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Cunningham’s Hand Carved Decoys

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A large, two-story, creamed colored workshop with a green roof sits across the bayou. The workshop is slightly raised on concrete blocks the end of a gravel road, in Bayou Blue, Louisiana. Old time country music floats out the window and the open door. The floor is covered in sawdust. Against the wall, there is a bookcase filled with books of various topics such as birds, waterfowl, decoys, game bird carving, and carpentry. Displayed on shelves and tables around the room are hand-carved duck decoys. Hanging on the walls are templates and patterns used as a model of what the artist wants the decoy to look like. Hand-built tables are attached to walls covered with a variety of tools, wood blocks, facial masks, spray paint, an empty water bottle, small wooden dowel rods, sand paper and boxes of decoy patterns.

Some of the work for the decoys is done in the workshop, but some of the artist’s work is done in an old wooden rocking chair in the living room of his home. Nearby sits an old air hockey table covered with acrylic paints, a tool box filled with a variety of carving knives, wood blocks and unfinished decoys. The living room has paintings of swamp scenes with ducks. The large glass case against the wall is filled with duck decoys and awards.

Steve Cunningham, waterfowl decoy carver and avid decoy collector, has been carving ducks for over 30 years and first became interested in decoy carving in 1983 when he was a junior in high school. Cunningham said he became interested in the hobby because one of his friends’ uncles carved ducks. “I went over to my friend’s uncle’s house to see how he carved the ducks, carved a few ducks with him and then started carving them on my own,” Cunningham says as he walks over to a cabinet of decoys and awards won over the years. He takes out a decoy slightly covered in dust and brings it to the couch. It has a brown head with a black and white stripe across it, and the belly is painted a cream color with black speckles. Covering the body are detailed squiggles of feathers, and on the top of the decoy, which would be the duck’s wings, are intricate feathers painted light brown with one green feather to the side of these. Carved on the bottom of the decoy is his name, the date it was carved and a pound sign with the number one behind it. Cunningham says to give it an antique look, he went in the backyard and shot the decoy with his pellet gun to make it look as though a hunter shot at the decoy.

It takes Cunningham about three months to carve a decoy. The two types of decoys that he carves are a decorative decoy, and a hunting slick. Cunningham grabs a few decoys from his cabinet, and points to a decorative decoy first. He explains the decorative decoys are used for decoration and are rich in detail and can be quite fragile. The second duck he points to is a hunting slick and he explains these are used for hunting and do not have as much detail as the decorative decoy. Though he has carved hunting slicks before, Cunningham says he enjoys carving decorative decoys the best because he likes the detail.

Sitting in his rocking chair, Cunningham flips through a book of decoy patterns and explains the first step to carving a decoy is to get a block of wood which he carves from tupelo wood, cypress wood or driftwood. After he finds the pattern of the decoy he is currently working on, he points to the decoy and explains, “I take my pattern and draw the side profiles, the top view on the top, and then cut the wood with a band saw in my workshop. I then round off the edges because there is nothing on a duck that should be square.” Cunningham takes out a grinder machine from the closet and a box of tips to attach to the machine to make detail on the decoys and explains, “After the head is attached, I will carve out the side pockets and the feather groups on the top of the duck, and then use a pencil to mark where the eyes will go on the head.” The eyes are made of old nails or glass taxidermy eyes. As he points to his wood burner, he says, “For a decorative decoy, I will have to draw in every feather with a pencil and then burn them with my wood burner.” The wood burner is used for fine details to the face and individual feathers of the decoy to make it realistic looking. “After I get it wood burned, I put a spray sealer on the decoy and then I paint them with acrylic paint,” he explains as he points to the colorful decoys in his case against the wall.

Cunningham has been a member of the Cajun Heritage Festival in Larose, Louisiana for over a decade and is currently serving as a board member. This is one of several duck clubs in South Louisiana. The Cajun Heritage Festival, a Louisiana state woodcarving championship competition, is usually held in October at the Larose Civic Center. In 2008, Cunningham was honored at the Cajun Heritage festival as a dedicated member. Over the years, he has helped in the auctions and carving competitions for the club.

In a documentary on the Cajun Heritage Festival, Robby Matherne, a member of the Cajun Heritage Festival, explains origins of the decoy began in South Louisiana. “The Cajun Heritage Festival began over a generation ago to promote and educate others of the great aspect of our Cajun culture, known as the hand carved duck decoy. This can be seen every year through our raffles, competitions, auctions, duck calling, and other events that take place.” He explains that the club has worked very hard to dedicate themselves to this great part of the Cajun culture and to continue for many generations to come. There are duck carvers that come down from northern states to compete in the contests of the festival because Matherne says, “down here we are the best of the best” when it comes to duck decoys.

Paul Mydler, decoy collector and duck hunter from St. Charles, Missouri, has attended the Cajun Heritage Festival for over eight years with his wife. The couple enjoys coming to Louisiana because they like the state, food, and the people. “I have been collecting decoys for a long time. The Louisiana decoy out-performs anything I have ever seen as a duck hunter. Whatever the background, whether it’s the French or the background that you have there, it makes that decoy unique.” He agrees that the painting and carving in Louisiana is much better than anywhere else he has seen.

Cunningham explains that he can enter his waterfowl carvings into several different categories and divisions. In the pamphlet for the show, it states all of the rules and guidelines each participant should follow to enter each contest.

Cunningham’s wife Cindy explained that her husband does not often like selling his decoys because he takes time on them and gets attached to the decoys. However, sometimes Cunningham will sell his decoys to his Uncle that lives in Arizona. He has sold them for as low as $300 to as high as $3,500. Cunningham’s wife says that if he sells them to his uncle then he’s able to see the decoys again at the lake house where his uncle displays them in Arizona.

Cunningham arrives to the duck show with the decoys he has been working on for months. He sets his decoys on the tables to each contest he enters. The judges walk around the Larose Civic Center carefully judging each decoy and other categories of the competition. “This decoy is first, this decoy is second, and this decoy is third,” says the judge after observing the table for a while.

Cunningham sits near his family at the show and for the judge’s decision. “And the first place winner for the Division “B” Decorative Life Size Carving not in a Tank, Category “A” Waterfowl is Steve Cunningham,” says the announcer at the Cajun Heritage Festival. Cunningham anxiously awaits the “best of show” decision. “And the winner of best of show for this year’s Cajun Heritage Festival is Steve Cunningham,” the judge says as the members at the Larose Civic Center rise to applaud the winner.