

# He “Turns” Big Logs Into Magnificent Art

“I guess it all began when I saw the incredible log lodges in Yellowstone Park when I was 8 years old,” says Virgil Leih, a log-sculpting artist from Minnesota. “I eventually spent 10 years building my own log home near Ely, Minnesota. And then at some point, I began to have a vision of transforming giant tree trunks into large-scale sculptures.”

That’s how Leih explains his evolving wood-sculpting hobby that, for the past 10 years, has produced rare and unique giant urns, vases and spheres that sell for \$5,000 or more in galleries and on consignment.

Leih’s tree art always begins with selecting a promising log from a landfill or a “tree-trunk dump”. Leih may start with a 4,000-lb. log and end up with an 8-ft. tall urn after 95 percent of the log has been turned into wood shavings.

Initially, Leih guessed his biggest challenge would be finding a lathe and other equipment to work the logs. He solved that problem when he bought an 8,000-lb. Oliver pattern-maker’s lathe, built in 1917, that could handle up to a 17- ft. log.

The greater challenge, Leih discovered, was learning to dry logs so they wouldn’t split and crack when they’re being worked on or after they’re completed. “Nothing is more frustrating than creating a magnificent vessel and then having it crack because the wood wasn’t sufficiently dry,” Leih says.

Leih struggled with the drying dilemma

for years, eventually devising a 38-in. heated vacuum chamber that he fabricated using a giant sewer pipe with 2-in. thick walls. The heated vacuum chamber slowly extracts a log’s moisture over several weeks.

Lathe woodworkers are used to working a piece of wood using a gouge as the wood turns towards them. Leih reverses that procedure so he works wood as his giant lathe turns a log away from him. He uses tools that he’s devised including a mounted chainsaw or a right-angle grinder to do the dangerous wood removal until he achieves a perfectly balanced round log.

Leih’s fanciest urns may require 100 hrs. or more to hollow and sand. Then he follows with up to 10 coats of shellac interspersed with more sanding and buffing between coats. “So the vessel becomes everlasting and virtually immune to discoloration”.

Leih refers to himself as a “grain chaser”, someone who’s constantly pursuing the often-awesome wood grain revealed in each new log. He says “that’s what wood has to offer – beautiful, tremendous wood grain. I always feel like it’s a spiritual thing, opening up a log for the first time. It’s never had human eyes on it before.”

Go to [www.farmshow.com](http://www.farmshow.com) to see a video of Leih’s process.

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Virgil Leih’s amazing woodwork includes huge vessels up to 8 ft. tall as well as small wood urns for ashes. He built custom tools that he uses to remove pieces of wood from huge logs that he works on his lathe.



# Expert Shares The History Of Aprons

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

“Tie on your cooking skirt, Grandma.”

A youngster’s observation is one of the best descriptions of an apron Yvonne Cory has heard. Cory has a growing collection of more than 1,000 aprons. She has given dozens of presentations to all types of groups, collecting hundreds of stories along the way.

The fiber artist from Easton, Minn., has developed “Joys and Tears in the Apron Strings” dedicated to the “art, history and acknowledgment of those who wore the world’s aprons.”

Cory notes her life experience set her up to collect aprons, from learning to sew on her own toy sewing machine as a child, to her needle arts studies, to 35-plus years as a Family and Consumer Science teacher. Throw in her experience as a farming wife and time on the Faribault County fair board, and the clincher - purchasing a late 1800’s apron at an estate sale in 2009.

She only paid \$5 for it, but she knew she had something special. The long, white apron resembled the ones in old photos worn over long dark dresses. The hand-sewn apron made from an open weave fabric had fine filet lace at the hemline.

That apron, along with several she had from her own family, ignited a passion to collect aprons. She finds the aprons at sales, flea markets and in boxes delivered to her doorstep. She logs every apron on a spreadsheet: where and when she received it, the type of apron, description and special notes.

Special notes often include the apron’s history, which is especially important to her. “It’s important to keep the memories alive - to tell younger generations about the historical value and memories of these aprons worn by our loved ones,” she says.

They also reflect the history of how clothing evolved from hand-sewn to treadle and crank sewing machines to mass production. Her six presentations reflect some of those changes,

focusing on full-bib aprons, half aprons and down through the decades, as well as fun focuses on kid’s aprons, checkered aprons and creating aprons with vintage linens. Cory also designs and sells vintage styled aprons.

Her history in fiber arts covers the gamut: aprons made of wool during the Civil War, feed sack creations, aprons sewn out of several manmade fibers after World War II including late 1950’s plastic aprons specially made for John Deere customer appreciation meals, and delicately crocheted and home-sewn creations.

Cory shares the diversity of aprons and is continuously awed how her programs touch lives. She recalls the excited noises a woman with disabilities at a long-term care facility made when she held an apron. Staff told Cory that the woman seldom uttered a sound.

Beyond historic and sentimental value, aprons are practical and still useful. Besides wearing aprons in the kitchen, they are growing in popularity with quilters. They are useful for many tradesmen, and Cory is working on obtaining enough examples to develop a program about men’s aprons.

“I’m looking for a leather welding apron and researching aprons worn in flour mills,” she says.

She invites groups interested in one of her 40 to 90-min. programs to contact her. She has shared her apron stories to farm groups, historical societies, long-term care facilities, libraries and other groups in Minnesota and nearby states.

“This world of aprons and vintage textiles is just amazing,” she says. “It’s become a passion for me. Touching lives is important, and if my programs stir memories, it’s a joy-filled day.”

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Cory wears her grandmother Mary’s apron (left). She also designs and sells vintage aprons (right).



Fancy crocheted-in-pineapple design – white and black (left). Apron at right is a 1950’s plastic one specially made for John Deere customer appreciation meals.

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