

# IF ONLY A DECOY COULD TALK



Illustration by Lou Schifferl.

by Ron Koch

**H**ow many times have you heard a decoy collector say, "If only this decoy could talk, he sure could tell us a lot of great stories." Well, hold on to your hats, folks, because the Old River Rat is going to bring a decoy to life in this issue. It may be just fantasy; but if you let your imagination take hold, I'm sure you'll enjoy it.

An incident that occurred during my annual duck hunting trip to Northern Ontario this past September set me to thinking about my own handmade decoys and what they would say if they could communicate with us and with each other. The idea began to form early one crisp morning just as the eastern sky was beginning to lighten up and the outline of my eleven wooden decoys in the lazy current of the small stream was vaguely visible.

It was still a good fifteen minutes until shooting time, which was fine with me. Not only was there a steady stream of wood ducks zipping back and forth in the darkness, but that first cup of morning coffee, piping hot out of the thermos bottle, was something to be savored. The finest restaurant in the world could not offer better surroundings (or better coffee, for that matter) than where I sat perched on a rock on the side of a lonely river, three miles by duck skiff from the nearest road in what can only be described as God's Country.

As I enjoyed my coffee and munched on a breakfast bar, I was contemplating the many missed shots of the previous day and wondering what the new day would bring. Maybe I had missed so many shots because Canada employs the metric system and I was leading the

ducks in feet instead of meters. Hey, as the man said, a bad excuse is better than no excuse at all.

Augie the pup, my erstwhile companion whose motto is "Eat it; it might be food," surprised me when he turned away from the tidbit I was offering him and, with ears squared, peered into the gloom toward the downstream side of the decoys. Something big was moving toward us through the water and for the life of me my old eyes couldn't make out what it was.

A low growl came from Augie's throat, but the monster was under-terred and kept coming toward us. I put a head lock on Augie so he wouldn't charge out into the water

*The idea began to form early one crisp morning just as the eastern sky was beginning to lighten up and the outline of my eleven wooden decoys in the lazy current of the small stream was vaguely visible.*

although I suspect there was a slim chance of that since he was probably a little too scared to make a move on the mysterious object which was now nearly in the decoys.

To my surprise and relief the object turned out to be a big leafy branch being dragged by a beaver. Slowly the rodent, with branch in

tow, made his way through the decoys, brushing several of them on his way through.

I wondered then, if my decoys could talk, what kind of story they would tell their buddies back home when they told them about the beaver incident. Which got me thinking. These decoys were only a few years old. Can you imagine a decoy a hundred years old telling us the story of its life? Thinking about one of my favorite decoys, a swimming canvasback made by August Moak, I let my imagination run free. But I'll let the old decoy tell his own story.

I guess my earliest memory goes back to when kindly old Mr. Moak was attaching lead ballast weights and eyelets for our anchor cords to me and my 35 brothers and 12 sisters. I must admit we were a stately group, all lined up on the shelf in the winter of 1903 in Mr. Moak's shop in Tustin, Wisconsin. Us guys had some nice swirl painting where the grayish black of our chests met the white of the side-pockets and the back, which was dabbed with some nice feather painting. Despite all these fine touches that Mr. Moak added to us boys, I always suspected he liked my sisters a lot better than my brothers and me. He spent so much extra time painting the girls and he



*Here I am, nearing my 100th birthday, and except for a tail chip and a little black repaint, I look about the same as when Mr. Moak made me.*

even added a white wing speculum with a neat little blue line highlighting the back of it. He never added that touch to any of us guys.

For the next several weeks we lounged around on some rickety shelves in the back of Mr. Moak's little shop. Every once in a while somebody would come in and take a look at us. One day a man asked Mr. Moak, "How much are they by the dozen?"

"Forty-eight dollars a dozen," Moak replied. "If you take all four dozen I'll give you a little off."

"Gus," the man said, "you're getting too high priced for me."

"Don't give me any hard-luck stories," Moak told him. "You're selling canvasbacks for \$1.50 apiece and last spring alone you shipped over 500 to Chicago."

