Samuel J. Denny Jr.

(1874-1953)

Clayton, N.Y.






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More displays at the Thousand Islands Museum, 312 James Street, Clayton:
• decoys
• fishing tackle
• Sam Denny room
• muskie hall of fame
• Chauncey Wheeler exhibit

Samuel Joseph Denny Jr. (1874-1953)

Sam Denny was one of the St. Lawrence River's most prominent decoy carvers. A life-long resident of Clayton, he married Salina Amo in 1896. Together they had seven sons and eight daughters, ten of them surviving at his death. Like his father, Sam was a fishing and hunting guide. To support his large family he also painted houses and boats, hauled wood, cut ice, salted and smoked fish for winter, maintained a garden, and made decoys.

Although Sam's education was limited, he taught himself to paint landscapes, read music, and play the fiddle and violin. He gave lessons to those he felt had natural musical inclinations, and he played for square dances and at midnight mass each Christmas Eve. Bitterly poor by present day standards, he developed many talents through his own efforts. His decoys and paintings live on as testimony to his creative craftsmanship.



Samuel Joseph Denny, Jr., circa 1894

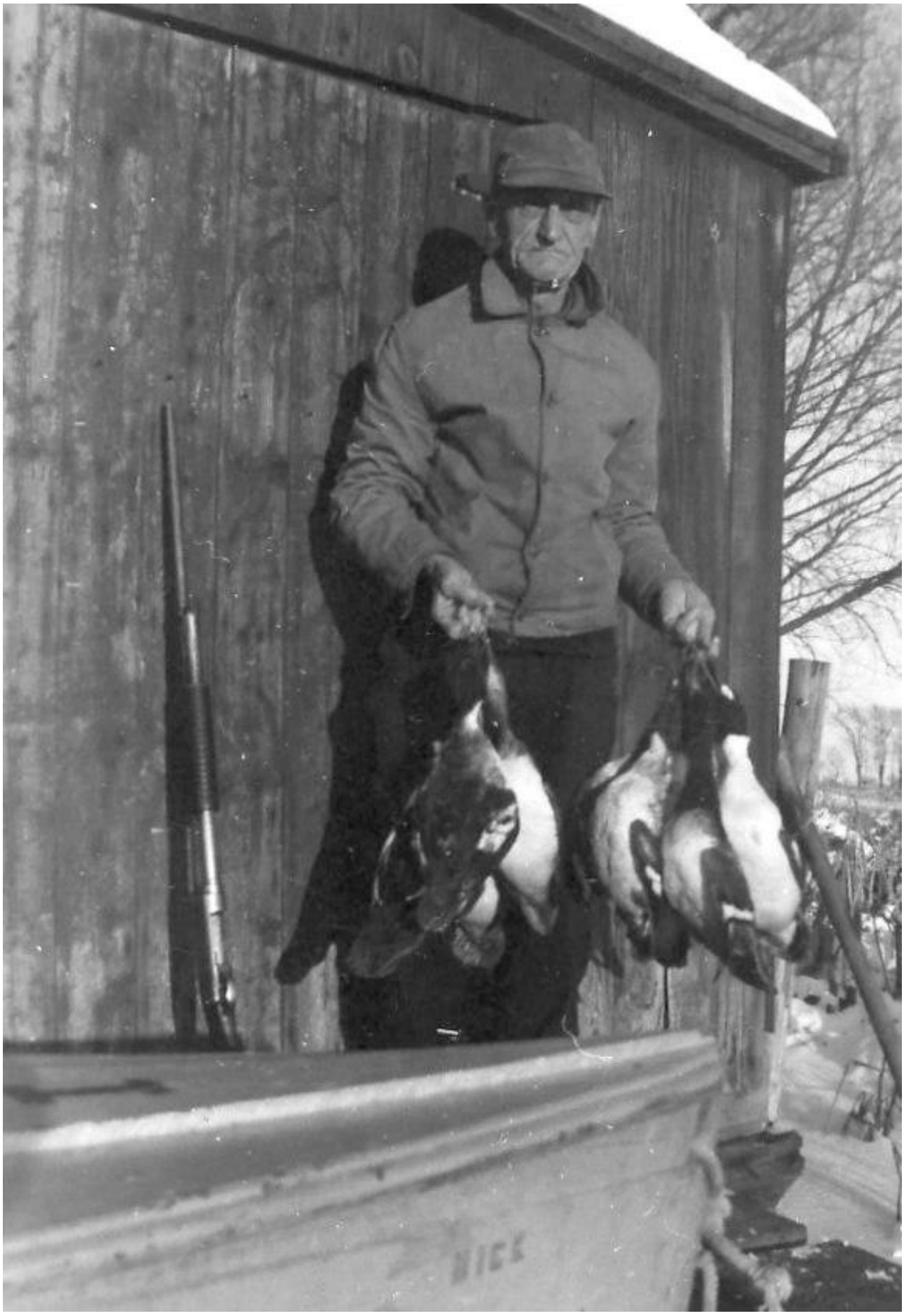




Sam Denny began making decoys around 1900, and continued until 1952, completing over a half century of commercial decoy carving. He usually carved between 125 and 150 decoys a year, with up to 400 decoys in his most productive years. Sam once estimated that he made 5,000 decoys in his lifetime.

Sam's favorite wood was cedar, and he preferred the big old trees from the "burnt lands" near Three Mile Bay. He experimented a great deal with paint after securing a book on chemistry by mail. He used banana oil and collodion to produce a flat finish. Because cedar did not always hold paint well, Sam used a special primer of his own concoction.

Sam is known to have made hunting decoys for at least eight different species of ducks and geese. Based on the examples of his work remaining today, their approximate order of abundance, from most to least common, are broadbill, black duck, goldeneye, canvasback, redhead, bufflehead, mallard, and Canada goose. Denny is also reported to have made decoys for pintails and green-winged teal.


