

Tom Leagjeld:

Mystery Crafter of the Fred Gibbon Fish Decoys



Four decoys carved by Tom Leagjeld and painted by his granddaughter.

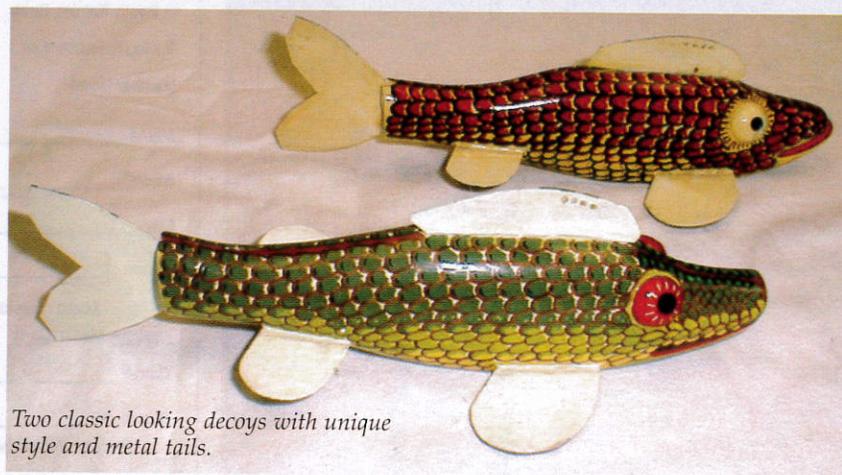
by Kirk A. Schnitker

Let me give you an inside tidbit on the fish decoy world. Many readers already have the scoop on this, one but here it is anyway. Some names attributed to decoys are incorrect and are actually contrived for one reason or another. When this happens, it's rare that the true maker is actually determined. However, let me introduce Mr. Tom Leagjeld, maker of the coveted Fred Gibbon fish decoys.

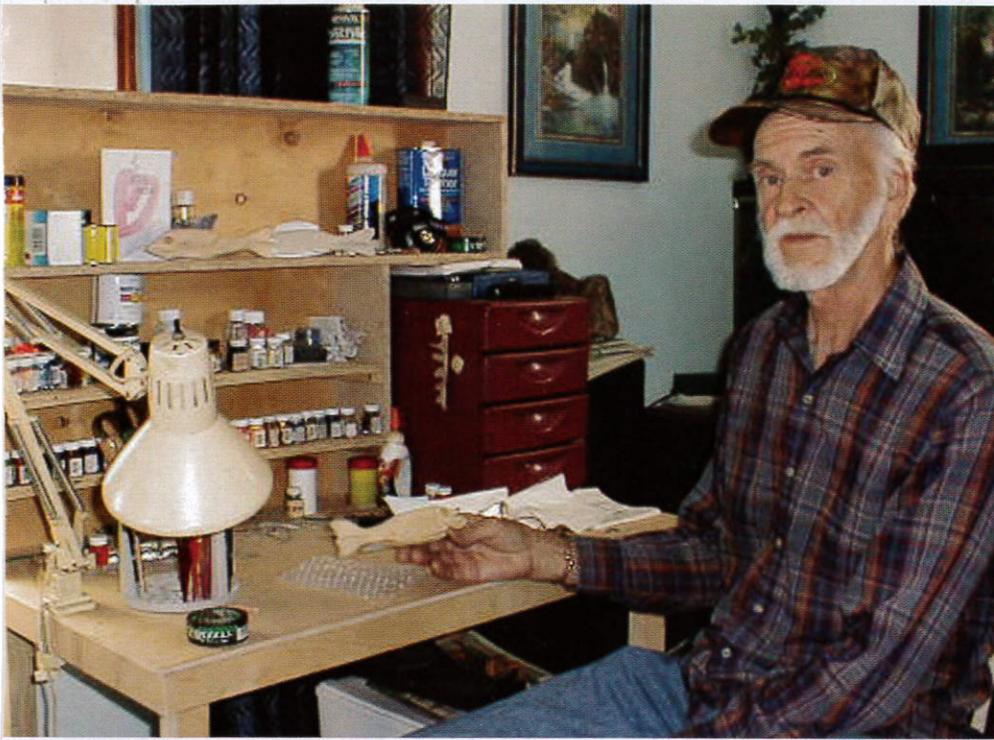
In the world of fish decoy collecting there has always been a bit of a mystery surrounding "Fred Gibbon" decoys. The decoys have attracted some attention because they are extremely well done and have commanded some high prices. For most of the past twenty-plus years few dealers or collectors truly thought these Gibbonish-looking



Very nice early sucker.



