

CARVING: TUCKERTON SEAPORT STYLE

“Do you know who Babe Ruth is? His picture is on the wall behind you. He used to go hunting in this area,” decoy carver/demonstrator Dick Jessen of Manahawkin asks. Thirty-some smiling heads nod in agreement and turn around.

Just a minute before Dick had elicited “ughs” and groans from the children as he told them, “There were no grocery stores or Burger Kings, so a hundred or more years ago you kids would have been eating whatever your parents could shoot or harvest – probably a lot of duck or goose.”

Thousands of New Jersey school children visit the Tuckerton Seaport for guided tours and special educational and environmental programs during the school year. One of the first stops for the children might be to Jay C. Parker’s Decoy Carving Shop where carvers are on hand daily to explain carving in the old Barnegat Bay style.

A combination of entertainer, historian, award winning carver, and just plain congenial gentleman, Dick Jessen thoroughly enjoys his Mondays and Fridays carving in Jay C. Parker’s Decoy Shop. “All of us hollow out our decoys. I put a penny in each of mine. Some people put in a kernel of corn so the duck won’t go hungry,” he tells the group. Laughter erupts.

“I started carving when I was 14 because I wanted to go hunting, and no one would give me money to buy decoys at 88 cents apiece.” Young faces remain impassive, completely unable to grasp this concept.

Dick first explains what decoys are used for and why. He gives a step by step account on how they are made, starting out with a bandsaw; then gouging out chips of Atlantic white cedar from both halves, which fly all over his attentive visitors. Next he chops off “everything that doesn’t look like a duck” with a hatchet. “You get all those big old hatchet marks smooth with a rasp; then finish it off with sandpaper.” He explains how he carves the head separately and then attaches it to the duck’s body.

Guided tours of the Seaport are offered daily during the season for all ages. It is common to see three generations enjoying these enlightening educational and environmental tours. Young families with infants in strollers find the boardwalk along Tuckerton Creek a fine place to walk. Visitors find buildings filled with knowledgeable volunteers, boatbuilders, or maybe a lady in Colonial costume.

Fred Reitmeyer also carves two days a week at the Seaport. “I learned to carve in my grandfather’s boatbuilding workshop along Nacote Creek,” Fred explains to an enthralled visitor. “Bits and pieces of wood were always lying about, perfect for a young boy to play with.” Grandfather Carl Adams was a noted boat builder in the Atlantic County area.

Fred enjoys passing examples of his work around showing the different stages of decoy carving. Visitors of all ages first put the wood to their noses, enjoying the natural smell of Jersey white cedar. Heads shake in wonderment at his talent as a shore bird ready to be painted passes from hand to hand. Fred shows the glass eyes that are used today as opposed to the painted ones of the past.

Just down the boardwalk is Hurley Conklin’s Decoy Carving Shop. Some think it is Malcolm Robinson’s second home. Sometimes he probably does too. Malcolm is a Tuckerton Seaport trustee and past president of the board of trustees. He has spent countless hours demonstrating his technique and doing good deeds for the Seaport.

Adorned in colorful suspenders and with a twinkle in his eye, Malcolm has a winning way with everyone. He tells how slab wood was saved for carvers at local sawmills a century ago. “Today’s carvers are really smart,” he quips. “We have to buy our wood.” Of course, some of Malcolm’s expertise may be hereditary – he is the great grandson of the famous carver Harry Shourds.

Preserving the heritage of the New Jersey baymen is the mission of the Seaport. Reproductions of Parson's Clam House, Napoleon Kelly's Oyster House, the lure of the Hotel DeCrab, Perrine Boat Works, the Hester Sedge Gun Club, and others tell the stories of the bountiful days of oysters, clams, birds, fish and boat building. Three historic buildings grace the Seaport property: the late 1600's Mordecai Andrews Homestead sits up in the woods; the early 1700's Sunny Brae Saltbox is now open for special programs on Colonial times; and the Sea Captain's House has an impressive Victorian parlor for all to see.

Carver Clarence Fenimore explains the difference between the Barnegat Bay style of decoy carving and the Delaware Bay style. Examples of both are displayed on a table in Jay C. Parker's Decoy Carving Shop in front of him. All Fenimore birds are, of course, done on his carving bench. While Clarence meets with visitors, his wife Barbara donates her time in the Tuckerton Seaport Gift Shop.

With the audience in the palm of his hand, Dick Jessen ends up showing how he paints layer after layer so that his work looks like real feathers. "Today all of us carvers make decoys to fool the judges, not the ducks," he says, referring to decoy shows. (Seaport carvers are always among the top winners at the Ocean County Decoy Show in the fall). Blue, red and yellow ribbons hang from the neck of some of his prize-winners.

"Why are you really here?" an inquisitive youngster ask Dick. With a smile he answers, "Because I get to meet nice people like all of you, and my wife doesn't yell at me for making a mess!" Everyone understands and snickers. "And I am not Jay Parker, he died years ago," he tells a teacher as she tries to equate the life size Jay Parker picture on the wall with Dick's face.

Needless to say, the Dick Jessen show is not to be missed. Nor are those of Fred Reitmeyer, Malcolm Robinson, Clarence Fenimore, or any of the other generous Tuckerton Seaport carvers. The Tuckerton Seaport carvers educate, entertain, and keep visitors coming back for more.