

The birth of commercial duck hunting

Stuttgart's hunting tradition can be traced through McCollum family

When the fee for a guided duck hunt in Bayou Meto bottoms increased from \$12.50 to \$15 in the 1950s, skeptics were quick to howl. "Everybody griped like hell," said J. W. McCollum. "They said you would never be able to book enough hunts."

They, of course, were wrong. Today, similar duck hunts start at \$100 and run as high as \$375.

The increase in cost is just one indicator of how far Arkansas duck hunting has grown in popularity. Many of those paying customers are from out of state. They pay the price because the hunting lives up to its reputation.

The roots of that reputation and Stuttgart's commercial duck hunting can be traced through one family: the McCollums.

The end result has been a town that reigns supreme as the "Duck Capital of the World." Duck hunters everywhere are as familiar with Stuttgart as baseball lovers are with Cooperstown, N.Y.

At the turn of the century, however, Stuttgart was nothing more than a farming community, surrounded by other farming communities. Arkansas County, which lies in the middle of the Delta's Grand Prairie, was best known for its vast hay fields.

When rice arrived in the Delta, in the early 1900s, the ducks that flew down the Mississippi Flyway and wintered in the White and Arkansas river bottoms became a nuisance. Rice was cut, shocked and stacked in the fields to dry. Rice shocks stacked three feet high would be leveled by morning if farmers didn't do something to protect them.

"We shot the ducks by the moonlight to keep them out of the rice fields," J. W. McCollum said.

McCollum said ducks were such a problem that Frank Freudenberg installed a rotating beacon, like those at airports, to keep the ducks out of his fields. In many ways, the farmers around Stuttgart hated ducks. That wasn't the case for the McCollum family, especially



Photo courtesy Bud McCollum

From left, Lloyd, Kenneth and Maurice McCollum after a successful hunt. Lloyd served as a member of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. Kenneth "Slick" McCollum's commercial hunting operation began on 1,500 acres his father, Roy, bought.

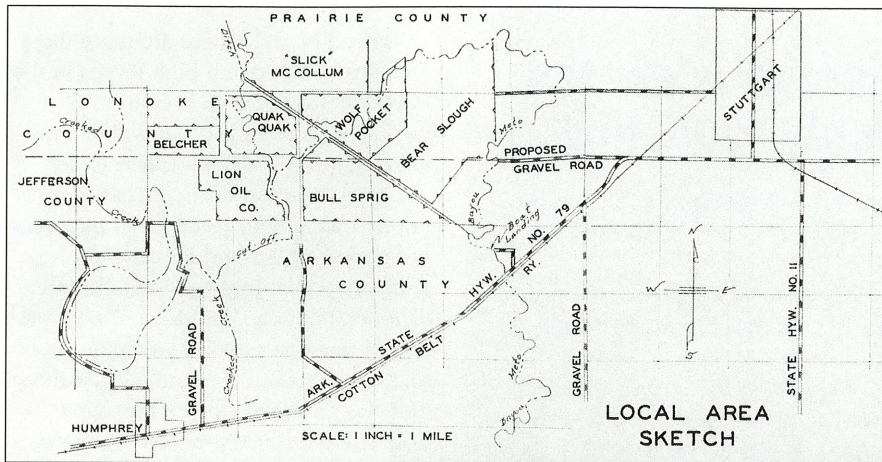
two half-brothers, Otis and Roy McCollum. They might well be considered the fathers of Stuttgart's commercial duck hunting.

"My father loved ducks," said J. W. McCollum, Otis' son. "He was the most knowledgeable man there was about ducks. The only problem was, he was about 20 years ahead of his time."

Otis McCollum never owned an acre

of land. But he developed more than 7,000 acres along Bayou Meto, north of Highway 79 and due west of Stuttgart. Bayou Meto and Buffalo Ditch, or Big Ditch, as it is commonly known, cut through the heart of the land.

Roy McCollum did own land — 1,500 acres of flooded timber known today as Slick McCollum's. Slick was actually Kenneth McCollum, Roy's son.



The northwestern corner of Arkansas County, through which Highway 79 runs from Stuttgart to Humphrey, contains some of the state's best-known duck clubs. This area of the Bayou Meto bottoms includes the commercial operations started by Russell McCollum (Bear Slough on map) and Slick McCollum, plus private clubs, such as Quak Quak, Lion Oil and Bull Sprig. Otis McCollum built the levees and developed the area for duck hunting after World War II.

