

Frank Coombs

and the

Alex Bay Longnecks

Title of an article written by
Harold Evans for Decoy
Collector's Guide, Vol. III,
No. 3, July-August-Sept.
1965.

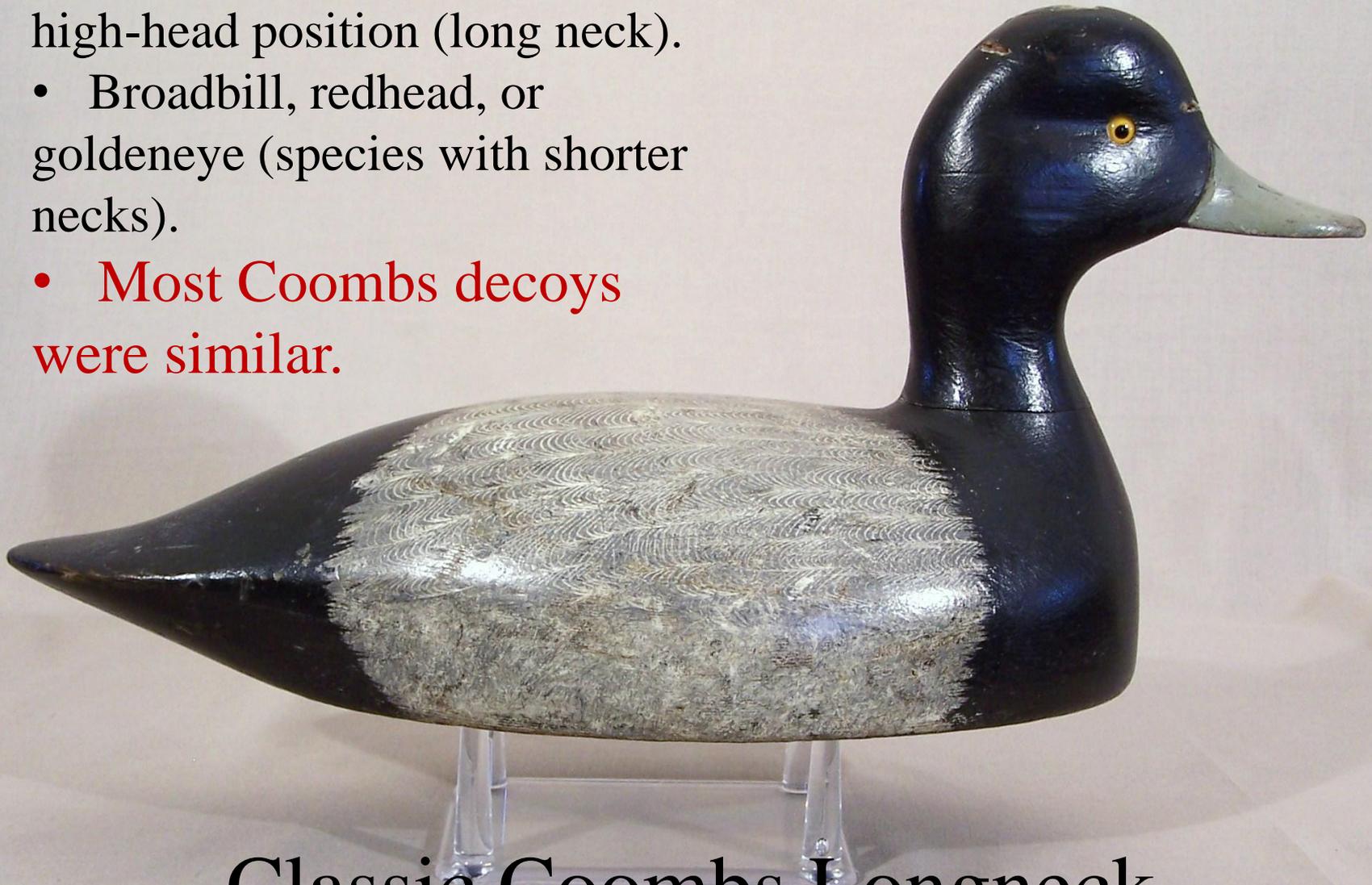
(published by 'Hal' Sorenson, Burlington, Iowa)

Started by asking two questions:

1. What is a longneck, and who made them ?
2. What was written about Coombs, and the other Alex Bay carvers, before Decoys of the Thousand Islands was published in 1991?

- Ducks with a high head are considered alert, or worse, alarmed.
- Hunters want a decoy set that projects safety and contentment, not alarm.
- In order to make a decoy set more natural looking, many carvers made decoys with a variety of head heights and attitudes.

- Alert-looking decoy with a high-head position (long neck).
- Broadbill, redhead, or goldeneye (species with shorter necks).
- **Most Coombs decoys were similar.**



Classic Coombs Longneck

Chauncey Wheeler
hen broadbill



“Longneck” classification
seems very subjective.



Gus Rogers hen broadbill

Conclusion:

- Many carvers made a few decoys in an alert-looking high-head posture.
- In Alexandria Bay, a number of the prominent carvers made many or most of their decoys with an alert-looking high-head position.
- Decoys vary widely in head and neck position – labeling them is difficult.

Question 2: What was written before 1991?

Three significant references to Frank Coombs in 1965:

1. American Bird Decoys by William (Bill) J. Mackey, Jr.
2. The Art of the Decoy: American Bird Carvings by Adele Earnest.
3. “Frank Coombs and the Alex Bay Longnecks” by Harold Evans.

