

WHITE MALLARD/WARD BROTHERS DECOYS

The White Mallard ranks as one of the most famous duck clubs on the Pacific Flyway. It's located in the Butte Sink, Colusa County, right in the middle of the 500,000 acres of Northern California rice land. The White Mallard consists of 969 acres, about 90% of which is dedicated to wetland habitat. One hundred acres of wetland is located in the middle of the club and is designated as a non-shooting area. The White Mallard is also located in close proximity to eight state and federal game refuges.



The duck club formed in 1919 and was originally called the White Mallard Outing Club. According to the grandson of Gilbert Williamson, one of the original members, 100 people put up \$100 each to buy the property. The first hunters had to walk in or push a tule splitter two miles to get to the shooting area. They hauled all their gear and supplies in and out without using a vehicle or boat motor.

The White Mallard is also well-known by decoy collectors because of the fine Ward Brothers decoys that were used at the club. In 1936 William Burroughs Sr., a building contractor and an original member, was

hired by Errol MacBoyle to build two large redwood horse barns in Grass Valley, California. Burroughs briefly moved his family from Marysville, California to Grass Valley to fulfill his contract. MacBoyle lived in San Francisco and owned the Idaho-Maryland Mining Company in Nevada County. At the time his company was the third leading gold producer in California. In 1933 MacBoyle constructed the original airport in Nevada County. He hired local youths on summer vacation to prepare the 1800 foot air strip. That same year MacBoyle used the air strip to fly 27 million dollars worth of gold from Nevada County directly to Mills Field (later SFO) en route to the San Francisco Mint.

MacBoyle and Burroughs became good friends and began duck hunting together. Although only marginally interested in the hunting itself, MacBoyle joined the White Mallard sometime between 1936 and 1938. To complete his hunting equipment, he bought a rig of an unknown number of Ward Brothers decoys, perhaps as many as seven dozen, in the late 30s. These decoys were reportedly purchased in San Francisco, possibly from Abercrombie and Finch but more likely from the Roos-Atkins Store.

When MacBoyle passed away in 1949 his chauffeur, Hardy Jenny, inherited his membership. Jenny shared a hunting cabin and storage shed with Burroughs and later with his son, William Burroughs Jr. According to Mike Burroughs, the son of William Burroughs Jr, Jenny also enjoyed socializing but did quite a bit of duck hunting and was usually at the club every weekend during duck season. Mike remembers the Wards Brothers decoys being stored in the shed that his dad and Jenny shared. During duck season Jenny kept the decoys in his duck boat as was common practice for members. The frequency of use of the Ward Brothers rig during this period, from the late 30s to 1960, is unknown. However, based on the indications of wear and tear (including shot marks) on many of the survivors, the decoys were used regularly for a considerable period of time. Mike Burroughs stated that with the introduction of plastic decoys, Jenny stopped using the heavy Ward Brothers decoys and switched to plastic. Undoubtedly, a portion of the original rig had been lost or destroyed by that time. The remainder of the rig stayed in the shed for a few years and then eventually started to disappear. A dozen or more appear to have been taken by caretakers or early

collectors. A few of the remaining birds in the rig were kept by the Jenny family (reportedly 8 to 10), and the remainder were given by Jenny to William Burroughs Jr.

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After his father passed away, William Burroughs Jr. took over his membership in the White Mallard. His brother-in-law, Phil Holmes, raised peaches outside of Yuba City, California. Holmes was not a member of the White Mallard but would on occasion hunt with Burroughs at the club. In 1960 Holmes suffered a heart attack and was unable to do any strenuous work; as a result, he started a decoy repair business called Decoy Rite. He occupied himself by repairing and repainting duck decoys for the local duck clubs, but never showed an interest in carving. He repaired and painted decoys for a number of Northern California duck clubs including the Sacramento Outing, South Butte Club, Field and Tule Club, Greenhead Land Company, Murphy Land Company, Burgundy Club, Poc. Valley Land Company, Moro Island Gun Club, Oak Hill Farms and of course the White Mallard.

On a number of occasions Holmes saw the Ward Brothers decoys at the White Mallard and was impressed by their workmanship. Holmes told Burroughs that he was interested in obtaining the decoys. In December 1960, Burroughs brought Holmes quite a Christmas present when he gave him

about 40 of the decoys. Holmes, in return, gave back to Burroughs a set consisting of each different style. This set has since been sold to a private collector.

The Ward Brothers rig given by Burroughs to Holmes consisted of Sprigs and Mallards. Using nomenclature found in Gard and McGrath book (The Ward Brothers Decoys, 1989), the rig consisted of a Classic 1936 Pinched Breast Sprig, a Classic 1942 Sprig (which during Holmes' ownership became known as "lessor sprig"), and Mallards in the 1936 to 1942 genre not otherwise identified. The group was about evenly distributed between hens and drakes of the three styles, although only three pinched breast hen Sprigs can be confirmed to have been included in the rig by tracing the records now available. Gard and McGrath indicate that although the name "1942" has been given to a style, the actual date of production can vary. There is no evidence that portions of this rig were purchased at different times. The different styles appear to have been produced in the 30s and included together in one order. The "Andy Williams" pair clearly came from this rig and the "1942" Classic Pintail Drake pictured as Plate 60 in Gard and McGrath is identical to others confirmed to have been in the rig. The Mallard drakes are very similar to the "1942" Classic Mallard Drake shown in Plate 75 of that book. No examples of hens matching either the 1942 Sprig or the Mallard are shown in Gard and McGrath book. The body painting on both the Mallard and Sprig hens in this rig, are surprisingly similar to each other and had elements of many different Ward hens painted in the 30s and 40s. However, the hen Mallards are much larger than the Sprig and the sizes obviously match their counterpart drakes.

2

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Over the years, some of the decoys made their way to auction, which led to some controversy. Many Ward Brothers decoys, included Wigeon, were attributed to the "White Mallard rig." As reported in Gard and McGrath and confirmed by the Holmes family, all the Ward decoys given to them had a lead balance weight shaped like a horseshoe. The weight was nailed around the back end of the bottom of the decoy. MacBoyle loved horses, which may explain why all the lead balance weights were shaped like a horseshoe (see photo below). If any of the Ward Brothers decoys sold at auction did not have the horseshoe weight or the nail pattern of a horseshoe weight, they probably did not come from MacBoyle's rig. There is no indication that any other White Mallard members ever owned Ward Brothers decoys.



Holmes eventually obtained other Wards Brothers decoys not associated with the White Mallard. These decoys were of later vintages and were obtained by trade or as payment for his work. It also appears that he obtained a few classic decoys as part of his reconditioning business, including a rig made by "Fresh Air Dick" Janson.

There also was a small Ward Brothers rig that ended up with a few members of the Sacramento Outing. These decoys may have come from the White Mallard, but I have not seen the bottom of any of the decoys to verify the horseshoe pattern. Sometime in the 1960s, Holmes was approached by a member of Sacramento Outing who wanted to sell eight Wards Brothers decoys that he said came from the White Mallard. Holmes did not purchase these decoys due to their poor condition.

Some members of the Holmes family feel that decoys from the original Ward Brothers White Mallard rig have not been accounted for. It appears that some of those fine decoys may be hidden away somewhere, probably in Northern California.

NOTE: Holmes and his family sold or traded most of the original group, although a few remain in the family and are not for sale. Any information on the White Mallard or Ward Brothers decoys used at the White Mallard would be greatly appreciated. You can contact me at decoylover@charter.net







