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Oct. 7, 2013

THE ODD COUPLE

Is it Shakespeare and Middleton?

Since this is my first essay to this group, I wanted a big subject so that I would have a lot of reference materials.

I remembered from my grade school years that the universe is infinite in size – hence I selected “The Universe” as the likely subject of this essay. The very first reference I consulted said in the opening paragraph that the universe was expanding. Since I could not explain how something that was already infinite could expand, I decided I could not use this subject – so I needed another subject.

Being that this is a literary club, I remembered that Shakespeare had something to do with literature, so I chose Shakespeare as a likely topic. My first reference mentioned Thomas Middleton as a co-author on the first page, and the idea of an odd couple came to me – my essay subject would be “The Odd Couple.”

But this essay will not be about either Shakespeare or Middleton; however, I will try to mention them somewhere in this essay. My essay should be titled: “The Odd Couple – Baseball and the only Truly American Art Form.”

For those of you who do not know what baseball is, I will define it. Baseball is a popular American team game played with a ball on a diamond in which the object is to outscore the other team. Baseball is the only popular American team game in which you do not want the ball – for example, in soccer, football or basketball it is hard to score when you do not have the ball, but in baseball you cannot score if your team has the ball.

Another thing about the game is it is not over until the fat lady sings – explaining this to you is beyond my pay level. This last sentence was added to give me a feel of how you would react to my humor.

Baseball, like any human activity, has its famous members. For example, in literature the famous members are:

Mozart – Bach – Chopin

Wait – my pages are mixed up.

This is the right page.

In literature, some of the famous members are:

Booth Tarkington

James Whitcomb Riley – our club’s own famous Hoosier Poet

and for an old timer, I will mention

Shakespeare. (See, I did get him into this essay!)

Back to baseball, for famous baseball players we could mention Cy Young or Walter Johnson; both were pitchers. We could mention famous hitters like Cobb or Rose. I had to mention Rose, as that’s my wife’s name. But in baseball, it is the homerun kings that are the most famous. The first homerun king was “Homerun Baker,” then came Ruth, who is probably more famous as a candy bar, and then Henry Aaron, who started playing just up the road in Milwaukee and finished playing down the road in Atlanta. I should remind you to remember some of these names, as they might appear again in this essay. That’s all you need to know about baseball, so now let’s review the other member of the odd couple – the “only truly American Art Form”.

Those of you who read the New York Times’ article of Feb. 22, 2011 would say that Jazz is the only truly American art form, but you would be

wrong. This is proof that everything you read in prestigious newspapers is not correct, as if I needed to remind this audience of that.

If you have lived all your life in Indy, you might say the “500” is the only truly American art form. Saying the “500” is an art form could be a stretch, but since in “Ben Hur” horsepower propelled a wheeled vehicle around an oval counterclockwise, we know the “500” is not truly American; this suggests Lew Wallace, another famous Indiana author, was the inspiration for the “500.”

Some of you are thinking maybe my background will give you a clue to what is the “only truly American Art Form.” Well, I am from Delaware, which has great beaches. Sunbathing is an art form, but not exclusively American. How about the Delaware mascot – the Blue Hen? Even Biden doesn’t make the gaffe of considering the blue hen an art form. But before I suggest another possibility, let me digress.

You all know that the most common chicken virus can be prevented by adding methylene blue to the chicken feed. But you might not recall that DuPont, the feature company in Delaware (I call it the Lilly of Delaware), had a dyes division that sold methylene blue. Hence for a long time the chicken meat in the Delaware stores had a blue tint. This practice of using methylene blue was discontinued when Purdue, not Mitch’s school up the

road, but the chicken company, started using marigold seeds in their chicken feed to give the meat a yellow tint. Can you imagine the drop in sales when the methylene blue/marigold meat was in the stores!

I promise not to have another dyes story in this essay.

So if the only truly American Art Form is not from my Delaware roots, maybe it is from the featured water-way in the area – the Chesapeake Bay.

