

Mill Pond Joe

Naturalist, Writer, Journalist,
and *NY Times* Columnist

Nelson Bryant

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Foreword

As we were repairing one of our duck blinds on Martha's Vineyard Island's Tisbury Great Pond, my youngest son Jeff recalled a family ritual that began more than a half-century before when he was a child and we were living in Claremont, New Hampshire where I was the managing editor of that city's newspaper, the *Daily Eagle*.

Jeff and his brother Steve, who is two-and one-half years older, enjoyed New Hampshire, but were also linked to the Vineyard where their mother Jean Morgan and I had grown up, met, married, owned our first home and where both boys had been born.

The boys shared my love of the Vineyard's West Tisbury where they had been introduced to the bluefish and striped bass that visit the Island's beaches from May through October.

They learned how to woo those species as well as the white perch that frequent Tisbury Great Pond and the brook trout that once thrived in Mill Brook and Mill Pond.

My parents moved to West Tisbury from mainland Massachusetts when I was nine years old and the Mill Pond and Mill Brook and Tisbury Great Pond into which the brook flows were places where I became intimate with the denizens of the surrounding natural world, among them black-crowned night herons that croaked down the brook at dusk as black ducks paddled about dining on watercress. I also encountered wandering otters—fish eaters that left their scat at their well-worn resting and observation points along the ponds and streams—as well as muskrats that built their mounded homes of cattails in the salt marshes.

What Jeff remembered was an evening ritual that had begun with Jean reading bedtime stories to him and his brother in our rented apartment on Claremont's Maple Avenue. (My oldest daughter, Mary, had just been born and my youngest, Alison, didn't arrive until four years later.) I shared in these readings and then at one point decided to tell my own stories.

I created a youngster named “Mill Pond Joe,” and on nights when I wasn’t involved with covering some event for the newspaper I often lay down in the boys’ bedroom and continued the saga of Mill Pond Joe’s adventures in the woods and meadows, ponds, swamps and streams of West Tisbury.

Jeff recalled climbing into the bed where I lay, begging for a Mill Pond Joe story and when I turned off the bedside light he knew that I was going to reminisce, not read. I liked telling my tales in an unlighted room. The semi-darkness added ambiance.

I was Mill Pond Joe, and my yarns were based on actual events in my boyhood. I spent fifteen years as managing editor of the *Daily Eagle* and devoted another thirty to writing an outdoors column for *The New York Times*. A few years after my stint with the *Times* was over, I was moved to chronicle the story of Mill Pond Joe from childhood to old age. In part this came from having been a journalist most of my life. When I quit writing on a regular basis, I discovered that much of my emotional well-being was wrapped up in getting words on paper. Somewhat melancholic and guilt-ridden, I also had the notion that while assembling Mill Pond Joe’s history I might gain more understanding of his flawed and selfish, albeit life-embracing, behavior.

Words I Regret While Quail Hunting in Georgia

I knew that my new job would necessitate learning about various species of fish, animals, and wildfowl with which I had little or no experience, including Atlantic salmon, tarpon, permit, the Pacific salmon, bonefish, barracuda, snook, moose, caribou, antelope, red grouse, and even the bobwhite quail which is found in the eastern half of the United States.

Although bobwhites were fairly common on the Vineyard before World War II, there was not much hunting of them, and I never met any Islander who pursued quail with pointing dogs, the classic approach in the southern states and elsewhere where they are plentiful. The numbers of Vineyard quail began dropping after WWII for various reasons, including habitat loss. Houses were popping up in bobwhite territory on meadows and forest edges where grasses, bull briars, beach plums, bayberries, and blueberries once held sway. Skunks were introduced to the Island—I know not how or by whom—and feral cats proliferated. Both these species enjoy dining on the eggs and fledglings of ground-nesting quail. By the close of the twentieth century, quail were gone from their usual haunts in my home town of West Tisbury.

