

Robert Elliston

(1849 - 1915) Bureau, IL

Robert Elliston originated the style of decoy carving which now typifies the Illinois River area. His style is distinct and varies little from decoy to decoy. His decoys are small, and sport peaked heads flattened to the notch of the bill. The bill is embellished with a carved lower mandible, nostrils, nail, and a groove on either side. High cheeks poke out from under high-set eyes, giving the bird a frog-like appearance. This quality workmanship continues down over the body of the bird to where the seam is barely visible. According to his son, Dr. R.L. Elliston, Elliston carved pairs of blue- and green-wing teal, mallards, and pintails, but only drakes of scaup, canvasbacks, coots, geese, redheads, ringnecks and wigeon. These were the decoys that Catherine then painted with such talent that even bland colored hen became masterpieces. Her painted designs and combed swirls yielded realistic decoys. She went as far as to highlight each painted feather with white to reproduce the pale edges of true duck feathers. There are no records, but it is estimated that the Elliston's produced a few thousand decoys. (Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art)



Robert Elliston
(1848-1915)



Catherine Elliston
(1858-1953)

Robert Elliston (1847-1811) Bureau, Illinois is recognized as one of the top master decoy carvers in Illinois. His decoys are hard to find in any condition so when examples like these teal came to market, they always demand high prices. Back in 1990 I had the opportunity to interview Robert Elliston's youngest daughter, Margureite Fuerer, who was 90 at the time. Joe and I brought along an Elliston mallard hen sleeper that we owned at the time to show Marguerite. She hadn't held one of her father's decoys in over 70 years. As she turned the mallard hen sleeper slowly about, the memories came flooding back.



"You know, I grew up in my dad's workshop. When I was just a baby, my mother would make a bed for me in the wood shavings. There was always a pile of shavings in the corner. I would sleep there while she painted my dad's decoys. She painted all his decoys you know. My parents work together every day in that shop next to our house during the winter. Isn't that Beautiful? He carved those ducks just perfect."

Robert A Elliston was born on July 2, 1847 in Kentucky. His family moved near Indianapolis, Indiana. Here he learned the buggy and carriage making trade. Working at the Studebaker shops in South Bend. Through the years, he plied his trade, leaving Indiana to work at the Henry Olds, factory, then moving on to New York and later to Philadelphia. He settled in St Louis Missouri for a while working as a hearse designer at the McLaren Hearse and Coach Mfg. Company. Leaving St Louis with his bride Ms. Kummiskey during the mid 1870's, Elliston took a job with the Brereton Buggy Shop in Lacon, Illinois. His young wife and baby were stricken with smallpox. His sister-in-law, Catherine Kummiskey (1858-1953) came to tend to her sister and child. When she died, Catherine stayed on to care for the child who never recovered fully and died a year or so later. Catherine and Robert were married on December 10, 1878 in Lacon where they lived for 6 years while Robert continued to work at the Buggy shop.

In 1884 they moved into the Undercliff Hotel, which was located on Lake Senachwine that is situated on the west shores of the Illinois River near Hennepin. An old letter from Elliston to J. E. Taylor, Hennepin, Illinois dated 1890 has a letterhead indicating that Elliston set up a factory in Henry, Illinois after he move from Putnam where he manufactured "fine decoys and hunting boats" suggesting that this is where he produced his decoys for the 7 years that the family lived at the Undercliff. As their family grew, Elliston wanted to make a life for his new family away from the city. Walking the bluffs along the Illinois River, he found a spot over-looking Goose Pond and Lake Senachwine that was perfect for his plans. He was able to rent several acres from the owner Albee Miller for ten dollars a year. Here he built his home, a fine frame house

encircled on two sides with a veranda. Behind the house he built his workshop. The gently sloping hillside would be perfect for a honeybee operation. In the coming years he would manage over 242 colonies of bees and produce thousands of hunting decoys.



