

Carving a Hitty: Bill Fifer's Method

by Esther Robertson

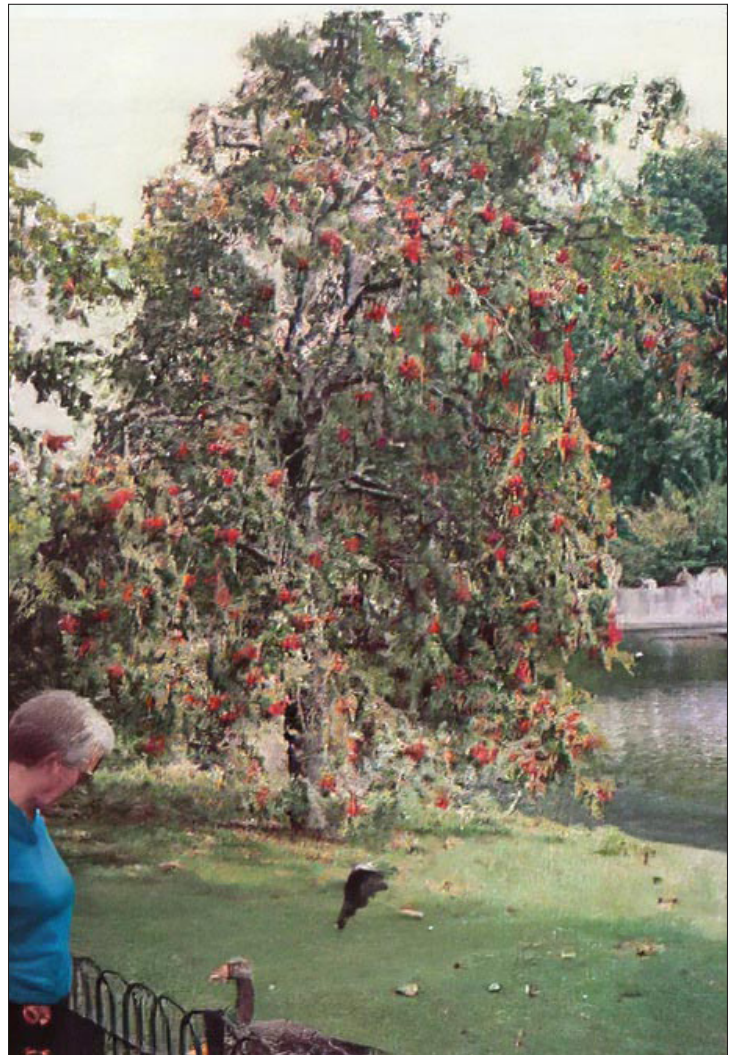


In the winter of 2003, I asked Bill Fifer to help me with a program on the art of wood carving to be given at the Zelenople Travelers Club. He is the artist that made my Hitty doll. I asked for pictures of how a Hitty doll is carved, and Bill graciously said he would carve a doll and photograph every step along the way. This was more than I ever hoped for, and when all these pictures started to arrive via my computer, I decided to put them into booklet form as well as the story board for which I had originally intended.

In the book *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years*, by Rachel Field, the doll is described as being carved out of Mountain Ash wood brought to America from Ireland by an itinerant peddler. Upon examining the original Hitty at the Stockbridge Library in Massachusetts, Bill believes she was carved from White Ash, however, he feels that it would take an expert looking at a specimen under a microscope to be sure.

The tree pictured below is an English Rowan tree, which is the name for Mountain Ash in England. This tree was heavily laden with red berries and stands in St. James Park in London. Mountain Ash (*Sorbus Americana*) is one of the woods that Bill uses to carve his Hitty dolls. It is from the Rose Family (Rosaceae) that has over 2,000 species of trees and shrubs worldwide. Mountain Ash is an ornamental tree that has white flowers in the spring and red berries in the fall. It is a small tree, not cut for commercial lumber, and is very disease prone. It can be found in the upper slopes of the Appalachian Mountains from Georgia and South Carolina north to New Hampshire and Maine.

White Ash is widely used in commercial applications for tool handles, chairs, etc. It is a very strong wood and can withstand a lot of shock without fracturing.



