

Back in the day

Wartime shortages made every shot count.

Stephen Lars Kalmon

A family farm in Taylor County, in north central Wisconsin, has been home to writer Stephen Lars Kalmon for more than five decades. In his self-published book, “Barn Fire and World Fires: World War II,” Kalmon mixes history lessons with personal tales to paint a picture of life on the farm from late 1941 to the end of the war in 1945. Chapter 20 of the book, “.30-40 Shells, Shortages Make Home Economy Valuable,” recounts how families during wartime had to manage life with less of everything — including rifle cartridges for hunting. With ammunition in short supply, hunters had to maximize every shot.

Here are excerpts.

Each year of the war seemed to be more savage than the last in fighting around the world. Our national production of war materials was in full swing early on, used car numbers dwindled, bald tires were highly valued and consumer items were no more plentiful than last year.

Such shortages made patched clothing, home canning, meat in the brine barrel and home cooking and baking virtues of the highest order. Even though people had ration stamps in hand, very often items were not in stock when a purchase was necessary. Thus, war effort and sacrifice were made by all of us on the home front.

One of the many ways we were affected by rationing in the war years was that Dad felt strongly the shortage of ammunition for his Springfield .30-40 Krag. He loved to hunt and was good at it, but the year he had to go into hunting season with only one bullet was the year he did not take any wild shots: That bullet had to count.

The opening morning of hunting season, three or four of his hunting friends gathered at the house. Some had a few bullets, others a full magazine. No matter; for them, too, each shot taken would be one that laid down some meat.

Dad stood in the kitchen that morning leaning against the sink cabinet holding the one bullet in his hand. He gazed at it as if commanding it to bring down a deer.

We in the kitchen heard him pray quietly, a “Hesus, Maria, Yosef” and other words in Slavic that meant, “Make this bullet do its work, we all need meat.”

The small gang hunted three days before anyone even saw a deer and it was running so fast no one could get off a shot. Deer were scarce. It is likely that hunters feeding their families in the Depression kept the population down, and there were stories that some gangs hunted (illegally) at night and took their kills to sell in the big cities. Also, a natural but small population of timber wolves took a toll.

Finally, one day when none of the gang showed up, Dad went hunting alone. That evening he brought home a six-point buck. As usual, he came from the hunt near dark and we had chores about half-finished. He walked in the door of the barn with the buck on his shoulders, his Krag in one hand and an ear-to-ear grin on his face.

Mom grabbed the lantern off its nail, we took a break from milking and followed her to the milkhouse to admire the kill as it lay on the cement floor. Dennis counted the points and shouted, “It’s got six horns!” Franklin, older and wiser, said, “It’s not horns, Denny, these are called tines.” We admired its antlers as Dad told the story.

“Got him on top’a Big Hill. I snuck up the side quiet as a mouse, never broke a twig, you couldn’t a’heard me from 10 feet away.” Still grinning like a sunrise, he continued,



Stephen Lars Kalmon, right, is shown at age 14 after a successful hunt with his father, Steve, left, and his brother Allen. Being a good shot was especially important during times when hunting supplies were harder to come by and bringing home a deer was largely about putting fresh meat on the table.

KALMON FAMILY PHOTO

“When I could just peek over the top, I snuck some more, staying behind brush and trees hoping to see one standing there. Finally, I stood still and waited, hoping one would come along. There wasn’t a thing. So I just stood like a statue, and it wasn’t but a minute or two and this guy comes from straight up wind.

“All I could see at first was his horns, then the rest of him. He wasn’t more than a stone’s throw from me, maybe two, but it wasn’t far. I put up my gun,” and he raised his arm here in the barn just as he had held the gun in the woods, “and just as soon as I saw his horns, I was ready for him.

“Well, he’s walking and sniffing, eating a piece of grass or a twig, and then stops and looks at me. Just that quick, I fine-tuned my aim and squeezed off my last bullet. Boom! And he went down like a ton of bricks. Got him in the neck, didn’t ruin much meat. Look at that fat, will ya?” And Dad was still grinning.

He had carried that deer a good mile and a half. We kids and Mom, held by Dad’s story, had stood quietly looking at the deer and then at Dad. He was a good storyteller and we inwardly praised his hunting prowess and strength.

“Mom, are we going to have steak in the morning?” Allen asked with longing in his voice. We hadn’t had fresh meat for a while. Throughout the storytelling, we all had been thinking of the morning, when Mom would fry up a good piece of the hind quarter in bacon fat and we all would have a full belly of good meat. The buck was as round as a beer barrel. His meat was rimmed with fat and would be as good as venison could get. ❧

Stephen Lars Kalmon has worked as a freelance writer for publications including the Marshfield News-Herald. His book “Barn Fire and World Fires: World War II” was published in 2016.