



By Jan Rahn

Managing Editor

This time of the year marks sports seasons, Thanksgiving, and changes in the weather as the year winds down and holidays approach. For the Watkins family of Venango, the chill in the air means reconnecting with old and dear friends from Missouri.

This marks the 40th year that Dennis and Anita Watkins have hosted a group of pheasant hunters from our neighboring state.

The annual tradition began in 1972 when Dennis was invited to hunt quail in Missouri—the men he hunted with accepted an offer to hunt “bigger” game birds in Nebraska.

After finding success at the sport, five men who made the trip passed the word to fellow hunters in Missouri—and between 1972-81 an average of nine men came to Perkins County on a quest for pheasant.

In the 1980s, the pickups and vans held approximately 12 hunters, said Anita Watkins, indicating that 1982 was the most successful hunting year over the entire 40-year span in terms of number of bagged pheasants.

A regional October snowstorm severe enough to close Interstate 80 in eastern Nebraska drove back the hunters who headed this direction in 1991—the beginning of the third decade for the returning sportsmen who had started out at 2 a.m. on their trek west. Although that was a disappointment, an average of 15 hunters came each year after that.

“The late 1990s through 2006 were drought years in our area, so bird numbers were down,” said Watkins. “But the trip continued each hunting season.”

Now in the fourth decade, the Watkins homestead is still welcoming to returning hunters and new hunters.

The yearly average from 2002-11 has been 14 men traveling to western Nebraska to enjoy the sport.

At least 50 different men from the rolling hills near the Missouri River bottom in Moniteau County, Mo. have come here to hunt over the past 40 years.

Nebraskans with Venango ties who have hunted pheasants with the Missourians include Dennis and Joel Watkins, Shane Kepler (husband of Melissa Ourada), Curtis Olsen, David Baker, Dustin Dolezal and John Dolezal and sons.

Six Venango area farm families have traveled to Missouri to meet the families of their hunting friends.

Watkins described how the men gather in Missouri for target practice in September—then at

that time draw names and divide themselves into three-man cook crews who will prepare meals and clean up afterward while in Nebraska.

They bring along stew and chili made in Missouri and frozen for transport north to heat and share with Nebraska friends.

They arrive on Friday afternoon and hunt during the first four days of pheasant season.

A smokehouse in their hometown of California, Mo. is famous for dry, salt-cured ham, Ozark sausage and turkey, which they bring each year to give to the local farm families around Venango.

A tradition hosted by the hunters on Sunday night is a fish fry for up to 30 guests that include all of the local farm families whose land they've hunted on as well as families of hired men during harvest.

They fry fish they caught back in Missouri over the summer, the specialty being flathead catfish. Crappie and frog legs have sometimes been served, said Watkins. The locals furnish the side dishes.

"A great evening together is enjoyed by all catching up on each other's families," said Watkins.

"Many a year in the past, the annual football game between the Nebraska Huskers and the Missouri Tigers has also been a lively topic of discussion."

This year, the hunters took home 73 pheasants—the most in a dozen years. They clean and ice them for the trip, then in February host a wild game feed in Missouri that consists of pheasant, rabbit, deer, turkey and quail, with approximately 50 of their friends and family members attending.

Over the past 40 years, the Nebraska/Missouri friends have reached several milestones. Three couples, Don and Loretta George, Kenny and Linda Imhoff and Bill and Jackie Patton have celebrated 50th wedding anniversaries. Reaching 62 years of marriage are John and Marian Dorn.

Two hunters have made it to Nebraska each of the past 40 years—Don George and Kenny Imhoff.

Still coming after 20 years are Charlie Mathews (for 28 years), Bill Patton (for 23 years) and Pete Fletcher (for 22 years).

Curt Baker, who is 93 years old, hunted in western Nebraska for 17 years, and John Dorn, 85, hunted for 28 years. In the early years, Bill Lange came to Nebraska for 26 pheasant seasons.

Father/son teams include Kenny Imhoff and sons Mark (deceased) and Terry; Don George and son Bill; the late Bob Imhoff and son Tom; Vince Hess and son Dennis; Charlie Mathews and sons Chris and Kenneth; the late Bill Glenn and sons Steve and Dale; Darrell Hoellering and son Clinton; Floyd Cain and son Randy. In 2001 Bill Patton and grandson Adam Scott were pheasant hunting partners in Nebraska.

The bonds of friendship are tight—some of the Missouri men who stayed on the Wayne and Marguerite Hoover farmstead near Venango over a period of 19 years served as pallbearers for each of their funerals. Hunters have also stayed on the Dale and Vicky Ourada farm.

"After 40 years of camaraderie, this "journey of friendship" is still growing strong in the lives of the farm families from the arid plains of Perkins County, Nebraska, and the hunters from the rolling hill country near the Missouri River bottom of Missouri," said Watkins.