Hurley Conklin Award

Presented to people who have lived in the Barnegat Bay tradition. This award has been named in honor of the last of the Great Old Time Barnegat Bay Carvers, Hurley Conklin.

This year's recipients:

John Passuth
Donated by Tuckerton Seaport & Baymen's Museum

Ed McCay
Donated by Braden Chiropractic Center

This program is dedicated to all of the Hurley Conklin Award winners ~ past and present.

John Passuth
by Victoria Ford

John Passuth of Toms River believes: "Time and tide wait for no man."

He has hunted ducks, carved decoys, bought and sold boats, caught fish and clams, picked vegetables, worked a 12-acre farm, butchered chickens and even wrangled an escaped cow – but his dogs have always been his primary passion and true calling.

"If I could attract money like I attract dogs, I'd be a millionaire," he said.

Passuth was born in 1935 and grew up in Bayonne, a city surrounded on three sides by water, i.e., Newark Bay, New York Bay, Kill Van Kull. "We were always in mud up to our knees as kids," he said.

Later he spent time in the woods of Milford, Pa., climbing trees, fishing in natural brook trout streams, hunting and trapping.

As a young man he always had dogs, such as setters and beagles. After he got seriously into duck hunting and moved to Toms River in 1969 with wife Dolores and family, he rescued his first retriever, a Chesapeake. From then on, he always owned, trained, bred, sold, raised and competed with dogs. "I come alive doing it," he said. The thrills are in watching a puppy learn and evolve; in seeing how a hunting dog's ears respond to the action word "mark."

His trade was masonry, like his dad. A guy he worked with in Toms River invited him to go duck hunting in Cedar Run, and he was "mesmerized." Then he went to a decoy show in Babylon, L.I., and "I was hooked on it." He got some white pine and carved a broadbill head. He then got some balsa wood and started making canvasbacks, black ducks, mallards, a couple of buffleheads and a big rig of brant. Later he moved on to cork, then cedar.



"I had built a gunning garvey, and I was dragging that around, going down to Brigantine," Passuth said. "That's when you were allowed 10 ducks a day, six brant, just a fantastic amount of birds. I would go down on the weekend, and sit and talk to Rube Corliss, watch him carve and work on sneakboxes. He would tell me about the old hunters, different tales."

The style he eventually developed was mainly flat-bottomed, Connecticut-style, he said. Now that he's mostly retired from dog training, carving still keeps him busy in his down time, when he's inspired. But most carving nowadays tends to be decorative, which is getting away from the point, in his opinion.

Once he got his first duck boat and created a gun box and made a hunting boat out of it, "then I was, like, on a quest," he said. "At one point I had five sneakboxes in the yard."

Every aspect of working with the dogs had its own rewards.

With the Shrewsbury River Retriever Club, Passuth served as

president and VP and did a lot of field trials and judging. He gave demonstrations at the Allaire decoy show for five years, then got involved with the Ocean County Decoy and Gunning Show in Tuckerton, back when it was just starting. He enjoyed training gun dogs, but when the field trial circuit was costing him too much time away from his family, he turned his focus more toward hunting and obedience training.

With field trials, the expenses for travel, training and birds got to be a lot after a while, with sanctioned trials at the club level every weekend, in New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania and New York. "You can't keep running the same grounds, you gotta move around," he said. "We had trials on Lakehurst, Fort Dix, private properties." Hunt tests were another way to improve skills, though non-competitive. He did a lot of judging, which he enjoyed, but he got away from it when he turned pro, and "that was even more beneficial to me."

As his experience in the outdoors grew, he upgraded to a 26-foot boat, increased his recreational bay work, clamming, crabbing and fishing. "The desire to be with the dogs was always there."

He had a training group that met on Sundays at the Whiting Wawa – at one point 10 trucks would gather. He would also take in dogs and work with them, whether for a few days, weeks or months. That business grew from three kennels to about a dozen kennels with outdoor runs, in addition to his house pets. At one time the Passuth household included two Labs, a Golden, a beagle, a training dog, and all the girls had cats, he said. Once, a client's dog had a litter of 7 or 8 puppies and when they were six months old the client hired Passuth to train them all. He kenneled and trained dogs on the farm for 10 or 15 years.

