

JAMES RIVER WOODCARVERS WORKSHOP

Carving Little People

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Instructional guide on carving little people for the James River Woodcarving Club Workshop.

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Table of Contents

Overview	4
Carving Little People	4
Recommended Tools.....	4
Wood	5
Pattern.....	5
Carving Recommendation	6
Rough Out Carving.....	7
Rounding Hat.....	7
Round Out Corners (Study Board Stage 1)	7
Rough Out Hat (Study Board Stage 2)	7
Rough Out Front and Back (Study Board Stage 3).....	8
Rough Out Sides (Study Board Stage 4).....	10
Face (Study Board Stage 5)	11
Detailed Carving (Study Board Stage 6).....	14
Finishing.....	16

Overview

This pamphlet is written for the JRWC workshop, Carving Little People. The little people are carved from a 1X1X2 inch piece of Basswood. I prefer to carve my little people with long beards, so that's what we're going to do. My men are a little squatty with big heads. The carver can take the basic pattern supplied during the workshop and adjust it to create different little people. My ideas for the pattern came from a cross between Harold L. Enlow's "Rufus" in his *"Carving Figure Caricatures in the Ozark Style"* book and Jack Price's little people in "Carving Small Characters" book. The club has a copy of *"Carving Figure Caricatures in the Ozark Style"* that you can check out if you are interested in Hillbilly people.

Carving Little People

Recommended Tools

Use tools that you feel comfortable carving with. The following is a list of tools that I primarily use to carve most of my little people. The little people can be carved by using only one knife. It's easier for me to use multiple tools to carve the little people. A carving glove and thumb guard is highly recommended because of the size of the little people. During the workshop, you're welcome to borrow some of my tools, so don't go out and buy additional tools for the workshop.

- Carving glove
- Thumb guard
- Rough out knife
- Narrow blade knife (optional)
- ¼" 45 degree V-Tool (optional)
- 1 mm 45 degree V-tool (optional)
- U-Gouges (optional)
 - 1 1/3 U-gouge
 - 7/4 U-gouge
 - 1mm (micro) U-gouge
- About a 1X1X2 inch basswood block
- Tacky glue for pattern

- Pencil (preferred) or marker that won't bleed

Wood

I use a one inch thick basswood board to cut my blocks from. I noticed that the “advertised” one inch is not quite one inch thick. My husband, Dennis, sets up his band saw for me to cut my blocks. He sets the fence to match the thickness of the board so that the width is the same on each side (not quite one inch). I cut my pieces just a little over two inches long to account for the amount of wood removed for the hat and sanding off the saw marks from the bottom of the piece. If you sand the bottom before carving, you should measure your piece at two inches.

Pattern

You don't necessarily need a pattern. Jack Price just draws a rough outline on the piece and starts carving. For this workshop, I thought the pattern might help to visualize what we are trying to carve. The pattern we will be using is all my creation, so it is a long way from being perfect. I'm not an artist! Use the pattern as a guide and adjust as needed. I don't recommend carving right up to the lines on the pattern. Give yourself some room to adjust, especially since it may not be proportional. I'm using this pattern to create the study board so I'll let you know if something needs to be adjusted.



Gluing the Pattern On

There are two ways to get that pattern transferred onto your block of wood. You can either use tracing paper to transfer the pattern or glue the pattern to the block of wood. The blanks I have will have the pattern glued on already so we can start carving. But, if you do this on your own, you can reference the method I've outlined here. I use Aleene's "Tacky Glue" to glue on the pattern. Don't use any glue that will seep into the wood. We really just need a temporary pattern. We'll end up carving it off. There are some tricks to getting the patterned laid out properly on the wood. Lessons learned!

- **Mark the Center:** Draw an X, from corner to corner, on the top and bottom of the block of wood. Drawing this X will



help you figure out where the center of your piece is carving the hat and shoes.

