

AL REITZ

“Craftsman Extraordinaire”



Early portrait of Al Reitz, 1933, the year before he married.

by Allen Linkchorst

Reitz pictured in one of his ducking boats along the Delaware River, ca. 1950.

As a rule, the majority of Delaware River decoy makers were a self-reliant group of sportsmen. While several professional carvers did make their livelihood along the Delaware, most of the decoys were made by duck hunters whose lifetime output was a hundred or less. Many made their own boats and hunting accoutrements as well. Al Reitz, a craftsman extraordinaire, certainly fit that mold.

Albert Charles Reitz was born on September 4, 1905 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where his parents, John and Laura Reitz, raised him. John's talents allowed him to thrive in the city, where he painted elaborate carriages, and later fancy automobiles, skills he later passed on to his son.

Al Reitz became a very talented woodworker and earned his living as a pattern

maker, first working for Budd Co. and later for the Kaiser Co. He had a passion for music and played guitar in a three-man band, the Leadmen Boys. It was while performing at Townsend Inlet that he met his future wife, Barbara Edelman, who he married in 1934. The new family eventually grew by five children, three boys and two girls.

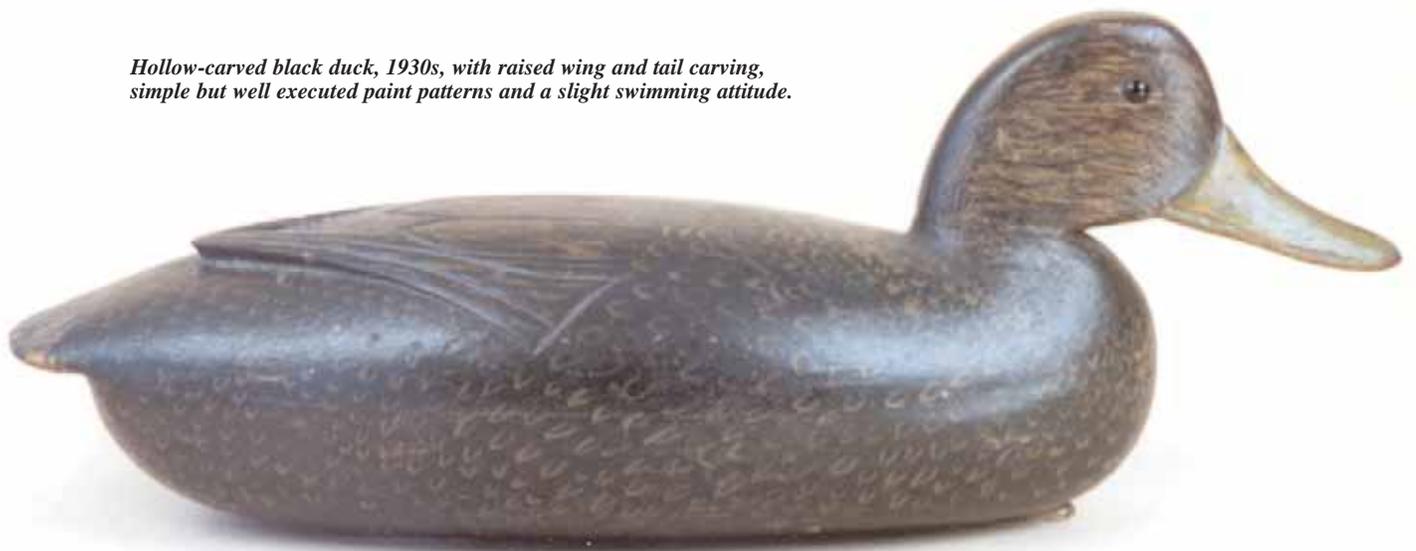
In the 1930s Reitz rented property for a dollar a year along the Delaware River in Croydon, Pennsylvania. He bought a huge wooden wagon with large iron wheels and had a team of horses haul it onto his property. This structure served as his hunting and fishing camp for years. Reitz eventually removed the iron wheels and lowered the wagon onto a foundation, added rooms, and created a house that his family moved into

in 1947. The family soon outgrew this house and Reitz acquired property in Emile in Bristol Township, Pennsylvania, where he built a house with a new shop behind it. The family moved into their new home in 1953.

Reitz crafted much of the furniture, including tables, cabinets and ladder back chairs, for all of his homes. In 1959 he combined his love of music and woodworking, opening a shop on South 17th Street in Philadelphia where he made guitars and violins and repaired musical instruments. He is largely recognized for these skills outside the decoy collecting community.

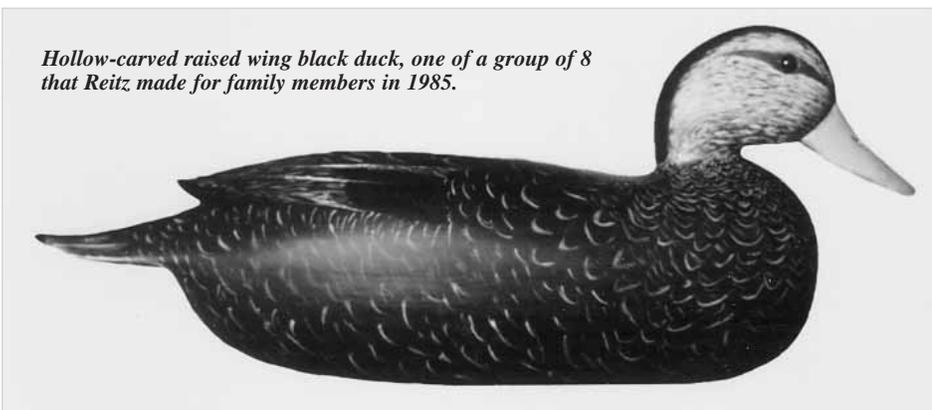
In his younger days Reitz was an avid hunter and fishermen. From the 1930s to 1945 he actively gunned ducks on the Delaware River from the Burlington-Bristol

Hollow-carved black duck, 1930s, with raised wing and tail carving, simple but well executed paint patterns and a slight swimming attitude.





