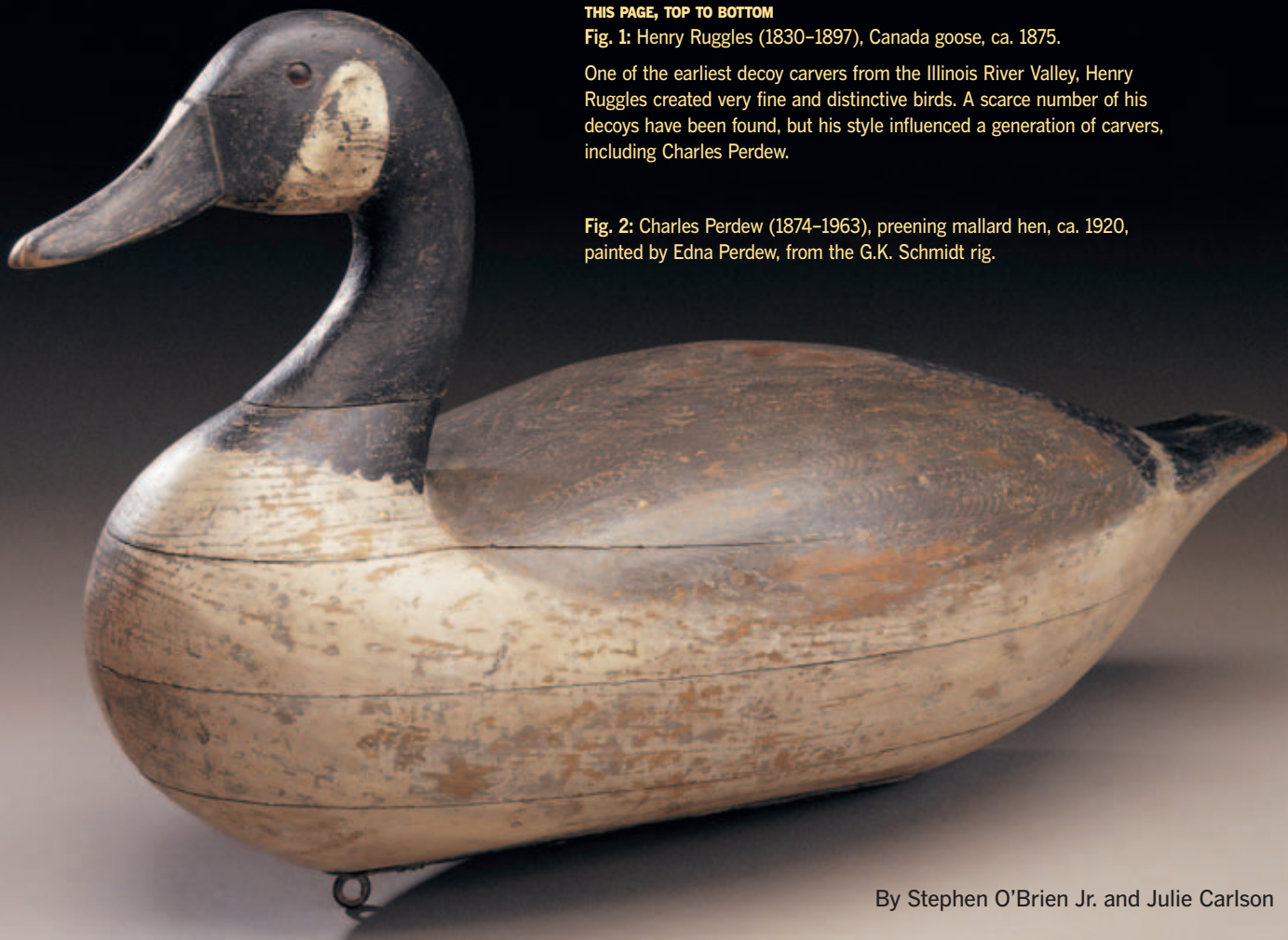


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Fig. 1: Henry Ruggles (1830–1897), Canada goose, ca. 1875.

