



THREE GENERATIONS OF DECOY CARVERS — Harry Vinuckson Shourds, the first generation of master decoy carvers, on the steps of his house on Water Street, near the head of the Tuckerton Creek. See story on page 10.

The decoy carver's art

Harry times 3: a Barnegat Bay tradition

Harry Vinuckson Shourds of Tuckerton, who died in 1920, is well-known as an old-time master decoy carver in the Barnegat Bay tradition. Born and raised in Tuckerton, he was a commercial supplier of decoys to prestigious hunting clubs of the rich, up and down the east coast.

Following in his footsteps, his son, Harry Mitchell Shourds continued the decoy carving tradition, and grandson, Harry V. Shourds II, received the prestigious National Heritage Fellowship in 1989 from the National Endowment for the Arts recognizing exemplary master folk artists and artisans.

By PAULA SCULLY

TUCKERTON — Grandson Harry V. Shourds II today lives in Seaville, where he maintains a carving studio in a barn next to his home.

In a recent visit, Shourds looked back on his famous grandfather who started the family tradition.

Harry V. Shourds was born Oct. 3, 1861. The Tuckerton resident preferred to hunt and fish, more than anything else, and spent much of his time on the waters near his home. He also worked as a house painter and commercial decoy maker using white cedar.

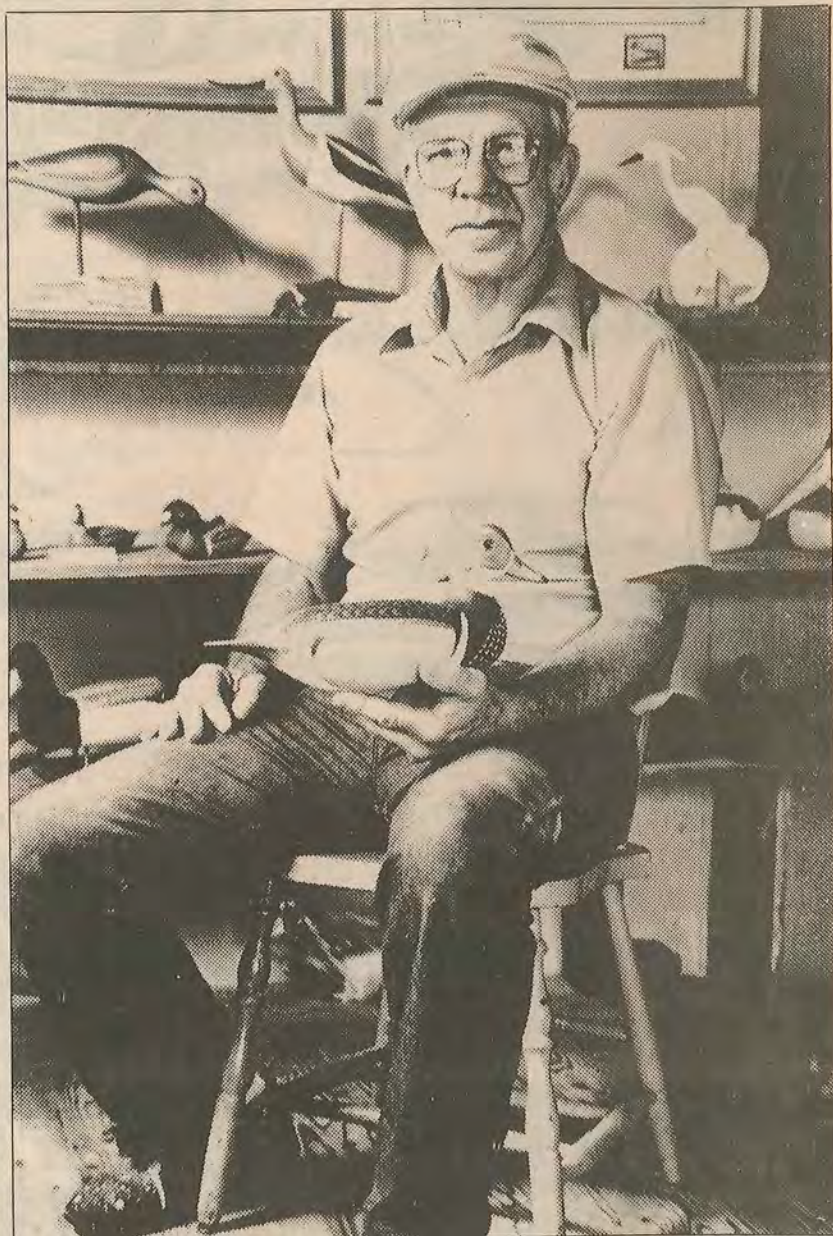
His decoys were not large. They were very well hollowed, lightweight and extremely well painted. He put poured lead weights in the bottom. The decoy heads were well detailed with nostrils, nail and mandible carving.

"I think you get influenced by other carvers. I can see carvers that resemble Harry V.'s work. There were a lot of carvers in Tuckerton who were pretty similar," his grandson said.

Harry V. Shourds could reportedly whittle a decoy head while waiting for a shave in a barber's chair.

"You can rough out a head in five minutes, but it takes a lot of work to finish it and paint it," his

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Third generation - Harry V. Shourds II continues the tradition in the old red barn next to his home in Seaville.

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grandson said. "Then if he did a couple a day, he would be doing good. I always heard they made a dozen a week, finished decoys. That would mean he probably could make up to 500 or 600 a year, but he probably didn't work on them 52 weeks a year. (An order for) 40 geese would take longer; shore birds would take less."

Harry V. Shourds' decoys have become collectors' items, and one of his geese went for \$60,000 recently at an auction in Maine.

