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OLD MASTERS OF NEW ENGLAND

Chase Reynolds Ewald



1994 Old Masters of New England by Chase Reynolds Ewald. ©1994 by Chase Reynolds Ewald, photographs and text. “Wings of Wood: Charles Greenough Chase Bird Carver, Brunswick, Maine” is the third of 18 interviews that Ewald conducted for the book. Published by Country Roads Press, Castine, Maine.

BIRD CARVER

ONE NEED GO NO farther than Chippy Chase's front hall to understand without a doubt the man's vocation, avocation, and overriding passion all at once. From floor to ceiling, on every wall of the small entranceway, hang laminated photographs of his work. Herons and egrets, vultures and eagles, scarlet ibises and ruddy ducks, an elf owl peeking out of a cactus and a life-sized heron in flight: 150 different birds, captured in various poses, reveal Chase's remarkable artistry as a woodcarver. Even though he uses no paint—just the natural color of the woods—the birds are exceptionally lifelike, each captured at what master photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson called "the decisive moment."

A Chase carving may feature a duck coming in for a landing on water, another at the moment the bird lifts off the ground, each bird touching its wood foundation in two or three places but in such a way that it is more in the air than grounded on the foundation. A near-life-sized heron, for instance, is several feet tall, yet so slender that all its weight is easily supported by one leg (the foot hidden under the surface of the water); the three claws of the bird's other foot touch the base lightly for balance. As he does with many of his carvings to give them greater stability and sturdiness, Chippy incorporated an upright cattail, which touches the heron lightly along its side. The plant helps to anchor the piece and also adds interest to the composition.

Each sculpture is carved from one block of wood, which makes the complexity of some pieces all the more striking. In one work, a roadrunner posed in front of a cactus, tail up and feet planted firmly apart, struggles to gain the advantage over a coiled rattlesnake. The bird has a firm grip on the snake, holding it just behind the head, but the snake's mouth is open, showing his menacing fangs, his rattle is upright in warning, and it's unclear which creature will dominate.

Another piece features three scarlet ibises

carved from a light red wood called bubinga, which is distinguished by an intricate tracery of darker grain. One bird stands above the others on a root sticking up out of the water, one dips his beak into the water, and the third has his body twisted so he can scratch under his wing. It is a piece of great delicacy and overall balance, the three birds forming a triangular composition and the wood grain, due to its artistic placement, appearing to be etched on. For instance, all the grain appears as curved lines, except on the raised wing of the one bird who's scratching: in the very center of his upraised wing is a circle, with concentric circles radiating out from it. It's the kind of detail that firmly establishes the artistry of the craftsman: how, staring at a large, round section of log, can Chippy know that the circles of grain will center on the wing as they do? The piece would not be as effective were they to hit, say, on one of the birds' heads. In addition, he always starts with a wood whose color matches the bird in question as closely as possible.

Many of Chippy's creations spring from his extensive travels around the globe to observe birds in their native habitat. The scarlet ibis carving is no exception. "In Trinidad," he recalls, "they take you out in a boat at about five o'clock in the afternoon. You wait until sunset and then five thousand of these scarlet ibises come in and alight in the mangroves. I think," he says thoughtfully, "that it must be the greatest sight in the world, ornithologically."

A trip to Argentinian Patagonia inspired a carving of two Magellanic penguins, done for Chippy's son, Charles, on his twenty-first birthday. One bird stands on the shore, while the other floats on the water, asleep. "About two-thirds of the way down the Valdez Peninsula, there's a great penguin colony," Chippy recalls with enthusiasm. "I actually saw one bird sound asleep in the water. He drifted in toward the rocks and then went out again, sound asleep, just

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like that! Then I saw another bunch, and I wanted to get them moving so I rushed up and they went waddle, waddle, waddle, back into the water. But you see thousands of them! You have to watch you don't step in the holes where they burrow underneath. But they look out at you," he says, chuckling, "and they're funny as hell!"

Chippy has traveled the world over: the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii, India, Malaysia, Africa, Central and South America, Australia. And he's shown no signs of slowing down. He just recently returned from a trip to the Antarctic, on which he was scheduled to act as the naturalist-in-residence; he had to decline the honor, though, due to fears that his angina, a mild but bothersome heart condition, might act up. This wouldn't be especially noteworthy, except that Chippy turned eighty-six this summer. He was also scheduled to go on a birding trip to Bhutan and Nepal, places not exactly known for their four-star resorts. That didn't bother Chippy at all, of course, but the trip was called off anyway due to the political instability of

the region. Chippy loves traveling with birding groups, he says. "They don't want to go to the cathedrals and the marketplace and all that stuff. They want to see birds!"

