

W. B. LEFFINGWELL, IOWA SPORTSMAN

by William M. Furnish



Iowa author William Bruce Leffingwell set standards of hunting practice that have been followed by generations of prairie sportsmen. But Leffingwell was not only an able hunter—his writings convey an appreciation of American wildlife on a par with those of the nation's finest naturalists.



"Prairie Chicken Shooting," an illustration from Leffingwell's *The Art of Wing Shooting*, published in 1889 (SHSI)

Outside his office window, attorney Leffingwell could see the busy pavements of urban Chicago, but on this November day in 1887, his thoughts were on the Mississippi River near Clinton, Iowa, where he had grown up and first enjoyed the pleasures of his lifelong love, wild fowl hunting.

"Such a sight!," he recalled. "The pond covered about four acres, and to this time, the ducks were in complete possession and control of it. They were scattered in bunches, ranging in numbers from three to fifty, all mallards. Some with head hidden underneath their wings were floating serenely, and dreaming idly of what ducks usually dream; others were preening themselves, now rising on their feet and fluttering their wings, while great drops of water were shaken from their shining bodies; still others were swimming to and fro, advancing and receding as if to form a better acquaintance with their neighbors. On the banks, some sat idly, half asleep, basking in the warm sun, while near them their companions were tipping up in the shallow water, performing acrobatic feats. First their glossy green heads with their plump bodies would be on the surface, then presto! their heads would disappear and their white and purple tails would point upward, while their bills were hidden under water and mud, searching for the ever welcome acorn."

A year later, Leffingwell completed *Wild Fowl Shooting*, which was considered the authoritative treatment of the subject in its time, both in the United States and in England. The book is still referred to with respect and affection nearly a hundred years after its publication by Rand McNally in 1888. Indeed, all of Leffingwell's seven books on hunting remain significant, for their author's hunting life spanned perhaps the most important fifty years in the history of the sport. It was a time when weapons technology was transforming firearms and

when populations of ducks, geese, and other wild fowl were declining from the limitless numbers of the early nineteenth century to the moderate numbers of our own era.

