Barnegat Bay Decoy & Baymen's Museum: OUR STORY

By JOHN GORMLEY

In 1989, a small group of sportsmen met to form a club. They planned to purchase one of the few remaining gunning clubs along the shore. Among the original founders were Harry Disbrow Jr., Jim Deevy, Tom Gormley, Frank Pullen, Bud Seaman, John Gormley, and Herb Heinrichs.

As the men began discussing the plan with other friends, enthusiasm grew. With the huge success of the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show, one of the group suggested building a museum to preserve the heritage of the baymen.

What started as an idea soon turned into a passion. The group began to sell clothing and food at the decoy show and set up fund raising booths at area sportsmen's shows.

The idea gathered momentum, and later that year, a formal meeting was held to elect the first slate of officers of the Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymen's Museum: Herb Heinrichs, President; Tom Gormley, Vice President; Bob Suralik, Secretary; Harry Disbrow Jr., Treasurer; and trustees Alfie Stevens, Steve Morey, Joe Tono, Mark Ford, and Pete Snyder. Bylaws were established and in August of 1990, the organization gained non-profit status.

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In February of that year, Sen. Leonard T. Connors, R-9th District, assisted the project by sending a draft resolution to the mayors of the county's 33-municipalities asking for support of the museum. The project has always received support from the host Borough of Tuckerton and surrounding Little Egg Harbor Township.



On Nov. 11, the Ocean County Freeholders and Tom Gormley (museum president) signed a 25-year lease agreement for the property at a cost of $1 a year. The agreement also included an option for two additional 25-year leases.

All the while, museum supporters had been collecting decoys, photographs, classic boats, and old hunting, clamming and life-saving tools to line the museum's walls.

Thanks to a donation by Southern Ocean State Bank (now Sun Bank) in 1993, a life-sized latex carving of legendary decoy carver Harry V. Shourds, a Tuckerton native who is reported to have carved more than 50,000 decoys in his lifetime, was commissioned to serve as the centerpiece of the museum's 1,200 square foot annex. The official groundbreaking for the museum was held January 30, 1993, with state, county, and local officials in attendance, including U.S. Rep. H. James Saxton, R-3rd and the 9th district legislators. Then-Gov. Jim Florio sent a letter of support.

It was on that day that the idea for the Tuckerton Seaport came about. It would soon receive enthusiastic support from the public and officials alike.

A year after the museum opened, Tom Gormley, museum President, announced the purchase of an 11-acre property along the Tuckerton Creek across from Lake Pohatcong. Once the site of a ship-building industry, the area was envisioned by the Board of Trustees as the perfect site to recreate a fully operational historic seaport village.

After her election, Governor Christine Todd Whitman was one of the many to tour the site.

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Since the original purchase, adjoining acreage has been purchased and the museum now owns a total of 40 acres. When completed, the seaport will occupy approximately 16 of those acres.

Since the initial group of men first met to envision a museum, the Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymen's Museum has grown to number more than 1,000 dedicated men and women.

The Museum is a co-sponsor of Annua Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy & Gunning Show, rated as one of the top 100 events i North America, held in Tuckerton by th Ocean County Department of Parks & Rec reation. Last year's show brought over 46,00 visitors interested in celebrating the life, skill and culture of the baymen. With the grow ing interest in the museum and the seapor there is no doubt that the preservation local history and culture will be a benefit t all of Ocean County and the State of Ne Jersey.