

How I Came to Love My Longbow

More Ramblings of an Old Derelict Bowhunter

By Dr. Ed Ashby

Long ago, in a land far away (hmmm, that sounds familiar), I fell head over heels in love. It was in the early 1950s, and I was only 11 years old. Nope, it wasn't some school boy crush on my teacher, nor was it with some contemporary cutie. It was with a different type of femme fatal. It was a love affair with wood and string, shaft and feather.

The school day had started much as any other, but that soon changed. In the early afternoon, there was a program scheduled in the auditorium. This one I was anxious to see. Some man had come to promote a hunting movie that was starting that day at the Strand, the only theater in my small Texas town. How he got permission to come to our school to help sell tickets to his movie I have no idea, and doubt that the thought ever crossed my mind at the time. I just reasoned that, as I already loved hunting, this would surely beat sitting in class being bored out of my wits.

Just after lunch the students were all assembled in the hall and a fine looking man, dressed all in khaki, took the stage. He was about six feet tall with arms that seemed almost too long for his body. He carried with him what I easily recognized as a bow (from all the cowboy and Indian movies I had sat through at the Saturday matinee at the Strand—which had, much to my concern, recently gone up from nine cents to a dime). On his back was a bag containing many arrows, all with white feathers.

The man introduced himself. He said his name was Howard Hill, and that he had been to Africa, and had shot many animals there with a bow and arrow. He had made a movie about his trip, and it would be showing in our town. Now he really had my interest!

Then he told us he was going to do some shooting with his bow to entertain us. What followed was the most marvelous exhibition of human skill I have ever witnessed. Using a large round mat of grass backed by a carpet hanging lose as a backstop, he proceeded to shoot numerous arrows into the center of it so fast I could hardly follow them. Then he broke

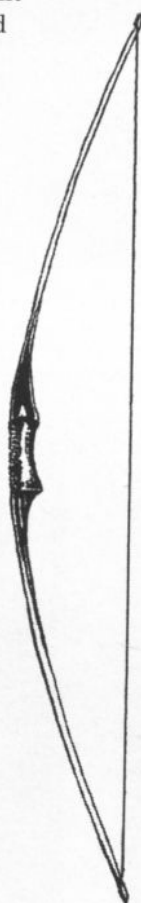
balloons attached to a spinning wheel, snuffed the flame of a lit candle, and hit playing cards dead center.

He bounced arrows off slanting boards, ricocheting them into the center of the target. Then he shot his bow by holding the bow with his foot. I was impressed! Then, moving to the back of the auditorium, he proceeded to shoot over our heads, still placing all his arrows so closely together that the feathers were torn from some of the arrows.

Moving back to the stage, he proceeded to hit objects tossed into the air by an assistant. After failing to get a volunteer from the audience for what he called his "William Tell Shot," his assistant placed an apple on her head and he proceeded to hit it dead center! As a finale, he said he was going to try to split an arrow—Robin Hood style. He fired an arrow into the target, then, taking a second arrow, tried to split it. Well, he wasn't perfect. The first arrow didn't split, but he *did* cut it in two with his second shot! By now I was totally awe struck.

After the assembly I couldn't wait for school to dismiss for the day. As soon as it did I rushed home, full of desire to emulate the great feats I had seen that day. Off to the lake back of the house I went. A short search ended with the selection of the first healthy willow branch I found and a few cane reeds. These would, respectively, become my bow and arrows. I had little time to lavish on my creation. A few whacks with a hatchet, some strong line pilfered from my Dad's fishing reel, and the "bow" was finished. The "arrows" required a little more effort. Some feathers were procured from our much distressed chickens and ducks. A dab of glue and a few wraps with some thread liberated from Mom's sewing box and the arrows were "fletched." A quick rummage in the garbage pail yielded some can lids. These I transformed into "arrow points" by use of some tin snips. More glue and thread and my arrows were ready to go!

