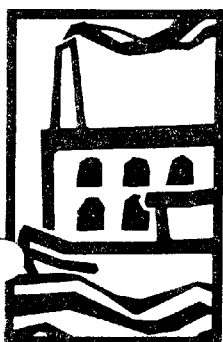


*Decoys and Decoy Carvers from the Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor.* A paper to accompany a Folk Art Exhibit, January 26 - February 26, 1986. Lewis University Library, Romeoville, Ill., 1986.

**Decoys and  
Decoy Carvers**

**from the**



**Illinois & Michigan  
Canal National  
Heritage Corridor**

**A Folk Art Exhibit**

**Jan.26 Feb.26  
1986**

**Lewis University Library**

**Romeoville, Ill.**

## **AN EXHIBIT OF DECOYS FROM THE ILLINOIS AND MICHIGAN CANAL NATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR**

This is the second exhibit of Folk Art from the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor sponsored by Lewis University and the Lewis University Canal Archives, and held in the Lewis University Library. The objective of these exhibits is to explore and record the folk art of the Corridor. This is a neglected area of study, but an important part of our cultural heritage. The University has committed itself to explore and also to pass on to posterity a knowledge of the objects made by skilled but untrained craftsmen, whose artistic vision has been mostly ignored.

Decoy making is the most distinctively American of all the folk arts practiced in this country. It is an art not found elsewhere, however, in America examples have been found dating back about 2,000 years. Apparently the Indian reed decoys were not used widely but they were used. The era of wood decoy making began when the West was opened and settlers found what they assumed was an unlimited supply of game birds. This led to that period of animal slaughter by market hunters who supplied thousands of birds to the meat markets of our cities. This era fortunately ended at the turn of the century when prohibitive national legislation was enacted. Some of the old professional hunters, who had made decoys as needed in their hunting, now supplemented their income by making decoys.<sup>1</sup> The wooden decoy, either handmade or machine made, flourished from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until after World War II. The wooden decoy made for hunting, or a working decoy, has been replaced by plastic and rubber inflatable decoys. The wooden decoys made now are decorative, and many makers concentrate upon realistic detailing of the feathers and the body.

Decoy carving is not only a native America folk art form, it was originally produced for a practical purpose—to aid the hunter in attracting birds. Sometimes live birds were used as decoys, the live duck or goose tied down to lure their brethren to their destruction. Yet the decoy's form is limited by convention and convenience. Realistic details might easily break, and they couldn't attract any more birds. Within the limits of the medium, individual expression developed as this display illustrates. The individuality is displayed in the carving of the head and body, and the painting of the body. As in most folk art a degree of abstraction is implicit, while the overall appearance must be realistic. An expert in decoys can, as a result, tell almost instantly who carved a specific decoy. Since the feathers on the back of the decoy were not carved in, but painted in, this allowed for a certain amount of individual expression, as can be seen in the examples in this exhibit. The lower parts of the decoy, being below water, were not usually as creatively painted.

Since the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor, which runs from Chicago to Peru, was and is on the migratory pathway, hunting and decoy making have always been an important part of the Corridor's culture. While decoy production was never as large as further down the Illinois River, the Corridor does have important decoy makers, a few of whose works are displayed here.

The exhibit seeks to give an overall view of the decoys and the decoy makers, not a comprehensive display. It includes older artists such as Barto, Hocking and Khoeler machine-made decoys from the largest decoy manufacturer in Illinois, if not in the country, namely William F. Pratt of Joliet, and finally some contemporary decoys made as objet d'art. The exhibit gives examples of working decoys and decorative decoys. Decorative decoys were frequently made by old decoy makers to please the wild fowl hunter who seems to be continually fascinated by the images of his prey. Now the decorative decoy is the only type made and, as can be seen from the exhibit, an increasing amount of attention is paid to the realistic carving of the feathers, wings and body.

## THE DECOY CARVERS EXHIBITED

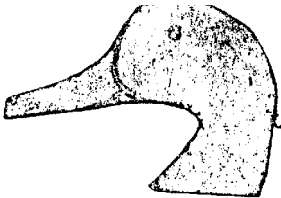
SAM HOCKINGS SR. (1868-1950) Peru, Illinois

Amongst the many decoy carvers of the La Salle-Peru area, two families contributed much, the Hockings and the Koehlers. Sam Hocking Sr. hunted not just for sport, but to feed his large family of ten. Hockings had been a coal miner and a policeman in Peru. He had a shop in the back of his house where he made decoys and other wooden items like chests. He taught his son, Sam Jr., to make decoys as a therapy after the son crippled his wrists in an accident. Another son, Fred, also took up decoy carving. There is no evidence that the Hockings ever made decoys for any purpose but their own hunting.

