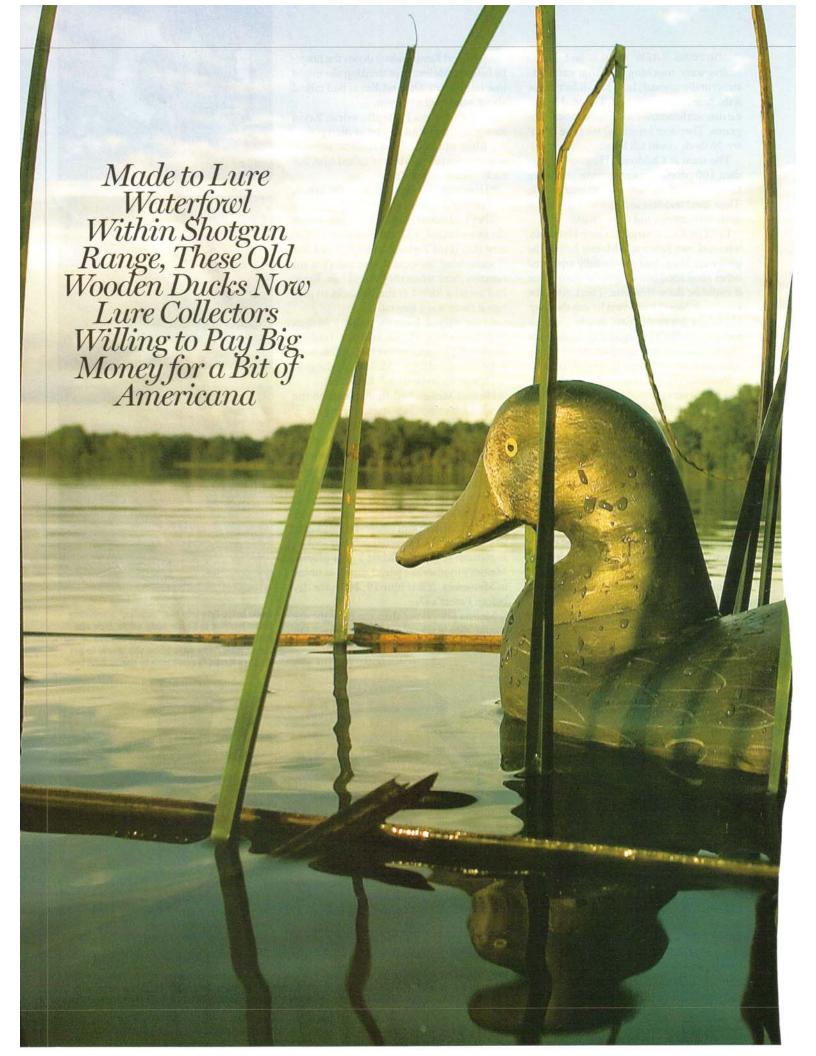
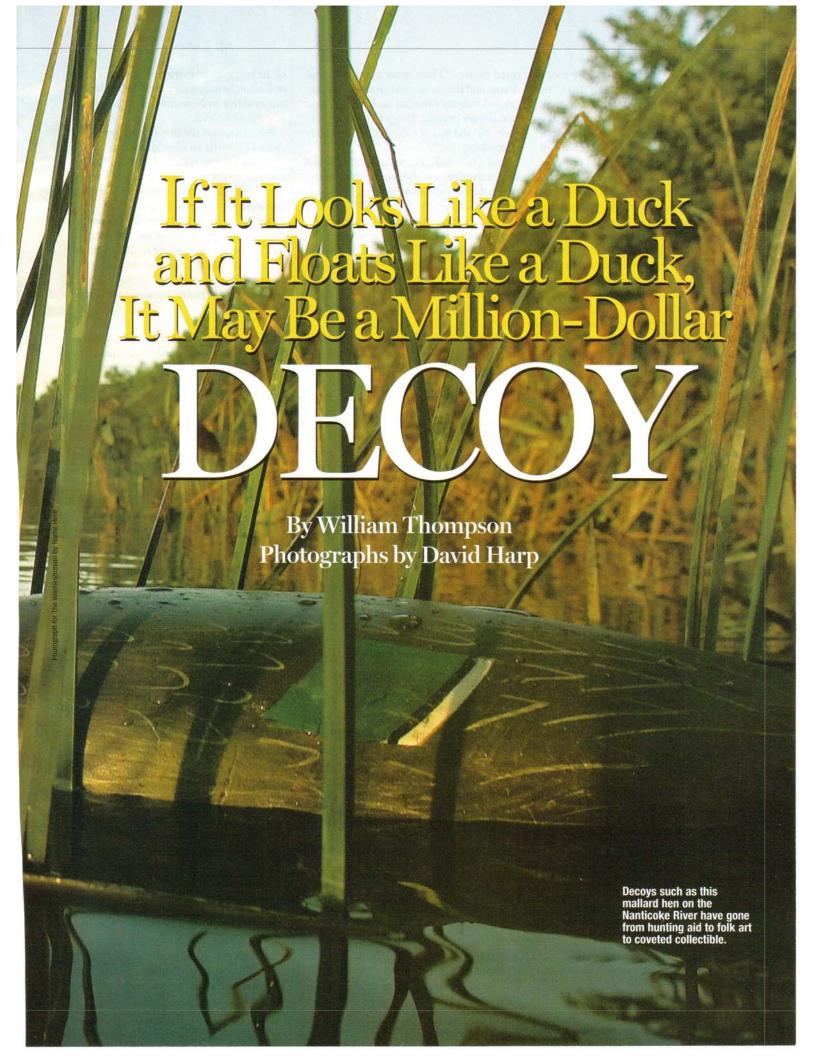
Is Mark Warner the Next Bill Clinton: + 10 The Ultimate Guide to Caring for Your Dog or Cat The Best Veterinarians, Pet Sitters, Kennels, Groomers, and More. Plus—Adopting ARE DOG February 2006 washingtonian.com With Your Dog, and What's Cool in Fish and Birds. HOW MUCH IS TOO SPEND ON YOUR PET? washingtonian.com \$3.95





