

# ORAL HISTORY

of

# Pete Ward

(Retired)

Interviewed by

**Unknown**

On April 30, 1987

Oral History Program  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
National Conservation Training Center  
Shepherdstown, West Virginia

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PW: These are all rough-cut blocks you know.

Q: Uh-huh.

PW: So each one of the guides made a slightly different decoy out of these rough-cut blocks and so you could tell, tell each one. I mean you could tell them all. And then they, I think, well along with my father, they painted them all and eventually they got a string of 25 decoys for each one of eight or 10 bolts.

Q: Uh huh.

PW: And, uh, then of course they needed replacements, so these same guides started making replacements for them. Each one of them interpreting it a little bit differently. Um, so you have to back up a bit further than that. That **Dunk de Charme** decoy that I showed you. That was already in existence at that time and, uh, he modified his decoys to put that keel on them. He never, never made a decoy like this. He stayed with his own interpretation of what the Canvasback was. And **Del** didn't have any of his, but there was a little **matey** guy by the name of **Dunk de Charme** who was, he guided for old man Bell all of the time, and he is the one that; he was a real artisan of them. He made bashers, and then he made decoys; he made all kinds of things. He was the one that when I took over, I got to make the replacement decoys, most of them. And, uh, it kept him busy, sometimes buying decoys from him when he was starving that we really didn't need. Anyway, most of the decoys that you collect from around this region were/are **Dunk de Charme** decoys.

Q: Was he French or half-breed?

PW: Half-breed?

Q: That would be considered a **maday**? . .

PW: **Matey**. Yeah.

Q: Well, how did your interest in painting develop? Have you always had an interest?

PW: Well, I started painting when I was 12. Um. The thing that influenced me into getting going was Allan Brooks and the Birds of Minnesota.

Q: You apparently got a hold of that copy. . .

PW: Yeah, **old JF**. The **old JF** was an old friend of **Dr. Roberts**. In fact, **Dr. Roberts** used to go on expeditions with him, on birding expeditions and that sort of thing, and I guess he financed a lot of the background thoughts for the Birds of Minnesota.

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Q: Um hmm.

PW: And he gave my father a copy and that's how I... One day the old man was going to Winnipeg and I asked him if he would pick me up some watercolor paints. By God, he did and he brought them home with him, a watercolor set.

Q: Um hmmm. What medium are you working in right now?

PW: Watercolor. I started in watercolors. Then I switched to oils, and now back to watercolor because I spent a couple winters in the Minneapolis Art Institute and worked under **Bernie Quick** and he was their watercolor man. I just never backed away from the watercolors after that.

Q: Is there anything you liked about the watercolors more than the oils? Just especially ...

PW: Oh, there is more freedom... Cloud formations look much more natural with watercolors.

Q: Um hmmm.

PW: You cannot sit around and rework watercolors hour after hour. They either go or they don't go. They kinda have a life of their own.

Q: Aren't watercolors a little more difficult than oils? Because if you screw up, you screw it up?

PW: Well, after you have been at it a long time, you can do. . . I don't use any white. . . Over the years, I have developed using ways of using miskit and cutting to get the white. . .

Q: What do you call that? Miskit?

PW: It is a rubber based cement that you put on the areas that you want to keep white and they have developed it so over the years so that you can paint with it, just the way you would with watercolors. So, if you are doing an evening scene where you want a lot of color in the reeds, you lay on a gold wash or yellow wash, or whatever it is on paper, and then you paint in your reeds. Then you go ahead and paint in all of the parts of the birds or whatever you are going to keep white, and then you go ahead and finish the picture. Then, when you are done, you rub off the miskit and there- your reeds are in the original gold color.

Q: Oh, I see.

PW: That's an example of how you do it.

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Q: What kind of a guy was James Ward as you remember him, as you were a youngster? Was he a pretty... Well, he would have had to have been a pretty forward person at that time with his concept of the delta...

PW: Well, he had a very inquiring mind and you know... What he was saying back then is that if you are going to destroy, you have got to replenish. In that in taking, you should be putting back. It is the same way that a farmer does or a stockman does. He decided to do his replenishing through the hatchery. He had brought in the latest avicultural. . . He built a hatchery using the latest in chicken technology and he had all of the latest in feed technology right in his own mill, and hell, we were using hormones and all specialty data back in those days. Well, now they are standard parts of a pack of feed that you buy. So, there really isn't anything new. We had it all and uh by the time the hatchery was in the fifth year of operation, I think that we put back over 10,000 birds into the wild.

