

Don Gearhart

An Oil Man's "Pocket-Sized" Rig

BY GENE KANGAS, PROFESSOR EMERITUS

Don Gearhart after a morning deer hunt on December 7, 1941.



HIS FRIENDS called him "Doc." Donald Rosevelt Gearhart (1900-1987) was born at the dawn of the century along the Allegheny River in Warren, Pennsylvania. Warren is in the northwest corner of the state, 70 miles southeast of Erie and 30 miles south of New York's Lake Chautauqua.

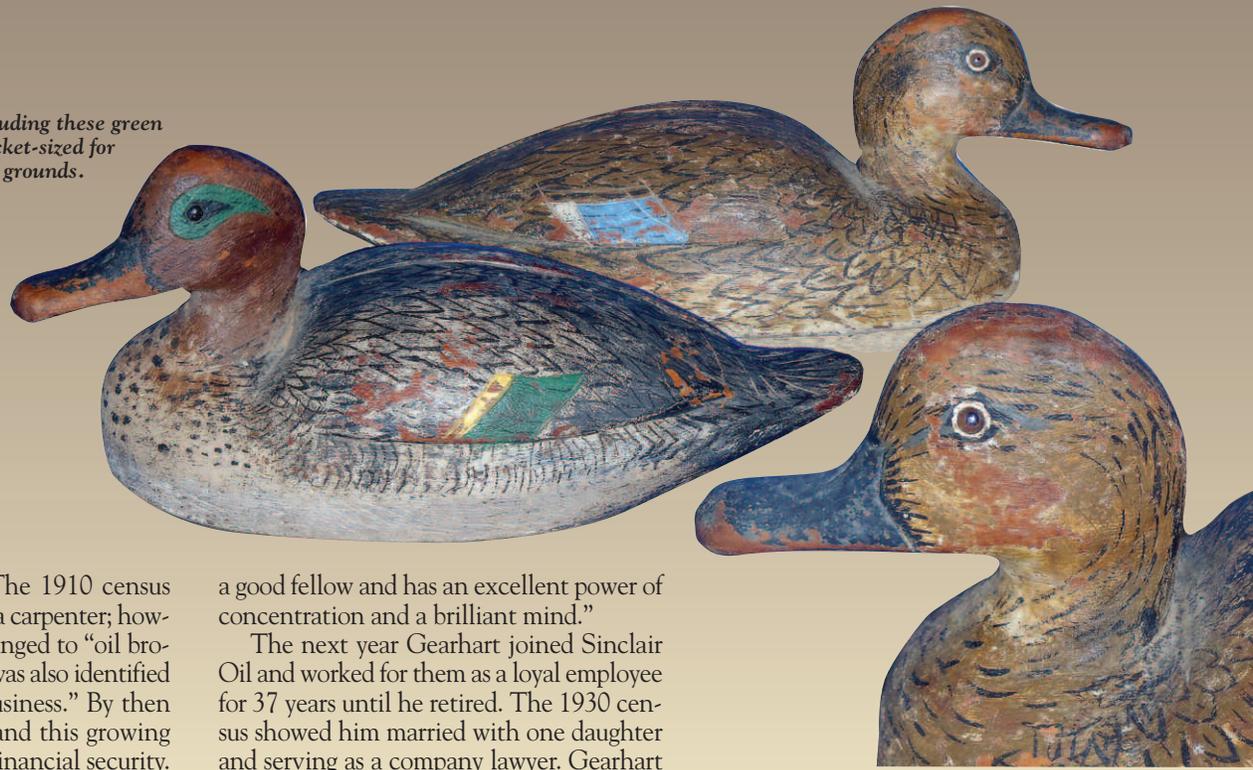
Oil was found in Warren in 1875, and after that fortuitous discovery local oil and lumber moguls began erecting fancy Victorian mansions there late in the century. Don's father Isaac was one of many skilled carpenters who benefitted from the opportunity. America began rapidly unearthing important energy resources that would transform the country forever.

At roughly the same time a more significant oil boom occurred in the Oklahoma/Indian Territories. It began prior to 1859, when Native Americans referred to ground oil pools as "medicinal springs." By 1900 extensive oil and gas exploration was well under way.

In 1906, the year before Oklahoma became a state, the Gearharts moved from their small petroleum producing area to a

Gearhart's unique tip-up decoys feature leg carving, wing separation, incised and delineated speculums and exacting paint detail. Signed "Don R. Gearhart" and "Tulsa, Okla.," the tip-ups, including this mallard (R) and rare mottled duck, were made in the early 1930s.

