

With Skill & Stories, Fred Stice Carved Iowa's Past



The astounding wood carvings and dolls that filled this small building near Le Grand, Iowa, are now part of the museum collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa. Thanks to the generosity of Mildred and George Heiring, the figures will be preserved and used in the Society's educational programs.

Right: Two of Fred Stice's carved figures play checkers in his "Country Store" diorama.

Opposite page: Silk-head dolls, created by Stice's daughter, Mildred Heiring, in "Park Bench Romance."

Text and photos by Steven Ohrn

From the outside it looked like a typical roadside attraction with a winged totem pole out front. A sign read "Doll Museum and Trading Post." For nearly a year, as I traveled across the state seeking out Iowa folk artists for an exhibit, I drove past this small building but never stopped. The first rule in effective folklore research is to learn to stop the car. Finally, one fall day in 1982, I pulled over.

Two friendly, older women—Mildred Heiring and her mother, Gladys Stice—welcomed me. They were anxious to give me a complete tour. First they led me into a small room containing hundreds of fabulous dolls displayed on shelves behind glass. Mildred was justifiably proud of these dolls, which she had collected over several decades going back to World War II. The silk-head dolls that she had made especially intrigued me.

Then the women took me to the next room. It was completely full of dimly lit dioramas. Most were about two feet high and ranged in width from three to six feet. The dioramas were three-dimensional scenes housed in boxes and peopled with painted wood-carvings five to twelve inches high.

This small museum astounded me. The expressive-



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Traditions



ness of the woodcarving and painting, and the detail afforded the costumes and their surroundings bowled me over. The two women talked me through a fascinating tour, their narration obviously delivered many times before but still open for interrupting questions. Their stories, together with the dioramas, exemplified everyday social history.

Woodcarving has long been a widespread tradition, and exhibitions of folk art have often included carvings portraying occupations like farming and logging or pastimes like fishing and dancing. In general these carvings are like memory paintings and story quilts, functioning the same as photographs and other mnemonic devices—as aids to remembering

Right: “Barber Shop Harmony.” Stice’s dioramas of traditional social settings like the local barbership primed visitors to share their memories.

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Below: Mildred Heiring fashioned "The Immigrant" based on a newspaper photo of a Ukrainian refugee who arrived in Iowa after nine years of wandering following World War II.



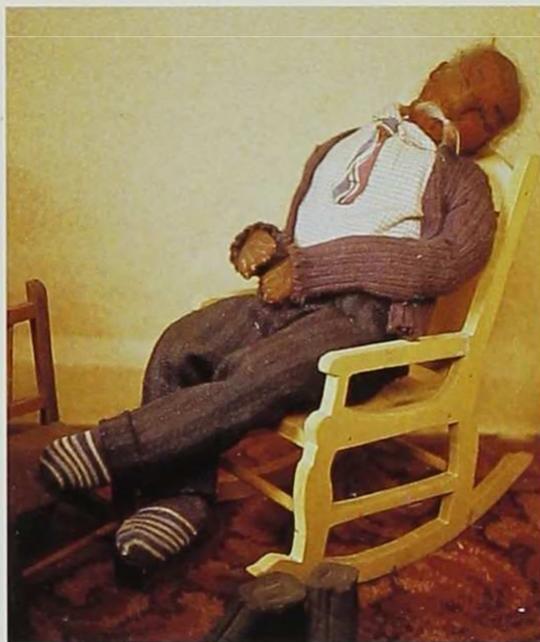
and retelling.

Three generations had been involved with this central Iowa roadside enterprise, which had evolved gradually over the years. Fred Stice and his daughter, Mildred Heiring, were the primary artists: they made the objects, tailored the costumes, assembled the dioramas, and served as tour guides. Gladys Stice (Fred's second wife) was also a tour guide. (She and Mildred, in fact, had given me my first tour on that day in 1982.) Mildred's son, George Heiring, helped with background painting of the dioramas.

Fred Stice worked in various jobs—on the railroad, in clothing stores, a restaurant, and a novelty store—but in his spare time he enjoyed carving. About the time of World War II, Mildred, then in her thirties, started collecting and making dolls. Eventually, a close collaboration grew between father and daughter. As Fred developed his carving talents, he scrounged wood from wherever he could find it, using basswood, apple, and pine. Both were skilled tailors. "Dad liked to sew really almost as well as he liked to carve," Mildred commented.

What was at first merely a hobby rapidly became all-consuming. "First I would make something and run over and show him, and then he would make something and show me," she recalled in a 1995 interview with Iowa Arts Council intern Dorothy Dvorachek. "He kept them under the bed, and [the collection] kept growing and growing."

