

SEPTEMBER REMEMBER

By Oscar Henson



S I DROVE home from the border town of McAllen, Texas, on the last day of August, following five 105-degree days of participation in Operation Strong Safety (a state border operation) I began running through my mind the month ahead. September is usually a month of recovery for me; water safety season was just ending and I was looking forward to hunting season. Soon I'd be checking dove hunters and scouting deer camps where I'd seen activity of hunters preparing. I was also anxious to prepare my own stands and feeders for my 8-year-old daughter, my 9-year-old son, and myself to use. In Texas, October opens with archery season and I knew it was just around the corner.

But before September could begin, I had to finish out August, which as all wardens know, means submitting monthly reports. It looked as if I'd get back to the office around 4 pm, so I thought I'd just finish up quickly before going home. I did arrive to the office by 4 pm, but after catching up with two

different people about pending cases and a county deputy about a deer shot back in the summer, by 7 pm I decided just to go home and try the reports again the next day.

Even though I went to the office early the next morning, my partner, Randy Harper, forwarded me a call from a landowner. The landowner had found a poached deer, which had been shot in his yard, presumably during the previous night. I took the call as Randy was a county away checking dove hunters, and that's where the story really begins. The August reports were turned in ... only half an hour late and September took off, but very differently from how I had scripted it.

When I met with the landowner that morning, the deer did appear to have been shot from the road. I questioned him on whether he had any ideas on suspects and he gave me two names. Oddly enough, I had heard both names the previous evening. Leon County Sheriff's Department Investigator, Sergeant Brian Stafford, had mentioned both of

them when telling me about a criminal mischief case he had been working ... a case in which he had come across information about a deer being poached. With these same two suspect names popping up in separate investigations, I decided to meet up with Sgt. Stafford to see how he wanted to approach this case.

Sgt. Stafford was looking at several suspects; 3 adults and 2 juveniles, who were involved in his investigation. Sgt. Stafford's investigation included crimes such as; smashed mailboxes, vandalized road signs, theft, and now illegal deer hunting. The three adult suspects were identified to me as; Jaden Kornegay (age 17), James Belknap (age 17) and Daniel Pate (age 20). Sgt. Stafford told me he had already spoken with Kornegay, who had confessed to much of the criminal mischief, minimizing his part in it and telling what the others had done. I had dealt with Belknap in the past and knew him to have previously been dishonest with me so we decided to talk to Pate first, figuring of the two, he would be the most forthcoming at this point.

We brought Daniel Pate in for an interview, and four and a half hours later, we finished. During the interview, Pate told us about twelve deer which had been shot, and two houses the group had broken into. Pate verified all the names which Kornegay had originally given to Sgt. Stafford, but he also insisted Kornegay had played a big part in the crimes. Pate also brought up one more name; "Little John". Pate told us Belknap had been the instigator of most of the theft, and had hidden the stolen items at "Little John's house". Neither Sgt. Stafford nor I were familiar with anyone who went by the nickname of Little John, and all Pate new was that "Little John" lived somewhere in Flo, a small community in Leon County.

The next day was the first Saturday of dove season, so I drove up to Navarro County to help out a bit up there, but I kept running the Pate interview through my mind. When I finally sat down to eat some lunch that afternoon, it hit me on my second bite of pulled pork, who "Little John" was! He was a young guy who I'd met working at the Buffalo Livestock Sale Barn whose real name is John Persuad (age 19). So I

called a man who was a family member of Persuad and I asked him if a guy named James Belknap had been staying with them this past summer, to which he answered "yes." He went on to tell me they'd kicked him out a few days before, telling him to get all his belongings and leave because they felt he was no good. I explained why I was calling and that Persuad wasn't currently in any trouble, but that this Belknap character might have hidden some stolen stuff at their house. I asked if I could go get Persuad, talk with him, and look for the stolen property. The gentleman gave me the green light, telling me he was working at the sale barn.

Then I called the owner of the sale barn and explained everything to him about us needing to borrow Persuad. He told me that three weeks before this, Belknap had come and worked for him one day and the same day a gun was stolen from his own truck. So with nothing but bad news appearing to be stacking up against Belknap, I put Persuad in my truck, headed for his house and explained to him the situation.

He became very nervous and quiet and normally he's a very talkative guy! So at that time, I decided to read him his rights and I asked him if he wanted to tell me anything. Persuad told me about two houses that he and Belknap had broken into, in addition to the two that Pate had mentioned in his interview. He also confessed to two more deer that he, Belknap, and a juvenile had shot from the road. I called Sgt. Stafford and asked him to meet me at Persuad's house.