### 1. A MALLARD DRAKE

GEORGE K. (SKIPPY) BARTO (1880-1959) Lockport, Illinois

Barto was born near Tiskilwa near Bureau. It was there he learned decoy carving. His work resembles and may have been influenced by the great Bureau decoy maker, Robert A. Elliston.<sup>2</sup> He moved to Fairmont, outside Lockport, where an industrial accident forced him to retire as a foreman in a steel plant. This was in 1937, after which he turned to making decoys full time, and also duck and crow calls.



As can be seen, his decoys were hollow, as were most of the handmade working decoys. The head was fastened to the body with a screw. The two parts were then glued together. Barto usually stamped his initials on the keel weights fastened to the bottom of the working decoys.

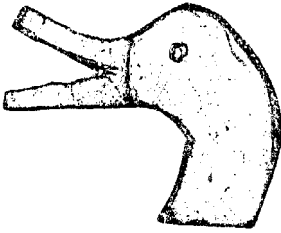
2. A Mallard Drake with an anchor manufactured by the Pratt Manufacturing Co. of Joliet. The anchor would hold the decoy in place while it floated.

3. A Mallard hen: the feathering on its back is characteristic of the way Barto painted and combed its feathers. This marks him as one of the master Illinois decoy makers.

4. A Mallard drake that came unglued and shows how Barto gouged out the center before glueing the decoy together. The initials are the former owner's!

5. A Pin Tail Drake with Barto's initial clearly stamped on the keel weight.

This company made a large number of items, everything from mouse traps to door handles. It operated in Joliet from 1893 until the 1950s. Sometime in the early 1920s they began to manufacture decoys. This was done by modifying World War I gun lathes purchased from the government. The lathes used to manufacture gun barrels were modified so that they could turn two decoys at a time based upon a pattern. Some of these were then painted rough cut right from the lathes (as the two Blue Bills in the next exhibit) or they were sanded and painted. The rough cut decoys were preferred by some hunters (according to a Pratt employee Leslie Keeler) as it did not reflect the light like the sanded decoys. Their decoys produced by machine were sold to Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward. William E. Pratt, who was himself an avid hunter, had skilled artisans who produced hollow decoys for the carriage trade. These were sold through Aberchrombie and Fitch and other expensive sporting goods stores.



In addition to decoys, Pratt also made decoy anchor keel weights, anchors to tie down live decoys and a variety of other decoy paraphernalia. Sometime in the 1930s Pratt sold the decoy manufacturing equipment, and it was moved to the South so that decoys could be made from the nearby lumber.<sup>3</sup>

6. Two examples of Blue Bill duck decoys. They are rough cut and painted right from the lathe. The usual hollowed out bottom evidently was designed to allow the decoy to float high.

7. Red Headed Duck decoy. This was made of solid wood with a Pratt keel weight.

#### GEORGE KOEHLER (1904-1974) Peru, Illinois

Koehler was the youngest member of the Koehler family to produce decoys. His father and brother were also hunters and decoy makers. George was only 12 when he began carving and made some 2,000 of the mallards as shown in the exhibit. George, like his father, also made boats for use in duck hunting.

8. Mallard Drake.

ARTHUR BEHMETUIK (1925-) Lockport, Illinois

Behmetuik (sometimes called Artie Bennet) was taught decoy carving by George Barto. His style, while similar, is decidedly different. Behmetuik produced commercial decoys as late as 1968. He also makes decorative decoys. In his working decoys he sometimes put a paper with his name, the date and maybe the weather for the day before glueing the two halves together. He did not put his name on the exterior of the working decoys, but he does so on the decorative decoys.

9. Black Duck working decoy.

10. A Mallard hen sleeper (a frequent pose on decoys) 1978.

11. A Mallard hen 1980.

12. A small Canada Goose 1982.

13. The patterns of duck heads and bodies throughout the exhibition are Behmetuik's.

ROY MALLINSON (1937- ) Shorewood, Illinois

Mallinson is recognized as one of the best realistic bird carvers in the area. He learned his carving skills from John Fisher of Peoria. He began carving in 1975. He also makes carvings of birds in flight and other action poses. This is in sharp contrast to the static poses favored by the old-time decoy makers.

