

Herb Heinrichs

2026 Conklin Awardee

By Pat Johnson

Decoy carver and artist Herb Heinrichs is part of a large family in Tuckerton that has included many talented tradesmen. His uncle was boat builder Gus Heinrichs. His Great Uncle was Captain Edward “Sock” Heinrichs, the owner of the Heinrichs boat shop and marine railway on Tuckerton Creek (current site of the Tuckerton Seaport). His grandmother Elsie had a dairy farm on Wood Street in Tuckerton and his grandfather Ed ran the tugboat and truck for the Fish Factory on Crab Island off Brigantine Road (also known as Great Bay Boulevard or Seven Bridges Road). His father was one of eight children: five sisters, Berta, Peggy, Reds (Elsie), Sis and Judy and two brothers, Alvie and Russell. His Dad was also Herb and was a builder. Herb Jr. grew up on Wood Street with sister Diane and brother Mark.

Tuckerton was very different then—it was a town that was 50 years behind the times. Hunting was a regular pastime for most of the boys. “We went duck hunting every chance we had. Back then it was food for the table. Since my grandfather ran the truck for the fish factory we were able to get permission to sink boxes in the meadows and hunt from them. Yes, we had decoys. Some of them were probably Horners, Shourdses, McAnnys – but I lost them all- some were stolen right out of the boat- but it is what it is,” said Heinrichs.

Hunting was so common that boys were able to take their guns to school and leave them in their lockers. “It was nothing to see a kid with a shotgun. One night after school, I shot two rabbits on Mrs. Richmond’s lawn on Cedar Street and she didn’t say anything. If you’d do that today—you’d get locked up.”

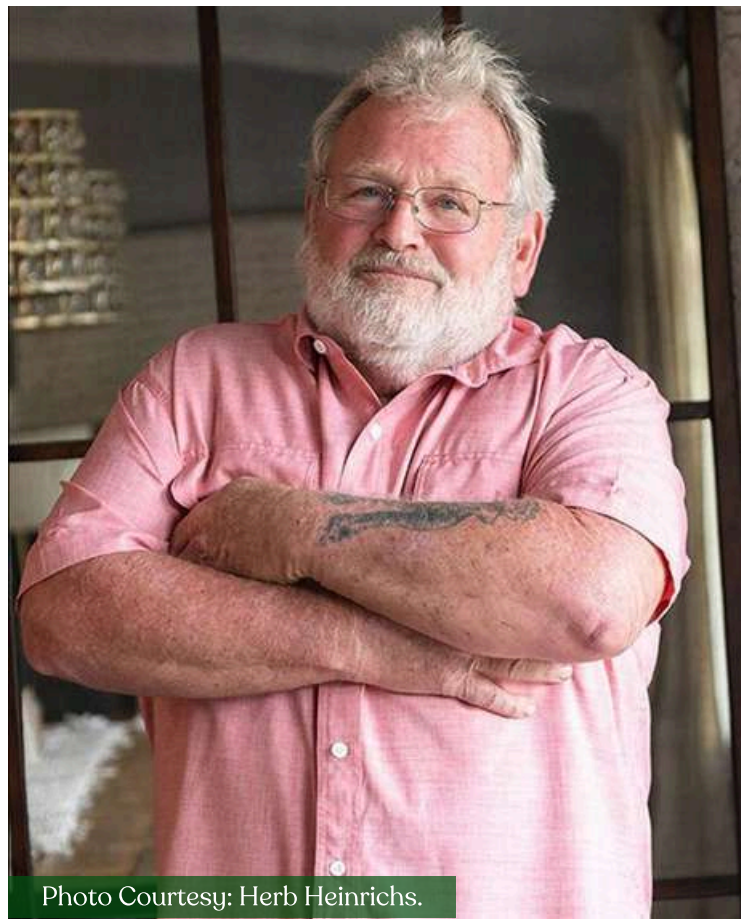


Photo Courtesy: Herb Heinrichs.

Like other boys in the area, Heinrichs went clamming in the bay. “My first boat was a 14’ sneakbox my father bought from Parkertown. I was ten or eleven. I went out with three buddies: Davy Miller, Johnny Godfry and Louie Driscoll. For our age we caught 200 or 300 a day tredding, later it was thousands. I clammed up until 1999. I had 19 acres of clam beds in the bay. I would plant the seed and 18 months later I would have small clams. I loved it. I wish I could still do it.”

Another pastime was garvey racing and Heinrichs had a T-101 souped-up garvey. “Me and Billy Mott had The Miss Town Tavern. Races were held every weekend in Tuckerton, West Creek, Barnegat or Pleasantville. I’ll tell you how it started: Pat and Joe Heinrichs, Eddie and George were coming back from clamming and decided to race their boats. It could have been others: Rocky Wycoff and some. And from there it took off—boats got bigger and fancier. This was in the early ‘60s.”

When racing, Heinrichs met Brenda, his wife of 56 years, in a tavern in North Jersey. “I had blown an engine in my boat and I took the engine out of her car and put it in my boat. That seemed like a proposal.”

Heinrichs started decoy carving in 1978 when he and Brenda moved to Louisiana. “That’s where I accepted Jesus, the most important thing in my life.” When visiting Tuckerton, “I saw Tommy Ryder carving decoys and that’s when I got serious. I thought I’d run with it. I started going to shows and selling stuff.”

When the couple moved back to Tuckerton ten years later, Heinrichs attended the decoy shows and taught decoy carving at Pinelands High School adult classes. “I loved doing that because when you are teaching, you are also teaching yourself.” He also judged decoy contests for many years, as did his son Keith.

Heinrichs was one of the founders of the Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymen’s Museum (Tuckerton Seaport), serving as the President for the first year. “A handful of us were hanging out at Tips Hardware (in West Creek) and talking. We formed an association and it took off. It started as a way of doing something for kids. That was what was in my heart—to save Tuckerton’s heritage.”

The Museum was on Main Street at the entrance to Tip Seaman County Park. It was later moved across the street to the current site of the Tuckerton Seaport, and that original building now serves as the Hunting Shanty - a space for programs, community meetings, and exhibits.

The Museum was built with volunteer labor. “While we were building it I got sick and so I stepped down as president. I’m better now.”

While in Tuckerton, he took a few oil painting classes with local artist Joyce Lawrence. “I used to hate to draw but in 2016, I picked up a pencil. Then one Sunday in church, a guy I know said I should try pastel and I absolutely love it! This is all God’s work.”



Painting by Herb Heinrichs.



Below: Heinrichs, 2026.
Photo credit: Heinrichs family.

Above: Heinrichs, 1996
Decoy Show.
Photo credit: Mike Mangum

Heinrichs now lives in Green Cove Springs on Florida’s East Coast surrounded by 50 acres of woods. “I love the woods. I have a sawmill and a workshop and I can make noise. But I love Tuckerton. My son lives in New Greta and rebuilds boats. He has an oyster farm with 150 floating boxes. When we visit we stay in his houseboat.”

Heinrichs has won many awards for his decoys including Best in Show for a brant in the working decoy contest. Heinrichs was also the artist for the 2001 Decoy Show Print depicting Heinrichs Boatworks and the bird of the year, Ruddy Ducks. The Hurley Conklin Award for living the baymen’s way of life is richly deserved by Heinrichs who gives all the credit to his Savior.