- **Front Pattern:** Begin by gluing the pattern with the little man facing forward. Try to center the pattern from elbow to elbow. Leave a small gap at the bottom of the piece so you can sand the saw marks off later. If you want, you can sand the bottom before gluing the pattern on. Once the pattern is glued on, draw a straight line on the bottom of the block from the outer shoe sole parallel to the back. Don't draw the line from the top of the turned up shoe. Use the straight line of the bottom of the shoe (before it turns up – see image). This will help position the back pattern of the man, using the shoes as the guide.
- **Right Side Pattern:** Align the top of the hat with the top of the hat's brim on the front, the best you can. This is an estimate, so don't worry if it isn't exact. For the pieces I've cut, the brim fits pretty good from front to back. Watch the alignment of the shoes. Try to get them to the same parallel at the base with the shoes in the front. After gluing the pattern on, draw guidelines for these shoes on the bottom of the block. Draw the first line from the back of the heel parallel to the opposite side of the block. Draw the second line from the tip of the shoe parallel to the opposite side of the block.
- **Back Pattern:** Glue and align the back pattern opposite the front. Obvious, right? But it's easy to not notice which side you're on. Align the outer side of the shoe heels with the lines drawn from the Front Pattern above. Make sure there is a slight gap between the sole and the base of the wood just like the other three pieces.
- **Left Side Pattern:** Glue and align the left side pattern. Align the shoes with the lines drawn from the Right Side Pattern above.

Now that the pattern is in place, let's start carving.

Carving Recommendation

Before we actually start, these guys are small. The little man is right inside the surface of that block, not too deep. So when carving the excess wood away, make little cuts, little chips, little slivers to carve out the little man! Since most of carving is "with" the grain, it would be easy to start a big cut and end up losing half of your man. He's

small enough, don't make him smaller. But, if it happens, grab another block and start again! It won't take long to catch up.

Rough Out Carving

During the initial stages, we want to focus on roughing out the man. We will carve in the details later.

Rounding Hat

Where's the Hat?

A hat is an indication of social status, so our little man needs a hat. My little man likes a slightly floppy Indiana Jones style hat. First thing we want to do is relieve the hat from the block of wood.

Round Out Corners (Study Board Stage 1)

Using a rough out knife, remove the corners of the block of wood by rounding the hat



from just below the bottom of the brim to the top of the piece of wood.

You can start removing the corners of the block from right above the elbow as well and work your way at an angle to below the brim. From the brim up, the hat

area should look like a cylinder. Draw your hat lines back on. Try to use a non-bleeding pencil or marker. For example, don't use a Sharpie. This guy is so small that you can end up carving away a big chunk of wood by trying to remove the marked lines. I'm using

Prismacolor Premier 03 fine line marker so you can see the lines in the photos. Even the Prismacolor brand bleeds a little, but not as bad as the Sharpies. Draw an extra line above the line you just drew to indicate the thickness of the hat's brim. During the detailed carving stage we will smooth the squared off edge of the brim.



Rough Out Hat (Study Board Stage 2)

Upper Brim: The upper brim will be angled slightly to give the hat strength. Don't cut straight across and then straight up. The brim will be brittle if you try to carve it straight across. You can "sand" the brim thinner if needed when you are almost finished with the piece. With a narrow bladed knife (or the tip of a wider knife), carve away the excess wood



from the hat above the brim (top line you drew on) to the top of the crown. The best way to shape the hat is to turn or curve the blade as you make the cuts. Cut in at a slight angle from the edge of the brim and then curve the blade up to form the crown. When you make a cut, rotate your piece and make an overlapping cut next to the one you just made (circling the hat). Once you're back at the position you started make the cut deeper and go around the hat again. This helps to keep the hat even. When carving the crown of the hat, carve the back at a slight angle to tilt the hat. When looking down at the 'X' on the hat, there should be less wood on the front of the hat than the back. I generally carve the crown of the hat in an egg shape, more narrow in the front than the back. Make the crown of the hat slightly larger around than what the size of the head will be. Continue carving around the hat over and over until you get the size of the crown you want on your man. Reference the pattern when needed. Clean off any saw marks if needed. And take off the rough edge from the top of the crown. It's okay if your hat brim isn't exactly even. It'll add character!

