

NEBRASKA MADE

By Jon Farrar, Larry Peterson and Gary Zaruba

Prompted by the banning of live decoys for hunting, many Nebraskans began making their own decoys, some for profit.

The federal banning of live call birds for hunting in 1935 sent most wildfowlers scrambling for other ways to lure ducks and geese within shotgun range. The only alternative was artificial decoys. Although aesthetically unappealing compared to those of the early 1900s, commercial decoys were available in the 1930s and 1940s, but few hunters could afford to buy them during the Great Depression and war years. Inexpensive papier-mâché decoys would not come into widespread use until after World War II. All those circumstances produced an expected outcome—small companies sprouting up to make their fortunes in decoys, and hunters making their own from materials at hand and free.

The commercial production of decoys was not new in Nebraska. “The Korker Duck Decoy is out, and it is a magnificent work and will receive the hearty endorsement of all appreciative hunters,” *Omaha Daily Bee* sportswriter Sandy Griswold wrote in the February 18, 1894 edition. The Korker was made of “closely woven drilling, water proof and moulded in the form of a duck, with a filling of fine cork ... and the painting is artistic and life like.” That same year, William W. Roberts of North Bend patented a novel cloth decoy with a “collapsible skeleton frame” of wire that opened, closed and locked similar to an umbrella.

And there were other Nebraska decoy makers, such as Fox Decoys who made a reversible goose decoy that could be converted from a Canada goose to a snow goose and back again, manufactured by Steve B. Reynard of Grand Island. His decoys were touted in an April 1901 *Field and Stream* advertisement as “...portable—may be taken apart and packed in small space. Is made of indestructible material, not

affected by frost or water. Will stand any amount of wind.” In addition to mail orders, Fox decoys were hawked by agents in Chicago and St. Paul, Minnesota. The Shell Decoy Company of Omaha advertised plans for hunters to make their own “super-light” decoy shells in the April 1901 issue of *Field and Stream*. Other enterprising Nebraskans also applied for decoy patents, such as Joseph R. Geisinger of Grand Island. In 1927, Geisinger patented his spread-winged duck and goose decoys, made of canvas over a wire framework and stuffed with straw, that moved along parallel wires to create the appearance of landing birds.

Little is known of these early-day Nebraska decoy makers. Some may have received a patent but never marketed a decoy. Some Nebraska decoy makers had short-lived success, such as Albert T. Candy of Kearney. Sears, Roebuck and Company briefly marketed Candy’s decoys in 1953, but when the contract was canceled after one season, Candy’s company closed its doors.

While relatively few Nebraska decoy makers prospered commercially, the number of waterfowl hunters who fashioned waterfowl lures for their own use were legion. Some hunters simply counterfeited the designs and materials of commercial decoys. Others improvised, cutting fence posts into foot-long lengths, splitting them, attaching a head cut from scrap lumber and crudely painting them to simulate their intended quarry. Perhaps the most popular homemade decoys in the early 1900s were silhouettes. Whether made from sheet metal and painted black, or from the ends of fruit crates and painted with three or four colors to suggest a mallard, they were used everywhere from Loup River sandbars to North Platte River meadows.

The decoys appearing on the following pages are most of the pre-1970, Nebraska-made commercial decoys known to the authors; and a sampling of a few makers who produced relatively few decoys for their own use. Others, no doubt, are waiting to be found in attics and haylofts.



PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

Lundgren’s straw-stuffed canvas decoys were still being used in western Nebraska in the 1980s, testimony to their durability.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LARRY PETERSON

John Lundgren, above, was an avid wildfowler, hunting ducks and geese each fall on the Platte River. His canvas decoys were widely copied by other Nebraska hunters.