One of the earliest decoy carvers from the Illinois River Valley, Henry Ruggles created very fine and distinctive birds. A scarce number of his decoys have been found, but his style influenced a generation of carvers, including Charles Perdew.

Fig. 2: Charles Perdew (1874–1963), preening mallard hen, ca. 1920, painted by Edna Perdew, from the G.K. Schmidt rig.



By Stephen O'Brien Jr. and Julie Carlson

# Illinois River Decoys

From the Collection  
of Thomas K. Figge



Between 1860 and 1940 a subculture of duck hunters and decoy carvers arose along the Illinois River. During this period, waterfowl hunting provided a source of income to market gunners and entertainment for sportsmen. Lures to draw the wild ducks within range of gunshot were needed and a cottage industry of decoy carving emerged. The results were often superbly crafted and painted waterfowl decoys. *Masterworks of the Illinois River*, at the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art, Salisbury University, Maryland, features the unique decoy collection of Thomas K. Figge, celebrates this small group of skilled craftsman, their beautiful creations, and the waterfowl that inspired their work.

Three hundred years ago in the Illinois River Valley, wild rice grew freely along the river and maize was cultivated by the Illiniwek tribe on the river banks. Today industrial farms and fast food restaurants constitute life along the river. But one constant is the timeless annual migration of waterfowl to this fertile region.

This annual migration numbering millions of birds was still near its peak in the mid-nineteenth century. When Henry Ruggles, a young house painter and decoy carver from Cincinnati (Fig. 1), arrived in Henry, Illinois, in the 1850s, closed hunting seasons were unheard of and the country's expanding transportation system had created a viable avenue for transporting wild game to urban areas such as Chicago, 130 miles to the northeast. In 1889, Chicago's Grand Pacific Hotel offered over twenty species of birds on its annual game night menu, in addition to twelve species of waterfowl. With a passion for hunting and fishing, Ruggles must have felt the region held limitless potential. To aid in his success in luring waterfowl, Ruggles carved graceful decoys distinguished by their elongated heads, unusual squared tail, and full body form. A portrait and landscape painter, his painting style was simple, with bold, sure-handed brushstrokes.

One of the most entrepreneurial suppliers to the Chicago market was Charles Perdew (Figs. 2, 2a), a native of Henry, Illinois. As a young boy he packed complimentary bags of the wild rice with the game he shipped to the grand hotels in Chicago and elsewhere, guaranteeing himself repeat customers. His innovative pioneering bird call and decoy designs make him one of the most famous carvers of all time.

With the beginning of the twentieth century, the depletion of bird populations due to overhunting created a public outcry. The consequent Federal Migratory Bird Act of 1918 outlawed the sale of migratory birds and effectively halted the demise of numerous duck and shorebird populations. Market gunners were forced to earn their livelihoods by other means, and many turned to the sport hunting trade.



Fig. 2a: Charles Perdew (1874–1963), early pintail pair, ca. 1910.

Charles Perdew is the most important, prolific, and versatile carver from the region. With a carving career that spanned over sixty years, Perdew and his wife Edna created working decoys, decorative birds, miniatures, and calls in virtually every shape and style known. Of his many styles, Perdew is most revered for his masterful sleepers and preeners, which he felt added a peaceful presence to the rig that enticed waterfowl.

Perdew constantly reworked head positions and cheek and raised-wing carving to create lifelike birds. His early birds were made in three pieces and had delicate necks. This construction proved fragile, however, with the result that few have survived. He soon remedied the flaw, making the body construction a two-piece design. Both he and his wife decorated the birds, though Edna had the steadier hand and her painting technique was superb.



Fig. 3: Robert Elliston (1847–1925), sleeping mallard hen and drake, ca. 1890; painted by Catherine Elliston, from the Dupee rig.





Fig 4: Charles Schoenheider (1854–1944), Standing ice duck mallard pair, ca. 1910, painted by Jack Franks.



**Fig. 3a:** Robert Elliston (1847–1925), canvasback drake, ca. 1885; with swirl paint by Catherine Elliston.

Widely regarded as the father of the Illinois River decoy carving tradition, Robert Elliston and his wife, Catherine, set the standard against which all Illinois River decoy are measured. The Ellistons' birds were so sought after by hunters that the couple began shipping decoys to sporting goods stores around the country. It is for this reason that the Ellistons are credited as the first commercial carvers from the region.