American Bird Decoys by Bill Mackey (1965)

- Intended to be the first new reference on North American decoys since Wild Fowl Decoys, published by Joel Barber in 1934.
- Covered all of North America – difficult task.
- Bill Mackey was the preeminent decoy collector and historian of his day. Bill died in 1972, and the sale of his collection by Richard Bourne over 8 days in 1973-74, “marked” the beginning of the modern decoy auctions.

American Bird Decoys

- New York State divided into 2 parts: Long Island; and Upstate New York and Ontario.
- Generally dismisses all upstate decoys except Stevens Factory decoys, and the work of Denny-Wheeler-Combs on the St. Lawrence.
- Questions the effectiveness of high-heads, and states all three made similar decoys.
- Writes that Coombs lost his right hand in a hunting accident (actually it was his left hand).
- Mentions only 2 carvers in Ontario; William Rumble (actually Rundle), and Ken Anger.

The Art of the Decoy: American Bird Carvings by Adele Earnest (1965)

- Decoys presented as an art form, both useful and beautiful.
- Mentions only 2 upstate carvers: Frank Coombs – 2 short paragraphs , no picture; and James Stanley – 5 paragraphs and 1 picture.
- Writes Coombs “....shot off half his right hand....”
- Acknowledges help from Harold Evans, Watertown, NY.

“Frank Coombs and the Alex Bay Longnecks” by Harold Evans (1965)

- Provides the first in depth look at Frank Coombs’ life and carving career, and includes most of the information we know today.
- Writes that “He told me....” or “....Frank told the writer....”
- Although he pictures Coombs decoys, he does not really discuss characteristics to identify them.

“Chauncey Wheeler and the Holland Street Whittlers” by Frank Ash and Harold Evans, Decoy Collector’s Guide, 1966-67 Annual (copyright 1966).

- Authors picture Wheeler and Coombs hen goldeneyes for comparison (one over the other), and state, “Wheeler carved separation line for upper and lower mandible.”

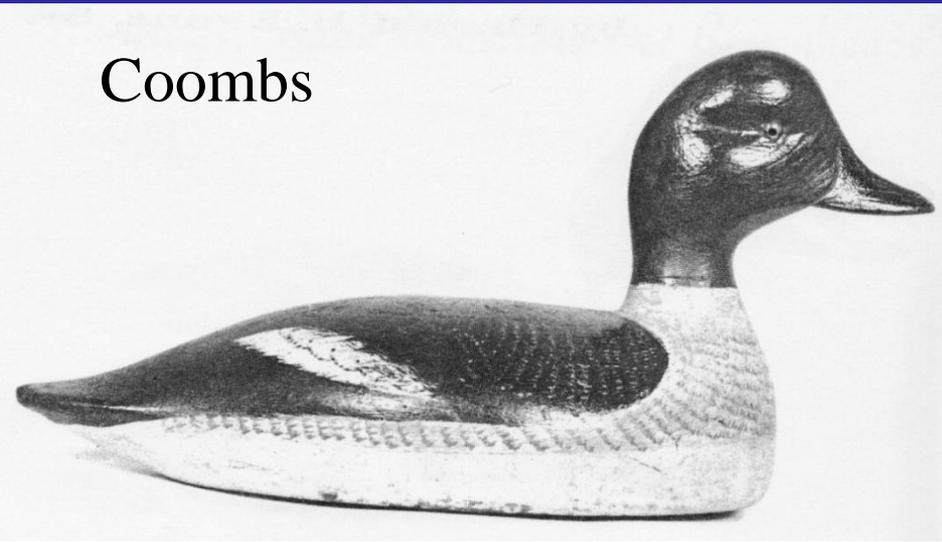
“He-grays, Buck Whistlers, and Brownheads”
by Harold Evans, North American Decoys,
summer 1971.

- Provides pictures of Wheeler and Coombs hen goldeneyes on facing pages for comparison, plus a picture of a drake goldeneye on a third page
- Caption under the Coombs hen goldeneye mentions the lack of mandible lines on his decoys.

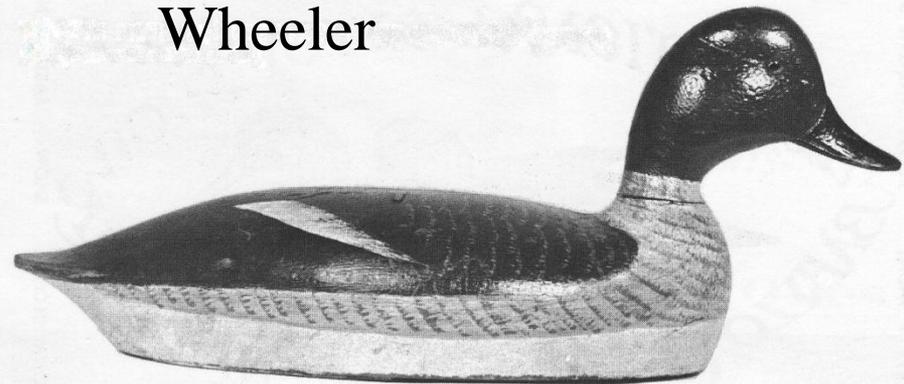
“He-grays, Buck Whistlers, and Brownheads”

- The caption under the Wheeler hen goldeneye states, “Since Frank Coombs was taught to paint decoys by Wheeler, birds by the two makers are sometimes difficult to distinguish.”

Coombs



Wheeler



“He-grays, Buck Whistlers, and Brownheads”

- The caption under the Wheeler goldeneye then goes on to state, “Usually, the carved line in the bill is enough to identify a Wheeler, although there are reports of Wheeler birds without the carved line.”



