The Price of Folk: The Progression of Two Decoy Makers’ Work from Folk to Non-Folk

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THE PRICE OF FOLK: THE PROGRESSION OF TWO DECOY MAKERS'
WORK FROM FOLK TO NON-FOLK

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of Intercultural and
Folk Studies
Western Kentucky University
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Benjamin Hill Vincent
June 1977
THE PRICE OF FOLK:  THE PROGRESSION OF TWO DECOY MAKERS' WORK FROM FOLK TO NON-FOLK

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THE PRICE OF FOLK: THE PROGRESSION OF TWO DECOY MAKERS’ WORK FROM FOLK TO NON-FOLK

Benjamin Hill Vincent       June 1977       96 pages

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Applying the standards for delineating folkcraft developed by Japanese scholar Soetsu Yanagi to the work of two Maryland decoy makers, Lem and Steve Ward, revealed that the Wards’ works followed a progression from folk to non-folk. A Hearst newspaper chain article on the two carvers plus winning first place at the New York Decoy Show brought publicity far beyond that usually encountered by the average folk craftsman. These events also exposed the two brothers to a range of wealthy collectors. When the Wards began to experiment with ornately carved birds, they had a waiting, and financially capable market. The extremely high prices of these later birds made their owners afraid to use them through fear of damage or loss. Thus, these recent carvings became non-functional and non-folk since functionality is a prime requisite for folkcraft according to the Yanagi standards. Therefore, price affects folk nature via function.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Using the standards of Japanese folkcraft scholar Soetsu Yanagi, this writer intends to show that the price of a craft object can remove it from the realm of folkcraft. To apply these criteria to an actual case, the progression of two decoy makers' work from folk to non-folk will be studied, thus, illustrating that not everything the folk produce is folk.

Yanagi, a Japanese scholar who began developing serious folkcraft theories in the 1920s, formulated a set of standards for determining which objects were folkcraft and which were not. American folklorists appear to have little knowledge of Yanagi's research. Perhaps this is the first time for these standards to be applied to an American folk-craft. Certainly it is the first instance in which Yanagi's standards have tested decoys. Hopefully, this in itself might be a small contribution to American material culture scholarship.

Generally speaking, the study of folk material culture has hardly gotten started in the United States. The relative scarcity of written material on price facets of folkcraft production forced the researcher to rely on field research involving interviews with the craftsmen themselves in their
native surroundings. This original research uncovered pertinent facts explaining why certain changes took place in their work and in the socio-economic composition of their customers.

Since the study of folk material culture in America is fairly new, American researchers sometimes turn to the writings of respected European scholars such as E. Estyn Evans, author of *Irish Folkways*, Robert Wildhaber, director of the Museum Für Völkerkunde and J. Geraint Jenkins, author of *Traditional Country Craftsmen* to mention only a few. Again, in this study the East provides folkcraft guidance and standards.

Throughout this thesis the term "folkcraft" will be used. Undoubtedly, there are instances when others would prefer substituting the words "folk art." Certainly, there is a difference in the usage of the two terms and a need for clarification exists. This paper, however, is concerned with a completely different problem.
CHAPTER II

STUDY

Soetsu Yanagi and his Standards for Folkcraft

When Soetsu Yanagi was born in 1889, the Japanese language had no word for "folkcraft." Upon Yanagi's death in 1961, Japan had a flourishing folkcraft movement, several excellent folkcraft museums, sundry volumes of literature on the folkcrafts and the word "mingei" which means "people's art."

Being from a well-to-do elite family, the future folkcraft expert graduated from Imperial University where he first became interested in, ironically enough, Western Arts. The oriental scholar's major fascination became Western mystics and he even published a tome on William Blake. Walt Whitman was another interest and eventually Yanagi edited a Japanese magazine entitled "Blake and Whitman."

Studying Buddhist philosophy under the famous scholar, Dr. Daisetsu Suzuki, imbued the young intellectual with a great interest in Buddhist esthetics. From this point, Yanagi, in a search for "true beauty," eventually became enamored with folkcrafts and began the Japanese folkcraft movement. Using American sources to search for a viable
standard to determine what craft items are folk quickly establishes the state of folkcraft research in the United States. "Definitions" of folkcraft abound, but it would be difficult to obtain a standard for determining what is folkcraft from such American folklorists' definitions such as

... one can generally say that folkcrafts are traditional crafts.  

or

Essentially, then, a folk thing is traditional and non-popular; material folk culture is composed of objects produced out of a non-popular tradition in proximity to popular culture.  

Folk art can be folkcraft that someone, subjectively, decides has enough esthetic merit to be considered art. Perhaps, all folk art must spring from folkcraft. What do art scholars have for a definition of folk art?

American folk art might be defined, I think, as the naive expression of a deeply felt reality by the unsophisticated American artist.  

or

Folk art is ... essentially the expression of the individual.  

or even, for those who have not left for a cathartic

So far as a definition of folk art is concerned, it is my belief that the material will define itself if one will allow it to do so.  

In a small Japanese book, one of many devoted to folkcraft, called Mingei no Tabi, or "A Folkcraft Journey," are six standards originally developed by the father of the Japanese folkcraft movement, that have found acceptance in Japan for delineating folkcraft objects. Folkcrafts are:
1. Works made by unknown craftsmen whose work has been transmitted down to them.

2. Functional.

3. Local specialties that reflect, in some way, the lifestyle found in the production area.

4. Hand made, but made in numbers so that the price is kept low.

5. Well made. Since the same item is made many times, the technique is mastered.

6. In addition to the above traits, they possess a sound, natural beauty.

Certain scholars might possibly find some part, or even all, of the Yanagi standards to be invalid for various reasons. The object of this paper, however, is not to attack, or defend Dr. Yanagi's scholarship, but simply to apply it to the task of determining when the Ward Brothers' decoy creations became non-folk.

The Town

"Crisfield is like no other place in the whole world. When the tide gets high and floods the town, everybody takes off their shoes and walks around like not a damn thing has happened!" said an obvious outsider.

The Ward Brothers' hometown, Crisfield, Maryland, does have its unusual facets. One of the few surviving public croquet grounds in the United States can be found there despite a relatively small population of about 3,500. Perhaps this green is a remnant from the earlier circa 1900 days when
the now quiet town held claim to being the fifth largest port of entry in the United States.\textsuperscript{11} Much of this former prosperity came from harvests of the then abundant Chesapeake Bay oysters, crabs, fish and the fabulous diamondback terrapins, prime ingredient in Victorian America's revered dish, terrapin stew. Market gunning for water fowl was profitable too, although practiced on a somewhat more individual scale than seafood processing. Commerce's insatiable demand for the Bay's sea life gradually led to the depletion of the Chesapeake's resources, resulting in the near extinction of some species which, in turn, brought strict government intervention to protect what remained. Fewer watermen could support themselves on the meager gleanings allowed by the legal authorities. Thus the large seafood industry of the pre-World War One days dwindled to a few crabmeat packing houses and left Crisfield to the pleasant existence of a boom town whose boom had long ceased and nobody cared. Most residents remain because they prefer to, not because they are seeking fortunes from the industrial cornucopia.

The relatively slow pace of life in Crisfield might be what has produced a populace with the time, and desire, to be gracious and kind. Although not exportable, good conversation must certainly be one of the community's most valuable products; there is always time to share experiences with friend or stranger, always time for coaxing a twinkle into young or old eyes. Yet Lem and Steve Ward have a local reputation for being outstanding talkers, even for Crisfield.

Conversations are characterized by accents more often
associated in the popular mind with Virginia than Maryland where "sooth" replaces "south" in the Civil War tales reflecting Crisfield's Confederate sympathies.

Although there has been some sort of small settlement in the general area for many years, Crisfield, as a town, really began in 1889 when a spur of the Pennsylvania Railroad was built down what became Main Street. Railway service enabled the fast shipment of fresh seafood, an absolute necessity in pre-refrigeration days. Discarded shells, by-products of a thriving seafood industry, were used to build a foundation for the expanding town.

No one positively knows when the name "Crisfield" was first applied to the small settlement in the Chesapeake marshes, but until around 1890 residents called the area "Sommers's Cove." Then, according to local legend, John W. Crisfield fell overboard and drowned in the area and, possibly in sympathy for this unfortunate accident, the town received its present name.

In addition to its location as a seafood center, this town, like many other coastal settlements on the Eastern shore of Maryland, was an excellent location for shooting the huge flocks of migrating waterfowl that paused on the Bay to rest and feed on the plentiful vegetation found in the great expanses of shallow water known as the "flats."

When gunning for the market was legal, many Crisfield watermen must have supplemented their income by shooting birds for sale. Most of these men made their own decoys since they knew how and factory produced birds cost too much by local
standards. A price list from the Mason Decoy Factory from CA. 1915 lists Premier model decoys for $12.00 per dozen which must have been extremely high by rural standards. By contrast the Crisfield storekeeper known locally as "Jim Binks" sold thousands of decoys he made for twenty-five to fifty cents. If a gunner made his own birds, he undoubtedly could have produced them for an even smaller sum.

Market gunning operations were not the only stimuli to produce decoys, since excellent money could be made by locals skilled enough to guide visiting big city hunters, locally referred to as "sports." For a party of four, $100.00 per day was not unreasonable in 1922.

Additionally for the truly elite visitors, there were exclusive gunning clubs that required enormous numbers of decoys. Such men as Louis Borden of the Borden Condensed Milk Company, Dawson Wrightson of the Simmons Mattress Company, and Walter Chrysler of the Chrysler Auto Company were typical members of such clubs and could easily afford the expensive membership fees, parts of which were subsequently used to purchase huge rafts of decoys numbering in the thousands.

All of these factors created a good demand for imitation wild fowl in most of the Eastern shore towns, and Crisfield was no exception. Yet, the stylistic features of Crisfield decoys sharply differed from those of all other areas for reasons yet to be discovered.

William Mackey commented on the uniqueness of the Crisfield style in his book, American Bird Decoys:
All of the sameness and uniformity of the Chesapeake Bay decoys we have discussed so far is scattered to the four winds when a representative collection of Crisfield decoys is studied. This important bay town on Tangier sound shared none of its pioneer decoy makers with the neighboring towns of communities. All of the good makers were natives of Crisfield. They produced a duck with a freedom of form and gaiety of style that can produce either delight or despair in the heart of the collector; some are that good, others are that bad. These so called "Crisfield models have been produced by generations of the Sterling, Ward, Tyler, Nelson and other families. Articulate descendants of all these families are still available, and they still hunt and make decoys, but the mystery of who originally created the Crisfield style is unsolved. Gunner Will Sterling, who was ninety-two when he died in 1962, made and used decoys all his life, but the origin of the graceful decoys was, as he said, "Before my time."10

The Brothers

The Ward Brothers, Lem and Steve, perform practically as one man. Their interests and life styles are amazingly parallel, even for brothers. Both were born in the late 1890s, Steve on February 3rd, 1895 and Lem on September 19th, 1896 in the house in which they resided all their lives, a two-story Victorian structure near Westly Church, a respectable section of Crisfield.

Their father, Trav Ward, had the reputation of being an excellent boat builder and decoy maker, although his primary vocation was barbering. Lem and Steve quite naturally followed their father into the barbering business. Neither had any formal training in decoy making; both simply watched their father hacking bodies from wooden blocks and picked up the rest. This lack of a formal decoy making apprenticeship
made little difference to the young men since neither had the slightest intention of becoming professional decoy makers. Lem and Steve both served barber apprenticeships under their father, and this trade gave them their main source of income until the 1960s.

One interesting feature of the Ward's barbering business was that most of their customers came in on a fairly well established schedule which enabled the brothers to plan their hunting and fishing expeditions with regularity. Between haircuts the barbershop became a work area where decoy heads were carved.

In Crisfield, these two decoy makers have the reputation of being exceptionally skilled barbers. Perhaps, to the older natives, the Wards are better known for their great skills with clippers and comb than with knife, paintbrush and chisel.19

Certainly this team of carvers is well-known and very well liked by the people of the town. Their flair for conversation and story telling endears them to everyone they meet, and the patience, kindness and sincerity of these elderly gentlemen should be the envy of later generations.20

After graduating from Crisfield High School, both men wanted to continue their educations, but financial difficulties made this impossible. Steve wanted to become a musician, while Lem dreamed of becoming an artist. Neither man realized his youthful ambition, but it might be contended that they diverted their artistic bents into the construction of decoys. This would account for the great attention paid to the shaping
and painting details of even the most functional Ward decoy.21

Although both men often lament their seeming lack of education, the Wards avidly read, and quote poetry - James Whitcomb Riley and Edgar A. Guest being their two favorites. Steve Ward writes poetry on occasion and Lem often includes a poem on the bottom of decoys he has repainted. The early days of decoy making were difficult.

Lem Ward: . . . Well, to tell you the truth, we made 'em for the love of making 'em. Once in a while we'd sell one. That's the way it worked. And everyone we sold was that much help to us. But we didn't get no money. Talk about money, there was no money to be got in them days. You couldn't do nothing.

The Wards have certain feelings of bitterness about their pioneering work that reaped such sparse financial dividends.

Ben Vincent: Mr. Lem, what did you get when you won that prize up there, [at the New York Decoy Show] as a prize?

L.W.: I, I went -

S.W.: A silver plate.

L.W.: I got- I' got - first prize- I got a - three ribbons around this bird that won first prize, it was a mallard, and a plaque, a silver plate which is blacker - it turned black - my God - you know I don't want that silver no way. And in Salisbury [at the annual decoy exhibition] they paid twenty-five hundred dollars for the best bird. Twenty-five hundred dollars. Cash money!

Steve Ward becomes particularly vexed when he talks about the prices now being paid for early Wards' decoys.
S.W.: O.K. Here's what the name, Ben can do for you.

B.V.: O.K. Here's what the name will do.

S.W.: In Bill Mackey's sale last year, up there in Belford, Massachusetts, there was one Lem, of our ducks sold. I don't know who made it myself, Lem made it and painted it both I expect. Lem, if he made it and painted it, never got over a dollar and a half for it.

L.W.: That what I got for it.

S.W.: Fifty-six hundred dollars!

B.V.: Fifty-six hundred dollars! Same decoy, exact same one?

S.W.: Same decoy, same decoy. And another one brought eighteen hundred. What done it? the name?

***********

S.W.: . . .Now if it had been somebody that hadn't been known, they no good. You - look, the public is a durn bunch of fools in a way, yes. I'll tell you why I say that. You can go in either shoe store in the United States. Whether it's in Georgia, Tennessee or Crisfield or anyplace, and take two pair of Florsheim shoes- and they're supposed to be the best, to me they're the commonest, I've had two pairs of 'em, they both come all to pieces-but anyway, you can put a sale price on one pair of Florsheims, brand new, six dollars we'll say. The other'll be forty dollars. See which one sells.

