

# Recollections of Things I Forgot to Remember!

by Joanie Ingraham

## My First Duck Hunting Season 1942

by Harlan Doering, Milwaukee  
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(Continued from last week):

My Dad usually beat the alarm and had a fire going in the wood-burner making for a comfortable environment getting dressed. Cooking was done on a gasoline fueled two-burner camp stove. Eggs, bacon, and toast were the basic menu without any thought of health consequences. Curbing the appetite and creating energy was the purpose of the meal.

Light was furnished by a six-volt battery system. Two old car batteries didn't provide light very long without charging and an automobile generator powered by a small Briggs and Stratton engine had to be started to keep the electricity flowing. Kerosene lamps still being commonly used in this era were at the ready for lighting should we have any mechanical failures in our charging system. (All this noise in the days when quiet abounded.)

Breakfast went quickly and dishes were left for later. Checking outside, the weather was a sharp contrast to the normal end of September temperatures. It was 27 degrees with misty rain and a brisk wind surging out of the northwest. This may be good duck weather but the waterfowl opening in those days was always productive and weather most times comfortable.

The trek to our slough landing, located approximately 300 yards west of the famous Ne Pee Nauk hunting club founded in 1879, entailed crossing County Trunk Highway "C" that was located about fifty feet in front of the cottage. (Little traffic to worry about in those days.) The land between "C" and the slough, in the family since 1865, was a cow pasture. A barbed wire fence paralleled the highway along the four-rod wide right-of-way. In the darkness we were careful to walk slowly near the fence to avoid any unnecessary scratches from a rusty barb. My Dad and Uncle would side straddle over the top wire, but I being shorter and younger would easily crawl under the bottom wire of the normal three wire fences. I did accumulate a few small rips on the back of my outer garments as evidences of not getting quite low enough during these anxious treks.

As we walked the two hundred plus yards to the landing where the skiffs were anchored, the rain started to turn to a wet snow. The wood strip skiffs had been taken down to the slough landing weeks before and had ample time to "soak up"—swelling the wood to seal any gaps between the wood strip construction. The older they became, the longer the "soaking period" was required until, like life, the end came. Hay was used a lot as bedding on the bottom of the boat and in wet weather it provided a damp seat and wet behind. I don't remember boat cushions in that era.

The chair for the paddler in the back of the skiff cockpit was more often than not a discarded wooden kitchen chair with the legs cut off to about six inches below the seat. This lent itself to a reasonably comfortable seat with a nice backrest.

Arriving at the landing in the pre-dawn darkness made it somewhat difficult to ready the skiffs and store the equipment. I don't remember using flashlights so what couldn't be seen in the darkness had to be done by feel.

I sat in front of the skiff compartment fluffing up the hay to form somewhat of a cushion effect. My Dad did all of the paddling and pushing as we headed out, the wind angling from our right and blowing at a good clip. The freezing rain now turning gradually to snow, stung the face if you looked into it. Even over the din of the wind we could hear large flocks of ducks, taking flight with violently beating wings, to get airborne and head out into the darkness. This day there would be few places for the ducks to rest, as even in 1942 there were vast numbers of hunters spread over the region on opening day.

At the William Stelter farm, along County Trunk "C" a half mile or so west of our landing, hunters were allowed to park in a cow pasture at 50 cents per vehicle. This was near the old marsh road, which was used by the many farmers to access their ten to forty acre plots of marsh. The individual owner, each summer, would cut the necessary area for needed hay and fabricate haystacks for storage. Later in fall and early winter, this hay would be retrieved with horse drawn wagons. This road at duck opening was utilized by the many hunters as a "walk-in" to the vast areas of marshland. The territory was almost equivalent to a public hunting ground as little attention was paid to trespassing. In 1942, from our blind, I could count upwards of forty cars parked at this access.

In the sloughs skiffs were the mode of travel for boat hunters. Consequently, "sports" from resorts on the main lake did not paddle the longer distance into the sloughs and remained on the lake proper. Habitat was much different. Rice and rushes were thick most years, and travel required poling, an art not mastered by many. Incidentally, these cut marsh areas and edges provided excellent habitat for prairie chickens and the 1920's and 1930's were days of bountiful harvest of these birds.

My Dad found the blind without trouble in the ever so little evidences of light of the approaching dawn. We pushed the skiff into the blind and were facing directly into the winds. The willow construction of the blind provided some windbreak but not much. I was cold and miserable even with the forthcoming excitement of the opening now less than an hour away. We had an old canvas cover in the skiff and Dad draped that over me providing a temporary respite

from the wind and snow. When he took it off, about ten minutes before the sunrise shooting time, it was covered with about a half inch of snow.

