

Sam Dyke

SALISBURY, MARYLAND

A “pioneer” decoy collector on Maryland’s Eastern Shore

To most decoy collectors, Sam Dyke is the face of the Ward Museum, despite the fact that he’s “only” a volunteer. But he’s been a presence there since the Museum first opened in 1975. Now holding the position of “consulting curator,” his major responsibility, as he explains it, is “keeping the interests in old birds alive,” and an important part of that task is to organize and catalog the temporary decoy exhibits that bring a needed variety to the Museum’s permanent collection, thus assuring that decoy enthusiasts will always have a reason to schedule another visit. Sam’s knowledge and artistic hand are ever-present, and his work on last year’s Ira Hudson exhibit and the recently featured Illinois River decoy display showcased his talents.

Sam, who lives in Salisbury, Maryland, just a short drive from the Museum, is originally from Pennsylvania where he developed an early interest in upland bird hunting. His mother gave him his first decoy, a hollow Delaware River bird by an unknown maker, but it really wasn’t the catalyst for his future passion. “I thought it was a neat thing to put on my shelf, a curio,” he says, “but I never knew that I’d get into decoy collecting.” But in 1957 his work brought him to the Eastern Shore and he soon became a duck hunter. “There were still old wooden birds being used at that time, plenty of them,” he says. So as many early collectors, the days spent in a duck blind brought about an allure for old decoys. “I’ve carved my own and used them,” Sam explains, “so decoys were

a natural part of that experience. Collecting older decoys expanded on that.”

There were very few people at that time collecting decoys on the Eastern Shore, so most collectors were on their own. “At that time we were all basically pioneers,” he

says. Dave Hawthorne, the well-known decoy carver, collector and dealer, was one of Sam’s early hunting partners, so it wasn’t long before he began frequenting his shop buying decoys. He soon after met Bill Purnell from nearby Ocean City and Somers Headley from Wilmington, Delaware, two other pioneer collectors.

In those days there were so many decoys on the Shore, you could easily find them in barns or antique shops. “Back then you’d see an old shanty and stop by to check for old decoys, and you’d usually find some,” he says, but admits, “I wouldn’t even think of doing that today.” And sometimes you didn’t even have to buy them. “If you were ambitious, you could walk the edge of the Bay and literally find Hudsons or Wards in the marsh,” an experience



Cobb Island curlew and robin snipe with carved eyes, split tails and wonderfully executed S-wing relief carving.



Dropped tail yellowlegs with whimsical polka dot feather pattern by Dave “Umbrella” Watson of Chincoteague, Virginia.



Feeding black-bellied plover with carved eyes, split tail and relief wing carving by an unknown Accomac, Virginia maker.



Bold, upright curlew with carved eyes by Walter Brady, a guide on Cobb Island, Virginia.



Sculptural split-tail brant with pronounced head carving by Eli Doughty of Hog Island, Virginia.



Very early oversized hollow-carved black duck with inletted head and split tail by Nathan Cobb Sr.



Hooded merganser hen with well-carved crest and fine scratch feather paint by Ira Hudson.



Large full-bodied Canada goose with slight relief carved tail feather separation by Dave "Umbrella" Watson of Chincoteague, Virginia.



Lowhead humpback pintail with thick stipple paint by the Ward brothers of Crisfield, Maryland.



Dainty blue-winged teal hen with well-applied feather pattern by Lloyd Sterling of Crisfield, Maryland.

modern day collectors could only dream of. And "antique dealers in the area were always turning up decoys," and few had a clue to what they had."

The original Shelburne Museum decoy catalog, published in 1961, spiked his interest even more. Then came Hal Sorenson's *Decoy Collectors Guide*, published in 1962, which pulled it all together. "When it arrived in the mail," he says, "everything stopped. It was like magic." Sam once suggested that its circulation was like throwing fuel on the fire, ratcheting the interest of decoy collecting to new levels, and establishing a community of what before were individual interests. "Then came Bill Mackey's book and the other early decoy books and it all came together," he says.