hat could be more beguiling than an old wooden duck resting peacefully atop a fireplace mantel? It takes up little space and eats nothing—it requires

only that you keep it from becoming the dog's next chew toy. In return, it gives immeasurable pleasure. It is history. It is beauty. It is Americana. And, in some cases, it is worth a ton of money.

But beware: That duck, carved out of a block of cedar or tupelo to lure real waterfowl within shotgun range, can cause humans to act in mysterious ways. Not everyone who comes in contact with decoys gets duck fever, but for those who do, it can be irreversible.

Harry J. Waite caught it at an early age.

Growing up near Wilmington on a du Pont estate managed by his father, Waite loved the outdoors. He couldn't afford to buy hunting decoys, so he carved his own. He continued to make ducks throughout his life at his home in Pennsylvania. And when he died in 2000, his family abided his last wishes by placing his cremated remains inside one of his canvasback decoys. It was driven to Maryland's Eastern Shore, where Waite had enjoyed duck hunting, and set loose on a creek in Talbot County. While a piper played "Amazing Grace," Waite's wife and children watched from the deck of a skipjack as the canvasback bobbed away with the tide. They then returned to shore and, completing Waite's memorial service, sat down at a table inside a Tilghman Island restaurant and

dined on Chesapeake Bay crab cakes, Maryland fried chicken, and coleslaw.

