



# Jerry Talton

*An unexpected second career*

BY ROD TAYLOR

SOME MONTHS AGO, while lamenting to our editor, Joe Engers, about the dearth of contemporary carvers to profile, he suggested Jerry Talton. "I've judged a few old decoy competitions with him and he's often been able to answer questions I've had about North Carolina decoys in general, and Core Sound decoys in particular," he said. "He's a talented carver and, maybe even just as important, he's a pretty good guy."

It turns out that Jerry is pretty knowledgeable about decoys from his native state, he's truly a terrific carver and more than a

likeable man. But in many ways the most fascinating part of this story is how, considering his incredible accomplishments, he stumbled into this hobby without any particular intent.

Most decoy carvers get into the craft because they had relatives or good friends who took them hunting as kids, which in turn led them over time into an interest in decoys. The son of a truck driver and homemaker, Talton was a surfing enthusiast on the North Carolina coast in the 1990s who never gave duck hunting or decoy making a thought.

Then, about 20 years ago, Jerry happened upon a decoy in a gift shop and, on a whim, purchased it for \$25 as a Christmas gift for his younger brother Jeff. It's probable that a decoy that cheap wasn't a collectible old bird, more likely destined as a doorstop. Nonetheless, he studied it for several weeks as the holiday approached and something clicked.

"One day it struck me that a duck decoy was nothing more than a surfboard with a head on it," he recalls. "Since I made my own surfboards, I figured that it wouldn't take too much more effort to make duck decoys," he says with a laugh.

*Jerry Talton has described his Core Sound-inspired decoys, such as this wigeon and bluebill, as "a stylized version of reality, stripped down to the bare essentials."*





*Talton fully rigs his decoys, such as this ruddy duck and blue-winged teal, to ensure they float evenly.*



Figuring that he could use a little instruction on making decoys, he went to see Don Walston, a local decoy collector who was an expert on Core Sound decoys. "He wouldn't even talk to me," Jerry says. "He told me to buy Jack Dudley's book, 'Carteret Waterfowl Heritage,' and then come back and talk to him about decoys." Walston ended up becoming a great friend and mentor in honing his interests in both carving and collecting.

Soon after that conversation, Talton met

Gail Gerringer, who encouraged him to try drawing his own patterns to make his decoys unique. "Those first patterns weren't very good," he says, "but it was a start." She also suggested he join the Core Sound Decoy Carvers Guild, where he met Curt Salter and Walter "Brother" Gaskill, among others, who were early influences on his budding carving career.

Several decades ago, the late Beach Haven, New Jersey carver Bill Cranmer was interviewed for an article in Decoy Hunter

magazine. "Everybody knows what a duck looks like," Cranmer observed. "People collect decoys because they're interested in what the carver thinks the duck looks like."

Arguably, it's still the best explanation for why decoy collectors are attracted to a particular maker's decoys. Virtually all collectors, particularly those who prefer vintage decoys, turn up their noses at decorative carvings that look exactly like the actual duck, right down to the wood-burned feathers. As one astute collector once com-

*Hooded merganser with a stylized crest and slightly raised wings. JOSHUA HINSON COLLECTION*



*Flat-bottomed brant described by its owner as "so simple and so perfect." PETE PETERSON COLLECTION*





Miniature wigeon pair mounted  
on small wooden bases.  
TOM REED COLLECTION



mented, "Decoys are the art of reduction." And maybe that's the attraction.

The first reaction to a Jerry Talton decoy might be that the carving is pretty simple, the painting is sort of plain and there's nothing particularly special about them. Yet, the more one looks at them, they bring to mind Japanese calligraphy - simple shapes decorated by bold strokes with minimal but key splashes of color. The simplicity is deceptively elegant and actually not simple at all.

"I like the lack of detail," observed noted Virginia carver Pete Peterson. "His decoys are just what they need to be and nothing else. My favorite is a brant that's stayed on my kitchen table since I got it ten years ago. It's just so simple and so perfect that I haven't found one that's prettier."

"I think you can be bold without being gaudy," Jerry adds.

"I want every decoy to be the best I've ever made," he says. "I want the owner's grandchildren to sue each other over who gets my decoys," he adds with a grin.

The majority of Talton's hollow-carved decoys are made of northern white cedar and painted with artist's tube oils. "I use a molded belly weight that's traditional to Core Sound decoys to get my decoys to float evenly," he says. And since he does hunt over his own decoys, a hobby he also stumbled onto, he can attest to that.

Unlike most carvers, Talton doesn't necessarily put eyes on his decoys. "Core Sound tradition holds that by the time the ducks come in and notice the lack of eyes, it's too late," he explains. That said, some

of the finest Core Sound decoys have eyes, so Jerry does include them on a number of his decoys.

