

Four Generations of Suzor Carvers

by Linda Blaszak

Putting meals on the table for his family first lead him to the craft of carving decoys. Three generations later, but for other reasons, his family continues the tradition. Helery Suzor was born in 1887 and worked as a commercial fisherman in Ontario, Canada, catching sturgeon, walleye, and whitefish. It's believed that he still holds a record in the area for a 9-foot (plus), 219-pound sturgeon that he landed.

Helery also hunted waterfowl to sell at area roadhouses. Along the whole, southern shore of Lake St. Clair, Ontario, he lured canvasbacks, redheads, mallards, and bluebills with his brilliant decoys. Stories are told of single day kills of as many as 150-200 birds in Mitchell Bay and the St. Clair Flats, but these were not the norm. Helery killed what he could to sell or trade with local farmers and vegetable grow-

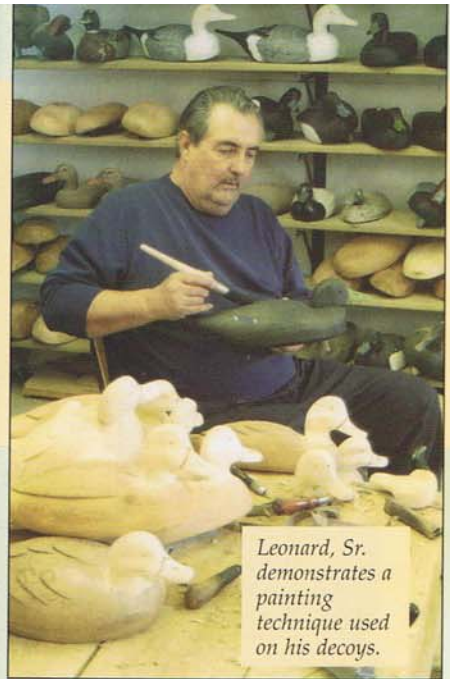
ers. He made a living out of his skill, born of need. Unfortunately, most of his decoys were tragically lost in a barn fire in the early 1940s.

Leonard Suzor Sr., Helery's grandson, now uses the skills and techniques passed down from his father and grandfather. "My grandfather perfected our style of decoys, taught my dad, who showed me; and I've shared the skill with my sons, Leonard Jr. and Michael. I've heard of families where a father and son both carve, but I believe we're one of only a few with four generations of carvers."

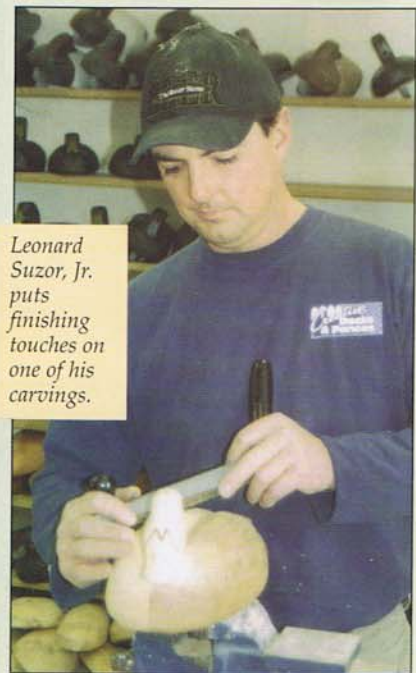
"The only surviving Helery decoy was given to me by my father," said Leonard Suzor. "I have seen no others resembling this decoy but would love to come across more some day. We're always hoping that he may have given some to friends and that they will one day surface at a decoy show."

Helery's son, Mose Suzor, was

Leonard, Sr. holds a finished canvasback and an unpainted decoy as he stands in front of shelves loaded with "hunted over" veteran blocks.



Leonard, Sr. demonstrates a painting technique used on his decoys.



Leonard Suzor, Jr. puts finishing touches on one of his carvings.

born in 1912 and started hanging around his father's workshop while still in diapers. Learning the carving trade early in life, Mose worked hunting and fishing with his father for a number of years. Then World War II started and Mose joined the Canadian army in 1941 as a military policeman. He was stationed at Camp Borden near London, Ontario, and St. Lukes Barracks, Windsor, where he policed the Windsor-Detroit border.



Leonard Suzor, Sr. holds last known surviving decoy carved by first-generation carver, Helery Suzor.



Mose returned home after serving 4 years and went to work at Borg-Warner manufacturing transmissions. He also started carving decoys again. Mose, an avid sportsman, fished and hunted all of his life and carved several hundred decoys. He carved decoys in his basement at first. Then, later, he built a house and turned the big new garage into a workshop. Rumor has it that his wife was pretty sore whenever her "exiled" car was covered with snow.

Using the decoys he made, Mose would go sneak shooting with his double-ended duck boat rigged with a low sail. He'd set anywhere from 100 to 200 of his decoys downwind about 500-600 yards from his boat. When the ducks landed among the decoys he'd untie the anchor and let the wind carry him to the ducks. "Pop loved to hunt and he took great pride in hunting over his own decoys. He studied the way they handled in the water and per-

fecting the design we use today," said Leonard Suzor, Sr.

"In late fall when the weather turned, my dad would leave his office and head to the marsh. When we were young, he would send us out at daybreak with the sneak rig; and about 10:30 he would come out to relieve us so we could go get a bite to eat and get warmed up. He'd always tell us to come back about noon. It took us years to catch on that this was the best flight time in our area for redheads. We could never figure out why he always had

more ducks than us."

