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Ex-Gov. Thompson buys rare Ill.-carved duck decoy

By CRAIG STERRETT and JEFF DANKERT - The Associated Press

SPRING VALLEY – A century-old wooden duck decoy carved in Bureau Junction went from being forgotten and neglected to becoming a prized possession of former Illinois Gov. Jim Thompson.

In the world of collectibles and antiques, the decoy discovery and then \$100,625 sale at auction was a true believe-it-or-not story, said Joe Tonelli of Spring Valley.

Tonelli, Midwest representative for the Guyette & Schmidt auction during the Midwest Decoy Collectors Association 25th annual decoy show, wasn't certain how often a wooden duck decoy carved perhaps 110 years ago by Robert Elliston of Bureau was used and how many waters it floated in over the years, but he figured it sold last month for about 100,000 times its original sale price.

Here's what happened:

Tonelli said he could not tell the names of the sellers or all the details of how the decoy was discovered, but a young couple bought an old, extremely dilapidated farmhouse north of Indianapolis, and came to reveal about 10 antique duck decoys.

Judging from the decoy cord and the big lead weights still attached to the rig of decoys, Tonelli estimated "Those ducks had probably been stored for a minimum of 60 to 70 years and forgotten." His theory is the ducks were used on the Illinois River first and, just maybe, taken to Indiana for hunting on the Kankakee River marsh before they were put up and out of sight.

One of the Elliston ducks was a mallard drake with its head pointing straight forward, a fairly common example. Another was an extremely rare "turned-head sleeper" a sleeping hen mallard that eventually brought \$40,250 at the auction in St. Charles.

"It's a very rare one," Thompson told a NewsTribune reporter. "I got a collection that I started about eight years ago. "

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It's a collection of Illinois River duck decoys only those decoys hand-carved and painted by known Illinois River carvers, in original paint, no repairs.

"The only major carver I didn't have was Elliston."

Because Elliston's ducks predate even those of famous carver Charles Perdew of Henry, a lot of Elliston's decoys are in poor condition, Thompson said.

"Up came this, not only in wonderful shape but it's a rare one, a preener. OK, this is the one I've been waiting for."

Thompson was bidding against a man from New Jersey and another man from Iowa, he said.

Thompson has installed the decoy in his collection in Michigan, he said.

"It's a wonderful bird. Very folksy," he said.

He added that Elliston's wife was, much like Perdew's, an outstanding painter. Thompson has about 40 decoys, and considers the Elliston specimen his crown jewel.

He said it's easier to list what he doesn't collect. He has a collection of every signature of every Illinois governor. He has campaign buttons going back to about 1870, he said.

Thompson's decoy collection also reflects his hobby of duck hunting, which he started up when he began collecting decoys, he said.

"Your area is a great area for hunting," Thompson told a NewsTribune reporter. "If anyone has any good Illinois River decoys, call me."



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