Talton tries to make a couple of decoys a week, for a total of just short of a hundred per year, which keeps him pretty busy considering he works full-time for the Emerald Isles Parks and Recreation Department, as well as running a swimming pool maintenance company with his wife of twenty years, Amie.

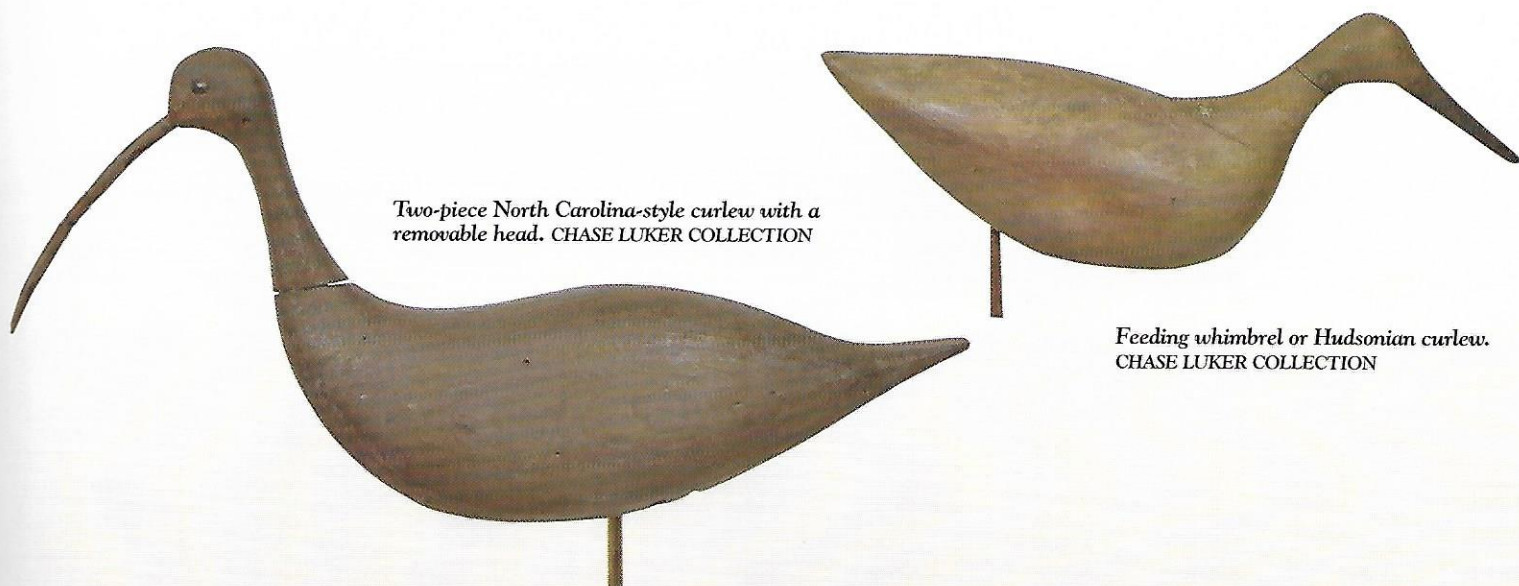
"I have been taught that if you do good work, you will get fast; but if you do fast work, you'll never get good," he says. His wife and his daughters, Catie and Emaline, always know where to find dad at the end of the day - in his shop making decoys.

One of Talton's other passions is the popular Core Sound Decoy Carvers Guild (decoyguild.com), where he serves as vice-president of this 350-member group that was founded in 1987. His wife Amie pitches in, publishing the club's newsletter and handling their social media account.



This gadwall is decorated with simple yet effective shapes of key splashes of color.





*Two-piece North Carolina-style curlew with a removable head. CHASE LUKER COLLECTION*

*Feeding whimbrel or Hudsonian curlew. CHASE LUKER COLLECTION*

Each year they sponsor the Core Sound Decoy Festival on Harkers Island, North Carolina, which is traditionally held the first weekend in December. "We're told it's one of the best shows on the East Coast," he notes proudly. To honor his accomplishments, he was the featured carver in 2015.

In addition to the festival, the organization participates in summer camps for 200 students through the Down East library, as well as sponsoring Boy Scout decoy classes and adult classes that feature noted New Jersey carver J.P. Hand as the instructor.

Known by many as the sage of Cape May County, J.P. Hand has become the Johnny Appleseed of decoy making. He has invested years of time and effort conducting carving seminars in North Carolina teaching scores of novice and intermediate carvers.

"I invited Jerry up to Tuckerton (N.J.) years ago and taught him how to make a pair of hollow-carved Jersey-style American mergansers. The pair was pretty good," Hand relates with a grin. "But over the years, Jerry has developed into the whole package. He has the creativity of George

Strunk but is still true to his regional roots."

