Art Birdsall, Decoy Maker.

By: Catherine McLearen



Art Birdsall and Zack in front of the Birdsall Decoy Shop.
Photo Credit: Mark Sullivan, Star News Group

Born and raised in the Lovelandtown section of Point Pleasant at the head of the bay, Arthur "Artie" Birdsall is known as the "Decoy King," having made over 3,000 decoys in his life. But Mr. Birdsall's embarrassed by the title and too humble to accept its implications, "I'm a decoy maker. I'm a blue-collar, hands-on decoy maker. Period." For over four decades of devotion to the trade, Mr. Birdsall is the first decoy carver to receive the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award for Ocean County Art. He gives credit to decoy collector Jim Allen for his nomination, "it was a shock to me because he knows everyone. I thank him. I don't know where I got this respect."

There is a proud tradition of decoy carving in the Birdsall family that goes back to Art's great-uncle, the one and only Capt. Jesse Birdsall (1843-1927). Representing the fourth generation of Birdsall decoy carvers, Art Birdsall also received the 2018 Hurley Conklin Award presented for those who have lived in the Barnegat Bay tradition. Captain Birdsall spent his winters hunting and guiding for waterfowl and to this day is regarded as a skilled and prolific decoy carver. Jesse's nephew, Nathan, was a boat builder by trade but also carved decoys. Traditionally decoy carving "wasn't their main stay in life, it was a tool of the trade."

Arthur's father, James E. Birdsall did not stick with carving but was a self-taught contractor and custom builder of homes and commercial buildings. Widely respected for his professional experience and as a lifelong volunteer in the Point Pleasant community, Art is clear, "Dad is my hero, simple." For over 20 years James and his brother Charlie were partners in Birdsall Bros. Building Inc. By 1961, Uncle Charlie bought the Wildfowler Decoy Company where he used a duplicating machine to make decoys.

Living just five houses apart, Uncle Charlie let Art shoot hubcaps in the yard with his BB gun and watch him work in the shop. Art was fascinated by the decoy making process and in 1971 he accepted a job in Uncle Charlie's shop. His devotion to decoy carving was instant, "It wasn't work – that's not a four letter word to me." In 1977, Charlie Birdsall sold Wildfowler and moved to Florida and Art went on to work for Barnegat Bay Decoys. Art was also influenced by his Uncle Lester "Dipper" Ortley another respected Lovelandtown carver and bayman. In 1984, Art bought his Uncle Lester's house and converted the garage into his own Birdsall Decoy Shop. Like Uncle Charlie's Wildfowler, Art's business sold decoys across the nation and to several foreign countries.

Continued on page 13

Art Birdsall from page 12

His shop used a duplicating machine to produce about 4-6 decoys at a time. To operate the machine, a master pattern is used to guide one or more spindles to make copies of the decoy. The body and heads are made separately. He carved many of his own masters and obtained others wherever he found them using patterns his uncle provided. Then each decoy is individually hand-carved, hollowed out, sanded, and painted, distinguishing it from others. Glenn Cook and Brad Holloway did the painting and Art still holds a deep appreciation for their talent and contribution to his shop.

Finally, the bottom of the body is stamped or adorned with a copper trapper tag to identify the maker, year, and species. When he completes a decoy on a special day, like his sister Lee's birthday – Flag Day, he marks that on the decoy, as well. Occasionally, Art picks up a body or head discarded from a previous project, assembles and paints it himself. These are stamped with an "S" for special.

"Your traits show up a lot in your decoys," Art points out, describing how decoy enthusiasts can tell without much difficulty who, where, and when a decoy was made by its features. "You develop an eye for it."

Art likes that, "there's no rules in making a decoy, as long as it turn out to be…well, a decoy." His guiding principles have been honesty and a respect for the trade. He admits he may not have been the savviest businessman but more important than making money has been making sure his work is quality and affordable. And he's done more than carve to keep the tradition alive. His friend and famed decoy collector John Hillman turned Artie onto collecting himself. A meeting at Bob Seabrook's house organized by Dr. Jack Conover in 1981 led to the formation of the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association with Art Birdsall appointed as the first treasurer.

Birdsall's impact goes beyond his carving skills, he's a man who goes out of his way for his neighbors and in return, whose friends have rallied around him. "The biggest thing in life to me is the laughs. Really good times. Great people. The shows. That's what's kept me going." Semi-retired, he has more time to think and he "grabs a hold of a name and all I do is think about the past and the laughs. All us carvers are characters."

He collects all things related to decoys and gunning, and his friend Bob Seabrook sends him lots of documents to Art for safekeeping in his collection. He does it because, "life is so interesting."

Art Birdsall is sure the tradition will continue, "it'll always be here. The whole city can come down around us but people will still be carving."



Art Birdsall with his decoys.
Photo credit: Mark Sullivan, Star News Group