

*Turkey Legion*  
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As I began preparation for this, my second paper to be presented to this august group, it was even more difficult than I had imagined to come up with a topic. I immediately ruled out any further discussion of the male genitalia, for any number of reasons, not the least of which being I did not plan to do a power point presentation. Other vocation-related subjects did not seem to be the route to go, although I knew interest would be high on the medical treatment of erectile dysfunction. This would lead, however, to the dispersal of samples, or at least the request thereof, and this would be both unethical and possibly dangerous to this group. Having known, admired and studied under William Turner, I did not want to be responsible for the "Levitra Challenge" to lead to his demise.

Other subjects I came up with were quite fortuitously recently chosen by others. The urological treatment of other maladies that would affect this group was covered quite nicely by Rob Harper in his "Let's Go Peay" paper. Dr Schweizer and I actually did discuss my doing a paper on beer, but alas, Jim Love beat me to the tap on that one. It was from Jim's paper, however, that I did receive the inspiration I needed to finally come up with a topic. As I listened to his paper, I wondered what I could talk to you about with the same degree of personal experience and passion for the subject as Jim. The topic then became quite obvious.

There is a peculiarity about military organizations that defies explanation. This peculiarity is that when a unit has once achieved real distinction, once it has become really good, rather than simply thinking it is good-it stays good.

When there is nothing left of the original organization but the signs and the flags, the previously established reputation feeds upon itself. The people who form this reputation, the men who created the excellence, may have been dead and gone a hundred years; but if the excellence they first created was good enough, it is of itself self-perpetuating.

Perhaps the reputation inspires the men who follow. Perhaps because of it, the men who follow rise above themselves to match it. But at any rate it happens, and it has been happening for a very long time. For example, at the Normandy landings in 1944, the right flank regiment at Omaha Beach was the 116th Infantry.

It was taken temporarily from its parent division, selected solely because of its excellence, attached to another division and put into this situation.

Its performance was superior, as it was only expected that it should have been. Eighty two years previously its performance likewise had been superior. Eighty two years previously, the 116th Infantry had been the Stonewall Brigade.

When a small city-state in middle Italy conquered the world, and kept it conquered for five centuries, historians agree generally that of all the Roman Legions, there was none to match the Tenth. Generation after generation, and country after country, and against successive waves of barbarians, there was always the Tenth. Three hundred years after the formation of the original Tenth, when no great grandfather left alive could remember the great grandson of the youngest man of the original group, the legend of the Tenth grew and fed upon itself and was self-sustaining.

An organization such as this is a subculture, a cult that exists within a larger group. It can happen, though it is less common, in organizations other than military ones. In the south, in the hunting of a particular species of game bird, there is such a cult. And it is this cult, the spiritual descendent of the original Tenth, that is the subject of our discussion tonight. Of course I am talking about the subculture of turkey hunters, a legion of men and women who pursue this magnificent beast with a passion unequalled by other forms of hunting.

As I grew up on a farm in South Christian, I developed a love for the outdoors. I would spend all my free time wandering about the farm, and perhaps due to some inherent predatory nature that lies within me, this lead to a lust for hunting. Over the past five decades, I have pursued this interest with great vigor. I have traveled far and wide in pursuit of a number of game species from doves in Mexico to mule deer and antelope in the Rocky Mountains to bear, elk, and moose in British Columbia. All are experiences I would trade for nothing else and will always cherish. Successes and failures have occurred and my usually patient wife, at times, was prompted to display a lack of understanding totally out of character to her usual docile and complacent deameanor, but I must admit it was worth it. I just love the outdoors and the challenge of hunting.

Of all these experiences, there is one species of game animal on this earth that is the most challenging, the most fulfilling and the most addictive to pursue. If the good Lord informed me today that I could only hunt one of his species in a fair-chase hunt, I would have no problem in that decision. There is no other hunting experience greater than this one.