Q: In that period of time?

PW: Yeah, uh huh. But then he decided that there was more to be learned that simply operating a hatchery and he started looking around for men and methods, and there were a lot of... He had a hard time finding people who were interested, but finally Dr. Perney from the University of Michigan State came to delta and he saw the potential. Perney was probably one of the first people to ever get a PhD in waterfowl ecology. He worked on the black duck, and he went back and got a hold of Leopold and they came up together. Leopold went back and made a proposal to the Wildlife Management Institute who in those days administered to the North American Wildlife Foundation. There was a North American Wildlife Foundation, but it did not have an office with supporting staff, and they had some money. The Wildlife Management Institute handled it as... they doled out grants and that sort of thing from. Anyway, I've got all of those original proposals. Anyway, Leopold made a proposal and I think the total of it was \$1000 to begin research. He went back and got Al Hopebaum interested. Al came to delta and that's how the thing started...

Q: Um hmmm.

PW: In 1937.

Q: You still do any egg collecting and release birds now?

PW: Well, that is the thing. If there are student studies involved that require ducklings or require eggs to be hatched in nests that was taken from the wild, we do that, and we also salvage eggs off of farmlands.

Q: I see. So like if a landowner comes in with a nest?

PW: You will start to get some now when they begin to plow. Although, we don't get as many now as we once did. When you were pulling a 50 foot rig out behind a four-wheel

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drive tractor, you are not going to see them, and you are not going to get off anyway. Although, that interest could be generated. It would take some doing, but if you had a method and you developed the interest and the method of collecting eggs from the farmland in western Canada, you would get so many you would not be able to handle them.

Q: Yeah.

PW: In the spring, you can listen to the farm broadcasts. Everyday they will tell you on the radio on the farm broadcast what percentage of the land has been plowed and seeded, and within 10 days these big machines will get out and turn over most of Western Canada, and along with it the first nesting attempts.

Q: You are raising mostly **spring weed** out there?

PW: Um. No. It's what you call **spring plant**? There is some winter wheat, but winter wheat has not come into its own yet, but there is a lot more interest now in winter wheat and no-till agriculture on these areas of the west.

Q: I would think that if they could come up with a good variety of winter wheat that would leave these fields so they would be untouchable in the spring and also. . .

PW: You know, that's what everybody thought, but the studies they have done on no-till agriculture show that it is not the fantasy that everybody thought...the ducks aren't using it.

Back and forth (indiscernible) conversation.

PW: The big no-till machines, when they are done moving over the land, they leave just as much back as the other two. That's a good nesting cover.

Q: What is that?

PW: That's alfalfa. I bet you there's ducks nesting in there, but there is one problem with that. That's where the... two problems with that. First, that would be where the ducks go when they get dumped off this stuff here. They go into that and then there is no regulation about cutting time on that, so just about the time of the second nesting attempt they will go in and cut that. On **Crown land**, marshland or any land that is leased for hay, you cannot cut up here until after the 15<sup>th</sup> of July, for that very reason.

Q: I see. I was thinking winter wheat, but I don't know what kind of depredation process you have in grain up here, but even like over in **Cole Lake**, they could develop a winter wheat; it is still very hearty, but there would probably be a lot of depredation problems with it. . . make a lot of farmland that is considerably more agreeable to raising some ducks I would think. . .

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PW: Well, you don't hear any talking about duck depredation in this country any more because there isn't any.

Q: Okay.

PW: Well, Delta Station can't, can't... You couldn't conduct a waterfowl listing, a study, a duck study on the delta marsh. It is a thing of the past. There are no ducks... that is simply a result of tremendous hunting pressure over a long period of time and um it's known. It really started, **Al** will tell you most of this. Back in the 40's, he was warning about what would happen if you burn out these native marshes by continuous and heavy hunting.

Q: Um hmm.

PW: And when Bell came up here and started shooting Canvasback, and umm, and he and you know... Except on weekends, you would never hear another gun in the marsh and then just at the latter stages of the war, World War II, Jimmy opened up his camp and there were a lot more camps too, and they all came in at the same time. Mostly many, many American camps, and the beds were never cold. One group would come in. I think that the next group would come in and Canvasback. Greeting canvasback on the marsh was no different than **showers**. They would just putter around the marsh heads where they were born...

