

WILDFOWL ART

Journal of the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art

Winter - 2006



the
Ward
Museum
Salisbury University



MEMBERSHIP FIELDWORK VOLUNTEERS COLLECTIONS EXHIBITS CARVERS LEM & STEVE WARD

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Over the past six months the Ward Museum has completed some projects and started up some new ones. We have finally finished the Norman Glenn Nature Walk which was funded in part by the Chesapeake Bay Gateways program of the National Park Service. The Museum's new outdoor education pavilion was completed around the same time as the Norman Glenn Nature Walk. The education pavilion was acquired with the help of a Maryland Heritage Areas grant. The Chesapeake Bay Trust provided funds to plant five gardens of native Chesapeake Bay plants in area schools and also to create a small arboretum of Chesapeake Bay plants as part of the new education complex.



These projects, while funded by public foundations, still required matches of money and donated time and materials. The Museum has been very fortunate to have so many dedicated volunteers who donated their time, equipment and materials to accomplish these projects.

Currently we look forward to a new permanent exhibit focusing on bird carving competitions. The exhibit will showcase how these contests have provided a bridge between decoy and decorative carving. Support for the new exhibit comes from a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. This will be an exhibit with a new focus, thus, we are on the lookout for new pieces and matching gifts. Specifically, we are looking for a bluebill decoy by Benjamin Holmes, a black duck decoy by Shang Wheeler, a canvasback decoy by Sam Barnes, a Joel Barber decoy and examples of works by carvers entered in competitions during the 1950s and '60s. By gaining these valuable pieces, we hope to put together an exhibit that will better illustrate the role that carving competitions have played in the evolution of the art form.

This past year the Maryland legislature voted to give the Ward Museum \$650,000 to replace the roof, to repair areas of the walls and ceilings that have water damage from the leaky roof, and to also replace the environmental and security systems. If you should see any members of the Maryland state legislature or the Salisbury University administration please thank them for all of their hard work.

Prior to starting any of these projects the Museum had to justify the need in its last strategic plan. We have come a long way with this plan. Many improvements have been made to the building and its collections, as well as improved services for members and the professional staff. We are now putting together the next plan that that will take us through the next five years of operations for the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art, Salisbury University. Can we plan for your continued support?

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Executive Director

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Salisbury
UNIVERSITY



Canada goose by Henry Ruggles, c. 1875.



Mallard pair by Stephen Lane, c. 1885.



Sleeping mallard hen and drake by Robert Elliston, c. 1890, painted by Catherine Elliston, from the Dupee rig.



Standing Mallard pair by Charles Schoenheider, c. 1915.

masterworks of the illinois river:

decoys from the collection of thomas k. figge

BY STEPHEN B. O'BRIEN JR.

Sandwiched between the subsistence culture of the native Illiniwek people of the Illinois River Valley over 300 years ago and the fast-paced industrial world of today, a sub-culture of duck hunters and decoy carvers arose along the Illinois River for a brief time from 1860 to 1940. During this period, waterfowl hunting provided a source of income to market gunners as well as entertainment for sportsmen. Lures to draw the wild ducks within range of gun shot were needed and a cottage industry of decoy carving emerged catering to these hunters. The results of these carvers' works were often superbly crafted and painted waterfowl decoys. *Masterworks of the Illinois River* celebrates this small group of skilled craftsman, their beautiful creations of function and the seasonal migrations of waterfowl that inspired their work.

The landscape of the Illinois River Valley looked vastly different 300 years ago. Wild rice grew freely along the river and maize was cultivated by the Illiniwek tribe on the river banks. The Illiniwek were called the Illinois by early French trappers and traders. Of the Illiniwek, French explorer Jacques Marquette, in 1669, wrote:

"The Illinois raise corn, which they have in great abundance ... There is fine hunting there of Wild Cattle (Bison), ... Ducks, ... and Cranes."

The Illiniwek numbered in the low

thousands, in sharp contrast to the hundreds of thousands living along the river today. The tribe traveled by means of pirogues, long heavy canoes fashioned out of logs. The industrial farms, fast food restaurants, motor boats, cars and barges that constitute life along the river today would have been alien to the Illiniwek. However, one constant that the Illiniwek would easily identify with today, is the timeless annual migration of waterfowl to the fertile Illinois River Valley.

This annual migration numbering millions of birds was still near its peak in the mid-19th century. Around this time, Henry Ruggles, a young house painter and decoy carver from Cincinnati, arrived in Henry, IL. Waterfowl darkened the sky and closed hunting seasons were unthinkable. With a passion for hunting and fishing, Ruggles must have felt that the river and sky held limitless potential. The country's rapidly expanding transportation system had created a viable avenue for shipping wild game to urban areas such as Chicago, lying 130 miles to the northeast. The Civil War was still on the horizon, and market hunting as a career must have seemed like a dream come true to the young painter and carver.

Upscale hotel restaurants featured wild game on their menus to satiate a booming American population. In 1889, Chicago's Grand Pacific Hotel



American Merganser pair by Charles Schoenheider, c. 1910.



Early Pintail pair by Charles Perdew, c. 1910.



Green-winged Teal pair by Charles Perdew, c. 1940.



Mallard pair by Charles Walker, c. 1948.

offered over 20 species of birds on its annual game night menu including ruffed grouse, plover, jack snipe and sand-hill cranes, in addition to 12 species of waterfowl. In the last quarter of the 19th century, hotels paid market gunners up to 25 cents for mallard and canvasback pairs, and 10 cents for teal and bluebill pairs. Thousands of barrels of birds were shipped to urban centers from the seemingly inexhaustible waterfowl flights of the Illinois River Valley.

