



No substantive facts in Bunn attribution

LET ME BEGIN my response to *Decoy Magazine* and Messrs. Reason, Jannsen and Bennett by expressing my concern with the misleading heading that *Decoy Magazine* used to introduce Mr. Reason's reply to my letter (July/August 2005). Mr. Reason's letter to me names support from one decoy collector, one decoy dealer, one anthropologist and two of his personal friends. This is hardly reason for the magazine to state there is "Support growing for Bunn attribution."

Mr. Reason does not feel that I either read or "absorbed" the information in his article (on Charles Sumner Bunn). I actually read his article several times searching for the facts that he claims establishes

Bunn as the maker of the Bill Bowman decoys. I could not find them. I found his article was more of a biography of Bunn than a scholarly research paper on him as the maker of the Bowman decoys. Mr. Reason provided us absolutely no evidence that Bunn was either the maker of the Bowman decoys or even the maker of the decoys pictured in the photograph in Madison Square Garden.

His article bases his reattribution theory of the Bowman decoys on one picture, Mr. Bunn's biographical information, combined with inference, innuendo and supposition. There are not any substantive facts to justify Bunn as the maker of the Bowman decoys. I specifically requested the identification of those facts in my initial letter and they remain unanswered in his reply. Mr. Reason begins with an illogical assumption that the decoys pictured are what we call Bowmans and were made by Mr. Bunn. He cannot prove that the decoys in the picture are identical to the ones we refer to as Bowmans nor can he prove that Mr. Bunn even carved the decoys in this picture.

Before initiating my first letter to *Decoy Magazine*, I had contact concerning Mr. Reason's article with Gary Guyette, Frank Schmidt, Ted Harmon and Jon Frank, owners of the three prominent decoy auc-

tion houses. These auction houses deal with almost every decoy collector and handle most of the decoys sold in this country every year. Each of them, individually and independently, communicated to me that they did not support Mr. Reason's position claiming Bunn as the maker of the Bowman decoys. Further, not one of these major decoy auction houses intends to market the Bowman decoys as Bunn decoys in their future sales unless the case can be established with facts.

It seems to me that Mr. Reason's thinking directly contradicts the long-held position of the Long Island Museums at Stony Brook, who has accepted the oral and written history of the Bowman decoys as fact. I do not believe that the Long Island Museum has ever questioned the validity of the Bowman documentation or would ever marginalize it, as Mr. Reason would lead us to believe, with his characterization of Mr. Ruff's statement that he partially quotes from the *New York Times*. Why would any reasonable collector question the fact-based history that the museum itself approved and accepted of the Bowman decoys versus what Mr. Reason has provided.

In an article in the *Southampton Press*, page 6A, dated February 12, 2004, where
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I certify that the statements made above by me are correct and complete.
(Signed) Joseph F. Engers, owner.



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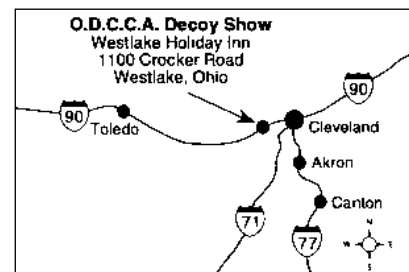
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Ken Cole
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Mr. Reason is interviewed, Mr. Bunn is pictured holding what looks to be a representation of one of his decoys carvings. The decoy in this picture does not resemble a Bowman decoy, nor the carvings supposedly looking like Bowmans in the photograph used in Mr. Reason's article. In the March/April 2004 issue of *Decoy Magazine* there is a picture of a decoy from Bill Mackey's collection that has Bunn carved into the bottom. The decoy, again, does not look to me like the decoys we refer to as Bowmans. Which of these decoys did Bunn actually carve?

Mr. Reason states in his reply to me, "Other than this oral history, which is not proof, no other evidence exists to suggest that a 'Bill Bowman' was the maker." Mr. Reason does not seem to understand that the documentation provided to the museum by Bill Mackey and the Herrick family is precisely the kind of information museums normally require before they will attribute a maker's name to objects in their possession. Most curators do not make attributions unless the object can be traced directly to the maker, as it was in the case with Bill Bowman. Mr. Reason's approach is to attack the validity of the known Bowman history rather than proving his Bunn thesis with facts.

I seriously doubt that the Stony Brook or any other museum will change their historic view on who made the Bowman decoys based upon Mr. Reason's article. I am pleased to report that the Long Island Museum has not changed the identification labels on their Bowman decoys. This is important information that could have been reported by *Decoy Magazine* if there was serious interest in presenting the other side to this story.

