

# Contributors get sneak peek at museum's duck-hunting exhibit

By Ryan Whisner Union regional editor | Posted: Friday, May 15, 2015 9:29 am

Fort Atkinson Historical Society members and donors dove into the history of Lake Koshkonong duck hunting Thursday as they got the first glimpse of the latest long-term exhibit at the Hoard Historical Museum.

Titled “Legacy of Duck Hunting on Lake Koshkonong,” the second-floor exhibit focuses on the rich duck hunting history of Lake Koshkonong during the late 19th century.

Jones Dairy Farm President Philip Jones noted the significance of the new display and the Fort Atkinson museum in general.

“When you look at this town, you start listing off the things that make it special. You start with the schools, the hospital, the library and the museum. For a town of 12,000 people, this is just remarkable,” Jones said. “To have the history and the preservation and the diversity, it is really not really nearly as hard to bring people here as it used to be 30 or 40 years ago.”

He noted how the new exhibit exemplifies the rich waterfowl history of yesteryear and, hopefully, tomorrow.

“It should make people proud of the local activities that were both important recreationally and commercially,” Jones said.

It’s a tribute to the past, and that’s fantastic.”

This marks the first long-term exhibit installed at the museum since an exhibit devoted to William Dempster Hoard and his role in making Wisconsin America’s Dairyland opened on the second floor of the museum’s Frank and Luella Hoard House in October 2010. The prior year saw the opening of the Mysteries of the Mounds exhibit.



## JUST DUCKY!

JUST DUCKY! — Fort Atkinson Historical Society members and donors were quacking Thursday about “Legacy of Duck Hunting on Lake Koshkonong,” the new exhibit at the Hoard Historical Museum. Pictured are scenes of the sneak peek. For more photos click [here](#). — Daily Union photos by Ryan Whisner.

“This was all made possible by contributions from local hunt clubs, former duck hunters, current duck hunters,” museum director Merrilee Lee said. “It is a community exhibit in every sense of the word.”

Neither the City of Fort Atkinson nor the Fort Atkinson Historical Society contributed directly to the exhibit.

“It was purely funded from outside sources,” Lee said, adding that all contributions designated specifically for the exhibit have been used for solely that purpose.

Today, the new exhibit officially opened to the public. Donors and members of the historical society were given a sneak peek Thursday, along with representatives from the hunt clubs and other related organizations.

No formal opening of the exhibit is planned.

However, Lee noted that there is a waterfowl hunting collectibles show being held at the museum on Saturday, May 30, from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Collectors will be on hand to share information, help identify items, and discuss all things waterfowl and hunting. Lee said collectors interested in sharing their waterfowl or hunting-related collections should contact the Hoard Historical Museum at (920) 563-7769.

The show coincides with the Ducks Unlimited National Convention in Milwaukee May 27-31.

The museum director said she is optimistic that such an exhibit will spark interest from attendees at the convention.

Lee said the idea of the lasting exhibit started with the passing of Fort Atkinson's Alan P. Jones in October 2010 at age 85. An avid duck hunter and history buff, he was remembered with many memorials to the museum.

Retired biology teacher and museum volunteer Dick Wanie and Fort Atkinson Historical Society Board of Directors member Joel Winn spearheaded development of the exhibit.

Lee said she thoroughly enjoyed working with Wanie and Winn on the project.

“It is so much fun to see the enthusiasm the community and our members have had for this exhibit,” she said.

It was driven, in part, by the success of a temporary duck hunting display the museum presented over a two-week period in 2008.

The exhibit focuses on the canvasback duck, which was hunted on Lake Koshkonong by market hunters from about 1875 to 1918, when federal laws stopped the practice.

The marsh scene mural that wraps around the room was painted by Jan Holewinski and Sally Koehler, both members of the Blackhawk Artists.

Lee pointed out that the entrance to the new exhibit purposely starts in the hallway with a focus on the lake. Before entering the exhibit, to the right is the entrance to the Niedecker Room, which focuses on the life and experiences of Fort Atkinson poet Lorine Niedecker, who lived on Blackhawk Island. Her poetry is intrinsically linked to the lake and the surrounding area and fit well in being linked to the new exhibit.

