

*Live geese don't have frost on their backs, so Goldie sweeps some of the more than 200 decoys in the spread.*



# Geese Were Made For Hunting

BY JON FARRAR

*Seventy years of hunting the North Platte River has given Goldie Haworth more than just experience. His stories of waterfowl hunting are endless.*

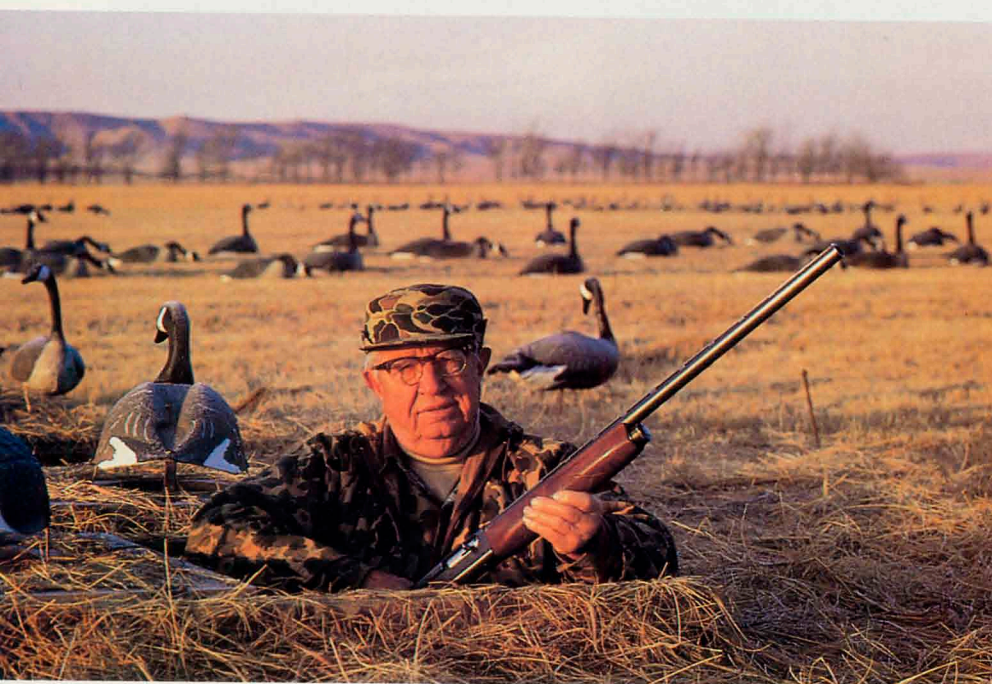
IT WAS 5 a.m. right on the button. Most worthwhile endeavors begin in the wee hours of the morning and this, I was convinced, would be no exception. In the headlights, as I approached Earl "Goldie" Haworth's house in Sidney, I could see two cased guns and two boxes containing groceries and other slightly less important gear like shotgun shells and goose calls, sitting at the curb. The light was on in the living room. It brought back a rush of memories of opening mornings of pheasant season when I was a straining-at-the-bridle kid as soon as corn pickers started stirring up the dry autumn soil. God only knows how many times Goldie's gear, or his hunting partner's gear, had sat at the curb in the darkest of dark that comes before dawn.

I had first met Goldie when I was working on a pair of articles about Art Storz Sr. and his Ducklore Lodge on the North Platte River west of Lisco (see November and December 1987 issues of NEBRASKAland). Goldie hosted Storz on his first hunting trip in the North Platte Valley, and for several years guided the Omaha brewer's guests out of the famous hunting lodge. Twice I sat in Goldie's living room and wallowed in his stories of waterfowl hunting in western Nebraska during the first half of this century. For 70 of his 84 years, waterfowl hunting had been the passion of his life. That alone put Goldie in an exclusive club. What made Goldie one of a handful, though, was that he was a storyteller, and good storytellers are hard to come by in this day of mass media.

