

# CHRONICLER COLLECTOR CARETAKER

## JOE ENGERS AND THE LASTING LEGACY OF *DECOY MAGAZINE*

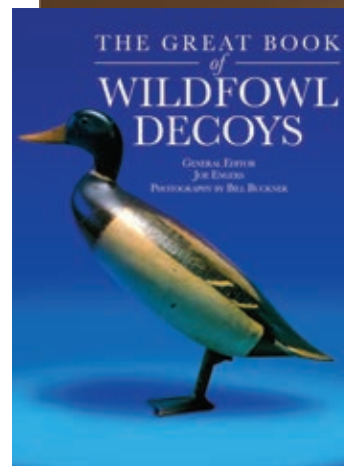
By Chad Tragakis

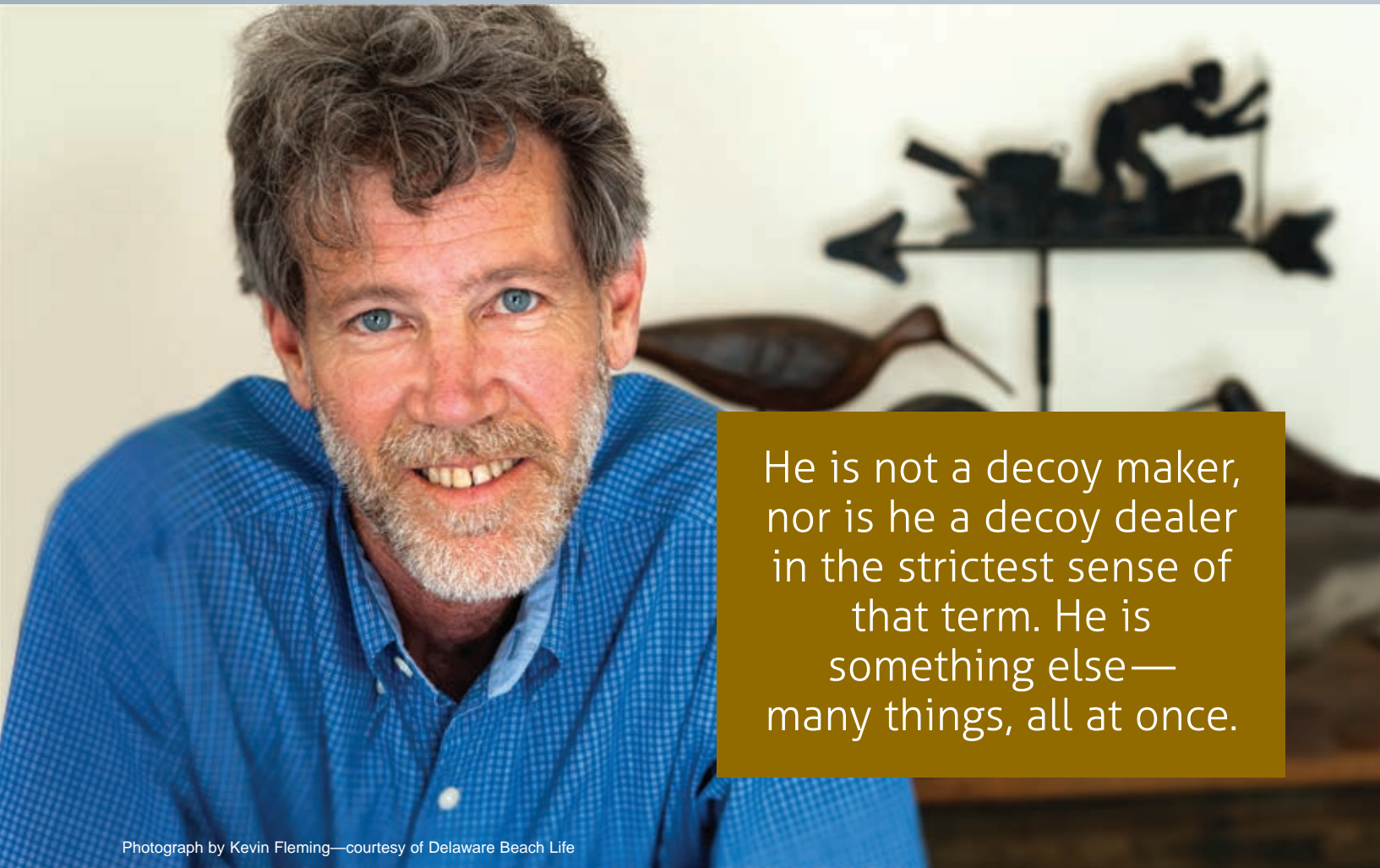


At a recent decoy show in Maryland, in a room filled with talented carvers, longtime dealers and the collectors who patronize them, one man sits quietly but confidently behind his table.

It is a scene repeated at shows all across the country, held all throughout the year. He is not a decoy maker, nor is he a decoy dealer in the strictest sense of that term. He is something else—many things, all at once. But the story of how he came to sit so naturally among all these thousands of wooden ducks, and to interact so seamlessly with people of every stripe—millionaires and working-class heroes, hedge fund managers and hotel managers, twenty-somethings and nonagenarians—is fascinating and surprising to say the least. For his was a most unusual journey and one that, in so many ways, was completely unexpected.

Joseph Francis Engers was born on October 20, 1953 in Baltimore, the oldest of five boys and a girl. He grew up there, attending a Catholic high school in the city,





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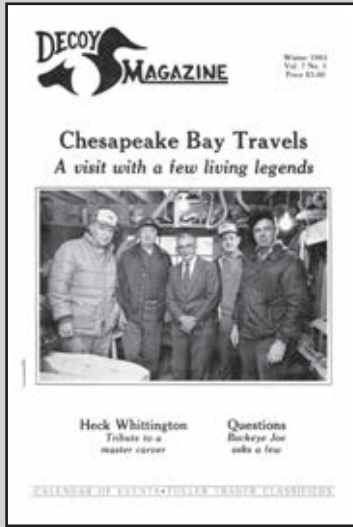
Photograph by Kevin Fleming—courtesy of Delaware Beach Life



A treasured specimen from Joe's collection: a sleeping canvasback hen by R. Madison Mitchell circa 1930s.

and developing a love for his local sports teams. He graduated from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County earning a Bachelor's Degree in American Studies with an emphasis on American History. Little did he know at the time just how relevant and useful that degree would one day be to his chosen profession.

