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Goodbye, Old Friend

I lost a good friend on a hot summer Sunday in 2019, just short of his 82nd birthday. Jill and I were leaving the NTA convention in Springfield, Missouri, heading for Russellville, Arkansas, to tell Tommy Aycock goodbye. He'd been sick for some time, and he was failing fast. We'd just cleared the city limits when my phone chirped. The message was from Tommy's daughter-in-law Elizabeth, telling us we were too late. My amigo had trapped his last beaver.

Tommy and I were friends 40 years. We had much in common: reading, baseball, good eats. But mostly we loved the outdoors, and over those four decades we spent a lot of time there together, usually either turkey hunting or trapping.

Until he was nearly 70, Tommy was hard to keep up with, whether he was climbing a ridge after a gobbling turkey or wading thigh-deep in a swamp checking beaver traps. He was also hard to keep up with in knowledge and skill at those things, too.

Nobody besides his close friends knew of his trapping ability, except the traveling fur buyers and the numerous farmers he trapped for. He stayed below the radar, but he was formidable. His season's beaver catch topped 500 several times, even though his window was brief: he couldn't start trapping until duck season ended in January and he had to quit at the end of March. I don't know how you feel about that, but it impresses me beyond words.

Simply put, Tommy may well have been the best beaver and otter man I ever met. If I'd ever had to send one man with one trap to catch one particular beaver, I couldn't tell you which trap I'd have picked. But I know damn well who I'd have sent to set it.

But Tommy Aycock was more than a good trapper and hunter. He was a master rice and soybean farmer, one of the best. He was a family man to beat all family men. He was the kindest, most considerate man I've ever known. He was a gentleman in the truest sense — a gentle man. We were friends, as I said, 40

years, and I got 40 birthday cards from him. If he'd lived another month, I'd have gotten another one. It shames me to say I failed to reciprocate, but it never occurred to Tommy to feel slighted. He was about giving, not taking.

As fate and the calendar would have it, about the time this issue of *The Trapper* arrives in your mailbox, I'll be hiking into southern Missouri's Devil's Backbone Wilderness Area to scatter his ashes in one of our favorite turkey hunting places. Difficult as it's going to be to get to the spot he's chosen, I'm looking forward to it. It will be an honor.

It's an established fact that big ol' rough he-man trappers don't cry. Everybody knows that, right? Okay. So, after learning Tommy had gone under, I was driving along being a big ol' rough he-man trapper, swiping at the dust or whatever was making my eyes water, when I saw a black blob in my peripheral vision. This next is God's truth. You can't make this stuff up.

The blob looked familiar. Hunter's instinct took over. I jerked my head around and saw a mature gobbler in full strut, not 50 yards off the highway. He ran his neck out and gobbled, and just that quick we were past him.

I couldn't hear it, of course. But I bet Tommy could, and when I saw that big gobbler salute my old friend, I knew things were as they should be. Tommy wasn't in pain any more, and his strength and his youth were back after several years of failing health. He was on his way to a place where the beavers and otters are thick, the turkeys gobble every day, and the fish are always biting.

And I get to make one last trip to the Backbone with my old friend. Thank you for that, Tommy.

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