



Decoy Maker

Harry Thibodeaux was born and reared in Crowley, Louisiana. As a child he never had any formal training when it came to carving, but he did have some talent. In his young years, he carved chains and ball-in-box games, but he actually began his self-taught carving of wood duck decoys after he retired in Pineville in 1975. Thibodeaux explains, “I always enjoyed carving, or ‘whittling,’ as we called it as kids.”

The only tools Thibodeaux ever used were a hatchet, pocket knives, a wood rasp, sandpaper, and a wood burning device to make the decoys out of virgin cypress and tupelo wood. Picking the wood for his decoys is a very tough process, as only the first few feet of trunk

closest to the ground can be used. The trees are usually found in swamps and river areas. Thibodeaux once said, “You have to use the base of the tree. The closer to the water the better.”

He made two types of decoys: the working decoys and the decorative decoys. The working decoys are used to lure waterfowl into hunting territory, something Thibodeaux knows well as he hunted ducks in rice paddies as a child. The decorative decoys take Thibodeaux up to 300 hours to complete, as he must carve, raise the feathers, burn it, and paint it. These decorative decoys come in miniature and life-size models. The working decoys take a few hours to carve and are only painted. Even though the working decoys are less work for Thibodeaux, he must be sure that the working decoys look alert, look realistic, and float correctly. Thibodeaux explains, “This is the way it was done in the old days. It’s more difficult and it takes more time.”

Thibodeaux had received several awards from the New Orleans Waterfowl Festival before participating in the first Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival. He has also participated in the Catahoula Lake Festival in Pineville and has some of his decoys in the Creole State Exhibit in the Alexandria Museum. Because of his true craftsmanship, Thibodeaux was inducted into the Louisiana Folklife Center’s Hall of Master Folk Artists in 1984.

Researched and rewritten by Amber Hendricks and Samantha Sullivan.