

Joseph Lehn, The Wood Turner

And His Now Fantastically Valuable Wooden Wares.

By CARL W. DREPPERD

Joseph Lehn, the subject of this text, was a Lancaster County wood turner who never drew his bow, even at a venture, at the target of fame. He was born February 6, 1798. He died September 16, 1892. This long life span of ninety-four years was spent in the pleasing obscurity that is the objective of our Mennonite brethren; an obscurity that can be called so only by the worldly because it is no more and no less than living out one's life without fanfare, doing that which comes to hand, with all one's might, and so achieving what psychiatric and psychological specialists try to sell at from \$10 to \$100 a visit: poise, peace of mind, and serenity.

Joseph Lehn's shop was some four miles north of Lititz, in Elizabeth Township near the settlement known as Clay, which was so named, I am informed, not because marl, commonly called clay, abounds in the area, but in honor of Henry Clay of Ashland; the man Andrew Jackson regretted he had not hanged.

Now where, within the ninety-four-year life span of a country wood turner, did the flash of genius strike and cause a simple workman at a treadle lathe to become the maker of avidly collected items which now bring utterly amazing prices? It struck on the day that Joseph Lehn dipped a small turned goblet into a bucket of paint, let it dry, and then decorated it, as best he could, in a design imitative of the colorful "queensware" then sold at every crossroads shop and in all "China Halls." Fame itself was inherent in this one act; his neighbors liked the piece, and asked him to make more, for sale. And so items for which Joseph Lehn had formerly asked a few pennies became objects he could

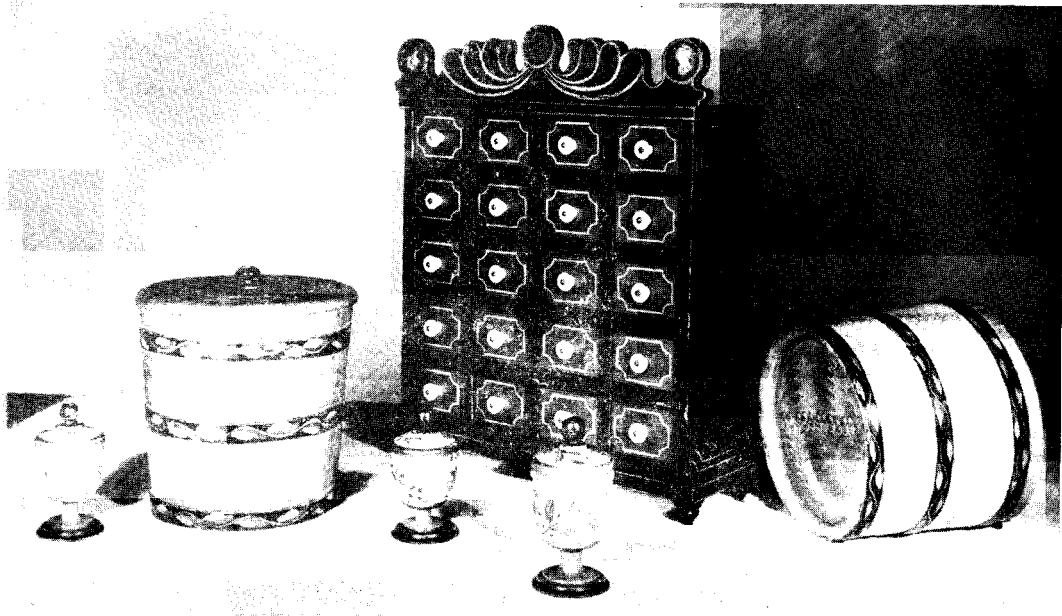


Joseph Lehman

sell for a dime, a quarter, and even half a dollar. This was minor affluence; it paid as well as raising the traditional crops of hay, wheat, corn and tobacco on eighty acres. His shop became a place of creative art, first at the lathe, and then at the painting bench. Stores in Lititz, and New Ephrata (Lincoln) bought pieces by the half dozen, for resale. And by that transaction, especially at Lititz, Lehn's wares were headed for National Distribution. These Lehn trinkets of painted wood were bought by girls at Linden Hall, even as they buy trinkets in Lititz now. Furthermore, fond parents, aunts and uncles came to Lititz for graduation exercises at Linden Hall; they too purchased odd bits of Lehn ware. And, since Linden Hall drew girls from most of the states, so did Lehn ware go, as gifts, and mementos to all the various states. All this, however, was what might well be called confidential distribution. Lehn ware was cute, it was pretty, it was sweet; but Lehn ware wasn't an antique and was never considered one. It had not fallen within the purview of any collectors of what are now designated as popular antiques.

Then something of which all of us at or near the half century mark of age should remember, happened. A succession of phenomena occurred within the cult of Americana Collecting.

1. Reilly ware, as it was called, started on the upward pathway of desirability as a collector's item. This was the nineteenth century imitation by the potter Reilly, of the ware first imitated by Royal Worcester in the 1770's — the Gaudy Imari patterned wares of China and Japan, brought to Europe by the Dutch East India Company, and called "Gaudy Dutch." Nineteenth century gaudy Dutch was not only made by Reilly. Wood, Adam, Wedgwood and many other potters of Staffordshire made it, and tried to sell it to the middle market of England. The Market wouldn't buy it. So England's potters "dumped" the gaudy stuff into the ports of Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. Here it was sold cheap. The only glaring error in its whole chain of history is the pure invention that "it was made for the color-loving Pennsylvania Germans." The biggest importer was a firm in Boston! The secret of why so much of it survives in Pennsylvania is this: we kept it in cupboards, to look at, while the people



Saffron Cups, Sugar Tub, Seed Cabinet, Bucket

of other regions seem to have used it daily. And if you do not know what happens to any kind of china used daily, in the course of twenty or thirty years, you've just never been at housekeeping, or haven't scanned the bills of home upkeep!

