

# Recollections of Things I Forgot to Remember!

by Joanie Ingraham

## A DAY OF DUCK HUNTING ON PUCKAWAY LAKE IN EARLY NOVEMBER, 1945

Rambling Experiences of Harlan L. Doering, then 15 years old (Continued)

Skiffs were predominantly built by hand, some individuals only building a single one for their own use, while a few garnered a notable reputation for their skills as skiff builders. I know my grandfather, Louis Zellmer, built at least twenty. He began taking in boarders for duck hunting and renting skiffs in the early 1900's at his homestead on County Trunk "C" which was three hundred yards from the sloughs. His boat landing was about seven hundred feet west of the Ne Pee Nauk Clubhouse and in line with the dredge bank and outlet of the original Fox River location. I can remember the boathouse, in the mid-30's, with skiffs on racks four tiers high on the sides and end of the building located at the homestead site.

Duck skiffs were built with 5/8" x 3/4" wooden strips using a shaped flat bottom as a base, three templates attached to the bottom board to fashion the hull shape and a nose piece on each end. Strips were planed, bent, twisted and nailed to form the hull with fifteen-sixteen strips high being the most common. Numerous skiffs would have tin or copper sheets nailed in front at the water line for protection while pushing through thin ice. Many of these were used for muskrat trapping, which continued after ducks were gone, and ice was a hindrance. A few were fitted with low, slender steel runners on the bottom for use on ice. These skiffs could be used in late season on thin ice where walking was dangerous and many open water potholes still existed. Two broom sticks with pointed steel pins in the ends were used for locomotion.

Veterans of the hunt such as my Dad and uncles, and sometimes myself would carry fifty wooden decoys. This was a load, and if the temperature stayed below freezing all day, the decoys became coated with ice adding to the weight on the trip home. Also, picking up slippery, ice-coated decoys in a heavy wind with a paddle-powered skiff required skill and strength.

Most of our decoys were made by my dad, a few by Grandpa Zellmer, with a small number "factory" Mason or Evans blocks. Most all of the old hand-made wooden decoys are worth a substantial amount of money at this time, with some choice makers and factory items being priced in the thousands.

We arrived at our blind after a hard paddle into the strong south wind. The distance of a mile, against the heavy wind, would take about forty-five minutes for veteran paddlers.

Between my dad and myself we would set out close to one hundred decoys which in those days was the legal limit of fifty decoys per hunter. The majority of the blinds were constructed in a double configuration for two skiffs, side by side. Seldom did you see a hunter in a boat powered by an outboard motor. This started in the late 1940's and progressed or should I say regressed until now where you rarely see a skiff.

About the time we would be setting out decoys the resorts would come out with their train of skiffs and "sports" behind an outboard powered rowboat. It always amazed me how they could haul out ten - twelve skiffs without any serious accidents. I heard of a few tipping over but never saw it. Art Zellmer (now Doepkes) and Henry Menge (now Good Old Days) were the largest operators. Uncle Art had a five horsepower Johnson for all of this utility work. Henry Menge sold his resort to a Cal Holland in the late 1940's. Holland acquired a large inboard powered boat for these hauling chores. I once counted twenty-two skiffs on one haul, a record.

The "sports" or hunters would rent a skiff, decoys and a blind for \$3.00 a day and would be on their own to paddle back to the resort at the end of their hunt.

Decoys were usually set out with leaders strung out away from the wind and the major bunch on the same side about thirty-five yards away.

In that ducks always decoyed into the wind the theory was that they would be drawn in by the leaders and even if they didn't decoy to the bunch, the wind would blow them close enough by the time they were in front of or on the opposite side of the blind. When new birds arrived most everything decoyed well. Otherwise the skill of setting out

decoys consistent with changing conditions was very respected. To constantly draw birds away from the other blinds was the challenge and success was very satisfying. Some of the knowledgeable, skilled hunters were Herman Menge (brother of Henry); Harry Zellmer, my uncle and grandson of Martin; Albert Stelter, Ne Pee Nauk guide, and Art Zellmer, also my uncle and resort owner. Henry Menge, the largest resort owner, did not hunt until he retired in the late 1940's or early '50's.

This particular day there were "new" lake birds. A few bluebill sat in the decoys while we were "setting out", which occurred only a few times in my hunting life.

Shooting was good along the whole west shore. It was frozen from behind the blinds to the marsh which tended to keep the birds flying along open water. In the 1945 habitat configuration, the so-called blind line of rushes was between one hundred to three hundred yards from the marsh behind us.

As a teenager with new full hip boots, I had to get back to the marsh and walk the edges along Bluebill Bay as we named this area of water behind our blinds. (A family colloquial name)

The marsh, at this time, was owned by Paul Zacharias, a feisty little "old" man probably about fifty at that time, but ancient to me. He would walk the area from his home on the "Big Island" and chase any strangers off, myself included.

He and my uncle, Art Zellmer, had a confrontation in the Round Hole regarding muskrat trapping. Uncle Art was fondly known in the family as the "Colonel", which stemmed from his days as a "private" in France during World War I. He and 'Zack' were both no more than 5'5" but thought they were a foot taller. Anyway, my uncle ended up chest deep in frigid early November water. This went all the way to litigation at the Marquette County Courthouse in Montello and Uncle Art lost. Zacharias claimed the Round Hole was his property and he won. Currently there are meandering lines around this body of water, surveyed by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Service, and it is considered public navigable waters. Times change.

