

Fred A. Allen

(1838 – 1912) Monmouth, Illinois

Over the years, Monmouth has had its share of avid sportsmen, but none could equal the passion of Fred A. Allen, who transformed the sports of duck hunting and fishing with his numerous inventions.

Known as the father of the modern duck call, which he designed in 1863, Allen gained a national following, selling his hunting specialties by mail — among them decoys and bow-facing oars.

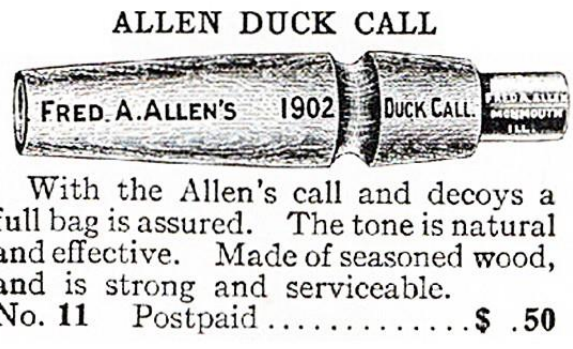
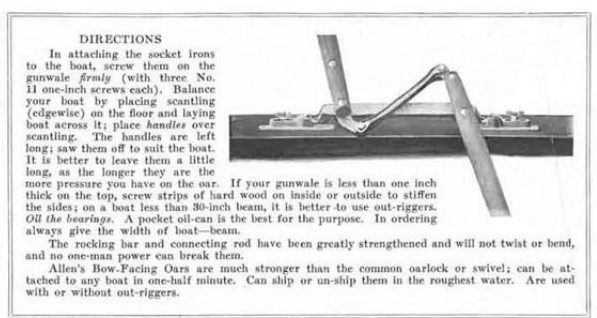
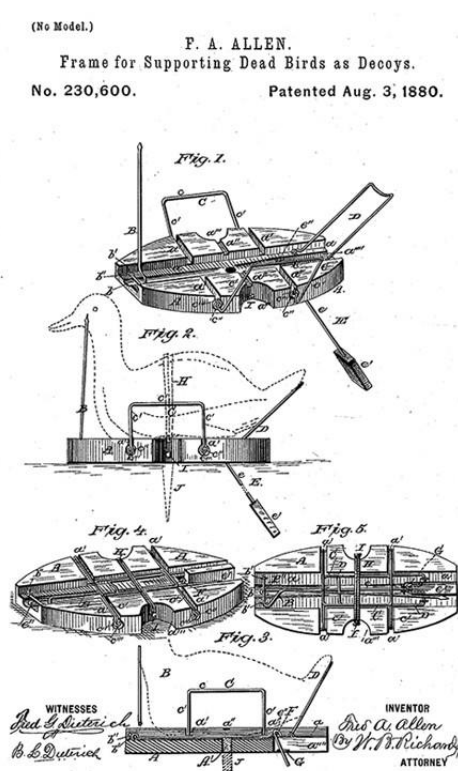
Born in Springfield, Mass., in 1838, Allen was a descendant of Revolutionary War hero Ethan Allen and the son of a Connecticut River pilot. Of six children, he was the only male, which perhaps caused his father to give him extra encouragement to become an outdoorsman. As a young man, he worked as a clerk in a wholesale house in Boston, but at age 21 he decided to go west and become a prospector. He initially went to Monmouth, then west to Colorado for a time, before returning western Illinois.

For two decades, Allen worked on commission as a grain buyer and also as a sign painter, although his Civil War draft registration gives his occupation in 1863 as a druggist. That year, he married Miss Amelia R. Adcock of Adams County and had his first son, Edmond — not to mention designing his revolutionary duck call, containing a single toneboard housed in a protective barrel. He also became a charter member of Monmouth Engine Company №1, and would serve as a firefighter for several decades.

By 1880, Amelia had died and Allen was a widower living in a local hotel. He was working as a “market hunter” — a practice now outlawed — shooting waterfowl for profit on the Mississippi. With the demand for his duck calls growing, he decided to go into the sportsmen’s specialty business full-time and opened the Allen Duck Caller Company on South First Street. Soon, his calls were being sold as far away as Australia, India, Finland and Tasmania. That year, he received his first U.S. patent, for a device that would support a recently-killed duck and turn it into a very realistic decoy.

Disaster almost struck for Allen’s business in 1883, when one morning he was heating some paraffin, which boiled over and the hot wax fell on wood shavings on the floor, starting a fire. Fortunately, his professional firefighting instincts kicked in. The sportsman had canvas tents nearby and was able to smother the flames.

An 1880 patent drawing for Allen’s mechanism to convert a dead bird to a decoy, instructions for mounting bow-facing oars, and a 1902 ad for Allen’s wooden duck call.



The following year, Allen received his second patent, for what he called his bow-facing oars. Previously, a hunter piloting a rowboat paddled facing the stern of the boat. When “jumping ducks,” a hunter relied on stealth in approaching waterfowl in a stream or river. When coming around a bend, the idea was to catch birds by surprise. Allen’s oars — also known as “grasshoppers” — had a jointed oarlock mechanism that gave the hunter the advantage of facing forward, toward the boat’s bow.



