

Gove, Birdsall elected to NJDCA Hall of Fame

Dick Gove, a long time decoy collector, and Artie Birdsall, a fourth generation decoy carver, were recently elected to the New Jersey Decoy Collectors “Hall of Fame,” joining Bill Cranmer, Harry V. Shourds II and David Rhodes as select members of this group. The announcement was made at the club’s meeting in April and a dinner was held in their honor on June 21 at the Parkertown Firehouse.

Dick Gove grew up in Brant Beach in the mid-1940s and took up hunting at the young age of 12. His father, a doctor, had a passion for duck shooting, and his friends and patients shared stories with his young son about their days in the marsh. Chris Sprague, Bill Cranmer, Hurlley Conklin and other baymen were still active in the 1950s and 60s, and Dick not only hunted with some of them, but with their family and friends as well. This would serve him well years later when he began knocking on doors and buying collections.

When he was getting ready for duck season in 1968, a friend told Dick that his hand-me-down rig of Rube Corlies, Joe Paul and Les Van Brunt decoys were too good for the bay – they might be worth a few bucks – and maybe he should put them in the garage. Years later, in the late 1980s, he found out they were even collectible, and with long-time friend Grove Conrad he attended his first decoy auction and became an immediate competitor. Today his garage in Port Republic – as well as his house – is filled with many decoy treasures.

Over the decades, Dick has become a familiar face at most of the major decoy shows and auctions, both as a dealer and a collector, and he belongs to numerous decoy collecting organizations. He also maintains a Web site – www.portrepublicdecoys.com. A historian as well as a collector, Dick has written numerous articles on New Jersey decoys. Although his focus is on New Jersey – he has the finest examples by Bill Cranmer of Long Beach Island – his collection includes examples by the Ward brothers of Crisfield, Maryland and George Warin of Toronto.

Arthur Birdsall was born on December 19, 1949 in Lovelandtown, a town at the Head of the Bay in an area now called Point Pleasant. This beautiful shore area



Dick Gove.



Artie Birdsall.

is surrounded by water, and the estuaries and the bay are just a short walk away, an ideal place for waterfowl enthusiasts. He received his first shotgun in the late 1950s.

Art’s family were boat builders, ship captains, baymen, market gunners, decoy carvers and guides, a heritage of which he is proud. As a young boy he developed an interest in woodworking. His father and his uncle, Charlie Birdsall, had been partners in the building business for over 20 years, when in 1961 Charlie bought the Wildfowler Decoy Company. His first job was cleaning up around the shop.

Throughout the 1960s Art took a greater interest in decoy carving – patterns and tools were readily available – and took a full time job with his uncle in 1972. Under his tutelage, Art learned all phases of the decoy making process, and when Uncle Charlie sold Wildfowler and moved to Florida in 1977, Art started a business of his own. He started with a single spindle machine, using patterns his uncle provided. Bill Cranmer was among other local area carvers that provided additional masters for his machine. Today he uses a 12-spindle lathe that greatly facilitates production. Over the years he’s made over 3000 decoys.

A visit to The Birdsall Decoy Shop, in

what was once his Uncle “Dipper” Ortley’s decoy shop, is a step back in time to the heyday of decoys and duck hunting. A “meeting place” for hunters and collectors, there are always old birds and new carvings for sale. Birds fill the room in various stages of completion and there is always plenty of sawdust.

There are also examples of old birds by his ancestors – Capt. Jesse Birdsall, Eugene Birdsall, Nathan Birdsall and Charlie Birdsall – whose work he actively collects. That he has continued the tradition – the fourth generation of Birdsalls to make hunting decoys – is his greatest source of pride.

To become a member of the NJDCA Hall of Fame, a carver or a collector must first be nominated by the membership. For consideration, one must be a carver for 20 years or a collector for 25 years, have contributed as an author or researcher concerning decoy history and willingly shared their knowledge with other carvers or collectors. For more information on the NJDCA, contact Pete Butler at (609) 965-3143 or smokehousepete@aol.com.

