

Interview Log

Interviewee: Ron Rue Tape #: MAAF/KF/MD/FT12.7.232

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault # of Tapes: 1 of 2

Date: 12/7/98 # of Sides: 2 of 4

Location: Cambridge MD; in Ron's workshop

Topic: decoy making, Ward Brothers, hunting, personal traditions for decoys

Corresponding Photography Log #: MAAF/KF/MD/PS12.7.98.241-247

Comments: File name: Mdft232.doc. See Fieldnotes: FN12.07.98. *Italics* indicate emphasis; [brackets indicate additional information not on the tape or asides by fieldworker]; "quotations indicate direct transcription."

For tape two of this series, see Mdft233.doc or MAAF/KF/MD/FT12.7.98.233. Ron apprenticed with the Ward Brothers by helping out in their studio and just visiting often. He has several good stories about them. On tape two, a friend drops by and the performance changes, the language changes. Both move into a highly coded communication and joking tradition, often stopping to explain a few things to me. This is further evidence of the necessity of partnering oral performers with friends that they feel comfortable talking with, especially material culture artists who may not be gregarious solo performers.

BEGIN SIDE A

[RR=Ron Rue, KF=Kelly Feltault, ED=Eddie Dean]

BIO: born in Cambridge, 11/4/31; house across street belonged to grandfather now historical society house; loved growing up in Cambridge, knew everyone

Loved hunting but couldn't afford wooden decoys; used to carve on wooden desks in school; thought it was creative rather than destructive; now desks made from formica & doesn't know where carvers will come from; best xmas present was a pair of high top boots with a place for a pen knife and now can't carry a knife near a school

Played mumbly-peg with knives; used to find decoy parts everywhere and he and brother would carve other body parts; more hunting then than now;

Hunting for food but also sold ducks to the chinese laundry in town [illegal]; was in the late 1930s; after big storm would go around getting decoys that blew in from Talbot

county and surrounds; best decoy in the 1940s was a Ward brother decoy; \$60 a dozen; too expensive for a high school boy; he and brother made a few decoys

Then Korean war happened and went to war; then came home
[first Korean vet I've interviewed; mostly WWII and Vietnam vets so far]
came home and started making decoys again; wanted to see Ward brothers so got hold of a car and went to see them; had made some decoys and carved a really fancy bird, took it to show Ward brothers;

"I found their place. You had to step up on a step and then step up on another high step to get to the entrance to their shop which in those days was about waist level. I remember rapping on the door from the ground and heard somebody say 'come in! come in!' and then somebody opened the door, Steve Ward opened the door. What I had carved and was going to show them was a hooded merganser which was not a rare bird but it was uncommon around here. You don't see them everyday. I thought it was real nice, and on the floor was a hooded merganser that they were getting ready to ship to somewhere in Illinois. Prettiest decoy I ever saw, and it made me feel so bad I remember putting my old hooded merganser down by this rock. It was just a piece of kindling then. So Lem or Steve said, 'What are you doing boy?' he made me feel so good about that carving of mine.

[UPS man at door]

"Steve made me feel so good about that carving of mine. My brother and I used to go down there once a month and they were two of the nicest men I've ever just princes, they were real gentlemen. Made me feel so good about my efforts. They would never ever offer any advice but they would tell you if you asked for it."

How they helped him; memories of Lem and Steve:

Loved barber shop singing

Baseball

Pro-Wrestling

Carving

What happened when Lem and Steve had a fight; how his style is influenced by Lem and Steve; patriarchs of entire decoys on shore; had so many styles and always changed them; didn't like umpires, contests or game wardens

How Ron started entering contests; best of show in US national show; does some judging but doesn't like it; really likes being invited to the waterfowl festival in Easton and teaching at the Dorchester County arts center; now teaching the children of some of his former students;

Tools: knives, good knives, favorite knives; making utilitarian objects; only true American art form;

Other carvers in Dorchester county; plastic vs. wooden decoys; how wooden decoys get a personality over the years: patina on them, age, a little shot in them; "they tell me more than a plastic decoy would. Like who carved you or what tree was cut down, where have you been used."

