

COURTESY OF GENE BAHR (2)



IN THE

CHIPS

BY MARTIN SILVERSTONE

HOW TO BE RICH WITHOUT MONEY.



THE BUTCHERS AT MY LOCAL GROCERY HAVE A NICKNAME FOR ME—*l'ouragan*, French for “hurricane.” Not really a compliment, it describes how I always seem to be in a rush, and they aren’t far off. Take for instance a recent trip to Sebago, Maine, more than a few hours away, to meet Gene Bahr. His carving work, which I was familiar with through his advertisement in the *Journal*, seemed almost too realistic, and I wanted to know more about how he bestows such a soft, wet look on something so obviously hard and dry as dead basswood. In true “*ouragan*” fashion I decided on the spur of the moment, one afternoon last September, to drive down to get a quick interview and maybe head back the same evening.

It all went well until route 160, a Maine “highway” which seemed to disappear on a bend just outside the tiny town of Denmark. After much driving back and forth and questioning of neighbours, I found Bahr’s log cabin. It was here that the “*ouragan*” was forced to abandon the fast lane. Gene Bahr, woodcarver, artist, sculptor, navy veteran, musician, songwriter, and log-cabin builder is not the person you can categorize in an afternoon. I know this because before leaving, among other highlights, I would be: A. treated to some genuine southern hospitality (yes, in Maine); B. guided through a very eclectic art gallery; C. brought behind the scenes

of a taxidermy workshop (actually under, in the basement); D. given a tour of a homemade sound studio; E. introduced and become friends with Tilly, the German short-haired pointer; F. served an authentic “Alabama” breakfast; and, finally, G. given an impromptu musical concert.

So much for a quick interview. It became immediately apparent that there would be no driving North that evening after I was offered a drink. “Whatever you’re having,” I innocently told my host. As it turns out, Bahr is what we call back home a “two-fister,” so with a Jack Daniels in one hand and a Rolling Rock beer in the other, we sat around a homemade wooden table. The beer and whiskey seemed to only thicken Bahr’s drawl. Although my Canadian ears aren’t tuned in to the various American dialects I had to ask; his just couldn’t be a Maine accent. As it turns out he is originally from Steele, Alabama. Bahr got a taste of Maine after leaving the navy where he served four years after high school, including a few weeks off Vietnam. He came north on vacation with a friend and liked what he found. The forest, the fish, the game suited the young man who fondly remembered hunting and fishing with his uncles and cousins before he was six.

As Bahr retraced how he came to live on this acreage in the Maine woods, we finished the Jack and went further south with a whiskey called Clyde Mays, a bourbon

beautiful fish by David Footer, the dean of Maine fish mounters. Bahr began mounting fish, a process that involves fitting the skin over a prepared form. From there he started handling taxidermy commissions. “Moving skin, arranging the derma,” Bahr took the pains to tell me that the phrase “stuffing” an animal was a very inaccurate term.

That was then and this is now. Bahr, over time, has discovered the secret of slowing the sometime frenetic pace of life enough to enjoy the natural world around us, and takes delight in the rhythms and signs of the changing seasons. Living close to the land, he sees first hand the importance of conservation. When it comes to fish, particularly Atlantic salmon, Bahr has realized the folly of killing the biggest and the best.

Mounting of fish skins is no longer part of Bahr’s life. There seems symmetry in the way a fish led Bahr into taxidermy and now, it’s fish carving that is leading him away. He has combined his talent for sculpture, woodworking and painting to become a premier wood carver. But just as the term “stuffing” inadequately describes the art of taxidermy, so does the term “carving” fail to describe what Bahr does with wood and paint.

As Bahr runs through the steps taken to create his last masterpiece, a 43.5-pound Norwegian Atlantic salmon caught by Axel Wimmer, it’s clear carving has become a true passion for him. “I feel I really have something to contribute to the conservation movement,” he tells me. “From just a photo and a few measurements, I know I can recreate the fish for the angler. And the fish can go free.”

Perhaps it’s the whiskey, but getting home doesn’t seem so important and all of a sudden, this “*ouragan*” is in less of a rush. Bahr kindly offers me a bed in the log cabin. A hand-made wooden banister, fashioned from a tree branch supports me on the way up the stairs. Snuggled under a patchwork quilt, with rain tapping on the tin roof to serenade me, I sleep better than I have in years, waking to the smell of Bahr’s “cowboy coffee.” We linger over a “southern” breakfast, complete with tomatoes from the garden outside. Still in his bathrobe, Bahr explains to me how, after years of working to carve out this home, he is in a happy place. Part of this he attributes to his girlfriend, Donna. She is not here, but her presence can be felt in the decorative corn (also grown in the garden) hanging from the ceiling, and the lovely watercolors on the walls.

