

# ZEKE McDonald

By RONALD SWANSON

## *Maker of quality St. Clair Flats style decoys*

**L**ITTLE IS KNOWN about Zeke McDonald. He was an early St. Clair Flats duck hunter who lived on a farm on McDonald's Island, a narrow, nearly two-mile long strip of land on the north side of the Middle Channel in the Harsen's Island delta in Michigan. In his later years he is remembered as a quiet man who often sat on his screened-in porch overlooking his domain.

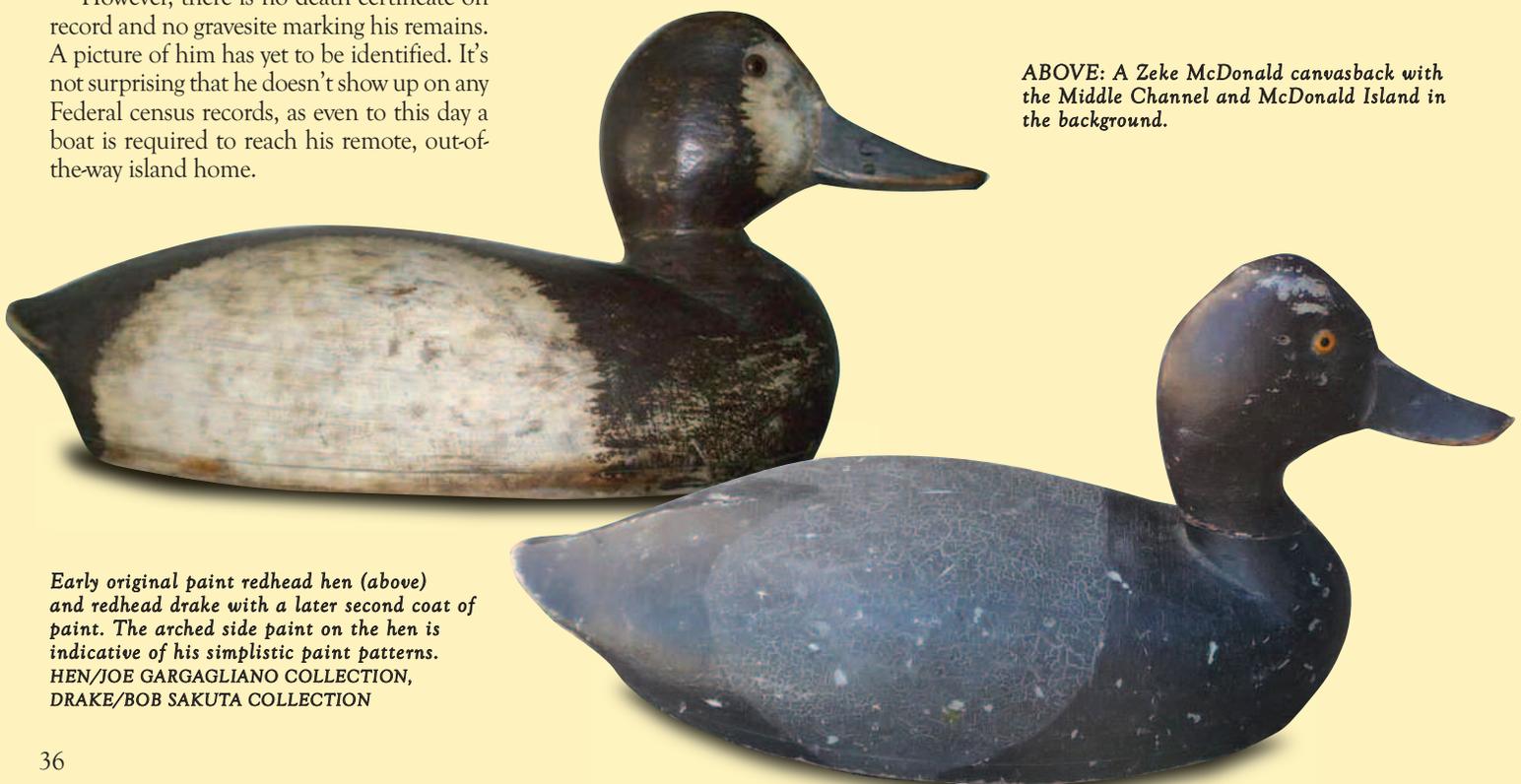
However, there is no death certificate on record and no gravesite marking his remains. A picture of him has yet to be identified. It's not surprising that he doesn't show up on any Federal census records, as even to this day a boat is required to reach his remote, out-of-the-way island home.

When McDonald died in 1938 at the age of 89, his farmhouse, a two-story structure, was left to his son Ed, who in the 1920s built three cottages on the property that he rented out. A new owner leveled the McDonald farmhouse and some of the other buildings just a few years ago and replaced them with a seasonal cottage.

