

Remembering **CHARLIE**

Charlie giving a painting demonstration at the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum.



The decoy community lost one of its tallest and strongest pillars with the passing of Charlie Bryan on April 3, 2008, one day shy of his eighty-eighth birthday. Charles P. Bryan, Jr., was born in Baltimore on April 4, 1920, and lived all his life in the waterfront community of Middle River, just outside the city. He served in the U.S. Navy in the Pacific during World War II. Upon returning to the Baltimore area after the war, Charlie went to work as a machinist for the Patapsco & Back River Railroad, part of Bethlehem Steel, in Sparrow's Point, a position he held until he retired in 1980. Charlie was proud of his railroad heritage and he was seldom without his trademark engineer's hat.

Charlie was an avid and skilled hunter, from his boyhood rabbit hunts on the rolling hills near his Middle River home, to duck shooting well into his eighties. Friends who gunned with him in recent years say he was still as quick and accurate as anyone in his party. As a young man, Charlie enjoyed bushwacking and blind shooting but he fell in love with body-booting. He hunted ducks all over the Chesapeake bay, on the western shore from Middle River and Back River to Rocky Point and Salt Peter Creek—and on the Eastern Shore from the Susquehanna Flats, to the shores of

Chestertown and Rock Hall, to St. Michaels, Kent Island, and near the Blackwater Refuge at Church Creek.

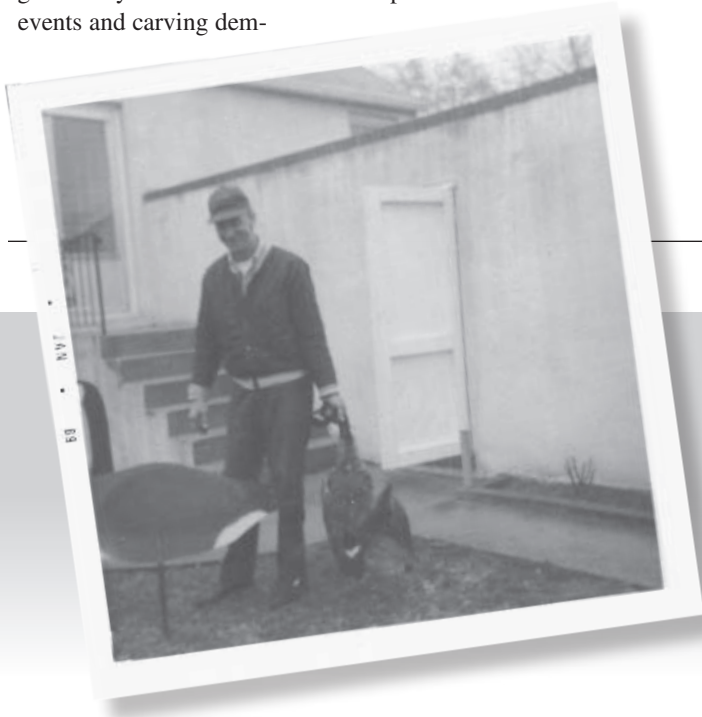
Out of sheer necessity, Charlie made his first decoys in the mid-1950's. Over the years, he made birds in many sizes and styles, using a variety of materials from pine and cedar to mahogany, walnut and cork. He made hundreds of silhouettes, both floating v-boards and field stickups, as well as cast iron sinkbox decoys and beautiful flat bottom decoratives. But the bulk of his output consisted of sturdy working decoys in the classic Havre de Grace Style, heavily influenced by Madison Mitchell. After years of getting others to turn his bodies he designed and built his own lathe. Because of their quality, reliability and relative affordability, his decoys were very popular with Chesapeake Bay hunters. For years, he sold them through National Sporting Goods located in downtown Baltimore. Many Bryan decoys remain in service to this day in rigs up and down the Bay. His mastery with knife and paintbrush was recognized in 1984 when he was selected as the honorary Chairman of the Havre de Grace Decoy Festival. Today, the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum maintains a permanent exhibit of his work in tribute to his artistry.

