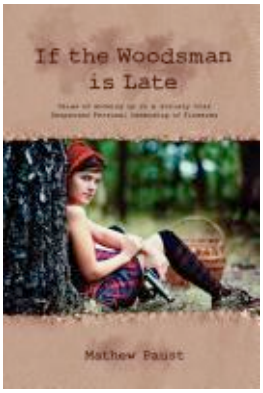
If the Woodsman is Late

Tales of Growing up in a Society that Respected Personal Ownership of Firearms

Mathew Paust



A collection of stories - some true, some fiction - by a man raised in a small Midwestern town in a day when the topic of guns did not instantly divide people into opposing camps and when people respected guns in part because guns had recently helped our country defeat her enemies in World War II. These stories are meant to entertain and shed light on a way of life that seems to be disappearing.

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Many of the stories in If the Woodsman is Late are personal histories. The author has changed many of the names of people in these stories, and in some cases he changed other identifying characteristics. The following names are pseudonyms: Mark, Bubba, Laurie, Steve, Butch, Roger, Cal, Terri, Miss Fortune, Achal, Rami, Klaus, Pete, Kenny, and Elmer Fudd.

All names, characters, places and incidents in the fiction stories are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people is unintentional and coincidental.

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We Were Cowboys Then

Guns and I go back to life before kindergarten. I assume this because of the gun incident in my morning kindergarten class, which is my earliest particular gun memory. There must have been precedents, as I remember that the gun in the kindergarten incident, while fascinating, was not an alien object. It was made of some cheap cast alloy. A cap gun, I imagine. Steve, the new guy, used it to bop Butch, the bully, on the head, making him cry. This was a sea change moment in our class of about 30 five-year-olds.

The year was 1946. World War II – the last of the "good" wars – had ended less than a year before. Guns had helped us beat the Heinies and the Japs. Guns were good. Kids were not at risk of being expelled from school for drawing pictures of guns or, hard as it is to believe, of being charged with a crime for bringing a real gun to school for show and tell. This actually happened several years later when I met the boy who would become my best friend carrying a German Luger in plain sight as he headed home after dazzling his classmates with his uncle's war trophy.

"I will deaded you," he announced, pointing the black military sidearm at me as we approached each other in the front stairwell, me staring in wonderment. Mark, was his name. He was a new student, whom I'd seen but never spoken with until now. We quickly learned we were neighbors and walked home together, Mark holding the pistol in his hands for all the world to see.

This was a time when certainties were established early and went unquestioned, at least through a boy's eyes. Good was good, bad was bad and gray was for old people's hair. The kindergarten incident played out with no mitigating ambiguities. From the moment Steve bopped and Butch cried the two became archetypes straight from our cowboy-movie-fueled boys' culture. Steve – tall, slim, blonde, taciturn, modest, the Randolph Scott sheriff; Butch – big, black-haired and blustery, the classic villain. They remained thus for the next several years until Steve and his family moved away. They remain thus in my mind even today, more than half a century later, despite my path crossing briefly with each of theirs under incongruous circumstances as young adults.

The unpretentious little club with the pretentious name "Metropolitan" sat off the highway in a ragged commercial strip near a college town. It was still a hangout mostly for university students. Its main attraction, besides no cover charge, was surprisingly good live music. Whoever booked the acts was able to snag name performers such as Conway Twitty, who was on stage my last night out before reporting to be sworn in and bused to basic training as an Army private.

It was mid-September 1963. Kennedy was well into his third year as president and U.S. troops were two years shy of removing their "advisory" gloves in Vietnam. I was joining the Army because I'd flunked out of school and lost my draft deferment. Enlisting, I figured, would give me choices other than infantry. The trade-off meant I'd be in uniform four years instead of two.

A couple of friends were taking me to “Metro's” for a farewell beer. The combo's pounding melodic bass welcomed us into the club as the dominant sound over a background buzz of conviviality, the laughter and chatter, the chair scrapes and clinks and clunks of glassware on wooden tables. Inside, the familiar bar smell engulfed our olfactory senses, heavy with tobacco smoke and fermented brews, with an occasional tease of feminine cosmetics.

The dominant personage in the room was Twitty. A big man with big hair, he towered on the narrow stage against the back wall. Propitious, it struck me, that Twitty was belting out the chorus of Lee and Goodman's *Let the Good Times Roll*. It was early enough to find a few unoccupied tables. We picked one a row back from a dance floor so cramped the two or three couples bobbing and trying to gyrate on it were hard pressed to keep from bumping each other.

I was finishing my second draft beer when the band took a break. Twitty unstrapped his guitar and set it down and sat himself down on a folding chair near the back of the stage. In the moments before recorded music replaced the live I overheard a snippet of conversation between two young women at a table at the edge of the dance space directly in front of the stage. “He asked me to meet him afterwards,” said one, tilting her head at the stage, her voice arched as if saying “ewwww.” Her companion vocalized the implied disgust. They were loud enough to ensure anyone nearby could hear them, Twitty included, but he never looked up. It might have been

unintended coincidence but his first song after the break was from his newly released album. It was his cover of *Fever*.

By then I'd had my last reunion with Butch. I hadn't seen him in about ten years and didn't recognize him at first. My friends had wandered off during the break and I was alone at the table when a waiter brought me a fresh, unordered beer. “Compliments of the guy at the bar,” he said, nodding at a hulking figure on a stool at the horseshoe bar next to the kitchen entrance. “Whoops,” thought I. The man turned then just enough so our eyes met. I had no choice but to get up and walk over.