The carvings cried out to be displayed. "Decisions about how to display the figures led to the first assemblages of figures into scenes,"



Dvorachek explained. "Fred not only made use of more than carving and tailoring skills, but he also brought in an element of collage, as he used carpet fragments from his mother's house or old magazine clippings to make his old-time scenes authentic."

Outside Montour, Iowa, Fred and Mildred set up some of the carvings in a small gift shop they dubbed the Trading Post. "Serendipity ordered the placement of the scenes," Dvorachek noted, and "when they moved [to Le Grand] in 1954, the happenstance order was maintained and glass cases added to the scenes." Situated on the Lincoln Highway (Highway 30), and renamed the Doll Museum and Trading Post, to acknowledge Mildred's collection of dolls, the enterprise attracted thousands of curious passersby for more than three decades. Many tourists stopped on their way to the annual powwow at the nearby Meskwaki Settlement outside Tama.

What delighted the visitors were more than 50 scenes, ranging from everyday social and work traditions of the past (like ice skating and blacksmithing) to biblical themes (Flight into Egypt, Last Supper, Christ before Pontius Pilate), from popular Americana (minstrels, cowboys and Indians, covered wagons) to historical figures and events (Abraham Lincoln, Will Rogers, Iwo Jima, President Kennedy's funeral) and transportation themes (the history of the wheel, horse-drawn sleighs, the railroad). As Mildred explained, "We just never ran out of ideas."

Many of the dioramas conveyed Stice's memory



Three figures from Stice's "Quilting Bee" diorama: a rocking-chair napper (top of page), an intense quilter, and a pipe-smoker.



One of Stice's first projects was "Threshing Scene" (above), completed in the 1930s. "I think the threshing machine is one of my favorites because we used to thresh," his wife, Gladys, remembered. "My mother would wonder, will they get through today or will we have them [the threshing crew] tomorrow? It was hot and hard work but everybody worked together and it didn't seem hard like today to do those things. We're spoiled now. It was a big day because they had lots of food and everybody worked together, which was good." At right: "Marines on Mt. Suribachi, Iwo Jima, Feb. 23, 1945."

of rural and small-town life in Iowa at the turn of the century. He carved his recollections of life as he had lived it, emphasizing the good times when people gathered together to thresh and quilt, square dance, and play games. He created familiar settings for his carvings: a parlor, a kitchen, a country store, or a barbershop. Older visitors to the Le Grand museum also recognized aspects of their own lives in earlier times. And as Gladys Stice watched her husband and Mildred create the scenes, she was often moved by the power of the scenes to bring forth memories. "I



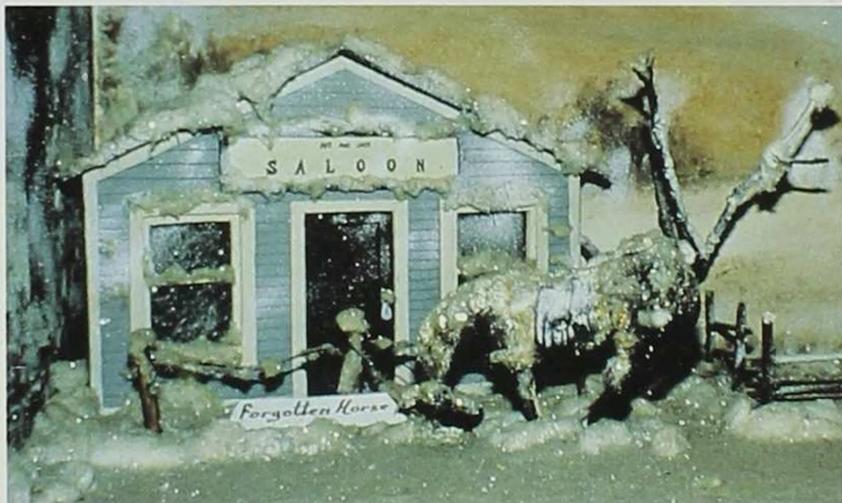


used to love to go to the blacksmith shop when I was a kid," she said, recalling the subject of one diorama. "If you lived through this time you'd remember all these things. They seem so vivid to you. I'm old, and this is the way it was when I was young."