What is known about Zeke McDonald, who was born in 1849, is that he made some

fine hollow, bottom-board decoys in the St. Clair Flats style, birds considered desirable since the earliest days of collecting. All of McDonald's decoys tend to be on the large size. His black ducks were made in a content, low head style, while the divers - canvasbacks, redheads, bluebills, ringbills and buffleheads - sport high heads, not as nervous sentinels but alert, as though they just landed and are sizing up the situation.

*ABOVE: A Zeke McDonald canvasback with the Middle Channel and McDonald Island in the background.*



*Early original paint redhead hen (above) and redhead drake with a later second coat of paint. The arched side paint on the hen is indicative of his simplistic paint patterns.*  
HEN/JOE GARGAGLIANO COLLECTION,  
DRAKE/BOB SAKUTA COLLECTION

In chapter 1, entitled Canvasback, in Clune Walsh and Lowell Jackson's 1983 book, "Waterfowl Decoys of Michigan and the Lake St. Clair Region," Michael and Julie Hall wrote:

"The Zeke McDonald canvasback (fig. 25) is a primitive. The hollow construction of this decoy indicates that McDonald was not unaware of the local tradition of decoy making around him in the St. Clair Flats, yet his image of a canvasback is highly original. The great head on his can rises on its slim neck like a giant lollipop on a stick. The broad oversized bill juts out from the bird's face like a snow plow blade. The decoy's body is flat and simple but it is punctuated with a beautiful tiny tail that gives the whole carving a sense of style. As art, the McDonald canvasback has both the originality and authority that make a good, collectible primitive."

The late Barney Crandall wrote the Michigan chapter in Joe Engers 1990 publication, "The Great Book of Wildfowl Decoys," and in it he disagreed with the Hall's opinions and voiced his own:

"Another maker who styled decoys with a forceful and challenging appearance was Zeke McDonald, who lived at the turn of the (last) century on a small island in the Flats known as McDonald's. His redheads and canvasbacks appear ready to dominate any kind of water and wind while his blacks are overbearing masters of the marsh."

"One collector has described the strong head and jutting bill of the McDonald canvasback as a "snowplow blade," but I liken it to a big-nosed, avuncular professor aggressively laying the facts of history on a class of



*This alert canvasback perfectly illustrates the simplicity and accuracy of McDonald's paint pattern. Applied over a primer with uncomplicated strokes, he avoided a hard edge line where the colors met.*  
RON SWANSON COLLECTION



*Delicate alert bufflehead nearly worn to the bare wood.* RON SWANSON COLLECTION



*Rare ringbill hen, a species nearly unheard of on the Flats, repainted by a former owner of the rig. Unlike bluebills and redheads, ringbills have a brown eye.* RON SWANSON COLLECTION



*Pintail hen with delicate scratch feather paint over the body and head. BOB SAKUTA COLLECTION*

*Mallard hen with a coat of darker paint on the body, likely to use it as a black duck. BOB SAKUTA COLLECTION*



uninterested students. Only the spectacles (perhaps a pince nez) are absent.”

When these words were respectively written, few collectors, including the Halls and Crandall, realized that McDonald was a pioneering carver who may have been making decoys as early as the 1870s. It's quite possible that along with Harsen's Island locals, Charles and Fred Unger and Budgeon Sampier, or Chris Smith of Algonac and Nate Quillen of Pointe Mouille - all among the earliest documented Michigan decoy makers - he might have been one of the originators or the St. Clair Flats style of hollow, bottom-board decoys.

Early Toronto carvers like George Warin and Phineas Reeves, both English immigrants, supplied hollow, bottom-board decoys for Lake Erie's Long Point Club (established in 1866) and the nearby St. Clair Flats Shooting Company or Canada Club (established in 1874). The Canada Club was just a short distance across the St. Clair River from Harsen's Island in the central part of the St. Clair Flats. All of these men helped establish the "Flats" style of decoy. It will never be proved who was the originator, but as of this writing Zeke is now placed in some very special company.

In 1863 George A. Peabody of Danvers, Massachusetts brought hollow, bottom-board decoys to those local waters during the Civil War, where they were used at both Long

Point, hunting with Phineas Reeves, and elsewhere on Lake St. Clair, but there is no evidence it established a trend. (As of now, the earliest known maker of hollow, bottom-board decoys is Albert D. Laing of New York City, who used his rig in the 1830s for market hunting.)

