



Sundays at the old White Gates field, 1970s

THE SHOOTING CALENDAR AT WHITE GATES followed the seasonal death and renewal of the mosquitoes. Starting in September, every Sunday until late April, the assigned host of the day swung open the white gates off the old Dunham Road around 9:00 A.M. to plow any snow and deliver boxes of targets to the high and low houses. The host was responsible for hiring and picking up the teens who hand-pulled the mechanical clay target traps, usually boys, and pay them, usually around \$20 for the day. The trap boys also hauled targets and shells, firewood for the stove, and helped prep the cabin for the delivery of food and drinks.

Once the cabin was swept of mouse droppings and a fire was started in the wood stove, lunch food and drink arrived via tailgate to the cabin door. Often it was a pot of chili or soup set on the wood stove, with bread, appetizers, and sweets arranged on a plank sideboard. A fully stocked bar was set up on the square wooden table in the corner of the cabin, covered for all those years by the same plastic red-and-white checked table cloth.

Shooting for people under 21 began at 10:00. Often the host would bring guests, who would also shoot in these rookie squads. The host, or another willing member, would mentor young or new shooters by offering coaching at each station.

The trap boys manned the high and low houses, climbing a rickety wooden ladder to get in to the high house. From their perches, they could peer out on to the field and monitor the progress of the squad. Shooters had to yell "pull" loud enough to be heard by the boys in the houses, who hand loaded the traps, careful to ensure that the flinger fit tightly against the clay pigeon so as not to break it on the way out, and also careful to stay out of range of the iron arm that, once cocked, could do serious bodily damage if a day-dreaming trap boy wasn't paying attention when it released.

Winters in northern Illinois can be bitterly freezing, and the wooden high and low houses had no insulation. Working the traps required sitting still for up to half an hour each round, while enduring frozen toes and fingers as well

as shooters demanding quick responses to their “pull” calls—with no misloads of the clay pigeons.

Scoring was the responsibility of the host, who would shoot their own rounds only once everyone else had shot at least a couple. The scoring hut held scoring sheets and stubby pencils to record the scores of the more competitive squads, which were then stuck on the walls with nails inside the cabin for all to strive against.

As more shooters and their spouses arrived and signed up for rounds, the younger rookies were eased off the field and into the cabin for lunch and goodbyes. Usually the non-shooting wives had begun socializing in earnest by noon, creating a loud and convivial atmosphere in the cramped quarters of the cabin. A celebrated right-of-passage was the art of relieving oneself in the woods behind the cabin, a task often avoided but also often unavoidable. Many couples considered these skeet Sundays a significant social day, so clothing choices did not always reflect the demands of the environment as much as the fashion of the day. The personal efforts for some middle-aged women navigating poison ivy and thorn bushes in the woods while dressed in furs was the source of much laughter.

Shooters were not to approach the bar table until their rounds were over and their guns stashed away, usually by 3:00 for the more determined shooters, aided by hot coffee and lunch. The highlight of the day was the final hour of socializing with everyone focused on the often artfully prepared food and drink. People came and went throughout the afternoon, but the shooting day was over well before dusk to allow time to clean up the cabin and lock up the houses.

Later in the evening, at many homes throughout town, smaller groups of skeet families gathered again for dinner, cards, and conversation. The skeet shooting community was close, and throughout the years White Gates gathered interest, membership, and enthusiasm. By the late 1970s White Gates shooters were competing in shooting events among other area gun clubs, bringing more competitive shooters to the club at Haskins’s farm to experience what some shooters described as the most difficult wooded shooting back drop of any skeet field anyone knew of.

– CARRIE JENKINS