



Pascagoula Decoy Company employees operating the duplicating lathe machines. A guiding arm traced the master mold, which controlled the shape of the decoy. Note the piles of sawdust.

CHAPTER 1



COLLECTING DECOYS

The evolution of duck decoys can be traced back to primitive days when American Indians used their resourceful talents to construct wild-duck decoys from a combination of mud, grass or reeds, and feathers. Hoping to get a shot with his wooden bow and arrow, the hunter arranged the fake ducks in different patterns to lure the birds within comfortable shooting range—preferably on the water. Using decoys during a hunt remains popular today.

In the late 1890s, the popularity of duck hunting increased dramatically with the advent of market hunters, or commercial hunters. Because the duck and goose populations were very strong, the commercial market was profitable, and there was a greater need for decoys. The individual hand-carvers could not keep up with demand, so this need was met by factories using duplicating lathe machines.

These machines made it possible to manufacture thousands of wooden duck decoys commercially. Up to twelve birds could be produced at the same time. The heads were drilled and fitted for glass eyes and glued for added strength. The head and body were made separate from one another and attached by a wooden dowel. Some of the heads were mounted in a fixed position while others were adjustable, allowing for different poses such as preening or sleeping.

The large numbers of birds produced by the lathe machines far surpassed the number of hand-carved decoys that were previously being produced. Nationwide, companies such as Dodge, Mason, and Stevens evolved in the late 1800s and were quickly followed by many more companies in the early 1900s.

Around 1915, the prairie pothole regions in Canada, the top duck-breeding territory, experienced severe drought that adversely affected the waterfowl population. Duck numbers were plummeting and waterfowl conservation became necessary. Then, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 that outlawed market hunting was passed. This dealt a devastating blow to the factory decoy companies. Demand for decoys dramatically diminished to levels not seen before by these companies. Many of the smaller and family-owned businesses quickly went bankrupt and closed.



A Pascagoula goose decoy made by either the Animal Trap Company, Trehern, or Hudson Manufacturing Company. These companies advertised making lathe-turned wooden goose decoys during their production years.

By the late 1920s, the waterfowl population was flourishing again, thanks in part to Mother Nature bringing much-needed rain and snow to the Canadian prairie lands. The resurgence brought about another wave of factory decoy companies. They, and the existing factory decoy companies, continued to produce wooden decoys until the late 1950s and early 1960s, when papier-mâché and plastic models hit the market.

The Pascagoula decoy companies made a significant contribution to the rich heritage of wooden decoy production. Charles W. Grubbs, a talented whittler and hand-carver of duck calls and decoys, established the first decoy factory in Pascagoula in 1920 on the East Bank of the Pascagoula River. Frank L. Hudson purchased Grubbs' business in 1925, and the Hudson Manufacturing Company designed its own decoy, which Hudson patented. Around 1941, the company and decoy patent were sold to the Cumbest Manufacturing Company.

Up the Pascagoula River, a second decoy facility was in operation off Lake Avenue. An old family name in Pascagoula and once a dominant player in the shipbuilding industry, the Poitevin brothers, Ellwood and Eugene, had entered the duck decoy business in 1926 and sold their decoys under the brand name Singing River Decoys.

Even farther up the Pascagoula River, a third duck decoy factory began operation. Lester C. Winterton and Clifford L. Dees founded the



Pascagoula Decoy Company (PADCO) in June 1940. This company manufactured and sold duck decoys and other wooden products nationwide.

The Pascagoula area gained national recognition when the Animal Trap Company of America in Lititz, Pennsylvania—the nation’s largest maker of mouse and rodent traps—purchased the Poitevin brothers’ decoy operation in 1940. Around 1945, Animal Trap also purchased the Cumbest Manufacturing Company, which was previously the Hudson Manufacturing Company.

There were myriad advantages for decoy companies locating in Pascagoula. For one, decoys were made of native hardwoods such as tupelo gum and pop ash—light, buoyant, and soft woods ideal for carving—that were, and still are, extremely abundant along the Pascagoula and Escatawpa rivers.

