

William Burnett: Iowa Hunter

Des Moines residents will no doubt remember William Burnett as their city's fire chief for 42 years. He was a well known, loyal city employee from 1895 until his tragic death in 1937.

Though he was known to have spent most of his time carrying out his duties as fire chief, he did a great deal of shooting during his free hours. He gained quite a reputation as an excellent shot in Iowa, and kept a large collection of guns in his home.

The following is from an interview with him by F. O. Thompson, a Des Moines businessman. Mr. Thompson compiled many stories from talks with Iowa hunters in the early 30's. This is Burnett's story.

When William Burnett came to Des Moines around 1870 from Newark, New Jersey, game was very plentiful and there were no closed seasons or limits on the number of ducks one could shoot. There was, in fact, excellent hunting within Des Moines' city limits.

Burnett started shooting when he was only 12 or 13 years old, always tagging along with older hunters. Stewart Park at East 14th and Grand Ave., just east of the State Capitol building, was then a large, spring-fed pond and they often hunted there. This pond was even more appealing since it was surrounded by hazelnut bushes which, for a young boy, were mighty fine eating when they were fresh. In those years there were many ponds within walking distance of Des Moines, most of which have now been drained.

Burnett's favorite pond was southeast of the Fair Grounds below the Rock Island Railroad tracks where they cross Four Mile Creek. It was full of muskrat houses and was a perfect shooting area. During a short time one evening, he was able to bag about 20 ducks and two swans on this site.

In 1872 on a farm on 18th and Des Moines streets where the East High football field was later located, Burnett killed his first prairie chicken. In the area east of E. 14th street one could then find flocks of prairie chickens and quail.

William Burnett and his fellow hunters made some big kills in the seventies. They would sell their game to get money to buy guns and ammunition. Quail would bring five cents a piece from butchers and hotels. Prairie chickens were about \$1.00 to \$1.50 per dozen which was very cheap due to the fact

that the farmers trapped them in masses and sold them by the wagon load. Their traps, made of lath, were usually 4 or 5 feet long and about 6 feet wide with hinged lids, and were baited with grain.

In 1870 when Burnett was very small, his father, Charles Burnett, was in the grocery business on East Locust Street across from the old Capitol City Hotel. Then, there were only about three grocery stores in the town. Farmers would come in from as far as 40 or 50 miles north to buy groceries. They would usually have with them wagon loads of prairie chickens, quail, and ducks which they would sell to the elder Mr. Burnett who would then ship them directly to New York by the carloads.

In the early '70's, the area around the Skunk River was one of the best hunting areas for ducks in the nation. East of Ankeny, the land was all one pond-covered prairie. It would take Burnett at least a day and a half over the 20 miles of rough roads to get to the river to hunt. The roads then were miserable, especially during the spring months when snow would melt.

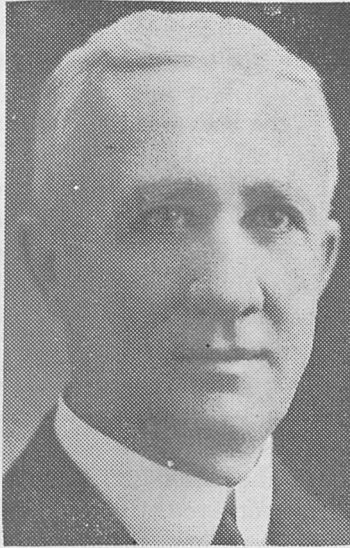
As an example of the good hunting in this area, Burnett, along with Gabe Howard, once took a two-horse spring wagon to the River and in one day filled it with mallards. Burnett, leaving Howard to drive the wagon, had to return to Des Moines by train to lighten the load. It wasn't much to get 50 ducks in an evening's shooting there.

The prairie hay around the river bottom was never cut, but instead was burned every fall. During this time there were prairie fires every night and hunters never thought of making camp without first backfiring at least a half acre of ground before pitching their tents. The farmers in the vicinity had to constantly keep the ground plowed around their farms.

Scarcity of game wasn't dreamed of in the 70's. Thousands of birds nested in the ponds along the Skunk bottom making shooting there almost unbelievable. Ducks, geese, prairie chickens, and brant flew into the area in clouds, and the flights would last at least a week and often two or three.

When Burnett hunted, birds weren't wild like they are today. Hunters weren't as numerous, and the birds didn't have the fear they now have. They used to wander fearlessly

among cattle. In fact, Burnett and a friend of his took advantage of this fearlessness in shooting ducks and geese. They made a wire frame of a cow and covered it with gunny sacks. This, they would put over their heads and walk toward a flock of game. When they reached the birds, they would throw the cow-like frame from their heads and proceed to shoot.



WILLIAM BURNETT — DES MOINES' FIRE CHIEF

Muzzle loaders with 3's and 4's were usually used in hunting geese. Burnett shot 6's, a light shot, so he wouldn't have as many crippled birds. When breech loading guns first came into the Iowa hunting scene, hunters reloaded their own shells.

Burnett never used decoys until about 1898 when he started hunting with a younger crowd which included Bert Maish, Nate Stark, Lynn Tuttle, F. C. Hubbell and George McCartney. Before then, he shot on flyways, dry land between two ponds sometimes called a pass. Burnett could nearly always pick out their regular flyway.

