



John Pususta, one of Minnesota's talented young carvers, displays a fish freshly speared in his shanty in Montrose.

JOHN Pususta

Minnesota spear fisherman continues a local tradition

by Kirk Schnitker

Minnesota, the land of 10,000 lakes, may not be well known for its abundance of handmade waterfowl decoys and identified decoy makers, but when it comes to its legacy of spearfishing decoys, this state takes a back seat to no other. The practice of using handmade spears and fish decoys may be a fading tradition, but it's definitely not a lost art. Certainly not for John Pususta, a native of the Great North, whose family has handed down those skills from generation to generation.

The days are long gone when spear fishermen had little choice but to make their own decoys. Yet despite the availability of commercial lures, Pususta, who lives in Montrose, is among a small group who continue to make their own. For them, making the tools to hunt and fish is simply a continuance of their traditions.

Pususta's father, who died in 1981, was

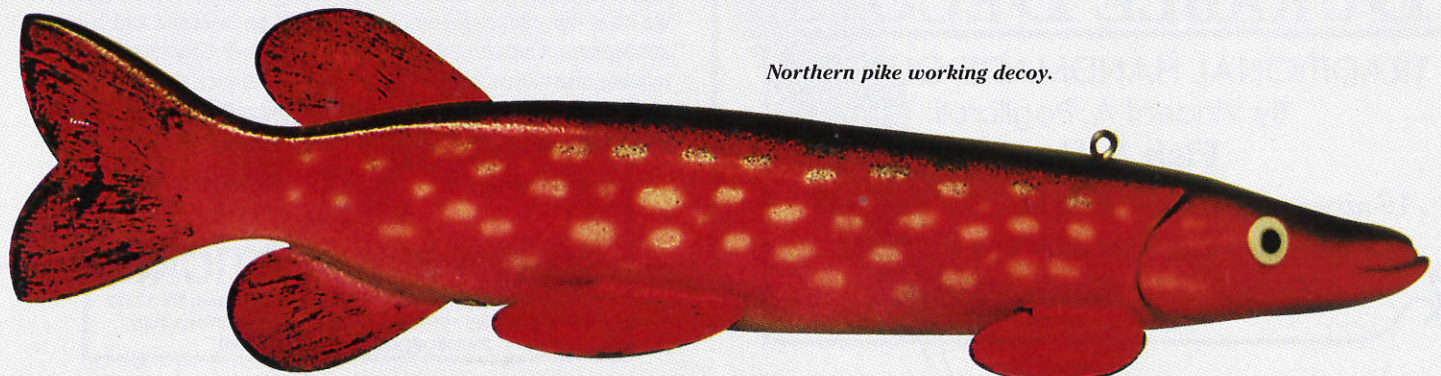
both a decoy maker and a builder of boats. From the time his sons were old enough to venture afield, he took them hunting and fishing. Both John and his older brother Greg recognized that their father's independence was strengthened through his self-reliance. They learned his talent of craftsmanship and embodied his can-do attitudes of life. Presently John is an award winning carver of working and decorative fish decoys and Greg is a well known and award winning bird carver who also makes fish decoys.

Although their father enjoyed fishing, he wasn't an avid ice fisherman. It was their uncle, James Pususta, a blacksmith who made custom spears, who actually introduced them to this winter rite of passage. In 1993, using one of his uncle's spears and a traditional red and white fish decoy, John took to the ice. While the red and white produced positive results, he felt

he could do better making one of his own. With a little coaching and encouragement from Greg, John carved and painted his first working fish decoy shortly thereafter.

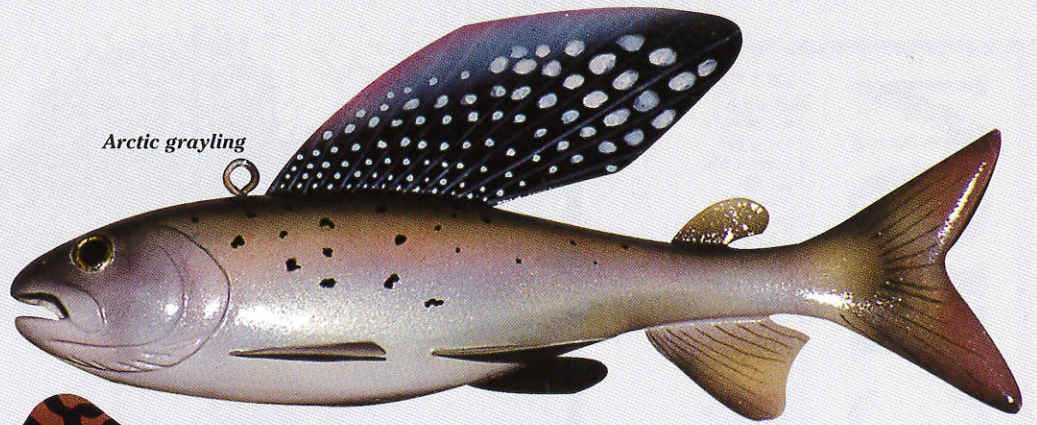
Pususta's earliest efforts were restricted to working decoys, but he now includes highly artistic decorative carvings as the main part of his repertoire. However all are made to "swim" in the water as working decoys, and they are complete with fins to make them function and the necessary lead weighting to make them sink.

