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Early Wisconsin Shooting Clubs

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WILD-FOWLING is an age-old pleasure of man. Whether the love of hunting arises from an elemental sympathy with nature or more brutally from a vestigial desire to kill may be debatable. Certainly it must be an imperative urge which each autumn causes men to leave warm homes for the discomforts and dangers of inclement weather, treacherous marshes, and unnatural hours. Yet in no other way than by answering this annual summons can the true sportsman get such an uplift of spirit, such ecstatic pleasure, such a glow of health.

I was reflecting on this on a cold, gray November morning in 1943 when my son John and I were waiting for "opening gun" as we sat in historic Stony Blind at the end of Bingham's Point jutting out into the shallow waters of Lake Koshkonong. Our decoys were bunched, too close, directly in front of us in the crescent of water from which an earlier wind had skimmed the ice now lying flat and gray out beyond. Just at vision's outer edge a long black streak was quivering sufficiently to give promise of game and evidence of open water on the northern half of the lake.

Suddenly the hovering quiet was disturbed by strange tinkling overtones. Before we could rise from our stools to identify the rustling music, it became louder and more suggestive of breaking glass-and all at once crescendoed into a north wind blast. Our tinkling cymbals were actually martial squadrons of ice blocks and chips advancing with a terrifying inevitability directly upon us. Simultaneously the air was alive with whirring wings. The quivering line had been game after all-huge Canadian honkers, hundreds of them, and great green headed mallards with their more sombre mates.

Narnre was alive in as spectacular a manner as I ever hope to witness, but we had no time to linger over our awe-struck enjoyment. Many of our decoys were now in the rumbling ice pack, making rescue of the balance perilous and doubtful. Actually only half of our "spread" was brought in and piled safely on the shore behind us before we had to retreat, as a mound of cubed *ice* grew fifteen or twenty feet over the top of the shooting box.

Meanwhile our companions on Mud Point to the east had been firing steadily. Hastily we joined them, for obviously our own position was untenable, and the other site was more favorable for shooting because of open water in the back bay where the *eastward* hook of the point gave protection. By shortly after noon seven guns had seventy mallards and three geese! Here was sport for kings, and a red-letter day for son John! Lake Koshkonong had produced another good hunting day, and this as late as 1943 in Wisconsin where it was being said that "the flyway has changed," "ducks are through," and "it ain't like it used to be."

IN TRUTH, Wisconsin hunting is not as it used to be. At the eastern end of Koshkonong just where the Rock River debouches into the lake stands the Blackhawk Club, whose early records tell of colorful shooting days of another era. It is not certain just when the

club was organized, but it must have been sometime in the early 1870's. Governor George W. Peck, an early member, wrote an elaborate description of what he called a "regular function," which was held at the clubhouse in honor of the fiftieth birthday of W. E. Ten Broeck, businessman from Evanston, Illinois, and an officer of the organization for many years. In the course of his story Peck said that the Blackhawk Club had been in existence for nearly half a century.¹ Thomas A. Logan of Cincinnati, a well-known sporting author with the pen name of "Gloan," while taking exception in 1904 to the drastic measures of the executive committee in trying to collect annual dues, wrote the secretary that he was one of the original members of the club, but had seen it only once since he joined thirty years earlier in 1874. The 1899 club secretary, C. S. Still of Beloit, probably with some inaccuracy, wrote, "The Blackhawk Club is the oldest shooting and fishing club in the northwest." At any rate, the club is an ancient one for this region and is remarkable in that it is still in active existence. It was formally incorporated in 1888 from which date there are rather complete records, albeit they are encased in slightly musty and time-embrowned coverings.²

The property of the club lies facing the river and sweeps around toward the north to include a considerable length of lake shore, which finally dips back to form a bay behind the buildings. Quite legitimately the club takes its name from that famous Indian warrior who actually encamped on that very spot as he hopefully waited for the Winnebago chieftain, White Crow, to lead General Dodge's pursuing whites into his trap. From that time on, though not truly insular, this location has been known as Blackhawk's Island.

Like any organization of equal age there were lean years and good years at Blackhawk. Sometimes the water was too high, sometimes too low; at one period the numerous carp threatened to eliminate all feed from the lake; occasionally there was a lethargy among the membership which threatened financial disaster. In 1906 the sale of the property and the possibility of running the club as a public hotel were actually discussed.

Originally, the members were from Whitewater, Fort Atkinson, Beloit, Milwaukee, and near-by towns with only a few Chicagoans. But when it became generally known that Lake Koshkonong had the unique balance of shallowness, wild celery for food, and sufficient size to attract great numbers of the king of game birds, the canvasback, individuals from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and even New York took out memberships.

At one time Lake Koshkonong had the reputation of being the best canvasback lake in the country and was said to have the greatest concentration of deep water ducks of any body of water on their line of migration. It is not surprising then that many of the great and near-great of the day, if they were nimrods at all, coveted an invitation to be guests at this famous club. Old Black Hawk with his drawn bow pointing out the wind direction from the top of the lookout tower has witnessed a colorful parade of personages enter the clubhouse below him. He has heard their great bursts of laughter, has seen their huge bags of game hung on the porches, and has witnessed their boastful claims, their uninhibited pranks, and their occasional tragedies.

