

Kenneth I. (Ken) Harris (1905-1981)

Ken Harris was born and raised in Watertown, N.Y. He was an ardent duck hunter and trout fisherman in his earlier years, and began carving hunting decoys in 1927, in part to disprove the statement that black ducks would not decoy. As word of his decoys began to spread, Ken began to carve for his friends and then as a part time business. All of the decoys made in Watertown were produced in his basement workshop with the assistance of his wife and two sons.

In 1944/45 Ken moved to the Woodville area and began carving full time. By 1947 he had moved to his well known location along Route 3, initially using the barn as both workshop and display room. An article printed December 18, 1948 in the Watertown Daily Times stated that Ken and his son William produced over 4,600 duck decoys in the “last year”.

Around 1963, Ken discontinued the wholesale distribution of gunning decoys to various stores, and concentrated on retail sales at his Route 3 show room. In 1981, Ken retired and sold his business to Tom Ferguson. Eight months later, Ken was stricken by a heart attack while checking his trap line.

Cork is a traditional material used for the bodies of hunting decoys. Compared to wood, cork is much lighter and easier to carve, but not as durable. To compensate for its lower durability, cork decoys typically include a wooden keel or bottom board, and thicker tail areas, sometimes reinforced with a wooden insert. Ken Harris cork-bodied hunting decoys can be divided into three basic groups:

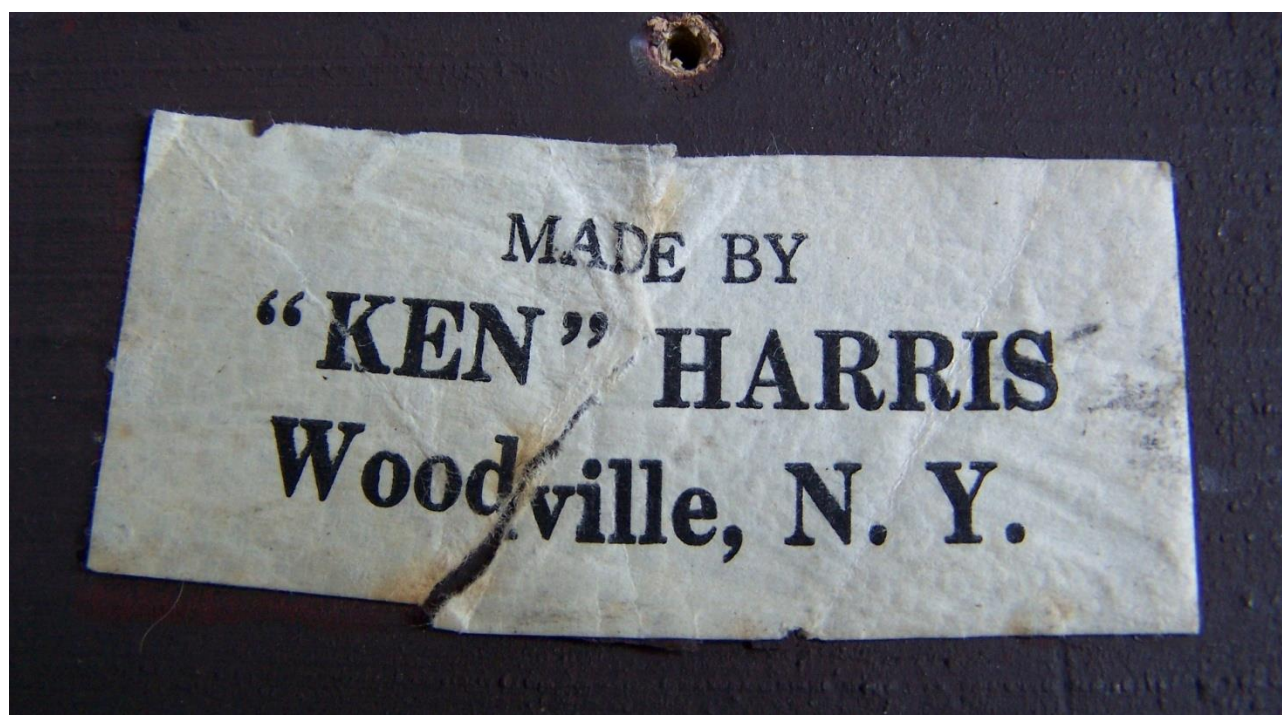
1. The earliest, and most common, has a beveled bottom board that covers part of the bottom area. Some of these beveled bottom boards are quite narrow and similar to a keel, while others cover half to two-thirds of the bottom. Made in both Watertown and Woodville from the late 1920s until 1947/48.

