

Down East Magazine article about Chippy, 1961

CHARLES GREENOUGH CHASE, WOOD CARVER

By Philip Brady



BACK in 1933 Charles Greenough Chase of Wis-
casset was teaching mathematics at St. Paul's
School in Concord, New Hampshire, when a student
showed him the carving of a duck he had just com-
pleted.

As he now admits, Chippy Chase immediately
thought to himself: "I can do that!" Forthwith he set
out to carve a partridge out of wood and—all un-
knowingly—launched himself on a new career, al-
though it would not come to full flower until 1952.

Now ranked by critics in the forefront of contem-
porary American wood carvers, Chippy Chase's carv-
ings are numbered well in excess of 200. At least
45 different species of birds have been shaped in
wood under his sensitive hands, for birds and only
birds intrigue him.

Why?

"Because of my love of hunting," says the artist.
"All of my early carvings were game birds." The
love of hunting persists, although today he pursues
it more often with a triple-turret camera than with a
gun.

Hidden away in a shaving-littered shed at the rear
of an old barn on Wiscasset's High Street, Chippy
Chase works full time at his art. He carves only on
commission and usually has a full year's work ahead
of him, a condition which he views with equanimity.
Two of his creations grace the contemporary wood
carving sections of major American museums; all
others have gone to private owners. When he par-

ticipates in an art show—and there have been some
two score such occasions—he borrows back ten to
fifteen pieces in order to display the scope and
variety of his talents.

It was through a series of art shows in 1949 that
Chip Chase got his first big boost. That year he was
invited to display his birds at the Farnsworth Museum
in Rockland, the Mint Museum at Charlotte, North
Carolina, and at the American Museum of Natural
History in New York City.

Not only did his New York debut produce orders
for carvings, but it resulted in a two-page feature in
The New York Times. Since then he has participated
in many shows. From the Vose Galleries in Boston
and the Princeton Arts Festival to as far away as
Dallas, Texas, people have delighted in the exquisite
design and craftsmanship of Chase's bird carvings.
And the commissions he received rapidly increased to
a point where he felt that he could take the plunge
and devote all of his time to wood carving, which
hitherto had been a hobby, sandwiched into his spare
time as a mathematician at the Bath Iron Works, a
teacher of anti-submarine warfare in the U.S. Navy,
and a partner in the Brunswick Flying Service.

WHEN we visited his studio last summer, a shop
cluttered with wood carving tools and equipment
and redolent with the tangy odors of many woods,
our attention was caught by the partially completed

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*Top left, Bosin bird carved
of Bermuda cedar*

