



Publication of the Harsens Island St.Clair Flats Historical Society

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President's Message for August 2017

Hi All,

Upcoming Annual Meeting

Please join the Board of Directors and your fellow members at our annual meeting scheduled for Saturday, August 19th. We start with wine and appetizers at 4:30 pm followed by our meeting at 5:00 pm. This is an opportunity to hear what the Board is planning for the future and to give your input on the future of the Society.

Steam Whistle

We are all very excited about the steam whistle from the freighter J.B. Ford donated by member John Cameron, Jr. Thank you to Chuck Miller for making arrangements for its transport from Grand Haven, MI, and to Bobby Bryson and Chuck for doing the actual move. It was quite a job moving the compressor which came with the whistle, since it weighs over half a ton.

The Society is making plans to mount the whistle on the front of the museum and installing the compressor in a small room to be added to the building. We have drawings prepared and are in the process of getting the needed permits and bids for construction.

This project will cost us a few dollars, but, we feel it is well worth it for what it will mean to the Society and the Island. We hope to use the whistle to signal the start of special events and to salute passing ships on occasion. It will be an important part of our collection and our activities. We will be one of the only historical museums with an operating steam whistle and with our very special location right on the water near passing ships, We may be the only museum with the ability to salute ships in this very special manner.

The task before us now is to find one or more sponsors to help cover the expense of the compressor room and installation of the whistle. Of course we have received offers from members and local contractors who will help with much of the labor, but, even at that, there will be material costs and some expenses for specialties. If you know of any members or contractors who would be able to help in this cause, please let me know at 248-388-0465 or xharpspah@aol.com.

Thank you,
 Bob Williams, President

Excerpted from: Letters to the Editor in :
RECREATION, Volume XXII. Number 1, JANUARY, 1905,
G. O. SHIELDS QCOQUINAT, Editor and Manager

FISHING AT ST. CLAIR. :

The St. Clair Flats, "The Venice of America," have long been known as the haunt of the black bass. They are in lake St. Clair, nine miles from the mainland. The flats are reached from Detroit, Michigan, by steamer, three times a day, the distance being twenty– five miles. In order to achieve success as a bass fisher man it will be necessary to employ a guide, or punter, as they are called; these punters formerly used a row or sail boat, but now each is the owner of a gasoline launch, making it very easy to reach the fishing grounds. A punter charges for his services and use of boat four dollars per day, and the start is usually made at daylight or earlier. The day's catch will depend much upon the skill of the punter, as black bass are continually moving in schools from place to place, and it is only by long experience that one can tell where to find them. In the spring they are found only in shallow water, moving into the deep channels about the end of August. The best fishing at this time of year is on the Canadian side of the lake, the open season beginning there on June 15th. In order to fish in Canadian waters, it is necessary for an American to have a license. This will cost five dollars, and can be secured from the game warden, who will no doubt appear on the scene just after one has started to fish. The baits used for black bass are chubs and shiners; the small crawfish is also used by many fishermen. For those who do not care to indulge in the more strenuous sport of bass-fishing, there are perch, pike, rock bass, silver bass, and pickerel. These can be caught in large numbers. Punters are not required to fish for other than black bass, as anyone can give information as to where they can be caught. There are many good hotels on the Flats, and a telephone cable connects with the mainland. Mail is delivered by steamer four times a day.

Harry C. McKee, St. Clair Flats. Mich.

Ed. Note: Anyone recognize the name Harry McKee??



Islander Carter McMillen shows off his 'Black Bass'.

Factory Decoy Production in Detroit

by Marie Eidt

With the establishment of hunting and shooting clubs a demand was created for good working duck decoys. Initially local carvers from the area surrounding Lake St. Clair supplied individual handmade birds for the hunt.

For today's collector having a duck produced by one of these factories links you to our area's past. The decoy ties you to the history of the sport when the gun clubs were established in the St. Clair Flats and gives you a personal bond with the men who enjoyed their time here.

Peterson and Dodge Decoy Factories

George Peterson and Jasper N. Dodge are two of the earliest manufactures with a shared history but they were not in business together. An old ad from the era shows Peterson in business on east Fort Street in Detroit by 1873. He had previously been a chair maker, saw maker, carpenter and machinist. These skills made a ready transfer to decoy making. His business relocated in 1875 to 278 Division Street. Then in 1884 the whole operation was sold to Jasper Dodge. Dodge wanted the facility to expand his own home production. He offered a full line of ducks, geese, swans, coot, brant, snipe and plovers. Duck calls were also sold. Dodge ran advertisements offering to copy any decoy – just send it to him. While he used the old Peterson shop, Dodge's own style was quite different. Since he occasionally he copied other makers decoys on request, identifying his original work can be difficult. His birds do tend to have a heavier look than other factory offerings. Dodge closed his shop in 1894; it appears he did not have enough decoy business to keep going so he turned to making oars.