The owner of share number one was John Parmalee of Chicago transfer fame, and the stock record book shows such familiar Wisconsin names as Pabst, Doe, Uihlein, Case, Spooner, Sawyer, Plankinton, Quarles, and Peck. Not so long ago, John Steuart Curry

autographed the guest book with a quick sketch of himself shooting a pheasant in a nearby marsh.

General Phil Sheridan was a social lion of the seventies who frequented Blackhawk and many of the duck clubs. He spent considerable time in southern Wisconsin during the summer and fall of 1874 and later. At Lake Geneva, in honor of the distinguished general's visit, yacht club members raised more than \$200 for a trophy which has been raced for without a gap for seventy years.³ The tradition at the hunting clubs was that the general matched his ardent love for hunting with a marksmanship commensurate with his Status as a military man, but Ira Bingham, Koshkonong hunter, is quoted as saying, "I have sculled the General many times up to a flock of canvasbacks and I also shot from the blind with him. He was a greater general, apparently, than a marksman."⁴

Much of the hilarity of Blackhawk centered around former Governor Peck, the author of *Peck's Bad Boy*. The register for November 1, 1888, records that George W. Peck, while taking a chew of tobacco, fell down the clubhouse steps, swallowing his quid, and running his features into the mud. Dean Swift of Edgerton, who remembered him well, discounted his shooting ability.⁵ For all of that his presence at the clubhouse must have been desired, for when it was discovered at the annual meeting in 1894 that the governor was \$40 in arrears, a situation normally resulting in suspension, the directors hurriedly adopted a new resolution stating that, "The Chief Executive of the State of Wisconsin, all ex-governors and succeeding governors, shall be considered honorary members entitled to all the rights and privileges of the club except the right to vote."⁶

Peck and his son harbored a small fleet of boats at the Blackhawk Clubhouse among which were a trim little sailboat and a light, cockleshell canoe. These were pastime boats, however, for the forty or more craft maintained by the club for duck hunting were contrived for that particular business exclusively and were only altered to conform more efficiently to the type of use or to the limitations of the law. Undoubtedly, more experimenting on duckboats was done in this region than in any locality in the country. Koshkonong monitors were as familiar at the docks of the exclusive clubs along the Kankakee River as they were in their home waters, and other models influenced the design of such sporting equipment all over the world.

The original Koshkonong flatboat or float was built nearly in the shape of a pumpkin seed about sixteen feet long and six feet wide, similar to the battery or sinkboats of the Maryland coast. The shooter lay in a long pit projecting below the bottom of the boat and under the water line. The rest of the craft was all wings tapering gradually from the cockpit to the outer circumference. When towed to location, the waters lapped over the flat edges and the hunter, concealed in his central nest, was hardly discernible above the surface. With decoys placed on the boat and just beyond its periphery, the set-up was ideal for slaughtering ducks. Fortunately, our laws which provide that hunters keep back of the reed line today prevent the use of such engines of destruction. One of these huge floats may still be seen behind the Blackhawk Club barn.

Also now illegal is the use of sneak or scull boats—a most exciting form of hunting and one demanding great skill. Were it not so destructive, it might be called sportsmanlike. The boat used for this purpose was a short square-sterned skiff so

arranged that it sank far down in the water. The hunter first placed a large fleet of decoys, perhaps two or three hundred, over a known feed bed well out in the shallow lake. Then from some distant hidden spot he watched the canvasbacks alight among his lures. Lying flat on his back with his feet toward the bow he gently sculled toward the mass of ducks, propelling the boat with a short paddle thrust through a hole in the stern and manipulated by horizontal motions of his arm back and forth across his chest. In this manner a skillful hunter was frequently able to approach to within ten to twenty yards of the feeding and gullible birds.

But it was the monitor, named after the famous Civil War vessel, which spread the fame of Koshkonong the farthest. This was a modified flatboat intended for rowing, but only three feet wide and fifteen feet long with very little free-board. The rower sitting in his cockpit was able to elevate a canvas extension in case of a high sea or cutting wind. Both ends of the boat were pointed alike, and oarlocks were simple projections of gas pipe, effective because they did not catch in the weeds and grass. Adaptations of this boat are used today and are considered most excellent for marsh hunting.

Ira Bingham was the first designer, during his market hunting days, of the monitor. But Duane Starin, a Fort Atkinson village blacksmith and a man whose activities were only slightly handicapped by having no legs, brought it to its highest perfection. He also defended its use in the sporting press of his day with vigor and surprising literary facility at the same time that the president of the Blackhawk Club, G. E. Esterly, Whitewater manufacturer, and E. D. Coe, publisher of the *Whitewater Register*, were pressing for the passage of a state law abolishing the use of “any float, sneak boat, sail or steamboat or floating box for hunting.”⁷

Starin, a next door neighbor to the Blackhawk Club, was a frequent visitor. He appears to have been on excellent terms with W. Y. Wentworth, the steward and manager, and with individual members of the club in spite of differences of opinion on conservation measures and the right to hold exclusive land leases. Wentworth, in addition to his club duties, was game warden for the southern counties of Wisconsin for many years and prosecuted his responsibilities with considerable energy.

Here we have the strange but commendable situation of a group of men, whose fraternity was motivated by a love of hunting, actually leading in the sponsorship of restrictive regulations which would tend to make the securing of game more difficult, and at the same time employing the services of a gentleman whose additional responsibility it was to enforce such laws! Indeed, the objects of the Blackhawk Club, according to the constitution, were “to properly protect game and fish, to enforce the laws concerning them, to foster public opinion in all that relates to the better protection of game, to elevate the moral standard of true sportsmanship, and to encourage physical training and recreation of members.” Not all members acquiesced in these principles at all times, but generally they were followed strictly.

