

Hillman and Conklin elected to New Jersey “Hall of Fame”

The New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association have elected two lions of the Garden State’s waterfowling carving and collecting heritage to their Hall of Fame: Hurley Conklin and John Hillman. It was the first time that the club has added members to that roster who have previously passed away. Both are worthy of this honor.

Many consider Hurley Conklin of Manahawkin the last of New Jersey’s professional decoy makers. Born in 1913, he began making decoys by the dozens sometime after his return from service in World War II, although this self-described “bayman” started carving them earlier in his life, filling his first order at the age of 15.

His early unbranded hollow-carved decoys exhibit sleek profiles and stylized paint patterns, traits that continued through his exquisite “shelf ducks” of the 1970s and 1980s. Throughout his carving career, Conklin made nearly every species of ducks, as well as shorebirds, crows and egrets. Many consider his hissing Canada geese his finest achievements. All of his later carvings bare his “H. Conklin” brand. His lifetime output easily numbers into the thousands.

Frank Lamson of Manahawkin is credited by many as being one of the influences on Conklin’s early decoy making career. Others find his work reminiscent of the earlier decoys made by Rowley Horner of nearby West Creek. In turn, Conklin encouraged many younger carvers along the Jersey coast, including J.P. Hand of Cape May County, who credited him for taking him “under his wing.”

During the 1950s and 1960s many early collectors, including John Hillman and Lloyd Johnson, often visited his shop. Bill Mackey also stopped by, either looking for inventory or requesting repairs. Conklin only exhibited at one decoy show during his lifetime, as legions of hunters and collectors continually beat a path to his door. He continued to make decoys until his death in 1991.

Although he wasn’t the first native of the Garden State to appreciate wooden waterfowl lures, many consider John Hillman to be the “Dean of the New Jersey decoy collectors,” as he eventually amassed one of the finest collections of coastal New Jersey and Delaware River decoys.

Born in 1909, one of Hillman’s classmates at Point Pleasant High School was Lloyd Johnson, with whom he developed a lifelong friendship. At the time, their only



Hurley Conklin roughs out a decoy in his Manahawkin shop.

interest in decoys was as a means of attracting wildfowl. After marrying his wife Isabelle, he built a house in nearby Sea Girt, where he worked as a builder and carpenter.

In 1945, his friend Lloyd stopped by to visit, asking Johnny to be on the lookout for shorebirds, geese and old duck decoys. From that day on, Hillman’s interest in collecting decoys started to bloom. His first trade was to Lloyd: a Henry Grant brant in original paint for a Hurley Conklin blue-bill. He always referred to that swap as the price he paid for a “decoy education.”

Johnny and Lloyd became decoy collecting buddies, spending many weekends scouring South Jersey, looking for old decoys and dividing equally whatever they found. Frank Schmidt once remarked: “There seemed to be a ‘Me and Lloyd’ story for about every bird in Johnny’s collection.”

Eventually, Hillman began selling and trading his extra decoys at the local shows. At one of those shows, Lloyd introduced him to Bill Mackey, and they became good friends and traded decoys often. Mackey introduced him to Bill Purnell, who supplied him with some good Southern birds. In time, his list of contacts grew to include Amos Waterfield, Bill and Elizabeth Kross, King Hemming, Mort Hanson, Bob White, Bobby Richardson, Henry Fleckenstein and Somers Headley, just to name a few.

One of the highlights of his collecting



John Hillman holding a rare red-breasted merganser hen that was carved by John English and painted by John Dawson.

career was attending the Mackey auctions on Cape Cod. He stayed at the Craigville Motel and enjoyed the buying, selling and trading that took place in the pool area, the parking lot and the motel rooms. He reserved the same room at the motel for the summer decoy auctions for years. Over the years, he traveled extensively, attending decoy shows in many other parts of the country.

“What was always so fascinating was Johnny’s willingness to share his vast knowledge of decoys,” said Frank Schmidt. Jimmy Allen, a student of Johnny’s and an occasional hunting buddy, remarked, “He taught me so much about decoys and collecting, but more importantly, taught me about the true meaning of friendship, preaching, ‘never let a piece of wood come between you and a friend.’”

The late Bud Ward once said, “If there were a hall of fame for decoy collectors, John Hillman would be the first selected.” Now the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association has enshrined him in its own.

To become a member of the NJDCA Hall of Fame, a nominee must be a collector or carver for 25 years, have contributed as an author or researcher concerning decoy history and willingly shared their knowledge with other collectors. For more information on the club, contact Jaime Lloyd at (609) 703-6143. 🐾