BURLINGTON BAY at the west end of Lake Ontario was once a haven for waterfowl during their southern migrations each fall. With its shores lined with shallow bays and inlets replete with marshes and wild celery throughout, it was a natural “fueling station.” The shallow sandy areas along the beach strip that enclosed the bay were also top feeding areas. Bluebills, redheads and canvasbacks congregated by the thousands at this favorite rest stop on their way to the wintering grounds and the locals took full advantage of the opportunity.

Although it’s called Burlington Bay on most maps, the locals sometimes referred to it as Hamilton Bay, as the sand spit that encloses it is called Hamilton Beach. The city of Hamilton sits on one side of the bay while the town of Burlington encompasses the other. The beach strip is divided in two by the shipping canal that cuts through it, allowing the ships that came to Hamilton Harbor access to the Great Lakes.

In the early days the bay provided such an opportunity for waterfowlers that market hunting was practiced by some of the locals. A ready demand for game existed both at the Hamilton open-air farmers market and to supply the regular duck dinners held at the Dynes Hotel on the beach. Many locals engaged in muskrat trapping, fishing and duck hunting to support their families, and fathers passed on these interests to their children. Even though money in the community...
shoe array with the open side facing the beach, which was believed to hold the ducks a bit during a hunter’s approach. Once the divers came into the decoys, the hunters would sneak out on them in a double-ended skiff powered by a strong sculling arm. The boat had a small frame interlaced with grass or reeds, called a screen, attached to its bow, hiding the movements of the hunters as they approached the ducks, thus the term “screening.” The legal limit for setting the decoys from shore was 200 yards.

Since divers tend to fly quite far out on large bodies of water, visibility was important to success, so a move towards larger than life decoys evolved in the 1930s and 40s. And to safely transport a sufficient number in a 16-foot skiff with two men, they had to be light, so most were hollowed as much as possible, with a 3/8-inch thickness, including the bottom board, providing about the right amount of weight without sacrificing strength. It is a rare exception to find a Burlington Bay decoy not made this way, although some of the “hide” hunters, those shooting from shore blinds, did make solid-bodied decoys.

Another trait common, though not unique to Burlington Bay decoys, is the raised neck shelf, often on the same plane as the top of the back but sometimes lower. This raised shelf allowed the joint between the neck and head to stay above the runoff of water from the

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Gord Munger, the author’s father (R), screening on Burlington Bay with Jack Ireland, ca. 1950.
back, thus keeping the seepage from causing problems in the joint. The carving behind the neck from the back of the shelf down to the shoulders allows for complete water runoff to prevent or at least minimize ice buildup in late season weather.

The heads most admired are those with full cheeks as a good-sized profile was important for visibility. The bills are almost always parallel to the water surface or slightly upward to prevent ice buildup on the bill tip. The upturned bills on some decoys would make the water run back under the chin; ice formation here would be less noticeable to the ducks than an unnatural glob of ice hanging from the bill. Since the last third of the season occurs in below freezing weather, these are important details to consider. Mandible separation, nostrils and a nail are sometimes included, although the nail is sometimes omitted.

Almost universally standard to Burlington Bay decoys is the swing weight, and there are several reasons. Most importantly, the swing weight is screwed to the edges of the bottom of the decoy, avoiding a hole in the bottom board that would invite leakage. In addition, the weight hangs down about six inches, causing a very low center of gravity to maintain an upright position even in a rough chop, a common feature in Burlington Bay and Hamilton Beach. Unlike the keels on other decoys, the swing weight folds up under the decoy with a single loop of the anchor cord. After securing the swing weight with a few additional loops around the body, the last three wraps go around the neck, making it ready for storage. Finally, the method of hanging the swing weight in concert with the flat bottom allows the decoy to ride naturally over the chop with no side-to-side roll, creating a more natural look on the water.