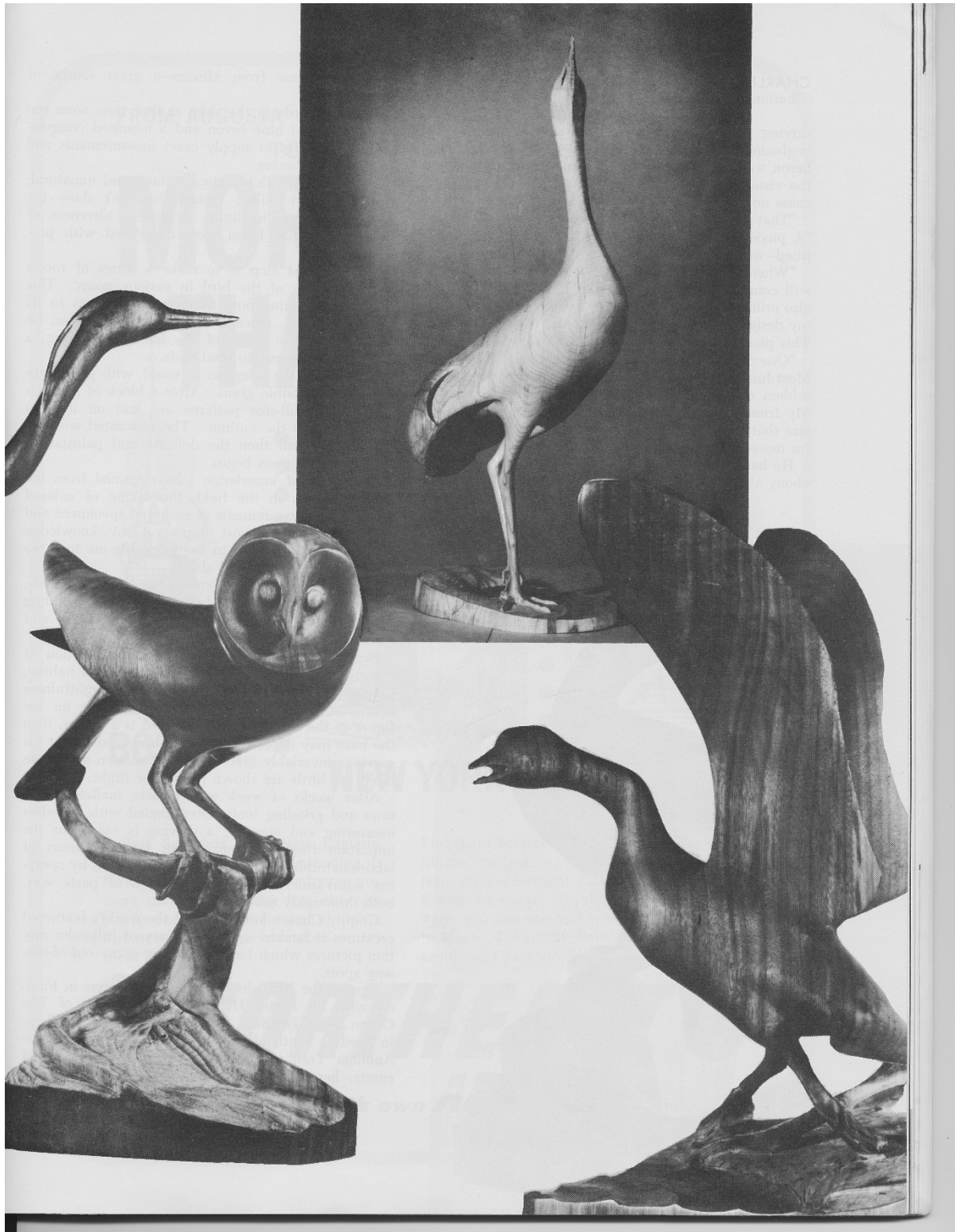
*Top center, Great blue
heron, black walnut*

*Top right, Whooping crane,
carved of maple*

Left, Pheasant, balsamo wood

Right, Barn owl, black walnut

*Far right, Canada goose,
black walnut*



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carving on his workbench. Although it was only beginning to assume its final form, the great blue heron was vibrant with life and grace and displayed the visual rhythms for which Chase's work has become noted.

"That's my current commission," explained Chippy. "A piece this size—about 24x15x15 inches when finished—will take me around nine weeks to carve.

"Whenever possible I select wood that in coloring will come close to matching the bird's plumage. I also utilize the grain as much as I can, working it into my design so that it complements the entire carving. This piece is black walnut—a favorite of mine.

"One of my hardest tasks is to find chunks of wood. Most lumber yards have planks and boards, but they seldom can supply the large pieces that I require. My friends keep a lookout for knot-free pieces of a size that I can use, but I am always scouting around for more."

He hauled from beneath a bench a dusty chunk of ebony about two feet long and a foot square. "This

Cormorant carved of black walnut



piece here came from Mexico—a great source of ebony."

The only birds in the shop at that time were the partially-carved blue heron and a mounted companion, used chiefly to supply exact measurements and details of feathering.

"A mounted model is always static and unnatural; even the most skilled taxidermist can't show the rhythms of a bird in flight. A sense of aliveness, of vibrancy is what I am most concerned with producing."

