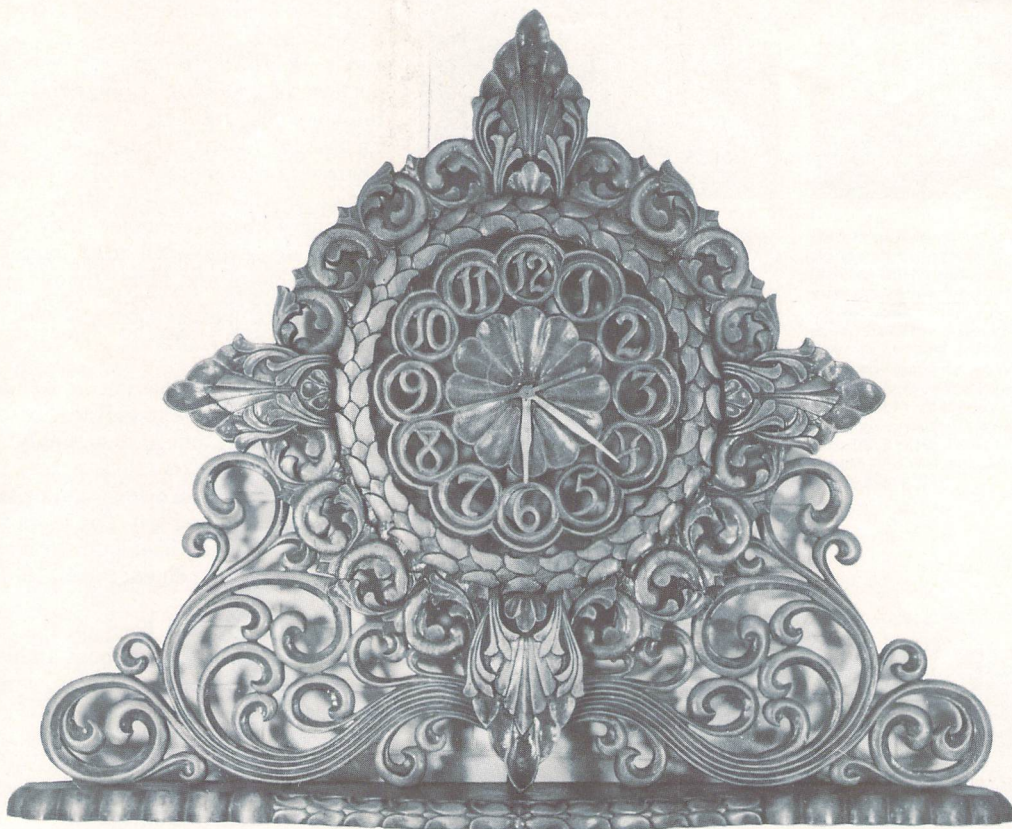


Herman Melheim and His Hand-Carved Furniture

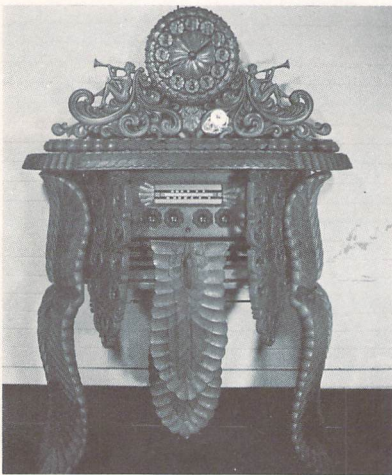




Herman and Lillian Melheim at home in their Lake Kabetogama cabin in August 1947. Duluth Herald and News-Tribune photograph.

Herman Melheim and His Hand-Carved Furniture

by John M. U. Thompson III,
St. Louis County Historical Society



The little log cabin on Moose Horn Road on the way to Wooden Frog Park near Lake Kabetogama in northern Minnesota was the perfect setting for the extraordinary collection of hand carved furniture that had been carved by the cabin's owner, Herman L. Melheim.