Yes, sailing is an art form, just ask any Annapolis graduate, but not truly American. Everyone who has enjoyed the fine restaurants in Baltimore knows that removing the meat from a blue crab is an art form, but again not truly American.

This leaves us the only remaining option – duck decoys.

A duck decoy is an image of a duck made by humans to entice game within range to be shot: thus a decoy is an art form. The literature states clearly that as this art form developed, it became easier to enjoy a duck dinner. Again I disagree with the literature on this point. I believe it was better DuPont powder, not a more realistic art form, that set the table. After all, a shotgun with DuPont powder is more effective than a stick with a chipped stone on the end.

I now promise no more DuPont plugs in this essay.

All that remains for me to do is prove that duck decoys are truly American. The oldest known decoys in the world were found in the United States by archaeologists from the New York Museum of the American Indian. These decoys were dated as 1000AD. More importantly, some of these decoys are often displayed in the Etigeljorg Museum in Indianapolis – what better proof that decoys are a “truly American art form.”

So now you know what this essay is about – Baseball and Duck Decoys – an odd couple indeed!

But as I pointed out previously, any human activity has its famous members. While I know most of you know all the famous decoy carvers, I will still review them to refresh your memory.

The Havre de Grace, Maryland undertaker R. Madison Mitchell is the best known carver of the 2nd half of the 20th century. In fact, Madison is so famous that the National Decoy Museum is named after him, just like other famous people have things named after them – the best example might be the Lincoln Memorial named after President Lincoln, who spent time in Indiana.

Back to famous decoy carvers – the Holly family is considered the first family of decoy carving, Daddy Holly in late 19th century, followed by his sons, with James being the best known. In fact, I am convinced that

James was the teacher of Madison Mitchell. I can name many other famous carvers like Ben Dye or Sam Barnes, but since none of you are taking notes, you must be familiar with all of them.

I must remind you that a decoy person can tell in which state a decoy was carved, just like an art person can tell the Hoosier Group from the Hudson Group. And just like an art expert can tell which Indiana artist painted a picture, be it Steele, Adams, Stark or Forsyth, a decoy expert can tell which county in a state a decoy was carved and by whom.

All that remains for me to complete this essay is to bring the two subjects together.

It all started on November 11, 2004, at the largest U.S. decoy auction held annually in Easton, MD. This was an annual Father and Son event in our family. As you know, an auction is no fun unless you are bidding and maybe buying. On this day my son and I were not having much fun. Then came lot 315, which contained 293 decoys. We looked at each other, both thinking it would be great to tell our wives that we bid on 293 decoys. Well, after the various consortiums of dealers stopped bidding, our card was still in the air. "Shocked" does not do justice to our feelings – no word does justice, on realizing we now owned 293 decoys.

Almost at once strangers came forward with the line – “I don’t know anything about decoys, but you have so many – will you sell or give me this one.” – “Stupid” is the word they equated with us. Anyway, I encouraged this behavior, as these were the experts trying to cherry pick, and I was learning which were the better decoys in the group, and in addition these individuals were helping us load our pick-up truck.

The local hardware store owner really decided we were “dumb” as he offered to sell us a tarp to put over the decoys in case of rain on the way home – first it was a sunny day, and second, decoys belong in water. Surely I was not as dumb as he believed.

On the way home, my son and I decided to read the auction catalog – something one must do prior to bidding, and something we had not done. We learned from the catalog that this was a full Rig of Decoys owned by a man who lived in Trappe, MD, and had died 40 years previously.

But, so what; a bigger concern was what to tell my wife. So my son and I worked on a plan. When finished, we were pleased with the plan.

I was going to write a book about this rig – telling where, when and by whom each decoy was made. The book would make the decoys famous, and thus this purchase a good investment.

I must point out that both my son and I ate an apple on the way home, and that didn't give us a clue to what would have been a good investment that day. Well, once home we learned what each of you also knows – our wives are smarter than we are. My wife pointed out that:

- Never before had I ever made a good investment at an auction
- Never before had I ever written a book
- And if I sold a copy to every decoy collector and gave a copy to The Jefferson Library, I would still need less than 200 copies, so how valuable would that large distribution make these decoys?