Chauncey Wheeler
drake redhead,
oversize balsa body,
head without a carved
mandible line

“Brownheads” by Harold Evans, *North American Decoys*, spring 1975.

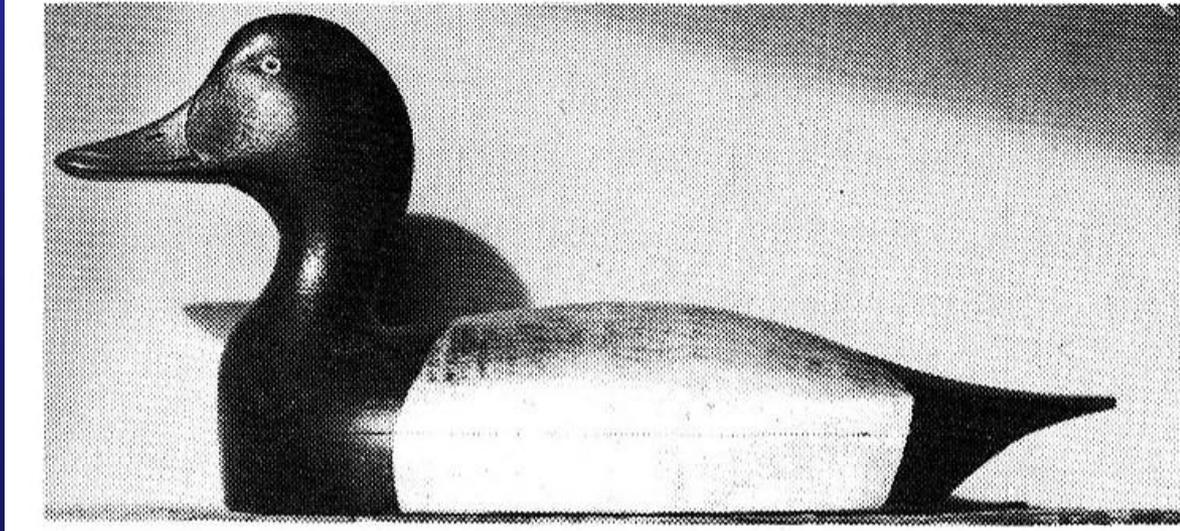
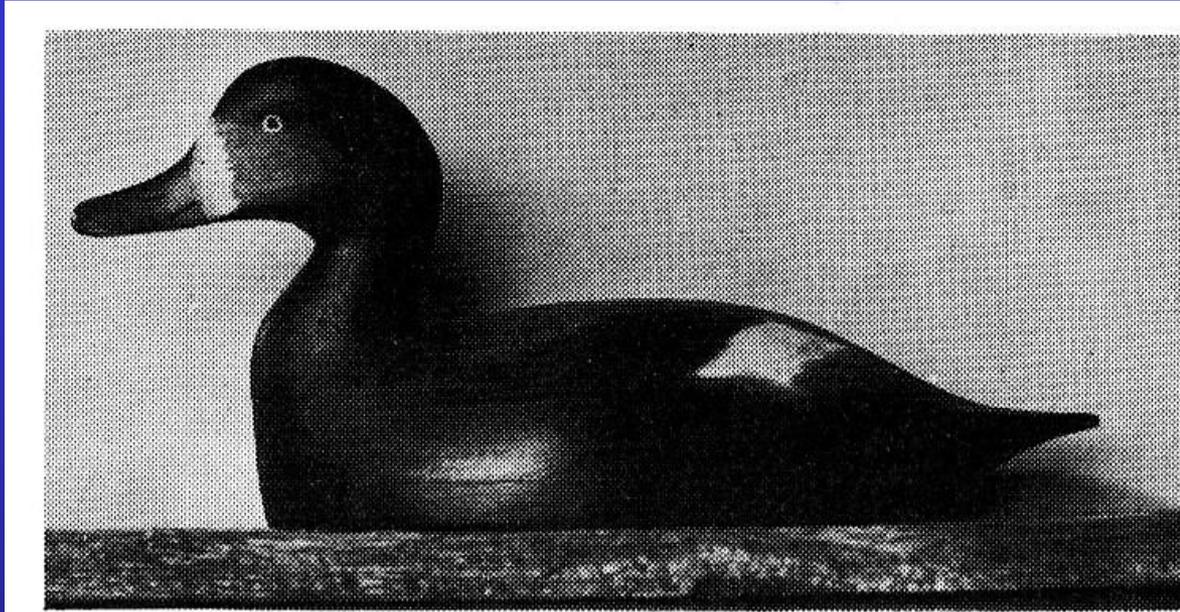
- Writes about Wheeler and Coombs lookalikes. Mentions that the body patterns were left at the local lumber mill, and that both makers would paint or repaint decoys made by others.
- “A no doubt innocent example of this confusion is the redhead drake shown in Plate 92, page 108, of American Bird Decoys by William J. Mackey, identified as having been made by Frank Coombs but actually carved by Frank Capron of Alexandria Bay.”

“A history of the Saint Lawrence and Alexandria Bay carvers” by Herbert G. Prakelt, M.D., Decoy Magazine, Winter 1982, Vol. 6, No.1.

- Describes an association of carvers who gathered on Holland Street – Chauncey Wheeler, Frank Coombs, and Sam Denny (Denny was actually from Clayton). Later refers to them as the “...Alexandria trio...”.
- States that Canadian carvers such as Robert Paquette influenced the Alexandria Bay whittlers.
- Other information about New York carvers is consistent with articles by Harold Evans.

