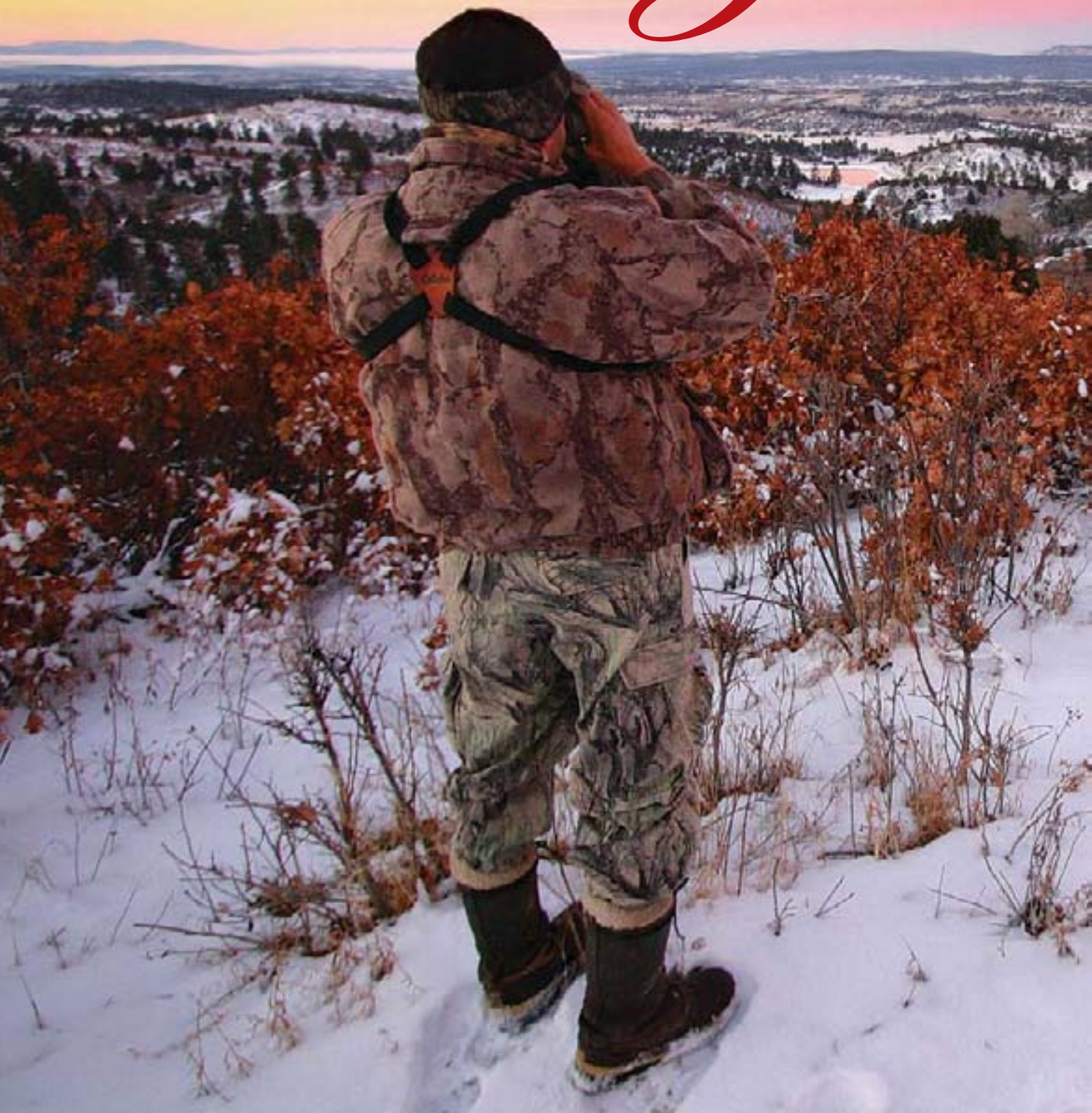


*It had been nearly two decades since the evening I had missed the big bull elk.*

# Nineteen Years



# to Sunrise

*And I didn't know if my chance would ever come again.*

*Story by Michael Altizer*



They poured off Sugarloaf like a cascade, plunging deep into the blue predawn canyon a thousand feet below. I watched through my binoculars as they reached the bottom and crossed the open meadow above Iron Springs Lake – or maybe it was through my rifle scope, and now I don't remember which, for we were more focused on their pace and direction.

