

Master Horner

PROFILES

This is the seventh in a series of articles on those members of the Honourable Company of Horners who have achieved the status of Master horner. Currently there are nine members who have attained this status and each one has played an integral role in the Guild, whether it is in their demonstrated artisan skills, leadership abilities, or being instrumental in the growth and development of our organization.

John Proud | Roland Cadle | John Kiselica
Lee Larkin | Art DeCamp | Joe Becker
Willy Frankfort | Erv Tschanz | Ron Ehler

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.

John Kiselica

Master Horner

Throughout life you meet many people and are fortunate indeed if at least a handful of those are truly unique in some special way.

For those individuals are the ones who significantly impact your life in some manner and run the gambit from parents, relatives, friends and even a few may be at the opposite end of the spectrum, if you understand my meaning. Well, I must admit that during my life I have had the opportunity of meeting some very unique individuals and am happy to report that the vast majority have been of the positive nature.

Most all Guild members are fortunate in that they have had some form of contact with our Master Horners, all truly unique individuals. Look at those who have already been featured in *The Horn Book* and how they were depicted: John Proud-quiet, involved, thorough / Lee Larkin-serious, studious, researcher extraordinaire / Willy Frankfort- artist, designer, fighter, your choice be careful / Roland Cadle-intense, driven, one who leads / Art DeCamp-the quiet loud type / Erv Tschanz-the professor. Now we have another unique individual to add to our list and he, like his fellow Masters, is indeed one who has a positive impact on those he meets.

The person in question is John Kiselica and fortunately he is one of those unique individuals that defy all human traits of normalcy. Although I will expound more on this later, in a nutshell John is a highly talented jeweler who designs, produces, repairs and restores intricate pieces of jewelry during the day, then at night teaches gunsmithing courses at the local community college, and in his spare time likes to attend muzzleloading events. Now is this normal? I think not!

I was recently doing some reading about Vincent van Gogh and to me John, a second generation grandson of a Russian born steelworker,

is like the famous painter, who was also a rather unique fellow. There are a lot of similarities between the two as both are highly talented artists, although of different venues. Van Gogh studied art to give happiness by creating beauty; John likes the "high art" style of horn work by combining ivory, shell, wood and precious metals to create beauty. Van Gogh liked to indulge in night long discussions followed by painting all day, whereas John has also been known to submerge himself in night long discussions followed by working all day and teaching and working in his shop late into the evenings. But the one quality shared by the two that I find most revealing is that Van Gogh, even though he produced approximately 900 paintings in the brief period of 10 years, only sold one painting during his lifetime. John, to my knowledge, has also produced many horn items but has only sold one piece of his horn work and it hasn't even been made yet! The only glaring difference is that both of John's earlobes

are intact and everyone knows about Van Gogh's ear problem!

From Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, John worked in his grandfather's hardware store while in high school and following graduation undertook a two year apprenticeship at a jewelry trade shop learning all aspects of repair and custom work. Over the years he has been intricately involved in all facets of the jewelry business and today, needless to say, he is an artisan of the highest order.

History has always been of extreme interest to John going back as far as the 8th grade when his history teacher made him write a final paper despite his having a cast on his right hand and could hardly write! However, he persevered, but it wasn't until 1985 when a friend let him shoot his flintlock rifle that his interest was truly intensified. Soon after



that John built his first rifle, joined a local group that held a monthly trail shoot and started attending local muzzleloading shoots and rendezvous. His two sons have also gotten involved and added greatly to John's favorite pastime.

His interest in horn work started with the building of that first muzzleloading rifle but wasn't accelerated until he met Willy Frankfort at a local colonial crafts fair which was also the start of a long and lasting friendship. John finished his first horn just before going to the HCH Annual Meeting in Bedford, Pennsylvania in 2001 and entered it in competition. Although that "exemplary first horn" didn't win a ribbon, he learned a lot and the rest is history.

John enjoys all aspects of horn work, from carving to pressing to using horn as an inlay material. His primary focus is on the "high art" style which he defines as "horn work, mostly European in origin that combines horn with any number of other materials such as ivory, shell, wood and precious metals. Through this unique blend of materials, I believe you can achieve presentation quality objects." This is amply demonstrated in his favorite project to date which is a reproduction French style turtle shell powder flask circa 1760's.

Another project that peaked John's interest was when fellow Guild member Joe Becker was contacted by Disney Studios to recreate Queen Susan's horn for the premiere of the 2008 movie "The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian." Joe did the horn work and John made all the silver mounts and mouthpiece along with a custom marble and brass stand. The horn was auctioned off at the premier by Disney for charity.

Now it's always interesting when interviewing a Master to see their response when asked about their workshops, particularly the nicknames they are labeled with and John's shop is no different. His wife Trish affectionately refers to it as the "Hole!" She stated, "I came up with that name because it's like a black hole; he goes down there every free moment he has and it swallows him up for hours!" John, being the consummate intellect that he is, doesn't even try to refute the charge!

As with all the Masters, research and studying original horn work is an important aspect of their endeavors. John's favorite and most inspirational collection was his visit to Jim Dressler's private collection of horns and early Americana. He also makes extensive use of old Christy's Catalogues as they contain excellent

photographs with in-depth descriptions. John noted that a lot of the items come from private collections and most likely end up in another private collection never to be seen for years.

John has won many ribbons at Dixon's Gunmakers Fair in both the accoutrement and gun building divisions. In the accoutrement area he has won Best Historical for his Musketeer Flask and three consecutive Best of Show ribbons. He has also won several ribbons at the HCH gatherings to include a Best of Show. It is not surprising that he is now on the accoutrement judging panel at Dixon's. His work has been featured in the Jan/Feb 2010 edition of the Pennsylvania Magazine, the March 2010 issue of the Industrial Heating Magazine and numerous local newspapers.

In addition to being a member of the Honourable Company of Horners, John is a member of the Contemporary Longrifle Association, the National Muzzleloading Rifle Association, the Dormont-Mt. Lebanon Sportsmen Club and the Conneaut Lake Sportsmen Club.



He has contributed immensely to our Guild as he served as Guildmaster from 2006-2007, followed by Chairman of the Membership



Committee for three years, and recently took over as the Committee Chairman for the HCH Logo items. He has always been a staunch supporter of *The Horn Book* by being a sounding board for new ideas, contributing articles, and doing photography and proofreading along with his wife Trish.

John is a truly unique individual, is as dedicated as he is meticulous and the Guild is fortunate indeed to have a member of this caliber who has provided the necessary direction and guidance for its growth and expansion over the years. As with the other Masters, he truly cares about the future and stability of the Honourable Company of Horners. With individuals such as John Kiselica in the Guild, the HCH will always have a bright future. ■