

CASHING IN ON

Antique Decoy

COLLECTING



Once Employed To Lure Duped Ducks Into Gun Range, These Relics Are Making Waves In The Antique Collectables World

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN



Antique Decoys Recall Duck Hunting's Golden Age

It was duck hunting's Golden Age. The Civil War had ended, a growing population was rapidly expanding westward, opportunities abounded and America's natural resources were seemingly limitless.

Technological advances in firearms, ammunition and transportation made it possible for market hunters to take more wild game faster and, equally important, to deliver their bag to hungry urban markets in record time.

The continent's sky-darkening clouds of waterfowl drew increasing numbers of recreational hunters as well. For the next eight decades, America would enjoy a bird hunt the likes of which the world has never seen, nor will ever witness again.

Then, as now, duck and goose hunters needed decoys, and plenty of them. That increasing need was met by local carvers, most of whom were market or sport hunters themselves. But instead of modern-day resins or plastic molds, decoy makers of yesteryear cunningly employed draw knife and rasp to fashion lifelike counterfeits from shapeless blocks of balsa, cedar, sugar pine and tupelo. And although they may not have known it at the time, these early craftsmen were producing more than just working decoys for their backwater clients. They were creating one-of-a-kind sculptures that would one day be regarded as fine art. Each time a completed mallard, bluebill or canvasback came off the work bench and into the marsh, it carried with it the potential to become a unique and valued piece of classic American folk art.

Times change, and as decades passed America's natural resources, including her migratory birds, grew

limited. Many old timers gave up the hunt when market gunning was outlawed. More fell by the wayside as legislation dropped daily limits to a mere 50 ducks.

Hunting boats were left to the elements and the old hand-crafted decoy rigs were stowed and forgotten to forever languish in barn attics and boat sheds. Considered outdated and useless tools, countless duck, goose and shorebird decoys were split into stove kindling. An appalling thought to contemporary collectors, the act was literally akin to warming the kitchen by igniting bundles of \$100 bills.

But all was not lost. Many historic decoys successfully survived the perils of time. Even today, previously unknown decoys pop up at flea markets, antique stores or from among the dusty rafters of a Midwestern barn. Each new discovery is cause for celebration.

The Million Dollar Decoy *Growing Popularity of Collecting Brings Big Bucks For Wooden Ducks*

When it comes to identifying, appraising or selling antique waterfowl decoys, Gary Guyette is the walking talking, real deal.

A resident of St. Michael, Md., Guyette has accounted for more than \$120 million in sales of collectable decoys during the past three decades. Along with partner Frank Schmidt, he currently manages Guyette & Schmidt Inc., the world's largest and most successful decoy auction

ABOVE: Elmer Crowell's preening pintail. Perhaps the most talked about piece in decoy collecting history, the carving sold for \$1.13 million in 2007—the most paid for a single decoy.

house. When the top collectors need counsel, Gary Guyette gets the call.

“Decoys are a fascinating subject and the number of people collecting old decoys continues to grow,” says Guyette. “There are a lot of different reasons for buying a piece. Some people look at old working decoys as investments, while others purchase them strictly for their beauty. Some people purchase a particular decoy simply because it reminds them of a special hunt or a particular period in their childhood.”

From a purely financial perspective, most collectable decoys do tend to increase in value, says Guyette. Generally speaking, the more you pay for a piece the faster it tends to appreciate. For exceptionally rare or unique decoys, initial prices can be staggering and record sales continue to be shattered.

In 2003, Guyette sold a preening drake pintail decoy, carved by Cape Cod market gunner Elmer Crowell, for \$801,000. In 2007, he sold a feeding plover decoy for \$830,000, and an antique merganser for a wallet-flattening \$856,000. Later that year, the Crowell pintail traded hands again, this time privately, and made national headlines by fetching \$1.13 million—the highest sum paid for a decoy.

“Each decoy really is a work of art,” says Guyette. “When it comes to decoy prices, nothing really surprises me anymore.”

Although million-dollar decoy sales are restricted to the rich and famous, decoy collecting is by no means limited to the Millionaires’ Club.

