

Punt Guns

By Mick Wick

If you were to review the Crawford Melonseed website, you might not think right away about shooting ducks, most of them are more concerned with more peaceful pursuits, but that was the original purpose of the melonseed. The upper reaches of the Chesapeake and the mouth of the Susquehanna River is a great stretch of shallow water right on the East Coast Flyway for ducks and other wildfowl. To prevent the winter blues from setting in, Tom Shephard gathered a group of members from the Delaware River Chapter to do a Saturday tour of three Eastern Maryland Museums one cold windy February.

The first stop after we carpoled to larger carpools to North East, Maryland, and the Upper Bay Museum. It is your old style museum, less like a video convention and more like your grandfather's attic, as long as your grandfather was a waterman. There and subsequent stops at the Decoy Museum and at the Havre de Gras Maritime Museum, I was treated to lots of information about both legal and illegal duck hunting in past years.

When I first think of duck hunting, I think about duck blinds and crack shots bringing down gamebirds as they fly by, but it wasn't always like that. These weren't hunters honing their expertise with spending the whole day hoping to get a brace of ducks, these watermen were hungry. Sportsmanship took a distant second place to killing enough birds to make market gunning worthwhile. They had considerable investment in guns and paraphernalia; they had to make a killing.

Sneakboxes and melonseeds were a kind of floating duckblind, but the watermen of the upper Chesapeake had more tricks than just low freeboard craft to ensure their successful hunting. Even 150 years ago, the government was concerned that crafty watermen would decimate the duck population, so there were gamewardens about to make sure that the poor ducks had a fighting chance, but it was when the wardens were asleep that the real duckhunting took place. It

wasn't sneakboxes and melonseeds, but sinkboxes and bushwhackers who came out in the dark nights.

First was the sinkbox: a wooden bathtub barely afloat with a canvas surround



that mounted many duck decoys. The hunter reclined in the bottom of the boat next to his shotgun, depending on the decoys to attract their more lively cousins to join them. As soon as they settled, the hunter would rise up and blast away.

There were boats with five or six gunbarrels mounted in the bow of their

boat in a modest fan pattern, but the most ingenious craft of all was the Punt Gun.

These guns were made in England and smuggled into the middle Atlantic States.

They were so illegal that no American gunmaker would be caught making them in

this country. They were the Post Civil War

equivalent of the AK 47, not made for

sport. The Gun was an eight foot long,

two inch diameter muzzleloader with its

stock cushioned against a couple of

sandbags. The duckhunter would load his

gun by leaning it up against a porch

column, then he would climb on the porch

roof and pour down the barrel a pound of

black powder and a pound of birdshot. This was a one shot endeavor. He would

carry it down to his duckboat and lay it along the centerline with the barrel just at

the bow and the stock cushioned against a couple of sandbags. No shoulder could

stand the kick of this piece. Then late on a dark night he would row out to a

sleeping mass of ducks. Before shooting, he would paddle backwards to pick up

some preliminary momentum or the kick of the gun would drive the stern of the

skiff underwater. He would blast away at the flock, then, if he didn't capsize, row

straight home and hide his gun where no gamewarden could find it. Picking up his

prey was the job of his buddies in another boat. If apprehended by the awakened



warden they could deny any knowledge of the identity of the cannonier. His evidence was safely buried in the backyard.

Sportsmanlike, not likely, but admirable in a pragmatic way. The record bag for the particular piece at the Upper Bay Museum was 54 merganzers