At one time, Illinois had more duck clubs than any other state in the Mississippi flyway.

Illinois Valley Duck Clubs

(Photo courtesy Mike Resetich.)

Story By Mike Resetich

The Illinois River valley has a rich history of duck hunting, and at one time more than 1,000 licensed clubs spanned the stretch of the river.

As the 19th century was nearing its close, waterfowl hunting in Illinois was beginning to change from a sustenance need to a sporting pastime. Market hunters (persons who hunted waterfowl for income) were still doing business in the spring and the fall, but almost all of them were feeding their families by commercial fishing or farming, rather than from their market hunting earnings.

In America, the Industrial Revolution had started and was running full speed. This meant cities and towns were growing, and more and more people were leaving the farm to make their living in jobs other than agriculture. This change in lifestyle did not diminish the urge to hunt for this generation of hunters. This takes one back to the old adage, "you can take the boy out of the country but you can't take the country out of the boy." The Industrial Revolution changed waterfowl hunting from the business of market hunting to a sporting activity, creating the need to maintain an ample supply of ducks and geese.

In this time period, sportsmen began to realize that they no longer had a place to hunt since they had left the farm. When they lived on the farm and had the urge to hunt, they would simply pick up the old shotgun and walk out the door. After their move to the city, they had to make elaborate plans before they could go hunting; thus, private hunting clubs were established in Illinois.

Private duck clubs are unique to North America. The first duck club was established near New Orleans in 1815. In the early 1800s, hunting and fishing clubs were being chartered and became operational in the eastern part of the country. The club concept quickly spread throughout the United States, with California becoming the most highly developed. To date, the Winous Point Shooting Club, founded in 1856 in Ohio on the shores of Lake Erie, is the oldest active waterfowl hunting club in the United States.

In the late 1800s, as a result of large population growth and habitat degradation in the northeast and southwest, attention turned to the bottomland of the Illinois River. The Illinois Valley still remained in pristine condition during this time period and private clubs began to appear in this area, along with a few in the flood plain of the Mississippi River.

The rich history of Illinois Valley duck clubs is highlighted by the carvers of

wood decoys. Many carvers also were market hunters, including Walter Dawson, Henry Geise, Thad Johnson and Charles Perdew, to name a few.

Marketing hunting was prohibited with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918. In 1935, live decoys and baiting were outlawed and the three-shell limit (gun not capable of firing more than three shots at one loading) was established. With these changes, most market hunters began to carve decoys as a profitable side line, or as a full-time occupation. Along with the decoy carving came the need for duck and game call makers. Many decoy carvers also made calls and from that need came the assembly line production of duck and game calls from P.S. Olt of Pekin. Fred Kimble from Chillicothe also contributed to the rich waterfowl lore of the Illinois Valley with his choked shotgun barrels.

Until 1920, when the automobile became common, hunters traveled to the Illinois Valley by railroad, steamers, launches or cabin boats. They went to the Undercliff Hotel located on Senachwine Lake near Putnam's railroad station, which was just 122 miles south of Chicago's Union Station by way of the great Rock Island Railroad. In 1882, the Undercliff Hotel and Resort was described as a place of elegance with large and airy rooms, bright new carpet, full menus and a large dance floor. It was clean and inviting, with each and every need anticipated and supplied.

Commercial, or day-shoot clubs, also played an important role in early Illinois waterfowl hunting history. These establishments were usually managed by one person and did not have the management practices or monetary resources for waterfowl management as did the private clubs. There were no memberships or bylaws, so hunters simply paid on a day-to-day basis.

At first, many hunters felt enormous hostility toward the private duck clubs and some of that hostility was more than justified. These clubs represented lost hunting opportunities for the average hunter. In some states, there were movements to stop the establishment of private duck clubs by legislation, but such laws interfered with the constitutional right of private ownership. Duck clubs soon became commercial operations with clubhouses, boats, blinds and club managers who were hired to maintain and patrol the grounds and provide favorable habitat for waterfowl.

In Illinois, waterfowl hunting took place along the Illinois River from DePue to Meredosia. This area, which is known as The Great Bend of the Illinois, had been the Mississippi River 10,000 years earlier. The Great Bend was designated as the entry point to the lower Illinois River's migratory waterfowl and is an important North American waterfowl corridor.

The three oldest clubs in operation are all neighbors, located in Putnam and Bureau counties, just below the Great Bend of the Illinois River. In 1883, hunters from Chicago purchased land and started the Chicago Gun Club. This club was the forerunner to the Swan

By the 1900s, private hunting clubs were popular along the Illinois River, including the Swan Lake Duck Club on Senachwine Lake (left and below).

(Photo courtesy the Swan Lake Duck Club.)

(Photo courtesy Mike Reseticch.)

(Photo by Max Schnorf courtesy Swan Lake Duck Club.)

(Photo of Griggsville Museum decoys by Adele Hodde.)

Decoy carving became a trade for many Illinois River market hunters after the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was passed in 1918.

Lake Gun Club of today, which is the oldest gun club still in operation in Illinois. In 1886, the Hennepin Shooting Club was established and today it is the Senachwine Gun Club, the second oldest in Illinois. The Princeton Game and Fish Club was established in 1887, making it the state's third oldest such club.

Each gun club has its own individual set of written bylaws, which can be quite lengthy, and have their own personality. With a number of similarities and as many differences, a few of the bylaws currently are: A hunter must leave the clubhouse for 24 hours after being at the club for three days, no one can hunt on Sunday, a member can hunt only three days a week, and a member must reside in the county of the club for at least one year before applying for membership.

At one time, Illinois had 1,413 licensed duck clubs, which meant it had more clubs than any other state in the Mississippi Flyway. With the creation of levee districts, the conversion of wetlands to agriculture, and two-thirds of the remaining habitat under private control, three out of five waterfowl hunters found it difficult to find a place to hunt.

Private duck clubs played a significant role in sport hunting and waterfowl resources. Management practices by these clubs set the stage for modern waterfowl management and are credited for many of today's waterfowl regulations. They set daily and possession limits and put into effect the three-shell limit. The private duck clubs were influential in outlawing spring hunting and banning of baiting and live decoys. They created alternative methods, such as planting and flooding of grain fields as attractants and food production. Staff of these private duck clubs constructed levees and water-control structures and added pumps to water the fields. Clubs also are being credited with the establishment of rest areas, where shooting or disturbance is not allowed for weeks prior to and during waterfowl season.

Private clubs play an important role for waterfowl and many other species of wildlife by providing a valuable habitat in the Mississippi Flyway. They are credited with providing upwards of 2.5 million acres of moderate- to high-quality habitat. Without their management, this land would lose its ability to attract waterfowl and likely would be converted to other uses.

Neither federal nor state agencies could ever hope to own or manage enough habitats for sport hunting or bird watching; therefore, private duck clubs should be highly encouraged to restore and maintain this habitat. They play an essential role in waterfowl and conservation, and are a legacy to future generations.

Mike Resetich is the DNR site superintendent at Donnelly State Fish and Wildlife Area.

(Photo courtesy Henry Public Library.)

Ollie Woods stands in the doorway, greeting Frank Woods (note cat on his head), Harry Woods and Ray Woods after a successful duck hunt on the Illinois river.