



PISGAH POACHER PATROLS

IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE N.C. WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION, WILDLIFE LAW ENFORCEMENT WAS DONE QUITE A BIT DIFFERENTLY THAN IT IS NOW.

Historical note: The author's recollections in this story go back to a time when the Wildlife Commission was only about 15 years old, and policies and procedures were gradually changing. The "refuges" of that time are today's game lands, and the refuge managers of that day were replaced by wildlife protectors, now known as wildlife enforcement officers.

“When the acorns begin to drop, our problems begin,” Wayne Wiggins told me as we drove through the beautiful fall colors of western North Carolina’s Pisgah National Forest. “The deer start ganging up where the first acorns are on the ground, and with the leaves gone, they are easy to see from the road. The cooler weather has folks thinking about hunting, and the outlaws can’t stand it. They won’t wait ’til deer season opens.”

Wiggins was the senior refuge manager on Pisgah Refuge, one of the best deer hunting areas in the state. I was Wayne’s new supervisor, and he was giving me an orientation tour of his refuge during the autumn of 1959. My responsibilities covered the eight Western Management Areas protected by officers of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. All 14 of the refuge men who worked for me had law enforcement authority and spent most of their time on enforcement activities. They were expected to protect refuge wildlife and enforce state regulations, both on and near the refuges.

Actually not a “refuge” in the true sense, Pisgah was a wildlife management area that covered 100,000 acres of the Pisgah National Forest. It was divided into five separate management areas protected by five refuge managers. Wayne was the senior manager stationed at the North Mills Station, and he supervised the four other refuge managers: Lloyd Higgins at Davidson River, Park Peterson at Bent Creek, J.C. Sanders at Stony Fork and Johnny Bryson at Turkey Pen. Pisgah Refuge had the worst illegal deer hunting problem in the western part of the state, and these men spent many long days and nights protecting deer.

As supervisor of these officers, I also had law enforcement authority. When I started my new job, my predecessor, Malcolm Edwards, handed me the Colt .38 Special he had been issued and briefed me on my responsibilities. Later, at Raleigh headquarters, I took an oath to uphold the laws of the state and was given a shiny new badge and my uniforms. That was it. We had no law enforcement manual or special training. We learned on the job from those who were already doing enforcement.

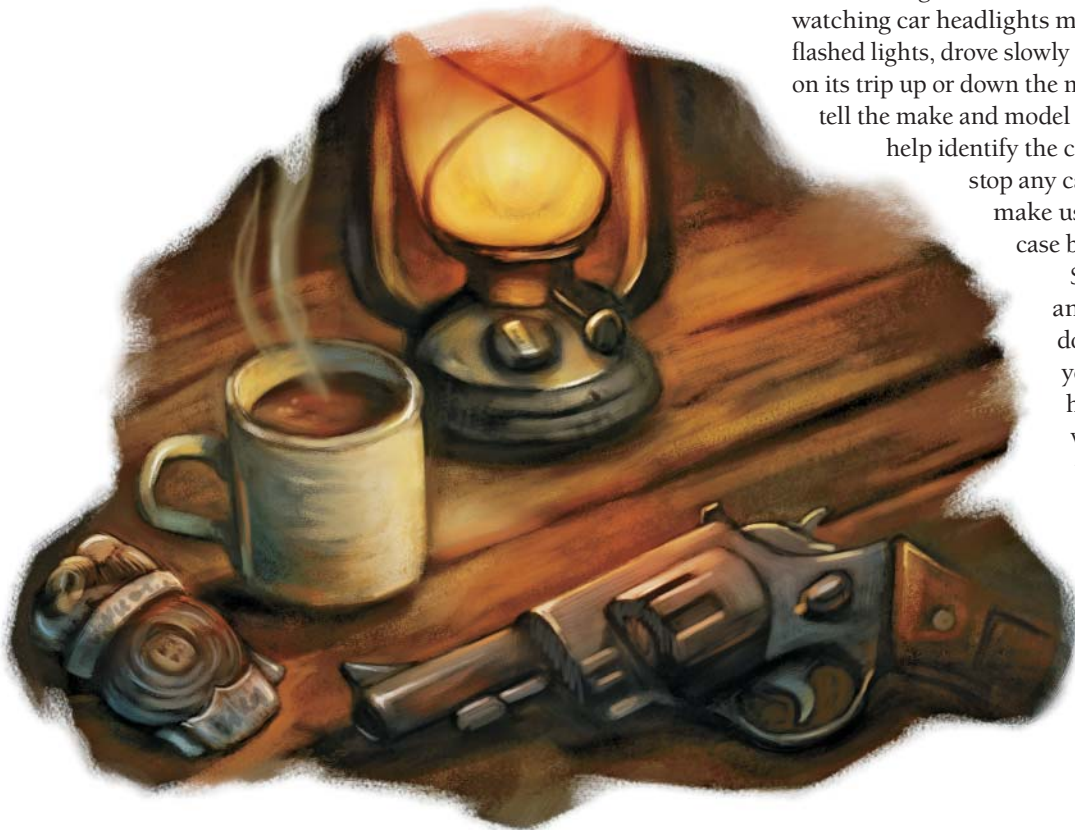
WRITTEN BY JOHN OBERHEU  ILLUSTRATED BY TIM LEE

