



Today's bowhunter is a stealth hunter with advanced equipment that would have awed Oklahoma's early bowhunters. And though the approach to bowhunting has changed over the decades, the simplicity of the sport is still attractive to sportsmen.





**Of Pope, Young, Ishi &
Little Larry Embry . . .**

**The Evolution
of Bowhunting
& Oklahoma's
First Archery
Deer Seasons**

By Rich Fuller



It's fairly common knowledge that a sharp broadhead launched by either a compound or traditional bow is quite capable of taking not only whitetail deer, but also bigger game such as elk, moose and even African game species. In fact, 11,090 deer were harvested in 2007 by Oklahoma's estimated 74,194 bowhunters. Today, there's little doubt that a bow and arrow can be a highly effective method of harvesting game. But this wasn't always the case.

In the early days of Oklahoma's deer seasons, archery was viewed by most as just a "novelty." A 1932 headline from *The Daily Oklahoman* that read "Many Ha Ha's End; Archer Gets Deer" is a case-in-point.

The story detailed the remarkable feat of J.S. Farmer, who harvested a seven-point whitetail buck with

a bow and arrow. The story was issued by the Associated Press and was likely reprinted in newspapers across the entire US. After trying for years, Farmer took his buck near Junction City, Texas, with a 75-lb. bow and steel head. The harvest was believed to be the first legal archery deer kill (in the post Stone-Age era, that is) in the state.

Evidently the "Ha Ha's" were the laughs of ridicule by many skeptics at the time that thought nobody could *really* successfully harvest a deer via bow and arrow. Maybe they didn't believe that an arrow could penetrate a deer's thick hide and body, or perhaps they thought even the most accomplished target archer couldn't ever hope to sneak up close enough to a wily whitetail in order to get a shot.

Who really knows why, but back in the 1930s, 40s, and to some

degree even today, there are skeptics who have their doubts about the efficiency of bowhunting. But just look at history. Undoubtedly, Oklahoma's first Native American residents were efficient in both hunting and combat with the bow. In fact, their lives very likely depended on it. Oklahoma's Archeological Survey has found whole arrowheads and the leftover shards of flint throughout every corner of the state. And even prior to the story of Texas' first archery deer kill, another article appeared not only in the *Daily Oklahoman*, but around the world detailing a unique archery hunt that occurred in America's most famous national park — Yellowstone. The May 27, 1920 *Oklahoman* article tells the story of a Californian named Art Young, who along with his hunting partners Dr. Saxton Pope and Will "Chief" Compton, got special permission from park officials in Washington D.C. to bowhunt grizzly bears at Yellowstone. The special permission was granted so the bowmen could collect specimens, which would be prepared by taxidermists to display in the California Academy of Sciences Museum. The bowmen collected five grizzlies with the bow, including a giant male that fell to Young's 80-lb. longbow. The huge bruin weighed an estimated 1,000 pounds. Years later, Young commented on the

skepticism of archery as a legitimate hunting method.

"At first we archers hunted squirrels and rabbits, and the doubters told us we could not ki-



*Above: Known as the "Last Wild Indian in North America" Ishi passed on his ancestral knowledge of archery and bow hunting to Dr. Saxton Pope, which was documented in Pope's classic, *Hunting with The Bow and Arrow*.*

Right: In the 1920s, Art Young (left) and Dr. Saxton Pope (right) proved the efficiency of archery equipment on a variety of game, including this black bear taken in Humboldt Co. in Northern California.





deer. We killed deer, and they raised the ante to bear. Right straight through the list we went until we had killed every species of American game fairly, including the grizzly bear of our Rockies and the brown grizzly of Alaska."

The chronicles of Pope and Young's Yellowstone adventure, along with other hunts in California and Alaska, can be found in Pope's 1923 archery classic, *Hunting with the Bow and Arrow*. Still popular today, particularly among traditional archery enthusiasts, the book also contains detailed accounts of Pope's friendship with "Ishi." Ishi was the lone survivor of a Northern California Indian tribe (Yahi) who in 1911 walked out of his Stone Age existence and into the industrialized world of the white man. Ishi gained notoriety as the "Last Wild Indian in North America" when he came to live at the UC Berkeley Anthropology Museum, which was next door to the university medical school where Pope taught surgery.

In addition to providing a window into ancient cultures for the Anthropology Department, Ishi put on public demonstrations of primitive fire making, flint knapping arrowheads and shooting his handmade bow and arrows. Pope became enamored with Ishi's archery skills, which led to the development of a close friendship. In the hills above San Francisco, Ishi would pass on his hunting techniques to Pope, Arthur Young and Will Compton, which would be so important in their future archery adventures. In *Hunting with the Bow and Arrow*, Pope writes of the experience.

"Hunting with Ishi was pure joy. Bow in hand, he seemed to be transformed into a being light as air and as silent as falling snow. From the very first we went on little expeditions into the country where, without appearing to instruct, he was my teacher in the old, old art of the chase..."

