

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 in one other fascinating hobby of his—woodcarving.

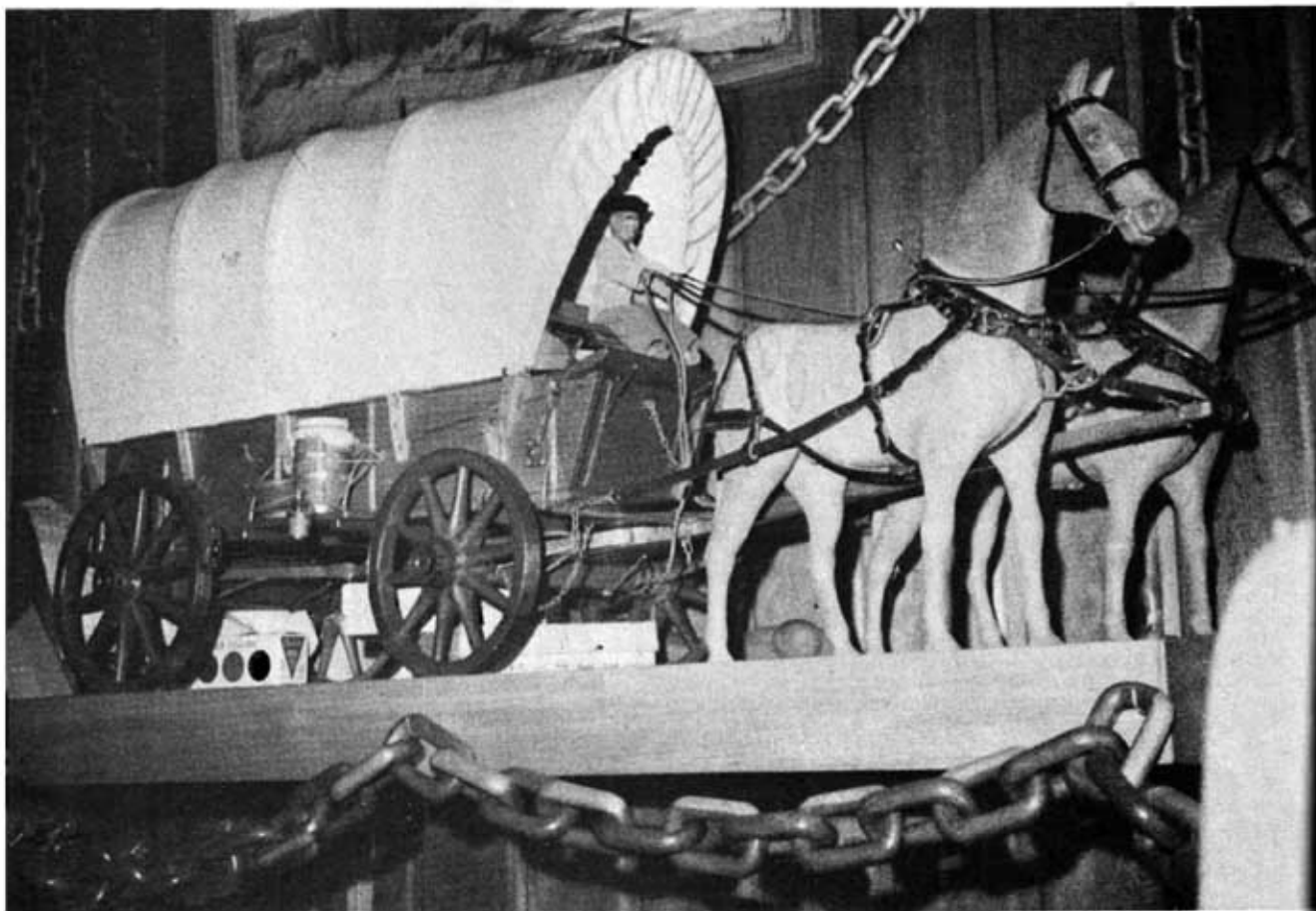
Jake's knowledge of his carving subjects is evident for an examination of his work reveals a large amount of detail. He does not carve only the shape of his subject but adds the necessary details which make the objects he carves extremely life-like. The fish have scales, the birds have feathers (on one 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!