L.W.: The forty dollar one.

B.V.: The forty dollar one will sell before the six dollar one?
S.W.: Everytime! They'll figure "that's no good."

*********

B.V.: So you think the public's sort of that way about decoys now?

S.W.: You durn right. They ain't missing it. They're like it on everything! I don't care what it is.

B.V.: But especially on decoys. You think your own decoys are a little too high?

S.W.: That's right.

B.V.: It takes a man to say that.

S.W.: It is. That's a fact.

Lem also paints on canvas, but he regards this mostly as a hobby.22 Steve's hobby is Civil War history and he has become a great admirer of Bruce Catton. Through personal research and reading, Steve Ward located the previously unknown tomb of Confederate artillery General Charles Sidney Winder.

Until recently both men enjoyed singing as members of the "29ers" barbershop quartet. At one time the Tawes Baking Company of nearby Salisbury, Maryland thought this group to be so good that they acted as sponsors for them on radio station WSAL in Salisbury, Maryland.23

Obviously, the Ward Brothers had the abilities to excell in everything they tried, but in making decoys, they excelled exceedingly.
The Decoys

The evolution of the Ward Brothers' work from folk to non-folk occurred very gradually; therefore, exactly pinpointing dates when specific changes took place is impossible. Neither of the brothers remembers exactly when they sold their first decoy or how many birds found buyers in any certain year. Since, in their earlier days, they had no idea that their work could be a source of income, this lack of specifics is understandable.

The Ward Brothers made their first decoys solely for their own use. Factory made models cost too much for the young duck gunners.

Steve Ward: We were talking yesterday about the Mason decoy. Anybody knows Mason made a nice decoy, the best you could buy, but what the heck are you spend twenty-one dollars [for a dozen decoys] when he could feed his whole family for twenty-one dollars in those days. You know that to be a fact.

Ben Vincent: Why did you make this first decoy?

Lem Ward: I'll tell you why. We were duck hunters and we couldn't afford to buy 'em. And we made our own stools [sets of decoys]. They were crude. We killed ducks over 'em.

Lem carved his first set, or "stool," of decoys in 1918. Steve had experimented with decoy making as early as 1907 when he was twelve years old, but made his first set in 1920.24

In the earlier stages, roughly from the 1920s to the early '30s, the craftsmen made many changes of a technical nature intended to improve their decoy's performance. For
example, some early decoys floated too low in the water to be seen properly by passing birds. Adding a thick piece of wood onto the bottoms of these particular birds raised the decoy higher in the water. Making the body of a decoy wider caused it to float higher, eliminating the need for modifications of this type.25

Pintail decoys with their characteristically long tail presented problems with balance. The very early birds had a thick, relatively long tail on a fairly small body. This combination caused the decoy to be tail heavy and float unnaturally. By utilizing a shorter, thinner tail with the wider body developed to eliminate the need for a float board, the brothers produced a much better balanced pintail.26

Three extremely important and original innovations were:

Ben Vincent: O.K. Now what made you make these changes, Mr. Ward?

Steve Ward: Because I observed ducks and like I say, when ducks are going for an objective, a feeding ground I'll say, they are everyone swimming in a line, everyone doing the same thing. But all their heads was still pointed straight ahead. We turned their heads right and left. Anchored some in the bow and the head and some in the tail and it worked. Mostly all the old decoy makers and everyone that I saw made 'em round on the bottom and they'd roll just like a log. And anybody knows that a round log will roll more than a flat board. So the ducks we made was wide-bottomed so they wouldn't roll this way and that [right and left] but would go this way and that [bob up and down].

B.V.: Well, they would rock forward and backwards more than sideways.
S.W.: That's right 'cause you don't see wild
ducks, unless it's real blowing a gale,
that's a rocking this way [from side to
side]. They go with the tide of
of
course. When the sea's rolling they
go with that. But ordinarily they
don't do that.

Thus, sometime in the 1920s, the two barbers began producing
models with turned heads, a feature that became a trademark
of Ward decoys.27

Some Ward functional decoys were hollowed out to make
them ride higher in the water. These birds had bodies made
in two lateral halves, each part hollowed out with a chisel,
 glued and nailed together and sealed with a waterproofing
 compound. Many such decoys leaked after time and rough
 handling opened the seams near the waterline. In another
 technical experiment the Crisfield Brothers cut a wedge from
 the back of a decoy, hollowed out the body, and recovered the
 back. This technique eliminated the need for a vulnerable
 seam at water level.

A further innovation, quickly discarded, was scratch
 painting. In this technique Lem Ward scratched through the
 fresh paint on a newly made decoy to reveal the white under
 coat in an attempt to duplicate feather patterns. This tech-
nique was not eliminated for esthetic reasons, but because
the feather definition resulting from a narrow nail scratch
was not as visible as the wider feather patterns made by a
brush.

Why undertake so many technical changes? Lem Ward
answered this question by saying, "We were searching for
perfection, but we never found it."
John M. Leavens, author of *L. T. Ward and Brother*, gives another possible explanation when he writes of the flotation board modification.

The addition of a flotation board to a decoy suggests that the Wards' clientele, after trying to shoot over such [low riding] birds, would criticize the decoy for riding too low. It is a fair guess that constructive criticism of this kind based on practical experience exercised a decided and conscious influence on the Ward's style.28

Folklorist Warren E. Roberts, writing on folkcrafts in *Folklore and Folklife*, echoes Leavens in more general terms.

The customer received craft items made specifically to his special needs and could be sure of receiving serviceable and reliable items. . . while the craftsman, on the other hand, was eager to produce satisfactory items, for he knew his customers and was anxious to serve them again.29

This period of technical change based solely on the need for improving function lasted until the early thirties. The Wards made no great efforts to sell their decoys prior to this time. Word slowly spread among duck hunters shooting near Crisfield that the Ward Brothers produced good decoys. Relatively few sold. The total output of the brothers up until 1930 might have been 300 birds. This figure must include a number of decoys the craftsmen carved for their own use. Prices ranged from .50 to $1.50.

Both brothers made and painted birds individually at first, but around 1926 Steve began specializing in carving ducks while Lem concentrated on painting. This particular division of labor can probably be traced to the fact that
Lem's right arm was crippled from his youth and this made carving more difficult for him. Also, his frustrated ambition to become an artist probably made him more eager to paint than carve.

Sometime in the early 1930s, and no one including the Ward Brothers knows exactly when, the barbers became serious about producing decoys "more-or-less" full time. Although they did not quit their barbering business, their barbering business quit them, for the exceptionally tight economic circumstances of the depression caused a great slackening in the demand for haircuts. Strangely enough, the demand for Wards' decoys started increasing at the very time the craftsmen had more spare time for carving.

Although it would be difficult to determine the one factor that led to increasing demand, several things undoubtedly had an influence.

1. The growing reputation of the quality of Ward Brothers' decoys. 30

2. Orders began to come in from the many gunning clubs in the Crisfield and Salisbury areas. These clubs did not cease operation during the depression. Each club had at least 100 to 200 decoys which were repainted often. Lost birds required replacements. 31

3. People hunted to supplement their depression diet and purchased inexpensive decoys for this purpose. In the middle of the thirties, the Wards sold their first "serious" birds.
Ben Vincent: Alright. Tell us, do you remember when you sold your first decoys to somebody?

Lem Ward: I remember the first dozen decoys I ever sold in my life. That's by the dozen now.

B.V.: Yeah.

L.W.: But to give you the exact date I couldn't. I know Martin Buck-Martin Sterling bought 'em. And he gave me eighteen dollars. I mean eighteen dollars for the dozen. And that was a lot of money, boy!

B.V.: That was a lot of money?

L.W.: They were them big dollar bills—looked like a million!

B.V.: O.K. Can you tell us about what year you think that was?

L.W.: I'd say it was about—I'd say 1935.

By about 1935, the technical problems had been solved and the brothers began to turn their artistic bents toward improving the paint patterns of their birds to make them even more natural looking. Lem Ward contended that birds far plainer that Ward Brothers' decoys could decoy just as well. Still, the intention of the accurate, and colorful painting was absolutely functional; it was by no means a decorative device intended to please a collecting public. Many splendid examples of the decoy maker's craft came from this period that roughly extended from 1935 past World War II.

With the innumerable changes the Ward Brothers' decoys underwent, no single Ward style developed. In some years the two brothers changed their birds three or four times, again in their elusive quest for perfection. Certain general
characteristics distinguished the Wards' production from this period such as the graceful shape of the whole decoy, the turned head, the highly skilled rendering of the feather patterns and a wide, flat bottom.

Up until post-war years all productions of this team of carvers met the Yanagi standards for folkcraft set forth at the beginning of this paper. The Wards were unknown craftsmen having only narrow, regional reputations. They produced only functional water fowl decoys, reflecting the water-based life of Crisfield. Economic conditions kept prices low and the brothers hand-carved all their productions. Their skill, honed by constant repetition, reached a high plateau. Subjectivity comes to the fore in any discussion of how beautiful any folkcraft might be, but it would take a brutally harsh critic to contend that the Ward decoys with their graceful shapes and warm coloring patterns so closely imitating natural birds have no esthetic appeal.

In 1948 two unrelated events occurred that eventually changed the folk character of the Ward Brothers' works.

The brothers entered the 11th Decoy Show in New York City where one of their birds, a mallard, won the grand prize. This event brought the high quality work of these brothers to the attention of a wealthy group of big city decoy collectors, men who bought the birds for their decorative or artistic aspects and seldom hunted over decoys.

In the same year another significant event occurred.

Lem Ward: . . . the rotogravure section in the Baltimore Sun came down there one Sunday,
1948, and they got that big write up there in the Baltimore—that went in every newspaper in the Hearst Publishing Company all over the country. And if you could see the letters we had to answer. They thought they were made on a machine! And this is why it takes so long to do the darn things. Well, that’s how we got started.

Demand increased so much that for the first time the brothers began selling what they considered “large” numbers of decoys. The total turned out cannot be precisely determined, since neither brother kept any records of production at any time. Surely the post-1948 decoys must have been at least 1,000 birds, for Steve Ward contends that even today in his old age he can “loaf” and carve out six bodies a day. The important point was that an abnormally large national, not local, demand existed after the events of 1948, a factor far beyond the control of carvers. With these post-War happenings began the cessation of the folk nature of the Wards’ decoys.32

Although many individuals purchased birds and did not intend to use them, hunters still bought a few birds to actually use as decoys, possibly to replace lost or severely damaged birds. Lem Ward estimated that as late as 1959 he sold some decoys that were actually thrown in the water even though the price had risen to twenty-dollars each.33

Byron Cheever in L. T. Ward and Brother states:

“Around 1950 the demand for gunning stool diminished, especially for handmade wooden decoys. Wood supplies became scarce resulting in high prices for material. It seemed you just couldn’t turn out a decoy for the price people were willing to pay. Rigs were smaller than in earlier days. During this time Steve began to make miniatures and also carved what he called “gunning decoys collector grade” which
were painted by Lem . . . Lem says that he started to make a few ornamentalts about 1951."

Steve Ward contended that a few functional decoys might have been made later.

B.V.: When would you say you made you last decoy that somebody put in the water? And used? Do you know what year?

S.W.: Oh- that would, that would be a difficult question. The answer I'd say has been probably ten - ten years or more.

B.V.: After World War II?

S.W.: Yes.

The production of artistic bird carvings began by accident.

B.V.: Now, Mr. Steve, there was a time when you and your brother were both making birds separately.

S.W.: Oh yeah.

L.W.: He make 'em, I paint 'em.

S.W.: I made 'em, he paint 'em.

B.V.: It's always been this way. You never made one and painted -

S.W.: No, no. It, it, huh, we stopped doing that. Lem said that when I was making ducks, and we weren't getting nothing for 'em, said, "Don't you think I want to make some ducks too?" He could make a duck better than I could, paint it better, and make it just as good. So he started to making this, doing this, I'd say "artistic" elaborate carving with their heads preening and all kinds of positions. I never went for that because I can make more money out of decoys that I could with that.

B.V.: What year was this when he started preening?

S.W.: Not too long ago.

B.V.: Pretty recent?
S.W.: Yes.

L.W.: About fifteen years ago.

B.V.: About fifteen years ago?

L.W.: Around fifteen years, let's say.

S.W.: Hadn't been that long since you been doing it—that goose Charlie Bowen's [a stockbroker from Salisbury, Maryland] got there, I just saw it somewhere.

L.W.: When was that made?

S.W.: I don't know, but—

L.W.: That was one of the first ones.

S.W.: That was, that was the first one!

L.W.: Yeah.

S.W.: He paid five hundred dollars for it and he's been offered thirty-five hundred.

B.V.: Why did you make that goose that time for him? You just wanted to or he offered—

S.W.: He put in an order.

L.W.: I didn't make it for him.

S.W.: He just done it for an experiment.

B.V.: Oh, you made it for fun sort of?

S.W.: That's right.

B.V.: And the this fellow came in and saw it.

S.W.: He came along and bought it.

B.V.: Five hundred dollars.

S.W.: Yeah!

B.V.: O.K. So that sort of made you—

S.W.: The first bird he ever sold for five hundred dollars.

B.V.: O.K. And this was strictly ornamental?

S.W.: Oh, yes.
B.V.: You wouldn't have put it in the water?
S.W.: Oh, no.
B.V.: Never?
S.W.: None of this stuff we make now never goes in the water.
B.V.: Sure, O.K. How much of it could go in the water?
S.W.: In other words, if you put it in the water you're liable to break the wings off. See?

Today's preening ducks and geese, so skillfully carved and painted using techniques amassed over decades, have no claim to being objects for luring wild birds from sleeting skies into shooting range.

With the cessation of practical decoy production, works of the Wards ceased to be folk, since one of the prime Yanagi standards for determining folkcraft is that an object must be functional.35

However, the problem of non-functionality has two facets. One is non-functionality derived from physical reasons such as scissors with deformed blades that will not cut or shoes too tight to be worn. Another type of non-functionality, one that is often either ignored or overlooked, is that originating in an object's price. The Wards' price progression was:

L.W.: We started off selling them, I think, for a dollar and a quarter apiece. That right Steve?
S.W.: Yeah. They went from a dollar and a quarter, let's see, to two and a half.
B.V.: About what year was that Mr. Ward?
L.W.: Now, now you got me. Now you got me.
B.V.: O.K.

L.W.: And from two and a half to five. Let's see that was sixty dollars a dozen. And when we got the balsa wood out of New York [shortly after World War II] we got paid two dollars and a half a block and got fifteen dollars a bird.

B.V.: Fifteen dollars a bird. And this was in?