One fall, this group went hunting on Maish's farm near Spirit Lake. They had gone across to Robinson Lake, west of

Marble Lake, taking boats with them. It wasn't a very deep lake and there were spots in it that were full of rushes. They went out early in the morning, put out decoys and proceeded to have a day of successful shooting. Towards evening, it became quite cold and ice started to form around the edge of the lake. Some of the boys got tired of this, but McCartney and Burnett wanted to stay since the hunting was so good. The rest of the party took one of the small boats back and left the two men in the other to continue their shooting.

With them in their small boat, they had some collapsible decoys in a box about a foot square which was poorly constructed. The seat in the boat was too low for McCartney, so he put the box on the seat and sat on it. The first time he shot, the box fell apart and he fell over. The boat went to the bottom of the lake taking everything with it including the two hunters. The water at that spot was relatively shallow and Burnett was just barely able to keep his head above water by standing on the seat of the sunken boat. McCartney was a taller man and had to help steady him.

The nearly drowning men started to call for their hunting comrades who, by then, were out of hearing range. However, a farmer on the south side of the lake heard them and called the boys back to help their friends. The wait seemed endless, but at last they were retrieved. Upon arriving back to their camp, the two men were immediately filled with whiskey, given good alcohol rubs and spent the succeeding 24 hours in bed. Both survived with no after effects.

As Burnett got older, he followed trap shooting quite a bit and could shoot enough to trail the professionals. He used to win enough prize money to pay his way from coast to coast. In those days there weren't many professionals. In the late 1800's, all of the professionals could be counted on one hand.

About 1890, manufacturers began to advertise trap shooting. They organized teams which were sent to cities throughout the United States and Europe. Prizes were offered to any team that could beat them. Under the management of the U.S. Cartridge Co., they traveled quite fashionably in their own private railroad car complete with their own porter.

Burnett was once on a challenging team when they stopped in Des Moines. Competition was held down at the old Fair

Grounds on southwest 9th Street in Des Moines. The grounds were covered with snow which made shooting difficult. The challenged team won.

Most professional trapshooters weren't good field shots, but there were a few who were both. Fred Kimble and George Hughes of Fonda were two exceptions. In fact, as good a shot as Burnett was, he could shoot better in the field than at the trap. These three men together made many big killings of ducks. Duck shooting was Fred Kimble's hobby and it is said that he patented the first duck call. However, he didn't need one, for he could imitate with his voice any duck that ever flew.

Burnett also did some target shooting, much of it with Charlie Budd, a wonderful shot who was a station agent at Carlisle. They shot before the existence of artificial targets by using live pigeons. Then, when shooting live pigeons was prohibited by law, the manufacturing of targets was begun. The first manufactured targets were made out of glass and were about as large as baseballs. The Peoria Blackbird was one made in Peoria by George Kimble.

When the first telegraph poles and lines were installed in Iowa, thousands of prairie chickens were killed. The wires were unfortunately hung at a level at which the birds flew and became hazardous to their lives. All one had to do in those days to get all the birds he wanted was to walk underneath the telegraph wires and pick them up.

Burnett also did some hunting around Twin Lakes. With Bill Reed, he used to make the trip there at least once or twice a year to shoot prairie chickens. At such times they would barrel up their birds and ship them down to some of the markets in Des Moines to get money to buy fresh ammunition.

Burnett had a wonderful hunting dog capable of retrieving birds through ice. A market hunter from Missouri had seen it at Twin Lakes and made Burnett an offer of \$100 for the dog since it was well broken on ducks and quail as well as prairie chickens. Burnett sold it to the man since it was already nine years old, which was about a dog's limit, but it lived for two more years.

William Burnett's father was a good hunter and he thought that if he kept his son out in the country hunting instead of in the city that he would be a better man. Burnett always believed he was brought up as good as a boy could have been. He was sorry, though, since it kept him from school a good deal.

In his later years, Burnett didn't hunt as much, but he did keep his gun collection in excellent shape and his love for wild game remained the same. For a number of years he kept coveys of quail in his back yard by preserving the natural brush growth. Every winter he would see that his birds were well fed and sheltered.

Through Burnett's story it is easy to see how much hunting has changed in the past 80 years. Though the Skunk River bottom has been drained, prairie chickens have disappeared from Iowa's prairies, and game isn't as plentiful, the spirit of hunting is the same among hunters today as it was then and will undoubtedly remain so.

Picture courtesy *Des Moines Register and Tribune*.

Stolen Nonsense

FROM THE *Journal*, KNOXVILLE, IOWA

"Look here boy! I don't see you at Sunday School anymore. Don't you want to go to Heaven?"

"Aw, not yet!"

Mr. McQuire (to hospital attendant)—"Phwat did you say the doctor's name was?"

Attendant—"Dr. Kilpatrick."

Mr. McQuire—"Thot settles it. No doctor wid thot cog-nomen will git a chance to operate on me—not if I know it."

Attendant—"Why not?"

Mr. McQuire—"Well, ye see, my name is Patrick."

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