But I was committed to writing a book, so I started to study the decoys.

On first cut, 2/3 were made in Harford County, MD, but the other third was a mystery. They had half the characteristics of Talbot County, MD and half the characteristics of Dorchester County, MD, but this combination was not in my reference books.

I decided to look on the Triple AAA map for Trappe, MD. No such place. Then I decided to go to the Decoy Museum with my wife, as they have a much bigger reference library. Surely I could find where this last one-third was made.

At the museum, we met the director, who had previously been the director of the Baraboo, Wisconsin circus museum. Since my wife was from Milwaukee, she knew we were at the correct place to get help. I should mention that her home was one block from County Stadium, and she had gone to so many games that she really believed that Henry Aaron, the great homerun hitter, was her brother.

The museum director knew nothing about decoys – they are not in a circus – but he introduced us to John Sullivan, a prolific writer of decoy lore and a museum board member. If any of you own real estate in Maryland, you know John real well, as he was the State Commissioner of Real Estate Tax Collection. John could not help us find a reference to our unique decoys' characteristics, but he knew that a complete rig of decoys sold at auction the previous week to an unknown collector (imagine this – I am unknown) and that based on his extensive knowledge, it was the only rig still in existence. My spirits jumped – I owned the only rig still in existence – maybe I had made a great investment!

John also had a detailed map of the best duck hunting places in Maryland, and Trappe was on his map. Guess where Trappe is – it straddles the county line between Talbot and Dorchester Counties – one mystery solved, but a bigger one existed – Harford County and Talbot/Dorchester

Counties have nothing in common – as we will see later they were worlds apart during the time this rig was being used. What ties these two groups of decoys together in this rig is now the question: was the book becoming a mystery book?

John Sullivan suggested I go to Trappe to seek more information, so I did, following his map. Trappe is a town with

- Five or more churches
- Twenty-seven or fewer homes
- A stop sign, to be exact, two stop signs, one on each side of the intersection
- A city hall attached to a fire house and
- An antique book store.

I entered the City Hall and met Joedy; on the Eastern Shore of Maryland you call everyone by their first name.

I noticed a picture on the wall behind the desk, where you would expect to find the picture of George Washington, but it was not George, it was a ball player, so trying to introduce myself, I asked Joedy who he was. Joedy said it was Frank, the man who put Trappe on the map. I didn't connect her statement. Joedy said if I was really interested in Trappe history,

I should go see Jim, the town historian and the owner of the antique book store.

Jim, who has a last name, Dawson, if any of you would like to visit the biggest and best antique book store on the Eastern Shore (I might point out based on a Google search probably the only antique book store on the Eastern Shore) told me he had heard a rumor that Lois, the daughter-in-law of Frank, had sold Frank's rig at auction recently. I noted that when he said Lois his eyes rolled in a strange way. Jim said I should confirm the rumor by talking to Lois, another eye roll, and that Joedy knew how to reach her – that's right, another eye roll. But Jim believed I should buy a book from him about Trappe, which has a chapter about Frank, the ball player.

It was getting exciting – the decoys I was writing the book about were previously owned by a ball player – the book would have wider appeal, as an odd-couple.

With the Trappe book in hand, I went back to see Joedy, who also had the book for sale, but being a government agency the price was higher. Joedy not only gave me Lois' address but pointed to the house, and her eyes rolled in a similar fashion.

Most of you might be concerned that there was something in Trappe water that made your eyes roll, but since during my forty plus years of

working at a chemical bench I had smelled or tasted every chemical except PFIB, I knew that no chemical causes eyes to roll. I was not afraid of the Trappe water.

On the way out of town I confirmed Lois' address and that she had a mailbox out front. Once home I wrote a very nice letter to Lois asking what she knew about the decoys. While we wait for her reply, let me review for you what I learned from reading the Trappe book.