It must not be thought that each season was exclusively a hunting idyl. Near-by settlers occasionally resented the patrolling of leased grounds by a small group of wealthy men, and at least once there was a serious altercation with a trapper who insisted on remaining in his boat directly in front of the shooting stands. Details are scant, but the records show that in some manner the trapper’s boat capsized and he later died from

exposure in the gunroom of the clubhouse.⁸

Warden Wentworth was busy each year with the market hunters who even after it became illegal continued to ship hundreds and thousands of birds to eastern markets under fictitious labels. Dean Swift confessed that in those days the commercial men had a signal arranged to let them know when a warden was approaching. With strong field glasses they watched the flag pole of the Taylor Hotel Lake House for notice that an investigator was near.

But we may be sure that Wentworth was aware of such dodges. He was truly a remarkable individual with a no less important wife. As steward and stewardess of the Blackhawk Club, they ministered attentively to the needs of the members for twenty-six years from 1879 to 1905. Their account books, which were scrupulously kept, show them to have been thrifty but indulgent provisioners. Even when their salary account was several hundred dollars in arrears, there is no evidence of complaint. Not the least of their value was their cooking ability. The culinary compensations to the members must have been most satisfactory, for they meekly permitted the stewardess to rule the sitting room, dining room, and her large and well furnished kitchen. She, allowed no liquor on the table and no games of chance on Sundays, which I am sure must confound many who have other notions of what goes on in a hunting club.

Mr. Wentworth's most famous recipe was for black bass with which the lake was filled at that time. One enthusiast rhapsodized that it "lifts fish, fishing and fish eating clear above the level of the purely practical, and transports the question into the upper realms of poetry." Apparently, from what remains of the recipe, ritual was almost as important as ingredient, for it was said to be most important that the fish be kept with the head pointing north at all times during preparation and frying in order that the electric currents in the atmosphere might be afforded freer passage.⁹

Ira Bingham, another employee of the club in sundry capacities, was deputy warden to Wentworth. He and his brother, Ed, the favorite guide of former Vice-President Tom Marshall on his frequent vacations at Koshkonong, were welcome visitors at Blackhawk because of their dead-pan technique of telling tall tales.

On one occasion Ira entered into a discussion regarding the breeding grounds of the canvasback, which he claimed bred right on Lake Koshkonong. After a considerable amount of mysterious backwardness, he was pressed into confessing that he had held this theory for some time but only recently had had it proved. The thing which had bothered him most was that neither he nor anyone else had ever found a canvasback nest in the region. But he had observed as he watched the great raft of ducks nodding and bobbing on the surface of the placid water, that when one duck went down—presumably to feed—there was no certainty that you saw the same duck come up again. As he put it, "All ducks have a strong facial resemblance to each other. For all we know, Mr. and Mrs. Canvasback may have been down in the lower regions for an hour, a day or several days."

Such thoughts tormented Ira until one summer when he was sinking a well he came upon an artesian which burst into a fine clear stream of about three inches which adequately supplied his milk house and farm. For a few days the well flowed without interruption after which it seemed to suffer from a sort of clogging up so that he decided

to sink the pipes a little deeper. When he did that he learned what was wrong, and at the same time solved the mystery of the nesting grounds. Suddenly he struck a flow of canvasback eggs which lasted for three days and nights completely filling his milk cooling tank. He had discovered that the canvasback is a subterranean or subaqueous breeder!¹⁰

THE BINGHAM boys were also frequenters of the Carcajou Club on the north shore of the lake not far from the present village of Busseyville. This club was organized and incorporated in 1896 by a group of Janesville men after C. L. Valentine, H. L. Skavlem, and Alex McNaughton had purchased the property from William Lee.

The original Lee farmhouse was remodeled as a clubhouse, a stone-walled kitchen being the particular task and joy of Skavlem. Adjacent property was sold to those members who desired building lots for summer homes. Carcajou was different from most hunting clubs in that it contemplated considerable year-round recreational and social activity for which it was willing to give up some of the duck hunting advantages of wilderness surroundings. Even today the club has fifteen house members and ten lot members. Carcajou favored the gregarious life of a community of cottages.

To a great degree the history of the Carcajou Club reflects the personalities and leadership of the Skavlem family, particularly Halvor, whose letters and writings give a clear picture of an earnest Scandinavian with a keen interest in nature, Indian lore, and politics. It was probably he who gave the Indian name for “Badger” to the club being established on the shores of Lake Koskonong, “the lake on which we dwell.”

Halvor Skavlem had severe opinions as to literacy values, a fact which is demonstrated by his indictment of his fellow countryman, Knur Hamsun, for “exclusively dipping his pen in sludge when the world is full of so many beautiful things.” He grudgingly confessed to an enjoyment of Governor Peck’s broad humor but said that if he had to have that sort of thing he would prefer a dose of Rabelais or Boccaccio.

His puritanical attitude and uncompromising standards of literary propriety, however, did not prevent him from being an ardent sportsman whose outdoor companionship was cherished by many. He attracted to Carcajou a coterie of sporting gentlemen which included Charles Spooner, William Van Brunt of Horicon, and the ubiquitous Governor Peck.