“A history of the Saint Lawrence and Alexandria Bay carvers”

Includes pictures of one Denny and two Coombs decoys, plus three longnecks that he attributes to Wheeler. The three longnecks (broadbills, 1 pair and 1 hen) are more likely by Gus Rogers.



Decoys – A North American Survey by Gene and Linda Kangas, 1983.

The Great Book of Wildfowl Decoys edited by Joe Engers, 1990. Chapter 7: Upstate New York by Walter C. Hallbauer and Sue A. Bauer.

- Both books include beautiful color plates of Frank Coombs decoys.
- Information contained in both is consistent with articles by Harold Evans.

Decoys of the Thousand Islands by Jim Stewart and Larry Lunman, copyright 1991, published 1992 by The Boston Mills Press.

- The best single reference for information on carvers from the Alexandria Bay area, and for many, the only source.
- Information provided on Frank Coombs is consistent with, or complementary to, the articles of Harold Evans, with a few small exceptions (carved mandible line, body plugs, head blank).

Frank Coombs and his decoys



- Frank Elmer Coombs – born Nov. 1, 1882 in Theresa, N.Y.
- Began working as a farmhand in Theresa.
- Moved to Alexandria Bay, where he worked on the boats and for local hotels, eventually becoming a barber.
- Married Abbie Wilbur in 1908 – had two children; a son named Arthur Ford, and a daughter named Jayne.
- Nicknamed “Goldie” for a gold-capped tooth.
- In 1916, his left hand was injured in a hunting accident, which ended his career as a barber.



Frank and Abbie
Coombs, c. 1917
(from Decoys of the
Thousand Islands

Abbie often
accompanied Frank
on his hunting trips.

Note missing
ring finger.



Missing ring
finger on Frank
Coombs' left
hand.

- Coombs told Harold Evans that, “he did not shoot as quickly or as well as before, so he frequently let ducks alight in his decoys.”

- Uncertain about his future following the accident, Coombs was encouraged by Chauncey Wheeler to carve decoys commercially.
- Evans stated, “Coached by Chauncey Wheeler...”, and “...acknowledged learning from Wheeler”; Lunman states , “one....of Chauncey Wheeler’s protégés.....”.
- Coombs had seen movies of broadbills being fed at a sanctuary, and according to Evans noticed that, as a flock flew in, “...the feeding birds would stop whatever they were doing and stretch their necks up to watch the newcomers.”

- Coombs also reasoned that high-necked decoys would be less susceptible to the bills “icing up”, and he decided to make a rig.
- Locals scoffed at the idea, but field tests proved the high-necks were effective.
- Evans stated, “The style was originated by Frank....”, while Lunman states, “He was responsible for initiating the well-known Alexandria Bay long-necked style....”.
- Frank began carving decoys commercially in the early 1920s.

Frank Coombs hen broadbill



Harold Evans thought hen broadbills were Coombs' finest work.

Frank Coombs drake broadbill



Broadbills were Coombs' most common decoy, with hens outnumbering drakes.

Frank Coombs drake goldeneye

Second most common species that Coombs made decoys for.



Frank Coombs hen
goldeneyes



A low-head Frank Coombs ??



Many similarities with the typical high-heads –
some say yes, some say no.

Frank Coombs drake redhead



Perhaps the third most common species carved by Coombs.

