

## W. Fred Reitmeyer, Jr.

by Catherine McLearen

W. Fred Reitmeyer, Jr. has been making decoys for over 70 years and he's carving now more than ever. Reitmeyer's mastery of the trade, family heritage, and integrity have earned him unanimous respect among his peers and a boat load of ribbons, plaques, and sales. Few others have been as successful in increasing understanding of Barnegat Bay traditions. Reitmeyer's generosity of time has set him apart as a recipient of the 2024 Hurley Conklin Award.

Since 2000, Reitmeyer has volunteered weekly at the Tuckerton Seaport & Baymen's Museum, inviting thousands of visitors and school groups *each year* to share in his lifetime of knowledge. His success as an educator is not only measured by the astounding number of people he's taught but by the quality of those interactions with Fred.

For visitors and students who step into the Seaport - typically Mondays 10 AM - 2 PM (call ahead first) or students who come for a school tour, Fred will not only warmly welcome you into the carving shop but he'll invite you to share in his heritage. His ability to embrace those who are not familiar with the concept of the Barnegat Bay, to teach them in understandable terms, and encourage them to not be afraid to ask a question or to become involved has left countless people with a lasting, transformative impression.

Reitmeyer was born in Pleasantville, NJ in 1941 to Walter Frederick Reitmeyer, Sr. and Mary Frances Adams. "My roots were in the pinelands. My grandmother didn't want to be called a piney, it was like a dirty word. Whereas today, being called a piney is somewhat romantic. ... I don't mind it at all... I'm very proud of my piney heritage."

Reitmeyer's family is steeped in tradition, his grandfather was the legendary boat builder Carl Adams. Around age 16, Adams began his apprenticeship at the Van Sant Boatyard in Atlantic City, a family that had been building and servicing boats in the region for generations. In fact, Reitmeyer was inducted into the Sons of the American Revolution through his relation to John Van Sant - Carl Adams' grandfather, a Patriot Captain of a privateer boat during the Revolution.

As a child, Reitmeyer would drive with his grandfather to Adams' boatyard, Modern Boatworks, and helped with small tasks like sweeping the floors and minor painting. In the afternoon, he would fish and crab behind the building. Adams had been avid duck and deer hunter throughout his life but he quit duck hunting in the late 1930s when the use of "live" decoys was outlawed. But when his young grandson took an interest, Adams taught 12 year old Reitmeyer to make his first decoy out of cork. Adams had sheets of cork used as insulation in the old days and the material is easy to shape.

As he progressed to wooden ducks, Adams demonstrated his boat building influence on Reitmeyer's carving style. In the traditional Barnegat Bay method, decoy bodies are made from 2 pieces of cedar hollowed out with a drill press or gouge to make it more lightweight. It's then glued or nailed together. Adams' method involved sandwiching 3 pieces of scrap boat building wood, 1-2 inch thick cedar plank ends that would have otherwise been used as fire wood. To hollow the bird, the middle piece is cut out so it can be used to make the head. Reitmeyer doesn't know of any other carver that uses the 3 piece method but he does alternate between the two methods.

In the early 1960s, a clammer friend of Reitmeyer's father introduced him to a young artist who wanted to learn the basics of decoy carving. Reitmeyer recounted the day of his first lesson for a man who would become one of New Jersey's most illustrious carvers, Dave Rhodes.

"He came over to my grandfather's house with this piece of driftwood and a big carving knife and that's the way he was going to carve ducks. I told him about the drawknife, spoke shave, a real carving knife, and cedar. He was an artist by trade, so he was well known as an artist but not (at that time) as a decoy carver. We met a few more times and he went off on his own. We became friends."



*Photo Credit: Tuckerton Seaport*

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For about 30 years, they hunted and fished together. Rhodes taught Reitmeyer about raising retrieving dogs, sometimes Reitmeyer would help Rhodes (who was colorblind) select the correct paint color, and they'd share with one another whatever they knew about hunting and fishing. "So it was like a joint venture where we would share things."

Reitmeyer went on to earn his MBA from Monmouth College and work for the South Jersey Gas Company for 34 years as the manager of budget and financial forecasting. He retired on January 1, 2000 and by that spring he began volunteering weekly at the Tuckerton Seaport.

Reitmeyer was part of the Seaport's Jersey Traditions curriculum program, visiting schools across Ocean County. He brought flatie shorebirds into the schools so students would have a lesson in carving and could take home a souvenir. He has also been a guest carver for the Seaport's Youth Carving Club for students aged 11-17. Reitmeyer's volunteer service even includes 40 years with the Boy Scouts and instructor of the Wood Carving Merit Badge.

In 2004, Reitmeyer had the honor of participating in the Smithsonian Folk Festival in Washington, DC. It was a two week program, fellow Seaport volunteer Clarence Fennimore did the first week and Reitmeyer covered the second.

