

ON THE TRAIL OF THE RED GODS

A TOAST TO WAPANOCCA

When the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis Railroad and other ribbons of steel began crossing east Arkansas in the early mid-1880's, there was a trestle and water tank at Big Creek, some 25 miles northwest of Memphis on what later became the "Frisco System."

That water tank and a cindered platform just beyond was destined to, for years, mark the getting-off place for what was probably the greatest waterfowl concentration area and best hunting site in the United States: Wapanocca, of fabled Indian lore, by name.

Directly beneath flyway immemorial and harboring wild game worth a king's ransom to be defaulted by posterity, for its acreage, Wapanocca held just about the nation's heaviest population of Anatidae. At times, it staggered credulity.

Post Civil War times, however, Wapanocca Lake seems to have been little known sportingly. The late Captain Bill Allen, one of Memphis' grandest elder sportsmen, told of a camp-hunt he made shortly after the surrender of Appomattox. He stood in the willows around Wapanocca's Big Lake and with a muzzleloading shotgun bagged 167 ducks in a day.

With the Red Gods calling, several waterfowlers visited the lake via a railroad-building work-train, where they found several market hunters camped on the bank of Big Creek and making huge shipments of waterfowl to city dispositions.

Impressed with the game-laden forest and beautiful lake, the sports negotiated with small landowners in the area and bought 5,500 acres – 600 acres of lake surrounded by cypress swamplands. Formal

organization of the Wapanocca Outing Club began in 1886, and the first clubhouse was an abandoned, trapper's log cabin on the west bank of Big Creek. In 1888, a spacious, white building replaced the cabin.

When Nash Buckingham, noted outdoor writer and conservationist, was a lad, his father was a member of the prestigious club. Nash considered it the premier ducking club in the country. "Chesapeake of the South," he called it.

When Nash first went to the club in 1890, at the age of ten, there was no bridge across the Mississippi at Memphis. Trains had to be backed down an incline onto a huge transport-streamer, taken across and hooked onto again before heading west to San Francisco.

The youngsters were kept well at heel and were warned to talk short unless otherwise bidden. Wretched the youth who blabbed of how many "snorts" Mister "So-and-So" took, or how much changed hands in the poker game they peeked at from a sheltered observation post around the chimney corner.

The first repeating shotgun Nash ever saw was a Spencer, operated by Mr. Bonnie, a famous shot from Louisville, Kentucky. Nevertheless, for the most part, members clung to works of art by Parker, Greener, Scott, Smith, and Westley Richards. They believed in stiff powder loads, plenty of big shot, and devil take the recoil. Sterling shots they were – taintless of porcine streak or sweat-dodging.

This was Wapanocca in the earliest of days. Did you not know of it? No, of course not. Come, I will tell you what I know while the quiet patter of the rain outside on the summer's leafage weaves pleasant memories amid the curling smoke rings that drift upward from my pipe. And under its conjuring influence, my mind wanders back to the Golden Age of Waterfowling when

One November morning in 1894, six members partook of a most savory and excellent 6 a.m. breakfast in their pretty cottage clubhouse, where 45 lockers bore the names of their owners who constituted the club. The season for duck shooting was at its zenith and the sport was royal, for in November, clouds and myriads of ducks and geese and a few swans drifted toward the Gulf with the Mississippi River as guide.

Between 7 and 8 a.m., waterfowl streamed in from roosting to the feeding grounds of the club, as marsh ducks loved the shallows and mud puddles where coontail, smartweed, peppergrass, wild rice, coltsfoot, and acorns were knee-deep in water. It had been a bright night, which generally made for poor shooting, because ducks fed by the light of the moon and frolicked or dozed during the day in sequestered spots.

But hark! The morning opened hot – a "Red Day Royal" it would be!

J.A. Austin in Price's Lagoon threw out 12 cedar and four live decoys while mallards that he wisely refrained from firing at when they arose like a storm and swept all around him now returned in singles, pairs, and small flocks. They darted ravenously to the mudflats and feeding places, and around the live quacking decoys, confusing the gunner by bold sweeps and incessant aerial maneuverings.

Sharply now his Smith double rang out the death note to lordly drakes and russet hen mallards, bagging 30 before 9 a.m. and 74 by 3 p.m., which were retrieved by the superb Bruno, a smooth-coated Chesapeake Bay retriever.

Crocket, his black paddler, was named aright; he had genius in knowing where game was or was not at different times of day, how to approach it, and how to outwit nature's wariest sentinels. He walked the marshland like a spider, even with a backload of ducks, where the shooter dared not attempt to venture, never failing to retrieve when no Chesapeake or Irish Water Spaniel was around.