Lundgren

John Albert Lundgren (1880-1964) was the son of a Swedish artist. His family immigrated to America and settled near the Platte River in Kearney County, where he lived the rest of his life. He was probably the most prolific of Nebraska’s commercial decoy makers in the mid-decades of the 20th century. Lundgren began making canvas-covered Canada goose decoys for his own use in the 1920s or 1930s. His floater decoys had a wooden baseboard to which a wire body framework and the wooden head and neck were attached. The roughly shaped head and neck were made of separate pieces of wood, so the grain ran lengthwise on both, and were joined by a dowel. The base of the neck was attached to the baseboard by two nails. Heavy canvas was cut in a pattern and sewn to fit over the wire armature and attached with staples. Relatively few floaters were made and finding one today in good condition is rare.

Most decoys manufactured by Lundgren were canvas-covered, Canada goose field decoys, or “stick-ups.” Patented in 1941, these decoys were stuffed with dry, long-stemmed wheat straw. Lundgren developed a machine to tightly pack the straw in the canvas shell before sewing it shut at the tail. Completed stuffed shells were dipped in a vat of animal glue and allowed to dry. Once dry they were painted white, then black, and the feather pattern was painted “in accordance with the plumage of the bird to be simulated.” Finishing paint was lampblack, burnt umber, turpentine and linseed oil. The feather pattern was applied with a rubber washing machine roller on which Lundgren etched a feather pattern. Canada stick-ups were made in feeding and high-head postures, with heads turned in different positions.



Lundgren made relatively few Canada goose floating decoys. Canvas was stretched over the wood, wire and sheet metal body and painted with a feather pattern.

Lundgren's patent application states: "It is one object of the invention to provide a decoy which will closely resemble the birds to be attracted and serves very effectively to entice them close enough to be shot from a blind," and that they would be "...light weight, natural in appearance, and of sturdy construction." Each decoy came with a square tube stake that fit in an opening on the bottom of the decoy, allowing them to be set in fields or on sandbars and not turn in the wind. A wire loop extended beyond the canvas body on the tail so they could be hung to dry and away from rodents when not in use. Lundgren goose decoys in good condition have the patent number stenciled on the bottom. Canada goose field decoys weighed about 4½ pounds.

Western Nebraska hunters were still using Lundgren's field

decoys in the 1980s, attesting to their durability when cared for properly. The decoys were offered for sale by national sporting goods outlets, such as the renowned Abercrombie & Fitch, and could be ordered by mail from hardware catalog dealers in the 1940s, at which time they sold for \$36 to \$40 per dozen. They were popular not only in Nebraska but also along the East Coast. In addition to goose decoys, Lundgren made mallard field decoys, probably in limited numbers, which are rare today. He continued to make decoys through 1958.

Many Platte and North Platte river hunters imitated the construction and materials of Lundgren's field goose decoys. Some produced hundreds of decoys but did not enter commercial production, probably in part because of Lundgren's patent. Typically the shaping of these counterfeit goose decoys was

less refined than Lundgren's birds, more lumpy and usually with inferior painting detail.

K&W Decoy Company

Commercial waterfowl hunter Ralph Kohler of Tekamah, and his longtime hunting partner and waterfowl call maker, Monte West, started the K&W Decoy Company in 1957. Kohler and West were dissatisfied with the quality and durability of commercial decoys available in the 1950s, especially those made of papier-mâché. Their solution was to manufacture their own. Ralph was a tool and die maker, owned a machine shop, and fashioned the aluminum stamping dies for the decoys.

The material used for the decoys, a resin-impregnated forming board (as used for suitcases and luggage of that time), was shaped after softening in a steam cabinet to make the material pliable, then formed between the male and female dies under 200 tons of pressure. The bodies were formed in halves, as were the head-neck sections. After cooling and hardening, the halves were stapled together and the seams covered with gauze and water resistant adhesive. A rugged leg framework was attached to the bodies on sturdy steel plates. K&W decoys could be purchased in two styles, with the standard H-frame support, or with more expensive life-like legs and feet. The decoys were painted with an airbrush using templates. Any hand painting on a K&W decoy suggests they are not in original condition. Early decoys manufactured in Tekamah were not labeled, but Kohler said later decoys had "K&W Decoy Company" rendered as an impression on the bottom.