Steve Ward caught the bug, too. Coming home to Maryland after having served in France during World War I, Ward joined brother Lem to form their "wildfowl counterfeiters" partnership. Today, Ward birds are prized, and their reputation beyond their native Crisfield is so great that a museum was named in their honor. But not everyone shared the obsession. When Steve Ward's wife, Allene, filed for a divorce, her family threw their support behind her and complained to the judge that Allene was unhappy because her husband kept a clut-

William Thompson is a former newspaper reporter, drawbridge tender, and bloodworm digger. He is now a writer and photographer living in Easton.

tered house. "There were paint cans and decoys and things like that around," the aggrieved woman's mother said, "and Allene would want to make things appear more orderly, but she was not allowed to have a say in anything"

And Thomas K. Figge, an outdoorsman and philanthropist who splits his time between Aspen and Santa Barbara, has a serious case of the fever. After 25 years of searching for the best decoys representing the migratory waterfowl flyways of the United States, he has amassed one of the nation's finest collections. In doing so, he set the decoy-auction record in 2003 when he reportedly paid \$801,500 for a pintail duck made by A. Elmer Crowell of Cape Cod.

"We were prepared to go over a million dollars," Figge's agent at the auction said.



Ithough hunters have used decoys in their pursuit of waterfowl since the early 1800s, collecting decoys began in the 1920s. A few decoy makers gathered in Bellport, Long Island, in the summer of 1923 to show off their birds, to share tips on carving and painting, and to swap a few ducks. At least two other exhibitions followed, attended mostly by carvers and sportsmen. In the fall of 1931, decoys gained a measure of respect when they were included in a display of American folk art at the Newark Museum in New Jersey.

These shows were baby steps toward establishing the decoy as folk art. It has taken decades, but wooden ducks and other sculpted birds draw tens of thousands of fans to shows and auctions each year. One of the biggest bird extravaganzas takes place in Easton, where more than 16,000 spectators arrive in November for the annual Waterfowl Festival.

For three days the downtown streets are closed to traffic so bird lovers can sip hot cider, toot goose calls, and stand in lines to examine sculptures and paintings of waterfowl, including contemporary carvings fashioned to resemble old decoys but meant to go no farther than the bookshelf. Derided by some locals as the "duck carnival," the event may be one of the few times a year that rational men and women find it acceptable to venture out in public wearing corduroy pants embroidered with Canada geese.

Before all this could happen, decoy milestones had to be set. The first major event was the 1934 publication of the book Wild Fowl Decoys. Written by Joel Barber, it offered arguments that decoys can be appreciated beyond their utilitarian purpose.

Barber was an architect who helped design Rockefeller Center in New York. But it was his rural travels that gave him the chance to collect decoys and to write the book which is credited with moving the decoy from the barn to a place of honor on the mantel.

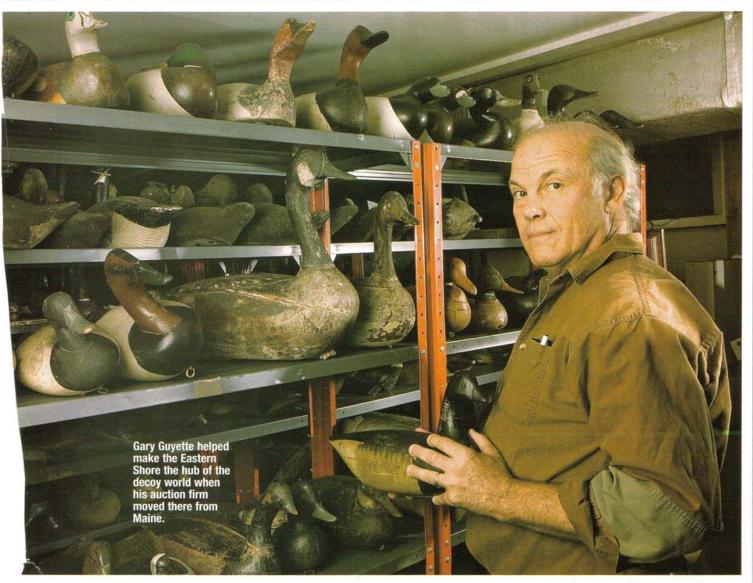
"He's the one that got all this lunacy started," says James L. Trimble, a retired Washington banker and a member of the Potomac Decoy Collectors Association.