Talton's Core Sound old squaw decoy is a perfect example of the beauty of keeping it simple. The black, tan and white primary colors are clearly delineated, but not in a way that seems forced. The three colors naturally flow in a way that defines the sections of the decoy precisely while at the same time looking minimal. The result is a classic style decoy that looks right at home in the twenty-first century.


"I try to capture a stylized version of reality, stripped down to the bare essentials in my decoys," Jerry says.

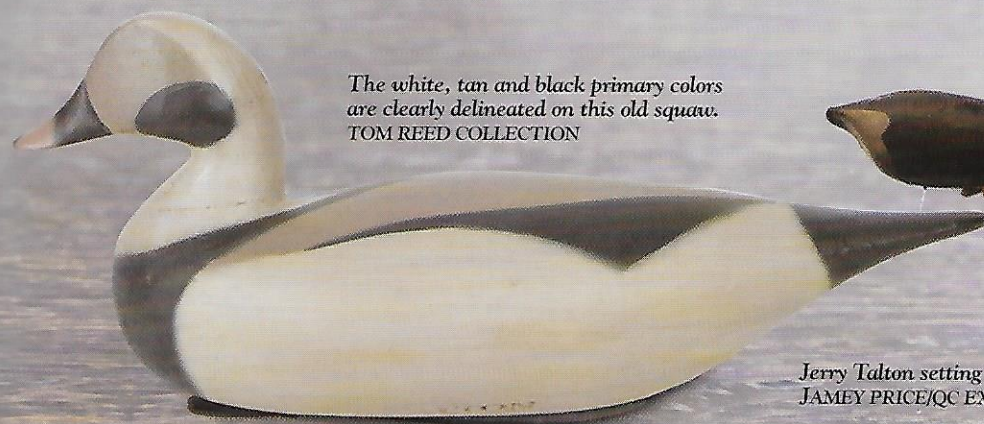
"Jerry is not only a master carver, he's great at antiquing his birds," Hand adds. "He just loves the tradition and history."

Having bought into those traditions, Jerry also felt a kinship with the decoys of earlier generations. So he's also become a decoy collector. His favorite bird is a beach robin or red knot by Alvin Harris that was given to him by his first mentor, Don Walston. He's quite proud of a Mitchell Fulcher brant in his collection, as most consider him the finest of the

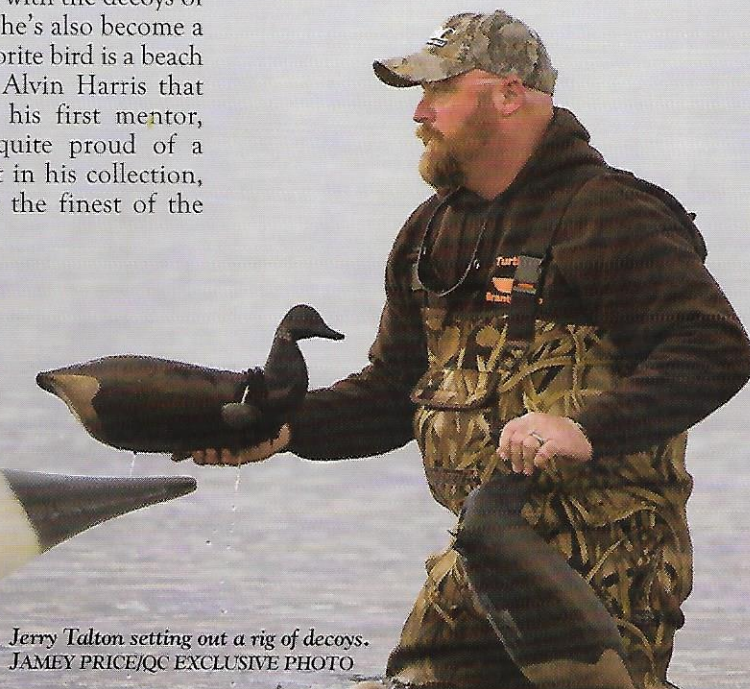
Core Sound decoy makers.

Talton lives in Stella, North Carolina, a small town on the White Oak River that's ten miles from the barrier island known as Bogue Banks. His body of work is found in both collections and hunting rigs throughout the world. In addition to his working decoys, he occasionally takes commissions for unique items, such as whales, roosters or mermaids.

Those lucky enough to obtain one of these iconic Core Sound-inspired decoys from this delightful Southern gentleman would have a hard time believing that it was an accidental career. But hey, if not for the chance purchase of a \$25 decoy, he might instead be making surfboards. 



*The white, tan and black primary colors are clearly delineated on this old squaw. TOM REED COLLECTION*



*Jerry Talton setting out a rig of decoys. JAMEY PRICE/QC EXCLUSIVE PHOTO*