

# Recollections of Things I Forgot to Remember!

by Joanie Ingraham

*It's Duck Hunting time again. This summer I heard from Harlan Doering, Milwaukee / Montello. He had written more ventures and history of the Puckaway Lake Duck Camp. He also brought lots of photos. Harlan writes so well that even if the reader is not a hunter, he/she will find the reading enjoyable. - Joanie*

## Louis Zellmer's Puckaway Lake Duck Camp 1898-1938

by Harlan Doering

Puckaway Lake, a large shallow body of water, lies within the confines of Marquette and Green Lake Counties in Central Wisconsin.

The lake's past is rich in early history of American Indian settlements and later as prime hunting and fishing territory for the burgeoning expansion of the white man. The body of water is 6.5 miles long and 2 miles wide with a maximum depth of 6 feet. Until the late 1950's, when water quality began deteriorating, the lake contained vast beds of wild celery and embodied extensive areas of rushes, canes and wild rice.

Indian lore had the Fox River formed by a giant serpent making the above described trip. Where the serpent spent time eating and resting for long periods of time legend declared this resulted in the formation of the numerous lakes that are the huge widenings of the river.

Martin Zellmer emigrated from Germany with his parents in 1857 and settled on a farm about twenty miles north of Puckaway Lake. His future wife, Emilie, immigrated to this same area and in 1859 they were united in marriage. They lived with Martin's parents a while and then moved ten miles south to the town of Montello on the Fox River. In 1862 they again moved a few miles east and settled in Mekan township along the shores of the northwest end of Puckaway Lake.

They occupied an "L" shaped piece of high land containing approximately 140 acres including three quarters of a mile of lake frontage. In March of 1867 Martin applied for title of this land under the Federal Homestead Act of 1862. He also became a citizen of the United States in May of 1870. After building a cabin (16x15 feet, 1-1/2 stories high with three doors and four windows, cultivated 20 acres, fenced in 20 acres, built a barn, dug a well, and planted twelve fruit trees) and living there for five consecutive years, the land was titled to him in December 1873 with a certificate from the U.S. land office and signed by President Ulysses S. Grant. The total cost in paper work was about 12 dollars. They

these shores helping with the farming but developed a passion for hunting, fishing and trapping the abundant fish and game in the region.

There was one story passed on where at age 12 he killed twenty-five redhead ducks from shore with one shot from a muzzle loader. Whether this was embellished over the years I don't know, but there are numerous references describing the vast numbers of waterfowl on Lake Puckaway in this era.

Louis met his future wife Emma Weckworth, who lived on a nearby farm, and married her in November 1887. Emma was eighteen, Louis, twenty-two. The couple resided with his parents for a year. Their first child, Olga, was born the next year but died in four months.

The couple then traveled overland by train and relocated to a farm near the small community of Wild Rose, North Dakota, in the northwest corner of that state. The farm was operated by Louis's younger brother, Henry.

Louis and Emma had one child, Walter, in North Dakota. In the spring of 1891 they decided to move back to Mekan township in Wisconsin. Shortly after leaving they had another child, Alma, born in May in Grand Forks, North Dakota, on their way home to Wisconsin.

Back in Wisconsin they lived in a wood clapboard house about a mile north of Louis' birthplace, and eked out a living by farming, hunting, fishing and trapping.

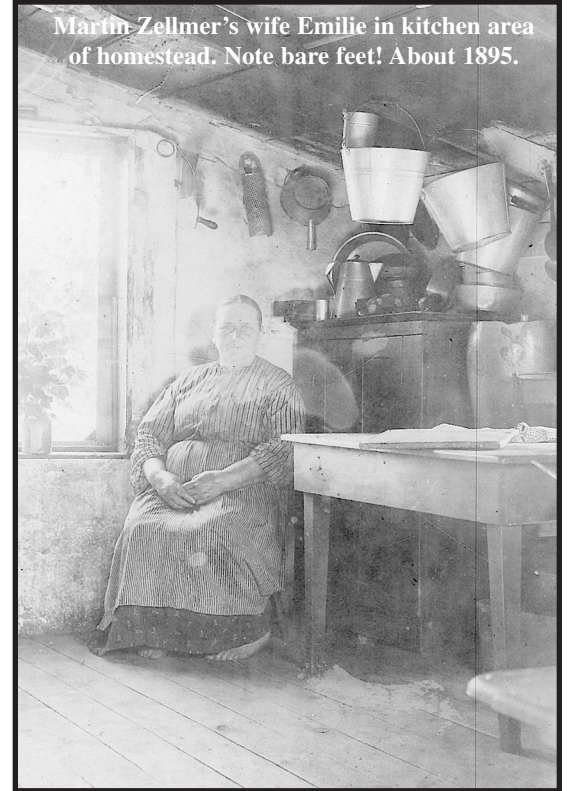
I remember when this structure was torn down in 1980 for highway relocation. The walls had straw and mud packed beneath the laths for insulation. Residing here for four years, they were then able in 1895 to build a 14' x 20' one-room home on a three acre parcel of land within Louis' parents' 140 acres. This dwelling became Louis'

Family income was garnered by a small farming operation and also trapping and selling furs – mainly muskrats.

