

Mallards for the Market

By WILSON W. SAWYER

The author's recollections are those of a pioneer Iowa family. He was born at Spirit Lake, graduated from the high school at Mason City and for several years worked on a Chicago trade journal edited by L. Frank Baum, author of *The Wizard of Oz*. Seattle, Washington has been Mr. Sawyer's home for nearly fifty years.

Can you imagine anything that would so thrill the average boy of fifteen as to be handed a double barrelled shotgun and be told he could accompany a seasoned hunter to a lake literally teeming with ducks?

In the early fall of 1887, I experienced that thrill. I had just been hired to drive a team of Indian ponies for three market hunters, who made it their business during the fall months to help supply the eastern market with ducks and prairie chickens from the sloughs and prairies of northwestern Iowa.

Two of the hunters, Elmer and Cars Mills, could not begin hunting until September 1st, but the third partner, Fred Rolfe, was able to start when the duck season opened in Minnesota, August 15th. It was agreed that he would do so, and that I would accompany him. On the 13th, we left home in the early afternoon and started North toward the state line.

Our outfit consisted of two tricky Indian ponies, that would run "at the drop of a hat," a light spring wagon, with a box about ten feet long by sixteen inches high, with a false bottom, under which a hundred and fifty ducks or prairie chickens could be stored. Behind the wagon we hauled a boat, perched on the axle and rear wheels of an old buggy.

By nightfall we had crossed into Minnesota and were ready to call it a day. On the prairie ahead we saw a small weather-beaten house and several haystacks. Driving to the place we met a light-complexioned man, whose speech was unmistakably Scandinavian. After a few words of greeting, Fred asked, "Do you care, Mr. Oleson, if we sleep in the hay to-night?" He explained that we were on our way North to shoot ducks. "Oh, Aye tank dat bay all right," the man cordially replied. An hour later as we burrowed into the hay, I

asked Fred how he knew the man's name was Oleson. With a chuckle, he replied, "I didn't know it—I could see that he was Sandinavian, and Oleson is one of the most common Scandinavian names—I thought it was a good bet."

The next morning we were up early and had started a little fire, intending to make coffee, when our host came out and insisted we come in and have breakfast. We had eaten only a cold lunch the night before and needed no second invitation. While we were at the table he said, "Aye vas yoost vundering how it vas you knowed my name vas Oleson." Fred was quick on the trigger. Without a moment's hesitation he replied, "Oh, everybody around here knows you, Mr. Oleson."

By six o'clock we were on our way. The morning was bright and still and not overly warm. A faint mist arose from numerous ponds and sloughs as we rattled over the rough prairie road toward our destination twenty miles distant. Along the way in almost every water hole there were numbers of Mallard and other ducks.

It was mid-afternoon when we drove into a farm yard, something like a quarter of a mile from what was known as, "The Eight Mile Slough." Going to the house which was surrounded by a whitewashed fence, an attractive Norwegian woman met us at the door. Fred told of our mission and asked if we might camp in the barn-yard. The lady gave permission.

As soon as our tent was up, we began making preparations for the morrow. The boat and decoys were taken to the slough, and two canvas bags containing brass shells were hidden in near-by rushes. As the day was still young, and with nothing to do, Fred suggested we get in the boat and do a little scouting. We poled through shallow water for two miles, or more, to a narrow place where the rushes were thick and the shore line raised a foot or so above water. "I remember this place," Fred said, "I've shot here before, and I'll shoot here tomorrow."

The trip proved profitable in another way. We found floating loose at the edge of the rushes a crudely made boat we guessed belonged to some farmer living in the vicinity.

On the way back we took it in tow and left it beside our boat.

An hour before daylight next morning, we ate a cold lunch, pulled on our rubber boots and started for the slough. Fred brought along a new hammer gun, also his old one to have handy in case he didn't like the "feel" of the new gun. Handing the old gun to me, he placed a sack of shells in the stray boat, saying as he did so, "These are for you, Billy." He had taken it for granted that I, like practically all boys of my age, knew how to shoot. While I was fairly proficient with a "22" rifle I had never pulled the trigger of a shotgun.

For some time we poled down the lake between jagged, uneven outlines of rushes, visible only by the feeble light from stars. At times open spaces widened to hundreds of feet, only to be pushed back again to a narrow channel, through which we were barely able to make our way. Loud quacking coming from several directions told eloquently of a large number of ducks.