2. The middle and least common group has a wood or plywood bottom board that covers the entire bottom. These decoys were made entirely in Woodville from 1947/48 until 1950/51.

3. The last group, also made entirely in Woodville, has a thin Masonite bottom board that covers the entire bottom area, with an attached wooden keel. These decoys were made mostly from 1950/51 until 1953/54, but Harris made special order cork decoys in later years.

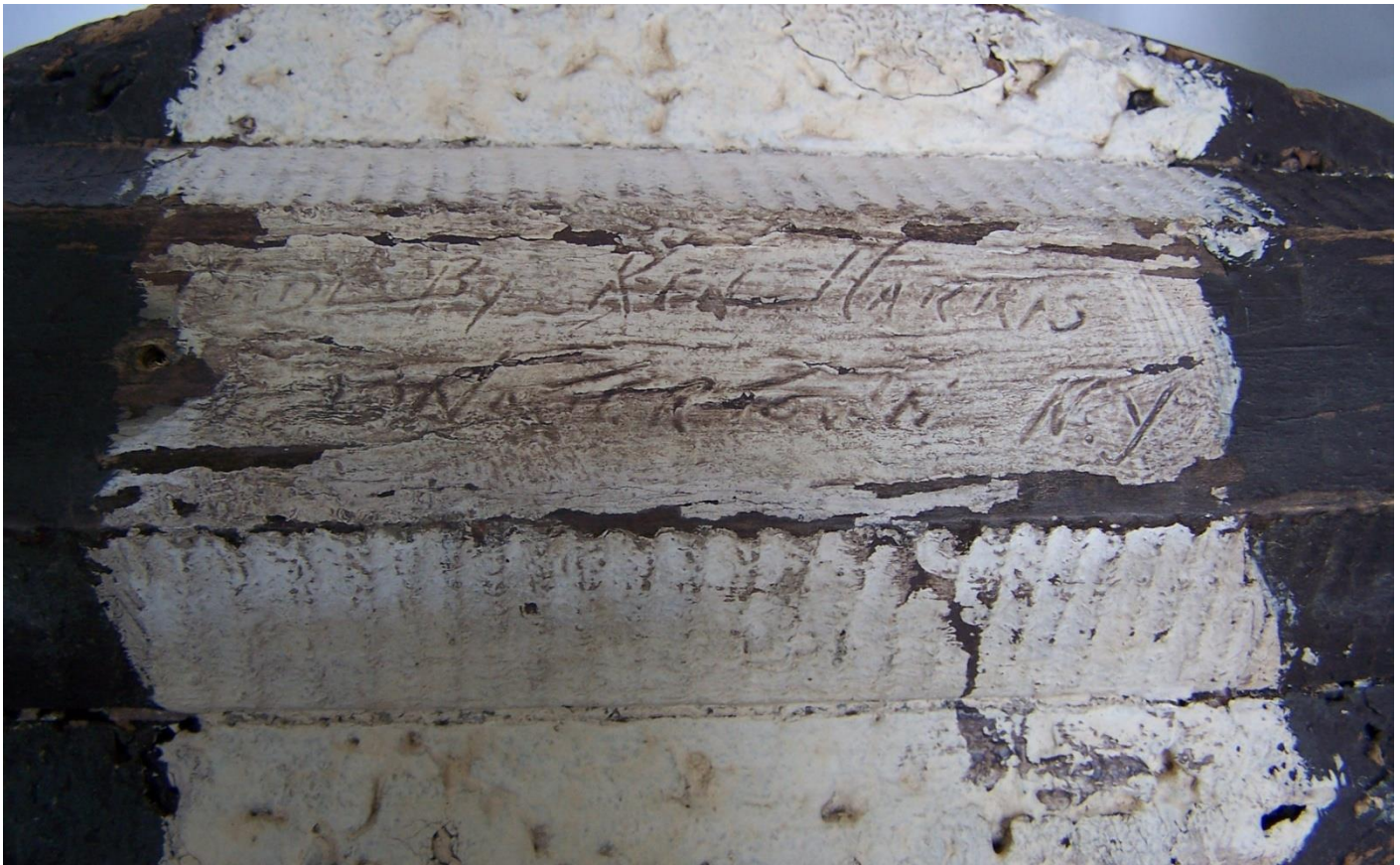
Names and initials found on the bottoms of hunting decoys typically identify the men who owned them. Ken Harris was unusual in that he clearly named himself as the maker on the majority of his hunting decoys, utilizing a variety of stamps, labels, and signatures. A few decoys did make it out of Harris's shop without being marked, and even more have lost their identifications over the years due to wear or repainting.

