

Youth Carving at Tuckerton Seaport

By: Pat Johnson

On a recent Saturday, four youngsters met with sage decoy carver Malcolm Robinson at the Tuckerton Seaport's Jersey Shore Folklife Center. They were brand new to the folk art of decoy carving but Robinson was no stranger to introducing newcomers to his craft. For sixteen years Robinson ran the Tuckerton Seaport's Youth Carving Club for 11- to 17-year-olds but like so many others, the two-year pandemic stopped this gathering in its tracks. Now the Seaport, with Robinson's help, hopes to revise it. Saturday's class was the first Youth Carving class of 2022 and the decoy was a black-bellied plover 'flattie' decoy



Malcolm Robinson instructing Youth Carving student.
Photo Credit: Pat Johnson

— one of Robinson's favorite birds to carve and paint. He explained, "Carvings of folk art decoys are open to interpretation—no one paints them the same way twice."

Now in his 77th year, Robinson could not say exactly how many awards he had won over the 42-years he has been practicing his craft—more than 20 but not more than 40, he estimated. Robinson was in on the very beginnings of the Tuckerton Seaport (originally the Barnegat Baymen's Museum), 23 years ago. The original museum building was moved from Tip Seaman Park across Route 9 to the site of the present-day Tuckerton Seaport and is now known as the Hunting Shanty. When the Seaport opened in 2000, Robinson spent every weekend, both Saturday and Sunday, demonstrating carving in one of the decoy 'shops' on the boardwalk. "I did that for three years—I wanted to make sure they had a demonstrator," he said.

On Saturday, Robinson was joined by decoy-carver John Fields from Bordentown. As the children settled around the large craft table, Fields was sharpening the craft knives. Eleven-year-old Aaron Mottershead and 10-year-old Matilda Voss from Little Egg Harbor are both active in their scout troops. They had used penknives before to whittle with. "Whittling is taking a big stick and turning it into a little stick," said Robinson.

Eleven-year-old Doug and 10-year-old Sam Cowperthwaite from New Gretna were hoping to use their decoy carving skills to make decoys for hunting as both hunt all kinds of game with their father. "Ducks, deer, rabbits and squirrels, anything for the pot," said their mother Jenna. Robinson said most decoys they would learn to make were not the type to throw in the water to attract ducks, most hunters today use inexpensive plastic decoys to make their "rigs," which are large numbers of duck decoys anchored together in the bay. "To make a rig today using wood-carved decoys would be too labor-intensive and expensive," he said. "My great, great, grandfather used to make them and he would get fifty cents a piece for them. But he got the wood for free and used leftover house paint. Those decoys were crude but they were not made to attract people, they were made to attract ducks."

Continued on page 11

Youth Carvers Doug and Sam with painted flatties.
Photo credit: Pat Johnson



Even though decoy carving has changed to attract buyers of decorative birds, they are still carved the same way, said Robinson.

For this beginning class, each child received an already cutout shape of a plover on a stick. Stick-up decoys or “flatties” were used to attract shorebirds of all types back in the old days when it was legal to shoot and eat them. Small birds like the plovers were shot in abundance because all that was taken was the breast meat. “It took a lot of birds to make a pot pie,” he said. “Remember that nursery rhyme: ‘Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie’? People ate everything back then, egrets, herons, some even ate robins—but that all ended with the adoption of the migratory bird act of 1918.” That also ended the market hunting whereby gunners would shoot as many ducks as they could and ship them to city markets. “A few still hunted illegally but I’d say it was all over by 1928.”

With that bit of history over, it was time to start carving the plover flattie. Each child got a knife and was told how to use it. “You would think you would carve away from you but actually that’s how accidents happen—instead prop your thumb against the wood of the bird and draw the knife towards you—like paring an apple. Do it slowly—the key is to have control at all times. The first thing is to round off the edges.”

This engaged them for a while and both men went from child to child giving individual instructions. “There’s no right or wrong way—it’s your interpretation of the bird,” he encouraged them.

The end goal - a finished flattie.
Photo credit: Pat Johnson



Robinson said he hoped that the Seaport could get a Youth Carving Club started again as it had been a good thing for many years. “The original group was like one big family — the older students helped the younger students and they kidded around like brothers and sisters.”

Robinson said he would teach a couple more flattie classes and he thought Clarence Fennimore would be teaching a full-body decoy class in June. From these

Youth Carving classes, perhaps enough enthusiasm would be found among like-minded youths—those interested in keeping a thriving folk art and baymen culture alive.