In the southern part of the United States there lives a remarkable bird. A bird that has lived wild in the woods for centuries. A bird who no less an authority than Benjamin Franklin put forth in candidacy as a national emblem of our country. A bird who, hatched in May, will at the end of the first summer weigh 10 pounds. A bird with a long neck and legs, a blue head and with breast and back feathers of a subdued, though iridescent beauty. A bird who when grown to a weight of 20 pounds can fly at a speed of 50 miles per hour, through trees, a bird whose sense of hearing is simply phenomenal, whose sense of sight is even better than that, and who bears about the same resemblance to a barnyard turkey as I do to Michael Jordan-in his prime.

The name of this bird is Meleagris gallopavo sylvestris, the eastern wild turkey. Concerning this bird, his habits and his traits, his life cycle and his range and about the skill required in manners pertaining to his pursuit and capture, there has arisen a mystique. A mystique that has grown into a deviant subculture. A subculture of which I am a card-carrying member and happily so.

Before I discuss this magnificent creature, his history and his capture, I must first digress to briefly discuss hunters in general. Let me begin by admitting that any man who hunts, hunts in order to kill; no matter what he says about it. Regardless of the ceremonies that surround the sport, regardless of the complexities and some of them are most remarkably complex and despite the artificial rules the participants erect for one another, the ultimate aim of a blood sport is the death of the beast. A great many of the participants in blood sports, the honest ones, not only recognize this, they enthusiastically embrace it. They neither make rationalizations about the inherent cruelty of nature, nor the necessity of harvesting excess stocks of birds or animals. They submit to game laws and to closed seasons and they pay their money only in order that there may continue to be huntable population. They approach the killing with anticipation

and in the event the kill is successfully made, feel absolutely no remorse - only a sensation of satisfaction and fulfillment. Men who deny this basic truth lie. Men who do not wish to kill need only to stop. If this admission makes us bloody-minded and heavy-handed barbarians, so be it. It is always best to be honest. This is true for hunting in general, but in the subculture of turkey hunters, it is the pursuit of the game that makes it unique. The acquisition is anti-climactic.

To explain this let us first briefly consider the two broad group of hunters in our area. The serious hunters here are of two kinds. Those who hunt deer and those who hunt turkey. By far the overwhelming number of disciples that follow either of these two religions follow that of deer hunting. Deer hunters as a group have the ultimate goal of harvesting a deer. Success is measured by the ultimate accomplishment of that feat and bragging rights established by the size of the trophy. The end justifies the means. Deer hunters often exhibit precisely the same expressions and exactly the same behavior patterns that you saw in soldiers standing in line before GI whorehouses during WWII. It forces you to the inescapable conclusion that the thought process of the two groups are as alike as their facial expressions. Neither group has any interest in, nor time for the thrill of the chase. They demand and are willing to pay for guaranteed success.

To be perfectly honest about it too, a piece of deer steak, unpalatable though it may be to some, is after all much more desirable than a case of the clap, so deer hunting does have a real advantage after all. I am of course overdrawing this a little, but only a very little. I deer hunt myself and consider myself an exception to the usual deer hunter. There are hunting clubs that stalk hunt, and some that don't allow drinking, and there are some preachers who deer hunt and who don't drink. Believe me I have never objected to the whiskey. The principal point to be taken is the basic psychological difference between two class of people, those who deer hunt and those who do not.

Now on the other side of the coin, let's discuss a member of the Turkey Legion, one of the Lord's annointed. He arises while it is yet night, he gets up and drives in the night and he gets in the woods while it is still night. Unlike deer hunters, he is alone. By himself. There is no roaring fire, no cups of

coffee, no collection of companions to keep up a running fire of nonsense to keep him from thinking. He understands quite clearly that if he does happen to kill a turkey, he is going to have to work for it and even beyond that, he knows he is going to have to walk to it.

He will experience moments of tragedy of such a depth and feeling as to be indescribable. He will exult in periods of rapture previously understood only by willing Christian martyrs being eaten by willing lions. He will operate in a climate not of desire, but often of compulsion. This is painfully evident in my own case. I hunt turkey because I feel I have to and am in the grips of my own compulsion. In some fortunate people, the compulsion is a trifle more well-adjusted than in others, but only a trifle. Crops have been lost hunting turkeys and wives estranged. Fairly close relatives have gone into the grave at unattended funerals, except on extremely rainy days, and businesses have gone to rack and ruin unless sustained by sympathetic companions or by associates who understand compulsions they do not share.