“Hey, remember me?” he said in a deep unfamiliar voice. “Yeah. You look familiar,” I lied. “Butch,” he said, and the years fell away as if they'd never been. It was Butch's wolfishly merry grin that took me back. I'd last seen him wielding a wooden bench in the locker room after gym class, the mean-spirited teacher staving off the bench with both hands. The rest of us cleared out. Butch never returned to school. We'd become friendly over the years up to then. He and his dad lived in a trailer on my paper route and I always looked forward to seeing him outside and would stop to chat.

He'd just been released from prison, where he served several years for receiving stolen property, he said. I sat at the bar with him, finished my beer and bought us another round. He teared up when I told him I was off to the Army. “I'd give anything to go with you,” he said, explaining that the Army wouldn't take him with his record. My memory of Butch closes there, with us

sitting at the bar, his black hair unruly, bushy mustache adorning his big square face, tears filling his eyes.

I didn't see Steve again from the day he moved away in elementary school until my first day of classes at the university after returning from my Army tour in Germany. I was meandering around the sprawling campus re-familiarizing myself with its geography when I paused at a construction site near on old departmental building. Someone was working in an excavation with a shovel. What struck me was the large brown mole at the base of his hairline. I'd never seen anyone else with such a mark. The hair was short and nearly white, just as I remembered it.

“Steve?” I called into the pit. The worker straightened up, turned and I knew it was him. He looked almost the same. Rail thin, handsome, chiseled features, light blue eyes. Randolph Scott. “It's Mattie,” I said. The shy smile of his childhood stretched his face just enough to acknowledge recognition. We spoke briefly. He was embarrassed, and, then, so was I. There really wasn't much to say. We made no plans to meet for a drink. “See you around,” I said. He nodded, waved a hand and went back to his shovel. I never saw him again.

Death in the Tall Grass

It struck without warning. No thunderclap, not even a rolling rumble. Just cr*ack*. The jolt shot across and up with a shriek from the right side of my face deep into the cerebral cortex, leaving me frightened and undone. It was what my dentist dismissively called “an electric shock,” which happened whenever a spoon or fork made contact with one of my silver molar fillings. This zap happened with nothing in my mouth but stewed meat. I stopped chewing and looked at my mother.

“What's the matter, Mathew?” she said, lines of concern crinkling the upper third of her warm round face.

I was afraid to speak. Afraid to move my jaw. I simply looked at her, my face undoubtedly crinkled even more than hers, and slowly, cautiously worked my tongue back to the molar area. That's where it was, a tiny ball of lead, about the size of a peppercorn. I've no doubt the relief from this discovery spread over my face in a wave that induced my mother to relax her face, thus allowing my father, who sat opposite her at the kitchen table and had been tuning his antennae to signals of something possibly amiss, to stand down as well.

I worked the pellet forward and spit it out, sending it hurtling onto my plate with a surprisingly distinct *plink*.

“Shot, huh?” My father wasn't much of a hunter, but he'd bought me the shotgun and knew enough to quickly solve the mystery

of the mini-crisis. My mother at first wondered if maybe it was a bone chip, which it easily might have been. Having grown up on a farm, she had helped me gut the rabbit and skin it. She'd found several of the lead pellets cutting it up for the stew pot and was disappointed she hadn't gotten them all.

Neither parent was enthusiastic about the meat but they ate enough to be good sports. It was tough and stringy. I chewed dutifully and swallowed most of what was on my plate before acknowledging defeat. It was awful, but I'd killed it and was trying to live up to the code of the hunter as represented by my favorite columnists in *Field & Stream*, one of them a distant relative who wrote as Gil Paust. In those articles rabbit was described as a delicacy, tender and delicious. I mentioned this.

"Well," my mother said earnestly, "he was probably an older rabbit. Their meat would be tougher." The thought had never entered my considerations, neither the gender nor the age. My considerations were becoming complicated.

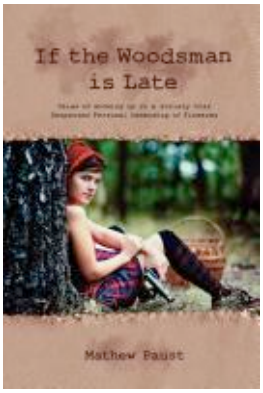
"How old do you think he was?" This was me, suddenly more discombobulated than I'd been after the tooth shock. I could still sing the words to *Peter Cottontail* and had been enthralled by Uncle Wiggly stories not many years prior as my mother would read an episode each night at bedtime. I was a big Bugs Bunny fan. Anthropomorphism was rearing its unwelcome head at the dinner table.

"They can live a long time," my dad contributed, his cruel streak awakening as

he sensed where my head was headed. He added, “He was probably an old grandpa.”

This came with the disabling force of a blow to the solar plexus. I struggled gamely to eat the rest of the meat on my plate, spitting out another pellet or two before finally concluding my rite of passage, fighting tears.

Old grandpa was the first mammal I had killed. To this day I can hear him screaming, out of sight in the grass where he'd run after I blasted him with the 20-gauge bird shot. I stalked in after him and found him lying on his side, writhing and shrieking in agony. I shot at him again at nearly point blank range. I assumed I had missed because the screaming didn't stop. It took a third shot to end what had started as something I'd dreamed of for years now become ghastly. But I manned up, took him home, cleaned his pellet-peppered flesh and ate him.



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