

EARLY DECOY DAYS

Starting from scratch

N I N T H I N A S E R I E S

by Joe French

When I started collecting, I had no references I could check and little to go on other than Bill Mackey's expertise or Joel Barber's early book on decoys. Even these were not much help to me because, other than Masons, most of their knowledge was based on Eastern carvers. Later, with the coming of new collectors in my area, we eagerly looked forward to each meeting or get-together as a source of new knowledge, and especially the identification of the carvers, a never-

ending mission throughout the whole country that still continues today.

As I recall, my first or second trip to the upper Illinois River area was particularly exciting because I thought I had found my FIRST Mason teal. By then I had learned that the Mason decoys with a notch in the bill were called Premiers, and that's exactly what the head on this little teal was. Yet I had seen Premier mallards and bluebills, and there was something different about this teal. It definitely had the typical Mason Premier head, but the body, seemingly

made of balsa, was rather flat. Though nicely painted, it just seemed different than the other Masons I'd seen. (Somewhat later I laid my hands on a perfectly beautiful and authentic Mason Premier teal, a personally historic moment.)

So what in the world was this little guy?

My best thought was to go back to the Senachwine Club, where I had traded new decoys for old ones, including my Mason-like teal. Amazingly, I found out that it had belonged to the owner of the Pratt Manufacturing Company, who had bought Mason's equipment when they quit the decoy business. Miscellaneous parts were shipped with the machinery, and apparently the decoy was a marriage of one of the left-over Premier heads with a Pratt balsa body, and they were prepared especially for Mr. Pratt's rig. So, while it wasn't a true Mason, it turned out to be an even rarer decoy, with a story now attached to it.

After a bit of research I headed for Joliet, Illinois, in search of Charlie Matzke, the only person to work on the decoys the whole period Pratt was in the decoy business. He was a very informative man, who told me Pratt bought the Mason equipment in 1926 and sold it to the Animal Trap Co. in 1938. When the decoy machinery was shipped to Lititz, Pennsylvania, Charlie soon followed, and when the decoy operation was then moved to Pascagoula, Mississippi, Charlie headed there too.

Charlie told me that Pratt never put weights on their decoys unless they were ordered, and when they did, they used cast iron weights Pratt had made instead of the more typical lead weights. Charlie admitted that the paint job at Pratt lacked the quality of Mason's finished decoys, and that they sprayed a white or gray primer on the birds before applying the finish coat by hand. Some spray painting was used in the finish

The author's "Pratt" blue-winged teal with a Mason Premier head and a balsa body, from Mr. Pratt's personal hunting





A selection of Illinois River decoy ballast weights.

coat as well.

To hollow their decoys Pratt used a drill press with a cutting head of over one-inch in diameter. The bottoms of the tails, from the bottom of the decoy to the tip of the tail, were basically a straight line, never concave, as they only had a sanding belt to round the edges. According to Charlie, Pratt sold their basic decoys for \$10 to \$12 a dozen and \$14 to \$15 for their better grade.

For years I have asked why Mason painted a round black circle under the tail of some of their Premier drakes, and like all

Many collectors feel that decoys by Steven Lane and Billy Shaw are nearly identical, but the heads on Shaw decoys (right) are much thinner than those of his Lacon, Illinois neighbor (at left).



the others I asked, Charlie didn't know either. He also had no idea why Mason placed a small, somewhat flat, round weight on just some of their decoys. Obviously those decisions were made well before he became involved in the decoy business.

In case some aren't familiar with Pratt's weight, I dug up one for a picture. And in the meanwhile, I'll show the more familiar lead strip weight, the most used ballast weight in the Midwest, that was manufactured by the Raymond Lead Co. of Chicago. The weight had the company name on one side and was blank on the other side, allowing Elliston and others to personalize their decoys. Many, like Perdew and Graves, poured their own weights, but a Raymond Lead strip weight, stamped "Mfg. By C.H. Perdew, Henry, Ill" is likely the earliest and rarest of Perdew's weights. I say rarest because over the years I must have handled hundreds of Perdew decoys and was into my 25th year of decoy collecting before I saw one of this type.

