

A TALE OF THE KANKAKEE RIVER

Interesting Early History of the Kankakee River Area as it was sixty five year ago.

EDITOR'S NOTE: (Inasmuch as the government has plans under way to restore parts of the Kankakee river area to its original state for a national game preserve, the following true narrative of that famous river and marsh published at this time appears to be opportune. The story was written by E. W. Erwin, who at the time of writing was totally blind, having dictated it for publication. Mr. Erwin will be remembered by many of the older inhabitants, especially in the vicinity of Hebron, where he spent much time on the once famous. but now almost forgotten, river and marsh.) On the 18th day of October, 1869, during a blinding snowstorm, I drove 10 miles to Westfield. N.Y., a station on the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern railroad, and bought a ticket to Chicago. I was going duck shooting. I did not know the exact scene of my depredations but would determine that upon inquiry after reaching Chicago.

A friend of mine had told me he had a brother-in-law, F. J. Abbey, who kept a gun store on South Clark Street, and who, he was sure, could give me some valuable advice in my search for a good shooting location. On my arrival at Chicago, I made my way at once to Mr. Abbey 's store and found him a very genial and pleasant gentleman- I gave him my muzzle-loading gun to be rebored and furnished with new tubes for percussion caps. After he had given the gun to his workmen to make the above repairs, I asked him if he could direct me to the best place he knew of for duck shooting. He said: "I think we had better take a walk over to South Water Street, the great game market, and see what we can learn there."

Upon arriving there, I saw what to me was a wonderful sight. Commission houses lined the street on both sides and wagon loads of game of all kinds were piled on the sidewalk and hung from the awnings; drays were constantly arriving with fresh supplies and hauling away that already sold. Buyers from hotels and restaurants were present getting their day's supplies. It was a scene of great activity. Carcasses of deer were hanging from the awnings; also wild turkeys, geese, brent, ducks and prairie chickens. This was going on, on both sides of the street as far as the eye could see. We stepped into the commission house of Joyce and Cunningham. As soon as we could get the attention of the manager, I told him I was looking for a place for good duck and goose shooting and asked him if he could advise me where to go to find it. He said, " I surely can. You go to Hebron on the Pan-handle railroad about 50 miles from here. There is the greatest duck and goose shooting I know of." He handed me a package of his shipping tags, "and if you have anything to sell while there, ship to us and we will guarantee quick and satisfactory returns."

Things began to look pretty rosy to me and after getting back to Mr. Abbey 's store I bought a .5 pound sack of No. 6 shot, and a 6 1/4 keg of powder. 1000 Ely's felt wads and 1000 Bly's water-proof percussion caps. This was just for a starter. Mr. Abbey told me he would be glad to ship me anything I might want at any time after I got located. Then after paying for my gun repairs, he insisted on showing me the way to the Pan-Handle railroad station.

Here was true western hospitality for you. My train left at about 9 o'clock in the evening and arrived at Hebron about 11 pm. I inquired of Mr. Scott, the station agent, for a place to spend the night. He pointed to a building on a knoll a little way south of the station. I walked and found the place shut up for the night. I knocked several times and the landlord at last came down with a

tallow candle in his hand. He showed me to a room at the head of the stairs. I rose early next morning.

It was a bright and beautiful October morning. Upon looking down on the station I saw the platform covered with game. I went down at once to look it over. There lay the carcasses of four deer and bundles of ducks in large quantities, also many geese and brant. Each deer carcass and bundle of game had a card attached which proved to be one of Joyce and Cunningham's tags. Each tag read as follows: 5 deer, 467 ducks (large), 392 ducks (small). 22 geese, 16 brant; from Beaubein and Sargent, Hebron, Indiana.

Mr. Scott, the agent, was there and informed me that Beaubein and Sargent were making shipment about the same size two or three times a week. He said they were shooting on the Kankakee river but he did not know exactly where, probably the landlord might inform me.

