

CARVING PROFILE

500 Chains: A World Record?

by Jim A. Anderson

Once he started carving, Elmer Marting Sr. had trouble putting his knife down.

In fact, he didn't put his knife down until he had hand-carved 500 chains throughout his lifetime—385 of which are displayed in the Marting Carving Room at the Monona (Iowa) Historical Museum and Willa Helwig History Center. Along with the chains, there are also many animals that he carved on display in the carving room.

Marting was a farmer but he always dabbled with woodcarving. "He was always whittling on the farm just using a hoof knife," his son Elmer Marting Jr. said.

Marting sold his farm in 1961 and moved to Postville, Iowa, in 1962. He tried fishing and playing cards as hobbies, but soon became bored with those things. It was a Christmas present in 1962 that would ultimately lead him to his love of woodcarving, and making chains. It was then that his family gave him an X-acto knife carving kit. That kit along with a Dremel tool were the only tools Marting ever used to make his carvings.

Marting's first carvings were just animals because it was a challenge to make the links right for a chain. But through a lot of time and trials, Marting became proficient at making the interlocking chains.

All of Marting's carvings were done from single pieces of wood. At first, Marting used basswood for his chains but the wood proved to be too soft, so he moved on to harder woods. He would get different kinds of wood from all over the country. He had relatives in Florida and California who would provide him with the wood he

needed, and in return, he would then give them a carved animal. He carved 2-, 3-, 4-, 5-, and 6-bar twisted chains and was working on a 7-bar twisted chain before he had a stroke in 1991. He ended up making chains from a remarkable 85 different kinds of wood. He had a goal of making a chain from 100 different kinds of wood but came up just short.

He carved chains out of broom handles, pencils (for writing chain letters... a running joke), toothpicks, and matchsticks. And each creation had the Marting signature located somewhere in the chain.

According to his son, his dad never said how long it took him to make a chain. "As a woodcarver, you can't measure fun and time," Marting Jr. said. "It was fun and gratification to him, but it did take a lot of desire and patience."

Most of the chains Marting Sr. carved were stored in an unheated garage. And he never tried to fix a broken chain.

"If he broke a chain," his son said, "he had two chains."

He loved to show off his woodcarvings—often taking his carvings to Monona and MacGregor, Iowa, where he won many ribbons in woodcarving competitions.

The stroke in 1991 ultimately ended his ability to carve, but he wanted to share what he had accomplished with the public. He finally got the chance to see the specially built 20-foot by 20-foot room at the Monona Historical Museum just before he died in 1992.



Monona (Iowa) Historical Museum,
home to the Elmer Marting Sr. carving collection.



Elmer Marting Jr. displays some of his
father's woodcarvings.

"I can just see him in the room while it was being constructed saying how nice it would be to have people come in and see the carvings," his son said. "He wanted the people to see the carvings and enjoy them."

According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, it is recognized as the largest display of hand-carved chains in the world by one individual, even though there is no known category at this time.

But his son is making a challenge.

"We're trying to find out if there is another display like this in the world," Marting Jr. said.

Among the many hand-carved chains, three stand out. There are two 20-foot chains, each made out of a 16-foot board. And the other is an amazing American flag made out of 1,380 pieces. On top of the flag is the hat that Marting Sr. wore when he did his carvings.

Marting Jr. manages the Marting Carving Room, but is a relative newcomer to carving himself. He only seriously started carving over the last four years. He does wish he had been more interested in it when his dad was still living.

"I never really recognized the desire and patience my dad had for his carving," he said. "I feel disappointed in myself that I didn't spend a lot of time with him while he was carving."

In addition to housing the carvings of Marting Sr., the room also serves as a host to a year-round biweekly carving group. The group meets on Tuesdays from 1-5 p.m. and Thursday nights from 6-9:30 p.m.

Elsewhere in the museum, there are carvings from Postville, Iowa, native Gustav Pufahl. Pufahl also did hand-carved chains and carvings using just a jackknife. The Monona Historical Museum is open from 1-4 p.m. Monday through

Fridays, and on Saturday and Sunday by appointment. For more information, call (563)539-8083 or visit the website: www.mononahistoricalmuseum.org.

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Many of the carvings on display at the museum... including the hat Marting always wore while working.