

MY TRIBUTE TO A FINE MAN



THE DICTIONARY IS FULL OF WORDS that should have Gene Riser's photo beside them – there are so many that fit him, yet I also feel he was quite indescribable. To say he fought a good fight would be an understatement. I think most everyone would agree that Gene Riser was a force to be reckoned with: a fierce protector of his family and family values handed down to be passed along; a staunch supporter of our rights to freedom, land and gun ownership; a wildlife conservationist, avid hunter, and steward of the land; well-read historian knowledgeable of all current events; and a man to have on your side when you needed help or the chips were down.

We all know Gene is in a much better place now, at peace and comfortable, but also possibly arguing some point with an angel or perhaps the Good Lord himself. Let me re-phrase that...Gene is likely at this very moment having an engaging conversation about his family, whitetail deer, game regulations, politics or world affairs.

It was through an assignment from TDA that I met one of the most interesting men I've ever encountered – Gene Riser. And it was again through TDA that my heart sank and tears flowed upon learning of Gene's passing. The flood of emotions I felt is something I'm sure many others did, too. There was a sense of loss I wasn't prepared for, but then, we never truly can be when someone we care about is departs this earth.

by
**JUDY BISHOP
JUREK**

After a telephone interview for a profile on Gene and his deer breeding operation, he invited my husband John and I to his ranch. Since it wasn't far from our hunting lease, we made a date. I didn't know what to expect when we knocked on his door. We heard a brisk command, "Come on in!" and entered a room filled with shed and sawed off antlers, some absolutely huge. I was astounded to put it mildly.

A firm handshake during introductions told me a lot. I liked him immediately. He commented on how strong my handshake was, adding he'd read some of my work and thought I was a good writer. Of course my head swelled just a little! What was supposed to be a one hour interview turned into an almost all day adventure filled with inquisitive questions on both sides as John and I got to know Gene and vice versa.

It was a trip back in time as Gene showed documents and photos of long ago events while giving us the history of his family, the ranch, friends and of course, his beloved whitetails. We rode around, looked at deer, went through his breeding operation, had a shooting competition with a variety of rifles at his range, laughed, joked and ended up in George West for a late afternoon lunch. I can't speak for Gene but John and I had a fine time; he made us feel like long-time well-seasoned friends.

I readily admit, and my husband knows, that I fell in

love with Gene that day in 2007. Our friendship grew not only from the article I produced but also because I had much admiration and respect for him as a man, a veteran, an outdoorsman and someone who told it like it was! With Gene you knew where you stood. The man did not mince words. He may not always agree with you, but Gene was willing to listen to your reasoning for why or what you believed. He was just that kind of man!

Often when writing for TDA and other publications I would call Gene for his opinion and possibly a quote regarding the subject at hand. A few times he would ask to read what I wrote before it was sent in. I would agree because I valued his judgment and experience. Most



often it would just be the part with his quote but on a few occasions I sent the entire piece before it went to whatever magazine.

On one article penned for TDA, Gene told me in no uncertain terms that he did not want a particular state agency mentioned it in any way, shape or form. He was quite blunt about it; there was no misunderstanding what he said. We butted hard heads for the first and only time as I told him why they were in the article and why I wouldn't remove them. I took a firm stance, saying I felt it was important to present a broad view from both sides of the high fence.

After much verbal sparring, some of it a little heated on both sides, Gene finally reconciled to my reasoning.

