



Record Price For Decoy Of \$830,000 Established At Guyette And Schmidt's

By **David S. Smith**

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Easton, Md.

:Waterfowling and decoys are serious business in this part of the country and there are relatively few times during the course of the year when the enthusiasm level is higher than the first week of November. It is the week when the Easton Waterfowl Festival is conducted — a week when the entire town is literally overrun with tens of thousands of decoy carvers, artists, duck boat builders, waterfowl guides and, appropriately, vendors of antique decoys and the collectors that seek their wares.



The A.E. Crowell black bellied plover in spring plumage from the Mackey collection, one of legendary "dust jacket birds," was termed "arguably the finest Crowell shorebird ever to come to auction," by auctioneer Gary Guyette prior to the sale. It sold after an intense bidding battle for a record price paid at auction for a decoy at \$830,000.

While the world championship for contemporary decoy carvers ranks as one of the top events, the most anticipated event takes place in the days leading up to the weekend. Guyette and Schmidt's annual North American Decoys at Auction, which like the other auctions conducted throughout the year by the firm, attracts its own core of serious collectors from across the country.

This year's auction, November 8 and 9, established more record prices than you could shake a stick at, including the highest price ever paid for a decoy sold at auction. The sale, consisting of approximately 800 lots, grossed an impressive \$4.5 million, ranking it as the second highest grossing decoy auction and behind the legendary McCleery auction.

While Guyette and Schmidt's Easton auction always attracts a good crowd, this sale saw a huge crowd of regular customers in attendance as well as a bunch of new-to-the-market buyers that have been attracted to the decoy marketplace by events such as the Paul Tudor Jones Decoy Exhibition, recently conducted at the Brooks Museum of Art in Memphis. Surprisingly, the auction also brought a host of the "old-guard" collectors out of the woodwork, many of whom had not been seen in auction halls for either years or decades.

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Several coveted collections were among the 800-plus decoys that would cross the block, including the first in a series of sales liquidating the collection of Dr John Conover III, the collection of Ed and Jane German, and a group of decoys and carvings that had descended and been consigned from the family of Massachusetts carver Charles Hart.

While each of the aforementioned collections were impressive in their own right, the single biggest draw to the auction was the offering of a selection of shorebirds and decoys that had been consigned from a direct descendant of the highly revered collector, the late William Mackey Jr.



The turned head Hudsonian curlew by Quogue, Long Island, carver Thomas Gelston, Mackey collection, sold for \$450,500, a record price for a New York decoy.

Termed the "lost Mackey collection decoys" by "those in the know," the collection contained a core group of decoys and shorebirds that never surfaced at the original Mackey collection auction when it was sold by Massachusetts auctioneer Richard Bourne in 1973.

Several of the "lost decoys" consigned to Guyette and Schmidt were considered to be some of the most coveted of the Mackey collection and for more than three decades collectors have openly wondered about the whereabouts of those particular birds.

Anticipation was high and a standing room only crowd was on hand for the auction, peppered with a several collectors that had been at the original Mackey sale. All seemed determined to either claim one of the major lots, or at least take something home.

"There are about 20 collectors here that were at the Mackey sale," stated Gary Guyette during preview. The auctioneer pointed out one bidder that was busy inspecting the Thomas Gelston curlew that would eventually sell for more than \$450,000.

"A lot of these guys went to the Mackey sale to buy these particular birds and they weren't there," said Guyette. "No one really knew what happened to them, until we got a call and they were consigned to us." Ultimately, it turned out that the rare birds had been cherry-picked from the collection by a family member and they had since descended in the family. "It has created quite a bit of excitement," said Guyette.

While the presale excitement was high, it would pale in comparison to the activities of the scene over the course of the auction. Virtually all of the Mackey collection decoys and shorebirds were subjected to flurries of bids when offered and estimates were handily exceeded.

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Mackey collection decoys have always commanded respect and the provenance is considered to be a stamp of approval by dealers and collectors alike. The now-famous Bowman curlew sold at Bourne's during the original Mackey sale for what was considered an amazing record price of \$10,000, was purchased by the late Dr James McCleery. It was sold at the renowned Sotheby's/Guyette and Schmidt auction liquidating the McCleery collection in January of 2000, for another historic record-setting price of \$460,000.

