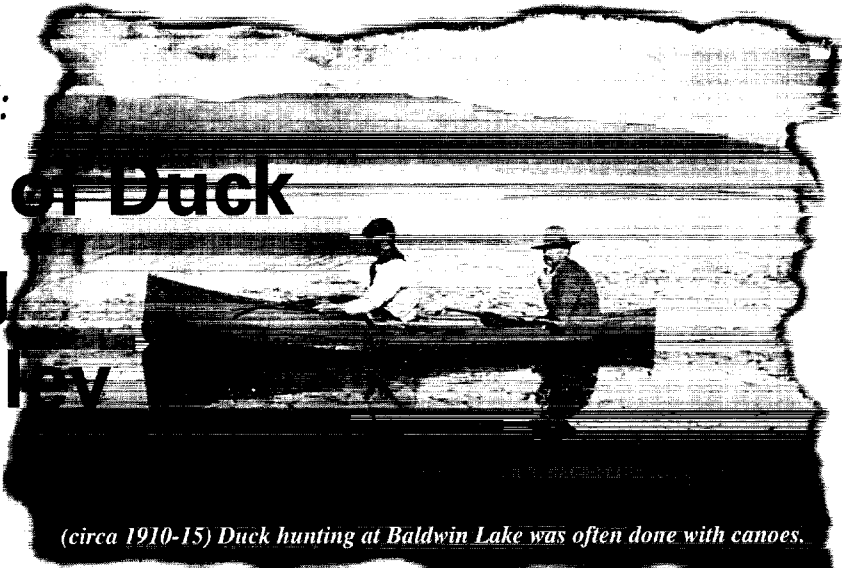


The Duck Baron of Baldwin Lake:

The Early Years of Duck Hunting in Bear Valley

by Harold M. Hill, M.D.



(circa 1910-15) Duck hunting at Baldwin Lake was often done with canoes.

Bear Valley is an elongated mountain valley of several miles length in the San Bernardino Mountains of Southern California. It was a marshy meadow used for summer cattle grazing prior to the construction of the Bear Valley Dam. At the east end of the valley lay Baldwin Lake, a shallow alkaline basin becoming a lake during wet weather cycles. At such times the marshy west end of Baldwin Lake would be filled with submerged pondweed which attracted great numbers of migratory waterfowl. In 1883-84 the Bear Valley Dam was constructed, turning much of the valley into a beautiful mountain lake surrounded by pine forests, which almost immediately became a very popular mountain resort area, particularly with the adjacent Baldwin Lake for duck hunting.

The rains were good in 1885, the first year of the completed dam, and the newspaper reported there was a sparkling lake five miles long. Trout were planted, and large numbers of waterfowl appeared in the fall in both Bear Lake and adjacent

Baldwin Lake. Hunters and fishermen soon found a mecca with their numbers increasing yearly.

Augustus Knight, Jr. (Gus) was a colorful sportsman and businessman of San Bernardino, California who in 1888 built the first and very successful hostelry at the newly created Bear Lake in the nearby San Bernardino Mountains. While an aggressive businessman, his passion was for exploiting the abundant wildlife in and about the lake, the wild ducks, trout, and deer.

While Knight was prominent in many ways in Bear Valley, he was perhaps best known for the developing of commercial duck hunting activities for sportsmen, centered on Baldwin Lake, which he promoted and largely controlled for many years, hence his title, according to one newspaper account, of "the Duck Baron of Bear Valley."

Starting in the winter of 1904-5 there was a prolonged wet cycle lasting about two decades which kept Baldwin Lake from drying up, which occurs during dry weather cycles. By this time roads to Bear

Valley were becoming much improved. With the coastal Los Angeles and Orange County wetlands being progressively eliminated by urbanization, except for private duck clubs, Baldwin and Bear Lakes were the main focus for much of southern California duck hunting. Popular Gus Knight rode the crest of the wave for a number of years. The newspaper reported in 1915, "Hunting (at Bear Valley) was not the same without Gus Knight to center the

sportsman crowd." Gus Knight exploited duck hunting both by market hunting and by supplying the sportsmen with room, board, and renting them boats and blinds.

Duck hunting was very popular during these years, and local newspapers often gave detailed reports of duck hunting trips by prominent citizens. A report of such a group from Redlands stated they "left for Bear Valley for a week of duck shooting. Loaded with shot guns and ammunition, they will make Gus Knight's record for duck shooting look like 30 cents. They have bought a cabin and several canoes and intend to make the trip every year." Another group of four hunters reported the best eight days of sport they ever had, each getting their limit of 50 ducks per day.

The good years continued. In 1917 a news article reported, "In reviewing California duck season generally, numerous (hunting) camps have been established (in Bear Valley) by former market hunters who no longer find it profitable to operate under bag limit restrictions (of 25 ducks) and turned to guiding hunters as more legitimate and paying better besides."

