

Chapter 3 - A Hidden Talent

One day, the mighty Michelangelo was asked how in the world he had produced his beautiful carving of David.. Michelangelo is quoted as saying, “On the day I decided to do David, I went to the stone yard, bought a piece of white marble and took it to my work shop. There I knocked off everything that didn’t look like David.”

Making no claim to talent anywhere within a thousand miles of Michelangelo, I once discovered I can do what he suggested. There are 25 or 30 pieces of sculpture in existence which show I can let a figure out of several kinds of material by cutting away or knocking off everything that doesn’t look like the figure I see in it. Eskimo sculptors, who work mostly in ivory say, “We see an animal in it and let it out.”

Now, when I begin a carving, I focus on the wisdom of Michelangelo and the Eskimos.

I have carried a pocket knife since my sixth birthday. But I had to reach my thirty-sixth year before I discovered my talent for carving. That happy finding came to light while we were on a trip to Hawaii. I don’t play golf and I don’t like

to ride rented horses. So, beyond enjoying the wonderful sights, sounds and smells of Hawaii, my activities in those islands consisted of swimming and keeping my wife company. One afternoon she and I were walking on the beach and I was utterly bored. I looked down and saw a six inch piece of wood floating onto the beach. I picked it up and looked it over. Suddenly, I saw something in it. When I confirmed that what I saw was a beautiful woman, I took out my pocket knife and began cutting away everything that didn't look like the lady. Then, while studying the wood, I got another surprise. There were two figures in that wood.. Held vertically it showed me a beautiful woman whose ample left breast was exposed because she had raised her left elbow and drawn her robe upward. Viewed horizontally, the side of the woman's head and her raised elbow became the open mouth of a whale. Her curvaceous hip and leg became the whale's back and her feet widened into a whale's tail. I continued to work on the woman's figure until my wife led us into a place where we could get a cool drink. As we took a seat, she noticed I was working on something and asked what it was. Just for the fun of keeping a secret, I turned the wood on its side and showed her the whale. She made no

comment. Quite interested in letting those two creatures out of the wood, I carried it with me the following day. That afternoon my wife asked how the whale was coming along. I showed her the whale and she complimented my work. I kept up the game of, “the lady and the whale” until I had created the figure of a truly voluptuous woman. Then I held it upright, called it to my wife’s attention and asked, “What do you think?”

She took the piece, studied it carefully and said, “She’s beautiful.”

On another beach in Hawaii I found a piece of lava that would serve as a base and brought it home to Lubbock. Here, I glued the carving to the lava and handed it to my wife. That time she said, “We’ll call her “Lady of the Pacific.”

Having found a talent I didn’t know I had, I began carving regularly, producing piece after piece over the years. When we cut down a mulberry tree on our acreage, a large branch served to create the head and neck of my horse, Basil’s Kipling King. When I turned my efforts from wood to wax and bronze, that horse served as a model for a unicorn-- the mythical animal that some say was hiding while Noah loaded the ark. Once, my nephew brought me the massive root of a

mesquite tree. In it I found an eagle with a three feet wing span. A friend who owned a wood working business gave me a piece of teak. From that I brought out a barefooted monk holding a begging bowl. My wife named him "Govinda, the Friend of Siddhartha." Siddhartha became the Buddha. When I chose to carve soapstone, I produced what my wife called, "Admiral Byrd and his sled dog."

A branch of a mesquite tree with the bark still on it became a winged dragon as one might have seen written about in "Lord of the Rings" by J.R.R. Tolkien.

I used the top sixteen inches of an old bois 'd arc post to make the Comanche Chief, Quannah Parker—the only carving I have with me at Carillon.

Once my wood working friend thought he had me stumped. Handing me an eighteen inch piece of oak fire wood with the bark still on it he said, "I'll bet you can't see anything in this." Not to be outdone I said, "I see Jonathan Livingston Sea Gull." After I finished a seagull with long graceful wings, I left the round bottom as a pedestal. If one rocks that piece of fire wood, Jonathan looks like he's flying.

One Sunday morning, after I'd been carving for several years, Gloria Hille, a friend and longtime fellow-member of

Saint John's United Methodist Church, stopped me in the hall and said, "Basil, why don't you carve an eagle for Saint John's?" Before thinking, I asked, "Why an eagle?"

"You know," she said, "an eagle is the symbol of Saint John."

Then I remembered. In about 325 A.D., Pope Jerome and his cohorts decided they needed to select a winged creature to represent the four apostles – Matthew Mark, Luke and John. Matthew's symbol was a masculine angel. Mark was associated with a winged lion. Luke was identified by a Griffin, and an eagle was chosen for Saint John. Luke's symbol, a griffin, is a mythical creature best described as a cross between an eagle and a lion. It has the head and wings of an eagle and the body, legs and tail of a lion.

After Gloria Hille straightened me out, I told her I'd carve an eagle to be placed in our church. The first, most important and hardest task I faced was to find a piece of wood with an eagle in it. One day I dropped by to see my friend, Douglas Carlisle, who was quite ill. During our visit I mentioned my problem with the eagle. "Come with me," he said. "I'll bet I have just the thing you need."

We went to his work shop. There he picked up and

handed me a piece of wood, the likes of which, I had never seen before and have not seen since. It was a slab of red cedar, three feet long and a foot thick. I took one look and saw an eagle. But the bird occupied only the top half of the piece of wood. I turned to Douglas and told him I saw an eagle, but I only needed the top half of the slab. "That's all right," he said. "I'll cut it in two. I want to use the other half myself."

Turning on his table saw he cut the wood in half and handed me the part I wanted. I went home a happy man. Unfortunately Douglas never got to use his half. He died shortly after our visit.

Later on I went to the library and looked up pictures of the winged representatives of the Apostles. In its picture, the eagle of Saint John stood tall, erect and dignified. His eyes were turned to the right looking into his elevated right wing. The left wing matched the elevation of the right. The thoughtful glance and partially folded wings gave him an appearance of solemn contemplation. His head was surrounded by a halo.

I set to work to release the calm, thoughtful, powerful bird which I saw in the wood. The appearance of feathered

legs and sharp claws were created by small branches cut from a Japanese pine tree in our front yard. A local metallurgist sold me a thin sheet of copper out of which I cut a shining halo.

I took a month to release the eagle, but the hard part lay ahead.. I still had to put the name, St. John, under the figure. Untrained and without experience, I thought long and hard about how to do the lettering. Then I remembered my mother's big Bible with colored pictures and artistic printing. With serious misgivings, I imitated the printing in that Bible and sketched the words I needed on the cedar. After sharpening my knife, I spent a gut wrenching Saturday morning carving St. John's name under the eagle.. The deed was done.

At some time in the middle 1980s I offered my work to the congregation at St. John's and saw it well accepted. During the two months I took to release the eagle from the cedar, our pastor, Ted Dotts, had given his approval and encouragement. He was quoted to me by a mutual friend as saying, "I'm glad Basil didn't produce a military eagle."

I was glad I had done my homework and carved an eagle in the image of a drawing said to date from the third

century-- the time of Pope Jerome.

I wish all who read this could visit St. John's United Methodist Church at the corner of 15th and University Avenue here in Lubbock. I would hope our beautiful stained glass windows with their descending doves, the lovely handcrafted wall banners and our magnificent organ would lead your thoughts to God. And then maybe, just maybe, you could take a moment to look over on the right, beyond the baptismal font, and see the eagle I carved to remind us of Saint John, the Apostle, whose name is borne by the church I love so much.

About St. John's Methodist Church. For more information visit <https://www.stjohnslubbock.org/>