

New Faces, Old Times: Waterfowling the Way It Should Be

By Chase Luker

There are many places in our little world that just seem big beyond belief. Decoy collectors, by and large, are well-traveled and undaunted by distant trips for the perfect decoy. Still, the one place that none of us can genuinely visit is Yesteryear. We've all imagined the Golden Era of waterfowl hunting – our favorite decoys pulling in wads of wild canvasbacks and what-nots over churlish surf. We can even imagine the great decoys lost to "time and tide," spectacular specimens left to Mother Nature's devices and Father Time's impatience.

Thankfully, a handful of dyed-in-the-wool traditionalists can speak to all of these things, with the exception, of course, of the sky-darkening flocks that are documented as thriving over a century ago. Two such people are Jerry Talton and Chandler Sawyer. Between the two of them, I suspect that over two thousand decoys have been produced in a traditional, North Carolina way; which, by the way is different for both of them.

Chandler Sawyer is Currituck County's Native Son. There's no one alive who can make a true Churches Island decoy, aside from him. It's in his blood. The same can be said for Jerry Talton, except that he's a Core Sounder, making birds in the Carteret County fashion – a school far different than the manner and style of Currituck.

Just as much as Sawyer may be the second coming of his great-grandfather, Robert Morse, only Mitchell Fulcher's decoys rival Talton's talents. They both have hunting rigs full of their own, native birds. They enjoy hosting other hunters, eager to do things the old-timey way. The two of them serve as "Deans" for their re-



Retired from the rig, the ruddies seem relaxed on the top of Sawyer's Cedar Island Bay blind.

gions. Whether it's collecting, sharing, or making decoys, they're at the top of any good Southern Collector's Rolodex. Aside from that, they're good men, donating and gifting their talents for the greater good.

Those familiar with North Carolina birds, though, are all too familiar with the oftentimes contentious bias between the Currituck and Carteret County decoys. Those who favor simple, boldly-posed, large birds find themselves as fans of Currituck County birds; while those seeking a more refined and finished bird often look for Carteret County examples. There seems to be no such thing as an in-between to many collectors.

But what happens when the two schools come together? Better yet, when the state's best two traditional makers collaborate to produce a stand of decoys? While imaginations could run wild contemplating the

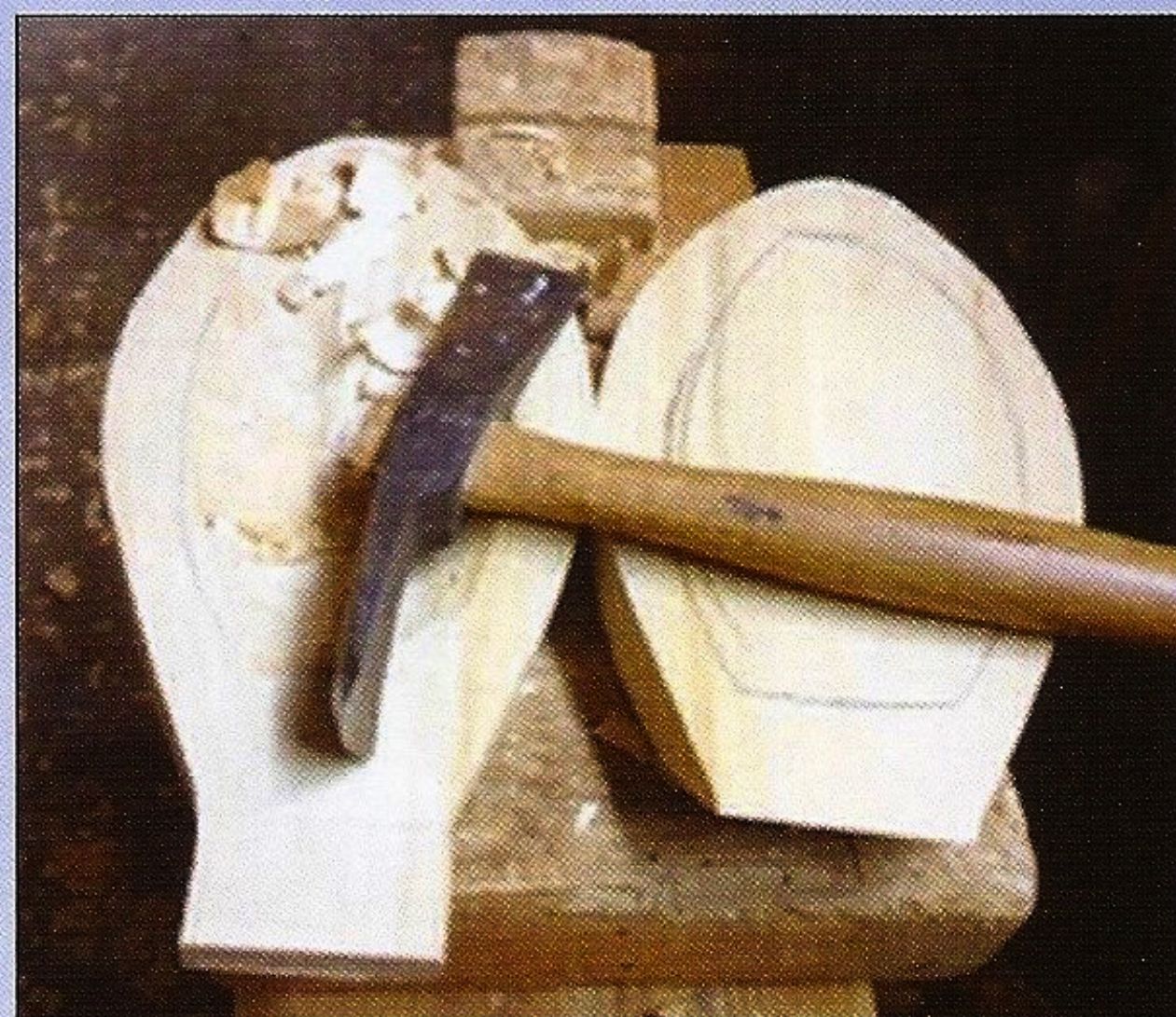
end result, what's most noteworthy is that the two great decoy makers actually did truly blend the two different styles into a gunning classic – a decoy that fulfills each man's need for a durable hunting decoy that fools birds and pleases collectors.

