Visitors to the home of this legendary Illinois River craftsman will find everything from historical letters, Charlie's boots—and plenty of decoys.

Charles and Edna Perdew Museum

Story and Photos
By Holly Schurter
Historic photos courtesy
Charles Perdew Museum
Association.

Charles Perdew used river rock for the foundation and chimney of his home built near the Illinois River in Henry.

On hot summer afternoons in the late 1950s, my sister and I walked to the local swimming pool. We always waved to our neighbors, a white-haired old man and his wife, sitting in their front yard in wooden yard chairs. Occasionally he unfolded himself from the chair, stood up and waved us over to show us what he was carving.

We would stop for a brief visit, petting one of the cats purring under his chair, admiring the miniature ducks or trying out a duck call he'd carved. Sometimes he would give us one of his finished miniatures or duck calls to take home.

Although we enjoyed his friendship, we didn't understand the significance of his gifts. The old man with the halo of white hair was Charles Perdew, one of the best of the Illinois River Valley decoy carvers. His wife Edna was the gifted painter who brought his decoys to life with paintbrush and combs.

The calls, decoys and miniatures they created were the product of lifetimes of study, innovation and creativity.

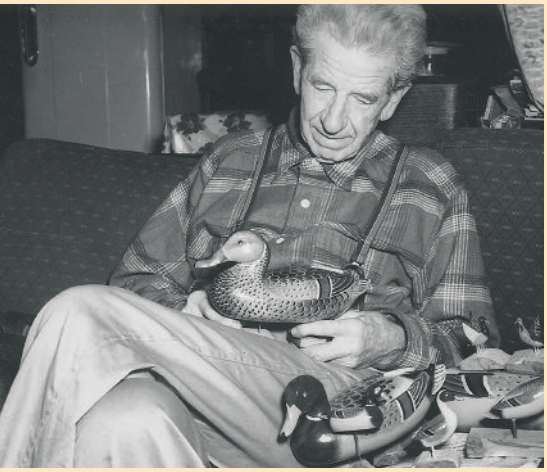
Born in 1874, Charlie Perdew lived near Sawmill Lake as a boy, fishing, trapping and learning about decoy carving from Illinois River Valley master carvers Henry Ruggles and Robert Elliston. Charlie carved his first decoy, a bluebill, from a charred piece of wood when he was 14.

At 15, he made his way to Chicago to work as a meat-packer and a carpenter and also to take painting classes at the Chicago Art Institute. When Charlie returned to Henry nine years later, he established himself in business, making duck and crow decoys and calls. In 1902, he married Edna Haddon, the young woman who had been painting his decoys.

Charlie patented his crow call by late 1909. About that time, he designed and

(Photo courtesy Tom Galliher, Galliher Photography, Ft. Wayne, Indiana.)

This photo of three Perdew decoys in Don and Almira Cark's collection appears on a poster available at the museum and in the book *Perdew, An Illinois River Tradition* by Ann Tandy Lacy.



The Charles Perdew Museum Association cares for many photographs of Charles Perdew.

built a home and shop at 914 Front Street in Henry, just up a hill from the Illinois River. Charlie used river rock for the foundation of the house, which had an expansive view of the river he and Edna loved.

"Charlie was a real river rat," says Pat Wright, vice-president of the Charles and Edna Perdew Museum Association. "He lived from the river."

Charlie's intimate knowledge of the river allowed him to render the decoys he carved naturally and accurately. His innovative hollow-bodied decoys, finished with Edna's realistic painting, were popular with hunters and guides. Orders came in steadily, and visitors often found the workshop and house piled high with works in progress.

Customers also wanted the crow and duck calls Charlie crafted. Beautifully carved, and in some cases embellished, calls became one of Charlie's best-known products. Perdew calls were—and still are—widely recognized as among the best for calling down crows and ducks.

Don Lashbrook, an Illinois native now living in Texas, says of his Perdew crow caller: "There's none better. It's unbelievable for sound, even as old as it is."

Recognized for their natural beauty and excellence, Perdew decoys and calls are still prized, consistently bringing top prices at auction. In April 2006, a pair of hollow mallard decoys sold for $120,500 at Guyette & Schmidt's auction in St. Charles.

Charlie died in 1963; Edna in 1974. Their only son Haddon left the house and shop as they were, with newspapers and mail strewn around as if Charlie and Edna would be back to read them any time.

In 1995, two Henry teachers, Jay McCracken and Pat Wright, had grown interested in Charles and Edna Perdew. Recognizing their importance both artistically and commercially, they moved to form the Charles and Edna Perdew Museum Association. Shortly afterward, the Perdew family gave the house and property to the newly formed association, with the stipulation that it be used as a museum.

The association faced daunting decisions: The workshop where Charlie repaired bicycles and guns, produced brooms and manufactured decoys had fallen in and burned; only one wall remained. The house, as well as many of its furnishings, had deteriorated to the point of instability.

Charles Perdew's rocker, boots, books and magazines appear just as he may have left them after relaxing after a day in the workshop.