Ishi was estimated to be in his late 40s or early 50s when he succumbed to tuberculosis in 1916. In his short time at the museum, his knowledge and skills passed onto his friend, "Popey," may have been long forgotten had it not been meticulously documented in Pope's book.

Today, the Pope and Young Club (appropriately named after Dr. Saxton Pope and Arthur Young) is the foremost bowhunting group in North America. In addition to promoting conservation and wise use of natural resources, the club maintains big game records of the major North American species taken with

archery equipment. Today, the names of Pope, Young, Compton and of course, Ishi, are regarded by avid bowhunters as the "Founding Fathers" of the sport.

Despite newspaper articles and books such as Pope's *Hunting with the Bow and Arrow* that gave indisputable evidence as to effectiveness of archery equipment on everything from squirrels to 1,000-lb. grizzly bears, many state wildlife agencies were slow to establish specific seasons designated for archers. In Oklahoma, the first legal gun season for deer came in 1933. Not until 13 years later did a handful of dedicated bowmen finally realize their wish of getting a special archery deer season. The year was 1946, and it's likely that among the bowmen who participated, were several who had just recently returned from the European or the Pacific theaters of World War II. For the vets who picked up their recurves or longbows for the state's first archery season, it was a special day for more than one reason.



In motley array, participants of one of Oklahoma's at Robbers Cave State Park first archery deer hunts gather for a camp picture Nov. 21, 1948. Left to right: George Littlebird, Colony; Ralph Hedrick, Oklahoma City, president of the Oklahoma Bow Hunters club at the time; Charles Hewett, Sapulpa (sitting), southern field archery champion and state target champion at the time; Roland D. Barber, Tulsa (checkered shirt); Don Gourley, Sapulpa; and Kenneth Pagels, Oklahoma City (camouflage shirt).

For one, Oklahoma's very first designated archery deer hunt was a one-day season on November 11, 1946 — Armistice Day (now known as Veterans Day). And as far as deer hunting was/is concerned, what better holiday to go out bowhunting for Oklahoma whitetails than Veterans Day? Additionally, many Oklahoma bowhunters believe the peak of the whitetail rut, (when the bucks are the most active and at their least wariness) occurs sometime around the second week of November. Personally, I've spent every Veterans Day over the past 15 years or so some 12 to 15 feet off the



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Unless there's proof that an Oklahoma archer took a whitetail while carrying a bow during the previous deer gun seasons (1933 through 1950), then Larry Embry, Jr., 13, right, took the very first whitetail deer by an Oklahoma archer since the days that native Americans hunted deer for subsistence.

ground — in my treestand!

For Oklahoma's first deer archery hunt in '46, bowmen were allowed to hunt the counties of Atoka, Haskell, Latimer, LeFlore, McCurtain, Pittsburg and Pushmataha, which were the only areas open to the regular gun season. The regular gun season for that year opened the day after the inaugural archery season and ran from Nov. 12 thru the 16.

After the close of that season, a total of 595 bucks had been taken. But unfortunately for the archers, they all fell to the bullet and not the arrow. Although their broadheads were sharp, the fact that not a single deer was taken by an archer didn't dull their enthusiasm.

For some unknown reason, the Oklahoma Game

and Fish Commission didn't authorize a special deer archery season in 1947, although there is some evidence to suggest that participants in the regular deer gun season could use a bow and arrow as a legal means of taking. Nevertheless, no archery harvested deer were reported.

In 1948, archers were given a six-day season unto themselves. The season was established for late November and was limited to only Latimer County. According to newspaper reports and articles within the *Oklahoma Game and Fish News* (precursor to *Outdoor Oklahoma* magazine), a crowd of more than 50 archers encamped at Robbers Cave State Park for the hunt; but again not a single buck was brought back to camp.

In 1949, and for several years thereafter, the Game and Fish Commission established a special five-day archery deer hunt only at Camp Gruber. On the first day of the hunt, November 2, a buck finally fell to an archer's arrow, but it wasn't a whitetail. Roland Barber, a champion shooter in field archery from Tulsa, harvested a fallow deer.

Who really knows how long it'd been since the last Plains Indian loosed a cane arrow with a stone head or primitive metal "trade point" on one of the few remaining deer that hungry white settlers hadn't managed to down with a muzzleloader for the stewpot. The buffalo were gone by the 1870s (and probably the deer at about the same time period), and certainly the civilized tribes (exiled to Oklahoma in the 1830s)

would've soon started using firearms for subsistence hunting. Therefore, Barber's might have been the first deer taken with a bow in more than a century.

A native species of Europe, deer like Barber's fallow buck (*Dama dama*) were widely stocked throughout North America both on public and private lands beginning in the 1800s. Along with Bartlesville oilman Frank Phillips stocking fallow deer onto his Woolaroc Ranch in the '30s, the US military also released fallows onto Camp Gruber. By the time of the 1949 archery season, Gruber's fallow herd had grown to a population of 50 or 60.