Frank Coombs drake canvasback

Relatively rare
species for Coombs

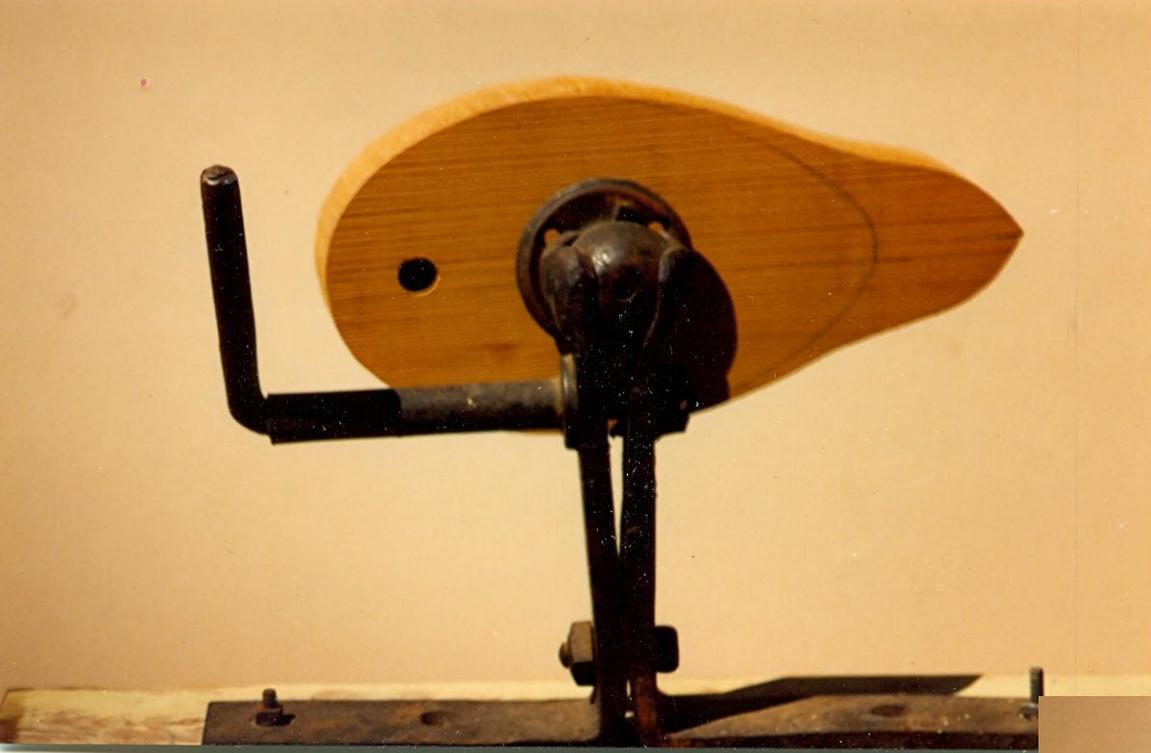


Ironic that these decoys have shorter necks, while black ducks actually have relatively long necks compared to species such as goldeneyes.

Frank Coombs black duck – another rare species



- Frank Coombs also carved a few bufflehead decoys, making a known total of six species.
- Carving decoys was primarily winter work, and he often worked 12-hour days.
- In addition to carving decoys, Frank worked as a guide, a tour boat captain (20 years with Ward Boatlines), and caretaker for some of the local estates (Max Winslow of Columbia Pictures).
- Frank made special vises to hold the decoy bodies, and heads, and could shape either in as little as 10 minutes.



Special holding devices designed by Frank Coombs.

The head blank is placed incorrectly in the vise. It should be located higher and rotated 90° so that the jaws hold the sides.



Coombs black duck



(picture left) The bill is separated from the face with a carved line, but the mandible line is not carved.

(picture right) The notch at the top of the bill is carved out, and the mandible line is carved (a second bill groove near the tip is often present).

Gus Rogers black duck





Lunman wrote that Coombs rarely carved a dividing line between the upper and lower mandibles, and included this picture of as one of the rare exceptions.

- I did note one small inconsistency in Evans' 1965 article. He writes that Coombs used a 2 ¾ inch head blank, but I think Evans meant a 1 ¾ inch blank.
- In Decoys of the Thousand Islands Larry Lunman writes that , “Frank’s decoys have a single (round) holding-screw plug, and he used a dowel to plug the head-screw hole, while Chauncey used a cork.”
- I agree with the single holding-screw plug, which was caused by his special vise, but have noticed that some are not perfectly round.
- I disagree, with a dowel only to plug the head-screw hole. Some were dowels, but in my experience, more were corks.

plug for head-screw ($\frac{3}{4}$ in. cork)



**plug for the
holding-screw
($\frac{1}{2}$ in. dowel)**



**Bottom view of a Frank
Coombs drake goldeneye.**

**plug for head-screw
(5/8 in. cork)**



**plug for the holding-
screw (3/8 in. dowel)**



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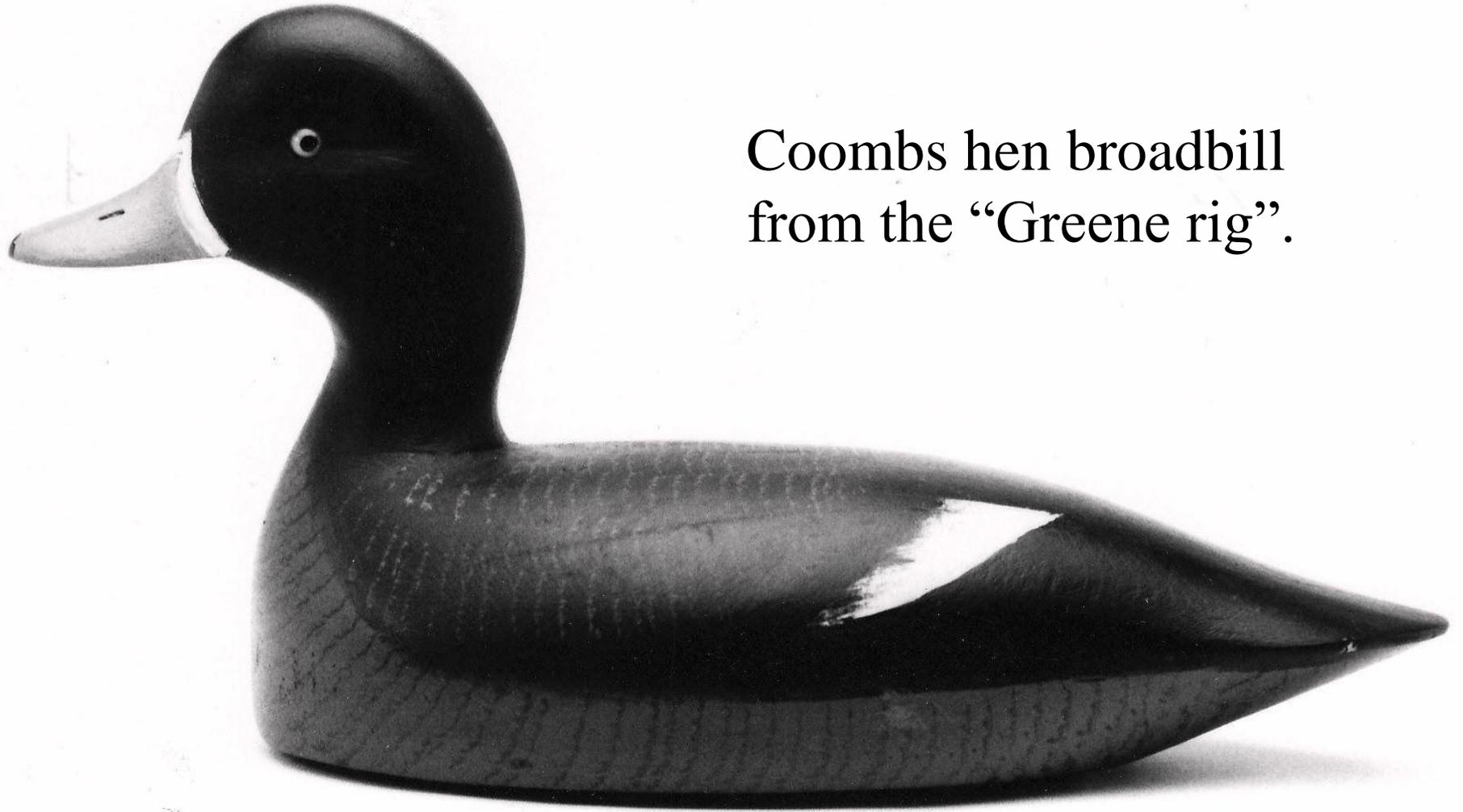
**Bottom view of a Frank
Coombs hen broadbill.**