L.W.: But we didn't make too many of 'em, I'll tell you that.

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B.V.: O.K. Around 1960, now, you mentioned you got fifteen dollars a pair -

L.W.: Every bird, every bird.

B.V.: Now, when did your price go up again?

L.W.: When we started making ornaments.

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B.V.: Since then how high have the prices gone?

L.W.: Ha, ha, ha.

B.V.: Much higher?

L.W.: I - I don't know whether I ought to say this or not cause - I'll tell you this much. I've gone from a fifty cent bird to a five thousand dollar one.

A five thousand dollar bird is far too expensive, even for a very wealthy owner, to put in the water or otherwise risk damaging. Available only to the monied elite, the extremely high price of such a creation negated any usage and thus eliminates function. Who would be willing to risk the loss or damage of such work?
Even lower priced carvings such as the five hundred dollar birds fail to meet the test of functionality, since a number of birds, at least a dozen, are necessary to lure wild fowl into gunning range. Few sportsmen could afford to pay six thousand dollars just for decoys. Individuals who would risk the loss of a five hundred dollar bird in stormy waters are rarer still.

To repeat, price affects function and function affects folk quality.

Thus, the Ward Brothers serve as excellent examples to the folklorist of folkcraftsmen who gradually evolved into artisans producing non-folk works because:

1. Nationwide publicity which brought them to the attention of a range of customers far wider than that normally encountered by folkcraftsmen.

2. The commercial success of the experimental "artistic" birds which caused the brothers to concentrate on producing this very expensive type.

We can only wonder how often this cycle has been repeated. Certainly, the folklorist cannot fault the Wards for making this gradual transition. The prime objective of the great majority of folkcraftsmen is to make a living. In no way should they be censured for being versatile enough to do so.
CHAPTER III

SUMMARY

This paper began with the intention of showing that the price of a craft object can affect its folk nature. Dr. Soetsu Yanagi's standards for determining which objects are folk were applied to the work of Lem and Steve Ward, two wild fowl decoy makers whose work covered a span of over fifty years. Within this period of time, the brothers' works naturally underwent changes which have been documented in the body of this thesis. Eventually, this progression of changes led the Wards to begin producing "ornaments," or intricately carved birds. These models sold for prices ranging from four hundred dollars to five thousand dollars each. At these high prices the owners refused to even put the birds in the water through fear of possible damage or loss. With this development, the works of the Wards became non-folk since they became non-functional and one of the prime prerequisites for folkcraft using the Yanagi standards is function.

Price affects folk nature via function.
FOOTNOTES


5. Ibid, p. 360.


8. "Unknown" carries the connotation "not famous," although a few folkcraftsmen, such as Hamada Shoji, a Japanese potter, do become well-known yet remain folkcraftsmen.

9. Of course beauty is an admittedly subjective matter. Folkcrafts possess a "sound" beauty as opposed to objects that are eloquent, such as fine jewelry, or gaudy, such as many tourist souvenirs.

10. This quotation came from an informal conversation with a man named Lynn Causey on May 23, 1974, in Pikeville, Maryland.


12. Ibid, p. 5.


16. *Chesapeake Bay Decoys*, p. 32.

17. Ibid, p. 56.


19. This information came from personal conversations with people in Crisfield.


   Not one person in Crisfield failed to recognize the names of these artisans; no one had a disparaging word to say about them.

21. The frustrated artist syndrome might be rather common in folkcraftsmen; it could be studied as a separate subject.

22. Lem has sold paintings for $1,000 each, but this is far less than some of the Ward Brothers' contemporary bird carvings.


   Steve Ward, an exceptionally modest man, saw the famous "Buffalo Bills" barbershop quartet perform in Salisbury, Maryland and said that he would not have been afraid to have sung on stage with them.


   This also illustrates the trial and error type of modification that might characterize folkcraft development, as opposed to modifications in industrial objects resulting from scientific research and development.


27. This is not to say that every bird made by the Wards had a turned head, but a majority did.


   Functionality is again emphasized.

29. *Folklore and Folklife*, p. 236.

   Serviceability and reliability are prime characteristics of functional items.
30. Folk tales are transmitted orally. Could the reputation of a folkcraftsman be transmitted by mainly oral means?

31. Decoy makers usually sold in units of a dozen, although people bought single birds to replace lost or severely damaged birds.

32. How tempting it is to claim that forces beyond the control of a folkcraftsman are ultimately what always cause the progression from folk to non-folk production. At this time there has been too little research to lend credence to this contention.

33. The date 1959 is obtained by taking the year of the interview, 1974, and subtracting fifteen years. In the interview, Lem Ward said that as late as fifteen years earlier he had sold a few functional decoys.

34. L. T. Ward and Brother, p. 28.

35. Admittedly, some would disagree with this view. Henry Glassie, in his book, Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States, p. 31, contends, "Recently, some traditional makers of decoys, like Lem Ward of Crisfield, Maryland, have taken the pains to produce folk sculpture for the collector's shelf instead of stool to float in the gunner's rig."
THE INTERVIEW

The following interview is an integral and important part of this thesis. Every effort has been made to reproduce the dialogue as accurately as possible. A few explanatory notes have been added in brackets.
Ben Vincent: Today is May 27, 1974 and we're interviewing Mr. Lem Ward, a well-known decoy maker in Crisfield, Maryland. My name is Ben Vincent and this interview is for a part of my Master's Thesis. Mr. Ward, when and where were you born?

Lem Ward: Crisfield, Maryland, September 19, 1896.

B.V.: Have you lived any places other than Crisfield?

L.W.: It's my home town and I've never been out of it. I mean never moved out of it to live anywhere, no.

B.V.: O.K. Have you traveled around much?

L.W.: Not very much. I've been in New York twice. I've been - well, on the shore - I don't call that traveling.

B.V.: And when you say "shore" you mean this eastern shore.

L.W.: Eastern shore.

B.V.: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

L.W.: Two sisters and one brother.

B.V.: What schools did you attend when you were growing up?

L.W.: Crisfield High School.

B.V.: Could you tell us a little bit about your family history?

L.W.: There's one thing I can tell you. I was born in a Christian home and I'm proud of it. Poor people; born of poor people. I never got much education; sorry for that too. And I've got to be myself no matter where I go. You know what I'm talking about now. If I'm other than myself, I'm a flop. I got in the fifth grade of high school and quit. I had to quit though, I'm telling you the truth. Steve's greatest desire was an education. My grandfather was paralyzed, stayed bedridden for three and one-half years. He had to tend to them so that cut his high school education. I, I tell you -
I don't know.

B.V.: O.K. Do you know much about where the people of Crisfield come from?

L.W.: Northern Ireland. Our people I'm talking about.

B.V.: The Ward family?

L.W.: Yeah. That's where they started from.

B.V.: You don't remember the town?

L.W.: Galloway Bay.

B.V.: Galloway Bay! Do you remember when that was?

L.W.: Steve can tell you because he's a great history lover. I'd like for you to talk to him.

B.V.: Yes sir. Now did anybody else in your family make decoys?

L.W.: My father.

B.V.: O.K. Good.

L.W.: My father, Trav Ward, Senior.

B.V.: Travis Ward, Senior.

L.W.: Right. That's where I started.

B.V.: O.K. Did he teach you how to make decoys?

L.W.: Well, he didn't teach me, but I learned a lot under him. He never told me anything. I done his painting! All of his painting, I done it.

B.V.: O.K.

L.W.: He'd make 'em and I'd paint 'em.

B.V.: O.K. Did your grandfather ever make any decoys?

L.W.: Not that I know of, but he used to carve - I think that this is where it come from - he used - you know bark that used to grow on trees was thick, it ain't like it no more - he'd make
little miniature boats out of this bark. I've seen him time and time again cutting these little boats. And they were beautiful when he got done with 'em. Nothing but bark. He wouldn't do it with nothing else, that was all he had to do it with. I guess that's where we inherited this carving.

B.V.: I see. So he did carve some things, but he wasn't a professional.

L.W.: Oh no! No.

B.V.: O.K. Now was your father a professional?

L.W.: He was a professional boat builder. But he was no bird carver.

B.V.: O.K. And he built these special boats they use on the Bay, right?

L.W.: Crabbing boats.

B.V.: Right. Do you have a special name for those boats?

L.W.: They're skipjacks.

B.V.: Skipjacks!

L.W.: That was the name of 'em, the skipjack.

B.V.: O.K.

L.W.: And they're built low-sided so the straight [crab trap] would be brought in easy. The culling board was that wide [spreads hands about 20" apart]. They dumped their catch on this culling board and culled 'em there and put 'em in the - it was, it was real - I wish you could see how they done it.

B.V.: They're not any boats like that anymore?

L.W.: Oh no. They're, they're all died up. The's been dead forty-eight years.

B.V.: And nobody makes these boats anymore?

L.W.: No sir.

B.V.: About how many decoys did he make would you say?
L.W.: He didn't make too many. He didn't make too many because he never had the wood to make 'em out of, tell you the truth. Now I, we never had no wood for years and years - anything we could get a hold of. That's the way be come to use this balsa wood. We got it out of the bottom of life rafts. Then we went from the life rafts to the good balsa which costs two and a half ($2.50) a block. It was bad balsa. You couldn't dent it. It was laminated, but boy that was hard. But these life rafts, you could pick it all to pieces.

B.V.: Just with your fingers?

L.W.: (Nodding) No good. But that's all we had to do it with.

B.V.: Yes sir. O.K. How old were you when you first made your first decoy?

L.W.: That was in 1918 so you can count back before from that. I was - oh, uh - twenty-two years old.

B.V.: O.K. What was this first decoy like?

L.W.: My God I wouldn't want to see it now! I know that was about a crude looking thing.

B.V.: Why did you make this first decoy?

L.W.: I'll tell you why. We were duck hunters and we couldn't afford to buy 'em. And we made our own stools [sets of decoys]. They were crude. We killed ducks over 'em but they better and better. And then the sportsmen's come moving down and they said to a man who had a decoy, "Where'd you get 'em." "Ward made 'em." This is how it spread. Then the rotogravure section in the Baltimore Sun came down there one Sunday, 1948, and they got that big write up there in the Baltimore - that went in every newspaper in the Hearst Publishing Company all over the country. And if you could see the letters we had to answer. They thought they were made on a machine! And this is why it takes so long to do the darn things. Well, that's how we got started.

B.V.: O.K. I know you started off as a barber too. When did you start as a barber?
L.W.: Well, I started barbering when Steve went into the Army in 1917. When did you go into the Army? 1918?

Steve Ward: Yeah.

L.W.: That's when I started barbering.

B.V.: O.K. Your brother, Steve, went into the Army in 1918 and that's when you started barbering.

L.W.: When I started barbering.

B.V.: Who taught you how to?

L.W.: My father was a barber.

B.V.: He was a barber too?

L.W.: That's the one who learned us.

B.V.: O.K. Now for the most part of your life you worked primarily as a barber you say.

L.W.: And made decoys in between times.

B.V.: Yes, on the side sort of. Now would you care to tell us about how much of your income you got from decoys back when you were barbering?


B.V.: Say ten percent?

L.W.: I guess we got - well, to tell you the truth, we made 'em for the love of making 'em. Once in a while we'd sell one. That's the way it worked. And everyone we sold was that much help to us. But we didn't get no money. Talk about money, there was no money to be got in them days. You couldn't do nothing.

B.V.: Couldn't make any money back then?

L.W.: No.

B.V.: Alright sir. Now I know at one point though you started making a lot of decoys. You sort of went into it full-time.

L.W.: Yes sir.

B.V.: Can you tell us when and why?
L.W.: (To Steve) When, when did we start making ducks at full time?

S.W.: It was in the thirties, early thirties.

L.W.: Early thirties is right.

B.V.: Alright sir. You say you and your brother think you started in the early thirties. Do you think the depression had anything to do with that?

L.W.: Well, it could have had.

B.V.: So your brother seems to think that the depression in the thirties didn't have too much to do with the fact that you started making the decoys fulltime. How did the depression do with your barbering business? Hurt it or help it?

L.W.: It hurt it!

B.V.: Really hurt it?

L.W.: Really hurt it. Those that got haircuts once a month then put it off to once every two months. Them that got their hair cut every week put it off for two weeks. So it's got to hurt that way.

B.V.: So you used to make your decoys - parts of 'em - when you were in your barbershop, didn't you? When you had a little spare time?

L.W.: Many a one. Many a one I've made that way. Made all the heads up that way. Then bring 'em back home and put 'em on the bodies.

B.V.: O.K. You made the heads in there then you brought 'em home and put 'em on the bodies. Now, when people stopped getting the haircuts, didn't you have a little more time to work on your decoys?

L.W.: That's when we worked on 'em.

B.V.: Alright. So in the depression when people stopped getting their hair cut so much, I guess you had plenty of time on your hands.

L.W.: Oh yeah, plenty of time.
B.V.: So you could put a lot of extra work in your decoys couldn't you?

L.W.: That's right.

B.V.: Alright. Tell us, do you remember when you sold your first decoys to somebody?

L.W.: I remember the first dozen decoys I ever sold in my life. That's by the dozen now.

B.V.: Yeah.

L.W.: But to give you the exact date, I couldn't. I know Martin Buck - Martin Sterling bought 'em. And he gave me $18.00. I mean eighteen dollars for the dozen. And that was a lot of money boy!

B.V.: That was a lot of money?

L.W.: They were them big dollar bills - looked like a million!

B.V.: O.K. Can you tell us about what year you think that was?

L.W.: I'd say that was about - I'd say 1935.

B.V.: About 1935?

L.W.: 1935 or '40 in between there.

B.V.: O.K. Up until this time when you sold that dozen to Mr. Martin Sterling about many do you think you made?

L.W.: Not too many.

B.V.: Can you give us a guess?

L.W.: Not too many.

B.V.: Would you say five hundred?

L.W.: I doubt it very much.

B.V.: Closer to three hundred?

L.W.: Closer to three hundred - Yes.

B.V.: Now often you started selling them, though, after what we think was about 1935, your business picked up pretty fast didn't it?
L.W.: Yeah!

B.V.: How many would you say you sold each year between 1935 and 1940?

L.W.: We didn't sell too many ducks. I, - I couldn't tell you. The time we started selling ducks was when the Baltimore Sun sent that photographer down here. That was in 1940 some - I forget which - but that really set us off. I mean we heard from everywhere - and they thought we were making 'em by machine. You know they thought we could make 'em that fast but we couldn't do it! But we lost a lot of trade that way.

B.V.: So you would say that up to about 1948 when you got that, un, Baltimore Sun publicity -

L.W.: Yeah, and that's when I won the show in New York.

B.V.: That's right you won the show in New York in 1948 too.

L.W.: Yeah, that's the one.

