

2022 Hurley Conklin Awards

Presented at the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy & Gunning Show
September 24th and 25th, 2022

Presented to people who have lived in the Barnegat Bay tradition. This award has been named in honor of the last of the Great Old Time Barnegat Bay Carvers, Hurley Conklin (1913-1998).

Please see the full profiles in the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy & Gunning Show program available online and at the Ocean County Parks & Recreation Department website.

Will Hammarstrom

By: Victoria Ford



William Hammarstrom
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 in Loveladies and Harvey Cedars using a sink box, 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.

When his dad got into fishing, he built his own charter boat, the 42-foot *Carolyn Ann I*. "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. Young Will started out cleaning the shop for his dad, and he discovered early his passion and natural talent for woodworking.

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. He recalled how they built the hull in the old chicken coop [...] and she was ready for mackerel season in April.

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

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. “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.”

He fell in love with white pine in wood shop at school and started carving decoys. (His dad had always used cork.) Today he continues to nurture his enthusiasm for hunting through his carving. Instead of burning wood scraps, he’ll use them to carve clams. One he made is in a glass case at the Tuckerton Seaport. He still takes custom orders for decoys.

According to an article titled “The Hammarstroms of Waretown” in a 2012 issue of *Decoy Magazine*, Will Hammarstrom is “[a]n 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 Allen Linkchorst.

In 1985, he “won first place ribbons for a black duck and Canada goose and a second-place ribbon for a brant at the Tuckerton decoy show.

“Being more of a hunter than a collector, his contemporary design is an effort to produce a practical and seaworthy decoy. [...] 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.

“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.”

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William Bruce Skeie

By: Victoria Ford



William Bruce Skeie.
Photo credit: Awardee's Family

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

“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

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was his first duck in Norway. My dad and brother plucked the duck and we had it for dinner.

“I built my first garvey out of cedar. It was 17 feet and included a cabin. I used it to tow my sneakbox.

“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 met Paul Vartanian [...] 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 [...]

“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.