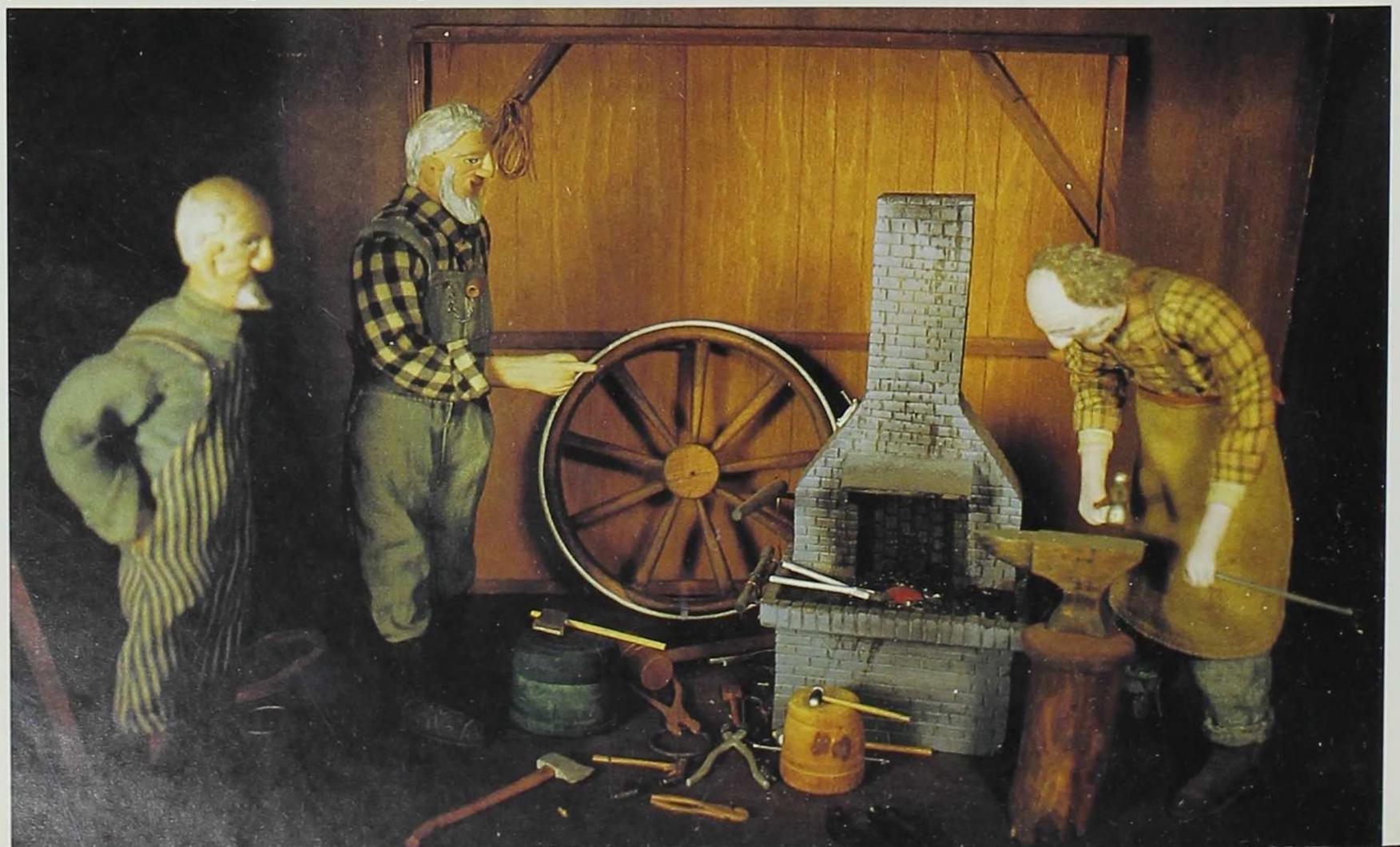
Fred was a great storyteller, according to family members. George Heiring remembers his grandfather as a showman who "loved to have people come through [the museum]. The carvings were almost a device to have people he could talk to and interact with." Mildred commented, "Dad called [the collection] 'The Good Old Days,' . . . what he was trying to convey was the past, and it was a method of just recording the past."