Wanie noted that Lake Koshkonong once was known as “the Chesapeake of the West,” in reference to Chesapeake Bay, a popular canvasback hunting destination on the East Coast.

The canvasback was “the gold standard” of waterfowl, the prized duck, Wanie said. When canvasbacks fed on wild celery, they acquired a special taste that was in high demand from hotels as far away as New York.

Koshkonong also was home to a good population of redhead ducks, which looked similar to the canvasback, but were not as tasty as the canvasback, Wanie said.

The ducks flocked to Koshkonong, thanks to construction of the Rock River's Indianford dam downstream from the lake. It was begun in the late 1840s, with the wooden dam completed in 1851. The dam backed up the water and changed what was marshland into a shallow, weedy lake: a perfect habitat for wild celery and diving ducks.

Among the items displayed in the museum exhibit is a replica of a menu from the Waldorf Astoria Hotel dining room in New York City, dated April 9, 1896. The menu shows the popular canvasback duck dinner priced at \$4 per bird and the redhead duck for \$3.25. Comparatively, one could purchase an entire chicken or mallard duck for \$1.50.

In addition to displays and photos of decoys, historic area hunt clubs and guns, the exhibit features a duck boat from the Blackhawk Hunt Club.

Susan Shearer said Thursday that her grandfather, Floyd Shearer, bought a farm on the south side of Lake Koshkonong in 1926 that would become Shearer's Hunt Club

He also had a carp seining operation. A section of net is featured in the entryway to the new exhibit.

Shearer said her grandfather reportedly made more money seining carp than he did in his profession as a doctor during the Great Depression.

“He was very enterprising out there,” Shearer said, noting that she was impressed by the exhibit and the story it told.

Lee said there also a taxidermy display of canvasback and redhead ducks mounted by Garry Senk Taxidermy Studio of Eagle.

One of the ducks featured in the display was shot by Wanie's own son-in-law, Mike Gelhaar, whom he had brought into the family tradition of duck hunting.

His wife, Wanie's daughter, Chris Gelhaar of Dousman, noted that duck hunting has always been her father's passion.

"He has duck-hunted his whole life. He grew up on the Horicon Marsh and this is his passion," Gelhaar said.

She noted that she thought the new exhibit was beautiful.

"I think it is really well done. He is telling us little bits and pieces along the way and it was hard to envision until coming here tonight," she said.

The centerpiece of the exhibit is the duck boat hanging from the ceiling. Labeled with a "BH" on the bow of the boat, it is believed to have belonged to the Blackhawk Hunt Club. The boat was found in storage on Jones property.

There is some historical debate as to whether the boat might have belonged to W.D. Hoard, himself.

On Thursday, Steve Mode said he was honored to have Dick Wanie call him up and ask for help installing the duck boat portion of the exhibit.

Structural engineer Conor Nelan and Todd Lueder got involved with Mode in coming up with a plan to hang the boat in the small exhibit space.

The trio analyzed the size of the room and figured out how the boat could be displayed. A plan was drawn-up. Mode credited Lueder with building the attachments to hang the boat.

"I'm really very happy with the whole room, it is really a neat exhibit," Mode said. "It's Dick Wanie's passion. He was such a driving force behind it and it was just an honor to be able to help with it and see it come to fruition."

Fort Atkinson Historical Society Board President Ron Langellier said the exhibit was done excellently by a number of individuals putting in a lot of time and effort.

Langellier described it as being truly part of the history of the Fort atkinson area.

To join the Fort Atkinson Historical Society or for more information, visit the museum, call (920) 563-7769 or email [info@hoardmuseum.org](mailto:info@hoardmuseum.org).

The Hoard Historical Museum and National Dairy Shrine Museum are located at 401 Whitewater Ave. in Fort Atkinson. The museums are open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. They are closed on Sundays and Mondays.