There are no records of how many K&W decoys were manufactured at the Tekamah plant. The shop was capable of producing as many as 500 decoys per day but probably never achieved that volume. K&W decoys were not sold through retail outlets. All sales were factory direct. Canada goose decoys were far and away the most popular of K&W's decoys. In addition to standard-sized Canadas, a small Canada decoy (called "the Hutch" and made on a snow goose body) and a large Canada model with an oversized breast, nicknamed the

Silhouettes (also called profiles or shadows), such as these made by Louie and Walt Engberg of Monroe, were popular homemade decoys. Some were fashioned from wood salvaged from fruit crates. Others were made of sheet metal and painted black.



K&W decoys were manufactured in Tekamah from 1957 into 1962, and at Bridgeport from 1968 until 1972. While at Tekamah, three models of Canada geese, white-fronted geese, "snow" and "blue" geese, and two mallard decoy models were produced.



Ralph Kohler, one of the co-founders of K&W decoys, was a tool and die maker and owned a machine shop in Tekamah. He made the aluminum stamping dies for all the decoy models. A resin-impregnated forming board was shaped between the male and female dies under 200 tons of pressure.

Mae West, were sold. Kohler said the largest market for K&W Canada geese was the Chesapeake Bay area. White-fronted goose decoys, and both white- and blue-phase snow geese, were made, as were full-body field mallards. About 200 mallard floaters were produced and sold but not formally marketed because Kohler and West never found a way to seal the body seam and prevent the decoys from leaking. The most rare K&W decoys today are the Mae West and floating mallards. In the late-1950s, a dozen goose decoys of any species with the H-frame legs sold for \$64, and those with realistic feet and legs were \$78 per dozen. Mallard stakeout decoys sold for \$34 per dozen.

Kohler and West closed the decoy factory in 1962. Kohler

found it impossible to carry on with his commercial hunting operation, the machine and welding shop, and decoy manufacturing at the same time. In 1968, Art Johnson and other partners purchased the company and equipment, moved it to Bridgeport and manufactured K&W decoys until 1972. As the same dies were used, it is probably impossible to distinguish between decoys manufactured in the two factories.

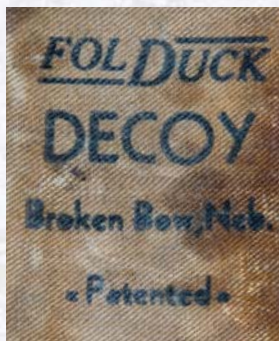
FolDuck Decoys

A folding decoy was manufactured in Broken Bow during the late-1930s by Parke F. Keays, the managing editor of the *Custer County Chief*. Plumage patterns were printed on canvas on the newspaper's presses, and the rest of the assembly work was done in Keays' garage. The canvas cover was stretched over a galvanized wire framework that collapsed flat onto a board. When erected, the decoy resembled a pup tent in shape. A cork panel was attached to the wood base to add buoyancy. Mallards were the principal species manufactured, but other species may have been made in small numbers. The decoys were designed for use on dry land or water.

FolDuck decoys were similar in concept to the popular folding decoys manufactured by the Acme Folding Decoy Company (1895-1907) and Wm. R. Johnson Decoy Company (1910-1960s). A dozen FolDuck decoys sold for \$10.50 in 1941. FolDuck decoys were advertised in national sporting magazines of the time. Keays' 1941 patent stated: "My invention relates to improvements in ducks for hunting purposes and the principal object in view is to provide an inexpensive, lightweight device of this character which will not sink and is collapsible into compact form for porting or shipping." A dozen decoys folded to a 6-by-15-by-18-inch cube.



The canvas covers for FolDuck decoys were printed on the *Custer County Chief* newspaper presses in Broken Bow.



together but with the imprint on the inside. All of us turned the result so that the imprint was outside. The beaks were particularly hard to do. Someone bent a wire profile and also two wires that fit on a wooden platform. The result was that the wire profile would slide on the two pieces on the wooden platform so that the decoys could be folded or erected as desired. The decoy was too heavy to float on the wooden platform so about a 3/8-inch sheet of cork had to be attached to the bottom and a paraffin layer was added before the canvas could be installed."

