

The Possum Point Club

Waterfowling on the tidal Potomac River

by James L. Trimble

The Potomac River was thick with migratory waterfowl in the early 20th century as wealthy individuals assembled tracts of river-front land for purchase and/or lease to establish private gunning clubs. The Possum Point Club, located on a jut of land on the north side of Quantico Creek, Virginia, just 25 miles south of Washington, D.C., was one of many within a convenient commute from our nation's capital. The property, complete with a one-story clubhouse and vast shorelines, was originally part of the Potomac's vast tobacco plantations that once flourished there.

Possum Point was improved in the late 1800s with a 6-mile long narrow gauge railroad, allowing access to the iron pyrites that were hauled from the nearby Cabin-Branch Mine. The narrow gauge railway, which connected to the RF&P Railroad and the shipping facilities at Possum Point's deepwater Barrow Siding Docks, was powered with small coal-fired engines carrying the whimsical names of Virginia Creeper, Dewey and Dinky. This ore hauling operation was ongoing from 1889 until it shut down in 1920. Dominion Resources now has a 650-acre power plant facility on the site.

Little has been written about the gunning off Possum Point, although D'Anne Evan's "Pictorial History of Prince William County" mentions the club as being owned by wealthy Washington sportsmen and includes 1948 photos of the railroad, the hunt club and a boat house being removed, making way for the power plant.

Marvin Twiford was a former guide at the Potomac's Deephole Club, located not far from Possum Point. In a 1992 interview, the then 82-year-old Twiford remembered the membership at Possum Point, whose onshore and offshore blinds ran



The remains of the boathouse of the Possum Point Hunt Club.

Reggie Waterfield's oversized canvasback decoys were very visible to passing flocks.

PHOTO COURTESY SAM BOYD





Russell Waterfield made many of the decoys used at the Possum Point Club. Most were oversized with thin heads, painted eyes and Elizabeth City weights. After the gun club was closed, most of the decoys were taken back to North Carolina and added to the family rigs. PHOTOS COURTESY KROGHIE ANDRESEN

from Quantico Creek at Dumphries south to Wide Water, as being comprised primarily of railroad officials. He also remembered Reggie Waterfield, the club caretaker, one of many guides from the Back Bay area that bordered Virginia and North Carolina who came north to provide gunning services for the Potomac River clubs. Twiford too had taken that journey.

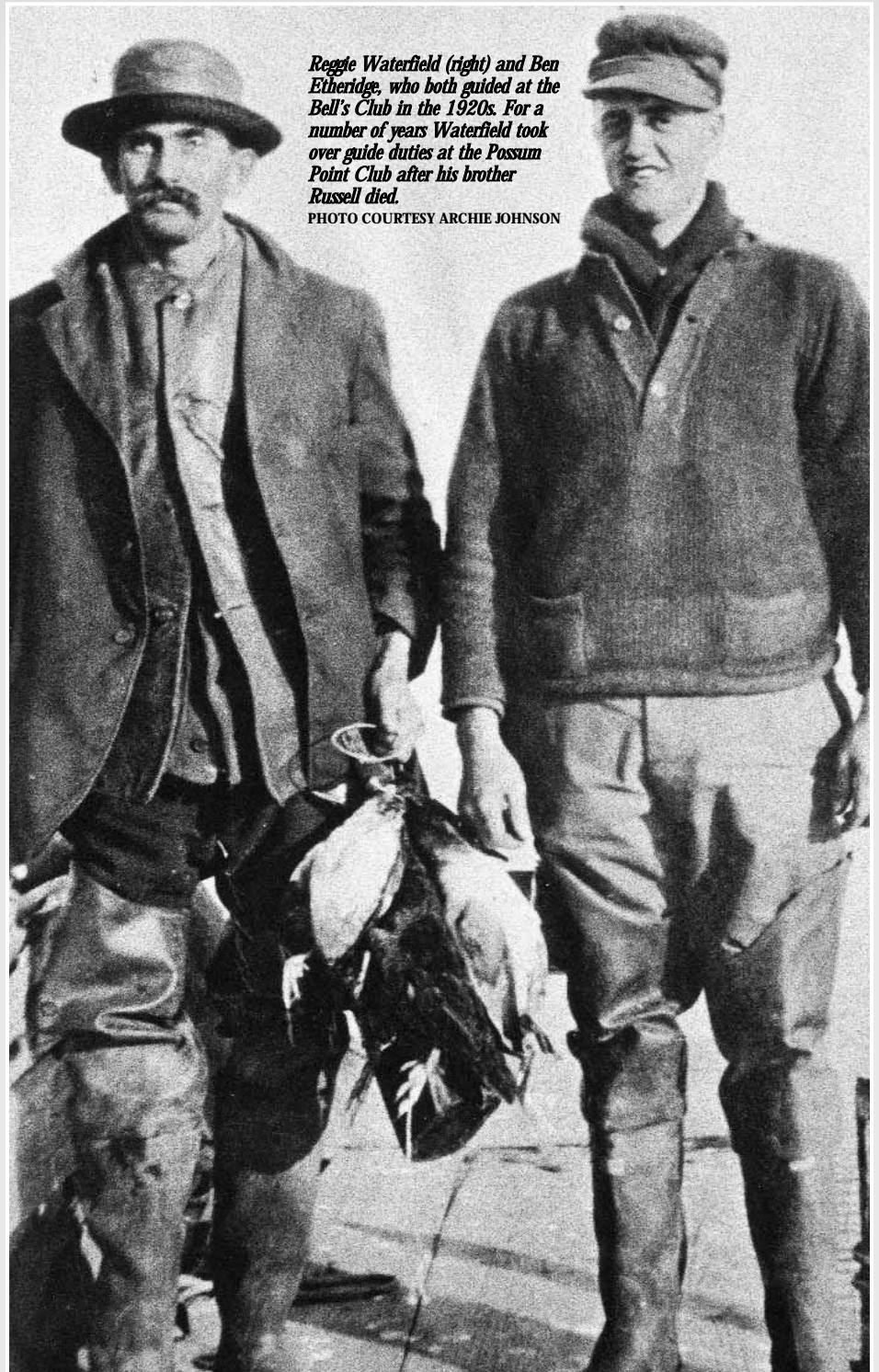
In a 2002 interview, Chester Bourne, then an 81-year-old retired schoolteacher who was raised along the Potomac, shared childhood memories of the Possum Point Club. As a kid, he helped his dad Wallace, a waterman who also worked as a pickup guide for the club. Other local waterman – the Dents, Cumberlands and Sissons – were also club guides, often tending blinds that were baited extensively.

