"One Reason God Made Trees": The Form and Ecology of the Barnegat Bay Sneakbox

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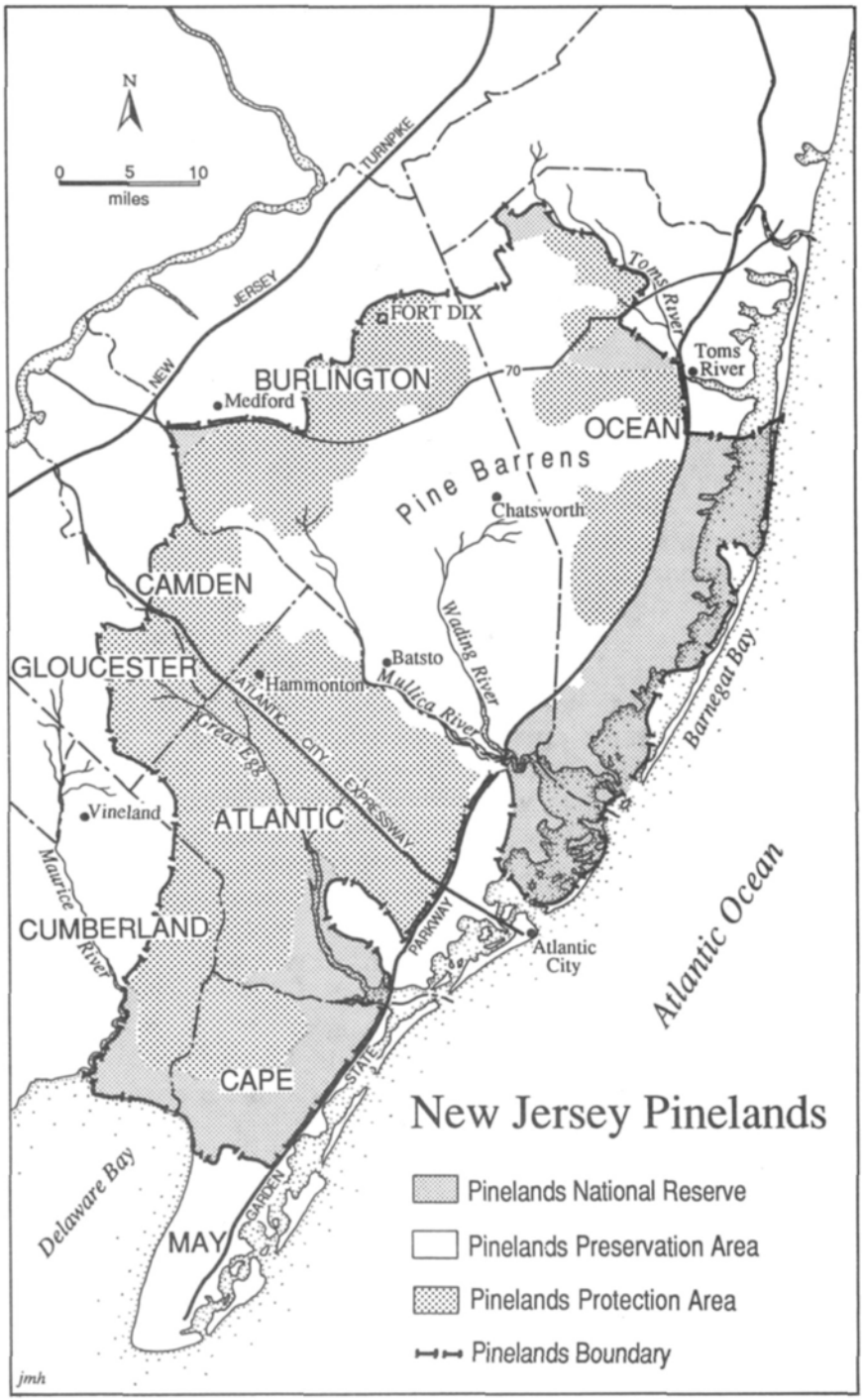
In both Larry Danielson's essay and this one by Mary Hufford, the central issue is how the relationship between the natural environment of a region and the people who live there is articulated in folk cultural forms. Whereas Danielson focused on narrative, Hufford examines an article of material culture: a small boat made and used by duck hunters in the Pine Barrens region of southern New Jersey. Hufford offers a systematic analysis of the Barnegat Bay sneakbox as a resonant symbol of the connections that residents draw among themselves, the wetlands that serve as their hunting grounds, and the birds they stalk. Because the boat is carefully crafted for a peculiar set of local conditions, it becomes a unique marker of regional identity for the man who makes it, owns it, and uses it.