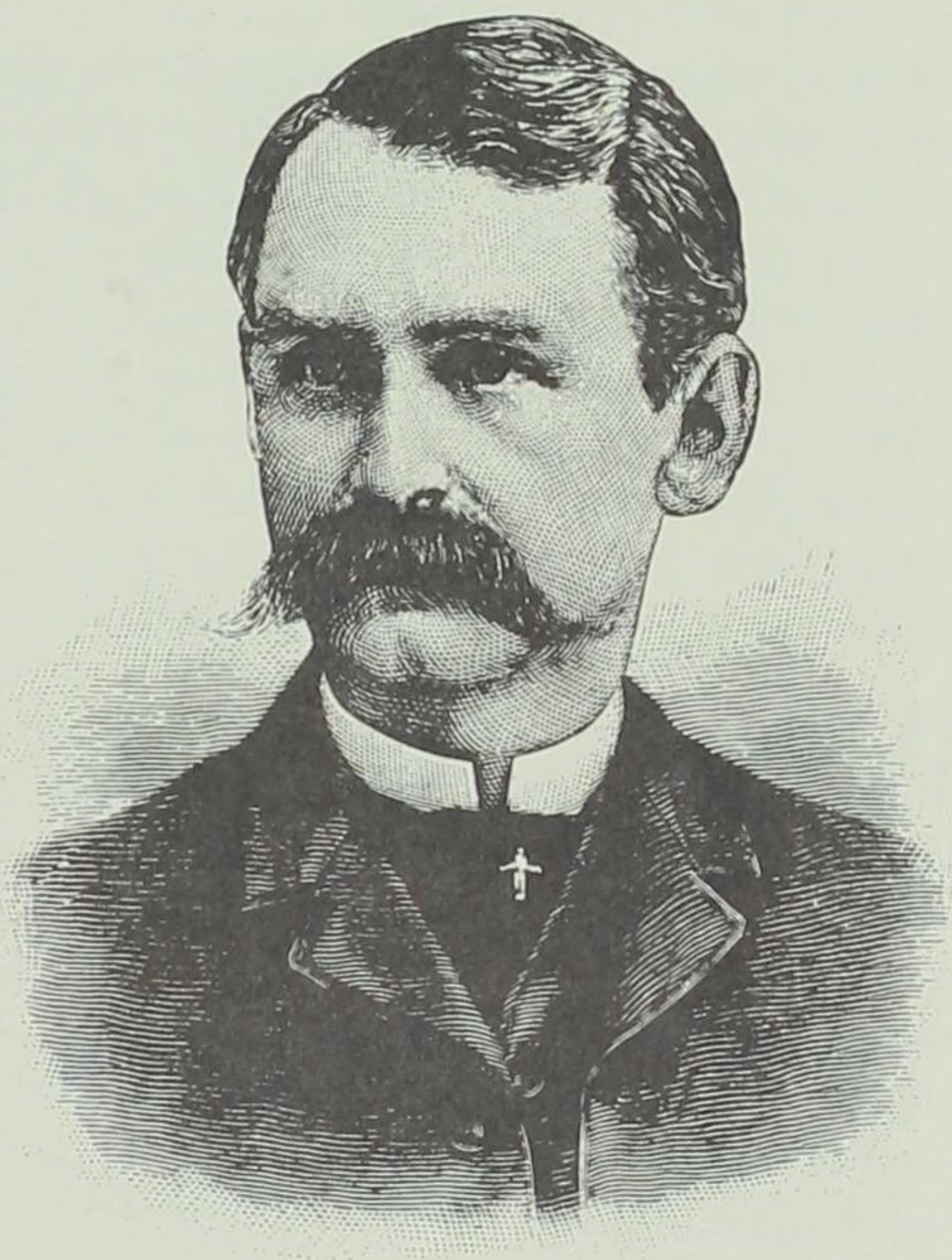
Born on April 6, 1850, Leffingwell, like most boys of his time, grew up with a gun in his hands. His ancestors had come from England to Norwich, Connecticut in 1637, and his father, William Edward Leffingwell, migrated to Iowa in 1839, at the age of seventeen. On the eastern fringe of the territory, the elder Leffingwell studied law and became an eminent member of his profession. Active in the affairs of the territory and the state, he eventually served as presidential elector, district judge, and president of the State Senate. With his wife, Celinda Walrod Leffingwell, he had twelve children, seven of whom survived. In spite of the press of business and domestic duties, he made time for hunting expeditions to surrounding rivers, and his third child—William Bruce Leffingwell—was an enthusiastic participant.

After local grammar schools and the University of Iowa, young Leffingwell followed his father into law. But his first love was always hunting. Hunters of 1980 can hardly imagine the millions of birds that Leffingwell was accustomed to seeing on the ponds and rivers of eastern Iowa and western Illinois. In *Wild Fowl Shooting*, he describes a trip on the Mississippi: "Our game is counted—sixty-five mallards, five redheads, six bluebills, one canvas back, and one goose—a splendid lot, but not unusual."

One of his favored spots was just south of Clinton, where he lived for a number of years after his marriage in 1874 to Ann Eliza Wallace, and where he served as county clerk for four or five years. The "Dosia (or Meredosia) Bottoms" lay in an abandoned valley leading from the Mississippi to the Rock River at Erie, Illinois. They are now traversed by a large drainage ditch. Here Leffingwell, like many of his con-