"Well, these swimming decoys will look great in the mating season, and I need something like this for spring hunting; so what's the best you can do?"

It was then that we realized that our prospective buyer was a market hunter. Our family didn't know it at the time, but we would come to hate this man. He not only had no respect for the ducks he killed but he showed even less regard for us. To him we were just tools of the trade instead of something to be cherished like we were when Mr. Moak was creating us.

Eventually the man and Mr. Moak made a deal. We became his property for \$175, a little over \$3.50 each. Mr. Moak carried us out and

the man tossed us unceremoniously into the back of his horse-drawn wagon. From there we were transported to the man's boathouse, about a mile down the road on the shore of Lake Poygan.

For those of you not familiar with Lake Poygan, in the first half of the twentieth century it was one of the premier lakes for canvasback shooting in the entire Mississippi Flyway. Located about fifteen miles west of Oshkosh in east-central Wisconsin, it attracted hunters from all over the Midwest. Many hunters traveled by train from Chicago or Milwaukee and then took a steamboat from Oshkosh to the little vil-

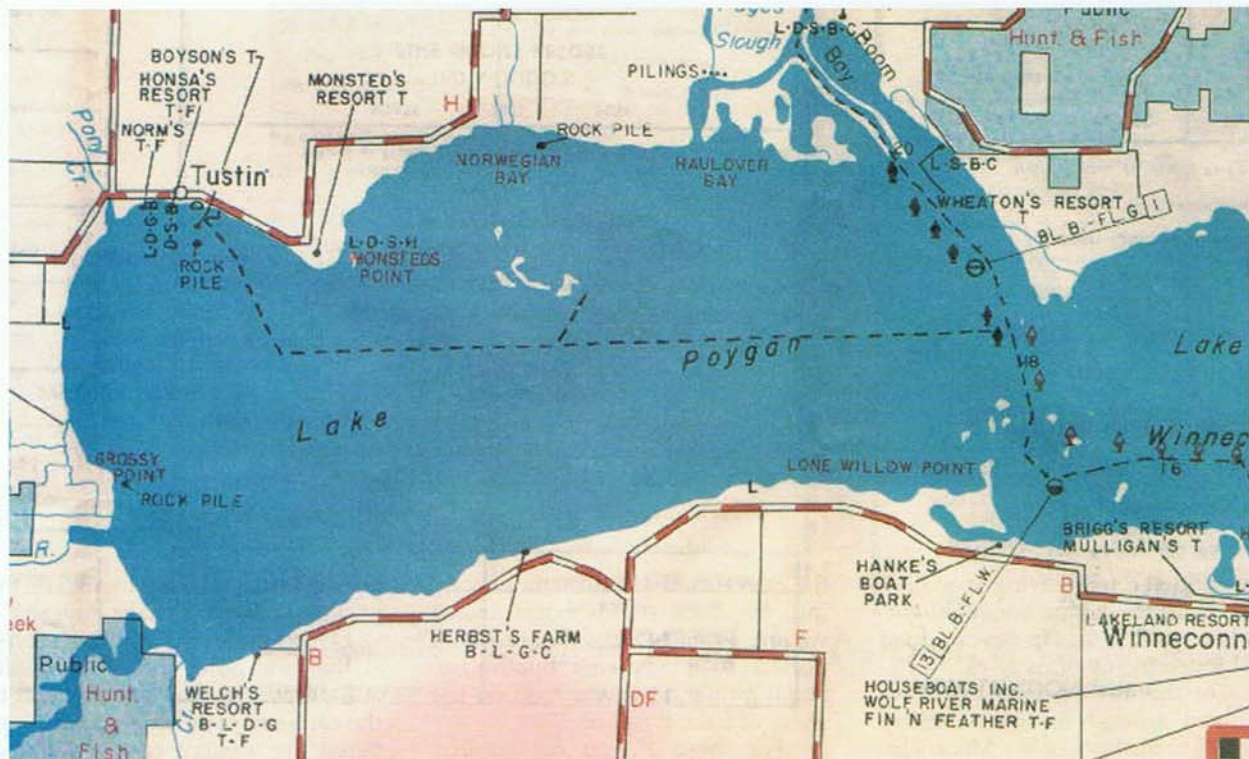
lage of Tustin, which is located on the northwest corner of Lake Poygan.

