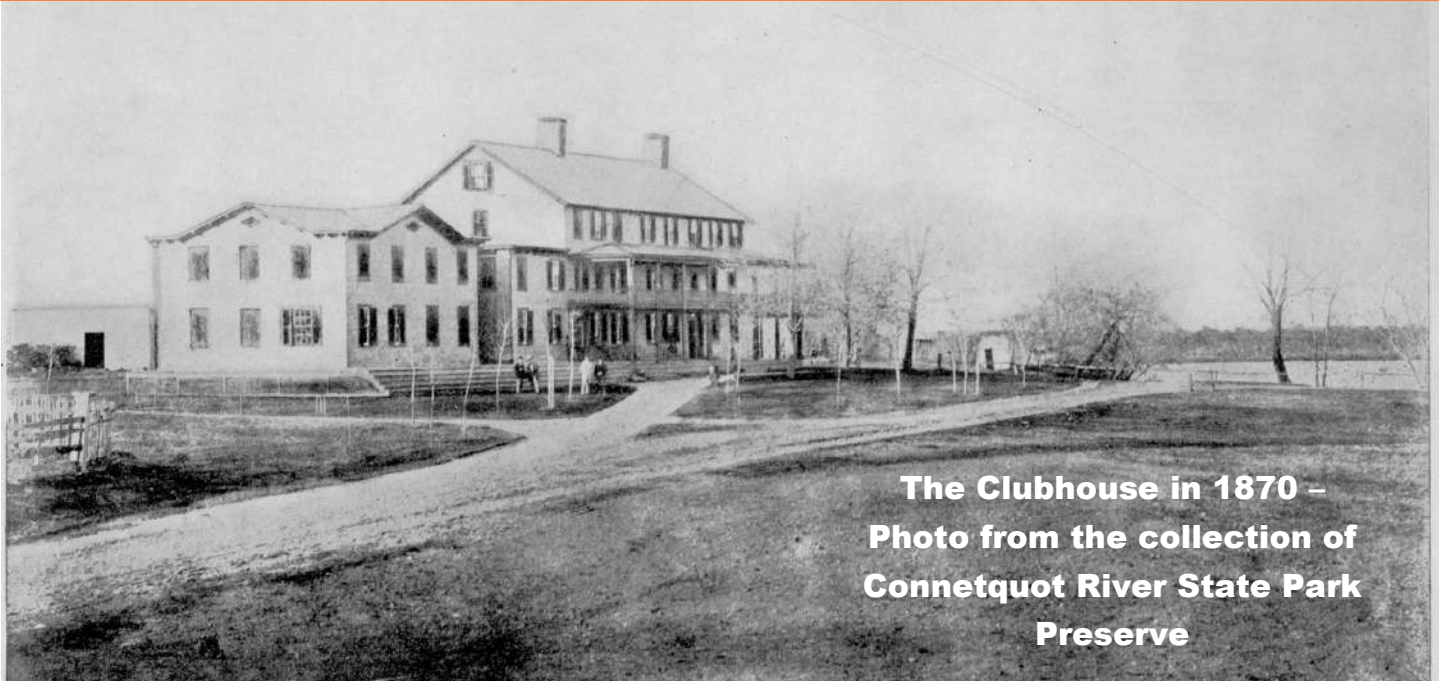


Folklore of Great River

Glimpse of Life and Legends

of Snedecor's Inn

in the 19th Century



**The Clubhouse in 1870 –
Photo from the collection of
Connetquot River State Park
Preserve**



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"Remember Your Past to Inspire Your Future"

These stories first appeared in the January-March 2024 issue of Islip Town's quarterly history magazine **Vignettes of Islip Town History**. Some additional text has been added for this publication to give the reader more information on life at the inn. The purpose of the first article was to take another look at some writings on Islip History from previous Islip Town Historians, in this case, Carl Starace. This article tells the story of the death of a member of the famous Delmonico family and who died from a rattlesnake bite or "buck fever" or who knows? We decided that this story needed more looking into and perhaps some corrections to get at the real story. My thanks to the members of Friends of Connetquot State Park who dug into their materials to update and determine the truth of the story! The original story is presented as Mr. Starace wrote it.

