



Abner Zook carves out a tree on one of his three-dimensional paintings in his Womelsdorf studio.

## Abner Zook shares Amish heritage in handcrafted pictures

**BY SUZANNE KEENE**  
**WOMELSDORF** — As a child growing up on a Lancaster County Amish farm, Abner Zook found many uses for the artistic talent he believes God gave him at birth.

During the Depression years when money was scarce, Zook and his twin brother, Aaron, learned to use their artistic skills to make their own toys. Using bits and pieces of wood and nails they found around the farm, the Zook twins created miniature replicas of the farm equipment that was such an integral part of their lives.

And, while at first they envied their neighbors' store-bought toys, they soon found that the neighbors spent more time at the Zook's playing with the homemade toys than they did at home playing with their own.

Today at age 64, Abner Zook is a successful artist, making his living creating unique three-dimensional paintings that depict rural and farm scenes. From his art studio in Womelsdorf, Zook explains that although he never received any formal art education, he has developed his natural ability and has found a medium in which he can express himself.

When creating his realistic pictures, Zook draws from his

life's experiences, first as an Amish farmer tilling the soil with horse and plow, and later from a number of other occupations including carpenter, electrician, and orchardist.

"I have grey hair and the greater part of my life's vocation is spent," Zook says without remorse. But, he continues, "I have benefitted from all these experiences."

For example, when he was a boy, the barn burned down and he remembers the Amish community joining forces to build a new one. Today, he depicts the barn-raising scene using wood, wire, auto body filler and paint.

Just as writers use pen and paper to express themselves, Zook uses his tools to share with others his knowledge of the rural people. "The medium in my hand," Zook explains, "is chisel and brush."

Having been raised in a community where higher education — anything beyond the eighth or ninth grade — was frowned upon, Zook was left to his own devices to develop the talent he discovered early in life. "They usually say artists are born," Zook says. And while he believes that people are born with God-given talents, he also realizes that talent must be

nurtured and developed.

Zook credits his parents for encouraging him to develop his talent, even though they discouraged him from pursuing his desire for more education. When Zook created a house from some old wood and a bag of nails, his father encouraged him. "Son, that house you built was quite unique," his father told him.

His father was also supportive when Zook and Aaron decided to convert an old swing hanging from the apple tree in the backyard into an airplane. Zook said he and Aaron took two boards set crosswise to create their plane and hung it with a rope. When their father saw that the rope could be a little dangerous, he went to the barn and found a heavy cable for their plane.

Around the time the twins were busy using their artistic talent to entertain themselves, tourism was making its way into the county and into the Zook home. When the tourists saw the little Zook boys out in the yard playing with their homemade toys, they wanted models to take home. "So we started making models of little horses and wagons," Zook remembers.

Now Zook says, "The toys are

# Homestead Notes



Amish lifestyle is the theme for many of Zook's pictures. Here he has depicted an Amish carriage shop.



Covered bridge scenes are especially popular with Zook's many customers. This particular picture can be transformed into a night scene when placed under a black light.

gone and the parents are gone, but the memory still lingers."

And though the setting and lifestyle of his childhood has changed, it was his school and provides the subject of his work.

Zook has no regrets that his schooling was different from that of most artists and believes his informal education, which he gained from reading and experimenting on his own, has given him greater freedom to express himself.

Other artists also offered Zook encouragement and advice. One time when Zook was having a problem with a piece of his work he packed it up and took it to Andrew Wyeth. In working through the colors in one of his pictures Zook had been following "the rules" he had learned from an art book. But Wyeth advised him that there are times when an artist must abandon the rules and go with his gut instinct.

Zook recalls the meeting with pleasure and just a hint of pride at conversing with such a famous artist. Wyeth's wife was standing alongside her husband when Zook made his call, and she asked Zook, "Do you know who you're talking to?" reminding him of Wyeth's social importance.

But mainly, Zook simply steered his own course, and although he describes himself as "a bit of a misfit" in the artistic community, he has attained a certain amount of fame himself.

Today Zook's three-dimensional artwork done in bas-relief brings a fair price in the marketplace. Prices vary according to the size of the artwork, which can be as small as 12 inches square or as large as 12 feet wide by eight feet high.

"I get thousands now for what I did for hundreds," Zook says, explaining that when he first started making these paintings 25 to 30 years ago, many of them sold for \$200 and \$300. His work is so popular that he has a backlog of orders that will keep him busy for eight or nine years.

Tourists bought many of his first pieces and now the second generation of his first customers are coming back and buying his work to hand down as collector's items.

He takes a picture of every piece he makes and keeps a log of his buyers. "I have a pretty good record of most of them," he says.

Paging through Zook's log book, the visitor learns that each painting is unique. While many feature similar scenes, there is always something different about each one. Whether the bridge is turned at a different angle or the faces painted with different expressions, each painting has a unique scene to portray.

An especially observant visitor will also notice a set of identical twins in many of the pictures. These twins are, of course, Abner and Aaron Zook, two little Amish boys growing up in Lancaster County.

Most of Zook's paintings are imaginary, or come from his mind rather than from actual places. However, he does do some field work, reproducing real scenes in 3-D.

Zook's studio is attached to his home along Route 422 in Womelsdorf and draws many tourists and senior citizens each year. There, they are treated to

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This huge carving has a special place in Zook's studio. It is half of a two-part display which shows two different angles of the same scene. The display comes apart so Zook can move it to display elsewhere.