Searching for the

Lake Koshkonong/Susquehanna Flats,

By Bob Lehmkuhl
Reprinted with permission from Decoy Magazine

Editor's note: Alert reader Phillip Schauer informed the Edgerton Reporter of the existence of this article, which was first published in Decoy Magazine several years ago. Schauer kindly contacted the magazine and helped the Reporter receive permission to reprint the article. The Reporter wishes to thank Schauer and Decoy Magazine.

For 137 years or so, decoys that resemble decoys made in the Susquehanna Flats area of the Chesapeake Bay between 1850 and 1880 have appeared in the Lake Koshkonong area of Wisconsin's Rock River Basin. Over the years these decoys were assumed to have migrated in the rigs of eastern sportsmen coming to Lake Koshkonong during the third and fourth quarters of the nineteenth century and remaining here to decoy and provide patterns for local carvers.

During the month of February over the past 13 years, these decoys began showing up with some frequency at the late Jim Neal's Edgerton, Wisconsin, Decoy Show.

Close study of these early decoys raised more questions than they answered. Were these decoys really by Flats makers? Were they brought in the tackle of the Eastern sports that traveled to Koshkonong as oral tradition maintained? Or, as evidence started to imply, were they from rigs purchased by a local hotel directly from Chesapeake makers? Or, were they made in Wisconsin, simply using the Maryland decoys for patterns?

"The Chesapeake of the West" – 1848

From the beginning we knew a few things. The huge migrations of Canvasback and Redhead ducks reported on Lake Koshkonong were so vast during the last half of the nineteenth century that Koshkonong was referred to in the American sporting press as "The Chesapeake of the West."

Joel Barber, in his 1934 book Wild Fowl Decoys, discussing early methods of making individual floating decoys, writes of Dr. William Bruette's grandfather owning Wisconsin land and visiting yearly in the late1840s. A few lines on Joel's sketchpad, reproduced in Plate 35 of his book, along with a small sketch of a root-head decoy, make note of a place called Rice Lake. Rice Lake is a small lake about two miles west-northwest of Lake Koshkonong. Barber also notes the Rock River as "the little Mis-

Lake Koshkonong, ca. 1848

Graphic courtesy of Decoy Magazine

decoy connection

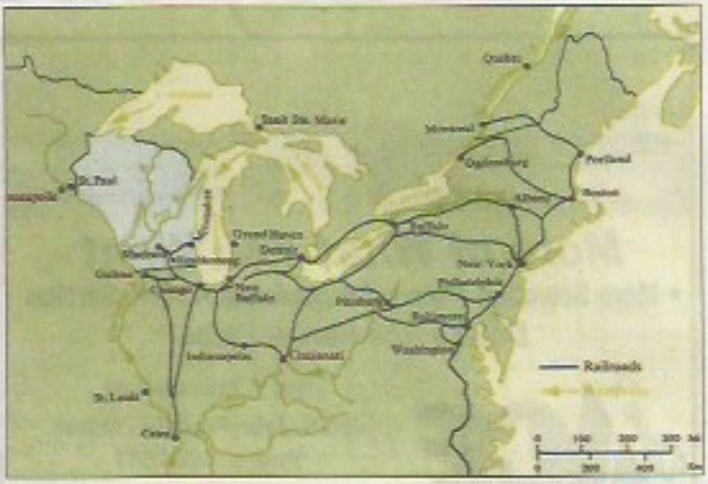
1870-1898

sissippi," According to Barber, during his visits to Wisconsin, Bruette's grandfather introduced the custom of shooting ducks over decoys and the decoy making methods used in the East.

Lake Koshkonong is formed by the widening of the Rock River and fed by numerous springs, creating the second largest natural body of water in Wisconsin. In the early 1850s depths ranged between 4'-12'and hosted vast amounts of wild rice and wild celery, prompting Increase Lapham, an early settler, to write: "It looked like a sea of grass." Dams put in place at the southern end of the Lake in the middle 1850s created 850 additional acres of surface water, bringing the total to over 11,000 acres, almost half the size of the Susquehanna Flats' 25, 000 acres.

The name Koshkonong, which means *lake we live on*, is a loose translation derived from over a dozen Native American languages describing encampments around the Lake for hundreds of years before the first Europeans arrived in the late 1600 and early 1700s. Originally part of the Northwest Territory acquired by Thomas Jefferson with the Louisiana Purchase from France in 1803, serious settlement of the area didn't begin until the 1830s.

Immediately after the Civil War, awareness of Koshkonong's huge migrations of canvasbacks spread quickly among the country's prominent duck hunters. Well-heeled sportsmen, military and political leaders began to arrive virtually overnight by fast trains from Boston, New York and Philadelphia through Chicago directly to Koshkonong, joining local market hunters, subsistence hunters and area sportsmen already in pursuit of the canvasback.



