

About 220 words

Datus Proper
1085 Hamilton Road
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BIG SKY CARVERS

308 Railroad Ave.
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When Eric Pierce moved his wood-carving shop to Manhattan, I supposed that he would be whittling the occasional decoy for collectors. Manhattan (in case you don't know) is a town in Montana, famous for its annual potato festival, and Eric's operation is down near the railroad tracks in a building where a farm-implement dealer went out of business a few years back.

What used to be the tractor building now looks like Santa's workshop. When you walk in, you are surrounded by carved ducks, pheasants, grouse, woodcock, quail, trout, bass, walleyes, and a sign that reads "Somehow the sound of a shotgun tends to cheer one up -- Robert Ruark." That's a short list. If you hunt or fish, this place has any decorative object you can imagine and some you can't.

In the back of the building are big, modern machines that do much of the work in duplicating prize-winning carvings. Details are then refined by hand, and the carvings are entirely hand-painted -- the only way to do it right. Quality is high, cost is reasonable, and demand is amazing.

There will always be prosperous farms in this valley, with luck, but Big Sky Carvers put together the prize-winning float in this year's potato festival parade. The old building no longer has room for all sixty workers and the population of Manhattan, Montana, looks almost too busy to go fishing.