Turkey hunters love to talk about it. In fact they talk about it all the time. Especially in the spring when the volume of telephonic gossip concerning who heard what where and who saw what when has had as much to do with making AT&T a blue chip in this state as that company's business acumen. Turkey hunters are usually as quick to admit defeat as they are to relate triumph. And, except for those strange individuals who murder turkeys out of car windows or from boat seats or who lie around the edges of pastures with rifles, there is always a curious humility in these confessions. The bird possess a remarkable ability to turn arrogance into hopelessness. Other hunters are perfectly willing to listen to these tails of frustration and tragedy because they understand quite well that the day will surely come when the table turns and they are going to get to tell them while someone else listens.

I first came to an awareness of turkeys during my teen years. I recall seeing a picture of David Hale having bagged a turkey between the rivers in the Kentucky New Era and the accompanying article that expounded on the rarity of the bird and the difficulty in its harvest. At that time I had never seen a wild turkey and the prospects of actually ever hunting them was only a fleeting thought.

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At the time of the Pilgrims, wild turkey populations were estimated to be between 10 and 40 million birds and provided one of the main sources of food for the early settlers. In so far as present day turkey hunters are concerned, the decade of the 1930's constituted the darkest of the dark ages. The vast droves that our grandfathers shot into were gone. By the Great Depression, there was only an estimated 30,000 wild turkeys left in the United States and widespread hunting and habitat depletion completely eliminated the bird in 38 of the states which originally encompassed their range. There are a great many things that caused this. There was strong evidence that there was an introduction of fowl pox from some domestic stock. There is evidence there was a marked change in timber type and forest cover, a situation which the bird would later adapt to. And certainly there existed in the 1930's a rural population that, in many cases, were composed of individuals who killed 30 or 40 birds a year.

All the reasons for the decline are not known. All of them will probably never be known, but the number of turkeys declined sharply and due to whatever known and unknown combination of causes, the period between 1925 and 1945 saw turkey populations reach the lowest ebb of all. In a great many areas the bird absolutely vanished. In the late 30's, the turkey hunter was a man apart. Except for those very few fortunate individuals who hunted on closely guarded and controlled land, a man who heard a turkey gobble had a successful hunt. A man who killed one every two or three years was an outstanding success. A man who killed one annually was almost a national monument and could have had a fence built around him and made a living charging admission to tourists for interviews. Today, because of a concerted effort by conservationists, the wild turkey has come back as one of the greatest success stories of the Conservation Movement.

Instrumental in this comeback has been the efforts of the National Wild Turkey Federation. The National Wild Turkey Federation is a half million-member grassroots non-profit organization with members in 50 states, Canada and 11 foreign countries. It supports scientific wildlife management on public, private and corporate lands as well as wild turkey hunting as a traditional North American sport.

In 1973 the National Wild Turkey Federation was founded in Fredericksburg, Virginia. At that time, there were an estimated 1.3 million wild turkeys and 1.5 million turkey hunters. Shortly after it's founding, the NWTf moved to Edgefield, South Carolina, where it is headquartered today.

Thanks to the work of Federal, State and Provincial wildlife agencies and the NWTf's many volunteers and partners, there are now over 6 million wild turkeys and approximately 2.6 million turkey hunters. Turkey hunting has become the second highest participated type of hunting and is the fastest growing form of hunting. Since 1985, more than 175 million NWTf and cooperator dollars have been spent on over 24,000 projects benefitting wild turkeys and other non-game species throughout North America.

In Kentucky, as is usually the case in instances of historic importance, it was a Western Kentucky influence that got things rolling. During the first quarter of 1973 a meeting was held at the Trigg County Court House in Cadiz, Kentucky in hopes that people who loved to turkey hunt would attend. Trigg, Caldwell, Christian, Calloway and Lyon counties in Western Kentucky were represented. Nine men were present at this meeting and from their efforts, the first chapter was now in Kentucky and Kentucky became the third state to affiliate with the National Wild Turkey Federation, South Carolina and Georgia being the first two.