Dean Swift first met Governor Peck here while working as a young man for William Lee. He particularly admired Peck’s hammerless gun, the first the boy had ever seen; but he considered the governor’s wit to be somewhat slower than advertised, for when His Honor asked what the round hole in the stern of a sneak boat was for he seemed quite taken in by the answer that it was there to “let the water out when the boat filled up”!

Other early members made up week-end parties at Janesville from whence they arrived at the club by horse and wagon or bicycle, or occasionally by boat up the Rock River. Today’s members are almost exclusively from this city.

In spite of the libel of an 1898 entry in the guest book boasting of a “good supper of roast loon.” the duck hunting at Carcajou was excellent. A banner day, November 4,

1897, is still remembered with awe and envy. Canvasback could be secured from almost any projecting point in those days if the wind was right. Furthermore, this was the era of sneak and scull boats which permitted wide ranging for game. Duck feed was abundant. Harry Knowlands, the present caretaker, says that in those days when viewed from the club's front porch high on the hill, the wild rice on Lake Koshkonong stirred in the breezes like a billowing green meadow as far as eye could see with only occasional water patches and a thread at channel down the middle.

Scavenger carp, control and power dams, forest cropping, and man's insatiable desire to give Mother Nature a facial have changed all that, though Koshkonong still is a remarkably shallow sheet of water—no more than a sprawling widespread of the Rock.

The guest books and registers of the Carcajou Club prove to be full of interest.¹¹ The intimate bit of information that on September 13, 1898, "Uncle John" spent the greater part of a day repairing his trousers with tobacco bags is none the less interesting for its triviality. Today's wartime guest reads with a particularly sympathetic throb the notation of April 24, 1898, "We miss our absent friends and long for news from the front. Dr. Joe¹² sent for his bed and tick. On to Cuba!"

Truly there is atmosphere to this place, a delightful feeling that the ghosts of good times past are lurking in the shadows of the boathouse, on the shelves of the decoy storage room, and behind the kitchen range, eager to revel with their progeny, good times present and good times future. Or maybe it is just the spirit of Halvor Skavlem saying again:

There's a charm at the Old Point Blind
When the winds go whistling by.
There's a kiss in the autumn wind
For my Old Pard and I.

TO THE NORTH and slightly east, the meandering Rock River takes its source in the extensive Horicon Marsh where nature and man have conspired through the years to create a drama of never failing excitement and interest. Here, one of the large lobes of the last great glacier, after scooping out Green Bay and Lake Winnebago, continued on southwardly to dig this shallow basin. Through many years of vicissitudes, legal battles, and manmade attempts at changing the face of nature, this wilderness region, sixteen miles long, six miles wide, and encompassing almost 40,000 acres, long remained one of the game paradises of the world.

State Senator Satterlee Clark, a visitor to the region in 1830, and later a distinguished citizen of the community of Horicon which sprang up at the site of an Indian village, recalled that just at this spot the marshy waters of the Rock were confined by a ledge of stone to a deep, narrow channel, a situation which seemed to pioneer Martin Rich to create an irresistible opportunity for profit. In 1845 he built a power dam, which in the course of two years backed up water through the bayous and sloughs to form the largest artificial lake in the world—lovely Lake Horicon, exceedingly picturesque with its many islands and numerous coves and peninsulas. Ducks and geese, muskrats and mink, and fish of all kinds which had previously inhabited the area increased many fold so that the

lake became known as the greatest and best feeding grounds in the Northwest. Excursion and cargo boats were numerous, and of course, the magnificent shooting and fishing attracted many sportsmen.

In the summer of 1866 a group of Milwaukee men organized the Caw-Caw Club, probably the oldest and most celebrated of all Wisconsin clubs and one whose robust history is, fascinating to trace from the early fervor of establishment at Lake Horicon to its later lusty maturity on the banks of the Fox River at Lake Puckaway.¹³ An enthusiastic and articulate young member, A. J. Aikens, the editor-manager of the Milwaukee *Evening Wisconsin*, decided that a brief record of the founding of the club should be retained. Accordingly, on the early pages of a thick volume with leather covers so old that under handling they crumble to brownish dust, is written the saga of Caw-Caw Island.

Four of the Milwaukee friends having learned of suitable spot in Lake Horicon decided to investigate it with the guiding help of Harry Clark, the son of Sat Clark. Selections from Aikens' own words can best describe what ensued.

We were provided with a chart which our esteemed friend Joel Hood sketched on a blank leaf resting on a bale of buffalo robes. After examining several possibilities, we drew our boat up on the stony beach at the west end of Caw-Caw island, hot, hungry and thirsty....The foliage was so dense that it was almost impossible to penetrate... Standing where the club house now is, neither sky nor water could be seen—nothing but the dark leafage. As we had been approaching the island it looked like an immense load of green hay resting upon the water.... We could see numbers of large birds flying about the tree tops. Occasionally dozens of them would rise in the air with a noise that could be heard a mile away.... As we landed the hubbub among the trees increased, the noise being like a caravan of monkeys, cats and turkey gobblers with a hundred mischievous boys poking sticks at the whole of them.... Young Clark knew that these birds were called Caw-Caws.¹⁴

From these experiences of the reconnoitering party it is understandable how the club's name originated. The club members' later struggles to remove the noisy birds and their filth were as arduous as the actual construction of their cabin which necessitated the floating of lumber, carpenters, crew, and cook on a sailing scow up the six miles from Horicon. On the way the boat ran aground in a dead calm, and only the most strenuous efforts, with poles and oars replacing the dispirited sails, enabled the men to reach their destination.