Looking out into the increasing light I could see small flocks of teal streaking about, some so close you felt you could reach up and touch them. Suddenly the cold and chill I had felt vanished. It was time to load up.

Reaching into my shell box I grabbed a few high velocity loads, broke open the Ranger 16-gauge double, and dropped a number six shot in the right barrel and a number four in the left. By five minutes to shooting time, there was sporadic shooting over the whole area and at the actual legal shooting time of sunrise, a constant roar was in progress. There was never more than a few seconds time between hearing shots during the first hour of the opening.

Even in the semi-darkness of sunrise on a very cloudy day, flocks of ducks could be seen on all sides of our blind location. Blue-wing teal with a few green-wing teal were the predominant species in the area in which our blind was located. Mallards and pintail seldom frequented this corner of the slough. I always had an extreme desire to get a genuine green head mallard but it would be three years before that dream-like fantasy would be fulfilled.

It was time to shoot! A pair of blue-wings came out of the west with the wind, and I swung on them. Two quick shots from the Ranger double and nothing. I don't think I ever got up to them let alone swinging ahead. While I had a passable amount of experience at wing shooting swinging ahead of these speedy blurs brought wing shooting to a new level. My Dad killed a few teal but I guess he was concerned about me harvesting a few ducks. My memory cannot recall the detail of my first kill, but I do know it was a blue-winger flying from right to left against this strong wind. Shooting at anything flying with the thirty mile per hour wind was a lost cause for me.

Normally we stayed in the blind until a few birds were downed and then picked them up. With so many birds flying in the first half hour, you didn't want to be out in the open and lose some nice opportunities. However, I was very anxious to pick up my first bird so out we went. As usual we spoiled a few potential shots by being out in the open, including a rare fly by of a small flock of mallards.

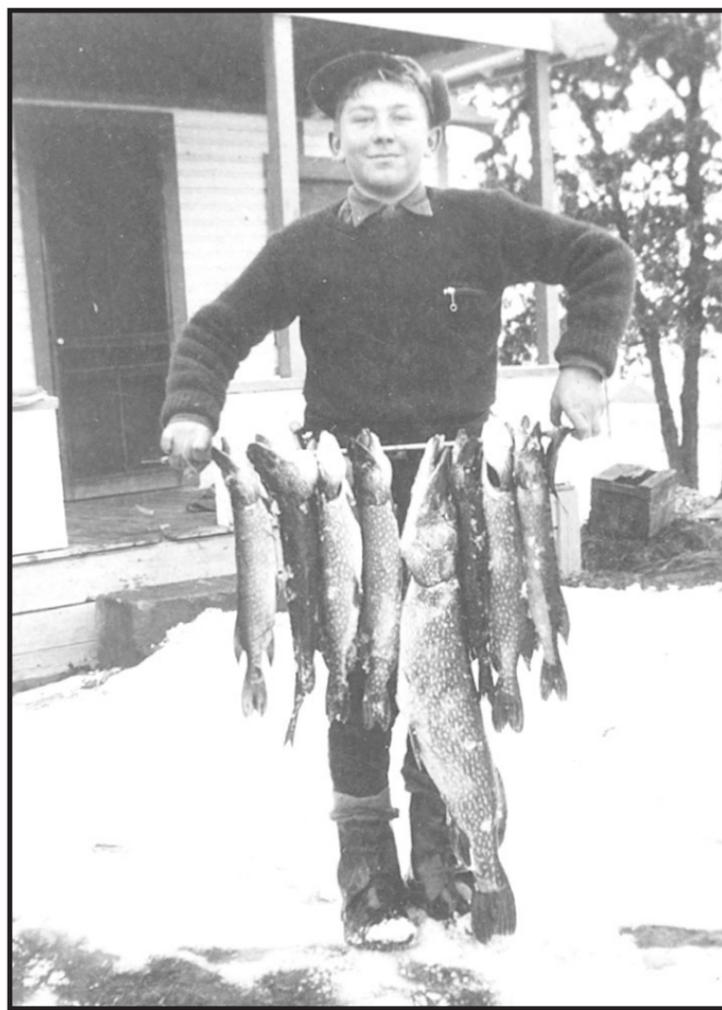
Picking up my first duck was a part of the event that I remember. Blue-wings in Fall are not the most beautiful ducks but this one was to me. The blue on the wings is gorgeous and the blending of browns and tans on the rest of the bird is just God-given. I have never ceased to appreciate the beauty of every duck, regardless of species, even to this day after taking close to two thousand waterfowl.