Historian La Fuze writes of this time, "Gus Knight had done something different: from the Oxam estate he had obtained all the lands around Baldwin Lake and rushed to build on the North shore a log clubhouse with a pier and numerous duck blinds." The *Review* newspaper of October 7, 1917 reported, "It had been reported that Knight was the Duck Baron of Bear Valley and had everything cornered. Here's the real situation: Gus Knight has not leased all of Baldwin Lake shore and there is no monopoly on the ducks. G. K. has purchased or leased about 1/4 of Baldwin Lake shore (the best hunting area), fenced the land, and has put in three groups of blinds. There are about 40 blinds for guests at Knight's camp for a three day hunt with one day at each group of blinds, a keeper to boat hunters to their blinds, scare up the ducks by motor boat, and pick up their



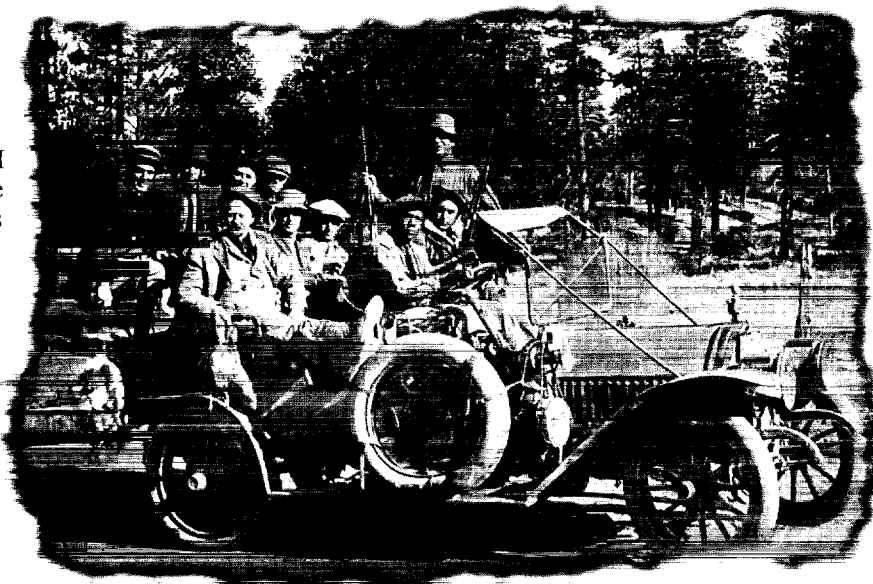
(circa 1910-15) Bear Lake.

Photos courtesy of the author

ducks." Gus explains further, "My arrangement will be a boost to the sport and in the common cause, for the land I have secured is in three pieces. All these pieces will not be used at the same time except on busy days, and the ducks will have a protected place to light and rest. The arrangement will serve the same as 'rest ponds' maintained by all big gun clubs—the valley is full of ducks."

Waterfowl were unbelievably numerous in those days, and duck hunting was very popular, probably reaching its zenith in 1919 when the *Redlands Daily Facts* reported that an estimated 5,000 ducks were bagged in the first two days of the season in Bear Valley. On Baldwin Lake there were an estimated 300 hunters with 90 boats and many sunken and shore blinds. Gus Knight was quoted as saying that he had never seen so many ducks.

In October 1919 a very knowledgeable news reporter wrote an extensive feature article on the duck opener in Bear Valley which is a good measure of those times and which the present-day Baldwin Lake hunter could still relate to: "The popularity of Bear Valley as a paradise of sportsmen came in for its most convincing demonstration with the opening of duck season half an hour before sunrise today. With every boat reserved and blinds built around the shining shores of Baldwin Lake's alkaline expanse—the only thing standing against the sport is its own excessive popularity, which when dealing with the wary, capricious sprig, is an entirely different nature of proposition from



(circa 1915) This is a typical group of Redlands leading citizens who hired transportation to go to Baldwin for a weekend shoot.

the bluebills and ruddies of later in the season, when royal canvasbacks and redheads are sprinkled in for variety. The grand game-birds all can be 'herded' or 'driven' to far greater success than the sprinting, springing, sky-scraping sprig, which soars to new altitude records at the first general fusillade of shots, and from its lofty elevation, speedily describes the sheen of the Salton Sea to the south-east and speeds hence in droves, only to meet an equally ardent if less intense reception upon its arrival. Those who go to the San Bernardino Mountains for the opening duck-shoot must reckon with the nature of sprigs, and realize that better shooting will be certain later on when different ducks prevail. Some widgeon are coming in nightly now to save the situation—splendid birds after they have been a month on rich ruppia, commonly known for their fondness for it, as 'Wigeon grass.' This feed ranks the highest in its resistance to alkaline salts in the water, is also one of the best known and most valuable food plants for ducks, nearly all species thriving upon it, attain-

ing wonderful fatness and delicious sweet flavor, far superior to the best of coast birds, even the half-tame 'barley-sprigs' of the duck clubs."

According to Leon Atwood, Jr., popular local nimrod of the time, from 1920 through 1923 an annual wild duck dinner was given for the participants and members of the National Orange Show organization in San Bernardino. Three hundred to 400 dinners were provided with wild ducks supplied by a group of prominent San Bernardino duck hunters.

These ducks were usually obtained at Baldwin Lake and consisted of about 60 percent canvasbacks, the preferred species, and the rest mostly redheads. The limit then was 25 but one could have 50 in possession after a two-day hunt. Five hundred ducks were usually supplied for these events. The ducks were accumulated for the event in 10 gallon creamery cans and frozen.

In the decades since the 1920s, Baldwin Lake has been dry during the dry weather cycles, becoming a large, white alkali flat. However, when the wet years have periodically returned, so have the ducks, though never as numerous as before the dust bowl and duck depression years of the 1930s. Baldwin Lake can still be one of the best southern California duck hunting places, under a California Department of Fish and Game reservation system, for the unattached hunter.

Hopefully, reclaimed water from the Bear Valley sewage plant will be upgraded and made available to assist Mother Nature in maintaining a permanent wetland to perpetuate our waterfowl heritage. 🦆



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