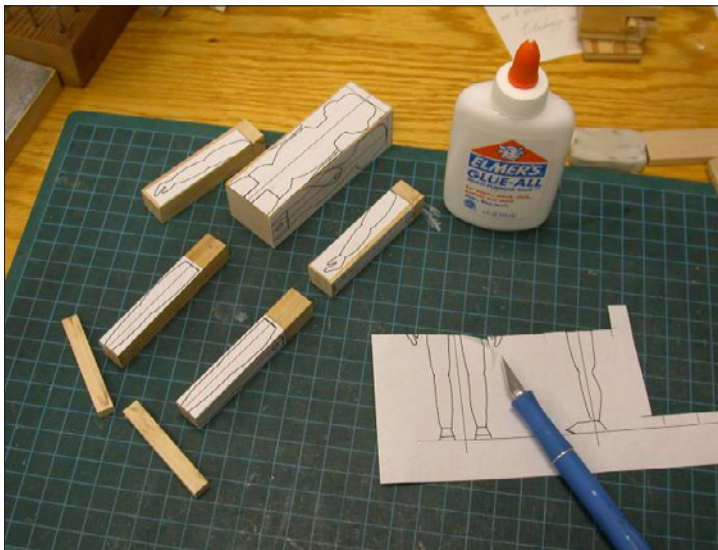


White Ash (left) and pieces of Mountain Ash wood.

Bill works in a well-equipped shop as the pictures of each step will show. Here he prepares to use a 6" Hegner table saw to cut the torso and limb blanks from a piece of kiln-dried Mountain Ash wood.



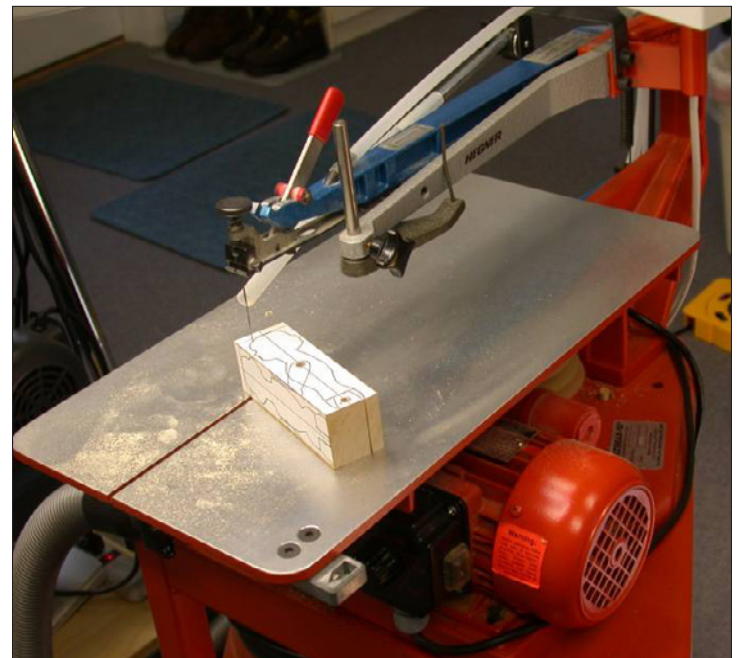
After cutting the blanks, the pattern for each piece is glued to the blank.



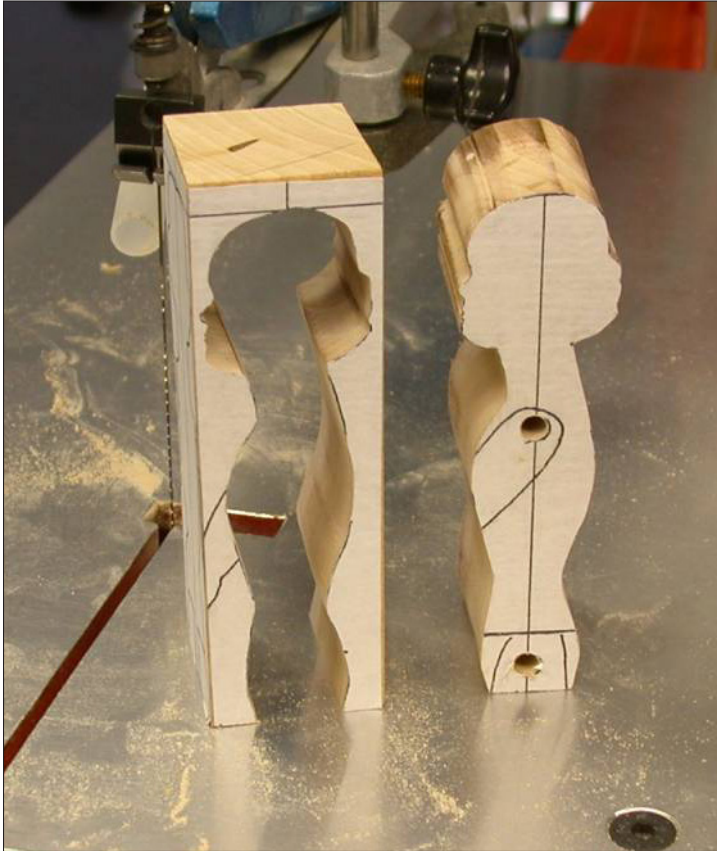
The next step is to drill the holes in the shoulder and hip joints, plus small holes up into the bottom of the legs to peg the shoes onto the legs with small dowels. The feet/shoes are shaped later.