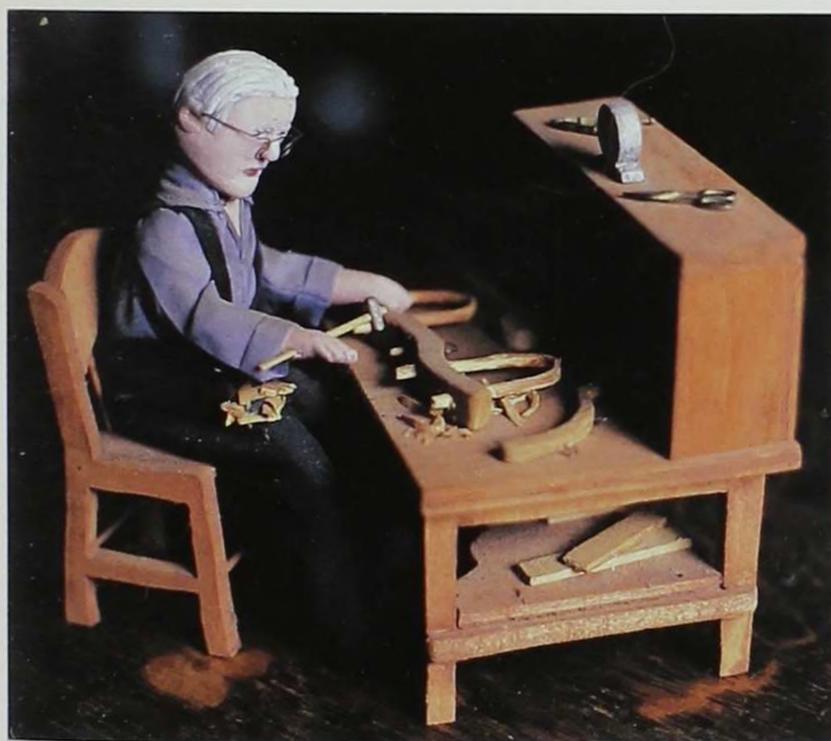
Gladys Stice recalled that her husband "liked to whittle even when he was young—he was always whittling something. He had a workshop in our basement. He practically lived there. Even to the very last days of his life, he was down there doing things." Mildred called her father an observant and contented man, who could spend hours watching a cicada come out of its shell. "He never wanted to be any place than where he was. He never wanted anything more than what he had." Fred died in 1977 at the age of 93.

In 1988 it became apparent that the family could



Top: Square dancers and four musicians fill the "Swing yer Pardner" scene. **Above:** Stice's cold winter scene outside a saloon, titled "Forgotten Horse," was modeled after a well-known painting. Family members recalled Stice's love of horses, and the number of horses he carved bears that out. **Below:** "The Blacksmith Shop." Stice's scene shows this small-town institution as a place for both working and socializing.





"Woodcarver at Work." Stice's self-portrait includes tiny tools, an ox yoke, and an alarm clock.

"To some people the thought of carving may seem a little silly, but it takes a lot of hard work. I was always interested in history and this is one way to preserve it. The scenes are interesting for the children who haven't seen them and the older folks who remember them."

— Fred Stice

no longer care for the museum, and they began to seek alternatives to dismantling the collection and disposing of it piecemeal. In 1995, they donated the entire collection—53 scenes comprising more than 1,200 pieces (people, animals, wagons, furniture, tools, and so forth)—to the State Historical Society of Iowa. The artifacts are now being prepared for exhibition at the Society's museum and historic sites.

Using scraps of wood and remnants of fabric, with an eye for detail and a deft hand, Fred Stice and Mildred Heiring gave form to their memories of the "good old days." In doing so, they employed common folk skills—wood carving and doll-making—to illuminate rural and small-town traditions of an earlier Iowa. ❖

Steven Ohrn is the Historic Sites Coordinator for the State Historical Society of Iowa. From 1982 to 1987 he was State Folklorist.



"Farmers at the Lincoln Memorial."

NOTE ON SOURCES

This brief look at the Fred Stice Collection in the State Historical Society of Iowa relied upon the following sources: Dorothy Dvorachek, "Le Grand 'Good Old Days'" (unpublished manuscript, 1998, produced during internship with Iowa Arts Council); George Heiring, "Catalog of Collection" (unpublished manuscript, 1995); Gail Heiring's videotaped interviews with Mildred Heiring and Gladys Stice; Shawn Conrad, "Noted Le Grand Doll Museum is Breaking Up," *Marshalltown Times Republican*, Nov. 10, 1988; Gene Raffensperger, "A Display of Generosity and Woodcarvings," *Des Moines Register* (1988?); Donna Walker, "When a hobby becomes art..." *Marshalltimes* (April 1997). For more on folk arts, see the following chapters in Steven Ohrn, ed., *Passing Time and Traditions: Contemporary Iowa Folk Artists* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, for the Iowa Arts Council, 1984); Dorothy Schwieder, "A Cultural Mosaic: The Settling of Iowa," and Steven Ohrn, "From Field and Grove: Caricatures and Miniatures," "As I Remember: Visual Histories and Narratives," and "Faith into Stone: Grottoes and Monuments."