Railroad System between east coast and Koshkonong in 1854. Koshkonong Station was on the main line of what became the Chicago Northwestern Railroad between Chicago and Milwaukee. Travel between eastern U.S. cities and Lake Koshkonong could be completed in a day and a half using fast overnight sleepers to Chicago.

Graphic courtesy of Decoy Magazine

Bingham Family – 1850

From the late 1850s on, as can be pieced together from reports in the local press, hunters converging on Koshkonong from great distances were housed and fed in all manner of inns, resorts and local residences. Among the later, based on local accounts, were the Lees, the Beemers and, most prominently the Binghams.

One of the earliest and most resourceful of settlers was the Bingham family; father Ephriam (Zep) (1805-1891) and oldest son Ira (1839-1921) were already the leading market hunters, guides and boat builders on Lake Koshkonong working from their farm on Bingham's Point. Zep's wife Laura (1818-1903) and daughters Lucy (1848-1938) and Belle (1854-1945) received and put up many prominent hunters. Some reported guests were Ohio born, Jay Cooke (1821-1905), "The Banker From Philadelphia" and foremost financier of the Civil War, and Mark Hanna, the political-

See **DECOYS,** page 13A

kingmaker from Cleveland, the Karl Rove of his day. After the War, the Janesville Gazette in undated and yellowed clippings pasted in a scrapbook, commented that, "Generals Sheridan and Logan were household names at the Binghams" and that "Lucy Bingham entertained more prominent sportsmen at the Bingham farm than any woman alive in the country today."

To say that the Binghams engaged in market hunting is somewhat of an understatement. They hunted themselves, bought from local hunters and employed professional hunters for a period spanning well over sixty years. One account claimed that Ira Bingham personally bagged 2,800 ducks in September and October of 1858 that made the trip to the Chicago market. According to personal reminiscences in the 1960s of Ira Vogel, son of Charles Vogel, a professional market hunter employed by the Binghams, they delivered canvasback ducks to the Astor Hotel in New York City in the 1870s for as high as five dollars a brace. (From a completely different source we learned that Ira Bingham's brother was manager of the Astor Hotel at the time.) Most ducks were plucked but some were simply drawn and packed in ice filled barrels, according to Vogel. Railroad boxcars, called flyers, rolled out of Koshkonong Station in the afternoon, arriving at New York City hotels the following evening.

From Native American times, jump shooting and shoreline blinds had been the method of taking ducks. By the 1860s, before the Civil War, sink boxes, flatboats and locally built scull boats were all in use on Koshkonong. It was Ira Bingham that designed, and blacksmith Duane Starin of Ft. Atkinson that perfected, the Koshkonong sneak boat that received national recognition for its stealth effectiveness in George Bird Grinnell's 1901 book American Duck Shooting. Nicknamed the Monitor, it was a double-ended skiff, with low freeboard, and deep canvas covering that could be raised or lowered for protection from sea or wind. Its effectiveness ultimately was a major factor in raising the response of local sportsmen to ban shooting from boats on open water in Wisconsin during the 1875 and 1876 legislature. That law stands today.

In addition to his work as a market hunter and boat builder, Ira Bingham also worked as guide and boat sculler. On more than one occasion he was quoted as boasting of being hired to fill the bag of visiting sportsmen. For a time he also served as a deputy to warden Yates Wentworth.

George W. Esterly (1842-1914)

Zep and Laura Bingham had

Incorporated, under the General Laws of the State of Wisconsin.

Number One. Share.

The Black-Hawk Club.

CAPITAL STOCK, $2000. 40 SHARES, $50 EACH.

This Certifies that George W. Esterly of Milwaukee is the owner of One Share of the Capital Stock of the

BLACK-HAWK CLUB,

of Lake Mills, Wis. transferable only on the Books of the Corporation in person or by Attorney, on the surrender of this Certificate.

In Witness Whereof, The President and Secretary have hereunto affixed their signatures, this 3rd day of April A.D. 1886.

Wm. F. Vilas Pres.

Geo. W. Esterly Secy.

ck-Hawk Club stock certificate number one issued to

ten children. Other than Ira, and sisters Lucy and Belle, another of those known was Ira's younger brother, Ed Bingham (1860-1941). Ed was the favorite guide of American Politician Thomas R. Marshall (1854-1925) on his numerous Koshkonong hunting trips. Marshall was Governor of Indiana and later became U.S. Vice-President for two terms under Woodrow Wilson. In addition to guiding, Ed traveled as a crack shot for Union Metallic Cartridge Company, later renamed Remington Arms.

Black-Hawk Club – 1870

The first of the Lake Koshkonong private hunting clubs was the Black-Hawk Club founded in the early 1870s on the northeast shore where the Rock River enters the Lake.