DIVING IN

In order to learn about the enforcement work my men were doing, and to show them I shared their commitment for protecting wildlife, I would work with them whenever I could. The hottest poaching activity on Pisgah was always at the Davidson River station and the adjoining Blue Ridge Parkway. When we worked on night hunting there, we would gather at Lloyd Higgins' house to plan our operation. We drank coffee while discussing and deciding our stakeout strategy and waited 'til it was late enough for poacher activity to start. Peak poaching activity occurred between 11 p.m. and 3 a.m. Part of this routine was getting psyched up for the job. We talked about previous poaching encounters and what had worked or not worked.

U.S. 276 enters Pisgah Forest at the mouth of the Davidson River and follows the river upstream for a distance. Then it begins a tortuous path of switchbacks and curves up the mountain 'til it reaches the

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Blue Ridge Parkway at Wagon Road Gap. Poachers liked to hunt the grassy edges of the parkway itself, and the edges of the road going down the mountain. They usually hunted from their cars, turning on spotlights or headlights to get deer to stand still while they shot them. Near the foot of the mountain, the highway passes through Sycamore Flats, now developed into a large campground. It was here that deer were most commonly seen, and it was a favorite place for poachers.

For law enforcement purposes, flashing a field or roadside with a spotlight or a car's headlights while in possession of a firearm was all the evidence needed for making a "spotlighting" or "firelighting" case. Spotlighting convictions would result in a \$250 fine, the highest for any game law violation. These were the hardest cases to make because officers had to witness the spotlighting and then stop the vehicle involved. This almost always required a chase and forced stop.

Our stakeout plans varied almost every time we worked. We would usually put one observer in a sleeping bag at a strategic observation point such as Sycamore Flats. The observer would lie hidden near the edge of the road and stay in radio contact with others on the detail via a walkie-talkie. Our radio equipment at that time was quite primitive by today's standards. Portables had a range of only 2 to 5 miles, and a mobile unit had to be stationed nearby to relay any transmittals. If a car flashed the roadside with its lights, we would radio to have it stopped and searched.

At least three pickups would be stationed at various locations to monitor traffic coming through the refuge. Two men in a pickup would generally be hidden somewhere within range of the walkie-talkie where they could watch the road. Another vehicle was usually stationed at a high vantage point overlooking stretches of the parkway and the road winding down the mountain. We tried to pick the best spots for watching car headlights moving through the refuge. Any car that flashed lights, drove slowly or acted suspiciously would be monitored on its trip up or down the mountain. In those days you could easily tell the make and model of the cars, even at night, and that would help identify the car we were watching. We would usually stop any car that drove slowly or did something to make us suspicious, because we could make a case by merely finding a gun in the car.

Staking out in a sleeping bag was a lonely and usually boring job. One could easily doze in spite of all the coffee we drank. If you were in one of the patrol vehicles, you had a partner to talk with, and the radio would keep you posted on what was happening. I took my turns in the sleeping bag along with the others, but I was never fortunate enough to see any poaching activity.

I was present only one time when we apprehended someone with a deer in the car. Our observer on the parkway had watched through binoculars as people in a distant car stopped to do something he could not determine, so it was decided we would

stop them and search the car. Though we found a dead deer in the trunk, we discovered that it had been killed by a car and not by gun. It was still a violation for the car occupants to have picked it up, so we confiscated the deer and issued a citation.

It was a very cold night, and with the wind and all the excitement, I could not stop my knees from shaking. I was really embarrassed by it until I noticed that Wiggins, an old hand at this kind of thing, was having the same trouble. Then I figured the adrenaline charge and cold were to blame, and not necessarily my courage or lack of experience. All of us had the same problem, and we used to joke about it.

