

[Print This Article!](#)



Recreation: Decoy expert to come to Mount Vernon

May 16, 2009 - 12:00 PM
by Vince Richardson

MOUNT VERNON — Let's say you have a dust-covered duck decoy that you inherited years ago from an uncle who was an avid hunter. The wooden relic has been under a tarp on the top shelf in your garage for decades.

Ever wonder what it's worth?

That dusty duck could put your children through college, or allow for your early retirement.

Finding out whether a decoy needs to be insured or if it is just fine where it is will be as simple as bringing it to the 35th Northwest Decoy Show on May 30 at the Best Western CottoTree Inn in Mount Vernon.

The show runs 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

On hand will be several folks who can estimate the worth of your fowl. One individual is probably overqualified to appraise your decoy.

Gary Guyette is co-owner of Guyette and Schmidt, Inc., which is billed as the world's largest antique decoy auction firm. The St. Michaels, Md., firm has had about \$117 million in decoy



Gary Guyette (right) and business partner Frank Schmidt sold this Elmer Crowell pintail drake decoy at auction for \$801,500. Guyette and Schmidt, Inc., is the world's largest antique decoy auction firm.

sales since its opened in 1984.

Guyette will be the featured guest at this year's decoy show.

"This is really an exciting thing to happen for those of us in the decoy community," show organizer Brett Stark said of Guyette's attendance. "It's a really big deal and I am sure he'll be bringing with him some impressive decoys."

Guyette and Schmidt, Inc., holds the record for the most money paid at auction for a decoy. In 2007, a red-breasted merganser hen by Lothrop Holmes sold for \$856,000. A feeding black-bellied plover by Elmer Crowell circa 1890 sold for \$830,000.

In fact, of the top 50 decoys sold at auction, Guyette and Schmidt, Inc., has 96 percent of those sales, including every decoy listed in the top 25.

Guyette is looking forward to bringing his knowledge and reputation out west.

"I am going to come out, visit some people and give free appraisals," Guyette said from his office in Maryland. "I will have auction catalogs with me that we'll be giving away as well.

"It's nice to get to places a little more remote. We are looking to expand and want to get our name out there and get more exposure. From San Francisco to Vancouver, B.C., there is really a concentration of collectors. Plus that area has great history when it comes to decoys. They are really underrated. I know when we receive decoys from Washington or Oregon, they are going to sell well. A year ago, it was a hotbed."

Guyette won't be making the trip to Mount Vernon alone.

Accompanying him will be a portion of a collection estimated to be worth millions of dollars. The collection's owner, Joe French, recently died at the age of 91, and Guyette and Schmidt, Inc., was given the job of auctioning off the duck and shorebird portion of the collection in 2010.

At one time, French possessed the largest decoy collection in the country, and was a respected decoy historian, collector and author.

"Joe French was a legend," said Guyette. "He started collecting back in 1954. He was a driving force when it came to decoy education. He knew what it used to be like and was more than willing to tell his stories. I plan on bringing shorebirds to the show. It gives people a chance to see something a little different."

Guyette and his wife Dale started in the antique business in 1973. They spent a lot of time in Canada's Maritime Provinces in search of antiques for their store. What they kept coming home with was decoys.

"Lots of decoys," recalled Guyette.

In 1982, the Guyettes wrote the book "Decoys of Maritime Canada." Two years later, they founded their company, selling decoys for under \$20. That's a far cry from the prices demanded at today's auctions, the average of which is around \$2,500.

"At the time we got into the business," said Guyette, "there was room for someone else. There was a gap in auction houses. There was room for someone like us.

"It was good timing on our part. Especially since nowadays these decoys are coveted by the super-wealthy. In the late '90s, multi-millionaires and even billionaires started to drive prices up. Before, it was your doctors and lawyers buying them up. Now, it's much bigger."

Despite the number of decoys that have been bought by collectors, Guyette believes there are still plenty yet to be discovered.

"They are still finding them," he said. "Most recently, a prized swan decoy was found in a hotel. It sold at auction for \$58,000. So finds like that are still happening, and that makes it exciting. There are definitely decoys still out there."

And who knows? The next record-breaking decoy might just waddle through the doors of the

CottonTree Inn.

Vince Richardson can be reached at 360-416-2181 or by e-mail at vrichardson@skagitpublishing.com.