

Season 78

CURT HALL

BY BOB KORNEGAY

Curt Hall is unmistakably a Southern gentleman sportsman, a man who loves turkey hunting and treasures every memory of it. The special keepsakes that have taken over his office at Albany's Plantation Services tell the story — the photographs, the framed prints, the mounted "fans," the ornate and utilitarian turkey calls on shelves. It is the inner sanctum of a turkey hunter.

Hall is not a has-been hunter, content with memories of seasons past. At 88, an age belied by twinkling eye, youthful smile and overall excellent health, Hall is still beckoned into the woods every spring to match wits with his favorite game bird.







Hall took an interest in turkey hunting as a boy when he saw his grandfather's call. He soon became an expert caller himself.

"I'm easy to find until turkey season rolls around every March," he says. "After that I'm a little hard to locate."

By many accounts, Hall still ranks among the best turkey hunters in the region. The 300-plus birds he has taken during his nearly eight decades speak volumes about his skill. Edison's Dan Hammack, a longtime friend, is quick to sing his praises.

"He still walks with vigor and his hearing and eyesight are excellent," says Hammack. "He has the patience of Job and often bags a gobbler late in the morning when most hunters have given up and returned home. He's a renowned caller and has that special understanding of woods lore that comes from years of experience. He's that special individual who succeeds when many others fail. He's the best I've ever seen."

Born in Albany and raised a farmer in Baker County, Hall graduated from high school in Camilla in 1939. He attended Georgia Military College and in 1943 earned an agriculture degree from the University of Georgia.



David Tutt (left) and Hall show off with one of 300 turkeys Hall has taken in his lifetime in the woods.





“I joined the air force (U.S. Army Air Corps) after college, became a pilot and served as a flight instructor during World War Two. I thought I could have won the war, but they made me an instructor instead. I stayed in the reserve until the Korean War and then instructed for five more years. I got into real estate in 1955 when a partner and I started Plantation Services. We sell and manage farms and plantations in the Southwest Georgia area.”

Hall credits his grandfather for fueling his passion for turkey hunting.

“I was still in grammar school,” he explains. “One afternoon I heard him practicing his turkey calling and was intrigued by it. I was fascinated even more by his hunting stories. Later, I inherited his old box call, and that’s what started it, I think. That was the spark.”

Hall schooled himself with the heirloom call and was soon calling turkeys for an old Baker County woodsman named Dillard White. “Mr. Dillard learned pretty quickly that I was a better caller than he was,” he recalls. “He’d

take me out, set me up and tell me when to call. He always did most of the shooting himself, the old son of a gun.”

Though he was 15 or 16 before successfully calling in his first turkey for himself, Hall took his first bird in 1933 at age 11, while riding to the field with his father’s farmhands. “A flock ran across our path, and I managed to kill one with my little bolt-action .22 rifle,” he says. “That was my first.”

Hall remembers well the evolution of turkey hunting in Southwest Georgia.

“It’s a pastime that’s seen many changes in my lifetime,” he says, recalling how they used to hold turkey “drives” on a lot of the plantations back in the 30s and 40s. They’d go out in the morning after patterning a flock’s roosting area and flight path. A line of drivers or “beaters” walked abreast through the swamp, yelling loudly and banging on pots and pans, causing the turkeys to fly toward a line of hunters who shot them as they flew over.



Above: Hall is a patient hunter and often bags a turkey later in the day when others have given up and headed home. Below: A younger Curt Hall poses with birds in Baker County in 1945.



“It was really indiscriminate killing. Hens, jakes (immature male turkeys), it didn’t matter. Sometimes 25 or 30 birds would be killed on one drive. There were regulations in place back then, but enforcement was lax and many folks didn’t pay much attention to them. That’s unfortunate.

“I believe turkey drives, along with blackhead disease and poaching, played a major role in turkeys almost disappearing back in the late 40s and well into the 60s. I actually stopped hunting altogether for about five years because there were basically no more turkeys to hunt. I’d go into the woods for days on end and never hear a single gobble.”

Hall, like most modern-day turkey hunters, is relieved that times and attitudes have changed. He applauds the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and other conservation-minded groups for turkey restoration programs and the fostering of more progressive attitudes.

“It’s a game management success story,” he states. “Today we have more turkeys than we’ve ever had, and turkey hunters have really changed their way of thinking. The average hunter now wouldn’t dare shoot a hen, and most of them won’t shoot a jake if they can help it. It’s strictly about fair chase now and beating a wary old gobbler at his own game.”

Hall believes turkey hunting has added, and continues to add, years to his life. He has every intention of hunting another 12 years, liking the sound of an even 90 seasons in the woods.

