

Duck Shooting at FORTY ACRE

In the beginning, you must be invited; and if you are not among the favored few, an invitation will never be forthcoming. But, if you do go, the first step in the procedure is to stop at the hotel in Tuckerton and drink four martinis, while Diz shoots darts and Piney talks politics with the bartender, then a long ride down a lonely road past the wireless station to "The Gate." The gate is made of wood and wire and is padlocked. It boasts a fancy sign which reads, "Scenic Bridle Path." They call it a bridle path because they "ride" their guests so much. Piney unlocks the gate, the cars pass through, and the gate is again padlocked. They have you! You couldn't get out if you wanted to. Next you drive down the Scenic Bridle Path for about half a mile. The bridle path runs through a thicket of scrub pine and brambles so thick a snake could hardly pass through it, and Diz tells you that this is where they shoot rabbits. You don't dispute Diz, but you know damn well no rabbit could live in such a place. However, guests must be polite so you shut up. Finally, you come to the Houseboat. When you see it you gasp and almost lose your four martinis.

Houseboats usually float on the water but this houseboat rests on dry land and is anchored to trees by strong iron cables. They tell you how Diz lifted it to its present position in the strength of his youth. There is a small clearing in front of the houseboat which is strewn with the accumulated garbage of many years. An iron tub of dirty, ice water stands by the step before the door. You step in this to wash your boots before you go inside. Thirty feet from the door is a small wooden outhouse. You think of the morning ritual and you shudder. Duck feathers litter the place, and a path leads over the meadows to a creek where a garvey is tied up to a ramshackle dock. It is very cold and the wind blows a gale as you park your car alongside the outhouse. Next, you wrestle your guns and duffel from the car and lug them inside. Kinky is there to greet you and shakes your hand.

Kinky is short, stocky and very strong. He even smells strong. He grins from ear to ear. You

don't know it, but he is grinning because he knows how uncomfortable you are going to be and how cold you will be on the morrow.

The Houseboat contains three compartments (the enclosed back porch, the kitchen-dining room and the dormitory) each about 10 by eight feet. The first is full of boots, raincoats, corn, apples and such—very full; the second only contains the stove, the gas range, the refrigerator, the sink, the dining table, the food and dish closets, the radio, liquor, the gun rack, and usually about six men. You lug your duffel into the dormitory which contains three double bunks and Piney's bureau. It also contains an unconscionable quantity of blankets, dirty underwear, coats, sweaters, boots and other paraphernalia; there is so much of this that you have a hard time finding a space to put down your duffel bag. This room contains one window, size: one foot by one foot. It is nailed shut. You have the feeling that you are going to sleep in a safe.

To the best of your ability you make up your bunk, using Fred Weigel's dirty underwear for a pillow; then shove some of the other stuff around to make a path from the door to your bunk. You wonder how you will ever find anything again if you lay it down; but, somehow, you change your clothes, put on heavy underwear and a wool shirt and return to the dining room, a matter of walking three feet. In the meantime, Kinky has turned up the oil stove and you are met by a wave of heat which makes you feel faint. The radio, to which nobody listens, is now going full blast, and Diz has mixed more martinis in the coffee pot. Piney and Rod McCoy are drinking brandy steadily. All is confusion and, between the heat, the drinks and the excessive profanity, you begin to wonder whether you will survive. While all this is going on, Kinky sits quietly on a milk can and plays the banjo. You smile graciously and begin to think what a damn fool you were to come here in the first place! You don't know yet about tomorrow!

By this time, everyone is feeling very good indeed. Kinky goes to bed and Diz decides to

cook supper. Diz is a good cook and the food is excellent, but it takes Diz about two hours to get it cooked, and the consumption of martinis and brandy continues unabated. Finally, you start to eat but you don't know what you are eating, and Watson yells, "Hey, Diz, where in the Hell are the martinis?" But food has a sobering effect and after supper things quiet down. Kinky gets up, eats his fill, and you help him wash the dishes. Then he goes back to the banjo.

In the meantime, Piney has opened a bottle of Scotch and Diz and McCoy proceed to drink a whole bottle of brandy. Soon Piney and Diz are in a terrific argument to the effect that Piney is the poorest lawyer in creation and that all Diz's troubles are due to his innate stupidity. Kinky continues to play the banjo. Piney gets mad and goes to bed on the top bunk. He carries the radio to his bunk, places it alongside of his ear, turns it on full blast and then goes to sleep. Kinky removes the radio from Piney's bunk and goes to bed. Diz and McCoy continue on the brandy. McCoy weakens and goes to bed. Diz decides to romp. He shouts, he dances, he sings, he pulls the blankets from everyone's bunk. He crawls into your bunk and lays his two hundred pounds on top of you. He keeps this up for an hour or more and then finally succumbs. He falls in his bunk and goes out like a light.

It is now quite late and, due to the liquid refreshment you have consumed, you find you must get up and go outside for natural reasons. Carefully, you feel your way through the debris to the door. The fire has died down and the floor is ice cold on your bare feet. You open the outside door and start out. The top step is covered with a sheet of ice; you slip and fall on your face, but you get up, tend to your business, and hurry back to your bed. You close your eyes and drift toward the land of Nod, but you never get there! A loud and raucous clamor causes you to sit up quickly in your bunk so that you almost break your head open against the bottom of the top bunk. In a daze you realize it is the alarm clock. It is four o'clock and time to get up.

Kinky gets up first and starts to get break-

fast. Soon they are all up except Piney; he's always the last out of bed and first on the meadows. You wash in ice-cold water, and a damn quick wash it is. Next comes breakfast; bacon and eggs or hot cakes and coffee, and sometimes Kinky makes biscuits. These are as flat as paper because Kinky always forgets the baking powder. If you mention that the biscuits are flat, Kinky grins and says, "Good enough, ain't they?" Then on with your boots and clothes and off to the blinds.