The first tinge of light was showing in the East when Fred stopped poling and suggested that I push into a small "island" of rushes we were then passing. He told me not to shoot until after I heard him fire, and warned against shooting at anything that was not close, saying there were plenty of ducks and for me not to waste ammunition. What he failed to tell me was to aim ahead of the duck I shot at.

The minutes that passed while I sat there nervously awaiting the opening gun seemed endless, but at last it came. Two shots rang out in quick succession, as the approaching sun reddened the sky. Instantly, pandemonium broke loose. A wild uproar swept across the marshes. Ducks raised in clouds from almost every portion of the slough, filling the air with whirring wings and frenzied quacking. Young ducks that never before had heard the sound of a gun were thrown into panic by the cannonading that started immediately from several parts of the slough where farmers had stationed themselves to be in on the opening shoot.

As fast as trembling fingers would permit, I fired and loaded, fired and loaded. Ducks came from every direction, at times but a few feet above the rushes. Some flew so close to my head, I dodged instinctively. They were mostly young mal-

lards with wings too weak to make speed, and were as easy targets as one could wish for. I fired at least a dozen times before so much as scratching a feather. Finally, a duck coming straight toward me was dropped, and I might add—almost blown to pieces. In the excitement I had given him both barrels. As I poled out to pick up my “kill” I realized that my shoulder was aching terribly from the pounding it had received.

After wasting a lot of ammunition, I had a break. A bunch of ducks flew by. I held on the front one and killed the one behind him. That gave me a hunch, and from then on my luck was a little better. I was learning fast, but learning the hard way.

It was near noon when I saw Fred returning. As he drew near he called, “Well, what luck?” I can still hear him laugh when I replied, “Five.” His boat was half full of ducks, mostly mallard and blue wing teal.

The Mills Brothers joined us September 1st, the prairie chicken law in Iowa being out on that date. For some days previous we had worked over time getting ready for the opening shoot. Among other essentials was the imperative need of cold storage facilities for storing game. A freezer about eight by twelve feet, had been started earlier in the season, which had to be completed and put in readiness for receiving game. This task fell largely to Fred, not only because he was a skilled mechanic, but also for the reason he had the time. I was his only helper and my knowledge of such work was about on a par with my skill with a gun.

Each of the hunters had his dogs. Cars had acquired a Red Irish Setter pup, of which he had become very fond, and wishing to break him in as soon as possible, had taken him out a few evenings before the opening date “just to give him the smell of powder,” as he put it. However, the rest of us surmised that the “smell” of fried prairie chicken might have had something to do with it.

On the opening day, Cars took the pup along believing that while he might flush a few birds there would be plenty and it wouldn't matter much. There proved to be plenty of chickens, but there was one angle he hadn't figured out quite

so accurately. That pup proved to be seven different kinds of a nuisance that day. If they let him loose, he ran wild, scaring up the game. When tied to a rope, he wound in and out getting in the way of the hunters. Besides he set up an almost incessant yelping—scaring up birds. Finally, in desperation Cars gave up and brought the dog to the wagon, telling me to look after him.

One of my duties was to watch where chickens lit after they had been shot at and gotten away, as some were sure to do. During that first afternoon when all three men were hunting abreast in a large cornfield, a covey of chickens was raised. Several were dropped, the rest "took to the woods." Instantly I was alert. Forgetting about the dog and the ponies, I jumped up on the seat to get a better view and to watch where the birds lit. The pup, tied with a short cord to the dash board, attempted to jump up beside me. His leap ending in a back summersault, the cord was broken and he fell to the ground, hitting the ponies' heels. With a lunge they sprang forward, and were off to a flying start, while I was jerked over the seat, landing in an assortment of shells, groceries and bedding. An instant later a tug became unhooked, releasing the tongue, in turn upsetting the wagon and throwing me to the ground. The ponies broke loose from the wagon and were soon out of sight behind a rise of ground.

When the boys arrived and I told them what had happened, Cars and Fred smiled, but said nothing. Elmer was mad. Surveying the mess, he barked, "Why in hell did you stand on the seat—I don't know who has the least sense, you or the fool dog." After a few more "kind words," he went with me in search of the ponies, which we found an hour later wrapped around a cottonwood tree.

