

Jim Pritchard: Carver Extraordinaire

The photographer stalks the flock of Millrace ducks, some wild mallards, but most tame, odd-looking highbreds.

The ragtag knot of birds keeps moving away while the touristy-looking fellow, camera pressed to his eye, slowly pursues them snapping pictures as he goes.

A lone drake mallard, however, remains steadfast.

The bird remains motionless. The man draws closer, a look of wide-eyed disbelief on his round face; he looks back at his family looking on in mild disbelief at the bird's strange behavior. The man peers at the bird over his camera as if to make sure it is alive.

Convinced, he moves forward slowly leaning down to see if he can touch the bird before it moves off. He does touch the bird but gets a rude shock. Instead of soft warm feathers he feels hard, unforgiving wood.

Wood! He stands bolt upright, and a look of

embarrassment and confusion crosses his face.

Jim Pritchard, a decoy carver of extraordinary ability, walks down from his vantage point on rise above the pond, introduces himself and claims the imposter bird as his own work.

When that incident took place several years ago across Franklin Boulevard from the University, the carver knew he finally was approaching the kind of realism he strives for. He had planted the carving in the flock hoping for just such a reaction.

Pritchard, a 48-year-old native of Tennessee who still has the soft drawl of those parts, has painted and sketched wildlife all his life but only began carving waterfowl and other birds six or seven years ago. In that short time he has mastered the art form. His work is so life like one is tempted to blow on the carvings to see if feathers ruffle.

He prefers to do his work from live birds or

mounts of live birds but says he will never carve an exact duplicate of a stuffed bird.

"No matter how beautiful a stuffed bird is done, it will always represent the death of a living thing. Mounted birds reek of death; my carvings represent life," he says.

His specialty is waterfowl, probably because he used to be an avid waterfowl hunter, he says. "I don't hunt anymore; I have no desire since I started to carve." He thinks of birds as "flowers in flight" and says they lend themselves greatly to this kind of work.

The former structural mechanic who two years ago moved to Eugene came into his own as a carver of some note when an "artist friend" from Los Angeles suggested he enter a show in Las Vegas.

"He said it was expensive; a \$1,000 just to set up a booth. He told me, 'You might get down there and not sell a thing, but you never know.' I said, well... I'll go for it. So, I borrowed \$1,000, loaded up my stuff in a U-Haul and went."

Pritchard at that time was working at the Georgia-Pacific mill in Coquille where he found work after migrating from the California desert and the rigors of a job with North American Aviation. At one point at North American he went 27 weeks without a day off.

He had accumulated 30 days of vacation and decided to tour Oregon. He had fallen in love with the state years earlier when, while he was in the Navy, his ship was invited to the Rose Parade in Portland.

While at Georgia-Pacific Pritchard worked on his paintings, drawings and had just begun carving. He had stockpiled about two years worth of work and took it to the show.

"There was some of the best stuff. I said, 'Man I'm in the wrong place,' but I was already there, and I already paid for the booth so I stayed. I brought 37 pieces and sold out." His eyes glow with pride. "I made enough money at that show to carry me for two years, and I thought to myself, 'If there was ever a time to quit the mill, now is it.'"

The Los Angeles show was in 1983, and he has been carving full time ever since.

Pritchard might never have found his calling had a friend not asked him to repaint some old duck decoys. As he started giving the decoys a fresh coat of plumage he noticed how crude and simple they were and decided he could do better — and did.

"Each time I started another one I'd try to make it just a little bit better than the last," he says.

Another friend told him of an art show in Portland called "Wild Wings in Wood," which deals exclusively with birds carved in wood. "I went to the show, and it was there that I decided that this is what I wanted to do with my life. I was in awe when I saw what people were doing with wood. I knew I had the ability, but I didn't have the knowledge, so I began to ask questions."

The questions paid off. Pritchard gets from several hundred to several thousand dollars for each piece — and he earns it.