On returning to the hotel and getting breakfast, the landlord told me he thought my best plan would be to go down to Harmon Granger 's. He said Mr. Granger was an old duck shooter and trapper, who lived on the edge of the marsh southwest of town. He said, "if you take the road it will be five miles; if you go straight across, down through the woods, it will be about three. I will go out and show you where to start. Mr. Granger may be out on the river now but he is home frequently and I think while waiting for him you can find fine shooting right near his house." So putting my gun barrel through the straps of my valise and throwing it over my shoulder, I was off in spite of the heavy load on my back. I was walking on air.

After leaving the hotel, I passed through heavy timber for a mile and a half, passing many ponds all of them full of ducks and I shot as many as I could carry.

When I reached the highway, a man came along with a load of lumber and carried me and my plunder to Mr. Granger's house. Arriving there just before noon, Mrs. Granger said she was expecting her husband every minute--"hang your ducks on the clothes line and come right in, dinner will be ready." Mr Granger came to a late dinner. He said he was anxious to get back to camp that night and would take me with him. When ready to start we walked four miles east to the Hebron canal, entered Mr. Granger's boat and started for the river a short distance away.

We began to see ducks the minute we entered the river. They were constantly in sight until we reached Granger's Landing in the edge of the timber and open water ducks in the channel. We also started several deer that ran back splashing through the water. We did no shooting as Mr. Granger said we would have no time to stop and pick up game that evening. We reached a high island called Indian Garden where Beaubein and Sargent 's camp was located. We met them just coming in with their boats loaded to the water with ducks and geese. After supper the market shooters suggested that we help them cut a boat road through the timber next morning to a marsh back three-fourths of a mile where they could hear geese but were unable to get to them on account of the timber and brush in the way.

Next morning we started on this job which took until 4 pm. When we entered the marsh a wild scene met our eyes. A northwest gale was blowing, whipping the tree tops which surrounded an open marsh perhaps three-fourths of a mile across. Ducks and geese were constantly pouring in

from all sides. We decided to shoot nothing but geese and brant. We pushed out into the marsh and took our stations. Beaubien and Sargent each had a boat and going ahead picked their places some distance apart. Mr. Granger followed and put me on the first big muskrat house he came to. He had not proceeded more than 75 yards before a large flock of brant came pouring over the tree tops directly over him. He gave them both barrels and I saw seven of them fall. That opened the ball and a million ducks and geese rose in the air and began to circle round the marsh thirty or forty feet high- A bunch of Canada geese came directly over me. I shot at the leader and killed him. I aimed at another when I saw the dead one falling directly towards my head.

By quick work I managed to dodge him so I kept from being knocked off the rat house. He fell so close I reached out and took him by the wing and pulled him up beside me. We were all using muzzle loading guns, the market shooters each had two double barreled ones and could load them very rapidly. In an hour 's time we had the three boats loaded with geese and made our way back to camp. I do not know how many there were but they made the biggest pile of geese I ever saw together at one time. That was probably the first time a gun had ever been fired in that marsh. Next morning Mr. Granger and I were going back up the river, in his boat which we intended to load with ducks on the way. He was to push the boat and I to do the shooting. He was in the stern with a long paddle. I was kneeling on a bunch of hay about two-thirds of the way to the bow of the boat. In front of me was a shallow box on the bottom of the boat containing extra ammunition consisting of one- half sack of shot, two boxes of gun weds; a box of percussion caps and a large powder flask belonging to Mr. Granger, which held one and fourth lbs. of powder. It was to be used to replenish mine when empty. The spring of the charger of this flask was broken which let the powder leak out, a small portion being in the bottom of the box. The wind was still blowing a gale which made it more favorable for our purpose which was to follow close to the bank of the river and shoot these ducks as they flew up out of the edge of timber and also out of the bayous bordering the river.

That was called jump shooting and was a successful way of getting the gene. We started up the river and had gone but a short distance when we came to the mouth of a bayou when a cloud of ducks with their great quacking came flying directly out over us. I raised up on my knees and fired first one barrel and then another. Then something happened--the pound and a quarter of powder in the extra flask had exploded. The wind pressing down over the tree-tops must have driven the fire from my gun down into the box and ignited the powder. It blew everything out of the boat except the sack of shot and that was burning. It also blew the planking loose from the bowl of the boat and spread it out flat like a raft. The whole inside of the boat was covered with blue smut like paint. The explosion deafened me so that I could scarcely hear anything. With great presence of mind Mr. Granger pushed the bow of the boat up into the bushes and so kept it from sinking with us. Just at this time an old trapper from Hebron by the name of Hunter Rice came down the river and took us into his boat and towed our boat down to Indian Garden, where we pulled it up on the bank. There we discovered the heavy brass charger of the exploded flask driven deep into the stern post about six inches above the bottom of the boat. It must have passed directly between my knees and between his feet without touching either of us.