Barber and other duck enthusiasts have noted that decoys were not made as art. The objective was to catch the eye of a bird, not an art

critic. But they also argue that many of the carvers were far more than whittlers, that they possessed creative sensibilities. A decoy made by A. Elmer Crowell, Nathan Cobb Jr., or Lem and Steve Ward transcends its function. And in some cases, the birds are so beautiful that they rise above their folkart category, which includes weather vanes and cigar-store Indians.

"It's painted sculpture," is how Stephen B. O'Brien Jr., an art and antiques dealer, puts it. "And if you can't appreciate a beautiful bird, you don't have a soul."

small man who favored a manicured mustache and three-piece suits, Joel Barber must have struck the weather-beaten carvers he befriended as an odd duck. The late Lem Ward, an Eastern Shore native whose decoys won more first prizes



than any other birds in 1948, met Barber at a fancy New York restaurant in 1951. Years later he recalled that Barber, then in his seventies, ordered an omelet. Ward said that Barber shook the salt shaker onto the table, pinched some grains with his fingers and sprinkled them over his eggs. He did the same with the pepper shaker.

Barber was familiar with the Chesapeake Bay region, having spent some time in Queen Anne's County in the 1930s when he designed the waterfront manor house for an advertising executive. Barber grew so fond of the creeks and marshes that he composed dozens of poems—he called them "shanty poetry"—about the tidewater country.

By the time Barber died and his collection of 400 decoys was given to Vermont's Shelburne Museum in 1952, the desire to own decoys had gotten a hold on a handful of men, among them William Mackey. He lived in New Jersey and spent much of his time on the road selling the

wood finisher Minwax and tracking down decoys and their makers. Like Barber, Mackey preferred East Coast ducks and featured them in his book *American Bird Decoys*.

Sam Dyke, the consulting curator of the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art in Salisbury, visited Mackey years ago and remembers the spectacle of birds that greeted him throughout the house. "They were everywhere," Dyke said. "You went into the bathroom and there was a little basket with some shore birds stuffed into it."

Dyke remembers Mackey from an era when decoy fanciers tried to shape their collections without spending much money. "He was an inveterate trader," Dyke said. "You didn't go to his house unless you brought something to trade. And that was symbolic of the business for a long time. 'You want it? You bring me something. I don't want to sell it. I want something I don't have.' "

Crounging old decoys from carvers and gunning clubs and then swapping the birds with others is how Joe French acquired several thousand carvings. French, whose first birds were a pair of old squaws given to him by Mackey in 1954, is a legend among collectors. Believed to be in his late eighties—he'll say only that he's "ancient"—French is the sole survivor among the duck enthusiasts of the 1940s and 1950s whose birds now form the core for many of today's collections.

French, who has lived in the Florida Keys since 1971, said the 1950s was a turning point for lovers of wood decoys. Decoy factories began churning out plastic birds that many hunters and guides preferred because they were cheap, weighed less, required little maintenance, and in some cases floated more like real ducks. Wooden birds, even the ones that had been hollowed, were heavy, and setting out a rig of a hundred or more decoys was work. They were treated roughly, too, and to help prevent their

Before You Buy a Painted Bird

Nobody has a college degree in antique decoys, the wooden birds carved and painted between the late 1800s and the early 1940s. But there are people whose insights—gained from years of examining decoys and observing the market—can be helpful if you're thinking about buying one.

Are decoys a good investment?

"The only thing better is oil, and I don't think oil's as good."—Joseph Tonelli, decoy dealer and adviser

"If all you're doing it for is the money, play the stock market."—Joe Engers, editor and publisher, Decoy Magazine

"Most people think their decoys are worth a lot of money, and 90 percent of them aren't worth anything." —Gary Guyette, Guyette & Schmidt decoy auction firm

"I bought a decoy once for \$2,000 and sold it for \$100,000."—Jim Cook, collector

What should I look for in an old decoy?