Down by the lake I found my target: a large tree. I soon found my effective shooting range, about five feet, and man-



Artwork by Noelle Naiden

aged to mangle and destroy most of my arrows before the willow limb gave out and my bow broke. I was disappointed but undaunted. Time after time, I made new bows from whatever wood was available at the time. I also succeeded in clearing a sizeable patch of the cane thicket in making arrows.

Pretty soon it became apparent to my father that something had to be done before I deforested the entire woodlot and cleared the lake shore of all cane! He took me to Josh Strickland's, our town's only sporting goods store. To both our amazement, there was actually a bow there—a Ben Pearson Old Hickory. Using all my hard-earned savings, I was allowed to buy it. I still had to make my own arrows, but now I had a real bow!

That bow was a 65# draw weight, but at my short draw must have been much less. Still, it was an extreme effort for me to shoot it even a few times. I refused to give up, and finally convinced my father to let me purchase another bow. This one, too, came from that same small store. It was an all fiberglass bow by Paul Bunyan. The glass was a lovely translucent green color and it was marked as a 55# draw. But it, too, proved very heavy for me to shoot more than a few shots with before sheer exhaustion overtook me.

By this time I had progressed to arrows made from dowel rods purchased from the hardware store, and most of my arrow heads were spent .38 caliber pistol cases. Pretty good arrows, if I do say so myself. It soon became apparent to me that if I was going to learn to hit anything with a bow, I had to get one I could pull back and still keep my eyes open!

Having failed to convince my father that I needed a third bow, I turned to every boy's last bastion of hope—Mom. Having convinced her that I would surely die if I didn't get permission to "waste my money" on yet a third bow, I trusted her persuasion to get the required permission from Dad. It worked.

This time I knew what I wanted. The bow was ordered from Herters. It, too, was an all fiberglass bow. It was a tawny brown color and of semi-recurve design with a draw weight of 35#. Anxiously I awaited its arrival. When the grand day arrived, I literally ripped the shipping box apart to get it out. Off to my range I went. Just a few shots and I knew...this was a bow I could shoot. Even at a full ten yards that tree was no match for my skills.

It was with this bow that I finally managed to develop enough skill to kill a few small animals, mostly frogs and snakes, but a few rabbits, a duck and a fish or two fell to it also. I shot my bow almost daily for the next several months and eventually became pretty good at it.

Then came summer and a job digging ditches. The soil of my native Texas was brick-hard clay, and the work hard and hot. For this toil I received a shinny quarter for each linear foot I could dig. That was big money to me then. With my new found wealth from three months at hard labor in that hot Texas sun, I ordered a Bear Kodiak bow. It was a 42# bow. Along with it I ordered two dozen Microflite fiberglass arrows. My first ever good factory-made arrows.

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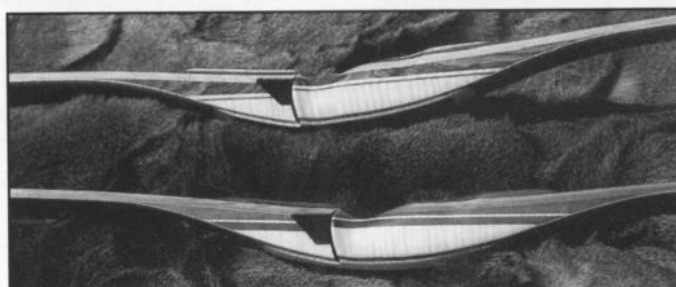
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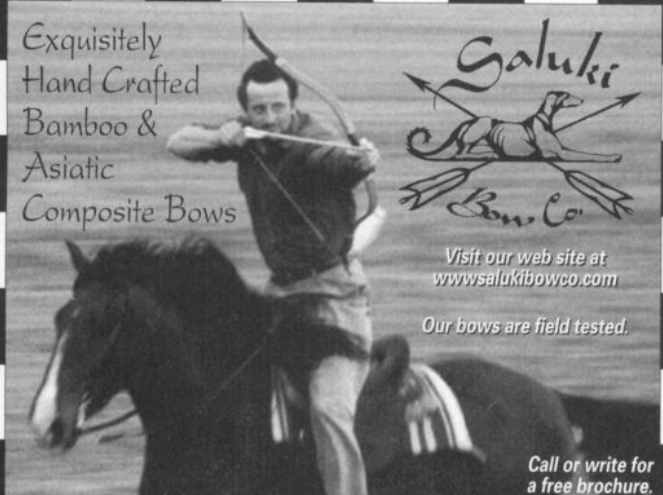
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right or left hand models. All the bows I had ever had could be shot from both sides of the grip, and I often shot from both the right and left side of the bow. What difference could that possibly make? I had no idea what a right hand was, but reasoned that, since I did everything else right handed, I must need a right hand bow. When that right hand bow arrived I discovered that I had always been shooting my bows left handed! I had to learn to shoot all over again!