He told Austin during the hunt, "Boss, if yo' gwine to shoot at dem blackjacks, work fast, work fast, boss, cause here dey come, dar dey go."

"Guido" Wheatley's share was 85 ducks, shot in the central stand of Little Lake, opposite Cross Arms, all retrieved by curly coated Marengo. Ring (for short) was the prince of the house of Chesapeakes, royal in looks, quick and tireless in work, a tiger to fight, allowing no one but the gunner to touch his pile of game, and faithful to death.

Guido's paddler was "Old Fred," long in the service of the club. That day when a flock of speed demons (green-winged teal) sped by like F-16's, Fred shouted, "Let dem go, dey don't make a mouthful."

When Guido asked Fred how he knew where to toss the decoys, Fred replied, "I'se puts dem whar de duks want to land."

From afar away at Willow Poles Crossing came faintly the report of George Mitchell's new gun, and although the mallards fairly pelted him, one barrel of his gun proved useless, and the mire and grass cut down his score to 89 ducks and a goose, because he had no retriever nor paddler.

The keenest gunner of the bunch, perhaps, was the silver-haired, vice president A.C. Treadwell, whose 65 years had not dimmed the fire in his eyes nor paled his ruddy cheeks kept aglow by sports afield. He stood at the junction of Cross Arms and Big Lake, and though one of the club's deadliest shots with his ejector hammerless he was out of the flight line and tied Mitchell. His retriever Topsy, wavy coated and strong, was the model form, size, coat, head, and color of all their Chesapeakes, and a most gallant and eager worker.

Sank, his paddler, said when a flock of spoonies buzzed around, "Dem spoonbills is mitey fine ducks . . . to give to yore friends."

The champion of the day, however, was the foxy and alert lawyer U.W. Miller, whose sharp eyes had seen afar off the clouds of green-winged teal rushing into Walker's Cove like they had been sent for a doctor. He hastened there and dropped anchor in the grass and willows, 5 inches of water and 8 feet of muck. Endlessly, each tube of his Parker double spit fire until 110 plump teal filled his bateau to the brim.

Miller prided himself on never missing, “‘ceptin’ once in erwhile.” When he did, Osborne, his paddler, was always ready with an excuse, such as “Yo’ feathered him,” or “Dat bird was shore a long ways off and flyin’ some,” or “De shells dey make now’day ain’t what dey uster be.”

When a member was shooting his ducks too frequently with the second barrel, after missing with the first, Osborne frequently gave forth with an expression often heard at the traps, “Boss, you’d ought to use that second barrel furst.”

From Long Pond stand came many twin shocks from the deadly tubes of the tall, genial George Handwerker, who counted only what he bagged. His score was 81, all retrieved by his Irish Water Spaniel, Frank, who dove out of sight for cripples, and at command would bring in the decoys.

Back at the clubhouse that night, heartfelt congratulations preceded supper. Never were mallards roasted nor teal broiled more daintily by that chief of *chefs de cuisine* and champion club keeper and coffee distiller than “Uncle Phil” Gwynne.

From the club’s inception in 1886, he served as paddler-in-chief and general all around generalissimo of the duck club. A few years later, he became caretaker and cook and knew each member’s likes and dislikes as to food.

If a shortage of paddler occurred, Uncle Phil undertook his old occupation, going out on the lake serving as paddler for some lucky sport. He owned a heavy old 10-gauge, double-barreled Wesley Richards Magnum and was considered a keen shot and a natural-born hunter and excellent trainer of water dogs, especially Chesapeake.

The menu at Wapanocca, as gotten up by Uncle Phil, was wholly original and always caused much merriment. Dinner might start with empty brass cartridge shells on which were written the different courses. For instance, when the sports sat down at the table, a shell was handed to them on which was written, “coffee or tea.” Of course, they all “coffee’d” or “tea’d.”

These shells were at once removed and another lot of empties passed around. This time “bread and butter, any style,” was called for. The third series read “barbecued goose, stuffed”; the fourth was “teal, broiled”; the fifth, “red-heads, baked”; the sixth, “mallard pot pie,” and so on until every different kind of duck had been served in every conceivable style. Uncle Phil’s dinner table was no place for a dyspeptic.

No one was more demanding of his food than a Southern gentleman, and no club could exist very long without the service of an excellent cook, well versed in the Southern style of cooking. He or she must be the master of the crocks, pots, stew pans, and cook stove. Probably, the two most famous in the culinary domain in the Southland were Uncle Phil at Wapanocca and Queen Victoria Bounds at Beaver Dam Ducking Club near Tunica, Mississippi.

