

Clarence Fennimore

by Victoria Ford

Clarence Fennimore is a bird carver and longtime active member of the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association. He is being awarded the 2021 Hurley Conklin Award at this year's Old-Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show.

He was born in 1935 in the Delaware River town of Bordentown and now lives in Wrightstown, in Burlington County.

“Our thing was to work on the farm, when farm work was available, and as much as possible we would be on the river with a canoe, fishing,” he said. “That’s what we loved to do, all the guys, go down to the river and fish. And we hunted on the river when we got old enough. Those days, you could walk from my house, we could walk right through town with our shotguns – no cases. Nobody even would bat an eye.”

Well-known decoy carver Harry Fennimore was Clarence’s bachelor uncle who lived at his house, too. “I learned a lot from just watching what he did,” Clarence said. Harry had a lease on the Rancocas River, and knew the proper way to trim out the duck boat, and had built a few himself. “We had a busy lifestyle at that time,” Clarence recalled.

As soon as he got his driver’s license, he and his friends headed for the shore, where there were a lot more ducks and fish, especially in the ’50s.



Photo Credit: Linda Hollins

Later on, Fennimore started tonging for clams – for pleasure and to give them away, never to sell them. He had an 18-foot wooden Grant skiff, made in Forked River. “That was ideal for tonging, because I could stand right on the edge of it,” he said.

When he needed money, he would pick on the farms or harvest/bale hay – “neither of which I would recommend.” His dad at one point worked for the railroad at Whiting Station, originally called Whiting’s Crossing; drove trucks for a living; and worked as a hunting guide for a time.

In high school, Fennimore was a cloth cutter at a clothing factory in Bordentown. After he came home from the service, a neighbor got him a job at Verizon, so he embarked on a 36-year career.

Fennimore’s renewed interest in carving took hold when he was in his 50s. At his office in Freehold was where he met Bill Doggart. The two men bonded over decoys and started hunting together, and then Doggart asked Fennimore to help him make decoys. “If I hadn’t ever run into Billy, I don’t know if I’d ever have gotten back into it. He made a big impact on my life.”

Fennimore had dabbled in carving as a younger man, but the demands of his job, kids, and farm (complete with sheep, Christmas trees and 4-H) didn’t leave much time for hobbies. The successful carvers he knew either carved full-time, or were bachelors.

When he started actively carving again, he made bay-style rigs because that’s what Doggart made, but when he started making his own he switched to Delaware River-style. He likes the raised wing tips. He uses white cedar, which he used to get from Maine but now gets out of New York. The key is to get it kiln-dried, he said – “It just weeps, otherwise.”

For his own hunting, Fennimore at first had used his uncle’s decoys; he later preferred L.L. Bean’s cork models. He was an avid hunter up until the ’80s – mainly black ducks, maybe a pintail or a mallard – for which he used a Heinrichs sneak box. But as regulatory agencies kept cutting limits, he felt the recreational activity became less worthwhile. According to Fennimore, over the years he’s made a couple thousand individual birds. “I write down every one, so I know,” he said.

Pre-COVID, he would do seven or eight shows a year. Last year he did one in New York before everything was shut down. His sales have suffered in the absence of live shows, so he’s adjusted his carving accordingly, taking commissions and branching out. Recent works include a three-foot-tall penguin, hawks, and other bird species such as crows and ravens. In the time he’s been collecting, carving and selling decoys, the market has changed, and he’s changed with it.

“Could sell ’em faster 20 years ago,” he said. “One year at Easton I sold 96 decoys (at a three-day show). That’s a lot of birds.” Nowadays there’s a lot of competition and a lot of young carvers, contrary to the public perception. It’s not the “lost art” people think of it as, according to Fennimore.

For about the last 15 summers he’s demonstrated decoy carving at Tuckerton Seaport, and he still does, “if they call me, like for a school or visiting group. It’s fun to do that.” He has a bench and a full display that shows every step from a block of wood to a finished bird.

“It’s a pretty straightforward process,” he said. It involves a hatchet, a draw knife, and a spokeshave to get it nice and round; then split it, hollow it out, glue the edge and put it back together. Fennimore uses a bench – similar to what some refer to as a chair maker’s bench – with a horseshoe-shaped block at the end that he pushes against.

Black ducks are his favorite species to carve, because “there’s a lot of feathering to be done.” Feathering is one part of decoy making that seems difficult until the technique is learned, he said. “I’ve scratch-painted some – you’ve got to kind of think backward when you do that. Nowadays we have tube oils. Old-timers used house paint. They didn’t use artist’s equipment like we do. A lot of guys use sign paints, because they dry fast.”

While neither of Fennimore’s sons inherited the carving gene, his grandson has tried his hand at it – and took a first place in the first contest he entered. “He got a better trophy than I ever got,” Fennimore said with a laugh.

Just as some older carvers taught Fennimore certain techniques, Fennimore has passed on his knowledge to other carvers, to an extent, but he believes some things an artist has to learn the hard way, by doing, by making mistakes and solving problems. 