

The Glory That Was

I can remember the day as though it was yesterday ó December 23, 1956. At exactly 3 p.m., my Dad had me, a whippersnapper of 12, in front of our black and white TV, a novelty because it had only been purchased two weeks before ó our very first TV.

It was a 21-inch, Zenith console model with òFlash-Matic Tuning,ö the first-ever remote control for TV. I can remember my Dad sitting in his easy chair working the remote with a smile across his face ó and mine too.

Advertisements blared all week, òIf you have never seen several hundred thousand ducks at one time, tune in Wide Wide World on December 23. You have a treat coming. If everything goes right, millions of you will see thousands and thousands of ducks flash onto your screen.ö

Dave Garroway hosted the 90-minute Sunday afternoon series. It involved the technical novelty of live remote pickups from various parts of the nation and the world, with a different theme each week.

One month before the telecast, Wide Wide World produced a 10-minute live telecast of a political rally for Arkansas Governor Faubus, who was running for a second-term. The rally at Batesville, Arkansas, centered on a fish fry of the famous White River catfish. After it was over, the producer asked if there was anything else they could film since they already had their equipment in the area.

Tom Mull, Director of Publicity and Education for the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, proposed a duck hunt. The season was but a few weeks away so George Purvis, who began working with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission in 1951, suggested Wallace Claypool's Wild Acres, where during the duck season one-fourth of the state's duck population concentrated on his 1,400-acre reservoir near Weiner, Arkansas.

The big question from the producers was, òCan you get ducks in front of the cameras?ö

Purvis remarked, òI've been driving ducks in front of the camera at Wild Acres for two years now. Mr. Claypool and I hunt in the mornings and film in the afternoons two or three times a week. I already have in place a 40-foot tree blind that Mr. Claypool built for me. The ducks are accustomed to it and pay it no attention. You may have seen pictures of the ducks in *Sport Illustrated* this past December with Boston's NBA point guard Bob Cousy on the front cover. It would be much easier if you would just send a cameraman down and let him spend the day shooting pictures. Then you could easily make an 8-minute film for your telecast.ö

“That’s not the way it’s done,” the producer said. “You see, Mr. Purvis, Garroway insists that everything on his show be filmed at the instant it appears on the viewer’s screen.”

The producer asked again, “Can you do it?”

He hesitated before answering, “I think I can. However, there are some *ifs*: if the ducks are plentiful like they’re suppose to be at this time of year, if the ducks are in the right place at the right time, and if none of the expensive television equipment fails.”

Purvis approached Claypool with his plan.

“Impossible!” was his reaction. He told Purvis, “My job will be easy. Your job will be to get 300,000 ducks in front of the cameras on December 23. Good luck!”

When the hunting season opened, two producers traveled to Wild Acres for two days of hunting and looking around. They agreed the spot was perfect, and since they knew nothing about waterfowl, NBC agreed to work with its outlets in Little Rock and Memphis and the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission for the telecast.

To make it possible, a great deal of preparation was necessary. Two miles of muddy roads, where only tractors had gone before, were graveled to allow the delivery of equipment and other paraphernalia to the hunting site.

To accommodate the cameras, the tree blind was enlarged and a ground blind was built 20 feet away. Back in the woods a short distance, another and bigger camouflaged structure was erected. Inside was a technical truck, housing five technicians and Tom Mull, narrator of the show. The truck could be no more than a few feet away from the cameras because of the complex coaxial cable that connected them.

Even being narrator had its problems, for there was no script, because the ducks would not follow a script so Mull had to ad-lib the entire time.

Back from the blinds about a half mile was an 80-foot microwave tower. From the blinds to the tower, the video went by cable and from there by microwave to a tower at Cherry Valley, to a tower near Earle, to another tower atop the Sterrick Building in Memphis. Here, the video went by cable to Atlanta where NBC network cables relayed it to New York, some 1,200 miles away.

The sound traveled a different route. It went by wire a mile and a half to the communications center, which was set up in a barn near the clubhouse. From the communication center, the sound went by radio to a receiver on top of a telephone building in Jonesboro, 20 miles away. From there, it went by telephone wire to Memphis. Here, the sound went by cable to Atlanta where it was added with the video before being sent to New York.