Water is everywhere in southern New Jersey, its comings and goings engendering the rhythm of regional lifeways. In the Pine Barrens, rainfall gathers underground in the Cohansey Aquifer, surfaces in freshwater swamps and feeder streams, and is captured for a while in cranberry reservoirs before coursing its way into saltier waters. Some of it flows out through brackish tidal marshes to the east and south, where it is again detained by muskrat trappers and salt-hay farmers. The interplay of this water system with an ice-age legacy of varied soils and land forms yields a diversity of wetlands, and these wetlands support the region's complex of traditional lifeways.

While the Pine Barrens—with its cranberry plantations, blueberry farms, and logging operations—and Barnegat Bay—with its salt-hay meadows, fishing communities, and boatyards—look like two very different habitats, the forested region north of the Mullica River reaching eastward from the cranberry watershed around Chatsworth to the coast is best thought of as one cultural region,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Pinelands Protection Area
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comprising interdependent subregions. The tendency among natives to shift their attention from the bay to the upland forest or vice versa when resources in one area or another are depleted makes it a mistake to consider the subregions in isolation. The local maxim, "You can always make a buck in the woods or a dollar on the bay," celebrates the versatility that for woodsmen and baymen alike continues to be a matter of pride. Shared participation over the past two centuries in this geographically rooted ethos is related to a persisting self-awareness of membership in such subregional folk groups as Pineys and Baymen.[1]

Both Barnegat Bay and the Pine Barrens are located within the million-acre tract designated by Congress in 1978 as the Pinelands National Reserve. The term "pinelands" is a portmanteau word conflating "Pine Barrens" and "wetlands." In contrast to the Pinelands National Reserve, an "ad hoc" region, Barnegat Bay and the Pine Barrens are ontic regions, "owing their existence to certain geographical, social and cultural 'facts.'"[2] These geographical, social, and cultural facts combine to manifest what human ecologists call a "socionatural system."[3] Humans sharing in such a system, who in fact do much to shape it, are bound together and distinguished from outsiders by the intimate knowledge they have of the environment and its workings.[4] In South Jersey a sense of intimacy with the landscape is professed in sayings like "You can go away from the Pines but you can't get the sand out of your shoes" or "Let me die with the salt in my ears."

This intimacy with the landscape is also expressed in the range of tools, architectural forms, and artifacts devised for shaping, traversing, and harvesting the region, for dwelling in it, and returning to its pasts. Such artifacts, products of the kind of esoteric knowledge that helps to define regional folk groups, may be seen as indexes to that knowledge, compact means for storing and retrieving it. And these artifacts, which illuminate boundaries between insiders and outsiders, also serve as portals of entry through which outsiders may formally encounter regional culture. For natives they also serve as thresholds across other boundaries, entryways to alternative realms ongoingly constructed within the region.[5]

Throughout South Jersey, in backyards of woodland towns and coastal villages alike, one is likely to come upon an ingenious artifact, a regional hallmark that links the subregions. Looking over the assortment of vehicles, machine parts, woodpiles, bird houses, outbuildings, and dog pens marking many native yards, one's eye

may fall upon an overturned cedar hull, shaped like a giant pumpkin seed, its hue a drab brownish green. It is obviously a boat, but a very odd-looking one, with no keel, stem, topsides, or chine. It may be in pristine condition or in an advanced state of disrepair, but in either case it could be more than fifty years old. Most local people, and duck hunters from other regions, recognize it instantly as a Barnegat Bay sneakbox.

The Barnegat Bay sneakbox, a small duck-hunting skiff that first appeared in South Jersey's backwaters in the mid-nineteenth century, offers a striking example of a form poised at the nexus of geography, society, and culture. Tradition holds that the first craft emerged in 1836 in the workshop of Hazelton Seaman of West Creek, New Jersey. According to Nathaniel Bishop, the eighteenth-century adventurer who first popularized the boat far beyond its native waters, Seaman was "a boatbuilder and expert shooter of wild-fowl [who] conceived the idea of constructing for his own use a low-decked boat, or gunning punt, in which when its deck was covered with sedge, he could secrete himself from the wildfowl while gunning on Barnegat and Little Egg Harbor Bays. . . . While secreted in his boat . . . hidden by a covering of grass or sedge, the gunner could approach within shooting distance of a flock of unsuspecting ducks: and this being done in a sneaking manner, the baymen gave her the sobriquet of sneakbox."[6] George Heinrichs, a third-generation sneakbox builder in New Gretna, attributes the form of the sneakbox to the meadows, the interstitial salt marshes where black ducks and other "puddlers" are found feeding on eel grass. It therefore has the draft for which it is celebrated, a draft shallow enough, as the saying goes, "to follow a mule as it sweats up a dusty road." Its spoon-shaped hull enables it to glide through areas marked as land on coastal maps, areas that are sometimes flooded and sometimes dry.

