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This display illustrates several of the different types of objects you can make with gourds.

He creates with gourds

By SUSAN KAUFFMAN
Feature Writer

What dehydrated vegetable can be fashioned into dishes, dippers, musical instruments, jewelry, lamps, hats, purses, thimbles, funnels, baskets, slippers, toys, birdhouses, fish net bouys, and dish cloths? The answer is not a new wonder hybrid, but a common plant known to man for at least 9,000 years—the gourd.

If you cannot imagine the gourd as the basis for all these items, then see Ralph Schneider's collection of handmade gourd crafts at 63 Woodland Avenue, York. Schneider, a retired tool engineer, puts his creative talents to work designing and making these numerous objects from gourds he raises on a farm near Hanover, York County. In addition to showing his display items, he can tell any person all he ever wanted to know about gourds. Schneider will quickly rebuke you if you say you can't raise gourds in Pennsylvania by showing you his specimens from this year's harvest.

Six years ago, Schneider became a member of the Gourd Society of America and began to search out more and more history of the gourd and many ways to create art objects from gourds. According to Schneider's research, the earliest known date of gourds in use was B.C. 7,000. Several perfect specimens have been found in a cave in Mexico where the dry, arid conditions allowed the gourds to remain in good condition. Proof of the age was detected by the carbon 14 process and scientists have agreed on these gourds' authenticity and age.

Gourds have also been found in Egyptian tombs, have been mentioned in the Bible at least five times - the most conspicuous reference in connection with Jonah's

argument with God over the salvation of the city of Ninevah - were a basis of many Polynesian religious ceremonies, and were used extensively by the American Indians as food and water containers.

Egyptians and Polynesians, alike, used the gourd as a religious ceremonial object. Food was placed in the gourd containers and buried with the dead to supply them with enough to eat until they reached their new world. The Polynesians, not knowing modern scientific information about heredity and genes, had the various types of gourd seeds sown by men whose physical appearance resembled the desired gourd. For instance, the long, thin serpent gourd seed was planted by a tall, thin man and the squat, fat birdhouse gourd was planted by a short, pot-bellied man.

The Polynesians used the fishnet gourd shaped like a set of barbells to bouy their fishnets and as water wings which were harnessed on their small children so they could learn to swim at a very early age, often before they could walk.

The American Indian used gourds as forms for making clay pots. The gourd shells would turn into ashes upon baking, leaving only the hardened pottery. Even though gourds will burn easily, the Indians learned how to use them for cooking containers. The food to be cooked was placed in water inside the gourd container, then hot stones were added to heat the water and cook the food. A cool stone was replaced by another hot stone until the food was cooked.

The Indians also used gourds as birdhouses. They found that gourds which accommodated the Purple Martin were highly useful because the Martins kept the crows away

from the grain fields and kept the insect population under control naturally.

The early American settler used the gourd for food and water containers, sewing baskets, thimbles, funnels, and dishes. Another use of the gourd was alluded to in a Tennessee law which stated, "A person cannot sell a dead man's pungent to pay for his funeral expenses." A pungent is a back scratcher made from the long-necked gourd.

Today, some enterprising people are marketing the dishrag gourd's lining as a natural "beauty sponge" which promises to remove skin imperfections. Schneider advises people to use this coarse fiber as a pot and pan scrubber rather than as a cosmetic cloth, or use it as he does for the clothes and hair of his gourd craft items.

Perhaps the most popular way to use gourds in modern America is to make decorative objects and commemorative figurines. Schneider has taught gourd craft classes and his basic instruction is to use your imagination. Look at a gourd and see what possibilities it has to become a chicken, a kangaroo, an elephant, a camel, a wiseman, an ostrich, a groundhog, an owl, a penguin, or whatever your imagination devises.

The caveman's club gourd, so named for its appearance, grows with a straight stem when grown on a trellis and develops a curved stem when grown on the ground. It is the basic shape of the kangaroo, chicken, elephant, camel, and ostrich.

The warty hardhead gourd, named for its bumpy sur-

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Ralph Schneider poses with two of his creations. Both the chicken and the elephant were made from cave man's club gourds.



The "Spirit of 1776" display contains a militiaman, an old man in a victory march, and a youthful drummer. To come up with these characters, Schneider did extensive research to arrive at the authentic details.