2025 HALL OF FAME



Jim Allen with highlights from his collection.
Photo Credit: Pat Johnson

JIM ALLEN:

Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy & Gunning Show MICHAEL T. MANGUM HALL OF FAME

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 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.

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"The very first decoy show I attended was at the Carlton House in 1969. My dad took me. Decoy carvers Lem Ward and Chris Sprague were there. Pam and Armand Carney started it. When the historic Carlton House burned down, the Carney's moved the show to the Tuckerton Beach community center.

"It was a swap meet," said Allen. They had them a couple of years and then it went away. We didn't have another show until we started the Decoy Show."

Allen has also served on the board of the Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymens' 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.

Allen was born August 25, 1954. He has deep family roots in Tuckerton and West Creek. His parents Elizabeth (Betty) and James Allen lived on Lakeside Drive. The old Allen homestead was on Main Street, Tuckerton. His Great Uncle Russell owned Horner's Grocery and his Great Uncle Nelson had the adjoining garage.

It was a meeting in this very same garage (but now owned by Claude Stevens) that started Allen on his decoy-collecting trajectory. Decoy maker, early collector and duck hunter John Hillman would stop at the gas pumps to fill up his duck boat before heading out to bay.

"I couldn't have been more than 16 or 17 when I met John Hillman. I had my hip boots on, and he started a conversation—'You like duck hunting—know where there are any wooden decoys?'

"I said, ' –oh yeah, my dad has a bunch.' He wrote his number down and I lost it.

"Than I was cleaning one of the old duck shanty's on Middle Island and found a sack of wooden decoys. I was told I could have them because the guys didn't want them. I could take them if I substituted cork ones. So I took them home.

"I had Mom look up his John's number –I called him and he stopped by. He 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.

"That was Russell Hurtz and 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?'"

John Hillman was to mentor Allen from the first day he sold him the black ducks by Captain Jesse Birdsall. "I'd be getting decoys and he'd say, 'Keep this one and sell that one.'

"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.'"