

A Note From A Wood Tinker

This month is the Hales Corners edition of A Note From A Wood Tinker. Just 90 miles south of Oshkosh, not far from Route 41, is the village of Hales Corners (pop. <8,000). This village is home for two places of interest to carvers: (1) the W. Ben Hunt Log Cabin, and (2) the only Tandy Leather store in Wisconsin. Last summer, the Wood Tinker explored both.



W. Ben Hunt Cabin



Many chippers had their first carving experience in a youth group. Campfire Girls, Boy Scouts and similar groups all have long promoted carving through honors and merit badges. A Hales Corners artist, carver and author W. Ben Hunt (1888-1970) played a major role in teaching youth to wood carve and make Indian crafts. Beginning in 1942 and for almost 30 years Hunt wrote columns and articles for Boy's Life magazine, often under the pseudonym "Whittlin' Jim." He also authored many books including six specifically on how to whittle:

1. Whittling with Ben Hunt (1939)
2. Ben Hunt's Whittling Book (1944)
3. More Ben Hunt Whittling (1947)
4. Let's Whittle (1962) [This book is in our club library]
5. Contemporary Carving and Whittling (1967)
6. Ben Hunt's Big Book of Whittling [This is a compilation from books 2 & 3.]

Hunt's books typically begin with "how to" sections on wood, design, layout, knives, sharpening, roughing, shaping and finishing which are followed by many examples drawn from his wide range of interests. Common themes in his books include both natural and stylized: birds, wild animals, and Indian motifs. Hunt once wrote,

"I made everything I wrote about. If you don't make it, you better not write about it, because those kids are just looking for a chance to trip you up."

Ben Hunt whittled things big and small, from chessmen, neckerchief slides, miniature duck decoys, stylized and natural birds, a salad fork and spoon, jewelry, book ends, decorative spirals, to Kachina dolls, native masks, totem poles, a canoe in rapids, a barefoot boy with a fishing pole, a buccaneer, a pack mule with miners tools, a Mexican peasant on an oxcart, a Spanish priest, a caricature of a moonshiner, and more.

Two other Hunt books deserve special note.

"The Golden Book of Crafts and Hobbies" was written by Hunt in 1957. In it Hunt has several beginner carving projects: whittling peach pits into monkeys or baskets, and carving coconut shells into decorative bowls, using burls to make bowls, trays and noggins (those are "small mugs", I looked it up. ;)) Hunt used bone, horn and antler to teach whittling buttons, neckerchief slides, Kachina dolls, and wooden tops. He also describes how to make leaf prints using soot or ink. Such prints can be used with graphite paper to make wood burning patterns on wood for natural leaf pyrography.

In 1958, Ben and his brother Ed authored "101 Alphabets", a reference book of lettering styles. If you desire patterns for lettering, certain styles are very amenable to use in carving or pyrography. Recognizing that the serifs on typefaces can be a bugaboo for letterers, Hunt provides a geometrical analysis of a Roman alphabet toward the end of the book. Other presented alphabets illustrate the effectiveness of shading and hatching to provide a three dimensional look (which may readily be reproduced by Chippers using woodburning techniques).

Ben Hunt carvings, art, books, and Indian crafts may be seen in the tamarack log cabin that he built in 1924. He made the cabin using: a hand ax, an adz, a crosscut saw, a brother, a father, and a father-in-law. First, a fireplace was constructed by a mason, then the rest of the 16 x 28 foot cabin, and its furniture and its flooring were built by Ben and his helpers. True to form, Hunt wrote about it in "Building a Log Cabin". Later using telephone poles, he added to his cabin: a lean to, a shed and a large room.

In 1945, Hunt used an axe, adz, and Indian crooked knife to make a 175 lb basswood dugout canoe. That canoe is on display in the cabin along with various carvings, Kachina dolls, carved wooden snow goggles, masks, neckerchief slides and Ben Hunt memorabilia.

The cabin is a local historic site. From May to November it is open to the public at no charge (donations accepted) on the first Saturday of each month, from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. It is also open on the 4th of July from Noon to 3 p.m. The Hales Corners Historical Society provides a guide.

<http://www.historichalescorners.org>



A trip to tour the Hunt Cabin has the added benefit of being within a few blocks of the only Tandy Leather store in Wisconsin. Leather is a very good medium for both pyrography and carving.

