

Back in the day



PAUL SAMERDYKE

The Horicon Marsh Education and Visitor Center is home to a unique and valuable collection of historic decoys that were hand carved by area craftsmen, including Burton Lange and John Yasger, and now hold significant value as folk art.

Historic Horicon Marsh decoy collection set to draw flocks of visitors.

Jennifer Sereno

You won't find Burton Lange's historic Horicon Marsh decoys out on the water bringing down the birds these days.

If you get lucky, you might find a few of the hand-carved, wooden waterfowl on a premier auction website, pictured next to other prized antiques.

But your best bet to see some of these rare and valuable hand-carved duck decoys is to head to Horicon, where the Horicon Marsh Education and Visitor Center serves as home to a remarkable collection of hunting equipment from a bygone era that highlights the wetland's importance as a gathering place for hunters and the hunted through the ages.

"The decoys themselves are beautiful examples of craftsmanship but they also symbolize an important period in the marsh's history, when citizen-led restoration efforts began to bring large numbers of waterfowl back to the marsh," says Bret Owsley, Horicon area supervisor for the Department of Natural Resources. "We have quite a few decoys by Burton Lange and John Yasger, two preeminent carvers from the area during the 1930s and '40s. Some of the pieces on display were used by Louis 'Curley' Radke, who led the campaign to have the marsh acquired by the public and restored."

Perhaps the most valuable pieces in the collection are decoys by Burton Lange, which today may fetch \$1,000 or more

at auction. Lange, a Horicon native and World War I veteran who lived from 1896 to 1967, was a foreman at what became John Deere Horicon Works and carved the decoys in his attic — he didn't have a garage. Lange served as a state director for the Izaak Walton League, a national conservation organization that Radke introduced into the area as he began work to restore the marsh in the 1920s.

Mark Kakatsch, vice president of the Friends of Horicon Marsh Education and Visitor Center and a wingshooting instructor, says Lange was noted for his ability to create convincing puddle duck decoys including mallards, black ducks and pintails. These birds began returning to the marsh in large numbers after attempts to introduce agriculture into the marsh were abandoned and a new dam was constructed to permanently raise water levels in 1934.

Decoy makers of the time used everything from old cork salvaged out of ice-boxes to old cedar posts or poles, yet using a variety of humble materials, Lange's work stood out.

"Every good carver back in those days would create a basic design with a stencil on a thin piece of wood or a thick piece of hide," Kakatsch says. "They would lay that pattern out on a block of wood or some cork and begin the manufacturing process. At the time, you would also have other, less skilled carvers copying the patterns of the best craftsmen. If you look at a Lange decoy, you don't see the kind of feather detail you would see on one of today's stylized art pieces but they do look sleek."



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Some of the local carvers were quite famous in their day and their work symbolized the prestige of the Horicon hunting grounds.

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The ducks — and the decoys — of Horicon Marsh caught the attention of hunters nationwide and many came to the marsh in search of a memorable outdoor experience. They typically left well satisfied and often took a few decoys and locally-made duck calls back home.

“In those days, hopping on a train and going someplace to hunt for a month at a time was not unusual and it was through the work of some of these dedicated hunters that enforceable regulations began taking hold including the 1934 federal Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act,” Kakatsch says.

Meanwhile, innovation in hunting methods and equipment continued around Horicon Marsh. Since very few hunters had access to boats with motors until after World War II, many used homemade skiffs and long push paddles to navigate out in search of a workable location. Some of the local carvers also created long, wide marsh skis that helped hunters glide over the reeds.

Thanks to support from the Friends of Horicon Marsh Education and Visitor Center, as well as relatives of some of the most famous carvers from the area, examples of the early marsh skis, skiffs, push paddles and decoys can be seen as part of the new Explorium, which opens to the public starting Aug. 22.

To learn more, visit dnr.wi.gov and search “Horicon Marsh.”



JENNIFER WIRTH

Mark Kakatsch with historic marsh skis and push paddles.

Jennifer Sereno works in DNR's Office of Communications.

>>> IF YOU GO

Historic decoys, hand-carved duck calls and other antique hunting equipment are on display at the new Explorium, part of the Horicon Marsh Education and Visitor Center. The Explorium opens Aug. 22 and features a variety of museum-quality exhibits and interactive displays.