After the war when I was finishing up at Dartmouth College, money was scarce and when Jean, the kids, and I came down to the Vineyard from Hanover, N.H. during vacations, waterfowl, deer, fish, cottontail rabbits, and an occasional quail were a source of food.

As a teenager, I shot all of my quail with a .22 rifle, but soon after returning from the war, my fowling piece was a battered side-by-side 12-gauge Parker shotgun and no dog was involved. I knew the thickets and fields where quail were wont to rest and feed and simply plowed through such cover to startle them into flight.

A box of 12-gauge shells cost several dollars, often more than I could afford at that time, and I passed up all difficult shots, not wanting to waste ammunition. On one of my late fall visits to the Vineyard from Hanover, N.H., my bother Danny mentioned to me that, while harvesting oysters from Tisbury Great Pond, he and his friends had dredged up boxes of

12-gauge shotgun shells that had been flung into the pond by well-heeled Long Point Gunning Club waterfowl hunters who apparently believed those shells were too old to be effective. Danny told me that the shells had been drying out for a month and speculated that they might still function.

“I’ll bring you half a dozen boxes if you want and you can try them out,” he said.

I accepted his offer.

The first thing I discovered was that moisture had swollen the shells—they were the old variety with hulls made of waxed paper, not plastic—so much that they wouldn’t fit into my gun’s chamber. I got around that by peeling off a few layers of paper.

The next difficulty, for which there was no remedy, was that perhaps a third of the shells simply made a little popping sound when I pulled the trigger. The cap fired but didn’t ignite the dampened powder charge. (Hence the admonition “keep your powder dry” that was born in the era of muzzle-loading firearms.) When that happened, there was just enough of an explosion to push the wads and shot out of the barrel.

Never knowing when those shells would be effective, I nonetheless went forth and gathered quail, rabbits, ducks, Canada geese, and rabbits with them. It was not an efficient endeavor, but penury has a logic of its own.

My introduction to classic quail hunting came soon after I joined the *Times* when I visited a lovely quail plantation—the previously mentioned Callaway Gardens in Pine Mountain, Georgia. That endeavor went well, but my second quail hunt, made about a year later to another Georgia quail plantation was flawed by my behavior.

I had one thing going for me on that second hunt, a lovely little side-by-side 20-gauge L.C. Smith shotgun that had been given me by my dear friend Ann (Coleman) Allen.

It was choked correctly for quail, a modified and improved cylinder, but I did not do well with it on my first day, missing many shots. My companions, all southerners, said nothing, but my embarrassment grew until I broke open my gun, took the shells out of it and announced that I was not going to shoot any more until the morrow.

“Perhaps I’ll settle down after a night’s sleep,” I said.

One of the fellows in the group said, “Nelson, can I see your gun for a minute?”

I handed it to him. He looked it over, swung it to his shoulder two or three times, smiled and said, “That wasn’t a good way to treat such a nice gun, Nelson.”

I laughed and agreed, but seethed inwardly.

That night at supper, which included quail and Vidalia onions and, for me at least, too much bourbon, I committed a significant social blunder.

There were about eight of us around the table, I the only northerner.

At one point, I apologized for doing so poorly afield that day. One of my fellow diners grinned and said, "I thought that you Yankees were good shots."

My mood changed instantly. I snarled, "We shot well enough to win the war between the states."

The laughter and small talk stopped and after half a minute one of the others said quietly, "You didn't out-shoot us, Nelson, you starved us to death."

I was overwhelmed with chagrin but too drunk to apologize. I have apologized in retrospect a thousand times since. Gentlemen all, they said nothing more on the subject and we had another full day of shooting together, during which I managed to hit most of the birds at which I fired, and in subsequent years I was invited back.

I also did some quail shooting in North Carolina after meeting Joel Arrington of Raleigh, whose job for many years was showing outdoor writers from all over the country what his state had to offer hunters and anglers. I was fascinated by North Carolina. From its trout-filled mountain streams to the vast sounds and bays of the Outer Banks, North Carolina is a natural treasure.