Highlighting the Mackey collection decoys in Guyette and Schmidt's most recent auction was the highly coveted Elmer Crowell black bellied plover in spring plumage, commonly known as the missing "dust jacket" decoy. The rare decoy got its nickname after being illustrated on the colorful dust jacket cover of Mackey's *American Bird Decoys*. Two other coveted shorebirds with Mackey collection provenance included an exceptional Nathan Cobb curlew, and the Hudsonian turned head curlew by Thomas Gelston.



The Nathan Cobb large and plump curlew from the Mackey collection was in outstanding dry original paint and was marked with the serified "N." It had been exhibited at Mackey's landmark IBM exhibition in Manhattan in 1966 and also illustrated in a 1964 issue of *Antiques Magazine*. The classic split-tail curlew sold for \$390,000, establishing a record price paid at auction not only for Nathan Cobb, but also for a Virginia decoy.

Day One

As the standing room only crowd settled into the auction room, bidders' heads craned from side to side, scanning the room and noting where their serious competition would come from. There was a buzz in the air as auctioneer James Julia began the sale and the first lot to cross the block would set the fast-paced, high-priced tone for the two-day auction.

With great anticipation from everyone involved, Julia set bidding into motion for a pair of miniature swimming Canada geese with crossed necks by Robert McGraw that would surpass estimates by a wide margin. The rare pair, mounted on a small board and estimated at \$1,250/1,750, opened for bidding at \$1,000 and was quickly hammered down at \$4,312. A couple of lots later a miniature Canada goose by Seabrook, N.H., carver George Boyd shot past the \$2,5/3,000 estimates selling to Connecticut dealer Alan Haid for \$4,715.

It quickly became apparent, however, that the shorebirds would be the sweethearts of the auction, especially those with Mackey collection provenance. The first of the shorebirds to attract attention came within 15 minutes of the sale beginning as a rare ruddy turnstone in outstanding original paint by H.V. Shourds was offered. From the Mackey collection and estimated at \$20/30,000, the lot opened for bidding at



\$22,500 and moved rapidly with several in the room competing with a telephone bidder. Bids bounced back and forth with the lot selling to a buyer in the room for \$54,625.

The lot was followed by another ruddy turnstone in great paint, also Mackey

collection, this one by Pleasantville, N.J., carver Daniel Lake Leeds. Estimated at \$15/20,000, this lot was also actively bid with it opening at the high estimate. Bids came fast and furious for the shorebird with three telephone bidders competing with two buyers in the room. In the end the two bidders in the room pushed the price to \$60,375 with a buyer in the front row claiming the lot.

The first of the "big" shorebirds to cross the block was the Nathan Cobb large and plump curlew in outstanding original paint. Marked with a large serifed "N" on the belly, the decoy had been exhibited at the Wald-Bronner's swimming goldeneye drake with a slightly crooked head mark IBM exhibition in Manhattan in 1966. It had also been illustrated in a 1964 issue of *Antiques Magazine* in conjunction with an article written by Mackey.

The classic split-tail curlew, retaining the original inserted and splined hardwood bill and the black glass eyes, carried a presale estimate of \$100/150,000. As the lot was about to be sold, a hush came over the crowd and several of the contenders in the room had positioned themselves in key locations where they could keep an eye on each other and the telephones.

Bidding on the lot opened at \$80,000 and moved to \$85,000 right away with a bidder standing on the right hand side of the room jumping into the action. An aggressive telephone bidder jumped the bid to \$100,000, only to be countered at \$110,000 by the bidder standing in the room. Action continued between the two until the \$270,000 mark where the phone bidder dropped from the action. South Carolina collector Dick McIntyre, standing on the opposite side of the room jumped in at \$280,000 and the action continued to \$330,000 where a new bidder stood up from his seat in the rear of the gallery and hit the lot at \$340,000. The original bidder in the room cut the bid to \$345,000, and the gentleman in the rear countered at \$350,000 with the lot selling there for \$390,000, including premium. The decoy established a record price paid at auction not only for Nathan Cobb, but also for a Virginia decoy.



The yellowlegs by Massachusetts carver Melvin Gardner with an unusual slotted head with replaceable bill, Mackey collection, sold at \$40,250.

