

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Rob Sawyer

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

DATE: April 4, 2023

LOCATION: Sugar Land, Texas

SOURCE MEDIA: MP3 audio file

TRANSCRIPTION: Trint, David Todd

REEL: 4148

FILE: Waterfowl_Sawyer_Rob_SugarlandTX_4April2023_Reel4148.mp3

David Todd [00:00:02] Well, just by way of introduction, I want to just say my name is David Todd, and I have the privilege of being here with Rob Sawyer and with his OK, we are planning on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas, a non-profit group in the state, and also for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and finally for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is at the University of Texas in Austin.

David Todd [00:00:36] And I wanted to emphasize that he would have rights to use the recording as he sees fit. And I just want to make sure that that's okay with Mr. Sawyer.

Rob Sawyer [00:00:47] Yes, David, it is. It sounds great. Thank you.

David Todd [00:00:49] Okay. Well, then let's get started.

David Todd [00:00:52] It is Tuesday, April 4th, 2023. It's about 2:10, Central Time, in the afternoon. And my name, as I said, is David Todd. I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas. I'm in Austin and we are conducting a remote audio interview with Rob Sawyer, who is based in the Sugarland, Texas area.

David Todd [00:01:18] Mr. Sawyer is a petroleum geologist. He's been a land manager and certainly interested and involved in recording histories of many hunting clubs in the states, so has a lot of familiarity with that world. He is also an author and has written two books that have appeared from Texas A&M University Press, one titled "A Hundred Years of Texas Waterfowl Hunting: The Decoys, Guides, Clubs, and Places: 1870s, the 1970s, and another title, "Texas Market Hunting: Stories of Waterfowl, Game Laws and Outlaws.

David Todd [00:02:02] Much of his work is based on personal interviews with guides, hunters and game managers, so he brings a lot of direct knowledge to these stories.

David Todd [00:02:15] Today, we'll talk about Mr. Sawyer's life and career, to-date, and especially focus on what he has learned about the history of waterfowl hunting, poaching and related topics, mostly on the Texas coastal plain.

David Todd [00:02:29] So, how about if we start by asking you about your childhood and your early years and whether there might have been any people or events in your life then that might have influenced your interest in animals in general and waterfowl in particular?

Rob Sawyer [00:02:48] Well, you know, the childhood and early years seem like a long time ago, when I think back on them.

Rob Sawyer [00:02:54] I grew up on the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, and my neighbor just, of course, a neighbor in a place like the bay, your nearest neighbor is probably across the river, was a gentleman by the name of Harry Walsh, and he wrote a book called "The Outlaw Gunner". And that book influenced a lot of a lot of people. One was James Michener, who wrote "Chesapeake" after he spent time with Harry Walsh and spent time on the bay.

Rob Sawyer [00:03:24] And in those years we were just covered up with Canada geese and with ducks. And we lived in the country on the river. And we were, we were surrounded by by waterfowl.

Rob Sawyer [00:03:36] And I remember thinking, I watched a television show when I was probably ten, 12 years old - Curt Gowdy's Wide World of Sports. And on that show he featured Marvin Tyler, and that would have been the Eagle Lake prairie with Andy Griffith. And they were shooting white geese, and they were shooting them over ditches in a rice field, and they were having the time of their life. And I said, "By golly, one day I'm going to go to Texas and I'm going to do that." And it took a while, but by golly, I did.

David Todd [00:04:13] Wow. Well, you've gone from one pretty amazing waterfowl area, the Chesapeake Bay, to another. I mean, the Texas coastal prairie is pretty noted, I think, as a hotspot for ducks and geese and other kinds of waterfowl.

David Todd [00:04:35] Well, you mentioned watching the Wide World of Sports and that being kind of an introduction for you to, you know, the hunting in Texas. Were there any other TV shows or movies or books that you found pretty inspiring and interesting?

Rob Sawyer [00:04:56] So, one of the big differences between Chesapeake Bay, I learned when I got to Texas was that on the bay and that part of the world, there were a tremendous number of books about watermen, about waterfowl hunting. And every Christmas and birthday there'd be a couple new ones. And I lived off of those stories and basically learned how to hunt from Outdoor Life and, and Field and Stream magazines that came every month.

Rob Sawyer [00:05:26] But when I, when I got to Texas, I didn't, didn't find any of those books. So kind of the joke is I ended up writing the book that I wanted to read.

David Todd [00:05:40] Well, and that other people wanted to read, too.

David Todd [00:05:44] So, were there any movies or TV shows or was this mostly things that you saw in print?