Using a 1/4" or 1mm 45 degree V-tool, outline the underside of the brim. A knife can be used to create the V cut as well. At this point we are just outlining the bottom of the hat's brim, so don't cut in too deep.

That's it for the hat for now. We'll carve in the details after we finish the face.

Rough Out Front and Back (Study Board Stage 3)

Backside

Redraw the back of the hairline on the side patterns. Starting on the back, carve off the excess wood following the outline of the patterns on each the side of the patterns.



About 1/16" to 1/8th of an inch needs to be removed from under the hat brim (to hairline) to the bottom of the little man's shoes (back of heel). When carving the back, keep the sides blocked off. Watch out for the alignment of the side patterns. They may not line up exactly with each other. Pick one that matches with your hat the best and



stick with that one.

Back of Head

Make stop cuts under the brim of the hat when carving the back of the head. To prevent chipping or breaking the brim, don't put pressure against the brim of the hat with your knife. Use a V-tool to outline the bottom of the hair.

Back

Curve the back from the little man's bottom up to the hairline, following the pattern on the sides.

Back of Knees and Legs

Carve the basic form of the legs and shoes. Start in the back and carve the back of the legs in a V-shape, keeping the sides square. Use a V-tool to get a starting cut along the backs of the knees. Make stop cuts and continue to carve the backs of the legs and knees.

Shoes

Now let's see if we can find those shoes. Carve down the excess wood from the back of the shoes. The shoes should be carved down to the line drawn on the bottom of the block of wood. We aren't actually carving out the shoes yet. Keep the sides square.

Front

Shoes and Legs

Use the V-tool to carve a groove between the bottom of the beard and the top of shoe.



The V-tool is used just to get started. You can also start with a knife and begin carving out the legs and shoes. Continue to carve out the front of the legs and the tops of the shoes. Carve away the wood up to the line drawn on the bottom of the piece. From looking at each side carve the underside of the shoe at an angle. Some of the wood on each side of the beard needs to be removed to carve down to the legs.

Face and Beard

There is quite a lot of wood on the face and beard left. We need to remove some of the excess and round off the edges. This is a rough rounding, so don't carve too deep at this point. Carve down the face and beard about 1/16" deep below the brim of the hat. Use stop cuts at the brim of the hat to prevent chipping or breaking the brim. Use

slow short cuts when carving toward the brim. Watch the side patterns to ensure you don't carve too close to the man's nose. From the side patterns, begin rounding off the corners starting from the back of the man's beard (on side view) to the center of the face (on front view) at about a 30 degree angle. The front center will extend further out than the sides (see pictures). The piece may still be top heavy and may not stand until we do more detail work on the front.

Rough Out Sides (Study Board Stage 4)

Right and Left Sides

Head and Hair

At this point we want to focus on whittling down the sides of the head. We already carved the back of the hairline and roughed in the nose and beard. Redraw the bottom of the hair on the sides and farthest edges of the beard. Make stop cuts along the brim of the hat for each cut you make toward the hat's brim. Start at the top of the shoulders and begin carving upward strokes to meet the stop cut on the hat's brim. Don't apply pressure to the brim of the hat in order to prevent breaks. Make even cuts from the sides of the head toward the back. Don't carve the front area yet, just round off the sides and transition to the front. Leave the nose and beard mass. When determining how deep to carve the head back, make it slightly wider the crown of the hat. When the little men wear their hats, their long hair get's pushed out a bit.



Side of Legs

Carve the back and side of the legs at about a 60 to 70 degree angle depending on how far out you want

The tips of the shoes angle further than the bottom of the drawing shoes are located.



to toes to be pointing out. will extend out at a slight heel. Use the lines on the to help guide where the Round off the outside toes of

the shoes. Round off the outside heels of the shoes. Draw a line on the back of the piece from the about the position of the pocket line to about an 1/8th of an inch

Arms

Look at your pattern on both sides of your wood. Make sure the arms are in the same



position on both sides. You wouldn't want one arm to be lower than the other, which is easy to do. You can use a Flexible Curve (by Thru) to wrap around the piece to help measure the height of the shoulders and the placement of the hands. Adjust your carving if necessary. Using the pattern as a guide, outline the arms using a ¼" V-Tool. The elbows will stand out the furthest on the piece. Starting at the elbow, carve at a slight angle up towards the hairline. Round the shoulders as carve near the hairline. Carve in the opposite direction from the elbow to the pants pockets. Leave enough material on the pants to account for the hand. The shoulder should be more to the back than the front of the little man. Round off the arms.