2. The activities of a post Civil War hobo named Schimmel, who lived and drank himself to death in the Carlisle region of Pennsylvania, and who began, after his discharge from the army, to carve eagles, imitative of the classic ones cut by Dr. Grier of Emmitsburg and Gettysburg, not far from the now famous Eisenhower farm. Schimmel used a jack knife and carved very curious eagles which, somehow, (whether this be evidence of good taste or bad, or smart promotion by certain antiques dealers is beside the point) quite suddenly became objects of collector's desire.
3. The late Jack Edgette, of New York, on a visit to these parts in search of Schimmel carvings, found some Lehn ware, and some of the same sort of painted turned wood said to have been made by Grosh, of Lititz, bought it, and took it back to his shop on Third Avenue. He sold it as a named item, at not over a 500 per cent mark up, at which price it was still a modestly priced "antique." Jack Edgette told me he had first seen examples of the ware in the collection of George D. and Henry K. Landis and they had told him where it was made.

Lehn ware was launched as an antique, as old as Schimmel carving and much prettier. Then Esther Stevens Brazer published her book on painted decoration. Several thousand women started painting trays and woodenware. And these factors, intermingled, were the yeast that got under Lehn ware and put it right up where the rich and rare antiques reside. Here before you are the pieces Jack Edgette saw at Landis Brothers house, at Landis Valley. These were most recently shown to the world in pictures in the magazine *Spinning Wheel*, in May of this year.

Parenthetically, I might mention that *Spinning Wheel*, published at Taneytown, Maryland, and available at only \$3 a year, has set up an editorial program which for some years has covered more ground, with quick facts, than any publication in this field. Now, I am informed, a professional indexer is at work on the

first ten years of this publication. We should have a complete file in our Historical Society library and I shall do my best to help you get it, by donating duplicates from my own file. Meantime many of us should subscribe to *Spinning Wheel* because it is the one down to earth, factual publishing venture in our entire field that will never be cluttered up, or overloaded with advertising. The publishers insist upon keeping a reasonable ratio of editorial to advertising, come what may.

Here, then, are some of the examples of Lehn ware from the collection at our Pennsylvania Farm Museum of Landis Valley. It is not, I think, necessary to expand upon the beauty of the ware. If you like it, you will see the beauty by virtue of your own eye; and if you don't you will not see, and there's an end to it. Excepting you might begin to like it ten minutes from now and leave here wishing you had some. This collecting is insidious. I know, I've been bit, as the saying goes.

However, since we are here on a woodenware spree, it is not getting off the track to talk a bit about all forms of woodenware, and especially what we consider one of the most important forms of all, the carved cake forms which were, about this time, hauled out by sugar bakers to make the goodies of Christmas time. These are called Marchpane molds. Marchpane¹ (merci-panis, or bread of mercy, is the original name) is a concoction of almonds pounded in a mortar to a paste, blended with sugar and egg white, formed in molds, and hardened as candy.

Of these molds, I would call your attention to the triangular one which was found in Lancaster County twenty years or more ago, the property of descendants of a Dutch family that had settled in New Sweden about 1660. Even in that year it was an antique because it is dated 1563! The other, showing a woman spinning on one side, and, on the other, a gaily caparisoned "San Niklas," riding his traditional donkey, is also Dutch and perhaps as old. The rest are military, tulip, stork and floral; all delightful, and all choice bits of woodenware. "Toys" as they were called, made from such molds, were advertised by Lancaster sugar bakers a century ago. The one that looks like a piece from an Egyptian tomb is really a mold to make six "frozen Charlottes" or stiff babies. Made of marchpane, and colored, these were hung on

¹ Marchpane or "Matzabaums." See vol. 36, p. 124.

Christmas tree, or candle trow. All of them have been used in making papier-mache models which now hang on our candle trow at Landis Valley.

You know, a grand-niece of Joseph Lehn, Mrs. Graybill G. Landis, lives on the Lititz Pike, near Lancaster. She has some very nice pieces and has loaned quite a few others to the Commonwealth Museum at Harrisburg. You, as individuals, are not interested in Lehn Ware that is off the market as are these examples. If you are collectors you want to buy, and own, at the lowest possible price, too. There is some chance for you, as I have said before, and will say over and over again: there is a bargain to be found in every shop. Go forth and hunt. Down at Williamsburg, Mr. Cogar told me about an "I.C.H. Lancaster"² pewter flask which he picked up in a shop hereabouts for \$2, not over ten years ago. "Brethren and Sistern," if I may paraphrase the old darkey minister, "wot we'se all gotta do, is delve: we-all don't git nowheres just sittin." And now, I shall be happy to git nowheres by just sitting, and let you try to get somewheres by asking questions. And I hope somebody asks, "What must be done to help our now Commonwealth-sponsored Museum at Landis Valley?" I have the answer right here:

What Lancaster County might well do is encourage the formation of a corporate association to consolidate what our Commonwealth has done, and plans to do, under the direction of the non-partisan, non-political, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Our greatest potential there is not competitive with any other museum in this region, and yet (again potentially) is one of the most important museum ideas in these United States. Our plan is to extend the museum by service to all industrial and commercial concerns, whether they might want ideas for new products, packages, toys, rug patterns, furniture, lighting, or what. There is a pottery in California that has made a small fortune in occasional dishes impressed with butter stamps. I could cite examples by the score and include soaps, candles, furniture, wall paper, paint, floor coverings, foods and so on. Any Pennsylvania industry can come to us for inspiration. No matter who comes, they'll not leave empty-handed.

²"I. C. H." Lancaster pewterer. See vol. 35, p. 301.



Decorated Lehn Saffron Cups