The earliest known makers, like the Morris clan, Dalton and Mummery, made life-sized decoys in the last half of the 19th century with artful attention to the details they thought most important. Most of them were also boat builders, so the materials available were often ends from planking for the large sailboats they built. These men had skills suited to the nautical woodworking craft. Hugh James, oldest of the Weir family, made decoys with slightly oversized heads. His brothers Al and Fred (Pop) did as well, but it was the much younger George (Geordie or Red) who was the most prolific and influential in the evolution to a larger screening decoy.

It’s no doubt that the styles of the earlier makers were incorporated by later generations into their decoys. For example, it appears that Donnie Reid made decoys with a similar body to those of F.G. Mummery, and that Ivar Fernlund’s decoys, to some extent, follow the style of Reid’s. If one fellow’s decoys were working well, then why not copy the best at-
tributes of those decoys when making their own.

Most late 19th century and early 20th century Burlington Bay makers built life-sized decoys, possibly because they were “hide” hunters or shot in an area with little competition. They concentrated their efforts on paint and carving detail to make a more realistic rig. Several were either pattern makers or knew someone with access to “pattern pine,” which is clean and free of knots, excellent wood for carving decoys. But as more fellows hunted the bay by screening and a limit was placed on the number of decoys one could legally set, the only other recourse to “outdraw” the competition was a bigger decoy. George Weir was the first to answer this call.

The following carvers were the most talented and important makers of Burlington Bay decoys, both yesterday’s hunters and today’s collectors would agree.

Donnie Reid (1862-1920) made primarily bluebill and redhead decoys with a body shape almost identical to Mummery, with a bit more detail to the bill, a straight rather than an upturned tail sloping down to near the water surface and very often with a ¼-inch dowel through the neck joint, possibly to tighten it and prevent leakage. While the style of his birds remained fairly constant over time, he did produce a variety with resting and alert attitudes and even some “coat pocket” bluebills, little 10½ inch gems that weighed only ten ounces. While they did indeed fit in a coat pocket, they were likely made to carry to a remote spot for a bit of shore shooting. Unlike most Burlington Bay hunters, Reid shot mostly from a blind in the marshes at the northwest end of the bay not far from his home. All of his decoys have a DR brand at least once, sometimes twice, on the bottom.

Ivar Fernlund (1881-1933) arrived in Hamilton in 1906, joining Westinghouse as a pattern shop foreman. Sometime later he moved to the Beach Strip and became friends with Bill Hazel, a screener and his next door neighbor. Along lines similar to Reid, his decoys exhibit finer detail in every way. He carved only his own rig, never made a bird for sale and is estimated to have made only 150 decoys in his relatively short lifetime. Painted with great skill in artist’s oils, he produced a full range of species hunted in the area - whenever he shot a new species he would use it as a model to produce a decoy for his rig - including bluebills, redheads, canvasbacks, black ducks, scoters, pintails (only two drakes and a hen), mallards (only one known pair) and a wood duck drake.

Bill Hazel (1893-1940) made nice examples of bluebills and redheads. The bluebills have a body shape similar to Fernlund’s but sporting a swimming head style of his own design. The pronounced crown on the head of his redheads is a variation to that style.
Both are life-sized birds with pleasant paint patterns.

Abner Cassidy (c. 1900) was another maker who followed the Mummery style. He only made them for himself, so their numbers are quite small. Life-sized decoys, they have a thin neck like the Mummery birds with the initials AC carved under the tail and the bill.

William “Willy” Freeborn (1883-1971) favored the Morris style but carved more depth between the shoulders, which give the wings more prominence. He also cut the underside of the tail straight in on the horizontal and branded a W on the flat underside of the tail. His heads are narrower and less cheeky with a narrower bill. Some of his decoys have the W stamp on the bottom boards and others are branded in both spots.

George “Red” Weir (1884-1978), 21 years younger than his brother Hugh, made his first decoys much the same as his sibling, slightly larger than life with oversized heads. Over a long and prolific career that began in the 1920s (he is thought to have made more decoys than the total of all the previous carvers discussed), his style evolved to a larger oversized decoy by the late 1930s. The large cheeky heads had a substantial upturned bill for visibility and durability. Relief-carved wing shoulders that lead across the back to his flat top tail are among his trademarks. His bluebills and canvasbacks, rough textured with a rasp to prevent glare, were reportedly the top drawing decoy for hunters, so if you wanted to compete for ducks, this was the decoy to copy. And many carvers did, as a “Weir school” of decoys soon followed.

