

village view

by Andrea Leonard

New Years Day fell on a Tuesday in 1884, and Orville Lovell and his dog, "Gamble", wandered across the fields lying between Osterville and Centerville, bordering Bumps River.

Gamble, according to his master, worked very well and Orville was much pleased with the dog, even though their bag was only one quail.

On Thursday morning, January 3rd, the duck hunters set out again for Waquoit; this time, since the boat was riding at anchor in Comfort Harbor, they drove up with the team.

"Found the COMFORT all right. Got boxes over under Menhant. Wind blowing a gale, northwest, and colder. Fear our chances for shooting are poor for the morning, but hope for the best.

"We lay on the shore for black ducks, but got none; returned to the COMFORT and had supper. A heavy gale blows from the northwest. It blows over us and howls and roars through the halyards and out over the beach hills to the sea.

"The coast lights shine out brightly, and the stars twinkle frostily in the clear blue above us. The sun sank down in a beautiful magenta bordering of fire, and the moon now silvers the clearcut headlands with its cold pure rays.

"In the cabin we are cozy and comfortable and Howard's stories amuse us vastly, but sleepiness is stealing on. We lay us down amidst the war of winds overhead and the beat of waters on the beach, and soon fall away, only to be awakened by the alarm that will sound soon for us tired slumberers. And so, good night to all, and a wish for a good bag tomorrow. (Which I do not expect but still hope for.)

Reading Orville's Shooting Record, I marvel at the men's tolerance for bitter weather, and the misery and physical discomfort they willingly endured to shoot birds. For some readers, the Record is fascinating because through Orville's words they may relive their own sufferings in the field without braving, again, the ferocity of cutting winds and icy cold.

For others, the idea of sport shooting is abhorrent. A century ago, if there was any sentiment for the hapless birds, such emotion was well hidden. For wives and mothers, a good bag meant meat on the table, and for husbands and fathers, a good bag meant fine sport and a full stomach.

In my own childhood men of the family went ducking in the late fall of the year. While huddled warm in my bed under woolen blankets, I'd hear, in the predawn darkness, the rattle of a doorknob along the hall, the thump of stockinged feet descending the stairs and, soon, the roar of the motor beneath the hood of the old Model A Ford that carried the hunters off to Flat Pond at Monomoscoy.

When the men returned, there'd be stories to tell of how the birds came in, the numbers flying, who got off which shots, how cold it was lying in wait. And then, dinner. How delicious! The flavor of those birds lingers still in memory. Nothing you can buy at a meat counter will ever taste as they did.

But best of all, in Orville's Shooting Record, are his descriptions of the weather, the nights and days on the water, the storms and winds. Those, alone, make the Record worth reading and re-reading.

"Friday, January 4, 1884: The alarm sounded out at 3:00 A.M., and we awoke to hear the same roar of wind through the rigging and around the mast that we last remembered. We sank back to sleep awhile. Then Nate got up and out; he

returned to report the weather very cold and the tide very low, and everything covered with ice as far as he could see; so, after a long consultation, we decided to get breakfast, await daylight, and then set.

"We did so, the wind still blowing heavily. At daylight we crossed the channel and went up by land to where we'd left our boats by 'Snake Creek Fence.' We found about 250 to 300 whistlers in, and Nate and I set our box off the fence.

"It was very cold. The coys rapidly iced up and turned over, and at last sank to a level with the water. Not a bird returned to us, but all flew in to the west of where we lay. I got off one long shot and got one whistler.

"It was icing up badly, and wherever we went with the boat, ice would make at once. At 9:00 A.M. we gave it up, gathered our rig and landed. Mr. Davis drove down and we sent by him a telegram for our team as the COMFORT was hard aground and we wanted to be at home and go to the 'Sociable' at the Hall by 6:00 P.M.

"We rowed our boat down to the COMFORT and at 4 P.M., the team having come, we bade boodby to Waquoit and drove away, leaving Nelson and Nate to bring the COMFORT home as soon as they could do so.

"We had a nice ride home and enjoyed the dance in the evening. This terminates our Waquoit trip which has not been a success (as to numbers of birds) but has been thoroughly enjoyed by us all, and I trust the next year will find us all together again in the old boat in Comfort Harbor.

"Saturday, January 5: At 5 P.M. the COMFORT arrived from Waquoit, and we moored her on the point of the beach, in a bend. Could not get her into the bay on account of the ice. Left good fires in her and I drove the boys home and returned from Centerville. They had had hard work to get her out of the ice, but accomplished it at last, and sailed through 'skim ice' the most of the way home. I am glad to have her so near the Boat House again. She left Waquoit at 1 P.M.

"Tuesday, January 8: Wind calm in the early morning. Got up at 4:00 A.M. and drove the team over the cool hills for Nate, got him, and drove to Centerville River and set coys for whistlers. They came late as it was so calm. I got nine and Nate none. Two of them fell outside, and we dragged the skiff boat over the beach and got them. Then I sent Nate back to the stand, and dragged the boat back alone.

"If you want a good pull, try that drag, and I feel you will want a few hours' rest after it. At 9:00 A.M. went home. Wind then east southeast, and it blew strong in the P.M. A fair bag out of about twenty birds that flew around us. Hear of a good chance in South Bay and hope to get it tomorrow.

"Thursday, January 10: Wind northwest, blowing heavily. Drove to Centerville River and, putting the horse in my Boat House shed, I piled up the blocks of ice around my box, set coys, and lay down for the birds to come. About twenty had been feeding in the river the day before, and I wanted ten of them.

"Only three came around, and I shot at two and got them. At 8:30 A.M., I pulled up and went home. This is my last shooting day, as tomorrow morning I leave for New York. I was alone this A.M., and hoped for better sport, but shall hope to have it the next time home. I bid goodbye, as I always do, with regret, to my home and to its pleasant memories and surroundings. I think forward to the next winter's sport with unabated zeal.

"Friday, January 11, 1884: Left home this A.M. for New York, via Boston. I leave my dog behind, and I think he is a very good one. I also leave the old COMFORT on the point, embarged with ice about eight feet deep, piled up by the last heavy sea around her. Shall get her into winter quarters soon and remodel her cabin so as to make it larger."

Once more, Orville resumes his role as prosperous New York businessman. And once more, I wish he'd left us more in his record: more of his travels, more about the "Sociable" at the Hall, more about the road as he drove his team around the Cape, more about the houses he passed and the people living in them.

Orville's reports of weather illustrate how able he was to record details. Had he been so inclined, he could have left us a legacy of vivid descriptions of Osterville nearly a century ago. Only in our imaginations, however, do the village and the activities of its people live again.