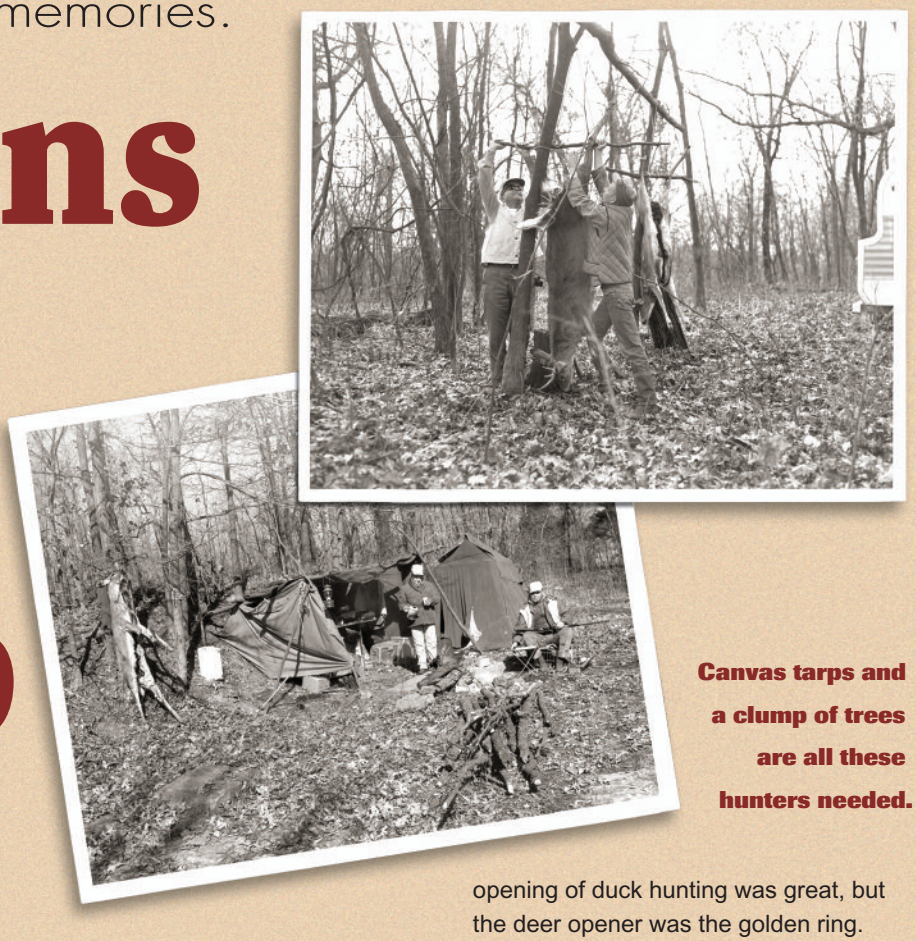
As thousands prepare to take to the field for Illinois' many deer seasons, opportunities abound to span the generation gap and build new memories.

Lessons From Deer Camp



Canvas tarps and a clump of trees are all these hunters needed.

Story By Joe Bauer

When I was a young hunter just starting out, my father would spin fabulous tales of the hunting experience. Stories of ducks on the wing, fields filled with pheasants, and squirrels hanging off the tree branches like holiday ornaments were told with great enthusiasm.

Detailed descriptions of the beauty of nature were passed along as well. I understood how much my father loved being in the woods. What I didn't understand at the time was that he was teaching me what hunting is really all about. He knew it was about all the little moments that add up to a magical experience. I couldn't wait until I was old enough to start making the long hunting trips and experience some of these things for myself. The annual trip for the opening of duck hunting was great, but the deer opener was the golden ring.

Deer hunting involved deer camp. In the early years, my deer crew consisted of my father, various uncles and cousins and a few family friends. Deer camp was a comfortable cabin at a resort in northern Minnesota. My deer camp now consists of a good friend's shed on his farm near Bethany and my crew is the people I've met in Illinois that I now consider family. These two places are about 700 miles apart as the crow flies, but the similarities are eerie. Your deer camp may be a campground, a living room, or a hunting shack, but I bet some of the similarities extend to your camp as well.

