

Chunks of Wood Become Songbirds Under Evelyn Yonkin's Knife

BY BARBARA MILLER

Lycoming Co. Correspondent
DUSHORE — Many people today use wood to heat their homes. But Evelyn Yonkin of Sullivan County uses wood to create a different kind of warmth. Her carved songbirds warm the hearts of all who possess them with the natural beauty of hand-polished wood.

Since 1967 Evelyn, now 70, has exhibited carvings at the Pennsylvania Farm Show, accumulating at least 20 ribbons, many of them blue.

"I have about 20 ribbons and am going to put them in a frame," she notes.

Evelyn began carving about 20 years ago when she took a course offered by the local extension office. The course, which encompassed ceramics and stone mosaics in addition to wood-carving, was quite extensive, meeting from 6 to 10 o'clock every week night for a year. Evelyn says she learned design from the course.

"When I took the course I got the basics...I learned how to make patterns and put them together," she recalls.

Although Evelyn occasionally carves other animals, she concentrates on carving various birds, usually songbirds such as cardinals. She has carved ruffed grouse, pheasants, turkeys and quail, and last year took first prize at the Farm Show with her carving of a wood duck.

One of her most striking carvings is that of a graceful 1½-foot falcon caught in the act of landing with wings extended vertically. Due to the fragility of the piece, Evelyn never exhibited it at the Farm Show.

The wood Evelyn uses comes from her farm. The Yonkins are retired dairy and potato farmers. Robert, her husband, saws the largest pieces into a manageable size, which Evelyn regards as the hardest part of her operation. She allows all wood to dry at least a year before she attempts to carve it.

Evelyn uses only hardwoods such as cherry, walnut, beech, and butternut for her carvings. Two exceptions, she notes, are red cedar, which she uses because of its color to create cardinals, and sumac wood.

Sumac, according to Evelyn, is a little tricky to work with because it has two different types of wood and the wood may "feather." She uses it because of its color, which she describes as "yellowish." She observes that ornaments and birds carved from it show up nicely on a Christmas tree.



The carving Evelyn holds won first prize at the Farm Show. Two songbirds sit on this piece of cedar wood.

The first step in the carving process, Evelyn says, is tracing the pattern on the wood. She has a stack of cardboard patterns of various birds accumulated through the years. The wood varies in thickness from one to three inches and she chooses it carefully, giving special consideration to the pattern of the wood grain.

After tracing the pattern she uses a bandsaw to rough cut the wood. She employs a belt sander next to "take all the rough off."

Next she goes to the flexible shaft, a small rotating disc of sandpaper capable of sanding a small area, which gives her a finer sanding. Lastly, Evelyn finishes the more delicate work by hand sanding and then applies two coats of lacquer.

Evelyn uses other parts of a tree in addition to the trunk. She has several creations fashioned from the roots of trees.

One of her most unusual displays, Evelyn notes, was created from a piece of wood obtained from a neighbor who saw its possibilities and refused to consign it to the firewood pile. It was part of a tree which had grown around an old horseshoe. He gave it to Evelyn and she crafted an attractive wall hanging and returned it to him. Presently, he has it

displayed in his shop in Dushore and he claims many people who enter the shop stop to admire it.

Songbirds, Evelyn reports, are her most popular item with customers. Working steadily, she says, she can complete one in about two and a half hours.

What does Evelyn enjoy most about her carving?

"Design," she says, "There are never two that come out alike."

Since Evelyn's workshop is unheated, she developed a side interest that she enjoys through the winter months. It is quilting.

"I've quilted since I was 12," she says.

She is currently working on a Brunswick Star quilt which, thus far, has taken 60 hours of her time. Evelyn sells quilts along with her carved items. She attends the Flaming Foliage Festival at Forksville, a large craft show at Skaneateles, NY and sells directly to customers from her home.

But it is evident that Evelyn's main interest lies in her wood carvings. How much longer does she plan to continue her wood carving?

"As long as I'm able," she says, "I like it—it's good for an older person to be busy." And she adds, "I just can't sit around. I've never done that."



This display includes a number of Evelyn's prize-winning bird carvings. In the foreground is a walnut duck that won first prize in the 1986 Pennsylvania Farm Show. The larger one to the right is a ruffed grouse of butternut wood sitting on a pine root. The taller sculpture is a graceful falcon carved from butternut wood, while the others are songbirds.

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