



THE *Huntress*

OF STANLY COUNTY

Katie Watson got a late start deer hunting, but at 97 she's going strong.

The ancient Greeks worshipped Artemis, goddess of the hunt and nature. In Roman mythology, Artemis became Diana, also goddess of the hunt and wild animals.

The good people of Stanly County have Katie Watson, and although she is not a deity by any stretch, the fact that she's still hunting at 96 makes her the doyenne of ladies afield in the Piedmont, if not the entire Tar Heel state.

She's not a Joanie-come-lately to the sport, either. Miss Katie, the youngest of 11 children, started at a young age and with a little tutelage. That pioneering spirit has been a part of her life, in both vocations and avocations.

"My dad wasn't a great hunter, but he'd go out and shoot a rabbit or a squirrel occasionally to feed the kids," she says, sitting on a couch in the living room of her ranch-style house. "I had a brother who was three years older than me who really liked to hunt, and he took me under his wing and taught me everything he knew about hunting. Woodrow was his name. We hunted and made slingshots and did all those things kids do."

Miss Katie sits on a couch, leaning toward her guest to better hear the questions. Her responses are measured and concise; her voice, soft and

throaty. Her grandnephew Wes Sells is sitting in an easy chair nearby. Her living room is country chic; the wood-paneled walls are adorned with turkey fan mounts and an 8-point buck shoulder mount. The fireplace mantel sports a merganser mount and turkey spurs. Overhead, a chandelier made of gourds illuminates the room. A stack of magazines is next to Sells' chair, and the current issue of *Outdoor Life* sits atop. During deer season, Sells helps Miss Katie get to and from deer stands. He also helps around the house and makes sure that visitors' intentions are good. He sits quietly as Miss Katie recalls her youth.

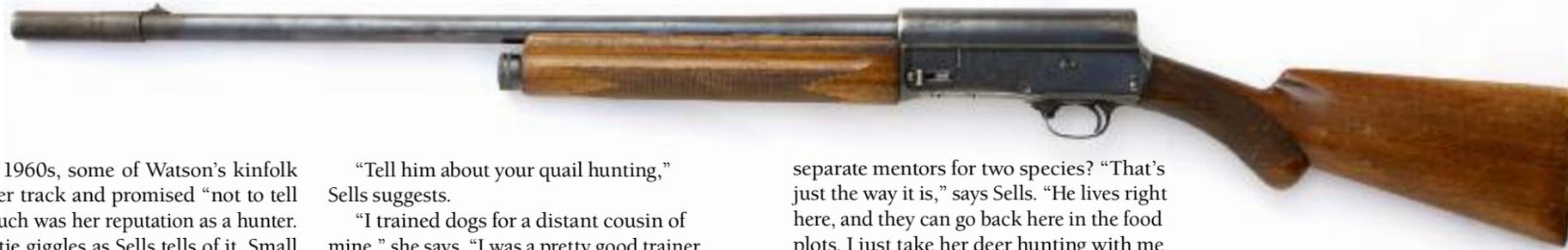
"I got my first doll at 6 years old," she says. "When I opened it I said, 'I wanted a knife!'"

"Woodrow let me shoot my first rabbit—I can't remember if it was a shotgun or rifle—when I was 10," she says. "He already had a little ol' single-barrel shotgun. I would think I shot the rabbit with the shotgun, but I don't really remember for sure if it was a rifle or a shotgun. I've been hunting ever since."

There weren't any deer—Miss Katie's favorite quarry—to hunt in Stanly County during her formative years. Sells says he saw his first deer in 1982. He also tells of an old family rumor that in

WRITTEN BY
MIKE ZLOTNICKI

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
MELISSA MCGAW



the early 1960s, some of Watson's kinfolk saw a deer track and promised "not to tell Katie," such was her reputation as a hunter. Miss Katie giggles as Sells tells of it. Small game was the order of the day during the Great Depression and the years following. Rabbits, squirrels and other critters were often part of dinner.

"I used to have a picture where I had 15 squirrels nailed up on a door," Miss Katie says as she flips through old pictures. "I went that morning and I went that evening. There wasn't too much other stuff to hunt. We went hunting at night for 'possum. When I was growing up there wasn't a lot of other food to eat, so we ate 'possum. My mother could cook 'em pretty good, but I wouldn't eat one now."

She chuckles as she starts thumbing through a stack of old pictures and newspaper clippings.



Top: Katie Watson trained quail dogs, like these pointers, for herself and others when she was younger. She also enjoys turkey hunting and does her own calling in the blind. **Opposite:** Up until she was 90 she was hunting out of an elevated blind dubbed "Katie's Condo." An ATV is handy for getting to and from hunting spots. Grandnephew Wes Sells assists with deer hunting chores.