For the next two years I hunted small game or shot with my bow almost every day. Little by little I learned everything on my own, and a lot of what I learned turned out to be wrong. That is probably why I still miss so many easy shots, at least that is what I tell myself.

During this time I also discovered I could get some useful information about shooting a bow from books. I pestered the librarian unmercifully on each visit but she never complained. She would simply smile, turn to her card file, and produce a title which seemed appropriate to her, then ask if this book would be alright. It was about bows, wasn't it? Sure, it would be alright. Of course my small town library never had the book but she always managed to have the copy for me when I returned in a couple of weeks.

The books so procured I read cover to cover, time and time again. From them I learned to make better arrows, and how to make good bowstrings. I learned about shooting form, and quivers, armguards and shooting gloves. It is undoubtedly not due my teachers, or my interest in school, that I finally learned to read well—it was due my interest in the bow and arrow! I probably could never have succeeded in school, much less earned an advanced degree, if it weren't for my love of those early bows!

Through the ensuing years my equipment progressed. From those first bows I gradually moved on to heavier recurves: a 45# Bear Grizzly; 49# bows by Colt and Wing; 55# Colt and Mercury bows; 70# Kodiak; 74# Mustang; 81# Panther; then on to compound bows by Allen, Jennings, Darton, PSE and Bear. From instinctive shooting off my fingers to sights and releases. My arrows progressed from those cane shafts and homemade wood arrows with dowel shafts to good, matched cedar shafts, then to fiberglass, compressed wood, aluminum and carbon fiber. Fletching changed from chicken and duck feathers to turkey feathers and on to plastic vanes.

One day I realized that bowhunting, indeed, even shooting my bow, was losing its fascination for me. It was the challenge of shooting with those early, crude bows which I had enjoyed most...the feeling of power as their graceful limbs arched back...the gratification of hitting a target by instinct. I missed the pure joy I had experienced with those first bows. I missed roaming the fields and forest with the freedom which only a young boy can know, unencumbered by pounds of steel and cables, sights and stabilizers. I made a decision. I would move back to a longbow and instinctive shooting again.

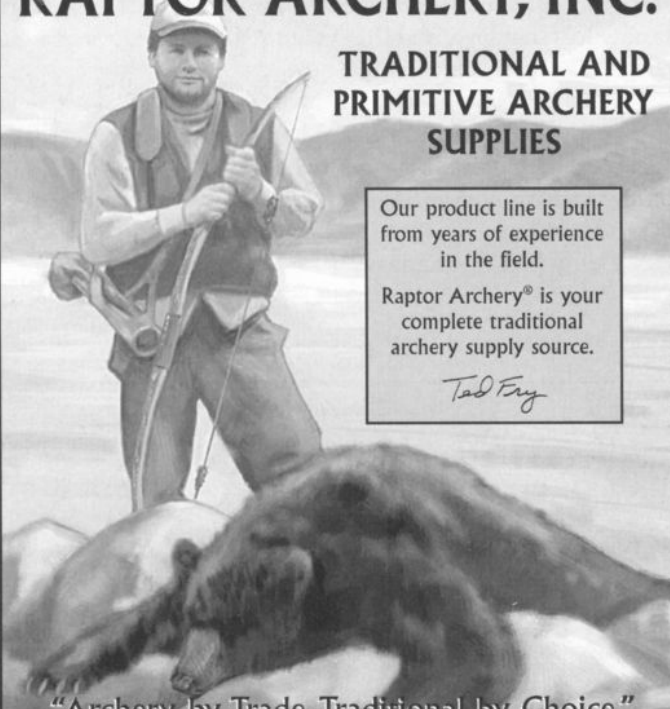
I ordered a longbow from the Howard Hill Company. It was a 100# draw weight and I shot it for several months. It suited me. I was finding the joy in shooting the bow which I had lost. Then tragedy struck. While at full draw, the bow

