

THE NORTH STATEWAY

FOR 100 YEARS, DEER HUNTERS HAVE COME TO COUNCIL, N.C., TO COMMUNE WITH NATURE AND ENJOY THE CAMARADERIE OF LIKE-MINDED OUTDOORSMEN. BUT AT THE EXCLUSIVE NORTH STATE GAME CLUB, HUNTING IS JUST ONE SMALL PART OF THE FUN.

WRITTEN BY GREG JENKINS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY DERRICK HAMRICK



The Court at North Fryer Swamp is one of North State Game Club's oldest traditions and, arguably, the one that members enjoy the most. Walter Campbell, sporting a coyote cap, prosecutes hunters who miss a shot at a deer. He chops off their shirttails as punishment.

*"... You may talk about your tennis and your football and all that;
Your baseball and your golfin' and all such like simple chat;
But for sport that's fit for grown-folks, just gimme my old gun
And put me on some likely stand where a buck is apt to run;
And though the gates of Heaven above, to let me through were swung,
I jest couldn't leave my stand, boys,
When the hounds give tongue!"*

*— Kinchen B. Council, charter member,
North State Game Club*

Hunt leaders prepare to release the hounds at the beginning of a hunt. Once the dogs are free, the chase is on and hunters listen intently, hoping the hounds will drive a deer past their stand.



In the pine woods of southern Bladen County, no more than 40 miles from the city lights of Wilmington, a place exists that seems untouched by the last six or eight decades. Save for the occasional tip of the hat to modern convenience — electric refrigeration, brand-new pickup trucks, autoloading shotguns — the stories told there and the activities that inspire them are virtually the same as the ones legendary outdoor writer Robert Ruark wrote about in 1946. And if you read Ruark's story "Dixie Deer Hunt" from the Oct. 26 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* that year, you would need to change only a few minor details for it to remain accurate today.

That's the way the 55 members of the North State Game Club like it. They prefer that a weekend deer hunt there be much like it was 100 years ago, when founder John Pickett Council and a handful of friends founded the club. At North State, that means individuals waiting alone at their deer stands while a huntmaster follows a pack of hounds through the forest in an attempt to drive deer past as many stands as possible.

North State Game Club differs most significantly from other Southern hunt clubs in its members' expectations for the weekend, and their collective definition of a successful hunt. If the running of dogs through the

club's property results in a few members each getting a shot at a deer and one person reducing a whitetail to possession, the day has been a rousing success. Although, if no one misses a shot on the traditional Friday hunt, the day might be considered a failure because of how it affects Friday night.

Since the days of its founders, North State has held a kangaroo court around a bonfire to judge and punish those accused of missing a shot. By all accounts, the Court of North Fryer Swamp has a 100 percent conviction rate over the last century. As if to prove it, the dining hall is decorated with dozens of shirttails cut off the garments of guilty hunters.

Time alone in the woods, the sound of the hounds working, a few good meals, sleeping outside for a couple of cool nights, time spent in fellowship with good friends who share these same passions — those are the expectations a hunter brings to North State on autumn weekends. They are the same expectations Council and his cronies brought 100 years ago. "North State is a way of life for some people," said Dial Gray, a descendant of John Pickett Council and a fourth-generation member for more than 30 years. "It has the best fraternity and brotherhood. It's a good influence on young men."

ROUGHING IT . . . TO A POINT

A hunt weekend at North State walks a fine line between camping and cushy. The club's main building consists of a dining hall capable of seating 85, plus an adjacent parlor known as the John Pickett Council Room. A few steps away are two sleeping cabins dubbed the Mayflower and the Hilton. Each building sleeps about 25 and is outfitted with bunk beds, electricity and plumbing, but no climate control. A large wood-burning fireplace in each building provides the necessary heat on chilly nights, as well as a glow that illuminates late-night conversations about sports, politics, religion, current events and, of course, the day's hunt.

Hunters arrive on Thursday evenings to a fine dinner spread of favorites such as fried chicken, collards, rice, green beans, biscuits and cornbread. Cooks prepare three meals on Friday, when there are usually morning



and afternoon hunts, as well as breakfast and lunch on Saturday, when hunters leave following a final morning hunt. Grilled venison is the specialty of the house, cooked over coals in the dining hall fireplace just as it was when Ruark visited 60 years ago — and before then as well.

While some hunters retire to the cabins, other hardy souls and more junior members sleep in the Bullpen, a large shed open to a bonfire that is kept stoked all night. The Bullpen's accommodations include a thick layer of pine straw on which to throw a sleeping bag. The opposite side of the structure is known as the Heifer Pen, where female guests sleep during ladies' hunts.

