

A Look Back ... Herb Dill and Howard Thornsberry

Herb Dill was described in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1951 as a man who “has a rather unconventional liveliness and likes to get a bit more than his job done.” The same article – a color spread in what was then a major national magazine – described Howard “Hacksaw” Thornsberry as the “young mechanical genius of the refuge.”

That would be Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Missouri, where manager Dill and maintenance worker Thornsberry invented the cannon-projected net trap in 1948.

They made the trap in the refuge shop using less than \$70 in salvaged and new materials. They did it despite various ballistics challenges and, after writing Washington for advice, getting what they once termed “a stiffish reply to the effect that it might be better to stick to more conventional methods.”

Dill and Thornsberry devised a cannon-projected net that enabled the capture of many geese at once. It worked like this: Charges of potassium chlorate and sugar were activated in tubes attached to the edges of a large net, projecting the leading edge of the net into the air and over geese and other waterfowl drawn to the area with bait. The captured geese were then examined, banded and released. A *Post* reporter invited to watch the net in action wrote that the “net whisked out like a banshee in a hurry.”

On Dec. 10, 1948, 20 geese were caught in the first cannon-projected net trap. In the first eight attempts, 226 geese were caught. The refuge’s historical notes indicate that “Washington repented of its original stand and gave the men an Award of Merit.”

By the late 1970s, the Dill-Thornsberry cannon net had been used to catch more than 100,000 geese at Swan Lake Refuge and countless more geese and other waterfowl around the world.

The Saturday Evening Post explained that before this innovation only a few geese could be caught in baited cages because, “with the uncooperative patience of wild things, the geese would stand and stand, talking it over dubiously while the man waiting nearby would slowly and blasphemously freeze to death.”

CAPTION

In 1948, Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge manager Herb Dill and maintenance worker Howard “Hacksaw” Thornsberry invented a cannon-projected net that allowed for the capture of many geese at one time. They are shown here in the March 10, 1951, issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*. (Gus Pasquarella/*The Saturday Evening Post*)