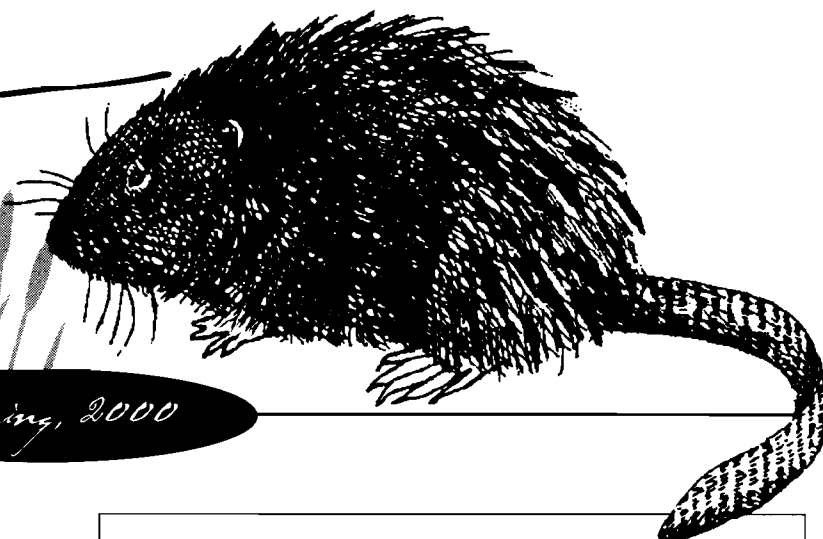


Port Pennings

Spring, 2000



From the President

by Bill Balascio

The first thing that I would like to do is thank Clyde Roberts for all of his hard work during his past term as president of our society.

The next thing I want to do is ask you to take a moment to think about the village of Port Penn, and what it means to you. The village and the surrounding area may be about to undergo changes of a truly historic level. New Castle County has designated all of the area between the C&D Canal to the north, Odessa to the south, the Delaware River to the east, and Route 13 to the west a sewer district.

They have recently refused to recommend that a farm in that area be allowed into an Aglands Preservation District. This decision was justified by the need to keep the proposed sewer system economically feasible. Public pressure and two News Journal articles seem to have caused a small change of heart, but the anti-preservation stance remains.

Members of your society's executive committee are participating in the Port Penn Area Preservation Coalition, in an effort to change that stance. Please support that effort by attending meetings, and calling or writing your state and county representatives. Let them know what this area means to you.

And finally, I would like to dedicate this issue of the newsletter to "The Last Waterman", Harold Hamon. Many thanks to John Levinson for providing us with this look into our recent past.

Annual Marshland Dinner Saturday, May 6

The Port Penn Historical Society's very popular **Annual Marshland Dinner** will be held on May 6 at the Port Penn Fire Hall. Last year most tickets were sold one week prior to the dinner. If you are interested in coming, order your tickets early.

The menu includes local river and marsh delicacies, snapping turtle soup and boneless baked shad and roe. Also included are home baked ham, regional vegetables, beaten biscuits, beverages and dessert. A cash bar is available.

Tickets are \$15 per person for one of two seatings at 5:00 p.m. or 7:00 p.m. Children five and under are free. Reservations may be made by sending checks, payable to the Port Penn Historical Society, to Marshland Shad Dinner, P.O. Box 120, Port Penn, DE 19731. Tickets will be held at the door. For more information or if you wish to volunteer, call Linda Beck at (302) 834-7525.



Port Penn Area Dates to Remember

Below are dates for future Historical Society meetings & events at the Museum sponsored by DNREC.

Port Penn Area Historical
Society Quarterly Meeting
Wednesday, April 5, 2000
7:00 p.m.

Port Penn Presbyterian Church

Annual Marshland Dinner
Saturday, May 6, 2000

Port Penn Fire Hall

Seatings 5:00 p.m. & 7:00 p.m.
(302)834-7525

Port Penn Area Historical

Cleaver House Tour
For Society Members ONLY

Saturday, May 20, 2000

10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.