Face (Study Board Stage 5)

Tackling the face

A magnified visor or glasses help at this stage. Smooth out the head and face area.

The face area should angle back from the area of the nose. The hat will sit right above the brow, so we will leave a little area under the hat for the brow.



There are many different ways of carving the face. If you already know how to carve faces, then use your own techniques to carve the face. This is my weakest point.

The next few steps are my methods to carving the face and I'm no expert!

- Using a light pencil, draw the center line down the face.
- Draw a line where the top of the brow will be and the bottom of the nose. The one I'm carving is 1/10th of an inch wide.
- Draw the width of the nose bridge between the eyes.
- Draw the tips of the eyes and a line for the center of the eyes.

Eyes:



The hardest part on carving the little people is carving the eyes. Carve in top of nose to center of eyes and from brow (right below rim of hat) to the center of the eyes using a knife. This should be done at a slight angle to match the curve of the head. Carve back the brow. Round off the sharp edges of the brow.



Carve each detail of the eyes on both eyes at the same time. Don't carve one eye and then the other. This will allow you to make adjustments as you go. Use a #11 3/3 U-gouge to deepen each eye socket, below the bridge of the nose.

Nose:

Before we get too far ahead, the nose should be carved in. I'd recommend doing this step right after hollowing out the eyes to make sure the eye sockets are deep enough. This should be done prior to completing the eyes so we will know where the cheeks are.



The nose is about one eye wide for realistic eyes. You can vary the size depending on your character. Draw the nose from the exterior of the nostril to the exterior of the bridge of the nose. The outside of the nostrils will extend further out than the bridge of the nose, but not quite to



center of the eyes. Using your knife or a small U-gouge, rough out the nose. Carve down the cheek area on each side to even it up with the lower part of the face.

Round off the top of the nose. My images are out of sequence, because I got ahead of myself.

Back to Eyes:



Rounding the eyes:

Cut a sideways V (> and <) at the bridge of each eye. Chip out the Vs at a slight angle to begin the rounding of the eye.



With a pencil, lightly draw (not like the image) the lines of the upper part of the eye ball and the lower part of the eye ball. Keep the lower eye ball pretty straight.

Outline the line drawn on both eyes with your knife. If the piece was much bigger, you could do this step with a U-gouge instead of a knife. At the outside corners of the eye, chip out a small piece to round the outside of the eye, similar to the way the inside was cut, but the outside should be shallower.

Now round the rest of the eye. Start from the center of the eye and slice off a little bit of wood rounding upward toward the top eye ball and then downward toward the bottom eye ball. Reduce the brow line and forehead to match the size of the eyes.

At this point you can clean up the eyes a little and paint the eyes on. If you want, you can continue to carve in more detailed eye lids.

Across the top of the eye ball you just carved, cut a line for upper eyelid slit, following the upper eye indentation and brow. Right under the bottom eyelid slit, use a 1 mm U-gouge and follow the outline of the lid to add an indentation for the bottom of the eye socket. Round out the cheek bone to the bottom of the eye socket.

Back to the Nose:

The nostrils on both sides of the nose are slightly higher than the center bottom of the



nose. Slightly angle the bottom of each side of the nose.

If you have a small U-gouge that will fit for the width of the exterior of the nostrils, press it straight down for form the side of the nostrils on both sides. If you don't have one (like me), then use a knife or 1/8" V-tool to form the nostrils. Smooth out the nose from the upper



curve of the nostril to the bridge of the nose. Round off the tip of the nose.

Mouth and Beard:

Although we don't want to put in the details of the beard at this time, we do need to get the basic form and carve in the mouth location.

