

named in honor of the last of the Great Old Time Barnegat Bay Carvers, Hurley Conklin.

This year's recipients:

Sponsored by the Ocean County Board of Commissioners

Gary Driscoll

Donated by New Jersey Ducks Unlimited

W. Fred Reitmeyer, Jr.

Donated by New Jersey Ducks Unlimited

Gary Driscoll

by Pat Johnson

Visitors to the Tuckerton Seaport and Ocean County Parks often hear about how early settlers in the area made a living by “Working the Cycle” — harvesting clams, oysters and fish from the bay in the summer and harvesting meat, pinecones and wood from the Pinelands in the winter. The impression tourists may get is that this cycle was a thing of the long-ago past but that’s not the case. Tuckerton’s Gary Driscoll worked the cycle for most of his life up through the 1990s.

2024 Hurley Conklin Award winner, Driscoll has deep roots in the area; his Grand Pop Ed Driscoll had a boat shop at the head of Tuckerton Creek. His other Grand Pop, Pat Heinrichs lived on Wood Street and worked at the fish factory on Crab Island in Great Bay for 50 years. His Grand Pop Heinrichs also built boats — garveys, and made scratch rakes and tongs for clambers and was a proficient guide for duck gunning parties.

“I remember him saying to us kids, ‘Pick a finger, any finger and put it here,’ — (Driscoll points to his head). He had #6 bird shot in his temple and another in his chest where a guy he was scouting for discharged his gun in his direction.”

Driscoll’s Great Uncle was Charles McCoy, a well-known decoy caver and duck-gunning guide from Tuckerton who sold miniature decoy carvings to the duck hunters for \$1 a piece. With all these family trades in his background, Driscoll easily followed in well-worn footsteps.

“I started decoy carving when I was duck hunting,” he said. “I made my first rig of black ducks when I was 16. I made a rig of seven. I always made a rig of seven — I don’t know why. I made a rig of diving ducks when I was 17. I made them for my own gunning purposes. I made them out of Atlantic white cedar and they are hollow inside — in the manner of Harry Shourds. I probably made 100 of them but I never sold them. Once in a while I would trade them. My second rig of black ducks I made in 1995 and I have all of them. I stopped (duck) gunning ten years ago. I don’t want to hurt anything, kill anything anymore.”

Driscoll like many young people in the 1950s-60s, got his working papers when he was 13 years old. “My parents said it was time to go out and work. I started out blueberry picking at Gene Reeder’s farm in Cedar Run every day, all summer. I would pick six or seven flats a day — a flat held 12 pints — actually 13 because Reeder would top them off. I was paid .87 a flat and would pick six or seven a day. So I would make six or seven bucks. I eventually figured I’ve got to do something better than this. So I bought a small sharpie rowboat and an 18-horse engine and started clamming in the bay. Later on my Grand Pop Heinrichs built a garvey for me.



Photo Credit: Pat Johnson

Continued on page 15

They were paying \$18 a thousand and if I caught a thousand clams, that was better than blueberry picking.”

“I started getting better at it and when I got married, we lived over top Parsons’ Seafood in an apartment. So I worked for Jack Parsons. The rent was \$75 a month and it was fun living there. I would catch mussels and clams for Jack. I’d go across the bay to Fox Burrow out by the old brick pile – site of the (first) old fish factory. They were easy to get – I’d tong for them and I could get 20 bushels at \$6 a bushel. Then I’d stop in the bay and catch 600 clams. It was a full time job and I did that for years.

“The good part about living in Tuckerton, you are five minutes to the bay and ten minutes to the Pinelands. In the summer I’d work the bay and the winter I’d be out picking pinecones, hog brush and huckleberry.”

These products were used by the florist industry and Driscoll sold them to a number of wholesalers. Driscoll harvested the pinecones during the fall and winter months when the cones were closed and are covered with stickers. “I would go through two pairs of gloves a day. Then I discovered duct tape and that made the gloves last a bit longer, almost a week.”

Folks who did this to make money would call it ‘pineballin’ and some would have a smoke house to pop the cones. Driscoll didn’t pop the cones himself. “I picked them closed and would fit a thousand to a bag. We didn’t count them but figured two five-gallon buckets heaped up was a thousand and we started at \$3 a gallon. I would work all day. There’s a knack to picking—you have to go against the grain of the wood.”