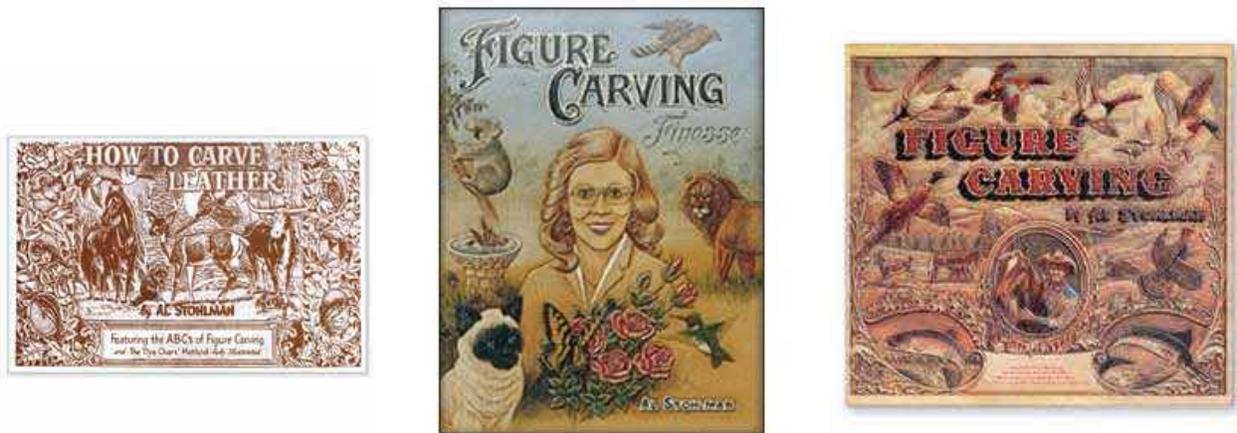
Located in a strip mall, this small, rather ugly, store has most of its floor space stacked with dozens of hides, splits, shoulders, pieces, remnants, and laces of various leathers and suedes. Both vegetable and chromium tanned skins are available, as are undyed and dyed tanned cowhides, pigskins, deerskins, and exotic leathers in all shapes and sizes. Leatherworking project kits and the tools and supplies needed are all displayed along the walls and storefront. The store does not specifically address pyrography on leather, but books and tools for carving leather are offered. They sell many metal stamps for imprinting designs and hardware buckles, rivets, swivels, and snaps, as well as clasps, rings, and feet (useful for carved boxes), and related hardware.

In addition to leather and hardware, Chippers may find other goods useful for: carving projects; bird and animal study; and for making habitats, such as fur, feathers, colored leather laces and remnants, waxed and unwaxed thread, crepe rubber sheets, a mini-anvil (for shaping bird feet?), and more. Of

further note, this is the only store in Wisconsin that sells toluene based Barge™ cement. Developed for the shoe industry, this cement is reputed to be the strongest and best adhesive for bonding leather. It has worked well for the Wood Tinker to glue leather to wood for making sharpening strops.

The Tupelo Tyro is looking forward to experimenting with pyrography on leather. Leather bought to make a carving apron may be just the thing to try. Maybe the Wood Tinker's name can be engraved by burning using a Ben Hunt typeface? Well at the rate the Tinker's bungling along it will be next summer before the apron's done; so lots of time to ponder and design before then.

This Tandy store has books and booklets on leatherworking including ones with pictorial and figure leather carving instructions, techniques, and patterns. Shown here are a few describing how to carve birds, fish, horses, wild animals, people, faces, and scenes, all on leather as the carving medium.



Come the first Saturday of May, I'm sure you will all be at Birdfest in Oshkosh, but perhaps that first Saturday in June, July, etc.... or November would be worth a 90 minute drive to check out Tandy Leather and explore the legacy and works of Wisconsin artist, carver and author W. Ben Hunt.

In 1986, Hunt's cabin was relocated 1/3 mile west of its original Janesville Road site to its present location at the W. Ben Hunt Center adjacent to the Hales Corners Library.

The Ben Hunt Cabin is at 5885 South 116th Street. Tandy Leather Store is at 5606 South 108th Street. Both are in the village of Hales Corners, Wisconsin.

An endnote: well known pyrographer and carver Lora Irish has authored a new book (128 pages), "The Art of Leather Burning: Step By Step Pyrography Techniques."