Back to the blind my Dad paddled. At this stage of the hunt, the cold and wind were oblivious as excitement blotted out the minor discomforts. We stayed about two hours and the shooting opportunities were plentiful. I can remember my dad bagging his ten bird limit, all teal, and that I had four. Those four birds required over a box of shells, which in our family circles would not be something to earn you any positive distinction.

The walk home, over a snow-covered pasture, was effortless with all the residual adrenalin still coursing through my system. I was very proud, period, blotting out all of the missed shots. (Something like sinking a thirty foot putt in golf, even though it took you seven strokes to get there.)

Even the picking of my birds was fun. I always wanted to see where each one had been hit and how they had reacted. This information through the following years helped in many retrieval situations, especially on the marshes and thick cover.

After that the roasted teal were delicious but storing birds for longer periods in 1942 was difficult. My Dad and Mother would can the surplus and this is a whole other story! The consumption of this product was enough to make a person quit hunting. But, alas, storage improved in years to come with the advent of



Harlan Doering - 1941  
Looks Like Some Success at Ice Fishing!

freezers, and now at age 75 I am still at it and enjoying the fruits of my endeavors.

P.S. I want to extend a special "thank you" to Lyle Anderson of the Wisconsin State Climatology Office who kindly forwarded a meteorological record of the month of September, 1942, thereby validating my memory of snow on this opening day. The observer was H.J. Parkinson, who was at that time the lock tender at the Grand River Locks and Dam located only three miles southwest, as the crow flies, from our duck blind.

P.S.S. The following is some interesting information garnered while perusing the Wisconsin Hunting and Trapping Laws of 1941-42.

Shooting time for migratory waterfowl was from sunrise to 4 p.m. Duck limit totals were ten per day and twenty in possession, Redhead and Bufflehead restricted to three per day and six in possession in aggregate.

Decoys were limited to fifty per hunter. While hunting for divers with my Dad or Uncle from blinds on the big water I can remember setting out one hundred decoys many times. The memory of the work entailed picking so many up remains as vivid as some of the superb duck days.

(Decoys of this era were predominantly wood consisting of a white cedar body, pine head, lead keel weight attached to the bottom to keep them upright, and a lead anchor on four to six feet of cord. In weighing some antiques recently the majority were over three pounds a piece. Fifty of these made a substantial load in a sixteen-foot wood skiff propelled by one's own energy and muscle paddling.) Heavy winds and freezing spray could add greatly to the difficulty of "picking up" and paddling home.

Upland game shooting hours were from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. In 1941 Marquette and Green Lake Counties still had a three-week prairie chicken season with a daily limit of four. I personally cannot remember anybody in our family harvesting any from 1941 on. However, the game census report indicated over 77,000 taken intrastate in 1941.

Each hunting license in 1941 included a "game killed report" which was required to be filled out and sent in by the individual licensee. How accurate this was cannot be vouched for but it gave the Conservation Department (Now DNR) some per-

ception of the amount of game taken.

The "game killed report" was comprehensive and required the county, species and number killed. The species portion included forty-eight different birds and animals from three different squirrels, all the common ducks, to woodchuck and lastly a number for "any other game."

The trapping report was similar and included House Cat (wild) and Unprotected Rodents among the sixteen fur-bearers. Other than the number of skins, the trapper was required to enter the amount of money received from the skins and to whom they were sold. One can well imagine the honesty and accuracy of these reports, especially from trapping.

A few excerpts from the 1940-41 game report are as follows:

ANIMAL	TOTAL
Cottontail Rabbit	1,218,137
Gray Squirrels	606,372
Skunk	11,148
Bobcats & Lynx	179
Canada Goose	1,716
(these were rare in this era)	
Pheasants	452,516
Mallards	409,168
Blue-winged Teal	101,872
Ducks Total	1,110,496
Red-heads	1940 1941
	11,726 16,570
Canvasbacks	20,101 14,038

Canvasbacks and redheads were closed in part of the 1930's and were just making a comeback. By the late 1940's, on Puckaway, they were numerous until the lake habitat began degrading in the 1960's.

Incidentally, "only" 33,138 deer were taken in 1941 in the whole state. A deer sighting in Marquette or Green Lake Counties in 1942 would make the local papers. "So while waterfowl and upland game were more abundant in 1942 we now have excellent deer hunting in the whole state, excellent goose hunting and a tremendous success in the planting, reproduction and hunting of wild turkeys."

However, given a choice would I take the hunting, fishing, environment, habitat, and human population numbers of 1941 — in a heartbeat I would!



1944 - Harlan with Pheasants and Rabbit and Squirrel