In 1973 a banquet was held at Lake Barkley State Park with approximately 165 people attending. TVA and LBL co-hosted the event. In 1974 the banquet was also held at Barkley Lodge with 640 people in attendance. In fact, the State Fire Marshall halted admission at 640 leaving several people waiting outside. Invited to this banquet were Carl Kays and Mike Boatwright, both members of the Kentucky Dept of Fish and Wildlife Resources Commission. Mr Kays discouraged the idea of wild turkey in Kentucky, but did agree there appeared to be a great interest in the wild turkey as was evidenced by the number of people in attendance that night, not to mention those turned away. Hiring a wild turkey biologist was discussed and the group recommended George Wright from Princeton, Kentucky who was soon to graduate from college and at the time was doing his thesis on the wild turkey in the Land Between the Lakes region. George ultimately was hired by the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife, but was put on a raccoon project in Eastern Kentucky for 3 years before actually becoming the State Turkey Biologist.

In 1975 the banquet was moved to Crofton, Kentucky, the hometown of Wayne Clark, and sponsored the first state wild turkey calling and owl hooting contest. The owl hooting champion was a good friend of mine, Jerry Turner, and the 1975 turkey calling champion was none other than David Hale of Cadiz, Kentucky. The state

banquets and contests remained in Crofton for years until the mid 90's when it was moved to Louisville as the membership in the Kentucky Chapter skyrocketed.

Any discussion of turkey restoration, particularly on the local level would be incomplete without the acknowledgement of a number of key individuals whose work in restoring the turkey population in Kentucky has made their comeback possible. George Wright has personally been responsible for the resurgence of wild turkey population in this state. As mentioned, George was the first turkey biologist in the state. He spearheaded restoration efforts which were started in 1978 with the short term goal of getting birds reestablished in all counties in the state with suitable habitat. Preference for releases were given to the best areas available in the state.

Because of the lack of birds in Kentucky when the restoration program started, turkeys for the first few years were obtained from other states. Initially, birds were obtained from Mississippi and Arkansas from private hunting clubs in exchange for whitetail deer. These deer-turkey trades lasted from 1978 until 1981 and provided 400 birds for the Commonwealth. In 1981, 50 turkeys were obtained from Missouri by the Tennessee Valley Authority for release on LBL. Missouri started providing birds in 1982 to Kentucky in exchange for river otter that were purchased from a private source in Louisiana. In 1985 Iowa started providing turkeys in exchange for otters. These trades provided several thousand birds over the years and were the backbone of the restoration program. In total, Missouri provided 1714 birds while Iowa provided 1660. Smaller number of birds were also obtained from several other states including Illinois, Tennessee, Virginia and Wisconsin. The total number of birds received from other states was 4313.

Kentucky started trapping turkeys in 1981 and gradually increased the number of birds caught in the state. From 1978 through the winter of 1996, 6760 birds were released on 430 sites across the Commonwealth. By 1990 turkeys had been re-established in all 120 counties in Kentucky. The entire state was opened to spring turkey hunting in 1996. In 1978, the total annual harvest of wild turkey in Kentucky was 44 birds out of a total estimated population of 2000 state-wide. In the year 2003, 30,000 birds were harvested out of a population estimated to be 200,000.

Harold Knight and David Hale are probably the main reason Kentucky has a thriving turkey population today. Both were instrumental in starting the first chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation in Kentucky, with David being named president and Harold vice-president as charter members.

Harold and David transformed a love for the outdoors and a passion for hunting into a multi-million dollar game call business. In the world of hunting, there is no one more respected or admired. To state that they are celebrities amongst the turkey hunting subculture would be a ridiculous understatement. Their story is interesting. Harold was born in the Land Between the Rivers near Golden Pond and lived there until TVA moved everybody out. He developed a love for the outdoors and learned about turkey hunting first hand. He made a living as a barber in Cadiz, Kentucky.