We seem to have had a most miraculous escape from serious injury or possible death. Mr. Rice said: "You fellows must have been born to be hung." My shooting for this trip was over as my ammunition was gone, so nothing remained for me but to go back up the river with Mr. Rice who kindly offered to take me. Mr. Granger told me I would find duck shooting near his home in the

ponds and Eagle Creek ditch with no other shooter to interfere. He said I could board at his house as long as I wished. I had seen the possibilities for wonderful shooting along the river and adjacent marshes and determined to see more of it later.

Next morning I started out from Mr. Granger's home to size up the situation. I found Eagle Creek ditch which ran close back of the house in a straight line three miles emptying into the Grand marsh, to be about 16 feet wide and shallow enough to be waded in most places. The dirt from the ditch was piled on the left bank or the side nearest the house. On top of this ridge was a wide cattle trail making an ideal place to walk. From this path I could see down the ditch far ahead and note the location of flocks of ducks. Then stepping down off the path on the landward side I could walk along until I came to the place where the ducks were feeding without danger of being seen by them. Then crawling carefully up on the embankment again, kill as many as possible with the two barrels of my double gun. Then I'd wade in and bring the ducks out and lay them on the bank; then go on down the ditch and repeat this performance until I had killed as many as I could carry. I had a two bushel grain sack, the upper and lower corners on one side being tied together. Slipping this over my right shoulder and under my left arm with the open end in front made a handy way of carrying the game. The ducks were all mallards, widgeon and teal, all the finest kind of ducks for eating and it was the finest shooting I had ever found up to that time.

There were two brothers living nearby that hunted coon in the swamp and as soon as the ice was strong enough to bear in the fall, they used three dogs, a large savage bull dog, an English setter and an ordinary farm dog. They claimed these three dogs could not be beaten for finding coon. I told them I had at home a dog that I raised and trained for coon hunting. He was three and a half years old, a large handsome hound, afraid of neither man nor beast and would Kill a coon quicker than any dog I ever saw. They said if I could send him on a trial and he proved good they would give me 575.00 for him. As I had no further use for him at home, I had him sent. He came with a strong collar and chain on him and I fastened him in the barn and fed him myself. On going out with his supper a few days later his chain and collar lay on the floor but the dog was gone. I went outside and whistled and called but he did not show up,

That night at supper time, a fur buyer by the name of Fox, from LaPorte, whom I afterwards came to know well, called to stay all night. Hearing me speak of the dog he asked me to describe him. Then he said, "I came up the river this afternoon and met a man going down that had a dog in his boat I am sure was yours. My boatman, who knew the man, asked him where he got the dog and he said he found him." He said that he was going to stay at Grape Island that night and next day was going on down to the Hebron canal by road and twelve miles down the river to Grape Island. As soon as I got my supper I started out and walked to the canal. There I found several boats but not paddles. Looking about, I found a piece of cane, a blade and about six inches of handle. With this I put a boat in the canal and started. Coming out through the timber into the open river I looked for some landmark by which to find my way back. I noticed a large oak tree with big limbs, standing straight out on each side like a man's arms. Then I struck out into the stream and started down with the swift current. In my former trip with Mr. Granger he had shown me Grape Island on the south side of the river with an open bayou standing back 100 years or so to the camp.