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BRYAN

Charlie was never comfortable with the steep increase in the value of his decoys. Ever the modest gentleman, in more than fifty years of decoy making, he never once charged what his work was truly worth or what resellers were getting shortly after leaving his shop. He often said that he only wanted to make enough money selling his decoys to offset his hunting expenses and he seemed to cling to that attitude his entire life.

Understanding the need to preserve history of hunting and decoy-making in the Chesapeake Bay region, Charlie was a dear friend of and a frequent donor to the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum as well as the Mitchell Endowment Trust. He gave generously both of his time at special events and carving dem-



onstrations and of his prized carvings, which over the years have raised many of thousands of dollars for the institution. He was so selflessly dedicated to the Museum, in fact, that one of his requests in the days before he passed was that the decoys he started but never completed, be finished by his friends and donated to benefit the museum in the years to come.

Charlie leaves behind his beloved wife of more than sixty-four years, Anna, daughter Bertha, son Charles and more friends than most men could claim in three lifetimes. Fittingly, for such a devoted sportsman, he was laid to rest at Holly Hills Memorial Gardens in Middle River, close to the wooded fields he hunted as a boy all those years ago. For both old friends and new acquaintances Charlie always offered a warm smile and a friendly word. And whether you were a novice decoy maker seeking tips on carving or a budding collector seeking stories from the “good old days,” Charlie was always incredibly gracious, patient and kind. May we always remember him that way.

—Chad Tragakis

Charlie and I have been friends for some fifty-five years. Some may say we were like family. We spent hours and days together hunting and fishing; we have been thru good times and bad times. Because we both worked at Bethlehem Steel, Charlie in the pattern shop and me with the fire department, we spent many lunch hours together making our hunting plans. In the early days I often went with Charlie to visit other carvers like Mitchell and Joiner, I miss those days. Good bye old friend, save a place for me when you get done carving.

—John Simon

Charlie and I first met in the early 60's. We spent many great times duck hunting at Millers Island in a very well constructed duck blind. On one occasion there were five of us who went out for a day of hunting and came back with over 100 ducks. And on another day, he and I shot 26 Golden Eyes from that well-constructed blind. I only took three decoys with me that day and I thought Charlie would be upset with me for bringing so few, but it turned out to be a fantastic day. Then over the next few years I gave up hunting ducks and we kind of lost contact. I am so grateful that our paths crossed again and he got me interested in decoys. I remember sitting in his basement and watching him paint, when he stopped painting and went over to the corner of the basement and reached for something and came over to me and handed me an old worn decoy. I asked him why he was giving this to me and he told me about the time we were duck hunting and I had found a decoy and gave it to him. He kept that decoy for over 20 years and gave it back to me. I had forgotten about that decoy, but I will never forget it again. I have such fond memories sitting in his basement and watching him carve those decoys. He began

showing me some of his techniques and I started cutting, sanding and priming them for him. The last decoys Charlie made we made together. We made a dozen Corn Ducks. These were the last decoys he completed. He insisted that the only way he would sign them is if I would sign first. We spent many hours together in the basement reminiscing over our days of duck hunting, old friends, and gardens. He enjoyed working in his garden and every summer we would brag to each other about who got the first tomato, and he always shared his vegetables with friends and neighbors. That was Charlie—he just wanted to make everyone



else happy—always putting you first and never wanting to take anything in return. He was one of a kind and I am proud to have been one of his friends. I miss you Charlie.

—Jim Dumbrowsky



*Body Booting on the Susquehanna Flats. CIRCA 1960.
LEFT TO RIGHT: John Wokolaska, Charlie Bryan, Joe Dowe*

Charlie and I met through a mutual friend some thirty-three years ago and, for some unknown reason, we became very close friends. He was like the reincarnation of my father, who I lost at an early age. Over the years Charlie and I fished, duck and goose hunted together, but more than that, we adopted each other's families. Charlie and Anna were, and still are, our children's grand parents and their children's great grand parents.

Charlie was very shy and unassuming, unless he knew you well, then he would tell you what he thought and how he felt about you and everything else, too. Many times I would stop by to see him and Anna; Charlie would be sitting at his paint table, busy putting the finishing touches on a shelf full of decoys. He would ask what I thought about a new color or design he was trying. This always amazed me, to have the master decoy maker ask the shoemaker what he thought.