"Tell him about your quail hunting," Sells suggests.

"I trained dogs for a distant cousin of mine," she says. "I was a pretty good trainer. Pointers." She flips through some pictures and laments the current quail population. "This is me, and this is a grandnephew of mine with pointers [the picture is dated 1951]. The quail population has disappeared. There's just not any quail. There's not enough for a person to even keep a quail dog. You'd walk and walk and maybe not even find a quail all day."

Sells leans forward and speaks so Miss Katie can hear from across the room.

"There's 50 years between me and her," he says, "and when I was 12 or 13 my parents were still at work, and when she came home from work I came across the road, and we went quail hunting. I started going hunting with her when I was about 8 and carrying a gun when I was 12. I waited for her to get home, and we loaded up the dogs in her Blazer and went quail hunting. In the summertime, it was fishing."

Ah, yes, the fishing. When Miss Katie is not waiting for deer or turkeys, she enjoys bream fishing with a fly rod so used that her handprint is embedded in the cork. She flips to another dog-eared picture from her stack. "I fish a lot here in the pond and in a neighbor's pond," she says. "Here's a picture of 42 bream I caught in two hours from a neighbor's pond."

"You don't want to fish behind her," says Sells. Miss Katie beams as her grandnephew speaks. She enjoys her stature in the community. Revels in it, even.

She tells of being good enough in high school basketball to be asked to play for the boys' team. Following high school, she went to work in a local hosiery mill, where she repaired her own machine so many times the company made her a "fixer," as she calls it. The other female employees were wearing skirts when she started with the wrenches. She wore the trousers of a fixer for the next 34 years and through three husbands before retiring at 62.

During the conversation another grandnephew, Kevin Barringer, stops by the house. Barringer is her turkey mentor. Why two

separate mentors for two species? "That's just the way it is," says Sells. "He lives right here, and they can go back here in the food plots. I just take her deer hunting with me down in New London. And she still hunts some here, too, but on her own. She's killed 43 deer since she turned 80."

Miss Katie was asked if she did her own calling in the turkey blind. Whether she uses instant grits or frozen pie crusts might have made a better question.

"I do my own calling!" she says loudly, shaking her finger. "Yes, sir, I sit in my own blind and do my own calling."

Up until she was 90, she hunted deer in an elevated box stand dubbed "Katie's Condo" that she made herself. Sells said they made her start hunting from a ground blind five or six years ago. She admits that she's not too keen on morning hunts now. "I'd rather go of an evening," she says.

At one point, Miss Katie gets up and brings a rifle and then a shotgun. The shotgun is a Belgian-made Browning bought at Lowder's Hardware in Albemarle a few decades ago. "I killed a pile of quail with that gun," she says as she cradles the receiver. The worn bluing and weathered wood complement her hands. Since Miss Katie's quail days, the gun has become her turkey slayer, and someone has welded a garish turkey choke to the end of the barrel. It may be effective, but it gives off a cleats-on-a-ballerina vibe.

The deer rifle is a Remington 742 chambered in the venerable .30-06. The cartridge was introduced in 1906, 10 years before Miss Katie was born. The .30-06 seems like a lot of gun for a lady slight of build. When asked why she chose it, she says simply: "I had a .30-30, but I needed more power. The .30-06 was the most popular gun in my area." She also has a Hawken muzzle-loader for blackpowder season.

Miss Katie loves her venison, and she always ages her deer for a week at a local processor. She prepares her venison "country style," as she calls it. She cuts backstrap into cubes, sprinkles it with garlic salt and then beats it with a mallet. After refrigerating it overnight, she rolls it in flour and fries it. For quail, she'd dust it with flour, fry it on both sides and then simmer it in water, mak-



ing a brown gravy to ladle over rice. Sells says "wow" and face-palms as Miss Katie describes a favorite meal of his childhood.

Hunting—especially deer hunting—is more than an outing in the woods for Miss Katie. It seems to keep her young, and it keeps her connected to two of the most important men in her life.

"They mean an awful lot to me," she says, nodding toward the men across the room. "They take me places I certainly couldn't go by myself. They make sure everything is all right. My outdoors activity is dependent upon them, although I still take my four-wheeler locally by myself." She grins and



talks of hunting in the fall, "if my health is good and I've still got it up here," she says, pointing to her head.

By all accounts, she will. Miss Katie had surgery over the summer but is back home and should be in the deer woods as you read this. You can be sure that Wes Sells or Kevin Barringer will be ready to answer their cell-phones with news of another deer for Miss Katie Watson, the huntress of Stanly County. ♡

Mike Zlotnicki is the associate editor of Wildlife in North Carolina. He may be reached at 919-707-0175 or mike.zlotnicki@ncwildlife.org.