Elliston became part of a surge in waterfowling. From approximately 1880 to 1910, waterfowling on the Illinois River would explode. The river and its back waters were a major stopping off point along the Mississippi Flyway used by thousands of migrating ducks. The development of the automatic shotgun with its choked barrels and reloadable shells enabled hunters to harvest great numbers of waterfowl which were often shipped by rail to the big cities markets. Market hunting was a respectable occupation, and the decoy was a useful tool. Hunting clubs formed all along the riverbanks from the wide waters of LaSalle County to the

wide waters of Peoria. Some of the most prestigious clubs in the country, like the Mallard Club, The Hennepin Club, The Senachwine Club and the Princeton Fish and Game Club were situated within miles of Elliston's home. Theirs was a simple life. Robert and Catherine would have nine children, five that would survive past infancy. During the warm months, the family would tend to the bees and their honey. The Ellistons would ship tons of honey by rail to the Chicago and Peoria markets. All that remains of the original home stead is the cool root cellar where the honey was stored. When the bees went into hibernation, Robert would begin work on his decoy orders.

Elliston was one of the first commercial decoy carvers in the Midwest and gained quite a reputation. The noted sportswriter, William Hazelton referred to him as "the best boat and decoy builder on the Illinois River" in his *Days Among the Ducks*. Elliston made a double bowed sixteen-foot galvanized iron duck boat over a oak framework. His decoys were carved out of native white pine. According to his daughter, Robert would have racks of decoys in his workshop waiting for their new owners. All around the workshop were shelves which displayed sample decoys of every species Elliston offered. Elliston worked from his orders and was always busy. He stopped making sleeper and preening decoys early in his carving career because he started to have trouble keeping up with his orders. These decoys and the geese took too much time. The sleepers especially took more time to paint because of their turned heads. Each day, he and Catherine would work together on their decoys. She would paint during the daylight hours, leaving to tend to the children when she was needed. Each evening Robert would bring six head blanks into the house. After dinner, he would sit by the window in the kitchen with a lamp at his side and whittle out a cheeky head with a finely detailed bill. The following day he would carve six bodies of a two-piece construction. Elliston's method of joining his decoy parts was unsurpassed by other decoy makers. Even after years of use in water and ice wore the paint from his decoys, the body seams rarely split. Lastly, quality taxidermist's eyes were embedded high up on the slightly pointed heads.



Catherine would prime the decoys with a coat of gray paint which was mixed with a heavy white lead paint. She would mix all of her own paints this way. Often using actual ducks that she would later cook for dinner; Catherine developed her own paint patterns. The large solid color areas on the sides and backs of the drake ducks were combed with a metal graining tool. Her feathering style blended dark loops of color over a wet base color. The back feathers were accented by scratching another loop around the dark loops with the end of her paintbrush. The break in color between the sides and breast were softened by looping the breast color over the

damp sides. The rump color was blended into the back by swirling the color into the damp paint on the back in a feathery design. Several Illinois River decoy makers were strongly influenced by Catherine's work, and Robert's. Millie Graves was actually taught by Catherine. Charlie Perdew was one of the few people that Robert allowed in his workshop. Robert didn't like having anyone looking over his shoulder when he was working, but he did enjoy visiting with young Charlie.

Robert didn't have much time for waterfowling. Hazelton included this Elliston quote in his *Days Among the Ducks*; " My name is Elliston. I build boats and decoys at Putman." (Elliston's house set between Putman and Bureau on the river road.) " Today I went out for a little duck shooting myself. I do not go out very often but seeing a lot of Chicago hunters come in every day with many ducks was too much of a temptation for me and I thought I would try it myself." When Elliston went hunting it was to feed his family. One of the Miller's boys related old local tales of Robert going duck hunting with a sack of shelled corn and his old single shot eight-gauge gun. The corn would be scattered in the waterhole. When the feeding ducks would bunch up, Robert would slide that old market gun over his hide and let loose. Margarite reminisced how everyone had their own stuffed and roasted bird when duck was served at the Elliston table. Robert's sons, Rob, and Roy, both grew up to be fine sportsmen who belong to the prestigious Mallard Club on Goose Pond situated just north of the Princeton Fish and Game Club. Like all the Elliston children, they were very successful. Robert was a strong believer in education. He once told a neighbor he didn't want his children to be stuck on the farm like him. He wanted them to be someone. Both his sons became doctors, yet it was Robert that gained fame through his decoys.

Robert died very unexpectedly in the winter of 1915. He was out pumping water for the family cow when he was struck with chest pains. He came into the house and laid on the couch. He died there. Catherine stayed on at the family home for several years until she was able to find someone to take over the bee operation. It was during this time that she worked with Bert Graves and taught his wife, Millie, how to paint his decoys. She left Bureau to live with her daughter Laureen who was a schoolteacher in Batavia, Illinois by 1920. For several years Bert Graves shipped his decoys up to Catherine for her to paint, but eventually his wife Millie took over the painting completely. After that she would occasionally repaint decoys for hunters, but few people knew about her talent in this town so far from the Illinois River. Catherine would live well into her 90's, dying in 1953 at her daughter's home in Aurora, Illinois.



