

Allen Man Has Rare Expertise: Bottle Whimsies By Don Meadorc-T Staff Writer

Walk around the home of Chris and Holly Wood and it doesn't take long to see the couple's appreciation for art and antiques. In the living room, attention is quickly drawn to an antique display hutch, filled with bottles- bottles that tell a story by what's inside.

For Scottsville native Chris Wood, the son of Marvey B. and Frances Wood, the bottles are his art, a medium known as bottle whimsies. Wood has developed a remarkable love for this very rare, yet outstanding demonstration of artistic brilliance. Like any person driven by a passion, Wood has spent hours researching and learning about the beginning of his interest. His research revealed that bottle whimsies dates to Germany and the late 1700's. "The beginning of this art form is difficult to ascertain," Wood said. "I have yet to find someone who can read German well enough to read their explanation of how it started." Many people have seen bottles with a wooden ship displayed inside. However, Wood quickly discovered that the art form of true bottle whimsies is much more than just ships.

"Ships in bottles are mostly not bottle whimsies since they are made to create an extremely detailed copy," Wood said. True bottle whimsies are just fancy creations that really don't have a practical purpose. They just prove an artist's skill.

However, by thinking about how a ship is constructed inside a bottle, one can see the skill involved in creating the ship and other complex masterpieces, from a simple old-fashioned rocking chair to a complex spinning wheel or a recreation of a coal mining scene from Germany. To explain what's involved, Wood starts by dispelling a popular myth. "It is a myth that these bottles are created by glass being blown around anything," Wood said. "The only time that's ever done is with dice or the bottles with the pennies inside. To blow glass around something like a ship would actually be almost impossible. It is just not done." So how does a ship get inside of a bottle? "The ships are built outside," Wood noted. "It's all made to compress down, and then pushed inside the bottle through the neck and then with small strings made to pull up at different levels. I have seen ships that have as many as 150 strings." Wood's collection includes several ships in bottles - including a very detailed, antique bottle detailing a yacht race with a pair of ships leaning to one side in full sailing trim. Most people look at this bottle and think it's turned over," Wood said while looking at the bottle. "In reality, the scene inside is showing the yachts as they are turning as they do in a race." Ships in bottles could be considered cousins to bottle whimsies - a less prevalent form of artwork. "People have always thought that ships in bottles came first but they probably did not," Wood said, noting that his research has led him to discover the origins of the earliest known bottle whimsies. "The oldest example we have bottle whimsies are from Matthew Buchlinger from about 1719. It's a bottle with a coal mining scene inside. On one level are miners digging ore and on the upper level is a man sharpening an axe."

Wood shared Buchlinger's remarkable story, a testament to the skill the German possessed."

"Buchlinger was born without hands and feet," Wood recounted. "He carved with his teeth and created some sort of rig that worked on the end of his shoulder." Wood said the art started in Germany and involved ships in bottles, coal mining scenes, spinning wheel displays reflecting