All of Gearhart's decoys, including these green and blue-winged teal, are pocket-sized for easy transport to the hunting grounds.



rapidly developing one. The 1910 census listed Isaac's occupation as a carpenter; however by 1920 his status changed to "oil broker" and Don's older sister was also identified as employed in the "oil business." By then the family lived in Tulsa and this growing industry guaranteed their financial security.

Gearhart's high school education was interrupted by service in World War I. After returning to Tulsa he completed his high school studies in 1921 and later enrolled in the Tulsa College of Law, from which he graduated in 1927. Six classmates affectionately observed in the law yearbook, "Doc' is

a good fellow and has an excellent power of concentration and a brilliant mind."

The next year Gearhart joined Sinclair Oil and worked for them as a loyal employee for 37 years until he retired. The 1930 census showed him married with one daughter and serving as a company lawyer. Gearhart was beginning to climb the company ladder.

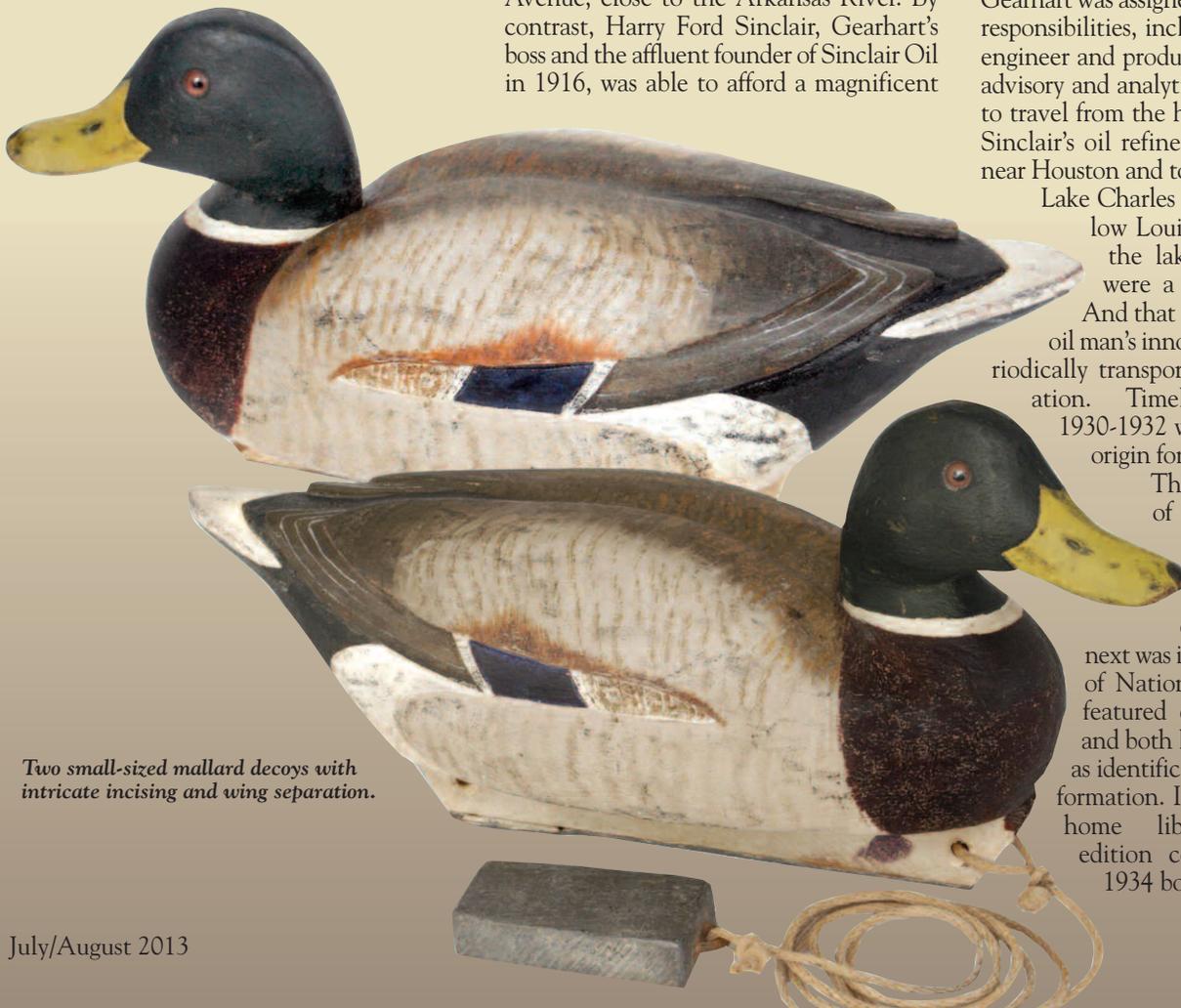
Unfortunately the 1930s proved to be incredibly challenging for most Americans, as the advent of the Great Depression caused unavoidable lifestyle changes. Luckily Don, his wife Vera and their daughter Donna earned sufficient income to own a modest suburban brick home at 1331 South Indian Avenue, close to the Arkansas River. By contrast, Harry Ford Sinclair, Gearhart's boss and the affluent founder of Sinclair Oil in 1916, was able to afford a magnificent

