

Museum Musings

Looking Forward to Preserving the Past

By BILL LEVENTON

It has a name: the Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymen's Museum. It has a mission: to preserve bay-related memorabilia and artifacts for future generations. It has a flourishing organization behind it, including a cadre of active members who positively drip enthusiasm when they talk about it.

The Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymen's Museum has yet to be built, but that goal is the focus of some devoted individuals who are seeking the help of the community. The museum may come to be in the not-too-distant future, according to its most ardent backers, who are immersed in the task of making their dream a reality.

"I eat, drink and sleep museum," says Tuckerton's Tom Gormley, with the smile and shining eyes of a man beholding the Grail. "There's so much history around here, it's unbelievable," continues Gormley, president of the 150-member museum organization. "Almost every day you find out something about this area that you never would have dreamed of."

One glittering part of the area's past is a long line of masterful decoy carvers. But while decoy displays certainly figure in their plans, Gormley's group sees their museum as much more than just a final resting place for old wooden shore birds.

"We're interested in anything that has to do with the bay," says Harry Disbrow Jr., a Tuckerton realtor who serves as the group's treasurer. "We'll take decoys, fishing equipment, gunning equipment, old photos, old hunting licenses. We want to be a baymen's museum, not just a decoy museum."

Before it's any kind of museum, of course, it will have to be built, and a piece of ground will have to be acquired to build it on. On the latter front, the county has promised the museum group about a third of an acre near the entrance of Tip Seaman Park on Route 9 in Tuckerton. There is, however, one condition: The museum project must pass muster with the state's Green Acres department.

"The biggest thing they need to see is how serious we are," says Gormley. To that end, he points out, his group has hired Barnegat architect Craig Brearley to come up with a museum design "that will fit into historic Tuckerton." The group has provided Brearley with old pictures and post cards of the area to give him an idea of what



Tim Moersh

REAL DECOY: Fine, feathered and functional, antique decoys fetch a fair price. Tom Gormley holds a black duck carved by J.C. Parker. It's among a growing collection that will be kept at the Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymen's Museum.

the building should be like.

To build the 7,500-square-foot structure they have in mind, organization members estimate that they will have to come up with about \$750,000. Through raffles, bake sales and other fund-raising events, the group has raised \$13,000 since its founding in 1990 — good work for an organization in its first year, but light years short of what is required.

So when does this museum group expect to have a museum? "There are two things for certain," says Disbrow. "If we have to rely on raffles and bake sales for the money, it's going to take a long time. The other thing that's for certain is that we don't have the ability at this point in time to go out and borrow the money. With those two things certain, what we see is that the museum can't be built tomorrow."

The group plans to enter the grant market, and is also checking into other ways of obtaining significant amounts of money. With a vast amount of funding still to be found, Disbrow's best guess is that the mu-

seum is three to five years down the road.

Though short on cash, Disbrow and his associates are overflowing with ideas for their museum. "We'd like to go beyond the typical museum," Disbrow says. "We'd like our museum to be a living museum, where you could sign up for a class, see a show, sign up for a day of flounder fishing or clamming with a member of the museum."

"We'll take people through the past with slide shows, movies, photos and exhibits in the museum. But then we'll go beyond that, bring them up to the present day. Show them that we still hunt, still fish, still clam and oyster in the waters around the area. Show them that the heritage hasn't died."

"I think that would separate us from other museums. I don't think other museums go that far."

Disbrow and Gormley would also like to develop comprehensive records of old area carvers so that those seeking information about a Hurley Conklin or Bradford Salmons could find it at the museum.

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Another Museum Aim: "Show Them That the Heritage Hasn't Died"

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So far, the museum group has accumulated about a dozen decoys for its future edifice to Barnegat Bay history. Two of these are black ducks made by Salmons, a well-known Barnegat Bay carver of the late 19th and early 20th century.

Another notable item in the group's possession is a sneakbox dating back to the 1920s. For those unfamiliar with the term, a sneakbox is a sturdy, shallow-draft wooden vessel used for duck hunting. Sneakboxes are built low so that they are difficult to spot on the water and easily hidden if dragged up onto land. The vessels are generally 12 feet long and 4 feet wide and are propelled by both sails and oars.

The old sneakbox in Tom Gormley's back yard was donated to the museum group earlier this year by Joel and Wanda Montgomery of Loveladies. "Wanda actually used to sail in this," says Gormley, gesturing toward the timeworn craft. The group plans to restore the vessel to its original condition, he adds.

Other items the group has collected include an old oyster dredge, clam tongs and a clam rake. The items are being stored temporarily at members' homes as well as in the pavilion at Tip Seaman Park.

The group will accept donated items right now, but because of a lack of storage space there's a limit to how many things can be taken. "We can't take everything at the moment, but we'll take as much as we can," Disbrow says.

"Our main goal right now is to make the public aware that they shouldn't get rid of these things. Before, people were selling the stuff at yard sales for 25 cents because it was up in the attic for centuries and they just wanted to get rid of it.

"But don't sell it at a yard sale. If you think it has anything to do with the history of the bay, let us come and take a look at it. We have experts who can look at the stuff and tell you if the museum would have any interest in it."

Oddly enough, this organization of 150 would-be museum makers has grown out of a meeting of half-a-dozen local guys who just wanted — or thought they just wanted — to do a little hunting. "But at that first meeting," Disbrow recalls, "we discovered that we really didn't get together to go hunting. We were more interested in preserving the hunting tradition — the whole tradition of the bay."

The group now meets on the second



Tim Moersh

PRETTY, SNEAKY: Museum-bound, this 1920-vintage Barnegat Bay sneakbox rests in Tom Gormley's care for now.

Thursday of each month in the recreation building at Tip Seaman Park. From 30 to 50 members generally show up for the two-hour meetings, according to Disbrow. "It's a pretty diversified group," he says. "There are kids 16 or 17 years old and there are guys in their 80s."

During the meetings, members discuss club rules, future fund-raising events and plans for the museum. The group is often treated to tales of the old bay life told by someone who has lived it.

"We like to invite an old-timer to the

meetings to talk about the area," Disbrow says. "In the last 15 minutes, we'll have him stand up, and he might have a bird with him or something else that he can talk about. And some of the stories are great — we usually end up staying well past the two hours just listening to the guys talk."

More than anything else, it's old-timers like these who keep the museum dream alive for Tom Gormley. He tells this story to explain why:

"We give out Hurley Conklin Awards

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(named after an old area carver) to old-timers who were baymen in this area. One guy who we had given it to, Weldon Parker, had known me since I was born. He called me up and asked me to stop over. And I did. And when he saw me, his eyes filled up with water. I guess his exact words were: 'Boy, you don't know what this means to me.' "

Gormley pauses for a moment. "These guys thought they'd never be appreciated. Now we want to prove to them that this whole area is behind what we're trying to do."

To contact the museum organizers, call Harry Disbrow Jr. at (609) 296-7111 or Tom Gormley at (609) 294-1415. To buy the Tom Hirata print on the front cover, sales of which benefit the museum, contact Gormley.