“You certainly don’t have to be rich to collect worthwhile bird decoys,” notes Guyette. “People can still find beautiful pieces for under \$200, and you can purchase some very nice decoys for under \$500.” Guyette is currently listing a 1948, mint condition, factory made wooden Wildfowler mallard for \$350. “That same decoy would have sold for \$200 just a short time ago.”

Three Tips for Better Collecting

Decoy collecting enthusiasts often possess shared traits. Most, for example, are men, says Guyette. Most have bird hunting backgrounds, and the majority have hunted waterfowl. Decoy collectors also enjoy some excess income. Nearly 80 percent are 40 years of age or older—largely because they represent the group with more of that all-important excess income. Despite some similarities, anyone can get involved in collecting. Here are some tips.

“It’s really no surprise that interest in collecting decoys remains so high,” says Guyette. “Each piece is literally an example of classic American folk art. As is always the case with fine art—beauty exists in the eye of the beholder.

“Although most decoys will increase in value, not all collectors are investors,” notes Guyette. “Many people collect decoys simply as sculptures and also for their

historical value.”

1) “Decoys fashioned by the more famous carvers bring much higher prices than those made by less well-known artists,” says Guyette. “The older the decoy the better, and condition is huge.”

2) Anything that makes a piece stand out adds to its collectability. Because they were produced in fewer numbers, unusual species like teal, mergansers or wood ducks command higher prices than comparatively more common mallards and bluebills. Preening, sleeping or feeding birds have more potential than traditional poses. Not all collectibles are necessarily hand-carved. Factory-made wooden decoys not only have eye appeal, but have also become a serious part of today’s decoy collecting market.

3) “We do around five or six free online appraisals per day,” says Guyette. “The best advice I can give people is to buy what they like and what they can afford. You also need to be sure you’re getting what you think you’re getting. Find a reputable, honest dealer that really knows decoys and take it from there.”

Not all decoys are created equal. To find out what Granddad’s old decoy is worth or to view other historic pieces listed on the market, send a single profile photo of your piece to: decoys@guyetteandschmidt.com.

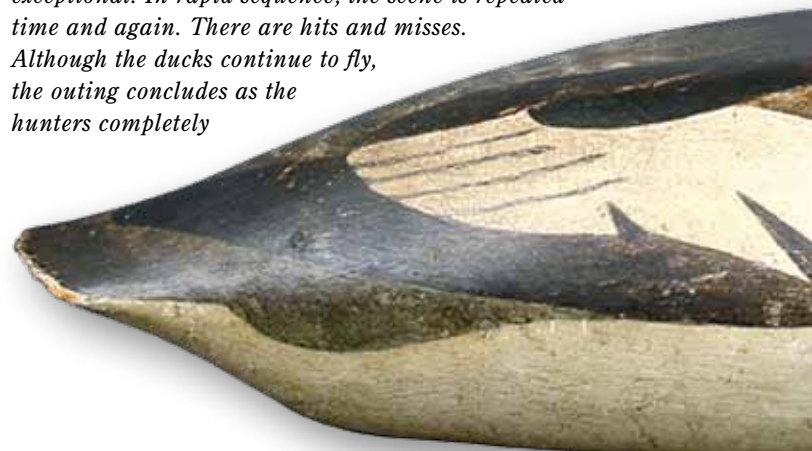
Lovelock Cave Yields 2,000-Year-Old Decoy

The scene is timeless. At the edge of a shallow marsh, two hunters crouch in the cattails. With sunrise fast approaching, a rising breeze provides lifelike movement to the group of 11 canvasback decoys swimming out front. Scanning overcast skies, the hunters anxiously await the arrival of the day’s first flock.

Ducks appear. On the deck and zig-zagging from pothole to pothole, the canvasbacks are looking for company. Spotting decoys, the flock banks sharply and prepares to land. Within moments, the ducks are nosily splashing down among the stiffly bobbing counterfeits. Simultaneously, the hunters rise and fire.

The migration is on, and the morning soon proves exceptional. In rapid sequence, the scene is repeated time and again. There are hits and misses.