They were set up on the lawn near the White House in the "Mid-Atlantic maritime section" which featured tradition bearers from New York down to South Carolina. They set up educational demonstrations and sold their decoys, too. One of the days a severe thunderstorm came through and they had to abandon everything outside until it passed – leaving Reitmeyer to hope his birds wouldn't fly away in the storm. Fortunately, some of the Smithsonian staff who were interested in decoys and duck hunting made up for it. They took Reitmeyer and his son John on a behind the scenes tour of collection items that were not on public display.

"We put on white gloves and handled the sword of the general on the American side at the Battle of Yorktown. So it was pretty special. We helped people, but we also got helped."

For several years, Reitmeyer also participated in the Ward Museum of Waterfowl Art's program sponsoring about 15 carvers across the country to teach a student how to carve decoys their way. "Even if they were an experienced decoy carver, we still had to teach them how to carve our way." Student and teacher worked together for as long as it took to learn Reitmeyer's method.

Twice Reitmeyer worked as the master carver for the New Jersey State Council on the Arts Folk Art Apprenticeship Program, teaching decoy making to Nancee Jo Luciani and Paul Scarlett.

While Reitmeyer has dedicated countless hours teaching the public about the Barnegat Bay traditions, he has also passed those traditions onto his children and grandchildren. Fred and his wife Susan have four children; Bob, John, and Lynne are carvers and Jennifer collects. He is proud to report on two of his grandsons (both carvers) - Tanner has a lot of initiative to go further with hunting ducks and Bailey is a very good carver and educator.

At decoy shows, members of the Reitmeyer clan always help with Fred's table. When his grandsons were young they would get very excited after selling a decoy, exclaiming "Look! I got \$100 dollars!" Periodically, Reitmeyer holds a "family auction" where he takes four of his decoys and has his children draw numbers to make sure some of his decoys stay in the family.

Following in centuries of family tradition, Reitmeyer and his son Bob are skilled Sneakbox restorers and model Sneakbox makers. His models are made using Carl Adams' patterns. When his son Bob was in his early 20s, they heard about a Sneakbox carved by Van Sant that was hanging in a garage in Ventnor. They bought the Sneakbox for about \$100. There was a shotgun hole in the bottom and pieces were missing but they were able to fiberglass the boat and get it back on the water.

They later bought and restored two sneakboxes that Carl Adams built. One was a 1960 featheredge style and the other was an unfinished 1976 slab-side duck hunting boat. The boats were sold to the Reitmeyers at a low price but they needed a lot of work.

"More recently the boat that was built in 1960 needed to be restored again. So this time Bob and my grandson Tanner took on the chance of taking off the old fiberglass and sanding the boat down to the wood and then reinstalling the fiberglass. It was quite a project."

Fred, Bob, John, and Tanner have all earned ribbons at the Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy & Gunning Show for their carvings or boats. In fact, Fred is among the shows top contenders in most of the carving categories. In the early years, Reitmeyer only sporadically entered decoys in contests since he was still working fulltime and supporting a family. At the time, his motivation was to carve decoys to sell for extra money to “buy [his] hunting toys.”

Reitmeyer’s carving style has even changed several times over the years. At first he stuck to carving traditional working decoys, black ducks and buffleheads he hunted in Absecon Bay. Then as people began buying decoys from him, he started carving them based on his customers’ interests. At the time that meant more detail – more color, wing carving, texturing, and fat bottoms so they sit nicely on shelves. For some time he would even use stick-on felt paper on the bottom so they wouldn’t damage display shelves. But once he retired, he decided that in order to be a contender in carving competitions he would stick to the smooth Barnegat Bay style – and it’s worked. He especially appreciates the bird of the year aspect of the show since it forces him to research and carve birds that he never carved before.

As Reitmeyer notes, “It’s important in decoy carving to look at other carvers’ work. Not to copy but to benefit from their years of experience and to learn there are different things about carving and painting.”

After the many years of volunteering and teaching Reitmeyer has done so far, he hopes those he’s interacted with take away that we’re losing many hunters in New Jersey for various reasons. “Decoy carving and duck hunting are very important to our heritage because it was one of the ways people helped to feed their families.” Through fishing, crabbing, clamming, and deer and duck hunting, “there was good food available without spending a lot of money. I remember my grandfather said one time he’d almost starve if he didn’t hunt or fish. That’s what I want to get people to understand...”

His son John remarked that duck hunting takes a special kind of person because “it’s too early, too cold, and too wet.” But Reitmeyer is just that kind of person, recalling, “many mornings we had to break ice in the creek... You had to be willing to crawl on your hands and knees in order to stalk a black duck or bufflehead. Where I grew up, we could walk two blocks to the rail road tracks to Atlantic City.... We would carry our gun over our shoulder and walk down the middle of the street.” Equally enthusiastic about deer hunting, Reitmeyer shot his first deer at age 15 at the Batsto fields and was later a charter member of the Shur Shot Gun Club of Laurel Dale. A lot of the kids that come to the Seaport have never experienced deer or duck hunting. So it (has been) our effort to enlarge their thinking about duck hunting and deer hunting and what it meant to be part of that.”



*Reitmeyer engages with students at the Tuckerton Seaport.  
Photo Credit: Tuckerton Seaport*