WELDON PARKER

Back in the Depression era, winter didn't stop waterfowl hunters like Weldon Parker of Parkertown, but it forced them to apply ingenuity. Using a boat with brass runners that guided a gliding boat out on the ice, they maneuvered into the water when they found air holes in the frozen bay. To get back in, if the ice wouldn't hold a boat laden with the catch from a full day's hunt, they often had to break a path in the ice all the way home.

Winter whipped up inconveniences of all kinds for the bayman. Sometimes the spray from the waves would freeze onto the decoys' heads that were perched along the boat, and scare the ducks away. Weldon would have to reach over and knock the ice off the decoys, sometimes knocking their heads off in the process. He'd have to rehead them before the next hunt.

Those were simpler times; the total bill for all the lumber that had gone into Weldon's first sneakbox, delivery included, came to $15. His father, Jay C. Parker, a guide who lived in a houseboat across the bay on Daniel's Island, built that first boat for him. The material was Jersey cedar from Wells Mills, sawed by Tilt Estlow by power from a water wheel. Weldon later went on to build his own garvey boats.

Weldon started working on the bay when he was 15 years old, and the only time he left was when he went into the service. During World War II, he joined the Army Air Corps, working in radar and serving in the Philippines for four years. When he came home, he started work doing carpentry on Long Beach Island, but was ill most of his first year back with recurring bouts of malaria. He also worked in Conrad's Lumber Yard in Ship Bottom and Holme's Lumber in Manahawkin.

He later went to work with the N.J. Department of Conservation, Bureau of Shellfish, which was transferred into the jurisdiction of the Marine Police. Driving the boats, he led the crew to rescue boating accident victims, or sometimes to drag the water for drowning victims. Weldon also worked on the state dredge boat to move polluted clams to good water where the clams could cleanse themselves. From aboard the *Senator Sharp*, an oyster dredge, seed oysters were dropped to seed the beds in the Mullica River and Great Egg Harbor.

When not working, Weldon loved to hunt ducks, deer and rabbits with his father. They went one step beyond the wooden decoys of the time. They used live black ducks instead, pinioned so they wouldn't fly away. Another feathered friend volunteered for the job — Weldon had a tamed live Canada goose decoy. He named it Patsy.

Weldon carved working decoys for many years, as his father had done. His father had carved black ducks, brant, geese, broadbills, canvasbacks, redheads and golden eyes. One time when Weldon went to Florida, he returned to find his home had been robbed and all of his and his father's decoys stolen. His heart just isn't into carving the full-sized birds anymore, he said. So today he carves miniatures — small birds, decoys and sneakboxes.