According to Mr. Reason both Dick Cowan and Ron McGrath acknowledged the decoys in the Madison Square Garden photograph used in his article "looked like the birds we have for years described as Bowmans." Yet he never states that either man actually told him they thought Bunn was the maker of the decoys shown in that picture. In a recent conversation with Mr. Cowan, he told me, "I do not believe that Mr. Reason has provided us with enough evidence to support his reattribution of the Bowman decoys to Charles Sumner Bunn." Similarly, in conversations with Mr. McGrath, he commented, "It seems to me that Mr. Reason, in an effort to lend credibility to his view of the Bowman/Bunn affair, has made available his opinion to several regional New York newspapers. Building a collection of one's magazine and newspaper articles does not

constitute responsible research. This method leads not to historical accuracy but confusion, doubt and myth. At this juncture I feel Mr. Reason is far from building a logical, plausible case for reattribution. Until credible information is presented to the contrary, I will continue to ascribe Long Island's finest decoys to the hands of William Bowman."

Mr. Reason ends his reply to me by suggesting if decoy collectors refuse to accept his theory of Charles Bunn they should refer to the Bowman decoys as "maker unknown, Long Island." This kind of logic does not sound to me like it comes from an unbiased researcher looking for the true facts.

In response to Mr. Jannsen's statement that "the 'other side' has had nearly two years to present their evidence for Bowman and we haven't heard a peep." I find this comment a bit disingenuous because as a member of the Long Island Decoy Collectors Association I am sure that Mr. Jannsen is fully aware that Bob Gerard, a fellow LIDCA club member, sent a rebuttal of Mr. Reason's article to *Decoy Magazine*. It is not widely known that *Decoy Magazine* refused to publish it. Withholding a rebuttal by a collector as knowledgeable as Mr. Gerard, especially on a topic that the magazine has taken a position on (see the cover of the January/February 2004 issue, which states, "Charles Sumner Bunn, The True Maker of the Bowman Decoys") is not fair and balanced journalism. So much for the "peep" that wasn't published.

In response to Mr. Jannsen's question concerning the "T.F. Norton" brand found on some of the Herrick rig Bowman decoys, he should read Jane Townsend's explanation about the brand on page 25 of her book, "Gunner's Paradise: Wildfowling and Decoys on Long Island." She says the brand "possibly refers to Thomas F. Norton, a carpenter living in Hewlett's section of Nassau County in 1900, not too far from Lawrence. It is presumed that Norton was a sportsman and put his stamp on the decoys to indicate ownership." Ms. Townsend separates Norton the carpenter from Bowman the cabinet maker as being the maker of the Bowman decoys by stating, "After seeing the fine carvings of William Bowman one can only conclude that they were not turned out with a jackknife on the beaches of Lawrence. They are the work of a consummate craftsman." I do not believe that the "T.F. Norton" branded Bowman decoys symbolizes anything other than ownership; they were probably owned by a "T.F. Norton" before they became part of the Herrick rig.

Finally the New England influence found in the decoys made by both Bill Bowman and Elmer Crowell was noted with Joel Barber's early attribution of the Bowman decoys to Elmer Crowell. This decoy carving and painting style is not found in the work of any other Long Island decoy carver and is simply not considered to be part of the Long Island tradition. Bill Mackey in his written appraisal for the museum established Bill Bowman as being from Bangor, Maine and evidence exists to suggest this. It is doubtful to this writer that this classic Bowman decoy style originated with a decoy maker from the Shinnecock Nation or any other decoy maker indigenous to Long Island.

- Jim Doherty
Moorestown, New Jersey

b b b

I'M WRITING IN RESPONSE to two letters published in *Decoy Magazine*. "Shinnecock Nation agrees" (March/April 2005) and "Not very convincing" (May/June 2005). This letter is in no way, shape or form a personal attack against any individual or group. I would just like to share a little information I believe will be interesting to the decoy community. Many members of the Shinnecock Nation and I do not agree with the research or lack of research pertaining to the controversy over the Bunn/Bowman and Cuffee/Bennett issues. The Shinnecock Museum has accepted the validity of this research, however it has based its conclusion solely on the information presented to them by Jamie Reason.

I am not claiming to be an expert in the area of decoys, however I do have a very strong interest in it. I am a decoy carver, collector, member of the Long Island Decoy Collectors Association and a Tribal Member of the Shinnecock Nation. I hope the decoy community realized that the Shinnecock Museum does not speak for the entire Shinnecock Nation. If in the future any attribution to decoy carvers is going to be changed, I hope they are based on more thorough information than what has been presented to us thus far.

- Lyle G. Smith
Tribal Member of the Shinnecock Nation

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Tabloid news

To my surprise I see in the July/August issue of *Decoy Magazine* another letter relating to the Bunn-Bowman issue. I do
(LETTERS continued on page 39)



Club Notes

Make each acquisition a special event

THE PUBLISHER'S NOTE in the latest issue of *Decoy Magazine* (July/August 2005) lists fourteen dollar amounts paid for decoys, ranging from \$800,000 to a low (!) of \$25,000. The price-hype continues in virtually every trade publication touting our particular brand of folk art (America's finest). Good grief – most of us bought our first automobile, first house and paid off our first wife for less than these amounts.