Another Look at an Earlier Article and Research:

Folklore of Great River

By Carl Starace. Late Town Historian, Town of Islip



Folklore knows no barriers. One even finds it in the early annals of the exclusive South Side Club at Great River, Long Island. The club is a product of the post-war period, referring to the Civil War. It was in 1866 that a group of solid businessmen of the metropolitan area purchased the tavern and extensive woodlands of one Lif Snedecor, turned the ancient tavern into a clubhouse, and with Lif and his son Obi in charge, restocked the woods with game and the streams with trout, and created a membership roll from a selected list of equally substantial fellow sportsmen.

Among the early members were represented such families as Baldwin, Crosby, DeForest, Garrison, Johnson, Knapp, Prince, Robeson, Rogers, Vandyke, etc. On the list were August Belmont, James Gordon Bennett, Heyward Cutting, Herbert B. Clarke, William G. Fargo, Charles L.

Tiffany, and New York's famous restaurateur, Alonzo Delmonico. And thereby hangs a tale – a tale to be more exact, with a very ominous rattle. For while deer-hunting on the club grounds Mr. Delmonico is said to have suffered the rare distinction of being fatally struck by a timber rattler.

At the time, as the story goes, fearful of the adverse effect that the incident might have on prospective members, the victim's sudden demise was laid to a malady, common to beginners in the field of hunting, known as buck fever. But news reporters sent out by the city press laughed this explanation to scorn. It just didn't fit in with Delmonico's reputation as a gentleman Nimrod who knew how to bag venison as well as serve it.

When it was learned that Mr. Delmonico's expensively clothed body had been found near one of the club's several streams known as Rattlesnake Brook, city reporters, not including those on Mr. James Gordon Bennett's leading daily¹, wrote the story their way. But certain members of the club had connections with most other New York publishers. This was reflected in the printed accounts of the unfortunate affair, which headlined the buck fever as a more probable cause of death than the venom of a rattlesnake.

It was not until some years later that the snake received public recognition more in keeping with its part in the tragedy. A free-lance writer managed to interview Lif Snedecor.

"I recon it was a snake bite alright," Lif was quoted as saying. *"Them timber rattles was lot more plentiful around Rattlesnake Brook in those days than they are now, thanks to our half-breed guides, Steve and his boys, Lem*

¹ That would be the *New York Herald* newspaper. As will be shown, the paper's editor at the time of the incident described was Scottish immigrant James Gordon Bennett, Sr. He founded the paper in May 1835 only a few years prior to the actual occurrence.

and Ike. They've got just enough Secatogue Injun inside their hides to strike faster than a timber rattler. But back in the early days I never let a member's guest go into the brush with warning him to stay clear of that brook – the one place in the club where the deer, which are natural snake-killers, couldn't trample the varmints [sic] effectively because of the mushy ground."

"I even had warning signs put up along the brook until the house committee decided it was bad for membership morale, especially for new members and those being considered. As for poor Mr. Delmonico – Delly, the other gentlemen called him – was one of the guests that was called Dr. examined the remains as acting coroner, and he gave the rattlesnakes a clean bill of health. And that, I guess, closed the case as far as the newspaper people was concerned."

That also closed the supposed interview with Liff Snedecor, but a few days later when the free-lance writer went back to the club to check up on some points, Liff was upstream reupholstering one of the duck blinds. So, the writer talked to one of the half-breed guides – which one he didn't say – the half breed verified everything Liff had said. He also added a few words to the affect that one of the saddest jobs he ever had was helping to burn Mr. Delmonico's hunting togs after it was all over. *"They was awfully rumped for a man who had always taken pride in his appearances."* But it was the light canvas leggings that the half-breed remembered, *"One had two blood-stained punctures about two inches above the ankle."*

I guess that was what started the Secatogues and other natives living in that part of the island singing a folklore ballad that started off with

Two little holes in a gentleman's leg
Like two bungholes in a whiskey keg.
It wasn't a buck that came in sight.
Two little holes is a rattlesnake's bite.

And a ballad that gives more details goes like this:

Alonzo Delmonico was hiding in a nook
Waiting for a deer near Rattlesnake Brook,
For he didn't believe Liff Snedecor's dream
Of rattlesnakes living around that stream
Alonzo Delmonico was out that day
To bag some venison for his café
For he'd promised his patrons venison steaks
With a relish of old Liff Snedecor's snakes.
As out of the brush stepped a ten-point buck
Alonzo aimed. Then the rattlesnake struck
And its rattle, rattled as rattles must
Alonzo Delmonico bit the dust.
'Twas a heart attack, the coroner said,
Tho he couldn't help seeing a spot that bled,
But the club was young and the coroner knew
Blaming a rattlesnake would never do.
Nobody doubted that the coroner saw
The mark of fangs where the flesh was raw
That Alonzo Delmonico had died that way
At the South Side Club they still debate.
How Alonzo Delmonico met his fate,
To old Liff Snedecor's warning word
And they drink a toast as they stir their ice
To old Liff's sound advice
And they toast Liff Snedecor once again
As the grand old man who warned in vain.