Somehow, the narrow but comfortable quarters of the first club-house were finished in time for that fall's shooting, after which the secretary was able to record with smug satisfaction, "The bag for the season was carefully estimated at 3,000 ducks and geese, a few sandhill cranes and a large number of snipe and golden plover."

Here is ample evidence of the unlimited amount of game present on the marsh at that time! One would have thought that no rude circumstances could force the hunters from this Elysium. Yet only two years later in 1868, after costly litigation, Martin Rich was forced to remove his dam, causing the waters to slowly but certainly sag from their forested boundaries. Within three years Horicon Marsh with its miles of sloughs, bogs, and mud had reverted to its primal state.

Transportation to the island by sailboat and scow was now impracticable, causing the

club in 1869 to appoint a committee of William Young and F. J. Bosworth to “get up plans and specifications for a scow for Lake Poygan in the event Lake Horicon should prove too low for the occupation of the present clubhouse.” Furthermore, as J. W. Foster of Brandon, a later secretary and member, explains, “The boys were fed up with puddle ducks and wanted to get into the diving duck game.” For these reasons the Caw-Caw Club moved to Marquette on Lake Puckaway, which was found more suitable than Poygan, and most of its history was made on that famous celery lake.

THE HORICON MARSH now spawned two of the most famous duck hunting clubs the Middle West has known. The Diana and Upper Horicon clubs attracted not only Wisconsin’s most prominent personages, but like the Blackhawk Club, received the memberships of enthusiastic wild-fowlers from Chicago and the East. Even Annie Oakley was entertained at Horicon, but there is no discoverable record to tell whether or not she centered the mallards luffing across the sedge with the accuracy with which she perforated the ace of clubs for Buffalo Bill.

The Diana Shooting Club was incorporated on June 8, 1883, and there is extant a little sewed book with green covers and gold stamping which includes the by-laws of the club as well as a historical sketch.¹⁵ The booklet stresses that all members were business and professional gentlemen who shot for sport and not for “big bags” and were unanimously opposed to shooting during the mating and breeding season. The club took pride in the fact that for the first time in the history of the marsh, it was responsible, in 1884, for entirely abolishing spring hunting.

W. A. Van Brunt, manufacturer from Horicon, was the first president of the Diana Club. Successful businessman though he was he always maintained a nice balance between relaxation and work, letting each whet the development of the other to his own pleasure and profit. His friend, Governor Peck, took advantage of this facet of his nature by writing a short sketch called, “Shooting on Sunday, with the Mouth.”¹⁶

The story purported to compliment Van Brunt for conscientiously attending Sabbath school in Owatonna, Minnesota, where he had gone on a hunting expedition. While there, he was so smitten by the appearance of a young lady teacher that he could not avoid gazing at her. She in turn noticed him and seeing that he was a stranger and a pious appearing man she invited him to help her teach the class.

It was new business for our friend, but he said he never had had anything sawed off onto him unless he stood it like a man, so he got up, with the girl’s eyes on him, and told the children the beautiful story of the cross, and how Samson went up in a chariot of fire, and Adam was found in the bullrushes by a Sunday School teacher while he was out shooting blue wing teal, and how Noah and Sat Clark built an ark and coasted around Horicon Lake and landed on Iron Ridge and sent out a canvasback duck to see if there was any living thing on this side of Schlesingerville, and how the duck came back with a sprig of wild celery in its bill which it had found at Lake Koshkonong.

Van Brunt and his charter member friends, twenty-five of them all together, secured for \$100 per year a twenty-five year lease on 5,800 acres from the Mechanics Union Manufacturing Company, which had purchased the entire marsh at auction from the government at 7 cents per acre. Later the Upper Horicon Club, having its headquarters

at Fond du Lac, obtained control of the northern portion of the marsh so that an area of the Horicon Marsh to the extent of 10,000 acres became a vast shooting preserve.

A scribe with a sense of humor to temper his phraseology drafted this Upper Club's constitution, which read in part:

The business and purposes of said corporation are the cultivation and practice of music; the refinement of both mental and bodily powers; the obtaining proficiency in sharpshooting with rifle, pistol, and shotgun...the protection of wild game out of season, and its legitimate and scientific capture in season; and the culture among its members of gallantry, sociality, temperance and moraliry.¹⁷

Naturally, the unsurpassed combination of easy access, comfortable accommodations, and seemingly limitless birds possessed by these two clubs attracted sportsmen from far and near. In one season alone six gentlemen from New York took out memberships at Diana. The first out-of-state member was Percy F. Stone of Chicago, who having heard of the formation of the club, telegraphed the incorporators that he would like to take out five memberships for himself and friends. These five formed a club within a club and built a comfortable four-room house, known as the Chicago Shooting Box, where things were run in a very fancy manner with dinner in courses and white caps on the cooks and waiters.

At that time the Milwaukee and Horicon contingent maintained a large and roomy cabin boat which they annually anchored at the edge of the marsh. Later on, the Chicago property was turned over to the club, improvements were made, and eventually a still larger clubhouse was constructed. Sturdy remnants of masonry and a few iron bars across fragmentary stone windows are reminders today that the Diana Club once stood on Steamboat Island about six miles into the marsh. The Wisconsin Conservation Commission now has a cabin there and a fire tower from which a breezy climb is rewarded by a strange panorama of mottled marshland—blended pot holes, channels and grass—extending from Horicon's village limits to the discernible water tower of Waupun.

