

## Arthur J. Birdsall by German Georgieff

Arthur Birdsall was born in Point Pleasant, NJ, in 1949. Better known to all as Artie, he has been a well-known member of the decoy carving and collecting community for some time now, for a variety of reasons. His appearance certainly fits the part, with his long beard and hair, usually in a ponytail. He has had a long association with one of the more modern and well known decoy factories. He also comes from a long line of decoy carvers, representing the fourth generation of Birdsalls to be involved in making decoys.

Artie's family came to the New World from England in the 1600s, first settling in Salem, Massachusetts, then making their way to Long Island, then to Toms River, eventually settling in Barnegat. It was there where his great-uncle, Capt. Jesse Birdsall, born in 1841, spent his winters hunting and guiding for waterfowl. He also became a skilled and prolific decoy carver. Jesse's brother Eugene, who was Artie's great-grandfather, moved to the Lovelandtown section of Point Pleasant in 1890. Eugene's son, Nathan, was a boat builder by trade but also carved decoys, being the second generation to do so. Charlie Birdsall, Artie's uncle, represented the next generation of Birdsall carvers. Charlie initially hand-carved decoys, but eventually took over Wildfowler Decoys in 1961, using a duplicating machine to manufacture carvings. These devices used a master pattern to guide one or more spindles to make an exact copy of the master, although significant handwork was still required to finish the carving.



That brings us to Arthur. As a child, he would visit his uncle's decoy shop, which was only five houses away from his own. Charlie would let him occupy himself in the yard, doing outdoor things boys enjoyed such as shooting at hubcaps with a BB gun. Inside the shop, he enjoyed seeing "how things worked", paying attention to every detail of the operation. As Artie approached adulthood, his first jobs all involved woodworking of some sort. Around 1971, Uncle Charlie offered him a job at Wildfowler. He loved every aspect of the work, and he quickly came to the conclusion that decoys were not only in his blood. They were his future. He started out moving lumber around the shop and bandsawing blanks, eventually operating the duplicator.

In 1977 Charlie Birdsall retired, selling wildfowler and moving to Florida for health reasons. He continued to hand carve decoys, but by hand rather than machine. Artie continued working for the new company, Barnegat Bay Decoys. In 1984 he purchased a house in Lovelandtown from his uncle, Lester "Dipper" Ortley, another well-known carver and bayman. He converted the garage into a decoy shop and started his own business. His first duplicator was purchased from Jim and Joan Siebert. Eventually, he moved from a single spindle duplicator to an eight spindle machine and then purchased a 12 spindle duplicator from Dick Morgan. While not a new machine, he considered this the "Cadillac" of duplicators. He did not consider his operation as much of a production one as Waterfowler, often carving no more than six birds at a time. This allowed him to customize birds yet keep them affordable. He always strived to keep the price of the decoys affordable, admitting that he often wasn't the best businessman.

Artie also did not want to copy Waterfowler or Barnegat Bay Decoys products. He carved many of his own masters and obtained others wherever he found them. Bill Cranmer was once among the few carvers in the region using a duplicator. While interviewing Bill for a Decoy Magazine article, Artie asked about the masters, now that Bill was only hand carving birds. Bill replied that they were just "gathering dust". A deal was quickly worked out and Artie purchased the lot of them. He also bought a load of masters from Barnegat Bay Decoys in 1991. Another source of masters was his Uncle Charlie, who would carve a new one for him each year when he visited from Florida. While Artie did some of the painting, he utilized skilled painters such as Glenn Cooke and Brad Holloway to help him finish the decoys.

Artie's involvement with decoys was not limited to their manufacture. Back when he was still working in his uncle's shop, he was introduced to John Hillman, one of the pioneers in the field of decoy collecting. The two became great friends and Artie

dove deeper into the world of collecting. He even began buying and selling decoys on behalf of other collectors. His personal collection focused more on Head-of-the Bay and Barnegat decoys.

Then, on a fateful day in 1981, another collector, Dr. Jack Conover, organized a meeting at Bob Seabrook's house. By the end of the meeting the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association was formed, with Artie being appointed its first treasurer, which he considered a great moment in his life. The organization grew quickly, attracting most of the major individuals involved in decoy carving and collecting, eventually hosting its own annual show.

Artie considers himself semi-retired now, although he still deals in decoys and his vendor space at the Ocean County Decoy & Gunning Show is a popular gathering ground for his fellow collectors. In fact, these individuals have been his biggest source of enjoyment while involved in this field. He can't say enough times how many wonderful people he has met and become friends with during his years of carving and collecting. And most people who have met Artie will readily place him within that fine group. 