



## Ben Schmidt

*(1884 - 1968) Centerline, MI*

Benjamin S. Schmidt was born in 1884 and carved his first decoys in 1914 when he needed a rig for hunting and ended up becoming one of the best-known carvers in Michigan and some described his product as “the All-American Working Decoy”. He lived in Centerline, a community at the northern edge of Detroit his entire life and was known to hunt the St. Claire Flats area in Michigan.

His life-like style is not typical for Michigan carvers, but other carvers have adopted and copied it since it was originated. Ben used old cedar telephone poles, cut to length and split in half for his decoy bodies. With a band saw borrowed from a friend, presumably **Ralph Johnston**, Schmidt roughed out the decoy’s shape and further refined the piece with a hand axe, lather’s hatchet, spokeshave, plane and rasp to finish them. All of his hollow decoys were drilled out from the bottom and had a bottom board attached. He almost always relief-carved the wing tips and tail feathers, but for the other feathers, he took a rather distinctive approach. Using tools that he made himself. The tool resembled a small, squeezed end pipe, sharpened at one end. He placed the tool against the decoy back and tapped it with a hammer to make the feather indentation. Different sized pipe tools made feather indentations of different sizes. In this manner, he textured the surface of the bird with feathers of different sizes.

Schmidt’s need for hunting decoys turned the production into a commercial volume in the 1940’s – ’50’s. He sold decoys in the hundreds to local sporting goods stores; one of his primary outlets was the J. L. Hudson Department Store in Detroit. During the period of greatest productivity, and running behind on completing orders Ben, and his older brother **Frank Schmidt** worked together. Although Frank was a good carver, Ben’s technique and painting seemed to be far superior to Frank’s work. Between the two of them displaying their combined talents, they produced a decoy for every duck and goose species hunted in the Midwest. Many

of these decoys were sold to sporting goods stores. As the years passed, Ben worked by himself and specialized in special-order decorative, miniatures and third-sized carvings. He painted in oils and his paint style was simple, but he used wet on wet technique with lifelike shading and blending.

Ben continued carving decorative and miniatures until his death in 1968 at the age of 93. Many of Ben's decoys are signed or stamped, but those sold to large department stores or sports shops may have their label only.

Most collectors figure that a Ben Schmidt decoy of any quality is worth \$1,000. His goose decoys are valued at nearly double that of his duck decoys. Ben Schmidt decoys have been selling at decoy auctions for \$250-\$5,000 for some rarer species in excellent condition.

You should remember many Michigan carvers tried to copy Ben Schmidt's style and technique.