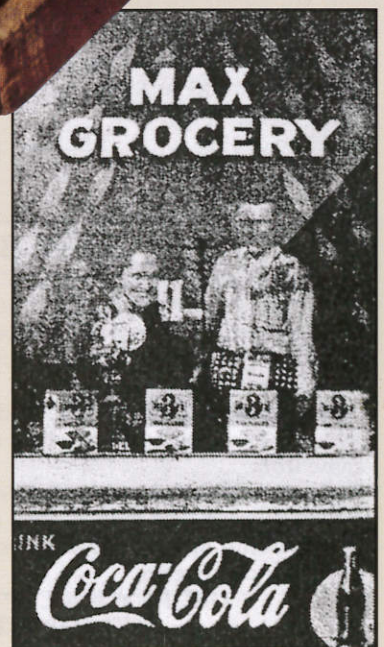


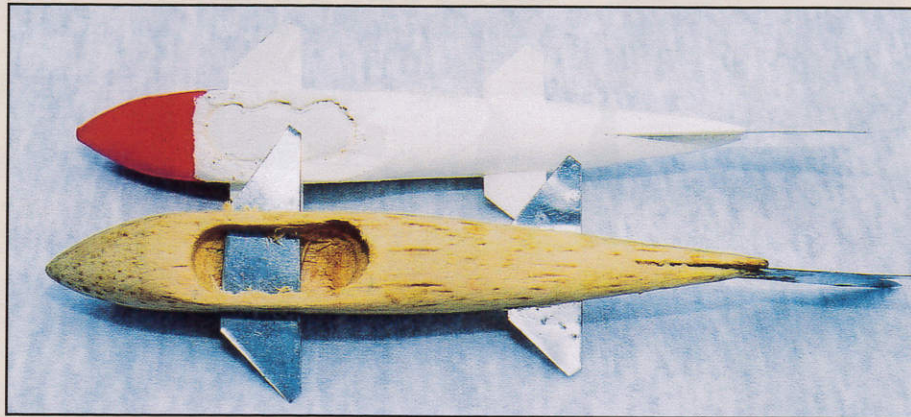
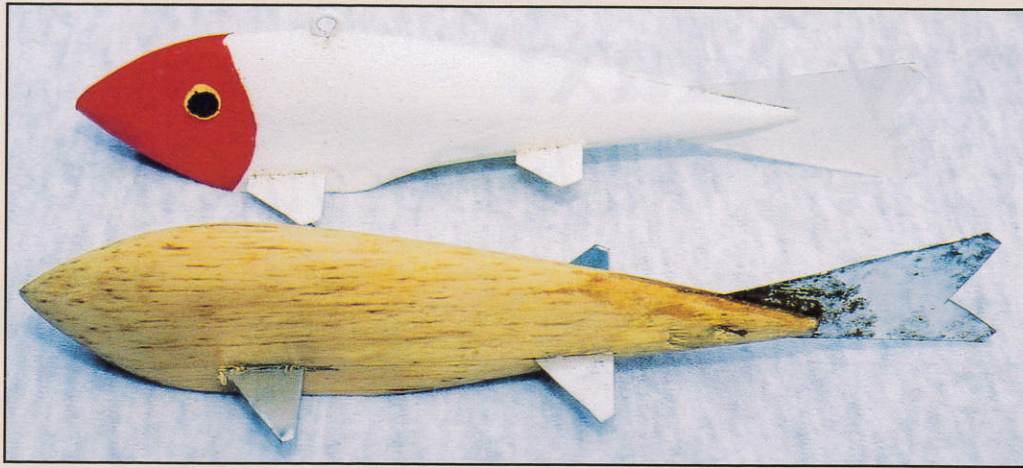
Henry Max: "Marathon" Fish Decoy Carver

by Bradford White



I am always encouraging young people to collect, even carve, decoys, whether they be waterfowl or fish. One day my son asked me, "Who carved the most ice fishing decoys?" Not a bad question for a nine-year-old. I really had to think about that. The first carver that came to mind was Leroy Howell, and then Oscar Peterson. I decided to jump-start my search for an answer by looking into our collection of spearing decoys. In no time at all I came across 15 Henry Max decoys.





This just might be a good carver to research, I thought; somehow I had a hunch that Henry Max might be the answer to my son's question. With the help of the Otter Tail Historical Society In Fergus Falls, Minnesota, I was pointed in the right direction for contacting a few close, personal friends of Mr. Max who are still alive. I also got the names of retail outlets where his decoys were sold.

Henry Max was a life-long resi-

dent of Fergus Falls, Minnesota - an American crossroads town of 5,000 located in northwest Minnesota, not too far from the North Dakota border. Max was born in 1903 and died in 1978. He and his wife, Hazel, operated a grocery store in Fergus Falls.

No one really knows why Henry started carving fish decoys; he never really ice-fished much. What spare time Henry and Hazel had away from the store, they would spend fishing at the cottage

they built on the shores of Long Lake, north of Fergus Falls.

