

Decoy Brands: An Identification Guide

Introduction

Joel Barber, the father of modern decoy collecting, put it best when he said of his attraction to the floating sculptures that, "...I am perhaps, the most susceptible bird of all." To outsiders, decoy collectors must certainly seem crazed to pay \$50,000 or more for a painted piece of wood that, a mere 60 years ago, was repeatedly and unceremoniously thrown over the side of a boat. But we collectors know who's nuts and who's not. And while we may collect them for different reasons, our appreciation of and passion for waterfowl decoys, is as legitimate as that for any art form. It is as real as the wood from which they are carved.

Regardless of why we acquire them, one thing decoy collectors all strive for is obtaining as much information as possible about our birds. Often, one of the greatest sources for this information lies in the brand (or brands) sometimes found on the underside of a decoy. Brands tell us who owned and used a particular decoy, where and how it was used, and often, exactly when it was used. They can also help us in determining who made a particular decoy, and where and when it was made.

Lucky for us that so many decoy owners branded or otherwise marked their birds! Given the hardy nature of duck hunting and the rough conditions of decoy use, it's no wonder owners took great care in identifying the valuable and often expensive tools of their trade. This was usually accomplished by hot-branding the bottom of the decoy (usually after painting, though in some cases before) with the owner's initials. Sometimes names or initials were simply carved or scratched into the wood. Some gunning clubs and individuals were methodical about the placement of their brands, insisting on uniformity throughout a rig. Most, however, were more cavalier and to a large extent, simply let the brands fall where they may. It should be noted that some hunters and clubs branded the tops and sides of their decoys in addition to, or in lieu of the bottoms. (Often, secondary brands were applied to the tops of used decoys – especially when the brands of former owners remained on the bottom.)

Inlaid iron weights and strip-lead weights with initials cast into them were also used, and metal rig markers are known to have been hammered into the bottoms of decoys. Some makers are known to have branded and/or marked the birds they made (Elmer Crowell, John Graham, and Delbert "Cigar" Daisy come to mind), some to identify their own rigs, some for marketing purposes, others simply out of pride. Finally, some collectors stamp or brand the decoys in their collections. Today, birds such as those bearing the Mackey, McCleery or Starr "stamp of approval" are prized by collectors.

The vast majority of known brands consist of only two or three letters, representing the initials of the individual owner/user. Full last names are also common, as are first initial/full last name combinations. Aside from brands of individuals or families, as was often the case, some brands include the names of the gunning scows and boats off of which the birds were used. A bit more scarce are the names and/or initials (some quite lengthy), of long-defunct gun clubs. These often take up the entire underside of a decoy. Occasionally, symbols were used instead of initials or names.

So you see, a brand on the bottom of a decoy brings its story to life. It can turn a beautiful piece of American Folk Art into a documented historical artifact. It can often double or triple the value of an otherwise pedestrian decoy. A brand can even help turn an “unknown” bird into a priceless, documented treasure. It is quite amazing when you think about it.

To understand the origins of this project – and this book, I must introduce *The Potomac Decoy Collectors Association* (PDCA). The PDCA was formed by seven Washington, DC area collectors in the summer of 1997 to preserve and celebrate the art of the decoy. Since then, we have grown into a club of nearly 75 members from almost a dozen states. With many of the decoy community’s veteran collectors, dealers, authors and historians among our members, it was only natural that decoy scholarship and historic preservation became principal parts of our mission. Indeed they have, and lively discussions and formal (and informal) presentations on makers, history, use, preservation and documentation are regular parts of our monthly meetings.

Most serious collectors keep running lists of the brands they encounter over the years, and PDCA members were and are no exception. Additionally, club members were familiar with the few pieces that had been written on the subject, usually related to a particular gunning region. But where was the one-stop directory of all known and documented brands for collectors, dealers, and historians? Why wasn’t there a single resource to consult for quick identification and background information? Why indeed.

In May of 1998, PDCA president Tom East and I were talking about decoy brands and quickly found we were thinking along the same lines: Why not establish a club-wide project to identify brands, the results of which we could share with the entire decoy collecting community? The idea fit our club and its mission extremely well, and was proposed to the membership at our June meeting. The rest, as they say, is history. The club went for the idea like ducks to water – with many members having saved lists of brands for over 20 years, just waiting for some type of outlet like this.

Since club members started with the local birds in their collections (and the decoys they knew best), our initial list was slightly Chesapeake Bay and Mid-Atlantic heavy. Word of the PDCA’s effort spread quickly throughout the decoy community, however, and soon, we were receiving lists from collectors in New England, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Some other associations, most notably the New Jersey Decoy Collectors Association, went even further, and actively sought new brands and information for the effort from their membership.

A steady stream of brand lists started pouring in. PDCA member and retired government librarian John Pluge, rose to the occasion. He put his professional skills to work consolidating, editing, organizing and maintaining the growing list. John then methodically scoured nearly every book and periodical published on decoys and every auction catalog known to date. These Herculean efforts (and that’s exactly what they were) are the reason this book exists. The decoy collecting community owes him a huge debt of gratitude.

With a list several thousand brands long and growing, we faced our next hurdle. How in the world were we going to publish and distribute the information? A huge task to say the least. Enter *Sporting Collector’s Monthly* publisher and honorary PDCA member

Bob Woollens. Bob had the experience, the time, and the resources to make the publishing end of the project work. And work it has! He's another reason this project got off the ground, and likewise, we owe him a tremendous thank you for his efforts.

As with any research project, there are a few caveats of which users of this book need to be aware. Certain brands one encounters, particularly initials, are exactly the same. So if, say, a gunner from Harwichport, Massachusetts and a gunner from Manteo, North Carolina both branded their rigs of Elmer Crowell decoys with "CJT," it would be difficult – if not impossible – to make a positive attribution. We also need to acknowledge that many brands remain barely legible today. Some were not impressed deeply enough into the wood to begin with. Many have simply worn away over the years. Others still have been fully or partially scratched out, often deliberately. It was not uncommon for older decoys to be sold or given away as new ones were acquired, but occasionally, "derelicts" that drifted away from one rig were "commandeered" for another. Other decoys (and even entire rigs) were simply stolen outright.

Finally, there is the human factor: Incorrect information that may have been listed in the books and catalogs used in this research, and simple mistakes that may have been made by collectors when jotting things down. All these factors should be taken into consideration. It's certainly not an exact science, but rather, this book should be viewed as simply one more tool in identifying, documenting, and learning more about our decoys.

To all of those collectors who sent lists, photographs and detailed information to the PDCA or *Sporting Collectors Monthly* for this effort – Thank You! You truly helped to make this project happen. To that end, as impressive as the list in this book is – it isn't now, nor will it ever be complete. It must not be viewed as static, but a growing and evolving resource. It is our hope that as this book finds its way into the hands of both seasoned and beginning collectors, decoys will be turned over and examined – and new brands and information will emerge (hopefully to be included in a revised future edition). We also hope that it will inspire some of the other groups in the collecting community to organize their own efforts, and document and list the brands in their regions. Only in these ways can we correct any mistakes, uncover new brands and information, and at the end of the day, advance decoy scholarship. Who ever thought scholarship could be this much fun?

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