Members always began their meal with a prayer by Uncle Phil, and all ended it by saying, "O Lord, from errors ways defend us lest we mistake thy will for luck. Give us, at dawn, a flight stupendous. Don't send coots, but geese and ducks."

They always ended their meal by toasting Uncle Phil, "Long may you live at our Chickasaw Indian lake that we call 'Wau-kee-nau-kee.'"

The table was then cleared, and a large goblet of sparkling water – be it remembered that nothing stronger was ever imbibed at the clubhouse? – was placed before each sport, followed by a large No. 8 shell, in which was inserted a fine Havana cigar. This was the clue for the sports to retire around the glowing log fireside of the clubhouse. Here each sport, with jests and wit and heartiest friendliness and fraternity, nobly congratulated the men who had beaten him, with many a toast and never a boast, brothers all.

This was also one of the happiest times in an old-timer's life when gathered around the fireplace in came the toddies and, after finishing their cigars, out came the pipes, veteran partner of a hundred experiences, the fragrant tobacco furnishing a sort of halo of dreams which Rip Van Winkle might enjoy.

What a fund of delightful memories came trooping up. How the happy days were lived over again: the best shot taken, not once, but a hundred times; the lucky shots made so often that future misses seem impossible! No better time than this for the achievements and joys of the past.

On this particular night, in the amiable and soothing company of those proved friends of his favorite pastime, Guido went first:

We can all remember from our childhood the popular poem of the "Old Oaken Bucket," in which the poet sung, "How dear to my heart are the scenes of my childhood," so at this time in responding to those magic words that are my subject, allow me to say that if that poet had ever felt the thrill of the communion with nature that comes to every true sportsman afield, and afloat, instead of singing of "The Old Oaken Bucket" he would have sung of the sport of his childhood, and then we should have had embalmed in song the love of nature's enthusiast for the true companion of his hours of leisure, the gun.

May I express it as the wish of every sportsman that the poets will yet choose this live subject, and then what joy it will give us to sing their choice meters of our early love for that old family relic, the old gun. In your speaker's case, it was an old flintlock that had been changed to use percussion caps. It had been carried by my mother's grandfather at the siege of Louisberg, when the colonists captured that stronghold of France in the New World.

It was known as a Queen's Arm musket, and with it, I used to frighten the chipmunks, squirrels, crows, and woodchucks on my father's hillside farm in central New York, and to produce lameness in the region of my right shoulder. But despite all its blemishes, that old gun held such a warm place in my youthful affections that the improved guns of my maturer years have never caused me to forget it, and to make a confession, I do not believe that my first deer, a ten-point buck, gave me half as much pride and self-satisfaction as did the death of the first chipmunk brought to bag with the old musket.

The guns of our childhood of which we have clear, distinct, and sometimes tender recollections were from many makers and principally were double barrels although a few shot a single tube. And oh, how we all lovingly remember those halcyon days when we played hooky from school to spend a day afield even though we knew we would get a paddling on our backside administered by our parents and the schoolmaster.

But even such misapplied use of the paddle did not cause a final separation and absolute divorce between the gun and us, when with gun on our shoulder and ammunition in our vest we strolled along meadowlands in search of small game or perched on the remains of old trees that had fallen into a lake and shot waterfowl far more satisfactory than we have ever shot in our mature years.

The joy of those early days with gun will ever linger as the brightest on memory's pages and ought to be embalmed in holiness, because we were then too young to know anything about that satire on sportsmen; invented by some fiend incarnate who said, "All hunters and fishermen will lie." At that period of our lives, we knew nothing of the license granted to "hunting stories," and innocently tried to tell the truth about our exploits on land and water.

What sportsman present but cherishes the memory of the time he felt the thrill that came with the downing of his first quail or duck, causing every nerve ending to tingle with emotion, and how eagerly you did retrieve it? Do you not remember how you felt when through your lack of skill the hunted gained its freedom? Oh, the disappointment and how you blamed yourself if alone, or laid the fault on the wind or anything else if you had a companion along. And when you afterward related the incident what person present will make an affidavit that you gave your friends a veritable account of the transaction and did not tell a "hunting story?"

How pleasant the recollection of that picture hung on memory's wall of the time when we approached our first big game, on a still hunt. How spectacular the leaves of the forest

were on that most beautiful day of the early fall. How the gold of the hickory, birch, and beech harmonized with the red and purple of the maple and oak, and the dark green of the pine, spruce, and hemlock. What a joy it was to breathe the crisp morning air. How the pulse throbbed and the heart thumped as we carefully crept up the hillside to deal death with the rifle to the deer in the vale. And how when out of breath we reached the crest of the hill and tried to sight our rifle, we had buck fever in such an intense form that we could not have hit a mountain.