Decoys returning to his shop; like an old fiend coming home when people bring in old decoys they find and want it signed; will die out one day though shows help

Finding supplies: eyes etc; where Ward bros. Got their eyes; German guy in Newark NJ, glass eyes for birds and taxidermy; Ron used the same guy; Mr. Schumaker; [Ron pulls out a blue, clothbound hard book that he uses as a scrapbook/ledger. In it are all the orders for supplies that he's made over the years and all the decoys he's made over the years.]

"My very first order I'll never forget it was for 5 or 6 dollars worth, big order. I said, 'Mr. Schumaker'-I'll never forget it and I wished I'd saved his answer, but 'Mr. Schumaker please give me so many reds, so many browns, and so many yellows. And Mr. Schumaker please make sure that the pupils are small and centered in the glass eye.' And he-I'll never forget it-he sent this letter back that said, 'Listen Rue. You take these eyes like a send them to you, they're not Tiffany diamonds. They're only five cents a pair."

How this man always sent him a little note with every order, became fiends through the mail; mr. Schumaker was in the German army in WWI

Eyes now; price is \$4 pair; better made; eyes have to be good; pays to get good eyes;

Teaching kids to carve

Jan Calvert, carver of blue crabs in Havre de Grace

Ron asked to be in the Havre de Grace decoy museum a year ago; nice honor, good museum

Afraid that it will go the way of wooden boats; decline of hunting is losing decoys

KF: what did the Ward brothers studio sound like when you were there

RR: "oh, man" went down twice a month and one was always in the shop; they talked and talked; Lem about baseball or gunning;

"What struck me so funny was that Lem would say, 'Steve, do you remember the time we were down on Fox's Island and those' and he would take a breath and Steve would say 'and those pintails came in.' I mean they knew almost what the other man was going to say. Another thing that I loved was that they would recite poetry by the hour. Some they made up, some that they had read. I believe I could say the words but with them saying it

it was really pretty, really good. It was beautiful. Another thing was that they had a guy across the street, Lloyd Tyler was a decoy maker and he would send birds over, he would say, 'Yes Lem will sign that for you. He'd sell it but he'll sign it.' And Lem would sign a shingle I believe especially if a woman gave it to him. And he used to get kind of mad with Lloyd, he used to go over and talk to him a few times about it."

How Lem stopped making birds for a man who got a divorce that he didn't agree with that; lots of talk about baseball; Wards never kept a ledger of the ones that they made and Lem said he'd wished they had; so Ron started one for himself, has records going back to the 60s

Hump back style of decoy was invented by senator who ordered it and told him how to make it; didn't like that and didn't make anymore

Wrestling talk; Steve would grab Ron's bro Smitty [who was big] and Steve would try to get him in a hold and Smitty would just walk around with him but say he couldn't get out; Ward brothers never said anything bad about others;

Very truthful and down to earth but not unless they were asked; story of that, the prettiest thing story;

Technical help; big on doing things in one piece; used clam shells to hold paint

Very close with the ward family; wife etc; sincerity;

Learned to turn decoys heads; never carve it straight; painting techniques; made slicks but did some decorative but not with burning; using white lead as a base and for stipling;

Hunting with ward brothers; his brother did that often; travis ward was a carver and boat builder;

Deciphering who made which birds; from what regions; can tell them all by just looking at them; NC birds always ugly; prefers flat bottom birds

Dove decoys; [shows me one] thrown up over telephone lines so sit on lines like real dove; "telephone company kinds frowns on it"; dove hunting

Makes fancy birds but prefers to make gunning birds; first to make the dove decoys

Story of how he carved a baltimore oriole and gave it to Princess Anne when she came to visit; surprised that she knew so much about decoys;