One of the most entrepreneurial suppliers to the Chicago market was another young boy from Henry, IL. The boy harvested boundless stalks of wild rice while he was duck hunting in order to pack complimentary bags of the grain in the game bird barrels that he shipped by rail to the grand hotels. This marketing tactic guaranteed the boy repeat customers. The boy's name was Charles Perdew and his innovative pioneering bird call and decoy designs would make him one of the most famous carvers of all time.

The depletion of waterfowl and game bird populations due to overhunting was met with public outcry by the beginning of the 20th century. The Federal Migratory Bird Act of 1918 helped put a halt to the wanton killing of flight birds. By outlawing the sale of migratory birds, the United States Congress effectively halted the demise of numerous duck and shorebird populations. Market gunners were forced to earn their livelihoods by other means, and many turned to the sport hunting trade as an alternative source for income.

Sport hunting was by no means a new concept. As early as 1865, gentlemen hunters like Boston native

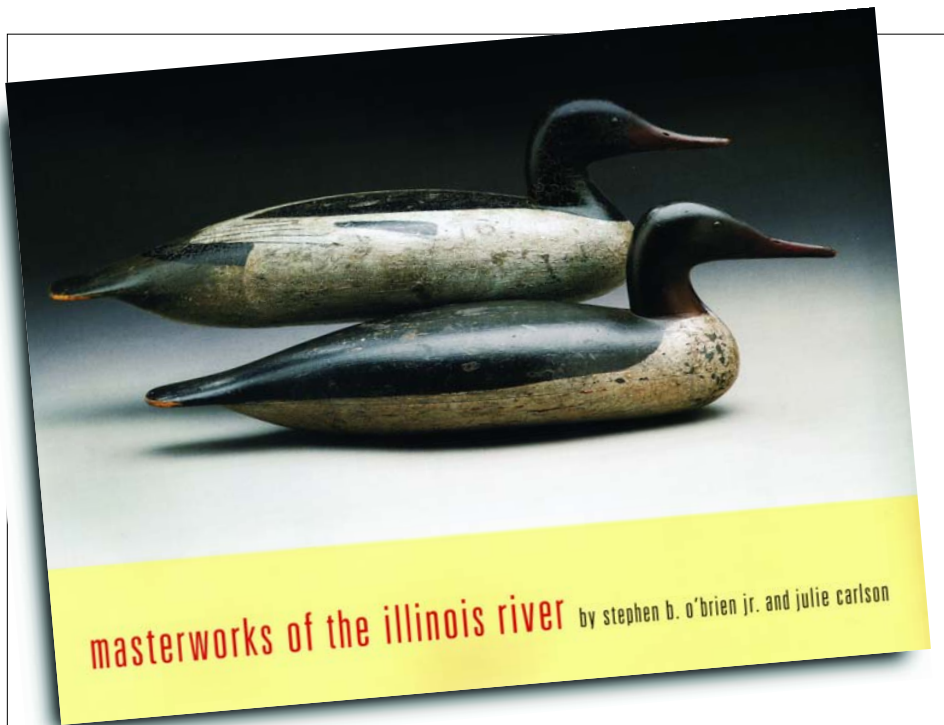
George Henry Mackay were traveling the globe in search of game birds. Hotels and clubs sprang up catering to these "sports," supported by the growing upper class of the late 19th century. Famous gunning destinations arose along the Illinois River flyway, including the Undercliff Hotel on Lake Senachwine, IL.

One of the first decoy makers to capitalize on the "sports" visiting hotels and clubs was Robert Elliston. Elliston, along with his wife, Catherine, moved to the Undercliff Hotel shortly after it opened in 1882. Often referred to as the "father" of the Illinois River carvers, Elliston was one of the earliest commercial makers. He crafted realistic and lightweight decoys that Catherine finished with exquisite paint patterns. The decoys were marketed to hotel hunting guests, and the "sports" clamored for Elliston decoys, sometimes waiting years for orders to be filled.

Today, the demand for top-notch Illinois River bird carvings has not waned. Folk art enthusiasts looking to build their collections must hunt down leads, turn to specialized decoy dealers or pony up small fortunes at auction to obtain great examples. Superior birds by Charles Perdew and Robert Elliston can fetch up to \$100,000 each. Decoys in original paint by early makers Henry Ruggles and Stephen Lane are almost unobtainable. It is for this reason that the Thomas K. Figge Illinois River decoy collection is so unique. As a single owner collection, much of it acquired directly from the makers' families, it represents one man's 25 year quest to obtain the greatest Illinois River decoys ever made.

Masterworks of the Illinois River

chronicles the golden years of the region's decoy carving tradition, the men and women who created this art form, and the natural world that inspired them. I hope that the decoys pictured in this book will give viewers the same enjoyment that I had researching them.



Masterworks of the Illinois River,
a 154-page color book reviewing the
history and significance of this regional
tradition of decoy making is available
from the Ward Museum.

Call 410-742-4988, ext. 120 to order.



Pintail pair by Bert Graves, c. 1925. Painted by Catherine Elliston.



Oversized mallard pair by Bert Graves, c. 1930. Painted by Catherine Elliston.



Pintail drake by Lou Kelly, c. 1930.



Mallard pair by Hector Whittington, c. 1940.