THE NEW WAY

During my tenure as refuge supervisor, the Wildlife Commission recognized the need to start law enforcement training. We learned about arrest procedures, search and seizure laws, pursuit driving, disarming techniques and defensive tactics. We trained on a standard law enforcement shooting range and were drilled in the legal and safe use of firearms.

Our refuge personnel drove pickups rather than police cruisers, and pursuing a vehicle on the sharp mountain curves was really quite hazardous. Higgins, who was stationed at Davidson River, was a master at driving these curves. Because he knew the roads so well, he could drive smoothly and confidently at speeds that would barely keep his light pickup on the road. There were several nights when I made white knuckle drives with him, my heart in my mouth, racing to block a vehicle at a strategic narrow spot on the highway. We didn't have seat belts in those days, and it always scared me.

One night I was handling the traffic blocking duty with my assigned six-cylinder sedan. For some reason there was an unexpected, last-minute decision to stop a car. My backup had gone on foot to a place where he could better see the highway and be in position after a stop. I was unable to get in the blocking position before the subject car passed, so I started chasing it. The driver floorboarded it, and a race began. My underpowered Plymouth quickly fell behind. At a crossroads about a half mile down the road, our suspects barely slowed for the stop sign and then headed down a long straightaway. I continued following them until my car reached its top speed of 87 mph, and I watched their taillights fade out of sight. What a letdown that was!

On another evening at Davidson River, we were having coffee and talking strategy. During these sessions, we loved to listen to Wiggins tell stories about his early days of law enforcement on Pisgah. Then, there were no state vehicles or two-way radios, and the men had to drive their own cars. They had to install their own red lights and sirens at their expense and were paid only 5 cents a mile. None of them had handcuffs or other standard enforcement gear unless they bought



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their own. Before they had radios, they would signal each other by firing gunshots.

Wayne loved to tell about the time he got a gunshot signal to block the road. The practice was to choose a bridge or a narrow highway cut through a rocky ledge and turn a vehicle across the road in a way that blocked passage on either side. Wayne had blocked the road with his personal car and then got out to prepare for confronting the suspects. When the vehicle's lights came into view around a curve, he watched helplessly as the car skidded out of control on the icy road and crashed into his car. Any time we passed that site with him, he would remind us, "This is Wiggins' Cut."

Wayne was a good storyteller because he had a real sense of humor and he had so many years of experience from which to draw. Any time we had a project meeting, we enjoyed getting together after dinner to

have a few drinks and listen to the old-timers tell their “war stories.” I have found through the years that almost any law enforcement officer will have favorite stories about personal law enforcement encounters, or those of others. The stories might be humorous, pathetic, hair-raising, heart-rending or difficult to believe. Most of them are embellished a little at each retelling, and they become even more entertaining. If I had a record of all the interesting law enforcement stories I’ve heard, I could write a best-selling book.

BACK TO THE ROOTS

As I have recalled details of the years I was privileged to work with these mountain men, I am impressed anew. How hard they worked, how dedicated they were, how committed they had to be! I think about the 20-hour days and seven-day weeks they sometimes worked. There were vacations they never took, nights they left a warm bed to break up a deer chase, and many cold days and nights they spent outdoors in all kinds of weather trying to catch habitual poachers, risking their lives by confronting armed outlaws in remote places.

The rewards were slim: low pay, rare recognition by a sportswriter who cared, an occasional pat on the back or thank-you from an appreciative hunter. They could not draw satisfaction from bringing large numbers of game law violators to justice. Poachers had all the advantages, and catching the real outlaws

red-handed was difficult and rare. But by their presence, and strategic appearance in unpredictable places, these officers provided a deterrent for most people who might be tempted to ignore game laws.

But what drove these men to stay with such a career for their entire working lives? Why were they not discouraged by the known outlaws who openly bragged they could never be caught? I think they knew that their work made a difference. Deer herds flourished. Their patrols of the backwoods and favorite poaching spots showed a law enforcement presence that reduced violations. I believe it was a labor of love, love for the outdoors, love for the mountains and love for the natural resources they worked to protect.

Today most of the men who worked with me are either retired or dead. Few of those who now enjoy the bounty and beauty of Pisgah Forest’s natural resources will ever know of the commitment and

dedication of these conservation pioneers. But among those who have paused to read these remembrances, some will recall names, places or incidents. For the others, I hope there will be a heightened appreciation for the rich historical heritage of Pisgah National Forest. ♦

John Oberheu is a former biologist and refuge manager with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