temporaries, hunted from a "small boat" which he describes in some detail in *Wild Fowl Shooting*. Such a boat is actually a moveable blind; it was designed for use on the river, to approach ducks within effective shotgun range before they became alarmed. It had a low deck, just a few inches off the water, to support camouflage blending with the background. (See the illustration on page 167.) The hunters lay on the bottom while operating a single oar at the rear. Leffingwell wrote that "an expert sculler will drive the boat along with such steadiness that were one to shut his eyes and sit in the boat, he would hear no noise, feel no motion, although the boat is going quite fast. . . . I have used all kinds of duckboats, and I never yet found a man who, after using one of these boats, would use any other. . . . I have crossed the Mississippi in one, when the south wind had lashed the broad river into a sea of seething, hissing foam, as it rolled and flew into spray from the crest of the big 'whitecaps.' I would often court an accident in one of them . . . with a companion equally as reckless, we would go out in the roughest part of the Mississippi in the highest winds, to the terror of kindly disposed old ladies, who watched us from the shores."

The Upper Mississippi type of scull boat perfected by early market hunters is unique. These craft were handmade by local boat builders to their favorite patterns or on special order. Such builders as Jenks, Oaks, Brown, Dribbleby, and others were well known in Clinton. Some boats were built as light one-man shells about ten feet long, and could be picked up easily. Larger boats—over twenty feet in length—could accomodate as many as three hunters. All such boats had keels to aid in the thrust of the sculling oar. Oars varied with personal preference, too. Those over ten feet long and with a narrow blade served best in the open river, where scullers used a brisk rolling figure-eight stroke to propel the craft. Both oar and "bung-hole" in the stern were covered with oil-soaked leather to reduce noise and to



William Bruce Leffingwell in 1890 (SHSI)

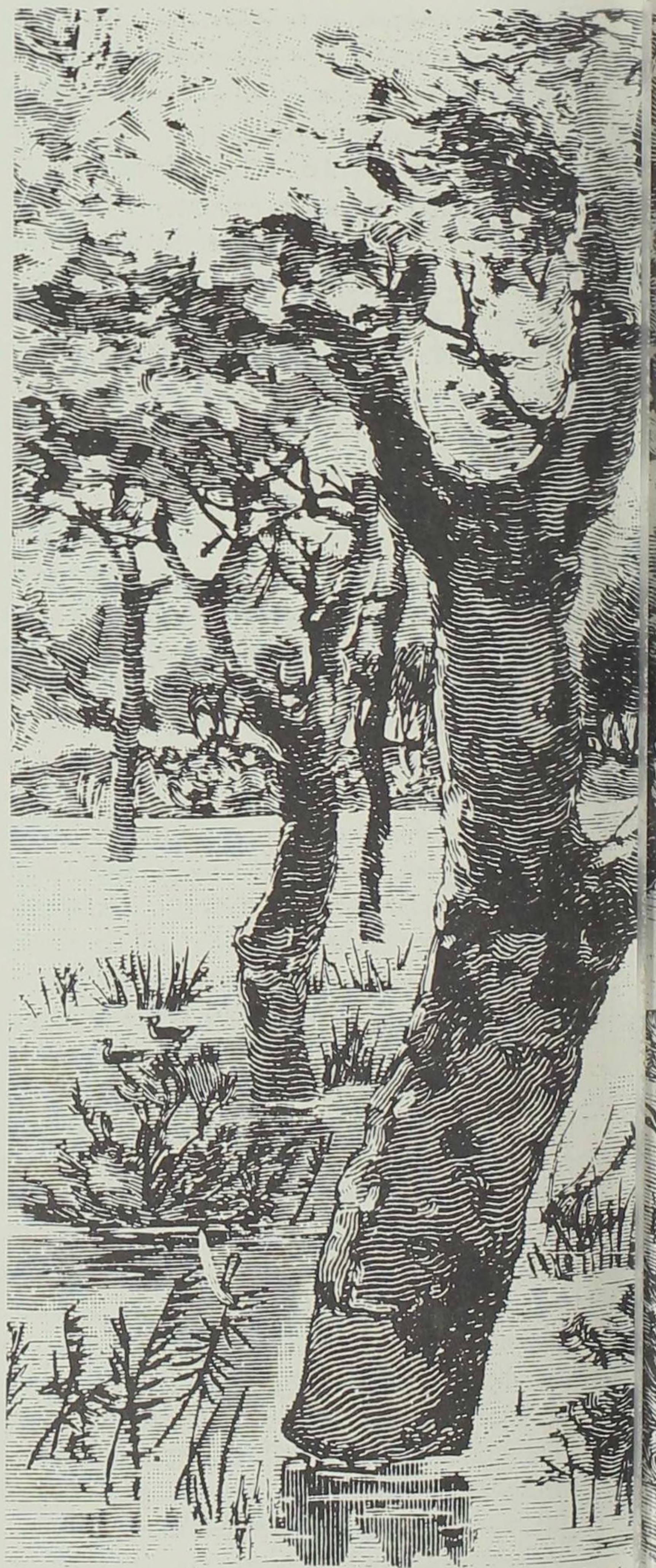
prevent water entry.