Not to diminish Barber's accomplishment, but the fallow deer didn't seem to be quite as wary as the native whitetails in the area.



After winning nearly every junior archery competition he entered, Ralph Hedrick of Oklahoma City was just a teenager when he began deer hunting with a bow. According to Hedrick, who participated in Oklahoma's first archery season and several seasons thereafter, Camp Gruber's fallow deer were still a challenge, but not like a whitetail.

"Sooner or later you were going to see the fallow deer on Camp Gruber," Hedrick said. "In fact, I got a small buck one time (1951 season) when it wandered through our camp as we were eating lunch. But the whitetails were a different story. They pretty much stayed inside the woods and didn't stick around long if they smelled you. We all hunted from the ground. There wasn't any such things as treestands or compound bows in those days, so putting a stalk on a whitetail within bow range was mighty tough."

In 1950, nobody took a deer during the "season" at Gruber. However, during the hunt, the OK Bowhunters Association held their annual business meeting to elect new officers. Roland Barber (the hunter who took the lone fallow deer in the Gruber hunt a year earlier) was elected the new president, replacing Ralph Hedrick, who had been called to active duty with the Navy.

Hedrick wasn't gone for long, however, because in the '51 hunt he was back at Camp Gruber when three deer fell to the archers' arrows. The first deer taken that year holds particular significance.

Early in the hunt, little did Larry Embry, Jr. of Muskogee know what chasm of history his arrow would travel on its way toward a young deer. Although the shot placement wasn't textbook, it still dispatched the three-point buck. The deer wasn't very big, but it was a whitetail!

Embry's whitetail buck marks the beginning of an era for today's Oklahoma deer archery hunters. Unless there's proof that an Oklahoma archer took a whitetail while carrying a bow during the previous deer gun seasons (1933 through 1950), then Larry Embry, Jr. took the very first whitetail deer by an Oklahoma archer since the days when Native Americans hunted deer for subsistence. Not bad for the dedicated archers of that time, but quite an accomplishment considering Embry's age of a mere 13 years. On the final day of that season, Alfred Jennings from Salina took a 6 pt. whitetail buck weighing 160 lbs., and Ralph Hedrick took an 85-lb. fallow buck (the one that walked into camp).

Today, Oklahoma has nearly 192,525 deer gun hunters, of which many also bowhunt. However if all 74,194 deer archery hunters in the state also gun hunt, then that says that the majority (61 percent) of gun hunters have yet to pick up a bow. Perhaps there's

still the age-old skepticism that a bow really isn't an effective hunting tool. Or perhaps, many gun hunters feel it's just too difficult to get close enough to a wily whitetail to get a shot. Well, I'm not saying it's easy, but once upon a time a 13-year-old kid from Muskogee proved it was indeed possible.

One of the best things about today's Oklahoma deer archery season is its length; a whopping 107 days from Oct. 1-Jan 15. An archer can take all six of his combined season limit of deer with a bow, of which no more than two can be antlered. And new for the fall 2008, the last 15 days of the deer archery season will be open to either-sex hunting, which in previous years were only open to antlerless harvest. Need a place to hunt? No problem. Of Oklahoma's more than 76 wildlife management areas, more than half are open to the

Ralph Hedrick, an Oklahoma Archery Forerunner



After being interviewed for this story in late 2007, Ralph Hedrick of Oklahoma City passed away February 12, 2008, at age 80. Hedrick was a multi-year state champion archer at Capitol Hill high school and participated in Oklahoma's early deer archery seasons in southeast Oklahoma and then at Camp Gruber. A lifelong resident of Capitol Hill, Hedrick opened Arrowhead Supply in 1948, a jewelry repair and lapidary supply shop (*lapidary* is the collecting and/or cutting and polishing of precious stones), which is still run by Hedrick's daughter, Kathy. Among his favorite accomplishments, Hedrick was proud to have taught countless kids in his neighborhood how to shoot bows on a range setup in the basement of his shop.

archery season for the entire 107 days. Another quarter of the remaining areas are open for 88 to 105 days! To be sure, the Department's WMAs and other public areas offer some terrific bowhunting opportunities, and every year more than a handful of Oklahoma's better archery bucks are taken on public areas.

But let's not forget about the best reason to pick up a bow this upcoming fall. Most avid bowhunters will tell you that time spent in the treestand is never wasted. The challenge, solitude and connection with nature is what bowhunting is all about. Dr. Pope, in his closing comments from *Hunting with the Bow and Arrow*, captured the essence of bowhunting when he spoke of wandering through the "forest glades to seek the bounding deer," lying in "deep meadow grasses," watching the "flight of birds," smelling the "fragrance of burning leaves," casting glances toward the "unobserved beauty of the moon," and of having the strength to "draw the string to cheek, the arrow to the barb and loose the flying shaft, so long as life may last." That says it all.

And in Pope's own words, "farewell and shoot well!" 