Driscoll and others would pick on the pygmy pine plains off Route 539 in Warren Grove because it was easy to reach the cones. He also picked on the (Air National Guard) bombing range and was given access because his dad (and many Tuckerton men) worked there and they knew him. “You can’t go there now – it’s tightened up. I guess since 9/11.

“Major Leek and I worked together and we could pick eight to ten thousand each. I could make \$80 a day – but it’s illegal now. I don’t get why,” he said. “I did that all winter long and there would be six to eight guys doing it. The state decided we were breaking foliage, but in my opinion, people have been doing it for 200 years. Also when it’s 10 degrees out, there’s no sap in the branches. “But that’s it – can’t do it anymore.”

Driscoll still picks a few cones when he’s out roaming the countryside and makes a limited amount of jewelry from them. By using a band saw, he cuts down the center of a cone and then lacquers the face. The split cone has a pretty flame image in the center.

Driscoll’s industriousness also meant he spent his youth and young adulthood trapping muskrats. “I made pretty good money at it in the 1970s’. I didn’t have to go far, I trapped ‘rats on the Tuckerton, Parkertown and West Creek meadows – 100 to 125 every winter. I don’t know how many are left,” he said. Muskrats favor brackish and freshwater creeks where they can eat cattails but saltwater intrusion into creeks and the abundance of phragmites (common reed) has impacted their habitat, he explained.

But back in the day they were plentiful. “I sold them both for pelts and for meat – the meat is called ‘marsh rabbit’ in stores. Depending on the size I could get \$6 to \$9 a piece. I didn’t have to skin them, I would freeze them and Henry Updike and Harry Ware would skin them and ship them to dealers. I did this during the winter up until February when the pelts were prime.”

I collect New Jersey game laws. Things that are legal now were never legal back then. We had no turkey season or Coyote. We used legs traps but now (trappers) use snare traps, which I think are more inhumane. A lot has changed. Deer hunting – we had to use buckshot – never rifle shot. Does were illegal, baiting was illegal and we had a six-day

Continued on page 16

firearm season. That was it. During deer season everybody took off school. Not all boys hunted but many did – eight out of ten. It was early December. There were deer clubs everywhere with 20 or 30 guys.” Driscoll said deer season now stretches an entire month with all the special seasons.

One of his favorite times of the year was small game season when he would take his beagles out for rabbit hunting on some of the old farm fields and wood lots that used to dot the area. “I had nine beagles – I started breeding them. I used to walk to Mike Witwer’s house and we would walk behind the Armory (now the NJ State Trooper barracks in Tuckerton) and the (Greenwood) Cemetery and through people’s backyards. People used to see us and say, ‘How you making out?’ They knew us and nobody cared about trespassing.

“I stopped deer and rabbit hunting fifteen years ago and duck hunting ten years ago. What ruined duck hunting for me was having ducks as pets. We had one that used to come right in the kitchen – mallards. They are so tame. I don’t eat chicken either as we had chickens.”

Gary said his brother Hubie Driscoll used to raise foxhounds and go fox hunting with them. “A fox will travel five or more miles with the dogs chasing so they did it with pickup trucks and CB radios. But you need large expanses so that’s all gone now. Someone wrote a book about it, *Chase World*.”

Driscoll’s family branch of the Cramers traces back to the 1780s. Driscolls came from County Cork, Ireland. The Heinrichs came from Germany. “My Great, Great Grandfather came from Hamburg to play in the Philharmonic Orchestra,” said Driscoll.

“My grandparents were both born and raised here (Tuckerton). My Grandmother Elsie Heinrichs had a dairy farm on Wood Street. Dawn Dairy. My Mom (also named Elsie) was one of eight children. My mom is 99 and still lives in Tuckerton.”



Photo Credit: Gary Driscoll

“We also used to go to the Columbus Auction with her and she would buy two or three calves and raise them off her cows and then sell them back for veal. We’d all cry because we were attached to them.

“Her sister, Minnie Dawson had a farm on 9 in Tuckerton where the McDonalds is now. They used to raise and slaughter pigs. She always had a revolver and a holster on her side. They were a different breed.”

Today, after retiring from the Eagleswood School district where he worked as the night janitor and met his wife Maryann – a teacher there, he spends a lot of his time in the winter months traipsing in the Pinelands, looking for deer antlers. “People don’t know that a deer sheds his antlers every year. They just fall off. I walk five to eight miles a day. Over the years I’ve found several hundred and every one is different. It’s just something I like to do. It’s nice walking in the woods.”