For several hours on two different







Sunday afternoons we turned the yellow pages of his scrapbook and I vicariously became one of Goldie's hunting partners: wading the shallow North Platte River to cut willows for a blind, floating hunting shacks downstream, training Chesapeakes, and making bets on who had the biggest call goose or smallest English call duck. It was the closest I will ever come to the glory days of waterfowl hunting, when seasons were liberal and ducks and geese still came south in incomprehensible numbers. Before I left Sidney after the second interview, I begged an invitation to come back in the fall and hunt geese.

After I picked up Goldie and his grandson, Barry Weaver, we drove north of Sidney to Gurley, then started cutting cross-country on back roads to the North Platte River, roads Goldie



*Many of the decoys in Goldie's spread are old canvas, straw-stuffed imitations (left) once manufactured in Axtell. The decades have not quenched Goldie's (bottom left) love for waterfowl hunting. His goose hunting career began in 1919 when he was just a sophomore in high school. After a football game at Bayard, he shot two from a flock (below) on a sandbar.*

could have driven blindfolded, roads filled with memories. Every farm house, every bend in the road had a story. Like the dead-end where he rolled his brand new Ford in about 1940. Goldie was on his way to Ducklore in the middle of the night to put out decoys and guide hunters at dawn, his car loaded with electrical generators and dogs. He pushed it back over on its wheels, and after the day's hunt, drove it home to Sidney that night. His wife saw it and told him he just as well take it to the dump, "but a local body man fixed it good as new."

Goldie hunts geese on a peninsula of meadow where the North Platte River bends sharply between Lisco and Oshkosh. Geese moving up and down the river usually fly across the point rather than faithfully following the river, so it is a good location in one of the best Canada goose hunting areas in North America.

We drove down to the pit blind in the meadow, unloaded the gear, and I drove the truck to a thin line of trees a quarter of a mile south and parked. By the time I walked back to the pit, blue flames were flickering from propane burners and Goldie was making coffee by the light of two candles.

I've spent a day or two in goose hunting pits over the years and was not unaccustomed to the luxuries they allow. But Goldie's pit was different and more to my liking. It bore the personal touch of being outfitted over many years by a hunter who had logged many days in its cramped quarters. But more than that, its furnishings were right out of the 1940s. It was a cut of hunting history from the past. Like Goldie, it was from a time when hunters and hunting were different, somehow better than now, less burdened by too much technology and too much talk.

The pit blind was made from an old fuel tank Goldie spotted behind a gas station years ago and bought for \$100. Waterproof pits are essential in the North Platte Valley where the water table is only a few feet below the surface. While tanks solve the problem of water leaking in, they create another—

tanks in water are no more than bubbles, and bubbles rise to the surface. This pit had popped out of the ground the night of the same day it was put in place. Since then it has been securely held in place by four engine blocks attached with cables and sunk in the ground as deadmen.

In the years Goldie has occupied the pit, it has become a masterpiece of comfort. A padded bench and backrest run its full length. The seat cushions are made from irrigation canvas left over when Goldie sold his hardware store in

Sidney. The material and construction were up to the standards of a very particular old goose hunter, right down to the metal eyelet air vents.

There were two propane burners for heat and cooking, one a two-burner in an old white enamel framework, and a four-burner in heavy cast grillwork with porcelain knob valves in front. Both were salvaged from old gas stoves.

Along the front of the pit there was a full-length shelf with a drop-board that could be opened for eating, or, I sus-





*One of Goldie's hunting cabins was an old homesteader's house from south of Sidney (below). When they went to move it, they found the walls filled with clay for insulation. An addition was added later, as was the slab siding, hauled in from Wyoming by a trucker friend. Goldie's wife, Mae (right), not only tolerated his frequent hunting trips, but was a companion on many.*

pect, for a friendly game of pitch when the geese weren't flying. Smaller shelves stored dishes, glasses, cups and cooking gear, along with other paraphernalia hunters are inclined to want in the course of a long day of waiting for geese. The shelves were filled with an array of unmatched kitchenware—bowls with Union Pacific Railroad markings on the underside, a massive cast aluminum kettle, a toast-maker the likes of which I'd only seen in advertisements from the back pages of 1920-era magazines. There were no plastic utensils and no paper plates. The forks had tines long enough to line up a bite of pancakes four or five deep if you were inclined, and the knives were made for cutting, not just for spreading butter.