Most people are familiar with the stamps and brands used on the later Woodville hunting and decorative decoys, but many are unfamiliar with the variety of stamps and signatures used on decoys made in Watertown, or the paper label used on some early Woodville decoys.





Watertown ink signature, covered with varnish.



Watertown signature scratched into the paint while it was still wet.



Most common of the Watertown stamps; note the period (.) after Ken.



Remains of a second Watertown stamp; applied with a purple colored ink.

"KEN" HARRIS DECOYS

AWARD WINNERS 1948 NATIONAL DECOY CONTEST

Our hand-carved and painted decoys, available in either selected Tupelo Gum wood or top-grade Corkboard, are finished in the most accurate detail and built to stand up under rough use. They are finished to a smoothness not found in other decoys, and, as the shaping is not limited by the use of a lathe or other mechanical device, we are able to follow the true body lines of the living bird to the finest degree. Only the best dead-flat paints are used following the application of our own specially prepared primer and preservative, the use of which insures long life to the finishing colors and decoy itself. The heads used on our decoys are also entirely hand-carved and are shaped in the finest detail. Our method of joining the head to the body insures against loosening of the head. Harris decoys are approximately 15 inches in length and run from 6½ to 7 inches in width, depending on specie, with a maximum of bottom surface to insure life-like buoyancy in rough water. Exact coloration and feathering has always been a feature of our decoy. Each decoy is assembled with a different head position in order to avoid an unnatural appearance when the stool is in the water. Our decoys are available with medium, short or long necks and are shipped in proper proportion unless otherwise specified. Our Canvasback decoy with extra long neck has proven unusually popular with late season gunners and we now ship this specie with the long neck unless advised otherwise. All species are packed 8 drakes to 4 hens unless otherwise instructed. Our Goose decoy comes in cork, only, and is equipped with a built-in wooden tail and bottom board for added durability and appearance. We have been supplying Canada Goose decoys to many gunners during the past few years in localities where geese are seldom seen inasmuch as it has been found that the presence of a goose decoy or two in a stool of duck decoys seems to have a favorable effect on passing birds. The cork decoy, which has a full wooden base is especially effective in marsh or Puddle-duck gunning where a very light and high-riding block is an advantage. We feel that our Tupelo Gum decoy is the finest offered anywhere, regardless of price. This decoy combines every desirable feature, such as, light weight, sturdiness, proper balance, appearance and effectiveness. All Harris decoys are built over-size for greater visibility and are available in all species.