B.V.: Alright. Until then though, you would say that your main occupation was just barbering.

L.W.: Barbering.

B.V.: Duck-makin decoys was more or less a sideline?

L.W.: That's right! We duck - we gunned everyday nearly about.

B.V.: Yeah?

L.W.: It's a transient trade you know. You got a chance to gun. You got so many people to work on and that's it. It would give us a chance to gun. I knew when they were coming to the barbershop so I'd go gunning.

B.V.: Oh, they had sort of a schedule?

L.W.: Oh yeah yeah! Yes sir.

B.V.: That must have been nice.

L.W.: That as nice. I told you I'd lived a good life. No whistles nor bells to go by.
B.V.: Good enough! So mostly you made them for your own use!

L.W.: Own use.

B.V.: And then started selling them.

L.W.: Until the sportsmen started moving in. Then he found out who made 'em and we started getting orders.

B.V.: So it slowly built up. And you say you got your biggest boost now, in 1948 when two things happened.

L.W.: Yep.

B.V.: Over the Baltimore Sun and Hearst newspapers.

L.W.: And that show.

B.V.: Yeah. Hearst newspapers sent a photographer out and that article went out all over the country. You got letters from all over America.

L.W.: Every - Detroit and everywhere else. Wherever that Sun was - we'd get letters from 'em.

B.V.: And the show in New York, what was it? New York Decoy Exhibition?

L.W.: Yeah.

B.V.: In 1948.


B.V.: And that gave you a big boost. Oh, did you win that as Lem Ward or was it Ward Brothers?


B.V.: Good. That's what I thought. Then did you quit your barbering business in 194-.

L.W.: Not, not then. I barbered up until fifteen years ago. (1959)

B.V.: O.K.

L.W.: Just about fifteen years ago.
B.V.: But you found, I think, that more and more of your income started coming in from the decoys than from the barbing.

L.W.: Yeah, yeah.

B.V.: O.K. Would you happen to remember the first year that your income came mostly from decoys instead of from barbing?

L.W.: No. I couldn't give you a definite answer. It - there weren't much income then. You were only getting a dollar and a half a bird you know. You couldn't, you couldn't get nothing. You couldn't make no money out of that.

B.V.: O.K.

L.W.: When we started making what little bit we made was, uh, five, six years ago.

B.V.: That recent?

L.W.: Yeah. And that -

S.W.: More than that Lemuel.

L.W.: Huh?

S.W.: Longer than that.

L.W.: When was it? Ten years ago?

S.W.: Longer than that.

B.V.: Uh oh!

L.W.: I don't think so.

B.V.: Mr. Steve says it's been a little bit longer. We'll talk to him in just a minute.

S.W.: Shelma's (Lem's wife) been dead ten years.

L.W.: Who?

S.W.: Your wife!

L.W.: She ain't been dead but eight Steve.

S.W.: She's been -

L.W.: She died in 1966. I remember what she said [died] We were building this shed.
B.V.: Well, Mr. Ward, can you tell us a little about what your prices have been over the years? Now you started off selling them by -

L.W.: We started off selling them, I think, for a dollar and a quarter a piece. That right Steve?

S.W.: Yeah.

L.W.: They went from a dollar and a quarter, let’s see, to two and a half.

B.V.: About what year was that Mr. Ward?

L.W.: Now, now you got me. Now you got me.

B.V.: O.K.

L.W.: And from two and a half to five. Let’s see that was sixty dollars a dozen. And when we got the balsa wood out of New York [shortly after World War II] we got, - paid - two dollars and a half block and got fifteen dollars a bird.

B.V.: Fifteen dollars a bird. And this was in -

L.W.: But we didn’t make too many of ’em, I’ll tell you that.

B.V.: And this was after the War when you got the balsa right?

L.W.: Oh yes. Way after the war.

B.V.: Where did that wood come from? Life rafts?

L.W.: No, no this come from New York City, but it come from wherever it grewed at. Where’s that balsa wood grow?

B.V.: South America, isn’t it?

L.W.: South America. They got it out of South America. But it was the balsa. They had - the billhead read that the floors was laid out of it. Hardwood floors. It was just like steel.

B.V.: O.K. Now I know, I’ve read in books, that you’ve made some from balsa from Army surplus life rafts.
L.W.: Yeah. That, that, - it was rotten. It was already deteriorated. Well, it was wrapped in canvas and when that canvas broke the water went through and rotted it. We didn't get too many birds out of a block.

B.V.: They weren't too good?

L.W.: No.

B.V.: O.K. And that was in 1948-49?

L.W.: '48-49. I'm sorry I ever made one out of it.

B.V.: O.K. Fine. But when you had this good balsa, now, what year was that?

L.W.: That's way after that show in New York. Let's see, see I got nothing down and it's just guesswork.


L.W.: It's '74. I'd say it was around 1960.


L.W.: Every bird, every bird.

B.V.: Now when did your price go up again?

L.W.: When we started making ornaments.

B.V.: Alright. Now you call these decorative birds "ornamental birds."

L.W.: Right.

B.V.: What did you get for those when you first started?

S.W.: What?

L.W.: Sommers Hedley's got three hundred I think to be correct. Three hundred and seventeen or eighteen pieces of my work - there's two of 'em - and the highest he ever paid was twenty dollars apiece. But they went up from there see, they went up from there.

B.V.: Uh huh. So the most you ever got from him was twenty dollars apiece. And when was the last
year you sold him one?

L.W.: It was long before my wife died in '66 - no he was still getting birds when my wife was living in 1966.

B.V.: Since then how have the prices gone?

L.W.: (Laughter)

B.V.: Much higher?

L.W.: I - I don't know whether I ought to say this or not cause - I'll tell you this much, I've worked from a fifty-cent bird to a five thousand dollar one.

B.V.: O.K. So you say you got - the highest price you've ever got was five thousand dollars for one bird.

L.W.: One bird.

B.V.: Alright sir. That's good because we can - it's interesting to see how your prices have changed with the things you've made. That's important to us.

B.V.: Now, we're going to talk a little bit with the partner in the Ward Brothers decoy business, Mr. Steve Ward. Mr. Ward, when and where were you born?

S.W.: I can't hear you.

B.V.: When and where were you born?

S.W.: Right here, February 3rd, 1895. Right in this home right here.

B.V.: Have you lived in any other places?

S.W.: Yes I have - not working for a living now. I traveled around a whole lot. Never stayed in no town to work you know.

B.V.: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

S.W.: One brother and two sisters.

B.V.: What schools did you attend Mr. Ward?

S.W.: Huh?
B.V.: What schools did you attend?

S.W.: This, uh, Crisfield High School.

B.V.: Fine. What did you want to be when you were young?

S.W.: Well, that's a question that - I wanted to be a musician.

B.V.: A musician!

S.W.: I was crazy over music and still am. It took more money than our people had to get to be a big musician I mean. I studied music all my life and still do. I mean when I could see. I can't see how to do it now. But that was my main ambition.

B.V.: Like your brother you became a barber also did you not?

S.W.: I was a barber ahead of him.

B.V.: Before he was?

S.W.: Oh yes because I'm a year and a half older than he is. He was afflicted in one hand and couldn't do no hand work so he took up barbering and making decoys. We didn't do this for a living! We'd just get a few on hand and sell 'em to the local hunters. That's about the height of it.

B.V.: O.K. Now your brother told me that your father didn't teach him too much about making. Did he teach you anything?

S.W.: No, I just watched him and I got a cue from him of course and picked it up gradually and seen that I could improve on what he made and on all the old duck makers, as far as that goes. 'Cause we done several things to decoys that the old duck makers never did do. Every one of the old fellas had their heads sticking right straight ahead, not turned. We changed that and turned their heads. We changed - I did - instead of anchoring all of them in the bow with the anchor off here [pointing to the bottom front part of a decoy] I'd anchor some in the stern, the tail rather, so everyone wouldn't be swimming the same way.

B.V.: Oh!
S.W.: It worked.

B.V.: You were the first person to do that?

S.W.: The first one.

B.V.: O.K. Now what made you make these changes Mr. Ward?

S.W.: Because I observed ducks and like I say, when
ducks are going for an objective, a feeding
ground I'll say, they are everyone swimming in
a line, everyone doing the same thing. But all
their heads are still pointed straight ahead.
We turned their heads right and left. Anchored
some in the bow and the head and some in the
tail and it worked. Mostly all the old decoy
makers and everyone I saw made 'em round on
the bottom and they'd roll just like a log.
And anybody knows that a round log will roll
more than a flat board. So the ducks we made
was wide-bottomed so they wouldn't roll this
way and that but would go this way and that
[bob up and down].

B.V.: Well, they would rock forward and backwards
more than sideways.

S.W.: That's right 'cause you don't see wild ducks,
unless it's real blowing a gale, that's a
rocking this way [from side to side]. They
go with the tide of course. When the sea's
rolling, they got to go with that. But
ordinarily they don't do that.

B.V.: Now when did you make your first decoy?

S.W.: When?

B.V.: Yes sir.

S.W.: Well a rough guess would be 1907. 'Cause I
was twelve years old and me and the boy that
was drowned, he had a half brother and he gave
him three old water witch decoys was what they
were - and they had no paint on 'em. And we
had an old single barreled musket and you could
buy a uh, uh, pint of shot for a pound. That's
what the old woman give you.

L.W.: That was way back there.
S.W.: "A pint's a pound," she said. And it was at least ten pounds of shot in a pint bottle. Well, for twelve cents you could buy enough ammunition to shoot all day. And that old musket, if you were man enough to shoot it, she'd knock your ears off, put three or four fingers into her. And you see what fingers are, when you ram your rammer down, you measured the load with your fingers, you see.

B.V.: Uh huh.

S.W.: What's sticking up out of the muzzle. Two fingers weren't enough load to kill a duck so we killed water witches. We couldn't go where the ducks were. But when you put three [fingers] in there, and four, it was just mayhem. It would knock your ears off.

B.V.: So you made this decoy when you were about twelve years old you think.

S.W.: Twelve years old. That's the first one I made. I can remember that.

B.V.: You don't remember –

S.W.: And that was made out of Georgia pine heart.

B.V.: Good deal!

S.W.: Now you know what a Georgia pine is!

B.V.: Yes sir.

S.W.: Down there are trees in the swamp where we were that I believe were three and one-half feet across where they bled 'em for the turpentine.

B.V.: Yes sir. That's right.

S.W.: And they were all clear heart. There was very little sap in the trees. They all turned to heart.

B.V.: That's right.

S.W.: That's what I made my first decoy. Now I know it never floated [properly] and it never rotted. It had to burn up. It's some where now, I don't know. But it had to burn up to be destroyed.

B.V.: It was that strong?
S.W.: Oh yeah, no termite can get in that you know.

B.V.: When you talk about water witches, what kind of birds are those?

L.W.: Grebes.

S.W.: That's a grebe.

B.V.: Grebes? Ah.

L.W.: Little grebes.

B.V.: Grebes. And you used to shoot those. Could you eat 'em?

S.W.: No.

B.V.: Can't eat 'em.

S.W.: No. Mother cooked one for me, the first one we killed, not me and him [lem] but the red-head boy that was drowned. I thought I had a swan, you know. The first one I'd ever killed and we had to throw the pot and everything else away.

B.V.: So it was pretty bad.

S.W.: We couldn't go where ducks flew. You had to cross the water and Pop wouldn't let me cross the water. Oh, I could handle the skiff good as any man.

B.V.: What was your barbershop and barbering business like?

S.W.: What was it like?

B.V.: Uh huh.

S.W.: Aw, that's a question I can't answer. Just like all barbershops you - We worked here. When I worked in this shop here on the road, Then I worked in town. It was easier here than it was in town. You had to stay there whether you worked or not in town, but I could close up here and go where I wanted.

B.V.: Oh, so you had some free time.

S.W.: Yeah.

B.V.: Do what you wanted to do with that free time.
L.W.: Right.
S.W.: Yeah.
B.V.: O.K. And you used some of this free time to work on decoys didn't you?
S.W.: Yeah. We didn't do too much work on decoys until -
L.W.: After the show. After the show in New York
S.W.: Yeah. That when it was that we started really working on decoys. And then we didn't do too "elaborately" I'll say. Just worked for something to do. Barbered at the same time.
B.V.: So you, you agree with your brother and you say most of your income then was from barbering.
S.W.: Yeah.
B.V.: Until you hit it big in the show in New York.
S.W.: Then we never got no money out of it. We lost some on it!
B.V.: Lost money? How'd that happen?
S.W.: Ask him?
B.V.: I'll ask him in just a minute.
S.W.: You had to pay so much for a duck to enter a show, you had to pay your own way and expenses up there and back, you had to eat in a restaurant.
L.W.: Dollar on every duck.
S.W.: You lost money!
B.V.: Oh, I see.
S.W.: I didn't go. I didn't go. Lem and his wife and Sommers Hedley and his wife, they went up there and they ate with Joel Barber there in the restaurant in New York. You know Joel Barber, he was the first man wrote one of the books. He started this collection. And Lem had dinner with him in New York. But it's not like this, like this show here now. If you're a well known carver, but, I say like we
are, they offered to pay me, Lord Almighty, last, last year the Smithsonian Institute, in Washington, they put on every year, they select people of all different arts, so many to go to the Expo in Montreal, they wanted us to go there for two weeks. And, and just work. Now they were going to pay. They were going to pay for our work and for our expenses there. If by jet, by car, by truck or what else, everything would be paid. And you'd be paid handsomely. In other words, if you were a good singer down in Georgia, they'd say, "Well, we got a man down in Georgia who's a good singer, extra good musician, pay him, get him up here." That's the way they done it, all walks of life. Well, we turned it down.

B.V.: How come?

S.W.: Because — because of our age. And Paul Locker in Salisbury he said, "My gosh I wish I had known it. I wish I had been eligible, I'd a went with you." And me and Paul could have pulled it over. And uh, another set-up, and Lem wouldn't go for it, this was to be on the Johnny Carson Show in New York. We were to be — we would have been paid handsomely, I don't know how handsomely. But Lem said, "I wouldn't get on the Johnny Carson Show in New York for nothing in the world." But that wouldn't have scared me a durn bit. That would bother —

L.W.: I wouldn't. I mean that captain.
B.V.: Now, Mr. Steve, there was a time when you and your brother were both making birds separately.

S.W.: Oh yeah.

L.W.: He make 'em, I paint 'em.

S.W.: I made 'em, he paint 'em.

B.V.: It's always been this way. You never made one and painted-

S.W.: No, no. It, it, huh, we stopped doing that. Len said that when I was making ducks, and we weren't getting nothing for 'em, said, "Don't you think I want to make some ducks too?" He could make a duck better than I could, paint it better, and make it just as good. So he started to making this, doing this. I'd say this "artistic" elaborate carving with their heads preening and all kinds of positions. I never went for that because I can make more money out of decoys than I could with that.