While looking for the Pratt weight, I ran across a loose Elliston weight, turned it over, and found it marked "F.W. BLATCHFORD & CO, CH," assuming the CH stands for Chicago and indicating that he also used weights other than Raymonds. I then took the weight off an Elliston pintail painted by his wife, found in the daughter's attic, and sure enough, another Blatchford. And there were other companies, including the St. Joe Lead Co., who made lead strip weights.

So while setting up my photograph, in addition to the Pratt and Raymond Lead Co.

weights, I've included the Blatchford, my earliest Perdew, another early Perdew from another decoy in the same rig, a Perdew poured weight like those used on the Schmidt rig, a Graves weight and a Tube Dawson weight. To many Illinois River collectors, the ballast weight is nearly as coveted as the decoy.

Identifying decoys, never easy, was often a scary business. Bill Mackey said one of the reasons he published a book was to correct some of the mistakes made by Joel Barber. The biggest problem I had in identifying Illinois River decoys was a wife or son telling me they remembered seeing their husband or father carving the decoys I hoped to acquire. What could be more positive identification? Well, Mackey or Adele Earnest or any of the early writers could answer that question: Don't bet on it! Possibly the best known case of this type was the Jess Birdsall shorebird rig that ended up being made by John Dille, not her husband. In Adele's book, "Art of the Decoy," I recall some old Masons being credited to someone's father, much to her later embarrassment.

Digging up pertinent information on decoy makers is becoming harder, if not impossible, with every passing decade. Not only that, but the time consumed is unbelievable. I remember spending two days in Lacon, Illinois trying to get information on Steve Lane and Billy Shaw, who had lived there. The hollow and well-painted decoys by Lane and Shaw were almost twins. They are very streamlined with rounded bodies and were quite popular with hunters. The

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Paul W. Parmalee
Illinois State Museum

Forrest D. Loomis
Illinois Department of Conservation

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An announcement flyer for "Decoys and Decoy Carvers of Illinois" by Parmalee and Loomis, the first book to focus on Illinois River decoys.

heads on the Shaw decoys were much thinner, and often the only way to tell the difference is to look at them side by side head on. I learned a number of things about both men during that trip, but I could have spent more time there. Unfortunately a tornado totally destroyed the Lane house, which may have unwittingly taken his patterns and other personal items.

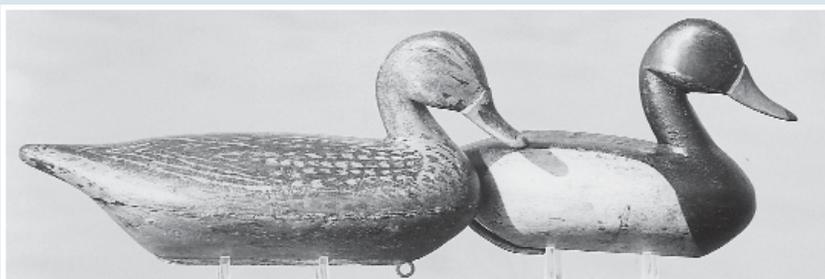
Speaking of the time required to dig up decoy information, brings to mind the "Decoys and Decoy Carvers of Illinois" book by Paul W. Parmalee of the Illinois State Museum and Forrest D. Loomis of the Illinois Department of Conservation that was published by the Northern Illinois University Press. I still can't imagine how they were able to get so much information

about so many carvers in such a short time period. It was a monumental task, even for basically a state supported project. I was somewhat close to the project, with nearly all of the decoys I had donated to the museum included in the book. All the photographs with a blue background were taken by their photographer at my house. At the time I wanted nothing but good looking decoys pictured, but Parmalee felt all deserved inclusion, even those many of us wouldn't have on our shelves. I now think he made the right choice, as it's become the bible of Illinois decoys.

Most of my favorite Illinois carvers lived near the Illinois River with its numerous marshes, shallows and bays, compared to the Mississippi, which is more like a canal. I would guess that many Mississippi hunters and decoy makers, like Harry Canfield, lost their decoy rigs when they froze up in the ice and headed down river after the thaw. But I had found so many beautiful works of decoy art along the Illinois River that, as a very spoiled collector and without Parmalee's discipline of including all Illinois decoys, I passed up many run of the mill decoys – on both rivers.