Although the ducks continue to fly, the outing concludes as the hunters completely





LEFT: Merganser hen decoy. Carved during the late 1800s by a Massachusetts duck hunter named Lothrop Holmes, this red-breasted merganser hen sold for \$856,000. ABOVE: A collection of aged factory made decoys—vintage 1930s and 1940s—manufactured by the Victor Trap Company.

ANCIENT DECOY

One of 11 now-famous Tule Eater Native American canvasback decoys, unearthed during an excavation of the famed Lovelock Cave in Nevada in the 1920s. Some were finished, some unfinished—waiting for a layer of real canvasback feathers for a realistic look. Perfectly preserved due to the arid land and constant cave temperatures, each decoy was individually wrapped, and the owner had taken great pains to conceal them from others. At more than 2,000 years old, they are the world's oldest-known decoys.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT KLETTE,
courtesy Nevada State Museum,
Carson City, Nevada Department
of Cultural Affairs





exhaust their supply of ammo. Gathering the slain and bagging the decoys, the duo leaves the marsh. Arriving home, the hunters clean their game and then store the decoys in the basement. Tomorrow will bring another day on the marsh.

No one knows what tragedy may have befallen those hunters, but one fact is sure. They never did return to that bag of 11 handcrafted canvasback decoys, nor did they claim any of the other possessions contained in their home.

The hunters were ancient Tule Eater Native Americans— forerunners of the Northern Paiutes. The shallow marsh was in Nevada. Located less than a two hour drive from Reno, the hunters' home is the now famous Lovelock Cave.

While excavating Lovelock Cave in 1924, archeologists L. L. Loud and Mark Harrington discovered a false floor hiding an underground basement-like storage pit. Opening the door, they unearthed the most amazing discovery in decoy collecting history.

There, in a woven basket, were 11 near perfectly preserved canvasback decoys. Fashioned from woven tule, or bulrush reeds, painted with soot and red ochre and adorned with canvasback feathers, the decoys were ancient works of art. Subjected to numerous carbon dating tests, the artifacts proved to be no less than 2,000 years old—making them the world's oldest known decoys.

Today, migrating hordes of waterfowl still congregate on the sprawling, 16,000-acre marsh that lies below the entrance of Lovelock Cave. With thick and extensive beds of sago pondweed, the wetland is a magnet for diving ducks like redheads, ring-necks and scaup. The prized canvasbacks still come here too, and peak numbers may surpass 17,000 birds. Contemporary hunters, like Nevada Waterfowl Association President Chris Nicolai, still carefully place their decoys and anxiously await the impending dawn of a new day.

"In addition to great duck hunting, I also find a real sense of history on this marsh," says Nicolai. "Where I normally hunt, you can look up over your shoulder and make out the (Lovelock) cave entrance. When you think about how long people have been hunting ducks here, it takes the term 'waterfowling tradition' to a completely new level."

Archeologists say that Tule Eaters often employed nets to capture ducks. After placing their reed and feather decoys on the water, the Native Americans erected the web-like devices to intercept incoming flocks. Although deadly, the nets were only effective under low light conditions of dawn and dusk. During the remainder of the day, they used bow and arrow to hunt over decoys in the

exact manner employed by modern-day shotgun toting waterfowlers.

"This is an extremely arid region and the marsh depends on snowmelt from the mountains," says Nicolai. "That means water levels can fluctuate a lot. When levels are down and the shoreline recedes, you can really see how long and how hard this place has been hunted. On any day of the week you can take a walk and literally fill a 5-gallon bucket with small, bird point arrow heads. The bottom of the marsh is just covered with them.

"I'm really not surprised that the world's oldest decoys were discovered here," says Nicolai. "It is so incredibly dry out here that there is still lumber lying on the ground from when the wagon trains came through here on the way to Oregon. It's so arid that nothing seems to go away."

Antique Goldeneye Takes Iowa Collector On Decoy Roller Coaster Ride

Like most Iowa farm boys, Lake Mills' Mark Chose had daily chores. One duty was to walk to the pasture each afternoon and bring the cows home for milking. As was common in northern Iowa farm country, the pasture contained a boggy slough that drew hundreds of ducks and geese during fall migration.

While going for the cows one day, Chose happened upon an abandoned decoy. Intrigued, he removed it from the mud and carried it home.

