

Duck Hunting

By Norman Nelson Jones Jr.

Can you imagine anything more exciting for an 11 year old than to come home from school Friday noon on a beautiful fall day to find a small pair of hip boots and a new shotgun standing against a chair in the living room? It was my first duck hunt. Dad, who had hunted since he was a kid, loved the sport and brought home large bags of beautiful mallards from fall and early winter outings. Now I was finally old enough to go along.

We piled our gear into the trunk of our old Model T Ford Roadster, a relic left over from the days when Drake Hardware furnished their salesmen with cars, and headed north on old Highway 99. At Kingston we stopped at the General Store, "Huessel & Gibbs", to get some food for our dinner. I remember clearly that I had a bottle of "pop" and Dad refreshed himself with a cold bottle of "near Beer" which establishes my approximate age, as "Prohibition" still was the law of the land. After buying supplies and exchanging pleasantries with Lester Huessel (they carried hardware as well as groceries and were a Drake customer) we turned east just north of the store and headed toward the river and the hunting camp. The old Model T was great for negotiating the ruddy dirt road and we rattled along, stopping to open and close gates as we had to pass thru John Brockway's farm en route. We halted the Ford at the levee and carried our groceries and hunting gear over the tall sandy barrier which held out the river from the farm land. The cabin, as it stood outside the levee, was strictly utilitarian, a homely, box-like affair perched atop a platform on stilts and reached by a flight of open stairs. We opened up the cabin to air it out, swept up the debris left by invading mice and put away groceries. Then we went back down the steps to turn over the wooden "johnboat" and slide it to the river bank. Next we opened the locker under the cabin to retrieve our oars and crates of wooden mallard decoys. The "blocks" were handcrafted and painted decoys, many of which Dad had made himself and painted during winter evenings in our basement shop. They had a strip of lead for a keel and a long length of cotton trot line with a lead weight as an anchor. Three to four dozen of our wooden mallards were a heavy load and we took several trips to stack the crates in the johnboat. With our preparations complete for the morning hunt, Dad decided I should have a little target practice with my new firearm, a big thrill for me. After a serious discussion of the dangers of loaded shotgun and proper safety procedures, he rounded up some empty beer cans, opened my box of shells and had me load up. My new gun was a Stevens 20 gauge, single shot, with rubber recoil pad and an ivory bead front sight- a lovely little gun, if a trifle light for duck hunting. As all kids of that age with good eyesight and natural coordination, I soon was busting the cans right and left and having the time of my life. The fun was over all too soon and we returned to the cabin to fix dinner. Dad primed the old "Red Jacket" pitcherspout pump and put together a delicious fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy dinner that really hit the spot. After

washing up, we sat around and watched the sunset as Dad smoked his pipe and told tales of duck hunting on the river.

We rose early, put on boots, and shoved off in the johnboat for Picaninny Island which Dad and his partners leased from the Federal Government. This was pretty much before the day of the outboard motor so Dad rowed us across as the first light of dawn exposed the willow-lined banks of the island. We tied up the boat, carried guns and decoys across to the "big river" side of the island and threw together a small willow blind. We set out the decoys, brought the crates into the blind to sit on, and loaded up our guns in hope of seeing a few ducks. As often happens early in the season, the weather was too fine. We saw very few ducks and didn't get a shot. We were back in the cabin by noon, had lunch on cold chicken, put away the boat and decoys, and fired up the Model T for our trip home. Oddly enough, this was my first and last trip to the hunting camp and Picaninny Island as Dad bought a share at the New Crystal Lake Club and all my hunting for years was done there.

Crystal Lake Club was a fantastic place for our family and we enjoyed it to the fullest. Fishing was good, the picnic grounds were a wonderful place for a family outing and the duck hunting was excellent. All these delights were just a few minutes from home.