Leffingwell described the manner of approach: "where the eye can see the water in an unbroken line for a half-mile, perhaps a full mile; where the ducks are feeding, preening and sitting on the bank, basking in the sunshine. . . . On such an occasion, note the sculler coming down, half reclining in his boat, the bow and sides trimmed with willow twigs and grass, to correspond with the shores he is passing. The ducks see nothing alarming about it [and] feed on in quiet contentment until the hunter is close enough to fire both barrels effectively. A few years ago, in running ice, three of us bagged in one day 112 mallards and six geese. These were killed in the middle of the day, right in the channel of the Mississippi. At this time, hunters in the islands were getting no shooting at all."

As a boy, Leffingwell learned to shoot a percussion lock muzzle loader which had to be

reloaded with a ramrod after each shot. In the hands of an expert who had practiced on thousands, even tens of thousands of birds, these arms were remarkably effective. Years of experience and a couple of hundred reloadings a day made such operations routinely simple: powder and shot dispensers were set for just the desired amount, and the hunter could fire off two shots per minute. Still, sportsmen found it exasperating to be in the act of reloading while cripples swam away or a new flock approached.

While Leffingwell was growing up, marrying, fathering six children, and beginning his distinguished career as a jurist, the nature of his favorite sport was changing, largely because of the introduction of the reasonably priced breech-loading shotgun. There were inconveniences involved in the change. Carrying ready-loaded brass shells added many pounds to the duck hunter's gear, for he would need perhaps several hundred shots for a day's sport. It was nearly as much trouble to reload the shells as it was to recharge barrels in an older percussion gun, but the task could be done at night in preparation for the next morning's hunt, while less ambitious companions slept. Brass shells were costly and many accounts tell of running out of ammunition or stopping to reload a new supply. Although the shooter could anticipate a few "duds" or misfires, an even more common difficulty for owners of double-barrelled guns was for shot pellets to drop out of the case in the second barrel after being loosened by shock of discharge in the first. Early paper shells could be crimped to hold the loads more securely, but they softened and swelled from the moisture and so were even less trustworthy. In spite of all difficulties, hunters became amazingly proficient with these hammer-model double guns. After firing at game, they could break the action, extract and replace shells, close the breech, recock the hammers, and shoot again, all in a matter of only two or three seconds. Expert trap shoot-