It's hard to say whether it's Chippy's lack of height, rounded features, twinkling eyes, or lively, endearing manner that calls to mind most readily the image of an elf. He has large, cupped ears, which he pulls forward when he gets excited or needs to hear more clearly, and although his hair has turned to white wisps and liver spots show gently on his hands and face, there is nothing in his attitude or his physical condition to indicate his age.

Chippy's lived a life more full than most of us will ever live—he had several careers before turning to bird carving full-time around 1949 and he has been widowed twice and divorced once. But he shows no signs of slowing down and still maintains an average of four and a half major woodcarving projects each year.

These he turns out one at a painstaking time from the greenhouse-workshop that is a



woodchip's throw from the rambling white clapboard house he shares with a housekeeper and his huge, hairy white dog, Meru, named after one of Chippy's favorite mountains, the tallest in Southeast Asia. ("We got the dog to herd the sheep," he laughs, "but he just chased the sheep around the pasture, so they had to be separated.") The house, workshop, garage, and stable-turned-wood-storage-shed command a view of woodlands and fields from their site in the midst of ninety acres of tidewater wildland just five minutes from Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine.

Although Charles Greenough Chase was born to a Boston Brahmin family and grew up in a brick townhouse in the heart of the city, he always considered himself a Mainer.

My mother's family came from Wiscasset, and we always used to spend the summers there," he explains. "I went to grade school in Brookline and then I went to St. Paul's, in Concord, New Hampshire, and then I went to Harvard. From there I messed up my life and

went to Harvard Law School for a year, which I didn't like at all, and then I worked in a bank in Boston and that was worse, so I got a job teaching math at St. Paul's! I worked there for two years, and then I floundered around and finally I got a very good job, which I liked, doing naval architecture in Bath. But I hadn't had enough engineering experience, so I ended up working in shipfitting, in charge of ventilating and testing hull machinery at the Bath Iron Works."

When World War II hit, Chippy, still single, signed on. "I had knowledge in navigation and in destroyer construction, and I had a private pilot's license. I went to see the guy at naval-officer procurement and I found that I knew him. I applied for a commission and when I came back from flying forest-fire patrol in northern Maine, I went to find out what I was going to be doing. He said, 'You're going to be teaching how to sink submarines.' And I said, 'Just offhand, I've never sunk a submarine in my life!' But the fact was they wanted math teachers, because you had to figure out from the sonar data you received what the submarine was doing. Of course, these days it's probably a lot more sophisticated.

I first went to Guantánamo," he continues, "and then I was sent to Casablanca and then Sicily. I was always where the war wasn't anymore. But then when the war was just about over, I went to the Hawaiian islands, to Midway—which is one thousand miles west of Oahu! The war was over then, but I saw a lot of birds I had never seen and wouldn't have otherwise."

By then, Chippy had already developed a real fascination with birds and had begun carving as a hobby. "I never took any art classes, but when we were kids we took drawing lessons one summer from a nice old lady. She taught us how to measure things at arm's length and think about perspective. My first carvings were of baseball players; they were like little lead soldiers. I'd always loved lead soldiers and I was crazy about professional baseball," he smiles, "the Boston Braves and the Red Sox. I think what makes you want to carve is that you want to make a model of something you like.

"But then my interest changed to birds, and I really got into carving at St. Paul's, in 1934. A kid in my dormitory named Bill Vaughan brought in a little duck that he'd carved and painted and said, 'How do you like this?' I thought it was interesting and I had a stuffed partridge, so I just did a little flying partridge, just whittled it with a knife. So I started carving a few birds as a hobby, and I did it all through the time I was in the Bath Iron Works."

Chippy was still carving birds after he returned from the war, when he got involved with a flying service in Brunswick with a couple of other guys, and married for the first time in 1949.

"Betty really put me on the right track," he recalls of his wife. "She wanted me to carve birds, and at that time the flying service was not doing well, so I got out of that and started carving birds. I've been whittling ever since." Tragically, Betty and their nine-month-old son were killed in an airplane accident. Thinking back on that time long ago, Chippy says philosophically, "Well, you can't do anything about it." Nothing, that is, except continue doing what Betty would have wanted him to do.

