

# THE WILDFOWLER

DECEMBER 2016

A PUBLICATION OF THE ATLANTIC WILDFOWL HERITAGE MUSEUM AND THE BACK BAY WILDFOWL GUILD

## *Back Bay Wildfowl Guild Memories*

### *Charlie Seidel 1939-2016*

*Lynn Hightower*

From the archives of the Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum, The Virginian –Pilot, History of the Back Bay Wildfowl Guild and Mid-Atlantic Wildfowl Festival by Emma Meehan, and Past editions of The Wildfowler,

On November 30, 2016 Charlie Seidel slipped his earthly bonds and joined the rest of the angels in the carving shack of his heavenly home.

Charlie was a friend and mentor to me as he was to hundreds of other carvers up and down the Eastern Flyway and around the world. I took a carving class with Charlie in the early eighties. He patiently taught me the correct way to layout and carve a duck's head. He taught me to carve with a knife. Charlie would have never considered picking up a power tool. He always stayed true to the methods and practices of his apprenticeship as a young boy growing up in New Jersey. He learned his skill and craftsmanship from old school decoy carvers living in and around the Delaware River. Mark Cromwell shared with me that Charlie would visit Mark's parents antique business on a regular basis in late 70's early 80's looking for old decoys. "He would even write to my parents from the ship, while he was still in the Navy, telling them the date and time his ship would dock so they would know to expect him," Mark said. Hank Grigolite and Bill Walsh brought me some pictures. They both knew there would be great interest in sharing memories of Charlie. Charlie Hurd paid me a visit hoping to add some substance to this article; but, his emotions were too raw and the loss of his friend overwhelmed him. He did help find a really nice article about Charlie that was published December 17, 2012 by Margret Matray. The following is a reprint of that article:



## Virginia Beach decoy carver's

### life is just ducky

The Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center is in the business of showcasing creatures in settings that imitate their natural environments. The harbor seals have a pool, where they dive and sunbathe on the rocks. The loggerhead turtles glide through an aquarium, one that looks like the waters near the Chesapeake Bay Light Tower. Beyond the river otter enclosure, just before the seahorses and the 750-gallon crab tank, a small wooden shack displays an exhibit of a different kind: the natural habitat of a guy named Charles and his wooden ducks. His enclosure is just big enough for a workbench, stove, chair, reference books and a tree stump where he keeps his business cards. Faux windows look out onto a painted scene of waterfowl flying above a marsh. Aquarium visitors can find him there from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., five days a week. He's the only human on display. Charles Seidel is as much a fixture of the aquarium as the sand tiger sharks and cownose rays. He's been there for 26 years, as long as the aquarium itself has existed.

"Charlie's like a living exhibit for us," aquarium spokeswoman Joan Barns said. In an aquarium, you'd expect the crustaceans, mollusks and fish. But a duck decoy-carving shack? Seidel explains it this way: "Yes, there are marine dwellers, and yes, there are bay animals. But the aquarium tries to showcase the history and culture of the region, too. The marsh is a big part of that, and carving shacks have always been located on the water. In that sense, he fits right in."

The Back Bay Wildfowl Guild, a group of wild game bird enthusiasts, donated money to help the aquarium get off the ground in the 1980s, Seidel said. The aquarium decided to display a carving shack, and the guild gathered saws, scissors, photographs and fishing lures to hang on the walls to make the shack look authentic. Volunteer carvers manned the shack in its first months, but Seidel submitted his resume for a full-time position. When the aquarium came calling, he went right to work.

Seidel grew up in New Jersey and hunted with hand-me-down decoys on the Delaware River. Look on the wall of his aquarium carving shack and you'll find two photographs of a young Seidel in the 1950s and '60s, ducks strung over his shoulders. Hollow wooden ducks spring leaks over time. Their necks and bills break. So a neighbor showed Seidel how to repair them. By age 13, Seidel was carving and painting. He learned how to draw patterns and cut bodies with a band saw. He learned to shape heads with a knife. He learned hollow ducks are made with three pieces of wood, solid ones with two, and that rot-resistant white cedar makes the best kind of decoy.