The *Warren County Democrat* gave the oars a glowing review: “Going backward on a bicycle is very inconvenient. Allen says, it’s comparatively just as inconvenient to ride backward on a boat. If the oars are what he claims, there’s a fortune in them for somebody. If not during his life time then for some one after his death. It can but be one of the greatest inventions. There are a good many hundred thousand boats in the country and Mr. Allen claims with much reason that the time will be when everyone will be equipped with the new ‘bow facers.’”

1890 would be a big year for Allen. The 52-year-old widower, who now had a shop at 215 E. Broadway, married 22-year-old Martha Ritchey, who would become his active partner in the sporting goods business. The couple moved into what would become their permanent home — a house at 208 North D St. — and he established a new factory on the west side of Monmouth. In

1891, The Democrat reported that his annual sales had reached \$10,000 — a significant sum in those days.

In 1892, Allen revised his popular duck call. Instead of a simple nickel-plated device, he started manufacturing a call with a fancy wooden barrel with a deep lanyard groove. By this time it was so popular that an eastern firm began selling a knock-off version called the “Allyn” duck call. In 1894, Martha gave birth to his second son, George.

Despite the demands of his growing business, Allen still found time for serious hunting. He established a permanent camp near New Boston, where he would often hunt and fish for two or three weeks in the spring and fall. He often hosted such prominent Monmouth men at his camp as Ivory Quinby II, E.A. Lord and C.D. Hardin. He was active in a local gun club, which held regular competitions, and his skills were such that he could brag of having shot ducks from the door of the old courthouse.



As a firefighter and an adventurer, it seemed only natural that Allen would be placed in charge of Monmouth's Fourth of July fireworks. The city authorized him to go to Chicago to purchase the most spectacular shells for the annual event.

By 1896, Allen's oars were a hot seller nationwide, and he had a need for immediate access to metal gearings, which he had been ordering from the east coast. He contracted with the Monmouth foundry of Torrance & McIntosh on South Main to take over casting the parts. Allen, who advertised in all the popular sportsmen's magazines, continually expanded his product line to include wooden decoys and calls for various birds, including crows.

Allen suffered a fall in 1900, severely injuring his hip. He then contracted "creeping paralysis" — possibly multiple sclerosis, and by 1909 became confined to his home. During his convalescence, Martha continued the manufacture and sale of his duck calls and oars. Perhaps looking out for Martha's financial future, in 1910, the couple incorporated their business as Fred A. Allen Sportsman's Specialty Co.

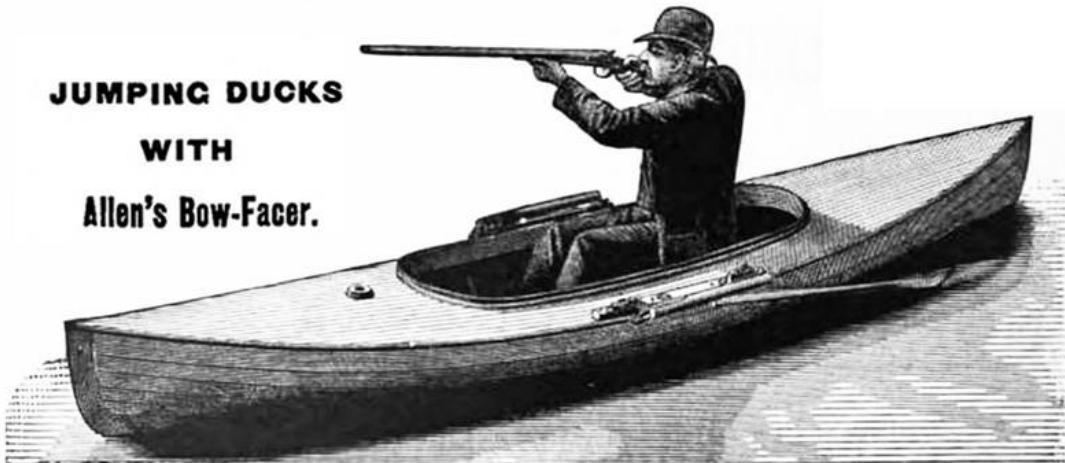
Allen died on Feb. 11, 1912. As a charter member of the fire department, city hall was decked in mourning for him, and a large contingent of firemen attended his funeral and his burial in Glendale Cemetery.

Shortly before Allen's death, a set of oars was ordered by the sultan of Turkey. Martha continued to run the business until her death in 1946. Later in life, she moved to 903 East Broadway, where she lived with a housekeeper and companion, Elva Good, who inherited the business upon Martha's death.

In 1959, Good sold both the company's name and oar business to boat maker Dale Calhoun of Tiptonville, Tenn



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An 1888 ad for Allen's duck call that also featured his revolutionary bow-facing oars, which could be used in a canoe or boat.

Jeff Rankin is an editor and historian for Monmouth College. He has been researching, writing and speaking about western Illinois history for more than 35 years.