

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Harold Duebbert

Date of Interview: June 4, 1998

Location of Interview: Fergus Falls, Minnesota

Interviewer:

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service:

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Field Biologist

Most Important Projects:

Colleagues and Mentors:

Most Important Issues:

Brief Summary of Interview: Live in Missouri as young child, now lives in Fergus Falls Minnesota. Has been making decoys for over 50 years. Married twice, has two daughters and six grandchildren. After retirement did contract work for *Ducks Unlimited*, Nature Conservancy, Fish and Wildlife and Soil Conservation.

[Sounds like tape picked up in the middle of a conversation]

HD:decoys now. Most of my work, sometimes my wife comes and looks at me, but most of my decoys have been produced (unclear).

[Some laughing here.]

HD: I (unclear) from start to finish and nobody ever sees them until they're done and that's why I've got these two young people now, kind of my apprentice's I call 'em. And I appreciate that because uh I mean I been making decoys now for over 50 years and you learn a lot that you want to transmit to somebody. I had to stumble onto 'em, I did things dumb ways, you know, back then when I didn't know any better, not that I'm perfect now. But I know how to set eyes, I know how to put the head on so it's not going to come off (unclear, some talking at same time) you set the tail, I've told 'em, you gotta get that tail before you ever start getting off square, cuz once you're off square (some more talking at same time) that way when you get to the high stuff you're head's still square, just little things like this.

Interviewer: How many birds you figure you've made in your life?

HD: Oh, I don't know, that questions come up. (unclear here) When I was kid in Missouri, of course, I didn't make any where near as fancy as they are now. But I've (unclear) a hundred, sometimes and then lose them; have to make some more. Not necessarily lose 'em (unclear) Missouri River. I've got, I got a lot of interesting stories in just my hunting background, we're not getting into that today but I don't know. But ever since I've been kind of making them, like the one I made for you, I keep a list now,

I'm up to 100, I've made a 110 or something like that. Just on commission, what I call it, unless my counting always I make myself. I've might of made, I don't know, I hate to say a thousand but if possible; it's possible cuz when I was a kid I'd make things out of cork you know you could make birds in a herd out of cork.

Interviewer: Sure, uh huh.

HD: And I'd had (unclear) 35 or 40 cork decoys, and you start adding up...you could say 500 without batting an eye it could be more, closer to a thousand I don't know.

Interviewer: I guess if I had to pick out your favorite duck, I guess I'd probably say the (unclear) you know.

HD: Did you meet everybody?

Interviewer: Well...

HD: (unclear) one that you're looking at right here, come close the widgeon, I like the widgeon.

Interviewer: Not everybody likes (unclear) though, I mean my brother would or wouldn't go out of his way to shoot a (unclear).

HD: I know it. Well...

Interviewer: (can't understand what is being said)

HD: Some of these people I hunt with, (unclear) they were mallard addicts. You start talking about shooting divers, they wouldn't listen to ya.

Interviewer: (unclear) like we're absolutely nuts, go out and shoot and sit in a boat and shoot divers all day.

HD: Awe, I'll tell ya, now, when I think back in my memory, what I've seen cans do, they're just so thrilling.

Interviewer: Yea , they're just a regal bird, so strong.

HD: This picture I got right behind me, there, it's one of my favorite (unclear, voices sound like they moved away from microphone) this is when they're doing a power dive, (unclear) when they into their feeder lakes and they do this screeching sound, it could be uh maybe 100 to 150 cans flock. And then uh...

Interviewer: I think (unclear), you know I enjoy shooting a few mallards and pintails, but it's just nothing like these guys (unclear).

HD: It's hard to pick out...

Interviewer: But you know they're all unique and they're all beautiful, you know people say (unclear, talking at same time).

HD: And you think about a pintail on a bright, sunny day when they're hanging up here (some chuckling).

Interviewer: Oh yea, yea.

HD: (unclear) I guess it's the sound they make when they're coming in and they're all, it seems like they're kind of on air.

Interviewer: Yea, (unclear on bird type) to me I think are really uh an impressive bird.

HD: I think I remember the (unclear) duck.

Interviewer: Yea, yea, I don't like to eat them but they're absolutely (unclear, talking at same time).

HD: I did my Masters on (unclear) I made in 1957.

Interviewer: Ok.

HD: When I was doing my Masterwork.

Interviewer: Ok.

HD: And uh, (unclear) people think kind of non-descript, but when you study them in detail, they're beautiful.

[Talking at same time, can't understand what was being said.]

Interviewer: They're hard to uh reproduce, that's for sure.

HD: (unclear) will ask me, you know, why I think waterfowl and I guess that's part of it, every species you know is so beautiful.

Interviewer: So different.

HD: Unique,

Interviewer: Yea.

HD: They really are.

Interviewer: There are many critters that's for sure. Look at the swans, big ole things.