Even while at sea in the Navy, Seidel carved. He brought his tools with him and taught fellow sailors the trade. It's been said that he left a trail of sawdust and woodchips behind him. "They always knew which ship he had been on," said Seidel's wife, Maureen. While stationed in Puerto Rico, Seidel carved enough decoys to fill a closet. When the movers arrived to get the Seidel's things, "They were shocked when they opened that door and saw all of those," Maureen Seidel said. Seidel's decoys are meant to be used. He insists the ducks' decorative nature is secondary, even though he uses a graining comb to etch vermiculated feathers into the ducks' wings. "We do that for ourselves," he said, "not for the ducks." Seidel has taught classes and traveled the country for shows. He doesn't hunt much anymore, but still, he carves. Most decoys he's either sold or given away as gifts. At age 73, Seidel has made 4,000 of them. The wooden birds displayed in the shack inside the aquarium's Marsh Pavilion are all his - from the ruddy duck and canvasback to the half-sized goose, Chinese Mandarin and passenger pigeon. The hunting licenses on the wall belonged to Seidel, and he also carved the wooden dog that lies on the shack's floor, next to baskets of sandpaper and wood scraps. Seidel calls him Mr. Dudley, named after a Back Bay decoy carver. Seidel keeps decoys in various states of completion on hand, so he can explain the process to passers-by. Mostly they want to know what kind of wood he uses (white cedar) and how long it takes to finish a duck (seven hours, over a couple days). Decades of hunting and decoy making have taught Seidel bird biology and waterfowl history. Ask, and Seidel has the answer. In an aquarium filled with jellies, lobsters and crab exhibits, he said, "I'm the only one who can talk back to you."



**“Charles Seidel, a duck decoy carver, is the only human on display at the Va. Aquarium.”** A December 2012 Tweet from Sarah Hutchins!

Coot Decoy by Charlie Seidel sold at Auction for \$125.00



Sharing a joke with Ken Wilson



DUNLINS



CURLEW



Rounding the edges







THE HATCHETT



OYSTER CATCHER



OLD CROW



Charlie was more than just a World Class Master Carver. He was a devoted husband, a loving and caring father, a retired Master Chief, an excellent instructor, a mentor, and a loyal and committed friend.

A memorial fund has been started to purchase a plaque on the Turner Sculpture for Charlie. If you would like to contribute to this fund, please contact Lynn Hightower at [director@atwildfowl.org](mailto:director@atwildfowl.org) or call the museum at (757) 437-8432 for further instructions. A memorial table has been set up in the Edgar T. Brown Gallery to display some of Charlie's work. If you have works of Charlie's you would like to display please contact the Director



*Upcoming Guild Events:*

12/13/2016: Christmas Party FOP#8 6:00

(See information below)

**No Board Meeting in December**

01/03/2017: Back Bay Wildfowl Guild

Membership Meeting 7:00pm, Social 6:30pm

Speaker: Edward Higginbotham-Blind Carver

Sold his work at Delta Waterfowl Festival

01/17/2017: Board Meeting [at the Museum]

**CHRISTMAS PARTY INFORMATION**

**PLEASE CALL THE MUSEUM TO REGISTER**

Our Annual Christmas Party will be held Tuesday December 13, 2016, 6:00pm at the Fraternal Order of Police Hall located at 961 S. Birdneck Road in Virginia Beach, VA. Please use this event as an opportunity to invite guests who would be interested in joining the Back Bay Wildfowl Guild in 2017. This is a potluck supper so please call the museum (757-437-8432) to let us know how many people will be attending in your group and what dish you will be bringing to the dinner. The Guild will provide ham and fried chicken. Beer, wine, and mixers will be provided; BYOB on any other alcohol. Spectrum Puppets will be providing entertainment.

**DOCENT CLASSES TO START JANUARY 10, 2017**

Docent Classes will start January 10, 2017 in the de Witt Cottage at 6:00pm. If you have some time during the summer to help visitors at the de Witt Cottage to enjoy and learn more about the cottage, Back Bay, the de Witt family, local hunt clubs, decoys, carving and Virginia Beach history then you will want to attend these fun and educational classes. Come out and enjoy friends, soup, sandwich, and drink. All while learning more about your Back Bay Wildfowl Guild Heritage. Let's see how many docents we can train this winter. Email [director@atwildfowl.org](mailto:director@atwildfowl.org) or call (757) 437-8432 if you are interested.