the weaving process and bottles containing crucifixion scenes. As immigrants crossed the Atlantic into the US a century later, the rare craft came along. "But what is amazing is that it changed a lot in America," Wood added. "There are no American mining bottles that I know of." But there are saloon bottle whimsies, thanks to a German immigrant named Carl Worner. "Worner was a sailor, a baker and then he, ended up somewhat of a hobo going from city to city," Wood said. "The man was a bit of a drunk. He would go to a saloon, drink up a bit of a bar tab and then ask to pay for it by making for them a copy of their saloon in a bottle. He would carry a lot of the pieces pre-made but he would also put it together out of cigar boxes. It's said that he could put a bottle together in less than a day. Over 120 of his bottles have survived." Worner's works are famous; two are on display at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. Wood has one of Worner's "saloon bottles," one that is somewhat of a trick bottle. "Where is the missing man in this bottle," Wood asked, holding the bottle by its base. "You do not see it until you turn it around and look closely at the back of the design. You can see in the back that a missing man is in the privy. What would often happen is that a bartender would often hold the bottle up and bet someone that they could not find the missing man. Of course, the bartender always held his hand over the missing man in the back. The one I have is easier to find than most of his." Worner also made bottles with clocks inside as he crossed America in the late 1890's. Another bottle whimsy maker that ranks a Wood's favorite is Daniel Rose. "He became a cripple at about the age of 12," Wood said. "He had a dream one night that took he took a pocket watch apart and put it back together inside a bottle. The next day he started by putting a small chair together inside a bottle." Amazingly, Rose began his artistic skill despite being bound to a wheelchair. "He was totally paralyzed in his body except for his hands," Wood explained. "Most of the bottles he made with his carvings and complicated workings inside have not survived. Almost all the ones that have survived have a testimony inside." Wood said it's believed that many of Rose's bottles were destroyed by his own hands after the Mennonite Church – of which Rose was a member – believed that the bottles he was selling for a small fee were drawing attention to himself rather than turning attention to God. Only a limited number of Rose's bottles still exist – and the ones that do are worth a small fortune. Several years ago, Wood became interested in bottle whimsies after discovering their rareness and uniqueness. His passion started when he began to collect. "I've been in probably 3,000 to 5,000 antique shops in my life and I've only seen bottles like these in three of four shops," Wood said. "You see plenty of 'ships in bottles' but not many bottle whimsies." Hence, Wood turned to eBay in his search to purchase the collector's item. Again, he quickly learned that the online auction giant had plenty of "ships in bottles" but a limited number of bottle whimsies. "Over time, Wood's collection grew, since purchasing the bottles usually could be done at relatively low price. Purchasing the bottles led to another problem and, as a result, led Wood into going from collector to restorer.

"When you buy them from eBay, they come damaged," Wood said, noting that the fragile nature of the bottles makes shipping difficult. "That's because you cannot really ship a bottle without some damage. About 75 percent of the bottles I received were damaged. I found out that I was going to have to learn how to repair the damage."

Like any artist, Wood discovered that having an idea of what's involved in the building process goes a long way in learning how to restore. "Actually, I started to try and build my own bottle whimsies," Wood said. "That gave me an idea of what was involved. After that, I could spend

hours looking at bottles and figuring out what to do to restore it." Since picking up the hobby about five years ago, Wood—who's constructed over 10 whimsies of his own—finds himself in demand as collectors now turn to him to help restore their purchases. "It's been told to me by collectors across the country that I restore more than anybody in the world," Wood said. "Of course I can't confirm that. I have restored over 200. Now, about every day or about every other day I'm working on one." In fact, in recent years, Wood demonstrated his art at a major Opryland show. Whether building or restoring a bottle, the craft takes time and patience—a lesson Wood learned when getting into the craft. "It took about 100 hours for me to put together one of my first ones," he recalled.

"That included about eight to nine hours painting a small chain inside a bottle." Repairing bottle whimsies—called "patience bottles" by Europeans—is not an easy task. The skill involves working with tools much like a surgeon would use. Wire is also important as a tool. The trade also requires long periods of concentration and extremely close attention to detail. Wood admits that restoring bottles and then selling the finished product to collectors can be financially rewarding since there is a growing collector's market. "In one case, I paid about \$80 for one, restored it and sold it for \$1,000" Wood said. "I've sold one bottle for \$5,000. If I wanted to focus on this all the time I could make good money at it, I think." The bottle whimsies are a reflection of an era when people had the time to spend to craft a masterful design inside the confines of a bottle. "It's hard to imagine how much can be inside of a bottle," Wood said. "It's pretty much as unlimited as the skill and the imagination of the carver. I have bottles that represent over 200 years. They range from theme bottles like that of an Indian and a fur trader to a peacock with his plumes spread out. I have spinning wheels inside of bottles. I have praying bottles which are a favorite. Fans are also a big thing." For more information on Wood's work persons can visit www.folkartinbottles.com.

Comments from Chris Wood: "The writer of this article took notes & re-assembled it without my input or editing. Some things are not completely accurate & nothing is as I would have written it. No quote is exactly as I said it, but overall I felt good about it. As an example, one of my favorite types are not praying bottles but I said "frame bottles". So enjoy it, but take it with a grain of salt."