

The Martha's Vineyard Times

Martha's Vineyard decoy sets new auction record

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Benjamin Warren Pease was a builder, fisherman, farmer, and decoy carver from Chappaquiddick who lived for about 15 years in Oak Bluffs. Mr. Pease died in 1938 at the age of 72.



Photo courtesy of Guyette & Schmidt

This hollow carved black duck by Benjamin Pease of Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard sold for \$22,425. It was formerly in the collection of Herbert Hancock of Chilmark.

He would not have imagined that one of his black duck decoys would one day be sold for \$22,425, a world auction record for a Pease decoy at the Guyette & Schmidt annual spring decoy auction in St. Charles, Illinois on April 28, according to a press release from the well-known auction house.

Mr. Pease, like many of his contemporaries, worked with his hands to earn a living from the Island in all seasons. He hunted and fished to put food on the table and carved decoys destined for the icy waters of a salt marsh and not a mantle.

Stan Murphy, who died in July 2003, was a noted Island artist, muralist, and decoy collector. He is less known as the author of one of the finest and now rarest books on Island carvers, "Martha's Vineyard Decoys" (David R. Godine, Publisher, 1978), long since out of print.

Mr. Murphy profiled 18 known Island decoy carvers, men like Henry Keyes Chadwick and Benjamin D. Smith, whose names and work now command wide-spread recognition and record prices among the rarefied world of well-financed decoy collectors.

The Pease decoy represents Martha's Vineyard's rich waterfowling tradition. Along the Island's great ponds, luxurious homes now sit where simple duck camps once stood.

The Watcha Club, set up in 1903, was the first in the Long Point area followed by the Tisbury Pond Club in 1912 with the club's initial purchase of 470 acres. By 1930 the entire area between Tisbury Great Pond and Oyster Pond was owned or controlled by hunting clubs, according to the informative "Land Use History of Long Point," a 30 page work by Lloyd Raleigh, former Trustees of Reservations regional ecologist.

In 1979, Frederick Blodgett, Carl Gilbert, and William Rogers, the three remaining members of the Tisbury Pond Club, gave to The Trustees the property that would become the Long Point Wildlife Refuge, enjoyed by thousands of Island residents and visitors each year.

In the introduction to his book Mr. Murphy described this generation of Island duck hunters and decoy carvers. "I discovered years ago that the older hunters had very little interest in the matter of who made what decoy," Mr. Murphy said. "It didn't occur to them to be aware of such things because almost anyone with a little time on his hands could do the job; improvisation was a fact of life to the average Vineyard farmer-fisherman. Cash, in the golden years of decoy carving, was hard to come by, therefore even when a dozen factory blocks could be had for eight dollars painted, a man would be apt to make his own. The materials could be found in driftwood on the beach or broken spars were available at the various boatyards — good cedar, well aged.

So the hunter would set out to carve a decoy on a winter's evening with the aim of attracting a live bird. It is a point to keep before us. Unlike the modern contest-carver, he wasn't attempting to impress his neighbor with his craft; he was out to con a living duck, or brant or goose or shorebird."

Mr. Pease was born on the family farm called Tom's Neck on Chappaquiddick, "a lovely, rolling land very close to the sea."

"Mr. Pease spent an active, hard-working life as builder, farmer, off-shore fisherman and seiner of herring, and was a fish buyer, selling to Fulton Market in New York," Mr. Murphy said. "He also served his town as selectman and assessor and managed to find time to go gunning in season."

Mr. Murphy said the Pease "conception of a duck is entirely original."

The auction route has a strong Vineyard connection. The Pease black duck originally came from the collection of Herbert R. Hancock and sold in July 2001 at a Guyette & Schmidt auction for \$17,000. A representative of the auction firm is scheduled to visit the Vineyard on May 16 to conduct appraisals in anticipation of an auction on July 19, 20 in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

In an interview published January 7, 1999 in The Times, Mr. Hancock, lobsterman and long-time Chilmark selectman, said he began duck hunting with his father and grandfather in the marshes and ponds of Chilmark. It was his job to pick up the ducks the men had shot.

"I was just a kid; I was doing it for fun, but my father was doing it for something to eat," Mr. Hancock said about his first trip.

"To me just sitting out there, with maybe 20 decoys in front of us there, and the bluebills were flying from the east out of the sunrise and comin' into the decoys, I'll tell you, that was something for a kid. I'd never seen anything like that before."

Mr. Hancock started carving decoys at a young age for the same reason that his great-grandfather — Russell Hancock, a whaler, fisherman, and farmer — carved them: to attract ducks.

"I wanted some bluebill and widgeon to go duck hunting," he said.

"It was a great life to go and to be there when the sun came up and the birds were comin' and everything was happening. Part of it was just being out there, it was very beautiful."

He stopped duck hunting when ducks, and opportunities to go places he had hunted as a boy, slowly disappeared.

Mr. Hancock said his favorite duck to carve was the black duck. It is, one expert Island waterfowler said, the

quintessential indigenous Island duck. It is smart, wary, and tough to fool — qualities Mr. Hancock projected as selectman for more than 35 years in a changing Chilmark.

Old decoys by recognized carvers have taken on a value that the hunters who shot over them could never have imagined. Modern decoys that have never spent a day in the icy water, carved by talented craftsmen who have never watched a duck flare, command a high price.

According to Guyette & Schmidt, based in St. Michaels, Maryland, its decoy auction held on April 28 and 29 grossed \$2.1 million with 44 lots selling for over \$10,000 and 2 lots selling for over \$100,000. Top lot in the sale was a rare swan by Charles Birch of Willis Wharf, Virginia that sold for \$186,500, a world auction record for Birch.

In January 2007, Guyette & Schmidt, in conjunction with Christie's, sold a merganser hen by Lothrop Holmes for a world record auction price of \$856,000.

In the conclusion of his book Stan Murphy said of the old decoys: "They were made only to toll the birds, not to leave for posterity the evidence of man's ability to create from common materials things of truth and occasional great beauty. The secret of the fascination of old decoys, of the endless variations of their small forms, lies somehow in the word unself-conscious. They pay no conscious homage, as do other art forms, to God or to man or to ego; their sole intent is to convince a living duck that they too are alive. Thus their rare integrity and finally, their immortality."

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