

I THOUGHT I HAD LOST HIM.

It had been nine years since my last contact with him. I tried to find him last year, but there was no phone listing for Keith Blakemore in the Prairie Grove Arkansas area. Surely the folks in the local sporting goods store would know him; they didn't. I thought of him often, especially during the past year. I thought a lot about what he had given me, and now that I was old enough to really appreciate it, I couldn't find him.

When I was 12 years old, he was my idol, my hero, and my friend. He was 25 years old at the time. It seems so strange that I am nine years older now, than he was then. He moved from Arkansas into the house next door to us in Atlanta. I was fortunate to have the greatest parents in the world, but they did not enjoy hunting and fishing. There was something inside of me that literally ached for the chance to become an outdoorsman. I think Keith recognized this, and he sort of took me under his wing. He spent a great deal of time with me, and may have even tired of me following him around all the time. He never let me know if he did.

He told me of his experiences on his uncle's ranch in Colorado. He introduced me to books like "The Old Man and the Boy". He taught me how to make fishing lures and rods, and even knives. He took me hunting and fishing. He cursed at me when I dropped the anchor in the bottom of the boat, always with a smile on his face. He always finished his french fries before he started on his hamburger. He used expressions like "Hell's Bells" and "six one, half a dozen the other." As the Randy Travis song says, "I thought he walked on water". He gave me the opportunity to live the outdoor adventures I had only dreamed of.

Keith was not just an outdoorsman, he was a Sportsman. He didn't just teach me how to hunt and fish, he taught me that killing deer or catching fish was not the most important part of being an outdoorsman. He taught me that respect for nature, and an appreciation for the total outdoor experience was what really mattered. I still remember the first time he took me deer hunting. He helped me climb through the pre-dawn darkness into the little dogwood tree, and walked away. He took a few steps, turned around, shined the flashlight in my face and said "It isn't doe day. If you shoot one, I'll beat the hell out of you." You can believe he had my attention. I asked him one day why he liked fishing better than hunting. He said, "When you catch fish, you can throw ^{them} back; You can't call back a bullet or an arrow."

A strange thing happens to boys at about age 14 or 15. They suddenly believe that the pursuit of young ladies is more important than the pursuit of the great outdoors. I started spending less time with Keith, and before long he moved back to

Arkansas. It took me 10 years to realize what I had lost.

During the past year, as president of the Sportsmans Club, I have thought of him often. Many times his words have come out of my mouth, or flowed through my fingers to this typewriter. I now realize that he was largely responsible for my deep feelings about sportsmanship and conservation. There are times when I see little evidence that the ethics message we have tried to promote during the past year is getting through. I also know that some people feel that outdoor ethics is a relatively unimportant subject, in the light of the other problems we face in the world today. It may be. But I believe that these same principles, of right and wrong, honesty and integrity, are the ones that should guide us in all our dealings, both with nature and our fellow man. If we have helped one person become a true sportsman, as Keith helped me, our efforts have been worthwhile.

I received a Christmas Card from Keith last month. He is still in Arkansas, 125 miles away from where I was trying to find him. He's started a new career as a game warden. I'll bet he'll be the best one in the state, because I know his heart is in it.

It sure was good finding him again. I thought I had lost him, but I will never lose what he gave to me.

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