Letters stamped into the bottom of
a Frank Coombs drake canvasback.
(H.BROS.)

H B R O S

- Frank's top production in any one year was estimated at 600 decoys.
- They first sold for \$15.00 per dozen, increasing over the years to \$48.00 per dozen.
- Coombs received an order for 500 decoys from Abercrombie and Fitch, but declined to fill it.
- Evans writes that Coombs stopped making decoys in the 1940s, while Lunman writes he retired from carving in the early 1950s.
- Coombs last rig was made in 1952 as a special favor to Marion Greene. Marion was a nurse at the Alex Bay hospital, and helped care for Coombs' wife (?).

- Coombs had stopped commercial production prior to making the “Greene rig”, and sold them to Marion for just \$2.00 each.
- The “Greene rig” contained 42 decoys, mostly broadbills and goldeneyes, with a few black ducks. Marion gave the decoys to her husband, Horace (Stub), for Christmas.
- Horace used the decoys only a few times before putting them away (too nice to use). All were stamped on the bottom with his name and address, and had a paper label glued-on.



Coombs hen broadbill
from the “Greene rig”.

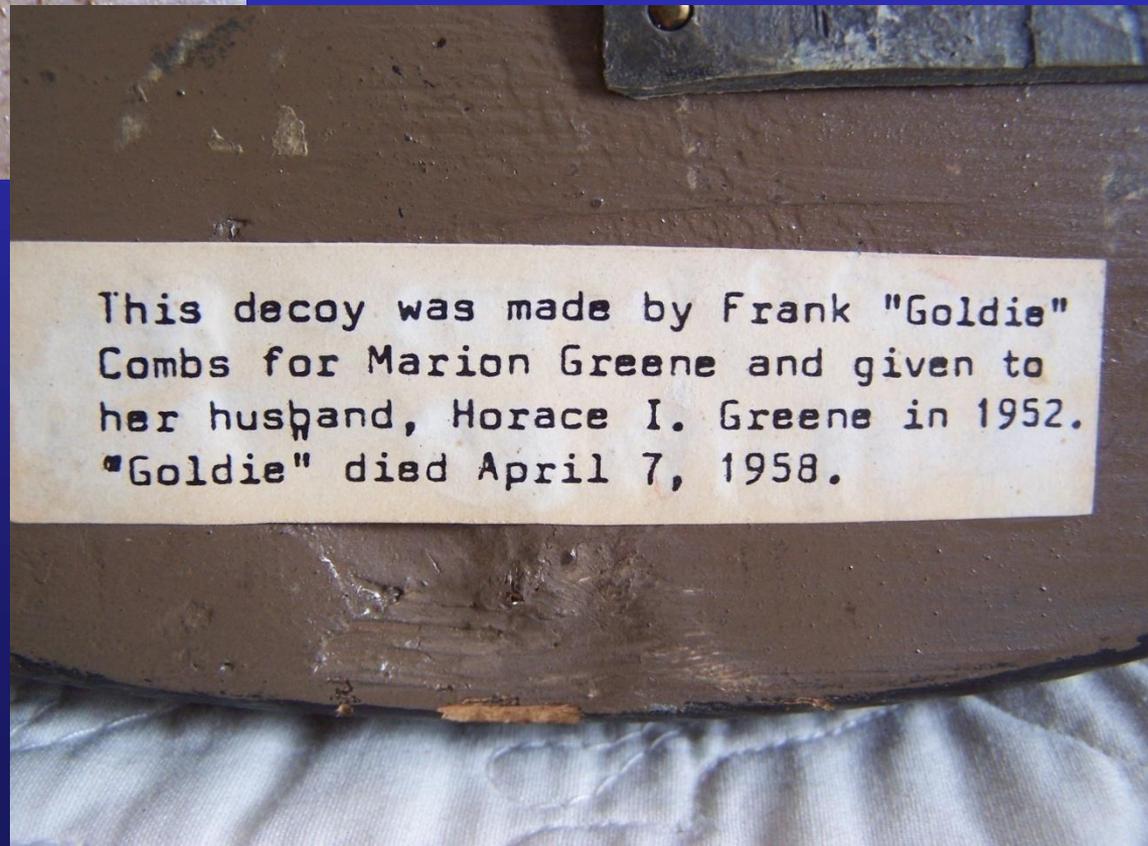
Coombs black duck
from the “Greene rig”.





“Greene rig” black
duck carved by
Frank Coombs.