New York City stone mega mansion purchased in 1918 with the company's astounding profits. He retained ownership of the huge urban edifice until 1930, when even the wealthiest were forced to begin making personal sacrifices.

During that extremely difficult era Gearhart was assigned several new corporate responsibilities, including that of valuation engineer and production supervisor. Those advisory and analytical duties required him to travel from the home offices in Tulsa to Sinclair's oil refineries in southeast Texas near Houston and to southwest Louisiana.

Lake Charles and the adjoining shallow Louisiana marshes south of the lake in Calcasieu Parish were a waterfowling paradise. And that is where this Oklahoma oil man's innovative decoy rig was periodically transported for personal recreation. Timelines indicate that 1930-1932 was a probable period of origin for Gearhart's first decoys.

The initial public exposure of a Gearhart decoy appeared in an advertisement in the May/June 2006 issue of Decoy Magazine. The next was in the premier 2012 issue of National Decoy News. Both featured drake ringneck decoys and both listings offered his name as identification but little other information. Interestingly, Gearhart's home library included first edition copies of Joel Barber's 1934 book "Wild Fowl Decoys"



Two small-sized mallard decoys with intricate incising and wing separation.

and Francis Kortrights's 1942 classic "The Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America."

A cursory forensic examination of Gearhart's decoys coupled with relevant historical facts leads to clarification of who Gearhart was, what his intentions were and what probably influenced him. Although no available correspondence offers any overt explanation of his purpose, analysis of existing details does provide a better understanding of their significance. Gearhart's decoys do, however, illustrate an independent and inventive mind that considered solutions to a range of criteria.

It was the rare American decoy maker who fashioned ducks in one state specifically for personal use in another. Transportation from region to region was certainly a prime

consideration. Since Louisiana's marshes, ponds and potholes were Gearhart's final destination, he designed a most atypical "pocket-sized" rig over 80 years ago. His reduced scale working decoys, which are roughly one-half the size of full-size lures, could have been easily carried in storage containers, by hand and/or by pirogue. They



The bottoms of Gearhart's earlier rig (below) is signed with painted letters, while his 1941 rig has his signature engraved into the bottoms.



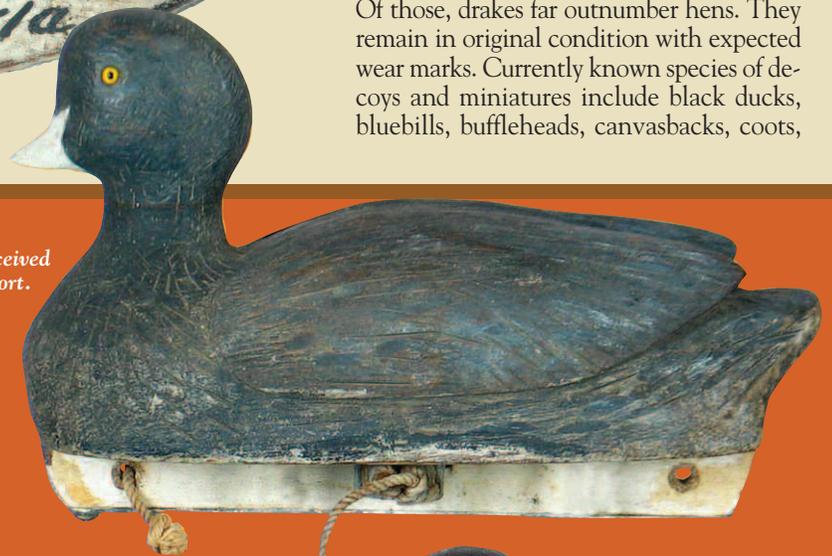
A newspaper portrait of Gearhart from the 1950s.



are some of the smallest working decoys known.