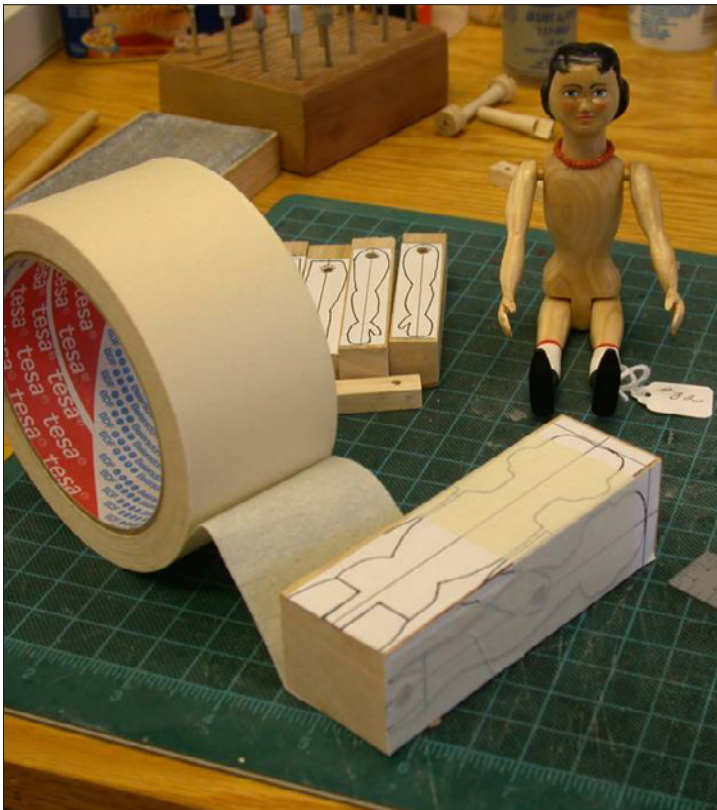
All parts are cut from the blanks following the pattern using a scroll saw.



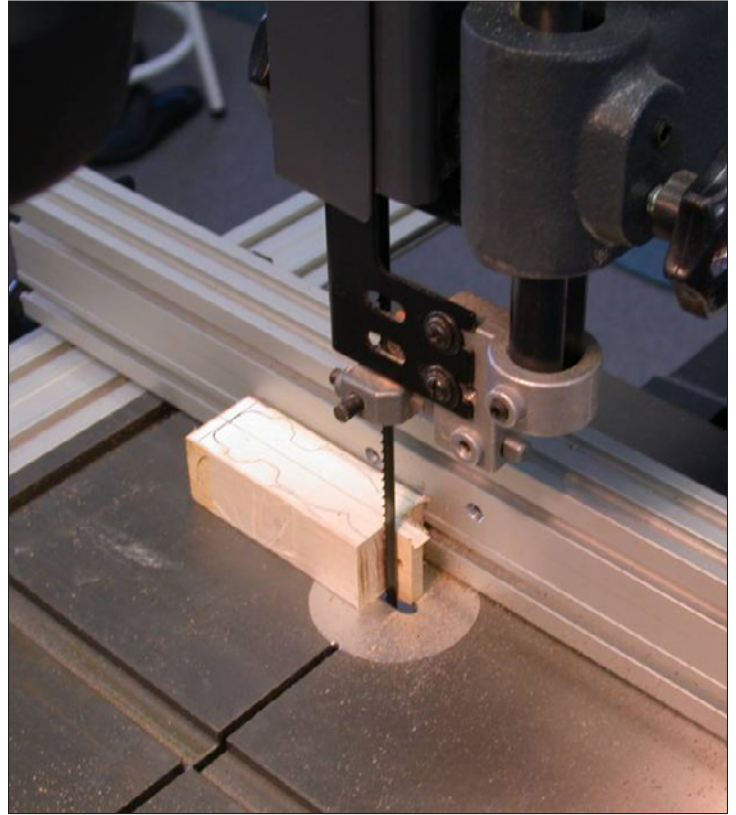
This picture shows the first cut completed and the parts separated to shake out excess sawdust.