HD: Yea, I've (unclear) swans, all of them I hand made decoy. I wouldn't shoot 'em any other way, in fact I didn't take a permit last year because my lakes are all changed so much (interviewer coughing in background) (unclear) to start chasing after 'em. Well, (unclear) you just go hunt ducks, put out your swan decoy and they're going to come in. It's just like, I don't care (unclear) all my swan's are in accurate lighting right next to my decoys. That's they only reason I wouldn't shoot one.

Interviewer: Did you uh, when you're out (unclear) do you chase some sharp tail too?

HD: Yea, I like to hunt sharp tail but they're not (unclear) right around where my hunting camp is. Years ago, back in the '50's and '60's, we use to always make two or three trips out to uh the Badlands in western (unclear) hunt sharp tail and camp out there. Now, back then the limit was sharp tail and you know eat the (unclear) flesh, 75 or 100

sharp tail only (unclear), like where I hunt now, in Kidder County you might walk all day and see one (some chuckling).

Interviewer: Uh, another thing you do too is, is you collect the old books on you know days of waterfowl in the past.

HD: That's a , that's a real passion of mine, I probably, I think I have one of the, well, I have most the real classic water fowling books dating back to 1874, I think the earliest one I got and that's (unclear) a passion. Not only collect 'em, I like to read 'em (light laughing).

Interviewer: Well, and you must have started collecting at the right time too.

HD: Some of 'em I did, some of 'em I just bought lately, well certain ones like uh, (unclear) my dad gave to me when I was 16 years old and (unclear) and then I read that many, many times it had quantitative, a quantitative act probably in my evolution as duck hunter. You know, I like to read those old (unclear) I don't know why (unclear). To me more of a poetic, almost a Victorian prose.

Interviewer: Well, I think we tended to notice more, you know you read some of the Waterfowl magazines and all they're concerned about is killing birds.

HD: It seems that way.

Interviewer: Just trying to bring them off as the greatest hunters of all time, you know "well I got two on the first shot and one on the second" and you know who cares really.

HD: I don't care to read that.

Interviewer: Tell us exactly what they're shooting, what kind of (unclear)...

HD: In the early accounts, much more describing what the area looked like, what the marsh looked like, and they talked very little about uh...bragging about their shots or whatever.

Interviewer: Yea, yea (unclear, some talking at same time)

HD: It was almost secondary. (unclear) people were uh, well-educated and probably influential people that came from the east coast.

Interviewer: Could afford (unclear)

HD: Yea.

Interviewer: Yea, yea.

HD: (lower voice, unclear) run of the mill.

Interviewer: So you, you carve decoys, you collect books, how many boats have you made?

HD: I've made three boats, made a 16-foot, Johnboat they call 'em, when I was about 16 years old. I made another 14-foot rowboat when I was maybe 18 or 19. The boat I use the most, in 1962, I made a 12-foot duck boat, double-ended duck boat.

Interviewer: Was that cedar?

HD: Nope, that's plywood.

Interviewer: That's plywood, ok ok.

HD: I got fiberglass on the side because I hunt in ice and I had to have something to keep from cutting my wood. No, I just, I love that boat and what I've done with it I could write a story just about the boat (some chuckling). I've been through some rough water with it, I tell my friends (unclear, interviewer coughed in background) I think he's going to go down, but (unclear) back to what these river men taught me I know how to handle a

boat. I'm getting older now and (unclear) but I can still, I can (unclear) rough water. I'm pretty proud of myself, I almost hate to say it (unclear) but just about every duck hunter I know has gone under some time or another, I've never done it.

Interviewer: Oh, you haven't yet.

HD: I've come close, one day I had a heavy load, (unclear) were out and it was a real windy day with ten ducks and all my decoys and a black lab and about a 40 mile wind. We start taking water, but uh we escaped that one; that's as close as I've ever come to **sinking** in the water. A lot of us got to be at the, I'm not bragging or anything you understand, it's just knowing how to handle a boat.

Interviewer: Yea, yea (unclear) you should be out there shooting too (unclear, sounds muffled).

HD: Yep, but uh I had, you had how many decoys I made what I wish I knew is how many miles I've rowed a boat.

Interviewer: Yea, yea, how many miles you...

HD: When you get up to my age, like I say I'm almost 70 now, and I've spent a lifetime as a field biologist, I've must have walked thousands of miles, waiting and you know looking for ducks. I know I rowed a boat a hundred maybe a thousand miles, I've spent a fair amount of time in canoes. I've walked thousands of miles, rode a bicycle (some chuckling) so the old body can do a lot.

Interviewer: You miss be out in the field?

HD: Umh.

Interviewer: Do you miss that?