The traditional dimensions of the sneakbox (twelve feet long by four feet amidships) fits it to the social structure of independent yet sociable gunners. It is large enough to accommodate one man, or a man and his boy, together with scores of decoys, yet small enough for him to pull over the spits of land that riddle the meadows. A "V-notch," the width of a sneakbox cut into a spit between North Pond and Barnegat Bay, bears the name "Draggin' Cross Place" for that precise act. Tradition links the hollow decoys indigenous to Barnegat Bay to the skiff's compact size. "Barnegat decoys are hollow," said John Holloway, a local carver. "They made 'em light for one

Fig. 2. The Barnegat Bay Sneakbox. *Drawing by Anthony Hillman, an artist and carver in Seaville, New Jersey. Copyright 1976.*

reason: all of 'em went on a Barnegat sneakbox, and they're carryin' about a hundred. If you're rowin' or sailin' this boat, you want 'em as light as possible, and as many as possible. They made 'em light and small."[7]

Made of cedar from the inland swamps to operate in places where fresh and salt waters converge, the craft represents wetland environments in constant flux. It synthesizes the observations that generations of Pineys and Baymen have compiled of water, air, land, wood, mud, man, ducks, and seasonal changes, anticipating and finely discriminating among a wide range of conditions. Its versatility and self-sufficiency remain a marvel to contemporary users who cherish these qualities in themselves.

Recently in Manahawkin a group of neighbors gathered in Ed Hazelton's "Bull Room," a home museum where he entertains visitors, many of whom have been growing old together all their lives. Hazelton, who claims common ancestry with Hazelton Seaman, is a retired carpenter in his seventies. Also in their seventies

are Bill Cranmer, Eppie Falconburg, and Hurley Conklin. All have hunted ducks, carved decoys, and built small watercraft. Bill Oler, a man in his thirties, apprenticed himself for three winters to Hurley Conklin, the decoy carver he most wanted to "style off of." When asked what makes a sneakbox so good for duck hunting, the men responded with a collaborative, thickly textured description of the boat. Their discourse reenacts in a small way the collective imagination behind the making of regional artifacts.

"It doesn't draw any water really," began Bill Oler.

"It doesn't draw any water," Ed Hazelton agreed.

"It gets you around," said Bill.

"Easy to hide," Ed added.

"Well, a sneakbox," drawled Hurley Conklin, "it's easier to go and better for the weather, and you only got a little hole to get into, and you can keep dry into it and everything else. There's shelves along the sides—"

"You have your decks for your decoys," Ed pointed out.

"—you can carry everything right in that one boat," Hurley went on.

"Sure," said Bill Cranmer, "it's quite seaworthy for its size."

"Yeah!" Ed interjected. "God! Yeah!"

"Ice hook," Hurley remembered, "and our oars, you got everything right there in one place."

"You can tow it," said Bill Oler, launching into a litany of its locomotive possibilities. "You can pull it, you can push it, you can row it—"

"Sail it," prompted Ed.

"You can pole it, you can sail it," resumed Bill Oler.

"Outboard motor," supplied Ed.

"You can do just about anything," Bill Oler concluded.

"And go anywheres with it," Ed added.

"You can even pull it out on the ice," said Hurley. "You got an ice hook."

"Yup," said Ed.

"Yup," said Bill Oler.

"Carry an ice hook with you in the wintertime," Ed elaborated. "*There's* one on the wall." And he pointed.

"You can pull a sneakbox right out onto it," Hurley informed us.

Bill Oler thought of another means of propulsion. "You can also push your sneakbox with a pair of boots," he said. "One foot in, one foot out."

Fig. 3. Reminiscing in Ed Hazelton's "Bull Room," a home museum and local gathering place in Manahawkin. From left: Bill Oler, Hurley Conklin, Bill Cranmer, and Ed Hazelton. *Photo by Dennis McDonald, courtesy Smithsonian Institution Office of Folklife Programs.*

"You can do anything," said Ed. "Like a skateboard—sail 'em on the ice, they have runners on them."

