

# *Four Old-Time Spear Fishing Decoy Makers*

By

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Spear fishing is currently permitted in only six states: Alaska, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, South Dakota and Wisconsin. The technique of spear fishing is relatively simple—an appropriate site on a frozen lake or river is selected, a hole in the ice is cut, a dark house [sometimes called a “shanty”] is placed over the hole, a fish decoy is jiggered down into the water, and ultimately, when a large fish is attracted by the decoy, the fisherman attempts to hurl a spear into the curious fish. Fish decoys were normally carved from wood, sanded and painted. A lead weight, usually placed in the belly of the decoy would cause it to sink in the water. However, some fish decoys were fashioned from metal, usually copper, and these, of course, would naturally sink. Not all decoys imitated fish. Some were fashioned to look like a frog, tadpole, crawdad, etc.

Fish decoys are a relative newcomer in the folk art-collectibles arena. It has only been since the mid-1980’s that interested parties have begun collecting them. The hobby was largely limited to individuals living in northern Midwest states [where spear fishing is permitted] and decoys were more obtainable. When there began to be a demand for decoys, “pickers” would buy them from old-time fisherman, often without obtaining any information concerning the maker. Much helpful data were, therefore, irretrievably lost, particularly when the carver only made a limited number of decoys for his own use. My best guess is that only five to ten percent of existing decoys will ever be identified. The dearth of information concerning fish decoy carvers has acted to stifle potential interest in collecting decoys.

However, in the past five years, significant changes have occurred to broaden the base of fish decoy collectors. First, the Internet and auction services such as E-bay have permitted people from every state in the Union, and even some foreign countries, to be able to purchase fish decoys. Second, the growing interest in fish decoys, combined with the relative dearth of good quality old-time decoys, has prompted talented contemporary people to begin carving fish decoys. This activity has spawned a market for fish decoys—even apart from the old ones. Some contemporary makers are becoming extremely popular [and well known] and in some cases, their decoys fetch over a \$1,000 for a single decoy. Third, more and more reliable information concerning fish decoys and their makers have been published. Such information permits collectors to purchase fish decoys, either contemporary or old-time ones, with greater knowledge and confidence.

## **Collecting Strategies**

Of course, an unlimited budget makes collecting strategies a minor consideration. For most of us, however, limited resources prompt us toward some method of making our

collection noteworthy, but without causing acute financial strain. For example, some people limit collecting to a particular state such as Michigan, Minnesota, or an area such as the LaCrosse, Wisconsin. There is the issue as to whether one collects only old-time decoys [I define “old-time” as prior to 1960] or to collect contemporary ones. There are advantages and disadvantages to each. Old-time decoys are usually more expensive. Also, because of their greater expense, they are more likely to be faked. On the other hand, they normally maintain a higher value. As previously noted, contemporary carvers, like artists, become popular. One may have bought a decoy from a particular maker five years ago for \$25. Now, the same decoy is priced at \$100 or more. Another advantage to collecting contemporary decoys is that there is less likelihood of them being faked, as the real decoys already are new looking in appearance. Some collectors prefer known decoy makers—especially the old-time ones. In general, this is a wise investment strategy, but perhaps short-sighted. Many times today’s unknown decoy becomes tomorrow’s known decoy. A huge cost saving can be achieved when a fish decoy is purchased as an unknown. At least some collectors buy decoys for beauty-sake, not solely for monetary gain. My preference is to buy a beautiful, but unknown decoy, over a rough but known decoy.

## **Four Old-Time Decoy Makers**

In my new book, *Fish Decoy Makers Past and Present*, I have information concerning over 125 contemporary fish decoy makers and 55 old-time makers. All information is new and not previously available. It has been obtained through interviews with the makers and/or verified through death certificates, historical societies, etc. I have selected four old-time decoy makers from this book to illustrate some of the art and appeal of fish decoys.

### **Frank Clark**

James Franklin “Frank” Clark was born on August 16, 1880, in Collinwood in Meeker County, Minnesota. He was married and had 12 children, seven girls and five boys. Mr. Clark farmed until he was 16 years old when he took a job at the Eden Valley Blacksmith Shop where he mastered the trade. He also worked as a blacksmith the Powers and Simpson Lumber Company in Hibbing, Minnesota. After a stint in Washington State where he worked in construction, Mr. Clark returned to Eden Valley, Minnesota to settle down. In addition to farming, he worked as a heater and temperer in a tool plant during World War II.

