
The Art of the Duck

by Sal Emma

“There isn’t much to it, really.”

That’s easy for Harry to say. He’s been immortalizing waterfowl for over forty years.



Photographs by Bill Horin

Hand-coloring by Laura Lawrence

You might have seen Harry Shourds' shingle swinging in the breeze outside his Route Nine shop in Seaville. It's all you can really see speeding by his place at 55 mph. "The Duck's Nest" is about all you can make out, zipping by. Maybe something about decoy carving as well, if you happen to be stuck behind a slow-moving sand truck. Little does one suspect that behind the trees by the road, in a little one hundred

plus-year-old red barn, Harry Shourds is carving away at an age-old South Jersey artistic tradition—hand-carved duck decoys.

By a wide, circular dirt drive, you can find Harry sitting by his antique wood stove, carving away at a piece of white cedar with simple tools—chisel and mallet for roughing out a duck's belly, one of Harry's favorite pocket knives for some plumage or an eyebrow, or sand-



Harry has disdain for mechanized decoy factories, preferring to practice his craft the old-fashioned way, by hand with simple tools in a century-old barn warmed by an old wood stove.

paper rolled around a dowel to smooth the inside curve of a bird's neck. Of course, after more than forty years of carving birds, Harry makes it look pretty easy.

"There isn't much to it, really. The body is done in two parts, split along the waterline and hollowed out inside." Harry picks up one of a half dozen hulls, each in two halves, sitting on one of the benches in the shop.

"You have to carve out a little to make them more buoyant and to keep the wood from splitting. The two halves are nailed together and shaped. The head is carved separately and toenailed in place. A little more shaping and sanding and it's ready to paint. I do most of my fine painting inside, away from the sawdust. They're primed first, to seal the wood against the water. The plumage doesn't have to be fancy . . .

any old thing will do as far as the ducks are concerned."

Harry doesn't see himself as an artist, I suspect. He just makes decoys. Real decoys, for hunters to take out into the marsh and float.

"I put a little lead in the bottom to make them sit upright in the water. You'd be surprised how little you need." He flips over a bird ready for leading and shows me the chiseled rectangular

slot where the molten lead will be poured. On a finished bird I view the smooth, shiny lead bar and next to it Harry's brand: H.V. Shourds.

Appropriately, Harry is named after his grandfather, one of the old guard of South Jersey decoy carvers. "I'm not the third, though. My father had a different middle name. He was Harry M., for Mitchell. My granddad and me are Harry V., for Vinuckson. I have no idea where that name came from."

The Shourds have been carving since the late nineteenth century. His grandfather was born in 1861, his father in 1890. Harry says he began seriously carving at the age of 16 in 1946. He was a carpenter by trade for most of his adult life, working for Fred Tarvis in Ocean City, where he grew up. He joined the Navy SeaBees and remained a carpenter in Northern Africa during the war, resuming his job with Tarvis upon his return.

In his spare time he carved birds. It was a natural thing for him to do, coming from such carving stock in his father and grandfather. He moved to the mainland in 1962 and decided to put out a shingle, just to see what would happen.

"I've been busy ever since," he says. Harry's shop is a real historic specimen. All timber and fastened together with wooden pegs, it's a perfect backdrop for his old-fashioned birds. The walls are lined with handtools and bird patterns, calendars, a painting or two and various small carvings: a loose duck head here, a tiny duck, two inches from stem to stern, there, a wooden chain that Harry carved, link inside link.

"Here's my dad's hatchet. It's the only tool that got handed down. He was a painting contractor and used to brand all his ladders. He branded his hatchet too." In big capitals on the handle: HM SHOURDS.

When most people think of decoys, they think of ducks. Rightfully so, since the bulk of Harry's work is ducks.