Forty-five years later, Chose is still dragging decoys home. He's sort of lost track of the numbers though. Today, his collection of duck, goose and shorebird decoys, along with old calls, shells, paintings, advertisements and other waterfowl hunting memorabilia, consumes two rooms and is still growing.

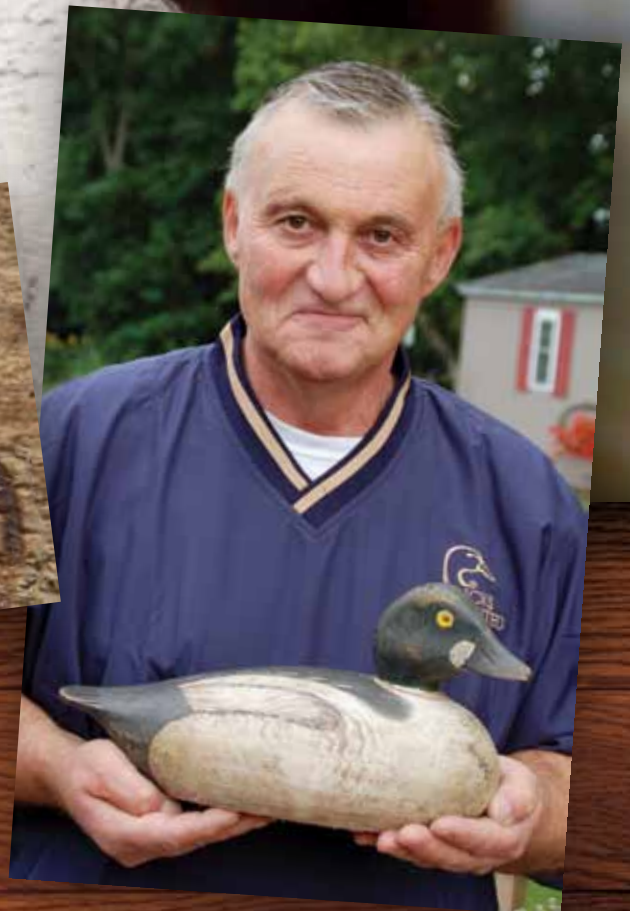
But of all the unique and interesting pieces the collection harbors, one decoy stands head and feathers above the rest, a hand-carved drake goldeneye. An astounding example of simple elegance, the decoy has no major splits or dents, retains nearly all of its original paint and has original glass eyes. Although the piece scores extra points for being a more "unusual" species, the goldeneye's most unique characteristic is its amazing story.

While perusing the aisles of a Saturday flea market where collectable old decoys often pop up, Chose paused to visit with a vendor. During the conversation, he spotted a basket containing decoys under the table. The basket held several



OPPOSITE PAGE: Once known for its impressive flights of southbound diving ducks, Hancock County's Eagle Lake was a second home to avid waterfowler Clarence Miller. During the glory days of the 1940s and 1950s, Miller assembled an impressive rig of 200 hand-crafted lesser scaup (bluebills). Today, five of the bluebills are all that remain—representing a unique link to Iowa waterfowl heritage. **BELOW:** Not all collectible decoys are waterfowl. During a long 1950s North Iowa-style winter, Hancock County farmer, artist, and skilled taxidermist Charlie Brcka crafted this great horned owl at his rural Garner studio. The well worn decoy was never used to attract other owls, but was rather intended to arouse the anger of its arch enemy – the common crow. The effort was aided by an equally well worn factory made, wooden crow.





Mark Chose displays his counterfeit goldeneye, initially thought to be an A. Elmer Crowell original. Crowell's decoys, considered the finest and most desirable ever made, fetch top dollar. Two of his originals—the pintail pictured on page 35 and a sleeping Canada goose—set world records when they sold for \$1.13 million apiece. Had this one been an original, it would have been worth \$10,000 to \$15,000. The giveaway? The craftsman's full name—A. Elmer Crowell—is burned into each original.

Produced by the famous Mason's Decoy Factory (Detroit), these wooden mallard "dekes" attracted clouds of ducks for Iowa waterfowler Gus Weida during his outings on the northeast Iowa Mississippi River backwaters. Weida relied on the decoys for more than three decades before finally retiring them.



interesting pieces, including the drake goldeneye.