And, as a bonus, the two carvers promised to commit at least one decoy to a good cause to be determined – decoys with a cause, if you will. And for fun's sake – and to add a little provenance to these special birds – the two also collaborated on a traditional waterfowl hunt over these decoys. As the accompanying photos depict, the duo opted to carve a stand of 12 ruddy ducks, North Carolina's most unique decoy species – and also one of collectors' favorites.

Six of the bodies were chopped by Talton (which were also hollowed), while Sawyer carved, fitted, and applied the heads. The remaining six



Fresh off the painting bench, each decoy's surface is perfectly patinated.



After the initial blanks were cut, Talton hollowed out his share with an adz, an ode to Jamie Hand and his Jersey roots, a man Talton calls "the ultimate rig-maker."



Powerful and playful form certainly transcends paint when considering North Carolina's traditional decoys – a look around either maker's shop proves such!

The fascination with making a rig of decoys captivates most casual collectors, but most decoy makers prefer the notion and romance of cranking out a pile of like-patterned decoys.

bodies were carved by Sawyer, while Talton completed the details. Talton also painted and rigged the birds; and while no two are alike, just as an old-time rig of birds, they all carry an identifiable pair of marks that signify their importance – both of the makers' brands.

Sawyer's bodies are easily identified by a broader paddle tail, while Talton's bodies have a smallish paddle, and a recessed shelf for the head. Both have "winded" head postures, those that are most indicative of the bold Churches Island style that so many collectors love about the early birds.

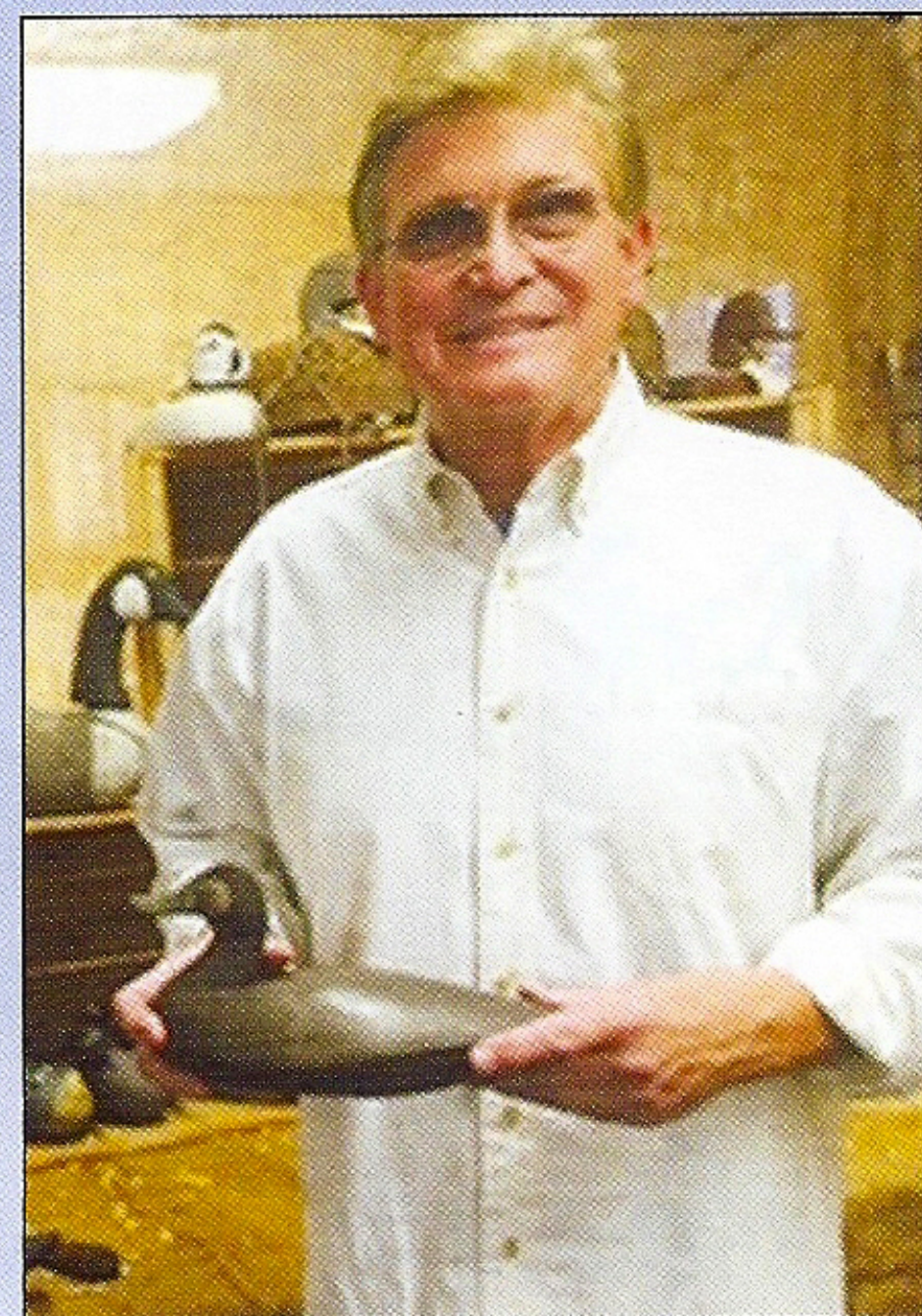
Sawyer's heads are much more representative of the standard battery bird, while Talton's are