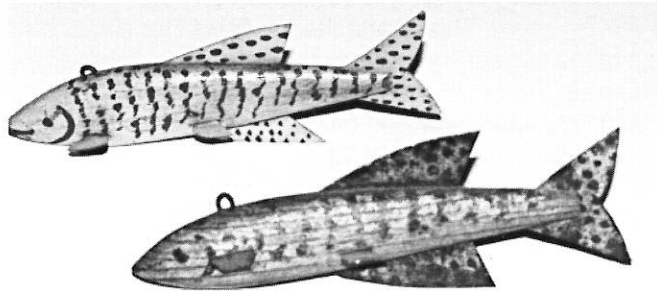


Also considered a master spear maker, Mr. Clark was a prolific maker of fish decoys. All are well constructed; it is rare to find a Frank Clark decoy with a mission fin. He made northern pike, walleye and crappies, but most of his decoys were generic "fish." The majority of his decoys have metal tails, but a few were made with wooden tails. Frank made decoys until he was 88 years old. He died in 1972.

### William Elmor

Like Frank Clark, William Elmor was a fine maker of spears. He was born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania in 1875, and came to Deerwood, Minnesota around 1902 or 1903, where he opened a blacksmith shop. He died in 1956.

Mr. Elmor made fish decoys and lures for resale as well as personal use. Judging from the few specimens that have survived, his decoys ranged in length from four to seven inch. Elmor's fish decoys are distinctive in that he made all



sizes of his decoys with sweeping anal and dorsal fins located approximately at the center of the decoy bodies. This produced a look as though the fins ran through the entire body of the decoy. The tail fins also have a sweeping look, giving his decoys an appearance that suggests great speed in the water. However, his painting lacked the precision and artistic quality found in the carving of his decoys. The eyes were either painted as a dot with a contracting color around them, or simply a dot.

Elmor also fashioned a frog that was wide around the front end and tapered to a smaller size at the rear of the decoy. He made the legs of the frog by inserting a flat piece of sheet metal into a slit carved into the frog; he then twisted the metal to form the legs.

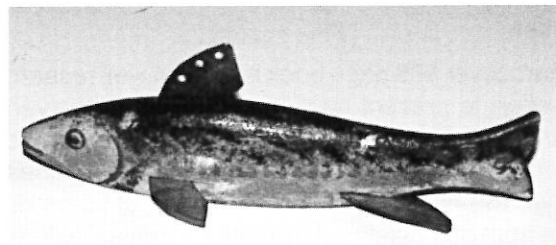
### Andy Hannula



Andrew "Andy" Hannula Sr. was born on September 29, 1887 in Olavieska, Finland, immigrated to the United States as an adult, initially becoming a farmer. Later he was a part owner of a grocery store-Kivisaari, Wuotila and Company located in Deer River, Minnesota. Mr. Wuotila was his maternal grandfather. Andy eventually purchased the store, adding his name to the title, and operated it with his wife. He also worked in the mines and for a cooperative. The Hannulas had six children, three boys and three girls.

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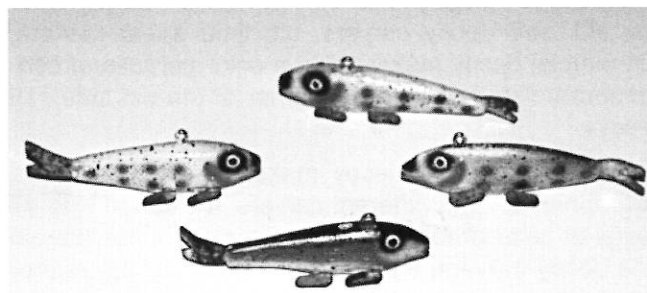
Mr. Hannula began making decoys for his own use in the 1930's. They exhibit a pronounced raised line tie, subtle and appealing paint schemes, and of the three owned by the author, two have wooden tails. One unique characteristic is the lower back fin slotted into a cut in the underside of the body.



Mr. Hannula enjoyed playing the violin and concertina. He died in 1962.

### Louis Kastner

Louis Kastner was born on June 14, 1897 in Good Thunder, Minnesota. Married with two sons, he operated a garage in Waseca, Minnesota where he resided. He also owned a resort on Big Trout Lake near Grand Rapids, Minnesota that he operated until his death in 1978.



During the long winter nights, fish decoy making became a past time for Louis. He carved them, then painted them with regular house paint. Over the years he may have made as many as 25 decoys. He stopped making decoys when he stopped spearing in the late 1940's. The remaining decoys were sold at auction in Waseca in 1999.

### Wrap up

It is hoped that this presentation of four fish decoy makers will wet the reader's appetite for fish decoys and also reliable information. The decoys are still out there, and some makers who previously have not been identified will become known.

Donald J. Petersen is a Professor of Management at Loyola University Chicago. He teaches Labor Relations and Labor Law. He has a collection of about 1,500 decoys.

His book Folk Art Fish Decoys [\$59.95 plus \$4.95 s&h] and his most recent [April, 2001] book, Fish Decoy Makers Past and Present [\$49.95 plus \$4.95 s&h] can be purchased from Donald J. Petersen, 820 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1325, Chicago, IL 60611. Call (312) 915-6542.

