

(1976)



A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

(George de Savoye)
(1905 - 1991)

(1987)



(1966)

A life-long love affair with hunting and fishing on the prairies.

One fall night 20 years ago, two hunters from Edmonton pulled up to the motel in the small community of Veteran on the east-central Alberta prairies.

George de Savoye and Ed Sande had located a promising goose shoot and were looking for a few hours sleep before heading out to the field. "The hotel was filled with hunters," recalls Sande. So the night clerk referred them to the only vacant spot in town, which happened to be an old coal shed with bunk beds.

by G.A. Hardy

A couple of American hunters were already there when they walked in. After unpacking, de Savoye pulled out a small bottle labelled "Trigger-Finger Oil" and started rubbing it on his fingers. "What are you doing?" one of the Americans asked.

"Haven't you heard of this stuff?" de Savoye replied. "It speeds up the reflexes." The southerners examined

the label. It described a special formula guaranteed to increase trigger-finger speed by at least 4/1000 of a second. The directions were precise: 'Rub a drop of oil on the trigger-finger and massage well on both joints until the oil has entered the skin. Pass the trigger-finger over the flame of a candle a few times, taking care that only enough heat is absorbed to enable deep penetration of the oil. Note: If too much heat is applied to finger, nervousness can develop, resulting in premature action.' And at the bottom,



Although he didn't do a lot of big game hunting de Savoye kneels by an antelope brought down in west-central Alberta.

another note: 'This oil can be used to limber the finger for other purposes.'

"By the time George got through, the visitors were clamoring to buy the franchise rights for the whole U.S.A.," laughs Sande. "George, as he could do better than anyone, kept stringing them along, and he never did let them know that it was just a joke." He actually had the label printed during some spare moments in his job as a salesman for an Edmonton printing firm.

That incident was typical of de Savoye, who combined expert marksmanship with a wry sense of humor in a life-long love affair with hunting and fishing on the prairies. It was a romance that lasted three-quarters of a century until his recent death at age 86. Truly a man for all seasons, he hunted in the fall well into December, shot clay birds in summer, and fished in winter and spring. His successful shoots throughout Alberta and Saskatchewan totalled in the hundreds, and he was a revered teacher of young hunters.

Hunting was his main devotion, but while he made occasional forays into big game, he mainly stuck to ducks, geese and upland birds because he loved their sporting challenge. He realized that despite the advantage technology offers the bird hunter, nature still has the upper hand. His philosophy was that it's when the quarry gets away that the experience becomes memorable.

A parchment which hung on his bed-

room wall for 20 years attests to that fact. Prepared by de Savoye, who could poke as much fun at himself as at others, it chronicled an embarrassing ending to the "Galahad Massacre" of December 3, 1969. The events started with Sande and companion Terry Darke spotting a huge pile of ducks and following them to an unharvested strip of barley near Galahad, east of Red Deer.

They quickly recruited de Savoye from Edmonton, and within half an hour they had their limits. Then, as the

parchment proclaims, de Savoye was suddenly "propositioned by one lonely hen (mallard). In noble and stately manner, George (Duckey) Savoye did shoulder one 12 gauge Browning automatic scattergun. With trusting eye and vicious intent, not once, not twice, but three times did he attempt to slay this lonely, hungry wretched hen. But he was denied, and his quarry soared into the dusk till one year's hence when it will again challenge a hunter's lust."

De Savoye's job as a printing salesman, which he held for decades, was the ideal occupation for someone whose real vocation was hunting. His hours were his own, and he could take time off when he wanted. It also didn't hurt that two of his bosses, Roy Neal and Bob Ozee, were also two of his best hunting partners.

Ozee and de Savoye met soon after World War II, when Ozee was superintendent at Bulletin Printers in Edmonton, and they quickly hit it off. De Savoye got Ozee started hunting in 1947, and they wound up going on 2 to 3 day shoots at least half a dozen times each fall until last year.

"Geese, ducks, partridge, pheasants, prairie chickens, you name it, we'd hunt anything that flew," reminisces Ozee. "George had a great way with farmers. We never got turned down for a shoot. We used to sneak out of the city early Saturday mornings. One time we followed some ducks into a farmer's field near Clyde, 35 miles



De Savoye with geese taken near Stettler in 1976. In the background are silhouette decoys that de Savoye made from old press plates.

north of Edmonton. It was about 5:30 a.m., pitch black out and the crops were off so everyone was asleep. But that didn't bother George. He knocked on the farmer's door until he finally roused him, then he said, "What're you doing sleeping in late?" He could get away with things like that. And he had a way with farmers' dogs, too. They'd growl and show their teeth as we drove up, but George would come right up and settle them down."

"There was no better sportsman than George," adds Sande. "He taught us respect for the farmer and the land, things like not leaving shell hulls lying around, walking instead of driving across a field that was in swath, and filling and packing our pits really well so the farmer's swather wouldn't break an axle."

Sande, now 62 and president of Ed Sande Realty in Edmonton, started learning in his late 20's from the master. "George was so good to us young fellows. Before the season started, he'd call us to bring our shovels over and he'd file them so they would be sharp for digging pits. Important little things that young guys like us often didn't think about."

