Decoy Show Hurley Conklin Awardee: Mark Ford

By Pat Johnson

Mark Ford says at age 60 he's too young to win the Hurley Conklin Award but he has accepted reluctantly. Ford was born on November 4, 1964 and grew up on Dock Road in Parkertown. He was perfectly situated to become a Barnegat Bay style decoy carver; carver Mutt Cramer lived across the street and carver Rob Daley lived nearby on Route 9. Cramer taught him how to use a band saw and Daley was always around to show the adolescent Ford his work.



Mark Ford at Tip Seaman County Park, 2025. Photo credit: Pat Johnson.

"Daley added artistic flair to a decoy that was different from the norm. He was a real artist." Ford said Daley would "rough cut a dozen bodies in a day and then decide what they would be in the following days," said Ford. "He would ask me –'What does that look like?' And I'd say, 'Looks like a broadbill or a black duck,' and he'd say, 'Ok, that's what it will be.'"

Can genetics be part of a craftsmen's story?" Frank Lamson and my great Uncle Calvin Hickman were all decoy carvers and boat builders. My Great Uncle Lamson taught Hurley Conklin to carve," said Ford.

Ford's early life living on Dock Road was where he witnessed the baymen's way of life—clamming, fishing, boat building and decoy making--all were ordinary pursuits by extraordinary men. Through the years Ford met most of the local carvers and baymen and heard lots of their stories, which he treasures.

When Ford was in the 11th grade at Pinelands Regional High School he took a carving class with local carver John Holloway. His real opportunity to hone his craft came by the side door at Rodger West's Clam House in Tuckerton where Ford went to work.

"There was a boat shop attached to the clam house and I was allowed to use it to make decoys. It was a great place to carve.... I built a gunning garvey in it and it won first place at the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show in 1988, my first award."

"Around that time a gentleman said to my Dad, 'That kid is really a good carver. He's going to win awards someday.' My Dad said, 'You won't have to wait too long...' and in 1989, I won Best of Show at the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show for my Broadbill, in 2004 for my Brant and 2012 for my Red-breasted merganser."



Ford decoys.
Photo credit: Pat Johnson.

In 1992, he made a rig of 12 black ducks for the Decoy Show which came in 4th place. But he was determined. "I said to myself, 'I'm not stopping until I get that trophy.' And I won it in 2010."

Ford grew up to be a carpenter with his father and is particularly good at finish work. Today he owns his own carpentry business, Home Repairs and Improvement. His decoy carving workshop is a converted chicken coop, heated in winter by a wood stove and in summer by the catch-as-catch can breezes. He also restored boats for 40 years.

He can sometimes work 17 hours straight in the shop if he is painting decoys for a show, he said. His work ethic has won him numerous ribbons. Last year alone he won a dozen awards at the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show including a first for his bufflehead in the Contemporary Antique Duck category. In 2011, the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association honored him with the Decoy Carver of the Year award.

"I've always appreciated and enjoyed the friendly competition at the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy Show. I have a lot of good memories of friends and fellow carvers," he added.

"My Uncle Kenny Maxwell was a Hurley Conklin Award winner and a self-made man. I told him once, "You are like George Bailey, you're the richest man in town. You raised four kids on a baymen's common sense approach to life and they were all successful."

Some decoy carvers won't give up their secrets—they jealously guard techniques and paint recipes—but Ford is of a different stripe. Like his heroes, Cramer and McKindlass, he is generous with his time and talent. He teaches the Youth Carving class at the Tuckerton Seaport with Gene Marshall and his friend and fellow carver Malcolm Robinson. It was Robinson who started the Youth Carving Club.

"I feel obligated to share –It's really a pleasure to show these kids at the Seaport to carve. I don't want to carry any secrets," said Ford.

"I've been so fortunate to know Howard Ware, Dick McKindlass, Mutt Cramer, Rocky Wycoff and talk to Harland Price – all those old-timers--that lifestyle is gone." But thanks to Ford and others that keep the traditions alive the stories continue.

"It's a lovely hobby," said Ford. "There's nothing like the feeling of a sharp knife and a nice piece of cedar. And I'm still learning as I go."



Canada Goose by Mark Ford in his workshop, 2025.
Photo credit: Pat Johnson.