

Clifford Jason Stubbs

Master Fish Decoy Carver from Lake Minnetonka

By Donald J. Petersen and John McCormick

Clifford Jason Stubbs was born on August 17, 1892 into a family that played an important role in the early settlement of Minnesota. He was the offspring of William Enos Stubbs (1864-1953) and Mary Beth [Brooks] Stubbs (1873-1938). The Stubbs' family connection to Minnesota began with family patriarch, Henry Stubbs, who was born on April 12, 1806 in Butler County, Ohio, but as a middle-aged man, moved to Minnesota in 1856 to homestead on Lake Minnetonka in Hennepin County. (See Note #1) The homestead encompassed about 160 acres. Married to Rachel Pray in 1828, Henry and Rachel had five children. Henry was a farmer, but also received a post office contract on his land. Mail was brought to him by horseback twice a week.

As previously noted, Clifford Jason Stubbs was one of the six children born to William Enos Stubbs and Mary Beth Stubbs (See Photo 1). His father was both a farmer and inventor. Apparently, Clifford followed in his father's footsteps because he is also listed as a farmer and inventor on his death notice. His (Clifford's) inventions include an underwater weed cutting machine. He was also a constable in Orono Township. A large man as an adult, he was six feet three inches tall and weighed 300 pounds. This may help explain that one of his occupations was serving as a bouncer at Long Siding Bar and Dance Hall. In the 1940's he did dock installations and removals. His nick name was "Horns," because he liked to make deer horn plaques. Clifford married Alice H. Stubbs (b. 1891) and together they had three children, two boys and one girl.

In addition to his farming and law enforcement duties, Clifford found time to make fish decoys. He carved them from 1945 to 1955, sitting at his kitchen table or in his upstairs work room. It is said that he made 300 to 500 decoys. (See Note #2) These typically came, for want of a better term, in four sizes: extra large, large, medium and small. The "extra large" size decoys are approximately 16½ inches in length (See Photo 2), while the "large" size measures about 8½ inches (See Photo 3), the "medium" size about 6½ inches in length (See Photo 4), and the "small" size is about 4½ inches in length (See Photo 5). Stubbs' decoys do not imitate any particular fish species but do have pronounced characteristics. First, there is the sloped nose of the decoy along with tack eyes (See Note #1). The nose of some Stubbs decoys have two "nostrils" (See Photo 2). The gills of his decoys are carved and the mouth of the fish fashioned into a kind of smile.



1 - The only known picture of Clifford Stubbs, at or about age 18. (Photo courtesy of Dan Stubbs)



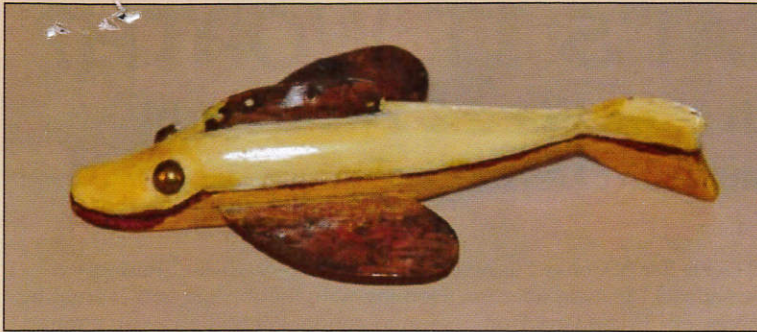
2 - An extra large Stubbs decoy, approximately 16½ inches in length. It is not known whether the "extra large" size decoys were actually made for spear fishing, or for decorative/display purposes. (Photo courtesy of Dr. Jerry Wintheiser)