When he graduated from college Joe, as family and friends call him, was working at a local bakery, a job he started while still in high school. It was a good job and he enjoyed the flexibility, but he soon realized that he didn't want a career that required working through the night, all night, every night. So, after seven years he tendered his resignation to the great disappointment of his boss. While



LEFT: The cover of the winter 1983 issue featured Havre de Grace carvers Capt. Harry Jobs, Paul Gibson, R. Madison Mitchell, Clarence "Titbird" Bauer, and Jim Pierce.

RIGHT: The cover of the March/April 2007 issue featured the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum.



impression on them, because within a year of their meeting, Joe was invited to join their staff as photo editor. He relocated to Ocean City just before the summer season, a move many people would love, but for Joe, it was all business. He was never a fan of the beach, but the publishers promised him an equity stake if the business was successful, which was all the motivation he needed.

The paper's editor was a young man named Jeff Williams, who Joe had never met before, but seeing as they shared responsibility for editorial content, they developed a solid working relationship and soon became fast friends. One day that summer, Jeff received a telephone call from his step-father, decoy-maker Captain Harry Jobs, who told him about a decoy newsletter called *Decoy World*, that was coming up for sale. Its publisher, Clarke Reed, no longer wanted to put it out, and was actively seeking a buyer. Captain Harry asked Jeff if he was interested and Jeff, in turn, asked Joe if he would help. Joe figured there would be no harm in taking on another publishing business venture, and he readily accepted the opportunity. He remembers that his first question to Jeff was, "What exactly is a decoy?"

