

Harry Mitchell Shourds, 1919.
Photo Credit: Tuckerton Seaport

HARRY M. SHOURDS:

Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy & Gunning Show THE HARRY M. SHOURDS HERITAGE AWARD

by J.P. Hand

The name Shourds has been a household word in the decoy collecting community for as long as Americans have been collecting and preserving the painted wooden gunning decoys of the early carvers.

Harry Vinuckson Shourds of Tuckerton N. J. was likely the first of that family to carve lightweight, hollow "stool ducks" of the native Atlantic White Cedar, (also known as swamp cedar or Jersey cedar). Harry V. is known not just for the artistic merit and quality of construction of his decoys, but also for the large numbers of decoys he produced. He was one of the few if not the only maker who shipped his decoys up and down the east coast as far south as the Carolinas.

A carpenter by trade, H. V. Shourds and his wife, Mary Bartholomew Shourds had three daughters and one son. That son, Harry Mitchell Shourds would follow in his father's footsteps when it came to carving decoys, though he worked as a house painter and painting contractor for most of his life.

Harry Mitchell Shourds holds the distinction of being a native son of Tuckerton but also the best-known carver of Cape May County. He learned to carve with his father on Water Street down on Tuckerton Creek and used his father's carving patterns throughout his life. The 1910 Federal Census for Tuckerton lists 48-year-old H V Shourds as a house carpenter and Harry M. age 19 as a house painter.

Ten years later, H. M. Shourds was living in Ocean City down in Cape May County and was married to Lenneta Loder Shourds, he owned his own home and was working as a house painter in that Cape May County beach town, (1920 Fed Census). Sadly, his wife Lennetta passed away, childless and in 1923 the widower would marry Martha Clemenson, a South Jersey girl from over on the mainland, whose father had emigrated from Sweden, her mother from Denmark. The couple would have four children, Virginia, Alvin, my friend and mentor Harry V. and the youngest, Ray.

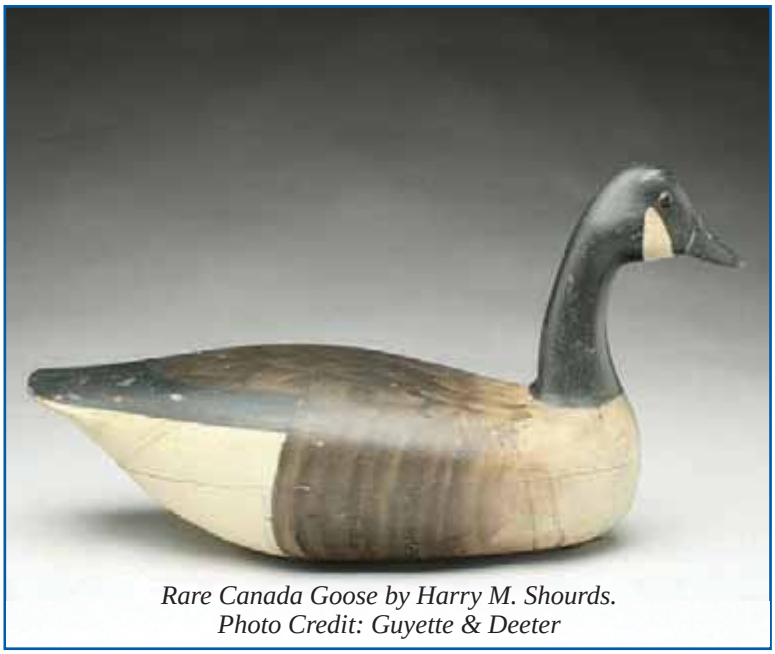
H. M. would spend the rest of his life in Cape May County running his painting contracting business and like his father, carving decoys and shipping them to eager customers locally and out of state. Like his father and many men of that time, he would die at a relatively young age; towards the end of WWII in 1944 at the age of 52. During the decades he lived in Ocean City, Harry M. made lots of friends both on the mainland and the island where he likely

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knew many of the local Cape May County carvers of his time, such as Clark Madara, the Godfreys of the Upper Township, and Cleave Daebler to the south, who lived on the road into Stone Harbor. And like his father, he surely influenced a lot of other men of the county who made their own gunning decoys.

It isn't known at this time as to which East coast waterfowler first thought to make a decoy with a hollow two-piece body made of light weight softwood. That method was common on both the Delaware River and the Jersey coast by the mid 1800s. H. V. Shourds likely didn't come up with that construction technique, as quite a few South Jersey carvers predate him. What he did do was create a carving style of light weight, well-constructed gunning decoys with stylized paint patterns that were pleasing to the eye.



Rare Canada Goose by Harry M. Shourds.
Photo Credit: Guyette & Deeter

Harry M. Shourds carried on the family tradition, using his father's patterns, his tools and painting techniques. To the untrained eye, the decoys of both the father and the son appear the same, but a knowledgeable collector can tell the difference. Harry M. decoys are usually a little "daintier" in form. Both men made decoys of the typical species of ducks used along the Atlantic coast, mostly Black Ducks, Broadbills, Brant, but also some Red Breasted Mergansers, Goldeneyes, Buffleheads and Old Squaws. Only Harry M. is known to have carved Pintails and Hooded Mergansers. While Harry V. likely made hundreds of shorebird decoys a various species, very few are known to have been made by Harry M. That may be explained by the fact that hunting shorebirds was outlawed in the United States right in the middle of his carving career.

The number decoys by both Harry V. and Harry M. Shourds that survive to this day stands as a testament to the skill and artistry of both men. Not to mention the innumerable other carvers up and down the East coast who copied their work in varying degrees.

One historical and genealogical note: It appears that all the Shourds of South Jersey descend from one Cornelius Shoyerde, (later anglicized to Shourds) who in 1684 left Holland for Philadelphia, bought a plantation in Bordentown, N. J. and with his wife raised a large family. Their descendants would spread out across South Jersey with some settling in Tuckerton, (when it was in Burlington County) and others settling near the Delaware River in Salem County.

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