A few moments later a tremendous bull appeared with them on the ridge above the lake 600 yards away, my crosshairs painting him as he whirled in momentary circles before deciding which way to go. But he and his companions were still on the move and too far away to even consider a shot on this frozen December morning, and so we bore east, then south, first into a parallel canyon and then up onto the intervening ridge in an attempt to cut the angle on them.

What it was that had pushed them off the mountain in the first place, we could not say for sure. But it really didn't matter, for our entire focus was now on the big bull. They finally disappeared into the hidden canyon below our line of sight, but that was fine;

*With the huge elk safely stowed in the truck, Chama President Frank Simms (left) and guide, Jaime Ortiz, enjoy Crockett's warm and wet congratulations for the author.*

we knew their direction, and my friend and guide Jaime Ortiz knew the land, and we hoped the old monarch would offer us a decent shot if we could simply circle and get ahead of the herd and Jaime could stop them. But for now, stopping was not on their agenda as they reappeared, and at this distance in the pale light of gathering dawn it was difficult to tell if the big bull was still with them.

You dream for years about the elk you would like to take. But in the end you know that once you are among them, you will take the elk that speaks to your soul. Don't worry; you'll know him when you see him. He may indeed be the six-by-six of your dreams, full and long and heavy from the brow tines to the splits. But then again, he might have more character and mass than length and symmetry, not necessarily six to a side. But he's yours, and you'll know he's yours the moment you see him.

And now, finally, I had seen him.

For nearly two decades I had been returning to the Lodge and Ranch at Chama, sometimes for trout, sometimes for turkeys, sometimes to photograph and write, sometimes simply to work on the business of the ranch. This is Jicarilla Apache land, and it was here, 19 years earlier, that my surrogate brother Frank Simms and I had been within 34 yards of what should have been my first bull elk, only to have my arrow deflected in mid-flight by a tiny overhanging branch I had failed to notice in the low evening light.

Two years ago I had finally taken an elk here, a cow to be sure, but still an elk, my first. But now the singular dream of a big bull had finally begun to stir once more, and Frank had invited me back to Chama to pursue that dream.

And so plans were made and schedules coordinated, and early December found me again back at the ranch, reveling in the lap of luxury in Chama's stunning 27,000-square-foot lodge. With me was my longtime friend and publisher Chuck Wechsler, in pursuit of his own bull elk.



My guide for this special hunt would be Jaime Ortiz, whose hunting skills and keen vision are legendary in northern New Mexico. Jaime and I had been friends for years, but we'd never actually had the opportunity to hunt together, and I was thrilled at the prospect of finally having him at my side.

Master-gunsmith Herb Reiley had rebuilt my old .300 Remington Ultra Mag., fully bedding it and fine-tuning its trigger and then setting its stainless barrel and action into a handsome and unique walnut-and-carbon-fiber, custom-fitted stock.

Jaime and I left the lodge an hour before daylight on the first morning with Herb's rifle riding behind us. The deep snow was like a field of diamonds in our headlights, and the ice-laden trees loomed like a forest of crystal in the starry predawn darkness as we climbed through the night into the high

country, stopping above the Horseshoe to glass.

The mountains that surrounded us glowed softly as the eastern sky began to awaken, bathing the entire snowscape in an opulent aura of crimson and coral and peach. After 20 minutes we began to move east on foot out the ridge, climbing the final few feet to the summit of a small spur where Jaime spotted three young bulls hidden in the thick timber less than a hundred and fifty yards below. Then from just over the crest of the ridge there came a bugle, a very close bugle, followed by the percussive bellows of a bull proclaiming his dominance. His calls resonated through the timber and deep into the core of my chest, and then all was quiet once more. He had spoken to my senses, but not to my soul, and so we backed off and left them all alone, making our way north to a point where we could scan the ridges and canyons above Book Out Lake.

With the sun continuing to rise, elk began to materialize below us. Some were in the trees, some in the oak brush, some on the sunny southern slopes a mile across the valley.



Some stood clear and defined, and some were mere wisps of ochre and bronze floating among the warm greys and cool blue shadows of the dark timber. Four hundred yards below, two bulls began posturing for dominance, finally turning to face one another before thrusting their great antlers together, the rattling crash filling the entire valley as the herd turned and disappeared into the trees.

We followed, dropping 700 feet into the canyon, descending through the deepening snow and then climbing the far ridge, hoping to ease over the top and gain position above them. But a small group of cows nailed us as we crested the ridge, putting the bulls beyond on full alert.

