Jim & Joan Seibert

2026 Heritage Awardee & Conklin Awardee

By Pat Johnson

Trees and flowering shrubs almost hide the home that Jim and Joan Seibert built in Dennisville, New Jersey. Forty acres surround the rustic house; twenty of them are salt marsh, a selling point for her husband, said Joan, since he was an avid duck hunter.

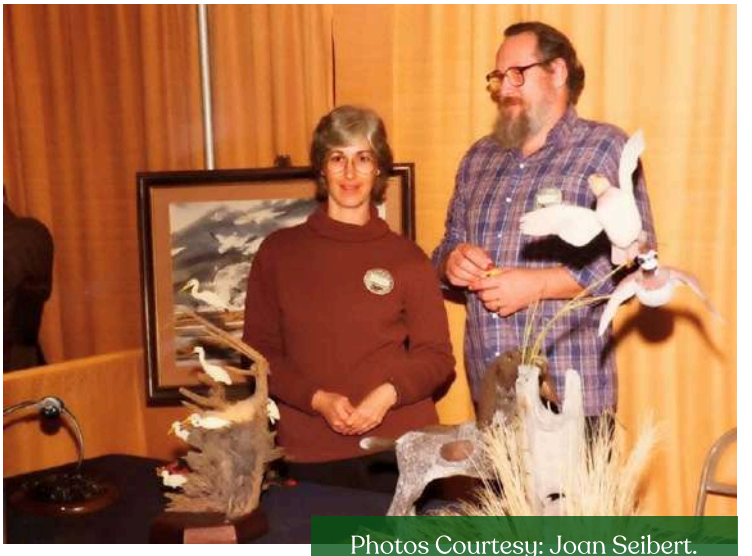
The couple spent fifty years together carving decorative birds and producing hunting decoys for the sportsmen market. Sadly, Jim passed away in 2012. Since then, Joan did not feel she could take the Conklin Award without Jim being honored as well. Both deserving of the honor, the Decoy Show Committee selected Joan Seibert for the Conklin Award and Jim Seibert with the new, posthumous Harry M. Shourds Heritage Award.

"We were one entity - always identified as Jim and Joan Seibert at the shows. We always worked together," said Joan.

Jim and Joan met while attending college. "We were the first art majors graduating from Glassboro—(now Rowan University.)" The couple taught art education in public schools. Joan and Jim taught for 11 years before they decided to start their decoy business and move back to where Jim grew up.

"When we lived in North Jersey we had some friends who invited us to go to Long Island to our first decoy show and Jim met Al McCormick –he was called 'Mr. Decoy'.

Photo Credit: Pat Johnson.



Photos Courtesy: Joan Seibert.

He would teach guys to make cork decoys. So they would be down in the basement rasping cork decoys and it created static electricity and he'd be covered in dark brown cork. But that's how he started. This was in 1970."

Jim carved mainly Delaware and Barnegat style decoys. While Jim carved full sized birds, Joan carved miniatures. "This is how I started carving miniatures: he had blocks of wood—he cut out the pattern and what was leftover were the corners. That's why I do that size. Honest to God that's how I started."

The couple bought the Delaware Decoy Company from decoy carver Terry McNulty and worked it for 15 years. The machine-made decoys were rough carved on a type of router from a set pattern and could turn out 12 at a time. From there, the Seiberts did fine carving, sanding, and painting to finish the birds. "We really turned out a lot of birds. And we invented the jingle birds—(a decorative song bird with a bell attached). "We made and sold a lot of them."

The Delaware Decoy Company sold wholesale to hunters. "We had a huge machine in the barn. We would

be up to our knees in sawdust. I did all the sanding and he did all the carving. At first we did all the painting but then we had to hire people to help."

Besides the hunting decoys, the couple worked on their own designs. "We never worked together on a bird but we advised each other," said Joan. "Jim was great with color. We worked together every day, daytime in the barn and nighttime decorative carving. We had a life!"

Because of his art background, Jim was very creative, said Joan. He made a model carousel with birds instead of horses. He made Noah's Arks with Joan's miniatures on the deck. His showstoppers included a life-size flying osprey and a diorama of a German shorthair puppy flushing three quail. "He made a lot of woodcock –hunters loved woodcocks –you can always sell a woodcock," said Joan.

"We used basswood for decorative birds –it's soft and the grain doesn't get in the way. Basswood is good for burning details like feathers. For working decoys we used cedar or pine."

The Seiberts started the Wings and Water Festival in Stone Harbor that ran for 30 years and was held the weekend before the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning show in Tuckerton. They also started the Cape May show on the Boardwalk that is no longer. Both served as contest judges at shows. For ten years Jim was the resident decoy carver at Wheaton Village.

The life of a decoy carver means meeting lots of other decoy carvers and collectors at shows and the couple had many lifelong friends.

"We were very friendly with Hurley (Conklin) and Harry V. Shourds. Hurley was a regular guy but what I remember most is he had twinkling eyes. Everyone in the county carves with Jamie Hand—he, Tony Hillman, and myself are the last 'men' standing."

When Jim got sick, the couple sold the Jingle Bird franchise to the Bird House in Cape May and sold the Delaware Decoy Company to 'a couple of guys' in Nebraska.

They also sold their extensive collection of decoys to pay hospital bills. Joan is 84 and after her husband died she stopped carving and doing shows. Then a year ago, a collector of Joan's work, Jim Hudgins, a retiree from Fish and Wildlife Service, persuaded her to pick up her tools again. At 84, she is carving and painting again and enjoying it.

Looking back, "I think I had a wonderful life!" she said.

Photos Courtesy: Joan Seibert.