Punt gun boats that his son in law builds; son in law a model boat builder; commercial hunting and punt guns; big on Hooper's Island; out only at night on calm nights; where ducks would "raft" up or bunch in the thousands; had to do it with the moon between you and ducks; would wad it with entire Baltimore Sun;

How Bay Bridge changed hunting styles; how he came home once in service in 1952 and first time he crossed bridge was then; how brother was pres. Of local hunters and trappers assoc., calls from Baltimore etc regarding practices etc. wanting to regulate; how bay bridge made state smaller

Feeding ducks even after the season but not shooting them, just feeding them; hears people now complain about the noise from ducks and geese, "what if you didn't hear it"

Carving still exciting to him; inventiveness in carving; trying new things; collectors, people you meet in carving;

Lee Fong laundry: story of taking ruddy ducks to Lee Fong laundry and Lee never wanted any more; hard to pick, have to unscrew feathers;

Regulations; licensing; hunters supporting waterfowl programs;

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

Occupations of Cambridge: canning, farming; oyster packing houses; crab picking houses; he picked tomatoes at 4 cent a basket; waterman; sewing factories [Secretary and Hurlock too]

Remembers the german prisoners down on the creek; saw them every day on way to high school;

Retired from printing business; was an estimator

Making swans as "confidence bird"; starting a carving; how that's done; make drawing of bird on wood; start rounding off comers; tools he uses; power sander, hatchet, saws; mixing up the look of heads;

Painting; uses oils; 4 different coats;

Weights that he pours and makes them look like an ear of com; keeps the flat side down; making them balanced; hard to explain

Hollowing out decoys; takes out moisture and makes them lighter; cut them lengthwise in half, used to place messages inside hollowed out birds about DNR

Hates sanding things; types of wood he uses;

Sense of place about dorchester county and characteristics of its residents;

Regional styles of Bay; upper bay is machine made and round bottom, no hatchets; doesn't allow you to make sleeping birds or alert birds etc; more creative in lower bay because heads are different at dill Positions; crisfield styles, mostly use cottonwood;

Stories of state hospital and hunters; shooting in front of the hospital;

Brother bigger hunter; has more stories; in dorchester county you pride self on how good a shot you are; notorious bad shots; story of a bad shot guy; "I'm going to kill you, you fast-walking son of a bitch" [in regards to a goose and a bad shot]

Shooting with old baltimore colts like John Unitas etc; brother used to take out Arthur Godfrey and Gen. Curtis Lemay; story of taking these guys hunting

Brother took out lots of parties and they were always dangerous, would ask, 'how do you put bullets in this gun, not bullets but shells.' Fellows get so excited that they don't know if they shot or didn't shoot at all and thought they had.

Impact of goose moratorium on area; recalls the first time a goose field went for \$1000 and people talked about it for years

Goose pickers and harrasment by DNR

Lem never made miniatures but Steve did; Steve couldn't paint though so Lem painted them; bothers Ron that Steve and Lem are buried in separate cemeteries; how they had great memories and would verbatim tell stories and quotes of hunting stories etc; Elliot brothers in Talbot, twins in Easton; had own style; they had uncanny senses too;

Giving me leads

Muskrat and trapping; muskrat and outsiders; food as culturally constructed things; eating cat in Korea but they called it chicken but it had a backbone

Brother traps too; enjoys it like hunting; see a lot of things in the marsh, very enjoyable

Hunter stories; places they hang out; Dorchester county bestings; tradition of lying in dorchester county; fishermen are good liars, hunters are better liars and trappers are the biggest liars; story with that;

Easton Show and other carvers who've been invited every year

END TAPE

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Eddie Dean, a former workmate and friend, visits on this tape. There is a good exchange of jokes and Dorchester county dialogue between the two and a high level of performance.