Duck decoys in the first session included a rare rimate pair of mergansers by Maine carver Oscar Bibber that

retained the original paint and horsehair crests. The drake is illustrated in the book *New England Decoys* by John and Shirley Delph. Estimated at \$35/45,000, the mergs sold for \$49,450.

Another of the Maine decoys to attract attention was a black duck in a preening pose with its bill under a raised wing. The folky looking decoy, made by Gus Wilson, was a late addition to the auction with it selling above estimates at \$47,150, going to Boston dealer Stephen O'Brien.

A hollow carved brant in excellent original paint by Chincoteague carver Dave "Umbrella" Watson sold at the low estimate bringing \$51,750, while a large swan by Virginia carver Charles Birch, consigned from the collection of Henry E.I. du Pont II, went out between estimates at \$57,500.

A Harry Shourds hollow carved Canada goose with nice original paint did well at \$66,125.

Although the area around Chincoteague, Va., is scoured on a regular basis for decoys, an unusual Ira Hudson wall plaque with flying mallard in original paint was a recent discovery, reportedly having been picked from a local garage sale. Purchased there for an undisclosed price, the decoy did well at the auction, selling at \$11,500.



Southern decoys, from left, included the Lee Dudley, Knotts Island, N.C., ruddy duck that sold at \$34,500, the Captain Ben Dye ruddy duck \$23,000, a John William ruddy duck \$8,625, and the John Williams blue-wing teal that was bid to \$49,450.

Decorative pieces also attracted attention with several of the lots commanding serious prices. A Ward Brothers carving of a Canada goose that had been custom made for collector Ed German did well as it sold above estimates at \$28,750. Decoratives by Elmer Crowell included a full-sized standing grouse mantle carving in good paint that was hammered down at \$31,625, a preening black duck sold at the high end of estimates at \$28,750, and a preening greater yellowlegs realized \$23,575.

A nice selection of working decoys included a selection of ruddy ducks and teals from the southern regions including a Lee Dudley, Knotts Island, N.C., ruddy duck with classic form that sold at \$34,500. A Captain Ben Dye ruddy duck in old reuse repaint brought \$23,000, and a John William ruddy with restoration sold at \$8,625,

A blue-wing teal by Port Deposit, Md., carver John Williams from the Mackey collection was another of the lots to attract the interest of bidders. In a worn surface, the decoy was described in the catalog as a "wonderful little bird." It had been pictured in Mackey's book, along with the author relating the story of its acquisition from Maryland collector Harry Barnes.

Apparently several in the crowd agreed that it was a "wonderful bird" as the decoy quickly soared past the \$6/8,000 presale estimates. The lot opened for bidding at \$3,000 and bidding bounced back and forth between the room and the telephone. It was not long before two determined bidders in the room started banging heads as they sat calmly, one in the front row, the other in the rear, just holding their bid cards in the air. As the lot cleared the \$10,000 mark, advancements increased to \$500, yet the action did not slow at all. At \$30,000, the bids advanced to \$1,000 increments, and again the action never slowed until it hit the selling price of \$49,450, going to the buyer in the front row.

Day Two

The Thursday morning session of the auction began with an assortment of uncataloged items, but it was not long before the lot that everyone had wanted to see sell was about to cross the auction block. Once again, within 15 minutes of the sale beginning, things got very serious as the A.E. Crowell black bellied plover in spring plumage was offered.

"This, without question, is the plumpest of any of the 'dust jacket birds,' and is arguably the finest Crowell shorebird ever to come to auction," stated Guyette prior to the sale. Called one of "Mackey's favorites," the decoy had been the subject of quite a bit of speculation and about the only thing people could agree on was that it would sell far above the presale estimates of \$300/350,000.

Cataloged as retaining a superb dry original paint with a wonderful patinated surface, the decoy was said to be structurally outstanding in every respect. Termed as "typical of the wonderful blended paint that Crowell was known for, superbly blended and typical of his finest and earliest work," everyone had stopped to admire the shorebird.

With the bank of phones set for bidding and the major players in the gallery poised and ready for action, auctioneer James Julia asked for an opening bid of \$300,000 and then opened the lot at \$100,000. Bids came quickly from the rear of the room and one of the seven phone bidders that were on the lines. As the lot crossed the \$450,000 mark, a new bidder standing on the side of the hall jumped into the fray. Moving in \$25,000 increments, bidding never slowed until it hit the \$650,000 mark with the phone holding the advantage. Just prior to the hammer, the bidder on the side of the room once again raised his bid-card, only to be quickly countered by the telephone bidder. This process was repeated a couple more times with the decoy finally selling to the telephones for a record price of \$830,000.