Joe was soon immersed in all things decoys, and he quickly came to appreciate the variety, quality and historical significance of the carvings he was encountering. Joe and Jeff published their first issue in the Fall of 1979 and they exhibited that year at the Easton Waterfowl Festival. They placed a small stack of the current issue and a pad of subscription forms on Captain Harry's table. It wasn't much of a display, but it was a start. Over the weekend, Joe got a crash course in newsletter marketing and subscriber relations, carefully cataloging all the feedback he was hearing. He had a lot of ideas swimming around in his head, but one important suggestion he made was that they should change the name. And so, with the Winter 1980 issue, *Decoy Magazine* was officially born.

Joe and Jeff eventually bought out their other partners in their original newspaper venture, and so with that business providing a steady income, he didn't actively travel to decoy shows too far away to pro-

still working at the bakery, Joe bought a decent camera and began pursuing photography as a hobby. One of his brothers ran the local Little League baseball program and through that connection, he began taking team photos. Not long after, one of the coaches asked if Joe would help him produce a league newsletter, with action photos and recaps of the games. The pair, along with another friend, eventually started a monthly paper called The

Catonsville Sports Leader, which marked Joe's first foray into publishing. A local newspaper soon hired all three to run the sports department for two of their growing publications.

In 1978, two entrepreneurs were starting a weekly entertainment tabloid in Ocean City, Maryland called *Oceana Magazine*. They visited the paper Joe worked for to learn how to do layout and production. He must have made a great



L TO R: Phil Ryser, Chad Tragakis, and Joe Engers hold some prized decoys from the J. Evans McKinney Old Decoy Contest judging at the 2014 Havre de Grace Decoy and Wildlife Art Festival.

mote his new magazine. Instead, he used this time to learn more about decoys and more about making sure he could produce and get a new issue in the mail each quarter. Much to their good fortune, pioneer collector Bill Purnell lived close by in Ocean City (Jeff had worked for him at his hotel when he was younger), and that connection led to frequent invitations to his home to study and photograph decoys, and it led to useful introductions to other notable collectors and collections. As Joe remembers, their connection to Bill sure helped fill a lot of pages in those first few years. He also says that he's always been appreciative of Harry Jobes and his late wife Helen (Jeff's mother), who not only made it all possible with that initial phone call to Jeff, but who were also very supportive in many ways during the early years.

Growing up, Joe would spend his summers working at a horse farm with his grandparents just 10 miles outside of Havre de Grace, the decoy capital of the world. And he vividly remembers seeing the seemingly endless flocks of geese making their way north and south on their annual spring and fall migrations. But he never knew anything about this fascinating aspect of American folk art. He continued to learn and his appreciation for the history of decoys and their strong connection to his home state continued to grow. Then, in 1983, Jackson Parker began contributing regular auction reports to the magazine, providing an important perspective on the economics and dynamics of the decoy market. This aspect of the decoy world fascinated Joe and gave him yet another dimension to study, analyze and address through the magazine.

In 1985, after being rebuffed several times, a large firm, Chesapeake Publishing, made Joe and his business partners an offer to buy their small newspaper, *Oceana*—it was an offer too good to refuse. Joe was hired back to serve as publisher for the next two years during the transition, but for the first time in a long time, he had a chance to pause and reflect on what he wanted to do next. It was at this point that he took a long, hard look at the little quarterly magazine he was publishing on decoys. Was there a future in it? Could he grow it into a viable