"It's good to see the Jersey decoy get the recognition, when I've seen the Carolinas' decoys getting it. I wouldn't have one of those ugly-looking things. Different areas had different hunting conditions, and people carved decoys accordingly to suit the conditions. In Maine, by the sea, the decoys were heavy, solid and

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Second generation — Harry Mitchell Shourds of Ocean City in 1919 with several of his decoys. In the background is the old Ocean Rest in Ocean City. Photo courtesy of the Ocean County Historical Society Museum, Toms River.

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much more oversized. Jersey decoys are undersized more than anything. They wanted to get more on the back of a sneakbox. They'd have to be lighter.

"My grandfather also carved little horses that would be used to advertise horse blankets. They'd be a couple feet high, and people would put a little horse blanket over it. Maybe through that, word got around that he made decoys, or through a wealthy sportsman who knew about them. There were exclusive hunting clubs in the South that would order rigs of them from him. High level politicians belonged to those clubs. That was like belonging to a golf club or an exclusive yacht club today.

"Orders came in, and he shipped decoys up and down the east coast to different hunt clubs. A

lot he shipped down to a club in Virginia where they branded the decoys with the club brand. I've heard stories that he packed the decoys in barrels so they wouldn't get banged up. They must have used chips or seaweed to pack them.

"Tuckerton a hundred years ago was one of the chief seaports along the coast. It was a bustling community. The train used to come down through Tuckerton all the way from New York," his grandson explained.

"Hunting clubs were very exclusive affairs. Hunting wasn't looked down on in any way back then. It was necessity, not just a sport. Then people didn't buy their meat in grocery stores; they had to get it some way.

"Decoys were thought of then as just a tool. The only reason they made them was to lure the birds close in to be shot. Now

people think of decoys as carvings.

"Ducks and game were taken to hotels that served them to the patrons. In 1915 seasonal hunting went into effect, and there was no more market hunting, just like today when the commercial fishermen have limits. We've got to preserve the stuff, or it won't be here forever.

"I think the pace was easier back then in my grandfather's day. People worked with the seasons. In the winter they built boats or painted houses. In good weather it was decoys and hunting and fishing parties.

"People got together more often than they do today. I remember when I was young, people coming over and shooting the breeze with my father, and I think it was the same in my grandfather's time, even more

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so. Today, people hardly take the time to visit. When I was growing up, I remember almost every Sunday we'd take a ride and visit someone. People were friendly and got along good then in a little town like Tuckerton. They didn't have the leisure time like we do today. One day would be wash day, and a hundred years ago it would take the whole day to do the wash. Yet, they had time to visit, because they didn't have television. That was way back when people made quilts, and women got together and worked on a quilt and talked.

"There could have been different guys coming over who helped my grandfather make decoys. Or you could get kids to sand the decoys and then take them down to the ice cream store and buy them an ice cream cone.

They'd work all day for that. Things have changed."

Following in his father's footsteps, his son, Harry Mitchell Shourds helped his dad with decoys and marketing. Both father and son painted houses off season. The grandson of the famous carver, Harry V. Shourds II, remembers his father was 30 when Harry V. Shourds died. Harry V. Shourds died Jan. 6, 1920, and his son moved to Ocean City and went into business as a painting contractor.

Harry M. Shourds had learned from his father to love hunting and fishing. Besides being a house painter, he fed his family on his hunting, and he made decoys for sale in the evenings or when the weather kept him from painting.

Harry Mitchell Shourds' decoys were very similar to his father's, except that the bodies

and heads looked a little slimmer. His painting and method of pouring lead were identical to his father's style.

Like his father, he taught his three children, Alvin, Harry, Raymond and Virginia, everything he knew about the out-of-doors.

"We used to watch him," Harry V. Shourds II remembered. "We didn't do much, maybe a little sanding. I think my brother who was a couple of years older than I was might have done more.

"My father never had a bandsaw. I remember when he made two dozen pintails for somebody. A dozen broadtail ducks or broad bills, any kind of duck, would be \$15 a dozen. Geese would be more, maybe \$25 a dozen. That was back in the days when men worked for \$3 or \$4 a week. He

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used hand tools the same way as my grandfather did.

"I whittled around. By watching him do that, I did pick it up. Although I didn't do much, and I probably got in his way more than anything, I still learned something, just by watching him and being around it."

Harry V. Shourds II, his grandfather's namesake, continues the tradition today at his home in Seaville.

Harry V. Shourds II always worked for himself, painting and taking small contracting jobs. In 1962 he moved to his home in Seaville, put a sign out indicating duck decoys and got orders. "I got orders. I thought, 'What the heck,'" so I made decoys. I think people eventually do things they like, and they find

themselves spending more and more time doing what they like."

Even though he hadn't carved

"You can rough out a head in five minutes, but it takes a lot of work to finish it and paint it," his grandson said. "Then if he did a couple a day, he would be doing good."

decoys professionally, Harry V. Shourds II found he had the gift. "I'm sure someone could come up

and draw something and any decoy carver could probably make it up for them," he said. "I guess it is kind of a gift."

The New Jersey Council of the Arts sent his name to Washington to the prestigious National Endowment for the Arts. He became the only New Jersey resident ever to win the National Heritage Fellowship.

Carving runs in the family. His younger brother carves quite a bit in Norfolk, VA. His nephew, Ross, also carves and will exhibit at the Old-Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show Sept. 29 and 30. His brother, Alvin, did carving but got away from it.

Harry V. Shourds II will be exhibiting at the Old-Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show.

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Harry Mitchell Shourds with his decoys, Ocean City, 1919.