

village view

by Andrea Leonard

The Shooting Record, a diary kept by Orville D. Lovell, New York businessman who hailed originally from Osterville, pertains primarily to his experiences while hunting shore birds in waters off the Cape and on the beaches of Fire Island, Long Island, N. Y., east of the city where he worked and lived most of the year.

During his visits to the Cape several times a year, he and his friends spent a good deal of their time birding. The Shooting Record tells little of the everyday life of Cape Codders a century ago, but much about the weather, the numbers of waterfowl that wintered in the rivers and bays, and makes many references to modes of transportation, the time it took to travel from one part of the Cape to another, and provides graphic pictures of sportsmen of the era.

On a Saturday, the 31st of March in the year 1883, we find Orville with his friend Nate Baldwin, once again pursuing their favorite sport.

"A winter's morning, wind N. W., ice along the shore and the land covered four inches deep with snow. A haze of frost lay over the waters and the stars twinkled frostily overhead. At 3:00 A.M. we waded through the snow and got rigged at daylight only a short distance from the shore. We lay in a 'seaweed bunk'. The morning flight was nothing. Nate and I lay until 8:00 A.M. and only got two tricks (one each).

"Baldwin is now aboard the box, and we are having a cup of coffee. In midwinter, it would not be colder nor the shores and bay present a more wintery scene than now with April close at hand. As Nate says, 'This beats all.' We can't seem to find any birds at all and I fear our goal will not be reached, but

hope it may."

There is no entry to indicate whether the men had better shooting the following week. In fact, the next entry is not made until early October and that a short one, reading, "Drove up to South Plymouth with Howard Marston and Joe. Also had for companions the ladies. The wind was northeast, light, and thick fog. No birds for the entire two days. A total failure. Won't go again until about the 20th."

On October 16, 1883, an entry is headed "Home", and is even shorter. "Wind northeast, cloudy and cold. Went off in VIXEN with Joe and shot three coots in New Harbor. A blurry day, blue, and very cold."

Mention of New Harbor raises a question. Where was it? It might have been the body of water we now call South Bay; long years ago, before the cut was constructed to permit vessels to enter the bay from the Sound, and when Sampson's Island was a spit of land extending from the point where Sea View Avenue deadends, most of South Bay was a cedar swamp.

Only a narrow ribbon of water skirted the eastern shore of Oyster Harbors (then called Grand Island), coursed between the island and what is now Sampson's, and eventually reached the open waters outside at the mouth of Cotuit Harbor. It may be that Orville was referring to the newly cleared waters of that bay.

It's hard to imagine South Bay a great cedar swamp, but old records reveal it once was.

On Monday, October 22, 1883, Orville set out once again to find birds. "Wind still northeast and has been so for nearly three weeks. Double-reefed the VIXEN and went out for coots. Before going, saw two ducks light in a small pond hole on Centerville Beach and sailed over in my gunning boat. Found them and shot both with one gun. They proved to be widgeons and very fine birds. I have not shot a widgeon at home for many years. Ran out off Squaw's Island in the VIXEN; found very few birds. Returned to the bay. This was my last sail as the miserable blowy rainy weather prevented my going again."

Not until Christmas week was Orville back on the Cape. On December 24th, 1883, he wrote; "This A.M. on my way to the Boat House with my dog 'Gamble' (a gift from Mr. Force of New York), he struck on a bevy of quail. I got one shot and bagged two birds. The dog acted very well and I like him thus far very much."

On Wednesday, December 26th, Orville's entry tells of still another expedition in the yacht COMFORT.

"A calm day. Bay full of ice on the 22nd. We got the COMFORT out to the point that day, and well we did for the bay closed that night. On the 26th we started for Waquoit at 1:00 P.M., wind southwest and south, calm and moderate. Howard Marston, N.E. West, Nelson H. Barse and myself, the com mand.

"At 4:30 P.M. anchored on Cotuit Bar. At 5:00 got underweigh again, and at 9:00 P.M. went into Comfort Harbor (Waquoit) and moored for the night. We towed the boxes up the bay and rowed around to look at the Hole. Heard a few geese but saw none; returned to the COMFORT and retired.

"Thursday, December 27: Arose at 3:30 A.M. and rigged our boxes in the East Channel. Howard did not get any shooting owing to a person from Waquoit setting in a sneak near him in the ice.

"I lay farther up the bay and got more shooting. At 9:00 A.M. we gathered our rig and returned to the boat. The parties from Waquoit dragged their boat over the ice for the second time and departed for home.

"Mr. Henry L. Lumbert called and dined with us. At 2:00 P.M. it began to rain, and it is a stormy afternoon. The boys are all asleep and I feel like joining them. Wind nor'nor'east. A stormy night and sharp lightning. Except a change soon.

Friday, December 28; At 3:00 A.M. the wind was blowing a heavy gale from the west and west northwest; in fact, blowing so hard we did not for a moment think of going out, but blew the lights out and went to sleep. At 8:30 A.M. had breakfast; the wind increasing and blowing a heavy gale, the sand flying along the beach, and the old COMFORT rocking in Comfort Harbor.

"At 12:30 Nate and I went over with 'Gamble', my dog, to try for quail on Menhaunt, and also to look for whistlers. We succeeded in getting over without a wetting and went up as far as Brant Point. The bay is well opened by the storm, but is full of ice below (or as far as) the Point. Saw a good many whistlers feeding up the East Channel. We returned to the boat and had a fine supper of roast whistlers.

It is now a little after six, and thw wind yet slows a gale and the sand flies along the beach. A wild blowy day, and yet continues; I hope for a chance in the morning, but fear the wind will not allow us to shoot. The COMFORT is hard agound, and all the tide is out of the Bay. Goodnight."

"Saturday, December 29: Wind blowing heavily at north-west. Telephoned for the teams and then rigged in East Channel and under Menhaunt. Result: six birds. Left for home at 5:00 P.M. with Nate on board as shipkeeper.

"Sunday, December 30th: Wind southwest. Drove the team up for Nate. Laura M. Barse and Joe rode with me. We all had dinner on the COMFORT, then drove home, leaving the COMFORT alone but under Mr. Davis' charge. Bay all open. This ends this year's record."

There is no entry for New Year's Eve, but the record continues immediately after the holiday, and we'll have more for you concerning the following week's experiences in another chapter.