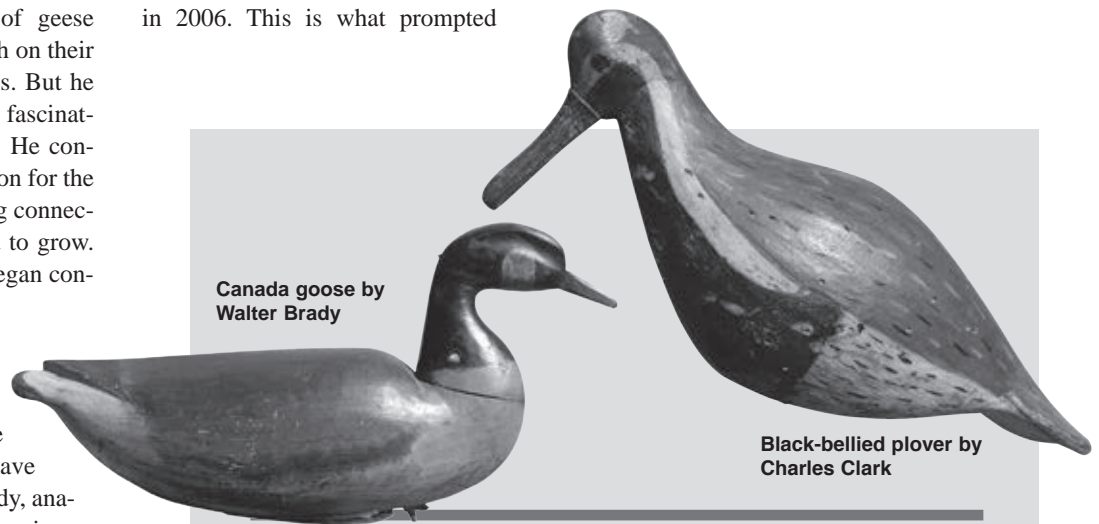
business? Would there be interest and more subscribers? After some research and deliberation, he decided the answer to these questions was a resounding “yes!”

His first realization was that if *Decoy Magazine* was to become a true magazine serving the needs and interests of the growing market of collectors, it would need to be published in a larger format, with an expanded page count and with more color. He also realized he would need to get out and promote it, far and wide, and begin attending decoy shows across the country. In 1986, he took the first steps in this exciting but unknown new direction. There were now 16 pages of color in the 48 page magazine. Looking back, he admits there was a lot of uncertainty—he was headed for uncharted territory.

By this time, Jeff had established other business interests and Joe bought out his share of *Decoy Magazine*. One of Jeff's ventures was a jewelry store in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, which Joe helped him open and manage until it closed in 2006. This is what prompted

Joe's move to nearby Lewes, Delaware in 1988, where he still lives today.

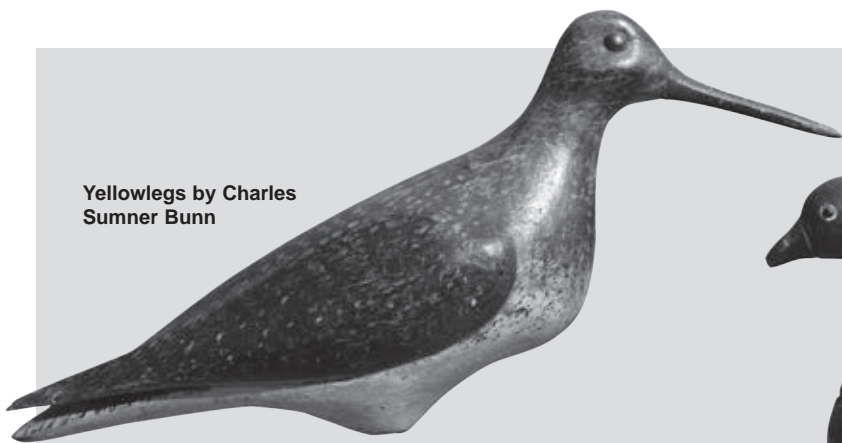
Just a few months before his move to Lewes, Joe received a call from publishers in New York City who were putting together a coffee table book on decoys. They hoped that the publisher of *Decoy Magazine* could help them acquire photos of quality decoys from all the major hunting regions of the country. He did more than that, spending the better part of 1988 traveling the country, sometimes alone and sometimes with a photographer, taking pictures of some of the top collections in the world. Joe was named General Editor of the project, which of course was the acclaimed *Great Book of Wildfowl Decoys*. When the book was released in 1989, it gave *Decoy Magazine* an enhanced reputation and greater status in the decoy collecting world. Most importantly, it gave Joe an opportunity to meet many of the nation's top collectors, and an opportunity to recruit some of the top writers as contributors to the