Oral tradition has consistently supported the founding of the Black-Hawk Club in the early 1870s. Walter Frautschi, in his June 1945 article on Early Wisconsin Shooting Clubs in the Wisconsin Magazine of History, stated that a Chicagoan officially incorporated the club in 1888.

New documentation uncovered in research for this article establishes that the Black-Hawk Club was officially incorporated in the State of Wisconsin June 8, 1875, thirteen years earlier than Frautschi had reported, and not by a Chicagoan. The first president in 1875 was L. A. Winchester of Whitewater, Wisconsin. Incorporation was officially amended on October 12, 1877 when by-laws and first stock were issued.

Share No. 1 was issued to George W. Esterly (1842-1914) Whitewater, Wisconsin. Esterly signed the first Black-Hawk Club stock certificate issued to himself as president.

Thirty-four founding members were recorded in the Constitution of the Black-Hawk Club of Lake Koshkonong, Wisconsin published in 1877: seven from Marquette, Mich., one from Boston, Mass., five from Chicago, Ill., three from Whitewater, Wis., two from St. Louis, Mo., one from Philadelphia, Pa., one from Milwaukee, Wis., five from Janesville, Wis., seven from Cincinnati, Ohio, one from New York City and one from Newport, Kentucky. Contrary to earlier writers that

Earliest known photo of Blac
the photo is full of wooden de
Photo from the Bob a

believed that Black-Hawk had its beginnings as a local club, Black-Hawk had a national membership from the start.

The Black-Hawk Club's finest years coincided with the best years of Lake Koshkonong canvasback shooting. From the beginning it was a popular hangout for the well-to-do. Contemporary writers often cite General Phil Sheridan as a frequent visitor from about 1874 on. Wisconsin Governors Hon. William D. Hoard (1836-1918) Ft. Atkinson and Hon. George W. Peck (1840-1916) Whitewater were early and continuing members of the Club. Club member George Peck, then Democratic mayor of Milwaukee, unseated fellow club member and sitting Republican Governor Hoard running for his second term going on to serve two terms as governor himself. Peck was the author of a series of nationally distributed boys' books; the most popular being Peck's Bad Boy.

By all published accounts, Black-Hawk was a comfortable place for its members. Mr. and Mrs. Yates Wentworth, who served as steward and stewardess from 1879 to 1905, were highly thought of by members. Published accounts tell of their dedication to the Club and its members. Yates Wentworth also served as game warden for southern Wisconsin counties.

It should be mentioned that Black-Hawk was also a fishing club and summer retreat for members. One of its curiosities constructed in 1885 was a 14' diameter by 3' deep fish tank in front of the clubhouse fed by an artesian well, where according

Earliest known photo of Black-Hawk Club c. 1880-1883. The wheelbarrow in the left of the photo is full of wooden decoys.

Photo from the Bob and Kristen Lehmkuhl collection courtesy of Decoy Magazine

believed that Black-Hawk had its beginnings as a local club, Black-Hawk had a national membership from the start.

The Black-Hawk Club's finest years coincided with the best years of Lake Koshkonong canvasback shooting. From the beginning it was a popular hangout for the well-to-do. Contemporary writers often cite General Phil Sheridan as a frequent visitor from about 1874 on. Wisconsin Governors Hon. William D. Hoard (1836-1918) Ft. Atkinson and Hon. George W. Peck (1840-1916) Whitewater were early and continuing members of the Club. Club member George Peck, then Democratic mayor of Milwaukee, unseated fellow club member and sitting Republican Governor Hoard running for his second term going on to serve two terms as governor himself. Peck was the author of a series of nationally distributed boys' books; the most popular being Peck's Bad Boy.

By all published accounts, Black-Hawk was a comfortable place for its members. Mr. and Mrs. Yates Wentworth, who served as steward and stewardess from 1879 to 1905, were highly thought of by members. Published accounts tell of their dedication to the Club and its members. Yates Wentworth also served as game warden for southern Wisconsin counties.

It should be mentioned that Black-Hawk was also a fishing club and summer retreat for members. One of its curiosities constructed in 1885 was a 14' diameter by 3' deep fish tank in

to an account in the Whitewater Register of September 3rd, 1885, the fish were already showing signs of tameness. The article concluded by saying, "In a few weeks the house will be filled with hunters from all parts of the country."