“Old Man” Miescke's fertile acres and well-kept barns are still visible beyond the western bogs. One of this pioneer's minor claims to fame, worth recounting because it indicates the great number of birds in the marsh, was that he killed ninety-three ducks with *one* shot.

Members of the two organized clubs also made large killings. Editorializing against such wasteful destruction of game under the guise of sport, *Forest and Stream* in 1893¹⁸ charged that in one day John Yorgey, the Diana Club keeper, had killed 104 mallards; Charles Wilson, in a stay of nineteen days had brought in 544 ducks; and other astounding bags were recorded and names mentioned. The average at the clubhouse for thirty consecutive days that year, good shooters and poor, had been more than thirty ducks to the gun each day. There was only one name for this—slaughter.

Yet at that time state and federal laws were lax or entirely absent. The more thoughtful members of the club recognizing that the harvest of such a spendthrift policy would be less game and that such gluttonous shooting was utterly at odds with their own stated principles promptly voted a bag limit per gun.

From the first, no spring shooting and no sink boxes had been permitted at either club, hunting from the same spots on successive days was carefully avoided, and programs to control water level and maintain feed in behalf of the birds were initiated. Indeed, the friendly tavernkeeper in Horicon, admitting that he used to resent the exclusive lease-holders of what he considered public domain, now declares, "We didn't know when we were well off. Those fellows knew how to take care of birds and they didn't chase them entirely out of the state by shooting at every speck in the sky. Now that I think of it we fellows kinda enjoyed sneaking into the preserves for our shooting."

Over the years, many petty court squabbles involved the hunting clubs. There were arguments caused by their attempts to establish small dams and there were challenges to their property rights on the marsh. By 1893 the Upper Horicon Club and the Diana Club had been merged into one organization controlling at that time 18,000 acres of the marsh. Percy Stone, the organizer of the Chicago Shooting Box, was made manager of the joint enterprise. With the assistance of his directors he pursued a vigorous course in protecting the club domain from interlopers and poachers. Wardens were engaged to patrol the boundaries, and when trespassers were caught they were tried in the courts at Waupun or Horicon. *Forest and Stream* in commenting on one episode said:

The club will win in the end, and it will fight all the way. The old, selfish, destructive way will not do. Leave the dub men alone and they will tread on local shooters' toes, but they will preserve the wildfowl of this great natural breeding ground. Leave the local men alone and they would exterminate the birds to the last feather, for they would shoot in spring, summer and fall, day and night.

Another disagreeable situation arose from the action of the Lombard Investment Company—one of many promotional groups anxious to exploit the marsh—which, disregarding the prior leases of the combined Diana and Horicon clubs, gave game preserve rights to W. R. Grady of Chicago. He established various agencies throughout the country and sold permits to hunt on Horicon Marsh at \$3.00 each. When the hunting season opened on September 1, 1894, the preserve was swarming with these permit holders, most of them the innocent victims of Grady, but others wilful trespassers. At the instigation of the clubs, deputy sheriffs and marshals were sworn and in a short time the Dodge County court dockets were filled with names of persons they caught. Forced to take action Grady asked for an injunction to establish the priority of his claims with the result that the clubs won a complete victory and a sympathetic nod from the judge.

Life at Horicon was not all aggravating worry about defense of the property; nor was it all bonanza shooting. There was much fun; there were occasional instances where man's frailties transcended sportsmanship. Sometimes there was a near tragedy as when R. M. Rogers, becoming lost on the marsh without a pusher, almost perished during a lonely night in a November blizzard. Showing great presence of mind he saved himself by buttoning up two live decoys underneath his hunting jacket where their body warmth contributed to his salvation. By and large, however, the quarter of a century after 1883 witnessed a procession of sporting friends and outdoor folks whose major interest was shooting, but whose capacity for companionship superseded all other considerations.

These jolly old-timers enjoyed their adventures and their feeling of "roughing it." It is easy to picture them each evening yarning before their fires, joshing one another for

misses, recalling this, that, or the other unusual shot, or perhaps listening to Emerson Hough tell his Kekoskee fish story concerning the remarkably cold winter of 1860 when the lake which then covered all of the Horicon basin was frozen so deep that the fish were distressed for lack of air. Unable to breathe they crowded into the live channel of the Rock River, making for the hole which the swift water kept open' just below the Kekoskee dam. The first arrival of the run of fish at this opening was marked by a geyser-like eruption of bullheads, fifty feet across and about twelve feet high, which caused such a strange sound that the early settlers, dreading some unknown calamity, hastened to the spot. Once there, their dread turned to joy. By noon every team in the neighborhood was at the dam hauling bullheads. The widow Sneider, who lived about a mile out in the country, testified that during one morning she counted 900 wagon loads coming from the dam. That winter everybody lived on bullheads using them in many ways. A broken-down old horse, Santa Anna, relic of the Mexican War, lived on a fish diet with no variety of hay for four months. And, said Hough, "The Kekoskee villagers all swear to the same facts and what's more I know this *is* all true, because I met a man who saw the horse, and I myself saw the exact spot where the geyser hole was."

