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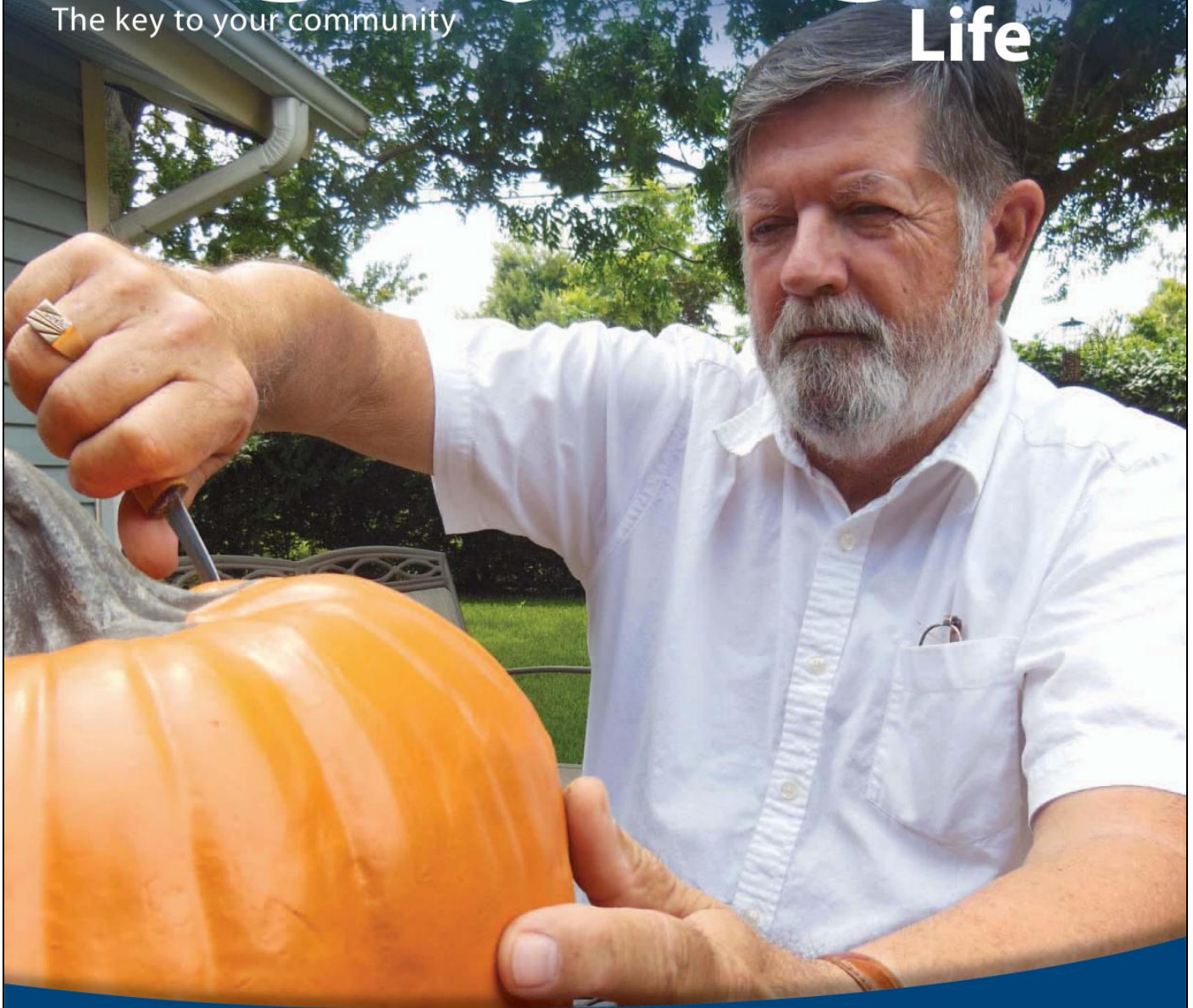
Halloween How-To
JACK-O'-LANTERNS

October 2013

Monument

The key to your community

Life



Slice And Dice

Wood Carving Pro Takes His Knife to Pumpkins

Definitely Not Your Standard Jack-o'-lanterns

Deer Park retiree blends his passion for wood carving into pumpkin craft, creating realistic frightening faces.

by Allen Jones
Editor

October is a fun month for Deer Park resident Michael Moeskau. The 70-year-old retired chemical plant analyst has incorporated his hobby of wood carving into crafting ghoulish faces in the rind of pumpkins. These are not typical jack-o'-lanterns with diamond shaped eyes, noses and mouths punched through the shells of hallowed out pumpkins. Instead, from his home on Marks Street, Moeskau shaves into the orange skin of pumpkins, exposing translucent faces in the round gourds.

"During Halloween I like to carve vampires and other gory, ugly, mean, scary looking faces," Moeskau says. "To me, it is more fun to carve the ghouls and goblins."

Carving pumpkins into jack-o'-lanterns is a Halloween tradition that historians believe Irish immigrants brought to America. Only in Ireland, turnips and beets were used to create lanterns, some with faces carved into them. They were used not only to light their way at night, but to represent spirits and to

protect their homes during a Gaelic festival celebrated Oct. 31 through Nov. 1.

In the New World, immigrants began cutting the tops off of pumpkins, scooping out the pulp, cutting holes in the gourds and placing candles inside, which created strange flickering lights. Today carvings have become more complex, featuring symbols, logos and realistic faces, like the ones Moeskau creates.

He also likes to play around with his creations. Among his favorite gourd carvings is a cannibal pumpkin.