Lake Koshkonong Hotel/ Koshkonong Place – 1870

In addition to residences and clubs, area resort hotels played a large part in providing accommodations for incoming sportsmen to Lake Koshkonong. A. L. Witcomb and W. H. Hudson built the first resort hotel on the northeast shore of the Lake in 1870 calling it the Lake Koshkonong Hotel with the expressed purpose of providing lodging for hunting and fishing parties. With its completion began a confusing record of owners, innkeepers and especially establishment names that has lasted to this day. In 1876 the First National Bank of Fort Atkinson is recorded as a buyer, but no record of a seller is included. We presume the sellers were its builders Witcomb and Hudson. In 1881 the Bank is recorded as the seller to a Thomas J. Proctor. Proctor changed the name to the Lake View Hotel only to resell quickly within two years in 1883, to G. E. Gordon. A court-ordered declaration made in 1887 revealed that Gordon had purchased and was holding the property in trust for

See **DECOYS,** page 14A

Earliest known photo of Koshkonong Place Hotel c.1880 or earlier, based on early crude dock cribs, visible first addition to original building before later re-siding to give impression of one continuous building and lack of mature trees around hotel.

Peck brothers Walter L., Clarence I. and Ferdinand W. Peck, all of Chicago, and Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. Finally in 1890 a deed was filed officially recording the property in their names. The Peck brothers, of substantial real estate wealth according to local accounts, ran the property as a summer and fall-spring hunting lodge for their own use as well as the public until they sold to Arthur Hoard in 1898. During this 1870-1898 period the property was on and off referred to in newspaper accounts and on picture titles as Koshkonong Place. The name seems to have been colloquial, for nowhere can it be documented to be the official name or designation for the property.

Koshkonong Place Decoys, the Susquehanna Flats Connection – 1870-1898

Sometime during the period mentioned above, decoys started to appear with KOSHKONONG PLACE branded on their backs. An actual date can only be approximated by placing it within the time frame that decoys of the same style were being made in and around the Susquehanna Flats area of the Upper Chesapeake Bay and the period this hotel was operated between its opening in 1870 and its purchase by Arthur Hoard in 1898 when Hoard changed the brand on the same decoys.

It seems reasonable to conclude that Koshkonong Place decoys would have appeared sometime on or after 1870 when the first hotel or later owners would have provided them to hunting guests.

With some logic we can assume that Koshkonong Place branded decoys were in use for some time prior to the sale of the hotel to Art Hoard in 1898 because at that time Hoard added his own Hoard brand to the same decoys, this time placing his brand on the decoy's bottom, leaving Koshkonong Place brand still on the back.

Koshkonong Place Decoys play the most significant role in any attempt to document a Susquehanna Flats – Lake Koshkonong decoy connection or to disprove it. It is Koshkonong Place Decoys that are the earliest found branded on their backs, with the name KOSHKONONG PLACE. It is these decoys that raise the question of whether they were ordered as rigs directly from a Maryland maker(s). It is these decoys that dispel, at least for these decoys, the idea that they were brought in by visiting hunters.

In making a case for Susquehanna Flats origin, direct comparison to Susquehanna Flats decoys of the same period presents the most compelling evidence. Shown in the accompanying photos are two Susquehanna Flats style decoys ostensibly by the same maker with the KOSHKONONG PLACE brand impressed on their back. One is a Canvasback drake in original paint and an empty hole in the bottom where the iron ballast weight has fallen out. The other is without paint, having been taken down to bare wood and having had its ballast weight holes and neck joint filled with wood putty.

Body measurements on Koshkonong Place branded decoys have an overall body measuring 13" long, 5 ½" wide, 2 ¾" high and 6" high to top of the head. They have a moderate vee shaped bottom and a relatively vertical breast when viewed from the front and side respectively. The heads are positioned back on a

Above: Bare-wooded decoy, probably originally painted as a canvasback, with Koshkonong Place brand on back. Below: Canvasback Drake original paint decoy with

semi-shelf and nailed in place with a large single nail and 4 or 5 small nails. The tail is extended off the back of the body in a generally flat plane and squared off. Editor Joe Engers, writing in J. Evans McKinney's book on Susquehanna Flats decoys says it best, "these are decoys that were made rather than carved".

The late Norris Pratt, Upper Chesapeake Bay historian and author, captured one of the most salient points in identifying these decoys when he said: "I have been told by some of the 'old heads' that the basic design of Upper Bay decoys changed in the 1880s. Before this, decoys had been made quite flat. For instance, I have some examples only 2 ¾" thick and approximately seven inches wide. Although weighted, they would not right themselves in heavy seas. I presume the hunter felt that if the decoys turned over it was time to get off the water himself." All of the Koshkonong Place decoys meet the dimensional criteria Pratt referred to. Why then haven't more examples surfaced in the Flats area?

Original paint is exciting on any Upper Bay decoy. We're fortunate to have one Koshkonong Place branded decoy, a canvasback that appears to be in original paint. It shows the Flats' painting style of lightly applied feathering behind the neck and shoulders and just ahead of the tail. This example also has the same style of painted eyes as those of the Flats decoys of the period.