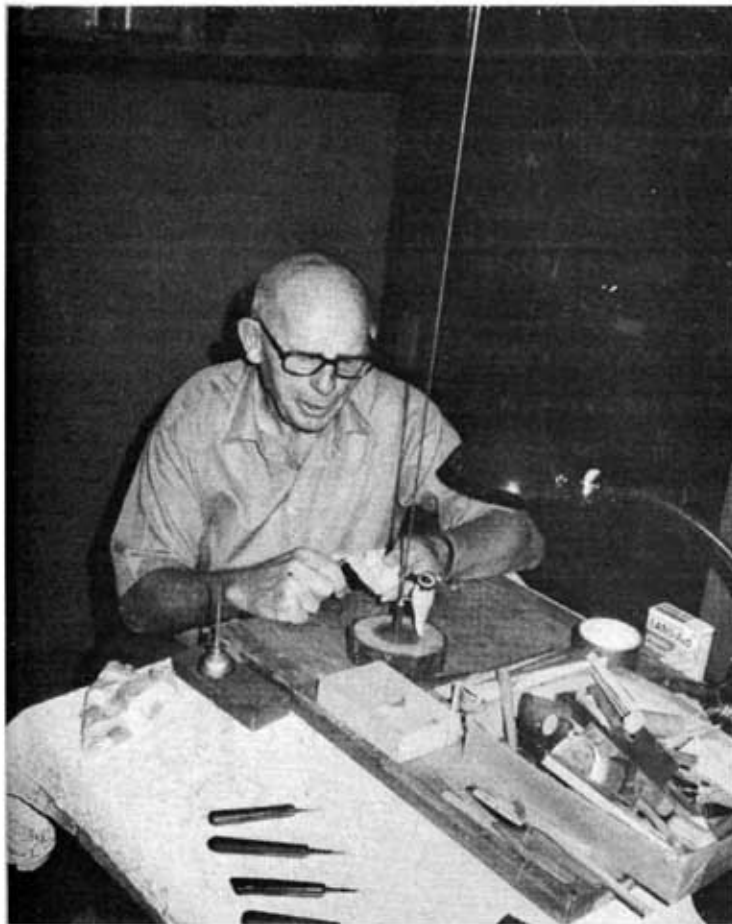
The Napoleon woodcarver makes his creations from a solid block of wood.

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,

Jake Baltzer of Napoleon has made a name for himself as a woodcarver with a lot of talent. His intricately carved horse and wagon always fascinate guests. The link chains above and below the wagon he also carved from wood.





Jake Baltzer sitting at his work table with carving knives in the foreground. Band-aid box in background contains his patterns for the woodpeckers he carves.

two actual catches of his own. The walleye he caught in the Missouri River and the 14½ inch perch he caught at Coldwater Lake near Ashley, N.D.

A unique creation of Jake's is his musical woodpecker—an idea he and his wife got from watching a woodpecker out of their living room window. He places a steel piano rod in a block of wood and attaches either a Downy woodpecker (native to N.D.) or a Florida woodpecker to the rod with a spring and sets the bird pecking up and down the rod causing a merry, jingling sound. So far, this is the only work he has sold and he is already behind on the orders he has received!

His "Ball in Prison" creation, a round ball encased in a cage and carved from a single block of wood, was done in response to a challenge thrown out by an article in *The Dakota Farmer Magazine* some years back.

"Helen likes the chain and heart best," Jake says, "but I was always a

farmer . . . I like the team and wagon best." Jake's team and covered wagon is something to behold—a lesson in history all by itself! Jake stuffed and sewed the harness himself and is happy to demonstrate how the outfit works. The top of the wagon can be removed so it can be used to haul hay; the wheels have a short-turn so the wagon won't tip at sharp corners; the brake will stop the wagon if it starts to roll downhill. Everything on the wagon was made to scale and everything works—including the spigot on the water barrel. Jake spent two winters on this wagon and had it done in time to help Napoleon celebrate its diamond jubilee in 1959.

Jake does most of his carving in the winter months. He usually spends a couple of hours carving in the morning and several more hours in the afternoon. It's a time-consuming hobby. One 7½ foot chain he carved took over 100 hours! Jake has exhibited his work at the Napoleon Corn Show and the North Dakota Flickertail Woodcarvers Association exhibit in Bismarck; his hobby has been written about in the *North Dakota REC Magazine*.

Advice to beginners? Jake says woodcarving can't be learned. "You've



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. ▼