I have learned as you go through life, that there are only one or two people who you can look up to, who change your life. Charlie Bryan was that one person in my life. There isn't a day that goes by I don't think or talk about my close friend and adopted dad, Charlie. God love you Charlie Bryan.

—Kenny Stevenson

He is a big grin, a bear hug

His big hands rub the dirt off a sweet potato

He steers the boat away from the dock to take me crabbing as a little girl

He whittles or sands or paints

He sits patiently listening to me chatting away

He tells stories

He asks questions—about school, college, my students, sturgeon, my new job, my bees, kids

He gives advice—about fishing, gardening, marriage

He gets older, more sentimental

He laughs with my children—plays play dough, arranges buttons, quacks like a duck

We share a love of nature AND dessert

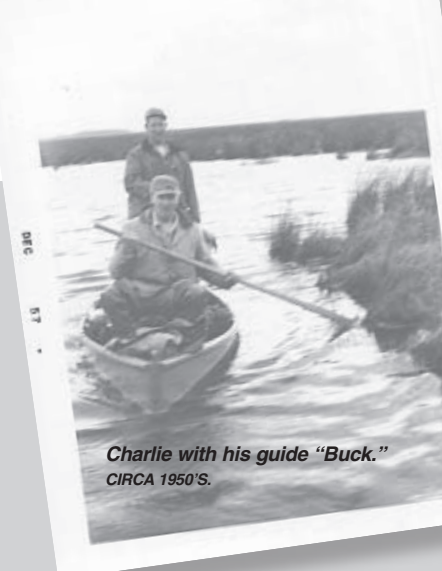
Some think it is the decoys that are his legacy but it is the memories that are worth more.

They are both always there for me, always listening, always supporting, offering strength and vegetables but always offering Real Love.

They are both still there for me—my “grandparents” Charles and Anna Bryan.

Heaven is a richer place to house this man, Grandad Bryan.

—Jill Stevenson



*Charlie with his guide “Buck.”
CIRCA 1950'S.*

Charlie was a dear personal friend and is truly missed by his family, friends and the decoy world...especially for his support of the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum.

One can emphatically say that the mold was broken when we lost Charlie. You knew you were a close friend of Charlie when you'd ask him for a pair of his decoys that were just completed and sitting on his shelf in the basement and he'd tell you, “No. You'll have to wait for the next batch!” Or he'd call you up and ask to return a pair so he could donate them to a DU or Museum function. I loved the guy like a father and he is always in my thoughts.

—Garry Ross



*Anna and Charlie at the beach.
Surely a bushel basket of heads is sitting just out of the picture.*

Summer Canvasback 2008



Charlie and Charles out fishing.

My good friend Charlie Bryan,

I first met Charlie after buying a pair of canvasbacks while working in the gun department at National Sporting Goods in 1970. Passing through the store I saw my first glimpse of what would have a hold on me the rest of my life... Chesapeake Bay Decoys. I inquired about the decoys to the owner and he sold them to me at cost for a grand total of \$5.00. I worked full-time for General Motors but a three-month strike forced me to gain employment at National Sporting Goods. Since it was to be a lean Christmas I got Charlie's address and purchased from him directly two black duck decoys that I made into lamps for Joan's and my parents as Christmas gifts.



Charlie and young Charles splitting cedar blocks for decoys.

When Joan and I started into photography in 1982, one of the first things we did was to photograph Charlie working. We didn't know it at the time that the decoys and Charlie would be a big part of our lives. In the 90's Charlie started hunting with Jack Palmer and me in Pennsylvania. Charlie had never blown a goose call, he just put out corn. He first started carrying a double 10 gauge because he was used to shooting high birds. My style of hunting is calling and getting

the birds as close as possible to make head shots if possible. This takes patience and sometimes Charlie had a problem with that and we'd all laugh.

