Woodcarving Can't Be Learned, Says Napoleon Expert

By Evon J. Dewald

Jake Baltzer, retired Napoleon, N.D., farmer, has many hobbies—hunting, fishing, gardening, and rock polishing, and he used his knowledge of all these hobbies to create his other fascinating hobby of woodcarving.

Jake's knowledge of his carving subjects is evident for an examination of his work reveals a large amount of detail. He does not carve only the shape of his subject but adds the necessary details which make the objects he carves extremely life-like. The fish have scales, the birds have feathers (on one bird Jake wrapped the claws with electrical tape to add texture—"Small things make the difference")—and even the cowboy driver for the covered wagon has boots carved right on him!

The Napoleon woodcarver makes his creations from a solid block of wood.

He does not carve a piece at a time and glue the pieces together. He is quick to point out that the open-mouthed lion he carved does not have false teeth. "Those teeth were carved right along with the body," he says. Some people who have seen his work have been skeptical of his claim "a solid block of wood," especially when they see his many feet of link chain, but he is happy to let people examine the chains and try to find the "glued together parts." That's a tough job because there aren't any! The links are carved right out of the wood. One eight-foot block of wood yielded him a ten foot link chain. "The links give a little to add the length," he states. At the end of one link chain dangles a heart, pierced by an arrow, which reads "My Love Helen"—a valentine gift for his wife one year when she was hospitalized.

Jake used, as the models for his fish,
Baltzer carved this heart for his wife as a recent Valentine's Day gift.

got to have it in you, and" he laughs, "you've got to have a sharp knife!" He uses regular kitchen paring-knives sharpened to a very fine point.

Jake's wife, Helen, encourages him in his hobby. While he spends the winter time carving in wood, she does numerous crafts from styrofoam, beads, soap, sequins and pearls.

Jake, who turned 74 in October, is quite modest about his talent and believes he is receiving too much publicity but the Napoleon community is proud to number this talented man among its citizens.

Jake's carved replicas of a walleye from the Missouri River and his perch from Coldwater Lake.