

Lewis BARKALOW

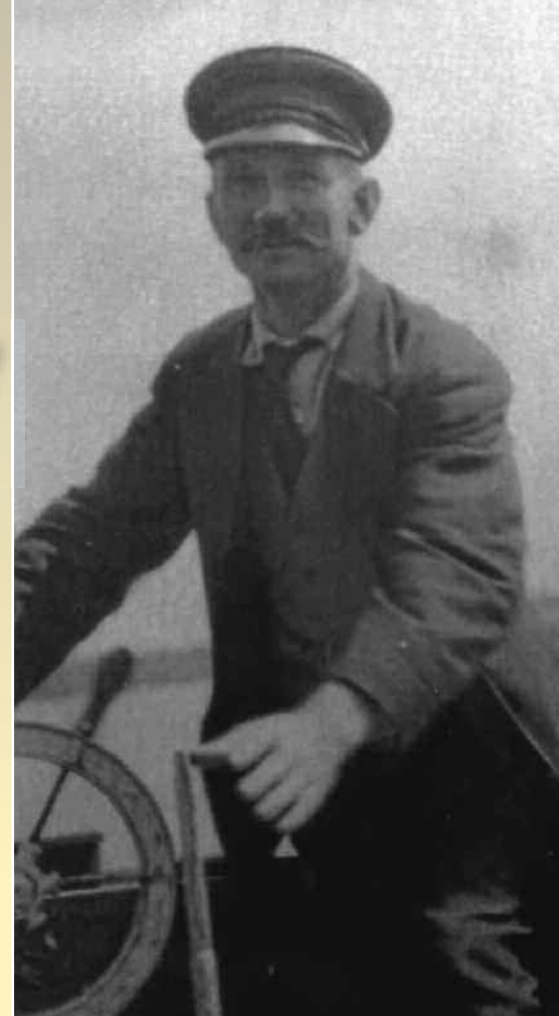
Forked River's esteemed boat captain and decoy maker

BY ALLEN LINKHORST & GENE MARSHALL

Born just ten years after the end of the Civil War, Lewis Barkalow and his peers witnessed more change to the American way of life than any group of people. From the days of the horse and buggy to the age of jet propulsion, his generation witnessed Reconstruction, two world wars, a Great Depression and the incredible technological innovations of the 20th century.

BORN IN 1875, Jesse Lewis Barkalow was one of three children by Samuel and Mary Barkalow. Apparently he didn't care much for this first name, for in the 1900 Federal census he's listed as Jessie L. Barkalow. As he aged he began referring to himself as J. Lewis Barkalow, and finally just Lewis. While his name changed often, he was a lifelong resident of Forked River, New Jersey.

In 1905 Barkalow married Matilda Lewis, known as Tillie to friends and family. They raised four children: Marguerite B., Frederick, Edgar and Albert. They lived in a large, comfortable house on nearly 1½ acres of property on Station Drive. Barkalow, a hard working, frugal man, maintained a large garden and grew nearly all of his own vegetables. Added to his deer and duck hunting and fishing, he provided his family with the majority



Capt. Lewis Barkalow.

of its food consumption. He also kept chickens for their eggs and meat. The property had several out buildings and a large, deep cold cellar for storing his vegetables during the winter. Photographs of his home and grounds reveal a tidy, well-maintained estate.

In his early days Barkalow worked as a bayman on Barnegat Bay. A talented woodworker, he made many of his own tools, such as decoys, rakes, oars and clam tongs. He also made beau-

Sanderling decoys in winter (L) and spring plumage, ca. 1900.



Yellowlegs decoy in spring plumage. The bills on Barkalow's shorebirds were inserted through the head and splined in the back, ca. 1900.



Pair of hollow-carved broadbills with Barkalow's signature ice grooves in the back. The drake was made around 1900 and the hen about 1930. GENE MARSHALL COLLECTION



Pair of hollow-carved goldeneyes with simplistic but efficient paint patterns from his 1945 rig. GENE MARSHALL COLLECTION



tiful Martin houses and skillfully produced many wooden household items, such as benches, small tables and cupboards. From 1900 to 1907 he served as a surfman in the U.S. Lifesaving Service, which provided seasonal employment from late December through March. Many bayman up and down the coast followed this pursuit, as they were the logical choice to handle rescue boats in the heavy surf.