Rob Sawyer [00:05:53] Yes, mostly print.

David Todd [00:05:57] Yeah, did you ever watch "Wild Kingdom" or "National Geographic" or "Jacques Cousteau" or any of those kinds of programs?

Rob Sawyer [00:06:06] Well, there was one called, "Bold Journey", which is unheard of now, I think. But, it was a program where people traveled the world and that one kind of was my impetus for traveling the world, although it was a lot easier when I set about to do it. I wasn't going by sailboat and by cart and wagon.

Rob Sawyer [00:06:31] But yes, there was Wild Kingdom was one I saw. But I spent, if I was awake, I was probably outdoors. I was not in front of a television.

David Todd [00:06:43] Well, so were there folks that you went hunting with, or was this kind of a solo venture?

Rob Sawyer [00:06:52] It's funny you ask that, because there were not many people who were my age that hunted. My father didn't hunt. He took me out one or two times. We victimized some older waterfowl hunters. And he said, you know, "My kid wants to learn." and I guess I was about ten. And he said, "All right, you've been out. You saw what it's all about. Here's your gun, go."

Rob Sawyer [00:07:18] So not a lot of ... I did everything, for the most part, by myself until, you know, I was much older and moved away and then got to hunt with friends.

David Todd [00:07:31] And so the hunting on Chesapeake Bay, I'm not really familiar with it. Were there blinds? Or was this trudging through the marsh, or you know, were you in boats or how did you do it?

Rob Sawyer [00:07:46] It was relatively gentlemanly. I rode my bike everywhere, just miles when I look back on it. And I'd knock on farmers' doors and ask permission to hunt their coves and rice fields, or not rice fields, corn fields. And that's what I do.

Rob Sawyer [00:08:04] I had, I think, oh, about a dozen silhouette goose decoys that went into the basket on the back of the bike. And, most of those farmers had small pits that they dug and used themselves and let me use. And then, on the waterways, there were a handful of duck blinds that I had permission to use, and that was a ten-foot john boat with a big old leak in it and a 1959 three horsepower Johnson. And I think it was about, let's see, twelve, no, it was eight plastic Victor duck decoys.

David Todd [00:08:49] That's great. Well now, so, this is is hunting in Maryland. And as you said, you watched the Wide World of Sports and got an introduction to Texas and eventually came south. I gather you had a career as a geologist. Is that right?

Rob Sawyer [00:09:16] Yeah, I left Maryland when I was, gosh, probably 18. So I never got to, never got to gun there when I had things like real boats and ATVs.

Rob Sawyer [00:09:29] But yeah, I came first over to Florida to get a degree and then moved to New Orleans, where I worked for Texaco and retired from oil and gas at 57, as quick as I could, so that I could do more hunting and write more books.

David Todd [00:09:48] Well, that's been a benefit to many of us who share your interest.

David Todd [00:09:54] What do you think was the first sort of steps that you took towards researching and writing books? It's kind of an unusual niche in life.

Rob Sawyer [00:10:06] It is, and I never set about to do it. I wasn't even sure there was a story. So, so I knew Texas had a just wonderful, just wonderful waterfowl hunting up and down the coast and inland. And I read an article by Shannon Tompkins that was about market hunting for canvasbacks, and that was in the newspaper. And, it just, it just sat in my craw that there might be a really good story. And, I called two or three people and said, "Hey, if you would write a book on waterfowl hunting, I'll do a bunch of interviews or anything you want

just to help you out." And everybody said what I came to figure out, which is it's way too much work and no money.

Rob Sawyer [00:10:53] And by that point I said, "Well I'll, I'll set about seeing if there's a good story here." And A&M Press was really great. A woman by the name of Shannon Davies was the acquisition editor or manager and she supported a total unknown. We weren't even sure I could write a sentence at that point.

David Todd [00:11:23] Well, that's been to our benefit that she saw a glimmer of promise there.

Rob Sawyer [00:11:32] She definitely rolled the dice, David.

David Todd [00:11:37] Well, this might be a good segue to finding out a little bit about what you learned over the years. I mean, it's many years, of course, of, you know, archival research and talking to, you know, folks that can remember years of experience of waterfowl and hunting.

David Todd [00:12:02] I think it'd be nice to just start by giving a kind of a baseline to the, well, sort of richness of and diversity of bird life folks first found on the Texas coast when Western settlement started.

Rob Sawyer [00:12:20] Yes. Well, I appreciate your, your words of encouragement.