"Its form and surface. It doesn't even have to have a name. It just reeks of quality." —Thomas K. Figge, collector

"People get caught up on names, just like in the art world where they often abide bad paintings by good artists. The neat thing about decoys is that we don't always know who made them." —Stephen O'Brien Jr., Stephen B. O'Brien Jr. Fine Arts

"The painting is the key." —Joseph Tonelli

"Condition, restoration, attribution, rarity, aesthetic value, provenance, popularity."—Sam Dyke, consulting curator, Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art

"Don't be a name collector." - Joe Engers

"You can look at what you think is a piece of junk and the guy next to you sees something special."

—James L. Trimble, member of Potomac Decoy Collectors Association

How do I get started?

"Find someone you trust. You do get burned a few times. You make mistakes." —Jim Cook

"If you only have \$200 to spend, buy some books and magazines and read about them." — Joe Engers

"Buy from somebody who'll guarantee what they sell." —James L. Trimble

"If you have \$1,000, buy a \$1,000 decoy, not ten \$100 decoys." —Joseph Tonelli

"Anybody who collects anything—especially decoys—is going to learn a lesson or two if they just blunder along."—Sam Dyke

The benefits of collecting decoys?

"The whole thing was then, and still is, a very social activity. You see the same people at the same shows every year. You know them. You're friends with them. You go out to dinner with them. You maybe hunt with them." —Gary Guyette

"I love old gunning decoys because they are beautiful and remind me of childhood days duck hunting with my dad and brothers in Arkansas." —Paul Tudor Jones II, financier and sportsman



heads from breaking off, carvers sometimes made the decoy necks thicker than the real bird's. And the paint job on wooden birds had to be touched up every now and then. In other words, the characteristics of decoys that appeal to collectors were considered liabilities at the dawn of the plastic age.

French and other collectors tried to take advantage of the change by contacting gunning clubs and guides to get their birds, but sometimes luck worked against them. "I can't tell you how many times some caretaker told me, 'Oh Joe, you should have been here last year before I burned those old decoys.'"

ollectors such as Barber, French, and Mackey discovered that they had more in common than just the love of a block of wood. They were sleuths. Locating birds was one thing. Determining provenance—who made them and who shot over them—was another. Decoy makers did not always sign their birds. While carvers were still living, it was commonplace for a collector to take a decoy to the man he thought made it and ask for confirmation. Through

studying different birds from different regions and sharing the information, styles of carving and painting emerged. Books by Barber and Mackey, followed by folk-art collector Adele Earnest's *The Art of the Decoy: American Bird Carvings*, became references for collectors.

Decoy research is an ongoing activity and has spawned publications devoted to old birds. "I counted that between 1965 and 2005 at least 75 books have been published on decoys," said the Ward Museum's Sam Dyke, noting that as decoy collecting spread, it became necessary for novice historians to put together information about regional carvers who had been ignored in the Barber-Mackey days.

he golden age of decoy collecting ended when afficionados realized that the best old birds were easier to find not in boathouses but at auctions. In some ways, auctions ushered in the brass-knuckles age. Most of the old carvers had died. The pioneer collectors were dying, too, and their heirs looked to auction houses as the way to liquidate the wooden assets. A new breed of buyer appeared and astounded observers by paying

thousands of dollars for decoys that had been acquired years earlier for a few dollars and a handshake.

In 1973, the decoy world reverberated with the news that a collector had paid more than \$10,000 for a shore bird made by a Long Island carver.

Prices paid for decoys climbed slowly until 1978 when a new

record setter cost about \$50,000. Today a \$50,000 bird doesn't even rank atop the list of the year's 100 most-expensive birds, according to *Decoy Magazine*, published in Lewes, Delaware, and regarded as the bible of the decoy world.