Graves ended up with most of Elliston's tools and patterns, but many of his decoys were left behind when Catherine moved.

One spring in the 1940's, renters of the old Elliston home approached Bob Weeks of Bureau to appraise some decoys they found in the attic. Bob was a local decoy carver and folks knew he liked decoys. He recalled going into attic and finding the decoys. He and the renter spread the decoys out on the lawn. Bob told him they were mostly Elliston's blocks including geese and a least one swan. Since the decoys were still in original paint and fairly good condition, some were unused, Bob told the renter he should be able to sell them for a dollar each. When the renter offered the decoys to Bob, he refused since he had enough decoys but accepted a small Elliston coot for his help. He planned to take a pattern off the decoy. Like most of the decoys Bob acquired, the Coot ended up in his decoy box in the corner of his basement workshop. This is where Joe French found the bird when he visited with Bob Weeks during the 1950's. Bob gave the decoy to Joe for his collection. What happened to the rest of the decoys from the Elliston attic? One of Elliston's old neighbors recalled driving by the house and seeing the children there playing with the decoys. They would tie several birds together and run across the yard dragging the decoys behind them. One would assume that these decoys were all destroyed.

The decoys Elliston made for use on the Illinois river have wide shallow bodies. Catherine painted the canvasbacks, redheads and blue-winged teal in full mating plumage because they were used for Spring shooting prior to the 1918 legislations that outlawed such practices. The other species common to the Illinois River valley were also produced regularly by Elliston, mallards, bluebills, and pintails. Rarer examples would include coot, geese, green-winged teal and at least one known black duck sleeper, not to mention the still uncounted for swan. Like most decoy makers Elliston made his hens at a ratio of one hen to four drakes, and he stopped making sleepers, preeners and geese early in his carving career so they are rare also. He also made a few pairs of miniature decoys for his children. His hunting decoys were finished off with a lead strip weight. Elliston used a commercially poured keel weights produced by the Raymond lead Company and the Blanchford lead Company. He personalized the weight by stamping "THE ELLISTON DECOY" into the blank side of the strip with a specially made stamp.

Some of the best examples of Elliston decoys were found around the Huricon marsh region in Wisconsin. Some of these deep bodied Elliston were branded "Dering". These decoys were used by Guy V Dering, a member of the Nee-Pee-Nauk club on Lake Puckaway which was situated just north of the Horicon marsh beyond the Portage divide in the Fox River system. Established in 1882, the club was hunted extensively by a group of successful Chicago businessmen including Dering during the late 1890's. There is no way of knowing if Dering bought his Elliston's directly from Elliston or ordered them through Bullard & Gormley Company of Chicago. An ad, which was sold as part of the Wm. Humbracht collection by Richard Oliver Gallery of Maine in 1988, offered Elliston decoys for twelve dollars per dozen in their 1909 catalog. Another rig of deep bodied Ellistons was found near Oconomowac, Wisconsin, also in the Horicon Marsh area at the Dupree estate sale with several early slope-breasted Mason decoys. Dupree was another wealthy Chicago hunter who hunted in the Horicon Marsh area during the late 1800's. There were fine examples of mallards, blue-winged teal and redheads in this group of decoys that were auctioned by Julia/ Guyette/Schmidt in April of 1991.

Julia/Guyette also sold a rare oversized black duck sleeper by Elliston in their first major decoy auction during the summer of 1984. Found in Massachusetts, this sleeper is just one of many

Elliston decoys that were used far from their origin in states across the country proving that Robert Elliston wasn't as much of an unknown country man as he thought. Although his descendants were well-educated successful people, it was Robert that had attained national fame among waterfowlers. These men appreciated the quality of his decoys and their ability to attract bird to their hunting holes and withstand years of hard use. Today, Robert and Catherine Elliston's decoys have found a new appreciation among art circles for their beauty and form and are considered among the best examples of American folk art. (Donna and Joe Tonelli)



This important sleeping mallard hen by Robert Elliston set a world record for the maker, selling at \$212,400 at the Guyette & Detter auction on June 25th, 2018.