my stand, I sat down for a while before starting off the top of the mountain. I met up with Dan and we managed to get the deer off the mountain,



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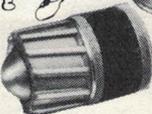
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though it was dark when we arrived at his pickup. Ironically, Let, his son John, and Kevin McCarty were parked beside Dan's truck. On the back of Kevin's Bronco was a nice seven-point buck Let had shot on another mountain about the same time I killed the spikehorn.

While we loaded my buck, we learned that John missed a buck earlier in the day. Wet and tired, we headed back to camp in darkness. When Dan's headlights picked up the camp, I saw another buck hanging from the porch. I was anxious to see who had scored. As Dan pulled the truck up to the porch, Doc Berry, Dick Snavely, and Ted Ochs came out to inspect our vehicles. Needless to say, there was much celebrating on the front porch as we hung two more bucks beside the

five-pointer Snavely shot early in the morning.

Though nearly all of us were tired, supper was joyous. Everyone had a story to tell. Dick Snavely gets a lot of ribbing from the guys because of where he hunts. Several years ago he started hunting the oak flats along Licking Creek, only a few hundred yards from camp. Naturally, all the other guys take to the mountain tops. Now "Snave" was having the last laugh because that morning he was the last to leave the cabin, walked the short distance to his stand, and shot a nice Pennsylvania buck before 7:30. While the rest of us were getting soaked as the ice melted, he napped in front of the fire.

Though Doc's bad knee acted up in the morning, he hadn't lost his

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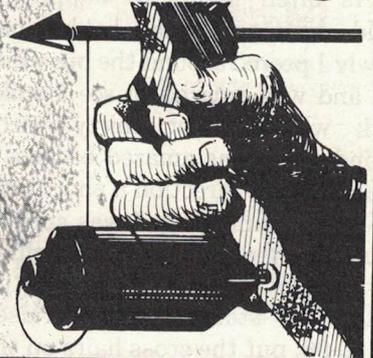
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sense of humor. Between "pass the meat and potatoes" he kidded me as to why a trophy-minded New Yorker would shoot a tiny spikehorn like I did. I said, "Doc it's like this, I'm only here a few days and as I see it a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

Even mild-mannered Let Haverstick got in the act. In complete detail, he told everyone how he nearly got a buck early in the morning—except that his poncho hood fell down over his eyes just as he was about to shoot, spooking the buck. Fortunately for him, he got a better chance at a bigger buck in the afternoon.

With all the stories and reminiscing, dinner lasted longer than usual as we all stayed saddled to the big table. Actually, part of the problem was Doc's cooking. On our way down to camp, Dick Snively told me what a good cook Doc was, but he was even better than I had envisioned. We all ate like kings!

Around 10:00 that night, I sat on the old frayed davenport, propped my feet up on a stool, and gazed into the fireplace. Stretched out in a worn easy chair next to the fireplace, Let was fast asleep. Out in the kitchen, young Kevin McCarty and John Haverstick discussed the next day's strategy. Ted Ochs had had enough and called it a day. Over the years, he'd come to know that 4:30 and Doc's bellowing voice came early.

Staring at the fire, the red, yellow, and blue flames were particularly beautiful as they danced about the seasoned oak logs. Slowly I glanced around the room and my eye caught a dusty deer rack on the wall. It wasn't big by anyone's standards, only a scrawny four-point, but it was a part of Camp Harmony just as Let, Doc, Dan, and Dick were. I wonder who shot it? Was it taken up on Short Mountain, on the lea side of Shade Mountain, or out back of the cabin? I guess it doesn't matter.

Turning back to the fire, the thought of Dick and I going home in the morning went through my mind. Like so many outdoor experiences I've had, I always thank God for them while at the same time wondering if I'll ever have a chance to do it all over again. Such was the case now.

Mesmerized by the fire, I wondered how one could place a value on the hunt I experienced during the last few days. In truth it doesn't come any better—the laughter around the table, the talk of past hunts while lounging in front of the fire at night, the making of new friends, and even the cold wind in my face on stand. Over the years, I'd only been able to read about such hunts in outdoor magazines and dream of one day being a part of a deer camp.

In his book, *The Seasons Of Life*, Paul Tournier writes, "True happiness is always linked with deep inner harmony." I guess that was what I found at Camp Harmony—true happiness. It had been all I'd hoped it would be and more, thanks to Doc Berry and a great bunch of guys, and, yes, the elusive whitetail, too.



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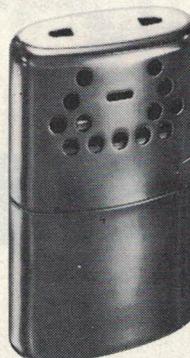


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