**COLLECTOR'S SHELF**

This is a picture of "the good old days"....how things used to be. This photo from 2016 depicts a shed full of hand carved wooden decoys made in the 1920s-1940s by some of Currituck County's best decoy makers. Making these decoys was a very labor intensive process. Back in the day, these decoys were treated as mere tools. Today, they are cherished as historical items and folk art pieces. Do you have any old decoys in the barn, attic, shed or den? Collectors are snapping them up.

Decoys used on Back Bay and Currituck Sound are finally getting the recognition that they deserve. They won't win any beauty contest but their sturdy form is highly desirable. It's been said that our local decoys



are "crude" compared to some of the refined "lures" made in the Northeast and elsewhere. Truth be told, the northern decoys that were hollowed out and finely painted would not have survived the rigors of the market hunting that took place locally. Our local decoys are not "crude" but rather "rugged" with excellent form and a platinum [market hunting](#) history to boot. To give you a sense of the local market hunting operations that took place here, I quote Mr. Ellie Saunders (1884-1969) from Currituck County: "My family would ship out two to three thousand ducks and three hundred geese EACH WEEK during the gunning season." [Wow! The Griggs brothers from Currituck County are rumored to have set the record for one day kills. In 1900, they shot 892 ducks in one day on Currituck Sound. In 1917, they broke that record by shooting over 1,500 ducks in a day on Back Bay!](#) If you would like a free evaluation of your old decoys, contact Jeff Tinkham at 757-724-7131 or [jeff@tinkhamlaw.com](mailto:jeff@tinkhamlaw.com).

#### CORRECTION FROM LAST MONTH'S NEWSLETTER

In last month's newsletter I mentioned that Harvey Ackiss had been commissioned by Virginia Tech to carve a wild turkey that was still on display. In fact, it was our very own Fletcher Bryant who commissioned Harvey to carve two pair of fighting gobblers. One pair was given to the school and the second pair was given to the head football coach, Bill Dooley. Dooley led the Hokies to the program's first-ever bowl win, in the [1986 Peach Bowl](#) over [NC State](#). It was during this game that Coach Dooley was presented with the carving. Below is a print of the carving that Fletcher sketched to help pay for the carving. Also a picture of a pair of turkeys Harvey carved for Fletcher Bryant.



#### FROM THE MUSEUM DIRECTOR

Wednesday was a tough and emotional day here at the Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum. People coming and going eyes filled with concern and hesitation. Charlie Seidel was the face and voice of our organization over the last two decades. He entertained thousands of visitors at the Marine Science Museum and introduced them to our guild and museum. Now he is gone and a large void exist that he filled so well for so many years. So I looked for a story of hope (other than the story of Jesus) that I thought would be fitting (for bird people) for this moment in time. It's a story that a friend sent me several years ago. It's been around on the internet so you may have seen this story before; but, it is worth repeating in order to establish renewed faith!

#### *Freedom and Jeff*

Freedom and I have been together 11 years this summer. She came in as a baby in 1998 with two broken wings. Her left wing doesn't open all the way even after surgery, it was broken in 4 places. She's my baby. When Freedom came in, she could not stand and both wings were broken. She was emaciated and covered in lice. We made the decision to give her a chance at life, so I took her to the vet's office. From then on, I was always around her. We had her in a huge dog carrier with the top off, and it was loaded up with shredded newspaper for her to



lay in. I used to sit and talk to her, urging her to live, to fight; and she would lay there looking at me with those big brown eyes. We also had to tube feed her for weeks. This went on for 4-6 weeks, and by then she still couldn't stand. It got to the point where the decision was made to euthanize her if she couldn't stand in a week. You know you don't want to cross that line between torture and rehab, and it looked like death was winning.

She was going to be put down that Friday, and I was supposed to come in on that Thursday afternoon. I didn't want to go to the center that Thursday, because I couldn't bear the thought of her being euthanized; but I went anyway, and when I walked in everyone was grinning from ear to ear. I went immediately back to her cage; and there she was, standing on her own, a big beautiful eagle. She was ready to live. I was just about in tears by then. That was a very good day. We knew she could never fly, so the director asked me to glove train her. I got her used to the glove, and then to jesses, and we started doing education programs for schools in western Washington. We wound up in the newspapers, radio (believe it or not) and some TV. Miracle Pets even did a show about us.