Label and
stamped letters
on the bottom.



This decoy was made by Frank "Goldie"
Combs for Marion Greene and given to
her husband, Horace I. Greene in 1952.
"Goldie" died April 7, 1958.

- Frank Coombs died April 7, 1958, at the age of 75. His wife Abbie died in March 1978, at the age of 91.

- Frank was among the three most prolific New York Thousands Islands decoy carvers.

Estimates provided in Decoys of the Thousand Islands list Coombs with a life-time production of 4,000-8,000 decoys, as compared to an estimated 4,000 decoys for Chauncey Wheeler, and an estimate of over 5,000 for Sam Denny.

- Many other area carvers made at least a few longnecks. Several intentionally patterned their decoys after Frank Coombs, some with Frank's help. None matched Frank's overall quality, but they did make some decoys that were close enough to present problems in identification.
- Keep in mind that Frank Coombs would readily paint or repaint any decoys brought to him, both his own and those carved by others.

Cyriel D. Heath (1901-1962)

- Employed at Hutchinson Boat Works, eventually becoming the company president.
- In the 1920s and 1930s he began carving his own diving duck rig, making approximately 100 decoys.
- Cyriel was taught by Coombs, and some of their decoys are very similar in style. Frank also painted some of Cyriel's decoys, so identification can be difficult

Pair of goldeneyes by Cyriel Heath. Hollow bodies with attached bottom board.



Cyriel Heath drake broadbill
solid body



Cyriel Heath hen broadbill
hollow body



Frank D. Capron (1868-1933)

- Worked on a number of the larger steam boats, first as an engineer, and later as a captain. Also helped manage a restaurant with his wife.
- Built boats and carved decoys in the restaurant during the off season.
- Most of his decoys were made between 1915 and 1925.
- Sold decoys throughout the eastern United States.

Frank Capron hen whistler

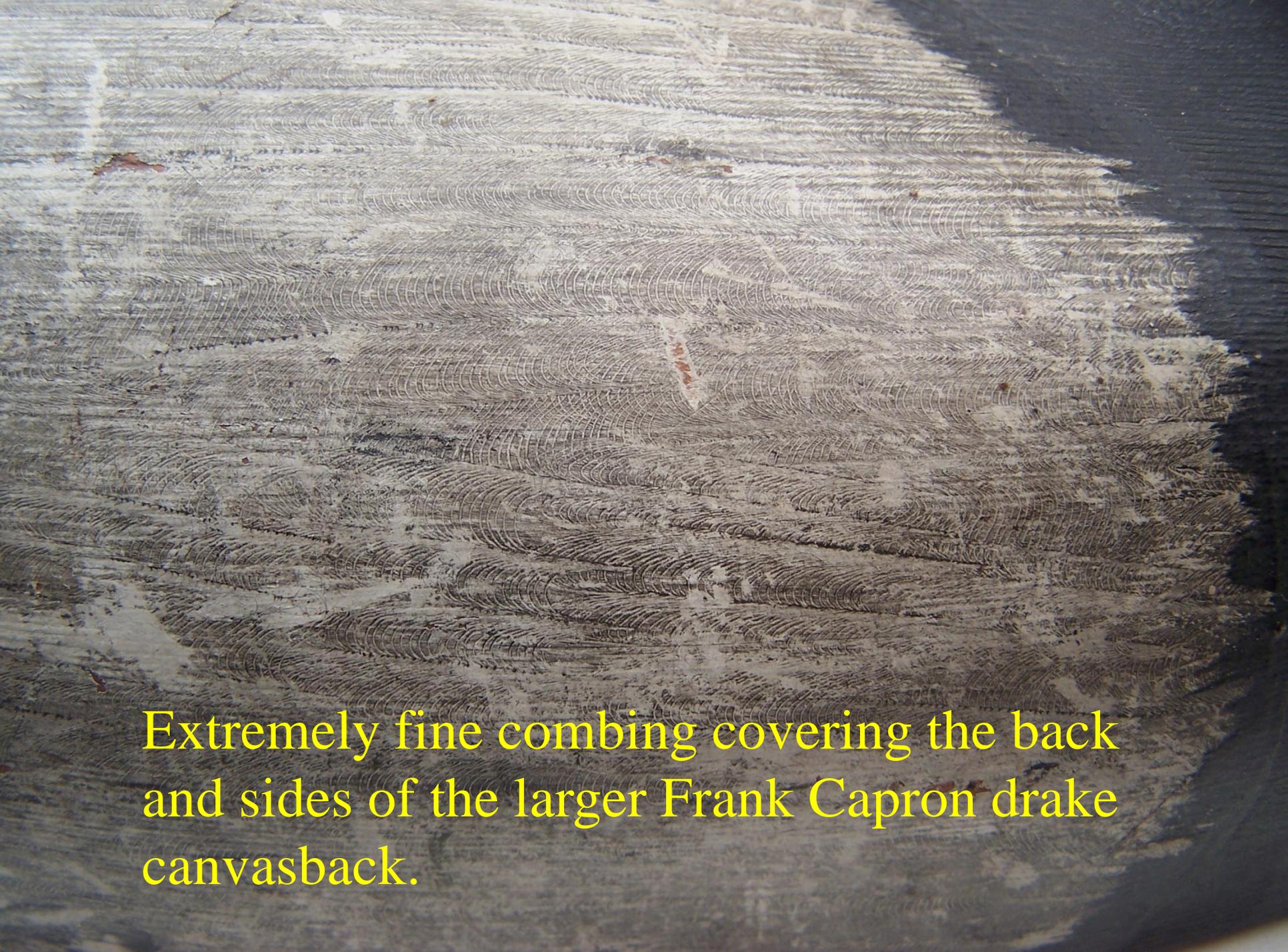


Frank Capron drake canvasback





A second style of Frank Capron
canvasback (larger)

A close-up photograph of a canvasback, showing the intricate, fine combing pattern on its back and sides. The combing consists of numerous fine, overlapping lines that create a dense, textured appearance. The color of the combing is a mix of light and dark brown, with some reddish-brown spots. The background is a dark, solid color, likely the canvas material.