Douglas Decoys

During the World War II years, the Douglas Manufacturing Corporation in Crete, whose principal product was voting booths and metal ballot storage containers, entered the decoy business. Douglas folding field decoys were similar to the Johnson folding decoy first marketed in 1910, with two halves

In a letter, Keat Keays, Parke's son, recalled helping fashion the decoys: "I was in junior high school and we had an assembly line in our garage. Dad and some of the printers at the *Custer County Chief* printed the decoy profiles on canvas. Mother cut the canvas profiles out of the square blocks of cloth and then stitched a left and right profile

attached at the top and spread at the bottom into a tent-shape when in use. Mallards were the only species produced. Douglas advertising touted their "New Improved All Metal Folding Decoy" as "Finished in natural duck colors . . . Folds Flat. No Bulk. Saves Space. Moves with wind or water . . . Practically indestructible."

The collapsible decoys were 16½ inches long, 7½ inches high, 3½ inches wide at the bottom when spread, and weighed about one pound. A round "rod with stem insert inside decoy, holds duck in position and controls side movement of decoy." There was some variation in the plumage painting during the five years the decoys were manufactured. Douglas decoys were sold in sets of eight drakes and four hens at a retail price of \$10 per dozen. Production ceased when the building housing the decoy works burned.

Schlemmer

Frederick Schlemmer (1887-1976) was born in Rogers, Nebraska and moved to North Platte in 1918. He owned an automobile repair shop in North Platte and was a dedicated waterfowler. Like many hunters along the Platte River, he found commercial decoys too expensive, not effective or not durable and decided to make his own. Apparently Schlemmer made decoys in the 1920s.

The number of decoys Schlemmer made is not known, but because of the number found by collectors it appears he may have also made them for other hunters. Even though the lead weights attached to the bottoms of his decoys were marked



Douglas collapsible decoys were manufactured in Crete during World War II. A set of eight drakes and four hens sold for \$10.

"Pat. pending" with a number and his name, it does not appear he ever received a patent, perhaps because patents for similar decoys had previously been awarded. Schlemmer apparently only made mallard decoys. His decoys were fashioned of heavy canvas, stuffed with kapok and tacked to a wooden bottom board. The canvas was hand-painted with a basic mallard plumage pattern using oil paint. The significant variation in both shape and painting adds to their folksy appeal. Interest in Schlemmer's decoys is primarily regional.

Scott

Samuel Sigsbee "Sig" Scott (1898-1976) was born in North Platte. For most of his life he worked as an engineer at the Pacific Fruit Express plant in North Platte, a firm making ice for the Union Pacific Railroad. Scott probably began making his own decoys when the use of live call birds was outlawed in 1935. Prior to that time Scott kept flocks of both mallards and Canada geese as live decoys. Other than a few used as part of a display in a Gambles store and sold for \$5 apiece, he is not known to have marketed his decoys. It is estimated he made about 500 decoys.

Like most other regional decoy makers of his time, Scott designed his own decoys and improvised his construction materials. His first pattern was made from a commercial Canada goose decoy cut in half. From those halves Scott cast plaster molds, then modified the molds to make the decoys more bird-like to his eye—widening the body and adding details such as depressions in the head for the eyes. Scott



Frederick Schlemmer of North Platte made kapok-stuffed canvas mallard decoys with wooden bottom boards during the 1920s.

made decoys in at least 12 postures, including feeding, preening, alert and with heads turned various ways.

Scott's decoys were made from red rosin building paper, a material used as a moisture barrier between sheeting and siding on houses. The construction paper was torn into one-inch strips, dipped in a paste made of flour and water, and pressed into the molds. Nine layers were applied and allowed to air dry before the half-shells were removed from the molds. Head, neck and body halves were molded as a unit. A quarter-inch-thick, wooden centerboard cut from a fruit crate was fit-



Samuel Sigsbee Scott of North Platte made decoys from the 1930s into the 1950s. The bodies were formed from strips of red rosin building paper, dipped in paste and formed in molds.