NOT FAR NORTH of Horicon, but over the Portage divide in the Fox River system draining north to Green Bay, lies Lake Puckaway. Like Koshkonong, this was a famous "wild celery lake," before the introduction of carp and before the natural destruction of civilization's march. George Sauerbreit, son of one of the caretakers of the Caw-Caw Club, remembers when the surface of the entire lake looked like the side of a red barn, it had so many canvasbacks and red head on it. Small wonder that the members of the Caw-Caw Club having determined to leave the marshes for open water settled upon Lake Puckaway for their sporting retreat.

Their requirements were handsomely met by the purchase of a large square house set comfortably in a grove of oak and hickory on a hillside in the village of Marquette. A commodious plot of ground surrounded the building where grape arbors, bird houses, and neatly trimmed reaches of lawn gave more of an air of magnificence than is customarily found in a hunting lodge. Even the captain's walk on the roof bespoke elegance. Down the slope at the highway's edge just where there had been an early Indian trading post, was the Cobble Stone House constructed from small fist size rocks firmly embedded in a strangely enduring concrete. This remains one of the most picturesque buildings in the quaint little inland river town which railroads and the rest of the world have passed by.

But when the Caw-Caw Club first entered the area, Marquette was a busy place, noisy with the hubbub of lumberyards, river steamers, and gristmills. On the shore were the boathouses of the ducking club, which controlled 5,000 acres where no one had a right to hunt unless he had a pass. Fantastic bags of game were secured, and sadly it must be confessed that occasionally excess birds, impossible to keep in those pre-refrigeration days, were buried under the hillside brush. J. W. Foster remembers the fortunate nimrods driving back to Brandon in hired liveries which hardly had room for the paying riders because of the great piles of canvasbacks.

In 1882 the Caw-Caw Club was incorporated, although it had been active on the lake for some time preceding this. From the start it had been a particularly favorite vacation

spot for many distinguished Milwaukeeans and their friends. Allis, Ilsley, Pabst, Layton, Pritzlaff, and Auer were familiar names on the membership roster. Governor Emanuel Philipp made it his rest haven, and Charles Pfister regularly arrived in the spring to preempt his favorite chair in the sun. Major A. T. Cunningham, a member from Georgia, annually reached Marquette on May 1, saying to caretaker Sauerbreit, "George, I've come home," and stayed until the last duck hung high after freeze-up. Away from responsibilities and in their own Valhalla these men reveled in the excitement of their sport, feasted on the product of their skill, and relished the pranks hatched from the imaginations of minds released from care.

PROBABLY THE REVELRY of the Caw-Caws could not be heard at the other end of Lake Puckaway, but if known about, it would have been thoroughly understood and commended at the lodge of another group of sportsmen, well organized into the aristocratic Nee-Pee-Nauk ("Home by the Lake") Club, additional headquarters for General Sheridan, and an association of wealthy Chicago sporting gentlemen. The club owned its own little steamer which transported the members the long length of the lake to and from easterly Princeton. Not far to the west the red granite bluffs of Montello muddied their feet in the game-laden marshes of the original Fox Rixer channel and the more southerly Grand River.

A. H. Sellers, president of the Chicago Guaranty Trust Company and an organizer in 1882 of the club, wrote in 1886:

There are but few duck-shooting places in the middle west and the Pacific coast which I have not visited and I unhesitatingly say that I know of no better grounds than those now partly controlled by our club. To make a good hunting place, there must be large open water areas where ducks can sit undisturbed, contiguous to one or more marshes containing good feed. All these requirements are found at our clubhouse at the head of Lake Puckaway.

Though Sellers and his associates were real hunters, they liked their creature comforts. Their clubhouse was roomy with eight sleeping apartments and several outbuildings, including a pusher's house, a stable, and a boathouse. Even today the visitor making his first acquaintance with the wide verandaed lodge is surprised at its attractive proportions and comfortable appurtenances.

The half-century old building still shelters interesting and valuable relics of earlier days including complete sets of French china, a collection of Pope bird study prints dated 1878, and innumerable bits of hunting gear, books, and trophies. On the front mantlepiece opposite a stuffed pelican—souvenir of some member's bizzare bag—is a small photograph of a gnarled old man, silent reminder to neophyte and oldster that firearms must be handled carefully. This is Oliver Smith, pusher, who on October 12, 1883, accidentally shot himself as he pulled his hammer gun—muzzle foremost—toward him across the seats of his boat. His death shortly after in the clubhouse gunroom is still remembered as a warning, although the membership personnel has changed many times.

Actually, three groups of owners have occupied Nee-Pee-Nauk without substantially changing the club name or losing any of the traditions that arise from a connected history. J. W. Parmalee, a rather short tempered individual, was one of the first members just as he was of the Blackhawk Club. During one season he brought his own paddle

wheel boat down from Green Bay and tied it up at the club dock; but after some slight altercation with the rest of the members, he steamed up the river to the Portage canal for a trip down the Wisconsin into the Mississippi River. Somewhere on the long journey, he encountered a railway bridge with insufficient clearance for the steamer's superstructure. Rather than turn back he telegraphed the Secretary of War that he was prevented from making progress on a federally declared navigable waterway and would not budge until the obstruction had been removed. It is a fact that after several days he forced the railroad to cut the rails after which he fastened a rope to the bridge, swung it with his power and went on to New Orleans leaving the railroad to close the bridge as best it could.

The Nee-Pee-Nauk Club maintains a large register, bound blank book style, containing the record of guests from 1882 to date. The book through the years is replete with information on water stages, wind and temperature readings, road conditions, amount and kind of birds killed, and nature of the annual flights. Along with such statistical information are other bits of human interest and whimsy which delight the reader even today....