"You can buy very small pumpkins that are maybe 3 inches in diameter, and are typically used for place settings and stuff like that," he says. "I love carving larger pumpkins and have them eating one of the smaller pumpkins."

Moeskau has carved a variety of pumpkin sizes. The smallest he has carved are what he calls "pie pumpkins," the standard 8- to 10-inch gourds typically found in grocery stores to be carved up and emptied of pulp to make pie. The largest pumpkin he has carved a face into, he says, was "about 35 or 40 pounds."

Moeskau began his carving hobby as a scrimshaw artist. Scrimshaw is the art of carving in bone or ivory. He says whalers in the 1800s used to use nails or needles to scratch pictures in teeth recovered from the whales they killed. Ashes from lamps were rubbed into the etchings to reveal the pictures.

A little more than 15 years ago Moeskau was demonstrating scrimshaw for a wood carving club. While there, he says, he saw club members carving realistic faces into wood. He calls them "spirit faces." He joined the wood carving club that very day.

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Artist Michael Moeskau says he enjoys carving vampires and other scary faces into the rinds of pumpkins.

Photo courtesy of Michael Moeskau



One of Michael Moeskau's favorite Halloween creations is his cannibal pumpkin chomping down on a tiny gourd.

Photo courtesy of Michael Moeskau



Deer Park artist Michael Moeskau combines his passion for wood carving with Halloween decor in these wooden pumpkins. Moeskau often creates faces in wood and took up extreme pumpkin carving a few years ago.
Photo by Allen Jones



The tools of a pumpkin carver's trade. Michael Moeskau uses woodcarving tools to peel away the orange skinned gourds to find the faces within.
Photo by Allen Jones

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“With spirit faces, you pick up a limb or a piece of bark and start carving,” he says. “Sometimes the grain of the wood will tell you what to carve. You may want to carve the face of an Indian, but it won’t let you. The grain wants you to carve an old man or something else. That is fun.”

Moeskau mostly carves on basswood, a nearly plain white wood with very little grain so he can carve the faces that inspire him.

He carves a lot of wood for family and friends. It has

The decade of the jack-o'-lantern:

1660

The decade language experts say the term of the popular pumpkin carving was first used in English folklore.

become a Christmas tradition to create wood carvings for his family and friends in the Houston area, including one of his young cousins.

“Three years ago I was asking my cousin, who was 12 years old, what she wanted for Christmas as I typically buy presents for the kids,” he says. “She says she wants a carving of Buckethead. I asked, ‘What do you mean by buckethead,’ and she shows me a picture of a band whose guitarist is known for wearing a KFC bucket on his head and a plain white mask. That was his stage name and she wanted me to carve him for her. Every Christmas she wants me to carve something for her. All the adults do, but I just thought it was strange that a 12-year-old girl wanted a wood carving instead of something girly and fun.”

Years later, wood carving would inspire him to shave faces into pumpkin gourds.

“Four or five years ago, I saw a demonstration where faces, like the ones I carve into wood, and other 3-D figures were being carved into pumpkins,” Moeskau says. “These were not standard jack-o'-lanterns.”

Pumpkin carving does have its challenges, though.

“The skin is only so thick,” he says. “You can’t make some of the faces as thick as you want to.”

He seeks out venues that host pumpkin patches or October festivals, and he will sit and carve faces for as long as the venue supplies him with the gourds. Last year, a small neighborhood festival held in Fort Bend County offered to pay him to come and carve pumpkins at its pumpkin patch. Amongst the half



Michael Moeskau in his art studio inside his Deer Park home.
Photo by Allen Jones

dozen craft and food vendors he sat creating his pumpkin carvings.

"I sat down and in five hours I carved eight pumpkins for them," he says. "I donated the pumpkins to them to raffle them off or whatever they wanted to do with them."

Moeskau's pumpkin carvings start at \$15 for a standard size gourd supplied by the customer. For \$20 he will supply and carve a pumpkin.

"The price depends on the size of the pumpkin," he says. "It will be more for a great big one."

Moeskau doesn't have a website. To purchase a pumpkin, call Moeskau at 281-479-3757 or email him at mmoeskau@yahoo.com.

"Just keep in mind that I don't check my email every day," he says. "My son called me up yesterday asking if I got his email. Well, I'm sure I got it; I haven't got around to reading it."

He also teaches wood carving at the city of Deer Park's Maxwell Adult Center, 1201 Center St., Wednesday afternoons. To learn more, visit the senior services section at DeerParkTx.gov.

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The Art of Golf Balls

Michael Moeskau also creates faces on those tiny dimpled white balls golfers use for sport.

A Popular Seller

Whether he is etching pictures in ivory to fashion into handles for custom made knives, imagining faces within a piece of wood's grain to carve, or shaving life-like faces on the gourds of pumpkins, it seems Michael Moeskau is always looking for something to take his carving tools to. Another object he like to take his tools to are 1.68-inch diameter golf balls. The same size used at golf courses around the world.

He scores the white covers of the golf balls, which he says are only about a 16th of an inch thick, and uses a small screwdriver to pop one side off to expose the ball's rubber core. That small rubber core becomes his etching surface.

Featuring a variety of faces, often comical in nature, he mounts his creations to golf tees and other objects.

"I've actually mounted them on the face of a golf club, too," he says.

The golf ball faces are popular around Christmas, he says. His creations are relatively inexpensive, costing \$20 for a golf ball. However, he tends to sell 30 to 40 golf balls each year.

"They are fun to carve," he says. —**Allen Jones**



The carved faces of golf balls surround the toothy grin of a softball on artist Michael Moeskau's studio desk. The golf ball creations are popular sellers at Christmas, Moeskau says.

Photo by Allen Jones