B.V.: What year was this when he started making the preening?

S.W.: Not too long ago.

B.V.: Pretty recent?

S.W.: Yes.

L.W.: About fifteen years ago.

B.V.: About fifteen years ago?

S.W.: It hasn't been that long.

L.W.: Around fifteen years, let's say.

S.W.: Hadn't been that long since you been doing it—that goose Charlie Bowen's a stockbroker from Salisbury, Maryland got there, I just saw it somewhere.

L.W.: When was that made?
S.W.: I don't know, but -
L.W.: That was one of the first ones.
S.W.: That was, that was the first one!
L.W.: Yeah.
S.W.: He paid five hundred dollars for it and he's been offered thirty five hundred.
B.V.: Why did you make that goose that time for him? You just wanted to or he offered?
S.W.: He put in an order.
L.W.: I didn't make it for him
S.W.: He just done it for an experiment.
B.V.: Oh you made it for fun sort of?
S.W.: That's right.
B.V.: And then this fellow came in and saw it.
S.W.: He came along and bought it.
B.V.: Five hundred dollars.
S.W.: Yeah.
B.V.: O.K. So that sort of made you -
S.W.: The first bird he ever sold for five hundred dollars.
B.V.: O.K. And this was strictly ornamental?
S.W.: Oh, yes.
B.V.: You wouldn't have put it in the water?
S.W.: Oh, no.
B.V.: Never?
S.W.: None of this stuff we make now never goes in the water.
B.V.: Sure. O.K. How much of it could go in the water?
S.W.: In other words if you put it in the water, you're liable to break the wings off. See?

B.V.: Cause they're thin?

S.W.: Yeah, they're thin ones. They'd take the water 'cause they're, they're made with, put together with waterproof glue.

B.V.: Yes sir.

S.W.: And Lord Almighty it would never come apart, but you would break it.

B.V.: When would you say you made your last decoy that somebody put in the water? And used? Do you know what year?

S.W.: Oh - that would, that would be a difficult question. The answer I'd say has been probably ten - ten years or more. (1964)

B.V.: After World War II?

S.W.: Yes.

B.V.: Definitely you made them after World War II to be used?

S.W.: That's right.

B.V.: O.K. So was there ever a time in your career when you carved out ducks and painted them? Or has your brother always done half the work?

S.W.: Oh, I done, I done some painting on the start when I had good eyesight. Not too much. 'Cause I didn't have the time.

B.V.: You liked to carve too.

S.W.: I had to make ducks and he had to paint 'em. And he didn't have time to make - carve 'em. And I was stronger than he was. I was always stronger than him in my right and both arms as far as that goes. We just made a team of it.

B.V.: Mr. Lem, how about telling us, if you don't mind, why you chose to be the man who painted them instead of the man who carved them? Do you like painting pretty much?

L.W.: No, I like to do both of 'em.
S.W.: He took a, he took a course in painting.

B.V.: He took a course in painting?

L.W.: I like to do both of 'em. Like I told you I wanted always to be an artist, on canvas, but I could never make it. I always wanted to be one.

B.V.: You wanted to be an artist, but you couldn't go to school because of financial reasons.

L.W.: That's right. And I liked painting ducks so I took up ducks. And with that we could sell 'em see?

B.V.: O.K. So in order to sell 'em a little bit better, your brother, who wanted to be an artist painted 'em while you carved 'em out.

S.W.: That's right. Here's the gist of the whole thing. Back then when he wanted to be an artist, and I took art lessons too, he took from one school and I took from another, but anyway, like we said, or like I said in here today, a man could buy a dozen Mason decoys [decoys factory-made by the now defunct Mason Decoy Company] for twenty-one or twenty-two dollars. But who in the world was going to spend twenty-two dollars for a dozen ducks and they would serve the same purpose? Now they weren't as good as the Masons, the old heads [old time hunters] I'm speaking about, and today a boy whose got the ambition, can go to college, if he's got the guts, and work his way through college. We got a boy in Eastern Maryland who's a millionaire, was a millionaire, and fell heir to the million and dropped out of Harvard lacking nine months of graduating when he fell heir to his million. And he told me one time, he said, "The boy that goes to college and works his way through, he's determined, he's determined." We got a lawyer right here in Crisfield, Loyd Bennett, worked his way through Law School, every bit of it. And he's a durn good lawyer.

L.W.: That's the kind I like to know of.

S.W.: You could take a young boy now that's gifted to painting - Dr. Corkin. I remember Dr. Corkin told too, right down in the old barbershop up the road, he said, "Lem, why don't you get in
the office of some good artist just to take
care of his paint brushes and sweep the floor?"
Today you can do that probably, but in those
days, it was a hard job.

B.V.: You couldn't do it?

S.W.: Let me tell you something. The boys of today
has got it all over the boys of yesterday. We
got kids right here in this town, and you've
got 'em in Georgia, and every state in the
Union [who] can take an automobile and go any-
where in the world that they want to go and
they got the gut to do it! You can't lose
'em. But I could have been lost. We hadn't
been up against the world. We hadn't been up
against it. Like Rocky Graziano said in New
York, the prize fighter. Somebody asked him,
but he said, "We had to steal." He was a news-
boy. He said, "We had to steal to exist."
There was no money! They stole fruit out of
the fruit carts. They stole anything they
could get to eat.

L.W.: They told you the truth too, boy.

S.W.: And that's the trouble today. I mean the
advantage today that the young boys is got over
the boys of fifty years ago. When I was in the
Army, I was gun shy, you know what I mean by
that. Uh, I weren't afraid of people, but I
was sorta distant. Today the boys don't -
they'll walk up to a stranger and in five
minutes they'll be just the best friends in the
world. We were a little bit reluctant on
our side.

L.W.: Well, we were cowed to start with Steve.

S.W.: Huh?

L.W.: Cowed like a scared bird dog. We weren't
allowed to do this and weren't allowed to do
that.

S.W.: Well, that's right. We were taught and it was
wrong.

S.W.: We were taught that it was wrong to do this and
it was wrong to do that. And, heck, I wish I
hadn't a listened to my mother and father like
I did. They practically, practically got us so
that we were afraid to do any durn thing. Now
how would you - I think I heard you say while ago about your father. How old did you say your father was? Weren't you telling Lem while ago?

L.W.: His mother.
B.V.: No, my aunt.
L.W.: His aunt.
B.V.: Eight-two.
S.W.: How old would your father - is your father still living?
B.V.: No.
S.W.: How long has he been dead? How old would he have been - uh - that's a personal question.
B.V.: Well, I don't know. Let me think.
S.W.: In Crisfield today, any fifteen year old boy, or any girl either can get in an automobile and drive any durn place they want. We had, - Lem, Lem's been to New York with people from Crisfield, I think he went there on one trip, with a gang been driving ever since they were young men. They were afraid to drive in New York. In New York City, parked their cars in Wilmington and took a bus.

L.W.: And I got a boy, that boy who was in here this morning [Lem Ward's grandson] who can go anywhere in the world. I don't give a durn where he wants to go 'cause he can go. He can go!
B.V.: Well, how did this sort of sheltered life you led affect your decoy making?
S.W.: What?
B.V.: How did this sheltered life you led here in Crisfield affect your decoy making? or did it?
S.W.: Well, no, I don't think it did. That didn't - nothing didn't make me do nothing. I just somebody who wanted to do what I wanted to do. I didn't give a durn whether people liked it or not. I know nobody's going to give me anything. The world doesn't owe me a living. I got to
make it. Nobody gives you nothing in this life.

B.V.: You say that back when you were making decoys, the Mason Decoy Factory sold good birds, excellent birds for twenty-one or twenty-two dollars a dozen.

S.W.: Yes.

L.W.: That's right, machine made.

B.V.: Machine made, that's right. How much would you fellows say you could have sold a dozen for back then?

S.W.: Oh, we couldn't have got nothing for ours at that time! Probably fifty cent apiece.

B.V.: Fifth cents apiece, six dollars a dozen?

S.W.: Yes 'cause there was an old man down here had this store and he made 'em for twenty-five, fifty cent apiece. They weren't as good as the Mason, but they decoyed birds just as good or better!

B.V.: They were just as effective?

S.W.: That's right. And the Mason, by being a machine-made decoy, and the name the Mason Company had is what sold 'em! That's what sold 'em. You can take any boy there is in this world today, or any girl there is in the United States today, and, we, we'll take, uh, now he never did make the grade and Bing Crosby's boys never did make the grade. Frank Sinatra's boy and Bing Crosby's boy - what they done, they done on their father's name. You get what I mean? In other words, like Danny Brown told Lem down in Salisbury a year or so ago. [He] said, "Lem, you could put your name on a basket of horse shit and sell it." And it's, it's the truth!

B.V.: Because you have the name.

S.W.: That's it. That's the word!

B.V.: But you had to work hard to get that name.

S.W.: You durn right.

L.W.: We were lucky to get it, that's all. It weren't the good work we done that got it.
B.V.: You think it was just plain luck that you got it?

S.W.: That's right.

L.W.: Just plain luck.

B.V.: It wasn't your hard work?

L.W.: No.

S.W.: Zane Grey, listen, graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and he was a destitute. He couldn't get a - he was a great writer, you know, of the West - and he couldn't sell a manuscript anywhere, nowhere. He sent 'em to one man, one editor after another, one publisher after another, nothing doing. They never even looked at his manuscript. That's the way it is with you and me and everybody else. You're unknown, I saying if you are unknown you got to make that name. So he went out West with a banker that was named Martin, his health had broke down on him. And he asked Martin if he could go to Arizona with him. He said, "It won't cost you anything; I won't charge you a penny. Give me what you want. I'll look after you," cause the man's health was bad and they wanted him to go West. Zane Grey went with him and he got right there in the territory where all this old stuff happened at, and he began to write. And the first book that he wrote, I think I'm right, I'm not positive, he sent it to I forget how many publishers and they didn't even open the manuscript, not a durn one. And he got desperate so he wrote. He said, "Please, please at least read the manuscript." He read it. He said, "I'll take everything that you've ever written." He was made right then and there. That was it.

B.V.: You think the same thing happened to you?

S.W.: The same thing happened.

B.V.: Do you think what that thing was was when you won the decoy show?

S.W.: Yes.

B.V.: You think that was the same thing like Zane Grey made it?

S.W.: Yes. Yes.
L.W.: Yes, right.
S.W.: That was it.
L.W.: I think that was it.
B.V.: Mr. Lem, what did you get when you won that prize up there, as a prize?
L.W.: I, I went -
S.W.: A silver plate.
L.W.: I got - I - I got - first prize - I got a - three ribbons around this bird that won first prize, it was a mallard, and a plaque, a silver plate which is blacker - it turned black - my God - you know, I don't want that silver no way. And in Salisbury [at the annual decoy exhibition] they paid twenty-five hundred dollars for the best bird. Twenty-five hundred dollars. Cash money!
B.V.: In the Salisbury show, that was last year?
L.W.: This year.
B.V.: This year.
L.W.: This year. Now a youngster got something to look forward to now.
S.W.: Here, here's what the name Ben can do for you.
B.V.: O.K. Here's what the name will do.
S.W.: In Bill Mackey's sale last year, up there in Belford, Massachusetts, there was one of Lem, or our ducks sold. I don't know who made it myself, Lem made it and painted it both I expect. Lem, if he made it and painted it, never got over a dollar and a half for it.
L.W.: That what I got for it.
S.W.: Fifty-six hundred dollars!
B.V.: Fifty-six hundred dollars! Same decoy, exact same one?
S.W.: Same decoy, same decoy. And another one brought eighteen hundred. What done it? The name!
B.V.: What was this grappling story, Mr. Lem?

L.W.: He, he'll tell you about it.

S.W.: Manufacturer up here in Crisfield, Burdell, sold out to a firm in Massachusetts. And they had so many these - you know what a grappling is, it's that they anchor boats with, with prongs on 'em you know, with a ring in the end of 'em.

B.V.: Yes sir.

S.W.: Well, they had so many of these galvanized grappling that they had no place to store 'em. So Charles Burdell went down to Bill's diner, or William Sterling, Bill Sterling. He said, "Bill, will you let me sell you some galvanized grappling." He had a whole upstairs there, a big room. He said, "Right, what do you want for 'em?" He said, "Fifty cent apiece, I'll sell 'em to you for fifty cent apiece." He said, "I, i." - It was four hundred, think it was he bought. He said, "I put 'em up in the attic." He put one or two downstairs for display. He said, "I couldn't sell a grappling."

L.W.: This is a true story.

S.W.: "One or two, once and awhile, I can sell one, but they figured something was wrong with 'em." There was nothing wrong with 'em. "Then one day I got it in my mind, I said, "Hell, I'm not selling no grappling for fifty cent, I'm going up on the price." He went up on the price. I forget what it was; I think it was two dollars. That was money in those days. He said, "I sold 'em out in no time!"

S.W.: Here's another story didn't happen in Crisfield, but there was a girl in New Jersey went to a clothing store. And, uh, she wanted a dress, it was women's apparel. And the man had a dress there and she said, "Oh I like the dress all right, but, uh, cheap like that, there must be something wrong with it." He told her, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I've got another shipment coming in. It'll be here in at least a couple of weeks if not sooner, and there'll be some dresses just like that one, and maybe there'll be some different colors, different styles." She went there next time and, the same
dress, he'd never got no shipment, he went up on the price about three times and she bought it!

B.V.: The name.

S.W.: The name.

B.V.: The name. So, I wonder now if you fellows think it's smart to pay that kind of price?

S.W.: I'll tell you why, yeah, they're smart 'cause they got the money. This "paraplegic," isn't that the name for it, in a wheelchair?


S.W.: "Paraplegic" is right. He was in a wheelchair. He's a multimillionaire they tell me down in Texas. One guy said that - now these two guys didn't - the one in the wheelchair didn't know the other guy and the other guy didn't know him. And this fellow said, "When the sales open tomorrow, I'm going to buy that bird." The sales had closed. This fellow in the wheelchair said, "The hell you are, I'm going to buy it. I don't care what you bid, I'm going to bid over you."

L.W.: That's what caused it to run up so.

S.W.: That ran it up. Now, if it had been somebody that hadn't been known, they no good. You - look, the public is a durn bunch of fools in a way, yes. I'll tell you why I say that. You can go in either shoe store in the United States. Whether it's in Georgia, Tennessee or Crisfield or anyplace, and take two pair of Florsheim shoes - and they're supposed to be the best, to me they're the commonest. I've had two pairs of 'em. They both come all to pieces - but anyway, you can put a sale price on one pair of Florsheim, brand new, six dollars we'll say. The other'll be forty dollars. See which one sells.