"They have runners onto the bottom," reiterated Hurley. "You can pull 'em on the ice. And go along with the wind on top of the ice."[8]

The sneakbox is made to move, unhampered by anything it might encounter in marsh or bay. The classic boat is fitted with mast-hole, centerboard well, and rudder for sailing, and with oarlocks for rowing. In recent decades, a small mount for an outboard motor has been added. The sprit sails come in winter and summer versions, and a retractable centerboard keeps the boat from sideslipping under sail. This centerboard is angled so that obstacles in shallow waters push it up into the well rather than impede the boat's progress. Runners attached to the hull convert the boat to a sailing sled during icy weather, when gunners also use an accessory ice hook with two different attachments for pulling the boat through "porridge" (slushy) and "pane" (hard) ice. A canvas spray curtain, locally called a "breakwater" or "windbreaker," is

traditionally made by the builder's wife. When fastened to the deck the spray curtain protects the gunner from wind and spray. The deck, rounded and planked-over, also deflects water, and its traditional tongue-and-groove joinery makes it watertight. A sloping transom helps in the often necessary task of rowing backward in channels too narrow to turn around in. The broad beam of the sneakbox keeps it from capsizing in rougher open waters.

"They are very seaworthy." said George Heinrichs. "My grandfather used to say that if you could cover the hatch up you could go to England in one of them."[9]

The boat is also made to stand still, to function as a hiding place. When the hunting season was longer, sneakboxes appeared in two different hues: dead-grass green for autumn, and winter white for snow. The centerboard well accepts a daggerboard for anchoring the boat in a V-notched piece of marsh, transforming it from a means of transportation into a stationary duck blind. The sprit sail can be taken down, mast and all, for storage inside the boat. The rudder is detachable. The hinged oarlocks, held upright by a movable stanchion when the gunner is rowing, can be folded down, and the decoy rack, held together with hooks and eyes when transporting decoys on the stern deck, may be removed to diminish the boat's profile.

The gunner further disguises the smooth, sleek lines of the stripped-down skiff with marsh vegetation, and then reclines in the boat with his rifle and duck call to await a migrating flock which he can lure within shooting range. Again the broad beam is pressed into service, keeping the boat stiff and steady when the gunner fires a shotgun with powerful recoil.

The boats are further fitted to meet gunners' needs for comfort. Some boats have two hatches, one for the gunner, the other for his dog or his boy. Some hatches are custom-made. "They used to build a boat special for a man," said Sam Hunt, a sneakbox builder in Waretown. "He used to lay down on the ground and they'd draw a circle around him and build a hatch so his belly could stick out."[10] Shelves on either side of the hatch are for storing provisions, such as food, beverages, duck calls, and cartridges. Small holes in the ribs keep water from collecting in one section of the boat, and a false bottom keeps the gunner dry. A hasp lock on the hatch cover turns the boat into a locker at dock or garage.

Insulating the insides with salt hay, hunting guides could spend a cold January night in such a "gunning bed," as the setup was

called, in order to lay claim to a good spot, which varied from year to year with the weather conditions. "It all depended," said Ed Hazelton.

> It all depended where you would gun it. The bay and the shore and the islands are very irregular, and down through the years—goin' back a couple hundred years—the old timers, our ancestors gunnin' out there, they knew where the ducks were travelling, on what winds. So they passed the word on to me.
>
> They said, "Ed, when the wind's southeast you want to gun such-and-such a point. Now when the wind's northwest, you want to gun such-and-such a point. The ducks'll be travellin' there; the wind'll be pushin' 'em over; they won't fight it; they'll go easy; it's gonna pay 'em over; it'll make 'em pay over. You want to be there tomorrow."
>
> So you just learn from experience, and what our ancestors have told us, what point to gun and when, and what hours to gun, see?[11]

The sneakbox is built, as the artist, duck hunter, and connoisseur and miniaturizer of local boats Anthony Hillman put it, "in the spirit of flexibility."[12] It articulates the polar extremes of fluctuation encountered by gunners on South Jersey marshes and bays: stationary and mobile, solid and liquid, rough and smooth, windy and calm, deep and shallow, land and water, airborne and earthbound.

This flexibility promotes the use of the boat in other contexts. Though designed with duck hunting in mind, the sneakbox lends itself to a variety of other uses like tending traps, crabbing, harvesting "cut-outs" (mussels forced to the surface by frozen mud) in the winter meadows, and fishing on the bay in summer. According to Ed Hazelton, it was the perfect emergency vehicle for navigating flooded streets in Bayside, also known as "Mud City": "We had to get around the streets in sneakboxes and go from house to house and come all the way up to Hilliard Boulevard and come on up into town with your boat to get people's groceries and take 'em back down to 'em. A sneakbox is so low-slung, it's the perfect boat for that kind of thing." Other uses, from coffee tables to coffins, are reported on and contemplated. "Hell," wrote Henry Hegeman. "I'm seriously considering being buried in mine."[13]