Back to the marsh. Nobody patrolling so I could walk the edges. Jumped and killed a mallard and a beautiful drake wood duck. The latter probably not in good health in that he was still around at this late date. Didn't have a dog in those

days. Ducks fell on the ice, not thick enough to walk on it, and water too deep to walk out, even with new hip boots! So this entailed walking back to the skiff and "breaking ice" to get the birds. This was my grandfather's skiff given to me by my grandmother the year before. It did not have tin or copper nailed around the bow at the water line, consequently I chewed the front end quite badly. Later it required a repair replacing five strips of about three foot in length on both sides. The skiff wasn't the only thing that was chewed out that day! I also learned a lot about skiff repair of that era.

Back to the blind for the remainder of the day. We killed more ducks in those days, and there were many more diving birds on the lake proper with almost always something flying. However, quite honestly we spent a lot more time out hunting. It was strictly on week-ends, and for myself I stayed out the whole day. The limits were generous. I believe in the 1945 there was a ten-bird limit, with a bonus of five mallards, pintails, or teals.

Storing the ducks was another story. No freezers. My dad and uncle would can the surplus at first in regular glass mason jars and later, after purchasing a tin canning kit, we progressed to the metal cans. After picking the birds, cutting them in pieces. Boiling the meat and the cans, seasoning the birds, they were then placed in the can and capped on this new machine. All this, many times, after hunting all day. As for the results when preparing a meal with canned ducks, well, this was not a "good" part of the good old days.

Clothing: There wasn't any Gore-Tex, polyester, poly-propylene or any of the other exotic materials we now have become accustomed to. Down was available, but was unaffordable in the majority of households. I had a hand-made-down cotton canvas hunting coat which was more or less the "standard issue" of the day. The water repellency treatment of the fabric was long gone and if I was unfortunate to get caught in a rain it acted more like a sponge than any rain protection. If one had a raincoat they were usually heavy rubber or constructed with two layers of cotton with a rubber layer in between. As you can well imagine, this fabric did not

when paddling hard a good sweat was produced. If this happened on the trip out the residual perspiration made for a cold, miserable day.

Rubber boots were usually heavy and stiff. Insulated boots were not available, and even though good wool socks were worn, feet would get cold on the lower temperature days while sitting in a cramped skiff for long periods.

Shirts were mostly flannel with maybe a Christmas present of one made out of wool. Many layers were used. Trousers were the same material as the hunting coats and were quite adequate. Long underwear was normally wool and very good. The gloves we used were the dark brown, cotton jersey work glove. They would soak water up quickly, so five or six pairs would be taken along. It was important to have a dry pair for the paddle home because the hands would become unbearably cold and wet picking up decoys. Some of the hunters would have rubber gloves but we never did.

In the evening at the cottage the wet cotton gloves would be hung over the wood stove to dry. I can still sit back, close my eyes and smell the odor emitted from a dozen pairs of wet cotton gloves steaming in the close quarters of the cottage.

Cormorants: These birds were not indigenous to this area until the Grand River dike and flooding project was constructed in the 1960's. They now have multiplied to a point of being a controversial nuisance.

Deer Hunting: Deer were not seen in this area again until the early 1940's. (I assume they were around in the middle or late 1800's.) To see a deer in 1941-2 would actually be noted in the local newspapers. The first Marquette County deer season in my era, I believe, was in 1945 and with shotgun slugs only. This was few months after World War II and new ammo was not available. My dad, a machinist, made a die to cast hollow based shotgun slugs and we manufactured over three thousand pieces, using old lead water pipe as our raw material, and selling the finished product to Hotmar Hardware Store in Princeton, Wisconsin. Shotgun shells were fabricated with roll crimp in those days and customers would pry open the crimp,

remove the overshot wad, pour out the shot, and replace it with a slug, and recrimp with a knife or screwdriver. Many a deer were killed with Doering slugs. I, incidentally, received five cents per slug cast, and produced most of them. They retailed at the hardware store for 35 cents each.

Geese: If a goose was shot on Puckaway in 1945, it was also a newsworthy item. Few sightings were to be had and they were mostly blue and snow geese. Canada geese did not become prevalent until Horicon Marsh Refuge was improved in the early 1950's.

Paddles: Paddles like decoys were constructed predominantly by the individual hunter or the skiff builders. I still have and use paddles fabricated by my dad and uncles, Harry Zellmer and Hermann Wegner. (Hermann had a farm on County Trunk C, two miles northeast of Ne Pee Nauk, now his grandson's.) All of the above also made at least one skiff, many decoys and paddles.

The paddles of the 1930's and '40's that I saw were fashioned from white ash wood that came from the mill, in the rough, at a 2-inch thickness. A general shape and length was cut out with a coping saw or a power band saw, if available. I imagine some were roughed out with an axe or adz. The wood would have to be straight grained with no knots and then the bull work would begin. It was all hand work using a draw shave, spoke shave, planes and sanding. To obtain a strong, thin blade symmetrical to the stem or handle was up to the individual's skill.

The true test was in the usage against the wind and in chasing wounded ducks. The real veteran hunters were grabbing the blind posts and propelling themselves backwards out the blind before a winged bird hit the water. As the skiff is gliding backwards the paddle would be used violently to accelerate forward chasing the bird with the utmost speed. This change in direction, coupled with the adrenaline flowing would put the paddle to its sternest test. If it did not "snap" at this time, it would probably last many years.

Water quality: Due to abundant vegetation growth solidifying the muck bottom, limited population, and minimal pollution, water clarity was excellent in the 1940's. On a calm day you could easily observe small minnows, crustaceans, and bottom growing plant life three or four feet down in the clear water.

Thanks, Harlan Doering, for sharing your great memories!