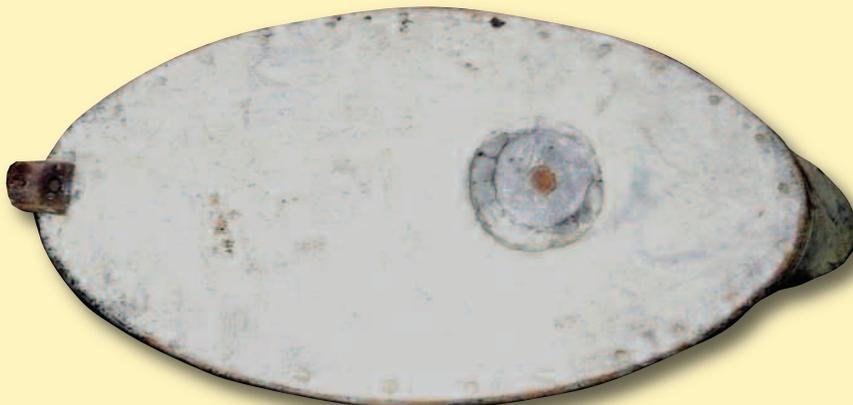
Maybe the Hall's designation of "primitive" in reference to McDonald's decoys is close to appropriate when judging just a single canvasback, but when reviewing his entire body of work it falls short. There is a distinct family look to all of his decoys. His view or interpretation is a caricature of each type or species of duck, but McDonald's birds are consistent, smooth, balanced, very well constructed and the overall look is quite appealing. As for Crandall's description, the decoys don't appear professorial to this writer, but they no doubt have an appearance that is both "forceful and challenging."

Considering the construction, McDonald's decoys are actually quite sophisticated.

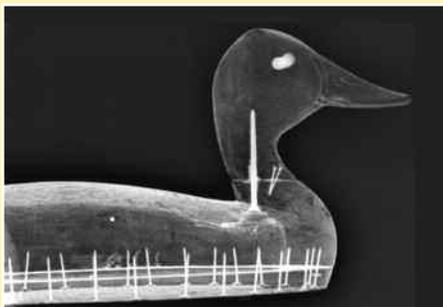
All of them are fully hollowed and have a first rate brass screw holding the head from within (refer to the x-ray). Some of his decoys have a 5/8-inch plug in the bottom board just below the screw, possibly a later addition to plug a hole made to tighten the head screw. The oval bottom-boards are held in place by as many as 30 small flathead nails (no "leakers" are known). The neck shelf is raised to receive a beautifully carved head with a carefully detailed bill that features mandible carving, a V-shaped chin, a nail and his unique triangular nostrils. The glass eyes are first class taxidermy products, likely from Germany. This Flats island farmer spared no expense in an effort to create superb decoys that would last for well over 100 years.

There are a few very fine examples of McDonald's decoys in original paint, and although the patterns are simple they are very correct. The brushstrokes on his canvasbacks are feathery and unadorned, without any wing shapes or speculums, just plain black and white. No hens are known to exist. The paint patterns on his redheads are also very simple yet accurately portray the sexes. The black ducks have body feathering and excellent comb or scratch painting on the head. Hen puddle ducks, such as his pintails and mallards, have additional scratch painting on the bodies.

One example of a bufflehead of undetermined sex - the paint has been worn off completely - is still desirable for its dainty form. It appears to be an early decoy, as it shows signs of having a dog-bone shaped lead weight rather than the typical two-inch diameter round weight generally attached to the bottom-board. Not only is it proportionately smaller than his other species, the bottom-



*The bottom boards on McDonald's decoys are perfectly oval with a round lead weight screwed into them and a leather loop attached for the anchor tie line.*



This x-ray of the canvasback on page 36 shows most of the 30 flathead nails holding the bottom board, the brass screw holding the head and only one pellet shot. Few of McDonald's decoys exhibit signs of shot, indicating the great care afforded the rig by its maker.

board is not a perfect oval, another indication that it's an earlier bird.

There are rumors of mallards but no drakes were found for this article, although there is one example of a mallard hen – a "Suzie" – being changed to a black duck with a coat of darker paint applied from the end of the chest area to the tail. When handling the decoy, a mallard hen wing flash or speculum is nearly visible. Early mallards are uncommon in the Flats area of Lake St. Clair, but there were a few made by the Toronto makers on the Canadian side, probably to the order of some of the club gunners, as opposed to market hunters who preferred canvasbacks and redheads. It's possible Zeke did a little guiding in his early days to augment his farming activities, or perhaps he just enjoyed a mallard or two occasionally, as they are delicious ducks.

His rarest decoy, a ringbill hen, an almost unheard of species on the Flats (examples by George Warin and Tom Schroeder have been identified), has been repainted by artist Bill Rose. Although it's the size of his bluebills, the brown eyes identify the species.

There is no indication that Zeke McDonald was a professional decoy maker. Although a good number of his decoys have survived, perhaps 50 or 60 in total, their numbers are insufficient to suggest he carved birds for more than his own or his family's rig. That they survived is no doubt due to their utility, high quality and careful family use. Very few have shot in them, indicating a high level of pride in the art form and sportsmanship in hunting over the rig. Due to those efforts in creating a simple decoy, his legacy will sustain.

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