L.W.: The forty dollar one.

B.V.: The forty dollar one will sell before the six dollar one?

S.W.: Everytime! They'll figure, "that's no good."
L.W.: Tell him about the anchors that happened right here in Crisfield. About all them grappling from Burdell. That's proof of it.

S.W.: Yeah.

B.V.: So you think the public's sort of that way about decoys now?

S.W.: You durn right. They ain't missing it. They're like it on everything! I don't care what it is.

B.V.: But especially on your decoys. You think your own decoys are a little too high?

S.W.: That's right.

B.V.: It takes a man to say that.

L.W.: It is. That's a fact.

B.V.: So you think people are foolish to pay those prices?

L.W.: Yes sir. Well, not, not now, the way they got now because they can make money on anything they buy.

S.W.: We don't get no money! This fellow here in South Carolina, he'll make more money in one week than we'll make in two years.

B.V.: What does he do?

S.W.: He's a carver.

L.W.: He's a bird carver.

B.V.: A bird carver.

S.W.: Maggiova. M-a-g-g-i-o-v-a or "y," something like that. It's an Italian name.

L.W.: Every feather in it's inserted.

S.W.: Charlie Bowen was talking about him in here after you left today. He knows him personally. He'll get more money. What was it, thirty-five hundred dollars?

L.W.: Thirty-five hundred dollars for a quail dusting.
S.W.: Thirty-five hundred dollars for one bird.
B.V.: Thirty-five hundred dollars.
S.W.: You burn right.
B.V.: What kind of people do you think are buying those?
S.W.: They're millionaires. There's a guy told Lem in here, by letter from Texas, he said, "I want some of your birds to put with my Doughty birds." Not "bird" b-i-r-d, but "birds" b-i-r-d-s. Doughty birds cost you fifty thousand dollars apiece!
L.W.: They're ceramics; the greatest ever made.
B.V.: Uh huh.
S.W.: So they got the money.
L.W.: Now Boheme's a making 'em. He's got the name now. I don't know how you spell it, but that's how you pronounce it. What is it? Not L. L. Bean, but his name's Boheme. Making the birds, ceramics, and they're the highest priced birds there is. I had a picture of one up there [pointing to the wall] ruffed grouse - twenty-five thousand dollars. One of twelve see? Not one of five, I know where one of five hundred is cheap, bought it for four fifty ($450.00).
S.W.: Yeah. See, they'll make a certain bird, in a certain position, then they'll make many of 'em. Then they'll break the mold. They'll destroy the mold.
B.V.: But your stuff is mostly one of a kind.
S.W.: Yeah.
B.V.: Now back in the '20s and '30s, who bought most of your stuff?
S.W.: Well -
B.V.: Hunters, right?
S.W.: Oh yes, absolutely.
B.V.: And you sold some to the clubs, the hunting clubs.
S.W.: That's right.
B.V.: But none of this millionaire stuff.
S.W.: That's right.
B.V.: And everybody who bought your stuff, you figure, back then, used it.
S.W.: It started -
L.W.: That's right!
B.V.: They put it in the water?
L.W.: Yes sir! Not any more though.
B.V.: Right.
L.W.: They're collector's items now. Even our decoy is collector's items now; they don't put 'em in the water any more.
S.W.: Dr. Edgar Burke called us up on the phone, from New York right after the show. Lem, I think, was still in New York, I'm not sure.
L.W.: No, I wasn't.
S.W.: Anyway, he said, "There's been over four hundred competitors, from Canada, from all over the world. You have met the best" - no, by letter, I got the letter. "You have met the best and licked hell out of all of 'em!" Lynn Bogue Hunt [a well-known wildlife artist], Dr. Edgar Burke, and Bill Mackey was the three judges. Well, they were known all over the world. That's what does it.
B.V.: O.K. Just the name.
L.W.: Well, let me prove it to you. There's two birds right here was in the show in 1952. He paid, I think, twenty dollars, a piece, if he paid that. I doubt if he paid that or not. Them two birds today, advertised, will bring you a thousand dollars. Same two birds. Just the name and that underneath of 'em. That'll sell 'em right there.
B.V.: It's got your name on the bottom, doesn't it? "L. J. Ward, Crisfield, Maryland." Let me ask you this. Had you rather make birds that sell
or birds that people use if you had the choice?

L.W.: I'd rather be making the good birds myself. He's different.

B.V.: O.K. When you say "the good birds" what do you mean, Mr. Lem?

L.W.: I mean the collector's items. He don't.

B.V.: O.K. Now, Mr. Steve, what would you rather be doing?

S.W.: I like to make the plain birds. And I'm going to tell you something else. If I was a collector, I would never collect these raised wing preening birds like Norris Pratt's got. He's got the greatest collection you ever seen or heard tell of. I guess he's got, I don't know, seventy-five or a hundred thousand dollars worth of 'em. But if I was a collector, I'd go for the old stuff. The old stuff, the old plain model decoys. And they're the ones that's a selling. I can prove it. I got four ducks I made way back there that I can get two thousand dollars apiece for 'em any time I want. They're not, they're not pretty, I'll swear they're not. They old, and the name has gone up and gone up and that's what they're looking for. They'll bring 'em here with no paint on 'em, with their heads cracked, their backs cracked and they don't want 'em re-touched up - some of 'em don't - some don't know does. You take an old artist's painting, I don't care who painted it, Van Gogh or whoever it is, if it's been touched up, it's ruined.

B.V.: Yes sir.

S.W.: It's ruined. It's got no value to it.

L.W.: You know you got millions of people today going in for - they look at a good painting and it don't mean a durn thing. All they want is abstract stuff. And it don't mean nothing to me! I wouldn't have it! They look at a good painting and they don't want it. They want abstract. I think. It takes all kinds of people to make the world boy.

B.V.: I guess so. O.K. You know Mr. Steve, your brother said he'd rather be making the decorative type of decoys.
S.W.: He had.

B.V.: And you'd rather be making decoys that you use. Now, why do you think there's a difference? You'll be both brothers, brought up in the same house, why is there a difference?

S.W.: Well, I tell you. He'll admit this. If he makes a goose that will sell for two thousand dollars, let's say, I can make, I can make—if I could paint like he could, he can't make now because he can't use his hand. I can make dollars to his dimes.

B.V.: You can?

S.W.: Yes sir.

B.V.: You could make more money faster you think?

S.W.: I know I could. Make dollars to his dimes. I can make six ducks a day and loaf. That's six hundred dollars. He can't do that working on a goose.

L.W.: No.

B.V.: Because he has to put more work and time into 'em?

L.W.: That's right!

S.W.: Right

B.V.: Because you have to carve the feathers?

L.W.: Yes.

S.W.: I, I've got up of a mornings at one and two o'clock and found him down there at the kitchen table with the drawing board drawing birds in all positions.

L.W.: That's why I'm paralyzed. [In the right arm and leg, Lem Ward is paralyzed].

S.W.: And you can't saw 'em out to save your life hardly. It's a delicate job and it's a dangerous job with a board saw. Why look I can take this kind of stuff [simple decoys] and saw 'em out in a couple of minutes and in five minutes more I can have the durn duck chopped out rough, I mean.
B.V.: Yep. O.K.

L.W.: See, the way they're making birds now they're inserting the feathers. Mine was carved in one block of wood.

B.V.: You say now they insert the feathers when they carve 'em. Now, yours are made from one block of wood. You chiseled out those feathers, each one.

L.W.: If I couldn't make it out of one block, I wouldn't have it; that's the way I worked. I'll show you.

B.V.: Mr. Steve, have you heard any more tales and stories about what a name will do for a person?

S.W.: Yes, I've got a good one. Jack Dempsey, the world's champion prize fighter, this happened at the same time he was champion - pulled into a filling station to get a tank of gas. And he spent a little more time there than the next man behind him was waiting to a turn too and, uh, he spent a little more time than the man behind him thought he ought to take. And, and this guy ran his head out - lowered his window down - said, "Hey there, who in the hell do you think you are?" He said, "I'll get out there and I'll punch you in the nose." His wife spoke to him and said, "You dang fool, do you know who you're talking to?" He said, "I don't give a damn." She said, "You're not talking to nobody but Jack Dempsey." They said he fell over right away and fainted.

B.V.: And you think it's sort of the same way today about your decoys. You got the name and people are just sort of crazy.

S.W.: That's right.

B.V.: Would you like to go back to the old days?

S.W.: Yes! Yeah, darn right I would.

B.V.: Why would you like to do that?

S.W.: For youth for one thing.

B.V.: Well, yeah, I guess so.
S.W.: I'm like - there was three ahead of 'em - Bing Crosby, Eddie Cantor, and uh, Bob Hope, I believe.

L.W.: Yeah, Bob Hope.

S.W.: They were on stage one night and they got to talking about the old days and Bob Hope said to Cantor, "Eddie Cantor," Benny was into it too.

L.W.: Jack Benny.

S.W.: That was Jack Benny. Said, "Would you like to go back again to the old days and start over." He said, "You bet your life I would." He said - no, I got it wrong. He said, "Who wants to go back to the old days?" Eddie Cantor spoke up, he said, "I do."

L.W.: Yeah.

B.V.: O.K.

S.W.: There's a woman, we know her very well and her husband, lives up there in Oxford, Maryland. Had an old pistol, handgun. And evidently it could have been a, uh, uh, - what the heck is that - a Colt Walker or a Walker Colt? It wasn't but it could have been. Well, anyway a collector went there. I got two stories to tell you on this, the same subject. And this collector kept worrying her and worrying the old man to death. So the old man called her by name and said, "Why don't you charge him a price he can't pay, and you'll get rid of him. He won't come here no more." She said, "All right, I believe I will." So, however what time had elapsed and he come back. And he said, "Have you decided to sell that pistol yet?" She said, "Yes, I'm going to sell it." He said, "Well, what do you want for it?" She said, "A thousand bucks." So he run his hand in his pocket and wrote her a check for a thousand dollars, just that quick. And if he charged five thousand it would have been the same. I knew a guy in Wilmington, Delaware that had a flying eagle penny. He give four hundred dollars for it!
B.V.: Today is May 25th.

L.W.: Right.

B.V.: 1974 and we're continuing our interview with the Ward Brothers of Crisfield, Maryland. We're going to talk a little bit to Mr. Steve Ward about some of the customers he's had in the past. Now, Mr. Steve, I know that one of your most famous customers was Glen L. Martin, who owned the Martin Aircraft Company. When did he first start buying decoys from you?

S.W.: You got me. It was during the Second World War. 'Cause he had a shipyard down here in Crisfield and, uh, he would come down every so often. And he also had a gunning club. [He] bought property on Smith's Island. I never did meet Mr. Martin but once and that was in Ocean City to a banquet, when we all belonged to the Maryland League of Sportsmen and he was president of it. He was a fine man and a very humble man to be worth fifteen million dollars which was reported after his death. He never would get married on account of his mother; he died a bachelor, a fine man. I couldn't tell you some of the notable customers, Dr. Edgar Burke, the famous artist and surgeon, and former Governor, Theodore McCaldon, from Baltimore, Maryland, my gosh. I couldn't even begin to count, to name - nearly every state. We've had every state in the Union represented here in this barbershop. [The Ward Brothers' workshop was made from their old barbershop]. One day we had seven different states here, seven different tag numbers.

B.V.: Well, I wonder about Glen Martin. You said he began to buy decoys from you during World War II.

S.W.: Uh huh.

B.V.: These were functional decoys, weren't they? Shooting, gunning stools as you call them.

S.W.: That's right.

B.V.: Did he ever ask you to make them in any special way?

S.W.: No.
B.V.: He just said, "Give me anything you have?"

S.W.: The only thing he ever did ask me, he said, "Mr. Ward, why don't you use a waterproof paint?" I said, "Mr. Martin, we've tried to find something like that." He said, "It's manufactured." I said, "Well, we can't find it, we can't just get hold of the waterproof paint." Evidently, he knew what he was talking about 'cause a manufacture of airplanes. He had a man there with the same name as ours, John Ward. He come here and bought - my Lord there was one day he came here and bought two station wagons of decoys for Mr. Martin. And we kept - every once in a while now one of those will pop up. G-L-M - Glen L. Martin.

B.V.: It has that on the bottom?

S.W.: No sir. It's burned in there with some kind of electric branding iron like you use to brand cattle.

B.V.: How many did you sell him in all? Did he use just Ward Brothers decoys or did he used any kind of decoys?

S.W.: We, he was using any kind he could get. But like a lot of these gunning clubs, they discarded the other makes and were getting ours. The South Morris and the Fox Island Gunning Club - in small numbers. We couldn't make too many you know. And they weren't bringing nothing at that time. They were very cheap. So it come down to - well I - just couldn't name the names of the famous people that's been here. We had the British Embassy here one day, members of the British Embassy in Washington. And I didn't know why and the guy was a little teeny short fellow. In the War of 1812 a British sailor or soldier died or got killed down here on Chesapeake Bay on the way to Baltimore, to capture Baltimore, you know. And, uh, Cockburn and Joshua Thomas, the evangelist, told him he'd never capture Baltimore; he'd be killed. But anyway, this sailor or got killed and they buried him on Smith's Island and every year they put a Union Jack on that sailor's grave on Memorial Day. And I'll bet right -

L.W.: Every year.
B.V.: One sailor?

S.W.: Yes sir, and I'll bet right now that it happened on Saturday or if it didn't happen on Saturday, it happened today. Now, if they can't get there in person, they'll send the Union Jack to some of the natives on Smith's Island to put on that sailor's grave. That happens every year.

B.V.: Hm, that's an interesting story.

S.W.: It is.

B.V.: Tell us about now, when these famous people got decoys from you, did they usually get gunning stools?

S.W.: Yeah, yeah. That's all we made at that time.

B.V.: And did they ever ask you for anything special?

S.W.: No.

B.V.: They didn't ask you to design 'em in some special way?

S.W.: No, no. Made it easier on 'em using our own ideas.

B.V.: O.K. Good. Now you know you mentioned you made a lot of decoys for gunning clubs around here.

S.W.: Yeah.

B.V.: What were those like?

S.W.: Same thing, same thing. If their best shooting was blackheads, they wanted blackhead decoys.

B.V.: And they'd order those from you?

S.W.: Yes sir. If they wanted canvas backs, if that was their best shooting, or the baldpates or redheads or geese and pintails.

B.V.: So in other words, it depended on their location, what they got.

S.W.: That's right.

B.V.: Most of the people who were in those clubs were rather wealthy I guess.
S.W.: Oh yes, my Lord, they're all, I wouldn't say all, most of 'em, it cost 'em a farm to belong to it. They had to pay I don't know how many thousand dollars a year to be a member of the club whether they were active or inactive.