Every little bracket and shelf was just as it should be, and substantial, made to last a lifetime of hunting, though at the same time it was obviously homemade. It had a nice feel to it and yet I could not exactly put my finger on why it appealed to me so much. In part it was because homemade was better than

store-bought. This was not a goose pit that could be had with money. It looked like it had grown with plates from here and tea kettles from there, many from hunters who had been in the pit and saw the need for some item. Mostly, though, I liked it because it had Goldie Haworth written all over it, and although I hardly knew Goldie, if you measure such things only by the time we had spent together, I had immediately taken a strong liking to the man.

Even if I'd been first into the blind I would have known right off the north end was where Goldie sat and the south end was to be avoided, because that is where the little hand water pump and dish washing equipment were located. The cooking gear was on Goldie's end of the blind and it was obvious Goldie was the pit cook. On his end of the pit was also a calendar. Every day since the opening of the goose season had an entry—who hunted in this pit and its sister pit about 100 yards southwest, and how many geese had been shot. When we crawled into the pit on the morning of December 18, 1987, the

total stood at 61 birds. It had been a slow year, according to Goldie.

Even before we could see geese we heard them moving up and down the river. Barry gave a steady accounting of the approach of legal shooting time but Goldie showed little interest, consulted neither sunrise-sunset tables nor his watch. I'm not implying he wasn't concerned about abiding by the law, but after seven decades of waterfowl hunting he knew what legal shooting time looked like in clear, heavy overcast and any weather condition in between. Anyway, there were more important affairs than goose shooting to attend to, like breakfast.

The menu included eggs, fried as ordered, thick slabs of ham, toast, and fried potatoes, each slice crispy and brown but not a one burnt. Goldie was a meticulous cook and followed a routine I suspect has changed with only minor variations to suit the menu over years. The potatoes and ham were fried first and kept warm along with the plates under the burners while the eggs were fried in a matched set of small tin fry





pans with white enamel lids. Barry was in charge of the toast, and of course every well-appointed goose pit offers a choice of juice—tomato or orange—and ample quantities of boiled coffee.

Once breakfast was under way, nothing short of a goose falling into the egg pan was going to delay its completion. After all, there was a whole day of goose hunting ahead but breakfast was served only at dawn. In between Barry's minute-by-minute account of geese moving up and down the river, Goldie began to do what he does even better than hunt waterfowl and fry potatoes: tell stories.

"The first geese I ever shot," he began, "was two I killed in 1919, up at Bayard. I was a sophomore in high school and we played football at Bayard on Thanksgiving. A friend of mine, who was in my class, had an uncle who lived on the south side of the river, just east of Bayard. After the game we went out there to his house and the next day we got up at daylight and went hunting. The Union Pacific Railroad crosses the river right there, and we were walking across that bridge. I looked down the river and sitting on an ice bar was a flock of geese. I tried to get my partner to sneak out in the river with me. We had hip boots was all, and he wouldn't go, so I went out and got two geese when they got up. We came home on the train, the Burlington, about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. And I had my shotgun and those two geese. My Dad was in the drug store in Sidney, Western Drugs, and I remember walking down the street carrying those two geese to show him, and anyone else who would look. Those were my first geese.

"The best we ever did out of one flock of geese," Goldie continued as he forked over each slice of potato, "was 13 out of one flock. I was putting decoys out, live ones, call birds, back in the days when they were still legal, out on this towhead. We'd usually put the gander on one end and the hens down below so they'd call between them. And those old ganders would get so damn mad they would just bawl. I was out of



the blind, staking the call birds out, and a flock of geese showed up. Ed, my brother-in-law, Ed Breternitz, says, 'Here comes a flock of geese.' And I just laid down flat and held this goose by the leg. And you ought to have heard that old goose call; called 'em in. And that same day we got 13 out of one bunch."

"How many of you were there shooting," I asked.

"Two," Goldie replied matter-of-factly.

"Just two of you shooting and you killed 13 geese out of one flock?"