Meet at the Port Penn
Interpretive Center

Sponsored by Division of
Parks & Recreation

Open House at the
Port Penn Interpretive Center

Saturday, May 20, 2000

10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Sponsored by Division of
Parks & Recreation

Special Program at Port Penn
Interpretive Center

Miss Molly, The Town Apothecary

Saturday & Sunday, June 10 & 11

Saturday & Sunday, July 22 & 23

from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Cost \$3.00

For information call
(302)834-7941 or (302)836-2533

Society Quarterly Meeting
Wednesday, July 5, 2000

7:00 p.m.

Port Penn Presbyterian Church

Port Penn
Interpretive Center Open
Wednesday through Sunday,
Memorial Day through Labor Day
Weekends only in September

Hours: Wednesday through Sunday,

10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

(302) 836-2533

Visit old one-room schoolhouse at
Port Penn now a folk museum
Sponsored by Division of
Parks & Recreation

Ongoing Programs at
Port Penn
Interpretive Center

Walking the Wetland Trail
Saturdays at 2:00 p.m.

Port Penn Village Tour
Sundays at 2:00 p.m.

Muskrats A-Z
Thursdays at 2:00 p.m.

A Siege of Herons
Saturdays at 11:30 a.m.

Open to the public.

PLEASE JOIN US.



The Last Waterman

By John M. Levinson

Harold Hamon is a man not easily forgotten. He lived a very full life from April 21, 1932 to March 24, 1994, and rarely spent a day that was not related to his beloved Delaware Bay and its surrounding marshland. In his early teens, he left a Vocational High School to work at the duPont Company's Edgemore plant. He became a Mechanical Maintenance Rigger—i.e. he worked with heavy machinery, and retired after 35 years of hard work. He looked the part—standing a good 6 foot 2 inches tall, weighing over 200 pounds, talked straight, and didn't hesitate to bark out orders from his lantern jaw.

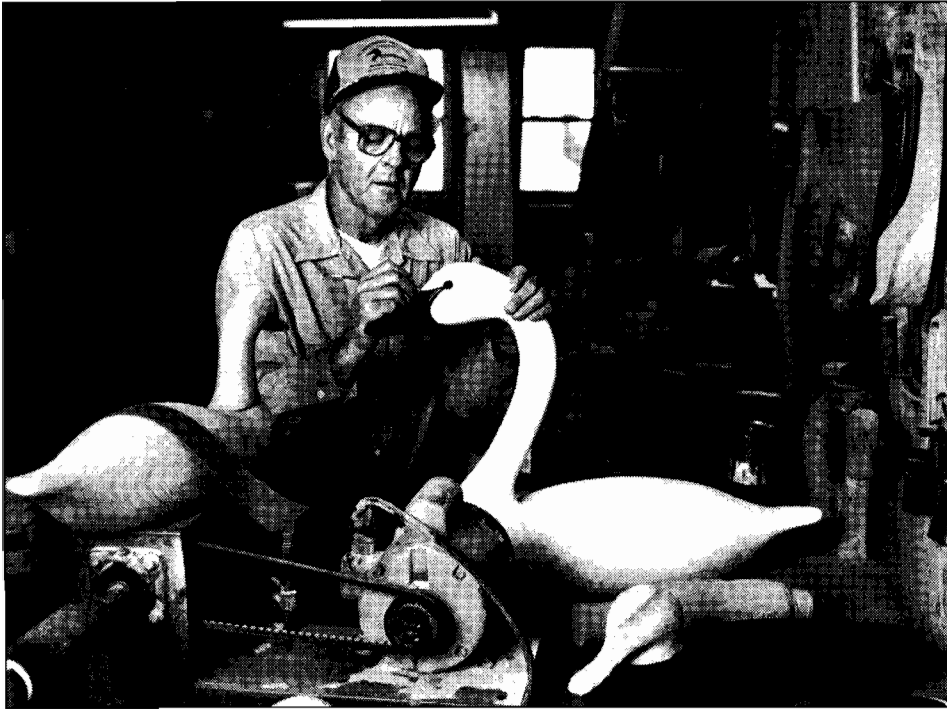
Harold's boundless energy was put to good use studying the wildlife in the Port Penn area and he became an expert wildfowl gunner and fisherman. He enjoyed crabbing for himself, but he