Mason Decoy Factory

The Mason Decoy Factory had its start in a shed behind Mason's house on Tuscola Street in 1896, perhaps even earlier. William Mason was an experienced duck hunter – a member of the "Old Club" on Harsen's Island in the 1870s and 1880s. He would have been very familiar with wild ducks in their natural environment.

Meeting with some success the decoy business was moved from his home to space in the back of the Nickolson Lumber Company on Brooklyn Avenue in 1903. About a dozen workers were employed at this time. Herbert Mason, William's son, oversaw the factory and did the paper work.

Cedar logs were delivered by wagon. The bodies for the ducks were cut out of this cedar using set patterns. The heads were made separately and then joined to the body. The factory had two floors with decoy construction located on the main floor utilizing a lathe, band saw and sander. The upper level held three benches for the paint process with drying racks to the side. The decoys were packaged there for shipment. Mason Decoy Factory was not a rigid assembly line – the ducks did show the style of the individuals who cut the patterns, carved in any details and then painted them.

Five grades of decoys were available:

Premier – full graceful body, fine carved head and bill with great paint. Challenger – these had a sleeker look about them, Standard Grade – included the #1 Glass Eye, #2 Tack Eye and #3 Painted Eye.

In 1905, William Mason died from rheumatic fever caught by lying in the marsh to study the ducks in their habitat. The aim was to make his decoys as realistic as possible. Herbert took complete control of the factory after his father's death, building a large mail order business. Mason Decoys became a volume supplier to Sears Roebuck. The business flourished for 30 years. Today these Factory produced decoys command high prices in the collectors' market. For Mason Decoys the higher the grade the more expensive the decoy. Condition and rarity do make for price exceptions.

In our Feathers and Fins exhibit this summer we mostly display hand crafted decoys from the island and nearby communities. But the factory decoys hold interest because our local sporting clubs maintained decoy strings for use by their members and these would have included the factory produced decoy. All part of our color full and interesting past on display at the Historical Museum.

Reference and source material:

Waterfowl Decoys of Michigan and the Lake St. Clair Region, collected and edited by Clune Walsh Jr. and Lowell G. Jackson

Factory Decoys of Mason, Stevens, Dodge and Peterson, by John and Shirley Delph

MUSEUM CALANDER OF EVENTS

August- 5 - Saturday – 10:30 AM – Board/Membership meeting at the Museum

“NEW: Kids Day at the Historical Museum”. The date is Monday, August 7th from 10 am until Noon. It’s open to children of all ages. Puppet making and storytelling around our theme of Muscrat Sally, our museum mascot. Refreshments will be served too.

11th – Friday – Social hour – 6 to 8 PM at the Museum

19th Saturday – 4:30 PM Wine and Appetizers at the museum.5 to 6 PM- Annual Membership Meeting at the museum, 4 PM.

Sept. – 8th – Friday – Social hour – 6 to 8 PM at the Museum

16– Saturday – 3:00 PM - Lecture series – Tony Gramer: “Lost in 17 Minutes-The Tug O Wilcox “
Reservations required- Call Chuck- 748-7209. Members. \$10, Non -Members \$15

Oct.- 7– Saturday – 10 – 3 PM - Pie Sale at Museum

14th - Saturday - 10:30 AM – Board/Membership meeting.

Dec.-

2nd – Saturday – 10 AM– 3 PM - Cookie Walk at the Museum

9th– Saturday – 10:30 AM – Board Meeting at Museum

2017 Summer Hours

May 25th (Memorial Day Weekend) Through September.

Thursday, Friday - 12-3 PM; Saturday – 10 AM–3 PM,

Sunday – Noon–4 PM Special Happy Hour- 2nd Friday 6-8 PM.

Special note from Curator Nancy Boulton: We have had an increasing number of groups from senior citizen homes visit the island during the week. Generally, they have lunch, then make their rounds visiting the library, the gift shop, the Lighthouse Hardware then a trip to the museum. We are pleased to welcome new friends to the island! If you know any senior group or other groups looking for a fun day out, please contact Nancy 748-3802 for a special appointment.



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