Once there, the hunters stayed at the local hotel and rented skiffs and decoys for their sojourns out to the cane and bulrush beds that peppered the western end of the lake and the mouth of the Wolf River that flowed into Poygan several miles east of Tustin. The hotel and other establishments needed many decoys, and Mr. Moak had a very lucrative business supplying not only the needed decoys but also the duck skiffs and paddles and other equipment that was used by the visiting hunters.

Anyhow, over the next few



*Mr. Moak put this fancy wing speculum with the blue line on my sisters. Both the gals and the guys had the scroll painting on the tail.*



Lake Poygan, the Canvasback Capital of Wisconsin in the first half of the twentieth century. Tustin is located on the northwest corner of the lake.

hunting seasons we saw some of our cousins out in the lake and they seemed to have a lot better time of it than we did. Every morning during the spring and fall the market hunter and his three sons used us to lure in unsuspecting canvasbacks. They had rigged us with seven-foot lines and heavy anchors to hold us firm in the choppy waters of Poygan. I have to admit that the hunters knew what they were doing, as nearly everyday they took dozens of ducks. Many times they fell right in the midst of our rig! I guess that Mr. Moak really knew what he was doing when he made us, too.

After a few years the hard hunting began to take a toll on us. Many of my brothers and sisters had shot holes in them from when crippled ducks were polished off when they fell close to us. I remember one day when the hunters were picking us up, one of my brothers was shot up so badly he was leaking and was so full of water he could barely stay above the water line.

"Cut the line off and throw it away," the old man told one of the youngsters. "That decoy is worthless."

The rest of us watched in horror as the boy tossed our brother over the side of the boat to drift away to a watery grave. By the end of the fall season that first year our number was down to 45, as another brother and a sister had their heads broken off and were discarded. I had suffered a loss of part of my tail when one of the boys banged me on the side of the boat to knock some ice off me. Fortunately, I had never been shot.

For the next fifteen years we were used on an almost daily basis in both spring and fall. Then in 1917, spring hunting and the selling of waterfowl was outlawed. By then our ranks were down to 38. Several of us were lost in a big storm when the hunters couldn't pick us all up and a few more drifted away when anchor lines broke. I remember one particular day when the hunters were shooting well past closing time and they missed picking up one of the girls in the dark. That night the lake froze over and the rest of us always wondered if an ice fisherman or anyone ever found her.

When the 1918 season rolled around, we were surprised that no one took us off the shelves. We didn't know that the old man had died and two of the boys had been killed in the war in Europe. The third son had lost his zest for hunting since there was no profit in it for him, and being somewhat on the lazy side, he never bothered to take us out in the lake again.

So there we were, a bruised and battered bunch of blocks, biding our time until some hunter would see fit to use us again for the purpose for which old Mr. Moak had made us, to lure the mighty canvasbacks into gun range. I can't even recall how many years we languished on the shelves in the old boathouse gathering layer upon layer of dust and grime.

Apparently the remaining son sold the property because one day the boathouse door opened and two strangers came inside.

"Look at all the duck decoys," one of them remarked.

"Yeah, I'll never use them so if you know anyone who wants 'em tell them to come and take whatever they want."

We were shocked. This man was giving us away!

It wasn't long before several people came by and began hauling us out by twos and threes. The best went first. Those of us with loose heads and broken bills and tails were left behind.

Soon there were only eleven of us left. One day a teen-age boy came into the boathouse with his father. He picked me up and remarked, "This one has a small chunk out of the tail, but otherwise looks pretty good. I'll take him and a couple of these others with loose heads. I can fix them up."

The youngster and his dad took us home and the boy gently cleaned us up and repaired the cracks in the necks of my brother and sister. I could see he really respected us. That's why I was appalled when he repainted their heads and then repainted the fine grayish black of my brother's tail and breast. When he picked me up I thought at first he was only going to paint the raw wood on the chip on my tail. But just like he did with my brother, he repainted my chest and tail, covering up Mr. Moak's fine swirl painting and the scrollwork on the top of my tail. To make matters worse he used a dark black paint instead of the grayish black that had set us apart from decoys fashioned by other makers of the time.