David grew up in Christian County, went to Murray State, and then farmed and hunted for fun. He had hunted all his life and became quite interested in turkey hunting at the Land Between the Lakes. In 1970 there were only 5 turkeys killed on LBL and David got one of them, instantly making him a hero amongst his peers. Someone asked him what kind of call he used to call the bird up and he admitted he did not use a call at all. He was told that to be a turkey hunter, he needed a turkey call and there was this barber in Cadiz that made some turkey calls. David was looking for a new barber anyway and the rest is history.

The first call was fashioned from a medicine bottle and a piece of condom rubber. Their big break came in 1971. David was hunting on LBL and was standing by Harold's truck with one of his calls hanging around his neck when a stranger pulled up and asked him what that was around his neck. David explained to him it was a turkey call that Harold made. The man insisted that he blow the call and this gentleman felt that the turkey call sounded wonderful. He introduced himself as David Harbour, contributing editor for Sports Afield magazine. David told Mr Harbour that if he would wait a few minutes the guy that made the call would come and give him one. They talked a bit, but Harold never showed up. Mr Harbour went by Harold's barber shop and Harold did give him a call. That spring in 1971 there were 6 gobblers killed at LBL. Mr Harbour killed one of them with Harold's call. The next year a story appeared in Sports Afield entitled "How a New Tube Tricked an Old Kentucky Gobbler". Instantly, Knight and Hale were in the game call business.

The wild turkey is North America's largest game bird and, although their range had been diminished are now quite prevalent particularly in the southern United States and into Northern Mexico. There are 5 subspecies: the Florida (Osceola), Eastern, Merriams, Rio Grande and the Gould.

The Eastern wild turkey is a large bird which spends most of its time on the ground, stands up to 4 foot tall and often weighs more than 20 pounds. It prefers to run from danger, capable of running up to 25 miles per hour but when forced to fly can sustain flight for over a mile. Wild turkeys have a number of qualities that make them a remarkable and challenging game animal. Their hearing is several times greater than man, and they can pinpoint the location of a sound from several hundred yards away. Their eyesight has at least 10 times the resolution power of humans. An old turkey hunter once told this story when trying to explain to young turkey hunters just how keen a turkey's senses are.

He suggested that one imagine that you are in the woods at the break of day. Everything is perfect for what looks like a productive morning. The evening prior, your spouse had cooked your favorite: brown beans, cabbage and cornbread and admittedly, you may have over indulged. Sitting there in the woods that morning, nature takes its course and you are overcome with the flatulence that such a meal would impart. Were you deer hunting: the deer would certainly hear it, were you bear hunting: the bear would undoubtedly smell it. A turkey would see it. Thus, the challenge.

So what is the mystique? Why is this the best of all hunting experiences? Imagine this. It is a still warm morning in spring. You have done your scouting and you know there are turkeys in the area. You are up before dawn which was easy because the anticipation of the hunt kept you from sleeping anyway. Dawn starts to break and the woods come alive. The whippoorwills are whipping, a barred owl erupts his call, and a turkey gobbler responds instantly with the force of a cannon's blast. The gobble sends shivers down your spine. You pinpoint his location and go to him, close enough, but not too close. You pick your spot. As golden shafts of light begin to fall on new budding leaves, you are nestled

into the folds of an oak tree, fully camouflaged, mask up, shotgun resting on your knees. Only your eyes are moving, searching intently through the woods, watching for motion, for color, for the fan of tail feathers or a glint of red in the sunlight.

Slowly deliberately you call and send forth soft, sweet notes: yelp, yelp, yelp. The gobbler responds, this time with a double gobble. He is close, and the moment of truth is near. Calling the gobbler into shotgun range is the essence of turkey hunting. Communicating with this wild, nervous creature is a huge and exciting challenge. And this is what sets the pursuit of wild turkeys apart from other types of hunting. It is rarely easy to work an old gobbler. He has no curiosity. If he feels anything is out of kilter, he just simply leaves the area. When one calls in a turkey gobbler, you are really reversing nature, as in the wild, it is the hens that go to the gobbler's call and not the latter.

