

Hunting with a Friend

*Don't be afraid to knock
on a landowner's door.
You never know where
it might lead.*

*By Dave Books
Illustrations by Stan Fellows*

I have to admit that I'm not as enthusiastic about knocking on doors as I once was, what with access to private land getting tougher each year. Or maybe it's just that I'm growing older, and standing on someone's doorstep, hat in hand, to ask for a favor is harder than it used to be. Over the years, though, screwing up my courage to request permission has sometimes led to great pheasant hunting and once even forged a long-lasting friendship.

One day while exploring new territory in far northeastern Montana, I pulled off a lightly traveled road near several grain bins to let my dogs out for a breather. When I opened the truck door, I saw a rooster pheasant scuttle into the creek bottom behind the bins. With my internal bird-seeking radar system now on full alert, I quickly noticed a couple of things: The draw looked like awfully good pheasant habitat, and there was a "No Trespassing" sign on the fence—not one of those intimidating "Keep Out, Don't Ask" signs, but a sign nonetheless.

I didn't see a house nearby, but a mile or so away I found a few houses, a stately old barn, some weathered corrals, a country schoolhouse no longer in use, an old grain elevator, and—wonder of wonders—a bar sporting a "Hunters Welcome" sign. I took that as a good omen and pulled in to ask for information and cut the road dust in my throat.

There was just one pickup truck in the parking lot and it had the look of a well-used farm vehicle. I went in and bellied up to the bar a few stools down from the only other customer, an old cowboy sporting a sweat-stained Stetson. When the silver-haired lady behind the bar delivered my Budweiser, I asked her if she knew whose land that might be up the road next to the grain bins.

She turned to the man in the Stetson. "That would be Richard's land, wouldn't it, Jim?"

Jim turned to talk to me. "Yeah, that would be Richard's land. He lives in town but comes out here 'most every day to tend his garden and tinker around in his barn. That's his barn across the road. It's historical, you know, even been written up in a book. Richard's a nice guy."

I figured by "town" he meant Scobey, the last town of any size I'd passed through and where I planned to camp for the night. "You mean Scobey?"

"Yep, that's the only town around. Ask at the Cenex station. Everyone knows Richard; they'll tell you how to find his house."



"I have my camper set up in the little campground at the edge of town. If you're not doing anything, come over for a drink after supper." He did, and that marked the beginning of a friendship that lasted more than a decade.

The next half-hour passed pleasantly as I sipped my beer and talked with Jim and the silver-haired lady about weather, crops, and football—the usual things strangers talk about in small-town bars. Then I said thanks and so-long, thinking I might still have daylight enough to find Richard, get his blessing (I'm an eternal optimist), and come back out for a late-afternoon pheasant hunt.

When Richard answered his door he was younger than I had pictured him—maybe mid-50s, about 5-foot-9, stocky, gray hair, twinkling blue eyes, and drooping handlebar mustache, with a Labrador the size of a small tank behind him.

When I saw the dog I thought, "Uh, oh, this guy's a hunter. He probably won't want any competition for his roosters." But he seemed friendly when we introduced ourselves and shook hands. I told him

where I was from and how I'd gotten his name. He laughed. "That's Jim alright. Guess I should hire him as my public relations guy."

I thought I'd better get down to business. "I saw a rooster run into the creek bottom at your grain bins down the road. Any chance I could do some pheasant hunting this evening?"

He stroked his chin. "It's getting late. If you're staying in town I'll run out with you in the morning and we'll look around."

"I have my camper set up in the little campground at the edge of town," I replied. "If you're not doing anything, come over for a drink after supper." He did, and that marked the beginning of a friendship that lasted more than a decade.

During the ensuing years we hunted together whenever I visited in the fall, played golf at the local course a few times, swapped lies, talked dogs, and most of all enjoyed each other's company. I appreciated his dry sense of humor and obvious love for the land. We were kindred spirits in many ways—we both admired game birds, shotguns, and bird dogs, and staunchly supported wildlife conservation. Although we lived 500 miles apart, we kept in touch through emails and phone calls throughout the year.

I looked forward to many years of friendship ahead, but then one winter day alarming news came in the form of an email. "I went in to get checked for a cough I can't seem to shake," Richard wrote. "They found a spot on my lung. It's cancer, but the good news is the spot is small and they caught it early."

It turned out to be a serious problem. Despite the best medical treatment available, Richard's health declined and he passed away a year-and-a-half later, in the spring. The fall before he died, I stopped to see him. The disease had robbed him of his strength and vitality, but he still wanted to make a trip out to his farm. He needed a walker to get around and I had to help him up into the truck. We spent a couple of hours driving around, looking at the countryside.

A dedicated Pheasants Forever member, amateur botanist, and ardent conservationist, Richard took pride in his land, the plant mixes he'd put into his CRP acres, and the wildlife his farm supported.

At Richard's insistence, we stopped along the way and I took my shotgun and my Brittany, Tess, for a short loop through a piece of cover that had been good to us over the years. As luck would have it, Tess pointed and I shot the lone sharptail that erupted from a patch of chokecherries. When I got back to the truck, Richard was thrilled to hold the bird and stroke its soft feathers. I'm sure it was the last game bird he ever touched.

On the way home we stopped for lunch at the country bar where I'd first asked about Richard's land. Jim wasn't there, but the silver-haired lady was behind the bar. She looked sad as she took our orders and

brought our burgers and drinks. Back at Richard's house we spent an hour talking about past hunts and making plans to hunt again when his health improved—even though we both knew it wasn't likely to happen.

The fall after Richard died, I made the long trip to his farm for a September sharptail hunt. It was a cold, clear morning, and the air smelled fresh and clean. The prairie landscape had begun to take on the burnished copper and gold of early autumn. As I made my way along the creek that winds through Richard's property, I saw something high on a bluff in the distance glinting in the sunlight, something I didn't remember seeing before. When I got closer I could see it was a metal cross. I'm not an especially religious person, but what I found inscribed on the cross brought me to my knees: "My ashes are spread throughout this land, I'll always be with you, my friend."

So, my fellow pheasant hunters, treasure your hunting partners while you have them, both human and canine, and your landowner acquaintances as well. Don't be afraid to knock on a door now and then; it might lead to something larger than a day afield. Enjoy every rooster you see, every one you flush, and every one you are lucky enough to take home. You never know when it might be your last.

As for me, I'll continue to make the pilgrimage to Richard's farm each fall as long as I'm able. When I'm hiking the fields and hills, I'll feel his presence, and as long as I'm there I'll know I'm hunting with a friend. 🐾

Richard Kerstein, of Scobey, was widely regarded for his dedication to child welfare, outdoors conservation, and plants. He was a member of the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission from 2015 until 2017, when he died at age 71.



Dave Books, of Helena, is the author of *Wingbeats and Heartbeats: Essays on Game Birds, Gun Dogs, and Days Afield*. Stan Fellows is an artist based in Colorado. This essay originally appeared in *Pheasants Forever*.