

The **BIG** April decoy show in Chicago

Canadian prices soft, yet some records set

by Jim Stewart

IT IS CALLED THE NATIONAL Antique Decoy Show or the Mid-West Decoy Collectors Show or just the Chicago Decoy Show, although it is not held in Chicago but at St. Charles, 40 km. west of the city. It is about the biggest event of the year for collectors of waterfowl decoys, whether American or Canadian. It includes three main events – a week-long, buy-sell of decoys and outdoor collectibles from several hundred of the rooms in the Pheasant Run hotel; a two-day Guyette and Schmidt Auction; and the Show itself – 350 tables for 2 days.

The Auction

Guyette and Schmidt is, by a long shot, the largest auction house specializing in waterfowl decoys. Gary Guyette and Frank Schmidt conduct three main auctions a year. As the mania for decoys has swept across North America, their auctions have provided an indispensable service for collectors. In 2007, their sales were \$13 million, mainly of decoys, and their total dollar volume for the last 20 years exceeded \$100 million! This year's auction had 600 items, somewhat less than the usual number and there were fewer "blockbuster" items. Nonetheless, it yielded \$3.6 million, the 5th largest decoy auction on record. The strength came from what has become the mid-range of prices – 50 lots that sold between \$10,000 and \$50,000. Some mid-range!

Collectors of decoys and Americana love the ruddy duck decoys made in the late 1800s by Lee Dudley of Knotts Island, North Carolina. One of these unusual birds, worn but with some original finish and with a repaired bill,



Dudley ruddy duck, highly valued for its age and form, sold for \$269,000.

sold for \$269,000, the highest price in the auction and a new record for a Dudley decoy. The pre-auction estimate was \$185,000 to \$203,000 (prices quoted are \$US, including buyer's premium).

Old and elegant doesn't always mean

a high price, however. There were two very old (mid-19th century) black duck decoys in the auction, both hollow, both in the desirable sleeping pose. One was made by Albert Laing (New York), the other by Richard Davids (Philadelphia). They went for \$13,800 and \$7,500 respectively, prices which seem moderate for such fine old decoys.



Hollow, great form, mid-19th century, Davids black reasonable at \$7,500 (estimate \$10,000 to \$14,000).

There were only two six-figure lots — the Dudley decoy and a fine Charles Perdew mallard drake that sold for \$137,000. Charles Perdew (Henry, Illinois, 1874-1963) didn't just carve decoys, he made many interesting things in his long career. This sale had duck, crow and pigeon decoys, miniature carvings, duck and crow calls, carved brooches, a music box, an ornately-carved humidior and even calendars advertising his calls and decoys. Altogether, the 40 Perdew items brought \$800,000, a quarter of the total auction. I liked a pair of robins and so did others: they brought \$92,000, way above the \$25,000 to \$30,000 estimate.



This fine pair of robins went for an astounding \$92,000.

The finest shorebird decoy of the 40 in the auction was a feeding black-bellied plover, made in the 3rd quarter of the 18th century by one of the master carvers, Obadiah Verity of Seaford, NY. It brought \$86,250.



The Verity plover, a real gem, with carved eyes and raised wings (\$86,250).

While there were not many fish in this auction, there were a few good ones. Two "extremely rare" trout spearing decoys, made circa 1930 by Ray Thompson (Minnesota) sold for \$12,500 and \$15,000, somewhat higher than estimated.



Thompson brown trout spearing decoy fetched \$15,000.

Canadian Decoys in the Auction

There were about 85 Canadian decoys in the auction, fewer than in some previous years. There were some fine ones but the overall selection could be called mediocre. Perhaps the pre-auction estimates were somewhat high. In any case, most did not make their estimate and only a few sold higher than the estimated range. Nevertheless, some new records were set.

The hollow goose decoys made by Phineas Reeves, a Long Point Company guide in the late 1800s, are among Canada's finest. One of these, in excellent condition, brought \$37,350, the highest price for a Canadian decoy in the auction and a new record for the maker. Most collectors are partial to their local makers and there are fewer Canadian collectors with deep pockets. Such a great old decoy from a well known US maker would surely have brought a much higher price.



Wonderful Phineas Reeves goose decoy brought \$37,350.

A pair of Wells mallards with some repairs sold for \$23,000 (estimate \$40,000-\$52,000). A Wells canvasback decoy, circa 1900, sold for \$11,500, well below its estimated range of \$20,000 to \$26,000. Its excellent condition and a paint pattern somewhat different from that of most Wells canvasbacks raised questions at the auction preview. Unfortunately, those concerns were not brought to the attention of the auction house. The decoy, consigned by a respected Canadian collector, was 100% as advertised and should have brought a considerably higher price.



Wells canvasback, circa 1900, sold for \$11,500, well below estimate.

In 2005, a fancy hooded merganser made by William Hart (Belleville, Ontario, early 20th century) sold for \$203,000, setting the Canadian auction record for a decoy. This year its brother, a good decoy but with some over-paint removed, sold for \$35,650, after failing to meet its reserve at a previous auction. \$35,650 is a high price for any decoy. But was there really such a difference in the two; or was it just another example of the extraordinary premium for the best, compared to the merely good?



Hart merganser with some over-paint removed fetched \$35,650.

Later in this article, in discussing the Canadian record prices for decoys, the high value that collectors give to mergansers is noted, the Hart mergansers being just one example. In this auction, a "Shannon Crier" hooded merganser was offered. Over the past several years, many so-called Crier decoys of several species have emerged. Keith Avann, a Toronto collector-researcher, has tried to identify the maker of these decoys, many of which were originally sold to hunters in the mid 20th century by Skinners, a Toronto sporting goods shop. The maker was not Shannon Crier, known to be the owner of one rig of them. Some evidence points to a Clarke family of Toronto. These birds could be called "medium" quality and dozens have been sold at shows, auctions and on e-Bay, generally for a few hundred dollars. Thus the \$14,000 to \$20,000 estimate on the merganser decoy astounded collectors. The bidding died at \$4,600, likely several times the highest previous price for a Crier decoy but apparently not up to the reserve!



The Shannon Crier hooded merganser, unsold at \$4,600.

There were some good Canadian decoys that sold at quite reasonable prices. A hollow whistler attributed to William Humphrey (Toronto, late 1800s) had fine form and good condition for its age. It sold for a bargain \$1,625, half of its low estimate. An Adam Brown bluebill (Gananoque) brought \$1,850, one of the few that went above estimate. I knew it well, having photographed it for *Decoys of the Thousand Islands* and sold it 15 years ago to the collector who consigned it to this auction! A collector of Western