Q: Um hmmm.

PW: Every day. Flying back and forth on the same ground they were born on. And all of a sudden that ground has a hunter on every point, you know what happened. And over time, well... if you want an example of it, well bluebills used to be a very common breeding duck here, so were the **Whiteline Storters**. They are nonexistent down in this region any more. And the Canvasback is down to the point where, well, as I said in that article, there might be 30 pairs in the whole delta marsh now.

Q: Well, I don't know what your season for residents, open-duck here, it must be around the middle of September?

PW: Ummm. Well, lets see. It would be the 7<sup>th</sup> of October or somewhere in there.

Q: Well. They don't open until the 7<sup>th</sup> of October?...

PW: Well... the traditional duck season opens in the last week of September and there was a week's delay on non-residents.

Q: Oh okay. I see. Some residents are opening in the last in September though.

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PW: Yeah.

Q: What would happen if that were to be delayed another week? Would that...

PW: Well, the residents don't bother going in the marsh.

Q: They don't bother?

PW: No. They don't care. Canadians don't hunt like Americans. They are much more casual about it.

Q: Uh huh?

PW: Everybody knows that the ducks are all pin feathers and they don't want to... why do it?

Q: Well how 'bout delaying it another week?

PW: But then about the time the non-resident season opens, the week later, that is about the time that the Canadians start thinking about getting going, so the two combined then; then the pressures begin. We finally got half-day hunting on snow geese in this country and now the snow geese stay around. Prior to that time, it would be one huge barrage that when the day the geese arrived and they just moved off somewhere else.

Q: Inaudible.

PW: Morning only hunting cuts down the. . . I mean you just can't get out there roaring around with your three-wheelers...

Q: I just saw them yesterday.

PW: Umm.

Q: Was Lake Manitoba ever... was that ever a magnet to hold birds other than maybe staging birds.

PW: Oh, when I was a kid, after the... by the 15<sup>th</sup> of August the shoreline at Lake Manitoba was a solid mass of mallards, molting mallards, and it would continue that way right through the hunting season.

Q: Um hmm.

PW: One of the reasons that the delta marsh has lasted as long as it has is the fact that the Bells owned all of the shoreline north of the marsh, and then the hunters would go up to the marsh in the morning and would put out all of the birds, and then they would go sit out on the lake, so in a way they were protected there. (coughs) Nobody shot the shoreline.

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The Reginald, both JF and even Ford and the sons never bothered to shoot geese even when they used to be there by the thousands.

Q: Um hmmm.

PW: Even the geese were the same way. They were undisturbed.

Q: Do you think that there are any other factors, you know, concerning maybe the lake or the marsh? Again, I am thinking like maybe the carp may have affected it to a certain extent?

PW: Well, Mike Anderson did a sago pondweed study for his Masters program and in that he built all kinds of exclosures for the... to include other ducks, carp, and other birds from the study area and as I remember it, he could not find any difference between inside the exclosure than outside. In other words, the carp were not... There is no shortage of sago pondweed in the marsh. None at all.

Q: And apparently, that you still got your good vegetation there; you're getting your little critters that are still looking for it to provide a source of protein and the birds too.

PW: Well, nobody's looking at the main marsh, but certainly in Murphy there is no lack of food. You don't see any great... there aren't any more birds in the marked ecology study area than there are outside.

Q: Um hmm. This is an area that's shot out. Now because recently, there used to be literally hundreds of birds and back and forth all of the time.

PW: In the fall...well, that's a different thing. Then it is a staging area.

Q: Um hmm.

PW: This marsh over here – the best shooting marsh in Manitoba. It is heavily shot, and yet you go in there and kill a limit of bluebills any day.

Q: Now, is an area like this? This part of the marsh on this side- is that pretty much non-residents that hit it that hard and the residents?

PW: Well, residents go in there, but there are a lot of non-residents who go in there too.

Q: Ah ha. Because obviously about the only way you can hunt it is with a bullet.

PW: Yeah. Well. There is a big resurgence of non-residents.

Q: Um hmm.



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PW: Last fall, I thought jeeze it had returned to the 60's and people are back again. ...it was blocked off for four years.

Q: Um hmm.