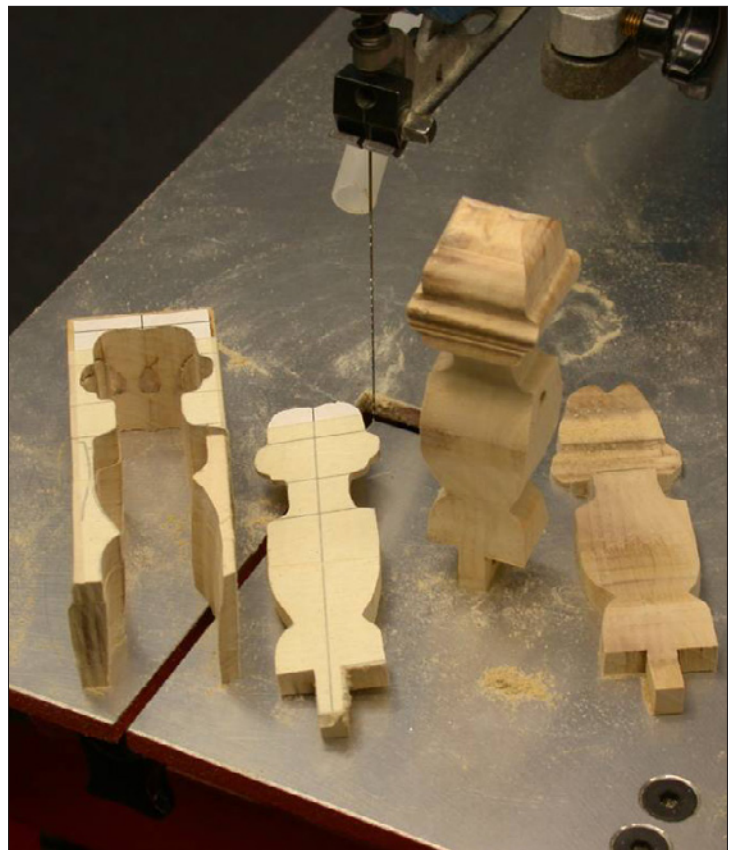
The torso parts are taped back together using masking tape in preparation to cut the second profile.



The band saw with fence is used to cut the tenon at the base of the torso. This will be where the legs are attached.



This picture shows the torso cut to both profiles and separated from the outside of the blanks.



After all the parts are cut out, center lines are drawn with a pencil on all four sides of each piece.



Rough rounding out of the parts to their center lines is accomplished using a Foredom rotary tool with a Typhoon burr that chews away the wood very quickly. This is done at his work bench where he has installed a dust collection system mounted on a computer keyboard shelf that pulls out. The system is stored under his work bench, and when in use the fan is turned on to suck away the dust created by the rotary tool. The sawdust goes into a cloth bag underneath the work bench.



Here are the parts after further smoothing using a Foredom rotary tool. Bill uses the sanding cylinders to smooth out the doll's torso.



For carving a delicate part such as the mouth with a carving knife, Bill wears his optimizer magnification unit.



The hair curls are shaped using, from left to right: a Foredom hand piece with a cutting burr, then a small palm chisel and finally a carving knife.



Work on the face continues using a smaller high-speed Foredom tool (that has the motor in the handpiece), palm chisels, carving knives and a very useful bow sander that lets him work around the curved parts such as the neck, chin, etc.



Closeup of the doll's face.



The shoe and toe are formed and sanded on a 10" sanding disc.



After all carving has been done, the doll is assembled. On the left is a completely finished doll, No. 32. On the right is doll No. 37, which will be painted with acrylics and sealed with Deft.



Editor's Note: This article was originally published in a booklet made by Esther Robertson. She has kindly given me permission to share it with you. Photos are courtesy of Bill Fifer.

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You can read more about carving Hitty dolls here:
www.ATaleofTwoHittys.com/Carving-Hitty