To be in Charlie's presence was like taking a child on his first hunting trip. He would be so excited he would talk the whole time, telling the greatest tales we ever heard. When the birds started to fly and we'd start calling he'd put his head down and his hands would shake in anticipation. We harvested more birds in our conversations than were ever taken in those blinds. As time went on and he started to fail a little he told me on the way home something I'll never forget. "I hope you and Jack will always have the patience to take me hunting even if I have to use a wheelchair." I assured him we'd take him as long as he wanted to go.

The last time I saw Charlie I said my goodbye and placed two shotgun shells into the top pocket of his bib overalls for his last trip. We have all been so blessed to have known him and have him touch our lives in such a positive way. When the geese come down this fall...in my heart, I know in spirit he'll be coming with them.

—Dave & Joan Hagan



Charlie and Anna behind their home in Middle River.

I met Charlie in March of 1978 on a Sunday afternoon at his home. That began a wonderful friendship. Charlie and Anna always made me feel welcome in their home. If I visited in the summer I always went home with an armful of garden vegetables. I often wondered why he treated me so well, soon I found out he treated everyone that way. Over the years I visited Charlie many times and enjoyed his and Miss Anna's company.

We had wonderful days together while hunting ducks, geese and dove. Charlie was great company in the blind. His stories of past experiences, I will remember as well as other active conversations we had. We also enjoyed many days fishing and time together getting wood for his decoys,

Charlie was a polite, humble, generous, kind, and fun to be with man, who had polished his decoy making skills to the highest degree. Every time we talked or met he always asked how I was doing and how my wife and family were. I know each of you that knew him had the same experience. That was just Charlie.

After getting to know Charlie my wife Karen told me I should fashion myself after Charlie. I said that it would be a good idea if only she would fashion herself after Anna. Imagine the world full of Charlie and Anna Bryans. What a great world this would be!

My life is much richer for knowing Charlie Bryan and I am proud to be able to call him and his family my friends. Everyone that knew Charlie loved him and will miss his quiet humor, friendship and talents with carving his birds. He has left his mark on the decoy carving industry. This is his legacy and all who knew him are blessed. What a true American. Thank you for the Memories,

—Art Oertel

Beyond the actual wood and paint, the decoys of Mr. Bryan represent the man that made them.

A batch of Mr. Bryan's decoys was very clean, consistent and precise. In 2004 he began a batch of mallards with a new body pattern; Once the bodies were turned he decided they were 1/4" oversize and had the entire batch returned. His decoys were done to the best of his ability, which I think was much greater than the credit he would ever give himself. When he was done a batch of birds he would always say, "I wish I had done them this way," "I wish I could paint like [another decoy maker]," or "I can't tell you how many times I wiped the paint off those decoys." Even in his 80's,

he was never satisfied. Each batch of decoys was slightly different. I



Charlie and Dickie Kamer painting decoys.



Charlie and Frank Wolfe in the boats they built for bushwhacking. CIRCA 1950.

It's never easy to say goodbye, especially when you have grown as close to someone as I did to Mr. Charlie Bryan.

Over the years my family and I grew to see Mr. Charlie as a surrogate grandfather, hunting with him, eating dinner with him and his family and just being a part of each other's lives. My two boys grew up not only being able to see one of the decoy making masters ply his trade, but also grew to love the man and his family as they were welcomed into Mr. Charlie's life. I know he enjoyed watching them grow, and he was always proud of their newfound accomplishments in the field and in their lives. As for me, I have a lifetime of memories that I will treasure forever. I took Mr. Charlie on his last goose hunt, watching him fold his last bird clean though he looked almost too frail to shoulder a gun. It was the last time he got to enjoy the sport he loved, but he was a happy man that morning. I will forever smell the wood burning in the garage, where most people could wear a tank top in January he had it so hot. I picture him in my mind holding a decoy in his hands making sure he got the details of the bird exactly as he saw them in his head. The world will remember him for the blocks of wood that he carved into ducks. I will remember him for the man and person he was, and strive to follow his example. Rest in peace Mr. Charlie... I miss you.

—Jeff Kreit and Family

would ask how and why he did things a certain way and he would never fail to share his little tricks. Additionally he, too, wanted to learn and would ask why I did things a particular way.

