



DESTINATION:

Harpole's Heartland Lodge

by Robert Matthews

Photography by Terry Allen



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The Mississippi River country has forever been the heartland of America. The big, brown river halves a flat alluvial plain, flanked east and west by rolling hills, nestling shoulder to shoulder, anchoring the fertile center of the country and serving as demarcation between East and West.

It is for that reason that Gary and Wanda Harpole's Heartland Lodge in Illinois is so aptly named. Terry Allen and I went there awhile back and were greeted like old friends, for as we were to learn, there are no strangers in the Heartland.

It was late evening when we arrived; the first stars were beginning to blink in a sky just turned to purple, and the first chill of autumn was settling on the countryside. The huge, three-story log lodge glowed with the light of holidays yet to come and flickered with the comings and goings of people who might well have

been family, and soon would be friends. According to Miss Wanda, the emphasis at Heartland Lodge has always been to make everyone feel like they are at home for the holidays. From the spacious log lodge to the home-cooked meals made from scratch, *everything* is oriented toward making the guest feel like he is at home.

It felt like home, too, when we wrapped ourselves around prime rib, baked potatoes, beans, and homemade yeast rolls a few minutes later. The "scratch made" apple pie with vanilla ice cream that followed simply primed us for our feather beds.

The first morning was textbook "October" with all that the first mention of October implies. It was cool and clear with powder blue skies and just the slightest hint of a breeze. Breath hung barely visible in the air, and

the barest tinge of color whispered the promise of what the next few months would bring. Terry and I had brought a couple of lovely old English hammer guns that we were eager to try. Both featured fully patterned and browned Damascus barrels. Both had been duly certified as sound, and we had special low-pressure shells to shoot.

Wingshooting manager Terry Abney and his shorthairs, Sam and L.D., met us in front of the lodge just after daybreak. We were in the field before the sun had cleared the horizon, and in a little while we were into birds. The Harpole's mixed bag of shooting primarily features quail and pheasant, with the occasional chukar for variety.

Within minutes, Sam had pointed in a stand of foxtail, and a cock pheasant rose straight up. The little hammer gun seemed to have a mind of its own, and it jumped to my



shoulder as I thumbed the right hammer to full cock. There was a slight, flat crack and a mini-flurry of feathers hung in the space that, milliseconds before, had been occupied by a brassy red-headed cock.

A short while later, we saw a huge covey of bobwhites flush wild from the end of the field we were working and scatter into a swale of poplar saplings. We flushed them over points, one by one. The varmints jinked and juked just like woodcock, and the little hammer guns came alive. We roamed for miles among the fields of tan and gray rimmed with orange, red, and yellow. Sam and L.D. pranced and strutted, stiff-legged and straight-backed, following invisible threads of scent, finding and fetching until they ran sideways and we could do no more.

Our second day dawned windy, with pewter skies and a serious threat of rain, and we hunted with Terry Abney again. Making good on the threat, the sky soon opened and embraced us in fog, then drizzling rain. It spit, coughed, and sputtered rain the rest of the day. We laughed, cursed, shot, and wiped rain off our guns until, finally, we just gave up and hunted wet.

Normally, under these conditions, you would expect the birds to squat, fly reluctantly, and fly poorly when they were booted out. Well, “usually” doesn’t always apply, and on this day the birds ran like rabbits, flushed wild, and flew like they were possessed by demons. And Terry and I just couldn’t seem to miss! It was one of those rare days when we could do no wrong.

Then, along about mid-afternoon, Mother Nature decided to quit fooling around, and it really rained! We hunted on for a while, unwilling to end this incredible day. Finally, we met at the end of a food plot, standing silently in the waist high, sodden milo. With the breech open, water ran unimpeded from the muzzle of the little double. Terry peered, squint-eyed from beneath a waterfall running off the bill of his cap. We stood for a moment saying nothing. Just two old fools standing in the rain. Grinning. Each knowing that, once again, that there was no place in the world that he would rather be.

Of course, all good things must come to an end. Finally, a knowing glance precipitated a nod of the head. It was time to capitulate.





“Whistle the dogs in, Terry. We’re going somewhere warm and dry!”

In due time, we found our way to the comfort of the lodge. Under the influence of a glass of good red wine, dry clothes, and warm slippers, we concluded that Miss Wanda’s vision of a home-away-from-home had great merit. In retrospect, it is perhaps this quality that distinguishes Heartland Lodge the most.

Life today sometimes requires that we seek refuge. Sometimes, we simply need a place to get away from the world that we have created. We need a place to play a bit, to muddle, to remember, and to forget....

For those of us who are inclined to birds and guns and dogs, the concept of “refuge” must include all of these in

good measure, but it also requires firelight, friends, and smiling faces.

If you throw in good food and a comfortable place to rest at the end of the day, you have fairly defined the concept. You have also described Heartland Lodge. 🍷

For more information, visit www.heartlandlodge.com.