Mose passed away in 1983, leaving Leonard and his other son, Rick, his last sneak shooting rig and duck boat. "Many of my dad's carvings have been given to family and friends and a few decoy collectors. I still have around 50 bluebills, redheads and canvasbacks," said Leonard (Len) Suzor, Sr. who has been actively carving since 1973. "I'd follow my dad to his workshop, and we'd carve decoys all winter long getting ready for the spring migration of ducks. We mainly carved mallards because at that time my dad had access to a big marsh in Stoney Point, Ontario."

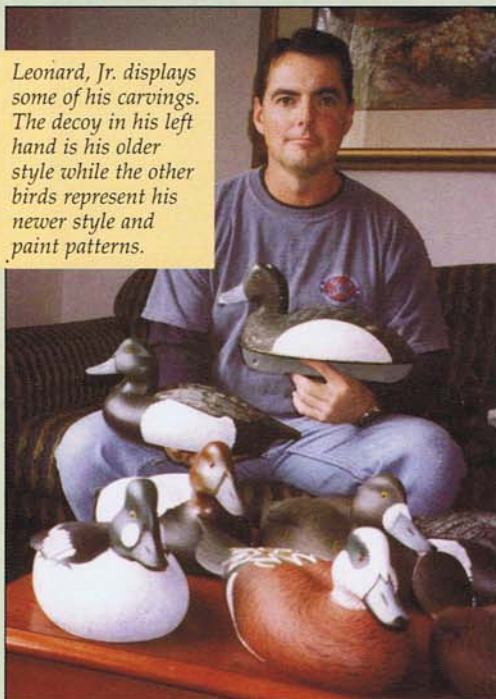
Being the 3rd generation of Suzor carvers, Leonard Sr. estimates he's hand-carved about 3,000 duck and goose decoys, with the majority of them being carved from 1977-1982. Len Sr. also started collecting decoys in 1983 and attends the Ohio Decoy Collectors & Carvers Association Show in March each year.

"I've been setting up a room or table at the show for over 20 years and enjoy talking with other carvers. It breaks up the long winter and gives me a chance to sell or trade a few of my ducks for some others. It's always exciting when I occasionally come across one of my

Finished carvings by Leonard, Jr. wait for paint to be applied.



Leonard, Jr. displays some of his carvings. The decoy in his left hand is his older style while the other birds represent his newer style and paint patterns.



Leonard Suzor, Sr.'s workshop shelves filled with decoys ready for shows and hunting season.

own for sale. They're easily identified by a 'LS' designed brand on the bottom right-hand side. When Leonard, Jr. started carving in his early teens, we decided he'd use the same brand but place it on the left-hand side."

The fourth generation of Suzor carvers, Leonard, Jr. and Michael, were taught carving techniques by their father when they were teenagers. Both continue to hunt the same area that Helery and Mose did, but the lakefront is more built up now.

Michael has carved his own hunting rig and for a while took the family business a step further by operating a hunting and fishing guide service. "I love the sport and could think of no better way to make a living than by doing what I enjoy. We hunted on the southeast section of Lake St. Clair where puddle and diver ducks migrate before colder weather chases them south," Michael says. Today, Mike continues to enjoy the sport while he works at a job he couldn't turn down — Marsh Manager for one of the largest private marsh hunt clubs in Southwestern Ontario.

Mike's older brother, Len Jr., has a strong desire to keep the family carving heritage going and pass it

on to his children. He has carved several hundred hunting decoys, including his own rig of more than 130 bluebills, redheads, and canvasbacks.

Len, Jr. has been experimenting with various styles and paint patterns. "Just a little friendly competition with the old man to carve the best decoys," he said. When he's not carving or running his construction business, Len, Jr. also hosts and guides hunters interested in hunting on Lake St. Clair, Ontario.

Whether guided by Mike or Len, Jr., hunters always seem to leave with their bag limits. Len, Jr. explains that their good fortune is due to "the way our wooden decoys set in the water and attract the ducks. We'll put out a rig of 100 to 200 decoys depending on the weather. I've seen other hunters using plastics but nothing floats as realistically as our wooden ducks."

Their hunting success was documented by host Tim Hooey of the "North American Fish and Game Outdoor Magazine Hunting Show" in the fall of 2000 and 2001, and the show continues to air on cable TV in the United States. During the broadcast they visited Leonard, Sr. in his workshop, and he showed some of his techniques used in carving the

decoys. "I use white cedar for the decoy bodies because it's light, durable, won't rot, and holds paint better. I use pine for the head for the same reasons plus the grain is more suitable and these woods last a long time. All four generations have used the same style, and we plan to continue making hunting decoys," stated Leonard, Sr.

Len, Sr. recently retired from a long career working at the Ford plant in Windsor, Ontario, and is excited by the prospect of having more time for carving and attending decoy shows. "I'm catching up on special decoy orders and have considered teaching a course on carving techniques. It just can't interfere with hunting. I'm in the process of training my new black lab "Buddy" to go on hunts with me, and we plan to spend as much time as we can on the lake," he explained.

When asked what the future holds, Len, Sr. responds "I have six grandchildren and hopefully can stick around to teach them the basics of decoy carving when they get older." And like an auctioneer looking for a bigger sale price, he continues with a twinkle in his eye "We already have four generations of carvers, we're hoping for five." □

(Readers wishing to contact the author may do so by emailing Elbee107@aol.com. Readers wishing to contact Leonard Suzor, Sr. may do so by email at ell-ess@jet2.net or by phone at 519-979-8506.)