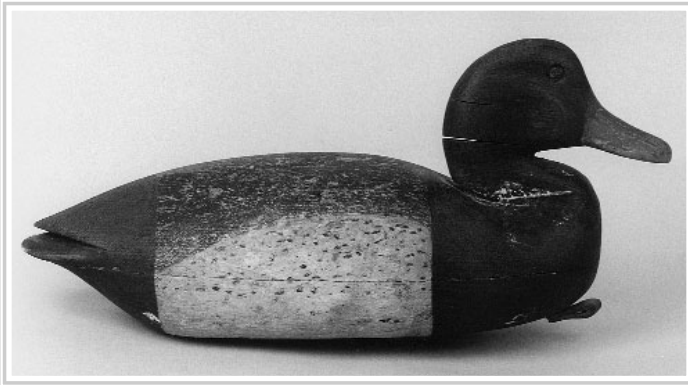
In the late 1960s and early 1970s, accompanied by Bill Purnell, Sam made

about a half dozen trips to Bill Mackey's house in New Jersey. "He was always an agreeable host," he recalls, "and going through his house and basement, which was full of decoys, was an awesome experience." In those days collectors mostly bartered, because the values of individual

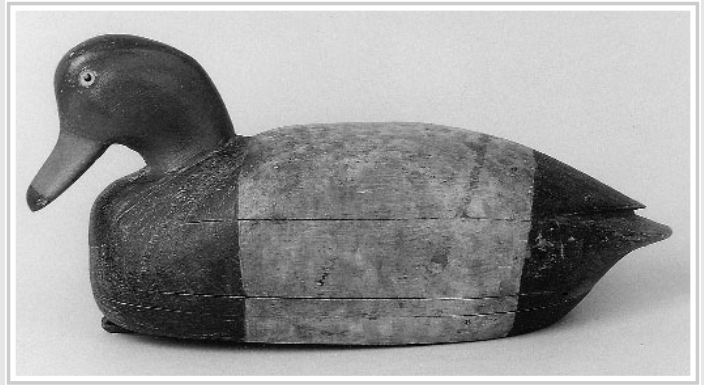
birds were not yet established, so "if you had something he wanted," Sam remembers, "trading was always a possibility." On one trip he traded Mackey a Harry V. Shourds redhead for an Ira Hudson hooded merganser hen. He acquired an oversized Nathan Cobb black duck on another.



Swimming hollow-carved brant by Nathan Cobb Jr. of Cobb Island, Virginia.



Hollow-carved bluebill with split tail and carved eyes by Nathan Cobb Jr.



Hollow-carved redhead with glass eyes by Nathan Cobb Jr.



Full-bodied oversized canvasback with a carved paddle tail and wonderful paint patterns by Ira Hudson.



Red-breasted merganser with "teeth" intricately carved in the bill by Ira Hudson.



Hollow-carved brant by Nathan Cobb Jr.

"Everybody on the Shore knew of Bill Mackey," Sam says, "and he considered it part of his territory. Cigar Daisy used to buy decoys for him all the time."

The Mackey sales were the first decoy auctions that Sam attended, and he remembers buying about a dozen birds. "In hindsight, nowhere near enough," he says. But over the years he has acquired additional decoys from the Mackey collection the second or third time through the

auction ring.

While admitting that he likes "decoys from everywhere," Sam decided to concentrate his collection on decoys from the Eastern Shore of Virginia and the Chesapeake Bay. "Because of the great availability of decoys in the early days you had to limit yourself, for space if nothing else," he says, "so I decided to focus on an area I was familiar with. It's where I hunted and fished and these were people I knew."

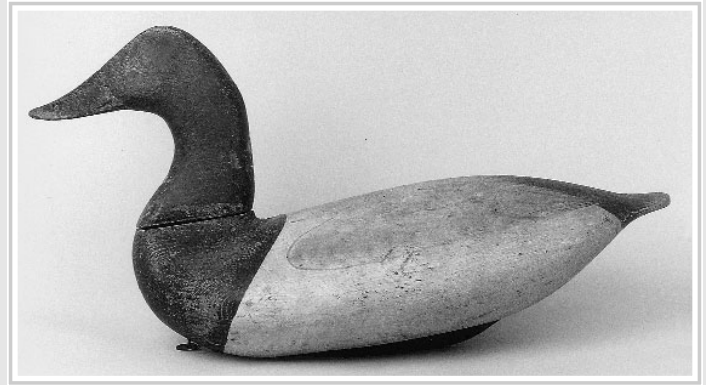
As did many collectors from the Eastern Shore in those days, Sam ventured occasionally to Crisfield to visit with the Ward brothers, and maybe buy a decoy. "It was always an enjoyable experience, but I never hung out there," he says, as many did. But one day he picked up a repainted Ward cedar goose for \$12, removed most of the overpaint himself and took it to Lem for refurbishing. Lem agreed to repaint it, accepting some walnut in trade to use as bases for his decorative carvings, and told him to come back in a few days to pick it up. "I told Lem that I wanted him to paint it like he did in the 1930s," he recalls, and Lem said if that were the case he'd do it now. "He put a paint job on in ten minutes and told me to be careful getting it home."

