

Adam Bogardus, world champion wing shot

In the fall of 1875, at a shooting tournament in Bloomington, champion marksman Adam H. Bogardus killed 25 of 28 pigeons in 2 minutes and 27 seconds, “the birds being thrown in the air two at a time,” reported *The Pantagraph*, “and he loading his own gun.”

Such was the utter cruelty of trap shooting before the widespread adoption of stand-in targets made of glass or clay.

Most Americans barely batted an eye over these bloodbaths, and the most accomplished “men of the trigger” were celebrated athletes and master showman feted across the U.S. and Europe. Perhaps the biggest name in the sport was Central Illinois’ own Adam Bogardus, national and world champion trap shooter.

Born in 1834 in Upstate New York, Bogardus married Cordelia Dearstyne and the two settled in the Logan County community of Elkhart, about 45 miles south of Bloomington. He apparently honed his sharpshooting skills hunting passenger pigeons, prairie chickens and other fast-disappearing game birds from the fast-disappearing undrained prairies of Illinois.

“In McLean County, Ford County, and the others of the tier on that line, there is as good grouse-shooting as any I have known of anywhere in Illinois,” Bogardus noted in his book “*Field, Cover, and Trap Shooting*,” published in 1874. “As good places as any to get off the railroad are at Bellflower in McLean County, and Gibson [City] in Ford County.”

In 1872, Bogardus paired with New Jersey trap shooter Miles Johnson for an extensive hunting trip in eastern McLean County. “We camped near Bellflower, and had a man for camp-keeper while Miles and I shot,” recalled Bogardus. “We were out ten days, and in that time bagged 600 grouse [prairie chickens], shooting only mornings and evenings.”

Today, some 100 to 200 prairie chickens on state-managed land are all that remain in Illinois of this magnificent species that once numbered 10 to 14 million in the Prairie State alone.

If the oft-told stories are to be believed, Bogardus entered his first wing shot competition in 1868 in St. Louis. Not long after that, he faced a trap shooter from Detroit in a \$200-a-side match in Elkhart. Each man was given the opportunity to kill 50 birds, with Bogardus bringing down 46 and Stanton 40.

Wing shot competitions were all the craze by the mid-1870s. The newly organized Bloomington Shooting Club staged a tournament in early Oct. 1875 at the McLean County fairgrounds, then located along West Washington Street on the city's western edge. The two-day competition required the shipment of some 2,000 pigeons, and involved notable wing shots like Bogardus as well as shooting clubs from Clinton, Decatur, Delavan, Lincoln and elsewhere.

In addition to wild (passenger) and domestic pigeons, competitive trap shooters slaughtered untold numbers of quail, meadowlarks and sparrows.

The use of live targets in this Bloomington tournament came under local attack. "It is simply amazing that such cruelty and barbarity [are] permitted, much less applauded, in a civilized community," read an open letter in the Oct. 8, 1875 *Pantagraph*, signed only "Anti-Cruelty."

"The statutes of Illinois make it a penal offense to engage in such cruelty, but there is no prospect of seeing the law enforced," added the letter-writer. "The only thing to do is to decry and condemn the brutalizing tendency of such entertainments, and endeavor to do better things than to encourage the wanton and useless taking of life."

Later that same month, on Oct. 22, Bogardus was in Decatur for two matches. In the first, he dispatched 39 of 40 birds released from two traps 40 yards apart. In the second, "doing his own loading," he killed 17 of 18 birds.

The outcry over the slaughter of birds—to say nothing of the cost of collecting, feeding and transporting them—spurred the search for cheaper and more humane alternatives.

Bloomington hosted another shooting tournament one year after the first, in Oct. 1876, but this time around Bogardus was aiming not for live birds but rather glass targets. "Mr. Bogardus will break 50 small glass balls in 8 minutes and load his own gun," was the promise of tournament organizers.

It was around this time that Bogardus developed a patented trap that could throw glass balls. Such targets were sometimes filled with feathers (so as to mimic the real thing when blasted) and certain types were known as "Bogardus balls."

In the latter half of the 19th century, celebrity trap shooters popularized their sport through circus-like exhibitions of strength and stamina. In Jan. 1877, for example, Bogardus was in New York City, appearing at Patrick's Gilmore's Garden, a popular venue for sporting events and the predecessor to Madison Square Garden. There he succeeded in breaking 5,000 glass balls in 500

minutes or less, accomplishing the feat in 480 minutes (8 hours) and 45 seconds. An exhausted Bogardus shattered the final 300 balls while seated in a chair.

In late Oct. 1880, Bogardus and four of his sons—Eugene, Edward, Peter and five-year-old Henry—performed at Schroder’s Opera House on the east side of the courthouse square in downtown Bloomington. “Captain Bogardus,” promised *The Pantagraph*, “will shoot with a rifle nickels from each of the boys’ fingers, and knock the ashes from a cigar held in Eugene’s mouth.” Likewise, his sons shot glass balls and marbles from their father’s hands.

“That playing William Tell is not an avocation entirely free from danger is shown by various scars on the captain’s hands where he was shot five different times by his sons, when bullets went a bit over the edge of the coins or balls he was holding in his fingers,” noted a later profile.

Bogardus lost his unofficial national title in 1883 when the enigmatic William Frank Carver bested him in a series of competitions. Yet Bogardus continued to capture the public’s imagination by performing with Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West show and other such traveling spectacles.

Late in his life, Bogardus, who settled into semi-retirement in Lincoln, Ill., was a pitchman for a patent medicine known as Foley’s Kidney Pills. “I was subject to severe backache and pains in my kidneys with suppression and oftentimes cloudy voiding,” he declared in one advertising testimonial. “Now I have taken three bottles of Foley’s Kidney Pills and feel 100 percent better.”

Adam Henry Bogardus passed away on Aug. 10, 1913, at the age of 78. He was laid to rest at the cemetery atop Elkhart Hill. It’s one of the lovelier, more peaceful spots in all Central Illinois, making it an interesting juxtaposition with the man who earned a living amid the deafening bang and acrid smoke of an overheated shotgun.