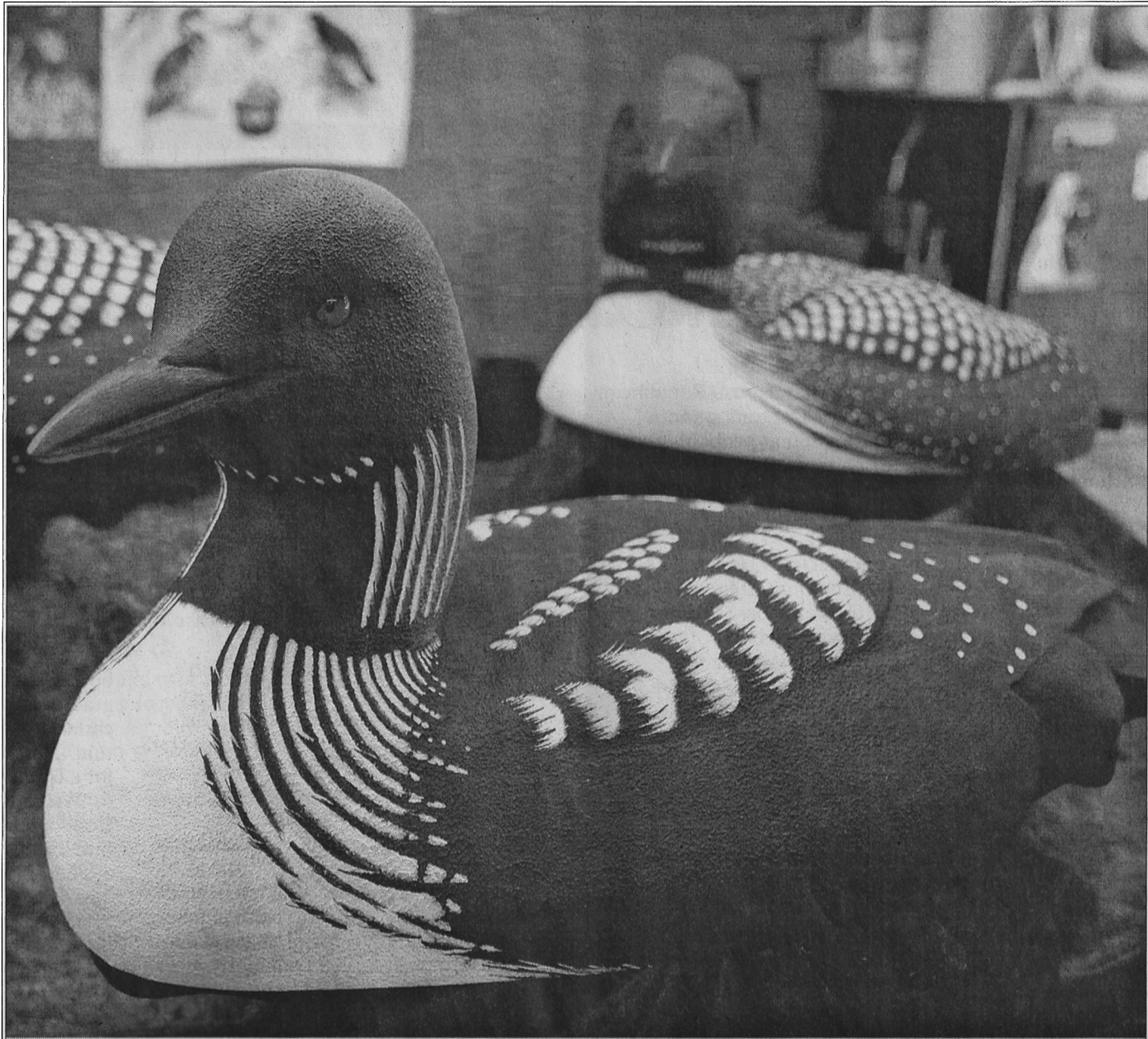


## HUNTER'S LURE BECOMES ART FORM

# Birds will never fly ...



Justin Engle/The Daily Item

Ross Smoker entered this loon decoy in this year's world competition.