— PRICES —

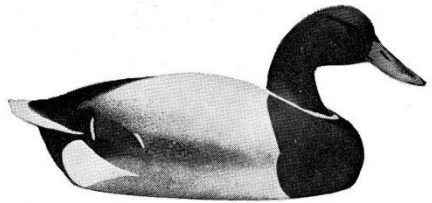
Duck decoys—Tupelo Gum or Cork—(any specie)—
33% ~~\$30.00~~ per dozen—Sample \$2.50
Canada Goose decoy—\$6.00 each.
Miniature decoys—(as illustrated with Mallard hen)—
size 7 x 3 inches—\$2.00 each.

"KEN" HARRIS DECOYS

Woodville, New York

Central portion of a threefold pamphlet advertising Ken Harris decoys, which is owned by Chris Pitman. Apparently printed in 1948 or early 1949, and noting results from the 1948 National Decoy Contest. This particular example has two pencil edits, thought to have been made by Harris or his staff before it was given out, that would date its use to 1949 or later. One edit notes that Harris decoys won awards at the 1949 National Contest, while the second edit notes that the price for a dozen decoys has risen from \$30.00 to \$33.00.

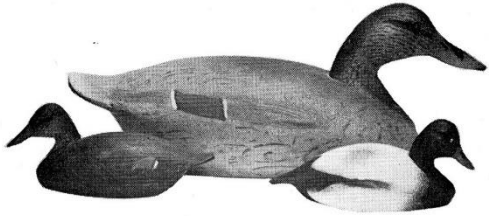
Note that quotation marks are located on either side of "Ken" in Harris' name.



