

an answered call

A custom carver bonds hunters and game with history-rich wood.

written by Mike Marsh • photographed by Jody Duggins



A flock of ducks circled just out of shotgun range. After flirting momentarily with the decoys, they turned away. A gentle feed call and a few soft quacks brought them back, pulling them into the decoys as if they were tied on a string. Showing no caution, they set their wings and settled right in front of a blind full of hunters.

"Boy, they sure came in pretty," said hunting guide Darrell McCauly. Looking at the call that duped the ducks, he rotated it in his hand. While his black lab, Drake, retrieved the ducks, McCauly felt the sharply peaked diamonds of finely cut checkering and crownlike projections carved in the shapes of mallard tail curls along the call's burled-walnut mouthpiece. Admiring the delicate ivory inlays, he smiled in spite of cheeks reddened to stiffness by the cold of a northwest wind.

"Nothing else looks or sounds like a Jensen call," he said.

Beside him, the maker of the call grinned through his beard. Some folks say the proof is in the pudding. With hunters, the proof of a call is in the game bag.

Ralph Jensen operates a custom furniture restoration business in Wilmington. Although his love affair with wood extends over many decades, it has been only in the last five years that he has been carving custom duck, goose and turkey calls.

"I began hunting with my brother Dan when we were kids living in Greensboro," Jensen said. "I didn't start my first carving until 1972, when I was 23. It was a carving of a hunter with a double-barrel shotgun and his setter. An old walnut tree had fallen on our farm, and I cut off a piece and started working on it with a serrated-blade hunting knife. I cut my thumb so many times I had to tape it so I could continue working."

Jensen worked for a week on the carving but did not get to finish the task. His wife, Chris, came into the room where he was working and announced it was time to go to the hospital.

"I didn't believe her at first, because I wanted to finish my carving," Jensen said. "But five minutes later, she came in again. She was right; it was urgent. We went to the hospital and my oldest son, Shawn, was born."

The same year, Jensen began working as a cabinetmaker in High Point. He was the first new woodworker hired by the Snow Lumber shop since World War II.

"I don't know why they decided to hire me," he said. "I guess they liked me because I appreciated beautiful wood. Still, they wouldn't allow me to touch any power equipment for six months. I just did rough-in work."



Ralph Jensen (on right) turned a love of woodworking and hunting into a career of handcrafting furniture, waterfowl and turkey calls and duck decoys.



Jensen began carving turkey calls (top) and then duck decoys after finding success with his duck and goose calls. His interest in carving began in the 1970s when he decided to craft a piece of walnut into a hunter with a dog. He finished the piece (opposite) and presented it to his son 29 years later.



Jensen and his family moved to Wilmington in 1978, where he opened his own shop, The Master's Touch.

"My father, Harold, sold bonds to fund church buildings. My mother, Margaret, is the author of 14 inspirational books, and she's still going strong at 89," Jensen said. "I named my new business The Master's Touch. I feel the talent for working wood with my hands is a gift from God."

At first The Master's Touch was a backyard garage operation where Jensen built furniture and custom cabinets. At the same time, he renewed his fascination with carving, and made a ball-and-claw-foot poster bed and an early Georgian-style table.

"My mom still has those pieces," he said. "I carved them with an Old Timer pocket knife because I didn't have any real carving tools."

Jensen eventually began to make custom furniture, then he gravitated to restoration of fine antique furniture.

"All through the years, I set aside beautiful pieces of wood that were too small for furniture making," Jensen said. "They were just too pretty to throw away, and I knew I could at least use them for inlays. One day about five years ago, I bought a wooden call at a flea market. It was only the barrel and stopper. The reed assembly was missing. But I wanted to see how it worked."

Jensen thinned a clarinet reed and secured it in the stopper. It was a laborious process, but it worked, at least for a short while. He then carved a replacement reed of heart pine. The call worked fine and still does. He keeps the restored call where he can see it for inspiration. After doing some research, he discovered that Mylar, a polyester material, made better reeds.

"I shape Mylar with scissors," Jensen said. "The hard part is getting the dip in the stopper right. I use fine sandpaper to shape it. If it won't make a good feed call and hail call, I toss it away and start again."

Jensen remanufactured a piano made in the 1800s into a piece of furniture known as a Hepplewhite sideboard. He saved the ivory and ebony keys for inlays. The piano soundboard was dense ash, 6 inches thick. He used the soundboard to make duck call barrels.

"All the wood I use for calls has history," Jensen said. "I have some chestnut that

was water-cured for gunstocks in a pond in Pennsylvania. I got the oldest cherry anyone has ever seen from a tree blown over by Hurricane Diane. It's really dark and dense. I have New England curly maple and exotic woods like coco bola. But most hunters like calls made from Riverwood."

