

Master Horner

PROFILES



This is the third in a series of articles on those members of the Honourable Company of Horners who have achieved the status of Master Horner.

There are only six members who have attained this status and each one is an integral part of the Guild, whether it is in their demonstrated artisan skills, leadership abilities, or being instrumental in the growth and development of our organization.

In accordance with the Guild's Standing Rules, for anyone to become a Master Horner, an individual must "demonstrate a superlative level of ability in carving, heating and pressing, turning, engraving, and integrating woods and metals with cow horn by presenting three horn objects that demonstrate his or her ability to the Awards Committee for evaluation," plus give "an original written and oral presentation to the HCH at an annual meeting or to another accredited organization on some aspect of horn working or its history." Needless to say this is a high standard that has been met by only a few members and each has played a vital role in making the HCH what it is today.

This issue's "Master Horner Profiles" will spotlight William "Wild Willy" Frankfort, an individual who is deeply passionate about hornworking, its related activities, and the Guild. Once you read this article, you should better understand "Wild Willy" and what makes him such a unique, dedicated and talented individual. ❖

William "Wild Willy" Frankfort

Master Horner

The first thing that struck me when I met "Wild Willy" at Fort Frederick was his interest and passion for hornworking.

I am not one to make snap judgments of folks, but Willy didn't afford me that opportunity. My initial impression was that this guy is a talented artist, accomplished writer (I purchased his first book), a very sincere person, and someone I would like to have at my back in a bar fight! Throughout this article I will quote Willy directly, as his answers to various topics are the true essence of his character.

Willy was born in Illinois in January 1960, and I think that those born in the winter time period tend to be hardy, robust and durable sorts. He and his family now live in Pennsylvania. He has been a commercial artist, illustrator and cartoonist for over twenty years and worked for several ad agencies and screen printing companies. Currently he is a full time horner / scrimshander and writes two editorial columns for a small newspaper.

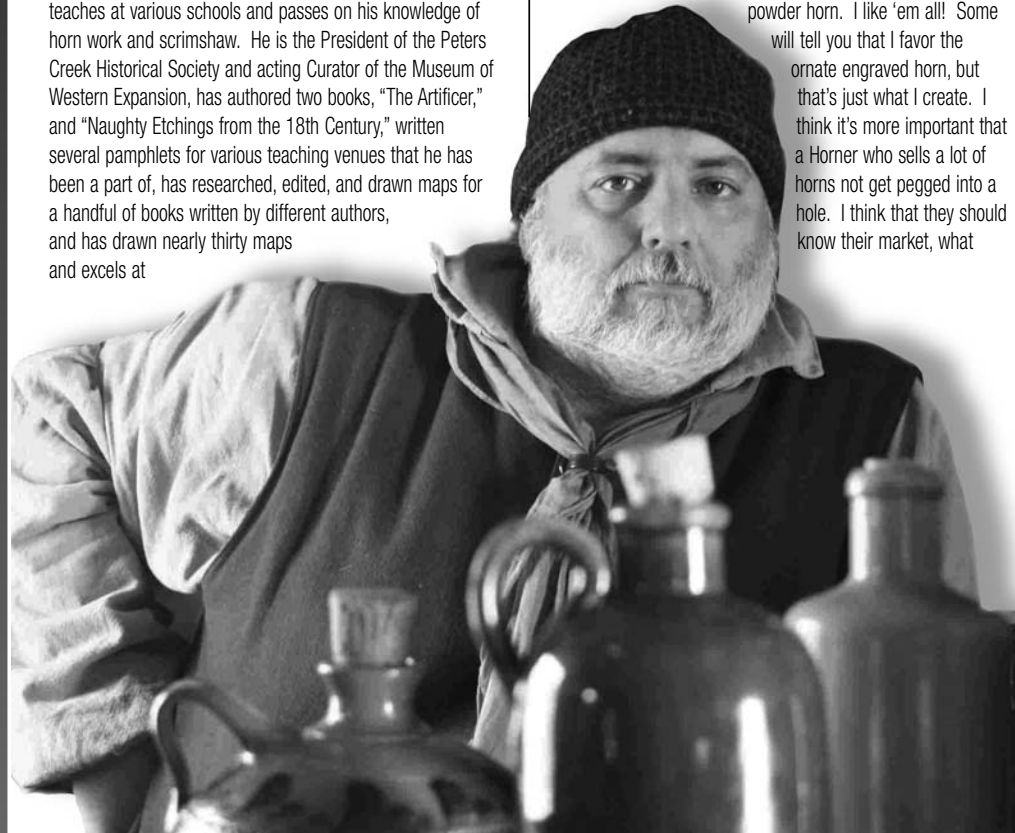
"Wild Willy," as his nickname implies, is not one who fits into the typical 9-5 job stuffed into some bland cubicle with posties all over his computer. In addition to the above, for the last two years he has been working with Prickett's Fort teaching, "History through the Arts," which is a course he also teaches at various schools and passes on his knowledge of horn work and scrimshaw. He is the President of the Peters Creek Historical Society and acting Curator of the Museum of Western Expansion, has authored two books, "The Artificer," and "Naughty Etchings from the 18th Century," written several pamphlets for various teaching venues that he has been a part of, has researched, edited, and drawn maps for a handful of books written by different authors, and has drawn nearly thirty maps and excels at

