

HUNTING UP TOM BROKAW

During a pheasant hunt in South Dakota, the author finds Tom Brokaw in his native land and natural element.

STORY BY MILES DEMOTT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEE THOMAS KJOS
AND TRAVIS GILLETT





Tom Brokaw has been the face—indeed, the voice—of journalism for more than two generations, breaking news from the Civil Rights Era through the crumbling of the Berlin Wall to his prophetic analysis on 9/11, “We’re at war.” He’s had a gift for being in the right place at the right time, and technology advanced in step with his ascent at NBC so that he could take viewers to the scene, to show the story, not just to tell it.

Along the way, it seems, Brokaw met and befriended almost everyone who entered the public consciousness, from presidents to entrepreneurs, writers to mountaineers, and so many in between. His narrative style and use of language to marry words with pictures, skills he picked up from David Brinkley and other journalists early in his career, made him a trusted friend in the pre-cable world of journalism—a time when viewers heard what they needed to hear, not just what they wanted to hear.

His was a lucky life, indeed, until multiple myeloma, a bone marrow cancer, interrupted Tom’s story in 2013. Early detection and lots of friends and family support saw him through several therapy regimens to a place where the cancer can be treated but never fully cured. And the treatments have evolved more rapidly than with many other cancers, so Tom’s lucky streak has continued. Today, he maintains an active schedule of speaking and book events and he remains relevant and engaged in a national and global conversation. The 72 hours preceding our time together in South Dakota found Tom in Washington for the National Book Festival, in New York for a couple of speaking gigs, and back to D.C. for a discussion on NBC’s *Meet the Press*. Nice work if you can get it. And Tom gets a lot of it. Maybe even too much. But that’s the ubiquitous Tom Brokaw, the face and the voice that emerges effortlessly from a crowd to the forefront of our awareness. He’s not hard to find, but this is not the Tom Brokaw I was hunting for.

Arriving in Gettysburg, in central South Dakota about 25 miles from the Missouri River and at the tail end of his whirlwind tour of the East Coast, Tom Brokaw seemed battle-worn from the travel, the chemo, and the back surgery; but the rarefied air of South Dakota (his home state) and the distant cluck of a rooster pheasant quickly put a lift in his step—a lift that elevated into a spring when he was reunited with his 10-year-old Lab and hunting companion, Red.

It was good to be back, he seemed to say, back to a place that brightened his eyes and planted his toes, a place that lifts the Sisyphean boulder of global news from his shoulders and offers only the pleasant rolling hills of wheat and corn that gave rise to a different Tom Brokaw some 75 years ago. That was a man molded by simple beginnings and high expectations, the

HOME FIELD ADVANTAGE

Tom Brokaw grew up in South Dakota and returns to the Mount Rushmore State each year during pheasant season.



beneficiary of a 19th-Century lifestyle in a mid-20th-Century world, a man with his finger on the pulse of a nation, whose own heartbeat is synchronized to the chuckle and wingbeat of a rising pheasant. That is the Tom Brokaw I was hunting for.

Brokaw's roots run deep in the prairie mud of South Dakota. His grandparents followed the railroad from the Finger Lakes region of western New York, and his parents weathered the Great Depression on the prairie, sometimes eating pheasant sandwiches out of season to get by. Born in Webster, South Dakota, Tom spent most of his childhood in Pickstown, a place he compares to the setting of *The Truman Show* because it was created out of thin air in the late 1940s to accommodate the families of the men building a dam across the Missouri River at Fort Randall. Brokaw's father, Red, was one of those men, adept at managing heavy equipment and other men with alacrity. Once the dam was built, the workers packed up their newly minted middle-class lives and sought work elsewhere. The Brokaws settled in Yankton, where Red continued to work with machines and Tom's mother, Jean, worked as a post-office clerk in Pickstown, often bringing the compelling stories of the town home to Tom, whose interest in journalism began to take shape as early as the seventh grade and was fueled by the allure of Yankton's radio station and high-school newspaper.

Brokaw's high-school days were spent alongside the other boys, shotguns and fishing rods in hand, combing the South

Dakota plains and puddles for fish and fowl. Friday nights spent as backup quarterback tumbled into basketball championship games, with some losses harder to escape than others, even 60 years later. And then there were the misspent hours at the pool hall, though the self-described snooker snob's future as a hustler never quite got off the ground. All the while, Tom was the curious kid, the one who ran with the older crowd and had a way with words, the one who charmed the doctor's daughter and changed the course of his own history. He graduated from the University of South Dakota and landed broadcasting jobs first in Omaha, and then Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New York, greeting viewers from dawn to dusk over the course of a career that has shown little sign of fatigue after half a century. He traveled the world a thousand times over to report the news as and where it was breaking. He rapidly became a fixture within the East Coast media establishment, planting roots in New York City and raising a family there, but the South Dakota prairie mud is tough to shake—from your boots and from your psyche.

As the saying goes, you can take the boy out of South

CANINES AND CONVERSATION

The extraordinary experience of hunting at South Dakota's Paul Nelson Farm provided the perfect opportunity for fun, fellowship, and pheasant.

LEAD AND WE WILL FOLLOW

A journalist for more than 50 years, Tom Brokaw continues to forge ahead into the thick of things in search of stories and pheasant. His faithful hunting companion for more than a decade, Red, remains ever optimistic.



Like riding a bike, Tom quickly dusted off the shooting prowess he'd developed along the dusty roads of South Dakota flushing pheasant from agricultural ditches and fencelines.