BEGIN SIDE A

[ED=Eddie Dean; RR=Ron Rue; KF=Kelly Feltault]

RR: teaching decoy carving; types of paints he uses; oil paints vs. acrylics; prefers oils; patina oils get; acrylics dry real fast, hard to blend; mixing oils;

Questions you get during shows; dry brush techniques; first show Easton ever had; memories of that; birds stolen during shows; people stiffing you for payment on decoys;

How shop is set up; sanding and carving in wood shop behind back of house; this is the paint shop; fun of shooting over own decoys; visitors to shop; Japanese visitors one day, story; were here looking at chicken processing; ordered a bird from him; links to hunting and hunters who visit;

Fixing birds, doesn't do it anymore;

Tourism; Hyatt in town; taking former hunters' kids hunting; how that's leaving;

Carving fish with pfiesteria in them; called it a DNR fish; makes patterns for fish but not for ducks, more familiar with ducks so doesn't need a pattern;

[take pictures while talking]

talk of the weather [80 degrees outside for the last week]

his favorite knife; a Not knife, Mr. Not made them; knife maker in DE, then went to NC now dead but nephew makes them in Salisbury; how Lem always had nicks in his shirts from carving;

doesn't have any finished decoys around, sold out;

wood, types, drying; etc; good and bad of the varieties; "ball crown" is a widgeon takes a knife to shows to test wood that is for sale

weights on decoys; used to make them out of cement; making corn weights for 20 years; using things from farm equipment, using fishing sinkers etc.;

Bishop's Head gun club used to use chains;

[Eddie Dean comes in]

good decoy carver from Hoopers Island, I should meet him

[Eddie comes in with false teeth that are rotten and crooked in his mouth]

Gilbert Phillips is Eddie's mentor but Eddie is better than he is; carving periodically

ED: learned from father and brother; father ran a gunning club and made decoys; make them rather than buy them; too expensive; has been in some carving shows; worked with Ron; how Ron would criticize him, joking between the two

RR: praising ED's decoys; working decoys; carving for the hunter rather than the bird; could paint Am. Flag on it and bird wouldn't notice; ED baits a lot

ED: "best decoy there ever was was a sack of corn"

RR: sea ducks this year; high numbers;

ED: talk of the club down on Hooper's IIs; too warm to hunt; deer hunting; got a Sika

RR: "did you go deer hunting?"

ED: "yeah,

RR: "get anything?"

ED: "I got a Sika [type of deer]

RR: "Did you,"

[pause]

ED: "Must have been thick, huh"

RR: "well, you probably hit it with your car, I'm sure."

ED: "yeah, had GM right across the side of it."

Talk of trapping and hide prices; nutria situation and destruction of Blackwater Refuge by nutria

How gov't will want to spend 6 million on study and then it will be buried and then someone else will want to do another study.

How locals could have done it for tenth less

Work lately, some carving Eddie is doing;

Robins' at beginning of deer season; community center in Robins MD that the hunters go to at the beginning of the season for a big dinner at the church; Alma sings; have oyster fritters etc, only hunters attend;

RR: "all the old rednecks were there, I love `em, and I'm one of them."
Lots of women hunters there; surprised at that; deer hunters;

Eddie built a few skipjacks too; brother runs gunning club; father ran Swan Island gunning club; sold it; brother stayed on; now at the Dollar gunning club;

RR: "I gave your brother some decoys one year for that club"

ED: "yeah, they had a big Christmas party and gave them out. Mostly blind people got them."

RR: "Oh, man [laughter]

ED: "you gotta watch us!. She's sitting there listening."

Bishop's head gunning club; \$6000 dollars to be a member; congressmen were members; one of the owners of Phillips packing company were owners; used the tomato skins; Al Bannis; dumped vegetables overboard for food for ducks; still alive. Loves to talk about it; bought in early 40s; had great food and own chef down there; how food tastes better when you're outside and hunting

Taxidermist they know; oyster buffet at Tilghman's island; outstanding buffet;

Rockfishing the last week of fishing; going fishing with Eddie's boss; huge rockfish, over 40", caught on top;

[ED leaves, I get his phone number]

[phone rings]

talking of project

END SIDE A
BEGIN SIDE B

END TAPE