Will Russell Hammarstrom

by Victoria Ford



Photo Credit: Awardee's Family

William Russell Hammarstrom was born in November 1953 in Toms River, the first of six kids born to William and Carolyn. His father's parents had immigrated to New York from Norway, and the family settled in Waretown.

Resourceful and hardworking people, they did anything they could do to make ends meet. The Hammarstroms had a chicken farm where the ShopRite is now; they raised an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 chickens. They caught clams off Loveladies and Harvey Cedars when the clamming was "unbelievable." When the elder William passed away in 2018, the family sold the Goose Pond Christmas tree farm they had started. As preserved farmland, it will remain a farm forever. In addition to fishing and hunting, Will Hammarstrom has always enjoyed gardening and canning food, he said. This is his story.

When his dad got into fishing, he built his own charter boat, the 42-foot *Carolyn Ann I*, named after his wife. The cedar came from Waretown. "I used to get seasick every day, and I didn't like it, but he made me go," Hammarstrom recalled. After about 10 years they upgraded to a 60-footer. Business was booming.

They trolled for tuna; caught seabass, fluke, porgies, bluefish; and business continued to grow. The 85-foot *Carolyn Ann III* was one of the biggest in Barnegat Light, and one of more than a dozen party boats in town.

Young Will started out cleaning the shop for his dad, and he discovered early his passion and natural talent for woodworking. He started helping his dad build boats, planking, gluing and laminating; he developed a strong work ethic.

The *Carolyn Ann III* was "double-planked mahogany, glued in between, all anchor fast nails, we drove everything by hand." He recalled how they built the hull in the old chicken coop, brought it outside, used a crane to flip it so they could glass the bottom, then righted it, put the keel on, finished glassing the decks and hauled her down Route 9 to launch in North Harbor. With the superstructure built, they put the engines in, started building the cabin, took a trial run in the bay, and she was ready for mackerel season in April.

"There were no little boats, like there is today," he said. "You had the ocean more or less to yourself. There was some other charter boats and stuff, we all worked together pretty much." They worked from Seaside to LBI. When Dad was ready to retire, Will and his sister Gina ran the business and bought the boat from their parents.

The boat was sold last year and is now in Cape May.

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Hammarstrom said he would “give my right arm” to revisit those fishing party trips of the ’70s, longlining for cod.

Before the head boats, when he was a teen, he had his own 24-foot garvey, with a six-cylinder Dakota in it and a clutch. It had been his uncle’s.

“She leaked like a sieve,” he said. Nevertheless he used it to tread for clams in the bay. He put a new bottom on it, using leftover epoxy and anchor fast nails – “couldn’t beat the price” – and a new six-cylinder carbureted Chevy motor, hot manifold, marine transmission, and “that was the cat’s meow, that thing.” He clammed a few winters with her, before he captained the *Carolyn Ann* in 1975.

Hammarstrom grew up duck hunting with his dad in the cranberry bogs and deer hunting in Maine. He had a Chesapeake Bay retriever, a 12-gauge shotgun, and a pickup truck – “you didn’t need anything else,” he said. He hunted black ducks on Clam Island, and the sedges too. “Some days I froze to death.” It was great on Oyster Creek when the bay was frozen and everything would come up, he said.

“I hunted the meadows a lot, some of the ponds, I enjoyed that, to hunker down in a nice sneak box in the grass. That was living.” Over the years he had Brittany spaniels and German Shorthaired pointers and hunted grouse and woodcock.

He fell in love with white pine in wood shop at school and started carving decoys. (His dad had always used cork.) At first he made geese, using the shop’s bandsaw. They had Styrofoam bodies and wooden heads. The he made a broadbill, using a Boy Scout knife. He came back to it later in life when he was more into hunting.

Today he continues to nurture his enthusiasm for hunting through his carving. Instead of burning wood scraps, he’ll use them to carve clams – he compared it to peeling potatoes – and people love them. One he made is in a glass case at the Tuckerton Seaport. He still takes custom orders for decoys.

“It’s my hobby,” he said.

According to an article titled “The Hammarstroms of Waretown” in a 2012 issue of *Decoy Magazine*, when Will was 19, he bought a sawmill kit from the Bell Machinery Company of Chicago and had it shipped to his father’s house, where it had to be assembled. “They put a roof over it and began cutting logs, generally pine, cedar and occasionally oak,” author Allen Linkchorst writes. “Most of the lumber was used for the boating industry, including planks, decking and blocking.”

“An innovative carver who likes to experiment with his decoys, they are now made in a variety of styles, shapes and sizes as his customers include both hunters and collectors,” according to Linkchorst. “They generally fit into three categories – two resembling the traditional Barnegat Bay and Delaware River styles, and a contemporary version targeted to hunters.

“His Barnegat Bay decoys account for the vast majority of his output. Like all of his decoys, they are hollow-carved from cedar that he milled. The two-piece bodies are held together with waterproof glue and galvanized nails with the seams above the waterline. The well-carved heads include nostrils and mandibles and a nail is usually painted at the end of the bill. Most of the decoys have quality glass eyes that match the color of the species, although some have painted eyes or no eyes at all. He varied the head positions and produced a few sleepers. While the majority has rectangular lead pad weights, some have inletted poured weights in the Barnegat style.

“All are painted in oils. When he began to sell more to collectors and hunters, he began elaborating on his otherwise simple paint patterns, adding wet on wet blending, combing and other techniques. He takes a tremendous amount of pride in the results.

“By the 1980s, Will was using a rig for a season or two, then after carving replacements he would sell the older decoys. He began to attend the local shows, and in 1985 won first place ribbons for a black duck and Canada goose and a second-place ribbon for a brant at the Tuckerton decoy show.

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“Being more of a hunter than a collector, his contemporary design is an effort to produce a practical and seaworthy decoy. After observing some decoys from the Herter’s Company, a style he liked, he realized their small size wouldn't work well in the chop of the Barnegat Bay, so Will proceeded to design a version of his own. They are large, hollow-carved flat-bottomed decoys with a keel that runs the length of the bodies. They were painted as black ducks and mallards, as mallards were becoming common on the bay, and the mallard hens are very attractive. Duck hunters loved these decoys and Will sold many over the years. He believes they are the most efficient gunning decoys he has ever produced.

“As time passed Will wanted to produce a more challenging decoy, both to please himself as well as the growing number of collector who bought his decoys. He was familiar with the quality decoys from the Delaware River, and began producing them in that style, with green-winged teal quickly becoming his favorite species. The small hollow decoys have finely carved tails and carved raised primaries. In variation to the style, they have flat bottoms. All are painted in greater detail than his earlier models, using wet on wet blending, combing and stipple paint to great effect.

“Over the years Will has carved both Canada geese and brant and nearly every species of duck that visit the Barnegat Bay. His lifetime output is estimated at 500 to 600 decoys.

“Capt. Will Hammarstrom is a hardworking self-reliant man who has followed in the footsteps of his father. Avid duck hunters, boat builders and charter captains, they each earned their livings, as did their Norwegian ancestors, as seafaring men. They also produced quality decoys, both seaworthy and attractive. They are worthy descendants of a family tradition.”