The unique part of Henry's decoy carving was that all his decoys were completely handmade. He never used any power tools in the manufacture of his fish decoys. He made his decoys of basswood. His tools consisted of his favorite Schrade jackknife, wood rasp files, sandpaper, and tin-snips for cutting out tin fins and tails.

He used a single-burner hot-plate to melt down the lead and fill the bottom, hand-carved cavities of his decoys to make them sink. He would screw in a small eyebolt for a line-tie, paint them one of his favorite paint combinations, and hang them on one of his handmade paint racks to dry.

Max was a very talented carver. Besides carving fish decoys, his talent extended to the carving of miniature pigs and horses, rocking horses, picture frames, and various types of furniture. All this time Henry suffered from severe arthritis which, during his final years, confined him to a bed or wheelchair.

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Even then, he maintained the courage and stamina to keep on carving his beloved fish decoys.

Most of Henry's decoys were carved in five and six-inch sizes, but he did a few larger ones that were

seven and ten inches in length. The larger fish, when discovered, are a rare find.

Max used countless different paint schemes on his decoys. The most popular was the red and

white; the least popular was the red and silver combination. Some of his other paint combinations were black and orange, yellow and black, black and white, and red and yellow.

His single-color decoys were red, green, black, pink, and yellow. Some of the rarest of his decoys that I have seen are painted red and white with silver, metal flakes mixed into the paint. Henry also experimented with various colors, using stripes and various decorative, pattern configurations.

Max's early decoys sold for sixty-five cents a piece or seven dollars a dozen. His wife, Hazel, once said in an interview with a local newspaper that her husband carved between 1800-2000 decoys a year. She helped paint them. I believe that Henry Max was a smart businessman in marketing his decoys and actually made a good living from this "Mom and Pop" operation.

Henry sold his decoys out of their own store and also out of sporting-goods and hardware stores. What most people didn't know was that Max decoys were

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also sold at Fleet Farm Stores in the Midwest and through Kmart stores as well. These stores sold great numbers of his decoys and retailed them for three to five dollars each.

I would estimate that in the twenty-seven years of Henry's carving he produced and sold over 40,000 fish decoys. Surely that makes him at least one of the most prolific carvers of all time, if not the most productive. We should remember, too, that all of Max's decoys were individually hand carved. His decoys are a fine example of Minnesota folk art. They are charming and very artistic, making a great addition to any collection.

Hazel Max also said in the interview mentioned earlier that in the last year of Henry's life, he carved 2,800 decoys. After Henry's death in 1978, Hazel sold the remaining 2,800 decoys and donated the proceeds to their church for the purpose of buying a new organ in memory of her husband.

In the final stage of my research on Henry Max, I discovered that his

wife is still alive and is living in a nursing home. I contacted Hazel and discovered that she is now ninety-two years old and still pretty sharp. I told her of my research and article about Henry; she was absolutely thrilled about it.

In my interview with her, I told her that I had estimated that Henry hand carved over 40,000 fish decoys in his lifetime. Hazel replied by saying that her husband carved thousands upon thousands of decoys. She went on to declare, though, that she thought the figure of 40,000 that I had mentioned was a low number. "I believe that's a low estimate," she said.

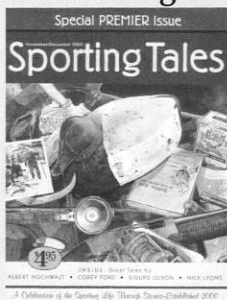
I asked if she had any pictures of her and Henry or of any of his decoys. She said that she didn't. I told her I would send some to her, and her instant reply was: "Oh, I would cherish them forever!" As the years have rolled along, Max's decoys are not as plentiful as they once were; but they can still be found, and they are very affordable.

Henry Max decoys are a great

starting point for a new collector. Ice spear fishermen have used them for years with great success. Now, after so much use, many of them have become worn out and have been tossed away. Less plentiful than in years past, I wouldn't be a bit surprised to see the prices on Henry's hand carved fish start rising. They are definitely becoming more collectible.

(Editor's note: Brad White is a veteran collector of ice fishing decoys. He has written articles for a number of fishing magazines and Internet sites and has published books related to his hobby interest. His latest is Lake Champlain Ice Spearing Decoys and Carvers. Brad also owns and operates a guide and outfitter business in upstate New York - "Yankee Guides & Outfitters." His Service offers five different "Fishing Getaway" packages that feature remote fly-ins and drift boat fishing. He can be reached at: P.O. Box 332, Chittenango, NY 13037. Phone: 315-687-3678. Email: yankang@a-znet.com)

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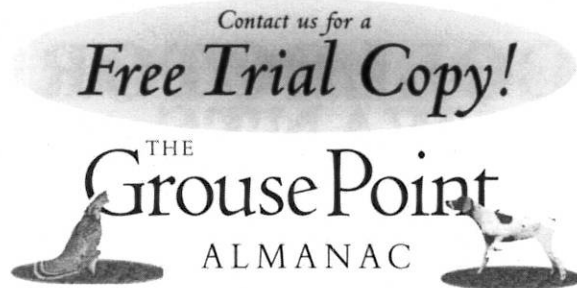


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