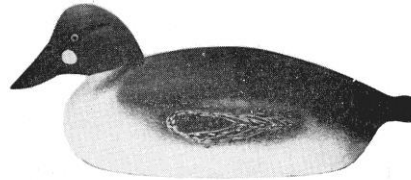
MALLARD DRAKE



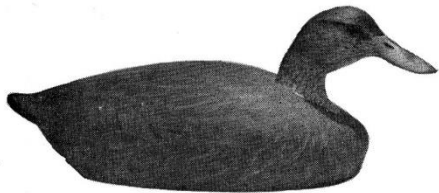
BLUEBILL DRAKE



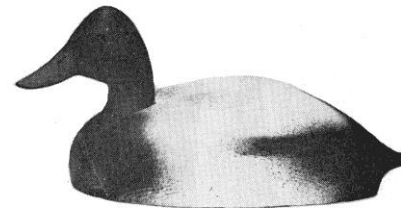
MALLARD HEN
MINIATURES BELOW



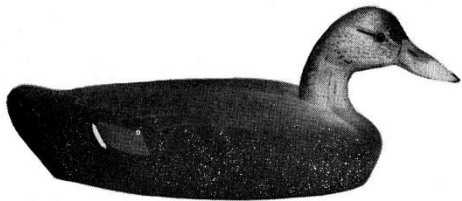
WHISTLER DRAKE



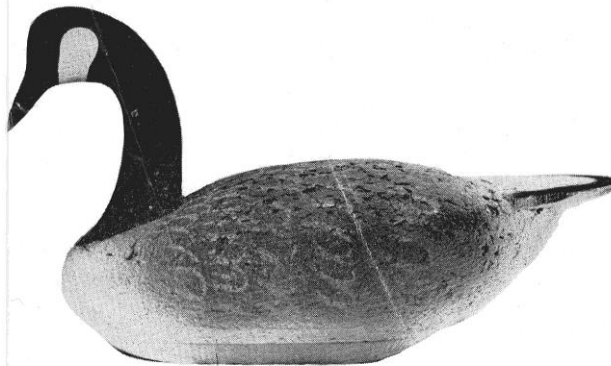
BLACK DUCK



CANVASBACK DRAKE

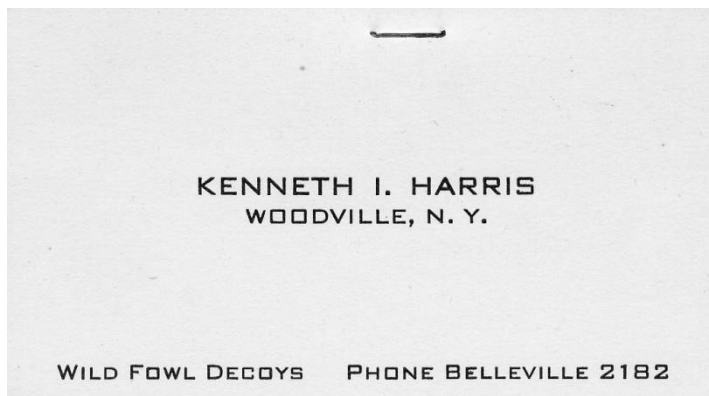


CORK BLACK



CANADA GOOSE

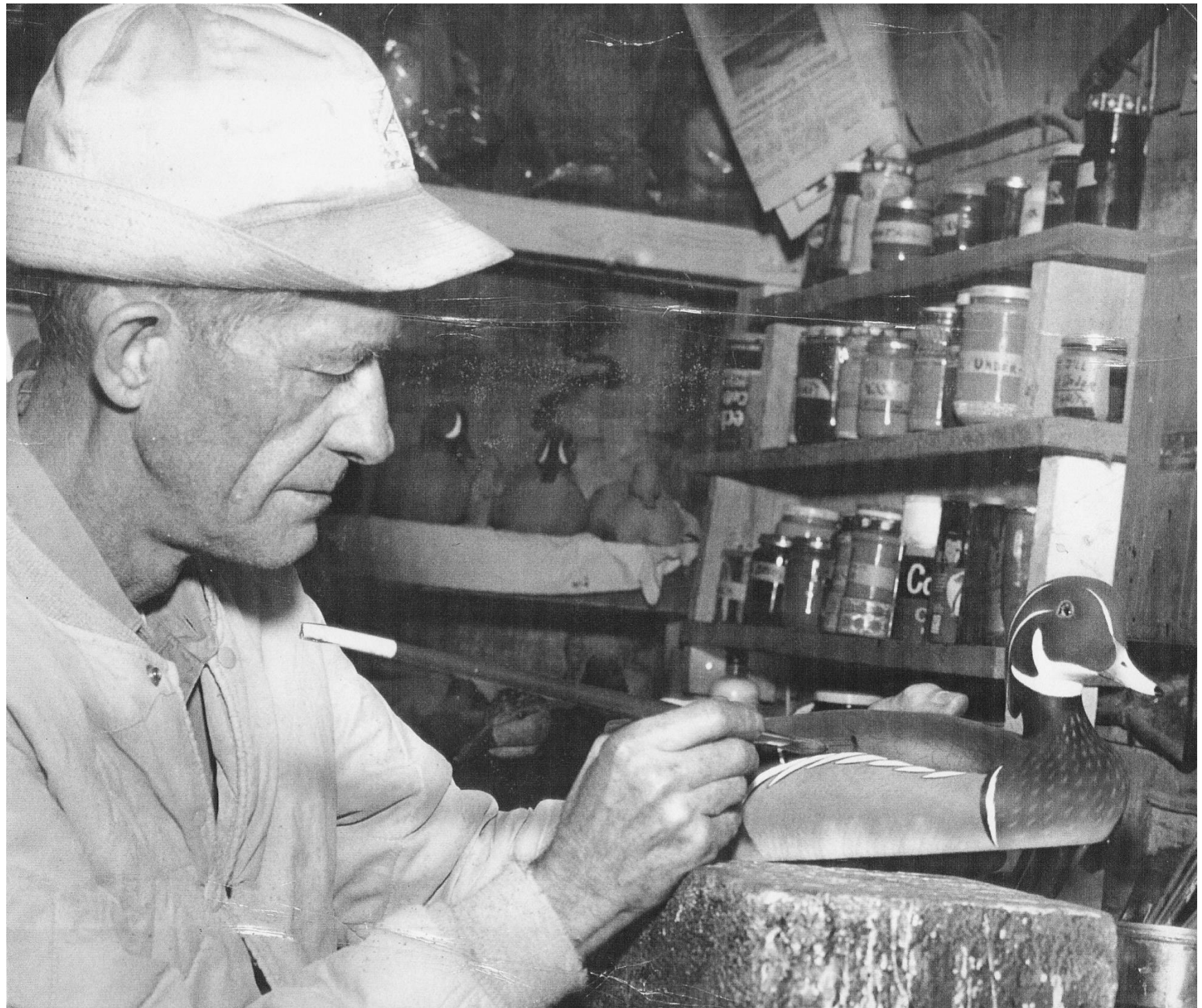
Left and right portions, respectively, of the threefold pamphlet advertising Ken Harris decoys, which is owned by Chris Pitman.