Harry Kretschman (1888-1954) was the owner of the Jockey Club tavern in Hamilton and a renowned trapshooter. He was a hunting partner with Weir and the pair were known as the deadliest screeners in their time, supplying large numbers of ducks for the annual Dynes Hotel game dinner on the beach strip. He carved a rig of 50 fine little bluebills, many with squat heads, with backs sloping down to the water.

Clarey Shaw (1884-1957) was possibly the first to follow Red’s larger pattern idea. His early bluebills are the shape and size of a Fernlund decoy, high at the back but with a thin rounded head. There are no wing shoulders carved in his early decoys, however some have the sides incised to give the suggestion of a shoulder. The bills have a ½ inch mandible separation and sport small triangular nostrils, which are common to all his decoys. Sometime around the early to mid-40s he started making his heads larger and blockier, similar in size to Weir’s, cut out mostly with a band saw before finishing them with a rasp. He developed patterns for his 7-piece bodies (two lower halves, two upper halves, a back board and two crescent shaped wing sec-
tions), sometimes with pegs to hold the sections together (they could have been added later to decoys that showed signs of separation). Once assembled, he had roughly hollowed decoys that could be carved quite quickly and easily with a drawknife.

Shaw made quite a few decoys for other hunters at this time. His redheads are even wider in the head and body, however most of these were overpainted as bluebills in the 1950s due to their decline in numbers; there was a limit of one, probably to allow for mistakes. The canvasbacks were his best decoys, not quite as large as Weirs but with his recognizable head style. Few exist in original paint.

George “Chic” Poyton (1895-1972), a bit younger than the previous two men, began making smooth body decoys during the Depression years. His birds, the same size as Weir’s with oversized heads, include much more detail, particularly the later birds, in the wing shoulders, carved primaries, secondaries and tail feathers, details for which he is best known among collectors. His redheads are decidedly larger than his bluebills, and some are magnums that take the idea of oversized to the extreme. He sometimes mixed sawdust into his paint to create a finish that reduced glare. Many of his decoys have G. POYTON DECOYS stenciled on the bottoms.

Ernie England (1905-1991), a bricklayer from Bristol, England, made his first rig of decoys in 1925 for his personal use but had to sell them during the Depression. He later made another rig of 150 decoys, mostly bluebills and canvasbacks. A good number of them were destroyed in a fire but it is estimated that about 100 still exist. His decoys are close in style to Weir’s but with an even larger head profile, especially the bluebills. They lack wing carving but have the same tail feather carving as the decoys made by his friend and hunting partner Chic Poyton. He also used the same sawdust method of painting to reduce glare. Wonder who influenced who? But in a variation from his friend’s birds, he scratch-painted the feathers on his canvasbacks. The bills of his decoys are simple and straightforward with a ¾-inch mandible separation and small triangular carved nostrils, similar to Shaw’s but smaller. Some of his decoys are marked COX on the bottom for Ernie Cox, not a hunter but a collector.

Cyril “Cy” McKim (1892-1948) made a decoy very similar to Weir’s early smaller decoys in both style and size. In fact, it’s hard to tell the difference, except that Red’s early birds have a bit of an upsweep to the tail where Cy’s curve straight down towards the water. His decoys were for personal use and examples are hard to come by.

Roland “Rolly” Jarvis (1899-1967) made some uniquely styled birds with good comb
painting on the backs and a black outlined speculum similar to Morris decoys only more distinct. They have a nicely formed head with a fairly thin bill and a straight vertical cut to delineate the head and bill separation.