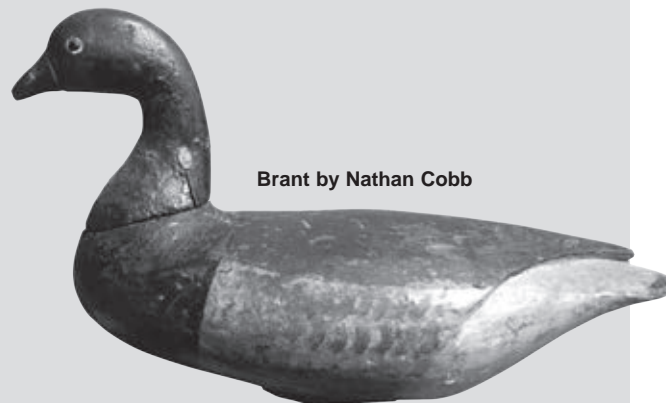
Canada goose by  
Walter Brady

Black-bellied plover by  
Charles Clark

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Yellowlegs by Charles Sumner Bunn



Brant by Nathan Cobb



Preening eider hen by Gus Wilson

magazine, many of whom still contribute articles to this day.

Thinking back to the very first story he submitted, Joe's friend and long-time *Decoy Magazine* contributor Jim Trimble remembers that, "At that point in time, there was no internet with e-mail attachment submissions or digital photos. Stories were prepared in manuscript form and were mailed in for acceptance. Photos were hard copy photos, and I was assured by Joe that it was not a problem as he was also a photographer. We met the summer of 1987 for the photo shoot in his makeshift office above a Fenwick Island, Delaware hardware store. As I unpacked boxes of decoys, he calmly walked over to his desk, and knocked a roll of brown paper off his desk, that was taped to the table, and unrolled to the floor. He explained that this was the backdrop as he set up a pair of umbrella lights."

The experience of working on the *Great Book of Wildfowl Decoys* gave Joe the confidence to move into book publishing, alongside publication of the magazine.

To date, *Decoy Magazine* has published a wide array of original and re-issued books, including *Decoys of the Susquehanna Flats*, *Chesapeake Bay Decoys*, *Mason Decoys*, *Canvas Decoys of North America*, *Carteret Waterfowl Heritage*, *Chance*, *Ira D. Hudson and Family*, *Lloyd J. Tyler*, *Wildfowler Decoys*, and *The Stevens Brothers*. The latest book, on Maumee Bay, Ohio decoys, has just gone to press.

With so much exposure to decoys, including a chance to handle some of

“ Joe bought a magazine, and it transformed him into one of America’s most noted decoy personalities. ”

the finest examples in the world, it was probably only a matter of time before Joe became the dedicated and passionate collector he is today. With the sale of his newspaper in 1986, he finally had a bit of money to work with and decided to start buying some quality decoys. He had dozens of birds by this time, but as he jokes, nothing that he would admit to owning today.

By 1988, he began to focus on what are now the two favorite parts of his collection—Chesapeake Bay area decoys and East Coast shorebirds. Mort Hanson's Virginia shorebird collection was to be sold at auction in October of that year. Joe was eager to leave that sale with a prize, but time after time, he came up short. Bill Purnell saw Joe bidding unsuccessful-

fully and the next day, he brought a box of choice shorebirds to the sale for Joe to examine—he bought one of them, a Cobb Island curlew that he still owns today. But he acquired his favorite shorebird about a year later, and it was just by sheer luck. Joe was checking into the Atlantic Budget Inn in Easton on his way to setting up at the Waterfowl Festival. As he was unlocking the motel door, dealer Steve O'Brien walked out of the room next door carrying a shopping bag. Joe inquired about its contents and it contained some shorebird consignments that Steve had just received. The first bird out of the bag was a big, fat black-bellied plover by Charles Clark in perfect original paint. Joe was delighted to add it to his growing collection, where it remains a centerpiece.