“I can remember the boats stacked high with corn,” Bourne said. He also recalled the use of sink boxes, primarily doubles, used for hunting divers. He believes the source of the cast iron wing ducks used on the sink boxes was a foundry upriver in Alexandria. He remembered one blind just inside the Railroad Bridge facing the creek that was good for shooting mallards and other puddle ducks.

“Remember, I was an impressionable kid working for my dad,” Bourne reminded this writer. And what was obvious to all the locals in the area is “these were railroad people and their guests with money.” So what he remembered most were “the posh railroad cars at the Siding that housed the gunners, complete with porters to service their needs. I can remember the bright brass that adorned the cars; they must have polished (it) three times a day,” he said.

It is believed the Possum Point Club, with its one-story clubhouse, caretaker cottage and a barn for small farm operations, opened about 1920, maybe earlier, and shut sometime during World War II.

There are a lot of Waterfields in the Bay Bay area of Tidewater Virginia, but I



Reggie Waterfield (right) and Ben Etheridge, who both guided at the Bell's Club in the 1920s. For a number of years Waterfield took over guide duties at the Possum Point Club after his brother Russell died.

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had little success in discovering the identity of Reggie Waterfield, the name Marvin Twiford had shared so long ago, until the summer of 2002, when Kroghie Andresen, a North Carolina decoy collector, contacted me to discuss the Bay Bay migration to the Potomac for a book he is writing on North Carolina's waterfowling history. He was able to connect the dots between this Possum Point guide and his Back Bay family.

Reggie Waterfield (1896-1959) was the older of two brothers, both having worked for the Possum Point Club. Russell Waterfield (1901-1948) moved there first, working at the club for almost ten years until developing a terminal illness in the late 1930s. Reggie replaced his brother, but just for a short period of time into the early 1940s.

Reggie was the son-in-law of well-known decoy maker and hunting guide John Williams, who had moved from Cedar Island to Munden Point, Virginia, where the two operated a battery rig. He also worked for several years as a guide at Back Bay's famous Pocahontas Fowling Club, where many of the Lee Dudley decoys were used.

The two Waterfield brothers guided for several seasons using large battery rigs in the Big Bay section of Back Bay, and both worked as market hunters until the federal game laws stopped them in 1918. These brothers are not related to the large clan of Knotts Island Waterfields (descendants of John Jehue Waterfield), but are descendants of Malachi James Waterfield (1832-1916) who moved from the Eastern Shore of Virginia and settled on the Virginia end of Knotts Island.