Although Scott made mostly Canada goose decoys, he also made a limited number of mallard floaters.

ted vertically in the decoy cavity where the two halves joined. Lead balance weights were attached on the inside of the centerboard on floating decoys to keep them upright in water. Field decoys had a metal plate on the belly into which a metal stake could be inserted. The two decoy halves were nailed to the centerboard and the seam covered with more strips of red rosin paper, then covered with unbleached muslin saturated in flour paste. After drying, the decoys received several coats of white shellac and were ready to paint. Scott's wife, Ruth, painted the decoys, blending a few basic pigments to create light and dark variations on the body, over which a simplified feather pattern was painted. The quality of painting is considered excellent for homemade decoys.

Most of Scott's decoys simulated large Canada geese, but he also made small Canadas. Perhaps Scott's most innovative design was a "flying" Canada goose decoy made with outstretched neck and tin wings. The flying decoys were mounted on metal stakes of different heights to suggest geese landing. He made a limited number of mallard floater decoys. Scott's only attempt to mark his decoys was to stamp the let-

ters "SSS" on the lead balance weight inside floating decoys. Scott continued to make decoys through the 1940s and perhaps into the 1950s. Because Scott made relatively few decoys compared to more prolific decoy makers such as Lundgren, they are rare finds. The interest in Scott decoys is mostly regional, and outside of Nebraska they generally do not fetch high prices.

Forney

Apparently Vic Forney of North Platte only made decoys for his own use. They were of a high quality and surely would be sought by collectors had he been more prolific and better known. Forney began work for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission seining crew in 1950, and ended his career in 1970

working at the North Platte fish hatchery. Most of Forney's decoy work was probably done during the 1950s, and perhaps into the early 1960s.

With the exception of solid-wood mourning dove decoys made in the 1970s, all known Forney decoys are diving ducks. His duck decoys had either wooden bodies (apparently not hollowed), or cork bodies with 3/4-inch baseboards. The type of wood he used is unknown but the wooden decoys are lightweight. Forney attached the heads to the bodies with a dowel and glue. The decoys were not rigged with keels, but had lead ballast weights on the bottoms that he poured in a mold he fashioned. The anchor line was attached to a screw eye near the front of the decoy bottom. Known Forney decoys were not marked with his name.

Black

Cyrus "Cy" Black (1871-1962) moved with his family from Illinois to Kearney in 1875, where they founded the Island Dairy and Celery Farm. As a young man, Black was an amateur baseball manager, later a scout for the St. Louis Cardinals and credited with discovering Baseball Hall of Fame center fielder Richie Ashburn. Baseball great Stan Musial visited



Vic Forney of North Platte fashioned solid wood mourning dove decoys in 1975 when Nebraska again had a hunting season.



During the 1950s, and perhaps into the 1960s, Vic Forney made decoys (apparently only diving ducks) for his own use. Shown above are a pair of his wood-bodied scaup and goldeneyes, and a canvasback pair with cork bodies and wood baseboards.

Black's barn and purchased both duck and goose decoys. Black was a hunting guide, skilled taxidermist and an artist who sketched and painted wildlife.

Black's decoy production began with plaster casts of mounted waterfowl from which he had iron molds cast at a Colorado foundry. Metal lath, a mesh used in plaster and stucco walls, was pressed and pounded into the molds. The two halves were removed from the molds and wired together on early production birds but later were welded. The head and neck was formed separately and attached to the body. Joints were smoothed with a mixture of sawdust and dissolved celluloid. The entire decoy was draped with burlap from gunnysacks and impregnated with linoleum paste. Black salvaged 8-by-10-inch negatives from a photography studio, cut them into small pieces and soaked them in lye water to remove the emulsion. The remaining celluloid was then dissolved in ace-

tone and brushed over the decoys. Black's field decoys had detachable legs with a U-shaped piece of No. 9 wire that slipped into the underside of the decoy, and rubber feet cut from inner tubes. Black used a limited palette of raw umber, ivory black and white oil paints.