creating, "Fraktur." Willy also builds furniture and paints signs when time permits. As he so succinctly puts it, "Sometimes I git a little busy."

Willy's father introduced him to the art of scrimshaw as a small boy. In 1972 he earned about forty-five dollars engraving knife handles and his father said, "Hell, that beats digging ditches." So he kept up with it till the local scrimshaw market dried up. I was surprised to learn that Willy didn't start making powder horns until 1994 after a work accident, even though he has been shooting black powder firearms for about forty years.

When asked about the type of horn work that most interests him, Willy responded that he is interested in all types and his work covers a wide range. As Willy said, "I have spent the last twenty years or so listening to people tell me that the items I make never existed. I like proving them wrong. I have assembled hundreds of photos to back up what I have already made and keep them on a DVD."

As far as a favorite style of powder horn, Willy's answer was what one would expect: "I don't really have a favorite powder horn. I like 'em all! Some will tell you that I favor the ornate engraved horn, but that's just what I create. I think it's more important that a Horner who sells a lot of horns not get pegged into a hole. I think that they should know their market, what



they're best at making, what artwork and time period are correct, and turning out a good representation. Whether that be a reproduction of an original or a correct original representation."



Another item I'll briefly mention is that when I asked Willy to comment on the awards and special achievements he has attained I was somewhat surprised as he mentioned that he has won over thirty ribbons at Dixon's Gun Fair, several ribbons from the Honourable Company of Horners, is also a published artist and author and then he stated that he is the Father of Zack and Ethan Frankfort and husband to Brenda. Rather insightful, I think.

He has worked on several horn projects that are different from the normal powder horns and said, "I think my experiments and the willingness to share ideas and information are what I am most proud of. I have this idea that I'm not gonna live forever, so I think that the information I have gathered should be shared with other horners. I am looking forward to completing the 2009, 1 Of 1000 powder horn and I think that you all will be surprised when you see it."

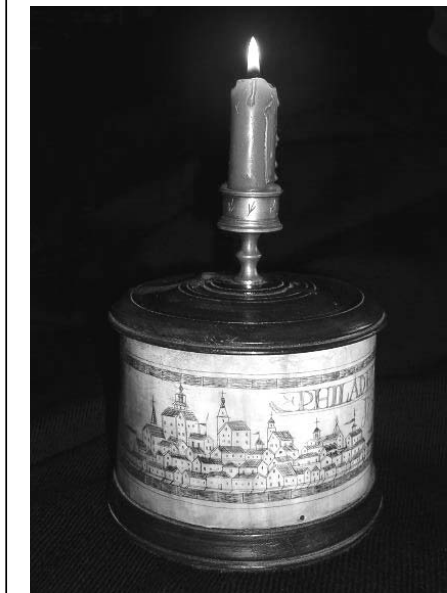
Willy is not one to pull any punches, even with himself. One of the items I ask each Master Horner to provide is a photo of their workshop. Willy told me before he took any photos, that he wanted to clean it up a bit, which he is still doing. He confided that, "My shop is a dirty, crowded, cave... That turns out more work than most other shops which are larger and cleaner... But, there is always

space for someone to stand, watch and learn. Be warned, if you come to my shop, I will put you to work!" One day I think I'll take him up on that.

