

Collector's corner

BY C. JOHN SULLIVAN

High head "bull neck" Canvasback Drakes from the Bowley's Quarter Ducking Club circa 1900.



A Day in the Life of a Collector



We all have a good day from time to time or as some say "even a blind squirrel finds an occasional nut." I had one of those good days several years back. I can attribute it to so many things in life: luck, happenstance, being at the right place at the right time or perhaps the proper alignment of the stars, the moon and planets. This was one of those days.

In April of 2003, I received a tip from a local antique dealer that a gentleman had called. He had some old decoys and some old guns to sell. I looked at the note sitting on my desk all day long. And at 5 minutes to 5 o'clock, I made the phone call introducing myself after the third ring to the gentleman. "Yes, I have some old decoys, my father got them from the Bowley's Quarters Gunning Club, they were under the ladies room in the cellar." "Do you have any old guns?" He says, "Yes, I have an 8-gauge English breech loader that came from Bowley's Quarters Gunning Club. I got my grandfather's Remington Model 11 with an extended tube." "When can I come to see them?" I ask. He gives me directions and I'm on the road. It is now 8:11 and I am returning from Middle River with 90 decoys in the back of my Suburban having written two checks to cover my purchases. Three

wonderful early fish float bobbars sit on the front seat next to me. The pièce de résistance is one decoy, a bluebill drake that is by the same maker as the decoy sticking up in front of two men photographed at Grace's Quarter. I would say that out of the approximately 90 decoys there are 20 to 30 Holly's, maybe 1 or 2 early McGaw's, some by Bailey Moltz from Havre de Grace – all redhead drakes, a big bold high head canvasback Holly drake, a big horse head Jim Currier canvasback drake, and of course, the wonderful little bluebill. Some early, early branded decoys, one with the brand J. Breese (Breese was the one-time owner of the Oakington estate) on its underside, others with just initials. A great visit, a great pile of stuff. I'll maybe be able to wash about 6 of them tonight, and a new term was introduced to me for storytelling. Low ceiling dirt floored cellar smelling of cat and dog, burned coal and the earthen floor, banging my head on the beams, cobwebs over every thing and 86 of the decoys way back in the furnace room, I could only look at them with a flashlight. I made my offer and bought them that way. Once I got them carried outside in the daylight they didn't look nearly as good as they did with the flashlight. I said to the gentleman "These look a lot worse out here in this light than they did with a flashlight." He replied "Don't tell me that John Sullivan, I know

you know what you're doing, you're what my father called a "smarter." I said, "A 'smarter,' what's that mean?" He said, "You've never heard that term? There's a new one for you." I said, "Well, what is a smarter?" He said, "You're smarter than I am when it comes to these decoys. You'll do fine." I think he was right, I did do fine. But the biggest problem is I am the worst kind of collector, a collector who hates to part with anything. The fish bobbars went into baskets with dozens of others that came from the same area; the decoys are displayed in my boats, my baskets and on my shelves. Am I smarter? I doubt it, but I am richer. Yes, I am richer from the experience and the stories that these old wooden decoys can tell.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have come upon that rig from the historic Bowley's Quarters Gunning club, a club that dates back to the mid-1800s. Approximately six months after I cleaned out that cellar a tropical storm by the name of Isabel finished the job, leaving in her wake extensive damage to the cellar, and washing away anything the foundation and I might have mistakenly left behind. ■