

## THE TURKEY HUNT

By Robert D. Culp

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Here in the oak-covered hills of west Arkansas, things don't change very fast. So when my best friend Cotton and I discovered that some new folks had moved into a deserted farm a couple of ridges over towards town, we spent all of our free time trying to find out every trivialing bit about them.

Cotton and I were pretty well occupied with snooping on the new family. But that got old fast and we had a skedillion other fun things we couldn't neglect. It was full spring and Uncle Jake always had something for us to take on.

Uncle Jake wasn't my real uncle, nor anybody's uncle that we knew of. Howsomeever, everybody called him Uncle Jake. His rickety one-room shack lay two ridges over on Big Little Creek. He had a tiny farm, and spent most of his time hunting and fishing. He really liked having us kids underfoot, so Cotton and I made many a trip up the twisty path to his place.

This day, no school to cage us up, Uncle Jake had asked us to go turkey hunting with him. It being spring, there wasn't a lot of hunting to be had. So be it, Uncle Jake made a big deal out of spring turkey hunting. Of course, he wouldn't shoot a hen, as they usually had chicks this time of year. So Uncle Jake's turkey calling came into good use. He could make a gobbler think he was stealing his territory and come running to defend it.

For this hunt, Uncle Jake said we needed to be at his place afore sunup. Cotton spent the night at our house, and Ma and Pa made sure we got up, fed and off in the dark. We stumbled along the narrow trail in pitch black, and got to Uncle Jake's when the sky was turning orange in the east.

Uncle Jake's old dog, Bogus, spotted us and let out a howl. He soon figured out who we were and came hopping out on three legs, today favoring the right hind one. That ugly old hound, with all his scars and grizzled red coat, was one of our favorites. We hugged him and fussed over him until Uncle Jake came out.

"Morning, Uncle Jake," I called out. "Is Bogus coming with us?"

Uncle Jake snorted. "Huh! That hound would scare off every turkey in these parts. We got to be quiet so I can call in gobblers. They're some cautious this time of year." He grabbed bogus by his collar. "I'll shut him in my place so's he won't follow us."

We left then with Bogus caterwauling in the shack. We headed north to the valley where Uncle Jake knew the turkeys were hanging out. It was close to his place, so we got there fast. And Bogus got there faster. He was waiting for us when we broke out of the woods into a meadow.

“How’d that hound beat us here, Uncle Jake?”

He didn’t answer, just looked disgusted. “Rooster, you’ve got a job now. Grab his collar and don’t let go no matter what. I don’t want that fool dog chasing the turkeys.”

Bogus was wearing a big wide leather collar, probably made out of one of Uncle Jake’s belts. I latched both fists around it and held tight. “Okay, Bogus,” I whispered to the hound. “You and me. We’ll stay back here and watch Uncle Jake work.”

Bogus whined and thumped his tail. Of course he wanted to be where the action was. I wasn’t going to turn loose, just as I promised. Bogus was just glad I wasn’t dragging him back home.

It began getting light and Uncle Jake was calling like a real gobbler. Didn’t take long for an answer. Some jealous gobbler came right up to challenge the intruder he thought was invading his space. Course, that’s what Uncle Jake expected.

There was a bodacious explosion. We knew we had a turkey for our dinner.

All was not settled, though. The instant that gun went off, calamity! Bogus lunged forward, and being attached to his collar with both hands, I flew after him. He took a straight line for that bird. So did I. He leaped through bushes and over a rock ledge. I dragged through those same bushes, leaving parts of my britches and my skin various places. I sailed over the ledge like as if I was a boliterated drag brake. Bogus landed light like a big cat. I landed heavy like a sack of feed and skidded across the rocks. Then bogus stopped. He grabbed up that dead turkey and started back up the hill, still dragging me.

“I didn’t let go, Uncle Jake!” was all I could say.

“You done fine, Rooster. And bogus brought that big bird back like a tarnal fetch dog.” Uncle Jake seemed might proud.

We decided to quit with one bird, which pleased me some, since I was aching all over like I’d been stomped by a herd of pigs.

Uncle Jake paid no never-mind to my pains. He just said, “Turn loose of Bogus now, Rooster. He can lead us back home.” And he did.

At Uncle Jake’s the old man cleaned the turkey, Cotton laughed at me, and I groaned every time I moved. That’s how we spent the rest of the day.

Come towards evening, Uncle Jake told us how to find the turkey roost. “You go on back up that valley where we got the gobbler. On the far side, in those big oaks, those birds will fly up and roost. Thirty or forty of ’em. It’s something to see.”

I was feeling a smidgen better by then, so Cotton and I set off to see the turkeys go to bed.

It took no time to get there. “Hush, Cotton. We can see from here. There’s the flock, the whole passel of ’em.”

We settled down. The birds were moseying towards the trees. We sat quiet and watched. I had forgotten all about my frazzled body. It was something to see those birds wandering home like cows to the barn.

“Look, Rooster. That one flew up.” And one by one, they took off and glided into a tree.

“One’s gonna make it!” Cotton was counting them. “Two’s gonna make it.” He kept count until too many flew at the same time. In the dim light we watched until all were safe in the roost. We told Uncle Jake about it. He just cackled. He knew we’d be mesmerized by that sight.

Cotton and I walked home in the dark, only a slice of fingernail moon helping us to see. All in all, it had been a splendiferous day. And I would heal soon enough.

Uncle Jake fixed that turkey for dinner a few days later. Cotton and I and both our families came to that old shack and had a smacking-fine feast. We hadn’t expected that in the spring. Sorta like a spring Thanksgiving. But you can be sure we’ll make this a tradition every spring from now on. But next time I’ll let Cotton hang on to Bogus.