Pressed to pick a favorite decoy maker, Sam suggested it might be Dave "Umbrella" Watson, but readily admits that he's "addicted to shorebirds." In fact the last decoy he added to his collection was an unknown Virginia plover, which filled a niche. "But you do reach a point where it's hard to find birds that add to your collection," he says.

Sam acknowledges that today's prices can be intimidating for new collectors, but suggests that the challenge is about more than the money. "Back then there was lit-



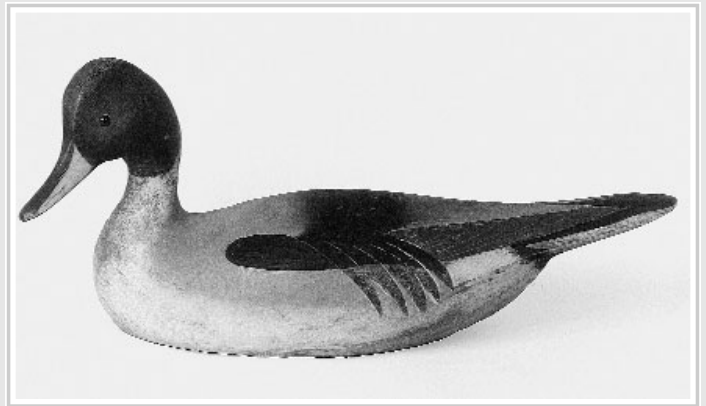
Hollow-carved Delaware River decoy by an unknown maker and an undetermined species, the first decoy in Sam Dyke's collection.



High head canvasback by Taylor Boyd of Perryville, Maryland.



Root head merganser hen attributed to Tom Parsons of Oxford, Maryland. It is branded for the gunning rig of A.C. Newnam.



Long-tailed pintail with a slightly turned, tucked head by the Ward brothers.

the difficulty finding and buying decoys, because there were so many there wasn't an urgency," he says. "You had more time to simply acquire decoys before you had to decide what you really wanted to collect. With today's prices you don't have that luxury."

The high prices have soured many early collectors, but not Sam, who has resisted the temptation to sell out, and has kept his core collection intact. "There are still a lot of good birds out there that don't cost a lot of money," he insists. "I enjoy visiting with collectors like Mike Keating, who has a good eye and often picks up great decoys that others have overlooked."

As a veteran collector, many approach him for advice, and Sam suggests his is pretty simple: "Stop, look and listen," he says. "Take the time to handle decoys, look carefully at what you're handling and listen to those willing to share their knowledge. There's such a wealth of information out there, take advantage of it."

Another part of Sam's early decoy collecting experience, the opportunity to acquire from the source, has changed over time. "In the early days the enjoyment came through the process of acquiring and identifying them. Today, when you step up to bid at auction you've already been told what the decoy is, so it's just a matter of



Rare preening canvasback by Chauncey Reynolds of North East, Maryland.

paying for it."

When Sam first began his collection, most decoy enthusiasts were fellow duck hunters, who were familiar with their manufacture and use. Since those days many folk art collectors have likewise been drawn to them, possibly through a fascination with handmade objects, particularly those made better than they needed to be.

Others "simply look upon them as investments," he offers, although it's doubtful that the decoy enthusiast in him would consider that sufficient reasoning.

But then again, being a pioneer decoy collector, when the chase was all about the birds, noting a lack of passion just might bring about a bit of nostalgia for the "good old days." 