Black made decoys from the 1920s though the 1950s. Most were Canada geese but he also made a limited number of snow geese and mallards, and at least one pintail. Even though Black formed his decoys in molds, no two are ever identical. In the 1950s, "lesser Canadas" sold for \$22 a dozen and larger Canadas for \$26 a dozen. Most decoys were sold by word of mouth, but Black also sold decoys out of a truck and wagon in towns along the Platte and North Platte rivers; and had a commercial sales outlet in Bonesteel, South Dakota. In addition to decoys, Black made duck and goose calls of the same celluloid material used in his decoys.

Cole

Joe Cole lived in Kearney, managed the local theater and one in Loup City, and made furniture and cabinets. He moved to Iowa in 1949. While in Nebraska he hunted waterfowl on the Platte River. Each of his decoys was stamped with the month, year and a unique decoy number. A July 1946 decoy, for example, was stamped "7-46-149" meaning it was the 149th decoy he had made. Because of the number of decoys known to exist, it is likely he made more than just for his own use, but unlikely he made hundreds of decoys. Only duck decoys are known to exist, and as expected, most are mallards.

Cole's decoy bodies were fashioned by gluing together seven layers of 3/4-inch pine boards, the wood probably salvaged from fruit crates. The centers of all but the top and bottom boards were cut out to create a hollow, lightweight bird. The head, cut from 3/4-inch dimension lumber with an



Most decoys made by Cy Black of Kearney were Canada geese, but he also made mallard decoys and at least one pintail, perhaps a prototype.



Joe Cole lived in Kearney in the 1940s. His hollow-bodied mallard decoys were made by shaping and gluing seven boards.

additional piece of wood glued to the sides for cheeks, was attached to the body with two wooden dowels. Cole decoys were slightly oversized and beautifully painted. Had he produced more, and lived on the East Coast or Great Lakes region, they would probably be highly sought by collectors.

Rex Decoys

Manufactured in the late-1950s and early-1960s by Avery Scott and Paul Covington in a rented store in Morrill, Rex Decoys were extensively advertised nationally. The decoys were made of 1/16-inch thick latex, and were inflated by blowing into a valve. A December 1963 *Outdoor Nebraska* article compared the latex to the type used in “rubber dolls, balloons, and girdles,” and described the manufacturing process as follows: “Liquid latex is poured into a plaster of Paris mold and allowed to harden for about five minutes. Since latex only hardens when in contact with a substance that absorbs moisture, the thickness of the decoy can be regulated. The remainder of the latex is poured off to be used later, and the part adhering to the mold has the consistency of butter. The mold is then set aside to cure or harden for 24 hours.” Each mold was made from a balsa-wood model hand-carved by Covington. The company’s advertising claimed the decoys were: “Custom Made – Hand Painted – Hand Finished” All decoys were made about 10 percent larger than life-sized.

Rex Decoy advertising copy was blatantly boastful and typical of the 1960s: “Lures ‘em in . . . Pulls ‘em Down like the real ones used to do.” “Made by hunters for hunters who want the very best. REX BRAND is an absolutely new idea in decoys. An outstanding achievement in the field of hunting that has taken 12 years to develop. They are unusually life-like in appearance. So completely deceptive that it is difficult to distinguish them from Live game, even



Rex Decoys in Morrill manufactured inflatable latex goose decoys during the late-1950s and early 1960s. The decoys could be rigged for use on both land or water.

at short distances.”

Rex decoys apparently were manufactured in Canada geese and mallards only, although a brochure notes the company “will provide other species on request.” They were made for use as stand-up field decoys or floaters. “Amazing life-like rubber feet reinforced with heavy wire,” metal stakes and keels were sold separately for \$1 in 1958. Canada geese were offered in “5 different models” with 14 different head positions. A Canada decoy weighed about two pounds with feet. In 1958, a dozen goose decoys sold for \$95 per dozen, mallards for \$55 per dozen. Unfortunately, the latex rubber deteriorated over time and with exposure to the elements.