"The guy who had the decoys traveled up and down the East Coast during winter, and then sold stuff across the Midwest during the rest of the year," says Chose. "I asked what he'd take for the goldeneye. He considered it for a bit, and then said he'd have to have 80 bucks. Although I love old decoys, I'm really not an expert on collecting, and I'm not an investor. Whenever I can, I just buy what I like and I really did like this one. I finally said, 'OK, I guess I'll take it.'"

Upon arriving home and viewing the goldeneye under brighter conditions, Chose discovered the words "Elmer Crowell Decoys" faintly stamped into the decoy's base. A quick Internet search identified Crowell as a turn-of-the-century Cape Cod market gunner, hunting guide and prolific maker of waterfowl decoys. Regarded as a true Picasso by modern-day collectors, Crowell's carvings continue to command high prices. Examples of Crowell's best work sell for hundreds, and in some cases, hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"I just couldn't believe this was happening," says Chose. "The first thing I did was contact a nationally renowned decoy collector at Buffalo Lake, Minnesota. I described the decoy, and he asked questions. When we were finished, he said the goldeneye was worth a minimum of \$10,000.

"I was just shocked. I still couldn't believe this was for real," Chose continues. "The next thing I did was contact two more well known collectors and they agreed, saying the decoy would be worth anywhere from \$10,000 to \$14,000, and maybe a lot more. All three said that if this decoy was for real it would be a huge find for me. By then my heart was racing, just beating like crazy."

But the sword had two edges. Instead of having a wonderful new piece to add to his collection, Chose was sitting on a \$10,000, 2-pound block of wood. Hanging onto the decoy became much harder to justify than the original purchase.

"It was a real dilemma and before long I was giving some very serious consideration to selling the decoy," recalls Chose. "It was just too much money. Like I said, I'm not an investor, I just love old decoys."

Before he actually sold the decoy, Chose wanted to make one last contact to make absolutely sure of what he had.

"I called the president of the Minnesota Decoy Collectors Association and told him my story," says

Chose. "He was coming down the interstate and we decided to meet at Cabela's in Owatonna. When we got together, he had two Crowell decoys with him and let me take a look at them. Then he asked to see the goldeneye."

"The first thing he did was smell the wood, and said it was the right stuff—eastern red cedar—which was what Crowell used," Chose continued. "He looked the decoy over for quite awhile and then put it down. 'It really is beautiful, but there are a couple of problems and I'm going to say you have a fake. It's not a Crowell.' At that point, my heart just sank. I was almost sick to my stomach."

On virtually all known examples, Crowell painted the bottom of his decoys. The goldeneye is unpainted. But it was the oval stamp—the one that created all the excitement in the first place—that provided the most incriminating evidence. The stamp was slightly larger than the one used by Crowell. Also, all known authentic examples of his work are emblazoned with the words "A. Elmer Crowell." The imprint on the goldeneye simply says "Elmer Crowell."

The forgery is not the first. At least four similar Crowell counterfeits are known to have surfaced across the country, all believed forged by the same hand. At least two can be traced back to the Cape Cod coastline. Although no one has been able to positively identify the fraud, one fact is certain. The crook had an intimate understanding of Elmer Crowell's style and technique. Some speculate that he may even have spent time in the master's shop.

If there is a silver lining, it's that Chose still owns and continues to admire this beautiful decoy.

"All I can say is that this has been a real saga—a real roller coaster ride," says Chose. "But like I said, I'm not an investor. I just truly like the look and feel of old decoys because they remind me of earlier days, remind me of how things used to be."

As for blowing his \$80 on a forgery, Chose is long past being bothered by that. Authentic Crowell or not, the decoy is still a good piece and its scurrilous past gives the bird a dubious, but unique, historic value. It is also worth mentioning that, so far, Chose has been offered up to \$500 for the goldeneye—as a known fake.

As it turns out, that \$80 was money well spent. The old goldeneye easily out performed just about anything else Chose could have done with the eighty bucks—including the purchase of gold. Just goes to show that even bad decoys are good. 🦆