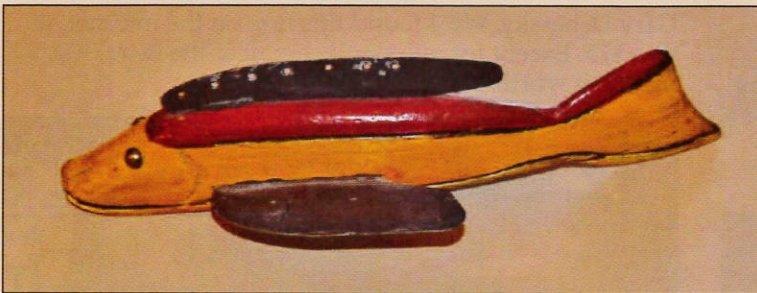
3 - Three 8½ inch large size Stubbs decoys. Note that the red-yellow painted decoy has pectoral fins that can flap while submerged under the ice. (Photo from Donald J. Petersen collection)



4 - Medium-sized Stubbs decoys. Note that the green-white painted decoy has a notch out of its pectoral fins, while the white-yellow-red painted decoy has a pronounced "Swept" effect on its pectoral fin design. (Photo from Donald J. Petersen collection)



5 - Small sized Stubbs decoy. (Photo from John McCormick collection)



6 - Note the blunt nose on this Stubbs decoy. It may represent the exception to the more usual sloped nose on most of the Stubbs' decoys. Courtesy Pete Meyers.



7 - A variety of Stubbs decoys, showing various styles and paint combinations. Note the "extra large" Stubbs decoy at the top of the picture and his bobbers at the bottom of the picture. (Photo courtesy Pete Meyers)



8 - Perhaps the most esthetically pleasing Stubbs decoys are those with the dark brown coloring and the dorsal and pectoral fins left unpainted and in the original copper finish. (Photo from the Donald J. Petersen collection)

The dorsal fin of Stubbs decoys has line-tie holes, usually six or seven in the medium and large decoys. It appears that the majority, if not all, Stubbs decoy fins are made from copper. Some are painted, some partially painted, while others are left in the natural copper finish. Interestingly enough, not all of his pectoral fins are the same in appearance. For example, **Photo 4** shows a decoy with a more swept-back wing look. Another unique, for Stubbs, pectoral fin setup is one that is jointed at the body of the decoy. Maybe the purpose for this was the expectation that the fins would flap while in the water (**See Photo 3**). Still another medium sized Stubbs decoy has a notch in the dorsal fin and another cut-out in both of the pectoral fins (**See Photo 4**). None of the Stubbs decoys have anal fins.

All Stubbs decoys have carved wooden tails, usually sloped (**See Photo 7**).

Esthetically, the most pleasing Stubbs decoys are those with the copper dorsal and pectoral fins left unpainted, with a solid-color body paint and contrasting paint color on the wooden tail (**See Photo 8**). Another painting approach was to have a two-tone solid cream color upper body, and a green (or other color) for the lower body and bottom of the decoy. One decoy has large dots painted on the fins, body, and tail (**See Photo 4**). Still another approach was to have stripes of contrasting colors below a cream-colored body (**See Photo 4**). Whatever the paint style chosen by him, Stubbs decoys are highly sought after by collectors and dealers alike.

Clifford Stubbs passed away on September 11, 1967. □

Notes:

As with most generalizations, there is almost always an exception. The Stubbs decoy pictured in Photo 6 sports an uncharacteristic blunted nose. Perhaps it is true that "It is the exception that proves the rule."

Sources:

1 - Donald J. Petersen, *Folk Art Fish Decoys*, Schiffer Publishing Co., pp. 101, 175.

2 - Dan Stubbs, *Henry Stubbs Family of Lake Minnetonka*, Higginson Book Company, 1997.

3 - Donald J. Petersen is the author of *Folk Art Fish Decoys*, Schiffer Publishing Co, and *Fish Decoy Makers Past and Present* [self published]. He has an extensive collection of fish decoys, fishing sticks, jig sticks, etc. Contact Don at decoywiz@att.net.

4 - John McCormick is a retired attorney with the City of St. Paul and has a large collection of fish and duck decoys, spears, fishing sticks, etc.

Editor's note:

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