Riverwood is the trade name for wood retrieved from the bottom of the Cape Fear River by a company in Wilmington. The wood comes from old-growth saw logs that sank while being floated to sawmills over 100 years ago.

"I like Riverwood that has 30 to 40 growth rings per inch," Jensen said. "The contrast of light and dark rings is really beautiful. Hunters also like it because of its history."

Hunters sometimes send Jensen photos of their dogs. He carves images of the dogs and waterfowl scenes onto their calls.

"I carved a bloodhound named Hoyt for a man whose son's dog had died," he said. "Lots of people want to remember their dogs that way."

Jensen carves calls into the shapes of duck and dog heads, sometimes using shotgun shell casings for stoppers. He carved a call into the shape of a retriever's head and added glass eyes, then inserted a shotgun-casing stopper holding a goose into the dog's mouth. He once carved a call shaped like a Louisiana Catahoula leopard dog for a hunter.

"They're smart dogs, with strange spots and sometimes each eye of a different color," Jensen said. "They are used to hunt waterfowl and herd cattle."

Eventually Jensen started making goose calls. Though he used the same odds and ends of wood for barrels and stoppers, the reed assemblies were more difficult to tune.

"It took me a month to get a goose call to sound right," Jensen said. "Now I've had champion callers use them because, they say, they are the easiest calls they've ever blown. Getting the reed to touch perfectly so the call sound breaks over easily is a long process. It takes as much time to tune a goose call as it does to carve it."

Jensen turns call barrels on a lathe, then lathes a run of stoppers, and drills and cuts the air passages. Reeds are added, held in place by pieces of cork. Then the calls are tuned. After any decorative carvings or inlays are added, each call is coated with an acrylic finish. It takes a week to craft

a custom call. Still, Jensen was shocked at the prices his calls began fetching at fund-raising auctions.

"One of the piano calls inlaid with ebony and ivory went for \$1,700 at a Wilmington Ducks Unlimited banquet," he said. "I never dreamed they would be worth anything like that."

In the beginning Jensen's calls were unsigned. Now he carves his name into every call. His duck and goose calls sell for \$150 and up.

Two years ago, Jensen began making box turkey calls. Last April, I sat beside him, using one of his calls to create soft cuts and purrs to lure a gobbler into range. Jensen had to wait for the hen accompanying the gobbler to move clear of his line of sight. She was 5 feet away, staring in the direction of my calling, when Jensen took the tom at a range of 20 yards. The call had a cherry base, walnut sides and a chestnut top with curly-maple inlays. To the turkey, it sounded like a Stradivarius. The gobbler was taken on a hard-hunted tract comprising 50,000 acres of Carolina bay. It was late in the season, late in the afternoon, and the gobbler was with a hen over 500 yards away when I began to call. Tough conditions. But the hunt proved a Jensen call sounds as good as it looks.

"I was surprised at how many turkey hunters want custom calls," Jensen said.

"I looked at some calls made by Albert Paul and Dennis Poeschel. Dennis helped with my call design and even sent me some custom springs he had made for his box calls. His calls have won high awards at turkey calling championships."

Jensen adds fancy carvings and inlays to his turkey calls. He uses one made of Riverwood. However, he had a difficult time tuning the call to make the right sound. The dense wood was very hard to shape.

"It's just too screechy," Jensen said. "It is such a hard wood. But once I got it right, I headed to Brunswick County to try it out. I found an old-timer standing on the roadside, listening for gobblers at 8 p.m. I asked him if he minded my trying a call, and he said to give it a try. When I worked the call, I couldn't believe it. The entire swamp came alive with gobblers. So many gobblers sounded off, it was deafening. That's the call I use for my own hunting."

Jensen sells turkey calls for \$95 and up. His calls have created a sensation everywhere they are shown.

"Dennis told me there were only a few people in the country carving custom calls," he said. "There is a demand for custom calls because they create a personal bond between the game and the hunter. Most people who buy my calls give them as gifts to someone special. People who don't even hunt buy my calls and keep them as collector or decorator pieces."

Jensen said he loves carving so much that he has created patterns for 16 different ducks. He has begun carving and painting his first blue-winged and green-winged teal decoys.

Ralph is now 55. He has been so busy all these years that he almost forgot an unfinished carving, half-born of a knotted chunk of walnut. But finally he returned to the task, painstakingly removed the remaining wood, and freed a hunter and his setter to resume their hunt.

He gave it as a gift to one of his personal heroes, a soldier fresh out of training and headed to Iraq.

On the bottom of the carving is inscribed, "To Shawn from Dad. I started this carving 1 week before you were born and I finished it 29 years later

for a young man, a cavalry scout. Ralph H. Jensen." ♦



Mike Marsh writes about North Carolina wildlife from his Wilmington home.