I never had much luck finding decoys above the tri-cities – Davenport, Iowa and Rock Island and Moline, Illinois – although I did run across miniatures made by Wilson Collins in nearby Milan, little beauties that have been welcomed across the country. And I did become friends with Russ Boom in Davenport, a member of the Treadway Club on the Illinois River that had several good original paint birds, but more importantly introduced me to a friend with an almost complete collection of Robert Morse minis. Through our company salesman in Boston I got a pair of mini pintails in the 1950s from the Audubon store where they were sold. Since I was resolved to collecting just hunting decoys, I didn't even bother to try and buy the collection.

But most of my acquisitions were below this area, so let me take you down the Mississippi, a river I lived by, played on and enjoyed most of my life until we moved to the Florida Keys. Between Davenport and



Vern Cheesman was a decoy maker from Macomb, Illinois whose carving skills outpaced his talents with a brush, so occasionally he carved decoys and took them to Charlie Perdew so his wife Edna would paint them. The pintail hen and bluebill (at left) is in Cheesman's own paint. The pintail and bluebill (at right) were beautifully painted by Edna Perdew.

Burlington, on the Illinois side of the Mississippi, there was no decent highway or numbered route even close to the river. The first town was New Boston, where I snagged a rig by Charles Whitmore, an early market hunter, and several by P.O. Drury. In Keithsburg, I picked up a neat little decoy by Bill Stahl, not for its beauty but ingenuity, because the head and anchor weight can be stored in recesses in the bottom of the decoy; he made enough of them so that most of the early collectors had at least one. I remember getting some decoys in the next town of Oquawka. Sadly I don't remember whose they were, but I love the town's name.

Fred Allen, best known in those days for his duck boats with forward facing rowing gear and duck calls, lived about 35 miles east of the river in Monmouth. His decoys are stylish, comparatively flat and well painted. About 20 miles further east was the renowned Mississippi River hunter, sculler and talented decoy maker Frank Cassini, who I've written about in an earlier part of this series.

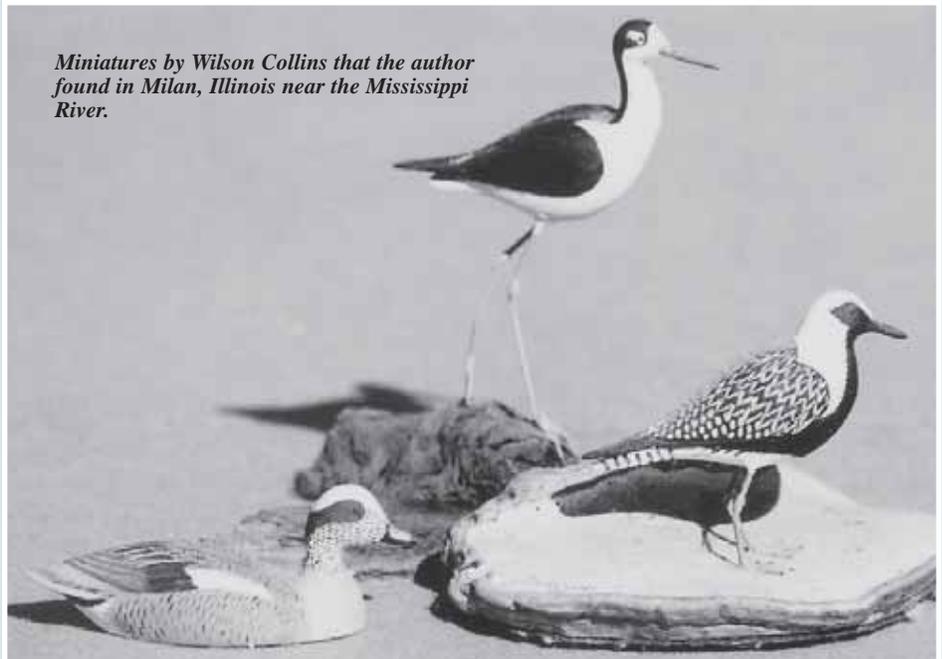
Back across the river in Burlington I found Bill Ewinger, who had carved one of the decoys I got from Jack Musgrove in Des Moines on my first decoying trip. Bill made mostly mallards, and I still have his almost paint-less decoy that was shown in Eugene Connett's "Wildfowling on the Mississippi Flyway." In January 1956 I also got from Bill a bluebill made in 1895 by Rodney Enger, a cigar maker, and one by Speck Schramm. I also met Kenneth Greenlea and came home with one of his mallard sleepers. This was five or six years before I met Hal Sorenson who lived in Burlington.