When we returned, Cars and Fred had righted the wagon, gathered up our scattered supplies, and stood chatting as they cleaned their guns. Elmer recognized the significance of the gun cleaning. He knew the boys had quit hunting for the day. After a short consultation, we hitched on the team and drove west a couple of miles to the Little Sioux river. We watered the ponies, had supper and began to look for a place to sleep. No haystacks were in sight. Our quest ended

when Elmer suggested we unroll our blankets and sleep in the sand beside the creek. The next morning we were up early, eager to begin our second day.

I soon realized that hunting for the market was no play day for these men. They worked hard and took it seriously. All three were fine, clean, resourceful fellows in the pink of physical manhood.

Not more than half of the land in the county was under cultivation at the time, the rest was in native grass called upland and bluestem. A coarse variety known locally as "swamp grass" surrounded ponds and small lakes. Much of the cultivated land was sown to wheat, barley and oats. The acreage in corn was comparatively small—perhaps not more than a quarter of the whole.

Generally speaking, prairie chickens were found in cornfields during the middle of the day, and in wheat stubble (if there was any) morning and evening, but a few could most always be found in any field or patch of upland grass. One of their favorite hangouts was in grass close to cornfields.

During September and early October, we hunted almost exclusively for prairie chickens. During the mornings the boys tramped the open fields. In the afternoon they searched cornfields, walking many tiresome miles each day. Chickens were plentiful and their labors were usually rewarded.

Some of the farmers in those days had the "ungentlemanly" habit, like a few of the present generation, of posting signs in conspicuous places, reading, "NO HUNTING ON THIS FARM." Our boys seldom paid the slightest attention to these; in fact they were inclined to regard them with favor, reasoning that the signs would tend to keep others off, therefore, the hunting should be good.

Along with ten gauge double-barreled hammer guns, and brass shells, "standard equipment" with us while hunting in most communities, included a quart bottle of either whisky or alcohol. That bottle did wonders on several occasions when irate farmers came "gunning" for us with pitchforks. After a few swigs of that potent medicine their sore spots would heal quickly; in a few minutes they would mellow noticeably and before the party broke up they would often tell us where we

could find chickens on their own farms. The following technique was often applied and crude as it was, it usually worked. When a gent with a pitchfork was seen approaching, the boys would head for the wagon and stage a little act, in which the bottle was always the hero.

I vividly recall the time a farmer came at us fairly spitting fire. As he emerged from the corn, he saw a fellow leaning against a wagon wheel nibbling at a cracker, another cleaning a gun and a third seemingly taking a long drag at the bottle. Before he had a chance to explode, the boy with the bottle turned toward him and with a string of friendly words, said something as follows: "Just having a little nip—won't you join me?" holding out the bottle as he spoke.

The real peeve of the farmer was not due so much to the killing of game, but rather to abuses arising therefrom, such as leaving gates open, permitting dogs to trample grain, shooting in the direction of cattle, and climbing and breaking fences. I am sure that few, if any, of the men who shot for the market ever indulged in such recklessness, but they shared the odium with those who did.

As the season advanced, prairie chickens became wild, usually rising before our men came within range. Naturally, this tended to greatly decrease the kill, so by the middle of October when flights from the north started coming, our boys switched to ducks.

Soon after we started hunting, Elmer began giving me pointers on how to use a gun. After supper when I had cared for the ponies and the men were resting, I began going to nearby stubble fields or sloughs in search of birds. It was not long before I was bringing in enough game to pay for the shells I used, so I was encouraged to keep at it.

I well remember a day I spent with Elmer in the vicinity of the Lakeville sloughs. In this group there was a very shallow lake, perhaps a quarter of a mile across and almost round, located within a pasture. The surrounding vegetation had been eaten away by cattle, leaving no cover for hunters. There was apparently in the bottom of the lake some aquatic plant of which ducks were especially fond. Mallards came to the lake at night in great numbers to feed. Elmer was

aware of this and arranged to be there for the evening shoot.

The sun had set before we reached the lake. Elmer told me to take one of the dogs and go to the North side, while he stayed and shot from the South shore. A few ducks came in while I was on my way, but not until it was getting dark did they really start to come—and then they came. They came in bunches that seemed like a solid mass of black a few feet in diameter. It soon became impossible to distinguish single ducks, so I shot at the mass, pulling both triggers almost simultaneously. The dog guided by the sound of a thud or a splash waded out into the water and darkness retrieving as fast as he could.