Two of them were definite candidates for the rifle, and Jaime quickly set up the shooting sticks and motioned toward them. I laid the crosshairs on the shoulder of the nearest bull,

but Jaime suddenly pointed to the right at an even better one and I turned, trying to locate him. But by now a young and overly energetic righthorn had wandered into position between us and them, and by the time he cleared, the entire herd had shifted up the mountain and into the timber without offering a decent shot. And though I felt a twinge of disappointment as we backed off the ridge and made our way farther down the valley, I knew in my heart that the bull of my dreams had simply not been there.

But I felt certain I would know him when he came.

**W**e hunted the broad valley and the snowy slopes for the rest of the day, moving with the elk, trying to locate a worthy target and work our way into proper position for a shot. Then, with the afternoon beginning to wane, we spotted a tremendous bull high on the side of the mountain, standing sentinel above the entire group. He was magnificent, the

master of his domain. But trying to climb into position at this late hour would have been pointless at best, for if we spooked him now we might never see him again. And so as daylight continued to fade and the

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*Dense oak brush covers much of Chama's lower elevations, making it difficult to spot even the biggest bulls as they move from resting areas to feeding grounds.*

clouds came rolling back in from the north, we made our way down the valley to the head of the lake.

Unknown to us, Frank Simms had come out from the lodge in late afternoon to do some glassing of his own and was now perched on a ridgeline a mile above us with

his spotting scope. What the three of us witnessed that evening in the fading light will dwell in our collective memory for as long as we live. For now, from up and down the canyon, elk began to gather on the high slopes across the frozen lake a quarter-mile away. In the dimming dusk we watched them through our binoculars as Frank watched us all through his spotting scope.

It was far too late to try making a move on them, but to our delight they began to ease down-slope along the side of the ridge, momentarily disappearing into the oak brush at the head of the lake before climbing a narrow trail and quartering up in our direction.

One by one they came, crossing an opening less than 30 yards above us. In the cold, fading light, we searched for the giant bull we had seen earlier, wanting him to be there, *willing*

him to be there, but he simply was not.

Frank told us later that two bulls had flinched as they struck our tracks at the head of the lake and veered east, back up the canyon. He said they were both big, but in the dimming light he could not tell *how* big. For our part, Jaime and I never saw them; we were too enthralled with the elk passing above us, so close we could smell them, for the light evening winds coming off the mountain were directly in our faces.

Some were five-by-fives, some five-by-sixes, along with a few cows and spikes and even one six-by-six, his antlers rich and dark and heavy in the front but somewhat weak in the back with short fourth points and small crab-claw splits on the ends. And when the last bull had finally become one with the dusk, we were all breathless and spent from what we had just witnessed, Jaime and I tucked into a small clump of oak brush by the lake and Frank still perched high on the ridge a mile above us.

Back at the lodge that night, Frank said he had watched in disbelief through his spotting scope as we held our fire while

anticipation and hope. It promised to be a perfect morning for photographs, and so Chuck decided to join us with his camera.

At first light from high above the Horseshoe we spotted them, a small, late-season bachelor group of bulls far to the southwest above Iron Springs Lake. We immediately began our move, dropping into the canyon and then climbing out before circling into the high valley below them. We spotted them again three hundred yards above, all of them big but one truly outstanding, his massive rack looking very much like the great herd bull from yesterday evening. For one fleeting moment I had him in my sights, but the whole group seemed to sense that something was not quite as it should be and began moving again.

We moved with them from below, up the canyon through the ever-deepening snow. Again they paused and again I momentarily caught the big bull above us in my rifle scope. But now they turned south along the ridge. Jaime and I continued to parallel them as we moved up the valley, but

Chuck turned and headed back down to be in position to cut them off if they doubled back.

We finally halted at the top of the canyon, 250 yards below the spur where the ridgeline fell away. We

*The author stands over his fallen elk, whose great antlers seem to merge with the random sprigs of oak and cedar along the skyline.*



the line of elk passed so close. He grinned at me and shook his head and said I must have ice water running in my veins. But the truth was, I simply did not want to shoot the wrong elk and disappoint him, for he wanted a big bull for me at least as much as I wanted it myself.

Still, I knew that my elk was out there – we had seen him earlier that day standing watch over his herd high on the side of the mountain.

And now a lesser bull simply would not do.