Composition of the rig is intriguing. Gearhart's estimated combined total of working and non-working glass eyed puddle ducks and divers probably didn't exceed 50. Of those, drakes far outnumber hens. They remain in original condition with expected wear marks. Currently known species of decoys and miniatures include black ducks, bluebills, buffleheads, canvasbacks, coots,

Rare coot with keel drilled fore and aft for securing the rig and a center notch that received the lead anchor for easy storage and transport.



Pair of bluebills with detailed paint patterns. Most of the decoys still have their rigging intact.



Don Gearhart's brick house in the Tulsa suburbs (L) was modest in comparison to Harry Ford Sinclair's magnificent mansion in New York City.

goldeneyes, mallards, redheads, ringnecks, blue and green-winged teal, an unfinished pintail and a few rare "mottled ducks." The majority have incised speculums, relief carved wing outlines, short resting necks and raised wingtips. All were signed "Don R. Gearhart, Tulsa, Okla."

Anyone finding a stray decoy back then could have simply returned it to the owner. His hand-painted signatures are evident of pride and indicative of their out-of-state use. If, on the other hand, they were intended only for hunting over in Oklahoma, state identification wouldn't have been necessary.

Louisiana makers typically relied upon lightweight cypress root, but Gearhart used heavier cedar and pine for his decoys. Weight differentials likely were factored into his decoy scale decisions. Plus, the narrowness and limited space of pirogues to carry both hunter and gear required careful planning. Pocket-sized decoys perfectly answered those restrictions.

Thankfully the complete rigging still exists on most of Gearhart's remaining decoys, which offers valuable insights. The length of the anchor

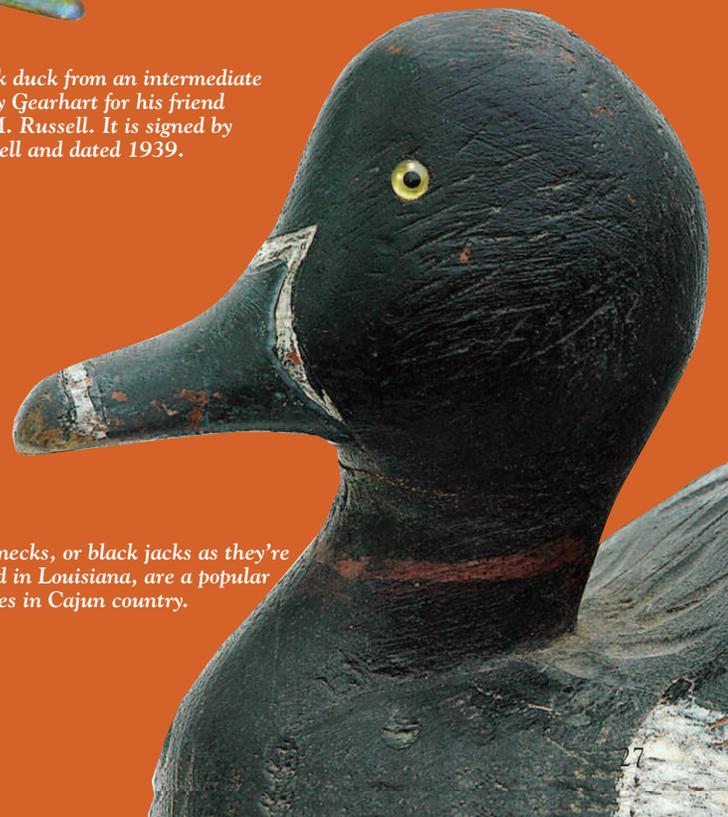
strings was carefully calculated. The smallest tip-ups have anchor line ties measuring two to three feet in length. Slightly larger floaters, by comparison, have strings measuring from three to nine feet. Attached to the end of each is a custom made tapered rectangular lead weight, flat on one side and angled on the opposite. Gearhart likely cast them with molten lead in a handmade mold. The wooden keels have a central receiving notch cut where they meet the flat decoy bottoms. The anchors snugly and conveniently fit into those slots for storage and transportation, an ingenious system that



Black duck from an intermediate rig by Gearhart for his friend H. M. Russell. It is signed by Russell and dated 1939.