"At the time Betty was killed," he continues, "a next door neighbor had me all set up for a show at the natural history museum in New York. I had enough birds to put together a show—small stuff mostly—but I had a lot of 'em, and it was right in the entranceway of the museum. It was terrific, and a good boost for me. There was a spread in the *New York Times*, and it really gave me a good start. But it was Betty who put me on the right track," he adds with conviction. "She really believed I should carve birds."

Chippy's second marriage lasted fifteen years and bore one son, Charles, who lives in Portland. It was during that time that Chippy's wife (they'd been living in Wiscasset) discovered the farm in Brunswick and suggested they buy it. "I knew this place because I'd been smelt fishing here. It's got a wonderful tidewater creek through it, and in May you go down and get the

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smelts out and take them home and put them in your freezer and have them all summer. I loved doing that! So I said okay," he says simply.

They moved to Milltide Farm in 1958, and until two years ago, Chippy kept a separate shop in nearby Wiscasset. In 1970 Chippy married his third wife (a hospital architect who was an old friend and a Wheaton classmate of his first wife) "and had the happiest fifteen years of my life." Dodie, sadly, died in 1986, but her name still wends its way into every conversation, especially in conjunction with funny traveling stories.

Like the time they were staying at the headwaters of the Amazon and Dodie went to use the outhouse, and a frog jumped out of the hole in the ground. "I nearly died laughing!" Chippy chuckles. Or the time Chippy got sick in Wisconsin and his wife and her friends snuck a llama into his bedroom.

"Of course, Dodie was terrified the llama would break his legs on the stairs, but that didn't stop them. I looked up from bed and yelled, 'Jesus Christ! Who put that llama in my bedroom?' Well, they're wonderful animals, but to look up and see this thing blinking at you.... Luckily this one didn't spit on me! The next day I came down to breakfast and said, 'Who put that goddamn llama in my bedroom?' And everyone said, 'Llama? What llama?' And the next night we had to go to dinner at a psychiatrist's and Dodie couldn't make it, but she called the man and said, 'I wish you'd have a little talk with Chippy. He's having trouble seeing llamas.' I never heard the end of it!"

These days, Chippy still continues his long-established routine. He works a full day each day, breaking for lunch at a restaurant on the New Meadows River in Bath. There he sits in a solarium overlooking the river where he can watch for waterfowl (he always carries binoculars) and

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observe the action at the marina where he keeps his Boston Whaler, in which he loves to go blue-fishing. Chippy still turns out an average of four and a half near-life-sized carvings each year, often traveling down to the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology to take measurements from its extensive collection of stuffed birds and always working on commission, mostly for collectors who are avid birders themselves.

His work is well represented in the Leigh Yawkey Woodsun Art Museum, in Wausau, Wisconsin, which has the foremost carved-bird collection in the country. Chippy was awarded the Master Wildlife Artist medal by the museum in 1984, the year after it was awarded to Roger Tory Peterson, and he still shows in its annual "Birds in Art" show, as he's been doing since 1979. Just last fall he was in a two-man show at the Wendell Gilley Museum in Southwest Harbor, Maine. His work was also featured in the Down East Wildlife Show, held several years ago in Freeport, Maine. "The Governor came and presented me with a plaque proclaiming that August third is Charles Greenough Chase Day," he chuckles, "so every August third I can get drunk!"

Chippy's still working on his "life list," the birder's list of species seen and identified over a

lifetime. "I got three hundred and fifty new birds on my first trip to Africa—new birds I'd never seen before in my life!" he says excitedly. "And then on my honeymoon safari with Dodie, going to some of the same places, I got seventy more! I went to Australia and got two hundred and sixty-five new ones just like that! You can't miss on a new continent. Well, I do keep my lists, it's a fun thing to do. I've got two thousand four hundred and ninety-seven on my life list. I tried to make twenty-five hundred on my last trip to India, but I didn't quite make it."

At eighty-six, Chippy's still working on his life list, still traveling to exotic new places to add to it, although now he has to wear a glycerine patch and avoid exerting himself. "I was born when Theodore Roosevelt was president of the United States," he points out. "I don't mind using the patches and taking the pills as long as I live a while longer. I doubt if I'll make a hundred," he says thoughtfully. "But I might!"

Looking back, Chippy wouldn't choose any differently, he says. "If I had gotten married and had wanted to carve but couldn't because I had to keep my job in a bank or something like that, it would have been horrible." After all, he points out, "You only get one life."