Ballast or body weights were bent from forged iron strips pointed and driven into the bottom of the decoy, usually at one end but occasionally at both ends. This style of iron ballast weight was common in Flats decoys before 1900, according to Henry Fleckenstein's chapter on Sporting Yachts in the 1991 edition of Chesapeake Bay Decoys edited by Robert H. Richardson. This practice wasn't found on decoys made in Wisconsin.

Anchor attachments on the decoys are uniformly leather loops and are a less distinguishing feature, being an almost universal form of anchor attachment prior to 1920.

Branding, however, is a distinguishing feature of Koshkonong Place decoys. All these decoys are regularly, neatly and clearly branded. By

universal form of anchor attachment prior to 1920.

Branding, however, is a distinguishing feature of Koshkonong Place decoys. All these decoys are regularly, neatly and clearly branded. By contrast, impressed branding of this style is only occasionally seen on decoys from other Wisconsin areas.

Flats decoy collectors in general agree that these Koshkonong Place Decoys have what they refer to as an up-the-river style found on the Flats between 1850-1880, but Maryland examples are scarce and the jury is out on any maker attribution.

Decoy from Son Rig shows virtually identical early Flats' style on Koshkonong Place rigs. Brand is located on underside of tail.

Decoy from the Bob and Kristen Lehmkuhl collection, photo courtesy of Decoy Magazine

Most characteristics of the Koshkonong Place decoys seem to favor what eventually evolved into the Cecil County School of makers led by John Graham. But, Harford County carvers can't be counted out because the earliest Havre de Grace carvers led by John "Daddy" Holly had not at that early a time fully developed the style that would ultimately define them.

Other makers were certainly at work. Advertising under the heading Decoy Ducks in The 1892 Sportsman's Directory and Year Book, readily available in the Koshkonong area, shows that decoys were being made, advertised and presumably sold into the area out of Baltimore, considerably south of the Flats, by a W.B. Trimble, Wooden Decoys, 838 W. Lexington St., Baltimore, Maryland. By way of general interest, in the same yearbook, R. A. Elliston of Bureau, Ill. and J. N. Dodge, Detroit, Mich. offered wooden decoys. Mason would not begin making decoys for another four years, in 1896.

At this point in our research, absent of a bill of sale or other documentation, it's impossible to prove whether the Koshkonong Place Decoys were purchased as a rig directly from Upper Chesapeake Bay makers. Visual, circumstantial and forensic evidence, however, seems to suggest the possibility of such a conclusion for at least some decoys.

Hoard Hotel Decoys – 1898

Art Hoard (1863-1942), son of Governor William. D. Hoard and member of the prominent Hoard newspaper and dairy families of Ft. Atkinson, Wisconsin and successful entrepreneur, purchased the Koshkonong Place property in 1898 from the Peck brothers, renaming it the Hoard Hotel.

With the renaming, the Koshkonong Place decoy inventory was re-branded with the name, HOARD, this time on the bottom of the decoys rather than the top.

Today many of these decoys appear with both brands. Some of them also carry later brands of individual rig owners, sug-

Hoard brand impressed on bottom of Koshkonong Place branded decoy, c. 1898.

From the Bob and Kristen Lehmkuhl collection, photo courtesy of Decoy Magazine

gesting that they took flight from their original rigs. Still others have only the HOARD brand, suggesting additional decoys were added by Hoard. These new decoys were in the same style as the Koshkonong Place Decoys. The presence of new decoys with only the Hoard brand also suggests that the decoys could have been available from the same maker as late as or after 1898 or by that time been copied and made locally.

The Hoard Hotel brand has so far always appeared beginning with the large H with somewhat stylized capital letters completing the name. From time to time other Hoard brands show up designating later Hoard family rigs. In one case, the brand is Bill Hoard, a nephew of Art Hoard.

With the declining trend in waterfowl population apparent even when he purchased the hotel in 1898, by 1920 Art Hoard was in the throes of planning a golf course for the property, which opened for play in 1924 using the hotel for the clubhouse. Two years after his death in 1942, a group of local business and professional people formed The Koshkonong Mounds Country Club and purchased the building as part of the golf course. The hotel continued as the clubhouse and served for 103 years until it was razed for a new golf clubhouse in 1973.

Oral tradition says that decoys matching those described above were among those disbursed from two barrels of decoys found in the Hoard Hotel-Clubhouse basement when the building was razed for the new country clubhouse in 1973. This might explain the fine condition of some of the examples we have today.

irtually identical early Flats' igs. Brand is located on un-

m the Bob and Kristen Lehmkuhl oto courtesy of Decoy Magazine

H. C. Son Rig Decoy

A Bluebill decoy by the same maker as the Koshkonong Place Decoys but slightly smaller and displaying the brand H. CLARK H.C. on the underside of the tail recently turned up in a dispersal of an old Wisconsin decoy collection. Originally the consensus was that the initials H. C. stood for hunt club, however, no record of such a club was found. Research did however find a reference to a H. C. (Clark) Son (1828-) Railway Express Agent at Edgerton, Wisconsin, with a son Harry Son (1862-), and we're assuming that this decoy wa from either of their rigs.