Ringnecks, or black jacks as they're called in Louisiana, are a popular species in Cajun country.



worked in early morning darkness and daylight.

Each keel has a hole drilled fore and aft and brass screws that fasten stabilizing lead strips. Interestingly, even Gearhart's tip-ups feature short wooden weighted keels, a characteristic atypical of Louisiana decoys.

Gearhart's sculptural tip-up feeders are unparalleled. Throughout 40 years of collecting and researching decoys, this author has not seen a similar decoy that combines such deliberate and unique scale, rare leg carving, ballast system, incising, wing separation, signatures and paint detail. Carved legs on vintage working decoys are extremely rare, even on feeders where the legs would normally be exposed. Photographs do not adequately portray their charisma.

One of the half-dozen known feeders is clearly a mallard. Its blue speculums are bounded with a pair of white and black bands. Other tip-ups of the same small size are very rare examples representing the southern mottled duck. They have green speculums bordered by only a single white edge. Mottled ducks as a decoy species are almost non-existent. They all measure about eight inches in length, including the keel, which is more heavily weighted on one end. That ensures the wing-tips will always point correctly upwards, bobbing either vertically or angled depending on string length. They would appear to be actively exploring for food.

The diminutive scale might suggest to



In this picture of the bookcases in Gearhart's house notice the the Canada geese on the top shelves along with two mallard drakes and miniatures of various species.

some that they represent teal, yet the mallard tip-up is the same exact petite dimension. And Gearhart carefully and deliberately delineated each speculum to illustrate the species.

During the early years of the Depression

when Gearhart crafted his decoys, the Sinclair Oil Company exerted a considerable effort to brand its world-wide presence by developing and registering a recognizable corporate logo. It was a big deal within the business hierarchy. Gearhart, as one of the company's prominent attorneys, was surely involved in those legal discussions. The Sinclair logo was officially registered in 1932. Since then "Dino" the bold green dinosaur became a highly identifiable and successful symbol. It connected the present with the distant past, when oil was just starting to form.

The logo is mentioned because creative individuals often scrutinize imagery, pay attention to rationale and then instinctively catalog it in their subconscious for future reference. The distinctive curvilinear back and tail profiles of Gearhart's tip-ups seem to reflect shapes that similarly define the back half of Dino. Could this be a coincidence? While it might be merely an accidental visual resemblance, there is also a remote chance it resulted from attorney Gearhart's protracted association with concentrated legal focus and associated observational memory. He saw something. He remembered it. He re-interpreted its form.

Directly following the end of the Great Depression, Gearhart produced a limited number of new decoys. The floating mallard illustrated here is one of a few made at that time. It is nearly identical to the two pictured on his book shelves. For some



Gearhart's tip-ups, such as this mottled duck, appear to be actively exploring for food.

reason he must have decided to add a few supplements to his first rig; after all, he had used and observed earlier models in action for nearly a decade before modifying his original ideas with slight improvements.

The later decoys have engraved auto-graphs instead of painted ones. And their surfaces are more exquisitely rendered and body segments are further delineated than previously. They are dated 1941 and likely emerged some months prior to the United States' involvement in World War II.

Gearhart could not have predicted the future or what sacrifices it might demand. He went deer hunting on the morning of December 7, 1941. By mid-morning he posed for a wide-eyed photograph with a buck he had just shot. That very same morning Pearl Harbor was attacked. What was Gearhart thinking? Did he know? Life for all Americans soon changed as a new chapter was entered in the journal of world history.

The infamous attack on Pearl Harbor immediately impacted normalcy. American manufacturers went into military-focused round-the-clock production while average citizens accepted rationing as their family's contributions to the war effort. Travel for the general public was curbed, except for individuals like Gearhart who held positions of critical national interest. He continued venturing back and forth between the production wells and refineries.

For his valued labors, Gearhart was awarded with a war-time promotion in 1944 to the Vice Presidency and Director of Sinclair Oil and Gas in North America. His boss and friend, Harry Ford Sinclair, retired from active involvement with the company in 1949 and passed away in 1956, the same year that Don Gearhart accepted the Presidency of Sinclair Canada Oil.

The carpenter's son had reached the pinnacle of the corporate ladder. He retired from his international role in 1965 and passed away 22 years later in 1987, after a long and fruitful life. 

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