Such are the pleasant pictures that furnish the bright pages of a true sportsman's memory, and each one of you will agree with me that it is not the capture of game that gives the zest and charm to the ramble afield, but the pleasure of the communion with nature that such occasions afford and the joyous recollections that linger around such trips in after years.

Let me express the wish that every lover of the gun may have such joyous use of them, that as your head grows more snow-like and your footsteps fewer and halting, you may look back on a life enlivened by the joys of the chase, and as you doze away your few short years may your dreams be happy ones of ranging the fields and woods of dreamland and may you paddle across Wapanocca Lake accompanied by the most joyous companion, the shotgun.

Next to speak was Handwerker who observed of late "that 'quite a few' of you have fallen into the fad of using the expression 'quite a few.' An attempt to analyze the quotation leads to some confusion of ideas in my mind, with doubts as to the fewness of 'quite a few,' and whether 'quite a few' are fewer than a few. As the fewness of 'quite a few' is emphasized by the quite, it seems to follow that the fewness of 'quite a few' should be fewer than a few, and it is opined that few do apprehend how much fewer than a few are 'quite a few.' The question raised is, how few are 'quite a few' than a few?"

"Any light on this profound and puzzling question will be gratefully received." After much back and forth, no one had an answer.

Minute after minute passed while wisps of smoke curled from the backlog. For some little time they had been thinking of giving it up for the night when Guido made the mistake of asking Handwerker which member had the best gun.

He lit his bulldog pipe and walked around the room in deep thought for a few moments and then engaged the members in conversation once again, "Yours is the best gun, but mine" – nodding in Guido's direction – "shoots so far I have to soak my shot in salt to keep the game I kill from spoiling before I get to it."

Guido wore the air of a man both hurt and disappointed and offered no utterance. He never again brought up the question of whose gun was better.

It was then the members asked Uncle Phil to step forward. Not being bashful, he high-stepped it to the front and asked, “Did yo’ ever hear of de scrape I’s e and Cousin Levi had duckin’ on de Mississippi?”

“No, we never did – do tell it,” was the reply.

“Well you muss knows dat I’s e and Cousin Levi took it into our heads on a Saturday mornin’ years ago to go gunnin’ after duks in my pappy’s bateau. So in we goes and sculled down de river and a right smart amount of duks flew back and forth, and a few lit by a sandbar. They went to feedin’ and paid no attention to usens. I’s e grab up my powder horn to prime and it slipped right out of my hand and settled to de bottom of de river. De water was amazingly clear, and I’s e could see it on de bottom. Now I’s e couldn’t swim a lick so I’s e sez to Cousin Levi, ‘You’re a pretty clever fellow; jest let me borrow your powder horn to prime.’

“And does yo’ know de stingy critter wouldn’t!

“Well, say I’s e, you’re a pretty good diver, and if yo’ dive and gets it, I’ll give it to yo’. I’s e thought he’d leave his powder horn behind, but he didn’t. Instead he stuck it in hizen pocket, and down he went – and dar he staid.”

Here the gathering opened their eyes with amazement, and a pause of some seconds ensued before Uncle Phil added, “I’s e look down, and what does yo’ think de critter was doin’?”

“Lord,” exclaimed Guido, smiling and listening enthusiastically, “I’m sure I don’t know.”

“Dar he was,” said Uncle Phil, “sittin’ on de bottom of de river, pourin’ de powder out of my horn into hizen!”

The members burst into laughter, and in that booming voice of his Guido said, “I believe every word of it – every word of it.”

For most, the night ended all too soon.

While Uncle Phil served up the platters at the club, there was much merriment. It was no surprise then that his death in 1901 caused much heartache. Bun F. Price, one of the charter members, gave this tribute:

Since the organization of the club, except for a short time, this old man has had charge of our culinary department and had won an enviable reputation as an artist in this line.

He was by profession a steamboat cook, having served in this capacity on the best steamers that ever run on the Mississippi River. By nature he was a thorough sportsman and an ardent admirer of all gentlemen who loved a dog and gun. By birth he was a slave,

and as such entered the Confederate army as a servant to his younger master. By education he was a Democrat and cast his destiny with that party after the close of the war, and, be it said to his credit, he never deserted them.

By religion he was a Methodist, and the little cabin situated on the banks of Big Creek, in the bottom near the clubhouse, is where his faith shone out in all its simplicity as he taught the little children of the neighborhood at his Sunday school. At Christmas times, he always had for them a "Christmas tree" well laden with presents bought by voluntary contributions solicited by him from us.