The production cost was \$20,000. Nevertheless, the producer said, "If all goes well and we get good duck pictures like Mr. Purvis has shot the last few years, the show will be worth millions of dollars in advertisement."

How to control unwanted visitors was a major concern. Roads leading to the area were blocked, while guards allowed only technicians to pass. Newspapers posted notices warning people to stay away.

The Friday before the telecast, the producers had Purvis make a full-scale rehearsal. Directing the drive by walkie-talkie from the tree blind, he conducted a drive, using several boats and about 30 beaters, to see how long it would take to corral the ducks into the staging area in front of the cameras. It took 1 1/2 hours, and the ducks could not have cooperated any better.

Getting cold feet on Saturday, after three weeks of frantic preparations by dozens of technicians, New York requested another rehearsal, but Claypool overruled them, not wanting to risk disturbing the ducks.

The theme of the show was a birthday gift for a boy who was turning 14 on December 23. The boy wasn't just any boy. It was Lynn Parsons, son of the legendary Herb Parsons of Somerville, Tennessee, better known as the "Winchester Wizard" or "The Showman Shooter." He was one of the last of the great exhibition shooters, those quick triggered celebrities who pleased the crowds, and in so doing, were walking advertisements for the shooting industry.

At first, Claypool wanted the daughter of his friend Norfleet Turner to hunt with him. She, at the time, was going to Foxcroft boarding school in Washington. When the producer asked permission for her to skip school for a few days, Ms. Charlotte, the headmaster, replied, "Sir, President Roosevelt once asked to let his friend's son off for a few days for a wedding, and I didn't allow it so I'm certainly not letting her off for a duck hunt!"

At 1:00 p.m., everyone was in place. Claypool said, "Just the glimpse of a face or loud noise or one false move by technicians, camera crew, or men driving the ducks will scare them away from the cameras. The whole show will be ruined. There is so much that can go wrong. All of us are praying."

Thirty minutes later, the drive started with Claypool's men in their boats coaxing the ducks toward the staging area. Most cooperated, swimming and flying into the staging area by the thousands, while others flew a short distance into the adjacent timber. Purvis knew this presented a problem so he called the clubhouse and told Claypool's friends, who were waiting in front of the TV, that they needed to flush the birds in the timber. Parsons' youngest son, Jerry, tagged along with this group and beat pans and other objects to scare the ducks. It worked as they also flew to the staging area.

New York was watching over closed circuits. By 3:00 p.m., there were 40 acres of ducks in front of the cameras. The directors in New York became enthusiastic and started trimming time off other segments of the show, fearful if they waited, the ducks might spook and leave.

At exactly 3:14 p.m., the program director in New York pushed a button while four million viewers looked on. TV screens were literally jammed packed with ducks. Cameras showed scene after scene of ducks swimming, while Mull narrated some of their habits. A remote microphone picked up the calling of the ducks in the background.

Then the moment arrived. On the other side of the lake, Parsons fired a rocket filled with three blocks of TNT, similar to those used in his exhibition shooting. Three hundred thousand ducks exploded into the air, and for eight minutes the sky was covered with ducks and so were TV screens across the country.

Fifty years later, Lynn reminisces, "It was amazing. All I can remember is looking across the reservoir and seeing a sea of ducks. When the TNT exploded, there were layers and layers of ducks stacked on top of one another. They were so closely packed that only glimpses of the sky could be seen. How they kept from flying into one another I will never know. The roar of the wing beats was deafening and louder than the TNT. It still is amazing as I think back on it."

The show ends with Claypool and Lynn leaving the ground blind and walking to the water's edge. Claypool blows his caller, and while ducks circle overhead, shots echo across the open water and a mallard falls. George Hilltop retrieves the duck and returns it to his master.

The soft-spoken Dave Garroway closes the segment by saying, "Now, if you will brush the duck feathers off your sofa, we will go on with the rest of the program." Thus, a TV program becomes history.