As the boy grew into a man he treated us with care for the next fifteen years, and although we were clearly the best of his rig, we enjoyed our time with the rag tag bunch of other wooden blocks he used. This hunter respected us and never shot into us like the old market hunters had.

When World War II began, once again we were relegated to bide our time stored away in gunny sacks as the young man was shipped to the South Pacific to fight for his country. When he returned from the service, although only a little past 30 years old, some of the youthful enthusiasm for hunting that he had possessed before the war seemed to be missing.

Over the next few years we were used sparingly and one day I heard the man telling one of his friends about a new kind of lightweight plastic decoy he had seen that would make us old heavy wooden decoys a

*I was now almost  
60 years old and had  
seen many hunting  
seasons come and go  
on Lake Poygan and I  
was devastated when  
I heard about  
these new decoys.*

thing of the past. I was now almost 60 years old and had seen many hunting seasons come and go on Lake Poygan and I was devastated when I heard about these new decoys. Hadn't I done my best for my owners? Why should I be replaced? I wasn't that heavy; I was hollow and still didn't leak a drop.

But I soon learned what it was like to be outdated. My rigmates and I never saw the outside of the sacks we were stored in for the next ten years. Then one day our owner came into the garage and pulled out the sacks of decoys. He spread us out on the floor and a well-dressed man looked us over very carefully. After some bargaining back and forth the man purchased us for \$45 each.

"Wow!" I thought, "Are we worth that much now?"

The man took us home and removed our lines and ballast weights. He rubbed a fine coat of polishing wax on us and I wondered what the heck he was doing. How were we going to attract any ducks when we were this shiny? And without my ballast weight I would surely tip over in the water.

But alas, I soon learned that my days of attracting wild ducks were over. With our gleaming surfaces we were placed on a shelf next to a fireplace and over the next few years, other than being dusted a few times by the lady of the house, the only action we saw was when we were admired by the man and his many visitors. One day the man took my brother and sister down from the shelf and sold them to another man for, get this, \$250!

Holy cow! We were really going up in value. Anyway, I was now alone, the last of Mr. Moak's original 48 decoys that the market hunter had purchased almost 100 years

ago. I thought I would live out my life on the nice man's shelf but one day someone came in and packed me and my shelf-mates into boxes filled with plastic peanuts. We were sealed up in the boxes and sent on a long journey to Maine.

Eventually we were unpacked and had labels attached to our bottoms. A photographer came in and took individual pictures of us. One of the other decoys in the lot said we were going to be in an auction. He told me he had been sold twice before in auctions, always for more money. Well, this was all new to me, but he said it could get pretty exciting. We were then repacked in boxes and sent on another long journey to St. Charles, Illinois.

Once we arrived in St. Charles we were unpacked and placed on tables in a large room. Soon hundreds of people were ogling us and picking us up and making comments about us.

One man looked at me and said, "That Moak has overpaint on it and it has a tail chip. It's worthless."

But his partner picked me up and lovingly ran his fingers over me. It brought back memories of kindly old Mr. Moak, who had always handled me the same gentle way. "Only the black has been repainted, and a lot of the overpaint is worn off. I kind of like it. I'm going to try and buy this decoy when it comes up."

Soon the auction started and I watched as decoy after decoy was put on the podium and sold. Eventually it was my turn and the bidding on me started slowly. I looked around and noticed that the man who said he liked me was bidding. I was aghast when the bidding went over \$1,000, but was very happy when the nice man was the winning bidder.

Later, when my new owner paid for me and was carrying me away, cradled lovingly in his arms, his friend who had said I was worthless stopped him.

"So, you got the Moak, huh?"

"Yeah, I got it. This decoy might have a little overpaint on it but can you imagine the stories this old block could tell if only he could talk?" □

(Ron Koch can be contacted by email at: rkoch@HFcollectibles.com)