He works between eight and 12 hours a day in a small shop converted from a single-car garage in south Eugene where he and his family moved almost two years ago. He spends anywhere from 100 to 200 hours on a single carving; three to four months on some larger projects, which he uses for center pieces at each of the three shows he attends each year.

To attain the superrealism Pritchard shoots for, one must possess a strong discipline and total dedication to the work, he says.

"You can't just like it, you've got to love it. Too many people just start to carve and don't take the time necessary to research their subject," he says. Pritchard picks up an unpainted head carved in Basswood and turns it in his well-weathered hands. It looks flawless, but it's a throwaway because the bill is an eighth of an inch too short.

Ninety percent of the work in carving is through research and knowledge of the subject, Pritchard says.

He knows the bill is too short because he has invested nearly \$3,000 in reference books on avian anatomy, and he also uses study bills and study feet as models for his carvings.

Study bills and study feet are molds made of

the actual feet and bills of live birds killed in the field. The molds are made immediately so the feet and bills don't begin to shrink.

Some carvers with a lesser degree of integrity than Pritchard attach the study bills and feet to their carvings as a shortcut to either save time or make up for a lack of skill.

"To me, that's not carving," he says.

"Decoy carving is America's oldest form of folk art, but where we are now, it's a new art form," he says. "The birds that won first place five years ago wouldn't even place now. And the birds I'm doing right now would have been the best in the world five years ago." He credits this mainly to the advances in the technology of carving tools.

