

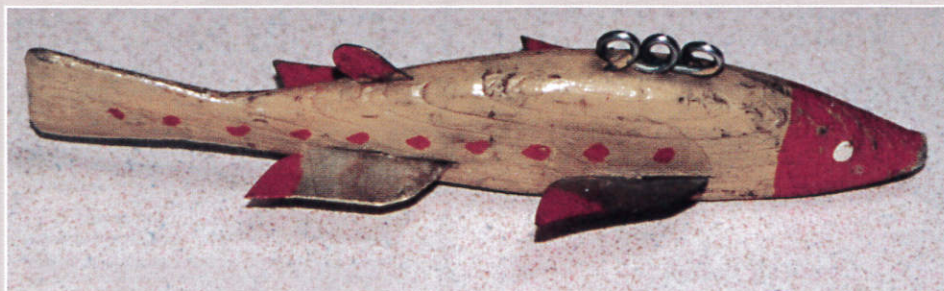
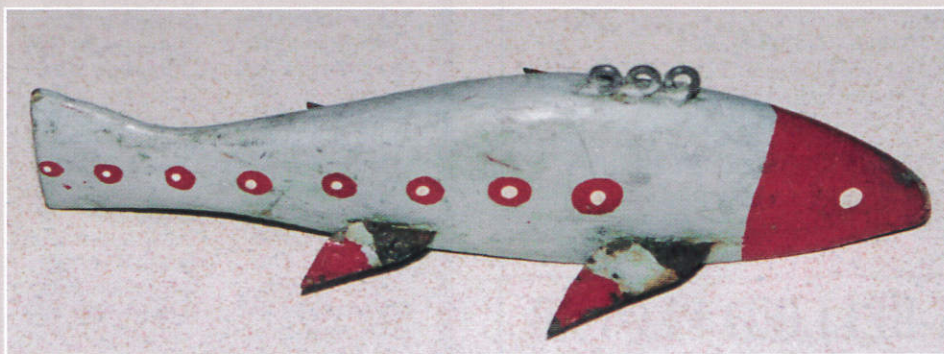
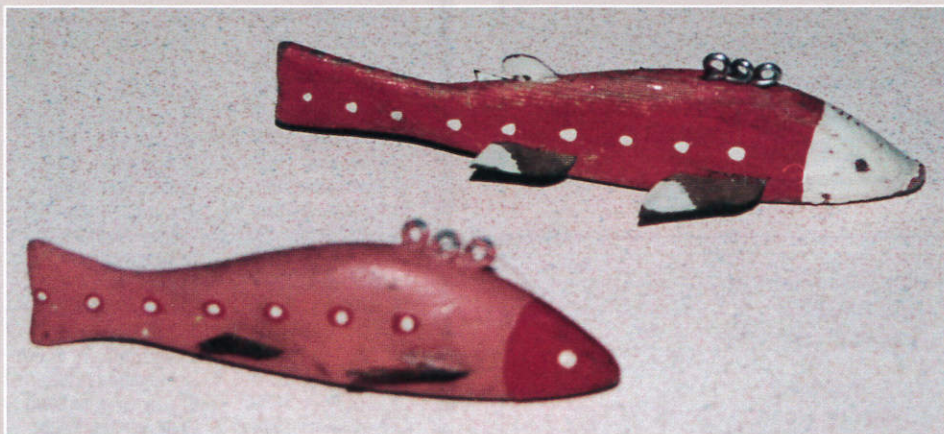
Minnesota fish decoy makers

Carl Satre, Lawrence Lunka and Frank Minsch

by Donald J. Petersen



Larry Lunka with a nice stringer of fish.



Carl Satre made fish decoys with wooden tails, unusually shaped copper fins and a series of three circular line ties. His typically small carvings (3 ½ to 5 inches) were decorated with a simple two-color paint scheme and embellished with a series of dots.

Despite writing two books documenting the history of spearfishing in Minnesota and identifying the makers of these wonderful folk art carvings, continued information is constantly unearthed that allows us to credit the work of previous unknowns, and in other cases simply add additional biographical material to previously published works. Such is the case with Carl Satre, Lawrence Lunka and Frank Minsch, three fish decoy makers whose contributions deserve recognition within the collecting community.

Carl Satre (pronounced Say Tree) was born on February 11, 1911 in Brainerd, Minnesota to Ole and Lena (Kopperstad) Satre. He married Ethel Avery in 1934 and the couple had a daughter. Satre was employed for 48 years with the railroad, first the Northern Pacific Railroad and later the Burlington National Railroad. He was a member of the Sons of Norway as well as a member of the Trinity Lutheran Church. He died on January 4, 1999 at the age of 87.

The surviving Satre fish decoys all were made with wooden tails, copper fins that are distinctively shaped, and a series of three circular line ties. He utilized a simple two-color paint scheme that consisted of one color for the head and the other for the body. The fish are decorated on the sides with a series of painted circles, usually the same color as the head, and some-

times he painted a white dot in the center of each. The eyes are generally white, unless the head color of the fish was already white. They are typically small, ranging 3 1/2 to 5 inches in length.

Lawrence Lunka's parents were born in modern day Slovenia, but as unemployment was rampant there his father moved the family to Brazil, where Lawrence was born on September 7, 1900 in Sao Paulo. After his father died, the family returned to Slovenia.