A few cows and chickens provided milk and eggs and some meat. A two-acre garden took care of the vegetable requirements for the family. Ducks and fish provided a needed variety of fare, although these pioneers were happy just to have food on the table, a vast difference from our contemporary demands.

Louis began building a few wooden skiffs paddles and decoys. Skiffs were built with 5/8" x 3/4" wood strips, mostly pine, some cedar, and from 13 to 17 strips high depending on the projected weight to be used in the skiff. I allude to this because my grandfather, Louis, was 5'7" and weighed 250 pounds in his mature years and his personal skiff was 17 strips high. I know, because I inherited it and it was a dog to paddle in the wind. Most of Louis' weight was in his upper body, built by hard manual labor and considerable paddling and pushing a skiff.

Skiffs had a crescent-shaped white oak nose-piece on each end bolted to the redwood bottom. The nose-piece had a notch chiseled into its length to accept the side strips. The strips were planed and fitted to a contour controlled by three temporary templates attached to the bottom board. Strips were nailed one on top the other until the desired height was achieved. A small deck was constructed on each end using the same size strips. A white oak combing was then added encompassing the entire cockpit area. The skill in achieving a tight fit between waterproof con-



Martin Zellmer's wife Emilie in kitchen area of homestead. Note bare feet! About 1895.

This was the dawning of the Zellmer duck camp in 1898. The Zellmer's eldest daughter, Alma, received a gold ring from one of the hunters inscribed for her seventh birthday in 1898 thus validating somewhat the beginnings of the enterprise. The ring is now owned by Alma's youngest daughter, Eleanor.

Louis would travel to the railroad station at Princeton, nine miles away, by horse and wagon to pick up the hunters. Along about 1918 a Ford Model "T" was purchased and this alleviated some of the problems of horse and wagon, however, roads were still primitive and getting stuck in wet weather was common. Also, tires and inner tubes were prone to puncture and blow out.

Roads were impassable during most of the winter and horse drawn sleighs were the common mode of travel, many times choosing overland routes through frozen marshes and fields.

American Indians were still in the area. My mother recalled, when she was 5 years old in 1900, squaws coming to the door to beg for food. The women had to walk, while the men rode horses. My mother was usually frightened and would run under the kitchen table for pseudo protection.

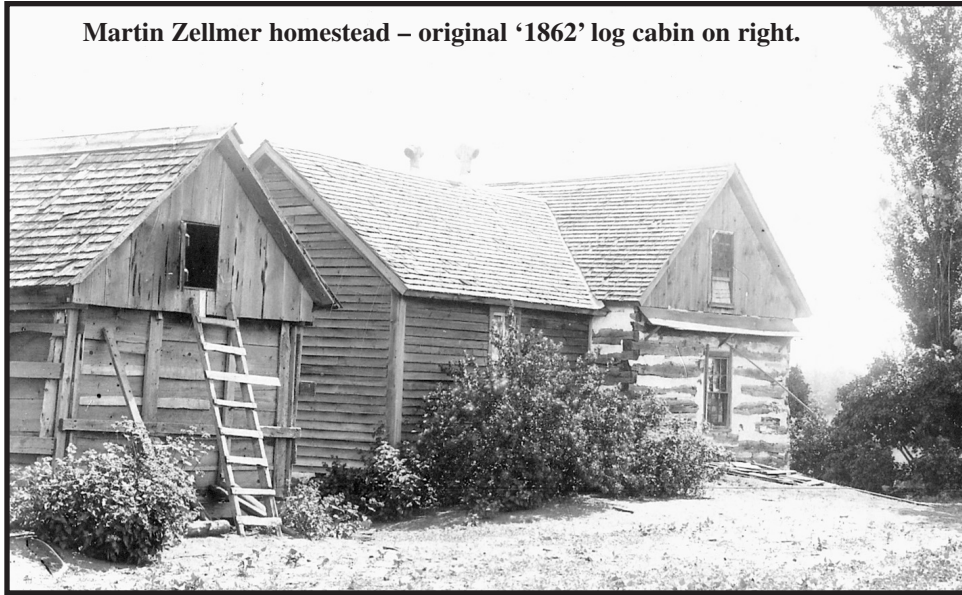
The large bedroom for Louis and Emma was about 10' x 20' and one end was cordoned off with a privacy curtain to accommodate one or two hunters sleeping on the floor. Chamber pots and a water pitcher with a washbasin were provided. Not the plush accommodations we are now accustomed to but not bad around the turn of the nineteenth century. Some of the more rugged individuals could sleep in the hayloft in the barn. These were men of means but they still traveled to this Spartan setting, lured by the dream of fantastic duck hunting.

