Three generations of turkey hunters—including a 65-year-old novice—owe their success to a generous family tradition.

Handing it Down

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

People build front porches today, with fresh paint and nails, but what they're really thinking of is the porch at the end of Third Street in Carlyle.

That's where Uncle Bill Ross lives, a lifetime sportsman, role model, storyteller and owner of the quintessential American front porch where everybody wants to sit. It's where this lanky, 65-year-old patriarch hands it all down as a hunter, fisherman and accomplished family historian. Also, he appears to be the official collector of mechanical devices nobody makes anymore.

"Recognize that?" Ross asks suddenly, gesturing toward a cryptic assemblage of cast iron in his front yard. Whatever it is, it looks ancient. There's a patent from the 1870s on the old metal, now painted, perhaps restored from some prior negligence.

It's an enormous coffee grinder, he explained, one you might find in a general store. Years ago, nobody would have to be told such things. Then there's the old garden tractor manufactured near Kankakee a million years ago, now fixed up and ready for service. And over there, he points, is where the original family house stood. All of this, one senses, is quite important. Ross recites names of family members born on this property, walking to this or that depression in the yard and saying, "here," to indicate some notable event of forebear history.

There's more. A heavily used but perfectly maintained set of hoop nets stretches out like an accordion near the front porch.

"Uncle Bill," calls out 48-year-old nephew Roger Wright, "Why don't you show him how you tie nets?" Good idea. Ross disappears into the old house and returns with a small piece of flat wood he carved himself. Ross also is a commercial fisherman. Over the years, the nearby Kaskaskia River has delivered boatloads of fresh fish out of these nets, which Ross now mends with a memorized skill lost to all but a few local generations.

"Look at this scoring board I made," Ross says a few minutes later, pulling out a fish-cleaning board made from carefully laminated strips of offset hardwood. He begins to demonstrate the technique of scoring a fresh fish, a process requiring exactly such a board to hold the fillet while narrow, half-slices reduce fish bones into particles.

The grand tour of self-sufficiency at the Ross property moves on to bee hives and laying hens; and even after the walking tour ends, there will be lively front-porch stories of squirrel, raccoon and rabbit hunts. Nothing is forgotten at the Ross residence, it seems, because all of it is the way of life.

"Rosses have lived on this property for 106 years," Uncle Bill announced in mid-tour.

Bill Ross, nephew Roger Wright and son Ross Wright represent three generations of family-taught sportsmen.

His nephew acknowledges every statement as fact.

"Families don't hand down these lessons anymore," Roger Wright offered, shaking his head slowly before launching into a verbal indictment of video games, junk food and television nonsense. Roger Wright is the man he is today because of Uncle Bill, who was his babysitter many years ago and took that opportunity to hand down a family tradition to the boy. Wright was 5 when his uncle brought him to the woods and introduced him to everything outdoors.

"He put me up on his shoulders and carried me into the woods one night," Wright recalled. "He showed me how to raccoon hunt—we went in his 1931 Model A Ford—and I still remember the branches brushing against my head as he walked through the woods."

But that rite of passage is fading away in America, the nephew said.

"Who knows anything about the real world?" Wright shrugged before sitting down on the porch and smiling once again.

For these three generations of extended family—Uncle Bill Ross, Wright and son Ross Wright—the natural world is all that really matters.

If all of this seems outdated or distantly quaint, Uncle Bill Ross has a message for this modern world.

"A lot of people don't bother to teach kids these things because it takes time and patience," he said, describing how, too often, adults race from one self-serving interest to the next. "Take the time. Go out and do it. Take a kid hunting or fishing. My father taught me these things when I was a boy and he didn't have to do it, but it was automatic. Everybody did it."

As if proof were necessary, photographs and newspaper clippings soon get transported to the front porch.

Nephew Ross Wright, 13, holds the framed evidence of his first successful wild turkey hunt. It made the news, he said, concealing a faint grin of pride. The local paper published details of how an amazing 9-year-old from Carlyle

Bill Ross is a commercial fisherman and still ties his own nets according to a nearly lost tradition.

Ross Wright made the news when he bagged his first gobbler at age 9. Wright tagged his fourth gobbler last spring.

Long ago, someone invented a machine for slicing fish bones into particles. But Bill Ross still likes to "score" fish by hand.

bagged a fine gobbler while hunting with his father.

Wright shrugs off the accomplishment.

"I got my fourth turkey this year," he said matter-of-factly. "It weighed 21 pounds and had a 9 and 3/4-inch beard."

"Man, he can shoot," Uncle Bill is quick to praise. "And he's tough; Ross never complains. We'll be out duck hunting and it'll be 25 degrees and I'll have on gloves, but he won't. When I took him dove hunting, he was making all kinds of great shots with a .410.

"Me, I'm just not that quick anymore."

This past spring, the three generations of outdoorsmen notched a milestone.

Each of them bagged a wild turkey over a span of three days while hunting in Washington County. Uncle Bill's came first, then nephew Roger, followed by his son Ross.

For Uncle Bill, it was an extra special day because the 16-pound jake he took at 6:20 a.m. on the opening morning of third season was his first-ever wild turkey. As a boy, there were no wild turkeys for him to hunt in southwestern Illinois—the state's wild turkey reintroduction program hadn't yet taken off—which meant he grew up in the outdoors without knowing much about the prized fowl.

Fortunately, nephew Roger acquired turkey-hunting expertise while attending Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in the late 70s. And, after bagging more than two dozen birds in the ensuing years, Wright realized he could repay a favor to his former babysitter.

Last year he introduced his uncle to the thrill of wild turkey hunting.

"He mentioned to me a few years ago how, in his lifetime, he'd hunted for basically everything out there that could be hunted," Wright said. "But he'd never hunted for wild turkeys."

It didn't take long to make a plan.

The boy who once rode atop his uncle's shoulders in the dark woods more than 40 years ago realized the lessons handed down in his youth never expire. Early one morning in the predawn darkness of April 2005, Wright found himself in the dark woods again, with the same man who'd introduced him to this way of life.

"It was my way of saying 'Thanks, Uncle Bill.'"

From fishing to hunting to raising bees, the spirit of self-sufficiency can be found at Bill Ross's Carlyle property.