What did we find in our research and the comments from the Friends of Connetquot State Park Preserve?

George Munkenbeck, Islip Town Historian



What happened to the Timber Rattle Snake population on Long Island? Rattlesnakes were once quite common on Long Island and were found from Brooklyn to the East End. Today, unless someone is keeping one in a terrarium or has a stuffed or preserved specimen in a natural history collection, they are no longer present. What happened to them? According to tradition, and some fact, the decline of the population was attributed to the Long Island Rail Road. The snakes enjoyed basking on the ballasted slopes of the right of way and then they found that the steel rails were even warmer. The reptiles would lie on the hot rails enjoying

the warmth and were lulled into what turned out to be their last sleep when a train came by. Today, the rattlesnakes of the Town of Islip are memorialized in Rattlesnake Creek a tributary of the Connetquot River having its source in the State Park Preserve. Take a look at the sign when you are travelling on Sunrise Highway when it passes through Connetquot State Park Preserve to realize that the sign commemorates a little piece of Islip Town history.

What did happen to Lorenzo Delmonico? Once again, it is not easy to separate fact from folklore but the contributions of the Friends of Connetquot have helped us put the story in context.

Who was he? Lorenzo Delmonico was a member of the famous restaurateur family that also ran an upscale hotel. Lorenzo was one of the three members of the Swiss Delmonico family. The other two were John (Giovanni), and Peter (Pietro) who emigrated to New York City and founded a pastry shop and then a high-end restaurant during the early 19th Century. Lorenzo was the nephew of John and Peter and the family worked hard to develop not only a high-end restaurant but also several other restaurants and a hotel. They also bought farmland in Brooklyn to raise their own vegetables to ensure freshness and availability for their table. While the story tells of an Alonzo, none of the family members involved with the business were named Alonzo and also there is a problem with Lorenzo as he dies in Sharon Springs, New York in the home of his nephew on September 3, 1881, of a lingering illness. He was not at the Southside Sportsman's Club. So, Lorenzo could not be Alonzo! He is buried in the Delmonico crypt below Saint Patrick's Old Cathedral in New York City.



Where does that lead us? That leads us to look at both newspapers and the submissions from others on who might have been the person told of in the story and allow fact to be separated from fiction.

One source wrote that "*Delmonico died by gunshot hunting.*" Tom Hubbard wrote that the last spot a rattlesnake was killed was at Rattlesnake Brook. "*According to Willie it was during his days when the guy was a member.*"

Keith Snedecor, a descendant of the Snedecor family and a person well-grounded in the history of our Town and the park, sent the following comment. "*I heard stories that he passed from "deer fright" or heart attack, but never did I hear of a snake bite . . . Delmonico passed in 1881 well before Willie and Paul's employment at the club. Members shied away from bird hunting in the early days of the club due to abundance of rattlers. Many lost their dogs to snake bites. I recall reading a story of two workmen traveling on bicycles from Sayville to the Cutting Estate where they were employed and came across a rattlesnake as they passed Rattlesnake Brook. Horses [being ridden or hauling wagons] were keenly aware of the presence of snakes and would let their driver know it when they were nearby. Perhaps the club records will one day shed light?"* Keith hits on something here as

the people mentioned in the story did not know Lorenzo Delmonico nor were employed when he was a member of the club.

The clue to the identity and the time frame of the incident is found in a submission by Janet Soley of the Friends of Connetquot who sent in an entry from the diary of Philip Hone who wrote on Saturday, November 12, 1842, the following, "*Mr. John Delmonico, the respectable proprietor of the great hotel and restaurant in William Street, died on Thursday morning in a strange and awful manner. He was with a party deer-hunting at Snedecor's, Islip, Long Island. He was placed on a stand up the creek, and a deer coming, he fired. The deer being wounded took to the water and was killed by one of the hunters on another stand. After some time, his companions, going to join him, found him lying on his face in the same spot where he had fired, quite dead of apoplexy², probably produced by the excitement which the sport of deer hunting always occasions with persons unaccustomed to it. Mr. Delmonico was an amiable man, very obliging in his house, and will not fail to be remembered as long as good dinners swell pleasantly upon the recollection of gastronomes.*"³