The term “pop” described the large section of the ash tree that is cork-like, spongy, and very conducive to decoy making. The top portion of the tree was harder and heavier and offered very little value in decoy production. The tupelo gum, *Nyssa aquatica*, is recognized by its buttressed base and long, clear trunk, which opens into a narrow crown. Its range is in the southeastern United States, from Virginia south to north Florida,



A great view inside the plant of the Pascagoula Decoy Company. The blocks of wood pictured are native pop ash and tupelo gum.



A tupelo gum tree in Buzzard Lake off the Pascagoula River. Note the buttressed base of the tree.

west to southeastern Texas, and following the Mississippi River valley to south Illinois. Typically, the tree reaches eighty to ninety feet and about six to seven feet around. It has shiny leaves and blooms from March to April. The dark-purple fruit ripens in October and is devoured by wood ducks, deer, turkeys, squirrels, raccoons, and other swamp animals. A tupelo gum swamp is a magical, mysterious place appreciated by hunters and environmentalists throughout the South.

The city of Pascagoula also offered a plentiful labor force. Workers easily adapted to producing wood decoys because of their experience in the shipbuilding and sawmill industries prevalent in the area. And a third advantage for the decoy companies was the river. The companies used wood from the swamps, which could be transported to the factories by barge, greatly reducing transportation costs.

Pascagoula's decoy history spanned more than fifty years, ranging from 1920 to 1971, and all of the local decoy companies had two qualities in common—superior decoys and success! The Pascagoula companies were leaders in decoy production throughout the United States and sold their products worldwide.

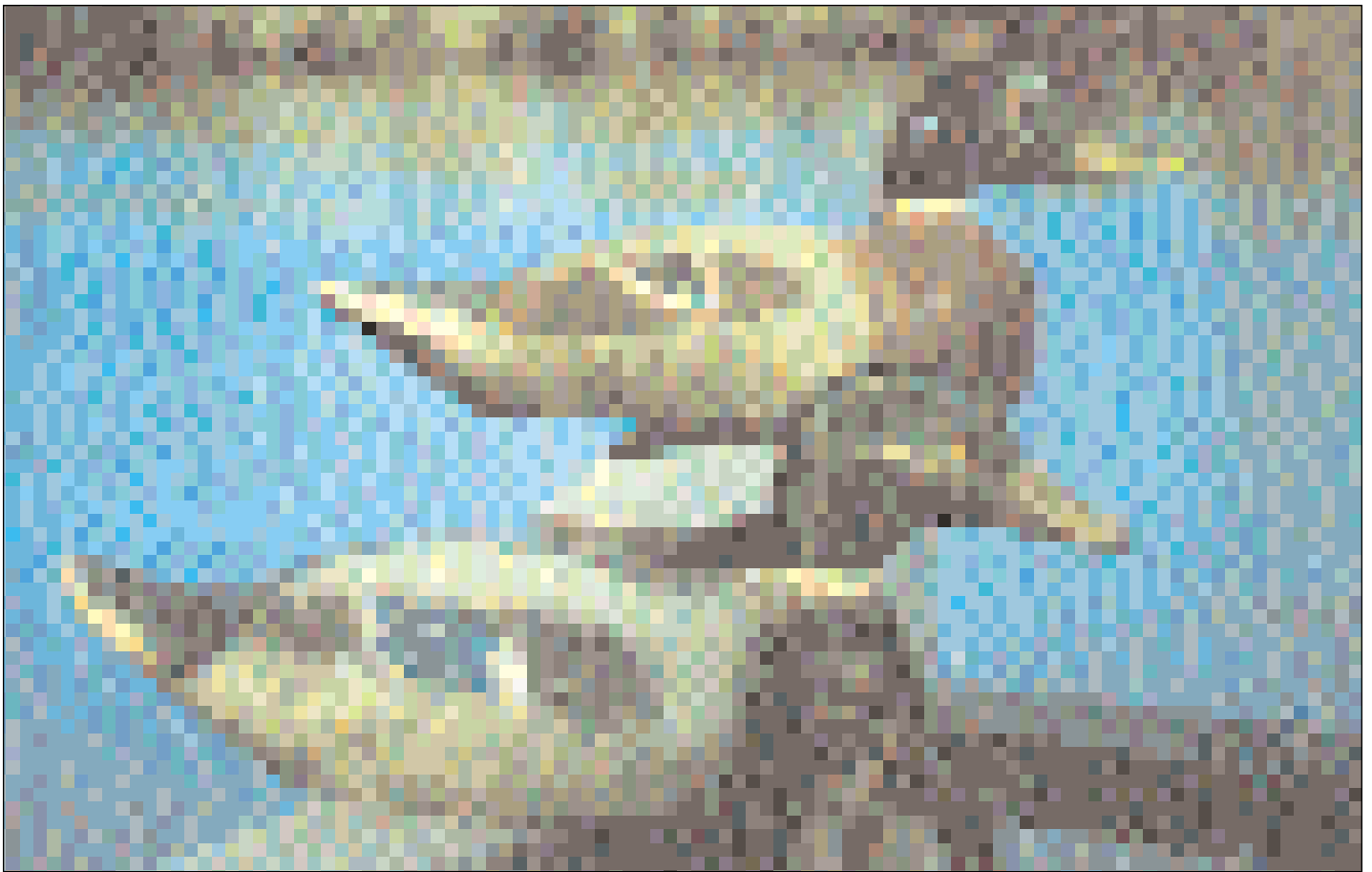
The prices old wooden decoys bring today make it highly unlikely they will ever see the water again. While a hunter in the 1940s would have paid \$6 to \$25 per dozen for wooden decoys, a Pascagoula decoy today can fetch between \$75 and \$300, depending on its condition and species, and the value continues to increase. Today, these decoys are becoming harder to find for the collector.

