

Frank Coombs and the Alex Bay Longnecks







Frank and Abbie Coombs, c. 1917



Frank Coombs left hand showing damage from a 1916 hunting accident. The accident ended his career as a barber, leading him to seek other ways to make a living, which included the carving of decoys for sale.

Frank Elmer (Goldie) Coombs

- Born in Theresa in 1882
- As a young man he worked on area farms, and on boats and hotels along the River, before becoming a barber.
- Married Abbie Wilbur in 1908. They lived in Alexandria Bay and together had one son (Arthur Ford) and one daughter (Jayne).
- A hunting accident in 1916 damaged his left hand, and ended his career as a barber.
- After his accident, Coombs built a boat and started guiding. Later he became a tour boat captain for Ward Boat Lines, working for them for over 20 years. He also served as caretaker for several of the palatial Thousand Islands homes, including the summer home of Max Winslow, president of Columbia Motion Pictures.
- Coombs was encouraged by Chauncey Wheeler to carve decoys to supplement his income. He began commercial production in the 1920s, producing up to 600 decoys in one year. Frank continued carving commercially through the 1940s, carving an estimated 4,000-8,000 decoys.
- Frank died in April 1958, age 75. Abbie died in March 1978, age 91.

Frank Coombs decoys:

- Frank told Harold Evans he could not shoot as quickly or as well after his accident, so he frequently let ducks alight in his decoys. Abbie accompanied him on many hunting trips, and they both came to enjoy watching the ducks.
- Coombs saw movies of broadbill being feed at a sanctuary in Florida. He noted the feeding ducks on the water often stretched their necks upright to watch other approaching birds. He decided to make a dozen longnecks to see how their worked and to see if they would lessen the problem of bill icing on late season hunts.
- The idea proved good, and soon Coombs and other Alex Bay carvers were carving more longnecks.
- Coombs has been credited with originating the longneck style, but I think it is more correct to say he popularized it. Almost all of Coombs decoys were carved in the longneck style with very upright heads.
- Frank was a prolific carver, able to shape a body and head with hand tools in as little as 20 minutes. Sanding and painting took addition time, but he could easily finish a dozen decoys in one day.
- Evans wrote that three coats of paint were applied to all of Coombs decoys, and that his bills were carved without mandible lines.

Long-necks by other Thousand Islands area carvers:



carved by Bill Aiken, painted by Roy Conklin



Dave Knapp



Charlie Smith



Ernie Fox