

Royal Duck Hunt

Queen Victoria, whose long reign saw the rise of Great Britain, passed away in January 1901 and her son Edward VII ascended to the throne. It was the dawn of the Edwardian age, when British royalty basked in the glow of a prosperous empire. In the fall of that year, Edward's 36 year-old son George, Duke of York, and his wife Mary, embarked on a visit to the Dominion of Canada. The couple would later be known as King George V and Queen Mary, destined to serve Britain through the difficult years of the First World War and, in 1901, they were being groomed for their future roles. The untimely death of his older brother Albert, in 1892, had thrust George unexpectedly into the role of heir apparent. A tour of Canada was seen as a good way to strengthen ties within the empire and give the royal entourage valuable experience.

George was an avid sportsman and hunter, so an invitation from a prominent Canadian senator for a duck shoot at Delta Marsh was accepted enthusiastically by the future King. It would serve as a welcome diversion from official public duties. The Duke's host, John Nesbitt Kirchoffer, had acquired land along the shore of Lake Manitoba, near a portion of Delta Marsh known as Clair Lake. He constructed a modest "shooting box" there, and named it York Lodge in honour of its illustrious guest.

The 1901 royal tour included Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier, who joined the party on a train journey that took them to Banff National Park and the luxurious accommodations of the Banff Springs Hotel. The royal party separated at Banff, with the future Queen Mary and a number of others remaining there while the Duke traveled east to Delta Marsh, accompanied by his brother, Prince Alexander of Teck. Laurier carried on to Winnipeg where the royal party was to reassemble following their respective sojourns at Banff and Delta.

On Sunday morning, the 6th of October, the Duke and his party arrived in Poplar Point. Here he was joined by the Governor General of Canada, Lord Minto, who had traveled from Ottawa to join the shooting party. After lunch in Poplar Point, they were taken 12 miles by horse and wagon to the marsh where a fleet of canoes conveyed them to York Lodge. They arrived around 5:00 pm and settled in for the evening.

Joseph Pope, a writer accompanying the royal party, described events of the next two days thusly:

"At an early hour the camp was astir, and the canoes carrying the distinguished sportsmen underway to the haunts of the wild duck. There were in all seven canoes, each with a capable guide taking a different route, John Atkinson, as before, having the honour of piloting his Royal Highness. The morning was an ideal one for duck shooting, the sky being slightly clouded, with a light breeze

blowing, and the party took full advantage of the morning flight. For five hours the sound of the guns could be heard from every part of the marshes and shortly after ten o'clock the canoes arrived at the lodge. As a result of the morning's sport nearly two hundred ducks, which number included all variety known to Manitoba hunters, were

brought in. His royal highness himself an excellent shot, bagging fifty-two birds. After luncheon the sportsmen started off anew and again did much execution. On their return to the lodge it was discovered that a distinguished member of the party, to wit, Prince Alexander of Teck, was missing. His serene Highness was attended by Mr. Helliwell, who though an experienced guide, had managed in some way to lose his bearings on the lake. Lanterns were hung out and guns fired, but it was not until some time after sundown that Prince Alexander arrived, none the worse for his little experience. The sport was renewed with equal zest on Tuesday morning, and at noon the party returned to Poplar Point thoroughly charmed with Mr. Kirchoffer's hospitality."

The royal tour proceeded eastward, and despite the best of intentions, George never returned to Delta Marsh. His eldest son Edward, who would briefly succeed George as King before abdicating for the woman he loved, fulfilled his father's dream by returning to this great hunting ground in 1919.

A great deal of preparation went into the event, seemingly out of proportion to the brief time in which George was actually present. However, the royal visit first placed Delta Marsh on the international stage and began a remarkable era when prominent people from all walks of life and from all over the world would be drawn to this magnificent marsh.