When a hunter imitates nature well enough, when he frustrates him, when he heightens his anticipation to the point where he forsakes his natural tendency to wait for the hen to come to him, then the hunter's accomplishment is great, and his satisfaction is commensurate to his feat. This is why for turkey hunters, calling the gobbler into gun range is what this sport is all about. The shooting is anti-climactic.

To become a turkey hunter, one does not just go to Walmart, buy a shotgun, the latest camouflage pattern, a license, and go kill a turkey. To get started turkey hunting, one must have a mentor. Someone who will take you under their wing, so to speak, and teach you how to scout, stalk, call, and occasionally harvest this wild creature. As mentors go, I was fortunate enough to have two of the best.

Twenty years ago, I had never seen a wild turkey. One Sunday in January, my partner called me and asked me if I would be interested in driving to the Land Between the Lakes with an old friend of his who was an avid turkey hunter and wanted to go scout for turkeys. He didn't want to drive his car because it had snowed and my pickup would provide much more suitable transportation. Always willing to help, I drove to meet Glen Hester. Glen Hester was, in simplest terms,

a turkey hunting fanatic. A woodworker, Glen fashioned and made his own turkey calls and lived for the spring turkey season. That day in January, Glen led me to see not only my first turkey in the wild but the first 100, and to areas of the Land Between the Lakes I did not know existed. This was the beginning of a long term relationship as Glen not only guided and took me on my first real turkey hunt, but also provided me with a number of his homemade turkey calls that I treasure to this day. Of the many times Glen and I hunted, we never killed a turkey together, but the time spent and the lessons learned from this old sage of local turkey hunters, I would trade for nothing. He both introduced me to the turkey hunting cult and was responsible for my life-long addiction.

One can not mention local turkey hunters of fame without the name of Jerry Turner coming up. Jerry was a Baptist minister from Cadiz, Kentucky who worked for and guided turkey hunters with Knight and Hale for his entire adult life. If a finer human being has ever trod this earth, I would certainly like to meet him. If a better woodsman or hunter ever did likewise, I would certainly like to hunt with him.

Jerry was a patient of mine who became not only a yearly hunting companion, but a deer friend, and I will always cherish our time spent together. He guided me to harvest my first turkey and many more and taught me how to be occasionally successful in this sport of the gods. The year 2001 was a devastating one for me in regards to turkey hunting. Jerry had contracted a terminal malignancy and after a stormy and difficult winter, passed away in February. We buried Jerry on a hill in a cemetery that Harold and David built above the shop where Jerry had worked so many years. His casket was lined with an embroidered gobbler in full strut and on Jerry's headstone, there are pictures of the wild turkey which he revered so much.

Two months later, Glen was hunting turkeys at the Land Between the Lakes. He did not return to the truck as planned and his hunting companion went looking for him. Glen had suffered a fatal heart attack and was found, turkey call in hand, sitting at the base of an oak tree. I know that if Glen was given the opportunity to request what he could do on the last day of his life, it would be to call up one more turkey. I am sure there is one old gobbler at LBL whose demise was just minutes away and he never knew it. Glen was buried during the turkey season

that year, clad in his favorite camouflage with his favorite call.

For those who have never had this experience, no amount of verbage can explain just how much fun it is to fool an old gobbler. Just being in the woods in the spring of the year is exhilarating in and of itself. On more than one occasion, I have broken the hunter's code and called up a bird and let him go just so my season wouldn't end. I have guided hunters to kill their first turkey and the sense of satisfaction gained in doing this is immeasurable, matching or exceeding the thrill of my own first. There is no competition between the hunters, just between you and this wily old patriarch of the woods.

When this old turkey hunter leaves this earth, hopefully I will go to a better place. How many members of the legion will be there, I don't know. I do know that Glen and Jerry will be there with a lot of turkeys. The area will be scouted, the birds will be located and we will spend eternity chasing him, the most wonderful of God's creatures.