HD: I do. I'll be bluntly; when I retired it was a, quite a shock. It's like cutting an umbilical cord. If you're sitting there one day, (unclear) people calling you up wanting to know about this and that, talking to your buddies and the next day you don't have that. It took awhile to adjust, but the thing that was really beneficial to me, I guess because of my reputation and so on and so forth, I was able to get pretty good contract work. I had contract work with the Ducks Unlimited, Nature Conservancy, some with the Fish and Wildlife Service, some with Soil Conservation.

Interviewer: This was after retirement?

HD: Yep, about five or six years after retirement I had pretty good contract work.

Interviewer: A lot been out in South Dakota, or in North Dakota?

HD: Most of it in North Dakota some in Minnesota.

Interviewer: When did you move back to Fergus, or move to Fergus.

HD: Moved here in '87.

Interviewer: Ok, and is that when you remarried?

HD: I married after I got here.

Interviewer: Ok. Your first wife died?

HD: Nope, divorced.

Interviewer: Oh divorced, ok so..

HD: Ann, my second wife, and she was living here in Fergus.

Interviewer: Oh, ok.

HD: That's why I moved here.

Interviewer: Where did you meet (unclear)?

HD: Umh?

Interviewer: Where did you meet her?

HD: Meet her at Valley City at a retreat weekend.

Interviewer: Oh, ok.

HD: I always tease her and say “You came out there to **snare** me.”

[Interviewer laughing]

HD: No, it worked out fine.

Interviewer: Where are your daughters at now?

HD: My one daughter lives in Casselton, North Dakota.

Interviewer: Ok.

HD: And one in Excelsior Minnesota.

Interviewer: Excelsior, ok.

HD: And they both got married and each of them have three children, so I have six grandchildren. And I look to be taking them duck hunting before too long, **(unclear) five in all.**

Interviewer: **Five in all.**

HD: **(unclear)** I’ll be taking them out. Both of their dads are hunters so.

Interviewer: I guess I started, you know, taking my kids out **as soon as, when** I could.

(Unclear) well she’s ten now, so I think she was probably in the first grade.

HD: I remember I got about one of my daughters I took out one day and, and one of these pintails come in, we were just kind of marking time, we’d been working pretty hard; pintail, **(unclear)** and I pull up on it and it fell right in the boat. My daughter says “Way to go dad!” She thought I did it on purpose.

[Both laughing] I said **no Jill** it wasn't planned that way, it just happened. You know I had a lot of fun taking the girls out, they both uh, they're fun to be out with and uh I think that it's an important part of their life.

Interviewer: Oh, I'm sure it is, something they'll always remember.

HD: Like I said, both of them married hunters so they understand what of all it is all about.

Interviewer: A buddy of mine, his daughter came back last year and she hadn't hunted with him, well probably lets say she's 25, probably since she was 14 or 15, she got away from it. **(Unclear)** she came back with a **(unclear)** license and came home **(unclear)** and said dad **(unclear, talking in a lower voice)**.

HD: **(Unclear)** I have five grandsons and one granddaughter and uh, **(unclear)** I let out in the boats, you know, and not during hunting season but still. **(Unclear)** my one granddaughter came down here **(chuckling some)** she kind of, she's got an active imagination, she put on a, I had some of these dried **(unclear)** and she put on kind of **(unclear)** skit or play **(laughing)**.

Interviewer: Ok, ok.

HD: It cracked me up. Well, one thing I wanna say, we've been talking about **profession** as you know, **Steve**, about my decoy making, cuz I do it the old fashion simplistic way. I don't have a lot of pow..., band saws the only power tool I got, the rest of it, a chopping block there, is where a lot of it takes place. **Go to** work with my hatchet and chopping block and a couple wood **(unclear)** and; to me people try to talk me into getting these uh, grinding machines and all that, but I'm a person to like quietness. And I've got whole library of fold music back here and I turn that on and I like to hear my tools working.

Interviewer: Yea.

HD: Like when I'm rasping I can hear that.

Interviewer: You can hear it.

HD: That means something to me.

Interviewer: Yea, it does.

HD: I don't know, another part of it is, you know I don't know if my mind doesn't work fast or what, but if I'm using power tool (unclear) more than I wanted to do. Well if I use hand tools, I'm forever picking the bird up and looking at it, from all angles.

Interviewer: Yea, yea. What do you use to make your eyeholes? Do you use a drill?

HD: Yea. I do that by hand. I don't (unclear).

Interviewer: Oh you do.

HD: I figure it goes too fast. I got a uh, I don't know what they call it, a bit (unclear) you know they got point in the center and...

Interviewer: You just crank it in by hand though.

HD: I just hold the bit in my hand and drill it. That's the hardest part of all, to me is setting those eye...

Interviewer: It is, well it is.

HD: (Unclear) before I knew what I was doing (unclear) and everything else.

Interviewer: Yea, I know.

HD: [Sounds like he's walking away from recorder and is further away.] I set them early on. See what I do now, is uh; first of all I got my pattern...

[Someone saying, "Yea, just shut that thing off" and appears to be end of tape]

