

KC Pheasant Hunters Celebrate 50 years of Smith Center

Love of region inspired by former resident Carl Hays

It was 5:30AM on November 13th, 1976. It was opening day for pheasant hunting. Four young college friends from the Kansas City area sat in their vehicle, parked next to a milo field near the BellAire elevator. It was cold, dark and raining. Everyone was tired from the previous night's long drive and late arrival in Smith Center. This was pheasant hunting? It certainly didn't seem very appealing at the moment.

As you might guess from this story's title, the adventure turned out quite well after that auspicious start. This November 8th, the Kansas City group will celebrate 50 years of continuous opening day pheasant hunting in Smith County. The number of hunters has swollen to over 20 annually. Fathers, sons and grandsons have all been part of the group. Many friends have joined over the years.

While the group still journeys out for the pheasant and quail hunting, it's the relaxation, the getaway, the big city escape, the fresh air, and seeing old friends that have all become competing and equal reasons for the continued tradition.

Dennis Hays was one of the four original hunters. His dad, Carl Hays, was the group's inspiration for coming to Smith Center in the first place. Carl, the son of Marvin and Mazie Hays, was born in 1920 on a farm 10 miles southeast of Smith Center in the Crystal Plains Township. The family never owned land, but rented and sharecropped various farms in the township during the difficult years of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Carl attended various one-room schoolhouses in the area as they moved from farm to farm over the years, one of which still stands today at the intersection of Roads 190 & T. The hunters posed for a group photo at this location back in 2013.

Carl graduated from Smith Center High School in 1940. A proud Redman, he lettered in football, basketball, and track. After serving in the Navy on the Pacific Front during World War II, he eventually settled in Olathe, Kansas. His love of Smith Center and pheasant hunting remained strong, joining his son and the hunters for many years until his passing in 1992. He remained a loyal subscriber to the Pioneer and attended many of his class reunions.

One of Carl's favorite hunting tales involved the late Gene Burns (1917-2009), also of Crystal Plains. Good friends and classmates, Carl and Gene would ride horseback to and from school. On several occasions, they'd shoot a pheasant on their way home. During the Depression, fresh meat was a welcome addition on the dinner table!

Of course, over the years, Carl introduced the hunters to many of his old friends, classmates, landowners and local farmers. Hunting permission was always obtained and continues to be a guiding principle today. Dennis, and Phil Winegardner (original hunter/friend) arrive a few days before opening weekend to confirm hunting permissions, find out where the cattle are located, obtain the status of crops still in the field, and continue the many long friendships they have developed over the years. The group has always strived to respect the farmer, the land, and the roads. They know to get out of the way when the harvest is in full swing!

Hunting in Smith County for all these years, the KC hunters are very proud of their safety record. They've never had a gun-related accident. Twisted knees and ankles, sore shoulders, out-of-shape weariness, but never a gun or shooting mishap. Every Friday night before opening day, the hunters gather for a celebratory toast followed by a safety lecture and reminder of proper hunting practices. A Kansas Wildlife & Parks Game Warden was an invited guest in 2022.

In 1979, the group started staying at what was then called the Modernaire Motel – of course, it's the Buckshot Inn today. Early on, just a few rooms were rented for the weekend, but it's now evolved to almost a total booking of all the available rooms each year. Through the years, the hunters have worked with 5 different owners of the property. They especially appreciated it when owner Monte Jones installed the heated, running water, indoor bird cleaning facility in 2006!

Not only have they enjoyed the local lodging, the hunters have consistently relied on the Smith Center Merchants. Restaurants, groceries, gas, last minute supplies, auto repair – always an essential part of the annual trip. They've even attended Redman Football games on Friday night.

Another tradition over the 50 years has been the Saturday morning Lions Club pancake feed. Usually, first in the door at 5AM, the hunters count on the Lions Club for a great breakfast to start the day and a chance to win the shotgun that's always raffled off every year. They've actually won the shotgun on five separate occasions.

While the hunters start the day with the pancake feed, they always end the day in the field at sundown. The sunsets of Smith County seldom fail to deliver a spectacular closing to a great opening day. With the guns always put away before any beers are opened in the evening, the day's recap begins. Missed shots are commiserated as well as praise for the good ones. Jokes and stories continue until darkness takes over and the hunters finally head back to town to clean the birds, shower, and head to dinner.

With 50 years of accumulation, it's impossible to single out a favorite memory. Not only have the hunters been here for the opening weekend in November, they usually return for closing weekend the following January. More trips, more memories. The hunters do have a favorite location and that's the Crystal Plains area. Even though they've hunted in all directions around

Smith Center, they invariably return to Crystal Plains, specifically the old Gene Burn's property. Gene was a great friend through the years. It just feels good to walk those fields.

The pheasant population around Smith Center has significantly declined since 1976. However, it doesn't really matter to these KC Hunters. They could journey to South Dakota and shoot dozens and dozens of pheasant. They could find a pheasant ranch somewhere in Kansas with pen-raised pheasants. Or, they could stay home and just talk about the good old days. But, these days, it's not really about the pheasants. It's about Smith Center, Smith County, the land, the sunsets, the memories, all the friendships, and the tradition.