

# Artful deception under the ice



Dorothy Webster

His lifestyle is envied by most...fishing when the urge strikes him, spinning tales with old-timers regularly, daily handcrafting a product that's considered folk art, raising a close knit family in a wayside Michigan village...and probably prolonging his existence.

Nick Torello, former General Motors executive, former Detroit area dweller, had a heart attack in the mid 1970s. During his recovery, he vowed to change his lifestyle -- and he did.

With his wife, Caryl, and two daughters, Rachel and Renee, Nick Torello established "Nick's Wood Shop" in a four-square building in Au Gres. Pronounced "Aw Gray" by locals, the village sits astride US-23 on the Lake Huron shoreline north of Bay City. Most travelers, passing through to points north, might stop at the bakery and restaurant for meals, or at a summer-only ice cream shop for a

snack. Fishermen know it as the site of the Au Gres River, which flows through the north end of town.

Turn east from US-23 in the center of town and you'll spot the converted Oddfellows Hall which houses Nick's Wood Shop. Part furniture repair shop, part antique showroom, part living quarters upstairs, the building is crammed with odds and ends of wooden pieces, a few upholstered settees, shorebird decoys, and fish. The fish will widen your eyes.

There's a red, white and blue striped specimen guaranteed to brighten the corner of even the most staid room. Others, some authentically rendered in acrylic paints by Caryl Torello, some fancifully conceived and finished, delight viewers.

Upstairs, the wonders unfold. Several antique painted china cabinets hold hundreds of fish decoys ranging from fine museum quality specimens dating from early Native American fishing days to contemporary carvings rendered by craftsmen all over the Great Lakes area. Nick can tell you the type, the area each came from, sometimes the name of the carver, and an approximate price range.

It wasn't always so.

"Back in 1979, shortly after we'd opened the wood shop, a fellow came in looking for contemporary decoys. I told him to stop back in a week and I'd have some for him. The next thing I knew, we were in the fish business with both feet." Nick began carving basswood decoys -- specializing in the types used in Saginaw Bay: perch, walleye and pike. These days, he'll produce just about any type of "attractor" known.

Fish decoys, used to lure fish within spear range while fishing through the ice, were used by Native peoples and were made of ivory or bone. The wooden fish spearing decoy has been made for several hundred years, particularly by people of the

Great Lakes region, primarily Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin and New York. They range from small, two-inch decoys used to lure perch and walleye within spear range on the Saginaw Bay, to 50-inch specimens used at Black and Mullett Lakes when fishing for sturgeon. The 50-inch decoys, explains Nick, were used both as lures and as measuring devices, since 50-inches is the minimum legal size for the fish.

Decoys vary in form from almost abstract shapes, finless and thin in aerodynamic smoothness, to classic, finned and detailed decoys found in the St. Clair and Mt. Clemens areas.

They sometimes couldn't be simpler -- and sometimes couldn't be more complex. Some are merely a bit of wood, with lead added to the body cavity for weight and a single screw-eye on top for attaching a line. Others are finished to the nth degree, boasting each fin and gill to almost perfection. Some, under an examining loupe, even have individual scales detailed! They can be a crude fishing expedient or a fine bit of art and craftsmanship -- depending upon the character of the carver, the amount of time expended, the innate "artistic" bent of the person holding the knife -- and yes, occasionally, a touch of genius.

Some of them cost as little as a few dollars while others fetch prices that make non-sportsmen wince. At a recent Sotheby's auction in New York City, a nine-inch carved trout with glass eyes and metal fins snared \$18,700. It was, of course, by Michigan's legendary Oscar Peterson of Cadillac, a premier carver.

Nick Torello holds a decoy, turning it over in his hands, pointing out the differences between it and one on the table before him.

"Now, these from Hansen's Island are heavy, not curved like mine are. The fishermen down there have to contend with swift current, and this



## WEST BRANCH

- Indoor pool/sauna/whirlpool
- 80 guest rooms
- Avanti's Italiano Ristorante
- Gift shop & convenience store
- 24 hr. coffee shop
- Plenty of parking

## Quality Inn Forwards Conference Center

I-75 Exit 212 At Cook Rd., West Branch, MI 48661  
Phone (517) 345-3503 - 1-800-228-5151



## THERE'S STILL A PLACE WHERE SNOW IS A RESOURCE, NOT AN INDUSTRY.

There's still a place where acres and miles refer to trails and woods -- not condos and queues. Where snowshoeing, snowmobiling and cross country skiing mean recreation, not exploitation.

There's still a place where long, winding trails are far removed from city slickness and tourist trappings. Where a short trip can show you how beautiful Mother Nature is when she's dressed in white.

There's still a place for you. Enjoy the best winter has to offer. In Ogemaw County. The way Northern Michigan was meant to be.

For winter recreation information, call 1-800-755-9091.



CLASSIC, DETAILED DECOY— Carved by Nick Torello, this brook trout depicted in full spawning colors. Is it any wonder fish decoys are finding increased favor with folk art collectors?