First about Frank in his youth:

- He came to school late in the fall after the crops were harvested, but still he was the teacher's pet
 - He was always smiling and a model student
 - He helped clean the blackboard and erasers and sharpen the pencils
 - He helped the girls that could not climb the trees to get the mulberries by throwing fruit down to them
- He was very strong and could row a boat forever
- He worked in the butcher shop and liked to play baseball, and was hired to shoot crows from the local corn fields.

Now about Frank as an adult

- He was the best shot on the Eastern Shore, at one time having five ducks shot in the air before the first one hit the water
- A family man who raised corn and asparagus on his three farms while being a church deacon
- A baseball coach, where he discovered Jimmie Foxx (that's really significant)
- Served on the Trappe Town Board for many years, a job that paid \$25.00 per year and was board president for several years and also tax collector
- Served as a director of the State Bank of Trappe and a member of the Volunteer Fire Company.

In summary, both as a youth and as an adult, Frank was a remarkable man in physique, mind and heart, long on character, honesty and sincerity. But it is his middle years where he became so famous as a baseball player.

- He played third base for Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics, part of the famous "hundred thousand dollar infield."
- He finished in the top ten American League Most Valuable Player voting in each of the thirteen years he played.
- His homeruns on consecutive days in the 1911 World Series earned him his moniker "Homerun" Baker, the 1st homerun

King as the mighty New York Giants team was defeated – yes, this Frank is the 1st homerun King.

- He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame for leading the Athletics to 4 American League titles and three World Series titles, and leading the majors in homeruns for many years.
- He was the only player Cy Young ever threw at;
- He was twice spiked by Ty Cobb (these last two names you remember from earlier in this essay)
- He was he first player to hit
 - Two homeruns in a single game
 - Two homeruns off the same pitcher in a game.

Is this not exciting – I was writing a book about an Odd Couple – the only complete decoy rig still in existence and a homerun king – the book would have unlimited potential.

Since the mail is slow, I have not yet heard from Lois, so while we wait for her reply, let me review for you what the Trappe Book tells about Trappe history. This is a plus you get from this essay.

Trappe is a town of Quakers and Methodists.

- The birthplace of the man credited with writing the 1st national anthem – “The Liberty Song”
- The birthplace of two men who were each elected three times as Governor of Maryland.
- The birthplace of a man who was to become Governor of Delaware.
- The birthplace of a man who, 40 years prior to the Wright Brothers, successfully flew in a plane from the roof of a Trappe church.
- The birthplace of a man who was to become Governor of Pennsylvania; this man was so famous that a College is named after him; the college is better known as the institution that expelled a young man who would become the 15th President of the United States.
- The birthplace of the man who political historians claim was solely responsible for getting the eventual President of the United States nominated at the Republican Convention in Chicago in 1860.

- The birthplace of the man called the “Penman of the Revolution” and while he had a major role in writing the Constitution of the United States, he had George Reed sign his name for him upon it.
- A town visited by the President of the United States on his yacht the “Sequoia” on October 26 at 3:30pm.

Is it not amazing that with all these famous politicians born in Trappe, it is a Homerun King that put the town on the maps.

Let me digress again – this town:

- Has the 1st homerun king as important to this country’s lore as the 1st President – Washington.
- Has a writer as important to the country’s birth as Jefferson.
- Has a politician solely responsible for the election of President Lincoln.
- Was visited by President Roosevelt.

I submit that if any part of this town was more than 10 ft. above sea level, the town would have been named “Mount Rushmore.” Now back to this essay’s subject.

I received my letter from Trappe, but it was not from Lois. The response was from the Trappe postmaster, who was more than pleased to inform me that my letter was UNDELIVERABLE.

Apparently if you have been a postmaster on the Eastern Shore, which Lois had been, you can decide from whom you will receive mail – regardless of any federal mail delivery rules (maybe her practices make eyes roll).

With my hopes of increasing the book sales with the odd couple connection completely dashed, I decided to have a more detailed study of the decoys, looking for features that would excite decoy collectors.

I found several things of interest to decoy collectors: for example, among other things –

I could explain using my high school chemistry why the canvasback and red head decoys have the most reheads.

