



**Winter
2025**

Winters in Texas

When winter settles in across Wisconsin and Minnesota —when lakes freeze hard and snow quiets the fields—a familiar migration begins. It is not marked by wings or weather maps, but by loaded trucks, fifth wheels, and caravans of friends heading south. Their destination is the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Their purpose is simple and enduring: to carve, to learn, and to be together.

For more than four decades, members of what is now the West Wisconsin Wood Carvers Guild, along with fellow carvers from across the Midwest, have spent winters in South Texas. There, amid palm trees and warm mornings, they built an extended seasonal community centered on woodcarving. This article is part of the **Winters in Texas** project—an effort to document and preserve the experiences of those carvers who helped shape this tradition and, in many cases, helped shape our Guild itself.

Carving Roots in the Rio Grande Valley

The organized carving community in South Texas took root in the early 1980s with the formation of the **Rio Grande Valley Woodcarvers** in Pharr. Meeting weekly at the Nomad Shrine Club, the group quickly attracted “Winter Texans”—retirees and seasonal residents from northern states who brought with them carving skills, curiosity, and a willingness to share.

As the years passed, carving activity spread throughout the Valley. RV parks and mobile-home communities in **Pharr, Mission, McAllen, Harlingen, and Weslaco** began setting aside rooms for carving. Some parks built full woodshops; others relied on donated tools and



Del Braunberger (l) and Gib Ganther (r)



Don Hopf's Cuckoo Clocks

shared resources. Each park developed its own character and specialties—chip carving, figure carving, birds, bark houses, relief work—but all were connected through shared events.

The annual **Show and Sale** at the Nomad Shrine became a focal point of the season, followed by classes and seminars often referred to as the **Rally on the Rio**. These events brought nationally recognized instructors into the Valley and allowed wintering carvers to learn new techniques while strengthening friendships that extended far beyond Texas.

Del and Sharon Braunberger: Building Community Through Carving

When **Del and Sharon Braunberger** first arrived at **Texas Trails RV Park** after retirement, they did not come as carvers. They came as newcomers, open to possibility. That changed quickly through friendships formed in the park—Del with George Blum of Eau Claire, and Sharon with Elaine from Iowa, an accomplished chip carver.

What followed was nearly **twenty-eight winters** of steady involvement and leadership. By the mid-1990s, Del was leading carving sessions at Texas Trails three mornings a week. The park itself grew dramatically during those years, expanding from a modest campground into a full-service winter community with recreation halls, woodshops, classrooms, and hundreds of seasonal residents.

“Texas Trails was more than a park,” Del has said. “For a few months each year, it was a carving town.”

The Braunbergers’ influence extended well beyond Texas. They played a key role in connecting southern instructors with northern carving groups, inviting teachers such as **Rex and Vicki Branson** and later **Fred and Elaine Stenman** to teach in the Chippewa Falls and Eau Claire area. In this way, the Texas winter carving scene became a bridge—linking regional styles, teaching traditions, and friendships across state lines.



Del Braunberger

Jan Jenson: Teaching, Mentorship, and Leadership

Jan and Vern Jenson began wintering at **Tropic Star RV Park** in Pharr in 1998. Like many winter residents, their early years were filled with social activities rather than carving. That changed in 2002, when Jan joined a small carving group meeting regularly in the park.

Tropic Star's carving home was **Hudson Hall**, a large building with multiple rooms. One space in particular—Room 10—became the heart of carving activity, hosting evening sessions where ideas and encouragement flowed as freely as wood chips.

Mentored by respected chip carvers **Sheila Hunter** and **Claudia Atkins**, Jan developed into a skilled carver, teacher, and eventually an author. She has since written two books, with a third manuscript completed, and began teaching carving regularly in 2012. Her work reflects the strong tradition of sharing knowledge that defined the Texas carving community.

Jan's leadership also extended to organized carving. She has served for several years as an **executive director of the Rio Grande Valley Woodcarvers**, helping guide one of the region's most enduring carving organizations.

Her husband Vern contributed to the life of the park in his own way. A lifelong musician, he provided music for bingo nights and community events, adding another layer to the social fabric of winter life. Together, Jan and Vern exemplify how carving, teaching, music, and fellowship blended seamlessly in the Valley.

Don Hopf: Craftsmanship and Quiet Dedication

Don Hopf arrived in Texas with a deep professional background in making. Having worked in the **model shop at Presto**, he was already an accomplished craftsman when he began wintering in the Valley, first for short vacation stays and later for full seasons after retirement.

Don stayed at a smaller park known as **Easy Bleeders**, a community that, while modest in size, was rich in interests. Rock hunters, collectors of petrified wood, and carvers lived side by side, sharing stories and skills. Don attended Rio Grande Valley Woodcarvers events and



Jan Jenson



Don Hopf

shows, where he encountered carvers working at every scale—from finely detailed miniatures to full-size carousel horses and wildlife carvings.