Other favorites that he's acquired over the years include a Canada goose by Walter Brady, a black duck by Robert Freirich, a Nathan Cobb brant, a Gus Wilson preening eider hen, a Charles Sumner Bunn yellowlegs, and an early sleeping canvasback hen by Madison Mitchell. What makes them special to Joe is that each bird has a memorable story that accompanies their purchase. His most recent acquisition is a redhead drake by James Best of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, which was in the collection of his late friend Ed Johnston. The connection to Ed makes it a very special bird to Joe.

When Joe and Jeff initially acquired *Decoy World*, there were two file card boxes with the names and addresses of fewer than 200 previous subscribers. "We had yet to receive a check from any of them," Joe remembers. But with a lot of effort, in less than ten years, subscribership had grown to nearly 900. Circulation peaked in the early 2000s at about 2,800 copies. Today, they distribute about 2,500 per issue, which includes subscribers in every state, Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

Having been on the decoy circuit full time for more than 25 years now, attending shows in all parts of the country as well as Canada, Joe has been able to meet thousands of collectors. He's personally shaken hands with more of his subscribers than probably any other publisher in the world, something that Joe is very proud of. The best part of all, however, is that he's made more friends than he could begin to add up. For Joe, the decoy community has truly become an extended family.

At many shows, Joe often sets up with his long-time friend, collector and broker Dick McIntyre, who vividly remembers the day he first met Joe more than three decades ago. "In 1981, Bobby Richardson, Henry Fleckenstein, and I were returning from a Bourne auction in New England. Unloading our vehicle in Henry's driveway, Joe drove up and introduced himself as the new publisher of *Decoy World*, a magazine he had just purchased from Clarke Reed. In our ensuing 20 minute conversation, it was pretty clear that Joe didn't know anything about decoys! 34 years year," jokes Dick, "Joe is beginning to catch on. Today, he travels to more organized decoy shows, auctions, and club functions than any collector since Bill Mackey died. Joe bought a magazine, and it transformed him into one of America's most noted decoy personalities."

Friend and longtime *Decoy Magazine* contributor Donna Tonelli says that, "working with Joe has always been a pleasure, and I have developed a great respect for all he has done to support the decoy collecting fraternity. I've lost count of how many decoy shows and auctions he attends each year where he

BY C. JOHN SULLIVAN, JR.

## MEMORIES OF *Decoy Magazine*

Looking back to a time before *Decoy Magazine*, I knew Clarke Reed when he was publishing his magazine, *Decoy World*. Clarke and Henry Fleckenstein sponsored a decoy show in Baltimore in 1974. It was called "The First Annual Greater Baltimore Decoy Collectors, Wildlife Art, and Gunners Show." It was to be just a few short years later that Clarke decided to sell his magazine.



John Sullivan (left) and Joe Engers at a show in 1991

The terms and conditions of the sale have been somewhat clouded over the years. Joe Engers and Jeff Williams were partners in the transaction. Jeff was Captain Harry Jobes' stepson. It was Harry who had heard that *Decoy World* was up for sale. The transaction was not for cash but for a group of Captain Harry's full size swan decoys. The details of how many swan were called for and

over what period of time they were to be made available have been lost over time. But ultimately the transaction was completed, and as they say the rest is history.

Joe Engers' accomplishments as the editor and publisher of *Decoy Magazine* are well known. *Decoy Magazine* is the bi-monthly epistle to followers of the wooden fowl. I know on a personal level it is the one periodical that I look forward to receiving in my post office box. Many times upon opening my box, I will walk out of the post office, climb into my vehicle, and read the entire issue before leaving the parking lot.

I have been fortunate to have worked with Joe on numerous articles and on my own Collector's Profile article. Working along with Joe as he edits and refines others' words is an example of his dedication to our passion. The professionalism and dignity of the magazine have brought a new level of respect to those of us who are passionate about our hobby.

I join with the thousands of subscribers and followers of *Decoy Magazine* in congratulating Joe Engers on his tremendous accomplishments and now this honor of being named Honorary Chairman of this—the 34th anniversary of the **Havre de Grace Decoy Museum's Decoy and Wildlife Art Festival**.

actively participates with show tables and room-to-room trading. His unbiased coverage in his editorials may have ruffled some feathers because he is not afraid to provide accurate coverage of any show or to give a voice to his readership. In a sense he has become a barometer of the decoy market.”