In time he quit working the bay and began working as a boat mate. Barkalow proved to be a gifted waterman and after a number of years became a boat captain, hosting parties for sport fishing. During that time fish were plentiful in Barnegat Bay, but occasionally he would navigate the boat out of Barnegat Inlet and into the Atlantic Ocean.

His boat, the Marguerite B., named after his daughter, was built in 1915 by his brother-in-law, Amos Lewis. Crafted of local Jersey cedar, she was 32 feet in length, 12 feet wide with a draft of 3½ feet. The vessel, equipped with a Chrysler marine engine, was docked at the state's marina, located just a short distance from his house and the railroad station.

The railroads were an integral part in the development of New Jersey's coastal region. Prior to the trains, overland travel to the

shore was difficult at best. In 1853 the first rail line to the shore linked Camden to Absecon. By the 1880s trains left Camden, Philadelphia and New York City for numerous shore points. The railroads delivered materials, supplies, tourists and sports for hunting and fishing. They returned to the cities carrying local produce, wild ducks and geese, fish and other seafood delicacies.

In the early 1920s Forked River was a small village of approximately 700 fulltime residents. Nevertheless it was a busy place. Located less than 60 miles from New York City, it was a gateway to Barnegat Bay with its abundant hunting and fishing opportunities. Captain Lewis, as he was now known, took full advantage of the situation. Wearing his captain's hat, he would wait at the train station, greeting arriving guests, and inquire if they were interested in a fishing expedition. Many



Stylistic early pair of hollow-carved red-breasted mergansers. They were reportedly a favorite of Bill Mackey's, who bought many directly from Barkalow, ca. 1900.

PHOTO COURTESY FRANK & FRANK SPORTING COLLECTIBLES



Hollow-carved red-breasted merganser with a stylish paint pattern.



Hollow-carved red-breasted merganser hen with an unusual head carving that lacks a crest. GENE MARSHALL COLLECTION

fishermen stayed at the Greyhound and Enos Hotels. Many duck hunters, who gunned at the famed Sedge Island Gun Club, embarked by boat from Forked River.

Although an avid hunter of ducks and shorebirds, Captain Lewis was not known to take out gunning parties. Yet duck hunting was such an important part of his life that he owned two sneakbox ducks boats; one was painted brown and decked out in typical Barnegat Bay fashion and the other was painted white, which he used when ice and snow were present. His hunting rig included his own handmade decoys as well as some made by others. He enjoyed hunting on the Forked River, Barnegat Bay, Bridge Creek and the Tide Pond Creek Point areas.

Along with ducks and shorebirds, Barkalow also hunted the marsh areas around Forked River for blue herons, which according to many accounts was a local delicacy. Bill