I first met Harold over 25 years ago when the late Somers Headley took me to his decoy shop located next to the family home, the Liston Range Rear Lighthouse, on Port Penn Road near Biddles Corner. It looked like a decoy shop. It was a concrete block building with a wood stove, a duplicating machine to rough out his birds, which were then hand finished. There was the expected clutter, large piles of blocks of cork, baskets of goose and duck heads, a row of recently finished oversized goose decoys and the smell of paint and wood dust permeated the air. I immediately succumbed to his excellent workmanship and placed an order for 18 oversized decoys. At that point he said, "You know Doc, you operated on my wife three months ago and I don't have the money to pay you. Could we write off the cost of the surgery against some of these decoys?" I was delighted! That was the first time I ever bartered my medical services. I proudly felt like a doctor must have back in the good old days when that sort of an arrangement was commonplace. I well remember that day with Harold. I had a new and very interesting friend.

Harold's sons Sam and Tom reiterated what he had said previously. "I know I've made over 100,000 decoys, all by hand or hand finished. That's more than anyone else in Delaware ever did." I won't dispute that statement. He was a hard worker who very much needed money to support his wife and six children. I just hope he didn't give away too many decoys. He never charged his fishing parties and I'm afraid for too often his layout boat trips were free for friends or donated to Duck's Unlimited auctions.

Without doubt, Harold became the most experienced and best prepared guide to take you on a hunting trip, that could be both brutal and dangerous, due to rough weather, but a trip that gave you a most unusual waterfowl hunting experience, and usually the shooting was superb! (On one occasion I brought with me my cousin who, since flying bombers in WWII, felt that waterfowl hunting was

the most fun a fellow could have with his clothes on. He talked about the great hunting with Harold for years afterwards.) Harold special "trick" was his layout gunning. He had two pumpkinseed shaped gray colored fiberglass boats, each approximately 14 feet long with a 5-foot beam. Two gunners propped up by board back-rests could squeeze in side by side, or have one facing forward and the other aft. These boats were not designed for comfort and might best be described as first cousins to the Barnegat Bay Sneakbox. Silhouettes of Canada geese were mounted on the side and several regular goose decoys fixed to the deck. The gunners were covered with camouflaged netting with allowance made for the hunter to view the sky and the well over a hundred silhouettes on V-boards and the full bodied decoys surrounding the layout boat. Usually only one boat was used and it was anchored fore and aft facing into the wind. This entire rig was set out south of the Delaware Memorial Bridge, somewhere in the big water that Harold felt was appropriate. I can't emphasize how much fun there was shooting geese this way. Possibly the hard work setting up the boats and the rig stimulated the experience. Occasionally ducks were shot, but usually they were not in season. One very misty day we were astonished to see some thousands of blue bills rafted up below the bridge on the New Jersey side. Oh how we wished we could have cut into them, just one time before we packed up and returned to Augustine Beach.



Harold Hamon painting the details on a decoy.
Photograph courtesy of ©Eric Crossan

was not a progger—or as one says on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, "he didn't fool with turtles". Even though he was full time with DuPont, he also seemed to be full time with hunting, fishing and decoys. As a young man, he began carving decoys for his own hunting rigs, then for a few friends and by 1960 he had become a commercial decoy manufacturer. His peak production was probably in 1966 and with orders becoming increasingly difficult to fill he employed several part-time helpers from 1970-1980. Although he started making decoy bodies out of wood, he then started using black cork from Portugal. Before too long, he was making most of his decoys out of a cork composite from the Wiley Cork Company that worked very well for his real specialty, the oversized cork Canada geese with wood heads. His work was personalized with heads in various positions, high, low, feeding, swimming, hissing, etc. Using these same materials he made decoys of most of the ducks hunted in his area, plus both small and large swan. His birds were quite substantial, were well carved and finished with an oil-based paint.

Forty years ago his decoys brought \$7 each. In the latter years, geese were \$75, ducks \$40, small swan \$100 and large swan \$500 each.

After 1978 he made goose silhouette V-boards for \$25 a set, but only a few sets of duck V-boards. Normally the V-boards were for his own layout-gunning rig.