A story entitled "**Reminiscences of Foreign Residents and Old Times In New York City**" confirms the story. It appears that the author, Pierre Morand, is writing this in the first person so it is possible he was a witness. "*It is a coincidence worthy of note that the founder of the house Delmionico and its last proprietor of the name in the male line both perished in a tragic and unexpected manner. About a dozen French residents, bent upon recreation, had gone some thirty miles out on Long Island for a deer-hunt, which then still afforded exciting and romantic sport. John Delmonico, who was one of the party, and though a hunter of some experience more sanguine than the rest of us, unaccountably failed to hit a large buck which suddenly confronted him within easy range. The shock of disappointment was apparently more than the excited sportsman could bear, for, without uttering a sound, he placed his hand upon his heart and expired on the spot.*"⁴

The Delmonico involved was John (Giovanni) Delmonico who died in 1842 not at the Southside Sportsman's Club but rather at Snedecor's Hotel which would become the Sportsman's Club. The person who died of "Deer Fever" was a member of the well-known restaurant family but not the person named in the story. So, the basic facts are in the story, but the timeline and story have been altered. John did die while deer hunting but not of a rattlesnake bite but rather a fatal stroke⁵.

So, the truth is that the basic story is true, a Delmonico did die hunting deer in the Town of Islip, but not the one in the story. Also, there was no snake bite as he died of a stroke which can be brought on by excitement and the fact that the families' fancy food diet and cigar smoking probably contributed to a blood clot or a hemorrhage in the brain that brought about instant death. The remainder of the story and the song attributed to the guides are part of the folklore of the Town of Islip and a window into a long-lost time when stories were frequently told and embellished that come down as fact but are folklore. Thanks to our friends at the Connetquot State Park Preserve for their input that allows us to publish another look at an old story.

What Were the Hunting Parties Like at 'Lif Snedecor's Hotel in the First Third of the Nineteenth Century?

George Munkenbeck, Islip Town Historian

While researching the previous article a website came up entitled "*South Side Story*" that had links to some sources taken from books and newspapers contemporary with the story of Mr. Delmonico's death at 'Lif

² Apoplexy refers to a sudden loss of consciousness or a sudden, severe impairment of neurological function. It is often caused by a stroke or bleeding in the brain due to a ruptured blood vessel. Symptoms can include sudden weakness, numbness, confusion, and difficulty speaking. If the comment found in the article written by Mr. Morand is correct it could also have been a massive heart attack. Back then either would have been instantly fatal.

³ Pp. 329-330, Hone, Philip; **The Diary of Philip Hone.**

⁴ Page 444, *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, Volume XXX, No. 4, October heart 1890

⁵ This is confirmed by a funeral announcement on page 2, column 6, of *The Evening Post* for November 11, 1842, "Yesterday morning of apoplexy, Mr. JOHN DELMONICO in the 48th year of his age. The time of his funeral will be announced in the morning papers for Saturday." There are other reports of his passing and the gist of all of them is the story found in the diary entry quoted above.

Snedecor's hotel that detailed hunting parties at what is now Connetquot River State Park Preserve. One source described a trip made to the hotel for deer hunting in 1837. That source also went into the effort that was a trip to Islip Town in 1837. That article entitled "**Three Days at Lif Snedecker's**" detailed the hunting trip of a group from New York City. The Snedecor owned hotel's actual name was the Connetquot (Connetquot) Hotel. The author described the hotel as follows:⁶

The Connetquot Hotel is a good old-fashioned Dutch inn, of a corpulent form, with an open space around it partly covered with turf. An immense elm stands on the west side, which is a marked object, famous for having had more fat bucks triced up to it than any other tree in the country. The large square sign over the porch shows a faded picture of an Indian drawing his arrow to his ear upon a fine stag, which is bounding across a plain pursued by bloodhounds; and antlers whitened by time and weather are nailed upon the sign.

The author described Eliphalet Snedecor as a "*fine full-chested fellow, with a broad forehead, and dark, healthy-looking countenance - portly rotundity of belt - a strong recommendation for a landlord. There is somewhat of the air of an English game-keeper about him.*"

He also described the hotel's accommodations as follows.