In the spring of 2000, I was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I had stage 3, which is not good (one major organ plus everywhere), so I wound up doing 8 months of chemo. Lost the hair - the whole bit. I missed a lot of work. When I felt good enough, I would go to Sarvey and take Freedom out for walks. Freedom would also come to me in my dreams and help me fight the cancer. This happened time and time again. Fast forward to November 2000. The day after Thanksgiving, I went in for my last checkup. I was told that if the cancer was not all gone after 8 rounds of chemo, then my last option was a stem cell transplant. Anyway, they did the tests; and I had to come back Monday for the results. I went in Monday, and I was told that all the cancer was gone. So the first thing I did was get up to Sarvey and take the big girl out for a walk. It was misty and cold. I went to her flight and jessed her up, and we went out front to the top of the hill. I hadn't said a word to Freedom, but somehow she knew. She looked at me and wrapped both her wings around me to where I could feel them pressing in on my back (I was engulfed in eagle wings), and she touched my nose with her beak and stared into my eyes, and we just stood there like that for I don't know how long. That was a magic moment. We have been soul mates ever since she came in. This is a very special bird. On a side note: I have had people who were sick come up to us when we are out, and Freedom has some kind of hold on them. I once had a guy who was terminal come up to us and I let him hold her. His knees just about buckled and he swore he could feel her power course through his body. I have so many stories like that. I never forget the honor I have of being so close to such a magnificent spirit as Freedom!! I hope you enjoyed this!



#### NEW WEBSITE LAUNCHED

The Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum launched a new website on November 3, 2016; [awhm.org](http://awhm.org). Please go check out the new website and let us know what you think of the new site. We would love to hear your suggestions and use your insight to help us evolve the website into an informative and dynamic experience for everyone. The website will be a constant work in progress where we will add new material frequently in an effort to keep people interested in the museum and the Back Bay Wildfowl Guild.



## BACK BAY WILDFOWL GUILD

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Jeff Tinkham, President	Wayne Jarman, Vice President
Jim Mehne, Secretary	Roger Shope, Treasurer
Fletcher Bryant	Werner Seibel
Jamie Champe	Herb Videll
Gentry Childress	Al Henley
William Walsh, Jr.	

### MUSEUM CARVERS

Tuesday:	Pete DiPietro
Wednesday:	Roy Carlson
	Ed Morrison, Herb Videll
Thursday:	Hank Grigolite
"The Boathouse Boys" Carving Club:	Al, Jamie, John & Pete
Friday:	Gary Holt
Saturday:	Gentry Childress & Ben Purvis
Sunday:	Herb Verhaagen

## MUSEUM VOLUNTEERS

Tuesday:	Susan VanHook 10a-12p
	Bob Bishop 1p-5p
Wednesday:	Archie Johnson 10a-2p
Thursday:	Joe Leo 10a-2p
Friday:	OPEN
Saturday:	OPEN
Sunday:	OPEN
Museum Grounds	Nancy Lekberg

### MUSEUM STAFF

Lynn Hightower, Director      Ann Smith, Gift Shop Manager

### MUSEUM CONTACT INFORMATION

ATLANTIC WILDFOWL HERITAGE MUSEUM  
1113 Atlantic Avenue  
Virginia Beach, VA 23451

Telephone: 757.437.8432  
Facsimile: 757.437.9950  
Website: [www.awhm.org](http://www.awhm.org)  
Email: [director@atwildfowl.org](mailto:director@atwildfowl.org)

**You can now pay your dues online at [awhm.org](http://awhm.org) !**

*Please understand that we depend on every dollar to operate the museum. If you have not paid your 2016 dues, please give serious consideration to catching up before the end of the year by using the renewal form below. The corporate and sponsor levels are for anyone who wishes to support the Guild and Museum through those amounts. All members are encouraged to give at those levels, if they are able. You may also invite people you know to join us-at whatever level they are able! Please return your form to the Museum as soon as possible.*

## 2016 DUES

\$25/YR INDIVIDUAL

\$35/FAMILY

\$200/YR CORPORATE

\$500/YR SPONSOR



## BACK BAY WILDFOWL GUILD 2016 MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL FORM

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ AMOUNT PAID \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

CITY: \_\_\_\_\_ STATE: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP CODE \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_ [CELL] \_\_\_\_\_

*January 1, 2017 will kick off our Annual Membership Campaign. Each member is encouraged to find one new member to join the Back Bay Wildfowl Guild. Our very existence depends on growing the membership of the Guild. Please encourage everyone you know to become a member!*