

[From Summer 2000]

The CNWR's Museum Property Collection

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (CNWR) was established in 1943 under authority of the Migratory Bird Commission "for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for the other management purpose, for migratory birds". The over 14,000 acre refuge is located primarily on the Virginia portion of Assateague Island but is named after the closest settlement, the town of Chincoteague.

Chincoteague, settled in the 1600s, is rich in cultural history. Until recent times, use of natural resources accounted for the major portion of the residents' livelihood. Working on the water, whether it be fishing, clamming, oystering, or gunning the myriads of waterfowl and shorebirds which reportedly darkened the skies, was a way of life year-round.

J. C. Apple, CNWR Manager from 1968 to 1980, envisioned using the unique cultural history of the area to increase the public's awareness of the refuge and the refuge system, as well as heighten its knowledge of this resource heritage. Consequently, Manager Apple and the refuge, in conjunction with NASA, the U. S. Coast Guard and the National Park Service, sponsored the first annual "Weekend of the Islands" on April 12 and 13, 1969. The refuge's contribution to the celebration included a decoy and art show which attracted 7,000 visitors to the refuge.

Highlights of the show included exhibitions and talks by local carvers such as Miles Hancock, old time market gunner, guide, decoy maker and diamondback terrapin farmer; decoy carver Delbert (Cigar) Daisey; reformed market hunter, naturalist and guide Tom Reed, who interpreted a fully rigged battery gun skiff and punt gun bateau, emphasizing the errors of market hunting and the importance of present-day conservation laws in perpetuating the resources.

Long-time Chincoteague resident Asa Turlington, who at that time was one of the last living net makers on Virginia's Eastern Shore, demonstrated his craft. Of particular note was the presence of William L. Mackey, Jr., who reportedly owned the largest collection of decoys, guns, and waterfowl and shorebird gunning accouterments. Mr. Mackey displayed a variety of historical Eastern Shore-associated gunning items.

Chincoteague Refuge's museum property collection began with the advent of this celebration. In preparation for the "Weekend of the Islands," event Manager Apple ran a news release asking for the public to donate or loan old artifacts associated with wildfowling, especially those that were made and used on Virginia's Eastern Shore. The release called for old duck, goose or shorebird decoys, gunning skiffs, shell boxes, paddles, oars, guns, calendars, advertisements, powder cans, shot bags, night lights, boat mounted guns, etc.

As a result of the response by the public to this request, the refuge was able to display a variety of decoys

and associated hunting equipment. For example, decoys from such well-know local carvers as Ira Hudson, Miles Handcock and Doug Jester were displayed.

In the 1970s, the annual decoy and art show continued. In addition, the refuge was able to put together a traveling exhibit of historical decoys, guns and other associated hunting paraphernalia that was exhibited at various decoy and art shows along the Atlantic Coast. The concept of a National Waterfowling Museum which was to be constructed on the refuge was also formulated.

During this time period, many donations were made to the refuge. Major contributors included Dr. Harry M. Walsh, William J. Mackey, Jr., Vernon E. Berg and William E. Purnell, Jr. Among other donors were Delbert Hudson, John R. Huglett, 111, and Atley Lankford. The Ebie Lunn family donated a variety of historical U. S. Coast Guard items including uniforms, photographs and accessories.

In 1981, the Department of Interior Museum transferred two shotguns, four battery guns and seven punt guns which had been used to kill waterfowl. The guns were transferred to the refuge in order to provide for their better protection and to coordinate loans to other refuges and museums in the Chesapeake Bay/Atlantic coast area.

By the early 1980s, lack of funding and opposition from environmental groups eliminated plans for the museum. However, the annual decoy and art show flourished. It became so popular that it was moved from the refuge to the local high school to accommodate the growing number of exhibitors. Sponsorship of the show was taken over by the Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce and the Chincoteague Decoy Carvers Association.

The refuge constructed a Waterfowling Exhibit Shed where decoys, guns and associated hunting equipment were displayed and interpreted. The exhibit was opened to the public prior to evening interpretive programs and during special refuge events.

The biggest problem with the exhibit was lack of humidity and temperature control which subjected the museum property to corrosion and widely fluctuating temperatures. Consequently, the exhibit was dismantled by the mid-1980s and the property put into storage on the refuge.

In the 1990s, museum property funds enabled the refuge to purchase steel museum property storage cabinets where items could be properly stored. Humidity and temperature control was added and a security alarm system was installed. In 1995, an agreement was reached with the Havre de Grace Museum, under which a museum consultant and technician intern cataloged much of the refuge collection and carried out conservation measures on the guns.

Although J. C. Apple's dream of a water-fowling museum did not materialize, his effort in securing museum property for the refuge, and his creative thinking in establishing the Weekend of the Islands decoy and art show, have educated and provided pleasure to thousands of people. Over the years, the refuge has loaned numerous items to other refuges and museums in order to further cultural resource knowledge.

The refuge currently has nearly 1800 historical museum property items, approximately 200 of which are out on loan to ten refuges and museums. A part of the new Chincoteague Refuge Education Administrative Complex facility will be an exhibit featuring many of the local, historical museum property items which link the past with the future.