B.V.: When local people around here bought, uh, decoys from you did they ever ask for anything special?

S.W.: What?

B.V.: Did the local people ask for anything special when they ordered decoys from you?

S.W.: No, they would just say, "Go ahead and make me" - if they wanted pintails - "A dozen pintails."

L.W.: There was very few local people.

B.V.: Very few local customers.

L.W.: That's true.

S.W.: That's correct.

L.W.: Local people couldn't afford 'em.

B.V.: Mr. Lem says that local people could not afford your decoys.

S.W.: That's right. Well, they'd make their own most of 'em. What the heck they'd answer the same purpose. We were talking yesterday about the Mason decoy. Anybody knows Mason made a nice decoy, the best you could buy, but what the heck are you spend twenty-one dollars when he could feed his whole family for twenty-one dollars in those days. You know that to be a fact.

L.W.: We had about fifteen or twenty makers here.

B.V.: Fifteen or twenty makers in Crisfield?

L.W.: Yes sir. All of 'em dead, every one of 'em.

S.W.: Yes sir.

L.W.: They made their own shooting stools. Everyone was different.

B.V.: Everyone was different?
L.W.: Everyone. I can tell everyone decoy that we made starting 'way back in the early eighteens (1918), nineteens, twenties, twenty-ones. They bring 'em in now for identification. There's a knack there.

B.V.: Um. O.K. Say somebody does bring in a Ward Brother decoy. He said, 'All right Mr. Lem and Mr. Steve, tell me what year is this.' How do you tell it? What do you go by?

S.W.: You have to do a lot of guessing.

L.W.: Well, sometimes you have to do a lot of guessing. Them years was marked. We advanced every year on 'em. That's how we can come close to telling 'em almost exactly.

B.V.: So you changed just about every year?

L.W.: Every year we changed models.

S.W.: Sometimes three or four times a year.

B.V.: Mr. Steve says you sometimes changed three or four times in one year. Can you tell us why you changed those models?

L.W.: We tried to get to perfection but we never made it.

B.V.: So you were experimenting!

L.W.: Right! Sure.

B.V.: Tell us some of the things you did to change 'em if you don't mind.

L.W.: Well, we changed the heads, changed the bodies; some wanted open water shooting birds which was larger and wider and longer. There's a big difference between a rough water shooting stool and a calm water shooting stool. When it's rough water and you're shooting out into the sound it takes a big block. We used Canada Geese for ducks. They made better showing. If the ducks can't see the decoys, they ain't going to come into 'em.

B.V.: Well, that makes sense, doesn't it?

L.W.: Yes sir.
B.V.: Did you ever change your techniques of making decoys? I guess you did.

L.W.: Now we had the same old — the marsh duck, the marsh bird when he's setting on the water with a high tail, the surface feeding duck is, and the diving duck with a low tail. See that's the only difference.

B.V.: I noticed in a book that it had several different tail styles that you used; now was there any reason that you changed those particular tail styles?

L.W.: No, not a bit. I liked some of 'em and the others liked the others. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. There's no way to pin it down.

S.W.: I had a habit, I call it a habit, of sort of photographing things in my mind. And I wrote Bruce Burt in Sherman Oaks, California and I got his book. He sent us one of his books. And he flies his own plane. He worked for this, er, millionaire — what's his name — Howard Hughes, he's retired now. But I said, "Bruce, if I'd had your book when we started, we could a went places." He said, "You didn't need it." He said, "You shot the ducks and you can't beat that. You had the ducks to draw the pictures from, Lem had the paint job [duck's colors] to draw the paint [colors] from." He said, "You just can't beat that."

B.V.: So you think that the fact that you grew up in Crisfield where there were plenty of ducks and you hunted —

L.W.: Right.

B.V.: Really helped you out a lot.

S.W.: That's right, that's right.

L.W.: Yes.

B.V.: Now, you said that there were many other decoy makers around here at the time. Can you tell your decoys from all these other peoples?

S.W.: Everyone of 'em.

B.V.: Absolutely?
S.W.: Everyone of 'em.

L.W.: Each one had a different knack.

S.W.: And I can tell everyone of their make.

B.V.: Everyone?

S.W.: Not everyone 'cause some of the old guys died before I was even born.

B.V.: But you say even though they have no signature, it's no problem to tell.

S.W.: That's right.

L.W.: Not a bit in the world.

S.W.: That's one of the worst faults of the duck makers of old and the duck makers of today. Now they're learning to put their names on 'em, and date 'em. But you take Shang Wheeler and Elmer Crowell and all those famous fellows and Lincoln and Purdue and they never put their name - one of them guys said, "Fifty cents a day is enough for any man to make." Now think of that! Famous duck makers! That'll show you.

L.W.: As long as he's talking about decoys about this museum in a bank. In a bank in Cape Cod, they've got a glass case and some guy - well, he was smart, smarter than the man who made 'em - that someday they were going to be worth something and this bank's got on display ninety miniature ducks that Crowell [an old master decoy maker] made. They're priceless. He bought 'em, he just asked him to give 'em to 'em. Now they're priceless. They're all in a case; nobody can get to 'em, Elmer Crowell. You see what it is? Do you think he knew that they were going to be when he was making 'em? No! He didn't know nothing about it. If we'd a knew that these birds was going to be famous, we'd have been millionaires. Make four or five and put 'em away, make four or five and put 'em away. In fifty-five years, you can accomplish a whole lot of work.

B.V.: I'll bet you can.

L.W.: But nobody knows it, nobody knows nothing about it.

B.V.: Did anybody ever copy you?
L.W.: Oh my gosh, they're doing it now!

S.W.: All of 'em.

L.W.: They're doing it now by the carloads. They're signing my name.

B.V.: In other words, they're faking Ward Brothers decoys?

S.W.: That's right.

L.W.: And they're getting by with it. There's nothing I could do about it. I wouldn't if I could.

S.W.: We had a doctor friend in Washington, D.C., a surgeon there in the Georgetown University, wonderful guy, married a Crisfield girl. He's retired now and gone out in Arizona to live. He was a giant of a guy; I don't believe if he was seven foot tall if he was an inch. He came here one day; he stood there in the doorway, he didn't pull no punches. He said, "I'll be damned if you fellows aren't getting right trashy." I said, "Henry," Henry Garner was his name - I said, "Doc, what's the score?" He said, "That damn mess of trash you got in Johnny's and Sammy's Restaurant in Salisbury, that's the score." I said, "We don't have nothing in Johnny's and Sammy's Restaurant; we never had, we don't have to put it there." He said, "Well, I'll be damned if somebody ain't copying you; they're copying you and they've even got your name, L. S. Ward Brothers on the bottom." I did believe it.

L.W.: I didn't believe it.

S.W.: But Price Wilson and Ed, his son who was a dentist, come over and said, "Come on I'll go up there and show 'em to you. Never did find - we always knew who was doing it. Crisfield boy.

L.W.: One of 'em was a Ward.

S.W.: We could a caused him a lot of trouble you know.

B.V.: That's forgery, isn't it?

S.W.: Sure!
L.W.: But what good would it have done? They're going to copy I don't care what you do. How are you going to stop it. You can copy 'em in these museums. You are allowed in there to copy 'em. But don't never sign his name under it.

B.V.: In the old days, did anybody ever copy you? Say in the twenties.

S.W.: No, they all had their own model. One old guy over here named Monroe Lawson made a black duck that was as big as a goose. Everything he made was oversize. And some bad - well you could tell. Another guy down here at this old store, Jim Nelson, "Jim Binks" they called him. You could tell every duck he made. His heads weren't much over an inch thick; made 'em out of white pine boxes and stuff. Anything he could get. There's no trouble to tell 'em.

B.V.: O.K. Did you ever see any work that you liked in the old days that maybe influenced your work?

L.W.: Yes! Mason, a factory-made decoy influenced me.

B.V.: Mason decoys?

L.W.: Yes sir.

B.V.: What did you like about these Mason decoys?

L.W.: They wasn't too big; they were a little life size. They were machine made, but he had a knack there and I got interested in that and I commenced. Steve's got one in there now in a glass case that I copied the head of Mason. That's a 1928 model. But I didn't do it as he done it, but it's the same thing. I, I had this bird laying right along side of him and I looked at it. And this - uh - then we cut it on our own patterns. But Mason was the influence of me. Not Shang Wheeler, not Elmer Crowell, but Mason. It was, it was - I never will forget that first dozen blackheads that come to Crisfield from Mason. My tongue watered. And I was always interested.

S.W.: We noticed things that the ordinary - these old heads, they didn't care. They had a living to make crabbing and oysterling. If they just wanted a mess of ducks, they'd just make a bunch
of decoys and shoot 'em. They didn't care what they looked like whether they were good or bad, as long as they answered the purpose. In fact, you didn't have to have no decoys in those days, you could go to the marsh and kill all the ducks you wanted without decoys.

B.V.: O.K. You mentioned Shang Wheeler and Elmer Crowell. Did you ever see these men's works?

S.W.: Oh yes, yes.

L.W.: Sure, they're in collections, I've seen 'em.

B.V.: How about a long time ago?

L.W.: Well, I never seen 'em no long time ago because I never did no traveling, my Lord no!

B.V.: And nobody here in Crisfield ever had any?

L.W.: No!

S.W.: Well, I know up there in Dize who got baldpates isn't it?

L.W.: Pintails.

S.W.: Who got some pintails of Elmer Crowell, but I never have seen but one duck that Shang Wheeler made and that was made. I didn't know what it was made for until Sommers Hadley told me. It was made not to put in the water, but to put on the mud flat. Real narrow bottom, but it had wide sides on it and it come down almost to nothing, just a couple of inches. I said, "Sommers, you know that won't float right." He said, "It weren't made to float; it was made to put on the mud flat." So they had a little bit - now he didn't make all that ducks that way. But he was great, just great. Shang Wheeler was the greatest.

L.W.: And Elmer Crowell the best shore bird maker, I think so.

B.V.: Did you fellows ever make any of these shore birds?

S.W.: Yeah.

B.V.: That were functional?
S.W.: Not too many.

L.W.: We didn't make too many to shoot over. I went in for the fancy stuff.

S.W.: Lem made a lot of 'em - not no big lots - of show pieces.

L.W.: My father cut 'em out of a piece of paper and stuck 'em up in a pond that way.

B.V.: They came in to those?

L.W.: Oh yeah. Stick 'em this way so they could see 'em then stick 'em that way so they would see 'em anyway they come in. Anywhere he [the bird] went they would see these birds. And, and it'll work. Anything will work for birds. [They are] using beer cans in the fields now for corn. Birds is easy to fool.

B.V.: What about these flat decoys you see sometimes? Did you ever make any of those flat ones?

L.W.: I never did. Steve made a few of 'em but he just made 'em for show. What did you do with them flat geese, them made out of -

S.W.: Yeah. Don't you know what happened to those? Gosh darn.

L.W.: Silhouettes we call 'em.


L.W.: For God's sake!

S.W.: I'd say I had a dozen or more of 'em.

L.W.: And you've never mentioned it to him?

S.W.: Anybody who'd do that I don't want to mention it to 'em. Now, I don't know what happened, 'cause if I mentioned it hell would fly in me and I'd just better keep my mouth shut.

B.V.: Twelve of 'em, a dozen?

L.W.: They'll fold, the legs fold under 'em.

S.W.: The head and the feet both would fold you see. You could put 'em under your arm. You could
carry a dozen and stick 'em out in the field.

L.W.: Boy, they'd work! On a sandbar, they would work!

B.V.: That would bring 'em in.

S.W.: Yes, indeed!

L.W.: Yes sir.

S.W.: You see you would put 'em in a circle so no matter how a goose flying, he would see 'em, one or two of 'em sideways, in the profile.

L.W.: That's the way he done these yellow legs in the ponds, stick 'em this way and that way so they could see any, anyway they coming in they could see 'em. Made of paper.

S.W.: I, I had some feeding and had two feeding with their heads down like they're picking up corn, some of 'em erect, some with their head drew down like he was contented or sleepy. And Cramer got those durn things and never did bring 'em back.

B.V.: You say Cramer got those birds and never brought 'em back?

S.W.: Never did.

L.W.: Don't go back down there though. He'd get a hold of that -

S.W.: I don't want to mention it. You talk about sounding different, but its because you're in a sound proof room. Get in a sound proof room and I have a feeling that your voice would sound on tape just like it would in that sound proof room.

B.V.: Well now Mr. Steve, was it you or Mr. Lem who was a singer?

L.W.: Both of us. He was the best bass singer.

S.W.: I sang. We had a quartet that they - somebody names it in the twenty-nines. But we organized in 1927.

B.V.: How many songs did you know?
S.W.: Oh, we never did -

L.W.: There's the portrait.

S.W.: We had, uh, some wonderful songs, some that I wouldn't be afraid to sing in front of nobody. Not bragging. We had one - we never did put none of 'em on tape or records, but uh, Sweet Kentucky Babe and When Uncle Joe Played A Rag on His Old Banjo. We've heard, - I got it's in there right now by the, by the Buffalo Bills, the most famous quartet in the world. And I would not have been ashamed. That night they sung in Salisbury, and I was there, both of us. I wouldn't have been afraid to get up there if Lem and Teeny had had the nerve that I had. It didn't scare me a durn bit; sung that piece. We had a little bit different on it, a little bit on the chorus. I split the banjo picking up. They didn't. In other words, the bass would come in - Boom! And the others would too. Everyone was picking a banjo in different time you know. Their's was all in unison.

L.W.: You know, I'm a funny guy; I'm a country boy and that's the way I want to die. People begged and begged me to have these oil paintings of mine, but I know my limitations. I know I don't belong there with these artists. I don't go in for that. I can sell my paintings. I don't have to beg anybody to buy 'em. But I'm not that good. I sometimes get a good one, but if I do, it's luck. An artist sits down and knows what he wants. The only thing I find fault with these artists is that they don't know their birds. They don't know their birds.

B.V.: So you think that they're good painters, but they just mess up when they have to paint a bird a certain way.

L.W.: That's right. If you don't get the movements of a bird a coming in the way he's supposed to come, you just ruined the painting. If you put a bird here and a bird there, that ain't nothing. You've got to get him the way he comes in. Like those geese there, [in a painting] everyone of them will come around to this headwind in the same line, working that same way.

B.V.: O.K. You do have a beautiful painting of geese you're working on over there.
L.W.: That's going to be nice.

B.V.: How many paintings would you say you do a year now?

L.W.: No, I don't know, now. I've done five paintings in the last ten years. There was no money there. When I cut this out - when I went to painting pictures, then my decoys, I forgot 'em. The money's in ducks, that's the reason.