"Shooting Mallards from a Scull Boat on the Missis



" an illustration from Leffingwell's Wild Fowl Shooting

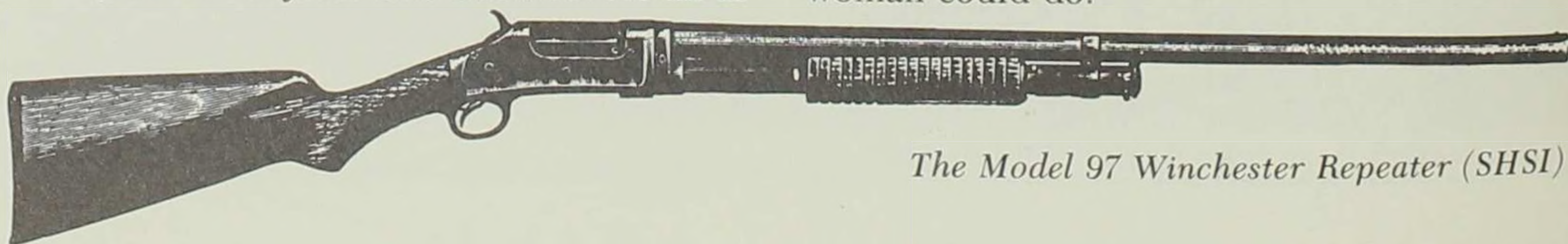
ers, loading their own guns, fired for extended periods at a rate greater than fifteen rounds per minute. Under similar circumstances, only two shots per minute could be fired with a muzzle loader.

Another change in the nature of hunting arms was apparent by the late 1880s, when hammerless model shotguns further simplified operations. Although the danger of this innovation could be recognized, the enclosed hammers proved a convenience. The next big step in fowling pieces was the development of a good multi-shot repeater. Magazine carbines had long been used as hunting rifles but the side-by-side double remained a standard in scatterguns until the appearance of the 1897 model Winchester pump. This Browning-action gun could be fired quite rapidly, as could the semi-automatic models that became available at about the same time. Serious duck hunters, such as those hunting for the market, soon discovered that the "97" would deliver six killing shots into a single flock. It is likely that more wild fowl fell to this gun than any ever made. It is certain that the appearance of the "97" accelerated the need for legislation on hunting migratory birds. Over a million of these arms—affectionately called "corn-shell-ers" or "trombones"—were manufactured in fifty years of production, and they are still being used.

Having established himself in the legal profession, Leffingwell had by his late thirties achieved prosperity and leisure sufficient to begin his literary career. In all, he wrote or edited at least seven books and penned numerous articles on the sport of hunting. *Wild Fowl Shooting* remained the most popular of these, perhaps because of its freshness and the novelty of its subject. The book covers all as-

pects of duck hunting on the Upper Mississippi: equipment and techniques, the identity and habits of the game, human and canine companionship, and many actual experiences. In addition to its 373 pages, the book contained twenty-two additional sheets of advertisements on guns, boats, decoys, ammunition, railroads offering trips to hunting areas, and other items of interest to the sportsman. The author himself prepared numerous pen and ink sketches of hunting scenes and details of water fowl, which added to the reliability of the volume. He portrays himself as the ordinary hunter, neither shooting hundreds of birds every day for market, nor needing a local guide to cater to his needs. Leffingwell was aware of all of the implications of his sport, and practiced it with the highest respect for traditional hunting etiquette.

In 1890, Leffingwell published *Shooting on Upland, Marsh, and Stream*, a volume of articles on hunting by a number of authors. He himself contributed the introduction and three chapters concerned with the shooting of passenger pigeons (now extinct), prairie chickens, and canvasback ducks (both now greatly diminished in numbers). Rand McNally printed two editions; a third was printed in London. *The Art of Wing Shooting*, published in 1894 and 1895 (two editions) was intended to be an instructional manual, covering basic principles for the beginner and details of interest to the experienced shooter. Leffingwell placed greatest emphasis on learning to become a competent wild fowl gunner. One chapter—entitled "Women as Shooters"—contains unqualified advice that women be encouraged to participate in the sport. Annie Oakley, who performed before huge crowds all over the world, is cited as the ultimate example of what a woman could do.



The Model 97 Winchester Repeater (SHSI)

Unusual among Leffingwell's works is a novel, *Manulito*, which appeared in 1892. A fictional account of the Iowa frontier, the story is based to some degree on the exploits of his father, Judge William Edward Leffingwell, who was recognized as a capable woodsman and hunter during the 1840s and 1850s. The book is a dramatic account of the exploits of a hardy pioneer leader named Attorney Wellington, and focuses on his close friendship with the equally intrepid Indian, Manulito. The original Thomas Leffingwell of Connecticut was known to have been a friend and associate of the real Uncas, Chief of the Mohicans. He may have served as the inspiration for Natty Bumppo, James Fenimore Cooper's dauntless hero.