Malachi made his living from two endeavors, cattle farming and market

hunting. His real love was hunting waterfowl, which he did from the 1870s until his death. The large fields of corn planted on the Morse Point Farm were used to feed the cattle and bait the blinds. During the market hunting days Malachi, with the help of family members, deployed numerous sink boxes on either side of the causeway between Back Bay and Currituck Sound, giving them access to both bodies of water. During this time it is estimated the family made up to 5000 decoys. Malachi's rig included canvasback, red-head and bluebill decoys. Grandson Russell also made a large number of decoys, mostly oversized, some for sale.

Reggie Waterfield Jr. of Knotts Island, who was 78-years-old when interviewed in 2002, accompanied his dad and Uncle Harold (Waterfield) when he was a young teenager on one of their trips to Possum Point to help their brother Russell shut down the club for the season and move home until next year. In all probability, Russell's Possum Point decoys returned home with him and were absorbed into the family rigs. When questioned about his Uncle Russell's decoy making, he produces an early 1930s business card advertising carpentry work and decoys. He's also familiar with their identification: large-bodied oversized canvasbacks with heads made from boards, painted eyes and Elizabeth City weights.

And due to their annual migration, they're liable to be found in the Back Bay area or in homes along the Potomac River. That's enough to give two sets of collectors something to look for.

Jim Trimble specializes in Chesapeake Bay and Chincoteague area decoys. If you have information on early decoy makers from this area, contact him at (703) 768-7264 or potomacduck@cox.net.

same amount it brought over 15 years ago, the last time it sold at auction. A hollow Nathan Cobb brant at \$20,700 and a Walter Brady brant at \$14,950, both well below estimate, astounded enthusiasts of Virginia barrier island decoys. We'll review the entire auction in our next issue.

By the end of the sale on Thursday exhibitors were busily packing up to move the party to the high school in Easton and prepare for the start of the Waterfowl Festival, the most well-attended decoy show in the country. Yet for the last ten years or so we've noticed the crowd has been trending downwards, and some of the reason may be that many of the auction-goers don't bother to stay for the show. Face it, if they're just here for the decoys, by then they've seen the majority of whatever will be offered over the weekend, as many of the same exhibitors display at both venues. Despite this trend, the majority of the dealers we spoke to were more than pleased with the results of the week, wherever the sales occurred. Many even feel that the somewhat smaller crowds keep the tire kickers out of the way of the big spenders. Maybe they're right.

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One of our favorite parts of the show is the Artifacts Display in the high school, where about ten collectors exhibit some of their favorites. Ronnie Newcomb displayed a selection of carvings by Ron Rue, who passed away earlier this year. Bruce Baynard put out an impressive display of early decoys by Madison Mitchell and Charlie Joiner. Henry Stansbury set out a group of swan decoys, including the Cockey swan he just picked up at the auction. Sarah Megargee, a veteran of the Artifacts Display, set out some choice Harry V. Shourds decoys along with other

Dealers report strong sales at Easton



Arguably better than either of the Ward canvasbacks sold at the Guyette & Schmidt auction, Steve O'Brien Jr. offered this '36 model for \$32,000. We hear he sold it on his return trip to Boston.



Alan Haid sold this fine pair of hollow Bert Graves pintails in excellent paint during the Waterfowl Festival.



Dealer Alan Haid always brings a good inventory of Mason decoys to most shows. He sold this pair of Premier mergansers (above) and this black-bellied plover (below) at Easton.



Dealer Steve O'Brien Jr. quickly sold this rare hollow pintail by Steven Lane while setting up at the Sailwinds in Cambridge.



favorites from New Jersey and Maryland. John Sullivan, a longtime collector of branded Upper Chesapeake Bay decoys, featured selections from his collection, along with a warning that someone has started branding old Upper Bay birds with fake contemporary brands.

On Saturday there is a small fundraising auction, held at the high school, which featured about 100 decoy lots for sale. We missed the preview, so we're unaware if any choice lots showed up for sale.

By Sunday the exhibitors are getting weary, as many have now been working the show for six consecutive days. While

Sunday is normally a bust many years, as most serious collectors have already come and gone, business seemed brisker than usual, with some sales still taking place as closing time neared.

As of press time, we're uncertain as to whether the location for the Guyette & Schmidt decoy auction will return to Easton. We understand there's a little politics involved. But if it comes down to the wishes of the exhibitors, the auction will have found a new home in Cambridge. And if that's their decision, we're certain they'll get plenty of support. 