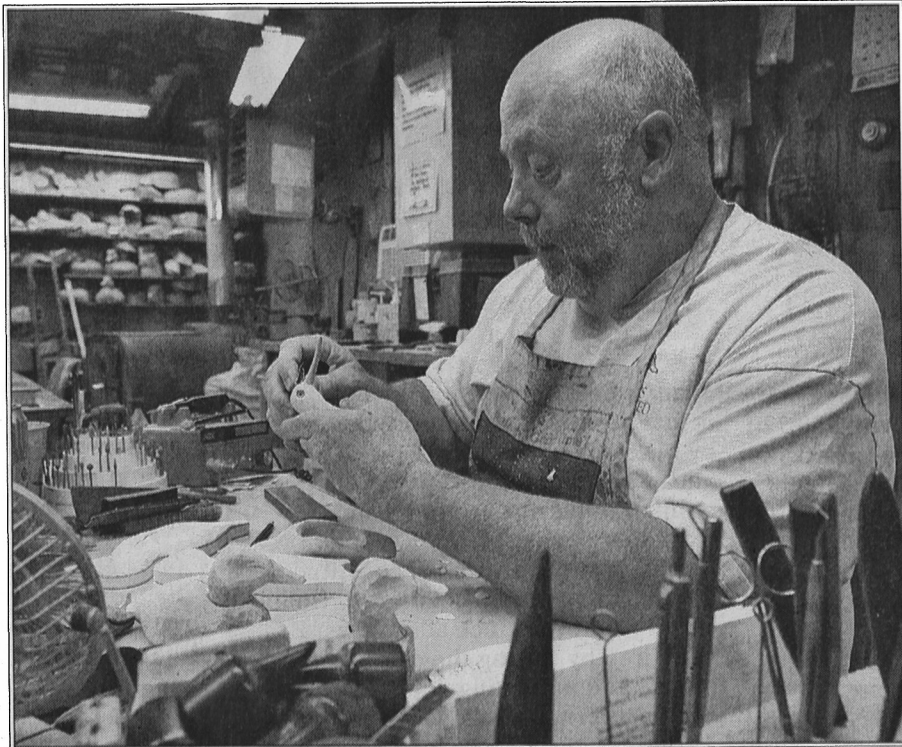
## ... but carver's lifelike decoys look like they could

**By Evamarie Socha**  
*The Daily Item*

SELINGROVE — If you can peel a potato, you can carve a duck — words to live by for bird decoy makers and wisdom from Ross Smoker's dad. Now about 40 years into his own bird decoy carving career, Smoker is competing at a world level against people from the other side of the planet.

By day, Smoker is a recycling technician at the Unicolor electronics recycling factory at U.S. Penitentiary Lewisburg, where he's worked more than 20 years. By night, at least Tuesdays and Thursdays, he indulges in the family hobby that has made him a world-class champion duck decoy carver.

"This is where I make my dirt," the 51-year-old Smoker said in his wood-carving shop in Selinsgrove, which sits behind his childhood home and where his dad took up the craft. Richard B. Smoker was a shop teacher at Selinsgrove Area High School in 1968 when



Justin Engle/The Daily Item

Ross Smoker works in his shop in Selinsgrove.

# Decoys look like they could fly

**DECOYS**, from Page A6

---

he decided to try making his own duck hunting rig.

This must have stirred something in the family blood line because all the Smokers got into it: sister Jeri and brother Rich began carving while Mom contributed on the painting side. Ross himself was about 10 when he tried his first duck.

"I'm a hunter, so the decoys appeal to me more than that aspect," he said. "But the carving is more about the art form."

Decoy carving competition came just as naturally to the family as the hobby itself. Smoker has competed at every level from novice to worlds and is a regular entrant and judge at the Ward World Championship Wildfowl Carving Competition and Art Festival, which takes place every spring in Ocean City, Md.

The annual gathering brings artists from as near as Havre de Grace, Md., known for its rich history in duck hunting and decoy making, to as far away as Australia and Japan, where the art form has really taken off, Smoker said.

"I've made friends all over the country" through decoy carving, he said, and travels to visit them and get ideas for more carvings. Last year he ventured to Washington state to visit a friend and observe Pacific native birds for future designs.

Flotation, profile, color and craftsmanship are the points judges look at in competition, and April was the 44th annual world gath-

ering. Unfortunately, Smoker came home empty handed prizewise. But looking at the three loon carvings he entered raises the question of why he lost: They're impeccable. Decoys of two common loons and a Pacific loon look so lifelike, from their deep red eyes to their gleaming colors and feather marks, as if they're about to fly away.

Still, Smoker has thousands of ribbons to his credit and regularly teaches the craft to anywhere from six to 23 students who sign up for a two-day workshop he does several times a year. Right now, great nephew Ben Drumheller, 14, is keeping the family tradition alive and learning carving from his great uncle.

"I like using my hands," Ben said of decoy making, as well as the creativity involved and keeping the family tradition alive. Ben works in Smoker's shop, which is filled with tools, wood blocks and shelves loaded with gear.

"When you become a carver, you become a collector," Smoker said. Myriad tools, wood, paints, brushes, knives, models, even real, stuffed beaks are in boxes and shelves in the shop. It's an accumulation over years, he said, and of course, everything is needed depending on what bird is the latest subject.

Two carvings have Smoker's attention for now: a common merganser, which is a large fish-eating duck that favors rivers and lakes; and a giant raven for a friend and fellow carver in Maine, who regularly is visited by the passerine birds.

Smoker gives an easy going laugh about his passion. "It keeps me out of pool halls," he said.