

Fair Game for Fun

A Decade of Decoys

By MARIA SCANDALE

From the start, the idea of a decoy show in the heart of baymen's country took off.

That was a decade ago, when local carvers compared their craftwork at Tuckerton's Tip Seaman County Park and more than 3,500 spectators came to look and to buy. On the 10th anniversary, with a bigger and better Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show, its distinction is expected to attract 40,000 people.

Calling 'em in from as far away as the Yukon, the show draws its visitors on the merit of its authenticity.

Showgoers agree the Tuckerton show, accepted to be the second-biggest of its kind in the country, is yet the most traditional.

More contests are to be found here, and more living culture — how else to describe 80-year-old Sammy Hunt, woodsman, banjo maker for Arlo Guthrie and rocker displayer at the Smithsonian Institution; or local boatbuilding dynasties like the Heinrichs'; or third-generation decoy carver Harry V. Shourds II, winner of a National Heritage Fellowship.

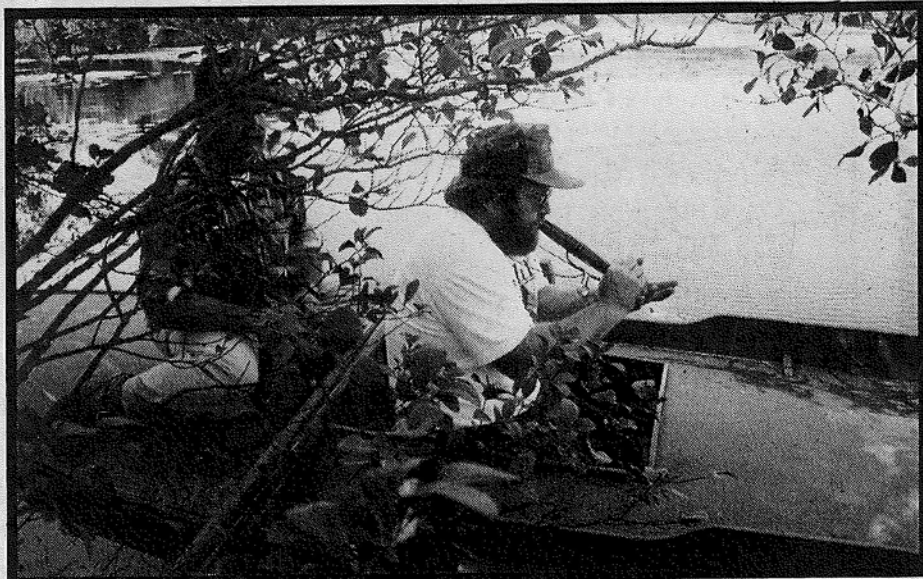
Not just aimed at the gunners counting the minutes until hunting season, the show is equally for those who'd shoot a duck only with a camera if it landed on their stove. It's also for those just curious what this old-time waterfowling fervor is all about.

This year a record 400 exhibitors of art and historical interest as well as decoys, boats and outdoor gear will fill tents and surround shade trees at the park Sept. 26 and 27.

Tradition will ring through the open air. The sights and sounds of baymen's skills kept alive — and updated; this year interest demanded a women's skeetshoot contest — will take place at the park's forest-backed Lake Pohatcong.

Authenticity will be obvious to the browser who wanders up to the skeet shoot from a sneakbox contest to find the hunter taking aim from a bobbing descendant of the same low-slung boat Capt. Hazelton Seaman invented in 1836. To keep the contest genuine, the organizers wanted to make sure the gunners shoot from a boat, as they actually would on the bay.

Seaman, a market gunner from West Creek, first faced ribbing from his friends when he devised the tiny craft with



Herb Heinrichs displays calling skills in contest.

"duckboards" to carry decoys and a cambered deck to be covered with reeds. Ribbing turned to respect when they saw the boat glide through the shallows and "sneak" to good hunting grounds.

For gunning, nothing more practical than the sneakbox has been designed to this day.

Says show organizer Mike Mangum of the Ocean County Parks Department, "We've had calls from all over North America from people who are interested in the Barnegat Bay sneakbox."