Uncle Phil was a character. His education kept him in close touch with his many white friends, and he was constantly on the alert to see what he could do or say for their comfort and his great delight was in their pleasure. By his genial disposition, ready wit, and unswerving honesty, he won a warm place in the affections of not only the members of the Wapanocca Outing Club, but also all the sportsmen of Memphis, together with visiting sportsmen of many other cities. No man has died for many years past who was more honored or respected than Uncle Phil, and the sportsmen of this city will never look upon his likes again.

This eulogy reflects just how deeply the sports revered him. Their bondage was sincere and went to the core of their soul. A loss was felt for years when one of their paddlers or cooks left this life for the heavenly world, but more so when Uncle Phil passed.

Nash Buckingham was still rather young when Uncle Phil died. Twenty-one years later, he captured the moment for *Field and Stream* magazine, hacked out on a typewriter, in a story entitled "Thou and Thy Gun Bearer." In it, he wrote most eloquently about Uncle Phil's last night. Guido, Nash, and Miles (Nash's father) were at the club when he began slipping fast. Word came quickly and here are the words written by Nash that have been reprinted countless times:

How well I remember his last night, for I was over there with Daddy and Mister Arthur and several other members who cherished the old slave. For hadn't they been together when storms beat upon them; when suns rose o'er the stubble of the northlands and set for them in the dark undergrowth of Southern canebrakes? Hadn't they known together all the joys of the chase and found therein for one another only boon comradeship and respect? We sat around the yawning fireplace that bitter-cold night, each one for the most part busy with thoughts of sadness for the quaint old soul so near the verge. At length, Mister Arthur and Daddy, unable to stand it longer, slipped quietly away and went

across the pasture lot to Uncle Phil's cabin. And I, unnoticed, trudged along behind them – I wanted to see Uncle Phil, too.

A dim light burned in the room where the old man lay and, as in most homes when the final hour impends, a group of friends and relatives and kindred offspring had gathered, standing and sitting about in various postures of dejected waiting. We tiptoed to the bedside and stood looking down at the pathetic figure, lying there so frail and still. Child that I was, his likeness in the fullness of manhood came sweeping across the years. I saw him tall and vigorous, scarcely bending under the weight of a deer, or outlined a black statue as he stood to pole the duck boat into the very teeth of a wintry gale. I saw him again as he peeked and pried into the pots and pans and cast his shadow upon the kitchen curtains!

Mister Arthur bent down and spoke very gently—"Uncle Phil – this is Mister Arthur – how do you feel – do you know me?" The drooping eyelids fluttered and for a moment the old man's eyes searched Mister Arthur's face without understanding, and then just the drift of a smile repaid the understanding that his treasured friend had come to him in this hour! And then he whispered—"The mud is deep, suh, I'se holdin' onto de willers but I'se sinkin' fas'!"

Mister Arthur placed his hand upon Uncle Phil's and I believe that as the white hand clasped the black one there passed between those two old friends a message that they alone understood – and perhaps from that hour looked forward to! Silently, Daddy and I stepped forward and petted Uncle Phil's hand, and each time the eyelids fluttered feebly. He had seen us – and understood – I know! Then we went quietly again, out into the night . . .

As a voice from the distant past and yet of present, as someone said, "Nash expresses what men will feel for as long as one of them stands under the stars and listens to the wind on a night a friend dies."

Dialect flows unfettered through Nash's famous stories. Many would say that his words were condescending at best, racist at worst, but viewed in the perspective of times, it reflects the loving bond of mutual friendship, respect, and esteem that existed between Nash and the paddlers. In truth, his extensive use of dialect gives reality to his work.

As one paddler said, "Mr. Nash, all through these many years I have knowed you I can truthfully say you always would try to do something to put sunshine and happiness in some one life. You

would give up your gun, dogs, boots, shells, waders, boat, even your guide. I prays God's richest blessing upon you and your family always."

Just think of long gone days—on duck stands—in goose pits on sand bars and through cornfields quail hunting. If anyone has ever written better about the halcyon days of waterfowling and quail shooting, I would like to know his name.

Here on these fabled ground, the paddlers were immortalized as much as its members: Henry Douglas, Kinney, Aaron Jones, Mose Holmes, Osborn Neely, "Sank" Davis, "Old Fred" Valentine, "Buster," "Sun" Bonnet, "Sam" Cook, Columbus, and others.

Moreover, here rest the remains of its paddlers. The cemetery is situated on an Indian mound where once was located nearby a Methodist log church that Uncle Phil officiated over. Today, the Indian mound is badly overgrown with trees, vines, and grass. Several sunken gravesites are located here, but only one faded marker tells the name of its inhabitant: Crocket Winesberry, a paddler and a favorite of Nash Buckingham.