The land was originally the Stuttgart Hunting Club, owned by Roy McCollum, Roger Crowe and Wallace Claypool. McCollum bought out the others and developed the land for duck hunting.

Before World War II, much of the area surrounding it was considered "open land." The parcels that did have an owner had been sold for taxes, most for \$1.25 an acre.

Hunters came by train. There was a depot at a place named Brummit, and hunters would go by wagon from there to a camp in the woods.

"They would kill all the ducks they could carry," said Elmer Grant, a neighbor of the McCollums.

Although there were limits, Grant said no one paid attention to them.

"There was only one game warden and he had half the state to look over," Grant said. "He never did catch anybody."

But the open land status started changing when Otis McCollum began leasing everything that wasn't owned by relatives. At one time, he controlled more than 7,000 acres.

That seems impossible today. Acre for acre, this northwestern corner of Arkansas County is the most sought-after duck hunting land in the U.S. It is the site of legendary duck clubs, such as Million Mallard, Quak Quak, Bull Sprig, Lion Oil and the commercial operations of Russell and Slick McCollum.

Otis McCollum leased the land for duck hunting. But the quality of the hunting depended entirely upon the whims of Mother Nature. During dry seasons, McCollum was forced to go to the lakes in the White River bottoms.

When rain was abundant, this northwestern corner of Arkansas County, attracted hundreds of thousands of ducks.

"Wherever it would flood, that is where he hunted," J. W. McCollum said.

Along with his seven brothers, Otis McCollum shot ducks for the market when it was legal. They had contracts with several hotels in Hot Springs.

After market hunting became illegal, Otis McCollum kept his love for duck hunting. But it became obvious to him that if exceptional duck hunting was going to be guaranteed, he would have to give Mother Nature a helping hand.

After World War II, McCollum decided he would develop the Bayou Meto-Big Ditch bottoms. In those days, the idea of forming levees to hold water for green-tree reservoirs was unheard of. Today, it is common practice. But it might not be, if not for Otis McCollum's work.

"It amazes me just to think about his ability to comprehend the possibilities of what he could do," J. W. McCollum said. "If he'd had just a little bit of capital, he could've done wonderful things. But for an old country boy who didn't get past 10th grade, he did pretty good."

Keeping up with McCollum family can be confusing, even for the McCollums

Bud McCollum and Marion McCollum are the same age. They are second cousins, which would lead you to believe the two spent their childhoods together in a small town like Stuttgart (pop. 10,420).

"I never met him until we started going to the fifth grade," Bud McCollum said.

That's partly explained by the fact that several miles separated their parents' homes. But it's also due to the large number of people with the last name McCollum in Arkansas County.

The present-day edition of the McCollum clan began with M. T. McCollum Sr. He fathered four sons in one marriage — Roy, Earnest, Robert and Johnny — and four more sons in another marriage — Otis, Gilbert, Thad and M. T. Jr.

M. T. Jr. fathered Marion McCollum III; Roy had Dick, Lloyd, Kenneth (better known as Slick), Roy Jr., Maurice and Russell McCollum. Roy Jr. fathered Roy III (Bud).

Keeping track of all the members of the McCollum family is tricky, even for members of the family. When Roy "Bud" McCollum III was a young boy, Otis McCollum would often refer to him as Charlie.

"Whenever we'd get ready to go somewhere, he'd look at me and say, 'Come on, Charlie,'" Bud said.

Otis McCollum probably knew Bud's name, but you can understand the need to develop your own tracking system.

M. T. McCollum owned McCollum Hardware, the forerunner of Mack's Sport Shop, now owned by Marion McCollum. Marion McCollum was named to a seven-year term on the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission in the early 1990s. Lloyd McCollum served on the commission in the late '60s and early '70s. Thad McCollum was one of the founders of the World's Championship Duck Calling Contest. Kenneth "Slick" McCollum won the fourth championship in 1939. J. T. McCollum finished second that year. M. T. McCollum won the title in 1941.

In other words, it's difficult to do anything involving duck hunting in Stuttgart and not bump into a member of the McCollum clan.

Concept of green-tree reservoirs started on Grand Prairie; commonly used now

Green-tree reservoirs symbolize the evolution of Arkansas duck hunting. You can chart that path in three steps: 1) the natural flooding of bottomland hardwood timber; 2) the creation of irrigation reservoirs for rice; 3) man-made versions of flooded timber, which are known as green-tree reservoirs.