The artifact relies to a high degree on traditional knowledge of

inland as well as coastal environs, articulating the cultural links between woodland and shore communities. Traditionally, men who felled the cedar in freshwater swamps farther inland knew the needs of their coastal customers and could read beneath the shaggy bark the outlines of "settin' poles," stakes for fishnets and clamlots (territory in the Bay leased from the state for growing and harvesting clams), and boat boards for Jersey garveys and Barnegat sneakboxes. To supply such boards, which have to be "clear," or knot-free, a tree has to be at least eighty years old. Harry Shourds, a local decoy carver and hunter, gets his wood from the Great Cedar Swamp near Dennisville, where George Brewer has a logging operation. "Brewer really knows his wood," said Shourds. "He knows what's good for carving, for boats, and for shingles."[14]

"Jersey" cedar is widely touted as the best wood for fitting boats to the contours of meadows and bays at the region's edge and is celebrated for its capacity to withstand the stresses imposed by variable weather conditions. Recognizing this, Bishop wrote: "No wood used in boatbuilding can compare with the white cedar in resisting the changes from a wet to a dry state and vice versa. The tree grows tall and straight. The lower part of the trunk with the diverging roots furnish knee timbers and carlins for the sneakbox." Jersey cedar is also exalted by Barnegat baymen for its superiority over fiberglass. "Fiberglass doesn't handle itself in water the way that cedar does," said Joe Reid, a Waretown boatbuilder. "Cedar takes in just the right amount of water. When it's first put there, it tends to sit right on top of the water and settles down. Then it handles really well. You can't beat cedar for a boat." Fiberglass is too noisy. "A duck can hear it a mile away," said Heinrichs. To at least one enthusiast, sneakboxes are a raison d'être for trees. "Jersey sneakboxes must be one reason God made trees," wrote Pemberton Drinker. Boatbuilders maintain that only cedar can provide the compound curves that a classic sneakbox requires, where the bottom joins the top in a "feather edge." Pine is too heavy, and plywood cannot take the compound curves. "When I can't get cedar no more," said Heinrichs, "why, I'll just have to quit building sneakboxes."[15]

"The sneakbox," said Bill Oler, "is your number one tool." As a tool, the sneakbox lends itself not only to hunting ducks, but to the building of identity. "The tools of one's trade," wrote Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, "perhaps more than any other set of objects, help to define who we are as individu-

als."[16] As a tool, the sneakbox enters into the shaping of individuals who are regionally distinctive.

Erving Goffman defines a region as "any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception. Regions vary, of course, in the degree to which they are bounded and according to the media of communication in which the barriers to perception occur."[17] Though he is using "region" as an analytical concept for exploring the boundaries of social behavior in varied settings and not defining it as a cultural/geographic entity, there is a sense in which his definition is useful here. The sneakbox is a medium of communication that both traces and traverses barriers between insiders and outsiders.

The sneakbox slices between the worlds of the marsh and of everyday life; between the worlds of men and of women; between those who have inherited the right to build sneakboxes and those who simply figure out how; between the worlds of duck hunters and strangers to duck hunting; and between the worlds of waterfowl and men. The boat comprises a distinctive response to distinctively regional conditions, a tool whereby local men distinguish themselves as inhabitants of a singular region. "It's to this area," said Bill Oler. "Now down south they use bush boats or scullin' boats, and on the Delaware River their boat was totally different. North of here they had longer boats and they had higher-sided boats, 'cause I guess they had worse weather. So I guess everybody's got something built into their own area. Inland I guess they'll use a lot of canoes or john boats, little flat-bottom boats."

The production of sneakboxes is said to rely less on technical skill than on an ineffable relationship between their makers and their environment. In local tradition a mysterious charter makes it possible for some people to build sneakboxes while others fail, a charter related more to lifestyle and genealogy than to virtuosity with wood, as Bishop wrote: "The sneakbox requires a peculiar talent to build—the kind of talent which enables one man to cut out a perfect axehandle, while the master carpenter finds it difficult to accomplish the same thing. The best yacht-builders in Ocean County generally fail in modeling a sneak-box, while many second-rate mechanics along the shore, who could not possibly construct a yacht that would sail well, can make a perfect sneak-box."[18] The boat is notoriously difficult to build, and jigs and patterns are jealously guarded. Contemporary builders proudly report that their predecessors eschewed patterns. George Heinrichs points out

that the fifty-year-old sneakbox awaiting repairs in his backyard was built by his grandfather, Gus Heinrichs, "by eye."

"Now my grandfather never had patterns," said Heinrichs. "If he did, nobody knows what he done with them. He built it from knowledge, and what he done, he handed down."[19]

According to Heinrichs, the fundamental secret of the Heinrichs sneakbox resides in the curve preserved by his grandfather's jig (a form that governs the shape of any sprung-timbered boat) to which the centerboard (or "set-up plank") is bolted during construction, to which in turn all ribs, transom, and adjacent bottom planks are attached. The profile of the entire boat is thus cued by the jig. Heinrich's father devised numbered patterns for the sawn-and-joined cedar ribs, no two of which were shaped identically.