The "Mother Boat" was a 23 foot Sea Ox with a 100 horsepower Johnson outboard motor and after they set up this rather cumbersome rig, she retired about a half mile away toward the shoreline. The 16 foot fiberglass tender with her 15 horsepower Johnson outboard motor picked up downed game and rotated gunners between the layout boat and the Sea Ox.

Traditional goose calls were used, but in addition Harold often used a large black Styrofoam paddle attached to his arm to wave at the geese and create the illusion of birds in motion. For many years waving a black flag from a goose pit on the Eastern Shore of Maryland has also brought good results.

For some years he offered the experience of gunning in his layout rig with a night's stay at a hotel at Boyds Corner including two meals—all for \$130. Usually you were "finished" by late morning. Shooting was guaranteed or your money refunded.

In the years that I did layout gunning with Harold, the limit was four geese per day per hunter. This was achieved each time

in spite of shooting from a rolling and tossing platform, feeling cramped and gunning from this most unnatural position. It's really very different from Sea Duck hunting on the Chesapeake Bay where you crouch behind the gunwale of a far larger and more stable boat.

Traditionally "goose season" in Delaware, though highly variable, ran from October into January. The number of days open for shooting was very limited in recent years. If you were lucky the weather wasn't too sloppy. Harold would go rain or shine except in a heavy rain or with a 20-knot east wind. He knew that bay, and his own limitations. Sometimes he personally did more conventional types of wildfowl hunting in Maryland or New Jersey, but he loved the Bay and his home area the best.

The Sea Ox was not idle in the summer. She became a fishing boat and Harold would enjoy taking friends from the Mispillion Landing out to the Brandywine Light. There were often many boats about during the night shinning a track of spotlights on the water to attract fish. It was not unusual to return with one or more ice chests filled with sea trout (weakfish), some up to four foot long. In his latter years Harold got into deep sea fishing for tuna and marlin. This, as the sea trout fishing was for fun, not for commercial parties.

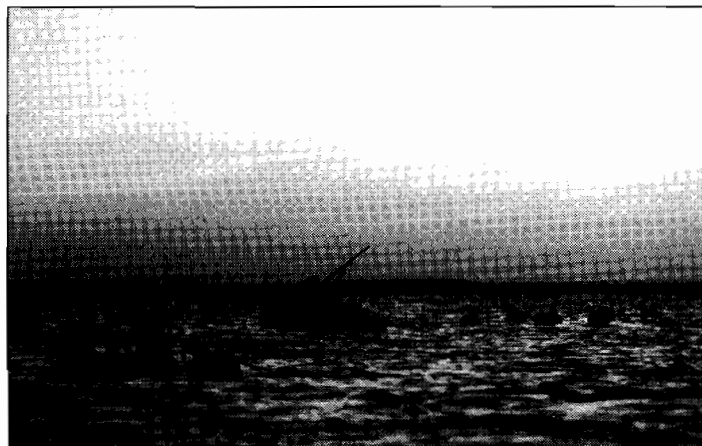
I find it interesting that only a few miles away, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, that a waterman as Harold Hamon was invariable called "Capt'n"—a term of respect and endearment. Curiously, that title, is not commonly used here as it is on the Chesapeake Bay. However I understand that the late Bob Beck, who among his many positions with the outdoors life, was the Augustine Area Wildlife Manager for the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife, spoke on the phone with Harold daily for years and they called one another "Cap". I feel this is a respectful regional variation.

A recent visit to the Hamon's old decoy shop was nostalgic. The boats were found in back of the shop building, not having been to sea since his death. Sam and Tom make a few decoys and some miniature swan. They looked good; their Dad had taught them well. But the place would never be the same.

- Harold Hamon died in 1994.
- The migrant Canada goose season closed in 1995.
- It is now the year 2000.
- Whoever said "don't look back, it's never the same" was right.

A special note of thanks to Harold Hamon's sons, Sam and Tom, for providing information about their father and layout boat hunting which contributed greatly to "The Last Waterman" article.

John M. Levinson formerly practiced medicine in Wilmington, DE. He is past president of the Explorers Club of New York City, and with the late Somers G. Headley wrote Shorebirds; The Birds, The Hunters, The Decoys. He has been associated with Ducks Unlimited, and has enjoyed wildfowl hunting for many years.



