

The Golden



ADAM VAN ZEE

Legacy of “Hunter Ed”

Sputnik went up, McCartney met Lennon, and Montana began an education program that over the past 50 years has helped 300,000 hunters become safer and more responsible in the field.



BY ANDREW MCKEAN

It was 50 years ago this fall that Dustin Hill and a dozen other teenagers gathered in a Nashua, Montana, classroom and learned how not to shoot each other.

Hill and his classmates were students in the first mandatory hunter education class offered in this small northeastern town. In church basements, civic centers, rural schoolhouses, and even living rooms across the state in 1957, other young hunters were also learning how to handle guns safely. The scene has been repeated thousands of times in what has become for many young Montanans a rite of passage—and for state officials, parents, and instructors an essential measure for reducing hunting accidents.

This year marks the golden anniversary of Montana's Hunter Education Program (commonly known as Hunter Ed). For the past five decades, thousands of volunteer instruc-

tors have donated their time to teach youngsters the basics of firearm safety, hunting ethics, and game animal identification. More than 300,000 kids and thousands of adults have graduated from the program. During that time, Hunter Ed has continued to improve, maintaining the core elements developed half a century ago while incorporating new instructional techniques and course content to keep pace with the ever-changing face of Montana hunting.

The early years

Montana's first Hunter Education students were a mix of farm kids who had grown up shooting cans and gophers, town kids who had never held a gun, and adults who wanted to learn more about ballistics and firearm anatomy. The instructors were their neighbors. Some were experienced

hunters, others gunsmiths and competitive shooters, and others game wardens and wildlife biologists. Some instructors had learned about firearms from military service. And some volunteered to teach because they had kids in the class.

Youth firearm safety instruction in Montana and across the United States began in response to a growing interest in hunting and a subsequent increase in hunting accidents. In those early years of the Eisenhower Administration, the country was becoming more prosperous as the post-World War II economy hummed along. Families had more leisure time for recreation and more money to pay for it. Sporting goods such as tents, backpacks, and rifles—often military leftovers—were cheap and abundant. And the new science of wildlife management was helping big game and waterfowl populations rebuild from the alarmingly low numbers of just a few decades earlier.

Pat McVay, who had been teaching firearm safety to young shooters through the National Rifle Association's (NRA) Junior Rifle Program, was one of the state program's first instructors. "After the war, we had a lot more people interested in shooting, and a lot more first-time hunters," says McVay, a Flathead

★ "Many of our earliest instructors were veterans of World War II or the Korean War....They were totally committed to firearm safety and making sure young hunters knew how to properly handle a gun in the field."

Valley resident. As a result, he explains, hunting accidents increased, "especially back East, where the population was higher and the cover more dense. Through the NRA, I started hearing that some Eastern states were starting mandatory programs to reduce the number of accidental shootings."

Successful lobbying

Believing compulsory education would benefit Montana hunters, McVay started thinking of ways to expand hunter education from teaching simple marksmanship and gun handling to also including safety in the mountains and basic woodsmanship skills such as fire building. Working with Mel Ruder, a trailblazing newspaper publisher in Columbia Falls, McVay successfully lobbied the Montana Legislature to

create a hunter education program, funded with money from hunting licenses and administered by what was then called the Fish and Game Department.

The initial Hunter Ed classes of a half-century ago marked the first time in Montana that prospective hunters were taught about gun safety in a formal context and by someone other than a father or family friend. The instructors, volunteers from every walk of life, turned briefly away from jobs and families to teach the students about muzzle control, shot selection, and the differences between lever and bolt-action rifles. "Many of our earliest instructors were veterans of World War II or the Korean War," says Thomas Baumeister, who administers Montana's Hunter Education Program. "They knew how to handle firearms and they

HAPPY HALF-CENTURY! 50 years of sending safer hunters afield

Over the past 50 years, Hunter Ed instructors have taught 300,000 kids the finer points of firearm safety, responsible hunting, game identification, wilderness survival, and more. Many students have gone on to become instructors themselves.

Late 1940s: Montana begins offering voluntary hunter safety courses.



1957: The Montana Fish and Game Department conducts the first mandatory hunter education classes.

1970: The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson Act of 1937) is amended to provide federal funds for state hunter education programs and the development of public shooting ranges.

1991: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks begins offering a separate bowhunter education course, mandatory for all first-time archery hunters in Montana, regardless of age.