When you leave the houseboat it is pitch dark. You must carry your gun, shells, seat cushion, raincoat, and whatever else is needed. Piney leads the way down a narrow path over the meadows. You cross three bridges over ditches, these bridges are planks six inches wide, covered with ice; and, at high tide, the water under them is six feet deep. It would take the man on the flying trapeze to negotiate them safely. They are known as Weigel's bridges because Fred Weigel falls in regularly. Eventually you reach the boat, a garvey which is tied up in the creek, and you stand on the shore in an icy wind for an hour while Captain Kinky tries to start the motor. With a burst of profanity, he advises you that the pump line has frozen and he must go back to the Houseboat for hot water. You wait another half hour in the icy wind. Then the motor roars and Kinky moves the boat from the dock to the shore. Now Piney leads you to a couple of sneakboxes loaded with decoys, each weighing about a thousand pounds, and tells you to push them off the meadows into the water. They are frozen to the ground and you regret that you are not a horse; but, eventually, you get them overboard, they are made fast to the garvey, and you start up the Bay.

Shades of Amundsen, Captain Peary and Admiral Byrd! The North Pole is warm compared to this! You are wet with ice spray, and the wind cuts like a knife. Your fingers are frozen, but you go round the point to Bass's Bay and eventually, in pitch dark, you are unloaded on a desolate point. By this time it is raining, and sleet drives into your eyes, your clothes are wet, and you are cold and shivering. Again, you wonder why you are here.

Piney shows you your blind. It is a box six feet by three feet by seven feet deep, sunk in the meadows, and it is filled to the top with water. You are handed two buckets and told to bail it out. Did you ever try to stoop over on the morning after a bad night and not fall on your face? Try it some time on a desolate point on the meadows in a sleet storm at daybreak with a bucket of ice water in your hand. Then and there, you will swear off martinis and brandy forever. Is

it strange that McCoy looked up from the half-empty box, his teeth chattering and his face green from a hangover, handed me a bucket only half full of water and said fervently, "The Hell with duck huntin'." The boxes hold at least five thousand buckets of water and you are worn out and you ache in every bone before the bailing is completed. Then you get down inside the damp, wet box and sit on the cold, slimy seat. You are out of the wind, even though the rain and sleet continue to beat down on your head

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and back and your feet are in the last bit of ice water you could not bail out. In the meantime, Piney has put out the decoys and now crawls into the box with you. It is getting light. You shiver, load your gun and wait for the ducks to come in.

You don't hunt ducks. The ducks hunt you. You just sit and shiver and keep your eye on the horizon and wait. Finally, two ducks appear. They spot the bobbing decoys through the mist and circle toward the blind. Tensely, you crouch down in the box and watch until they come to a decision and sail rapidly over the decoys. Then you stand up to shoot. But, McCoy has forgotten to take his gun off safety and, while he pulls on the trigger frantically, the gun doesn't go off. Watson fires two barrels five yards behind the ducks. Piney kills both ducks. There is a breathless silence. Piney is modest and keeps still. Then Watson says, "Mac, that was a nice shot you made," and, without a smile, Mac replies, "No better than yours; you killed the lead duck." This exchange calls forth a roar of blasphemy, profanity and indignation from Piney. By the time he is through, Watson and McCoy are in no doubt as to their ancestry nor as to their ability to kill ducks.

The entire morning is spent in like fashion. The colder and wetter you get the poorer your shooting becomes, and you are insulted and ridiculed—are just looked at with scorn—every time you miss a duck. But by noon there are six ducks in the blind and nobody dares to claim

who hit them. Piney thinks he killed them all. McCoy thinks he's a liar and Watson is too cold to think.

Kinky and Diz now come into the garvey from the other blind, where Diz has been shooting alone. He has twelve ducks. He just looks at Piney and says nothing. Piney looks back. If looks could kill there would be no more Houseboat and no more duck dinners.

Now you go back to the Houseboat for red-hot clam stew; and it is strange indeed how you welcome that bottle of Scotch, the mere thought of which would have made you vomit a few hours earlier.

Around the table the loud, vulgar, profane voices are again raised. The morning shoot is rehashed, the radio blares, and Kinky plunks the inevitable banjo. Later, you return to the blinds.

And so go two days of delightful duck hunting and it is time to go home. You finally locate all of your things, load the duffel bags and carry them to the car.

Then Piney and Diz give you all the ducks. Forgotten is all the animosity concerning whose shots laid them low. Generously, they are piled in your car trunk. You know damn well you have more than the legal limit and that you will probably be arrested before you leave the State of New Jersey. Piney and Diz know it too, but they would prefer that you get arrested rather than they. It is a delicate point but, of course, nobody mentions it. You take the ducks and you go home.

Eventually the duck season comes to an end, and prominent citizens from far and wide gather round the festive board upon the occasion of the Annual Duck Dinner tendered by the Forty Acre Club. It is undoubtedly true that these persons enjoy immeasurably the steaming, succulent fowl upon their platters. It is no less true that they are grateful to the members of the Club for supplying the ducks for these memorable occasions; but it is to be feared that they have but scant knowledge of the vicissitudes and hardships which must be endured each year by the poor misguided devils who have been unfortunate enough to embrace the avocation of duck hunting. If this article makes them aware of the same it has accomplished its purpose and their gratitude to those who supply the ducks should increase a thousand fold. 🦆

—Harold J. Watson
January 27, 1956

(Dedicated to Piney and Diz and written for the benefit of those who have never visited the houseboat)