

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 15, 2017

How I Learned to Shoot: My father took up trapshooting seriously in 1914, 10 years before I was born. He established the Yorklyn Gun Club in 1921 and had an annual tournament there each year (usually in August), plus numerous smaller events like the Delaware State Championships, etc. I grew up with the “shoot” and all that it entailed. Our summer vacation at Rehoboth would be interrupted for about two weeks each year -- one for getting ready and one for the tournament itself. By the time I was eight or nine years old, I wanted to be a part of it.

The hill now called “Gun Club Hill” was previously known by locals as Poplar Hill. About 2/3 of this hill was part of the property bought by the Marshall brothers, Israel and Elwood, as they expanded their vulcanized fibre business about 1903. The other 1/3 was a part of the large Sharpless farm that had extended from both sides of Yorklyn Road to Ashland. In 1921, there were only two dwellings on the hill, those being a 19th-century brick farmhouse, part way up the hill from Yorklyn Station on the railroad and the bungalow off to the northeast built by Warren and Bertha Marshall in 1908. My father held his first tournament in 1921 partway up the hill with three traps (now called “fields”) on a level section facing the mills. In 1922, as three company houses were built at this location to accommodate mill superintendents, the Yorklyn Gun Club was moved to the very top of the hill, tight against the property line with the Sharpless farm, where four traps threw clay targets down the hill toward the mills. Tents were pitched to accommodate the annual shooting events, and about two adjacent acres were leased from William P. Sharpless for parking. In 1924, the first permanent clubhouse building was erected. By that time, the Marshall Tournament lasted four days each year.

In 1925, my father bought 18 acres adjoining the gun club from Mr. Sharpless, and slightly reconfigured the traps and parking to include this new space. Soon there were seven traps in a line facing Yorklyn, with one facing the other direction toward the present Ashland Nature Center. By 1929, the clubhouse building had been expanded to its present size, with a permanent dining room and kitchen attached to the 1924 club room. The trap facing Ashland was now used only for practice, as the parking area surrounded it. With only seven traps in the main line, many of the championship events were shot at 175 targets, instead of the more common 200 (all State Championships were at 200 targets by the late 1920s). By 1930, just before the effects of the Depression were felt, the annual tournament at Yorklyn had grown to about three times its original size, and expert shooters from all parts of the country participated.

In 1933, I watched with great interest as 26-year-old Joe Hiestand of Ohio won the “Marathon” with 497 out of 500. In the spring of 1934, when I was 10, my father let me try shooting for the first time. He bought me a 20-gauge Fox Sterlingworth double-barreled gun and decided I should try to hit straight-away targets first, shooting from about eight yards behind the trap house (16 yards is normal). A year or two before, he had taught me to shoot a 22-caliber rifle under the boardwalk at Rehoboth. After school one day in April, we went to the gun club with Clifford Murray to pull the trap and one of the Berry boys, who lived in one of the dwellings across from the Marshall Brothers mill, to load inside the trap house. I got set at my position, called “pull,” aimed at the target, and pulled the trigger. The gun’s recoil nearly knocked me over, as a 22 rifle didn’t “kick.” I never saw the result of that first shot, but my father told me I broke the target. I shot about 15 more that first day, but I never broke another one. A few days later, we tried again.

The Eastern Zone Shoot was held at Yorklyn in late May 1934. On Practice Day, I was allowed to shoot in a five-man squad for the first time, and I broke 20 out of 50. In 1934 and 1935, I participated alongside the men in the 50-target night shoots during the big tournament. In September, 1935, I shot my first registered targets EVER, in the wind on the boardwalk at Brigantine Beach, New Jersey, and broke only 43 out of 100 in the Westy Hogan Handicap, which was won by Harry Crawford of Dover, Delaware, with 90. Still using a 20-gauge gun in 1936, I was usually breaking about 70%, occasionally better. Late in the year, my father wanted me to try a 12-gauge single-barreled Daly trap gun with a 30” barrel, and a light load (less powder and shot than

the maximum allowed, which was at that time 3 drams of powder and 1¼ ounces of shot). He even had some special ammunition made which had 2½ drams and 1 ounce of shot, but I still liked the 20-gauge gun better. In the spring of 1937, however, I made the switch to 12 gauge and won Class D (the poorest class) at a spring shoot of the Wilmington Trapshooting Association with 47 out of 50. For the 1937 year, however, my official average was about 75%. My father bought me a Life Membership in the Amateur Trapshooting Association of America (then \$25), and my card was dated May 22, 1937. I probably hold the record for being a Life Member longer than anyone (80 years), although the authorities think I've been dead for years.

Some of you think I became a good "shot." Good, perhaps, but certainly not expert. During my time in the sport, experts were in Class AA and had annual averages on standard 16-yard targets of over 97%. Class A shooters generally averaged between 94% and 97%, and that's where I ended up. On a few days each year a Class A shooter was as good as anyone competing, but over a year's shooting, good targets and bad, he would have too many bad days to average 97%. I won the Delaware Championship three times, but in a larger state like Pennsylvania and the big trapshooting states in the West, I would have stood little chance. For all intents and purposes, I retired from serious shooting after the 1950 season when I was 26, also the last year of shooting on Gun Club Hill.