The previous record, also for a Crowell decoy, was established by Guyette and Schmidt in conjunction with Christie's when a preening pintail sold for \$801,500 in January 2003.

The next shorebird to be offered was an exceptional yellowlegs by Massachusetts carver Melvin Gardner with an unusual slotted head that had a removable section to facilitate the replaceable bill. In original paint and another of the Mackey collection decoys, the lot sold well above the



A selection of carvings that had descended in the family of Gloucester, Mass., carver

\$12/18,000 estimates at \$40,250.

The last of the "big three" shorebirds to cross the block was a rare turned head Hudsonian curlew by Quogue, Long Island, carver Thomas Gelston that dated to the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century. Also consigned from the Mackey collection, it was cataloged as being one of the most photographed of the collection, appearing, among other places, on the cover of *American Decoys* by Quintina Colio. The decoy had also been displayed alongside the Crowell black bellied plover in the '66 IBM exhibition.

Charles Hart included this penguin, measuring 12 inches tall, that shot past the \$7/9,000 estimates, bringing \$44,275.

Estimated at \$55/65,000, the decoy opened for bidding at \$40,000 and the action bounced back and forth between the room and three telephone bidders. At \$95,000, competition narrowed to two of the phone bidders with the lot eventually selling at \$450,500, a record price for a Gelston shorebird and also a record price paid for any New York decoy.

Other shorebirds that attracted attention included an Ira Hudson yellowlegs, Mackey collection, in exceptional original paint with scratch feathering that sold at \$66,125. Another Hudson yellowlegs sold at \$23,000.

A boxed set of six sanderlings by Long Island carver Harry Knapp, from the Mackey collection and also described in his book, carried a presale estimate of \$20/25,000. Cataloged as being in outstanding dry original paint, the lot was bid to \$23,000.



Auction house principals Frank Schmidt, left, and Gary Guyette, with two of the stars from the "lost Mackey collection decoys," respectively, the A.E. Crowell black bellied plover that established a record price paid at auction for a decoy at \$830,000, and the Nathan Cobb curlew that brought \$390,000, a record price paid at auction for a Virginia decoy.

Once again duck decoys took a back seat to the shorebirds, although lots that attracted interest included a Ward Brothers "outstanding and very rare swimming" goldeneye drake that carried a presale estimate of \$35/45,000. The decoy was described as retaining the original paint with a good patina acquired over the years. Carved in an unusual style, it was cataloged as possessing an "exceptional animated head style that is not only reaching, but also turned and slightly cocked." Bidding on the lot was initially slow as it crossed the block, yet it was not long before the true players showed their hands and began banging away at the bird. Bids came from both sides of the room and the telephones with the decoy finally selling to a bidder standing in the rear corner of the room for \$109,250.

Another of the Ward decoys to do well was a 1936 model green-wing teal that also sold well above the \$12/15,000 estimates as it was knocked down at \$46,000.

A rare pair of rigmate blue-wing teal decoys by Crowell in near mint original paint were bid to \$51,750, while a pair of goldeneye birds with great paint hammered at \$29,900.

A selection of carvings that had descended in the family of Gloucester, Mass., carver Charles Hart were sold with the top lot coming as a carved and paint decorated penguin was offered. The rare carving, measuring 12 inches tall, shot past the \$7/9,000 estimates as it was bid to \$44,275. A sanderling decorative miniature from the Hart collection brought \$6,900, while a hollow-carved black duck working decoy with raised wings sold at \$6,325.

A California decoy that had been featured in *Wildfowl Decoys of the Pacific Coast* was a late addition to the auction and it appeared as an addendum lot. The rare hollow-carved flying brant with removable wings attracted serious interest with it easily surpassing the \$9/12,000 estimate as it brought \$29,900.

Prices include the buyer's premium charged. The next auction for Guyette and Schmidt will take place in April in St Charles, Ill. A selection of Mackey collection decoys will highlight that auction as well. For further information, 410-745-0485, 207-625-8055, or www.guyetteandschmidt.com.

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