Deer camp is a glorious place where it's OK to eat with your hands, use your sleeve as a napkin and generally ignore the rules of good manners, etiquette and possibly even hygiene for a few days. It is a place where the 'rookie' has to do

(Photo courtesy Tim Driver.)

Camping equipment has become more sophisticated, but roughing it is still roughing it.

The Friday through Sunday before Thanksgiving is the opening weekend of the firearm deer season in Illinois. Firearm deer season is the most popular hunting season in Illinois with nearly 200,000 hunters stomping out into the timber and fields every year. Last year, 115,000-plus deer were harvested during the first and second firearm seasons.

(Photo courtesy Brent Winka.)

The Winka family deer camp is a converted barn.

the grunt work; the veteran hunters are shown great respect and anyone who complains about the food is more than welcomed, if not forced, to take over the cooking duties.

The tall tales grow taller every year and the 'bull' flies so fast and furious you're glad you're wearing boots. The rest of last year's venison sausage is considered its own food group and somehow, once a year, sardines are delicious. Damp hunting clothes are hung everywhere to dry to the point that it looks like a sporting goods store exploded. Naps at noon are not required, but certainly are encouraged because at deer camp, the talking, lying, card playing, story telling and laughing can go on well into the night. It is a place where adults can revert back to being kids and where kids become adults.

As wonderful as deer camp is, there is a reason for being there. It's time to get in the woods.

A successful deer hunt starts with scouting. Finding a good location, ensuring you have permission to be there and setting up correctly are all key to a successful hunt. Some hunters like to sit at the base of a tree or in a deadfall. Some prefer a pop-up ground blind. Others choose to get into a tree stand and wait it out.

After a successful hunt, these hunters retire to the lodge, a hot shower and a hot meal in front of the fireplace.

(Photo courtesy David Dow.)

You may get lucky and harvest your deer right off the get-go. Other times, it can be a long wait. Either way, you might as well be comfortable while you are out in the woods. If nothing else, it makes the day more enjoyable. Take the time to get your spot just right. It's a lot easier to sit quietly and appreciate nature without fidgeting if you don't have a stick jabbing you in the kidneys.

Proper attire is required for comfort, too. Hunting clothing is now so advanced that there is an outfit for all weather conditions. Don't forget the blaze orange requirement. Keep an eye on the forecast and dress accordingly.

Safety is a huge concern and a couple of thoughts might help. Let someone know where you are going to be hunting and what time you intend to come out of the woods. Cell phones are handy, but many times they don't work in the timber. If you have one, by all means bring it with you, but have a back-up plan in case it doesn't get a signal. A set of quality two-way radios also is handy for communication, and in my experience they work better in the woods than cell phones. Tree-stand mishaps account for 50 percent of all hunting accidents in Illinois each year. If you are hunting from a tree, don't become a statistic. Strap yourself in with a quality harness.

Shotguns, muzzleloaders and handguns are all legal for harvesting deer during the firearm season. Make sure you check the hunting regulations for specifics. Ensure your firearm of choice is in proper working order and sighted in. Know your limitations for both accuracy and safety and stick to these limitations. You owe this to yourself, other hunters and the deer.

The rest is about the magic of the experience. Breathe in the sunrise. Be amazed by the vast array of colors offered up by the numerous species of woodland birds. Enjoy the adrenaline rush when you hear a twig snap behind you, even if it turns out to be a raccoon. If you harvest a deer, good for you and congratulations. The Department of Natural Resources appreciates your efforts to help maintain a healthy deer herd. If you don't, you always have deer camp.

If you think about it, the greatest thing about deer camp is simple. There are precious few moments in this day and age where several generations gather in the same place at the same time sharing the same interests and excitement, actually communicating and thinking there is no other place in the world they would rather be. Never forget: Every day you get to spend in the timber is a successful one.

Thanks, Dad. Is there any venison sausage left?

Joe Bauer is an avid outdoorsman and works for the DNR Division of Education in Springfield.