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In the early 1900s, Denny charged 75¢ each for his decoys. By the 1940s, his price had gone up to $5.00 each for black ducks, a bit less for other species. Despite the increase in prices, he could not keep up with demand, and was always sold out before the duck season opened.

Although the prices charged for decoys by Sam Denny, and other local carvers, seem low by today's standards, they were at the time rather expensive items. Most local hunters could not afford them, and many opted to make their own.

Hunters attempting to make their own decoys often copied the work of the more successful local carvers, sometimes with borrowed patterns and the assistance of those carvers. These practices commonly lead to the creation of a regional decoy style, with decoys by different makers closely resembling each other. Further complicating matters, the work of carvers who made only a limited number of decoys was seldom properly documented. Given the passage of time, the decoys of many local carvers cannot be properly identified.





Paintings by Sam Denny. The painting above/right is signed “Sam Denis”. Sam Denny used two different anglicized spellings of his surname during his lifetime, (Denny and Denney), plus the French spelling (Denis) as the signature on some of his paintings.

Photographs of the Sam Denny decoys featured in the TIDCA display at the 2026 Clayton Decoy Show are shown in the following pages, with some brief notations. With the exception of the drake bufflehead, all of these decoys are believed to be in original paint and in generally good to excellent condition.



Drake broadbill carved from a very deep (thick) body block and with a pronounced schooner bow.



Elaborate comb painting on the back and upper sides involving the use the several different graining combs.



Hen broadbill with darker brown paint over most of the head and body and combed patches on each shoulder area.



Drake broadbill with combed back, and wet-on-wet blending along the sides.



Hen broadbill with blended shades of brown paint over the head and body. Lighter colored paint on the back without any combing.



Low-head drake broadbill with a very nicely combed back. This decoy is pictured on page 95 of The Great Book of Wildfowl Decoys edited by Joe Engers, and on page 90 of Great Lakes Decoy Interpretations by Gene and Linda Kangas.



Low-head drake goldeneye. This decoy is pictured on page 216 of Decoys of the Thousand Islands by Stewart and Lunman.