We were shown to rough, but clean bed-rooms - destitute, it is true, of wardrobe, or chest of drawers - but with pegs sufficient on which to hang up your trousers and shooting-jacket, and a dry change of clothes. Two of my companions shared a double-bedded room; I, being a stranger, was shown, or rather allowed to find my way, (for liberty is here the order of the day,) into a single one -and our ambitious friend of the trophy of the horns, being of a gay disposition, was allotted a bed in the ball-room - so called from its being appropriated sometimes to the solemnity of dancing, which, in this part of the country, is a grave and grotesque ceremony.

Presently, we all met in our general sitting-room - a blazing wood-fire crackled within the ample chimney, and threw its warm and cheering reflection on the walls - lit up, as it were, with a sunny glow, the autumnal pictures of English fox-hunting, which were suspended around, and gleamed brightly on the locks and barrels of rifles and fowling-pieces in the corners.

Then came the snowy table-cloth, spread by the hands of old Liffy's graceful and dark-eyed daughter; and we sat down with keen appetites to a dinner of soup, fish, roast beef, broiled chickens, ham, partridges and wild ducks, with a variety of fresh vegetables, all admirably cooked. Oysters, roasted in the shell, were piled up before us; and empty shells were piled up in turn, and were carried out and succeeded by full ones - the oysters, like stanch veterans, always maintaining a bold front, and finally beating us off the ground.

But one word more as to the position of the hotel, and then for some field sport.

Know, then, that on the east side of old Liffy's, you come upon the borders of a forest, fifty miles in length, and eight or nine miles wide - a small river, called by the Indian name the Connetquutt, flows through the forest, forms a mill-pond by the side of the inn, and then winds away through swamp, brushwood and meadow, to the ocean.

While the accommodations were more spartan than a city hotel, to put it mildly, they were not exactly "roughing it!"

After their dinner, they went out to hunt snipe and ducks in the nearby wetlands as deer-hunting started only in the morning. The next morning, they had a "*famous breakfast*" before native-American, 70-year-old "John Murray" described as "*the most famous hunter about the country*" came to guide them in their pursuit of the deer. The hunting party set out with deerhounds and were taken to prepared deer stands. The "*intrepid*" hunters waited while the hounds drove deer toward the stands. The author managed to bag a doe and then the deer was

⁶ *The New York Mirror*, "A Hunt and An Adventure," November 25, 1837, page 188.

brought back to the hotel to be dressed, a haunch cut out for the hunter and the remainder was put up for bid to all the party.

The author of the previous passages was enthusiastically describing the hunt at Snedecor's, not all sportsmen of the time were convinced that this was really hunting!⁷ This author called the type of hunting on Long Island as "driving" which only required the hunter to have "*the patience of Job, added to enough skill with the gun to knock over a great beast, as big as a jack ass, and as timid as a sheep, with a heavy charge of buck-shot.*" He went on to add,

On Long Island, especially, at Snedecor's and Carman's, where excellent hotels are kept for the accommodations of city sportsmen, it is usual to collect large parties, often numbering twenty or thirty guns. All the Deer-paths and run-ways are perfectly well known to the hunters and drivers, and the comparative excellence of them thoroughly ascertained. The stations at these are, therefore, meted out by lot to the sportsmen, some of whom have thus a fair chance of getting a shot in the course of a whole day's weary watch to leeward of Deer-path, while against others the odds are, perhaps, a hundred to one against their so much as hearing the distant bay of a hound.

Meantime the hounds are uncoupled, the drivers enter the woods, and endeavor to force the quarry to the known passes, at which the gallant cits. wait patiently, or impatiently, as it may be, with little or no excitement; beyond the knowledge, that if they are detected indulging in a cigar, or in firing an unwise shot at any passing small game, much more in being absent from their stand when a Deer – if any – crosses it, or missing him if present under arms, they will be fined a dozen of Champagne at dinner, for the benefit of the company; whereas, if they succeed in killing Hart or Hind, they will be rewarded by the hide and horns, and by the permission to buy the venison at auction in the evening, if they bid more for it than their unsuccessful neighbors.

Herbert was once present at one of these Epping hunts in Epping Forest before he left England,⁸

There is certainly no sublimity about them, unless it be the sublimity of the ridiculous; and I believe that now-a-days few persons worthy of the name of sportsmen honor these travestied battues⁹ with their presence. High living by day, high play at night, soft pillows in the morning, with just enough sporting to serve as an excuse, are the great inducements to New-York gunners to visit "the Island," unless it be for Fowl shooting, which is really fine, and a sport worthy of a sportsman, or for the kindred amusement of Trout fishing with the fly, in waters which it is no easy matter to surpass anywhere, either for the excellence of their stocking, or the quality of their fish.