Henderson

Joe “Bud” Henderson grew up on a farm in Custer County, moved to California during World War II to work, and



Rex Decoys produced miniature decoys to use as salesmen’s samples and for advertising displays in sporting goods stores.



Joe Henderson of North Platte produced this “flying” goose decoy in the 1940s or 1950s. The decoy was restored by Gary Zaruba. Henderson also made a flying decoy that could be mounted on a post, and its wings made to move by pulling a rope.

returned to Nebraska after the war, settling in North Platte and working for the Union Pacific Railroad, retiring as an engineer. He began waterfowl hunting along the Platte and North Platte rivers during the late-1940s and making decoys for his own use. Henderson and his hunting friends probably made stick-up Canada goose decoys but none are known to exist today. It is not known how many he made.

Henderson made at least two flying Canada goose decoys. One had spread wings and two eyelets on the back to which snaps could be attached. A length of cable or heavy wire passed through the snaps and was stretched between two posts. The flying decoy could be released to glide downward, or pulled to simulate a landing goose. Henderson’s second flying goose was made to mount on a post or stout stake. Pulling on a rope would flap its spread wings.

Long

Jesse Long homesteaded in the Sandhills northeast of North Platte, and moved closer to the river in about 1900. In addition to hunting big game in Wyoming, he was an inveterate waterfowl hunter. His grandson, Larry Long, believes Jesse and his hunting cronies began making Canada goose decoys in the 1910s and deployed them on sandbars on the North Platte and Platte rivers. He made two types of stick-up Canada goose decoys—canvas stuffed with straw, similar to the type John Lundgren commercially marketed in the 1940s; and canvas over a wire mesh.

Long’s wire mesh decoys were unique in construction. The body form was fashioned from metal lath,

the expanded metal sheeting commonly used in plastering during those decades. To prevent the body shell from being crushed or losing its shape, a circular 3/4-inch board was positioned mid-body and anchored to the metal lath with a strip of 1 1/2-inch galvanized metal sewn to the metal lath with wire. Another strip of metal was sewn with wire along the spine of the decoy. The head and neck sections were fashioned entirely with metal lath. A tail section made of metal lath and a thin galvanized metal plate was attached. Once the goose was shaped, it was covered with a light canvas and painted. There was a galvanized plate on the belly with a slot into which a U-shaped part of welded No. 9 wire “legs” could be inserted. Because of the light canvas used, and the propensity for metal lath to rust, few decoys in good condition have survived.



Jesse Long and his hunting partners made goose decoys in the 1910s by stretching canvas over bodies formed from metal lath, an expanded metal used in plastering.



By blowing through a 30-foot-long rubber hose, a hunter could make a Call-D-Coy mallard or Canada goose head move and issue a call to lure passing birds within range.

Call-D-Coy

Usually considered a novelty decoy by today's collectors, the Call-D-Coy, designed and sold by Neal J. Lynch from St. Paul, Nebraska, was marketed nationally as a game animal lure in the 1960s. At some point the distribution center, and probably the company, was moved to Kansas City, Missouri.

The principal behind Call-D-Coy decoys was to produce a duck or goose call right from the decoy's mouth. The idea was not new, as a cork decoy that quacked was marketed during the 1930s and 1940s by Boutin Products of Minneapolis. To accomplish this, Lynch modified G&H goose shell decoys and plastic Quackers full-bodied mallard decoys by inserting a calling device connected to a 30-foot rubber hose in the neck of the decoys. The "patented lung" built into the decoys expanded and produced a call when the hunter blew into the white plastic mouthpiece on the other end of the tubing. The passage of air down the tube also moved the modified decoy



Sporting Specialties' wicker Canada goose decoys were made in Hong Kong, but designed and painted by Wayne Barber of Norfolk



Call-D-Coy advertised extensively. This appeared in the October 1960 *Sports Afield*.

heads up and down to create lifelike motion. A template was included from which a one-inch-thick board could be cut to be attached to the bottom of the shells allowing them to be used as floaters. Call-D-Coy also manufactured a varmint lure using a jackrabbit decoy that produced a wounded, squealing call. An October 1960 *Sports Afield* advertisement listed prices as ranging from \$16.50 for a small duck decoy up to \$19.95 for a large goose decoy.