Rob Sawyer [00:12:24] You know, when I think back on those two books now, I guess I started those in 2008, and really I wanted to tell the market hunting story in Texas, if there was one. And it turned out there was.

Rob Sawyer [00:12:37] But, along the way, I interviewed, I guess, about 150 people, male and female, up and down the coast. And they had another story in addition to the market hunting story. And that was the basis for that first book, "100 Years of Texas Waterfowl Hunting".

Rob Sawyer [00:12:57] And, but, the real passion was the market book. And it wasn't because there were huge numbers of waterfowl taken and killed for the market, but it was a uniqueness, a way that people in Texas made a living. And, it turned out to be really big business in Texas.

Rob Sawyer [00:13:20] And, it does indeed start with descriptions of a richness of bird life. And, it was funny to kick it off because a lot of the early descriptions were from Europeans who came to Texas and wrote about what they saw, but they didn't always know what they were seeing.

Rob Sawyer [00:13:38] So I can remember reports of, or writings about flamingos. And I'm going, "Wow, flamingos in Texas!" Well, it turns out that, and it took a while to find it, but those were roseate spoonbills. Took a while to determine that the white bugler crane was a whooping crane.

Rob Sawyer [00:13:58] And I love the description of the snowy egret. The British gentleman describing it had no idea what it was. So he said, "Well, this is a white bird with a long neck. It's a superior longitudinal bird with long legs that give it a connection with the earth." Interesting, interesting things.

Rob Sawyer [00:14:18] But they describe passenger pigeons in flocks that blacken the sky. They called them wild pigeons. They weren't called passengers then. Grasslands that were full of prairie chickens and quail and descriptions of wetland bird life - infinite numbers of ducks, geese and cranes and swans, which we don't see much anymore.

Rob Sawyer [00:14:42] And some of the birds they described are birds we'll never see again - the passenger pigeon and what they called the northern curlew, which was the Eskimo curlew.

David Todd [00:14:57] Yeah, that is a departed world. And I'm so glad that, you know, there are these folks that did write down their impressions because it's something that, you know, whether it's the species that are gone or just the scale of the populations that we no longer see, it's pretty dramatic and definitely different from maybe what we would see now.

David Todd [00:15:29] You know, I think it'd be good to talk a little bit about how this human ingenuity and, I guess, entrepreneurial spirit took off, too, to try to harvest some of this bird life. Can you tell us about how, you know, the hunting first began, especially the hunting at scale, that kind of market-hunting dimension?

Rob Sawyer [00:16:01] Yes. So if you look at any, you know, if you look at the East Coast - populated and, you know, started its settlement, its pioneer stage was the 1600s.

Rob Sawyer [00:16:11] And, you look at Texas and its Anglo period started in the 1820s. And in any of these new settlement, pioneering days, wildlife fed the population.

Rob Sawyer [00:16:26] So it was interesting, one of the first settlements in coastal Texas was at Galveston. Of course, it was called something else then. It was called Campeche, and it was settled by some people call him a pirate, some people call him a privateer, but John Lafitte. And he settled there and for two or three years and had close to about a thousand convicts, outlaws and fortune seekers.

Rob Sawyer [00:16:55] And he sailed to Louisiana and hired a rather well-known marksman by the name of Burrell Franks and hired him to shoot ducks, shoot deer, shoot quail, prairie chickens and feed his community.

Rob Sawyer [00:17:12] Now, as Mexico began to allow Anglo settlement, particularly the Austin Colony, we started introducing a number of people to the coastal areas and up rivers in Texas, and market hunting started nucleating from that and got bigger.

Rob Sawyer [00:17:36] So market hunters were as just a important occupation as a farmer or a seaman or a merchant, and they were called huntsmen - 1820s to kind of 1840s period of time. And what they did was, was hunt waterfowl and, and other birds.

Rob Sawyer [00:17:55] And they would sell it by the side of the road. They were called game hawkers, or they'd go into town squares as towns started becoming founded along that growing Texas inland areas. And market square is where everybody went to buy their fruit, vegetables, exchange gossip, tell stories. And that's where most of the ducks were sold.

David Todd [00:18:22] So it was a local market and I guess a fresh market. Is that right?

Rob Sawyer [00:18:29] Yes. Yeah, they were. And of course, when you're talking about meat, there's problems with with that. A lot of spoilage. Warm days were the bane to waterfowl market hunters and even moreso I think to the housewife that was buying food for the family. Cold days were much better.

David Todd [00:18:52] Safer I imagine.

Rob Sawyer [00:18:54] Yes.