“It gets me out and gives me something to look forward to, a goal in life, if you will. You often hear people speak of turkey hunting as an addiction. Well, I believe that. I’ve been an addict a long time and, believe you me, there are a lot worse addictions to have. Nothing in the world gives me more pleasure than getting out into the woods on opening day and hearing that first gobbler answer my call. It brings home the fact that I’ve made it another year and am still able to do something I truly love doing.”

While he has a long list of recollections born out of his years in the woods, not all are about turkeys.

“You know, I once came across another old turkey hunter in the woods after a hunt and we talked awhile. He asked

me if I ever prayed while I was hunting. Thinking he meant praying to kill a turkey, I said no. He looked at me and said, 'I do.' When I asked him what he prayed for, he said, 'Oh, I don't pray for anything. I just thank the Lord for allowing me to be here, to do this.'

"I've been saying that same prayer ever since," says a misty-eyed Hall, ready to get back in the woods, where the long-spurred, long-bearded, bronze-feathered forest harem masters will again respond to the beckoning of a wily old turkey imposter upon whom Providence has bestowed yet another season.

AFTER THOUGHT

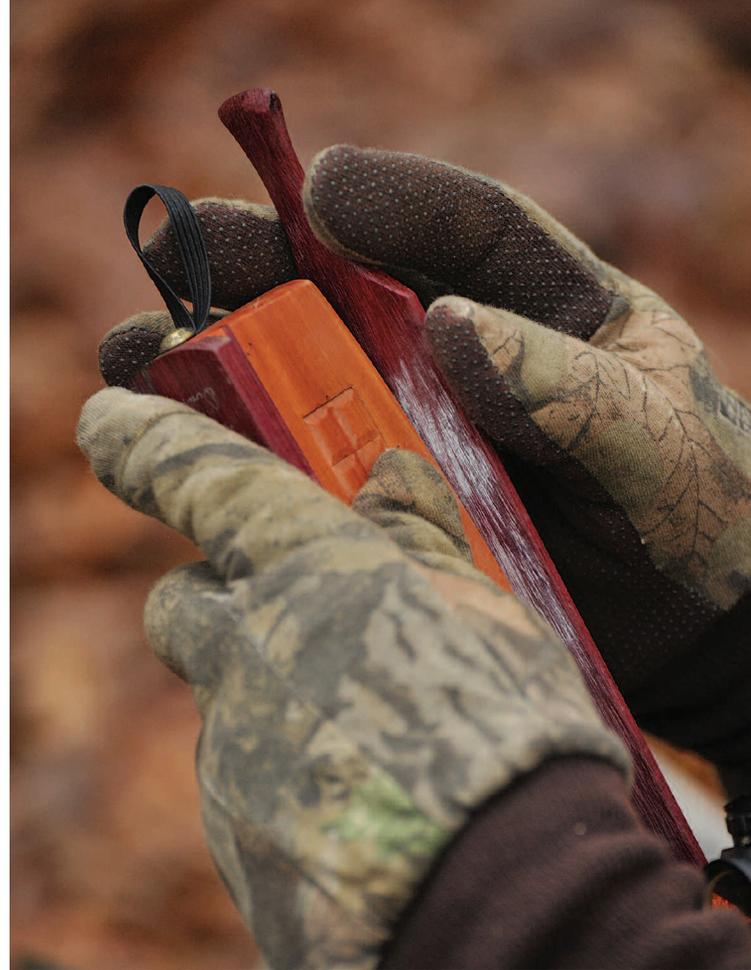
Though plantation turkey drives were less than ethical by modern hunting standards, Curt Hall recalled the lighter side of one held at Ichauway in the late 1930s or early 40s.

Robert Woodruff (Coca Cola's legendary board chairman and Ichauway's famous "Boss") rubbed elbows with many celebrities, from movie stars to presidents. Many of these notables came to Ichauway at one time or another. Naturally, quail and turkey hunting were major components of the entertainment Woodruff provided.

Included in one particular turkey drive was the famous vaudeville, radio and movie ventriloquist Edgar Bergen, whose celebrity appeal was lost on a couple of plantation hands oblivious to his name. At the drive's conclusion, when everyone was standing around socializing and admiring the bagged turkeys lined up on the ground, Woodruff approached Bergen and Johnny, the man standing alongside Bergen when the turkeys flew over.

As Hall recalls, Woodruff pointed to a bird at his feet and said, "Edgar, who killed this turkey, you or Johnny?" Edgar said, "Well, I don't know. Why don't we ask the turkey?"

Bergen glanced down and addressed the deceased bird, saying, "Mr. Turkey, who killed you?" Employing his unique talent, the noted ventriloquist 'threw' his voice and prompted the turkey to answer, "Why, you did, Mr. Bergen!" Bystanders were very amused, with the exception of the two plantation workers, who beat a hasty retreat.



Above: A box call is one of many types of turkey calls Hall has employed over the years. Below: The office at Plantation Services has become a trophy room for Hall's collection of fans, spurs, beards, calls and other prized possessions.

