

Fresh from the Bench... Part #25 in a Series

by Rod Taylor

George Root - Wood Duck Drake Decoy

We've featured a few cork decoy makers in this space in the past but, for my money, none as interesting as George Root. George was born and raised in the small town of Mount Joy, Pennsylvania and grew up fishing for local trout. A visit to the nearby Susquehanna River in 1965 started a lifetime love affair with waterfowl hunting.

George's business career was as a beer distributor for his area of Pennsylvania. A lifelong fur trapper, George went into the trapping business for a while after he retired from the beer business, buying furs and selling traps. A friend commented to him in 1984 that "All the good decoy carvers come out of Maryland," and that motivated George to try his hand at carving. "I like using cork for my decoy bodies," George notes; "it's easier to carve and cheaper to use than wood and holds up remarkably well to rough use. I had a decoy that was sunk underwater for six days; and when we found it, it looked as good as new."

What I found most interesting about George's carving process was how he solved the problem of all those holes in the cork. He says, "I use tan cork, never black cork, because it's denser and has finer pores. I seal each carved body with Gac-700 and then paint them with Tru-Value Weather-All Exterior paint. I coat the still wet decoy with sawdust to fill in the pores in the cork and then repaint it again after it's dry. I hate cork decoys that show their pores. I then finish the decoy with colored acrylic paints in the pattern of the species I'm doing." Heads and tails



of the decoys are carved out of pine because George is allergic to cedar.

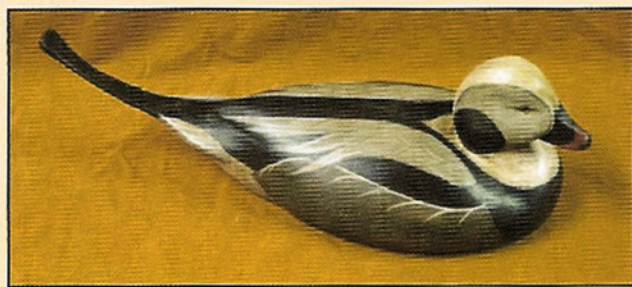
George also makes a line of contemporary antique birds in the style of Shang Wheeler, Ira Hudson, and other carving greats. Since these are carved to be mantle birds, he uses oil paints on them. "My best customers are all duck hunters," George observes. As a concession to these customers, he places a keel on the bottoms of his gunning birds.

"Rich Smoker was my mentor," George says; "I owe all my success to him. We're like brothers now; he took me under his wing and really taught me." George produces as many decoys as he can between hunting and fishing these days. In addition to his cork decoys, George also does a nice line of fine miniatures carved in basswood. You can reach him by phone at (717)-653-2548 or by email at: carver_george@hotmail.com

Ross Smoker - Old Squaw Drake Decoy

Ross Smoker's dad, Richard, was a career woodshop teacher, wildfowl hunter, and decoy maker; and the same is true of Ross. But it was his older brother, Rich, who was his greatest inspiration. Although Ross lives in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania, some five hours away from his brother who lives in Maryland, the two are still able to see each other a few times a year for hunting trips and the invariable decoy discussion. At forty-seven Ross is in a countdown mode on the thirty months he has left before retirement when he will be able to spend more time carving. For the time being, carving just two nights a week, he's still able to produce 45-50 birds a year.

Ross carves the bodies of his decoys out of cedar or tupelo and does their heads out of white pine. Most of his decoys are solid block gunners, so he has no need to weight their bottom for stability. He paints his gunning birds with acrylics, but defers to oil paints when he's carving one of his contemporary antique decoys. Ross claims to carve "anything with feathers," but admits to favoring ringnecks and mergansers when he has the chance to carve them. At the time of our interview he was working on a trio of miniature swans.



The tough thing about carving in his area of Pennsylvania, as Ross is quick to point out, is that he and his friends spend a lot more time looking at decoys than they do at real ducks. These days, he says, folks in his neck of the woods don't have much of a duck population to observe or shoot at. Despite the lack of local ducks, Ross claims he's "still trying to make each decoy better than the one before."

You can add a Ross Smoker decoy, like this solid body old squaw, to your collection by calling Ross at (570)-374-2740 or emailing him at: smokerdecoys@msn.com