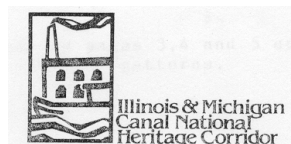
14. Canvas Back duck carved in 1984.

**FOOTNOTES**

1. p. 11 Paul E. Parmalee and Forrest D. Loomis, *Decoys and Decoy Carvers of Illinois*, 1969 Northern Illinois University Press, DeKalb, Ill. This is the best book on the subject and certainly must be the most complete and authoritative.

2. p. 213, Ibid.

3. Most of this information came from Leslie Keeler, a long time employee of the Pratt Co., as his father was before him. His information differs somewhat from that in *Decoys and Decoy Carvers of Illinois*. For example: *Decoy Carvers* says that Pratt bought the decoy making equipment from Mason, a decoy manufacturing company in Detroit. But Keeler says that Pratt and Mason were competitors in the early part of the 1920s. See pages 74-75 in *Decoys and Decoy Carvers*.



We wish to give a special thanks to the following without whose advice and assistance this decoy show would not have been possible:

Gerald Adelman, Lockport; Howard Adelman, Lockport; Arthur Behmetuik, Lockport; Brother David Delahanty, Lewis University; Mr. & Mrs. Erwin Hageman, Peru; Joe Tonelli, Spring Valley; Richard Columbo, Crest Hill; Merle Glick, Pekin; Leslie Keeler, Joliet; Roy Mallinson, Shorewood; Art Schumann, Lockport; Don Harpham, Lockport.

WM. E. PRATT MFG. CO. JOLIET, ILL.

**Duck Decoys** We manufacture Duck Decoys of all species including the following varieties:

Mallard  
Canvasback  
Red Head  
Teal  
Black Duck  
(Black  
Mallard)  
Pintail (Sprig)

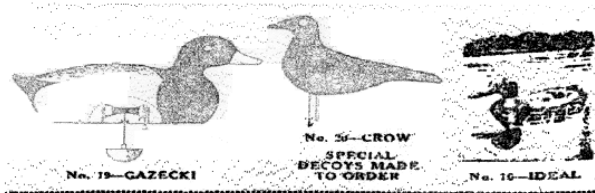


Blue Bill (Broad  
Bill)  
Mud Hen (Am.  
Coot)  
Widgeon  
Scoter  
Butterball  
Whistler

Our Decoy Lumber is out [sic] through out own [sic] Dry Kiln to assure light weight and freedom from checking, the cedar blocks are then treated in a waterproofing solution and carefully painted several coats. The Decoys are of proper shape, and all except Nos. 9, 17 and 18 have glass eyes. Heads are fitted on with dowels. Eight drakes and four hens are packed in a one-dozen crate. Except where noted decoys are painted with a dull finish to prevent glare. The letter F indicates rough or feather finish.

Decoys are furnished regularly in the following styles:

No. 1 or 1-F.	Solid.	Standard size, non-gloss finish.
No. 2	Solid.	Mammoth size, long necks.
No. 2-A.	Solid.	Mammoth size, extra large, with short necks.
No. 3	Hollow.	Large size, smooth finish.
No. 4 or 4-F.	Airwood.	Large size, solid.
No. 5	Solid.	Extra large, smooth finish, geese only.
No. 5-A.	Hollow.	Extra large, smooth finish, geese only.
No. 5-B.	Airwood.	Extra large, smooth finish, geese only.
No. 6 or 6-F.	Solid.	Flat pattern.
No. 8 or 8-F.	Airwood.	Flat pattern.
No. 9-F.	Solid.	Flat pattern, painted eyes.
No. 10-F.	Solid.	Flat pattern, glass eyes.
No. 12-F.	Rival.	Standard size, feather finish, glass eyes.
No. 14	Solid.	Hand carved.
No. 15-F.	Hollow.	Standard size, feather finish, glass eyes.
No. 16	Ideal.	Hard patent, wood base, steel body.
No. 17	Profile.	Wood.
No. 18	Solid.	
No. 19	Gazecki.	Self-contained anchors.
No. 20	Solid.	Crows only.
No. 21	Set-up.	Anchor, cord, and balance weight.



Decoy types available from W.F. Pratt  
1936 Catalog  
Duck heads on pages 3,4, and 5 are copies of Arthur Behmetuik.