The Turkey Shoot

A son learns a lesson from his father.

By Aldo P. Biagiotti

Bang! My brother and I heard the shot as we sat in the rear of Biagio Feduzi's 1930 Chevy sedan on that Sunday afternoon in November 1939. With Biagio at the wheel, my father, my brother, Fabio, and I were headed to the turkey shoot at Big Jim Smith's farm in Ridgefield, Conn. As we drew closer, intermittent shotgun blasts reached our ears.

Biagio pulled onto the edge of a field. Several old apple trees separated us from the firing line where the contestants mingled and chatted. To the left of the group, two large wire cages held six full-size, gobbling turkeys.

"I'm going to get me one of those turkeys," said Biagio as he stepped out of the car on the driver's side.

"*Anch'io* (I am, also)," said Father. Their unloaded 12-gauge shotguns were in the backseat with us. I grabbed them, one at a time, and handed them out to Father and Biagio. As they strode over to the cluster of men standing behind the firing line, my brother and I scrambled out of the sedan and followed.

Alfredo Biagiotti and Biagio Feduzi hunt in the Great Swamp in Ridgefield, Conn.

The shooting range was simple and rustic. Two wooden posts about 6 feet tall with rectangular backboards at the top stood 100 yards from the firing line. Paper targets were stapled to the backboards; they flapped whenever the wind stirred.

The firing line was marked by a long birch sapling that had been nailed to an upright post at both ends.

Two at a time, the contestants lined up behind the barrier, aimed and fired. The shotgun blasts rang in our ears and stirred the apple tree branches.

"*Babbo* (Father), are you going to win?" I ask.

Forcing a smile, Father said, "Aldo, I'm going to try real hard."

Fabio interjected, "I want the empty shell."

"Me too," said I.

"*Ragazzi, ci sarrano le cartucce abgastanza per tutti*," said Father to stop any squabbling. ("Boys, there will be enough shells for everyone.")

In front of the firing line on that Sunday afternoon, about 30 men and a few children of our age were milling about, waiting for the next round to begin. I sidled up to one of the apple trees and waited, watching.

To the right side of the firing line, Big Jim Smith, 6 feet 5 inches tall and over 250 pounds, with white hair and a big smile, sat on a rickety chair in front of a small, shaky table. A cigar box, yellow pad and stack of paper targets rested on the tabletop.

The contestants lined up in front of the wobbly table. "One dollar," said Big Jim Smith, taking the dollar bill from the contestant and stuffing it into the cigar box. "Name?"

The contestant, clutching a 12-gauge shotgun, gave his name, and Big Jim Smith scribbled it onto the yellow pad and onto a paper target.

Reaching down to the ground next to his chair, he pulled a single shell from a box of Remington no. 12 shotgun shells and handed it to the contestant.

"Next."

Biagio Feduzi stood in front of Father as they moved toward the table to sign up. Reaching into his pocket, Biagio pulled out two crumpled dollar bills. He peeled one off and handed it to Big Jim Smith.

"Name?" asked Big Jim.

"Biagio Feduzi."

Big Jim Smith wrote it down on the yellow pad and a target. Then he handed Biagio a shell.

"Next."

From Good Old Days Magazine, November 2007, Vol. 44, No. 11, Copyright © 2007 Good Old Days Magazine

Father, clutching four quarters in his left hand, approached the table. When Big Jim Smith asked for his name, Father gave it to him in the Italian way: last name first, first name last.

"Biagiotti, Alfredo."

"What?"

"Biagiotti, Alfredo," repeated Father.

Frowning, Big Jim Smith stumbled, "Bee … a … got … tea." He wrote it down on the yellow pad and target. Later, when I examined Father's target, I saw "Beeagottea."

Father placed the four quarters into Big Jim's massive palm, who dropped them on top of the dollar bills in the cigar box. I was sure those were the only coins in the box. I felt sorry for Father; I believe he was embarrassed to pay with coins and not a dollar bill, as all of the other contestants had.

I knew that Father had saved those quarters over the weeks, in anticipation of trying his luck at the turkey shoot. He had fervent hopes of bringing home a turkey. We never had had a turkey on the table during the Great Depression.

After the 20th contestant had signed up, Big Jim Smith rose from the rickety chair and announced in a booming voice, "OK, boys, that's it for this round. We've filled up the quota."

Two contestants at a time lined up behind the barrier at the firing line. They fired, emptied their shotguns of the spent shells and stepped back. We children rushed forward to retrieve the prized empty shells.

A runner, a boy in his teens, ran up to the target posts, pulled off the paper targets and slapped new ones in their place. Then he ran back to the table and handed the targets to Big Jim Smith.

Holding each target up to the light, Big Jim examined the pellet holes in the bulls-eye area. After counting, he jotted down on the target the number of pellet holes visible.

The contestants crowded around, talking and laughing, waiting for their turns.

Biagio shot first. Then Father, who stood beside him at the firing line, raised his shotgun. He stood out, for all of the other contestants were right-handed. I held my breath.

Father aimed, taking a long time before squeezing off his shot. He was grim-faced as he stepped back. I could tell he was saying to himself, *Oh, God, please let me win.* I was thinking the same thing.

My heart skipped—then suddenly, I remembered the spent shell. Running up to Father, I blurted, *"Babbo dammi la cartuccia."* ("Father, give me the empty shell.")

"*Certo*," he said, breaking open the breech of the shotgun. The shell popped out and I caught it with both hands.

"*Mille grazie, Babbo!* (A thousand thanks!)," I said, feeling the warmth of the spent shell. As I strode off with my prize, I added, "*Buona fortuna* (Good luck)!"

Forcing a smile, Father nodded. I knew that Father would not be shooting again.

There was fierce competition for the spent shells among us youngsters that afternoon. Once he fired, each contestant broke open the breech of the shotgun and the empty shell popped out and fell to the ground. A spiral of burnt gray powder with an acrid smell curled up from the spent shell. Anxious youngsters, standing ready nearby, rushed forward and grabbed for it. "I got it!" called out the lucky one.

Years later, when the long-forgotten empty shells appeared in a desk drawer, I wondered what the attraction had been to grab the empty shells.

After the last of the 20 contestants had fired and the runner had brought the targets to the table, Big Jim Smith held up the winning target.

"Four holes in the bull's eye," he announced. "And the winner of the turkey is Jack Sullivan!"

"Great!" the winner exclaimed.

The smile on Father's face faded. I could see disappointment on the faces of the other contestants, too, but no one expressed his deep disappointment aloud. I looked at Father. He bit his lower lip. I felt sorry, very sorry.

Sitting down on the unstable chair, Big Jim Smith boomed, "OK, friends, we're ready for the next round."

Once more, the line of contestants formed in front of Big Jim Smith at the wobbly table. Biagio got into line but Father did not.

"*Babbo*, aren't you going to shoot again?"

Shaking his head and forcing a smile, Father said, "No, not today. I'll wait until next Sunday's turkey shoot. I may be luckier then."

Then I felt sorry that I had asked, for I realized the real reason. Father's pockets were empty. He had put all of his hopes on the only try he could afford at Big Jim's turkey shoot. ❖

From Good Old Days Magazine, November 2007, Vol. 44, No. 11, Copyright © 2007 Good Old Days Magazine