Taylor's Hotel/Koshkonong Inn – 1870

Taylor's Hotel, also referred to as The Koshkonong Hotel, was built in 1870, the same year as Koshkonong Place but on the southwest lakeshore near the town of Edgerton, Wisconsin. It was purchased by Messrs. Taylor & Robert Carr in 1872. An 1873 lithograph of the hotel provides the earliest visual documentation of wildfowl shooting on Koshkonong. Taylor's / Koshkonong Inn is mentioned in local newspaper reports as the lodging place of many visiting hunters.

Taylor's Hotel continues in operation today as a restaurant called the Lake House Inn. *(Editor's note: The Lake House Inn closed in 2017.)*

No decoys have surfaced displaying either a Taylor's or a Koshkonong Inn brand.

To give readers some idea of the activity in the area at the turn of the century, the crossings of two major railroads, the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul and the Chicago and Northwestern at nearby Milton Junction resulted in timetables reporting service by 28 passenger trains daily.

Esterly Decoys – 1870-75

These decoys are similar in style to Flats decoys but attributed to George W. Esterly, Whitewater, Wisconsin and represent the shift from actual decoys made in Maryland to

See **DECOYS,** page 15A

those being made in Wisconsin. They have a unique cast iron hang-down ballast weight that could well have been a part used on Esterly's early agricultural machines. These weights are castiron, with the name ESTERLY in the mold itself, although a few have turned up blank. The marked examples have been found on decoys carrying the personal brand GEW on the back of the decoy, which identifies them as the personal rig of George W. Esterly, Black-Hawk Club's second president in 1877.

George W. was the son of George Esterly, a leading Wisconsin inventor and founder of the Esterly Harvester Company of Whitewater, Wisconsin, maker of harvesting and agricultural equipment from the late 1840s to 1892. Esterly's early reaper surpassed that of Cyrus McCormick, winning the gold medal at the Chicago Mechanics Fair of 1848.

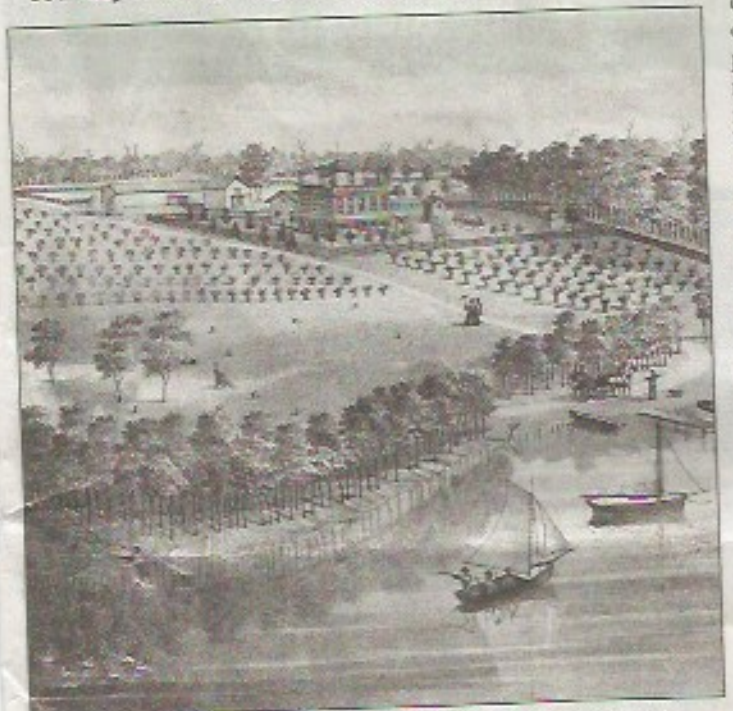
In addition to photos and the first Black-Hawk Club stock certificate, the Esterlys have shared with the author a long-standing oral family tradition of their ancestors making decoys but no documentation has surfaced. In addition to maintaining a woodworking shop for the implement business, one of the related Esterly businesses in Whitewater was furniture making, which began in 1864. By 1878 the local newspaper was reporting that, "Manufacturing various articles of furniture by machinery has increased in the past decade."

Interestingly, the Esterly decoys follow a similar but even more simplified pattern than the Koshkonong Place Decoys. They are models of production efficiency, employing band saw cut-out bodies and heads, requiring minimal hand shaping, so it's not a big leap of the imagination to visualize the boss keeping the men in the shop busy making his own rig of decoys and possibly more.

Our ability to date the Esterly decoys to the 1870s timeframe ranks them among the earliest Wisconsin documented decoys. It will be even more important if we're successful in finding evidence that Esterly actually made them.