Somewhere among the overgrown trees and vines rests Uncle Phil.

Four hundred and thirty ducks was the score of six men that particular November day in 1894. Each gunner took home five ducks, and a wagon divided 400 among the five orphan asylums of Memphis.

The next year, the club established a self-imposed limit per gun: 50 ducks, with as many swans and geese as one could down. For every duck over the limit, the sport had to deposit a dollar in the slot of the Wapanocca's treasury. Nevertheless, it was still the custom to give the bulk of the game to those who needed it.

Another rule adopted by the club was that no gun other than a 12-bore double was to be used. It was considered unfair for any member to hold the advantage of shooting 8- or 10-bore guns, as the ducks were so thick that it was regarded as "malicious mischief" to use a heavy gun. This placed each member on equal terms and rendered the sport much more enjoyable.

In 1888, over 1,000 ducks were shot in one week, while on November 12 five members shot 261. For three months (September through December), the members harvested 2,200. Be it remembered that none were shot upon the water, but were bagged while in full flight.

The mallard record for a day's winter ducking was held by W.D. Bethell, who bagged 106. Bob Tate followed with 99 and Minter Parker, 92. He winged 127, but being without a dog he managed only 92.

During the off season, members often gathered for lunch at Doug Stamper's famous Mermaid Tavern on Cotton Row in Memphis. Here they ploughed through plates of chef Mingo's barbecued spareribs, mashed turnips, potlickered greens, corn sticks, wedges of molasses-meringue pie, and cups of Luzianne.

It was here that the first Chesapeake Bay dog was introduced to the gunners of the region in 1872. In November 1887, Guido received “by express” a Chesapeake from the kennels of Ed Lynch of Magnolia, Maryland, costing him \$150. Lynch was caretaker of the Carroll Island Gun Club, located on Chesapeake Bay. He “bred and preserved the purity of the Chesapeake Bay dogs up to the highest standards,” and always had on hand “ten or twelve purebred Chesapeakes.”

Probably, no other sportsman devoted more time to their introduction into the Mid-South than Guido. Uncle Phil Gwynne ably trained Guido’s Chesapeakes, as he did for the other members.

In 1896, Nash with 19 other gunners killed a limit each of 50 birds before noon, with many geese added and a swan thrown in. By this time, the rules had been changed so that pumps could be used.

Nash shot an 1893 model Winchester pump action repeating shotgun, 32-inch, full-choked, offered as a school prize between Nash and his brother by Irby Bennett, district manager of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company of New Haven, Connecticut. “Big Brother” won the gun, but eventually physical competition and great presence of mine triumphed over mentality – and the wonderful Winchester became “ours.”

Its barreled squinted swayback so Nash had an old German gunsmith lay a solid steel rib down its tube; undoubtedly the first “ribbed” Winchester shotgun in existence. Nash also whittled off its half-pistoled grip with his pocket knife. He was experimenting and pioneering – even then.

For many years and many a year, the old Winchester went on and on along the trail of the Red Gods. It knew the sunrises and sunsets of Wapanocca; a comrade-in-arms whose iron fibers proved stronger than the sterling pal who loved it – and the game they played so well – together!

One of Nash’s famous recollections happened on Washington’s Birthday, 1901, when a famous old lawyer of Memphis and he hunted with Aaron serving as their paddler. Using live decoys, his father’s 12-gauge Greener Magnum, and Winchester Leader shells, with pintails literally covering them up, they had their limit of 50 sprigtails each in two hours gunning from Trexler’s Stand.

And the Red Gods smiled!

Nash came into the outdoor world in the 1890 period of unlimited game, when sportsman thought ducks, geese, and quail were provided in unlimited abundance by nature.

He began hunting when he was eight after receiving a Christmas shotgun. When he was ten years old (1890), on a Saturday in November, he took his first duck hunt at the Long Pond blind with a 16-gauge, double-hammered Parker and downed his first duck: a greenhead.

He remarked, "As far as my boyish eyes could reach, the great lake was pimpled with rafts of swans, geese, and ducks. That day my ears first knew the haunting cadence of wildfowl hubbub." He vowed afterward to study so hard that "I'd never have to return to school on Saturdays for demerits."

That same year, he took his first solo duck hunt with paddler "Son" Bonnet. Shooting his beloved Bonehill hammer double gun, by sundown about shot out of ammunition, he had boated a "club limit" (50) of mallards, sprigs, gadwalls, and widgeons.