For some ten or fifteen minutes I engaged in the greatest slaughter of my life—it was just plain murder, but we weren't out for sport—we were after ducks, and I was getting them and that was all that counted. Once when I happened to hold the gun in just the right spot, I brought down three with a single shot. They were still coming in large numbers when I had to quit because of darkness. I carried to camp those the dog dropped near me. Next morning Elmer and I picked up the rest. In all I had killed thirty-four.

The men I drove for were representative of the best market hunters of the day. That fall they killed about five thousand birds, probably half were prairie chickens, the rest mostly ducks. They owned a freezer, held their birds for seasonal prices, and conducted their affairs in a business-like manner. They had a good outfit—the best of guns and sufficient funds to finance their operations. All were skilled hunters and excellent shots, and yet, with most conditions favoring them they did not make more than fair wages due to the low price of game. They received but three dollars a dozen for prairie chickens or mallard ducks. Canvasback, the aristocrat of the duck family brought five dollars per pair on the New York market, but they were few and far between.

About the middle of November, canvasback were reported coming into West Okoboji lake. The boys thought it might be well to get after them. It was decided that Fred and Cars would take boats and decoys, go to the North end of the lake where the canvasbacks were said to be feeding, and try it out,

while Elmer and I drove out to the Ocheyedan sloughs some twenty miles to the West.

The weather was getting cold. Finding ice on some of the smaller ponds, we wasted no time and drove through to our destination in one day. Next morning we found all but the larger sloughs frozen. In the center there was a large number of ducks. As all were out of range, Elmer told me to go to the North end and shoot a time or two, thinking they would fly South with the wind, and he would get a few as they went out. Instead of doing as he expected, they arose in a body and flew eastward, apparently heading for Silver Lake some eight miles distant. We stayed around all day and shot a few stragglers, but when no evening flight developed, Elmer decided to quit and go home.

When we crawled from the haystack next morning, a storm was brewing. An occasional snow-flake gave a hint as to what might happen. We hitched up the ponies and started. Elmer noticing that I was shivering, reached for the lines, saying, "Here, I'll drive—you're cold." With true huntsman's fortitude I replied as my teeth chattered, "Oh, I'm all right." I do remember that I got down and trotted behind the wagon for a time, "just for the exercise."

We took the road that passed close to the South side of Silver Lake. By the time we reached the lake, a high wind was blowing and considerable snow falling. Near the East side we saw the somewhat pretentious farm buildings of the Bennett ranch. Elmer decided to drive in and wait until the storm abated. We were greeted cordially by the foreman and crew, who observing our chilled condition, asked us to stay and have dinner with them. After dinner when I had thawed out, I was again rarin' to go—but not toward home. We could see hundreds of ducks flying wildly in the storm above the lake.

That afternoon I certainly disproved that old saying, "There's no fool like an old fool." I went to a rocky point on the lake, stood exposed to the storm, held a gun with freezing fingers, and shot at storm-crazed ducks until nightfall. During the night the sky cleared.

Next morning it was cold and clear. When we reached

home, nearly frozen, we found Fred and Cars awaiting us. The storm had driven them from the lake.

After a short conference, the boys decided to quit hunting for the season. I was called in to be paid off. They handed me six dollars as pay for the past two weeks—thus ending my “career” as a Market Hunter.

Oldest Greybeard

The 37th Iowa Regiment, now doing guard duty at St. Louis, is almost exclusively composed of men over 45. Among the number is Charles King, who is 81 years of age. He is six feet eight inches in height. He was born in Culpepper county, Va., and claims to be a lineal descendant of Pocahontas, and this statement is verified by his physiognomy, which betrays the characteristics of the Indian. He has been married twice (first when only 19 years of age), and is the father of twenty-one children, one of which was, two weeks since, only fifteen months old when it died. He claims to be able to repeat every word of the Bible from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelations, and can *neither read nor write!*—a daughter having read the book to him, his wonderful memory enabling him to retain it after committing it to memory. The daughter commenced her reading to him at five years of age, he then being twenty-six. In 1815 he emigrated to Ohio, resided there some twenty-five years, and then removed to Wapello, Iowa, where his home now is, and where he enlisted. Mr. King’s family is somewhat celebrated for longevity, his mother having lived to the age of 103, and one grandfather to 105 years.—*Exchange* quoted in *Muscatine Daily Journal*, February 10, 1863.

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