

Decoy Show Hall of Fame Awardee: Jim Allen

By Pat Johnson & Catherine McLearen

As in many institutions, we sometimes take for granted the history and men behind their inception. The Michael T. Mangum Hall of Fame Award was created to rectify that. Decoy collector Jim Allen of Tuckerton has rightly been given the award for his contributions to the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show and perpetuating the traditions of the Barnegat Bay over the decades.

Allen is also a founding member of the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association. Because of his expertise he is a consultant for Copley Fine Art Auctions and he had his own business, Decoy Heritage.

The Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show started when Allen was secretary of the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association and they wanted to use Ocean County's Tip Seaman Park for a buy, swap, sell. He asked Ocean County Parks and Recreation Naturalist Mike Mangum.

"Mike said, 'Why don't we just do a show?' and basically off it went. The Decoy Show from day one really put the stamp on the Tuckerton area," said Allen.

Mangum recounted that Allen had a bigger vision for the show and what it could be than other members of the Collectors Association. The Show, thought Mangum and Allen, should represent all facets of waterfowling and should be for a wider audience not only for the dedicated local collectors. This is the 43rd decoy show and Allen has been involved all along. Allen was on the Decoy Show Committee from the beginning. He did appraisals for a couple of years and he still sets up a table of the decoys he can part with. He also judges some of the decoy carving contests.

Allen's favorite contest to compete in was the Waterfowling contest which included rowing a



Jim Allen, 2025.
Photo credit: Pat Johnson.

Sneakbox onto Lake Pohatong and setting up a rig of decoys. "Jimmy and Shaun Mann partnered on that contest and they were the masters," Mangum recalled.

While advocating for new additions to the show each year to attract new people, Allen was also critical in convening the heavy hitting collectors to bring legitimacy and quality judging to the show, the likes of which included; Somers Headley, Doc Conover, and Johnny Hillman.

Allen has also served on the board of the Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymen's Museum (Tuckerton Seaport) from the very beginning. "The main reason it was started was to have a place to educate the kids on the way of the baymen; not just duck hunting, but clamming, oystering, fishing."

The museum was started in 1991 and opened in 1993. It was an outgrowth of the Decoy Show and was built entirely by volunteers. The Museum was such a success that a bigger project was envisioned and the Tuckerton Seaport opened in 2000.

When Allen was about 16 or 17, he started on his decoy-collecting trajectory when he a pioneer early collector and duck hunter John Hillman would stop at the gas pumps to fill up his duck boat before heading out to bay.

One day, Allen was cleaning one of the old duck shanty's on Middle Island and found a sack of wooden decoys that he was allowed to keep because the guys didn't want them. He asked Hillman to stop by to look at them.

Allen recounted, "[Hillman] said, '—Oh these are nice'—Course, I didn't know anything. He offered me \$25 a piece and I just about fainted. I had five of them and, here's the cool part, he said, 'I'll take four of them but you keep one. That started me collecting.

"Three years later we're at the waterfowl show in Easton, Maryland. I'm sitting with John at his table and a guy walks up and John pulls out one of those black ducks.

"He says, 'I'll take it. Well, he reaches in his pocket and out comes a roll of hundreds. He paid \$300 for it. The gentlemen goes away and Johnny turns to me and says, 'So, Jim, did you learn anything?'"

"After he passed, his collection was sold for over \$5 million in 1996."

Allen treasures a decoy from Hillman's personal gunning rig. "John was a hunter. I took him duck hunting one day and he wanted to use all his old decoys to hunt over. I was afraid they'd get ruined by shot but he said '—don't worry about it Jim, that's what they are for.'"



L to R: Dick Morton, Bob Seabrook, John Hillman, Roger Dunn, Fred Ellenberg, Jim Allen, John Holloway at Batsto Village.
Photo credit: Jim Allen.