

BIOGRAPHY: BILL CRANMER

By John Gormley

Bill was born and raised in Manahawkin in 1917. He graduated from Tuckerton High School in 1935. After high school, Bill went to work clamming in the bay, but he could get only between 10 and 40 cents a hundred for clams. In 1936, he tried house painting for the summer. And in 1937, Bill became a carpenter apprentice for Harry "Dick" Crane of Manahawkin.

Bill's father passed away when the boy was only six years old, so he never really got to know his dad. Bill's uncle, Walt Martin of Manahawkin, taught him about the bay.

In 1932 or 33, when Bill wanted to start gunning, he couldn't afford to buy decoys, so he made his own. Joe Tom Cranmer taught Bill how to carve decoys. He also gave Bill his first shotgun. Bill was also able to use some of Joe Tom's tools to carve with, but he had to get his own adze made (a tool used for hollowing out decoys). He borrowed one and took it to a local blacksmith, Irving Cook, who made him a copy for \$1.25.

Getting cedar for making his decoys wasn't too much of a problem. Sherwood Corliss has a small sawmill, and he would save 7- or 8-inch slabs of cedar for the decoy carvers for 10 cents each. Black duck decoys

were the first decoys Bill sold. After using them for one season, he was able to sell them for \$20 a dozen.

Now that Bill had a shotgun and decoys for hunting, all he needed was a boat. So he traded a dozen broadbill decoys to Carol Pharo of Manahawkin for a 12-foot sailing sneakbox built by Frank Lamson of Mayetta. Bill lost his sneakbox and decoys in the 1938 hurricane. They were found by Milton Cranmer of Manahawkin along Bonnet Island. The boat was damaged and had to be rebuilt, and most of the decoys were gone.

From 1942 to 1945, Bill served in the Army, serving two years in Europe. After the war he went back to carpentry work and decoy carving.

In 1947 Bill built his first sneakbox. It was a 12-foot feather-edge boat with a centerboard. Since then, he has made seven sneakboxes and two 10-foot gunning garveys; in 1948 he and his brother-in-law built a 26-foot garvey, buying most of the cedar from a Parkertown sawmill owned by Joe Dayton.

In 1948, Bill was inspired by an article in *Field and Stream* magazine to enter a black duck decoy in the International Decoy Makers' contest in New York; he won Honorable Mention. In 1951 a red breasted merganser won first place for Bill at that show.

Around 1950 a trip to the Ward brothers in Crisfield, Maryland, with Chris Sprague and Nat Ewer inspired Bill to change his style from a working decoy to a decorative decoy. In the early 1960s he also learned some painting tips from them. Bill painted some decoys for the Wildfowler Decoy Company of Point Pleasant, owned by Charlie Birdsall.

Bill started to carve full time in 1958 and continued until the mid-1980s. Now he carves occasionally for friends and enjoys telling stories of his past.

Bill Cranmer will be on hand at the Decoy Show on Saturday, September 24, to autograph decoys and talk about his decoy carving career.