It was a bright, still, cold, starlight night. I made pretty good time going down. Mallard ducks were constantly flying up on each side of the river, and I started deer two or three times. After I knew I

must be pretty well down, I began to look for the bayou and island and on arriving there could see the white frost on the roof of the camp. Turning my boat into the bayou, I soon approached the shore. When within a few feet of land the boat ran into thin ice that had formed since dark. It made a crashing noise on the still night air. Next minute I heard my hound begin to bark. He plunged into the water and I soon had him in the boat. He seemed as glad to see me as I was to see him. I then started back. I found it a far different matter going up stream with that short paddle; and long before I got up to my landmark my hands were cut and blistered; my knees were sore from kneeling on the bottom of the boat and it was getting daylight in the morning. I soon got into the canal again but it was now frozen over. I pulled the boat out on the bank and left it there. I got back to Mr. Granger's just as they were sitting down to breakfast but I had my dog.

It was now late in December and soon the marsh and swamp froze up and in a day or two the ice was strong enough to bear. Then we started out to try the dog. They had their three dogs on chains leading them but mine was running loose. I asked them why they had theirs tied and they said to keep the bull dog from killing my hound. I told them not to worry, the hound could take care of himself.

We had to cross on a narrow marsh and when we reached the edge of the swamp timber where we could see ahead a little way, my dog started and ran about sixty yards and caught a large mink which he killed, dropping it on the ice and went on into the swamp. We stopped and skinned the mink and while doing so I heard my dog bark "treed." I said "he has found coons."

Then they let their dogs loose. In about a minute there was a dog fight going on. They said "Let's hurry! They'll kill your dog." While we were talking the fight ceased and my dog was barking "treed" again. But his was the only noise we heard.

On arriving at the spot my dog was trying to chew down a small black ash stump and barking between mouthfuls. The other three dogs sat back at a very respectful distance licking their bleeding wounds. One of the men started to cut down the tree but my dog would not let him come near it until I told him to stand back, which he did, being thoroughly trained.

While one man was cutting down the tree the other fellow cut a club. I asked him what he was going to do with that and said he would kill the coons when the tree came down. I said, "never mind, the hound will attend to the coons and if you undertake to butt into his game, you are going to get badly bitten." When the stub fell, three coons rolled out on the ice. In less than half a minute the hound had them ready for skinning and started off to hunt for more.

My dog was sold!

The morning after the coon hunt, broke with a wild blizzard. Although it was the 20th of December it was the first snow we had had that fall. It was a foot deep and badly drifted. There was an Osage hedge a short distance from the house and the snow banks on the lee of the hedge seemed covered with prairie chickens.

Borrowing a white sheet from Mrs. Granger, I tied it over and around me and started out. Keeping behind the hedge and going carefully I soon had begged five of them. I was now ready to return

home as everything was frozen up and duck shooting ended.

I arrived home just in time to have the chickens cooked for our Christmas dinner. I promised to go back in the spring and did so late in March. The ducks had all left for the north.

Mr. Granger had moved away and I boarded with Wm. Fisher, a well-to-do farmer, who afterwards became a banker at Hebron. I put in a few days visiting before returning home. I got acquainted with George Allen, a prosperous farmer, who originally come from my native place. Chatuauque Lake, and married his wife there. He had a large family of children, a large farm and many horses, cattle and hogs. Mr. Allen was a very interesting talker and I think some of the tales he told me would be interesting in connection with this article. He said the first settlers could raise no crops, the deer were so plentiful. He showed me where he had his first 40-acre corn field near the house and the deer came into it in droves of thirty and forty at a time. He would go out in the morning with a dog and drive them out and by the time he got back to the house they would be in the field again.

All the other settlers in the swamp suffered in the same manner. But the next winter there came an unusually deep snow. An icy crust formed on the surface that would bear up a man and a dog, but the small sharp feet of the deer would cut through it so they could not run and were helpless. Then the farmers took the opportunity to destroy them. They killed the deer with clubs and drew them on the crust to their buildings. There they skinned out the fore quarters to be fed to the hogs and tied the skin around the hind quarters or saddle. This snow lasted nearly a week and they killed hundreds of deer and so reduced their number that the remainder took to the swamp and never bothered them again. They would take a sleigh load of the saddles and drive to the small towns nearby and to farmers back from the river and sold them out at 50 cents each.