Les Drew (1900-1969) produced four rigs in his lifetime. His first rig of 100 decoys was made on the small side but nicely styled. For the second rig he used Weir’s pattern, which resulted in a larger more competitive decoy with carved shoulder separation. The heads are nicely rounded and the bills have mandible separation and nails. His third rig of 100 decoys were made on the Morris pattern with the same attention to detail he devoted to the second rig. The tails are carved with a V-shaped point to indicate the separation between wingtips and tail. After a brief retirement in Florida, he and his son Bob made one last rig of 40 solid-bodied decoys they used until he died.

Ben Taborek (1912-?), another pattern maker, made about 600 decoys in the 1930s and 40s, fine little decoys carved in the Morris style. He made mostly bluebills, with some redheads, canvasbacks and a few marsh ducks. The drawknife marks are still lightly visible on the bodies and the tail has a slight indication of the wingtip to tail separation. The heads are nicely rounded and cheeky, with slight mandible separation, nostrils and a slight nail undercut at the tip of the bill. The neck shelf is 1/8-inch high, just enough to serve the purpose, the breast is carved to a slight pinched breast effect and there are virtually no shoulders. Taborek copied the Morris-styled speculums and the comb painting on the back is exceptional.

Oscar “Augie” Noorling (1903-1962), a coal dealer in the 1930s and 40s and later a International Harvester employee, where he met his shooting partner Jimmy Calderbank, made two rigs of nice little bluebills in his short lifetime. They were patterned after the Morris decoys with very cheeky heads, the same bill carving and nicely formed shoulders. Many different attitudes, including some with contented little squat heads, were included in both rigs. His first rig, which he sold during a period when he was unemployed, has tack eyes; the second rig, branded with a stylized N on the bottoms, has glass eyes. All have a nice 1/2-inch groove on both sides of the top of the tail to define the separation between wingtips and tail. Although the heads are only 2-inches wide, they still have an amazingly fat pair of cheeks – fantastic lesser scaup! Noorling also copied the Morris styled speculums.

Les Fawcett (1914-2007) was a “bay kid” who started his carving career at the age of 15. He made a good hollow decoy using the Weir pattern and continued to produce decoys most of his life. Fawcett favored shooting off the “mudbank” in the west end of the
bay and used an Irish Water Spaniel, a popular hunting dog of the day.

Other waterfowlers of the bay, some who made decoys, deserve mention, including Reg Stone (a hunting partner of the author), Bill Dyens, Harlo Trueman, Frankie May (made decoys), Joe Lynch, Don “Ducker” Donaldson (copied Weir), Bob Lawry, Bill Ronalds, Bill Simmons (his decoys are similar to Ken Anger), Ray Hazel, Jimmy Calderbank (shot with Noorling), Pete Townsend, Ross Corey, Jim Simmons, Gord Munger (author’s father), Jack Ireland and Barnie Wannamaker.

As a youngster, Graham Pilling (b.1932) watched the hunters of the bay as he walked to school, sometimes late for class, and came to know and admire them, particularly Les Fawcett and Red Weir. His decoys emulate the size of Weir’s with the cheekiness of a Morris. They have excellently detailed bill carving, the shoulders are nicely formed and he added his own style of carved primaries and secondaries.

In his book “Decoying, St. Clair to the St. Lawrence,” Barney Crandell wrote that ducks were mostly gone from the bay by the 1940s due to pollution and the resultant loss of habitat. Duck hunting continued on the beach until the early 1970s but was eventually crowded out by urbanization. Yet concentrated efforts to clean up the Great Lakes and stop dumping of shipping waste in the harbor and the curtailment of agricultural and municipal waste runoff into the bay has restored much of the aquatic vegetation and the ducks are back.

Just last winter Pilling reported seeing a group of over 1000 bluebills and redheads rafted off the north shore of the bay late in the season. The hunting on Burlington Bay will never approach its glory days, when flocks of waterfowl blotted out the sun and locals took advantage of their numbers to boost its local economy. But it does bring back memories of the good old days and those old wooden decoys that proved so effective.

The author, a long-time screener, learned the art from his father. A decoy maker who carved his own hunting rig, he has retired many veteran Burlington Bay decoys to a new home on his shelf.