In 1925, Clayborn Wallis bought his first rifle. More than 80 years later, it's safe to say nobody has more experience hunting in Illinois.

Illinois' Oldest Hunter

Story and Photos By
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Shortly before his 96th birthday, Clayborn Wallis realized he finally had to quit deer hunting, for legal reasons. This retired central Illinois farmer, who didn't retire from the fields until he was 80, said he had no other option when it came to finally ending his annual deer hunt.

"They never sent me my permit, so I couldn't go hunting," the veteran hunter shrugged from his kitchen as he recalled the events of last year. It was the first deer season he missed since Illinois began offering firearm deer hunting in 1957.

"They won't let you hunt without that permit, you know."

Fearing the worst, Wallis assumed this modern world had no use for him anymore. After buying a hunting license every year since the 1920s, Wallis figured the government didn't issue deer permits to people born in 1912.

"I thought, 'Maybe they think I'm too old or something.'"

Not quite. Wallis probably didn't notice the reminder he would have received in the mail the prior spring, a notice to renew his landowner deer permit. Or maybe it was lost in the mail. Either way, Wallis waited and waited for his Illinois deer permit application that never arrived.

Despite ending his string of consecutive deer hunting seasons, Wallis holds no grudges. Still energetic in his 97th year, he insists he's ready to return to the woods behind his farm again this fall.

"You bet," he chirped. "If they'd give me a permit, I'd go deer hunting."

He keeps a light .20 gauge handy for the occasion, and pulled it out for show.

"It's not the first gun I ever bought—that one is long gone," he said. "The first gun I ever got was a little .22 back in 1925. I used it for squirrels, rabbits and everything."

No hunting or trapping opportunity was missed when it came to feeding his large family. And money earned from trapping also provided a good winter income.

"I'd make more money trapping than I could working out somewhere," Wallis recalled of the Depression years. "They'd only give you a dollar a day to

Born in 1912—the year the Titanic sank—lifetime hunter Clayborn Wallace displays a few badges of honor. His greatest prize: a photo taken the day he met Alice Hamm at a local picnic.

work, and I could make more than that trapping and selling furs, so I did."

"I guess I've been hunting and trapping ever since I was old enough to do it," he added. "I've hunted and trapped for muskrat, opossum, coon, mink, squirrel, rabbits, deer, turkey—you name it."

Don Strubberg, a neighbor, hunter and former concessionaire at nearby Beaver Dam State Park, said he recalls this dedicated outdoorsman stopping in for his annual license purchases at the park.

"He'd get a hunting and fishing and trapping license and a ginseng license every year, for as long as I can remember," Strubberg said, adding that Wallis never had to wander beyond his 200-acre farm to hunt. "He never did hunt in the state park, as I recall. But he's got some good deer hunting over at his place."

Overlooked by many hunters today is the fact such bountiful opportunities weren't always the case. Deer and turkey hunting weren't even legal in Illinois until relatively modern times. Wallis was in his mid 40s before he could participate in the state's first modern deer season in 1957. He was 75 before he could hunt for turkeys, when the season first opened in Macoupin County in 1987—and he bagged a turkey.

"I remember the first deer I ever saw," Wallis added. "I was 12 or 13 years old. There just weren't any deer around back then, not like today. Seeing that deer was really something."

Few hunters could imagine matching the legacy of this living witness to history. Among the 282,642 hunters still active in Illinois, Wallis is the only one who can say he was born in 1912—the year the Titanic sank. According DNR's database of license-holder birth dates, Wallis is now the oldest living hunter in Illinois.

"I was born December 2, 1912," he recited before mentioning the greatest love of his life, a passion even greater than hunting. "My wife was born June the 8th, 1912—she was a little older than me—but we got married on October 1, 1930 and we ended up being married for 70 years and six weeks."

In his living room is a prominently placed photograph of a teenage couple, a black-and-white photograph taken in the 1920s.

"We had that picture taken on the first day we met. We were at the Athensville Picnic about 30 miles from here," Wallis gestured toward the framed image, his eyes shimmering. "Her name was Alice. Alice Hamm. She was really something. There's never been a better woman anywhere in the world and I'll never know another one like her."

When asked to reveal the secrets of a long life afield, the state's oldest hunter said he can offer no advice beyond the basics. Hard work. Plenty of exercise. Good food.

In the end, even a diet filled with wild game isn't essential.

"Corn bread and milk—straight from the cow," this retired farmer grinned. "That's the best food there is."