The model on which the early boatbuilders relied was an idea about how humans and the environment interacted: their perception of the socionatural system. Contemporary boatbuilders now rely on patterns that crystallize those ideas, but they continue to distinguish between those individuals who are merely capable of building the boat and those who are entitled to do so. It is true that a skilled and canny woodworker could, by studying the construction of an old sneakbox, produce a replica. But those who see themselves as rightful heirs to the original process, bequeathed to them in tools and patterns, refuse legitimacy to the replica. Such builders conserve sneakbox building as a legacy, a process vital to the maintenance of regional and family identity, to be transmitted only to blood relatives. "I've been in the boat business all my life," said Heinrichs. "It's in the blood. My father and all of his family were boatbuilders. We're strictly a boatbuilding family."[20]

Heinrichs is under an oath he made to his dying father not to let the patterns out of the family. Said Heinrichs, "I made a promise to my father that if I didn't build boats, and my brother didn't, that I'd cut up the patterns and destroy them. Because it's his pattern, and no one has ever copied it. The Heinrichs sneakbox will die if I don't continue with it."[21] Thus sneakbox construction and membership in a regional folk group are made to be tightly interdependent.

Making the acquisition difficult seems in some cases to whet the appetite for it, both enhancing the value of the skill and distinguishing the man who owns it. John Chadwick, another builder in Barnegat, is heir to the J. Howard Perrine boatworks, which was in its heyday a leading manufacturer of sneakboxes and sails. He learned the craft from his father, who forbade him to take notes,

ostensibly to keep the secret from leaking out. From memory then, in his room at night, John Chadwick jotted the plans down. Like Heinrichs, he shields the information from strangers: "There was a fellow come in here a few months ago, wanted to know everything about building this boat—wanted me to teach him how. And I said, you know, I couldn't do it. There's just something about it. It's all information that's been in the family, from my father, my grandfather, my uncle—you just can't go givin' it all away to strangers."[22]

Not only does the sneakbox play an important role in the task of self-definition, but it enhances the experience of losing oneself, an avowed function of the meadows for men in the region.

Related to the task of identity building is the work of "taking the other"—imagining the world from alternative vantage points.[23] Like the place requested by Archimedes, the sneakbox affords a place to stand outside of the world of everyday life and an opportunity to experience the world from the perspective of another species. Living along the flyways of migratory fowl, in other words, offers people a regionally distinctive way to define themselves as humans over and against other species.[24]

The boat is not only indexical, it is iconic, used in creating an appearance that "won't make the duck nervous," as John Holloway put it. Contrary to the boat's etymology, gunners do not sneak up on flocks of feeding ducks, but rather concentrate on the skies, crafting an illusion of animation on the water with inanimate objects to draw the interest of living birds. With its spoon-shaped belly the sneakbox lends ducklike contours to the human form, and with a little camouflaging, it is made to converge at its horizons with the surrounding water and marshes. The sneakbox, then, with its carefully fashioned rig of decoys, is a portable kit for crafting landscapes not only attractive to ducks but delightful to hunters who insert themselves into the ducks' milieu. "There's nothing like being out there," said Hurley Conklin, "in your nice little sneakbox, with a new gun, and your own well-made decoys all around you in the water."[25]

The sneakbox fits the duck hunter to the water almost as if he were himself a giant duck, the head of his own decoy rig, an alpha duck of sorts. From his vantage point in the sneakbox he manages the impression made by his floating rig of decoys on flocks flying overhead. The sight of a boat would make ducks nervous, especially the much-sought-after and intelligent black duck. "The black duck is popular," said Heinrichs, "because they're much harder and

wiser to kill. That's the reason these boats come in handy. You can hide them. You have a big boat, you can't hide it."[26]

The sneakbox materializes an empathetic relationship between the hunter and his quarry. "There isn't a straight flat piece on it," said Hazelton. "Same as a duck. There's not really a flat part to a duck, Billy, is there?" The best duck hunter, according to Ed Hazelton, is one who "thinks like a duck," a cognitive style his brother-in-law, Paul Cramer, had thoroughly mastered:

> He was the type of fella that thought like a duck. He thought like a duck. He just knew every move they were gonna make. In other words, we'd sit there, gunning, and have the stools [i.e., decoys] out, and in would come some ducks. And they wouldn't come in just the way he wanted 'em. Just exactly right. You *could* kill 'em, but he says, "They gotta do better than that." And he would go out and he'd take this stool here and put it there, and this stool here and set it back there, and the next time they'd almost light in your lap. . . . He just thought like a duck all the time.[27]

The boat's nineteenth-century moniker, "devil's coffin," links the boat with the arch-deceiver, trickster, and crafter of the counterfeit. Duck hunters themselves are masters of illusion, voyagers in a skiff that articulates and resolves environmental oppositions. The boat becomes a tool for conjuring up the alternative reality inhabited by duck hunters. The container for the trickster who dupes ducks is itself a kind of culture hero, engendering confusion and reversals of the natural order, but ultimately enabling civilization to triumph over inchoate nature.