I first met Mr. Bryan in the summer of 1981 while I was working for Jimmy Pierce. Mr. Bryan had come to sand heads on the belt sander. At lunchtime we talked about decoys, hunting, fishing and his garden. You must understand, Mr. Bryan had recently retired and I had just graduated high school—making him over 40 years my senior, but he immediately treated me like a friend.

Mr. Bryan was a very generous man. He took me on many hunting and fishing trips, and always sent me home with a goody bag from his garden—even if it included a green pepper, which he knew I hated! He was always a humble gentleman and a true friend—a person that I am lucky to have had the privilege of knowing.

—Bryon Bodt

I met Charlie Bryan when I was kid in my father's shop. For years when I was young, Charlie, my father, young Charles, and I would go dove hunting every Tuesday with Johnie Camper on his farm near Easton. That was the beginning of our long friendship. I always sat near Mr. Bryan when we hunted so we could talk; I really enjoyed all of his stories. He would often relive an old hunt or fishing tale that would interest me.

As I got older I began helping him put his decoys together. I would help him work up the bodies, put the heads on, and sand them with him. Mr. Bryan was very detail oriented when it came to his decoys. All of his patterns were precise and had to be done a specific way, "his way." I always joked with him about how particular he was, but it was something I really admired. It took years for him to truly trust me to work on his decoys without him looking over my shoulder and critiquing me. He taught me an awful lot about decoys.

We went on many hunting trips with Kenny Bryan and Renny Gay that were memorable. He always took my father and me fishing with Ed Darwin a couple times a year. I really do cherish those times with him and my father together. He explained to me what was important in life and how much satisfaction he got from people who collected his decoys. The generosity that Mr. Bryan and his wife Anna showed to my family was amazing. He was always there for me to talk to and get advice from. I am very thankful for the time we shared together.

—Charlie Pierce

Thank you for asking me to send some thoughts about Charlie Bryan. I truly feel it is an honor to be mentioned in the same sentence as Charlie. When you called to ask me to contribute to this article, it really made me sit and think. What can you say about this man that someone else hasn't already said?

I was first introduced to Charlie Bryan in 1998 by John Simon and over the next ten years Charlie became a mentor, teacher and

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friend. All that I know about making decoys I owe to Charlie. He taught me how to make heads and how to paint. I really loved to watch him paint. He would always say that he was not a painter. If I only learn to paint half as well as Charlie painted I would be happy!

Whenever I made a new piece I would take it to Charlie to critique. He always had positive suggestions but never criticized. Charlie was so humble that I do not think that he realized just how good he was. Just look at the last blackheads he made. He was truly the Master.

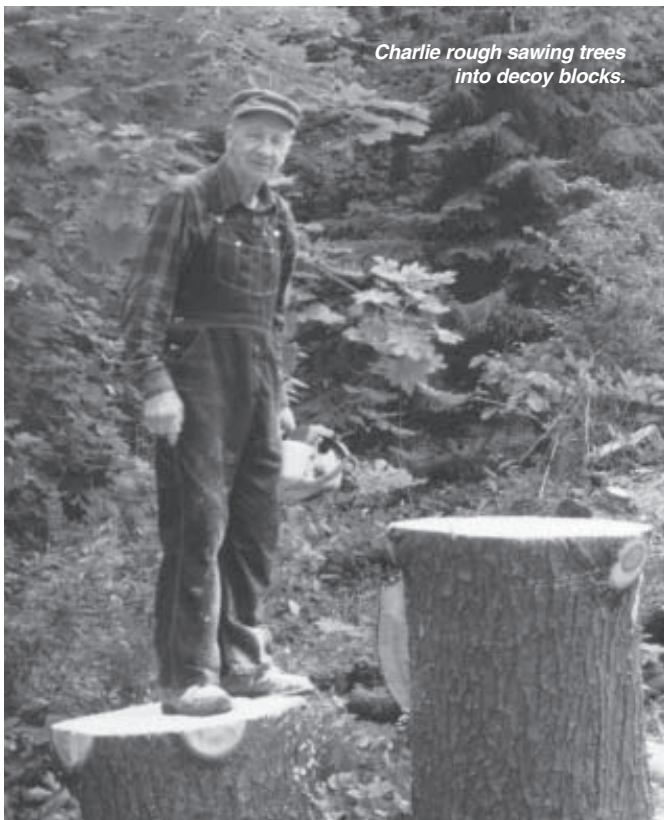
I think about Charlie every time I go out into my shop and I am so proud to have been able to call Charlie Bryan my friend.

