

2019 Hurley Conklin Awards

Presented at the Ocean County Decoy & Waterfowling Show
September 28, 2019

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 (1913-1998).

For a more in-depth look at the featured artists, please see their full profiles in the 2019 Decoy and Gunning Program.

Joe Rizzo



Photo credit: Courtesy of O.C. Parks
Joe Rizzo.

Joe Rizzo, born May 3, 1958, in Teaneck, is a duck guide and aquaculture clam farmer. He was introduced to the water by his dad, who was an avid fisherman and auto mechanic.

Rizzo started fishing and shooting ducks with John Chadwick, who introduced him to Birdsall “Budge” Ridgeway, who introduced him to charter boat captain Nelson Mills, whose charter boat *Nighthawk* and duck guiding business Rizzo would one day purchase.

The decade of the ’70s saw good clamming in most of the local

bays. “It was an eye-opener – everywhere you looked there were guys clamming,” Rizzo said. “Treaders, bull rakers, tongers. All seemed to be putting clams in the boat.”

As a high schooler on split sessions, Rizzo spent his afternoons clamming then hunting and trapping in season.

“You learn pretty early on when clamming the wilds,” Rizzo said.

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"If you can be diversified and be proficient at treading, tonging and bull raking, you can make a day's pay whatever the conditions." Rizzo has clammed Navasink River all the way down to Absecon.

In the fall of 1982 Rizzo started his career as a duck guide. He moved the boat to Cape Horn Marina on Great Bay Boulevard.

"While at the marina, George Mathis Jr. gave me a lecture on the virtues good and bad on hard clam aquaculture. Some had already made the calculation that clamming in the wilds would die out and aquaculture, growing your own clam, was the future in the bay."

Rizzo also spent about 30 years crab potting and catching eels and Kellies to sell to local bait shops. "Really that's what a bayman was, just a guy that would, with the seasons, do different stuff," he said.

Dick Jessen



Richard "Dick" Jessen was born in Perth Amboy in 1942. His grandfather, Paul Jessen, was a Danish carpenter who had purchased a two-bedroom cottage on Fox Island Creek in the Mud City section of Manahawkin for \$450 nearly 20 years before Dick was born, because he said the beaches of Long Beach Island reminded him of the beaches in Denmark. Dick Jessen retired to Mud City in 2000.

Clamming paid for much of his college education in the early '60s and helped to supplement his regular income during his early

years of raising a family. Jessen continues to clam, but he has switched from treading to scratch raking in Middle Channel area.

Jessen obtained his hunting license at age 14, but he couldn't afford to purchase decoys; the cheapest were Sears decoys at \$.88 apiece. So he started carving, seeking help from local carver Rube Corliss.

Jessen spent 25+ years on the Southern Ocean chapter of Ducks

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Unlimited and established the New Jersey Ducks Unlimited decoy contest. He has been involved with the Ocean County Decoy Show since it began and has won over 40 best of show plaques. In all, he has amassed 400+ blue ribbons.

Jessen has taught decoy art at the Tuckerton Seaport in the Parker's shop. He is a master carver with the New Jersey State Council on the Arts apprenticeship program and received the President's Award for over 4,000 hours of volunteer service and educating the public by demonstrating and sharing the history of duck hunting and decoy carving.

Bill Simonsen



Photo credit: Courtesy of O.C. Parks
Bill Simonsen.

Bill Simonsen was born in Atlantic City, where he also grew up, in 1928. He started duck hunting in the 1930's while still in school. Only one of his buddies had a motor, so they would tie several sneakboxes together and tow them out to their hunting spot. He recalled getting caught in a storm once while returning from hunting. The three boys had to hitch a ride back home to Atlantic City, while covered with mud and carrying their shotguns.

At the age of 17 Bill joined the Marine Corps. After his enlistment was up he attended New Jersey State Teachers College. While there he met and married June Walton. He left college early to work but was soon recalled to the military to serve during Korea, after which he finished his education at Rutgers. After his discharge they also bought their first home in Lambertville, NJ. They later moved to a farm in Smithville, NJ and in the early 1960's moved to West Atlantic City, where he started to build boats.

Bill's first boat was an 18 ft. Catboat. He soon began building sneakboxes as well, the first being a Van Sant-style sailing Sneakbox made in the mid-1960's. He started to build wider power boxes around 1970. He continued to build wider power boxes around 1970. He continued to build Catboats and sneakboxes in West Atlantic City until the early 1980's when he moved to Egg Harbor Township. The first boat he built after the move was a 15 ft. Catboat he

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built for a friend in his garage. After that boat was complete he built his current shop.

In the mid-1980's an old neighbor gave him a 5 ft. beam sailing sneakbox that became the basis for the rest of his sailing sneakboxes and the 5 ft. beam power box that both he and his son built. A 5 ft. beam power box was the last new boat he built, in about 2016. After that he concentrated on repairs to sneakboxes, as well as continuing to build models of various NJ boats. He also made working-style decoys. Over the years he won many ribbons for both boats he built and for those he restored, at the Ocean County Decoy and Waterfowling Show.

Like many boat builders and most decoy carvers, Bill pursued his passions while working at more "traditional" jobs. His professional career started at Ventnor Boat Works, as the lofting and layout man. He later worked at Delaval Machine Shop, near Trenton, as a time study person, until about 1956. Finally, he worked at Lenox China until his mid-1980's retirement, where he started as a products engineer and time study person and eventually moved up to Director of New Products and production Control.

Sadly, Bill passed away this July, only a few months before the Decoy Show, which he certainly would have attended if able. His spaces at the show have long been a gathering spot for traditional boat fans, both to admire his craftsmanship and to chat about boats. According to his family, he built about a dozen catboats and an unknown number of sneakboxes. The individuals building such boats are a vanishing breed and Bill was one of the finest. 



2019 show cover print painted by Rob Leslie

Spoonie

Show print available for purchase at the show