There was also a very small, red painted, wooden cottage nestled at the tranquil shores of the slough, which could be used by two or three hunters. Constructed around 1905 it was later sold in 1930 and moved over the ice to a site on the shores of the main lake.

The central room of the house was 14' x 20', contained chairs and table, and in one corner a wood burning heating and cooking stove. The average person in the United States nowadays could not even imagine cooking on a wood-burning stove, especially during the summer months! However, with the skill of Emma's preparation, this stove produced all of the necessities of home cooking required by grown men and children.

Light in the rooms, after dark, was provided by kerosene lamps and some candles. Fire hazards abounded, but nothing ever occurred.

Martin Zellmer homestead – original '1862' log cabin on right.



Wm. Menge (L) – Louis Zellmer (R). American water spaniel on rear deck. Slough landing of the Zellmer Duck Camp, Puckaway Lake, WI. About 1895. Skiffs probably built by Louis Zellmer. Menge's wife was a sister of Louis Zellmer.



had the usual horses, cows, pigs, sheep, and chickens which made the rudiments of a small farm and provided a meager living. They remained at this location their entire lives.

About half of the lake shore abutted the vast sloughs of Puckaway whereas the remainder of the lineal frontage was adjacent to the big open waters of the main lake.

A few hundred yards across from the westerly segment of the shore the mouth of the Fox River forged its way into Lake Puckaway.

A new channel was dredged and this river location was relocated to the other side of the lake sometime in the late 1800's to provide a more direct route for steamboat traffic. The original Fox River site was abandoned, aptly renamed the Dead River, and remains to this day providing a two mile serpentine waterway coursing through fecund marsh lands.

Also, some time in this era Martin owned up to 1,000 acres of marsh land situated across the quarter mile wide slough.

The marriage of Emilie and Martin produced ten children, among them Louis Zellmer, my grandfather, born in 1866. Louis grew up along

and Emma's permanent homestead and they resided there until their deaths.

The homestead parcel was located on the north side of County Highway "C" with the shore of the lake's slough a 200 yard trek south through sparsely wooded pasture land.

At this point in time there were four children, two boys and two girls age one through six, among them, my mother. The offsprings all slept in the attic accessed by a ladder through a trapdoor opening in the corner of the one-room living quarters. The attic actually had plastered walls and was wallpapered. It is still there with remnants of wallpaper hanging down in disrepair and bat infested.

A large one-room bedroom 10 feet deep, the width of the house, was added to the structure in 1898. In the interim Louis, with the help of relatives, had built a barn, granary, ice house and chicken house on the lake side of the highway. The original barn was later destroyed by a tornado in 1930 and subsequently rebuilt that same year. The house and a milk house were on the north or other side of the road and still remain at this writing.

figuration. Some of the lesser builders had to add canvas to the sides to seal them and prevent leaking.

Length of Puckaway skiffs as a rule were sixteen feet for open water hunting. This presented a very stable craft, tracked nicely, plus holding straight into the wind when picking up decoys. Some shorter models around fourteen feet were constructed for marsh and slough endeavors.

Paddles were fabricated most of the time from white ash. A 1-1/2" thick plank with straight grain was selected, cut out to a pattern, then shaped to final form by hand with draw knife, plane, and spoke shave. It was then sanded and painted.

Decoys were predominantly made with white cedar bodies and white pine heads. Species were basically canvasback and bluebill, as this is what you were attempting to decoy on the big lake open water hunting. A few puddle duck blocks were made for slough hunting, but many times the female can and bluebill decoys were used to fool the mallards and teal. Divers were the pre-eminent varieties of the ducks to be hunted on Puckaway Lake.

Cottage east of Louis Zellmer homestead, shortly after being built 1914-15. Note the Model "T"'s!