A native of Sogn, Norway, Melheim emigrated to Hanska, Minn. in 1915. He tackled numerous jobs in many parts of the country and ended up with one he was familiar with in his native land.

In 1930 Melheim formed a partnership with a Mr. Dimond and they purchased six Alaskan reindeer and a sleigh. This company was formed for the purpose of traveling throughout the country from Indianapolis, Ind. to Omaha, Neb. during the Christmas season. Under the sponsorship of the Chambers of Commerce of the cities, he became known as the "Reindeer Man."

Along with the reindeer, they had an entourage of animals—even a Siberian camel. During these tours Melheim and Mrs. Dimond masqueraded as Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus. After the death of Mr. Dimond, Mrs. Dimond married Herman Melheim.

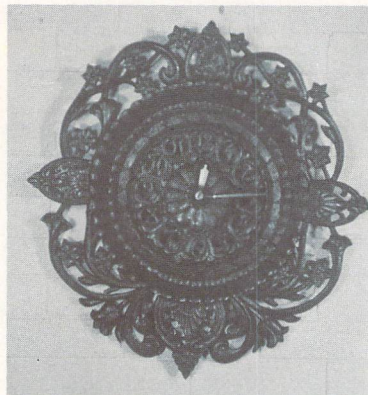
The necessity of having an abundant supply of moss brought Melheim to Kabetogama to spend the summers. He gathered in a supply of moss to take with him on his excursions across the country. In winter he would use a dog team to haul gunny sacks of moss back to the barn. The moss was mixed with oatmeal and sugar beet pulp to feed the deer. He traveled with the reindeer until 1937 when tragedy struck the herd.

The company had been on the road for only a week and a half, on the most ambitious tour ever planned for a Christmas season, when the reindeer were fed mildewed moss that Melheim had contracted for delivery along the trip. The whole herd died within four days. They were buried where they died, but Melheim kept the antlers as keepsakes for remembrances of the years of pleasure that they had given him.

The beginning of the story of Melheim's carved furniture starts in 1935, when Herman and Lillian Melheim decided to build a log cabin at Ray, Minn.

Using native white pine, Melheim grooved and fitted together the logs to make the substantial weatherproof house in which he still lives. The partitions within are of log also. There are three

Some of Melheim's work, clockwise from above: radio cabinet (center panels close over controls), television cabinet (front doors open for use), table top with Melheim's unique mechanism which raises and lowers all four leaves simultaneously, straight back chair with leaf motif, platform rocker carved from one large white pine log, chair carved for Lillian in 1959 with Norwegian rosemaing design featuring six birds holding shield with initial L. Photographs by Bruce Ojard, Depot Darkroom.



bedrooms, one downstairs, the other two on either side of the second floor, with an open stairway off the living room area leading to them.

When the log structure was completed he began to carve some new and different furniture which they needed. "We had lots of good white pine on our property and I had lots of time," says Melheim with a twinkle in his eyes.

Melheim began carving with only a pocket knife and later developed his own makeshift tools. He had been given a set of professional carving tools in the late 30s but still prefers a favorite one he made from a trap spring. Melheim uses mostly white pine from his own land but also works with mahogany, walnut, basswood and myrtle.

In setting out to carve a piece, Melheim first pictures in his mind the finished product, then sketches it on paper with the detailed design before beginning to carve. As work progresses, he changes each of his designs slightly.

It is difficult to find a favorite item of furniture in the collection because each piece in its own way is a "treasure." The most unusual one is a hand-carved pendulum clock which stands eight feet high, with a base two feet wide. The tall slender masterpiece is of graceful scroll work, its design based on the leaf pattern, and carved from one log of white pine. The works of the clock, which keeps perfect time, were purchased from a former International Falls jeweler, Dr. Olaf Neset. It took Melheim six months to carve the elaborate case.

Eventually, this clock was featured in Robert Ripley's "Believe It or Not" series of illustrated unusual data, which appeared in the Sunday editions of most newspapers throughout the United States during the 30s, 40s and 50s.