On hunt mornings, after consuming a hearty breakfast, a bell is rung and everyone convenes in front of the main building for the "circle up." This club tradition includes a welcome, introduction of guests and prospective members, counting off of participants and the rules of the hunt. Afterwards, hunters drive down sandy roads named after former and current club members to hunting stands also named after former and current club members. Once on the stand, the waiting begins.

For those who truly want to hunt, the sound of approaching hounds is the sweetest music imaginable. Kinchen B. Council, a charter member and brother of J. P. Council, wrote "When the Hounds Give Tongue," an ode to the canine symphony, sometime in the early 1900s. Poetry is a grand tradition at North State, much of it written while sitting in a stand, waiting for the hounds to bawl or simply admiring the gorgeous day (see "The hunt that inspires poetry," page 27). Hunters inspired in a different way are often found napping on their stand. Judge Sandy McKinnon, who has been a club member since 1947, longer than anyone else, actually went almost

30 years without taking a shot. McKinnon missed a buck in 1936 when he was 14 years old, and despite hunting every year except for a couple during World War II, he did not fire his weapon again until 1965, when he finally killed a North State buck. To celebrate, the club named a stand after him.

THE EVER-PRESENT PATRIARCH

John Pickett Council (1855–1929) had a knack for creating enduring institutions. The Bladen businessman and farmer founded the Council Tool Company in 1886 to make tools for turpentine harvesting, an industry that was huge in southeastern North Carolina at the time. His company has stayed in business for 120 years by continuing to manufacture top-quality tools used by building contractors and firefighters.

During the 1880s, Council and several friends maintained a loosely organized hunt club on his land, some of which still belongs to North State. After Council moved the tool company just across the Bladen-Columbus county line to Lake Waccamaw in 1902, the group began to talk about formalizing their hunting arrangements. The men mapped off a large chunk of Council's property and chartered the North State Game Club Company on Aug. 29, 1906. Council owned tens of thousands of acres, much of which was used by the club at various times. Now the club owns and leases a bit more than 6,000 acres, some of which is timbered and some of which is far too swampy to even consider such a proposition.

Most of the original membership came from communities along the Seaboard Railroad. There were three hunts a year — October, Thanksgiving and after Christmas — so hunters would take the train to Council Station and stay for a week. Originally, membership



From top left: The Bullpen provides a place for club members to sleep outside by the campfire. The ceiling of North State's dining hall is decorated with shirttails removed from hunters found guilty at the Court of North Fryer. Deer trophies and photos from years and years of hunts at the club adorn the walls of the dining hall. Alex Gregg, the club's oldest member, is the grandson-in-law of founder John Pickett Council.

Right: The ringing of a bell calls hunters to assemble in front of the clubhouse for the "circle up" that precedes a hunt. Below: Nights are often spent chatting in front of the fire in one of North State's two cabins, which are outfitted with bunk beds. Club caretaker and huntmaster Cicero McLean also serves as the greeter.



was strictly limited to 25 people. It remained that way until the early 1950s, when it was increased to 40 and eventually to its current 55. There are about 10 honorary members, most of whom who are retired from hunting and pay no dues but are welcome back any-time. And despite the presence of 11 on a waiting list, the club has no plans to increase membership. Sons, sons-in-law and brothers of members have always had preference and automatically move to the top of the waiting list. As a result, more than half of the members are at least second-generation, and a few are fourth-generation North Staters.

As one might imagine, North State's membership has always included movers and shakers. Clyde Council, J. P. Council's son, was a state senator, president of Council Tool Co., a banker and a trustee of the University of North Carolina system. He was also the huntmaster, riding a horse around the club's land to check on hunters, until his death in 1951. John Umstead (whose brother, William, was governor from 1953 to 1955) was an executive at Jefferson Standard Life Insurance, a 14-term member of the General Assembly, a UNC system trustee and the man who arranged the purchase of Camp Butner from the federal government after World War II for use as a mental hospital.

Even farther back, North Carolina governor Cameron Morrison (served 1921-25) was a North State member. John D. Chalk, North Carolina's first commissioner of game, also was on the club membership roll. His grandsons, John III and Bryan



Chalk, both currently belong to the club. John III and fellow club member Perry Harris have each served on the board of the National Wild Turkey Federation. Current member Bob Gordon was chairman of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission for eight years and is now chair of the N.C. Natural Heritage Trust Fund.

Especially long-tenured current members include Alex Gregg, the club's oldest member at 86 and the son-in-law of Clyde Council. Gregg joined the same year his father-in-law died, 1951. D. E. Ward Jr., a member since 1953, is one of several physicians in the club — albeit the only one still performing surgeries at age 83.