Chippy's first step is to make a series of rough pencil sketches of the bird in various poses. This helps to determine how to show the species to its best advantage. Once he decides on the pose, he draws two plane views of the intended carving, a front and side view, to final scale.

Next comes the selection of wood, with great care given to the visible grain. After a block of wood is chosen, the full-size patterns are laid on it from which to trace the outline. The unwanted wood is slabbed off, and then the delicate and painstaking work of carving can begin.

"Every bit of knowledge I have gained from the study of birds in the field, the taking of colored movies, the measurements of mounted specimens and last—but probably most important—my knowledge of aerodynamics, is put to use to enable me to carve a bird that is vibrant and alive."

Chippy uses all of the conventional carving tools, as well as a high speed drill and a set of grinding tools to reach into places inaccessible to chisels and gouges.

Because the base has the important function of representing something of the bird's natural habitat, Chippy lavishes as much care and thoughtfulness upon the underlying carving as he spends on the figure of the bird itself. If the bird is a wader, then the base may depict water, mud and reeds. But his carvings invariably give a sense of motion and quite often the birds are shown poised for flight.

After weeks of work with chisels, mallets, drills, saws and grinding tools, intermingled with ceaseless measuring and viewing, a carving is ready for the important finishing steps. This involves hours of laborious rubbing with steel wool, followed by spraying with sealer and the application of paste wax, both thoroughly rubbed in.

Chippy Chase's knowledge of the world's feathered creatures is backed up by a library of full-color motion pictures which he has taken in many out-of-the-way spots.

During the 1950s he spent several winters in Florida with his friend Henry Chapin, author of *The Ocean River, The Sun, The Sea and Tomorrow*. Chapin lived at South Miami, and he took Chippy to the Anhinga Trail to see the great, colorful flocks of egrets, herons, ibis and anhingas. "Right away I

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CHARLES GREENOUGH CHASE

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knew I needed a movie camera," Chip said, "and I bought one the next day."

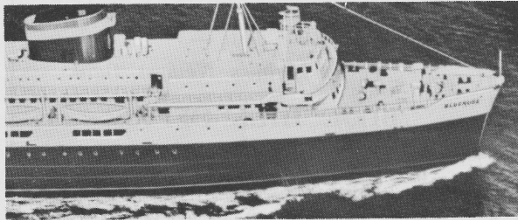
A by-product of his movie-making has been a series of nature lectures, which he gives during the winter season.

Chippy also has photographed in Texas, where he traveled with his brother-in-law, Herbert Pratt, a well-known Massachusetts ornithologist. There he had the good fortune to capture on film the extremely rare (at one time almost extinct) whooping cranes. These priceless film clips paid off handsomely when Chippy was commissioned to carve a whooping crane. With characteristic thoroughness, he spent hours and hours running and rerunning his films, checking every photograph he could obtain and absorbing every available bit of knowledge about whooping cranes before beginning the work.

This basic integrity and rigid self-discipline is reflected in Chippy Chase's work, and despite his lack of formal training in art, he has gained the stature of a meticulous creative artist. Maine's Charles Greenough Chase has come a long way from the young teacher who, as a casual whittler, thought that if one of his students could carve a bird from a block of wood, so could he.

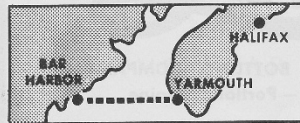


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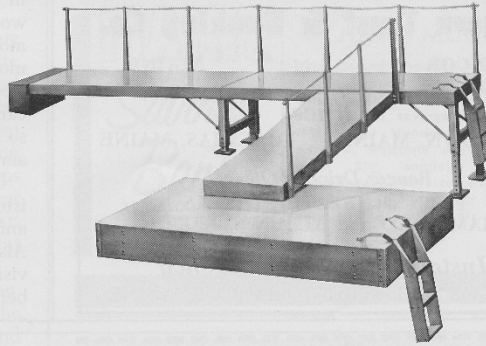
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