

Weather vanes are works of art to craftsman Ivan Barnett

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Feature Writer

STEVENS - When Ivan Barnett looks at a weathervane he does not see an instrument for telling wind direction - he sees art. Barnett makes his living by creating workable weathervanes in early American folk art style.

Barnett lives at Stevens R1, on Girl Scout Road, and has been in the weathervane making business for just two years. Weathervanes, as art, are enjoying a tremendous amount of popularity these days, so finding customers is not a great problem.

Barnett says, "I can't pinpoint how I decided to do weathervanes, but I was looking to create something which a lot of other people weren't already making." He adds that his four years of art college pointed him in that direction, and his candlemaking business was no longer a challenge to him.

To learn as much as he could about weathervanes, Barnett said he read all the books which were available on the subject, and he visited museum collections. These, he said, "are my biggest source of inspiration and learning." He added that the Pennsylvania Farm Museum of Landis Valley has an extensive weathervane collection, and the Heritage Center in Lancaster recently had an interesting show on weathervanes.

About his work Barnett said, "I have stuck to traditional weathervane designs. Basically I do farm animals."

He said he begins his work by photographing farm animals, to help him get details right. Having grown up in suburbia, Barnett recalls an early disastrous mistake when he located a cow's udder at the wrong place. "I use my photographs as a source for design, as a point of reference for details" he says.

Normally, he said, he will spend one month of the year, usually in the Winter, designing weathervanes. "I do thumbnail sketches of animals which are then scaled to the large pieces of wood." He added thoughtfully, "I don't think I will run out of ideas - there is so much variety in animals."

Barnett makes two kinds of weathervanes. One is a large wooden animal in varying sizes, but larger enough to look good on a barn or other outbuilding. He also creates metal weathervanes for outdoor use. Along with weathervanes, he makes smaller decorative metal animals in the style of weathervanes which can be used on a desk or other piece of furniture. Barnett estimates that probably half of his weathervanes are purchased for decoration, never making it to the rooftop.

Coming upon the basic materials is not easy. Ivan presently is using 100-year-old barn siding from Berks County for his wooden weathervanes. For his metal ones he visits salvage yards. The weathervanes in his showroom stand on large sturdy blocks of wood which he purchased from saw mills. Half of his material is waste after cutting out the animals, but he puts the waste to use as kindling in his wood stove.

Barnett uses no power tools for his wooden animals, preferring to craft them by hand. He does use metal clippers for his metal vanes and decorative items, but often demonstrates at shows how early weathervanes were made using a hammer and chisel.

Barnett said he enjoys animals, and the flat shape of weathervanes and so has come to enjoy his new craft. "It was difficult getting started," he acknowledged.

"Having a business at home is twice as much work as going away to a place of business. It is all-encompassing, and I often work a 12-hour day. Discipline is definitely required." He admits there are advantages to working for oneself, like being able to adjust one's schedule and take a day off if necessary, but basically, he says, it's a lot of hard work. "I like working for myself - I don't find it easy



A weathervane on a fence post will assure you of knowing just what the weather may bring. The traditional rooster is on display at Ivan Barnett's home.

Homestead Notes



Several wooden weathervanes give an example of some of Ivan Barnett's fold art designs.

working under somebody. I function better independently.

He said he has found that the bookkeeping and business end of his work is as important as making the item. He credits his wife Donna with helping to carry out that part of a business and make it work. She too is an artist, and creates patchwork pillows for local businesses and for mail order catalogues.

Barnett says he does a lot of shows, usually within a 150 mile radius of Lancaster. Next year, however, he hopes to expand his areas and possibly go to New

England, the South, and to the Washington suburban area. He said locally, "this area is full of artisans and craftsmen and you tend to reach a saturation point." Therefore, he'd like to get his products in areas where people have no access to them.

As an instrument of telling wind directions, Barnett said the weathervane is extremely old, probably pre-dating the Greeks and the Romans who used primitive weathervanes. He pointed out that in early American life weathervanes were most commonly seen perched high on a barn. Often, the weathervane would

depict whatever kind of livestock was raised on the farm. The horse and the rooster are most commonly seen, he said, adding that the rooster has religious connotations as does the fish, and could be found on churches.

In Lancaster County, Barnett said, it was common to find a single arrow, with the extremely thrifty Pennsylvania Dutch sticking to the basics.

He also noted that directionals were not common on farm weathervanes, because farmers knew their directions without the aid of the instrument. He doesn't use them on his weathervanes, and many people inquire why they are missing. Directionals, he said, were much more common among urban dwellers who purchased the weathervanes for use on carriage houses and the like.

Early American weathervanes were usually a silhouette, with three dimensional ones coming along later. Many times, Barnett pointed out, a farmer used a weathervane simply to show that he was proud of his homestead. Weathervanes also became a means of giving directions, as a point of reference.

Most farmers would have made their own weathervanes and wood was the primary material since it was easily accessible in this area. Also, relatively simple and few hand tools were required to make them. Barnett said, "There are very few examples of early wooden weather vanes around because they rotted."

To preserve his wooden weathervanes, Barnett treats them. Also to protect them from a battering Barnett will strengthen areas of possible weakness with pieces of iron. Legs are always supported with iron and other stress points may be as well.

Barnett said other early materials used in weathervane making might have included tin, or sheet iron or copper. The blacksmith was the most obvious person to create a weathervane if the farmer didn't do it himself. Because early weathervanes were not considered works of art, very few have been signed, Barnett said.

When the industrial revolution came along, Barnett said weathervanes became machine-made and more sophisticated. Mail order catalogues made them available to all and relatively inexpensive, so hand made weathervanes were virtually put out of existence, Barnett said.

Barnett's wife grew up in Lancaster County, just eight miles from where they now live. Barnett said he has been coming to Lancaster since he was a child to visit relatives and the couple decided to move here permanently because, "We liked the rural atmosphere."

After searching for an appropriate property for two years, the Barnetts are looking forward to restoring the 150-year-old log home they are living in. Furthermore, while the living room is presently serving as a showroom, Barnett has plans to convert the bank barn into a studio-showroom. In the meantime, his creative work is done in a very cozy chicken house - barely recognizable in its present state.

He said he and his wife are enjoying the relative privacy, especially since their hours tend to be somewhat irregular. He also feels the rural area makes people enjoy the trip to visit and purchase his work. Presently most of his work is purchased through private customers or through interior decorators who specialize in antiques and early American design.

Barnett keeps a "catalogue" of each design he has made and sold to give potential customers an idea of the possibilities. He is also working on a book of his work, and has photographed many of his weathervanes in appropriate rural settings.

A short visit to Barnett's home and workroom makes it clear that he thoroughly enjoys creating this early American folk art for people to use and enjoy today. In the conversation he notes that today, most items of this nature are being made by a "new generation" of craftsmen. Barnett the craftsman is absorbed with his work - and the pleasure he receives in working with the weathervanes is repeated many times over for those who see or purchase these simple, homey works of art.