It is fair to say that most of us who collect decoys and related artifacts lose sight of the fact that just \$1000 is a lot of money, so there has to be an appreciation for those sellers, dealers and auction houses that are mindful of this, and at the same time offer "collectible old decoys."

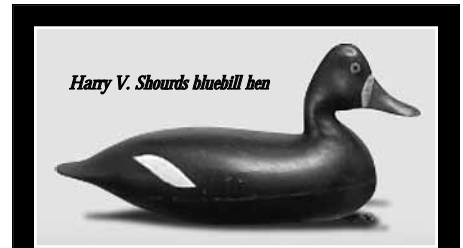
Sometimes not having unlimited resources is a good thing; the result is having to study the object harder, take more time, look in unusual places and having to be careful with the buck, most likely improves the learning process. And it makes each acquisition a special event. Remember that first decoy put on the

shelf – join the club – it was not big money and not mint, but it was and still is special and still carries a story. Joel Barber's first collected decoy was his favorite to the end, and it most likely would fetch only a few hundred in the next big auction, and lucky to rate a picture at that.

Alright you say, what's the dollar-careful collector to do? After over 30 years of collecting I can offer the following humble advice. Be patient. Don't focus on the investment side of ducks – focus on what you like. Do not chase big names (dead or alive) because these decoys are driven not only by quality but also in large part by name. Be patient. Watch for auctions off the beaten path – the Daley auctions this past summer allowed many, many collectors to take home a pleasing bird for less than \$100 and some super decoys for less than \$1000. Be patient. Invest time in looking at a lot of ducks, get to know collectors who share your interests and perhaps share in acquisitions. Offering to buy "all of them" with a partner has worked well for me more than once. Be patient. Let the big boys worry about original paint and repairs, while you go for shape and form. You'll like yours as much or more than they like theirs, and at the end of the road you both are just temporary custodians anyway. And if you are younger rather than older, really be patient, because my ducks and their ducks will be coming to auction just about the time you have either earned that first million or won the lottery.

- *Grove Conrad*
Egg Harbor City, New Jersey

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Harry V. Shourds bluebill hen

Focus on "shape and form"

IN THE ACCOMPANYING column by Grove Conrad, he offers some advice for collectors on a budget. We've often insisted that there are many worthy decoys sold at bargain prices that deserve valued display space. One of Grove's suggestions is to "let the big boys worry about original paint and repairs, while you go for shape and form." We couldn't agree more, specifically when it comes to coastal birds that were used in saltwater environments. When judging the quality in a decoy the first criteria is form, after all, we call it "floating sculpture." The next standard that many collectors apply, particularly to those decoys used in freshwater, is the quality of the paint. But when it comes to saltwater birds, which required constant repainting, we've always felt that surface condition is equally important. Saltwater gave many decoys, despite more than one coat of paint, a warm patina, which makes them aesthetically pleasing to the eye. This Harry V. Shourds bluebill hen, which sold at the recent Frank & Frank decoy auction for \$1610, is a perfect example of a decoy with excellent form and terrific patina that was attainable, in today's market, for a modest price. And as a bonus, it was made by a "big name" decoy maker.

LETTERS (cont'd. from page 31)

not understand why you continue to publish this kind of tabloid news, The only fact supporting the Bunn theory is a picture showing him with some unpainted Bowman duck decoys. There is nothing to prove he did them and nothing demonstrating he did the shorebirds. Everything else is pure conjecture.

- *Alberto Cerruti*
Teton Village, Wyoming

Collector Profile a keeper

I just wanted you to know that I enjoyed your new feature entitled *Collector Profile*. It is even more appropriate that the inaugural edition featured Jim Doherty. As a new collector, "Doc" has been a great help and inspiration to me. I met "Doc" two

years ago in Easton and since that time I have visited him on numerous occasions. He is always willing to share his knowledge and expertise. He tells it to you straight and he does preach patience and discipline. His collection is outstanding and it is always a pleasure to look at and handle his decoys.

"Collector Profile" is a keeper.

- *Donald Kirson*
Glyndon, Maryland

Buy a Cajun decoy

One of the sentences on the first page of my "2005 Louisiana Mallards" calendar stated that "most of the old working decoys that were used in south Louisiana were destroyed long ago by the severe storms that occasionally ravage our fragile coast." How ironic that 2005 will be

remembered for the two horrific hurricanes that once again hit Louisiana with all of Mother Nature's fury.

I'm sure many in the decoy collecting community have already contributed to the various relief efforts, but I'd like to suggest another way to help. Quite a few of our contemporary south Louisiana carvers suffered tremendous losses because of Katrina and Rita. When these carvers display their birds at the Pheasant Run show next April, or when some of their carvings show up on e-Bay, pick out a decoy you like and buy it!

- *Bruce Lowe*
Shreveport, Louisiana



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