Crossing back into Illinois from Burlington, Iowa and going south along the river, I ran across a typical little vacation community on the banks of the river. It was here that I was fortunate to meet Vern Cheesman (pronounced Chessman), who lived in Macomb about 50 miles east of the river. I recall turning off the highway onto a small road, seeing the cottages dotted along the river, and making my usual inquiries for decoys, which brought about a fortunate meeting.

After spring shooting was stopped along the river, the hunting of divers was minimized. As luck would have it, Vern had a great group of diver decoys that he had made, many painted by Edna Perdew! This was fantastic, because Vern's painting skills did not match the excellence of his carving abilities. He told me that he would carve a bunch of decoys and take them up to Perdew in trade for Edna painting a decoy of so. I've often wondered what happened to the unpainted decoys left with Charlie. I wouldn't doubt that the attractive little crease in the neck of some of Perdew's



Bert Graves canvasbacks from the rig of Dan Vorhees.



Miniatures by Wilson Collins that the author found in Milan, Illinois near the Mississippi River.

birds was due to the influence of Cheesman's decoys.

A short distance further south of Vern's cottage is Dallas City, where I hunted with Harry Canfield. The lathe that Harry used in making his decoys was formerly owned and used by Steve Tyler, who reportedly made thousands of decoys during his lifetime. Further south is Nauvoo, the town from where the Mormons headed west to Utah, and quite possibly, the U.S. birthplace of blue cheese. From there the highway hugs the river the entire way to Hamilton, alongside the lake formed by the dam built in 1913 for Union Electric, between Hamilton and Keokuk, Iowa, my mother's home.

Grandfather started his life on the river in 1854, working his way up to pilot, captain and manager of the Yellowstone Transportation Co., taking General Scully

to locate Fort Rice in 1894. The first boat he owned was the Phil Sheridan, running between St. Louis and Vicksburg. Along with other men, he was engaged in numerous lines, as the average life of the steamboats was short because they burned to the waterline with regularity. Their cottage in Hamilton eventually came to my mother and we spent many delightful summers there. The drive from Nauvoo at night with the dam lights and the lovely old power house is a beautiful sight. So were some of the decoys I found in the area. I loved Keokuk, named after an Indian chief, with its beautiful homes, some on the bluff overlooking the river, and great parks. At one time they had more millionaires per capita than any city in the country.

About 35 miles south of Hamilton is Quincy, Illinois, another nice river town

where I met Henry Geise, who was close to 90-years-old and had carved at least several thousand ducks and geese. But more importantly, Quincy was home to Electric Wheel Co., a maker of all kinds of wheels, including the huge ones used on caterpillar treads, that was owned by Dan Vorhees, who had a big hunting club on the Illinois River. He is best known among collectors for turning down the now-famous rig of Schoenheider standing Canada geese.

For some time I enjoyed visiting Dan Jr., who was an internationally known skeet and pigeon shooter as well as an all-around nice guy. He took me to their farm where many of the decoys they no longer used were kept. They were mainly canvasbacks,

mostly by Bert Graves and some by Hotze and Elliston. All were cleaned and painted by a local man. The company was either merged with or purchased by Firestone, and Dan Jr., now deceased, moved to Akron as vice president. His very nice brother Bill took me out to the farm and let me have some of the decoys that were left. Several of my ex-college friends lived in Quincy too, so it was often a fun time.

Looking back through my record book, I am amazed how many people I could see in a day. For many years I have kept a paragraph from a business magazine article that expresses my credo better than I can, and I'd like to share it:

"The span of life is absolutely limited.

There is no way to buy or earn your way beyond it. The conventional wisdom says that time is money. The wisdom I espouse tells us that time is time. LIFE is value. TIME is its most rigid measurement. Money? How can it compare? What sort of fools bargain would it be to trade your life time for mere money."

But I would certainly pay for a little more time chasing decoys in those early days. 

This is the 9th part in a series of occasional articles chronicling the early days of decoy collecting.