Hen goldeneye by Sam Denny with a darker paint pattern.

Both of the goldeneyes shown on this page were from the rig of Roland P. (Shack) Canell [1902-1974]. Roland's mother was Lillie May Denny Canell, Sam Denny's sister and only sibling.



Hen goldeneye with light paint on the lower breast and sides. Marks from the anchor line visible around the middle of the body.



Low-head drake redhead . Blended gray paint on the back and sides, without any combing.



Hen redhead with blended shades of brown and tan paint and without any combing.



Drake redhead with combing on the back. This decoy is pictured on page 50 of “Decoy Collectors Guide, 1968 Annual”, and on page 9 of the 1993 Jan-Feb issue of “Decoy Magazine”.



Drake canvasback with light colored back and sides. This decoy is pictured on page 9 of the 1993 Jan-Feb issue of “Decoy Magazine.



Drake canvasback with a slimmer style head (“bullet-head”), and light gray paint on the back and sides. This decoy is pictured on the cover of the 1993 Jan-Feb issue of “Decoy Magazine”.

Both drake canvasbacks on this page and the two canvasbacks on the next page were all finished without combing, typical of most Sam Denny canvasbacks.



Hen canvasback with the original blended shades of brown and gray paint. Denny hen canvasbacks are quite rare and most that remain today have been repainted.



Drake canvasback with head in a forward or reaching position.

Both canvasbacks on this page are from the rig of William L. (Bill) Barlow, Clayton, NY. Bill often hunted with Leonard Denny, one of Sam's sons, and he also carved a rig of his own decoys modeled after Sam Denny decoys, with some assistance and advice from Sam.



Repainted drake bufflehead 12&1/2 inches long. Buffleheads are a very small species of duck, and few decoys for them were made by St. Lawrence River carvers.



Canada goose hunting decoy approximately 21&7/8 inches in overall length. Body made from cork with wood bottom board, wood head, and wood inserted tail; painted eyes. Made for Sam Denny's son-in-law, Ernest Montroy.



Black duck with scratch painting on the head and body. This decoy is pictured on page 216 of Decoys of the Thousand Islands by Stewart and Lunman, on pages 9 and 10 of the 2009 May-June (9[3]) issue of “Hunting and Fishing Collectibles Magazine” (head view only on page 9), and on page 14 of the 2012 March-April issue of “Decoy Magazine”.



Black duck with scratch painting on the head and rather simple brush painting on the body. This decoy is pictured on page 19 of Collectors Guide to Decoys by Linda and Gene Kangas, and page 9 of the 1993 Jan-Feb issue of “Decoy Magazine”.



Low-head black duck with scratch painting on the head and body.



Black duck with fine scratch painting on the head and elaborate brush painting on the body. Rigged for hunting but very lightly or perhaps never actually used. This decoy is pictured on page 50 of “Decoy Collectors Guide 1968 Annual”, on page 159 of Decoys: A North American Survey by Gene and Linda Kangas, on pages 9 and 10 of the 2009 May-June (9[3]) issue of “Hunting and Fishing Collectibles Magazine” (head view only on page 9), and on page 90 of Great Lakes Decoy Interpretations by Gene and Linda Kangas.



Hen mallard, never rigged for hunting, with very fine scratch paint on the head and elaborate brush painting on the body. Hollow wood body with bottom board. This decoy is pictured on page 204 of Decoys by Linda and Gene Kangas; on page 214 of Decoys of the Thousand Islands by Stewart and Lunman, and on page 90 of Great Lakes Decoy Interpretations by Gene and Linda Kangas.



Drake mallard hunting decoy, with metal tail curls broken off. From the collection of the late Frank Ash, one of the earliest northern New York decoy collectors.



Miniature drake mallard with metal tail curls, 5 inches long.



Miniature hen mallard, 4&1/2 inches long, made as a mate to the drake shown above.

Denny is known to have made at least several dozen miniature ducks, and two miniature Canada geese. Many of the miniatures were made as matched pairs, and included some species that he seldom or never made hunting decoys for.