

Man carves ducks, but not for eating

By Anthony Esposito

Staff reporter

SELINGROVE — Ross Smoker sits hunched over the table in his cluttered workshop scratching at a piece of wood with a knife.

A closer look reveals he is carving the head of a duck.

Both Smoker and his father, Richard, carve ducks, working their craft for business and pleasure. Their ducks are used by hunters as decoys and are also exhibited in competitions.

On a work table was a carving of an Old Squaw duck, which won a first place award at the Ward World Carving Competition in Ocean City, Md. At that time, Smoker competed as a novice, a category he has since left behind.

Smoker said he spent more than 200 hours on the carving, burning and grinding each feather into the wood in such detail that you can feel the quills (the hard hollow shaft of a feather).

“That’s when it compounds the hours,” he said.

The workmanship is so exceptional, the carving carries a \$700 price tag.

When Smoker starts a new carving, he begins the process —not with wood but with paper — as he first sketches the bird.

To be sure he makes an exact replica, he refers to the resource material that fills a cabinet in his workroom.

“Any kind of reference material you can get a hold of, you use,” he said.

The carving is done in two pieces — the head and the body.

Smoker transfers the pattern onto a block of wood,

called a blank, which may be bass wood, sugar pine or tupelo.

Smoker begins carving with a flexible grinding tool, which he said helps to “hog a lot of wood off.”

He switches to knives for the more detailed work and then using a pen and grinder, he carves the threadlike lines, called barbels, in the feathers.

Once the carving is completed, Smoker uses a variety of brushes to paint the waterfowl, again using his resource material to be sure the colors are exact.

In the four to five years he’s been carving, Smoker has done 200 birds — decorative, gunning decoys, shore birds and miniatures.

He also teaches classes in duck carving.

“It’s not that hard to learn,” he said. “You just have to know the steps. Anybody can do it.”

His father, who taught wood shop at Selinsgrove Area High School for 35 years, agrees.

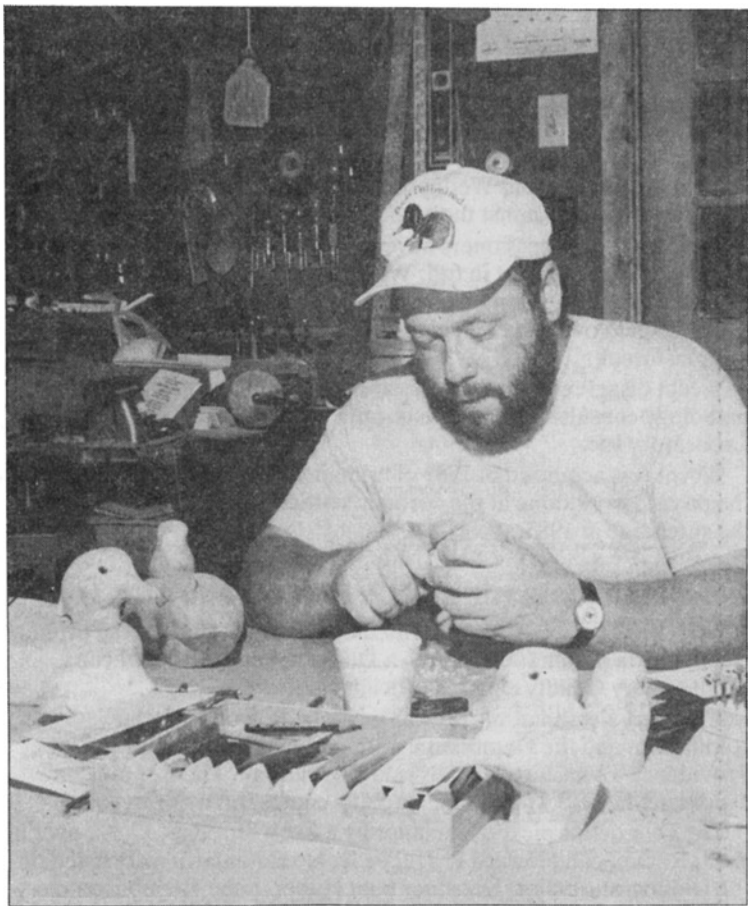
“I’ve taught hundreds of people,” he said. “The most important thing is to have good reference materials because you need a good picture. Who knows what an Egyptian goose looks like?”

The Smokers are establishing a family tradition in the world of duck carving. The elder Smoker has been carving for more than 30 years and introduced the art to his sons, both of whom are following in their father’s footsteps.

The elder Smoker is an award winning carver and has a drawer full of ribbons to prove it.

However, he no longer limits himself to carving ducks, and now carves figurines and fish.

“It’s a great hobby,” he said. “All you need is a block of wood and a knife. It keeps you off the streets and out of the pool halls.”



Daily Item photo by Paul Leese

Ross Smoker, High Street, Selinsgrove, works on a carving of a duck’s head.