—Andy Zielinski

About ten years ago when I first started collecting decoys a very good friend of mine suggested I should collect Charlie Bryan decoys. I wanted to know who Charlie Bryan was and he said he would introduce me and he did. The first time I met Mr. Charlie was in a goose blind and after that our friendship began.

Mr. Charlie was a man I very much admired, he was a very humble gentleman, an outdoorsman, loving waterfowl and fishing and he was good at it. Most of all is the timeless art he left all of us who loved collecting his decoys.

—Rennie Gay



Charlie rough sawing trees into decoy blocks.

Charlie Bryan with out a doubt is one of the greatest guys I have ever known. I feel very lucky to have gotten to know Mr. Charlie and his family. My only wish is that I could have met him sooner. It has been a pleasure to have sat in his basement and chatted with him, hunter, and to have his friendship. I will greatly miss him but I will never forget, as I have many decoys to remember him by. One of his many fans and friend.

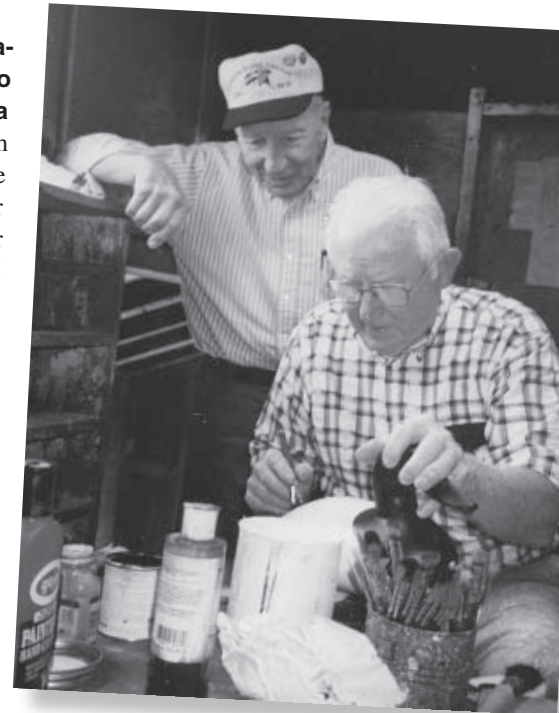
—Allen Bryan

In 1975 I had the pleasure and honor to meet Charlie and Anna Bryan. Speaking with him on the phone for the first time and then later visiting them at their home with Jim Pierce, I recognized immediately that they were both very special people. Charlie was always a gentleman and never thought his work measured up to other well known carvers of his time, but we all knew differently.

He often talked about the early days visiting Madison Mitchell and how open and inviting Mr. Mitchell was with his knowledge and how well he fit in with the group of other men he met in the shop, talking about what else; decoys, hunting, and fishing. Over the years Jeannie and I often remarked how down-to-earth Charlie and Anna were. They always greeted you in such a way that you knew they were truly happy to see you. Charlie, like your friend Madison, your passing will leave a void that can never be filled.

At the core of every successful venture you will always find a small group of dedicated volunteers and committed supporters. Charlie Bryan, along with his family for the past twenty-four years, has been a key part of the foundation that has supported the efforts of both the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum and the R. Madison Mitchell Endowment Trust. On behalf of the Directors, Staff, Volunteers, and membership we thank Anna, Bertha, and Charles for allowing us the opportunity to share quality time and to forge lasting memories with their beloved husband, father and our friend, Mr. Charlie Bryan.

—Patrick Vincenti



Charlie Bryan looks on as "Speed" Joiner paints the special Decoy Museum canvasbacks.