His own specialty was the carving of **cuckoo clocks**, executed with exceptional detail and precision. Though Don often preferred carving independently, the Texas winters provided lasting friendships, including close ties with a German couple whose friendship endured long after the winters ended.

Don's experience reflects an important part of the Texas carving scene: not every carver sought a leadership role or a teaching platform, yet each contributed to the richness of the community simply by being present, engaged, and committed to high standards of craftsmanship.

Gib Ganther: Fellowship and Shared Experience

Gib Ganther and his wife spent nearly three decades wintering at **Siesta Park in Weslaco**, beginning in 1990 and continuing until 2018. Before turning to wood, Gib had been deeply involved in leather carving, and Texas became the place where he expanded his artistic focus.

Siesta Park hosted a friendly carving circle known informally as the **Rag Tag Carving Group**, which met weekly and typically included fifteen to twenty participants. Members also attended Rio Grande Valley Woodcarvers meetings and spring contests in Pharr, drawing inspiration from more experienced carvers and formal classes.

The park's recreation hall served multiple purposes, hosting carving sessions, social gatherings, and Sunday services. Friendships formed easily and often lasted decades, sometimes extending internationally. Gib also pursued other interests during his winters, including RC airplane flying near the river—a reminder that winter life in Texas offered balance as well as productivity.



Gib Ganther

Texas Culture: Life Beyond the Workbench

While carving was central to these winters, it was not the only thing that defined them. All of the carvers interviewed for this project recall the broader rhythm of South Texas life—particularly evenings spent at local gathering places such as **Pepe's on the River** and **The River Inn** near Mission.

These riverside venues offered music, dancing, and conversation, with decks overlooking the Rio Grande. They were places where carvers from different parks gathered, where laughter flowed easily, and where friendships deepened. Such experiences were not distractions from the carving life; they were an essential part of it, reinforcing the sense of belonging that drew people back year after year.

The Legacy of Winters in Texas

What began in the early 1980s as a small group meeting in borrowed space grew into a vibrant seasonal culture that lasted more than forty years. Parks like **Texas Trails**, **Tropic Star**, **Siesta Park**, and others became temporary villages devoted to creativity, teaching, and friendship. Techniques learned in Texas traveled north each spring, influencing carving groups, classes, and Guild activities back home.

The **Winters in Texas** project exists to recognize and preserve this history. It honors the contributions of members who helped build these communities—many of them esteemed and founding figures within our own Guild—and ensures that their stories are not lost to time.

As one carver observed, the key to a successful winter was not just warm weather or good facilities, but people: a place with a shop, a carving room, and friends willing to share what they knew. In that simple formula lies the enduring legacy of winters spent carving in Texas.



Pepe's Honky Tonk

Hand-Carved Canes Bring Strength, Pride, and Connection to Local Veterans

In November of 2011, the West Wisconsin Wood Carvers Guild once again demonstrated how the art of woodcarving can reach far beyond craft and creativity. Under the steady hands and generous spirit of Guild member **Dell Braunberger**, a group of local veterans at the Wisconsin Veterans Home at Chippewa Falls received individually handcrafted walking canes—gifts that proved to be as meaningful emotionally as they are practical.

For many of the veterans, mobility challenges are part of daily life. Several struggle with leg weakness, impaired balance, or long-term effects of injuries sustained during their years of service. A sturdy cane can make all the difference in staying safe and independent. But the canes Dell and the Guild provided were much more than functional devices—they were heartfelt tributes.

Each cane was **made from solid hardwood**, shaped and sanded by hand, and carefully sealed for strength. Many featured symbolic carvings such as eagles, flags, or service emblems. Others had decorative details uniquely matched to the veteran who would receive it. Dell



Dell and Sharon with a Vet

devoted many hours to each one, ensuring that the finished pieces would serve not only as mobility aids but as lasting reminders of gratitude and respect.

The veterans felt that gratitude deeply. Many were visibly moved during the presentation at the Veterans Home. One veteran, Kevin Hanson—who served in both Vietnam and Operation Desert Storm—expressed how meaningful the gift was. His cane featured an eagle head and a hand-painted flag, and he shared that he was touched knowing someone built the cane specifically for him. “It’s fantastic. It’s an honor that someone made this for me,” Hanson said. “I was very touched when they gave it to me, because they made it just for me.”

Another veteran echoed the disbelief and appreciation: **“I couldn’t believe it. It just warmed me right up,”** he said as he accepted his cane. “They didn’t have to do this—but they did.”