On August 24, 1889, Albert Hayden took pleasure in his new rowboat which he had just brought up from Chicago, but protested with a vigorous purple pencil at the carelessness of some shooter with a Marlin rifle who had sent a ball just between him and his pusher. The next year the Carter and Flint families considerably informed whoever followed them that they had left several large fish in the minnow tank, and they admonished the reader to "go thou and do likewise." In 1895 George Christy, a Pennsylvania giant of 254 pounds, recorded that the mallards came into his decoys so fast that "Johnny Dockstetter had to drive them off with a club every fifteen minutes all day long."

Local men from Portage, Fond du Lac, Columbus, and Milwaukee began to join the club at about 1900. The Sellers and Trego families from Chicago were still frequent sojourners during the summer and fall seasons, but the dominant spirits now were Guy V. Dering, Dr. B. F. Bellack, and F. A. Chadbourn of Columbus, Dr. Byron Meacher and W. E. Wills of Portage, and Frank Reed of Columbus. The Baraboo Ringlings were frequent visitors.

In 1936 Nee-Pee-Nauk was acquired by the third group—most of them men from Milwaukee.¹⁹ Although the club's vast lease holdings are gone, there is still good marsh and lake shooting with even an occasional "boss" day. In addition, the old clubhouse with its fine equipment and surroundings, excellent accommodations, and solicitous caretakers is an ideal headquarters for the week-end type of outings our motor cars and paved highways make possible.

THESE were the major duck hunting clubs of Wisconsin. Of course, there were, and are, many more. Will Wildwood's *Sportsman's Directory* of 1892 listed thirty-four clubs in the state, and that was not complete.²⁰ But the Koshkonong, Horicon; and Puckaway clubs were outstanding for the large acreages they controlled as well as for their lavish investment in clubhouses. They were unique in the number of out-of-state members they attracted and in the celebrities they entertained. They were progressive in their studies of

conservation measures and were responsible for many of our most intelligent regulations. Their existence needs no other justification than the good fellowship and wholesome pleasure their members secured in the pursuit of their favorite sport, yet all lovers of the out-of-doors today owe much to these early men who organized their playtime with such constructive intelligence.

As Van Campen Heilner points out in his encyclopedic *Book on Duck Shooting*:

The duck clubs of America were the first to impose on the duck shooter regulations of any kind. They were first to establish bag limits and then reduce them, the first to bar automatic guns, the first to voluntarily stop spring shooting, the first to limit shooting hours, and the first to have rest areas and rest days.²¹

In Wisconsin hunters must not forget that George W. Esterly and E. D. Coe of the Blackhawk Club were called “fathers of the law against open water shooting” nor that the Horicon clubs always recognized the tragedy of destroying the mother birds as they flew north to nest in the spring. Members of all these clubs by their constant prodding of the legislature unquestionably contributed to our modern constructive regulatory enactments respecting wildlife. The ideals of sportsmanship and conservation which the State Conservation Commission today sets before the thousands of hunters who annually seek recreation on what is left of the suitable shooting spots took their genesis in the common sense self-imposed rules established by yesterday’s handful of clubmen.

The heyday of the exclusive ducking club in Wisconsin is gone; may the legion of shooters now crowding our public hunting grounds and licensed preserves gain as much enjoyment and contribute as much conservation planning to another generation as did the members of Wisconsin’s early shooting clubs.

Endnotes

- 1 Jefferson *Union*, October 25, 1913.
- 2 Still in possession of the club secretary.
3. The Lake Geneva Yacht Club, *Yearbook, 1925*, contains pictures of Sheridan and the trophy, as well as a history of the prize.
4. William C. Hazelton, comp., *Wildfowling Tales* (Chicago, 1921).
5. An early Koshkonong market hunter, who died October 19, 1944, a few weeks after his conversation with the author.
6. Blackhawk Club, *Minutes*, October, 1894.
7. See, for example, Starin’s letter to *Forest and Stream*, 34:82-83 (Feb. 20, 1890).
8. *Ibid.*, 47:409 (Nov. 21, 1896); also verified in conversation with Dean Swift.
9. Emerson Hough, then western editor of *Forest and Stream*, in 34:26 (Jan. 30, 1890).
10. So described by Harry Knowlands, present caretaker of the Carcajou Club.
11. In the Skavlem Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Library.
12. Dr. Joseph Whiting, Janesville physician.
13. Its records are in the Wisconsin Historical Society Library.
14. According to A. W. Schorger, Madison ornithologist, the birds were probably black-crowned night herons which collect in large colonies and emit distinctly raucous “quawks,” easily transformed into “caw-caws.”
15. Now in possession of Louis Radke of Horicon.

16. George W. Peck, *Peck's Sunshine* (Chicago, 1882).
17. *Forest and Stream*, 39:380 (Nov. 3, 1892).
18. *Ibid.*, 41:452 (Nov. 25, 1893).
19. The writer has been aided by information from F. A. Chadbourn and R. C. Chadbourn, Columbus, and Frank Hughes, Milwaukee.
20. There were clubs in the Oshkosh region, on Lakes Poygan, Winneconne, and Butte des Morts, in the northern counties, and on the Mississippi River. For a delightful account of a deer hunting club, see M. B. Rosenberry, *History of Deerfoot Lodge* (Madison, 1941).
21. (New York, 1939), 498.