PW: And then, came **Kirtland Sterling Lyon** the premier of the province and he and I got together and got the delta channel reopened and also that **Clandenvoi** channel opened so that the lake and the marsh now fluctuate together.

Q: Which is the natural...

PW: I guess if I were given the... Here's a guy who is getting ready to pitch for carp.

Q: Really?

PW: Is it full of carp?.

Q: Yeah.

PW: Really?

Q: Hmmm. That looks good.

PW: Lets have a look at that.

Pause. Background noise. Indiscernible voices/radio/bumping/thumping.

Q: ...your perspective from the delta marsh.

PW: You can't tell anything by that, but certainly, from what I have seen, it has married what's going on right across the country. The real problem is there. . . I mean, you are an example of it. There are so many people sports writers and everybody running around getting little bits of the picture, but, and all of that yet... All of that you cannot call pressure because there really has not been pressure that has arisen out of it all to change what's happening on the farms in western Canada. Until that happens, the duck situation isn't going to get any better.

Q: Well, I think I saw what is evident this morning with the water birds.

PW: No the west is strewn with millions. One of my friends put it this way, my Canadian Wildlife Service friend, two years ago when we had lots of water; the west looked like a moonscape, pure black fields with a bunch of potholes with puddle patches of water in them. You know, so, the raw material is still out there to return those potholes. Leave them alone and they will come right back. I guess the raw material for the population to fill them is out there too, but as to whether they will come back under our present harvesting regimens is a question. I think that that is the crux of the whole thing.

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Q: Well I have been out in Skechawan for . . . and both sides. (inaudible)

PW: Yep.

Q: ...perhaps more geese...

PW: Well, we will see a bump in the goose population. They did not do very well last year and I don't know how well, nobody knows, how well they will do this year, although they certainly are getting a good start. Yeah, even on the bay, it is breaking up early, so maybe there will be a change again.

Q: Um hmm.

PW: Locally, our snow goose population seems to be directly tied to the corn industry and it will blossom for what 10 or 12 years here, especially up till they got the new hybrid corn. And then all of a sudden it went broke and all of a sudden everybody is out of it again. And, I do not know whether that is the reason or not, but certainly last fall we did not have the snow geese that we have had in this general area.

Q: Are the snow geese actually going out to the corn?

PW: Well, that is what they concentrate on. Actually, they come into this part of the world. They feed in the prairies first and then they get into the fields, and then feed around like that. Then, all of a sudden, they seem to gravitate to the corn fields and then gravitate back to the big water at night.

Q: So they are going south where the corn is?

PW: They are going down around Carmen, practically to the border. Then they come back on these big waters at night.

Q: How soon will the breeding counts come out, where you get a handle on...Well you were out last week?

PW: The 15<sup>th</sup> of . . . by the 15<sup>th</sup> of . . . Well if they are starting in the first of May, I would say that the rough form stuff will be out in another three weeks.

Q: How does the delta breeding stock look this year compared to recent years in the data?

PW: All I can...I would say that as far as the mallard is concerned, it is almost nonexistent; there is an occasional pair here and there. Most of the pairs that you will see are right around here where the release station is. Ken Reecy had a couple nests of pintails brought in by the farmland, and he put nasal saddles on them and released the young ones out here on the pond. Two of them are back here nesting.

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Q: Two of them back here?

PW: Yeah.

Q: Well with an early start. Inaudible.

PW: It is the same as fish. You kill all of the breeding tradition and it takes a long, long time to reestablish it. Umm. If that's not the case, why aren't seeing Trumpeter Swans all over the west? There is a great abundance of Trumpeter Swans in Red Rock Lake, Montana, and they stay there, don't they? They are not moving back out here to their old traditional range.

Q: They have tried to stock them in Minnesota as well.

PW: They are sort of taking a hold in Minnesota? Aren't they?

Q: A little bit, but you know, of course they get a little bit of a start and then somebody goes out and...

PW: They are too obvious.

Q: Yeah they are.

PW: ...somehow be able to contend with that, but when you shoot one of a pair of swans you are shooting 15 years of effort.

Q: That's right.

PW: Its three years before they breed and probably another two before they are successful. So, it is a long, long. Sure, the Trumpeter Swan will eventually move back out over their range. It might take hundreds of years to do it.

Q: Yeah. They just transported a couple dozen up to . . . becomes in audible. . .

End.