Decoy collectors generally don't like talking about the money. They plead that the duck is a thing of beauty and that art, even folk art, should be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities. Even so, the conversation often ends up about the money. Fifty-four birds fetched more than \$100,000 a piece at decoy auctions from 1986 through 2004. Eighteen of those decoys sold for more than \$200,000. And the top three birds each brought its sellers more than half a million dollars.

Pointing to the 2000 auction of a private collection owned by the late Dr. James M. McCleery when a number of decoys sold for four and five times their estimated value, *Decoy Magazine* editor and publisher Joe Engers said that some new buyers overbid.

Whether a decoy will break the milliondollar mark is a matter of "when." Thomas Figge, who reportedly holds the current top two record prices (\$801,500 and \$684,500 for two Crowell birds), suggested that a number of decoys worth a million dollars already exist in private collections. The question is when these birds will be put up for sale. According to Decoy Magazine contributing editor Jackson Parker, classic birds generally end up on the auction block through one of the Four D's: death, divorce, debt, and deaccession (a museum putting part of its collection on sale to raise funds). One enterprising dealer is said to stick his business cards on the underside of old decoys that the owner isn't ready to sell. If one of the Four D's happens, he wants his phone to ring.

In the meantime, plans are under way to give the public a glimpse of some of the best decoys. The American Folk Art Museum in New York is planning a traveling exhibition of 150 old decoys. Tentatively sched-





tember 2008, the show is intended to focus on the decoy's artistic merits.

"It's important for people to see these," says Figge, who has offered to lend the show some of his best birds. "You can't just salt these away. We're just stewards of these decoys for a while."

If there was any question about where the center of the decoy universe is, it was put to rest last January. That's when the decoy auction firm Guyette & Schmidt moved its headquarters from Maine to a waterfront estate outside St. Michaels on the Eastern Shore, not far from the weekend getaways acquired by Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

The Chesapeake Bay region already was home to three permanent decoy exhibitions—the Ward Museum in Wicomico County, the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum in Harford County, and the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in Talbot County, where the Harry Waite decoy urn is among the collections—as well as the Waterfowl Festival in Easton and an annual swap fest put on by collectors' clubs at the Best Western St. Michaels Motor Inn.

Maryland and Virginia tidewater country had more than its share of great decoy makers—Lem and Steve Ward, R. Madison Mitchell, Ira Hudson, Robert McGraw, James Holly, Charles Joiner, and Jesse Urie—and several private decoy collections worth millions of dollars are tucked away on local estates.

The move by Guyette & Schmidt, which has auctioned \$82 million worth of decoys and waterfowling artifacts since it started in 1984, adds to the Eastern Shore's duck culture.

Gary Guyette said the move was practical. His Talbot County location is a better jumping-off point to get to shows, other dealers, and to private collectors. Guyette and partner Frank Schmidt each travel 30,000 miles a year pursuing decoys to include in their yearly trio of auctions.

arver Harry Waite, who died in 2000

asked that his ashes be kept in this beloved bird, held by Pete Lesher of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime

Museum, where the decoy is on

Guyette is bullish on birds. But he cautions newcomers to the decoy world not to let duck fever spoil their judgments. "Buy from people who are in it for the long haul and who have a good reputation," he says. "The advice we give to people is if you don't know, make sure you're dealing with someone who does know."

Where to See the Best

Four area museums have antique decoys made by some of the nation's best carvers and painters:

Calvert Marine Museum

14150 Solomons Island Rd. Solomons, MD 20688 410-326-2042 www.calvertmarinemuseum.com

Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum

213 N. Talbot St. Navy Point St. Michaels, MD 21663 410-745-2916 cbmm.org

Havre de Grace Decoy Museum

215 Giles St. Havre de Grace, MD 21078 410-939-3739 decoymuseum.com

Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art 909 S. Schumaker Dr.

Salisbury, MD 21804 410-742-4988 wardmuseum.org