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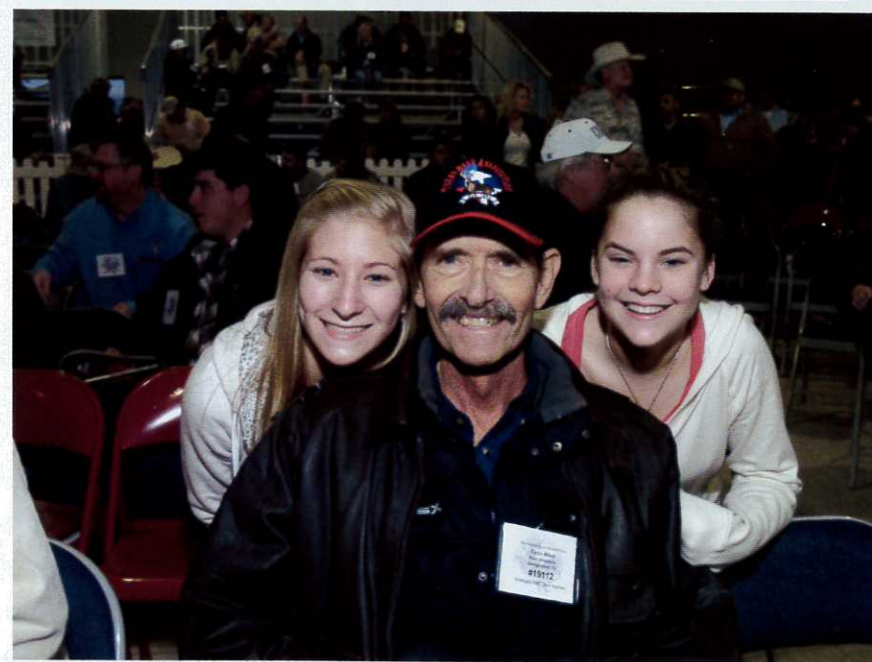
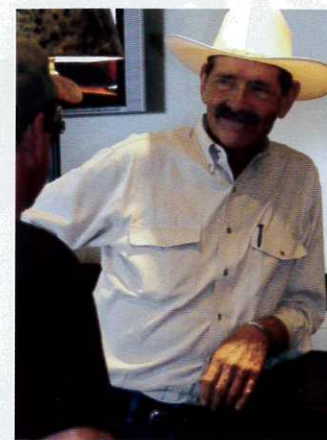
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Before we finished the discussion, he said, "Well, OK, but can you tone it down a bit and not give them so much word space?" I laughed and conceded a bit for him. When it was published, Gene called to say he was very pleased with it, that I had done a good job. His praise and approval were greatly appreciated. The experience made me realize this South Texas brush country man could be tougher than an old boar hog backed up in cacti ready to take on a pack of rabid canines!

In my writings I encounter many people, quite a few I never get the chance to meet in person. I am so thankful we visited with Gene on that day years ago and got to know him. Although I've hunted my entire life, he taught me so much about whitetail deer and even more about the deer breeding industry. Quite passionate about both, Gene would generously advise me, correct my mistakes, set me straight and help me in any way on a moment's notice. I'm most certainly a better person from knowing him. I treasure our many encounters and conversations.

Family was first and foremost with Gene. He was so very proud of his lovely wife Vicky and their three children, daughters Anna and Jane, and son Michael. Photos adorned the walls while trophies for various accomplishments were on display everywhere. The pride in his voice when discussing any one of them was quite noticeable. Gene also admired many of his fellow TDA members for a wide variety of reasons. He was a fine friend to have.

It was also his trait to always ask about your health and welfare, and that of your family. There was never a phone call or e-mail that Gene didn't ask how John was doing. He would always end by adding, "Tell John hello for me." Gene was just that kind of a man, concerned for his family, you and your family, and others but not himself. I cannot recall ever hearing him complain about his own health even when queried. Gene endured many battles that his iron will pulled him through, all except this last one.



I often use his name and quote something he told me that will forever stick with me. It can be applied to every species out there, not just deer. During my original interview with him, Gene said, "When you dip into that genetic bucket, there's a whole lot of stuff in it. Something from way back may surface when least expected." Gene loved raising deer, watching the bucks grow out each year and often having surprises pop out of that genetic bucket he'd talked about!

Always willing to share his knowledge Gene hoped to prevent you from making the mistakes he'd made along the road of life. His experience covered a vast array of things, too many to name here. When doing his profile I was impressed with the words two of his long-time friends used to describe him.

"Gene Riser is a piece of work!" said Jerry Johnston, "He's a John Wayne, Leonardo de Vinci, Aristotle and Larry McMurry all wrapped up into one." Now that's quite an accolade!

Dr. James Kroll stated something similar, "Gene Riser is an incredible man - a reader, a thinker, a true scholar." Both men were entirely correct in their assessment of their trusted friend and TDA co-founder. Kroll also said Gene did not receive enough credit for all the hard work he did for both TDA and the whitetail deer industry.

The world is full of what people simply refer to as a character. It's meant

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to signify that a person is unique in some way, different from the mainstream. Texas being Texas, it is packed full of characters of all sorts, sizes, backgrounds and experiences. I would most certainly apply the word to Gene Riser. He was a character in every sense of the word but always in a positive way. He was distinctive, that one-of-a-kind, they-threw-away-the-mold, irreplaceable man.

John and I didn't know Gene for as long as many people did but we both feel a tremendous sense of loss knowing we'll never get to feel that firm handshake, see those dancing eyes, hear that strong voice and deep chuckle, or be in his presence.



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