**W**e left the lodge the next morning an hour and a half before sunrise, headed back up into the high country. The night was sharp and clear and brutally cold, the black sky studded with stars, our senses and souls vital and brimming with

could see them there above us as they milled about in the open cedars and scrub oak, first moving briefly back north in the direction they had just come, then dropping away over the crest and disappearing altogether.

There was simply no possibility for us to head them off from here, and so we tucked into the

shadows, scanning the spur above and hoping they would circle back, me sitting with my rifle resting lightly on the shooting sticks as I covered the skyline with my scope, Jaime kneeling close beside me glassing the ridge above.

Then, from around the southern flank came three big bulls, clearly on alert, peering back up the ridge to the north. A moment later three or four more topped the skyline 80 yards above them to the right. I examined each as they came, searching for that one magnificent bull we hoped was still with them. The tall cedars and fragmented sprigs of oak brush that separated them seemed vast and empty. And then there was movement.

At first it was just the tips of his antlers I saw, then his entire rack filling my scope as the morning parted and the great bull crested the ridge. He moved as I had always imagined he

would, looming grand and majestic, slowly turning his head from side to side as he studied the scene, huge, bigger than any elk I had ever beheld.

The entire universe now existed only in my rifle scope. I *knew* this elk; I had known him for 19 years, confident that one day he would come, growing into my vision until he was complete. And now he *was* complete, breathtaking in his every movement, royal in his demeanor, framed against the sky and the still-shaded ridge, turning slightly to the left as he began quartering downhill.

And on he came, step by deliberate step, his nose held high into the swirling breezes, his great headdress flung back over his massive shoulders as he surveyed his last domain, turning fully broadside as I eased my rifle and myself off safety, the crosshairs probing his broad amber chest, searching for that lovely crease that I knew existed just behind his shoulder, distance certain, angle uphill, steady, steady, breathe, don't breathe, wait for him to clear, there, there . . . wait . . . wait . . .

The recoil was firm and confident and controlled, and it lifted the rifle slightly as I racked the bolt and rechambered. Pulling the scope back down, I saw him fall,

*Mike Altizer (left) and guide Jaime Ortiz bask in the early morning light high along the crest of a ridge where the great bull fell at dawn.*

then try to regain his feet, both of us knowing he could not, and I immediately sent another round up the mountain and high into his chest to end it for him.

For the briefest moment he paused where he lay. Then with supreme effort, he raised his massive rack and began turning his face toward me before slowly surrendering to the Eternal as his noble head settled to earth.

And still I watched him, my last round chambered, his great shoulder covered by my crosshairs, keenly alert for any sign that might require this one final cartridge. The barrel was hot in my ungloved hand, and the smooth, oil-finished walnut was warm and reassuring as it pressed firmly into my face.

The silence was pristine and nearly overwhelming as the muffled echoes of my shots and Jaime's distant voice began seeping back into the tiny universe that for the past few moments had existed only in my scope. I lifted my head and peered over the top of the rifle at our elk and then turned to Jaime who was still kneeling close beside me, and he smiled his grandest smile and put his arm around my shoulder and shook me, and I was back from the killing.

I climbed the ridge alone that morning, leaving Chuck and Jaime at the base of the cedar from where I had shot. It is a holy thing, walking up to a creature you have just killed, and for my part, it is something I can never quite bring myself to fully share. I rose from the snow and the dark-blue shadows of dawn, easing up into the first warm rays of morning, and when I finally reached him I paused for a moment. He lay above me on his side, his noble head angled downhill in my direction, his great antlers rising into the sky, his vacant amber eye still shining as it stared into my soul.

I knelt there below him and made words to him, and it took a minute or so before I could finally bring myself to touch him, whispering a prayer of thanks as I laid my bare hand against his still-warm shoulder. The December sun bathed us in the first copper rays of morning as I looked out on the world awakening below us, still deep in shadow except for this single ridge lifting its blood-stained crest into the low golden light of dawn.



We waited there together, the old bull and I, and finally Chuck and Jaime joined us. I thanked Jaime in his own language, and he responded in kind, and we did what we had to do and by noon were all back at the lodge where Frank and his good dog Crockett were standing in the warm morning sunshine to greet us. We had waited long to share this moment, Frank and I, and only *we* truly understood what it meant.

Just as we'd known we would for 19 years. 🐻

### IF YOU WANT TO GO

The Lodge and Ranch at Chama in New Mexico offers some of the finest big game hunting and accommodations in North America. Call 505-756-2133 or visit [www.lodgeatchama.com](http://www.lodgeatchama.com).