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ELSE BIGTON -NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN FOLK ARTIST

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You don't need to be Norwegian to appreciate the multiple talents of Else Bigton, folk artist of Barronett, Wisconsin. Though she earns her living as a cabinet maker and wood carver, she is also a skilled weaver and knife maker.

Else Bigton and her husband, Phillip Odden, are co-owners

of the Norsk Wood Works of Barronett. They produce one-of-a-kind heirlooms owned and treasured, so far, by people from forty states and ten countries.

Else was born in Aalesund, Norway, where her family still lives. She is a graduate of a Norwegian trade school in weaving.

But it was at the prestigious Hjerlid Trade School for woodcarvers at Dovre, Gudbrandsdalen, Norway, that she befriended an American student who could barely speak and understand Norwegian. She was so helpful, in fact, that Phillip Odden soon presented her

with a "mangle board" which he had carved himself. According to Norwegian folk custom, if the woman accepts the mangle board she has accepted a marriage proposal. They wed in traditional Norwegian costume in Else's home town in December, 1978.

In 1979 they graduated from the Hjerlid School where Else specialized in cabinet making and Phillip in carving.

Few countries have a richer tradition of the art of woodcarving than Norway. Arrogant dragons from the powerful art of the Vikings decorated the Norwegian "stave" churches peculiar to Norway about 1,300 A.D. When Christianity spread into Norway, the carvers added the cross,

grapevine, acanthus leaf, and the symbolic lions and eagles of the Crusaders. Even when the Industrial Revolution transformed the rest of Europe, it almost bypassed Norway. So the old Norsemen continued to carve in wood. It was not unusual for several generations to use the same house and furnishings.

It is this culture that Else and Phillip perpetuate in their life in Wisconsin.

Though they work together, Else and Phillip work independently according to their special skills and strengths.

"We don't take guidance very well from each other so we have found we work best by not interfering," Else says.

Though Else may appear delicate, she is skilled in the use of the huge electrical woodworking tools. "Since I was trained as a cabinet maker," explains Else, "I will do the technical drawing. I will figure out the dimensions and how things should be put together."

They buy lumber from local Wisconsin sawmills, air dry it, and select it for the proper grain direction, uniformity, density,

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and moisture content. Else will use any wood that a client may request but she prefers to carve in butternut. Birch, pine, and baswood are also popular.

She transfers her original designs to the wood and carves them entirely by hand sometimes using as many as 60 different tools for one design. Just to keep her tools sharp is a demanding task. It takes time and concentration to achieve the complicated patterns. European joining techniques allow the wood to expand or contract as the weather changes. She mixes her own water base stains and uses a penetrating oil finish.

Small pieces such as boxes, mirrors, shelves, and frames can be made in a few weeks. Larger pieces such as a dining room tables and chairs may take several months of work. Baby cradles are popular items ordered by doting grandparents. Prices vary depending on the wood used, the size of the item, and the intricacy of the carving.

Usually Else and Phillip will work on orders according to their schedules. However, some women, especially, will request that Else make and sign their order, appreciating the fact that there are not many world-famous women woodcarvers.

In fact, this summer Else goes for the "gold" - an honor bestowed to the winners of eight points in a yearly juried competition

sponsored by the Vesterheim, the Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa.

Carvers may enter three carvings in each yearly contest and are awarded three points for a blue ribbon, two points for a red, and one point for a white. Entrants do not need to be Norwegian

but they must carve in the Norwegian style.

Else has won six points in previous competitions. This year she plans to enter three pieces, one of which is a Kubbestol. A Kubbestol was the only chair found in the Norwegian peasant home and was reserved for the head of the household. It is carved from a single log, hollowed out so that the base conceals storage and the back continues upward to form a long and comfortable curve.

When Else wins the gold medal, she will be the first woman to do so. The Vesterheim has previously honored six male woodcarvers, one of whom is Phillip Odden.

The three day Nordic Fest will be held this year on July 26, 27, and 28th. Else and Phi will also exhibit their work this summer at Door County, Wisconsin, and the Host Fest at Minot, South Dakota.

The Kohler Museum, of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, has picked samples of Else and Phi's work as part of a two year traveling

exhibit of Wisconsin folk art.

If you go through Decorah, Iowa, on a vacation, stop and eat at McDonald's. It is decorated in the Norwegian Viking style and displays 30 of their carvings.

Or plan to visit the Norwegian Pavilion at Epcot Center, Disneyworld, Florida, when it is finished in 1988. Their names are already on display there, as two of the three American woodcarver# and two Norwegian woodcarvers to be asked to contribute their work for this permanent exhibition.

Or if you drive through northwest Wisconsin, visit the showrooms of the Scandinavian Import shop owned by Phi's mother

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in Barronett. Or visit the workrooms themselves when they hold Open House on Friday and Saturday of every Thanksgiving weekend.

It is only in the evenings that Else has time to weave and make knives. "I earn my living as a cabinet maker and carver, but I love to weave."

She accepts orders for weaving and knives just so she can keep up her skills.

It is in the "junk" room of their home in a converted country schoolhouse near Barronett surrounded by the woods and lakes that she loves that Else keeps her Swedish loom. "I pick out my wool in Norway when I visit there every other year and have it shipped over because that is what I am used to working with. The hardest part of weaving is to set up the loom itself - to set up the right tensions of the thread and tie the pattern into it. After that is done, it's just fun to sit and play with the pedals," according to Else.

Else learned knife-making by taking a week long course one year at the Vesterheim. "Of course, it helped that I was able to understand the visiting Norwegian instructor," Else smiles. She made a belt knife and sheath for a present for Phil which he wears all of the time. Now she plans to make him a "twin" knife set for his belt. "Twin knives are common for men in Norway," Else explains.

"I start out with a flat sheet of leather for the sheath and three pieces of steel, one hard piece and two soft pieces. I like to use birch bark for the handle, and then I use silver or brass for the cap."

A twin knife set may take Else one hundred hours of "evening" work and cost more than \$125.00. However, such knives are meant to last a lifetime and in Norway are passed down as treasured family heirlooms.

Else has never allowed her left-handedness to be a handicap although many tools are designed for the right handed. "You just learn to work around it," Else explains. "Right handed plastic scissors can really hurt. With hand tools it doesn't make any difference. In fact, carvers are supposed to be ambidextrous. That way you can just switch hands as needed, rather than move around the piece on which you are carving."

"I did have to get a jigsaw made to a new design, however. The old one blew air into my eyes every time I used it," Else says.

"Growing up as a left-handed child in Norway, I heard many horror stories," continues Else. "Parents would tie the left hands behind their children's backs to force them to use the right hands."

"I was more fortunate. Thirteen students out of my class of 26 in school were left-handed. So no one tried to change any of us!"

American collectors have made folk art a hot item. In addition to its beauty and emotional appeal, ethnic art is practical for every day use.

Interestingly enough, Else and Phil have many customers from Norway itself because woodcarvers in Norway can no longer afford to work fulltime at carving. Indeed, Else and Phil may be the only Norwegian-

American woodcarvers who are able to support themselves by working in their chosen field.

Through her multiple talents, this Norwegian immigrant contributes her own bright strands to the colorful fabric of contemporary American life.

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