Harris business card stapled to the back of the above Harris advertising pamphlet.

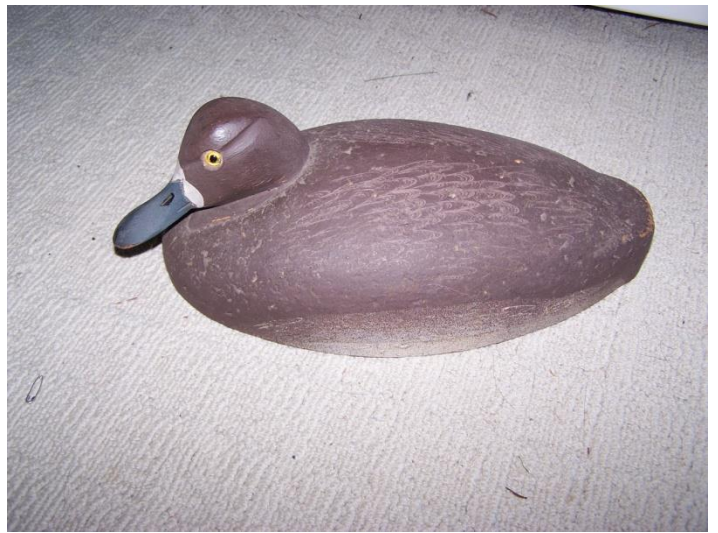


Ken Harris with a display of decorative decoys at his retail store on Rt. 3 near Woodville, N.Y. Species shown include canvasback, wood duck, green-winged teal, wigeon, blue-winged teal, ruddy duck, hooded merganser, pintail, and mallard. Several lamps with attached decoys are evident, and at least six half-flyers are visible on the back wall.





Oversize Drake Canvasback: (1-piece body)
Woodville - "Beveled Bottom Board"



Hen Broadbill: Woodville
"Full Bottom Board"



Hen Redhead: Woodville
"Beveled Bottom Board"



Drake Redhead: Woodville
"Beveled Bottom Board"



Black Duck: (2-piece body)
Woodville - "Full Bottom Board"



Hen Goldeneye: (2-piece body)
Woodville - "Full Bottom Board"



Drake Goldeneye: Woodville
"Beveled Bottom Board"



Black Duck: (2-piece body)
Woodville - "Masonite Bottom Board"



Drake Mallard: (2-piece body)
Woodville - "Full Bottom Board"



Drake Canvasback: Woodville
"Beveled Bottom Board"



Hen Mallard: (2-piece body)
Woodville - "Full Bottom Board"



Preening Black Duck:
Woodville - "Masonite Bottom Board"



Drake Goldeneye: Woodville
"Full Bottom Board"



Hen Broadbill: c. 1935 - Watertown
"Beveled Bottom Board"



Black Duck: c. 1940 - Watertown
"Beveled Bottom Board"



Drake Mallard: Watertown
"Beveled Bottom Board"



Drake Mallard: Woodville
"Masonite Bottom Board"



Drake Broadbill: Watertown
"Beveled Bottom Board"



Drake Broadbill: Watertown
"Beveled Bottom Board"



Canada Goose: 2-piece head/neck
Woodville - Plywood Tail Insert
¼ Inch Plywood "Full Bottom Board"



Canada Goose: 1-piece head/neck
Watertown - "Beveled Bottom Board"