Quick collaboration resulted in a blended ballast to balance the decoys – all are alike, but unlike anything found on either maker's prior rigs.



Talton teaches Sawyer the best knots to tie while Sawyer assures him that his anchors are without comparison.



Jesse Sorrel collected "the last" of the famous rig, probably with far more fanfare than the humble man wanted. His strong collection of antique Carolina birds just became even more legendary, though.

reminiscent of what one would find in a Core Sound decoy – a thick, round neck and refined bill delineation. The casual collector might not notice the differences, but for those who are deft at diagnosing decoys, the styles blend perfectly while representing both traditional schools.

Once thrown overboard in Currituck Sound, it would be an understatement to say that a ruddy duck or two was duped, too! As a member of the lucky sporting party employed to baptize the rig, it's truthful to report that the decoys floated and fooled, nicely, as literally hundreds of ducks and geese stooled over the decoys throughout the morning. They looked at home on the fabled Currituck Sound, right where ruddy ducks gained their fame as "dollar ducks."

Still, just as this article is about to change dramatically, so too did the little ruddy duck rig. Sure enough, all of the birds were sent down the road to lucky collectors, save for one particular decoy, subsequently donated to a special North Carolina-based 501(c)3 (charitable, non-profit organization), "Love for Layla."

To make a long story short, carver Talton first encountered "Love for Layla" while traveling to pick up juniper, noticing signs for a benefit event in virtually every neighborhood he passed through. Lo and behold, he was driven to ask his friend and legendary auctioneer Timmy Evans about the effort. The organization initially was formed to support

Layla, a special little girl with a difficult brand of cancer. The success of the endeavor, however, has allowed the family to also reach out and support other families that they encounter while seeking similar treatment. To say that hundreds of people have been helped by Layla, or the organization itself, is an understatement. It's a wonderful story that my loose grip on the English language can't describe, but it's certainly worth a deeper look for those so inclined to insist on good outlooks for tough times.

In any case, the special decoy would be sold at the Core Sound Decoy Festival's Annual Auction, held December 5, 2015. It's always a lively event that's heavy on inventory-type decoys for dealers, a dozen or so choice birds, and a collection of local contemporary birds...but with Timmy Evans calling bids, it turns in to quite the event. He graciously donates his time and skill to the event, and the patrons aren't disappointed.

Roughly 120 lots were previewed throughout the morning, but the one decoy that drew the most interest, and subsequently the highest bid, was the final Sawyer/Talton ruddy duck. It was widely publicized and the tent was filled with both decoy lovers, and those with love for Layla. If you, the reader, cannot imagine Ned Burgess and Eldon Willis taking a backseat to a 3-year-old girl, then you are short on creativity... since that is exactly what transpired!

Certainly, Layla and her family were on hand! And after a brief description of the cause, bidder cards leapt in to the air while tears gave up to gravity. Humble decoy men and selfless collectors are a powerful force. One of this writer's favorite collectors won the bird for a staggering number. He wanted the bird and wanted to help, and he did! The North Carolina Decoy World took pause as a tent full of folks hugged, cried, and congratulated.

Personally, this moment will never be forgotten. It was both dramatic and tender – two words that rarely share a sentence, especially in a decoy report. This event, this experience, gives new meaning to the words – "important decoy" and reminds us of how decoys can be, and still are, a strong part of our community and family traditions. Particular birds speak to our souls – the little rig of ruddies that Chandler Sawyer and Jerry Talton turned out did just that. These two guys are "world-class good," and they share their talents with the world. But they, too, take a backseat to the Greater Good...and a 3 year old girl named Layla.

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