Duke of York shooting at Delta Marsh, 1901

“Lawbreakers” - 1925

“The committee of the management for the ladies rest room have heard that there has been dancing at Delta Beach on Sunday and an attempt to continue the same. Also that bathing costumes are not discarded when the wearers leave the water also the girls are making a habit of wearing overalls as a common article of dress in defiance of the law.”
The Manitoba Liberal, 13 August 1925

Delta Reed Harvest

The Common Reed (known technically as *Phragmites australis* or “phrags” for short) occurs throughout Delta Marsh, with its distinctive golden tassels that shimmer in the sunlight. This enormous plant, a member of the grass family, has been harvested for a variety of uses for thousands of years. So it is perhaps not surprising that, twice over the last 50 years, attempts have been made to harvest reeds commercially at Delta Marsh.

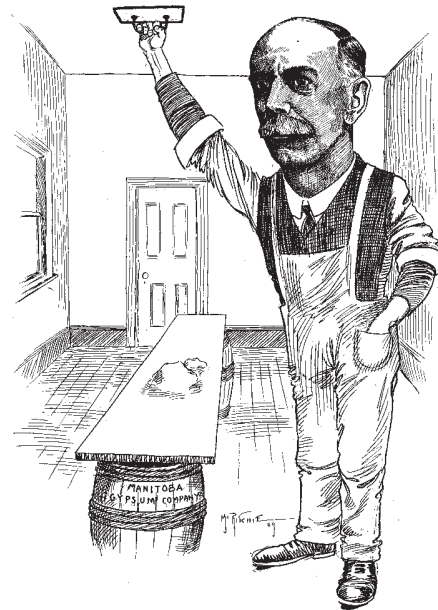
Between 1951 and 1954, Baron von Rengres of The Netherlands arranged for a reed harvest for the company Dutch Building Panels Ltd. At least three outfits were actively involved: J. A. McDonald, Ed Humiski, and N. Bruinooge. This enterprise came to an abrupt end in 1955 with a dramatic fire in Portage la Prairie, during which the factory and a year’s supply of reeds went up in smoke.

A second, somewhat less ambitious harvest attempt was made between 1975 and 1989. In 1974, Mike Dawson, a roofer from the Ottawa area, had approached Bob Jones, the provincial Marsh Manager, about the possibility of harvesting reeds to thatch roofs. He was going to Somerset, England to apprentice as a thatcher and was interested in the availability of Delta Marsh reeds. Permits were issued for a harvest in 1975 and the controlled fires necessary to produce high quality reeds were completed on the harvest area. A power take-off binder, made in 1936, was used to cut the reeds which, with some adjustments, produced bundles of the proper size. The first large-scale harvest was completed in 1977 and the harvested material was used to thatch a 200 year-old, square-timbered barn for the Quebec Heritage Association.

In 1980, the provincial government was contacted by the Dutch firm Gouderak b.v., makers of reed-based paneling for home construction, who were interested in acquiring the rights to harvest up to 2,000 acres of Delta Marsh for a period of five years. At that time, reeds occupied over 14,000 acres of the marsh but much of this area was inaccessible. The province decided they could not guarantee availability of this acreage for the length of time required so the deal fell through.

Between 1977 and 1989, Art Barrett, working in partnership with Mike Dawson, harvested a large quantity of reed from several areas of the marsh, but primarily in the Flee Island area. Some went into construction of heritage buildings around Connecticut and Massachusetts, including a shopping mall.

Prepared by Bob Jones



William Martin was President of the Manitoba Gypsum Company, and a founding member of the Lakewood Country Club on the west side of Delta Marsh, in 1909 when this caricature was drawn.

Delta Marsh History Initiative

In its heyday, Delta Marsh attracted people from all over the world and all walks of life. Generations of farmers, fishers, hunters, and trappers found themselves in the company of royalty, movie stars, and even astronauts.

A group of people who share an interest in the area, the Delta Marsh History Initiative, is preparing to write a book. It will feature histories of the prominent people and organizations of the marsh, from the earliest aboriginal inhabitants to the present cottagers, hunters, and scientists. We hope that the book will encourage conservation of this world-class marsh.

You can help!

- provide photographs, reminiscences, family stories, or any other information pertaining to Delta
- let us know about people who have information
- volunteer your time to help collect and organize information, contact people, and prepare a book on Delta history to be published in 2004
- make a tax-deductible donation to help with costs

Delta Marsh History Initiative

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