

Rare Beckhart duck call brings “extra special” attention at National Antique Decoy Show

Each spring collectors converge on the Pheasant Run Resort in St. Charles, Illinois in hope of adding something great to their collection, be it a decoy, duck call, shell box or advertising poster. Hosted by the Midwest Decoy Collectors Association, this week long convention features room to room trading, a two-day decoy auction and a ballroom show. Many consider it the best decoy show in the country.

The general public is always invited to bring in hunting or fishing items for appraisal by members of the MDCA board, and over the years several good pieces, like carved Perdew duck calls or decoys, have shown up. But this year something extra special turned up, an intricately carved duck call by J.T. Beckhart, arguably the best item to ever walk into the show. As Joe Tonelli and Roger Ludwig were appraising its value, a call collector noticed and offered \$35,000. Tonelli leaned forward and advised its owner, “Don’t sell! This call will bring at least double at auction.”

James Tillman Beckhart (1864-1922) is considered by many as “the father of Arkansas duck calls.” Carved in the early

1900s, this four-panel call, each with intricately carved details, easily transcends into the realm of great American folk art. The panels, each accented with fine checking patterns, feature a model 1897 shotgun, a dog pointing a pheasant, a brace of ducks, a fish and an alligator. A cotton mouth snake coils around the stopper.

The call, Beckhart’s “Big Lake Special Duck Call,” was given to Joseph Nathaniel Whitley, game warden and supervisor of the commercial fisheries for the Arkansas Game & Fish Commission, in 1919. He gave it to his daughter Vannye shortly before his death, telling her to “hang onto it because it would be worth lots of money.” Big Lake, located in northeast Arkansas, was a hot spot for market hunters in the 1800s. Ducks love it, especially mallards, and men like Beckhart took full advantage.

Born in Warsaw, Indiana, Beckhart worked at a St. Louis railroad until 1897 when the opportunities at Big Lake convinced him to move his family. Living in a houseboat, Beckhart duck hunted for the St. Louis market, fished commercially, built boats and offered guide service with



This rare decoratively carved duck call by J. T. Beckhart was brought to the National Antique Decoy Show for appraisal. It'll be sold at auction in July of this year.

room and board to visiting hunters. He most certainly made duck calls during these early years but it wasn't until the 1900s when market hunting subsided that he began to produce them in earnest. His first commercial calls had raised panels with fine checking patterns that sold for \$2.50. The more elaborate ones with the added carved detailing on the panels cost \$5.00.

This wasn't the first time that Whitley's Beckhart call caused a stir. According to a front page article in the December 5, 1957 edition of the Stuttgart Daily Leader, Whitley brought the call to the World Championship Duck Calling Competition that year and showed it to some in attendance, claiming that he had been offered the incredible sum of \$100 for the call. When it's auctioned at the Guyette, Schmidt & Deeter sale in Portsmouth, New Hampshire this July, with some of the proceeds benefitting the MDCA, it could possibly command 500 times more.



Joe Tonelli (R) with Richard and Vannye Whitley Besancon, whose father gave her the Beckhart call she brought to the show.