

# William Bruce Skeie

by Victoria Ford

Hurley Conklin Award winner William Bruce Skeie was born in 1937 in Beach Haven Crest, on Long Beach Island. His dad came from Norway and his mom was born in Nashville, Tenn. This is his story.

“Dad worked for Ship Bottom Fishery, manning the pound boats, an occupation that many of the men on LBI did to make a living.”

As neatly summarized on the website of the Tide Table Group’s Ship Bottom Shellfish: “In the early days, hardy seafaring gents would row out to the pound and row back through the surf. Once they hit the beach, the skiffs were pulled by Clydesdales. The fish were sorted into hand-woven baskets.

Long Beach Island was home to seven pound operations – Long Beach Fishery, Crest Fishery, Barnegat City Fishery, Surf City Fish Company, St. Alban’s Fish Co., Ship Bottom Fishery, and Beach Haven Fishery. The pound fisheries produced dozens of species of fish: cod, flounder, tuna, squid, monk weakfish, bluefish, striped bass, croakers, congor eels, whiting, herring, kingfish and sea trout, flying fish, sun fish.

As Skeie recalled, he “grew up like most boys living on the Island, fishing, crabbing and clamming, but most of all, I liked duck hunting. When a good northwest wind blew, I would walk along the banks of the bay, looking for decoys that broke loose from other hunters’ set rigs. That’s how I got my first two black duck decoys. To this day, one of those decoys is displayed in the Barnegat Light Museum.

“When I was 16, I worked at Keller’s Garage in Ship Bottom, pumping gas. I was able to make and save enough money to buy my first rig. I bought it from George Svelling [of Barnegat Light], and it included the boat, gun, and a few decoys, but I knew I needed more decoys. So I got together with my cousin Art Cordrey, and we found some cork left over from building a new freezer at the fishery. Art got cedar from someone in Cedar Run to make heads and bottoms. My job was the bodies. Art would carve the heads out using his penknife; he was very good at his craft. It



*Photo Credit: Awardee’s Family*

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saddened me that he passed at an early age; he would have been one of the best carvers in the area.”

According to the burial records of Greenwood Cemetery in Cedar Run, Arthur Cordrey lived from 1934 to 1955.

“I still remember my first hunting trip and shooting my first mallard,” Skeie said. “I was so proud, walking home, holding it in my hand to show my dad. And he reminded me that a mallard was his first duck in Norway. My dad and brother plucked the duck and we had it for dinner.

“After high school I joined the Air Force, and I thought, ‘There goes duck hunting,’ but luck would be on my side, and I was stationed at McGuire Air Force Base and never missed a season! Those four years in the service I came home and gunned with my friend Harry ‘Skip’ DeFreitas every season. That’s how I learned a lot about duck hunting. He was a great teacher. When I got out of the service in 1959 I worked for a builder until 1974 and still never missed a duck season.

“I built my first garvey out of cedar. It was 17 feet and included a cabin. I used it to tow my sneakbox. A few years later I built my second garvey. It was 18 feet and I used marine plywood and fiberglassed it myself.

“Now that I had more time, Skip and I started gunning in the Beach Haven area. We would stop in at the old Hester Sedge (Gun) Club and I would notice how bad shape it was in.

“I also visited Sandy Island (Gun Club) a lot, did some carpentry work on the club for Bill Inman, and had some great gunning trips, too. In the years following, I met Paul Vartanian at Sandy Island. He told me he was still a member of Hester Sedge Club. We discussed the decaying shape of the club and also the fact that if the building was lost, rebuilding may not be permitted. He asked me if I was interested in remodeling the club. I met with the members, and they accepted my proposal.

“It was 1988, and I remodeled the entire club from outside to inside: new roof, siding, window, kitchen, bathroom, guide and locker rooms. I also built new decks and docks and floating docks for boats. I designed and constructed a five-man floating blind, a two-man floating blind, and one in-ground blind.

“I also stayed on as guide and caretaker until 2000, with the help of my son Jim and my good friend Gus Guenther. We made Hester Sedge one of the premier hunting clubs of New Jersey. The members were elated, and it was expressed in the weekend trips and good hunting enjoyed by all.

“Years later, the Tuckerton Seaport Baymen’s Museum made a replica of Hester Sedge for visitors to see and tour.”

Skeie currently resides in Vero Beach, Fla., and still enjoys fishing and doing a little carving.

“My carving interest has turned from decoys to shorebirds and songbirds, but my first love will always be carving a black duck and a hunting day on Barnegat Bay,” he said. 