

# The Gentleman Carver

by J.P. Hand

On April 6, 2019, we lost another great carver, David Rhodes of Absecon, N. J., and in recent years of Ocean City. His peers and many of his customers knew Dave as, “The Gentleman Carver.” Anyone who knew him well understood just how he acquired that moniker!

Like many of the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association members, I knew David (the name he preferred) for decades and I considered him one of my closest friends. I don't remember how I met him, probably at the decoy show at The Quail Hill Inn that was hosted by Fred & Ethel Noyes. I used to jokingly describe Dave as the only decoy maker I knew that couldn't be elected President, as his parents had emigrated from England to Canada, where Dave was born in 1933. His family left Canada for Atlantic City, N. J. when Dave was three years old, and I often reminded him that though he had lived at the Jersey Shore for three-quarters of a century, he was still a “shoobie.”

Over the last few decades I liked to keep my friends Dave and Harry Shourds in “free wood” (the carving wood that Harry considered the best.) In the case of Dave, it was usually cutoffs and chunks of cedar or white pine, left over from me sawing out gunning decoys by the dozen, but big enough for Dave to use to make his beautiful shorebirds. While I was happy to share with my friends and didn't expect anything in return, Dave would often return the favor by stopping by with a shorebird or some other carving for my wife Gwen and I to add to our collection.

Dave often reminisced about the time over 20 years ago, when I took him gunning for Wood Ducks at Hands Mill Pond just over the county line in Cumberland County. We gunned over wooden decoys, mine along with some Strunk's and one of Dave's. Many of you know those kinds of hunts that you always remember, in this case the two of us surrounded by imposing Jersey cedars with a mist rising over the “iced tea” colored water, and those “squeakers” flying in so fast you could hardly react quickly enough to lift your gun, let alone hit one! We each got our limit of two good-eating Woodies that day, but I won't say how many shells it took.

It's always sad to see a good friend and in this case a good man leave this world, but I remind myself that Dave had a rich, full life. He served in the USAF during the Korean War as an aviation mechanic stationed in Japan. After his discharge, he put himself through art school in Philadelphia (which required commuting by train from Atlantic City and back each day). His “real job” was serving as the staff artist for Wheaton Industries, which at the time was the largest privately owned glass company in the world (and was founded by the son of decoy maker, Amos Wheaton.)

As a resident artist Dave had a lot of free time on his hands during working hours. Not many people know that while working at Wheaton, Dave originated the “palm bird.” These were very small carvings and miniatures that could be carved on “company time,” but could be cupped in one hand while extending the other to shake hands with superior management when they entered his office. Most of you have seen Dave's “palm birds” as they graced the award plaques at the Tuckerton decoy show for many years. Many of us miss our friend Dave, I just hope that wherever he is now, the knives are sharp and the cedar is soft!



Photo Credit: J.P. Hand

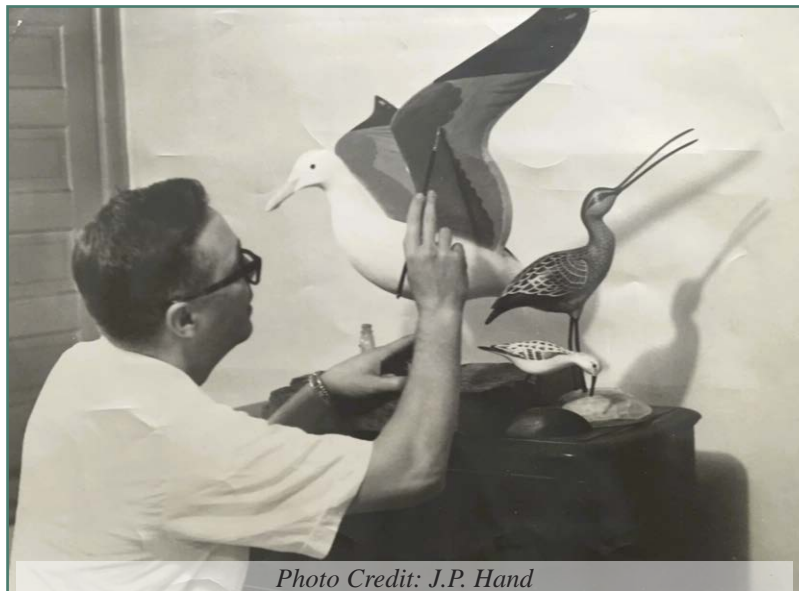


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