In decoy discourse we glimpse something of the marsh as an arena in which ducks and hunters may trick each other. The infusion of inanimate cedar with animacy emerges as a theme in anecdotes. "I used to carve decoys," said Robert Suralik, of Tuckerton. "But I stopped carvin'. I used to hunt over them. I used to paint 'em so precisely that they looked like real ducks. . . . And one day I was duck hunting, and when I got up to shoot they all flew away and they took my decoys with them!"[28] And vice versa: "I caught this one in my patch," said Eppie Falconburg, displaying a carved bird to those assembled in the Bull Room. "And I got my BB gun out and I stuffed it with wood."

The vessel is a means of transit into another kind of region, and

a dwelling place in an otherwise uninhabitable zone that becomes for a time a world of men, a world apart from everyday life. In this world these men have richly developed the shared understandings that distinguish them. The sneakbox has helped them to transform the uninhabitable marshlands at the region's edge into a profusion of places, many of them marked by duck blinds, shanties, and gunning boxes (or "sink blinds"). These places, now managed by the Barnegat Wildlife Refuge, are minutes away as the crow flies but take hours to get to by sneakbox.[29]

"It's one of the last areas you can go and get away from everything," said Bill Oler.

"Yeah," said Ed Hazelton and Bill Cranmer.

"You can just forget traffic and you can forget other people and everything," Bill Oler explained. "You go out and get on the meadows—lose yourself for the day."

"I do, Billy," said Ed. "I go up the crick crabbin,' they don't push me around."

"I sit days with my decoys," Bill Oler said, "and just watch the birds fly in—don't even shoot 'em—just to get away from the house."

"Get up there to Turtle Cove," said Ed, "North Pond, Draggin' Cross Place—"

"Yup," Bill Oler confirmed.

"—Black Crick and anywhere," Ed continued, "Pettit's Point, you know."

This losing of the self is visually conveyed in the disappearance of the gunner into landscape, reclining in a gunning bed dressed with reeds and marsh elders. But knowledge of how to use a sneakbox keeps the negative aspect of losing oneself at bay, both literally and figuratively.

The marsh, an interstitial zone, is not only cultivated in the agricultural sense, but it is also used to cultivate stamina among hunters who undergo the sensual bombardment of cold and the stench of marsh mud. The pervasive odor of methane erects a perceptual barrier, dividing those who eventually come to enjoy it from those who remain disgusted by it. In time the odor itself becomes a threshold, cited by those gathered in the Bull Room as a powerful memory smell, one that plunges them into the realm of hunting.

"The mud, goin' over the bridge," laughed Bill Oler.

"Mud," agreed Ed.

"As soon as you smell the meadow grass and the mud," Bill Oler observed, "you know you're back huntin' somewhere."

"Or a sneakbox that's been damp inside," Ed said. "Take the hatch cover off."

"Cedar shavings," mused Bill Oler.

"That has a characteristic odor," agreed Bill Cranmer.

"I'll tell you the worst one, I think, of 'em all," said Bill Oler with waxing enthusiasm. "Pump out a box before gunning season. Hop in the hunting box when that mud's been sittin' there all summer long!"

"Oh yeah!" Bill Cranmer said, remembering, to a background chorus of "Whew!" and "Phew!"

"The first huntin' day you got all the smell in the world!" said Bill Oler.

"You get used to it though," Bill Cranmer defended it.

"Well," said Eppie Falconberg, "say, today we went over the big bridge to Pleasantville, and the tide's way up, and it stinks over there. My wife—she used to call it 'Lowtide.' Well, when it's low-tide it's worse. It's almost the same smell as the gunning box. Well, she didn't want me to go, but I just had to go. I don't know why. I've gone ever since I was old enough to have a gun."

"Always will," Ed predicted.

"Always will, I guess," said Eppie, resuming the story. "But she says, 'My God, Eppie, how can you go out on any meadow when it smells like this?!' And to me it's not bad, but to her it's sickening!"

"It is not altogether unpleasant," said Bill Cranmer.

"I *like* it, Bill!" exclaimed Ed. "I enjoy the meadows and the smell, and it's part of our way of life. We're brought up in it!"

