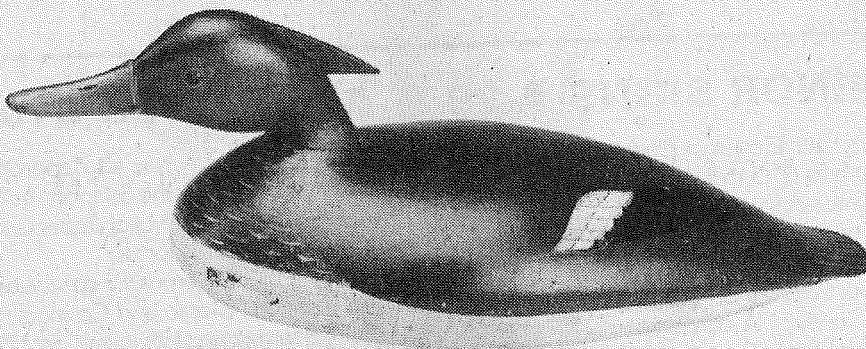


Decoys DECOYS Decoys

By Bruce Williams



American merganser hen. Carved by John English, ca. 1880 and painted by John Dawson, ca. 1910: collection: Bruce Williams

At the Barnegat Bay Decoy & Baymen's Museum we have just installed another new exhibit of antique duck decoys which is visually appealing and historically important. These old hunting decoys (pre 1950) represent the work of dozens of NJ master carvers from all regions of the State: the head of Barnegat Bay, South Jersey and Delaware River in the western part of the state.

Each member of the decoy committee has loaned decoys from their collections. It has also been generously supplemented by others with an interest in the museum exhibit program (currently "Doc" James Thompson). Included is a stunning mix of rare mergansers, geese, mallards, golden eyes, black ducks, shorebirds and more. Come take a look!

For variety, Bob Seabrook has set up a separate display of antique oyster cans, tools and artifacts from his large collection of items of this old-time NJ industry. It is colorful, educational and reminiscently interesting. Come take a look!

Because of great prominence in the field, there are separate display cases always

featuring the decoy carvings of Harry V. Shourds and Nathan Rowley Horner plus Stanley Grant.

The Decoy & Baymen's Museum rolls over its display of 200 or so decoys three or four times a year, so as to provide new viewing pleasure for visitors. In the past year or so, we have had separate displays of decoys from the Mullica River/Absecon Bay/Atlantic City area, preceded by a show of 50 old-time NJ black ducks, 20 old squaws and 20 ruddy turnstone shorebirds which itself was preceded by an exhibit concentrating on the carvings of old-timers Bill Quinn and Lloyd Parker. That show was preceded by a display of 400 miniature decoy whittlings (pre 1950). In their selections, the decoy committee strives for variety and the best of quality available in form and paint.

Clearly, the museum has the most prominent continuing display of historic hunting decoys in this state and also

one of the best displays of decoys, hunting and fishing artifacts plus antique photos (more than 4,000) along the entire East Coast.

Interestingly, the museum has a 1916 letter from the prolific and best-known NJ decoy carver, Harry V. Shourds, to his client, Phineas Cranmer, advising him on completion of his order: 18 decoys for \$18 plus 40 cents postage to ship from Tuckerton to Surf City! Cranmer was a duck-hunting guide at the popular Bonnet Gunning Club.

Six geese cost \$1.50 each or \$9 the half dozen in 1916. Twelve "ducks" cost 75 cents each or \$9 for a dozen. The Baymen's Museum also has a client ledger from the early 1890's of H. V. Shourds listing prices for decoys sold to a Dr. Reeves: 16 "ducks" for a total of \$5.20, averaging 33 cents each. Prices more than doubled during the 25 years following.

Today, original paint black

ducks and broad bills by H. V. Shourds and in good condition can sell for several thousand dollars each and geese often for many times that amount. This attests to appreciation by today's collectors for their historic

significance, rarity and beauty.

These hunting decoys have evolved from being the hunter's tools (legitimate "breadwinners" in their active days 100 years ago) to becoming tangible keepsakes for passionate collectors interested in the earlier days. While those with a bent for history are still the most active in pursuing decoys, the aesthetically pleasing polychromed carvings are now emerging as New Jersey's most notable and important folk art, which adds a new dimension of interest.

The museum welcomes your visit for a visual feast and a tasty bit of history.

The decoy committee of the Baymen's Museum currently includes Executive Director John Gormley, Vice President Jim Allen and volunteers Ar Birdsall, Gary Giberson, Dick Gove, Russ Allen and Bruce Williams.