Sporting Specialties

It is not known when Wayne Barber, owner of Norfolk's Sporting Specialties Sporting Goods Store, first produced and marketed his Canada goose decoys. An advertisement for them appeared in the October 1961 issue of *Field and Stream*. Apparently most were sold locally and at regional sports shows and goose calling contests. Although designed for field use, the wicker decoys are usually considered novelty decoys today and sought by designers.

Barber's decoys were fashioned in Hong Kong of woven rattan (the stems of any of several climbing palms of tropical Asia used extensively in wickerwork furniture), making them extremely lightweight. There were at least four different designs—a shell with detachable head, full-bodies in two sizes, and a full-body with a circular hole in the belly. A basic Canada goose plumage pattern was spray painted on the decoys in Barber's garage. Steel-shaft legs, with sliding webbed feet, were sold to support the decoy in the field. Because of the material from which they were constructed, and the relatively small production, mint examples are uncommon and fetch reasonably good prices.

Hoffmann

Gail Hoffmann of Omaha was representative of the many Nebraska waterfowlers who produced decoys in considerable quantity for their own use. With money tight, and a substantial

spread essential to hunt the Missouri River, Hoffmann obtained discarded cork insulation for bodies from Railway Fruit Express. Heads and necks were essentially silhouettes cut from dimension lumber. Both bodies and heads were cut with a coping saw. A long bolt passed through the body and attached the head to the body, along with glue. A small piece of tin was inserted between the head and body, and under the bolt nut on the bottom of the decoy. A hole in the bottom tin was used to attach the anchor line. The bottom of the body was tarred. Neither keels nor bottom weights were used. Typically the entire decoy was painted a flat black. Cross-links from tire chains were used for anchor weights on his later decoys. Hoffmann began making decoys in 1937 and continued until World War II, when he was in the armed services. He resumed making them after the war, until about 1956. Pre-war decoys were smaller with rounded bodies, post-war larger and more square in shape. His total production was probably about 200 mallard decoys.

Wood

Perhaps the most unusual Nebraska-made decoy to survive through the years was made by Walter C. Wood of Sumner in about 1920 or earlier. Wood's son, Walter Wood, of Broken Bow, thought his father made "perhaps" a dozen decoys for his own use. Only one is known to exist today. The hand-carved wooden head has an exaggerated spatulate bill, suggesting the decoys were shovelers. The body is fashioned from cattail or bulrush, bound with wire, and reminiscent of the earliest known North American decoys—11 canvasback duck decoys made of bundled tule stems and found in Nevada's Lovelock Cave in 1924. Those decoys were made by the Paiute tribe and are approximately 2,000 years old. ■



From the late-1930s into the 1950s, Gail Hoffmann of Omaha produced about 200 mallard decoys using discarded cork from insulated railway cars. Originally the decoys were painted black.

Some information for this article came from two books with author's permission: *Canvas Decoys of North America* by Archie Johnson, published by Decoy Magazine, 1994, available from Decoy Magazine, POB 787, Lewes, DE 19958 for \$29.95 plus \$3.95 shipping, www.decoymag.com; and *North American Factory Decoys – A Pictorial Identification and Reference Guide* by Kenneth L. Trayer, Reprint Publishing, 2003, available from author, 314 Little Creek Road, Lancaster PA 17601, \$69.95 plus \$5 shipping, www.factorydecoys.com. Collectors loaning decoys are credited with the photographs. For more information see past NEBRASKALAND issues: "John Lundgren, Decoy Maker," November 1993; "Cy Black's Counterfeit Canadas," November 1995; and "Sig Scott's Homegrown Decoys," December 1997.



Walter Wood of Sumner is only known to have fashioned about a dozen decoys but they are perhaps the most unique from Nebraska, with bodies made of bundled and wired cattail or bulrush. The spatulate bill identifies the decoys as shovelers.