Dakota . . . and life did just that. For a number of years, work and family literally took the gun right out of his hand and even out of his house. While living and covering rampant crime in Los Angeles in the early 1970s, Tom became uneasy about having guns in the house with his wife and daughters, confused about what sort of signal it sent to the kids and how to reconcile his history with guns afield and the daily barrage of gun violence. So he stopped shooting and gave away the shotguns of his youth.

As the saying continues, though, you can't take the South Dakota out of the boy. When Tom washed up on the shores of Manhattan in the late 1970s, the lure of shooting sports had hooked the hedge funders and Wall Street types, bringing a renewed cachet to shouldering a double gun with skill and panache. Like riding a bike, Tom quickly dusted off the shooting prowess he'd developed along the dusty roads of South Dakota flushing pheasant from agricultural ditches and fencelines. Only now he was shooting skeet and trap, and, having put away the childish guns of his youth, found himself with means enough to shoulder a new Beretta shotgun. This was a new day.

FISTS FULL OF PHEASANT

The only thing better than a successful bird hunt is the endless flow of stories that follow.



As Tom was taking up arms once again, pheasant hunting was enjoying a renaissance in his home state, ushering in a new popularity among upland hunters that would evolve into what is today a \$200 million industry in South Dakota alone. Old friends began to woo Tom with tales of bigger hunts, better guns, and bird dogs. The siren song did not go unheard, but there were wars to cover and revolutions to report. His life was enveloped in the bright lights and big city that had been his youthful quest. Ironically, the forces that pulled him away from South Dakota delivered him back once again.

Covering the buildup to the 1988 presidential election, Tom found himself passing through Iowa and Nebraska, very close to his old hunting grounds. Traveling with him was the first of his bird dogs, Sage, as he enjoyed some downtime at an old friend's farm in South Dakota. The weather was crisp and the skies were blue when he rose early to walk the roads and fields, gun in hand and dog leading the way. Along with the birds and the breeze that morning came a brush with nostalgia so intense that he called his wife, Meredith, and said, "This is who I am. This is where we come from."

The revelation set in motion what has become a pilgrimage of sorts. Beginning with Opening Day festivities in and around Mitchell, Brokaw has returned to South Dakota to hunt pheas-

ant for more than 25 years, often to great fanfare, sometimes on the quiet farms of childhood friends and family. Pheasant hunting is one of the ties that bind him to a place, centers him in a life that has, at times, sent him to many points on the compass.

A sense of place, for Brokaw, is also an important legacy for his family, a legacy that includes a ranch in Montana and a small plot of land an hour north of Manhattan. The primary draw of these places is continuity, a way for The Hooligans, as he lovingly calls his New York grandkids, to interact with nature and see an America that extends well beyond the Hudson River. And a way for his West Coast grandkids to experience the humanizing influence of what he describes as a classless society, where people are measured by their contribution, not their place of origin. It allows them, also, to contextualize their ancestors, and what they did, where they lived, the physical places that nurtured and molded them, just as trips back to South Dakota have helped them understand their grandparents, Tom and Meredith Brokaw.

FARM FIELDS OF DREAMS

(ABOVE:) Pheasant hunting is one of the ties that bind a hunter to a place. Each year for more than 25 years for Tom Brokaw, that's been with friends in the farmland of South Dakota.



RETRACING HIS STEPS

More than just a walk through the cornfields and prairie mud, Tom Brokaw returns to South Dakota each year to hunt for new friends, new stories, and new connections to his own history.



In many ways, it's like the water tower in Yankton. Returning with his kids and grandkids several years ago, he used that landmark, clearly visible at the center of town from every angle and distance, to assure his grandkids that they could wander freely, just as he'd done two generations before. As long as they could see the water tower, they couldn't get lost.

That water tower still anchors the global Tom Brokaw today, so that he never loses sight of his humble beginnings and Main Street roots. "It would be impossible," he says, "to come back to this place and put on any New York airs. These folks will set you straight right away. A guy has to be comfortable with who he is."

In this regard, Brokaw is a man of two rivers. The Hudson in the East defines the island that has offered the opportunities and treasures of the larger world, but there's a wild stretch of the Missouri in South Dakota, between Fort Randall and Yankton, that brought him into the world, that moves him every time he's there, and that, ultimately, will beckon him home.

The comfort of home has become particularly palpable as he wages battles with cancer and time, trying, as he says, to reduce his appetite and "pursue more low-key time" with friends and family. What he seems unlikely to reduce is his appetite for walking a field of corn or milo, 20-gauge slung across his shoulder, watching and listening for that familiar rise and cackle. He finished strong, going five for five on the closing fields over our weekend hunt, relishing the return of his feel once again after more than two years on the bench with chemotherapy and back surgery.

At his side is Red, his trusted Lab and confidant, who shares his love of time afield, even when that field runs through Central Park. Red is the third of his family's three Labs and, as Tom puts it, "The Brokaws have become the people they used to make fun of for being so attached to their dog."

Theirs is an organic bond, and neither would hunt without the other, Red combing the rows for pheasant but never letting Tom out of his sight. He's older and he doesn't get as much work as he used to, but he's pretty good for an old dog from the Upper East Side. And he would say the same about Tom.

I spent a weekend hunting for Tom Brokaw, the curious boy who rose from the South Dakota prairie to achieve great things, know interesting people, and bring big ideas and important moments into American conversation and consciousness. For that he was awarded our almost undivided attention and our nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. I found him walking the fields of South Dakota with Red, commanding the table at storytelling time with tales of hunting and global adventure, and sitting quietly before an enormous television while the news washed over him. I found a man comfortable with who he is. ✨

A TALE OF TWO BROKAWS

(ABOVE:) Red and Tom climb aboard Nicholas Air, leaving the Missouri River for the Hudson, the same journey Tom made a lifetime ago.