When Dad bought his Crystal Lake membership from Tracy Garrett he also got two lovely wooden duck boats in the bargain, both hand-made by the legendary Jim Jordan. One was double-bowed, the other had a round stern with a little gallery to hold a few decoys on the deck. The boats would hold two men plus hunting equipment, and they rowed like a dream, just skimming over the water. It was here that I learned the difficulty of wading in deep mud, tripping in muskrat runs and filling my boots with icy water. I broke ice on bitter cold mornings, struggled with live decoys and enjoyed every minute of it. I couldn't wait for Saturday and Sunday to roll around during hunting season, and I was seldom left at home as Dad took me as often as he could. I did manage to knock down a few ducks with my 20-gauge, single shot before Dad finally allowed me to graduate to my Grandfather Jones' old Parker 12-gauge double-barreled shotgun. The 12-gauge seemed like a cannon and I was thrilled beyond words to shoot it. It was a gorgeous gun with beautiful walnut wood, Damascus steel barrels and double triggers. Since the barrels were of twisted steel Dad would not allow me to shoot the high brass heavy load shells. I, however, had great success with the lighter field loads and it may have made me a better shot because I had to shoot with more discretion. It was after getting the Parker 12-gauge that I remember a really fabulous hunt occurred.

We drew for blinds at the Club each morning and since my Dad had only one "draw" (I was not a share-holding member) compared to most other hunters who hunted in pairs or threes. With such multiple draws these members usually got the best blinds and we pretty much took what was left. This particular morning was no

exception and though Dad and I had the “Run”, the “hot” spot at the time was in South Stoney where there was a patch of smartweed that the ducks were just piling in to feed on. Frustration was the word of the day for us; the mallards would circle, we’d anticipate a shot only to have them drop over the timber, and our hopes were dashed again and again by the round of shots that would follow. We’d nearly had our fill of such repeated disappointment when “what to our wondering eyes should appear” in the west timber but one of the hunters in Stoney, Bill Curley (our neighbor on North Hill who was also rated Burlington Villain #1 after he absconded with huge funds from the First National Bank, causing its failure).

Mr. Curley called out, “Come and take over our blind...we only lack one duck of our limit!” Dad waded to the timber and toward the south Stoney blind while I picked up the decoys and rowed our boat around to our new hunting spot. Dad and I huddled in the timber across from their decoy set-out, awaiting their final shot. In just minutes a big mallard swung on high, saw the decoys, and in the strong wind “corkscrewed” down, offering a beautiful shot which the second hunter there, Walter Eaton, (also a North Hill neighbor and President of Chittenden & Eastman furniture manufacturers) dispatched with an expert towering shot. The two successful hunters then picked up their decoys as we set ours out and they departed in short order. I feared that, as so often happens, the ducks might stop flying, but today luck was ours. We soon were experiencing the incredible flights of ducks enjoyed by our predecessors. We rowed back to the boathouse with our own limit of 24 beautiful mallards in the dwindling light of the winter evening.

The winter storm which was driving the ducks southward deepened during that night and we hunted the next morning on a bitter, windy and snowy day. By some incredible luck Dad got first draw, and we went back to the same blind in Stoney we had taken over the afternoon before. The hunting was much more difficult but was such exciting shooting with ducks circling in the snow squalls as I tried to row in the wind to chase cripples and then get back in the blind before more ducks decoyed. Long before we shot our limit I ran out of shells, so Dad shared his gun with me.

To switch guns with Dad was a real experience, for his one gun was a Browning 16-gauge automatic that he had bought from “young Mr. Browning” himself (when Dad was buying guns and ammunition for Drake Hardware Company). Before closing time we shot everything in Dad’s old Army musette bag, goose loads and all, but we went home with another limit of 24 mallards. In this day and age of fewer ducks and greatly reduced limits, I’m not too proud of shooting so many ducks, but we were within the legal limit and thought nothing of it at the time. I should perhaps add that these fine ducks did not go to waste as we had great roast duck dinners for all of our family and also gave away many ducks to neighbors who enjoyed roast duck, but had no hunters.

After returning from the Lake it was my job to take gifts of ducks to our neighbors, the Hirsches, Toppings and my godmother, Mrs. Charles Hutchins, who looked forward to my calls.