Because the mallard was the most common bird produced, its worth is significantly lower than a rare teal or widgeon decoy. This does not mean that greenheads are cheap! If you can find one, its price range is \$75 to \$125. These antique birds represent a very important piece of history, especially to those who relied on this industry for their livelihood.

Thousands of duck decoys were produced and distributed by Pascagoula decoy companies, and as a result, there are still decoys to be found in antiques stores and flea markets in states as far reaching as Florida, California, and New York. Because so many of these decoys were sold nationwide to jobbers, wholesalers, and retailers, some collectors claim they are not as valuable today as other factory decoys, such as Mason or Pratt. However, many collectors, including myself, will dispute this claim after pricing an Animal Trap teal or PADCO widgeon in mint condition. It is important to remember that the history behind the factory decoy companies in the United States would not have been as rich or complete without the workmanship and production of the Pascagoula companies. Today, these decoys are receiving the attention and appreciation of collectors that they truly deserve.

A characteristic that distinguishes a Pascagoula decoy from others is the rough marks encircling the bird left by the duplicating lathe machine. These marks give the appearance of feathers, thus creating a more realistic decoy. Most competitors' birds featured a smooth finish.

The two major categories of decoys highly sought after by collectors



A PADCO mallard (top) and Animal Trap mallard (bottom). Note the difference between the two companies' work in the wing spectrum paint patterns and the lathe marks.



Drake pintails, Animal Trap (top) and PADCO (bottom).

today are hand-carved and factory-produced decoys. Renowned carvers such as Ira Hudson, Elmer Crowell, Mark Whipple, and Nicol Vidacovitch produced hand-carved decoys. These birds were primarily made in the late 1800s and early 1900s and are very expensive and difficult to find today. The factory companies played as important a role in decoy production as their predecessors, and they are just as collectible. Some of the better-known factory decoy companies included:

- Dodge, founded by Jasper Dodge around 1885 and located in Detroit, Michigan.
- Stevens, established by Harvey Stevens in Weedsport, New York around 1890.
- Mason Decoy Factory, located in Detroit, Michigan. The company began business around 1895. Mason's decoys are probably the most famous and valuable factory decoys today!
- Evans Decoy Company, founded by Walter Evans in Wisconsin in 1921.
- Herters, Inc., located in Waseca, Minnesota and still producing high-quality plastic decoys today. Their most sought-after decoys are the Canada geese, wooden owls, and crows.
- Pratt Manufacturing, founded by William E. Pratt in Joliet, Illinois around 1920.
- Animal Trap Company of America, located in Lititz, Pennsylvania. They initially made mouse and other fur-bearing-animal traps. They entered the decoy business with the purchase of Pratt in 1939. Today, they operate under the name Woodstream Corporation.
- Wildfowler Decoys, Inc., started business in 1939 in Old Saybrook, Connecticut.

There are several approaches to collecting decoys. You might pursue those produced by a particular carver or factory, or maybe decoys made in your area. I prefer the latter; my collection consists exclusively of decoys made by the Pascagoula companies. Some collectors pursue particular species such as pintails or diving ducks.

Collecting waterfowl decoys has been a passion for decades, and the number of collectors has grown significantly over the last few years. This is apparent by the numbers of decoys sold on the on-line auction giant, Ebay. Decoys are auctioned and sold throughout the world on a daily basis. They are also becoming more difficult to find in antiques stores. This increase in popularity has resulted in higher prices for collectors and investors.

While conducting interviews during my research, countless times I heard the statement, "If I only knew then what these decoys would be worth today." Many decoys were lost during a hunt, and some hunters would use the worn or damaged blocks as firewood. During the off-season, the wooden decoys were often haplessly stored in sheds and many were destroyed by termites.



There are a variety of sources available to collectors hoping to find Pascagoula decoys. One method for buying or just “screen shopping” is on-line, particularly at Internet auction sites, such as Ebay.

Ebay (www.ebay.com) is the most common on-line auction site. Practically anything can be found on this popular Web site, from antiques to magazines to jewelry to toys. Old and unique duck decoys are also available. However, although Ebay is a reputable site, new collectors should learn a few safeguards before bidding. First, educate yourself on the particular decoy you are seeking. If your interest is in PADCO decoys, become familiar with the species produced, paint and body styles, and markings. Some sellers incorrectly advertise a decoy as a particular brand or species simply from lack of knowledge on the subject. However, if you know your product, you will be able to identify a decoy accurately.