Utilizing volunteers and an initial $100,000 loan through the Experience Illinois program, the museum association began by clearing trees and brush from the site. Once again the Illinois River could be seen from windows at the back of the house. The river-rock foundation, west wall and the porch were stabilized.

A general clean-up of the property followed. Paints and brushes Edna had used to work on decoys were found lying around, as well as personal letters from sporting goods retailer Eddie Bauer requesting new supplies of crow calls.

"We built up a pretty nice demand for the Perdew call,

"YOUR HOBBY HEADQUARTERS"

Eddie BAUER
SPORTING GOODS
119 UNION STREET W. A. C. BUILDING ... SENECA 2525
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

July. 6, 1940

Mr. Charles E. Perdew
Henry, Illinois

Dear Mr. Perdew:

I don't often wait on the trade in our store but yesterday a friend of mine came to me for certain purchases and among them he wanted a crow call and much to my surprise, the department was entirely out of them and upon inquiring I found that it has been two or three months since they have placed an order and yet they have not received calls.

We built up a pretty nice demand for the Perdew call, they have a real reputation here and I am so anxious to have a few for stock. Can't you see to it that a dozen at least are sent to us right away? Two dozen would be much better. We like the deep tone.

Will look forward to hearing from you real soon and with kind personal regards, I am

Sincerely yours,
BAUER'S SPORT SHOP, INC.

By Eddie Bauer

The Charles Perdew Museum, built on the footprint of the original workshop, contains interesting memorabilia, including a 1940 letter from Eddie Bauer.

Displayed at the Charles Perdew Museum are Edna's palette, brushes and some of her original art, and Charles's glasses, two calls, a pattern and the violin he played to entertain his family.

they have a real reputation here and I am so anxious to have a few for stock," wrote Eddie Bauer in a letter to Charlie Perdew dated Aug. 6, 1940.

That letter is on display in the new museum, which was built on the footprint of Charlie's original workshop.

Perdew decoys are on display when the museum is open, but the museum is about more than decoys. Visitors can see a variety of the tools and equipment Charlie Perdew used and crafted. Hand tools are on display, as well as the line-shaft powered with a gasoline engine, to which he attached lathes, sanders and the hollowing machine he invented in the 1930s. Edna Perdew's palette of paints and several of her paintings can be seen as well.

Other items in the museum's collection reveal some of Charlie's other interests and endeavors. A double-bowed hunting skiff Charlie built in the 1920s hangs on one wall of the museum. Visitors also can see the broom machine Charlie built to support his family during wartime.

Details of Charlie and Edna's family life are revealed in the violin Charlie played, a pair of small skis he made for his son and a tandem bicycle he built before his marriage to Edna, later used by the family, that stands against a wall. His rocking chair and boots sit in a corner just as he might have left them.

Charlie and Edna Perdew's love for the river and commitment to excellence and craft are qualities worth learning from.

They are still fine friends to visit.

Holly Schurter is a freelance writer living in Normal.

Visiting the museum

- The Charles and Edna Perdew Museum, located at 914 Front Street, Henry, is open every Sunday from 2-4 p.m. from Memorial Day through Labor Day or by special appointment.
- The museum welcomes individual visitors as well as groups of school children, teacher's workshops and other groups interested in Illinois river lore. Call (309) 346-3261 to make arrangements.
- Donations are accepted and used to support the museum and for further renovations on the Perdew house.
- Perdew Days, Sept. 15-16, 2006 at Henry Waterworks Park and at the museum, offers a buffet dinner, an auction, Perdew decoy exhibits, carving demonstrations and duck call competitions. Phone (309) 346-3261 for details.
- Museum Association Memberships, $25 yearly. Members receive a quarterly newsletter detailing museum events as well as ongoing work on the Perdew property. A poster highlighting the Perdew's life and work is a perk of museum membership. A video detailing the life and work of Charles and Edna Perdew is available from the association for $20.
- For more information check the museum website at www.charlesperdew.com.

In the area

Interested in learning more about the Illinois River Valley? You may want to visit other sites and events like these:

- Annual Decoy Show, the largest decoy show in central Illinois, held each February. Call (309) 364-3261 for information. The Perdew Museum is usually open during this event.
- Bald Eagle Days in Henry, usually held in February at the Henry Riverfront. Phone (309) 364-3261 for information.
- The Paint Store, 425 Edward Street, Henry, offers Perdew souvenirs. Owner Jim Cummins is a member of the Perdew Museum Association.
- The Wheeler Museum, located in rural Putnam, open by reservation only, includes a display of Indian tools and arrowheads, as well as the burial site of Chief Senachwine. Phone (815) 437-2978 for information.
- The Marshall County Historical Museum (Lacon) offers visitors insight into the early days of the county. Phone (309) 246-2349.
- The Spirit of Peoria, an authentic sternwheel steamboat based in Peoria, occasionally stops in Henry for afternoon sightseeing tours and an evening dinner cruise. Watch for Steamboat Elsie's lighthouse as you approach Waterworks Park in Henry. Phone 1-800-676-8988 or check info@spiritofpeoria.com for more information.