Lunka was 15 years old when World War I broke out in Europe, and lying about his age, he fought in the Austrian army. As Lunka and other troops hid out in a trench, some Italian soldiers called out that the war was over. They were captured as they emerged. (Ironically, the War did end three days later.) Lunka spent a considerable time in a hospital suffering dysentery.

When Lunka was 18 years old, his mother put him on a boat for the United States. He first went to Cleveland after his arrival, but within a year he headed for Ely, Minnesota to seek employment in the mines. Lunka worked underground for Pioneer Mines, placing fuses, igniting fuses, reinforcing the mineshaft and extracting iron ore.

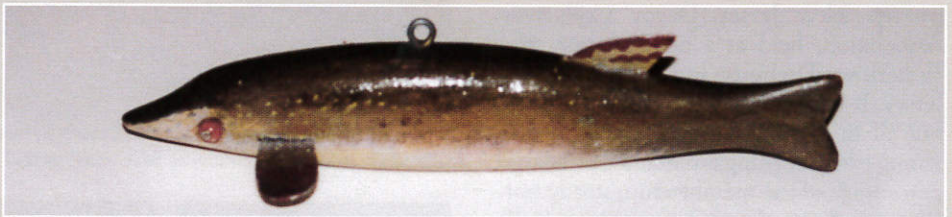
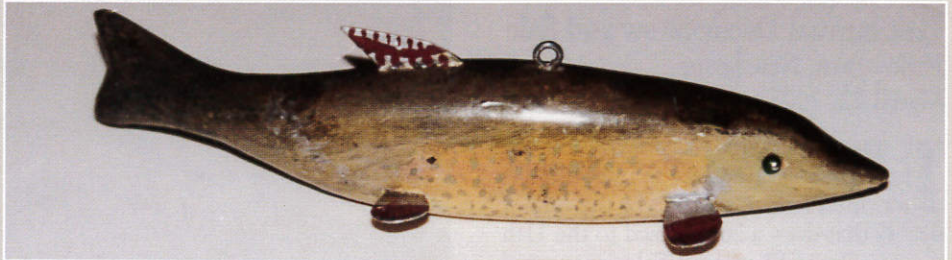
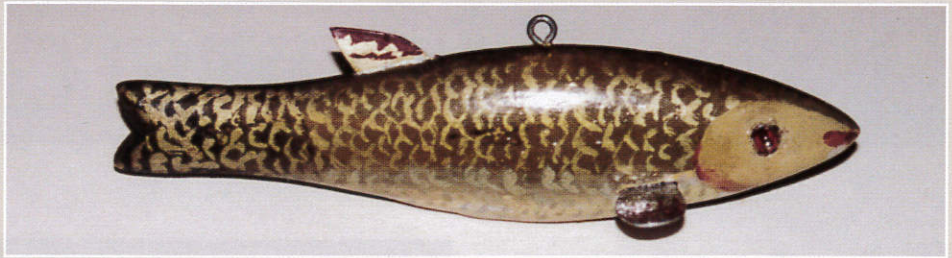
Lunka suffered a fall in the mine but escaped certain death when he caught an extended plank, which somewhat broke his fall. But he suffered a broken leg and was subsequently given light duty responsibility in the dry house, repairing the lights on mining helmets.

Lunka married in July 1930 and had two children, although one died as an infant. His surviving daughter, Mrs. Josephine Lunka Elioff, who lives in Ely provided much of the information for this story.

Around 1940 Lunka began making fish decoys and fishing lures. He enjoyed spearing on Shawaga Lake near Ely. Three of his surviving fish decoys exhibit exceptional craftsmanship. Two of them have only one pectoral fin on each side and the other has two. All have a dorsal fin and a wooden tail. Two are decorated with spots and one has painted fish scales. All are done in subtle muted colors.

In 1960 Lunka suffered a heart attack, which effectively ended his desire to spear or angle for fish. It also halted his decoy production. However he continued to carve, making jewelry boxes, picture frames and songbirds. Two days before his death on September 2, 1987 he told his daughter that he wouldn't be able to finish a cone Christmas tree that he was then creating.

Frank Minsch was born on March 7, 1900 in Pierz, Minnesota near Little Falls.



Larry Lunka's fish decoys have a wooden tail and a dorsal fin, but vary between one or two pectoral fins on each side. Some are decorated with dots and at least one has simulated fish scales painted on. All are done in subtle, muted colors.



Two Frank Minsch spearing decoys still attached to their jiggling sticks. The natural finish has circles around the body and a mouth and eyes that were wood burned into the decoys. One has a red head and both have metal tails.

His father was born in Germany, but his mother was born in Minnesota. They lived in St. Paul. Never married, Minsch was a custodian in the Pierz public schools. He died on October 26, 1975.

Two of his fish have survived and both are still attached to their jiggling sticks. Each has wood burned designs that encircle the decoys. He also wood burned the mouth and eyes. There are two pectoral fins on each side of the decoys and each

has a metal tail. One has a red painted head. They appear to have been made in the 1930s or earlier.

So the continued documentation of the makers of Minnesota's spear fishing decoys goes on. The added history does little to add or detract from the inherent value of these desirable lures. Yet those artisans who can be identified deserve their due.