For the rest, I can conceive nothing more lugubriously dull than a Long Island Deer-hunt. It is just the thing for a Broadway dandy, and for nothing on the broad earth beside.

The author of **Deer Hunting on Long Island** had a different take on a deer hunts here. He pointed out that this sport took place over "70,000 acres of woodland and pine plains with no clearings of settlements. Through it, flow several streams, the main one, being the Connetquot River, to which at some period of the day of the hunt, the deer seem 'bound' to come."¹⁰

The time and exact place of their taking to water, depends so much upon their place of being started, the close or far off pursuit of the dogs, the wind and state of atmosphere, that but little accurate calculation can be made upon it. It is customary for those who are strangers to the hunting ground, to take by lot the places or stand upon the river, there to await the sooner or later probable appearance of the deer. This

⁷ Forster, Frank, **Field Sports of the United States and British Provinces of North America**, 1849, pages 242-243

⁸ The Epping Hunt was held on Easter Monday where a stag was chased through Epping Forest by residents of London who came out to view this or participate. They went along with the elite and it was more of a fair than a hunt with food and drink aplenty. It was established in the 11th Century and eventually got dubbed the "Cockney Hunt."

⁹ This is a French word describing the driving of deer to the hunter

¹⁰ "Friend P," *Spirit of the Times*, May 19, 1849, **Deer Hunting on Long Island**, pages 151-152.

*part of the hunt, however, which 'F.F.' seems to consider quite the whole, is but 'bagatelle,' compared with the other, the most essential, and the most manly and exciting. This is, mounted upon well bred, strong and sure footed horses, by the aid of noble, well bred, and fleet hounds, to traverse the almost unbounded woodland and thickets, to seek the track, and when once well started upon it, to endeavor by every means of hard riding, by an intimate knowledge of the country, of the habits and manner of running of the deer, taking into consideration, wind and atmosphere, also whether it be buck, doe, or fawn, to **head off**, not **drive**, and thus secure a chance to shoot before the deer finally takes to water, where the guns of those upon the stands are ready to receive them, and where the dogs are most apt to lose them. To do this, calls into requisition every quality of a sportsman: proper management of the hounds, strength and endurance in the river, and the same qualities in the horse; for these hunts frequently continue from the rising to the setting of the sun. This part of the hunt, upon which the other altogether depends, requires a thorough knowledge of the country, and hence limits very much the number of its followers.*

The author then goes on to detail the hunt as conducted at Snedecor's hotel. This paragraph gives us details of the hunt when Mr. Delmonico was here in Islip Town. This description closely matches the description found in "Three Days at 'Lif Snedecker's."

At the hunts described by 'F.F.' at Snedecor's, there are, as there always should be, if the party be large, rules and regulations for the carrying on of the hunt.

Those who go upon the 'brush,' as it is termed, endeavor after starting their deer, as I have above described, to head them off and kill them. Surely it requires no mean skill, when the game is under full speed, closely pursued by the noble hounds, from on horseback to fire with the 'eye of faith' and with fatal effect, guided by the mere fleeting glimpse of the white stag, as it occasionally shows itself through a thicket of the densest description. Or, if more fortunate to head the deer off on some narrow wood road, of the width of a wagon track, and overhung in the bushes and trees, to pull the sure trigger as the deer bounds over the narrow space.

Any derivation from the well-known rules of the hunt, such as smoking, firing at passing small game, or moving around with bushes, oftentimes not only robs the offending party of the chance of a shot, but also by immediately turning the deer short back upon his tracks, spoils the chances of other members of the host.

A dozen of champagne, therefore, can be considered but a mild punishment, especially when we reflect that the party fined drinks probably more than his individual allowance of it. The selling of the venison, at auction, at which only the actual members of the hunt are allowed to bid, certainly must be considered an impartial division of the spoils.

This author saw the celebration, food and drink as part of the whole hunt experience on Long Island. While the various authors may differ in their interpretation of these hunts and whether they were true sport or not they did leave us with a glimpse into the hunts of a more rural Islip Town and more information of life at the Connetquot (or Connetquut) Hotel, now part of the main structure at Connetquot River State Park Preserve.

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