

Suisun Marsh - a local treasure

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More than half of Solano County is bordered by water, with the Suisun Marsh constituting the single largest portion.

While in times past Suisun Marsh formed only a small part of the delta, today it represents the largest contiguous estuarine marsh in the United States. More than 200 species of birds, 45 kinds of mammals, 36 different reptiles and amphibians and 200 species of fish call it home. In addition, a large part of California's migrating duck population lives in this area for part of the year.

During the past 150 years, California has lost well over 90 percent of its wetlands. Fortunately for the Suisun Marsh, more than 80 percent of its original 74,000 acres exist today. A combination of factors, especially the efforts of the duck hunting community during the last century, has played a role in the continued existence of this local treasure.

Around 1859, the first few white hunters came to the area to shoot waterfowl for the market in San Francisco. One of them, Walter Welch, recorded how he and his partner made the trip in 1879, equipped with six vessels, a 42-foot 'scow sloop,' two tule splitters (narrow, double-bowed boats ideally suited to pole through flooded tule grasses), two scull boats, and a small, fast sailboat to take the ducks back to San Francisco.

In addition, they carried 300 decoys, a 90-day supply of food, and an arsenal of guns and ammunition. On an average day, Welch and his partner shot 100 to 200 ducks each, with the season lasting from September 1 through November.

By the late 1800s, the first duck-hunting clubs formed. These consisted of groups of mostly well-off San Francisco businessmen, who hunted for sport and not for profit.

In the early years, they arrived by boat or mule cart, after a long and often arduous trip. The new railroad connection between Benicia and Fairfield, begun in 1878, offered a quicker and easier access to the western part of the Suisun Marsh. Unfortunately, the railroad tracks were not installed along the foot of the Coastal Range (the route where today's I-680 runs) but on a slightly more direct line closer to the marsh.

Trouble soon followed that decision. Late in October 1879, the first six miles of the track

were sinking into the marsh, giving the gravel train operator, who was according to the Solano Republican of October 23, "a jolly fellow who has just gotten acquainted with the (local) boys and possibly with the girls," another long extension of his job.

Over the next 35 years, the tracks sank a foot a year, despite continuous upkeep. In 1905, massive repairs were undertaken over several months. On the night before the grand reopening, a thousand feet of track disappeared into the mud. The San Francisco earthquake of 1906 dropped one section 12 feet.

In 1911, another section of track was once again 10 feet under water. A road gang worked day and night to shore the tracks up - in vain. Duck hunters had to be evacuated by trains that ran backward from Suisun and then took the long way home through Vallejo.

Even today, upkeep on the Benicia-Suisun stretch allegedly is one of the most costly operations for its length in the whole of the United States.

Early on, the railroad agreed to operate several stations along the line. The Teal station, like others on the line, was only a whistle stop, where a train had to be flagged down. Duck hunter Stan Arnold recalled of those early days: "I can't think of anything calculated to make a boy feel more important than to stand out on the main transcontinental train tracks with a little red lantern, and flag down a great huffing monster. It was about as impressive as stopping the sun or the moon."

And so the hunters came. "In their bowler hats and sidewhiskers, and laden with jugs of whiskey and 10-gauge Parker shotguns, the club hunters crossed on the ferry from San Francisco to Oakland and boarded the steam cars, to debark at Teal, and Cygnus, and Jacksnipe station for a leisurely weekend of duck hunting."

Not only did these men know how to hunt well, they also knew how to celebrate. The Teal Club, for example, held a week-long October bash every year, both for its male members and their wives (who were normally excluded). Seventy-year-old M. Hall McAllister recounted in 1930 what took place during this week: "A special French chef with extra servants went along, and they also took with them the famous old-time 'Macaroni Band,' an Italian orchestra that used to play on the Sausalito ferry. The men would take the morning shoot, the ladies of the party would go with the keepers for the afternoon hunt, and in the evening they had music and cards. ... There were no limits on ducks, champagne, and cards."

Today, more than 150 clubs, most of them with just a small number of members, operate in the marsh. While their entertainment style is no longer as lavish as that of the early San Franciscan hunters, their devotion to and care of the marsh is as

extensive. Without the hunting clubs, Suisun Marsh as we know it today would probably not exist.

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