Decoy from the personal rig of George W. Esterly, branded GWE on back. Unique hanging ballast weights bearing cast-in name of ESTERLY.

From the Bob and Kristen Lehmkuhl collection, photo courtesy of Decoy Magazine



Lithograph of the Taylor Hotel in 1873 depicting duck shooting from sailboats on Lake Koshkonong.

File photo

Shannon–Tallman Decoys

SHANNNON and TALLMAN are the brands on the bottom of these beautiful canvasback Koshkonong decoys in a modified Flats style. Oral Tallman family tradition says that Charles F. Shannon made decoys for the Tallmans. No hard evidence confirming this has surfaced. The Shannon Canvasbacks shown here are without much argument among the finest looking Wisconsin made decoys ever done in the Flat's style.

The drake carries the brand of C. F. SHANNON in addition to the brand TALLMAN. The hen carries the brand of C. E. SHANNON. The Tallmans were prominent residents of Janesville, Wisconsin, settling there in 1850. Julia Hornbostel, in her 1996 book, A Good and Caring Woman, the Life and Times of Nellie Tallman, documents the hunting exploits of family members.

The C. F. Shannon brand on the drake is that of Charles F. Shannon (1857-) The C. E. Shannon brand appearing on the hen canvasback is that of Clarence E. Shannon (1860-) his brother and both sons of Charles O. Shannon (1830-) Fulton, Wisconsin, Rock County. The Shannons are listed in the 1880 U.S. Census as farmers.

Shekey Rig Decoys

Two early Koshkonong decoys with the SHEKEY brand on their back and originally painted as Canvasbacks are now sporting coats of cinnamon-brown paint with greenish bills. They are made in Wisconsin conveying the Flats style. A half-dozen male Shekeys are recorded as living in Rock and Jefferson Counties bordering Lake Koshkonong during the last half of the 19th century. We are assuming that one of these is the owner of this rig. A possible candidate is Albert H. Shekey (1848-1921). He and his wife Mary Shekey (1859-1944) rest in the Lakeview Cemetery, Ft. Atkinson, Jefferson County, Wisconsin.

Chesapeake Bay and Koshkonong Decoys after 1900

Eastern hunters of course continued to travel to Lake Koshkonong for another 20 years after the 1870-1898 period. The decoys that came in these later years are more recognizable Upper Bay styles and makers. They provide stronger visual evidence for most the stories of how Upper Bay decoys got to Wisconsin. None of these later decoys have been found with either Koshkonong Place or Hoard brands but marked with personal brands. With a little work these decoys could probably be attributable to known Upper Bay makers and sportsmen. An example is pictured that looks very much like a Havre de Grace maker. This is a fine, well-used migrant decoy that could even today be well thought of by a collector.

Another is a fine Dudley style decoy attributed to the upper Chesapeake. It carries the brands FGF and FULLER, a brand that surfaced recently at an Eastern auction. It appears to date to around 1915. A reasonable number of these later decoys regularly show up in the Lake Koshkonong area along with decoys patterned after them by local Lake Koshkonong area makers

Made in Maryland?
Made in Wisconsin?
What have we learned?

Most importantly, we now know that:

•Decoys branded Koshkonong Place, all of the same style, appear to have been provided to guest hunters by at least three different hotels at the same location commonly called Koshkonong Place between 1870 and 1898.

•Decoys branded HOARD began appearing in 1898 when Arthur Hoard purchased the hotel and re-branded the original decoys.

•Visual profiling of the Koshkonong Place Decoys shows that these decoys appear to be by the same maker. Direct side-by-side comparison shows that the decoys are the same in shape, size, paint, and construction detail to decoys made in the Susquehanna Flats area of the Upper Chesapeake Bay in Maryland between 1850 and 1880.

•The decoys have a production, even factory-made look to them, and vary little from one decoy to the next dispelling the idea that these decoys were orphan decoys left by visiting hunters from their rigs.

•We know that wooden decoys were available from Maryland sellers, particularly a

Continued from page 14A

ognizable Upper Bay styles and makers. They provide stronger visual evidence for most the stories of how Upper Bay decoys got to Wisconsin. None of these later decoys have been found with either Koshkonong Place or Hoard brands but marked with personal brands. With a little work these decoys could probably be attributable to known Upper Bay makers and sportsmen. An example is pictured that looks very much like a Havre de Grace maker. This is a fine, well-used migrant decoy that could even today be well thought of by a collector.

Another is a fine Dudley style decoy attributed to the upper Chesapeake. It carries the brands FGF and FULLER, a brand that surfaced recently at an Eastern auction. It appears to date to around 1915. A reasonable number of these later decoys regularly show up in the Lake Koshkonong area along with decoys patterned after them by local Lake Koshkonong area makers

Made in Maryland?
Made in Wisconsin?
What have we learned?

