

Carving Artist

Remembering One Of the Last and Best

By MARIA SCANDALE

Noted local carver and Cedar Run native Hurley Conklin died this year at age 77, but his decoys have already been prized by collectors and fetching high prices at auctions for two decades. Among the last of the old-time Barnegat Bay decoy carvers, Hurley in his lifetime etched his mark on some 22,000 slabs of cedar, hand-fashioning the blocks into graceful and lifelike forms of waterfowl.

What his great-granddaughter would like people to remember about Hurley Conklin, she said, is that "excuse the expression, he was one hell of a carver."

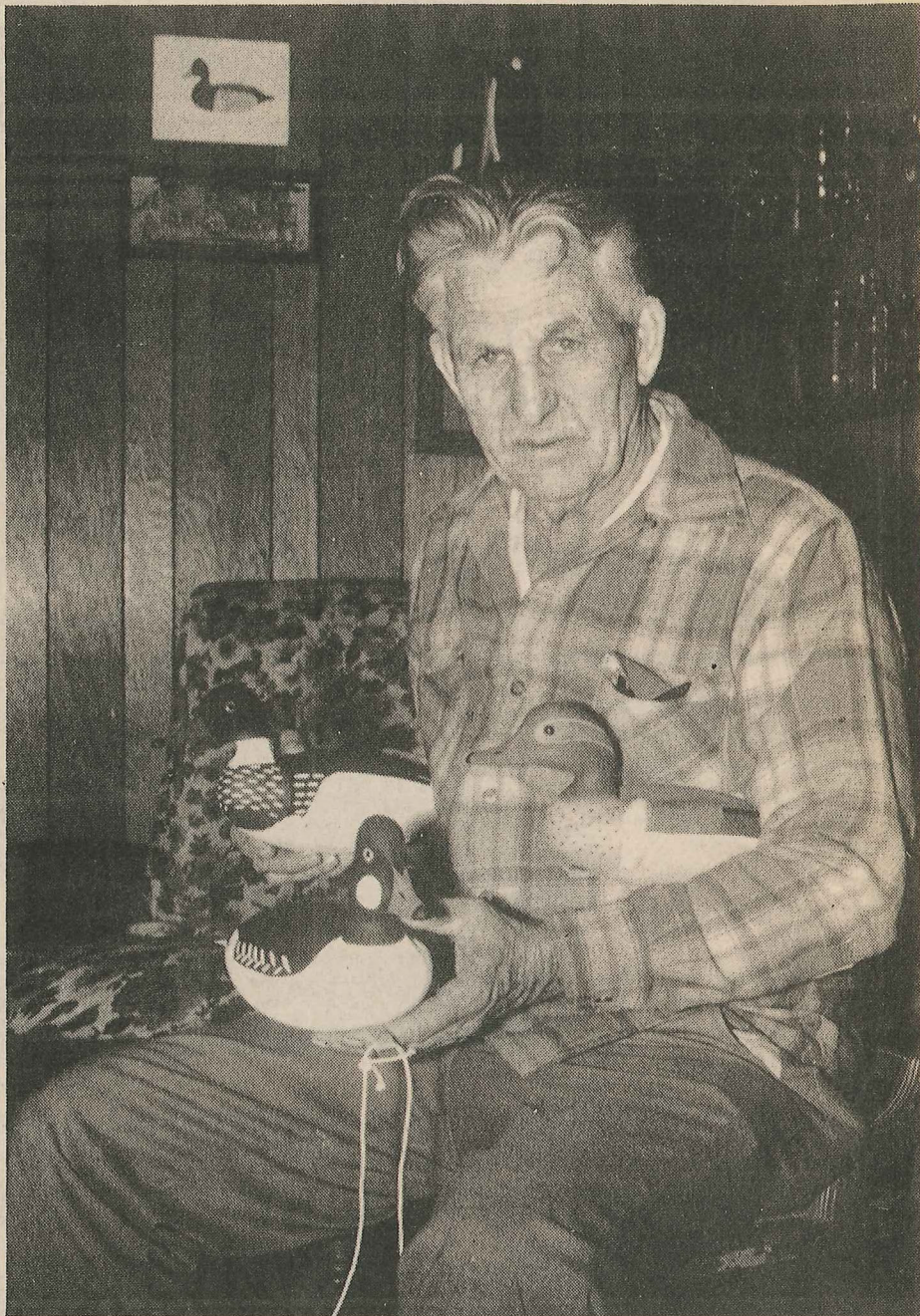
Regina Foster will try to communicate that memory as she reads a dedication to her great-grandfather and master carver during this year's Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show.