"It was fun, I really enjoyed it. My kids (three girls and one boy) grew up in the back of a pickup truck, out in the bogs."

During those years, he learned dogs are teachable -- but people usually aren't.

Passuth says training dogs solely with cookies and tender loving care is ineffective. But it can't be by intimidation, either. There's a balance.

Different breeds have different temperaments and therefore require different techniques. And each individual dog is unique. One might need stronger discipline, while another can be controlled with only a look. "If you open the door and your dog runs out in front of you, he's dominant. He's going to lead you where he wants to go," Passuth said. But that's good, too, he added. "I like a dog that's right on the edge of exploding to get out there." It's important to recognize a dog's limits and read his stress level, he noted. The bottom line is they want to learn.

"The dogs are great. They always come with an open mind and want to be your friend and want to be petted. They never come in anger. Very seldom. That's usually created."

Passuth's relationship with his dogs was always one built on love and trust, almost as if he were the alpha in a pack. He was in touch and in tune with them, teaching them to accept him, tending to their needs for exercise. "They would eat before I ate." If he were to lie down with a group of dogs and make his stature lower than theirs, they would panic and try to push him to get him up. He would even bite them from time to time to prove a point.

"You get a dog that doesn't want to release a bird, when they freeze on a bird – some trainers squeeze the dog's lips. I like to take hold of the bird and step on the dog's toe."



As one customer noticed, he had a habit of calling his male dogs "son."

About bites, he said there was only one time a dog came after him:

Once he separated two dogs that were fighting – a small one that had started a fight with a big one. "And I wouldn't let (the smaller one) out with the big dogs anymore, just the puppies. And he went after one of the puppies. And I whacked him with a broom. I threw a sponge at him. And he turned around and he's walking at me, stiff-legged. And I'm backing up, I'm telling him, 'Heel! Heel!' and I stumbled. And I had a brand new T-shirt on. And I fell in a puddle, and he leaped, and I had him like this," he said, his arms above his face. That day he called the dog's owner. ""Come and get your dog.' I sent him home."

But every dog he ever raised as his own lies buried in the Pines and holds a special place in his heart.

"They take a piece of you," he said.



Ed McCay

by Victoria Ford

"I don't know where else I could ever live but the Pinelands," Edward McCay said, having done just about everything a man can do in the woods and the water.

He was born in Mt. Holly and brought up in Tabernacle, where his parents' house remains in the family; he now lives in Nesco, with his wife, Lorraine, and cultivates about 10 acres of blueberries on a 40-acre farm in Chatsworth. He and Lorraine have a son and daughter, six grandkids.

He has worked for the New Jersey Park Service for 30 years; was buildings and grounds supervisor at Allaire State Park for 14 years; ran the water-powered sawmill at Historic Batsto Village in Wharton State Forest for about 16 years and did historic restoration work there. He has always kept a wood shop for carpentry jobs, building furniture, boats, molding, private restoration projects, and "once I got established, I had customers all over the United States with the decoy wood."

He was one of the original vendors at the Ocean County Decoy and Gunning Show, which started in 1983, and he still donates the wood for the annual head-whittling contest. He's worked for the Forest Fire Service since he was 18, and now he's a District Fire Warden, performing forest management tasks, plowing and prescribed burns, creating fire protection buffers around developments. The southern pine beetle made some work for him three summers ago, by infesting thousands of trees that had to be cut down. He clear cut some 20 acres.

His love and stewardship of the outdoors has enabled him to make a living in a variety of ways, doing "a little bit of everything" – harvesting cedar, cutting firewood, logging, milling, cutting huckleberry brush, birch whips, grapevine, collecting pine cones, sphagnum moss – and he's always enjoyed hunting, fishing and trapping, too. A trapper since the age of 10, McCay specializes in beaver, fox and raccoon. He's made traps for snapping turtles and knitted and set fyke nets. In the '70s he built a garvey and worked the bay to sell clams. He's carved a few decoys, tried his hand at growing various crops, framed and built houses.