While Parsons hugged Lynn and Jerry at the clubhouse, Claypool remarked, "What a birthday gift. It's a miracle that everything happened at just the right time."

In 1957, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission tried to buy Wild Acres. They wanted to convert it into a state bird and wildlife sanctuary, closing it to all hunters. Claypool said, "My chief reason for not selling the farm is because I want ducks available for the hunters and hunting clubs in the Weiner area. Later, I may decide to sell."

He allowed only six people to hunt at Wild Acres regularly: Bayard Boyle, Snowden Boyle, Toof Brown, Norfleet Turner, Ernest Hogue, and his bosom-buddy Frank Vestal, outdoor writer for the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*.

The first four mentioned were members of the Wapanoca Outing Club, made famous by Nash Buckingham in so many of his stories. When the members voted to sell

the club to the federal government for a wildfowl refuge, these four approached Claypool about selling his land as a recreational investment for their sons.

Claypool was agreeable, but offered it first to Dr. Joe Verser of Harrisburg, Arkansas, who owned land adjacent to Wild Acres. Dr. Joe had always told Claypool that if he ever wanted to sell his property to let him know. When the time came, however, Dr. Joe declined because he wanted none of the farm ground. Claypool would not divide the 3,500 acres. Dr. Joe was chided throughout his life as the ðman who refused to buy Wild Acres.ö

After the sale in 1966, Claypool and Sally, his second wife, continued to live at the farm. When Sally died, Rip, her Golden retriever, was given to Norfleet R. Turner, son of Norfleet Turner, who tagged along on many hunts with his father at Wild Acres. Sally was an excellent retriever trainer, and the combination of Rip and George working together was admired nearly as much as the ducks.

Seven years later, Wallace Claypool died July 21, 1973, at the ripe old age of 87. During his lifetime, every morning he rose while dawn was stalking through the dew on high eastward hills, sheathed his lower extremities in rubber, and waded contently off into timber, which was knee-deep in water and chin-deep in ducks.

As gray pancakes of clouds put on rose ruffles and silhouettes against the lemon-washed sky appeared in the distance, he preformed magic with his wooden tube, as flight leaders answered back their reply. Banking to the right and left, the long-necked multitudes entered the flight pattern and soon descended below the spiked crests of the timber, drifting down like autumn leaves. Hugged against a tree, the morning air felt like chilled cider against his lips.

With wings cupped like the landing flaps of bombers, while webbed feet reached down for arrival, his gun recoiled with joyous rhythm as a thimble of leaden pellets exploded through the air. When gifted wings lifted the feathered warriors over the treetops into the misted distance, George Hilltop, his yellow Lab, turned trembling stillness into hot flesh of classical motion. It was then that he felt superior to *abnormal* creatures who were home in bed.

Nine years after Claypool's death, on the very same day, July 21, Garroway died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound at his home in the Philadelphia suburb of Swarthmore. He was 69 years old and considered the ðfounding father of morning television,ö having hosted NBC's Today show that premiered in New York on January 14, 1952.

At the clubhouse, one of Purvis's photographs of that eventful day of December 23 hangs on the wall. Claypool signed it:

To my friends and successors, Bayard Boyle, Snowden Boyle, Toof Brown, and Norfleet Turner, I entrust the fulfillment of my life's work ó Wild Acres and its ducks.

If it is not too lyrical, I hope to say that Wild Acres was one of the wonders of America during the 1950s. No place else on earth could ducks be seen and heard in such profusion. To go into the timber before daybreak, listen to the chatter of great rafts of ducks on the water, watch them as they soared gracefully in the sky with whistling wings, and see the morning sun bring out the brilliant colors of their heads, wings, and breasts ó that was living.

For those of us who saw Wide Wide World that day, it is etched in our memory forever. For those that did not see the "greatest spectacle ever telecast," I am sure you have seen the posters of that eventful December day, and I am sure it is also etched in your memory forever.

Thanks to all those who gave us this gift to cherish forever. Thanks for the glory that was! (Published in DELTA WATERFOWL magazine.)