Carving had been Hurley's calling since he was 14, when, after local sawmill operator Sherwood Corlies gave him some slabs of cedar to carve, Corlies reportedly proclaimed of the results, "I'll have to put them in the closet, because they look so real, the cats will eat their heads off!"

That was in 1928; soon Hurley began filling mounting orders for sheldrake, black duck, brant, Canada geese, broadbill, bufflehead, sea gulls, shoveler, teal, pintail and canvasback. He charged \$1 apiece for his work.

Today, Conklin decoys perch regally in collections of Senator Edward Kennedy and Andy Williams, among others. What collectors call the "Hurley Conklin Classic" is a mantle bird from Conklin's decorative works which began in the 1960s.

"His birds today will sell at anywhere from \$1,200 to \$2,000 a pair," observed Barnegat Bay decoy expert Jim Allen of Tuckerton. "Some of his geese have sold for as high as \$1,800 or \$2,000." Prices escalated, reported *Decoy Magazine*, after the collection of Bill Mackey was auctioned following his death in the early 1970s. "If you have an opportunity to pick up a Hurley Conklin decoy, regardless of age, don't hesitate," wrote the magazine's Dick Morton in 1989.



Photograph Courtesy John Gornley

HURLEY CONKLIN in his Manahawkin home with a few pieces of his work. If you have a Conklin decoy, collectors say, you might want to hold onto it. Prices go up every day.

"Just check the auction catalogs, the prices go up every day."

Hurley himself told a reporter several years ago, "If I had the money my decoys get now, I would be half a millionaire."

Hurley died in June with complications of heart failure and Parkinson's disease. The latter condition, according to Regina, was attributable to many hard seasons of clam-

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HURLEY CONKLIN

Leaving a Legacy

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ming and working in the frigid bay.

But undoubtedly no one could have convinced such a hardy, headstrong bayman to live his life in any other manner.

"He was a very stubborn man, and what he said, no matter if it was right or wrong, it was right," recalled Regina, who cared for Conklin during his illness, and, sadly, must auction his remaining equipment and decoys to help pay \$32,000 in medical bills. "He was one of the old-timers."

"What's unique about how my grandfather used to clam," she added, "is that men usually use a clamming basket to hold onto. He used to hold onto his boat — a 17-foot garvey. He used that as his clamming basket."

Hurley left the area to serve in the Army's armored division during World War II under Gen. George S. Patton in North Africa. He worked for less than a year for the Civilian Conservation Corps in Idaho because he yearned to come back home.

Spending outdoor hours eeling, cranberrying and fishing, he was also a duck

hunter and a guide for the Marshelder Gunning Club. The boatbuilding tradition ran in the family; Hurley's father built "Bateau sharpies" and his brother made

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garveys. Hurley developed a charming collector's version of his own — 18-inch miniature Barnegat Bay sneakboxes complete with decoys on deck.

Well-known throughout the United

States, Canada and Europe, his works can be viewed locally at the Noyes Museum and the Trenton State Museum.

One tribute to the veteran carver, and more insight into the man, was recently given to the Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymen's Museum organizers by an admiring carver who met Hurley in the early 1970s.

In "An Open Letter to the World," Robert Arthur Daley acclaimed that Hurley "leaves a legacy of American art."

He remembers Hurley advising him, "If you want to carve decoys, you should carve a dozen at a time," because if you didn't, you weren't being serious, he said.

Conklin wanted buyers of his decoys to "keep them and cherish them and own them forever," said Daley, who learned the hard way by purchasing a crooked neck goose some years ago for \$75, reselling it a few months later for \$125, and finding its maker irritated and unwilling to replace it with another one.

Daley eulogized, "I know you are laughing at the mad scramble of collectors coveting your decoys ... and I'm sure that you feel a great warmth about the folks that are handing down your works as family heirlooms."