It was at Mack Ballard's Squash Hill Shooting Preserve in Charlotte that I was introduced to Adolph, the most unusual hunting dog I ever met. The grizzled, 9-year-old Adolph was a Drahthaar, a century-old breed, Ballard said, that includes pointer, French poodle, otter hound, and foxhound. Adolph could point and retrieve quail, pheasant and woodcock, retrieve ducks and hunt deer.

Before setting up his shooting preserve, Ballard owned a sporting goods store in Charlotte where Adolph was able to find certain items and bring them to the customers. One rainy day when we couldn't pursue quail and Adolph was sleeping by the wood stove, Mack took a cardboard box, walked several hundred yards down the road, and hid the box in the grass. When he returned, he awakened Adolph and said, with no gesturing and in a conversational tone, "Adolph, I left a box down the road a piece. Would you get it for me?"

Adolph stretched, nodded, and fetched the box.

The next day he pointed our quail, watched us shoot at them, shook his head at our misses and retrieved those that we hit. A delightful fellow.

On one of my southern hunting sorties I pursued Wilson's snipe, a migratory species that was once one of the most popular game birds in the eastern half of the nation.

I drove south in my pickup truck for that adventure. Shortly after leaving home I stopped in Buzzard's Bay, Mass. at a sporting goods store that often had good bargains on guns and ammunition. A small antique 28-gauge muzzleloading shotgun immediately caught my eye. A side-by

side, percussion double made in Belgium, it was in good shape and engraved with a pointing dog on one side of the receiver and a deer on the other. It was lightweight, less than six pounds. I enjoy hunting with muzzleloaders, whether rifles or shotguns, and the price was low, so I bought it.

I was about to leave the store with my new possession when it occurred to me that I might want to use it during my forthcoming snipe hunt. I bought some black powder and a powder measuring tool, some 7½ shot, and percussion caps, field containers for the powder and shot, and some wadding material.

A few days later, when my hunting companions and I got out of our vehicles along the edge of a huge boggy field, I noticed that many of them were using modern 12-gauge pump guns, big guns more suitable for ducks and geese than for Wilson's snipe which are only a bit larger than a robin. Wanting to surprise my hosts, I left my modern 20-gauge shotgun in my truck and pulled out my little muzzleloader, saying, "I picked this up on the way here and just want to see how it shoots," I said.

One of the group said that I might find it necessary to return to my truck for my modern 20-gauge.

We scattered out across the field—because of its size we were usually 100 yards or more apart—the object being to flush snipe from the thick grasses. No dogs were used. Within a few minutes, my friends' guns began going off, but they were too far away for me to tell whether they were hitting or missing.

My first chance came when a single snipe flushed about thirty yards away. I swung and fired one barrel. It kept flying, which puzzled me because I felt that I had been right on it. I reloaded and the same thing happened at the same distance with another bird. I was lowering my gun when eight or ten snipe exploded from the grasses less than twenty feet away. I swung on the center of the flock and fired the remaining loaded barrel. Four birds fell, all but one killed instantly. I gathered them up, put them in my game bag, lit my pipe, and tried to figure out what was going on. I decided that my little muzzleloader was bored wide open in both barrels, meaning that the pellets were scattering widely and that I had better avoid shooting at any birds that flushed more than 20 yards away.

After making that decision, I had no more trouble bagging my quarry and when the hunt ended I had one snipe for every shot that I fired. As I walked toward where all hands were gathering, I was pleased. I had a notion that at least a few of them had noted how many shots I had fired—black powder shotguns make a low thumping sound altogether different from that created by a modern smokeless powder shell, and, in addition, there is always a little dark cloud of exploded black powder above the gunner.

As I emptied the snipe from my game bag, I heard someone exclaim, "Good shooting!"