Goose hunting on the Delaware River in Harold Hamon's layout boat



Setting out the goose silhouettes on V-boards and full-bodied decoys prior to the hunt.
Photographs courtesy of ©Eric Crossan



Membership Application

**Port Penn Area Historical Society
P.O. Box 120
Port Penn, Delaware 19731**

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ Fax _____ Email _____

Membership Categories Individual \$5.00 Joint (Husband and Wife) \$7.50 Family \$10.00 Life \$100.00

I/We would like to volunteer help with Port Penn Activities.

The Port Penn Area Historical Society Newsletter is interested in your comments and ideas. Please write or call.
Please return this form with your remittance to the above address. For information call: (302) 762-6472.

Port Penn Area Preservation Coalition

by Alan Muller

In the last newsletter we reported on the Port Penn Area Preservation Coalition. The Coalition has had several public meetings, and meetings with political leaders. Like any matter involving "land use," and "development," the issues are complicated and involve strong feelings and varied interests not easily reconciled. It has become clear that our desire to create a buffer around Port Penn conflicts directly with plans of New Castle County to provide sewer service to the area. The County doesn't want to lose potential customers for its "sewer company" and thus is inclined to oppose farmland preservation in the "Southern Sewer Service Area." The County has also applied pressure to the State not to take steps to limit development anywhere, and has sued to prevent application of the Delaware Coastal Zone Act to sewer plants and sewer lines.

One possible solution is for the County to take some of the approximately \$100 million it plans to invest in sewers and instead spend this money on

preservation of farmland and open space. In the long run, the money saved through avoided infrastructure costs would greatly exceed that invested in preservation.

Meanwhile, the Coalition is working to make sure that landowners in the Port Penn area are aware of existing voluntary programs offering alternatives to selling out to developers. We are hopeful that at least one farm, belonging to a Society member, will soon be preserved as a result of these efforts.

Governor Carper's proposed budget for land preservation for the coming fiscal year is only about \$13 million for the entire state, although this number is expected to be increased by the General Assembly. People concerned about preserving Delaware's natural and cultural resources should consider letting County and State officials and officeholders know how they feel. Your help is needed. Please contact Alan Muller (302) 834-3466 or Linda Beck (302) 834-7525.



Interpretive Center Receives Historic Decoys

by Mike Miller

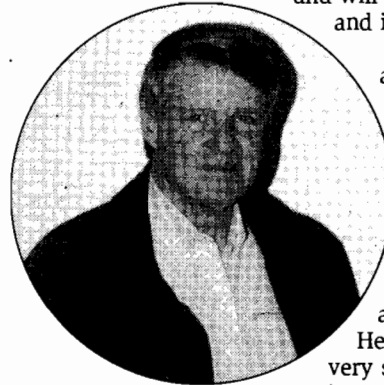
Delaware Folklife Program

Division of Parks and Recreation

The Port Penn Interpretive Center recently received a valuable donation of historic hunting decoys from Pennsylvania resident Hugh James.

James, son of former Wilmington Mayor Albert James, sought an appropriate site to donate some artifacts collected by his father. The family grew up in Wilmington and learned to hunt waterfowl on the marshes around Port Penn. Following his father's edict to, "...make sure you donate these items to a museum in Delaware," he searched for an appropriate recipient. In December, James found the Port Penn Interpretive Center and contacted Linda Beck to make arrangements for the donation.

James donated a total of ten working decoys and a number of photographs showing the decoys in use. Michael Miller later met with James to document, through a taped interview, the pieces and their history of use around Port Penn. Such complete documentation about artifacts is very rare in the museum world and will improve our ability to display and interpret them properly.



James, a former duPont and Remington employee, is an avid outdoorsman and hunter. His experiences on the marshes around Port Penn, learning to hunt, learning about the environment, and learning about himself, became an important part of his identity and helped shape his values.

He said, "...there is something very special about seeing the sunrise and watching the world become active for another day. It doesn't matter if you don't always get a bird..." These are some of the same values the Interpretive Center is trying to preserve and present to the public.

A new display, featuring these decoys, is planned for the Interpretive Center by the Open House scheduled for May 20, 2000.

Port Penn Area Historical Society
P.O. Box 120
Port Penn, Delaware 19731

Address Correction Requested