Regardless of their stature in the real world, all members are equal at North State. For decades, there was a mailbox on the dirt road that leads to the club. All members were expected to place their egos, honors, awards and titles in the box on the way in, and pick them up on the way out. "The people who started the club had great character and strength," said club president Ben Wilson, a 15-year member.

ORATOR, PHILOSOPHER, HUNTMASTER

As with any hunt club, the North State family is peppered with interesting characters. Perhaps the most beloved — and also the funniest — is Cicero McLean, longtime caretaker and huntmaster. McLean, who has

worked for North State since 1982, got the job with the help of his silver tongue: "I promised to run big bucks all the time," he laughed.

McLean maintains the club's buildings and grounds, cuts wood for the cabin and clubhouse fires and, perhaps most importantly, takes care of 50 dogs and their kennels. In an age when many deer clubs rent dogs for the hunting season, North State owns its dogs and keeps them on the property year-round. With his son, nephew and another young man helping him, McLean drives the dogs during the hunt and tracks them afterwards. Because many of the club's neighbors recognize North State dogs and will call McLean to come get them, he usually gets back almost every dog.

And there's nothing like the club's dogs to inspire a Cicero story or quip. He claims that once he "had a dog so good, I had to put tape on one side of his nose to keep him from tracking two deer at the same time." Then there's his recounting of the 1989 "White Christmas" hunt when members killed 37 deer — "the worst hunt with the most deer" he recalled — while constantly getting their vehicles stuck in the snow. McLean had to shovel snow all over the property, fix "100 water lines," track dogs by bloody paw prints and drive a tractor 5 miles back into the woods to free hunters' trucks.

McLean is a natural as the club's greeter, welcoming members as they arrive and showing guests the facilities. But no one outworks him either. He rises at 4 a.m. for Friday hunts, cleans and collects jawbones from deer, and generally keeps the hunt running smoothly.

The members of North State Game Club have managed to keep their enjoyable pastime going for 100 years with few problems. There is some concern among the membership that because dog hunting is problematic in other areas, the club might suffer at some point. But considering the remoteness of the area, it would likely be among the last places forced to deal with that issue.

Meanwhile, the club will continue to do what it has done for the last 10 decades with as few changes as possible. Respect for tradition and natural resources is a good start. Add in the elements of relaxed camaraderie, long-lasting brotherhood and downright fun, and you have a combination that's tough to beat. John Pickett Council would be pleased. ♡

Greg Jenkins is editor of WINC.



"The Court at North Fryer" commemorates North State Game Club's 100th anniversary. The painting features members throughout the club's history, including founder John Pickett Council, seated right of the fire with his gun.

Time spent at North State Game Club has always inspired members to try their hand at verse. Depending on the experiences of the hunter in the field, his poems might be tender and touching, wry and mocking, or a deft combination of both. The foibles or habits of fellow members are often immortalized for all to enjoy.

The bard of North State Game Club was undoubtedly Kinchen B. Council, a charter member who wrote the deer camp classics "When the Hounds Give Tongue" and "The Buck that Got Away." Council also wrote rhyming letters to the club membership. On the occasion of a November 1914 hunt he had to miss, Council wrote, "To each and all of you, kind greetings I extend — May fortune join you in the hunt and stay until the end; Not in the present chase alone, but till you hear the hounds Hot-foot behind the four-snags in the Happy Hunting Grounds."

If that letter is a fine example of the depth of sentiment North Staters hold for the hunt and one another, Council's "The Buck that Got Away" is the best sample of verse that has fun at members' expense:

*"And old friend Farrior stood on guard beside the mile-post run,
He saw the deer and pulled so hard the trigger left his gun ...
Old Captain Barnes the deer next found as he went laughing by—
Captain shot a big hole in the ground, another in the sky ...
Nick Campbell grabbed his musket stock to hold the school house hill,
He shot and missed — he'd miss a flock of freight trains standing still ...
On went the deer and hounds in line through an old mill pond strand
And leaped the lake road at the pine that marks Sam Potts' stand.
But Sam was fast asleep; 'Tis true he woke in time to see
A white flag wave Adieu! Adieu! in courteous mockery."*

Current members Dial Gray and Judge Sam Britt, among others, have carried on the tradition. Gray penned his verse "The Bull Pen Way" as a tribute to nights spent outdoors by the fire, and Britt composed his epic "Memories From a Deer Stand" to honor the club's traditions and friendships, and the abundance of game available. Anyone rendering a heartfelt verse will find a receptive audience at North State. "The poetry is especially touching," said member Hobson Morgan. "The Buck that Got Away" epitomizes the Southern deer hunt."

—Greg Jenkins