Through the years, friends and tourists often found their way to the secluded cabin of the congenial couple, and Melheim, who worked from four to six hours a day at carving, was kept busy replacing items from the mantel and filling special orders.

The list of items which Melheim has carved includes: a corner cupboard, end tables, several rockers (each made of one piece of log), trays, beds, chairs, what-not shelves, candleholders, lamps, book covers, picture frames, and clocks and more clocks.

Among the other beautifully carved pieces is a table fitted with a wheel on the underside, with a small crank which when turned causes all four of the leaves to swing upward. Turned counterclockwise, the crank causes all four of the leaves to go down.

Then there is the television cabinet with an elaborate vine and flower design and, on the side, a lever which opens or closes the four panels which serve to conceal the face of the TV set.

Asked if his wife helped with the carvings, Melheim replied: "When I wanted to see if something was straight, I would ask her to come and take a look at it. She seemed to know; so I took her word for it." He added that his wife tried to keep his workshop tidy. With a wink she would counter: "You betcha I tried to keep it clean and it didn't stay clean worth one cent!"

During the early years he also had a lucrative sideline with a friend, Warren Bauman. Together they carved totem poles for resorts and individuals. Many of their totem poles are still standing in the Kabetogama area. The designs were not taken from any specific Indian culture, but created by

Melheim and Bauman. Unfortunately, many of the totem poles suffered vandalism in the absence of the cabin owners during the winter; therefore, the ones that are left are greatly treasured by their owners who often remove them to their homes for safekeeping during the winter.

In the home where Melheim now lives alone since Mrs. Melheim entered a nursing home, he is surrounded by mementos that bespeak the couple's varied interests. A bearskin rug, a Rosa Bonheur horse print, a picture of Sir Galahad, hunting photos, reindeer horns, handmade rag rugs, plants of all types in the cabin windows, a "snoose-jar" vase, hand embroidery and crocheting and old dishes, all help to give the cabin a very "homey" feeling that invites a visitor to stay and talk awhile.

In the fall of 1976, Melheim, in his 87th year, gave the entire collection of furnishings to the St. Louis County Historical Society. The furniture is now on permanent display at the St. Louis County Heritage and Arts Center, known as The Depot, in Duluth.

Mr. Melheim has over the years given generously to museums and historical societies, and the gift in 1976 of the bulk of his furnishings to the St. Louis County Historical Society is one of the most important gifts that the society has received since it was founded in 1922.

A part of Melheim's bequest to the St. Louis County Historical Society, the antlers of Donner and Blitzen, reindeer named after Santa's, are presently in a storage warehouse, as the society does not have sufficient space to display all of its possessions. However the society hopes that at each Christmastime it will be able to bring them out and deck them with festive garlands for the holiday season.

Other than the pieces in Duluth, one of Melheim's clocks, carved from Honduras mahogany, is on display at the Norwegian American Historical Museum in Decorah, Iowa. Another clock was given to the Koochiching County Historical Society at International Falls, Minn.

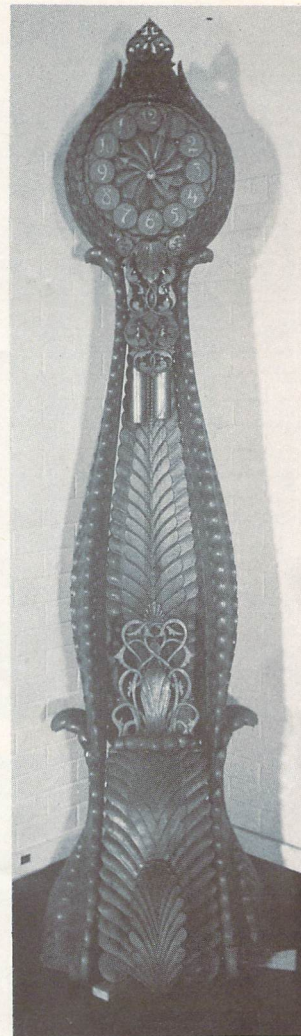
The reason for Melheim's decision to dispose of his carvings was three-fold:

- (1) He was afraid of forest fires (there were many in 1976).
- (2) He contemplated a winter vacation in California and feared vandalism in his absence.
- (3) If anything would happen to him he wanted the furniture to have an appropriate home and to be seen and appreciated by as many people as possible.

