

HIS GREAT GRANDDAD'S TOOLS

by Julia Nunnally Duncan

Like many people our age, my husband Steve and I have inherited mementos from our families' past. Some of these relics are quite old, dating back to the 19th century. Thankfully, our grandparents' and great-grandparents' possessions were passed down through the generations and preserved.

In Steve's case, he inherited many of his great-granddad Phlemm Duncan's tools. In a mule-drawn wagon in the early 20th century, Phlemm moved his family down the mountain from Mitchell County, to McDowell County, North Carolina. He hoped to find more productive farmland in the foothill region. Being a homesteader and a farmer, he brought his tools with him.

Steve uses many of his great-granddad's tools in his woodcarving trade. Tools he finds especially practical are a crowbar, a froe, and a drawknife. Of course, there are many uses for a tough old crowbar. For Steve, the crowbar has been necessary lately in prying out nails from locust posts, once supporting a horse fence on our property. Anyone who has dealt



Steve using the Froe

with locust posts knows how durable and hard the wood is and removing nails from this wood is an arduous task. But with the aid of a crowbar, patience, and some

physical strength, the nails can be extracted. Once the wood is free of nails, Steve can repurpose it.

A froe is equally useful. With Phlemm's froe, Steve



Phlemm's Buck Saw and Drawknife

can split a log in half and then accurately split out pieces for his woodcarving projects. Though Steve has modern tools that would get the job done, he prefers using his froe. He has explained to me that starting with a log, a woodworker could use a froe to split out the middle and eventually make anything from a chair to a wooden handle. Such a tool must have been indispensable in past times.

Also, a necessary tool for Steve, especially as a walking stick carver, is his drawknife. A drawknife allows him to shape the wood lengthwise. It also enables him to take off bark from the stick for a smoother finish, particularly in the area where one grasps the walking stick. When I asked Steve why he likes to use his great-granddad Phlemm's tools, which I see him using so often, he explained that the tools take him back to a time before electricity—an era when many things had to be made rather than

bought.

He has wondered about what Phlemm might have made with his tools and what trees on his property, now our property, he

used. “It gives me great respect for the time and skill it took to use these tools,” Steve said, “to make things needed to survive in the mountains of Western North Carolina in the early 20th century.” And we both know how primitive and hard life must have been in these parts back in those days.

Steve also wonders, as I do, if Phlemm ever imagined that someday his great-grandson would pick up these tools, use and care for them, and create something useful from the same land that he settled. We can only speculate about what someone thought in the past. But I do believe Phlemm Duncan would have been proud to think his tools would still be respected and put to use over a century later. *JND*



Steve with the Crowbar