I found the “missing link” in the history of decoy keel design, a missing link that decoy collectors did not know was missing.

But unfortunately, I could also prove that this rig had been used with a sink box for many years after 1935. You will recall that 1935 is the year that the U.S. Congress passed laws making sink box use illegal.

My concern now was not about an odd couple, but was I, the current rig owner, guilty of this sink-box violation. If you think decoys are expensive, you do not know how expensive a discussion about “statute of limitations” is with a lawyer. My lawyer suggested I check the local hunting laws just to be sure of things.

Hence back to Easton, the Talbot Co. seat and into the library, where I found plenty of references in the local paper after 1935 on when, where and how to use sink boxes. I also checked the sporting section in the library and found in addition to Frank Baker, a Judy Johnson was a local ball player. Judy must be famous since the ball diamond in my hometown is called the Judy Johnson Field. In fact, Judy Johnson played during the same years as “Homerun Baker” and like Baker is in the Baseball Hall of Fame and also played third base. Judy was born in Snowhill, Maryland, which is 20 miles from Trappe. You ask how can two third basemen from the same area be famous at the same time – the answer: one was in the American League, the other in the Negro League.

Also of interest, I discovered that since in the early 1900s you needed a license to hunt ducks in the area, and the money from these licenses went to support the school board – is that not a progressive practice that maybe we should adopt in Indiana.

One of the licenses issued every year was to a John Mitchell, a Baltimore undertaker, as were licenses to three members of the Baker Family. But the real issue now is how can a local paper encourage people to hunt in violation of Federal laws.

I decided to go to Annapolis and ask the DNR Director about this. Well you know a capital city is a great place to visit when the legislature is not in session and when the last letters in the name are “polis”, so I had a wonderful visit with the DNR Director, Mr. Hoffman. You note that in the western part of Maryland you do not use first names. Mr. Hoffman looked at me and said “You don’t understand the Eastern Shore – over there we legislators as well as the Congress in Washington know that laws passed do not apply to the Eastern Shore. The Eastern Shore is a different world – they do their own thing.” In fact, up until a few years ago Mr. Hoffman did not have game wardens on the Eastern Shore – he does not put people in harm’s way. So Mr. Hoffman taught me about the two parts of Maryland. Maybe these two parts should be the odd couple of this essay.

I had to get “Homerun” to be the decoys’ owner or the Odd Couple of my essay would not exist.

With Joedy’s help and modern technology, I talked to Lois Baker on the phone, visited her home and confirmed the following:

- she is very pleasant and in person doesn't cause eyes to roll
- she sent the rig to auction
- it was Frank "Homerun" Baker's rig! (I have my odd couple.)
- the rig was put together by Frank, his father and grandfather; the latter two were both farmers and blacksmiths.
- the Baker farm was adjacent to the Dickinson Farm (now you know the name of one of the famous people born in Trappe.)
- that John Mitchell hunted with Frank in the early 1900s
- that Frank "Homerun" Baker married John Mitchell's daughter in 1922 after his first wife died in the 1918 influenza epidemic.
- that R. Madison Mitchell, the famous decoy carver, was the 1st cousin to Frank's second wife.
- that the Mitchell and Baker families did travel often between Trappe and Havre de Grace.

This essay is about to end. The odd couple is together, together by love. Two of Maryland's famous families (the baseball family and the decoy family) are on the same family tree.

The two human activities for which Maryland is most famous –

Baseball with Baker

Ruth

Johnson

Foxx

and the “Iron Man” Cal Ripken, born in Havre de Grace

and Decoys – the only truly American Art Form with Mitchell, etc.

are not an odd couple – they are a love couple that also are tied together by

the 442 miles long Susquehanna River – the Baseball Hall of Fame in

Cooperstown at the head water of the river and the National Decoy Museum

at the mouth of this famous river.

The only thing that remains before I can completely finish this essay is to do research to show that families with the last name of Shakespeare and Middleton live on this Susquehanna River, or maybe live on opposite sides of the Chesapeake Bay.