While it's difficult to pinpoint the first green-tree reservoir, there's no doubt it came from the Grand Prairie region.

After Verne Tindall discovered the extra benefit of a rice irrigation reservoir — ducks flocked to it — many more were built on the Grand Prairie. Excluding Corps of Engineers and Arkansas Game and Fish Commission lakes, Arkansas County has 15 percent by number and 11 percent by area of all lakes over five acres in the state, according to the AGFC.

Early rice irrigation reservoirs, like Tindall's, held water most of the year. With advances in levee-building heavy equipment, some of these reservoirs were made several feet deep. The hardwood trees in the lakes died from the water covering their roots during the growing season. Peckerwood Lake, the 3,500-acre reservoir built by Edgar Queeny and Arkansas Irrigation Company, serves as the biggest example of what are often called dead-timber reservoirs.

Normally, late winter and spring are the heaviest rainfall seasons in Arkansas. One study by waterfowl biologist Ken Reinecke determined that good water conditions for mallards occurred in the White River National Refuge bottomlands only 31 of 53 winters (58%) from 1932-85. Often there is no overflow anywhere in the state on November duck season openers. That's why the rice irrigation reservoirs attracted so many ducks initially.

It didn't take much of a leap to go from dead-timber reservoirs to green-timber reservoirs. The next best thing to naturally flooded bottomland hardwoods is artificially flooded bottomland hardwoods. By building short levees around hardwood stands and, most importantly, draining the water quickly after duck season ended, it was possible to keep the timber alive year after year, hence

the name green-tree reservoirs. It's the ultimate duck hunter's manipulation of Mother Nature.

The ideal place for a green-tree reservoir is a pin oak covered flat of clay-based soil. This provides food for ducks in the form of acorns. And it allows for relatively easy water manipulation, because the soil holds water. Arkansas' Grand Prairie region of the Delta fits that description perfectly.

But the green-tree concept can be put to use with other variables. By the 1950s, the use of green-tree reservoirs had spread to several other lower Mississippi River valley states.

As hardwood timber becomes more and more valuable, the importance of proper green-tree reservoir management increases. Research continues on how to best achieve the delicate balance of managing for ducks, long-term forest health and the desires of duck hunters.

The maximum depth of a green-timber reservoir should be 12 to 18 inches. Dabbling ducks, like mallards, tip up their tails to feed underwater. They don't completely submerge, as diving ducks do. Therefore, any food deeper than their outstretched necks is unavailable to them.

It's also well-documented that mallards are attracted to rising water and the "feather edge" of flooded timber. Along this edge they can best utilize acorns, seeds from moist-soil plants and invertebrates. Green-tree reservoirs permit gradual flooding that attracts ducks over a longer period of time.

By 1997, there were approximately 83,000 acres of public land under green-tree management for ducks by the AGFC. It's important to note that green-tree reservoirs remain relatively new, especially in terms of managing the health of 100-year-old hardwood trees.

Another step in the evolution of Arkansas duck hunting is likely to center on this conflict between man and nature: White River bottomlands naturally flood only about two of every three years, but public land duck hunters want flooded timber hunting every season.

Indeed he did. There are more than 15 miles of McCollum-built levees in the Bayou Meto-Big Ditch bottoms. All of them, which were laid out with a hand-held sight level, are still in use today.

The 7,000-plus acres McCollum flooded are where commercial hunting in flooded timber and the legend of Stuttgart began. In developing this area for duck hunting, McCollum also saved one of the area's critical wetlands. Since that time, most of the land around those bottoms has been cleared for crops. Today, those 7,000 acres have several owners, but this area is one of the largest privately owned contiguous blocks of timber in east Arkansas.

There are more than 15 miles of (Otis) McCollum-built levees in the Bayou Meto-Big Ditch bottoms. All were laid out with a hand-held sight level and are still in use today.

Almost without exception, the other large blocks of forested land in the Delta are owned by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

To pay the leases for so much land, McCollum began guiding. Hunts were \$5, \$7 or \$10 a day. Clients came from word-of-mouth advertising. Even with that primitive form of promotion, the reputation of Stuttgart duck hunting began to grow.

A big boost came from *Movietone News*, news clips shown as trailers for feature-length motion pictures. One of the segments highlighted the World's Championship Duck Calling Contest, duck hunting and Stuttgart.

"After that, we had people from all over the world coming to town to hunt," J. W. McCollum said.