Unfortunately, a list of all of Leffingwell's writing is not available; some publications are so rare that no copies can be located. He contributed shorter articles to sporting magazines of his day, and later wrote books on shooting and hunting in the South and in Texas. Both of the latter books were distributed *gratis* by the Southern Railway Company and by the Frisco Lines to prospective travelers, but unlike his earlier productions, they offered little more than descriptions of areas attractive to sportmen.

Circumstances for hunters changed rapidly during Leffingwell's lifetime. With new weapons and an increasing population of consumers to serve, market hunters began to alter the character of wildlife systems in Iowa. Even if conservation-minded, a couple of hunters could dispatch a hundred birds in a day. At least by the early 1900s, the vast number of birds Leffingwell had known as a boy declined so considerably that seasons and limits had to be imposed. Although a hunter in Illinois could still legally take thirty-five ducks and thirty-five

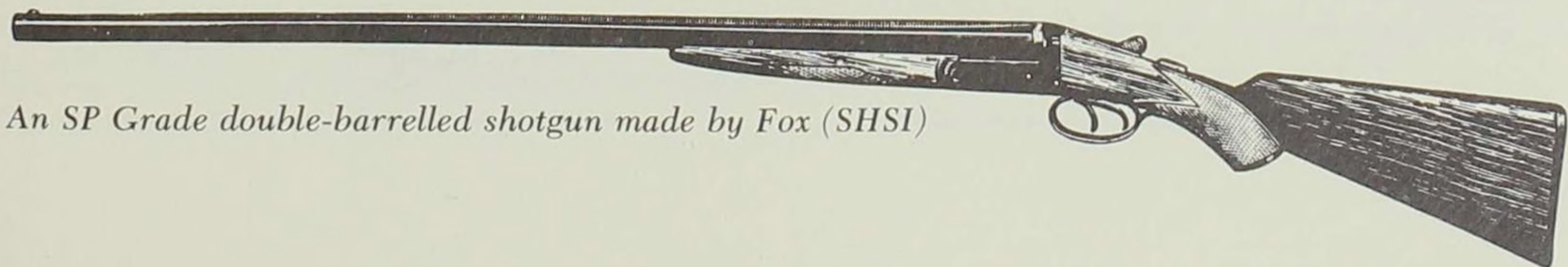
geese in a single day, an age of scarcity loomed ahead.

The activity of the hunter himself also changed in the course of Leffingwell's career. Firearms were always dangerous, despite the safety features incorporated into well-made double shotguns. Risk was always present, especially during the excitement of firing at game. Almost everyone could recall near misses and the shock of imbedded number-six pellets, with a chance for infections resulting from even minor gunshot wounds. In some respects, the dangers increased, as when hammerless and repeater model guns introduced additional odds for accidental discharge, for they were ready to fire when loaded. Most hunters tolerated only experienced companions who could be trusted to use proper caution.

Hunting had always been a family affair with the Leffingwells. Small boys routinely accompanied their fathers to the duck blind; young Leffingwell went out by himself at age twelve. Precaution was instilled in him at an early age, but nothing could have anticipated the tragic accident that befell him later. At the beginning of an expedition, a large dog used as a retriever scrambled into the skiff and bumped against a loaded gun lying there, causing it to discharge. By chance, William Bruce Leffingwell caught the full load of shot in the midriff, at deadly close range. He died soon after, not yet sixty years old. □

Note on Sources

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Mrs. Eloise Leinfelter of Iowa City and Mr. William E.L. Graham of Orlando, Florida in the preparation of this article. Several other individuals also provided useful information, including Ned Ashton of Iowa City, Joe Meder of Solon, and Bruce Duhl of Blue Grass.



An SP Grade double-barrelled shotgun made by Fox (SHSI)