Two classic looking decoys with unique style and metal tails.



Tom at his painting bench back home.

them stuck. These decoys may always be referred to as Fred Gibbon decoys but we now know otherwise. Tom Leagjeld created this great folk art and is here today to prove it and to tell us his story.

Then & Now

Tom Leagjeld made his first fish decoy in 1969; he did it as an experiment. In 1971 or 1972 he made his first frog decoys, a task he undertook because a friend bought a frog decoy to use that Tom did not care for. He thought he could do better. For a few years thereafter he made a few decoys, but prior to the early 80s he "had not made more than a dozen." Tom tells a story of a 14" pike decoy he made around 1969 that he lost through a darkhouse hole. As he puts it, "I think he's headed northeast in Lake Osakis." With regard to the sport of ice spearfishing, Tom lives near Lake Osakis and in 1969 when he made that first decoy he decided to give it a try. He struggled at the sport and finally got a nice pike in 1970. As he puts it, he was a very happy spear

decoys were made by Fred Gibbon. If one were to read Donna Tonelli's *Top of the Line Fishing Collectibles* (Schiffer: 1997), one would discover that the author gives a tentative attribution and states that the "decoy maker that is believed to be misidentified is Fred Gibbon." Don

Peterson, author of *Folk Art Fish Decoys* (Schiffer: 1996), placed the Gibbon-like decoys in the category of "Unknown Makers." Despite all of this faltering uncertainty about these decoys, dealers and buyers (and the decoys themselves) needed a name; and the early name given to



Three Leagjeld frogs. The red one is from 2003 and the green one from early 80s. Note the bottom side of frog.

fisherman; but when he got home, he left the pike outside in the cold and his cat stole it and ate it. "That was my spearing career," he says; he went back to angling, the sport he still does to this day.

All the decoys Tom made were "just for fun," and he never had a plan to sell them. In the early 80s his sister, Jean Stone, saw some of his decoys and asked him if she could try to sell them in her antique shop. He agreed and before long she was back asking for more. He made some more for his sister and some for a dealer named Olie Olson from Wadena, Minnesota. All together, in the years between 1969 and 1981 (or 1982) he made about 84 decoys that included frogs, pike, walleyes, and four sunfish. The early sunfish were the only early fish he made with wooden tails.

In 1981 or 1982 Tom simply quit making decoys. There was a "long stretch" where he made no decoys. Then about ten years ago he made a few more but did not paint them; that brings the story up to July of 2003. Tom's granddaughter, Tamara Buchta, had taken up making decoys; and Tom had some decoys that he had carved and leaded but not painted. Tom and Tamara struck up a deal. Tamara would paint her granddad's decoys and sell them, and they would split the money from the sale. In that "bunch of unpainted decoys" was one of Tom's distinctive frog decoys that had been completed. Tamara put it out for sale along with her other merchandise. An antique dealer from another nearby town came by and recognized the frog and asked Tamara where she got the Fred Gibbon decoy. Not surprisingly, she declared the decoy was not made by Fred Gibbon but by her grandfather. The antique dealer, knowledgeable about the world of fish decoys and cognizant of the desirability of Gibbon decoys, was soon at Tom Leagjeld's door.

When the antique dealer and Tom met, the dealer quickly learned those "Gibbon" decoys were really Tom Leagjeld decoys. The dealer also learned that Tom had some other decoys from the early 80s to sell and that Tom could make some new decoys. According to Tom, when he met that dealer, the dealer



Tom with two decoys in front of his beautiful lawnscap.



Two sunfish and a lure made by Tom.

asked him to "Make me some more decoys, but don't sign them." In making that request, the dealer inadvertently triggered Tom's suspicion that there must be some reason why he didn't want them signed. At that point in time Tom had no idea that his decoys were commanding a handsome price on the market or that they were being sought after as pieces of folk art. Over a period of months, thereafter, Tom Leagjeld learned more and more about his own decoys.

Now, 23 years later, Tom learns that someone else is getting credit for his work. In fact, for a while he and his wife tried to find out "Just who is this Fred Gibbon person?" After a while he concluded, with

much thought and advice, that there is no such a person. It's just a name. Fiction or a mistake, it doesn't matter; but the need for "correcting the record" was apparent, and with this writing we're happy to set the record straight.

The Author's Quest

My first serious interest in these decoys occurred in 1998. I was in my law office, and a client came in and noticed the many spearing decoys scattered throughout. He also saw a fish decoy book on top of my desk. The client was an owner of an antique shop. He opened the decoy book to a photograph of one



Two of Tom Leagjeld's recent works; wood tails.



