

Wood carver is an angler at heart

GONE FISHIN'

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

2/12/10

At the Branford River Festival this past October, a white-haired man sat hunched at one end of a picnic table, industriously chopping a log down to size. A small girl timidly approached one of the fish he had on display, as if waiting for it to writhe or snap.

"Is it real?" she asked her mother above the thocking sound of the hatchet. A few other onlookers took stock of the pieces, wondering at their astonishing trueness to life and sheer whimsy. Soon a crowd gathered.

It wasn't easy to say what was more remarkable: the exquisite beauty of the fish or the vigor with which the wood carver went about his work. What's clear is that Bill Brody, 89, whose fish carvings are on display at the Blackstone Memorial Library through Feb. 21, is a natural artist — or, one might even say, a natural phenomenon. Not that the self-deprecating Brody will cop to it.

"It's just folk art, what I do," he says, shrugging.

From the time he was a youngster, however, he showed an ability to draw with uncanny likeness and an instinct for balance and design. With no formal training, he was selected for a rapid advanced drawing class in his New York high school; his teacher, no doubt observing his gift, put him in charge of the other students and awarded him a grade of 110.

Then, for roughly 50 years, life intervened. Brody served for three years in the Army Corps of Engineers and the Air Corps in the European theater during World War II; after marrying his wife Harriet, he settled in the Bensonhurst area of Brooklyn and went into business to support his family. Still, the creative impulse never left



Brody works on a Brook Trout in his basement workshop at his Branford Condo. Brody estimates that each fish takes some 30-40,000 brush strokes after the initial carving is completed. Photos by Peter Casolino



89-year-old Bill Brody shows off a Northern Pike, complete with the fish's realistic sharp teeth. Under the master carver's hands, a fish is released from inside a piece of wood. Photos by Peter Casolino.

See FISHIN', Page 3



Brody works on a Brook Trout in his basement workshop at his Branford Condo. Photo by Peter Casolino.

From page 1

him; in rare moments of leisure, he drew and painted.

Until one afternoon in the late 1980s, that is. Brody was visiting friends in upstate New York. He passed a pile of wood. From the pile he picked out a piece of yellow fir. As it happened, he had caught a pickerel while fishing the day before. "I saw that fish in the piece of wood," says Brody in his kind, crackly voice. There was a little hatchet and a rasp file on the grounds, and he carved the fish into being.

Not long after, Brody was told that he had to cut down an elm tree in the backyard of his Bensonhurst house. The tree was 35 years old. In 1955, Brody had planted it from a bare root he had ordered from a magazine advertisement. It had grown so large that it was interfering with the utility lines in his neighborhood. This was not the first time his backyard was a site of controversy. Years before, Brody was forced to confront the legendary mobster Sammy "The Bull" Gravano, his next-door neighbor, because a recently laid fence by Gravano's men was encroaching on tomatoes Brody was cultivating in his garden.

But that's another story. Suffice to say, Brody was less successful reasoning with the city authorities than with a high-ranking member of the Gambino crime family. He chopped down the elm. From two of the branches, he carved a

muskie fish and an eagle head. When he and Harriet, his wife of 60 years, retired to Connecticut soon afterwards, he transplanted some of the roots that the elm gave off to his daughter's house in Guilford. Both of them took. One now reaches upwards of 50 feet in height.

Once settled in Branford, it was only a matter of time before Brody began surveying his property and the woods nearby for branches and logs. "Wood conforms to the shape of fish," he says. "That's why I carve fish." The simplicity of it also appeals to him.

"No matter where I am, I can pick up a piece of wood and work on it right then and there." He doesn't need much more than his small hatchet to take off the bark and cut it to size and then the rasp file for precision work.

It doesn't hurt to have a good measure of innate ability in his toolbox as well. Which might explain how Brody came so naturally to wood carving. Or perhaps, when he saw the piece of yellow fir in upstate New York, that wood carving was waiting for him. He already knew how to translate his ideas into images on paper and could visualize a two-dimensional pattern in three dimensions — Brody works from drawings of fish that he has enlarged — skills essential for the craft.

Not to mention the patience of Job. Mastering the art of carving is a lengthy process achieved through practice and more practice. It's also

labor-intensive. (In a two-week period of chopping — up to 50,000 strokes for some pieces, Brody says—shaping, and detailing, he lost six pounds.) And like all crafts that depend solely on the human hand — Brody eschews power tools — even a master carver needs lots of time to achieve the ideal of verisimilitude.

That's why it's most satisfying, according to Brody, when someone mistakes one of his fish for the real thing — and not just the little girl at the Branford River Festival.

"Where'd you catch that?" he recalls someone asking when he brought the carving of a blue trout into a sporting goods shop. (The trout is now exhibited at Blue Moon Gallery in Guilford.) Over the years, it's happened more than once. "What I try to do is endow any given piece of wood with life," says Brody, who makes it a rule never to take wood from living trees.

Like most wood carvers (and true to his own policy of "organized disorganization") Brody works on more than one project at a time.

"I might start something and then another idea comes to mind and then one day I'm 19 projects behind," Brody says as he putters around the clutter of tools and hunks of wood in various stages of development in his cozy workshop. "Then I'll find whatever I was working on a month or two later and go back to it."

Unlike most wood carvers, other

non-carving-related projects also might get in the way. Brody volunteers at Blackstone Memorial Library, sorting books for their annual book sale. He's also a founding member of the Branford River Project. For years he served as chairman of the Branford Litter Committee, posting public notices. Looking for "new fields to conquer," he once offered to take over the duties of First Selectman Anthony "Unk" Daros while the First Selectman took his lunch. "I could run this town as well as anyone else," he says with a twinkle in his eye.

Not that Brody's an easy catch. "We were thrilled when Bill agreed to demonstrate his fish carving skills at the festival," said Maria Storm, co-chair of the Branford River Project. According to his wife Harriet, whom Brody credits for his longevity, each time he shows his creations, as happened last October, he's invariably asked if one or another piece is for sale. "I'm not an anti-entrepreneur," he insisted, allowing his wife wouldn't mind if he sold some of his carvings. He's just less interested in purveying his wares than in honing his craft. Eventually, he was persuaded to showcase his pieces at Blackstone Library in February.

"It's simple," says Brody, of the vitality he maintains at 89. "I never look at anything as a mistake. Everything can be adjusted, altered, and made into something else — maybe even something better."