Extremely fine combing covering the back and sides of the larger Frank Capron drake canvasback.

Edward J. Sweet

(1907-1978)

- Worked as a lighthouse keeper, making decoys in the winter.
- He was a regular in Chauncey Wheeler's Holland Street shop.
- “Many of his diving duck decoys appear to be a more rugged, heavily painted version of a Coombs decoy.” (from Decoys of the Thousand Islands)

Ed Sweet broadbills



Chauncey Wheeler
(1862-1937)

hen broadbill



Canvasbacks were the most common species carved as a longneck by Chauncey Wheeler (in my opinion).



Wheeler made a few goldeneyes in the classic longneck style (smaller slant sided decoys).



Augustus A.
(Gus) Rogers
(1892-1938)



Gus Rogers goldeneyes



Rogers carved a fair number of classic Alex Bay longnecks.



Roy A. Conklin, Jr.
(1909-1967)



Most of Roy's decoys were made as decoratives, but many were high-heads with an alert-looking posture.



attributed to Oliver Hunt (??)



According to newspaper archives, there was an Oliver Hunt in the Hammond area in 1937. He was in the Buffalo area in 1962, and had a son, James Oliver Hunt, in the Massena area in 1988.



Alex Bay longnecks
by an unknown maker.
(Conroy Auction, 4/15/06,
Baldwinsville, NY)

copper tags labeled:
Donald Baxter
Syracuse, NY



Harold Evans wrote in his 1965 article, “While none of us would willingly return to the ‘bad old days’ without unemployment insurance, it is interesting to note that no one, nowadays, would regularly work 12 hours a day on decoys. Consequently, the proficiency of Frank Coombs is all too rarely found.”

Frank E. Coombs
Alex Bay Longnecks



Pictures of displays, and entries
in the classic decoy contest, at
the March 2008 TIDCA
Meeting in Clayton, NY.



Display Tables:
Longneck Decoys



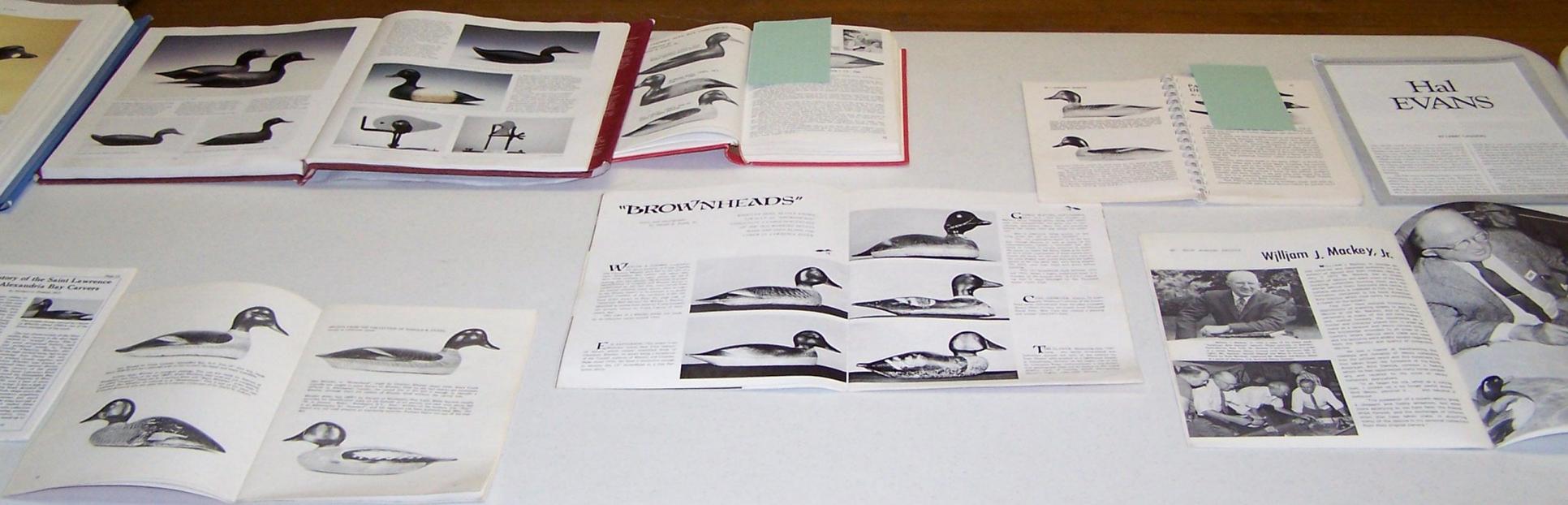
Longneck Decoy Display – Part 1

Longneck Decoy Display – Part 2



Hal
EVANS

Literature Display





Category 1: Frank Coombs decoy.

Category 2: Alex Bay longneck by
a maker other than Frank Coombs.



Category 3: Thousand Islands Redhead



Category 4: 4 black ducks by 4 different makers – part 2.





Category 4: 4 black ducks by 4 different makers – part 3.