Shooting wasn't just an autumn pastime for de Savoye. He and his shooting buddies Bernie Bokenfohr and George Knoll bought a small trap and practised on clay pigeons in the summer. Ed Shaske (a world class trap-shooter who competed for Canada in



De Savoye (R) and his trusty Remington, and Lee Wall (L), of Edmonton, take a rest beside their car that is covered with the days results from another successful goose hunt.

the 1968 Mexico City Olympics and is now a national team coach) sometimes joined them, along with Sande, who admits he couldn't have had better teachers.

How to hit a clay target wasn't the only thing Sande learned. "The big thing was proper gun handling. George was a stickler for that. The more you handle a gun, the more familiar you become, the safer you are with it."

Born in the tiny community of Francis in southwestern Saskatchewan (it was the North West Territories in those days), de Savoye wound up in Edmonton in 1908. It remained his home for life except for four years spent in the U.S. Marines starting at 18, and sometime in the american west during the depression grabbing any work that was available, including a labor job in the building of the Hoover Dam.

He came by his love for hunting naturally. His father, Henri, immigrated to western Canada from France near the turn of the century, lured by adventure and the chance to hunt. De Savoye took to the sport like, uh, a duck to water. By 15, he and his shotgun were regulars around St. Albert, which today is a modern city adjacent to Edmonton but in those days was wilderness.

De Savoye hunted right up to his death. "There wasn't a better field shot around," says Sande. "On one of our early trips, Bernie Bokenfohr and I saw a few ducks by a slough. Bernie suggested we walk over and try to bag one or two. We asked George to come, but he gave us the knowing smile that was his trademark and told us he'd wait where he was. The wise old rascal had seen some ducks on the horizon and while we were gone he studied them. When Bernie and I returned with nothing, George said, 'Let's drive over there about a mile.'



De Savoye (far right) and some of his old hunting cronies gather together for this picture taking session after a very successful whitetail hunt.

"Darn if there wasn't the biggest pile of mallards I've ever seen in my life. We shot our limit in a few minutes. George knew better than to get excited about a couple of ducks on a slough. With him, you really hunted them."

De Savoye is recognized as one of the earliest innovators of silhouette decoys. Never wealthy, he believed it was a misconception that one needs to invest a small fortune in a humongous spread of decoys to successfully hunt ducks and geese. Early on, in the 1940's he had decided to make his own out of pieces of inner tubes. They took up too much room in his car's trunk, however, so he started searching for something better.

Kibitzing with one of the pressmen at work one spring day in the 1950's, de Savoye found the answer. He looked over at a pile of lithograph plates, the thin metal sheets which wrap around the presses to print books and newspapers. It suddenly struck him that here was the source of 1,000 decoys that could fit in his trunk at one time. He spent the summer cutting the metal into shapes of ducks and geese, and painting them with the distinctive green, black and white colors of mallards and Canada geese. From the side, they looked exactly like the real thing, but from the top they were paper thin.

"George was the first I ever saw to use silhouettes," recalls Sande. "It was 1957, and he put over 100 of them in a box that was only 8 inches wide. I remember being with him when a flock of ducks came over. They kept cocking their heads from side to side because they'd been looking down and would lose the decoys. So the next time we went out, George brought along a bag of black rags to throw over their backs to give them a body appearance. It worked real well."

De Savoye's hunting habits were meticulous. He was a stickler for camouflage and remaining motionless. He often said that most birds fail to decoy not because the calling was bad or the decoys were placed wrong, but because they saw something they

didn't like. "Movement is what gives hunters away. Ducks and geese are quick to perceive the slightest motion."

Canada geese, unlike many species of birds, aren't much for circling. Instead, they most often make a long, careful approach, using their remarkable vision to pry into every stitch of nearby cover that could conceal a hunter. If a hunter moved, he could forget about killing any geese. So de Savoye hunkered low, and as the flock approached, he watched through the straw that covered his pit. When the flock slipped past, he quickly rose, thumbed back the worn hammer on his Browning, and took aim. He would wait till the birds were close, 35 yards instead of 50. He said there were fewer cripples that way. It was more sportsmanlike.



De Savoye's long-time companion, Muriel (Molly) Markle, holds up a prize bird from a Tofield hunt in 1980. It was Muriel that helped George put together his many Valentine Hunter parties that became so well known among his friends.



De Savoye gave away most of the game he bagged to friends and relatives. The rest was saved for the popular "Hunters' Parties" he and his long-time companion, Muriel (Molly) Markle, hosted for friends in Markle's compact downtown apartment.

Held at Valentine's, Christmas or whenever the mood struck, "they were big occasions," recalls Ozee, and featured meat delicacies such as duck and goose pate. Every dish had an exotic-sounding name. "George being the practical joker he was, I have a hunch some of the rare wild meats, like the caribou stew, were really pork or beef from the local butcher shop, and George and Molly stuck a different name tag on them and added some extra flavor," says Sande.

Markle, a widow, and de Savoye, a life-long bachelor, were made for each other. She became an ardent outdoors person and they often went together in search of upland birds. Another of their favorite times was ice fishing at Moose Lake near Bonnyville, Alberta. For years they were late winter-early spring regulars.

De Savoye took his gun-and-rod artistry indoors in later life, turning to sketching and oil painting. His subjects, to no surprise, were the creatures of the wild, such as his oil of a wise old owl perched on a branch gazing at the world. To some of de Savoye's friends, it seemed like a self-study by a man who made a practise of watching and learning. And there is another of his works which personifies both his sense of humor and his life as a bird hunter. It shows him dug in with shotgun smoking, looking wistfully at a flock that got away. It is titled 'A Pit to Miss In.'