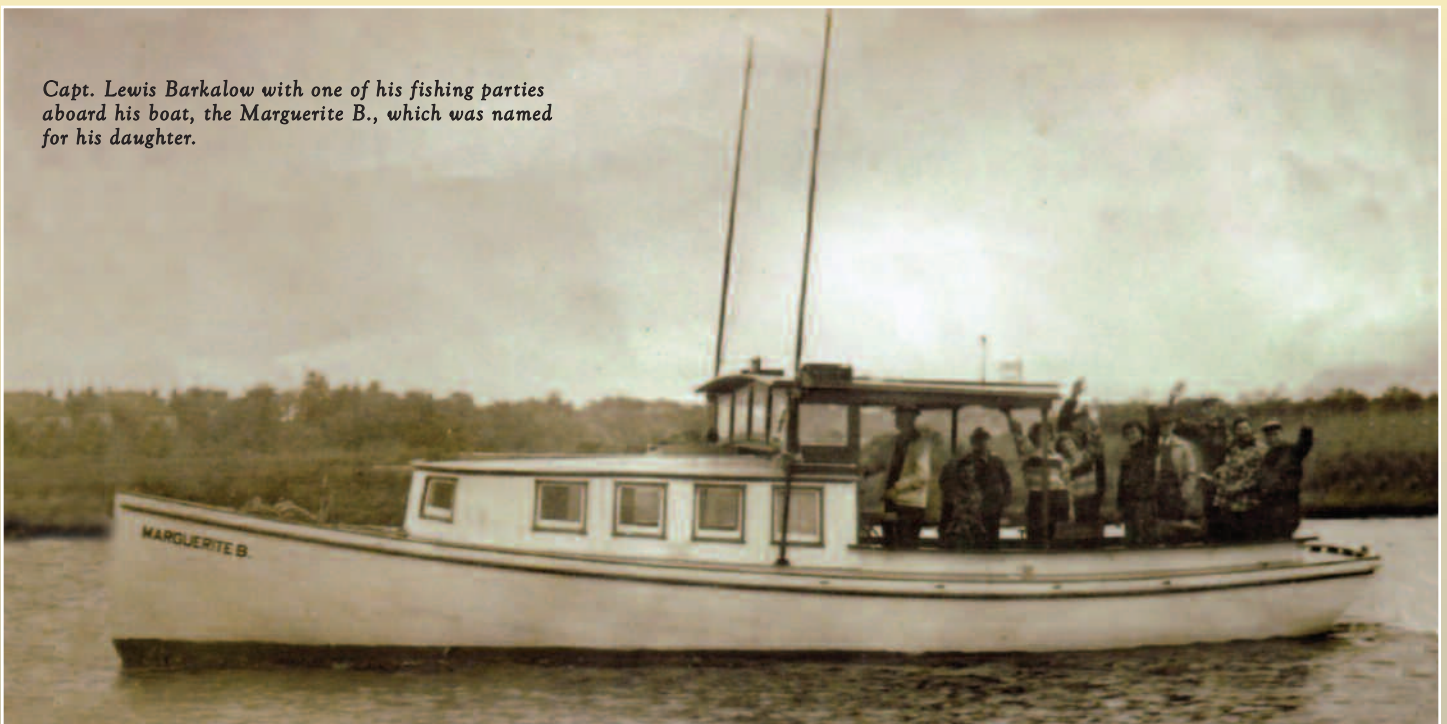
Mackey in his book "American Bird Decoys" illustrated an example of a heron decoy that was carved by John Cornelius of Forked River and given to Barkalow in 1893 as a birthday gift (see page 55, plate 35). Just 18 years old at the time and already a dedicated hunter, Barkalow later told Mackey that he hunted over the decoy for years.

Barkalow began carving decoys as a teenager, starting with shorebirds. His uncle, Joel Barkalow, was a noted shorebird carver and hunter, so one could speculate he was a strong influence on his nephew's early pursuits. He later began carving duck decoys for his own use. After he acquired his house on Station Drive, he carved them in a small shed located directly behind his house. According to his family, he was a very neat and efficient woodworker; the shed was very organized and his tools were always clean and sharp.

The shorebird decoys were carved out of

aged cedar. He used hard woods for the bills that were inserted through the head and splined in back. This produced a very tight fitting bill that could easily be repaired if needed. His simple paint palette included four colors: brown, black, green and white. They produced all the shades he needed to paint realistically looking shorebirds in both spring and fall plumage.

The spring plumage birds were painted a beige color with a dark tail and an elongated teardrop - or dark sideways "J" - denoting the wing line. While the paint was still wet, he dabbed the back and sides with a brownish-green color, often adding some fine ticking or stippling in either black, brown or white. Fall plumage birds were painted in a similar manner, only the base color was off-white and dabbed with black paint. The eyes were always painted black. He reportedly made sanderlings, pectoral sandpipers, yellowlegs and wil-



Capt. Lewis Barkalow with one of his fishing parties aboard his boat, the Marguerite B., which was named for his daughter.

lets. Most were branded or stamped "LB" on the sides and bottoms.