Visitors can learn as much about the baymen's sport and art as they can pack into the two days the show fills.

There are two locations — the nearby Pinelands Regional High School will also host films and exhibits. In fact, for easier parking, visitors are encouraged to drive to the school and ride the free shuttle bus to the park.

Best yet, the show is free to the public. Invites Mangum, "They can come to the show and bring their family and it doesn't cost anything."

Plenty of food will be provided by local organizations like the fire companies and first aid squads. Each is bringing a different type of item and together the menu runs the gamut from barbecue to pierogies, hot roast beef to ice cream, deviled clams to cheesecake and funnel cakes, pizza to dog biscuits (for the retrievers, of course).

And it's fair to say you never know

what hidden value you might find on an exhibitor's table for sale.

Asked if such a rumor was true, Mangum nodded his head and answered, "I heard that a few years ago we had a carving that was worth over \$50,000 sitting on this one guy's table." Jim Allen of Tuckerton, a show co-organizer from the start and a decoy appraiser, told him the same thing during a show a few years back. "Jimmy said, 'Come here, I want to tell you something.' He said, 'See that pintail? It's worth \$100,000.'"

An Idea in the Right Place At the Right Time

Ten years ago, it was another Seaman who had an idea.

Hazelton's distant descendant Bud, a hardware store owner in West Creek, had just come back from a decoy show in Point Pleasant when he made a suggestion that seemed to make sense: "Why don't we have one here?"

He was talking to a friend, Joe Smith, who ran the park in Tuckerton named after Bud's father, Stanley H. "Tip" Seaman was an Ocean County freeholder, mayor of Tuckerton and longtime public servant.

As Bud tells it, "Joe would come up and we used to talk and I said, 'Why don't you start a decoy show?' He said, 'Okay, we'll try it.' After the first year, it just got bigger and bigger, and he said, 'See what you got me into?'"

"Everybody liked it from the start. It

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On With the Show



Sammy Hunt (right) and Merce Ridgway just showed up and strummed in 1982. There's been music at the show since.

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worked out real good."

What he and others had in mind was "just for all the guys who were carving decoys, to get together and put them on display and sell them," Bud Seaman said. "Now it's about the second biggest show in the country."

Mangum worked with Jim Allen, who was secretary of the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association, to gain their support. Carver John Holloway of Parkertown had entered many shows and knew what made a fair contest. He helped draft the rules.

What they did differently from other shows, said Mangum, was to expand to include all the gunning aspects.

So evolved the retriever contests, the skeet shooting and the duck calling. "I think we've done every facet of waterfowling and the skills necessary to make the different things you need — building boats, training dogs, calling, carving decoys," Mangum observed.

In fact, the show has been sanctioned for the last year as the New Jersey State Duck Calling Championship. Last year, 17-year-old Pinelands Regional High School junior Keith Heinrichs advanced his way from his home show to the World Championship in Stuttgart, Ark. Show organizers couldn't have been happier than to see the younger generation taking interest in the old local skills, and doing well at it.

"We always try to get the kids involved

and have kids' contests, because they're the future," Mangum pointed out.

Looking back, Mangum can hardly believe it's been 10 years since the first show; he credits all the volunteers, the show committee and organizations for their help.

Holloway wrote a letter that still sits in a scrapbook commemorating the show's growth. "I've been actively involved in decoy shows since the middle '60s," he wrote, "and for a show to be done as well in its first year as this one makes me proud to come from Ocean County."

Superior Court of New Jersey Judge Paul R. Kramer was compelled to put his thoughts on paper in 1984, when the show had grown to attract 12,000 in its third year. "I enjoyed myself thoroughly. I was most impressed with the exhibits having to do with this unique American art form," he wrote.

Last year marked the first auction to benefit the planned Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymen's Museum, a \$1 million learning center that will be built at the park entrance.

This year, the auction will be held Saturday night, Sept. 26 at 7 p.m. at the school, following a benefit spaghetti dinner.

Said Mangum, "It looks like this year the museum is really starting to get under way. That's the biggest thing that's come out of the show, the fact that it sort of spawned the museum. I guess that's appropriate for the 10th anniversary."