When we got there, we filled both mine and Sgt. Stafford's truck beds with stolen material, including; fishing poles, ammunition, knives, hunting clothing and gear, deer blinds, chain saws, bags of corn, and tons of loose change. We also seized five guns that had been used to kill deer and other animals from the road at night. We convinced Persuad to show us the houses they'd broken into. He ended up showing us two new houses that he claimed he hadn't been in, but

that Belknap, Kornegay, and two juveniles had burglarized.

The next couple days consisted of sorting through stolen material and obtaining warrants for Belknap's arrest.....all the while taking our regular calls. Once the warrants were secured, Sgt. Stafford and I went to Centerville High School and placed James Belknap



under arrest for three burglaries. Sgt. Stafford asked him if he had anything more he wanted to talk about and he immediately said "no." I pulled him

aside for a moment and explained to him what he was facing and told him that it would help his case to be honest. He finally agreed and told me all the things and people involved that I already knew about, but he mentioned more deer that he'd shot and what guns he'd used. So I asked him if we could do an interview the next morning and he agreed. I wondered if he could keep his story straight from day to day ...

The next morning's interview lasted four hours. During that time Belknap's story changed several times, but by the end of it, we learned of various animals they had poached in Leon County and of unsuccessful attempts made at poaching in two other counties. At this point, the tally sheet included birds, foxes, raccoons, armadillos, and 27 deer.

Next, we decided to contact the parents of the two juveniles and bring them all in for questioning. Both of these interviews yielded similar results as the

others, with confirmation of what we already knew, but with more information. They told of more houses and hunting camps they had burglarized and more animals they had killed illegally. Sgt. Stafford and my partner, Randy Harper, took Daniel Pate throughout the county so he could show them exactly where some of these crimes had occurred. I returned to the jail to visit with Belknap again and he confessed to a few more hunting camps and more deer not previously mentioned by anyone. When Randy and Sgt. Stafford returned, they also had new locations of newly confessed crimes by Pate.

I spent the next few days securing warrants for Pate and Persuad. Randy and I recovered more stolen items involved in these burglaries. When we arrested Persuad, on the way to the jail he showed us yet another spot where he and Belknap had shot a deer from the road.

Because of the sheer volume of what the violators were confessing to, I wanted to bring everyone back and interview them again. I also took Pate and Belknap around the county to have them show me once more where everything took place. So over the next two weeks, this is what kept Sgt. Stafford, Randy, and I occupied. After several more interview hours, we were finally at a point where we were satisfied with the information we had. Our deer count was at forty-five. But through all these interviews, one name kept popping up ... Jaden Kornegay, the guy Sgt. Stafford had talked to in the beginning before I became involved. Each suspect mentioned him over and over, and in a way that suggested he was more than simply there by accident.

Randy and I picked Kornegay up at the high school one afternoon with three warrants for taking deer without landowner consent and took him to the interview room. After reading him his rights, he agreed to talk to us. We spent the first hour trying to get him onto the path of truthfulness, as we knew a lot at this point. Finally, Kornegay looked at me and said, "You really do know everything we did, don't you?"

"Yes, Jaden, I do. Now I just want to know your side of things."

Kornegay then opened up. He told



Suspects Daniel Pate left, and John Persaud

us about fifteen more deer we had not covered yet. Randy and I took him riding to have him show us where they had killed these new deer. He also showed us another deer camp they had hit. In addition, Kornegay told us about cattle and pets they'd shot, as well as a truck and a gas station window that had been shot. Then he showed us the spot where they'd killed a calf with a machete.

Since Kornegay had cooperated so well with us, we got him back home by the time he would normally have gotten out of football practice. He said we could meet again and he would tell us

more the next day. We knew we were taking a chance on additional information, but we were in a good spot in our investigation and still knew more than he realized. When I called Kornegay the next day, his parents informed me that he would not be talking with us anymore and that I could talk with his lawyer regarding anything else I had questions about. This move was expected on their part.

All the other suspects confirmed Kornegay's new information. The landowners of all properties involved let us look around and we found numerous skeletal remains of all the various animals that had been killed. When the dust finally settled, we had confessions from four adults and two juveniles that between June 4 and August 29, 2015, they shot 68 deer, 10 doves, two alligators, a squirrel, a fox, a buzzard, and some water birds. Aside from wild game, they confessed to killing six cows, several house cats, shooting signs, a truck and a gas station window and had engaged



in smashing mailboxes. They also confessed to burglarizing thirteen houses, deer camps and one church. Oh, and what had all these guys told their parents they were

up to all summer? Bowling!

The strangest part of the entire investigation is that with all this shooting, we only received one landowner call about shooting at night, shooting from the roadway, illegal hunting, etc. That was the call I received on September 1st, and we still don't know who shot that particular deer!

I've only been a game warden for eight years, but I learned early that in this job, as soon as you make plans for your day, they'll change. I just didn't know that rule could apply to a whole month though! ☹️

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RICK SEWARD(Ret) to hand carve a
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