He supplements his income with the blueberries. "It was a previously established farm, but it was an older variety and little by little I've been putting new in." Blueberries is a rough business, he said, with the pruning, irrigating, harvesting, weather-related issues, people don't realize. "They think, 'oh, you've got blueberries, you just pick them and they're gone,' but, no, that's a full-time job." McCay farms his blueberries100 percent organically, which is even more labor-intensive, with chemical-free weed and pest control. He's independent, not a member of the Ocean Spray Cooperative. He used to belong to Tru-Blu in Pemberton, then did business with a broker in Philly, but that wasn't consistent or profitable enough to be worthwhile.

In the tradition of his father, uncles and other relatives, he learned to work the woods, the water and the land. Winter is for harvesting cedar, summer for cutting. (It's important to get the cedar in January or February when the sap is down, for carvers and boat builders. "I don't want to be in the swamp in the summer with the ticks," he said.) He would cut for demonstration at Batsto and send wood throughout the state for shingles, fencing, siding, sign material, placards.

"I've always had that passion with the cedar."

His knowledge of the 200-year-old mill's operation is highly specialized, given its age and mechanical complexity, with five saws: planer, cut-all saw, shingle saw, table saw, long saw.

Though the demand for cedar has changed, i.e. he used to cut a lot of boat wood, he still does a lot of specialized siding for restoration work, in places such as Cold Spring Village and Cape May, which uses siding 8 to 10 inches thick, compared to the standard 6-inch. The supply, too, has changed. A good stand of cedars is increasingly hard to find; and wetlands regulations don't make it easier.

"When we harvest it, we're pretty conscientious about it, we're making sure everything's done right," McCay said. "We remove pine, gum and maple, so that swamp's going to come back into cedar. That's what a lot of people don't understand. We're not just going in and clear-cutting for no reason. We're clear-cutting it so it's going to come back in Atlantic white cedar." If only the cedar is removed, he explained, the other tree species will take over.

If a fire goes through a swamp, the cedar will die while the other species survive. Even if the moss smolders, the cedar's root system will get damaged and it'll die right off, McCay said.

"Cedar is really delicate," he explained. "I cringe whenever I hear about a fire near any kind of wetlands."

The stand he's working on currently is some of the biggest mature cedar he's ever cut. The plan is to leave all the edge wood and smaller stuff and take out the

gum and maple in order to let the cedar regenerate.

"Only a handful of us left, maybe four that I know of, that cut cedar on a bigger scale."

At his shop he built a solar kiln that's "working out really well." In it, he can dry in three weeks in August wood that would take him eight months to air dry, and he can get the moisture down to 6 or 7 percent, whereas air drying would get it to 14 or 15.

When the cedar supply is low, McCay cuts walnuts, white pine, hickory, a lot of variety. Milled maple, with its nice grain, is good for benches, he said. Hickory is beautiful for trim, cabinet material, the knottier the better. In cedar, clear is better, but it's a tall order. "A lot of orders are for 15 boards of clear, two-inch cedar; they think you can just walk out into the yard and cut that. I might cut tree after tree before I can see a nice piece. Without touching a heart, without too much sapwood in it, it's really hard to find." The urban wood often contains nails and other foreign objects such as old musket balls and horseshoes inside the walnuts at Washington Crossing State Park.

Historic restoration is some of the most rewarding work, he said. He loves the old mortise-and-tenon building style. He cut "every bit of timber" in what is today the Nature Center at Batsto and did a lot of moldings and detail work in the old Batsto mansion. He steamed ribs for an ore boat, rebuilt raceways for the grist mill and made a grate to catch grasses from clogging the turbine. He was called in to lead a demonstration at Double Trouble when that mill was refurbished.

McCay said he does all his own harvesting because he loves the woods as a caretaker.

"I feel like, if I'm out there doing it, I try to do the best job I can. You go into one of my swamps, you won't even see a stump. The stumps are cut down, I slash all the brush down, I try to make sure that it's going to come back." He limits his footprint in the woods as much as possible by winching all the cedar right to the machine.

The same holds for the cedar back at the mill, he continued. "If you cut that tree down, I feel you better utilize that the best way you can. I use the slabs, sawdust, everything."

His latest project is a boat, sort of like a mini garvey-style, but a pond box. "I keep looking at it," but the project keeps getting put off. So it goes for a Pinelands man with no shortage of work to be done.

McCay was featured in Bob Birdsall's coffee table book, *People of the Pines*, available from Plexus Publishing and through the Pinelands Preservation Alliance.