"There must be at least thirty species of duck and goose that come through the county throughout the year. Most of my work is occupied by the species most familiar to people, especially for the collectors who buy decoys to display and not for hunting. Teal, wood duck, goldeneye, mallards, blacks, brant, Canada geese, and buffleheads, mostly. I've done many more than that, but those make up the majority of my work." Har-

ry does not limit himself to waterfowl, however. His shop displays excellent examples of other shore birds, including sandpipers, woodcock, and yellowlegs.

"I've had quite a few special orders for songbirds . . . chickadees, goldfinches, cardinals. I've done a few owls, just about all the hawks that live down here, like the redtail and the osprey. I did a bunch of penguins once. They were big things, life-size, I guess two, three feet tall. A guy came down from Allentown and asked for them. They were for some kind of iceberg ride at Dorney Park. We didn't use wood for those, since they were going to be out in the weather all the time. We carved them from styrofoam and covered them with fiberglass, then painted them.

"White cedar seems to be the best wood for the ducks. It's easy to carve and holds up well to the water. I've used different woods over the years, mainly for special orders. I once had a fellow make a fireplace mantel from walnut. He had a hunk left over, so he asked me to make some birds from it. I made a bird from applewood once that I wish I hadn't. That was terrible, tough."

The one thing you have to feel when speaking to Harry is his genuine love for



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the birds he immortalizes in wood. He is an active supporter of Ducks Unlimited, an environmentalist group concerned with saving the water birds' habitats. Harry carves a series of special collector birds each year which D.U. auctions as a fundraiser. He has served as president of the group and maintains active involvement.

"One year we had a terrible ice storm. The fields and meadows were just completely covered in thick ice. The ducks wintering here were starving since they couldn't get to the vegetation under the ice. We decided to try and bail them out. We bought tons of corn and started throwing it out into the areas ducks were living in. Everybody got into the act . . . it was a terrific relief effort. The Coast Guard gave us a hand. They took their boats out to the areas we couldn't reach by foot and even dropped corn down on the birds from helicopters. It really gave us a good feeling, since we were doing something to really directly help those starving birds. The group still buys a lot of grain which is used to feed the birds on their breeding grounds up in Canada."

Harry still takes his yellow labrador out in the Sneak Box to attract some birds with his handiwork, but a lot of days he doesn't shoot at all.

"Candy just loves to go out in the boat. She sits up on the deck, ready to retrieve something. Anything. One day, some black ducks came down and settled by the decoys. She gets all excited, ready to fetch one. Well, I told her we weren't shooting today, but she doesn't take 'no' for an answer. Pretty soon she can't stand it anymore and dives in. Of course, the ducks got pretty upset and flew away. So she grabbed one of the decoys and brought it back to the boat."

Harry's shop is a meeting place for collectors, hunters and other carvers. On chilly days he'll stoke up the old stove and Jamie Hand will come by and carve with Harry. Jamie has his own decoy shop over in Goshen, and he likes to keep Harry company by the stove.

"Harry's the best decoy man in New Jersey," says Jamie. "He won't tell you that, but he is. He's also been at it the longest. There was one fellow up in north Jersey who was older than Harry, but he recently passed away, so Harry's the senior carver now. Harry taught me how to carve the old-fashioned way."

Jamie tells me this as he chisels the innards out of geese-to-be. "He's modest, but he's the best."

When I mention mechanized decoy factories, Harry and Jamie cringe a little. "They're too noisy! This is about as much noise as we ever make," Jamie adds as he hammers big wood chips to the floor with his chisel.

Harry's place is a little bird sanctuary. He has built a number of bird boxes over the years, which have been homes to countless house wrens and other small songbirds. His log fence is covered by a

winding trumpet vine, which provides cover for the finches and sparrows and food for hummingbirds in summer.

"Hummingbirds love the trumpets. I've seen as many as six at a time out there," says Harry.

Bird lovers, outdoorsmen, or just plain lovers of fine craft will find Harry's shop a great place to visit. Just knock if the door is shut and you hear hammering on the other side.

"Come on in . . . let me put another log in the stove. Did I ever tell you about the time I got eight birds in one shot?"



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