1940

1950

1960

1970

1980

1990

2000

1949: New York state and the National Rifle Association establish the first hunter education program.

1957: The Montana Legislature passes a law making it mandatory for hunters under age 18 to graduate from a hunter education course before buying a big game license.

1963: The Montana law is amended so that no resident hunter under 18 can buy a hunting license (including those for birds) without a certificate showing completion of a Hunter Ed course. The law is further amended in 1973 to extend to non-resident juveniles.



2000: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks expands the Hunter Education Program to encourage ethical hunting and conservation practices through advanced hunter education classes, outstanding hunter behavior acknowledgment, and the youth "one-shot hunter" award program.

2007: FWP celebrates Hunter Education's golden anniversary. It inducts five instructors into a new Montana Hunter Education Hall of Fame.



knew—sometimes firsthand—the damage guns could do. They were totally committed to firearm safety and making sure young hunters knew how to properly handle a gun in the field.”

The first classes used educational materials borrowed from the NRA. Instructors drilled into students the three cardinal rules of gun safety: Always point the muzzle of your gun in a safe direction; always treat every gun as if it were loaded; and always be sure of your target and beyond. They also taught how to tell a mule deer from a white-tailed deer, how to safely remove a rifle from a vehicle, and other important lessons.

Over the decades the program has evolved to also include safety instruction such as outdoor survival and hunting from tree stands; bear identification (so that hunters will not inadvertently shoot federally protected grizzlies); and landowner relations, increasingly important as the amount of private land available for hunting has declined. Montana's Hunter Education course has stressed the importance of personal responsibility by coaching potential hunters on how to make ethical decisions in the field. FWP added a separate course, devoted to bowhunter education, in 1991.

Graduation from a Hunter Ed course became mandatory for all hunters under age 18 in 1957. In the last decade the legislature amended the law to require anyone born after January 1, 1985, to take the course before they can purchase a Montana hunting license. Bowhunter education is required of all first-time archery hunters in Montana, regardless of age.

Constant commitment

Despite the continual improvements and additions, the core portions of the Hunter Education Program have remained in place throughout the decades, says McVay. “We’ve added new elements such as responsible ATV use, ethics, landowner relations, and the fourth cardinal rule of gun safety [always keep your finger off the trigger until you’re ready to fire], but the program has stayed the same more than it’s changed,” he says.

One of the constants has been the commitment of volunteer instructors. Five of the original instructors—McVay, former Olympic smallbore shooter Lones Wigger of Carter (who died this past summer at age 91), George Rice of Big Sandy, Don McKee of Powell County, and Lake County’s Robert Larsson—were inducted into the new

Hunter Education Hall of Fame earlier this year as the program’s first 50-year veterans. Roughly 1,500 instructors teach the course across the state each year. “This program is run with and by volunteers,” says Baumeister. “Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks administers the program with the equivalent of just two full-time paid employees. There is just no way we could deliver first-class education to about 6,500 students annually without these citizen volunteers.”

By program policy, Hunter Ed classes must be at least 12 hours long, but many courses extend to 16 and even 18 hours. They’re generally conducted during evenings in early spring and late summer and include a weekend field day. Instructors spend hours prepping for the course and supplement course materials with their own firearms, hunting packs, survival gear, binoculars, and other personal items. They receive no financial compensation.

“I find it amazing that Hunter Ed instructors are so passionate and involved in the program,” says Baumeister. “We do no recruitment—none—yet every year we have a good pool of instructors to draw from. Why is it that volunteer participation in Hunter Ed is thriving when you hear that other civic organ-

SERIOUS BUSINESS For many young Montanans, Hunter Ed class is a rite of passage into adulthood. The students take their instruction seriously. Upon completing the course, they may purchase hunting licenses allowing them to harvest elk, deer, pronghorn, and other big game.



ADAM VAN ZEE

PASSING THE TORCH Many Hunter Ed instructors have reached hunting's "philosopher stage." They've mastered the art of hunting and feel a need to pass their knowledge and wisdom on to a new generation. "They want to see the hunting tradition continue," says one senior instructor.



izations are losing members?"