With a pencil, lightly draw in the hairline along the temples, down the cheeks, and curving back up right below the outside nostrils. Go over the lines you drew with a 1/8" micro U-gouge, but don't cut in too deep. Smooth out the cheeks back down to the hairline to get rid of the distinct U. Remove some of the beard between the long mustache handles to clear an area for the mouth. For the mouth area, come down slightly from the nose and cut an inverted V. Chip the V out to form the placement of where the mouth will be carved. Right below the bottom of the inverted V (bottom lip) take a U-gouge and follow the line just below the line to form the lip so it sticks out a little from the beard.

Detailed Carving (Study Board Stage 6)

Forming the legs and shoes:

From the back, draw a center line from the bottom between the shoes to right above



the V cut we made between the back of the knees. Draw an inverted V at the seat of the man's pants meeting the bottom tip of the V to the straight line you just drew. Cut out the V. Round off the backs of the legs to the center line forming a V between the legs. From the bottom tip of the V carve a straight line down to form the split between the legs.

On the front side, begin with the center of the shoe and draw a line straight up to the beard. If you haven't already done so, outline the bottom of the beard with a V tool so you know where you want to carve the pants. Carve out the center of the shoe tips at an outward pointing angle. Be careful around the shoes, because it is easy to snap the tops off. Continue carving between the legs, by round off the legs from the front of the legs to the inside of the center line you drew. The tops of the shoes will need to be carved back to get to the bottom of the pant leg. The pant leg rests on the tops of the shoe.

Once you have the basic forms of the legs, use a 1/8" V-tool to outline the bottom of the pant legs. This will help separate the bottom of the pants from the shoes. The pant legs are lower in the back than they are in the front. Starting at the top of the shoe angle the bottom of the pants down to about where top of the shoe heel will be. Use your knife to follow the V cut around the shoe to deepen the cut. Shave off a little of the shoes up to the pant legs so the shoes are set in further than the pants.

On the bottom of the shoe cut in a V cut for the placement of the heel. Using a small V-tool, make a cut around the bottom of the sides of the shoe to form the sole. Using your knife, add creases into shoes sides where the toes are bent.

Carve the waistline. Take in consideration of where the pockets will be placed. If you want a belt, draw the location of the belt on your man. You can add as much detail as you want. You can add belt loops if you want. Once you figure out where the belt is or the waistline of your man's pants, you can determine where the pockets are. I like the pockets to bulge out with the man's hands in them. From the waistline or bottom of belt, draw a line to form the pocket opening. Try to keep them as even as possible. Cut the line with a knife and then carve off some of the shirt sleeve to the pocket edge so that the hand appears to be going into the pocket.

Add wrinkles to the pants by making small V cuts with the knife. I don't recommend using a V-tool for the wrinkles. Areas to add wrinkles to: behind the knees, above the shoes, some on the sides of the pants, and front above the shoes and inside of the legs.

Shirt:

Clean up the arms. Add wrinkles to the bend in the elbows by carving small V cuts with the knife. Shave off the bottom of the shirt so it looks like it is tucked into the pants. Add wrinkles to the bottom of the shirt where it is tucked in. Undercut the beard from the shirt. Add wrinkles to the side of the shirt as well.

Beard and Hair:

I think the beard is what gives the little man character. The beard should be in layers



with the mustache being the top level. Use a medium size U-gouge to form the various curved layers for the beard. The beard should be slightly undercut from the shirt. Use a smaller U-gouge or V-tool to defined groves in the beard.

Undercut the hair on the sides and back of the head. Use a U-gouge to give various depths of the hair. Come back and use a knife to cut under some of the in groves for the hair to give them more depth and

body.

Finishing

Sanding:

Use an emery board or sandpaper to sand down any knife marks from under the hat.

Sand down the bottom of the shoes. It's up to you if you want to sand the rest of the man or keep the natural knife cuts.

Woodburning:

To accentuate the wrinkles and shadows, you can woodburn them. We'll have to get Linda to show us how to woodburn our little people on another day.

Painting:

I use thinned acrylic paint to paint the little men.

Study board