Most importantly, we now know that:

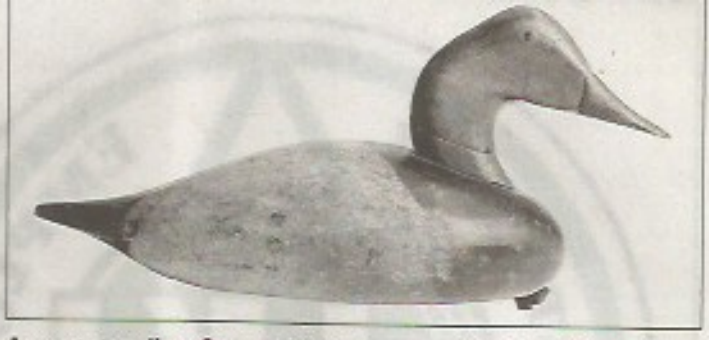
•Decoys branded Koshkonong Place, all of the same style, appear to have been provided to guest hunters by at least three different hotels at the same location commonly called Koshkonong Place between 1870 and 1898.

•Decoys branded HOARD began appearing in 1898 when Arthur Hoard purchased the hotel and re-branded the original decoys.

•Visual profiling of the Koshkonong Place Decoys shows that these decoys appear to be by the same maker. Direct side-by-side comparison shows that the decoys are the same in shape, size, paint, and construction detail to decoys made in the Susquehanna Flats area of the Upper Chesapeake Bay in Maryland between 1850 and 1880.

•The decoys have a production, even factory-made look to them, and vary little from one decoy to the next dispelling the idea that these decoys were orphan decoys left by visiting hunters from their rigs.

•We know that wooden decoys were available from Maryland sellers, particularly a



An outstanding Canvasback decoy c. 1880 attributed to Charles F. Shannon, Fulton, Wis.

From the Bob and Kristen Lehmkuhl collection, photo courtesy of Decoy Magazine

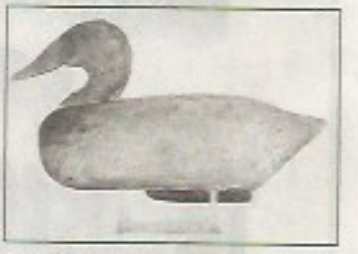
W. B. Trimble of Baltimore during the period, based on advertisements in hunting annuals distributed in Wisconsin.

•Unfortunately we do not yet possess documentation that can make a connection. Until such time as evidence surfaces we can only continue to speculate, albeit with a little more confidence, as to the source of these early examples of a commercial rig being made in Maryland and shipped to Wisconsin between 1870 and 1898.

•And lastly, we know that Susquehanna Flats decoys influenced the making of decoys by Wisconsin makers of the Lake Koshkonong – Rock River basin during that time and later, by contributing a style believed by many to be a basis for a good share of Wisconsin's finest collectible wildfowl decoys of today.

Above: This Wisconsin-made decoy in the Koshkonong tradition c.1880 is branded Shekey on back. Below: Exquisite form of later Susquehanna Flats style decoy c. 1915 used later on Lake Koshkonong.

From the Bob and Kristen Lehmkuhl collection, photo courtesy of Decoy Magazine



Readers familiar with the Lake Koshkonong Story know that the Carcajou Hunt Club (fr. Badger) established in the old Lee Home on the northwest corner of the lake in 1896 still exists. Although it has a colorful history all its own and shares many of the same celebrity visitors and stories, it wasn't mentioned in this article because of the Club's founding at the close of the peak canvasback era and did not play a role in the early Maryland Susquehanna Flats decoy issue.

To get an appreciation and importance of the Lake Koshkonong area in the global history of waterfowl and ornithology in general it's important to know that the most important ornithological activity carried out in world in its time was on Lake Koshkonong. Thure Kumlein (1819-1888), ornithologist, naturalist and taxidermist extraordinaire built a collection with detailed record keeping of species and migration habits of all birds and animals for the State of Wisconsin. Museums worldwide were some of his best customers at that time or since. He accompanied the transfer of the collection to the Milwaukee Public Museum in 1883. Kumlein's work formed the basis of the collection that Milwaukee Museum School decoy carvers Owen Gromme, Walt Pelzer, Earl Voelker and Warren Dettmann drew and built upon during the mid-twentieth century.

Special thanks in contributing to this research are due Virginia Esterly Larson; and, to the assistance of the late Jim Neal, Tom Neal, Jim Leute, Bill Zeman, Kurt Buggs, and the staff at the Hoard Museum, all of the Lake Koshkonong area. Maryland assistance and references were invaluable from the previous work of C. John Sullivan, Jr., Henry Flechenstein, Jr., Norris Pratt, J. Evans McKinney and Joe Engers.