Five of Tom's recent decoys.

of the Gibbon decoys and declared, "Those fish were not made by Fred Gibbon; they were made by my uncle." To which I replied, "So what's his name, and where does he live?" I never did get an answer from this individual. He said his uncle did not want to be hounded to make any more decoys. "End of story," he said; "Don't ask me again; I won't tell you his name!" I must say, this incident inspired me to learn more about these decoys.

Over the years from 1998 to 2003 I prodded the client a bit more for information. The most information I ever got from him was that he and his mother, Jean Stone, ran an antique shop in Clearwater,

Minnesota in the early 80s and sold some of his uncle's decoys. He said one of the buyers was Joe Tonelli, who many in the sporting collectible world know as being an authority on sporting collectibles, including spearing decoys. According to my client, Joe had purchased, and then later sold, a number of the decoys. Recently, I asked Joe about these decoys. He recalled purchasing some of them from an antique dealer in Clearwater, Minnesota. Joe remembered that she told him that Fred Gibbon made them. As it turns out, that antique dealer was Tom Leagjeld's sister, Jean Stone. Joe went on to say that "Everybody was referring to them as Fred Gibbon decoys, but there was *also* the belief

that they *weren't* made by a Fred Gibbon." Tonelli concluded by saying, "I'm glad you found the guy; he should get the credit."

As to this author's quest to discover who really made these decoys, I hit many dead ends. My client (the antique store owner) wouldn't talk. I ran ads in the Lester Prairie, Minnesota newspaper only to later learn that Tom Leagjeld lived in Long Prairie. Calls to various historical society type sources netted nothing. Finally, in the summer of 2003 I followed up on a five-year-old lead that I had obtained indirectly from my law office client; this brought me close to being able to write the article that you are now reading. This is not to say, however, that I was not apprehensive once I met Tom Leagjeld and saw his old decoys sitting side by side next to his new ones. I knew I needed to hear his story, not from someone else, but directly from him.

Tom Leagjeld, the Artist

Thomas Raymond Leagjeld was born on September 25, 1937 in Long Prairie, Minnesota where he lives today in the home where he was

born. After high school Tom farmed out of necessity because his dad had a bad heart. In 1960 he was drafted and did a two-year stint in the U.S. Army where he served stateside. After the Army he went back to farming. In 1966 Tom began what would become his lifelong career which was as a printer working for Hart Press that later became Banta Printing. He worked in the plate room. Although printing was Tom's career, he also farmed; for 13 years he raised as many as 1,000 head of hogs. Tom gave spearing (ice fishing) a short try, but he has always loved traditional fishing and hunting. He spends over a hundred days a year fishing the lakes near his home.

Tom and his wife Mavis have

raised five children – four girls and one boy. Tom is half Norwegian and half Swede, and to this author some of that background shows up in his decoys, especially the fish. Tom's uncle was a carver and made fine violins as well as various novelty items. When Tom talks about his carving, which also includes novelty items as well as knives, he says, "Every decoy I make I want to make just a little better than the last one." Tom says, "It's a learning thing." Rather than trying to duplicate nature, he says he has "come to over exaggerate" features of a fish.

When Tom learned that his decoys were being enjoyed by collectors, he decided to try his hand again. He made a few decoys in 2003

and a few more in 2004. Just recently Tom has decided to sign and date his decoys. However, he has learned that steps are being taken to remove his name from these newer decoys. For the most part the newer decoys reflect the style of the older fish; however, he has made some changes, including wooden tails on his more recent decoys. Also, the top fins on the older ones are rounded while the newer ones have an upward curve and squared-off appearance. Of the older ones from prior to 1982 only the sunfish had wooden tails. Inspired by the Iraqi War, in 2003 Tom made approximately nine decoys in the likeness of an F18 fighter.

As to future decoys, Tom is emphatic in saying "I don't intend to make a lot of them." As he puts it, he's far too busy with his retirement duties of fishing and gardening. Tom's yard is a very unusual and beautifully landscaped sight, a testament to a gifted artist. Tom Leagjeld is a straight-up honest man. When he found out his decoys were well liked and highly sought after, he was a little amused and surprised. He is a person who one can tell doesn't want for a lot, including recognition. At the same time, there's a sense of integrity with this man that says, "This is my work; I'm glad you like it." To many fish decoy people these decoys may always have the Fred Gibbon name attached; but we also know that the credit for these artistic creations goes to no one but Tom Leagjeld, a good man with a gift. □

(Readers wishing to contact the author may do so by calling 763-493-4336 or 612-789-5151.)

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