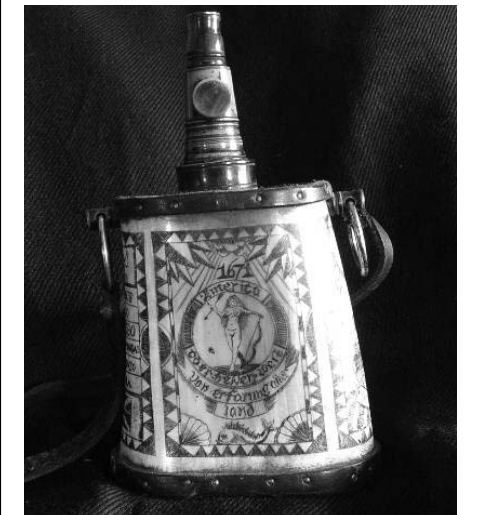
One of the major attributes that sets the Masters apart from others is their dedication to research and Willy is no exception as he explains: "I have viewed numerous collections, public and private. I think the best was Dressler's museum and home. I managed to get several photos and the Dresslers were very kind to suffer our intrusion. I have been fortunate to be able to visit many small museums and after the Guild meeting at Fort Pitt and the subsequent articles in the local newspapers, I saw many horns owned by local folks that were brought to the shop. It astounds me to see what's out there and nobody knows exists."

An avid outdoorsman, Willy and a handful of other like minded folks started "The Rangers of the Ohio Company," an F&I group located in Southwestern Pennsylvania. He is also a member of "The 1st Virginia Regiment/Peter's Creek Rangers," president of the "Peters Creek Historical Society," curator of "The Museum of Western Expansion" and fervent black powder shooter. He also belongs to the Dormont and Mt. Lebanon Sportsmen's club and shoots at about eight or ten other local clubs which are all within 15 minutes of his home.

Another topic I like for a Master Horner to address is if their horn work has been featured in any publications. The response was somewhat surprising: "I have had small things featured in most magazines, but no real in depth articles. I was asked a few years ago why I haven't been featured in any of the magazines or why I don't make it to all of the "happening" events. The truth is I work and sell my goods at reasonable prices that most folks can afford. So many times I sell just about everything I have. I also will not kiss ass to get into a publication. If I don't like what



you're doing I'll tell you. That was my feud with the NMLRA. For more than a few years, craftsmen were gouged and bore the brunt of costs incurred at rendezvous. Something that the NMLRA would not admit to. (If you pay your dues and donated goods and were asked yearly for more donations to the point that before you set up a camp you were 500 dollars in the hole, it could leave a sour taste in your mouth.) I think the membership would have liked to know how many successful rendezvous were floated on the backs of the craftsmen. Well, I was never bashful about saying that to any one of their reps. Needless to say, I haven't been in their magazine." (Editor's note: You will soon Willy! Things



ought to get pretty interesting when Willy presents his 1 of a 1,000 powder horn that he is doing for the HCH to present this year to the NMLRA to help that organization raise money.)

What about his favorite publications, other than The Horn Book? As expected Willy is a voracious reader and reads several books and magazines each year. He doesn't have a favorite because when he gets them, he "consumes them all." He has a large reference library in both books and magazines and it is not unusual to see colored clips and markers sticking out of the pages. When asked what he plans to do with his books, he simply said, "I plan on giving it to a small museum that needs them, along with my reference and contact books. (Right after my boys sell the originals and first editions.)" Vintage Willy.

It should be noted that Willy has been a member of the Honourable Company of Horners since 1996, was Guild Master in 2006, and currently serves as the Awards Chairman. Like the other Master Horners I have interviewed, Willy Frankfort is one who is sincere, willing to share his knowledge, takes the time to answer any and all questions no matter how busy he may be, and like the others he is indeed a credit to the Honourable Company of Horners! ■

Editor's Note: To read more about "Wild Willy" and view some extraordinary pieces of his work go to:
www.powderhornsandscrimshaw.mysite.com