Part of the answer is tied to the instructors' passion for hunting. Whether they're motivated by a love of guns, wilderness, or wild animals, adult hunters of a certain age are often compelled by a need to reinvest some of themselves back into the source of their inspiration. (That trajectory of a hunter's maturity is actually detailed in Montana's Hunter Ed manual, which defines five typical stages of a hunter: Hunters often begin as shooters, interested mainly in marksmanship; as they become more competent, they focus on shooting a limit of game; then they graduate to a more selective stage, hunting for large-antlered trophies or a particular species; later in life, hunters often challenge themselves by using more-primitive equipment, such as muzzleloaders or bows; and finally, many hunters enter the "philosopher stage," characterized by a desire to pass on their accumulated knowledge and passion to a new generation.) "Most instructors don't want payment and would be insulted if you tried to pay them," says McVay. "Oh, they like to be recognized and get a plaque every few years, but they're passionate about hunting and they want to see the hunting tradition continue. They know the only way to do that is through a new generation of competent hunters who care as much about it as they do. That's their payment." Baumeister, himself an instructor, adds that volunteers who teach hunter education often receive another type of compensation years later: a graduate's story about a safe and enjoyable hunt.

Shared ownership

Many instructors point to their sense of shared ownership in the program as a reason for their devotion. FWP provides guidance and course materials—funded mainly by a federal tax on hunting equipment that's distributed to state wildlife agencies. The state also certifies instructors, keeps them informed of new teaching methods, administers student records, and adjusts the program to meet new social, legal, or other require-

Andrew McKean manages FWP's regional Information and Education Program in Glasgow.

★ “All the kids I graduate have to demonstrate to me that they’re safe enough that I would hunt with them—and I’m pretty picky about my hunting partners.”

ments. But the instructors have great latitude in how they teach. Some read verbatim from the FWP manual, while others barely refer to the text, preferring a more free-form educational approach. As long as they teach the materials well and cover the required curriculum, FWP doesn’t interfere with an instructor’s personal teaching style. “It’s a balance,” says Baumeister. “FWP is legislatively charged with administering the program. But if we rigorously controlled the program, the instructors would have less passion and ownership. Hunter Ed has been deliberately designed so our instructors can build it and own a good chunk of it.”

Occasionally that delicate balance gets thrown off. Earlier this year, the Montana Legislature proposed lowering the minimum age to hunt to nine—something FWP supported because it offered the opportunity to recruit young hunters before they become distracted by video games and other pursuits. Hunter Ed instructors mobilized to defeat the bill. “Nine years old is just too young to hunt competently, and I wouldn’t have that conclusion if it wasn’t for the years I’ve spent in the classroom with 12-year-olds,” says Joe Yeoman, a Fort Peck instructor. “We’re teaching the kids, but they’re teaching us, too, about what teaching techniques work and how much information they can absorb.”

McVay’s measure of a competent graduate is whether the young hunter would be safe, knowledgeable, and ethical in the field. “All the kids I graduate have to demonstrate that they’re safe enough that I would hunt with them—and I’m pretty picky about my hunting partners,” he says. “Passing the paper test doesn’t mean that they’ll pass the Hunter Ed course. It’s how they conduct themselves with a real gun—conduct we measure on the field course—that determines whether they’ll pass.”

To ensure his students absorb the weighty subject matter, McVay insists on attentive-

ness. “In one of my very first classes, a girl wouldn’t pay attention and was disruptive,” he says. “I asked her to leave and come back next year when she was ready. She did, and she became a very good student. Then she got married and brought her own daughter to my program. Then that daughter brought her daughter. That really tickled me.”

Dustin Hill, who was the young Nashua student in 1957, has a similar long-term investment in the program. After graduating from college, he started a long career as a public school teacher and administrator.

Like many Hunter Ed graduates, Hill became an instructor. For the last few decades, most recently in Scobey, he has been his county’s lead instructor. Now retired from the school system, Hill says he views the hunter safety class as a way he can continue teaching and working with Daniels County youngsters. “I can’t say that I would not be a Hunter Ed instructor without taking that class all those years ago,” he says. “But the class confirmed to me that I wanted to be a hunter, and then an educator, so it was a pretty easy choice to bring the two together as a Hunter Education instructor.”

How long the four original instructors will continue combining their interest in hunting and education is anyone’s guess. After 50 years, McVay still teaches a course every year and intends to continue until he can’t. “If you’re having fun and making a difference with kids,” he says, “why quit?” 🐾



THE PAYOFF A young hunter poses with his first mule deer buck, harvested safely and responsibly. For half a century, Montana’s Hunter Education instructors have been donating their time to help create moments like this one.

PAT MUNDAY