

An outlaw gunner and decoy maker who turned to conservation

Delbert “Cigar” Daisey Decoys

By Doily Earl Fulcher Sr.

REVIEWED BY JIM VAN NESS

The publication of a new book is always a cause for celebration within the decoy collecting community. This is especially so when the subject of the book is Delbert “Cigar” Daisey, whose passing in 2017 marked the end of an era during which some watermen – legally or otherwise – earned a substantial portion of their livelihood from market gunning.

“Delbert ‘Cigar’ Daisey Decoys” provides a pictorial survey of Cigar’s remarkable production of decoys over plus five decades - more than 5,000 all told. It contains more than 600 pictures of decoys from every period of Cigar’s carving career. But the book is much more than simply a compilation of decoy photographs. It also offers a brief history of gunning on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, the rise of decoy collecting and the history of the Chincoteague Refuge Waterfowl Museum, where Cigar was the resident carver. Yet what truly distinguishes this book from almost any other decoy book is the personal story it chronicles of the 38 years of heartfelt friendship shared by the author and Mr. Daisey.

The excellent photographs of the decoys are well presented, making the details of each carving readily discernible. Many include multiple angles, oftentimes including a picture of the bottom, revealing the “CIGAR” brand and other notations. In addition, the book includes roughly 300 photographs of Cigar, his workshop, the Refuge Waterfowl Museum and related subjects. Overall, the layout is pleasing to the eye.

The first two chapters cover Mr. Daisey’s family history and the many ways this resourceful young man made a living – chicken farmer, oysterman, duck trapper, guide, fur trapper, fisherman and picker for pioneer decoy collector, Bill Mackey. Chapter 3 provides a short history of decoy collecting, leading naturally to a discussion in Chapter 4 of Cigar’s beginnings as a decoy carver in the mid-1960s. The author introduces a typology of the various types of decoys Cigar carved over the years: hunting decoys, premium decoys, competition decoys and reproductions.



Cigar carved hunting decoys throughout his career, although after the 1960s few made it to the water as most were purchased by collectors for display. Most of Cigar’s hunting decoys are functional and good-looking, based on his own patterns, most with flat bottoms and paddle tails. Many of his earliest hunting decoys were made from refrigerator cork. Cigar also produced premium decoys based on these same patterns, but hollow-carved them with more detailed paint patterns.

The author treats Daisey’s carving of reproductions rather gingerly. Although the author only witnessed Cigar carving reproductions (or more candidly, fakes) on two occasions, there clearly was a time when Cigar made copies of many vintage Virginia decoys, most of which were sold to antique dealers clamoring to resell them as originals. Although some refer to this period as Cigar’s “scallywag days,” it’s hard to fault a man for putting food on his table when times were tough.

In Chapter 5, the author makes a welcome contribution by cataloguing the various brands Cigar used to mark his decoys. Between 1965 and 2008, the author documents Cigar’s use of one shorebird and seven duck and goose brands, which now provide a means to determine with some accuracy when his branded decoys were made.


Chapter 6 covers Daisey’s foray into competition carving. Twice a winner at the U.S. National Decoy Show – both

times with black duck – Cigar’s competition carving culminated in 1989 when he won a Best of Show ribbon at the World Championship Wildfowl Carving Competition for a hen red-breasted merganser, finally besting his friend, Louisiana carver Jimmy Vizier. There are also pictures of some of Daisey’s finest creations, including a wonderful Canada goose that won second Best of Show at the first World Championship Wildfowl Carving Competition in 1971.

Chapter 8 details the establishment of the Chincoteague Refuge Waterfowl Museum in 1977 by John Maddox, including historical photographs and descriptions of the various displays and the two auctions in 2013 that disposed of the decoys and artifacts in its collection. For many years, Maddox purchased – and resold – the lion’s share of Cigar’s decoy production, as Cigar seldom sold directly to individuals and disliked the pressure of taking orders.

Chapters 9 through 11 cover the decades of the 80s, 90s and 2000s. Each decoy pictured is supplemented by a short essay in which the author discusses his visits with Cigar, what was going on in his life and what he was carving. They clearly established a fraternal relationship that reflects their mutual love of the outdoors, hunting, decoy making and conservation.

Chapters 12 through 15 documents the many styles of decoys that Cigar created during his carving career, including some rarities, such as American widgeon and hooded mergansers. While it focuses on representative examples of the various species, styles and postures, it includes essays reflecting on the birds hunted in the vicinity of Chincoteague.

The final chapter focuses on the various interviews with Mr. Daisey over the years, some of the many awards he’d received and a peek into his conversion from one-time market gunner and occasional scoundrel to conservationist. It’s a fitting tribute to a celebrated decoy maker who was quite the character. 

“Delbert ‘Cigar’ Daisey Decoys” is a hard-bound, 282-page book, priced at \$80 plus \$7 shipping, and is available directly from the author: Doily E. Fulcher Sr., 11396 Beechwood Lane, King George, Virginia 22485.