



Lititz carver Joseph Jordan's versatility in wood creations includes this detailed reproduction of the famous Clydesdales pulling the Budweiser wagon.



Ken Murray, a founder and charter member of the Yorkcarvers, applies gouge and mallet to a large log during an exhibit demonstration. Murray says the hobby is relatively inexpensive, but there always seems to be just one more tool a carving hobbyist wants to add to his assortment.

Local artists find beauty, profit in carving

BY JOYCE BUPP
Staff Correspondent

Frozen in mid-flight, a ringneck pheasant glows with shimmering color. Bright-eyed mallard ducks and majestic snowy whistling swans sit poised but alert, while songbirds keep watch from slender branch perches.

But these birds will neither streak away in flight, nor break out in song.

They are wooden. Each detail, each ridged feather, set of wing, slender foot has been lovingly crafted with knife and gouge into a masterpiece.

While birdlife and waterfowl creations reigned supreme at the recent seventh annual show of the Yorkcarvers, other beautifully

crafted wood sculpting also filled the host York College's Wolf Gymnasium.

Yorkcarvers is a York-based organization of hobby wood carvers. Among the over 60 exhibitors at the show were a few professional, full-time wood artists, but the bulk of the creations for show and sale were by amateurs.

Ken Murray, co-chairman of the show with his wife Etta, was one of the founders of the carving support group. Wanting a wood Viking ornament for their home interior theme several years ago, Murray finally resorted to experimentally carving away at a piece of red cedar he'd gotten from a friend. He found the craft relaxing, rewar-

ding, and addictive, after discovering a buried talent.

After moving to York from Illinois for the Caterpillar firm, Murray ran an ad in the national carving hobby magazine, "Chip Chats," to investigate any interest in forming a group in the south-central Pennsylvania area.

"Our purpose was to share ideas and meet with other carvers, and to benefit from each other's experiences," says Murray.

From an initial dozen wood sculptors who formed the core group, Yorkcarvers today boasts a membership of over 125. Their major event of the year is the annual exhibit, which has doubled in size since its inception.

Besides being a talent showcase and sale, the exhibit features both novice and advanced competition for figure and decoy carving, an impromptu whittling contest, and demonstrations on carving techniques.

According to Murray, wood carving exhibits in Pennsylvania are fairly scarce. Lititz runs one each Spring, while another is hosted at Willow Grove. And Salisbury, on the bird and waterfowl-rich Eastern Shore of Maryland, holds what the carvers call the largest decoy and bird exhibit in the East.

While tools are relatively simple, good quality ones can be expensive, and sometimes hard to find. Murray says a fine-quality,

sharp knife is the backbone of the carver's tools, used up to half the time. Gouges, styled with sharp, curved cutting ends, are another major tool, plus the mallets used to hit them for cutting grooves in the design.

Handling such fine quality tools is but a sideline for wood artist Eleanor Bruegel, one of the few women practicing carving as a profession. Bubbly and outgoing, Eleanor recalled her childhood dream of carving, amidst frequent interruptions from customers enthralled with her table brimming with whimsical, oil-tinted animals.

"Saturdays, my grandfather used to give me his pocketknife to use," she smiles in remembrance, while waiting on a customer for her Austrian-made carving tools. "I just always wanted to be a carver."

A fine arts graduate of New York's University, Eleanor worked for a year as a librarian at Bryn Mawr, while pondering what she really wanted to do with her life.

"Then I took off for Germany for a year," she says. "And stayed for seven."

Once in Germany, she managed to obtain an apprentice position with the Langwood carving firm in Oberammergau, a town located in the heart of the Bavarian wood carving area, and known around the world for its production of the Passion Play every ten years.

She was the last apprentice taken under the tutelage of the family-based firm, which dates back to 1775.

Tracing the history of the carving craft back to the 16th century, or perhaps even earlier, Eleanor explained that the art had been introduced to the Bavarian state's rural mountain areas by Benedictine monks. The mainstay industry was farming, making hay from a few rugged mountain acres for the family's handful of cows, and cutting wood over the snowy winter months. Carving fitted into this way of life, becoming a "cottage industry," and a way to earn a bit of extra income during the snow-bound season.

The Lang firm, where Eleanor studied, began as one of the "publishers," or dealers, who purchased the mountain-crafted wood carvings, in turn selling them throughout Europe. Toys were a popular item, as well as an article known as a watch holder, often intricately carved.

"The father of the family usually owned a watch, and it was hung on the special decorative stand, often serving as the family's lone clock," she says.

After marriage into a German family, Eleanor related how she lived in part of a very large old farm home. She laughs when remembering that, to get from her rooms to other parts of the home, it was necessary to pass through the barn, with its four cows and hay storage area, built right into the house.

Returning to the states after the death of her husband, Eleanor went into the wood carving profession for herself, opening a shop at her home in Broomall, teaching carving classes, and exhibiting at shows like that of the Yorkcarvers.

Works of two Lancaster Countians, Joseph Jordan of Lititz, and William Porterfield, Holtwood,

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Carving from pieces of rare American Chestnut from the Chesapeake region, Howard Strott of Baltimore, creates representations of the bird and waterfowl of the Maryland bay.



German-trained Eleanor Bruegel is one of a handful of women professional carvers. Although her favorite work is in figure carving, customer demand seems unlimited for her captivating, lifelike small animals.

Homestead Notes