His late friend and longtime magazine contributor Jackson Parker was the first person who offered Joe advice on collecting, directing his attention to antique decoys and “schooling” him during the initial auction previews he attended. “Pick up and look at every one, he told me, and that’s how you’ll learn. He also counseled me about the importance of original paint and condition. When I once commented that I was attracted to Hurley Conklin decoys, he suggested they were ‘decorator decoys.’ He believed it was best to collect decoys from the ‘Golden Age’ of waterfowling, as they have historical as well as aesthetic value.”

That early advice stuck with Joe, whose approach to collecting is to buy good examples of decoys that you like. It is advice he readily shares with new collectors today. “Don’t buy something that you have to make an excuse for,” he says. “If it’s a good decoy and you put it under your arm and walk around a decoy show, someone will ask if it’s for sale. That’s what you want to buy. I’ve never considered buying decoys as spending money. It’s like buying a savings bond. I can point to it and say here’s the money and sell it if I need to get it back. Taking a two-week ski trip to Utah is spending money. Buying a new pickup truck is spending money. And that’s the advice I give new collectors—no matter what price range they find comfortable.”

Perhaps not surprisingly though, Joe also encourages every new collector to become a true student of decoys. “This way,” he explains, “they don’t have to rely entirely on the kindness of strangers, or other collectors. Subscribe to *Decoy Magazine*, buy books and back issues

that serve your area of interest, read and study the auction catalogs—and nowadays, you don’t even have to buy them anymore because they’re all available on the Internet. Go to shows and auctions. Pick up the decoys and actually look at them and ask questions. At the shows, you can converse with knowledgeable dealers, most of whom want to work with educated collectors. The auction previews are incredible opportunities—you get to handle decoys from all price ranges, and begin to get an understanding of value. Once you’ve looked at and studied three dozen Ira Hudson black ducks, you start to get an

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understanding of the good ones. If you get a chance to visit with other collectors, don’t pass up the opportunity. Never be embarrassed to ask for advice. And most of all, be patient and enjoy the journey, after all, a hobby is supposed to be fun.”

Joe’s friend and longtime *Decoy Magazine* contributor Allen Linkchorst agrees, saying:

“If you are a collector, acquiring vintage or contemporary decoys is indeed a thrill. But, that thrill is greatly enhanced when you can read about how your decoy was made, information on the carver, and where your decoy was used for hunting. Joe’s contribution to decoy collecting and the stories he publishes are keeping the tradition alive.”

When asked to share one of the most exciting events he was able to witness on behalf of the magazine, Joe says that “by far, it was the opportunity to attend

the Sotheby’s auction of Jim McCleery’s collection in New York City. We attended the terrific seminars that preceded the sale, were among a small group of collectors who were invited to attend the family banquet the night before the auction in Sotheby’s private ballroom, and we got to watch them sell \$11 million worth of decoys during the two-day sale.” One of Joe’s greatest decoy disappointments, however, occurred during that same January 2000 sale, when in spite of bidding as much as the cost of a European luxury sedan, he was unsuccessful in adding the incredible Gus Wilson eider

with the mussel in its mouth to his collection. “But man, was it exciting!” he remembers with a grin.

The constant travel can be tough at times, but Joe understands that his attendance at shows is one of the most important aspects of the job. It’s important to promote the magazine to potential new subscribers, but there is also the aspect of what he refers to as “missionary work”—promoting the joys

of decoy collecting and providing new enthusiasts with a comfort zone. Getting into decoys, like any collectible field, can be overwhelming, so he’s happy to help new collectors navigate the hobby and realize that they really can do it. However, perhaps the most important part of participating in shows is that it allows Joe to share a real-time, first-hand report, account and analysis of the decoy market, both through the economic and social aspects of the hobby. As the magazine of record for the decoy collecting community, *Decoy Magazine* is the only publication that provides that, and Joe takes great pride in his personal involvement, not just as a publisher but also as a collector.