Reitz painting a decoy, ca. 1985.



Hollow-carved raised wing black duck, one of a group of 8 that Reitz made for family members in 1985.

Bridge to the Neshaminy Creek. In duck season Reitz would remove the mast from his motorized sailboat. After setting out the decoys, he and his son would retire to the cabin to keep warm and sip coffee. When the ducks came into his decoys, they would climb into his sneakboat and scull into the birds. His primary target was black ducks, the prominent species on the river at that time, and Reitz believed black ducks were the only decoys needed. His son recalls they

shot many species, including bluebills, over his father's rig. Reitz also hunted railbirds with his son in the wild rice meadows around Hog Head Run and at the mouth of Neshaminy Creek.

In July 1955 Reitz ran a classified in the Bristol Courier, advertising: "Bargain – Very fine leak proof duck boat with sculling oar and 35 hand carved hollow decoys." It is believed he that had already given away or sold some of his rig and these 35 were

the remainder of them.

After his duck hunting days ended Reitz continued to hunt rabbits and pheasant, especially enjoying the time with his prized English Setters. He fly fished for trout in the Poconos, cast many a line in the Delaware River and loved boating on the river. His sons recall the family ate everything they shot or caught.

Reitz started carving decoys around 1932 and in a few years finished his entire rig, about 45 black ducks and six broadbills, all hollow-carved. The designs, particularly of his black ducks, are similar to those by John English. The raised primaries are well carved with neat, crisp lines and two secondary feathers are incised into the backs. The carved tails are nicely shaped. The heads are thin, and while similar to English, are different enough to be easily identified. The longer than average bills are well done. He used glass eyes in all of his decoys.

The black duck decoys all have low or normal heads in a forward posture, although the sons remember two preening black ducks, which Reitz considered a special addition to the rig. The broadbills were short and round with raised primaries, incised secondary feathering and carved tails. The broadbills, all of which had been repainted, have yellow glass eyes.

Reitz was very critical of the wood selected, using only clear, dry Jersey cedar for the bodies and sugar pine for the heads. They are extremely well made with the tight waterproof seams held together only with high-quality animal glue. No nails were ever used. The heads were fastened with the same glue, although a screw was driven into the head from inside the upper portion of the hollow body for additional support. After the glue dried, he mixed shellac from flakes and coated the decoys. After the shellac dried he painted them. The seams of the decoys rode above the waterline.

All of the decoys are well painted and attractive, although Reitz used a simple palette consisting of primarily two colors, applying a dark umber base on the bodies and a tan/brown color on the heads. Uniformly small triangular feathers, the same tan/brown color over the umber base, neatly and crisply cover the entire body. The ticking on the heads, which gives the decoys a subtle realistic appearance, is the same dark umber used on the body. There are no speculums or eye patches on the early black ducks. The bills are painted olive drab with an umber stripe in the center.

For ballast Reitz cast his own decoy weights and anchors. A leather loop, attached with brass nails, held the anchor. A small galvanized or tin tag was attached to

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An invoice for a classified ad that ran in the Bristol Courier want ads from July 8-15, 1955: "Bargain - Very fine leak proof duck boat with sculling oar and 35 hand carved hollow decoys." It is believed that Reitz already gave away or sold some of his rig and the 35 were the remainder of them.

the bottom of each, which read "Al Reitz, Croydon, PA."

This extremely talented woodworker and methodical craftsman applied his talents to duck boats as well, making many, and earning a good reputation for making them sound and leak proof. They all had to meet his demanding standards. Sailboats, runabouts, scull boats, railbird skiffs and rowboats were among the crafts he fashioned. Four rowboats were made for George Cowan's boatyard on Neshaminy Creek. With a good local following, he easily sold every boat he made.

In 1985, at the urging of family members, he made eight more black ducks. While similar to his earlier work, they are not as refined, with deeper bodies, less well-executed raised primaries and tails that are thicker and longer. The painting is different as well, with a darker base coat on the body and feathering that's not as skillfully applied. There is also a dark blue speculum on the backs and a blackish eye stripe on the heads.

Al Rietz, who passed away on June 28, 1994, utilized the skills inherited from his father and applied them to a lifetime as a talented woodworker. Whether he made patterns to earn a living, furniture for his home, boats and decoys for duck hunting, or guitars and violins for musicians, all reflected the demanding standards of this self-reliant man. These contributions have certainly earned him the title of "craftsman extraordinaire."



A sign for "A.C. Reitz, Violin Maker" hung outside his 17th Street shop in Philadelphia, ca. 1959.

A special thanks to the Reitz family - Al Jr., Mary and Ron - whose help and cooperation made this article possible.