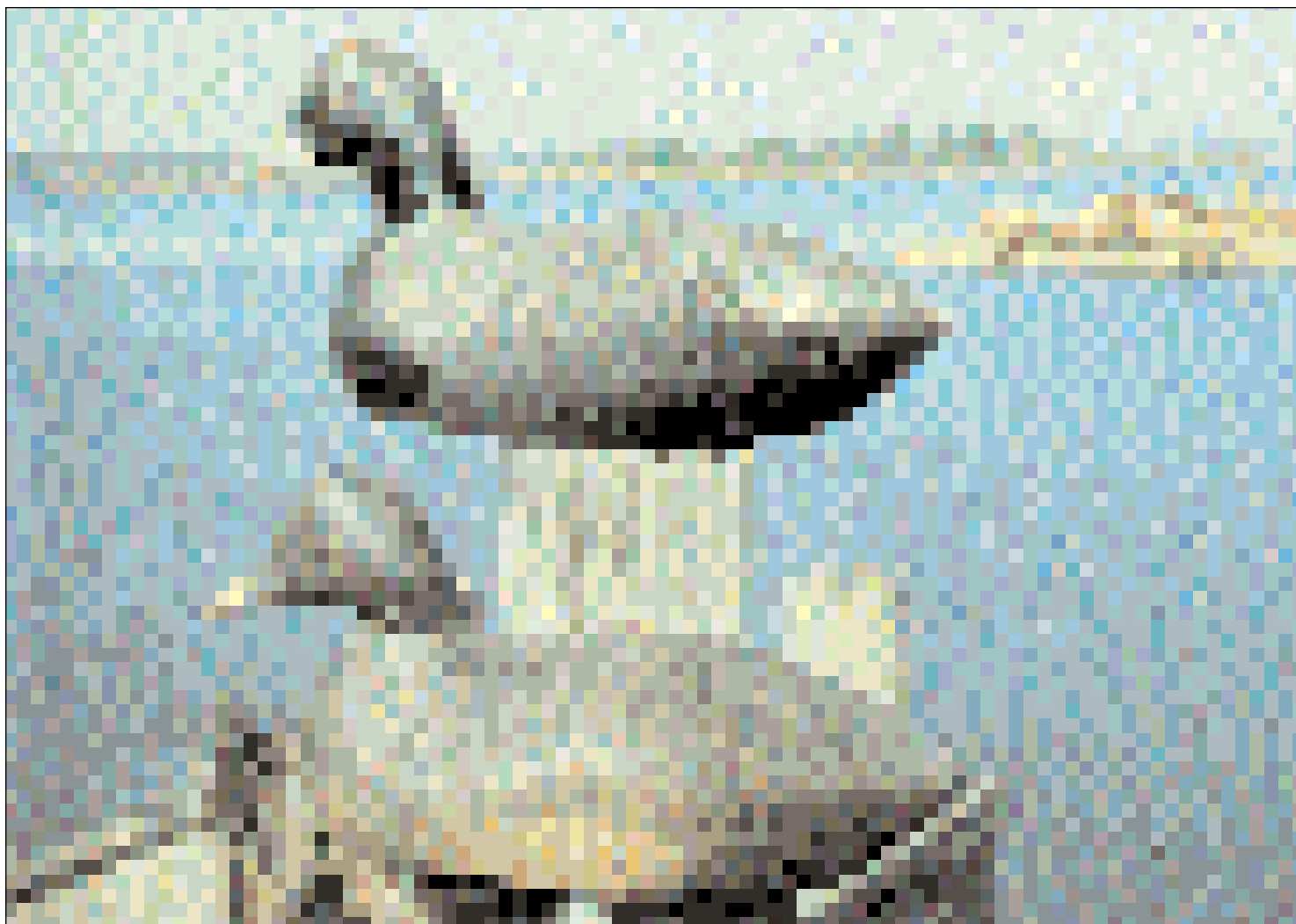
Antiques stores are another worthy source. Every time my wife and I travel, we visit stores along the route to our final destination. In fact, I purchased my first Animal Trap Company of Mississippi black mallard decoy from a dealer in southwest Georgia. He was not particularly knowledgeable (he had it advertised as a blue-winged teal), but after negotiating back and forth, I finally added it to my collection.

Another fortunate find occurred on our annual family vacation to south Florida. At one store, I located two PADCO coot decoys that were priced at only \$25 each. Obviously, the owner did not recognize the true value of the PADCO coot since collectors have paid more than \$200 today! I purchased both, which are pictured in this book. The next day, I found a drake mallard decoy made by the Hudson Manufacturing Company circa 1930. This rare bird was a DUO-STA model. The body pattern and paint were the typical “Pascagoula style,” featuring the lathe marks left on the bird from the duplicating machine. The only distinguishing characteristics that identified the bird as a Hudson were the DUO-STA markings, which are two large, machine-drilled holes starting from the tail and going toward the head. These holes enabled the bird to float with ultimate buoyancy without the need for weights.

Estate sales provide good buying opportunities and are often advertised in the newspapers. You may also consider working with a reputable antiques dealer to serve as a contact in searching for that special decoy for your collection.

Decoy collecting can be a fun and fulfilling hobby. The true worth of a decoy is the value placed on it by the collector. For instance, the rough, handmade bluebill hen decoy made by my grandfather, which he used during his lifetime of hunting, is invaluable to me. The monetary value determined by another collector could never exceed the sentimental value of that bird!





Rare coot or poule-d'eau decoys by PADCO circa 1950s. Hunters often added a few coots to their spread as “confidence decoys” to give the impression of a safe environment to approaching birds. Not many coots were produced, thus significantly increasing their value today.