Running what is largely a one-person show, there are lots of balls that Joe must constantly juggle, many ongoing pressures and challenges, and some parts of

the business he wishes he could avoid altogether. “What I really do enjoy is editing a good manuscript,” he says. As Jim Trimble puts it, “the hardest part for any writer, after doing all the research, is to balance the ‘who, what, when, where, why and how’ of the story with creative flair and submit it all in a proper form. Joe wears two hats—besides publisher, he is also editor, tweaking the storyline for grammar, without rewriting the story, and cutting for fit. In my experience, it has always been a good natured back and forth of editorial changes, with an accord always struck. The reward for me and for all of Joe’s regular contributors has been seeing stories that we researched and wrote come alive in *Decoy Magazine*.”

Joe wholeheartedly agrees, pointing to the “many successful collaborations we’ve had that have resulted in some of the best articles that we’ve published. Some that come to mind include the recent article on A.B. Vance of Philadelphia, identifying the maker of the ‘Mr. X’ decoys, and the one on Charles Sumner Bunn. We’ve also had some terrific cover stories on Chesapeake Bay decoys. And for 35 years, we’ve yet to run out of topics to write about, so the challenge is to keep that success rate going forward.” Joe believes that the real mission of the magazine is to help keep the interest in decoys alive. “It’s incredibly satisfying when you open up an envelope with a renewal check inside, accompanied by a note that expresses, ‘We love the magazine,’ or ‘Keep up the good work.’ It’s humbling to know how much pleasure the magazine has provided to so many people.”

Looking ahead, Joe thinks that it’s hard to make predictions about the future of the decoy market. “There’s always the fear that new collectors won’t pick up where we left off,” he says, “but I don’t doubt that their desirability as great examples of

American folk sculpture will continue for future generations. People do worry that as some of the great collections hit the auction block—and some great ones will in the next ten years—that there won’t be enough new collectors to absorb them and



There is also the aspect of what he refers to as “missionary work”—promoting the joys of decoy collecting and providing new enthusiasts with a comfort zone.

that the prices could fall. My response, as a collector, is that’s not the worst thing in the world as I’ll be able to afford better birds. And so far as what they’re worth when I punch my ticket, that’s not my concern as I will have enjoyed them tremendously over the years and they will have given me joy on a daily basis. It’s hard to ask for much more than that.”

Looking back, Joe can think of a lot of things he might have done differently, but having come into decoys almost by accident, and without any expectation that they would actually become the focus of his lifelong career, he has absolutely no

regrets. “The first ten years I was practically groping to get my feet firmly on the ground and comprehend just what this hobby was all about,” he explains. “But I’ll never regret the decision to try and make decoys my business. They’ve been very good to me and I feel very appreciative that they have been such a large part of my life. I’d be happy to do it all over again.”

Joe is a conscientious caretaker of the decoys in his collection, but more than that, he is a leading steward of our hobby, a custodian of its legacy and a caretaker for its future. Through Joe’s vision, hundreds of cover stories have clarified, corrected and expanded upon previously published research. Hundreds more features, many uncovering never before published information, have vastly improved and increased the scholarship and available literature. In this regard, having led the chronicling of America’s waterfowling past for the last 35 years, Joe Engers has had arguably as great an impact on our hobby as Joel Barber or Bill Mackey. His name belongs in the company of these two men, and alongside Hal Sorenson, Adele Earnest and George Starr.

“I don’t know that any of my individual accomplishments would be considered great,” he says humbly, “but I’m proud of what we’ve been able to accomplish, especially over such a long period of time, which is sometimes hard for me to even imagine.” Joe tries hard to avoid the limelight, and regardless of how well they are deserved, honors and profiles make him uncomfortable. He is happy to talk publicly and at great length about the importance of decoys and their rightful place in American history and folk art whenever asked, but he is just as happy to advance our hobby from behind the scenes. He is quietly impactful, unassuming but influential—a singular enthusiast with an infectious optimism, and a far reaching and wide ranging presence. And he’s still got a lot more to do. ■