



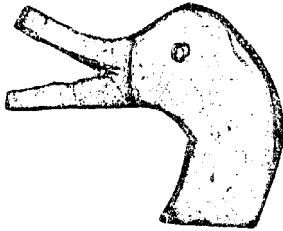
## **AN EXHIBIT OF DECOYS FROM THE ILLINOIS AND MICHIGAN CANAL NATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR**

This is the second exhibit of Folk Art from the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor sponsored by Lewis University and the Lewis University Canal Archives, and held in the Lewis University Library. The objective of these exhibits is to explore and record the folk art of the Corridor. This is a neglected area of study, but an important part of our cultural heritage. The University has committed itself to explore and also to pass on to posterity a knowledge of the objects made by skilled but untrained craftsmen, whose artistic vision has been mostly ignored.

Decoy making is the most distinctively American of all the folk arts practiced in this country. It is an art not found elsewhere, however, in America examples have been found dating back about 2,000 years. Apparently the Indian reed decoys were not used widely but they were used. The era of wood decoy making began when the West was opened and settlers found what they assumed was an unlimited supply of game birds. This led to that period of animal slaughter by market hunters who supplied thousands of birds to the meat markets of our cities. This era fortunately ended at the turn of the century when prohibitive national legislation was enacted. Some of the old professional hunters, who had made decoys as needed in their hunting, now supplemented their income by making decoys.<sup>1</sup> The wooden decoy, either handmade or machine made, flourished from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until



This company made a large number of items, everything from mouse traps to door handles. It operated in Joliet from 1893 until the 1950s. Sometime in the early 1920s they began to manufacture decoys. This was done by modifying World War I gun lathes purchased from the government. The lathes used to manufacture gun barrels were modified so that they could turn two decoys at a time based upon a pattern. Some of these were then painted rough cut right from the lathes (as the two Blue Bills in the next exhibit) or they were sanded and painted. The rough cut decoys were preferred by some hunters (according to a Pratt employee Leslie Keeler) as it did not reflect the light like the sanded decoys. Their decoys produced by machine were sold to Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward. William E. Pratt, who was himself an avid hunter, had skilled artisans who produced hollow decoys for the carriage



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1. p. 11 Paul E. Parmalee and Forrest D. Loomis, *Decoys and Decoy Carvers of Illinois*, 1969 Northern Illinois

