

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Finding a journal written nearly a century ago is like finding a treasure chest if you've a curiosity bump about the past. Finding such diary written here on the Cape by a native son of Osterville is like finding a treasure chest filled to the brim with golden coins and precious jewels.

Such a journal has come to hand. It was written between 1881 and 1894. While the entries weren't made daily, and while the principal subject is the sport of waterfowling (a pastime greatly enjoyed by the landed gentry of the era), the record's details of weather, boating, and shooting activities are fascinating.

"The sportsman's quick eye and ready aim must bring the bird to bag when he is once within range. Over the waters of the inland bays and on the ever-rolling ocean, I have shot, but my greatest sporting days, and those most pleasing to recall, have been in the waters of my boyhood home and amid the scenes I love so well, on Cape Cod."

The author of the above introductory paragraph did, indeed, grow up in Osterville, here maintained his home, boats, horses and dogs, and family. Here he spent as much time as he could spare from his ship chandlery business in New York City. In addition to bird hunting on the Cape, he went on frequent sport-shooting excursions to Long Island's Great South Bay.

Typical of many entries is the one that follows dated December 26, 1882:

"Started in the boat COMFORT from East Bay at 11:45 a.m., tide last of the flood, and a light breeze from N.W. to W., coming into the north off Popponess, and S.W. there from Waquoit. The girls and Howard and Ella saw us off and followed in the carriage as far as the Hotel. With the help of the ebbtide we arrived all right in Comfort Harbor (Waquoit Bay) at 5 P.M.

"Weather chilly, cloudy and wind light, S.W. Made everything snug for the night and turned in at 9:00 P.M. Can see quite a number of birds up under the west shore and hope for some shooting in the morning.

December 27; Waquoit: Alarm roused us at 3 A.M. Beautiful morning, bright moonlight and sharp air with fresh breeze from N.W. After a good breakfast, Nate and Orville started for Deep River country. Nelson and I turned in and had 40 or 50 winks, turned out just at sunrise and found flocks of fowl flying in, high over the eastern beach.

"At 9:30 Orville and Nate returned to the COMFORT and brought with them only two birds, having had no shooting. The main body of birds lay inside the sheet of quite thick ice which they (having left the ice hooks behind them) could not break into. About 10 a.m. we saw a boat pulling around the beach point and the man came alongside.

"We expected it was one of the "Dissenters" from Waquoit but instead found he is a friend who, as evidence of his good feeling, brought a pail of very fine oysters and presented them to Orville. His name is I. Hinckley.

"After he left, three boats containing together five men pulled out through the narrows and boarded the wrecked sloop lying off the point of the beach entrance. Then two men appeared in front of the fish house, making seven, all told. We expected a visit from them, but after hanging around in an uncertain mood until Nate and Orville started for the box again, they left without having said or done anything against our right of shooting."

Mention of "Dissenters" and the talk of a box roused confusion since there was no entry that described them, or it. Tucked between the pages of the record, however, a yellowed newspaper clipping provided the description of their sport and a clue to the concerns of the seven men called "Dissenters". It reads:

"On January 16 of 1882, Justice Hopkins held Orville D. Lovell of New York (Oysterville), and Nathan E. West of Oysterville, for the Grand Jury, charged with illegally shooting wild fowl by using a battery.

"What is called a battery is usually a box or box sunk low in the water upon the feeding grounds of the wild fowl, either so close to the water's edge as to be practically invisible to the eyes of the wary fowl, or else so disguised as to resemble a sand or mud bar, rising just above the surface.

"They are used to considerable an extent along our Atlantic coast, but almost every state restricts, and several entirely prohibit their use on account of the murderous effect upon the wild fowl sojourning in our bays."

That's really how reporters used to write for newspapers!

"The contrivance is surrounded by numerous wooden decoys, often numbering 100 or more, to resemble a bunch of feeding ducks, which attract the passing fowl and those driven from their feeding grounds by a companion sailboat.

"Constant harassing from the sailboat and attacks from unseen foes in the water so terrify the fowl that those not destroyed soon leave for more hospitable shores, not to return.

"This is what has happened on the shores of New York and New Jersey and, to a lesser extent, owing to their comparatively larger territory, in the more southern states."

The above newspaper article describes precisely the manner in which the sportsmen bagged their birds. Game laws today prohibit these methods of attracting birds to their certain destruction; most of us are glad of it, for the flocks of birds we see off-shore today are only now, after nearly a century, rebuilding their former numbers.

Survival of the water birds continues to be a matter of concern to naturalists and environmentalists since they are now being threatened again; this time not with guns, but with oil spills.

A few days later, under the date of January 5, 1883, the record states, "I shall not be troubled again by the "Dissenters" now the Grand Jury has found no objection. I am glad the unpleasant feeling has gone and that I can now see a villager without thinking he is coming to disturb me in my sport."

From time to time during the coming winter, there will be more in this column about Orville, Nate, Nelson and their friends. This time we'll close with a description of a night aboard the COMFORT.

"It is a most dismal dreary night, black with darkness and not a star visible or even the coast lights to enliven the outlook. A chilly night, grey and damp; the sound of the fog horn has greeted us all day from West Chop with its moaning cry. The wind marches by us in sighs and is lost over the cold heaving sea which is covered with ice from the bay.

"I should have been glad to have seen a carriage from home so I could have spent the night at home, but the storm is almost too severe to expect it to come. Shall hope for a change of weather by tomorrow, and a change of wind for home.

"Only the cabin and our beds look inviting, so now I'll turn in, hoping for better luck tomorrow."

Much of the journal is repetitious; however, there are some grand descriptions of storms, and superstitions, and throughout the record a feeling of a bygone era. We'll share parts of it during the coming winter.

Perhaps we'll appreciate our own warm firesides during the cold months ahead if we have the adventures of Orville, Nate, and Nelson to entertain us.