B.V.: You think you can make a better living with the decoys?

L.W.: Why sure, yes. I mean it would take me two months to paint a good painting. If it's a good one, I mean. And I ruin so many it ain't worth it.

B.V.: How long would it take to paint, say an average size decoy?

L.W.: Dozen a week.

B.V.: Dozen a week! Oh.

L.W.: See there's a difference. I've got to live. I don't care what I get for these paintings, there's no money in it.

B.V.: O.K.

L.W.: Now a man told me, "If you get this picture right, these geese, there's a banker in Salisbury wants it, one thousand dollars." Well, if it takes me two months to paint it, what have I made? I can make more than that making duck heads, whether I can get it right or not.

S.W.: Well, Lem, you doing a good argument and you got a bad argument, 'bout that artistic stuff.

L.W.: No I ain't got no bad argument! I know the way I feel about it.

S.W.: Here's what I'm talking about. You can take Andrew Wyeth, Lynn Bogue Hunt. You can take any of 'em even the great artists up there in Massachusetts, what's his name, he's still living? You can look at their pictures and find fault with 'em.

L.W.: Find fault with their wildlife.
S.W.: I don't give a durn. You can find fault with nature. You can see clouds; in other words, when the sun's rising in the morning the sky you see one time, and in just a second, the sun starts shining on everything and everything changes just that quick. And the sunset, the same blamed way. And uh -

L.W.: If you paint a duck in detail, here, here's the artist, if you paint a duck in detail, you eliminate your scenery. You can't have 'em both.

S.W.: No you can't.

L.W.: You can't have 'em both! And here's where all artists today painting wildlife paints the birds and they're brilliant. They're bright, but if it's cloudy, it can't be bright. See what I mean? It kills the scenery.

B.V.: I see.

L.W.: And I, I don't think the wildlife artists of today have gunned or nothing. I'll be frank with you. They haven't had the experience with the wild-birds.

B.V.: And you think that there's no substitute for that experience.

L.W.: Not a bit in the world. No substitute.

B.V.: What if somebody had to work from a book?

L.W.: He's wrong.

B.V.: You're sure he would be wrong.

L.W.: He's wrong to start with.

B.V.: O.K. Good.

L.W.: He's wrong to start with.
B.V.: Well now, Mr. Lem, did you ever make any decoys from studying mounted birds?

L.W.: I've painted 'em, not making 'em. I painted 'em from the mount. But I used my own discretion. I mean I didn't go by him altogether. I got his color scheme; that's what I'm talking after.

B.V.: O.K. Have you ever used any machines in making your decoys?

L.W.: No sir.

B.V.: All hand made.

L.W.: Bandsaw and a belt sander is all we ever had.

B.V.: How did you hollow 'em out?

L.W.: With one of these - what do you call it? That machine in there. That machine you press down.

S.W.: Drill press.

B.V.: Drill press.

L.W.: Drill press. That's all we ever had. We never had that till Al Decker sent it down.

B.F.: Yeah, he's the president of Black and Decker.

L.W.: Yeah.

B.V.: He gave you one!

L.W.: Yeah.

B.V.: Good.

L.W.: He came in here one day and I was kind of hollowing out one with a two-inch bit. He said, "This is the way you do it?" I said, "Yeah." That's all he said. Three days there was one here on that pavement, a drill press.

B.V.: That's nice for somebody to do something like that.
L.W.: It certainly is. Not a penny; all freight and all paid for.

B.V.: That's nice; that's good.

S.W.: I wish you could meet that guy. He's president of the Black and Decker outfit and you wouldn't think you had a nickel. He come down here with old clothes on, and he could wear the best. We get cards from him from all over the world where he goes around to do business.

L.W.: He's been good with me.

S.W.: Great guy. And his wife, Virginia is just as sweet as anything you ever saw. She'd come in here, look like she's ragged, don't bother them at all. That's the way you're supposed to be.

L.W.: And listen, there's these kinds of people. When a guy comes in that door and says, "I'm an artist." Forget him. He ain't no good, never was. They don't tell it; they don't tell it. You got to find out the hard way if he's an artist. You'd never know if Edgar Burke had ever had a brush in his hand in his life. But boy, that guy could - he could paint! But they don't tell it, pal.

S.W.: But before you leave here, you made a statement while ago and it impressed me very much. And I want to tell you two stories for your benefit. I want to tell you two stories, and they're both true. There's a young boy, I think from the state of West Virginia, but I won't say for sure. There was a manufacturing plant there. This kid graduated from high school and he was poor. He, and later on I'll tell you how I knew he was poor, he, uh, graduated from high school and went to this manufacturing plant and he asked for a job. And the manager said, "Son, I sorry but we don't have any jobs." He said, "Well, I want a job. I graduated from high school and I want to make something out of myself. I'd like to learn this business." Whatever they were manufacturing, I don't remember now what it was. He said, "I'll work for nothing; you don't have to pay me." He said, "How are you going to live?" He said, "I went to school many a day without anything to eat; I can still do it." It impressed this manager. He said, "If you've..."
got that kind of determination, yes, we'll give you a job." He said, "Start me on the floor, the low floor. I want to learn it and work up." That boy became the manager of that whole outfit. Eugene Grace went to work for Bethlehem Steel. He went there and he asked for a job. He said, "We don't have it." In those days, they didn't have running water like they got there in fountains you know. He said, "Can't I carry water out to the workers in pails?" And they give him a job, fifty-cent a day.

L.W.: It's a true story.

S.W.: Fifty cent a day! Eugene Grace become manager of Bethlehem Steel and married Charles Schwab's daughter, who was manager. Determination, that's for your benefit. Don't give up!

B.V.: O.K. I'll try.

S.W.: Don't give up.

B.V.: Mr. Ward, has anybody ever offered to set you fellows up in business?

S.W.: Oh yes! Several! There's some of 'em done it for their own benefit. We had a guy; we had two guys here. Lem worked in the man's place for one of 'em and he had the money. The father-in-law, I'm talking about, he had some. And Lem said, "Tommy" - or Tommy offered one - he said, "I'll set you fellows up in a big way, but you got to bring my son into it; make him a partner." Well, the son couldn't do nothing. With all regards to him, he couldn't do nothing. Then another fellow said, "Let's make a stock company out of it; sell stock. I'll be your biggest buyer. I'll start it off with so many thousand shares." Harry Killy. I said, "No, anything I do I'm going to do on my own. I don't want nobody to help me do a durn thing." This fellow Dean, Freddy Young brought him here, he took him out a gunning on the Pokaome River. Whenever he took Dean out, he'd give him a hundred dollar bill. A hundred dollar bill was some money in those days. Every day, every day in the week he'd give him a hundred dollar bill. So Mr. Dean said, "Fellow, I'll tell you what I'll do. If you'll take my advice and go with me, you'll have more money in three years than you will ever thought was on earth.
I got the money; I'll build you a building if I can't rent one or buy one, I'll put the multiple wood carver where you make twenty-four ducks at a time. "The twenty dollar bills," he said, "You can shovel 'em up with one of these big oyster shovels. And in three years I guarantee you'll have all the money, so much that you'll never be able to spend it. After that, if you have to go three or four or five I want no profits, nothing at all. But when you retire, it'll all go back to me, revert back to me. Is that fair?" I said, "That's pretty good." Well, he said something like, "When do we start?" I said, "We're not starting." I said, "What we do, what I do, I'm gonna do for myself 'cause people would say - I don't know, your own personal - if we was to take your advice and go with you, then the natives down here would say, "They yeah, they made plenty money, but they had to have a millionaire to back 'em." I said, "We're not going into it for the money, to heck with money." He put his hand on my shoulder and he said, "You're a king and don't know it." I said, "The heck, I don't know it; that's why I do it. When I want to go gunning, or when Lem wants to go, we take off. We lock the shop up. You can't do that; you're making too much money. When we want to go fishing, we go fishing." I said, "Mr. Dean, money isn't everything in the world; it's the smallest thing in the world. It's more discontent money causes than anything in the world today. You know that well as I do." And we drifted on and on and he said, "You are a king and don't know it." And I said, "The heck I don't know it. I'm a living the way I want to live."

L.W.: That's right.

B.V.: Mr. Lem, how do you feel about making money?

L.W.: I don't want it. I like to make money. Yeah, I think anybody sensible at all likes to make money. But it's what you do with the money. You can have money. I don't care who you are. That don't answer the question I'm after - contentment.

B.V.: Do you think you've been content making decoys?

L.W.: Yes sir. This is my heaven right here and this is why I'm living today. I had that stroke twenty-eight months ago. I'd be dead if I
hadn't got in here. But when I got in here I started to improve. Doing what you want to do.

B.V.: You're happy that you stayed here in Crisfield?

L.W.: Yes sir! I proud of every minute of it. I had people say, "How do you live here?" Well, I want to know, how they live in the city.

B.V.: That's a pretty good question.

L.W.: I'm contented here, so a contented mind is all of it.

B.V.: O.K. What kind of wood did you fellas like to use the most? In the old days?

L.W.: Well, we got, we, we took what we could get and that's all. White pine or cedar or what not. I like cedar, but I like basswood to hold up.

S.W.: He likes basswood and I despise it.

B.V.: What do you usually do?

S.W.: Cedar.

L.W.: We use cedar.

S.W.: I use cedar.

L.W.: Cedar's got a way of cracking and there's no way to prevent it.

B.V.: What about lately now, what woods have you been using?

L.W.: Cedar, white pine, basswood, uh, and balsa wood which I never did like.

B.V.: What about your paints, did you develop your own paints?

L.W.: No. You mix your own paints, but we don't develop 'em.

B.V.: I guess you get paints to mix your own colors to get what you want?

L.W.: You get colors in tubes and mix and mix until you get what you want to.

B.V.: You don't think you can get the right colors off the shelf?
L.W.: Oh, no, no, no. The right colors don't come in tubes, they wasn't meant to be. The colors is the color scheme. You have to inter mix and mix because white goes in there with all of it.

B.V.: O.K. Who taught you how to mix your colors?

L.W.: Taught it myself, what I know. I don't know much about mixing colors.

S.W.: You know more that the books tells you; you got it by experience.

L.W.: You know he cut a piece out of the paper not long ago and give it to me. And this answers all the whole questions. It's not much of it, but so. "Happiness is not having what you want, but wanting what you have." Right there, that answers the whole thing. If you're satisfied with what you got, then you're happy.

S.W.: Well, I just told him a little while ago like Jack Syler said, "Why in the devil won't he come out of the woods?" He's satisfied in the woods, let him stay there, he's happy. Why bother him?

L.W.: I know this and I don't care nothing what you get, and this'll go to preaching and speaking and whittling and what not, there's always somebody in the wood's who's got you skint [skinned], always. He's never come out yet, he don't want to come out. If you'd follow these bird carvings, now listed, I'm telling you the positive truth, the first was held in Salisbury by the Ward Foundation. The this last show, the amateurs was just as good as the professionals were the days we first started. He'll vouch for it.

S.W.: Sure.

L.W.: I never seen 'em come to the top like they're coming. Boy, but they've got all kind of tools. Look, you can do anything you want with that [router]. That'll make a duck head, that'll make a duck body, anything!

B.V.: What do you call that tool Mr. Ward?
L.W.: It does it by revolutions, but it's the dirtiest durn thing in the world. It goes all right in your eyes. Well, you can take that block right there and make a duck head out of it. I didn't have nothing like this. The only thing about it is that you've got to take forty baths a day when you use it. But that'll do it, boy.

B.V.: That's a canvasback head you're making there, isn't it?

L.W.: That's a goose.

B.V.: That's shows you what I know about ducks.

L.W.: You ain't supposed to know nothing about 'em. You ain't supposed to know nothing about 'em.

B.V.: Which one of the fellows writes the poetry?

L.W.: He's the writer.

S.W.: I ain't had a chance to write no poetry in so long.

B.V.: Now Mr. Steve, how about reciting just one of your poems for us now if you don't mind.

S.W.: Which one?

B.V.: Any one. The one you wrote that's the best.

S.W.: I, I wrote several but I never memorized only one or two of 'em.

L.W.: He's just like I am about art and painting canvas; he don't think he's good enough.

S.W.: It isn't that Lemuel.

L.W.: Yes it is.

S.W.: It is not that! It is not that. I'm no quitter. I've never tackled a job.

L.W.: Neither am I; neither am I. But there's something there that stops you.

S.W.: No it isn't. It's 'cause I don't have time to concentrate on the stuff.

L.W.: It's because you ain't got education enough. Why don't you own it up?
S.W.: No, it isn't that.

L.W.: Listen, when they write poetry it's like a whole book. There's a whole book in that one poem. Takes it all; covers it all.

S.W.: I think it was Edwin Markham wrote, just what you're talking about. He said - is your tape running?

B.V.: Yes sir.

S.W.: He said:

"They drew a circle and shut me out
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout
But love and I had the will to win.
There it is right there, "the will to win."
They drew a circle and took me in.
Never let nothing lick you."

L.W.: It takes smart people to write that kind of stuff.

S.W.: It don't take no smart people to do it. It does not! Some of the brainiest men in the world today can't write poetry. And some of the biggest fools in the world can sit down and write all day long! So there!

L.W.: I, I admit, there's a gift there.

S.W.: We've met all kinds, all kinds. And the guy that says, "I can't do this and I can't do that."

L.W.: He's beat.

S.W.: He's a licking his self.

L.W.: He's beat.

S.W.: I know it can be done. There's nothing that can't. And if some years ago somebody had said, "We're going to the moon. Man's going to walk on the moon." They would have said, "You're a durn fool."

L.W.: They done it though.

S.W.: If, if Columbus, when he started over here, when the crew mutinied. One of 'em said, "Brave Admiral, what must we do?" He said,
"Sail on, sail on!" That's what to say, "Sail on."

L.W.: There's a lot of stuff happened in my day but this, this going to the moon is the greatest thing there ever was. How that was ever figured out, they figured it on a drawing board. Boys, now there, there is the greatest thing.

S.W.: Chuck Willis had it right; he's college. Well, he didn't graduate; he lacked nine months of graduating. I told you this yesterday, he said, "The man works his way through college, he goes there to learn. He learns! A man who's got the millions back of 'em, he don't care whether he learns or not. I'm going to get all I want when I become twenty-one years old. Which is what he did; he got a million dollars and five years later, he was broke. Just think of that!

B.V.: Five years.

S.W.: I think I've talked about all I can talk.

B.V.: Well, I just thought we'd finish up our interview now and I just want to thank both of you gentlemen for helping me out so.

L.W.: You don't have to thank us, boy.

B.V.: I just wonder, is there anything you'd like to say in closing?

S.W.: Well, if I could think a little while I might say something.

L.W.: I don't know what to say, pal.
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