Time to check out where Bahr makes a living. It has been a long road to arrive at what he calls, his “little Eden.” But now, his morning commute consists of only the few steps it takes to get from the log cabin to the gallery and workshop. Here, with a fire crackling in the wood stove, Bahr works his magic over the winter. The basswood also comes from his land. He demonstrates how he roughly prepares the block of wood with a stud to hold the piece in the vice. Then he goes to work with a draw knife to shape the larger features. As he works he chats.



MARTIN SILVERSTONE

Go slow say the signs at the entrance to the Bahr homestead (above). In addition to taking the time; care, precision and love are the other ingredients that go into turning a block of wood into a lifelike piece of art (facing page).

first concocted by a WWII veteran living near Conecuh Ridge in Southern Alabama. The moonshiner relied on his wits to keep his family alive during tough times, but it also meant he had to spend time in a Federal penitentiary. Years later, however, he and his son began making the brand legally.

The choice of spirits was appropriate, because Bahr, although not a moonshiner, also lives off the land, using ingredients close at hand to carve out a joyful existence.

A visit to a friend’s cabin on Mousam Lake back in 1972 started it all. There, hanging on the wall, he saw a



COURTESY OF GENE BAHR (2)

“Carving gets spiritual at times. Sometimes something special happens,” he says, struggling to put his feelings into words. “From an object as valueless as a block of wood I get an overwhelming feeling of satisfaction; thankful to create art from nothing.”

Part of that special feeling may harken back to when Bahr was a young boy of six and his grandfather gave him a piece of paper and charcoal and taught him to draw. The encouragement he received then, first helped elicit the feeling of satisfaction he gets when he catches just the right colour and tone for a fish carving.

If home and hearth are the foundation of a man’s happiness, Bahr’s carving work also gives him great joy. In one photo he showed me, he is beaming while holding a completed carved fish. At first the Atlantic salmon looks so real you wonder why the fish is not sagging under its own weight. Bahr hides no secrets and takes great pain to try to explain in detail how he manages to make each fish look so real.

From a photo (yes, you can leave the fish in the water) and a couple of measurements (length, girth; Bahr suggests using the rod as reference), this transplanted Alabaman can reproduce an angler’s salmon to perfection. He gives the fish’s skin depth by painting the deeper colors first,



Basswood (above) is the beginning of a giant Atlantic salmon (top), each scale carved and painted individually. A smaller block of tupelo wood, but no less care and detail, goes into an Eastern bluebird and black-capped chickadee (facing page).

slowly finding the exact surface hues to finish scales that have been painstakingly chiseled out, one at a time.



COURTESY OF GENE BAHR (2)

It's always a wonder to meet someone who has made his living working with his or her own hands and mind. There is an honesty there that can't be bought, and indeed, money seems to hold little interest for Bahr. As if to underline this, before I leave, he decides to give me an impromptu concert. He accompanies himself on the guitar and harmonica, and dedicates both songs to his girlfriend. In his own humble words, Bahr is not the best guitar player or does he have the smoothest voice, but as he strums and sings a tune called "Angel," it all seems to work beautifully.

*I've been looking everyday for an angel.
Someone who is good and kind and true.
I prayed everyday that you would come my way.
I've been looking for an angel like you.*

Too bad I didn't get to meet Donna, she must be special to have inspired such poetry and music. I call for an encore and Bahr introduces another song he wrote, "A Million Dollars Worth of Love." It's a story told to him by a friend who described himself as having a 10 chicken graveyard for a belly. "He had a grin like a possum," he laughs.

This friend helped out a hard-up woman, "enough to make sure she had a place to stay and a car with good tires." His workmates would bug him about how much this arrangement cost him to which his friend responded, "She costs me a little bit of money, but she gives me a million dollars worth of love." Bahr is not wealthy in financial terms, but he has found richness and happiness in the small joys a simple life can provide.

After saying goodbye, I pause on the way out to look back. Bahr waves from his front porch. Signs on the road frame his workshop. "Slow" they say in triplicate. With the words of his song "A Million Dollars" ringing in my ears:

*A million dollars worth of love and it
didn't cost one thin dime,
It sounds crazy I know but it's true.
You look at me through blue eyes and tell me
I'm so fine.
A million dollars worth of love and you're all mine.*

I turn towards home, driving with uncustomary leisure, noticing, for the first time, that the leaves are beginning to change into their colourful autumnal hues.

To see more of Gene Bahr's work visit genebahr.com. Editor Martin Silverstone made his way to Sebago, Maine in September, 2014 to meet the talented artist and musician. 🐾



MARTIN SILVERSTONE