

Carving in the Summer

By Rod Fraser



Five Easy Pieces

It was ten or twelve years ago, when Don first invited me to attend the *Brooklyn Woodcarving Show*. It was held a short distance from my home on a lovely day, so I was happy to attend.

I didn't know much about woodcarving, but I was familiar with hand tools. Over the years, I had built a few tables, a stool and some other furniture in the basement.

As a hobby, woodcarving offers a number of advantages. Most carvings are small and the tools are inexpensive—just a knife and a few chisels. They don't take up a lot of space. You can carve almost

anywhere. Just bring along a tea towel to catch all your wood chips.



The Brooklyn Woodcarving Show.

When you accumulate too many carvings (unlike furniture), it isn't difficult to sell them at a show or give them away to family or friends. It's quite a thrill to have a little boy fess up \$10 of his Dad's money to buy one of your carvings.



Don and I arrived at the *Brooklyn Woodcarving Show* about 10 a.m., offered up a donation of \$10 each, and toured the premises. The carvings were so well done I was a little discouraged. I wondered if I could muster the skill (as well as the patience) to make carving a hobby.

At one table, I saw a number of small caricature

carvings, simple enough, but striking in their own way. They were 'Little Guys', four inches tall, carved out of a block of wood one inch square and nicely painted.



When I asked the carver about them, he confessed, "If I can do them, anyone can." He marched me over to one of the vendors, pulled a book from a rack (*Carving Small Characters* by Jack Price) and said, "Read this book, then come to our club next week. I'll show you how to carve these figures in two weeks."

He was true to his word. Within a month I was carving figures that bore some resemblance to reality. And within a year, I was an accomplished carver, albeit of small and charming 'Little Guys,' carved in the flat plane style that is popular today.

Unfortunately the club I joined, like many others,

closed for the summer months. I had one month of instruction, then was cast loose, to cope as best I could until the cooler months of fall.

When I spoke to Don about this, he was similarly dismayed. Of course, we could all carve at home if we wished. But older guys like company. We needed a place to gather and whittle. We're social creatures.

If you left this problem for me to solve, we would still be talking about it. But Don is a doer. Within a week, he had scouted out a couple of public parks in which to carve. He suggested we meet each week (on Thursdays), bring a picnic lunch, and enjoy some woodcarving, company and sunshine.

Within a short time, the word spread. Two carvers joined us within a few weeks. Fortunately, they liked our argumentative banter and shared many of the same opinions. Don's *'Carving in the Summer'* let them work on their carvings, as well as their friendships.



In the first few years, various places were selected for meeting, including public parks in Oshawa, Whitby, Scarborough and Toronto. Bluffer's Park (in Scarborough) seemed to work best, so before long, it became our home on Thursdays.

Don let us know what the weather was likely to be, and he usually arrived at Bluffer's an hour before

our gathering time of 12 noon. He would commandeer a table (or two), lay out the tablecloths and get started on his favorite carving, a relief carving of an old farmer from long ago.

Everyone seemed happy with the arrangement. It was a compatible group of old guys, shooting the breeze, chatting up the tourists and hoping to sell a few carvings from time to time.

This all changed when Fred had heart surgery and dropped out of the group. He was sorely missed. Fred had a hundred stories and a cheerful nature. There was hardly a conversation that started up where Fred didn't add to it and make it better.

Next to leave was Ron. He was a retired sales executive and a serious thinker. Ron could be counted on to offer interesting political observations and carry everyone along with his reasoning. If there were disagreements, Ron made sure they weren't disagreeable.



After Don and Fred left the club, Don told me he wondered about our future,

"Carving in the Summer' has been a good thing. You and I have made good friends and enjoyed our Thursday gatherings. This is likely to change, now that Fred and Ron have left. As new people join us, it'll feel different. It'll be different."

Don got me thinking. What was it about our club that made us enjoy it so? I suggested Don and I discuss this question at our next lunch.

By the time we got together, a number of weeks had passed and I'd had plenty of time to think on the matter. We ate a light lunch and then settled back in our chairs sipping lattes. I told Don some of my thoughts.

"I've been wondering how to explain the success of our small club over these past years. We did get on well. That's certain."

"But let's face it: We were all quite different. We came from a variety of backgrounds, had different opinions, and yet we all meshed together. Why was that?"

"I think it was because we grew to enjoy each other's company. Sitting around a table, sharing lunch, watching each other work, and chatting about the world became an end in itself. The key to it all was that we attracted people who used carving as an excuse for getting together."

"Not all carvers are like that. Some join clubs to improve their carving, get and give advice, access information on shows and interact with other talented people. Larger clubs accommodate these carvers. They match them up with other like-minded members."

"Our club is too small for that."

"As I see it, when you invite new people to join the club, you can choose sociable people who like to carve (as in the past), or more serious carvers."

"Of course, it's always possible to find people who are both, but I wonder? More likely, sociable people will leave the club if discussions aren't relaxed, varied and interesting. And serious carvers will do the same if the club is too focused on social chit-chat."

"It's up to you, Don. It's your club. You should give it some thought and decide the kind of person you'd like to join us before summer arrives."



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