

Cortlandville man continues horn-making tradition

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Joe McIntyre/staff photographer



John Proud scrimshaws a cow horn Thursday to be used as a powder horn while at his workshop in Cortlandville.

Since he was a boy in Buffalo, John Proud has been fascinated by history. He lived near the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society and would often play around outside the building. When rain drove him inside, Proud would admire the dioramas and displays of gunpowder horns.

"It's something that always stuck with me," Proud said.

Now 75, the Cortlandville town board member and former regional wildlife manager for the state Department of Environmental Conservation has a different way of interacting with history; making those same powder horns he saw as a child.

Proud has been making them since 1986, when he needed a horn for an 1830s-era percussion rifle he bought. He keeps two horns for two rifles he owns, a half-stock plains rifle and a full-stock flintlock rifle. His wife, Carole, has a cabinet filled with 20 horns.

Powder horns are made from cattle horn and are, as Proud puts it, "the perfect container." Black powder absorbs moisture and is, of course, explosive when it meets spark or fire. Horns do not conduct electricity, do absorb moisture and do not easily burn.

"It was a readily available material in the Colonial era," Proud said, calling it the "plastic of the revolutionary period," used for cups, spoons, cones and boxes, too. In the 18th century, American colonists used so much horn they had to import it from South America.

They still do: Finding a proper cattle horn is difficult because most cattle have their horns removed while young.

To create a powder horn, the maker drills a hole through the tip of the horn and plugs the other end with a piece of wood to hole it out. They use woodworking tools to craft decorations on them.

"A very simple one I can make in a day," Proud said. "Usually the detailed ones take a week."

The horns Proud makes resemble ones ranging from the years 1725 to 1800. Most of them focus on the French and Indian War period, a period of time he finds fascinating, before Cortland County was founded.

Proud also belongs to The Honorable Company of Horner's, the only active horn maker guild in the world that still uses animal horn to make their works. He joined the 400-member organization in 1996 and served a year as its guild master in 2003.

Horn making is not limited to the eastern United States, said Rick Sheets, a journeyman horn maker from Durham, N.C., and guild webmaster. He knows groups on the West Coast who participate in war reenactments who use horns as well.

"Some people in Australia and Europe do reenactments too," Sheets said.

Proud used to compete, winning two best of shows at guild meetings and other awards at the Dixon's Gun maker's Fair, but he stopped in 2007.

"I felt my skill is proven," Proud said, as he encourages new competitors to come along.

Museums need horns for display, Sheets said. They like to display the originals, but may hire a horn maker if they can't find one appropriate to the period or if security is a concern.

"People with a patriot ancestor can get a patriot horn," Sheets said, "and the Horner can make one that looks 200 years old."

Proud makes the horns only for friends and historical shows, despite offers to create commercial designs for mass production. He has no interest in commercializing his work.

"I only do it by inspiration," Proud said.