The first clients included John Olin, head of Winchester-Western and the Olin Corporation, who started hunting with the McCollums before he set up his



Photo courtesy/ Bird McCollum

These ducks were killed in the Long Water Hole on Bayou Meto south of Highway 165, according to information written on the back of the photo. The men, from left, are Roy McCollum Sr., M. T. McCollum Jr., Thad McCollum and an unidentified hunter.

own Greenbriar Club. After Olin developed Greenbriar, he would lease out the second floor of the Riceland Hotel and bring in guests. When there were too many hunters for Greenbriar, the McCollums would get the spillover for their guide service.

The railroad also served as a source for providing hunters. As automobiles became more popular, the railroad companies began looking for ways to keep people traveling by rail. Hunting ducks in Stuttgart became a successful promotion for the railways and the McCollums. There was a station located on Highway 165 between Humnoke and Stuttgart.

J. W. McCollum remembers seeing rail cars full of people who had come to hunt ducks at Stuttgart.

No roads led to the acreage they hunted. Access was gained along Bayou Meto from a boat ramp at Highway 79. To carry hunters the two to five miles up Bayou Meto, McCollum would load them in Army M-1 personnel carriers, outfitted with five-horsepower motors. The carriers would accommodate 21 hunters.

"And believe me, it took a long time with only a 5-horsepower motor," said McCollum, noting he thought he'd hit the big time later with the purchase of a 22-horsepower Evinrude-ELTO.

Fifty percent of these clients had never hunted ducks before, and many of those had never shot a shotgun.

Most of the clients stayed at the Riceland Hotel. When they needed to be outfitted for hunting, they visited McCollum's Hardware, the forerunner of Mack's Sports Shop. Black gum boots sold for \$6.50; a hunting coat cost \$7; and a box of shotgun shells was \$2.50. If you needed a shotgun, a Winchester Model 12 could be purchased for \$65.

"That was a lot of money in those days," McCollum said.

All that for a duck hunt that seldom lasted longer than a couple of hours.

"Either you got your ducks early or you didn't get them," McCollum said. "You never hunted past 10 o'clock."

Otis McCollum required no hunting past 10 a.m., reminding J. W. that his father had an instinct for waterfowl behavior. Those were the days when ducks were numerous, and few people managed hunting places. Ducks filled the woods readily, so it seemed overly cautious to limit the shooting there. But Otis McCollum insisted. In addition, he always left one-third of the acreage as a rest area, another unusual practice at that time.

J. W. McCollum said his father did those things out of love for ducks

"To him it was a way of life," McCollum said. "He probably knew he was doing some good, but I doubt he ever thought he was changing duck hunting to the point it is today."

Mack's Sport Shop has grown with tradition of Stuttgart duck hunting

In the early 1930s, McCollum's Hardware was a good place to buy a hoe handle or keg of nails. There was no such thing as a sporting goods store.

When duck hunters started coming to Stuttgart en masse, McCollum's Hardware began stocking items to outfit them. You could still get a hoe handle and a keg of nails, but the shelves also included the following: black gum boots, \$6.50; hunting coat, \$7; long underwear, \$1.50; hunting shirt, \$2.50, wool socks, \$1; and a box of No. 6 or 7 shot, \$2.50. A Winchester Model 12 shotgun cost \$65.

Business was good, too. Business was so good that M. T. "Mack" McCollum II decided to take sporting goods out of the hardware store and open a separate store in 1944.

McCollum's Hardware was on Main Street, next door to Ben Franklin's. Each building had about 1,500 square feet of floor space. When Ben Franklin's went out of business, McCollum cut a hole in the wall between the stores and moved his sporting goods into that space.

"At the time, a sporting goods store was unheard of," said Marion McCollum, Mack's son. "It's been said many times that it was the first full-line sporting goods store anywhere."

By 1970, it was time to expand again. Marion McCollum moved the business to Highway 79 in a 3,200-square-foot building. Decorated with various animal and fish mounts and filled with every item available for the duck hunter, the store became a tourist attraction during the hunting season.

It became even more of a draw after 1993, when McCollum added a mail-order catalog business. The catalog is mailed to more than 600,000 duck hunters worldwide. The store was enlarged again in 1997 to encompass more than 18,200 square feet, most of it in inventory waiting to go on the shelf or through the mail.

One fact says it all about today's version of McCollum's Hardware: More steel shotgun shells are sold at Mack's Sport Shop than any other retail location in the world.