simply gave up the ghost and slowly the upper limb gave way, right where the sight window had been cut in. I was heart broken. Still, life must go on. An order was soon placed for a new longbow. It was a Dick Palmer bow, again in 100# draw weight. This bow never seemed right to me and I was almost happy when the upper limb began to develop a decided twist.

This time I ordered a bow blank from the Howard Hill Company. A few hours' work was all that was needed to complete it. Instead of cutting in an arrow shelf, I put a small peg arrow rest on it. No sight window to weaken this bow, I told myself. It would not be even a semi-center shot bow. It would be like my first bows. It finished up into a 115# bow, which I still have, and through the years I have shot several animals, including two white rhinos with it. Still, that bow was not just right. It was not me. I didn't find the joy in shooting it that I had found in the my first bows, or in the longbow which had broken. By now I had decided that, if I wanted a bow to be me I had to build it myself.

Off went the order for the materials needed. Once they arrived it was only a matter of time before the bow took form. With loving care I shaped its slender limbs and contoured its handle to just the shape I wanted. Its grip I covered with a piece of waterbuck leather from my first trip to Africa. It, too, would have no arrow shelf cut in. A peg rest was made from a piece of Dall sheep horn from one of my Alaskan hunts. A leather arrow plate was added to make the arrow quiet on the bow. As I fashioned it, molding its every line and curve to my idea of perfection, I had visions of the great hunts we would have in our life together and peaceful

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
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times in the forest. I would raise this bow to be just what I wanted it to be.

When it was finished it scaled 94# at my 27" draw length. It felt as light as a feather in my palm. The grip nestled smoothly and perfectly in my hand. I knew from the start that there was something purely sensuous...yes, sexy...about that bow. It was definitely a "she." From the first shot I knew that I had found my long lost love again.

That was 15 years ago. Since then we have shared many intimate moments together. Moments so intimate that only another hunter could possibly appreciate or understand. While others may now find her old, tired and homely, her beauty hidden under dark shades of black, brown and dark gray, I still see only beauty each time my eyes fall on her. Old? Yes, she is getting older, but then so am I. Tired? Not any more so than I. Homely? Not to me. She is the reincarnation of the young, pretty and sexy thing I fell in love with so many years ago. She certainly has all the same lust inspiring qualities. I still tingle all over at her touch. Perhaps she is, indeed, that same femme fatal I fell in love with for, by now, over three hundred big animals have fallen to her grace and beauty.

Now, I must admit that I have, from time to time, cheated on her, having affairs with a few pretty young compounds. But they were only passing flings. The novelty soon wore off each time and their beauty faded in my eyes. Each time I sheepishly returned to her and, ever faithful, she has always received me back warmly. Each time I have vowed never to wander again. It has been many years now since I last wandered but I still find myself occasionally looking longingly at the young models all decked out in this year's finest dress. But I have grown up...some. I now know what I feel for them is only lust, not love, and they could really never love and old codger like me back.

Yes, I am content with my love. I think I'll just settle to live with her until I am too old to keep up with her. She seems to be holding her age much better than I am. I am happy with my choice. She may not really be a reincarnation of that first love, but then, perhaps, by some magic, she is.

I truly love my longbow!



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