Although he has been carving fish since 1994, John's output is scarce. Just recently he broke the hundred mark (he numbers all his fish) with a special carving that he awarded to his brother. Although the numbers are small, Pususta has tried his hand at a large variety of species of fish: perch, golden shiners, small and largemouth bass, crappies, sunfish, northern pike and trout - brook, rainbow, brown



Northern pike working decoy.

Arctic grayling



*Open mouthed
brook trout*



Arctic char



Decorative rainbow trout



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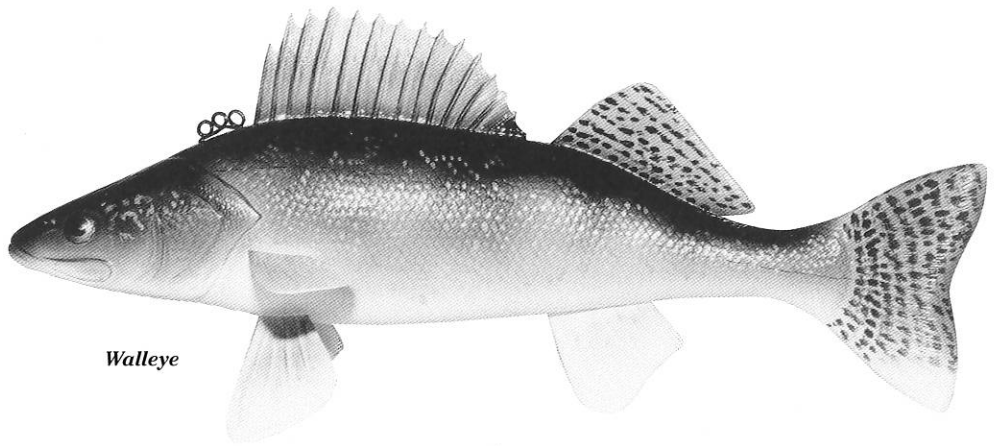
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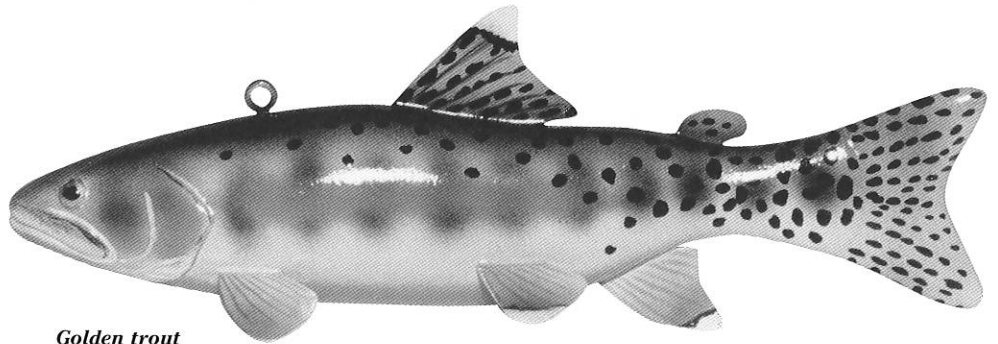
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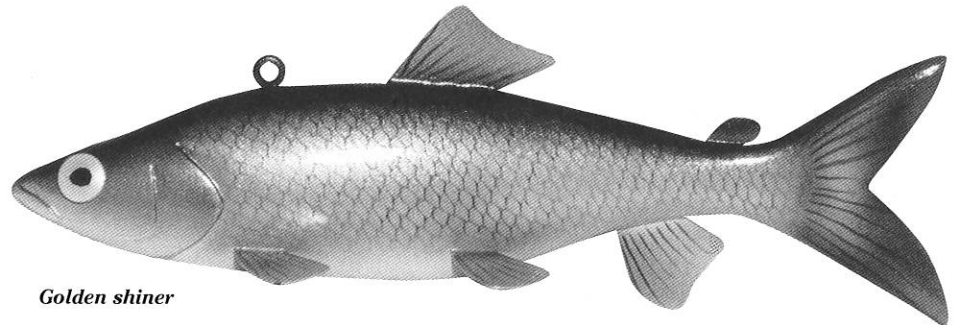
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Walleye



Golden trout



Golden shiner

and golden.

Competitions and the marketplace are the best determiners of the quality of one's work. Pususta has been extremely successful on both fronts. He won his first award in 1995 at the Northern National

All too often family traditions are lost, as generations are separated from their pasts. Yet the Pususta clan has successfully passed its torch.

Carving Competition where he took a first place in the spearing decoy division with a bass. Since then his winning ribbons have continued to accumulate. And due to the limited numbers of his carvings available,

a waiting list of eager collectors is always at hand.

A good number of fish carvers attend the annual Minnesota Decoy Collectors and Carvers Show, providing them an opportunity to compare their work with that of their peers. Intense competition is an accurate description of their efforts. At the 1999 show Pususta was selected by a panel of carvers and collectors as the Minnesota Southern Region's Decoy Carver of the Year. It is a fitting testament to his accomplishments.

All too often family traditions are lost, as generations are separated from their pasts. Yet the Pususta clan has successfully passed its torch. Although John's father and uncle are now gone, in some way their legacy continues through him. In Minnesota the taking of fish through the ice with decoys and spears is a tradition survived. Now it's John Pususta's responsibility to carry it on.