Barkalow's duck decoys are not typical Barnegat Bay models. Although most were hollow-carved from aged Jersey cedar he also made examples of solid construction. His earliest decoys are round bottomed with wide squared tails. The bodies are held together with two hardwood dowels, white lead and galvanized nails. A deep ice groove was carved into the back. The heads, which sit on a small neck shelf, were skillfully joined to the body; the earliest include a nicely carved eye groove. The bills on all of his decoys were minimally carved, with no nails, nostrils or mandibles. The eyes were stamped then painted, yellow for ducks and red for mergansers. All the heads were attached in a straightforward position.

Barkalow used whatever lead was available for the ballast weights on his decoys. Some are long and rectangular while others are square. All were held in place with galvanized nails. "LB" was stamped into all of the weights, and some of the bodies. He even stamped the weights of some decoys in his rig that were made by others. A leather loop held in place by on or two nails served as the anchor tie line. On many of the drakes in the rig, a second leather loop was located at the rear of the decoy, enabling him to attach a short line to a hen decoy, requiring only one anchor.

The duck decoys, simply painted, were very efficient. He was known to make mergansers, broadbills and goldeneyes. He might have made other species, but the vast majority of ducks found on the Forked River were divers. His earlier duck decoys were much more skillfully carved than his later decoys.

In 1945, when he was 70 years old, Barkalow carved another rig of broadbills and goldeneyes. They were made for his son, Edgar, who served in the U.S. Army in Europe during World War II. Both of his sons, Edgar and Fred, worked on the bay. Edgar worked as a bayman and operated a small seafood store and Fred was a boat captain like his dad. Avid duck hunters, they were both gifted with decoys from their father.

These later decoys were more squared off than round, with barge sides and a flatter top. None had the ice groove in the back as the earlier rigs. The bodies were hollow-carved from Jersey cedar and the construction methods remained the same - two dowels, white lead and nails. The heads were also flat sided, without eye grooves, and they were attached directly to the body. Rigged similar to the earlier decoys, most have "EB" (Edgar Barkalow) or "LB" stamped into the weights.

The majority of New Jersey merganser de-



Lew Barkalow and his wife Tillie, ca. 1945. A peep by his uncle, Joel Barkalow, is pictured below.

coys are good-looking birds, and Barkalow's, all red-breasted and carved early in his career, are outstanding decoys. Streamlined and racy in design, they were a favorite of decoy collector Bill Mackey, who owned some of the finest. The heads, well carved with stamped red eyes and bills, were mounted on a neck shelf with some variation in the location of the merganser crest. All sport a stylish paint pattern.

A well-respected member of the community, Barkalow was very conscious of his role as a boat captain, never leaving the house without a fresh shirt and his signature cap. Not only a successful captain, he was a shrewd businessman as well, clever enough to develop a mailing list of sport fishermen. He had post cards printed of him standing at the helm of his boat, which he mailed to these valued clients.

Lewis Barkalow was a hard working, frugal man, who lived off the bay and the bounty of his garden, providing well for his family throughout his life. Likewise his decoys were honest gunning birds, both practical and seaworthy, that assisted in those efforts. He was well liked by his family and friends, a big citizen in a small town. He lived a life to be proud of, to coin a phrase, one he could hang his hat on. Despite the great changes he witnessed in his life, this was a constant that remained the same.



The authors would like to thank Mrs. Linda Barkalow Goeke for her assistance with this article.

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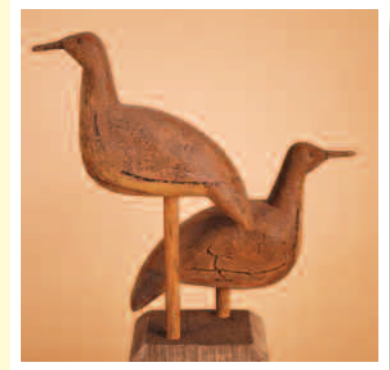
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