David Todd [00:18:55] Well, I think you've sort of explained how the market hunting really started as a kind of small scale and local affair. But, my understanding is that it quickly grew as there were some technologies that were introduced that made market hunting a bigger-scale, larger-footprint kind of operation. Is that right?

Rob Sawyer [00:19:25] Oh, absolutely right. So small scale, relatively harmless. Remember, people were shooting with black-powder shotguns. And so they couldn't really do a lot of damage to the resource.

Rob Sawyer [00:19:38] But wild game became food and fashion, if you will, after the Civil War, particularly the period between 1880s to 1900, and it was technology-driven as well as demand-driven.

Rob Sawyer [00:19:54] So the business of hunting wild game for the market was made a lot easier with refrigeration, the first gasoline engines, improvements in firearms, and perhaps most importantly railroads. Texas was, and much of the South, was behind the East coast and the North with the railroads. But once you combined refrigeration and railroads, you could take wild game anywhere in the United States. And in fact, with steamers, around the world. And those were the big boom years.

David Todd [00:20:35] So, maybe just to to give a little flavor to this, what sort of creatures were being marketed and where were they being found?

Rob Sawyer [00:20:53] So, if you look at it, you really, I'd divide market hunting into three periods. And one is the first that we talked about - that being the early period, local scale, small scale, and then the years of technology and growth and national demand, and then the what I call the outlaw gunning period, which was after our first game laws.

Rob Sawyer [00:21:18] And so local consumption, if you start at the beginning, you're talking marketplaces, restaurants and all species of ducks were sold - geese, swans, cranes, shorebirds, prairie chickens. Canvasback, even before the big, big national demand, canvasback was preferred.

Rob Sawyer [00:21:39] And some of these, some of the ducks were called summer mallards and cornfield ducks. And sometimes it took months to figure out that a cornfield duck was actually a whistling duck and a summer mallard was a mottled duck.

Rob Sawyer [00:21:56] Geese were kind of amusing because the gunners knew what they were, but nobody in the marketplace did. So if you looked at the listing of game that was available in various towns and markets in the newspapers, if it said geese, it meant Canada geese. But, blue geese and speckled bellies were just called gray geese. And, for some reason I've never figured out, snow geese were always called "brant".

Rob Sawyer [00:22:24] And, in addition to ducks, geese and swans, there was a big interest and a big market for shorebirds, and they didn't know what to call those. Any, any plover-like bird was called a prairie plover or a gray plover or a tiltup or a beach bird or a prairie snipe. They just didn't know what to call them.

Rob Sawyer [00:22:46] And, it's, even today, it's pretty, pretty confusing when you go back and read those old documents. And, they called yellowlegs, "willetts", and upland sandpipers, "rattlers" or "tell tales". And, it turns out they gave them that name because whenever the market gunner would head out, they would produce a shrill alarm at the approach of the hunter as a warning. And that would, they would jump other birds.

Rob Sawyer [00:23:18] Small birds were also very popular. I was surprised. Robins were big in the marketplaces, but you'd also see listed blackbirds and meadow larks and flickers and wood rushes and mockingbirds, which I can't imagine eating. And I even found recipes for owls and hummingbirds.

David Todd [00:23:45] Wow. So everything was considered game.

Rob Sawyer [00:23:51] It was. It was dinner.

David Todd [00:23:59] So, let me just see if we're following this.

David Todd [00:24:05] Now, my understanding is that, you know, a good deal of the demand was for food, for people's homes, and for restaurants and hotels. But that there was also pretty significant demand for feathers and quills. And I was hopeful that you can kind of fill us in on that.

Rob Sawyer [00:24:29] Yeah, they ... now that's an area where it was only geese and ducks, and feathers were a big business. So I guess we, today, it's pretty easy to take what's inside of your mattress or your pillow for granted. But not so in the pre-Civil War era. Wild game feathers were used to fill mattresses, pillows. It was a tradition for brides to receive a feather pillow when they married. It was a big deal.

Rob Sawyer [00:25:02] And they were expensive. In Texas, \$0.50 a pound in the 1840s. So if you had a big family, you were either going to shoot that waterfowl yourself and pluck those, those feathers or you were going to buy them. It became really big business and they were carried in the 1850s in most of the growing Texas cities, and you'd order these feathers that were packed in bales and shipped by the half-ton to wholesale - you'd buy them from wholesale merchants.

Rob Sawyer [00:25:35] And it was the same with fat. If you, you'd boil down birds and render the fat and you'd use it for cooking. You'd also use it for soap. So waterfowl were a big part of any homestead.