Guild members who attended the presentation were equally moved. They watched as each veteran tested their new cane, gripping the handle, checking the balance, and standing a little taller. Some tried a few steps immediately; others held theirs like a treasured keepsake. A few joked that their canes looked too nice to use. The room filled with stories—laughter, shared memories, and quiet moments of reflection.

For Dell Braunberger, this project was a labor of love. He has carved for many years, but he considers projects like this among the most meaningful. Carving for a purpose—to honor service, restore confidence, and strengthen community connection—brings out the heart of the Guild’s mission. The West Wisconsin Wood Carvers Guild exists not only to preserve the tradition of carving but also to share it, to help, and to build relationships through craft.

As we look ahead to another year of carving, outreach, and education, Dell’s cane project stands as a powerful reminder of how simple acts of craftsmanship can change lives. A block of wood, a sharp knife, and a caring hand can offer support—literally and figuratively—to those who have already given so much.



Dell with walking stick



Past President Ron Mastrobouni with 2 vets and their sticks

Tapered Spiral Cone Seminar with Dennis Johnson

At the October meeting, members were treated to a lively and engaging hands-on seminar led by Dennis Johnson on carving tapered spiral cones. These elegant forms, deceptively simple at first glance, quickly proved to be a true test of knife control, patience, and planning.

Dennis demonstrated several variations, including two-, three-, and four-element spirals, explaining how each additional element increases both the visual complexity and the carving challenge. Members learned how to lay out the spirals, establish clean separations, and maintain even taper while carving deep into the form—all without snapping off a fragile strand along the way. As many discovered, that last part takes a steady hand and a bit of luck.

To help everyone focus on technique rather than rough stock preparation, Dennis thoughtfully supplied blanks pre-cut to the proper tapered shape on his band saw. Members could purchase a blank for one dollar, and in a generous gesture, Dennis donated all proceeds directly to the Guild.

The room was filled with concentration, laughter, and the occasional groan when a spiral let go unexpectedly. Still, the overall success rate was impressive, and a number of striking spiral cones emerged by the end of the session. Even the “learning experiences” provided valuable lessons and good humor, as reflected in the variety of finished (and nearly finished) pieces on the tables.

The seminar was a great example of what makes Guild gatherings special: shared skills, shared challenges, and shared enjoyment of the carving process. Many members left inspired to try spiral forms again at home—perhaps with a little more confidence and fewer breaks next time.



Tapered Spiral Cone



Several completed cones

Some were more successful than others



Education Planning Underway at WWWCG

At a recent Zoom meeting, the West Wisconsin Wood Carvers Guild took time to review and discuss the Guild's current education efforts and to explore ways to strengthen learning opportunities for members at all skill levels.

The committee acknowledged that WWWCG already offers a wide range of educational activities. These include frequent carving sessions in both Eau Claire and Chippewa Falls, starter tool kits and project instructions for new members, nationally known instructors offering multi-day classes, beginner workshops at special events, and access to respected online learning resources. Together, these form a strong foundation that many members have benefited from over the years.

During the discussion, the committee focused on how these offerings might be better connected and organized so members—especially beginners—can progress more confidently and consistently in their carving journey. A key outcome of the meeting was agreement on the value of developing a **more intentional curriculum for beginning carvers**, one that would support mentoring in a clear and thoughtful way. The goal is to help new members build skills step by step, while still allowing flexibility for different carving interests and learning styles.

The conversation also touched on the wide range of carving disciplines within the Guild, the importance of in-person learning at regular meetings, the useful role of selected online instruction as a supplement, and the potential for cooperative efforts with neighboring carving clubs when it makes sense.

The board agreed that this work should move forward thoughtfully and incrementally. A Training and Education Committee will continue to meet to explore ideas, refine concepts, and develop practical recommendations that fit the Guild's culture, facilities, and volunteer resources. No final curriculum or program has been adopted yet, but the first meeting was productive and generated many constructive ideas.

Members will be kept informed as this effort continues, and input from the membership will be welcomed as plans take shape. The Guild remains committed to supporting carvers at every stage—from those picking up a knife for the first time to those refining advanced skills—while preserving the friendly, hands-on spirit that defines WWWCG.

Volunteers Welcome

Education at WWWCG has always been driven by members willing to share their time, experience, and enthusiasm. As the Guild looks at ways to strengthen training—especially for beginning carvers—there will be opportunities for members to help in many ways, from mentoring and demonstrating techniques to helping organize materials and ideas.

If you're interested in participating, keep an eye out for future announcements or reach out to a board member.

New Learning Resources Online

A new Learn page has been added to the Guild website at: wwwcwg.org/Learn/

This page brings together a selection of high-quality learning resources, including respected online instruction that many members already use. The page is intended as a supplement to hands-on carving at meetings and classes, giving members another way to explore techniques and disciplines at their own pace.