A woodworker by trade, Elliston crafted beautifully carved decoys with nearly invisible body seams. Unmistakable trademarks of his work include a raised “V” notched bill carving, flat pointed heads, and higher than normal eye placement. To the bodies, Catherine applied graceful paint patterns that are virtually unequaled by any of her contemporaries. Implementing a metal graining comb to suggest feathering and provide a realistic look, her techniques were copied by Nillie Graves and others along the Illinois River.


Sport hunting was by no means a new concept. As early as 1865, gentlemen hunters like Boston native George Henry Mackay were traveling the globe in search of game birds. Hotels and clubs sprang up to cater to them, and popular gunning destinations arose along the Illinois River flyway, among them, the Undercliff Hotel on Lake Senachwine, Illinois.

One of the first decoy makers to capitalize on the “sports” who visited the Illinois River Valley was Robert Elliston (Figs. 3, 3a). Along with his wife, Catherine, he moved to the Undercliff Hotel shortly after it opened in 1882, where he crafted realistic and lightweight decoys that his wife finished with exquisite paint patterns. The “sports” clamored for Elliston decoys, sometimes waiting years for orders to be filled. Often referred to as the “father” of the Illinois River carvers, Elliston was one of the earliest commercial makers of decoys.

Charles Schoenheider, a market hunter from Peoria, Illinois, was one of the region's finest decoy carvers (Fig. 4). He enlisted the assistance of hunting partner Jack Franks to paint his better carvings, and another friend, Fred Finholst, to cast the iron feet for the standing decoys, with Finholst even replicating the webbing.

Bert Graves built the Graves Decoy Company out of a workshop behind his home in Peoria, leaving a legacy nearing that of Elliston and Perdew (Fig. 5). When Elliston died in 1915, Graves purchased his business, including wood, patterns, tools, and commissioned rigs. He also hired Elliston's widow to continue painting decoys for his company.

The demand for top-notch Illinois River bird carvings has not waned. Today, superior decoys by Charles Perdew and Robert Elliston can fetch up to \$100,000 each. Decoys in original paint by Henry Ruggles and his contemporary Stephen Lane (Fig. 6) are almost unobtainable. This is what makes the Thomas K. Figge decoy collection, containing some of the greatest Illinois River decoys ever made, so unique.

*The Illinois River Meets the Chesapeake*, at the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art, Salisbury University, Salisbury, Maryland, is on view through November 13, 2005. An accompanying publication *Masterworks of the Illinois River: Decoys from the Collection of Thomas K. Figge*, by Stephen O'Brien Jr. and Julie Carlson, is available at [www.americansportingart.com](http://www.americansportingart.com). 



**Fig. 5:** Bert Graves (1880–1956), pintail drake, ca. 1925; painted by Catherine Elliston.

Often listed among the premier decoy makers of the entire Midwestern region, Bert Graves's hollow-bodied birds are distinguished by their detailed carved bills, large glass eyes, and fine paint patterns. His forms for decoy patterns were slightly oversized but well-proportioned and lightweight. In addition to Catherine Elliston, his decoys were painted by Nillie and Effie Graves. All three recreated very realistic color and plumage patterns.



**Fig. 6:** Stephen Lane (1843–1900), Pintail drake, ca. 1890.

Lane was a professional woodworker who constructed everything from furniture to houses. His carvings are unusual for Illinois River decoys in that he used no nails to attach the body halves. So perfect were the shape of his halves that only glue was needed at the body seam. Lane's decoys have elegantly carved heads with pronounced breasts that give the front profile an “S” shape. The sharply pointed tails are in contrast to the smooth frontal lines. Similar to carvings by Henry Ruggles, Lane's birds have V-shaped bottoms. He carved primarily mallard, pintail, and teal decoys. His realistic and detailed painting was attained using a metal comb and a wet-paint, scratch-feather technique that may have been the inspiration for Catherine Elliston's work. To further the realistic impression, Lane fitted his decoys with taxidermy quality eyes.