"Yeah," Goldie said. "The flock circled three times. Ed was shooting a Remington Model 10. He got nine of

them. I shot a Model 11 Remington automatic with a four-shot extension on the magazine. That was a long time ago, before plugs, and you could legally have a lot more geese than now."

By the time we had cleaned up the last of the fried potatoes and ham it was light enough to see the spread of decoys that dotted the meadow around the pits. There were about 200 decoys in the spread, set in four or five distinct groups. One set was oversized shells, some inflatable types, and some regular-size plastic shells, but the bulk were old canvas, straw-filled decoys. No two were alike; some had their heads up in an alert posture, others were stretched



*Goldie (below left) and his hunting partner during the 1930s, Al Zlomke, posed for a photo after an especially good day of goose hunting. Their call geese are in the cage in the decoy boat. Many of the Canada geese coming to the North Platte refuge are "giant" Canadas, some banded by biologists. Goldie (right, bottom) gives each bacon slice his personal attention.*

out as if feeding, and there were all variations in between.

"They're the longest-lived decoys that were ever on the market," Goldie said of the canvas decoys, "if you take care of them. A fellow by the name of J.A. Lundgren at Axtell used to make and sell them. He used to have a hunting lease next to me. When he left he gave me a dozen of those decoys, and when I got in the hardware store I retailed a lot of them. He was an old harness maker from Sweden and had patterns and everything. They were 'steam-stuffed.' He could steam that rice straw and stuff 'em and make 'em

solid. They sold for about \$60 a dozen in the 1940s."

Hunting with a photographer has its drawbacks. We had been joking about the "7:05 flight," and sure enough, I was out of the pit at 7:05 shooting photos of the old canvas decoys when a pair of Canada geese came gliding down the meadow as if they intended to drop into Goldie's spread. Humped-up photographers don't look all that natural in a spread of decoys, or hardly anywhere else for that matter, and the birds flared off at the last minute.

A bit later, while we were sitting down in the pit and Goldie was spin-

ning a yarn or two about rattlesnakes, rigging call geese and pass shooting in the Sandhills north of Lisco, a lone goose slipped into the decoys about 50 yards in front of the pit. Barry slipped out of the pit and stalked the bird as best a hunter can on a pool-table-flat meadow, but returned minutes later three shotgun shells lighter and without the goose.

After only an hour into legal shooting time, Goldie was already pronouncing that it was a terrible day, that there were no geese moving. His definition of "no geese moving" is very precise, though. Swarms of geese rising up from the river roosts do not count. Small groups trading up and down the river do not count. What counts are geese moving away from the river and over the meadows, or big movements of geese going out to the grainfields to feed.

After a few hours of talking with Goldie and listening in on assorted conversations between him and other hunters in Sidney, it was evident that goose watching is something of a local art form in the North Platte Valley. "Were the geese moving today?" is the opening of most conversations. Seeing lots of geese in the air will bring a rush of adrenalin to the veins of most hunters, but not to experienced North Platte River hunters.

Goldie explained that in the area we were hunting there are three roosts on the river that have been used by the geese for years and years: Crane's Grove Roost about three miles to the west, where Rush Creek comes to the North Platte River; Farrel's Roost about a mile and a half northeast; and Soup Bowl Roost, so named as it is near a particularly low meadow, about two and a half miles to the southeast. All morning long we saw large flocks of geese rise up from these roosts, mill around and then settle back down. There was some goose traffic on the river, usually small groups or just a pair of birds, but they followed the river closely and never came over the meadows. Several times during the morning a single goose flew low along the river







calling. "A leather-skinned old son-of-a-gun" Goldie would say, "just taunting us."

According to Goldie, the geese do not go out every day to feed. Some days they feed on natural vegetation on the river, which is a "legislative waterfowl refuge" in Garden County, one defined by statutes but on privately-owned land. By way of the local grapevine, hunters keep up on the movements of geese, and if after a couple of days the geese have not left the river in significant numbers, the anticipation of a good day grows.

Last year at this time, hunters in Goldie's pit and the one next to it had shot 20 or 30 more geese than this year. But last year at this time, Oahe Reservoir in South Dakota, a major Canada goose gathering place during fall migration, held only (Continued on page 44)