When the new Kabetogama Methodist Church was built in 1964, Melheim worked for six months carving various pieces of furniture and religious objects for them. Among the latter are the pulpit, baptismal font, and candelabra. He also made the guest book and the collection baskets.

In July of 1977 Melheim gave the church an altarpiece showing the two Marys (Mary Magdalene and Mary, the Mother of Jesus) at the foot of the cross. This is his latest piece, and he worked on it for over a year and a half.

During the summer of 1978, Melheim plans to continue working at his occupation and avocation of wood carving at the cabin in Ray. He hopes that Mrs. Melheim will be well enough to leave the nursing home in Little Fork for frequent visits to their home. He has said that he is sure the birds and squirrels miss her as much as he does.



Grandfather clock, eight feet tall and carved from one log, was featured in Ripley's Believe It or Not.

The author acknowledges the assistance of Professor Emeritus Harry Davis, University of Minnesota, Duluth in editing this story. The Melheim Collection of Wood Carvings, in the legal aspect of the gift, is from Lt. Col. Neil Dimond, San Clemente, Calif., who is Mr. Melheim's step-son.

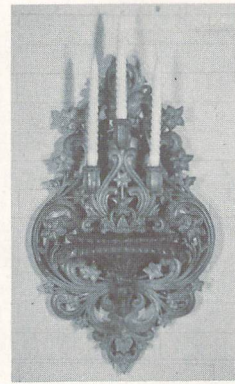
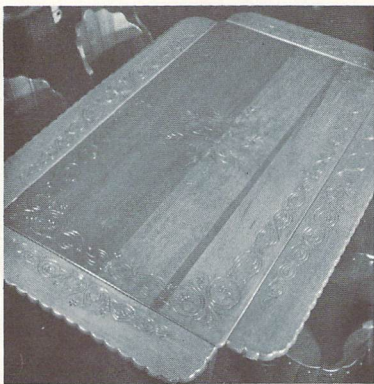
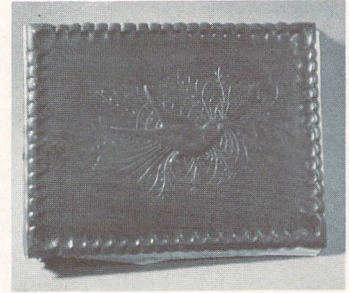
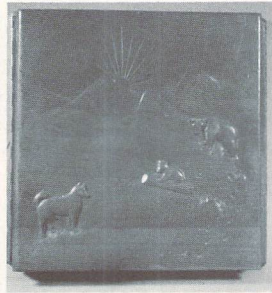
This story appeared in part in the June 1978 issue of The Duluthian.



On the front cover is the largest mantel clock in the Melheim display, carved of white pine and finished with a dark stain. Photograph by Darrell Henning.

At left, Herman Melheim carves a clock mounting from a redwood burl. He is seated in one of his carved chairs in his front yard at Lake Kabetogama in 1966. Photograph by Minneapolis Sunday Tribune.

Below left is the scrapbook the Melheims have filled with many treasured memories over the years. The carved cover shows a mother bear and cub climbing a mountain, under observation by a wolf. At right is one of the Melheims' many guest books — with entries from all over the world.



The table at left above incorporates Melheim's unique mechanism which raises and lowers all four leaves simultaneously. The original design of the birds carved on the table top is above. At the right is an elaborate candleholder which hung in the cabin at Ray and is now in the Depot in Duluth. A pair of similar candleholders is in the Methodist Church at Ray.

These two photographs show the entire Melheim collection of the St. Louis County Historical Society, photographed from opposite ends of the Melheim Room at the Depot.