In 1921, Western Cartridge Company's president John Olin sent Nash his personal Burt Becker over-bored Askins-Sweeley Fox 12 gauge to field test the company's experimental "new-fangled, slow-burning powder," purported to significantly enhance performance.

As Nash would later state, "I was the load tester."

Those shells would subsequently come on the market in 1922 under the trade-name Super X. During this time, Nash was a partner in a Memphis sporting goods business, Buckingham, Ensley, Carrigan & Company.

Through the testing of the Super X shotshells, Becker, Askins, and Sweeley discovered that a tightly tapered chamber linked to a long, gradually tapered forcing cone that flowed into a barrel bored to .740 inch as opposed to the tighter industry standard .729 gave them the tight patterns they sought. What resulted was the HE Grade Super-Fox, and a handful of Becker-bored Foxes. Today, these fowling pieces are treasured collectibles.

Using the test gun and experimental shells (4's), Nash went to Walker's Cove with paddler Mose in a Dan Kidney boat. Here it didn't take long for him to acquire a limit of 25 ducks along with four honkers.

He was so impressed with the gun he abandoned his 34-inch Parker and got his own Super-Fox waterfowl gun in January 1923, bored by Burt Becker specifically for the Super X shotshells. John Olin got one of the first Super-Foxes on December 23, 1922.

The new Super-Fox was collaboration between Captain Charles Askins, Sr., the best known gun writer in the country at the time, E.M. Sweeley, an attorney from Twin Falls, Idaho, whose avocation was finding ways to improve the ballistics of a shotgun, and Burt Becker, a superb Philadelphia gunsmith, and "unquestionably the finest gun-borer that ever lived."

It was on the morning of January 31, 1923, last day of the federal shooting season, when Nash and Aaron went to Tate's Pocket. Shooting at waterfowl for the first time at Wapanocca with the big gun, in a little more than an hour, he recorded his twenty-fifth drake.

This Super-Fox served as Nash's waterfowling gun for several years. He liked it so much he commissioned Becker in 1927 to build a "Big Uns" for him just like it – HE grade that weighed 9 1/2

pounds and had 32-inch Full and Full barrels bored especially to shoot 3-inch loads of 4 shot. It had a straight-hand stock, a rubber recoil pad, and, at Buckingham's order, no safety.

It is interesting to know that Colonel Harold Sheldon, himself a great outdoors author, named this gun "Bo Whoop." Hunting with Nash at the Section 16 Duck Club near Clarendon, Arkansas, he noted:

Nash had blinded up in a dense thicket of willows some 150 yards from my (Col. H.P. Sheldon's) stand. A pair of mallards travelling high and in hurry went over Nash. Both collapsed and after a moment of complete silence the double boom of the big gun came rolling roundly over the marshes. It sounded exactly like two solo notes from the bass horn in a symphony orchestra, and I mentioned it to Nash when we got back to the lodge.
Bo Whoop, Bo Whoop.

And thus a shotgun was birthed that would become legendary.

In 1927, Becker made Nash three Super-Fox double guns, two 12 bores for waterfowling and a 20-gauge Magnum for upland game, bored for three-inch 20's and a set of quail barrels. Burt made a specialty of boring for a client's favored shot size, but he preferred 4's coppered. It was Nash through his writings that elevated Becker to near sainthood.

After two decades of partnership, Bo Whoop, probably the most famous waterfowl gun ever, was lost, when it was inadvertently left on a car fender during a field check by game wardens, after a morning shoot at the Section 16 Duck Club.

In Nash's words: "I shot [Bo Whoop] steadily for twenty-one years until, in 1948, December 1, an examining game agent just forgot to put it back where he found it in our automobile. He left it, 'twixt hood and fender; it was never recovered, though engraved on both case and steel."

Despite an exhaustive search by game wardens, police, and hunters, and ads placed with local newspapers, Buckingham never saw Bo Whoop again. Its whereabouts has been the stuff of legends ever since.

Afterwards, one of Nash's friends and an admirer got together and had Becker make him a duplicate gun – Bo Whoop II. Records reflect that the "aging gunsmith" made the second gun in the period from July 12 to August 5, 1950. The cost – \$500, and it was the last 12-bore Magnum old Burt Becker ever built.

In November 1921, Nash starred in a *Field and Stream* 16 mm film entitled *Duck Shooting on Wapanoca Lake* alongside Eltinge "El" Warner, owner and publisher of the magazine. Henry Mason, who helped film *The Birth of a Nation*, used a Carl Akeley camera. The Wapanocca film stayed on the outdoor circuit for 20 years, with its debut occurring at the Waldorf Astoria in New York.