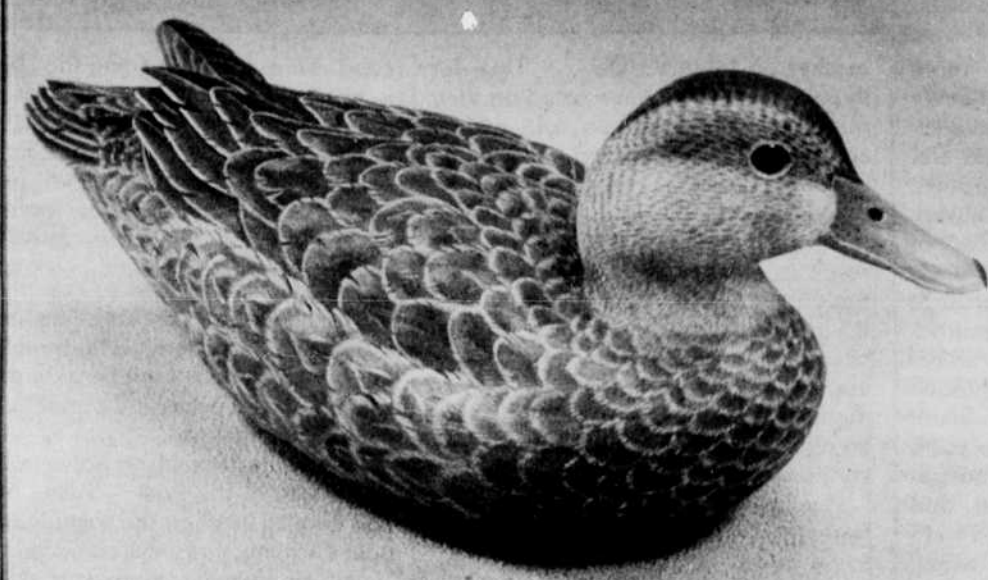
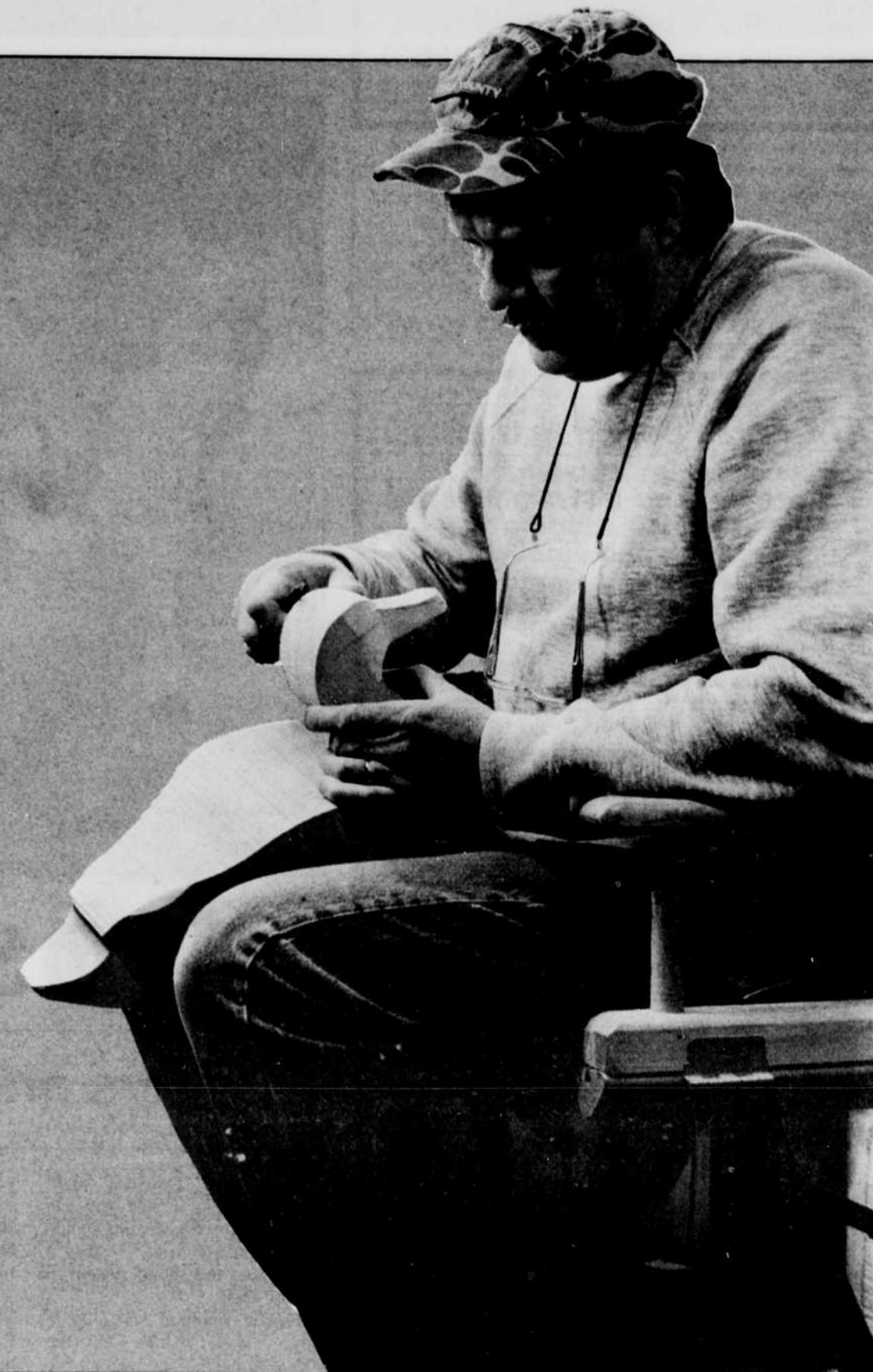
Carvers are getting so good at producing technically perfect likenesses that the next step is going to be artistic interpretation and presentation of the carvings, he says. The setting and attitude of individual birds are becoming critical to winning competitions. This is making it a true art form.

He notes, however, that art critics still are debating whether it is a fine art. He believes that eventually it will be accepted as such.

"I've done both, and I think it (carving) is an art even more so than flat work. A carver must be not only a sculptor, but an ornithologist, a naturalist and a painter," he says. "A painter usually only knows the side of the bird, a carver must know the bird in three dimensions."

Story by
B.J. Thomsen
Photos by
John Giustina

Jim Pritchard begins carving a mallard drake (right). The finished product, a blue-winged teal, after 20 coats of paint (left).



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