These wonderful outings with my Dad continued every fall until I graduated from high school. We had great times and many good hunts, though none ever came up to that early Saturday and Sunday in South Stoney. One amusing aside, nothing to do with duck hunting really, but part of the scene...in high school, I often found myself involved in a dance or dinner party on Saturday night and on returning from a day in the cold wind duck hunting, I found my enthusiasm had waned somewhat from earlier in the week. I showered, slathered my windburned cheeks and chapped legs with Mom's hand lotion against the long evening. My only dress suit was dark, wool, and scratchy so to spare my tender legs, I would wear my pajama pants instead of underwear and managed to survive the ordeal.

1937

Intermission – 4 years of college

NO DUCK HUNTING

1941

As I was in the process of graduation from Dartmouth College, I signed up for the flight training program with the Army Air Corps. The AAC in their infinite wisdom decided in August that the spots on my lungs might be suspicious and deferred me to months of observation. This was a terrible disappointment to me and a terrible shock to my family until our local Doc's assured my Mom that I was in perfect health, and that the scars were old and harmless. After adjusting to this problem I continued to work at Drake Hardware and looked forward to the day that I could join my friends already in the service. While all this nonsense went on, my Dad had joined a group of friends, lead by Walter Eaton, in a new duck hunting venture in the Big Bottoms above Oquawka, Illinois. This area had been a great "Ducking" area for many years and Walter had arranged to lease the property and put up a rather plush cabin. The partners were Walter Eaton, Dr. Alf Eggleston, Ed Cady, Frank Sandell, a Mr. Peacock from Monmouth, Ill. and my Dad. Mr. Eaton was the prime mover and made all the arrangements, which included the hiring an old professional hunter (who helped him) and his wife who came and cooked for the combine. These generous men invited me to hunt in the exclusive group with my Dad until I went into the "Service". Uncle Sam didn't call me until January '42, after Pearl Harbor, so I was able to hunt the entire season. Dad and I hunted every weekend and a few days in between. Dad had ordered my Christmas present early, a Winchester 12 gauge Model 12 pump gun and it arrived in time for the season. This wonderful gun, truly a legend in firearms, has been my one and only just as Dad's old 16 gauge Browning was for him. Our hunting that fall was wonderful, great companionship. These older men took me into the group as an equal and I just couldn't have had a finer time. We brought home many limits of mallards and I still made my neighborhood rounds to give ducks to our old friends who did enjoy roasted mallard.

This wonderful fall passed all too quickly and then came the “Day of Infamy” and the very strange Christmas which followed. By January 3, 1942, I was off to the AAC, this time for keeps and duck hunting was once again set aside.

Intermission – World War II
1942 – 1945

I came home from the Wars unscathed, with a bride of two years, expecting our first child. My father and the group of hunters headed by Walter Eaton that had been so kind to include me in hunting the fall of 1941 were still holding forth at the same stand and I was welcomed back with open arms. Needless to say, I was thrilled to be home, particularly because it meant I would get good duck hunting after such a long time away. I guess I should add that there was no way I could have afforded any duck hunting on my own, so this was an incredibly wonderful homecoming bonus for me. Dad and I hunted most weekends and a few days in between, since I was back working at Drake Hardware and we could work out a few extra curricular outings. Duck hunting was not as fabulous as it had been in 1941 and limits had been reduced, but we had many wonderful hunts and Mary AD was soon inducted in the ancient rite of roasting wild ducks. Mary Ad and I had brought home our very own transportation, a 1941 Ford Tudor which was still going strong. I would fire it up early (4:30 A.M.), pick up Dad, and drive across the bridge up to Oquawka and west to the sand road toward Keithsburg to Walter’s cabin. After a hot breakfast in the cabin we’d drive down to the river bank and load our gear in the hideous and clumsy johnboat Dad had built during the War. Then we could run to our blind of the day. That darn johnboat was constructed of cypress and was heavy as lead, a wonder that it would float, but it did somehow.