"It might bother some other people," Bill Cranmer pointed out, "but not me. I'm like you. . . . It smells a lot better to me than following a diesel truck." The cultural group in this case defines itself by the shared affection of its members for marsh mud, a smell that conjures up vivid, emotionally laden memories.

In both broad and narrow senses, the sneakbox is also a tool for self-preservation. In the hostile ambience of the marshes, the sneakbox makes the difference between life and death, but only if one knows how to manage one, as another story by Eppie Falconburg illustrates:

"The days we spent there gunning for them brant [geese]," said Eppie. "I don't know how in God's name we ever lived."

"Right," said Ed.

"Oh, my gracious," Eppie continued, "and that man, I can't think of his name, we almost lost him one day when he stepped on the side of a sneakbox and slipped over in the goddam mud. And I remember gettin' down in that mud, gettin' my hand under his crotch, you know."

"Good shape," Ed observed.

"I wasn't muscular," said Eppie modestly. "But I was in pretty good shape. But that man was a little roly-poly fella, boy oh boy. He didn't want to lose his boots, so I took my huntin' knife and cut the straps, you know, on his boots. I had to cut 'em."

"Full of water," Ed commented.

"'You gotta come outa them boots!'" shouted Eppie, reenacting the scene. "'I can't get you back in the sneakbox!'"

"Full of water," again from Ed.

"He didn't know how to handle a sneakbox," explained Eppie, calming down. "It's like a canoe. Unless you step on it with your chewing gum just right, you're going overboard. And he went overboard."

In the broader sense, against the unsettling changes of urbanization and old age, the sneakbox has become, as an emblem of a whole way of life, a steadying factor: a prop snatched from a disappearing stage, a detachable part made to stand for the whole.

For the old men who see in the proliferation of fiberglass boats, housing developments, and environmental spoilage a way of life on the wane, the sneakbox enables journeys that keep sense of self and identity vivid. For such voyages, miniature sneakboxes are perhaps superior to life-sized ones. Within the past two decades a variety of miniature boats, including sneakboxes, have begun emerging in the workshops of local carvers and boatbuilders. The appearance of the miniature cedar boats at a time when small workboats are being built of fiberglass by larger companies is significant—arising like other historic examples of miniaturization, from a heightened awareness of change, in this case, changes wrought through the development of the region by outsiders.[30] When miniaturized and given to friends and descendants it becomes a metaphysical vessel, a means of transit into past worlds. The miniature sneakbox offers a way of "inscribing culture on the threshold of its disappearance."[31] It encapsulates the collective memory of a generation that knew well how to ply a vanishing landscape.

"It really I guess appeals to the fellows that know what it's about, you know," said Bill Oler, who makes miniature scenes of

duck hunting in addition to carving decoys for gunners and collectors, "that have gone out on the bay and actually duck hunted that way."

We often find tools formerly used to ply the physical world transformed into tools that encapsulate it, a way of materializing what now only exists in memory. In miniatures, the encapsulating tools are diminished in size and amplified in significance, a means of transporting aging gunners mentally into the marshes, while transmitting regional identity to children and grandchildren.[32] For the men in the Bull Room the miniature sneakboxes offer a way to retain what is disappearing due to overdevelopment, wetlands preservation, and pollution.

As a showcase for local knowledge, a portal to native images of the environment, a threshold to other realms, the sneakbox holds implications for regional planners. It does what any good policy should: it anticipates and codifies the range of possibilities inherent in a given situation. Yet few of the management policies devised since the reserve's creation approach the sophistication and flexibility of the Barnegat Bay sneakbox.[33]

Hence there is an odd geometric dissonance between ad hoc and ontic regions in South Jersey. In its *Comprehensive Management Plan,* the Pinelands Commission has inscribed the region with a new center, deemed the locus of the purest natural and cultural resources.[34] Around this center the rest of the region is arranged like concentric rings around a bull's eye. The plan deflects most development to the outer "reserve," despite the complex relationship of fishing and farming communities to the core and their inherent status as cultural centers. Residents of coastal communities mourn the sacrifice of their towns to favor the interior. In recent years headlines lamenting the pollution of natural resources have given way to laments over vanishing lifeways: "Pinelands Preservation Threatens a Lifestyle"; "In Pinelands, A Way of Life Is in Peril"; "Pinelands Shellfishermen See Way of Life Fading Fast"; and "New Jersey Drives Pineys to Southern States."[35] In the midst of this the sneakbox emerges to stand for the vanishing ontic region, resolving as usual the problems it articulates. Not only does it sound an alarm for lifeways slipping over the horizon, but it offers a means of returning to them again and again.

"Everybody goes away always comes back," said Hurley Conklin.

"Get that mud between your toes," said Ed Hazelton.

"That's right," said Eppie Falconberg. "That's right."