As the years passed, so did a great number of ducks and geese, as they headed for the rice fields to the west around Stuttgart and Gillett. When asked to compare the quantity of ducks in the old days and in 1934, Nash lamented:

The comparison is laughable. When members of that club now sit out all-day and return thankfully at evening with a “limit” of 12, or even less, it is time to sit up and take notice. And yet, men who have taken up shooting within the last ten years; men who haven’t the remotest idea of what real quantities of ducks look like, scoff at the alleged shortage, and boast, “Why we have more ducks now than I ever saw.” Than he ever saw, alas, yes. Only too true!

Interest began to fade as many of the old-timers approached retirement or had passed away. Most were getting too old or losing their interest in the club by the mid-1950’s, and the club was costing about \$20,000 per year to operate effectively. In addition, the duck season in 1961 was shortened to 30 days, with a bag limit of two, the reductions necessitated by drought which resulted in what was described as the worst breeding ground condition in 30 years.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service bought the 5,500-acre club in 1961 with funds from the sale of duck stamps. Purchase of the club was part of a federal program to establish a chain of goose preserves down the Mississippi Flyway. It was hoped the refuge would draw migrating geese to the lower Mississippi Valley and break up the heavy concentrations of honkers around Cairo, Illinois. The government was fearful of a disease outbreak at Cairo, which might wipe out mass flights of waterfowl.

Ten years later, Nash died. I can hear him saying after his last hunting season, one year before he died, “I have opened another season – have thus added still another memory. Any more? I don’t know. I don’t worry about that. I have seen another beautiful season!”

And I can see Aaron stretching out his hand to greet Nash and saying, “Come with me, Mist’ Nash, I bin sent t’ meet an’ fetch you. All our old lifetime folks an’ friends has done got together, all our loved ones an’ our dawgs. An’, Mist’ Nash, you jes’ never seen such duck-shootin’ – nowhere.”

Much sentimentality existed regarding the old club by its members. When the refuge was considering tearing down the clubhouse that was built in 1913, an old member wrote a letter to the refuge manager in which he stated, “May I put in a word to save the fine old structure that has afforded so many sportsmen so much pleasure.”

In 1983, the clubhouse was laid to rest and replaced with a modern building. What a waste!

Wapanocca was the setting for several classic waterfowling stories written by Nash. Besides his dad, his foster mentor out-of-doors was Guido. In an introduction to Colonel H.P. Sheldon's book entitled *Tranquility*, Nash wrote these moving words:

In my youth a very dear old gentleman [Guido] presented me a shooting dairy hand-penned through many decades. Child that I was, I sensed when he put it in my hands that somehow its giving was linked mysteriously to tears that shone in his eyes. I asked wonderingly, "For me?" And he whispered, "Yes, Boy, I give you back my years!"

Many of Nash's stories could not have been written except for the paddlers who were admired for their skills as trackers, callers, guides, and camp cooks. In addition, they were always willing to entertain, and the picturesque yarns spun by some of them around the campfires and in the clubhouses have, when put in print by Nash, enlivened the leisure hours of sportsmen whose fortune it has been never to know them well and to appreciate them at their true value. No men of this type are left.

Nash and other old-time outdoor writers said that red are the gods that called young men to nature; the rather were the wonder if they were to call the gods other.

The calling of the Red Gods takes the hunter to the pure bosom of nature, whose every phase is replete with beauty, of good fellowship, of love for nature and forgetfulness of the unspeakably disgusting vulgarities of the "civilized" battle for life.

Every time we bend to inhale the sweet odor of the heliotrope, the Red Gods call us out to nature. I can hear them calling now, "go—go—go," as they have for so many years. Mother Nature pours out her life-giving soul—restoring magic upon us all who come to her.

*And we go—go—go away from here!
On the other side the world we're overdue!
'Send the road is clear before you when the old Spring-fret comes o'er you,
And the Red Gods call for you!*

RUDYARD KIPLING

Although the Red Gods may be silent so long that you will forget them, yet there will come a day when they will call to let you know that no matter what binds you, whether strong arms or ropes of gold, you have to go, and you will hear nothing else. Then, as you would keep your happiness, get up and follow—follow to the hunting lands of proved desire and known delight!

For many happy years, those who loved Wapanocca heard the calling of the Red Gods and went often to this quite repose to hunt, but summer sunshines have waned and winter snows have fallen since the last one who cherished it passed through the clubhouse doors for a day of waterfowling.

Perhaps, the great hereafter holds as charming a region as the beautiful Wapanocca, and the sports and paddlers have found that place. Who knows but that they have found everlasting youth and their comrades of the gun on shaded shores by mystic waters where spirit zephyrs softly sing!