While in the subject of deer, I will relate a story told me by Burl Pratt. He was a large powerful man, a cattle buyer and well used to handling ugly cattle. When old hunters told him that no man could hold a live deer with his hand alone, Pratt would give a snort of contempt and say he wished he had a chance, he would show them. In those days all prairie dwellers owned a tract of swamp timber. When the ice got strong enough to bear a team they would haul enough out for their year's firewood. Mr. Pratt drove in the swamp one day with Renz Brainard and Sam Irvin for a load of wood.

These two men were old hunters and had often heard Mr. Pratt say he would like to show them he could hold a deer. They had a dog with them and when well in the swamp the dog started up a small deer. The ice was very slippery without snow and the dog could easily outrun a deer under these conditions and soon had the deer at bay in the brush. They drove the team as near to it as they could, the two hunters jumped off the sleigh and went to the dog. A good sized tree had turned up by the roots some time previous and left a round open space about six feet in diameter with heavy pucker brush on three sides and the large root on the fourth. This space was covered with smooth ice. The deer was facing the dog which was constantly trying to get behind the animal and kept the deer turning round and round. Then the hunters called to Mr. Pratt, saying "come on, Burl, here's your deer." Burl soon arrived on the scene and when he saw the deer he laughed and said: "You had better try this first and if it is not large enough we can easily get a bigger one." The deer paid no attention to the men, being too busy with the dog. So Pratt slipped up behind the root and when the

deer came around just right he launched himself full length on its back. The deer's hind feet slipped, he crushed it down on to the ice, his hind feet slipping forward and Pratt grabbed one in each hand and held them up tight against the deer's body.

The men called off the dog and left Pratt and the deer to fight it out alone. The deer was badly handicapped but he slung Pratt around, banged him against the root, walloped his legs against the pucker brush and churned the breath out of Pratt's body. As soon as he could get wind enough to speak he begged the hunters to knock the deer in the head. They replied, "Hang on, Burl, this is the chance you long have wished for; you may never get another." As soon as Pratt could speak again he said, " You knock this deer in the head or I will let it go. I can't hold it another second." That was all they were waiting for and they soon had the deer killed and in the sleigh. Then they took stock of Pratt. His pants were completely torn off and hung in strings on the brush. He was scratched and battered and bruised and bleeding in many places. They got him into the sleigh, covered him with horse blankets and drove home without waiting to get a load of wood. Mr. Pratt used to take great delight in telling this story on himself and this is just as he told it to me.

Now to go back--George Allen had a good friend in Hebron named Had Folsom who had a camp in Red Oak Island and owned a trapping ground there.

Unlike most of the trappers of those days, he saved his money and invested it in land. He, like all the other trappers, went into camp in the fall with a camp cook and two assistants and stayed there until the first of May, when they would boat their furs up to the Hebron canal to be met there by teams and be hauled to some point in the village where all the fur buyers would meet by appointment and put in sealed bids on each batch of fur. The highest bidder took the batch. Mr. Allen used to haul Had Folsom's fur every spring. He told me he drove down there with a strong team of horses and a hay rack and binding pole on his wagon and Mr. Folsom's winter catch made as heavy a load as he could draw.

The furs were all packed in bales, the muskrats, by themselves, also the mink, coon and otter the same. Each bale would weigh about one hundred pounds and was wrapped and covered on the outside with deer skins. A load of fur like that now-a-days coming into town would create some excitement. But in those days there were several wagon loads coming in from the various camps. I doubt if the old Kankakee Valley will ever produce another crop as valuable as the fur crop was in those days.

At the time of which I write conditions were rapidly changing. The trapper was giving way to the shooter, wealthy sportsmen from Chicago (only 50 miles away) were flocking to the river in ever increasing numbers. The only places where they could be accommodated were at the trapper's camps. And the only guides available were the trappers themselves. They owned the only boats on the river and know every inch of the swamp and marsh. These sportsmen were able and willing to pay them prices they could not refuse. Mr. Folsom's camp was situated at the extreme lower end of the swamp timber and thus commanded both timber and marsh shooting of the finest kind. He had a famous camp cook named Uncle Harl Seymour, an old forty-niner who could cook the best camp meal and make the best camp coffee I ever tasted. His camp was always "neat and tidy" and any shooter who could get accommodations at the old Red Oak Camp was in luck.